

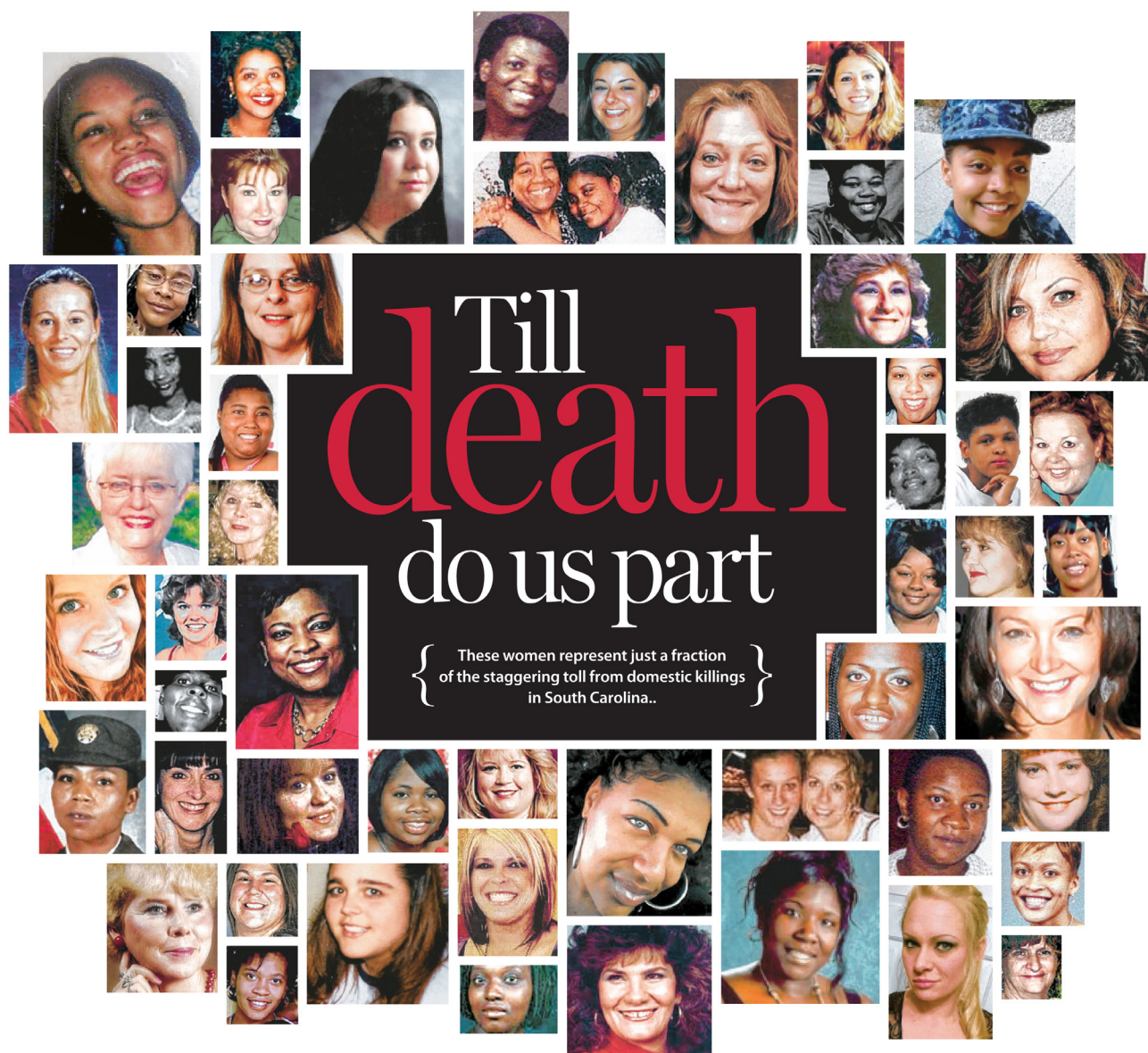
The Post and Courier

THE SOUTH'S OLDEST DAILY NEWSPAPER • FOUNDED 1803

WEDNESDAY, August 20, 2014

Charleston, North Charleston, S.C.

