



Filicide and other child homicides in Spain: Comparing victim, offender, and crime characteristics

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ABSTRACT

Background: Filicide is a rare but severe form of lethal violence against children. Although international research has identified several victim, offender, and contextual correlates, empirical evidence from Spain remains scarce and fragmented.

Objective: This study aimed to describe filicide cases adjudicated in Spain and to examine how they differ from other child homicide cases.

Participants and setting: The sample comprised 197 victim-based cases of completed or attempted homicide or murder involving victims under 18 years of age, adjudicated by Spanish Provincial Courts between 2016 and 2025. Of these, 116 were filicide cases and 81 were non-filicide child homicide cases.

Methods: Judicial decisions were retrieved from the Spanish Judicial Documentation Centre. Information was extracted from the statement of proven facts and coded for victim, offender, and offense characteristics. Descriptive and bivariate analyses were conducted to compare filicide with other child homicide cases.

Results: Filicide victims were substantially younger than victims of other child homicides ($M = 4.69$ vs. 12.66 years; Welch's $t(119.41) = 9.90$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 1.614$). Filicide cases were also more likely to involve female offenders ($\chi^2(2) = 57.43$, $p < .001$, Cramer's $V = 0.540$), older first offenders (Welch's $t(112.41) = 3.47$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.588$), completed offenses, murder classifications, and methods involving close interpersonal proximity or caregiving access.

Conclusions: Filicide in Spain presents a distinctive victim-offender profile within lethal violence against children. Prevention efforts should address child maltreatment, mental health crises, domestic violence, and caregiving breakdown, with particular attention to infants and young children.

1. Introduction

Child homicide encompasses the intentional killing of a person under 18 years of age and includes a heterogeneous range of victim-

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offender relationships, contexts, and mechanisms. Within this broader category, filicide refers specifically to the killing of a child by a parent, stepparent, or other parental figure, following the classic definition of parental child murder proposed by Resnick (1969). Contemporary reviews continue to use this relational criterion to distinguish filicide from broader child homicide categories (Frederick et al., 2022). This distinction is central to both research and prevention because filicide occurs within a relationship of care, dependence, and routine access, whereas other child homicides may involve relatives, acquaintances, strangers, or offenders outside the caregiving system. International evidence shows that the victim-offender relationship is strongly patterned by age: parents account for a substantial proportion of homicides involving younger children, while extrafamilial offenders become more common as victims grow older (Stöckl et al., 2017).

Filicide is therefore not simply a subcategory of child homicide defined by legal outcome, but a distinctive form of lethal intra-familial violence. Its relevance for child protection is linked to the fact that parents account for a substantial proportion of homicides involving younger children, who are highly dependent on caregivers and have limited capacity for self-protection (Stöckl et al., 2017). The phenomenon may also be underestimated, particularly in cases involving infants, concealed births, neglect-related deaths, or ambiguous injury mechanisms (Overpeck et al., 1999). Recent reviews further emphasize that filicide is heterogeneous rather than a single-pathway phenomenon. It may arise in contexts of fatal maltreatment, severe neglect, acute mental illness, unwanted or concealed pregnancy, intimate partner violence, and suicidal or retaliatory dynamics (Frederick et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2024). Accordingly, comparing filicide with other child homicides can help clarify which characteristics are shared across lethal violence against children and which are specific to killings committed by parents or parental figures.

1.1. International literature on filicide and other forms of child homicide

In Europe, child homicide rates have generally declined since the 1990s (Lehti et al., 2012; Sturup & Granath, 2015; Törö et al., 2010), a trend reported across several national contexts (Ellonen et al., 2015). However, recent evidence suggests that this decline may not be uniform across countries, age groups, or victim-offender relationships, and that changes in population composition and family structures may be associated with shifts in the profile and frequency of cases (Sundwall et al., 2024). These findings underscore the need for country-specific research capable of clarifying the characteristics of filicide and distinguishing it from other forms of child homicide.

A central challenge in the study of filicide concerns its conceptual and empirical delimitation. Several typologies have been proposed, the most influential of which remains Resnick's psychiatric classification of child murder by parents (Resnick, 1969) and neonaticide (Resnick, 1970). Resnick used filicide as a broad term referring to the killing of a child by a parent, while distinguishing specific subtypes according to the age of the victim and the presumed motivation of the perpetrator. Within this framework, neonaticide refers to the killing of a newborn within the first 24 h of life (Resnick, 1970), whereas infanticide refers to the killing of a child during the first year of life. Resnick (1969) also identified five motivational categories: altruistic filicide, often linked to suicide and framed by the offender as an attempt to relieve real or perceived suffering; acutely psychotic filicide; accidental filicide resulting from fatal abuse or maltreatment; unwanted child filicide; and spouse-revenge filicide.

