

An Abominable Crime: Filicide in the Context of Parental Separation and Divorce

Thea Brown¹ and Danielle Tyson²

1 Department of Social Work, Faculty of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia

2 Department of Criminology, School of Political and Social Inquiry, Faculty of Arts, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia

The victims of filicide in the context of parental separation and divorce have recently been identified as the largest group among all filicide victims in Australia. Nevertheless, research into this group of victims has been sparse, fragmentary and contradictory, with the consequence that confusion has prevailed. This article critically reflects on the existing research on filicide and argues that it has been insufficiently comprehensive and reliable and, therefore, is not suitable for use as a knowledge base for professional individuals, programmatic and policy interventions, and prevention. The article suggests ways of developing more reliable research for knowledge building and details the data developed so far that underpins their recommendations for a national programme of research.

■ **Keywords:** filicide, parental separation and divorce, child homicide, family violence, child abuse

Introduction

The death of four-year-old Darcey Freeman, murdered by her father in tragic circumstances in Melbourne in January 2009, highlights an emerging social problem, that of the killing of a child by a parent in the context of parental separation and divorce. Both the media and the wider community struggle to comprehend what could motivate a parent to kill their child (or children), and many of these cases are reported in the media as ‘inexplicable’ tragedies (see, for example, Carlyon & Anderson, 2011). There is little empirical research documenting the extent, nature and causes of these tragedies, nor the ways of preventing them. The existing research has been patchy and uncoordinated, producing findings that are contradictory, create confusion and provide insufficient understanding to illuminate preventive action at individual, programme or policy level. This article draws together the research available on filicide internationally, examines its limitations and considers how future research might be designed to build a more reliable knowledge base to create more understanding and, most especially, to identify points of early intervention and hopefully prevention.

An abominable crime

According to the only review of filicide undertaken in Australia – that by the National Homicide Monitoring Program (NHMP) housed within the Australian Institute of Criminology – the community regards the killing of children

by their parent, termed filicide, as an abominable crime (Mouzos & Rushworth, 2003, p. 3). This research also suggests that the largest single group among filicide victims is that in which the homicide was carried out in the context of parental separation and divorce, although the authors concluded ‘the underlying motive behind incidents of filicide is difficult to explain’ (Mouzos & Rushworth, 2003, p. 3). Filicide in the context of parental separation and divorce has a long history dating back to the myth of Medea, the wronged wife and central character in a tale of maternal filicide told in ancient Greco-Roman mythology (Johnston, 1997). Yet, the picture that emerges of this, or any type of filicide, in the existing research literature is incomplete; in particular, there is no coherent theory, either supported or not by research evidence, to explain or address it.

To date filicide has been approached from a variety of disciplinary and organisational perspectives, with each discipline or organisation having its own purpose and context, but with few of them relating to each other or to the topic more broadly. Most of the research looks at filicide narrowly, dividing filicide into categories, such as neonaticide and familicide, and studying one category without placing it into any overall filicide conceptual schema. Moreover, there

ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: Thea Brown, Department of Social Work, Faculty of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences, Monash University, Caulfield East, Victoria 3930, Australia.
Email: Thea.Brown@monash.edu

is little consensus about these categories as they have been developed differently by the individual researchers over time and created according to differing foci – for example, according to the age of the victim or the motive of the perpetrator or the gender of the perpetrator.

This article presents an analysis of the current research and considers how we, as a community, and those working in the field of family violence and child protection, can better understand these deaths, and how we can build a knowledge base that provides new understandings, new theory, and new models of prevention and intervention.

Definitional confusion

Confusion in the research arises at the outset because most researchers deploy a variety of definitions of filicide and these different definitions are not made clear by the authors of the research. In most circumstances filicide is defined as the ‘killing of a child by their parent’ (see *Collins Dictionary of the English Language*, 1980) and, as a homicide, it may ultimately be determined to be a criminal offence.

