

# Familicide in Ghana: Concurrent Lethal Victimization of Spouses and Children

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**Abstract:** There is a copious body of literature on many types of family homicide, including spousal homicide, filicide, and parricide. Much less researched is the type of family homicide known as familicide, a homicidal event in which a person slays his or her spouse and one or more of their children. The paucity of information on this type of multiple-family homicide is particularly acute in the non-western non-industrialized societies of Africa, Asia, South America, and the South Pacific. The aim of the present study therefore was to examine the criminological aspects of familicides that occurred in Ghana, West Africa, during 2010-2020. The study utilized mass media news data extracted from various Ghanaian print and electronic sources. The article finds that familicide is an extremely rare crime in Ghana. The majority of offenders were male and most familicides occurred in the family's shared residence. The most common method of killing was slashing with a machete or stabbing with a knife. Familicide perpetrators were often suicidal, with 3 out of the 7 offenders committing suicide at the scene of the crime or shortly after the killings and one other engaging in nonfatal suicidal behavior.

**Keywords:** familicide, mass murder, homicide, murder-suicide, Ghana

## Introduction

Generally speaking, familicide refers to a multiple-victim homicide event (or multicide) in which the perpetrator annihilates, or attempts to annihilate, his or her entire family by killing his or her partner and other members of the family. Typically, a spouse and all the dependent children in the family are slain and the

perpetrator attempts or succeeds in committing suicide (Aho et al., 2017; Boyd et al., 2020; Daly & Wilson, 1988; Karlsson et al., 2021; Mailloux, 2014; Wilson, Daly & Daniele, 1995). In this article, the author examines the criminological features of familicide in Ghana, West Africa, with the goal of identifying similarities and differences that exist between familicides in Ghana and familicides reported for other societies.

A search of the extant literature indicates that familicide has been the object of only a limited amount of research (Aho et al., 2017; Auchter, 2010; Boyd et al., 2020; Daly & Wilson, 1988; Karlsson et al., 2021; Tosini, 2017; Wilson, Daly & Daniele, 1995). The existing literature has however, contributed to some understanding of the phenomenon. Regrettably, most of the existing research has been conducted in Western industrialized societies (see Aho et al., 2017; Karlsson et al., 2020). Concurrently, there is a dearth of research on familicide in non-Western non-industrialized societies. Indeed, a recent search of the homicide literature by the current author yielded virtually no scholarly investigation on familicide in Africa. Undeniably, a total understanding of familicide will require systematic studies of familicide in geographic and cultural groupings in both Western and non-Western societies.

To help address the gap in the literature and contribute to research on familicide in Africa, the current research examined in depth all seven media-reported familicide incidents that occurred in Ghana during 2010-2020. Among the issues examined were the (1) extent or scope of familicide; (2) public reaction to familicide; (3) sociodemographic characteristics of offenders and victims, including age, occupation, employment status, and marital status; (4) offender's relationship to the victim; (5) modus operandi, including weapon used (6) spatial and temporal aspects of the crime; (7) motivation and the circumstances under which the crime occurred; and (8) criminal justice outcome.

### **Familicide: Definitional Issues**

One major problem with familicide research is the lack of uniformity in defining the term familicide (Aho et al., 2017; Boyd et al., 2020; Karlsson et al., 2021). In a 1995 publication, Wilson, Daly, and Daniele (1995) defined familicide as the killing of spouse and children. Since that time, the definition of familicide has undergone enormous variations. In some studies, the term has been used to refer to the killing

of multiple family members, thereby broadening the term to encompass lethal victimization of persons other than those in the perpetrator's immediate family (Aho et al., 2017; Boyd et al., 2020; Karlsson et al., 2021). Some researchers use the term familicide to describe any form of intrafamilial mass homicide (Karlsson et al., 2021). Others use it narrowly to describe a homicide event in which a person kills a spouse or ex-spouse and one or more of their offspring (Boyd et al., 2020; Wilson, Daly & Daniele, 1995). Besides the definitional variations and ambiguities, some familicide scholars specify a certain minimum size of victim count required for a homicide event to qualify as familicide (Karlsson et al., 2021). Undoubtedly, depending on which definition is employed in a research study, the study will yield a distinctly different familicide volume and rate.

To avoid the definitional ambiguities that have plagued prior familicide research, it has become standard practice for familicide researchers to stipulate the definition used in that research. For the present research, the decision was made to use the original, narrower definition which is the most common definition used in familicide research (Karlsson, 2021). This will allow for comparison with the original study by Wilson and colleagues (1995) and other studies that employ this definition. Thus, in this article, the term familicide will be used to connote a homicide event in which a person kills a spouse and one or more of their biological or stepchildren.

## Literature Review

First, familicide is a form of mass homicide. Unlike certain forms of multicide such as serial murder, wherein the offender kills multiple victims serially with periods of inactivity between murders, and spree murder, wherein the offender kills multiple victims in two or more locations over a short span of time, in familicides, several persons are killed in a single homicide event in one location and within a relatively short period of time (Fox & Levin, 1999; Siegel, 2015). There is consensus in the mass homicide literature that familicide is the most common form of mass murder. In fact, some homicide scholars have described familicide as “the modal mass murder” (Duwe, 2004). For the United States, Duwe's (2004) extensive analysis of data on mass killings revealed that familicides represented 52% of mass killings that occurred in the country between 1970 and 1975. Based on an analysis of Canadian homicide data, Boyd and colleagues (2020) also described familicide as the most common form of mass killing in Canada.