Subsequent research has refined these distinctions. Deaths resulting from severe abuse or neglect are often conceptualized as child maltreatment fatalities rather than intentional filicide in a narrow sense (Douglas, 2005). Similarly, in cases where a parent kills both a partner and one or more children, the term familicide is sometimes used, particularly when the act is embedded in intimate partner violence, coercive control, or revenge against the partner (Karlsson et al., 2021). These distinctions are analytically important because they point to different mechanisms, risk profiles, and prevention opportunities.

The inclusion of stepparents and parental partners is also relevant because non-biological parental figures may differ from biological parents in caregiving roles and risk contexts. Research comparing stepfathers with biological fathers has reported an elevated risk of lethal assault against young children (Daly & Wilson, 1994), although more recent work emphasizes that this pattern should not be attributed to genetic unrelatedness alone and should be interpreted alongside broader family and caregiving factors (Temrin, 2024).

Beyond these relational distinctions, filicide has also been classified according to motivation, intentionality, and mental illness. Bourget and Gagné (2002, 2005) proposed an alternative classification based on these three dimensions. Their framework distinguishes filicides associated with mental disorder, with or without intent; fatal abuse, typically understood as unintentional; spouse-revenge filicide; altruistic filicide; and other unspecified cases. More recently, register-based research from Austria and Finland identified five perpetrator profiles: homicidal-suicidal fathers, often motivated by extended suicide; violent and impulsive parents with prior criminal records and histories of domestic violence; single parents with mental health problems but without substance misuse; prosocial but psychotic parents; and infanticidal mothers, often associated with the disposal of an unwanted child (Putkonen et al., 2016).

Although these typologies have advanced the field, empirical findings remain heterogeneous. Reviews have identified recurring offender characteristics, including parental psychopathology, suicidality, prior violence, social isolation, financial stress, and family conflict (Koenen & Thompson, 2008; Stanton & Simpson, 2002). However, findings are not always consistent and sometimes appear contradictory (Bourget et al., 2007). This inconsistency partly reflects differences in definitions, data sources, inclusion criteria, age thresholds, legal classifications, and whether studies include completed homicides only or also attempted cases.

Several risk-related characteristics observed in filicide overlap with those documented in non-fatal child maltreatment, including parental mental health problems, socioeconomic stress, and low educational attainment (Stith et al., 2009). Recent reviews similarly situate filicide within broader patterns of intrafamilial violence, caregiving stress, and child maltreatment dynamics (Kim et al., 2024). Comparative studies have therefore examined whether filicide should be understood as a qualitatively distinct form of homicide or as the most extreme outcome on a continuum of violence against children. In Finland, Putkonen et al. (2009) found few differences

between filicide perpetrators and other child homicide offenders in terms of diagnosed mental disorders, although filicide perpetrators were more likely to attempt suicide at the crime scene. In Sweden, [Lysell et al. \(2014\)](#) reported that major psychiatric disorders and prior suicide attempts were associated with filicide, whereas substance misuse and prior violent offending were less common than among non-filicide homicide offenders. More recently, [van Berkel et al. \(2025\)](#), in a Dutch study comparing filicide perpetrators with individuals responsible for other forms of violence against children, found that most risk factors were similar. This supports the view that filicide may represent the lethal endpoint of a broader continuum of fatal and non-fatal violence against children. The main differences identified were that filicide victims tended to be younger and more often male, and that perpetrators were more frequently young adults and single parents.

Overall, there is still no comprehensive explanatory model of filicide. Existing evidence suggests that filicide is a heterogeneous phenomenon involving different pathways, including severe maltreatment, acute mental illness, unwanted parenthood, intimate partner violence, and suicidal dynamics. Further research is needed to clarify how filicide differs from other forms of child homicide ([Kim et al., 2024](#)), particularly across diverse sociocultural and legal contexts where empirical evidence remains limited ([Ssekitto et al., 2024](#)).

1.2. Research on filicide and child homicide in Spain

In Spain, academic interest in filicide has increased in recent years, as reflected in systematic and narrative reviews of the literature ([Carrasco-Sánchez et al., 2023](#); [González Trijueque & Muñoz Rivas, 2003](#)). However, empirical studies based on case-level data remain scarce. This scarcity is largely attributable to the difficulty of accessing reliable, comprehensive, and comparable data sources. As a result, the Spanish evidence base remains fragmented and is often limited to judicial samples, media-based reconstructions, or official statistics that do not specifically identify filicide as a distinct category.

One of the most relevant empirical contributions is the study by [Company et al. \(2015\)](#), which analyzed final court rulings issued by Provincial Courts and the Supreme Court between 2000 and 2010. The sample included 58 completed and attempted child homicides perpetrated by parents. A slight majority of offenders were women (56.9%), and more than half presented some form of mental disorder (55.2%). All 10 neonaticide cases identified were committed by women. Suicide by the offender occurred in 17.2% of cases, and a similar proportion involved prior family breakdown. Victims were predominantly male (60.2%), and the most common methods were asphyxiation, blunt force, and stabbing. Importantly, the study identified gendered patterns consistent with international research: maternal filicide was more frequently associated with psychopathology, whereas paternal filicide was more often linked to fatal abuse or reactions to perceived child behavioral problems.

