



Are Familicides On The Rise?

(<http://www.babble.com/CS/blogs/strollerderby/wood%20family.jpg>) Boston public radio host Robin Young recently looked at a troubling rise in the most horrifying crime: familicide (<http://www.hereandnow.org/shows/2009/04/rundown-323-2/>). The term may not be familiar yet, but the concept sure is — the murder of an entire family, usually by a father who then commits suicide. There are currently four to six of these crimes nationwide each year, yet Young's guest, Dr. Richard Gelles of the University of Pennsylvania, says that today's economic crisis is driving a spike in this type of crime, during which we can expect to see a dozen or more a year.

One of the most recent was a family of four from Long Island who died (http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5jxQQjyY9vp7_w7Gz1ECphvVYI8QD97N1D000) at the hand of father and husband William Parente. Another was the family of Christopher Wood, a 34-year-old sales accountant who shot his three children and wife (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/04/21/AR2009042102484.html>), leaving notes detailing his enormous debt load. Both men fit the profile Gelles described to Young (while noting, of course, that it's very hard to predict who will commit this kind of crime): men who are older than the typical violent offender, men who consider themselves "enmeshed" in their families, long-term employees with no expectation of a job loss, whose roles as caretaker and breadwinner provide the chief source of their identity.

But it's not enough to just look at the today's terrible economy; the roots for this kind of crime go much, much deeper. As one *Baltimore Sun* columnist wrote, men who kill their whole families — for any reason — are betraying a mindset that says they own them. It is, she writes, evidence of "a toxic kind of patriarchy, in which the man views his wife and children as possessions, and believes it is his right to treat them any way he wishes — even to hit and abuse them." She goes on:

What happened to these two families is a tragedy. But it is not simply the result of economic strain or mental illness. And it wasn't random craziness or a lightning strike. Beneath the exterior of these model fathers were men who believe they had the right and the obligation to make all the family decisions, including those of life and death.

It's not always life and death, though. Gelles says he sees these crimes as "the canary in the mine shaft," noting that they always accompany a rise in more common, less severe violence within families, including child and spousal abuse. Because the federal government's statistics on child abuse and domestic

violence tend to lag two years behind, Gelles says, the recent spike in familicides should put authorities on notice to “get ready” with more social workers, more foster homes, more awareness at the police and hospital level. “Cities,” he says, “should be careful where they cut funding.”

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