Every unpunished murder takes away something from the security of every man’s life.

—Daniel Webster

In many respects, homicide is a relatively simple and straightforward event. It requires merely motive, opportunity, and only a modicum of skill.

—Terance D. Miethe and Wendy C. Regoecci

A murder victim lies dead, and law enforcement searches for clues to apprehend a suspect. The friends and family react in horror, and they only have one question: why?

—Kim Egger

The Word of Life Christian Church in upstate New York was, by all accounts, a very secretive group. Living and worshipping in a former schoolhouse, they kept mostly to themselves, which made it all the more surprising when, in late October 2015, this sect made national news after church members beat to death one of their own and put another in the hospital. Lucas Leonard was just 19 years old when he died from blunt force trauma that had been inflicted on him by numerous church members, including his parents and sister. Both Lucas and his brother, 17-year-old Christopher, were summoned to a “counseling” session in which, over the course of hours, they were punched and kicked repeatedly on their stomachs, genitals, backs, and legs by fellow parishioners. Lucas was later taken to a hospital after being found not breathing and pronounced dead on arrival. His brother, also admitted to the hospital, survived his injuries. Reportedly, their ostensible crime had been to consider leaving the church. Subsequently, the parents of the young men were charged with first-degree manslaughter, while four other parishioners who had taken part were charged with felony assault.

Given the charges leveled against the parents and the other church members, it appears as if killing was never the underlying motive. If the prosecutor felt that their intention was
to kill, then a charge of first- or second-degree murder would have been more appropriate. The reality, however, as we shall see in this chapter, is that proving intent can be a tricky business. Part of the difficulty is that intent refers to an internal mental state of mind that isn’t always easy to assess, and part of the problem relates to the similarities between assault and homicide; they are closely connected. In fact, many scholars who study violent crime contend that the conceptual and behavioral elements of assault and murder overlap in many important ways. Murder, in other words, is simply the most lethal form of assault—or as Leslie Kennedy and David Forde explain,

It makes more sense to see acts of violence on a continuum, where fatal actions represent an extremely harmful escalation of more mundane disagreements or coercive actions. The fact that one party ends up dead need not make us change our view of why these conflicts occur, although they clearly make our search for answers about how to curtail this escalation to violence much more urgent.\(^5\)

Although there are many different factors that influence violent assaults, the majority of homicides appear to be sparked by relatively minor conflicts and disagreements. As we have already discussed in this book, what often separates nonlethal assaults from those that result in death is the availability of a firearm, as well as the availability of medical resources needed to treat injuries. In this chapter, we examine some of the general patterns and types of assault and homicide that tend to occur most frequently. Since other chapters discuss more specific forms of assaultive violence, such as violence that occurs within the home (Chapter 5), sexual assault and rape (Chapter 6), and violence between strangers (Chapter 7), we do not review them in any detail in this chapter. Instead, a large portion of this chapter focuses on the different types of homicide. We begin, as always, by examining a number of definitional issues.

**Defining Assault and Homicide**

Assault is a term that covers a wide range of actions and can vary from a simple threat of harm to a near-fatal attack. The National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) includes both aggravated and simple assault within its estimate of violent victimization. An *aggravated assault* is defined as “an attack or
attempted attack with a weapon, regardless of whether or not an injury occurred, and attack without a weapon when serious injury results.” A **simple assault**, on the other hand, is an “attack without a weapon resulting either in no injury, minor injury (for example, bruises, black eyes, cuts, scratches, or swelling) or an undetermined injury requiring less than 2 days of hospitalization. Simple assaults also include cases of attempted assault without a weapon.”6

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)’s Uniform Crime Reporting system collects detailed information on aggravated assaults only. For the FBI, an aggravated assault is defined as “an unlawful attack or threat of an attack by one person upon another for the purpose of inflicting severe or aggravated bodily injury.” It is usually accompanied by the use of a weapon or by other means likely to produce death or great bodily harm.7 When an aggravated assault and theft occur together, it becomes a robbery, which is discussed in Chapter 7. When an assault culminates in death, then it obviously becomes a homicide.

**Homicide**

Most of us use the terms *murder* and *homicide* interchangeably, but they are really distinct categories of killing. Homicide is a general term for the killing of another individual, whereas murder refers to the specific legal category of criminal homicide. In this chapter, however, we will use the terms interchangeably for ease of discussion. As with all crimes, the legal definitions of homicide vary from state to state, but there are typically three types: excusable, justifiable, and murder. Figure 4.1 displays the different kinds included in most state statutes.

**Justifiable homicides** are killings judged to be legally acceptable because they occurred in defense of life or property. **Excusable homicides**, on the other hand, are accidental or unintentional killings that did not occur because of negligence or recklessness. **Criminal homicides**, the kind of killing we are most concerned with here, generally include two categories—murder and manslaughter—with various types subsumed under each. **First-degree murders** are generally committed with both premeditation and deliberation. **Premeditation** refers to the knowledge and intention to kill, while **deliberation** implies that the killing was planned and thought about rather than committed on impulse. **Second-degree murders** are considered a little less serious, because they do not involve premeditation and deliberation. Instead, they are more spontaneous in nature. Some states also have **felony murder** statutes for murders that occur during the commission of another felony, such as a robbery. And finally, **manslaughters** are criminal homicides in which the degree of responsibility is considered much less than that of murder, not only because...
premeditation and deliberation are absent but also because the offender did not act with malice. Most states also divide manslaughters into voluntary (e.g., someone killed while overwhelmed by emotion or passion) and involuntary (e.g., someone killed because of another individual’s reckless behavior). If you are thinking that the distinction between these different degrees of homicide appears to be somewhat indistinct and arbitrary, you are absolutely correct. In many ways, the legal differences between first-degree murder and second-degree murder and manslaughter depend upon how the killing is interpreted by others. It is truly a subjective evaluation. Essentially, the various types of murder are differentiated based on the state of mind and intentions of the person perpetrating the violence, and it is hard for others to really know what is in

Figure 4.1 Homicide Types

Homicide

- Justifiable
  - Citizen
  - Police

- Excusable
  - Felony Murder

- Criminal
  - 1st Degree Murder
    - 2nd Degree murder
    - Manslaughter
      - Involuntary
      - Voluntary
somebody else’s mind. The person’s intent can only be guessed or inferred from his or her actions and words, and that is a judgment call.

**Estimates of Assault**

In 2014, there were just over 1 million aggravated assault and more than 4 million simple assault victimizations that occurred in the United States against individuals 12 years of age or older. This translates to a rate of 4.1 per 1,000 persons for aggravated assault, and 12.4 per 1,000 for simple assault. Of these assaults, less than half (44.6%) were reported to the police.\(^8\)

Generally, assaults make up the majority of nonlethal violent crime victimizations. For example, in 2014 the NCVS recorded 3,599,570 violent victimizations; of those, 4,411,010 or 82.3% were assaults. The majority of these assault victimizations were simple assaults.\(^9\) Males usually have much higher rates of assault compared with females, which is consistent with what we know about violence generally. However, as with most forms of violence, the risk is not distributed equally across society. Patterns of assault, for example, vary tremendously across gender groups. As you can see from Figure 4.2, females are much more likely to be assaulted by people they know compared with males, although recent years have seen an increase in females assaulted by strangers. For both simple and aggravated assaults, males, on the other hand, are far more likely to be assaulted by strangers. American Indian or Alaskan Natives have rates of assault that are more than twice those of other race/ethnic groups, followed by African Americans, Whites, and Hispanics.\(^10\) The young are also more likely to be the victims of assault, with assault rates dropping off sharply for those over the age of 25.

In the vast majority of all aggravated assaults, a weapon was used, regardless of the victim–offender relationship. However, strangers were more likely to be armed with firearms for both aggravated and simple assault victimizations, compared with known offenders who were more likely to use knives. As you can see from Figure 4.3, rates of both aggravated and simple assault peaked around 1994, but the peak was higher for rates of simple assault. Since that time, they have generally been declining, with simple assaults declining more precipitously than aggravated assaults. However, both simple and aggravated assault rates appear to have largely stabilized in recent years.

