

LOCAL NEWS

Are older gay men targets of violence?

Homicide experts say gay victims tend to be older, killed in their homes

By [PHIL LaPADULA](#)

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By most accounts, Richard Shoemaker was a rock of stability within the gay community. The 60-year-old was a successful and respected accountant who owned a business in Wilton Manors. He also owned a nice home in Fort Lauderdale. Shoemaker was previously in a relationship for 17 years.

But when that relationship ended recently, Shoemaker became involved with someone a generation his junior.

Now that young man, Matthew Hicks, 29, stands accused of being Shoemaker's killer.

Familiar scenario

In the past few months, the story has seemed to repeat itself with eerie familiarity: a middle-aged or older gay man is found murdered in his home, beaten or strangled to death. In fact, gay homicide experts say such a scenario is typical of gay murders throughout the country.

"The GLBT homicide victims tend to be older than the average age of homicide victims," said Dallas Drake, principal researcher for the Center for Homicide Research, a nonprofit organization based in Minneapolis that conducts nationwide research on gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender homicides. He noted that the mean age for gay homicide victims is 37.7 years compared with a mean age of 25 years for non-gay murder victims.

Less than two weeks after Shoemaker's murder, Steven Schumacher, 72, was found murdered in his Oakland Park apartment. Schumacher, a regular customer at Cubby Hole bar, also enjoyed the company of younger men, according to acquaintances.

On Sept. 22, police arrested Eric Patrick, 42, a felon who had just been released from prison on Aug. 9. Police say Patrick beat and strangled Schumacher before stealing his pick-up truck and ATM card.

And in January, Dr. Harry T. Grossman, a gay physician, was found beaten to death in his home in the Citrus Isles neighborhood of Fort Lauderdale. Two young suspects, Joseph Fleischer, 18, and Scott Whisenant, 17, were arrested in that case.

False sense of security?

"[The older gay men] may think they are secure because they are more stable and financially secure," Drake said. "But what happens is they bring this young person into their lives who is not stable. In many cases, such a person is not OK with his own sexuality. When that person feels threatened, they lash out and kill."



Clockwise from top left: Richard Shoemaker, 60, was found murdered in his Fort Lauderdale home Sept. 18. Steven Schumacher, 72, was found murdered in his Oakland Park apartment Sept. 27. Dr. Harry Grossman was found beaten to death in his Fort Lauderdale home Jan. 23. Clarence Patton, acting executive director of the New York City Gay & Lesbian Anti-Violence Project, said South Florida could benefit from a gay anti-violence project of its own.

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Suspect says he targeted gay men

Drake suggested that mature gay men who want to help troubled young men should refer them to people or agencies who are trained to help them.

"If you're looking for a relationship, you should look for someone who is similarly situated," Drake said. "If you're stable, you should look for someone who is stable, whether they're younger or older. A relationship of inequality can be problematic."

Strangulation, beatings common

Another factor that sets gay homicides apart from non-gay murders is the method of killing. Three-quarters of homicides in the United States are committed with firearms, Drake said. But he noted that only 25 percent of gay murders are committed with guns. Most gay killings involve beatings, strangulation or stabbings.

In the past year and a half, at least seven gay men have been murdered in South Florida.

All of the victims were found dead in their homes. In almost all of the cases, the victims were either strangled or beaten to death.

The one exception was the double murder of Alan Gould and Leonard Larsen, who were found shot to death in Gould's home in Oakland Park. A friend of Gould's and Larsen told the Express that the two former lovers were heavily involved in crystal meth use, and he speculated their killings might have been drug related. No one has been arrested in the case.

The murders of Henser Leiva and Jesus Pineda were believed to be pick-up murders. Both men were found murdered in their Miami homes within a week of each other in August 2004. A suspect, Carlos Sanchez, 41, was arrested in the Pineda killing.

Expert: robbery often 'an afterthought'

In many gay murders, the victim is also robbed. For example, the suspected killer took the victim's vehicle in the two recent murders of Shoemaker and Schumacher. And in the Leiva and Pineda murders, the victims' vehicles were also taken.

But, according to Drake, it would be a mistake to assume that robbery was the primary motive in any of these cases.

"One of the misconceptions out there is that a lot of these murders are robberies gone bad," Drake said. "But often robbery tends to be an afterthought."

The accused killer of Schumacher, Eric Patrick, has told police that he had been targeting gay men for a month in order to rob them. But in Schumacher's case, he apparently did not choose a wealthy victim, Drake noted. Schumacher lived in a modest apartment in Oakland Park.

"He could have targeted wealthy men, but he didn't. He was targeting gay men," Drake said.

Furthermore, the "overkill" aspect of Schumacher's murder---he was tied up, beaten, his teeth were knocked out and he was strangled---is the signature of an anti-gay hate crime, Drake said.

Drake said some police may avoid classifying a case as a hate crime because it makes it more burdensome.

"There are some very stringent guidelines about what is and what is not a hate crime," Drake said.

"And once it is labeled a hate crime, it sets into motion a whole set of protocols that is cumbersome and takes a lot of work."

Patton: Florida needs gay anti-violence project

Fort Lauderdale has one of the largest populations of gay seniors in the country, so it is not surprising that some of them are falling victim to violence, said Clarence Patton, acting executive director of the New York City Gay & Lesbian Anti-Violence Project.

"The question to be asked in the Fort Lauderdale area is how aware are the gay seniors of the potential dangers that they may be facing," Patton said.

He added, "One of the unfortunate things about South Florida and Florida in general is that there are not any gay anti-violence programs."

He noted that there are about 20 gay anti-violence projects throughout the country.

Prevention tips

Patton said gay men can protect themselves from pickup murders by getting to know dates better before inviting them into their homes. Introducing a potential date to a bartender or an acquaintance is also a good idea.

According to Patton, online pick-up crimes are becoming more widespread. He noted that many people have fake e-mail addresses and that there is no way of verifying the identity of online profiles. He suggested asking for a photo of a potential online date before agreeing to meet him. That provides a computer record of the date's face in case something happens.

Drake said many people don't realize that they are most vulnerable to crime when they invite new acquaintances into their home.

"A lot of times, people think, 'I'll take him back to my place because I feel secure there,'" Drake said. "But if you're murdered in your home, the offender won't have to dispose of your body. If you go to his place, he'll have to get rid of the body."

Patton noted those who prey on gay people may come from within the gay community, from outside of it or from somewhere in between.

"There are gay people who choose the gay community as their hunting ground," Patton said. "We do ourselves a disservice by thinking that all of the danger comes from the outside."

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