

Femicidal Men in the Police: Toxic Masculinity and Impunity

After police officer Néstor Rodríguez Heredia murdered his ex-wifer, the Police Commissioner stated that “he who once swore to protect lives, relinquished, and tarnished the image of the police” (Tolentino Rosario, 2023). By that same year 2023, the Puerto Rico Police Bureau (PRPB) itself had for years been relinquishing its responsibility to rigorously and transparently investigate domestic violence cases involving police officers (Romero, 2023, page 8). In 2022, after police of-

ficer José Rivera Velázquez murdered his ex-partner, who was also a police officer, the Commissioner alleged that many frivolous gender violence complaints are filed against police officers (Quiles, Ortíz Blanes & Chacín, 2022). In 2018, when police officer Luis Daniel Negrón Reyes became the third police officer to murder his partner in less than six months (Hernandez, 2018), the then Commissioner claimed that there was no irregular pattern with the officer’s behavior that would justify disarming him (Pereira, 2018), although his supervisors and other officers had information that claimed otherwise (Rivera Puig, 2018). Regardless of who

What is an intimate femicide?
An intimate femicide is a femicide in which the aggressor is the partner or former intimate partner of the murdered woman, regardless of whether or not the two are legally married, or whether or not they live together under the same roof, or whether the relationship was real or imagined by the aggressor.

Access the Methodological Appendix [HERE](#)

Table 1
 Police officers who murdered their partners or ex-partners
 2018–2023

| # | Year | Femicidal police | Years of service | Murdered woman | Observation |
|---|------|--------------------------|------------------|--------------------------|--|
| 1 | 2018 | Carlos Cruz Martínez | 32 | Milagros Ortiz Alvarado | Femicide-suicide |
| 2 | 2018 | Jonathan Vargas Semidey | Not reported | Frances Pagán Resto | Femicide-suicide |
| 3 | 2018 | Luis Negrón Reyes | 6 | Pilar Hernández Llera | Police officer imprisoned awaiting trial |
| 4 | 2022 | José Rivera Velázquez | 28 | Brenda Pérez Bahamonde | Police officer sentenced to 60 years in prison. |
| 5 | 2023 | Néstor Rodríguez Heredia | 29 | Érika de Jesús Rodríguez | Police officer remains free with electronic shackle. |

Source

(1) Hernandez, M. (2018). (2) Irizarry, F. (2018). (3) Telemundo. (2018). Hernandez, M. (2018) (4) Tolentino, C. (2022). (5) Rosario F. (2023). Cruz, A. (2023).

has been at the head of the PRPB, the agency has tried to hide the obvious: it has been unable to detect signs that suggest its officers merit any kind of intervention, and as a result, five women were murdered between 2018 and 2023.

The Puerto Rico Police Bureau tries to assure the country that, despite being a self-investigating agency, it fully complies with all mandated processes when a domestic violence complaint involving an officer arises. The 5 cases of police officers who committed intimate femicides in the last 6 years (see Table 1) must cause particular concern among those who proclaim that the Puerto Rico Police is an institution committed to promoting public safety. **Moreover, since most of these police officers who committed femicides had nearly 30 years of service in the agency, it is evident that years of police experience do not help prevent police officers from committing intimate femicides.**

Were the 5 Femicides by Police Officers Isolated Events?

Kilómetro Cero undertook the task of analyzing this streak of 5 femicidal police officers with the interest of determining if these were isolated events or if they constitute a trend beyond what is statistically expected. When we use the term “femicidal men or officer” in this research we will refer to men who have killed their intimate partners.

