



# Research Bulletin

Vol. 2, No. 3

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## Chicago Homicide Dataset Series

# Why is age discrepancy a risk factor for intimate partner homicide?

## — *Examining the influence of offender criminal history*

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According to research based on the Chicago Homicide Dataset, the risk of intimate partner homicide is greater when the man is at least 16 years older than the woman or the woman is at least 10 years older than the man (Breitman, Shackelford, & Block, 2003). Relative to their numbers in the

The higher risk of intimate partner homicide when the couple's ages are widely disparate is not easy to explain.

population, the risk of one partner killing the other is much higher for age-discrepant Chicago couples than for Chicago couples who are closer to each other in age. Many questions remain to be answered, however, before this finding may be used as a guide for practice. Why are age-discrepant couples at higher risk? Can this

association be explained by some other factor related to age discrepancy?

There are many possible explanations for this phenomenon. Daly and Wilson (1988, and see Wilson, Daly, & Wright, 1993) suggest that the apparent relationship between age discrepancy and the risk of intimate partner homicide might be explained by an increased likelihood for intimate partner offenders in age-discrepant relationships to be involved in other criminal activities, not just intimate partner homicide. The evidence presented in this *Research Bulletin* indicates the association between the couple's age discrepancy and their risk of intimate partner homicide cannot be explained by the likelihood that the homicide offender has a previous arrest record.

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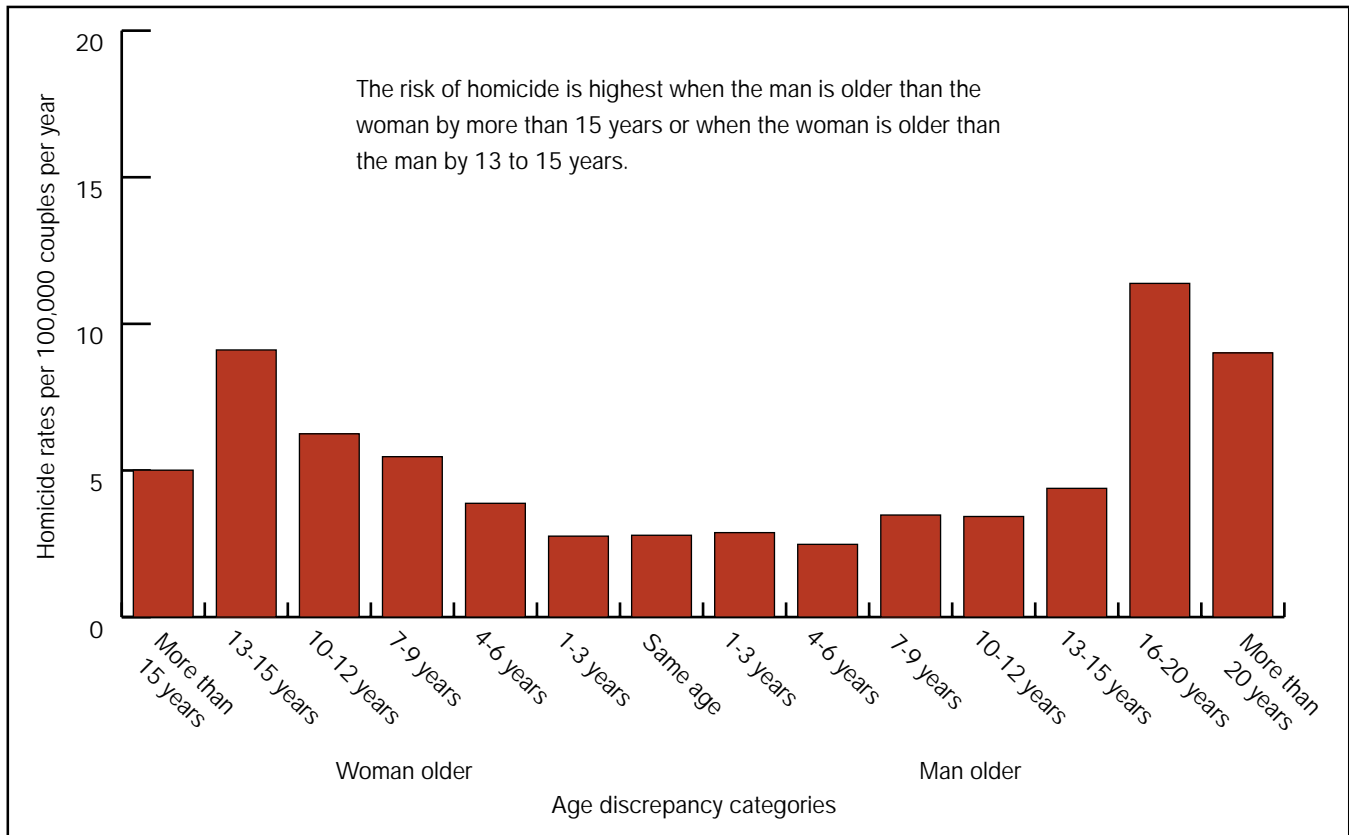
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Figure 1  
The risk of woman-offender intimate partner homicides is higher for age discrepant couples



