



Child Safety First

Preventing Child Homicides During Divorce, Separation, and Child Custody Disputes

Recommendations for Reforming U.S. Family Courts




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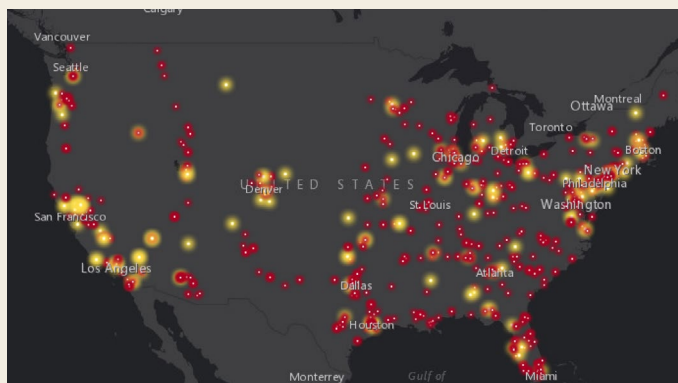
Uncovering the Crisis

In the United States, countless children each year are ordered into unsupervised contact with their alleged abusive parent by family courts during divorce, separation and child custody disputes.

The Leadership Conference on Child Abuse and Interpersonal Violence estimates that **at least 58,000 American children** each year are court-ordered into visitation or custody with a dangerous parent. This is more than three times the rate of childhood cancer in the United States, yet almost no resources exist for parents struggling to keep their children safe during this volatile time.

Researchers at the Center for Judicial Excellence began documenting child homicide cases involving divorcing, separating or court-involved parents more than a decade ago after realizing that no government entity or researchers were tracking these tragedies across the country.

We quickly recognized that these murders were not the isolated tragedies the news media reported them to be, but instead they consistently illuminated what domestic violence experts and researchers have known for decades: that the moment of divorce or separation is the most lethal time for family members suffering under domestic violence and coercive control.



Pictured above: CJE's U.S. Child Homicide Map, 2008 - 2023.

By tracking more than 940 cases of children murdered by a divorcing, separating or court-involved parent or parental figure since 2008, CJE researchers have drawn significant conclusions about divorce and separation-fueled child homicide, including:

- Family court personnel routinely ignore well-established lethality risk factors and evidence of abuse and instead prioritize shared parenting.
- The mere mention of divorce or separation can trigger a perpetrator of coercive control to murder their children in an act of revenge against the other parent for leaving them, but physical and legal separation creates the greatest risk.
- The news media is woefully uninformed about trauma-informed best practices for reporting on child homicides.

For nearly two decades, CJE has been at the forefront of exposing this national crisis in the family court system that routinely ignores the safety concerns of protective parents and places children in the dangerous homes of their abusers.

We have been a voice for vulnerable children and a catalyst for child safety as we work tirelessly to expose the systemic failures and gaps in family courts by educating the media, state and federal lawmakers, and the public about the need for major reforms.

This report was written in collaboration with researcher Mara Tissera Luna.

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Purpose and Scope

Child Safety First: Preventing Child Homicides During Divorce and Separation explores tragic and preventable child homicides, where judges and other family court professionals in separation, divorce, custody or child support proceedings were warned about an abusive parent's history of domestic violence, abusive behavior, and/or severe mental illness but decided to place children into unsupervised contact with the dangerous parent anyway, putting them at risk of harm and ultimately death.

The insights and recommendations in this report result from a qualitative analysis involving data triangulation – that is, the combination of multiple types of information, namely:

56 academic articles 



More than 20 secondary sources, such as media news articles, policy reports and analysis, and experts' websites and blogs

12 stories of preventable child murder built by reviewing more than 50 news articles.



3 in-depth interviews

By combining multiple independent sources of evidence, we sought to overcome the bias inherent in considering single experts or sources.

Our hope with this report is to provide evidence to advocate for eliminating preventable child homicides in divorce, separation, custody, visitation, or child support proceedings and to protect children in family courts.

This report's goals are to:

- 1** Raise public awareness of the systemic gaps and failures of the family court system that led to preventable child homicides by a divorcing, separating or court-involved parent or parental figure.
- 2** Provide clear and detailed evidence of what we've learned from documenting hundreds of cases of preventable child homicides by a parent or parental figure.
- 3** Present evidence-based recommendations to governors, state and federal lawmakers, and other elected officials for child safety-centered policy reform in legislatures and state judicial councils. These crucial reforms must include mandatory, comprehensive domestic violence and child abuse training for judges and court-connected personnel who frequently deal with these issues in court.

