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J Interpers Violence 2007; 22; 1382

DOI: 10.1177/0886260507305526

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Parricide

An Empirical Analysis of 24 Years of U.S. Data

Kathleen M. Heide
University of South Florida

Thomas A. Petee
Auburn University

Empirical analysis of homicides in which children have killed parents has been limited. The most comprehensive statistical analysis involving parents as victims was undertaken by Heide and used Supplementary Homicide Report (SHR) data for the 10-year period 1977 to 1986. This article provides an updated examination of characteristics of victims, offenders, and offenses in parricide incidents using SHR data for the 24-year period 1976 to 1999. The analysis proceeds in two stages. First, offense (homicide circumstances), victim (age, race), and offender (age, race, sex) correlates are reported. Second, juvenile involvement in incidents in which parents were killed is examined and a determination is made whether changes in youth involvement in parricide offenses are discernible over the 24-year period. The article concludes with a comparison of findings that emerged from 24 years of data with those from the earlier 10-year period and the discussion of the significance of these findings.

Keywords: *parricide; matricide; patricide; juvenile homicide; murder*

A number of cases of adolescents killing parents in the early 1980s garnered newspaper headlines in the United States. From that time onward, the killing of fathers and mothers, particularly by juveniles, herein defined as youths under 18, has continued to generate national concern. The term *parricide*, although it technically refers to the killing of a close relative, has become increasingly identified in both the popular and professional literature with the killing of one or both parents. Accordingly, in this article, we use the term *parricide* to indicate homicides in which fathers, mothers, or both parents are killed. We use the more precise terms, *patricides* and *matricides*, when we are referring precisely to the killings of fathers and mothers, respectively (Heide, 1992).

Despite the interest in this topic, most of the scholarly work on this topic has been limited to analyses involving clinical samples, typically involving from 1 to 15 participants. Many clinical analyses of parricide cases involving juvenile offenders have been published over the past 50 years (Corder et al., 1976; Duncan & Duncan, 1971; Heide, 1992; Kirschner, 1992; Lennings, 2002; Mach, Scherl, & Macht, 1973; McCully, 1978; Medlicott, 1955; Mouridsen & Tolstrup, 1988; Post, 1982; Russell, 1984; Sargent, 1962; Scherl & Mack, 1966; Schlesinger, 1999; Tanay, 1973, 1976; Tucker & Cornwall, 1977; Wertham, 1941). In addition, there are numerous clinical studies focusing on adult parricide offenders (Akuffo, McGuire, & Choon, 1991; Bouchard & Bachelier, 2004; Champion et al., 1985; Chiswick, 1981; Cravens, Champion, Rotholz, Covan, & Cravens, 1985; Gillies, 1965; Lipson, 1986; Maas, Prakash, Hollender, & Regan, 1984; McKnight, Mohr, Quinsey, & Erochko, 1965; Millaud, Auclair, & Meunier, 1996; Newhill, 1991; O'Connell, 1963; Raizen, 1960; Schwade & Geiger, 1953; Weisman, Ehrenclou, & Sharma, 2002) and a few studies that include both juvenile and adult parricide offenders (see, e.g., McKnight et al., 1965; Mohr & McKnight, 1971; Sadoff, 1971). Clinical studies or empirical analyses involving more than 30 parricide subjects are rare and, to date, have focused on adult parricide offenders (Baxter, Duggan, Larkin, Cordess, & Page, 2001; Green, 1981; Marleau, Millaud, & Auclair, 2003; Weisman & Sharma, 1997). One author team combined eight studies of adult parricide offenders; by so doing, they were able to analyze the distribution of diagnoses for 237 offenders (Hillbrand, Alexandre, Young, & Spitz, 1999).

Studies involving clinical samples are very valuable in understanding the dynamics involved when juvenile and adult children kill parents (Heide, 1992). However, their usefulness in describing the phenomenon of parricide offenders, parricide victims, and parricide incidents is limited, given the small size of these samples and the manner in which cases were generated (Heide, 2003).

Statistical analyses of victim, offender, and offense correlates of parents slain using a national database do exist. Heide used the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI's) Supplementary Homicide Reports (SHR) for the period 1977 to 1986 to describe the characteristics of parricide victims and offenders (Heide, 1993b), to examine weapons used in parricide cases (Heide, 1993c), and to explore juvenile involvement in multiple offender and multiple victim parricides (Heide, 1993a). These analyses, although valuable from an historical period, need to be updated.

