

When Children Kill

This page intentionally left blank

when children kill

A social-psychological study of youth homicide

Katharine Kelly and Mark Totten



broadview press

©2002 Katherine Kelly and Mark Totten

All rights reserved. The use of any part of this publication reproduced, transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, or stored in a retrieval system, without prior written consent of the publisher – or in the case of photocopying, a licence from CANCOPY (Canadian Copyright Licensing Agency), One Yonge Street, Suite 201, Toronto, ON M5E 1E5 – is an infringement of the copyright law.

National Library of Canada Cataloguing in Publication Data

Kelly, Katharine D. (Katharine Doreen)

When children kill : a social psychological study of youth homicide
Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN1-55111-417-8

1. Juvenile homicide—Canada—Case studies. 2. Juvenile homicide—Psychological aspects. I. Totten, Mark Douglas, 1962- II. Title.

HV9067.H6K45 2002 364.15'23'0830971 C2002-900699-6

Broadview Press Ltd., is an independent, international publishing house, incorporated in 1985.

North America:

P.O. Box 1243, Peterborough, Ontario, Canada K9J 7H5

3576 California Road, Orchard Park, NY 14127

TEL: (705) 743-8990; FAX: (705) 743-8353;

E-MAIL: customerservice@broadviewpress.com

United Kingdom:

Thomas Lyster Ltd.

Unit 3&4a, Ormskirk Industrial Park

Old Boundary Way, Burscough Road

Ormskirk, Lancashire L39 2YW

TEL: (01695) 575112; FAX: (01695) 570120; E-mail: books@tlyster.co.uk

Australia:

St. Clair Press, P.O. Box 287, Rozelle, NSW 2039

TEL: (02) 818-1942; FAX: (02) 418-1923

www.broadviewpress.com

Broadview Press gratefully acknowledges the financial support of the Book Publishing Industry Development Program, Ministry of Canadian Heritage, Government of Canada.

Design and composition by George Kirkpatrick

Cover Photo by Wayne Eardly

PRINTED IN CANADA

For
Peter, Valerie, Alison, and Kenny

and

Sharon, Daniel, Kaila, and Leah

Our study could not have been possible without your unwavering commitment, patience, understanding, and support.

This book is just as much yours as ours.
We love you dearly.

KK and MT

This page intentionally left blank

contents

Acknowledgements ix

Preface xi

Chapter 1: Theories of Youth Homicide 1

Chapter 2: Studying Youth Homicide 21

Chapter 3: The Role of Early Childhood Experiences 51

Chapter 4: Lessons Learned in Adolescence 101

Chapter 5: Homicides in Context 143

Chapter 6: Charged and Convicted: Experiences in Custody and the
Community 191

Chapter 7: Conclusion 247

Appendix A: Youth Homicide Study Questionnaire 255

Appendix B: Youth Homicide Study Informed Consent Form 267

References 269

This page intentionally left blank

acknowledgements

This book would not have been possible without the help and support of many people. We wish to express our sincere gratitude to the Youth Services Bureau of Ottawa for their financial and staffing support. We thank, in particular, Dan Paré, Executive Director; the Board of Directors; and the management team—Gordon Boyd, Mary Conroy, Francine Gravelle, Judy Perley, Wes Richardson, Yvan Roy, Michael Tross, and Denise Valley. Special thanks are extended to those who helped us with invaluable word processing, transcribing, research, technical support, and supplies—Audra Bennett, Michael Blench, Claudette Contant, Sandie Cybulski, Joanne Moore, Sabra Ripley, Sarah Villani, and Mary Wehrle. Members of the Research Committee—Drs. Tullio Caputo, Robert Flynn, Robert Glosup, Don Loree, and Paul Reed—provided us with a critical reading of our work and many helpful suggestions. Finally, Bob Bennett, Linda Byron, Gordon MacDonald, and Terri Thorhauge gave us invaluable assistance.

Thanks also to Carleton University and its support of the work through its GR-6 grant program and to our colleagues there: Dennis Forcese, Karen March, Flo Kellner, and Zhique Lin.

We extend special thanks to Catherine Latimer and Eileen Hornby, Department of Justice Canada, for their financial support which made this study possible. Their insights into the issue of youth homicide helped us in the presentation and analysis of our data.

Shaila Beaudry, Gerry Bezanson, Roger Boe, Melanie Ferdinand, Skip Graham, Kathleen Hunter, Stephanie MacLeod, Larry Motiuk, Michelle Motiuk, Alyson Muzzerall, John Rives, Rick Sauve, Joe Chmiel, Derra Thibodeau, John Watters, and Francine Wilks assisted us in identifying participants, guided us through the paperwork of getting access to those in custody, or helped with additional administrative tasks. We thank them for their valuable time and insights.

This book would not have been possible without Michael Harrison, Vice-President, Broadview Press; Barbara Conolly and Betsy Struthers, our wonderful Broadview editors. We hope we have lived up to their faith in our work. They have provided us with support and have been tireless in making sure it was known in the academic and publishing world.

Finally, we are grateful to the 19 young people who shared their stories

with us. The opportunity to discuss with them some of the most intimate aspects of their lives is one we will always remember. For us this was, at times, a difficult sharing. For them it was even more demanding as they relived horrible events and terrible moments in their lives. We wish them well.