**Source of data**

This analysis was based on the Chicago Homicide Dataset, one of the largest and most detailed datasets on homicide in the U.S. It has been collected and maintained for many years by the Authority, in cooperation with the Chicago Police Department’s Crime Analysis Unit. The current analysis includes preliminary data for 1996, so that the dataset includes information on 24,609 homicides recorded by the Chicago police between 1965 and 1996.<sup>1</sup>

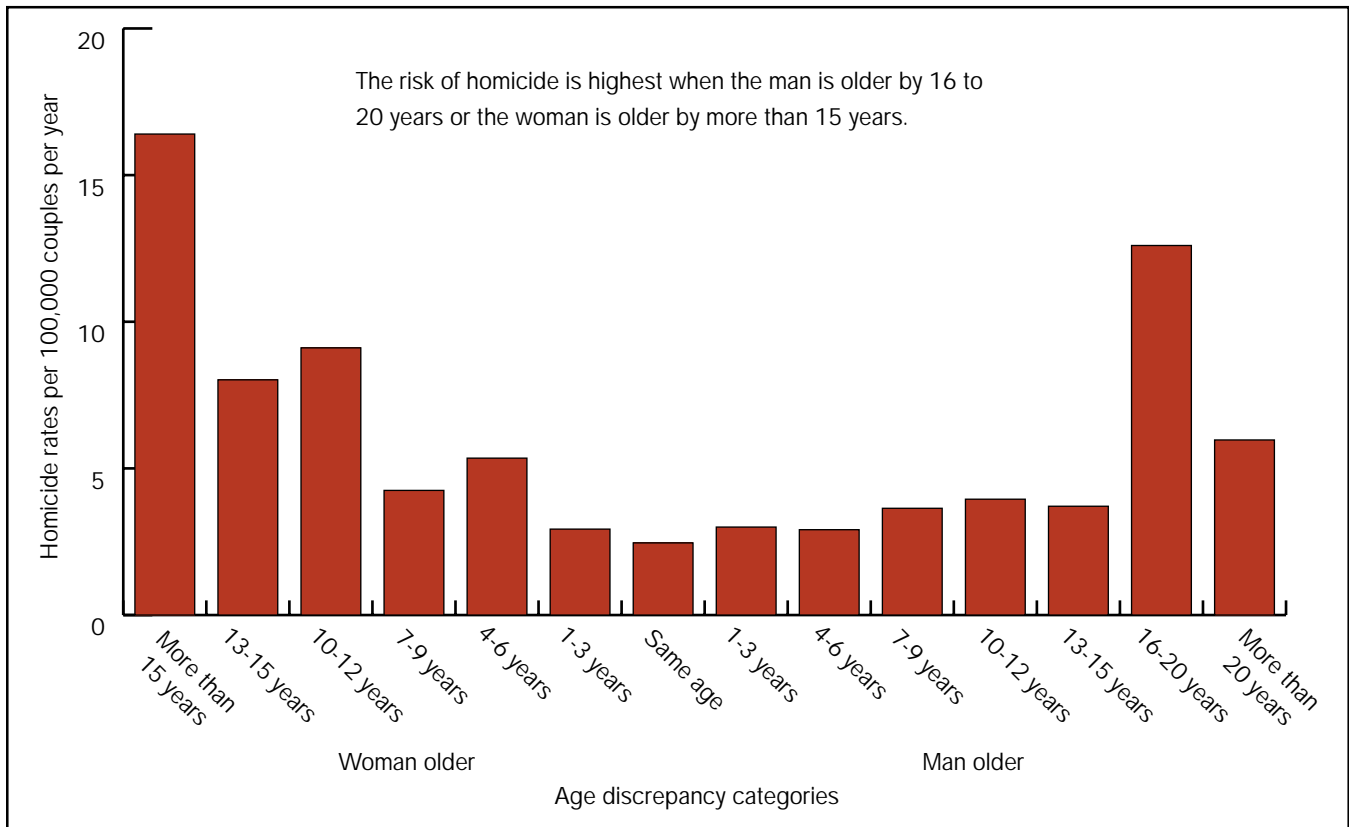
There are 2,579 homicides in which the victim and offender were opposite-sex intimate partners (legal marriages, common-law marriages, boyfriend/girlfriend, ex-legal marriages, ex-common-law marriages, and ex-boyfriend/girlfriend), the woman was at least 18 years old, and the age of both partners was known. All 2,579 cases were analyzed, each representing a heterosexual intimate couple in which either the man or the woman had been killed by the partner between 1965 and 1996 in Chicago. Because population data for same-sex couples is not available, the analysis was limited to opposite-sex couples.

