Juvenile Homicide in America: How Can We Stop the Killing?

Kathleen M. Heide, Ph.D.

Juvenile homicide remains a serious problem in the U.S., despite recent decreases in the juvenile arrest rate for murder. Reflecting on her clinical experiences evaluating 90 adolescent murderers, the author identifies 15 factors that appear to have contributed to the escalation in juvenile homicide beginning in the mid-1980s. These factors can be grouped into five categories: situational factors (child abuse and neglect, and the absence of positive male role models), societal influences (the crisis in leadership and lack of heroes, and witnessing violence), resource availability (access to guns, involvement in alcohol and drugs, and poverty and lack of resources), personality characteristics (low self-esteem, the inability to deal with strong feelings, boredom, poor judgment, and prejudice and hatred), and their cumulative effects (little or nothing left to lose and the biological connection).

Strategies to reduce juvenile violence are addressed using parents, schools, communities, government leaders, the media, and individuals. ©1997 by John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno announced in August 1996 that preliminary analyses of 1995 crime statistics indicated that the homicide arrest rate for juveniles had decreased for a second consecutive year. She suggested that federal programs targeted at youth violence might be responsible for halting the decade long escalation in murders perpetrated by American youths (Juvenile arrests decline, 1996).

Janet Reno’s remarks were front-page news across the country. They came at a time when the public has been in the grip of fear of today's children. The number of youths arrested for murder in 1993 had reached a 25 year high. In 1968, 1,029 of homicide arrestees were under 18; in 1993, this number had climbed to 3,284. This large increase did not result solely from a general rise in crime. Although the number of homicide arrests in 1993 was almost twice the number in 1968, the
number of juveniles arrested for homicide in 1993 was more than three times the number arrested 25 years earlier (Heide, 1996).

The proportionate involvement of juveniles among homicide arrestees had also taken an ominous course from 1968 through 1993. Over the 25 year period, the mean percentage of those arrested for homicide who were under 18 was 10.3. Perusal of data for the respective years indicated that the percentage involvement of juveniles in homicide arrests generally increased from 1968 to 1972. From 1973 through 1984, a decreasing trend was apparent. However, since reaching its low of 7.3 in 1984, the percentage of juveniles arrested for homicide steadily increased throughout the next 10 years. The percentage of those arrested for homicide who were under 18 was at its highest (16.2) in 1993. In 1993, the odds were almost 1 out of 6 that an individual arrested for homicide was a juvenile. Ten years earlier, the odds that the arrestee was under 18 were about 1 in 14 (Heide, 1996).

The dramatic increase in murders committed by youths under 18 since the mid-1980s cannot be attributed to an increase in the juvenile population during the last decade. Until recently, the percentage of young Americans had generally been declining (Blumstein, 1995; Cornell, 1993; Ewing, 1990; Fox, 1996; Gest and Friedman, 1994; Heide, 1994). Aware that the juvenile population would be growing at a much higher rate than the total population during the 1990s, leading experts on juvenile homicide predicted that murders by juveniles, if they continued at the same pace, would become a national epidemic (Fox, 1996; Ewing, 1990).

While the decreases in the juvenile homicide rate in 1994 and 1995 are good news, it is too early to tell if these data are aberrations or truly indicative of a downward trend. Data need to be examined closely and in a context. The 1995 figures released by Janet Reno are too sketchy at this point to draw any conclusions. The 1994 data are illustrative in this record. Fewer juveniles were arrested for murder in 1994 (3102) than in 1993 (3284) (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1994). However, the percentage of homicide arrestees who were juveniles (16.7) was at an all time high in 1994. Clearly, this is not a time to conclude that the juvenile homicide problem is behind us.

When kids kill today, adults ask why just as they have for centuries (Zagar, Arbit, Sylvies, Busch, & Hughes, 1990). The question, however, has become more complex since the mid 1980s because there are really two issues involved: Youths killing and more youths killing today than in previous generations. Two excellent critiques of the literature on juvenile homicide by University of Virginia Professor Dewey Cornell (1989) and SUNY Professor Charles Patrick Ewing (1990) have been published in recent years. Both scholars cited a number of methodological problems with most of the available studies on juvenile homicide and suggested that the psychiatric, psychological, sociological, and biological findings that they synthesized on why children kill be viewed with caution.

The existent literature on juvenile homicide rarely addresses the factors fueling the escalation in murders by juveniles beginning in the mid 1980s. Several reasons account for the gap. Most of the studies of adolescent murderers were published prior to 1990 and were restricted to the analysis of individual and family characteristics. Many of these variables were relatively easy to obtain and to verify. This manuscript reflects my experiences evaluating youths charged with murder and counseling families with adolescent children. I look to the juveniles with whom
I have worked over the last decade to identify factors contributing to the escalation in youth murders as we enter the 21st century (Heide, 1996).

