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Psychological and Criminological Characteristics of Adolescent Serial Killers

Parth Chaturvedi^a

^aJagran Lakecity University, Bhopal, India

Received 07 March 2025; Accepted 07 April 2025; Published 11 April 2025

The paper aims to analyse the core emotional and motivational factors influencing adolescent serial killers, particularly examining the role of traumatic childhood experiences and psychological disorders in the development of violent tendencies. Violent criminal actions classified as serial murders occur infrequently, yet significantly, while most perpetrators belong to the adult population. The population of serial killers who are adolescents exists at a low rate but generates significant investigative concerns among criminology experts, psychologists, and legal scholars. The research explores adolescent serial killer profiles by studying their criminological and psychosocial attributes along with the mental condition of psychopathy and environmental and behavioural influences. Research reveals an urgent requirement for both prevention services and threat evaluation, and supports additional scientific studies connected to environmental elements leading to serial juvenile homicide. The study seeks to enhance the understanding of the psychological profiles of adolescent serial killers, ultimately providing insights that can inform ethical judicial strategies for identifying and preventing serial homicides.

Keywords: *adolescent serial killers, traumatic childhood experiences, criminology, behavioural influences.*

INTRODUCTION

Within the fields of psychology and criminology, the study of teenage serial killers is a delicate and intricate topic. Serial killers who are adolescents have distinct psychological and criminological traits that mark them apart from adult criminals. Because adolescent serial killers present unique obstacles because of their developmental stage, psychological composition, and contextual factors, it is crucial to comprehend these traits for both prevention and intervention measures. We can learn more about the underlying reasons for such high violence and possible rehabilitation routes by looking at the psychological characteristics and criminological elements that influence teenage serial killing behaviour.¹

Adolescent serial killers frequently have psychological characteristics or personality problems that increase their propensity for aggressive behaviour. These could include an overpowering drive for power and control, narcissism, or a lack of empathy. Psychopathy is characterised by manipulative behaviours, superficial emotions, and a flagrant disdain for other people's rights. Since they are disengaged from the misery they inflict, their incapacity to establish positive emotional bonds with others frequently fuels their violent behaviour.² In addition, a lot of teenage serial killers have pasts of trauma, abuse, or neglect that have influenced their perspectives and actions. The development of violent inclinations is significantly influenced by early childhood trauma, such as physical, sexual, or emotional abuse, which fuels sentiments of fury.³

Numerous theoretical frameworks can be used to understand serial killing in adolescents from a criminological perspective. According to the social learning theory⁴, for instance, teenagers pick up aggressive behaviours from peers, family members, or the media. The acceptance of violence or hostility in the adolescent's surroundings can have a big impact on their propensity to commit crimes.⁵ Furthermore, according to the strain theory, teenagers who are under a lot

¹ Robert D Hare, *Without Conscience: The Disturbing World of the Psychopaths Among Us* (Guilford Press 1993)

² David L. Rosenhan and Martin E.P. Seligman, *Abnormal Psychology* (4th edn, W.W. Norton & Company 1995)

³ John H. Laub and Robert J. Sampson, *Crime in the Making: Pathways and Turning Point Through Life* (Harvard University Press 1993)

⁴ Albert Bandura, *Social Learning Theory* (Pearson 1977)

⁵ *Ibid*

of emotional, social, or financial stress may turn to violence as a coping mechanism or to settle internal disputes.⁶ Adolescent serial killers frequently express feelings of loneliness, rejection, or marginalisation, which can lead them to act out violently in an attempt to attract attention or establish their dominance.

The hypothesis of routine actions also sheds important light on how teenage serial killing opportunities emerge. According to this idea, several contextual factors, including habitual engagement in dangerous activities, access to susceptible victims, and a lack of supervision, can make violent acts more likely.⁷ Teens may find themselves in circumstances that make committing serial killings more likely, particularly if they have a history of criminal activity or substance misuse.

