

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:  
Air Force

## Victim, Perpetrator, Family, and Incident Characteristics of Infant and Child Homicide In the United States Air Force

Lucas, D.R., Wezner, K.C., Milner, J.S., McCanne, T.R, Harris, I.N., Monroe Posey, C., & Nelson, J.P. (2002). Victim, perpetrator, family, and incident characteristics of infant and child homicide in the United States Air Force *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 26(2), 167-186. doi:10.1016/S0145-2134(01)00315-5

**SUMMARY:** Understanding the characteristics of both the perpetrators and victims of infant and child fatal abuse may help develop strategies to prevent future occurrences. Records of infant (24 hours to less than one year old), young child (ages one to four years), and child (ages five to 15 years) victims in the U.S. Air Force were reviewed for common characteristics and differences between the three groups. Several common factors related to perpetrators and victims were determined and key differences between victim groups were identified.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- Perpetrators had a prior history of alcohol abuse in 32% of cases, and outside agencies reported previous domestic or family violence by the perpetrator in 39% of cases.
- The majority of incidents involved a potential catalyst (68%), with impending spouse break-up as the most common catalyst (59%).
- More families in the young child (59%) and child groups (86%) experienced at least one life stressor in the previous month than in the infant group (26%).
- Infant victims were almost equally distributed between male and female genders; however, young child and child victims were more likely to be male (71% and 62% respectively).

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Encourage collaboration between DoD programs and outside agencies to identify military families in need of child abuse intervention services
- Provide programs for military families experiencing a life stressor that focus on positive coping skills and abuse prevention
- Disseminate information to military families about available support services for military families experiencing abuse

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to support programs that identify and prevent child abuse in military families
- Recommend partnerships among military and community based programs to promote information sharing and identify military families in need of abuse prevention services
- Encourage the training of professionals on child abuse risk factors in military families

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## METHODS

- Victim categories were defined as infant (24 hours to less than one year old), young child (ages one to four years), and child (ages 5 to 15 years).
- Records from 32 young child and child cases of fatal child abuse were reviewed for several pre-defined factors.
- Data from a previous study that similarly reviewed 31 cases of infant fatal child abuse was used for comparison.
- Victim, perpetrator, and family factors and characteristics were described and compared across the victim groups.

## PARTICIPANTS

- The victims included 31 infants (mean age not provided), and 32 children (24 young children and 8 child victims; mean age at death = 3.9 years, SD=3.48 years). Mean age at death was not provided for child groups separately.
- The gender of victims was 52% male and 48% female for infants, 71% male and 29% female for young children, and 62% male and 38% female for child victims.
- Infant victims were 62% White and 38% Black, young child victims were 74% White and 26% Black, and child victims were 74% White and 13% Black. In addition, 13% of child victims were Latino
- The majority of perpetrators were male in both the infant (84%) and child groups (75%). Perpetrator age was not included.

## LIMITATIONS

- Due to missing or incomplete records, sample sizes for some factors were small. This may limit the generalizability of the findings to larger populations.
- The sample size for the child group is small compared to the infant and young child groups; this may limit the conclusions of comparisons between age groups.
- There were no comparison groups of children with non-fatal abuse outcomes or non-abuse child fatalities, making it difficult to compare the characteristics of this sample to other populations.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Compare the characteristics of the current sample to cases of fatal child abuse in other military branches
- Explore interventions that lead to non-fatal and improved outcomes in military families with previous substantiated instances of child abuse
- Examine the factors involved in cases of fatal child abuse in military families compared to civilian families

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