Shon & Targonski (2003) did a graphic analysis of parents and stepparents slain over the period 1976 through 1998. Unlike Heide's earlier analyses,

they did not keep their analyses of parents and stepparents separate. Instead, the author team combined stepmothers with mothers and stepfathers with fathers. Stepparents do not share the same relationship with stepchildren that biological parents share with their offspring (see Daly & Wilson, 1988). Accordingly, their inclusion in analyses with biological parents would be expected to affect the results. In her earlier analyses, Heide (1993b, 1993c) found differences between biological parents and stepparents. For example, stepparents tended to be younger than biological parents who were slain; the mean age of stepfathers killed was 46; stepmothers, 50; fathers, 54; and mothers, 58. Parricide offenders who killed stepparents were more likely to be under 18 than those who killed biological parents. Thirty-four percent of stepfathers, 30% of stepmothers, 25% of fathers, and 15% of mothers were killed by juveniles (Heide, 1992).

This article uses 24 years of data to describe the correlates of victims, offenders, and offenses in parricide incidents as an overall phenomenon, and then examines these characteristics by juvenile versus adult offender status. Juvenile involvement at various points of time is examined to discern whether juveniles have become more involved since the mid-1970s in incidents in which biological parents have been killed. The article concludes with a brief comparison of the present findings with those previously reported by Heide and a discussion of their significance in understanding the phenomenon of parental killings in the United States.

Method

The data for this study are derived from the FBI's SHR for the years 1976 through 1999 (see Fox, 2001). The SHR contains fairly detailed information on the victim, offender, and circumstances for homicides occurring in the United States that are known to law enforcement agencies participating in the FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting Program. For the years 1976 to 1999, the SHR provides homicide data (unweighted) on 452,965 victims and 500,946 offenders, representing approximately 92% of the estimated number of homicides occurring in the United States during that time period. The data are separated into two separate files—one pertaining to the offender and the other to the victim—both of which are utilized in the present study. Because we are interested in examining the nature and context of parricide offenses, our study focuses on homicide incidents.

We initially constructed our parricide victim and offender data sets by using the victim-offender relationship variable in the SHR data set to select

homicide cases involving parents and children. This variable, which is supposed to indicate the homicide victim's relationship to the offender, is sometimes miscoded by law enforcement officers, who inadvertently switch the order of the relationship, that is, they mistakenly report the offender's relationship to the victim. This error can be relatively easily remedied, particularly in homicide cases involving single victims and single offenders, by cross-checking the ages of the victim and offender and then making the necessary corrections. (For example, a 14-year-old father killed by a 35-year-old child is clearly miscoded). We recoded 68 cases as a result of this cross-checking. Thereafter, we created a separate data set for all homicide cases involving fathers and/or mothers as victims. Our final parricide data sets consisted of 5,781 victims and 5,558 offenders.

The victim and offender databases that we constructed contain four types of incidents: (1) single-victim, single-offender parricides; (2) multiple-victim, single-offender parricides; (3) single-victim, multiple-offender parricides, and (4) multiple-victim, multiple-offender parricides. The SHR data links the victim-offender relationship to the first victim killed. In parricide cases, the overwhelming majority of fathers and mothers slain are killed in single victim, single offender incidents. In our victim-based data set, 86% of the mothers and fathers slain were killed in single-victim, single-offender incidents. The remaining 14% (834 cases) were killed in multiple-victim situations. It is possible that a subset of these cases involves nonparents. This would seem particularly likely in the 2% of cases ($n = 107$) that involved three or more victims. In our offender-based data set, 92% of offenders killed parents in single-victim, single-offender incidents. The remaining 8% (446) of cases involved multiple-offender situations.

In multiple-victim and multiple-offender incidents, this linkage suggests that caution be used in reporting findings. It is more accurate, for example, to report the results in terms of incidents in which fathers were killed than to tie it specifically to fathers killed. Accordingly, we describe findings in terms of "victims who were killed in patricide incidents" or report correlates of offenders "in patricide events" or "patricide incidents" to be on the safe side. It would seem likely that the results obtained would be fairly close to the true characteristics of both parricide victims and offenders, given the very high representation of victims and offenders in single-victim, single-offender incidents. However, we take a conservative approach to the reporting of our results so that erroneous conclusions are reduced.

