

By **ALESSANDRA STANLEY** OCT. 16, 1992

A truck driver who claimed that child-support payments had ruined his life walked into a county office building today and fatally shot four women whose jobs were to track down and collect support money.

Initially calm when trapped by law-enforcement officers, he fatally shot himself in the head with a 9-millimeter semiautomatic pistol. He had, he said, "hurt everyone I came here to hurt."

The gunman, John T. Miller, 50 years old, had a history of arrests here in Schuyler County for nonpayment of child support dating to 1970, law-enforcement authorities said.

Mr. Miller was raised in this area, in the heart of New York State's Finger Lakes region, and returned after service in the Army. He later moved to North Ridgeville, Ohio, about 25 miles west of Cleveland in Cuyahoga County. Back Payments

Computer records showed that an order was filed on Sept. 22 in Cuyahoga County's Domestic Relations Court to garnishee Mr. Miller's wages at a rate of \$221 a month.

Mr. Miller was a driver for New Era Trucking Inc., in North Ridgeville. A company official said Mr. Miller earned between \$550 and \$700 a week and had been employed by the company since Aug. 23, 1988. Mr. Miller was in Watkins Glen, the Schuyler County seat, because he had driven a truck from Ohio with a load of McDonald's hamburger buns.

Yesterday, the Schuyler County Sheriff, Michael J. Mahoney, said Mr. Miller had visited the social-services department, which was seeking to collect the back money Mr. Miller owed.

This morning, the Sheriff said, Mr. Miller returned to the office about 10 o'clock carrying a briefcase and a duffel bag and walked up the stairs to the child-support unit on the second floor.

He entered an office and shot Phyllis Caslin, 54, an investigator in the support unit. He then walked across the hall and shot three other women, Florence A. Pike, 50, the supervisor of the unit; Nancy J. Wheeler, 48, a senior account clerk, and Denise M. Van Amburg, 28 a part-time account clerk.

All four women died immediately after being shot, the Sheriff said.

Deputy Sheriff Alfred J. Foote of the Sheriff's Office, which is in the building, was one of the first to arrive at the scene.

He and other officers evacuated employees, then walked up to where the shootings had occurred. Deputy Foote said that Mr. Miller stood in a hallway with a gun at his head.

"We had a conversation," Deputy Foote said. "We asked him his name, and he told us. We asked him if we could get him some help, and he said, 'Nobody can help me now.' "

Mr. Miller was calm, and even cooperative, Deputy Foote said, assuring the deputy sheriffs that he had "hurt everyone he was going to hurt." Deputy Foote added that Mr. Miller told him not to worry about evacuating other office employees. "He told us people didn't have to hurry, they could take their time, that he had done what he came there to do."

Deputy Foote said that Mr. Miller raised his voice when speaking of the child-support payments. "He said the people here had ruined his life, that he couldn't get a job, or a wife, because he owed so much child support."

...

One of the victims, Florence Pike, had told her nephew that an irate man had come to her office Wednesday and threatened to kill himself, according to a neighbor of Mrs. Pike, Gail Wyre, 42, who spoke to the nephew today.

"The man said he could not pay his child support and wanted to shoot himself," Mrs. Wyre reported that the nephew said. She added that the nephew said Mrs. Pike had not taken the threat seriously. "He said she just joked it off."

Man sentenced to life in prison without parole for fatal shooting of teacher, their 2-year-old child

By [fox5dc.com staff](#)

Posted Jun 21 2018 04:39PM EDT

UPPER MARLBORO, Md. - A Prince George's County man [found guilty](#) for the killing of his 2-year-old daughter and the girl's mother in a dispute over child support has been sentenced to life in prison without parole.

Daron Boswell-Johnson [shot and killed](#) NeShante Davis, a teacher at [Bradbury Heights Elementary School](#) in Capitol Heights, and their daughter, Chloe, in Feb. 2016.

Prosecutors said Boswell-Johnson was waiting outside of Davis' Fort Washington home when he approached her placing their daughter into a car child seat. During the dispute, Boswell-Johnson shot and killed [both the mother and child](#).

[Boswell-Johnson](#) had been ordered by the court to pay \$600 a month to Davis after a paternity test determined Boswell-Johnson was the 2-year-old's biological father, police said.

He was convicted of two counts of first-degree murder and two counts of use of a handgun in the commission of a felony in April.

"The conduct that we sentenced today really did represent sheer evil," said Prince George's County State's Attorney Angela Alsobrooks...

"The most aggravating factor in this case was that we are convinced that the true target of this murder was the 2-year-old," Alsobrooks said. "It was not her mother. ***This defendant simply did***

not want to pay child support. He conducted several internet searches and those searches said very simply how to terminate child support.

