

# Eight Types of Childhood Environments that Actually Produced Serial Killers Based on the Information in Lay Literature and on the Internet

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**Abstract:** Although there have been significant advances in the knowledge and understanding of serial murder, its exact etiology remains unknown. In particular, the effect of environmental influences is unclear. While some researchers stress the impossibility of predicting multiple murders from an understanding of early childhood events, others posit the importance of traumatic event(s) on the development of serial killers. However, even among those who have stressed on traumatic event(s), there are clear inconsistencies regarding the timing and types of such incident(s). This study investigates the childhood environments of 52 serial killers to see if there are any patterns that appear repeatedly among their environmental backgrounds and if so, when such factors have more damaging effects on the subjects. This preliminary research intentionally uses lay literature and Internet-based information that are normally overlooked by academic researchers

. **Keywords:** etiology of serial murder, development of serial killer, family environment, childhood background, environmental factors, pattern

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## 1. Introduction

A substantial sum of knowledge has been devoted to understanding the extreme form of violence known as serial murder. Among researchers, it is generally agreed that serial killers kill a minimum of three to four people over time [1]. Although there has been a steady increase in serious crimes committed by women, women still represent only about 5-8% of serial killers in the United States [2]. Thus, the

current orientation of criminological research, especially in homicide, focuses primarily on male criminality, a focus which is also partly supported by public perceptions [1].

Lee [3] differentiates between types of general murders according to motive. Those motives include profit, passion, hatred, power or domination, revenge, opportunism, fear, contract killing, desperation, compassion, and ritual. In a

similar manner, Holmes and DeBurger [4] identify four different types of serial killers according to their core characteristics: The *visionary* type is compelled to murder by God or the Devil, and could be psychotic; the *mission-oriented* type acts in order to rid the world of a specific type of person, such as homosexuals, prostitutes, or people of other ethnicities or religions; the *power or control* type gains and exerts power over victims through murder; and the *hedonistic* type derives pleasure from killing. This last type can be further classified into *lust-*, *thrill-*, or *comfort-* (*profit-*) oriented murderers [5].

## 2. Research Questions

Regarding the etiology of antisocial behaviors, an increasing number of recent studies have concluded that genetic or biological influences and their interactions with the environment are the key [6] [7]. However, regarding the environmental influences, there are some inconsistencies which need to be clarified. Fox and Levin [8] stress the impossibility of predicting multiple murders from an understanding of early childhood events, based on the fact that only a few of those who share common childhood traits actually become such killers. Holmes and Holmes [2] also maintain that the reasons behind antisocial behaviors are complex and not completely understood, and that until true understanding from the examination of the whole experience comes, no great strides can occur.

Hickey [1] posits the importance of traumatic event(s) that can gradually influence a person to kill. In his *trauma-control model*, Hickey hypothesizes that the subject experiences certain destabilizing event(s) “during the formative years” (p. 86). Hickey seems to include both abusive and neglectful factors in the destabilizing event(s), such as “unstable home life, death of parents, divorce, corporal punishments, sexual abuse, and other negative events” (p. 86), and considers rejection in an unstable, abusive home as being the most common. These unresolved traumas then lead to a deep sense of anxiety, mistrust, confusion, inadequacy, and self-doubt in the subject, which is suppressed to such an extent that it cannot be recalled

consciously. This suppressed experience will in time be split off within the subject, but will eventually surface unexpectedly.

Holmes, Tewksbury, and Holmes [9] try to further specify this developmental process in their *fractured identity syndrome*. However, they argue that one traumatic incident happens “in the adolescent years” (p. 267) that causes a small fissure in the subject’s personality, and following incidents cause that fissure to explode and fracture the personality. Holmes et al. say that before this happens, “[s]erial killers are much like everyone else during the primary years of personality development...and there was nothing in their early years that would have prepared them for the sequential predation that would occur later in their lives” (p. 267). They mention, as examples of the single traumatic incident that causes the fissure, unreasonable punishment for something the subject did not do and the discovery of the subject’s illegitimacy or adoption, insinuating that psychological abuse or shock is the key etiological element. They further state that these subjects can also recall the painful social event that made them feel that the subsequent homicide would be acceptable. Holmes et al. also emphasize the importance of the timing of the initial fracturing event and the sequence of events that followed.

