

# **CHILD HOMICIDE**

## **Review of Statistics and Studies**

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## CHILD HOMICIDE

This resume provides selected information on child homicide from six countries: England and Wales, Scotland, Canada, USA, and Australia. The information given is primarily intended to encourage and inform public debate and is of limited extent. Some of the national data for child homicide is not always comparable (for instance, different ranges of child ages applying in different countries), but the general pattern of prevalence, perpetration, methods, reasons, and criminal justice outcomes, is fairly consistent between these countries.

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### DEFINITIONS

<b>Filicide</b>	Killing of own child by a biological parent
<b>Neonaticide</b>	Killing of own child within the first 24 hours of birth by a parent
<b>Infanticide</b>	Killing of own child less than 1 year old by a parent
<b>Filicide-suicide</b>	Killing of own child by biological parent followed by suicide of parent
<b>Familicide</b>	Murder of own child and other parent followed by suicide

## KEY OBSERVATIONS

- Most children killed are under the age of 5 or 6
- Infants under 1 year old are the most vulnerable
- Boys are generally at slightly more risk than girls
- Child homicide victims account for 8% to 14% of all homicide victims
- A parent is the principal suspect/perpetrator in 50% to 70% of all family child homicides
- Male parents are responsible for about two thirds of family child homicides and female parents about one third
- Biological fathers are responsible for about 55% of murders of their own offspring and biological mothers about 45%
- Mothers are responsible for the majority of infant deaths
- Children under 1 year old are especially vulnerable to physical assault (fists, feet, shaking, dropping, throwing)
- Children under the age of 6 are more likely to be killed by strangulation or a beating than by other means
- A substantial proportion of family members responsible for family child homicide are classified as mentally ill
- About a half of mentally ill perpetrators of child homicide have a psychotic disorder
- A substantial proportion of parents who kill their children express the belief that they had acted altruistically
- A substantial number of filicides occur following parental separation, primarily by fathers: of these, a substantial proportion then commit suicide and a further significant proportion require psychiatric services
- Male parents who kill their children are generally treated more harshly and unsympathetically by the legal process than female parents: fathers are more likely than mothers to be charged with murder than manslaughter, and more fathers than mothers convicted of manslaughter are imprisoned; convicted mothers are more likely than fathers to be hospitalised or treated rather than imprisoned

## PREVALENCE

### England and Wales

During the 12-year period 1992 to 2002/03, an average of 78 children per year aged under 16 years were victims of homicide in England and Wales<sup>(1)</sup>, representing an average of 11.5% per year of all homicides. The numbers of child homicides per year ranged from 64 to 99, corresponding to 7.8% to 13.7% of all homicides respectively.

In 2002/03, a total of 99 children under 16 were victims of child homicide, about two thirds of them under the age of 5. The total number represented 9.8% of all homicides in England and Wales for that year.

Age (years)	Number	Percent
< 1	34	34.3
1 – 4	31	31.3
<i>Total &lt; 5</i>	<i>65</i>	<i>65.6</i>
5 – 15	34	34.3
<b>Total &lt; 16</b>	<b>99</b>	<b>100.0</b>

These totals do not include sudden infant deaths (SIDs) or cot deaths unless homicide was suspected. In 2001, there were 231 SIDs in England and Wales. The rates of cot death vary with social class and marital status. In 2001, the rate was 1.28 per 1000 live births among children of single mothers, six times the rate of 0.2 per 1000 for babies of married couples. The rate for babies registered by unmarried parents living at different addresses was 0.71 per 1000 live births, over three times the rate for married couples.

A report published in April 2004 by researchers from the Foundation for the Study of Infant Deaths (FSID)<sup>(2)</sup> suggested that as many as one in 10 of sudden infant deaths could be cases of murder or child neglect, amounting to 30 to 40 of 'covert homicides' of babies a year in Britain. The number of sudden baby deaths registered in Britain has steadily fallen in recent years. However, the researchers believed that the number of suspected 'covert homicides' has stayed about the same, although they admitted that "it is impossible to be certain of the exact figures." The findings were based on the national *Confidential Enquiry into Stillbirths and Death in Infancy 1993-1996*, a study of the outcome of some half million births.

### Scotland

In Scotland, during the 10-year period 1993 to 2002<sup>(3)</sup>, an average of 9 children per year under age 16 were victims of homicide, representing an average of 8.2% per year of all homicides.

In 2002 in Scotland, a total of 10 children under 16 were victims of child homicide, half of them under the age of 5. The total number represented 7.9% of all homicides in Scotland for that year.

Age (years)	Number	Percent
< 1	2	20.0
1 – 4	3	30.0
<i>Total &lt; 5</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>50.0</i>
5 – 15	5	50.0
<b>Total &lt; 16</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>100.0</b>

## Canada

The report *Family Violence In Canada: A Statistical Profile 2003*<sup>(4)</sup>, gave details in Table 3.7 of the cause of death for known child and youth homicides under the age of 18 committed by family members during the 27-year period 1974 to 2001. A total of 1,326 children and youths were victims of homicide by family members in this period, an average of 49 per year. Of this average, 41 were children under age 12 (84% of the total for under 18s).

Age (years)	Number	Percent	Av. number per year
< 1	379	28.6	14
1 - 2	254	19.2	9
3 - 5	236	17.7	9
6 - 8	136	10.3	5
9 - 11	110	8.3	6
<i>Total &lt; 12</i>	<i>1,115</i>	<i>84.1</i>	<i>41</i>
12 - 14	105	7.9	4
15 - 17	106	8.0	4
<b>Total &lt; 18</b>	<b>1,326</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>49</b>

In 2001, 69 children and youths under the age of 18 were murdered, representing about 12% of total homicides in Canada in that year.