A basic definitional issue relates to the term ‘child’ as this varies from one country to another according to age; in Australia a ‘child’ is aged from 0 to 17 years as per the definition used in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 2011). Usually this is not a source of confusion, but merely a difference. A more important issue lies in the relationship between the parent and the child. Definitions of filicide vary as to which parents are included in the definition. Some definitions include biological parents only, but others also include step-parents, sometimes termed de facto parents (Strang, 1996), together with biological parents (Kirkwood, 2012; Victorian Coroners’ Database, 2010 [not publicly available]). When a step-parent is also a child’s legal guardian, their inclusion seems logical, but when the step-parent is not the child’s legal guardian yet is the perpetrator of the crime, their inclusion seems less logical, but nevertheless important if this group is involved.

Another definitional issue is the meaning of the terms ‘homicide’ and ‘murder’, which are not interchangeable but which are often used as if they were. Homicide is the killing of one person by another and it includes both lawful and unlawful killing. Murder is a narrower term relating to the unlawful killing of a person with intent; it can be premeditated or unpremeditated (Irving, 2009). In most Australian states, the crime of infanticide operates as an alternative offence to murder and, in some jurisdictions, as a partial defence to murder which, if successfully argued, reduces murder to the lesser charge of manslaughter. In Victoria the offence of infanticide refers to the killing of a baby aged less than 12 months by its mother while suffering from a disturbance of the mind, caused by the effects of giving birth or lactation (Victorian Law Reform Commission, 2004, pp. 253–254). While the term infanticide is understood to be distinguishable from filicide, filicide is a form of homicide and it may be determined to be an intentional act and

a murder. However, in areas such as child protection, other terms are used that include instances of filicide but where the terminology does not refer explicitly to filicide and so submerges filicide in broader child protection terms, like the fatal abuse of a child or non-accidental injury causing the death of a child (Victorian Child Death Review Committee, 2009). The inclusion of instances of filicide within the broader terms relates to the primary purpose of the collection of data in child protection; that is to monitoring, evaluating and improving child protection services, rather than to addressing filicide. In the reports of child protection death reviews there is a lack of clarity in individual cases as to if, when and how the abuse was followed by homicide, whether there are clear, separate events carried out by an identified perpetrator that led to the child’s death, or whether the background is one of drawn out injury and/or neglect, and whether there is an identified perpetrator and what relationship they had with the child victim. Filicide is similarly lost within the broader terms and descriptions of family (or domestic) violence deaths, all of which include instances of filicide but do not explicitly focus on it. Thus, the placing of filicide within these categories precludes a more comprehensive understanding of its existence and ways of addressing it.

A consequence of these various definitional confusions is that any discussion of filicide may be a discussion of somewhat different types of events, although the discussants may not realise this. Moreover, the differences and contradictions that exist in the findings in the various studies may stem from differences in definitions without any understanding that this is the reason why. Thus, it is vital for future filicide research to develop clear definitions and to explain them at the outset of the research. Arguably, definitions of filicide in any research should refer to the homicide of a child aged 0 to 17 years who has been killed, with or without premeditation, by one or more perpetrating parents who may be the child’s biological parents, their step-parents (de facto or legal) and who also may or may not be their legal guardians.

A highly emotive issue

The killing of a child by their parent has been described as ‘the most emotive of offences’ (Danson & Soothill, 1996, p. 495). Although community responses have varied somewhat over time, contemporary society reacts with horror and disgust (Grünfeld & Steen, 1984, cited in Stroud, 2008, p. 482). As a result, confusion can flow from the strong feelings surrounding the events – feelings emanating from the families involved, the professionals who deal with them, the media and even the researchers studying such deaths. Filicide contravenes three sets of deep-seated community values. First, it contravenes the community’s moral and legal prohibition against homicide and murder. Secondly, it contravenes the moral and legal responsibility the community delegates to parents for the nurture and protection of

their children as they raise them to adulthood. Thirdly, it contravenes the community's moral and legal prohibition of the use of physical power against less powerful people unable to defend themselves, such as children who lack the physical and emotional maturity needed for defence and who would not normally expect their parent to be a danger to them. While these views are not applicable universally or in all circumstances, they are nevertheless commonly held and ones that are increasingly supported in national and international family policies, such as articulated in Articles 6 and 19 of the United Nations Convention on Declaration on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 2011).