The opinions expressed in this book are ours alone, and may not necessarily reflect those of the Youth Services Bureau of Ottawa, Carleton University or the Department of Justice Canada. Any errors are, of course, our own.

preface

This book is entitled “When Children Kill.” We do not attempt to explain *why* children kill, but to explore the conditions leading to and occurring at the time of the murder. We purposely included the term “children” in the title, despite the fact that our participants were *adolescents* when they committed homicide. We did this to emphasize our belief that these youth had suffered so much emotional damage during their lives that they were essentially functioning as *children* when they killed.

What drew us to study the lives of these adolescents? We wanted to provide a more textured understanding of both youth homicide and the young people involved, an understanding that challenges stereotypic notions of youth convicted of homicide as “monsters.” We found that our participants were neither simply victims, nor solely villains. They were young people who, in response to emotional, physical, and sexual harm, adopted behavioural patterns that put them at risk to commit murder.

Most children who are harmed as they grow up do not kill. They deal with their harm in other ways, some constructive and some destructive. What led our participants to kill were the choices they made, choices constrained by their abilities (biological, physiological, psychological) and their social circumstances. Our participants chose to respond to their harm and to deal with negative emotions and circumstances through violence. Some were actively violent towards others, some became involved in risk-taking that included aggression towards others, and some kept their commitment to violence hidden in a fantasy world. The choice to use violence led them to hurt others.

Our research has caused us to reflect on some broad philosophical questions about children and youth in Canada. How do young people come to be involved in homicides? Is there a single pathway or are their multiple routes to committing a homicide? What is the nature of responsibility of young people who commit violent crimes? What should be the legal response to young people who kill? Where should these young people be incarcerated—in youth facilities or in adult facilities? Is there anything that can be done to reduce the risk of young people using violence? We address some of these issues in our book.

Our study is exploratory and interpretative. This type of research on a

sample of young people charged with homicide has never been done before in Canada. Given the small number of youth who have killed in Canada (an average of 52 young people are charged with homicide offences each year), and in the absence of any available lists of homicide perpetrators, we did not have the luxury of being able to randomly select participants. These factors resulted in important constraints on the generalizability, in the statistical sense of the word, of the results. However, we have discovered patterns and insights that are worth exploring and testing in future research.

Conducting the in-depth interviews and combing through the nearly 1000 pages of interview transcripts and 3000 pages of related documentation was an exhausting and sometimes terrifying process. At times, we were exhilarated, buoyed by the fact that we were breaking new ground in a much talked-about but poorly-understood phenomenon. However, we also found that researching violent and often brutal murders took its toll. We both suffered from symptoms of what has been referred to as vicarious (or secondary) trauma.¹ These included nightmares and anxiety; obsessive thoughts about the offenders, their horrifying actions, and the brutal deaths of the victims; and feelings of hopelessness, sorrow, and anger. How did we cope? We both drew heavily upon our respective external support networks—family, friends, and colleagues. The fact that we both are parents of young children and have understanding partners who have not only tolerated but embraced our passion for this work, helped a great deal. However, some of our children were the same age as the participants were when they killed their victims. This made us vulnerable. We could not help but look at our own kids, thinking “what if?” Arriving home after interviews was always a rush; a rush to embrace our loved ones, a rush to regain some sense of normalcy. Debriefing immediately after interviews was extremely helpful. Journal writing and long-distance running were useful coping mechanisms.

In the end, we hope that we have produced a book that will engage others in a discourse about young people who commit extreme acts of violence. Our wish is that, instead of viewing these adolescents as monsters, the reader will join us in contextualizing their monstrous actions within the bio-psychosocial framework of their life courses.

Note

1 Figley, 1995; Ruzek, 1993; McCann and Pearlman, 1990.

one

Theories of Youth Homicide

It goes to that no-emotion thing where you can just do anything. That's why I say rage really had nothing to do with it, because it wasn't because I blew up and flew off the handle, when I heard this and went out and killed him. It was like a blankness of no emotion. So anyway, it was somewhere from the game to becoming a reality. I struck him with a baseball bat, and then from the first blow that I hit him, it sort of snapped me into reality of what was happening. I just struck this guy, and it was a pretty bad blow to start with. I went into a panic from there, where I was hitting him more. Then what evolved from there, is that I felt he was going to die from the injuries he had sustained, and there was nothing I could do, couldn't call an ambulance or something like that 'cause he was already basically going to die, but that he was suffering on the way to there. At that point, I got a knife and cut his throat. That was, the purpose of that was, because I felt he was going to die, but I couldn't handle watching him suffer while he was going there. So that was really the essence of the plan. After that was the panic, now this is done, and I don't want to be around here, and clean the place up and things like that. I was picked up the next day.

This is Phillip's¹ account of the homicide he committed. Phillip had been a troubled young man before the murder, with significant psychiatric problems and a history of violent outbursts. As this study demonstrates, he and the others we interviewed are not simply "monsters" who murder. Rather, they are troubled young people whose childhood and adolescent histories contributed to their killings and involvement with the criminal justice system. While adolescent homicides have garnered much attention and outrage over the past number of years, the problems these young people experienced prior to these acts have remained virtually invisible. Instead, public

concern has centred on their criminal histories, their “depravity,” and their lack of values. This is likely due to a perception that “[j]uveniles who kill challenge long-standing and widely held conceptions of childhood and adolescence.”² The emotional, social, and economic context of their lives is often forgotten during this public discourse.

We use a life-course approach, through in-depth interviews, to understand how the histories of the 19 adolescents in our study contributed to their extreme acts of violence. When we quote these young people, we attempt to provide the proper context; the quotes are verbatim, and the language is often raw.

