



PEARSON NEW INTERNATIONAL EDITION

Social Problems:  
A Down to Earth Approach  
James M. Henslin  
Eleventh Edition



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**TABLE 5 ► Murder: The Ten Safest and Most Dangerous U.S. Cities**

THE SAFEST			THE MOST DANGEROUS		
Rank	City	Murders per 100,000 People	Rank	City	Murders per 100,000 People
1	Plano, TX	1.5	1	New Orleans, LA	52
2	Honolulu, HI	1.5	2	Detroit, MI	40
3	Henderson, NV	1.5	3	St. Louis, MO	40
4	El Paso, TX	1.9	4	Baltimore, MD	37
5	Chandler, AZ	2.0	5	Newark, NJ	29
6	Lincoln, NE	2.0	6	Oakland, CA	26
7	Anaheim, CA	2.7	7	Washington, DC	24
8	Austin, TX	2.9	7	Buffalo, NY	22
9	San Jose, CA	2.9	9	Kansas City, MO	21
10	San Diego, CA	3.1	10	Memphis, TN	20

Note: From data reported by police officials in cities over 250,000 people.

Source: By the author. Based on *Statistical Abstract of the United States 2012*:Table 309.

**The “Why” of Murder.** Now that we have looked at the “who,” “what,” “when,” and “where” of murder, let’s examine the “why.” As we examine the reasons behind the social patterns, you will see that they reflect our society.

## Explaining the Social Patterns

**Acquaintanceship.** As you saw, most murder victims are killed by someone they know. Indeed, most murders are crimes of passion spurred by heated arguments. Many analysts have pointed out that we are much more likely to argue with people we know than with strangers. It is with people we know that we share our money, property, and intimate emotions—which fuel the kinds of quarrels that sometimes lead to violent death.

**Poverty.** Why are poor people more likely to commit murder? The theoretical perspectives help us understand this pattern. *Conflict theorists*, who stress the oppression of the poor, see their high murder rates as a result of their poverty. As sociologist Elliott Currie (1985:160) put it,


*Brutal conditions breed brutal behavior. To believe otherwise requires us to argue that the experience of being confined to the mean and precarious depths of the American economy has no serious consequences for personal character or social behavior.*

Because most murder victims are also poor, conflict theorists conclude that people in poverty are striking out at one another instead of at their oppressors.

*Functionalists* use both strain theory and control theory in their explanation. Those who use strain theory emphasize that people who are blocked from achieving their goals feel stress and are more likely to strike out at others. Those who use control theory point out that the poor have weaker controls to inhibit their desires to strike out at others. For example, the poor have “less to lose” if they go to jail. Compared with people from higher social classes, the poor are less likely to own their own homes, and their jobs pay relatively little.

**The Meaning Behind Murder.** To these explanations, *symbolic interactionists* add that the social classes have different ways of resolving disputes. Middle-class people are likely to call the police or talk to a lawyer. Poor people, in contrast, can’t afford lawyers, and many don’t trust the police. Those who stand up to others are admired for doing so. As a result, poor people are more likely to settle disagreements directly and personally. Direct confrontations over passionate issues lead to heated words, physical assault, and sometimes death.

**12** Explain the social patterns of murder.

 **View on MySocLab**  
**Figure** Murder by Relationship

To trace the path by which people became involved in killing, Lonnie Athens, a symbolic interactionist, interviewed 58 people serving sentences for murder. He found this general pattern: The killer found something intolerable. A spouse or lover might have refused sex or threatened to leave. Or someone may have said something insulting. The killer interpreted the act as something that called for violence, often because the act threatened the killer's self-image or social standing among friends.

