

Fetal abduction: brutal attacks against expectant mothers on the rise in US

Joanna Walters in New York, The Guardian

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Experts fear easy access to news and information online has contributed to rise of the crime, in which perpetrators seek to claim others' fetuses as their own



Ashleigh Wade liked to refer to herself on Facebook as her boyfriend's "pregnant girlfriend". The couple posted sonogram images, boasting of their forthcoming baby girl, and had set up a registry for friends to buy them baby gifts.

Wade, 22, had recently reconnected with a childhood friend in New York, Angelikque Sutton. Sutton was pregnant, too, and expecting a girl imminently, around the same time as Wade was understood to be due.

But last month, Sutton, also 22, who was about to marry her long-term boyfriend and the father of their unborn child, died a bloody death in her Bronx apartment, stabbed and cut open, with the baby ripped from her abdomen. Police found the placenta and a knife on the floor inside the apartment and Wade outside, screaming that the baby was hers.

Wade has now been charged with murder and is being held in a hospital psychiatric ward, accused of faking her pregnancy and attacking Sutton in order to steal the baby. Wade appears to have fooled her boyfriend into believing she was expecting his baby. Her sonogram was probably a generic image easily downloaded from the internet.

Miraculously, the baby girl survived and is recovering in hospital.

Detectives are still investigating, and Wade has reportedly told police she acted in self-defense, then saved Sutton's baby.

But the event has all the hallmarks of the brutal and desperate crime of fetal abduction, which, while extremely rare, is on the rise in the US.

Also known as caesarean kidnapping, it occurs when a woman desires a child so badly she is prepared to attack a mother-to-be and cut the baby from her womb, then try to pass it off as her own.

Experts have recorded 14 cases in the US in the last decade, as well as others around the world.

"This is the most extreme end of the crime of infant abduction, where more usually a woman tries to steal a newborn baby from a hospital or from the new mother in her home or out in public," said Cathy Nahirny, senior analyst on infant abduction for the Washington-based National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. "Occasionally, she will resort to this gruesome and horrific act of violence."



The center monitors the crime and has recorded 302 cases of infant abduction in the United States since 1983, of which 18 cases – or 6% – were fetal abductions.

With 4m births annually in the US, fetal abduction is indeed very rare, but so macabre that each case draws considerable attention.

There are no official statistics, for the US or worldwide, but Nahirny said the crime is not limited to this country. There are recorded cases from many countries across Europe, Asia, South America and Australia.

In the US, at least, it is revealed to be a small but growing trend – influenced, Nahirny fears, by easy access to news and online information.

“There has been a rise. There is lots of information available and, whereas in the old days you might have to steal another woman’s sonogram image from her, now you can just download one from the internet,” she said.

Websites such as Facebook and Craigslist feature in many of the cases, and in one case a woman briefed herself on how to conduct a caesarean by watching the Discovery Channel.

Of the 18 US fetal abductions documented by the national center, four occurred in the two decades between 1983 and 2003. But there have been 14 cases since 2003 in addition to four foiled attempts.

Almost all the mothers-to-be did not survive being mutilated, while a slight majority of the babies have lived despite the ad hoc nature of the caesarean.

Ashleigh Wade's case is the second this year.

An established pattern

Every fetal abduction case has unique details, but there are also some clear patterns, experts said.

The perpetrators, sometimes derisively dubbed "womb raiders", almost always fake their own pregnancy. Then, they target a friend, co-worker or neighbor, or befriend a pregnant stranger online – sometimes several – and make plans to steal a full-term fetus. They have usually lost a baby of their own at some point and may be unable to have another, but often desperately want to produce a baby in order to keep a boyfriend or husband in the relationship.

Theresa Porter, a Connecticut state forensic psychologist who specializes in female violence, scotched the notion that the prime motive is an obsessive desire for motherhood.

"This is not the maternal urge run amok," she said. The perpetrators are driven more by narcissism and grandiose delusions than an obsession to nurture, she said.

"There's no evidence they bond with the babies they snatch. These women are often extreme con artists. They are psychologically impaired but the majority are not psychotic," she said.

Porter added that if the abductions were driven primarily by maternal obsession, then infertility would prompt thousands of perpetrators, which does not happen.

