

**LONDON BOROUGH OF RICHMOND UPON THAMES  
COMMUNITY SAFETY PARTNERSHIP**

**JOINT DOMESTIC HOMICIDE REVIEW  
AND SERIOUS CASE REVIEW**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**MARIA AGED 47**

**LUIS AGED 10**

**CARLOS AGED 7**

**FOUND MURDERED BY JUAN AGED 57  
WHO ALSO TOOK HIS OWN LIFE**

**IN MARCH 2018 AT RICHMOND AND SUSSEX**

**REVIEW PANEL CHAIR AND REPORT AUTHOR  
BILL GRIFFITHS CBE BEM QPM**

**25 AUGUST 2020**

## **Joint Domestic Homicide Review and Serious Case Review – LB Richmond Upon Thames Maria found murdered March 2018 in Richmond and Luis, aged 10, and Carlos, aged 7, found dead in Sussex**

### **Introduction**

This summary outlines the process of the Community Safety Partnership joint Domestic Homicide Review (DHR) and Serious Case Review (SCR) Panel established in July 2018 under s9 Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims Act 2004 by the London Borough of Richmond Upon Thames (LBRuT) Community Safety Partnership, independently chaired by Bill Griffiths CBE BEM QPM, to examine agency responses and support given to Maria (aged 47), her children Luis (aged 10) and Carlos (aged 7) residents of LBRuT prior to the discovery in March 2018 of her death at home and her children's death in Sussex, all at the hands of Juan (aged 57) who took his own life. Each individual mentioned in the overview report and this summary has been allocated a random pseudonym (an invitation to family members to choose names was not responded to). The full report contains ten footnotes that signpost the source of references used in this summary.

The process began with a meeting on 2 July 2018 of all agencies that potentially had contact with those involved prior to the death of Maria, Luis and Carlos. Agencies participating in the review were:

- LBRuT Community Safety (Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy)
- LBRuT Adult Safeguarding
- LBRuT Safeguarding Children Board and Achieving for Children
- LBRuT Education
- LBRuT Named Nurse for Safeguarding Children
- Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) Specialist Crime Review Group

Contributions and specialist advice to the Panel were also received from:

- Refuge, including a Latin American specialist

Agencies and local voluntary organisations in Richmond were asked to give chronological accounts of their contact with the family who had emigrated from Venezuela in November 2015 and arrived in Richmond in January 2016. There was nothing remarkable revealed through contact with the GP Practice where the family were registered or with the local primary school attended by the children. The absence of relevant contact with the family from any other source meant there would be no further information to be gained from Individual Management Reviews (IMR). The MPS provided a letter that set out relevant discoveries from the homicide investigation. The Chair conducted telephone interviews with a London-based friend and three parents whose children attended the same school. He was registered as an 'Interested Party' to the Inquest hearings that were not attended by any family members.

There are no relatives of the family living in the UK. Contact by email was made with Maria's brother Antonio who lives in Mexico and indicated that a family meeting would be held to share their reflective thoughts on why this tragedy happened. The family was provided via email with a draft of the overview report for comment in August 2019 but did not respond. Juan's son, Mateo, who lives in Australia has also been contacted for his input but he did not respond.

This was an unimaginable and appalling tragedy for Maria's family, and the Panel have offered heartfelt condolences upon their loss. For the family of the perpetrator, news of Juan's actions must have been profoundly shocking, as well as inexplicable, and they also have endured loss, for which deepest sympathy is also offered.

**Joint Domestic Homicide Review and Serious Case Review – LB Richmond Upon Thames  
Maria found murdered March 2018 in Richmond  
and Luis, aged 10, and Carlos, aged 7, found dead in Sussex**

The process ended when the Richmond Upon Thames Community Safety Partnership Board approved a final version of the joint DHR/SCR overview report at a meeting on 30 September 2019.

**Background information (the facts)**

**Discovery of the fatal incidents**

At about 17:00 on the afternoon of a Monday in early March 2018, Sussex Police were alerted by the coastguard to the discovery of three bodies at the bottom of a cliff near to Beachy Head. Documents in their possession and in a parked car, identified them as Juan and his two sons.

Later that day, at about 18:00, the Metropolitan Police were contacted by Mateo to report that he had received an email from his father with the heading “Farewell” in Spanish and setting out an intention to take his own life and the lives of his sons. Officers attended a rented property in Richmond, forced entry and discovered Maria’s body in the master bedroom. Numerous stab wounds had been inflicted, some described as ‘defence wounds’.

