



**Violence against children:
Domestic violence and child homicide in
New Zealand**

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Introduction¹

The police launched a homicide investigation into the deaths of three-month old twins Cru and Chris Kahui after a post-mortem revealed they had died of multiple injuries, including head injuries and a broken thighbone. The injuries had been received up to four days prior to their admission to hospital. The mother brought the children to hospital because they were “not feeding”. Media reports noted the mother had been absent in the twelve hours prior to bringing the children to the hospital, and that the adults in the house were on benefits. The fact the twins were Maori with beneficiary parents set the tone for most of the discussion that followed. Among the blame tossed around like so much confetti were all manner of ideologues cynically using the twins’ death as a peg upon which to hang their hats. The victims of child homicide and domestic violence deserve better. This paper is an attempt to do right by them.

The twins’ death brought into sharp relief the fact that many of our children grow up in households where most of the general community’s behavioural norms are ignored or rejected. Domestic violence is normal and accepted in many of these households, with both short and long term consequences for their children. On one of the coldest mornings of the year several hundred members of the Mangere community where the twins had lived turned out a pre-dawn vigil to commemorate the Kahui babies and other victims of South Auckland’s domestic violence. The vigil was a public rejection of the violence that occurs in too many households, and provided an opportunity for the wider community to consider the causes of, and responses to, that violence.

The central question in the Kahui case is stark: how did the injuries that killed these children happen in a house occupied by five adults, including the parents, whilst they were under the care of Kidz First, and in a neighbourhood with social services specifically designed to deal with the problems the parents appeared to be having? Since the death of the children there has been no shortage of commentators ready to answer this question. This paper explains why we must be wary of some of the answers so offered and suggests we need to take a harder look at the deeper causes of our high rates of domestic violence² and child homicide if we to avoid the needless deaths of children in the future.

Problems and solutions.

It must be noted at the outset that changing the circumstances of the twins’ household and thousands of others like it in order to reduce the risk of domestic violence will not be easy, cheap or quick. Entrenched social problems take time and commitment to change.

¹ The opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of Child Poverty Action Group or its members.

² “Domestic violence” in this paper refers to violence against children and spouses.

Simple, cheap solutions – the politically appealing ones – often have consequences that are as grave as the problem they set out to solve.³

The roots of the social problems that give rise to our high rates of child homicide are not easily identified and isolated – if they were, abused women and children would have ceased many centuries ago. In the case of the Kahuis, the fact that they are a Maori family again put the spotlight on our appalling Maori child abuse and child death statistics. A number of people, both Maori and non-Maori, were quoted as saying Maori have to “front up” to child abuse. Perhaps so, but when Pakehas beat their children, for example with riding crops, no-one gets on talkback radio and says Pakeha should front up to the child abuse in their community. Nor do they say state agencies should leave the families to solve their own problems, for the obvious reason they are usually poorly resourced, uneducated, and incapable of looking after anything more complex than a cactus.

While race may be the obvious indicator of a high risk of family violence, Mike Doolan⁴ notes:

“...there is a danger that race will be unfairly identified as a risk factor in child homicide. Had more extensive demographic data been collected, such as social class and income levels, family composition and social support, housing and environmental factors,... other variables indicating an association with risk of homicide may have emerged.”⁵

If child abuse were a “Maori” problem, we would expect to see it only within Maori families. However, it occurs in communities the world over. Family violence, sexual abuse of women and children, high levels of drug and alcohol abuse, poverty and high levels of crime occur in other highly stressed communities. Aboriginal communities, Native American communities in Canada and the US, and African-American communities in the US are all grappling with these problems. At present Australia is going through the same soul-searching as New Zealand in respect of its Aboriginal people. The same arguments for and against government intervention in Aboriginal families and communities are being aired, and the same lack of consensus is evident. Child abuse is not, therefore, a function of race or genetics, but rather a function of whatever those communities have in common.

The other chestnut that will surely be dragged out for cracking is welfare. The fact that the Kahuis were on benefits did not escape anyone’s attention, and for many the link between welfare and child abuse is a causal one. The argument goes: people on welfare abuse their spouses and children, take drugs and are lazy. Ergo, if we cut welfare they

³ For example in the US welfare-to-work policies have been blighted by scams, and had adverse effects on children. See O’Brien, M (2005) *Workfare: Not fair for kids?*. Available at <http://www.cpag.org.nz/resources/publications/res1122875506.pdf>.

⁴ See Doolan M, (2004) *Child Death by Homicide*, Te Awatea Review, August 2004, 7-10. Available at http://www.vrc.canterbury.ac.nz/docs/55881te_awatea_review.pdf

⁵ Doolan (2004), p.9.

will get jobs, start cleaning their teeth and become responsible, caring citizens. A similar line of reasoning is that welfare makes people dependent.⁶ Therefore they are lazy and abuse their spouses etc. If they weren't dependent they would clean their teeth etc. These arguments ignore the fact that family violence "knows no boundaries" as one of the speakers at the vigil observed. All child abuse does not occur in beneficiary households, nor do all beneficiaries abuse their children. Moreover, the evidence suggests that when work is available, "dependent" beneficiaries get jobs, even if the pay is not much better than a benefit. Among beneficiaries with illness and disabilities there are many who would prefer to work but are unable to get jobs. They depend on the state for income, albeit reluctantly.

