WHEN PARENTS KILL CHILDREN

Understanding Filicide

Editors

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We wish to dedicate the edited collection to those who died as a result of these filicides and filicide-suicides and the family members who were affected by their deaths.

Preface

Filicide refers to the phenomenon where one or more child is killed by a parent, stepparent or equivalent guardian. While filicides are committed globally, it is a rare event. Despite this, such events are deeply shocking and provoke a sense of horror and outrage: the killing of one's own child or children shatters our fundamental expectations about what it means to be a parent and the idea of parental instincts as a protection for children. Not surprisingly, many of these cases are reported in the media as "inexplicable tragedies" leading those in the wider community and particularly the families affected by these events struggling to find an explanation.

Although filicide events take place around the world, the small numbers, coupled with the uniqueness of each filicide event, present challenges for identifying trends and patterns, and raises questions as to how filicides can be prevented. When it comes to the national and international literature on filicide, the picture is limited. One key issue concerns comparability. Comparability is compounded by the data not readily being available or published, marked differences in the definitions of filicide applied, examining children from varying age groups, obtaining information from different data sources and collecting data over different time periods (see Brown et al, this collection). Moreover, early filicide research, pioneered by Phillip J Resnick (1979, 1969), approached filicide from the perspective of the perpetrator's psychological motives for committing child homicide and developed a categorisation

of filicide events according to five motives. These motives were then used as explanations for the deaths. While it is important to recognise Resnick's pioneering work and the fact that he contributed to the establishment of the study of filicide as a specific field or area of concern, it is equally important to recognise that scholarship has advanced considerably since his original studies.

More recent research has moved beyond a focus on categorisation arguing that such analyses reduce complex events to simplistic ones and overlooks the personal and familial circumstances of the offender and the victim, and the broader community and service connection and implications. Importantly, research has begun to generate a more contextual picture of filicide by revealing that there is a complex of factors that co-exist in any one filicide event. These include the offender's mental illness, actual or imminent parental separation, a history of domestic violence being inflicted by, or suffered by the offender, child abuse inflicted by the offender, prior child abuse suffered by the offender, and the abuse of alcohol and/or drugs by the offender. While the findings of this research, as illustrated by the chapters included in this collection, provide a more robust assessment of the nature and prevalence of filicide events, it remains a somewhat disparate but growing body of literature.

This collection take a first step by addressing some of the knowledge gaps in the existing literature on filicide by presenting the data and perspectives of a range international researchers from a selection of different countries. The countries which are included in this book represent a diverse group including Australia, the United Kingdom, the Republic of Ireland, Canada, South Africa, Chile, South America and Japan.

Part I: Incidence

The first section of this book provides an overview of the incidence of filicide in four different countries: Canada, Chile, South Africa and Japan. While the length of the study periods varies, it becomes clear that generating a complete and accurate picture of incidence remains a difficult task that researchers continue to take head on. The overall goal of this section is to show that despite obvious differences, there are similarities that emerge across countries.

Chapter 2 depicts Canadian filicide trends emerging from a study covering 51 years, the longest of any filicide study. The author notes that while most child homicide victims die at the hands of their parent, step-parent, or guardian there is no standard definition of filicide and suggests that situational characteristics vary between men and women. This chapter highlights gender as playing a part in the way in which filicide occurs. An important departure from traditional findings on filicide is that men outnumber women as perpetrators and this, the author argues, requires further study due to the traditional emphasis on filicidal mothers.

Chapter 3 is a first attempt at analyzing the incidence of filicide in Chile. While filicide has been present for the same length of time as other countries, there has been little local research done on the topic. The authors tracked all filicide deaths and near misses that occurred between the years 2010 and 2012. The findings suggest that socioeconomic and geographical factors play a part in the kind of filicide perpetrated. In line with international research, younger children were more vulnerable than their older counterparts. However, it is worth nothing that there was a high concentration of infanticides in the southern rural regions of Chile, an unexpected finding given the lower population concentrations present in the area.

