Chapter 1: The Problem of Violent Behavior

Draft of July, 2011

“Violence is as American as cherry pie.”

--- Hubert Gerald “H. Rap” Brown, Detroit, 1967.

“Go ahead, punk, [shoot her and] make my day.”

--- Clint Eastwood as Detective Harry Callahan in “Sudden Impact,” 1983.

On the day we started writing this chapter the national newscasts are competing for our attention by airing stories about 100 people killed by two female suicide bombers in an Iraqi pet market, about rebels in Darfur raping and hacking to death all the young girls in a village, and about five women in Tinley Park, Illinois who were all shot to death by a robber for no apparent reason. This news is not really unusual; similar stories appear on most days in the national news, and on most nights the local newscasts and newspapers similarly are filled with stories of blood and gore.

If we move past “today’s news” to look at last month’s news, last year’s news, or the last century’s news, we may become even more depressed in thinking about the aggressiveness and violent propensities of humans. In the relatively recent history of the world, we have seen Hitler kill over 6 million without compunction in the 1930s and 40s; we have seen Stalin execute over 20 million with no remorse; we have seen see the Khmer Rouge eradicate 3 million innocents in the 1970s; we have seen Serbian nationalists rape and murder untold numbers in the 1990s, and now in the 21st Century we are exposed to the horror of the 9/11 attacks, of suicide bombings and of ethnic warfare in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Africa every night. These examples are only the tip of the iceberg, in that similar brutality has marred nearly every period of human history. On a more
personal and perhaps more threatening level for most of us, we have seen our children killed at random with school shootings like those at Columbine High School and Northern Illinois and Virginia Tech Universities.

Yet, these highly publicized historical and current events are only the veneer of violence in our society today. Violence occurs on a daily basis in many people’s lives, but it neither makes the news nor is it even noticed by more than a few people. In 2009, of the 252 million or so people over 12 years old in the U.S., about 3.7 million were assaulted, 126,000 were raped (U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2010), and over 15,000 were murdered (U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2009). Major violent acts, like these, may often (but not always) come to the attention of the authorities, but the everyday occurrences of child beating, spousal assaults, peer assaults, bullying, intimidation, and small robberies seldom attract attention. When such "minor" acts of aggression and violence do attract attention, they often are minimized or dismissed as “family disputes,” or “schoolyard disagreements” that do not deserve our attention or intervention.

Obviously, we live in a violent world. Furthermore, because of “body bag journalism” and our natural tendency to focus more on the present than the past, it seems to many people that the world is more brutal and violent now than it was in the past. This is not true, however. We humans have the capacity to quickly forget (at least quickly on the scale of historical time) the relative frequency of local, national, and world violence earlier in our lives and are largely unaware of violence rates in the decades and centuries before we were born. This is fortunate for our psychological functioning, but unfortunate for historical accuracy. Certainly humans’ capacity to kill large numbers of fellow humans quickly has increased exponentially over time as the technologies of killing have improved, but it is doubtful that humans’ motivations to aggress against and kill fellow humans have increased at all over several thousand years. In fact, as we
will see later in this text, humans' propensities to aggress against fellow humans probably have diminished over the centuries.

In his book, “Guns, Germs, and Steel,” on the emergence and dominance of the modern Western nation-state, Jared Diamond (1999) summarizes anthropologists’ observations that murder is a leading cause of death in primitive societies with a telling quotation from one woman: “My first husband was killed by (tribal) raiders. My second husband was killed by a man who wanted me, and who became my third husband. He was killed by the brother of my second husband. And so on …..” (p. 277). Greek civilization was the cradle of Western society, but it was a brutal and violent society in which might made for right and the weak were terminated without compunction. Roman society was, if anything, even more violent, engaging in public practices (crucifixion, strangulation, gladiatorial combat, feeding people to lions) and private practices (murder, rape, plunder) that made even the so called “barbarian” tribes from middle Europe wince when they learned of them. Although Hollywood’s depiction of crime in modern society wildly exaggerates its prevalence, movies such as “The Three-Hundred,” about Sparta, and the HBO series “Rome” probably capture the violence of those times fairly accurately.