“He did that for a while and then he received a wage garnishment in the mail indicating that his wages would be garnished, and so he knew from that point that there was no way to terminate the child support. So he changed the plan and the plan became to kill. He went to that home and he shot the mother in her side. But placing a gun within six inches of the temple of a 2-year-old baby meant that was who the target was, and so the most aggravating factor of this is that his true target was a 2-year-old baby. That is why we believe life without parole was the proper sentence in this case.”

Davis' family said they are pleased with the sentence, but the deaths of NeShante and Chloe will continue to resonate with them.

“It’s not closure to us,” said Neshanna Turner, Davis' sister. “This will never close. It will never end. This is something that we will continue to feel for the rest of our lives. We will also forever hold their memories close and near, which will help us get through this.”

Man charged for murder of Spanish Lake woman over child support

NEWS

by: [Kevin S. Held](#)

Posted: Nov 12, 2019

CLAYTON, Mo. - The St. Louis County Prosecuting Attorney's Office charged a 26-year-old man Tuesday for the murder of a 27-year-old Spanish Lake woman who was the mother of his child.

According to a spokesman for the St. Louis County Police Department, the murder happened just after midnight on November 11 at an apartment in the 11900 block of Sagunto Terrace.

Homicide detectives said someone fired shots into Kanika Martin's apartment window while she was sitting on a couch with her 1-year-old and 3-year-old sons. Martin's parents were also in the apartment at the time of the shooting.

Family members said Martin's father held her in his arms until police arrived. Police said Martin died on the couch.

The suspect, Anthony Farr, was later arrested in Ferguson.

Farr is the father of one of Martin's children. *Before the shooting, Farr and Martin got into an argument at the apartment about Farr paying child support. Farr left the apartment and called Martin on the phone and the two continued arguing. Police said*

Farr eventually pulled out a handgun and shot Martin through the living room window of her apartment.

Prosecutors charged Farr with first-degree murder, unlawful use of a weapon, and two counts of armed criminal action.

Man ordered to pay child support accused of killing 3-year-old son, boy's mother

Man Accused of Kidnapping, Killing 3-Year-Old Son, Boy's Mother After Ordered to Pay Child Support

Updated: June 18, 2019 - 9:08 AM

SALEM, Ore. — The bodies of an Oregon woman and her 3-year-old son were found over the weekend and the boy's biological father, who was recently ordered to pay child support for his son, has been charged in connection with their deaths.

Karissa Alyn Fretwell, 25, of Salem, and William Fretwell, known to his family as Billy, were last seen alive the afternoon of May 13, [according to KGW-TV in Portland](#). [The Oregonian reported](#) that they were reported missing May 17 after a concerned family member found their apartment unlocked.

A probable cause affidavit said the television was on inside the apartment and Karissa Fretwell's eyeglasses and bank card were still there. Both of her vehicles were parked outside the apartment and she had missed three shifts at work, the court document states.

Dad & Daughter Team Up To Murder Mom In Her Own Home, So Dad Doesn't Have To Pay Child Support

by  10 months ago



Lloyd Neurauter, 47, of New Jersey, according to his own testimony in his guilty plea, strangled his ex-wife Michele Neurauter in the bedroom of her home on Dwight Avenue in Corning, then staged the scene to appear to be a suicide.

Karrie Neurauter admitted to assisting by distracting her younger sister while Lloyd Neurauter carried out the killing in the home.

Karrie is the second of three children of Lloyd and Michele. She was 19 at the time of the killing, was living in Syracuse at the time of her arrest, and was a student at the Rochester Institute of Technology.

Lloyd Neurauter also said he had threatened to kill himself if Karrie did not assist him in the killing.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-london-48267340>

Emma Day: Murdered woman told child support of threats from ex

By Phil Shepka

BBC News

16 May 2019



The family of a woman killed by her ex have criticised the "blasé" attitude of the child maintenance service after she had told it of his violent threats.

Emma Day, 33, was murdered by Mark Morris as she walked home from school in south London in May 2017 **after they argued about childcare payments.**

A **review into her death** said the management of her case was "inadequate" and found wider "systemic issues".

Her sister, Lorna McNamara, now wants a full inquest into Ms Day's death.

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) said it would consider the report's recommendations.

Ms Day and Morris had a child together during their eight-year "on-off" relationship before separating in March 2016.



While making a child maintenance claim in November 2016, Ms Day disclosed a history of domestic violence, which had been reported to the police, a domestic homicide review said.

Two days later she rang the service again to cancel the claim after Morris met her outside her work at King's College Hospital, followed her on to the bus and made violent threats.

