

'Better Off Dead'?

Families in Crisis Killing Each Other Across Country

First, it was the Lupoe family in Los Angeles on Jan. 27. Dad, Mom and five children, ages 2 to 8, found shot to death. Dad was the trigger man.

The next day, it was the Meeks family in Columbus, two hours west of Wheeling. Dad, Mom and two children, ages 5 and 8, shot to death by Dad.

Three weeks later, the dateline was Belle Valley, Ohio, just outside Caldwell in Noble County, about an hour away: Dad, Mom, 11-year-old son. Mom and boy strangled by Dad before he shot himself.

As the violence came increasingly closer to the Ohio Valley, this reporter started keeping track of Associated Press stories on domestic homicides, particularly those involving parents or caretakers killing their children.

Any article that moved in the United States with the words "infant" or "child" flowed into my e-mail box. On a daily basis, the majority of the stories involved abuse, and of those, about half involved children dying at the hands of their parents or caregivers.

While local domestic abuse shelter directors say men are almost always the culprits in "family annihilations," as were the cases above, both moms and dads are killing their children.

In the span of March 3-5, for example, 11 articles moved on the wire involving child abuse deaths, including:

- a South Carolina mother accused of drowning her two toddlers in a pool;
- a Virginia woman accused of drowning her 13-year-old adoptive daughter in

a creek;

- a Texas woman sentenced to life for smothering her 4-year-old daughter with a pillow;
- a South Carolina couple accused of starving their toddler to death;
- a Louisiana woman sentenced to 48 years for throwing her 2-week-old baby and killing her because she wouldn't stop crying;
- an Alabama man accused of flinging his four children, ages 4 months, 1, 2 and 3, off a bridge to their deaths.

Closer to home, on Feb. 23, another dad shot and killed his wife and 11-year-old son before shooting himself in Georgetown, Ohio, about 45 miles east of Cincinnati. And on March 5, a Cleveland man shot his wife, her sister and three children before getting cornered by police and turning the gun on himself.

Other articles in the past few weeks tell of men beating their kids or their girlfriends' kids to death for misbehaving or crying; a toddler dying of dehydration because his baby-sitter, a long-time friend of his mother, deprived him of liquids for at least a week because he wet the bed; parents intentionally drugging their children to death or people high on drugs or alcohol killing their children unintentionally.

Just yesterday in Alabama, a gunman killed 10 people, including his mother, four relatives and two children, before shooting himself.

This grisly tally doesn't include the children who survived the potentially fatal attacks by their parents and custodians.

Many experts are pointing the finger at the sour economy.

"History and experience tell us when the economy is bad and unemployment rises, children don't do well," Linda Spears, vice president of the Child Welfare League of America, told The Washington Post in a Dec. 29 article titled "Child Neglect Cases Multiply as Economic Woes Spread."

"It feels like there's almost an epidemic going on," said Dr. Alice Newton at Children's Hospital in Boston, in a Boston Herald article on Sunday. Her comment was in response to the newspaper's report that from Jan. 1 to March 1, the county district attorney's office in Boston had 256 child abuse cases, more than double the 105 it saw in the same period last year.

On Tuesday, the AP reported that officials in Sacramento County, Calif., found the number of children who died of abuse and neglect in 2008 nearly tripled to 11 from 2007, when four died.

Child abuse or neglect, in addition to deaths from abuse or neglect, have been on the increase nationwide. The latest available federal data is from 2006, in which there were an estimated 1,530 child fatalities from abuse or neglect. The rate was 2.04 per 100,000 children, up from 1.98 in 2002, according to the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System.

Derrek Hofrichter, spokesperson for the National Child Abuse Prevention Hotline run by Childhelp, said an average of four children die every day in America, up from three a day a few years ago. He said hotline call volume has increased about 10 percent in the first few months of 2009.

In addition, the hotline counselors are reporting the average call is six minutes, up from about two minutes, which counselors said indicates callers need more than just information.

"They're calling because they're in immediate stress or crisis," he said. Callers - both men and women - are stating they feel overwhelmed and that they may become violent toward their children. "We have definitely gone from an information line to a crisis line," Hofrichter said.

Why Wipe Out the Family?

It CAN happen here. In fact, it has. Readers may remember how the valley was shaken by the murder-suicide rampage of Mark Storm of Wheeling, who killed his wife, two children and his mother before shooting himself and falling in the Ohio River into the late 1990s.

Debbie Wood, director of the YWCA Wheeling Family Violence Prevention Program, said men who commit domestic homicide may feel they must be their family's "provider," and they don't know how to proceed when faced with a major financial crisis.

"In stressful circumstances that involve men unable to provide for their families financially, the husband feels he cannot care for his family in the current existence, so they all would be better off dead," Wood said in an e-mail interview. "With the loss of thousands of jobs each month, society may be facing the most troubled times in domestic history."

When news of the most recent murder-suicides broke, water cooler comments included such sentiments as, "In the Depression, the men just killed themselves! They left their families alone."

But Wood said men may feel they don't want the children "to suffer the consequences" of losing their parents, so they kill everyone.

What Can We Do?

There is help for families and individuals who are having difficulty coping and feel they may become violent. The National Child Abuse Prevention Hotline is staffed 24 hours a day, seven days a week by licensed counselors with master's-level degrees or higher who can provide on-the-spot counseling as well as referral services to local agencies.

In addition, county affiliates of West Virginia Partners in Prevention offers free local parenting workshops and other activities and resources for parents.

It's important, Wood said, that friends and families watch out for each other.

"Be aware of the signs of domestic violence. Most killers don't 'go crazy.' There are signs of stress or depression, control and manipulation on the part of the abuser.

"Reach out to all the family members when life throws unexpected curves. ... If there is divorce or a job loss, this time can be extremely dangerous."

The Family Violence Prevention Program offers a 24-hour hotline, emergency shelter for women and children, parenting classes, batterers' intervention, legal advocacy and support groups.

The Tri-County Help Center in St. Clairsville also operates a crisis hotline, counseling and an emergency shelter for women and children. Cathy Campbell, Tri-County executive director, said domestic homicides are "not new" and that the risk of death to women and children in domestic disputes rises with the number of weapons in the home and the number of previous domestic violence incidents.

She called upon local law enforcement to tighten their efforts against domestic violence offenders.

"Domestic violence can be decreased by appropriate law enforcement intervention, e.g. taking the offender to jail and not the victim; and appropriate criminal justice intervention, e.g. charging domestic violence offenders with felonies if it is not their first offense, court-ordering to treatment for at least six months, and not dismissing the charges if the offender finishes treatment," Campbell said in an e-mail interview.

Virginia Loew-Shelhammer, a Christian counselor in Wheeling, said support is key to prevention of a Lupoe-esque killing spree in the Ohio Valley.

"People in stressful situations can benefit from talking about their problems with friends, family, clergy, support groups and professional resources," she said. "Sometimes sharing helps to relieve stress. We are often encouraged to learn that others have overcome similar problems. Sometimes others can have insight into our problems that we are unable to see because our pain clouds our thoughts."

She also urged people to listen to their loved ones.

"Family members and those close to us can often see our stress before we do," she said in via e-mail.

Wood echoed Shelhammer, and said linking with community experts is crucial for families in crisis.

"Call a local domestic violence shelter. Assuming the current state of the economy will worsen, violent abuse in families will increase. Talk with the children's school guidance counselors and know that there is free personal, family and financial help available through community agencies," Wood said.