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# Matricide: A Critique of the Literature

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## Abstract

Matricide, the killing of mothers by their biological children, is a very rare event, comprising less than 2% of all U.S. homicides in which the victim-offender relationship is known. This manuscript examines more than 20 years of U.S. homicides to determine the age and gender characteristics of matricide offenders. These data reveal that most mothers are killed by their adult sons. Daughters younger than 18 years are the most infrequent killers of mothers. This article examines the incidence of parricide, the involvement of sons and daughters in matricidal incidents, and synthesizes the literature in terms of offender gender. Special attention is given to female matricide offenders, given the lack of research currently available with respect to this population. Implications for practice, policy, and research are discussed.

## Keywords

matricide, parricide, murder, female murderers, juvenile murderers, girls who kill parents

The killing of parents by their children garners intense media coverage in countries worldwide (Boots & Heide, 2006). When adolescent girls are the perpetrators and mothers the victims, the cases often make headline news for years afterward (see, for e.g., Tufts divided on freshman who killed mother, 1995; A mother, a daughter, a murder, 2000). *Matricide* is the term used to refer to the killing of one's mother, whereas, *parricide* is used to denote the slaying of one's father. Both are types of *parricide* that technically refers to the killing of a close relative but has become increasingly synonymous with a child killing his or her parents (Heide, 1992). This phenomenon both fascinates and horrifies the public, as evidenced by books in the popular crime genre area particularly profiling the lives of teens who killed their mothers and fathers (Davis, 2003; Kleiman, 1988; Lang, 1995; Leyton, 1990; McGinnis, 1991; McMurray, 2006; Morris, 1985; Mones, 1991).

## PARRICIDE UNMASKED

Despite the coverage and interest parricide events generate, murders of parents are rare events in the United States, typically comprising less than 2% of all homicides in which the victim-offender relationship is known (Heide, 1989; Heide & Boots, 2007; Walsh, Krienert, & Crowder, 2008). In 2005, of 14,680 total homicide victims, 123 were identified as mothers and 118 as fathers slain by their biological children, together representing less than 2% of all homicide victims and approximately 3% of homicides in which the victim-offender relationship was known (Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI], 2005). Studies that have addressed this phenomenon outside the United States have concluded that parricide is also a rare event in other countries (Marleau, Millaud, & Auclair, 2003; Millaud, Auclair, & Meunier, 1996). For example, parricide

comprises less than 4% of all homicides in Canada (Fedorowycz, 1999) and about 2% to 3% of all homicides and attempted homicides in France (Fontaine & Guérard des Lauriers, 1994; Stoessel & Bornstein, 1988).

## Female-Perpetrated Parricide

Female-perpetrated parricide has been reported as particularly rare. Studies spanning more than 40 years have continuously concluded that when fathers and mothers are killed, their sons are typically the perpetrators (see, e.g., Bourget, Gagne', & Labelle, 2007; Chiswick, 1981; Heide, 1993b, Heide & Petee, 2003, Heide & Petee, 2007a; Hillbrand & Cipriano, 2007; McKnight, Mohr, Quinsey, & Erochko, 1966; Walsh et al., 2008; Wick, Mitchell, Gilbert, & Byard, 2008). In their review of the literature, D'Orbán and O'Connor (1989) cited several studies indicating that the killings of mothers, as well as fathers, by daughters was very rare in England (Morris & Blom-Cooper, 1964; Green, 1981), Scotland (Gillies, 1976), Finland (Väisänen & Väisänen, 1983), France (Devauux, Petit, Perol, & Porot, 1974), and Japan (Hirose, 1970).

Studies of parricide incidents in the United States have found that in the majority of cases fathers and mothers are slain by sons. Nonetheless, the involvement of daughters in the killings of their parents is quite substantial. Using Supplementary

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**TABLE 1.** Number and Percent of Juvenile and Adult Matricide Offenders by Year (1976–1999), United States

Year of offense	Male offenders younger than 18 years, N (%)	Female offenders younger than 18 years, N (%)	Total offenders younger than 18 years, N (100%)	Male offenders older than 18 years, N (100%)	Female offenders older than 18 years, N (100%)	Total offenders older than 18 years, N (100%)
1976	13 (93%)	1 (7%)	14	62 (84%)	12 (16%)	74
1977	14 (78%)	4 (22%)	18	59 (81%)	14 (19%)	73
1978	17 (94%)	1 (6%)	18	67 (90%)	7 (10%)	74
1979	15 (79%)	4 (21%)	19	72 (86%)	12 (14%)	84
1980	20 (91%)	2 (9%)	22	71 (89%)	9 (11%)	80
1981	7 (88%)	1 (12%)	8	77 (90%)	9 (10%)	86
1982	14 (93%)	1 (7%)	15	81 (84%)	16 (16%)	97
1983	16 (80%)	4 (20%)	20	84 (84%)	16 (16%)	100
1984	13 (72%)	5 (28%)	18	84 (87%)	13 (13%)	97
1985	12 (67%)	6 (33%)	18	81 (84%)	15 (16%)	96
1986	14 (82%)	3 (18%)	17	70 (86%)	11 (14%)	81
1987	13 (87%)	2 (13%)	15	73 (83%)	15 (17%)	88
1988	18 (82%)	4 (18%)	22	76 (87%)	11 (13%)	87
1989	16 (80%)	4 (20%)	20	76 (85%)	13 (15%)	89
1990	11 (79%)	3 (21%)	14	60 (82%)	13 (18%)	73
1991	15 (94%)	1 (6%)	16	90 (86%)	14 (14%)	104
1992	15 (75%)	5 (25%)	20	78 (84%)	15 (16%)	93
1993	16 (76%)	5 (24%)	21	74 (80%)	18 (20%)	92
1994	13 (72%)	5 (28%)	18	69 (82%)	15 (18%)	84
1995	10 (59%)	7 (41%)	17	76 (84%)	14 (16%)	90
1996	19 (79%)	5 (21%)	24	54 (77%)	16 (23%)	70
1997	8 (89%)	1 (11%)	9	48 (79%)	13 (21%)	61
1998	16 (76%)	5 (24%)	21	59 (83%)	12 (17%)	71
1999	7 (64%)	4 (36%)	11	61 (79%)	16 (21%)	77
Total (%)	332 (80%)	83 (20%)	415 (100%)	1702 (84%)	319 (16%)	2,021 (100%)

Homicide Report (SHR), Heide and Petee (2007a) found that from 1976 to 1999, 5,588 individuals were arrested in U.S. incidents involving the killing of mothers ( $n = 2,436$ ) and fathers ( $n = 3,122$ ). Daughters were the killers in 16% of the matricide incidents and 13% of the patricide incidents over the 24-year-period.