In previous analyses, Heide (1992, 1993b, 1993c) used only single-victim, single-offender parricides to avoid this difficulty. In this article we have included all parricidal incidents for two reasons. First, we were interested in

examining characteristics involved in all types of parricide cases, and we did not want to exclude important subsets. Second, we were interested in seeing if the patterns that Heide found using single-victim, single-offender incidents would be similar to those encountered in all types of parricidal incidents, including those involving multiple-victim and multiple-offender situations.

Offense, Victim, and Offender Correlates

The FBI classifies murder circumstances into four broad categories: felonies, suspected felonies, other-than-felony-type circumstances, and unknown. In cases in which parents were slain, the two latter categories predominated; very few parricides were identified as involving any known or suspected felony involvement. Examination of Table 1 reveals that five of the FBI designated circumstance categories predominated in incidents involving the slayings of parents over the 24-year period examined using offender-based data: other argument (not over money/property), other reason (not felony), unable to determine, brawl due to alcohol, and argument over money/property. The sixth category consisted of all remaining types and included felonies, suspected felonies, and the remaining nonfelony circumstances (e.g., romantic triangle, brawl due to narcotics, institutional killings). Two of the circumstances—other arguments and other reasons (not felony)—accounted for approximately 81% of the homicidal incidents involving fathers and 76% of the homicidal incidents involving mothers.

The differences in the circumstances surrounding the deaths of victims in patricide and matricide incidents were significant. As indicated in Table 1, victims in patricide incidents were significantly more likely than victims in matricide incidents to die as a result of other arguments (59% versus 44%). Victims in matricide incidents were significantly more likely than those in patricide events to be killed in homicidal events for other (not felony) reasons (31% versus 23%) or in circumstances unable to determine (12% versus 8%).

Parricide Victim Characteristics

As depicted in Table 2, the age range for victims killed in patricide and matricide incidents using victim-based data over the period 1976 to 1999 was expansive. Victims killed in incidents in which fathers were slain ranged in age from 27 to 98 years of age and older; nearly identical to the age range for victims killed in matricide incidents, from 28 to 98 years of

Table 1
Circumstances of Parricide Offenses, 1976–1999
(Offender-Based Data)

Circumstances	Fathers as Victims		Mothers as Victims		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Other argument	1,826	58.5	1,083	44.5	2,909	52.3
Other (not felony)	707	22.6	763	31.3	1,470	26.4
Unable to determine	234	7.5	296	12.2	530	9.5
Brawl due to alcohol	79	2.5	31	1.3	110	2
Argument over money or property	89	2.9	73	3	162	2.9
Other reasons	187	6	190	7.8	377	6.8
Total	3,122	100	2,436	100	5,558	100

Note: Significant $\chi^2 = 139.16$, $df = 5$, $p < .001$.

Table 2
Characteristics of Parricide Victims, 1976–1999
(Victim-Based Data)

	Father as Victim (<i>n</i> = 3189)		Mother as Victim (<i>n</i> = 2592)	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Age	<i>n</i> = 3,173		<i>n</i> = 2,578	
Mean	54.6		58	
Median	53		57	
Range	27–98		28–98	
Race	<i>n</i> = 3,189		<i>n</i> = 2,592	
White ^a	2,156	67.6	1,953	75.3
Black	960	30.1	585	22.6
Oriental	31	1	28	1.1
Indian	26	0.8	13	0.5
Other	3	0.1	5	0.2
Unknown	13	0.4	8	0.3

Note: Significant $\chi^2 = 41.275$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$.

a. White versus all other known ($N = 5,760$).

age and older. The mean and median ages of victims killed in patricide incidents were 55 and 53, respectively. Victims in matricide events were slightly older than victims in patricide events. The comparable average ages for victims killed in matricide events were 58 and 57, respectively.

Significant racial differences between victims killed in incidents involving fathers and mothers were apparent. In patricide incidents, 68% of victims were White, 30% were Black; the remaining 2% comprised Oriental, Indian, other racial group, or unknown race categories combined. In matricide incidents, 75% of victims were White, 23% were Black; approximately 2% comprised the four other categories. Victims killed in matricide events were significantly more likely than victims killed in patricide events to be White than non-White.