**JUVENILE HOMICIDE IN THE 1990S**

I am convinced, after evaluating 90 adolescents involved in murder, that many factors often act in concert when youths kill. Some of these factors are more global and difficult to measure in the individual case, yet their effects on a society and on a generation of kids growing up today are more visible. As depicted in Table 1, I have grouped these variables into five main categories: situational factors, societal influences, resource availability, personality characteristics, and their cumulative effects. I present them in the hope that the discussion sheds light on why youths today are more likely to kill than in prior years and leads to further research into these factors and their interactive effects. Suggestions made later in this article with respect to intervention and prevention are based on finding solutions to the problems highlighted below.

**Situational Factors**

Many of today's youth grow up in families that foster violent and destructive behaviors. Although the majority of children who are victims or witnesses of family violence do not grow up to victimize others (Gelles & Conte, 1990; Scudder, Blount, Heide, & Silverman, 1993; Smith and Thornberry, 1995), a growing body of research indicates that these children are at greater risk of engaging in delinquent behavior. Retrospective studies of violent adolescents and young killers have repeatedly found child abuse, neglect, and exposure to parental violence in their backgrounds (Cornell, 1989; Ewing, 1990; Heide, 1992; Lewis et al., 1985; Lewis et al., 1988; Lewis, Lovely, Yeager, and Femina, 1989; Lewis, Pincus, Bard, & Richardson, 1988; Lewis, Shanok, Grant, & Ritvo, 1983; Lewis, Shanok, Pincus, & Glaser, 1979; Sendi & Blomgren, 1975).

Well-controlled and extensive research conducted in recent years by several professors at the State University of New York at Albany has helped to clarify the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Ingredients for juvenile murder in the 1990s</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Situational factors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—child abuse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—child neglect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—absence of positive male role models</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Societal influences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—crisis in leadership and lack of heroes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—witnessing violence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resource availability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—access to guns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—involvement in alcohol and drugs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—poverty and lack of resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personality characteristics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—low self-esteem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—inability to deal with strong negative feelings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—boredom and nothing constructive to do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—poor judgment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—prejudice and hatred</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cumulative effect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—little or nothing left to lose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—biological connection</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
nature of the relationship of child maltreatment to delinquency. These studies were prospective by design, meaning that subjects were selected for reasons other than having a delinquent history and followed up several years to determine the extent of their subsequent involvement in criminal or delinquent behavior. Professor Cathy Spatz Widom used official records to compare the criminal and delinquent involvement of maltreated youths with a matched group of nonmaltreated youths. She found that youths who were abused and neglected were at higher risk of becoming juvenile delinquents or adult criminals and engaging in violent criminal behavior. In comparison to youths with no history of child maltreatment, abused and neglected children committed significantly more offenses, began their delinquent careers earlier, and had a higher percentage of individuals charged with five or more offenses (Widom, 1989a,b,c,d). Those who have been victimized as children were also significantly more likely to receive a diagnosis of antisocial personality disorder (persistent pattern of violating the rights of others) as adults than the control group, even after demographic characteristics and arrest history were taken into account (Luntz & Widom, 1994).

Professors Carolyn Smith and Terence Thornberry investigated the relationship of child maltreatment to involvement in delinquency among students attending public schools in Rochester, New York. Unlike other prospective studies, this research included self-reported measures of delinquency, as well as official records. According to the study design, students from seventh or eighth grades were selected in such a way as to overrepresent those who were at higher risk of delinquency and drug involvement and these youths were followed over time. Using official measures of delinquency, Smith and Thornberry (1995) replicated Widom’s findings. More importantly, they found that “more serious forms of self-reported delinquency, including violent, serious, and moderate forms of delinquency” (p. 468) were related to child maltreatment. Subsequent analyses confirmed that these results were genuine and not due to factors such as race/ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic class, family structure, or mobility. This study also provided preliminary support that experiencing more extensive childhood maltreatment was related to more serious forms of delinquency.

There is a growing body of evidence that indicates that exposure to parental violence is also related to violent behavior, particularly by men towards their spouses or partners (Briere, 1992; Browne, 1987; Gelles & Conte, 1990; Hotaling & Sugarman, 1986; Howell, Krisberg, & Jones, 1995; Silvern et al., 1994; Thornberry, 1994). Smith and Thornberry found that children who witnessed and experienced many violent acts in their homes (child abuse, spouse abuse, and family conflict) were twice as likely to engage in violent acts themselves (Howell et al., 1995).

Despite a decrease in the number of young Americans, reports of child abuse have greatly increased in recent years (Florida Center for Children and Youth, 1993; Snyder & Sickmund, 1995; Willis, 1995). Figures released by the U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect in 1993 indicated that reported cases of child abuse and neglect had increased from 60,000 in 1973 to over 3,000,000 cases in 1993 (USABCAN, 1993; Willis, 1995).

Some severely abused children kill their parents, many of whom have alcohol or other drug problems. They kill because they are afraid or see no other way to escape the abuse. Patty was a 17-year-old girl who, for years, had been physically, verbally,
and psychologically abused by her father. In addition, she was sexually abused and forcibly raped by him. After being denied help by the adult figures in her life and failing in earlier attempts to kill herself and run away, Patty believed she had no recourse. Early one morning hour while he slept, she fired a bullet into his head (Heide, 1992).

