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## WHY DO WE DO IT?

On Saturday afternoon, May 14, 2022, an 18-year-old White male, Payton Gendron, who self-identified himself as a White Supremacist on social media, drove several hours from his home in rural New York to the Tops Friendly Supermarket in Buffalo, New York. He was dressed in body armor and wore a military helmet upon which a camera was mounted that was livestreaming via Twitch. Upon arrival, he shot four people in the parking lot, killing three. After entering the store, he shot and killed six more people, and wounded another two. Because the supermarket was located in a predominantly Black neighborhood, virtually all of those killed were not surprisingly Black. This was no accident. During the assault, he yelled racial slurs at his victims and even apologized after aiming his automatic rifle at a White person standing behind a checkout counter. A security guard in the supermarket shot him, but he was protected by his body armor and returned fire, killing the security guard. Within minutes, police officers were on the scene and convinced him to drop his weapons. In total, sixty shots were fired, thirteen people were hit, and ten of these died, all of them Black. After subsequently pleading guilty to ten counts of first degree murder and one count of first degree domestic terrorism motivated by hate, Payton Gendron was sentenced to life without the possibility of parole on February 15, 2023.<sup>1</sup>

Why would Payton Gendron carry out such a heinous attack? We know that prosecutors in New York state and the U.S. justice department have treated this as a hate crime motivated by racism.<sup>2</sup> Influenced by far right ethno nationalist ideology, Gendron believed in a conspiracy theory popular among white supremacists known as the “Great Replacement” or “White Genocide” theory. Prior to the shooting, a document was released online under his name which repeatedly referenced this theory.<sup>3</sup> According to this conspiracy theory, native-born Whites are intentionally being replaced by ethnic majorities through immigration and high birth rates among non-White populations. However, regardless of whether someone believed in such a false theory, how could anyone feel compelled to kill so many innocent people? Can we explain, in other words, the violence as being solely or primarily caused by this particular conspiracy theory? Does this provide enough of an explanation, or should we dig deeper? Are there other reasons why Gendron carried out this attack? In high school, when asked about his plans after graduation, Gendron stated that he wanted to commit a murder-suicide.<sup>4</sup> Even though he claimed he was just joking, this comment was taken seriously enough that New York State Police were called in and he was taken into custody and given a psychiatric evaluation. Nothing came of it, and he was subsequently released, but it raises the question of whether some deeper psychological issue might have contributed to his perpetration of the mass murder in Buffalo. As he was being approached by police after killing ten people and wounding three others, he did place his gun to his neck, but the police managed to talk him into surrendering rather than killing himself.

Human behavior is often hard to explain, and it is especially difficult when we see or hear about violent behavior. We often find it difficult to understand how and why individuals can do such horrible things. How can a man assault his wife over and over again, leaving her bruised and battered, both physically and mentally? How can a mother drown her children? What possesses a young man to take a gun to school and kill as many students and teachers as he can? How can some governments massacre thousands or even millions of its own citizens?

There is no single answer to these questions. Someone who engages in violence usually does so for many reasons, and even when there is a specific trigger, that behavior is influenced by various other factors, including biology, psychology, history, childhood trauma, and socialization, structural factors including poverty and culture. This is as true for Payton Gendron as it is for anyone else who commits a violent act. For example, when a young man is insulted in a bar and starts a fight, he is responding primarily to that slur, but his rejoinder is also dictated by his mood and temperament, the amount of alcohol he has had, his previous life experiences, how bystanders respond, what kind of music is playing, whether he has a weapon close at hand, and many other factors. We need to understand that behavior is typically the result of numerous elements that interact and influence our actions in multiple complex and interconnected ways. This makes violent behavior difficult to predict. Given the same situation, different people will react in different ways, and the same individuals may not act the same way twice in similar situations. A night of partying at a bar may end in a violent brawl for some, while others may end up at a Denny's for a different kind of grand slam. Many people live their entire lives without engaging in violent behavior, even though they are exposed to the same stresses, experiences, and influences that result in violence for others. Not every argument ends in a fight, not all marriages involve battering, not all nations go to war, and most crowds don't erupt into riots.

Evolution and history have conspired with biology to give humans the ability to engage in violent behavior, yet that potential is dramatically shaped by temperament and personality as well as by the cultural, social, and political environments within which people find themselves. In order to understand violence, therefore, we must look at a number of influences that interact and affect human behavior in a multitude of ways and can vary tremendously from individual to individual and from situation to situation. This reality is compounded by the fact that although different kinds of violence are related, no single theory alone can explain all violence. Because of this, we must look at a variety of theories, each of which can help us understand a portion of the puzzle that is human violence. These theories can be categorized into several broad categories that include ethological or biological/neurochemical theories, psychological theories, and sociological theories. It is important to understand that these broad categories are not mutually exclusive; many theories overlap into more than one grouping. Many psychological perspectives, for example, also include sociological components and vice versa. Keep this in mind as you read the chapter.

## **ETHOLOGICAL AND BIOLOGICAL EXPLANATIONS OF VIOLENCE**

A starting point to the problem of explaining the causes of human violence can be made with evolution and how it has impacted our propensity for violence. While much about our origins is unknown or disputed, what we do know is that human beings have evolved to inhabit a world in which violent behavior has often proved necessary for survival. This is not unique to humanity.

The lives of other animal species that inhabit our planet are also characterized by a great deal of violence. We can see this when we examine the types of aggression routinely engaged in by different animals, as illustrated by Table 2.1.

**TABLE 2.1 ■ Typology of Animal Aggression**

- *Predatory aggression* is intended to kill and eat prey.
- *Male-on-male aggression* is played out between males of the same species and has supremacy as its goal.
- *Fear-based aggression* is violence in response to a perceived threat where there is no escape.
- *Maternal aggression* revolves around females protecting their young.
- *Irritable aggression* derives from pain, frustration, or some sort of deprivation.
- *Sex-based aggression* is sometimes perpetrated by males who use violence or the threat of it for mating purposes.
- *Instrumental aggression* refers to aggression generated by experimentation on animals.
- *Territorial aggression* concerns the defense of land that animals or groups have defined as their own.

Source: Adapted from Kenneth E. Moyer, *The Psychobiology of Aggression* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976).

Looking at the listed motivations for aggressive behavior exhibited by animals in Table 2.1, it is easy to relate most of these to human aggression and violence. **Intermale aggression**, for example, is something that we can easily recognize among young men who sometimes struggle and compete for status by being the toughest and strongest. **Territorial aggression**, on the other hand, concerns animals that fight to control a piece of land they have marked or defined as their own. Unfortunately, we have many contemporary examples of this form of human aggression. In February of 2022, for example, Russian president Vladimir Putin gave a speech that, among other things, asserted that the country of Ukraine was really part of Russia and had only been granted independent statehood because countries in the West were attempting to break up Russia's empire.<sup>5</sup> Russia had already been working to undermine Ukrainian independence since 2014 by annexing the Crimea and then supporting separatist movements in several eastern provinces. Finally, in the wake of his speech Russia escalated hostilities by invading Ukraine and beginning a war between the two nations that continues to devastate the Ukrainian people as we write this edition of the book.

Another example of these territorial disputes comes from India and Pakistan, who have been fighting an on-again/off-again limited conflict because each nation disputes part of its shared border in the high Himalayas. The irony is that the mountainous terrain being fought over is so elevated, isolated, and remote, that it is virtually uninhabitable, and more soldiers have died from altitude sickness, avalanches, and falling into glacier crevasses than from enemy action. On a smaller scale, drug cartels and smaller youth gangs often use violence to protect their turf resulting in extremely high murder rates in some South and Central American countries.

One specific type of violence that was once believed to separate human beings from other animals is murder, since it was assumed that we were the only animals that killed within our own species.<sup>6</sup> While many animals kill, it usually involves animals outside of their species—the most common example is the predator/prey scenario in which certain animal species hunt and

kill other animals for food. Certainly, animals sometimes kill others of their kind, but this was considered a rarity. When males of the same species fight for dominance or reproductive rights, the violence typically ends when one or the other submits. A lethal outcome is not usually the norm. However, more contemporary research reveals that many species do violently attack each other, and the outcomes are often deadly.<sup>7</sup> We can certainly see this if we examine our closest relatives: apes, which include chimpanzees, bonobos, gorillas, and orangutans.

Genetically, humans are closest to chimpanzees. Research has shown that humans and chimps share between 96 percent and 99 percent of the same DNA makeup. This means that, genetically, humans are more closely related to chimpanzees than chimps are to gorillas.<sup>8</sup> Chimpanzee violence reveals much about the evolutionary roots of human violence. The image many people have of peaceful chimpanzees was largely shaped by the pioneering work of Jane Goodall, who spent many years studying and writing about the chimpanzees of Tanzania.<sup>9</sup> We now know that chimpanzees are not as peaceful as once believed and routinely engage in murder, assassination, rape, raiding, and even what can be considered war.<sup>10</sup> Researchers have documented various instances in which groups of chimpanzees have attacked and killed males from rival groups. In fact, recent research reveals that chimpanzees are around thirty times more likely to kill a member of a different group than they are to kill a member of their own.<sup>11</sup> Sometimes it is an opportunistic attack on members of competitor groups that encroach on their territory, while other times, they have been observed stalking and killing chimpanzees in premeditated raids that take place on rival territory. Chimpanzees are territorial and, like many animals, defend their land vigorously from intruders and trespassers. In many ways, as we noted above, this mirrors the behavior of nations and gangs—both of which engage in the same kinds of territorial defense. Chimpanzees also engage in raids intended to kill all of the rival males of another group and incorporate the surviving females into their own community.<sup>12</sup> One primatologist recently documented a chimpanzee troop in a national park in Uganda that, over the course of a decade, steadily murdered off all the male members of a neighboring troop, forcibly took the remaining female members of that group, and expanded into the territory of the now-destroyed group.<sup>13</sup> Can we characterize this as warfare or perhaps even genocide? As you will see, many of the characteristics certainly appear to be the same.

Similarly, male-on-female chimpanzee violence appears to be very similar to human male-on-female violence. In fact, Wrangham and Peterson suggest that it may best be described as *battering* since, as they have observed,

chimpanzee battering and human battering are similar in three respects. First, they are both cases of predominantly male against female violence. Second, they are both instances of relationship violence; male chimpanzees batter females who are members of their community, ordinarily known to them for many years, often in contexts with nothing material, such as food or support for an ally, at stake. Third, like human battering, the battering of a female chimpanzee may take place during or be triggered by a number of superficial contexts, but the underlying issue looks to be domination or control.<sup>14</sup>

An important point to note is that chimpanzee violence generally and battering in particular are largely perpetrated by males. Female chimpanzees tend to be much less aggressive and

violent than male chimps. Again, we see the same pattern when we examine human violence. One of the most consistent patterns of human violence is that it is largely perpetrated by young males. Around the world and in most situations, most violent victims and offenders are men.