All heterosexual intimate partner homicides were included, regardless of the number of victims or offenders.

The researchers divided the cases into 14 categories of age disparity, consisting of one central category (both partners were the same age), seven categories for “man older” (ranging from one to three years older to more than 20 years older), and six categories for “woman older” (ranging from one to three years older to more than 15 years older). There were too few homicides in which the woman was more than 20 years older to analyze that category by itself.

The researchers conducted separate analyses for the 1,324 homicides in which the man killed the woman, and the 1,255 homicides in which the woman killed the man, because analysis showed that 65 percent of the men and only 36 percent of the women had previous arrest records. Therefore, the researchers calculated population-based rates for these two types of heterosexual intimate partner homicide for each of the 14 age-discrepancy groups. The populations used to calculate these rates were estimates of the number of

Figure 2  
The risk of man-offender intimate partner homicides is higher for age discrepant couples



heterosexual intimate couples with the given age discrepancy (For details, see Brietman, et al). The relationship between partner age discrepancy and the offender’s previous arrest record was then examined.

**Results**

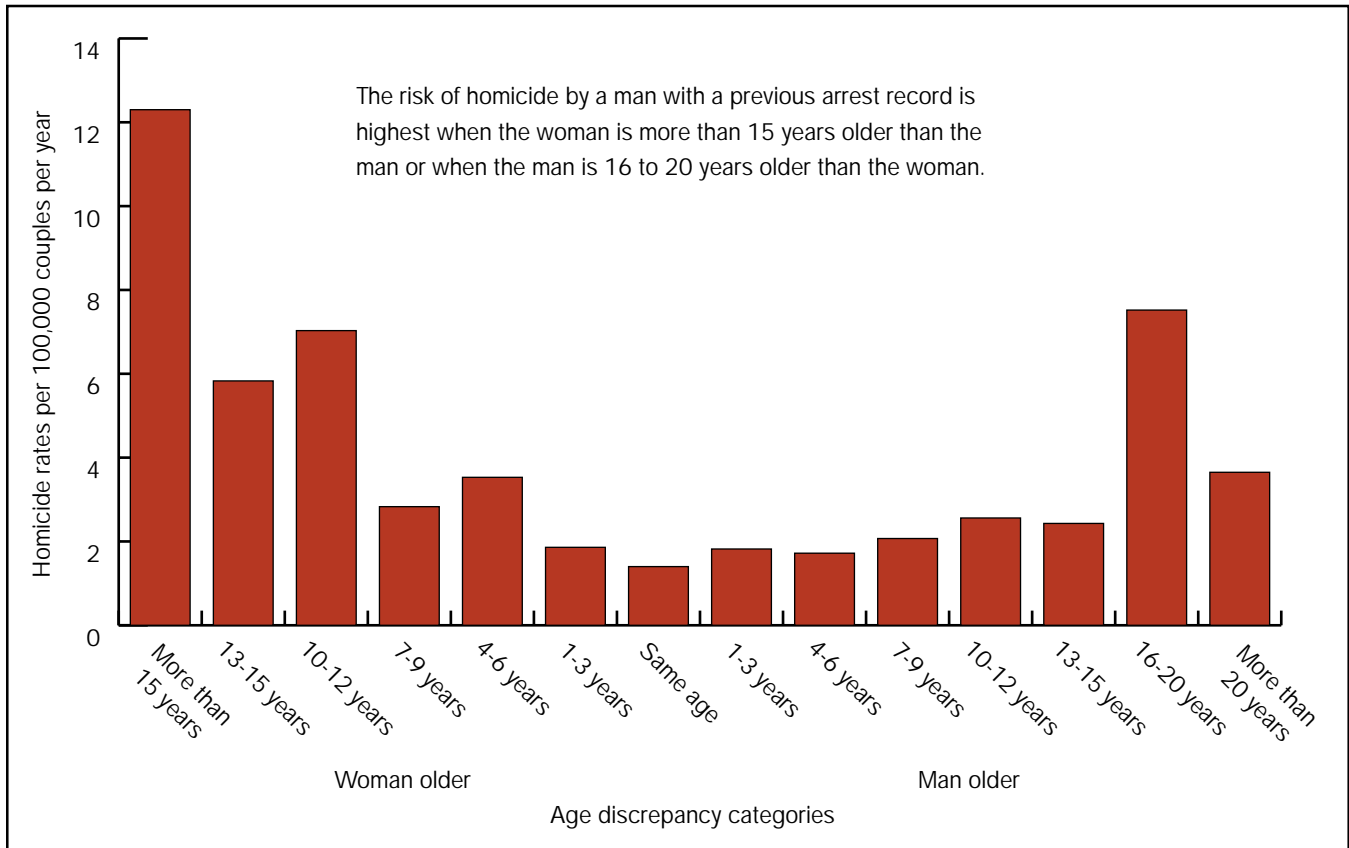
Whether the woman or the man committed the intimate partner homicide, the risk of homicide increased as the age discrepancy between the partners increased. The risk per 100,000 population for homicides in which the woman killed the man was highest when the man was older than the woman by more than 15 years or when the woman was older than the man by 13 to 15 years (Figure 1). The risk per 100,000 population for homicides in which the man killed the woman was highest when the man was older by 16 to 20 years or the woman was older by more than 15 years (Figure 2). Although the levels differ, the similar U-shaped patterns indicate that the risk of intimate partner homicide as a function of the partner’s age discrepancy was not affected by the gender of the offender.

