What Turns a Psychopath into a Killer?

by

Makaiya Wilson

Submitted to the Department of Psychology
School of Natural and Social Sciences
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

Purchase College
State University of New York

May 2023

Sponsor: Dr. Meagan Curtis
Second reader: Dr. Carolyn Cates
ABSTRACT

According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation in 2021 there were 13,477 homicide incidents which total about 36 murders per day. Most murders are committed by a person that the victim has known or has met once before but some are completely random. The random ones have the most linked connection with being committed by people who are diagnosed with an antisocial personality disorder or psychopathy, as seen in people such as Ed Gein, Richard Martinez, or Ted Bundy, people who have committed heinous acts of murder without feeling remorse toward victims or their families. In society, many people think a psychopath is simply a person who does not have the mental capacity to do the right thing rather than thinking of any of the genetic or environmental factors that play a role when creating a psychopath. The paper will cover factors that may contribute to violence in psychopaths, such as brain structural differences and childhood traumas.
What Turns a Psychopath into a Killer?

The purpose of this paper was to try to find an understanding of psychopathy and the way in which it can affect the person who may have it. Psychopathy is different from other mental disorders that it is commonly placed with such as sociopathy because the disorder has behavior traits that we see in everyday people such as flat affect but on a much more severe scale with less response to treatment. These same qualities that we may see as usual affect people with psychopathy on a much greater scale and can be seen to develop gradually over time leading to these people being unable to fit within the social norms completely. While there are people that have psychopathy who never commit violent crimes, the rate for psychopaths who do commit violent crimes may be higher. A very extreme but negative way that psychopathy may affect an individual's life is by being the foundation for them to become a murderer hence enticing my research question. How does an individual go from being described with psychopathy to becoming a violent murderer?

This paper will focus on the way in which psychopathy works not only in the human brain but in societal structures to create the modern-day murderer. The paper will cover topics of brain structural differences, childhood traumas, and correlations made between psychopathy and violence. To explore this issue, I will give short reviews from related sources that cover the topics of child behavior and brain structure that have been analyzed by other researchers. I will then give my assessment and finally, through this, I will end the paper by giving insight into what can happen in future studies on psychopathic murderers.

The Definition of Psychopathy

The word psychopathy is a social construct that is categorized by variations of emotional attachment and the lack of understanding of the impact actions can have on other human beings.
What Turns a Psychopath into a Killer? (Anderson & Kiehl, 2012). In The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), psychopathy would be categorized as a Cluster B personality disorder with the most common attributes relating to Antisocial Personality Disorder. According to the DSM (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 659), Antisocial Personality Disorder is defined as a “pervasive pattern of disregard for and violation of the rights of others that has been continuously occurring since an individual was age 15 years old.” The DSM lists seven criteria for diagnosing anti-personality disorder:

“1. Failure to conform to social norms concerning lawful behaviors, as indicated by repeatedly performing acts that are grounds for arrest. 2. Deceitfulness, as indicated by repeated lying, use of aliases, or conning others for personal profit or pleasure. 3. Impulsivity or failure to plan ahead. 4. Irritability and aggressiveness, as indicated by repeated physical fights or assaults. 5. Reckless disregard for the safety of self or others. 6. Consistent irresponsibility, as indicated by repeated failure to sustain consistent work behavior or honor financial obligations. 7. Lack of remorse, as indicated by being indifferent to or rationalizing having hurt, mistreated, or stolen from another.” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 659)

Additional diagnostic criteria include a requirement that the person must be at least 18 years old, that there is evidence of conduct disorder beginning before the age of 15, and that the antisocial behavior is not solely linked to bipolar disorder or schizophrenia (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Psychopathy is relatively uncommon. Within the United States, about 1.2% of adult men and up to 0.7% of adult women are believed to have clinically significant levels of psychopathy.
What Turns a Psychopath into a Killer? (DeAngelis, 2022). Although people with high levels of psychopathy may have little interest in the well-being of others, most do not commit homicide. This paper explores some of the factors that may account for why some individuals with psychopathy become murderers while others do not.

