

The Origins of Violent Crime: Psychological and Environmental Triggers

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Introduction

It's no secret that Americans, in particular, are obsessed with criminal documentaries, true crime television series and podcasts, and detective or murder mystery shows and movies. While it is fascinating on one hand to think that there are so many individuals obsessed with those who are violent, it does not come without the violence and consequence of actual victims. With that in mind, one begins to wonder what is the cause of these minds? What makes these murderous individuals so interesting that thousands of viewers are willing to stop tending to their own mental health just to tune in and learn about these notorious killers' psychological profiles?

No two crimes are the same; each has different details, motivations, and thoughts behind it. According to the FBI, violent crime is any offense involving force or the threat of force (*Violent Crime*, n.d.). Among industrialized nations, the United States (US) is the most violent country (Kostelny & Garbarino). This kind of crime is all around us, but its impact on us is varied. Society always focuses on what happened, but never truly why it happened or how one can lessen the amount of violent crimes being committed. Violent crime is influenced by a combination of psychological disorders, including Schizoid Personality Disorder, bipolar disorder, specific personality traits such as the Big Five, and environmental factors involving media, trauma, and abuse, all of which interact to shape aggressive behavior and increase the likelihood of criminal activity. Grasping these factors not only helps one understand the crime and the criminal better, but also how to use this knowledge to create prevention strategies for the future.

Understanding Violent Crime Through Psychology

The (*Violent Crime* | *National Institute of Justice*, n.d.) defines violent crime as any crime where “a victim is harmed by or threatened with violence; violent crimes include rape and sexual

assault, robbery, aggravated assault, and murder.” While this definition of a violent crime covers a wide variety of acts, the specifics of these acts are what deem them violent. According to (*FBI — Rape*, n.d.), rape is defined as penetration, no matter how slight, of the vagina or anus with any body part or object, or oral penetration by a sex organ of another person without consent of the victim; robbery is the taking or attempting to take anything of value from the care custody, or control of a person or persons by force or threat of force or violence and/or by putting the victim in fear (*FBI — Robbery*, n.d.); aggravated assault is an unlawful attack by one person upon another for the purpose of inflicting severe or aggravated bodily injury (*FBI — Aggravated Assault*, n.d.); murder is the willful killing of one human being by another (*FBI — Murder*, n.d.). Society and the victims of these crimes have to deal with the aftermath of physical and psychological trauma that can often be long-lasting. As stated by (*34 U.S. Code & 10651*), non-offenses are offenses that do not have as an element the use, attempted use, or threatened use of physical force against another person. The motivation for these crimes is often very different from the motivation for violent crimes committed. Motivation, not to be confused with Modus Operandi (MO), is psychological rather than a “drive” or goal-oriented behavior. (Mowat-Leger, V. 2001) stated, for violent offenders specifically, the motivation is often psychopathy and impulsivity.

In comparison, according to Douglas et al. (2006), MO is a set of learned behaviors that an offender develops and maintains; in other words, MO is the habits an offender demonstrates in their crimes. In a perfect world, there would be no crime, but that isn’t realistic, and a single factor doesn’t cause the crimes committed. Any crime, from a large-scale robbery to a petty crime such as trespassing, is too complex to be explained by just one cause. Motivation, cause, and intent vary greatly across different offenses. Čekić (2024) lists serial killers, the geographic

areas of their crimes, their psychological profiles, biographical data, motivations, behavioral patterns, and criminal patterns. Two examples are notorious serial killers Jeffrey Dahmer and John Wayne Gacy. They both committed murders of young men. Dahmer's MO was luring his victims to his house by promising them money or companionship. He had high emotional detachment and manipulation, and severe elements of sexual sadism, and wanted to gain control by manipulating and drugging his victims (Čekić, 2024, p.16). According to an article originally published in 1992 by the Chicago Tribune, Dahmer's lawyer expressed that Dahmer had been obsessed by homosexual fantasies, bone structures and organs in animals, and necrophilia (a desire to have sexual intercourse with a corpse). This had been happening since he was a young teenager, and ultimately, his necrophiliac desires pushed him to commit the crimes that he did (*Dahmer's grisly motivation is debated*, 2021).

Despite Gacy having the same MO in a broader perspective, his sadism wasn't sexual, and he had fantasies of having complete domination over his victims. As for his motivation, Dahmer's victims were predominantly queer boys of color, compared to Gacy's, who were predominantly white. Both killers had victims who were mostly teens to their early twenties or thirties. Gacy also had Antisocial personality disorder, whereas Dahmer had Borderline Personality Disorder and Schizotypal Personality Disorder (Čekić, 2024, p.16-17). During the trial, Gacy stood by the notion that he had multiple personalities: the policeman, a contractor, the clown, and another policeman called "Jack Hanley" or "Bad Jack" (Cahill & Ewing, 1986). This shows that there can be big commonalities among crimes, but once you look past the surface details, every crime is different.