Further analyses indicated that, regardless of whether the offender (male or female) had a previous arrest

record, the intimate partner homicide risk increased as the partner age discrepancy increased. The risk of intimate partner homicide by men offenders who had a previous arrest record was highest for couples in which the woman was more than 15 years older than the man, and for couples in which the man was 16 to 20 years older than the woman (Figure 3). In fact, the rate for couples in which the woman was more than 15 years older was almost nine times that of couples with no age discrepancy (12.3 versus 1.4 per 100,000 population, respectively). In general, the risk of homicide was lower when the man did not have an arrest record. Even in these cases, however, the risk was higher for couples where the man was 16 to 20 years older than the woman, or when the woman was more than 15 years older than the man (Figure 4).

The population-based rate for intimate partner homicides committed by a woman with a previous arrest record was highest when the woman was between 13 and 15 years older than the man or the man was more than 20 years older than the woman (Figure 5). The risk of homicide by a woman with a previous arrest

Figure 3  
Risk of intimate partner homicides committed by men with previous arrest records



record who was between 13 and 15 years older than the man was more than nine times that of couples with no age discrepancy (6.20 versus 0.66 per 100,000 population, respectively). In the case of homicide committed by a woman without a previous arrest record, the risk of intimate partner homicide was highest in couples in which the man was 16 to 20 years older than the woman (Figure 6).