## USA

According to a US Bureau of Justice Statistics report<sup>(5)</sup> on infanticide, during the 25-year period 1976 to 2000, an average of 638 children each year under the age of 5 years were victims of homicide.

Age (years)	Number	Percent
< 1	253	39.7
1	143	22.4
2	118	18.5
3	73	11.4
4	51	8.0
<b>Total &lt; 5</b>	<b>638</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Based on 14,069 of such victims in the period, 55% were male and 45% female. Most of the children under age 5 murdered in the US in this period were therefore male.

In 2001, the total number of victims under the age of 18 was about 1,300, according to a report *Child Maltreatment 2001* by the US Department of Health and Human Services<sup>(6)</sup>. Children under the age of 1 year were the most vulnerable, accounting for 41% of the total. Children aged 1 - 5 years accounted for a further 44%, making a total proportion of 85% for children under age 6. Children and youths aged 6 -17 accounted for 15%.

A further report from the same source<sup>(7)</sup> offered several general conclusions;

Many researchers and practitioners believed that child fatalities due to abuse and neglect were under-reported. Recent studies in Colorado and North Carolina estimated as many as 50 to 60% of deaths resulting from abuse or neglect were not recorded. These studies showed that neglect was the most under-recorded form of fatal maltreatment.

Boys were slightly more likely than girls to be the victims of fatal child abuse or neglect. In 2001, male children accounted for 56% and females for 44% of all [child] fatalities.

Almost all child fatalities (93% in 2001) were associated with physical abuse or neglect, as opposed to other types of child maltreatment. In 2001, 36% were associated with neglect alone. Physical abuse was cited in 26% of reported fatalities. Another 22% of fatalities were the result of a combination of neglect and physical abuse.

Fatal abuse may involve repeated abuse over a period of time or it may involve a single, impulsive incident (eg. drowning, suffocating, or shaking a baby). In cases of fatal neglect, the child's death resulted from a carer's failure to act. The neglect may be chronic (eg. extended malnourishment) or acute (eg. an infant who drowned because it was left unsupervised in the bathtub).

In July 1994, a report *Murder in Families* by the Bureau of Justice Statistics<sup>(8)</sup> was published giving the results of a detailed study of family homicide cases during 1988 in 33 urban counties in the US, weighted up to give estimates of family homicide for the 75 largest urban counties.

The study estimated a total of 8,063 homicides for the 75 counties in 1988, including 1,308 family homicides. Of these, 285 were 'offspring'.

Of the offspring, 55.8% were male and 44.2% female. 78.5% were under the age of 12, and 10.9% were aged 12 - 19.

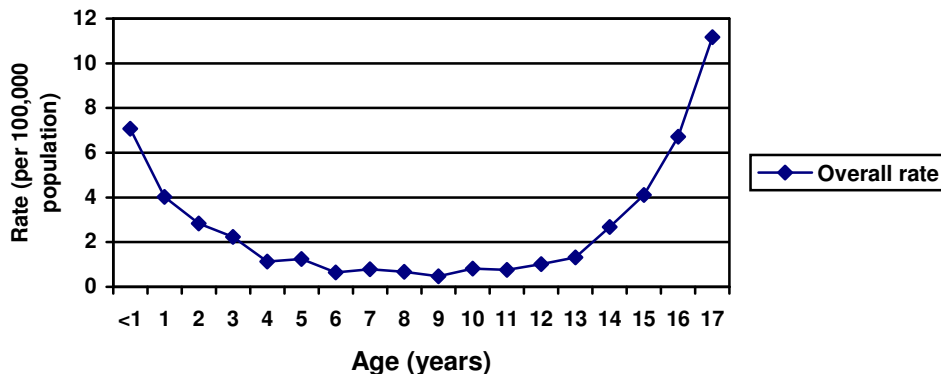
57% of child victims under the age of 12 were killed by the child's parents. The study found that when a mother killed her own child, it was more likely to be a son than a daughter (64% compared to 36%), and when a father killed his own child, it was more likely to be a daughter than a son (52% compared to 48%).

The study also found that, compared to defendants in other types of family murder, defendants accused of killing their offspring, or their parents, were most likely to have multiple victims.

Alder and Polk (2001) in their book *Child Victims of Homicide*<sup>(9)</sup>, based on a detailed study of 90 homicides of children and youths under age 18 in Victoria, Australia during the period 1985 to 1995, also gave rates for child homicide in the USA for year 1998 obtained from the US Bureau of Justice Statistics. Rates ranged from 7.07 per thousand population for children under 1 year old to a low of 0.47 per thousand for children of age 9, and with significantly increasing rates from age 14.

The typical 'U-shaped' pattern is shown in Figure 1 overleaf.

**Fig 1 Child Homicide Rates by Age of Victim  
USA 1998**



Source quoted: US Bureau of Justice Statistics

**Australia**

A report *Children as Victims of Homicide*, published in March 1996 by the Australian Institute of Criminology<sup>(10)</sup>, gave some statistics for child homicide in Australia for the period July 1989 to December 1993.

The study found that during this period, there were 108 known child homicide incidents resulting in the deaths of 126 children under the age of 15, this number representing about 8.5% of all homicides in this period. 25 of the incidents (20%) involved multiple victims – sometimes the mother, sometimes another child. In almost all these 25 cases, the offender was male.