Personality Traits and Violent Behavior

Personalities are relatively stable thoughts, emotional responses, and behaviors in a person over time and across numerous circumstances. The Big Five Personality traits are the idea that five main factors describe personality; every individual has these traits, but the levels at which they show up vary. The traits are neuroticism (tendency to experience negative emotions), agreeableness (the extent a person is trusting and helpful), conscientiousness (how careful and organized a person is), openness to experience (a person's willingness to try new things, embrace new ideas, and be imaginative), and extraversion (outgoing, sociable, assertive, and energized by social interaction) (Gazzaniga et al., 2013). As mentioned, all of these traits are present in each person, but the extent to which they exhibit them varies from person to person. According to (Kamaluddin et al., 2015, 1-5), high neuroticism, low agreeableness, and low conscientiousness are predictive of potential violent, criminal behavior, and aggression (an overt behavior carried out to intentionally harm another person who is motivated to avoid the harm) (Anderson & Bushman, 2002). That said, these traits link to form different, more advanced personality traits.

Tharshini et al. (2021) found a variety of connections between criminal behavior and psychopathy, difficult temperament, and self-control. Other cognitive abilities were correlated with persistence and low harm avoidance. Certain personality traits have a stronger connection with violent behavior, but this doesn't mean that having a higher level of a certain trait absolutely leads to violent behavior. (Gazzaniga et al., 2013) notes that physical aggression is more common among adolescents than among adults. Physical aggression is also associated with low levels of serotonin, a neurotransmitter that carries messages between nerve cells in your brain and the rest of your body (Cleveland Clinic, 2022), and frustration can lead to aggressive behavior. While aggression is not a personality disorder in itself, it is found to be a trait that shows up in certain disorders (Gazzaniga et al., 2013).

Personality Disorders and Criminal Behavior

Personality disorders are mental health conditions where people have chronic patterns of disruptive thinking, behavior, and mood relating to others. These disorders are maladaptive, meaning they affect an individual's ability to respond appropriately in situations (Gazzaniga et al., 2013). 10 recognized disorders differ in characteristics. These are different from basic personality traits, which are characteristics, a dispositional tendency to act in a certain way over time and across circumstances (Gazzaniga et al., 2013). Disorders are diagnosed using the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM); personality disorders fall under Axis II (Gazzaniga et al., 2013). The DSM provides detailed descriptions of mental health and brain-related conditions, along with the signs and symptoms, allowing health care professionals to make accurate diagnoses (*DSM-5: What it is & what it Diagnoses*, 2022). Psychiatrists and forensic psychologists evaluate criminals for the “presence, absence, or severity of a diagnosable mental condition”. This can be used to determine if they are competent enough to stand trial, if an “insanity defense” is possible, and the risk of reoffending (Miller, 2013).

Disorders often show up in criminals, especially violent offenders. Some of the most common are Narcissistic personality disorder (NPD); a mental health condition in which individuals have an inflated sense of self-importance and a lack of empathy for peers characterized by dramatic, emotional or erratic behavior; borderline personality disorder (BPD); long patterns of intense emotions, impulsiveness, and unstable relationships; antisocial personality disorder (ASPD); where an individual lacks regard for others and a disregard of right and wrong, and schizoid Personality Disorders (SZPD); a mental health condition characterized by an intense detachment from social relationships, and a restricted range of emotional

expression, characterized by odd or eccentric behavior. While these disorders have specific identifiable personality traits, it is not always easy to put the characteristics into a simple category and check the box. This means that, when it comes to understanding the why behind criminal and violent behavior, answers cannot be easily categorized. However, Nestor (2002) makes a case in his article “Mental Disorder and Violence: Personality Dimensions and Clinical Features,” that provides a closer look at how personality traits interact with personality disorders in violent offenders.

Nestor views violence as a symptom of a diagnosis and goes on to identify four traits that interact to elevate risk. The four traits that Nestor discusses are impulse control, affect regulation, threatened egotism or narcissism, and paranoid cognitive personality style. Impulse control refers to an unplanned reaction without regard to negative consequences; affect regulation is the ability to manage the range of intense and appropriate emotional responses; narcissism manifests in psychopathy as a grossly inflated sense of self-worth and entitlement; lastly, paranoid cognitive personality is the consistent attributional bias to view the world as hostile or threatening.