Possibly as a result of this, media coverage of the murder of children (when the homicide is seen as unlawful and therefore as a crime) is widespread; more widespread than for any other type of crime (Danson & Soothill, 1996). Recently, there have been a number of high profile cases reported in the Australian media involving the murder of a child or children by a parent in the context of parental separation and divorce and these raise questions about what makes the dynamics of this particular context so desperate that child and adult deaths can result. Such cases include Robert Farquharson, tried twice and sentenced to life imprisonment with a minimum non-parole period of 33 years for driving his car into a dam and drowning his three sons near Geelong on Father's Day in September 2005 (*DPP v Farquharson* [2007] VSC 469; *R v Farquharson* [2010] VSC 462); Arthur Freeman who was also given a life sentence with a minimum non-parole period of 32 years for throwing his four-year-old daughter, Darcey, from the Melbourne West Gate Bridge in January 2009 (*R v Freeman* [2011] VSC 139); Rajesh Osborne who shot his three children and then himself in Roxburgh Park in April 2010 (Reid, 2010); and Allyson McConnell, formerly of Gosford on the New South Wales Central Coast, who was charged with the murders of her two sons and whose case is presently being heard in a Canadian court (the trial commenced in March 2012). In such cases, the media expresses society's rejection of the act, recoils in disbelief and horror; some writers echo public reactions of disbelief (Lillebuen & Scott, 2010), while others do believe it and condemn it vigorously (Kirkwood, 2011; Kissane, 2007). Media reporting reflects the current confusion over the possible motivations and its links to the role of gender and whether fathers or mothers are the more prevalent offender (compare Fewster, 2011; Horin, 2011; Noveck, 2011; Nikunen, 2006, 2011), whether there is previous family violence, the presence of any signs of mental illness on the part of the perpetrator, and the degree of legal responsibility that perpetrators should bear for what they have done (compare Kirkwood, 2012; Overington, 2010; see also Draper, 2011). Since the killing of one's child is so socially alarming and morally repugnant, it attracts considerable press commentary. Although research on domestic homicide has shown that separation is a factor in intimate partner homicide (Johnson, 2005; Mouzou & Rushforth, 2003) there is a tendency for researchers to focus on factors such as child

abuse or mental illness rather than foregrounding the context of parental separation in their explanations for filicide. As recently noted by Kirkwood (2012, p. 7), 'while separation is acknowledged as a factor' in the filicide research, 'there is a gap . . . regarding cases that occur in this context'. As such, without rigorous research to assist the press when reporting such crimes, the media coverage of these highly newsworthy events ultimately contributes to the existing confusion evident within the existing research and further reinforces this by reporting it in a predictable and simplified or episodic manner (on newsworthiness and media reporting of crimes involving children as victims more generally, see Jewkes, 2011, pp. 64–65).

Filicide research

Formal research on filicide has been sparse and fragmentary. Due to the excessively narrow scope of the studies, their small sample sizes and their biased sample selection, such studies have produced contradictory findings and brought confusion to the problem (Strang, 1996; Stroud, 2008). Moreover, while some find that parental separation and divorce is a possible factor, mostly in relation to filicide perpetrated by the father, the remainder do not consider this factor as they are wedded to other theories of causation.

The earliest studies on filicide, undertaken some forty years ago, used a psychological framework to try to detect psychological causes and determine the role of mental illness in the perpetrator's actions (d'Orban, 1979; Resnick, 1969, 1970). These studies focused on mothers as perpetrators and fostered the notion that filicide was a crime committed by mothers who were mentally ill, and therefore mad, rather than criminal and therefore bad; a view that was congruent with the attitude to all women who had committed a criminal offence at that time (Strang, 1996). Research to address the gender bias of these studies then looked at fathers who had murdered their children (Alder & Polk, 1996, 2001; Bourget & Gagné, 2005; Bourget, Grace, & Whitehurst, 2007); but by focusing on fathers they continued the narrow scope established earlier. Some of the studies of this period developed classification schemes of types of filicide that were based on attributed motives for the act, because it was believed the classifications would produce explanatory theory. The categories identified included altruistic filicide and revenge filicide and the latter classification was seen as particularly applying to the context of parental separation and divorce (Bourget & Bradford, 1990). However, the studies assumed that motives could be correctly and commonly obtained, though later research showed that this was not so and that knowledge of motive could not usually be identified (Mouzou & Rushworth, 2003). In addition, the categories overlapped with each other and, by being restricted mainly to motive rather than including other factors, were too narrow.

