

Child Maltreatment Fatalities in the United States

Emily M. Douglas

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Four Decades of Policy, Program, and
Professional Responses

 Springer

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*For Sandra S. Hodge —
my original child welfare mentor and a force
to be reckoned with;
a woman whose priorities are clear,
whose child welfare practice was informed
by evidence,
and who never took her eye off the child.
My professional interests and this book are
because of you.*

Acknowledgments

When I was in graduate school, I studied public policy, family problems, and situations under which children were vulnerable to poor outcomes and sometimes, even harm. It was at this time that I started working for the Maine Child Death & Serious Injury Review Panel (MCDSIRP). This is a multidisciplinary team of professionals with a vested interest in the well being of children in their state, the circumstances that might leave children vulnerable to harm or even death, and the potential gaps in service delivery for such children and their families. I had been working with at-risk children in therapeutic settings such as residential care, specialized school services, and adults in a correctional setting. Thus, I was not completely ignorant to the problems that children and their families can face, but serving on the MCDSIRP was both validating and eye-opening at the same time. My initial work experiences after I finished my undergraduate degree prompted my interest in families and especially the social service systems that support them; I saw these services as fragmented and leaving children in risky situations. The work that I did and the cases that we reviewed on the MCDSIRP confirmed my initial impressions and interactions with the social service sector.

Even more important, as an emerging professional with limited experience, I was surrounded by local giants—professionals from various disciplines who had been working with, investigating, servicing, and treating maltreating families and their children for decades. They made a tremendous impression on me and a lasting mark on my professional aspirations, outlook, and career. I list them here, in alphabetical order.

- Neil Colan, Ed.D., psychologist
- Timothy Doyle, Maine State Police detective
- Michael Ferenc, M.D., medical examiner
- Sandra Hodge, child welfare professional
- Karen Mosher, Ph.D., psychologist
- Lawrence Ricci, M.D., forensic pediatrician

Though from different disciplines, these individuals role-modeled uniform ethical standards that became part of my own professional code of ethics—how to assess

for strengths and risks using an approach that is child-centered and safety-centered. They demonstrated for me how a system can support children and their families for optimum physical and emotional well-being, and also taught me to look for gaps in services which can leave a child without a safety net. I have never collectively thanked them for the tremendous impact that they had on my career, my aspirations, and the way that I approach fatal child maltreatment. So, thank you, to each of you—my sincerest gratitude. I must extend a special thank you to Sandra Hodge, who not only planted a seed that led to my interest in child welfare outcomes, but laid a massive oak tree at my feet. More than a decade has passed since she left the child welfare field and she still asks the most important questions of any child welfare practitioner I know. As I noted in my dedication to this book, my professional interests and this book are because of her.

My colleague, Dr. Melinda Gushwa, at Simmons College, has been a constant source of support for me in my work on fatal child maltreatment. With decades of applied social work experience under her belt as a child welfare worker, trainer, medical social worker, clinician, and more, she provides useful insight and role models how practitioners use evidence to inform their approach to working with families. She has walked me through cases, helped me to better understand the systems that support children, listened to my endless concerns about how to balance strengths and risks in child welfare practice, and commiserated with me about children who have needlessly died. It was Melinda who developed the idea of using a “fatality lens,” when working with families—a notion that might prevent high risk situations from resulting in death and simultaneously offer more protection for all children. Thank you, Melinda. I look forward to our continued collaborations.

Next, I thank Dr. Dana Mohler-Faria, the recent president of Bridgewater State University in Bridgewater, Massachusetts. He is responsible for the development of the Presidential Fellows Program at this teaching-intensive university, in which each year, one or two faculty are given a year’s release from teaching and campus responsibilities to pursue scholarly activities or applied experiences. In the 2010–2011 academic year, Dr. Mohler-Faria, gave me, an untenured faculty member, the opportunity of a lifetime by selecting me as the Presidential Fellow for our institution. This granted me an entire academic year, at full salary, to spend at the Family Research Laboratory at the University of New Hampshire, to focus on the study of fatal child maltreatment. It was during this time that I conducted my research on the intersection of fatal child maltreatment and the child welfare system, and identified the need for a book that would examine the policy, programmatic, and other professional responses to fatal child maltreatment. This opportunity was a pivotal experience in my career and laid the foundation for this book.