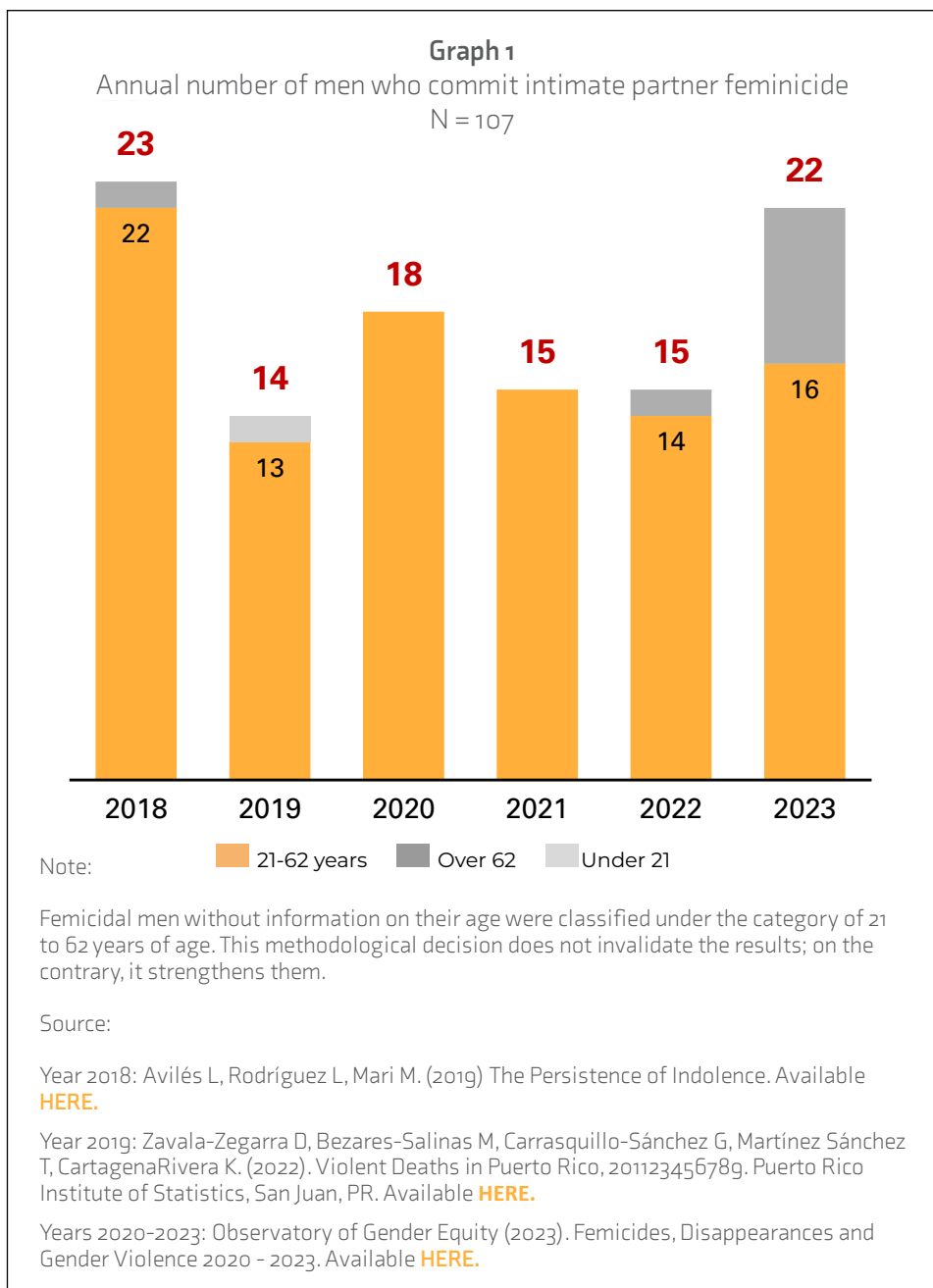
The objective of this analysis is to determine whether male police officers commit intimate femicides with a similar frequency to that of the non-police population in Puerto Rico. **We want to provide statistical evidence to answer a simple question: taking into consideration the size of each group, where are there more femicidal men, inside or outside the Police? We insist that a**

single event of a femicidal police officer is highly worrisome and demands the immediate attention of the entire

police force. Nevertheless, the existence of a statistical trend invalidates the argument that individual officers, who sullied “the good name of the Police” are at blame, as if they were disconnected from the institution to which they belong. A trend shows that the police institution creates the conditions for there to be more femicidal men within it than in the rest of the country.

