



# **Fatal Child Abuse: The murder of children in the home**

**By Shanaaz Mathews**

Violence against children is considered a pervasive problem in South Africa. Yet, until recently very little was known about the magnitude of violence in the lives of children particular violence experienced in the home. Fatal child abuse is considered to be the most severe consequence of violence against children and a proxy measure for the effectiveness of a country's child protection system.

The first national child homicide study provided us with data to quantify this extreme form of violence. This brief draws on quantitative data collected for the national child homicide study and qualitative case studies collected through the child death review project in Kwa-Zulu Natal and the Western Cape to provide us with insights into the pattern and contributing factors to children being murdered in the home.

Through a combination of these data sources we come to see that filicide in the context of high levels of violence, intimate partner violence and violence against children provides the milieu for a type of filicide that is somewhat different to what is commonly experienced in developed settings.



The national child homicide study estimates that 1018 children died due to homicide in 2009, a child homicide rates of 5.5/100 000 children under the age of 18 years, higher than the estimated global rate of 4 /100 00 children aged 0–19 years. Of interest, nearly half (44.6%) of these child homicides were identified as child abuse deaths.

Homicide resulting from child abuse was most common in children younger than 5 years (73.8%) and occur in the home but there is no difference by sex. Three-quarters of fatal abuse killings occur among infants (under the age of 1 year) also known as infanticide, with mothers the most likely perpetrators. The South African infanticide rate is 28.3 per 100 000 live births and the highest global reported rate. Infants are most at risk of being killed by a mother in the first 6 days after birth.

The contribution of poor mental health such as a history of depression, post-partum depression, psychosis, previous mental health treatment is unknown as very few infant deaths are linked with perpetrators and where they are identified mental health assessments are not routine. As children become older the role of men, in particular the mother's partner plays a more prominent role in the murder of children. The qualitative case reviews shows that family breakdown and domestic violence is at the centre of fatal child abuse in older children (1 to 10 years), with psychological explanations not sufficient to capture the complexity of such events.

#### **KEY DEFINITIONS:**

**Child homicide:** the intentional, unlawful killing of a child for which another person is held responsible

**Fatal child abuse:** all forms of physical, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment resulting in a child's death.

**Early neonaticide:** the killing of a new-born within the first 6 days of life;

**Late neonaticide:** the killing of a new-born within 7-28 days of life;

**Infanticide:** the killing of a child within one year of birth

**Filicide:** the killing of a child by a parent(s) or primary caregiver(s).



## Key recommendations

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- There is an urgent call to improve the early detection of mental health symptomatology at primary care level (especially public hospitals and clinics) to prevent infanticide.
- We need to strengthen community-based interventions around access to reproductive and maternity services, particularly community mental health services.
- Improve detection of families in distress and enhance current parenting practices in order to provide needed support services, identify vulnerable families and prevent fatal child abuse.
- Finally, improved coordination of multidisciplinary services in preventing and responding to child abuse, which includes improving investigations into child murders, as well as improving prosecutions rates to decrease re-traumatisation for victims of child abuse as well as minimise re-perpetration or future perpetration by others.

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