Living in households like Patty’s, many abused youths fail to bond with others. Consequently, they do not develop the values or empathy that could inhibit them from killing others (Magid & McKelvey, 1987). Myron had been physically abused and physically, medically, and emotionally neglected from the time he was a child. His father abandoned him as an infant and his alcoholic mother died when he was 7. At 12, he was living on the streets, making his living by taking what he wanted by threat or force. I first met Myron at age 15 after he had been charged with two counts of murder and two counts of attempted murder, each count resulting from separate incidents.

Rather than being passively indifferent toward the lives of others, some abused youths are angry and in pain and vent their rage through destruction and violence (Magid & McKelvey, 1987). One of my clients, José, was sentenced to prison at age 18 for murder. The killing was especially brutal—the victim was beaten beyond recognition. The blows to the victim’s skull were so severe that brain tissue was found in several areas of the apartment. José committed the crime with the assistance of three friends. The four boys all told me that it was José’s idea to commit the murder. José acknowledged a long history of violence toward others. He explained that he wanted to hurt others as he had been hurt.

Neglect frequently accompanies abuse, but it can also exist independently, often manifesting itself as the common failure of parents to supervise their children (Heide, 1992). During the last 25 years, several significant changes in family structures have contributed to decreasing levels of child supervision and have placed adolescents at greater risk of getting into serious trouble.

The number of children born to unmarried mothers has nearly tripled—from 398,700 in 1970 to 1,165,384 in 1990. Over the two decades, dramatic increases in illegitimate births are apparent among both white and black females. For every 1000 births by white females, the number who were born to unmarried females rose from 57 in 1970 to 201 in 1990. The comparable figures for births to black unmarried females were 376 in 1970 and 652 in 1990 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1990).

During the same period, the divorce rate (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1990; Bynum & Thompson, 1996) and percentage of single-parent households (Magid & McKelvey, 1987) also increased. Today, more than 50 percent of all marriages end in divorce. The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1995) noted in its concluding report that more than 50% of all children in the United States in the mid 1990s will be raised for at least part of their childhood and adolescent years in a single-parent household, a far greater percentage than a few decades ago. Almost half of the adolescent children of married parents will experience their parents divorce or remarry by age 16.

In addition to the rising number of children born to single mothers, the increasing divorce rate and percentage of single-parent families, the number of mothers in the work force has also increased significantly during the last two decades. In 1970, 30% of married women with children under age 6 were gainfully
employed; in 1990, 59% of women in this category were working. The percentage of married women with children ages 6 to 17 who were working rose from 49% in 1970 to 74% in 1990. Figures for single mothers with children are not available for 1970 to permit comparisons across the two decades. However, 1990 data indicate that among single mothers, 49% with children under age 6 and 70% with children ages 6 to 17 were working (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1993, Table No. 626). Increases in the percentages of working wives with children was evident among both white and black women over the last two decades (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1993, Table No. 627).

Given these familial changes, the time that youths spend with their parents and the amount of supervision and guidance that they receive have significantly decreased during the past several decades (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1995). In 1970, 37% of families with children under 18 lacked full-time parental supervision. In 1992, the percentage had risen to 57% (Fox, 1996). Many of the adolescent homicide offenders I examine are not in school during the day and are out late at night. Their parents do not know where they are, in what activities they are involved, or with whom they are associating.

Often accompanying abuse or lack of supervision is the absence of positive male role models. In some cases, the identities or whereabouts of fathers are unknown. In others, fathers are present only to be uninvolved or violent, or both. Boys need same-sex role models to define themselves as male. When fathers are absent, young males are more likely to exaggerate their purported masculinity (Silverman and Dinitz, 1974; Messerschmidt, 1993).

Mothers, although typically loved and often revered by their sons, all too frequently cannot control their sons’ behavior. Case 1004 told me, for example, that his mother was “a nice lady . . . she took care of me when I was out there, ya know, but I would avoid every word she was sayin’, that why I’m in here now. I wouldn’t do what she say.” Case 1005 related that his mother was “a very tiny young lady, but I loved her more than anything, ya know, and like, she give me anything I want. I don’t have to to go out and do wrong, I just did it. She give me anything. She try to tell me what good and what bad for me. But, I just, I didn’t listen.”

Societal Influences

On a larger scale, youths who kill today are also affected by our country’s crisis in leadership and lack of heroes. In the past, U.S. Presidents, successful entertainers, and legendary sports figures were presented to the youth of America as people to emulate. In the 1990s, the personal ethics and behavior of many of these individuals have been seriously questioned. Government leaders who break campaign promises and involve themselves in money and sex scandals have shown that many politicians today deny responsibility for their behavior and their decisions. When leaders of our country are no longer expected to keep their word and are not held accountable, some youths become cynical about their futures. When police officers are viewed on nationwide television repeatedly beating an African-American in their custody and are proven to be lying on the witness stand in the case of another African-American man, adolescents from minority groups increasingly lose faith in a criminal justice system that is supposed to protect them.
and to dispense equal justice. When world class boxing champion Mike Tyson and rappers like Snoop Doggy Dog (Dunn, 1996) are accused of violent criminal acts, some adolescents feel free to adopt similar courses of behavior.