Increased impulsivity and bad decision-making are caused by the substantial emotional, psychological, and neurological growth that occurs during adolescence. Adolescents are more prone to acting on violent impulses without fully weighing the consequences because their developing brains are still developing in the areas that control impulse control, moral reasoning, and long-term planning. Some people may become extremely violent as a result of this developmental immaturity and a lack of emotional control.⁸

Creating successful preventative and intervention plans requires an awareness of the psychological and criminological traits of teenage serial killers. We can attempt to address the underlying reasons for serial violence and improve support for at-risk kids by examining the distinct psychological characteristics, social influences, and developmental aspects that contribute to their behaviour.⁹

⁶ Robert Agnew, *Pressured Into Crime: An Overview of General Strain Theory* (Oxford University Press & Roxbury Publishing Company 2005)

⁷ Bandura (n 4)

⁸ Agnew (n 6)

⁹ David Finkelhor, *Childhood Victimization: Violence, Crimes and Abuse in the Lives of Young People* (Oxford University Press 2008)

METHODOLOGY

Adolescent serial killers are a complicated subject that requires a careful analysis of criminological and psychological aspects. With an emphasis on the interaction of developmental psychology,¹⁰ Social influences and criminological theories that influence the behaviour of juvenile offenders, this methodology aims to systematically analyse these elements.¹¹

1. Psychological Assessment: Adolescent serial killers frequently have psychiatric profiles that examine cognitive errors, traumatic traumas, and personality problems:

- To evaluate personality traits and prior experiences, standardised psychological tests such as the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ), the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI), and the Hare Psychopathy Checklist (PCL-R) are utilised. These tools aid in detecting antisocial behaviour, psychopathy, and other mental health conditions that could make teenagers more likely to act violently.¹²
- To learn more about the adolescent's history, character, *and* experiences, interviews are conducted with offenders, psychologists, and family members. Clinicians can investigate any history of abuse, neglect, or exposure to violence that may have influenced the development of aggressive tendencies with the aid of these encounters.¹³
- An emphasis on cognitive errors (such as the justification of violence and the dehumanisation of victims) aids in comprehending how these teenagers interpret their environment and defend their behaviour. Examining the part played by empathy deficiencies, which are prevalent among repeat offenders, is another aspect of this.¹⁴

2. Criminological Framework: A basis for comprehending the social and environmental elements influencing teenage serial killings is provided by criminological theories. A mix informs the criminological portion of the study of structural, social, and biological theories:¹⁵

¹⁰ Michael Rutter, *Developmental Psychopathology: Theory and Method* (6th edn, John Wiley & Sons 2015)

¹¹ *Ibid*

¹² Hare (n 1)

¹³ Finklehor (n 9)

¹⁴ Bandura (n 4)

¹⁵ Agnew (n 6)

According to the strain theory, teenagers who go through a lot of emotional or social stress, like dysfunctional families, bullying, or financial difficulties, may turn to violence as a coping strategy. Examining whether such stressors are present in an adolescent's life can reveal information about the criminogenic elements that contribute to aggressive conduct.¹⁶

According to this view, criminal behaviour is acquired through social contacts. For teenage serial killers, seeing and copying violent behaviour, whether from friends, family, or the media, can normalise such behaviour. It is essential to thoroughly examine an adolescent's social surroundings, including their interactions with friends and family, as well as any exposure to violent subcultures.¹⁷

Analysing an adolescent's everyday routines and criminal chances offers valuable insights into how environmental factors, including isolation or access to weapons, contribute to the development of violent impulses. Adolescents may develop a tendency towards serial murder as a result of routine actions like spending time alone or partaking in dangerous hobbies.

3. Developmental Considerations: One of the most important phases of psychological and emotional development is adolescence. It's critical to comprehend how a person's development may affect their likelihood of committing violent crimes:

Impulsivity and bad decision-making are more noticeable during adolescence, according to research on the development of the teenage brain. The increased propensity for violent acts without fully considering the repercussions may be explained by this developmental period, in addition to potential underlying neurological or hormonal disorders.