The involvement of females in parent killings appears to be a relatively stable phenomenon. A similar analysis restricted to single-victim, single-offender incidents involving parents slain during the 10-year period 1977–1986 revealed the same level of female involvement in the killings of fathers (13%) and slightly lower participation in the killing of mothers at 14% (Heide, 1993b). These analyses suggest that the involvement of females in killing parents is fairly comparable to their proportionate involvement in homicide arrests during this period (Heide & Petee, 2007a).

### Youth Involvement in Parricide

The overwhelming majority of individuals arrested for killing parents in both of these U.S. studies were adults (Heide, 1993b; Heide & Petee, 2007a). In both periods, approximately 25% of those arrested for killing fathers were younger than 18 years. In the 1977–1986 study (Heide, 1993b), 15% of matricide arrestees were juveniles; in the 1976–1999 study

(Heide & Petee, 2007a), 17% of offenders arrested for killing their mothers were younger than 18 years of age.

Using Heide and Petee's data set (see, Heide & Petee, 2007a), the authors tabulated the number of sons and daughters arrested for killing mothers from 1976 through 1999 by juvenile and adult status. As depicted in Table 1, the number of adults arrested for killing mothers ranged from 61 to 104 and averaged 84 per year during this 24-year period. Adult daughters were the killers in 16% of these cases overall; the number of mothers they killed per year ranged from 7 to 18 and averaged 13.

The number of mothers killed by male and female juveniles was substantially lower than their adult counterparts. The number of offenders younger than 18 years arrested for matricide ranged from 8 to 24 and averaged 17 per year. Girls younger than 18 years were the killers in 20% of the matricide incidents committed by juveniles; the number of mothers they killed ranged from 1 to 7 and averaged less than 4 per year.

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Examining the professional literature on matricide with the aim of comparing the motivations of different offender types (male adults, male juveniles, female adults, and female juveniles) is a difficult undertaking. The literature on matricide is not easily deciphered in terms of offender age and gender. Much of the

parricide literature takes a broad approach to investigating the killing of parents by their offspring. Many of these studies use data that encompasses all types of parricide and parricide offenders in the same report. That is, as discussed below, samples often include both sons and daughters of varying age categories who kill or attempt to kill a variety of victim types (mothers, fathers, stepparents, adopted parents, both parents, and parents along with other family members). In many of these reports, findings are not analyzed by victim gender and offender age and gender. Accordingly, it is not possible to draw conclusions specifically with respect to a particular type of parricide offender, such as teenage daughters as opposed to adult sons who kill their mothers.

Following a critique of this literature, attention turns to the review of studies focusing on matricide and, in some cases, parricide, when findings are not analyzed by type of victim. The literature review first focuses on studies of adult or predominantly adult male matricide offenders, followed by studies of female parricide offenders, and then case studies of adult female matricide offenders. After the discussion of the adult literature, the literature on juvenile and adolescent parricide offenders is presented, followed by the synthesis of case studies of male and female adolescent matricide offenders, respectively, and finally case studies of adolescents involved in double parricides and familicides.

As the discussion will reveal, perusal of the available literature indicates that several studies of adult matricide offenders exist. The in-depth studies of juvenile or adolescent matricide offenders, in contrast, are few. Almost all the research reported on matricide offenses consists of male offenders. As discussed below, the literature on girls who kill mothers is sparse indeed.

### Parricide Studies

The literature on parricide suffers from several methodological problems (Hillbrand & Cipriano, 2007; Walsh et al., 2008). Many studies and review articles *combine cases of patricide and matricide and discuss their findings primarily in terms of parents killed by their children*. This methodology has been used in studies involving both adult offenders (see, for e.g., Baxter, Duggan, Larkin, Cordess, & Page, 2001; Hillbrand, Alexandre, Young, & Spitz, 1999; Kirschner, 1992; LeBihan & Benezech, 2004; Marleau, Auclair, & Millaud, 2006; Millaud et al., 1996; McCarthy et al., 2001; Rozycka & Thille, 1972) and juveniles who kill parents (Auclair, Marleau, Millaud, & Toutant, 2006; Corder, Ball, Haizlip, Rollins, & Beaumont, 1976; Dutton & Yamini, 1995; Ewing, 2001; Heide, 1992; Kashani, Darby, Allan, Hartke, & Reid, 1997). Combining matricide with patricide cases risks obscuring differences that may exist between the two victim groups. Research has indicated that differences in demographic and case variables between matricide and patricide offenders, victims, and incidents in the United States do exist (Heide, 1992, 1993b, 1993c; Heide & Petee, 2003, 2007a, 2007b). Differences in motivational dynamics propelling the killings of mothers and

fathers also have been suggested in the clinical literature (Heide, 1992; Marleau, Millaud, & Auclair, 2001).

*Some studies include in their analyses cases in which both parents are killed and cases in which a single parent is slain* (see, e.g., Marleau et al., 2006; Millaud et al., 1996). There are studies that include cases in which other relatives are killed, provided that there is at least one parent among the victims whom the offender killed (see, e.g., LeBihan & Benezech, 2004) or attempted to kill (Newhill, 1991). The *inclusion of double parricide cases* with single victim cases is particularly suspect. The dynamics involved in these cases are quite likely to differ from those involved in cases when a child kills one parent (Marleau et al., 2006). It is best to analyze these cases separately as illustrated in the works of several investigators (see, e.g., Cooke, 2001; Maas, Prakash, Hollender, & Regan, 1984; Weisman, Ehrenclou, & Sharma, 2002). Although double parricides are typically perpetrated by sons (see, e.g., Bourget et al., 2007), two cases of females killing two parents were identified. Chamberlain (1986) reported the case of a 20-year-old daughter who killed both parents and Reinhardt (1970) discussed the case of a 16-year-old girl who killed her mother and stepfather.

Some studies include in their samples and subsequent analyses of parricide offenders individuals who *attempted to kill their parents* (Marleau et al., 2003, 2006; Millaud et al., 1996; Newhill, 1991; Weisman & Sharma, 1997), whereas others do not. The literature on homicide has established that often what distinguishes an attempted murder from a completed one is a chance factor, such as the marksmanship of the offender, the physical stamina of the victim, and the availability of medical care (Block, 1977; Heide, 1999). Thus, combining attempted murders with completed acts is defensible. However, some caution is advised, as comparative analyses of parricide and attempted cases have found some differences (Marleau et al., 2003; Weisman & Sharma, 1997).

Some studies include *stepparents* among their samples of parents slain (see, e.g., Marleau et al., 2003; Shon & Targonski, 2003). The inclusion of stepparents, although common in the clinical literature, is not without risk. The motivational dynamics involved in killing a stepparent may differ from those involved in killing a biological parent (Daly & Wilson, 1988). In addition, differences in demographic and case variables between biological parents and stepparents slain have been found (Heide, 1993b, 1993c; Walsh et al., 2008). Including *adopted parents* in parricide analyses (see, e.g., Irastorza, 1982; Marleau et al., 2003; Wick et al., 2008) is questionable. Studies focusing on adoptees who kill their adopted parents have suggested that the dynamics involved in these killings differ from those involved in killing biological parents (see, Finch, 2001; Kirschner, 1992).

