



**Denise  
Paquette Boots**

# **MENTAL HEALTH AND VIOLENT YOUTH**

***A Developmental/Lifecourse Perspective***

# Criminal Justice

## Recent Scholarship

Edited by  
Marilyn McShane and Frank P. Williams III

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# Mental Health and Violent Youth

## A Developmental/Lifecourse Perspective

Denise Paquette Boots

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# Preface

Concern about violence, and especially violence perpetrated by our youth, is of great international concern currently. Newspapers, magazines, television interest programs, and talk shows highlight the prevalence rates of violence perpetuated by youth (along with violence perpetuated against youth) and the public at large is left to wring their hands and lock their doors.

Thankfully, Dr. Boots has conducted a study that not only helps us understand where we have been in the world of violent youth but also where we should go from here. Too often studies are conducted in what seems to be the vacuum of an ivory tower, where there are a lot of statistically significant findings but where there are few real-world implications. Luckily, Dr. Boots' work has clear ramifications for social policy in order to decrease the risk of, and perhaps even prevent the occurrence of, violence perpetuated by youth.

The study is symbolic of the best that real-world research has to offer. The data set is incredible and the original work by Rolf Loeber and Magda Stouthamer-Loeber and colleagues sets the stage for the newest line of findings related to violent youth. Unlike so many other studies that can be summarized by saying that "Most of the subjects were white and middle class" (Graham, 1992), this study is diverse in terms of participants' race/ethnicity, family socioeconomic status, and living circumstances.

The design of the study is also to be admired, given the focus on prospective, longitudinal work over the lifespan of youth in at-risk situations. In addition, the focus on dimensional as well as categorical conceptualizations of children's and adolescents' functioning is considered state-of-the-art in research on developmental psychopathology (Achenbach, 2005a). The use of well-established, psychometrically sound measurement instruments is a clear strength of the study, as is the use of multiple informants. The different findings from parent-reports versus teacher-reports highlights the need to gather information from a number of important informants in the lives of youth (Achenbach, 2005).

Dr. Boots' use of a developmental lifecourse perspective is consistent with the finest lines of research currently available and this perspective is crucial to the understanding of violence within youth and families (Caspi, 2000). By carrying on in a tradition that emphasizes the need for compassion, understanding, and firm consequences to youth who are violent, Dr. Boots has assembled a thorough, comprehensive, and interesting study that points to the connections between mental health problems in youth and their ultimate use of violence.

The work is interdisciplinary and should be of interest to scholars and students in the fields of criminology, psychology, social work, counseling, and public health. The study also has ramifications to work in genetics, behavioral genetics, environmental issues, family research, and educational foundations of the well-being of youth.

In the study of violent youth, there are often difficulties in combining data from divergent fields, partly because different subsets of youth are used in different arenas of investigation. For example, research on developmental psychopathology and within the realm of clinical child psychology has focused on youth who meet criteria for conduct disorder, whereas the tradition in research on criminology has been to define youth based on their status as juvenile delinquents (Frick, Stickle, Dandreaux, Farrell, & Kimonis, 2005). The current research seeks to bridge

this gap by focusing on what the youth do rather than on a potentially arbitrary diagnosis or juvenile justice label. Thus, this work will hopefully bring researchers from divergent fields together with a common goal of finding ways to prevent youth from perpetuating violence.

The practical policy implications of these findings are tremendous. Although the results are not quite as consistent as might have been expected, there appear to be clear connections between psychological problems at certain points in the lives of boys and their ultimate level of severe violence. From a preventive perspective, one wonders how many acts of severe violence might have been prevented if some of these boys had received effective psychological interventions for their mental health problems before their ultimate usage of severe violence. Perhaps this book is one step in the direction of helping youth before they harm others and themselves in a way that is irreparable. Dr. Boots has shown us the path and has laid the ground work, so it is now up to us to put these findings into action in order to prevent more harm from and against the youth of today.

-- Vicky Phares, Ph.D.

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# Violence and Chronic Offending as a Social Phenomenon

As a social problem, few garner more consistent attention in the media than violent crime. “In cities, suburban areas, and even small towns, Americans are fearful and concerned that violence has permeated the fabric and degraded the quality of their lives...violent deaths and incidents that result in lesser injuries are sources of chronic fear and a high level of concern with the seeming inability of public authorities to prevent them” (Reiss & Roth, 1993, p. 1). This fascination and enduring interest has generated an enormous body of literature, both scholarly and popular, which explores the etiology, perpetuation, and consequences of lethal and non-lethal forms of interpersonal violence.

Violence affects individuals, families, communities, and societies as a whole. Indeed, the public and the intellectual community of academia worldwide recognize the significant economic, medical, social, and psychological costs of violence. Security and safety are fleeting desires today for people living in urban centers plagued by violence and poverty (Kiser, 2006). The popular portrayal of violence, particularly in the media, as an important social problem in the United States

consistently ensures that citizen fear of violent crime will be a top concern of Americans in public opinion polls nationally (Gallup Poll Online, 2003). Certainly, “when citizens are afraid of crime, it is life-threatening, personal violence that dominates their attention” (Zimring & Hawkins, 1997, pp. 11-12). Although public perception seems to indicate that Americans are afraid of being a victim of serious violent crime, the question remains to what extent violence is a serious problem in American society today. The present study is concerned with violence as it applies to individual criminal and antisocial behaviors.

