



Gender differences in filicide offense characteristics—A comprehensive register-based study of child murder in two European countries[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study searched for gender differences in filicidal offense characteristics and associated variables.

Methods: In this binational register-based study all filicide perpetrators (75 mothers and 45 fathers) and their crimes in Austria and Finland 1995–2005 were examined for putative gender differences. The assessed variables were associated with the offense characteristics, the offenders' socioeconomic and criminal history, and related stressful events.

Results: Mothers had previously committed violent offenses less often than fathers (5% vs. 28%, $p < 0.001$) and they were less often employed (27% vs. 49%, $p < 0.05$). Mothers' victims were on average younger than those of fathers; median ages of the victims were 3.4 and 6.1 years, respectively ($p < 0.001$). Fathers were more often intoxicated during the offense (11% vs. 42%, $p < 0.001$) and also used shooting as the method of operation more often than mothers (5% vs. 27%, $p < 0.001$). Mothers used drowning, criminal negligence, and poisoning more often than fathers. Fathers' motives were more impulsive in nature (13% vs. 41%, $p < 0.001$). After the killing, mothers tried to get rid of the body more often than fathers (25% vs. 7%, $p < 0.05$).

Conclusions: Fathers who commit filicide may represent at least two subgroups, the one not unlike the common homicide offender; the other, the overloaded, working and suicidal father. Mothers may include several types of offenders, one of which is the neonaticide offender. More detailed descriptions and, therefore, more research are needed.

Practice implications: Distressed parents and families need support and health care personnel, social work and other officials need to be alert to notice fatigued parents' signs of despair, especially when several stressful experiences amass. Straightforward enquiry to the situation and even practical and psychological help may be needed for enhanced protection of children. The role of employers should also be discussed in relation to the welfare of working parents.

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Introduction

Filicide is the tragic crime of killing one's own child. It is an engendered crime, and offending mothers and fathers have been found to differ in situational characteristics (Bourget, Grace, & Whitehurst, 2007). According to a Canadian study, special features that differentiate paternal from maternal filicide seem to be connected to victim characteristics, method of killing, and filicidal motive (Bourget & Gagne, 2005). Even though both mothers and fathers commit filicide (Bourget & Bradford, 1990; Marks & Kumar, 1996; Somander & Rammer, 1991; Vanamo, Kauppi, Karkola, Merikanto, & Räsänen, 2001), the ratio being perhaps 1:1 (West, Friedman, & Resnick, 2009), most studies have focused on the female perpetrators.

Gender differences of homicidal crime scene behavior have been studied and the characteristics of female homicides, although more often related to family circumstances, did not stand out as significantly different from the characteristics of male homicides (Häkkänen-Nyholm et al., 2009). Yet in that study drinking quarrel, such as an argument aggravated by the influence of alcohol and/or other intoxication, was significantly more frequent among men than women, there was a trend of self-destructive motives being more frequent among women, and the use of a firearm was significantly more frequent among men. Further, violent crimes in general have been found to be more attributable to severe mental illness in women than in men (Fazel & Grann, 2006). For example, personality disorders are more common among mentally disordered violent female offenders while corresponding males more often get a diagnosis of alcohol and/or drug dependence (Yourstone, Lindholm, Grann, & Fazel, 2009). A study on the gender differences in filicide offenders' psychiatric history and post-offense diagnoses showed, quite in line with previous research on violent offenders in general, that fathers were more often diagnosed with substance abuse/dependence while mothers were diagnosed with a psychotic disorder (Putkonen et al., 2010). Moreover, psychotic and personality disordered female homicide offenders have been found to differ in their crime scene behavior (Putkonen, Collander, Honkasalo, & Lönnqvist, 2001). One can assume that gender differences of diagnoses affect the crime scene behavior (i.e., victim related variables, method of operation, motives, offender's intoxication, immediate post-offense behavior) of filicides also.

Several methods have been reported to be in use in the actual act of filicide. An American study, for example, found psychotic women to use weapons more often than non-psychotic women and older children were found more likely to be killed with weapons than younger children, who were more likely to be strangled or suffocated (Lewis, Baranoski, Buchanan, & Benedek, 1998).

The socioeconomic and criminal background of filicide offenders have been studied before. Financial problems, limited education, and unemployment have been found frequent in many countries (Bourget et al., 2007; Hatters Friedman, Horwitz, & Resnick, 2005; West et al., 2009). Psychotic female filicide offenders have been found to be more educated than non-psychotic offenders (Lewis & Bunce, 2003). In comparison with other homicide offenders, a Finnish study found filicide offenders to be more often employed and less often with criminal history (Putkonen, Weizmann-Henelius, Lindberg, Eronen, & Häkkänen, 2009). Moreover, vulnerabilities and triggers have been discussed in relation to filicide (Mugavin, 2008). For example, a predisposition to mental illness and an unfavorable social environment were considered vulnerabilities, while substance abuse, desperation, and a lack of interest in parenting were among the triggers.

Many attempts have been made to categorize filicide, especially according to its motive. One of the most referenced is by Resnick (1969): (1) altruistic (e.g., to save the child from the "evil world"), (2) acutely psychotic, (3) unwanted child, (4) accidental, and (5) spousal revenge. Another frequently cited is that by Bourget and Bradford (1990): (1) Pathological (altruistic or homicide-suicide), (2) Accidental (battered child or other, i.e., non-lethal intent), (3) Retaliating, (4) Neonaticide, and (5) Paternal. Of course, several other equally valuable classifications do exist. Classifications have comprised of different levels and qualities of information; some have been a mixture of different qualities, such as motive (altruistic) and age of victim (neonaticide). Being such a multifaceted, multidimensional, and dramatic event an all-satisfying classification has been difficult to accomplish. Also the universality of findings from different countries is a concern. Further, broad attempts to examine the structure of filicide, such as general population studies of coroner files, which explore every filicide that occurs within a region over a period of time, are very rare (Bourget et al., 2007).

Fortunately, filicide is quite a rare crime in Western societies. The global rate of child homicide has been approximated to be 1.92 for girl victims and 2.93 for boy victims in the age group 0–17 years per 100,000 inhabitants (Pinheiro, 2006). Yet it is considered an underreported crime, and especially, infant homicide rates are underestimates (Overpeck et al., 2002). In a previous comprehensive Austrian and Finnish study, a filicide rate of approximately 5 per 100,000 inhabitants 0–17 years was found (Putkonen, Amon, et al., 2009; Putkonen, Weizmann-Henelius, et al., 2009). This was a substantially larger prevalence than the official statistics illustrate, which emphasizes the hidden nature of filicide and accentuates the need of its extensive study.

This paper is part of a comprehensive study on filicide in Austria and Finland in 1995–2005 (The European Collaboration for the Understanding of Filicide). The purpose of the collaboration is to form a comprehensive and contemporary picture of filicide and to help prevent these crimes. The aim of the present study was to investigate putative gender differences in the history of the filicide offender (socioeconomic, criminal, and abuse history), pre-offense events (stressful experiences, and ideation of the forthcoming act), the offense characteristics and crime scene behavior (time and location, victims, offender's intoxication, method of operation, motives), as well as immediate post-offense behavior. One of the study questions was "would the mothers' offense characteristics be more related to mental disorders and fathers' to alcohol and/or drug abuse?" Last, a subgroup of employed offenders was analyzed separately.

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