

1-18-2019

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Recommended Citation

Beyer, Kristen R.; Hickey, Eric; and Bishop-Deaton, Deanna, "An Analysis of Mothers and Fathers Who Kill Their Children: Examining Offense Characteristics and Adjudication Outcomes" (2019). *2019 Program & Posters*. 5.
<https://scholarworks.waldenu.edu/symposium2019/5>

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An Analysis of Mothers and Fathers Who Kill Their Children: Examining Offense Characteristics and Adjudication Outcomes

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Problem

Filicide - the killing of one's biological child, is a crime that conflicts with nature in that it undermines parental genetic fitness and defies attachment theory. While much of the existing research surrounding filicide focuses on the death of children of a specific age or killings committed by mothers, law enforcement appears to lack an in-depth understanding of this phenomenon.

Purpose

The purpose of this exploratory, secondary analysis was to develop a more complete understanding of the phenomenon of filicide and to examine any potential similarities or differences between mothers and fathers who kill their children.

Significance

The significance of this study is to contribute to the existing knowledge base surrounding this phenomenon, and to potentially gain a clearer understanding of filicide and any potential similarities and differences among parental offenders as well as their subsequent sentences. Understanding how offense characteristics and adjudication disparities between female and male offenders of filicide enhances practitioner understanding of the subject, which can potentially contribute to risk mitigation of filicide and assist in investigations and interview strategies with these types of offenders. This is especially critical for practitioners providing services to clients at risk. Data obtained in this study applies not only to the discipline of psychology, but may also serve to inform law enforcement, the legal system, social services, medical professionals, and the community at-large on risk factors and preventative measures.

Social Change Implications

This study has the potential to promote greater understanding of this type of violent crime by educating society on identifying points of intervention to effect prevention. The findings from this study may be helpful to law enforcement entities investigating these types of crimes by contributing to their investigative, interviewing, and prosecutorial strategies.

Theory or Framework

Using Bowlby and Ainsworth's (1992) attachment theory, a child has an innate nature to forge bonds with parents to ensure its survival. A failed parental-child attachment results in potentially catastrophic outcomes. In addition, parental investment theories are rooted in biological and evolutionary psychology and explore the dynamics of parent-offspring relationships and investment. Parental investment is defined as the expenditures (e.g., time, resources, etc.) that a parent incurs to benefit their offspring. Parental investment theories explore adaptive functioning and fitness dynamics of parent-offspring relationship (Wang, 2016).

Relevant Scholarship

Child murder by a mother is often viewed as more distressing than by a father as it is assumed that mothers are more nurturing, selfless, and willing to protect their children. Often, female filicide offenders are considered to be either "mad" or "bad", suffering from either psychosis or psychopathy. The U.S. has the highest rate of child murder among industrialized countries with the most common offender being a parent. Uniform Crime Report data from 2017 reported 169 mothers who killed their children and 186 fathers who killed their children. Resnick (1969), in his seminal research on filicide, developed five categories of filicide to include altruistic, acutely psychotic, unwanted, child maltreatment, and spousal revenge.

To date, data reflect correlations between filicide typologies, risk factors, motive, gender, mode and manner of death, and victim demographics. Studies, however, primarily focus on female offenders' mental health factors and male offenders' socioeconomic status (Barone, Bramante, Lionetti, & Pastore, 2014; Mariano, Chan, Oliver, & Myers, 2014). What remains primarily unknown is if or how contributing variables and demographics result in adjudication disparities between maternal and paternal offenders (e.g., sentencing).

Research Question

What are the frequencies of offender, victim, and offense characteristics?

What are the adjudication differences between maternal and paternal offenders of filicide?

Participants

The snowball sample included 100 maternal filicide cases and 100 paternal filicide cases.

Procedures

For this secondary analysis, using keyword specific language for cases of filicide, an internet search was conducted through public/open sources such as court records, media sources, and social media. Sourced cases were chronicled and cross-checked against open court dockets and records of adjudication to ensure collection integrity. A coding protocol was developed for data entry and consistency and was then entered into SPSS.