This research differs from previous studies in that the object of interest is not the act of femicide, but the person who commits the femicide. Our statistical analysis focuses on males

In proportional terms, where are there more femicidal men, within the Police or out of it?



who commit femicides and not on murdered women. For this reason, as we will see below, we use the population of men in Puerto Rico (police and non-police) as the reference population for the statistical analysis.

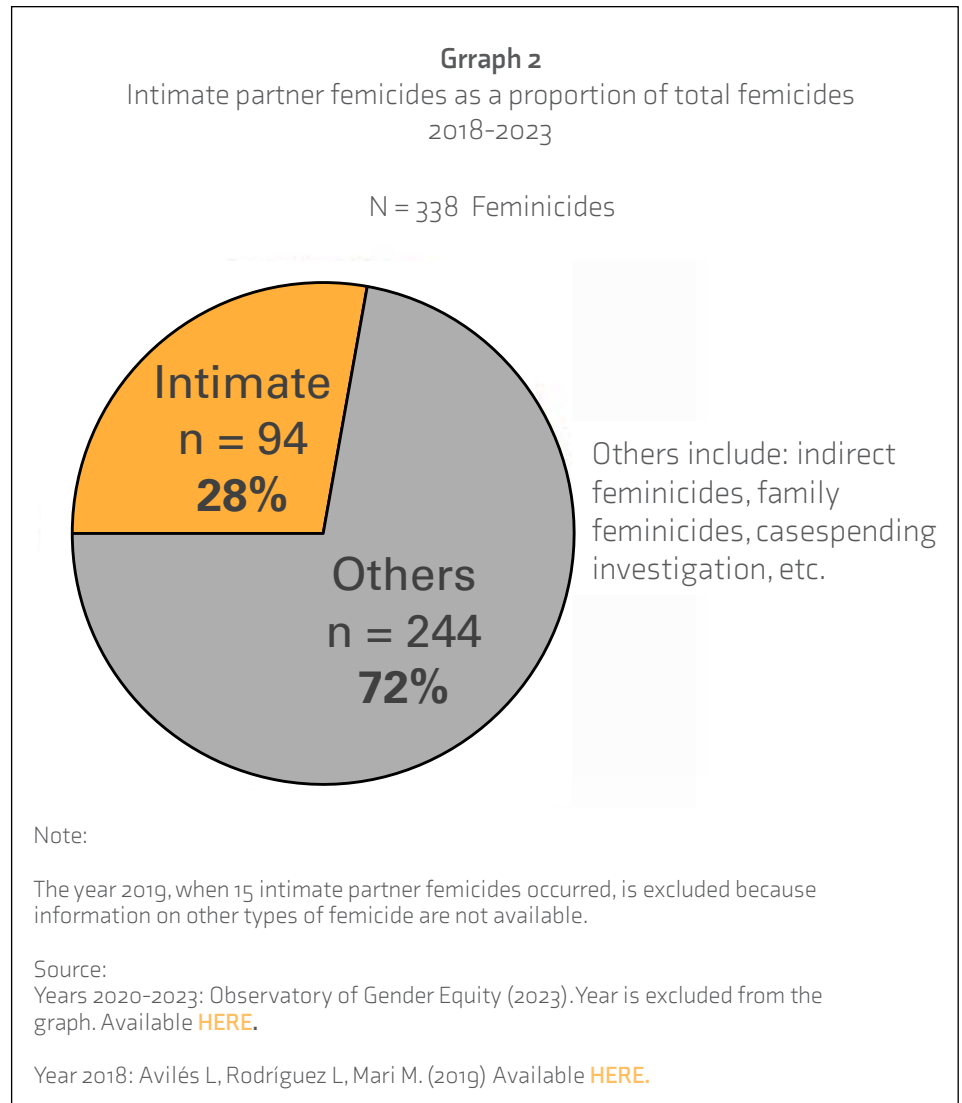
Men Who Commit Intimate Femicides: 18 Per Year