Chapter 4 provides insight into the state of filicide research in South Africa. The authors make a case for the relationship between a persistent context of violence that permeates the South African milieu and the actual incidence of filicide. While it is not possible to establish all the underlying causes of violence, in South Africa, filicide can be understood as an extreme outcome of a continuum of violence. It is this context and other structural issues, such as chronic poverty, family breakdown and social isolation, that place South Africa's neonaticide rates as one of the highest in the world.

Chapter 5 presents the findings on filicide for a 20-year period, 1994–2013, in Japan. Similarly, to Chap. 3 the author found that there is a relationship between the geographical location of the incidents and the kinds of filicide events, with a high concentration of filicide-suicide and unwanted child deaths in rural areas. Whereas the overall filicide rate did not increase compared to previous research, this study revealed that compared to the 1970s there has been an increase in fatal abuse deaths despite increased prevention campaigns and service provision.

Part II: Explaining Filicide

Part II of this book looks at possible explanations for filicide deaths. It is important to remember that explanations are not limited to motives and that, as stated previously, research has, to a large degree, moved away from viewing motives as the only form of explanation possible. Access to long term and aggregated data have provided researchers with the opportunity to explore the life course of perpetrators and victims generating new understandings on the progression of events that lead to a filicide event.

Chapter 6 uses data from the Murder in Britain study to look at male perpetrators and compare family to non-family perpetrators. Examining the life course of these groups reveals that there are differences between birth fathers and non-birth fathers, where non-birth fathers had troubled lives from relatively early ages and many of them developed drug and alcohol issues. Examining the life course of male perpetrators reveals that when men murder children the type of relationship they have with the child, and the child's mother, is an important factor.

Chapter 7 diverges from the traditional separation in diagnoses and service provision to propose an integrated child protection–psychiatric interface response. In a departure from the common emphasis on child abuse-related deaths, the authors now argue that this was the wrong focus to measure improvements and develop intervention strategies from. Given the growing evidence of the presence of mental health issues across perpetrator categories, there should be much more attention placed on the role of the mental health of perpetrators and its long-term impact on children.

Chapter 8 seeks to provide a deeper understanding of familicide-suicide through an exploration of the psychodynamic or unconscious motivations of perpetrators. Focusing on cases of familicide-suicide in Western Australia that occurred following separation of heterosexual intimate partners, the authors present a conceptualization of hypothesised perpetrator motivation, based on attachment theory, personality dysfunction and the neurobiology of trauma and identify key risk factors that may be useful to practitioners seeking to prevent these deaths. They argue that it is the perpetrator's failure to cope with separation that increases the risk of lethality to the "other" and to the self.

Drawing on the most recent research on filicide in Australia and internationally, the authors of Chap. 9 highlight national trends regarding filicide incidents, victims and offenders and provide an overview of the distinctive features of filicide in Australia from which to develop improved measures for prevention. The authors identify a number of risk factors evident in Australian research including the vulnerability of very young children, the mental illness of the perpetrator, prior domestic violence inflicted by the male perpetrator or suffered by the female perpetrator, parental separation, prior child abuse, substance abuse, the criminal history of the perpetrator, the presence of a stepfather and the perpetrator's use of or failure to engage with services. The authors argue that the constellation of factors varies according to perpetrator group and that professionals carrying out risk assessments need to take this into consideration.

Chapter 10 uses de-identified aggregated data from the Arizona Child Fatality Review Program to consider whether children with special healthcare needs are at higher risk for filicide than other children. Examining a sample of cases involving children with special needs compared to a sample of cases involving children without special needs, the author found that the former were more at risk for filicide than other children, that biological fathers were more likely to be perpetrators and children less than one year to four years accounted for the majority of cases. The author argues that further research is needed to provide supporting evidence on the incidence and nature of filicide among children with special needs and to help enhance prevention services and intervention programmes.