Parricide Offender Characteristics

The ages of offenders involved in parricide incidents using offender-based data covered a large span. As reflected in Table 3, offenders involved in incidents in which fathers were killed ranged in age from 7 to 72 years of age; fairly similar to the offender range found in matricide incidents, from 8 to 78 years old. The mean and median ages of offenders who participated in killing fathers were 25 and 23, respectively. Offenders involved in matricide events tended to be slightly older; the comparable ages for these offenders were 30 and 27, respectively. The racial profile of those involved in parricide events was very similar to the racial profile of victims killed in parricide incidents. Offenders who participated in the killings of mothers were significantly more likely to be White than offenders involved in the killings of fathers.

Offender gender differences in parricide events were apparent and significant. Males were the killers in both matricide and patricide events in the overwhelming majority of cases. As depicted in Table 3, males, typically sons, were significantly more likely than females, usually daughters, to participate in the killings of both mothers and fathers. Males were involved in the murders of 87% of the incidents involving fathers and 84% of the incidents involving mothers.

Youth Involvement in the Slaying of Parents

Significant differences in the age distribution of offenders involved in patricide and matricide incidents were found using offender-based data. As depicted in Table 4, the age distribution of offenders involved in patricide offenses was more truncated than that found in matricide incidents. More than 72% of incidents in which fathers were killed involved children less

Table 3
Characteristics of Parricide Offenders, 1976–1999
(Offender-Based Data)

	Father as Victim (<i>n</i> = 3,122)		Mother as Victim (<i>n</i> = 2,436)	
Age				
Mean	25		30.1	
Median	23		27	
Range	7–72		8–78	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Race				
White ^a	2,097	67.2	1,799	73.9
Black	950	30.4	586	24.1
Oriental	31	1	26	1.1
Indian	29	0.9	15	0.6
Other	3	0.1	3	0.1
Unknown	12	0.4	7	0.3
Sex				
Male ^b	2,716	87	2,034	83.5
Female	406	13	402	16.5

a. White versus all other known ($N = 5,539$); significant $\chi^2 = 28.783$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$.

b. Male versus female offenders ($N = 5,558$); significant $\chi^2 = 13.476$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$.

Table 4
Offender Age Categories by Parricide Victim Type, 1976–1999
(Offender-Based Data)

Offender Age Category	Father as Victim			Mother as Victim			Total Parents		
	<i>n</i>	%	Cum. %	<i>n</i>	%	Cum. %	<i>n</i>	%	Cum. %
Under age 18	793	25.4	25.4	415	17	17	1,208	21.7	21.7
18 to 19 years	346	11.1	36.5	195	8	25	541	9.7	31.4
20 to 29 years	1,119	35.8	72.3	744	30.5	55.6	1,863	33.5	64.9
30 to 39 years	579	18.5	90.9	535	22	77.5	1,114	20	84.9
40 to 49 years	217	7	97.8	317	13	90.6	534	9.6	94.5
50 to 59 years	53	1.7	99.5	169	6.9	97.5	222	4	98.5
60 and older	15	0.5	100	61	2.5	100	76	1.4	100
Totals	3,122	100	100	2,436	100	100	5,558	100	100

Note: Significant $\chi^2 = 264.184$, $df = 6$, $p < .001$.

Table 5
Juvenile/Adult Status by Time Period, 1976–1999
(Offender-Based Data)

Age Group	Time Periods									
	1976–1981		1982–1987		1988–1993		1994–1999		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Under 18 years	397	25.7	292	20.2	274	19.9	245	20.5	1208	21.7
18 years and older	1,147	74.3	1,155	79.8	1,100	80.1	948	79.5	4,350	78.3
Total	1,544	100	1,447	100	1,374	100	1,193	100	5,558	100

Note: Significant $\chi^2 = 20.022$, $df = 3$, $p < .001$.

than 30 years of age. The percentages of incidents in which fathers were slain by offenders over 30, and particularly over 40, declined noticeably as offender age categories increased. Of victims slain in patricide events during the period 1974 to 1999, 91% were killed by offenders under 40 years of age, and 98% were killed by those under 50 years of age. In contrast, 56% of offenders involved in the killings of mothers were under 30 years of age, 78% were under 40, and 91% were under 50.