Especially between Hickey [1] and Holmes et al. (1999), who hypothesize the importance of traumatic incident(s) in the development of serial murder personalities, there are clear inconsistencies regarding the timing and types of such incident(s). However, it is proven that various child maltreatments have different effects on the development of a child’s personality. Neglect, physical abuse, and psychological abuse each have a distinct psychological effect on a child’s development. Although physical abuse produces aggression toward others, psychological attacks and criticism from the parents appear to be specifically associated with low self-evaluation [10]. Neglect, on the other hand, is associated with even more severe cognitive and academic deficits—social withdrawal, limited peer

acceptance, and internalizing problems—than physical abuse [11]. Regarding the timing of the traumatic incident, Hickey [1] uses the phrase *formative years* while Holmes et al. [9] uses *adolescent years*. While Hickey states that “[f]or the offender, this cycle of trauma and quest for regaining control can be generated at a very early age” (p. 88), Holmes et al. give examples in which such incidents happened at ages eight, nine, and 13. Although they could generally mean the same age range, Hickey seems to mean younger ages than Holmes et al. There are serial killers who actually started showing their aggression at even younger ages than the researchers suggest. For example, Ted Bundy surrounded his aunt with knives at the age of three when she was taking a nap [12]. William Heirens playfully shut a dog up in an unlit oven and locked his mother in the pantry at age two [13]. It seems important to clarify what types of environmental factors are critical in causing serial murder and when those factors have more damaging effects on the subjects.

Children are known to develop a cognitive framework called an *internal working model* around the age of three [14] [15], and a child’s later interaction with others is guided by memories and expectations from this internal working model [16]. Thus, this paper attempts to discover certain patterns among serial killers’ backgrounds, especially during their early childhood.

### 3. Data Source

However, in general, data on homicide offenders are not freely available, and datasets are mainly derived from news archives [8] [17]. Such information does not necessarily cover the offenders’ upbringings. Especially for serial murders, there are no official data sources for assessing prevalence or patterns, and depending on the authority one chooses to read, the typologies of the murders often differ, some using causation while others are diagnostic in nature [18] [19]. In addition, family problems are not directly perceptible by traditional measures [20], and serial killers are notorious for not telling the truth [21]. These are part of why research into serial killers’ backgrounds is stagnant [2].

Normally, lay literature and internet sources are considered unreliable for academic research. While acknowledging the lesser credibility of information from lay literature and the internet, if a wide range of less credible information is combined and compared to find commonalities, there still is a possibility that irregular or exceptional outliers would fall off and only the common information would remain. In the current situation, in which obtaining official records for a wide range of serial killers’ backgrounds is next to impossible, such research could still serve as a pilot work that may stimulate further research.

### 4. Methodology

In this study, the childhood environments of 52 serial killers were looked into to see if there are any patterns that appear repeatedly among their environmental backgrounds. The information used in this preliminary research was based on what could be obtained from lay literature on true crimes and internet sites such as *Murderpedia*, *Crime Library on truTV*, *Wikipedia*, *radford.edu*, and *YouTube*, which contain as much inside information as can be considered helpful in knowing exactly what happened during the early lives of the subjects. The subjects that were chosen for this study included only those with ample background information available from those two types of sources. As a result, most of the included cases turned out to be the ones that once caused a sensation in the news. Since this research is qualitative, to look into too many cases would prevent a careful examination of each case. At the same time, too few cases could not produce reliable commonalities. Thus, the number of cases to look into was originally set at around 50 without any special conditions on the selection of subjects.

