Chapter 1: The Importance of Violent Offenders to Criminology

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"For some, the term career criminal is a label that will serve to further stigmatize and exacerbate the risk factors that chronic offenders experience. For others, this moniker is the mark of Cain."

-- Matt DeLisi
Introduction & Background

• For most of the 20th century, criminology floundered because it focused on normal processes and situations that were purported to cause people to be delinquent.

• During the 1960s – 1970s the causes of crime were even attributed to functional features of society.

• Sociological, specious, and liberal, criminology had an accreditability problem because its major theories of crime lacked the ring of truth – they were too academic.
Introduction & Background

• Between 1985 – 1993, three major works appeared that saved criminology

• Individually and collectively, these works have made a towering impact on the study of criminal behavior
Introduction & Background

• Wilson and Herrnstein articulated the idea that crime is fundamentally a matter of choice

• Therefore, rational choice theory and the thought-processes of individual actors are essential in understanding why some people use violence against others

• Wilson and Herrnstein suggested “the existence of biological predispositions means that circumstances that activate behavior in one person will not do so in another…”
Introduction & Background

• Gottfredson and Hirschi’s theory advanced that low self-control is the indispensable predictor of crime and violence received a similar reception for it occupied a similar niche

• They are very accomplished and influential academics who because they focused on individual-level factors to explain crime, went against the grain of the discipline

• *A General Theory of Crime* has single-handedly dominated criminological journals since 1990 racking up more than 1,100 citations
Introduction & Background

• Terrie Moffitt’s developmental taxonomy theory advances 2 offender prototypes
  1. A normative group who tend to engage in low levels of crime consisting of benign offenses during adolescence
  2. A pathological group whose antisocial behavior is chronic, frequent, serious, and violent

• Moffitt has advanced understanding of the interaction between nature and nurture in explaining crime and violence
This chapter explores 3 general contributions

1. As a result of the popularity, appeal, and empirical strength of these researchers, there has been a renewed emphasis on the individual as the rightful locus or place to explain criminal and violent behavior

2. There has been an increased recognition of criminality as an important way, perhaps the important way, to understand violent criminal behavior

3. There has been an increased appreciation for the diversity of criminals from an array of disciplinary perspectives
Current Focus

• With these new reformulations, criminology became a more believable and scientifically confident discipline

• This is because it disproportionately focuses scholarly attention on the most serious offenders, namely the violent offenders that pose the greatest threat to society
Reductionism & Violence

- To understand violent offenders, it’s imperative to understand individual-level factors, such as personality, temperament, self-control, temper, or psychopathy, that influence behavior.

  Reductionism: to boil scientific explanations down to a more fundamental unit of analysis.

- Thus, to understand violent offenders, it’s necessary to understand the characteristics that appear to typify violent offenders not just the statuses they might occupy.
Reductionism & Violence

• An interest in individuals as the unit of analysis to explain crime was a major contribution of Wilson and Herrnstein.

• Their work speaks to the pressing need to acknowledge constitutional features of people that powerfully affect how they choose to behave.

• According to Wilson and Herrnstein, “whatever factors contribute to crime... they must all affect the behavior of individuals, if they are to affect crime. If people differ in their tendency to commit crime, we must express those differences in terms of how some array of factors affects their individual decisions.”
Reductionism & Violence

- Even as children and adolescents, violent offenders are noteworthy for their callous and emotional traits which reflect low empathetic concern for others, little guilt or anxiety over misdeeds, and limited emotional range.

- Violent offenders are often removed by normal human emotions and connectedness to others – that they are so unempathetic facilitates their ability to harm others.

- When criminogenic traits are so apparent early in life, and when they accompany violent or antisocial behaviors, it’s likely that their etiology stems from the offenders themselves.
Criminality: The Mark of Cain

- A recent study conducted found significant genetic risk for psychopathy in 7-year-olds – the data are staggering.

- Extreme violent behavior strikes some as very young children – and it strikes from within.