Listen to a woman whom Athens (1980:36–37) interviewed. She said that she was at a party when a stranger accused her of cheating him of \$20. The man kept insulting her and laughing at her:

*Then I told myself, "This man has got to go one way or another; I've just had enough of this (man) messing with me; I'm going to cut his dirty . . . throat." I went into my bedroom, got a \$20 bill and my razor. I said to myself . . . "now he's hung himself," and I walked out of the bedroom. I went up to him with a big smile on my face. I held the \$20 bill in my hand out in front of me and hid the razor in the other hand. Then I sat on his lap and said, "O.K., you're a fast dude; here's your \$20 back." He said, "I'm glad that you are finally admitting it." I looked at him with a smile and said, "Let me seal it with a kiss" . . . and then I bent over like I was going to kiss him and started slicing up his throat.*

**Killing as a Manly Act.** This last example notwithstanding, why do men kill so much more than women? One reason is that dominance is considered an essential element of masculinity. Among working-class boys and men—and not limited to them—is the view that a “real man” is tough. Their standing in the group may depend on being known as “the kind of guy who can’t be pushed around.” Not fighting back when insulted is to be a coward, to show a lack of masculinity (Rios 2011).

As we saw earlier, among some groups spilling blood brings honor. In the Mafia, to kill is to demonstrate masculinity: Killing is the measure of a man's *capacity as a man*. There, “the more awesome and potent the victim, the more worthy and meritorious the killer” (Arlacchi 1980:113).

Symbolic interactionists stress that while men learn to associate masculinity with acting tough and, when necessary, being violent, women tend to learn less violent ways of handling problems. As a result, *in every society around the world* men kill at a rate several times that of women (Daly and Wilson 1988; Chernoff and Simon 2000). (Biological and evolutionary theorists point to this worldwide pattern of killing as evidence of genetic inheritance. We will continue with a sociological focus on environmental theories.)

**Racial–Ethnic Differences.** So why do African Americans kill at a higher rate than other racial-ethnic groups? Let's start with symbolic interactionism. It is important to note that almost all murder by African Americans occurs among the very poor. In this subculture, masculinity is highly prized—and the form of masculinity dominant here centers on the willingness to defend oneself aggressively. Functionalists would add that African Americans are socialized to strive for the cultural goal of material success, but discrimination blocks many of them from reaching that goal. This increases their strain, leading to a higher rate of violence, most of which is directed against people nearby.

How about the intraracial pattern of murder that we reviewed? This is primarily due to segregated living and housing patterns. Then what about violence that crosses racial lines? Functionalists stress our society's pattern of money and race–ethnicity. If a robbery (or mugging or burglary) results in a murder across racial lines, it is most likely to involve a poor African American robbing a white, not a poor white robbing an African American. If African Americans possessed more wealth than whites, we would expect this pattern to be reversed.

In *The Declining Significance of Race*, sociologist William Julius Wilson (1978) analyzed the impact of social change on patterns of violence. As African Americans gained more access to education, they took higher-paying jobs and entered the middle class. As they moved out of the ghetto and into more desirable areas of the city and suburbs left behind was an *underclass*. These people are desperately poor and plagued with social problems: poverty, dropping out of school, unemployment, single-parent households, drug addiction, murder, robbery, and rape. As Wilson put it, this group “is increasingly isolated from mainstream patterns and norms of behavior.”

**Temporal Patterns.** The timing of U.S. murder also reflects society. Murders are less frequent during weekdays when people are working and meeting personal and family responsibilities. Murders are higher on weekends when people are more likely to be socializing in public, drinking, and using drugs, with the peak of violence occurring on Saturday night. And because people are more likely to get out of the house and socialize during warm weather, murder is higher during the summer months and lower during winter months.

**Geographic Patterns.** You also saw how geography plays a role in murder. Since we've had records, now for more than a century, the South's murder rate has been higher than that of the rest of the country. You saw this pattern on the Social Map you looked at. Because the South's high murder rate persists year after year, some researchers conclude that there is a *southern subculture of violence*. In this subculture, Southerners learn to resolve disagreements in confrontational ways. More violent themes run through southern music, literature, and jokes. Apparently, Southerners are more likely to own guns, to know how to shoot them, and to use guns during quarrels. Sociologists find these explanations suggestive, but not satisfactory (Doerner 1978; Huff-Corzine et al. 1986, 1991; Pridemore and Freilich 2006). We need more research to establish adequate explanations.