It is difficult to believe that abolishing or cutting welfare will stop anyone taking their frustrations out on their spouses and children. Furthermore, this reasoning in no way explains the domestic violence that occurs in well-off households – indeed it renders it invisible.

Violence against women and children will not be "prevented" by instilling something called "family values". Proponents of this argument share common ground with those who argue it is a welfare problem. Well documented by numerous right-wing think tanks, this view holds out a mythical benevolent white male patriarchy out as a social ideal. Cloaked in the language of morality and values, the arguments themselves are usually economic, and used to justify marginalising certain sectors of the community. However, people don't murder their children because they don't comply with the conservative right's social norms and values. They murder their children because they don't hold any of the usual social values in very high regard. As Ian Hassall points out, if murdering children were not "profoundly aberrant" we would hardly have survived as a species.

As for the Left, they are uncomfortable with cases such the Kahuis. Less inclined to take a moral stance, they usually end up trying to explain and understand. In so doing they risk being seen as apologists for bad behaviour. Long-time activist John Minto, who tried to explain why bad stuff happens to children, found himself vilified as a "sickly white liberal" for his trouble. Yet to understand is not to excuse, as Chief Family Court judge Andrew Becroft has pointed out. The natural response of those on the left is to point to the material deprivation of the protagonists and call for more resources. Financial stress makes life difficult for the most well-intentioned families. Importantly, in New Zealand's low-wage economy financial stress occurs in working as well as beneficiary families.⁷

⁶ One startling headline from a Sensible Sentencing Trust press release stated: "Welfare State Killed Kahui Twins, Says Watchdog". The release can be found at <http://www.safe-nz.org.nz/press.htm>.

⁷ The Ministry of Social Development figures suggest that approximately half of the 400,000 New Zealand children facing "severe and significant" hardship are from working families. See <http://www.msd.govt.nz/work-areas/social-research/living-standards/living-standards-2004.html>.

The Kahuis did not live in a social vacuum. They lived in a poor neighbourhood in Manukau City. According to the 2001 census this area has a median personal income of \$13,600, compared with a national median of \$18,500. 29% of personal incomes were less than \$10,000 per year. These low incomes help explain the overcrowding in the Kahui household and others in this neighbourhood. The average household size in 2001 was 4.8 people, compared to the national average of 2.7. 35% of families are single parent families. Underscoring their economic and geographical ghettoisation, only 18% of households had access to the internet.⁸

Even in this relatively deprived suburb this family stuck out. Neighbours commented on the noise and the benefit day parties, and wished for more quiet in the neighbourhood for the sake of their own children.

Studies show there is a correlation between domestic violence and low socio-economic status, suggesting availability of resources is indeed a risk factor for abuse. Yet, other uniformly poor communities in other countries do not have our high rates of child abuse. Absolute poverty alone does not explain what is happening in New Zealand. The issue is more likely to be one of relative poverty.

The rise in Maori child abuse rates has coincided with the economic reforms of the eighties and nineties that transferred so many resources from the bottom half of income earners, where most Maori and Pacific Island workers are situated, to the top ten percent of earners. According to the Ministry of Social Development, this income gap continues to widen.⁹ People with low socio-economic status endure higher levels of homicides, poorer health, lower life expectancy and a raft of other negative social indicators. The greater the gap between rich and poor, the greater the negative consequences for those at the bottom.¹⁰

For Maori children whose families' relative incomes have fallen the furthest, the risk of being killed has more than doubled (see Table 1). For families in "severe and significant" hardship,¹¹ increased benefit levels and wages are necessary, but will not be sufficient to reverse the damage wrought by economic reform.¹² Moreover, there remain policy gaps which have negative implications for the incomes of the poorest households. While the In Work Payment will be a real boost in income for those who meet the work

⁸ This does raise some questions as to the usefulness of the Ministry of Social Development's ads exhorting people to fill out their Working for Families applications online.

⁹ See <http://www.msd.govt.nz/documents/publications/strategic-social-policy/social-report-indicators-for-low-incomes-and-inequality.doc>

¹⁰ See Wilkinson, R (2005), *The impact of inequality: How to make sick societies healthier*. New York: The New Press.

¹¹ As defined in the *Living Standards Report*, <http://www.msd.govt.nz/work-areas/social-research/living-standards/living-standards-2004.html>.

¹² The Ministry of Social Development's "Social report indicators for low incomes and inequality" clearly shows the impact of economic reform on poor New Zealanders' incomes since 1988. See note 9, above.

requirements, it is designed to increase the gap between the very poor and the rest, not close it. Greater investment in *all* children is needed in the areas of education, housing and access to primary healthcare.