The annual average of men who commit intimate femicides for the period 2018-2023 is 18 (see Graph 1). The total number of intimate femicides corresponds to 28% of the 338 cases of femicides that were documented (see Graph 2). This figure is quite similar to that of the U.S., where one third of all femicides are intimate femicides (Smith, 2022).

Results: There Are More Femicidal Men Inside the Police Than Outside of It

Our analysis estimates the standard mortality ratio (Szklo & Nieto, 2019) to determine in which of two populations of different sizes there is more relative frequency of femicidal men. We use the number of male police officers and the number of non-police men (between 21 and 62 years of age) to determine whether there are, proportionally, more men who commit femicides in the PRPB or outside of it.

With about 850,000 non-police men and 93 documented femicidal men among them, there is a rate of 11.0 femicidal men per 100,000 non-police men for the 6-year period (see Table 2 and [Methodological Appendix](#)). We formulated the following question, : how many men who commit femicide would there be in the police force if its officers had the same rate as non-po-



lice officers? This is equivalent to asking: how many femicidal men would there be in the police bureau if its officers acted in the same way as non-police officers? Statistically, it would be expected that the police would have slightly more than 1 femicidal man (expected value = 1.13) every 6 years (see Table 3). That statistically expected number of just over 1 male who commits a femicide contrasts sharply with the 5 femicidal police that were documented for this six-year period. Basically, being a member of the Puerto Rican Police multiplies by four the probability of becoming a femicidal man by 4 (see Table 3).

Culture of Impunity and Masculinity

The strategies used by the Puerto Rico Police to deal with the problem of gender-based violence perpetrated by its officers consists of proclaiming that they have “zero tolerance for domestic violence” and that they have adopted a “protocol for domestic violence situations in the workplace” (Bauzá, 2022). Evidence shows that “zero tolerance” is more of a communications strategy than a consistent institutional practice. The Police has not provided evidence that they have trained their officers in the norms for handling domestic violence cases, and that the investigations of these cases are carried out with the required standards (Romero, 2023, page 102). The Bureau

Table 2
Femicidal police officers and femicidal non-police men
2018–2023

| Group | Population | Femicidal men | Femicidal men rate (per 100,000) For every 6 years |
|--|------------------------|-------------------|--|
| Non-police men (21–62 years old) | 843,295 ⁽¹⁾ | 93 ⁽³⁾ | 11.0 |
| Male police officers (21–62 years old) | 10,199 ⁽²⁾ | 5 ⁽⁴⁾ | NA ⁽⁵⁾ |

Sources

Population:

(1) U.S. Census Bureau. (2023). Available [HERE](#)

(2) This figure is an estimate based on Rosario, F. (2022) and the police population according to various sources. See [Methodology Appendix](#).

Number of femicides:

(3) Year 2018: Avilés L, Rodríguez L, Mari M. (2019). Available [HERE](#)

Year 2019: Zavala-Zegarra D, Bezares-Salinas M, Carrasquillo-Sánchez G, Martínez Sánchez T, Cartagena Rivera K. (2022). Available [HERE](#)

Years 2020-2023: Gender Equity Observatory. (2023). Available [HERE](#)

(4) Kilometer Zero (2023). Available [HERE](#)

Caution on calculations:

(5) It is not advisable to calculate rates when the number of cases is equal to or less than 16, according to the Washington State Department of Health. (2018). Available [HERE](#)

A detailed description of each of these figures and their calculations can be found in the Methodological Appendix. Available [HERE](#).

claims not to know how many police officers arrested for domestic violence are still active, are suspended, have been disarmed or have been expelled (Quiles, Ortiz Blanes & Chacín, 2022). Moreover, the criminal legal system also protects police officers because they present themselves as officials concerned with public safety, and prosecutors or judges may be reluctant to believe that an officer is abusing a woman. Likewise, a prosecutor’s final decision to proceed against an offending officer depends to a large extent on the cooperation, data collection and investigation of the police themselves.