**When Assaults Become Lethal—Homicide**

In 2014, there were 14,249 people murdered in the United States, which translates into a rate of 4.5 per 100,000 US inhabitants.\(^11\) While we shouldn’t forget that each of these numbers represents a human life that was violently
snuffed out, we should also remember that the murder rate in the United States now is relatively low compared to previous decades. Figure 4.4 charts the murder rate in the United States from 1970 through 2014 and reveals that during the 1970s and the early 1990s, murder rates were much higher than they are today. Beginning around 1993, murder rates began a decline that has continued for 20 years. It is also important to note that this generally declining trend has not been present everywhere in the United States. Several cities in the United States have experienced significant increases in murder over the past few years. For example, in 2015 more than 30 cities such as New Orleans, Washington, Chicago, and Baltimore saw significant increases. Milwaukee, Wisconsin, saw a whopping 76% increase in its murder rate between 2014 and 2015, while St. Louis saw a 60% rise for the same period. As with so many forms of violence, it is clear that homicide risk and increases and decreases in rates do not happen uniformly across this country. Murder patterns, in other words, vary according to many factors and variables. If we look at murder rates by region, for example, we see significant

differences across this country. Figure 4.5 shows that the highest rates of murder tend to occur in many of the southeastern states, while the northern Midwest and Northeast tend to have the lowest rates.

Geography is not the only factor around which murder rates vary; age and race also influence the perpetration and victimization rates for homicide. In 2014, 50.8% of all murders involved African American victims. Given that only around 12% of the US population is Black, and given that most homicides are intraracial and intraethnic (perpetrated within the same racial and ethnic group), we can easily see that murder disproportionately impacts African American lives and communities. Figure 4.6 further reveals that age is another important variable around which murder rates revolve. As is evident, the largest proportion of victims fall into the age bracket of 25 to 49, followed by 18 to 24. Importantly, this pattern also holds for perpetration. The picture we get, therefore, when looking at general patterns of homicide perpetration and victimization, is that it is largely about relatively young Black men victimizing other relatively young Black men. Although there are always exceptions to this rule, the data indicate that this is the most common pattern.
Figure 4.4  Murder Rate per 100,000 in the United States, 1970–2014

National Murder Rate, 1970–2014

One important factor that contributed to the high rates of murder witnessed in the 1990s was handguns. Figure 4.7 displays homicide rates from 1980 to 2013 by the weapon used to kill. The majority of homicides during this time were committed with firearms, which John Lofland termed *facilitating hardware* for lethal violence. In fact, after reviewing thousands of homicide narratives from police reports, Terance Miethe and Wendy Regoeczi concluded that the dynamics of a conflict or dispute change dramatically once a firearm becomes involved. They state,

> The narrative accounts are filled with numerous instances of homicides that would have been difficult, if not impossible, to commit if it was not for the availability and use of a firearm. These situations are best represented by (1) drive-by shootings and (2) young males being “picked on” or “dissed” by groups of males, leaving the scene, and then returning with a gun. Within these particular situations, firearms provide a unique opportunity structure for homicide because they are highly lethal weapons, easily used to equalize strength differentials, and may be employed without direct physical contact with the victim.
Clearly, the United States has very high rates of assaultive violence, and when a gun is available these conflicts often end in death. But are these rates high compared with those of other countries that are similar to us? This is a harder question to answer than you might think, because it can be difficult to ensure that we are comparing the same things. Definitions of assault vary tremendously across nations, which makes it extremely challenging to compare how many such crimes are perpetrated in different countries. Although there are also differences for homicide rates, these are more comparable than assault rates, because there is less variation in terms of what constitutes murder, at least in most industrialized and democratic nations. Table 4.1 displays rates of homicide for the United States along with several other nations similar in economic and political climate. As you can see, the United States has the distinction of being number one in terms of lethal violence; in fact, the United States has a rate that is almost two
times higher than the next highest rates. Of course, there are other countries with even higher rates of murder, but these countries are usually struggling with some type of political, economic, or social turmoil. Countries like Colombia, for example, have extremely high rates of murder because of internal conflict against drug cartels and revolutionary movements intent on overthrowing the government.17 Other countries in Central America such as Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala experience extremely high rates of murder, which have also been fueled by drug trafficking and the corruption of public officials that usually follows behind.18

In sum, compared with other industrialized and democratic nations, the United States has very high rates of assault and homicide. Although the decline in rates
of assault and homicide has been leveling off over the past two years, the good news is that these rates are leveling out at rates nowhere near those observed in the early 1990s. At this point, it is important to note that these assaults and homicides don’t just happen but are instead the outcome of certain kinds of violent encounters, and it is to these that we now turn.

**Violent Interactions**

Shakespeare once famously wrote that “all the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players.” Science suggests much the same thing, albeit less poetically. Specifically, a theory known as **symbolic interactionism** also contends that human behavior—including assaults and homicides—occurs...
Table 4.1  Homicide Rates per 100,000 Population by Nation, 2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colombia</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Salvador</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Zealand</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


In social situations, and that the meaning people attach to their behavior is an important element in understanding what takes place in a given circumstance. A given interaction may appear to be the same to all those not involved in it; however, to those involved, the perception and interpretation of the meaning of the situation can vary dramatically and produce quite different reactions and behaviors. For example, one person may be pushed in a bar and perceive the push as an insult to his or her honor, while another person may interpret it as a simple accident and ignore it. The latter person will probably continue on his or her way without further incident, while the former person may shove back, increasing the likelihood of a violent ending to the situation. This means that, like all social events, the outcome of the encounter depends on the interpretations and perceptions of those involved, which, in turn, shape their behaviors. Because of this, violent events tend to be evolutionary and sequential in nature, with a beginning and an end. In other words, violence is often patterned behavior.
As we saw in Chapter 2, theories that attempt to explain violence focus on several levels of explanation, from geographical units like states and cities down to the individual level. Some researchers, however, have focused exclusively on violent events as the units of analysis: the offender, the victim, and the circumstances surrounding the event. A basic assumption with these types of analyses is that violent events cannot be separated from the physical and social settings within which they occur. As Terance Miethe and Wendy Regoeczi assert, “As social events, crimes are said to be intricately linked to the routine activities of subsequent victims and offenders, the places in which these activities occur, the behavior of witnesses and bystanders, and the particular circumstances of the situation.”

To distinguish between the primary precipitating circumstances of assaultive violence, researchers have classified homicide situations into what are termed instrumental and expressive events. Instrumental murders are those conducted for explicit future goals, such as acquiring money or property. Robbery murders are usually classified as instrumental. In essence, the killing is a means to an end. In contrast, expressive murders are often unplanned acts of anger, rage, or frustration, typically precipitated by a conflict situation, such as an argument or fight. Keep in mind, however, that these are not absolute separate categories. A robber, for example, may commit violence to get money or valuables but also engage in these crimes because he gets a kick out of them. In other words, any act of violence may contain both instrumental and expressive motives at the same time.

Other researchers have developed more detailed classifications to characterize the evolution of a social interaction from a conflict or argument to an assault to murder. Based on his analysis of murder situations, David Luckenbill distinguished six different developmental stages that characterize the most typical homicide transaction:

1. The eventual victim says or does something that is offensive to the eventual murderer. This phase marks the opening round of a series of interactions that Luckenbill terms a “character contest,” in which at least one actor—but usually both—will attempt to establish or “save face.”

2. The murderer interprets the previous interaction as offensive; in many cases, this interpretation is mediated by bystanders and witnesses who help interpret what happened.

3. A variety of response options are available to the eventual murderer, including walking away from the event; however, if retaliation is chosen, violence becomes almost inevitable. In some cases, this is when murder occurs.
4. Interaction between the parties escalates, and both perceive the situation as a confrontation to which the only appropriate response involves aggression and violence.

5. Violence is used to resolve the conflict. The offender may procure a weapon that is at hand, or briefly leave the scene to get one.

