

New study compares mothers, fathers who kill their children

October 28 2015

"How could this have been prevented?" That was the first thought for University of Guelph sociology professor Myrna Dawson upon learning last month about a Winnipeg woman charged with killing her two-month-old daughter.

Dawson asked herself the same question this past summer after a Montreal man killed his 10-month-old-son and then himself.

And she pondered it again this month after hearing about a woman who threw her six-month-old child from a New York City apartment - the third such infant death in three months in that city.

A recognized expert on homicide and a longtime member of Canada's first Domestic Violence Death Review Committee, Dawson says we need better intervention and social supports and improved understanding of psychological and social factors that are often at play in parents' lives.

Her latest research appeared in the journal *Child Abuse and Neglect*.

In one of the most extensive reviews of filicide (the killing of a child under age 18 by a parent), she examined Statistics Canada data covering more than half a century of such cases—the longest period for a study of this kind in any country.

She studied cases between 1961—the year Statistics Canada began conducting its annual homicide survey—and 2011, the most recent year

that data was available. During that period, at least 1,612 children in Canada were killed by parents; many more incidents have since been reported in the media.

Examining everything from the parent's gender, age and marital status to where they lived to possible motives including a history of [family violence](#), Dawson looked for patterns and trends to identify strategies for prevention, particularly similarities and differences between mothers and fathers.

"Cases of filicide by mothers and fathers often differ in a variety of ways, as shown by this study and other research," said Dawson, who holds the Canada Research Chair in Public Policy in Criminal Justice and heads U of G's Centre for the Study of Social and Legal Responses to Violence.

Among her findings were the following:

- More males than females were accused nationwide, a difference that appears to be increasing.
- Female accused were more common among people under 18, and males dominated in older age groups.
- Women made up four out of five accused who were single and never married, and men represented two-thirds of accused who were divorced, separated or widowed.
- More men than women were accused when revenge or jealousy was the motive.
- Most accused were biological parents. When stepchildren were killed, nine of 10 accused were stepfathers. While numbers remain small, the proportion of accused who were step-parents, and particularly stepfathers, appears to be increasing.
- Since 1991, more reports of family violence have occurred before filicides.

- Fathers are more likely than mothers to commit suicide after killing a child, although the likelihood of either parent committing suicide has decreased in recent years.

"It's important that intervention and prevention approaches consider these and other potential differences in determining best practices when responding to families who may be at risk," said Dawson.

She said sexual jealousy or suspected infidelity and ongoing child and custody access disputes can increase the risk of harm to a parent—usually female—and children.

Calling for more public and professional awareness of risks to children, particularly those of separated or estranged parents, she says family and criminal court systems need to better co-ordinate responses to families at risk.

Dawson said researchers need to examine the link between filicide and changing roles of mothers and fathers in child care, particularly as the gender gap between accused parents grows. With more "blended families," she said experts in risk assessment and management should pay more attention to cases of family violence and stepchildren.

Dawson co-directs the recently launched Canadian Domestic Homicide Prevention Initiative for Vulnerable Populations with Dr. Peter Jaffe at Western University. She also belongs to the international Homicide Research Working Group.

Provided by University of Guelph

Citation: New study compares mothers, fathers who kill their children (2015, October 28) retrieved 7 May 2024 from

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