

Why Violence?

Why Violence?

*Leading Questions Regarding the
Conceptualization and Reality of
Violence in Society*

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Contents

List of Boxes, Images, Figures and Tables	xi
Preface	xiii
Chapter 1 • What Is the Meaning of Violence?	3
Common Definitions	4
Violence as Physical Force	4
Violence as Violation	5
Levels of Violence	6
Interpersonal Violence	7
Institutional Violence	7
Structural Violence	8
The Social Construction of Violence in Society	9
Informal Consensual Reality v. Formal Consensual Reality	11
Common Stock Knowledge	12
Cultural Indicators of Violence: Language and Metaphors	13
Mass Media Images v. the Reality of Violence	17
Competing Perspectives on Violence	19
Criminal Justice Perspective	20
Public Health Perspective	21
Human Rights Perspective	24
Commercial/Commodity Perspective	26
The Scientific/Criminological Construction of Violence	28
Violence and the Law	29
The Measurement of Violence	29
Violence Victims	30
Violence Typologies	30
The Etiology of Violence	31
Criminology, the Criminal Justice System, and the Political Order	32
Debunking Violence Myths	33
References	37
Chapter 2 • The Measurement of Violence	45
The Measurement of Violence in the United States	48
Uniform Crime Reports	48
NIBRS, Redesign and Changes in the UCR	51
Trends in Violent Crimes from the UCR	54
National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS)	56
Select Findings from NCVS	58
The NCVS and UCR: True Crime Stories?	59

Self-Report Inventories	61
Other Sources of Data on Violence	63
National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH)	63
The National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS)	65
Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS)	66
Cross Cultural Comparisons of Violence	66
United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)	67
United Nations Surveys of Crime Trends and Operations of Criminal Justice Systems	68
UNODC Global Study on Homicide	69
Global Crime Victimization Surveys	70
International Crime Victimization Survey (ICVS)	72
World Health Organization (WHO)	73
WHO Multi-Country Study on Women's Health and Domestic Violence against Women	74
Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS)	74
Conclusion	74
References	75
Chapter 3 • Interpersonal Violence	81
Criminal Violence	82
Homicide	84
The Law	84
Patterns and Trends	84
Characteristics of Offenders	85
Characteristics of Victims	85
Typologies	86
Rape	91
The Law	91
Patterns and Trends	93
Characteristics of Offenders	93
Characteristics of Victims	94
Typologies	94
Robbery	96
The Law	96
Patterns and Trends	97
Characteristics of Offenders	98
Characteristics of Victims	98
Typologies	99
Assault	101
The Law	101
Patterns and Trends	102
Characteristics of Offenders	102
Characteristics of Victims	103
Typologies	103
Interpersonal Violence in Institutional Contexts	104
Family Violence	104
Intimate Partner Abuse	104
Child Abuse	107

Child-Parental Abuse	109
School Violence	110
Violence in Primary and Secondary Schools	111
Violence on College and University Campuses	113
Workplace Violence	115
Community Violence/Hate Crimes	116
Conclusion	118
References	119
Chapter 4 • Institutional Violence	129
Part 1: General Description of Institutional Forms of Violence	131
Family Violence	131
Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)	131
Child Abuse and Neglect	133
Educational Violence	135
Tracking	135
Corporal Punishment	137
Religious Violence	137
Political or State Violence	138
Part 2: Corporate Violence: An In-Depth Analysis	139
Harm and Blame in Corporate Violence	140
Corporate Violence and Dangerous Consumer Products	141
Ten Characteristics of Corporate Violence	142
The Definition and Social Construction of Corporate Violence	
by Social Scientists	143
Social Construction of Corporate Violence in Law	146
Social Construction of Corporate Violence in the Mass Media	
and the Public	147
Corporate Violence in the Workplace, the Fire at Imperial	
Food Products, Inc.	149
Organizational Culture as a Cause of Corporate Violence	150
Is There a Subculture of Corporate Violence?	153
Recent High Profile Cases of Corporate Violence	154
The Challenger and Columbia Disasters	154
The BP Disaster: Employee Safety and Environmental Destruction	156
Harming the Environment — The Most Criminalized Corporate Violence	158
Preventing Corporate Violence	159
Conclusion	161
References	162
Chapter 5 • Collective and Group Violence	173
Types of Active Crowds	175
Mobs	175
Riots	176
Panics	177
Social Movements	177
Reform Movements	179
Revolutionary Movements	179
Reactionary Social Movements	180