6. The final stage involves the murderer either fleeing, remaining, or being held by bystanders; the choice is determined by the social context, including the relationship between the victim and offender.

It might seem that people kill over very slight insults or affronts, but what Luckenbill’s research indicates is that while the initial issue may indeed be petty and ultimately meaningless, as the interaction continues, it becomes more about “face,” social status, and certain ideas about what it means to be a man. Several researchers have found that a large percentage of homicides involve character contests. In fact, the depiction of homicides involving the victim as an active participant as well as the offender was first introduced by Marvin Wolfgang in 1958. He coined the term *victim precipitation*, which simply means that victims sometimes start the conflicts that end in their own deaths. Kenneth Polk labels these types of events as *confrontational homicides*, because they are characterized by altercations that typically evolve from verbal exchanges of insults into physical contests. What all these terms convey is the fact that a homicide is often an event in which the victim is not always an innocent bystander but is often an active participant as well.

Most recently, Terance Miethe and Wendy Regoeczi analyzed narratives from homicide cases from four large cities in the United States and concluded that most homicides occur in situational contexts that have changed little over years. They found expressive homicides involving disputes and arguments to be more prevalent than instrumental homicides, with males being the primary perpetrators of both, but particularly of instrumental homicides. Their research also suggests that *confrontational homicides* occur between a wider range of victims and perpetrators and situations than was often believed. They found that, while these character contests did most often involve males, they also often involved female offenders, occurred in both public and private settings, and were not restricted to minority group members. These contests often began with what many would call trivial altercations. Miethe and Regoeczi found that alcohol was a common element in many of these conflicts and that the victim often provoked the offender in some way—the phenomenon mentioned above.
as victim precipitation. This kind of scenario is particularly common for youth homicides, given that they very often revolve around honor contests and issues of respect. Others have termed these confrontations the “young male syndrome” because of the hypersensitivity of many young men about saving face. James Gilligan, who has been studying violence and violent offenders for over three decades, contends that all violence is an attempt to achieve justice—or at least what the offender perceives to be justice. His perspective certainly highlights the importance of perception in understanding these interactions. Gilligan writes:

> When individuals and groups feel their “honor” is at stake, and an intolerable degree of humiliation or “loss of face” would result from a failure to fight for that honor, they may act violently. The loss of self-esteem is experienced subjectively as the death of the self. People sacrifice anything to prevent the death and disintegration of their individual or group identity.

Although both males and females were involved in all types of murder, Miethe and Regoeczi found that each gender group typically killed within different situational contexts. Male offenders generally killed in situations involving acquaintances of the same age, gender, and race in disputes that occurred in public at night. Beginning in the 1990s, they found that male offenders were increasingly younger and increasingly relying on guns as their weapon of choice. Females were disproportionately more likely to kill family members and intimates of the opposite gender in private locations. Compared with females of earlier decades, females in the 1990s began killing in a more diverse array of social situations and, similar to their male counterparts, were killing at increasingly younger ages.

In sum, research that examines assaults and homicides as social events illustrates the interactive pattern of escalating tension that sometimes culminates in murder. This is why Harries calls murder a process crime. Death is not always inevitable. In fact, Blumstein estimates that, for every murder, there are 50 nonfatal assaults. The final act of an assault is contingent on the individual responses to the situation. At any point in the process, choices could be made that would de-escalate the conflict and end the interaction. Unfortunately, when interactions end lethally, it is often because both actors defined the situation as one in which violence was not only appropriate but preferrable to a verbal or other nonviolent response. Not all murders, however, fit this interactional pattern. Some forms of felony murder, for example, in which a stranger commits a robbery and kills the victims, don’t necessarily result from an escalating series of actions and reactions. Similarly, when we look at multiple murders, we often find a very different dynamic and sequence of events at play.
Multicide

Although the percentage of murders involving multiple victims has been increasing over the past three decades, these types of homicides still compose only about 5% of all murders.28 Despite the low frequency of these murders relative to lone-offender and victim incidents, they grab the largest proportion of media attention. These kinds of killings are generally referred to as multicides, which means they involve the killing of more than one person. There are three broad types of multicide: mass murder, spree murder, and serial murder. In this section, we will highlight the general characteristics of each, although we should point out that there is no real consensus on what constitutes each category. While we tend to be fairly familiar with the names of famous serial killers—like Ted Bundy and Jeffrey Dahmer—we don’t always know what elements must be present to make someone a serial killer. Is serial murder when one person kills several people at a single moment in time, or does it have to involve killings over a period of time? If so, how much time must pass between the murders? One day? One week? One year? Issues such as these make defining the categories somewhat problematic, and as the criminologists James Alan Fox and Jack Levin point out, “Unfortunately, the classification of multiple homicides into mass, spree, and serial subtypes often has been a red herring, more a meaningless distraction than a helpful distinction.”29 While we agree that it is important to acknowledge the dangers of an overly pedantic focus on definitional distinctions, we nevertheless feel that these ways of categorizing multicides still offers some important insights into the variety of methods and motives for these killings, and with this in mind we turn to the first category: mass murder.

Mass Murder

Mass murder is generally understood to have taken place when someone kills four or more victims in one location at one general point in time. The killings may stretch over a period of hours, but they are all part of the same emotional experience.30 For example, Cho Seung-Hui began his deadly rampage at Virginia Tech by killing two students in a dormitory, followed two hours later by a series of attacks in a classroom building that left 30 more people dead. In other incidents, the murders may take place in different locations, but they are usually within the same general area and the same general time frame. For example, when 16-year-old Jeff Weise killed his grandfather and the older man’s girlfriend in their home and then went to Red Lake High School and killed eight people, including himself, most still consider this an incident of mass murder because the killings occurred within a relatively small geographical area. One of the most infamous cases from US history that illustrates this well concerns Charles J. Whitman and the University of Texas
tower in Austin on July 31 and August 1, 1966.\textsuperscript{31} A student at the university, Whitman, a former Marine and Eagle Scout, decided to commit mass murder. He first went to visit his mother in her apartment, and after hitting her in the back of the head, strangled and then stabbed her to death before tucking her body in bed and covering it with a bedspread. From there he went home where his wife Kathy was sleeping after a long day at work and killed her in her sleep by stabbing her multiple times with a large hunting knife. Whitman then gathered a variety of weapons, cleaned and prepared them for what was to come, and concealed them in a footlocker. After driving to the university, he went to the tower and, disguised as a worker in coveralls, took the elevator to the observation deck on the 28th floor. Here he attacked the receptionist, and after shooting and killing three people who were coming up the stairs, he barricaded himself on the observation deck, where he began firing at whoever came within range. He killed 14 people and wounded another 32 before Austin police gained access to the observation deck and shot him.

Another common characteristic of these events is that mass murderers often take their own lives after their rampage, either killing themselves directly, or in other cases, staging the situation in such a way that police officers are left with no choice but to kill the mass murderer—a scenario sometimes referred to as “suicide by cop.”\textsuperscript{32} Charles Whitman clearly fell into this latter category.

**Mass Murder in the Workplace** One common setting where many mass murders take place is the workplace. In August 1986, Patrick Sherrill went to the Edmond, Oklahoma, post office where he worked and killed his supervisor and 14 employees before finally killing himself. This was one of a string of shootings in the mid-1980s and early 1990s that occurred at postal installations, and the term “going postal” soon entered our vocabulary. This is somewhat ironic since postal workers tend to be statistically safer from becoming victims of workplace violence than workers in many other professions.\textsuperscript{33} The term, however, resurfaced in January 2006, when a former female postal worker who had been put on medical leave for psychological problems shot and killed five people at a large mail-processing center in Goleta, California, and then shot herself. What made this incident so noteworthy is that it is believed to be the deadliest mass murder carried out by a woman. But this case is the exception to the rule, since the vast majority of mass murders are committed by men. So who are the men perpetrating this kind of violence?

