State ranks second in rate of men killing women

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States News Service/The Advertiser

WASHINGTON — There are some areas in which it does not pay to be No. 1. The number of homicides perpetrated by men against women is one of those areas.

This year Louisiana has ceded the top spot to South Carolina, but the state still ranks second in these unenviable statistics, according to a report by the Violence Policy Center, a nonprofit gun-control advocacy group working to reduce firearm deaths and accidents.

"This study dispels the gun lobby claim that the greatest threat to a woman is an attack by a stranger and that having a handgun protects them from death and injury," said Karen Brock, a health policy analyst at the Violence Policy Center and author of the report. "Handguns don't save lives. They take lives. The truth is that the greatest threat to a woman is the man she knows best: husband, boyfriends, and other acquaintances with ready access to handguns."

The report, "When Men Murder Women," draws on FBI data for the year 1998, the most recent year for which figures are available. The information on homicides is based on a survey conducted by police departments and is gathered for the Uniform Crime Reports.

Based on scenarios involving one female murder victim and one male offender, the report ranks second among the states with 61 such killings, a rate of 2.69 homicides per 100,000 people. Only South Carolina has more, with 62 women murdered by men in 1998 in single victim-offender incidents, a rate of 3.12 per 100,000. Other states at the top of the ranking include Arkansas (2.97), North Carolina (2.57), Wyoming (2.51), Maine (2.35) and Oklahoma (2.16). The average nationwide was 1.4 homicides per 100,000.

"Homicides against women are surrounded by an aura of mythology and sensationalism," reads the report. "These supposed typical scenarios are far from real to us all: A woman is depicted alone and vulnerable, perhaps walking on a dark street or at home asleep. Her attacker, according to this archetype, is a twisted stranger who will rape, rob and eventually kill her."

The report slams the role played by the gun lobby in perpetrating this view of the threats faced by women in the United States, criticizing the firearms industry and its supporters for portraying gun ownership as a guarantor of personal safety against attacks by strangers.

"Stranger attack is the least likely homicide scenario that a woman can expect to face, with more than 12 times as many females murdered by men they knew than by strangers, according to FBI statistics cited in the report. More women were killed with guns than with all other weapons combined.

This is the third annual report from the Washington-based group, which was established a decade ago. Last year's report, based on the FBI's 1997 homicide data, ranked Louisiana as number one. In 1997, there were 1,920 such instances of female homicide nationwide, compared to 1,932 in 1998.

"Overall, violent crime is going down, but in these instances against women, there has been a slight increase on last year," said Brock. "It's disappointing. The same states tend to be at the top of the list. Areas of the country where there are a lot of guns, like the South and the West, tend to have more homicides against women."

Calls to the National Rifle Association failed to produce anyone willing to comment on the Violence Policy Center's report. The NRA is the most prominent national organization promoting gun ownership and Second Amendment. Displayed prominently on the NRA Web site is a notice for an NRA-run seminar called "Refuse to be a Victim."

"Three out of four women fall victim to violent crime at some time in their lives," the site reports. "So even your kids."

"This report was done exactly to counter that myth," said Brock. "In reality it's men that these women know that are truly the danger."

If women bring a handgun into a home in which there is the risk of domestic violence, it is the easy access to a gun that often turns the situation.

"We want women to act in their own interest, not the gun lobby's," said Brock. "They need to know that a gun in the home can be used to hurt them or even to kill them."

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