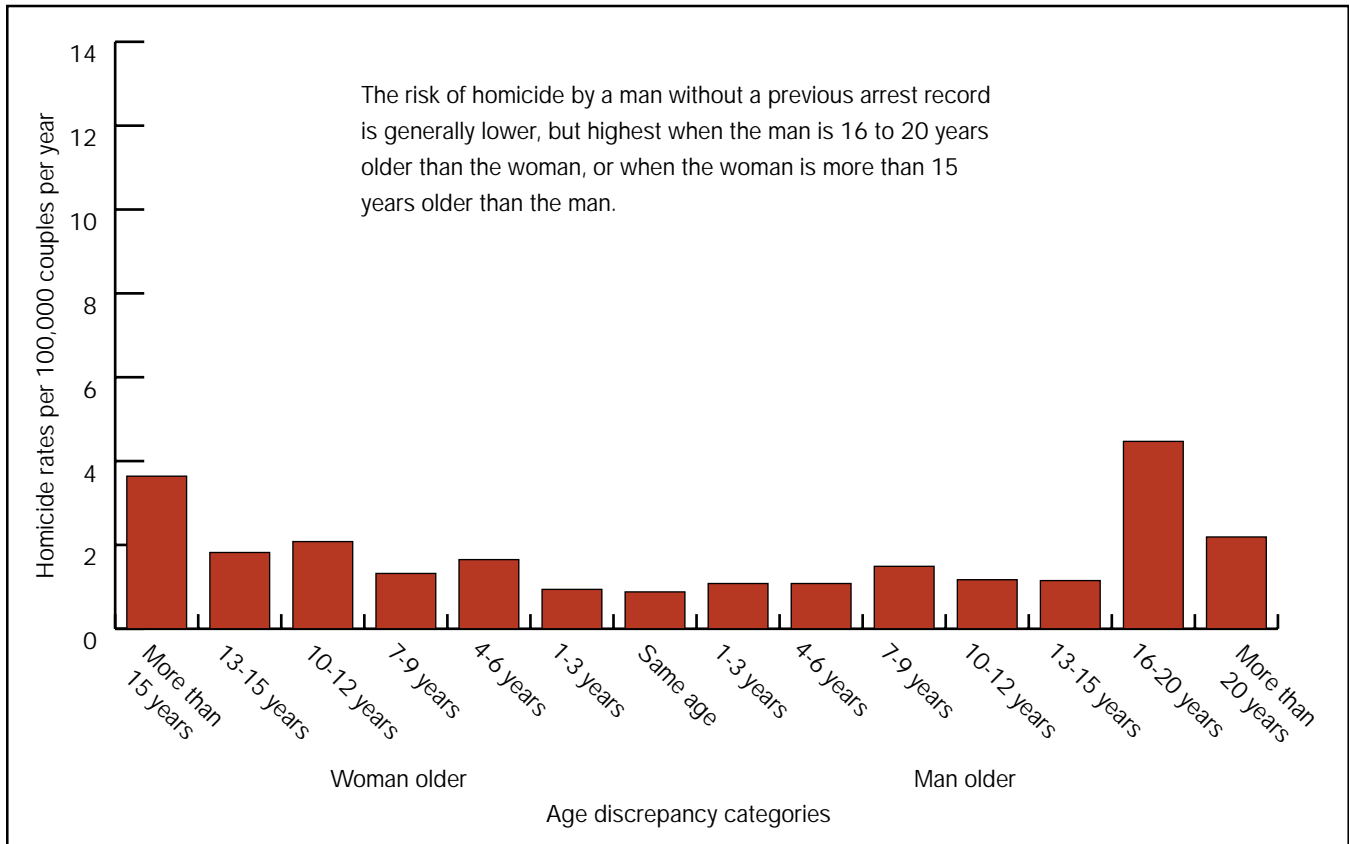
The results shown in Figure 4 should be interpreted cautiously due to the small number of cases in which the man was the offender and the woman was older than the man by at least 10 years. Also, caution should be taken when interpreting Figure 5 and Figure 6 due to the small number of cases in which the woman had a previous arrest record and was more than 15 years older, and when the woman did not have a previous arrest record and was more than 12 years older.

