CHAPTER 1

Overview

Homicide generally is a horrific crime, but we are especially moved by the tragedy of children being killed. In general, communities do their best to protect children, surrounding them with the supports of family and other caring adults. At the same time, we have become increasingly aware of the significant numbers of children in our communities who are victims of physical and sexual abuse. In extreme cases a child’s life is taken.

Shirl Bennett* was 6 years old when she rode her bike to the local store on an errand for her mother. Her body was found three months later in a storm water drain. A 57-year-old Sunday school teacher was later found guilty of her kidnapping and murder. [Case No. 91-3189]

Such events are every parent’s nightmare. The fear of the unknown stranger taking their young child is familiar to all parents and may come to form a backdrop to everyday decisions about family activities. However, as with many forms of violence, the threat to young children’s lives is most often found in the home.

Doug Versaci was 2 years old when he died of severe abdominal trauma resulting from a number of blows to his stomach by his mother’s de facto husband. The Coroner likened the injuries to those found in victims of serious road accidents. [Case No. 90-3384]

Doug’s death provoked community outrage and a call for the introduction of mandatory reporting of child abuse. When the person

* Pseudonyms are used throughout the book to protect the privacy of family.
CHILD VICTIMS OF HOMICIDE

responsible for their protection murders a dependent child, many of our fundamental expectations about the relationship between adults and children are violated.

Community outrage can be even greater when a mother kills her own child.

Charles Gunsten was 10 years old when his mother used a belt to strangle him to death in the family home. In the same incident the mother also hit her 12-year-old son repeatedly with a rolling pin and dragged her 7-year-old daughter by a belt around her neck through the house. [Case No. 93-2465]

On the face of it, such an action by a mother is a violation not only of broadly maintained understandings of women as non-violent, but also, perhaps even more powerfully, of dominant ideologies about the nature and role of motherhood.

Each of these cases was the subject of intense media coverage. In recent years newspapers across the Western world have carried stories of other homicides involving children. Such cases include: the killing of her two sons by Susan Smith in South Carolina in the United States; the killing of Jamie Bulger by two young boys in England; and the cases of ‘nannies’, or child-carers, in both the United States and the United Kingdom, who have been convicted of the homicides of infants in their care. Although such incidents became international media events, most child victims of homicide are not killed in these ways. In this book we attempt a detailed exploration of the actual circumstances and contexts of homicides involving child victims, that is, child homicides.

Research on violence highlights the extent of child homicide, and its importance to the study of violence. Children account for a significant proportion of all homicide victims in such countries as Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States. In Australia in 1991–92, children under the age of 18 accounted for 11 per cent of all homicide victims (Strang 1994), a figure equal to that found in 1991 in Canada (Statistics Canada 1992). In England and Wales children under the age of 16 make up a slightly larger proportion (16 per cent) of homicide victims (Home Office 1993). From 1985 to 1992, nearly 17,000 persons under the age of 18 were victims of homicide in the United States (Snyder and Sickmund 1995). This age group accounted for 9 per cent of all homicide victims in the United States in the years since the 1980s (Snyder, Sickmund and Poe-Yamagata 1996). The actual rate of child homicide in the United States is among the highest in the developed world (Unnithan 1996; Dowdy and Unnithan 1997).

Such overall statistical figures may not capture the significance of child homicides. In Australia, for example, a persistent finding has
been that individuals under the age of one year are more at risk of homicide than any other age group (Strang 1993). In the United States, similarly, the risk of homicide has been found to be greater during the first day of life than at any other equivalent age span (Crittenden and Craig 1990: 202), a finding replicated in data from England and Wales (Marks and Kumar 1993). Other data suggest that the commonest age for fatal child abuse is the first year of life (Rose 1986; de Silva and Oates 1993). Also, in the United States, homicide is the leading cause of injury-related death for children below age 1 (Unnithan 1991a; Overpeck et al. 1998) and is the only cause of death of those under the age of 15 to have increased in the last thirty years (Christoffel 1984). In sum, there are significant risks of lethal violence in the early months and years of life, and if nothing else, the level of these in the total pattern of homicide merits closer inspection.

