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Parricidal Juveniles and Young Adults:

Why do They Kill?

An In-Depth Look at Literature

And Case Study

Madison Barber

University of North Georgia

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Abstract

This paper explores the leading factors that could cause a juvenile or young adult to murder one or both of their biological, step, or adoptive parents. Through analysis of current research and case study, this paper aims to explore juvenile and early adulthood parricide through the scope of mental illness and the presence of abuse or neglect in the perpetrator's home. Contradicting research shows disagreement in the leading cause of parricide and the ability to predict, and therefore prevent, these types of murders. This paper focuses largely on prevention through intervention of law enforcement and the criminal justice realm as a whole to aid those with mental illness and separate young victims from their abusers. Additionally, this paper explores general information regarding parricide cases, including important statistics such as race, gender, age, and weapon used during the killings. Finally, this paper explores multiple case studies from many different time periods to emphasize the commonalities between parricide cases and how those similarities can be used to prevent future crimes.

Parricidal Juveniles and Young Adults:

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And Case Study

Although widely glorified, parricide as a whole has been generally overlooked by researchers. Cases of parricide—specifically committed by children and younger adults—provide a disturbing look into the minds of these murderers when given the attention they deserve. From the available research, a clear truth presents itself: youth and adolescents who kill their parents often suffer from severe mental illness or are themselves victims of abuse or neglect. Although murderers, these young people, through their acts of violence, show how they need intervention from support systems or the criminal justice world. Specifically, children like Kipland Kinkel, Robert Currie, Rachel Booth, Larry Swartz, and a young adult like Adam Lanza all murdered their parents because of their undisclosed distress—whether visible or invisible. Additional research into this very rare form of murder would allow the criminal justice profession the chance to serve its community and protect both children and parents.

Statistics and Importance

Multiple studies have shown that parricide is relatively rare. Since parricides are still murders, understanding the statistics and reasons behind these killings can help policy makers determine what steps to take to decrease the number of parricides. A book about parricide, written by Lyall (2014), aimed to better grasp the concept of parricide as a whole, and explored many different subgroups of offenders, including adolescents and adults, those who commit suicide post-offense, those who were abused and neglected by their victims, and the presence of

mental illness. The author presents very important statistics, including the fact that only 2% of all murders are parricides. Additionally, the author noted that males commit 85% of all parricides, and that children killers act with an accomplice 25% of the time. Children are also more likely than adults to kill both parents, most often as a result of abuse by one or both parents.

Another article evaluated 10 years of data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation's homicide report and drew several conclusions from the data. Firstly, parricides are mostly committed by adults, not children. Secondly, parricides committed by children are not increasing in number, except in the case of stepfather victims. Parent victims are generally white, and stepparent killings make up one-third of all parricides committed by juveniles. Out of all parricides reported, 15% of mothers killed and 25% of fathers killed were killed by children. The author comments that these statistics should cause concern in America, where blended families are increasing in number ("Parricide Mostly Committed by Adult Offspring," 1994). This article, while written over twenty years ago, shows that very few parricides are committed by children, but that a great need still exists to protect children from potential abuse in order to ensure a steady decline in rate of parricide.

It is also important to note that some types of murder are predictable, which makes them easier to prevent. Efforts have been made to try and predict if a juvenile will kill their parents. One study by Evans, McGovern-Kondik, and Peric (2005) was conducted to determine a predictable rate of offense of parricide amongst youth. The Structured Assessment of Violence Risk in Youth and the Psychopathy Checklist: Youth Version were utilized by researchers to attempt to find a factor that would predict the likelihood of offense. This study officially proved the notion that these parricide cases are extremely rare and unpredictable (Evans, McGovern-Kondik & Peric, 2005).

