

Extract from The Empathy Gap, Section 9.2.7 (Domestic Homicides)

Gender issues in relation to the homicide of children are less often discussed. In particular, data on the sex of perpetrators of child killing in the UK are difficult to obtain, not being specified in ONS datasets (though some information is available from Crown Prosecution Service reports, see section 9.3). This is odd in view of the prominence given to the sex of partner killers and the sex of perpetrators of homicide generally. Table 3 of the domestic abuse dataset, (Office for National Statistics, 2018c), gives a breakdown of the suspected perpetrators of domestic homicides. But this Table is grossly misleading as regards the cases where the perpetrator is a parent (i.e., the victim is their son or daughter), because the Table is restricted to adult victims, 16 years or older, not children. Some data on the sex of perpetrators of child killing was obtained via a Freedom of Information enquiry to the Home Office (2018). The number of homicides of children under 16 per year by a parent, averaged over the 20 years 1998 to 2017, was 21 perpetrated by fathers and 11 perpetrated by mothers. However, there are some difficulties with this dataset. Firstly, as will be seen below, around 20% of child killings involve both parents, and it is not clear how this has been addressed. (If the homicide has been assigned to the father in such cases, then the killings by mothers and fathers would actually be much closer to parity). Also, cases where the suspect has committed suicide or died before trial have been assumed guilty. There are also issues related to the completeness of the homicide statistics in relation to infanticide and death through neglect, co-sleeping, etc., as discussed further below.

The following data is taken from (Office for National Statistics, 2016c) and (Office for National Statistics, 2018f). Table 9.2 gives the number of homicides of children and young adults by sex of the victim. These data have been averaged over a range of years to smooth the data because the statistics are small. There is a slightly greater number of boys than girls who are victims of homicide at all ages. This excess of male homicide victims becomes emphatic in the teenage years, and even more so in the early twenties.

Table 9.2 relates to all homicides. Between 2006 and 2017 an average of 62% of homicides of children under 16 in the UK were carried out by a parent or both parents (although there are signs in the last year of data that this

proportion may be falling to less than half). A similar percentage (59.7%) is indicated across a range of countries, (Stockl et al, 2017).

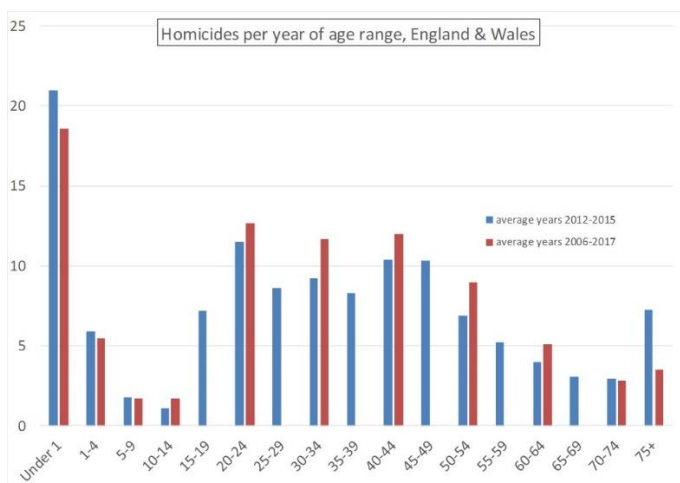
Table 9.2: *Number of homicides per year of children and young adults by sex of victim, England and Wales*

Age range	Averaged over years	male	female
Under 1	2006-2017	10	8
1 - 4	2006-2017	9	8
5 - 15	2006-2017	12	7
15 - 19	2012-2015	29	7
16 - 24	2006-2017	90	24

The excess of fatalities of boys over girls is reflected in data from the USA, (NCANDS, 2016), which reports that, ‘boys had a slightly higher child fatality rate than girls at 2.87 boys per 100,000 boys in the population compared with 2.11 girls per 100,000 girls in the population’. The same source informs us that, ‘nearly three-quarters of child fatalities were attributed to neglect only or a combination of neglect and another maltreatment type’. In contrast, more than half of child fatalities involved no element of physical abuse. Neglect, in other words, is the principal child killer rather than violence (at least in the US).