Often, this violence revolves around issues of **status** and **dominance** as male chimpanzees compete for status against other males within the same group, and much of their daily behavior revolves around this rivalry. It's interesting to note that once a male has achieved dominance, his tendency to rely on violence falls dramatically. Much of the violence, in other words, is intended to help him gain higher rank and to preserve that position. A lower-ranked male who doesn't act submissively to a higher-ranked male, for example, risks a violent reprisal from the higher-ranked male.<sup>15</sup> How different is this from a young man who assaults someone over some perceived slight or act of disrespect? As you will see in Chapter 3, many murders occur because an individual feels disrespected or insulted by what someone else has said or done.<sup>16</sup>

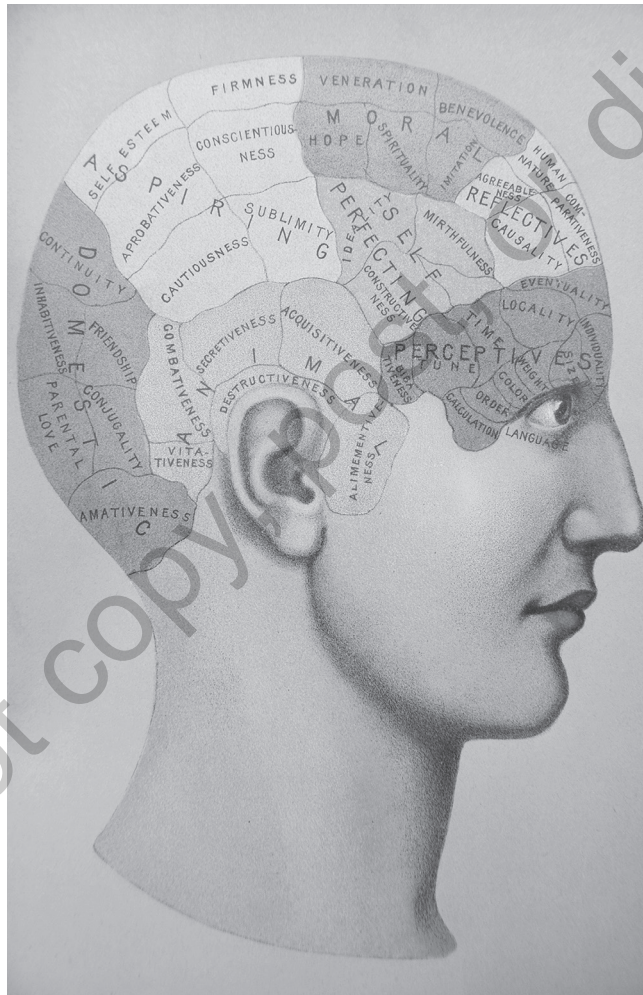
Wrangham and Peterson specifically suggest that pride is at the root of the quest for status and prestige. It's hard to dispute this when we acknowledge that perceived insults, challenges to status, and demonstrations of a lack of respect are all important precursors to violent behavior for both chimpanzees and human beings. In many ways, perhaps we have not traveled that far from our ancestral origins. This is important to recognize, since it illustrates that violence—or at least the capacity for violence—is part of our evolutionary heritage and is a quality we still share with our closest animal relatives. In short, the potential for violence resides within us all. This *ethological argument*, as it is known, is summed up by Jeffrey Goldstein, who writes, “Our animal ancestors were instinctively violent beings, and since we have evolved from them, we too must be the bearers of destructive impulses in our genetic makeup.”<sup>17</sup>

To suggest that we are predisposed to violence because of our evolutionary heritage does not mean that violence is inevitable. Not all people engage in violence, even though everybody is capable of it. Many factors affect how and why individuals engage in aggressive behavior, including individual temperament, gender, emotion, biological predisposition, and/or trauma, the presence or absence of weapons, alcohol, drugs, and the cultural, political, and situational contexts that people experience. It is therefore a mistake to classify people as either violent or peaceful. Humans are both. Some individuals engage in more frequent violence and/or more severe forms than others, but the bottom line is that everyone has the capacity. That being said, we can next look at some of the specific ways in which biology and chemistry have been linked with violent behavior.

It should be noted that explaining violence in biological terms has historically been fraught with controversy. This is largely because early research on biology and crime was based on faulty science that suggested that the causes of crime lay with defective individuals. From this perspective, social and environmental factors were largely irrelevant. Early scientific studies focused on body types, skull shapes, bad genes, and atavistic (e.g., primitive) attributes to suggest that “criminals” were born, not made.<sup>18</sup> In the late 1700s and early 1800s, for example, Franz Joseph Gall suggested that those prone to crime and violent acts could be identified by looking at the shape of the skull, which was believed to reflect the personality of the individual.<sup>19</sup> They believed that the spatial dimensions of the skull were dictated by the underlying development of the brain. Since specific parts of the brain were linked with specific functions, they hoped

to identify the part of the brain that controlled crime and aggression by studying skull shapes. Advocates of this perspective, known as **phrenology**, took diligent measurements of the skulls of those who were incarcerated to determine the specific type of skull shapes that would reveal criminality. This school of thought remained quite popular until the early twentieth century in the United States. Similarly, the Italian physician Cesare Lombroso suggested in the late 1800s that for some there was an inborn tendency to crime because

germs of an ancestral past lie dormant in our heredity. In some unfortunate individuals, the past comes to life again. These people are innately driven to act as a normal ape or savage would, but such behavior is deemed criminal in our civilized society.<sup>20</sup>



**PHOTO 2.1** Phrenology An example of skull mapping by phrenologists showing the characteristics believed to be influenced by abnormalities in parts of the brain.

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In essence, Lombroso was arguing that those who committed violent crimes were evolutionary throwbacks or **atavisms**, and the problem of crime rested upon the shoulders of those individuals who were born to be violent and criminal. They could be identified, he concluded, through a number of distinguishing characteristics that included the following: a small head with a large facial area; a sloping forehead; large, protruding ears; bushy eyebrows that meet over the nose; abnormally large teeth; and tattoos. Not surprisingly, later research challenging these notions concluded that these characteristics were as common in the general population as they were among any crime-committing population. As far-fetched as this work now seems, we can't underestimate its influence over the years for those looking to identify people who were prone to crime through their appearance and demeanor. These notions clearly have implications for policies aimed at reducing crime and violence; if people are born that way, some may argue, why can't we simply lock them up and throw away the key? See the problem?

As should be evident by now, the implications of these theories are profound and disturbing and, in the past, have been used to justify racism, discrimination, oppression, slavery, and genocide. If the causes of crime can be traced to "born criminals," then we don't have to examine problematic social issues such as poverty, inequality, racism, and/or discrimination. Instead, our attention can be focused on identifying, controlling, and punishing those who are supposedly born to be violent and/or criminal. Keep in mind that this kind of criminological research helped form the basis of the **eugenics movement**, which tried to improve the human race through selective breeding practices, forced sterilization programs, and similar kinds of policies. These ideas also formed the philosophical justification for many discriminatory laws, beliefs, and policies.<sup>21</sup>

Extending such ludicrous claims to so-called scientific theories is not a relic of our past. As noted at the beginning of this chapter, the racist "Great Replacement" conspiracy theory was a primary motivation behind the mass shooting at a grocery store in Buffalo, NY. This conspiracy theory falsely claims that there is an ongoing and clandestine effort to replace White populations in current White-majority countries with non-White babies and immigrants, including the United States. While these paranoid narratives have frequently been voiced on a radical fringe of many societies, they have occasionally been voiced by authority figures, including politicians and media figures. It is at times like this, when such claims without an empirical basis move out of the fringe, that horrendous consequences usually emerge. These include forced sterilization programs, racial quota systems in federal immigration law, hate crimes against targeted populations that include mass shootings, and even genocide. In addition to the mass shooting in Buffalo, New York, the suspect accused of mass murder at a Pittsburgh synagogue in 2018, the killer behind the attack at a mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand, in 2019, and the mass shooting at a Walmart in El Paso, Texas, in 2019 each had cited the **great replacement theory** on social media platforms before their horrendous crimes.<sup>22</sup>

Because of the political and social misuses of biological studies of criminality, many social scientists and others have an almost instinctive mistrust of them. But science has come a long way from the early days of measuring body types and skull shapes, and we now know a great deal more about how the human body and mind function. Ignoring the biological factors that influence behavior ultimately condemns us to an incomplete understanding of the causes of

human violence. It also helps create a false dichotomy by suggesting that the causes of human behavior are either biological or social. The truth lies somewhere in between. People who perpetrate violence are indeed influenced by innate biological factors, but social, cultural, and political circumstances also affect violent behavior. One neuroscientist who studies violence summarizes it this way:

Violence cannot be linked to one gene, one brain region, one actor; it cannot be viewed in isolation, and it cannot be detached from history. The product of both nature and nurture, aggressive behavior is an ongoing and collaborative effort between the world of genes and proteins inside the neuron and the constantly changing and occasionally hostile world on the outside.<sup>23</sup>

So, what does modern biology tell us about violence? What are the biological factors that affect the likelihood of a particular person engaging in violence? Recent research in this area has tended to focus on either brain injuries or on substances produced in the body, such as neurotransmitters and hormones. These two areas suggest that violence is at least partially the result of somebody's brain not working correctly because of head trauma or because the body is producing too much or too little of some substance that also affects behavior. Before discussing these factors, however, it is important to reiterate that these biological explanations do not act in isolation but interact with social and psychological factors. Their strength lies in their ability to help explain violence at the individual level, but they are not very helpful at explaining larger trends and patterns of violence. In other words, while they may assist in explaining why someone who has experienced brain trauma may be more likely in some cases to act violently, they have little explanatory power in making sense of the variations in violent behavior internationally, regionally, or even within different areas of a city. With these caveats in mind, we can turn our attention to the role of chemicals and hormones in the body and how they may shape and influence some violent behavior. We begin with serotonin.

## Serotonin

In the brain, data messages are transmitted between nerve cells via a *synapse*, a small gap between the nerve cells or neurons. **Serotonin** is a substance that helps relay those messages over the gaps and allows them to proceed. Without serotonin, data messages don't make it across the gap or, if they do, they tend to be incomplete and garbled. Behaviorally, deficiencies in serotonin have been linked to a wide variety of disorders, such as depression, suicide, and anxiety. Importantly, they have also been linked with impulsive acts of aggression. People with low levels of serotonin appear to be more likely to engage in violence because their ability to control their aggressive impulses is diminished. Serotonin acts as an impulse inhibitor, and lower levels of this neurotransmitter hamper a person's ability to stop and think.<sup>24</sup> We need to understand, however, that while this may help explain certain types of impulsive violence that are essentially overreactions to some sort of provocation, serotonin levels do not help us to understand how other more calculated forms of violence are perpetrated. At the risk of sounding redundant, we also need to remember that a low level of serotonin is not sufficient, in and of itself, to produce violence. Serotonin deficiency is only one of many possible contributing factors that help explain the puzzle of violence.



Recent research on a gene that produces an enzyme known as *monoamine oxidase A* (MAOA), which breaks down brain neurotransmitters such as serotonin has revealed some interesting implications for violence. Some people have a variation of the gene that results in decreased levels of this enzyme. A growing body of research suggests that this **warrior gene**, as this genetic polymorphism is sometimes referred to, correlates with higher levels of delinquency; antisocial, impulsive, and aggressive behavior, and hypersensitivity to real or imagined slights. These qualities are especially pronounced among those who have experienced some level of abuse while growing up.<sup>25</sup> Such research highlights the complicated interplay between genetics, biology, and environment in making certain types of violent and aggressive behavior more likely.

## Testosterone

Another substance produced in the body that has received a tremendous amount of attention for its possible connection to violence is the hormone **testosterone**. Given that most violence is perpetrated by males, some have suggested that male aggression is linked with levels of testosterone. Proponents of this argument contend that individuals with higher levels of testosterone are more likely to be aggressive. Supporting evidence comes from animal studies showing that aggressive and violent animals become meek and mild when castrated, but then resume their violent behavior when given shots of testosterone.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, while these studies appear to show a strong relationship between testosterone and aggression, research on humans reveals a much more complicated relationship. While some research has shown that those who commit violent offenses have higher levels of testosterone than those who perpetrate nonviolent offenses, other investigators have failed to replicate these results. Additionally, whereas some research has supported this finding in both adult<sup>27</sup> and juvenile populations,<sup>28</sup> other studies have not. For example, one Canadian project found no statistical difference in testosterone levels between men charged with violent crimes and those charged with nonviolent property offenses.<sup>29</sup> Other contrary evidence comes from the use of testosterone to treat a variety of medical conditions, including some sexual dysfunctions. Studies have shown that men who are given testosterone for these problems do not become more aggressive.<sup>30</sup> To further muddy the waters, evidence also shows that participation in sports affects men's testosterone levels. Winning tends to increase levels, while the losers are apt to have a decrease in testosterone. Similar decreases and increases have also been measured in military personnel during basic training.<sup>31</sup> If testosterone levels are so responsive to environmental influences, it makes it hard to separate the effect of the hormone from the effects of the external context.

