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Filicide Cases in Turkey, 1995–2000

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Aim. To determine socio-demographic features and criminal liability of individuals who committed filicide in Turkey.

Method. The study involved 85 cases of filicide evaluated by the 4th Specialized Board of the Institute of Forensic Medicine in Istanbul in the 1995-2000 period. We assessed the characteristics of parents who committed filicide (age, sex, education level, employment status, and criminal liability) and children victims (age, sex, own or stepchild), as well as the causes of death.

Results. There were 85 parents who committed filicide (41 fathers and 44 mothers) and 96 children victims. The mean age of mothers who committed filicide (52% of filicides) was 26.5 ± 7.7 years, and the mean age of fathers (48% of filicides) was 36.1 ± 10.0 years ($t = -5.00$, $p < 0.001$). Individuals diagnosed with psychiatric disturbances, such as schizophrenia (61%), major depression (22%), imbecility (10%), and mild mental retardation (7%), were not subject to criminal liability. Almost half of parents who committed filicide were unemployed and illiterate.

Conclusion. Filicide in Turkey was equally committed by mothers and fathers. More than half of the parents were diagnosed with psychiatric disorders and came from disadvantageous socioeconomic environments, where unemployment and illiteracy rates are highly above the average of Turkey.

Key words: *crime; crime victims; homicide; infanticide; Turkey*

Few crimes are as difficult to understand as filicide – the killing of a child by his or her parents. Many factors are involved in the dynamics of a filicidal situation. Almost invariably, filicides fall into one of the following five motive categories: 1) accidental; 2) altruistic – filicides committed from unselfish concern for the welfare of children; 3) acutely psychotic – filicides committed during an acute psychotic episode in which there is no obvious discernible motive, although in some cases "voices" instruct the parents to kill the child; 4) unwanted child – filicides based on the parent's egoism or selfishness in which the parent places self-interest above that of the child (opposite to altruistic); and 5) spouse revenge – filicides committed in a deliberate attempt to torment or punish the spouse (1). It is therefore difficult to identify specific warning signals of filicide and prevent it. General public and law enforcement personnel find these crimes shocking and disturbing, although closer analysis reveals that some of these acts occur during states of parental fear, panic, psychosis, or depression (1).

Criminal liability refers to the possibility of being prosecuted for the offense in a criminal court. If a conviction is secured, the result may be punitive damages or time in prison. An analysis of filicide cases suggests that categories can greatly facilitate our interpretation of cases and hopefully lead to new strategies for prevention (2,3).

In Turkey, the courts refer all filicides to the 4th Specialized Board of the Institute of Forensic Medicine, Ministry of Justice, Istanbul, where an expert medical assessment is made to establish whether there are any psychiatric disorders that may influence criminal liability of the parents committing filicide. As filicide crime is rarely seen in our country, each and every suspect is sent to the Board for psychiatric examination. The decisions of the Board are accepted as reference in court, and have a strong influence on the final decision on the verdict.

The aim of the study was to determine socio-demographic features of individuals who committed filicide in Turkey and their criminal liabilities, which could be used as hallmarks for guidelines for preventive measures.

Subjects and Methods

Filicide was defined as killing of a child or a stepchild aged between 0 and 18 years by his or her parents (neonatacide, infanticide, or pedicide).

We analyzed all 85 cases of filicide processed by the 4th Specialized Board of the Institute of Forensic Medicine, Istanbul, between 1995 and 2000. The filicide files were retrospectively analyzed and evaluated according to the characteristics of parents who committed filicide (age, sex, educational level, employment status, and criminal liability), children who were murdered (age, sex, own or stepchild), and the causes of death. The children's status (born or adopted) was established based on children's identity cards and court records.

Filicidal parents in cases where no medical, ie, psychiatric, conditions could be established as a possible factor contributing to committing the crime were defined as persons with "exact criminal liability" (4). Suspects with psychiatric disorder, including schizophrenia, major depression, imbecility, or mild mental retardation, were not subject to criminal liability. The diagnoses were established by a group of experienced specialist in forensic medicine and psychiatry, according to the DSM IV criteria (5).