Mrs McNamara said: "They [child maintenance] didn't really do anything - they just went 'OK we'll cancel your claim', even though Emma told them why she did so. They were just very blasé about it."

The service then informed him of the cancellation and the pair are believed to have had no contact through the festive period.

Ms Day made a further incomplete claim in January 2017, and when asked by the service on 16 May why it had not been finished, she told them Morris threatened her.

Nine days after that call Morris waited for Ms Day with a knife outside the gates of their child's school in West Norwood before stabbing her to death after they argued over payments.

He was jailed for life after admitting murder at the Old Bailey, when the court was told he had repeatedly threatened to kill Ms Day if she did not cancel the £2,000-a-year child maintenance claim, texting her: "I'll go to prison before you get a penny from me."

As a result of its findings, the report's authors asked the DWP to urgently commission an independent review into the child maintenance service's policy around domestic violence.

It also asked the service to set up a "robust domestic violence training programme".

Mrs McNamara has begun a crowdfunding campaign for an inquest, because "I don't want this to happen to another family".

A DWP spokeswoman said: "Our thoughts are with Ms Day's friends and family.

"The child maintenance service takes the safety of its clients seriously and we will consider the recommendations of this report.

"There are processes and training in place to mitigate risks to people in cases of domestic violence, and we continually review and improve these processes."

Dad ‘stabbed his own baby to death because he didn’t want to pay child support’ Comment Jimmy McCloskey Monday 16 Sep 2019 3:13 pm

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SHARES Enoch Zarceno reportedly murdered his four month-old son Bentley, right, after Bentley’s mother Heather Cook filed a child support claim against him (Pictures: WREG) A dad stabbed his four month-old baby son to death because he did not want to pay child support, police say. Enoch Zarceno, 25, reportedly knifed the youngster, named Bentley, and Bentley’s mother Heather Cook at their home last week before setting it alight. The bodies of Cook, 32, and her baby were found by firefighters called to the blaze at their home in Bennington Circle in Tennessee on Friday morning. Mother and baby were both pronounced dead at the scene, with deputies from Shelby County Sheriff’s Office later determining that the fire had been deliberately set. TOP ARTICLES 1/5 READ MORE Hypocrite politician ordered beauty salons to close – then went and got her nails done Cook herself had posted in a private Facebook group for single mothers a fortnight ago asking for advice on child support. Heather Cook and her son Bentley were both found murdered in their burnt-out apartment last Friday (Picture: WREG) She said that she got pregnant soon after sleeping with Zarceno, who was in a six year relationship at the time. Cook went on to claim that Zarceno had offered to ‘remedy the situation’ by paying for an abortion, and that she hadn’t heard from him until filing for child support in August. Several relatives backed up those claims, and alleged that Zarceno had killed his ex and her baby after the support claim was lodged in court. An affidavit obtained by WREG said Cook and Bentley had both been slashed multiple times. A relative told cops that Zarceno was Bentley’s dad, and that there had been arguments over who would have custody of the infant. Cook posted to a single mothers’ group on Facebook a fortnight before she was murdered explaining that Zarceno had offered to pay for an abortion – then contacted her after she filed for child support (Picture: WREG) Other relations b the TV station that Zarceno had committed the double murder after his ex demanded he pay child support for Bentley. During an interview with detectives, Zarceno is said to have changed his story several times. He is then said to have admitted breaking into the

apartment through a back window, but said both Cook and Bentley were already dead when he entered. Zarceno has been charged with two counts of first-degree murder, as well as aggravated arson, and is due in court Monday.

Read more: <https://metro.co.uk/2019/09/16/dad-stabbed-baby-death-didnt-want-pay-child-support-10752697/?ito=cbshare>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/MetroUK> | Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/MetroUK/>

2 children and father dead. Contempt hearing scheduled two weeks after murder/suicide: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-6195653/Father-shoots-dead-two-teen-children-bedrooms-year-divorce.html>

Mother, 4 year old child and father dead. Warrant issued the month before for failure to pay child support.
https://www.mlive.com/news/kalamazoo/2017/11/boy_4_shot_in_kalamazoo_murder.html#:~:text=Police%20say%20Nick%20Allen%20Mitchell,after%20Gibson%20and%20Mitchell%20argued.

