Filicide: When Parents Kill Their Children

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Terms

• Neonaticide
  - First 24 hours of life
• Infanticide
  - First year of life
• Filicide
  - Parent who kills child

Age of Victims

• < 1 week old  10%
• 1 week–1 year old  30%
• 1-2 years old  28%
• 3-4 years old  11%
• 5-9 years old  11%
• 10-18 years old  10%
Frequency

- Child homicide victims:
  - Parent is killer in 65%
- 5-7 cases/week in U.S.
- 1 case/week in Canada

Sex of Parent Murderer

- Overall, mothers = fathers
- Babies < 1 week old – Mothers (almost always)
- 16-18 year olds – Fathers (77%)

Method of Death - Mothers

- Quebec study:
  - Carbon monoxide poisoning 24%
  - Shooting 18%
  - Strangulation 15%
  - Drowning 15%
  - Stabbing 12%
  - Beating 6%
Method of Death - Fathers

- Quebec study:
  - Shooting 34%
  - Beating 22%
  - Stabbing 12%
  - Strangulation 10%
  - Blunt instrument 7%

Neonaticide

- Almost always mothers
- Unwanted teenage pregnancy
- Rarely depressed or psychotic
- Rare accompanying suicide attempts
- May deny pregnancy

Neonaticide

- Tend to be young
- 81% unmarried
- No preparation for the birth or the killing
- Ashamed or fear rejection from parents, afraid to disappoint them
Neonaticide

• Suffocate, strangle, head trauma, drown
• Passive personality style
• Rate of recurrence:
  – If discovered, almost never
  – If undetected, a couple case reports
  – Often marry and become good mothers

Maternal Filicide

• 2/3 of mothers psychotic
• >2/3 of mothers have depression
• 1/3 of mothers have accompanying suicide attempt
• Most common dx: major depression with psychotic features

Maternal Filicide

• 70% occur at home
• Almost always born in Canada and Caucasian
• Substance abuse not usually present
Paternal Filicide

• 40% recent marital separation
• At least 40% past domestic violence
• Only 5% involved substance use at time of offence
• Almost all born in Canada and Caucasian

Paternal Filicide

• 52% major depression
• 30% psychosis
• 5% substance intoxication

Paternal Filicide

• 23% involve multiple victims
• 18% killed wife as well
• 60% followed by suicide attempt
Outcome of Convicted

- Mothers:
  - Hospitalized 68%
  - Jail 27%
- Fathers:
  - Hospitalized 14%
  - Jail/executed 72%

Resnick Classification System

- Altruistic – 49%
- Acutely psychotic – 21%
- Unwanted child – 14%
- Fatal maltreatment – 12%
- Spousal revenge – 4%

Alternative Classification

(% in Quebec Maternal Suicide)
(% in Quebec Paternal Filicide)

- Mentally ill (85%) (64%)
- Fatal abuse (11%) (25%)
- Retaliating (0%) (4%)
- Mercy (0%) (0%)
- Other/unknown (4%) (8%)
Mentally ill (85%) (64%)
• Axis I diagnosis active at time of filicide
• Psychosis in 2/3 of mothers and 1/3 of fathers
• May result from delusions, hallucinations, depression, suicidality

Fatal Abuse (11%) (25%)
• Child abuse or neglect
• Prior abuse common
• No intent to kill
• Factitious Disorder by proxy (Munchausen's Syndrome by proxy)

Retaliating (0%) (4%)
• Intent to make spouse suffer
• May be triggered by jealousy or spousal infidelity
• Often severe personality disorder
Mercy Killing
- Child has a severe and debilitating illness
- Parent does not have significant mental illness

Unwanted Child – 14% (Resnick)
- Illegitimate child
- Extra-marital paternity
- Inconvenience

After the Homicide
- Altruistic and acutely psychotic
  - Seek help immediately
  - No effort to hide
- Unwanted and fatal maltreatment
  - Usually deny the crime
  - Hide incriminating evidence
Familicide

- Almost always fathers
- Often involves suicide
- Quick failsafe methods

Criminal Code of Canada
Section 233 – Infanticide

- Female by a willful act or omission causes the death of her newly-born child
- Mind is disturbed from incomplete recovery from giving birth or the effect of lactation
- Maximum penalty is 5 years

Not Criminally Responsible by Mental Disorder (NCR)

- Unable, by virtue of mental disorder, to appreciate the nature and quality of the act or know that it is wrong
Not Criminally Responsible

• Mental disorder = disease of the mind
• Any mental abnormality which causes impairment
  • Psychotic disorders and mental retardation most straightforward

Not Criminally Responsible

• Personality disorders are eligible, but:
  – Uncommon as it is unlikely they are unable to appreciate the nature and quality of the act

Not Criminally Responsible

• “Appreciate”
  – Ability to foresee and measure consequences and not simply “know” in the cognitive sense
• “Nature and quality of the act”
  – The physical consequences
Not Criminally Responsible

• “Wrong”
  – Legal and moral wrongfulness
  – Wrong in the eyes of the law and wrong according to society’s usual standards
  – Must have ability to apply that knowledge rationally

Not Criminally Responsible by Mental Disorder (NCR)

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Questions/Discussion
Thank you for your participation

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