Typed notes indicating suicidal and murderous intention were found clearly on display to be noticed. The two incidents were soon linked when Sussex Police made their enquiries and it was agreed that all four deaths would be investigated by the Metropolitan Police and referred to the West London Coroner for Inquest.

**Family background**

Maria is Venezuelan, the youngest of one brother, Antonio, and four sisters, and was brought up in Caracas. Juan and Maria met in 2004 and were married in 2008. Luis was born in 2007 and Carlos in 2010. Juan had been married twice before and had a son, Mateo, with his first wife and a daughter with his second. The daughter is estranged from her father, having not had contact with him for more than 20 years.

Juan ran his own construction business and this is verified by examination of a computer recovered from the crime scene that contained invoice records. Maria had trained as a journalist and had held a senior position in a communications company.

Venezuela is a country that has experienced severe financial inflation and civil unrest. As a result, many of its citizens have emigrated, including Antonio who left for Mexico in 2008 and Mateo living in Australia since 2009. In the email that alerted Mateo to Juan’s intentions, there is a reference to child sexual abuse (CSA) in Caracas and Lima that contributed to the decision to emigrate. This email is the only known reference to such abuse identified in the review.

Juan had Portuguese nationality through his parents and held a Portuguese passport. Portuguese Identity Cards for the children were applied for from Venezuela and issued in 2013. Maria’s Venezuelan passport shows that she entered the UK in November 2015 as a family member of Juan. It is believed the family had flown from Caracas to Madrid before making their way to London.

Mateo knew that his family had been looking at opportunities to leave Venezuela for some time due to concerns about the quality of life there, including the safety of the children, “a common

**Joint Domestic Homicide Review and Serious Case Review – LB Richmond Upon Thames  
Maria found murdered March 2018 in Richmond  
and Luis, aged 10, and Carlos, aged 7, found dead in Sussex**

theme". He understood they settled on England as a destination because of the access to Portuguese nationality providing membership of the European Union plus the potential benefit to the children of learning the English language.

**Living in London**

On arrival, Juan made use of the North London address of a friend, Lucia, for the purpose of opening bank accounts and as a billing address. In November 2015, Juan signed a contract for rental at a house in South West London. Customs and Excise registered the import of personal possessions from Venezuela there in March 2016.

The family registered with a local Health Centre from January 2016 and remained so throughout their house moves. The family contacts with the Practice were unremarkable and there is nothing to indicate domestic or child sexual abuse.

In September 2016, the family moved to another house in Richmond and Juan registered the lease purchase of a Mercedes car in November. In May 2017, he signed a contract for the rent of their second house in Richmond, paying ten months' rent in advance. The Panel noted the significance of this fact because renewal of the contract was due on a Monday in March 2018, the day of the homicides. The estate agent involved had been informed that Juan intended to renew for a further 12 months and this would have required a substantial amount of money.

Juan had described himself as involved in the import/export business. There is no evidence that he had such a business or that he had any employment at all. Maria did not work. They appeared to be living from a large sum of money that had been transferred from a Santander Bank in Portugal during 2018 to a joint Santander Bank account in the UK that had also been credited with cash deposits in branch. Another joint bank account was held with Lloyds and this was credited with transfers from the Santander account.

It would appear that Maria had the means to make independent purchases. She had credit cards in her own name and debit cards for both bank accounts were retrieved from her purse but this not eliminate the possibility that she was subject of economic control as a form of domestic abuse.. Cards in Juan's name were found in his wallet. It appears that Juan made exclusive use of the Lloyds bank card.

The balance in each account at the time of the homicides in March was under ten pounds. Two junior ISA accounts at Lloyds in the names of the children had been opened with £500 each in February 2016. These accounts had also been depleted to a negligible amount. There was no cash of any significance found at either murder scene. The Panel noted that Juan made more than 20 on-line lottery gambles amounting to nearly 500 pounds between January 2018 and the homicides in March.

The children attended a local Primary School from June 2016. Their headteacher reported that the children were doing well at school, albeit Spanish was their first language, and at no time expressed any worries or concerns connected with their home in the UK or from their time in Venezuela. When attending the inception familiarisation, the parents did reference the security

**Joint Domestic Homicide Review and Serious Case Review – LB Richmond Upon Thames  
Maria found murdered March 2018 in Richmond  
and Luis, aged 10, and Carlos, aged 7, found dead in Sussex**

and corruption situation in Venezuela as their reason for moving to Europe. They did not feel safe in Venezuela.