Despite research suggesting that familicide is the most common form of mass murder, it has been the subject of only a small volume of academic research in lethal violence studies (Aho et al., 2017; Boyd et al., 2020; Karlsson et al., 2021; Tosini, 2017; Wilson, Daly & Daniele, 1995). This lack of research attention may be attributable to the infrequency of the phenomenon and the paucity of information on the offense in many jurisdictions (Karlsson et al., 2021). At present, in many of the non-Western, non-industrialized societies where familicide research is lacking, crime data are erratically collated; oftentimes, the available data are plagued with missing information necessary to complete a worthwhile study (Adinkrah, 1996, 2017b; LaFree, 1999).

Existing research into familicide has produced rich and informative literature on the subject. However, before proceeding into findings in the existing literature, it must be emphasized that most of this research has been conducted in Western industrialized societies (Aho et al., 2017; Karlsson et al., 2021; Mailloux, 2014) such as Australia (Cullen & Fritzon, 2019), Canada (Boyd et al., 2020; Wilson et al., 1995), Italy (Tosini, 2017), Switzerland (Frei & Ilic, 2020) and the United States (Liem, Levin, Holland & Fox, 2013; Liem & Reichelmann, 2014). Indeed, much of the information on mass murder, of which familicide is the most common form, is derived from research of the phenomenon in the United States. Currently, considerably less is known about mass murder in other societies (Adinkrah, 2017b; Karlsson, 2021). For instance, in a review of 67 studies of familicide in the homicide literature, Karlsson and colleagues (2021) found studies only in North America, Europe, Asia, Australia and Fiji. No scholarly study of familicide was identified by the authors in Africa, South America, and other geographical and cultural areas. The relative absence of research from non-Western societies implies that we know very little about the phenomenon in these societies.

According to homicide scholars, familicide is a very rare crime (Boyd et al., 2020; Karlsson et al., 2021; Wilson, Daly & Daniele, 1995), less common than intimate partner homicides (uxoricides, mariticides) and child homicides (filicides) as independent or stand-alone crimes. Karlsson and associates noted from their review of 67 familicide studies from 18 countries that “the incidence rate of familicide [was] about 1-2 per 10 million persons annually” (p.93). To illustrate the infrequency of the crime, it is notable that during the 10-year period from 2010-2019, Canada, a country of 37 million people, reported 25 familicide cases involving

69 victims and 25 offenders. This comprised 4% of the total Canadian domestic homicides and 9% of the country's domestic homicide victims during the period (Boyd et al., 2020). Comparably, for Switzerland, Frei and Ilic (2020) identified 20 familicide incidents in the country during the 43-year period, 1972–2015.

Regardless of the geographical location in the world, across the globe, familicides tend to be highly publicized criminal incidents. In several instances, reported familicide cases receive widespread national attention in the mass media (Karlsson et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 1995). The first reason for this may be the high number of victims associated with familicidal killings. To illustrate, Boyd et al., (2020) identified 25 familicide incidents with a total of 61 victims in Canada during 2010–2019, an average of 2.76 victims per familicide. In a previous study of familicide in Canada spanning the period 1974–1990, Wilson and colleagues (1995) identified 61 familicide incidents with a victim toll of 161 fatalities. These consisted of “33 two-victim cases, 19 three-victim cases, 7 four-victim cases, and 2 five-victim cases” (p.279). This translates into an average of 2.64 fatalities per familicide incident. The second reason may be the nature of the victim-perpetrator relationships involved in the crime. Most people consider concurrent lethal victimization of multiple family members to be abnormal and bizarre. The third reason may be the immense violence with which the crime is usually perpetrated. As will be described below, many familicides involve overkill; that is, perpetrators use more violence than is deemed necessary to complete the crime. Additionally, familicide incidents tend to have devastating effects on the secondary victims, including extended family members, friends, neighbors, co-workers, and the surrounding communities where the crime occurred (Karlsson et al., 2021).

Existing studies of familicide report that familicide is inordinately gendered. The vast majority of familicide perpetrators are men (Boyd et al., 2020; Frei & Ilic, 2020; Karlsson et al., 2021; Mailloux, 2014; Wilson, Daly & Daniele, 1995). Indeed, Wilson et al., (1995) described familicide as a “peculiarly male crime” (p.286) and “virtually a male monopoly” (p.279). In that study, 95% of victims of familicides in their British and Canadian sample were killed by male perpetrators. Boyd and associates' (2020) analysis of familicide in Canada spanning 2010–2019, affirmed the finding that men are exceedingly more likely than women to commit familicides. They reported that 24 (96%) out of the 25 accused offenders were male. For Switzerland, Frei and Ilic (2020) reported that 19 (95%) out of the 20 familicide

incidents that occurred in the country between 1972 and 2015 were perpetrated by males. Tosini (2017) also observed from an analysis of familicides in Italy that “more than 95%” of familicide perpetrators were male. Given the predominance of males as perpetrators, contrastingly, the primary adult victim in familicides is typically the female intimate partner.

