

# A UNIQUE KILLING: ADOPTIVE PARENTS WHO KILL THEIR ADOPTED CHILDREN; ADOPTED CHILDREN WHO KILL THEIR ADOPTIVE PARENTS

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Parricide and filicide are surely two of the most unthinkable and rare crimes.<sup>1</sup> Parricide is the killing of a parent or other near relative.<sup>2</sup> Filicide is the killing of a child less than eighteen years old by their parent or guardian.<sup>3</sup> Subsumed under this category are two subcategories.<sup>4</sup> Infanticide is the killing of a child less than one-year-old by their parent or guardian, and neonaticide is the killing of a newborn by a parent within the first twenty-four hours of life.<sup>5</sup> This Article investigates an even more infrequent phenomenon—adoptive parents who kill their adopted children and adopted children who kill their adoptive parents.<sup>6</sup>

## II. BACKGROUND

### A. *The Children*

In 2020, there were 73,368,194 children in the United States.<sup>7</sup> That same year, there were 1,622 international adoptions in the United States.<sup>8</sup> This reflects a forty-five percent decline from the previous year, largely due to the pandemic; it also reflects an eighty-five percent decline from 2010 when 11,058 children were adopted internationally (thirty-nine percent of 2020 international adoptions were boys and sixty-one percent girls).<sup>9</sup> An estimated 57,881 children were adopted in the United States in 2020 through public child welfare agencies<sup>10</sup> (a

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1. See James T. Hubbell et al., *Adopted Children Who Kill Their Adoptive Parents*, 37 BEHAV. SCIS. & L. (SPECIAL ISSUE) 473, 473 (2019); Sara G. West, Review, *An Overview of Filicide*, 4 PSYCHIATRY 48, 48 (2007).

2. Hubbell et al., *supra* note 1, at 473.

3. West, *supra* note 1, at 50.

4. *Id.*

5. *Id.*

6. See discussion *infra* Parts III–IV.

7. CHILD.'S BUREAU, U.S. DEP'T OF HEALTH & HUM. SERVS., CHILD MALTREATMENT 7 (2020).

8. U.S. DEP'T OF STATE, ANNUAL REPORT ON INTERCOUNTRY ADOPTION 5 (2021).

9. *Id.* at 5–6; Abby Budiman & Mark Hugo Lopez, *Amid Decline in International Adoptions to U.S., Boys Outnumber Girls for the First Time*, PEW RSCH. CTR (Oct. 17, 2017), <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/10/17/amid-decline-in-international-adoptions-to-u-s-boys-outnumber-girls-for-the-first-time/>.

10. CHILD.'S BUREAU, U.S. DEP'T OF HEALTH & HUM. SERVS., THE AFCARS REPORT NO. 28, THE AFCARS REPORT: PRELIMINARY FY 2020 ESTIMATES AS OF OCTOBER 04, 2021, at 1 (2021) [hereinafter THE AFCARS REPORT, No. 28].

twelve percent decrease from the 66,208 adopted in 2019, but a nine percent increase from the 52,891 adopted in 2010 when fifty-one percent were boys and forty-nine percent were girls).<sup>11</sup>

In addition to these international and public welfare adoptions, there are other forms of adoptions in the United States,<sup>12</sup> which can be termed private adoptions.\* This group is estimated to represent nearly half of all U.S. adoptions and includes private agencies, Tribes, stepparents, and others.<sup>13</sup> Data for these adoptions compiled in 2016 by the Child Welfare Information Gateway mined a wide variety of sources including private agencies, State courts, State departments of social services, State bureaus of vital records, etc.<sup>14</sup> Childrens' ages at adoption were not reported.<sup>15</sup>

## B. *The Victims*

Child Protective Services ("CPS") agencies received approximately 3,925,000 referrals alleging the maltreatment of approximately 7,065,000 children in 2020.<sup>16</sup> These CPS agencies accepted 2,120,316 of these allegations for investigation or other response.<sup>17</sup> These 2,120,316 allegations involved 3,798,038 children,<sup>18</sup> 618,000 of which were found to be victims of abuse and neglect.<sup>19</sup> There is no data on how many of these were adopted children.<sup>20</sup>

Of the children tracked in the United States in 2020, CPS estimates that 1,750 died from maltreatment (defined as abuse and neglect).<sup>21</sup> 46.4% of child fatalities in 2020 were children under one year in age,<sup>22</sup> with boys having a far higher fatality rate than girls.<sup>23</sup> Although CPS does not collect official causes of death,<sup>24</sup> the Center for Disease Control and Prevention ("CDC") reported that

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11. See *id.*; CHILD.'S BUREAU, U.S. DEP'T OF HEALTH & HUM. SERVS., THE AFCARS REPORT No. 18, THE AFCARS REPORT: PRELIMINARY FY 2010 ESTIMATES AS OF JUNE 1, 2011, at 7 (2011) [hereinafter THE AFCARS REPORT, No. 18].

12. CHILD. WELFARE INFO. GATEWAY, CHILD.'S BUREAU, TRENDS IN U.S. ADOPTIONS: 2008–2012, at 2, 14 (2016).

13. *Id.*

14. *Id.* at 1, 15.

15. *Id.* at 2.

16. CHILD.'S BUREAU, *supra* note 7, at 8.

17. *Id.*

18. *Id.*

19. *Id.* at 98. The numbers provided in this report are rounded. *Id.*

20. See CHILD.'S BUREAU, *supra* note 7, at 98.

21. *Id.* at 54.

22. *Id.* at 63 tbl.4-3.

23. *Id.* at 56 tbl.4-C.

24. *Id.* at 57.

230 infant children were murdered from 1999 through 2020.<sup>25</sup> Of these, it is unknown how many were adopted.<sup>26</sup>

### C. *The Perpetrators*

Out of the 2,120,316 allegations, 77.2% of the perpetrators were the victim's parent(s).<sup>27</sup> 52% of the perpetrators were female, 47.1% male, and 0.9% of undetermined gender.<sup>28</sup> 83.2% of perpetrators ranged in age from eighteen to forty-four, with the majority of these, 41.3%, being between twenty-five to thirty-four years of age.<sup>29</sup> There is a surprising lack of coordinated data regarding adoptions in the United States.<sup>30</sup> In many cases, it is simply not garnered by local authorities, whether they are school principals, local police, state courts, or others.<sup>31</sup> How, then, do we determine if a correlation between adoption, parricide, and infanticide exists and, if so, is there a statistical difference between the adoptee and non-adoptee experience?<sup>32</sup>

## III. THE CASE LAW ON PARENTAL MURDER OF ADOPTED CHILDREN

### A. *In re Welfare of M.D.O.*

One might think that when a parent is convicted of the murder of his/her own child, that parent would be found unfit to parent another child.<sup>33</sup> Such was not the case in *In re Welfare of M.D.O.*,<sup>34</sup> where a mother was convicted of the unintentional second-degree murder of her adopted child.<sup>35</sup> The County Bureau of Social Services sought to terminate the mother's parental rights to her biological child born *after* her conviction.<sup>36</sup> The trial court dismissed the

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25. *Underlying Cause of Death, 1999–2020*, CTRS. FOR DISEASE CONTROL & PREVENTION, <http://wonder.cdc.gov/ucd-icd10.html> (Click “I Agree”; then under location choose “Census Regions”; then under demographics choose “Infant Age Groups” and select “28–364 days”; then under year select “2020”; then under cause of death choose “ICD-10 130 Cause List (Infants)” and select “#Assault (homicide)”; then click “Send”) (last visited Mar. 11, 2023).

26. *See id.*

27. CHILD.'S BUREAU, *supra* note 7, at 8, 67, 75 tbl.5-5.

28. *Id.* at 72 tbl.5-3.

29. *Id.* at 66.

30. *See* CHILD. WELFARE INFO. GATEWAY, *supra* note 12, at 2.

31. *See id.*

32. *See* Hubbell et al., *supra* note 1, at 473–74.

33. *See In re Welfare of M.D.O.*, 462 N.W.2d 370, 371 (Minn. 1990).

34. *Id.*

35. *Id.*

36. *See id.* at 371, 373.

County's petition, however, the appeals court reversed.<sup>37</sup> The Minnesota Supreme Court reversed the appeals court decision, finding that the County failed to prove that the mother was unfit to parent *this child* based upon "a consistent pattern of abuse of her adopted daughter and [her] refusal to make a rehabilitative admission of her culpability for that death."<sup>38</sup>

The Minnesota Supreme Court reasoned that the mother's conviction did not support "a consistent pattern of abuse because it was not an element of the crime" of unintentional second-degree murder.<sup>39</sup> The trial court found no "consistent pattern of abuse" by the mother.<sup>40</sup> The Minnesota Supreme Court noted that the mother may not be representative of a model parent but that failing to be a model parent was not the standard to terminate parental rights.<sup>41</sup> If it was, termination cases would proliferate.<sup>42</sup> Rather, the Minnesota Supreme Court endorsed the trial court's finding that it was in the best interests of the child "to maintain and strengthen the relationship with" the mother.<sup>43</sup>

#### B. J.B. v. State

In a criminal prosecution of an adoptive mother facing the death penalty for the murder of her son, the defense sought to compel the release of mental health records belonging to one of her other adopted children, who was not named as a victim in the indictment.<sup>44</sup> In *J.B. v. State*,<sup>45</sup> the mother's attempt to "pierce J.B.'s statutory privilege regarding her psychological records" was unsuccessful because she failed to raise the three exceptions to the psychotherapist-patient privilege, namely: "(a) involuntary commitment proceedings; (b) court-ordered mental examinations; and (c) where the patient raises his or her own mental condition during the litigation."<sup>46</sup> None of those exceptions were applicable to the trial.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, the third exception can only be raised by the patient.<sup>48</sup>

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37. *Id.* at 374.

38. *In re Welfare of M.D.O.*, 462 N.W.2d at 371, 378, 379.

39. *Id.* at 376.

40. *Id.* at 374.

41. *See id.* at 379.

42. *See id.*

43. *In re Welfare of M.D.O.*, 462 N.W.2d at 378, 379.

44. *J.B. v. State*, 250 So. 3d 829, 830 (Fla. 3d Dist. Ct. App. 2018).

45. 250 So. 3d 829 (Fla. 3d Dist. Ct. App. 2018).

46. *Id.* at 832.

47. *See id.* at 833.

48. *Id.* at 832.