## Mass Murder and Serial Murder

Let's look at two patterns of murder that have gripped the public's attention: mass murder and serial murder.

**13** Discuss the findings on mass murder and serial murder.

**Mass Murder.** **Mass murder** is the killing of four or more people in a single episode (Fox and Levin 2005). By this definition, Amy Bishop in our opening vignette is not a mass murderer because she had three victims, but, unfortunately, there is no problem locating examples. One of the most notorious is Richard Speck, who slaughtered eight nursing students in Chicago one night in 1966. In that same year, Charles Whitman killed 16 people in a sniper attack from a tower at the University of Texas. In 1981, Priscilla Ford deliberately drove her car into a crowd at a Thanksgiving Day parade in Reno, Nevada, killing six. The list goes on: James Huberty shot 21 people at a McDonald's in 1984. In 1991, Julio Gonzalez, unhappy that his girlfriend was breaking up with him, killed 87 people by torching the Happy Land Social Club in the Bronx. In Houston in 2001, Andrea Yates drowned her five small children in the family bathtub while her husband was at work. In 2007, Seung-Hui Cho shot to death 32 students and faculty members at Virginia Tech. In 2012, Adam Lanza shot to death 20 children and 6 adults at an elementary school in Connecticut.

The largest mass murder by a single individual in the United States occurred in 1995 when Timothy McVeigh killed 168 people by blowing up a federal building in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. McVeigh's stunning number of victims was overshadowed on September 11, 2001, of course, when about 3,000 people lost their lives. This was a different form of mass murder, involving many people who made plans for years, with many people carrying them out. September 11 is better thought of as an act of war.

**Serial Murder.** Killing people in three or more separate events is called **serial murder**. The murders may occur over several days, weeks, or even years. The elapsed time between murders distinguishes serial killers from mass murderers. Serial killers are generally less spontaneous and do more planning than mass murderers. But not always, with Timothy McVeigh the prime example.

Some serial killers are motivated by lust and are aroused sexually by killing. The FBI refers to this type of killing as "lust murder." These serial killers like to take souvenirs from their victims. The victims' jewelry, underwear, even body parts remind them of the pleasure the killing gave them (Fox and Levin 2005:44). One of the most bizarre serial killers was



Amy Bishop

Jeffrey Dahmer of Milwaukee. Dahmer had sex with the dead bodies of the young men he killed, and he fried and ate parts of his victims. In 2009, Anthony Sowell was found to be living with decaying corpses in his home in Cleveland, Ohio. He was charged with killing 11 women. The serial killer with the most victims is Harold Shipman, a quiet, unassuming physician in Manchester, England. From 1977 to 2000, he killed 275 elderly women patients, giving them lethal injections while making house calls. In the Spotlight on Social Research box below, I focus on how a young teenager became a serial killer.

## Spotlight on Social Research

### Doing Research on a Serial Killer

Dean Corll, age 33, of Houston Texas, raped, tortured, and killed 27 teenaged boys. Two teenagers helped him, Elmer Wayne Henley, 14, and David Brooks, 15. Neither boy had a father living at home, and Corll became a father substitute who molded the boys into killers. Henley and Brooks, who helped Corll pick up young hitchhikers, would sometimes even bring him their own neighbors and high school classmates to rape, torture, and kill.

The case came to the attention of the police when Henley shot Corll to death.

The reports were shocking: As television crews recorded the event, decaying corpses, one after another, were unearthed from a rented boat storage shed. All the corpses seemed to be teenagers.

My curiosity got the best of me, and I decided to go to Houston. Summer classes were ending in just a few days, and as soon as I taught my last class I took off for a straight-through drive from Illinois. My budget was low (nonexistent, actually), but these were “hippie” times, and it was easy to meet a stranger and find a place to stay for a few nights.