Familicide research conducted in western industrialized societies estimates the average offender age to be between 35 and 43 years (Karlsson et al., 2021; Mailloux, 2014). In their study of 25 offenders who perpetrated familicide in Canada during 2010–2019, Boyd et al., (2020) reported that 10 (40%) of the assailants were aged 25–34 years old and 13 (52%) were aged 25–44 years old. For Switzerland, Frei and Ilic (2020) found the mean age of familicide perpetrators in their sample of familicide perpetrators to be 39.5 years old. Relatedly, familicide research reports that the male familicide perpetrator is usually older than his female intimate—typically the primary target in the crime. This is attributable to the trend where men tend to marry younger women (Karlsson et al., 2021).

Regarding *modus operandi*, or the method of offense perpetration, a review of the literature indicates that familicide is usually perpetrated with a firearm (Karlsson et al., 2021; Wilson, Daly & Daniele, 1995). In the United States, one of the most discussed features of familicide is the frequency with which firearms are used to perpetrate the crime (Duwe, 2004). Other common familicide methods include stabbing with knives and other sharp implements, beatings with hands and feet (personal weapon) and blunt objects, strangulation, and arson (Boyd et al., 2020). For Canada, Boyd, and associates (2020) noted that the *modus operandi* for familicide was not consistently reported in public records about the crime. Nevertheless, in 41% of the familicides where this information was available, shooting with a handgun or long gun was the homicide method. This was followed by stabbing (13%), strangulation (7%) and beating (7%). In Switzerland, guns were the murder weapon in just over one-half (11 out of 20 or 55%) of the familicide cases studied by Frei and Ilic (2020). In China, Hilal et al., (2014) observed a predominance of knives and other cutting instruments among the *modus operandi* used in the perpetration of mass killings.

Several studies of familicide have reported overkill to be a characteristic feature of the crime (Wilson, Daly & Daniele, 1995). As noted above, a homicide incident is deemed to evince characteristics of overkill when the perpetrator used inordinately

high levels of violence, exceeding the amount of force or aggression necessary to accomplish the act. Homicides demonstrating overkill involve “two or more acts of stabbing, cutting, or shooting or a severe beating” (Browne et al., 1999, p.73). Lethal violence scholars report that expressive homicides, or homicides motivated by rage, frustration, hate, and or revenge tend to involve greater levels of violence than other homicides (Browne et al., 1999).

Studies that analyze familicide consistently report that the vast majority of familicides are committed in the domestic setting, typically the home shared by the perpetrator and the victims (Boyd et al., 2020). Boyd et al., (2020) observed that 64% of familicides that occurred in Canada during 2010-2019 occurred in a home shared by the perpetrator and the victim, while 13% occurred in the victim’s home and 7% in the perpetrator’s home. Also, Frei and Ilic’s (2020) study of familicides in Switzerland identified the domestic setting as the dominant location of familicides. Findings from that study indicated that “in all but one case, the crime scene was the family home” (p.31).

Existing studies of familicide indicate that the suicide of the perpetrator is a frequent feature of familicides. Many familicide perpetrators commit suicide at the scene of the crime, or shortly thereafter (Wilson, Daly & Daniele, 1995). Boyd et al., (2020) observed from their analysis of familicide in Canada over a 10-year period that 52% of all familicide perpetrators died by suicide following the familicide, and one perpetrator engaged in nonfatal suicidal behavior. Relatedly, Wilson, Daly, and Daniele (1995) reported a higher rate of post-homicidal suicide among male familicidal perpetrators who slew biological children than those who killed only stepchildren.

Some scholars have attempted to develop a taxonomy of familicides and familicide perpetrators (e.g., Cullen & Fritzon, 2019; Tosini, 2017). For example, Wilson, Daly & Daniele (1995) distinguished between the “hostile accusatory perpetrator” and the “despondent perpetrator.” The hostile accusatory familicidal perpetrator kills out of rage towards an estranging partner while the despondent familicide perpetrator kills out of sympathy towards his familial victims, perceiving his lethal action against them as a way of saving them from negative actions after his own suicide. Other researchers have identified another type of familicide offender. This type of familicide offender commits familicide because of stressful life events. The offender commits the offense because he was under severe personal stress

such as financial losses, financial bankruptcy, job loss, or employment difficulties (Karlsson et al., 2021).

Extant studies have studied the circumstances under which familicides occurred. The data show that both social and psychological factors play a role in familicides. Wilson, Daly, and Daniele (1995) conducted research on familicide in Canada and Britain (England and Wales) and found that some familicide perpetrators kill out of sexual jealousy. Some kill because they are despondent and feel dejected about life. They wish to commit suicide but wish to take the rest of the family along. This phenomenon is known as extended suicide (Palermo, 1994). Similar findings are reported in other studies on familicide. Another commonly identified risk factor in familicide research is the female partner's complete severance or intent to sever herself from the marital or cohabiting relationship with the perpetrator. When this occurs, the perpetrator, who perceives that he has lost control over the relationship, furiously strikes back at the female partner (Boyd et al., 2020; Karlsson et al., 2021; Wilson, Daly & Daniele, 1995). In case after case, one reads about a familicide triggered by divorce or separation where the male perpetrator killed his estranged female partner, their dependent children, and usually himself. Extant research also reports that some familicides are precipitated by imminent, new, or ongoing financial troubles in the family. Typically, the husband, as the sole or main breadwinner of the family, has experienced a job loss or financial bankruptcy and kills the entire family in a familicidal episode to "save" or "rescue" everyone from the impending financial disaster.