Although the overwhelming majority of offenders involved in incidents in which fathers and mothers were killed during the 24-year period under review were adults, juvenile involvement in these types of incidents is noteworthy. Approximately one of four offenders involved in the killings of fathers (25.4%) and one of six offenders who participated in the killings of mothers (17.0%) were under 18 years of age. If the analysis is extended to include 18 and 19 year olds, which is defined by child development experts as the later period of adolescence (Solomon, Berg, Martin, & Villee, 1996, Table 49-4, p. 1105), the involvement of youth in U.S. patricide incidents is quite substantial. Children or adolescents were involved in more than one third of incidents in which fathers were killed (36.5%) and one quarter of incidents in which mothers were slain (25.0%).

Juvenile involvement in incidents in which parents were killed was examined over time in three analyses using offender-based data. In the first analysis (Table 5), the 24-year time frame was divided into four periods of 6 years (1976 to 1981, 1982 to 1987, 1988 to 1993, and 1994 to 1999). The differences in the proportionate involvement of juvenile across these four time periods were significant. Juveniles were significantly more likely to have participated in the killings of mothers and fathers in the earliest time

Table 6
Juvenile/Adult Status by Decade, 1980–1999
(Offender-Based Data)

Age Group	Time Periods					
	1980–1989		1990–1999		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Under 18 years	508	20.9	416	19.8	924	20.4
18 years and older	1,921	79.1	1,688	80.2	3,609	79.6
Total	2,429	100	2,104	100	4,533	100

Note: Not significant $\chi^2 = .906$, $df = 1$, $p < .341$.

Table 7
Juvenile/Adult Status by Early/Late 1990s (Offender-Based Data)

Age Group	Time Periods					
	1990–1994		1990–1999		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Under 18 years	221	19.3	195	20.3	416	19.8
18 years and older	922	80.7	766	79.7	1,688	80.2
Total	1,143	100	961	100	2,104	100

Note: Not significant $\chi^2 = .301$, $df = 1$, $p < .583$.

period than in the three subsequent ones. Approximately one of four individuals arrested in incidents in which parents were killed in 1976 through 1981 was under 18. In the three subsequent periods, about one of five of those arrested in events in which parents were killed was a juvenile.

In the second analysis, the involvement of juveniles in the killings of biological parents was examined over two decades (1980 to 1989 and 1990 to 1999). As depicted in Table 6, approximately one of five arrested in parricidal incidents was a juvenile across the two decades. The very slight differences between the two decades in proportionate involvement were not significant.

In the third analysis, the 1990s were equally divided into the early 1990s and the late 1990s. As shown in Table 7, the very slight differences in the proportionate involvement of juveniles in incidents involving the killings of parents during the two periods (19% versus 20%) were not significant.

Summary, Conclusions, and Implications for Further Study

In this article, we used SHR data to examine correlates of parricide victims and offenders over the 24-year period 1976 to 1999. We used two databases, one involving 5,781 victims and the other comprising 5,558 offenders involved in incidents in which fathers and mothers were slain. The incidents we examined were those identified by the FBI as involving the killings of biological father or mothers. We included parricidal incidents involving single and multiple victims committed by either single or multiple offenders because no other statistical analysis had used patricidal and matricidal incidents (fathers and mothers slain) as the unit of analysis in this manner. We were particularly interested in investigating whether patterns observed by Heide (1993b) with respect to the killings of biological fathers and mothers in single victim, single offender incidents would be similar to those encountered in patricides and matricides involving multiple victims and offenders, in addition to single victims and offenders.

As noted earlier, the overwhelming majority of parents slain were killed in single-victim, single-offender incidents. It is possible that some of the victims killed in multiple-victim incidents might not be biological parents. An unknown number could be stepparents, mates of the parent slain, or other family members or friends. As noted above, the SHR data set codes only the first victim and offender relationship; in multiple victim incidents, the relationships of subsequent victims to the offender are not available. Similarly, it is also possible that some of the offenders involved in multiple-offender incidents coded as patricides or matricides might not be the victim's or victims' biological children. They could be, for example, stepsiblings, friends, or acquaintances of the biological child. Therefore, to be on the safe side, we discussed results in terms of incidents in which fathers and mothers were killed rather than tying the results obtained specifically to fathers and mothers as victims, and sons and daughters as offenders. This approach seemed best particularly when reporting the demographic characteristics of victims and offenders. Inclusion of multiple victims and multiple-offender incidents is unlikely to affect analyses involving the circumstances behind the patricide or matricide incidents.