The outlook for domestic violence victims is grim in a male-dominated state where lawmakers resist change, punishment is light and abusers go free again and again.



S.C. was No. 1 this past year for the rate of women killed by men, with a toll more than double the U.S. rate

BY DOUG PARDUE, GLENN SMITH,
JENNIFER BERRY HAWES and NATALIE CAULA HAUFF
The Post and Courier

More than 300 women were shot, stabbed, strangled, beaten, bludgeoned or burned to death over the past decade by men in South Carolina, dying at a rate of one every 12 days while the state does little to stem the carnage from domestic abuse.

More than three times as many women have died here at the hands of current or former lovers than the number of Palmetto State soldiers killed in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars combined.

It's a staggering toll that for more than 15 years has placed South Carolina among the top 10 states na-

tionally in the rate of women killed by men. The state topped the list on three occasions, including this past year, when it posted a murder rate for women that was more than double the national rate.

Awash in guns, saddled with ineffective laws and lacking enough shelters for the battered, South Carolina is a state where the deck is stacked against women trapped in the cycle of abuse, a Post and Courier investigation has found.

Couple this with deep-rooted beliefs about the sanctity of marriage and the place of women in the home, and the vows "till death do us part" take on a sinister tone.

S.C. is No. 1 for women killed by men

The beat of killings has remained a constant in South Carolina, even as domestic violence rates have tumbled 64 percent nationwide over the past two decades, according to an analysis of crime statistics by the newspaper. This blood has spilled in every corner of the state, from beach towns and mountain hamlets to farming villages and sprawling urban centers, cutting across racial, ethnic and economic lines.

Consider 25-year-old Erica Olsen of Anderson, who was two months pregnant when her boyfriend stabbed her 25 times in front of her young daughter in October 2006. Or Andrenna Butler, 72, whose estranged husband drove from Pennsylvania to gun her down in her Newberry home in December. Or 30-year-old Dara Watson, whose fiancé shot her in the head at their Mount Pleasant home and dumped her in a Lowcountry forest in February 2012 before killing himself.

Interviews with more than 100 victims, counselors, police, prosecutors and judges reveal an ingrained, multi-generational problem in South Carolina, where abusive behavior is passed down from parents to their children. Yet the problem essentially remains a silent epidemic, a private matter that is seldom discussed outside the home until someone is seriously hurt.

“We have the notion that what goes on between a couple is just between the couple and is none of our business,” said 9th Circuit Solicitor Scarlett Wilson, chief prosecutor for Charleston and Berkeley counties. “Where that analysis goes wrong is we have to remember that couple is training their little boy that this is how he treats women and training their little girl that this is what she should expect from her man. The cycle is just perpetual.”

A lack of action

South Carolina is hardly alone in dealing with domestic violence. Nationwide, an average of three women are killed by a current or former lover every day. Other states are moving forward with reform measures, but South Carolina has largely remained idle while its domestic murder rate consistently ranks among the nation’s worst.

Though state officials have long lamented the high death toll for women, lawmakers have put little money into prevention programs and have resisted efforts to toughen penalties for abusers. This past year alone, a dozen measures to combat domestic violence died in the Legislature.

