

**American Homicide Supplemental Volume (AHSV)**

***Child Murder in America (CMA)***

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### *Child Murder in America*

The United States has not had a problem with every kind of homicide. Murders of children by parents or guardians were relatively rare in the United States before the late twentieth century. The historical and archaeological record shows that America was a comparatively safe place for children of European ancestry, beginning in the late seventeenth century, and for children of African ancestry, beginning in the mid-eighteenth century. However, children were murdered by abusive masters, mistresses, and overseers during the heyday of indentured servitude and the early days of slavery, and like adults, they could be victims of racial or frontier violence. Homicide rates for Native American children were higher than rates for black or white children. By the mid-eighteenth century, they were at risk from both parents and non-relatives. When they lived among Europeans as indentured servants or slaves, they were at risk; and when they lived with their own people, they were subjected to genocidal violence by European colonists. The loss of land and the deaths of so many men in battle also made it difficult for Indian parents to raise children, which is why so many killed their newborn children or abused or neglected their older children.

The rate at which parents murdered newborns, infants, and older children went up and down in America, as they did in Western Europe, in long, smooth curves that peaked in the mid-seventeenth century and the mid-nineteenth century, hit lows in the eighteenth century, and ran opposite the birth rate. When young men and women could afford to marry young and start families, birth rates were high and child murder rates were low. When prospective parents could not afford to start families or raised their economic aspirations for themselves and their children,

birth rates were low and parents murdered children at a high rate. Economic need, ambition, and the cost of raising children drove both the child murder rate and the birth rate. Because the productivity of child labor and the resources available to young parents were greater in North America than in Europe, America (together with Canada) had the lowest child murder rate in the Western world through the nineteenth century.

Because child homicides rates have followed a distinctive pattern over the course of American history, I plan to write about child homicides in a separate book, *Child Murder in America*. I have published essays on child murder in New England and on neonaticides in early modern England, for those who wish to learn more about the subject.

I would like to note, however, that the pattern of child homicides in New England, Ohio, Virginia, Great Britain, and France played a crucial role in confirming the theories of homicides among adults in *American Homicide*. Murders of children by unrelated persons—including murders of children by unrelated children—followed the same pattern as homicides among unrelated adults. But murders of children by relatives or caregivers followed a distinctive pattern, because the correlates of domestic homicides of children were distinctive. Once I realized in the mid-1990s that societies could be homicidal toward non-relatives and non-homicidal toward children who were relatives, or vice versa, I realized that the political correlates of homicides among unrelated persons were robust, not an artifact of the ways in which evidence of homicide was gathered or preserved. Further confirmation came when I read Philip Walker's paper on fractures in skeletal remains associated with child abuse. Walker, a forensic archaeologist, shows that

the tell-tale signs of child abuse—twisting, spiral fractures of the arms or legs, which indicate that a child has been thrown violently—appeared in skeletal remains in Western nations at precisely the time the historical data shows child homicides increased in the nineteenth century. The patterns in the historical data are real, as are the phenomena they correlate with: fertility rates for domestic murders of children, and political upheavals for murders among unrelated persons.

### **References**

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