Early Signs of Psychopathy

It has been noted by many studies that the lack of emotion or the inability to control emotion has been a strong factor when it comes to the description of psychopathy. Psychopaths are short-tempered and this leads to them dealing with any form of frustration, failure, or discipline with verbal abuse, threats, and sudden violence (Hare, 1998). In most cases, conduct issues in the early stages are a sign that an individual may develop anti-social personality disorder or psychopathy. Due to the fact that the DSM states that individuals under 18 cannot be tested to see if they qualify for an anti-personality disorder, researchers have created other tools such as the Hare Psychopathy Checklist (Hare, 1991) or the Preschool version of the Inventory of Callous Unemotional Traits (Frick, 2004) to screen younger children.

Breaux et al. (2019) examined early signs of psychopathy in children, focusing on two questions that were important for this research: (1) How are psychopathic traits associated with each other including Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), Conduct Disorder (CD), Oppositional defiant disorder (ODD), and callousness? and (2) How are youth seen classified by Psychopathic traits and disruptive behavior disorder? For this study, researchers recruited 222 participants, 80% male, between ages 5 and 12. These participants were collected as willing participants and children in a Summer Treatment Program. To collect participants researchers used many methods such as school recruitment, health professionals, televised ads, and posters. The parents and teachers for each child provided information on the Disruptive Behavior Disorder
What Turns a Psychopath into a Killer?

Rating Scale (Pelham Jr. et al. 1992), parent report on the Disruptive Behavior Disorder Interview (Pelham Jr. 1998), and parent and teacher ratings on the Impairment Rating Scale (Fabiano et al. 2006). From these first tests, it was shown that out of the children who had conduct problems, 59.6% met the criteria for having ODD without CD, 39.1% met the criteria for ODD with CD, and only two children making up 1.2% met the criteria for CD without ODD (Breaux et al., 2019).

After taking data from the provided caregivers, researchers found that the volatile effect was an important trait that was noted throughout the children. There are different levels to conduct outbursts which may be due to other disorders described as disruptive behavior disorders. It was found that there was no overlapping correlation between levels of psychopathy traits with ADHD or ODD and there was a bigger correlation to limited prosocial emotions to callousness. It was also noted that the correlation between psychopathy traits and disruptive behavior outbursts scores was significant. Identifying the way in which children with psychopathic traits and other conduct disorders were classified within society, it was found that teachers have better abilities to detect and differentiate between antisocial behaviors and those children who show more severe signs. From this research, it was concluded that psychopathy and its traits are more associated with severe antisocial behavior in childhood.

Links Between Child Abuse and Homicide

An important factor to note that may lead to psychopathy is child abuse. Mitchell and Aamodt (2005) tested to see if there was any correlation between the type of child abuse experienced and becoming a lust serial killer. A lust killer is a person who kills strictly for sexual gratification but this can also range from organized to disorganized killer. Organized murderers are categorized as individuals who have planned their actions before committing the crime. The victims chosen by them are either carefully watched before the crime takes place or chosen with
What Turns a Psychopath into a Killer?  

reason. Disorganized murderers are categorized as individuals who do not plan their crime beforehand and take the opportunity to commit their crimes when the time arises with their victims being chosen at random (Berbell, 2022).

To conduct the study researchers used The Encyclopedia of Serial Killers to find good candidates. The requirements to qualify for this study were that the serial killer had to have been born and educated in the United States, have a lust motive during the murders, and there must be valid information available about their childhood experiences. The types of abuse experienced by serial killers were also categorized as physical, sexual, psychological, and neglect. The types of abuse each murderer faced were recorded along with the way in which their crime was committed. From these cases, researchers could determine whether the person was an organized, disorganized, or mixed killer. Along with this for each criminal’s background history of family abuse, researchers used a minimum of three credible sources which were then compared to societal norms.

