



An exploration of the current knowledge on young people who kill: A systematic review



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ABSTRACT

This exploratory systematic review assessed the quality of primary studies on young people who kill and synthesised the findings regarding the characteristics of these offenders. An electronic search yielded 12,717 hits of papers published between 1989 and 2012. Of these, 8395 duplicates, 3787 irrelevant hits, and 527 publications not meeting the inclusion criteria of the review were excluded (15 publications were added after searching the grey literature), leaving 23 good quality studies. From these, a further seven were removed due to their small sample size (i.e., $n < 30$), leaving a total of 16 studies reviewed in detail. A search update was carried out on 2 February 2014 and no further studies meeting the inclusion criteria were found. The results indicate that juvenile homicide offenders are a heterogeneous group and the risk factors for juvenile homicide are cumulative and evolve through life. The findings are mixed, but ten risk factors are identified which appear to be consistent for offenders across the studies reviewed. The limitations of the current review are highlighted and recommendations for future research are outlined, with particular consideration given to improving the quality of the literature in this field.

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1. Introduction

Juvenile homicide is a rare event, but has increasingly been making media headlines since the 1990s. According to Rodway et al. (2011), approximately 12% of homicides in Canada are committed by young people per year, 10% in the United States of America (USA), 8% in Finland, and 6% in England and Wales. Despite being a rare event, a number of empirical studies have been conducted in an effort to understand the offence, motivations and characteristics of these young offenders (see Heide, 2003 for a summary). However, these studies tend to be diverse in content and primarily comprised of case studies (Heide, 2003).

Two literature reviews have previously been carried out regarding juvenile homicide. A comprehensive literature review was conducted by Heide (2003), focusing on clinical and empirical findings, as well as the treatment of the offenders. The second literature review (Shumaker & Prinz, 2000) concentrated on the characteristics of pre-teen homicide offenders (under 13 years old). The existing literature on juvenile homicide offenders has successfully explored the demographic, psychiatric, familial and social characteristics associated with these offenders (Heide, 2003). However, Heide (2003) provides recommendations concerning enhanced methodological designs to explore the aetiology, interventions and long-term outcomes. In addition, Shumaker and Prinz (2000) suggest that, despite their differences, pre-teens share similarities with adolescent homicide offenders in terms of background characteristics, such as domestic violence and abuse, poor parenting and instability. They also found weak evidence to support the existence of different etiologies between pre-teen and adolescent homicide offenders.

2. The difficulty of defining juvenile homicide

Existing studies relating to juvenile homicide are heterogeneous in terms of their content because of inconsistent definitions used across the literature. There are not only incongruities relating to the meaning of the term 'juvenile', but also different legal definitions of what constitutes homicide. Indeed, homicide is defined differently depending on the country in which it occurs. In England and Wales, according to Crown Prosecution Service (2013), homicide includes the offences of murder, manslaughter, infanticide and causing death by dangerous or careless driving. In Scotland, homicide refers to the offences of murder and culpable homicide (Scottish Government, 2012).

International agencies also vary in terms of how they define homicide, as well as which offences constitute homicide. For instance, European Commission (2013) refers to homicide as the "intentional killing of a person" (para. 1). It includes offences such as murder, manslaughter, euthanasia and infanticide. On the other hand, United Nations (2012) defines homicide as "unlawful death purposefully inflicted on a person by another person" (para. 1). While the definitions (and offences included within the definitions) of homicide may differ, they all consist of similar elements, that is, a person has been killed, there was an intention to kill that person, and there is a human offender (Smit, De Jong, & Bijleveld, 2012).

In the United Kingdom (UK) legislation, the terms 'juvenile' and 'youth' are used interchangeably. In some instances these terms refer to all individuals under the age of 18, while in others they only refer to those aged 14 to 18. However, it is generally accepted that a 'child' is someone aged 13 or below, a 'young person' refers to someone between the ages of 14 and 17, and a 'young adult' is someone aged 18 to 21 (Penal Affairs Panel, 2009). The term 'juvenile' appears to be used far more frequently in the USA legislation, and whether or not an individual is classified as a 'juvenile' is determined by a judicial decision. Depending on the state, a juvenile is usually someone under the age of either 17 or 18 (Heide, 2003).