The vast majority of mass killings are committed by White, middle-aged men.\textsuperscript{34} Mass murderers are often frustrated and angry individuals who frequently have a history of written complaints against them and by them. They often feel that they have been wronged and suffer from a sense of injustice about their
situation. For example, Doug Williams—who eventually went on a workplace killing rampage—was a known racist and often taunted and threatened African American employees at the Lockheed plant where he worked. In fact, many of his coworkers had predicted that he would one day do something terrible. Another mass murderer, Matthew Beck, who killed four of his superiors at the Connecticut State Lottery, had filed a grievance contending that he was being assigned jobs outside of his work classification and that he deserved a raise. Just days before his killings, he told coworkers that he planned to sue the lottery. Larry Hensel was given various warnings about his inappropriate comments and rants about religion and politics, and when layoffs were forced on the company by hard economic times, Hensel was let go. This job loss, combined with a deteriorating family situation, created a man who, in the subsequent words of his attorney, “was distraught, disgruntled, and unbalanced.” Shortly after losing his job, the former electronics technician showed up at his former workplace with a shotgun and a hit list and killed two individuals before leaving the scene on a mountain bike. He later showed up at a sheriff’s department and turned himself in. Unfortunately, this is just one example from many.

Table 4.2 displays a few of the deadliest workplace shootings that have happened in the United States since 2000. As you can see, another characteristic of mass murder in the workplace is the availability of high-powered and semiautomatic weaponry that greatly facilitates the lethal violence. It is important to remember that, although mass murders are the most likely to make the headlines, there are hundreds of employees killed on the job every year. In fact, from 2006 to 2010, the Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that in the United States there has been an average of 551 homicides in the workplace annually. The majority of these homicides occurred in retail establishments and were the result of robberies. In fact, employees working in retail sales are much more likely to be killed on the job compared with law enforcement officers or taxi drivers. This might be surprising, given that we don’t tend to think of salespeople in stores as being particularly at risk.

While these incidents capture our attention, there are many more assaults than homicides on the job. In fact, the Bureau of Justice Statistics estimates that almost 2 million assault victimizations are perpetrated against individuals on the job every year. Professions most likely to experience an assault on the job (other than retail employees) include law enforcement officers and taxi drivers. Clearly, some jobs are more dangerous than others. In addition to mass murders in the workplace, schools have emerged as another setting in which mass killings sometimes take place.
### Table 4.3  Selected Workplace Shootings Since 2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>December 26, 2000</td>
<td>Software engineer Michael McDermott, 42, killed seven coworkers at Edgewater Technology, an Internet consultant firm in Wakefield, Massachusetts. He was armed with an AK-47 assault rifle, a shotgun, and a semiautomatic handgun.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 5, 2001</td>
<td>A former employee shot eight people, killing four, at the Navistar International Corporation, a diesel engine manufacturing plant in Chicago, Illinois, before killing himself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 8, 2003</td>
<td>Doug Williams shot and killed six people including himself at a Lockheed Martin plant near Meridian, Missouri. He was armed with a shotgun and a semiautomatic rifle.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 27, 2003</td>
<td>After being fired, Salvador Tapia went to a Chicago auto parts company armed with a semiautomatic handgun and killed six former coworkers. He died in a shoot-out with police.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 2, 2004</td>
<td>Elijah Brown killed five coworkers at a Kansas City, Kansas, meatpacking plant before killing himself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 31, 2006</td>
<td>Jennifer Sanmarco killed five former coworkers at a mail-processing plant in Goleta, California, before killing herself. She was armed with a 9 mm semiautomatic pistol.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 5, 2009</td>
<td>Nidal Malik Hassan, a US Army officer stationed at Fort Hood, Texas, opened fire at the Soldier Readiness Center on the base while shouting “Allahu Akbar” or “God is Great.” He was shot and wounded by police officers and placed into custody.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 3, 2010</td>
<td>At a disciplinary hearing at Hartford Distributors in Manchester, Connecticut, Omar Thornton pulled out a 9 mm Ruger and killed eight, then killed himself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 29, 2012</td>
<td>Andrew Engeldinger lost his job at a factory in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and returned the next day with a 9 mm Glock handgun, killing five and then killing himself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 29, 2015</td>
<td>Robert Lewis Dear entered a Planned Parenthood clinic in Colorado Springs, Colorado, and opened fire, killing three people and wounding another nine before being surrendering to law enforcement.*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 2, 2015</td>
<td>Syed Rizwan Farook and his wife Tasheen Malik attacked a social service agency in San Bernardino, California, where Farook worked, killed 14 coworkers, and wounded 21 others before fleeing. They were later killed by police officers.*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* These last two cases can also be considered as acts of terrorism and, in fact, we will discuss these cases further in the chapter on terrorism (Chapter 9).

**Mass Murder at School**  It is a sad reality that we can divide school shootings into college, high school, and secondary school settings and sadder still that they happen frequently enough to necessitate an update in this edition. On April 16, 2007, Cho Seung-Hui committed the deadliest school shooting in US history. It resulted in 32 students, faculty, and staff murdered before the shooter killed himself on the campus of Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Virginia.
The deadliest school shooting to occur at a high school occurred on April 20, 1999, in Littleton, Colorado, at Columbine High School, where Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris went on a shooting rampage that resulted in the death of 13 of their fellow students before they killed themselves. Like mass murderers who strike in other contexts, Cho, Klebold, and Harris all had a long history of rage and anger. This rage was depicted vividly on Harris's website where he described his hatred, "God, I can't wait until I can kill you people I'll just go to some downtown area in some big [expletive] city and blow up and shoot everything I can." And the deadliest elementary school shooting occurred on December 14, 2012, when 20-year-old Adam Lanza killed his mother at her home, then went to Sandy Hook Elementary School and killed 20 first graders and 6 teachers and staff, and then shot himself using several semiautomatic weapons. Not much is known about Lanza's motive, but former classmates described him as intelligent but quiet and socially awkward.

As noted earlier, another mass shooting took place on March 21, 2005, at Red Lake High School, located on an American Indian reservation in northern Minnesota. On that day, Jeff Weise killed his grandfather and the grandfather's companion, and then went to the school where he killed a teacher, a security guard, five students, and finally himself, leaving a total of 10 people dead. Like the others, there were warning signs in Weise's life before the shooting. He was often the target of teasing and as a result kept mostly to himself. He often drew pictures of people dying along with Nazi swastikas. Several postings were made to a neo-Nazi Internet site that were later attributed to him, including one that asserted, "It's hard being a Native American National Socialist, people are so misinformed, ignorant and close-minded, it makes your life a living hell."

More recently, a young man named Christopher Sean Harper-Mercer arrived at Umpqua Community College in Roseburg, Oregon, on October 1, 2015, where he attended classes as a student. Armed with a variety of firearms and body armor, he opened fire on his classmates and teachers, killed eight students and a teacher, and wounded another nine individuals before taking his own life after a shootout with law enforcement officers.

As the evidence indicates, most mass murderers tend to be very angry people with a great deal of hostility toward those they believe to have wronged them in some way. Christopher Sean Harper-Mercer, for example, was described as a "hate-filled" individual with anti-religion and white supremacist leanings who had long struggled with mental health issues.

Many believe that such acts of violence could be decreased if more social and personal support systems were available in society. James Fox and Jack Levin echo this sentiment when they state,
The real culprit in explaining mass murder can be found in society itself and in a trend that has affected almost everyone. During recent years, there has been an eclipse of community, a dwindling of the social relationships—family ties and neighborliness—that had protected former generations of Americans from succumbing to disaster. . . . For too many Americans who suffer, their misery has no company. 44

Lest we give a false impression, we need to point out that, like homicide in general, homicides in middle and high schools have been in decline during the past decade. It is also important to look at long-term trends, not just one incident. An examination of Figure 4.8 reveals that the number of students killed in schools is actually remarkably low. This isn't to diminish the tragedy of these deaths, or the horrific nature of school shootings, but rather to remind

![Figure 4.8 Number of School Homicides for Students Aged 5–18](image)

ourselves that schools are still quite safe for children. Of course, the number of people killed in a mass shooting fluctuates greatly, and a mass killing, like the Sandy Hook Elementary School that resulted in such a high number of deaths, skews such trends. Moreover, it is important to place these homicides in the larger context of homicides against young people. Although mass shootings at schools receive a great deal of media attention, they account for a very small proportion of all murders against children and adolescents. Figure 4.9 shows school-associated violent deaths for youth aged 5 to 18, and this graph illustrates the great discrepancy between at-school and away-from-school violent deaths.