Terrorism	181
Organized Crime and Violence	184
Definition and Nature of Organized Crime	185
History of Organized Crime in the United States	186
Contemporary Transnational Organized Crime Networks	190
Trafficking in Persons	192
Smuggling of Migrants	192
Cocaine and Heroin Trafficking	192
Counterfeit Products	195
Maritime Piracy	196
Environmental Resource Trafficking	196
Cybercrime	197
Control of Transnational Organized Crime	198
Comparison of Organized Crime Groups and Terrorist Groups	198
Gangs and Violence	199
Definition of Gangs	200
Demographic Characteristics of Gang Members	201
Age	201
Gender	202
Race/Ethnicity	202
Types of Gangs	202
Street Gangs	202
Prison Gangs	207
Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs	208
Homicides and Gangs	208
Other Gang-Related Violence	209
The Future of Gangs	209
Conclusion	210
References	212
 Chapter 6 • State Violence	 221
State Power and Legality	222
A Typology of State Violence	223
Select Forms of State Violence	224
Exogenous State Violence	225
Genocide	226
Torture	228
War and International Conflict	230
The Rise of Asymmetrical Warfare and Terrorism	234
Endogenous State Violence	236
State Executions	237
Experimentation on Human Populations	240
Anti-Communist Attacks	243
Domestic Spying and Disruption of Political Groups	245
Crimes of Intergroup Conflict	246
Government Facilitation of Human Rights Violations of Migrant Workers	247
Conclusion	251
References	251

Chapter 7 • Who Are the Victims of Violence?	257
Legal Rights of Violent Crime Victims	258
The Right to Notice	259
The Right to Be Present	259
The Right to Be Heard	259
The Right to Protection	260
The Right to a Speedy Trial	260
The Right to Restitution	260
The Right to Privacy and Confidentiality	260
Crisis Intervention for Violent Crime Victims	261
Hate Crime	262
Racially-Motivated Hate Crime	263
Religious-Based Hate Crime	264
Sexually-Oriented Hate Crime	264
Disability-Based Hate Crime	265
Consequences of Hate Crime Victimization	265
Violent Sexual Assault Victimization	266
Victims of Workplace Violence	268
Underserved Populations as Victims of Institutional and State Violence	270
Homelessness and Crime Victimization	270
Environmental Degradation as Violence	272
Human Rights Violations and Corruption as Violence	273
Financial Victimization as Violence	275
Conclusion	276
References	278
 Chapter 8 • Individual Predictors of Violence and Dangerousness: Biological, Psychological/Psychiatric, and Integrated Life-Course Theories	 285
Biological/Hereditary Theories of Crime	286
Historical Overview	286
Contemporary Perspectives	289
Genetics and Crime	290
Fear Conditioning and Crime	291
Brain Dysfunctions and Crime	292
Psychological and Psychiatric Perspectives on Criminality	293
Competence, Criminal Culpability, and the Insanity Defense	295
M’Naghten Rule	297
Irresistible Impulse	297
The Durham Rule	297
Diminished Capacity	298
Substantial Capacity Test	298
Assessing Dangerousness	298
Clinical Predictions	298
Actuarial Models	299
Mental Illness and Violent Crime	301
Personality Disorders and Crime	304
Integrated Developmental and Life-Course Theories of Violent Behavior	306
Critical Comment and Conclusion	308
References	309

