

## Parricide: Characteristics of sons and daughters who kill their parents



### **Sara G. West, MD**

Assistant Professor of Psychiatry  
Case Western Reserve University  
School of Medicine  
Cleveland, OH

### **Mendel Feldsher, MD**

Consulting Forensic Psychiatrist  
Patton State Hospital  
Patton, CA

### Schizophrenia, difficult relationships are common among adult perpetrators

**M**r. B, age 37, is single and lives with his elderly mother. Since being diagnosed with schizophrenia in his early 20s, he has been intermittently compliant with antipsychotic therapy. When unmedicated, Mr. B develops paranoid delusions and becomes preoccupied with the idea that his mother is plotting to kill him. He has been hospitalized twice in the last 5 years for physical aggression toward his mother. In the last 10 years, Mr. B has been placed in several group homes, but when he takes his medications, he is able to convince his mother to allow him to live with her.

During his most recent stay in his mother's home, Mr. B again stops taking his psychotropic medications and decompensates. His mother becomes concerned about her son's paranoid behavior—such as trying to listen in on her telephone conversations and smelling his food before he eats it—and considers having her son involuntarily committed. One day, after she prepares Mr. B a sandwich, he decides the meat is poisoned. When his mother tries to convince him to eat the sandwich, Mr. B becomes enraged and stabs her 54 times with a kitchen knife.

Mr. B is arrested without resistance. He is adjudicated incompetent to stand trial and is restored to competency within 3 months. Mr. B is found not guilty by reason of insanity (NGRI) and is civilly committed to a state psychiatric facility.

Parricide—killing one's parents—once was referred to as “the schizophrenic crime,”<sup>1</sup> but is now recognized as being more complex.<sup>2</sup> In the United States, parricides ac-

continued on page 22



**Parricide and mental illness**

**Clinical Point**

Themes in parricide literature should be interpreted cautiously because of the limitations of this research



Visit this article at [CurrentPsychiatry.com](http://CurrentPsychiatry.com) for depictions of parricide in popular culture

**Table 1**

**Sons who kill their parents: Schizophrenia is common**

**Sons who kill their mothers**

**Sons who kill their fathers**

<p><b>Sons:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Often immature, passive, and dependent</li> <li>• Schizophrenia is common</li> <li>• Single and living with mother</li> <li>• Fathers absent</li> </ul>	<p><b>Sons:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Schizophrenia is common</li> <li>• Single</li> </ul>
<p><b>Mothers:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Often domineering, demanding, and possessive</li> <li>• Often the only victim</li> </ul>	<p><b>Fathers:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Often domineering and aggressive</li> <li>• Often the only victim</li> <li>• Relationship with son often is cruel and abusive</li> </ul>
<p><b>Crime:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Excessive force often used</li> <li>• Motive: delusional beliefs, altruism, threat of separation, or arguments</li> <li>• Often committed in the home</li> </ul>	<p><b>Crime:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Often involves excessive force</li> <li>• Following the crime, the perpetrator experiences relief, rather than remorse</li> </ul>

Source: References 5,8,10-14

counted for 2% of all homicides from 1976 to 1998,<sup>3</sup> which is consistent with studies from France<sup>4</sup> and the United Kingdom.<sup>5</sup> Parricide’s scandalous nature has long attracted the public’s fascination (see this article at [CurrentPsychiatry.com](http://CurrentPsychiatry.com)).

This article primarily focuses on the interplay of the diagnostic and demographic factors seen in adults who kill their biological parents but briefly notes differences seen in juvenile perpetrators and those who kill their stepparents. Knowledge of these characteristics can help clinicians identify and more safely manage patients who may be at risk of harming their parents.

**A limited evidence base**

The common themes found in the literature on parricide should be interpreted cautiously because of the limitations of this research. The number of individuals assessed in these studies often is small, which limits the statistical power of the findings. Studies often are conducted in forensic hospitals, which excludes those who are imprisoned or commit suicide following the acts. Finally, most individuals studied were diagnosed with a psychiatric disorder after the crime, which makes it difficult to distinguish the primary illness from the crime’s effect on a person’s

mental state. Additionally, some individuals may be tempted to exaggerate or feign psychiatric symptoms in an effort to be found NGRI or granted leniency during sentencing. Despite these limitations, several conclusions can be drawn from these investigations.

The sex of the victims and perpetrators needs to be carefully considered when reviewing characteristics of those who commit parricide. Killing a mother is matricide, and killing a father is patricide.