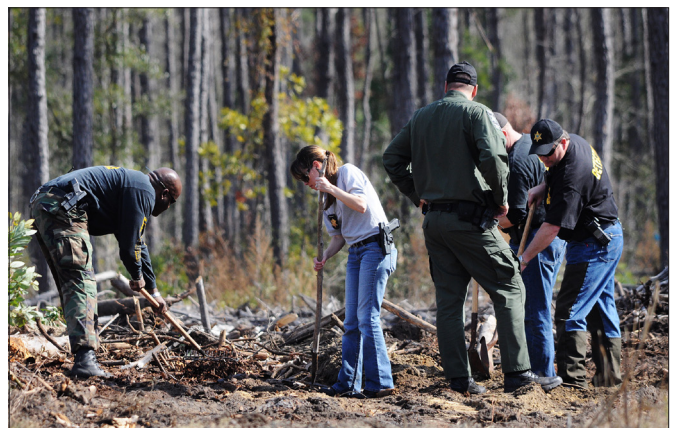
The state’s largest metro areas of Greenville, Columbia and Charleston lead the death tally in sheer numbers. But rural pockets, such as Marlboro, Allendale and Greenwood counties, hold more danger because the odds are higher there that a woman will die from domestic violence. These are places where resources for victims of abuse are thin, a predicament the state has done little to address.

All 46 counties have at least one animal shelter to care



FILE/STAFF

The casket of 6-year-old Samenia Robinson is laid to rest alongside those of her mother, Detra Rainey, 39, and three brothers in Hillsboro Brown Cemetery in 2006. Detra Rainey’s husband was accused of fatally shooting her and his stepchildren inside their North Charleston mobile home.



FILE/ANDREW KNAPP/STAFF

Investigators search Francis Marion National Forest in 2012 near the site where Dara Watson’s sport utility vehicle was found burning off Halfway Creek Road. Her fiancé fatally shot her at their Mount Pleasant home, dumped her body in the forest and then killed himself. days later.



FILE/ANDREW KNAPP/STAFF

Police and coroner’s staff remove a body from a mobile home on North Charleston’s Thoroughbred Drive in June 2013 after Peter Williams fatally shot Zakiya Lawson, a 34-year-old mother of seven, before turning the gun on himself.

for stray dogs and cats, but the state has only 18 domestic violence shelters to help women trying to escape abuse in the home. Experts say that just isn’t enough in a state that records around 36,000 incidents of domestic abuse every year. More than 380 victims were turned away from shelters around the state between

"To be in the top 10 states for so many years is pretty significant.

I think that says the state needs to take advantage of this opportunity to craft good policy and legislation to ensure that it is not failing half of its population."

Paulette Sullivan Moore, vice president of public policy for Washington, D.C.-based National Network to End Domestic Violence



FILE/ANDREW KNAPP/STAFF

Crime scene investigators remove evidence from the home of David Hedrick and Dara Watson in Mount Pleasant. The reason Hedrick shot and killed his fiancée and then killed himself was never determined.



PROVIDED

Farah Abbasi lingered in a coma after police found her covered in blood behind the counter of her husband's minimart in 2008. The mother of two died two days later in the hospital. Her husband was charged with killing her.



PROVIDED

A bloody knife lies on the floor of the West Ashley home where authorities said Chesley Black stabbed his wife, Amanda Kalman Black, to death during a September 2011 argument.

In S.C., abusers go free time and time again

2012 and 2013 because they had no room, according to the state Department of Social Services.

Oconee County, in South Carolina's rural northwest corner, realized it had a problem last year after six people died over six months in domestic killings. The sheriff pushed for the county to open a shelter after 58-year-old Gwendolyn Hiott was shot dead while trying to leave her husband, who then killed himself. She had nowhere to go, but the couple's 24 cats and dogs were taken to the local animal shelter to be fed and housed while waiting for adoption.

When asked, most state legislators profess deep concern over domestic violence. Yet they maintain a legal system in which a man can earn five years in prison for abusing his dog but a maximum of just 30 days in jail for beating his wife or girlfriend on a first offense.

Many states have harsher penalties. Mississippi, Ohio and Tennessee, for example, set the maximum jail stay for the same crime at six months. In Georgia and Alabama it is a year.

This extra time behind bars not only serves as a deterrent but also can save lives, according to counselors, prosecutors and academics. Studies have shown that the risk of being killed by an angry lover declines three months after separation and drops sharply after a year's time.