While the contradictory research does not allow for a definitive answer, it does seem to imply that, in many ways, testosterone is more about status and dominance than it is about violence. This is illustrated by a study looking at status among people who are incarcerated that found that those with low status also had low levels of testosterone. On the other hand, among people who are incarcerated, both nonviolent high-status individuals and violent high-status people had similarly high levels of the hormone.<sup>32</sup> As you can see, the empirical evidence about the relationship between testosterone and violence is extremely inconclusive, but what does seem clear is that when men compete for status, prestige, and dominance, their testosterone levels rise and fall according to their fortunes, regardless of whether or not they use violence in that struggle.

## Brain Injuries

Other biological research on violence, rather than focusing on hormones and neurotransmitters, has examined brain function by looking at things such as lesions in the brain caused by injuries, tumors, and other kinds of trauma to the head. This avenue of research was spurred, in part, by the University of Texas tower shooter, Charles J. Whitman, who in 1966 killed 14 people and wounded 32 others before being gunned down by police himself.<sup>33</sup> His autopsy revealed that he had a glioblastoma tumor growing in his brain. A commission formed to find out why Whitman perpetrated this crime concluded that the tumor could have contributed to his decisions to commit this mass murder. Although not everyone agrees with this assessment, it nevertheless helped spark interest in brain lesions and trauma to help explain some violent offending.

Antisocial and violent individuals have been subjected to magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), which relies on magnetic fields to view the tissue of the brain, and positron emission tomography (PET), a nuclear imaging technique that creates 3-D images of the brain. These studies have revealed that those who have committed violent acts, especially impulsively aggressive individuals, often have **brain dysfunctions** that are believed to have played a role in predisposing some of them to violent behavior.<sup>34</sup> One study using electroencephalographic (EEG) brain scans found that those who showed a long-term pattern of violent behavior were three times more likely (65 percent) to have abnormalities in the EEG readings than those who were rarely violent.<sup>35</sup> In a similar vein, a study of Danish men, English schoolboys, and people on death row in California concluded that brain trauma was an important element in producing violent behavior.<sup>36</sup> The difficulty with this kind of research, however, is deciding whether the lesions caused violent behavior or whether violence caused the lesions. It's not unreasonable to expect that someone prone to violence is also more likely to sustain head injuries as the result of violent encounters. Unfortunately, it is almost impossible to establish the appropriate time order between these two variables. It's the old chicken-versus-the-egg question as to which came first.

One of the most recent brain injuries to be linked with violence is called **chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE)**, a neurodegenerative disease characterized by an abnormal accumulation of tau protein in the brain. As the name suggests, CTE is caused by repeated head traumas and can cause brain cell death, cognitive deficits such as memory loss, and dementia.<sup>37</sup> Unfortunately, CTE can only be diagnosed after death, when slices of the brain can be examined.

Recent attention has been given to CTE largely because a number of autopsies of high-profile athletes from the National Football League (NFL) revealed these serious brain injuries. The story of Dr. Bennet Omalu, the pathologist who uncovered the truth about brain damage in NFL players, was dramatized in the movie *Concussion*, which was released in 2015. Several of the athletes diagnosed with CTE post-mortem committed suicide, including Aaron Hernandez, the former New England Patriots tight end who killed himself while serving time in prison for murder. More recently, a number of young female athletes committed suicide. One was a track cyclist and three-time world champion, while another was a snowboarder. The common element in these two cases was that both had previously sustained head injuries leading some to suggest that this may have played a role in their suicides.<sup>38</sup> In fact, research has shown that female athletes are more susceptible to serious concussions and experience worse consequences from those injuries than males.<sup>39</sup> While not definitive, these cases have led to speculation about the relationship between CTE and violent behavior (whether violence directed against others or against the self).

However, just because a few people whose brains showed signs of CTE engaged in violence does not mean that CTE caused the violence. In fact, after Hernandez was convicted of murder, journalists uncovered that he had engaged in several violent acts before his NFL career, including punching a bouncer at a bar so hard in the head that it broke the bouncer's eardrum.<sup>40</sup>



**PHOTO 2.2** Head-to-head tackles have been banned by the National Football League, but still occur frequently.

iStock.com/South\_agency

There are a few studies that have linked brain injuries to violence, however. One such study, called the Vietnam Head Injury Study (VHIS), examined a large cohort of previously healthy young men who suffered penetrating brain injuries during their service in the Vietnam War.<sup>41</sup> If this research relied only on those soldiers who sustained brain injuries, it would tell us nothing about how their change in behavior was related to those injuries. To control for other factors that could have been related to their violence, the researchers also selected a matched comparison group of other soldiers who had not sustained brain injuries, but who were the same age, had the same education levels, and had similar service records. Men from both the injured and non-injured groups were examined ten to fifteen years after they were discharged, and at least one close family member or friend filled out the Katz Adjustment Scale, which measured how well their loved ones were adjusting, including whether they exhibited aggressive or violent behavior. Although results indicated that men with frontal lobe injuries (this is where CTE takes place) were much more likely to engage in aggressive behavior than other men, only 14 percent of relatives/friends reported that these injured men actually engaged in physical violence. This illustrates the very important point that correlation does not mean causation!

In sum, the relationship between CTE and violent behavior is far from clear. Moreover, there are several other factors that may confound this relationship. For example, pro athletes

often use performance-enhancing drugs such as steroids, including testosterone, which, as we have seen, has also been linked with violence.

## Biosocial Factors

In the preceding sections, we have noted how a number of neurobiological factors were mediated, either positively or negatively, by environmental and structural factors. Known as *epigenetics*, scholars have recently begun examining the ways in which genes respond to different environmental influences not in terms of the gene sequence but in regard to the expression of those genes. In other words, some environmental factors can play a role in activating some genes or turning others off. Importantly, studies have revealed that this is a dynamic and bidirectional process—that is, our environment affects our genes, and our genes also impact the environment.<sup>42</sup> For example, risk factors in a pregnant woman's environment, such as substance use, exposure to abuse, or disadvantage, can alter gene expressions and affect her unborn child's emotional disposition.

## Toxins

We also know that certain toxins in the environment affect our genetic makeup and increase the risk of aggression and violence. For example, recent research has found that children exposed to high levels of lead not only have serious health consequences but also have an increased risk of behavioral outcomes such as aggression. Evidence for this relationship is fairly convincing. For example, lead emissions from cars using leaded gasoline rose steadily from the 1940s through the early 1970s, until vehicles were required to use unleaded gasoline, after which lead emission plummeted. About twenty years later, when the children who had ingested all of that lead moved into early adulthood, which is typically when offending peaks, there was a huge increase in violent crime.<sup>43</sup> This relationship between lead emissions and crime has also been found at the city level and across different countries.<sup>44</sup> This is a very convincing example of how our environment impacts our physiology, which ultimately influences our behavior.

In sum, the ability to determine the biological and neurological factors related to violence have improved with technologies such as fMRIs and other research developments. What is clear, however, is that these factors cannot explain the significant variations in violent crime rates across aggregate units such as countries, states, cities, and even neighborhoods.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL EXPLANATIONS OF VIOLENCE

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We now turn to theories that focus on psychological perspectives that seek to understand violent behavior in terms of personality, character, and mental disorder. We will begin with one of the most well-known psychological theories of violence, which is commonly referred to as **psychopathy** or *sociopathy* but is more correctly termed *antisocial personality disorder*.<sup>45</sup>

### Antisocial Personality Disorder

Most people are at least superficially familiar with this personality type because it is a term that is used often in popular culture. Those who have an **antisocial personality disorder**

are often characterized as being very narcissistic, reckless, and emotionally shallow (see Table 2.2). Importantly, they are also unable to empathize or feel compassion for others. The suffering of others does not touch them emotionally, so they have no guilt about hurting others. In many ways, it comes down to the issue of empathy. The ability to feel the pain of others, to put yourself in their place, to share their feelings is a crucial element in developing a moral sense of your actions. The notorious serial killer Ted Bundy was reported to have told an investigator, “I don’t feel guilty for anything” and “I feel sorry for people who feel guilt,”<sup>46</sup> while another time he asserted, “Guilt. It’s this mechanism we use to control people. It’s an illusion. It’s a kind of social control mechanism and it’s very unhealthy. It does terrible things to our body.”<sup>47</sup> If his statements were true—Bundy was renowned for being manipulative and dishonest—then they clearly illustrate a lack of empathy toward his victims.

**TABLE 2.2 ■ Characteristics of Antisocial Personality Disorder**

Inferred Personality Traits
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Glibness, superficial charm</li> <li>● Grandiose sense of self-worth/narcissism</li> <li>● Pathological lying</li> <li>● Cunning, manipulative behavior</li> <li>● Lack of remorse or guilt</li> <li>● Shallow affect</li> <li>● Callousness/lack of empathy</li> <li>● Failure to accept responsibility for actions/blames others</li> </ul>
Explicit Lifestyle Traits
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Constant need for stimulation/easily bored</li> <li>● Parasitic lifestyle</li> <li>● Poor behavioral controls/impulsive</li> <li>● Early onset behavioral problems</li> <li>● Lack of realistic, long-term goals</li> <li>● Irresponsibility</li> <li>● Juvenile delinquency</li> </ul>
Other Traits
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Promiscuous sexual behavior</li> <li>● Multiple short-term marital relationships</li> <li>● Criminal versatility and skills</li> </ul>

Source: Adapted from Eric W. Hickey, *Serial Murderers and Their Victims*, 2nd ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1997).