**Discussion**

The analyses produced the following findings:

- The elevated risk of intimate partner homicide for age-discrepant couples was equally apparent regardless of whether the man killed the woman or the woman killed the man.
- For intimate partner homicide committed by a man, the risk of homicide was highest when the man was 16 to 20 years older than the woman, or when the woman was 10 or more years older than the man. The risk increased substantially when the woman was more than 15 years older than the man. When the man had a previous arrest record, the risk was generally higher across all the age discrepancy categories than when the man had no previous arrest record. However, regardless of arrest record, the risk of intimate partner homicide was higher when the discrepancy between the couple's ages was greater.
- For intimate partner homicide committed by a woman, the risk of homicide was highest for couples in which the woman was older by 13 to 15 years, and for couples in which the man was older by more than 15 years. If the woman had a previous arrest record,

Figure 4  
Risk of intimate partner homicides committed by men without previous arrest records



the risk pattern remained the same. If the woman did not have a previous arrest record, the highest risk was for couples in which the man was older by more than 15 years.

In summary, the evidence presented in this *Research Bulletin* shows that the association between the couple’s age discrepancy and their risk of intimate partner homicide cannot be explained by the likelihood that the homicide offender has a previous arrest record. The risk of homicide is higher, relative to their numbers in the population, for age-disparate couples, and this higher risk cannot be “explained away” by controlling for the offender’s gender or for the offender’s prior arrest record. The reason high age discrepancy between two intimate partners is associated with a higher risk of lethal violence remains undetermined. Future research should investigate whether other variables or groups of variables are responsible for this phenomenon.