The early theme of mental illness as a causal factor in incidences of filicide continued in the research and today it

is still a major explanation with the most recent research, undertaken in the Netherlands using separate samples of fathers and mothers, all of whom were patients in mental hospitals subsequent to their convictions for filicide offences (Liem & Koenraadt, 2008). This research offered the advantage of comparing mothers with fathers, but since mental illness and its expression varies according to gender (Olliffe & Phillips, 2008), the differences this research found regarding mental illness and gender may be undermined. Another problem with the studies looking at mental illness was the tendency to define the existence of mental illness in terms of the presence or absence of psychosis (Liem & Koenraadt, 2008), resulting in some events not meeting the criteria for filicide resulting from mental illness and not being classified as such. This may be too blunt an approach to mental illness, particularly with regard to depression which is not regarded as a psychosis, yet which has been identified as a significant factor in paternal filicide (Goldney, 1977; Polk, 1994; Schlesinger, 2000). Since depression is an almost invariable reaction to partnership separation, it may be difficult to appreciate it as a serious risk because it seems normal in these circumstances. Another shortcoming of this research was that it was carried out with respondents who were currently in mental hospitals as a result of conviction for their crime (Liem & Koenraadt, 2008) and the perpetrators were selected from the ranks of the mentally ill. However, this group of studies, while discounting the bias of its samples, did make the significant point that research on filicide should not be carried out with either female or male perpetrators, but with both.

A past history of domestic violence has been found to be associated with filicide when the perpetrator is a male, but again the research is contradictory (Kirkwood, 2012). It is possible that socio-economic class affects the manner of the expression of violence and that this accounts for the contradictions between the studies that find male violence and those that do not (Ooms, 2006). Also, a past history of domestic violence is associated with child abuse that proves fatal and this may colour discussions of the relationship between domestic violence and filicide. Finally, research has shown contradictory findings regarding the use of community services by these families before the event; some research shows the families attempting to access services but finding their concerns being disbelieved and discounted (Bagshaw et al., 2010). Other research shows families accessing services that then make the situation worse (Bagshaw et al., 2010; Varcoe & Irwon, 2004), while yet further research shows families not accessing services at all (Brown & Hampson, 2010; Johnson, 2005, 2008).

Valuable new thinking on understanding filicide has been developed using a psycho-social research framework that combines a quantitative analysis of data of incidence and characteristics of perpetrators with a qualitative analysis of the precursors or psycho-social antecedents to the events in relation to the perpetrator and their families (Stroud, 2008; Stroud & Pritchard, 2001). This work used data from

individuals who had been charged with filicide and where a forensic psychological assessment had been carried out. While not focusing on the context that is the specific focus of our article, parental separation and divorce, the work did show that, by bringing a more comprehensive understanding to causal explanations, filicide could be shown to stem from a complexity of family and community factors and relationships, and their interaction.

The notion of a stressful interaction within families, and between family members and community services, as suggested by Stroud (2008) may underpin the number of high profile filicides that have occurred in response to family court litigation over care of the children of the relationship post-separation in Australia and New Zealand (e.g. the 1994 case of Alan Bristol who killed his three children, then himself, after a custody battle in the New Zealand Family Court; Riddell, 2008). However, there is a gap in the filicide research regarding this issue and, in the few studies that have examined the link between filicide and family court litigation, the findings have suggested that, while there was a dispute and there was litigation, the perpetrating parent had not been denied access to the children (Johnson, 2005).