The boys made good progress with English and were soon integrated with school life. They last attended the school on the Friday before the homicides and were collected by Juan who had mainly carried out this duty. The Chair conducted telephone interviews with three parents who had the most contact with the family:

- It was understood that Juan had his own construction business in Venezuela and Maria had held a senior position in a communications company. The impression was gained that they were very wealthy. This made them a kidnap target for “the rebels” which led to Maria home-schooling the children for two years. Juan was planning to set up a business, perhaps a shop, but wanted to see the boys settled in first. He also talked of starting an import/export business
- Maria did not drive; therefore, they saw more of Juan on the school run which was necessary after the house move. Maria was generally chatty with a ready smile. She did talk about their time in Venezuela and that it was too dangerous for the boys to attend school, so she had home-schooled them within a gated community. Consequently, she particularly enjoyed the freedom of open spaces for social activities such as picnics
- One parent suggested they support each other to improve language skills. This did not happen because Maria was busy “working on articles” as a journalist. To another parent, also Spanish speaking, Maria disclosed she had not worked for three years and wanted to find work. An offer to work with her to develop a CV was not taken up
- Luis and Carlos were well-mannered, well-behaved and popular, however, not aware of basic safety advice. The headteacher and others noted that when Juan would collect his sons, they would run up to their father every day to hug him, always happy and smiling. Juan seemed like the perfect father
- As parents, Juan and Maria were very generous: gifts for everyone in the class at Christmas and the whole class of 30 invited to an activity such as go-karting at a son’s birthday event.
- There was no hint of domestic or child sexual abuse in the UK or historically in Venezuela.
- Over the winter of 2017/18, Maria seemed depressed and complained about the English weather. She kept harking back to what their lifestyle had become in Venezuela and one friend suggested she seek counselling to help disconnect from the bad memories. She could well have felt isolated and may well have been isolated under coercion and control exercised by Juan, however, other than complaining about the cold and the effects of influenza, Maria did not disclose anything to her brother or Lucia in the contacts she had with them over the weekend prior to the fatal incident.

Other sources of information about the family’s life in London came from the police investigation: Mateo had spoken to the family by telephone about once a month. He gained the general impression that life in the UK was: “working out OK”. He was slightly concerned at the time it was taking his father to start a business and he was not sure if they had enough funds. Along with this, they all seemed sick or unwell with respiratory issues which he assumed was due to the change in climate for them. As far as he knew, the boys were happy at school and engaging in activities. Neither Juan or Maria expressed any concerns or worries to him.

Antonio had a good relationship with Maria and Juan and was godfather to Luis. He would see the family about once a month but, in 2009, emigrated to Mexico. He understands that his sister’s

**Joint Domestic Homicide Review and Serious Case Review – LB Richmond Upon Thames  
Maria found murdered March 2018 in Richmond  
and Luis, aged 10, and Carlos, aged 7, found dead in Sussex**

family took the decision to emigrate to the UK because of their security concerns. Antonio spoke to Maria by telephone about twice a week. Antonio believed Maria was happier living in London and he understood the boys were happy, enjoyed school and had friends. He did not ascertain anything about their employment or financial situation and was not concerned. His last conversation with Maria was on the Saturday, two days before the homicides. They had a general conversation about politics and made jokes. Maria revealed it was snowing in London which she liked even though it made her feel ill.

Lucia, the friend who lived in North London met Maria for lunch shortly after the family emigrated. Maria relayed an account of the reason for emigrating, that involved hiring a detective to identify organised crime influencing the children's education and family servants. Fear of kidnap and corruption led to Maria home-schooling the children. Maria and Lucia kept in touch via the WhatsApp facility and would meet occasionally, including as couples with her partner. Lucia described Juan as: "a quiet man who never got a word in as Maria did all the talking". The last time Lucia met Maria was just before Christmas 2017 and nothing seemed amiss. The last WhatsApp communication between Maria and Lucia was between about 3.30pm on the Thursday before the homicides and 10pm on the Saturday. The 'conversations' in Spanish contained nothing contentious; comprising references to the weather (it had been snowing) and general health (Maria was recovering from influenza). It has been established that Maria last looked at her WhatsApp facility at about 8.45pm on the Sunday, a day before the homicides.