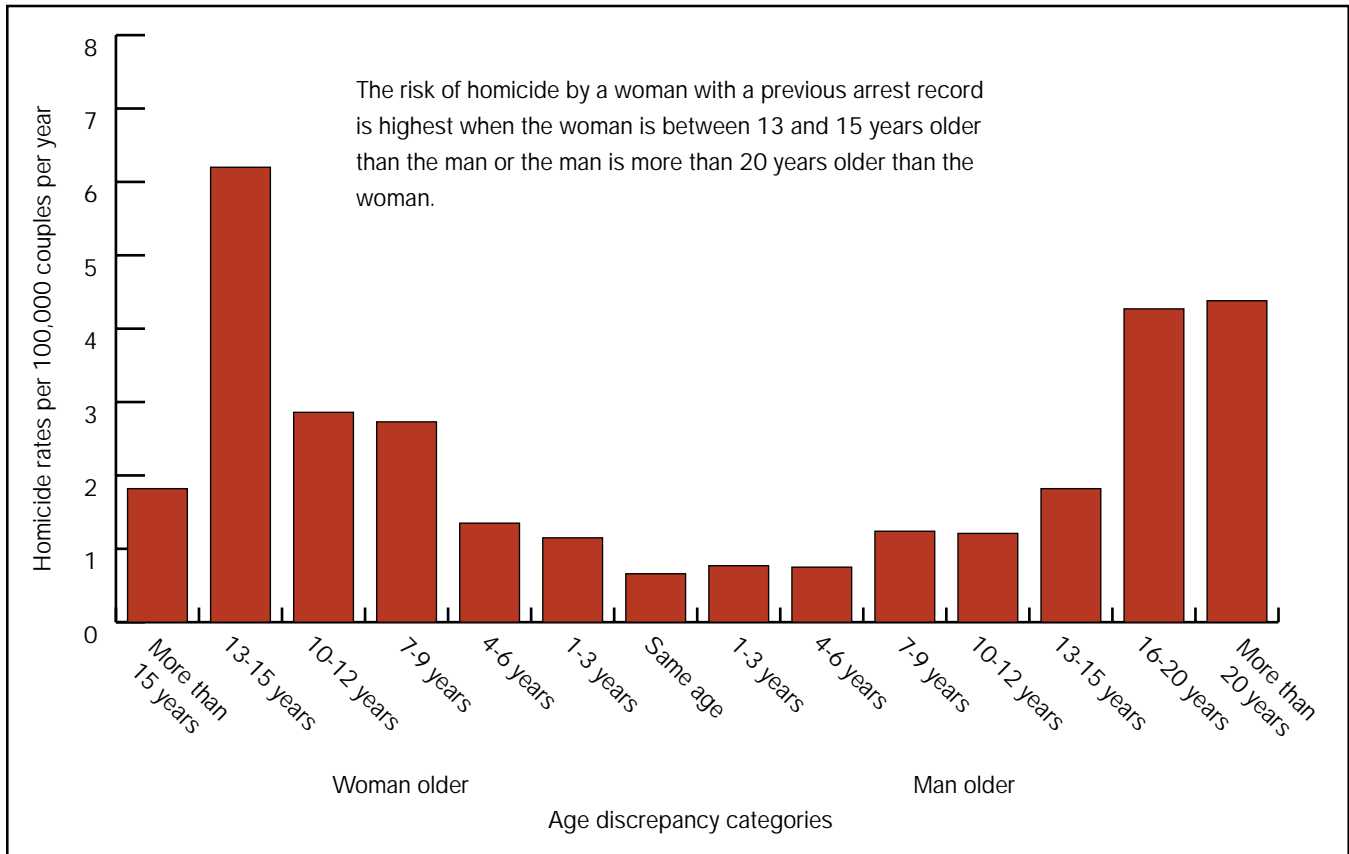
**Practical implications**

Although intimate partner homicide in general is rare, among Chicago couples, the risk of one partner killing the other is higher when the man is at least 16 years older than the woman, compared to couples who are closer to each other in age. This is true regardless of which partner is the homicide offender, and whether the offender has a prior arrest record. Further, the risk of homicide is greater among couples in which the woman is at least 10 years older than the man. This is true regardless of which partner is the homicide offender, but the effect is stronger when the man is the offender, especially when he has a prior arrest record.

Because many questions remain unanswered, it is important to be cautious in applying this information to practical situations. It is increasingly clear, however, that there is a real association between the couple’s age discrepancy and the risk of intimate partner homicide. Therefore, practitioners might consider:<sup>2</sup>

- Including “elevated risk based on couple age discrepancy” in a list of risk factors for intimate

Figure 5  
Risk of intimate partner homicides committed by women with previous arrest records

