

## SIDE ARM HOMICIDE IN THE ITALIAN PROVINCE OF TRIESTE BETWEEN 1953 AND 2002

U. Nardi, F. Tomasella, F. Gongolo, A. Peretti and F. Costantinides\*

Department of Science of Public Health – Forensic Pathology Unit  
University of Trieste School of Medicine, Trieste, Italy

**SUMMARY** – The authors present a complete overview of the phenomenon of side arm homicide, basing the study on the data collected at the Forensic Pathology Unit of the University of Trieste School of Medicine. Side arms are the most frequently used homicidal method in the town and province of Trieste in a considered study period of 50 years from 1953 to 2002.

The analysis of the collected data shows that the town and province of Trieste are communities still very well disjoined from a reality in which crimes against life are yet very uncommon occurrences. This conclusion is well supported by the fact that it has not been possible to define a category of potential victims, which is on the contrary quite easy among societies where organised crime is consistent and widespread. The popularity of side arm as homicide method in our province supports the hypothesis that these crimes are often not aforethought murders, perpetrated by subjects often afflicted by recorded mental health problems, acting during an insanity raptus. Knives are not only actually the easiest weapons to obtain in a household, but are very easily used as well, even by the subjects not accustomed to handle weapons.

**Key words:** *side arm, homicide*

### Introduction

The authors present a complete overview of the side arm homicide phenomenon, based on the data collected at the Forensic Pathology Unit of the University of Trieste School of Medicine. Side arms are the most used homicidal method in the town and province of Trieste in a study period of 50 years from 1953 to 2002<sup>2</sup>

During the considered time, 39 of 108 cases of wilful murders occurred by means of side arms which were knives (25 cases), table-knives (4 cases), pocket-knives (4 cases), axes (2 cases), shoemaker's knife, bayonet and paper knife (1 case each). In one of the cases of sidearm-perpetrated homicides, it hasn't been possible to make clear which weapon determined the deadly wounds. We have taken into consideration all the cases of homicide which took place in our Province or whose autopsies were disposed by the Criminal Proceedings Law Court to our Forensic Pathology Unit. This study nevertheless contemplates only those cases in which the prosecution reached a final degree of judgement.

The purpose of our study is to define a profile of the sidearm murderer taking the following points into account: sex, age, victim to perpetrator relationship and motive of the crime.

In order to accomplish this target, we compared these data with those related to other types of murders. We have furthermore compared our findings with the studies conducted in other Italian provinces<sup>3,4,5</sup>

In particular, our attention has been paid to the relationship between the murderer and the victim and to the motive of the crime in order to verify if sidearm homicide in Trieste is an occasional murder or a crime of passion, as alleged by several Authors from other Italian forensic pathology realities<sup>4,5,6</sup> Side arm homicides are usually unpremeditated crimes, while firearm murders are premeditated and often typical of organised criminality.

### Description of the territory and demographic data

The province of Trieste is 211.57 sq. km and apart from the capital, it includes five small and scarcely populated

Table 1: Homicides in Trieste in the period 1953–2002.

Murder Instruments	Numbers of cases
Side arms	39
Firearms	24
Blunt instruments	23
Asphyxia	15
Shells*	3
Arson	2
Precipitation	1
Unknown	1

\*Italian journalists and TV operators murdered in Mostar (Bosnia).

districts of Duino-Aurisina, Monrupino, Muggia, S. Dorligo della Valle e Sgonico. The capital covers the area of 84.56 sq.km; hence, for all these reasons, we can consider the province of Trieste as a town-province.

This is confirmed by its population (215,096 up to December 2000), which represents most of the province's population (246,464). 87.24% of the entire province of Trieste population lives in town.

### Statistical analysis and discussion

The 39 sidearm homicide cases represent 36.1% of the total murders in the considered period. The second most frequent murder method is firearm, which was involved in 24 homicide cases, (22.2%). The deaths due to blunt instruments were 23 (21.2%), while asphyxia has been considered responsible in 15 cases (13.8%).

Generally, shells are used in war or massacres; in our research, they were the cause of death of 3 journalists and TV operators in Mostar (Bosnia) during the war in former Yugoslavia in 1994. Others murder methods were arson and precipitation.