Offender psychopathology has also been identified as a major contributing factor in familicides (Aho et al., 2017). For instance, Karlsson et al., (2021) determined from their review of 67 familicide studies that "the reported prevalence of depression varied between 13% and 69%, whereas between 13% and 44% of offenders had a history of mental health treatment" (p.88). "Depression, psychosis or paranoia, personality disorder, obsessive behavior, and substance abuse disorder" (p.90) were among the most frequently observed psychiatric disorders. Studies also report that some perpetrators of familicide had a history of domestic violence (Karlsson et al., (2021).

In sum, the existing literature has provided rich data on familicide. What is needed is additional research on familicide with more studies particularly from societies in the non-western world. The inclusion of research on familicide from

all geographical and cultural areas is essential for furthering the understanding of homicide as a form of human behavior. Only by studying familicide extensively can scholars formulate and implement policies to achieve a reduction in familicide in particular, and homicide in general.

### **Ghana: The Research Setting**

Ghana is located along the west coast of Africa. In 2020, the country had an estimated population of 30 million. Females constitute approximately 50.5% of the population, with males making up 49.5%. Life expectancy is higher for females than for males, with female life-expectancy estimated to be 64 years and males at 61 years in 2015. The society is ethnically, religiously, and linguistically diverse. The dominant ethnic groups are Akan (45.3%), Mole Dagbon (15.2%) Ewe (11.7%) and Ga Dangme (7.3%). Religiously, 68.8% of the population is estimated to be Christian. Other major religious groups are Muslim (15.9%) and adherents of traditional African religion, primarily ancestral veneration (8.5%). It is estimated that around one-half of the population reside in rural communities of less than 5,000 persons. About 60% of the country's workforce is employed in agriculture and fishing, and about 15% in industry; the remaining 25% are employed in the service sector, particularly trading, transportation, and communication. Unemployment is a major economic and social problem. About one-quarter of the population was estimated to be living below the government's established poverty line in 2007 (Adinkrah, 2015).

Although there have been ongoing societal changes in attitudes in the last decade, the average Ghanaian household unit consists of a dominant husband as breadwinner and an economically dependent wife. Regarding division of labor in the domestic realm, husbands are considered the economic providers, even where the wife maintains regular employment outside the home and even provides the bulk of family income. In most homes, the wife is still responsible for domestic chores—e.g., cooking, cleaning, laundering and childcare—regardless of her employment status. Polygyny, or the marriage system in which the husband is permitted to marry multiple wives simultaneously, is culturally and legally permissible. Also, gerontogamy, a form of marriage in which one spouse is significantly older than the other spouse is common in the society, with the older spouse almost invariably being the man.

Lethal and nonlethal assaults by men against wives and other intimate partners is common in the society; it is estimated that approximately one-third of all women in marital and cohabiting dating relationships are victims of nonlethal aggression perpetrated by male partners (Adinkrah, 2008a, 2008b, 2014, 2017a; Adjei, 2018). Men in these relationships use lethal and sublethal force against intimate partners whom they suspect of being sexually unfaithful, women who have separated from them or threaten to terminate the sexual relationship, or who challenge the man's domestic orders (Adinkrah, 2008a, 2008b, 2014, 2017a). Unfortunately, in many Ghanaian communities, social and legal resources for victims of abuse are sparse or nonexistent (Adinkrah, 2017a; Adjei, 2018).

Ghana has stringent regulations on the sale and possession of firearms (Alpers & Picard, 2021). Strict national gun laws coupled with the strict enforcement of the laws by the security agencies have operated to ensure that gun availability and access to them is kept to a minimum. In recent years, however, the illegal manufacture of small arms by local blacksmiths and illegal smuggling of arms from war-torn neighboring countries have led to increased access to firearms among some criminal gangs, although access remains generally limited.

### Research Method and Data Sources

In Ghana, there is no national database of homicide, suicide, or homicide-suicides. Thus, comprehensive official data on the different forms of lethal violence are lacking. Therefore, for this research, a decision was made to use media surveillance methodology. A content analysis was conducted of all issues of the major daily newspapers in the country for the period 2010 to 2020. These were the *Daily Graphic*, the *Ghanaian Times*, and the *Daily Guide*. Searches were also conducted of the print versions of the two popular weekend newspapers, the *Mirror*, and the *Weekly Spectator* accessed at the library of the Ministry of Information in Accra, Ghana. The objective of the search was to identify all news reports pertaining to the crime of familicide. Once a familicide incident was identified, the news items pertaining to the case were photocopied and read. At the conclusion of the search, a content analysis was conducted of all the copied items in order to gather information on the sociodemographic characteristics of the offenders and victims, victim-offender relationships, spatial and temporal aspects of the crime, modus operandi and type of weapon employed in the killing, as well as the circumstances and motivations. Case summaries were then prepared for each case.