**Serial Murder**

In 1974, a series of ten murders occurred near Wichita, Kansas, in which the victims were strangled and/or tortured and then killed. It began in January of that year, when the bodies of Julie and Joseph Otero were found strangled in their home, along with two of their children—Joseph Jr., who was suffocated with a plastic bag, and Josephine, who was found hanging by a rope tied to a

---

**Figure 4.9** Percentage Distribution for School-Associated Homicides for Youth 5–18 by Location, 2012–13.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>At-School</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Away-From-School</td>
<td>97.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

water pipe. Semen was found around the victims' bodies. A few months later, in April, Kathryn Bright, a 21-year-old, was found stabbed to death in her home. It wasn’t until March 1977 that the next connected murder occurred, when 24-year-old Shirley Vian was also found tied up and strangled in her home, followed in December by 35-year-old Nancy Fox, who was killed in a similar way. After another hiatus that lasted until April 1985, 53-year-old Marine Hedge was discovered after she had been strangled in her home and her body subsequently dumped in a ditch. This murder was followed in September 1986 by that of Vicki Wegerle, a 28-year-old who was strangled in her home. In January 1991, Delores “Dee” Davis was strangled and her body then dumped in a rural area near a river. Who committed these terrible crimes, and why did the killer do it? It would be many years before the answer was finally known.

Soon after the first killings in 1974, a *Wichita Eagle* newspaper reporter received an anonymous phone call telling him he could find a letter hidden in a mechanical engineering book at the city library. The letter claimed responsibility for the Otera killings and provided details about the incident that could only have been known by the killer. During the next few weeks, more letters arrived at the *Wichita Eagle*, and all were signed “BTK,” for “bind, torture, kill.” The killer was soon called the **BTK killer**. The killer periodically made contact with police until 1979, when all contacts stopped for a few years. In April 1985, after the naked body of Marine Hedge was found in a ditch, police suspected that the BTK killer was at it again, but they were unsure, since the perpetrator had never removed bodies from the victims’ homes before. In September 1986, Vicki Wegerle’s husband returned home to find her body. Six years would pass before another body, that of Delores Davis, was found near a river. There was still no communication from BTK to the media or police. Then, in March 2004—over 30 years after the first murders—the *Wichita Eagle* again received a letter enclosing photographs of Vicki Wegerle’s body. Other letters soon arrived with more personal items from the killer’s victims. A computer disk was also sent to a Wichita television station that was subsequently tracked down to the killer’s church. In April 2005, Dennis Rader—the BTK killer—was arrested and charged with 10 counts of first-degree murder for the crimes that had haunted Wichita for over 30 years.

Who was Dennis Rader? He graduated from Wichita State University with a degree in justice administration in 1979 and worked as an ordinance enforcement officer. He lived with his wife and had two adult children. Rader was a Cub Scout leader and before his arrest was elected president of the church council at the Lutheran church where he was a member. Although many later
described him as a bit “weird,” others noted the many good works he performed, including helping elderly neighbors with their yard work. In August 2005, Rader was sentenced to 10 consecutive life terms for his murders and will spend the rest of his life in a maximum-security prison near Wichita.

Although they both have multiple victims, serial murders, such as those committed by the BTK killer, are very different from mass murders. John Douglas and Mark Olshaker define a serial murderer as one who kills on at least three occasions, with what can be called an emotional cooling-off period between the incidents. This cooling-off period can last days, weeks, months, or years. The important distinction is that each event is emotionally separate from the others. A more comprehensive definition of serial murder was developed by Steven Egger, who identified a number of additional characteristics that typically characterize serial murders:

1. There is generally no prior relationship between the victim and the attacker.
2. Subsequent murders are at different times and have no apparent connection to the initial murder.
3. Subsequent murders are usually committed in a different geographical location.
4. The motive is usually not material gain but the murderer’s desire to have power or dominance over his victims.
5. The victims may have symbolic value for the murderer or are perceived to have little status or prestige and, in most instances, are unable to defend themselves or alert others to their situation. Individuals who are particularly at risk are those whose situations make them powerless, such as prostitutes, homeless people, missing children, and single women.

So how often does a serial murderer strike? How many of the several thousand intentional killings that occur in the United States are actually the work of a serial killer? Unfortunately, this number is a bit difficult to estimate. Do we count a bank robber who kills several people during the course of his or her life of crime as a serial killer? How about a mob contract killer who kills for money? For example, Louis Eppolito and Steven Caracappa—both former law
enforcement officials—were sentenced to life in federal prison in 2006 for killing eight people for the Mob in New York City for up to $65,000 a hit. Should they be considered serial murderers? Even if there were a consensus on what to include, there are still many other problems inherent in estimating numbers. In fact, neither the FBI nor the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention keep separate records for serial killings. The only agency that even attempts to count serial killings in the United States is the FBI’s Behavioral Sciences Investigative Support Unit at the National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime. They don’t rely on official data, however, but instead use reports from newspapers and wire services. As you can imagine, these sources are less than ideal.

Why is it so hard to count serial murders? Much of the difficulty has to do with connecting murders that take place in different geographical locations. Identifying a murder as part of a serial case requires the killer to leave distinctive identifiers, sometimes called “signatures,” at the crime scene, such as folding the victim’s clothes or leaving a common object. Connecting killings across different jurisdictions is problematic for several reasons but primarily due to communication issues. Poor communication about unsolved murders or missing persons across law enforcement jurisdictions can create “linkage blindness” that hinders the ability of police to make connections. It is also very expensive to conduct long-term investigations of several murders, particularly when they have occurred in different jurisdictions. For example, in King County, Washington, it cost millions of dollars to finally capture 54-year-old Gary Ridgway, who had become known as the Green River Killer. Ridgway killed 48 young women between the ages of 16 and 38 from 1982 to 1998 before his DNA evidence was finally linked to four of his victims. He pleaded guilty in November 2003 to 48 counts of aggravated murder in the first degree. At his sentencing hearing, Ridgway stated, “I wanted to kill as many women I thought were prostitutes as I possibly could.”

As you can see, the reality is that identifying a murder victim as part of a larger pattern can be very difficult. Every year, there are many murder victims who remain unidentified; they are left in shallow graves, in garbage dumps, in woods, and in roadside ditches—these, along with a proportion of the thousands of missing children and other individuals, may have been victims of serial killers. Determining how many, however, is virtually impossible. A case in Chillicothe, Ohio, also reinforces this issue. Chillicothe is a small city in central Ohio with a population of around 23,000. Since 2014, at least six women have disappeared in this small city, with a number of them being found dead in area streams. Some of the women were linked with drug abuse and trafficking as well as prostitution, all of which may have made these women vulnerable to abduction.
and murder. Although a serial killer or killers is suspected, as of this writing, it has not been definitively established. Despite these obstacles, several scholars have attempted to estimate the number of serial murderers active in the United States in a given year. Several leading researchers estimate the number to be around 35 active serial killers in a given year,\textsuperscript{55} while others place the number much higher.\textsuperscript{56}

**Characteristics of Serial Murderers** One of the things you may have noticed in our discussion above is that, like mass murderers, serial killers tend to be male and White. There are notable exceptions to this, however. For example, Aileen Wuornos admitted to killing seven men but was only convicted of killing six because one body was never found. Another woman, Genene Jones, who was a licensed nurse, was convicted in 1984 of killing a young girl in her care with a lethal dose of a muscle relaxant along with other charges related to the injury of seven other children who had not died but who had also been injected with the drug. There was not enough evidence to convict her of 47 other suspicious deaths of children that occurred on her watch at the Bexar County Medical Center Hospital. A problem with insufficient evidence in the case was compounded because hospital officials threw out most of her employment records after her first conviction because they were afraid of bad publicity and further embarrassment.\textsuperscript{57}

There have also been nonwhite serial murderers, although they are the exception. For example, Wayne Williams, an African American man, was convicted of killing two young African American boys in Atlanta, Georgia, in the late 1970s, but was suspected in the deaths of at least 20 other missing young African American boys. Despite these exceptions, the majority of serial killers who have been caught have been White, middle-aged males.