Part III: Intervention and Prevention

The third and final part of this book provides a platform for addressing the prevention and intervention efforts in filicides. Each chapter identifies a particular issue that has become increasingly important to address in the aftermath of filicide. These issues range from how domestic homicide/child death review teams have addressed the needs of vulnerable groups of victims, the role played by professionals in engaging

with research when assessing the risks of filicide and the advocacy role played by the families of victims in the aftermath of homicide in raising awareness about filicides and/or domestic homicides. Often it is the family member's experiences and commitment to making improvements to individual, system and societal responses that can bring about concrete change.

Chapter 11 discusses how domestic violence death review committees have addressed or could better address the needs of vulnerable groups, children in the context of immigration. The authors argue that risk assessment tools be developed so that they are adaptable and culturally sensitive to recognise the diverse needs of, and assess lethality among, abused immigrant women and their children. The authors highlight that a major recommendation to come out of the inquiry into the tragic case of Christian Lee and his family is the importance of providing culturally informed services to immigrant women and their children living with domestic violence. The authors emphasise that when dealing with victims and their families, service provides need to approach their concerns in therapeutic, culturally competed way, and spend time attempting to understanding the family dynamics and impacts of the migration and acculturation experiences to better assess risk and safety. This, the authors conclude, often requires collaboration between advocates who understand immigrant victims' vulnerabilities as well as the complex socio-legal service systems around them.

The challenges faced by professionals when assessing the risk for filicide is explored in Chap. 12. The author begins by highlighting the paradigm shifts in knowledge and practice brought about since the 1990s inquiries into the protection of children in the out-of-home-care system in Australia. The author argues that a similar shift in knowledge and practice needs to take place if practitioners are to prevent parents from perpetrating filicide. The author presents a proposal for achieving change and triggering action-based responses (?) on the findings from a survey and focus groups conducted with 55 experienced family practitioners. The chapter provides an overview of a high-impact communication strategy, #KnowAskDo, which, it is argued, has the capacity to translate a complex body of knowledge into a call for action on the part of professionals, the broader community and potential perpetrators.

Few events are more devastating than the loss of a loved one to murder. When the perpetrator is the parent of a child, the trauma, loss, grief and despair suffered by the remaining parent and/or family members is palpable. In her book, *Homicide: The Hidden Victims: A Resource for Professionals*, Deborah Spungen offers that homicide for a family member is "the blackest hell accompanied by a pain so intense that even breathing becomes an unendurable labor" (1998, xix). She goes on to describe an incredible story in which the murder of her 20-year-old daughter, Nancy, in 1978 not only catapulted her on a journey she could never have envisaged, it was the catalyst for what ultimately became a lifetime dedicated to supporting and working with crime victims.

Little is known about the nature, breadth and experiences of families and friends of homicide victims, the secondary or co-victims, who undertake advocacy work in the aftermath of homicide/filicide/filicide-suicide. However, we have heard of and met with a number of extraordinarily courageous women and men—mothers, fathers, wives, husbands, partners, uncles, aunts, sisters, brothers, daughters, sons, grandmothers and grandfathers—who have in their own way become advocates for change in the aftermath of the murder of their loved ones. The authors of Chaps. 13 and 14 each reflect on their unique experiences of advocacy in the aftermath domestic homicide/filicide/filicide-suicide. In both cases, the perpetrator also killed himself. Chap. 13 lays out the many reasons why there needs to be changes made to the *Mental Health Act (2001)* in the Republic of Ireland. The author describes the challenges she faced engaging with her husband's mental health team and following their decision to discharge him, despite her concerns for his well-being. The underlying argument is that the death of her husband and two daughters could have been prevented with greater involvement from family members in her husband's treatment. Building on a similar theme, and drawing on his own experience, the author of Chap. 14 describes the challenges faced by families after domestic homicide. The author reflects on his decision to establish the organisation Advocacy After Fatal Child Abuse (AAFDA) and makes a case for why there needs to be greater family involvement in domestic homicide reviews.