It must be stressed that the adoption of newspaper surveillance methodology in the study of familicide is not novel or extraordinary. Indeed, this has been an accepted methodology in familicide studies given the scarcity or unavailability of national data sets on the phenomenon in several countries or jurisdictions around the world. Actually, the use of newspaper surveillance approach for procuring familicide data and other homicide data is particularly vital and beneficial in non-Western countries such as Ghana where police record keeping of crime data characteristically erratic, unreliable, or plainly absent. Although some scholars express reservations about the capacity of newspapers to accurately capture incidents of homicide, there are several factors that make the data utilized in this study trustworthy. First interpersonal conflicts with lethal outcomes are relatively infrequent in Ghana. Even more rare are homicide incidents involving multiple family members as victims. Given the exceptional rarity of such incidents they are deemed particularly newsworthy. Indeed, in Ghana, when a familicide incident occurs, it is the rule, rather than the exception, to find major media outlets in the country giving ample, front-page coverage to the story. Given the markedly high degree of interest in the crime, the various media houses go to incredible lengths to report all the details of the crime. Crime news reporters conduct extensive investigations into the crime, often interviewing secondary victims (relatives, friends, acquaintances) and other associates of the decedents. The media reports typically include excerpts from interviews conducted with police personnel about investigations into the crime. Almost invariably, medical, and public health practitioners, including forensic pathologists, psychiatrists, psychologists, and other relevant officials, are also interviewed for their insights. These efforts always culminate in the publication of significant details about the crime.

Supplementary information from interviews with representatives of the Homicide Unit of the Ghana Police Force was used to clarify local aspects of law enforcement investigations into homicide. Discussions held with a senior-level forensic pathologist as well as a senior-level psychiatrist, both in government employment, provided data useful in understanding official guidelines and processes that occur in the aftermath of homicidal episodes in the country. It must be stressed that in Ghana, the police typically devote a greater amount of material and human resources to the investigation of multiple-victim homicides than for any other crime. This information is routinely shared with representatives of the

various media houses in the country who publish it in conjunction with information obtained through their own investigations.

## Results

### *Scope or Extent of Familicide*

Familicide is a rare occurrence in Ghana. Using Daly and Wilson's (1988) seminal definition of familicide as constituting the murder of a spouse and one or more of the couple's offspring, the current study identified 7 familicide cases during the 11-year period from 2010 to 2020. In all, 22 persons were slain in 7 familicide cases, an average fatality toll of 3.14 victims per incident.

### *Public Reactions to Familicide*

In Ghana, homicide generally arouses public curiosity, fascination, interest, and condemnation, perhaps given the relative rarity of lethal violence in the society. Familicide, however, generates immense public interest and furor, perhaps because of the perceived aberration of slaying multiple family members, coupled with the often-brutal violence accompanying the act. Surviving family members, neighbors, friends, and the general community are distressed by the crime. Judging by the comments left at internet news sites that reported these crimes, most people consider it particularly morally reprehensible to kill a family member, more so, multiple family members in a single event. Media reports indicate that typically, large numbers of the neighboring residents congregated near the crime scene to discuss the crime. In some cases where the perpetrator did not die by suicide at or near the crime scene, a lynch mob assembled clamoring to lynch the perpetrator.

In Case 1, residents of the farming community where the incident occurred reportedly "woke up to their rudest shock" about the familicide. The incident was described in the media report as "a gruesome and barbaric act." In Case 2, residents of the community where the incident occurred were reportedly "thrown into a state of shock when five family members were found dead in an acid attack." In Case 4, community members were so enraged by the murders that they threatened to lynch the assailant. The police had to battle the rapidly assembling vigilante mob for several minutes before managing to carry the assailant to safety. In Case 6, residents of the village where the familicide occurred were reportedly filled with "fear and trepidation" when they heard about the multiple family homicides.

*Offenders and Victims:* This study examined the demographic characteristics of the persons involved. It found familicide perpetration or offending to be gendered. Six (85.7%) out of the 7 familicidal perpetrators were male. Only one (14.7%) was female. This finding is consistent with the familicide literature. The data show that familicides occurred among low-income families. Perpetrators were described as unemployed, fisherman, peasant farmer. Adult primary victims were described as peasant farmers, petty trader etc.

*Victim-Offender Relationships:* This study examined the relationship between the victims of familicide and their aggressors. The primary victim was always the spouse or ex-spouse of the familicide perpetrator. Five husbands killed wives and the couple's child or children; one man killed an ex-spouse. One woman killed her estranged husband and their son.

*Spatial Aspects of Killing:* This study examined the spatial and temporal characteristics of the familicide incidents and found that a substantial proportion of them occurred in small towns and other rural communities. Regarding homicidal settings, the single most dangerous place was inside a home. In 5 (71.4%) familicides, the victims were slain inside a home shared by the victims and the assailant. Two incidents occurred outside the home. Of these two incidents, one occurred on the victims' farm; the other occurred outside in a remote bush area that was a purported ritual site.

### **Method of Killing**

The frequent use of firearms in the commission of familicides observed in western industrialized societies was absent from Ghanaian familicides. None of the seven familicides was committed with a firearm. Four (57.1%) out of the 7 familicides involved the use of stabbing with a knife or slashing with machete. In one (14.3%) case, the perpetrator stabbed the victims with a knife and then doused the bodies with acid. Poisoning accounted for 1 (14.3%) of the 7 cases. In this case, the perpetrator laced the victims' food with rodenticide. In one (14.3%) other case, the perpetrator used fire to burn the victims.