Specifically, this work is designed to investigate whether the onset of childhood or adolescent mental health disorders may play a significant role in the development of later violent behavior and the continuance of serious antisocial acts over the lifespan. According to one recent study regarding mental health, most disorders begin in childhood and early adolescence though they may not be formally diagnosed and treated until much later in life (Patel, Flisher, Hetrick, & McGorry, 2007). The term “violence” is an ambiguous term that is used broadly across various temporal, situational, spatial, and structural contexts. Violence is defined, for the purposes of the present study, as “behavior by persons against persons that intentionally threatens, attempts, or actually inflicts physical harm” (Reiss & Roth, 1993, p. 35). Hereafter, violent and/or aggressive behaviors are discussed as they relate to situational contexts where such actions are almost always considered antisocial and are legally condemned by the criminal justice system (e.g., homicide, attempted homicide, rape, aggravated assault, robbery).

Other key terms also used within this paper include antisocial or deviant acts, delinquent behaviors, and youth violence. The terms *antisocial* and *deviant acts* refer to certain behaviors that break societal norms. Antisocial behaviors specifically refer to “acts that maximize a person’s immediate personal gain through inflicting pain or

loss on others” (Loeber, 1982, p. 1432). Both delinquent behaviors and youth violence are used herein to refer to behaviors of persons that are considered to be juveniles, or persons less than 18 years of age. *Delinquent behaviors* are defined broadly here to include any actions considered criminal (or illegal) for adults, as well as certain prohibited behaviors for minors that are status offenses due to age (e.g., smoking, truancy, curfews, underage drinking, sexual intercourse, etc.). *Youth violence* refers to intentionally harmful behaviors that seek to inflict harm on others and which are committed by individuals under age 18. Both “juvenile or minority status is determined on the basis of age and is a legislative decision” (Heide, 1999, p. 5).

There is a critical need to better understand the etiology of violent behaviors as they develop across the lifecourse. It is a well-established fact that the majority of violent adult offenders begin their criminal careers as youngsters. Accordingly, the necessity of identifying the causes and correlates of delinquency and violence in youths is obvious to academics and laymen alike. .

### *Violence in American Society*

A large body of empirical literature has explored the prominence of violence historically in American culture (Brown, 1979; McGrath, 1984; Gurr, 1990; Butterfield, 1996; Lane, 1997; Kurtz, 1999). Widespread interest has focused in particular on increases in violence that occurred beginning in the 1960s (U.S. President’s Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice, 1967). Zimring and Hawkins (1997) analyzed index crimes (offenses ranging from homicide to theft) in the U.S. for the years 1961 through 1980. The authors found a three-fold increase in the rate of index crimes through the 1960s and 1970s. Additionally, lethal violence more than doubled during the same period and extended into the 1980s, with 4.8/100,000 homicides recorded in 1960 and 10.2/100,000 recorded in the year 1980.



Violent crime peaked in the early 1990s. A steady decline in violent offenses began and continued into the year 2000 (U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1984-2002). Indeed, “violent crimes as recorded by the police dropped in 2000 for the ninth consecutive year, representing the longest-running decline in violent crime since the Federal Bureau of Investigation began keeping records in 1960” (Barak, 2003, p. 21). This trend continued in 2001 and 2002, with rates of 5.6 per 100,000 (Fox & Zawitz, 2004). These data come in stark contrast to previous levels of homicide in the U.S. in the early 1990s, with rates of over 10 persons per 100,000 being killed during the early part of this decade (Barak, 2003).

Alarming, the most recent Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) report on violent crime shows a renewed spike in serious offending throughout the nation. A preliminary report released in June 2007 indicated a 1.3 percent increase of violent crime when compared to 2005 rates (U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2007). Interestingly, the most significant increases in violent offenses were located in relatively small towns (25,000-49,000 population) and medium-sized urban cities with a population between 250,000 and 499,999 inhabitants. These findings highlight the continuing struggle to ameliorate violence across the varied American social landscape.

A deconstruction of violent crime rates over the past several decades reveals that both adult and juvenile violence have emerged as a collective community problem. Beginning in the 1950s and over the next 40 years, violent crime rose over 600 percent, with juveniles accounting for the greatest increase in these numbers (Skogan, 1989). The coinciding rise of official reports of juveniles committing interpersonal acts of violence, beginning in the 1980s and continuing on into the 1990s, underscored the need to look at the youth violence phenomenon independently (Heide, 1992; 1995; 1999; Heide & Boots, 2003). This recognition

of teen violence and aggression as a social and public health crisis, coupled with high-profile media accounts of school shootings in various settings across the country, led to the U.S. Surgeon General in 2001 to call for an investigation of the continuing issues surrounding youth violence in America. Following an exhaustive review of empirical and scholarly evidence on this problem, the Surgeon General stated, “there is a powerful consensus that youth violence is, indeed, our Nation’s problem, and not merely a problem of cities, or of the isolated rural regions, or any single segment of our society” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001, p. vi).