The dark middle-ages that followed the collapse of Rome were a time when violence and aggression were part of almost everyone’s everyday life. Although we have no systematic way to measure the prevalence of violence in those times, feudalism emerged as a successful social system because it provided a repressed peasant majority with enough protection from random violence and theft that they could live. One could live either by producing food, by stealing others' food and goods (e.g., the Vikings), or by getting others to give you some of their food in exchange for your protection. Of course, Christianity, Mohammadism, and other religions promoted non-violence to some degree, but such organized religions also contributed a good
share of organized violence as well (Avalos, 2005). Violence was not only instrumental in
societies, but violent retaliation and retribution for perceived wrongs often became a “sacred
value” (Atran, 2010) for members of a tribe or society. It was probably not until the emergence
of egalitarianism and the rise of a middle-class in Western societies after the middle ages that
interpersonal aggression and violence began to be seen as generally “anti-social” in Western
societies while remaining a sacred value in some subcultures.

At this point it is perhaps appropriate to be more precise about exactly what scholars of
aggression and violence mean by those terms. If asked to define violence, most people would
probably respond the way US Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart did in the 1960s when asked
to define obscenity, and say I can’t define it exactly, but “I know it when I see it” (Jacobellis v.
Ohio, 378 U.S. 184, 197, 1964). Yet, to make aggression and violence a subject of scientific
study, we need to be much more precise than this. Let us begin with the terms “aggression” and
“aggressive behavior.”

AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR

Everyday we hear the term "aggression" used in multiple ways. People who behave
“aggressively” toward others are often scorned, but “aggressive” salespeople and executives are
admired and promoted. No one likes being called the aggressor country in a war, but everyone
wants aggressive commanders (like George Patton or Norman Schwarzkopf) leading their
armies. Most people don’t like aggressive teen-agers, but every high school coach wants
aggressive linebackers on their football team. This is not just an issue of aggression having good
and bad dimensions. It is an issue of the word aggression having multiple meanings. Just as the
word "run" means different things when talking about stockings, the stock market, baseball
scores, and fear, "aggression" means different things to different people in different contexts.
However, to study the topic systematically and scientifically, we need to settle on one meaning that conveys what we want to study.

**Defining Aggression**

This textbook is about understanding behaviors by one human being that are intended to harm other human beings, and this is how we define both "aggression" and "aggressive behavior." An aggressive behavior is an act intended to harm another individual. We do not include under this rubric the kind of assertive, confident, or enthusiastic behaviors that are often called “aggressive” in a military general, a football player, or a business executive. We do not include behaviors that accidentally harm another. Intent is a key part of this definition, though intent may often be difficult to assess.

Harm can be the physical harm caused by hitting a person, or it can be the harm to a person caused by stealing something from them, or it can be the harm caused to a person’s reputation by lying about them, or it can be any of a multitude of other possible harms. The harm does not actually need to have happened for us to define a behavior as aggressive. If one throws a punch at another and misses, it is still an aggressive act. If one lies about another and no one believes it, it is still an aggressive act. It is the attempt (act) and intent to harm that result in the psychologist's categorization of a behavior as aggressive.

It is also important to realize that aggressive behaviors are “social” behaviors – they involve at least two people interacting in a specific way, in which at least one person attempts to harm at least one other person. This is important because it means that we cannot study aggressive behavior in isolation from other kinds of social behaviors such as loving, helping, nurturing, or cooperative behaviors. It also means that we are not concerned here with the kinds of self-injurious behaviors that typify certain forms of psychopathology.
At times in this text, we may talk about animals as well as humans. In dealing with animals we need to modify our definition of aggression a little. Intent is not only difficult to measure with animals, it is difficult to define. However, accidental harm almost never occurs in the animal world, so acts that harm other individuals or appear to the observer to be directed at harming other individuals can be defined as aggressive (Archer, 1988; Blanchard & Blanchard, 1977; Moyer, 1976; Scott, 1958). Again, no harm need actually occur. In fact, the purpose of many aggressive displays by animals is to make actual physical harm unnecessary. The larger male attacks the smaller male just enough to drive the smaller male away, so the larger male can have access to the female. The wolf takes the coyote’s prey away by simply threatening physical aggression and in turn the lion can take a lone wolf’s prey away by only threatening physical aggression. Of course, there is harm to the loser in these confrontations – the harm of losing food or access to a female. But both the winner and loser were engaging in aggressive behaviors in these situations that were directed at harming the other in some way.

