



Psychiatry & Behavioral Science Section - 2016

137 Killing a Child: Neuropsychological Profiles of Murderers of Children

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After attending this presentation, attendees will better understand the heterogeneity of the psychological and neuropsychological functioning of offenders charged with the murder of a child.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by describing a group of offenders on whom minimal research has been conducted. This study expands the existing research on subgroups of homicide offenders (i.e., filicide and neonaticide offenders) to describe patterns of functioning in a diverse sample, helping to identify psychological and neuropsychological characteristics relevant to forensic evaluation.

An estimated 1,520 children were killed due to child abuse or neglect in 2013 in the United States, accounting for only a portion of all children killed in this country.¹ Despite a disproportionate media focus on women with severe mental illness who murder their children, homicides of children occur in a variety of contexts, not all of which are characterized by mental illness.² Studies of offenders who have killed children have been limited to select groups, such as parents committing filicide. Even among these offenders, a variety of motives and patterns of psychopathology are evident.³⁻¹³

No study has used comprehensive neuropsychological data to compare offenders who kill children. The current study addresses this omission in the literature by examining the demographic, neuropsychological, and psychological characteristics of homicide offenders who have murdered children. Participants were men ($n=27$) and women ($n=6$) charged with and/or convicted of murdering one or more children, referred for forensic neuropsychological evaluations. Forensic evaluations included clinical interview, comprehensive neuropsychological assessment, and review of pertinent records. Neurocognitive performance was assessed using standardized neuropsychological tests. Supplementary analyses examined group differences by presence or absence of adult victims, gender, and victim age. P -values were set at 0.05, and significance was two-tailed.

Head trauma (84.8%), psychiatric disorder (57.6%), alcohol abuse (69.7%), and drug abuse (81.8%) were prevalent. Furthermore, a majority (60.6%) had a history of special education. Mean scores were low average in many domains, including overall intellectual functioning (Full Scale Intelligence Quotient (FSIQ)=85.5), attentional functions, immediate and delayed verbal memory, abstract reasoning, executive functioning, inhibition, and verbal skills. Mild to moderate impairments were seen in verbal fluency and processing speed. In supplementary analyses, those who had killed adults as well as children ($n=14$) had higher scores in many domains, including overall intellectual functioning, executive functioning, verbal memory, and verbal fluency. Differences in background characteristics (e.g., learning disorders) accounted for many of these differences.

This study corroborates and expands upon studies that demonstrated heterogeneous psychological and intellectual functioning among offenders who kill children. Offenders who kill adults in the same offense exhibit higher neuropsychological functioning, are less likely to have a learning disorder, and are more likely to have a personality disorder than those who do not kill adults, perhaps indicating the greater capacity needed to kill an adult and kill multiple victims. Such differences may have implications for criminal responsibility and capacity.



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