Wife beaters get lenient treatment

More than a third of those charged in South Carolina domestic killings over the past decade had at least one prior arrest for criminal domestic violence or assault. About 60 percent of those people had multiple prior arrests on those charges, with one man alone charged with seven domestic assaults. The majority spent just days in jail as a result of those crimes.

A prime example is Lee Dell Bradley, a 59-year-old Summerville man accused of fatally stabbing his long-time girlfriend, Frances Lawrence, 59, in late May. De-

spite two prior arrests for violating court orders meant to protect Lawrence, the longest Bradley ever stayed in jail for abusing women was 81 days. And that came only after he appeared before a judge on a domestic violence charge for the fifth time.

Then there is 55-year-old David Reagan of Charleston, who spent a total of less than a year in jail on three previous domestic violence convictions before he was charged with strangling a girlfriend in 2013 while awaiting trial on an earlier domestic violence charge involving the girlfriend.

The Post and Courier investigation also found:

- Police and court resources vary wildly across the state. Larger cities, such as Charleston, generally have dedicated police units and special courts to deal with domestic violence. Most small towns do not, making it difficult to track abusers, catch signs of escalating violence and make services readily available to both victims and abusers.

- Accused killers are funneled into a state court system that struggles with overloaded dockets and depends on plea deals to push cases through. Of those convicted of domestic homicides since 2005, nearly half pleaded guilty to lesser charges that carry lighter sentences.

- Guns were the weapon of choice in nearly seven out of every 10 domestic killings of women over the past decade, but South Carolina lawmakers have blocked efforts to keep firearms out of the hands of abusers. Unlike South Carolina, more than two-thirds of all states bar batterers facing restraining orders from having firearms, and about half of those allow or require police to seize guns when they respond to domestic violence complaints.

- Abusers get out of jail quickly because of low bail requirements. Some states, including Maryland and Connecticut, screen domestic cases to determine which

offenders pose the most danger to their victims. South Carolina doesn't do this.

- Domestic abusers often are diverted to anger-management programs rather than jail even though many experts agree that they don't work. In Charleston, authorities hauled one young man into court in March after he failed to complete his anger-management program. His excuse: He had missed his appointments because he had been jailed again for breaking into his girlfriend's home and beating her.
- Victims are encouraged to seek orders of protection, but the orders lack teeth, and the state has no central means to alert police that an order exists. Take the case of 46-year-old Robert Irby, who still had the restraining order paperwork in his hand the day he confessed to stalking and killing his ex-girlfriend in Greer in 2010. He gunned her down outside her home the day after he learned about the order.
- The vast majority of states have fatality-review teams in place that study domestic killings for patterns and lessons that can be used to prevent future violence. South Carolina is one of only nine states without such a team.

Legislative death

Located in the heart of the Bible Belt, South Carolina is a deeply conservative state where men have ruled for centuries. The state elected its first female governor four years ago, but men continue to dominate elected offices, judicial appointments and other seats of government and corporate power. In many respects, the state's power structure is a fraternity reluctant to challenge the belief that a man's home is his castle and what goes on there, stays there.

"Some of this is rooted in this notion of women as property and maintaining the privacy of what goes on within the walls of the home," said state Rep. Gilda Cobb-Hunter, an Orangeburg Democrat. "And a lot of it has to do with this notion of gun rights as well. When all of those things are rolled into one, it tends to speak to why we rank so high in the number of fatalities."

Against this backdrop, it has often been difficult to get traction for spending more tax dollars for domestic violence programs and bolstering protections for the abused. The only consistent state money spent on such programs comes from a sliver of proceeds from marriage license fees — a figure that has hovered for years around \$800,000 for the entire state. That's just a tad more than lawmakers earmarked this year for improvements to a fish farm in Colleton County. It equates to roughly \$22 for each domestic violence victim.