**Perspective and Aggression**

Another important issue concerns the ways in which a person’s perspective can influence their perception of a behavioral act as being aggressive or not, the idea that “aggression is often in the eye of the beholder.” What one person sees as a behavior intended to harm, another may see as a behavior intended to help. In cases of political violence, one person’s aggressive terrorist (whose main intent is to unjustly kill) is another person’s “freedom fighter” (whose main intent is to protect his people or rights or to make a political statement). Ethnicity affects what people “see” in news clips of wars – viewers tend to perceive those with whom they identify to be victims of violence rather than perpetrators (Huesmann, Dubow, Boxer, & Ginges, 2011). Similarly, when outsiders see a mother or father beating their child, they most likely will perceive abuse and aggression in the act. However, the mother or father may believe they are
simply “disciplining” the child to help them learn right from wrong and ultimately get along better in life; from their perspective, there is no aggression. Who is right? The problem is compounded because there are strong individual and cultural differences in beliefs about the kinds of social behaviors that are appropriate in given situations. For example, Straus and his colleagues (Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980) report that many men believe that “the marriage license is a hitting license,” yet other men obviously believe that hitting a women is absolutely wrong. Similarly, in the United States spanking a child is viewed as an aggressive act by some but not by others, and these attitudes vary significantly across ethnic and cultural communities within the U.S., with spanking being viewed as more normative for discipline by African-Americans, for example, than by White Americans (Deater-Deckard, Dodge, & Bates, 1996; Slade, & Wissow, 2004).

Similar issues arise when considering other behaviors that inflict some pain or harm on another person along the path to helping them. Is the dentist drilling into a patient’s tooth in order fill a cavity behaving aggressively? The dentist does not want to cause the patient pain, and the patient wants the procedure done. These are probably sufficient conditions for us to dismiss the idea that the dentist’s behavior is aggressive. Other cases may not be as easily resolved in our mind if we believe that “aggression” is always something “bad.” Scholars have previously discussed considering whether hostile emotions were present, whether the perpetrator or target gain more from the act, in addition to other dimensions (Anderson & Huesmann, 2003).

These are important issues for consideration, but they need not affect our definition of aggressive behavior. It may be impossible, for example, to determine all the motives that lead a parent to spank his or her child in a particular situation. However, if the spanking is intended to hurt the child, which it certainly is, then it satisfies our definition of an aggressive behavior even if the ultimate goal of the parent is to teach the child discipline by exposing them to a little pain
now. Such mildly aggressive behaviors often occur and are not necessarily bad. We can call behaviors that are intended to harm another person aggressive behaviors even if the long term goals behind the behaviors are well-intentioned.

It should be clear at this point that our definition of aggression may require some reconsideration on the reader’s part of how positively or negatively aggression is viewed. Is aggression generally bad or can aggression be good? The word "aggression" certainly carries a negative connotation, but, as we have discussed, in some situations aggressive behaviors may produce desirable outcomes for the individual, for other individuals, and even for society. In our well socialized human society it may no longer be needed for survival, but in the animal world behaving aggressively at times may be a prerequisite for survival.

**Aggressiveness and Aggressive People**

One very important point remains to be made about what we define as aggressive behavior. Behaviors that are intended to harm someone may vary greatly in the harm that they are intended to do. Feeling mad at your roommate, you may eat one of her favorite snacks you see lying about or, instead, you might tell her boyfriend the lie that she is seeing someone else. Both are aggressive but hardly equivalent in harm. In other words, the “aggressiveness” of behaviors varies on a continuum from behaviors that are only slightly aggressive to those that are extremely aggressive.