Out of the 50 murderers that were studied, 68% had had some form of maltreatment with psychological abuse being shown in 50%, physical abuse 38%, sexual abuse 26%, neglect 18%, and no abuse 32%. It was found that the types of abuse did play a role in the type of killer a person was categorized into. When compared to the general population signs of neglect were shown in both disorganized and organized killers on an even scale. Compared to each other disorganized criminals had 33% for signs of neglect to organized killers which had 16%. Physical abuse during childhood was higher in serial killers no matter the type when compared to the population. Along with this research showed that disorganized killers were most likely to have forms of sexual abuse in childhood while organized killers were more linked to psychological abuse.

While there are hereditary factors that can support the development of a psychopathic brain, adverse childhood experiences are also known as another key factor. Moreira and Oliveira
What Turns a Psychopath into a Killer?

(2020) hypothesized that high amounts or degrees of abuse during childhood would lead to the development of psychopathy. Using 12 documents published between 1995 and 2007 that focused on the relationship between adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and psychopathy. For eligibility, the inclusion criteria were each study needed to have reports of empirical findings, show a relationship between adverse childhood experiences and psychopathy, and include clinical samples who were assessed for psychopathy. These documents included participants who were children, women, and convicts who had shown signs of psychopathy previously.

Researchers compared the data on psychiatric disorders in individuals who possibly went through traumatic events during childhood, and adulthood and those who had no history of any traumatic experience. From this, it was determined that different types of abuse are linked to different personality disorders. It was found that children with adverse childhood experiences have a strong link to the development of psychopathic traits in adulthood. Physical abuse was the most commonly reported type of ACE in people that showed traits of psychopathy throughout the studies. Likewise, when tested interpersonal trauma in childhood versus in adulthood it was predicted that these traumas during childhood would lead to alcohol or drug use disorders which are most associated with psychopathy. Studies showed that women who reported high amounts of ACEs led to more violent behavior when compared to those who were not exposed. Along with this, it was found that parental bonding, or the lack thereof, played a crucial role in the development of psychopathic traits. From the research done, researchers were able to conclude that children who are more exposed to adverse childhood experiences are more likely to show psychopathic traits in adulthood but the type of ACE experience influences the types of behaviors that the person has.

Inside The Brain of a Psychopath
What Turns a Psychopath into a Killer?

While there may be social differences between psychopaths and normal civilians, it has also been demonstrated that there are differences in brain structure as well. To understand the importance of the specific brain functions, one must know what they would do in the general sense. There are three main parts of the brain: the cerebrum, the cerebellum, and the brain stem. The cerebrum is involved in sensory processing, as well as language production, inhibitory control, decision-making, emotions, learning, and fine motor control. The cerebrum has four lobes: the frontal, parietal, temporal, and occipital. The frontal and temporal lobes are responsible for traits such as emotion regulation and understanding language.

There are several abnormalities that can be found inside the brain of a psychopath once compared to that of a non-psychopath. In a review paper, Debowska et al. (2014) examined the results from neurobiological studies that were conducted to find the different brain abnormalities in psychopathy. To ensure the most accuracy, they only looked at research that was done 5 years prior. Researchers found that damage to the frontal and temporal lobes was most associated with patients who had psychopathy. It was shown that damage to the frontal lobe can lead to little symptoms such as insensitivity to having negative consequences to actions taken by that individual because they do not completely understand societal boundaries (Debowska, 2014). Importantly, it has been suggested that damage to the frontal cortex, the prefrontal cortex in particular, may result in psychopathy (Kiehl, 2006).

Looking at the activity in a psychopath’s brain researchers and comparing them to self-reported criminals it was found that there was little to no activity specifically looking at the temporal lobe and prefrontal cortex (Anderson & Kiehl, 2012). Located in the temporal lobe is the amygdala which is associated with noticing important emotional cues. This causes psychopaths the inability to understand the emotions or beliefs of others due to the fact that these areas regulate
these types of social connections. In their research, it was concluded damage to areas in the prefrontal cortex specifically the ventromedial portion was most commonly associated with practical moral judgments. Damage to this part of the brain was shown to lead to psychopaths' decision-making skills being non-empathetic. While this is true it was also suggested that psychopaths' emotions are not voluntary but based rather on an opportunity. For example, a psychopath may express empathy if it does not interfere with goal-directed behavior (Debowska et al, 2014).