- Personality is the relatively enduring, distinctive, integrated, and functional set of psychological characteristics that result from people’s temperaments interacting with their cultural and developmental experiences.
Criminality: The Mark of Cain

• Criminality can be understood as the raw material or potential to engage in crime and violence that every person has within – ranging on a continuum from very low to very high

• Criminality is not normally distributed; most people have low criminality whereas a small number of people have very high criminality

• Criminality is a global characteristic in that it affects more than just criminal behavior
Criminality: The Mark of Cain

• Moffitt advises that children with neuropsychological deficits coupled with adverse home environments are especially at risk for criminal behavior

• Neurodevelopmental and family risk factors at age 3 predict life-course persistent offending in adulthood

• Criminology only recently paid close attention to the criminality that likely distinguishes mundane from deeply problematic offenders
The Diversity of Violent Criminals

• A psychological phenomenon that has historically been helpful in understanding violent offenders is psychopathy

• Hervey Cleckley’s work was the most systematic clinical study of psychopathy and laid the groundwork for contemporary research

  – His work is helpful in discerning subtle but important differences among even the most violent offenders
The Diversity of Violent Criminals

• Focusing on the individual-level characteristics of the most serious criminals has also led to strides in understanding crime from general and more specific theoretical perspectives

• While there are great commonalities in the lives of serious offenders, there are also important distinctions between them

• Because murder and rape are the most serious forms of violence, much scholarly attention is devoted toward the offender and offense characteristics of murderers and various types of sexual offenders
The Diversity of Violent Criminals

- Easily the most serious example of violence is sexual homicide which occurs in less than 1% of homicides annually and is the primary motivation of serial killers.

- Sexual homicides are classified in 2 general ways – organized and disorganized.

- J. Reid Meloy developed a clinical typology that builds upon the organized/disorganized distinction.
The Diversity of Violent Criminals

• Organized killers are compulsive sexual sadists with antisocial and narcissistic personality disorders

• Disorganized killers are described as catathymic and perpetrators are men with mood disorders and avoidant traits

• In terms of psychopathology and risk for violence, those who commit sexual homicides are the most dangerous and disturbed offenders in society – however, they are but one type of sexual offender
The Diversity of Violent Criminals

- All criminals are prone to be versatile in their offending behavior and most do not specialize in narrow or discrete criminal behaviors.

- What is clear is that persons who commit the most serious crimes are at risk to commit the “other” serious crimes.

- The rate of murder among sex offenders was one homicide for every 400 sex offenders compared to a general population ratio of one homicide per 3,000 individuals.
The Diversity of Violent Criminals

• Regardless of an offender’s current conviction status, sex offenders commit a range of criminal activity spanning violent, property, drug, white-collar, nuisance, and noncompliance offenses

• Generalized criminal involvement is not limited to sex offenders or murderers

• Even groups that are comparatively considered to be innocuous offenders, such as non-violent drug offenders, are violent
The Diversity of Violent Criminals

• Students often gravitate to the most extreme types of offenders when introduced to criminology and there’s often the misperception that offender types are just that – narrow categories of offenders who only commit single offenses

• Empirically, this does not hold -- all criminals dabble in an assortment of antisocial behaviors

• The same applies to those who commit the most serious crimes – they just happen to murder, rape, kidnap, and molest in conjunction with robbery, burglary, auto theft, fraud, and drugs
Conclusion

• Violent offenders pose a great public health threat to societies in terms of mortality, victimization, lost and diminished productivity, fear of crime and quality of life, and untold costs to manage and supervise them in the criminal justice system.

• Violent offenders are who the general public entrusts criminal justice practitioners to apprehend, prosecute, and detain.

• Violent offenders have forced criminologists to sharpen their theoretical ideas – no longer can banal social processes be cited to explain serious interpersonal violence.
Conclusion

• The landmark works described in this chapter afforded criminology greater credibility and authenticity

• Criminology confidently knows that individual-level factors are paramount and the pathology of the most violent and serious offenders is largely attributable to biological factors and the complex interplay between the nature and nurture

• Violent offenders hold the most promise for criminology to achieve its most noteworthy scientific account of criminality
Conclusion

• Increasingly, the sociological processes of criminological theories will be recast as biosocial, in fact, this is already being done

• The neuropsychological measures were among the most consistent predictors of childhood levels of self-control

• Over time, many similar advances will occur in criminology and a scientifically-curious eye on the most antisocial and violent offenders will lead the way