

# **Why Violence?**



# Why Violence?

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

SECOND EDITION

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# Contents

List of Boxes, Images, Figures and Tables	xiii
Preface	xvii
<b>Chapter 1 · What Is the Meaning of Violence?</b>	<b>3</b>
Part 1 Common Definitions	4
Violence as Physical Force	6
Violence as Violation	7
The Scientific/Criminological Definition of Violence	8
Violence and the Law	10
The Measurement of Violence	10
Violence Victims	11
Violence Typologies	11
The Etiology of Violence	12
Criminology and the Study of the Criminal Justice System and the Political Order	13
Levels of Violence	16
Interpersonal Violence	19
Institutional Violence	19
Structural Violence	20
Violence and Democracy	21
The Antithetical Relationship between Violence and Democracy	22
Surplus Violence	22
Part 2 The Social Construction of Violence in Society	25
Informal Consensual Reality v. Formal Consensual Reality	28
Common Stock Knowledge	30
Violence as a Social Problem	30
Cultural and Symbolic Expressions of Violence: Language and Metaphors	35
Arguments and Debates Framed as War/Violence	36
Violence as a Summary Label	37
Media Images v. Reality of Violence	39
Media Construction of Violence	42
Old Legacy Media v. New Media	46
Part 3 Competing Perspectives on Violence	48
Criminal Justice Perspective	48
Public Health Perspective	51

Human Rights Perspective	56
Corruption and Human Rights Violations	60
Commercial/Commodity Perspective	62
Debunking Violence Myths	68
Metaphorical Blindness	70
Conclusion	72
References	73
<b>Chapter 2 · The Measurement of Violence</b>	<b>91</b>
The Measurement of Violence in the United States	94
Uniform Crime Reports	95
National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS), Redesign and Changes in the UCR	99
Trends in Violent Crimes from the UCR	105
National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS)	110
Select Findings from NCVS	112
The NCVS and UCR: True Crime Stories?	114
Self-Report Inventories	115
Other Sources of Data on Violence	117
National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH)	118
The National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS)	119
Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS)	120
Cross Cultural Comparisons of Violence	121
United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)	121
United Nations Surveys of Crime Trends and Operations of Criminal Justice Systems	122
UNODC Global Study on Homicide	123
Global Crime Victimization Surveys	126
International Crime Victimization Survey (ICVS)	127
World Health Organization (WHO)	129
WHO Multi-Country Study on Women’s Health and Domestic Violence against Women	131
Bureau of Justice International Statistics (BJS)	132
Conclusion	132
References	133
<b>Chapter 3 · Who Are the Victims of Violence?</b>	<b>141</b>
The Consequences of Violence Victimization	142
Social and Emotional Effects of Violent Crime	142
Crisis Intervention for Violent Crime Victims	143
Legal Rights of Violent Crime Victims	144
Core Victim Rights	145
Victim Services	147

Theories of Violence Victimization	147
Sociocultural, Social Disorganization, and Social Ecological Theories	148
Victim-Criminal Interaction and Victim Precipitation Theories	149
Routine Activity and Lifestyles Theories	150
Social Strain and Interpersonal Conflict Theories	151
Symbolic Interaction and Learning Theories	152
Conflict/Critical Humanist and Radical Feminist Theories	153
Underserved Populations as Victims of Institutional and State Violence	154
Homeless Victimization	155
Sex Worker Victimization	159
Hate Crime Victimization	160
Bullying as Violent Victimization	164
Environmental Degradation as Violence	165
Human Rights Violations and Corruption as Violence	166
Financial Victimization as Violence	168
Conclusion	170
References	173
<b>Chapter 4 · Interpersonal Violence</b>	<b>185</b>
Criminal Violence	186
Homicide	188
The Law	188
Patterns and Trends	189
Characteristics of Offenders	190
Characteristics of Victims	190
Typologies	191
Rape	196
The Law	197
Patterns and Trends	199
Characteristics of Offenders	199
Characteristics of Victims	200
Typologies	201
Robbery	204
The Law	205
Patterns and Trends	205
Characteristics of Offenders	206
Characteristics of Victims	207
Typologies	207
Assault	211
The Law	211
Patterns and Trends	211
Characteristics of Offenders	212
Characteristics of Victims	213
Typologies	213

