

PUBLIC ABANDONMENT OF NEWBORNS: POLICIES AND PRACTICES IN THE UNITED STATES AND AROUND THE WORLD

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Statistics suggest that the incidence of newborn abandonment is increasing. Is this the case, or has the increase in the amount of media coverage of such events given this perception? In actuality, the practice of abandoning newborns shortly after birth has always existed. Occurring in primitive and contemporary societies, this practice has varied motivations that are dependent upon the social norms of a specific geographic region at a given point in time (Rascovsky & Rogers, 1995). Although it is known that such practices exist, no official statistics have been maintained anywhere on the abandonment or murder of infants at or near the time of birth. In addition, no one has any idea of how many babies have faced this demise by being discarded and never found. The purpose of this article is to explore the historical and current practices of newborn abandonment throughout the world. Also, the formation of health policy, social programs, and the legislative process addressing this issue will be discussed.

Historical Background and Research

Economic factors are often cited as a contributing factor to this phenomenon and include poverty, population control, class structure, greed, profit, and exploitation of labor (Bloch, 1988). The low value of children and the cost of raising them have historically been the most common reasons given for legitimizing this practice. Political climate and ideologies or philosophies of racial and ethnic superiority also play a role in a woman's decision-making process when faced with an unwanted pregnancy and few options available to her in managing the situation (Rsoner & Markowitz, 1997; Green, 1999). Psychological disorders and mental instability also account for a portion of the incidents in which newborns are left in public places, disposed of in dumpsters and toilets, or occasionally mutilated or murdered (Bonnet, 1993; Long, 1993). Religious beliefs, both in ancient times and today, provide a moral basis for human action and shape the paradigm of what is acceptable behavior in a given society at a given point in time (Rascovsky & Rogers, 1995). Some religions practiced human sacrifice of infants while others forbid abortion and murder. Ritual sacrifice of infants and children was condoned by the ancient Egyptians as they sought to appease the Gods, slew male offspring of Jewish slaves, and entombed a live child with a dead parent to give that parent comfort and companionship as they passed from this world. The ancient Greeks and Romans had similar ritualistic practices and often left unwanted or deformed newborns on dung heaps, exposed to be devoured by wild animals or salvaged for slavery or prostitution (Burstein, 1981). In Japan and China, female newborns have historically been viewed as an economic hardship and disposed of, usually by drowning. This is a practice that quietly continues in China to this day.

Although reasons may vary, the abandonment of newborns and neonaticide continue in modern times. However, the diversity of situations and conditions under which newborn abandonment or homicide occurs makes it a very difficult topic to research and address. Relatively little data are available to assist health care professionals in the construction of a profile of the woman at risk

for committing this act. Therefore, it is difficult to predict when, where, how, or why abandonment will occur. Overpeck and colleagues (1998) summarized the primary risk factors for contemporary newborn abandonment and homicide as maternal in origin relating to age, education, postpartum psychosis, ambivalence towards the pregnancy, and emotional health. Specifically, they found that women most at risk for harming their newborns or young infants were 17 years of age or younger, having their second child, lacking adequate prenatal care, and having fewer than 12 years of education. Other researchers, who have found that women who abandon or murder their newborns are single, young, and living in difficult circumstances, support these findings (McKee & Shea, 1998; Winpisinger, Hopkins, Indian, & Hostetler, 1991; Silverman & Kennedy, 1988; and Daly & Wilson, 1984).

Finnish researchers also found clear differences between women who committed neonaticide and those who killed an older child. The mothers who had murdered or attempted to murder their newborns were young, unmarried, dependent upon their family of origin (not a spouse or same age partner), likely to conceal the pregnancy, and showing fewer psychological problems than women who had harmed older children (Haapasalo & Petaja, 1999). However, psychologists, who have found the phenomenon to cut across all social, racial, and economic levels, contradict this view (Hurst, 2000). In a letter to the editor, West suggests that demographic conclusions are accompanied by blame and do not address the familial and societal issues involving both men and women that may contribute to contemporary practices of newborn abandonment and neonaticide throughout the world (West, 1999).

In a French study, 22 female subjects were interviewed between 1987 and 1989. Using a psychoanalytic methodology, an attempt was made to understand why women did not choose to take advantage of the French law permitting anonymous, cost free delivery and immediate placement of the infant for adoption as an alternative to newborn abandonment. The interviews revealed that the motives behind this choice stemmed from denial of the pregnancy and fantasies of violence toward the fetus resulting from psychological and sexual traumas experienced by the subjects during childhood. Therefore, these women seldom sought prenatal care and did not enter the health care system prior to the birth of the infant that was subsequently abandoned (Bonnet, 1993).