Demographics

Victims

Victimology of parricide offenses has not been well-studied. The available research addresses common questions regarding victimology, such as differences between killings of step-parents versus biological parents. One article utilized data from Supplementary Homicide Report Data from 1976-2007 to compare parricide case data between mother and stepmother victims. From her research, Heide (2013) found that both mother and stepmother victims tended to be white and were most likely killed by sons. The researcher also found that stepmothers and their killers tended to be younger than mothers and their killers. The author also investigated multiple-offender killings and found that more juveniles were involved in multiple-offender killings. She also found that these juvenile offenders were most often females. Those killing stepmothers were more likely to use guns, and juveniles were more likely to use guns in general (Heide, 2013). Vast differences exist between adult and juvenile offenders, including the fact that juveniles were less likely to act alone.

Another common question of parricide researchers focuses on the details of killings of both parents versus the killing of one parent. By using data available through the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) from 1991-2010, Fegadel and Heide (2015) were able to identify cases of double-parricide (killing of both parents). From the data available, the researchers identified forty five incidences of double-parricide. The researchers noted that thirty five of the killings involved a single offender while the remaining ten included multiple offenders—usually a female accomplice. The writers found that the offenders were generally white males around the age of thirty, but that the offenders were younger when there were

multiple offenders. The researchers also looked at victimology for single offenders, and found that 47% of victims were mothers, 37% were fathers, 13% were stepfathers, and 3% were stepmothers. The mean age of the victim was 57, and the majority (94%) were white. For multiple-offender cases, the researchers found that the mean age of victims was 54, and 90% of victims were white (Fegadel & Heide, 2015). Most research into parricide shows that these killings are committed intraracially. Additionally, step parents are just as susceptible to becoming victims of parricide as biological parents.

Perpetrators

A study of the demographics of parricidal offenders showed that there were some overwhelming similarities for possible contributing factors to parricide amongst perpetrators, including race, sex, and type of murder weapon (Viñas-Racionero, Schlesinger, Scalora, & Jarvis, 2016). The article studied a sample of nineteen parricide offenders and reviewed their demographics and reasons for committing or attempting to commit parricide. Like many other articles regarding parricide, most offenders were white males.

Many studies have also been conducted to analyze the difference between male and female juvenile offenders. One article utilized data from Supplementary Homicide Reports from 1976 to 2003 to analyze 2,599 parricides committed by individuals twenty one years old or younger. The researchers found that 90% of offenders were male, but that this trend decreased over time, while the rate of female offenders remained constant. When committing matricide, males were slightly older than females, but both genders were roughly the same age when committing patricide. Most offenders were white and killed intraracially. The researchers reported that patricides happen more often than matricides, and that biological parents were more often victims than stepparents. Girls killed their mothers more than boys did, and the authors

hypothesize that this is because of female competition for dominance in the home. Girls also killed their stepfathers more often than boys, which could be caused by instances of abuse by stepfathers. Biological parents were, on average, forty six years old when they were killed, while stepparents were forty two on average. Firearms were the most prevalent weapon used. The authors also found that the age of the male offender at the time of the killing increased over time (Walsh, Krienert, & Crowder, 2008).

Motives

Previous Conflicts

An article aimed at understanding motive behind parricide found that out of their nineteen samples, the majority of offenders had previous conflicts with their families for reasons such as substance use or violence. Most of their sample were immediate suspects, confessed to committing the crime, and shot their parents in a planned attack. Half of the sample told someone they planned to kill their parents and half called their friends after committing the crime. The previous conflicts involved in the cases studied were marked as the primary reason for the parricide (Viñas-Racionero, Schlesinger, Scalora, & Jarvis, 2016).

Abuse or Neglect

The idea of “Battered Child Syndrome” has been discussed in literature as a possible motive for parricide, and the authors of a book about parricide believe that this syndrome differs from “Battered Woman Syndrome” in that the battered child is less likely to perpetuate the cycle of violence. The author suggested that instead of turning to abuse someone else as a result of their abuse, they build up emotional turmoil, which eventually turns to anger, which could eventually cause them to kill their abuser. As far as suicide is concerned, the author notes that 10% of

parricide offenders commit suicide (Lyall, 2014). The concept of “Battered Child Syndrome” attributes to the theory that children commit parricide out of reaction to abuse by parents.