Child homicides present a number of distinctive features in relation to other forms of lethal violence. One of the most striking is the fact that they are committed by both men and women. In general, men are the perpetrators of homicide. Most investigations find that the proportion of male offenders in the total range of homicides falls somewhere between 85 and 90 per cent (Wolfgang 1958; Strang 1992; Silverman and Kennedy 1993; Polk 1994; Mouzos 2000). Child homicide, however, stands in sharp contrast. It is the one form of homicide where the offender is frequently a woman. In fact, some investigations have found women to be as likely as men to be the perpetrators. Of thirty-six parents who killed their children in Detroit between 1982 and 1986, 53 per cent were female and 47 per cent male (Goetting 1988: 341), with similar proportions reported in more recent studies in Quebec (Hodgins and Dube 1996) and Los Angeles (Sorensen, Petersen and Richardson 1997). Of the 395 parents suspected of the murder of their child in the United Kingdom between 1982 and 1989, 44 per cent were mothers (Wilczynski and Morris 1993). Among those cases where the victim was under the age of 1, the proportion accounted for by mothers was slightly higher, 47 per cent. Even more striking was the earlier study of filicide (that is, the killing of a child by a parent or parents) in the United States conducted by Resnick (1969), in which 67 per cent of the offenders were mothers of the victims.

The exploration of child homicide therefore provides a unique opportunity to consider the violent actions of both men and women. Across time and across cultures, predominantly men have committed violent crimes, in particular homicide, but until recently the maleness of violent crime was rarely considered as ‘a variable, an analytic dimension, a causal factor, a discursive condition’ (Allen 1988: 16; Miedzian 1991). More recently, in part as a development out of the substantial body of
feminist research on male violence against women, the maleness and the masculinity of violence have become a focus of inquiry and theoretical debate (Messerschmidt 1993; Archer 1994; Newburn and Stanko 1994; Collier 1998).

Female violence has been less extensively investigated than male violence. The exception has been feminist analyses of the situations of women who kill their husbands who have abused them (e.g. Browne 1987; Walker 1989; Jurik and Winn 1990; Mann 1996). The mid-1990s witnessed a growing number of works on women’s violence more generally (Kirsta 1994; Lloyd 1995; Pearson 1998). However, the issue of women’s violence against their children has been ‘virtually ignored’ (Dougherty 1993: 92). Dougherty convincingly argues that in not addressing this issue, feminists have left a ‘critical void in a field dominated if not defined by a perspective that provides fertile ground for misogynist assumptions to thrive’ (Dougherty 1993: 94).

A general finding of existing research is that women kill for different reasons, and in different circumstances, than men. We are therefore not searching for a singular explanation or understanding of child homicide, but rather through an examination of instances of child homicide we hope to explore the complexity of these events and the varied contexts and circumstances of both men’s and women’s violence. It is our contention that an understanding of child homicide requires elaboration of the meaning and experience of being a man or a woman in everyday life and the structural situation of both the victims and perpetrators. Before presenting our analysis of case narratives, we turn first to an outline of the related literature.

Women Who Kill Children

Until the 1990s women’s violence had not been subject to the same degree of analysis as male violence. The form of women’s violence that had been most extensively examined was ‘infanticide’. The term ‘infanticide’ is used in a variety of ways, but in British law it refers to the killing of a child by its mother within the first twelve months of life. Most of the analyses of this phenomenon have been historical studies (e.g. Piers 1978) that note an inverse relationship between the availability of safe and effective contraception, especially abortion techniques, and infanticide, particularly the killing of newborn babies (neonaticide) (Wallace 1986: 25; Allen 1990: 38, 98, 110, 164). Filicide has been a method of eliminating devalued or unwanted children such as those lacking a socially acceptable father, deformed infants, infants possessing an undesirable physical characteristic such as the wrong skin colour or sex, and those conceived by rape (Jones 1980: 51; Rose 1986; Lomis 1986: 503; Backhouse 1985: 450).
OVERVIEW

In criminological theorising, criminal justice practice and in popular culture, explanations and understandings of female violence more broadly have traditionally focused on the mental state of the offender: she is either ‘mad’ or ‘sick’, or, at the other end of the pathological spectrum, extremely ‘bad’ (Wilczynski 1991: 78; 1997). We see this evidenced in criminal justice decision-making. In her examination of judicial decisions regarding female felons in England, Allen (1987) documented the significance given to psychiatric explanations of the behaviour. In terms of popular understandings of women’s violence, in the United States Wilbanks (1982: 173) found that college students considered female killers to be more deranged than equivalent males.

