

# Halloween Sadism:

## The Evidence

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The practice of giving contaminated treats to children during trick-or-treating has been termed Halloween sadism (Trubo 1974). In 1985, I published an article that reviewed press coverage of Halloween sadism in four U.S. newspapers: the leading papers in the three largest metropolitan areas (New York Times, Los Angeles Times, and Chicago Tribune); as well as the Fresno Bee (at the time, I lived in Fresno, California). The article, co-authored with one of my undergraduate students, examined those papers for the period 1958-84 (Best and Horiuchi 1985). An updated version, covering the same four newspapers through 1989 appeared in my book, Threatened Children (Best 1990).

In reviewing the press coverage, I searched for reports which specified (a) where the incident had occurred, and (b) how the treat had been contaminated. Thus, a story reporting that a child in Boston had received a candy bar with a pin in it, would have counted as an incident. In reviewing these reports, a couple things stood out. First, there weren't all that many incidents reported. Although the belief in Halloween sadism is widespread, I don't think that media coverage can be blamed--there simply haven't been that many stories. (The media do, however, often warn parents about the risk of Halloween sadism. Lists of recommended precautions routinely advise parents to inspect their children's treats, in addition to making sure they can see through the eyeholes in their masks, etc.) Second, there were relatively few reports of children being injured by Halloween sadism; most of the reported incidents involved the discovery of a contaminated treat, but no injury. (This is confirmed by efforts to follow up on reports of Halloween sadism; researchers who have done this have concluded that a large proportion of these reports are hoaxes [Editor and Publisher 1973; National Confectioners Association et al. 1982].) In my own research, I have been unable to find a substantiated report of a child being killed or seriously injured by a contaminated treat

picked up in the course of trick-or-treating.

Since 1985, I have been interviewed by dozens of reporters from television, radio, magazines, and newspapers. They often ask whether I have updated my research. Therefore, I am posting both my original data, supplemented by my efforts to bring the research up to date. I also list all of the cases that have come to my attention in which children's deaths were initially attributed to Halloween sadism (in each of those cases, follow-up stories offered a different interpretation), and I am including a discussion of the medical literature's treatment of Halloween sadism.

A basic logical principle is that one cannot prove a negative. Therefore, I can never prove that no child has been killed by a Halloween sadist. I can simply note that such a death probably would be a major news story, yet I can't find any evidence of such a story being covered by major media.

Halloween sadism is best seen as a contemporary legend (sometimes called an urban legend) (Best and Horiuchi 1985, Grider 1984, Ellis 1994). That is, it is a story that is told as true, even though there may be little or no evidence that the events in the story ever occurred. Contemporary legends are ways we express anxiety. Note that concerns about Halloween tend to be particularly acute in years when some sort of terrible recent crime has heightened public fears. Thus, the September, 1982 reports of deaths due to poisoned Tylenol capsules led to many warnings about trick-or-treating's dangers in that year. Similarly, the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks were followed by legends warning against visiting malls on Halloween. Of course, many malls now offer "safe" trick-or-treating, and this legend may be seen as a way of expressing fears that Americans are no longer safe. (There are related legends in more recent years, that children have received cryptic, terrorist-related messages in their treats.)

## DEATHS ATTRIBUTED TO HALLOWEEN SADISM

1. *Kevin Totson* (Detroit, 1970). Five-year-old Kevin died after eating heroin supposedly hidden in his Halloween candy. Less heavily publicized was a follow-up story that Kevin had found the heroin in a relative's home.
2. *Timothy O'Bryan* (Pasadena, TX, 1974). Eight-year-old Timothy died after eating cyanide-laced Halloween candy. Later investigation revealed that he had received the candy from his father (who had taken out a life insurance policy on his son). The father was tried, convicted, and executed for the murder of his son.
3. *Patrick Wiederhold* (Flint, MI, 1978). Two-year-old Patrick died after eating Halloween treats. However, tests of tissue samples failed to find traces of drugs or poison, and police concluded that Patrick's death was from natural causes.

4. *Ariel Katz* (Santa Monica, CA, 1990). Seven-year-old Ariel collapsed while trick-or-treating and died. Although her parents told the authorities that she had heart problems, the initial press reports blamed Halloween sadism. The coroner attributed the death to an enlarged heart.
5. *Name Withheld* (Vancouver, British Columbia, 2001). A four-year-old girl died after eating some Halloween candy, leading police to advise parents to throw out all Halloween treats. However, pathology tests showed no evidence of poisoning, and the autopsy showed she died of a streptococcus infection.

#### WHAT DOES THE MEDICAL LITERATURE SHOW?

A recent medical overview argues that Halloween sadism is “quite rare and the risk may be exaggerated” (Weir 2000: 1046). I know of only two reports of foreign bodies having been ingested and the injury attributed to Halloween sadism; in one of these cases, a pin was swallowed nearly a week before Halloween; in the other, a 55-year-old man ingested a needle thought to have been in a caramel-covered apple. In other words, it seems unlikely that either incident was directly related to trick-or-treating (Conforti et al 1987; Bajwa 2003). In a third case, an adolescent entered a hospital on Halloween suffering from abdominal pain. He attributed this to a commercially wrapped cupcake that he had purchased at a gas station; however, he later acknowledged that he had overdosed on prescription medication (White et al. 2002). In other words, the medical literature does not offer any reports of children poisoned by treats they received while trick-or-treating.

Although many hospitals offer to X-ray Halloween treats, this practice is controversial among radiologists both because few foreign objects are found, and because some worry that the practice may induce a false sense of security, since X-rays cannot detect drugs or poisons (Calvanese 1986; Cappelle et al. 1993; Malott 1987).

The medical literature does offer evidence that Halloween is indeed a dangerous holiday. After all, it is a night when tens of millions of children are wandering through the streets. One study concluded that children’s risk of being struck by a car is four times higher on Halloween than on other nights (Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report 1997).

## REPORTED INCIDENTS OF HALLOWEEN SADISM BY YEAR

1958 – 0	1975 – 2	1992 – 1
1959 – 1	1976 – 2	1993 – 0
1960 – 0	1977 – 0	1994 – 0
1961 – 0	1978 – 1	1995 – 1
1962 – 1	1979 – 3	1996 – 1
1963 – 1	1980 – 0	1997 – 0
1964 – 3	1981 – 0	1998 – 2
1965 – 1	1982 – 12	1999 – 0
1966 – 5	1983 – 1	2000 – 2
1967 – 4	1984 – 0	2001 – 1
1968 – 3	1985 – 0	2002 – 0
1969 – 7	1986 – 1	2003 – 1
1970 – 10	1987 – 0	2004 – 0
1971 – 14	1988 – 1	2005 – 0
1972 – 1	1989 – 0	2006 – 0
1973 – 4	1990 – 1	2007 – 1
1974 – 1	1991 – 0	2008 -- 1

Methodological note: The numbers in this table are derived from slightly different sources (which reflect changes in the ways newspapers are indexed). For the period 1958-84, I searched the printed annual indexes for the New York Times, the “morgue” files of the Fresno Bee, and microfilmed copies of the Chicago Tribune and the Los Angeles Times for Nov. 1-3. Beginning in 1985, I was able to draw upon the LEXIS-NEXIS database. While it is impossible to devise a complete list of reported incidents, it should be evident that these reports are not very common.

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