The correlation between psychopathy and violence

According to the DSM, the highest proportion of the population who have psychopathy or antisocial personality disorder are males with alcohol or substance abuse (greater than 70%) or have been to prison. Results were shown to be higher in people with adverse socioeconomic situations and individuals with sociocultural issues. Being that people must be 18 to be diagnosed with an anti-personality disorder, the records of adolescents' diagnoses are undetermined. Many of the studies that have been done on prisoners have presented signs that the number of psychopaths that lead to violent crimes are shown these kinds of actions at young ages which creates what is demonstrated through secondary psychopaths. These are people who have developed psychopathy through trauma exposure rather than primary psychopaths who have developed psychopathy due to a natural unknown cause. Primary psychopaths are categorized as people with lower anxiety and their crimes have some form of importance to them as compared to secondary psychopaths who are seen to be more volatile and whose crimes are spontaneous. It is seen that the biggest difference between the two groups is the levels of anxiety rather than the actual types of crimes committed (Anderson & Kiehl, 2012).
In the DSM there is no number estimate of the portion of psychopaths who go on to commit violent crimes. With that being said the DSM does note that antisocial disorder can be distinguished by the types of crime committed and the reasoning behind it. In research done by Robert Hare (1999) on the measurements of psychopaths who go on to commit violent murders, it was found that psychopaths make up a large proportion of the prison population despite the fact that people with psychopathy only make up 1% of the “general” population outside of prison. The crime lifespan for psychopaths started at earlier ages when compared to non-psychopath offenders and the urge to commit crimes with violence does not decrease with age. Along with this the rate of violent crimes committed by psychopaths was higher than other offenders and showed signs of what would be known as dispassionate towards victims. In relation to sexual violence, it was found that psychopathy traits were found in 10-15% of child molesters and 40-50% of rapists or mixed offenders. Lastly, it was found that psychopaths are three times more likely to recommit these violent acts upon release from prison when compared to non-psychopath offenders.

Discussion

Psychopathy or Antisocial personality disorder is characterized by a lack of empathy, manipulative behavior, and impulsivity. It has been associated with violent behavior and in this particular case murder. A review of the literature would suggest that there are multiple factors that are important when discussing the way in which a person can go from being described with psychopathy to becoming a murderer. Research has shown that psychopaths are more likely to commit crimes at younger ages when compared to non-psychopaths (Breaux et al. 2019). The progression of a person described with an antisocial personality disorder to becoming a
psychopathic murderer often begins with the display of a disregard for social norms and the basic rights of others (Pelham Jr. et al. 1992, Anderson & Kiehl, 2012).

The combination of traits associated with psychopathy – lack of empathy, impulsivity, and manipulative behavior – can create a dangerous individual capable of extreme violence. The rate of violent crimes committed by psychopaths was found to be higher than non-psychopath offenders (Hare, 1999). It has also been found during studies that people with psychopathy engage in predatory behavior, seeking out vulnerable victims to satisfy their own desires. They may also exhibit callousness towards their victims, showing no remorse or guilt for their actions (Berbell, 2022). While not all psychopaths become murderers, there is a clear link between psychopathy and violent behavior that cannot be ignored.

Child abuse was also shown to be a prevalent aspect as to why people with psychopathy tend to be more violent than the general population. Signs that treatment from parents in terms of nurturing could also play a role as the lack of expression could result from not being shown these feelings. The research found that 68% of incarcerated psychopaths had some form of maltreatment during childhood (Mitchell & Aamodt, 2005). Different forms of maltreatment were shown to be linked to different kinds of mental issues, psychopathy was most linked to physical abuse (Moreira and Oliveira, 2020). Along with this, it was found that this type of abuse can lead to alcohol or drug abuse in adulthood which is common in psychopathy. The effects of alcohol and drugs mixed with mental disorders can create the means for an individual to become increasingly violent.