### **Overkill**

A characteristic feature of the familicide incidents was overkill. In each of the cases profiled, the violence was far beyond what was necessary to kill the victims. In Case

2, the offending spouse stabbed the wife and children to death before dousing the bodies with sulphuric acid. In Case 1, the man killed the wife with a machete and strangled the infant baby to death with his hands. In Case 3, the assailant fatally battered his wife and all 4 of their children with a heavy wooden pestle, or *woma*, that the wife was using to prepare the family's *fufu* meal. In Case 4, the husband killed the two children in ghastly, barbaric manner.

### *Circumstances and Motivation*

Among the issues studied were the motive for a familicidal event and the circumstances surrounding it. What circumstances seemed to lead to familicide in the cases under study? There were a variety of circumstances in which entire families were killed by another family member. These included financial difficulties (Case 6), strained marital relations (Case 5 and Case 7), mental disorder, and sexual jealousy.

In Case 1, the perpetrator had just discovered that he was suffering from a stigmatized, terminal physical ailment. Distressed by the thought of dying and leaving his wife and child behind, he killed them so they would leave this world together. In Case 2, a complex mixture of events fueled the familicide. The offender had chronic marital challenges with his wife. Part of the conjugal difficulties stemmed from his suspicion that his wife, the primary target in the familicide, had been sexually unfaithful to him while he was living overseas. He denied paternity of one their 3 children and accused his wife's trading customers of being her sexual partners. It should also be noted that he had returned home destitute after a lengthy stay overseas where he had gone in search of economic opportunities and returned home to become financially dependent on his wife. It is likely that he suffered from low self-esteem, which could have been exacerbated by the sense that the wife was about to divorce him.

In Case 3, the assailant was despondent about his life. He had returned from the city with his wife and children to engage in farming in the village. Prior to his return to the village, he and his wife were unemployed and had four young, dependent children to support. Dejected by his lack of success, he became withdrawn and did not have social interaction with neighbors in the village, refusing to respond to pleasantries and greetings. The familicide was an extended suicide in which he killed himself and his dependent family. In Case 4, cognitive distortions appear to have caused a man to sacrifice his children in a ritual to his deity. When the wife discovered the gruesome murders, her shocked reaction culminated in his decision to kill her too.

In Case 5, chronic marital quarrels and strained marital relations caused a woman to leave her matrimonial home. She premeditated the killings. Under the guise of returning for a visit with her son, she killed her husband, son, and then herself. In Case 6, the perpetrator appears to have killed his wife and children out of severe economic distress. Unable to support them financially, he came to see them as a burden. At the time of the murders, his mother was supporting his wife and children, something he found deeply emasculating. There were also suspicions that his chronic drug abuse may have fueled the crime. Case 7 was a classic case of revenge. After being rejected by a woman, the perpetrator sneaked into her home and poisoned her food. The victim later consumed the food with her dependent children, and they all perished.

### **Post-Homicidal Suicide**

Post-homicidal suicidal behavior was evident in 4 (57.1%) out of the seven familicides. Three (42.9%) out of the 7 assailants killed themselves at the scene of the crime. One other assailant engaged in nonfatal suicidal behavior.

### ***Criminal Justice Response and Dispositional Outcome***

In Ghana, once a homicide perpetrator is arrested, the case is transferred to the prosecutor for prosecution. The penalty for a murder conviction is death by hanging. As stated previously, 3 of the 7 assailants died by suicide. Unfortunately, there was no information regarding the disposition of the 4 remaining cases. It must be stated that in Ghana, there is a long-time lapse between the apprehension of a homicide suspect and the disposition of the homicide case. Police prosecutors typically send the case to the Attorney General's office for legal advice, and it typically takes an extensive time between arrest and prosecution. It is not unusual for a case referred to the Attorney General's office for advice to take 10 years or longer before receiving approval for prosecution. Meanwhile, the crime suspect would be languishing in a pretrial detention facility. When criminal trials occur, they generally take place months to years after the offense ("Ghana's Attorney General," 2020).

### **Case Summaries**

#### ***Case 1***

In Case 1, a 28-year-old fisherman asked his wife to accompany him to the family farm to fetch some firewood which was to be carted home. They left home at about

5 a.m. The wife carried the couple's 7-month-old daughter on her back while they traveled by foot to the farm. While at the farm, the assailant used a machete to butcher his wife to death. He then strangled their 7-month-old infant to death. Following that, he committed suicide by hanging himself from a tree nearby. When the trio did not return from the farm, community residents organized a search party to find them. The bodies were subsequently discovered by the search group. The assailant's mother told police that her son was "not well," but it was unclear what the nature of his sickness or ill-health was ("Man Kills Wife, Child, and Hangs Himself," 2015).