Similarly, [Ramos Vázquez \(2018\)](#), in an analysis of 84 court rulings involving 64 deceased minors and 32 survivors of attempted homicide, found that children under one year of age were disproportionately represented among fatalities. Offenders were 45% female and 55% male, with notable gender differences according to the victim-offender relationship. Whereas most extrafamilial offenders were men, women predominated among perpetrators within the family context. These findings again point to the particular vulnerability of infants and very young children in caregiving environments.

More recently, [Barón Picazo et al. \(2021\)](#) examined 35 filicide cases involving 40 victims, 85% of whom were minors, and 39 offenders. Among perpetrators, 59% were women and 41% were men. Victim age differed by offender gender: in maternal filicide, the mean victim age was 4 years, compared with 9 years in paternal filicide. More than half of the filicides committed by women involved children under one year of age, compared with approximately one fifth of cases involving male perpetrators. Mental disorders were identified in 25.6% of offenders, and both completed and attempted suicides were observed among perpetrators.

Despite these contributions, the actual incidence of filicide in Spain remains difficult to determine. Underreporting is a persistent concern, especially in cases of neonaticide, fatal neglect, or deaths that may initially be classified as accidental or undetermined. In addition, Spain lacks comprehensive official statistics that systematically distinguish filicide from other forms of child homicide. The most approximate estimates can be derived from annual reports published by the Spanish Ministry of the Interior. Between 2016 and 2024, 448 child homicide cases were recorded, of which 138 were completed. These cases represented 4.3% of all homicides and 5.4% of completed homicides. Age-specific patterns suggest important differences: the annual average number of homicides among children aged 13 years or younger was 23.2, including 12.2 completed cases, whereas among adolescents aged 14 to 17 the annual average was 26.5, but with a much lower proportion of completed cases, 3.1 per year. These figures suggest higher lethality among younger victims and a greater prevalence of attempted homicide among adolescents.

Data from the Spanish Ministry of Equality further illustrate the fragmentation of available information. These records only include child victims of gender-based violence and therefore capture a specific subset of cases. Between 2015 and 2024, 43 minors were recorded as victims in this category, accounting for approximately 34.8% of child homicide cases reported by the Ministry of the Interior during a comparable period. However, these data do not systematically identify whether the perpetrator was a parent, stepparent, or other caregiver, which limits their utility for estimating filicide specifically.

Taken together, the Spanish literature remains limited in scope, fragmented across data sources, and constrained by small samples. Existing studies suggest relevant gendered patterns, the particular vulnerability of infants and young children, and the frequent presence of mental health problems, suicidality, family breakdown, or maltreatment dynamics. However, it remains unclear to what extent filicide in Spain differs from other forms of child homicide in terms of victim characteristics, offender profile, situational context, and case outcomes. Addressing this gap is essential for improving the epidemiological understanding of lethal violence against children and for informing more targeted prevention, detection, and intervention strategies.

1.3. Aims of the study

A more nuanced understanding of the characteristics associated with filicide, and of the extent to which these differ from those observed in other forms of child homicide, is essential for prevention. Identifying both shared and distinctive features of fatal violence against children may help refine risk assessment procedures and inform more targeted interventions for families and children in situations of heightened vulnerability. This study therefore focuses specifically on adjudicated filicide and other child homicide cases, rather than on broader child mortality or non-intentional child deaths.

However, the existing literature on domestic and family homicide remains heavily concentrated in the United States (Truong et al., 2023), limiting the generalizability of findings to other sociocultural and legal contexts. Recent reviews have therefore emphasized the need to expand empirical research on filicide in countries where evidence remains scarce, particularly given that filicide is a global phenomenon whose expression may be shaped by country-specific demographic, cultural, institutional, and child protection contexts (Kim et al., 2024).

Against this background, the present study aims to provide a systematic description of filicide cases adjudicated in Spain and to compare them with other cases of child homicide. By examining victim, offender, offense, and contextual characteristics, the study seeks to clarify whether filicide in Spain presents a distinct profile within the broader spectrum of lethal violence against children.

Specifically, the study pursues two objectives. First, it examines and compares the characteristics of filicide and non-filicide child homicide cases in Spain using two case samples. Second, it analyzes the contextual factors, motivations, and key victim- and offender-related circumstances present in filicide cases.

2. Methods

2.1. Data source and case identification

Data were drawn from judicial decisions retrieved from the Spanish Judicial Documentation Centre (*Centro de Documentación Judicial*, CENDOJ), managed by the General Council of the Judiciary. CENDOJ provides access to anonymized decisions issued by Spanish courts. Searches were conducted among decisions issued by Spanish Provincial Courts between 2016 and 2025 using the terms “asesinato” AND “menor” and “homicidio” AND “menor”. All retrieved decisions were reviewed for eligibility. Appeal decisions and cases involving negligent homicide were excluded. The final sample included intentional homicide or murder cases, completed or attempted, involving victims under 18 years of age.