Data could not be recovered from Juan's telephone due to damage in the fall. The telephone used by Maria and a computer that appeared to be a family resource were examined successfully, the latter using key word searches. There are a number of personal records and family photos on the hard drive which all appear to be dated before the family arrived in the UK. There are excel spreadsheets with invoices relating to construction business in Venezuela. There is nothing logged that indicates that Maria carried on with work as a journalist.

### **The fatal incidents**

The "Farewell" email received by Mateo and other family members had an attached Word document of some 1500 words. This is a suicide note in which Juan sets out his justification for killing his sons and ending his own life. Maria is mentioned but he does not refer to an intention to kill her. Juan draws heavily on a popular spiritual text that he had read some 15 years earlier that made him question his beliefs. The salient points include:

- Luis and Carlos were abused physically and sexually at a pre-school in Caracas for two years. They were taken to parties and the abuse filmed. The school and some of their acquaintances were colluding
- The family visited Lima in Peru to find alternative schooling but the same thing happened there. Maria "connected the dots" and removed the boys from school. She became depressed because Carlos had been told she was not his mother and had nightmares. It was no longer safe in Venezuela
- Referring to the spiritual text he had read he pondered 'meaning of life' issues and that the life we know is just a simulation. He questioned why God created such imperfection, allowing wars and the situation in Venezuela. He challenges the concept of 'free will' and that fear and grief are drowning his spirit. He considers it is difficult to live
- Turning to his children, he writes that Luis had asked why things have to be so difficult. Carlos (who recently suffered from an ear infection) asked him why God doesn't help with the pain

**Joint Domestic Homicide Review and Serious Case Review – LB Richmond Upon Thames  
Maria found murdered March 2018 in Richmond  
and Luis, aged 10, and Carlos, aged 7, found dead in Sussex**

- Juan then states that they are both “wonderful kids, good-natured, generous and kind” but that he cannot stand seeing them in pain anymore and “above all, thinking about the pain they are yet to experience”. He refers back to the concept that the world is a simulation and leaving it is the “right decision”. He then makes it clear he is going to end their lives

Computer records show that Juan created the note at about 17:30 on the Sunday and last accessed it at 02:00 on Monday morning. The time it was sent, attached to the email, is logged at about 08:30 GMT. Searches of the internet made between 01:13 and 01:34 hours that same morning, included:

- Beachy head suicide
- Facebook – what are the most popular suicide spots in the world
- A route from the home to Beachy Head, along with a weather forecast
- Blogs / opinions on [the title of the spiritual text referred to in the note]

The forensic examination of the computer and Maria’s telephone did not reveal any correspondence or other evidence relevant to the relationship between Maria and Juan, nor any reference to the alleged sexual abuse of the children.

Examination of the crime scene found Maria in bed dressed in nightclothes. Her mobile telephone which was switched off was found under her body. The pathologist who examined her found more than 60 stab wounds on her upper body, some of them defence type injuries to her arms and hands. She died from multiple incised wounds. Toxicology found a therapeutic concentration of zopiclone which has sedative properties.

The kitchen knife used to inflict these wounds was found in the dish washer. Aside from the blood traces associated with the attack on Maria, a bloody handprint was found on the bedclothes in the children’s bedroom, indicating that Juan had placed his hand on the bed shortly after the murder, perhaps to check that his sons were asleep. On a table were found several computer-generated notes regarding school bags, a cremation and an apology that: “I cannot let my children live anymore in a world of despair, emptiness, pain, suffering and uncertainty”.

The car registered to Juan was tracked on ANPR (Automatic Number Plate Recognition) on the journey to Sussex. The remains of crisps and yoghurts consumption were found in the car. Juan and the children each died from multiple injuries consistent with a fall from the cliff. Toxicology concluded that Juan would not have been affected by alcohol or any of the drugs or medicines that were tested for, at the time he died. There was no sign of brain disease. Both children had ingested zopiclone in a therapeutic concentration found in the blood. Zopiclone has sedative properties and should only be prescribed for adults.

Inquests were concluded at West London Coroners Court in May 2019 and, under s5(2) of the Coroners and Justice Act 2009, the Coroner formally certified the circumstances by which each had come by their deaths, as follows:

- Maria was unlawfully killed by stabbing at the home address
- Luis and Carlos had been sedated and were unlawfully killed by their father by being forced off the upper edge of the cliff

**Joint Domestic Homicide Review and Serious Case Review – LB Richmond Upon Thames  
Maria found murdered March 2018 in Richmond  
and Luis, aged 10, and Carlos, aged 7, found dead in Sussex**

- Juan had murdered Maria and his sons and committed suicide

The Coroner considered and ruled out the possibility of third-party involvement and any suggestion that there was a suicide pact with Maria.