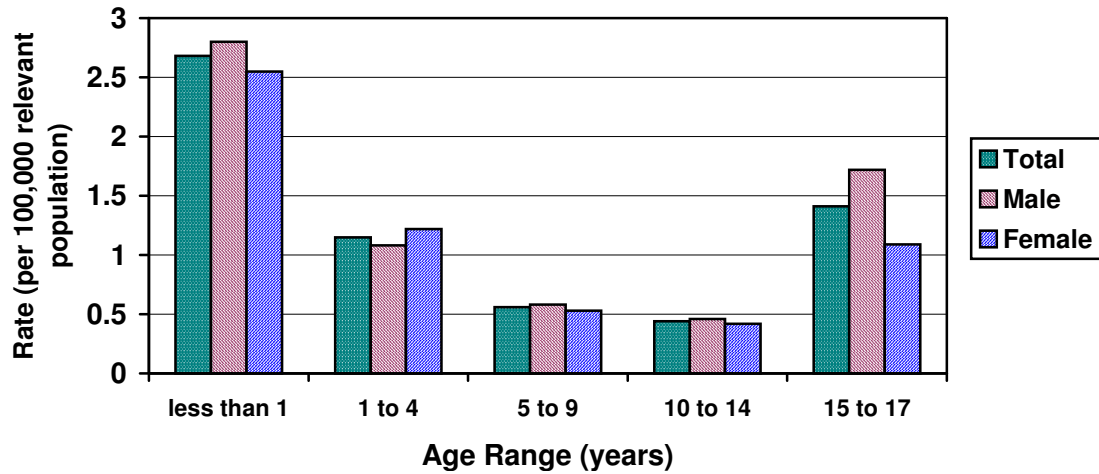
The total of 126 children comprised 58 boys and 67 girls (and one child whose sex was unknown).

Age (years)	Number	Percent
< 1	32	25
1 - 5	47	38
6 - 10	29	23
11 - 14	18	14
<b>Total &lt; 15</b>	<b>126</b>	<b>100</b>

In Australia, as elsewhere, there is an enhanced risk for children under the age of one year. For those under this age, the number of deaths by homicide equals or exceeds the number of deaths caused through motor vehicle accidents, accidental poisonings, falls or drownings. For infants under 1 year of age, one of the biggest single categories of death (20% in 1991) is ‘Sudden Death, Cause Unknown’ (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1988 - 1991)

Alder and Polk (2001)<sup>(9)</sup> gave child homicide rates for Australia for the decade 1 July 1989 to 30 June 1999. These are shown in Figure 2 overleaf.

**Fig 2 Child Homicide Rates by Age of Victim  
Australia 1989 - 1999**



Source quoted: Mouzos (2000)

The rates show a 'U-shaped' pattern similar to other countries, with a value for children under 1 year of age about five times that for children of 5 to 14, and nearly twice that for youths of 15 to 17.



## SUSPECTS/PERPETRATORS

### England and Wales

During the 12-year period 1992 to 2002/03<sup>(11)</sup>, the number of parents suspected of killing their children under the age of 16 averaged 53 per year, with a range of 41 to 80 parents. The average total of 53 corresponded to 30 male victims and 23 female victims.

A parent as the principle suspect averaged 67.9% per year in all family homicides over this period, with a range of 55.6 to 80.8%.

In 2002/03, 55 parents were the principle suspects, corresponding to 29 male victims and 26 female victims, and representing 56% of family homicides.

In the 6-year period 1995/96 to 2000/01, a total of 296 children were murdered by their biological parents, 160 by fathers and 136 by mothers<sup>(12)</sup>. In addition, a total of 56 children were killed by their step-parents, 54 by stepfathers and two by stepmothers.

Year	Total Victims	Sons/ daughters	Sex of suspect		Step/ children	Sex of suspect	
			Male	Female		Male	Female
95/96	56	45	27	18	11	11	0
96/97	52	46	25	21	6	6	0
97/98	48	41	27	19	7	7	0
98/99	62	49	25	24	13	12	1
99/00	52	44	28	16	8	7	1
00/01	82	71	33	38	11	11	0
Totals	352	296	160	136	56	54	2
Av pa	59	50	27	23	9	9	<1
% M/F suspects			54.0	46.0		96.4	3.6

Overall, for all 352 victims, biological and non-biological, a male parent was suspect in 60.8% of instances and a female parent in 39.2% of instances.

Alder and Polk<sup>(9)</sup> referred to research by Wilczynski and Morris (1993) which found that of 395 parents suspected of murder of their child in the UK during the period 1982 to 1989, 44% were mothers. This proportion increased to 47% for victims under 1 year of age.

A report published by the NSPCC in July 1992<sup>(13)</sup> on child abuse trends in England and Wales during the period 1988 to 1990, gave details of 28 child fatalities notified to the charity registers during this period. 13 of these children were registered after their deaths, and the remaining 15 were already registered when they died.

13 of these 15 subsequent deaths were either natural or accidental, comprising 8 cot deaths, 4 children from illness, and 1 in a car accident. Of the other two, 1 subsequently died in a fire in his home and the other was found dead with massive and extensive physical injuries. [The child's mother and her cohabitee were subsequently jailed for this].

Of the 13 registered fatalities, natural mothers were implicated in 5 cases and natural fathers in two. Father substitutes (1 stepfather, 3 cohabitees) were implicated in 4 cases and both the natural father and his cohabitee in one. The cohabitee of the child's aunt was implicated in the last case.

11 of these 13 registered children were boys. 2 were poisoned, 3 asphyxiated (1 strangled, 1 suffocated, and 1 smothered), and the rest died from inflicted injuries.

