

Domestic child homicide – the final step of systematic physical abuse and neglect or a separate entity? A population-based study of child homicides in Sweden 1998 - 2012.

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ABSTRACT

Despite a fundamental right for all children to live and grow up in safe and nourishing environments, millions of children worldwide are subjected to abuse, neglect and fatal violence. During the past decades, numerous scientific publications on physical child abuse and neglect has contributed to a profound knowledge about associated individual, contextual and situational risk factors. Contradictory, the nature of the most serious form of child violence victimization, homicide, is far less explored. Furthermore, little is known about the correlation between different forms of violence towards children. Regarding the relation between child abuse and child homicide there is no consensus whether child violence represents a continuum ranging from mild physical punishment to serious and lethal violent actions or if child abuse and child homicide represent two different entities with their own set of underlying factors.

The primary aim of this population-based study was to explore the nature of child homicides in terms of epidemiological, contextual, situational, forensic medical and crime scene findings (i.e. evidential signs of criminal violence including previous abuse and neglect at the body and at the crime scene). Police reports, including crime scene and autopsy protocols of child homicides occurring 1992 to 2012 in Sweden were collected and reviewed according to a standardized protocol. A total of 53 cases with 61 victims (25 girls/ 36 boys aged 0-14) were included and reviewed with special focus on epidemiological, forensic medical and crime scene variables. The data was presented using descriptive statistics.

The annual frequency of child homicide offences was 4.0 cases (4.6 victims). A majority of the cases, 79%, were intrafamilial in nature and most commonly committed in the parental home (n=40). Suicide by the perpetrator occurred in 17 incidents (27%). A majority of victims displayed visual injuries (73%). Most children (89%) died from an immediate killing action, most frequently asphyxia and sharp violence (n=16 and n=15 respectively). Signs of neglect and abuse prior to death was present in 24% of the cases (n=10). Active efforts by the perpetrator to mislead the investigation followed 25 children's death (61%) and in two cases (3%) the crime scene had been staged to mimic another type of death but homicide (accident or natural).

The results of this study show that child homicidal acts in most case are committed by a parent by a concentrated and

irreversible killing act, that the homicidal act may be followed by suicide by the perpetrator and that systematic and escalating abuse and neglect prior to the killing act was unusual in the selected population. This might indicate that child abuse and child homicide represent different causal mechanisms, such as motivational factors. However, which specific traits that characterizes child homicides and how this ultimate form of child violence is related to other, less violent forms, needs to be further elucidated.