The presence of abuse in general has been cited in literature as one of the main reasons for a juvenile or adult to commit parricide. In a study conducted by the Council of Forensic Medicine in Turkey, thirty nine adolescent parricide offenders were evaluated to determine the underlying reasons they chose to kill their parent(s) and to attain statistics regarding parricide. From their research, the writers found that a large majority of the offenders were male, most of the victims were fathers, only four offenders suffered from mental illness, and the majority (51%) had been abused by one or both of their parents. The most common type of abuse suffered was physical abuse. The researchers also found that the most common murder weapons were firearms and knives (Buyuk, Kurnaz, Eke, Ankarali, & Oral, 2011). This article furthers the hypothesis that adolescent offenders kill mostly as a form of self-preservation or revenge for abuse, while adult offenders primarily kill because of mental illness, but still occasionally killed because of abuse.

One book, written by C. P. Ewing (1990), explores many different facets of children murderers in general. When focusing specifically on parricides, Ewing discovered, through secondary analysis, that many of the children who murdered their parents had witnessed or had experienced abuse and violence. This abuse pushes the child over the edge, and causes them to retaliate against the parent that had victimized them (Ewing, 1990). This book shows how even observing a parent abuse someone else, such as a sibling or parent, can lead a child to commit parricide. This witnessing of abuse has been shown to create the same sort of psychological damage as actually being abused.

Another book, written by Connie M. Tang (2019), explored the reason why children commit parricide from the perspective of victimization of the killers. The book's focus was on a larger scale, and it aimed to explain the many reasons why children commit any crimes, specifically examining the maltreatment of the children by their parents or guardians. The researchers found that there was no obvious connection between child maltreatment and likelihood of committing offenses, although they did find that sometimes the children became delinquent if they had been mistreated (Tang, 2019). Not only does this article show that childhood maltreatment can lead to delinquent acts, it also highlights how dangerous these killings can be as they are so unpredictable.

Mental Illness

Mental illness has been cited as one of the main reasons a juvenile or young adult would decide to kill their parents. One very informative book explored parricide around America, including case studies from Georgia to Maine. Heide (2013) highlighted the media presence in these cases, and reported on just how interested the news and viewers seem to be when it comes to parricide. The author also called to attention that parricide is a world-wide phenomenon, and cited cases from Essex in the United Kingdom. Heide also discussed the ancient history of parricide in mythology, such as Hamlet or Oedipus. The book reported on the current statistics in 2013, when parricides were fairly uncommon in the United States and the entire world, citing statistics from the Uniform Crime Report. The author also commented on the fact that parricides committed by children under age 12 are extremely rare, with only thirty-three cases over the course of thirty-two years. The most relevant piece of information from this book is the author's comments on the distinction between children and adolescent's views of death. According to the author, adolescents kill because of their involvement in gang activity or because of the

expectations or obligations given to them by their parents. In contrast, younger children kill because of an extreme mental issue, because children act more impulsively and do not understand the finality of death, or because they are influenced by parents or other family members who have mental issues themselves. These children are usually not charged, whereas older children (around ages twelve to seventeen) are charged and often treated as adults in the court system for committing parricide (Heide, 2013). The focus on the mental capacity of a young child in addition to the presence of mental illness highlights a very real and also very dangerous reason a child would kill their parents or other family members.

Other studies have been conducted to determine if mental illness could motivate someone to kill their parents. One article aimed to fill the gap in research about parricide in a non-Western setting: Ghana, Africa. Taking an exploratory approach, Adinkrah (2017) formed no hypotheses and developed their paper based solely on available case facts. From their research, the writer determined that offenders most likely suffered from some sort of mental illness. Most of the parricides were spontaneous and stemmed from a disagreement between a father and a son. The researchers also determined that parricides are rare in Ghana (Adinkrah, 2017). This article shows how often mental illness can play a role in parricidal killings.