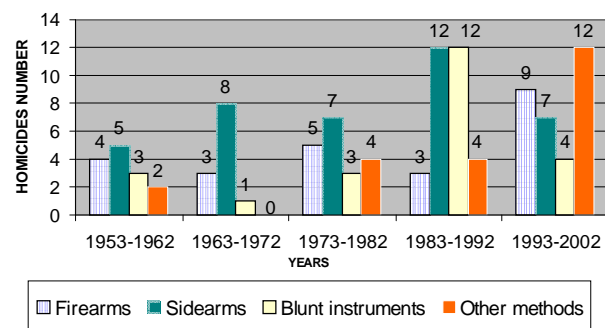


Figure 1: homicides per decade in Trieste subdivided by method.

Only in one case it was impossible to identify the exact murder method, because of the advanced decomposition of the corpse, as shown in Table 1.

Within the considered study period, the decade 1993-2002 has shown to have the highest rate of homicides compared to other decades: 32 cases (29.6%). In the previous ten years the number of cases was slightly smaller 31 murders (28.7% of the total amount).

The sidearm homicide number per decade is rather uniform; the decade in which there have been more sidearm murders was 1983-1992 (12 cases), while in the decade 1953-1962 we have records of only 5 cases (Figure 1).

In the last decade of the considered period, the use of firearms in homicides was prevalent; which is interesting, because in the previous decades the preferred weapons were always side arms.

Considering the perpetrators of the crimes, not in all murders it was possible to clearly define the responsible person: there were some cases in which the murderer was not identified (21 cases) and two in which the identity was uncertain.

In our research we considered only 85 cases (85 victims) in which the perpetrator was ascertained.

In 3 occasions a man committed a double homicide (1 case in 1955, 1 in 1972 and 1 in 1982).

Only in one case a murder killed twice (1974 and 1987) using two different methods (respectively hammer and knife + axe). Afterwards he killed the third person, who was hospitalised in a mental health clinic in another province.

In 3 occasions the murder was perpetrated by 2 persons in complicity: in one occasion a male and a female, and in the other 2 cases 2 males.

We have considered a final amount of 84 homicides perpetrators of which 76 (90.5%) were males and 8 (9.5%) were females.

Considering side arm homicides, we can see that in 34 cases of 39 the murderer was a male, in 3 cases it was a female; in 2 cases the murderer was not found.

In the considered fifty years there were no firearm homicides carried out by women. Among 108 deaths, there were 61 cases of women victims which represents 56.4% of the total number.

Our records show no significant differences between the number of female and male victims of side arms homicide (19 males and 20 females), while in cases of victims of other kind of homicide the female to male ratio is always about 2:1 (15:9 in case of firearms; 15:8 for blunt instruments; 9:4 for asphyxia).

*Table 2: Age of perpetrators. Since in some cases murderers killed more than one victim and in other cases the crimes were perpetrated by more than one person, the "number of homicides" column gives, in this table, a total result of no significance.*

Age of perpetrator	Number of homicides
10-19	8
20-29	17
30-39	25
40-49	14
50-59	13
60-69	3
>70	5
Unknown	3

We have furthermore subdivided the recognised perpetrators by groups of age, considering the number of committed homicides (Table 2).

In 3 cases it has not been possible to clearly identify the age of the perpetrator, with the available data: (two cases dating back to the fifties' and one case of a person shot by a foreign border police officer of unknown identity).

25 homicides (28.4%) were carried out by subjects aged between 30 and 39 years; 17 (19.3%) by subjects from 20 to 29 years old and 14 (15.9%) by subjects from 40 to 49 years old; in 13 cases (14.7%) the age of the perpetrator was between 50 and 59.

Having classified by age the murderers of homicides in which it was clearly possible to identify the perpetrator, it has been possible to notice that in the youngest considered class, none of the 8 committed homicides was perpetrated with firearms, while side arms were employed in 6 cases (Table 3).