Research shows that morality develops best when young people are shown how their actions affect others, but individuals with this disorder show an impaired ability to empathize. Simply put, they can't process the pain and fear of others.<sup>48</sup> In addition to this, they also have a reduced ability to process fear, which means that the punishments and negative consequences that often prevent the majority of us from engaging in criminal acts don't act as a deterrent to these individuals. Punishment doesn't scare them. These factors are combined with a tendency for them to be extremely self-centered, seeing others as a means to an end. As such, they do not hesitate to employ violence to fulfill their selfish goals. They act out of pure self-interest, without reference to a moral or ethical compass.<sup>49</sup> In fact, historically, this kind of disorder was originally defined as a kind of "moral insanity."<sup>50</sup> This does not mean that they don't understand the consequences of their actions. In fact, they are fairly well grounded in reality and understand right from wrong; they simply don't seem to care.<sup>51</sup>

People with this disorder are consequently marked by a high likelihood of engaging in instrumental forms of violence, which makes sense since instrumental violence is a means to an end.<sup>52</sup> In fact, some contend that individuals such as Bernie Madoff, the operator of the Ponzi scheme that defrauded thousands of investors of billions of dollars and who showed little remorse, are as likely to have an antisocial personality disorder as those who kill. In fact, it is important to underscore the harm produced by people like Madoff; many of his victims lost their entire life savings and at least one committed suicide. Of course, others with this disorder may resort to aggression to help them get their way or acquire something they want. The underlying mechanism in both cases is that fact that they seem incapable of caring that their behavior harms others. In short, they lack empathy.<sup>53</sup>

Antisocial personality disorder is most commonly associated with serial killers, but this stereotype is not based on empirical facts. Not all serial killers suffer from this disorder and, importantly, not everyone with this disorder is a serial killer. In fact, most of us have some antisocial tendencies, although not to the same degree as individuals diagnosed with antisocial personality disorder.<sup>54</sup> The National Institute of Mental Health estimates that between 1 percent and 3 percent of the U.S. population can be categorized as having this condition.<sup>55</sup>

The infrequency of this disorder, compared with the levels of violence in this country, indicates that most of those who commit violent acts do not fit into this classification, even though we often popularly describe violent individuals as being psychopaths or sociopaths. Importantly, it appears as if these individuals may represent a small but distinct class among those who carry out violent crimes.<sup>56</sup> One study of people in prison for violent felonies, for example, found that out of the sample of 321, only thirty-six were diagnosed with psychopathy; these individuals had more arrests for more types of offenses, including more violent offenses, and they appeared to be proud of their violent behavior.<sup>57</sup> But again, this group represents a small percentage of the larger group that has committed violent crimes. We know that a small minority of this larger group tends to commit most crimes.<sup>58</sup> Among this group, those with psychopathy tend to be career criminals with more offenses and greater levels of violence.<sup>59</sup> This serves to feed into the image of "criminals as psychopaths." In fact, during the height of the violent crime wave in the early 1990s, a few criminologists suggested that our society was home to a new breed of violent people known as "**superpredators**." First popularized by the criminologist John DiIulio, this argument suggested that

America is now home to thickening ranks of juvenile “superpredators”—radically impulsive, brutally remorseless youngsters, including ever more preteenage boys, who murder, assault, rape, rob, burglarize, deal deadly drugs, join gun toting gangs, and create serious communal disorders. They do not fear the stigma of arrest, the pains of imprisonment, or the pangs of conscience. They perceive hardly any relationship between doing right (or wrong) now and being rewarded (or punished) for it later. To these mean-street youngsters, the words “right” and “wrong” have no fixed moral meaning.<sup>60</sup>

This description clearly portrayed young people committing crimes as sociopaths. But as it turned out, this dire vision of the future was never fulfilled, and rates of violent crime today are significantly lower than they were in the early 1990s. Unfortunately, this image of the ultraviolent delinquent remains a fixture of the popular imagination even though it is not based on an empirical reality. As we will see, it is easier for some, including those enacting policy, to blame social problems such as violent crime on a few bad people rather than tackling the larger social factors such as inequality, which have also been shown to contribute to violence.

We can't turn from this image of the malevolent psychopath or teen superpredator without at least considering the ideas of Roy Baumeister and W. Keith Campbell, who suggest that violence has an intrinsic appeal for some.<sup>61</sup> While recognizing that violence can occur for instrumental or ideological reasons, they suggest that it can also result from individuals being bored and looking for the excitement, kicks, and thrills often found in risk-taking behavior, such as violence. Some of these individuals, in other words, may actually find violent behavior enjoyable. Specifically, Baumeister and Campbell identify three reasons why violence can be gratifying. The first is **sadism**, in which people derive pleasure from harming others. The second involves the gratification that can result from performing high-risk and potentially destructive behaviors and getting away with it. We will return to this theme later. The third rationale suggests that individuals can find satisfaction from harming someone whom they perceive has threatened or somehow damaged their positive self-image.<sup>62</sup> In many ways, these ideas parallel the work of Jack Katz, who also emphasized the attractions of illegal behavior in his work on the seduction of criminality.<sup>63</sup> Katz's argument is that violence and criminality can have an intrinsic appeal for some individuals because it can be fun, exciting, and empowering.

Other psychological perspectives pay more attention to the external forces that trigger aggression and violence rather than specific personality disorders. One such example is the frustration-aggression hypothesis.

### Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis

As the name implies, the **frustration-aggression hypothesis** contends that violence is one possible response for individuals who feel frustrated and thwarted in achieving something. It can be broken down into three main components: People are blocked from achieving something they want; this results in them becoming frustrated and upset, and this frustration may lead them to respond violently.<sup>64</sup> In this scenario, violence is one of many possible responses. The violence may be instrumental in the sense that it is used as a way to remove some obstacle to achieving a goal or it may be expressive as a way of venting that frustration or letting off some

steam. Research indicates that certain factors increase the likelihood of a violent outcome, such as when people perceive their frustration as being intentionally caused by someone else, when they perceive the hindrance as being unfair, and when an aggressive stimulus, such as a weapon or even aggressive music, is present.<sup>65</sup>

The final psychological perspective that we will examine goes even further in weaving in external influences to help explain violence. While medical researchers were the first to discover the negative influence of stress on illness and mortality, social researchers soon discovered that **stress** was also related to behavioral outcomes, including violence.

## Stress and Violence

Human beings are tremendously adaptable creatures, and our bodies have many ways of responding to difficult and/or threatening situations. Our cardiovascular and immune systems, for example, respond to stressors in ways that help us cope and deal with life. In truth, all our physiological and neurological systems are affected by stress. Linsky, Bachman, and Straus summarize it this way:

When the organism is faced with external threats, survival mechanisms prepare it for flight or fight. There is an emergency discharge of adrenaline, a quickening of the pulse, an increase in blood pressure, stimulation of the central nervous system, temporary suspension of digestion, a quickening of blood clotting, and a rise in the blood sugar. These physiological responses prepare the organism for heightened physical activity, such as aggression or flight.<sup>66</sup>

This flexibility allows human beings to survive in a sometimes dangerous, complex, and often changing world. Yet prolonged stress has many adverse effects on the body and mind because it puts a tremendous strain on the various systems and organs. Our bodies can handle stress in the short term, but in the long run, our bodies' ability to react wears out. Consequently, our reactions get out of sync to stimuli or, as Debra Niehoff points out,

Forced to operate at a capacity for which they were never designed, the reciprocal processes that regulate neurotransmission and neuroendocrine function during stress overshoot, break down, or oscillate frenetically. . . . Depression, impulsive Type H aggression, PTSD and antisocial personality disorder are very different expressions of a common failure to assign the correct emotional valence to memories, thoughts, or external events; as a result, stimulus and response are mismatched.<sup>67</sup>

In other words, prolonged stress compromises our ability to respond to events appropriately. How does this relate to patterns of violence? As we indicated above, we know that many forms of violence are concentrated among the ranks of the poor, and we also know that low-income neighborhoods and communities suffer from a disproportionate number of social problems that often include high rates of drug and alcohol abuse, gang violence, street crime, and similar kinds of stressors. Individuals in these communities also suffer the daily strains and indignities of living with few resources within a society that largely ignores their plight. People struggle to get by, to survive, and to make ends meet. They also have to constantly be on



their guard and react to potentially dangerous situations. In short, the poor tend to lead stressful lives, and over time, stress decreases their ability to cope. Violence, at least in part, may be a result of this declining ability to cope with stressful life situations. Debra Niehoff says it well when she points out that

this is why bad neighborhoods, bad homes, and bad relationships breed violence—not because of a deterioration in moral character but because of a steady deterioration in the ability to cope. As stress wears away at the nervous system, risk assessment grows less and less accurate. Minor insults are seen as major threats. Benign details take on a new emotional urgency. Empathy takes a back seat to relief from the numbing discomfort of a stress-deadened nervous system.<sup>68</sup>

In many ways, then, violence is sometimes part of a developmental process rather than an absolute imperative. We as human beings are outfitted with a nervous system that is capable of responding aggressively when we feel threatened, and the ways we respond to situations and experiences can then have a lasting effect on our neurobiological processes.<sup>69</sup> Being exposed to stressful situations results in certain responses, which in turn affect our subsequent reactions. The notion of the “vicious circle” is a cliché, but there is ample evidence to support it.

While there are a variety of other biological and psychological explanations of violence, these explanations all illustrate important ideas about how some individuals have an increased likelihood of engaging in violence. The weakness of these explanations, however, is that they cannot adequately explain larger trends and patterns of violence. These theories are by their very nature individualistic in orientation and not very helpful for explaining varying patterns of violence found in different regions, countries, or populations. Why does one community or neighborhood have so much more violence than another? Why does the United States have higher murder rates compared to all other western and democratic nations? It’s not likely that all people with low levels of serotonin or with brain lesions live in some communities but not in others. Logically, we would expect these individual kinds of problems to be distributed randomly throughout society. Because of their focus on individual aberrations and pathologies, most biological and psychological theories are unable to address these sorts of questions. We therefore need to look at the social units of society for further explanation and examine the family, peer groups, neighborhoods, and the communities within which people live in order to more fully explain the origins of violence.

## SOCIOLOGICAL EXPLANATIONS OF VIOLENCE

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Sociological explanations of violence tend to focus largely on structural and cultural life situations that affect the behavior of individuals and groups. Some sociological theories focus on large macro-units such as society itself, while others focus on smaller units such as the family. But in general, they explore and try to identify which environmental conditions or situations help bring about violent behavior. So, while biological and psychological theories focus on internal pushes toward behavior, sociological theories tend to examine the external influences on behavior.

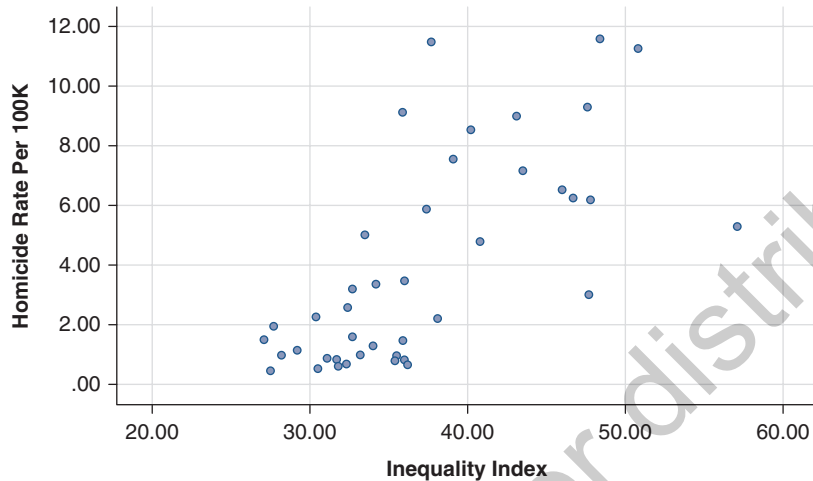
## Economic Deprivation

One factor that has often been linked with violence is poverty—often referred to as **economic deprivation**. This, of course, is related to the stress literature we noted above, since one element of stress would certainly be the inability to provide for yourself or your family. However, sociologists have articulated the manifestations of poverty in greater detail. Since the early part of the twentieth century, criminologists have noted that poor neighborhoods, communities, and groups tend to have much higher rates of violence compared with those that are better off economically. In many countries, including the United States, this is also correlated with race/ethnicity as minority communities are overrepresented among the ranks of the poor, where they not only suffer from economic deprivation but also from discrimination and racism. In other words, many minority populations live in more impoverished and more difficult life situations than do majority populations, and these situations are largely responsible for their higher levels of violent crime. While cultural adaptations among poor minority groups may explain some of the violence,<sup>70</sup> much of it is also a function of the circumstances of their lives. For example, African American couples living in more affluent neighborhoods are three times less likely than African American couples living in poor neighborhoods to suffer from intimate partner violence.<sup>71</sup> The same is true for homicide, with research indicating that poor African Americans experience much higher homicide rates than middle- and upper-class African Americans.<sup>72</sup> In short, violence is not distributed equally across society but instead occurs more frequently among some groups and in some locations compared with others. It is also important to note that this deprivation also brings with it exposure to other risk factors, including lead exposure, which we discussed earlier.