**Sons who kill their parents**

Men are more likely to kill their parents than women.<sup>6-9</sup> In a study of 5,488 cases of parricide in the United States, 4,738 (86%) of perpetrators were male.<sup>3</sup> Common characteristics of men who commit parricide are listed in *Table 1*.<sup>5,8,10-14</sup>

**Matricide by sons.** Although sons kill their fathers more often than their mothers,<sup>15</sup> authors writing about parricide commonly focus on men who commit matricide. Wertham described sons who kill their mothers in terms of the “Orestes Complex,” which refers to ambivalent feelings toward the mother that ultimately manifest in homicidal rage. He noted that many matricides are committed with excessive force, occur in the bedroom, and are precipitated by



## Parricide and mental illness

### Clinical Point

Many men were psychotic shortly before the crime and their acts were influenced by delusions and/or hallucinations

ONLINE ONLY

Discuss this article at <http://CurrentPsychiatry.blogspot.com>

Table 2

## Daughters who kill their parents: Strained relationships

### Daughters who kill their mothers

**Daughters:**

- Often middle-aged, single, and living with mother
- Psychosis is common

**Mothers:**

- Often the only victim
- Relationship with daughter often is hostile and dependent

**Crime:**

- Often involves excessive force

Source: Reference 9

### Daughters who kill their fathers

**Daughters:**

- Less likely to be psychotic

**Fathers:**

- Often tyrannical
- Relationship with daughter is likely violent

trivial reasons. Wertham stated that these crimes represent the son's unconscious hatred for his mother superimposed on sexual desire for her.<sup>16</sup> Sigmund Freud argued that matricide served as a displacement defense against incestuous impulses.<sup>17</sup>

In 5 studies that looked at sons who killed their mothers (n=13 to 58),<sup>5,10-13</sup> most of which examined men residing in forensic hospitals after the crime, perpetrators were noted to be immature, dependent, and passive. In a study of 16 men with schizophrenia who committed matricide, subjects perceived themselves as "weak, small, inadequate, hopeless, doubtful about sexual identity, dependent, and unable to accept a separate, adult male role."<sup>11</sup> Mothers generally were domineering, demanding, and possessive.

Based on our literature review, most men who committed matricide had a schizophrenia diagnosis (weighted mean 72%, range 50% to 100%); other diagnoses included depression and personality disorders. Many men were experiencing psychosis shortly before the crime, and their acts were influenced by persecutory delusions and/or auditory hallucinations. Approximately one-quarter of sons killed their mothers for altruistic reasons, such as to relieve actual or perceived suffering.

Nearly all men in these 5 studies were single and lived with their mothers before killing them, and many of the perpetrators' fathers were absent. Mothers often were the only victims of their sons' violent acts. In addition to delusional beliefs, sons were motivated to kill their mothers for various

reasons, including threatened separation or minor arguments (eg, over food or money). Many of these homicides took place in the home. Sharp or blunt objects were the most common weapons, but guns and strangulation/asphyxiation also were used. Approximately one-half of the men used excessive violence; for example, 1 victim had 177 stab wounds. After the crimes, the perpetrators generally expressed remorse or relief.

**Patricide by sons.** Psychoanalysts may consider the Oedipal Complex to be the primary impetus for a son to commit patricide. By eliminating his father the son gains possession of his mother.<sup>18</sup> Three studies looked at sons who killed their fathers; 2 examined 10 perpetrators residing in a forensic hospital after the crimes<sup>8,14</sup> and the third was based on coroners' reports.<sup>10</sup> Although the sons' personality traits were not described, the fathers were noted to be "domineering and aggressive," and their relationships with their sons were "cruel and unusual."<sup>8</sup> In our review of these studies, >50% of sons were diagnosed with schizophrenia (weighted mean 60%, range 49% to 80%). Many perpetrators exhibited psychotic symptoms, including delusions and hallucinations. In 1 study, 40% of sons with psychotic symptoms perceived their fathers as posing "threats of physical or psychological annihilation."<sup>14</sup>

In 2 of these studies all of the sons were single or separated from their spouses.<sup>8,14</sup> Most killed only their fathers at the time of the act. Immediately before the crime, one-half of the fathers were consuming alcohol

and/or arguing with their sons. Ninety percent of the fathers were killed by excessive violence. Following the acts, the sons described feeling “relief rather than remorse or guilt ... leading to a feeling of freedom from the abnormal relationship.”<sup>14</sup> One study noted that, in the course of legal proceedings, one-fifth were deemed competent to stand trial and the others were found to be incompetent and hospitalized.<sup>14</sup>