For women offenders specifically, one study found common denominators between women who committed parricides including that these women were unmarried, lived without much social interaction, and lived with their mothers in an unloving relationship. Out of the seventeen parricidal women studied, all but two of them had some sort of mental health deficiency or disorder. Additionally, the study noticed an increased risk of parricide if the child believed they were being poisoned (D'Orbán & O'Connor, 1989). This study provides a valuable

insight to some of the possible factors associated with why women kill their parents, including the presence of mental illness.

A study by Jacques Marleau, Nathalie Auclair, and Frederic Millaud (2006) studied forty three parricides committed by adults and twelve parricides committed by youth to examine the differences between parricides committed by adults and adolescents. It should be noted that the researchers did not (or were not able to) find an equal number of cases for each population being studied. With this in mind, their investigation found that significant differences existed between the two groups. The adults showed signs of severe mental illness, whereas the younger population did not (Marleau, Auclair & Millaud, 2006). This research helps further the belief that parricides are committed because of mental disorder, but it refutes the hypothesis that these mental disorders urge youth specifically to commit parricide.

Schizophrenia

With regards to specific mental illness affecting the perpetrators, schizophrenia has been shown as a largely prevalent mental illness among offenders. One study utilized a larger sample size than most other studies regarding parricide. They investigated parricidal offenders who had been sentenced or sent to high-security mental illness facilities, and only those with predetermined mental illnesses were studied. These offenders were compared to individuals who murdered strangers. Compared to this group, the parricide offenders were more likely to suffer from schizophrenia and less likely to have suffered from a troubled childhood. They were also less likely to have a criminal history. The researchers found that 40% of their sample study had attacked their victims before killing them (Baxter, Duggan, Larkin, Cordess, & Page, 2001).

While not focusing solely on juveniles, this study aids current research by highlighting the

differences between parricide committers and stranger murderers. This article also singles out schizophrenia as the major mental disorder affecting perpetrators of parricide.

Another study was conducted to review the differences in mental illness between 86 matricidal men and 106 patricidal men (Liettu, Säävälä, Hakko, Räsänen & Joukamaa, 2009). From their research, the writers found that matricidal offenders were more likely to have paranoid schizophrenia. Additionally, the researchers found that the matricidal killers' motive was their mental illness, whereas the patricidal offenders were motivated by a long term conflict with their fathers. Finally, they found that matricidal killers were found not guilty by reason of insanity more frequently than patricidal killers (Liettu et al., 2009). This article highlights the deviation between matricidal and patricidal parricide committers and provides very interesting statistics on the difference in mental illness between the two groups.

Personality Disorders

Personality disorders have also been seen in parricidal offenders, but only in specific populations. In an article by Liettu, Säävälä, Hakko, Räsänen & Joukamaa (2009), the researchers retrospectively reviewed cases from 86 matricidal men and 106 patricidal men in Finland from 1973-2004 to determine what, if any, mental illnesses were present in the offenders. The researchers utilized a forensic psychiatric examination based on the information they had about the males. They determined that patricidal offenders were less likely to have a psychotic disorder but were more likely to suffer from a personality disorder, specifically borderline personality disorder. These men were found to have their motive based on a previous conflict and were less likely to be found not guilty by reason of insanity than matricidal killers (Liettu et al., 2009).