Some authors (e.g., Carcach, 1997) argue that the term 'youth' refers to a broader concept that encompasses all those going through adolescence, and can thus be defined as anyone under the age of 24. Across Europe, the age relating to juvenile delinquency also differs, with the

age of criminal responsibility being eight in Scotland, 10 in England and Wales, 13 in France, 14 in Germany, 16 in Spain, and 18 in Belgium (Marttunen, 2008). The young offenders referred to in this paper are individuals under the age of 21. This is because 21 is the legal age in most European countries and also incorporates puberty, psychological and physical development.

3. Characteristics of juvenile homicide offenders

A number of characteristics have been identified in relation to juvenile homicide offenders. These include characteristics relating to their background (e.g., low socio-economic status, harsh parenting and exclusion from school) and their environment (e.g., availability of weapons, family disorganisation, abusive home environment and violent family life) (Darby, Allan, Kashani, Hartke, & Reid, 1998; Hill-Smith, Hugo, Hughes, Fonagy, & Hartman, 2002).

The social learning approach, developed by Bandura (1986), states that learning results from a combination of human interactions and environmental influences. Bandura's (1986) theory focuses on observational learning, where an individual models his or her behaviour on that of others after observing their behaviour. The observed behaviour is adopted or changed according to the consequences experienced by the individual (referred to as reinforcement and punishment). Studies in which aggressive behaviours (e.g., punching or hitting) were modelled by adults show that exposure to aggressive models increases the rate of imitation by children (see Gonzalez, 2001). Research also shows that the parents of juvenile homicide offenders tend to provide a model of violence as shown in Hardwick and Rowton-Lee (1996) in which parricide offenders are more likely to have experienced severe abuse by their families. According to Roe-Sepowitz (2007), risk factors concerning the background characteristics of female juvenile homicide offenders include family disruption and lack of parental supervision. She also found that sexual abuse occurred in 20% of cases and more than half of the offenders experienced a history of substance use.

A comprehensive study carried out by Heide (1997) identified 15 primary factors associated with juvenile homicide offenders in the 1990s. These factors belong to five broad categories: the situation, societal influences, resource availability, personality characteristics and cumulative effect. Heide (1997) suggests that these categories contribute towards the escalation of juvenile homicide in the USA. She also highlights other contributing factors, such as psychological disorders, neurological impairments, influence of home environment, involvement in antisocial behaviour, substance abuse, and other social difficulties (e.g., truancy, dropping out or being expelled from school).

In addition to the work of Heide (1997, 1999, 2003), other studies have examined the criminal involvement of parents (Busch, Zagar, Hughes, Arbit, & Bussell, 1990; Lindberg et al., 2009; Zagar, Arbit, Sylvies, Busch, & Hughes, 1990), gang membership (Busch et al., 1990; Zagar et al., 1990), and previous arrests (Carter, 1999; Myers, Burgess, & Nelson, 1998; Zagar & Grove, 2010).

The Pittsburgh Youth Study (Loeber & Farrington, 2011) is a prospective longitudinal study that followed 1517 males from childhood to early adulthood. It is the first study of its kind to prospectively gather information on the lives and living conditions of men growing up in a medium-sized city in order to explore those who would later become homicide offenders, victims, or neither. Between 1987 and 2009, 37 participants (aged 15–29) were convicted of homicide. It is important to note that this includes first, second and third degree murder, manslaughter, vehicular homicide, and 'unknown degree' murder. Four fifths of these offenders had committed their offences by the age of 20, peaking at 18 to 19 years old. Despite the age range being older in this study, it seems important to report their findings because it is the only recent longitudinal study examining young people who later go on to offend. According to Heide (2012), this study by Loeber and Farrington (2011) is ground-breaking due to its longitudinal nature, large sample, comparative analyses, utilisation of several control groups, inclusion of both self-

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