## C. State v. Edgar

In *State v. Edgar*,<sup>49</sup> the father of three adopted children was convicted of first-degree felony murder in the death of one of his adopted sons and two counts of abuse of a child regarding his other two adopted children.<sup>50</sup> The father attempted to assert that he was aware of some restrictions on the children's bodies but claimed "the women were in charge of [the] discipline."<sup>51</sup> The abuse included the three children tied up by their hands and feet, taped from feet to shoulders using twist ties and duct tape, and gagging their mouths.<sup>52</sup> Punishments mainly resulted from stealing food.<sup>53</sup> The father was convicted of first-degree felony murder of his son—along with two counts of abuse of a child—and was sentenced to life for the felony murder and thirty-two months for the child abuse convictions.<sup>54</sup> The father's appeal was based upon the court's failure to give an aiding and abetting instruction,<sup>55</sup> the court's failure to give lesser included offense instructions,<sup>56</sup> the denial of his right to a fair trial because of prosecutorial misconduct,<sup>57</sup> and the insufficiency of the evidence supporting his felony murder conviction.<sup>58</sup> Each of his arguments fell short because nothing in the record supported any of his appeals.<sup>59</sup> Rather, each of his arguments lacked substance and were simply commonplace, futile assertions made in many cases.<sup>60</sup>

## D. Gilreath v. State

In *Gilreath v. State*,<sup>61</sup> the convictions for malice murder, cruelty to children in the first degree (premised on cruel and excessive physical pain caused by bruising), felony murder predicated on aggravated battery, felony murder predicated on cruelty to children in the first degree (failure to get medical care), and aggravated battery in the death of an adopted child were reversed on appeal.<sup>62</sup>

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49. 127 P.3d 1016 (Kan. 2006).  
50. *Id.* at 1020.  
51. *Id.* at 1024.  
52. *Id.* at 1022.  
53. *See id.*  
54. *Edgar*, 127 P.3d at 1023.  
55. *Id.* at 1020.  
56. *Id.*  
57. *Id.*  
58. *Id.*  
59. *See Edgar*, 127 P.3d at 1025–26.  
60. *See id.* at 1031–32.  
61. 784 S.E.2d 388 (2016).  
62. *Id.* at 391–92.

The accused was the live-in boyfriend of the mother of two adopted children.<sup>63</sup> One of the children was severely beaten and died from severe trauma to his head.<sup>64</sup>

The mother's former husband was barred from testifying that the mother slapped one of the children in the face when the child was an infant—swearing and threatening to beat the children and send them back to their country of origin.<sup>65</sup> The Supreme Court of Georgia determined the impediment of the former husband's testimony was reversible error.<sup>66</sup> The mother had been the only other person in the house with the boyfriend and had a history of abusive treatment toward her children.<sup>67</sup> The former husband's testimony raised a reasonable inference as to the boyfriend's innocence and prevented the defense rebutting claims that the mother was a good mother.<sup>68</sup> Fortuitously, the Supreme Court of Georgia also stated that the boyfriend could be retried because there was sufficient evidence to support the original convictions.<sup>69</sup>

#### IV. THE NEWS

Newspapers, magazines, podcasts, and nightly news report instances in which family members' mistreatment results in death.<sup>70</sup> It may be mistreatment by the parent to the child, or by the child to the parent.<sup>71</sup> This discussion is narrowed by one common denominator: adoption.<sup>72</sup> Either the parents harmed their children whom they adopted, or the children adopted into the family harmed their parents.<sup>73</sup> Each incident depicted here resulted in death, and for the most part constituted murder.<sup>74</sup> Clearly, this is not a phenomenon only to families built

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63. *Id.* at 389.

64. *Id.* at 390.

65. *Id.* at 390–91.

66. *Gilreath*, 784 S.E.2d at 391.

67. *Id.*

68. *Id.*

69. *Id.* at 392.

70. *See The Life and Death of Grace Packer: A Timeline*, MORNING CALL, <http://www.mcall.com/news/police/mc-grace-packer-timeline-20170609-htmlstory.html> (last visited Mar. 11, 2023); Giles Tremlett, *Why Did Two Parents Murder Their Adopted Child?*, GUARDIAN, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/02/why-did-two-parents-murder-their-adopted-child-asunta-fong-yang> (Oct. 9, 2018).

71. *See* Mara Bovsun, *Adopted California Teen Convinces Boyfriend to Kill Parents in 1975 'Barbecue Murders'*, N.Y. DAILY NEWS (Nov. 12, 2017, 4:15 AM), <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/crime/adopted-calif-teen-convinces-boyfriend-kill-parents-1975-article-1.3627098>; Tremlett, *supra* note 70.

72. *See* discussion *supra* Parts II–III.

73. *See* Bovsun, *supra* note 71; Tremlett, *supra* note 70.

74. *See* discussion *infra* Part IV.



by adoption, but perhaps some thread within these cases may lead to further research and, with any luck, more insight and effective preventative measures.<sup>75</sup>

#### A. *Filicide Cases*

There are many examples that indicate such abuse and neglect know no boundaries, whether it be geography, religion, economic status, education, or background.<sup>76</sup> The following examples are of families with wealth, education, and religious ties.<sup>77</sup> In each case, the parents' severe neglect of their child resulted in death.<sup>78</sup> In a 2017 Dallas County, Texas case, a child's body was found near her suburban home in Dallas two weeks after being reported missing.<sup>79</sup> The father of this three-year-old child, whom he and his wife adopted from an Indian orphanage, made her stand outside because she refused to drink her milk.<sup>80</sup> He stated that when he went out later to check on her, she was gone.<sup>81</sup> At that point, the father mentioned that coyotes were often in the area.<sup>82</sup> Several weeks later, the father changed his story to say he helped the child drink her milk, which resulted in her choking.<sup>83</sup> News outlets initially reported that the child's autopsy revealed she died by a deadly weapon; however, the autopsy report stated that the child died by "homicidal violence" and court records indicate the "Findings on Deadly Weapon" as inconclusive due to body decomposition.<sup>84</sup> Her body was found in a culvert on the side of the road.<sup>85</sup>

In 2017, a case was reported in Llandaff, Cardiff, United Kingdom, where a child adopted by her father just weeks earlier died because of his physical

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75. See discussion *infra* Part VI.

76. See discussion *supra* Part II.

77. See discussion *infra* Part IV.

78. See discussion *infra* Part IV.

79. Mathews v. State, No. 05-19-00847-CR, 2020 WL 7332676, at \*1 (Tex. Ct. App. Dec. 14, 2020); Phil Gast, *Texas Father Charged with Murder in Adopted Girl's Death*, CNN, <http://www.cnn.com/2018/01/12/us/texas-child-adoptive-parents-indicted/index.html> (Jan. 12, 2018, 8:41 PM).

80. Mathews, 2020 WL 7332676, at \*1.

81. *Id.*

82. *Id.* at \*2, \*3; *Body Found in Search for Girl, 3, Who Went Missing in Coyote-Prone Area*, FOX 5 (Oct. 22, 2017, 6:08 PM), <http://fox5sandiego.com/news/body-found-in-search-for-girl-3-who-went-missing-in-coyote-prone-area/>.

83. Mathews, 2020 WL 7332676, at \*3; Gast, *supra* note 79.

84. *Father of Richardson Girl Who 'Choked on Milk' Indicted on Capital Murder Charge*, KXAN NEWS (Jan. 12, 2018, 1:01 PM), <http://www.kxan.com/news/crime/father-of-richardson-girl-who-choked-on-milk-indicted-on-capital-murder-charge/>.

85. *Id.*

abuse.<sup>86</sup> The spouse had not suspected any abuse by his husband, despite a broken leg and bruises on the child's head.<sup>87</sup> The abuse that ultimately killed the child was a result of her father having violently shaken and struck her in the head.<sup>88</sup> The injuries inflicted by her father's hands included three separate areas of bleeding on her brain, retinal bleeding, a skull fracture, and three rib fractures.<sup>89</sup> The father had been an employer services consultant before becoming a stay-at-home dad.<sup>90</sup> In this United Kingdom case, the father, who struggled to cope with parenting, referred to his child as "a psycho," "the exorcist," and "Satan dressed up in a Babygro."<sup>91</sup>

In 2001, a wealthy couple from Spain flew to China to adopt a baby girl.<sup>92</sup> Asunta Fong Yang was adopted by a lawyer (mother) and a freelance journalist (father).<sup>93</sup> The mother came from a prestigious family whose parents gave them a "flat" in an upper-middle-class section in Santiago.<sup>94</sup> At the time Asunta was adopted, there were few children adopted from China in Spain.<sup>95</sup> They lived a privileged life, having easy access to private hospitals and prescription-only medicines.<sup>96</sup> Asunta was considered a gifted child, skipped a grade, and spoke fluent Spanish and Galician, the language of the region in which they lived.<sup>97</sup> Asunta was raised as a prodigy child, with her Saturday's chock full of Chinese lessons, ballet classes, French lessons, and of course, violin and piano.<sup>98</sup> Asunta did these activities because, as she said, her mother liked them.<sup>99</sup>

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86. R v. Scully-Hicks [2017] Cardiff Crown Ct. [p. 1] (Eng.), <http://www.judiciary.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/sentencing-remarks-r-v-scully-hicks.pdf> (sentencing remarks of Davies J); Victoria Ward, *Fitness Instructor Guilty of Murdering Toddler He Adopted Two Weeks Earlier*, TELEGRAPH (Nov. 6, 2017, 8:00 PM), <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/11/06/fatherconvicted-murdering-18-month-old-adopted-daughter/>.

87. Ward, *supra* note 86; *Scully-Hicks* [2017], at [pp. 2, 4].

88. *Scully-Hicks* [2017], at [p. 5].

89. *Id.* at [p. 1].

90. *Id.* at [4].

91. *Matthew Scully-Hicks Is Found Guilty of Murdering 18-Month-Old Adopted Daughter*, WALESONLINE, <http://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/wales-news/live-updates-matthew-scully-hicks-13864409> (Nov. 6, 2017).

92. MARK GUSCIN, *THE MURDER OF ASUNTA YONG FANG* 5 (2018); *see also* Tremlett, *supra* note 70.

93. GUSCIN, *supra* note 92, at 3–4, 5.

94. *Id.* at 3, 4, 12, 53.

95. *See id.* at 6; Tremlett, *supra* note 70.

