57 Children Murdered By A Parent That U.S. Family Courts Should Have Protected
From a Sampling of 515 Murdered Kids Between 2008 – 2016

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Over the past nine years, the Center for Judicial Excellence has tracked news media coverage of at least 515 children who were killed by a parent when divorce, separation, custody, visitation or child support was mentioned as a factor in their lives at the time of the murder. Many of these child homicides were preventable, if the family court had only heeded the warnings of protective parents who frequently brought evidence of abuse to the court. Our database of 515 child murders was compiled through a simple “Google alert” set up, and through in-depth online research of each case after the case was brought to our attention.

The Center for Judicial Excellence decided to focus on the deaths of 57 children in 43 cases in which a U.S. family court did the unthinkable during a couple’s separation or divorce- it knowingly placed their children into unsupervised contact with a dangerous parent who eventually killed the child(ren), and often themselves.

We believe that if family courts across the country were held accountable for operating as they were set up to - with “the best interests of the child” at the forefront of their decision-making - then many, if not all, of these tragic child homicides could have been avoided.

The subset of cases we have selected share three key characteristics:

• The murdered child’s parents had previous contact with a family court
• Criminal or dangerous behavior by the murderous parent had been brought to the court’s attention before the child(ren) were killed
• The child had a safer parent who was attempting to protect their child from harm by the other parent.

We believe that family court judges have a duty to protect all children of the parents who appear before them from child abuse, neglect and murder, regardless of what a parent may formally request during his or her divorce. A voluminous body of research on domestic violence details the numerous challenges that battered spouses face when trying to leave an abusive relationship. This data does not attempt to delve into these issues- it merely presents a snapshot of the cases where family courts failed to protect children from the ultimate harm -murder- by a parent.
Why Were Some Family Court Murder Cases Excluded From The List?
Many cases in our master database involve family court breakdowns, and serious lapses that should be addressed to better protect children in the future. We decided to be much more conservative in determining our subset of cases to focus on.

To give you an idea about the nature of the cases that were not included in the subset, we omitted cases with prior family court involvement that also met the following criteria:

- The parent who lost custody to the killer was alleged to have harmed their child, since we have not had the resources needed to research the court files to determine whether these allegations were true or false. (Johnson, CO, 2016)

- Media coverage of the murders does not mention the other parent’s whereabouts, or any specific info on why the killer was granted custody. (Rogers, AZ, 2016; Loyd, MS, 2012)

- A protective parent’s child is kidnapped by the other parent during a planned visit and is later charged in his death, but news coverage suggests that the couple never went to family court, so the mother’s attempts to find her child with the FBI and law enforcement went unheeded because they appear to have not been to court before the abduction. (Wells, TX, 2014)

- Both parents have a history of violence or addiction that the court has been working with them on. (Wilder, CA, 2012)

- A case where the family court ordered supervised visitation for an abusive parent who then broke the court order and grabbed his daughter from a playground and killed her and her half-sister. (Parcells, NY, 2011)

- The news coverage does not mention whether child abuse or domestic violence by the killer was raised during previous family court proceedings. The mother’s claim that “the custody battle was a long story” and that the “San Diego (family court) screwed up on a lot of stuff. The court system just wasn’t very justifiable out there,” is not sufficient to include the case as family court failure. (Weeks, CO, 2010).

BACKGROUND: U. S. Family Courts
The Center for Judicial Excellence and perhaps a dozen nonprofits from around the country have spent more than a decade working to expose a crisis in the family court system in the U.S. that is pushing more than 58,000 children each year into unsupervised contact or full custody with a physically or sexually abusive parent.

In many of these horrifying cases, a safe, nurturing parent is being punished by the court for trying to protect their child from abuse by the other parent. In a matter of months or years, these divorcing parents frequently end up losing their life savings, their homes, their jobs, and their trust in the court system to keep their kids safe.
How 58,000 Kids Are Being Harmed Each Year
In many cases, the criminal history of a parent is ignored. The American Judges Association found that in over 70% of family law cases where a convicted batterer sought custody of their children, they received it.

This happens for a variety of reasons, but chief among them is:

- Family court judges often ignore medical evidence of abuse and disallow testimony from doctors, teachers and other mandated reporters with knowledge of the abuse the kids are experiencing.
- Rampant use of “junk science” in family courts that falsely suggests that abuse claims made during a divorce are always lies or fabrications.
- Widespread court policies that punish the parent who is perceived to be limiting the other parent’s access to the child, regardless of legitimate safety concerns.

Family Court Murders Are Not ‘Uniquely’ American
For some context for this American child murder crisis, we need only cross the pond to the U.K., and to the work of Women’s Aid, the national charity that is working to end domestic abuse against women and children there. The Women’s Aid 2016 report, Nineteen Child Homicides, presents stark evidence that what is happening in the United States is not unique, and that it is, in fact, a crisis that warrants more in-depth study and analysis. This report indicates that 19 children from 12 families had been killed in the past 10 years, and “each of these children had died at the hands of a parent who was a known perpetrator of domestic abuse.”

Further Study Is Needed
Due to resource limitations, we have been unable to delve more deeply into the 515 child murders we uncovered to determine how many more of these cases fit our collection criteria. This initial data set provides a significant opportunity for more in-depth research into these cases, which will enable us to better understand what system reforms are needed to prevent these tragic child homicides and to better protect children in family courts from ongoing abuse.

Unlike juvenile court records, many family court records are publicly accessible. Court transcripts, when available, frequently show that judges and other court professionals knew about a parent’s violent criminal history and chose to ignore it before placing child homicide victims into unsupervised contact with their violent parent. Grieving parents are often more willing to speak about their tragic loss of a child or children after some time has passed, so the opportunities to obtain a more detailed picture of the family court system’s role in child homicides may be possible. Thank you for your interest in this work. Questions? Please don’t hesitate to contact us in California.

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