Adolescent deviance and decreased inhibitions to violence have also been correlated to witnessing violence (Prothrow-Stith & Weissman, 1991). Over the last two decades, films and television shows, including the evening news, have become increasingly violent (Levin & Fox, 1985; Prothrow-Stith & Weissman, 1991; Fox & Levin, 1994). Experts estimate that the average youth in the United States watches 45 violent acts on television every day, with most of them committed with handguns (Myers, 1992). A study conducted by the American Psychological Association confirmed that children who view two to four hours of television violence daily will witness 8,000 murders and 100,000 other acts of violence before finishing elementary school (Wheeler, 1993). The APA Commission on Violence and Youth estimated further that, if the viewing period is extended to the late teens, these youths will have observed about 200,000 violent acts. The Commission cautioned these figures may be even higher for youths who watch cable programs and R-rated movies on home VCRs (Sleek, 1994).

An impressive body of research spanning more than 30 years indicates that exposure to television violence is related to violent behavior (Wheeler, 1993). For example, research shows that aggressive children who have difficulty in school and in relating to peers tend to watch more television (Sleek, 1994). Studies reveal that even limited exposure to violent pornographic movies can lower the inhibitions of psychologically normal adults to engage in aggressive behavior (Donnerstein, 1984; Donnerstein, Linz, & Penrod, 1987). Researchers in the physical and social sciences agree that repeated exposure to a stimulus results in individuals’ becoming habituated to that stimulus. When habituation occurs to a violent stimulus, for example, more intense violent behaviors are needed for the viewers’ bodies to react and to register physiological indicators of distress (Fromm, 1973; Solomon, Schmidt, & Ardragna, 1990).

Perhaps, even more troubling than the thousands of children watching violent programs are the scores of youths who see violence first hand in their neighborhoods, schools and homes. The exposure to violence among inner-city youths is particularly astounding (Jenkins & Bell, 1994). In 1992, Drs. Carl Bell and Esther Jenkins surveyed 203 African-American students in a public high school in an inner city Chicago community. Four out of five of these students qualified for some type of public assistance. The area in which the school was located consistently had one of the highest homicide rates and ranked third in homicides during the year the study was conducted. Among these youths, 43% reported that they had seen a killing, and 59% reported that someone close to them had been killed. The percentages of children who reported exposure to shootings were even higher: 61% had seen a shooting, 66% knew that someone who was close to them had been shot, and 48% had been shot-at themselves (Bell, 1994).

To many children and teens, the world is a violent place. This image is particularly extolled in the music known as “gangsta rap.” Rappers, such as Spice One, MC8, Eightball and MJG, and Geto Boys sing about robbing, killing, and raping which they maintain is part of everyday life in “the hood” for low-income members of society, particularly African-Americans. The words in “gangsta rap” music, similar to the scenes in televised violence, would appear likely to have a disinhibiting and
desensitizing effect on those who listen to them repeatedly. Although the link between “gangsta rap” music and violence has not been proven, a recent study provided some evidence that misogynous (hate-filled) rap music was related to sexually aggressive behavior against women by men (Barongan & Hall, 1995). In several of my recent cases, violent music lyrics appeared to provide the additional impetus needed for unbonded youths to kill. Donnell, a handsome 17-year-old African-American youth from an upper-middle class family, was charged with three armed robberies of convenience stores and two homicides in connection with them. This youth, whose IQ was in the dull normal range, had some brain damage, apparently present from birth, and thought and acted like a much younger child. Donnell experienced early abandonment by both his biological parents and repeated breaks in the bonding process. It is questionable whether he ever bonded to anyone. During his middle adolescence. Donnell became heavily involved in “gangsta rap.” When asked, he easily described each of the rap singers/groups to which he reported listening. The messages in the songs clearly influenced him. When I listened to several recordings after speaking with Donnell, I discovered that some of the responses that he gave to my questions were lyrics from the songs. For example, when I asked Donnell how come he shot the clerk immediately upon entering the store, he replied that he had gotten “trigga happy,” one of the recordings sung by the rapper known as Spice One.

Most of the inner city young homicide offenders whom I have evaluated viewed violence as part of everyday life. They carried guns and were prepared to use them. Case 1002 explained that he brought a gun with him on the day of the homicidal event because “you see, that’s a real rough neighborhood and it was rougher than the neighborhood I stayed in, you know, if you don’t have a gun around there, something is able to be killed. So I had to bring a gun with me that day.” Life in the project “was like really wild,” Case 1005 maintained. There was “a lot of robbing and killing goin’ on.” People who lived there “grew up in the wild, a faster place, that all they know.” Case 2014 stated that there was “a lot of violence” in his neighborhood, “a lot of crime, everyday, fighting, killing.” Case 5030 remembered, “One time I was walking, sidewalk, I saw a man get busted in the head, man get shot. They don’t want police come there. Whoever did it get away. I seen a lot of, I seen a lot of violence in my time.”