Table 1: Changes in rates of Maori and non-Maori child homicide: 1978-1987 and 1991-2000

Period	*Maori child population 0-14	*Non-Maori child population 0-14
1978-1987	1.05	0.92
1991-2000	2.40	.067

**Rate per 100,000*

Source: Doolan (2004)

Also putting forward ideas are Maori rights proponents. Holding out an idealised notion of the whanau the argument for many seems to be “these are Maori problems for Maori families to sort out.” However, when whanau are so stressed and fragmented that violence towards women and children is normal, they are unlikely to have the material or spiritual resources to deal with the issues that give rise to the violence in the first place. Pita Sharples, who visited the Kahui family on the evening of 26 June, was shocked by the level of dysfunction within the household. Asked if they needed help, he stated: “It’s amazing just how much help they do need.”¹³

One press release suggested Maori families would be better off moving from the care of state agencies to whanau and Maori agencies. This may be true, but the Kahuis were not under the wing of any state agencies except Middlemore Hospital, and then only because the twins had been born premature. Child Youth and Family had received no reports about the family, and there was no suggestion that they had sought help from any government or non-government agency. The family were flying under everyone’s radar.¹⁴ They were what Ian Hassall describes as “social outliers”. More harsh is June Jackson’s description of them as “rubbish whanau”. This suggests a whanau beyond redemption. However, it is not the role of advocacy groups and think-tanks to judge who is redeemable and who is not. The phrase also carries the fate of the children with it. Even if the adults are irredeemable, we cannot assume the children, too, are beyond hope. It is possible to intervene in a manner that bypasses the adults (if this is in fact desirable) - school breakfasts being one such intervention.

¹³ Radio New Zealand interview, 27 June 2006.

¹⁴ Doolan (2004) notes this is not unusual in New Zealand. From 1996-2000, in only 20% (n=9) of child homicides were the children known to the Department of Child, Youth and Family.

Violence against children: The role of the public spectacle

In the absence of better public understanding and a hardening of political will leading to effective action, the death of the twins is reduced to a narrower social role, the role of the public spectacle. One newspaper article carefully described the squalor the twins lived in, and the anti-social behaviour of its inhabitants. The article clearly set out to distinguish “us” from “them”. Once the difference is established, “they” become symbols of the problems that vex the broader polity: race, class, the failure of liberalism, the failure of neo-liberalism, etc. The process of transforming actual events into media tragedy then serves to elicit from the populace what playwright Dario Fo¹⁵ calls “the cathartic burp.” Hence wider society can find itself “not guilty” in the Kahui case and the many others like it. The bigger picture is obscured, rather than revealed.

Anna Pinto¹⁶ argues that violence against children needs to be seen as the collateral damage of a social strategy of cultural and socio-economic oppression and that spectacles like these are an important way in which such strategies are enforced. Although cases such as the Kahuis appear to be random, they are part of a bigger picture, and are not “just individual happenstance”.

Pinto points out that it is cheaper for those who benefit from the status quo to exercise social control when violence against children, particularly indigenous children, is witnessed. The implied message is that violence can be waged against weaker members of society.¹⁷ The paradox, as Pinto notes, is that while all cultures pay lip service to protecting children, abuse – economic or physical – is also universal. This argument suggests that, while torture is no longer a public spectacle,¹⁸ torture – and hence social control – by proxy is very much alive and well. But to be witnessed, there must be a public display, and the media, so well adapted to reporting crime and sport, is only too happy to oblige.

The initial reports of death and family mayhem, and the resultant public condemnation, are only one half of the spectacle. The other half is the reassurance by the political elite that they will “do something” to find out what went wrong and prevent it happening again. As a result of the death of the Kahui babies a cross-party committee has been formed to look at the issue of domestic violence. But if it is true that domestic violence and child homicide is a symptom of socio-economic inequality and the lack of opportunity that goes with it, then the only thing we can be assured of is that “nothing’s going to happen”,¹⁹ because the one thing nobody wants to discuss is inequality. Referring to a

¹⁵ Thanks to Rachel for this reference.

¹⁶ Anna Pinto (2006), *Seeds of Tyranny* Social Policy Journal of New Zealand, No.27, March 2006.

¹⁷ This is a brief summary of the argument. The paper is complex, and it is likely that this summary does not do it justice.

¹⁸ Michel Foucault (1975), *Discipline and Punish*, 1997 English translation, Penguin.

¹⁹ Alan Duff, quoted in the New Zealand Herald, 28 March 2006.

summit on Aboriginal violence held recently in Australia, Phil Cleary²⁰ described it as “a political stunt that did not throw one shred of light on the extent and origins of violence towards women.” It is likely the same fate awaits our own cross-party committee.

Conclusion

This paper outlines reasons to be wary of over-simplification of domestic violence issues in the aftermath of the death of the Kahui twins. For CPAG and other child advocacy groups the issues are complex and difficult. The focus, though, must be the children in households under financial and social stress. Right now we are confronted with the deaths of two babies at the hands of those closest to them, and the perpetrators must be held to account. However, we have a duty to consider this violence in the wider context of social inequality, and the fragmentation of family and whanau, and to address it in an intelligent and inclusive manner. Unless and until we are all prepared to do just this the random and brutal deaths of our most vulnerable children will continue.

²⁰ The Age, Thursday June 29 2006, <<http://www.theage.com.au/news/opinion/better-to-bash-aborigines-than-whites/2006/06/28/1151174267440.html>>.