The 3 asphyxiated children, all boys between 18 and 30 months old, were killed by their natural mothers. The 2 poisoned children were also boys and 2 years old. The father and mother substitute were implicated in the case of one and the mother's cohabitee in the other. Natural parents were implicated in all 4 of the infant deaths, natural mothers in the case of the 2 youngest (2.5 weeks and 1 month) and natural fathers in the case of the 2 older infants.

In the 4 remaining deaths, 3 father substitutes (1 stepfather, 2 cohabitees) and a cohabitee of an aunt were suspected of inflicting the injuries which killed them [the majority from severe head injuries].

Overall, 14 of the 28 child fatalities were due to homicide. Suspects comprised 6 natural mothers, 3 natural fathers, 1 stepfather, 1 female cohabitee, and 5 male cohabitees.

Infants had usually been killed by one or other of their natural parents. Older children tended to have been killed by natural parents in psychotic outbursts, or by father substitutes who had recently joined the family.

A study of child homicide by researchers at the University of Southampton published in 2001<sup>(14)</sup>, was based on an analysis of police and official records for 2 English counties over the decade 1986 to 1995. The study involved the records of 33 children killed by 27 assailants in this period.

The study found that in more than 80% of cases the assailants were 'family members', of whom 55% were classified as 'mentally ill'. Of this group, half subsequently committed suicide.

The study also found that mentally ill mothers (MIM) killed at 50 times the general population rate. Men with previous convictions for violence had a murder rate 4 times that of MIM, and women on the 'at risk' register killed at 6 times the rate of MIM. However, the 'multi-criminal child sex abuser' with convictions for violence killed at 80 times the MIM rate.

## Scotland

Over the 10-year period 1993 to 2002, the number of parents suspected of killing their children under the age of 16 averaged 5 per year with a range of 4 to 9<sup>(15)</sup>. A parent as the main suspect averaged 57.4% over the period.

In 2002, 5 parents were the main suspects, corresponding to 3 male victims and 2 female victims, and representing 50% of family homicides.

## Canada

The report *Family Violence in Canada: A Statistical Profile 2003*<sup>(4)</sup> gave details in Table 3.5 of solved homicides of known victims under the age of 18 for the period 1974 to 2001.

Over the 27-year period 1974 to 2000, family homicides of victims under 18 averaged 49 per year, 24 by fathers (22 biological and 3? stepfathers) and 18 by mothers (all biological).

In 2001, 69 children and youths under 18 were murdered, representing 12% of total homicides. 43 victims (62%) were killed by family members – primarily parents. 20 were

killed by fathers (16 biological and 4 stepfathers) and 17 by mothers (16 biological and 1 stepmother).

Relationship of accused to victim	2001		Annual average 1974-2000	
	Number	%	Number	%
Total family homicides	43	62	49	63
<i>Total fathers</i>	20	29	24	30
Biological	16	23	22	28
Step	4	6	3?	4
<i>Total mothers</i>	17	25	18	23
Biological	16	23	17?	22
Step	1	1	0	0
Other family	6	8	7	9
Total non-family homicides	26	38	29	37
Total solved homicides	69	100	78	100

Note: includes only known victims and known ages.

Table 3.6 in the report gave details of family homicides of children and youth under 18 by sex of victim during the period 1974 to 2001. In all, 1,324 persons under this age were killed by family members, 1,128 of these (85%) by biological parents.

Relationship of accused to victim	Total	Sex of victim	
		Female	Male
Total family homicides	1,324	611	713
<i>Total fathers</i>	652	299	353
Biological	581	268	313
Step	71	31	40
<i>Total mothers</i>	476	227	249
Biological	469	222	247
Step	7	5	2
Other family	196	85	111

Note: includes only known victims and known age and sex

Some data on child homicide was included in an overview of family violence published by the British Columbia Institute Against Family Violence in 2000<sup>(16)</sup>.

In the 20-year period 1979 to 1998 in Canada, there were some 2,000 child victims of murder (15.7% of all murder victims). 60% of these were killed by family members, and 80% of these by biological or legal parents or their intimate partners.

In 1998, family members – in 93% of cases, parents – were responsible for 72% of solved child homicides that year, fathers accounting for 34% and mothers 17%.

The highest risk of child homicide occurred in the first three years of life. In the period 1979 to 1998, 55 to 70% of all children killed by parents were age 3 or younger. In 70% of young child deaths, mothers were responsible, and in 55% of homicides of children under age 3, fathers were identified as perpetrators.

Family members committed 92% of infanticide crimes (children under 1 year old), mothers accounting for 38% of infant deaths and fathers 49% (ref Statistics Canada 2000).

The overview concluded that as a percentage of perpetrators, more women committed filicide than homicide, although the percentage of women committing filicide was not as high as the percentage of men committing either filicide or homicide. Where biological parents

commit the crime, mothers and fathers were equally culpable: where the relationship was non-biological, fathers were implicated more often.

According to a paper by Sobsey (2001)<sup>(17)</sup> on altruistic filicide, during the 5-year period 1994 to 1998 in Canada, the number of children under the age of 12 murdered by parents increased to 7.1% of all homicides compared to 4.9% in the period 1974 to 1983. About 80% of child homicide victims were murdered by one or both of their own parents (compared to about 55% in the US) and about half of parents who killed their children expressed the belief that they acted altruistically.

The Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics indicated that between 1974 and 1993, almost exactly half (50.7%) of parents who were implicated in homicides of their children were fathers and stepfathers. Since 1994, however, the percentage of fathers and stepfathers implicated in filicide has increased to 60.1%.

Sobsey referred to more recent research (eg. by Marleau et al, 1999) which now reports altruism as a motive in 50% of Canadian paternal filicides.