Another distinction for serial killers is their victims. Recall from our discussion of murder in general that victims and offenders most often know each other. In contrast, serial murderers tend to kill strangers. Targeting strangers may be a strategy designed to protect them from detection by authorities. Killing strangers may also serve to dehumanize the victims and thus make it easier to kill them. Serial killers also tend to target victims who are vulnerable, choosing particular subsets of the population. As noted above, the Green River Killer targeted prostitutes who, by the very nature of their profession, make themselves vulnerable. In fact, Gary Ridgway specifically asserted that

well, low-risk victims would be, ah, ah, prostitutes who eagerly get in your car for . . . for money, and they wouldn't be
missed. Where the high risk victim would be like somebody at a college. . . . They would be more of a . . . of a risk of . . . of, ah, people caring more about ‘em, and friends asking questions . . . low risk prostitutes they’re not . . . they’re not as valued as much as a college person . . . or a business person.\textsuperscript{58}

Moreover, Ridgway tried to stay away from more experienced prostitutes who he called “hardcore,” and of whom he said, “There’s a few of them that were just too tough to kill.”\textsuperscript{59} He preferred instead to target younger, less experienced, and therefore more vulnerable prostitutes. Other serial killers have targeted students, elderly people who live alone, hitchhikers, and the homeless. By targeting vulnerable populations, they can more easily isolate and dominate victims who are not able to protect or defend themselves. Prostitutes, for example, frequently get into vehicles with total strangers and often drive to secluded areas. These same behaviors, of course, make them extremely vulnerable to victimizations of many kinds, including serial killing.

There are two other factors common to serial killers. Although there are exceptions, most kill alone, and most also have previous criminal records. For example, Ted Bundy had a history of shoplifting and juvenile car theft before he confessed to killing scores of women before he was put to death in the state of Florida. Despite these similarities among serial killers, there are still some important differences among them in terms of what motivates and drives them in their violence. Holmes and Holmes\textsuperscript{60} classify serial killers into six typologies, based on the explicit or implicit motives of the killer:

1. **Hedonistic lust killers** are distinguished by their effort to obtain sexual pleasure from killing. The lust killer derives direct sexual satisfaction from murdering his victims or by having sex with the corpse or by mutilating or cutting off sex organs.

2. **Thrill killers** also may derive sexual satisfaction from their murders, but they require a live victim for sexual satisfaction. They derive pleasure from torturing, dominating, terrorizing, and humiliating their victims.

3. **Comfort killers** murder for creature comforts, such as financial gain.

4. **Power/control killers** murder to obtain a sense of domination and total control over their victims. Although
sex is sometimes involved, the pleasure is primarily derived from the complete control the killer has over his victim.

5. **Mission killers** are on a mission to rid the world of a group of people they perceive as unworthy or inferior in some way.

6. **Visionary killers** are rare because they suffer from some form of psychosis: They frequently perceive voices or images that command them to kill. Recall from Chapter 2, however, that only a small percentage of violent offenders have mental disorders such as this, which is true for serial killers as well.

As you can see, serial killers do not represent a homogeneous group. Despite this, we are still compelled to understand their behavior. When we read about someone like Ted Bundy or the BTK killer, it is hard not to ask, “How can someone do something so terrible?” We want to believe that anyone who is capable of such atrocities must have completely broken from reality and suffer from severe psychosis. But this is far from accurate. Although serial killers have different motives, scholars who study this kind of violence have determined some common factors that have been present in the lives of apprehended serial killers. The first is that most killers, as their selection of victims underscores, are very aware of right and wrong and know how to avoid detection. James Fox and Jack Levin put it this way:

They know right from wrong, know exactly what they are doing, and can control their desire to kill—but choose not to. They are more cruel than crazy. Their crimes may be sickening, but their minds are not necessarily sick. . . . Indeed, those assailants who are deeply confused or disoriented are generally not capable of the level of planning and organization necessary to conceal their identity from the authorities and, therefore, do not amass a large number of victims.61

Even though they can distinguish right from wrong, meeting their own needs is seen as being more important than those concepts.62 Although most do not suffer from psychosis, several serial killers have been diagnosed with a personality disorder, widely known as sociopathy or psychopathy but now labeled “antisocial personality disorder,”63 which we discussed in Chapter 2. The characteristics of this disorder include insincerity, a lack of shame or remorse, an inability to love, extreme selfishness, and the lack of a conscience. Because they lack a conscience,
the suffering of others does not affect them in the way that it affects most people who might empathize and sympathize with another person’s pain. Other people are often seen as a means to an end; they are simply “things” to be used in meeting the needs of the person who has this particular character defect. People suffering from this disorder are often perceived to be aggressive, charismatic, and intelligent, but they also suffer from chronic feelings of emptiness and isolation.64

Because they often have a need to dominate and control, they are often drawn to careers believed to convey the power they crave, such as law enforcement. The BTK killer, for example, had a degree in criminal justice and worked in a division of law enforcement—albeit on the fringe. John Wayne Gacy, another serial killer, was fascinated with the idea of becoming a police officer and was described by his wife as a “police freak.” Gacy also exhibited some of the other characteristics of this disorder: He was an outgoing, hard-working businessman who hosted street parties in his neighborhood, dressed as a clown to entertain children in the hospital, and belonged to several civic organizations. However, Gacy also tortured and killed 30 young men and boys, whose bodies were found under the floorboards in his house.65 Like others with this disorder, Gacy was able to lead a relatively normal life on the outside, including having a job and a family. Of course, most of the people with this disorder are not violent, and even fewer become serial killers. So what other factors may be related to serial killing?

Another condition that is common in the histories of serial killers is suffering abuse and/or neglect as children. There are many mechanisms that may relate previous abuse and neglect to adult offending. As we saw in Chapter 2, social learning theory would say these individuals learn through imitation and modeling that violence is a tool they can use in their relationships with others. Cathy Spatz Widom, who has studied the effects of childhood abuse, suggests that violent offending may arise in adolescence and adulthood because those victimized as children learn destructive coping mechanisms, including skills in manipulation and denial as well as violent behavior.66 General strain theory would suggest childhood abuse acts as a form of negative stimulus that causes stress and strain; if this strain manifests as negative emotions such as anger and rage, violence would become increasingly likely as a result.

Other factors that frequently appear in the histories of serial killers include what has been termed the homicidal triad: bed-wetting past an appropriate age, cruelty to animals, and fire-setting.67 Any one of these behaviors alone may not be a factor, but according to John Douglas, many serial killers he studied
displayed at least two of the three qualities in childhood. Of the three, cruelty to animals is the behavior most analogous to killing and as such may be a more significant warning sign. This behavior has been notable in many contemporary serial killers, including Edmund Kemper, who buried the family cat alive in the yard and, after its death, decapitated it and put its head on a spindle. Another time, he sliced off the top of another cat’s skull and then tortured it while it convulsed. Henry Lee Lucas reportedly tortured and killed animals and then had sex with their bodies; he later did this with his victims. David Berkowitz, the famous Son of Sam serial killer from New York, also reportedly tormented small animals when he was a child. These are just a few examples.68

Despite the similarities across the lives of serial killers, there is no one causal explanation for why they can perform the acts they do. As with all violence, there are undoubtedly myriad factors that somehow allow individuals to perform such acts without remorse, including biological and neuropsychological factors, environmental factors, such as observing and experiencing violence at the hands of others, and cultural factors, such as being bombarded by images that glamorize violence on a daily basis.