The study followed the categories used in Spanish criminal law. Under the Spanish Criminal Code, homicide (*homicidio*) refers to the intentional killing of another person, whereas murder (*asesinato*) is an aggravated form of intentional killing involving qualifying circumstances such as treachery, price or reward, cruelty, or killing to facilitate or conceal another crime (Organic Law 10/1995, arts. 138–139). When murder involves a victim under 16 years of age, Spanish criminal law provides for the penalty of reviewable life imprisonment (*prisión permanente revisable*) (Organic Law 10/1995, art. 140).

2.2. Sample

Two groups were constructed. The filicide group included cases in which at least one offender was the victim's mother, father, stepmother, stepfather, or the intimate partner of one of the parents. Neonaticide cases were included within this group. The comparison group included child homicide cases in which no offender met these parental or parental-figure criteria.

A total of 168 judicial decisions met the inclusion criteria. Because some decisions involved more than one victim, the unit of analysis was the victim rather than the judgment. The final dataset comprised 197 victim-based cases: 116 filicide cases and 81 non-filicide child homicide cases. In the filicide group, 17 cases involved more than one offender, and 128 offenders met the parental or parental-figure criterion.

2.3. Coding procedure

Information was extracted from the statement of proven facts in each judgment, which provides the factual basis for the court's decision. Variables were coded across three domains: victim characteristics, offender characteristics, and offense characteristics. Victim variables included gender, age, and national origin. Offender variables included number of offenders, authorship, gender, national origin, and relationship to the victim. Offense variables included legal classification, degree of execution, method, and apparent motivation or context.

In multiple-offender cases, information was coded for up to two offenders, as two was the maximum number observed in the filicide group. Where relevant, dyadic variables were created to capture the combined characteristics of both offenders.

Motivational and contextual categories were coded from the proven facts using Resnick's (1969, 1970) typology and later classifications by Bourget and Gagné (2002, 2005) and Douglas (2005). Categories included psychotic or mental pathology-related filicide, altruistic filicide, rejection or non-acceptance of the child, maltreatment-related filicide, revenge against the other parent, and cases occurring in the context of fights or interpersonal disputes. Comparable categories were applied to non-filicide cases where appropriate.

The psychotic or mental pathology-related category was coded only when the proven facts explicitly described psychotic symptoms, severe mental disorder, psychiatric expert evidence, or a legally relevant mental disorder. Because judicial decisions did not

consistently distinguish postpartum psychosis, substance-induced psychosis, schizoaffective disorder, or other diagnoses, the study did not create diagnostic subcategories unless the judgment provided sufficient information. Maltreatment-related cases were coded when the proven facts described fatal or potentially fatal violence, neglect, omission of care, or prior abusive conduct toward the child.

Methods of killing were initially coded in detail and later collapsed for comparative analyses when categories had low frequency. Strangulation/asphyxiation and physical force were retained as theoretically relevant forms of direct interpersonal physical violence. The category sharp weapon refers to knives and other bladed instruments.

To assess inter-rater reliability, a subsample of cases was independently coded by two researchers. Cohen's kappa values were calculated for the principal categorical variables requiring interpretative judgment, including motive, mental pathology-related context, maltreatment-related circumstances, revenge against the other parent, and method of killing, and indicated substantial to almost perfect agreement (κ range: 0.825–0.946). Discrepancies were discussed and resolved by consensus.

2.4. Statistical analyses

Descriptive statistics were used to summarize both groups. Frequencies and percentages were calculated for categorical variables, and measures of central tendency and dispersion were calculated for continuous variables. Group differences were examined using Chi-square tests for categorical variables and Welch's *t*-tests for continuous variables, given that equality of variances could not be assumed across groups.

Sparse categorical variables were collapsed to ensure adequate cell sizes. Offender characteristics were simplified into dyadic categories when necessary; for example, offender gender was coded as male, female, or mixed. Variables structurally embedded in the definition of filicide, such as offender–victim relationship, were not included in comparative models. Motivation was examined descriptively because several categories were derived from filicide-specific typologies and were therefore not fully independent of the study group.

Supplementary material provides additional detail on offender configuration, offender–victim relationship, method of killing, and motivational/contextual categories.

3. Results

3.1. Case composition

The final dataset comprised 197 victim-based cases: 116 filicide cases and 81 non-filicide child homicide cases. The filicide group included completed or attempted homicide or murder cases committed by parents or parental figures, whereas the comparison group included analogous cases committed by offenders outside this parental or parental-figure definition. The results are presented by victim, offender, and offense characteristics.