## USA

The report by the Bureau of Justice Statistics<sup>(5)</sup>, updated in November 2002, detailed the number of homicides of children under age 5 in the US during the 25-year period 1976 to 2000. During the period, a total of 15,948 children under 5 were killed, giving an average of 638 children per year, 349 of these by parents (54.7% of the total).

In 2000, 601 children under this age were killed, 314 by parents (52.2%).

Just over half of homicides of young children are thus by parents, with culpability between male and female offenders almost equal.

During the period 1976 to 2000, a total of 8,618 parents were offenders, comprising 4,360 males and 4,258 females, proportions of 50.6% and 49.4%.

Of all the children under age 5 killed during the period 1976 to 2000, 31% were killed by fathers, 30% by mothers, 23% killed by male acquaintances, 7% by other relatives, and 3% by strangers.

Offenders in the case of male infanticide victims comprised about 65% males and 35% females, and in the case of the female victims about 60% males and 40% females. Total offenders in the case of all infanticide victims over the period comprised about 62.5% males and 37.5% females.

The earlier report *Murder in Families* by the Bureau of Justice<sup>(8)</sup> published in July 1994, gave details for family homicides in 1988. Family members killed 63% of child murder victims under age 12, with a parent being the assailant in 57% of cases. Of parents killing their offspring in 1988, 54.6% were female and 45.4% were male. About a third of family murders involved a female as the killer.

The study found that, compared to defendants in other types of family murder, defendants accused of killing their offspring (or parents) were the most likely to involve multiple assailants.

For all murder victims under age 12, death was often preceded by child abuse (by the assailant in 57% of cases). Rape or sexual assault preceded death in 6% of cases. For

offspring murder victims under age 12, 79% had suffered abuse by the (parental) assailant before their death. Rape or sexual abuse applied in 1% of offspring murder cases.

Thomas (1993) in his book *Not Guilty: The Case in Defense of Men*<sup>(18)</sup> referred to the results of a study by the American Association for Protecting Children (AAPC) of data relating to infanticide collected in 1986 from 20 states, representing about half of the US child population.

He reported that in the 20 states surveyed, there were 556 child fatalities in 1986 as a result of maltreatment. The average age of the victims was 2.8 years and 53.7% of the victims were male; the parent was the perpetrator in 76.4% of cases; physical injury caused the death in 62% of cases and neglect in 44.3%; the average age of the perpetrator was 27.3 years; and female perpetrators accounted for 55.7% of cases.

Alder and Polk<sup>(9)</sup> referred to a study of child homicides in Detroit during the period 1982 to 1986. This found that, of the 36 parents who killed their children, 53% were female and 47% male.

They reported that similar proportions had been found in more recent studies of child homicides in Quebec (Hodgins and Dube, 1996) and in Los Angeles (Sorensen, Petersen and Richardson, 1997).

## Australia

The Australian Institute of Criminology 1996 publication *Children as Victims of Homicide*<sup>(10)</sup> indicated that during the period July 1989 to December 1993, there were 126 child victims of homicide under age 15, with 79 male and 25 female identified offenders involved (in 14 incidents the offender was unknown).

22 of these offenders subsequently committed suicide, 6 others attempted suicide, and one was killed by the police. All of the 29 offenders were parents (biological and step) of the victims and 23 were male (79%) and 6 female (21%).

A parent was the offender in the case of 86 victims (68.3% of the total).

Number of victims	Offender
46	Father only
11	De-facto father only
22	Mother only
7	Mothers and fathers or de-facto fathers jointly

Biological fathers were thus implicated in the cases of 53 victims and biological mothers in 29 cases (proportions of 64.6% and 35.4%).

In most cases where the offender was the child's mother, the victims were under the age of 1 year. For children over 1 year old, the risk seemed to be proportionately with their mother's new partners, especially if those parents were very young.

Wallace (1986) in *Homicide: The Social Reality* found that, in New South Wales during the 14-year period 1968 to 1981, for victims under age 6, 55% of offenders were female and 45% were male. By contrast, a study of homicide in Queensland for the 12-year period mid 1981 to mid 1992, reported by the Criminal Justice Commission 1994 in *Murder in Queensland*, showed findings more similar to the Australia-wide data for July 1989 to

December 1993: for all incidents involving victims under age 16, 75% of perpetrators were known to be male and 22% female.

Alder and Polk<sup>(9)</sup> gave in Table 7.3 of their book details of victims and offenders for 90 child homicides in Victoria during the period 1989 to 1999, by social context, type of homicide, sex and average age.

Type of Homicide	Victims				Offenders			
	No	Male	Female	Av age	No	Male	Female	Av age
<b>Filicide</b>								
Neonaticides	11	na	na	<24hrs	6	-	6	22
Fatal assaults	19	11	8	16mths	19	14	5	27
Attempt/suicide	18	6	12	8yrs	13	7	6	32
Extreme psychiatric disturbance	6	1	5	6yrs	4	1	3	30
'Distinctive'	4	2	2	5yrs	4	2	2	34
<b>Totals</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>4yrs</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>Non-filicide</b>								
Honour contest homicides	7	7	-	17yrs	7	7	-	19
Homicide in the course of other crime	4	2	2	16yrs	4	4	-	27
Conflict resolution homicides	3	3	-	16yrs	3	3	-	21
Jealousy/control homicides	4	1	3	16yrs	4	3	1	21
Predatory sexual homicides	4	-	4	11yrs	4	4	-	40
Accidental shootings	2	2	-	11yrs	2	2	-	15
'Distinctive'	3	1	2	13yrs	3	3	-	24
Unknown	5	2	3	15yrs	5	na	na	na
<b>Totals</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>15yrs</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>24</b>

na=not available

Source: Alder and Polk, 2001. Table 7.3

Although a relatively small study, the results suggest that, in the case of the murder of infants and younger children by biological parents, mothers or fathers can be almost equally numerically implicated. In the case of non-filicide murders of children, the victims tend to be older and almost all offenders are male.