Many studies *combine both male and female offenders* in their analyses of the killings of mothers and fathers. This methodological practice has been used in studies involving adult parricide offenders (see, for e.g., Baxter et al., 2001; Marleau et al., 2006; Rozycka & Thille, 1972; Weisman & Sharma, 1997) and juveniles who kill parents (Auclair et al., 2006;

Corder et al., 1976; Heide, 1992; Marleau et al., 2006). Researchers have usually combined both genders to bolster the number of cases. The number of female parricide offenders in these studies is typically small and would not permit analysis by gender. Still, these studies risk obscuring gender differences.

Many studies focus on *males who kill parents*. Although most of these focus on *adult offenders* (LeBihan & Benezech, 2004; Maas et al., 1984; Millaud et al., 1996; Weisman et al., 2002), some of them include *both juvenile and adult subjects* (Bourget et al., 2007; Cooke, 2001; Kirschner, 1992; Sadoff, 1971). The inclusion of sample subjects without controlling for age is problematic. For example, research has revealed differences in weapons used to kill parents by offender age (Heide, 1993c; Heide & Petee 2003, 2007b) and in motivational dynamics behind the crime (Heide, 1992; Hillbrand & Cipriano, 2007; Marleau et al., 2006).

Some studies that include both juvenile and adult offenders do discuss differences between these age groups, particularly as they apply to motivational dynamics. However, these studies do not differentiate between type of victim (mother or father) and gender of the offender. Rather, differences between juvenile and adult offenders are discussed in general without regard to victim gender (Cooke, 2001; Hillbrand et al., 1999; Marleau et al., 2006).

Some studies appropriately restrict their sample to *adults only* (see, for e.g., Baxter et al., 2001; LeBihan & Benezech, 2004; Marleau et al., 2003; Weisman et al., 2002; Weisman & Sharma, 1997). Samples from some of these studies, however, consist of *hospitalized subjects* (see, for e.g., Baxter et al., 2001; LeBihan & Benezech, 2004; Marleau et al., 2003, Millaud et al., 1996). The extent to which findings pertaining to subjects who are hospitalized for evaluation or found not guilty by reason of insanity are generalizable to the population of parricide offenders is not known, a point made by Chiswick (1981) more than 25 years ago.

*Our review of the literature found only two comparative studies of matricide and patricide events that examined type of parricidal incident by gender of offenders.* Using coroners' records, Bourget et al. (2007) identified 64 cases of parents killed by juvenile and adult children in Quebec, Canada between 1990 and 2005. This sample was *one of the few studies to include nonhospitalized cases*. This study found, consistent with previous literature, that parents were typically slain by adult sons; only 4 of 64 cases involved female perpetrators. Three of the four female parricide offenders killed their mothers. Sons, in contrast, were more likely to kill their fathers; 36 of the 60 victims killed by sons were fathers. All nine of the double parricides were committed by sons. The large number of male offenders permitted comparisons to be made between sons who killed mothers and those who killed fathers. Psychosis and/or psychotic delusions predominated in both patricidal and matricidal incidents committed by sons. Psychotic symptoms were present in two of the three matricide cases, and depression was evident in the one patricide case in which daughters were the perpetrators.

The second comparative study used SHR data over the 28-year period 1976–2003 to examine gender differences in 2,599 offenders who killed parents and stepparents (Walsh et al., 2008). Offenders aged 21 years and younger were included in the study. Consistent with past literature, boys outnumbered girls 7:1 in the killing of mothers. Several significant differences were found when results were analyzed by victim type. Girls who killed mothers tended to be younger than their male counterparts. Girls who killed mothers peaked in the mid-adolescent age category (14–17 years); boys, in the late adolescent age category (18–21 years). Although girls who killed fathers were significantly more likely than boys to be African American, no significant racial differences were found between boys and girls who killed mothers. Contrary to the researchers' hypotheses, no significant differences were found by offender gender in the selection of weapons used to kill mothers. Firearms were the most frequently selected weapon by both girls and boys.

### *Studies of Adult or Predominantly Adult Matricide Offenders*

Most of the literature on matricide consists of killings by adult sons, as shown in Table 2. Several studies, however, include both juveniles and adults in their samples of matricide offenders. The studies that used mixed age samples of offenders are presented in Table 3.

Four cohort studies of adult male matricide offenders evaluated in forensic or hospitalized settings currently exist with sample sizes ranging from 13 to 58 (Campion et al., 1985; Green, 1981; O'Connell, 1963; Singhal & Dutta, 1992). Nearly all the matricide offenders in these samples were single adult males. Schizophrenia was commonly diagnosed among adult male matricide offenders. Extensive histories of problematic relationships between mothers and sons were typically apparent. These offenders often reported feeling that their mothers were either ambivalent toward them or excessively domineering.

Another study included *both juvenile/adolescents and adults* in its sample of 12 hospitalized matricide offenders; findings were not analyzed in this manuscript by age (McKnight et al., 1966). Results for this mixed sample were similar to those of adult matricide offender samples in terms of mental illness and level of violence used. A more recent study, which also included juvenile and adult perpetrators, identified 11 cases of matricide occurring from 1985 to 2004 in South Australia (Wick et al., 2008). Of the 11 cases, 10 were committed by sons. One offender committed suicide following the killing. Of the remaining 10, 7 were found not guilty by reason of insanity and an eighth offender had charges reduced from murder to manslaughter due to mental impairment.

Case reports of adult male matricide offenders also exist (Hill & Sargant, 1943; Lipson, 1986; Livaditis, Esagian, Kakoulidis, Samakouri, & Tzavaras, 2005; Meloy, 1996; Oberdalloff, 1974; Revitch & Schlesinger, 1981; Silberstein, 1998; Sugai, 1999). The majority of these case studies focused

