

Causes of Violent Criminality in Society

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Violence has been a character of the human evolution since the beginning of time (Siegel, 2013). Some anthropologists have tracked the origin of violence back to our ancestors, and early human civilization, by evaluating artifacts left behind by specific civilizations like Ancient Mesopotamians and Babylonians (Siegel, 2013). The primal human would not hesitate to attack with violence (Siegel, 2013). It was customary for tribal members to shield other tribal members using violence or force to control activities within, and outside of the tribes (Siegel, 2013). Violence was a means of survival for them (Siegel, 2013). Criminologist study many different ideologies of violent behaviors (Levitt, 2013). They typically research the following questions when evaluating violence: what causes a person to have violent outbursts? Is being violent a mental impairment, illness, or disorder? Are we predisposed to criminality by some trait or gene? Is there something subconsciously inside of humanity that makes an individual violent? Do we live in a world where we can control the antisocial behavior of our children by taking care of our bodies when pregnant? Alternatively, is the environment a place where individuals learn to be violent? In 1977, George Engel wrote an essay advocating a new model of crime identified as the biopsychosocial model (Nordstrom, 2011). This model integrates “*the biological view of the subject, their psychological state of mind, and the social background in which they occur*” (Nordstrom, 2011).

One single element does not cause violence, but a combination of biology, psychology, and sociology serve as precursors to potential violence (Nordstrom, 2011). Many criminologists speculate the reasons of personal and societal violence (Siegel, 2013). Research shows that our pre-history ancestors were violent out of necessity and need for survival (Siegel, 2013). A mental

impairment, illness, or disorder correlates with antisocial behavior, and also causes violent behavior in association with the need for survival; however, it usually does not affect large percentages of a population (Siegel, 2013).

There are also biological phenotypes associated with the human brain that cause antisocial behaviors (Nordstrom, 2011). The frontal lobe and occipital areas may contribute to lack of reasoning and violence if there is a mutation, birth defect, or chemical imbalance in these areas (Nordstrom, 2011). There are also inherited natural inclinations for criminal behavior, typically seen for survival, however with evolution have mutated to cause a variety of personality disorders, stress disorders, and other psychiatric disorders (Nordstrom, 2011). We have instinctual drives that subconsciously propel us to behave a certain way depending on our environments (Siegel, 2013).

Research also concludes that exposure to alcohol and tobacco smoke, while in utero, have effects on children during developmental stages that may cause delinquent and behavioral problems as they are growing (LaPrairie, 2011). Lastly, there are diverse social and environmental events that create risk factors for criminality (Nordstrom, 2011).

One question many researchers ask is whether mental illnesses or impairments have a direct effect on crime and violence (Siegel, 2013). A method for testing the effectiveness and responsibility of different brain areas is neuropsychological testing (Nordstrom, 2011). A very consistent finding in neuropsychology is that some antisocial individuals may have lower verbal IQs compared to non-antisocial individuals (Nordstrom, 2011). Studies show children with verbal deficits at age 13 predict delinquency at age 18 (Nordstrom, 2011). Moreover, research also reveals that a certain percentage of individuals who have committed homicide tend to have

neurological impairments, low intelligence levels, and inadequate or improper treatment for mental illness prior to their criminal acts (Siegel, 2013). Many offenders who have a history of cruelty to animals also tend to show signs of aggression, antisocial behaviors, personality disorders, and dissociative disorders (Siegel, 2013).

Current research shows a compelling correlation between psychological instability and violence; suggesting a need for further research on the impact of untreated mental illness, crime, and violence (Siegel, 2013). According to the American Psychological Association, 2014, there has been a global drop in crime rate, which could be due to the expanding treatment of mental health issues across the world. However, there continues to be a great need to advance treatment to decrease potentially crime and violence associated with mental illness (American Psychological Association, 2014).

Researchers do not have one standard diagnosis that will identify criminal behavior (Nordstrom, 2011). Children with conduct disorder (CD) or oppositional defiant disobedience (ODD) tend to have brain abnormalities that create increased risks for antisocial behavior (Rubia, 2011). CD occurs within a 6-to 12-month period before the age of 18 (Rubia, 2011). CD is defined by “*the infringement of the interests of others and communal regulations, and the continual display of antisocial behaviors such as, deceitfulness, stealing, defacing property, and violence*” (Rubia, 2011). CD is a risk factor for antisocial personality disorder in adulthood (Rubia, 2011).

According to Rubia, 2011, “*ODD is portrayed by a continuous model of unruly, insubordinate, noncompliant, and violent behavior toward authority.*” Before the age of 10, there is a significant risk for criminality into adulthood the earlier the onset of ODD (Rubia, 2011).