According to Erik Erikson's phases of psychosocial development, unresolved adolescent tensions, like identity crises or problems with autonomy, can result in antisocial behaviour or aggressiveness. Teenagers may also find it difficult to build positive relationships, which can result in emotional distance and a lack of compassion for their victims.¹⁸

¹⁶ *Ibid*

¹⁷ Bandura (n 4)

¹⁸ Erik H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (W.W. Norton & Company 1950)

FINDINGS

Numerous criminological and psychological traits are found in the research of teenage serial killers, which aids in the explanation of their abnormal conduct. Researchers have discovered important trends and root causes by looking at both personal psychological characteristics and more general criminological elements. These results highlight the intricate interactions between developmental, environmental, and personality factors that lead to the genesis of serial violence in juvenile offenders.¹⁹

Psychological Characteristics: A lot of teenage serial killers display psychopathic characteristics, like a lack of empathy, a shallow appeal, and a propensity for manipulative actions. Because psychopathy is frequently linked to a diminished capacity for guilt or regret, these people can act violently without experiencing emotional anguish. These teenagers also frequently exhibit antisocial personality traits, which include a disdain for regulations, social conventions, and other people's welfare. According to research, these characteristics are not only innate but can also be made worse by neglect or stress experienced early in life.²⁰

Cognitive distortions, in which the perpetrators defend or rationalise their violent actions, are a noteworthy discovery in the psychological profiles of teenage serial killers. Victims may be dehumanised, thought to be deserving of punishment, or thought to be on a mission or participating in self-assertion. The adolescent's persistent violence is made possible by these warped perspectives, which enable them to distance themselves from the emotional fallout of their deeds.²¹

A large number of teenage serial killers had severe early-life trauma, including emotional, sexual, or physical abuse. Deep-seated wrath, fear, and an inability to establish healthy emotional bonds can all be influenced by these experiences. Future aggressive behaviours are often influenced by early exposure to violence, whether in the family or the community.

¹⁹ Finklehor (n 9)

²⁰ Hare (n 1)

²¹ David A. Clark and Aaron T. Beck, *Cognitive Therapy of Anxiety Disorders* (The Guilford Press 2010)

According to some research, these teenagers might try to reclaim control of their lives by engaging in violent or domineering behaviours, which may include serial killings.²²

Due to early caregiving interruptions or neglect, adolescents who commit serial homicides frequently have attachment issues. These conditions may make it more difficult for them to build sympathetic, meaningful relationships. As a result, they could become detached and see other people as things or means to achieve their goals.²³

Criminological Characteristics: Adolescent serial killers may have picked up violent behaviours from their social surroundings, according to the criminological theory of social learning. Aggressive behaviour can be normalised by peer groups that glorify violence, dysfunctional family dynamics, or exposure to violent media. Sometimes, the teenager learns that using violence to solve problems is appropriate due to family patterns of violence or criminality.²⁴

According to the strain theory, teenagers who are under a lot of social, emotional, or financial stress may turn to crime as a coping strategy. Feelings of rejection, loneliness, or estrangement from their classmates, families, or society are common among teenage serial killers. Their impulse to use violence to acquire recognition or assert control may be influenced by these emotions of marginalisation.²⁵

In routine tasks, the significance of opportunity in committing serial crimes is emphasised by theory. Victims of many teenage serial killers are easily accessible, frequently in remote or unprotected locations. Their chances of committing such crimes may be further increased by their social isolation and lack of supervision. Violent tendencies might develop more easily when there is a lack of supervision and participation in risky activities (such as substance misuse or criminal subcultures).