TABLE 2. Adult Matricide Offenders<sup>a</sup>

Authors	Year of publication	Country of study	Number of subjects sample design/data source	Offender gender	
				Male	Female
Hill & Sargant	1943	England	Case study: adult male matricide offender	✓	
O'Connell	1963	England	Clinical analysis of 13 adult male matricide offenders, aged 19–40 years, in psychiatric setting	✓	
Oberdalloff	1974	Germany	Case study: adult male matricide offender, aged 50 years	✓	
Green	1981	England	Clinical survey 1960–1979: 58 male patients institutionalized in a psychiatric hospital (49 cases—mothers were only victims; in remaining cases, 5 fathers and 8 other relatives were also killed)	✓	
Väisänen and Väisänen	1983	Finland	Case study: female matricide offender, aged 22 years		✓
Campion et al.	1985	United States	Clinical evaluations: Forensic sample of 15 men, aged 21–63 years, 1970–1982	✓	
Chamberlain	1986	United States	Case study: 20 year-old female offender who killed both parents		✓
Lipson	1986	United States	Case study: 34-year-old male matricide offender	✓	
D'Orbán and O'Connor	1989	England	Case study: 17 women, aged 17–54 years, in prison or under medical care for killing a parent (14 matricide, 3 patricide)		✓
Singhal and Dutta	1992	England	Retrospective clinical survey: 16 schizophrenic adult males who committed matricide, aged 28–55 years Control group used: 16 hospitalized chronically schizophrenic adult males who did not commit matricide, aged 28–55 years	✓	
Meloy	1996	United States	Case study: adult male matricide offender, aged 33 years	✓	
Weisman and Sharma	1997	United States	Clinical archive study: (retrospective—1978–1996) 64 adjudicated adult cases: 40 male and 5 female parricide offenders; 16 male and 3 female attempted parricide offenders 45 parricide offenders: 23 matricide, 16 patricide, 6 parricide 19 attempted parricide offenders: 11 attempted matricide, 7 attempted patricide, 1 attempted parricide	✓	✓
Silberstein	1998	Argentina	Review of parricide literature from a psychodynamic approach Case study: adult male who committed matricide	✓	
Sugai	1999	Japan	Case study: adult male matricide offender, aged 25 years	✓	
Baxter et al.	2001	England and Wales	Comparative data analyses of consecutive series of parricides with consecutive series of stranger killings—all mentally disordered offenders 98 parricide offenders: 89 men, 9 women; 6 double parricide, 57 matricide, 41 patricide 159 stranger killers: 151 men, 8 women; 139 single-stranger victim, 11 two-stranger victims, 3 three-stranger victims, 6 four or more stranger victims	✓	✓
Livaditis et al.	2005	Greece	Forensic case study: adult male matricide offender, aged 43 years	✓	

<sup>a</sup> Studies on matricide and comparative studies on parricide that include matricide.

on men who committed acts of violence against their mothers during a mentally disordered state. These men were frequently described as considering the act of killing their mothers as either liberating to maintain their masculinity or as protection against extreme emotions triggered by their mothers' behavior. Similar to cohort studies of matricidal men, the case studies depicted mothers and sons with long-term dysfunctional relationships that culminated in violence. Legal outcomes of these cases were briefly discussed with most offenders receiving long prison sentences.

Although these cases studies also depicted adult matricide offenders as suffering from mental illness, caution is advised in generalizing to the population of adult matricide offenders. The majority of the extant research on the subject has focused

on offenders who have been hospitalized after the killings for psychiatric evaluation. Additional factors, explanations, and motivations might be operative in cases of adult matricide offenders who are not hospitalized following the murders.

Matricide cases discussed in the literature on occasion cross age and gender categories. An article focusing on three matricide offenders, written in French, included two adult males and one female juvenile (Fontaine & Guérard des Lauriers, 1994). One of the adult offenders, age 21 years, and the 15-year-old girl were found to be seriously mentally disturbed and potentially treatable. The other male adult offender, age 45 years, was judged to be antisocial, not amenable to treatment, and more appropriately treated in the legal system than the mental health arena.

**TABLE 3.** Mixed Samples of Adult/Juvenile Matricide Offenders<sup>a</sup>

Authors	Year of publication	Country of study	Sample design/methods/sources	Offender	
				Male	Female
McKnight et al.	1966	Canada	Clinical analysis of 12 matricide offenders, aged 15–39, in a psychiatric hospital	✓	
Malmquist	1980	Unites States	Case study: eight cases of familicide all committed by males; three familicides included mothers as victims; offenders were aged 14, 18, and 21 years	✓	
Kirschner	1992	United States	Case Study: review adult male adoptee, aged 44 years, killed mother; adolescent male adoptee, aged 18, killed both parents; adolescent male adoptee, aged 14 years, killed both parents	✓	
Clark	1993	Scotland	Retrospective/National study: all individuals in Scotland between 1957 and 1987 who were charged with the murder of their biological mother: 23 men, 3 women, aged 16–62 years	✓	✓
Fontaine and Guérard des Lauriers	1994	France	Case study: juvenile female matricide offender, aged 15 years; adult male matricide offender, aged 21 years; adult male matricide offender, aged 45 years	✓	✓
Marleau et al.	2001	Multicountry	38 cases of female adult and adolescent parricide offenders reported in the literature		✓
Bourget et al.	2007	Canada	Clinical archive study: (retrospective—1990–2005) Comparative study between matricide and patricide 56 parricide offenders: 52 males, aged 14–58 years, 36 patricide and 24 matricide victims 4 female aged “late teens to 50s”; 1 patricide and 3 matricide victims	✓	✓
Wick et al.	2008	Australia	20-year retrospective review of matricide cases. 10 males and 1 female aged 15–35 years	✓	✓

<sup>a</sup> Studies on matricide and comparative studies on parricide that include matricide.

The literature on adult daughters who kill their mothers is sparse when compared to the literature available on parricide in general or on sons who kill mothers. Clark's (1993) study of matricide offenders in Scotland included all matricides that occurred from 1957 to 1987. Three of the 26 offspring who killed their mothers were female. The low representation of females over the 30-year period indicated that women were significantly less likely than men to commit matricide in Scotland. Results were not analyzed by gender. Although psychosis was overrepresented in the sample of 26 offenders, Clark argued against viewing matricide as being solely a schizophrenic crime. He emphasized the need for psychiatric assessment in these cases. Although 10 of the 26 had serious mental illness (schizophrenia, psychotic depression, and hypomania), 16 did not. Of these 16, 4 were diagnosed with alcohol dependence; another 5, with personality disorders. The seven remaining matricide offenders were not diagnosed with a mental illness.

All the 10 offenders diagnosed with serious mental illness received hospital dispositions. Three of the four offenders with alcohol dependence, six of the seven with no diagnosis, and three of the five with personality disorders received prison sentences. Eight of the 12 sentenced to prison received life sentences. Clark (1993) noted that “where no explanation of behavior could be forwarded to the court, the individual was more likely to receive a life sentence” (p. 328).

### *Studies of Female Parricide Offenders*

Our review of the literature found only two studies that included more than a few cases of daughters killing mothers. D'Orbán and O'Connor (1989) focused on 17 women who committed 14 matricides and three patricides in England. Eleven of these sample subjects came from a female “remand prison” (detention facility), five from a special hospital, and one from a Regional Secure Hospital. Interestingly and importantly, five of these women had never been hospitalized. Accordingly, had the sample been drawn exclusively from a hospital, nearly 30% of these cases would have been missed, a point noted by the investigators.