Qualitative content analysis was used to analyze the collected data. Due to the preliminary nature of this research, any specific assumptions were not set in advance, as is the case with deductive qualitative analysis [22] [23] [24]. We first extracted sufficient information pertaining to each of the serial killer subjects’ childhood backgrounds from lay literature and online sources. Outstanding

environmental features that characterized each case were underlined. They were then condensed by deleting all unnecessary words and paraphrased into a short form. These short forms were transcribed on a coded sheet and common categories were generated. These categories were then applied to the rest of the cases and revised, when necessary, to assure intercoder consistency. Finally, we attempted to place all the subjects into one category that we considered to best represent their childhood environment after a full comparison to similar cases of other subjects.

### 5. Results

The results of our research and categorization are shown in the table below. Some types which clearly involve clear specific factors are divided into sub-features. Although we attempted to focus on the one most outstanding environmental feature for each subject, when a subject clearly belonged in more than one category, the name was also placed under the secondary feature and parenthesized. The parenthesized numbers indicate the age at which the single traumatic event occurred. The types of these events were briefly described in parentheses in *Note*.

**Table 1**

<i>Eight Types of Childhood Environments that Produced Serial Killers</i> <b>Type #</b>	<u>Outstanding Environmental Feature</u>	<u>Subjects in Category</u>
<b>Type 1</b>	Aggression/ domination from mother	Andrei Chikatilo, Angelo Buono, Edmond Kemper, Dennis Rader, Rodney Alcala, Tommy Lynn Sells, Gary Ridgway, (Chester Turner), (Paul Bernardo) Ed Gein, Randy Kraft, William Heirens, Michael Swango, Harold Shipman, (Charles Albright), (Kenneth Bianchi), (Leonard Lake), Sakakibara Seito Henry Lee Lucas, Ottis Toole
	1) Stress from anger-prone/overbearing mother <sup>a</sup>	Paul Bernardo, Albert De Salvo, Charles Ng, Danny Rolling, John Wayne Gacy, Robert Hansen, Richard Ramirez, (Ted Bundy), (Donald Gaskins), (Cary
	2) Denial of identity/male sexuality by fixed idea/complete domination/excessive interference <sup>b</sup>	
	3) Mixture of the previous features	
<b>Type 2</b>	Abuse/home terrorization by father/father figure	

		Stayner), (Joel Rifkin), Suzuka Hatakeyama, (Naohide), (Kiyotaka Katsuta)
<b>Type 3</b>	Hostilities from both parents	Richard Chase, Hadden Clark, Gerard Schaefer, (Robert Black), (Gerald Stano)
<b>Type 4</b>	Bully at school	David Parker Ray, Donald Gaskins
<b>Type 5</b>	Abuse at orphanage/institution	Albert Fish, Anatoly Onoprienko, William Bonin
		Dean Corll (7), Coral Eugene Watts (8), Robert Yates (6),
<b>Type 6</b>	Neglect + $\alpha^c$	Donald Harvey (4), Dennis Nilsen (6), Leonard Lake, Issei Sagawa (1), Tsutomu Miyazaki
	<sup>d</sup> Deprived of basic care after birth	Jeffrey Dahmer (4), Ted Bundy, Cary Stayner, Naohide
<b>Type 7</b>	Adoption + $\alpha^c$	David Berkowitz (7), Kenneth Bianchi, Joel Rifkin, Charles Albright
	<sup>d</sup> Deprived of basic care after birth	Gerald Stano, Robert Black
<b>Type 8</b>	Neglect + $\alpha$ with friends <sup>e</sup>	Chester Turner, Miyoko Sumida, Kiyotaka Katsuta

*Note.* Andrei Chikatilo and Anatoly Onoprienko are Russian, Robert Black and Harold Shipman British, Paul Bernardo Canadian, and Charles Ng Chinese. Miyoko Sumida, Suzuka Hatakeyama, Naohide, Sakakibara Seito, Kiyotaka Katsuta, Issei Sagawa, and Tsutomu Miyazaki are all Japanese. Naohide and Sakakibara Seito, having been still minor at the time of their offenses, are nicknames. Among all subjects, only Miyoko Sumida and Suzuka Hatakeyama are female.

