



Cradle to a Quick Grave

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A PREGNANT addict on a crack binge goes into early labor, suffocates her newborn and leaves the boy's body in the toilet of a West Philadelphia crackhouse.

In Fairhill, a man with a bum leg blames his toddler's fatal head injuries on their tumble down the stairs, but the coroner declares the case a homicide when the hospital uncovers evidence of abuse.

Four miles northeast, a troubled teenage father from Frankford shakes his crying 1-year-old son to death.

At a time when Philadelphia's soaring homicide rate is drawing national scrutiny, a little-known horror hidden in the body count is this: Eight of last year's 406 homicide victims were babies under the age of 2, almost triple that of the previous year.

Although reluctant to declare a trend, experts are scrambling to find commonalities so they can develop strategies to save the city's youngest, most vulnerable citizens.

"The leading cause of death in infancy is prematurity, but every child homicide concerns me," said Dr. Cindy Christian, a consultant on the city's child fatality review team and chairwoman of Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia.

A *Daily News* probe into the eight cases in 2006 shows many of the lost babies spent their short lives mired in danger and hardship. Most were born into fractured families struggling with poverty, drug addiction, a lack of education and a history of child abuse or neglect.

But even when social services intervened, death came from surprising sources.

In one case, social workers received a complaint that the baby's mother regularly left him in the care of his drug-addicted grandmother, who would go buy crack and leave him alone in a home infested with mice, roaches and fleas. The day after the complaint was made, the baby's father killed him.

Another baby's mother had a 10-year history with the Department of Human Services, mostly neglect complaints due to her drug addiction. But that tot died at the hands of the mother's boyfriend.

The similarities in the cases are striking:

- * Seven of the eight babies were killed by a biological parent, and six of the accused killers were men. Most weren't the child's primary caregiver.

- * Most of the accused killers were unemployed high-school dropouts.

- * None of the accused killers was married, and most of those charged were no longer involved with the baby's other parent.

- * City child-protective workers had received reports of or investigated neglect or abuse in five of the eight families involved. In a sixth case, although no prior abuse had been reported, doctors found healing fractures and other signs of mistreatment in the slain child.

A national expert said infant homicide likely is more widespread than the numbers suggest, because many child deaths are explained away as medical anomalies or "undetermined."

"If postmortem examinations were done on every child death, we would see many more homicide rulings," said Dr. Larry Milner, who heads the Society for the Prevention of Infanticide in Northbrook, Ill. "This is not just a one-year, rare statistical blip. This is the tip of the iceberg."

In Philadelphia, coroners are required by law to autopsy every death considered "sudden and unexplained," said Jeff Moran, spokesman for the medical examiner's office.

Autopsy results can be crucial in homicide cases. In several of last year's baby murders, suspects confessed when confronted with medical exams contradicting their claims.

In other cases, accused killers offer plausible explanations that might leave doubtful juries dissecting every detail of the coroner's report.

In a few horrifying cases, autopsy results are almost unnecessary because the killers were so aggressively purposeful in their murderous missions that the details made even the most seasoned detectives cringe.

But coroners can't always deliver answers, Moran said.

"When an infant death has been caused by a lack of oxygen to the brain [anoxic encephalopathy], it is very difficult for a medical examiner to determine the manner of death. The evidence seen on autopsy, a darker colored brain, can be identical in cases of homicide and natural or accidental death," Moran said.

"Without signs of struggle or abuse or additional investigative evidence about the circumstances of the death, the medical examiner must rule that the manner of death is 'undetermined,'" Moran added. "That is why many experts believe that infant homicides are underreported."