The researchers found that the social situation of these 17 women was characterized by extreme isolation. Only two of the subjects were married; 12 were single and the remaining three women were divorced or widowed. Those who killed their mothers differed from those who killed their fathers in offender age, victim age, social situation, nature of the victim-offender relationship, and psychiatric history and diagnosis. Matricide offenders tended to be middle aged women who killed their elderly mothers. Twelve of the 14 matricide offenders were living with their mothers at the time of the homicide. Their relationship with their mothers, with one exception, had been conflictual for years and was marked by extreme dependence

on each other and underlying feelings of resentment and hostility. All the matricide offenders were diagnosed with a psychiatric disorder. Eleven were diagnosed as suffering from a psychotic illness (six with schizophrenia and five with psychotic depression). Two were diagnosed with personality disorders, and one with alcohol dependence. Depression was observed as prominent in eight matricide offenders.

The three female patricide offenders, in contrast, were younger and their victims were correspondingly younger, middle aged rather than elderly population. Only one daughter was living with her father at the time of the incident. Chronic conflict and abuse were suggested in all three patricide cases. One of the three women who killed her father was diagnosed as having an antisocial personality; the other two women were not viewed as having a psychiatric disorder. A sexual element was reportedly involved in two of the three patricide cases, but only in one of the 14 matricide cases.

All 17 parricide subjects were charged with murder. Only one was convicted of murder and sentenced to life imprisonment. On appeal, this individual was also determined to be suffering from diminished responsibility and her sentence was substantially reduced. Of the remaining 16, 3 were determined to be incompetent to proceed, 11 were convicted of manslaughter on the basis of diminished responsibility, and 2 were convicted of ordinary manslaughter. Follow-up ranged from 1 to 15 years for sample subjects. Three of the women committed suicide. Only one woman committed another offense. This woman who had suffered from recurrent bouts of psychotic depression when she killed her mother later killed her husband in a similar delusional state. She was again deemed to have diminished responsibility for her actions.

A review of the literature on female parricides by Marleau et al. (2001), written in French, identified 38 cases of daughters who killed or, in 5 cases, attempted to kill one or more of their parents. The authors analyzed these cases by victim type, age of offender, weapon used, and situational dynamics. Of the 38 cases, 21 involved mothers as the sole victim or as among the victims. Sixteen of the matricide offenders in this sample of case reports were adolescents or young adults; only five of the incidents in which mothers were killed involved offenders age 20 years or older. Marleau et al. concluded that the motivations for the killing of parents varied depending on victim type and age of the offender. They advised that females who murder parents should not be treated as a homogenous category.

### *Case Studies of Adult Female Matricide Offenders*

In contrast to many case reports available on adult sons who killed mothers, we found only two case studies of adult females who killed mothers written in the English language and published in journals. Both of these cases involved women in their early 20s. One of them killed her mother; the other, both parents.

Väisänen and Väisänen (1983) presented a case study of Lisa, a 21- or 22-year-old daughter who killed her mother. They described a home filled with violence and rancor. The

parents were engaged in domestic violence, and there was apparently incestuous behavior between the father and the children, and the siblings with one another. The mother was described as physically, mentally, and verbally abusive toward her children. She reportedly tried to drown two of her children by her first marriage and later succeeded in killing her second husband, Lisa's father.

Lisa was tormented by her mother for years. Unable to get help as an adolescent, she attempted suicide later on, sought treatment briefly, and eventually ran away. When she returned home, she was drinking heavily and had obsessive thoughts that she would have to kill her mother or die herself. The matricide occurred on the first year anniversary of Lisa's father's death. At the time of the killing, the young woman was drunk and had just been humiliated again by her mother. "In a flash thought that she would have to kill her mother," she stabbed her mother multiple times (p. 122).

Family and friends were not surprised by the killing. They expected that the mother would kill herself or kill Lisa because the mother had been saying farewell to friends and to her grandchildren prior to the killing. The authors viewed the murder as the daughter acting as the agent of her mother's suicide. They noted that the family was relieved after the killing and intended to support the young woman during her prison sentence (Väisänen & Väisänen, 1983).

Chamberlain (1986) discussed the dynamics behind a 20-year-old woman who killed both parents. Psychotic symptoms were detected more than a year prior to the homicide and she was referred for psychiatric care. There was some disagreement in diagnosis following the murders. In contrast to mental health professionals who diagnosed the young woman as schizophrenic, Chamberlain believed that she was bipolar and committed the double parricide during "an acute manic episode marked by grandiose delusions and paranoid ideation" (p. 11). The defendant was found not guilty by reason of insanity. Chamberlain followed her for a few years during which she remained hospitalized.

### *Studies Involving Juvenile and Adolescent Parricide Offenders*

The literature discussed below highlights primarily findings from studies of youths who typically ranged from 12 to 17 years of age, although some research included youths who were younger and even adolescents in their late teens, that is, 18 or 19 years of age. In recognition of reporting practices in the professional literature, the terms juvenile and adolescent are treated as equivalent terms in the review that follows. Similar to the literature on adult parricide, several analyses of youths who killed parents included cases of both boys and girls in their discussion of the dynamics involved in the killings of parents (see, for e.g., Ewing, 1997, 1990; Heide, 1992, Scherl & Mack, 1966).

As depicted in Table 4, research on juvenile and adolescent parricide offenders has focused almost exclusively on boys. Two studies that compared parricidal adolescents with other

**TABLE 4.** Juvenile Matricide Offenders

Authors	Year of publication	Country of study	Sample design/methods/sources	Offender	
				Male	Female
Wertham	1941	United States	Case study: 15-year-old male matricide offender	✓	
Schwade and Geiger	1953	United States	Case study: 13-year-old male matricide offender	✓	
Medlicott	1955	New Zealand	Case study: 2 juvenile female matricide offenders (1 victim) aged 15 and 16 years		✓
Winfield and Ozturk	1959	United States	Case study: 13-year-old male matricide offender	✓	
Scherl and Mack	1966	United States	Case study primarily: 14-year-old male matricide offender	✓	
Reinhardt	1970	United States	Case study: 16-year-old boy who killed mother and father; 16-year-old girl who killed mother and stepfather	✓	✓
Mohr and McKnight	1971	Canada	Case study primarily: 3 male matricide offenders, aged 15–17 years	✓	
Sadoff	1971	United States	Case study: 17-year-old male matricide offender	✓	
Mack et al.	1973	United States	Case study: 3 male matricide offenders, aged 14–16 years; 1 female matricide offender, aged 16 years	✓	✓
Tanay	1973, 1976	United States	Case study: 15-year-old matricide offender	✓	
Russell	1984	United States	Case study: 4 male matricide offenders, aged 15–16 years	✓	
Mouridsen and Tolstrup	1988	Denmark	Case study: 9-year-old male matricide offender	✓	
Heide	1992	United States	Case study: 12-year-old matricide offender, killed mother and brother	✓	
Schlesinger	1999	United States	Case study: 16-year-old male matricide offender	✓	
Slovenko	2003	United States	Commentary/review, legal case study; 15-year-old male matricide offender	✓	

types of homicide offenders, each had one girl in their samples of 10 and 11 (Auclair et al., 2006; Corder et al., 1976). Most of the literature on juvenile and adolescent parricide offenders available in the English language consists of case studies or clinical reports involving boys who killed biological fathers (Heide, 1994; see Duncan & Duncan, 1971; Evans, McGovern-Kondik, & Peric, 2005; Heide, 1992; Post, 1982; Tanay, 1973). In these cases, youths were frequently portrayed as killing in response to long-standing abuse.

