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# Prevention of Violent Crime: A Review of the Literature

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# Prevention of Violent Crime

A Review of  
the Literature

Spring 2017

Criminology and Criminal Justice Senior Capstone Class:

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# Prevention of Violent Crime: A Review of the Literature

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## Introduction

During the course of the term, our group was tasked with researching the prevention of violent crime. Our research consisted of examining scholarly articles containing original information regarding the definition and prevalence of violent crime, victims, offenders, *modus operandi*, prevention strategies and implications for policy and training. Our findings are closely linked to data found in the United States. We began our research with original definitions of the prevention of violent crime contained in the articles. The prevalence of violent crime is discussed, including how measurements were determined. The characteristics of, and factors associated with being a victim of violent crime were then reviewed, followed by the characteristics of offenders associated with carrying out these violent crimes. We described the *modus operandi* used by different offenders, including information about income levels, proactive and reactive aggression and other details of violent crime. As a conclusion to the report, we also discussed prevention strategies, policy implications, and other training tactics, in order to improve outcomes at the individual, community, and societal levels identified by the authors.

## Definitions and Prevalence

### Definition

Violent crime consists of offenses that involve the threat or use of force. According to the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) issued through the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) violent crime is defined as rape, sexual assault, robbery, aggravated assault, or simple assault (2015, p.1). The FBI unit, Uniform Crime Reports (UCR), cites murder, non-negligent manslaughter, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault as the main offenses making up violent crimes (Langton & Truman, 2010).

### Prevalence

In 2015, there were 5,006,620 reported violent crimes in the U.S. (Bureau of Justice Statistics, National Crime Victim Survey, 2015), roughly 18.6 per 1,000 people, ages 12 years or older (Truman & Morgan, 2016, p.1). The authors note that between 1993 and 2015, the rate of violent crime for ages 12 and older declined from 79.8 to 18.6 per 1,000. From 2014 to 2015, the overall rate was steady, declining only slightly from 20.1 to 18.6 per 1,000 (Truman & Morgan, 2016, p.1). The BJS also reported that of all 2015 violent crimes, rates of assault were highest at 14.8 incidents per 1,000, age 12+. Of the same age group, stranger violence was second at 6.8 incidents per 1,000, followed by violent crime involving injury (4.8 per 1,000), domestic violence (4.1 per 1,000), and robbery (2.1 per 1,000). Rates of rape/sexual assault were lowest at 1.6 incidents per 1,000 residents (Truman & Morgan, 2016, p.2).

While there are many factors which contribute to the rate of violent crime, Moore and Bergner (2016) found both the increase in population density and the prevalence of firearms in a community were leading contributors to violent crime rates. The increase in firearms sold directly correlates to the increase in the number of violent crimes (pp.13, 16). Koper, Woods, and

Isom (2016) examined the "multiagency comprehensive violence reduction initiative" conducted in a notoriously violent neighborhood in St. Louis, MO. It had experienced "357 violent crimes, 4 homicides, 60 armed robberies, [and] 117 aggravated assaults with guns" (pp.122, 135). During the gun violence reduction initiative, violence, itself, declined by 18 to 19%, and by 28 to 32% for violent crime involving guns (p.136).

Moore and Recker (2016) found that the rate of opportunities for community activities (e.g., religious organizations, bowling centers, public golf courses, non-profit organizations and civic organizations) influence rates of violent crime. Community activities increase friendships and build bonds that increase social control. The study found that when opportunities for social control, such as bowling centers or religious organizations decreased, violent crime increased. Despite the recreational activities' ability to reduce crime, however, an increase in fitness centers was linked to increased rates of violent crime (pp.741-742). According to Stucky, Payton, and Ottensmann (2016), income inequalities within and between neighborhoods to be key indicators and valid predictors of specific types of violent crime (pp.356-357). They found that "higher within-tract income inequality was associated with higher violent and property crime counts" (p.356).

Over the years, trends in clearance rates for violent crime show an overall decrease. Jarvis, Mancik, and Regoezci state homicides consistently had the highest clearance rates of all violent crime. As of 2013, the homicide clearance rate was 63%, which is down from the 1961 rate. Aggravated assault was 79% in 1961 compared to 56% in 2013. Rape and robbery clearance trends are markedly different, though, from historical highs in 1961, at about 73% and 42%, respectively. Clearance rates in 2013 much less positive at about 40% for rape and 29% for robbery (2016, p.6).