Studies have shown that the brains of psychopaths are structurally different from those of non-psychopaths. It was found that the levels of gray matter inside the brain of individuals with psychopathy were lower than those without (Debowska et al., 2014). Inside of the prefrontal cortex and temporal lobe, responsible for understanding emotions and language was found to have
What Turns a Psychopath into a Killer?

significantly lower gray matter (Anderson & Kiehl, 2012). The lack of connection between the gray matter has been shown to be a factor as to why empathize with others or feel remorse for their actions. Damage to the prefrontal cortex was found to be one of the leading causes of psychopathy traits in individuals (Kiehl, 2006). The decision-making of psychopaths is described to be non-empathetic (Debowska et al, 2014). This description can be used in terms of an individual who is a psychopathic murderer as they feel no remorse towards the person for the crime done towards them. While the biological differences may not excuse the harmful actions of some psychopaths, understanding the biological basis of the behaviors can help in the development of further studies.

While the research I found was significant enough to answer some of the questions I had, I feel as though there should be a lot more research done on psychopathic murderers and the way in which they become who they are in society. To understand this complex disorder I do believe that we must fully understand the different ways that it can be developed so that there can be some forms of prevention. The research done on child psychopathy showed that callousness and the general lack of concern for others were the first signs but these signs could be the results of things such as child abuse in the household. A question I would have for the researcher would be is there a way to prevent a psychopath from becoming violent in adulthood? Damage to the brain due to traumatic accidents may not be able to be prevented but the doctoral attention to the parts of the brain that have been damaged on an individual may be studied. While it is true that psychopaths make up a small percentage of the population, the prison rate for psychopathic people is much higher which would also lead me to ask the question of prevention. Not all psychopaths go on to commit violent crimes but the only answer to the reason why psychopaths go on to be murderers cannot only be dependent on abuse from childhood.
For further research, I would suggest a study be done on diagnoses of psychopathic people who have committed violent crimes and compare it to psychopaths who have not. In the study, researchers should ask the participants about their lives and the different task that they would do on an average day. Based on the recollections from the participants I believe that researchers would be able to see that throughout the course of their life, their actions and daily activities and practices would show some signs of whether or not the individual would be violent in adulthood.

**Biography of Murderer**

**Richard Ramirez**

Ricardo Leyva Muñoz Ramírez also known as “The Night Stalker” was born on February 29, 1960, in El Paso Texas to Mercedez and Julian Ramirez. In the early stages of Richard's life, he had 3 major injuries to the head. The first injury was at the age of two when Richard received 30 stitches because a dresser fell on his head. The second occurred at the age of 6 when a swing his sister was using knocked him unconscious in the playground. At age 11, doctors described him with epilepsy which is known for causing seizures due to brain activities. Along with damage to the brain, there were also environmental factors that played a crucial role in his development. Richard was a victim of psychical abuse from his father who was reported to drink heavily and get into outbursts of rage. He was also greatly influenced by his cousin Mike Ramirez who had served in the Vietnam War. This would be the person who introduced him to rape and torture through the Polaroids that he had from the war. When Richard was 12 he witnessed Mike murder his wife Jessie by shooting her in the face during a domestic argument. After this, he moved in with his sister whose husband would take him on trips to stalk women. At the age of 22, Richard moved to California and began his spree in June of 1984 that would last until August 1985. He had multiple
murder weapons including handguns, a machete, and a tire iron. Richard was found to have 14 murdered victims with many other victims who had traumatic injuries and experiences.