We used SPSS 7.0 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA) for all data analysis. Frequency, percentages, and categorical variables were tested with the chi-square test and Fisher's exact test, whereas continuous variable was analyzed by the Student's t-test and Mann-Whitney U-test.

Results

Out of 85 parents who committed filicide, 48% were men and 52% women (Table 1). The median age of mothers at the time of event was 26 years (range, 14-48), and the median age of fathers was 35 years (range, 17-71) ($t=-5.00$, $p<0.001$). Only 3.5% of these parents had more than eight years of education, and almost half of them (45%) were unemployed. Out of individuals whose marital status could be determined, 65% lived with their families (wife/husband and children) and 35% were separated (all separated filicidal parents lived with their children).

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of mothers and fathers accused of filicide in Turkey, 1995-2000

Characteristics of filicide mothers and fathers	No. (%)
Sex:	
father	41 (48.0)
mother	44 (52.0.)
Mean age (±SD, years):	
father	36.1±10.0
mother	26.4±7.7
Educational status:	
illiterate	41 (48.0)
8 years of education	33 (39.0)
>8 years of education	3 (3)
undetermined	8 (10)
Marital status:	
legal	71 (84.0)
illegal	14 (16.0)
Marriage:	
first	61 (72.0)
second or more	10 (12.0)
undetermined	14 (16.0)
Employment status:	
employed	14 (16.0)
unemployed	38 (45.0)
undetermined	33 (39.0)
Parents:	
living together	40 (47.0)
separated	22 (26.0)
undetermined	23 (27.0)

Among 96 filicide victims, 88 (92%) were killed by their own parent, 5 (5%) were killed by their stepparent, and for 3 (3%) it could not be determined whether they were related to the parent by law or by blood. Most children victims (82%) were under 12 years of age (Table 2). Nineteen of 27 filicide victims under the age of one year were killed by their mothers, and eight were killed by their fathers. The opposite proportion was found for the victims between 12 and 18 years of age, of whom three were killed by their mothers and 14 by their fathers. Mothers killed younger children, whereas fathers killed older children. This trend was found statistically significant by Fisher's exact test (odds ratio, 11.08; 95% confidence interval [95% CI], 2.48–49.47; $p=0.0016$). There were 33% of parents with a single child, 25% with two children, 15% with three, and 19% with four or more children. For seven (8%) families, it could not be determined how many children they had. The child number proportion in the families where filicide was committed did not differ from the child number proportion noted in the last Turkish Demographic and Health Survey from 1998 (6).

Table 2. Socio-demographic characteristics of filicide victims in Turkey, 1995-2000

Characteristics of filicide victim	No. (%)
Sex:	
male	40 (42.0)
female	40 (42.0)
undetermined	16 (16.0)
Age group (years):	
<1	27 (28.0)
1-5	29 (30.0)
6-11	23 (24.0)
12-18	17 (18.0)
Related to filicide parent:	
by blood (one's own)	88 (92.0)
by law (stepchild)	5 (5)
undetermined	3 (3)
Legal status:	
legitimate	78 (81.0)
illegitimate	15 (16.0)
undetermined	3 (3)

Asphyxia was the cause of death in 38% of filicide acts, whereas cutting, perforating, or crushing injuries inflicted by various instruments caused death in 20% of the cases (Table 3). Asphyxia was mostly found in filicide committed by mothers (45% for mothers and 28% for fathers; odds ratio, 2.13; 95% CI, 0.90–4.99; $p=0.092$; Fisher's exact test), whereas fatal gunshot wound were found in filicides committed by fathers (10% for mothers and 28% for fathers; odds ratio, 3.21; 95% CI, 1.04–9.90; $p=0.064$; Fisher's exact test). Filicide by beating and use of firearms was twice more common in fathers than in mothers (Table 4).