²² John Briere, *Child Abuse Trauma: Theory and Treatment of the Lasting Effects* (Sage Publications 1992)

²³ Mary Ainsworth, *Attachment and the Growth Of Love* (Harvard University Press 1989)

²⁴ Bandura (n 4)

²⁵ Agnew (n 6)

Developmental Factors: Significant emotional and cognitive development occurs during adolescence. Adolescents' brains are still developing, especially in areas linked to decision-making and impulse control. Teenage serial killers may therefore be more impulsive, which makes it simpler for them to act on violent impulses without fully weighing the repercussions.²⁶

The combination of underdeveloped cognitive functions, heightened impulsivity, and environmental influences creates a perfect storm for adolescent violence, including serial homicide. While most teenagers do not engage in such extreme behaviours, those with a history of trauma, emotional instability, and a lack of guidance may be particularly vulnerable to impulsive, violent tendencies. Understanding these developmental and psychological factors is crucial for early intervention and prevention, highlighting the need for mental health support, parental guidance, and educational programs that promote emotional regulation and decision-making skills among adolescents.

CONCLUSION

Adolescent serial killers present a complex and unsettling challenge, necessitating a thorough understanding of the psychological, criminological, and developmental factors that shape their behaviour. This study has demonstrated that their actions are not solely the result of inherent psychopathy or antisocial tendencies but are also heavily influenced by early childhood trauma, cognitive distortions, and environmental conditions. These adolescents often exhibit severe emotional detachment, lack of empathy, and manipulative behaviours, which are exacerbated by unstable family dynamics, exposure to violence, and social marginalisation.²⁷ Furthermore, theories such as social learning, strain, and routine activities provide a framework for understanding how these individuals develop violent tendencies and seize opportunities to commit serial offences.²⁸

The research findings emphasise the critical need for early identification of risk factors, particularly in children displaying antisocial behaviours or experiencing significant

²⁶ R.L. Miller, *Juvenile Delinquency and Juvenile Justice* (2nd edn, Academic Press 2018)

²⁷ *Ibid*

²⁸ Ronald L. Akers and Christine S. Sellers, *Criminological Theories: Introduction, Evaluation and Application* (7th edn, Oxford University Press 2017)

psychological distress. Psychological assessments, such as psychometric testing and clinical interviews, can help identify at-risk youth before their behaviours escalate into serial violence. Likewise, intervention programs aimed at addressing childhood trauma, improving social integration, and promoting emotional development could play a crucial role in preventing the emergence of violent tendencies.²⁹

From a criminological perspective, understanding the societal and environmental factors that contribute to adolescent serial killing is essential for developing effective prevention strategies. Strengthening family support systems, promoting positive peer influences, and limiting exposure to violent media and criminal subcultures can reduce the likelihood of adolescents adopting violent behaviour. Law enforcement and legal professionals must also work towards improved threat evaluation mechanisms to detect and intervene in cases where warning signs of violent tendencies are apparent.³⁰

The legal and ethical implications of adolescent serial homicide remain a contentious issue, with jurisdictions divided on whether such offenders should be treated as juveniles or adults. While some argue for punitive measures due to the severity of their crimes, others emphasise the potential for rehabilitation given the cognitive and emotional immaturity of adolescent offenders.³¹ A balanced judicial approach- one that considers both accountability and rehabilitation- could provide a more just and effective response to these cases.

Ultimately, this study underscores the need for a multidisciplinary approach to addressing the issue of adolescent serial killers. Psychological research, criminology analysis, and legal considerations must work together to improve early detection, intervention, and policy development. By understanding the interplay of developmental, social, and psychological influences, society can take meaningful steps to reduce the occurrence of serial juvenile homicide and provide appropriate support for at-risk youth. Future research should further explore the long-term effectiveness of rehabilitation strategies and the role of modern social influences in

²⁹ David P. Farrington and Brandon C. Welsh, *Saving Children from a Life of Crime: Early Risk Factors and Effective Interventions* (Oxford University Press 2007)

³⁰ *Ibid*

³¹ Barry C. Feld, *Juvenile Justice Administration in a Nutshell* (4th edn, West Academic Publishing 2019)

shaping adolescent violent behaviour, ensuring that efforts to prevent serial violence remain relevant and effective.³²

³² James Garbarino, *Lost Boys: Why Our Son turn Violent and How We Can Save Them* (1st edn, Free Press 1999)