

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 people do not have the services they need, this is a real societal problem. But in general, it is good to avoid saying that blame for a murder ultimately lies with factors that may have made the murderer's life difficult, even if those factors are real societal problems. For example, if a disgruntled employee murders a colleague, we shouldn't use this as a launching point for a national conversation about how Americans need better employee benefits. We shouldn't write articles like, "Workplace Killing Illustrates Need For Paid Leave." We shouldn't speculate that the death could have been prevented if the murderer had gotten that raise they wanted, or muse about how the victim could have been a more friendly colleague, or declare that until working conditions improve, we will inevitably see more people "pushed to the point of" murdering their colleagues. This doesn't mean that we don't care about workers' rights; 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?

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 inter-state 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](#).

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://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/capdo915st.pdf>.

Why is it bad to try to understand why someone might do this?

Filicide is a horrifying act, and wondering how someone could do this is a natural response. But when we progress to saying “I understand why someone would do this,” or “but you have to understand,” we are not just saying that we have thought about what motivated the killer - we are saying that the killer’s actions make sense to us.

Our society’s reactions to filicide reflect our beliefs about disability. When parents of kids without disabilities murder their children, we are universally united in condemnation. It is only when the victim is disabled that we pause. It is only when the victim is disabled that we are encouraged to understand. This is a double standard, and it reveals dangerous things about our beliefs.

When we say *every parent of a disabled child has had moments like this* or *walk a mile in our shoes* or *the system failed everyone* or *but you have to understand how hard it is*, we are excusing a parent murdering their child. 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, if we take and normalize the perspective and the side of abusers and murderers, we are minimizing and excusing this act. Doing so puts the lives of disabled people everywhere in danger.

There are absolutely things we should understand about filicide. There are absolutely people with whom we should empathize. We should understand that filicide is not committed by loving parents. We should empathize with the victims. But to say, “I don’t condone the murder but I understand it,” is to say, “This is bad, but it isn’t **so** bad if we put it in context.”

We do not believe that this is a good way to talk about murder.

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

Filicide is not a symptom of mental health disabilities. Filicide indicates a decision to murder. These decisions are deliberate and often premeditated for days or weeks. The perpetrators of filicides are often evaluated and found competent to stand trial.

Saying that only people with mental health disabilities would commit a murder can make some people feel better, but it’s not true. People with mental health disabilities are no more violent than the general population - but, like people with developmental disabilities, they are often the targets of violent crimes.¹¹ When we’re talking about cases where people with disabilities are murdered by parents, invoking a mental health disability 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.

¹¹ Erika Harrell, “Crimes Against Persons with Disabilities, 2009-2015- Statistical Tables”; Sarah L. Desmarais et. al., “Community Violence Perpetration and Victimization Among Adults with Mental Illnesses,” *American Journal of Public Health* 104, no. 12 (2007), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4133297/#>; Virginia Aldigé Hiday et. al., “Criminal Victimization of Persons with Severe Mental Illness,” *Psychiatric Services* 50, no. 1 (1999), <https://ps.psychiatryonline.org/toc/ps/50/1>; Linda A. Teplin et. al., “Crime Victimization in Adults with Severe Mental Illness,” *Archives of General Psychiatry* 63, no. 8 (2005), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1389236/>; John S. Brekke et. al., “Risks for individuals with schizophrenia who are living in the community,” *Psychiatric Services* 52, no.10 (2001), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/11585953>.