Interpersonal Violence in Institutional Contexts	214
Family Violence	214
Intimate Partner Abuse	214
Child Abuse and Maltreatment	218
Child-Parental Abuse	221
School Violence	222
Violence in Primary and Secondary Schools	223
Violence on College and University Campuses	226
Workplace Violence	228
Community Violence/Hate Crimes	230
Conclusion	232
References	233
<b>Chapter 5 · Institutional Violence</b>	245
Church Child Abuse Scandal: A Shroud of Secrecy	248
Spotlight on the Archdiocese of Boston	249
Clericalism, Changing Social Mores and Public Shame	252
Schools and Sexual Abuse: Higher Learning Is Not Always Higher Morality	253
Staff Subculture and University Enabled Child Sexual Abuse	254
Student Subculture, University Inaction and Acquaintance Rapes	257
Corporal Punishment in Schools: Sanctioned and Unsanctioned	260
Police Violence: A Thin Blue Line between Two Societies	261
The Chicago Cover-Up of Laquan McDonald's Shooting	262
Broken Windows: A Broken Policy	264
Prison Violence: Controlling the Caged	266
Violent Officer Subcultures	267
Solitary Confinement for Juveniles	269
Women in Prison: No Better, On Either Side of the Cage	269
Corporate Violence	270
Harm and Blame in Corporate Violence	271
Corporate Violence and Dangerous, Unhealthy Consumer Products	272
Ten Characteristics of Corporate Violence	275
The Definition and Social Construction of Corporate Violence by Social Scientists	276
Social Construction of Corporate Violence in Law	279
Social Construction of Corporate Violence in the Mass Media and the Public	281
Corporate Violence in the Workplace	283
Organizational Culture as a Cause of Corporate Violence	288
Is There a Subculture of Corporate Violence?	289
The "Dark Side" of Organizational Culture: The <i>Challenger</i> and <i>Columbia</i> Disasters	290
The BP Disaster: Employee Safety and Environmental Destruction	293



Harming the Environment — The Most Criminalized Corporate Violence	295
State Corporate Crime: Violations of Migrant Workers	298
Preventing Corporate Violence	302
Conclusion	304
References	306
<b>Chapter 6 · Collective and Group Violence</b>	<b>321</b>
Theories of Collective Violence	322
Types of Elementary Collective Violence	326
Crowds	326
Mobs	327
Riots	328
Panics	329
Social Movements	330
Reform Social Movements	332
Revolutionary Movements	332
Reactionary Social Movements	334
Gangs and Violence	336
Definition of Gangs	338
Demographic Characteristics of Gang Members	339
Types of Gangs	339
Street Gangs	339
Prison Gangs	342
Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs	342
Homicides and Gangs	343
Other Gang-Related Violence	344
The Future of Gangs	344
Organized Crime and Violence	345
Definition and Nature of Organized Crime	347
History of Organized Crime in the United States	349
Contemporary Transnational Organized Crime Networks and Activities	354
Trafficking in Persons	355
Smuggling of Migrants	355
Cocaine and Heroin Trafficking	356
Counterfeit Products	357
Maritime Piracy	360
Environmental Resource Trafficking	361
Cybercrime — Child Pornography	362
Control of Transnational Organized Crime	363
Conclusion	363
References	365