Defining Homicide

Homicide is a general term for the culpable killing of one human being by another. In legal terms, homicide includes murder, infanticide, and manslaughter (Criminal Code of Canada [CCC] s. 222). In this study we examine only murder and manslaughter.

According to the Criminal Code of Canada, homicide is defined as a murder:

- a) when a person who causes the death of another means to cause that death, or means to cause harm, knowing (or ought to know) that causing death is a likely consequence of that harm and is reckless.
- b) when death occurs by accident or mistake when the perpetrator means to cause death or means to inflict bodily harm that she or he knows (or ought to know) is likely to cause death.
- c) when, during the commission of an unlawful act, a person does something that he or she knows or ought to know is likely to cause death, notwithstanding that there is no desire to cause death and/or bodily harm. A wide variety of acts are considered: high treason, treason, sabotage, piratical acts, hijacking an aircraft, escape from prison or lawful custody, assaulting a peace officer, sexual assault (levels 1, 2, and 3),³ kidnapping and forcible confinement, hostage taking, robbery, break and entering, and arson. The perpetrator is held to be guilty of murder whether or not she or he intended to cause the death.

Murder is classified as first or second degree. First-degree murder is gener-

ally regarded as a murder that is planned and deliberate. However, the CCC statutes on first-degree murder include acts where the death is both intended and unintended and where the accused both commits the offence and does not. With respect to the latter, "murder for hire," or contracting a murder, is considered first-degree murder, even though the person charged did not commit the actual offence. First-degree murder also includes deaths whether planned or not when the victim is a peace officer,⁴ or when the death is caused while the offender is committing or attempting to commit hijacking, sexual assault, kidnapping or forcible confinement, or hostage-taking. The CCC also includes as first-degree murder deaths that occur when committing criminal harassment and when an associate of a criminal organization uses explosives.

Second-degree murder is a residual category; it includes all murders that are not first-degree murder. Manslaughter is commonly understood as a reduced, or less serious, charge than murder, and its general definition is a culpable homicide that is not murder or infanticide. The CCC does allow for an act that would otherwise be defined as murder to be reduced to manslaughter when the act is committed in the "heat of passion" caused by provocation.

Another charge related to homicide is death caused by criminal negligence (CCC s. 220). In this case the accused can be convicted of either murder or manslaughter; the issue is whether the offender showed a wanton or reckless disregard for the lives or safety of others. For the conviction to be a murder conviction, the perpetrator must have intended to cause death or bodily harm. For a negligent homicide to be considered manslaughter, the issue of intent to cause death and/or bodily harm becomes critical. Criminal negligence charges that could result in a manslaughter charge include deaths resulting from drunk or reckless driving.

The CCC also stipulates that a person can be guilty of a homicide both when they commit an act and when they fail to act. Thus, a parent may be culpable in the death of their child not because they directly caused that death, but because they failed to protect their child from violence by another that they foresaw or ought to have foreseen. Similarly, one can be charged with homicide when one participates in a crime that results in a death at the hands of a co-criminal.

Our case studies include young people who were convicted of first-degree murder, second-degree murder, and manslaughter. Some of them committed the actual murders. Others were charged and convicted when

they were involved indirectly in events that resulted in deaths. For some, simply being present in a location where a homicide occurred and not acting to stop it was enough to result in conviction. In some of these situations, participants reported that they felt unable to stop the events. In most, they didn't try. Finally, some of these offenders were convicted of murder because of criminal negligence—for example, drunk driving causing deaths.

Theoretical Understandings of Youth Homicide

While youth homicide is rare in Canada, it is an event that raises substantial concern, anger, and fear. Why do “kids” kill? In answering this question, it is important to recognize that youth homicides are not homogenous events—there are different types of homicides.⁵ Homicides vary according to the type of victim. Some victims are family members (parents, siblings, grandparents, etc.), some are strangers, and many are acquaintances (friends, schoolmates, and casual acquaintances). Homicides also vary in the context in which they occur: during the commission of a crime,⁶ motivated by hate or bias, revenge killings, and senseless killings for “thrills.”⁷

Despite this diversity, Marvin Wolfgang and Franco Ferracuti remind us that what unites homicides is that they are all acts of violence.⁸ While this is helpful in framing a study of homicide, it begs the question: why are human beings violent? Wolfgang and Ferracuti argue that the extent to which any individual is violent (either lethally or sub-lethally) is learned (that is, we are socialized to use or not use violence).⁹ What factors impact on an individual's socialization to use violence? Traditional approaches focus on the ability of social institutions (the family, school, neighbourhood, community, peers) to provide individuals with non-violent means to resolve conflicts, with vocabularies of motives to support non-violence, and with the means to meet their needs without violence. While we recognize the importance of institutional factors in violence, we argue that socialization to violence begins with macro-social factors and is mediated through individual capabilities. Macro-social factors—such as the organization of production, social definitions of youth, and state policies—contribute indirectly to the likelihood of any member of society committing violence through their impact on the social institutions (the family, schools, peers, religious institutions, communities, and neighbourhoods) that provide people with the knowledge, skills, norms, and abilities they require. Finally, socialization depends upon the individuals' capabilities (their biological and

psychological make-up). These factors combine (interact) to increase the risk of young people becoming involved in crime. Eron *et al.* sum up this position as follows:

As the individual child develops and matures, he or she learns how to interpret the surrounding world as hostile or benevolent, how to solve interpersonal problems in pro-social or in anti-social and violent ways, how to manage or mismanage frustration, and how to meet emotional, social, and physical needs through either legal or illegal means. This learning takes place in multiple contexts: in the family, school, peer group, neighbourhood, and larger community, each of which are affected by social and cultural forces in society at large.¹⁰

Socialization contributes to the development of particular attitudes towards violence in certain children. However, it also impacts on the kinds of situations that these children find themselves in and hence indirectly on their risk of both using violence and becoming its victim.¹¹ As we shall see, situations are often a key factor in the culmination of violence in a death.