Categories within filicide

Research has isolated and studied two particular categories of filicide: neonaticide and familicide. *Neonaticide* is a research classification, as opposed to a legal classification like infanticide, that was developed (Resnick, 1969) to describe the killing of a baby aged from one day to six months old by its parent, usually its mother. It is regarded very differently from other filicide events in that it is viewed more generously by the community as being a likely result of mental illness or extreme distress following the mother's experience of the birth (Robinson, 1998). Research has shown that in modern times it is associated with a denial of the pregnancy (Oberman & Meyer, 2008) and, while still occurring, as for example in the recent case of Keli Lane who was convicted in December 2010 in the Supreme Court of New South Wales for the murder of her two-day-old baby Teagan (*R v Keli Lane* [2011] NSWSC 289), it has diminished in those countries with an increased availability of effective contraception (Robinson, 1998). Some communities offer anonymous drop-off facilities for newborn or young babies to overcome the problem. (A confusing element in such discussions is the use of the research term 'neonaticide' to describe the homicide of a baby ranging from one day to some months old as compared with the medical and legal term 'infanticide' to describe the homicide of an infant up to twelve months old. Neonaticide and infanticide can overlap in research and medical discussion. However, the term of infanticide – see definition above – is different in that when used legally it applies to a crime of the murder of an infant that brings a lesser penalty than that of other homicides.)

Familicide has been studied only very recently and, as the research has associated familicide with parental separation

and divorce, it seems central to any examination of filicide in the context of parental separation and divorce. Like filicide research, familicide research is also confused by definitional issues; for example, familicide can be defined to cover the murder of one's children, the murder of one's partner and children, or the murder of children together with the suicide of the parent (Johnson, 2005). Johnson has undertaken pioneering work on familicide in Australia and she includes all three of these meanings in her definition of this term. She argues that all perpetrators (mostly, but not only, fathers) suffered from childhood abuse and trauma, that the intimate partnership is marked by domestic violence, and that the intimate partnership relationship has either broken down or is in the process of so doing. In her research, parental separation and divorce were a significant factor in the type of filicide that occurs as part of familicide, as well as mental illness and substance abuse.

Family violence, or domestic violence, deaths committees

Recently, family violence, or domestic violence, death committees have emerged to study adult and child homicides perpetrated by one family member on others in the family. Family violence committees are most common in North America, in the provinces and territories of Canada and in the USA; one has just been established in New Zealand as the first national family violence deaths committee worldwide. There are family violence death committees in some, but not all, Australian states (Newton, Fredericks, Wilson, Dibben, & Goddard, 2010). The committees give most attention to adults as they are the most common victims in family violence or domestic violence deaths (Kirkwood, 2012; Martin & Pritchard, 2010). Although they include child victims, the committees look at them more from the perspective of child abuse, often long-term abuse leading to a fatality, rather than from the perspective of homicide. They have raised the context of parental separation as a causal factor in family deaths, but they have raised it in relation to adult female victims rather than to child victims, again because adult victims are more common than child victims.

The recent report (Martin & Pritchard, 2010) sponsored by the New Zealand Family Violence Death Review Committee (NZFVDRC) typifies the approach of such organisations. Being concerned with all family violence deaths it did not identify filicide in the context of parental separation and divorce as a group of victims sufficiently large to be worthy of attention, and so revealed little about it. It did make one important comment saying that, when children had been killed by a parent in the context of parental separation and divorce, the perpetrator gave warnings of the act through threats of violence to the victim, to the partner and to the perpetrator themselves (Martin & Pritchard, 2010), a finding that one of the authors had made in previous research (Stroud & Pritchard, 2001). Otherwise, it subsumed children killed by a parent in the context of separation and

divorce within all children killed by a family member and frequently within all murdered family members.

National databases

In 1989, the Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC) introduced a National Homicide Monitoring Program (NHMP) database and this is one of the few reliable national databases of its kind in the world. It is made up of data from the records held in state Coroners' Offices. Each state Coroner reports to that database on all homicide victims, adult and child, killed by strangers, family members and others, thereby contributing a regular flow of data to the National Coroner's Information System and to the NHMP held by the AIC. In 2003, a pioneering analysis of Australian family violence deaths using the data held by that database was published reviewing all homicide deaths from 1989 to 2002 (Mouzos & Rushworth, 2003).