## **Victims**

Our study reviewed articles that provided valuable insight regarding violent victimization. We organized this information into four sections: risk factors of violent victimization, victim demographics, victim demographics by offense type, and the effects of violence on victims.

### Risk Factors

Risky lifestyles significantly increase the chance of victimization. Multiple sex partners, psychiatric disorders, drug use, and being a first-year college student are predictors of violent victimization. Drinking behavior was found to be a notable predictor of victimization, but only for males (Johnson, Daigle, & Napper, 2017, pp.390-393).

### Demographics

Violent victimization varies among demographic divisions. According to the BJS, the highest rates of victimization, overall, occurred among 12-17 year olds and among females, of those 12+. Blacks were highest, compared to other racial groups and those who were separated or divorced. The violent victimization rate increased as household income decreased (Truman & Morgan, 2016, p.9).

Jarvis et al. (2016) examined specific types of victimizations and found a higher percentage of males are victims of homicide (74%), aggravated assault (55%), and robbery (66%), while females are victim of sexual assaults in 90% of incidents (p.13). Addington (2012) determined

nearly half of elderly homicides are committed against those ages 65-74 and homicide victims age 85 and older were mostly female, killed by a family member, and with personal contact weapons (pp.138-147).

### Demographics by Offense

Clifford et al. (2017) reviewed cases of children, under age 5, who were victims of aggravated assault or homicide, and found as children aged, the percentage of victims decreased. Forty-six percent were 1 years old or younger, 38% were 2 or 3 years old, and 17% were 4 years old. They also found fatalities less likely among White children and most of these incidents occurred between 4pm and 4am (pp.9, 11-12). Owens, Eakin, Hoffer, Muirhead, and Shelton (2016) found 85% of offenders, who collected child pornography, had at least one contact offense against a victim. Of those victims, 96% were White, 67% were female, 62% were 6-12 years old, and 86% knew the offender (pp.8-9).

### Effects of Violence

Violent crime has a long-lasting effect on its victims. The BJS reports 68% of victims of a serious violent crime experienced socio-emotional problems within 3 years of their victimizations. Overlien and Aas (2016) found children in homes where domestic violence occurred had little or no positive contacts with police, were unsure they could communicate effectively with authorities, or do not perceive the abusive parents “real” criminals. Children were also reluctant to seek help from police due to fears that nothing would happen to resolve the problems and that future interactions would only be worse (pp.438-440).

Early interventions are key to avoiding many problems, including chances that victims could become offenders later in life (Langton & Truman, 2014, pp.1-7; Overlien & Aas, 2016, pp.439-440). Zimmerman, Farrell, and Posick (2017) found the odds of violent offending are 76% higher among youths who were victimized as compared to youths who were not (pp.26-27). They further state victimization by family members or gang members increased the likelihoods of victims’ own violent behaviors, by 49% and 70%, respectively. The study found victimization by a peer to increase the odds for victims to engage in violent crimes after the initial event to 123%, compared to victims not victimized by peers (pp.26-28).

## **Offenders**

### Demographics of Offenders

Researchers have found these demographic characteristics regarding violent offenders: Males are more likely than females to be perpetrators of violence (Clifford et al., 2017, p.9); Blacks are more likely to commit homicides or aggravated assaults, but not rapes or robberies (Stucky et al., 2016, pp.355, 357); adolescents with higher levels of violence exposure and lower levels of self-control experience higher levels of violent criminal engagements (Zimmerman, et al., 2016, p.100); violent females are predominantly White, from lower-socioeconomic strata, urban backgrounds, younger than 16 years of age (Pechorro, Kahn, Ray, Raine, and Gonçalves 2017, p.535). Sex offenders fit no specific demographic criteria, but are likely to engage in multiple criminal behaviors (Owens et al. 2016, pp. 6-7); offenders who committed aggravated assaults and homicides against children were 27.7 years old (mean age); 66% male (Clifford et al., 2017, p.9).