Similarly, we can talk about how “aggressive” different people are. People vary in their tendencies to behave aggressively and in the typical intensity of their aggressive behaviors. Part of the reason is that aggression is always influenced both by ‘situational’ factors and ‘personal’ factors (Huesmann & Eron, 1992). When provoked some people consistently resort to physically aggressive behaviors that cause serious physical harm, e.g., hitting, fighting, or assaulting the provocateur with a weapon. Others only resort to aggressive, but less harmful, verbal insults.
Furthermore, some will resort to aggressive behaviors frequently, whereas others will do so only infrequently. Thus, like behaviors, people vary along a continuum of aggressiveness from highly aggressive individuals who typically harm others frequently and severely to highly un-aggressive people who will almost never resort to aggressive behaviors, even those that would cause little harm.

The point is that aggression is not an “all or none” property. It is not a disease that a person either has or does not have. It is not a property that a specific behavior either has or does not have. Unfortunately, because of the dominant role that the clinical and medical models play in applied psychology and psychiatry, the fact that aggressiveness — like intelligence and happiness — falls on a continuum gets lost in some scientific discussions. Even some economic forces push the discipline in this direction of "either/or" thinking. For example, insurance companies require diagnostic “categories” if they are to pay for treatments. Children who are diagnosed as having “diseases” such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Conduct Disorder, Problem Behavior Disorder, and Antisocial Personality Disorder can receive treatments that are reimbursed by health insurance. But children who are reported simply to be high on aggressiveness are unlikely to receive health-insurance-covered treatments.

A similar problem occurs in the criminology field. Criminals are either guilty or not-guilty of specific behaviors, and the behaviors are not scaled along a continuum. Thus, it is difficult to map aggression onto crime. The more aggressive person is certainly more likely to be convicted of an aggressive crime, but it is difficult to map crimes back to the continuum of aggression. In summary, the reader who wants to be well informed about aggression must be wary of falling into the trap of treating aggression in an all-or-none manner, but must also be aware that important research on aggression appears under these other rubrics from Psychiatry and Criminology.
VIOLENT BEHAVIORS

Having defined aggression and pointed out that aggressive behaviors and aggressive people are represented on a continuum, we can now turn to defining what we mean by “violent behaviors.” Calling a behavior violent generally carries even more negative connotations than calling a behavior aggressive. Again, if we want to study the subject scientifically, we must move away from everyday understandings and define the term precisely and unambiguously. For this purpose we do not necessarily care how most people define violence; we care about how scientists and scholars define it.

By “violent behavior” most researchers simply mean aggressive behaviors that are at the high end of the aggression severity continuum for intended harm. To that description we might add the requirement that the intended harm of the behavior be physical and serious. Hitting a person certainly is a violent behavior, but by this definition insulting a person verbally is not a violent behavior. Trying to harm a person with a club, knife or gun is violent behavior even if the person is not clubbed, stabbed or shot. However, lying to send a person to prison or spreading gossip to get a person fired are not considered violent behaviors. In some fields of study, such as criminology, the label "violence" is applied only if the act is illegal, that is, a criminal behavior. However, to most psychological scholars the legality is largely irrelevant; the aggressive act simply needs to be physical and serious. By this definition mildly spanking your toddler would not be violent but slapping your teen-aged daughter would be a violent act.

It may seem a waste of time to bother with these kinds of fine distinctions. To some extent, we agree and will mostly use the term “aggressive behavior” in this text. However, it is important to understand that those who write elsewhere about “violent” behaviors are not writing about qualitatively different kinds of behaviors than are discussed in this book. They are simply writing about aggressive behaviors intended to cause serious physical harm.
HISTORICAL TRENDS FOR AGGRESSION AND VIOLENCE

Early in this chapter we noted that aggression and violence have been an integral part of human life for thousands of years. Historical analyses suggest that although human society now has the capacity to harm more people more quickly than ever before, on the whole human aggression and violence is less prevalent now than 200, 500, 1000, 2000, or 10,000 years ago. Still, until very recently on the scale of human history there was no very objective way to test such assertions. With rare exceptions systematic records about violence were not accumulated until a century or so ago.