<sup>a</sup>The anger-prone/overbearing mother is a hysterical/volatile character.

<sup>b</sup>The denial of identity/male sexuality from a mother is a rigid character, exemplified by the mother denying all women other than herself, forcing the subject to wear female clothing, and/or calling him by a female name. The anger-prone/overbearing and the denial of identity/male sexuality could overlap.

<sup>c</sup>Neglect +  $\alpha$  and Adoption +  $\alpha$  means there was a trauma in addition to neglect or adoption. Each event was:

Dean Corll (rheumatic fever), Coral Eugene Watts (meningitis), Robert Yates (sexual abuse), Donald Harvey (sexual abuse), Dennis Nilsen (death of grandfather), *Issei Sagawa (peritonitis)*, Jeffrey Dahmer (hernia), David Berkowitz (announcement of adoption).

<sup>d</sup>Deprived of basic care after birth was placed separately under Neglect +  $\alpha$  and Adoption +  $\alpha$  due to its much greater effect over ordinary neglect that occurred after the postnatal stage [25] [26].

<sup>e</sup>Neglect +  $\alpha$  with access to outside friends was separated from Neglect +  $\alpha$  while confined to the family because of its unique offense pattern, in which the subjects repeated their murderous acts in spite of their guilty feelings after each incident.

## 6. Discussion

As seen in Table 1, eight types of environmental features emerged from the examination of the childhoods of 52 serial killer subjects. Against what both Hickey [1] and Holmes et al. [9] hypothesized, the single traumatic event types covered only part of the cases and the repetitive trauma types covered more cases. These single traumatic events happened between the ages of one and eight following neglect, adoption, and other types of traumas, which began much earlier than the specific events. According to Terr [27], traumas are divided into two types: one caused by a single event (*Type I trauma*), and the other caused by a long-standing repetitive ordeal (*Type II trauma*). Thus, 46 of the 52 serial murderers in this study experienced Type II traumas. All 52 serial killers had one or more factors from their childhood that implanted in them the seeds of their later aggressive acts. Even if they were neglected at some point, there were always certain abusive factor(s) confirmed. This seems to indicate that they were under abusive, not neglectful, conditions. Lange and DeWitt [28] conducted a worldwide study of 165 motiveless murders from 1600 to the present. In their research, they point out that the reason only a handful of people develop into serial killers is because of neurological malfunctioning resulting from head injuries, epilepsy, or deep temporal-lobe spiking, which can lead to seizures and later compulsive autonomic behavior. However, among our 52 subjects, the number of those who clearly shared such features were minor: Berkowitz, Ramirez, Bianchi, Harvey, and Heirens.

It is inconclusive at this point whether the claim by Fox and

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Levin [8] that only few of those who share common environmental traits actually become serial killers is true. Still, there is a possibility that the traumatic environmental factors either occurred during very early childhood when the subjects' personalities were not yet firmly established, were at higher damaging levels than what ordinary people experience, or were highly consistent within the family circumstances in which they were confined throughout their childhood. Considering that all the Type II traumas in this study were the results of parental dispositions and had likely been consistent since the subjects' births, it is possible that most of those who developed a serial murder personality were under each adverse condition before the age four. This seems consistent with the age when an internal working model is established, as proposed by Bowlby [14].

As was mentioned, this research was utterly preliminary in nature, with its information based on lay literature and the internet, which are not used in academic research. However, the fact that some clear factors surfaced from the childhood environments of our 52 subjects based on only unofficial information suggests that there is a possibility that similar, more reliable patterns could be found based on more official information. Thus, such studies are highly recommended. It also seems promising to compare the backgrounds of those who committed serial murders and those who did not after experiencing apparently similar environmental conditions, including the age differences for when the traumatic conditions began. A careful examinations of a limited number of such subjects might be a more effective method of finding their distinctions.

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