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The murder of children by fathers in the context of child abuse[☆]

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Abstract

Objective: This study examined the backgrounds of fathers who fatally abuse their children and the contexts within which these homicides occur. The type of relationship between victim, perpetrator, and the victim's mother was a particular interest.

Methods: Data were gathered from 26 cases of fatal child abuse perpetrated by fathers derived from the wider *Murder in Britain* study. ^{**} Quantitative and qualitative data were collected from extensive prison case files of men serving life sentences for child murder.

Results: This was a group of undereducated, underemployed men with significant criminal histories. All except one victim had been subjected to previous violence by the offender, almost three-quarter of whom had also perpetrated violence against their intimate partners (the child's birth mother). Many men had unreasonable expectations and low tolerance levels of normal childhood behaviors, and many appeared jealous and resentful of these young children. All 26 victims were under 4 years of age. Sixty-two percent of the offenders were stepfathers and in only four cases was the perpetrator a birth father married to the birth mother. Stepfathers had more disrupted and disadvantaged backgrounds and experiences than birth fathers.

Conclusions: Findings suggest that fathers who perpetrate fatal child abuse have a propensity to use violence against children in their care and intimate partners, raising questions about the gender dynamics and generational

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boundaries operating in these families. The nature and type of intimate relationship (whether married or cohabiting) and fathering relationship (whether birth or de facto) were important differentiating factors in these homicides as well as characteristics of the offender.

Practice implications: Professionals working in child protection strive to provide effective services to children and families, ever vigilant to the possibility of the death of a child as a consequence of an assault. By and large, fathers (either biological or *de facto*) as the perpetrators of such assaults have received minimal attention in both policy and practice. Findings from this study suggest that practitioners need to be cognisant of men's attitudes towards and expectations of fathering (particularly stepfathering) which may present increased levels of risk to both children and intimate partners.

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Keywords: Child murder; Child homicide; Fatal child; Abuse; Fathers; Stepfathers

Introduction

It is widely recognized that homicide is a male activity (Brookman & Macguire, 2003; Daly & Wilson, 1988; Mouzos, 2000; Soothill, 1999). With regard to fatal child abuse, several studies have reported a preponderance of fathers as perpetrators (Copeland, 1985; Goetting, 1988; Marks & Kumar, 1996; Somander & Rammer, 1991). Other studies have noted the prevalence of de facto fathers as perpetrators (Kaplun & Reich, 1976; Scott, 1973; Vanamo, Kauppi, Karkola, Merikanto, & Rasanen, 2001). Relatedly, a number of commentators have noted the lack of empirical data on these fathers (Adinkrah, 2003; Alder & Polk, 1996; Lucas et al., 2002) and the dominant focus on offending mothers (Corby, 2000; Victoria Child Death Review Committee, 2004). Addressing this imbalance, this paper presents findings from a study of 26 cases of fatal child abuse perpetrated by fathers (biological and de facto) convicted of the murder of their birth or stepchild. Quantitative data demonstrating patterns evident in these cases are presented, complemented with qualitative data illustrating contextual themes. The findings reported here are derived from the *Murder in Britain* study whose aim was to provide detailed evidence about the nature, context, situations, and lethal intentions associated with different types of murder.

Background

Existing research indicates that children are most likely to be killed within the family and usually by a parent or stepparent (Alder & Polk, 2001; NSPCC, 2001; Wilczynski, 1997). Several studies have identified fatal child abuse as a distinct type of familial child homicide and the one that occurs most frequently (Blaser, 1985; Christoffel & Lui, 1983; Crittenden & Craig, 1990; Herman-Giddens, 1999; Strang, 1993). In the rich body of literature on fatal child abuse, generally accepted as the killing of a young child by a caretaker usually in the context of ongoing abuse and neglect (Creighton, 1995; De Silva & Oates, 1993; Falkov, 1996; Greenland, 1987; Hicks & Gaughan, 1995; Kotch, Chalmers, Fanslow, Marshall, & Langley, 1993; Reder & Duncan, 1999), a number of key themes have been identified including: the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim and between the perpetrator and the victim's mother, the prevalence of previous violence to the victim and/or the victim's mother, a range of factors associated with

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