## METHODS/CAUSES OF DEATH

### Canada

During the 27-year period 1974 to 2001<sup>(4)</sup>, children under age 6 were more likely to have been killed as a result of strangulation or a beating than by other means. In contrast, older child victims were increasingly likely to die as a result of a shooting, from 32% of victims aged 6 - 8 to over 50% aged 15 - 17.

The cause of death for victims under age 18 by family members during this period was given in Table 3.7 (of ref 4).

Cause of Death	Total victims	Age of victim (years)						
		<1	1-2	3-5	6-8	9-11	12-14	15-17
Shooting	267	12	24	40	43	46	47	55
Stabbing	121	20	19	20	20	13	8	21
Beating	324	130	94	56	13	10	10	11
Strangulation	346	118	64	80	34	25	14	11
Shaken Baby Syndrome	30	21	8	1	0	0	0	0
Other	218	67	42	38	26	14	24	7
Unknown	20	11	3	1	0	2	2	1
<b>Totals</b>	<b>1,326</b>	<b>379</b>	<b>254</b>	<b>236</b>	<b>136</b>	<b>110</b>	<b>105</b>	<b>106</b>

Note: "Strangulation" includes all deaths caused by asphyxiation, eg. suffocating and drowning. 'Other' includes poisoning, smoke inhalation and burns, motor vehicle, causing heart attack, exposure, etc

### USA

According to the report *Murder in Families*<sup>(8)</sup> for homicides in 1988, when parents killed their offspring under the age of 12, they rarely used a firearm or knife. These weapons were responsible for only 7% of offspring victims under this age.

Strangulation, use of a blunt instrument, and pounding with fists or feet were among the more frequent methods of murder when firearms or knives were not used.

Of the total 84 murders of offspring under age 12, one or more reasons were identified for 62 of the victims.

Number of victims	Reason
18	Unspecified forms of child abuse
15	Victim's behaviour, such as crying or misbehaviour
9	Parent's emotional instability or retardation
8	Unwanted new-born baby
6	Unintended consequence of the commission of another crime (eg. lethal conflict between parents)
5	Neglect
3	Difficulty handling the responsibility of child rearing
1	Child held hostage

The most frequent method of murder was beating, punching with fists, kicking, throwing, pushing, slapping, hitting (with belts, hammers, wooden brushes), and striking the body against furniture (eg. shower head or walls).

With 5 of the victims under age 12 counted under two or three methods of murder, specific methods of killing and the number of child victims were:

Method	Number
Beating	35
'Shaken Baby' syndrome	10
Arson	6
New-born disposed of in toilet or trashcan	6
Drowning in bathtub	6
Firearm	5
Suffocation/strangulation	5
Neglect (dehydration, starvation, etc)	4
Stabbing	3
Starvation	2
Other (incl. poisoning with carbon monoxide, lethal doses of drugs, running over with a car, boiling, and putting in freezer)	5

Of the 5 victims killed by firearms, 2 were killed intentionally, and the others accidentally during the commission of another crime.

Dahlia Lithwick in an article *When Parents Kill*<sup>(19)</sup> posted in March 2002, reported that a study by the National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) showed that while the victims of maternal killings were almost always found either in or close to the home, fathers tended to dispose of bodies further away.

Patricia Pearson (1998) in her book *When She Was Bad*<sup>(20)</sup> reported that police investigators and academics guess that 10 to 20% of the six to eight thousand sudden infant death (SID) cases recorded each year in the US conceal accidental or deliberate suffocation.

## Australia

Information on methods used in cases of child homicide was given in the March 1996 *Children as Victims of Homicide* publication<sup>(10)</sup> for the period July 1989 to December 1993.

Infants under 1 year old were especially vulnerable to assault (fists, feet, shaking, dropping, throwing). About half of all assault victims under the age of 15 were in the under-one-year-old group, while older children were more often the victims of firearms or knives.

Age (years)	Age of child victims by method/weapon				Total
	<1	1-5	6-10	10-14	
	Number				
	30	46	29	18	123
%	24	37	24	15	100
<b>Method %</b>					
Firearm	3	22	10	33	16
Knife	3	17	25	11	15
Assault	57	26	7	17	30
Strangulation	10	11	14	17	12
Other (incl. carbon monoxide, poisoning, blunt instruments, drowning, and neglect)	27	24	43	22	26
Unknown	-	1	-	1	1



## REASONS/EXPLANATIONS

Alder and Polk<sup>(9)</sup> observed that neonaticide - the killing of a new-born baby - was “definitively” an act of women. They reported that Wallace (1986) had found that men are only rarely involved in neonaticide.

They also observed that, in almost all cases, men who commit filicide-suicide are the biological fathers of the children they kill. “Family separation and child custody battles are the feature of such cases”. “When biological fathers do kill their children, it is most often in a situation in which they are separated from the child’s mother, or they perceive a threat of separation”.

“While children killed in fatal assaults tend to be less than 2 years of age, there is a wider age range (average of 10 years) of children killed by their biological fathers”.

Alder and Polk referred to observations reported by Daly and Wilson (1988) that familicide (the killing of all family members followed by suicide) was almost exclusively committed by men.