This book recognises that the picture of filicide internationally is incomplete. The wide-range of contributions presented here represent

but a glimpse into this picture that sometimes adopts a narrow focus on incidence or a particular category of victim or that pays close attention to the details about filicide events, the circumstances in which they occur and what should be done to prevent filicide in the future. Whether the focus is on quantifying the data, identifying key patterns and trends, the contributions in this collection add further depth and detail that only serves to broaden our understanding about filicides in general. We hope readers will find the contributions to be a useful addition to the disparate but rapidly growing literature on filicide and prompt further debate and discussion about how we can intervene earlier to support vulnerable family members and better prevent these tragic events.

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Acknowledgements

This edited collection includes a number of articles based on papers presented at the Addressing Filicide: Moving to Prevention International Conference, held on 3–4 June 2015, at the Monash University Prato Centre, which is set within the medieval city of Prato in Tuscany, Italy. The inaugural international conference took place in 2013 and was the first of its kind. The conference, held bi-annually, aims to create an opportunity for cross-country and interdisciplinary dialogue on filicide by bringing together researchers, policy experts, service providers (governmental and non-governmental) and victim advocates from a diverse range of countries. Inspired by the conference series, the conference facilitators were keen to bring together the important work being done in this area in this edited collection.

The Addressing Filicide International Conference Series builds on an on-going collaboration between Monash and Deakin Universities. The Monash Deakin Filicide Research Project was established in 2010 at Monash University as a joint research venture between the Faculty of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences (Professor Thea Brown and Dr Paula Fernandez Arias, Department of Social Work) and the Faculty of Arts (Dr Danielle Tyson, Department of Criminology) at Monash University. Since the beginning of 2016, Dr Danielle Tyson joined Deakin University and the joint venture is now between Monash and Deakin Universities.

We would like to thank all of the contributors to this collection who gave generously their time and expertise and for their patience during the editorial process and their willingness to respond to our editorial feedback. We would like particularly to thank the administrators from the Monash Prato Centre which hosts the conference, conference organisers Helen McLean and Marg Scarlett from Casey Conference Services and finally the editors from Palgrave Macmillan Publishers.

We wish to dedicate this edited collection to the children who died as a result of these filicides and the family members who were affected by their deaths.

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Part I

Incidence

1

Canadian Trends in Filicide by Gender of the Accused, 1961–2011

Myrna Dawson

1.1 Introduction

The intentional killing of a child prompts reactions of shock and horror from most members of society, a situation that is greatly exacerbated when the accused is the child's father or mother. In Westernized societies, the majority of child homicide victims are killed by their parents, stepparent, or guardian, acts broadly referred to as filicide (Dixon, Krienert, & Walsh, 2013). The true rate of filicide remains unknown because it is assumed that many filicide perpetrators successfully conceal their crimes (Koenen & Thompson, 2008). There is no standard definition of filicide, and studies often focus on types of filicide separately using different sample parameters. When studies focus on filicides more generally, varying age groups are used to identify the sample. For these reasons, comparisons across studies can be difficult, and findings often appear contradictory.

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It is recognized that at least half of filicidal acts are committed by fathers, even though the majority of studies have focused on maternal filicide (West, Hatters Friedman, & Resnick, 2009). Few studies have systematically compared the similarities and differences in cases involving mothers and fathers who kill their children, but recent work in Australia (Eriksson, Mazerolle, Wortley, & Johnson, 2014), the Netherlands (Liem & Koenraadt, 2008), and the United States (Dixon et al., 2013) have begun to address this gap. Commonly found differences in the commission of and motivations for filicide by mothers and fathers may be important in the development of appropriate prevention strategies. To build on this growing body of international research, the aim of this study is to compare trends and patterns in filicide cases by gender of the accused that occurred in Canada over more than half a century.