I am lucky to have been associated with the Family Research Laboratory and the Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire since 2002. The weekly research seminars in which one scholar’s work in-progress is reviewed in front of a body of peers, has had an important impact on my writing

and thinking as a social scientist. Many of the chapters in this book were reviewed by colleagues in this setting; it would be impossible to identify all of the contributions that were made and incorporated into this book. The footprints of their remarks and recommendations are spread through these pages and I am deeply indebted to them. I cannot thank Drs. Murray Straus and David Finkelhor enough; as the “founding fathers” of the study of family violence and child victimization, their sincere interest in my work and ideas have advanced my scholarship on fatal child maltreatment. An extra special thank you to Murray who passed away in May of 2016. He continues to be a daily source of inspiration for me.

There are numerous other people who offered me support in the writing of this book. My research and graduate assistants, Brandy Mohn, Stephen Maloney, and Sarah Cleaver, conducted literature reviews, retrieved articles, compiled databases, edited chapters, obtained copyright permissions, and did all of the “grunt” work that goes with writing a book. Despite these menial tasks, I don’t think that I heard a single complaint from any of them. Dr. Jenn Vanderminde, a colleague and one-time officemate at the Family Research Laboratory, listened to me tell countless, ugly stories about deceased children; solved endless statistical quandaries that I could not resolve; shared her chocolate; and, engaged in shared mini therapeutic sessions over the angst that all academics bear. Toni Chance, fellow child welfare professional, has answered many questions about risk factors, child welfare training, and child welfare practice concerning fatal child maltreatment. Her interest, support, and sweet, southern voice have provided reassurance on more than one occasion. Rachel Angerhofer, also another child welfare practitioner, has entertained many questions and asked me questions in turn, which have informed my thinking. She has talked to my students on numerous occasions about the child welfare profession and willingly gave feedback on chapters in this book—all-the-while staying afloat when her own state agency battled several child fatality-related crises. Thank you to Drs. Lars Alberth, Jess Goldberg, Hal Grotevant, Lisa Jones, the now late Staci Perlman, and Wendy Walsh—all stellar colleagues who provided last-minute feedback and advice on my writing and conclusions. Michael Dineen at the National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect at Cornell University, has answered numerous questions for me about conducting child fatality-related research using the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data Set. He is patient, thoughtful, and always eager to help. The Center for the Advancement of Research and Scholarship at Bridgewater State University provided me with summer grants to further my research on fatal child maltreatment. This type of support for scholarship at a teaching-intensive university is unique and is just one example of the many ways that this university supports its faculty.

My husband has been a daily source of support for me: performing endless household tasks and listening to the vacillating stories of woe and excitement that come with being the partner of an academic in “book writing season.” He is always patient and interested in helping me find a resolution to whatever problem I face. Finally, I must thank him for listening to some of the most heart-wrenching stories that exist: children dying from abuse or neglect at the hands of their caregivers. This goes beyond the “for better or for worse” contract, but he’s handled it all with grace.

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About the Author

Emily M. Douglas, Ph.D. is an associate professor of social work at Bridgewater State University in Bridgewater, Massachusetts. Her areas of expertise address child and family well being, and programs and policies that promote positive outcomes. Specifically, her areas of expertise include fatal child maltreatment, corporal punishment, partner violence, and divorced families. Dr. Douglas' interest in fatal child maltreatment began when she was in graduate school and worked for a child death review panel; it has remained a substantive research interest ever since. Her work in this area has focused on child death review teams, state policy, and the intersection of the child welfare profession and fatal maltreatment. Dr. Douglas has conducted the largest study on this issue, with over 425 child welfare professionals participating in a study about fatal maltreatment. She testified about this issue before the National Commission on the Elimination of Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities in 2014. Dr. Douglas has also conducted research on male victims of female partner violence with her colleague, Dr. Denise Hines (Clark University); this research has been funded by the National Institutes of Health. Dr. Douglas has an undergraduate degree in psychology and graduate degrees in public policy; she also completed an NIMH-supported post-doctoral research fellowship under the mentorship of the late Dr. Murray Straus at the Family Research Laboratory at the University of New Hampshire. Dr. Douglas is the founder and director of the *National Research Conference on Child and Family Programs and Policy* which was held for five summers from 2008 to 2012. During the 2010–2011 academic year, Dr. Douglas was named the Presidential Fellow at Bridgewater State University, allowing her a full academic year to focus on her research on maltreatment fatalities and the child welfare system. Finally, Dr. Douglas is the author/co-author of three books on family policy issues and ~40 peer-reviewed publications; she also regularly presents at national and international conferences. At Bridgewater State University, she teaches courses in social policy, research methods, and directs the Graduate Writing Fellows program for the university campus. For the 2016–2017 academic year, Dr. Douglas will be a Congressional fellow in Washington, D.C. for the Society for Research on Child Development.