

## Murder-suicide disturbing trend among the elderly

By Diana Reese , Updated: January 26, 2013

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — Golden years? Not every senior citizen thinks so.

Murder-suicide is occurring with alarming frequency among the elderly. This week a 93-year-old man reportedly stabbed his 95-year-old wife to death early Wednesday morning in their south Kansas City, Mo. home. Then he tried to stab himself in the chest, but failed to kill himself and woke up in the hospital.

Harry Irwin [told](#) a paramedic, “Yes, I killed her. And then killed myself. Why am I still awake?”

This did not appear to be a mercy killing, intended to relieve pain and suffering. Irwin told a nurse his wife, Grace Irwin, had been “arguing and screaming at him all night,” and he couldn’t take it anymore.

The couple’s 70th wedding anniversary was last month. They have seven children who live in the area.

The Jackson County prosecutor has charged Harry Irwin with second-degree murder. “No victim deserves someone else deciding when they will die,” Prosecutor Jean Peters Baker said in a statement released to the media.

The Kansas City murder-attempted suicide is hardly an isolated incident.

Two weeks ago Roy Boldt, 81, visited his wife at a Tequesta, Fla. [nursing home](#). He shot and killed 75-year-old Virginia Boldt and then turned the gun on himself. Family members told a reporter the couple had known each other since she was 5 and he was 12-years-old.

In October James Stanton, 75, shot his wife, Patricia Stanton, 68, during a visit to the [Jacksonville, Fla.](#) inpatient rehabilitation facility where she had been admitted after suffering injuries from a fall. She survived the murder attempt, but he died after shooting himself at the scene.

Earlier this year in the Washington, D.C. area, [Charles D. Snelling](#) killed his wife and then himself a week after their 61st wedding anniversary. Snelling, who’d written an [essay](#) for The New York Times on the love story he shared with his wife, had once chaired the authority overseeing Reagan and Dulles airports and the construction of Metro’s new \$6 billion Silver Line. Adrienne Snelling, a fine arts photographer, had suffered from Alzheimer’s disease for years, and her condition had deteriorated.

Adrienne explained, in a letter written three years earlier to the couple's children, "We are both in agreement that neither one of us wants to live after all reasonable hope for a good life is over."

"Might more support have made a difference? Or did he just not want to go on without her?" wrote Paula Spencer Scott on Caring.com about the Snellings.

Murder-suicides [among people 55](#) and older have increased from 21 percent in 2002 to 25 percent in 2011 of the total murder-suicides in the United States, according to the Violence Policy Center.

A murder-suicide involving an elderly couple occurs about every two weeks in Florida, [Donna Cohen](#), a professor at the University of South Florida, told the Kansas City Star. The author of several scholarly research articles on the topic, Cohen [estimates](#) that 20 older Americans die *each week* as the result of murder-suicide.

The typical case? A depressed, controlling husband who shoots his ailing wife — without her permission, according to Cohen. For most, this isn't the romanticized Romeo and Juliet suicide pact with the couple agreeing on the time and place to ride off into the sunset together.

Although the Snellings might have agreed to end it together, the [majority](#) of murder-suicides among older couples are not suicide pacts, reports Sonia Salari, a sociologist at the University of Utah. Salari analyzed data from 225 murder-suicides in which one member was age 60 or older.

Experts say depression, exhaustion and isolation all play a role; often, it's men who are thrust into the unfamiliar role of caregiver. They may suffer from undiagnosed clinical depression. And if they learn their own health problems put them at risk of dying before their spouses, they may believe that no one else can take care of their wives as well as they can.

And they don't bother asking their wives for permission; in fact, the spouse is often unaware of the plan — and probably wouldn't agree to it.

Grace Irwin's brother, Salvatore Privitera, told the Kansas City Star, "My sister was very much interested in living," he said. "She was very content."

*To get help: Ask your doctor or mental health professional or visit the Web site of [The Institute on Aging](#) in San Francisco, which offers a Center for Elderly Suicide Prevention & Grief Counseling. The phone number for their Friendship Line is (800) 971-001.*

*Diana Reese is a freelance journalist in Overland Park, Kan. Follow her on Twitter at [@dianareese](#).*

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