Chapter 9 • Social Predictors of Violence and Dangerousness: Sociological and Humanistic/Critical Theories	317
Historical Accounts of Varying Patterns and Rates of Violence	318
Mainstream Sociological Theories of Violence	321
Demographic and Ecological Patterns Associated with Varying Rates of Violence	321
Social Strain Theories	323
Social Learning Theories	325
Social Control Theories	327
Routine Activities Theories	327
Rational Choice Theory	328
General Theory of Crime	328
Humanistic/Critical Theories of Violence	329
Defining Legitimate and Illegitimate Violence	329
The Political Economy and Violence	330
Violence and the Reproduction of Power Control	330
The Social Geometry of Conflict and Intensity of Violence	331
Structural Production of Violence and the Cycle of Violence, Suppression of Freedom, and Inequality	332
Conclusion	333
References	334
Chapter 10 • Is Peace Possible?	343
Violence as Sanctioned and Unsanctioned Harm	344
The Need for a Holistic Understanding of Violence and Harm	344
Pathways to Peace	346
Restorative Justice	349
Conflict Resolution	355
The Ladder of Inference	357
Peacekeeping Criminology	357
Human Rights and Social Justice	358
Concluding Comment	359
References	361
 Index	 367

List of Boxes, Images, Figures and Tables

Chapter 2 • The Measurement of Violence

Box 2.1	UCR Definition of Violent Crimes	50
Box 2.2	NIBRS Group A Offenses and Data Elements	53
Box 2.3	Types of Data and Potential Sources for Collecting Violence Information	64
Figure 2.1	Expanded Homicide Data Figure	52
Figure 2.2	Violent Crime Rates	60
Figure 2.3	Four Measures of Serious Violent Crime	61
Table 2.1	Violent Crimes in the U.S. by Volume and Rate per 100,000 Inhabitants, 1990–2010	55
Table 2.2	Number of Criminal Victimizations and Percent Changes, by Type of Crime, 2001, 2009, and 2010	59
Table 2.3	2009 Self-Report Survey of Violent Activity of 50,000 High School Seniors	62
Table 2.4	Homicide Cause of Death—ICD Codes: E960–E969	65
Table 2.5	World Homicide Rates by Region	69
Table 2.6	Key Topics for International Comparability	71

Chapter 3 • Interpersonal Violence

Box 3.1	Anders Behring Breivik: Norway Mass Murderer	89
Box 3.2	California Zodiac Killer	90
Box 3.3	Intimate Partner Violence: I Ran Into the Door	106
Box 3.4	Child Abuse and Neglect: I Fell Out of My Cradle	108
Table 3.1	Violent Criminal Offenses on College and University Campuses 2007–2009	114

Chapter 4 • Institutional Violence

Box 4.1	The Most Dangerous Serial Corporate Killers	144
Box 4.2	Organizational Causes of Corporate Violence: Another Look at the Imperial Fire	151
Table 4.1	Factors Associated with a Man's Risk for Abusing His Partner	132

Chapter 5 • Collective and Group Violence

Box 5.1 Occupy Wall Street	178
Box 5.2 Arab Spring and American Fall	182
Box 5.3 New York's Five Families	190
Box 5.4 El Narco—Inside Mexico's Criminal Insurgency	194
Box 5.5 U.S. Based Street Gangs (Regional and National)	203

Chapter 6 • State Violence

Box 6.1 International Criminal Court (ICC)	225
Box 6.2 Prehistoric Evidence of Violence	227
Image 6.1 The machine gun effectively put an end to cavalry charges in World War I	232
Image 6.2 Infamous entrance building to the Auschwitz II (Birkenau) death camp in Oswiecim	233
Image 6.3 Jewish Neighborhood of Paris: Infants murdered by the Nazis with the complicity of the Vichy government	233
Image 6.4 Lethal Injection Gurney	239
Table 6.1 Crimes of Domination and Oppression Generated by Sovereign State and Their Legitimate Institutions to Protect and Promote their Interests	224
Table 6.2 Executions in the United States: Total and by State	241

Chapter 7 • Who Are the Victims of Violence?

Image 7.1 Jerry Sandusky	269
Image 7.2 Protestors seek recognition for bias crimes against the homeless and better protection for this vulnerable population	271
Image 7.3 Deep Horizon oil rig burning	273

Chapter 8 • Individual Predictors of Violence and Dangerousness: Biological, Psychological/Psychiatric, and Integrated Life-Course Theories

Box 8.1 Governor Apologizes for Forced Sterilization: Virginia Eugenics Law Was One of 30 in U.S.	288
Box 8.2 The Nature-Nurture Debate, Redux	294

Chapter 10 • Is Peace Possible?