Case 2008 explained that he got in trouble because he “found the wrong people, see them do something, then you want to do it.” He indicated that watching people in his neighborhood shooting up or at each other had an effect on him. “I wanted to try it.” When asked if the homicidal event was the first time he had ever shot at anybody, Case 2008 replied no, he had shot at people “often.” He added, “I really wanted to scare them. . . . They play with me like that, too.”

Resource Availability

Not only do our youths grow up in a world that encourages violence, they are increasingly finding themselves surrounded with the tools which makes acts of violence quick and easy (Sheley & Wright, 1995). The increase in murders by juveniles in recent years has been tied directly to the use of firearms, particularly handguns (Blumstein, 1995; Fox, 1996). Analyses by the Federal Bureau of

Investigation indicate that gun homicides by juveniles nearly tripled from 1983 to 1991. In contrast, murders by juveniles using other weapons declined during the same period. In 1976, 59 percent of young homicide offenders killed their victims with a firearm. Twenty-five years later, 78 percent selected firearms as their weapons of destruction (Howell et al., 1995).

Carnegie-Mellon University Professor Alfred Blumstein has argued that the increase in killings by juveniles is a result of the rapid growth in the crack markets in the mid 1980s. Juveniles who were recruited into illicit drug marketing armed themselves with guns for protection. Other juveniles in these communities, aware of what was happening, armed themselves for protection and for status reasons. Consequently, guns become more prevalent in the larger community. When guns are easily accessible, youths who often are impulsive and unskilled in conflict resolution may decide to use them with increasingly lethal results than other methods of settling disputes (Blumstein, 1995).

The majority of juvenile homicide offenders whom I see used guns, which were readily available to them, to kill their victims. At the time case 1004 was arrested for murder and armed robbery, he had three firearms on his person that he had just gotten from a burglary. Case 1004 related, however, that he did not usually walk around on the street with a gun “on me, but I had some I can get. If I didn’t have none, I can get some. I can get one or whatever from a brother or my friend.” He explained that most of his friends carried guns “once in awhile they’ll, like on a Friday night, they’ll walk around with ‘em you know, in case something jumps off in the neighborhood.”

Young killers frequently reported that guns were cheap and easy to get in their neighborhoods. The adolescents whom I evaluated could often provide specific information about the prices of specific types of hot guns. Case 1005 related that the going rate for a .22 caliber gun would depend, “if it [is] hot, and is new, get about, some would sell it for $30 or $20. Cheap.” For a .38 caliber pistol, “you could spend about $40 or $50;” for a .357 Magnum, the cost would be “about, almost $80 or $100.”

Many of these kids did not have the physical ability or the emotional detachment to use other weapons of destruction, such as knives or fists. At the age of 12, Timmy, a boy from a middle class family, decided he was going to kill himself. He thought that he would kill his mother, whom he perceived as the person responsible for much of the unhappiness in his family, before killing himself. Although Timmy tried to get his brother to leave the home, his brother did not cooperate. Rather than postpone his plan, Timmy shot his brother with a .357 magnum. When his mother arrived home, he shot her as well. Overcome by the sight of human carnage, Timmy could not manage to turn the gun on himself. Instead, he aborted his plan and called for help.

Most of the adolescents involved in felony homicides whom I have evaluated are using alcohol and drugs. These observations are consistent with findings from a growing number of studies of a substantial relationship between adolescent violence and substance abuse (Elliott, Huizinga, & Menard, 1989; Johnston, O’Malley, & Bachman, 1993; National Drug Control Strategy 1995; Osgood, 1995). Interestingly, drug use surveys indicate that the rates of illicit drug use by adolescents, which had declined during the 1980s (Osgood, 1995), are again rising in the 1990s and are much higher than they were a generation ago. The percentage of youths reporting past month use of marijuana, stimulants, hallucinogens, and inhalants rose from
A 1993–1994 survey of junior high (grades 6 through 8) and high school students (grades 9 through 12) conducted by the Parent Resource Institute for Drug Education (PRIDE) found a strong link in both groups between use of alcohol and marijuana and several measures of violent behavior, including carrying a gun to school and threatening to harm another person (National Drug Control Strategy, 1995).

Although few of the young killers I have interviewed claim that alcohol or drugs caused them to commit murder, it is likely that chemical abuse affected their judgment about engaging in criminal activity and their perceptions during the homicidal event. In addition, it is highly probable, in light of prior research, that the use of alcohol and drugs by many adolescent murderers is “more a reflection of shared influences on a wide variety of deviant behavior than of any causal relationship” (Osgood, 1995, p. 32). Several researchers have found that various types of deviant or illegal behaviors are positively related to one another (Dembo et al., 1992; Elliott et al., 1989; Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Osgood, Johnston, O’Malley, & Bachman, 1988).

