Reviewer's report

Title: Child murder and psychopathy - A nationwide register-based case-control study of filicide offenders 1995-2004

Version: 1 Date: 26 February 2009

Reviewer: robert schoevers

Reviewer's report:

This is an interesting and well described study on an important topic that is hard to investigate as the incidence of the event is so low. Being able to use a nationwide database is definitely of value. Still, I think the manuscript could be somewhat ameliorated.

1. Is the question posed by the authors well defined?

Yes it is. However, the title suggests that psychopathy is the only characteristic investigated, whereas other psychosocial and psychopathological factors are also compared and described in order to differentiate filicide from homicide offenders. I would suggest amending the title to (e.g.): …. differences between homicide and filicide offenders; results of a nationwide register-based case-control study.....

2. Are the methods appropriate and well described?

Yes they generally are. The description of the comparison group could be somewhat clearer about the criteria for inclusion (“…a crime itself with no extreme, exceptional features…”).

It remains unclear how personality disorders have been assessed. Has this been done by MMPI or by clinical interviews?

3. Are the data sound?

The study provides more data than those shown in the tables. It is mentioned that only variables with substantial of perfect agreement were chosen for the study. I think the authors could be more specific about this. Furthermore, how many and which variables yielded less optimal agreement, and could this have affected the study outcome?

There is no mention of Axis-I Disorders in the table (whereas the text offers data about the number of psychotic/depressive features), no description of psychiatric comorbidities, no separate outlining of the sexe of the offender, this could be added.

Also, could the finding of a specific type of emotional dysfunction in filicide offenders be indicative of mourning over the dead child?
4. Does the manuscript adhere to the relevant standards for reporting and data deposition?

yes

5. Are the discussion and conclusions well balanced and adequately supported by the data?

As stated above, the comparison includes more interesting differences between groups than mentioned in the title and in the discussion (and results section). Furthermore, some of the conclusion appear too speculative.

“The filicide offenders seemed more socially conformed than the other offenders…”: Could it be that the filicide offenders were parenting an indication for their ability of social conformation, for their ability of bonding? If this is so, would it have been interesting to note if the comparison group offenders were parenting?

The remark “filicide offenders must have experienced some acute distress, not visible in the diagnoses…”, seems speculative. There is a general lack of understanding about the risk factors that lead to the deed of filicide altogether. International literature speculates about many associated variables, e.g. low intelligence, longstanding economic adversity and/or the event of acute distress like an acute loss.

The paragraph including statements about Warren is confusing. Filicide is not mostly considered an intentional homicide in international literature, similar to murder, although there are marked differences in legal procedures internationally. Perhaps the authors could be more clear about what exactly they mean here, and whether this is in line with Warren.

“The majority of filicide offenders may represent the same constellation of personality traits found in domestic batterers…”. Filicide are a heterogeneously composed group, largely divided into a ‘mentally ill’ group, a battering group and a neonaticide group. Is it possible that there was a relatively big group of domestic batterers in this group of filicide offenders?

The authors mention potential consequences of their study for prevention, and state that prevention of filicide "cannot remain the task of psychiatry alone". I have some problems with such statements that seem to go further than the evidence would permit. It is clear that prevention of these terrible happenings would be of utmost importance. However, prevention (or prediction) of events that very rarely occur is very hard, especially if the association between risk factors and event is either weak or unclear. The conclusion of this study could also be that severe psychiatric disorder is associated with a risk for either homicide or filicide, and that this concerns psychiatry. The debate is somewhat similar to that around suicide prevention. There are many risk factors, and none have a singular strong relationship to this outcome. Still, psychopathological characteristics do seem relevant, and many perpetrators have been in contact
with mental health services before the deed. In this respect, I was wondering whether the authors also have information on previous outpatient contacts, as they now only mention psychiatric admission in their table?

And, if prevention could be an option not solely for psychiatry, how would the authors see this, drawing from their own data?

6. Are limitations of the work clearly stated?

Yes they are, and I agree that this is a unique opportunity to study this issue. One further comment regarding prevention: this paper compares homicide and filicide offenders. It does not make comparisons with the general population, or the mental health users population, so the relevance in terms of prevention is limited. This should be stated more clearly.

7. Do the authors clearly acknowledge any work upon which they are building, both published and unpublished?

Yes.

8. Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found?

See comment 1.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.