*Table 3: Age of murderers and type of used weapons.*

Age of perpetrator	Side arms	Firearms	Blunt instruments
10-19	6	/	1
20-29	4	6	4
30-39	10	6	8
40-49	6	3	5
50-59	6	3	2
60-69	1	1	/
>70	3	2	/
Unknown	1	/	/

*Table 4: Age of victims is shown in years.*

Age of victims	Number of victims
10<	4
10-19	3
20-29	18
30-39	19
40-49	23
50-59	14
60-69	12
>70	14
Unknown	1

Subdividing the victims by age it is possible to show that most frequently they are 40 to 49 years old (23 cases i.e. 21.3%) (Table 4).

In 18 cases the age of the victims was between 20 and 29 years, while in 19 cases the victim's age was between 30 and 39 years (17.6%). The less represented range for the victims is 10-19 years of age.

Trying to classify the homicide victims according to the type of the wound, we found out that the victim of a side arm murder has an average age between 40 and 49 years, while victims of firearms are most frequently 20 to 29 years old.

It is of furthermore interest to notice that 12 out of 14 over seventy years old victims have been killed with side arms or blunt instruments and none by means of firearms (Table 5).

Even though homicide among family members in Italy is considered quite rare (1 case out of 5 on a national base), it is also nevertheless true that in the province of Trieste, in the period under study, this particular kind of murder has occurred 33 times (30.5%). We have recorded the following cases:

*Table 5: Types of homicide and age of victims in the study period.*

Age of victims	Side arms	Firearms	Blunt instruments
10<	1	1	1
10-19	2	/	1
20-29	4	10	3
30-39	6	6	1
40-49	9	3	5
50-59	6	3	2
60-69	4	1	4
>70	6	/	6
Unknown	1	/	/

Table 6: Victim-perpetrator relationships.

Victim-perpetrator relationship	Number homicides
Acquaintance-friendship	10
Husband/wife	12
Father/son-daugh.	19
Other relatives	12
Adulterous affair	2
Eterosexual liaison	13
Homosexual liaison	5
Work	1
Unrelated	13
Unknown	21

- The wife was killed by her husband in 12 cases (11.1%);
- the mother was killed by a son/daughter in 10 cases (9.2%);
- the father has killed son/daughter in 3 cases;
- a son has killed his father in 3 cases;
- mother has killed her son in 2 cases;
- 2 cases of homicides among siblings;
- in 1 case father and mother killed their son.

Further ten considered cases are homicides among acquaintances or friends (Table 6).

It is interesting to notice how the use of side arms has been recorded in most of the cases of homicides in a father and son relationship, while firearms were a frequent method employed in most of the homicides occurred between married couples (Table 7).

The motives of all wilful murders whose data have been analyzed in our study are defined as trivial in 29 cases

Table 7: Victim-perpetrator relationship referred to employed weapons.

Victim-perpetrator relationship	Side arms	Firearms	Blunt instruments
Acquaintance-friendship	7	2	/
Husband/wife	3	6	2
Father/son-daugh.	9	2	5
Other relatives	5	3	3
Adulterous affair	2	/	/
Eterosexual liaison	4	3	1
Homosexual liaison	2	/	/
Work	/	/	1
Unrelated	2	1	2
Unknown	5	7	9

Table 8: Motives of crimes and number of homicides.

Motive	Number of homicides
Trivial	29
Insanity	16
Jealousy	13
Sexual assault	13
Robbery	7
War*	4
Political	4
Euthanasia	2
Depression	2
Crime of passion	1
Weapons dealing	1
Drugs peddling	1
Health	1
Money	1
Police on duty	1
Honour	1
Racket	1
Unknown	10

\*Cases whose autopsies were disposed by Criminal Proceedings Law Court and conducted in Trieste by our Forensic Pathology Unit on Italian victims of the former Yugoslavia conflict (a journalist and two TV operators deceased in Bosnia in 1994) and during the peace keeping operations in Somalia (a TV operator killed in 1994).

(26.8%), which is a rather paradoxical finding for such a serious crime. In 16 cases (14.8%) the demonstrated motive of homicide has been insanity of the perpetrator, while in 13 cases (12%) jealousy and sexual assault were the causes of the committed murder (Table 8).

