

Was SIDS the cause of infant deaths even 150 years ago?

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Nineteenth century infant deaths attributed to smothering and overlaying, by either a co-sleeper or bedding, were in all likelihood crib deaths, or Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS). These deaths would have been mislabeled by lawmakers as neglect and even infanticide, because SIDS had not yet been identified, according to Dr. Ariane Kemkes, an independent researcher from Scottsdale, Arizona, USA. Her findings are published online this week in Springer's journal *Human Ecology*.

SIDS is the third most prominent cause of death among infants under a year old, accounting for 30-55 percent of [infant deaths](#) during their first year. Although the specific causes of SIDS remain largely unknown, the infant's age, gender, race, neonatal history and sleep environment are recognized risk factors. Historically, the unanticipated death of an apparently healthy baby during night-time sleep would have been rationalized as accidental smothering or overlaying. Lawmakers attributed smothering deaths to negligent caretakers and characterized infant-adult bedsharing practices as proof of parental incompetence.

Dr. Kemkes investigated whether 19th century infant deaths attributed to smothering or overlaying shared the same characteristics as known SIDS cases. She analyzed data from the U.S. Federal Mortality Schedule from the years 1850-1880. She found that, just like SIDS, smothering and overlaying deaths occurred primarily during the second to fourth month of the baby's life, were more likely in the late winter months and amongst boys, and there were more infant deaths among black babies.

The author concludes: "The study strongly supports the hypothesis that these infant deaths represent empirical evidence of 19th century SIDS mortality."

More information: Kemkes A (2009) "Smothered" infants - neglect, infanticide or SIDS? A fresh look at the 19th century mortality schedules. [Human Ecology](#) DOI 10.1007/s10745-009-9265-y

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