Obviously, not all people living in poverty engage in violence. Most poor people never engage in any criminal activity, much less violent crime. This reality has led a number of scholars to assert that it is not absolute deprivation that is associated with violence but rather inequality—sometimes referred to as **relative deprivation**. In other words, being poor and living within a relatively affluent community is a much more negative experience than being poor and living within a poor community. This can be generalized to the societal level as well; people who are poor in societies where some are extremely wealthy suffer more compared to those who live in societies where the majority are similarly poor. The greater the gap between the haves and have-nots, it is believed, the greater the likelihood of negative outcomes, such as crime and violence. In fact, recent research suggests that poverty is an even greater contributor to violence than to nonviolent offending.<sup>73</sup> Using both homicide rates and the inequality data from the World Health Organization (WHO), Figure 2.1 shows this relationship for countries.<sup>74</sup> This graph clearly shows that countries with higher levels of inequality also have higher rates of homicide.

Other research has found that inequality is also a powerful predictor of homicide rates among other aggregate units such as cities, states, counties, and census tracts.<sup>75</sup> One study examined research on this topic going back to 1967 and found that income inequality was strongly connected with violent crime throughout this time period, especially with homicides and assaults.<sup>76</sup> So what is the connection between inequality and violent behavior? Williams and Flewelling articulate it this way:

**FIGURE 2.1** ■ Scatterplot of Inequality and Homicide Rate in Countries, World Bank Data



Source: World Bank Data. Made available under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Note: Most recent data available upon publication.

It is reasonable to assume that when people live under conditions of extreme scarcity, the struggle for survival is intensified. Such conditions are often accompanied by a host of agitating psychological manifestations, ranging from a deep sense of powerlessness and brutalization to anger, anxiety, and alienation. Such manifestations can provoke physical aggression in conflict situations.<sup>77</sup>

James Gilligan suggests that the linkage between poverty and violence is caused by one specific factor: **shame**. Based on his research and experience working with people who have been incarcerated for violent offenses, Gilligan contends that

it is difficult not to feel inferior if one is poor when others are rich, especially in a society that equates self-worth with net worth; and it is difficult not to feel rejected and worthless if one cannot get or hold a job while others continue to be employed. Of course, most people who lose jobs or income do not commit murders as a result; but there are always some men who are just barely maintaining their self-esteem at minimally tolerable levels even when they do have jobs and incomes. And when large numbers of them lose those sources of self-esteem, the number who explode into homicidal rage increases as measurably, regularly, and predictably as any epidemic.<sup>78</sup>

Several sociologists have articulated what have been called *strain theories* of crime and violence, which are related to economic deprivation and also similar to the frustration-aggression hypothesis but focus more on the societal factors than on the psychological factors associated with violence.

## Strain Theories

**Strain theories** generally contend that blocked or frustrated needs and desires may result in criminality and violence. One of the first theories to make this argument was developed by Robert K. Merton, who noted that people living in impoverished circumstances are placed under strain because their access to conventional and legitimate means of success is severely limited.<sup>79</sup> While the goals of success and material wealth are distributed throughout society, the means of accomplishing these goals are not. Merton believed that a state of **anomie** would result when individuals lived under conditions where legitimate means were not available to achieve societal goals. In our capitalist and money-oriented society, material wealth is equated with success. Yet the pathways to achieving these ambitions, such as getting a good education and getting a well-paying job with good benefits and opportunities for promotions, are hard to come by if you are poor. According to Merton, individuals may choose from a variety of adaptations that include *conformity* to the goals even if the means are not readily available; *retreatism*, which involves a rejection of the goals and the means through drug or alcohol abuse; *rebellion*, which may involve an attempt to replace the accepted goals and means with new or revolutionary ones; and *ritualism*, signifying an acceptance of the status quo. Importantly for our purposes, an individual may choose to *innovate* or come up with creative ways of acquiring the things they value. For example, some may decide to deal drugs or hold up liquor stores in order to get the money to buy the things they want. Obviously, these choices come with increased risk of violent confrontation.

Do other factors create these strains and feelings of anomie? In his **general strain theory**, Robert Agnew refined anomie theory to include strains other than economic conditions.<sup>80</sup> For Agnew, the strain people experience revolves around much more than gaps between goals and the ability to achieve them. Specifically, he argues that strain can come from three main sources: (1) An individual is stopped from achieving a goal, (2) something an individual possesses or values is removed or threatened, or (3) something negative or unwanted is imposed on an individual. When somebody experiences one of these three situations, and when that occurrence is accompanied by difficulty in coping and a sense of anger, then violence may result as that person lashes out to resolve the situation through force and aggression.

Steven Messner and Richard Rosenfeld developed what they call an “**institutional-anomie theory** of crime” that links crime to the existing social structure. Specifically, they suggest that the high rates of crime and violence found in U.S. society can, in part, be explained with reference to the notion of the “American Dream,” which suggests that economic success can be achieved by anyone who works hard, plays by the rules, and is willing to engage in competition with others for jobs, income, and status. For Messner and Rosenfeld, anomie is the “deregulation of both the goals that people are encouraged to aspire to, and the means that are regarded as acceptable in the pursuit of these goals.”<sup>81</sup> They contend that the economic goals of profit and material gain in U.S. society have no clear stopping points; no matter how much money you accumulate, there is always more that could be attained. The more you have, the more you want, and it is this aspect of human nature that increases the unregulated and anomic quality of U.S. life.

Messner and Rosenfeld importantly note that other institutions, such as the family and schools, provide alternative goals to profit and gain. However, when the roles of these other institutions are devalued in comparison to the economic institution, they lose their ability to temper and constrain the anomic tendencies inherent in a capitalist society such as the United

States. The result, Messner and Rosenfeld contend, is that our culture pressures people to strive relentlessly for success—primarily monetary success—and the fact that some consequently turn to crime and violence, they believe, should not be seen as surprising.

### Institutional Anomie and the Opioid Epidemic

The notion that some people will strive relentlessly for more financial success is illustrated very well in the attempts by some corporate actors to knowingly lie about the safety of consumer products in search of greater profits. The current opioid epidemic gripping the United States is a clear example of this corporate greed. Opioids were involved in more than 68,000 deaths in the United States in 2020.

The drug that has been held largely responsible for this epidemic is OxyContin, which is an opioid pain killer made by Purdue Pharma. The active ingredient in OxyContin is oxycodone, which is chemically related to heroin and is up to twice as powerful as morphine. Because of the addictive nature of these drugs, prescriptions for opioids were rarely given, except for end-of-life palliative care. However, Purdue Pharma had another plan. Richard Sackler, a son of the founder of Purdue Pharma, was actively involved in the marketing of OxyContin, and several other Sackler family members sit on the company's board or are involved in controlling the company. The company paid for researchers and doctors to testify in promotional materials that OxyContin was not as addictive as other opioids. Doctors were given all-expense paid trips to seminars in expensive resort locations. In return, many of these doctors provided testimonials to OxyContin's safety. Based on this evidence paid for by Purdue Pharma, OxyContin was marketed as a new miracle drug that could now be used to treat many kinds of pain including arthritis pain, back pain, dental pain, and sports injuries. Unfortunately, instead of being less addictive, it was even more addictive.



**PHOTO 2.3** Young man rushed to emergency room after opioid overdose. What theory do you think best explains the opioid crisis?

iStock.com/FangXiaNuo

The company has settled many lawsuits for improperly marketing OxyContin, including pleading guilty to criminal charges that the company misrepresented the dangers of the drug. In these settlements, Purdue Pharma demanded that states destroy all documents related to the case. However, in February of 2019, some documents from a lawsuit filed in Kentucky were released to the public, including a deposition given by Richard Sackler, the only member of the family to be questioned under oath. In the deposition, Sackler said “I don’t know” over one hundred times. However, e-mails in the court documents clearly revealed that Sackler encouraged Purdue sales staff to conceal the dangers of OxyContin because the myth that it was safer than other opioid drugs was fueling prescriptions and sales. In fact, in one e-mail, Sackler noted that sales of OxyContin had exceeded his “fondest dreams.”<sup>82</sup> This part is likely true. OxyContin contributed nearly \$5 billion to Purdue’s profits, and since 2007, the Sackler family received more than \$4 billion from these profits. These profits were apparently not enough, as court documents also indicate that Purdue Pharma was considering marketing new drugs used to treat opioid addiction. From 1999–2020, 645,000 people died from overdoses involving opioids including both prescription and illicit opioids.<sup>83</sup> Purdue Pharma was not alone seeking profits over the risk of consumer safety. Johnson & Johnson, AmerisourceBergen, Cardinal Health, McKesson Corp., CVS, Walgreens, Rite Aid among others, all companies involved in either the manufacture or distribution of opioids each agreed to pay billions to settle lawsuits for their role in the epidemic.<sup>84</sup>

While there are other variations of strain theories, they all share a basic contention that individual behavior is affected by aspirations that are often unattainable because of structural inequalities. In contrast, another school of thought focuses more attention on the cultural and group adaptations to these disadvantaged conditions. These perspectives suggest that much violence stems from the values and beliefs adopted by certain groups.

### Cultural Adaptations

Elijah Anderson suggests that some poor young African American men develop what he labels a “**code of the street**,” which involves a strong sense of personal honor combined with a corresponding emphasis on guarding against personal affronts and insults.<sup>85</sup> These young men take respect very seriously and are more likely to respond violently to what they perceive as disrespect. Anderson writes,

Central to the issue of manhood is the widespread belief that one of the most effective ways of gaining respect is to manifest nerve. A man shows nerve by taking another person’s possessions, messing with someone’s woman, throwing the first punch, “getting in someone’s face,” or pulling a trigger. Its proper display helps check others who would violate one’s person, and it also helps build a reputation that works to prevent future challenges. . . . True nerve expresses a lack of fear of death. Many feel that it is acceptable to risk dying over issues of respect. In fact, among the hard-core street-oriented, the clear risk of violent death may be preferable to being dissed.<sup>86</sup>

In many ways, it is an oppositional subculture to the mainstream that places a premium on being treated with deference and respect. It is, according to Anderson, a cultural adaptation in the face of overwhelming alienation and racism and a way of asserting personal power in a society

in which many feel powerless. In one sense, we can understand this cultural perspective as an extension of the literature on strain and frustration. In fact, Yasser Payne contends that African American men who adopt this “street identity” are doing so as an expression of resilience.<sup>87</sup>

Other sociological perspectives examine smaller social units such as peer groups and families in order to understand their influence on deviant behavior, including violence. The most general of these, *social learning theory*, combines various sociological and psychological insights in trying to make sense of the puzzle of human behavior.