3.2. Victim characteristics

Victim sex was almost evenly distributed in the filicide group, with 59 boys (50.9%) and 57 girls (49.1%). In the comparison group, victims were more frequently boys ($n = 49$, 60.5%) than girls ($n = 32$, 39.5%); however, this difference was not statistically significant ($\chi^2(1) = 1.787$, $p = .181$, Cramer's $V = 0.095$).

Victim age was the clearest victim-level difference between groups. Filicide victims were substantially younger than victims of other child homicides ($M = 4.69$ vs. 12.66 years), and this difference was statistically significant with a large effect size (Welch's $t(119.41) = 9.90$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 1.614$). The distribution by age group confirmed this pattern: children aged 0 to 5 years

Table 1

Victim characteristics and group differences by case type.

Characteristic	Filicide ($n = 116$)	Other child homicide ($n = 81$)	Statistic	p	Effect size
Victim gender					
Boy	59 (50.9)	49 (60.5)	$\chi^2(1) = 1.787$	0.181	Cramer's $V = 0.095$
Girl	57 (49.1)	32 (39.5)			
Victim age					
Age, M (SD)	4.69 (4.68) [$n = 107$]	12.66 (5.33) [$n = 64$]	Welch's $t(119.41) = 9.90$	<0.001	Cohen's $d = 1.614$
Neonaticide (first 24 h)	12 (10.3)	0 (0.0)			
0–5 years	59 (50.9)	9 (11.1)			
6–13 years	31 (26.7)	13 (16.0)			
14–17 years	5 (4.3)	42 (51.9)			
Missing age	9 (7.8)	17 (21.0)			
Victim national origin					
Spanish	72/85 (84.7)	12/20 (60.0)	$\chi^2(1) = 6.18$	0.013	Cramer's $V = 0.243$
Foreign national	13/85 (15.3)	8/20 (40.0)			
Missing origin	31 (26.7)	61 (75.3)			

Note. Values are n (%) unless otherwise indicated. Percentages for gender, age range, and missing data are based on the full group N . Percentages for national origin are based on available data; missing origin is reported separately. Inferential tests exclude missing data.

represented 50.9% of the filicide group but only 11.1% of the comparison group, whereas adolescents aged 14 to 17 years represented 4.3% and 51.9% of cases, respectively. All neonaticide cases occurred within the filicide group.

Victim national origin differed significantly among cases with available information, with victims of Spanish origin being more frequent in the filicide group than in the comparison group ($\chi^2(1) = 6.18$, $p = .013$, Cramer's $V = 0.243$). This finding should be interpreted with caution because missing data were especially frequent for this variable in the comparison group (Table 1).

3.3. Offender characteristics

Regarding offenders, the filicide group included 128 parental or parental-figure offenders. Of these, 81 were women (63.3%) and 47 were men (36.7%). Among female offenders, mothers accounted for 95.0% and stepmothers for 5.0%; among male offenders, fathers represented 81.9% and stepfathers 18.1%. The comparison group included 105 offenders, most of whom were men ($n = 91$, 86.7%).

The number of offenders per case did not differ significantly between groups. Most cases in both groups involved a single offender, although multiple-offender cases were somewhat more frequent in the comparison group (23.5%) than in the filicide group (14.7%) ($\chi^2(1) = 2.47$, $p = .116$).

Offender gender showed a strong association with case type. Filicide cases were more likely to involve female offenders, whereas comparison cases were predominantly committed by male offenders. In the filicide group, 56.0% of cases involved only female offenders, 30.2% involved only male offenders, and 13.8% involved mixed-gender offender dyads. In the comparison group, 84.0% of cases involved only male offenders, 8.6% involved only female offenders, and 7.4% involved mixed-gender dyads ($\chi^2(2) = 57.43$, $p < .001$, Cramer's $V = 0.540$).

Offender age also differed between groups. The first offender was significantly older in filicide cases than in comparison cases ($M = 33.8$ vs. 28.2 years; Welch's $t(112.41) = 3.47$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.588$). Among cases involving a second offender, the mean age was also higher in the filicide group than in the comparison group (31.8 vs. 24.9 years), but this difference did not reach statistical significance (Welch's $t(17.33) = 1.69$, $p = .109$). No statistically significant differences were found in offender national origin (Table 2).

3.4. Crime characteristics

Several offense characteristics differed between filicide and non-filicide child homicide cases. Legal classification showed a strong association with case type: filicide cases were more often classified as murder, whereas comparison cases were more often classified as homicide (86.2% vs. 43.2% murder; $\chi^2(1) = 40.90$, $p < .001$, Cramer's $V = 0.456$).

The degree of execution also differed significantly. Completed offenses were more frequent in the filicide group than in the comparison group (50.0% vs. 29.6%; $\chi^2(1) = 8.15$, $p = .004$, Cramer's $V = 0.203$), although the effect size was small.