In China, the increase in infant abandonment and infanticide during the 1980s coincided directly with increased regulation and enforcement of birth planning by the Chinese government. A recent study, in which 629 families were surveyed, led to the generalization that it was the biological father in his late 20s to late 30s, who was of average education and income, that most often made the decision to abandon the newborn female offspring. Birth mothers frequently expressed emotional pain and remorse for the act, but had no recourse or other options in the patriarchal society in which they live (Johnson, Huan, & Wang, 1998).

Other countries throughout the world are experiencing this resurgence of women voluntarily choosing to abandon their newborn infants. In Belgium, economic reasons appear to be the driving force (Kelly, 2000). High levels of poverty, family breakdown, and infection from HIV/AIDS have led to a growing problem of abandoned babies in South Africa. Many women die,

PUBLIC ABANDONMENT OF NEWBORNS

others are afraid that they will not be able to cope with child-rearing because they are ill, and some infants are rejected because they are infected with the HIV virus (United Nations Foundation, 1999).

The modern-day practice of newborn abandonment seems to be gaining popularity in the United States as well. The phenomenon in this geographical area appears to be linked to social and health policy issues and is less dependent on economic conditions. Although statistics regarding this phenomenon are difficult to obtain, 1998 records indicate that 105 newborns were found abandoned in public places (trash bins, restrooms, churches, fields, and by deserted roadsides); 33 of them were dead. In 1999, the recorded figure increased to 724 babies who were abandoned in the United States (ABC News, 2000; Williams, 2000).

In Britain, at least twenty women commit neonaticide every year and countless others abandon their newly born infants (BBC, 1998). These women are usually young and described as the “good girls in a very difficult, chaotic, or dysfunctional family.” They do not tell anyone and they are quite effective in suppressing physical evidence of the pregnancy. It is believed that not telling anyone about the pregnancy allows the woman to deny the reality and detach herself from the stress and the anxiety of the situation. The BBC report cited Dr. Clare Gerada, who works with teen mothers at the Hurley Clinic in London. It is her belief that sex education and breaking the silence of concealed pregnancies are essential components of an effective strategy to stop the rash of newborn abandonments.

Global Practices, Policies, and Programs

A wide variety of approaches are being implemented around the world to address newborn abandonment. The available but limited literature regarding newborn abandonment classifies newly introduced or proposed interventions into six broad categories. These include the enactment of “Safe Haven” laws, establishment of “Baby Drops,” adoption at birth, widespread implementation of family planning programs, government mandates on family fertility, and community efforts to address local needs.

The establishment of “Baby Drops” is gaining popularity in a number of countries. Most widely publicized are the programs in Germany and South Africa. In Germany, Social Services Offices have installed chutes referred to as “baby drops.” The project, dubbed “Operation Foundling,” allows the mother to place her newborn through a door onto a warmed bed. An alarm is then sounded, summoning a nurse to care for the infant. No attempt is made to identify the person dropping off the infant. If the infant is not reclaimed in two months, the baby is placed for adoption (ABC News, 2000). China and Russia also allow anonymous relinquishment of newborns.

In Johannesburg, South Africa, the Baptist Church operates a similar program, entitled “The Door of Hope.” Recently revived to prevent the death of abandoned babies, a revolving crib allows the baby to be brought inside while preserving the privacy of the person or persons who put the child in the crib. Since the inception of this safe haven program, an average of one baby per month has been deposited in a large mail slot cut in the door of the church. The goal of the program is to reduce the high number of infants found dead each year in the garbage or exposed outside (Reber, 2000).

France has implemented an “adoption at birth” approach to newborn abandonment. This country has a well-documented and rich history of caring for abandoned infants that reflects changing sociological views over time and dates back to ancient eras in the Mediterranean Basin. Currently, French law permits anonymous and cost-free delivery for women choosing to voluntarily relinquish their newborns at the time of birth. In 1966, a law was passed that clearly stipulated, for the benefit of the child, that this situation irrevocably breaks the link with the birth family and allows putting the child into the hands of adoptive parents (Bonnet, 1993). And ever since the 1940s, women who give birth in Italian hospitals can walk away from their newborns with no questions asked (ABC News, 2000).