While our integrated approach argues that homicide and violent behaviour are the outcome of individual, social, and situational factors, most existing theories, primarily from Britain and the US, tend to focus exclusively on biological/physiological, psychological, or social factors as leading to violent and deadly outcomes, but fail to integrate these important areas. However, individuals are born with certain bio-social psychological features and exist within socio-cultural locations. These locations impact profoundly on how any particular child “turns out.” A bio-social psychological approach integrates all significant factors related to child and adolescent development and contextualizes violent behaviour within life experiences. Figure 1.1 summarizes these factors.

We argue in this book that young people are not born killers. Rather, over their life course, their experiences, their emotional responses to them, and their behavioural choices come together to place them in situations where homicides are likely to occur. While the choices made are important, it is critical to note that these are *constrained* choices: constrained by life experiences and by each person’s unique abilities. It is critical to recognize that there are multiple pathways to involvement in homicide. Children have different biological make-ups. Some face biologically based problems, such as Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS); others have brain injuries that limit their ability to cope. They also experience different kinds of negative social

events—poverty, neglect, abuse, family violence, bullying, and teasing—and they struggle to deal with them in a variety of ways. They have differential access to positive social support. Families, communities, school, health, and social services supports vary from young person to young person. All too often these institutions fail to identify the problems facing young children or they are unable or unwilling to respond to them. Children themselves have different skills and abilities that influence their ability to respond to adversity. Some are very resilient and survive well despite serious trouble; others are unable to cope in pro-social ways with their pain and trauma.

Generally, children learn a variety of ways for dealing with the pain, frustration, isolation, and other negative feelings they experience. These patterns of behaviour lead some to engage in behaviours that put them “at risk” to harm themselves and others. Most do not set out to kill.

None of these factors alone will cause a youth to use serious violence; instead, the presence of many of these factors *in interaction* can dramatically increase this likelihood.¹² In addition, wider social features (macro-sociological features of a society) and the immediate situations impact on homicide events.

Macro-level Factors: The Role of Poverty, Gender, and Race

How do macro-sociological factors impact on the ability of institutions to socialize children into positive (non-violent, non-deviant) roles? How do they impact on the failure of these institutions to meet these goals? There is considerable evidence that violence, including homicide, is a consequence of socio-economic factors, particularly economic inequality¹³ and labour markets.¹⁴ The social definition of youth is an important macro-level factor in shaping youth violence.¹⁵ Gender also plays a pivotal role, as males are more likely than females to use violence generally and lethal violence in particular. Although race has been a critical concern, many researchers argue that it is a “mask” for broader social factors related to poverty, as well as to community and familial disruption, which are more common in some minority communities. Finally, government policies also impact on the ability of institutions to socialize children away from violence.

Poverty

Poverty can aggravate any number of the social psychological factors discussed in this chapter, creating conditions conducive to extreme youth

CHAPTER ONE: THEORIES OF YOUTH HOMICIDE

Individual Factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Pregnancy and delivery complications; low birth weight; FAS/FAE; developmental delays.▶ Girls: internalizing disorders (nervousness/withdrawal, anxiety, eating disorders, suicidal behaviour, self-mutilation).▶ Boys: externalizing disorders (hyperactivity, concentration problems, restlessness, risk taking, aggression).▶ Early initiation of violent behaviour.▶ Involvement in other forms of antisocial behaviour.▶ Beliefs and attitudes favourable to deviant or antisocial behaviour.
Family Factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Parental criminality.▶ Child maltreatment.▶ Poor family management practices (neglect, poor supervision, severe and inconsistent discipline, unclear expectations).▶ Low levels of parental involvement.▶ Poor family bonding and conflict.▶ Parental attitudes favourable to substance abuse and violence.▶ Residential mobility (frequent moves).▶ Stress (unemployment, social isolation, lack of resources).▶ Parent-child separation, leaving home at early age.
School Factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Academic failure.▶ Low bonding at school (low commitment and educational aspirations).▶ Truancy and dropping out of school.▶ Frequent school transitions.▶ High delinquency rate of students at school.
Peer-related Factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Delinquent siblings.▶ Delinquent peers.▶ Gang membership.
Community and Neighbourhood Factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Poverty.▶ Community disorganization (presence of crime, drug-selling, gangs, poor housing).▶ Availability of drugs and guns.▶ Exposure to violence (home, elsewhere) and racial discrimination.

Figure 1.1: Summary of Youth Violence Risk Factors¹⁶

violence. Many studies have suggested the link between low socio-economic status and physical violence. Findings are generally attributed to the higher levels of stress and the lack of access to relevant resources to remedy prevalent problems associated with living in poverty (for example, physical and mental illness, unemployment, substance abuse, parenting difficulties, crime, etc.). It must be noted that poverty alone does not cause violence; the vast majority of low-income individuals are peaceful citizens. However, it is one important mediating factor.