"Even as we have gone up in the number of murders and attempted murders over the years, that support has never changed," said Rebecca Williams-Agee, director of prevention and education for the S.C. Coalition Against Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault. "It's all wrapped up in the politics of this state and the stereotypes of domestic violence victims. Why does she stay? Why doesn't

Faces of domestic violence

Stories of witnesses and survivors



Danielle Richardson

Two years ago, Danielle Richardson poured out her heart in a book titled "God Heard My Cries: The Deliverance."

She was 37 and had spent much of her adult life drugged, drunk or both to escape what she witnessed at 16.

In the early morning hours of June 18, 1991, her mother's longtime boyfriend, Greatly Montgomery, stormed into their East Side Charleston home drunk and argumentative, the way he did many nights. He railed at Richardson's mother and the blows began. Richardson heard her mother's screams as she tumbled from furniture to wall. Her mother then crashed into Richardson's bedroom, blood spewing from 38 stab wounds. Richardson pressed a sheet into one gaping wound, but blood still flowed.

Neighbors called 911 and held Montgomery until they arrived and hauled him to jail, where he committed suicide a couple weeks later.

The trauma of that night stole the next 16 years of Richardson's life. Then on July 15, 2007, she awoke in pain and vomit and promised God she'd sober up and straighten out her life.

She stumbled a couple of times but eventually found the strength she needed at Ebenezer AME Church on Nassau Street not far from where her mother died.

Today, Richardson says she's found happiness in motherhood and in God and church.

"I'm determined not to be in an unhealthy relationship ... ever," she said. "I never want to see anybody carry that burden."

she pull herself up by her own bootstraps?”

Alicia Alvarez put up with abuse for years before she got the courage to leave. The Charleston mother of two said abusers create an atmosphere that robs victims of confidence.

Abusers don't begin by hitting or killing, Alvarez said. “It begins with little criticisms, second-guessing everything you do. They get in your brain so that when they tell you, ‘You are worthless,’ you believe it.”

Just a few months after South Carolina's most recent designation as the deadliest in the nation for women, the state's Legislature took up about a dozen bills aimed at toughening penalties for abusers, keeping guns out of their hands and keeping them away from their victims.

The bills languished in committees and died, with the exception of a lone provision that aims to protect the welfare of family pets left in the care of a person facing domestic abuse charges.

Five of those measures got stuck in the Senate Judiciary Committee, a panel filled with lawyers. Its chairman is Larry Martin, a Republican from Pickens County, where nine domestic killings occurred over the past decade.

Martin wasn't sure why the bills failed to advance, but he stressed that he is a strong supporter of measures to reduce domestic abuse. He said lawmakers had approved meaningful legislation on the topic in recent years and that the measures had a powerful impact, though he couldn't recall what those bills were.

“I promise you there is no effort to hold anything up,” he said. “We are generally supportive of legislation that helps reduce the horrible statistics we have each year on domestic violence.”

If so, Cobb-Hunter hasn't seen it. She pushed a proposal to require abusers to surrender their firearms if convicted of domestic violence or facing a restraining order. The proposal went nowhere after running headlong into the state's powerful gun lobby in an election year, she said.

“You put those two things together and you see the results — nothing happens. But, at the same time, families are being destroyed by this violence. That shouldn't be acceptable to any of us.”

State Rep. Bakari Sellers' proposal to stiffen penalties for first-time domestic violence offenders met a similar fate. The Democrat from Denmark, who is running for lieutenant governor, said some of his fellow House Judiciary Committee members seemed more intent on blaming victims for staying in abusive relationships than in giving the bill a fair airing.

“It's a big issue statewide, but people were just indifferent,” Sellers said. “The sad part is that women will die.”

After several calls to legislators from The Post and Courier, House Speaker Bobby Harrell contacted the newspaper in early June to say he was disappointed the session had ended with no action on domestic violence reform. The Charleston Republican pledged

to appoint an ad hoc committee, led by a female lawmaker, to study the issue prior to the next legislative session and chart a path for change. No appointments had been made by Monday, but they were said to be in the works.

This time, Harrell said, things will be different.