### *Youth Violence in America*

The participation of youths in violent behaviors is not a new phenomenon. Rather, it is one that has had a significant historical precedent in the United States (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). Indeed, some of the earliest literature that originated from the Chicago School found a relationship between youth violence and gang membership (Reidel & Welsh, 2002). A review of the FBI Uniform Crime Report (UCR) data shows a rise in juvenile crime rates beginning in the late 1980s and peaking in the mid 1990s (Heide, 1999). During the ten-year period between 1983 and 1993, arrests of violent youthful offenders increased an alarming 70 percent. Furthermore, the number of juveniles arrested for homicide surged three-fold for the same period (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001).

Additional analyses of UCR and National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) data by Cook and Laub (2002) showed a doubling of violent crime arrests for teenagers between the ages of 13 and 17. Their analysis found a stable arrest rate between 1975 and 1984. Data from the mid 1980s through the mid 1990s, however, indicated a two-fold increase in violent youth arrests. Since 1994, rates of juvenile violent arrests have fallen between

three and six percent annually; in the year 2000, rates were comparable to those rates in 1984.

Further analyses of the juvenile arrest trends have shown that the majority of these arrests are for aggravated assault and robbery. For 2001 UCR data, approximately 94% of all violent arrests (approximately 63,000) were for these two offenses (Snyder, 2003). Of all arrestees, urban males, particularly minorities, are overrepresented for all young offenders reported as arrested in UCR data. Of particular concern are recent national self-report data from U.S. high school seniors. These data suggest that the rates of violent youthful offending, while falling from the highs of the 1990s, remain unsatisfactorily elevated for crimes such as robbery and assaults (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001).

With respect to homicide, the most lethal form of interpersonal violence, a review of UCR data provided by the FBI indicates that the number of teen homicide arrestees rose from just over 1000 youngsters in 1984 to over 3100 youths in the year 1994 (see Heide, 1999 for illustration; U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1984-2002). For the decade between 1984 and 1993, juveniles accounted for 11.6 percent of all homicide arrests nationally; for the following decade between 1993 and 2002, youths accounted for an average mean of 14 percent of all homicide arrests. Since 1998, less than 1000 youths a year have been arrested for homicide offenses. These numbers are dramatically lower than those seen in the mid 1990s and are at levels not seen since the early 1980s. Despite these reductions in the number and rates of youths committing lethal violence, however, 2002 UCR data indicate that juveniles still account for approximately one out of every ten homicide arrests (9.6%) in the U.S. These 2002 homicide rates, at 7.3 percent, are still over two percent higher than 1984 levels.

Although chronic youthful violent offending is relatively rare (Klein, 1995; Esbensen, 2004; Loeber &

Farrington, 1998; Loeber & Farrington, 2000) and the majority of juvenile offenders desist from criminal activities in their early to mid 20s (Moffitt, 1993; Moffitt, Caspi, Dickson, Silva, & Stanton, 1996), boys, gang members, and youngsters of color continue to both engage and become victims of violent and antisocial behaviors in alarming numbers (Spergel, 1990; Moone, 1994; Thornberry, 1998; Jenson & Howard, 1999). There is evidence that there is a gap between when serious offending behaviors begin and when youthful offenders may be formally arrested and enter the criminal justice system (Elliott, 1994). Some studies have estimated that only five percent of serious violent offenders had official arrests as a juvenile despite years of violent acts against others (Howell, Krisberg, & Jones, 1995). Other studies have reported that upwards of 84 percent of serious violent offenders are never arrested for their crimes (Dunford & Elliott, 1984). Using National Youth Survey (NYS) data, Elliott and his colleagues have reported that nearly half of children who committed their first violent act prior to age 11 continued committing serious violence into young adulthood. Seriously violent careers began in these youths at age 12, doubling between the ages 13 and 14, peaking around age 16 and then dropping by 50 percent by age 18 (Elliott, Huizinga, & Morse, 1986; Elliott, 1994).

The first cohort studies to focus on chronic criminal offenders came from the seminal works of Wolfgang and his colleagues (Wolfgang, Figlio, & Sellin, 1972; Tracy, Wolfgang, & Figlio, 1985; Wolfgang, Thornberry, & Figlio, 1987; Tracy, Wolfgang, & Figlio, 1990) and West and Farrington (Farrington & West, 1990; 1993; West, 1969; 1982; West & Farrington, 1973; 1977). In his 1945 cohort study on “chronic offenders” in Philadelphia with five or more police contacts, Wolfgang and his fellow researchers found that these six percent of the cohort and 18 percent of all delinquent youths committed almost 2/3 of all violent offenses and 51 percent of total offenses (Wolfgang et al., 1972). In another study on the 1958