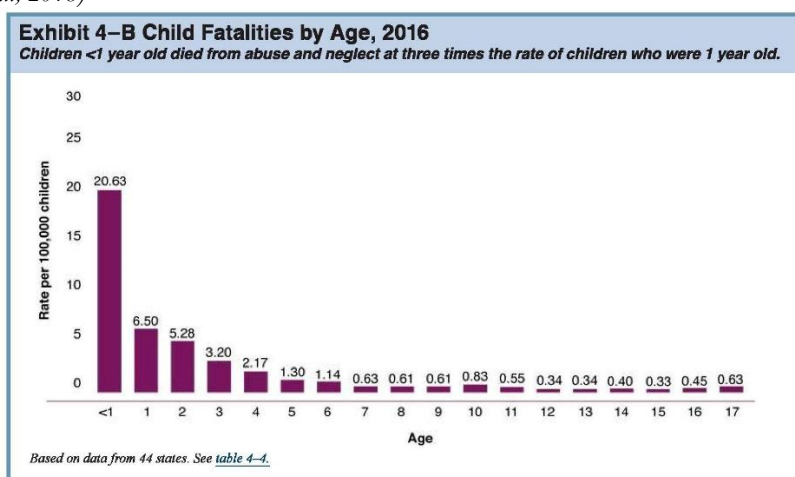
Per year of age range, the homicide rate of children over one year old is substantially less than that for adults of pre-retirement age, see Figure 9.14. In sharp contrast, however, infants under one year old suffer by far the greatest homicide rate. US data confirm this same, very emphatic, pattern of high infant homicide rates (Figure 9.15). The greater prevalence of homicide of infants is of significance when considering the sex of perpetrators. In English law, infanticide is defined as the killing of a child under one year old by the child’s mother. The purpose of introducing the law of infanticide was explicitly to facilitate mitigation for mothers killing their infant children, infanticide being regarded as a lesser offence than murder or manslaughter. Such mitigation, or the offence of infanticide itself, is not available for men.

Figure 9.14: *Number of homicides per year of victims’ age range (England & Wales)*



In the late 1960s / early 1970s, there were typically around 18 convictions for infanticide per year. In recent years there is perhaps one conviction for infanticide per year on average, (Office for National Statistics, 2018f). Moreover, the convictions for infanticide in recent years are almost always the outcome of an initial indictment for murder, (Crown Prosecution Service, 2014). Prosecution for an initial charge of infanticide almost never happens now. This begs the question: are infanticides being registered as homicides, as they should be? The sentence awarded for a conviction for infanticide is never imprisonment. Even a suspended sentence is unusual. Generally, a hospital sentence, probation or a supervision order is awarded.

Figure 9.15: *Number of homicides per year of victims' age range (USA). Copied from (Children's Bureau, 2018)*



The sex of perpetrators of child homicide is less than clear in the general literature. For example, (Debowska et al, 2015) cite a number of sources which variously claim greater female perpetration, greater male perpetration, or about equal – although there appears to be a consensus regarding mothers being the predominant perpetrators of the homicide of younger children. The major USA study, (NCANDS, 2016b), is more helpful, concluding that,

In 2016, parents - acting alone or with another parent or individual - were responsible for 78% of child abuse or neglect fatalities. More than one-quarter (27%) of fatalities were perpetrated by the mother acting alone, 16.8% were perpetrated by the father acting alone, and 20.1% were perpetrated by the mother and father acting together. Nonparents (including kin and child care providers, among others) were responsible for 16.7% of child fatalities, and child fatalities with unknown perpetrator relationship data accounted for 5.3% of the total.'

The corresponding report for the following year, (NCANDS, 2017), indicates that 80.1% of child fatalities due to abuse or neglect were the responsibility of one or more parent. Only 15.2% were attributed entirely to non-parents. The mother acting alone was responsible in 30.5% of cases, the father acting alone in 15.5% of cases, and the mother and father both responsible in 22.3% of cases. The mother together with a non-parent were responsible for the child death in a further 10.8% of cases. All told, the mother was implicated in 63.6% of cases. The father was implicated in 38.8% of cases. This is a clear indication of greater perpetration by mothers than fathers based on a large USA dataset. For the UK, examination of all serious cases reviews over the 7 year period from 2009 to 2015, (Bradford R. , 332 Child Homicides, 2018a), provided the following conclusions,

- Where culpability was established, the mother was the lone perpetrator in 36% of cases and either a lone or a co-perpetrator in over half of cases (58%).
- Mothers were more likely to be responsible for a child death than fathers and male partners combined.
- Single mothers were the demographic most likely to be responsible for the deaths of children.