Another teen I evaluated is Peter, a gentle boy who had a serious drug problem for which he had been hospitalized. Peter was diagnosed as having severe marijuana dependence and a history of alcohol and cocaine abuse. One day, after getting high on marijuana and possibly acid, Peter impulsively entered the home of an elderly man intending to steal his car. When the man unexpectedly appeared, Peter stabbed him with a knife he had picked up moments before in the kitchen. Peter said that he “freaked out” after he saw the victim’s blood. He left shortly thereafter in the victim’s car and picked up some other kids to go joy riding. Although he knew what he did was wrong, the drugs helped Peter to forget about the homicide for awhile.

Other than guns and drugs, the majority of the young killers whom I have met are poor and lacking in resources. Many are from lower class areas where violent crimes are commonplace. Robbery and burglary provide a means to acquire money, drugs, and other goods, as well as an opportunity for fun. When asked how he could afford to buy drugs, for example, Case 5030 stated matter-of-factly that he was “stealing anything that I can get my hands on” from “anyplace.”

Case 1002 reported that whenever he was “out there doing wrong,” he was trying to help his mother. “Everytime I go out and make money, you know, I would bring it to my momma. Tell her to keep the money. She know that it would be stolen or something, you know, and then my momma didn’t like stolen money, you know, she would hardly take it.” He related that he gave the money to his mother to help her with “bills, help her get some clothes, something she want, anything, food.”

### Personality Characteristics

Adolescent homicide offenders typically lack a healthy self-concept. They have deficits in communication skills and decision-making ability. The literature on juvenile homicide offenders indicates that, regardless of intelligence potential, many perform poorly academically (Bernstein, 1978; Ewing, 1990; Hellsten & Katila, 1965; Scherl & Mack, 1966; Sendi & Blomgren, 1975; Stearns, 1957), have cognitive and language deficits (King, 1975; Myers and Mutch, 1992), experience severe educational difficulties (Busch, Zagar, Hughes, Arbit, and Bussell, 1990; Zagar et al.,...
1990), and suffer from learning disabilities (Bender, 1959; Lewis, Pincus et al., 1988; King, 1975; Patterson, 1943; Sendi & Blomgren, 1975).

The personalities of youths who kill are almost always marked by low self-esteem. They may appear tough and cool, but deep down they typically feel insecure and do not believe they can succeed in conventional activities such as school, sports, or work. Johnny, who was sentenced to life in prison at age 16, did not like violence. He was an obese youth who hung around with some tough kids. He went along with their violent escapades, which eventually resulted in his charge of murder, because he “wanted to be somebody.”

Another common trait of adolescents who kill is an inability to deal with strong negative emotions such as anger or jealousy. When wronged, they become consumed with rage and feel compelled to strike back. In addressing “the young male syndrome” and homicide, Professors Margo Wilson and Martin Daly at McMaster University noted that “The precipitating insult may appear petty, but it is usually a deliberate provocation (or is perceived to be), and hence constitutes a public challenge that cannot be shrugged off” (Wilson & Daly, 1985, p. 69). To some male adolescents, nothing less than murder is considered an appropriate response. Derek shot the clerk in the convenience store because the man “dissed” him. Derek explained to me that he had entered the store, pointed the gun at the clerk, and demanded money. When the clerk allegedly laughed and tried to brush Derek’s hand away, Derek fired directly into him.

The perceived affronts do not always come from strangers. Jerry methodically planned the execution of his “best friend.” The friend had gone out with Jerry’s girlfriend and Jerry believed that “he broke a rule,” and deserved to die.

Other youths are more bored than angry. Engaging in violent behavior becomes a way to amuse themselves, to pass the time. Many of the young killers whom I evaluated were not involved in conventional and prosocial activities, such as school, sports, or work. For these youths, robbing and using guns often seemed like fun and a way to reduce boredom. Case 2008 related that he engaged in fewer strong arm robberies of women as time went on because “that ain’t excite me no more. I stop trying to do that, I stop doing that, though I use to do that sometimes to ladies, then I try men like that.”

Many young killers explained that on the night of the homicide they were hanging out with other boys drinking and doing drugs, when one suggested that they rob somebody. Although most of the boys had participated in robberies several times in the past, this time was different. Something happened in the interchange, typically quite unexpectedly, that turned the robbery into a homicide.

Case 3026 related that he was high on marijuana on the night of the homicide. “I was running around with two friends. They had guns, right. I knew they had guns because they showed it to me before, but that particular night I didn’t know they were going to do anything such as to rob somebody. Okay, the robbery or it turned into a homicide. It wasn’t intentional, but there’s a saying, if you don’t intend to do something, you’re not supposed to have it, you know. He had the gun and he was high also and it—he was so high that it looked like the guy was coming towards him but he was going toward the guy subconscious—and he shot and the guy died enroute to the hospital.”

Some youths simply have poor judgment. They become involved in felony homicides not so much out of anger or reckless thrill seeking, but because they
choose to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. When invited to accompany a group of boys “out for a night of fun,” they are sent cues that something bad might happen, but these indications go undetected. One of my clients, Tony, found himself in this kind of situation. Tony was a kid who did not have many friends. One evening, Tony saw some boys from his neighborhood riding around in a nice car. They stopped and asked if he would like to join them. Tony got into the car, which had been stolen shortly before. A few minutes later the boys stopped at a gas station. The next thing Tony knew he found himself in the middle of a robbery which ended with one of the boys shooting and killing the attendant.