Falkov (1996) reported that a Department of Health funded study of child death reviews in England<sup>(21)</sup> had found, in various studies of child homicide, that 40 to 60% of mentally ill perpetrators had a psychotic disorder. Indeed, Falkov maintained that psychotic illnesses formed a substantial proportion of samples of parents who kill their children. The extent to which psychiatric factors caused or contributed to child maltreatment was provided in case studies and small clinical series which document severe and fatal injuries or neglect of children by their mentally ill parents. However, “parental psychopathology was only one component in an interlocking web of influences associated with child maltreatment”.

Falkov also noted that depressed parents, especially mothers, were consistently over-represented in studies of child fatalities. In HIGHLIGHT No.149 (NCB, Jan 1997), he referred to a study by DJ West (1965) *Murder Followed by Suicide* (Heinemann) which found that “depressed mothers tended to kill more than one child, aged between one and five years, *at the start of or with recovery from a depressive episode*”.

Amongst the psychiatrically ill parents of fatally abused children, Falkov found there was evidence of extensive violence in the childhood’s of perpetrators and in their current and marital relationships. Less frequently considered was the influence of mental illness on a carer’s capacity to ensure the safety of a child.

Falkov reported that suicide attempts were documented in the childhood and adulthood of mentally ill parents who had killed a child.

Sobsey (2001) in *Altruistic Filicide: Bioethics or Criminology?*<sup>(17)</sup> referred to the number of parents who claimed that they had killed their children for ‘altruistic’ reasons. He reported that, in Canada, about half of parents who killed their children expressed the belief that they had acted altruistically.

He compared this with the similar finding some three decades earlier of Philip Resnick reported in his paper ‘Child murder by parents: A psychiatric review of filicide’ (*American Journal of Psychiatry*, 126, 1969), following his study of American parents who killed their children, that about half rationalised their actions as altruistic. Resnick suggested that this motive was much more common in mothers and that only 35% of (American) paternal filicides were altruistic.

Sobsey referred to more recent research in Canada (eg. by Marleau et al, 1999) which reported altruism as a motive in 50% of Canadian paternal filicides. While many factors made comparison of the earlier and more recent studies difficult, Sobsey suggested that the difference might indicate a recent increase in Canadian fathers committing 'altruistic filicides'.

Sobsey also reported that so-called 'mercy killings', in which the altruistic reason was related to an illness, injury or disability of the victim, made up on average about 3% of child homicides in Canada (Richards, 2000), but experts in criminal psychology have suggested that these cases have a deeper and darker motivation.

A study of family homicides in 1994 in British Columbia by the British Columbia Institute Against Family Violence (BCIFV)<sup>(16)</sup> found that about one third of filicides occurred following parental separation. 32% of those who killed following a relationship separation then committed suicide and another 34% required forensic psychiatric services. Filicide committed following parental separation was primarily committed by fathers or those acting in their place.

Another third of filicides in the BCIFV study occurred within a context of child abuse. Other contributory factors included parental mental illness, substance abuse, and social isolation.

Statistics Canada reported in 1997 that 25% of Canadian perpetrators of filicide subsequently committed suicide.

Lithwick in her article *When Parents Kill*<sup>(19)</sup> drew attention to the differences in motivations and perceptions of mothers and fathers who kill their children.

She observed that while most scholars argue that the majority of maternal murderers suffer from depression, post-partum psychoses, and other mental afflictions, no one has offered an analogous medical theory to explain whether fathers who kill their offspring are also depressed, isolated, or psychotic.

Lithwick commented that "social science research and FBI crime statistics showed that men and women differ in the reasons they kill their children, in the methods they employ, and in the ways they behave following such murders. None of this data proves that fathers are crazier than mothers. Much of it suggested that we all simply believe that children "belong to the mums"".

"Researchers have shown that women tended to kill their offspring for one of several reasons: because the child was unwanted, out of mercy, as result of some mental illness in the mother, in retaliation against a spouse, as a result of abuse. Frequent themes were that they themselves deserved to be punished, that killing the children would be an altruistic or loving act, or that the children needed to be 'erased' in order to save or preserve a relationship".

Lithwick contrasted this with the reasons why men killed their children: "because they feel they have lost control over their finances, or their families, or the relationship, or out of a perceived slight or infidelity"

The consistent idea is that "women usually kill their children either because they are angry at themselves or because they want to destroy that which they created, whereas more often than not, men kill their children to get back at a woman - to take away what she most cherishes".

Lithwick observed that studies further revealed that fathers were far more likely to commit suicide after killing their children. Mothers attempt post-filicide suicide but rarely succeed. "Some scholars suggest this is because mothers tend to view their children as mere extensions of themselves and these homicides are in fact suicidal".

Patricia Pearson<sup>(20)</sup> in her book observed that fathers were more likely to engage in murder-suicides than mothers, whereas mothers were more likely to borrow suicidal intent as an explanation after the fact. "Murder suicides are the direct consequence of a mother [or father] who perceives her[him]self to have failed".

Heather Strang, in her article published by the Australian Institute of Criminology<sup>(10)</sup>, observed that many child homicides occurred in circumstances of poverty and unstable family environment.

Australia-wide data from the National Homicide Monitoring Program for the period July 1989 to December 1993 revealed that there were 126 children homicide victims under age 11 in the period, resulting from 108 incidents. Of the 123 children with known details, 43 (35%) died as a consequence of a family dispute between members of the family, usually relating to the termination of their parent's relationship. Men were the offenders in all these incidents. Such incidents were characterised by very high rates of suicide amongst the offenders. 17 of the 28 family dispute incidents resulting in the deaths of these 43 children also involved the suicide of the offender.