**Spree Murder**

**Spree murder** appears to be the least common of the three types of multicide. While spree murders involve multiple victims at multiple locations, the difference between a killing spree and a serial killing is that there is no emotional cooling-off period between the murders involved in a spree killing. Therefore, the killings tend to take place over a shorter period of time.

The most infamous case of spree murder in the United States occurred in the winter of 1958 in Nebraska, when Charles Starkweather and his girlfriend Caril Fugate went on a week-long killing spree. This spree killing has been the basis for several movies, including Oliver Stone’s 1994 *Natural Born Killers*. Starkweather killed a gas station attendant after he robbed the station, in an apparent attempt to get rid of the witness. Six weeks later, the Starkweather and Fugate killing spree began after an argument with Caril’s mother. Returning to the Fugate house after the argument, Starkweather confronted both Caril’s mother and stepfather with a .22 rifle and shot them both in the head. He used the butt of the rifle to kill Caril’s two-and-a-half-year-old sister. The stepfather apparently showed signs of life and was then finished off with a knife. Caril and Charles moved the bodies out of the way and sat down to watch television. They apparently stayed in the house with the dead bodies for several days before killing a nearby farmer for his money and heading out on
the road. They abandoned their car and were picked up by two high school students, who they also murdered. In Lincoln, Nebraska, they broke into a home, killing the husband and wife along with their maid. On the road again, they murdered a traveling salesman for his car but were discovered in the act. After a high-speed chase, both were apprehended and later convicted of first-degree murder.

A more recent example of spree killing occurred in the Washington, D.C., area and has become known as the Beltway sniper attacks. The spree began on October 2, 2002, with a series of five fatal shootings in less than 15 hours in a suburban county in Maryland, north of Washington. The spree continued for the next three weeks and resulted in ten people being murdered and three others receiving critical injuries. The victims were apparently selected at random and crossed all race/ethnicity and gender lines. The killings were performed in a sniper attack fashion with a high-powered rifle from relatively long distances and occurred at gas stations and parking lots within the suburban areas of Maryland, Virginia, and Washington, D.C. All the shootings occurred close to interstate highways, which provided the killers with an easy escape route after the shootings occurred. Because there were no visual cues that a shooting had just happened, victims who slumped over at the gas pump or near their cars in a parking lot were frequently assumed to have had heart attacks until a closer inspection revealed gunshot wounds. Residents of the area were terrified, and many stayed hidden in their homes and did not allow their children to go to school. Bulletins describing the vehicle the killers might be driving were distributed to all media, including television and radio. Unfortunately, these descriptions were initially off base, describing a white van. When the correct description of a blue sedan was released, it took only hours for two witnesses to spot the occupied car at a Maryland highway rest area. The Beltway sniper ordeal ended when John Allen Muhammad and Lee Boyd Malvo, his much younger accomplice, were arrested as they slept at the rest area in the car that had been their killing machine. The car was a former police car that had been rigged with a firing port in the trunk from where the shooter killed his victims. Both were convicted for their crimes, and Muhammad was executed by lethal injection in November 2009, while Malvo continues to serve a life imprisonment term in Virginia.

As you can see, both of these murderous rampages illustrate the signs of a spree killing: They are relatively short-lived but violent sets of killings that don’t seem to have a lot of direction or planning. Their victims were innocents who just happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. The
other common characteristic of spree killings—characterized in both those discussed—is that the rampage is usually stopped only when the killers are captured or killed.

**What Are We Doing About Murder?**

We end this chapter with a discussion of capital punishment because it is the most extreme form of punishment that states and the federal government can hand down as a sanction for murder. While there are many possible policies and punishments aimed at reducing levels of lethal violence in our society, it

**Figure 4.9 Death Penalty States, 2015**

![Death Penalty States, 2015](source)

**Source:** Data from the Death Penalty Information Center, [http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org/](http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org/) states-and-without-death-penalty.
is the death penalty that continues to garner the lion's share of attention and that is the subject of a great deal of misperception, rhetoric, and legislation. In 2015, the death penalty was authorized as punishment for capital murder in 31 states, by the federal government, and by the US military. Figure 4.9 illustrates the geographic distribution of death penalty states. Like the criteria for other state laws, however, the criteria that make a murderer eligible for death vary by state. In some states, prosecutors can seek death for defendants in all first-degree murders, while other states mandate that at least one aggravating circumstance must be present (e.g., killing more than one victim, killing during the commission of another felony).

Even though 31 states allow capital punishment, only a few use capital punishment on a regular basis. For example, Texas executed 10 inmates in 2014 and 13 in 2015; it was followed by Missouri (10 in 2014, 6 in 2015) and Oklahoma (3 in 2014, 1 in 2015).70 Nationally, the number of people sentenced to death and the number of people actually executed rose steadily after the Supreme Court reaffirmed the use of the death penalty in Gregg v. Georgia in 1976.71 However, as can be seen from Figure 4.10, the number of people who have been executed has been declining for a number of years. This declining trend is also evident for the number of people sentenced to death nationally.72 The reasons for these declines will be explored below. First, however, we will briefly discuss the theoretical rationales for capital punishment.

What justification can there be for an act of state-sponsored violence, such as capital punishment? Is it justified because it prevents additional acts of violence? Theoretically, violence prevented by capital punishment can occur two ways: Someone who is thinking about committing a murder refrains from doing so because she or he fears the death penalty—a general deterrence argument; and someone who has committed murder is put to death and therefore is prevented from committing another murder in the future—an incapacitation argument. Both of these arguments are based on the utilitarian position that an act of violence committed by the state—the execution of someone—is justified because it produces a net good.

The general deterrence argument argues that people generally refrain from committing murder because they fear execution. Actually, the argument is not that the death penalty deters would-be murderers compared with no punishment at all, but that the death penalty inhibits some people from committing murder who would have killed someone if the punishment were life imprisonment or some other sentence rather than death. Is there evidence that there is a general deterrent effect for capital punishment in the United States? Well, if the death
penalty deters murder better than life imprisonment, then jurisdictions that punish murder with the death penalty should have lower homicide rates than comparable jurisdictions that punish murder with life imprisonment. The evidence, however, suggests that this is not the case.

The earliest data on this issue come from work by Thorsten Sellin, whose research strategy involved systematic comparisons of homicide rates among states that were similar in as many respects as possible but which differed on their policy of using the death penalty. He found that, within the same geographic region, those states that had the death penalty did not seem to have lower rates of homicide than states in the same geographic area that did not.\textsuperscript{73}

Peterson and Bailey updated this study covering the period of 1973 through 1984 by comparing sets of data in death penalty and life imprisonment states.\textsuperscript{74} They also found that, averaged over a 12-year time period, the annual homicide rate in death penalty states (8.5 homicides per 100,000 population) was actually higher than the rate in states without the death penalty (7.6 homicides per 100,000 population). Their analysis—like that of Sellin—provided no evidence of reduced homicide rates in death penalty states.

The problem with these simple comparisons, of course, is that we must assume that states with the death penalty are comparable to states with only life imprisonment penalties on other important social and economic factors. More recently, researchers have been able to statistically control for other factors within states in addition to the punishment type in order to determine whether the death penalty is a more effective deterrent to murder than life
imprisonment. Results of these studies are somewhat mixed. However, after an extensive statistical review of the studies, Richard Berk concluded that “for the vast majority of states for the vast majority of years, there is no evidence for deterrence in these analyses.”

The incapacitation justification for capital punishment is that executing those who commit murder is the only effective way to keep them from ever killing again. In a sense, this argument can hardly be refuted. If you execute someone who committed murder, the chance that the person will kill again is zero. The real issue, then, is not whether capital punishment is effective in incapacitating those who have committed murder, but whether it is the only way to incapacitate them. Can murderers effectively be prevented from killing again by incarcerating them for life without the possibility of parole or for long periods of time before releasing them?