While many groups of children and youth commit acts of violence out of generalized anger or “for kicks,” still others do so out of prejudice and hatred. Despite the civil rights movement of the 1960s, the United States has encountered increasing struggles with issues of cultural diversity in recent years. Affirmative action, sexual harassment policies, gender equity, political correctness and hate-crime statutes were once presented as means to move our nation towards a society of peacefulness and equity. Today, these concepts are interpreted by some Americans as threats, reverse discrimination, and detrimental to First Amendment rights. Youths today, as in the past, search for their identities through causes in which to believe. Those with fragile self-esteem tend to be attracted to groups that accept and exalt them on the basis of superficial characteristics, such as skin color. Two teenage Caucasian brothers about whom I was consulted were members of a skinhead group. One evening they came across a homeless African-American man, passed out in a public garage. Unprovoked, they beat him until he died.

THE CUMULATIVE EFFECT IN CONTEXT

For many youths, the effect of these factors is cumulative. Put succinctly, many young killers growing up in the 1990s have little or nothing left to lose. These are the kids who are angry, frequently in pain, and too often unattached to other human beings due to experiences in their home and neighborhood environments. More than in other generations, adolescents today are growing up in an era beset by “an overall decline of the extent and influence of the family from the extended multigenerational family, to the nuclear family, to the single parent family, to the ‘no parent’ family of street children” (Friedman, 1993, p. 509). Many of these youths lack self-esteem and the resources to improve their lives. They are living in a society experiencing increases in youths having sex and babies outside of marriage (Friedman, 1992), using drugs, engaging in criminal violence, and dying violently whether through homicide or suicide. Accordingly, many kids today are severely alienated (Lerner, 1994; Wynne & Hess, 1986). They do not hold conventional values or dreams. Often chronically bored, they use drugs, alcohol, and sex to anesthetize themselves and commit crimes for fun. They live in the moment. To them, thrills—and lives—are cheap.

Case 3017 described his friends as “the type that like to party and stuff. None of them would do no hard drugs and that, [they would]smoke a little reefer. I had a few of them that were shooting up, but—a couple of them shooting up, you know, doing some hard drugs. But the rest of the ones I went to school with, they skip school, making bad grades, you know, and do nothing in school but mess with the girls, go to lunch, PE, and that’s about it. That’s all for school for them. Then, ah, go do some
wrong, go break into some houses, robbing, whatever they want to do. Makes them some money. Then they go get high and party. That’s about all they do."

When asked, he explained his friends’ and his own participation in burglaries and robberies. “They say that’s the only way they can ah, left to make money, you know. I didn’t see it like that ’cause, you know, I [was] used to getting me a job for something like that right there. But since I’ve got started getting high with them you know, I didn’t want to be called square at all like that, so go along with it. Just do what they do. . . . I’m under the influence, you know, by my friends, you know. They want to do this, you see. I’m drunk, I’m not really thinking about nothing right now. But see, whatever they do, I be game, you know. I be ready to do it with them.”

In summary, changes in situational factors, societal influences, and resource availability in the 1990s appear to be significant factors in the rising involvement of youths in homicides in the 1990s. These variables likely interact with the personality characteristics of particular adolescents, making some youths more likely to engage in violent behavior than others.

The Biological Connection

Biological factors also may be intricately entwined in the homicidal equation in many cases. A growing body of research suggests that criminal behavior may be linked at least in some cases to genetics, neurological factors, and biochemical reactions (Eysenck, 1977; Fishbein, 1990; Glueck & Glueck, 1950; Jeffrey, 1979; Lewis, 1992; Mednick & Christiansen, 1977; Pincus, 1993; Widom, 1991; Wilson & Hernstein, 1985). Hans Eysenck, a British psychologist, argued persuasively that personality differences between criminals and noncriminals were genetically based. He maintained that psychopaths were extreme extroverts who lacked a “conscience” because they failed to acquire conditioned emotional responses of fear associated with rule-violating behavior, due to the underarousal of their autonomic nervous systems (Eysenck, 1977). Results from two studies conducted in Israel and in the United States and released in January 1996 provided the first verified association between a particular gene and a specific personality trait, called “novelty-seeking,” which includes impulsiveness and excitability (Ritter, 1996).

Sociobiologists, such as C. R. Jeffrey of Florida State University, have maintained that criminal behavior is influenced by both individual biological factors and social and environmental conditions (Jeffrey, 1979). In his book Sociobiology, E. O. Wilson (1975) noted that individuals are born with different potentials for learning. The physical environment (neighborhoods and schools) and the social environment interact to either limit or enhance a particular individual’s capacity for learning.