Table 3. Causes of death in filicide cases in Turkey,1995-2000

Cause of death	No. (%) of cases
Asphyxia	32 (38.0)
Perforating, cutting, or crushing injury	17 (20.0)
Gunshot wound	14 (16.0)
Beating	14 (16.0)
Falls	3 (4.0)
Poisoning	2 (2.0)
Fire	1 (1.0)
Undetermined	2 (3.0)
Total	85 (100.0)

In 41 cases, the 4th Specialized Board Institute of Forensic Medicine concluded that filicide parents were not subject to criminal liability. Of those 41 par-

Table 4. No. (%) of filicide committed by parents according to cause of death in Turkey, 1995-2000*

Cause of death	Filicide by mother	Filicide by father	Total
Asphyxia	22 (45)	13 (28)	35 (36)
Perforating, cutting or crushing injury	10 (21)	9 (19)	19 (20)
Gunshot wound	5 (10)	13 (28)	18 (19)
Beating	5 (10)	10 (21)	15 (16)
Falls	1 (2)	2 (4)	3 (3)
Poisoning	3 (6)	–	3 (3)
Fire	1 (2)	–	1 (1)
Undetermined	2 (4)	–	2 (2)
Total	49 (100.0)	47 (100.0)	96 (100)

*In nine cases 2 children were killed, and in a case 3 children were killed at the same time.

ents, 25 were diagnosed with schizophrenia, nine with major depression, four with imbecility, and three with debility. The remaining 44 parents, 20 women and 24 men, were subject to exact criminal liability. Proportional difference between sexes was not significant (odds ratio = 0.590; 95% CI = 0.227–1.520; chi-square = 1.455; p = 0.228). The mean age of mothers subject to criminal liability (median, 25.5; range, 16-48) did not differ from those who were not subject to criminal liability (median, 26; range, 14-45) (26.7 ± 8.5 vs 26.3 ± 7.2 years, respectively; Mann Whitney U = 231.5; p = 0.841).

Eighteen of criminally liable parents and 20 of those who could not be held criminally liable were unemployed; there was no statistically significant difference between these two groups of parents (odds ratio, 0.726; 95% CI, 0.281–1.871; chi-square = 0.261, p = 0.609).

Discussion

Child homicide is a significant cause of child mortality in wealthy, industrialized countries (7,8), but filicide is very unusual in Turkey (9).

There are different reasons for killing a child – compassion, impulsive psychotic behavior, chronic physical abuse, taking revenge on wife, getting rid of unwanted child, or accidentally during sexual or sadistic abuse (10). In cases where parents do not have a psychiatric pathology, economic problems and negative environmental conditions may lead to the motivation for the homicide (11-17). Our results indicated that parents who committed filicide came from disadvantageous socioeconomic environment. A very significant fact is that, while unemployment rate in Turkey in 2001 was 8% and illiteracy rate 14%, the rates in our study group were 45% and 48%, respectively. These findings are consistent with other studies (18, 19). Furthermore, in our study mothers were responsible for 70% of filicides under age of one.

In their study of a group of mothers, Lewis et al (10) found that firearms were used in 25% of the filicide cases. In our study, firearms and perforating-cutting-crushing instruments were used in 36% of the cases, and fathers used firearms twice more often than mothers.

The analysis of mothers who murdered their children showed that the mothers who were not criminally liable were ten years older than the mothers who were criminally liable (12,20). Jennings et al (21) found that the average age of the mothers who had major depression or no major depression, was similar. In our study, the average age of the mothers was similar in both groups (p = 0.841) as well. Vanamo et al (20) found that the mean age of mothers was significantly lower than that of fathers.

Recent studies have indicated that a significant number of homicidal adults suffer from serious mental illness, mostly psychosis (22). Our findings were similar: 48% of the cases were not criminally liable, and 61% of them were diagnosed with schizophrenia. It is also very interesting that half of the parents who committed filicide could not be held criminally liable.

Further research in this area should aim at gaining detailed information about the child, child's family, and their social network. Pediatricians should be actively involved in both determining risk factors for filicide and screening children for risk when these factors are determined. Epidemiological studies in filicide subtypes could provide information leading to strategies for prevention. Prevention strategies should include community access to immediate psychiatric care, prompt intervention at the first report of child abuse, and social agencies cognizant of the need for taking "unwanted" children. We hope the present study will help clarify the understanding of filicide and contribute the development of filicide prevention.

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