96. GUSCIN, *supra* note 92, at 40; Tremlett, *supra* note 70.

97. GUSCIN, *supra* note 92, at 7, 8–9; Tremlett, *supra* note 70.

98. GUSCIN, *supra* note 92, at 8–9; Tremlett, *supra* note 70.

99. Tremlett, *supra* note 70.

Asunta appeared to be happy and enjoying what she did.<sup>100</sup> She was a talented and disciplined child.<sup>101</sup>

As time went on, Mother's emotions and psychological well-being deteriorated.<sup>102</sup> Both of her parents died; she had an affair, and the marriage fell apart.<sup>103</sup> All that appeared on the outside turned out not to be true.<sup>104</sup> Assunta's body was found in an area of dirt tracks by men in a car that happened to be driving by.<sup>105</sup> The parents were both arrested based upon pieced-together evidence such as news footage and highly toxic levels of lorazepam in Assunta's blood and urine.<sup>106</sup> Lorazepam was the drug Assunta's Mother used to calm her anxiety attacks.<sup>107</sup> A hair follicle test revealed lorazepam in Assunta's system.<sup>108</sup> Father and Mother were found guilty as their lies about the situation and circumstances unraveled, and witnesses confirmed that Assunta's behavior had changed starting about two months before her death; she appeared doxy, stumbling, and was not able to read her sheet music.<sup>109</sup> Assunta had also told one of her teachers that her parents were giving her white powders.<sup>110</sup> Investigators found that the family grew tired of her.<sup>111</sup>

These cases are often characterized by significant twists and turns.<sup>112</sup> In a Pennsylvania case, three children taken from their parents were placed in foster care.<sup>113</sup> There was a family who wanted to adopt the children but became frustrated with the system.<sup>114</sup> The children were placed with another family, the Packer Family.<sup>115</sup> One of the children, Susan, at age four or five, was sexually abused by her foster father, David Packer.<sup>116</sup> Shortly thereafter, Susan and one of her brothers were adopted by the Packer Family, who then changed her name

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100. *Id.*

101. *Id.*; GUSCIN, *supra* note 92, at 8–9.

102. *See* Tremlett, *supra* note 70.

103. GUSCIN, *supra* note 92, at 10, 11–12.

104. *See id.* at 9; Tremlett, *supra* note 70.

105. GUSCIN, *supra* note 92, at 10; Tremlett, *supra* note 70.

106. GUSCIN, *supra* note 92, at 18; Tremlett, *supra* note 70.

107. Tremlett, *supra* note 70.

108. GUSCIN, *supra* note 92, at 46 n.7.

109. *Id.* at 43, 45; Tremlett, *supra* note 70.

110. GUSCIN, *supra* note 92, at 45.

111. Tremlett, *supra* note 70.

112. *See id.*; *The Life and Death of Grace Packer: A Timeline*, *supra* note 70.

113. *The Life and Death of Grace Packer: A Timeline*, *supra* note 70.

114. *Id.*

115. *Id.*

116. *Id.*

to Grace.<sup>117</sup> The adoptive mother, Sara, became Northampton County's Children, Youth, and Families Division supervisor.<sup>118</sup>

Although the welfare department investigated David for sexual abuse of Grace, no charges initially resulted.<sup>119</sup> Two years later, the sexual abuse matter was investigated.<sup>120</sup> Once the investigation began, Sara lost her job because of misconduct allegations.<sup>121</sup> David was finally charged with indecent assault of a child under age thirteen, namely Grace.<sup>122</sup> David pled guilty and was sentenced to eighteen months in jail and ordered to register as a sex offender.<sup>123</sup> There were no charges against Sara, but her name was listed with a clearinghouse on people involved in abuse cases.<sup>124</sup>

In June 2013, Grace settled into a residential treatment center, then went to an alternative school; thereafter, she lived with a Packer cousin and eventually made her way back to Pennsylvania.<sup>125</sup> David was out of prison on parole and had filed for divorce.<sup>126</sup> Sara now had a boyfriend, and the two of them planned to kill Grace.<sup>127</sup> Before killing Grace, Sara watched while her boyfriend raped Grace.<sup>128</sup> After Sara and her boyfriend bound, gagged, and drugged Grace, she was put in a hot attic to die.<sup>129</sup> Finding that Grace was still alive, the boyfriend strangled her, then kept her body in cat litter.<sup>130</sup> Sara told the police that Grace was missing.<sup>131</sup>

In their investigation, the police learned that Sara's brother was in school in another district, but Grace was not.<sup>132</sup> Over three months after killing Grace, Sara purchased a bow saw and two blades.<sup>133</sup> About two weeks later, Grace's dismembered body was found by hunters in another town.<sup>134</sup> The prosecution sought the death penalty for Sara and her boyfriend.<sup>135</sup> The Impact Project of

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117. *Id.*  
 118. *The Life and Death of Grace Packer: A Timeline, supra note 70.*  
 119. *Id.*  
 120. *Id.*  
 121. *Id.*  
 122. *Id.*  
 123. *The Life and Death of Grace Packer: A Timeline, supra note 70.*  
 124. *Id.*  
 125. *Id.*  
 126. *Id.*  
 127. *Id.*  
 128. *The Life and Death of Grace Packer: A Timeline, supra note 70.*  
 129. *Id.*  
 130. *Id.*  
 131. *Id.*  
 132. *Id.*  
 133. *The Life and Death of Grace Packer: A Timeline, supra note 70.*  
 134. *Id.*  
 135. *See id.*

Emmaus, the institution that placed the children with the Packer Family, may have received reports about abuse by the Packer Family years prior to Grace's death, and subsequently, two counties stopped placements with them.<sup>136</sup> Nevertheless, the Impact Project of Emmaus was not found in violation of any regulations and continues to operate.<sup>137</sup> The boyfriend, Jacob Sullivan, died on death row in 2020 of natural causes.<sup>138</sup> Upon information and belief, Sara Packer is serving a life sentence without parole.<sup>139</sup>

In Erica Parsons' case, Erica was thirteen when she went missing, and for two years, her adoptive parents continued to collect federal adoption assistance money.<sup>140</sup> While serving a prison sentence for fraud, the father admitted her body had been "discarded" and led the authorities to a shallow grave on the property owned by his family.<sup>141</sup> Erica's autopsy revealed that she suffered from severe physical abuse and malnutrition.<sup>142</sup> Upon information and belief, the father's "harsh treatment" included beating with a belt, choking her, locking her in a closet, and bending her fingers backward.<sup>143</sup> It was determined that the mother had been even more abusive to Erica.<sup>144</sup> In fact, Erica, who was adopted at two, was subjected to abuse by everyone in the family, and at the encouragement of Casey Parson, her adoptive mother.<sup>145</sup> Casey pled guilty and was sentenced to life in prison without parole.<sup>146</sup> Eventually, Sandy Parsons, the

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136. *Id.*

137. *Id.*

138. Ford Turner, *Five Years After Grace Packer Murder, Pennsylvania Lawmakers Seek Stronger Child Protection System*, MORNING CALL (Sept. 9, 2021, 5:54 PM), <http://www.mcall.com/news/pennsylvania/capitol-ideas/mc-nws-pa-grace-packer-bills-20210909-nassugpyvey7ncj7okxf5ebgy-story.html>.

139. *Id.*; Ron Martin, *Bucks County Mother Sentenced to Life in Prison in Connection with Adopted Daughter's Killing*, WGAL, <http://www.wgal.com/article/bucks-county-mother-sentenced-to-life-in-prison-in-connection-with-adopted-daughters-killing/26993786> (Mar. 29, 2019).

140. *Erica Parsons Case: Parents Charged with Murder Years After N.C. Girl Vanished*, CBS NEWS (Feb. 20, 2018, 12:27 PM), <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/erica-parsons-case-parents-charged-with-murder-years-after-n-c-girl-vanished/>.

141. *Id.*

142. *Id.*

143. *Id.*

144. U.S. v. Parsons, No. 15-4261 (4th Cir. filed May 6, 2015); *see also* Kate Corbett Pollack, *Homeschool, Disability and Homicide: The Story of Erica Parsons*, COAL. FOR RESPONSIBLE HOME EDUC., <http://responsiblehomeschooling.org/homeschool-disability-and-homicide-the-story-of-erica-parsons/> (Mar. 23, 2021).

145. Pollack, *supra* note 144; *Erica Parsons Case: Parents Charged with Murder Years After N.C. Girl Vanished*, *supra* note 140.

146. Hank Lee, *9 Years Later: Erica Parsons' Disappearance and Murder*, WCNC (Dec. 17, 2020, 12:49 PM), <http://www.wcnc.com/article/news/crime/erica-parsons-murder-investigation-anniversary/275-be920c66-97a4-4eb7-8ac0-5eb2ec9b0364>.

adoptive father, pled guilty and was sentenced to a minimum of thirty-three years following his federal prison sentence.<sup>147</sup>

In March 2018, an SUV was found upside down, having crashed over a 100-foot cliff off the Pacific Coast.<sup>148</sup> The Harts and their six adopted children were found dead.<sup>149</sup> It was concluded that the mothers deliberately crashed the vehicle.<sup>150</sup> Over the years, there were signs that something was not right, but it was not until one of the sons continued to go to neighbors' asking for food and help that a neighbor finally called Children Protective Services ("CPS").<sup>151</sup> By the time CPS responded to the call, the Harts' already ran the car off the cliff.<sup>152</sup> Outwardly, the Hart family appeared to be perfect and engaged in the community.<sup>153</sup> The signs of neglect and abuse were successfully abated each time by one of the mothers.<sup>154</sup> Perhaps a house with six children, shades always drawn, and no one ever playing outside should be more than just noticed.<sup>155</sup>

## B. *Parricide Cases*

Sometimes, adopted children kill their parents.<sup>156</sup> Tragedies that occur through the hands of adopted children are racially colorblind.<sup>157</sup> Some, but not all, are motivated by money.<sup>158</sup> The adopted child may have been placed at birth or soon thereafter; bounced around foster care homes; older when the placement was made; and/or languished by the care and/or length of stay in orphanages or

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147. *Id.*; *Erica Parsons' Adoptive Father Released from Federal Custody, Transferred to State Prison*, SALISBURY POST (Jan. 10, 2022, 6:23 PM), <http://www.salisburypost.com/2022/01/20/erica-parsons-adoptive-father-released-from-federal-custody-transferred-to-state-prison>.

148. Madeline Holcombe & Augie Martin, *Jennifer Hart Drove Her Six Children to Their Deaths as Her Wife Looked up How Much They Would Suffer, a Jury Says*, CNN, <http://www.cnn.com/2019/04/06/us/hart-family-crash-inquest-searches/index.html> (Apr. 6, 2019, 5:02 PM).