Based on her own clinical experiences and review of the professional and legal literature, Heide (1992) proposed a typology consisting of three types of parricide offenders. The first type, the *severely abused child*, had a long and easily documented history of being abused by one or both parents. This individual killed the parent out of desperation or terror. The primary motivation for the killing was to end the abuse. The second type, the *severely mentally ill child*, killed the parent due to severe mental illness, which typically was long standing, but not always diagnosed before the killing (Newhill, 1991). The third type, the *dangerously antisocial child*, killed the parent to serve a selfish instrumental purpose, such as getting freedom or money (Heide, 1992, 1997).

Heide noted that abuse is often found across parricide types. She argued that the critical factor in determining the classification of the parricide offender was the motivation behind the killing, *not the existence of abuse per se* (Heide, 1992). Heide noted that the *severely abused child* was most commonly seen among juvenile and adolescent parricide offenders, the *severely mentally ill child*, among adult parricide offenders. The

*dangerously antisocial child* was seen across age categories. Parricide offenders who killed to achieve an instrumental goal would most likely be diagnosed as conduct disorder youth if younger than 18 years of age and as having antisocial personality disorder if older than 18 years (Heide, 1997).

Heide (1992) identified 12 characteristics often found in cases of abused children, particularly boys, who kill parents, notably fathers: pattern of family violence; youth's attempts to obtain help from other people fail; youth's efforts to escape the family situation fail (e.g., running away, suicide attempts, suicidal thoughts); youth is isolated from other people; home life becomes increasingly intolerable; youth feels trapped and helpless; youth loses control due to inability to cope; youth has little or no criminal history; a gun is available; and the deceased is often a heavy user of alcohol and/or drugs. In adolescent parricide cases, the youth is often stressed to the point of dissociation during the homicidal incident and the parent's death is frequently perceived as a relief to the offender and to the surviving family members.

Although parricide cannot be predicted, Heide (1992) noted that five factors when present put abused youths at higher risk of behaving violently than when these factors are not present. First, the youth is raised in a home in which parental chemical dependency or other severe family dysfunction is present. Second, a pattern of family violence has been ongoing for years. Typically, several types of abuse (physical, verbal, psychological, and sexual) and neglect (emotional, physical, and medical) are found in these homes. If there is a nonabusive parent, this parent does not protect the children. The failure to protect in

these cases is physical neglect because parents have a duty to protect their children from physical and emotional harm. Third, conditions in these homes go from bad to worse and violence increases. Fourth, over time the youth becomes increasingly vulnerable to the unremitting turmoil in these homes. Fifth, a firearm (handgun, rifle, shotgun) is easily available.

### *Case Studies of Male Adolescent Matricide Offenders*

Although her cases consisted of mainly boys who killed fathers, Heide (1992) discussed one case of a boy who decided to kill his mother and also wound up killing his younger brother in the process. Psychological abuse and emotional neglect by the mother propelled the boy's murderous behavior. Several other case studies of boys who killed biological mothers appear in the literature (Mack, Scherl, & Macht, 1973; Mohr & McKnight, 1971; Mouridsen & Tolstrup, 1988; Sadoff, 1971; Scherl & Mack, 1966; Schlesinger, 1999; Schwade & Geiger, 1953; Slovenko, 2003; Tanay, 1973, 1976; Winfield & Ozturk, 1959). Wertham's account of the 15-year-old Gino who killed his mother, published in 1941, remains a classic in the field of matricide. The findings in relation to the cases involving matricide by juveniles parallel the case studies of adult male matricide offenders discussed earlier in terms of family dynamics and psychological problems (Wertham, 1941). Adolescent matricide offenders, however, are less likely than their adult counterparts to have long-standing histories of severe mental illness. Typically, the prognosis for youths who kill mothers in a psychotic state is better than for adult matricide offenders.

Russell's 1984 study of 11 juvenile murderers of family members included boys who killed fathers (four cases), mothers (four cases), and siblings (three cases). The four matricide offenders had histories of problematic relationships with their mothers, committed their offenses in response to an acute event in their lives in which the mother played a pivotal role and had documented emotional difficulties. In sharp contrast to their adult counterparts, the teenagers involved in these crimes also had histories of maltreatment, including abuse and neglect, which were acknowledged by family, school administrators, and the criminal justice system. These boys had repeatedly run away from home and been returned to the care of their mothers even after seeking help from law enforcement, being monitored by social services, having been diagnosed with severe personality disturbances, and having psychiatric care recommended. Two of the four boys attempted suicide, two of the four boys had recommendations from mental health personnel to be removed from their homes, and one of the boys' mothers had been under psychiatric care after severely beating her son, yet none of these boys were permanently removed from their homes. Russell (1984) emphasized how dysfunctional parental relationships, internalized threatening circumstances, and intense conflict and provocation can lead to matricide. He argued that the response to these acts should focus on a therapeutic approach as opposed to a punitive one.

### *Case Studies of Female Adolescent Matricide Offenders*

In their synthesis of the literature on female parricide offenders mentioned above, Marleau et al. (2001) identified 16 cases in which female offenders 19 years of age or younger killed or, in four cases, attempted to kill mothers. Many of the accounts mentioned in the literature they reviewed were very brief (see, e.g., Streaun & Freeman, 1991). Several others were not written in English, making them less accessible to those not fluent particularly in the French and German languages.

Our review of the literature found only three detailed case studies of girls who killed their mothers written in the English language (Kromm, Vasile, & Gutheil, 1982; Medlicott, 1955; Scherl & Mack, 1966). Medlicott (1955) discussed the motivational dynamics that led to the killing of a mother by the woman's 16-year-old daughter, Pauline, and her 15-year-old friend, Juliet. Medlicott attributed the killing to the infatuation that the two girls had with each other. Over time, both the girls developed a shared delusional belief system in which they saw themselves as geniuses with no equals. Although both girls had no history of delinquent behavior prior to their meeting, their thoughts and writings became increasingly antisocial and violent over the nearly 2-year course of their friendship. When it appeared that the girls would be geographically separated due to Juliet's family moving to another country, they devised a plan to kill Pauline's mother who was viewed as the obstacle preventing Pauline from moving away with Juliet's family.

Writings from Pauline's diary depicted the girls as very excited and exalted as they talked about the upcoming murder. Excerpts from the diaries indicated the girls had extreme mood swings ranging from euphoria to despair, seemed to require little sleep, and shared the same delusions, such as having an extra part of their brains that allowed them access to a special place called the "Fourth World," which they deemed "Paradise." Although the murder was premeditated, it was poorly planned and the girls were quickly apprehended. Both confessed to their involvement (Medlicott, 1955).