I went to the “morgue,” the office where newspapers store their back issues. There I read the reports, from the first revelation of the killings to their current coverage. The accounts included the addresses of victims. On a city map, I marked the home of each local victim, as well as the homes of the killers. As I drove around the neighborhoods, map in hand, at one of the marked homes I saw a man painting his porch. I stopped my car, went over and introduced myself. I asked him if he were the father of a boy who had been killed. Although reluctant to talk about his son’s death, he did so. His son had left the house one Saturday to go for a haircut. He never made it home. He told me bitterly that the police had refused to investigate his son’s disappearance. They insisted that his son was a runaway.

Elmer Wayne Henley, one of the accused killers, was a neighborhood kid. He lived just down the street.

As I drove by Henley’s home, I decided to stop and try to get an interview. As I was knocking on the door, Henley’s mother and grandmother came around the side of the house, carrying bags of groceries. I told them who

I was and what I wanted. Henley’s mother said that she couldn’t talk to me, that her attorney had ordered her not to talk to anyone. I explained that I had driven all the way from Illinois to talk to her, and I promised that I would keep whatever she said private until after her son’s trial. She agreed to be interviewed, and I went inside her home. While I was talking to her and her mother, three of Henley’s friends came over. I was also able to interview them.

To prevent contamination—what one person says in an interview influencing others—I interviewed each person separately. I recorded the interviews in Henley’s bedroom, with the door closed. My interviews revealed what since has become common knowledge about serial killers: They successfully lead double lives that catch their friends and family unaware. Henley’s mother swore to me that her son was a good boy and that he couldn’t possibly be guilty. His high school friends stressed that Elmer couldn’t be involved in homosexual rape and murder because he was interested only in girls. For proof of Elmer’s innocence, his friends pointed to a pair of girls’ panties that were hanging in his bedroom.

Henley and Brooks were tried and found guilty. They had methodically delivered hitchhikers and acquaintances to Corll, and together the three of them had raped, tortured, killed, and buried the boys. Henley and Brooks were sentenced to life terms in Texas prisons, where they remain today.

### For Your Consideration

What punishment do you think is appropriate for serial killers. Why?



*Elmer Wayne Henley in Corpus Christi, Texas, who was sentenced to six life sentences for his involvement in the kidnapping, torture, rape, and murder of teenaged boys.*



Almost all serial killers are men, but there are exceptions. Here are three. In the 1980s, Genene Jones, a nurse, killed small children in her care in a hospital and a pediatrics clinic in Kerrville, Texas. In 1988, Dorothea Montalvo Puente killed seven senior citizens so she could keep cashing their Social Security checks. In 2002, Aileen Wuornos was executed for killing five men after she had sex with them.

**Have Mass and Serial Murders Become More Common?** Many assume that mass and serial murders are more common now than they used to be, but we can't draw this conclusion. In the past, police departments had little communication with one another, and when killings occurred in different jurisdictions the killings were seldom linked. Today's computer programs and more efficient investigative techniques make it easier for the police to recognize that a serial killer is operating in an area.

## Social Policy

While I could suggest many policies for dealing with offenders and their victims, the primary concern is the prevention of violence. Let's look at the potential.

### Global Concerns: Preventing Violence

Here are four social policies that can reduce or prevent violence:

**Equality.** *First*, researchers have documented that rape is higher in societies in which women are devalued (Lalumiere et al. 2005). The implications for social policy are profound. We can reduce rape by increasing the social value of women. To do this, we need programs in churches and schools, for families, and on television that stress equality.

**The Cost of Rape.** *Second*, researchers have also documented that rape is lower when the perceived cost of raping is high (Lalumiere et al. 2005). Put more simply, if men think they will be punished, they are less likely to rape. This finding also has profound implications for social policy: To reduce rape, we need social policies that increase the likelihood that rapists will be punished. Of the many possibilities, here is just one. Some men are serial rapists, who commit a large number of rapes. Some rape several times a month until they are caught—which can take years. Long sentences for repeat offenders—with little chance of parole—will prevent many women from being raped. For a related social policy, read the Issues in Social Problems box on the next page.

