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# Why is Switzerland prone to family killings?

## Adam Beaumont in Geneva



The chalet where Corinne Rey-Bellet and her brother were shot dead (Keystone)

### **The brutal murders of Swiss skier Corinne Rey-Bellet and her brother have once again cast the spotlight on family killings in Switzerland.**

According to a recent study of four cantons, family murders account for more than half of all homicides – a rate three times higher than in the United States.

Rey-Bellet's husband was suspected of carrying out the double murder.

Police reported on Wednesday evening that the body of the private banker had been found. He had apparently shot himself dead.

In the aftermath of the Rey-Bellet tragedy various theories have been doing the rounds. Experts interviewed by a media desperately scrabbling for answers have pointed to fragmenting social networks and changing family roles in Switzerland's traditionally male-dominated society as being partly to blame.

But, according to criminologist Eva Wyss, it is still too early to put a finger on what lies behind the recent upsurge in family killings. So far this year there have been at least six incidents where a man has shot his wife or partner before turning the gun on himself.

"Domestic killings do seem to have been happening more often over the past two to three years but there are always individual situations that need to be taken into account and, for me, it's too early to draw any conclusions," she told swissinfo.

"It may be just by accident that there has been an accumulation over the past few years. The period for observing this should be at least ten years."

Wyss, who has just completed a study on battered husbands, admits there has been a big change in the nature and frequency of domestic violence in Switzerland. But she says this is very different from someone taking a gun and killing family members.

### **Murder study**

A study by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF), which examined murders in cantons Vaud, Fribourg, Valais and Neuchâtel since 1980, shows that this phenomenon is particularly acute in Switzerland.

It found that family killings account for 58 per cent of all murders – a figure substantially higher than in the Netherlands (29 per cent) and the United States (20 per cent).

But Philip Jaffé, professor of psychology at Geneva University, warns against making comparisons with the US where he says people tend to be more homicidal "outside the family".

"These figures are not exceptional. Homicides occur in families because the family is a very violent place. There is a lot of violence between partners and against children – and that's true everywhere," he said.

Jaffé says family killings tend to fall into two categories: the first, when an abusive husband goes too far; the second, when "a single event of high intensity" such as separation tips men over the edge. According to the SNSF study, men are responsible for almost 85 per cent of family killings.

### **Social revolution**

Jaffé, along with other experts, believes that social fragmentation and gender issues do have a part to play. He says Switzerland experienced a "revolution" in changing masculine roles.

"We are also dealing with more equal rights for women in deciding when to end a relationship or marriage," he said. "In the past there was more control on the man's part but changes to divorce legislation have altered that."

"Most of these murders are the consequence of fragile men who just lose it in a moment of abandonment and narcissistic breakdown," he added. "The anger can be directed towards the wife or the whole family."

Martin Boess, director of Swiss Crime Prevention, an organisation funded by cantonal police forces, says it is now time to address a problem that has been ignored for far too long.

"Even though the numbers in Switzerland are quite low, they are incredible when viewed in proportion to other countries," he said.

"We need to bring the research together with the prevention work we do for domestic violence. We need to find a way for society to react and prevent more killings in the future."

swissinfo, Adam Beaumont in Geneva