

Every child matters

A year-long review of child deaths in Phoenix revealed that one child died every second day, with most from a preventable cause

OPINION

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MAY 31 marked the official start of Child Protection Week across the country. This campaign started in 1997, yet large numbers of South Africa's children continue to experience violence in their homes and communities on a daily basis.

Alarming, violence is not decreasing. Children are dying at the hands of those who are meant to care for and protect them, and children continue to die from preventable causes.

To stop preventable deaths, we need

a better understanding of how and why children are dying. Once we know that, we can identify potential strategies to prevent future deaths, and that can help to strengthen our health and child-protection system to reduce child deaths.

To contribute to this goal, a child-death review pilot project was implemented a year ago to investigate systematically the deaths of children at two pilot sites, in KwaZulu-Natal and the Western Cape.

In KwaZulu-Natal, all child deaths re-

corded at Phoenix mortuary, north of Durban, were reviewed every month by a child-deaths' review team made up of staff of the Children's Institute and the Division of Forensic Medicine, both at the University of Cape Town, the KZN departments of Health and Social Development, the KZN Police Service, Childline South Africa and Child Welfare.

During this pilot phase (January to December last year), we saw almost one child death every second day at this mortuary. Of concern, we found the leading causes of death for children under 18 years were road-traffic injuries, homicide, suicide and electrocutions. Sadly, these are all injury deaths that are preventable.

Child Protection Week aims to create safe and secure environments, and we

can learn a lot about barriers to this goal by reviewing child deaths, as we have done at Phoenix mortuary. There we found that, in a relatively small district, 30 children were killed in one year in the context of child abuse and neglect. Most of these deaths occurred within the confines of the home or at the hands of someone close to them, some soon after birth.

This is an absolute tragedy. Although child abuse and the death of a child are not the result of a single factor, there are often warning signs when a family is in distress. But services are often not responsive to the needs of such families or individuals, with devastating consequences.

We also found a disproportionate number of young children, two as young

as nine, who committed suicide. In these cases, both the families and schools reported that they were not aware that the children were in emotional turmoil.

The young age of these children raises concern and poses challenges to those who provide services to children. It is clear that children do not feel free to talk about their concerns to those closest to them, who should be responsive to both their physical and emotional needs.

To reduce the kinds of preventable deaths we reviewed in Phoenix, community-based services should be reaching out to families and caregivers in crisis, and educating them on signs of depression and severe distress. Children who are in distress and feel unsupported in their homes and community should also be targeted.

The disproportionate number of electrocution deaths found by this child-deaths review is shameful.

These deaths are all due to illegal electrical connections in informal communities where basic services such as electricity are not a priority, are unaffordable, or where there is resistance to paying for services.

It is critical that local authorities take heed of the dire consequences of such illegal connections as these deaths of young children should not have happened.

Communities should also be made aware of the fatal consequences of illegal connections by alerting them to the unfortunate deaths of innocent children, and their role in stopping this practice.

The theme for Child Protection Week

2015 is Working together to protect children.

This research has alerted the child-protection community of the need to work harder and more consistently towards the prevention of child deaths and violence against children.

However, child protection is everyone's business and therefore it is important for the government and communities to join forces to make communities safer spaces for all children, to prevent such unnecessary deaths.

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