149. *Id.*

150. *Id.*

151. *Id.*

152. *See id.*

153. *See* Holcombe & Martin, *supra* note 148; Matt Gilligan, *Inside the Tragic Hart Family Murder-Suicide Crash*, INVESTIGATION DISCOVERY, <http://www.investigationdiscovery.com/crimefeed/murder/-this-is-beyond-bullying---mother-demands-justice-after-classmat> (last visited Mar. 11, 2023).

154. *See* Gilligan, *supra* note 153.

155. *See id.*

156. Hubbell et al., *supra* note 1, at 487.

157. *See id.* at 482–83.

158. *Id.* at 480.

foster homes.<sup>159</sup> Some of the children were voluntarily placed by a biological parent.<sup>160</sup> Some were removed from their home involuntarily by CPS while others may have found themselves in foster care because a parent died.<sup>161</sup>

### 1. Adopted as a Newborn

In 1975, in California, adoptive parents were murdered in their home by the boyfriend of their daughter, Marlene Olive, age sixteen at the time.<sup>162</sup> Marlene was out shopping with her father.<sup>163</sup> It was reported that the daughter had a good relationship with the father but not the mother, who suffered from mental illness, which worsened over the years.<sup>164</sup> The daughter was adopted as a newborn.<sup>165</sup> At age fourteen the family moved from Ecuador, where her adoptive father (“father”) was employed, to a suburb in California.<sup>166</sup> Marlene learned she was adopted when, at age ten, she came across her adoption papers.<sup>167</sup> This heightened her contempt for her adoptive mother.<sup>168</sup>

In high school, Marlene got involved with a rough crowd and was arrested several times.<sup>169</sup> Marlene had a boyfriend, Charles Riley, age nineteen, “a 300-pound high-school dropout and local drug pusher,” whom she controlled.<sup>170</sup> He would steal for her and do whatever she said.<sup>171</sup> She asked him to kill her parents, and he did.<sup>172</sup> Remains of the bodies were found at a campground.<sup>173</sup> The daughter and her boyfriend had doused them with gasoline

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159. James T. Hubbell et al., *Adopted Children Who Kill Their Adoptive Parents: An Examination Through the Lens of Attachment Theory*, 39 BEHAV. SCIS. & L. (SPECIAL ISSUE) 450, 464 (2021).

160. *See id.*

161. *See id.*

162. *In re Riley*, No. A145041, 2015 WL 7833041, at \*1, \*16 (Cal. Ct. App., Dec. 5, 2015).

163. Bovsun, *supra* note 71.

164. *Id.*

165. *Id.*

166. *See id.*

167. *Id.*

168. Bovsun, *supra* note 71.

169. *Id.*

170. *Id.*; *In re Riley*, No. A145041, 2015 WL 7833041, at \*1, \*16 (Cal. Ct. App., Dec. 5, 2015).

171. *See Bovsun, supra* note 71.

172. *See id.*; *In re Riley*, 2015 WL 7833041, at \*2.

173. Bovsun, *supra* note 71; *In re Riley*, 2015 WL 7833041, at \*2.

and burned them.<sup>174</sup> The boyfriend claimed the daughter had put him under a spell.<sup>175</sup>

## 2. Murder Motive: Jail Cell Next to Biological Father

In 2018, Jordan Marin-Doan, age sixteen, was sentenced to prison after being found guilty of murdering his adoptive father.<sup>176</sup> The child had been adopted by his fathers, Jason Doan and Alan Marin.<sup>177</sup> It was reported that Jordan said he wanted to kill his whole family, but he only managed to kill one of them, his adoptive father.<sup>178</sup> It was reported that he wanted to be sent to jail so he could be in the jail cell next to his biological father.<sup>179</sup> Jordan set the house on fire by pouring gasoline on the stairwell and lighting it.<sup>180</sup> The father who died, Jason, saved Jordan's two siblings by handing them out a window to their father, Alan.<sup>181</sup>

## 3. Biological Mother Remained in Touch and Had Contact

In March 2018, Kaleb Taylor, brutally murdered his adoptive parents with the aid of two friends.<sup>182</sup> The adoptive parents were slaughtered with a knife and a piece of reinforcing bar.<sup>183</sup> The family had lived in Helena, Montana.<sup>184</sup> The adoptive mother had established a real estate business, and the adoptive father joined her.<sup>185</sup>

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174. *In re Riley*, 2015 WL 7833041, at \*2.

175. Bovsun, *supra* note 71.

176. Jordan Fischer, *Adopted Son Charged with Arson, Murder in Father's Death in Indiana*, DENVER 7, <http://web.archive.org/web/20230124213709/https://www.denver7.com/news/national/adopted-son-charged-with-arson-murder-in-fathers-death-in-indiana> (Nov. 8, 2017, 12:05 PM); *Indy Teen Sentenced to 32 Years for Arson, Manslaughter of Adoptive Father*, FOX 59, <http://fox59.com/news/indy-teen-sentenced-to-32-years-for-arson-manslaughter-of-adoptive-father/> (Aug. 29, 2018, 10:31 PM).

177. Fischer, *supra* note 176; Trevor Shirley, *Husband of Dad Killed in Fire Speaks Out*, FOX 59, <http://fox59.com/news/husband-of-dad-killed-in-fire-speaks-out/> (Nov. 5, 2017, 3:44 PM).

178. *See* Fischer, *supra* note 176.

179. *Id.*

180. *Id.*

181. *Id.*; Shirley, *supra* note 177.

182. *State v. Wienke*, 511 P.3d 990, 992 (Mont., 2022).

183. *Id.*

184. *Id.*

185. Emma Parry & Isolde Walters, *Monster Son: Birth Mom of Killer Who Slaughtered Adoptive Parents as They Slept Says He Is 'a Monster' but She'll Always Love Him*, SUN, <http://www.the-sun.com/news/895026/birth-mom-killer-slaughtered-adoptive-parents->



Kaleb had been with his biological mother until he was fifteen months old, at which point she realized she was not able to properly take care of him.<sup>186</sup> Initially, he went to his adoptive home for foster care, and within a few months, was adopted by them.<sup>187</sup> It was reported that when Kaleb was young, he questioned his biological mother about his biological father.<sup>188</sup> He was angered when he learned that his biological father had no interest in him.<sup>189</sup>

#### 4. Child Adopted at Age Ten

At age sixteen, Brad George, killed his adoptive mother with a dumbbell.<sup>190</sup> Brad had a history of psychotic episodes, having stopped his medication for mood disorders a week prior to the killing.<sup>191</sup> He had been a student at a specialized school for troubled children with special needs.<sup>192</sup> As is common with many who suffer from mood disorders, Brad could appear “normal” for periods of time.<sup>193</sup> Indeed, after he killed her, he went to school.<sup>194</sup> When he came home, he called 911 to say it was unusual to find the apartment door open and her car in the parking lot.<sup>195</sup> He sent out a plea when appearing on television asking how someone could commit such a heinous crime.<sup>196</sup>

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monster-loves-him/ (May 30, 2020, 1:49 PM); *In Memory of Dave and Charla Taylor of Helena*, ANDERSON STEVENSON WILKE FUNERAL HOME, <http://helenafuneralhome.com/obituaries/dave-and-charla-taylor-of-helena/> (last visited Mar. 11, 2023).

186. Parry & Walters, *supra* note 185.

187. *Id.*

188. *Id.*

189. *Id.*

190. Eric Stevick & Diana Hefley, *Slain Woman Was Deeply Devoted to Boy Charged in Death*, HERALDNET (Feb. 14, 2014, 8:43 PM), <http://www.heraldnet.com/news/slain-woman-was-deeply-devoted-to-boy-charged-in-her-death/>; *see also* Rob MacKay, *16-Year-Old Everett Boy Pleads Not Guilty to Adoptive Mother’s Killing*, FOX 13 SEATTLE (Feb. 13, 2014), <http://www.q13fox.com/news/16-year-old-everett-boy-pleads-not-guilty-to-adoptive-mothers-killing>.

191. MacKay, *supra* note 190; Stevick & Hefley, *supra* note 190.

192. Stevick & Hefley, *supra* note 190.

193. *See Symptoms - Bipolar Disorder*, NHS, <http://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/bipolar-disorder/symptoms/> (last visited Mar. 11, 2023).

194. Stevick & Hefley, *supra* note 190.

195. *KIRO 7 Interviews Son Suspected of Killing Mother*, KIRO 7 NEWS, at 00:26 <http://www.kiro7.com/video/archive/raw-video-kiro-7-interviews-son-suspected-killing-mother/3ZU2NWBFFFGY6BURM5JUZZPDXQ/> (last visited Apr. 28, 2023).

196. *See id.*; Deborah Horne, *Boy Expected to Be Charged as Adult in Gruesome Killing*, KIRO 7 NEWS (Feb. 10, 2014, 11:51 AM), <http://www.kiro7.com/news/boy-charged-adult-everett-womans-gruesome-murder/81860682/>.

## 5. Infant of Asian Heritage Adopted at Three Months

An infant of Asian heritage, John Lee, was abandoned by his biological parents and adopted at three months old.<sup>197</sup> At age twenty-nine, John murdered his adopted mother and two others.<sup>198</sup> He also shot a fourth individual twice.<sup>199</sup> His adopted mother sang in the choir of the United Unitarian Church.<sup>200</sup> Lee's second victim, his landlord, was a financial consultant at an insurance company and philanthropic in the community.<sup>201</sup>

## 6. Obstacle for Reunification with Birth Family or Gang Member Initiation?

Adopted at the age of six, fifteen-year-old Moses Kamin claimed he killed his adoptive parents in a "fit of anger" for fear they would be upset with him because he was suspended from school for smoking marijuana.<sup>202</sup> The method was a chokehold he had learned from martial arts.<sup>203</sup> Evidence at trial also suggested that he wanted to reunite with his birth parents and/or the murder was an initiation into a gang.<sup>204</sup> Evidence was found in his diary about "killing his [adoptive] mother with a sharp knife and about slicing out her intestines . . ." <sup>205</sup> It was reported that Moses "had 'a murderous state of mind' before he killed his adoptive parents . . ." <sup>206</sup>

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197. *Personal and Familial Background: Triple Homicide Suspect John Lee*, JOURNAL6OTHER, <http://journal6other.wordpress.com/2017/01/02/personal-and-familial-background-triple-homicide-suspect-john-lee/> (last visited Mar. 11, 2023); *see also* *Moscow Shooting Latest: Bail Set at \$500,000*, KREM (Jan. 26, 2015, 1:19 PM), <http://www.krem.com/article/news/local/latah-county/moscow-shooting-latest-bail-set-at-500000/293-125718736>.