The President’s Task Force for 21st Century Policing report made a blunt assertion, “culture eats policy for lunch” (President’s Task Force, 2015, page 11), to refer to the adoption of protocols or policies that, when in conflict with the organizational culture of the Police, end up being circumvented, mocked or sabotaged. In the daily practices of individual police officers, one can observe this organizational culture that tolerates, promotes and rewards gender-based violence, either out of their own free will or for fear of reprisals from colleagues and supervisors. The country’s press has documented cases in which police officers refuse to

file complaints against their co-workers, seek to dissuade the victims and intimidate them into abandoning their decision to file a complaint (Quiles, Ortiz Blanes & Chacín, 2022). Just the fact of having to file a complaint with the aggressor’s co-workers is in itself a strong institutional deterrent. In addition, the daily actions of police officers are accompanied by a police leadership that refuses to acknowledge the existence of the problem of gender-based violence within the Police and disregards the domestic

Table 3
Standardized ratio of femicidal male police officers
2018–2023

| | Men who commit intimate femicide for every 6 years |
|--|--|
| Documented number of femicidal police officers | 5 |
| Statistically expected number of femicidal police officers (1) | 1.1 |
| Standardized ratio of femicidal police officers | 4.4 |

Note

(1) The calculation of the statistically expected number (expected value) assumes that police officers have the same proportion of femicidal men as the general population of men in Puerto Rico who are not police officers: $843,295 \times 11.0/100,000 = 1.1$. The documented amount, 5, divided by the expected amount, 1.13, results in 4.4 (Table 2).

The Puerto Rico Police produces, proportionally, 4 times the number of femicidal men that occurs in the general population of non-police men.

violence regulations contained in the Police Reform Agreement. Therefore it becomes evident that the institutional Police culture circumvents, mocks, and sabotages any gender-based violence protocols.

There is an element of police culture that should not go unnoticed: **police power is essentially a project of toxic masculinity as it represents the legitimization of the use of force and, as a consequence, promotes the attitudes and behaviors that trigger gender-based violence** (Goodmark, 2015). If police forces tend to attract individuals with an authoritarian personality (Roslin & Hope, 2017) and these individuals are trained in a masculinity that finds in punishment and in use of force the primary way to resolve conflicts, it is then explained why there are proportionally more femicidal men within the Police than outside of it. It must be recognized that the danger of violence for partners or ex-partners of police officers is high as they -the policemen- are trained to have investigative skills and the ability to monitor or track their partners or ex-partners without them being aware of it. **Given that the police creates a militarized masculinity obsessed with dominance, control and violence, we must abandon the idea that improving police training or adopting new protocols and reforms will actually be useful to address incidents of gender-based violence.** (Goodmark, 2015).

Twelve Years of Impunity and Failure

It has been 12 years since the U.S. Department of Justice documented how the PRPB was “infected” with domestic violence cases and asserted that this prevented the police from fulfilling its mission (USDOJ, 2011, page 16). The following year, the American Civil Liberties Union labeled the number of domestic violence complaints perpetrated by police officers as alarming

After 12 years of finger-pointing from the Department of Justice after 11 years of ACLU complaints, and after 10 years of Police Reform Agreement, today there are more femicidal men inside the Police than outside of it.

and asserted that it was a symptom of the institutional dysfunctionality of the Police (ACLU, 2012, page 116). Both the Department of Justice and the ACLU asserted that the institutional practices of impunity in the Police allow domestic violence, tolerate it, encourage it, and even reward it, contrary to the explanation assumed by the Puerto Rico Police Bureau in its public communications that each incident was an isolated case of an officer’s individual misconduct.