Importantly, that report singled out filicide deaths for special attention and undertook a separate analysis of them. The research found filicide deaths to be 17% of all family murders in contrast to intimate partner deaths, the largest group of family murders, which comprised some 60%. The study found an average of 25 filicide deaths occurred in Australia in each of the years covered by the study. Reviewing these deaths the study attempted to categorise them according to motive, but were not able to do this in mutually exclusive category terms, particularly because, in 63% of instances, motive was unclear. They signalled concern about filicide in the context of parental separation and divorce because they saw this group (along with victims in the domestic violence group that could also include instances of parental separation and divorce) as the largest group in the filicide category. Their work demonstrated the value of a national database and implied that Australia, with its combination of a national database supported by single centralised sources in each state's Coroners' files, might be one of the few countries able to undertake large and reliable studies of filicide deaths.

The Child Protection Services databases

Child Protection Services are another potential source of data on filicide. These services, internationally, have assembled their own organisational networks to compile data about child deaths and to analyse it for patterns, themes and causes so as to develop improved service intervention. In Australia, these governmental reviews are termed Child Death Review Committees or similar, and are conducted annually at the state but not at the national level. They include data on the deaths of children who were recently or were currently in the care of the Child Protection Service at the time of death. The deaths reported may arise from illness, accident or injury; they may be caused by a parent, another adult or child both within and without the family, or by the

child her/himself. They are limited in their scope as they do not include all child deaths or even all child homicides.

The reviews undertaken by the Victorian Child Death Review Committee (VCDRC) are typical of such child protection reviews. The reviews identify the number of children who have died. They divide the deaths into various categories, including one of children who have died from what is termed non-accidental injury. However, they do not identify the numbers in that category who are homicide victims, let alone filicide victims, or discuss these deaths further (VCDRC, 2009). The numbers of children who die from non-accidental injury are few annually and they are the smallest category among all the child deaths included in these reviews. For example, children who died from non-accidental injury in Victoria from 1996 to 2008 totalled 17 of the total of 221 deaths and comprised only 1 of the total 60 in the final four of those years put together (VCDRC, 2009, p. 20). The findings of that review which looked back over 12 years of history suggested that non-accidental injury deaths are declining in number, although the total of child deaths reported has stayed more or less constant. The review suggested themes of domestic violence, substance abuse and mental illness within the families of the children, but did not undertake separate analysis of the non-accidental injury (or trauma) group. Since other research (Brown & Alexander, 2007; Brown, Frederico, Hewitt, & Sheehan, 1998) has shown that child abuse in the context of parental separation and divorce does not usually become known to Child Protection Services, it would seem likely that filicide victims and their families may not have many, if any, links with Child Protection Services.

The costs of filicide

One of the consequences of filicide is the cost it imposes on the family and the wider community, an issue that is rarely raised, although the costs are very burdensome. Johnson (2002) depicts the costs as huge for the families; she sees any surviving nuclear family member as virtually being unable to function again. In addition, many professionals such as the police and paramedics who attend such events, the doctors who care for the victims, the social workers, psychologists and lawyers who assist surviving family members, are traumatised, sometimes over many years. There is a cost in professional services and from the enquiries that occur subsequently, such as coroner's inquests and criminal trials. On occasions, there are other governmental inquiries, such as the recent Chisholm Inquiry for the Commonwealth Government into Darcey Freeman's death (Chisholm, 2009).

Definition of parental separation and divorce

Before examining parental separation and divorce and its association with filicide, it should be noted that parental separation and divorce cannot be simply defined as an ob-

jective event clearly dated and agreed on by all. For any separated person the time and events around the separation may be understood and recounted differently from time to time and disputed strongly by various members within the family. An individual may see separation as something that has happened, or as something in train but not final, or as anticipated or as threatened. Johnson suggests that the actual acts of separation or of divorce are not the precipitating factors to filicide and intimate partner homicide, but rather it is the perpetrator's belief that a particular act committed by their former partner implies final abandonment by their partner that provokes the event (Johnson, 2008, pp. 27, 109–110). Thus filicide can occur before a separation, after a number of separations, or even a long time after separation and a divorce. A substantial proportion of filicide events perpetrated by fathers, some 40%, occur shortly after separation, but the remainder occur at varying time periods after separation. One widely publicised murder of three children by their father in 1997 in Tasmania took place eight years after the divorce (Munro, 1997). In light of this, any study of filicide in the context of parental separation and divorce should take account of the full range of possible meanings of the concept of separation, as well as recognising that the possibility of other meanings may be attributed to it but might be presently unrecognised.