The widespread implementation of family planning programs and the imposition of government mandates on family fertility are most commonly found in developing countries in Africa, India, and China. In an attempt to reduce the number of unwanted pregnancies and subsequently unwanted newborns, culturally sensitive government programs offer contraceptive, abortion, and sterilization procedures at very reduced or no cost to citizens. However, government-mandated birth planning policies, such as those found in China, may actually accentuate the problem of newborn abandonment instead of reduce it (Johnson, 1996). During the 1970s, restrictive birth planning was implemented to address the country’s growing problem of overpopulation. Following the passage of this mandate, newborn abandonment, neonaticide, and the problem of “missing girls” continued to rise during the 1980s (Zeng, 1993; Johansson & Nygren, 1991). That is, whenever a nation exhibits sex ratios that differ significantly from the norm of the number of girls being approximately equal to that of boys at one year of age, there is reason to suspect neonaticide (Meyer & Oberman, 2001).

Practices, Policies, and Programs in the United States

Enactment of “Safe Haven” laws appears to be the method of choice to address this problem in the United States (Chagnon, 2001; Sussman, 2000). Although no federal legislation addresses newborn abandonment, the majority of the states now have some form of a “Safe Haven” law (Bernstein, 2001). Adding to the confusion, each state law is different from others. Depending on the state, “newborn” is defined as a baby ranging from three days of age (Michigan) up to 30 days old (Texas). In addition, some states specify that the baby must be taken to a fire station and some say the baby needs to be taken to a hospital. And finally, some states offer complete anonymity and immunity from prosecution while others only offer an affirmative defense for the birth mother.

In response to thirteen newborn abandonments in a 10-month period of time in the Houston area, Texas was the first state to sign such a bill into law on September 1, 1999 (Unruh, 2000). Within two years, legislators from 48 of the 50 United States had introduced approximately 60 bills modeled after the Texas law. Thirty-five states have laws in place to address the issue of newborn abandonment. A list of these states can be found in Table 1. Thirteen other states have introduced safe haven legislation that has not yet been enacted into law. The legislation in these states, listed in Table 2, has failed or is currently pending. Only the District of Columbia and two other states (Vermont and Wyoming) have not addressed this issue (see Table 3).

cont’d on page 26

In the federal legislature, the House of Representatives unanimously passed a resolution designed to focus attention and raise awareness of the public abandonment of newborns. The resolution urges local, state, and federal governments to collect more detailed abandonment statistics (Dailard, 2000; Lash, 2000).

Another intervention taking place in the United States is the effort by individual communities to address local needs associated with the public abandonment of newborns. Under this broad category, a number of very different needs have been identified and efforts made to address them. These diverse programs have unique missions that range from providing safe drop-off locations (not government designated) or enhancing community awareness and resources, to providing burial arrangements for newborns who were left alone to die (Cesario, 2001).

Project Cuddle, founded by Debbe Magnusen in California, began as a project to equip police vehicles with soft toys in order to mitigate the emotional trauma to children who may be taken into protective custody by local law enforcement personnel. Since its inception, Project Cuddle has developed several other programs and events to aid children, such as The Baby Rescue Program. This branch of Project Cuddle began offering a 24-hour hotline for women contemplating abandoning their infants in 1996. The agency claims to have prevented over 200 newborn abandonments or neonaticides.

Also, on the West Coast of the United States, Debi Faris tackled the problem of newborn abandonment in a different way. She initiated a program that is not one of prevention, but of dealing with the worst outcomes of newborn abandonment. In May of 1996, Faris began tending her "Garden of Angels," a quiet, private cemetery where she has since buried approximately 50 abandoned babies. The babies are given a first name and a funeral ceremony is performed. It has become her mission to provide these brief lives with a finale other than anonymous cremation or mass burial, the fate that the majority of abandoned newborns face. Timothy Jaccard, president of "Hope Foundation Infant Burial, Inc.," offers a similar service in the New York City area, where he has provided graves for more than 30 infants.

In Pennsylvania, Gigi Kelly, a nurse and a mother, established a community program called "Baskets for Babies." When a newborn baby boy was left in a trash bag behind her church, Kelly found an old laundry basket, lined it with a warm blanket and put it on her front porch. Then she called reporters with a plea for young mothers to bring their babies to her. Although nobody has taken her up on her offer, her actions have evolved into a public awareness campaign for desperate women. Today, over 600 local families leave their porch lights on and have their baskets ready to receive any unwanted newborn (Roche, 2000).