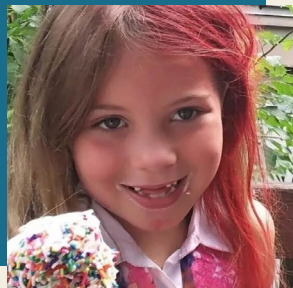
**As of June 30, 2023, CJE has documented 944 children murdered by a divorcing, separating or court-involved parent in the United States. Sadly, this is a fluid, growing number. Visit the CJE website for the most current data.*



Pictured above: Jayden Hines (age 2, center) with his protective father, brother, and sister.



Tragic Stories of Preventable Child Homicide



**KAYDEN
MANCUSO**

(Age 7)

Kayden was **killed by her father** in a murder-suicide during court-ordered, unsupervised custody time **on August 6, 2018 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.**

The court record **documented Kayden's father's history of murder threats and suicidal tendencies.** Nevertheless, the judge ignored these lethality factors. Kayden's mother submitted evidence of the father's abusive, violent history, including criminal records and a protection from abuse order for his threatening to kill family members, but he was granted unsupervised contact.

Her father was barred from Kayden's elementary school for stalking and harassing a teacher. A custody evaluator recommended to the judge that visitations be unsupervised **only if Kayden's father received mental health treatment, which he never received.**



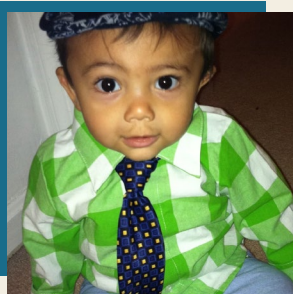
**GREYSON
KESSLER**

(Age 4)

Greyson was **killed by his father** in a murder-suicide during court-ordered parenting time **on May 21, 2021 in Fort Lauderdale, Florida.**

His father's history of abusive behavior and mental illness was documented in the court record. Greyson's mother **petitioned for a domestic violence injunction, which was denied the day before he was killed, despite 250 pages of evidence.** When Greyson was not returned to her custody and remained missing from school, his mother filed for an emergency pick-up order, which was denied.

The day Greyson was found dead, his mother called police five times requesting wellness checks. They repeatedly put her off.



**PRINCE
MCLEOD**

(Age 15 months)

Prince was **killed by his father** on his fourth unsupervised visit **on October 20, 2012 in Manassas, Virginia.**

A judge **granted the father visits with Prince despite objections by the boy's mother, who repeatedly brought evidence to court about the danger he posed to their son.** The father was previously charged with child abuse against his older son and was the sole suspect in the murder of that son's mother when the judge gave him unsupervised visits with Prince.

A jury convicted his father of capital murder and sentenced him to life in prison for murdering Prince for life insurance money.

Key Findings and Recommendations

GAP 1: Family courts ignore signs of child abuse and the risks of children's exposure to domestic violence.

Court professionals in these cases often ignore four main facts about child abuse and domestic violence, which leads them to overlook warning signs and minimize the risk to children exposed to domestic violence.

GAP 2: Court professionals' biases often inform custody decisions.

Peer-reviewed studies have demonstrated that child custody decisions are often informed by judges' biases, which are frequently reinforced by poorly trained and biased court appointees, such as custody evaluators, guardians ad-litem, minors' counsel, special masters, parenting coaches, and therapists.

GAP 3: The justice gap and financial conflicts of interest impact custody decisions.

With costly attorneys', evaluators', and other appointees' fees and lacking free legal counsel in most states, economically disadvantaged parents, including those experiencing domestic economic abuse as part of coercive control, are at a great disadvantage in the family court system.

GAP 4: Coordination, communication, and collaboration between agencies are subpar.

There is a need for service providers from different sectors (including criminal courts, family courts, child protection services, juvenile courts, and professionals who are mandated reporters, such as school staff, healthcare workers, police station staff, and other law enforcement personnel) to strengthen coordination, communication, and collaboration to act faster and avoid contradictory orders.

RECOMMENDATION

Prioritize children's safety and well-being over shared parenting. All custody and visitation decisions should prioritize child safety and hold the perpetrator responsible for their abusive behavior.

RECOMMENDATION

Use science-based, evidence-based tools to assess risk and lethality. Family Courts should systematically use a science-based, evidence-based approach for identifying risk and lethality, as other agencies have done for decades.