### Relationships

Offender-victim relationships vary depending on types of offenses, victim demographics, and offender characteristics. Victims 65, and older, were 21% often likely to be killed by family members or friends (46%) (Addington, 2012, p.143; intimate partners commit more aggravated assaults (friends, 35% and acquaintances, 38%); 61% of robberies are perpetrated by strangers (Jarvis et al., 2016, pp.12-14); of sexual offenses against children, 52% are committed by their parents (Clifford et al., 2017, p.9).

### Substance Abuse and Weapons

Clifford et al. (2017) state that according to the National Council on Child Abuse and Family Violence, substance abuse (drugs and/or alcohol) exists, in some form, in 40% to 80% of families where children are abused and accounts for at least 70% of cases of child abuse and neglect. Their research on violence against children suggests personal weapons were used 35% of the time, more than other types of weapons (firearms 20%, knives 6%, blunt instruments 7%) and that 56% of the incidents occurred toward the evening hours (4:00 p.m. to 3:59 a.m.) (p.6).

### Additional Factors

Other factors can include: exposure to crime at a young age (Pechorro et al., 2017, p.545); unstructured socializing; minority, first generation immigrants, with prior arrest records; individuals from non-intact or transient families; and those who have, themselves, experienced direct and personal victimization (Zimmerman et al., 2016, pp.100-102). Although racial background does not necessarily predict offender behavior and prevalence of crime among races, it can be a predictor of police responses. Studies have shown a greater number of formal sanctions are handed out to minority offenders (Briones-Robinson, Powers, & Socia, 2016, p.1695. Owens et al. (2016) found 38% of offenders who violated child pornography laws also engaged in sexual conduct with children. Mental illnesses do not directly cause violent crimes, though some violent offenders do exhibit schizophrenic or psychotic disorders (Michalski, 2016, p.6). Social media, often blamed for increasing violent crime, has not been found to be directly linked, but has been found to be spreading the information about violent crime at a faster rate (Pyros, Decker, & Shjarback, 2016, pp. 2-3). Stucky et al. found a correlation between crime rates and the economic conditions in neighborhoods and surrounding areas. They stated, "income may be the most critical element of socioeconomic disadvantage to consider for crime" (p.356). However, research suggested little correlation between economic conditions and homicides (2016, pp.356-357).

### *Modus Operandi*

Our study analyzed research on offenders to determine methods used (*modus operandi*) to commit violent crimes. Offenders' behaviors vary depending on types of offenses, locations of crimes, and types of victims, among other things. Data presented here represent information pertaining to weapons used, times-of-day, offense locations, victim-offender relationships, victim demographics, and other variables.

Locations of crimes depend on the overall nature of the crimes. Jarvis et al. (2016) found over 50% of homicides and aggravated assaults occur in victims' homes. Sexual assaults occur in residences approximately 73% of the time, while 56% of robberies occur outdoors. Offenders



used a variety of weapons when committing robberies, the most common being guns and personal weapons. Offenders employ firearms in 57% of homicides, while aggravated assaults involve a variety of weapons, the most common types (27%) being hands, feet (which are always available), or knives (more easily obtained than firearms). They usually employ hands, fists, or feet in sexual assaults (59%), while a smaller number of offenders use more lethal weapons, such as guns or knives. Violent crimes are more likely to occur at night, except for sexual assaults, which occur more frequently during the day (p.12). Addington's research with elderly populations revealed violent crimes occur more frequently against females in their own residences and are usually committed by family members, who use personal contact weapons (2012, pp.143-147).

When considering homicides and aggravated assaults involving children under five years-old, offenders primarily (36%) use personal weapons like hands, fists, or feet instead of firearms, knives, or blunt instruments, which are mainly used in adult homicides (Clifford et al., 2017, pp.9-11). With child sex-offenders, Owens et al. (2016) found most offenders possess child pornography and exploit the images to "desensitize" their victims.

Victims are accessed through families, neighborhoods, and communities in 74% of cases, but are also sought out online in about 21% of cases. It is important to note that only 3% of child sex offenders are strangers to their victims. In 75% of the cases, offenses occur as fondling, oral sex (51%), masturbation (37%), vaginal penetration (20%), digital penetration (19%), and insertion of a foreign object (11%) (pp.9-13).