At the macro-level, inequality and poverty combine to lessen the ability of institutions, such as the family, to meet the needs of young people. Macro-level changes in the economy are associated with the availability of entry-level, low-skill jobs and the potential for social mobility. The loss of entry-level jobs tends to raise unemployment:¹⁷ one consequence of limited employment opportunities is poverty. Poverty denies people access to traditional sources of status and respect. This may have a number of profound impacts not only on individuals, but also on their ability to parent children. Poor parents are at greater risk for feelings of shame, humiliation, and disrespect—all antecedents to violence.¹⁸ These feelings affect their parenting skills.

It is important to recognize that families across the socio-economic spectrum may be unable to meet the needs of their children—child abuse and neglect may also result when parents are stressed, addicts, alcoholic, mentally ill, or emotionally disturbed. It is the combination of both family breakdown and poverty that contributes to the risk that young people will become involved in violence. Research indicates that in poor households parents are often less able to monitor children and to provide them with positive role models,¹⁹ due, in part, to the overwhelming number of single-parent households living in poverty. It is simply more difficult for a single parent than for two-parent households to adequately supervise children. Such families are also less able to provide their children with the skills, capabilities, and knowledge they need.²⁰ This often leads to conflict with the educational system, as children not only lack basic skills and knowledge, but things such as homework, permission slips, or information packages are not completed. Poor families may also have problems providing their children with adequate nutrition. Poor nutrition contributes to disruptive behaviour and poor performance in schools. The result is that children lack the social capital (skills, knowledge, and capabilities) they require to succeed in mainstream society. This lack of social capital has been linked to involvement in crime, violence, and homicide.²¹

Changes in economic opportunities impact directly on youth violence and homicide, although the specific patterns vary from urban centre to urban centre.²² Two of the three cities in Crutchfield *et al.*'s study had a persistent underclass, which resulted in higher homicide rates. In the third city changes in the structure of the job market negatively impacted on employment opportunities and increased homicide. The declining availability of low-skill, entry-level jobs has resulted, internationally, in higher rates of unemployment and indirectly on higher crime and homicide

rates,²³ suggesting that a decline in access to low-skill jobs affects violence indirectly through increasing economic deprivation.²⁴ Lack of entry-level employment opportunities are particularly important for youth violence and homicide because high-risk youth are most likely, given their lack of social capital, to be looking for such low-skill, entry-level jobs.

Gender

Gender role socialization—that is, the development of socially appropriate gender (masculine and feminine) behaviour—has an impact on violence. In general hegemonic masculinity is associated with many of the following characteristics: power, independence, aggression, dominance, heterosexuality, and violence. Femininity is portrayed as related to dependence, nurturing, passivity, serving others, and maintenance of social relationships. Although these are gross overgeneralizations, the common themes are undeniable. What does this have to do with violence and murder? Gender role socialization theory offers important insights into gendered differences in violent behaviour by explaining why it is that males commit by far the majority of physical and sexual violence, particularly the most serious forms of violence. It indicates that there are significant differences in the causes, forms, and consequences of violent behaviour by male and female youth.

Gender role socialization supports young men's utilitarian approach to violence and their use of violence, including the initiation of unprovoked attacks. In contrast, young women are discouraged from using violence. As a consequence, young men are more likely to be charged with violent crimes in Canada and are more likely to engage in unprovoked violence. Further, the injuries sustained by the victims of male violence tend to be more serious than those sustained by victims of female violence. Clearly, some young women do kill, and some engage in unprovoked violence. However, their numbers pale in comparison to their male counterparts. This research suggests that it is how we socialize boys to be male that leads to their increased risk of engaging in violent behaviour.

Generally, young people who engage in this behaviour hold rigid, traditional gender beliefs. It must be stressed that many people who hold these beliefs are not violent and that only a handful of those who are actually commit murder. Again it is a combination of factors that increases the risk of violence. When a young person adheres to rigid gender roles and also has exposure to a variety of the other risk factors discussed here, the likelihood of serious violence dramatically escalates. Male youth who perceive

that they are unable to achieve the traditional entitlements of power and privilege associated with masculinity (for example, a high paying job, material possessions, sexual relations with desirable females, success in academic/social/athletic pursuits, respect, and status) are at particular risk.²⁵ Many boys who kill adhere to traditional roles and are “caught” in situations in which they are unable to achieve the entitlements of those roles. These young men often report feelings of being “disrespected,” shamed, and humiliated by others and by their circumstances. They may act violently to give themselves the power they lack in their personal lives and have been socialized to expect.

Race

While most research on race, violence, and homicide is American, there is concern about race and crime in Canada. We share with our American neighbour an overrepresentation of visible minorities in our jails and prisons. Aboriginal peoples are particularly at risk for involvement with the criminal justice system.²⁶ How does race factor into involvement in violence and homicide? Parker and Pruitt claim that apparent racial differences in homicide in the western and southern US are accounted for not by race but by differences in structural and cultural forces. However, in a second study they note that poverty and growing up in areas of high poverty (poverty concentration) do vary by race,²⁷ suggesting that the impact of social conditions varies by racial group. Lee argues that racial differences in homicide reflect the measures used, *not* real differences.²⁸ Thus, blacks and whites growing up in similarly poor conditions are both at greater risk for involvement in homicides. The effects may be stronger for blacks, which is not surprising, given that these individuals are also dealing with problems related to racism. In the Canadian context race issues are similarly compounded by experiences of poverty, family disruption, and drug and alcohol abuse.²⁹ There are no Canadian homicide statistics by racial group, so it remains unclear if Aboriginal Canadians or other visible minorities are more likely to be charged and/or convicted of homicide in Canada.