2 children, pet dog and father killed: Detectives located child support-related documents and information on the kitchen counter. A handwritten note was found inside of a spiral binder noting the debt amount and a handwritten comment stating, “Debt Kill.”
http://www.calaverasenterprise.com/news/article_4b1f2ac8-98b7-11e2-a952-001a4bcf887a.html

Mother and daughter killed: “He wanted to avoid paying child support.”
<http://www.nbcwashington.com/news/local/Father-Charged-With-Killing-2-Year-Old-Daughter-Mother-in-Maryland-367518771.html>

Mother and son killed: ARLINGTON (CBSDFW.COM) – A 31-year-old man was sentenced to life in prison without parole for viciously stabbing a woman who wanted him to pay child support and then setting fire to his illegitimate son, killing them both.
<http://dfw.cbslocal.com/2014/10/02/man-sentenced-to-life-after-brutal-slayings/>

Fatal court

‘The harm to children in the nation’s family courts has reached crisis proportions’

By [Gillian Friedman@by_gillian](#) Sep 17, 2019

Deseret News



Katie Tagle with a photo of her murdered son Wyatt is pictured at her home Saturday, Aug. 10, 2019, in Las Vegas.

Wyatt was murdered by his father. Isaac Brekken, For the Deseret News

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SALT LAKE CITY — On a bone-chilling January morning in Yucca Valley, California, 23-year-old Katie Tagle woke up to an email that made her heart stop.

It was from Stephen Garcia, her ex-boyfriend. She had left him five months before in August 2009, after he had beaten her so severely she was knocked unconscious. He

had recently petitioned the court successfully for shared custody of their 9-month-old baby, Wyatt.

The email subject line was “A Necessary Evil.” She opened it, her heart pounding in her ears as she tried to make sense of the words, her head still foggy from sleep.

It was a story he had written her, but it wasn’t fiction: the characters were Tagle, Garcia and, their baby, Wyatt.

Her stomach turned as she reached the fatal ending: the “necessary evil” he described was Garcia murdering Wyatt. It was revenge, he said, for Tagle abandoning him.

Tagle and Garcia had joint custody, and she was legally required to hand Wyatt over to Garcia for the weekend. But shortly after getting his letter, Tagle went to family court and pleaded with San Bernardino Superior Court Judge Robert Lemkau to grant her an emergency restraining order that would prohibit Wyatt from having unsupervised contact with Garcia.

She presented the disturbing email Garcia had sent her, as well as dozens of subsequent text messages repeating his threat to kill their child. She put forward an email in which Garcia admitted to hitting her, and a sheriff’s report made after he pushed her down during a custody exchange and threatened to kill her.



Katie Tagle holds her son Wyatt shortly after his birth in 2009. Tagle's ex-boyfriend, Stephen Garcia, who had joint custody of their son, murdered him in January 2010, before turning the gun on himself. Tagle Family Photo

“It says it in the story that he will kill our son with Benadryl, that he will put it in his juice bottle and kill him,” she told the judge, according to a [court transcript](#).

Garcia told the judge Tagle was making it all up. She wanted him out of her son's life, Garcia said, and this was her way of making sure that happened.

“Mr. Garcia claims it’s a total fabrication on your part,” Lemkau told her.

The judge refused to grant the emergency restraining order.

“My supposition, ma’am, is that you’re lying,” said Lemkau. (Lemkau did not respond to multiple interview requests by the Deseret News).

Tagle had no choice but to follow the judge’s order. She gathered Wyatt up in her arms, kissed his forehead, and said goodbye as she handed him over to Garcia. It was the last time she would see her son alive.

Ten days later, on Jan. 31, on an icy road in the snow-capped mountains of Twin Peaks, Stephen Garcia shot his infant son before turning the pistol on himself.

A family court ‘crisis’

What happened to Tagle and her late son Wyatt was not an isolated incident.

Since 2008, more than 700 children across the nation have been killed by a parent or parental-figure during circumstances involving divorce, separation, custody, visitation or child support, according to the Center for Judicial Excellence, a national child advocacy nonprofit that promotes judicial accountability and child safety.

That figure represents about 15% of the estimated total 4,500 children who, according to FBI data, have been killed by a parent in the last decade.

Approximately 15 million children are exposed each year to domestic violence and/or child abuse, which are often linked. A child’s risk of abuse increases after parents separate, when feelings of anger and loss of control are most intense.

Family courts are in a unique, vital position: they are on the front lines of what can turn into a deadly fight for visitation or custody.

But a four-month investigation by the Deseret News found that in many cases family courts are failing to protect children, placing them instead in the hands of an abusive parent.

Such cases are resulting in the physical and sexual abuse of children, and even child homicide.



Joan S. Meier, professor of clinical law at George Washington University Law School, takes time for a portrait at her home in Takoma Park, Md., Tuesday, Sept. 3, 2019. Rod Lamkey Jr., For the Deseret News

“The harm to children in the nation’s family courts has reached crisis proportions.” — Joan Meier

“The harm to children in the nation’s family courts has reached crisis proportions,” said Joan Meier, professor of clinical law at George Washington University and a nationally recognized expert on domestic violence and the law.