RECOMMENDATION

Establish systematic capacity-building and gatekeeping mechanisms for court professionals. Family court-connected personnel should be effectively screened and properly trained in domestic violence and child abuse. They must also be held accountable for violating the ethical standards that govern their professions, especially when exhibiting biases that put children in harm's way.

RECOMMENDATION

Provide a right to counsel in child custody proceedings. All states should eliminate inequalities in family courts that emerge from financial interests by ensuring free legal counsel and the right to an attorney for low-income, unrepresented litigants in custody proceedings.

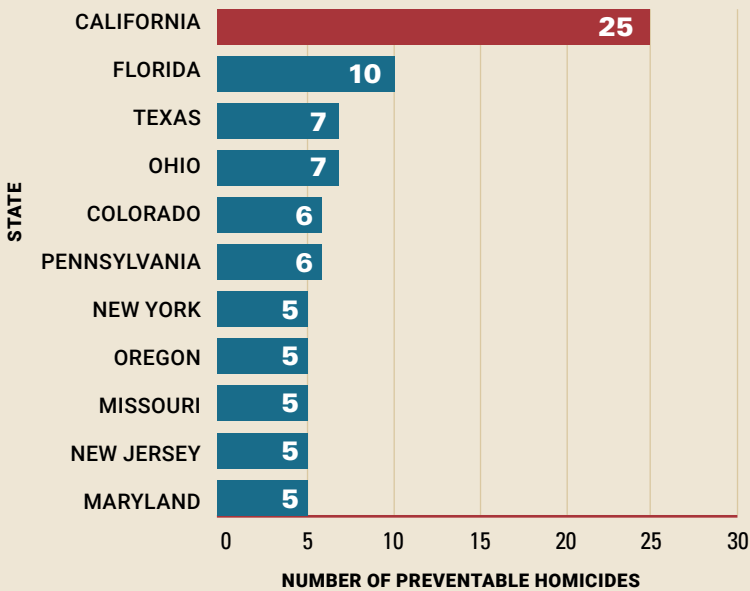
RECOMMENDATION

Improve cooperation and collaboration mechanisms between sectors and agencies. States should set up a centralized multidisciplinary coordination mechanism to promptly identify, report and discuss responses to individual domestic violence and child abuse cases, including by sharing information to support risk assessment, safety planning, and risk management.