Nahirny explained that the women tend to be compulsive and manipulative and are principally seeking power, control and attention from those around them. And they crave the cherished status of pregnancy or new motherhood, one of the most potent tools a woman has, to try to achieve that.

"The attacker presents herself to others as pregnant. And nine times out of 10, she is desperate to hold on to her man in a relationship that may be crumbling, so by producing a baby that he thinks is his, she will have some control over him – it's a power play," she said.

The attackers often offer baby clothes, either directly to the mothers-to-be they are targeting or for sale.

In March 2015 Michelle Wilkins, 26, went to a house in Longmont, Colorado, to meet Dynel Lane, who was selling baby clothes via Craigslist.

As Wilkins went to leave with her bag of clothes, the Boulder County district attorney's office alleges, Lane grabbed her and the two women got into a fierce struggle, during which Dynel tried to smother her and then knocked her unconscious with a lamp.

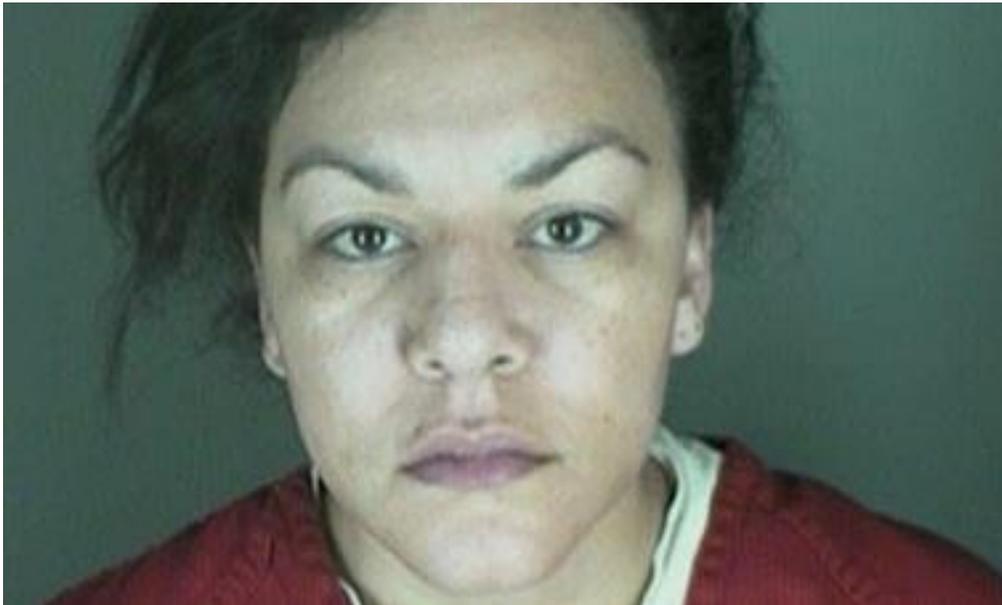
When Wilkins came to, she was bleeding profusely from her abdomen. After she was taken to the hospital, she discovered that Lane had already gone there with the baby, but it was dead.

Lane, 35, has denied attempted murder, first degree unlawful termination of a pregnancy and multiple counts of assault and is due to stand trial in 2016.

It has emerged that Lane had a toddler who drowned in a pond in her backyard in 2002.

After the horrific event in March 2015, it turned out that someone had voiced suspicion about Lane online two months earlier, but in vain.

Without naming Lane at the time, a Colorado woman posted on a Facebook breastfeeding group page in January that the wife of a friend of her fiance was pregnant but refused to visit the doctor – and her baby had been due in November, but it was now mid-January “and still no baby”.



A photo provided by the Longmont police department shows Dynel Lane. Photograph: AP

A doula based in Denver, Elizabeth Petrucelli, saw the post and responded online that this was “a red flag”.

“My concern would be for any pregnant woman being around her because if she is desperate, she may do the unmentionable and harm the mother and take the baby,” she wrote.

Petrucelli had worked in hospital security before becoming a doula and knew the measures healthcare facilities routinely take because of the known risk of women trying to steal newborns.