The Deseret News reviewed dozens of family court cases and spoke to 30 experts, including family court judges, lawyers, parents, politicians, policymakers, academics and advocates across the nation, and found:

- During the past decade, at least 98 children in 40 American states have been killed by a parent or parental-figure after a family court allowed them unsupervised contact with the child, according to the Center for Judicial Excellence. In these cases, the family court was told beforehand about the parent’s or parent-figure’s violent history, mental illness, and/or risk of harming a child, according to CJE.
- More than 58,000 children are ordered by family courts into unsupervised contact with physically or sexually abusive parents following divorce in the United States, according to the Leadership Council on Child Abuse & Interpersonal Violence.
- Forty-seven percent of custody evaluators still recommend unsupervised visitation even when there are reports of violence in the family, according to a 2011 National Institute of Justice study.



Photographed in his courtroom in Albuquerque, N.M., on Friday, Aug. 16, 2019, Judge John J. Romero Jr. serves on the bench for the Children's Court Division of New Mexico's Second Judicial District Court. He is also a past president of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges. Craig Fritz, For the Deseret News

There is no government agency that tracks the number of children that are killed by parents in the midst of family court proceedings, or the number of children that family courts place in the hands of an abusive parent, on a national scale. While family courts operate differently from state to state, for the purposes of this story, a family court is a court of law that adjudicates domestic matters including marriage, divorce, child custody, child support, domestic violence and child abuse cases.

Judge John J. Romero Jr., past president of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges who is a judge in New Mexico and was involved in custody cases for 18 years as a lawyer, said that family court judges have extremely difficult

jobs in which they are tasked with making quick decisions in complex cases, sometimes with little evidence.

Judges are people and people sometimes make mistakes, said Romero.

“We’re fallible human beings, our systems are fallible systems as well,” he said. “And things fall through the cracks that should not have fallen through the cracks.”

But it is children who often pay the price for such mistakes, sometimes with their lives:

In October 2012, Hera McLeod pleaded with a Maryland family court judge to keep her 15-month-old son, Prince, away from her abusive ex-boyfriend. She told the judge about the man’s fits of rage and the night he held her at gunpoint and threatened to kill her. The court allowed him to keep Prince for unsupervised visits. On one of the visits, he murdered the toddler at a friend’s home. In 2017 he was convicted of capital murder.

In August 2018, 7-year-old Kayden Mancuso was killed by her father during a court-ordered visitation in Philadelphia. Kayden’s father had been granted unsupervised visitation despite the fact that he had a felony conviction for aggravated assault and after a court-ordered mental-health evaluation had revealed he suffered from a depressive disorder with suicidal tendencies.

In June 2019, 5-year-old Bella Younkin was drugged and strangled to death by her mother, who then shot herself in the head, according to preliminary autopsy reports. Bella’s mother had been awarded physical custody of the child, despite the fact that the father, Nathan Younkin, had told a Michigan court that she had a history of mental illness and had abused Bella in the past.

These cases, and hundreds of others like them, have generated increasing national attention and have pushed leaders at the state and federal level to take action to insure child safety in family courts.



Kathleen Russell, director of the Center for Judicial Excellence, poses for a portrait at the Marin County Civic Center in San Rafael, California, Friday, Aug. 16, 2019. Ramin Rahimian, For the Deseret News

“For decades, family courts across the country have been placing children in unsafe homes. How many more must die before we get meaningful leadership here?” — Kathleen Russell

“We believe that if family courts across the country were held accountable for operating as they should, with child safety at the forefront of their decision-making, then many of these children would be alive today,” said Kathleen Russell, director of the Center for Judicial Excellence.

In 2018, Congress passed a resolution acknowledging that “abusive parents are often granted custody or unprotected parenting time by courts, placing children at ongoing risk,” and urging state courts to make child safety the first priority of court decisions involving custody and parenting.

In 2019, Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan signed Senate Bill 568, which mandated the formation of a first-of-its-kind workgroup, which includes parents, state legislators, and experts in domestic violence, child abuse and custody issues, with a mandate to study the problem and make recommendations to the governor.

“Courts and the entire state apparatus should do everything in their power to reduce the likelihood that children are placed with abusive parents,” said Maryland Sen. Susan Lee, who sponsored the original legislation creating the workgroup, in a recent press release. “This workgroup will explore best practices to identify trauma behavior and mitigate preventable, life-altering harm.”

These efforts to acknowledge the problem are encouraging as first steps, said Russell, but they are not enough to solve a crisis that often leads to lethal consequences for children.