Another very large study, covering a wide range of countries, has recently been published in the BMJ, (Stockl et al, 2017). This involved a systematic review of 9431 studies which, after screening, led to the inclusion of 126

studies which all reported the number or proportion of perpetrators of child homicide. Key findings (medians) were,

- Over the 44 countries for which there was relevant data, parents committed 56.5% of child homicides, with parents killing rather more girls than boys;
- Data from 33 countries distinguishing the perpetrators of parental homicides of children under the age of 18 years showed that mothers committed just over half of all parental homicides (54.7%);
- Across all homicides of children (under 18), boys were the victims substantially more often than girls (70% cf 30%), the homicide of boys increasing dramatically in late adolescence;
- Over the 14 countries for which there was relevant data, parents committed 77.8% of homicides of children under one year old;
- Over the 12 countries for which there was relevant data, mothers committed 71.7% of parental homicides of children under one year old;
- Over the 13 countries for which there was relevant data, almost all neonaticides (killing within the first day of life) were committed by mothers (median 100%, inter-quartile range 92.9% to 100%). Fathers committed extremely few neonaticides (median 0%, inter-quartile range 0% to 6.7%).

The study found that acquaintances committed only 12.6% of child homicides, but this increased to 36.9% for adolescents. Step-parents committed only 7.2% of parental homicides (hence 4% overall).

A review of the serious case reviews to which the Children And Family Court Advisory and Support Services (CAFCASS) have contributed in recent years, (Green and Halliday, 2017), provided the following results, from 49 cases of child death. The father was involved in 33% to 41% of the child deaths, whereas the mother was involved in 47% to 55% of the child deaths (and the mother's partner in 12% of the deaths). All these sources concur that mothers are responsible for rather more child homicides than fathers, or men in general, especially as regards younger children.

Despite this, the advice of the London Safeguarding Children Board (2017b) in respect of protecting children from domestic abuse recognises only the dangers to children posed by men. In being so limited this procedure omits at least half the risk to children. And yet both the review of serious cases by Bradford (2018a) and that by Green and Halliday (2017) have highlighted many cases where exactly this refusal to acknowledge that mothers too can pose a risk to children has had fatal consequences. Some of

these are celebrated cases which have been much in the news. The skewed perception of domestic abuse as “gendered”, and hence the exclusive province of male perpetrators, is thus more than a male disadvantage: it permits children to be exposed to avoidable risk by a refusal to accept reality.

There are two further contributions to the overall homicide rate of infants which do not appear in the statistics. (I do not include abortion here, the statistics for which would render homicides statistically insignificant). These are neonaticides and covert homicides passed off as sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS), or “cot death”. No one knows what proportion of SIDS is actually covert homicide. However, the variation of the rate of SIDS with marital status is rather alarming, see Table 9.3 based on (Office for National Statistics, 2018m). Here the term “joint registrant” refers to the father being named on the birth certificate, in contrast to “sole registrant” where that is not the case. The incidence of SIDS per 100,000 live births has a consistent trend with marital status. The rate is least for married couples, greater for cohabiting joint registrants, greater still for non-cohabiting joint registrants, but greatest for sole registrants (lone parents, generally single mothers). The rate of SIDS is 7 or 8 times greater for a single parent family than a married couple family.

Table 9.3: *Rate of SIDS (“Cot Death”) by Marital Status (per 100,000 live births)*

Marital Status	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Married	8	7	17	15	17
Joint Registrants, Same Address	20	30			
Joint Registrants, Different Address	40	44	66	67	82
Sole Registrant	55	58			

Neonaticide is the killing of a new born baby within its first 24 hours of life. Debowska et al (2015) note,

‘some women give birth unassisted, kill the neonate, and dispose of the body immediately after birth.’

Similarly, Craig (2004) observes,

‘It is very difficult to get accurate figures on the incidence of neonaticide and infant homicide since many cases are never discovered; official figures are likely to be an underestimate’

Resnick (1970) opines,

‘hundreds and possibly thousands of neonaticides still occur in Britain each year’

And Steven Pinker (1997), referring to the USA, rather graphically described it thus,

'Every year, hundreds of women commit neonaticide: they kill their newborns or let them die. Most neonaticides remain undiscovered, but every once in a while a janitor follows a trail of blood to a tiny body in a trash bin, or a woman faints and doctors find the remains of a placenta inside her.'