“She may be attempting to find someone whom she can get a baby from in order to present this to her husband,” Petrucelli further wrote in her January post.

After Wilkins was allegedly assaulted by Lane in March – brutally eviscerated – the original woman who had posted her concern online wrote that the “supposedly pregnant” woman she had referred to in January “is in the news now”.

Petrucelli told the Guardian she had felt awful ever since.

“I feel guilt. I wish I had followed up. Why didn’t someone intervene? There were lots of signs to suggest something wasn’t right with that situation. There are always warning signs in these cases,” she said.

Petrucelli advises pregnant women not to be overly alarmed but to be educated about the tiny but real risk of fetal abduction, she said. “You need to be more careful about who you interact with, who you are alone with. If someone says they are pregnant, ask some questions.”

She warned pregnant women against old friends who had lost touch, or acquaintances who suddenly become “your best friend” when they find out you are expecting.

Nahirny said the attackers are often manipulative and compulsive. They may be sociopathic and regard the mother-to-be as simply a “vessel”.

The abductors’ defense teams often argue for a verdict of not guilty by reason of insanity – but they rarely succeed.

Meanwhile, the silver lining to the violent deaths of the mothers-to-be are the infants who survive.

Sam Evans’s daughter Debra was killed via fetal abduction just before Thanksgiving in 1995, near Chicago, in a savage attack in which the abductor had two male accomplices and also murdered two of the woman’s three children.

But the baby boy who was snatched from his mother’s womb, Eli Evans, turned 20 this year and is now at community college, having been raised, along with his surviving brother, by Sam.

“It’s not peaches and cream every day, but Eli’s doing fine. It’s still very emotional for me, and him sometimes,” Sam Evans, 67, of Lawrenceville, Illinois, said.

Eli was an avid footballer as a teenager “and he would always kiss his hand and raise it to the sky when he ran on the field, as if to his mother who he felt was watching,” Evans said.

He said Eli and his brother Jordan felt a void growing up and the family was racked with anger and grief.

“There were times they wanted revenge, but they know that’s not the answer,” he said.

Sam is haunted by the fact that he and Debra had had a falling out but had forgiven each other over the phone and were planning to reconcile in person. Then she was murdered.

“I just wanted to hug her and I lost out on that,” he said.

Recent fetal abduction cases:

Oklahoma, 2003: Effie Goodson, 37, promised to give pregnant co-worker Carolyn Simpson, 21, baby clothes. When Goodson went to hospital with a dead fetus, claiming a stillbirth, doctors discovered it wasn't her baby. Simpson was found in a field, shot and her abdomen slashed with a razor. Goodson admitted double murder. She is serving life without parole.

Missouri, 2004: Lisa Montgomery, 36, met Bobbie Jo Stinnett, 23, at a dog show. They corresponded online. Montgomery traveled to Stinnett's home, ostensibly to buy a dog, but strangled the struggling woman and cut out her baby with a kitchen knife, then fled with it. Stinnett's mother told authorities it looked as though her "stomach had exploded". Baby Victoria Jo Stinnett survived. Montgomery was convicted of murder and is on federal death row.

Kentucky, 2005: Katie Smith, 22, convinced friends and family she was pregnant, then lured Sarah Brady, 26, to her house, saying she had packages from her baby registry mistakenly sent to her. Smith pulled a knife and a fierce fight ensued until Brady grabbed the knife and stabbed her attacker dead and called the police. The killing was ruled self-defense.

Pennsylvania, 2005: Peggy Jo Conner, 38, clubbed her neighbor Valerie Oskin, 30, over the head and drove her to some remote woods, where she tried to cut out her fetus with a razor, along an old caesarean scar. But the women were discovered and Oskin and her baby survived. Police found a bassinet, baby swing and other baby paraphernalia in Conner's trailer, even though she was not pregnant. Conner was sentenced to 22 to 50 years in prison, recently reduced to 12.5 to 31 years.

Illinois, 2006: Tiffany Hall, 24, attacked her childhood friend, Jimella Tunstall, 23, and cut her with scissors to snatch her unborn child. She also killed Tunstall's three young children, stuffing them into a washer-dryer. Tunstall bled to death after being knocked unconscious. The fetus died. Hall pleaded guilty in a deal to avoid execution and is serving life without parole.

