

# ***LOS ANGELES TIMES***

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## ***Los Angeles; County Calls Domestic Abuse a Key Factor in Child Deaths***

By Carla Rivera, *Times* Staff Writer

Domestic violence in the home is a key factor driving the number of children killed by their parents or caretakers in Los Angeles County, according to an annual report on child abuse and neglect being released today.

Of 37 child homicides recorded in 2002, 16 involved domestic violence between partners as a direct factor or as a problem that had been identified before the death, according to the county's Inter-Agency Council of Child Abuse and Neglect.

In one case, a 12-year-old Highland Park girl about to leave the house for school was shot by her father. He then killed her mother after the woman returned from work and turned the gun on himself. Authorities said there had been a history of abuse in the family.

Many of the child deaths appeared to be deliberate attempts by one parent to control or emotionally wound the other, the report's authors said.

"Batterers, whether they're directly taking out their aggressiveness against their adult partner or using children as a means of controlling their adult partner, are likely to express violence against the most vulnerable person in the home," said Pam Booth, who heads the Los Angeles County district attorney's family violence division.

The report is scheduled to be released at a news conference today, where the district attorney's office also plans to present new rules designed to improve how law enforcement, child welfare, education, medical and other agencies respond to abuse cases.

"The new guidelines will extend across Los Angeles County and will set a blueprint for reacting to problems," said Assistant Dist. Atty. William Hodgman.

The report provides a detailed annual analysis of accidental deaths, youth suicides, abuse cases and child homicides by caretakers. The 37 homicides are a slight increase from 2000 and 2001 when 35 were reported.

Among other findings:

- Eighty-six percent of children killed by their parent or guardian were under age 5. The average age was about 2½.
- The two leading causes of child homicide were multiple trauma and drowning, with seven deaths in each category. The children who drowned were left in bathtubs or ponds because of caretaker neglect.
- Eight newborns were abandoned or killed by their mothers in 2002, a decrease from 11 in 2001. Eight children were safely surrendered.
- There were 161,638 cases of abuse reported to the county's Department of Children and Family Services, a 9.7% increase from 2001.

However, the number of youth suicides decreased to 19 in 2002 from 27 the previous year. In addition, the number of accidental deaths decreased slightly to 127 from 137 in 2001.

The report also noted a significant decrease in shaken baby syndrome, which in recent years had been the leading cause of child homicides. In 2002, there were only two such cases, the lowest number in more than a decade.

Deanne Tilton Durfee, executive director of the council, said the numbers reflected the results of a concerted campaign in Los Angeles County to educate parents about the dangers of shaking their babies.

“I talk to a lot of parents who think that shaking their babies is better than hitting them,” said Tilton Durfee. “They will say they were just shaking the baby to make it quiet down, not thinking that it would kill the child. But I think the message has been heard that it’s not OK.”

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