**The Climate of Violence.** *Third*, policy makers can support research to determine how our culture creates a climate of violence. Remember the sociological question that was posed at the beginning of this: What in a society increases or decreases the likelihood of violence? As indicated in the first two policies I suggested, we do have some answers to this question. But we need more research to determine what aspects of our culture produce high rates of violence and how they do so. I suggest that researchers

1. Examine cultures with low violence to determine factors that minimize violence
2. Find ways to teach young men to channel their aggression constructively
3. Find ways to increase respect among men and women
4. To the degree that rape and murder are based on economic inequality and blocked goals to opportunities, develop programs that open opportunities for the disadvantaged

**Gun Control.** As we saw in Figure 8, most murder victims die from gunshot wounds. Two opposing views on gun control exist, extremes that illustrate why it is difficult to establish social policy for the prevention of violence.

**14** Identify social policies that can reduce or prevent violence.



**Read on MySocLab Document:**  
Through a Sociological Lens:  
Social Structure and Family Violence

## Issues in Social Problems

### Rape Kits: Why Wait?

In Los Angeles, the backlog in crime labs is so huge that it takes 8 months for rape kits to be tested.

When a woman reports a rape, the police gather evidence from her body. Part of that evidence consists of swabs taken from wherever the rapist has penetrated her, as well as any residue that is elsewhere on her body and clothing. This evidence is placed in a rape kit and sent to a state laboratory for analysis. DNA evidence from the crime scene is compared with a DNA database. If there is a “hit,” a match with DNA records, the police know they are dealing with a serial rapist.

But while a rape kit goes untested, a serial rapist can and will keep raping:

Catherine was in her forties, living with her young son. She was awakened at midnight by a stranger who raped her, sodomized her, and repeatedly forced her to orally copulate him. When it was over, the police brought her to the Rape Treatment Center. As is the case with all rape victims, her body was a “crime scene”. She consented to the collection of evidence.

The detective was told by the crime lab that it would take at least 8 months to analyze Catherine’s rape kit. The detective said he knew from the “M.O.” in this crime that the rapist was a repeat offender. Eight months was too long to wait. He personally drove the kit to the state lab—where the kit still sat for months. When it was processed, they got a “cold hit.” Catherine’s rapist was identified. He was in the offender database.

During the months that Catherine’s kit sat on a shelf, unopened, the same rapist attacked at least two other victims—one was a child. (Tofte 2009)

The reason for the 8-month wait? Testing rape kits is expensive, costing \$1,000 to \$1,500 a kit. There are a



*This Texas woman was raped at knifepoint. Twenty-four years later, her rape kit was tested. The DNA identified the rapist.*

lot of rapes in this huge metropolitan sprawl of 13 million people, and like other areas of the country, Los Angeles is short on money.

### For Your Consideration

Like the residents of many other states, Californians feel that they are being eaten alive by taxes, and with shortages of money a lot of programs are going unfunded. What would you think about citizens starting a campaign to raise private (nontax) funds to get all the rape kits tested? And it isn’t just a California problem. All over the country, untested rape kits collect dust, allowing rapists to remain free (Martindale 2012). How about you beginning a campaign in your state? You could make a difference.

Proponents of gun control argue that because most murders are crimes of passion, emotional outbursts would be less lethal if guns were less accessible. They claim we could reduce the U.S. murder rate by registering all guns and licensing gun owners. They consider gun ownership a custom that has “no redeeming social value.”

Opponents of gun control argue that gun ownership is a constitutional right and that Americans need more guns, not less. They argue that if all law-abiding citizens had guns, few rapists and killers would break into homes—and of those who did, many wouldn’t survive to do it again. They say that those who argue that guns are the problem are mistaken. They point out that Americans have more guns now than ever before, and the rates of murder and rape have dropped.

**Keeping the Issue Alive.** The final suggestion follows the feminist/conflict view. If we are going to reduce rape further, we need to keep this issue before the public.