Analysis

Frequency and crosstab descriptive statistics were generated and analyzed.

Findings

Frequency and crosstab descriptive statistics were generated and analyzed.

Interpretation

The results reveal adjudication disparities amongst offender characteristics when considering offender and victim demographics.

- The majority of offenders (65%) were single. Almost twice as many men as women were divorced or separated.
- A co-offender was present in only 5% of maternal cases, and 3% of paternal cases, and less than 5% overall.
- 75% of the cases had single victims, 68% Female and 81% Male

Victim Case Type	Bio Mother	Bio Father	Total
Filicide	79	68	147
Infanticide	14	31	45
Neonaticide	7	1	8
Grand Total	100	100	200

- Fatal Child Abuse was the most common motive by a wide margin, accounting for approximately 38% of the cases, followed by Revenge, Other, and Mental Illness at approximately 17% each, 88% total among those motives.
- First or Second-degree murder accounting for 50% of the first charges, followed by Non-homicide type charge of the second charges. There was no evident disparity in offender charges as both mothers and fathers were charged with first-and second-degree murder and capital punishment.

Offender Charge 1	Biological Mother Offcnt	%OffCnt	Biological Father Offcnt	%OffCnt	Total Offcnt	Total %OffCnt
First Degree Murder	36	36.00%	37	37.00%	73	36.50%
Second Degree Murder	13	13.00%	12	12.00%	25	12.50%
Other	13	13.00%	8	8.00%	21	10.50%
Murder-Suicide	9	9.00%	11	11.00%	20	10.00%
Capital Murder	9	9.00%	8	8.00%	17	8.50%
Non-homicide type charge (e.g., assault, battery, cruelty)	5	5.00%	10	10.00%	15	7.50%
Involuntary Manslaughter	9	9.00%	3	3.00%	12	6.00%
Voluntary Manslaughter	5	5.00%	4	4.00%	9	4.50%
Murder w/sex charges (e.g., rape, incest, abuse)		0.00%	4	4.00%	4	2.00%
Open Homicide		0.00%	2	2.00%	2	1.00%
Reckless Homicide	1	1.00%	1	1.00%	2	1.00%
Grand Total	100	100.00%	100	100.00%	200	100.00%

Interpretation Continued

- The most prevalent condition is awaiting trial (17%), followed by Life without Parole (13%), and Life with Parole (11%). Also, there were 20 (11%) murder suicides. Eleven (approximately 6%), were psychiatrically committed.

Offender Sentence	Biological Mother Offcnt	Biological Father Offcnt	Total Offcnt
Not adjudicated awaiting trial	15	18	33
LWOP (Life W/O Parole)	11	14	25
Life w/Parole	8	14	22
Murder Suicide	9	11	20
21-20 years	11	9	20
11-20 years	8	8	16
Psychiatric Commitment	7	4	11
0-10 years	5	4	9
31-40 years	5	3	8
Death Penalty	2	5	7
LWOP + Additional Sentence(s)	3	4	7
19	6		6
41-50 years	4	1	5
51-60 years	2	2	4
51-61 years	1	1	2
61-70 years	1	1	2
71-80 years		1	1
Grand Total	98	100	198

Limitations

While the study primarily employed court records, much of the data were obtained from news articles, leaving offender and victim demographics and historical material to the interpretation of the media source. Therefore, the information collected from the open sources may contain inaccurate information. Further data analysis is warranted.

Recommendations

This study provides a clearer picture of offender characteristics and the adjudication process for maternal and paternal filicide offenders. The existing literature frequently reports a disparity in sentencing between mothers and fathers. However, this research did not identify disparity in charges and sentencing between mothers and fathers. This study may reflect that charges and sentencing may have more equity than previously noted. Future research may involve further examination of mental health records and previous criminal behavior which may mitigate or contribute to sentencing. These findings may assist law enforcement in honing their interview, interrogation, and prosecutorial strategies.