Briones-Robinson et al. (2016) analyzed LGBT hate crime severity and weapons. They found more severe victimizations resulted when there was greater likelihood victims would report the crimes to police. They say it is important to note 15% of sexual orientation bias victimizations involved serious injuries, while other types of victimizations resulted in serious injury only 4.9% of the time. A higher percentage of the crimes are committed by strangers (21%), multiple offenders (26%), Whites (33%), and males (52%). In addition, they found the location of the crimes (public/private) influenced types of police responses (pp.1695-1697).

Boothroyd and Cross (2016) state male offenders were more likely to commit violent thefts than female offenders. In addition, non-parents were more likely to commit violent theft than persons who are parents, with female parents being the least likely to engage in such crimes. The numbers of violent theft offenses involving youths and individuals with low levels of education have recently increased (pp.580-581).

## Prevention Strategies

Several areas where policy changes might positively affect prevention strategies surround practical implementation of approaches.

Groff et al. (2014) found offender-focused (hot spot) policing more effective in reduction of violent crime, compared with increased foot patrols or problem-oriented policing. They also learned hot spot policing helped citizens perceive law enforcement officers as doing their jobs and working towards safer communities, instead of focusing on problem areas elsewhere (p.45).



On the other hand, Novak, Fox, Carr, and Spade found increased foot patrols to decrease violent crime, compared with no changes to patrols in the controlled areas, but did not compare this with hot spot or problem oriented policing. There was no significant spatial displacement in crime, but the authors believed displacement rolls slowly to neighboring cities (2016, p.473).

Gerell (2016) found no reduction in public environment assaults in hot spot areas directly monitored by CCTV cameras (as opposed to those patrolled, but not filmed). He conjectured this may be related to lowered numbers of officers responding to incidents (but monitoring cameras in an office). He notes when, in 2012, additional officers patrolled public areas, violent crimes dropped dramatically, even though CCTV cameras had not yet been installed. Gerell believes use of cameras should stop as they have resulted in more harm than benefit. Overall, there are several different avenues a police agency could take when wanting to reduce violent crime and based on our articles it shows that placing more police officers on the streets, cameras or not, would be the better choice.

Police officers are typically the first contacts for persons experiencing mental health crises. Michalski (2016) believes promising initiatives to assist officers include community response preventative measures, in-depth mental health training to respond appropriately, implementation of, and access to, mental health courts and diversion programs, and prison treatment programs, in conjunction with intensive follow-up and community reintegration programs. He warns against releasing persons with psychiatric disorders from prison without follow up care, as this is likely to result in higher levels of recidivism, as the issues causing the criminal activity are unlikely to have been effectively addressed or improved (p.16). In related research Sundt, Salisbury, and Harmon (2016) suggest that to fully address mental illness in the criminal justice system, reduction, specifically, in the numbers of such offenders must be made. This may be accomplished, they say, by improving mental health treatment, broadly. Episodes of psychosis are a major factor in incarceration and are significantly more likely result in multiple incarcerations for violent crimes, than inmates with no major psychiatric disorders. They conclude non-clinical circumstances (“what set him off?”) must be considered when encountering persons in mental health crisis situations (p.332).

It appears increasing the numbers of officers in neighborhoods and improving their training in appropriately interacting with people with mental health issues are likely to make the most difference in reducing instances of violent crime.

## Conclusion

We have reviewed literature concerning prevention of violent crime and have identified the definitions and prevalence of violent crime, characteristics of both victims and offenders, *modus operandi*, and suggestions for effective strategies against it, as well as implications for policy and officer training. We discovered several causes for increased violent crime rates, including income disparity, firearm availability, and substance abuse. Although the media often depicts violent crime as perpetrated by strangers, we found it more likely the two are, at least, acquaintances. Offenders tend to be younger males, as the most common age an offender will commit a crime is 27. They are often persons experiencing mental health crisis situations. We discovered that race does not necessarily predict offender behavior or prevalence of crime,

however substance abuse, assumption of risk, income disparity, education level, and parental status are linked to criminal offending, as well as recidivism rates.

Reducing violent crime is difficult, and no doubt must include collaboration with the community. There is no one “catch-all” solution for preventing violent crime. Specific strategies, however, such as increased foot patrols and improved officer training for dealing with the public may be helpful. Concentrating on specific geographic locations, commitment to early interventions in offenders’ and victims’ lives, along with strengthened connections with community members will help officers navigate the daunting tasks ahead.

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