It is easy to notice how the crime motive, related to the side arms murders, consists of 11 cases of trivial homicides (28.2%) and of 7 cases (17.9%) which are due to insanity raptus of the perpetrator. Trivial homicides are also very often carried out with blunt instruments while firearms are the most commonly used weapons in cases of jealousy murders (Table 9).

## Conclusion

The analysis of the collected data shows that the town and province of Trieste are communities still very well disjoined from a reality of violent organised crime: crimes against life and personal injuries are yet very uncommon occurrences. The small number of homicides pro decades that we have reported and a very wide range of the victims'

Table 9: Motives of the crime and type of weapons.

Motives	Side arms	Firearms	Blunt instruments
trivial	11	6	7
insanity	7	/	5
jealousy	3	8	2
sexual assault	6	/	2
robbery	1	1	4
war	/	1	/
political	1	2	1
euthanasia	1	/	/
depression	1	1	/
crime of passion	1	/	/
weapons dealing	/	/	/
drugs peddling	1	/	/
health	/	1	/
money	1	/	/
police on duty	/	1	/
honour	/	1	/
racket	/	/	/
unknown	5	2	2

age are a clear evidence that homicide remains an occasional type of crime among the population. This conclusion is well supported by the fact that so far it has not been possible to define a category of potential victims, which is on the contrary quite easy among societies where organised crime is consistent and widespread.

This situation is consistent with a multiethnic societies since the native population is of very high average age, with straitened social conditions, even if it is limited to personal and familiar realities. A rather high number of suicides afflicting the town of Trieste could depend on these aforementioned social circumstances. The authors have yet noticed that the suicide incidence - in the past years - is somehow decreasing and this could be probably due to the prevention programs of the Italian Ministry of Health.<sup>8</sup>

It has been noticed that the inner conflicts afflicting an individual have effects inside the familiar environment,

giving a portrait of typical side arm murderer characterised by the following features: male 30 to 39 years old, perpetrating homicide among family, as a crime of passion or with a trivial motive.

The popularity of side arm as homicide means in our province corroborates the hypothesis that these crimes are often not aforethought murders, perpetrated by subjects often afflicted by recorded mental health problems, acting during an insanity raptus. Knives not only are actually the easiest weapons to obtain in a household, but they are very easily used as well by the subjects not accustomed to handle weapons.

We have therefore collected data confirming that the firearms are used in organised crime realities very different from that of Trieste in which side arms are the most frequently used weapon, being typically available in occasional crimes taking place at home.

## References

1. CORRERA MM., COSTANTINIDES F, MARTUCCI P, Il fenomeno dell'omicidio volontario nella provincia di Trieste: il decennio 1981-1990, *Rass. It. Crim.* (1992) 4, 463-485
2. COSTANTINIDES F, GIUSTI G.V, L'omicidio volontario nella provincia di Trieste dal 1945 al 1980, *Riv. It. Med. Leg.* (1982) 1: 111-150.
3. CIPOLLONI L, D'ANNIBALE C, MORTATI L, CECCHI R, L'omicidio volontario nella casistica del settore medico-legale romano negli anni 1985-1997, *Zacchia Archiv. It. Med. Leg.* (2000), 4: 507-522.
4. MORTATI L, Il mezzo lesivo nei reati di omicidio, casistica dell'Istituto medico-legale dell'Università di Roma "La Sapienza" negli anni 1985-1997, *Zacchia Archiv. It. Med. Leg.* (1999), 1-2: 157-168.
5. VENTURA F, MOLINELLI A., ANGI A., REBIZZO A., BRAIDOTTI A., CANALE M, L'omicidio da arma da fuoco nel settore medico legale genovese nel decennio 1991-2000.
6. TRAVERSO GB, Gli Omicidi, in *La criminalità in Italia* (2002) ed. Il Mulino, 67-78
7. CIAPPIS, Gli Omicidi in Famiglia, in *La criminalità in Italia* (2002) ed. Il Mulino, 79-90.
8. AA. VV. "Amalia. Telefono Speciale. Il primo triennio di un progetto di prevenzione", *Arti Grafiche Stella, Trieste*, 2002