Policy

Perhaps one of the most important areas of the macro-sociological structure affecting crime is how state policies, such as cuts to spending on education and social services or new policies on who is eligible or ineligible for aid, impact on social institutions. These, in turn, can affect factors like unemployment, lack of employment skills, poverty, and family break-up.

For example, it has been reported that the restructuring of the Canadian welfare system resulted in increased unemployment, poverty, and community instability in Atlantic Canada.³⁰ Changes in social welfare policy have led to increased homelessness among the young;³¹ homelessness is highly correlated to substance abuse and involvement in violence and other illegal activities.³² Social welfare policy in the US has had unintended, negative consequences. For example, the failure to extend social welfare support to family members other than parents caring for minor children too often results in putting families at financial risk.³³ On the positive side, programs such as "I Have A Dream" (IHAD), which offers long-term financial, academic, and social support to youth in grade six, has been enormously successful in keeping young people in school.³⁴ The negative effects of economic marginalization and higher youth crime rates in the post-Fordist global economy on low-income groups can be mitigated by political policies.³⁵

While we do not examine policy initiatives in depth here, it is important to note that policy decisions play an important role in shaping the life-situations of young people and hence on their risk of involvement in high-risk behaviour. The examination of changing Canadian policy and the loss of the social safety net is a study in itself.

Social Institutions: Neighbourhoods, Families, Schools, Peers, and Media

Neighbourhoods

Research has shown that neighbourhoods are important in meeting citizens' social needs.³⁶ Crime, a mirror of the quality of the social environment in which people live, is increased in poor neighbourhoods.³⁷ How do neighbourhoods impact on crime? One key feature of the social environment is the kind of institutions they attract. Poorer neighbourhoods have difficulty attracting conventional institutions, such as recreational facilities,³⁸ which provide young people with positive sites not only for recreational activities but also for socialization and the development of positive social skills. Communities can reduce violence by developing a larger base of certain types of institutions (such as recreation centres) and preventing the encroachment of negative institutions (such as bars or strip clubs). However, attracting positive institutions and preventing the encroachment of others requires support, including municipal government support through by-laws prohibiting certain institutions in residential neighbourhoods and through funds for recreational and other facilities.³⁹

There are other features of neighbourhoods that impact negatively on youth crime. Neighbourhoods with low population stability, inadequate housing, and high population density are more likely to be violent and to have more homicides,⁴⁰ perhaps because they contain sites that are more or less conducive to violence.⁴¹ Such neighbourhoods lack social cohesion; their citizens have few ties to one another and lack a sense of responsibility for what occurs around them, resulting in an increased vulnerability to violent crime.⁴² The lack of social trust has been linked to homicide, suggesting that in these neighbourhoods mobility, poverty, and high population density may impact on social trust.⁴³

Families

Families are affected by the socio-economic conditions in society and communities. In turn, family dynamics impact on the development of young people. Exposure to family violence, child abuse, and neglect are all correlated with an individual's use of violence as a teenager and as an adult.⁴⁴ Neglect, deprivation, and witnessing violence (both in person and through the media) all contribute to the risk that young people will become involved in murder.⁴⁵

Social learning theory provides important insights into violent behaviour, by suggesting that violence is not an innate characteristic; instead, it is learned through interpersonal modelling (both inside and outside the family) and exposure to violent imagery in other sectors of society. Victimization by serious and prolonged physical, sexual, and emotional abuse in childhood can result in many mental health and behavioural problems, including depression, low self-esteem, self-destructive and criminal behaviour, aggression, and violence. Witnessing chronic and severely abusive behaviour between caregivers has similar results on many children. Boys who experience these forms of abuse have a significantly higher likelihood of becoming violent themselves, whereas girls tend to experience ongoing victimization by suffering abuse in their later interpersonal relationships.⁴⁶

However, experiencing serious violence in the home, on its own, does not cause one to engage in serious violence. In fact, most children who grow up in families like these are not violent, and some individuals who do not experience abuse at home become violent. The impact of dysfunctional families on violence can be mitigated by other institutional supports young people can turn to—recreational opportunities, supportive schools, and peers with intact and supportive families. In sum, the surrounding institutions and young people's relationship to them can combine with

negative family experiences to increase the risk of violent and other risky behaviours, or can help to lessen them.

Schools

School problems and early school leaving (dropping out) are linked to youth involvement in crime. For example, it has been found that among skinheads, use of violence is exacerbated by negative school experiences.⁴⁷ Education has a direct influence on criminal involvement; early school leaving contributes to the risk of young people being involved in crime.⁴⁸ Most juvenile homicide offenders do not do well in school.⁴⁹

Schools are supposed to provide young people with the social capital (skills, knowledge, and capabilities) necessary for competing in the wider social world. These include reading, writing, and communication skills, base knowledge, and assessments of ability. When young people fail at school or drop out, they do not gain the necessary certifications and skills to work at many jobs. As a result, they are closed out of (legitimate) well-paying jobs and future education and training programs. These youth depend on low-skilled, entry-level jobs. One alternative is jobs in high risk, criminal enterprises, such as dealing drugs, breaking and entering, car thefts, and robbery. What moves young people to choose these occupations is a complex combination of factors, but it is the combination of the youths' immediate circumstance with their past socialization in the family and community that makes them more or less susceptible to taking a criminal pathway in adolescence and early adulthood.