### **Conclusions from the review**

It is beyond doubt that Maria and her children were murdered by Juan who also took his own life. The main unresolved question is 'why?'. One hypothesis is contained in Juan's suicide note in which he sets out his version of what happened to the family in Venezuela prior to their emigration to the UK, specifically that the children were being taken out of school, physically abused and subjected to CSA. There is no evidence available that CSA was an ongoing concern during the two years living in London until Juan's suicide note was written. In none of the conversations with teachers and friends during that time was reference made to CSA.

The family had regularly attended the GP Practice, mainly with respiratory infections, and no historical concerns were raised. There was no trigger for 'professional curiosity'. Antonio, Mateo and Lucia were in regular contact with Maria, including in the days immediately preceding the fatal incidents. The pressure she was apparently feeling over the historical CSA issue, that Juan was writing about in such graphic terms, was not mentioned by her.

The second theory concerns the parlous state of the family finances. The family had no visible means of financial support yet behaved as if they were wealthy and acted with largess at times, such as their children's birthday treats for classmates. Juan's gambling on the lottery with the last of the cash available in the bank suggests he was aware of the looming crisis of family destitution. The Panel conclude that it is more than a coincidence that renewal of their rental contract was due on the day of the homicides. Juan made no reference to financial pressures in his suicide note and, for reasons that cannot be established, set out a different rationale for murdering his family and taking his own life.

There is substantive research available that relationship-based homicides are rarely spontaneous and the: 'He just snapped' explanation, which suggests an immediate proximal provocation, is not supported. Schlesinger describes 'catathymic homicides' as occurring when:

*There is a change in thinking whereby the offender comes to believe that he can resolve his inner conflict by committing an act of extreme violence against someone to whom he feels emotionally bonded*

The so-called 'journey to homicide' suggests planning and decision making. Juan initiated his suicide note on Sunday afternoon when the children were probably awake and did not finish it until the early hours of Monday when they would have been asleep. The attack on Maria was sustained and substantial and, given there are defence wounds, she would have been conscious and capable of crying out. A bloody handprint on the boys' bedclothes indicates they slept through the attack on their mother, possibly having been drugged with the zopiclone found in their bodies. There may then have been a change of Juan's plan [originally to kill them and himself in the house], because he initiated his internet searches for suicide locations from early on the Monday, just prior to completing the note that clearly states his intention to take their lives.



**Joint Domestic Homicide Review and Serious Case Review – LB Richmond Upon Thames  
Maria found murdered March 2018 in Richmond  
and Luis, aged 10, and Carlos, aged 7, found dead in Sussex**

A more recent study identified ‘The Homicide Triad’, and the coincidence of three groups of characteristics, namely, the offender’s emotional or psychological state, the presence of acknowledged high risk markers and the triggers which create escalation. This prompts further speculation that Juan:

1. Had become psychologically obsessed with his perception of CSA inflicted on his sons and his interpretation of a popular spiritual text
2. Was simultaneously facing the triggers of financial ruin and cultural embarrassment (possibly machismo)
3. Had then escalated his use of weapons and extreme violence to complete his ‘journey to homicide’

The family did not come to the attention of any agency or organisation connected with safeguarding during their time in the UK. None of the clinicians, teaching staff or parents who met the family through the school or their close family members resident around the world had any reason to be concerned and their lifestyle gave no hint of financial pressure.

Thus, one strategic learning point for this review is to ascertain how a migrant family in such financial stress could have sought and found assistance. The second strategic learning point is the need to ensure the link between financial difficulty and suicide is incorporated into the work of Safeguarding Adults and suicide prevention.

**Recommendations from the review**

In response to these learning points, the Panel have prepared recommendations and an Action Plan (appendix 3 to the overview report) for the Richmond Upon Thames Community Safety Partnership to oversee:

1. It is recommended that the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames ensures that the issue of financial difficulties for all communities and the link to Domestic Abuse is addressed within the development of its VAWG (Violence Against Women and Girls) strategy 2020-2023.
2. It is recommended that the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames ensures that the issue of financial difficulty and the link to suicide is incorporated into the work of Safeguarding Adults and suicide prevention.