Official Violent Crime Statistics

Having someone collect data on violence in a society is only part of the problem, however. Because statistics about violence are taken as indicators of the “health” of a society, such statistics often are distorted or suppressed by powers with a vested interest in the healthy appearance of a society. City mayors in the USA seem to have an uncanny ability to show that violence rates in their cities were going up when they became mayor and have gone down since. It is not hard to even unintentionally influence arrest rate and conviction statistics by letting subordinates know how important the statistics are. Overworked police can happily “forget” to file written reports of minor crimes that are never likely to be solved. Citizens may not even report crimes that they think are unlikely to get any attention. Arrests may be made on flimsy evidence. Criminals are convicted of or plead to a related minor charge for a major crime, and the major crime is considered closed. For all these reasons official criminal records are of questionable validity when it comes to evaluating the prevalence of violence.

The same processes operate on a larger scale on the world scene. For years, communist countries such as the Soviet Union reported almost no “violent” crime to world bodies collecting such statistics. Yet, when communism ended and new recording procedures were introduced,
many of the newly “free” countries moved to the highest ranks for frequency of violent crime. For example, Russia reported a homicide rate of 30 homicides per hundred thousand population in 1995, which was more than ten times the rate among European countries. How much of this was a real increase in criminal violence due to the “wild west” atmosphere of the new society and how much was due to the old statistics being very biased, we will probably never know.

In the USA the major “official” crime statistics are the “Uniform Crime Reports” prepared by the Bureau of Justice Statistics and the Federal Bureau of Investigation from reports from federal, state, and local police forces all over the country (U.S Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2009). The collection of these data is a sophisticated operation that has evolved over time, and the statistics are probably about as objective and unbiased as such statistics can be. Nevertheless, they undoubtedly underestimate violence rates for all of the reasons described above. For this reason, the Bureau of Justice Statistics instituted another approach in the early 1970s to assess more accurately the amount of violence in our society by surveying people directly about their “violent victimization.”

**National Criminal Victimization Survey**

Begun in 1972 the National Criminal Victimization Survey (U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2009) is a large scale survey by telephone of a stratified-random sample of individuals in the U.S. who are 12 or older. By stratified, we mean that the sample is selected to be representative of all segments of the population on the basis of location, ethnicity, and socio-economic condition. The country is divided up into different “strata,” and individuals within each strata are interviewed in numbers proportional to the strata’s proportion of the total population (Kerlinger, 2000). Individuals are called and asked a series of questions about whether they have been the victim of a crime in the current year, and if so, what kind of crime. This stratified sampling approach gives very accurate estimates of violent crime with the size of
samples that are used. For example, in 2005 134,000 individuals were interviewed from 77,200 different households. At least one individual responded from 90.7% of the households that were called.

The results of these yearly criminal victimization surveys provide as accurate as possible a picture of violence in America as we can obtain. Of course, they do not provide any data on homicide, as homicide victims are not around to report on their own death. However, they do provide good data on many other violent crimes. Table 1.1 shows the USA national victimization rates for every 5 years between 1975 and 2005.

**Table 1.1**  
Violent crime victims in the U.S. per 100,000 people (12 or older) since 1980

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Simple Assault</th>
<th>Aggravated Assault</th>
<th>Robbery</th>
<th>Rape/sexual assault</th>
<th>Total Violent Victimization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>3,600</td>
<td>1,200</td>
<td>650</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>5,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>3,300</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>530</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>5,020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>3,200</td>
<td>920</td>
<td>530</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>4,820</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>2,900</td>
<td>870</td>
<td>530</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>4,410</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>1,800</td>
<td>570</td>
<td>320</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>2,730</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>1,350</td>
<td>430</td>
<td>260</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>2,120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>1,300</td>
<td>320</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>1,710</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: US Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs>  
US Department of Justice, FBI Uniform Crime Reports <http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/ucr.htm>

Crime and victimization rates are typically reported as the number per hundred thousand people over 12 years old. So, for example, the overall violent victimization rate of 2,120 for the year 2005 indicates that 2,120 people out of every 100,000 people in the United States (approximately 6,360,000 people) were a victim of a violent crime in 2005.

The first interesting point to note from this table is how much the “official” crime reports of police forces represented in the FBI’s uniform crime reports substantially underestimate the actual rates of violent crime. The actual rates of assaults, robberies, and rapes as reported by victims are about twice the rates that the police records suggest. This is probably due to the
multitude of factors mentioned above including under-reporting by victims, by police, and by administrators.