Box 10.1 Mohandas Ghandi	347
Box 10.2 Martin Luther King, Jr.	348
Box 10.3 Organizations Promoting Peace and Nonviolence	360
Table 10.1 Ancient and Current Patterns of Response to Harm and Violations	349
Table 10.2 Contrasting Characteristics of Criminal Justice and Restorative Justice	351

Preface

Why Violence? Leading Questions Regarding the Conceptualization and Reality of Violence in Society presents a comprehensive discussion of violence that is organized around overarching questions that have perplexed human beings since time immemorial. The book begins with the question of what is the meaning of *violence*. The relative ubiquity and ambiguity of the term has made it difficult to find a definition of violence that captures its complexity and often contradictory forms of expressions. Violence refers to various acts such as homicide, rape, robbery, and assault as well as collective violence, war, and terrorism; it may be found in our homes, workplaces, schools, places of worship, and communities both locally and globally. In everyday life the concept of violence seems to draw its significance more from the ways it is used to label certain types of behavior and certain types of people or countries than from the ways it is applied to describe concrete phenomenon. As a consequence, the concept is typically used as a pejorative or negative “summary symbol” serving mainly as an emotional intensifier, which creates mistrust or fear of others. Through its ubiquitous and ambiguous application, violence has become the quintessential metaphor that we all live by; it is symbolically ingrained in our language, thinking, and behavior. Due to its lack of specificity and function as a symbolic intensifier, it has lent itself to being politically exploited. As a result of the challenges associated with violence, its study calls for a very cautious and critical approach.

Why Violence? explores the many manifest ways in which violence is understood in contemporary society, ranging from popular perceptions to scientific claims. It covers age-long questions such as why some human beings, under certain circumstances, react in violent or aggressive ways and others do not and why some social forces/institutions tend to encourage or exacerbate violence and others do not. The book also treats questions that have not conventionally been associated with violence such as: why are acts of social injustice, environmental degradation, and gross abuse of power not considered acts of violence per se? In this sense, the book serves to fill a gap in the literature by raising not only the enduring questions of violence, but also new questions about the conceptualization and reality of violence. For example, should the recent financial crisis stemming from mass fraudulent acts that have adversely affected the lives of millions of people be considered acts of violence? Should homeless populations be considered victims of violence? Should unchecked and blatant air and water pollution be considered forms of violence? Unlike many books on violence that focus on narrow depictions of certain types of perpetrators, this book widens the list of potential perpetrators and includes consideration of a broad spectrum of victims of violence.

In addressing the leading questions about violence, the book introduces readers not only to the complexities associated with violence and violence studies, but also to state-of-the-art thinking and associated research/knowledge-base on violence. It provides a critical analysis of the interplay between popular questions of why there is a “disconnect” between the public’s understanding of violence, including official responses to violence

and scientific evidence. The most current theories and research evidence from the biological, psychological, sociological, and criminological viewpoints are presented and critically considered with respect to their relative strengths and weaknesses and potential for finding solutions to the problem of violence. The book begins with the question *Why Violence?* and ends with the question *Why not peace?*

A companion reader to the book, *Violence: Do We Know It When We See It?* (Harper, Voigt, and Thornton, 2012), comprised of original works from leading experts on violence from around the world, addresses a wide spectrum of interpersonal, institutional, and structural forms of violence and serves to illustrate key elements of this book. Together, *Why Violence?* and its companion reader explore multiple socially manifest and latent expressions of violence, including the symbolic ways in which violence is understood in contemporary society. The books cover topics ranging from common parlance, everyday perceptions and myths to governmental proclamations and scientific claims.

Special thanks must be expressed to Leo Barrile and Rae Taylor, who have contributed to the chapters in this book that deal with corporate violence and violent victimization, respectively. We would also like to thank our many colleagues who have written on the topic of violence over the years and have inspired us in ways that would be difficult to enumerate in a few words. Finally, we would like to extend our appreciation to everyone at Carolina Academic Press for their support on this project.