

Kenneth Bevan III, Malia Crew, Chable Graddy, Harper Kaplan, Julia Lobodzinski, Kennedy Murphy, and Dr. Brendan Lantz & Dr. Marin Wenger

Introduction

- Violence against people with disabilities is a serious social issue, and fatal violence (specifically violence committed by family members and caretakers) is of particular concern.
- Addressing this violence requires understanding the details of these incidents and their outcomes, yet detailed data of such violence does not currently exist.
- This project will create a database of known homicides of disabled people in the United States, spanning the last several decades.
- During the research period, the research team will assist with collecting information (via media reports, newspapers, and other sources) on disabled homicide victims, analyzing patterns in these cases, and writing and disseminating research reports.

Methodology

1. This research analyzed homicide cases in which disabled persons were the victims. A database of names was provided to a team of undergraduate research assistants.
2. To identify these victims, the research assistants began with a list of homicide victims provided by the non-profit organization, Disability Day of Mourning. The victims’ disabilities were typically known. These cases were the subject of the study because additional variables needed to be researched and added to the database.
3. Beginning with these victim names, the purpose of the research was to collect as much additional information about each incident as possible, using open-source data collection techniques. This information included details about the victim and perpetrator(s).
4. Incident IDs were used to identify unique incidents. Victim IDs were used to identify multiple victims in the same incident. This data was collected by multiple coders, and each coder was assigned a unique coder ID, which allowed for accountability in case the coding of variables needed to be rechecked.
5. Coders searched the victim’s name in an online search engine, usually Google. Beginning with online searches using the victim’s name. If this did not yield results, keywords including, but not limited to, “homicide,” “death,” “disability,” and more were used to narrow results. Coders were looking for reviewed news articles, court documents, police records, or any search results that would return the previously listed variables. These variables were inputted into a dataset shared among all project members.
6. If there was confusion on how to code a specific variable, this case was reflected upon and discussed by the research team. The data in the dataset was analyzed for patterns among cases. For more information on these patterns, see the results and discussion.

Case Themes

Theme 1: Failure of CPS (Child Protective Services) and APS (Adult Protective Services) to successfully intervene and prevent murder from occurring.

- Amora Milbourne; Her mother had been reported to CPS twice before Amora's death, despite these reports, CPS allowed Amora to remain in her mother's care
- William Fitzhugh; He was murdered by his two grandsons who served as his caretakers. APS was called multiple times regarding William's grandsons, but they pressured him into denying the abuse. APS failed to intervene and remove him from their care ultimately leading to his death.

Theme 2: Murder- Suicide

- Gabby Petito; In September 2021, Gabby was found dead due to blunt force trauma and strangulation. While investigating her fiancé's belongings, police found a journal where he confessed to murdering her and committing suicide.
- Noah Landon; He had unspecified special needs and was shot in March of 2024. Noah's father, Joe Landon, had an altercation with his son and shot him while he was in the hospital, before turning the gun on himself.

Theme 3: Neglect of disabled persons

- Ethan Ruiz; In October 2023, Barbara and Lester were high on marijuana when the toddler got out of the apartment and drowned in a nearby pond in central Florida. Barbara was charged with aggravated manslaughter of a child and Lester was arrested and charged with a violation of his probation.
- Chelsea and Connor Hill; They were found by police starved to death by their mother in August 2021. Their mother had previous run ins with CPS and received concerns about the kids’ health from the school. Upon their death she was charged with 2nd degree murder.

Theme 4: Alleged Mercy Killings

- Donna Kitzmiller; She had Alzheimer's disease and was cared for by her husband, William Kitzmiller. Mr. Kitzmiller shot his wife and then himself. Before taking his own life, Mr. Kitzmiller called 911 and stated, “I’ve given my wife a merciful ending from her Alzheimer's disease... I am going to follow her now in death.”
- Jamie Ward; She was killed by her husband, Braeden Ward. Mr. Ward claimed his wife had asked him to kill her to end her pain.

Discussion

- Through the continuation of the study, one goal is to continue coding and assessing each case to eventually draw conclusions as to patterns and red flags indicating potential violence.
- This project will contribute to a comprehensive database to add to the limited literature and research on homicides against disabled individuals.
- It is our hope that the database will not only provide valuable insight into these crimes but raise awareness to the prevalence of homicides against the disabled population.



Donna Kitzmiller, victim of Mercy Killing



Amora Milbourne, victim of CPS Failure



Gabby Petito, victim of Murder- Suicide