Keeping this in mind, Nestor goes on to explain that:

Poor emotional and behavioral regulation fuels violence in substance abuse and chronic psychosis, and specialized factors like threatened egotism and paranoid delusions are more critical for understanding aggression in personality disorders and schizophrenia. (2002, p.1973).

Thus, the conclusion becomes that these four fundamental personality traits are evident as an incitement of violence amongst these mental disorders. Nestor’s work suggests that a clinical risk assessment model that uses objective personality measures enables clinicians to move beyond broad stigma and identify treatable targets for violence prevention in the future. Therefore, this

establishment can then be applied to a study done by the *National Library of Medicine* on prisoners.

The *National Library of Medicine* completed a study of 228 prisoners that showed 87.3% of women and 83.3% of men had some personality disorder at the time of committing a crime. These disorders can lead to impulsive behavior and a complete disregard for the law and the consequences of potential actions. This behavior links back to one of Nestor's four personality traits: affect regulation. Affect regulation also encompasses emotional dysregulation and a lack of empathy, which can make these individuals potential criminals and offenders. *Cleveland Clinic* stated that emotional dysregulation is "having difficulty managing your emotions and the way you react to them." Thus, supporting Čekić's claim that psychological disorders were prevalent in serial killers.

For example, serial killer Aileen Wuornos was diagnosed with both borderline and antisocial personality disorders and had a psychopathic personality (Čekić, 2024, p. 15). Her crimes also carried elements of sexual motivation and gratification (Myers et al., 2005). She experienced extreme emotional impulsiveness and lacked regard for her victims, who were primarily her clients, allowing her to manipulate them easily.

Environmental and Developmental Factors

Many things can contribute to someone being involved in crime. How someone is raised and what they grow up around and doing can be a large part of their behavior. This argument touches similarities to the theory of "Nature versus Nurture" as explained by Huesmann and Kirwil: "One important environmental experience that contributes both to predisposing a person to behave more violently in the long run and to precipitating violent behavior in the short run is exposure to violence" (p.545). So, whether or not the exposure to violence is long-lasting, it is

still enough to support the meditation of committing violent acts or criminal behavior. Moreover, this exposure to violence can come in different forms, abuse being one of the most prominent.

As defined by the FBI (definitions, n.d.), abuse is a pattern of behavior involving the use, attempted, or threatened use of physical force, intimidation, violence, or coercion against a partner, spouse, child, or family member. Abuse can be physical, sexual, verbal, psychological, or financial. Being abused, witnessing abuse, or any form of consistent violence, childhood trauma, substance abuse, and more can contribute to this behavior. These can all result in adverse effects on brain development and affect how they interact with the everyday world. For example, abuse is a learned behavior; witnessing abuse or being abused can potentially create a new cycle of the victim becoming the abuser. According to Tsavoussis et al. (2014),

There is substantial evidence indicating that children who witness domestic violence (DV) have psychosocial maladaptation that is associated with demonstrable changes in the anatomic and physiological make-up of their central nervous system. Individuals with these changes do not function well in society and present communities with serious medical, sociological, and economic dilemmas for communities.

The victim becomes the abuser not immediately, but instead in stages. They experience psychosocial maladjustment. This occurs when a person cannot successfully feel comfortable in their environment or with their psychological demands. The next stage in this process is the manifestation of internal symptoms such as anxiety, depression, and withdrawal, or external behaviors like aggression, delinquency, and substance abuse. The last result shows up from stressors they encounter, such as life stress, poor coping mechanisms, and family conflict. Although abuse is a common factor, addiction can also play a role.

Addiction is defined as “a treatable, chronic medical disease involving complex interactions among brain circuits, genetics, the environment, and an individual’s life experiences” (*What is the definition of addiction: American Society of Addiction Medicine*, n.d.). Addiction can often lead to behaviors that are compulsive and can have harmful consequences. Substance abuse is a pattern of overpowering substance use, with extreme consequences (*Substance use, abuse, and addiction*, n.d.). These abuse disorders have the greatest correspondence of violence among mental disorders (*Nestor, 2002, p. 1974*). Commonly, alcohol and opioids are involved in substance abuse (*Substance use, abuse, and addiction*, n.d.). While commonly used interchangeably, substance abuse is addiction, but addiction is not always substance abuse, as it can be an addiction to various things beyond substances.

