

DOMESTIC HOMICIDES AND CHILDREN WHO WITNESS THEM

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This paper will focus on the still largely unrecognised tragedy of children who witness the murder of a parent in the context of domestic violence.

Domestic Violence can and does impact, intrude, interrupt and destroy the lives of thousands of young people in this country. Some may be the primary victims of abuse when physical, sexual emotional and verbal abuse is directly inflicted upon them. Others may carry the emotional scars of witnessing the war that rages around them. Tragically, many children have died. Some when they have tried to intervene to stop the violence, others as part of the jealous revenge that can result when one parent attempts to re-build a 'new' life for themselves and their children.

A report undertaken by the Australian Institute of Criminology *Children as Victims of Homicide* informs that between 1989 and 1993 there were 108 child homicide incidents in Australia. About one fifth of these involved multiple victims - sometimes the mother and sometimes another child.

Thirty-five percent of these children died as a consequence of a family dispute usually relating to the termination of the parent's relationship. Children were often not the primary or intended victim of the attack which was usually the mother. These children became caught up in the lethal violence ensuing from domestic violence and died because they were there at the time.

In Queensland between 1994 and 1997 there were 6 children who died as a result of domestic homicide. All of these children died at the time their mother was also killed.

While it is tragic to consider the homicide of children there also exists an other group of children who are largely forgotten by society and who live with the scars of witnessing one parent murder the other.

Children and homicide is still a 'too hard basket' issue. Something that is still largely unrecognised and un-named

Homicides in the public arena brings a considerable amount of media and public attention. Often public outrage, as was the case with Port Arthur, brings concern and actions to prevent such incidents from occurring again. While such outrage is appropriate, the focus on stranger danger has obscured the extent and nature of domestic homicides which account for the largest single category of all homicides in Australia.

Between 1989 and 1996 there were 2407 homicides in Australia. 1506 of the victims were male and 901 were women. The highest risk category for women is in intimate relationships where women represented 8 in every 10 victims. Women who were separated or divorced were at the highest end of the spectrum in regards to risk. These statistics are comparable with Queensland figures which show that women accounted for 82% of domestic homicide victims over the past four years.

In three quarters of all homicides where the victim is in a married or de-facto relationship, the homicide was a direct result of a domestic argument involving either sexual jealousy or the termination of the relationship. James & Hallinan (1995) suggest that in the majority of familial homicides there has been a history of abuse.

When a woman or children are killed in the context of domestic violence there is often minimum attention by the media and community. When it is reported it is usually presented as a isolated incident or a story of personal tragedy not as a social crime which often has a long history of violence and abuse. The extreme end of domestic violence is murder.

What of the children who are survivors of homicide or witnesses to homicide? What does society afford them in terms of protection and recovery?

Finding information is difficult. It as if these children don't exist. Finding information on the nature and extent of children's presence to parental homicide is virtually non-existent.

Yet over the past two years on the Gold Coast there have been ten domestic homicides. Ten women dead at the hands of violent men. A shocking tragedy for any community that calls itself civilised. But what of the tragedy of their children who survived them - some of whom were in the home when their mother was murdered.

Between them, these women have seventeen children under the age of eighteen, thirteen of whom were in or around the home at the time of the murder. One woman was six months pregnant at the time of her death.

In one instance an 11 year old girl awoke to screams, found her mothers body and rang the police. In another, four young children played in the backyard and saw their father carry their mothers body from the house and yet in another home small children watched television as their mother was strangled with the telephone cord.

When Kylie Steel's friend Megan left her abusive partner and went into hiding with her eighteen month old son, Kylie joined her. When Megan's partner found her and broke into her home, Kylie's first thoughts were to protect her friend and her baby. In doing this, Kylie Steel who was 24 years old was stabbed to death with the baby in her arms.

In many other instances, children have played a crucial role in intervention often preventing homicide.

The impact on a child, of having their mother killed by their father, is immense. Their lives are changed forever. Their mother has died, in some instances their father may have suicided. In 19.5% of homicides in Queensland between 1994-1997, the offender suicided. While others, he has been arrested.

Not only are they dealing with trauma and grief, there are also practical consequences centred around who they will live with and where. They may become separated from friends, school and possessions.

For some, it may mean the end of some family relationships while others may have to cope with the ongoing contact with their father - including for some, visits to prison or on-going communication (Welcomed or otherwise) from prison. Others may be subject to custody disputes between maternal and paternal relatives.

Many others may have the ongoing trauma of court and the stresses involved in giving evidence. The fear of facing the offending parent in court can be immense. They may be fearful of reprisals around giving evidence. After giving evidence at the trial of his father for the murder of his mother, one nineteen male received a letter from his imprisoned father saying "he forgave him for the lies he told to court". This, to a young person who also received gun shot wounds in the incident that killed his mother, was extremely traumatic.

Hendriks, Black and Kaplan in their book *When Father Kills Mother* suggests that children have to live not only with the shame of being a child of a killer but also with the guilt of not being able to prevent the killing of their mother. Many live with ongoing nightmares and fear.

How do we get these children on the agenda? And in doing so how do we ensure that we aren't promoting the false sentimentality of a society that portrays children as "innocent victims" but doesn't really care that females are beaten to death once they turn adults.

The two issues are inseparable. The protection and safety of children must be linked to the protection and safety of their mothers. Traumatized and bereaved these children struggle to find a new life. They are largely unrecognized and unheard.

Who advocates for them?

How do we give these children a voice?

This paper offers no answers but is given in an attempt to put the voice of these children on the public agenda.

References

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