

# Individuals who solely murder children differ from other murderers

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The neuropsychological profiles of murderers who solely kill children differ significantly from the profiles of those who kill both children and adults in the same homicidal act, according to a new Northwestern Medicine study.

Homicide with a child victim is one of the rarest and least understood categories of homicide. Identifying the differences in the two types of killers adds to the very limited research on the topic and could help predict which children may be at risk.

Individuals who solely kill children tend to have relatively low intelligence, poor communication skills and problem-solving abilities, and often are mentally ill. Individuals who [murder](#) only children also tend to kill impulsively with manual methods (e.g. beating, drowning), compared to [individuals](#) who murder children and one or more adults in the same homicidal act.

Those individuals who murder children and adults together tend to commit premeditated killings and use weapons. They have normal intelligence but antisocial traits and substance abuse that resulted in the killings.

"This study suggests many reasons some children may be at extreme risk of severe physical abuse and murder, which points to different preventive actions," said lead author Dr. Robert Hanlon, an associate professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences and of neurology at

Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine and a Northwestern Medicine neuropsychologist.

The study was published March 27 in the journal *Criminal Justice and Behavior*.

The goal of the study was to examine the demographic, criminological, psychiatric and cognitive profiles of a group of [homicide offenders](#) who killed children.

Previous studies have primarily focused on women who killed infants and children. The current study expanded the focus to include both men and women who murdered children.

Eleven of the 27 men and two of the six women offenders in the study killed their own children. Many offenders in the current study murdered the children of friends and relatives. The homicide offenders in the study were responsible for the murders of 51 children.

Participants included 33 men and six women charged with and convicted of first-degree murder in Illinois, Missouri or Indiana. They were referred for forensic neuropsychological evaluations in relation to the assessment of fitness to stand trial, criminal responsibility or sentencing.

The mean age was 32 years. Approximately half (48.5 percent) of the sample was African American; 36.4 percent was Caucasian; 12.1 percent was Hispanic; and 3 percent was of other race/ethnicity. The majority was single (60.6 percent.)

"Many of the children in this study were murdered by the boyfriends of their mothers in impulsive acts of violence," Hanlon said. "Working with these individuals on anger management and nonviolent decision-making may help reduce the risk of harm to children."

As for individuals who killed both children and adults and executed premeditated, planned murders, warning signs like classic antisocial attitudes and behaviors may be more critical to address, Hanlon said.

"We were surprised by how few of these individuals matched the narrow media stereotype of psychotic mothers being the ones who kill children," Hanlon said. "Our findings caution us to challenge assumptions about the murder of children and encourage us to pay close attention to specific deficits, characteristics and situations that put [children](#) at risk."

**More information:** Nicole M. Azores-Gococo et al. Killing A Child, *Criminal Justice and Behavior* (2017). [DOI: 10.1177/0093854817699437](https://doi.org/10.1177/0093854817699437)

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