Paulette Sullivan Moore, vice president of public policy for Washington, D.C.-based National Network to End Domestic Violence, said curbing domestic violence is possible with good laws and systems for protecting women. But South Carolina's lingering presence among the top states for domestic homicides shows the state isn't getting the job done, she said.

“To be in the top 10 states for so many years is pretty significant,” she said. “I think that says the state needs to take advantage of this opportunity to craft good policy and legislation to ensure that it is not failing half of its population.”

If history holds true, 30 more women will be dead by the end of the next legislative session in June 2015, when lawmakers have another chance to stem the violence.

The thin line

Every year, people from across South Carolina gather at the Statehouse in Columbia to remember those killed in domestic violence, a somber ceremony marked by the reading of names and tolling of bells.

Politicians, prosecutors and other advocates repeat calls for an end to the bloodshed and proclaim criminal domestic violence the state's No. 1 law enforcement priority.

Poets, scholars and philosophers have long rhapsodized about the thin line separating love from hate, a delicate thread that, when bent, can fuel a ravenous passion for reckoning and retribution. All too often in South Carolina, this ends with women paying the ultimate price.

That was the case just before Christmas 2011, when Avery Blandin, 49, stalked through the front of a Wal-Mart store in suburban Greenville County, seething with rage and carrying a 12-inch knife tucked into the waistband of his slacks.

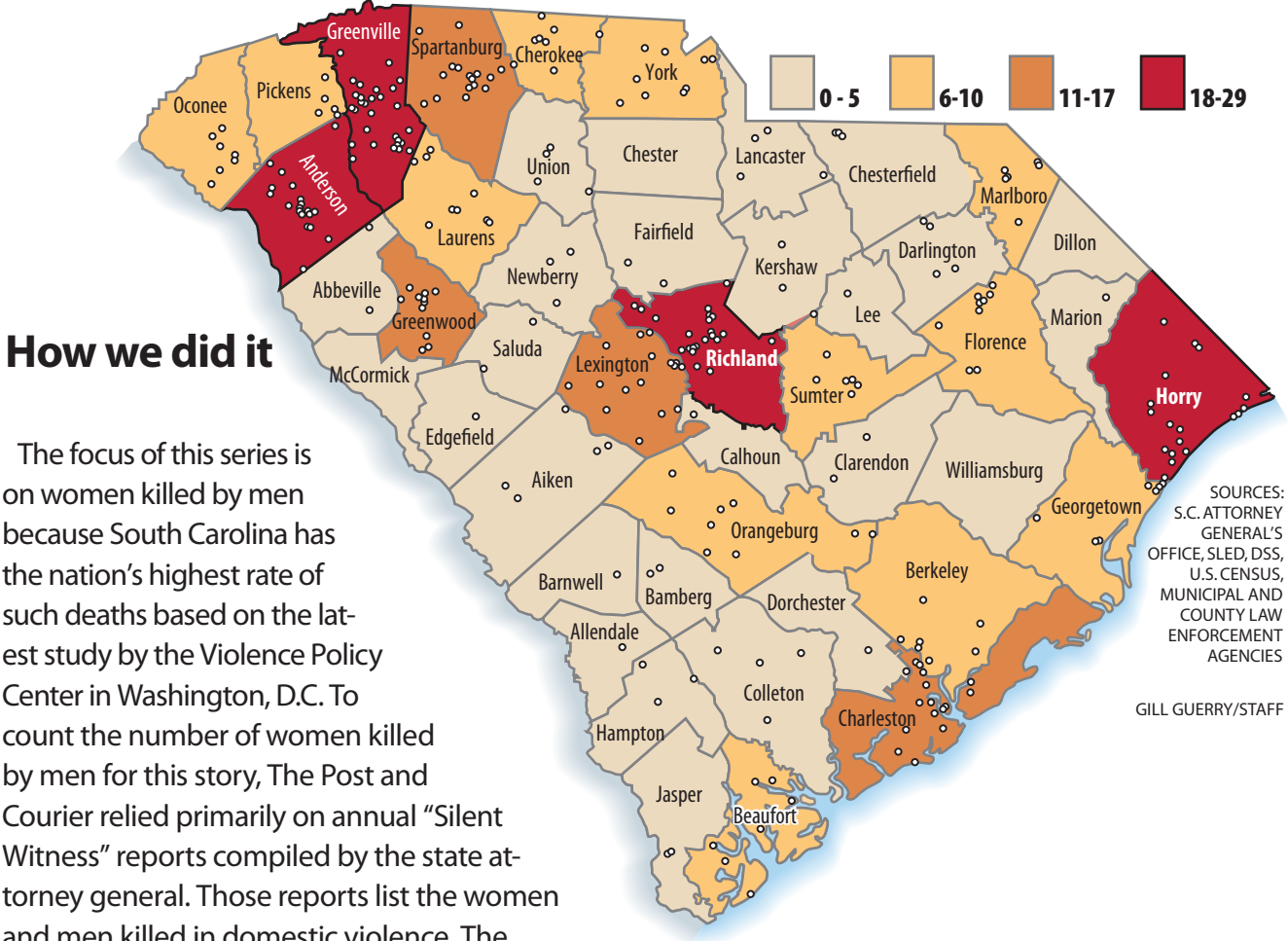
Built like a fireplug and prone to blowing his stack, Blandin marched into the bank inside the store where his wife Lilia worked and began shouting. He jerked her onto a table and pulled out his knife, stabbing her again and again. When she slumped to the floor, he stomped on her head and neck.