"Safe Places for Newborns," a program under the leadership of the Rev. Andrew Cozzens of Minnesota, began when parishioners of the Cathedral of St. Paul persuaded local hospitals to allow women to anonymously drop off their newborns, no questions asked. They also convinced local district attorneys to not prosecute women for abandoning their babies. This program was the basis for the recently passed Minnesota law governing this issue. "Safe Places for Newborns" spread to other states such as Alabama and spurred legislation in those states as well.

Final Thoughts

Based on current societal norms, newborn abandonment and neonaticide are no longer considered acceptable practices. Health care providers play a vital role in addressing this issue and have the potential to impact the lives of thousands of women and newborns worldwide. Developing strategies to care for mothers who chose to manage their pregnancies and deliveries in secret is a very difficult undertaking. It is not unusual for babies delivered by mothers without assistance to develop various kinds of distress. We do not live in a society where women are prepared to deliver by themselves and provide adequate care for their newborns. For these reasons, the health policies, social programs, and governmental laws discussed in this article were created to save lives. They are designed to encourage women in stressful childbirth situations to seek care from a health facility where there are trained professionals present to stabilize and transport those in need of immediate medical attention (Romboy, 2001). Health care workers as well as individuals working in the areas of criminology, psychology, sociology, and social policy development all play a major role in carrying out the newly implemented programs and policies. The enactment of rudimentary legislation does not provide an end to the issues of newborn abandonment and neonaticide—it is merely a beginning. Thus, continued interdisciplinary strategizing and general awareness are needed to serve as catalysts to build supports for pregnant women and unwanted newborns.

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Table 1: Legislative Efforts in the United States – States With Safe Haven Laws in Place

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| <p>AL /Alabama...Hall, Pruitt, Brooks - HB115 http://www.legislature.state.al.us/SearchableInstruments/Enrolled%20Acts/2000%20Regular%20Session/</p> <p>AZ /Arizona...Brimhall, Gray, Solomon - HB2001, SB 1076 www.azleg.state.az.us/legtext/45leg/lr/bills/hb2001/txt</p> <p>AR /Arkansas...Bledsoe, Minton - HB1070 http://www.arkleg.state.ar.us/</p> <p>CA /California...Brulte, Maddox - HB/SB 1368 www.leginfo.ca.gov/pub/99-00/bills/sb_1351-1400/sb_1368_bill20001006_status.htm</p> <p>CO /Colorado...Tanner - SB171 http://www.state.co.us/dleg/html</p> <p>CT /Connecticut...Lopez, Kirkley, Bey - HB 5023 www.cga.state.ct.us</p> <p>DE /Delaware...Maier - HB555 http://www.legis.state.de.us/billtracking</p> <p>FL /Florida...HB1901, SB2082 http://www.leg.state.fl.us/</p> <p>ID /Idaho...Health & Welfare Committee - SB1037 http://www3.state.id.us/oasis/S1037.html</p> <p>IL /Illinois...Trotter, Coulson, Scott, Karpel - SB1668, HB0632, SB0216 http://www.legis.state.il.us/script/stran.exe?LIBSINCWHB0632</p> <p>IN /Indiana...Wolf - SB330 http://www.state.in.us/ser/lisa_billinfo</p> <p>IA /Iowa...SSB1148 http://www.legis.state.ia.us/cgi-bin/Legislation/Bill.pl</p> <p>KS /Kansas...O'Conner - HB2838 http://www.accesskansas.org/legislative/</p> <p>LA /Louisiana...Clover, Perkins, Foster - HB223 http://www.legis.state.la.us/home.htm</p> <p>MI /Michigan...Birkholz, Johnson, et al - HB5543, SB1052, 1053, 1187 http://michiganlegislature.org/txt.house.analysis.legis/1999-2000/H9h5543a.htm</p> <p>MN /Minnesota...deFiebre, Foley - HF3008, SF2615 http://www.leg.state.mn.us/leg/legis.htm</p> | <p>MS /Mississippi...Taylor - HB169 http://billstatus.ls.state.ms.us/2001/html/history/HB/HB0169.htm#history</p> <p>MT /Montana...Halligan - SB132 http://data.opi.state.mt.us/bills/2001/billhtml/SB0132.htm</p> <p>NV /Nevada...Rawson - SB191 http://www.leg.state.nv.us/Bills/Bills.htm</p> <p>NJ /New Jersey...Collins, Vandervalk - A6 http://www.njleg.state.nj.us/</p> <p>NM /New Mexico...Jennings, Aragon, Gubbels - HB251, SB94, 366 http://legis.state.nm.us/billfinder.asp</p> <p>NY /New York...Jaccard - S6688, Assembly Bill 8808 http://assembly.state.ny.us/</p> <p>NC /North Carolina...Haire - HB1616, SB1257 http://www.nega.state.nc.us/</p> <p>ND /North Dakota...Human Services Committee - SB2129 http://www.state.nd.us/lr/homepic.html</p> <p>OH /Ohio...Winker - HB660 http://www.legislature.state.oh.us/search.cfm</p> <p>OK /Oklahoma...Winchester, Cain - HB2148, 1122, SB1577 http://www2.lsb.state.ok.us/2001-02HB/HB1122_enr.rf</p> <p>OR /Oregon...Wirth - HB3402 http://www.leg.state.or.us/billsset.htm</p> <p>RI /Rhode Island...Graziano, Giannini - S0094, HB5131 http://www.rilin.state.ri.us/BillText01/SenateText01/s0094.htm</p> <p>SC /South Carolina...Smith - GB4743 http://www.lpitir.state.sc.us/bil99-00/4743.htm</p> <p>SD /South Dakota...Ham, Albers, Bogue, et al - SB92 http://legis.state.sd.us/index.cfm</p> <p>TN /Tennessee...McAfee, Maddox, Harper - HB3112 http://www.legislature.state.tn.us/bills</p> <p>TX /Texas...Morrison, Richardson - HB3423 http://www.capitol.state.tx.us/dl/billsrch/search.htm</p> <p>UT /Utah...Arent http://www.le.state.ut.us/~2000/2000.htm</p> <p>WV /West Virginia...Hatfield - GB4300 http://129.71.161.247/Bill_Status/bstat_intro.html</p> <p>WI /Wisconsin...Bill 54 http://www.legis.state.wi.us/</p> |
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List of Helpful Websites