Depression

One article aimed to explain the reasoning behind parricide through an in-depth and psychological view of depression, suicide, and the steps leading to becoming depressed or suicidal tied the link between the mental illness of depression/suicide and committing parricide. According to Dutton and Yamini (1995), the steps to becoming suicidal include attributing any disappointments to the self (whether from prompting from parents or otherwise), setting too-high standards, entering a numb state as a form of escape, forming disinhibition, and finally needing to escape the escaped form through suicide. As it relates to parricide, this article also set up a step-by-step process: first, a traumatic experience occurs, leaving the victim in constant emotional turmoil. Next, the individual projects their internal feelings of turmoil onto their surrounding environment. Then, the individual believes that violence is the only way to fix their feelings of turmoil, so they kill their parents. Finally, their tension is relieved. Because of the similarities in the processes of becoming suicidal and homicidal, the researchers believe that these two are related in the sense that they are both means of escape. The researchers also note that abuse of a child during its early developmental stages of life can result in personality disorders that could, ultimately, lead to the child killing their abuser (Dutton & Yamini, 1995). This article adds a large element of psychology to current research as it thoroughly investigates and integrates the available theories regarding intimate, sudden murders such as parricide. Additionally, the writers show how abuse can lead to mental illnesses such as depression which can, in turn, lead a child to commit parricide.

Case Study

One of the best ways to examine the validity of research is to explore case study. One article, written by Elisa Swanson (2000), explored the case of a juvenile parricide committer, Kipland Kinkel. Swanson explored the case in its entirety, and paid special attention to his harsh sentencing of 111.67 years in prison, although he was only fifteen when he killed his parents and two other students, and wounding or attempting to wound twenty-six other people. The author also called to attention the mental sufferings of Kinkel and how his mental health was unaddressed in his lifetime, by both his parents and the court system. Kinkel expressed learning disabilities as well as difficulties controlling his temper. He also exhibited strange behaviors, such as looking up bomb-making tutorials and setting things on fire. His parents were well aware of all of these behaviors, and yet they lightly punished him and did not do anything to inhibit these behaviors. Kinkel complained often of voices in his head, and left a note in his house after he had killed his parents, explaining how he believed they were good parents and he could not escape the voices telling him to kill. After analysis of this case, Swanson then examined the role of stigma in our society with regards to mental health difficulties. Even in prison, Kinkel's mental state is not adequately addressed, and he lives constantly wishing to die (Swanson, 2000). This article highlights a case study that solidifies the mental health variable which causes children to commit parricide. The article also address that these parricides will continue to happen until the current American society changes its view of mental health issues and ceases treating children as adults in the court system.

A news article from Fox News described how a thirteen year old girl, Rachel Booth, shot and killed her father in their home in Pennsylvania. The young girl had been sexually and physically abused by her father for seven years and her home, animals found in the home, and

her needs had been completely neglected by her father. The Pennsylvania court system decided to process her through the juvenile court system instead of the adult court, which is normal for children who murder someone. Her conditions and the abuse she endured led the court to rule in favor of her rehabilitation, and she will be under court supervision until she is twenty-one. Her record is believed to be expunged soon (Associated Press, 2015). This case study shows that the presence of abuse and neglect can cause a child to murder their parent.

One article by Montaldo (2018) described the murders of Robert and Kathy Swartz by their adopted son, Larry Swartz. Larry and his two siblings had been adopted by the Swartz's and Larry had been born with a learning disability. Larry and his brother suffered abuse, both physical and verbal, from their adopters. Larry's brother was kicked out of the house, which left Larry exposed to the viciousness of his parents, who were never satisfied with Larry's successes. Larry turned to drinking after fights with his parents, and eventually was pushed over the edge in his drunken rage. He murdered his parents and sexually assaulted his mother's dead body. He laid her naked body in the back yard, in the snow. Larry was obviously mentally impaired from living with his parents, and the court psychologist's test revealed that Larry needed psychological help (Montaldo, 2018). Larry was sentenced to forty years in prison and served only nine. This case explores the parricide of adoptive parents, and also furthers the hypothesis that mental illness and abuse are large indicators of possible future parricide.

