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## **ORANGE COUNTY DOMESTIC VIOLENCE DEATH REVIEW TEAM RELEASES DECADE-LONG STUDY HIGHLIGHTING FATALITY TRENDS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION**

*Report Analyzed 113 Domestic Violence Fatalities That Occurred in Orange County,  
Citing Firearm Use in 72 Percent of Fatalities*

### **Key Takeaways:**

- The Orange County Domestic Violence Death Review Team analyzed 113 domestic violence fatalities in Orange County from 2006 to 2017, which is likely a significant undercounting due to underreporting.
- A significant increase in domestic violence fatalities occurred in Orange County during 2010 and 2011 as a potential result of stressors following the 2008 financial crisis.
- Firearms were used in 72 percent of fatalities. Nationwide, access to firearms in the home is shown to increase fatality rates in domestic violence cases by 500 percent.
- Between 2006 and 2017, 9 percent of Orange County domestic violence fatalities were caused by strangulation. This shows an opportunity for intervention, as research shows that up to 68 percent of abuse survivors will be victims of near-fatal strangulation by their partner, and strangulation victims face a 750 percent increase in later homicide-related death.

**IRVINE**, Calif., February 16, 2022 — The Orange County Domestic Violence Death Review Team (DVDRT), a multi-disciplinary task force, released its first ever study that analyzed a decade of trends in domestic violence fatalities. The team reviewed county coroner case files from 2006 through 2017 and analyzed domestic violence-related homicide and homicide/suicide cases to develop recommendations for community prevention and intervention initiatives in reducing and eradicating domestic violence.

The DVDRT is co-chaired by Maricela Rio-Faust, Chief Executive Officer of nonprofit Human Options, and Professor Jane Stoeber, who directs the University of California, Irvine School of Law's Domestic Violence Clinic and the UCI Initiative to End Family Violence and includes multiple partner agencies. The Orange County Coroner's Office identified 113 domestic violence related fatalities, or deaths caused by an intimate partner, which the DVDRT analyzed with the assistance of UCI Law Domestic Violence Clinic students providing case summaries and co-authoring the report. The DVDRT noted that this is likely a significant undercounting of actual domestic violence-related fatalities since some domestic violence homicides are classified as "accidental," and are not referred to the DVDRT, or never prompt criminal charges or prosecution.

"Every life lost is a call for change. Our county and community responders need to understand the lethality factors in order to intervene and prevent future tragedies," said Professor Stoeber.

"Every person in our community deserves to live a life free from fear, and this data will drive our county-wide response to prevent violence and abuse and intervene before these tragic outcomes," said Ms. Rios-Faust.

### **Economic Stressors Could Cause Uptick in Fatal Violence**

Over the decade, nearly half of domestic violence fatalities, 47 percent, were homicide only. The remaining cases involved suicide by one of the parties, with 32 percent of the cases categorized as homicide-suicide. Most of these



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homicide-suicides were males who killed their female intimate partners before taking their own lives. 18 percent of the cases referred to the DVDRT involved the abusive partner committing suicide after committing domestic violence, and 3 percent of cases involved victims of domestic violence taking their own life considering the abuse they were suffering.

An uptick of violence in 2010 and 2011 was observed in the data, potentially associated with Orange County's slow recovery from the 2008 financial crisis. Following the crisis, unemployment, financial instability, and other stressors that continued into 2010 and 2011 likely added to this increase in intimate partner violence. Eight cases reported known financial trouble or job loss triggering the fatal violence, factors that are likely present in additional cases but are unreported. Pointedly, in 32 percent of these cases, the fatal incident followed a recent divorce, separation, affair, and/or child custody dispute.

The historic Seal Beach Massacre that occurred in 2011 is an example of missed opportunities for intervention leading to Orange County's deadliest mass killing to date. Eight people inside of a salon and one person in the parking lot were shot, and only one victim survived. For this mass shooting, a history of domestic violence, mental illness, and a custody dispute all existed between the victim and perpetrator.

"This data shows the pervasiveness of domestic violence and is crucial in raising public awareness and preventing domestic violence fatalities," said Anaheim Police Chief Jorge Cisneros. "It will strengthen our strategies for domestic violence prevention and intervention, which we cannot do without the collaboration between law enforcement and our partners."

### **Access to Firearms Increases Fatality Rate**

Most people are aware of the gun violence epidemic in the United States, a threat that is magnified in situations of domestic violence. Access to firearms in the home is shown to increase fatality rates by 500 percent. The report also indicated that firearms were used in 72 percent of the Orange County fatalities.

Strangulation is the leading cause of domestic violence fatalities after fatalities involving weapons. Between 2006 and 2017, 10 of the 113 intimate partner violence fatalities that occurred in Orange County (9 percent) were caused by strangulation. This number is significant and deserving of further study as a lethality risk and cause. Up to 68 percent of abuse survivors will be victims of near-fatal strangulation by their partner, and victims of strangulation face a 750 percent increase in later homicide-related death. Strangulation often occurs in "heat of the moment situations" due to lack of de-escalation, and lack of easy access to weapons.

### **A Call to Action for Prevention, Lethality Assessment**

The DVDRT report clearly identifies several opportunities for prevention and intervention in Orange County. There are often warning signs before domestic violence turns fatal, however, common signs such as prior physical abuse, verbal abuse, or threats often go unreported. In Orange County, data showed that just under half, 46 percent, of intimate partner fatality cases involved some known history of violence and 9 percent of these cases had a restraining order in place. In many of the fatal incidents reviewed, mental illness or substance abuse was experienced by at least one of the parties, which demonstrates possible missed opportunities for earlier intervention by medical personnel or other professionals.



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The report also identified opportunities for improvement in follow through and follow up on enforcement of disarming laws. Nationwide, half of all female victims of intimate partner homicide and near-lethal domestic violence had a domestic violence restraining order or reported their abusive partner to police. Yet in California, 4,500 abusers with restraining orders against them had firearms in 2019. Gun relinquishment with law enforcement follow up, proactive searches of abusers, and meaningful consequences following a domestic violence restraining order could reduce domestic violence fatalities.

The report provides recommendations on increased education for criminal justice professionals, including judges, lawyers, and law enforcement. Domestic violence training is recommended to assess abusers and victims for lethality factors and counsel for safety planning, ensure police presence on site in cases of domestic violence, and communicate the extreme danger of suicidal threats and guns. Increased training is also recommended for medical to understand gun safety in the home.

DVDRT leaders also emphasized that in addition to unwavering support for victims, “compassionate accountability” is necessary for abusers, ensuring that they are connected with mental health services, law enforcement, rehabilitation, and social services, to provide a positive path forward after a domestic violence offense.

**ABOUT THE ORANGE COUNTY DOMESTIC VIOLENCE DEATH REVIEW TEAM**

The Orange County DVDRT is an interagency team that collects and assesses data regarding domestic violence fatalities across Orange County, California. The Orange County DVDRT consists of leadership from the county’s law enforcement, probation, prosecution, coroner’s office, domestic violence service agencies, law clinics, and courts, along with researchers, psychologists, and scholars.

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