While addiction is most commonly linked to substance abuse, other things create addictive tendencies that negatively impact an individual. One example is video games, a form of passive media. Passive media is content that requires little or no interaction, such as television or music. According to Kirsch (2003), video games differ from other media sources because they require users to engage actively with the game. Adolescents are particularly susceptible to following the behavior they see, as the brain is in a critically developmental stage between adolescence and young adulthood. Television can often contain negative and violent images; in the US, children will have witnessed over 200,000 violent acts on television by the time they are 18 years old (Kostelny & Garbarino, 2001). Witnessing these violent and aggressive acts on television can lead to negative effects on a child's development.

These effects include: (1) increased aggressiveness and antisocial behavior, including developing favorable attitudes and values about the use of violence to solve problems and an increased appetite for more violence in entertainment and real life; (2) desensitization

to real-life violence, including less sensitivity to the pain and suffering of others, and more willingness to tolerate increasing amounts of violence; and (3) belief that the world is as mean and dangerous in real life as it is on television (Murray, 1997) (Kostelny, Garbarino, 2001).

The more children are exposed to violence, the more likely they are to experience a change in development. Being in a stage with extreme brain development and being repeatedly exposed to violence can cause violence to become normalized in the brain. Exposure to this kind of television blurs the line between what is real and what is not. Chronic violence can lead to major personality changes and changes in typical behavior (Kostelny & Garbarino, 2001). In a study done by Kostelny and Garbarino, they found that children who were exposed to four or more kinds of community violence displayed double the aggressive behavior as children who experienced one kind of community violence.

Implications: Prevention and Rehabilitation

Once a violent offender commits their crime, it often can repeat more than once, making it difficult to stop the problem where it's at. (Recidivism, n.d.) defines recidivism as a person's relapse into criminal behavior. Due to the high rate of recidivism with violent offenders, the need to create strategies to reduce violent and aggressive behavior becomes exceptionally clear (*National Library of Medicine*). Adolescent children can demonstrate predictive behaviors as they develop that indicate potential violent behaviors in their teenage years to adulthood.

Learning these patterns early on makes it easier to stop them before they become unmanageable.

Therefore, mental health screenings have become increasingly more common in not just the health system but the justice system. This kind of screening consists of a set of questions that help health providers check for signs of mental disorders (Mental health screening: Medlineplus

medical test, n.d.). When used early enough, this can help prevent or manage behavior that may lead to violent or aggressive behavior. Having access to appropriate care for those who display disruptive behavior means intervening before the problem becomes a bigger issue and the justice system gets involved. Early inclusion of mental health services, even in schools, can help address risk factors directly (*Prevention, intervention, and treatment*, 2018).

(*UNODC Crime Prevention*, n.d.) defines crime prevention as a combination of strategies and measures aimed at reducing the risk of crime. For this prevention to be effective, the justice system must work with other sectors to directly target the root causes of crime and conflict (*United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime*). Data analysis, victim support, and violence prevention are some ways that crime prevention can occur.

Rehabilitation (rehab) is often a general process applied to a wide variety of individuals. (*Rehabilitation*, n.d.) defines rehab as “a set of interventions designed to optimize functioning and reduce disability in individuals with health conditions in interaction with their environment”. Sometimes, if these interventions are not targeted to specific areas for certain individuals, the treatment may be less effective (O'Brien & Daffern, 2016). Once people are convicted, they are often placed in prison, where sometimes treatment may be more generalized rather than individual, targeted therapy. One effective method of individualized therapy is Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, which combines cognitive and behavioral therapy. Cognitive therapy is “about forming a clear idea of your own thoughts, attitudes and expectations” (*In Brief: Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT)*, 2006, para 3). This focuses on controlling your own thoughts and replacing negative ones with realistic, positive ones. Behavioral therapy targets specific behavioral patterns that may make life more difficult and examines how those patterns can be changed. (*In Brief: Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT)*, 2006, para 7). These therapies

can help examine problems at their root and find personal solutions to the behavior caused by these problems, ultimately aiming to reduce recidivism. So, while a proven method, due to the treatment of convicts in prison, they rarely get the opportunity to experience such a specific plan.

Conclusion

Violent crime can be understood by examining the roots of the behavior leading up to it. The interaction of certain personality traits, environmental disorders, and psychological disorders can contribute to and raise the risk of criminal activity. Certain personality traits or disorders can give someone the potential of becoming a violent offender. The development of the mind, mixed with the right environment, can lead to one committing violent crimes, though it's never guaranteed. Understanding what causes such behavior then allows the topic of prevention to come into play. Although crime will never fully go away, understanding why it happens can improve prevention, thus reducing violent crime. Simply punishing a person by placing them in prison doesn't get to the root of the problem. Steps should be taken to target individual traits rather than grouping people and "treating" them as all the same.

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