## Social Learning Theory

As the name implies, **social learning theory** contends that violence is learned in the same way that anything else is learned. We learn from the things we experience, the things we see, and the people with whom we associate. We learn from our surroundings, experiences, acquaintances, friends, and family. Research has shown that individuals learn to respond aggressively and violently when they are rewarded for it, when they observe it, when they are victimized by it, and when people don't develop strong positive connections with others.<sup>88</sup>

Social learning theory specifically asserts that people learn through conditioning, reinforcement, and imitation and modeling. People learn to expect either rewards or punishments for certain behaviors; for example, a schoolyard bully may come to expect respect from fellow students. Bullies may also learn to anticipate more tangible rewards, such as lunch money or favors, or perhaps humiliating others makes them feel powerful for a moment. We learn from direct experience but also by watching what happens to others and modeling our own behavior based on those observations. The latter is especially true for children, who find out how to behave by watching their parents and others. Research indicates, for example, that children learn aggression when they view it, are positively reinforced for engaging in it, and/or experience it at the hands of others, such as parents and siblings.<sup>89</sup>

One variant of social learning theory, known as **differential association theory**, asserts that if you associate with individuals and groups who use violence and who have attitudes supporting and justifying violence, then you are more likely to engage in violent behavior yourself. Revolutionary in impact when it was first developed by Edwin Sutherland in the 1940s, this theory was one of the first to suggest that criminality and violence were not aberrations but were simply learned behaviors like all other behaviors.<sup>90</sup> What this theory explicitly recognizes is that friends, family, and acquaintances teach not only the techniques of criminality but also the motivations and attitudes supporting that behavior. Sutherland contends that crime happens when an individual comes to have a preponderance of attitudes supporting certain behaviors versus attitudes prohibiting that behavior. In regard to violence, people learn not only the methods of violence but the attitudes, rationalizations, justifications, and vocabulary as well.<sup>91</sup>

Youth gangs are a good example of differential association in action. Gangs are very good at inculcating violent attitudes among their membership. New members often undergo a ritualized beating by older members, known as a “beat down” or **jumping in**, that is intended to prove the toughness of the new member but also symbolizes the centrality of violence to the life of the gang.<sup>92</sup> Within these groups, violence is often the preferred means of protecting each other, territory or turf, and reputation and status. Here's how one Los Angeles gang member framed it to a new recruit:

You got potential, 'cause you eager to learn. Bangin' ain't no part-time thang, it's full-time, it's a career. It's bein' down when ain't nobody else down with you. It's gettin' caught and not tellin'. Killin' and not caring, and dyin' without fear. It's love for your set and hate for the enemy. You hear what I'm sayin'?'<sup>93</sup>

Obviously, the ability to accept and mete out violence was fundamental to how this person defined being a gang member. New members in the gang are quickly socialized into this particular worldview that includes not only the *hows* of gang life but the *whys* as well. Recent work by Diego Gambetta focuses on how such information is transmitted between those who have been involved in crimes. His work on **signaling theory**, for example, suggests that they often communicate through a wide variety of signals and signs that convey to others their credentials, their toughness, and their willingness to engage in violent and criminal activities.<sup>94</sup> More than merely what they say, such signals also encompass physical indicators such as bullet and knife scars, tattoos, knowledge of crime-related slang or *argot*, and other such displays and indicators. We will talk more specifically about the factors related to youth involvement in gangs in Chapter 7.

Building on differential association theory, criminologists Robert Burgess and Ronald Akers revised some of Sutherland's ideas by suggesting that we learn not only from people with whom we associate but also from those we watch and with whom we identify. In other words, we can learn and imitate violent behaviors and attitudes from individuals and groups we have never even met. Perhaps the most obvious example of how such learning works is the effect of the mass media.

### Social Learning, Media, and Violence

Like most of us, you have probably been exposed to—and may even enjoy—watching violent television shows, going to see the latest action or horror movie, or playing violent video games. While we don't have national averages on the amount of time spent engaging in these activities, we do have numbers reflecting exposure to these forms of media generally, and the numbers are fairly disturbing. For example, it is estimated that U.S. children watch an average of three to four hours of television daily.<sup>95</sup> Older children and adolescents (eight- to eighteen-year-olds) play video games, on average, between 1.2 and 7.5 hours per week.

Boys tend to play video games more often than girls, but they both still play regularly. So, we know kids spend a great deal of time in front of the television and playing video games. We don't know exactly how much of this time is being spent viewing violent images, but we do know that violent television and movies as well as violent video games are more popular than those without violent content.<sup>96</sup> For example, one study found that 80 percent of the most popular video games currently on the market are violent in nature. Moreover, with new and more powerful graphics technologies, the cartoonish violence depicted in the early generation of video games is becoming ever more realistic and graphic. This also has important implications for evaluating the research on violent video games, since studies from previous eras of games might lead to very different results. Earlier generations of video games that were once thought to be violent would be considered mild by today's standards.<sup>97</sup>

As we noted above, social learning theory contends that we learn aggression like any other behavior—by watching others and imitating their behavior. Theoretically, of course, children



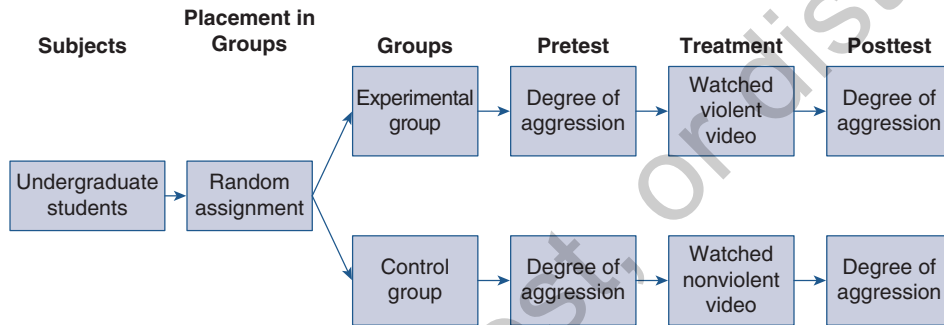
can learn from many sources, including their parents, peers, and media characters. A behavior is more likely to be acquired if, among other things, the viewer can identify with the model and the viewed behavior is rewarded in some way.<sup>98</sup> When individuals imitate a behavior, the reinforcements or rewards they receive will also increase the likelihood that the behavior will be continued in the long term. Recent advancements in our understanding of this learning process suggest that children learn not only specific behaviors from models but can also learn more general and complex social scripts. **Script theory** tells us that we often learn to associate certain roles and behaviors with certain social situations.<sup>99</sup> A *script* can be described as a mental or cognitive program that helps us define situations in understandable and meaningful ways. Scripts guide our behavior, help us solve social problems, and are typically linked with specific roles and plans of action.<sup>100</sup> Movie or TV plots, in other words, often help us make sense of new, ambiguous, or confusing real-world situations we find ourselves in. Television and movies are ubiquitous and powerful sources for many of our attitudes and values, and watching violent media images provides us with the vocabulary of motives and situations that serves to increase the likelihood that we will also engage in violence. In sum, media violence doesn't cause violence per se, but it helps teach us how to interpret and react to conflictual situations and thus helps to make a violent reaction more likely.

There are other pathways that link media violence and individual aggression. The arousal component of watching violence or playing a violent video game is also connected to aggressive behavior. Arousal increases the heart rate and other physiological conditions that can serve to strengthen an individual's response, including aggression. An aroused state appears to be particularly linked to aggression when someone is provoked.<sup>101</sup> **Emotional desensitization** is also related to the likelihood that watching violent media will increase aggressive behavior. Craig Anderson and his colleagues define *emotional desensitization* as the reduction in distress-related physiological reactivity to observations or thoughts of violence.<sup>102</sup> In other words, the first time you play a game like *Halo* or *Mass Effect*, you may feel a bit squeamish; however, the more frequently you play, the less squeamish you become. In short, you become desensitized and more used to it. That's not always a bad thing, since viewing violent media can help children and adults come to grips with and deal with real fears and anxieties.<sup>103</sup> But barring these kinds of situations, becoming more used to violence serves only to make its use easier.

How do we know that watching violent television or playing violent video games increases the likelihood of individuals acting violently themselves? It would not be enough to simply ask kids how much time they spend playing violent video games and then observe their behavior for aggression or violence. If we observed a high frequency of violence in these kids, we wouldn't know whether playing the violent video games was actually responsible for violent behavior or if they were predisposed toward violence to begin with and that is why they were attracted to violent games in the first place. However, there are a large number of studies that have done just this—they ask kids to report how often they watch or play games with violent content and then ask them and sometimes their parents and teachers about their aggressive behavior. These studies generally report a very strong correlation between exposure to violent media and aggressive behavior, but as we learned in our discussion about alcohol and violence, correlation does not mean causation.

An experimental design would also be needed to determine the causal effects of violent media exposure on violent behavior. For example, the typical experiment would take a group of people and randomly assign each of them to either an experimental or a control group. The experimental group would watch a violent show (or play a violent video game) and the control group would watch a nonviolent show (or play a nonviolent game). After the exposure, aggression would be measured for individuals from both groups, and if people who were exposed to the violent presentation acted more aggressively compared to those in the control group, you could assume that it was attributable to the violent media exposure. An illustration of this kind of research, conducted by Brad Bushman and his colleagues, is provided in Figure 2.2.

**FIGURE 2.2 ■ Bushman Experimental Design**



Source: Adapted from Brad J. Bushman and L. Rowell Huesmann. "Effects of Violent Media on Aggression," in *Handbook of Children and the Media*, 2nd ed., eds. Dorothy G. Singer and Jerome L. Singer (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2012), 231–248.

There are numerous studies using experimental designs that have found a direct relationship between exposure to television or film violence and the likelihood that children and adolescents will be physically violent toward each other. In fact, Anderson and his colleagues conclude that

the evidence from these experiments is compelling. Brief exposure to violent dramatic presentations on TV or in films causes short-term increases in youths' aggressive thoughts, emotions, and behavior, including physically aggressive behavior serious enough to harm others.<sup>104</sup>

There have also been studies that have examined the effects of playing violent video games on behavior. Policy makers and parents alike are increasingly concerned about video game play, not only because of its realistic nature but because children who play these games are active participants in the violence, not merely passive observers. Similar to media violence generally, experiments have found that playing violent video games is related to increased aggressive behavior in the short term. There have also been a few studies that have followed kids over time to determine the long-term effects of violent video play. For example, one study followed a group of students annually from ninth through twelfth grades, asking them about the types

of video games they played, the average number of hours they played, and their own aggressive behavior (e.g., such things as “How often have you pushed or shoved someone in anger during the last school year?”). Researchers found that kids who played violent video games for longer periods of time were also more likely to be aggressive over the entire span of high school. In fact, this effect remained even after other important variables such as gender, peer deviance, parental control, and other demographic factors were controlled.<sup>105</sup>

Recent research has also investigated the effects of violent media exposure on brain activity. For example, by using MRIs to monitor brain activity, a few studies have found a relationship between playing violent video games and neurobiological activity typically associated with aggression. In one study, researchers observed the brain activity of male students playing a realistic video game depicting first-person shooting and found brain activity patterns characteristic of aggressive thoughts.<sup>106</sup>

In sum, there is a substantial body of research indicating that being exposed to violent media content increases aggressive and violent behavior in the short term and even into adulthood. It is important to note, however, that not all studies that have examined the connection between media violence and aggression have found a causal connection. In addition, the experiments that have found causal connections between media violence and aggressive behavior are not without their critics. It is also important to note that measuring aggression in a laboratory study does not necessarily translate into aggression in the real world.

As we have already stated in this book, our position is that there are many factors related to violence—that is, there is no single causal factor. Violence happens in a complex social environment, bringing together many factors that both increase and decrease the chances of a violent event occurring. Being exposed to media violence is simply one of those factors. Many policy makers have used a nutritional analogy when talking about media “consumption.” Similar to food consumption, it takes very little effort to make good nutritional choices when selecting a media diet for children. A steady diet of violence, it seems to us, would inherently contribute to an unhealthy outcome, as would a steady diet of sugar.