- U. S. News Online, Policies to Stop Moms from Abandoning Babies
<http://www.usnews.com/usnews/issue/000228/abandon.htm>
- Project Cuddle, California, USA
<http://www.projectcuddle.org>
- "Safe Haven" Program Johannesburg, South Africa
<http://fifamerica.faithweb.com/ARTICLES/1999DECEMBER/Art16.htm>
- OASIS: A Haven for Women and Children, New York City, USA
http://www.oxygen.com/pureoxygen/tvcontent/pureOX_tvcontent25.html
- Arizona Republic: Help for Desperate Mothers
<http://www.azcentral.com/opinions/kidsedit3.shtml>
- Safe Place for Newborns, Alabama, USA
<http://www.helpline-ir.org/h1341.htm>
- Baby Moses Project, Texas, USA
<http://www.babymoses.org>
- Child Welfare League of America
<http://www.cwla.org/programs/baby/>
- BBC Broadcast Neonatacide
<http://www.bbc.co.uk.qed/neo.shtml>
- CNN, Brussels Bureau, Antwerp, Belgium, the charity Mothers for Mothers (Moeders voor Moeders)
<http://europe.cnn.com/2000/WORLD/europe/10/26/belgium.mothers/>
- CNN, Hamburg, Germany
<http://europe.cnn.com/2000/WORLD/03/09/germany.baby/index.html>

Table 2: Legislative Efforts in the United States – Safe Haven Laws Introduced, Pending, or Failed

| | | |
|---------------------|--------------|--------------|
| AK ...Alaska | Croft, Guess | HB29 |
| GA ...Georgia | Smith | HB1292 |
| HI ...Hawaii | | HB108, SB139 |
| KY ...Kentucky | Bafford | HB546, SB188 |
| ME ...Maine | Kilkelly | LD1670 |
| MD ...Maryland | Rudolph | HB3423, 312 |
| MA ...Massachusetts | | |
| MO...Missouri | Gibbons | HB2134 |
| NE ...Nebraska | Brashear | LR391 |
| NH ...New Hampshire | Clegg | HB289 |
| PA ...Pennsylvania | | HB23212322 |
| VA ...Virginia | | |
| WA ...Washington | Kohl-Weiles | HB1134 |

Table 3: Legislative Efforts in the United States States That Have Not Addressed Newborn Abandonment

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|----|----------------------|
| DC | District of Columbia |
| VT | Vermont |
| WY | Wyoming |