Understandings of the violent woman as necessarily ‘mad’ or exceptionally ‘bad’ are embedded in dominant understandings of what it is to be a woman. Violence and femininity are understood as inconsistent; therefore ‘normal’ women are not violent. The killing of a child by a woman is even more incongruent with dominant understandings of femininity and motherhood. Consequently, the killing of a child by a woman may in itself be understood as evidence of psychiatric problems (Wilbanks 1982; Wilczynski 1997). It is not surprising therefore that much of the consideration of this issue has been in the psychiatric literature (Wilbanks 1982: 152; see as examples of the psychiatric literature Husain and Daniel 1984 and Resnick 1969).

Such conceptions of women who kill children also dominate ‘common-sense’ understandings. Silverman and Kennedy (1988) found that police were significantly more likely to classify women who kill their children as ‘mentally ill’ than they were the women who killed their spouses. Women who kill their children have been found to themselves believe that they should have been placed in a mental health facility rather than a prison (Totman 1978 noted in Weisheit 1986: 442).

This understanding of the situation of women who kill young children has been enshrined in British and Commonwealth law in the offence of infanticide. This law applies in circumstances where a mother kills a child, generally under the age of twelve months, while the balance of her mind is believed to be disturbed due to the effects of lactation or giving birth (Silverman and Kennedy 1993: 27). However, the medical assumption and its legal affirmation that some mothers may be psychologically predisposed to filicide faces increasing scepticism (Wilczynski 1991: 5; Silverman and Kennedy 1993: 155). As Wilczynski (1991: 7) notes, ‘it is fallacious to equate the undeniable emotional and physical upheaval of the birth with mental illness, or even temporary insanity. Further, there is usually no evidence of psychosis or mental illness either before or after the birth.’

In the 1990s the continuing psychological focus of explanations of female violence is apparent in representations of these acts as emotional
outbursts in response to situations of ‘stress’. An image emerges of a woman extremely ‘stressed’, whose frustration and anger build to the point where she explodes in a highly emotional, uncontrolled moment of violence against her children. Speaking more generally of male and female aggression, Campbell (1993: 40) argues that, whereas men’s aggression is instrumental, women’s is expressive and represents a loss of control: aggressive behaviour for women is a consequence of a mounting anger that develops to a fury that ‘can erupt into physical aggression’.

A similar representation of women’s violence is found in the theory of Ogle, Maier-Katkin and Bernard (1995) about ‘homicidal behaviour among women’. They argue that women have ‘overcontrolled’ personalities and that at ‘somewhat random intervals’ they erupt in a display of uncontrolled aggression that is very extreme and violent’ (p. 181). Silverman and Kennedy (1988) also invoke the notion of loss of control over anger and frustration when postulating explanations for non-infanticide child-killing by mothers. Such explanations for female violence are essentially founded in dominant understandings of femininity, in particular its equation with emotionality and irrationality.

A further explanation for female violence draws attention to the violent experiences of the women themselves. Certainly feminist research on women who kill their husbands exposed the extent to which such events had to be understood in the context of the histories of extreme abuse that the women had suffered at the hands of the men they eventually killed (e.g. Jones 1980; Browne 1987). However, this issue has not been as extensively explored in the limited research on women’s violence towards their children. Some of the literature on child abuse poses a notion of the ‘cycle of violence’ (Gordon 1988: 172), which suggests that those who are abused as children are more likely to abuse as adults. In interviews with mothers who killed their children Smithey (1997: 261) notes that physical and emotional abuse by their parents was a consistent theme. However, the notion of the cycle of violence remains a contentious proposition. Silverman and Kennedy (1988: 124) cite evidence that ‘the child from a violent home is more at risk to be violent in his own home’, while Goetting (1994: 187) concludes from a review of the literature that ‘The evidence on this connection is contradictory and therefore inconclusive.’

Others have argued that women’s aggression and violence entail a process of reproducing the physical and emotional harm they have suffered as adults at the hands of violent men (Daly 1994: 59). The women in Smithey’s study of women who killed their children reported ‘abusive, unsupported or antagonistic relations with the infant’s father’ (Smithey 1997: 263). Observing that non-infanticide child-killings by mothers may be best understood in terms of ‘child abuse gone awry’,
Silverman and Kennedy (1988: 124) suggest that, the more a woman is assaulted by her male partner, the more likely she is to be violent toward her children. They postulate that such women transfer their feelings of frustration, anger and hurt to the child as a ‘convenient and perhaps frustrating target’. Some support for this general proposition is found in studies of maternal filicides: between 19 and 56 per cent of suicidal women in cases of maternal filicide have been found to have a history of being subjected to violence perpetrated by their partners (Cheung 1986: 188; d’Orban 1979: 5; Korbin 1986: 333).