The need for research

Reviewing past international and Australian research shows that parental separation and divorce has been identified as a key theme in filicide research for some years, but that it has been seen as an incidental theme surfacing in various studies, but never receiving attention in its own right. It has not been considered as a major theme despite recent Australian evidence that shows those filicide victims killed in the context of parental separation and divorce appear to be the largest single group among victims in the filicide population. At the same time, parental separation and divorce has been identified as presenting risks of all types of family violence to children (Brown & Alexander, 2007) though this research has not been linked to filicide. This may be due, in part, to the early research on parental separation and divorce that showed that the impact of parental separation and divorce on parents and children was mostly short term and relatively benign (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1979). However, later research by some of the same group showed this to be untrue and they corrected their earlier views (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989). The later research showed that parental separation and divorce did affect parents in all areas of their social functioning – in their work, their finances, their relationship with family and friends, in their emotional functioning and in their care and protection of their children. Other research has subsequently supported these findings, alerting us to the dangers for the children (Brown & Lundgren, 2009).

Still little is known of the role of parental separation and divorce in filicide. Past research has produced contradictory findings in terms of the roles of gender, family violence and mental health, as well as only fragmentary evidence regarding the role of parental separation and divorce. In addition, past research has suffered from flaws of varying and unclear definitions, small and unreliable samples, and excessively singular purposes that have produced particular disciplinary or organisationally biased frameworks. It must be acknowledged that there are difficulties in gaining access to relevant data and it may be that the narrow nature of some studies, particularly those looking at perpetrators rather than at the offence or at victims, are undertaken because perpetrator data is the most accessible of all possible data. Another cause of the small scale of past research may be the small numbers of filicide events that occur annually. This makes it difficult to amass sufficient numbers of cases to produce reliable findings.

Larger research studies

Larger studies are required to achieve the reliability of findings that will provide information about the role of parental separation and divorce in filicide, as well as the role of other factors like mental health, gender and domestic violence. Long-term studies stand to amass greater amounts of data. Although they may present practical problems, it is important to move past spotlighting selected groups of perpetrators and, instead, studying larger numbers of offences, victims, perpetrators and their families, and undertaking quantitative and qualitative analyses of them. Conducting research over a longer period would produce a more substantial number of incidences of filicide to allow an examination of the complexity of family and community factors that surround these tragic events and that interact to produce them. This might mean extending the time frame for the collection of data from the previous ten to even twenty years so that any patterns detected are more reliable because they include sufficient numbers and because they stand firm over time.

Designing research

In an effort to test the potential for the development of such a study, the authors of this article constructed some preliminary design work towards a national study combining quantitative data from the NHMP database combined with a quantitative and qualitative analysis of case-file data held in state Coroners' files, that would run over ten years at least and possibly for a longer time. The planned approach to researching the events and circumstances leading to the deaths was a qualitatively driven mixed-method approach which draws on the tradition known as a 'psycho-social approach' (Stroud, 2008). The idea of the study was to consider the social context of such deaths in terms of the characteristics of the victim(s), perpetrator(s) and the family's circum-

stances and their interactions (or lack of interactions) with family, friends, and the wider community including any socio-legal-support services they may have accessed. It was envisaged that this would allow identification of points of early intervention focusing on prevention and, importantly, a greater understanding of how programmatic and policy responses might be developed or expanded to respond more effectively to the individuals involved.