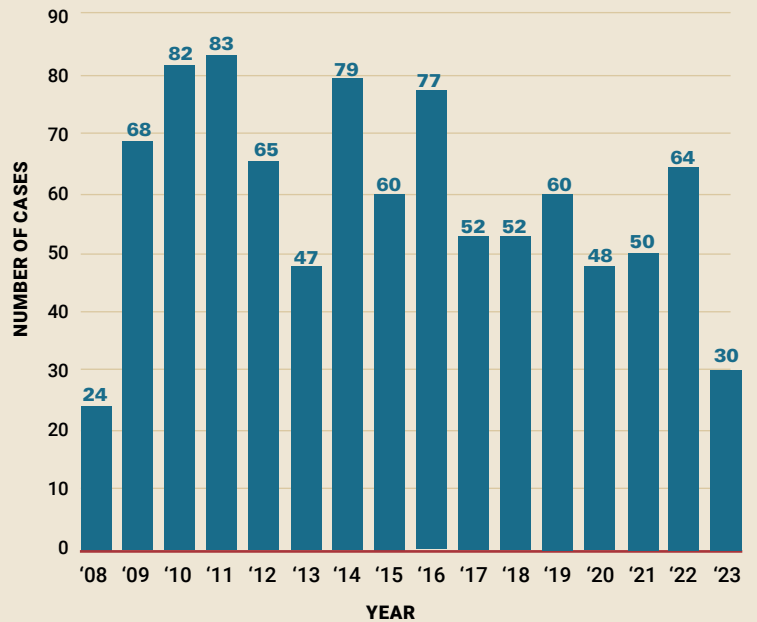


Important Takeaways from the National Crisis

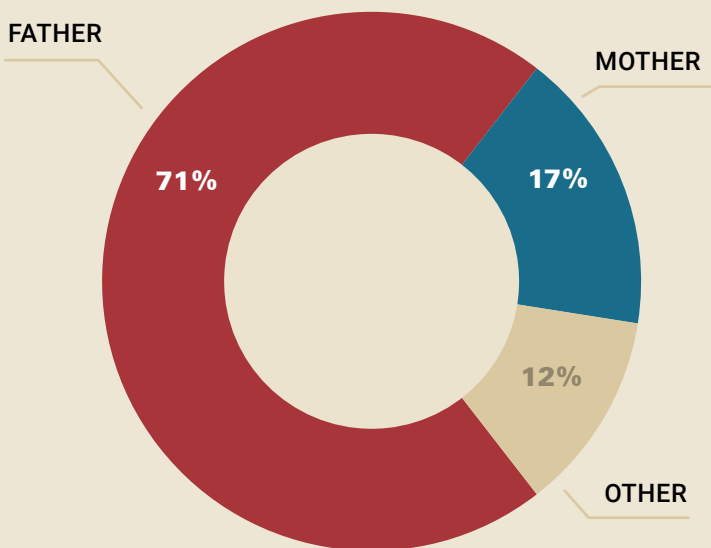
States With Most Preventable Homicides



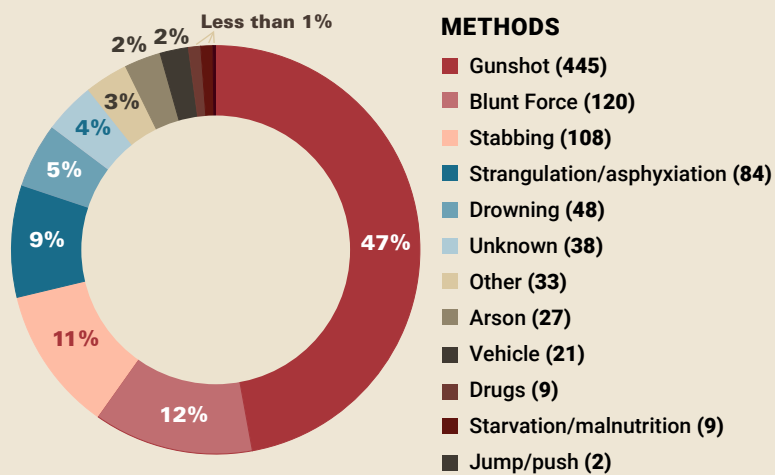
Total Child Victims of Homicides We Track, 2008 - June 30, 2023



Relationship of Killer

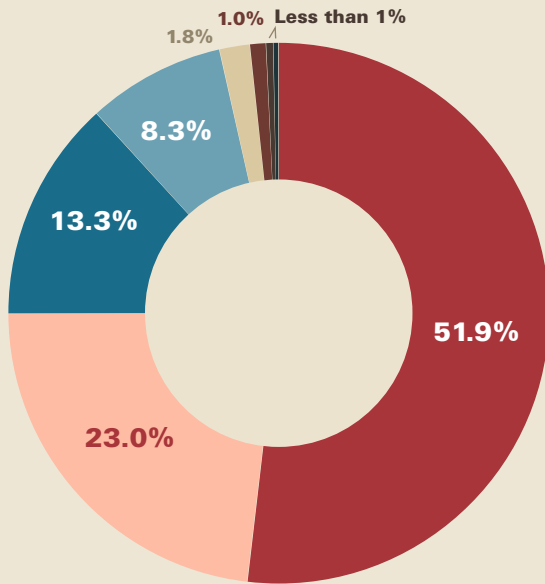


Homicide Method



Important Takeaways from the National Crisis

Racial Background of Child Victims

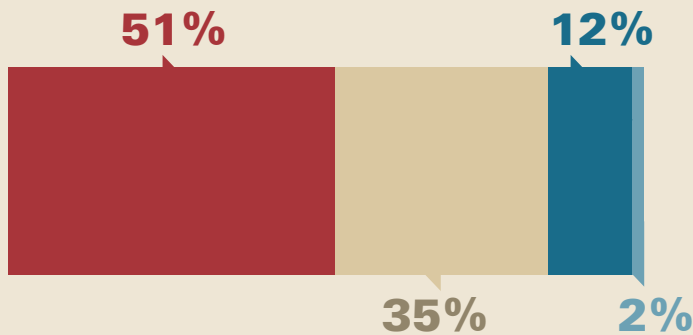


RACES

- White or Caucasian (490)
- Black, African or African American (217)
- Hispanic, Latinx or Spanish Origin (126)
- Multiracial (78)
- Asian or Asian American (17)
- Middle Eastern or North African (9)
- Indian (4)
- Native American, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian (3)

Age of Child Victims

5 & Under (481)
 6-12 (333)
 13-17 (111)
 18+ (19)



Gender of Child Victims



52%
male



48%
female





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