### The Cycle of Violence

Further support for the idea that violence is learned comes from the literature on domestic violence. One of the most consistent findings is that those who witness or experience violence and abuse as children are more likely to perpetrate it as adults. Often known as the **intergenerational transmission of violence theory** or the **cycle of violence** theory, this perspective points out that parents are often the strongest role models that children have, and when children see their father hitting their mother, for example, or experience one of their parents hitting or otherwise physically disciplining or abusing them, they cannot help but learn that this is how parents interact with each other and with their kids. Violence is thus understood to be a normal and acceptable part of family life. As a result, children who grow up in such environments are more likely to engage in similar acts of violence when they themselves are adults.<sup>107</sup> This is not to say that they are condemned to repeat this cycle. In fact, Cathy Spitz Widom and her colleagues found that most children exposed to violence in their families do *not* go on to perpetrate it, but it does make it somewhat more likely.<sup>108</sup>

Importantly, this explanation is also related to the stress literature earlier. Childhood abuse and trauma can be conceptualized as stressful events that require adaptation. However, regardless of whether later adulthood violence is a result of an adaptation to stress or is more appropriately considered learned, there is consistent evidence that both physical and sexual abuse as well as childhood neglect all increase the likelihood of violent offending behavior.<sup>109</sup>

Next, we turn to criminological perspectives that focus more specifically on the effects that parenting and other social attachments have on individuals' ability to control their behavior through self-control.

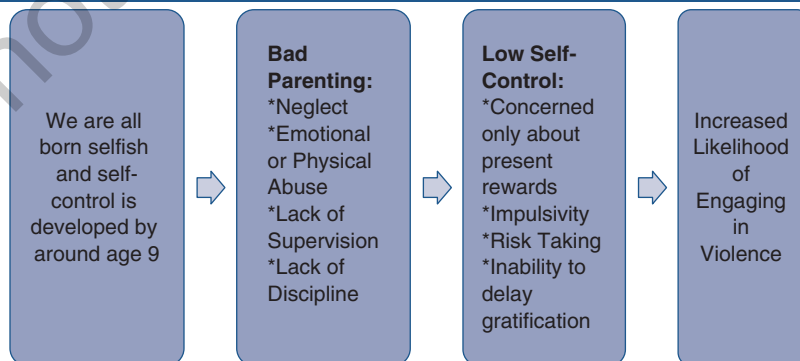
## Self-Control and Violence

Michael Gottfredson and Travis Hirschi articulated their **general theory of crime** based on the notion that the likelihood of individual engagement in crime is the result of low self-control. While the concept of **self-control** may at first appear to be psychological, Gottfredson and Hirschi point out that low self-control is a product of early socialization and *not* a trait innate within individuals. They state,

The major "cause" of low self-control thus appears to be ineffective child-rearing. . . . In order to teach the child self-control, someone must (1) monitor the child's behavior, (2) recognize deviant behavior when it occurs, and (3) punish such behavior. This seems simple and obvious. All that is required to activate the system is affection for or investment in the child.<sup>110</sup>

As you can see, the last condition denoting punishment for bad behavior recognizes the importance of the learning process discussed above. People who lack self-control, according to Gottfredson and Hirschi, tend to be impulsive, insensitive, physical (as opposed to mental), prone to risk taking, shortsighted, and nonverbal. They contend that individuals generally develop self-control by the age of eight and, once developed, it remains consistent throughout one's life, regardless of any changes in life circumstances. This last contention that self-control is not amenable to change once in place, however, is where other theorists strongly disagree. The illustration in Figure 2.3 depicts how self-control evolves to influence crime and violence.

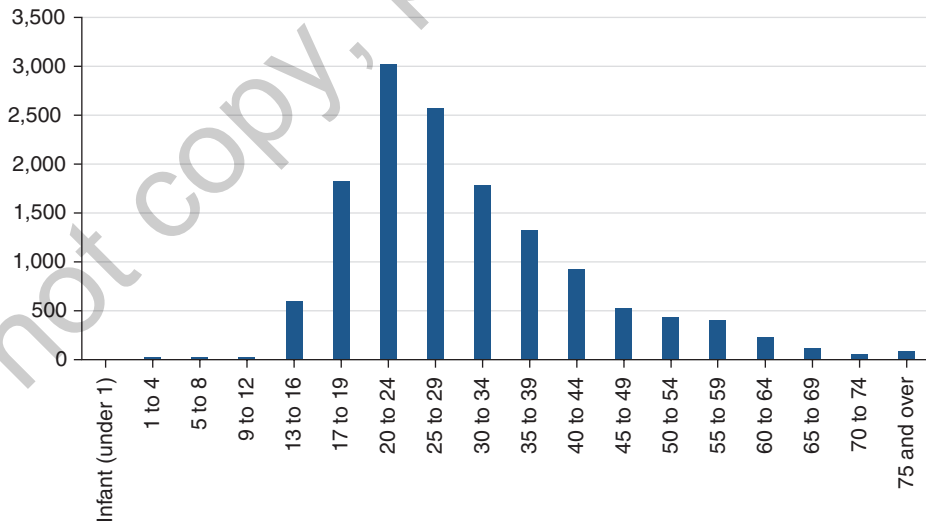
**FIGURE 2.3** ■ Example of Gottfredson and Hirschi's Theory of Low Self-Control



## Informal Social Control and Life-Course Perspectives

In their book *Crime in the Making: Pathways and Turning Points Through Life*, Robert Sampson and John Laub strongly oppose the idea that life circumstances have no effect on changing behavior.<sup>111</sup> On the contrary, they contend that a pattern of committing crimes is a function of both structural factors, such as poverty, and of weak **informal social controls**, such as the family. As the result of these influences, Sampson and Laub believe that individuals develop poor social bonds with peers and have low attachments to conventional activities, such as school. Individuals with these low attachments have a more difficult time developing good relationships and getting good grades and good jobs. However, significant life events and changes can be turning points in their lives. For example, individuals may be on a certain trajectory that involves delinquency and violence, but as the result of a turning point, such as getting into a good relationship or landing a good job, individuals' paths can change. People can and do stop offending. In fact, one of the most consistent findings in most societies is that violent offending behavior decreases as one ages. For example, Figure 2.4 reveals the age-crime curve well using the number of people who have committed homicide in the United States by age group for 2020. Like all violent crime, offending behavior generally peaks in early adulthood and then declines steadily. Scholars such as Sampson and Laub believe that this decrease in the probability of offending is because most people develop significant attachments later in life that provide the connection to conventional society that is necessary to deter them from engaging in crime.

**FIGURE 2.4** ■ Number of People Committing Homicide by Age Group, FBI 2020



Source: Crime in the United States, FBI 2020.

Note: This figure does not include homicide incidents in which the age of the person committing the homicide was unknown.

The sociological perspectives, as well as the psychological and biological ones we have reviewed thus far, compose a select sampling of the various arguments that have been forwarded to explain violent and criminal behavior. It is far from complete. We will, however, review various other theoretical arguments in subsequent chapters, where such explanations are useful in making sense of particular types of violence. Feminist theories, for example, will be discussed in the chapters on family violence and sexual assault. In sum, though, it is safe to say that no single category of theory can adequately explain why people engage in violent behavior. When an individual murders, rapes, or otherwise acts violently, there is no one single motivating cause for that deed. Instead, we have to recognize that there were many things that influenced that act, including the biological and chemical makeup of the person committing the crime; his upbringing; his state of mind, temperament, and character; and his experiences, friends, and family as well as a host of other historical and situational factors. While the previously discussed theories do not represent a complete overview of all the theoretical arguments that have been proposed, they do provide a fairly representative summary of some of the major schools of thought.

At this point, however, it might be useful to transfer our attention to reviewing some of the perspectives that are important in helping us understand the nature of collective forms of violence that we discuss in the second half of this book.

## EXPLAINING COLLECTIVE VIOLENCE

The motivations for participation in collective and group violence are often separate and distinct from the factors related to one-on-one acts of violence. A murderer who kills another person in a fight, for example, is usually acting out of different impulses than a soldier who kills the enemy during a war. However, there is also overlap between the causes of individual and collective violence. Young men who join a violent gang, for example, may do so for many of the individualistic reasons outlined in the previous section, and these may interact with some of the group dynamics that we will explore in this section. It is therefore important to examine some of the ways that groups can facilitate violence. What characteristics do groups have that make it easier and/or more likely for members to act violently?

### IN FOCUS 2.1

#### AILEEN WUORNOS

When we began this chapter, we noted that multiple factors interact to explain individual acts of violence. Now that we have examined several theories, we want to highlight the complex network of factors that are thought to have led to one woman murdering six men. **Aileen Wuornos** was born on February 29, 1956, in Rochester, Michigan. From birth, Aileen's life seemed destined for problems. Her father was in prison for child molestation when she was born and hanged himself in jail. When Aileen was about four, her mother abandoned Aileen and her older brother to be raised by the grandparents. This abandonment was most certainly a traumatic event for young Aileen and could easily constitute a sign of strain as noted by general strain theory.

If Aileen's grandparents had been loving and nurturing, it may very well have changed the course of her life. Unfortunately, her grandmother was an alcoholic who provided little supervision and her grandfather physically and sexually abused Aileen. Aileen's brother also sexually abused her, and by age 11, Aileen was self-medicating with drugs and alcohol and exchanging sex for both money and food. When she became pregnant at 14, Aileen's grandfather kicked her out of the house, and she had to survive on her own, often homeless and supporting herself through sex work. This combined trauma clearly affected her ability to mature into a mentally healthy adult, and because of the abuse she experienced, she learned that the way to handle her frustrations and conflicts with others was through violence, as predicted by social learning theory. Having to survive on the streets, living in poverty, also adds the structural element of deprivation.

In 1989, Aileen killed her first victim, Richard Mallory, who was a john and also a convicted rapist. During the following year, she would kill five other men in Florida, leaving all but one of their bullet-riddled bodies in roadside ditches. Her palm print on one of the victim's abandoned cars led law enforcement to Aileen, and she was arrested and convicted of killing one man and then pleaded guilty to the other five murders. In court, she told the jury that the murders had been in self-defense, although she would later retract this. She was executed by lethal injection on October 9, 2002.<sup>112</sup> It is clear that any single theory alone would be insufficient to explain the murders committed by Aileen Wuornos.



**PHOTO 2.4** Aileen Wuornos, who was convicted of killing six men.

IanDagnall Computing / Alamy Stock Photo

We began this chapter by pointing out that we are a violent species. We also need to note that we are social animals. Humans have evolved to live and work in groups. Groups play a powerful role in our lives and have a tremendous influence on our actions, beliefs, and perceptions.

In fact, groups are so powerful that they can even cause individuals to doubt their own senses in order to conform to the group. One famous experiment that illustrates this was conducted by Solomon Asch in 1952.<sup>113</sup> Asch set up a situation in which a small group of participants were asked to look at some cards upon which were a series of lines of varying lengths. Each individual was then asked to select the longest line in front of the others. Unknown to one of the individuals, all of the others had been instructed to select a shorter line and say that it was the longest. Amazingly, about a third of all the experimental subjects selected what they knew to be the wrong line in half of the situations in which they were asked to choose, while another 10 percent also answered incorrectly but less often. This study has been replicated many times, and as such, illustrates the power of the group to influence our behavior and attitudes.

Why are we so predisposed to groups? What is it about them that so affects us and makes us defer our will to that of the group? While there is no single answer to these questions, there are a number of qualities that groups possess that help us understand why we are so vulnerable to the influence of groups.

First, groups tend to possess legitimacy and authority. When a group of individuals come together as an organization, a gang, or a crowd, we tend to ascribe certain qualities to that collection of people, including a certain amount of legitimacy. Stated differently, groups have an authority that individuals within the group alone do not have. The mere fact that the group is composed of multiple people means that we automatically defer to the whole. We live in a world in which we are taught to function within groups, organizations, and institutions. We learn to accept and defer to the judgments of collectives, whether in the boardroom or in the classroom. Team sports teach us the value of cooperation and teamwork. All of us belong to many different groups, some of which provide practical benefits, such as allowing us to make a living, while others simply provide us with a sense of belonging and place. It shouldn't be a surprise, therefore, that groups can influence a great deal of our behavior, even if we don't necessarily agree with what is dictated.