198. *State v. Lee*, 443 P.3d 268, 270 (Idaho Ct. App. 2019); *Moscow Shooting Latest: Bail Set at \$500,000*, *supra* note 197.

199. *Moscow Shooting Latest: Bail Set at \$500,000*, *supra* note 197.

200. *Id.*

201. *Id.*

202. *Oakland Teen Gets 25 Years to Life for Murdering Adoptive Parents*, CBS S.F. (Jan. 25, 2013, 1:55 PM), <http://www.cbsnews.com/sanfrancisco/news/oakland-teen-gets-25-years-to-life-for-murdering-adoptive-parents/>; Daniel Heimpel & Lauren Gonzalves, *Helping Moses Kamin: Too Little Too Late?*, <http://imprintnews.org/featured/helping-moses-kamin-too-little-too-late/3242> (Aug. 19, 2013).

203. *Oakland Teen Gets 25 Years to Life for Murdering Adoptive Parents*, *supra* note 202.

204. *Id.*

205. *Id.*

206. *Id.*

## 7. Adopted by Cousin

Gerard Lopes Belmonte was adopted by his adult cousin at the age of ten, when his father, the adoptive parent's uncle, died in their homeland of Guyana.<sup>207</sup> Gerard had a disturbed past, including several arrests, and was known for an incident of animal cruelty.<sup>208</sup> At age twenty-one, he murdered his adoptive mother, a real estate agent, at their home, hours before he had invited a friend over to watch the World Cup, something he and his adoptive mother had planned.<sup>209</sup>

## 8. Filipino Woman/Filipino Boy

Charlie Hernane was brought from the Philippines to the United States by a Filipino woman at the age of ten.<sup>210</sup> It was said Charlie had a violent past, spent time in a drug rehabilitation center, and continued to battle drug addiction.<sup>211</sup> The two shared an apartment together in Hawaii.<sup>212</sup> The son did not work, and for many years, until she fell ill, the mother worked as a housekeeper at a Waikiki hotel.<sup>213</sup> It was also reported that the mother was generous to her family when they needed food or money.<sup>214</sup> The murder weapon was a kitchen knife.<sup>215</sup>

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207. Michael Mayo, *Two Horrific Crimes, One Question: Why?*, S. FLA. SUN SENTINEL, July 24, 2011, at 1B.

208. *Id.*; see also Matthew Hendley, *Gerard Lopes, Accused of Murdering Mother, Rumored to Have Had Postkilling Hangout*, NEW TIMES BROWARD-PALM BEACH (July 25, 2011, 8:59 AM), <http://www.browardpalmbeach.com/news/gerard-lobes-accused-of-murdering-mother-rumored-to-have-had-postkilling-hangout-6458192>.

209. Hendley, *supra* note 208.

210. See Jermel-Lynn Quillopo, *Small Hawaii Community Shaken with Murder of Filipino Mom*, ABS-CBN NEWS, <http://news.abs-cbn.com/global-filipino/05/17/11/small-hawaii-community-shaken-murder-filipino-mom> (May 18, 2011, 1:17 AM).

211. *Id.*

212. *See id.*

213. *Id.*

214. *See id.*

215. *See* Quillopo, *supra* note 210.

### 9. Adoptive Parents: Scout Master and Psychiatric Nurse

All three children in the Menard family were adopted.<sup>216</sup> To all, this was a great family.<sup>217</sup> One of the siblings, testifying at his brother's murder trial for killing his parents and younger sister, stated there was no mistreatment, and he described his family as "the best."<sup>218</sup> The murderer, Brandon Christopher Menard, was a college student and achieved the highest rank in Eagle Scouts.<sup>219</sup> He had a good relationship with his sister, chauffeuring her around as needed, and for several years, they worked together at a "spooky house" and enjoyed watching the "Rocky Horror Picture Show."<sup>220</sup> The parents were reported as having their entire lives "revolve around their children."<sup>221</sup> No motive has ever been determined.<sup>222</sup> The murder weapon was a knife, however, he also shot the victims.<sup>223</sup>

### 10. Shells Labeled: MOM DAD

In 1991, Matthew Heikkila, a twenty-year-old adopted son shot his parents in the back of their heads.<sup>224</sup> The shells were labeled "Mom" and "Mom and Dad."<sup>225</sup> He forced his girlfriend to spend the night in the house with his dead parents by kidnapping and handcuffing her.<sup>226</sup> This crime has been memorialized in a television series (*Your Worst Nightmare*), a book (*Dark Son*),

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216. *Northridge Man Gets Life in Prison for Murdering Adoptive Family*, L.A. DAILY NEWS, <http://www.dailynews.com/2011/06/02/northridge-man-gets-life-in-prison-for-murdering-adoptive-family/> (Aug. 28, 2017, 9:38 AM).

217. Lynn Doan & Richard Winton, *Trouble Beneath a Happy Surface*, L.A. TIMES, Aug. 11, 2006, at 6.

218. *Northridge Man Sentenced for Murdering His Adoptive Parents, 16-Year-Old Sister*, KPCC (June 2, 2011, 11:13 AM), <http://www.kpcc.org/2011-06-02/northridge-man-sentenced-murdering-his-adoptive-pa>.

219. Doan & Winton, *supra* note 217.

220. *Id.*

221. *Northridge Man Sentenced for Murdering His Adoptive Parents, 16-Year-Old Sister*, *supra* note 218.

222. *Northridge Man Gets Life in Prison for Murdering Adoptive Family*, *supra* note 216.

223. *Id.*

224. Bill Doyle, *The 30th Anniversary of the Gruesome Heikkila Murders*, N.J. 101.5 (Jan. 29, 2021), <http://nj1015.com/the-30th-anniversary-of-the-gruesome-heikkila-murders>.

225. *Id.*

226. *Id.*

and a podcast.<sup>227</sup> The defense’s arguments, grounded in the “adopted child syndrome,” failed when the prosecution was able to prove the murders were premeditated.<sup>228</sup> In 1989, Matthew was found not guilty by reason of insanity when charged with threatening his father.<sup>229</sup> “Heikkila himself blamed the legal system for failing to give him needed treatment after he was found not guilty by reason of insanity to a 1989 charge of threatening his father.”<sup>230</sup>

#### 11. Adoptive Son Conspires with Biological Mother and Kill Son’s Adoptive Parents

Anthony, age six or seven, and Chris, age four or five, brothers, were adopted by the Bluml family when their biological mother, Kisha Schaberg, was no longer able to care for them.<sup>231</sup> In high school, Anthony, now known as Tony, excelled in wrestling and intended to join the U.S. Air Force.<sup>232</sup> His parents kicked him out of the house when he was caught smoking marijuana.<sup>233</sup> Living at various friends’ houses, working in fast food restaurants, and selling marijuana, he met up with his biological mother through Facebook.<sup>234</sup> Together, they spent most of their time high on marijuana.<sup>235</sup> Both had anger against the Blumls.<sup>236</sup> Tony contended his adoptive parents were too strict, favored his brother, and made him work to earn his own money.<sup>237</sup> Kisha was angry, believing the Blumls’ influence alienated Chris from her.<sup>238</sup> Both resented the

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227. *Your Worst Nightmare: The Bad Son* (Crazy Legs Production television broadcast Nov. 19, 2014); *Episode 12: Matthew Heikkila*, GALS & GORE (Aug. 9, 2020), <http://www.galsandgore.com/podcast/episode/21aa0a49/episode-12-matthew-heikkila>.

228. Doyle, *supra* note 224.

229. Brad Wadlow, *Remember When ... The Heikkila Murders Shook a Quiet Central Jersey Community*, MY CENT. JERSEY, <http://www.mycentraljersey.com/story/news/history/2021/01/29/remember-when-heikkila-murders-shook-bernards-township-nj-1991/6493146002/> (Jan. 29, 2021, 5:00 PM).

230. *Id.*

231. See Benjamin H. Smith, *Teen and Biological Mom Murder His Adoptive Parents Because They Were ‘Too Strict,’* OXYGEN (May 23, 2019, 5:07 PM), <http://www.oxygen.com/snapped/crime-time/anthony-bluml-kisha-schaberg-murder-adoptive-parents>.

232. *Id.*

233. *See id.*

234. *Id.*

235. *Id.*

236. Smith, *supra* note 231.

237. *Id.*

238. *Id.*

Blumls' wealth.<sup>239</sup> Tony expected an inheritance if his adoptive parents were killed.<sup>240</sup>

The plan was for Tony to go out to dinner with his adoptive parents.<sup>241</sup> Meanwhile, Kisha and another burglarized the house.<sup>242</sup> Upon the Blumls' return, she shot them both.<sup>243</sup> His adoptive mother died the next day, and his adoptive father died about a month later.<sup>244</sup> It was reported that Tony visited his adoptive parents in the hospital the next day and someone told him he most likely was not in the will.<sup>245</sup> The murder weapon was a handgun.<sup>246</sup>

## 12. Killing of Adoptive Father Claimed Isolated Event

George Stevenson was a mentor and coach with boys in youth baseball.<sup>247</sup> Former team players and parents of players described George as "more than a coach," caring about the boys to become "better men."<sup>248</sup> George's family had fostered children as he was growing up and specifically wanted an older child because they were often hard to place.<sup>249</sup> George's brother and sister had also adopted older children.<sup>250</sup> Galen was adopted by George at the age of eight.<sup>251</sup>

At age sixteen, Galen stabbed his adoptive father multiple times.<sup>252</sup> It was reported that Galen and his adoptive father had a fight over money and Galen's unauthorized use of his adoptive father's credit card.<sup>253</sup> Galen had been using his adoptive father's credit card and George had been advised to press

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239. *See id.*

240. *Id.*

241. Smith, *supra* note 231.

242. *See id.*

243. *See id.*

244. *Id.*

245. *Id.*

246. *See* Chris Strunk, *Witness Details Plot to Kill Couple*, ARK. VALLEY NEWS, <http://web.archive.org/web/20200323173620/http://www.arkvalleynews.com/web/issue.dll?1406217771764> (July 24, 2014); Smith, *supra* note 231.