First stage

In the first stage of the planned study undertaken by the authors, a search was conducted of all newspapers covering the state of Victoria, the second most populated state in Australia, for all filicide events from 1998 to 2008. A total of 40 filicide incidents for that period were identified of which ten were understood to have taken place in the context of parental separation and divorce. Within that group were seven murders of children accompanied by the suicide death of the perpetrator. Using that data the proportion of filicide deaths taking place in the context of parental separation and divorce was almost 25%, a higher proportion than was found in the analysis of filicide deaths using the National Homicide Monitoring Data Base for the 12 years up to in 2002, and higher also than the 20% suggested by a NSW Child Deaths Committee Review (NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2008), but smaller than the proportion of 40% found in a Canadian study (Bourget & Bradford, 1990). Interestingly, the Victorian Death Review Committee found there were 11 child deaths where the cause of death was termed non-accidental trauma in this same period (1998–2008). Thus, the numbers of deaths of children known to child protection who died as a result of non-accidental trauma were almost the same as the number of filicide victims killed in the context of parental separation and divorce in the same period in Victoria.

From here, the researchers progressed to the more reliable data source, the Victorian Coroners' database and case files. To gain access to this data source, the researchers received ethical approval from the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (MUHREC), the Victorian Department of Justice and the State Coroner's Office. The researchers found that individual case records were not reliably available before 2000 and so their study (and indeed any study) could not include data for the years prior to 2000. Another limitation was that some case files for that time period were not 'closed' and so were unable to be accessed by the researchers. Using the Coroners' database, some 52 cases of filicide were identified as occurring between 2000 and 2010, but ten of these were not closed by 2011, which is a sizeable proportion amounting to 20%. The files themselves varied in their detail, but most possessed enough of the information that the case file data collection tool sought to cover. However, the researchers concluded at this point that the study needed to extend beyond one state, even one as populous as Victoria, because there were insufficient

numbers available in the database from 2000 to reveal key themes and patterns reliably.

Conclusions

Sufficient cases need to be found to develop a comprehensive study on the extent and contextual factors underpinning incidences of filicide in Australia, on the role of parental separation and divorce, mental health, gender and domestic violence, and on opportunities for intervention and prevention of filicide in Australia. This could be achieved by including a greater number of states, or at least the most populous states of Victoria and New South Wales, together with another state that is different in ethnic and racial composition and also in its industrial profile, so that sufficient numbers of events and sufficient diversity is obtained. The authors propose that such a study would need to run retrospectively over the ten years prior to the commencement of the study, preferably for a longer period if possible, but it is likely that there is limited availability of case records prior to 2000 in some states, certainly in Victoria. Fortunately, publicly available national data on child protection-related deaths extends back to 1998, thereby allowing the possibility of a comparison between these two data sets. Such a study could use the data stored in case files held at the Coroner's Office in each state and analyse a minimum desirable number of cases, over 100, in terms of the child's and family's socio-economic circumstances, their physical and mental health, past histories of violence, the gender of perpetrators, the types of parent-child relationships, the events leading up to the deaths, the use of community services, the role of professionals and any reported perpetrator motivations.

One design issue is the consideration of attempted filicide events, which are sometimes reported in the press, even when they do not result in a child's death. Some are so serious in their intent and implementation that it is hard to believe they are not of the same intent, nature and intensity as actual deaths and so it is hard to disregard them. However, there are few, if any, studies that have included an analysis of attempted filicide incidences as well as completed filicide incidences. It may be that instances of attempted filicide require special attention of their own. However, if threats to kill and severe forms of physical violence to the victims prior to the homicide are part of the trajectory leading up to the filicide event, then such attempts may end up being included in the proposed study by the authors.

Finally, while it can be argued that the annual number of filicide deaths in Australia is small, the authors conclude that the problem should be addressed urgently. There is evidence that some 25 children are killed by one or other parent every year in Australia and, as yet, we do not know why or how to prevent these deaths. Each death is a tragedy not only for the child and their family, but also for the wider community. The emotional costs of these tragic events not only fall on the families and friends of the victims, but flow on to the wider community. A national study of all filicide deaths

over a minimum of a ten-year period would be the first step towards reducing this toll. It would place us on the path to understanding why these deaths take place, what role various factors play in these events and what can be done to improve early intervention, develop prevention policies and better equip services with the knowledge and resources to respond to and support the individuals involved more effectively.

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