Method of killing also varied between groups. In the filicide group, the most frequent grouped methods were strangulation/asphyxiation or physical force (31.9%), sharp weapons (27.6%), and poisoning/intoxication (14.7%). In the comparison group, sharp

Table 2
Offender characteristics and group differences by case type.

Characteristic	Filicide (n = 116)	Other child homicide (n = 81)	Statistic	p	Effect size
Number of offenders					
One	99 (85.3)	62 (76.5)	$\chi^2(1) = 2.47$	0.116	Cramer's $V = 0.112$
More than one	17 (14.7)	19 (23.5)			
Offender gender (case-level dyadic coding)					
Male	35 (30.2)	68 (84.0)	$\chi^2(2) = 57.43$	<.001	Cramer's $V = 0.540$
Female	65 (56.0)	7 (8.6)			
Mixed	16 (13.8)	6 (7.4)			
Offender age					
Age of offender no. 1, M (SD)	33.8 (8.63) [n = 96]	28.2 (10.75) [n = 63]	Welch's $t(112.41) = 3.47$	<.001	Cohen's $d = 0.588$
Age of offender no. 2, M (SD)	31.8 (12.40) [n = 12]	24.9 (7.37) [n = 14]	Welch's $t(17.33) = 1.69$	0.109	Cohen's $d = 0.683$
Offender national origin (case-level dyadic coding)					
Spanish	55 (53.9)	38 (60.3)	$\chi^2(2) = 5.315$	0.070	Cramer's $V = 0.179$
Foreign national	46 (45.1)	21 (33.3)			
Mixed	1 (1.0)	4 (6.4)			

Note. Values are n (%) unless otherwise indicated. For cases with two offenders, gender and national origin were coded as male, female, or mixed, and Spanish, foreign national, or mixed, respectively. Detailed offender-victim relationship and single-/two-offender information are provided in Supplementary Table S1.

weapons were the most frequent method (42.0%), followed by other methods (29.6%) and fire (13.6%). The grouped method distribution differed significantly between groups ($\chi^2(4) = 22.461$, $p < .001$, Cramer's $V = 0.338$).

Motivational and contextual patterns were interpreted descriptively. In filicide cases, the most frequent categories were violence and/or neglect (30.2%), psychotic or mental pathology-related contexts (26.7%), altruistic motives (12.1%), rejection or non-acceptance of the child (12.1%), and revenge against the other parent (10.3%). In contrast, comparison cases were more frequently classified under other motives (60.5%) or fight-related contexts (23.5%) (Table 3).

4. Discussion

This study provides one of the most comprehensive empirical descriptions to date of filicide cases adjudicated in Spain and compares them with other child homicide cases involving victims under 18 years of age. Overall, the findings suggest that filicide has a distinctive profile within lethal violence against children, characterized by younger victims, a higher proportion of female offenders, older offenders, greater lethality, and heterogeneous motivational and contextual patterns. The strongest differences were observed in the victim-offender profile, particularly victim age, offender gender, and offender age, while legal classification, completion of the offense, and method of killing also differed in bivariate analyses.

The strong association between filicide and young victim age is consistent with international evidence showing that early childhood is a period of heightened vulnerability to lethal intrafamilial violence. Stöckl et al. (2017), in a systematic review across 44 countries, found that parents account for a substantial proportion of child homicides, particularly among younger children. Similarly, van Berkel et al. (2025) reported that children aged 0–3 years were at increased risk of filicide victimization when filicide was compared with non-fatal parental violence in the Netherlands. The Spanish findings therefore support the view that dependency, limited self-protection, and high exposure to caregiving environments are central to filicide vulnerability. The exclusive presence of neonaticide within the filicide group further underscores the heterogeneity of the phenomenon and the need to distinguish between neonaticide, infanticide, fatal maltreatment, psychosis-related filicide, and revenge-motivated filicide, which differ in context, precipitating circumstances, and prevention opportunities.

Offender gender was another key distinguishing feature. Filicide cases were much more likely than other child homicide cases to involve female offenders, whereas non-filicide child homicides were predominantly committed by men. This finding is consistent with previous Spanish studies, including Company et al. (2015) and Barón Picazo et al. (2021), which also reported a substantial presence of women among filicide perpetrators. At the same time, international research shows considerable variation in the relative proportion of maternal and paternal filicide depending on country, data source, and inclusion criteria. For example, Flynn et al. (2013) found that fathers represented a larger proportion of filicide perpetrators in England and Wales, although mothers were more likely to have a history of mental disorder and psychiatric symptoms at the time of the offense. Liem and Koenraadt (2008) also identified relevant differences between maternal and paternal filicide in terms of age, method, and motivation. In the present study, the predominance of women may partly reflect the inclusion of neonaticide, the young age profile of victims, the judicial nature of the sample, and the composition of adjudicated cases.