Having either one of these two mental disorders as a child sets the stage for antisocial behavior as an adult (Rubia, 2011). However, mental impairments, illnesses, and disorders are just a small part of the puzzle of violent criminality (Rubia, 2011).

Another hypothesis is the belief that personal traits predispose certain individuals to crime and criminal behavior (Siegel, 2013). The study of criminology has been using neuroanatomy since the early 18<sup>th</sup> century (Nordstrom, 2011). Computerized axial tomography (CAT) scans and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scans are the two main neuroimaging devices used to see images of the brain (Nordstrom, 2011). A CAT scan allows easier access to see the differences between bone, fluid, and brain tissue (Nordstrom, 2011). An MRI scan allows easier access to see the difference between the gray and white matter of the brain (Nordstrom, 2011).

Criminals have had much research done on their brains (Nordstrom, 2011). One study gave CAT scans to sexual sadists, and about half of them had some abnormal brain structure (Nordstrom, 2011). Another research study was of CAT scans and MRI scans on nineteen murder suspects (Nordstrom, 2011). The study concluded that half of them had atrophic brains from both scans (Nordstrom, 2011). Moreover, a third study, on violent psychiatric inpatients, found that the six out of ten of them had atrophic temporal regions (Nordstrom, 2011). These studies show that violent criminality may stem from biological traits (Nordstrom, 2011). However, there are many other theories of violent behavior in the criminal justice field.

According to Nordstrom, 2011, there are strong correlations between genetic predisposition and juvenile delinquency. One specific gene cannot cause criminality by itself, but groupings of genes can create internal and external risk factors for criminality (Nordstrom,

2011). Comparing specific frequencies in different sets of biological siblings, with which aggression and antisocial behavior has been identified; is just one way to study the genetic components of criminal behaviors (Nordstrom, 2011). Monozygotic, also known as, '*identical twins*' come from one fertilized egg; which means their genes are identical (Nordstrom, 2011). Dizygotic, also known as, '*fraternal, twins*' come from two eggs, and share half of the amount of genes, as if they were common, biological siblings (Nordstrom, 2011). When both twins exhibit antisocial behavior, concordance in terms of criminal behavior is evident (Nordstrom, 2011). However, when only one of the twins exhibits signs of antisocial behavior, discordance in terms of criminal behavior is relevant (Nordstrom, 2011). Comparing concordance and discordance can show whether antisocial behavior is hereditary (Nordstrom, 2011). A study of 605 economically and ethnically diverse families, of 9- and 10-year-old twins and triplets, was conducted to determine genetic criminal behaviors (Nordstrom, 2011). The study showed that there was a strong heritability of criminal behavior (Nordstrom, 2011). When it comes to criminality, another way to study genetics versus the environment is by adoption studies. (Nordstrom, 2011). One study found genetic links to alcoholism, but not criminal behavior, while another found conformation for heritability of criminality in the same year (Nordstrom, 2011). Two more studies showed a strong genetic propensity for later in life criminal behavior (Nordstrom, 2011). With conflicting research results, genetics cannot be the sole cause of criminality (Levitt, 2013).

However, what about the theory of the unconscious drive to violent behavior? Sigmund Freud was the founder of psychoanalysis (Beer, 2015). He believed that "*a universal factor of psychoanalytic criminological theory focuses on unconscious process, drives and instincts used*

*to manage them which operate in the unconscious mind, are unstable and lead to antisocial and criminal behavior”* (Nordstrom, 2011). Freud swayed between two different ways of explaining behavior (Beer, 2015). According to Freud, we have two instinctual drives we carry from our ancestors (Siegel, 2013). ‘*Eros*,’ the first instinctual drive, is believed to regulate the self-gratification drive (Siegel, 2013). It is the life instinct (Beer, 2015). ‘*Thanatos*,’ the second instinct, is the death instinct (Beer, 2015). It is the drive that regulates our external brutality and perversion, and internal suicide and self-destruction tendencies that may result in death (Siegel, 2013). In ancient Greek mythology, ‘*Thanatos*’ is the personification of death (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2015). He would carry humans off to the underworld when their time on earth was over (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2015). However, what about the people who are not violent? Why does their ‘*Thanatos*’ not show? Along with the behavior instinct, does the female human species have the instinct to take care of themselves and their unborn children?