Interestingly, comparison of findings reported in this article with those reported in Heide's earlier analyses revealed very striking consistencies. Differences found to be significant in the earlier period remained significant in the later and more extensive time period. The consistency across

time frames underscores the significance of these findings and the conclusions that can be drawn from them. Highlights of these similarities are presented below. For ease of comparison, analyses published in 1993 involving 1977 to 1986 data are referred to as the *earlier study*; those discussed above involving 1976 to 1999 data are referred to as the *later study* or the *present study*. Following a comparative analysis of the findings across studies, the authors present their interpretations of the findings.

Circumstances of Parricide Offenses

The six types of circumstances that predominated in the earlier study (Heide, 1993b) were the same in the later study. The ranking in the circumstances found in incidents in which fathers and mothers were killed were the same in both studies. The top two circumstances (other argument, other not felony) comprised 81% of the circumstances involved in patricide incidents in this study as compared to 83% in the earlier study. In matricide incidents, these two circumstances comprised 76% of the total in this study versus 78% in the earlier study. Differences between these two top circumstances in the matricide and patricide incidents were tested in both studies and found to be significant.

The consistency in findings underscores that the circumstances behind the killings of parents rarely involve ongoing felony situations. The available FBI categories are not particularly illuminating in understanding the circumstances leading to parricide, however. Refinement of existing codes would help to elucidate the factors leading to parricidal incidents. Law enforcement officers checked "other arguments" and "other (not felony)" in approximately 80% of the cases. Perusal of the data indicates that arguments are common occurrences leading to lethal violence involving parents, particularly when general arguments are combined with arguments over money/property and brawls over alcohol.

Characteristics of Victims and Offenders in Parricide Incidents

Similar results were found across both studies in victim age and race, and offender race and gender. The typical age and age patterns of the victims killed in patricide and matricide cases in the earlier study were very comparable to those in the present study (Heide, 1993b). The typical victim killed in patricide incidents was in his early 50s. The typical victim killed in matricide incidents was in her late 50s.

Parricide and race. In both studies, parents killed tended to be White. Victims killed in matricide incidents were significantly more likely than those killed in patricide incidents to be White versus non-White. In matricide cases, using victim-based data, 75% of victims in this study, compared to 74% of victims in the earlier study (Heide, 1993b), were White. In patricide cases, 68% of victims in this study, as opposed to 65% in the earlier study, were White. The percentages of male and female parricide victims who were White were much higher than percentages found among known homicide victims during the period 1976 to 1999. White females comprised 75% of parricide victims versus 59% of total homicide victims; White males comprised 68% of parricide victims versus 49% of total homicide victims.

Not surprisingly, given the victim-offender relationship in both parricide databases, the results obtained using offender-based data were very nearly the same in the earlier (Heide, 1993b) and later studies. The percentages of patricide and matricide offenders who were Black exceeded their 12% to 13% representation in the population during the 24-year period (U.S. Bureau of the Census, n.d.). However, the proportion of Blacks arrested in parricidal incidents was far less than their representation among homicide arrestees in general. During the period 1976 to 1999, Blacks comprised 51% of those arrested for homicide when offender race was known.

It is interesting to speculate why Blacks are far less likely to be involved in arrests for killing parents than among homicide arrestees in general. Research has consistently shown that the majority of homicide offenders are poor, that poverty is correlated with race, and that killing often occurs during the commission of another felony (e.g., Block, 1977; Curtis, 1974; Dietz, 1985; Parker & Smith, 1979; Wolfgang, 1958; Wolfgang & Ferracuti, 1967). As noted above, police rarely coded parricidal incidents as springing from another felonious situation. In addition, in Black families, the mother is very often the head of the household and is a revered figure by her sons (Heide, 1999). Accordingly, she is less likely to be a target for violence than strangers. Fathers, particularly in lower socioeconomic areas, are less likely to live with their families, perhaps, reducing their risk of becoming involved in family arguments, culminating in expressive acts of murder.

Parricide and offender gender. Males were significantly more likely than females to kill parents in both studies. The proportionate involvement of males in the killing of victims in patricide incidents was the same in both studies, 87%. Males also were disproportionately represented in the killings of victims in matricide events in both studies, 84% in the present study and 86% in the earlier study. The high percentage of male parricide offenders is

consistent with their representation among homicide arrestees. During the 24-year period under examination, males comprised 88% of homicide arrestees when gender was known. These data indicate that females are no more likely to become involved in the killing of parents than in homicidal incidents in general.