The findings also support the view that maternal and paternal filicide may follow partially different pathways. Classic clinical and forensic literature has linked maternal filicide to psychiatric symptoms, altruistic motives, unwanted child filicide, and postpartum vulnerability (Friedman & Resnick, 2007), while qualitative evidence on women who committed neonaticide, infanticide, or filicide highlights concealed or unwanted pregnancy, psychosocial crisis, and child rejection (Milia & Noonan, 2022). Evidence from serious case reviews further suggests that these cases may occur within complex caregiving contexts involving mental health problems, domestic abuse, social isolation, and prior professional contact (Sidebotham & Retzer, 2019). Paternal filicide, in turn, has more often been linked to family violence, separation, coercive control, familicide, and homicide-suicide dynamics (Brown et al., 2019). Although the present study was not designed to model maternal and paternal filicide separately, the descriptive patterns are consistent with this gendered heterogeneity.

A related issue concerns mothers' male partners who are not biologically related to the child. Research on fatal and severe child

Table 3
Offense characteristics and group differences by case type.

Characteristic	Filicide (n = 116)	Other child homicide (n = 81)	Statistic	p	Effect size
Legal classification					
Homicide	16 (13.8)	46 (56.8)	$\chi^2(1) = 40.90$	<0.001	Cramer's $V = 0.456$
Murder	100 (86.2)	35 (43.2)			
Degree of execution					
Attempted	58 (50.0)	57 (70.4)	$\chi^2(1) = 8.15$	0.004	Cramer's $V = 0.203$
Completed	58 (50.0)	24 (29.6)			
Method of killing (grouped for comparison)					
Sharp weapon	32 (27.6)	34 (42.0)	$\chi^2(4) = 22.461$	<0.001	Cramer's $V = 0.338$
Poisoning/intoxication	17 (14.7)	5 (6.2)			
Strangulation/asphyxiation or physical force	37 (31.9)	7 (8.6)			
Fire	7 (6.0)	11 (13.6)			
Other methods	23 (19.8)	24 (29.6)			

Note. Values are n (%). Method categories were grouped for the comparative analysis to avoid sparse cells. Detailed low-frequency methods and motivational/contextual categories are provided in Supplementary Table S2.

maltreatment has found these non-biological male caregivers to be disproportionately represented among perpetrators in some samples. In a population-based study of fatal inflicted injuries among children younger than five years, Schnitzer and Ewigman (2005) found that the mother's boyfriend accounted for 24.2% of identified perpetrators, and that children living in households with an unrelated adult were at markedly increased risk of fatal inflicted injury. Earlier research specifically examining mothers' boyfriends suggested that their overrepresentation in child abuse may reflect a combination of factors, including limited attachment to the child, ambiguity or perceived illegitimacy in the caregiving role, and rivalry for the mother's attention (Margolin, 1992). Evolutionary accounts have interpreted elevated risk among non-biological parental figures in terms of differential parental investment (Daly & Wilson, 1994), although subsequent research indicates that genetic unrelatedness alone is insufficient to explain the association and that co-residence, family structure, offender characteristics, and broader caregiving circumstances must also be considered (Nobes et al., 2019; Temrin, 2024). In the present study, mothers' partners were included within the parental-figure definition because they may occupy a caregiving role and have routine access to the child; however, their prevalence and specific risk profile could not be examined separately.

Motivational findings further indicate that filicide cannot be reduced to a single causal explanation. Violence and/or neglect was the most frequent category, followed by psychotic or mental pathology-related contexts. This supports the view that filicide lies at the intersection of child maltreatment, family violence, mental health, and acute situational crisis. The results are consistent with Putkonen et al. (2009), who found that filicide offenders constitute a distinctive subgroup of homicide offenders but are not necessarily more mentally disordered than other homicide offenders, and with Lysell et al. (2014), who identified psychiatric disorders and prior suicide attempts as important but not sufficient risk factors. In the present study, mental pathology-related contexts were common but accounted for only part of the cases, while a larger share involved maltreatment, neglect, or family-conflict contexts. This balanced interpretation is important for prevention: filicide prevention cannot be delegated to mental health services alone.

The relatively low proportion of revenge-motivated filicide is especially relevant in the Spanish context, where such cases have received substantial political, media, and social attention in relation to gender-based and vicarious violence. The present findings do not diminish the seriousness of these cases, but they suggest that they represent a minority of adjudicated filicides. Prevention policies should therefore recognize revenge-motivated filicide as a severe and preventable manifestation of family violence, while avoiding an overly narrow framework that overlooks fatal maltreatment, severe neglect, parental mental health crises, unwanted or concealed pregnancies, social isolation, and caregiving collapse.

The methods of killing and degree of completion also reflected the relational and caregiving nature of filicide. Filicide was more frequently associated with methods involving close interpersonal proximity or caregiving access, such as strangulation, asphyxiation, physical force, poisoning or intoxication, omission of care, and abandonment of the newborn. These findings are consistent with previous reviews showing that methods vary by victim age, offender type, and motivation (Debowska et al., 2015). The higher proportion of completed offenses among filicide cases may reflect the young age and vulnerability of victims, the private context in which many incidents occur, and delayed detection.