Medlicott and another defense expert believed that the girls suffered from "paranoia of the exalted type." Interviews with both girls clearly indicated that they knew the nature and quality of their act and that killing Pauline's mother was against the law and mores of the community. Accordingly, the jury did not find them insane and convicted them. Medlicott noted that the girls did not express remorse for the killing and seemed not to foresee the likely consequences that would result from their murderous behavior, which included separation from one another (Medlicott, 1955).

The second in-depth analysis involved a 16-year-old girl named Nell, the only girl among four juvenile matricide offenders discussed in a book chapter by Mack et al. (1973). Nell was one of six children and the only girl in "an upwardly mobile black family which placed considerable emphasis on social respectability and guarded itself against revealing inner conflict to the world" (p. 328). The girl was reportedly a quiet

and sullen youth. She shot her mother to death and later told police that she had intended to kill both her parents.

Similar to the situations of the three male matricide offenders, Nell's mother was depicted as "highly restrictive and critical" (p. 328). Statements the girl made suggested that she was physically and psychologically abused by her mother. Mack et al. noted, that in contrast to their three male cases, Nell stated that she had never felt close to either parent and felt unloved since early childhood. Nell told her therapist that she felt that she had to kill someone. She wanted her mother dead because she hated her mother. She related that, if she had not killed her mother, no one would realize that something was wrong with her.

The girl developed a paranoid psychotic state and experienced delusions and hallucinations. She was afraid her dead mother would return to earth to kill her. Although initially she maintained that her mother deserved to die, she later begged God for forgiveness so that she would not have to kill others or die herself. Unlike the three male matricide offenders, Nell did not show therapeutic improvement within several months of the killing. Three years after the killing, "Nell remained hospitalized in a deluded, paranoid, and child-like state, plagued with continuing homicidal and suicidal preoccupations" (p. 329).

The third case involved a 17-year-old girl who stabbed her mother to death and reported no memory of the event. Kromm et al. (1982) described an evaluative process designed to access the patient's personality and development through art therapy. The girl was described on admission to the hospital as "cooperative, controlled, distant, intelligent and articulate," (p. 86) and at times as having periods of dissociation. Testing indicated "a tightly controlled schizoid personality structure with marked narcissistic features, abnormal objects relations, and difficulty with impulse control" (p. 86).

The girl lived with her mother as an only child for more than 16 years without any other significant relationships. Her parents divorced when she was an infant; she did not see her father again until she was 13 years old. The girl's mother was a successful businesswoman. The girl functioned in many ways as a surrogate spouse, cooking and cleaning, and serving as her mother's confidante. The evening before the killing, the woman came home drunk from a party, threw up, and was cleaned up by her daughter.

The girl had few friends of her own and socialized with her mother's friends. The girl aspired to go into a similar profession as her mother. The consulting psychiatrist opined that "this close relationship was characterized by little depth of feeling as well as mutually shared and fragile ego boundaries in a symbiotic tie, in which murder may have been perceived as the only exit from an intolerable dependency" (p. 86). The girl was subsequently found not guilty due to insanity at her trial for murder. She was treated, released from the hospital, and later committed suicide.

### *Case Studies of Double Parricides and Multiple Family Killings*

Juvenile involvement in parricides involving more than one victim is very rare (Heide, 1992, 1993a, 1993b; Heide & Petee,

2007a). The literature contains a few case reports of double parricide and multiple family killings in which mothers were among the victims killed by adolescent perpetrators. As noted above, although we suspect that the dynamics involved in the killings of two or more family members are different from those involved in single victim incidents, we mention them briefly here. Malmquist's study of familicide involved eight cases in which eight male perpetrators killed multiple family members; none of the mass killers were females. Three of the eight male assassins were sons aged 14, 18, and 21 years; each of them killed both of his parents and at least one sibling (Malmquist, 1980). Two of these three would be classified as adolescents.

In 4 of the 16 cases identified by Marleau et al. (2001) in which females younger than 20 years killed mothers, fathers were also killed during these events. Two of the case studies profiled in a book called *Nothing Left But Murder* (Reinhardt, 1970) involved double parricides. One involved a 16-year-old boy who killed his mother and father; the other, discussed further below, involved a 16-year-old girl who killed her mother and stepfather.

Reinhardt (1970) explained the factors that led Caron, a 16-year-old girl, to kill her mother and her stepfather as they lay sleeping. Caron had never felt loved as a child. She deduced from events and her mother's answers to her questions that she was illegitimate. Corroborative data indicated that her parents were heavy drinkers and likely alcoholics. Caron's responsibilities included taking care of her five younger siblings while her parents drank in the tavern and then making sure her parents got safely home. Caron had an extensive array of chores to do that included stocking the feed on the farm, carrying heavy loads, toting bags of food, keeping up the household, and preparing breakfast. Caron was rarely allowed to participate in activities at school. Although her parents did not want her to date as a teen, they pushed her to see a 39-year-old man and to go off with him. Caron came to hate her parents.

Reinhardt's case report is replete with evidence that Caron was physically and emotionally neglected by her parents and subjected to both psychological and physical abuse by them. She became obsessed with the idea of killing her parents after her brother had showed her how to load the shotgun. She got to the point where she felt that she could no longer endure living in that household with her parents and convinced herself that her younger siblings, whom she loved deeply, would be better off without their mother and father.

After the killings, Caron felt relief, not remorse. She experienced peace and happiness in the jail and was struck by the kindness of the Sheriff's family and her clean and nice jail cell. The judge recognized that there were extenuating cases in Caron's case. However, he sentenced her to prison for 30 years to ensure that the punishment would deter other youths in similar or worse circumstances (Reinhardt, 1970).

### **CONCLUSIONS**

Our review of the literature indicates that many studies and clinical reports that investigate the killings of parents by their

children currently exist. Unfortunately, drawing firm conclusions about specific types of matricide and patricide offenders is difficult due to methodological issues plaguing this body of literature. Much of the research, including investigations with sample sizes of 10 or more, does not specifically target victim type (mother or father) by offender type (son or daughter), controlling for age (juvenile or adult) and incident type (single victim-single offender, multiple victims-single offender, single victim-multiple offenders, multiple victims-multiple offenders).

Not surprisingly, given the demographics on offenders who kill parents, most of the literature focuses on male offenders. Yet, analyses of parents slain by their offspring over a 24-year period revealed that killings by females are indeed worthy of note. Daughters comprised 14.5% of offspring arrested for killing their parents from 1976 to 1999 (Heide & Petee, 2007a).

When the involvement of females as perpetrators in parricide incidents is examined by victim gender, the representation of daughters in killing mothers is higher than their overall representation in parricide or patricide incidents. Approximately one of six mothers killed from 1976 to 1999 by their adult offspring was female. During the same period, the proportion of mothers slain by female juveniles was even higher. About 20% of mothers killed by juvenile offspring were murdered by daughters younger than 18 years.