One way to examine this question is to compare the recidivism rates of convicted murderers with the recidivism rates for other types of offenders. Evidence from a recent Bureau of Justice Statistics study of recidivism rates from 15 states reported that, compared with homicide offenders, offenders in 19 other offense categories all had higher three-year recidivism rates, and most rates were over twice as high. In fact, when the outcome measure was rearrest, homicide offenders had the lowest recidivism rate compared with offenders in all 21 other offense categories. Another interesting question examined by this report was whether homicide offenders exhibit a special tendency to commit new homicides when they return to the community. Based on the data presented in the report, the answer to this question appears to be “no” as well. Of the homicide offenders released in 1994, 1.2% were rearrested for a new homicide within three years of release. This rate was much lower than the rate for other violent offenses: 8.5% of those released from prison for robbery were rearrested within three years of their release for committing a homicide. These data suggest that when homicide offenders are eventually released from prison, they do not exhibit comparatively high levels of future offending or future homicide.

The final justification for capital punishment is retribution. Retribution has nothing to do with public safety—it is a moral justification. The argument here is simply that murderers should be executed because they deserve to be. Because we cannot determine the validity of this argument on the basis of empirical data, there is rarely a middle ground for advocates and opponents of this argument. Taking a retribution argument literally would require all convicted murderers to be sentenced to death. This is not only inconsistent with constitutional law but ignores the extreme variation across murder contexts, even across first-degree
murder contexts, such as those killings committed under the influence of drugs or alcohol, those committed under emotional duress in which the offender expresses a great deal of remorse, and so on. As an alternative to this literal interpretation of retribution, some have argued that life without the possibility of parole is a legitimate alternative to death and does not trivialize the moral harm of first-degree murder.  

At a societal level, even if we accept the premise of retribution, we have to ask ourselves: “At what cost?” Research has clearly demonstrated that the likelihood of receiving a death sentence is dependent not only on legally relevant factors, like the seriousness of the offense, but also on other factors, like the jurisdiction in which the offense took place and demographic characteristics of the victim and the offender, such as race. What this means is that whether you receive a death sentence is often a matter of where you live and who you killed, not just the fact that you committed murder. For example, after analyzing all homicides that were eligible to receive the death sentence (1,311 cases) in the state of Maryland for the years between 1978 and 1999, Raymond Paternoster and his colleagues found that Black offenders who killed White victims were significantly more likely to be sentenced to death than offenders in cases of other racial combinations. They also found that defendants who killed in particular jurisdictions in Maryland were much more likely to be sentenced to death compared with defendants in other jurisdictions. This was true even after controlling for legal factors like the heinousness of the offense. This and other studies like it have called into question the fairness of capital punishment in the United States. Adding urgency to this belief is the number of innocent people who have been held on death row, sometimes to within days of their death, and then been exonerated by DNA or other evidence.

In the last 25 years, over 100 people in the United States awaiting execution on death row have been freed after it was discovered that they were innocent. These exonerations were usually obtained through aggressive investigations from outside advocates such as the Center for Wrongful Convictions at Northwestern University Law School. In fact, releases from death row are becoming so common that they rarely even make the national news. Despite this inattention, their stories are sobering. For example, after spending almost 18 years—nearly one-third of his life—on death row, in 2002 Juan Roberto Melendez was proven innocent and released from a Florida prison. His years in prison were spent mostly in his cell, except when he was allowed to exercise for two hours on Mondays and Wednesdays and the three times a week he was allowed a five-minute shower—all of the time being shackled. When he was released, he kissed the ground because he had never seen the ground during his time in prison. Melendez said, “When I was released, I was given 100 dollars, a pair of pants,
and a shirt. That’s it. Nobody ever apologized.” Unfortunately, this is similar to the treatment received by many exonerated defendants.

This reality has led a few states to place a moratorium on executions until their state’s trial and sentencing procedures are reviewed. For example, in 2000 Illinois governor George Ryan, who was a conservative pro–death penalty governor, announced that there would be a moratorium on all executions in the state until he could be sure—with moral certainty—that no innocent man or woman was facing lethal injection. Governor Ryan stated, “We have now freed more people than we have put to death under our system—13 people have been exonerated and 12 have been put to death. There is a flaw in the system, without question, and it needs to be studied.” At present, several other states have a moratorium on executions while their states’ systems are being reviewed, with many reviewing challenges to the lethal injection process and others examining repealing the death penalty altogether. In sum, not only does the United States have some of the highest rates of murder compared with all other Western and industrialized nations, we also are unique in our efforts to control this violence through the use of capital punishment. In fact, because of our use of capital punishment, our nation could not be a member of the European Union, which strongly opposes the use of capital punishment. As Raymond Paternoster states, “In using the death penalty the United States finds itself in the uncomfortable company of such repressive regimes as the People’s Republic of China, Iran, Iraq, Korea, [and] Libya.”

Conclusions

We have seen that most violent interactions fall on a continuum, with many factors related to the outcome, including the perceptions of the situation both by the eventual victim and offender, the behavior of bystanders, and the availability of a firearm. Although national assault and murder rates in our country are at much lower levels than they were in the early 1990s, the decreasing trends we have seen over the past several years have now leveled off, and in some cities they are climbing back to these earlier peak levels. We have also seen that the rise in violence observed in the 1990s was primarily attributable to killings by young males armed with handguns. While rates of assault and murder are highest for young males in general and young minority group males in particular, we have seen that multicide, in the form of mass and serial killings, is more often committed by middle-aged White men.
Together with the data presented in Chapter 1, the information presented in this chapter has underscored the fact that our society has the unfortunate honor of being at the top of the rankings in rates of violence compared with other industrialized nations around the globe. Also, unlike most other industrialized and Western democracies, the United States continues to rely on capital punishment in many of our states.

**KEY TERMS**

aggravated assault 107
BTK killer 128
capital punishment 137
character contest 118
comfort killers 132
confrontational homicide 119
criminal homicide 108
deliberation 108
excusable homicide 108
facilitating hardware 113
felony murder 108
first-degree murder 108
general deterrence argument 138
hedonistic lust killers 132
homicidal triad 134
incapacitation argument 138
justifiable homicide 108
manslaughter 108
mass murder 121
mission killers 133
multicide 121
power/control killers 132
premeditation 108
retribution 140
second-degree murder 108
serial murder 129
simple assault 108
spree murder 135
symbolic interactionism 116
thrill killers 132
victim precipitation 119
visionary killers 133

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**


2. First, find the capital punishment statutes in your state. You can find this easily on many search engines including the LexisNexis State Capital search engine. If your state does not allow capital punishment, find a neighboring or regional state that does. According to the state statute, which crimes are eligible for capital punishment, and which factors within an offense make it death eligible (e.g., multiple victims, the killing of a
violence. Now go to the Bureau of Justice Statistics website (www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs) and find the most recent publication on capital punishment. Find the table listing the number of people under sentence of death by state. Now go to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website and find rates of murder by state under its Homicide Mortality by State: 2014 section, http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/sosmap/homicide.htm. Make a list of states by the rate of murder and the number of people under sentence of death. Do you see any relationship between these two variables?

3. What role do the media play in shaping our attitudes toward interpersonal violence? Do representations of homicide on evening news shows accurately reflect the true nature of lethal violence in the United States? Why or why not?

4. The National Criminal Justice Reference Service (NCJRS) is a clearinghouse sponsored by the US Department of Justice (www.ncjrs.gov). Go to its spotlight on gangs (you can find this by doing a search for “spotlight on gangs” or simply “gangs”) to find summary information about a number of facts, including findings from the National Youth Gang Survey. You can also find information on innovative approaches that have been undertaken by jurisdictions to combat gangs and gang-related violence. For example, the city of Baltimore, Maryland, has implemented a successful approach to decrease the incidents of drug-related homicides (www.ncjrs.gov/html/bja/gang). Using this website as a resource, highlight the strategies that Baltimore has introduced. How have they measured the extent to which these new policies are actually working? What other indicators could they have used? What other factors may have been responsible for any decline in homicides that was observed in Baltimore?