32 of the children (26%) were assessed as being victims of fatal abuse, comprising 17 girls and 15 boys. 27 of these children died in consequence of assault (strangulation, burns, poisoning and neglect). Of the offenders, 10 were mothers, 11 were biological fathers, 12 were father substitutes, 2 were male babysitters, and one was a female babysitter.

17 of the children (14%) appeared to be victims of the psychiatric illness of the offender, nearly always a parent. 11 children (10%) were known to be victims of a fatal sexual assault (only two of them by a stranger). 4 children were abandoned neonates, and the remainder died in a variety of circumstances.

Most of the victims of the family dispute incidents were in the 1 - 5 and 6 -10 age ranges, while the majority of child abuse victims were under 1 year of age.

Strang commented that, setting aside those causes involving fatal abuse, it was striking that such a high proportion of filicides were perpetrated by biological fathers, these often following the breakdown of a marital relationship and also often resulting in the suicide of the father.

She observed that the precipitating factor in such incidents appeared frequently to be the desertion of the wife from the marriage, either taking the children with her and thus engendering rage in the offender, or leaving them behind and thus engendering depression. "Either way, these offenders were unable to cope, fatal violence ensued and frequently suicide as well".

Strang made no comment on the particular plight of separated fathers, who usually lose custody of their children and are ousted from the family home following parental separation, many finding themselves in difficult and often desperate situations.

## CRIMINAL JUSTICE OUTCOMES

Thomas<sup>(18)</sup> in his book drew attention to the curious way in which the criminal justice system in Britain treated infanticide. In the period 1980 to 1990, 293 children less than 1 year old were victims of infanticide in Britain. Yet only 42 suspects were charged with infanticide in the same period. In the years 1989 to 1990, the discrepancy was even more marked. There were 50 child victims but only one suspect was brought to court.

Thomas wondered whether it could be that “the legal system simply finds it intolerable to contemplate female perpetrators? The notion of a mother who kills her own child is profoundly horrifying. Yet, purely by virtue of the intimacy of their relationship, the stress imposed on the mother, and the amount of time that the mother and child spend together, it would seem not unreasonable to suppose that the majority of baby victims are killed by their mothers”.

Other authors have commented on the disparity in treatment by the legal system of male and female offenders accused of child homicide.

Lithwick<sup>(19)</sup> in her article observed that women who killed their children in the US were disproportionately hospitalised or treated, while men who did the same were disproportionately jailed, even executed.

She referred to a recent book *Mothers Who Kill Their Children* by Michelle Oberman - professor of law at De Paul University - which concluded that juries [in the USA] were “loath to hand down murder convictions for mothers accused of killing their own children, and that such juries were even more reluctant to impose draconian penalties”.

In his study of parents in the US who had killed their children, Resnick (1969) found that while mothers convicted of murdering their children were hospitalised 68% of the time and imprisoned 27% of the time, fathers convicted of killing their children were sentenced to prison or executed 72% of the time and hospitalised only 14% of the time. Lithwick commented that more recent British studies by P.T. D’Orban supported these findings.

Lithwick also observed that although the US does not have any formal equivalent to England’s Infanticide Act (first introduced in 1922) – which codifies a sort of post-partum depression defense – American juries and judges have taken it upon themselves to excuse and treat most of these mothers for mental illness while condemning fathers as violent criminals.

Lithwick suggested that we still view children as the mother’s property. Since destroying one’s own property is considered crazy while destroying someone else’s property is criminal, “women who murder their own children are sent to hospitals, whereas their husbands are criminals, who go to jail or the electric chair”. “Men are disproportionately jailed for filicide not because they are more evil than women, but because we believe they have harmed a woman’s property – as opposed to their own”.

She also commented that while psychotic breaks explain why some of this homicidal rage and violence is turned upon one’s own children, “it doesn’t account for either the staggering numbers of maternal homicides or for society’s leniency toward women in these cases”.

Lithwick believed that her 'property' theory did provide answers to these questions and to the disparity of treatment by the legal system of men and women in such cases. "Women still believe that they have sole dominion over so little property that other [violent] crimes make no intuitive sense to them. But the destruction and control of something deemed to be a woman's sole property sends a powerful message about who's really in charge, and this message hasn't changed since the time of Jason and Medea".

Pearson<sup>(20)</sup> in her book also commented on the disparity of treatment of men and women in child homicide cases. "Most women aren't incarcerated for infanticide. Of those who are even convicted, about two thirds avoid prison, and the rest receive an average sentence [in the US] of 7 years".

She reported that in England [and Wales], between 1982 and 1989, "fewer than 10% of mothers convicted of manslaughter for killing their children (at any age) were imprisoned: only two of the mothers who'd committed infanticide were. British fathers were more likely to be charged with murder than manslaughter. Over half of the fathers convicted of manslaughter went to jail. Three times as many mothers as fathers were deemed to be mentally ill for killing their children".

The US Bureau of Justice report *Murder in Families*<sup>(8)</sup> for year 1988 concluded that, compared to defendants in other types of family murder, defendants in offspring murders were the most likely to have had voluntary or non-negligent manslaughter as the most serious arrest charge and were less likely to be charged with first degree murder.

The report also concluded that the urban county data used for the study provided little support for criticism that the police and courts treated family violence generally less seriously than other violence. In several important respects, the criminal justice outcomes of family murder defendants were about the same as those of other murder defendants. However, this was not the case with offspring murder. Defendants charged with offspring murder were less likely to be convicted of first degree murder, less likely to be convicted of voluntary/non-negligent manslaughter, less likely to be jailed for life, and more likely to be convicted for a less serious violent offence.

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