However, the existence and nature of this proposed relationship also remains contentious. Gordon (1988: 173) observes that, although ‘Many female child abusers are themselves victims,… most wife beating victims did not beat their children.’ Dougherty (1993: 104) also points out that some women who have never experienced violence do abuse their children, and she thereby challenges explanations for child abuse by women in terms of a ‘mechanical modelling of violent behaviour’. Taking a similar position, Gordon (1988: 175) concludes from her historical study of child abuse that we cannot simply ‘explain women’s violence against their children with an analogy to referred pain or deflected anger’.

Their economic context is infrequently the focus of theories about women’s violence. Nevertheless, poverty and unemployment have been consistently noted as features of the lives of women who come to official attention for child abuse and women who kill their children (Gordon 1988; Weisheit 1986; Kaplun and Reich 1976; Mann 1993; McKee and Shea 1998). While Baron (1993: 210) observed that ‘A substantial amount of evidence suggests that poverty increases the likelihood of child homicide’, the findings of his own macro-level research are inconsistent with this observation.

In the United States Smithey (1997: 267) observed ‘economic deprivation and a lack of interpersonal support’ in the lives of women who killed their children (see also Oberman 1996: 38). Similarly, a cross-national (United Kingdom and Canada) study of maternal filicide (McKee and Shea 1998) indicated that most often the women in the study were experiencing high levels of stress and a lack of resources (see also d’Orban 1979). Most of the women were caring for two or more children and were trying to cope with the demands of a new child, with the majority having given birth within the previous two years. They also had limited education and were unemployed, resulting in stressful economic dependence on others. Most of the women were raising children alone and many, though not most, were involved in ongoing abusive adult relationships. The authors conclude, ‘These women lacked adequate resources with which to cope with the stressors preceding the children’s death’ (McKee and Shea 1998: 684).
A growing body of research indicates that economic marginalisation is a factor to be considered in efforts to understand female crime and delinquency generally (Jurik 1983; Carlen 1988; Alder 1986). Research based on women’s own accounts of their lives provides the strongest evidence of the importance of their economic circumstances to their life decision-making (Miller 1986; Carlen 1988; Alder 1986). At the same time, feminist research also reveals that there is no necessary, simple, direct causal relationship between economic factors and female crime (Alder 1986; Daly 1994), nor with women’s violence towards their children. Clearly not all women living in poverty physically abuse their children (Gordon 1988; O’Donnell and Craney 1982).

Relevant to consideration of the ways in which economic circumstances may play a part in some women’s violence against their children is the observation that poverty is more than simply not having sufficient money to survive. Carlen (1988: 71) speaks of the ‘multifarious ways in which women saw the relationship between poverty and law-breaking’. Poverty means not only limited access to financial resources, but also limited options and opportunities for dealing with the range of problems that confront women. Women’s stories reveal the reality of the everyday life of poverty, the feeling of powerlessness, the boredom, the futility, and the dependence (Carlen 1988). All of these have consequences for the individual woman’s sense of self, of future, of worth, her relationship to others, and the choices she makes in terms of dealing with the problems that confront her.

A woman’s economic circumstances limit the options available to her to resolve her situation. Further, it has been suggested that in some circumstances the options that are available may aggravate her situation. Women with limited resources are more likely to seek out public social welfare agencies to help them find solutions to their problems with their children, while other women may have available to them more independent solutions (Gordon 1988; O’Donnell and Craney 1982). In turn, poverty influences the ways in which women are dealt with by professionals and government agencies, and the ways in which women relate to them, and in so doing can affect the form of coercive intervention to which they are subject (Carlen 1988; Worrall 1990). In the case of child welfare, it is often the same agencies from which they seek help that have the power to invoke coercive responses to the situation such as removing the child from the mother. Gordon (1988: 175) observes that ‘the threat of losing one’s children was an extremely anxiety-provoking stress in an already stressful life’. Intervention by government agencies not only caused embarrassment and humiliation, but the anonymity of informants also provoked distrust of friends, neighbours and relatives and thereby further isolated the mother. Gordon
OVERVIEW

concludes, ‘some women’s violence was intensified, possibly even pro-
voked, by intervening social agencies’ (p. 175).