It has been common knowledge for centuries that a mother’s health affects her unborn child (LaPrairie, 2011). Only recently, however, scientists have started to explore the advancement of aggression and fetal development (LaPrairie, 2011). Perinatal life events, including exposure to tobacco and alcohol, are risk factors for a life path of consistently high aggression (LaPrairie, 2011). The byproduct of smoking may alter the brain’s dopaminergic and noradrenergic systems and affect different brain structures (Nordstrom, 2011). Moreover, smoking causes low birth weight (LaPrairie, 2011). Aggressive and antisocial behaviors and low birth weight correlate with one another in boys (LaPrairie, 2011). Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) is not present in all children exposed to alcohol in utero (LaPrairie, 2011). The children who did not meet all of the requirements of FAS, had been exposed to high levels of alcohol, and were at

higher risk of criminal behaviors (Nordstrom, 2011). Furthermore, children born with FAS also have certain characteristics such as lying, showing impaired moral judgment, and demonstrating unawareness of the consequences of one's actions (LaPrairie, 2011). Do we blame an individual's criminality on issues that they cannot control? It is unfair and dangerous to say that the cause of one's violent criminal behavior is circumstances out of their control (Levitt, 2013).

American criminologists took a survey that showed criminologists of all doctrines viewed biosocial causes of crime, such as genetics and low intelligence, not as principal until they added the environmental theories (Levitt, 2013). However, there has been a surplus of funds dedicated to the study of finding a precursor to antisocial behavior (Levitt, 2013). There are hopes to one day find a "cure" to this behavior and reduce crime (Levitt, 2013). These groups of problem families or children would have unfair discrimination, and stigma (Levitt, 2013). This discrimination could affect school, employment, or family and social life (Levitt, 2013). While it would be motivating to find a cure for antisocial behavior, it could also prevent individuals from taking personal responsibility (Levitt, 2013). If tests for criminal behavior are delivered to children; especially before any signs of antisocial behavior were evident, it could weaken parents' beliefs that there are avenues for preventing crime and criminal behavior (Levitt, 2013). Even now, the United States uses evidence of genetic traits associated with criminal behavior for mitigating circumstance rather than aggravating (Levitt, 2013). Environmental explanations can also be used to close doors for those in poverty and disadvantaged (Levitt, 2013). However, biological explanations cause more of a concern because they are there at birth and are harder to change (Levitt, 2013).

Each group of criminologists make a valid argument, from conclusions of conducted research, for their belief on what causes violence in a person. However, the aim should be to analyze the internal and external causes of violent and antisocial behavior and to explore how the environment affects those types of behaviors (Levitt, 2013). Criminologists need to unite and study the interaction of biology, psychology, and sociology instead of focusing on one area.

Research shows that individuals asked if they met two children, one kind and polite and the other aggressive and violent, how do they believe the children came about to be that way (Levitt, 2013). Almost all respondents replied that the environment in which a child is brought up in, mainly the role that the parents play, shapes how a child will act and what kind of adult they will be (Levitt, 2013). When asked about a young person who displays antisocial behavior, they replied the upbringing as well (Levitt, 2013).

Moreover, when asked about an adult who has criminal convictions, they responded that once an adult, the individual is responsible for themselves (Levitt, 2013). While most answers were the environment, this does not mean that they did not include aspects of biology and psychology (Levitt, 2013). This study shows that most people feel the behavior of any kind is 60 percent sociology and 40 percent biology and psychology (Levitt, 2013). This study demonstrates that we need a combination of all studies, biology, psychology, and sociology to learn about violent behavior (Levitt, 2013).

Whether directly or indirectly, the issue of violent criminality affects everyone (LaPrairie, 2011). There are societal implications of aggressiveness resulting from antisocial behavior and delinquency (Lesch, 2012). Criminality and antisocial behavior are not only a burden to the individual, but to society as a whole (LaPrairie, 2011). The most severe cases cost

the United States upward of 2.3 million dollars (LaPrairie, 2011). Society has a vested interest in discovering which psychological and biological aspects predispose an individual to antisocial behavior and what social factors nurture them to cause the individual to become a violent offender (LaPrairie, 2011).

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, antisocial behavior is typically influenced by an interaction of biological, psychological, and social elements (Lesch, 2012). Research has shown that mental disorders, biological traits, and genes can all predispose an individual to violence (Nordstrom, 2011). However, this does not necessarily mean that each of these individuals with the biological and psychological markers will become violent offenders (Levitt, 2013). It is the environment in which an individual lives that allow these psychological and biological predispositions to grow into violent behaviors (Levitt, 2013). It is imperative that criminologists unite and stop looking to one answer for aggressive behavior. Further research is needed on the one concept that causes violent criminality, that of the biopsychosocial model.

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