



Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

CRIME PATTERNS AND TRENDS , FAMILY VIOLENCE , MURDER AND MAYHEM

Fewer mothers killing kids

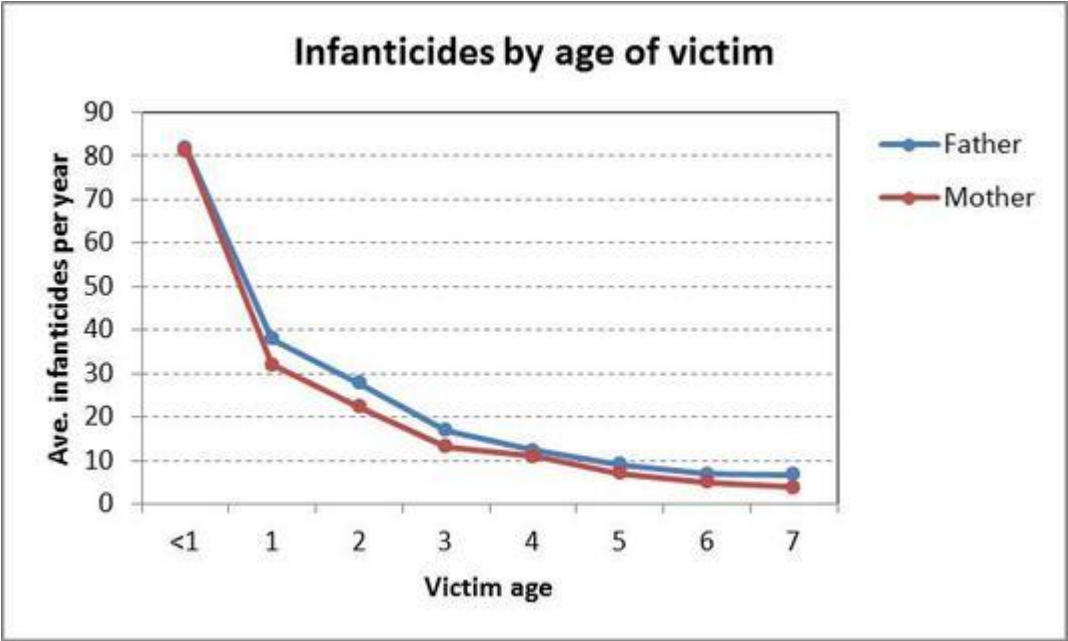
Posted by James Alan Fox, Crime and Punishment May 23, 2011 08:00 AM

At least based on comments uploaded to my "Why mothers kill" blog post of last week, there appears to be some disagreement about whether mothers or fathers are more apt to commit infanticide. The opposing positions are supported by conflicting research reports that use different data sources and different time frames.

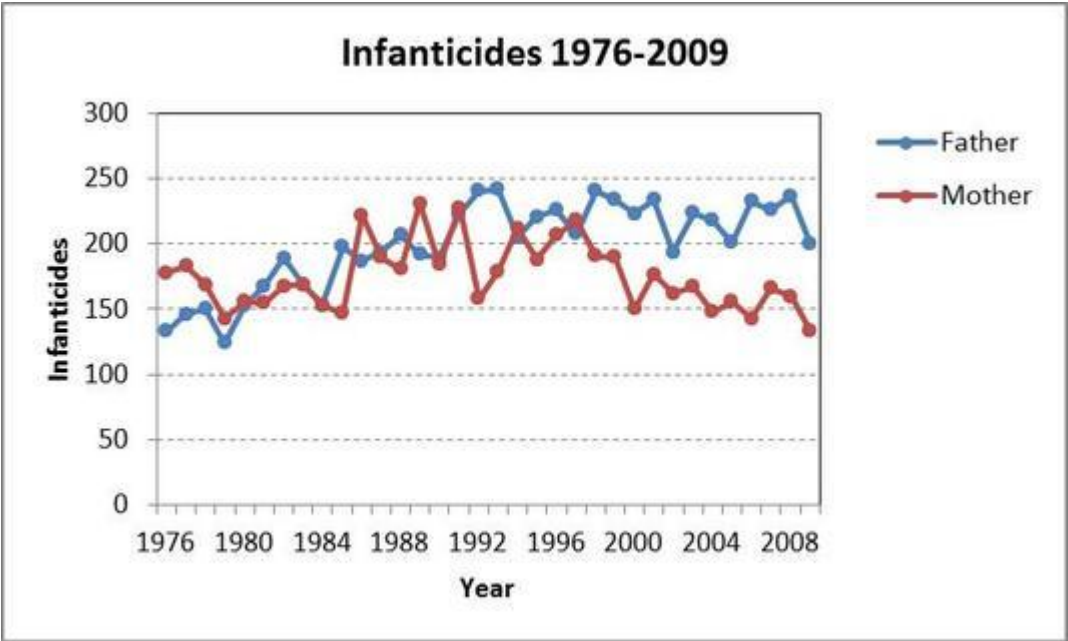
There are logical reasons to back either point of view. One might think that fathers are more inclined to kill their children in light of the very uneven gender split generally among those who commit homicide. Overall, 90% of murderers in this country are male.

On the other hand, mothers tend to have much greater contact with their children, increasing the opportunities for violent outbursts directed against their sons or daughters. To whatever extent infanticide is precipitated by the stresses and strains of child rearing, one might expect mothers to outnumber fathers as perpetrators of infanticide.

Of course, the question is not really open to opinion or debate as it can be settled easily and directly with official police statistics on homicides of children. The following chart shows the yearly average number of fathers and mothers who murder their children according to the age of the victim. While fathers and mothers are virtually tied in the number who murder children under the age of one, a slight edge for fathers emerges with increasing age of the victim.



The discrepant outcomes derived from earlier studies may just be a function of the years covered in the data. As shown in the figure below, until the mid-1990s mothers and fathers were represented equally among those who murdered children ages 7 and under. Since then, however, the numbers have clearly diverged. Specifically, whereas the number of fathers killing their children has remained fairly level in recent years, the number of mothers committing infanticide has dropped by as much as one-third over the past decade and one-half.



I will leave it to others (including those who post comments to this blog) to debate the possible reasons for this recent pattern. In my mind, at least, the increasing tendency of mothers to be working outside the home (using alternative forms of child care) likely accounts for at least some of the decline in maternal infanticide.

There are those who question the choice that many mothers make to return to work while their children are still very young because of the possible impact on their development. Apparently, there is one positive side effect: fewer children are being murdered by their mothers.