The second interesting point to note is that violent crime in this country diminished substantially over the 29 years from 1980 to 2009. The rate of almost every crime went down by a factor of two or more. Why violence rates went down is a complicated topic that many criminologists are struggling to explain. The most important point about the decline that almost everyone agrees on is that there is no one single factor to which it can be attributed. Overall violence rates are influenced by the age distribution of the population, by the number of incarcerated people, by socio-economic factors, by one-time violent convulsions (e.g., 9/11 – though it is excluded from 2001 FBI UCR statistics) and by a multitude of other personal and situational factors. Consequently, it is perfectly possible that the influence of some factors in stimulating aggression may actually have increased during this time even though the overall violence rates were diminishing. Their influence has just been masked by the effect of other, larger demographic changes. For example, simply because overall violence rates were going down during these 25 years and children’s exposure to graphic scenes of violence (in the media or real life) has been increasing during the 25 years, it would not be appropriate to conclude, as some have (see Grimes, J. Anderson, & Bergen, 2007), that exposure to violence is having no effect or was causing a decline in aggression. More sophisticated studies are needed to accurately test the real effects of specific factors, such as exposure to violence, on aggression rates.

Violence rates also grow and fall differently for different age groups and differently for victimization and perpetration. For example, during the same 1980 to 2005 period when overall violence victimization rates were falling according to the National Victimization Survey, violent perpetration among 12th graders was increasing according to self-report surveys (Escobar-Chaves & Anderson, 2008). Figure 1.1 displays six different twelfth-grade violence prevalence rates
from 1982 to 2003. While the rates fluctuated from year to year, the overall rates for all violent acts increased. For example, the rate of multiple assaults with injury increased about 40% during this time period.


**HISTORICAL TRENDS FOR HOMICIDE**

In the above violent crime statistics, data about homicides were omitted. We omitted those data simply because victimization surveys cannot assess homicide rates. We must rely on official records to learn about historical trends in homicide. The good news is that official records on homicide are probably more accurate than about any other violent act. It is hard to
ignore a dead body with knife or bullet wounds and not consider it to be a homicide. Of course, officials in certain political systems have made a point of disguising homicides as accidental deaths or natural deaths, but in most modern western countries that is unlikely. Consequently, the homicide rate probably gives one of the best historical pictures of violence over time and also is one of the best measures of violence to compare across societies. Homicide, after all, is the ultimate “violent” act. However, even accurately reported homicide rates can be difficult to interpret across different time periods, because multiple factors can influence them. For example, improvements in medical care and the creation of trauma centers have increased the likelihood that a seriously wounded person will survive. That is, a gun shot to the chest is considerably less likely to result in death today that it did 100 years ago. Without a death, there is no homicide.

Good records of homicide rates have now been maintained by the US Department of Justice for over a century. In Figure 1.2 below we graph the rate of homicides per 100,000 people during the course of the 20th century and into the current century.
One can see that there have been two main bulges in homicide rates in the U.S. in the past century. One occurred during the height of the depression in the early 1930s when the rate approached 10 per hundred-thousand people. The other occurred about 1980, which also represents an economic downturn characterized by very high inflation and low economic growth. The rates today, however, are well below the peak of 1980 and very similar to the rates in the U.S. after the Second World War, from the late forties to the early sixties. Again, we must warn the reader not to make too much of such parallels. Although the economic conditions of these times may well have played a role in the increasing violence, many other demographic, cultural, and personal changes were going on at the same time and may have played an equally important role. For example, some criminologists attribute much of the increase that occurred in the 1970s and 1980s to increased carrying of guns by young males, especially those involved in illegal drugs (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2001). They also attribute at least part of the subsequent decline in homicide to a decline in gun-toting young males. Even if that explanation accounts for part of this second bulge in homicide rates, it leaves unexplained why there were such changes in gun carrying.