247. *See* Justin Fenton, *After Man's Alleged Killing by Adopted Son, Family Says It Was an 'Isolated Incident'*, BALT. SUN (May 30, 2012, 8:34 PM), <http://www.baltimoresun.com/maryland/baltimore-city/bs-md-ci-stevenson-son-murder-20120523-story.html>.

248. *Id.*

249. *See id.*

250. *See id.*

251. *Id.*

252. Fenton, *supra* note 247.

253. *See id.*

charges.<sup>254</sup> George died several weeks later, having suffered a stroke as well.<sup>255</sup> The family had a history of fostering children and adoption, and they claimed George's murder was an "isolated incident."<sup>256</sup>

## V. THE PSYCHOLOGICAL ISSUES

The phenomenon of adopted children killing their adoptive parents has not been examined in detail, and most of the existing research on this topic has been qualitative with small sample sizes.<sup>257</sup> Much of what we know about parricide is based on acts committed by biological children against their parents or stepparents.<sup>258</sup> Parental homicide by biological children is a rare event and the killing of one's adoptive parents is even more unusual.<sup>259</sup> Since available data is limited, this discussion will draw on older as well as more recent literature, and conclusions will be tentative.<sup>260</sup>

### A. *Emotional and Behavioral Difficulties in Adoptees vs. Non-Adoptees*

Hubbell and his colleagues reviewed several studies comparing the behavior and antisocial traits of adoptees with non-adoptees.<sup>261</sup> One early study found that negativity, hyperactivity, and hostility were higher in the adopted group and that having been adopted, especially after the age of six months, predicted increased aggression.<sup>262</sup> The study did not mention whether the adoptees had experienced abuse or neglect before adoption.<sup>263</sup> A second study found that adopted children displayed a higher prevalence of externalizing behaviors, including criminal behavior, aggression, and interpersonal conflict.<sup>264</sup> On the other hand, some studies ran counter to these findings.<sup>265</sup> One study found no significant difference between adopted and non-adopted youth regarding aggressive and antisocial behavior, although it's noteworthy that these findings

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254. *Id.*

255. *See id.*

256. *Id.*

257. *See* Hubbell et al., *supra* note 1, at 474, 478.

258. *Id.* at 474.

259. Philip D. Jaffé, *Adoption and Murder*, in *ADVANCES IN PSYCHOLOGY AND LAW* 274, 279 (Santiago Redondo et al. eds., 1997).

260. Hubbell et al., *supra* note 1, at 475.

261. *Id.* at 475–76.

262. *Id.* at 475.

263. *Id.*

264. *Id.*

265. *See* Hubbell et al., *supra* note 1, at 476.

relied on self-report.<sup>266</sup> Another study found that a sample of killers, compared with a sample of nonviolent offenders, were significantly less likely to have been adopted.<sup>267</sup> In contrast, a different study of a small sample of female serial killers found that adoptees were overrepresented.<sup>268</sup>

Studies during the 1990s suggested that adoptees were overrepresented in clinical settings, commonly presenting with attention/deficit hyperactivity disorder and conduct problems.<sup>269</sup> More recent research, though, suggests that this may be a function of adoptive parents' greater inclination to seek mental health services for their children.<sup>270</sup> In sum, although some data suggest that individuals who have been adopted display increased negative and antisocial behavior, these findings are not uniform.\* If adoptees indeed have a higher likelihood of antisocial behavior, several possible causes have been proposed.<sup>271</sup> These include genetic factors, prenatal factors, pre-placement experiences, and post-adoption psychological factors.<sup>272</sup>

#### B. *Genetic Influences on Adoptees*

With regard to genetic factors, one study suggests that individuals who were adopted at birth have a 13.5% likelihood of engaging in criminal behavior if neither the biological nor the adoptive parents qualify as criminals, a 14.7% likelihood of engaging in criminal behavior if the adoptive parents qualify as criminals but the biological parents do not, and a twenty percent likelihood of engaging in criminal behavior if the biological, but not the adoptive parents, qualify as criminals.<sup>273</sup> Although this data suggests the possibility of a genetic influence, this influence seems relatively minor.<sup>274</sup>

#### C. *Pre-Placement Influences on Adoptees*

Concerning possible non-genetic influences, it is difficult to separate the influence of pre-adoption experiences from the actual experience of having been adopted.<sup>275</sup> Prenatal experiences, foster care or institutional experiences prior to

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266. *See id.*

267. *Id.*

268. *See id.*

269. *Id.* at 475.

270. Rachel H. Farr & Harold D. Grotevant, *Adoption*, in 1 JUSTICE APA HANDBOOK OF CONTEMPORARY FAMILY PSYCHOLOGY 725, 729, (Barbara H. Fiese et al. eds., 2019).

271. Hubbell et al., *supra* note 1, at 488.

272. *See id.*

273. Jaffé, *supra* note 259, at 275.

274. *Id.* at 276.

275. *See* Farr & Grotevant, *supra* note 270, at 727.



adoption, and the adoptive upbringing itself may all play a role in an adopted child's development.<sup>276</sup> Depending on the circumstances of the adoption, some adopted children may have received poor prenatal care.<sup>277</sup>

Postnatally, some adopted children have experienced institutional neglect in group homes or abuse/neglect while in foster care, while others have not.<sup>278</sup> Studies suggest that spending more time in institutional settings prior to adoption predicts deficits in development.<sup>279</sup> Some findings suggest that adolescent adoptees and children adopted after one year of age experience poorer parent-child relationships and display more problematic behavior.<sup>280</sup> Arguably, older age at adoption might be a proxy for a greater duration of institutionalized care and increased pre-adoption adversities.<sup>281</sup> At the same time, some studies suggest that—at least for children adopted before the age of eighteen months—a positive adoptive family context has a far greater impact than pre-adoptive experiences.<sup>282</sup>

#### D. *The Experience of Growing Up in an Adoptive Family*

Research findings are mixed with regard to the nature of adoptive families.<sup>283</sup> While some research suggests a greater parent-child conflict in adoptive families, other studies find generally positive parent-child relationships in these families.<sup>284</sup> Family cohesion is defined as the degree of connectedness and distance among family members.<sup>285</sup> Low levels of family cohesion have been found to predict maladjustment, and adoptive families may have a greater likelihood of low family cohesion.<sup>286</sup> One study of family cohesion in adoptive

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276. *See id.*

277. *Id.*

278. *See id.*

279. *Id.*

280. *See* Robin Harwood et al., *Preadoption Adversities and Postadoption Mediators of Mental Health and School Outcomes Among International, Foster, and Private Adoptees in the United States*, 27 J. FAM. PSYCH. 409, 410, 418 (2013).

281. Farr & Grotevant, *supra* note 270, at 727.

282. Abbie E. Goldberg & JuliAnna Z. Smith, *Predictors of Psychological Adjustment in Early Placed Adopted Children with Lesbian, Gay, and Heterosexual Parents*, 27 J. FAM. PSYCH. 431, 440 (2013).

283. Kathleen L. Whitten & Scott R. Weaver, *Adoptive Family Relationships and Healthy Adolescent Development: A Risk and Resilience Analysis*, 13 ADOPTION Q. 209, 210 (2010).

284. *Id.* at 210–11.

285. *See* Maria Ann Wydra & Karen Mary O'Brien, *Attachment, Affective Responsiveness, and Cohesion in Adoptive Families: Child and Parent Perspectives*, 21 ADOPTION Q. 1, 3 (2018).

286. *Id.*

families found that adoptive parents tended to report a higher degree of cohesion and emotional responsiveness in their families than did their adopted children.<sup>287</sup> This might reflect the adoptive parents' strong desire for cohesion or the adopted child's underestimation of the family's actual responsiveness to their needs.<sup>288</sup> A child who perceives his family as low in cohesion may respond in ways that are maladaptive.<sup>289</sup>

A qualitative, small-sample study by Kirschner and Nagel<sup>290</sup> described "adopted child syndrome," which involves psychological symptoms and traits such as superficial charm, impulsivity, shallow relationships, and low opinion of authority, among others.<sup>291</sup> Kirschner attributed this phenomenon in part to some adoptive parents' reluctance to share the circumstances of the adoption openly with their children, leading to distrust and thoughts of rejection on the part of the adopted child.<sup>292</sup> In a later study, Kirschner<sup>293</sup> attributed acts of homicide by adopted children to extreme anger and dissociation rooted in the adopted child's negative fantasies about their biological parents.<sup>294</sup> Once again, although this study is useful for speculating about adopted children's experiences, its conclusions are limited given its qualitative nature and small sample size.<sup>295</sup>

Adopted children's outcomes appear to be influenced by the degree to which both the adoptive parents and the adopted child are satisfied with the adoption outcome.<sup>296</sup> Families with greater emotional expressiveness, greater involvement in shared activities, and lower family conflict predicted more successful outcomes for their adopted children.<sup>297</sup> Traditional "goodness of fit" theory suggests that children function optimally when parents and children have compatible temperament traits.<sup>298</sup> For example, a child with high aggression benefits from having a parent with low aggression.<sup>299</sup> Person-environment transactional theory further suggests that a good fit between parent and child is key.<sup>300</sup> For example, when both parent and child are high in negativity, it can

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287. *Id.* at 10.

288. *Id.* at 11.

289. *Id.* at 3, 4; Bibiana D. Koh & Martha A. Rueter, *Contributions of Parent-Adolescent Negative Emotionality, Adolescent Conflict, and Adoption Status to Adolescent Externalizing Behaviors*, 40 J. CLINICAL CHILD & ADOLESCENT PSYCH. 825, 827 (2011).

290. Hubbell et al., *supra* note 1, at 477.

291. *Id.*

292. *Id.*

293. *Id.*

294. *Id.*

295. *See* Hubbell et al., *supra* note 1, at 477, 478.

296. Wydra & O'Brien, *supra* note 285, at 4.

297. *Id.*

298. Koh & Rueter, *supra* note 289, at 826.

299. *Id.* at 826-27.

