

Child murders: Social responses, psychosocial factors, and safeguarding measures

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Child murders trigger a very strong public reaction shaped by intense grief, anger, and demands for justice. The end of a child's life in this way is seen as a complete violation of social acceptances of childhood's innocence and need for protection (1). Such incidents create a deep shock in society and cause feelings of vulnerability and fear, especially among parents. While this collective grief and anger are often expressed through commemorations and social media campaigns, the lack of justice in response to these reactions deepens the sense of 'moral injury' in society (2). The involvement of the media in these processes increases the magnitude of the reactions and creates awareness about the need for systemic reform.

While there is intense anger towards the perpetrator, there is also a reaction against institutions such as schools, social services, and law enforcement that failed to protect the child. The question of "How could this have happened?" triggers the search for accountability and justice. Institutions that fail to protect children are questioned, and this process strengthens demands for reform.

Although reactions to child murders vary over time and across cultures, the social reflex is generally shaped around grief and a search for justice. Erasmus Darwin's 1767 statement that a person who kills a child commits the 'most unnatural crime' still manifests itself in social reactions today (3). When examining the ways in which child mur-

ders are covered in the media, it is seen that until the 1990s, reactions to child murders remained passive and targeted directly at the perpetrator as an individual, but after this period, active reactions such as protests against perpetrators, demands for legal changes and the formation of civil society organizations came to the fore (4). The media contributed to the discussion of crime as a social problem rather than an individual one. Society has become more aware that these crimes are not only a reflection of the perpetrators but also of the social structure and that the systems are inadequate to protect children (5).

The media and social media play a major role in shaping reactions to child murders. The way events are covered in the media, the emphasis on personal stories and the intense use of emotional elements result in a strong bond between the victim and the public. The widespread use of visual materials and the emphasis on emotional content can increase the public's emotional response. This role of the media sometimes causes panic; however, these responses can also raise awareness of the need for systemic change and contribute to the creation of safeguarding legislation. For example, the death of Victoria Climbié in the United Kingdom and the subsequent Laming Inquiry addressed this tragedy through the deficiencies of the system and led to radical changes in the organization and delivery of children's services (6). Similarly, the adoption of Karen's Law in the United States, which tightened the conditions of parole for offenders who commit-

DOI: 10.5505/kpd.2024.93357

Cite this article as: Aslan Genc H. Child murders: Social responses, psychosocial factors, and safeguarding measures. Turkish J Clin Psych 2024; 27: 183-186

The arrival date of article: 19.09.2024, Acceptance date publication: 20.09.2024

Turkish J Clinical Psychiatry 2024;27:183-186

ted sexual assault, are the results of these societal responses (7).

Child murders often trigger widespread demands for reform. The accountability of institutions such as schools, social services and law enforcement agencies is questioned and the need for stronger child safeguarding laws becomes clear. Such incidents also prompt discussions of broader social issues such as poverty, mental health problems and violence. Public opinion demands that comprehensive measures be taken to prevent similar tragedies in the future. These responses reflect a deep belief in protecting the most vulnerable members of society.

As the importance of protecting and ensuring the safety of children is emphasized, the assessment and monitoring of children at risk and the recognition of sociological, psychological and systemic factors underlying child murders become more important (8). Limited data on this subject show that most children are killed by their parents or parental substitutes; therefore, child murders can be defined as a predominantly 'domestic' phenomenon (9). Clinical, sociological and demographic studies on child murders within the family are quite limited. In a study examining child murders committed within families in Finland between 1970 and 1994, it was found that 60% of the victims were male (n=42) and 40% were female (n=28) (10). Approximately 40% of the children were killed before the age of 1, and 80% before the age of 5; 60% of the perpetrators were identified as mothers and 40% as fathers or stepfathers. The most common methods of attack were assault, drowning and strangulation, and many of the children killed had previously been abused. While mothers were more dominant in infanticide cases, the prevalence of fathers is striking in suicide-homicide cases (10).

Child murders committed by strangers to the child are quite rare. In a study of child murders committed by strangers, it was determined that an average of seven children per year were killed in this way, mostly through sexual assaults, and usually by men between 1992 and 2000 (11).

When the past experiences of those who commit

child murders are examined, three main themes emerge: Psychological difficulties, difficulties in establishing relationships throughout life, and social isolation. It is thought that there are complex and interactive processes between all these themes. However, developmental experiences and attachment-related disorders are suggested as one of the basic precursors of murders (1). In addition, studies have shown that there is no correlation between child murders and adult murders, and this finding has been discussed in terms of the possibility that child and adult murders have different etiologies (12, 13). The sociocultural perspective on child abuse and murders is based on economic stress, social disorganization, culture of violence, and social isolation (14). It is argued that gender inequality and economic conditions are also related to child abuse, and that ensuring equal participation of women in social roles and economic measures can be effective in preventing such tragedies. In this context, the effects of factors such as family stress, social status of women, and culture of violence on child murders remain valid in all age groups (15).

In our country, scientific studies examining the characteristics of the attacker in child murders are limited to studies examining cases that meet the definition of filicide carried out by mothers and fathers. As a result of a recent study examining filicide cases that occurred between 2014 and 2023, where both mothers and fathers were the aggressors, the risk factors for mothers were determined to be depression, unemployment, young age, single status and an unwanted pregnancy. The risk factors for fathers were being divorced or in the process of divorce, low level of education, being diagnosed with a personality disorder and having access to firearms (16). As a result of another study examining filicide cases carried out between 1995 and 2000, it was determined that half of the parents were unemployed and illiterate (1).

When one looks at the public reaction that emerged after child murders, the way they were covered in the media, and scientific studies examining both social and individual risk factors, it is seen that increasing the level of education of parents, increasing social awareness about mental health, supporting women's mental health services that

include the postpartum period, making safeguarding arrangements especially for children at risk, and ensuring strong communication between responsible institutions are among the preventive measures that can be taken to prevent child murders. Measures that can be taken at the social level include moving away from a culture of violence, ensuring equal opportunities for women in society, supporting families under economic stress, and providing counseling programs for parental stress. Responding the public reaction that emerged after child murders with transparent and fair trial processes and deterrent sanctions for the guilty and responsible will support the perception of hope and trust for the future.

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