<b>Chapter 7 · Political/State Violence</b>	377
Three Types of Political Violence	378
State Violence	379
State Power and the Just War	381
Types of State Violence: Exogenous and Endogenous	382
Genocide	383
Torture	386
Exogenous State Violence	388
War and International Conflict	388
Endogenous State Violence	395
The State's Attack against Indigenous Peoples	395
Slavery, Jim Crow, and an Unequal Society	397
State Executions	399
Better Dead than Red: State Violence against Communists and Political Opponents	403
Anti-Union Violence	403
State Violence against Political Threats	404
Domestic Spying and Disruption of Political Groups	405
The End Justifies the Means: State Violence against Its Citizens for the National Security	407
NSA's Mass Surveillance of Citizens	410
Insurgent Political Violence	411
Islamic Radicalism, International and Domestic	411
American Antigovernment Domestic Terrorism	413
Oklahoma City Bombing	415
Sovereign Citizen Militias	416
Intergroup Political Violence	418
Anti-Black Hate Crime	419
Lynchings	420
Anti-Abortion Attacks	421
Sexual Orientation Hate Crime	423
Conclusion	424
References	426
 <b>Chapter 8 · Interpersonal Theories of Violence</b>	 439
Biological/Hereditary Theories of Crime	440
Historical Overview	440
Contemporary Perspectives	444
Genetics and Crime	444
Fear Conditioning and Crime	446
Brain Dysfunctions and Crime	447
Psychological and Psychiatric Perspectives on Criminality	449
Competence, Criminal Culpability, and the Insanity Defense	449
<i>M'Naghten</i> Rule	453

Irresistible Impulse	453
The <i>Durham</i> Rule	453
Diminished Capacity	454
Substantial Capacity Test	454
Assessing Dangerousness	454
Clinical Predictions	455
Actuarial Models	455
Mental Illness and Violent Crime	458
Personality Disorders and Crime	462
Integrated Developmental and Life-Course Theories of Violent Behavior	463
Conclusion	466
References	467
<b>Chapter 9 · Institutional and Structural Theories of Violence</b>	475
Historical Accounts of Varying Patterns and Rates of Violence	476
Mainstream Sociological Theories of Violence	479
Analysis of Demographic and Ecological Patterns	479
Routine Activities and Rational Choice Theories	482
Social Strain Theories and the American Dream	484
Differential Association and Social Learning Theories	487
Social Control and Social Bond Theories and the General Theory of Crime	489
Humanistic/Critical Theories of Violence	490
Defining Legitimate and Illegitimate Violence	491
The Political Economy and Violence	491
Violence and the Reproduction of Power Control	492
The Social Geometry of Conflict and Intensity of Violence	493
Structural Production of Violence and the Cycle of Violence, Suppression of Freedom, and Inequality	494
Conclusion	495
References	497
<b>Chapter 10 · Is Peace Possible?</b>	509
The Universal Quest for Peace	510
The Need for a Holistic Understanding of Violence	511
Violence as Sanctioned and Unsanctioned Harm	513
The Paradox of Peace and Violence	514
Promising Pathways to Peace	515
Restorative Justice	517
Comparison of Restorative Justice with Criminal Justice	518
Restorative Justice Approaches	523
Key Elements of Restorative Processes	525
Measures of Success	526
Conflict Resolution (CR)	527
The Ladder of Inference	529

Peacekeeping Criminology	530
Democracy, Human Rights, and Social Justice	531
Conclusion	534
References	534
<b>Index</b>	<b>543</b>