300. *See id.* at 827.

often contribute to behavior problems.<sup>301</sup> While this is equally true for biological children and their parents, the goodness-of-fit between adoptive children and their parents may be less predictable since they do not share the same genetic heritage.<sup>302</sup>

#### E. *Adoptees and Attachment*

When adopted children demonstrate emotional and behavioral difficulties, many attribute this to problems with attachment.<sup>303</sup> Attachment theory proposes that forming a healthy bond with a caregiver during infancy is a prerequisite for healthy emotional development throughout the lifespan, and that children who have experienced inconsistent, neglectful, or abusive caregiving are at risk for developing psychological and behavioral problems.<sup>304</sup> Questions have been raised about whether children can form attachments to multiple caregivers, and whether a healthy attachment must form within a particular time frame in order to promote positive emotional development.<sup>305</sup> These questions are particularly relevant to adopted children, who may not have had the opportunity to develop healthy attachments in early infancy and sometimes must form new attachments to their adoptive parents.<sup>306</sup>

The DSM-5 describes a phenomenon called reactive attachment disorder (“RAD”), characterized by a child withdrawing emotionally from caregivers, displaying unexplained tantrums, showing little positive emotion, and engaging in minimal interactions.<sup>307</sup> These children were found to be lower in empathy and to have a higher incidence of behavioral and social problems.<sup>308</sup> RAD is common among children who have experienced inconsistent or inappropriate caregiving or environments that do not support healthy attachment, and it is more common among adopted children.<sup>309</sup> At the same time, mixed results and small sample sizes limit our ability to draw conclusions about the ramifications of RAD for psychological development.<sup>310</sup>

Currently, attachment theory suggests that adopted children who are placed in supportive and responsive families have the potential to form healthy

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301. *Id.*

302. *See id.* at 826.

303. *See* Hubbell et al., *supra* note 159, at 451, 452, 453.

304. *See id.* at 452; Wydra & O’Brien, *supra* note 285, at 2.

305. Wydra & O’Brien, *supra* note 285, at 2.

306. *Id.*; *see also* Hubbell et al., *supra* note 159, at 453.

307. Hubbell et al., *supra* note 1, at 477.

308. *Id.* at 478.

309. *Id.* at 477–78.

310. *See id.* at 478.

attachments to their adoptive parents.<sup>311</sup> Despite this, it has been argued that adopted children, particularly those adopted after their first birthday, are at greater risk of facing difficulty in developing secure attachments.<sup>312</sup> This is even more common among children who have been institutionalized.<sup>313</sup> Attachment researchers maintain that infants who are raised in environments that do not support healthy attachments often experience developmental and behavioral delays, and may later become violent or aggressive.<sup>314</sup> These children's relationships may be impaired because they did not develop the ability to trust others.<sup>315</sup> Some studies suggest that children who attacked their biological parents failed to develop secure attachments to their parents.<sup>316</sup> Some of the few studies on adoptive parricide suggest that feelings of rejection and abandonment, which suggest difficulties in attachment, are at the root of these crimes.<sup>317</sup>

A literature search found only two studies focusing specifically on parricide by adopted children.<sup>318</sup> Both were conducted by Hubbell and colleagues, and relied on newspaper accounts of adopted parricide offenders.<sup>319</sup> The first study found that adopted parricide offenders were more likely than biological offenders to kill both parents and be juveniles.<sup>320</sup> Both of these findings would seem to implicate attachment issues.<sup>321</sup> However, the second study compared late adoptees who killed their parents with early adoptees who killed their parents.<sup>322</sup> According to this study, late adoptees who killed their parents were significantly younger than early adoptees and more likely to have experienced multiple forms of abuse.<sup>323</sup> Early adoptees, in contrast, were more likely to kill for selfish, instrumental purposes, such as to obtain money.<sup>324</sup> They were also more likely to have adoptive parents who did not set appropriate limits on their behavior, suggesting that overindulgence may have played a role in their development.<sup>325</sup> The fact that early adoptees, whose ability to attach to their

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311. Wydra & O'Brien, *supra* note 285, at 1, 2.

312. *Id.* at 2–3.

313. *Id.*

314. See Farr & Grotevant, *supra* note 270, at 727; Hubbell et al., *supra* note 159, at 453.

315. See Farr & Grotevant, *supra* note 270, at 727, 728; Hubbell et al., *supra* note 159, at 453.

316. See Hubbell et al., *supra* note 159, at 453.

317. *Id.*

318. See *id.* at 451; Hubbell et al., *supra* note 1, at 474.

319. Hubbell et al., *supra* note 1, at 474; Hubbell et al., *supra* note 159, at 462.

320. Hubbell et al., *supra* note 1, at 487.

321. *Id.*

322. Hubbell et al., *supra* note 159, at 451, 454.

323. *Id.* at 462.

324. *Id.* at 461.

325. *Id.* at 461–62.

adoptive parents would seem to have been less affected, were more likely to kill for instrumental purposes rather than to commit crimes of passion may contraindicate poor attachment as a factor influencing parricide.<sup>326</sup> At the same time, this study was unable to control for other variables such as a genetic predisposition to mental illness or antisocial behavior, prenatal factors, multiple placements pre-adoption, abuse or neglect during infancy, etc.<sup>327</sup>

In general, news reports of parricide by offenders who had been adopted as children did not offer sufficient information to evaluate whether these deeds may have been a function of RAD, adopted child syndrome, and/or genetic factors.<sup>328</sup> More research is needed in order to fully understand the underpinnings of parricide by adopted children.<sup>329</sup>

#### F. *Filicide by Adoptive Parents*

Almost ninety percent of filicides are committed by biological parents against their biological children.<sup>330</sup> Most of the remaining filicides are committed by stepparents against their stepchildren, most commonly by stepfathers.<sup>331</sup> Much of the research on filicide, as with adoptive parricide, relies on secondary data, such as media reports and police files.<sup>332</sup> As such, clinically relevant details are limited, and it is difficult to draw conclusions.<sup>333</sup> Adoptive filicide is an even rarer phenomenon and therefore even more difficult to study.<sup>334</sup>

With regard to filicide in general, we know little about the factors influencing the perpetrators.<sup>335</sup> The research on this topic focuses almost exclusively on maternal filicide; paternal filicide is even less understood.<sup>336</sup> Some research notes that a high proportion of filicide offenders suffered maltreatment as children, experience socioeconomic disadvantages, have a

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326. *Id.* at 461–62, 464.

327. Hubbell et al., *supra* note 159, at 464.

328. *See id.* at 465, 466.

329. *Id.* at 466.

330. Kimberly D. Dodson & Leann N. Cabage, *Mothers Who Kill*, in *WOMEN IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM: TRACKING THE JOURNEY OF FEMALES AND CRIME* 189, 202 (Tina L. Freiburger & Catherine D. Marcum eds., 2016).

331. *Id.*

332. Li Eriksson et al., *Maternal and Paternal Filicide: Case Studies from the Australian Homicide Project*, 25 *CHILD ABUSE REV.* 17, 18 (2016).

333. *See id.*

334. Dodson & Cabage, *supra* note 330, at 202.

335. *See* Eriksson et al., *supra* note 332, at 18.

336. *Id.*

criminal history, have mental health issues, and perceive social support as limited or unavailable.<sup>337</sup>

The general risk of filicide appears to be higher when the perpetrator is a non-biological parent, e.g., stepfather or foster father.<sup>338</sup> While mothers are more likely to kill their biological children, non-genetic children are more likely to be killed by stepfathers.<sup>339</sup> Parenting is often challenging, and parents who do not feel that the child is their own may have more difficulty tolerating them.<sup>340</sup> Although the stepparent-stepchild relationship is not a perfect analogy for the relationship between an adoptive parent and an adopted child, both involve parents and children who are not biologically related.<sup>341</sup> From an evolutionary perspective, it's possible that humans have an inherent drive to protect their genetic offspring.<sup>342</sup> This drive may not be relevant for non-biological parents.<sup>343</sup> At the same time, the usually higher educational level of adoptive parents may mitigate this risk.<sup>344</sup>

It is not common for mothers to kill their adoptive children.<sup>345</sup> However, anecdotal evidence suggests a perhaps underestimated phenomenon of adoptive parents trying to “re-home” their children, i.e., give them away to strangers, sometimes after only five days.<sup>346</sup> While re-homing is not the same as killing the child, it points to a phenomenon of adoptive parents failing to adjust to the adoption or to bond with their child.<sup>347</sup> Many adoptive parents face issues of conflict or undergo a challenging adjustment after their child's arrival.<sup>348</sup> At the same time, most adoptive mothers do not commit filicide.<sup>349</sup> As such, this phenomenon is poorly understood.<sup>350</sup>

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337. *Id.* at 19.

338. Janine Little, *Filicide, Journalism and the 'Disempowered Man' in Three Australian Cases 2010–2016*, 22 *JOURNALISM* 1450, 1451 (2021); Eriksson et al., *supra* note 332, at 19.

339. See Eriksson et al., *supra* note 332, at 19; Little, *supra* note 338, at 1451.

340. West, *supra* note 1, at 53.

341. Richard Barth & Mary Hodorowicz, *Foster and Adopted Children Who Die from Filicide: What Can We Learn & What Can We Do?*, 14 *ADOPTION Q.* 85, 90 (2011).

342. *Id.*; Katherine E. Sunder, *Mothers Who Kill Children They Have Adopted* 15 (July 15, 2014) (Ph.D dissertation, Wright State University) (on file with CORE Scholar, Wright State University).

343. See Barth & Hodorowicz, *supra* note 341, at 90; Sunder, *supra* note 342, at 15.

344. Barth & Hodorowicz, *supra* note 341, at 103.

345. Sunder, *supra* note 342, at 50.

346. *Id.*

347. *Id.*

348. *Id.*

349. *Id.*

350. Sunder, *supra* note 342, at 50.

## 1. Possible Contributing Factors to Filicide by Adoptive Parents

As with parricide, attachment theory has been proposed as an important factor in filicide.<sup>351</sup> Filicide may be a result of mounting frustration in response to the inability to bond with a child.<sup>352</sup> This may be even more relevant for adopted children who, as noted above, may be at greater risk for attachment failures, especially if they have been institutionalized.<sup>353</sup> In fact, research cited by Barth and Hodorowicz found that approximately a quarter of adoptive parents—whose child was between the ages of three and eleven at the time of their adoption—reported difficulty bonding with their children.<sup>354</sup> Some of them indicated that they take medication for anxiety or depression.<sup>355</sup> A minority of these parents reported that the adoption was entirely unrewarding for them.<sup>356</sup> Additionally, although adoptive parents are usually carefully screened and often receive more preparation for parenthood than biological parents, they may face greater challenges.<sup>357</sup> Adoptive parents frequently care for children who present developmental delays or behavioral difficulties.<sup>358</sup> Additionally, although there is a great deal of awareness of postpartum depression, post-adoption depression (“PAD”) is a lesser-known but equally relevant phenomenon.<sup>359</sup> Depression in adoptive parents has been associated with difficult behaviors in their adopted children.<sup>360</sup> A number of studies report increased parent-child conflict in adoptive families as well as a decrease in closeness between adoptive mothers and their children over time.<sup>361</sup> This may be due to a combination of genetic and

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351. Agata Debowska et al., *Victim, Perpetrator, and Offense Characteristics in Filicide and Filicide-Suicide*, 21 *AGGRESSION & VIOLENT BEHAV.* 113, 114 (2015).