Conclusions drawn with respect to juvenile murderers by Dr. Dorothy Otnow Lewis are consistent with a ‘diathesis-stress theory’” (Sarason & Sarason, 1996) of aggression. She maintained that genetic factors and biological vulnerabilities, particularly when severe, predispose certain individuals to respond violently. Dr. Lewis’s research findings suggest that if these individuals are subjected to intense psychological, social, and environmental stressors that exceed their ability to cope, violent expression is more likely to result, particularly among males (Lewis et al., 1989; Lewis et al., 1991; Lewis, 1992).

Individually, each of the vulnerabilities characteristic of juvenile murderers may be present, to a greater or lesser extent, in nonviolent delinquents and even in nondelinquents. It is, rather, the combination of serious intrinsic vulnerabilities in the combination of an abusive or violent environment that is associated with the development of aggression. The impulsivity, emotional liability, and cognitive impairment often associated with neurological dysfunction diminish the ability to control behavior. A paranoid orientation and a tendency to misperceive reality further lowers a child’s threshold for controlling aggression. Abuse and family violence, in turn, provide stimulating models for assaultive behaviors, and also engender rage in these already oversuspicious, impulsive individuals (Lewis, Lovely et al., 1988, p. 587).

Lewis’s theory of neuropsychiatric vulnerability also received support in a larger study involving urban delinquents in Chicago (Hughes, Zagar, Arbit, & Busch, 1991).

REVERSING THE CYCLE OF DESTRUCTIVENESS

What can be done to reverse the upward surge in murders by today’s juveniles? Neutralizing or eliminating the variables that contribute to youths becoming involved in homicidal incidents may require a generation or more to accomplish (Heide, 1996). My clinical experiences with over 100 violent youths have convinced me that change must include parents, the educational system, communities, government leaders, the media, and individuals joining together to raise a healthier next generation and to build a more peaceful society.

Parenting needs to become once again a priority concern. To this end, parenting classes need to be made easily available in communities. In addition, information on child development and parenting skills should be made a part of the high school curricula (Heide, 1992).

There are many ways that the educational system can help youths to rebound from unhealthy influences in their homes and neighborhoods and to develop into healthier human beings. These include educating children about the parameters of childhood maltreatment and the effects of parental chemical dependency. Allowing support groups in school and providing a supportive network to help youths are other avenues to guide those who are having problems at home. The schools should also develop curricula to foster self-esteem, to increase understanding of cultural differences, and to improve communication skills. Students should be taught conflict resolution skills and techniques to deal with strong emotions, such as anger and sadness (Heide, 1992, 1996).

Communities must take an active role in guiding today’s youth. Perhaps now, more than in other generations, given the changes in family structure, kids need mentors and places where they can congregate, such as neighborhood centers. They need part-time and summer jobs and employment training to develop a work ethic, as well as a sense of pride in their accomplishments (Becker, 1994; Straus, 1994).

Our government leaders need to make a national commitment to children. They need to spearhead legislation that looks to the future for all children. Parents must have access to supportive services to ensure the health of their children as well as their
own longevity. The national leave policy that permits parents to take needed time off from work to care for children or aging parents without fear of losing their jobs was an important step in this direction. The United States must also explore incentives for businesses to provide quality daycare facilities on their premises or close by at a reasonable cost to their employees.

The government also must implement prevention and early intervention programs on a large scale with the awareness that the direct results may take 20 to 30 years to materialize. Denying mental health and social services benefits to children today to save money ensures that our prison population, already at a record high, will continue to escalate.

Attention must be given to reducing the number of guns in our society and to restricting juvenile access to guns. The majority of homicides perpetrated by juveniles, as well as adults, are effected with guns. Research has also shown that the dramatic increase in juvenile homicides since the mid 1980s has been directly due to gun-related homicides (Blumstein, 1995; Fox, 1996; Snyder, Sickmund, & Poe-Yamagata, 1996). Recent studies have also shown that juvenile homicide offenders like to equip themselves with newer and more powerful weapons. Restrictions on assault weaponry must be imposed. Stricter handgun policies have been shown to reduce both homicide and suicide among adolescents (Straus, 1994).

The media, including the record industry, need to make a concerted effort to limit gratuitous violence and to provide more socially responsible programming. The media’s recent public service announcements denouncing violence are noteworthy. The power of the media to change societal attitudes was amply demonstrated with respect to the problem of child abuse less than 25 years ago (Donnelly, 1991). The potential of the media to raise public consciousness about viable solutions to violence during the next decade is virtually limitless, given today’s technology and its widespread availability to the U.S. population.

Individuals in their roles of taxpayers and voters also have the power to influence today’s youth. More importantly, they can impact as human beings. Studies of abused children who did not grow up to abuse or hurt others are noteworthy in this regard. These adults, in remembering their lives as children, could often identify an adult figure in their childhood who was nice to them (Egeland, Jacobvitz, & Sroufe, 1988). The person could have been a neighbor, a school nurse, a favorite teacher, or a clerk in the town library. The exchanges were often fleeting and not at all sensational. In that moment, the youth was aware of being noticed by an adult, who communicated, whether intentionally or quite accidentally, that the adult believed in the youngster and cared about him or her.

REFERENCES


JUVENILE HOMICIDE IN AMERICA