In conclusion, as we look to the literature for an understanding of women who kill their children, we find that it is sparse, and that pathological explanations predominate. In the criminological literature maternal filicide is most often represented as taking one of two forms: a psychologically disturbed young woman who kills her newborn or young infant; or a stressed mother who regularly loses control and physically abuses her children. Looking to the more extensive child abuse literature, explanations tend to be offered in gender-neutral terms (Dougherty 1993; O’Donnell and Craney 1982). Consequently there is a failure to elaborate on the broader social and economic context and the ways in which this is manifested and reproduced in the everyday experiences of mothers within the family.

More recently, these gaps in the existing literature are beginning to be identified and efforts are being made to develop more explicitly gender-based analyses that entail broader structural considerations (e.g. Dougherty 1993). In proposing a theory of female homicide generally, Ogle, Maier-Katkin and Bernard (1995) call for recognition of the particular structural situations of women and an analysis of the implications of these for women. Their particular effort however, with very little reference to data regarding the circumstances in which women kill, supposes a unitary phenomenon of female violence and ultimately represents these acts as emotional losses of control.

In part our understanding of the circumstances in which women kill their children is limited by a paucity of information and the tendency to seek to frame their actions as either evil or mad. It is hoped that the following analysis of case studies of mothers who kill their children will elaborate the complexities of the events, the women’s circumstances and their actions.

When Men Kill Children

Although men commit significant numbers of child homicides, studies of child homicide have tended to focus on those offences predominantly committed by women, in particular infanticide (Unnithan 1991a). This is consistent with the more general child abuse literature, which as several feminist writers have demonstrated either focuses attention on the mother’s direct or indirect responsibility, or speaks in gender-neutral terms (Parton 1990: 43). ‘Feminist work has drawn attention to the failure of mainstream child abuse literature, policy and practice to acknowledge and analyze the high level of men’s abuse of children’ (Parton 1990: 42; see also Archer 1994; Andrews 1994; Hearn 1990).
Consequently we need to turn to the more general literature on maleness, masculinity and homicide to inform our analysis of child homicide. That men predominantly commit homicide has been noted in most homicide studies. However, while noting the maleness of this offence, it is striking that until recently, few authors made this a key component of their analysis or theory. For example, Wolfgang and Ferracuti (1967: 258) noted that with respect to violent crime, ‘almost universally … Males predominate everywhere.’ They concluded from this observation:

In general, a review of the statistical and clinical literature from many societies indicates that the age–sex category of youthful males exhibits the highest association with violent crime and that physically aggressive behavior for this group converges with notions about the masculine ideal. [Wolfgang and Ferracuti 1967: 260]

Despite this observation, their theory centred on the class and ‘subculture’ dimensions of violent behaviour. These became the focus of attention in research that followed, rather than their observation regarding the maleness of the behaviour, or the ‘masculine ideal’.

Some of the most detailed investigations of homicide in more recent times which focus on the maleness of violent crime are those conducted by Daly and Wilson (1988, 1989). They note that there is no evidence that the women in any society have ever approached the level of violent conflict prevailing among men in the same society (Daly and Wilson 1988: 149). Working from a perspective based in evolutionary psychology, Daly and Wilson argue that male violence has to be understood in the context of the human reproductive process. They maintain that man’s psyche is ‘obsessed with social comparison, with the need for achievement and with the desire to gain control over the reproductive capacities of women’ (p. 136). The most common type of homicide, according to Daly and Wilson (1988: 125) involves two acquainted, unrelated males, in a dispute over status or face.

One of the more influential criminological works in recent years is The Seductions of Crime by Jack Katz (1988). While Katz acknowledges at some points that men are more likely to engage in violent acts than women are, masculinity is not one of the ‘contours of crime’ that for him warrants direct attention in his conclusion to the book. Nevertheless most of the ‘lived experiences’ of crime considered by Katz are those of men. Katz’s thesis is of interest to us because, in contrast to much recent homicide research, it is not derived from aggregate statistical data. Katz calls for us to ‘track the lived experience of criminality’ (p. 311). From this perspective, he concludes in regard to homicide that ‘In committing a righteous slaughter, the impassioned assailant takes humiliation and