Although it is lower now than in the past, we should think for a minute of what the current rate of about 5 murders per hundred-thousand population really means. First, in a country of over 300 million people, this rate means that over 15,000 human beings are being murdered each year. This seems appallingly high for a civilized society. However, the picture is even worse when we look within some sub-populations in our country. For example, according to the FBI’s Uniform Crime Reports, among 18 to 24 year-old men, the murder rate is about six times higher, i.e., about 30 murders per hundred thousand. Among minority, impoverished, inner-city males the murder rate skyrockets all the way up to 100 to 300 murders per hundred thousand. Think of what this means for a young man who is 18 and in this situation. Other things
being equal, he has about a 2% chance of being murdered before his 26th birthday! Most likely, if he is murdered, it will be by someone he knows, and with a gun. Contrary to popular opinion you are very unlikely to be murdered by a stranger; only 25% of murder victims were slain by strangers in 2005. Finally, as one might guess, guns were used for 73% of the murders!

GENDER AND AGE DIFFERENCES IN VIOLENCE

Males are clearly much more at risk both of killing and of being killed. In 2005, 79% of murder victims were male, as were 90% of murderers. Four times as many wives were killed by their husbands as husbands by their wives. However, these differences are not limited to married couples. Although both men and women engage in significant amounts of violence, the criminal violence rates for males are much higher than for females regardless of relationship or age. For example, in 1990 the arrest rate for homicide averaged around 30 per hundred thousand for males between 15 and 30 years old and averaged about 4 per hundred thousand for females in the same age rage. Males are also more likely to be violently victimized in other ways besides being killed. The 2005 National Victimization Survey revealed that the rate of violent victimization of males was about 2,500 per hundred thousand whereas the rate of violent victimization of females was about 1,800 per hundred thousand. None of this means that females are not violent. In fact, as a major review by Archer (2000) has shown, in romantic relationships females engage in just as much or more violence against males as males do against females. More females get injured by such violence in about a 3 to 2 ratio, but the number of males who are injured through violent actions by their romantic partner is not trivial.

Both engaging in violent behavior and being a victim of violence are correlated with age. Official records of criminal violence generally do not include offenders under 12 years old; however, as we will see later in this book, for many youth serious habitually violent behavior often begins in middle childhood. Official criminal violence statistics show that violent
offending is highest for both males and females between ages 15 and 30 and declines significantly after that. For example, in 1990 the arrest rates for homicide were about 45 per hundred thousand for males aged 20 to 24; 20 per hundred thousand for males aged 30 to 34; 13 per hundred thousand for males aged 40 to 44; and about 7 per hundred thousand for males aged 50 to 54. Parallel decreases at a much lower level occurred for females, though there was little evidence of a decline after age 45 for females.

Younger people are also much more at risk of being victimized by violence. Only accidental injury (frequently auto accidents) consistently leads homicide as the cause of death among U.S. youths between 1 and 24 years of age. For youths between the ages of 10 and 24, homicide is the leading cause of death for African Americans, and it is the second leading cause for Hispanics (CDC, 2007). In 2005 the violent victimization rate for people 15 to 24 years old was about 4,500 per hundred thousand people, for people 25 to 34 years old was about 2,400, for people 35 to 49 was about 1,800, for people 50 to 64 was about 1,100, and for people 65 and older was about 270. The picture many people have of old people being the primary victims of violence is obviously wrong. Both men and women between 15 and 35 are those most likely to act violently and those most likely to be violently victimized.

CROSS-NATIONAL COMPARISON OF VIOLENCE RATES

These figures paint a overall picture of the USA as a society that is highly violent today, even if it is not as violent as it has been in the past. The level of violence seems intolerable for a modern compassionate nation. Yet, is it any higher than the levels of violence found in other countries today?

In Figure 1.3 below we present comparative homicide data from a number of countries or areas around the world. For multi-country comparisons, homicides are the only reasonable
comparison that can be made because of errors and biases in defining other crimes and collecting data.

As one can see from the Figure 1.3, the USA does not have the highest homicide rate in the ‘civilized’ world. That “honor” belongs to South Africa; Russia is just a short way behind. Of course, countries in which wars are being waged (e.g., Iraq, Afghanistan) would score even higher, but data from these countries are not included in these figures. Nevertheless, the USA homicide rate is much higher than the rate in any other established western democracy, two to five times that of European countries, and five times or more higher than the rates in Japan and Singapore. For example, whereas in 1995 the homicide rate in the USA was 8.2 per hundred thousand, it was about 1.5 per hundred thousand in England. Japan's homicide rates tend to be about 1 per hundred thousand.