**Alexander Pichushkin**

Russian serial killer Alexander Pichushkin, commonly known as the "Chessboard Killer," ravaged Moscow's streets from 1992 to 2006. Pichushkin, who was born in 1974 in the Moscow district of Mytishchi, had a difficult upbringing. He described his upbringing as a difficult home with a dominating and overly protective mother and a distant relationship with his industrial worker father. As a child, Pichushkin was introverted and had a hard time making friends. At the age of 4, Pichushkin had a head injury from a swing that lead to damage to his frontal cortex. It was reported that after this incident his personality completely changed. He was constantly bullied at school as well, which was said to have influenced his antisocial behavior later on. Even though socially Pichushkin struggled, he was said to be a good student who did well in school. as he approached his teenage years, he began to display symptoms of mental illness, such as anxiety and depression. In addition, he started experimenting with drugs and alcohol and became fascinated with death. In the tenth grade, he quit going to school and started to isolate himself more. The difficult upbringing of Pichushkin continued throughout his adult life as he struggled to get and hold a job and also had numerous unsuccessful relationships. He also started to withdraw and isolate himself, spending much of his time by himself in his apartment. When he was only 18 years old, in 1992, he started a killing spree that lasted for nearly ten years. His victims were primarily homeless men who he would persuade to go with him to remote locations with the promise of liquor. Once at the location he would viciously murder them and the bodies would then be left in the same spot, placing them on a neighboring chessboard in a certain pattern. After an unsuccessful attempt to kill his companion, Pichushkin was finally apprehended in 2006. He admitted to killing
61 people when he was apprehended, though it's thought that the actual toll may be significantly higher. He received a life sentence without the chance of release.

**Ed Gein**

One of the most infamous serial killers in American history was Edward Gein, also known as "Ed Gein." He was born on August 27, 1906 in Wisconsin's La Crosse County. Gein grew up in poverty with a distant father and an extremely controlling and religious mother. From research done, it is believed that Gein's upbringing played a major role in the crimes that he would commit in adulthood. George and Augusta Gein, Edwards's parents, ran a 160-acre farm close to Plainfield, Wisconsin. He described the relationship between his family as one that did not show love towards one another. Due to his father George’s alcoholism Augusta was left to care for Edward and his brother Henry. Augusta instilled a rigid set of religious and moral beliefs as she belonged to a Lutheran church and thought that sex was immoral and evil since women were by nature sinful. Augusta frequently read passages from the Bible to her sons and stressed the value of chastity and decrying society's immorality. She would also lecture them on the negative effects of alcohol and the value of perseverance and independence. Along with this she was morbidly fascinated by the human body and frequently discussed death and the afterlife. She would frequently accompany her sons to the neighborhood cemetery, pointing out the graves of persons she saw as "good Christian women." In 1940 Edward’s brother died in a mysterious house fire, this allowed for the bond between him and his mother to grow. Being that Edward was so attached to his mother, her death in 1945 had a devastating impact on him. He began to delve deeper into his obsession with death and the human body, which eventually led him to commit his first murder in 1954. Authorities explored Ed Gein's property in 1957 and found a variety of human remains and horrifying items there. It was discovered that Gein had excavated numerous women's bodies from
nearby cemeteries and utilized their body parts to make his household objects. Gein stated that he
at one point intended to build a "woman suit" that he could wear to take on the role of his mother
because he was particularly fascinated by the feminine body. Gein was found guilty of murdering
Mary Hogan and Bernice Worden in addition to tomb robbing and collecting body parts. Gein shot
and killed Hogan, a pub owner, in 1954. Worden, a hardware shop owner, was slain by Gein in
1957. Gein was detained for the murder of Worden, but when the investigation turned up his
peculiar collection of human remains, Gein was found guilty of both killings.
References


DeAngelis T., (2022). *Continuing Education: A broader view of Psychopathy*


What Turns a Psychopath into a Killer?


https://www.ranker.com/list/creepy-facts-alexander-pichushkin/amandasedlakhevener


Learish, J., (2021) Richard Ramirez: The story, the evidence, the Night Stalker


Moreiraa, D., Moreirab, D., Oliveirab, S., Ribeiroc, F., Barbosaa, F., Fáveroc, M., Gomes, V. (2020). Relationship between adverse childhood experiences and psychopathy: A systematic review, 53, 101452


https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ed-Gein


TheFamousPeople.com Website, Alexander Pichushkin Biography