# List of Boxes, Images, Figures and Tables

<b>Chapter 1 · What Is the Meaning of Violence?</b>	3
Box 1.1 The Big Graph: Skyrocketing Incarceration Rate in U.S.	18
Box 1.2 The Rise of the Carceral State	24
Box 1.3 The Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994	27
Box 1.4 Sentencing Reform and Corrections Act of 2015	34
Box 1.5 Mass Incarceration in the U.S. — A Human Rights Violation	59
Figure 1.1 Cultural Rules and Their Violations	8
Figure 1.2 Gradual Declining Trend in U.S. Public Support of the Death Penalty	14
Figure 1.3 State-by-State Status of the Use of the Death Penalty in 2015	15
Figure 1.4 Global Death Penalty Trends	16
Figure 1.5 U.S. Violent Crime Rate and Public Perceptions of Crime Rate v. Year Ago	39
Figure 1.6 Perceived Seriousness of the U. S. Crime Problem	40
Figure 1.7 Perceived Seriousness of the Crime Problem in Americans' Local Areas	41
Figure 1.8 General Public Satisfaction with Current Conditions in the U.S.	42
Figure 1.9 Gun Ownership	65
Figure 1.10 Public Satisfaction with Gun Control Laws	65
Figure 1.11 Reasons Americans Own Guns	66
Image 1.1 President Obama tours the El Reno Federal Correction Institution in Oklahoma.	32
Image 1.2 Media shooter, Vester Lee Flanagan, using his phone camera to video his shooting of Alison Parker.	47
Image 1.3 Gun display at annual local gun show.	64
Table 1.1 Sample Lists of More Common and Less Common Acts Associated with Violence	5
Table 1.2 Internationally Recognized Human Rights	57
<b>Chapter 2 · The Measurement of Violence</b>	91
Box 2.1 UCR Definition of Violent Crimes	97
Box 2.2 NIBRS Crimes against Persons, Property and Society: Group A Offenses	101
Box 2.3 NIBRS Crimes against Persons, Property and Society: Group Incident Report	103

Box 2.4 Types of Data and Potential Sources for Collecting Violence Information	118
Figure 2.1 Expanded Homicide Data Figure	99
Figure 2.2 Behavioral and Health Consequences of Violence	131
Table 2.1 Violent Crimes in the U. S. by Volume and Rate per 100,000 Inhabitants, 1990–2014	106
Table 2.2 Theories on the Crime Decline (Based on Brennan Center Analysis)	109
Table 2.3 Violent Victimization by Type of Violent Crime 2005, 2013, and 2014	113
Table 2.4 2012 Self-Report Survey of Violent Activity of 14,343 High School Seniors	116
Table 2.5 Homicide Cause of Death — ICD Codes: E960–E969	119
Table 2.6 Global Homicide Statistics: Rate and Total Volume by Region for 2012	124
Table 2.7 Key Topics for International Comparability	127
<b>Chapter 3 · Who Are the Victims of Violence?</b>	141
Box 3.1 Legislation Assisting Victims of Crime	145
Box 3.2 Brains Are Built over Time, from the Bottom Up	158
Box 3.3 Louisiana Applies Hate-Crime Laws to First Responders	164
Image 3.1 Protestors seek recognition for bias crimes against the homeless and better protection.	159
Image 3.2 Deepwater Horizon oil rig burning.	167
<b>Chapter 4 · Interpersonal Violence</b>	185
Box 4.1 Anders Behring Breivik: Norway Mass Murderer	194
Box 4.2 California Zodiac Killer	195
Box 4.3 Intimate Partner Violence: I Ran Into the Door	216
Box 4.4 Child Abuse and Neglect: I Fell Out of My Cradle	220
Image 4.1 Jerry Sandusky.	200
Table 4.1 Violent Criminal Offenses on College and University Campuses 2009–2013	227
<b>Chapter 5 · Institutional Violence</b>	245
Box 5.1 The Most Dangerous Serial Corporate Killers	277
Box 5.2 Organizational Causes of Corporate Violence: Another Look at the Imperial Fire	285
<b>Chapter 6 · Collective and Group Violence</b>	321
Box 6.1 Occupy Wall Street	331
Box 6.2 New York’s Five Families	353
Box 6.3 El Narco — Inside Mexico’s Criminal Insurgency	358
Table 6.1 National, Regional, and Local Street Gangs	341