Youth Involvement in Killing Biological Parents

The involvement of youth across the two studies was the same in incidents in which fathers were killed, and very similar in matricide incidents. Juveniles under 18 comprised 25% of offenders in incidents in which fathers were killed in both studies. If offender age is increased to include upper adolescents, 36% of those arrested in patricide incidents were age 19 or younger in both studies. In incidents in which mothers were killed, 17% of arrestees in the present study, as compared to 15% in the earlier study (Heide, 1993b), were juveniles. When the analysis is extended to include those through age 19, 25% of offenders who were involved in matricide incidents in this study, as opposed to 22% in the earlier study, were 19 years of age or younger.

The truncated pattern in age range categories observed with respect to those involved in the killings of fathers, as contrasted to those involved in the killings of mothers, was also observed in both studies. The results in offender age categories are amazingly similar in patricide and matricide incidents in both the present and earlier studies. The differences found in age categories of offenders involved in the killings of fathers and mothers are significant in both studies. In incidents in which fathers were killed, the cumulative frequency results can be encapsulated as follows for each offender age group (present study versus earlier study): up to 29 years old (72% versus 76%), up to 39 years old (91% versus 94%), up to 49 years old (98% to 99%), and up to 59 years old (99.5% versus 99.9%). In incidents in which mothers were killed, the cumulative frequency results can be encapsulated as follows for each offender age group (present study versus earlier study): up to 29 years old (56% versus 54%), up to 39 years old (78% versus 78%), up to 49 years old (91% to 91%), and up to 59 years old (98% versus 98%).

One important difference between the two studies emerged when youth involvement in parricide events was examined. In the earlier study, no significant differences were found to suggest increasing involvement of juveniles in the killings of mothers or fathers over the 10-year period, 1977 to 1986. In contrast, significant differences were found during the 24-year period when the period was broken down into four equal 6-year periods.

This analysis found that juveniles were significantly more likely to be involved in incidents in which parents were killed in the first period, (1976 to 1981) than the three later periods (1982 to 1987, 1988 to 1993, 1994 to 1999). Similar to results found in the earlier study, other analyses investigating juvenile versus adult involvement over two decades (the 1980s versus the 1990s) and the 1990s (1990 to 1994 versus 1995 to 1999) revealed no evidence of increased youth involvement in incidents in which parents were killed over time.

The clear lack of evidence for an increase in the killings of mothers and fathers by juveniles in the 1980s and 1990s seems at odds with the increased reporting of parricidal incidents by the media since the early 1980s (Boots & Heide, 2006). Perhaps, the heightened awareness of the role that child maltreatment has played in parricidal incidents has led to improved services for youths at risk and more efforts aimed at preventing child abuse and neglect so that similar tragedies could be avoided (see Heide, 1992).

Conclusions and Implications

The comparison of the findings in the present study with those from the earlier study indicates that the characteristics of parricide offenders, victims, and offenses are amazingly stable over time. The patterns observed with respect to single-offender and single-victim parricides remain when multiple-victim and multiple-offender incidents are included. The consistency is not surprising, given the very high percentage of parricides involving both single victims and single offenders. Given the stability of these findings, attention should now focus on prevention and intervention before a parent is killed. The data indicate that at least half of parricidal incidents stem from arguments. Efforts aimed at helping individuals, particularly males, to learn how to deal appropriately with strong emotion and to communicate more effectively would seem a promising place to begin. The research suggests that efforts to strengthen family bonds and to increase respect for family relationships should be targeted at both the White and Black communities.

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Kathleen M. Heide, PhD, is professor of criminology at the University of South Florida, Tampa. Her extensive publication record includes two widely acclaimed books on juvenile homicide, *Why Kids Kill Parents: Child Abuse and Adolescent Homicide* and *Young Killers: The Challenge of Juvenile Homicide*, and the recently released book (coauthored with Linda Merz-Perez): *Animal Cruelty: Pathway to Violence Against People*. She is a licensed mental health counselor and a court-appointed expert in matters relating to homicide, and children and families. Professor Heide is a frequent consultant to the national print and electronic media and numerous international newspapers and magazines.

Thomas A. Petee, PhD, is professor in the Department of Sociology at Auburn University. He is also currently coeditor of the journal *Homicide Studies*. He has more than 40 publications in journals such as *Criminology*, *Sociological Inquiry*, and *Criminal Justice and Behavior*. His current research interests include the routine activities elements of violent crime and determining what factors are associated with lethal outcomes in violent encounters.