“For decades, family courts across the country have been placing children in unsafe homes,” said Russell. “How many more must die before we get meaningful leadership here?”

A ‘troublesome epidemic’ of disbelief

In custody proceedings, family courts often see a parent’s allegation of child abuse as no more than a tactic to undermine the other parent’s custodial rights to the child — and therefore not a credible accusation, said Russell.

There is a growing recognition of this phenomenon and its adverse impact on child safety. A recent press release by the Maryland governor’s workgroup on family courts called it a “troublesome epidemic.”

“This workgroup is based on a heightened awareness of a troublesome epidemic, where evidence suggests children and the protective parent are not seen as credible when reporting abuse in the midst of a custody proceeding,” the press release read. “Outcomes from these cases are impacting the future of our children, and in some cases have resulted in death.”



A wind chime made of spoons hangs over the dinner table at the home of Katie Tagle, left, pictured with her daughter Karlee Rodriguez, 8, and son Dakota Tagle, 14, Saturday, Aug. 10, 2019, in Las Vegas. Tagle’s son Wyatt, who was killed by her ex-boyfriend, liked spoons as an infant. Isaac Brekken, For the Deseret News

“This is not a father’s rights issue, this is not a mother’s rights issue, this is a child safety issue.”

— Anne Hoyer

This issue crosses gender lines, said Anne Hoyer, the founder of the workgroup, as both mothers and fathers abuse and kill their children.

“When allegations of abuse come before our court system, we should have a court that understands and has a protocol in place to address these issues,” said Hoyer. “This is not a father’s rights issue, this is not a mother’s rights issue, this is a child safety issue.”

Nevertheless, mothers are at a particular disadvantage when raising allegations of child abuse by the father in family court, said Joan Meier with George Washington University.

The Deseret News talked to five mothers whose children were killed by the father during unsupervised visitation, after they warned family court that he was dangerous, and reviewed dozens of other similar cases.

In these cases, a common theme arose: the mothers stated that the courts did not take their allegations of child abuse by the father seriously, and that’s why the children’s fathers were granted the unsupervised access.

Some echoed Katie Tagle’s experience of being told directly by a family court judge that he or she did not believe her. Others recall their claims being dismissed as “vengeful” or “irrational,” fueled by a desire to punish their ex-husband or boyfriend.

But Meier said the notion that women frequently lie in family court is not backed up by research. Instead, she said, studies show the opposite: most women in family court do not intentionally fabricate claims of child abuse.

“There is a big misconception that women make up claims of child abuse, but there is no independent research to support that.” — Joan Meier

The most substantive analysis of this phenomenon as it relates to family court was a 1998 study from the University of Toronto Faculty of Social Work which documented the rate of intentionally false allegations of abuse and neglect investigated by child welfare services in Canada. The study found that 12% of allegations of child maltreatment made in custody cases were intentionally fabricated. Of the intentionally false allegations of maltreatment, mothers and children were much less likely than fathers to fabricate reports of child abuse or neglect.



Joan S. Meier, professor of clinical law at George Washington University Law School, takes time for a portrait at her home in Takoma Park, Md., Tuesday, Sept. 3, 2019. Rod Lamkey Jr., For the Deseret News

“There is a big misconception that women make up claims of child abuse, but there is no independent research to support that,” said Meier.

The idea, she said, comes from a now widely discredited theory from the 1980s called “Parental Alienation Syndrome,” which asserted that in the context of child custody disputes, a “disorder” arises in which vengeful mothers, in an effort to turn their child away from their father, brainwash their children into believing that their father has abused them.

These mothers, according to the theory, employ false child sexual abuse allegations in court in order to undermine their ex-husbands and ensure custody for themselves. The

theory — which lacks scientific support — holds that these kinds of allegations are rampant in custody litigation, and that the majority of them are false.

“The idea that women fabricate these claims out of vengeance is a widespread myth,” she said. “I’m not saying it never happens. But it’s not the norm.”

The National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges advises judges in custody cases “not to accept testimony regarding parental alienation syndrome or PAS” because “the theory positing the existence of PAS has been discredited by the scientific community.”

Nevertheless, Meier said the idea of “parental alienation” is still used as a basis for family court judgments which often discredit mothers who accuse fathers of child abuse, whether sexual, physical or both.

“Parental alienation theory has fueled this whole ideology in family court that women who raise abuse allegations are just vengeful or pathological.” — Joan Meier

“Parental alienation theory has fueled this whole ideology in family court that women who raise abuse allegations are just vengeful or pathological,” said Meier.

This may be why women who report child abuse in family court have a substantial risk of losing custody of their child, according to a new study from George Washington University, led by Meier and funded by the National Institute of Justice.