### Daughters who commit parricide

d’Orban and O’Connor conducted the only major study examining women who commit parricide,<sup>9</sup> a retrospective evaluation of 17 women who killed a parent and were housed in a prison or hospital. The authors highlight the importance of delusional beliefs as a motive for parricide (*Table 2*).<sup>9</sup>

In a 1970 Japanese study of 21 women who killed parents or in-laws, half of the victims were mothers-in-law, but none were biological mothers.<sup>19</sup> According to the authors, this finding suggests that relationships between Japanese women and their mothers-in-law often are particularly contentious; however, no research has examined this theory in the United States.

**Matricide by daughters.** In the d’Orban and O’Connor study,<sup>9</sup> >80% of women who committed parricide killed their mothers. In general, the daughters were described as being “in mid-life, living alone with an elderly, domineering mother in marked social isolation.” The parent-child relationship was “characterized by mutual hostility and dependence.” Seventy-five percent of the daughters suffered from psychotic illness. Extreme violence often was used.

**Patricide by daughters.** Of the 3 women who killed their fathers in d’Orban and O’Connor’s study,<sup>9</sup> none were psychotic. Furthermore, 2 women had no psychiatric diagnosis—the third had antisocial personality disorder—and “killed tyrannical fathers in response to prolonged parental violence.” One woman reported that she was forced into a long-term incestuous relationship before killing her father. The women who killed their fathers were

Table 3

### Characteristics of juveniles who kill their parents or stepparents

Often teenage boys
Generally lack history of psychosis
Actions often are spontaneous
Motivated by long-term parental abuse
Often feel relief rather than remorse after the crime
More likely to kill stepparents than biological parents
<b>Source:</b> References 21-27

younger (mean age 21.3) than those who killed their mothers (mean age 39.5).

### Other perpetrators and victims

Patricide is most often committed by adults<sup>20</sup>; however, some important conclusions can be drawn regarding juveniles who kill their parents (*Table 3*).<sup>21-27</sup> The most common scenario is of adolescent boys who have no history of psychosis and kill their fathers in a burst of rage brought on by ongoing abuse from parents. These murders typically are followed by feelings of relief rather than remorse.<sup>21-27</sup>

Stepparents often have a more challenging relationship with children than biological parents.<sup>28</sup> Research indicates that stepparents are more likely than biological parents to be killed by juvenile offenders.<sup>29</sup> Also, stepparent victims tended to be younger than biological parent victims.<sup>29</sup>

### Clinical applications

Ask adult schizophrenia patients living with a parent about the quality of the relationship. If the relationship is characterized by conflict or abuse or if psychotic symptoms are present, assess for violent thoughts toward the parent. For patients with uncontrolled psychosis coupled with a contentious parental relationship, in addition to aggressively treating psychotic symptoms, consider initiating family therapy, anger management classes, group home placement, or involuntary hospitalization to lower the risk of parricide.

### Clinical Point

More than 80% of women who committed parricide killed their mothers



## Parricide and mental illness

### Clinical Point

If the relationship is characterized by conflict or abuse or if psychotic symptoms are present, assess for violent thoughts toward the parent

### Related Resources

- Heide KM, Boots DP. A comparative analysis of media reports of U.S. parricide cases with officially reported national crime data and the psychiatric and psychological literature. *Int J Offender Ther Comp Criminol.* 2007;51(6):646-675.
- Jacobs A. On matricide: myth, psychoanalysis, and the law of the mother. New York, NY: Columbia University Press; 2007.

### Disclosure

The authors report no financial relationship with any company whose products are mentioned in this article, or with manufacturers of competing products.

