

What is filicide?

In the past five years, over 650 people with disabilities have been murdered by their parents, relatives or caregivers.

These acts are horrific enough on their own. But they exist in the context of a larger pattern:

1. A parent kills their disabled child.
2. The media portrays these murders as justifiable and inevitable due to the “burden” of having a disabled person in the family.⁷
3. If the parent stands trial, they are given sympathy and comparatively lighter sentences, if they are sentenced at all.
4. The victim is disregarded, blamed for their own murder at the hands of the person they should have been able to trust the most, and ultimately forgotten.
5. The media sends a message that if you kill your disabled child, you will receive attention and sympathy. The justice system sends a message that if you kill your disabled child, your punishment will likely be minimal.
6. Parents of kids with disabilities see these messages.
7. A parent kills their disabled child.

What does the term “filicide” mean?

“Filicide” is the legal term for a parent murdering their child. In the disability community, “filicide” is used when talking about a parent or other relative murdering a child or adult relative with a disability. This toolkit is specifically about filicide in the disability community. When we say “filicide,” we are talking about a pattern of violence that starts when a parent or caregiver murders their child or adult relative with a disability and continues in how these murders are reported, discussed, justified, excused, and replicated.

How common is it?

We don’t know. Filicide in general is very difficult to track, and filicide in the disability community is notoriously underreported. We are aware of over 650 filicides in the United States from the last 5 years where the victim was disabled.⁸ We know that the numbers we know of are much smaller than the reality.

⁷ David Perry et. al., “Media Coverage of the Murder of People with Disabilities by Their Caretakers,” *Ruderman Family Foundation*, 2017. http://rudermanfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Murders-by-Caregivers-WP_final_final.pdf.

⁸ Disability Day of Mourning, <http://disability-memorial.org/>.

Why are we only talking about filicide against people with disabilities?

Typically, when a child without a disability is murdered by their parents, everyone stands united in condemnation. No one attempts to understand, justify, or explain the murder. No one expresses sympathy for the murderer. No one argues that every parent has had moments or thoughts like that. No one understands. No one suggests that if the child had been easier or the family had had more support, this could have been avoided. The crime is punished harshly, and the victim is remembered and mourned.

When someone with a disability is murdered by their parents, the opposite happens.

Why does it happen?

Because we live in a world where disabled lives are valued less than the lives of people without disabilities.

Because we live in a world where people think it is better to be dead than to be disabled.

Because we live in a world where killing your disabled child is excused, minimized, and normalized.

Because we live in a world where this is okay.