

Frequently Asked Questions About Filicide

Isn't this caused by lack of services?

It's absolutely true that people with disabilities and our families don't get enough services. But that's not what causes these murders.

There are thousands of families across the country with insufficient or nonexistent services who refrain from murdering their disabled family members. In addition, most high-profile cases have occurred in upper-middle-class communities and have been committed by parents who either refused services, or had more family services than is typical.⁹ This is not about services. Suggesting that murders could be prevented with more funding holds people with disabilities hostage: ***give us what we want, or the kid gets it!***

When disgruntled employees take guns into their workplaces and murder their colleagues, we don't use that as a launching point for a conversation about how Americans need better employee benefits or more paid leave. When students shoot people in their schools, we don't use this as a launching point for a conversation about anti-bullying policies. This doesn't mean that we don't care about worker's rights or student safety; it means that these are separate conversations, and combining them makes excuses for murderers. We feel that drawing a line between filicide and lack of services is equally inappropriate.

Is it a hate crime? What can we do?

Yes and no. A hate crime is a crime that is motivated by bias; disability hate crimes are defined as crimes that are committed because of a bias or prejudice against disability.¹⁰ Filicide in the disability community is almost always about the person's disability, so in that sense, yes, this is a hate crime.

Legally, disability-related hate crime can only be prosecuted on the federal level if it can be considered to affect interstate commerce. Individual states vary in their state-based hate crimes laws. Check your state to see if filicide related to disability can be considered a hate crime under state law; if not, consider lobbying your state legislature to include disability in your state's hate crimes statute, or to adopt one if your state does not have one. To find out about your state's hate crime legislation, go [here](#).

We also encourage you to work with other people and groups in your communities to counter ableism and other forms of discrimination before they become violent. Filicide and other hate crimes are a very visible form of discrimination, but getting rid of discrimination means doing more than pushing for more hate crimes legislation alone.

⁹ Emily Willingham, "Here's Why You Don't Want to View Disability as an Excuse For Murder," *Forbes*, 2016, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/emilywillingham/2016/12/13/heres-why-you-dont-want-to-view-disability-as-an-excuse-for-murder/#61ee724e6396>; David Perry, "Why London McCabe's death matters," *CNN*, 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/11/10/opinion/perry-autism-london-mccabe/index.html>.

¹⁰ Erika Harrell, "Crimes Against Persons with Disabilities, 2009-2015- Statistical Tables" U.S. Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2017, <https://bjs.ojp.gov/search/results?keys=%22crimes+against+persons+with+disabilities%22#gsc.tab=0&gsc.q=%22crimes%20against%20persons%20with%20disabilities%22&gsc.page=1>.

Beyond advocating for hate crimes legislation, here are some actions you and other groups in your community can take to counter ableism, violence and discrimination:

- Advocate for, and run, bystander intervention training. Bystander intervention training teaches people how to respond when they see someone else being abused or treated badly.
- Advocate for services that help people escape unhealthy or abusive situations (such as domestic violence services) and demand that these services be accessible to people with disabilities.
- Advocate to replace guardianship with forms of support such as supported decision-making. Guardianship is when a court takes away a person with a disability's right to make decisions for themselves and appoints another person (a guardian) to make decisions for the person. Guardianship can trap people with disabilities in unhealthy or abusive living situations.
- Advocate to close institutions and fully fund services that help people with disabilities live in the community with everyone else. People living in institutions are at a much higher risk of being abused or neglected. Community ties can protect people who are being abused and help connect them to resources.
- Educate community members on what ableism is, what it looks like, how it affects people with disabilities, and how we can stop it.

ASAN thinks that there should be more solutions that help stop hate crimes before they happen. ASAN wants to get rid of all forms of discrimination. We do not just want laws that punish people who commit hate crimes. We want policies and laws that help protect people from discrimination and violence in the first place.