### *Case 2*

In this case, a 50-year-old man lethally stabbed his 40-year-old wife and their three children aged 15, 13, and 7 years to death. He then doused the bodies with corrosive acid. Following the murders, he committed suicide by drinking a quantity of the corrosive acid. The incident occurred barely three months after the man returned from a sojourn to a European country where he had gone in search of greener economic pastures. He was reported to have returned home penniless. To mitigate his sorrows, the wife apparently took a commercial bank loan and bought him a vehicle to be used as a taxi. The man later conspired with the taxi driver he had hired to drive the vehicle, to sell the vehicle without his wife's knowledge. When the wife would not give him documents covering the vehicle, the assailant beat her. According to the reports, the assailant also repeatedly accused his wife of having been sexually unfaithful during his stay abroad. He even denied the paternity of one of their three children. The wife reportedly told neighbors and friends that the husband beat her incessantly over the disputed paternity. The assailant's wife was a trader in second-hand clothing and the husband repeatedly accused several of her male customers of being her sexual partners. The assailant further became infuriated when the wife reported the matter to others, including her church pastor and her landlord, from whom she had sought intervention and rescue. According to family friends, when the wife threatened divorce, the husband had warned her that he would kill her if she ever left him. Sensing that the wife was about to divorce him, the assailant took the drastic steps and killed the wife and all 3 children ("Koforidua Jealous Acid Killer," 2015; "Man Kills Wife, 3 Kids with Acid," 2015).

### *Case 3*

In this case, a 32-year-old man killed his 28-year-old wife and two of their children. At the time of the murder, the wife was preparing the evening meal. The assailant grabbed the heavy wooden pestle that the wife was using to prepare the meal and used it to brutally assault her and all four of their children. He then fled the scene of the crime, leaving them for dead. The wife and the youngest child died instantly. The perpetrator's older brother visited the family's house several hours later and found three of the children alive but in critical condition. Two of the four children perished while the remaining two were in critical condition at a local hospital due to injuries sustained during the attack. According to case information, some weeks prior to the murder, the assailant and his family lived in a major city in Ghana. The husband and the wife were unemployed and were in dire financial condition. The assailant's brother who visited the family encouraged the assailant to move with his family and settle at his [the brother's] farming village and engage in farming. The assailant obliged and moved the family over. The assailant and his family occupied a small, thatched house, slightly removed from the house of his elder brother with whom he engaged in farming. According to neighbors who knew the family, the family had moved into the neighborhood just three months prior to the lethal attacks. The husband apparently kept to himself and would not respond to greetings by neighbors of the village, something they found extremely odd ("Man Kills Wife and Butchers 4 Children," 2018; "Man Clubs Wife, Daughter to Death," 2018).

### *Case 4*

In Case 4, a 35-year-old man killed his wife and their two children in an extremely gruesome manner. He cut the throats of the two children, one after the other and sprinkled the blood on a pile of rocks in an apparent ritual sacrifice to his gods. He took the two children to the site of the ritual. He sacrificed his 7-year-old son first. When his younger daughter reacted to her sibling's murder, the man became infuriated and bludgeoned her to death with a machete, killing her in the same ritualized fashion. When the wife came to see what the husband had done and expressed shock and disgust, the husband used the same machete to kill her. According to reports, law enforcement officers had a particularly difficult time in arresting the offender as they were resisted by a vigilante lynch mob comprising community residents who wanted to take the law into their own hands and lynch the offender for his crimes ("Man Kills Wife, Children for Rituals," 2019).

### *Case 5*

Case 5 involved a woman who had a lengthy history of marital strife with her husband. She ultimately separated from him, leaving their 7-year-old son with the father. She went back to the marital home weeks later under the pretense of paying her young son a visit. Without the knowledge of her husband and child, her baggage had a gallon of petrol and matches concealed in it. After they fell asleep that night, she got up, drenched the apartment with petrol, and set the place alight. Both her husband and son died in the fire. She survived the injuries and was rushed to the local hospital for medical care. While on admission at the hospital, she declined food, water, and treatment, stating she wanted to die with her family. She died a few days later from her wounds.

### *Case 6*

A 27-year-old unemployed man lethally stabbed his 26-year-old pregnant wife and the couple's two children with a knife. The two children, aged 4 and one-and-a-half years old respectively, died instantly from the assault. The assailant then attempted to take his own life but survived the suicide attempt. The wife, who was rendered unconscious from the assault, subsequently succumbed to her injuries. The perpetrator, who was described in media reports as a chronic illicit drug user, was said to be under the influence of narcotic drugs when he committed the assaults. On the day of the murders, the offender, who at the time of the murders was not living with his family, came to the residence of his wife and children to perpetrate the crime. Neighbors and friends of the family said they had overheard the assailant complain on numerous occasions about not having the financial wherewithal to take care of himself and his family. He also expressed the idea that he would one day annihilate the family in hopes of acquiring peace. According to the assailant's wife, her husband had once complained to her about being financially incapacitated. He then suggested to her that they kill the children to abate their economic deprivation. She dismissed the husband's suggestion as a distasteful joke. On the day of the murders, the assailant arrived at the family's home at 11:00 a.m. and lured the children to a room in the house. He turned the television to high volume, apparently to drown out the screams of the kids, before using a machete to butcher them. Having killed the kids, he then went to the part of the house where the wife lay awake; he stabbed her in the abdomen. He bolted from the scene when the

wife feigned death. The assailant's mother told police that she helped the wife and children financially since her assailant son was unemployed. She further told police that the assailant had once threatened to kill her for giving financial assistance to her daughter-in-law, instead of channeling the money through him ("Guy Kills Two Kids, Stabs Pregnant Wife," 2012; Horror! Father Kills Kids Stabs Pregnant Wife," 2012).