Most youth involved in violent crime have experienced failure at school, because of learning difficulties, bullying or being victimized by bullies, attention-deficit and conduct disorders, and other such reasons. The result is often a pattern of grade failure, frequent suspensions, absenteeism, and dropping out altogether. Again, the problems in school by themselves may not lead young people to become involved in crime. In some cases they reflect abuse, neglect, and violence at home, while in other cases the cause is a failure to identify the problem early and/or a failure to respond effectively to these problems.

School completion supports a healthy socialization process and development of academic and vocational interests and credentials. School also provides structured daytime activities. The absence of this structure increases the risk that young people will become involved in crime and violence.

Peers

Our social definition of youth impacts on the kinds of activities in which youth engage and the individuals with whom they come into contact. These social definitions are reflected both in the laws that make education compulsory and in the criminal justice system response to young people through a separate court system. We have increasingly segregated young people into same-age peer-groups, initially within the school setting. The result of this has been the growing importance of the peer group as a location for youth socialization.⁵⁰ These peer groups contribute to the kinds of choices young people make and the risk that a young person may become involved in crime.⁵¹ Most youth in Canada belong to *groups* of friends, which are a positive, healthy influence upon their social and emotional development. Groups can provide acceptance, identity, self-affirmation, and support young people in their transition from dependent childhood, through the difficult stage of adolescence, into independent adulthood.⁵²

However, on a negative side, some peer groups can and do provide other youth with information on how to commit crimes (contacts, tools, skills "training"), with a vocabulary of motive and with a set of normative values that support their activities. Involvement in peer group activities, particularly the use and abuse of alcohol and other drugs, contributes to youth involvement in criminal activities. Youth who use and abuse drugs and alcohol are more likely to carry weapons and to engage in violent behaviour.⁵³ Association with delinquent peers can place youth at risk for criminal involvement, while association with positive peers can assist in protecting youth from involvement in crime.⁵⁴

Gender is an important factor in determining which peers young people associate with, and the resulting risk of their engaging in violent behaviour. For male youth, associations with violent male peers can lead to serious violence, often collective in nature. The collective provides youth with "techniques of neutralization,"⁵⁵ which allow them to carry on with their lives while engaging in deviant activity. Males who engage in serious violence do not identify their behaviour as wrong; instead, they argue that their values and actions are guided by a superior morality and are the *only* course of action given their situation. Their description of violence has been termed a "vocabulary of adjustment,"⁵⁶ in which the social unacceptability of their behaviour is denied through the sophisticated use of justifications.

Often when people hear about groups of delinquent youth they assume these are youth gangs. This is not the reality. Very few adolescents in

Canada belong to hard-core criminal youth gangs. The key difference between a group and a gang is the gang's high degree of organization for violent, criminal objectives. A youth gang is a group of three or more youth whose members routinely commit serious crimes and regularly engage in serious acts of violence. Hard-core gangs are highly organized, have some degree of permanence, and usually protect an identified "turf" (related to crime, the drug trade, and/or a geographic area). Members must demonstrate allegiance to the gang, abide by its code of honour, and use common hand signals, clothing, graffiti, and vocabulary.⁵⁷ Visible and ethnic minority youth, who face blocked opportunities in school and employment, are at an increased likelihood of joining such hard-core criminal gangs.⁵⁸

Again, it is important to note that association with violent peers is only one factor in explaining youth violence. Many of these youth are economically and socially marginal and find excitement and adventure through extreme violence, which allows them to express their anger and frustration. They view their environment as intolerable and hostile and see themselves as having no value. They have no anchor to their family and community and no sense of broader social purpose in their lives. Internalized norms regarding the impact of harming others are lacking. The varied societal agents of socialization have collectively failed these young people.⁵⁹

The Media

The modelling of violent behaviour also occurs through the media. Certain elements of television, music videos, video games, movies, pornography, sports, and the military glorify violence and contribute to a desensitization among viewers. Frequent exposure to these images can result in violent and aggressive behaviour by viewers who closely identify with the situations and/or central figures. The negative effects of repeated exposure to these forms of violence can be mediated by the stable presence of an adult mentor, who provides an alternative, healthy role model throughout a young person's life. As with the other factors discussed above, however, exposure to these images on their own is not enough to cause a young person to engage in serious violence.

Individual Factors

It is not simply the impact of macro-sociological factors on various social institutions that results in homicides; there are other important factors.

Individual agency plays a critical role. Often when we speak of the role of the individual in criminal behaviour, we imagine an individual who is “genetically” driven to commit crime. It is true that there are physiological theories on extreme violence that focus on genetic factors, including brain structure and hormones, as causes of crime.⁶⁰ However, more common are intrapsychic theories that explore the attributes of individual personality features—including personality disorders, addiction, fear of intimacy or abandonment, depression, other psychiatric illnesses, and learning disabilities—on criminal behaviour. However, once again, these individual problems do not exist in isolation. Learning disabilities can be problematic when the school system is unable to identify and/or respond to them. Thus, it is the combination of learning disabilities with the response to them that places children at risk for school failure, dropping out, and problems gaining access to legitimate occupations. As well, individuals vary in their susceptibility to drugs and alcohol. These variations can have profound consequences for the risk of addictions and the subsequent likelihood of young people becoming involved in both crime and dangerous situations.