Avoiding making excuses for caregivers who kill

Our society's reactions to filicide reflect our beliefs about disability. When parents of kids without disabilities murder their children, everyone agrees it is horrible. It is only when the victim is disabled that we are encouraged to “understand” why someone would murder their child. This is a double standard, and it reveals dangerous things about our beliefs.

When we say that we “understand” why someone would kill their child, we are excusing that action. It does not matter how many times we say not that I would ever condone this: if we attempt to make a parent murdering their child understandable, if we ever attempt to position it as a comprehensible or inevitable or normal thing, we are minimizing and excusing this act. Doing so puts the lives of disabled people everywhere in danger.

The narrative that “the system has failed everyone” is an old one, but one only brought up as a way to dismiss the very interpersonal violence of filicide. The system is failing people with disabilities—but that does not absolve our murderers. “The system” cannot only be brought up to excuse violence. We have to talk about the ways in which ableism, classism, racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination cause harm in our everyday lives—and we need to do something about it. Before someone is murdered.

Understanding filicide as part of social ableism.

Ableism—discrimination against and poor treatment of people with disabilities—is baked into our society. People learn to value health, wellness, and ability over disability and illness from a young age. This is even more true for people with disabilities. We are told from the time we are babies, explicitly and implicitly, that we are lesser for being disabled.

Ableism is a part of white supremacy. White supremacy is a system of beliefs that says white people's lives are more valuable than the lives of people of color, and argues this by saying white people are better. White supremacy pushes these ideas by dividing people into smaller and smaller groups and saying one group is the “good” group and the other group is the “bad” one. (You can learn more about white supremacy and structural racism in our toolkit on structural racism.)

Ableism in society shows itself in many ways. Filicide is one of the most extreme ways ableism works in society. But there are many more mundane ways: stereotypes and microaggressions towards disabled people, accommodations being ignored, accessible door openers not working, disabled people losing jobs because we “weren't the right fit” for the company. Institutionalization and segregation of disabled people off into separate places “just for us” are another example of ableism at work in society.

When we talk about filicide, we have to talk about the role ableism plays. We have to talk about how someone can believe ableist attitudes and ideas to the degree that they kill their family member for being disabled. We have to talk about how, when someone kills their disabled family member, plenty of people are willing to make excuses for them. That is ableism in action as well. People are, of course, responsible for their own actions — widespread social ableism is not an excuse to kill your disabled family member. But unless we get to the root cause of the problem — ableism and ableist attitudes —

we are not going to get a long-term, wide-spread solution for filicide.

In the section “Is it a hate crime?” we talked about ways to get your community involved in fighting ableism. Approaches that only target the most extreme manifestations of ableism (filicide and other types of violence against people with disabilities) are less likely to work than approaches that acknowledge ableism is embedded in every social system people encounter. If we want to fight ableism, including ending filicide, we have to acknowledge and address ableism whenever it happens, in whatever form it's in.

But anyone who would kill their child, or try to kill their child, must have a mental illness. Doesn't that change how we should think about this?

Committing murder is not a symptom of mental illness. Choosing to kill someone with a disability because you believe their life is not as valuable as yours comes from ableism. Ableism sets up this idea that a human being's life, and therefore their death, is less important if they are disabled.

People with mental illness are no more violent than the general population - but, like people with developmental disabilities, they are often the targets of violent crimes. When talking about cases where people with disabilities are murdered by parents, invoking mental illness is just a way of blaming one group of people with disabilities for the murders of other people with disabilities, and shifting the blame away from the person who is actually responsible - the murderer. Saying that filicide is a sign of mental illness also downplays the numbers of people with mental illness who have been murdered in filicides.

When we explain away filicide as a sign of someone being mentally ill, we ignore the ways in which our society teaches us from a very young age to devalue the lives of disabled people. Filicide is not a symptom of mental illness, it is a hate crime. The ways filicide is dismissed and excused in our culture shows how normalized ableism is.