Another case study, written by Slovenko (2003), explored the murder of Jacqueline Currie by her fifteen year old son Robert Currie in New Orleans in 1997. Robert stabbed his mother 24 times in the courtyard of their hotel after she made a comment about one of his new, goth, vampiric friends, which angered him. He had then tried to commit suicide, but police found him before he died. He was found fit to stand trial, and at the trial, one of Robert's doctors

testified that Robert was likely schizophrenic. The doctor did not diagnose Robert because he did not want to stigmatize Robert. Robert had been making threats to shoot up and bomb his school, and his anger with his mother had grown during high school. Another doctor who had treated Robert testified that he diagnosed Robert with paranoid schizophrenia and organic brain damage. The court psychologist also diagnosed Robert with paranoid schizophrenia as well as psychotic drug dependence. Robert's father testified that he let Robert go off his medication before Robert took the trip to New Orleans with his mother. Robert was eventually found not guilty by reason of insanity (Slovenko, 2003). This case study adds a more in-depth look at the effects of schizophrenia, brain damage, and psychotic drugs on the human mind and how it can lead to parricide.

Kathleen Heide, who has written many peer-reviewed scientific articles regarding parricide, released a post on the Oxford University Press's blog in the wake of the Newtown, Connecticut mass shooting perpetrated by Adam Lanza (2012). In her post, Heide discusses how Adam killed his mother, Nancy Lanza, before driving to Sandy Hook Elementary school and killing twenty-six children and teachers. Heide comments on the obvious mental anguish Adam must have been experiencing in order to commit such a heinous crime and how he likely had a combination of mental illnesses. Heide comments that there is much significance in Adam killing his mother before carrying out his other murders, and she lists four different types of parricidal offenders that she has encountered in her extensive research. Among these types, Adam seems to fall the second category of the severely mentally ill. The other types include those suffering from abuse, those who are dangerously antisocial and kill as a result of a very selfish desire and are often psychopathic, and those with desperately suppressed rage. This post also comments on how the rarity of a parricidal killer murdering others after killing their parents (Heide, 2012). Heide's

post adds a profession and parricide-focused lens on the Newtown tragedy committed by Adam Lanza.

Consequences

Each of these cases demonstrates the many possible outcomes an offender will face after killing their parents. For some, like Adam Lanza, Robert Currie, and Kipland Kinkel, suicide is preferred. For others, their satisfaction was met just by committing the killing. The desired outcome differs based on motive for the killing, as the offenders exhibiting signs of mental illness preferred suicide and the abuse victims did not. As far as consequences go, the discretion of judges in the American criminal justice system can be observed. Kipland Kinkel will likely spend his life in prison, whereas Rachel Booth will be exonerated soon. Larry Swartz was given a relatively light sentence for murdering two people, but he only served a very short time. Robert Currie was not found guilty at all and will likely spend his days in a mental institution. These cases act as a small sample of the different consequences an offender may face after committing parricide.

Hope for the Future

The outlook for parricidal offenders is not all negative. One book, written by Connie Tang, focused on resiliency of those who survived harsh conditions in their childhood, and found that many factors, such as protection and positive self-esteem, were pivotal in ensuring the child would recover from their trauma and refrain from committing crimes (Tang, 2019). This book offers hope to children who suffered from abuse and learned aggressive tendencies from a parent, and shows that there can be healing for young children who killed as a result of neglect or abuse.

Conclusion

Although an extremely rare form of murder, parricides committed by juveniles happen globally, and often occur because of underlying difficulties in the home life of the victims and perpetrators. These difficulties include mental illness, abuse, and neglect. Children kill their parents because of their own mental illness, their own victimization, or from merely watching someone they love be victimized. All available research on juvenile parricide shows that fathers, mothers, stepfathers, and stepmothers are all vulnerable to this type of crime, and that children often act with an accomplice. Additionally, children who suffer from abuse or neglect will kill out of self-preservation, self-defense, or retaliation for the torment they endured. Finally, sometimes children kill their parents because of schizophrenia, personality disorder, or brain damage. All forms of parricide are tragic and show a great deal of need for intervention from those with the authority and ability to do so.

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