

## Fatal risk in family break-ups

Patrick Parkinson

THE tragic deaths of five-year-old Kyla Rogers, her mother Tania and her partner in the past 48 hours brings to mind the agonising stories of many other murders and murder-suicides that have occurred after couples have separated.

When young children are murdered, the sense of grief and shock is particularly intense, but we should grieve equally whenever a mother loses her life at the hands of a former partner.

Separating from a partner can be a dangerous time for women.

In many of these homicides, there has been a history of domestic violence before the separation, but this is not always the case.

In one British study, for example, 41 per cent of the murders of partners did not appear to involve previous violence towards the victim.

A family break-up can release feelings of anger, betrayal, jealousy and revenge of such passionate intensity that people are capable of doing things that are entirely out of character.

Family break-ups can lead to severe depression and feelings of abandonment that can trigger violent responses.

It is understandable that when these tragedies occur, people ask what more could be done to prevent them.

In some cases, the answer may be very little.

All states and territories have laws allowing people who fear violence from a former partner to obtain a restraining order. However, having a court order in place will not deter someone intent on murder.

The family law system also provides an opportunity for steps to be taken that might reduce the risk of violence.

Professor Richard Chisholm, a former Family Court judge, recommended in a report to the Federal Government that, in each case coming into the family courts, there should be a risk assessment made.

The Family Law Council has also recommended there should be a federal Child Protection Service to investigate concerns about children's safety when there is no other assessment available from the child protection authorities, police or hospitals.

There is little doubt courts could make better decisions about what parenting arrangements are appropriate in these cases if they had better information, but that requires allocating more resources to investigation and risk assessment early in a case.

Above all, we need to look at the services that could help desperate, depressed and angry people cope with the trauma of family breakdown.

We rely too much on courts to have the answers and focus too much on changes to legislation to solve the problems.

The network of Family Relationship Centres that have been established across the country since 2006 offers one means for separating parents to get help early and quickly after separation.

Better funding of mental health services is also welcome and we need to maintain efforts to reduce domestic violence.

Above all, we need to try to stem the appalling tide of family breakdown, by helping people to have healthier, safer relationships.

Prevention of all kinds is better than having to discover the body of a five-year-old girl in the back of a car, murdered by her father.

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