

# Filicide: The most tragic family violence event

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## Thea Brown, Professor Emeritus AM from Monash University, Caulfield in Australia, guides us through filicide, the most tragic family violence event

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### Filicide: An international problem

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Filicide, the killing of a child or children by a parent, stepparent or equivalent guardian, is a tragic international problem, provoking shock and horror in the child's family and the wider community. Often thought of as rare, incidence studies show it is not (Brown, Lyneham, Bryant, Tomison, Tyson, Fernandez Arias, Bricknell, 2019; Dawson, 2019; Buiten, 2022). Moreover, incidence has been shown to be alarmingly high in some more affluent nations, like the United States, Australia, and New Zealand (Pritchard, Davey, and Williams, 2013).

Identifying the number of children killed in filicide events is difficult; most countries do not keep such statistics, and even when they do, a child's death can be hidden or wrongly categorised. In Australia, where records of these children's deaths are collected in a national database, the National Homicide Monitoring Program, it seems that one child is killed by a parent or stepparent in Australia almost every fortnight (Brown et al. 2019).

### Filicide: Who are the victims?

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In the past, research on filicide was sparse and slow-growing, but this has changed in the last decade (Klier, Fisher, Chandra, and Spinelli, 2019). Studies have revealed many similar and some dissimilar patterns among victims and perpetrators (often termed offenders) internationally. Victims across all countries are usually equally divided among males and females, and most are very young, under five, although a small number are older, over eighteen. For example, in Australia, some 70% of victims are under five (Brown, Tyson, Fernandez Arias, 2014).

Mostly, only one child is killed, but sometimes multiple children are killed. Sometimes the perpetrator kills a child or children and then kills themselves; such murder-suicide occurs everywhere but more commonly in Japan and South Korea (Yasumi. 2019; Shon and Shon, 2023; Yoon, Hu, Lee, 2023). Some perpetrators kill all the children, other family members and themselves, and this is often associated with parental separation (Kirkwood, 2012; Brown, Tyson, Fernandez Arias, 2012). Some perpetrators, usually mothers, kill newborn babies, and this is associated with the unavailability of birth control (Razali, Jaris, Muuti, Abdullah, 2022)

### Who are the perpetrators of filicide?

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It is distressing to confront the fact that the perpetrators are parents. Perpetrator parents are commonly mothers, fathers, stepfathers, or mothers and fathers acting together or mothers and stepfathers acting together (Brown et al. 2019). Other family members, such as grandparents, stepmothers, and aunts, have emerged but rarely.

In Australia, as elsewhere (Brown et al., 2019), mothers are a little more frequent perpetrators than fathers, but when fathers and stepfathers are added together, males are the more common perpetrators. Stepfathers (often the mother's live-in boyfriend) are more frequent perpetrators than their incidence in the population warrants.

## **What leads to a filicide death?**

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Originally, filicide deaths were thought to stem from a single factor (Resnick, 1969). Still, research now supports a framework of multiple causes, a constellation of factors, that surround the victim and the various types of parental perpetrators. The constellation varies according to whether the perpetrator is the mother, or the father, or the stepfather. Research has identified these factors surrounding perpetrators as:

- History of inflicting intimate partner violence.
- History of inflicting child abuse.
- Suffering from mental illness (mostly depression).
- Parental separation.
- Illicit substance or alcohol abuse.
- Being a victim of intimate partner violence.
- Traumatic childhood experiences.
- Migration.
- Having a criminal history. And around victims as:
  - Being under five,
  - Having a disability or chronic illness.
  - Having been hospitalised shortly after birth.

## **What leads to what?**

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There is vigorous debate as to how these factors interact. Some researchers (Dobash and Dobash, 2019) argue that intimate partner violence is the dominant factor, and others flow from that. However, not all fathers are violent, and few mothers are. Others (Pritchard, Williams, Fernandez Arias, 2019) argue that mental illness is the dominant factor, but not all perpetrators are mentally ill. Bourget, Grace, and Whitehurst (2007) argued that if one could look more closely at all perpetrators, we would see much more mental illness.

Stroud (2008) and Johnson and Sachmann (2019) argue that the factors are an accumulation of burdens that lead to the collapse of the perpetrator and their attack on their child. Brandon (2009) sees the constellation as dangerous when it comprises

intimate partner violence, mental illness and illicit substance abuse, a toxic trio. **The Monash Deakin Filicide Research Hub** (Thea Brown, Danielle Tyson, and Paula Fernandez Arias) is exploring the dynamics in the various constellations.

## **Filicide: Solutions?**

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Research has highlighted the role of services in early intervention and prevention. Australian (Brown, Tyson and Fernandez Arias, 2014) and Chilean research (Rodriguez Manriquez and Fernandez Arias, 2019) showed that areas with few health and welfare services have higher rates of filicide.

However, the same research showed where services existed, they failed some children. They did not fail because the perpetrator had no contact with them, but rather because the perpetrator and the services failed to achieve any engagement in working together. Mothers drifted away from the health services; their problems were not recognised, and they were not pursued. Child Protection contacted fathers and stepfathers, but they evaded and avoided the attempted contact. In all cases, the severity of the danger to the child was not recognised.

Clearly, professionals need education as to the reality of filicide; it is not rare, it happens regularly. There are now research-based red flag profiles of perpetrators and victims to assist in identifying danger to children (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2022). Considering that most victims are under five, services to children of that age are a priority for education.

Considering the risk factor constellations, services addressing intimate partner violence, child abuse, mental health, parental separation, and illicit substance abuse should also be a priority for education. At the same time, services do not appear to have models of intervention that are sufficiently immediate, sufficiently responsive to the potential perpetrator's many problems, and sufficiently long-term, suggesting new models of intervention need to be created.

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