Research efforts that specifically investigated mothers killed by daughters, particularly by those younger than 18 years of age, are sparse. We found only four in-depth case reports of female juveniles who killed mothers in the professional literature: (a) two adolescent girls who killed one of the girl's mothers in a case of shared *folie à deux*; (b) another female juvenile who killed her mother and stepfather largely due to extreme abuse; (c) a girl who killed her reportedly psychologically abusive mother, maintained that she intended to kill both parents, and remained hospitalized for years in a psychotic state; and (d) lastly, a girl who killed her mother with whom she shared an excessively dependent relationship, had amnesia for the event, was found insane at trial, and later committed suicide.

The first two cases are very unusual, in that one involved two offenders and one involved both parents slain. Most mothers and fathers are slain in single-victim, single-offender incidents (Heide, 1992, 1993b; Heide & Petee, 2007a). Generalizing from these two cases to the adolescent matricide literature is ill-advised, given their infrequency among juvenile parricide offenders.

Severe mental illness is evident in three of the four cases. Interestingly, most youths who kill parents, particularly fathers, are not found to be psychotic or delusional, as the cases presented above were (Heide, 1992). More research specifically focusing on girls who kill mothers is necessary to determine whether this particular group of young parricide offenders is more likely to suffer from severe mental illness than girls who kill fathers.

Abuse, including psychological abuse, is reported in three cases. In at least one case, the daughter, Pauline, who acted with her friend to kill Pauline's mother, is presented as

dangerously antisocial. In this case, mental illness is evident. However, the girls were found criminally responsible for their actions.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH, PRACTICE, AND POLICY

- National studies indicate that on the average, approximately 250 parents are killed by their children in the United States each year. About 100 of these victims are mothers (Boots & Heide, 2006). Yet, despite the frequency of such events, little is known about the perpetrators, particularly when they are females. More research on female matricide offenders is needed. Future studies should focus more on identifying the types of matricide offenders by age and by gender rather than continuing to provide a general overview of all types of matricide or parricide offenders. At this time, it is unwise to draw any firm conclusions with respect to differences between the dynamics involved in these cases by juvenile and adult male and female matricide offenders. Clearly, more in-depth information on the offenders and victims involved in matricidal incidents is needed.
- The likelihood of preventing matricidal incidents could be significantly enhanced with more information on the victims and offenders in these incidents. Unlike many other types of homicides, the victims and offenders have long-standing relationships. The opportunities for the prevention of homicides by intervening before violence has escalated to the point of homicide need to be explored. Although parricides cannot be predicted given their low base rate (Heide, 1992), it is likely that risk factors for both adult and juvenile matricide and patricide offenders can be identified. Heide (1992) noted risk factors for severely abused youths, particularly boys who kill their fathers. Would these risk factors be the same for boys and girls who murder mothers? Can risk factors be identified for adult men and women who kill mothers? If so, intervention could potentially prevent murder.
- Further in-depth comparative studies on juvenile and adult matricide offenders may provide valuable clues for successful intervention strategies, especially with regard to younger offenders. The literature on adult male and female matricide offenders indicates that many killers have significant mental health histories and a few appear antisocial. The literature on male and female juveniles who kill mothers is very limited. The available research on adolescent matricide suggests that mental illness and abuse may play key roles. One classic case study of two girls who killed one of the girl's mother clearly suggests an antisocial motive, possibly exacerbated by mental illness. A larger study of girls who kill mothers is needed to determine which types of parricide offenders are more represented in cases of matricide: the severely abused child, a mentally ill child, or the dangerously antisocial child.
- Although child-parent violence and parricide appear to be distinct and unique crimes (Walsh et al., 2008; Walsh &

- Krienert, 2009), in some cases, does child-initiated family violence serve as a precursor to parricide? Walsh & Krienert (2009) have proposed that there may be an escalation in family violence in certain cases. This hypothesis needs to be investigated, particularly in matricide cases when the offenders are later evaluated as mentally ill or as antisocial. If earlier episodes of aggression against the mother are discernible in these cases, an argument can be made for intensive intervention before violence escalates. Separation of the child, whether juvenile or adult, from his or her mother may be necessary to prevent further violence.
- When mothers present in therapy, clinicians need to inquire about the relationships between mothers and their adult children, particularly when the adult children have significant mental health problems and live in the same home with their mothers. Mothers need to be asked specifically if they are afraid of their sons and daughters, and if they fear that their children could harm them physically. Mental health professionals need to inquire directly if there has been violence in the home because many clients are reluctant and embarrassed to provide this information unless specifically asked.
  - Policy makers need to recognize that extended mental health coverage is a valuable and needed resource to reduce family violence and, in some cases, even homicide. Unlike other types of homicide, the killing of mothers and fathers by their offspring is unlikely to be prevented by putting more police officers on the street or by simply reducing access to firearms. The problems in these families are typically deeply rooted, complex, and private. The literature on matricide, although limited, suggests that access to therapy, hospitalization when indicated, and alternative living homes (e.g., group homes, assisted living facilities) for the mentally ill when needed could help reduce the incidence of matricide and improve the quality of life for the parents and children in many of these families.
  - More in-depth research on long-term outcomes in matricide cases is needed to guide criminal justice practitioners and policy makers in terms of sentencing and disposition when sons and daughters kill their parents. What is the prognosis in cases of severe mental illness? Do these offenders represent a continuing threat to society? In cases of severe mental illness failing short of the threshold for insanity, is long-term incarceration a just sentence? Decision makers often struggle in cases when adolescents kill parents after enduring severe abuse over many years (see, Heide, Boots, Alldredge, Donerly, & White, 2005). How much consideration should judges and juries in the criminal and juvenile justice systems place on abuse in trial and the sentencing decision (Heide & Solomon, 2006; Mones, 1993; Walsh et al., 2008)? What if the abuse is limited to extreme psychological abuse? The long-term follow-up research on matricide offenders could help judges make informed decisions on whether offspring who kill their mothers can be safely released back into society at the time of disposition, require long-term treatment, or warrant life in prison.
  - The school system can play a pivotal role in reducing family violence and preventing homicidal acts by children younger than 18 years of age in several ways (Heide, 1992; Walsh et al., 2008). Teachers can help identify abused children and, working with appropriate venues, take steps to get appropriate intervention in these homes. The addition of child advocates in elementary and high schools to help children who are in distress cope with their situations and find solutions is needed to prevent youths from taking inappropriate steps to end violence in their homes (Heide, 1992).
  - The media, quick to publicize incidents when children kill parents, could play a powerful role in prevention (Heide, 1992). Public service announcements advising parents and children who perceive they are in danger where they can get *immediate help* and temporary shelter to prevent violence could conceivably go a long way to stemming the tide of continued suffering and possibly even murder.

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