The period under analysis in this investigation, 2018-2023, corresponds to the second half of those 12 years since the release of the devastating U.S. Department of Justice report that served as the foundation for the Puerto Rico Police Reform Agreement. When it came to fulfilling the objectives of the Reform, a streak of 5 femicidal

police officers in 6 years evidenced its resounding failure. The institution whose mission is to guarantee citizen security was not able to prevent its own police officers with decades of experience from becoming femicidal men, in a much higher proportion than statistically expected. Is more evidence needed to conclude that the Puerto Rico Police Bureau is incapable of reform? Similar experiences are observed in the U.S.: police reforms have not been effective in reducing police violence (Kaba & Ritchie, 2022) nor gender-based violence perpetrated by police officers (Roslin & Hope, 2017). It is time to abandon reform simulations and pursue other routes.

Recommendations

In line with the proposals that have long been debated by activist groups in the United States, such as Black Lives Matter and abolitionist feminisms, -represented by Kaba and Ritchie (2022) in their article *Why We Don't Say "Reform the Police"*- to transform public safety, **we advocate the reduction of roles and the reduction of resources allocated to the police.** This applies to issues related to gender violence, as well as to many others. Many of the cases of gender violence are incipient situations that can be addressed with prevention-centered policies and programs, emotional and educational assistance especially to men, and mediation resources with the participation of human behavior professionals, such as social work or psychology professionals. To the extent that the roles of the police force are reduced, its budget must also be reduced, so that the new functions have the corresponding resources.

1. It is a priority to eliminate the absurd practice of the police investigating themselves. As long as the Puerto Rico Police does not recognize that it has a serious gender-based violence problem among its officers, no institutional change can be expected. The necessary changes should be promoted or imposed from outside the Police Bureau, rather than continuing with the internal ways of more investment, protocols, and reforms.
2. The State must adopt effective policies with a gender perspective in all its agencies. As long as it continues to ignore the issue of gender-based violence in the country, the problem will filter into all of its agencies, including the Puerto Rico Police. The aggravated incidence of gender-based violence within the police is a reflection of a problem that continues to be ignored. Refusing to adopt strategies with a gender perspective will continue to validate and endorse the violent actions of its officials in this field.
3. Recognizing that civilian oversight bodies exist in different countries around the world, and following the experience of over 200 cities and counties in the U.S. (Stephens, Scrivner & Cambareri, 2018), we reiterate the need to establish a civilian police oversight body in Puerto Rico. Moreover, the development of civilian oversight bodies in the U.S. resumed importance after 2020 as a consequence of the assassination of George Floyd, which resulted in the creation of at least 25 such independent bodies among the 100 most populated U.S. cities (Fairley, 2022). As long as the Police is an organization that investigates itself, the patterns of impunity for gender-based violence will remain unchanged. To guarantee the effectiveness of this civilian body, it must be provided with due access to resources and information, and it must be provided with subpoena and investigative powers to evaluate any complaint against any member of the Police. Since the Puerto Rico Police Bureau has shown disregard for the orders of the Reform Agreement, a fixed percent of its annual budget could pay for the operations of the civilian oversight body. This would represent no additional budgetary cost.
4. The practice of having to file gender violence complaints against police officers at the Police Bureau must cease. This creates the effect of discouraging people from raising a flag against police officers who become aggressors and covering up the violence committed by the officers themselves. This function could be assumed by an independent civilian police oversight body with necessary investigative powers, technical competence, and access to data. This civilian oversight body must be a trustful companion of survivors of gender-based violence and/or state violence.

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PALIQUESES POLICIALES

Publication of Kilómetro Cero to share the results of the Evidence of Violence project that collects data on the interventions of the Puerto Rico Police. Share this information.

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