When mothers allege child abuse by fathers in family court, they have approximately a 34% chance of losing custody of their child, according to the study.

The risk that mothers will lose custody goes much higher when the father invokes “parental alienation” as a defense. In cases in which the court believed that the mother was an “alienator,” the mothers lost custody 73% of the time, the study found, including cases in which the court acknowledged that the father had a history of abuse.

“Parental alienation syndrome planted the seed that you can’t trust mothers’ claims of abuse,” said Meier. “And the courts have been widely misled by this.”

Several of the women the Deseret News spoke to were instructed by their lawyers not to raise child abuse allegations at all in court, for fear it would compromise their case or even result in loss of custody to the man they feared was abusing their child.

“The #MeToo movement has broken open the ways society has denied women’s true reports of sexual abuse on the job. But that same awareness has yet to permeate the legal system, where women’s and children’s reports of abuse are still too often denied.” — Joan Meier

To Meier, family courts’ resistance to believing women’s reports of abuse echoes a similar phenomenon at the heart of the #MeToo movement.

“The #MeToo movement has broken open the ways society has denied women’s true reports of sexual abuse on the job,” she said. “But that same awareness has yet to permeate the legal system, where women’s and children’s reports of abuse are still too often denied.”

But Walter Richardson, U.S. legislative manager for the Father's Rights Movement, an Alaska-based nonprofit organization that advocates for fathers who feel they have been treated unfairly by family courts, said that in his experience, "parental alienation is alive and well."

Richardson, a father himself who has been through a custody dispute, said his organization frequently receives calls from fathers who say that the mother is falsely accusing them of child abuse in order to get an edge up in a family court custody proceeding.

"I think it's a very deep-rooted psychological inability for one parent to feel empathy or sympathy for the other parent and child," he said. "They are solely focused on winning and getting the last word at all costs."

(The Deseret News spoke to some child psychologists, custody evaluators and family lawyers who said that in their experience, some parents — both mothers and fathers — do make false abuse claims and alienate children by pressuring them to take sides in custody disputes, but that this phenomenon should not be characterized as a psychological "syndrome" and should not be used as a justification for disregarding allegations of child abuse raised in family court.)

Richardson said he takes issue with the notion that family court is prejudiced against mothers. Instead, he believes that family court is actually biased against fathers, pointing out the fact that more mothers in the United States are custodial parents than fathers. (In 2015, 80% of the custodial parents in the United States were mothers, according to the U.S. Census Bureau).

"There's this stigma that fathers aren't as good of parents as mothers," he said.

Many family court professionals — judges, lawyers, psychologists — point out that in their experience, the problem isn't as simple as judges not believing a litigant's abuse allegations, or a bias against mothers or fathers. Sometimes, there just isn't enough evidence to back up child abuse allegations, said John Myers, family law attorney and professor at the University of California Hastings School of Law.

In addition, experts point out that the system is overloaded. Judges have to see as many as 20 cases a day and may have to make a decision after spending no more than 20 minutes on a case.

“You're making these decisions fast and furious with just the tip of the iceberg of information,” said Utah Third District Juvenile Court Judge James Michie, who has adjudicated child welfare cases for more than 12 years. “There's no way a judge gets it right every time.”

‘It's gut-wrenching’

The Deseret News found that family court is not just placing children in the hands of an abusive parent when abuse is alleged.

They are also placing the child with that abusive parent when abuse is substantiated.

“If there is something that could be fixed in the family court system, it could be this: that we are too willing to give visitation to people with a proven track record of violence.” — John Myers

Forty-seven percent of custody evaluators still recommend unsupervised visitation even when there are reports of violence in the family, according to a 2011 National Institute of Justice study.

Myers said he currently has a number of cases in which he believes there should be no contact with the parent because of their history of violence. But he has little hope of convincing a judge to revoke visitation rights.

“It’s extremely difficult to get a judge to award no visitation,” said Myers. “In family court, they just bend over backwards to try to maintain parental ties and give visitation.”

In his Utah courtroom every day, Michie sees cases in which one parent has a proven history of physically abusing the child, and said his decisions are guided by a fundamental tension between parent’s rights and child welfare at the heart of juvenile court law.

A parent’s right to raise kids the way they see fit, he said, must be balanced with the child’s right to be raised by competent parents, free of abuse and neglect.

“The philosophy is, if a parent-child relationship can be preserved, we have a duty to try to preserve it, despite the fact that there may have been findings of abuse,” Michie said.

If a judge determines that a parent has a history of child abuse, the next step is to reduce risk and then, if the judge determines it is in the child’s best interest, work to “reunify” the abusive parent with the child, Michie said.