352. *Id.*

353. Hubbell et al., *supra* note 159, at 452–53.

354. Barth & Hodorowicz, *supra* note 341, at 89; *see also* C.A. Rees & J. Selwyn, *Non-Infant Adoption from Care: Lessons for Safe-Guarding Children*, 35 *CHILD CARE HEALTH & DEV.* 561, 565 (2009).

355. Barth & Hodorowicz, *supra* note 341, at 89; Rees & Selwyn, *supra* note 354, at 563.

356. Barth & Hodorowicz, *supra* note 341, at 89; Rees & Selwyn, *supra* note 354, at 564.

357. Barth & Hodorowicz, *supra* note 341, at 88.

358. *Id.*

359. *Id.* at 87–88.

360. Karen J. Foli et al., *Post-Adoption Depression: Parental Classes of Depressive Symptoms Across Time*, 200 *J. AFFECTIVE DISORDERS* 293, 293–94 (2016).

361. Martha A. Rueter et al., *Family Interactions in Adoptive Compared to Nonadoptive Families*, 23 *J. FAM. PSYCH.* 58, 63 (2009); Amy J. Walkner & Martha A. Rueter, *Adoption Status and Family Relationships During the Transition to Young Adulthood*, 28 *J. FAM. PSYCH.* 877, 882–83 (2014).

parenting factors.<sup>362</sup> One study of adopted toddlers found that toddlers who had a genetic predisposition to be less interactive and more socially withdrawn tended to evoke more hostile parenting behavior in their adoptive parents.<sup>363</sup>

The transition to adoptive parenthood may be more challenging than the transition to biological parenting.<sup>364</sup> Adoptive parents go through a difficult screening process and may wait months or years before receiving their child; additionally, in some states, birth parents have the right to rescind their decision to have their child adopted for a period of time.<sup>365</sup> At the same time, adoptive parents may be older and have more financial resources, which can serve as a buffer from some of the unique challenges of becoming an adoptive parent.<sup>366</sup> In fact, one study of adoptive families concluded that although these families were confronted with several challenges the majority were not dysfunctional.<sup>367</sup>

## 2. Research on Adoptive Mothers Who Kill Their Children

One of the few studies focusing specifically on adoptive filicide was Sunder's research on a sample of thirty adoptive mothers who killed their children.<sup>368</sup> In Sunder's sample, most of the mothers were older, married, viewed as "loving," had little mental health history, and had put a great deal of effort into adopting their children.<sup>369</sup> About half of these mothers had killed their children through physical assault, which appeared to be non-premeditated.<sup>370</sup> However, while biological mothers were more likely to have killed their children accidentally and not through physical force, adoptive mothers were more likely to have killed their children through the use of excessive force.<sup>371</sup> Unlike biological mothers who killed their children, adoptive mothers who did so generally did not present mental health or substance abuse issues, and were not in relationships involving domestic violence.<sup>372</sup> The majority of adoptive

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362. Kit K. Elam et al., *Adoptive Parent Hostility and Children's Peer Behavior Problems: Examining the Role of Genetically Informed Child Attributes on Adoptive Parent Behavior*, 50 DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCH. 1543, 1544, 1545 (2014).

363. *Id.* at 1547–48, 1549.

364. *See* Foli et al., *supra* note 360, at 294.

365. Farr & Grotevant, *supra* note 270, at 730.

366. *Id.*

367. Fanny Melançon et al., *Parenting Stress of Adoptive Mothers, Mother–Child Conflict, and Behavior Problems During Adolescence Among International Adoptees*, 33 J. FAM. PSYCH. 988, 992 (2019).

368. Sunder, *supra* note 342, at 18.

369. *Id.* at 30.

370. *Id.* at 31.

371. *Id.* at 32, 33.

372. *Id.* at 34.



mothers tried to call 911 immediately to rescue their child, suggesting that they had not intended to kill their child and, rather, had lost control.<sup>373</sup>

Although Sunder's sample is small, it is striking to note the similarities and differences between Sunder's findings and some of the research on mothers who kill their biological children.<sup>374</sup> Sunder explores a typology of mothers who kill their children, suggested by Meyer and Oberman, and whether this typology is relevant to her sample of adoptive mothers.<sup>375</sup> According to Sunder, Meyer and Oberman's first category, women who ignore their pregnancy and kill their neonates within the first twenty-four hours of their birth, is generally irrelevant to adoptive mothers.<sup>376</sup> Meyer and Oberman's second category, mothers who are mentally ill or psychotic and deliberately kill their children because of a break with reality, was also not relevant for the adoptive mothers in Sunder's study.<sup>377</sup>

Meyer and Oberman's third category, mothers who abuse their children and kill them through excessive force, was more relevant.<sup>378</sup> Meyer and Oberman's fourth category included mothers who were assisted in killing their children or were coerced into killing their children.<sup>379</sup> Although the adoptive mothers in Sunder's sample sometimes had an accomplice, they were not coerced.<sup>380</sup> Meyer and Oberman's final category, mothers who killed their children through acts of neglect, was equally relevant to adoptive mothers.<sup>381</sup> In sum, we know little about filicide in general and even less about filicide by adoptive parents.\* The little research we have suggests that there are unique aspects to adoptive parents' experiences and that research findings about general filicide may not always apply to these cases.<sup>382</sup>

## VI. CONCLUSION

It is difficult to draw any firm conclusions with regard to parricide by adopted children and filicide by adoptive parents.\* Clearly, this is an area in need of more research.\* That said, although findings are mixed, research suggests that a number of factors may predispose adopted children to emotional and behavioral difficulties.<sup>383</sup> These include genetic tendencies, prenatal

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373. Sunder, *supra* note 342, at 34.

374. *Id.* at 35, 41.

375. *Id.* at 41.

376. *Id.*

377. *Id.* at 41–42.

378. Sunder, *supra* note 342, at 9–10, 42.

379. *Id.* at 10.

380. *See id.* at 10, 35, 36.

381. *Id.* at 43.

382. *See id.* at 1.

383. *See* Elam et al., *supra* note 362, at 1544; Jaffé, *supra* note 259, at 276.

influences, preplacement experiences, and particular challenges of growing up in an adoptive family.<sup>384</sup> Some research suggests that a supportive, positive adoptive family environment can compensate for prior negative influences on the child.<sup>385</sup> At the same time, this appears to vary with the age at which the child was adopted.<sup>386</sup> Furthermore, adopted children may present with traits and behaviors that make them difficult for parents to raise, contributing at times to higher degrees of parent-child conflict.<sup>387</sup>

Adoptive parents and their children may disagree about the level of cohesion in the home, with adoptive parents perhaps overestimating it as a function of their wish for a happy family.<sup>388</sup> Researchers have speculated that some adoptive parents may be reluctant to be open with their children about the circumstances surrounding their adoption, and that this may be detrimental to some children's development.<sup>389</sup> Many have suggested that, depending on the adopted child's age at adoption and pre-adoption history, the child may have difficulty forming a secure attachment to his caregivers, which is viewed as a prerequisite for healthy emotional development.<sup>390</sup>

The phenomenon of attachment goes both ways, as one study showed that some adoptive parents—whose child was between the ages of three and eleven when adopted—reported difficulty bonding with their child.<sup>391</sup> Some adoptive parents try to “re-home” their children, giving them away to strangers over the internet because they despair of ever bonding with them.<sup>392</sup> Many adoptive parents, especially those struggling with challenging behaviors in their children, may experience a lesser-known phenomenon called Post-Adoption Depression, which likely complicates their experiences and their relationships with their children.<sup>393</sup> One of the only studies focusing specifically on adoptive parents who kill their children examined a small sample of mothers in this category, comparing their presentation with a typology of biological mothers who kill their children.<sup>394</sup> The mothers in this study differed from their biological

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384. See Elam et al., *supra* note 362, at 1544–45.

385. See Harwood et al., *supra* note 280, at 411.

386. *Id.* at 410.

387. See Jaffé, *supra* note 259, at 276.

388. Wydra & O'Brien, *supra* note 285, at 11.

389. Hubbell et al., *supra* note 1, at 477.

390. Wydra & O'Brien, *supra* note 285, at 2; Farr & Grotevant, *supra* note 270, at 727.

391. See Wydra & O'Brien, *supra* note 285, at 4; Farr & Grotevant, *supra* note 270, at 728.

392. See Sunder, *supra* note 342, at 50.

393. Foli et al., *supra* note 360, at 293; Barth & Hodorowicz, *supra* note 341, at 87–88.

394. See Sunder, *supra* note 342, at 31.

counterparts in a number of ways.<sup>395</sup> The adoptive mothers were described as “loving,” had invested a great deal of effort into the adoption, did not generally present with substance abuse or mental health issues, and appeared to have killed their children through loss of control and excessive physical force, unlike their biological counterparts who tended to kill their children accidentally and not through physical force.<sup>396</sup> Here, too, the sample of mothers was small and generalizability was limited.<sup>397</sup>

Happily, parricide by adopted children and filicide by adopted parents appears to be a small phenomenon and as such, there is a dearth of research.\* Much of this research focuses on small sample sizes, is qualitative in nature, and/or relies on secondary sources of information (e.g., media reports) which do not provide sufficient clinically relevant detail.<sup>398</sup> The little we know, though, points to unique qualities of the adopted child and adoptive parent’s experiences.<sup>399</sup> This suggests that much of what we know about general parricide and filicide may not apply in these cases.<sup>400</sup> More research is needed to understand the precise role that attachment plays in both parricide and filicide in adoptive families.<sup>401</sup> In general, the particular characteristics of the adoption experience and their implications should not be overlooked when examining these tragic cases.<sup>402</sup>

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395. *See id.* at 31, 32, 33.

396. *Id.* at 30, 33.

397. *See id.* at 31.

398. *See id.* at 49.

399. *See* Sunder, *supra* note 342, at 52–53.

400. *See id.* at 30.

401. *See id.* at 52.

402. *See id.* at 7.