### *Case 7*

In this case, there was unequivocal evidence of premeditation as the perpetrator had purchased a rodenticide and sneaked into the vacant house of the estranged woman to commit the crime. His apparent motivation was revenge against the woman, the primary target, for breaking off their intimate relationship. In his mind, the children, whom he saw as an extension of her, also needed to be eliminated. The familicide incident occurred in a small fishing village along the southern coast of Ghana. In this case, a woman's decision to leave an intimate relationship was the precipitating factor for the murder of five people. The assailant was a 34-year-old fisherman. The victims were his former girlfriend, aged 26-years-old, and four children—three boys and one girl, ranging in age from 2 to 6 years old. Two of the children were the slain woman's biological children from a prior marriage, one was her niece, and the other child was a neighborhood child who was a friend of her children. According to the facts of the case, the assailant, and his former intimate partner, the 26-year-old fish vendor, were involved in a two-year nonmarital cohabiting relationship. The victim told police before her death that their two-year relationship produced no children. Also, the perpetrator had reneged on a customary requirement to pay bride-wealth to formally seal their relationship. The woman further told police that during their two-year relationship, the perpetrator did not provide adequate care and maintenance [to her and her children] but he was persistent and aggressive in his demands for sex. Following the separation, the woman relocated to a new apartment with her children. A few months later, she married another man in the community. The assailant harbored bitterness and resentment towards the woman for terminating the relationship. At about 4:00 am on the day of the homicides, while the woman was absent from home, the assailant sneaked into the apartment and laced food she had prepared for herself and her family with rodenticide. Oblivious to the poison, she served the food to the children and herself when she returned from work that

day. Attending physicians confirmed that the rodenticide was far more lethal than the chemical DDT (dichloro-diphenyl-trichloroethane) once it entered the human blood stream. Public reaction to the incident was disbelief and outrage. Confronted by police, the perpetrator admitted to the offense and was arrested. A search of his home led to the discovery of the unused portion of the poisonous chemical. During interviews with police, the assailant said he “could not stand the humiliation handed to him by the woman and her friends whom, he claimed, composed a song to tease him” about the relationship breakup (Aklorbortu, 2015; “Man Poisons Girlfriend, 4 Kids,” 2015; “Man Remanded for Poisoning,” 2015).

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

As stated in the introduction section, a major shortcoming of the current literature on familicide is the paucity of contributions from non-western, non-industrial societies. Indeed, following their review of 67 scholarly studies on familicide, Karlsson and colleagues (2021) bemoaned the paucity of familicide research in most societies, imploring scholars to conduct “more research in the form of large international investigations and qualitative in-depth studies” (p.96). The current study has attempted to satisfy two of the acknowledged shortcomings of the familicide literature: it has presented a study of familicide in Ghana where familicide had hitherto not been studied. Second, the current study has provided an in-depth, qualitative description of events associated with each of the 7 familicide cases identified in the study.

Many of the findings of this research lend support to findings in the existing familicide literature. For instance, consistent with studies of familicides elsewhere, familicides are extremely rare in Ghana. Second, the study found that in Ghana, as in the literature from western industrialized societies, males predominated among familicide perpetrators. Third, post-homicidal suicidal behavior was common among perpetrators of familicide in Ghana, as elsewhere.

During the search of the media for familicide cases for the current study, the study identified several cases of husband-wife murders (uxoricides) and a few cases of wife-husband cases (mariticides). However, familicide cases where a person slays an intimate partner and one or more of their children was extremely rare, with the search yielding only 7 cases during a 11-year period. Men who kill their wives or nonmarital cohabiting partners appear reluctant or disinclined to kill their children

in the family. This may stem from views about the innocence of children. It is also interesting to note that none of the familicides was committed with a gun. The absence of gun familicide may be attributable to restrictive firearm laws in the country and the stringent enforcement of those laws (Alpers & Pickard, 2021).

The current research calls for the adoption of certain practices and the implementation of certain programs to help curtail the incidence of family homicides in the country. In Ghana, at present, professional counseling services for families beset with challenges or difficulties are either unavailable or difficult to access. The few available counseling centers are located in large metropolitan centers and are unaffordable to the average citizen. The relevant authorities should extend professional counseling services to all who need them. Also in short supply and needing immediate resolution in the country is access to mental health services for persons dealing with psychiatric illness. The familicide literature suggests that psychiatric ailment is a major contributory factor in many familicides. Analysts have documented the lack of psychiatric resources and services in the country. At present, it is estimated that less than 3% of those who need psychiatric services in the Ghana receive professional care (Roberts et al., 2014). Third, there is a serious shortage of domestic violence shelters for persons fleeing physical and psychological abuse at the hands of intimate partners. The provision of such shelters will help reduce domestic homicides by preventing minor interspousal conflicts from escalating into lethal aggression.

One limitation of the current study is the small number of cases identified and analyzed. However, the small number of cases may be emblematic of the infrequency of the phenomenon in the society. Nevertheless, the findings of the study should be treated as suggestive, rather than definitive, contributing information about the nature and patterns of familicide in Ghana. By focalizing on a heretofore unanalyzed type of homicide in a society that has been neglected in familicide scholarship, the study has potentially helped extend the field of homicide. In conclusion, our knowledge of familicide will continue to be enhanced if homicide researchers in various societies around the world conduct research on familicide in their own societies.

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