Why would the USA be a more violent country that other Western democracies? While much of the world does have an image of the USA as a kind of “wild west” in which violence is
endemic, those official homicide statistics probably exaggerate the real differences in overall violent behavior. Again, comparisons of violence rates across countries are a very complicated topic. We can only be certain that it is likely to be multiple factors that cause differences in violence rates between countries. Just as multiple socio-economic, demographic, cultural, and environmental factors affect historical trends in violence, they affect differences between countries. Also, one would like to compare more than just homicide data from official records before reaching a definitive conclusion.

Fortunately, a National Victimization Survey fairly comparable to the USA survey was conducted in England in from 1981 to 1996 so we can compare objective victimization reports about other violent acts in these two countries. This comparison has been published on-line by the US Department of Justice (Langan & Farrington, 1998). Much to the surprise of many scholars, the report shows that in 1995 the USA had LESS violent crime of almost every type (other than homicide) than did England. For example, whereas the robbery rate was about 530 per hundred thousand in the USA in 1995, it was 775 per hundred thousand in England. Whereas the aggravated assault rate was about 870 per hundred thousand in the USA, it was about 1,950 per hundred thousand in England. In summary, you are much more likely to get robbed or assaulted on the streets of England than in the USA, but you are much more likely to be murdered in the USA!

These differences certainly suggest the possibility that the difference in gun laws and gun ownership between Britain and the USA could be a contributing factor to the higher murder rate in the USA. Britain has much more restrictive gun laws, particularly for handguns. With 73% of all homicides in the USA being committed with a gun, this certainly is a thought worth considering. But again, other factors also undoubtedly come into play. For example, in the USA a much higher proportion of people who commit a crime are incarcerated and remain
incarcerated for a longer time than in Britain (see Langan & Farrington, 1998). Incarcerated prisoners often behave quite violently, but violence in that setting never gets into the victimization statistics we have been comparing.

**REGIONAL DIFFERENCES IN THE USA**

Just as there are differences in violence rates between countries; so there are differences in violence rates across different sub-areas of the USA. However, victimization surveys show that the differences are neither what many average people think nor what some scholars have concluded by looking at the proportion of national crimes that are committed in each area. The highest violent crime rate is in the Western USA where there are 2,570 violent crimes per hundred thousand people. This compares with rates of 2,340 in the Midwest, 1,910 in the South and 1,770 in the Northeast. The urban/rural differences are even bigger with rates of 2,940 violent crimes per hundred thousand in urban areas compared to rates of about 1,800 in suburban and rural areas. Of course, the urban/rural differences and the regional differences are confounded, and the overall rates for various regions may not reflect comparisons of similar urban or rural settings in different regions. Later in this book we will discuss the regional differences in more detail and the implications of the differences for understanding aggression.

**SUMMARY**

The term aggression is used in many ways in every day life, but scientists define aggressive behaviors as behaviors that are intended to harm another person. Violent behaviors are serious aggressive behaviors in which the intent is to harm someone physically. The occurrence of aggressive and violent behavior, like other social behaviors, is always due to the interaction of situational and personal factors. Aggressiveness and violence proneness are best thought of as continuous scales on which people fall at different points. Aggressiveness should not be thought of as a disease that one either does or does not have. Violent and aggressive
behaviors have been a part of human history for thousands of years, and, on the average, humans are probably less violent and aggressive now than they were hundreds or thousands of years ago. Victimization surveys, which avoid many of the biases found in official records, indicate that violence and aggression are a serious social problem today. Each adult in the US has about a one-half percent chance of being violently victimized in the next year, but the rate is much higher for males in the 15 to 35 age range. This rate of victimization has been much higher at times over the past century, but it is unclear whether the rate in the near future will go up or down. The homicide rate in the USA of 5 per hundred thousand is much higher than the rate in most comparable western countries, but the total violence rate in the USA is no higher than England according to victimization surveys. It is clear that aggressive and violent behaviors are serious social problems today, both in the USA and in other countries.
References