### References

1. Gillies H. Murder in the west of Scotland. *Br J Psychiatry.* 1965;111:1087-1094.
2. Clark SA. Matricide: the schizophrenic crime? *Med Sci Law.* 1993;33(4):325-328.
3. Federal Bureau of Investigation. *Crime in the United States.* Washington, DC: Department of Justice; 1998.
4. Devaux C, Petit G, Perol Y, et al. Enquête sure le parricide en France. *Ann Med Psychol (Paris).* 1974;1:161-168.
5. Green C. Matricide by sons. *Med Sci Law.* 1981;21:207-214.
6. Marleau JD, Millaud F, Auclair N. A comparison of parricide and attempted parricide: a study of 39 psychotic adults. *Int J Law Psychiatry.* 2003;26(3):269-279.
7. Weisman AM, Ehrenclou MG, Sharma KK. Double parricide: forensic analysis and psycholegal implications. *J Forensic Sci.* 2002;47(2):313-317.
8. Singhal S, Dutta A. Who commits patricide? *Acta Psychiatr Scand.* 1990;82:40-43.
9. d'Orban PT, O'Connor A. Women who kill their parents. *Br J Psychiatry.* 1989;154:27-33.
10. Bourget D, Gagné P, Labelle ME. Parricide: a comparative study of matricide versus patricide. *J Am Acad Psychiatry Law.* 2007;35(3):306-312.
11. Singhal S, Dutta A. Who commits matricide? *Med Sci Law.* 1992;32:213-217.
12. Campion J, Cravens JM, Rotholc A, et al. A study of 15 matricidal men. *Am J Psychiatry.* 1985;142:312-317.
13. O'Connell B. Matricide (report of a meeting of the Royal Medico-Psychological Association). *Lancet.* 1963;1:1083-1084.
14. Cravens JM, Campion J, Rotholc A, et al. A study of 10 men charged with patricide. *Am J Psychiatry.* 1985;142(9):1089-1092.
15. Shon PC, Targonski JR. Declining trends in U.S. parricides, 1976-1978: testing the Freudian assumptions. *Int J Law Psychiatry.* 2003;26:387-402.
16. Wertham F. *Dark legend: a study in murder.* New York, NY: Duell, Sloan and Pearce; 1941.
17. Freud S. The interpretation of dreams. Strachey J, trans. New York, NY: Discus; 1925.
18. Freud S. Sigmund Freud: collected papers. Vol 5. New York, NY: Basic Books; 1959.
19. Hirose K. A psychiatric study of female homicide: on the cases of parricide. *Acta Criminologiae et Medicinae Legalis Japonica.* 1970;36:29.
20. Heide KM. Parents who get killed and the children who kill them. *J Interpers Violence.* 1993;8(4):531-544.
21. Hellsten P, Katila O. Murder and homicide by children under 15 in Finland. *Psychiatr Q Suppl.* 1965;39:54-74.
22. Scherl DJ, Mack JE. A study of adolescent matricide. *J Am Acad Child Psychiatry.* 1966;5:569-593.
23. Sadoff RL. Clinical observations on parricide. *Psychiatr Q.* 1971;45:65-69.
24. Tanay E. Proceedings: adolescents who kill parents—reactive parricide. *Aust N Z J Psychiatry.* 1973;7:263-277.
25. Tuovinen M. On parricide. *Psychiatria Fennica.* 1973;141-146.
26. Corder BF, Ball BC, Haizlip TM, et al. Adolescent parricide: a comparison with other adolescent murder. *Am J Psychiatry.* 1976;133:957-961.
27. Post S. Adolescent parricide in abusive families. *Child Welfare.* 1982;61:445-455.
28. Daly M, Wilson M. Evolutionary social psychology and family homicide. *Science.* 1988;242:520-524.
29. Heide KM. *Why kids kill parents: child abuse and adolescent homicide.* Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press; 1992.

## Bottom Line

Schizophrenia is highly prevalent among adults who kill their parents. Individuals may be motivated in part by persecutory delusions and/or auditory hallucinations. Perpetrators often are single and live at home with their parents, who frequently are domineering.

## The public's view of parricide: Fascination and horror

The public maintains a morbid curiosity about parricide. In ancient times, the Roman emperor Nero was responsible for the death of his mother, Agrippina. In 1892, Lizzie Borden attracted national attention—and inspired a children's song about “40 whacks”—when she was suspected, but acquitted, of murdering her father and stepmother. Charles Whitman, infamous for his 1966 killing spree from the University of Texas at Austin tower, killed his mother before his rampage. In 1993, the trial of the Menendez brothers, who were eventually convicted of murdering their parents, was broadcast on Court TV.

Parricide also plays a role in literature and popular culture. Oedipus would have never been able to marry his mother had he not first killed his father. In the movie *Psycho*, Alfred Hitchcock told the story of Norman Bates, a hotel owner who killed his mother and preserved her body in the basement. In the novel *Carrie*, Stephen King uses matricide as a means to sever the relationship between the main character and her domineering mother. In 1989, the band Aerosmith released a song, *Janie's Got a Gun*, about a girl who kills her father after he sexually abused her.