“Reunification” is a process by which the court provides services to the family with the goal of “reunifying” the family so that the state’s involvement is no longer needed. These services include substance abuse treatment, domestic violence assessment, psychological counseling, anger management and assistance with housing and employment.

“You want to work with both parents to try to get them both healthy so when you close the case, they can co-parent together,” Michie said. “In an ideal world, it’s not about one parent versus the other parent, it’s about both parents if possible. It doesn’t always work out that way.”

But Myers said his experience has shown him that an abusive parent is at risk of abusing again, even after receiving help.

“The courts believe people can change, and so the judge will order the batterer to undergo treatment or counseling, and sometimes that works. More often than not, in my experience, it doesn’t,” said Myers. “I think our system does bend over too far backward to allow children in an abuser’s lives, without sufficient proof that they have changed.”

Ruth Glenn, CEO and president of the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, shares Myers’ concerns.

“There is a very high likelihood that an abuser will abuse again,” she said.

Of batterers convicted on a misdemeanor domestic violence charge, 31% were arrested again within a year of being released and 44% were arrested again within two years of being released; in both instances the most common re-arrest was for felony assault, according to a study by the Center for Court Innovation.

“It’s horrific. It’s gut-wrenching.” — James Michie

Placing a child with a parent who has a history of domestic violence can be dangerous even if the parent has never hurt the child in the past, said Glenn. That’s because the

parent can hurt the child as a means of controlling or punishing the partner or spouse that the parent no longer has access to, she said.

“Time and time again, children are used as a tool in domestic violence, and then become the object of a lethal act as a result,” she said.

Michie said he is still haunted by cases in which he feels he made the wrong decision.

“When a case backfires on you, there’s nothing worse,” Michie said. “There’s nothing more heartbreaking than to know you had jurisdiction over a child and that child was injured, again, by the same person that you were trying to shield against from the beginning. It’s horrific. It’s gut-wrenching.”

‘Happy, happy’

When Katie Tagle’s son Wyatt was killed, her case made national headlines.

Major newspapers covered the story. She appeared on the “Dr. Phil Show.” She was invited to the nation’s capitol to meet with Lynn Rosenthal, the White House Adviser on Violence Against Women.

For a brief period, Tagle felt optimistic that something would change. That Wyatt’s death would mean something, because it would change the system that endangered him.

“When Wyatt died the way he died, people kept reassuring me that family law and everything was going to be exposed, and everything was going to be changed for the better,” she said.

But now, 10 years later, the nation’s attention in her case has subsided, and with it, Tagle’s optimism.

“I thought everything was going to change. But I don’t feel there’s been any kind of change.” —

Katie Tagle

Each day, she still must live with the wrenching memory of her son’s short life and brutal death — a tragedy she said was completely preventable, if only she had been believed. And the change she thought might give meaning to her son’s death never materialized.

“I thought everything was going to change,” she said. “But I don’t feel there’s been any kind of change.”



Katie Tagle is pictured at her home Saturday, Aug. 10, 2019, in Las Vegas. Tagle’s infant son Wyatt was killed by the boy’s father. Isaac Brekken, For the Deseret News

But Wyatt's death did give rise to at least one important shift that has catalyzed the beginnings of a newly emerging national movement for family court reform. Russell with the Center for Judicial Excellence said it was Tagle's case and a spate of other child homicides close in time that inspired her to create a database to track similar cases.

Russell said the data has proved key in convincing state and federal leaders to recognize the problems with family courts across the country, and was instrumental in passing the congressional resolution in 2018, the first step the federal government has taken to address the issue of child safety in family courts.



Each year on Jan. 31, the anniversary of her son Wyatt's death, Katie Tagle holds a balloon release in his honor.

"It's a sad day, but we try not to make it too sad," said Tagle. Katie Tagle

Every year on Jan. 31, the anniversary of Wyatt's death, Katie Tagle gathers all of her friends, her boyfriend of four years, and her two children, Dakota, 14, and Karlee, 8, and go to a park.

Tagle remembers Wyatt as an exceptionally happy baby. Everything seemed to make him smile or laugh. She holds the party — complete with a theme and a cake — in Wyatt's honor.

It's a celebration of his life and the happiness he brought into the world for too short a time.

"It's a sad day, but we try not to make it too sad," said Tagle.

They all hold balloons; blue and brown, Wyatt's baby shower colors. Dakota and Karlee hold white ones, to represent heaven. They stand in a circle and say a few words to remember Wyatt.

Balloons in hand, they shout "Happy, Happy," the magic words that would make Wyatt giggle infectiously whenever he heard them.

And then they let go.