Missouri, 2007: Lauren Gash, 20, and Alisa Betts, 18, found pregnant victim Amanda Howard on MySpace and promised to donate baby clothes to her. In a motel meeting, the two bound and gagged Howard, but Betts got cold feet and their fetal abduction plan fell apart. Gash was sentenced to eight years in prison, Betts to six years' probation. Howard successfully gave birth.

Washington state, 2008: Phiengchai Sisouvanh Synhavong, 23, also used a ruse of offering baby clothes to a pregnant woman she met at a bus stop. She invited Araceli Camacho Gomez, 27, into her car, where she stabbed her multiple times, ripped her fetus from her

womb and dumped her body in a park. Baby Salvador Gomez survived. Sisouvanh Synhavong is serving life without parole.

Pennsylvania, 2008: Serial infant abductor Andrea Curry-Demus, 40, killed Kia Johnson, 18, after befriending her when they were both visiting inmates at the Allegheny County jail. Johnson died of blood loss and suffocation after Curry-Demus trussed her up and cut her baby from her. Baby Terrell Kian Johnson survived. Curry-Demus was ruled guilty but mentally ill and given a life sentence. She had stabbed a woman and tried to steal her fetus and had kidnapped a newborn in the early 1990s.

Oregon, 2009: Korena Roberts, 29, pretended she was pregnant with twins, then used Craigslist to lure Heather Snively, 21, to her house, where she beat her unconscious in the bath and removed her fetus. Roberts had unsuccessfully tried to connect with other pregnant women online. Roberts's boyfriend came home to find the woman sobbing and clutching the dead baby. She admitted murder and is serving life without parole.

Massachusetts, 2009: When Julie Corey, 35, was arrested at a homeless shelter with a newborn baby that was not her own, it transpired that she had strangled and mutilated her friend Darlene Haynes and put her body in a closet. Corey had suffered her own miscarriage three months earlier. Baby Sheila Marie Haynes survived. Corey was found guilty and is serving life without parole.

Maryland, 2009: Teka Adams, 29, made a desperate escape with her intestines and placenta exposed after Veronica Deramous, 40, whom she met at a homeless shelter, held her captive for five days and tried to rip her baby out of her using a razor and box cutters. Deramous, who had told her boyfriend she was pregnant, admitted assault and is serving 25 years in prison. Adams survived and her baby, Miracle Sky, was born safely.

Louisiana, 2011: Pamela Causey-Fregia, 32, allegedly tried to persuade her husband, who had left her, to return by claiming she was pregnant and sending him fake sonogram images. Then she went to a hospital looking for a baby, found heavily pregnant Victoria Marie Perez, 22, and lured her to an apartment with the promise of baby clothes, the authorities say, before killing her. The baby also died. Perez's missing person case was not solved until 2015, when her buried remains were found. Causey-Fregia is charged with murder and other counts and the case continues.

Wisconsin, 2011: Annette Morales-Rodriguez, 33, had three children but desperately wanted a fourth with her new boyfriend. After two miscarriages she stalked pregnant Martiza Ramirez-Cruz, 23, on the street and offered her a ride. Morales-Rodriguez beat the younger woman with a baseball bat and choked her, then performed a caesarean section as "she had seen on the Discovery Channel". The baby died. Morales-Rodriguez was sentenced to life without parole.

Kentucky, 2011: Jamie Stice got to know Kathy Coy on Facebook, but when they met in person "to go shopping for baby supplies", Coy lured pregnant Stice, 21, to the woods where she used a stun gun on her, cut her wrists and tied her hands behind her before

cutting out her baby, together with her reproductive organs. Stice died from her injuries. Coy, 34, was arrested when she went to a hospital with the baby. Baby Isaiah Reynolds survived and was returned to his family. Coy pleaded guilty but mentally ill and is serving life without parole.

Colorado, 2015: Dynel Lane is due to stand trial accused of attacking Michelle Wilkins and abducting her fetus, which died (see main article).

New York, 2015: Ashleigh Wade has been accused of killing Angelikque Sutton for her baby. Baby Genesis survived and is being cared for in hospital.

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