Lilia died within the hour. She was 38.

Blandin had used his wife as a punching bag for years. She had filed charges against him, sought orders of protection and slept in her car to keep him at bay. But none of that stopped him from making good on his threats to kill her that December day.

“I loved her,” Blandin told an Upstate courtroom after pleading guilty to her murder. “She was my wife, my best friend.”

Women killed by men in South Carolina 2005-2013



The focus of this series is on women killed by men because South Carolina has the nation's highest rate of such deaths based on the latest study by the Violence Policy Center in Washington, D.C. To count the number of women killed by men for this story, The Post and Courier relied primarily on annual "Silent Witness" reports compiled by the state attorney general. Those reports list the women and men killed in domestic violence. The state's laws define criminal domestic violence as involving the following relationships: present and former spouses, men and women who share a child, and men and women who live together or used to live together.

The Post and Courier, with the assistance of the South Carolina Press Association, ran criminal background checks on the killers listed in the reports. The newspaper then compiled the victims and killers into a database covering the years 2005-14, adding in criminal backgrounds, details about the killings and information from court records, law enforcement agencies and news accounts.

Some other tallies of the death toll from domestic violence show markedly higher numbers. That's because they include other relationships, such as boyfriends and girlfriends who don't live together, and family members. For example, a study of domestic violence in South Carolina between 2007 and 2011 listed 412 killings over that five-year period alone. That count by the S.C. Department of Public Safety, Office of Highway Safety and Justice Programs included family members and romantic relationships in which the couple didn't live together.

Men are also victims of domestic killings.

They accounted for 19 percent of the dead in South Carolina from 2005 to June 2014. In many of those cases the women killed the man in apparent self-defense, The Post and Courier found. Nationally, the percentage of men killed in domestic violence is 15 percent.

About this project

This project is the result of an eight-month investigation by the Post and Courier. The Center for Investigative Reporting's Editorial Director Mark Katches consulted on and helped edit the series, while Senior Editor for Data Journalism Jennifer LaFleur provided database training. CIR also provided generous funding for data research and print graphics.

CIR also helped form a consortium with The Post and Courier, WCIV-TV and the University of South Carolina to bring the results of this investigation to a larger audience. University of South Carolina students Isabelle Khurshudyan and Sarah Ellis helped the newspaper and its partners with data research.