



Research article

Canadian trends in filicide by gender of the accused, 1961–2011[☆]



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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a comprehensive historical and contemporary picture of filicide in Canada for more than half a century. Focusing on 1,612 children under age 18 that were killed by their parents between 1961 and 2011, regional and temporal trends in the gender of accused are examined as well as differences in maternal and paternal filicides by the gender and age of the victim, the age and marital status of the accused, type of parental relationship, cause of death, motive, history of family violence, and clearance status. Results show that there are significant differences in filicides by mothers and fathers. Five possible emerging trends were identified: an increasing gender gap in accused, increasing presence of relationship breakdown, growing number of cases involving stepfathers and a prior history of family violence, and declines in accused who committed suicide. Implications of these trends for interventions and prevention are discussed and future research priorities highlighted.

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Introduction

The intentional killing of a child prompts reactions of shock and horror from most members of society, a situation that is greatly exacerbated when the accused is the child's father or mother. In Westernized societies, the majority of child homicide victims are killed by their parent, stepparent, or guardian, acts broadly referred to as filicide (Dixon, Krienert, & Walsh, 2013). During the past two centuries, filicide rates have declined in Westernized countries as have child homicide rates more generally (Sturup & Granath, 2014). The true rate of filicide remains unknown, however, because it is assumed that many filicide perpetrators successfully conceal their crimes (Koenen & Thompson, 2008). As a result, such acts are believed to be underreported, particularly when infants are involved (Bortoli, Coles, & Dolan, 2013). There is no standard definition of filicide, and studies often focus on types of filicide separately using different sample parameters. For example, some researchers have focused on infanticide which has been legally defined in several countries as the murder of a child before their first birthday by their mother (Porter & Gavin, 2010). Neonaticide is the murder of a newborn on his or her day of birth, and research has shown that these acts most commonly involve mothers rather than fathers (Porter & Gavin, 2010). When studies focus on filicides more generally, varying age groups are used to identify the sample. For these reasons, comparisons across studies can be difficult, and findings often appear contradictory.

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It is recognized that at least half of filicidal acts are committed by fathers even though the majority of studies have focused on maternal filicide (West, Hatters Friedman, & Resnick, 2009). Few studies have systematically compared the similarities and differences in cases involving mothers and fathers who kill their children, but recent work in Australia (Eriksson, Mazerolle, Wortley, & Johnson, 2014), the Netherlands (Liem & Koenraadt, 2008), and the United States (Dixon et al., 2013) have begun to address this gap. To build on this growing body of international research, the aim of this study is to compare trends and patterns in filicide cases by gender of the accused focusing on the total population of filicide cases that occurred in Canada over more than half a century. Commonly found differences in the commission of and motivations for filicide by mothers and fathers may be important in the development of appropriate prevention strategies.

Prior Research on Gender and Filicide

According to many community samples and aggregate crime data, mothers and fathers have been shown to commit filicide at almost the same rate, making it one of the few crimes that women commit as often as men (Adelson, 1961; Fox & Zawitz, 2007; Kunz & Bahr, 1996; Mariano, Chan, & Myers, 2014). However, depending on the jurisdiction, time period, and type of filicide being examined, research has also shown that mothers commit filicide more often than fathers (Bourget & Bradford, 1990; Dawson & Lanagan, 1994). Conversely, paternal filicide has been shown to be more common than maternal filicide (Bourget & Gagne, 2007; Flynn, Shaw, & Abel, 2007; Marks & Kumar, 1993). Some recent comprehensive reviews of filicide, infanticide, and neonaticide (Bourget, Grace, & Whitehurst, 2007; Harris, Hilton, Rice, & Eke, 2007; Koenen & Thompson, 2008; Porter & Gavin, 2010; West et al., 2009), and some recent empirical research (Dixon et al., 2013; Levelee, Marleau, & Dubé, 2007; Liem & Koenraadt, 2008; Putkonen et al., 2011) have begun to examine whether mothers and fathers kill their children in the same way and for the same reasons. Findings have been contradictory because of the varying samples examined.

Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Filicide Accused and Their Victims

Perpetrators. The majority of research has shown that fathers who kill their children are older (Bourget et al., 2007; Dixon et al., 2013; Koenen & Thompson, 2008; Liem & Koenraadt, 2008), more likely to be employed (Putkonen et al., 2011), and more likely to have a criminal record (Harris et al., 2007; Koenen & Thompson, 2008; Marks & Kumar, 1993; Putkonen et al., 2011) than mothers. Recent Australian research shows that filicidal fathers are more likely to report unemployment as well as alcohol and drug problems compared to mothers (Eriksson et al., 2014). Most studies show that single mothers are more at risk of perpetrating filicide than single fathers (Koenen & Thompson, 2008). Limited existing research shows that stepparents, particularly stepfathers, are more at risk of killing their stepchildren than biological parents (Daly & Wilson, 1988; Dixon et al., 2013; Harris et al., 2007; Wilson, Daly, & Daniele, 1995). Biological parents remain the most common filicidal perpetrator (Mariano et al., 2014).

Victims. The majority of research has found an even distribution of female and male filicide victims (Bourget & Gagne, 2007; Dixon et al., 2013; Flynn et al., 2007; Kunz & Bahr, 1996; Laporte, Tzoumakis, Marleau, & Allaire, 2005; West et al., 2009). However, findings are contradictory as to whether or not the victim's sex varies by gender of accused. For example, some research shows fathers were more likely to kill male children compared to mothers (Bourget et al., 2007; Mariano et al., 2014) whereas other work found mothers killed a higher proportion of male victims (Dawson & Lanagan, 1994). Overall filicide risk declines as children age (Koenen & Thompson, 2008). Fathers rarely commit neonaticide (Porter & Gavin, 2010), more often killing older children compared to mothers who more often kill infants (Bourget et al., 2007; Harris et al., 2007; Koenen & Thompson, 2008; Kunz & Bahr, 1996; Liem & Koenraadt, 2008; Mariano et al., 2014; Putkonen et al., 2011). Although the presence of risk factors has been examined, more attention needs to focus on the combinations of risk factors that may be more lethal, and whether these combinations vary by gender of the accused.

Situational Characteristics in Filicide

Research shows that fathers are more likely to use what are argued to be more violent methods, including weapons and particularly knives (Dixon et al., 2013; Liem & Koenraadt, 2008; Putkonen et al., 2011). Fathers are more likely to stab, squeeze or beat their children to death whereas mothers are more likely to drown, suffocate or gas their victims (Koenen & Thompson, 2008; Putkonen et al., 2011). Substance abuse has been found to be more common among filicidal men than women (Eriksson et al., 2014; Harris et al., 2007; Putkonen et al., 2011). Findings are contradictory with respect to suicide as an outcome for filicidal offenders. Some research has shown that fathers are less likely to commit suicide than mothers, but other research shows that fathers are more likely to commit suicide following the filicide (Bourget et al., 2007; Cooper & Eaves, 1996; Daly & Wilson, 1988). Recent work has suggested that filicide-suicides have been declining overall in some countries, however (Sturup & Granath, 2014). Finally, the majority of research demonstrates that men are more likely to kill additional victims in cases of filicide, primarily their spouse and/or other children, whereas this is seldom the case for mothers (Dixon et al., 2013; Harris et al., 2007; Koenen & Thompson, 2008; Marleau, Poulin, Webanck, Roy, & Laporte, 1999; West & Hatters Friedman, 2007; West et al., 2009). Often ending with the suicide of the offender, these cases are referred

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