

Filicide: The search for explanations

 openaccessgovernment.org/article/filicide-the-search-for-explanations/185169

18 November 2024

Thea Brown, Professor Emeritus in the Department of Social Work at Monash University, examines the development of research aimed at understanding filicide

The search for explanations for filicide (the killing of a child or children by a parent, stepparent, or equivalent guardian) has long driven research on filicide – from the time of the earliest studies some sixty years ago (Resnick, 1969) to the present day. Only now, as studies have become more sophisticated, are explanations becoming more reliable. At the same time, they have become more complex and confusing, and the search continues for clear causes as explanations and a basis for prevention.

Mental illness as a cause

Mental illness was the first explanation. Research focused on perpetrators and carried out with women filicide perpetrators imprisoned in forensic mental hospitals (Resnick, 1969) unsurprisingly found mental illness was the cause of the perpetrator's actions. This was somewhat misleading, arising from the biased sample the researchers used.

Nevertheless, being the only available research, mental illness became the major theme in explanations. The researchers also placed importance on the perpetrator's motives, but later research (Mouzos & Rushforth, 2003; Brown et al., 2018) contradicted this view as they found many perpetrators did not articulate motives. Motivation as an explanation disappeared.

Multiple causes

Today, the explanation of mental illness has given way to that of the perpetrator being surrounded by many causes or associated and contextual factors. These have been identified (Bourget et al., 2007; Brandon, 2009; Dawson, 2018; Brown et al., 2019; Johnson & Sachmann, 2018; Buiten, 2022) as the perpetrator having a history of inflicting domestic violence, of mental illness, of using illicit substances, of abuse or trauma as a child, being a victim of intimate partner violence, having a criminal history, being separated from one's partner, and having a migration background.

Little is known about the relationship between these many factors. Which are the most powerful ones? Which cause some or all the others? Which are the consequences of the others? Pritchard (Pritchard et al., 2018) argued that mental illness was the important factor from which the others flowed, but Dobash and Dobash (2018) argued that inflicting intimate partner violence and child abuse underpinned all the factors. Johnson and Sachmann (2019) believed having an abusive or traumatic childhood was the key. Stroud (2008) did not see any factor as the most important but rather saw them all as increasingly heavy burdens the perpetrator carried.

Risk profiles for the three perpetrator groups

These debates can be clarified by using the research to establish constellations of causes for each of the three major groups of perpetrators rather than aggregating them as has been the practice. By exploring the current research, the Monash Deakin Filicide Research Hub has developed constellations of associated factors or risk profiles for victims, mother perpetrators, father perpetrators and stepfather perpetrators. These are for professionals to use to assess clients and thereby determine if there is a need for immediate intervention. When a client demonstrates most of these factors, immediate action should follow. It is the constellation of factors, not any single one, that is indicative of danger to the child.

The most common factors are listed in order of most to least common, occurring from 100% to 30% of the perpetrators.

The risk factors for children are:

- Being under five years of age,
- Being reported to Child Protection,
- Having a history of parental abuse, and
- Having a hospitalisation, especially soon after birth

The risk factors for mothers are:

- Parenting a child or children under five years of age,
- Having a diagnosed mental illness, particularly depression,
- Having been a migrant to Australia, and
- Being a victim of family violence from a partner or other family members.

The risk factors for fathers are;

- Parenting a child under five,
- Having a diagnosed mental illness, mostly depression,
- Perpetrating intimate partner violence,
- Perpetrating child abuse,
- Currently using illicit substances,
- Having a partnership breakdown, and
- Having a criminal history.

Within the group of fathers is a subgroup of separated fathers. The risk factors for these fathers are:

- Living near to children who now live apart from the father,
- Having had or having a partnership breakdown,
- Perpetrating intimate partner violence prior to separation,
- Perpetrating intimate partner violence after separation,
- Having a parenting dispute,
- Abusing the child or children, and

- Threatening to kill the child and that threat being reported to an authority.

The risk factors for stepfathers are:

- Parenting a stepchild,
- Perpetrating intimate partner violence,
- Perpetrating child abuse,
- Using illicit substances and
- Having a diagnosed mental illness.

Reviewing the constellations shows that parenting a child under five and having a diagnosed mental illness occurs amongst all perpetrators but a little more often among mothers than fathers or stepfathers. Inflicting intimate partner violence and child abuse, using illicit substances occurs most commonly among males. Having a partnership breakdown occurs most commonly among fathers. Thus, the profiles are distinctive.

Further explanations of Filicide

There are further explanations. Service provision plays a role. Countries or regions with poor or few services have higher rates of filicide (Brown et al., 2018; Rodriguez & Fernandez Arias, 2019). Services are a protection. However, they are not successful with all potential perpetrators. The perpetrators have contact with services but do not engage. Researchers are planning models of intervention that will better fit the explanations. More explanations are emerging, and their complexity is increasing. Relationships between factors will become better known. National differences, now only hinted at (Matthews & Abrahams, 2019; Yasumi, 2019; Yoon et al., 2022), will be better recognised. Explanations will become clear, eventually.

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Stakeholder Details

- Article Categories
- Social Sciences

- Article Tags
- Mental Health
- Police and Crime
- Violence

- Publication Tags
- OAG 045 - January 2025

- Stakeholder Tags
- SH - Monash University - Department of Social Work