1.2 Prior Research on Gender and Filicide

According to many community samples and aggregate crime data, mothers and fathers have been shown to commit filicide at almost the same rate, making it one of the few crimes that women commit as often as men (Adelson, 1961; Fox & Zawitz, 2007; Kunz & Bahr, 1996; Mariano, Chan Choon, & Myers, 2014; Marleau, Poulin, Webanck, Roy, & Laporte, 1999). Some recent comprehensive reviews (Bourget, Grace, & Whitehurst, 2007; Harris et al.; Koenen & Thompson, 2008; Porter & Gavin, 2010; West et al., 2009), and some recent empirical research (Dixon et al., 2013; Leveillee, Marleau, & Dubé, 2007; Liem & Koenraadt, 2008; Putkonen et al., 2011) have begun to examine whether mothers and fathers kill their children in the same way and for the same reasons. Findings have been contradictory because of the varying samples examined (Bourget & Bradford, 1990; Bourget & Gagne, 2007; Dawson & Lanagan, 1994; Flynn, Shaw, & Abel, 2007; Marks & Kumar, 1993), but some consistent patterns have been documented.

1.2.1 Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Filicide Accused and Their Victims

1.2.1.1 Perpetrators

The majority of research has shown that fathers who kill their children are older (Bourget et al., 2007; Dixon et al., 2013; Koenen & Thompson, 2008; Liem & Koenraadt, 2008), more likely to be employed (Putkonen et al., 2011), and more likely to have a criminal record (Harris, Hilton, Rice, & Eke, 2007; Koenen & Thompson, 2008; Marks & Kumar, 1993; Putkonen et al., 2011) than mothers. Most studies show that single mothers are more at risk of perpetrating filicide than single fathers (Koenen & Thompson, 2008). Biological parents are the most common filicidal perpetrator (Mariano et al., 2014).

1.2.1.2 Victims

The majority of research has found an even distribution of female and male filicide victims (Bouget & Gagne, 2007; Dixon et al., 2013; Flynn et al., 2007; Kunz & Bahr, 1996; Laporte, Tzoumakis, Marleau, & Allaire, 2005; West et al., 2009). However, findings are contradictory as to whether or not the victim's sex varies by gender of accused (Bourget et al., 2007; Mariano et al., 2014; Dawson & Langan, 1994). Overall filicide risk declines as children age (Koenen & Thompson, 2008). The presence of risk factors has been examined, but more attention needs to focus on the combinations of risk factors that may be more lethal and on whether these combinations vary by gender of the accused.

1.2.2 Situational Characteristics in Filicide

Research shows that fathers are more likely to stab, squeeze, or beat their children to death, whereas mothers are more likely to drown, suffocate, or gas their victims (Koenen & Thompson, 2008; Putkonen et al., 2011). Substance abuse has been found to be more common among filicidal

men than women (Eriksson et al., 2014; Harris et al., 2007; Putkonen et al., 2011). Findings are contradictory with respect to suicide as an outcome for filicidal offenders; some studies have shown that fathers are less likely to commit suicide than mothers, but others show that fathers are more likely to commit suicide after the filicide (Bourget et al., 2007; Cooper & Eaves, 1996; Daly & Wilson, 1988). Finally, the majority of research demonstrates that men are more likely to kill additional victims in cases of filicide, primarily their spouse and/or other children, whereas mothers seldom do so (Dixon et al., 2013; Harris et al., 2007; Koenen & Thompson, 2008; Marleau et al., 1999; West et al., 2009; West & Friedman, 2007). Often ending with the suicide of the offender, these cases are referred to as familicides (Bourget et al., 2007; Liem & Koenraadt, 2008; Wilson, Daly, & Daniele, 1995) and children are often collateral, rather than primary, victims in these cases (Meyer & Post, 2013).