<b>Chapter 7 · Political/State Violence</b>	377
Box 7.1 International Criminal Court (ICC)	383
Box 7.2 Prehistoric Evidence of Violence	389
Image 7.1 The machine gun effectively put an end to cavalry charges in World War I.	391
Image 7.2 Infamous entrance building to the Auschwitz II (Birkenau) death camp in Oswiecim.	394
Image 7.3 Jewish Neighborhood of Paris: Infants murdered by the Nazis with the complicity of the Vichy government.	394
Image 7.4 Lethal Injection Gurney. The death chamber of the new lethal injection facility at San Quentin State prison in San Quentin, California, September 21, 2010.	402
<b>Chapter 8 · Interpersonal Theories of Violence</b>	439
Box 8.1 Governor Apologizes for Forced Sterilization: Virginia Eugenics Law Was One of 30 in U.S.	442
Box 8.2 The Nature-Nurture Debate, Redux	450
<b>Chapter 9 · Institutional and Structural Theories of Violence</b>	475
Table 9.1 Robert Merton's Typology of Adaptation	485
<b>Chapter 10 · Is Peace Possible?</b>	509
Box 10.1 Mohandas Gandhi	515
Box 10.2 Martin Luther King, Jr.	516
Figure 10. 1 Competencies for Democratic Citizenship	512
Figure 10.2 Ladder of Inference	529
Table 10.1 Ancient and Current Patterns of Response to Harm and Violations of the Law	518
Table 10.2 Contrasting Characteristics of Criminal Justice and Restorative Justice	520





# 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. Using the lens of the social scientific perspective and analytical tools, this book provides a broad, interdisciplinary understanding of the complexities and controversies/debates surrounding the problem of violence, especially in democratic societies, with special emphasis on the antithetical relationship between violence and democracy. This book not only examines the relationship between violence and the violation of democratic principles, such as human rights violations, but it also engenders the idea that a greater commitment to democratic values, including equality and freedom and the preservation of human rights as well as a demonstrative preference for non-violence, is arguably the most effective way to prevent and reduce violence. Drawing upon sociology, criminology, anthropology, psychology, political science, economics, and history as well as professional specialty areas including criminal justice, law, and public health, *Why Violence?* is designed to enhance appreciation for scientifically constructed knowledge and the application of critical thinking and analytical techniques in assessing various databases, theories of causation, social policies, and solutions related to violence. Special emphasis is given to social policies that are intended to prevent and control violence in democratic societies, paying particular attention to the underlying theoretical assumptions and their social justice and human rights implications. The relationship between science and social policy, as well as questions associated with the ethics and politics of scientific theory and research related to violence, are considered on state, national, and international levels, with careful attention given to the patterns of violence in democratic societies with respect to differential life chances, poverty, gender and racial inequality, and the consequences of changes taking place in the world.

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 expression. 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 categorize certain types of behavior and certain types of people or countries than from the ways it is applied to describe concrete phenomena. As a consequence, the concept is typically employed as a pejorative label or negative “summary symbol”

serving mainly as an intensifier of emotions or judgments which leads to mistrust or fear of others. Through its ubiquitous and ambiguous application, violence has become the quintessential metaphor that we all live by; that is, 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 and latent expressions of violence and the numerous ways in which violence is understood in contemporary society, ranging from common parlance, everyday perceptions and myths to governmental proclamations and 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 and victims, this book offers a broader consideration of violence extending beyond criminal violence at the interpersonal level to include discussions of violence at the institutional and structural levels.

The book begins with the question *Why Violence?* and ends with the question *Why not peace?* In addressing the leading questions about violence and ultimately peace, the book introduces readers to the complexities associated with violence and violence studies as well as with non-violence and peace studies and their implications for the future of democracy. State-of-the-art thinking and associated research/knowledge-base on violence and non-violence are discussed, providing a critical analysis of the interplay between popular questions of why there is a “disconnect” between the public’s understanding of violence and non-violence, including official responses to violence and peace and related scientific evidence.

Special thanks must be expressed to Rae Taylor, who has contributed to the chapter in this book that deals with victims of violence. We would also like to thank our many colleagues who have written on the topics of violence and peace and human rights 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 all at Carolina Academic Press for their support on this project.