Most youth with significant psychological or psychiatric problems are not violent. It is only a minority of seriously violent youth who have a diagnosed mental illness, although many youth who commit homicides have experienced psychological problems. These include periods of emotional distress, feelings of low self-worth, or chronic, low-grade depression (mostly undiagnosed). In addition, many engage in self-destructive behaviours including suicide attempts, slashing and cutting with knives and razors, and substance abuse.⁶¹ These factors, combined with feelings of shame, humiliation, and disrespect, are related to their use of violence. Further, many of these problems originate from having suffered or witnessed abuse and/or neglect as a child and become aggravated in the absence of appropriate supports to address them. But, even factoring in all these dimensions, not all youth with such problems nor those who have been exposed to maltreatment become involved in violence. This is because young people vary in their resilience.

Resilience is the ability of individuals living in adverse conditions to achieve positive outcomes.⁶² It is through resilience that the combination of societal level, institutional, and individual factors⁶³ to which young people are exposed result in positive and negative outcomes. It is important to recognize that diverse outcomes are possible for young people living in similar negative life situations. The key is the ability of individual, family, schools, and community to mitigate the risk factors. For example, young

people who live in abusive families but have positive community supports (e.g., access to recreational activities), and/or positive support within the school setting (e.g., high achievement and/or supportive teachers), and/or particular individual attributes (e.g., perseverance, determination, intellectual ability, athletic ability) create some protection against the risks of experiencing family violence (i.e., risk of using violence themselves or of delinquency). But what can we expect from a typical young person, with average skills and abilities? When these young people live in situations where the community, schools, and family are all unable to provide needed support and guidance, they are likely to remain at high risk, a risk that can be exacerbated by contact with delinquent peers and engagement in activities such as drug and alcohol use. This can begin a pathway to involvement in violent activities and to an individual's involvement in a homicide.

The Homicide Context: The Micro-Environment of Homicide

Thus far we have focussed on perpetrators of homicide. It is important to note that almost all young people who experience the personal and social disruptions discussed above do not commit homicides. Linking these factors with actual offending requires us to consider the context in which the homicide occurs. Every crime has a history of events that precede it, a place where it occurs, and a socio-cultural context that defines it.⁶⁴ Youth homicides are more likely to occur when there is a weapon present, during the commission of another crime, and when the perpetrator and/or the victim(s) are intoxicated.⁶⁵ Victims are at risk for a variety of reasons: because of where they are (e.g., in locations where drugs and alcohol are consumed), or who they are ("attractive" targets who offer valuable possessions, or who are unable to defend themselves, or who are alone with no one to defend them).⁶⁶

To the extent that conflict results in homicide, the management of conflict can be critical to determining whether or not a homicide occurs. Consuming drugs and alcohol can contribute to the escalation of conflict.⁶⁷ The presence of a third person can lead to the escalation of conflict or it can contribute to reducing it,⁶⁸ hence decreasing the risk for homicide.

The relationship between the victim and the perpetrator also impacts on homicides.⁶⁹ Girls are more likely than boys to kill a family member. However, most youth homicides are committed against strangers, often during the commission of another crime.⁷⁰ Youth are more likely to kill other youth.⁷¹

Lifestyle-exposure theory suggests that the more time an individual spends in risky situations the greater their risk of victimization. Lifestyle choices can increase risk—this includes decisions on alcohol/drug consumption, peers, and choice of recreational activities. It is important to note that a homicide may be a culmination of poor choices but not necessarily of lethal intent—although it may also be the result of lethal intent. Distinguishing these features is important for responding to the young person and to the crime, and for prevention.

Notes

- 1 Pseudonyms are used with all participants to maintain anonymity. For a discussion of other measures taken to ensure anonymity, see p. 31.
- 2 Ewing, 1990, 13.
- 3 Under the CCC, there are three categories of sexual assault: level 1 sexual assault (incidents which include the least bodily harm to the victim), level 2 (with a weapon, threatening to use a weapon, or inflicting bodily harm), and level 3 (aggravated sexual assault, resulting in injury, mutilation and disfigurement or endangering the life of a victim).
- 4 The term “peace officer” includes police officers, police constables, constables, sheriffs, deputy sheriffs, wardens, deputy wardens, jailers, guards, and a permanent employee of a prison acting in the course of his/her duties.
- 5 Avakame, 1998; Ewing, 1990; Myers, 1994.
- 6 Cheatwood and Block, 1990; Ewing, 1990; Heide, 1999.
- 7 Heide, 1999; Ewing, 1990.
- 8 Wolfgang and Ferracuti, 1976.
- 9 *ibid.*
- 10 Eron *et al.*, 1994, 25.
- 11 Hindelang, Gottfredson, and Garofalo, 1978; Cohen and Felson, 1979; Miethe and Meier, 1994.
- 12 Totten, 2000a.
- 13 Hagan, 1994; Kennedy *et al.*, 1998; Lee and Bankston, 1999; Lourie *et al.*, 1995; Parker and Pruitt, 2000.
- 14 Crutchfield *et al.*, 1999; Lee and Shihadeh, 1998; Shihadeh and Ousey, 1998.
- 15 Tanner, 1996; Acland, 1995; Smandych, 1995; Minor, 1993.
- 16 Based upon Hawkins *et al.*, 1998; and Totten, 2001c.
- 17 Lee and Shihadeh, 1998.
- 18 Wilkinson, Kawachi, and Kennedy, 1998.
- 19 Lipman, Offord, and Dooley, 1996.