Taken together, the findings contribute to the debate on whether filicide should be understood as a distinct form of child homicide or as the lethal endpoint of a broader continuum of violence against children. The results support both interpretations. On the one hand, filicide shares features with child maltreatment and family violence, particularly in cases involving violence and/or neglect, consistent with van Berkel et al.'s (2025) conceptualization of filicide as an extreme outcome of fatal and non-fatal violence against children. On the other hand, the strong differences observed in victim age, offender gender, offender age, legal classification, completion, and method indicate that filicide has a specific empirical profile when compared with other child homicides. The most useful interpretation may therefore be that filicide belongs to the broader spectrum of violence against children but is not interchangeable with other child homicide events.

4.1. Implications for prevention and child protection

The findings have several implications for prevention, risk assessment, and professional practice. First, the concentration of filicide among very young children highlights the importance of early detection and support during pregnancy, the postpartum period, and the first years of life. Primary care, pediatric care, perinatal mental health services, social services, and child protection systems are especially relevant because infants and young children are unlikely to disclose abuse or seek help. Second, prevention strategies should address the heterogeneity of filicide pathways. Neonaticide and child rejection require attention to concealed pregnancies, reproductive vulnerability, and social isolation. Psychosis-related or altruistic filicide requires timely access to perinatal and adult mental health care, particularly where suicidal ideation or delusional beliefs involve children. Maltreatment-related filicide requires stronger identification of escalating abuse, neglect, and repeated family-service contacts. Revenge-motivated filicide requires robust domestic violence and coercive control assessment, especially in contexts of separation and custody conflict. Across these pathways, prevention requires coordinated responses that integrate child protection, mental health, domestic violence assessment, and social support. Third, surviving child victims of attempted filicide require specific clinical, social, and legal attention. These cases involve not only physical injury and psychological trauma, but also the disruption of the caregiving system itself. Intervention should therefore include trauma-informed care, safety planning, family placement assessment, and long-term support for recovery.

4.2. Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study is based on criminal court judgments; therefore, cases that did not result in a court judgment, were not known to the authorities, or were not identified as possible homicides could not be included. This

is particularly relevant for neonaticide, fatal neglect, and ambiguous infant or child deaths, which may remain undetected or may be difficult to classify consistently in judicial or administrative data. Evidence from serious case reviews also shows that fatal child harm may involve complex caregiving, maltreatment, mental health, and professional-contact histories that are not always fully captured in criminal judgments (Sidebotham & Retzer, 2019). These difficulties contribute to the fragmented evidence base on intrafamilial child homicide and highlight the need for more integrated and comparable data sources (Kim et al., 2024). Second, the study relies on judicially established facts. Although the statement of proven facts provides a strong legal basis for coding, it was not produced for research purposes. Consequently, some variables of criminological and psychosocial interest may be absent, inconsistently reported, or shaped by evidentiary and procedural considerations, especially mental health problems, prior maltreatment, domestic violence, substance use, family breakdown, and motive. Third, some variables contained substantial missing data, particularly victim origin in the comparison group, and findings involving national origin should therefore be interpreted with caution. In addition, motivational categories necessarily involved interpretative judgment, even though they were grounded in established filicide typologies. Fourth, because of sample-size constraints, the study did not estimate a multivariable predictive model; the findings should therefore be interpreted as descriptive and comparative rather than predictive. Future research would benefit from broader data linkage, including forensic reports, child protection records, police files, and mental health records. Finally, the use of victim-based cases allowed comparison across incidents involving multiple victims, but may introduce statistical dependence when several victims belonged to the same event. Future studies with larger samples could consider event-based or multilevel sensitivity analyses.

4.3. Conclusion

This study advances the limited empirical evidence on filicide in Spain by systematically comparing adjudicated filicide cases with other child homicide cases. Filicide was distinguished above all by very young victims, greater presence of female offenders, older offender age, and higher levels of completion. Motivational patterns were heterogeneous, with violence and/or neglect and psychotic or mental pathology-related contexts being the most frequent, while revenge against the other parent represented a smaller subset of cases. These results support the understanding of filicide as both part of the broader continuum of lethal violence against children and a distinctive intrafamilial phenomenon with specific victim-offender dynamics. Prevention efforts should therefore address child maltreatment, mental health crises, domestic violence, social isolation, and caregiving breakdown, while remaining sensitive to the particular vulnerability of infants and young children. In Spain, the findings underscore the need for more integrated data systems, improved case identification, and coordinated child protection, mental health, and family violence responses.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Noemí Pereda: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Alba Marsol:** Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Laura Arantegui-Arráez:** Validation, Supervision, Investigation. **Josep M. Tamarit:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration, Investigation, Funding acquisition.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2026.108338>.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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