E68 Infant Homicide: Perpetrators, Causes, and Prevention

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Learning Overview: After attending this presentation, attendees will have learned the most likely perpetrators of infant homicide, the associated risk factors, and potential prevention measures to increase infants health and safety.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This research will impact the forensic science community by providing critical information concerning a high-risk group of medicolegal death investigation and by increasing awareness of infant homicide and possible prevention strategies to avoid infanticide.

The prevalence of infanticide in the medicolegal death investigation is an underresearched area within the forensic community. This research aims to focus on infanticide's critical aspects, such as the most likely perpetrator, associated risk factors, and potential prevention measurements. Utilizing autopsy records from the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner (OCME), a retrospective study was conducted examining 41 cases of infant homicide over 19 years dating between 1999 and 2018.

Infanticide is defined as the intentional killing of an infant greater than one day and less than or equal to 12 months of age caused by a parent, guardian, or caretaker.[1] This comprehensive study revealed that of the 41 infanticide cases, the biological parents were most likely perpetrators. The mother was the most common perpetrator (32.4%), followed by the father (24.75%), the mother's boyfriend (16.4%), an individual unrelated to the child (8.36%) in shooting or house fire by arson, and a babysitter (6.02%). The most common causes of deaths were asphyxia (38%) and head injuries as a result of blunt force trauma (38%), followed by multiple varying injuries (12%), burn/thermal injuries (5%), gunshot wound (3%), sharp force injuries (2%), and methadone intoxication (2%).

The most common victims were White (48%), followed by African Americans (40%), Hispanic (10%), and Asian (2%). Males were disproportionately affected at 62% in comparison to females at 38%. The age group for victims ranged from 1 day to 12 months, with the highest frequency of reported deaths being infants 1–2 months of age (55%). This increase in frequency suggests that infants within 1–2 months of age have a higher risk of becoming homicide victims. While contributing factors range from family stress, availability of resources, and cultures of violence, most infanticides occurred due to sudden anger or rage from the caregiver as a result of the baby's crying.

The risk factors of infanticide include: (1) caregiver/family risk factors such as young, single, poor, unemployed parents, less education, low self-esteem, poor control of their impulses and mental health issues, a history of drug or alcohol abuse, domestic violence, or lack of social support; and (2) community/society factors such as a high crime rate and high poverty rate. The highest infanticides occurred in Baltimore, MD, which has the highest crime rate and poverty rate in Maryland. Prevention efforts should focus on socioeconomic support to the new parents, education programs to teach caregivers how to control their emotions and deal with infants' crying and their needs, and community crime-reduction programs.

Reference(s):

1. Brewster, Albert L., John Nelson, Kent Hymel, Donald R. Colby, Don R. Lucas, Thomas R. McCanne, and Joel S. Milner. Victim, Perpetrator, Family, and Incident Characteristics of 32 Infant Maltreatment Deaths in the United States Air Force. *Child Abuse & Neglect* 22, no. 2 (1998): 91-101. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0145-2134(97)00132-4.

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