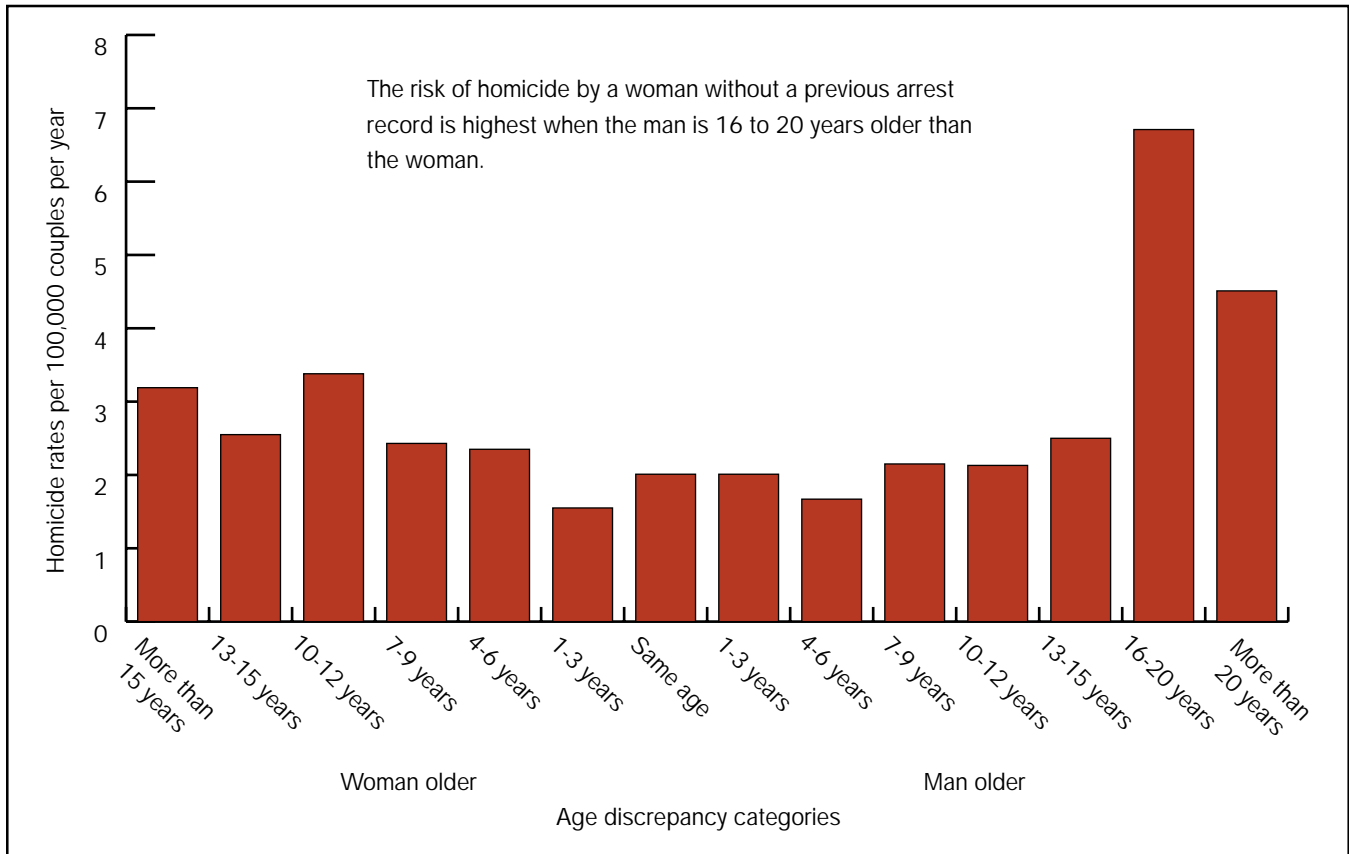


partner homicide. Until more is known about how age discrepancy interacts with other couple characteristics, age discrepancy should not be integrated into a screening or assessment instrument. Instead, it should be used as an additional risk factor, in conjunction with other screening and assessment tools for intimate partner violence. For example, when discussing the results of the Campbell Danger Assessment (Campbell, Sharps, & Glass, 2000) with a woman, practitioners should also let her know that her “couple age discrepancy” might place her in a higher risk category.

- Gathering age information for both partners. Age information is simple and safe to gather, and nonintrusive. There is potential benefit and little risk or cost to asking for this information.<sup>3</sup>
- Recording the partners’ age information with a notation for level of risk. Risk is elevated when the man is at least 16 years older than the woman or the woman is at least 10 years older than the man.

- Considering age discrepancy in light of the man’s previous arrest record. The risk for a woman being killed is higher when her partner has a previous arrest record, regardless of the age discrepancy between them.
- Keeping in mind that the risk of women-offender homicide is higher when she is at least 10 years older or at least 16 years younger than the man. It is especially important for an abused woman to know about her options for ending the violence when other known risk factors for intimate partner homicide are present. The Chicago Women’s Health Risk Study (Block, 2000) found three high-risk factors to be associated with intimate partner homicide committed by a woman: severe and increasing intimate partner violence against the woman, low material resources, and a traditional and lengthy relationship.

Figure 6  
Risk of intimate partner homicides committed by women without previous arrest records



**Endnotes**

- 1) The Authority and the Chicago Police Department are in the process of updating the Chicago Homicide Dataset through 2001.
- 2) Some of these practical suggestions also appeared in *Research Bulletin* Vol. 1, No. 3, "Is age discrepancy a risk factor for intimate partner homicide?" However, because the added research results make us more confident of the association between couple age discrepancy and the risk of intimate partner homicide, we are now more confident in making these suggestions for action.
- 3) For people in an abusive situation, practitioners should record the age of the abusive partner. This may not be the current intimate partner.

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