

BOOK REVIEW

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A Review of When Children Kill: The Dynamics of Homicide

REFERENCE: Ewing, C. P., *When Children Kill: The Dynamics of Homicide*. Lexington Books, Lexington, MA, 1990.

When Children Kill provides an immense amount of data and singular vignettes concerning homicides committed by people under the age of 18—roughly 2000 a year in the United States or about 10% of the total.

The majority of juvenile homicides involve the use of firearms. Most perpetrators are black; similarly, hispanics account for a disproportionate number of homicides. The number of homicides by juvenile hispanics are higher than that found in adult hispanics, whereas the rates in juvenile and adult blacks are similar. Two thirds involve people who know each other; in 17%, the victims are family members. Compared to adult homicides, juvenile homicides are much more likely to be done by two or more persons or groups.

Ewing has culled the literature to obtain information about the extent of mental illness (it is minimal), learning disabilities, and neurological impairment of perpetrators and about family characteristics (broken families, parental psychopathology, abuse and neglect) and pre-homicidal adjustment (behavior disorder, substance abuse, social functioning, and so forth).

Examples of killings of parents, siblings, or whole families are presented as are the relationships of homicides and other criminal activities. A high percentage of homicides of strangers is theft-related. The incidence of sex crimes in association with homicide is not known. Some killings have resulted from an effort by the killer to avoid identification after a sex crime such as rape. Group rape occasionally results in homicide.

The author also discusses a group of "senseless" killings in that they are less understandable. Included here are thrill killings, hate or bias killings, revenge killings, cult-related killings, "romantic" murder-suicides, and killings by mentally disturbed juveniles (the number of killings by psychotic juveniles is extremely small). Bias killings include homeless people, homosexuals, and members of minority groups.

Extremely distressing is the rapid increase in gang killings. For example, the number of gang-related homicides in Los Angeles County went from 205 in 1982 to at least 406 in 1988, mostly involving blacks or hispanics. This reflects a national phenomenon and even the evolution of a new terminology—"posses," "packs," and "wilding." Special

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problems are killings related to drug trafficking, robbery, and rape and the victimization of innocent bystanders.

The subgroup of preteens, children twelve and younger, has accounted for about 2% of arrests. While the patterns of very young killers are similar to those in older juveniles, the victims are usually even younger children. Impulsive and accidental killings with firearms are special problems in this younger group. Boys are about twelve times more likely to commit homicide than females.

Considerable discussion is devoted to the problem of trying adolescent killers in adult courts with a review of recent Supreme Court decisions, particularly those related to capital punishment. Some states put age limitations on eligibility for capital punishment, though the ages vary. Execution is rare, but strikingly the United States is one of the few countries in the world that allows execution of juveniles; since 1979, 3 of the 8 worldwide have occurred in this country (300 since the year 1642).

Because of increasing juvenile populations, substance abuse, increasing parental drug abuse and child maltreatment, and the ready availability of guns, the author anticipates an increasing number of juvenile killings in the next decade.

Questions that remain to be answered are these:

1. Those who kill have certain characteristics common to a much larger group of people who do not kill. Why do these particular people kill? In what way are they different (if they are) from the larger group?
2. What is the long-term behavioral prognosis? What is the subsequent behavior pattern of those who are ultimately released?
3. Is there any indication that treatment or management programs have affected the long-term behavior pattern of juvenile murderers?

One other comment. I am not sure of the context in which the word “dynamics” is used. It can apply to psychodynamics—the evolution of individual function as determined by intrapsychic or other psychological factors, or it can refer to group, cultural, social, or milieu factors. As to the latter, the elaboration is more clear. In view of the wide individual variances, the limited material in case recitation, and the problems of depth analysis in a literature review, the data referable to the former definition are less helpful.

This book represents a major effort in the compilation of data about juvenile killers, and as such it is highly recommended to all students of the problem of homicide in our society.