1.2.3 Explaining Filicide

Canadian researchers Bourget and Bradford (1990) were the first to recognize the role of gender as a significant category in and of itself when explaining filicides. The lack of research on fathers who kill their children continues to persist, however, preventing further theoretical development and evolution of typologies. Some studies have demonstrated that fathers who kill their children more often had a documented history of violence than did mothers (Bourget et al., 2007; Eriksson et al., 2014). Thus, one motivation or precursor for paternal filicide is child abuse that results in a fatality (Liem & Koenraadt, 2008), including accidental filicides (Eriksson et al., 2014). Research has also shown that fathers act more often out of vengeful anger or retaliation because of sexual jealousy, marital instability, and actual or pending separation from a female partner (Harris et al., 2007). The latter situation often involves child custody and access disputes (Jaffe, Campbell, Hamilton, & Juodis, 2012; Jaffe et al., 2013). This is much less frequent for filicidal mothers.

Linked to the above findings, one explanation for filicide that has dominated the literature is the evolutionary or selectionist framework first proposed by Daly and Wilson (1988). Within this tradition, filicide is perceived as the outcome of parental manipulation in which parental actions are "designed to seize control of reproduction by affecting resource allocation among offspring or by affecting the reproductive behaviour of mates" (Harris et al., 2007: 92). This framework is supported by research that has shown men are more likely to kill children when their paternity is in question (Daly & Wilson, 1988; Wilson et al., 1995), when they view children as a burden or an obstacle (Resnick, 1969), or when they fear losing their spouse (Daly & Wilson, 1988; Wilson et al., 1995).

Traditional parenting cycles for men and women have also been examined to aid in understanding research that has shown that the age of filicide victims varies by offender gender. It is argued that mothers have more opportunities to kill younger children because they spend more time with them at that age than fathers—in short, their time at risk is higher. As children age, fathers may begin to spend more time with their children, becoming more involved in their care and discipline. This increase in father–child interaction may also raise the likelihood of filicide. Although parenting traditions have changed over time, this gender patterning in childcare largely remains true today in most countries, including Canada.

Although mental illness is commonly assumed to be a major precursor or motivation for filicide, findings remain mixed (Flynn, Shaw, & Abel, 2013). Fathers have been found to be less often psychotic compared to mothers (Adelson, 1961; Eriksson et al., 2014; Koenen & Thompson, 2008; Liem & Koenraadt, 2008). However, one review concluded that both filicidal mothers and fathers were experiencing significant life stressors, socially isolated with few supports, and suffered a history of abuse during their childhood (Bourget et al., 2007; Eriksson et al., 2014). As such, time spent with the child combined with mental health issues or the experience of significant life adversities may explain, in part, gender differences in and motivations for filicide.

1.3 The Current Study

1.3.1 Data Source and Sample

The primary data examined in this study were drawn from Statistics Canada's annual Homicide Survey that has collected information on homicide incidents, victims, and accused persons since 1961. In accordance with Canadian law, the Homicide Survey classifies criminal homicide as first-degree murder, second-degree murder, manslaughter, or infanticide (see *Criminal Code of Canada*, Section 222(4)). Collection of information on cases of manslaughter and infanticide did not begin until 1974. To account for this difference in recording patterns, the earliest time period examined in this study captures the years 1961–1973 to distinguish this period from later periods when information on manslaughter and infanticide was collected. Using these data, it is acknowledged that there is a risk of undercounting filicides if they were not reported to police, or they were not classified as a homicide. Furthermore, given that data do not document court outcomes, some accused may have been subsequently acquitted of the filicide.

Consistent with the majority of previous research, filicide is defined in this study as the killing of a child less than 18 years of age by a biological parent or stepparent (Dixon et al., 2013; West & Friedman, 2007). Included in this sample, after 1974, are infanticides. The current sample includes filicide cases officially reported and recorded by police excluding manslaughter and infanticide for a 51-year period and including infanticide and manslaughter for a 38-year period. This represents the longest period of time over which filicides have been examined in any country. The total sample analyzed is 1612 cases. Below, patterns and trends in filicide are examined by gender of accused for various victim, accused, and incident characteristics. Table 1.1 shows the distribution of characteristics for the total sample, and then by comparing the number and proportion of male and female accused in each category.