The authority we ascribe to groups can compel fairly extreme behavior, as the British scientist and novelist Charles Percy Snow observed when he wrote, "When you think of the long and gloomy history of man, you will find more hideous crimes have been committed in the name of obedience than have ever been committed in the name of rebellion."<sup>114</sup> The work of Stanley Milgram, a student of Solomon Asch, certainly illustrates this point. In a famous series of experiments, Milgram was interested in finding out how far people would go on the orders of someone in authority.<sup>115</sup> He therefore designed experiments in which volunteers who replied to newspaper ads were paid to take part in a study that was ostensibly about the effects of electric shocks on learning. The volunteers didn't realize that they themselves were the subjects of the experiment. Seated at a machine, they were told to administer shocks of increasing voltage when another supposed volunteer answered a question incorrectly. In reality, the machine did not administer any electric shock; the "learner" was actually a part of the experiment. These supposed victims were instructed to purposely answer questions incorrectly and then to yell in pain, plead, beg, and even hit their head against a wall at the higher dosages of electricity.

Most experts assumed that only a few sick or pathological individuals would administer the higher voltage clearly marked "Danger: Severe Shock."<sup>116</sup> Instead, Milgram found that most



volunteers were willing to administer even potentially dangerous amounts of electric shocks to people who were obviously suffering if they were explicitly told to do so by someone in authority (in this case, the experimenter). Importantly, most of the volunteers evidenced clear discomfort, tension, and unhappiness in following their instructions. Transcripts of the experiment document the extreme duress the subjects experienced, including statements such as, “I can’t stand it. I’m not going to kill that man in there. You hear him hollering?”<sup>117</sup> Subjects clearly felt discomfort in administering the shocks, but they still gave them. Consider this verbatim transcript of one of Milgram’s sessions, which will give you an idea of what participants experienced:

*150 volts delivered.* You want me to keep going?

*165 volts delivered.* That guy is hollering in there. There’s a lot of them here. He’s liable to have a heart condition. You want me to go on?

*180 volts delivered.* He can’t stand it! I’m not going to kill that man in there! You hear him hollering? He’s hollering. He can’t stand it. . . . I mean who is going to take responsibility if anything happens to that gentleman?

[The experimenter accepts responsibility.] All right.

*195 volts delivered.* You see he’s hollering. Hear that. Gee, I don’t know. [The experimenter says: “The experiment requires that you go on.”] I know it does, sir, but I mean—Hugh—he don’t know what he’s in for. He’s up to 195 volts.

*210 volts delivered.*

*225 volts delivered.*

*240 volts delivered.*<sup>118</sup>

If you think we have changed since Milgram’s experiment, you would be wrong. In 2006 at Santa Clara University, Professor Jerry Burger replicated Milgram’s experiment, but the human subjects review committee would only allow the pretend voltage meter to reach a high of 150 volts. Results indicated that like Milgram’s study, the majority of both men and women continued to shock the fake learners until the highest voltage level was reached. Burger concluded, “Although one must be cautious when making the leap from laboratory studies to complex social behaviors like genocide, understanding the social psychological factors that contribute to people acting in unexpected and unsettling ways is important.”<sup>119</sup> Groups command the same sort of power to compel individuals to comply. Perhaps this is why Freud wanted us not to “underestimate the power of the need to obey.”<sup>120</sup>

In order to explain this respect for authority, Albert Bandura suggests the **theory of moral disengagement**. According to this argument, individuals learn (remember that Bandura is a social learning theorist) not to act in ways that go against their own personal standards of morality because that brings about self-condemnation and self-criticism.<sup>121</sup> But humans are very resourceful and have developed ways of selectively disengaging their moral prohibitions against negative or destructive behavior in order to avoid seeing themselves as bad people. Harmful

behavior, for example, can be reconstructed as being moral or justified, in which case, the behavior is redefined as a positive act. This can involve relying on various euphemisms to help shape perceptions of the act as being more innocent or on making advantageous comparisons. Bandura uses the example of terrorists who see their “behavior as acts of selfless martyrdom by comparing them with widespread cruelties inflicted on the people with whom they identify.”<sup>122</sup> Since moral control is strongest when an individual perceives personal responsibility for the harm caused, displacing or diffusing responsibility can also act as a tool of moral disengagement. The larger and more hierarchical the group, the easier it is to avoid taking personal accountability and the easier it is to participate in harmful and violent acts. Bandura also points out that the consequences of bad behavior can be minimized or distorted, which also allows disengagement of moral prohibitions.

The last method of disengagement is **dehumanization**. It is easier to remove ethical restrictions against violence when we perceive the victims to be less than we are or perhaps even less than human. During examples of genocide, for example, the perpetrators often label the victim groups as being cockroaches, insects, or vermin, or they use similarly denigrating terms, thus making the violence against that group easier and more acceptable.<sup>123</sup> The more social distance between the perpetrator and the victims, the easier it is to inflict violence upon them. What Bandura was suggesting, therefore, is that the authority of the group calls into play certain practices of moral disengagement so that individuals are able to act in ways that are not outwardly consistent with their moral values but that are demanded or encouraged by membership in a collective. Morality, it seems, is often applied selectively. The authority of collectives is also aided in its ability to influence behavior by a number of other factors, the most important of which is deindividuation.

## Deindividuation

**Deindividuation**, a phenomenon that facilitates violence in a group setting, is actually based on the classic work of Gustave Le Bon, who studied crowds in the late 1800s.<sup>124</sup> Le Bon suggested that

the psychological mechanisms of anonymity, suggestibility and contagion transform an assembly into a “psychological crowd.” In the crowd, the collective mind takes possession of the individual. As a consequence, a crowd member is reduced to an inferior form of evolution: irrational, fickle, and suggestible. The individual submerged in the crowd loses self-control and becomes a mindless puppet, possibly controlled by the crowd’s leader, and capable of performing any act, however atrocious or heroic.<sup>125</sup>

Sigmund Freud expanded the work of Le Bon and suggested that, in groups, individuals display certain behavioral characteristics that include (1) the lessening of a conscious individual personality, (2) a convergence of thoughts and emotions in a common direction, (3) emotions and unconscious drives displacing reason and rationality, and (4) the propensity to immediately carry out intentions as they develop.<sup>126</sup> Essentially, then, deindividuation refers to the long-noted phenomenon of individuals losing their sense of self and individuality when in a group. This loss of a personal identity means that individuals are more capable of acting outside of the boundaries of their normal behavior. There is freedom in a crowd—the freedom to do things that otherwise

would be unthinkable. Think of the members of a lynch mob or riot who in their normal, everyday lives may be fairly nonviolent and peaceful, yet in the grip of the mob's fury allow themselves to be swept along and embrace the violent actions of the group. According to research, the process of deindividuation is aided by a number of circumstances that include anonymity, loss of individual responsibility, arousal, sensory overload, new or unstructured situations, and drugs and/or alcohol.<sup>127</sup> In the present day, this perspective has been used to explain the violent and destructive behavior of hooliganism, violent crowds, lynch mobs, and even genocide.<sup>128</sup>

Another factor that facilitates participation in group violence is **conformity to peer pressure**, which is especially strong among members of military and paramilitary groups. This, of course, is related to social learning theory, which recognizes the strong rewards that peer groups can provide to their individual members. A great deal of research indicates that, during war, men fight not for ideology, nationalism, or even hate—although these factors can still be present—but rather for their fellow soldiers. This is captured in the powerful work of Christopher Browning, who studied the actions of German Reserve Police Battalion 101 in Poland during World War II.<sup>129</sup> Composed of a cross-section of Germans from a variety of professions, the battalion was ordered to participate in the mass shootings of Polish Jews rounded up in a variety of Polish villages. Even though one of their commanding officers excused soldiers from the duty if they felt they couldn't do it, most did in fact participate, even though they found the task to be horrific and disgusting. Browning argued that most of the men—around 80 percent to 90 percent of them—participated because they didn't want to let their buddies down. They felt that they had a collective obligation and to shirk their duty would be to shift their share of that responsibility onto the shoulders of their fellows. Importantly, those few who did not participate went out of their way to seek the goodwill of their comrades and avoid any possible reproach.

This pressure to conform is heightened by the training that military personnel undergo. All soldiers and paramilitary forces go through some form of basic training or boot camp that is designed to socialize soldiers into becoming able and willing members of an organization fundamentally rooted in violence. This training is intentionally difficult and harsh, since it is designed to break individuals down both psychologically and physically and then rebuild them in a military mold—one that replaces individualism with group loyalty, pride, and obedience.<sup>130</sup> The rigors of the training ensure that members of the group become fiercely bonded to each other and, as a result, will support each other, even in the perpetration of atrocities. This pressure to conform to the expectations of a group, however, is not limited to military settings. All groups exert power and influence over their members, including gangs, work groups, and sports teams. Gang rapes in fraternities and among team athletes are examples of how these collectives can help facilitate violence, as we will see in Chapter 6.

## CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has illustrated the diversity of motivations and structural conditions that impel individuals and groups into acts of violence. Human behavior, as we have discussed, is not easily categorized. Individuals often act within a context that brings victims and offenders together, and this context cannot be separated from the participants' historical, cultural,

structural, psychological, or biological backgrounds. Although we could not discuss every theory on violence here, we tried to examine the most widely relied-upon explanations. We will refer back to these arguments throughout the text and also provide additional explanations when we examine specific types of violence, such as homicide, rape, and violence against women.

## KEY TERMS

anomie	intergenerational transmission of violence theory
antisocial personality disorder	intermale aggression
atavisms	jumping in
brain dysfunctions	phrenology
chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE)	psychopathy
code of the street	relative deprivation
conformity to peer pressure	sadism
cycle of violence	script theory
dehumanization	self-control
deindividuation	serotonin
differential association theory	shame
dominance	signaling theory
economic deprivation	social learning theory
emotional desensitization	status
eugenics movement	strain theories
frustration-aggression hypothesis	stress
general strain theory	superpredators
general theory of crime	territorial aggression
Great Replacement Theory	testosterone
informal social controls	theory of moral disengagement
institutional-anomic theory	warrior gene

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The main assumption of the eugenics movement is that the human race can be improved through various forms of intervention, including sterilization. The modern eugenics movement was first formulated by Sir Francis Galton. In the United States, the movement was exposed for being behind many horrific policies, including mass sterilizations of subgroups of people, such as those with mental deficiencies. The horrors being perpetrated by Nazi Germany were also soon connected to the philosophy of the eugenics movement. Some contend that even talking about the biological factors that may be related to violence is flirting with disaster because of atrocities committed in the

past, which were based on such notions of biological determinism. What risks do we have as a society when we investigate the connections between violence and neurochemical or other physiological conditions? Do the benefits outweigh the costs? What policies would be necessary to prevent the atrocities of the past from happening again?

2. Students often think that theory remains an abstract endeavor that is never applied to the real world. However, virtually all public policy is based on some theoretical perspective. Delineate at least three policies you are aware of that have been implemented to reduce some type of violence (e.g., youth violence, gun violence). From what you know about each policy, what theory or theories identified in this chapter could help explain the rationale for the policy? That is, what does the theory say about the causes of violence that would have led to such a policy?
3. The National Criminal Justice Reference Service (<http://www.ncjrs.gov>) is funded by the U.S. Department of Justice to disseminate information about crime and crime prevention to policy makers, practitioners, and the public at large. Go to their website and search for publications on “theories of violence.” Select at least two publications and outline their theoretical contributions to the study of violence.

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