



**Killer Kids:  
What Makes Children Kill and How Do We Handle It?**

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This curriculum unit is recommended for Advanced Forensic Science, Honors Forensic Science, Psychology, AP Psychology

**Keywords:** juvenile, youth, children, killer, psychopath, sociopath, youth violence, amygdala, hippocampus, murder, life without parole, adult, court

**Teaching Standards:** See [Appendix 1](#) for teaching standards addressed in this unit.

**Synopsis:** This unit first defines juvenile versus adult offenders and then investigates reasons why children become killers. Familial and societal influences are studied and then physiological and psychological factors are considered. The unit has students attempt to create a profile of a “typical” child killer. The unit subsequently analyzes how children are treated in the criminal court systems of the United States and other countries to come to a better understanding of responses to violent juvenile offenders. Students make judgements about how child killers should be handled within the legal system. The unit concludes by studying the common characteristics of some school shooters with an eye toward developing an action plan if those characteristics are observed in students’ lives. Student learning is assessed through class debates, individual position papers and class discussions.

*I plan to teach this unit during the coming year to forty-seven students in Advanced Forensic Science (12<sup>th</sup> grade).*

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# **Killer Kids: What Makes Children Kill and How Do We Handle It?**

*Jackie Smith*

## **Introduction**

### **Rationale**

The threat of youths who kill is becoming an ever-present part of students' lives. They hear about school shootings on the news on an increasingly frequent basis. Schools conduct active shooter drills. Students have to sit in class and ponder whether they would run, hide or fight if faced with school violence. Violence is expressed for real at home or in videos and games on the internet. The nightly news is full of violence locally, nationally and around the world. But why do children kill? Is it their social background? Are they born violent? Is it some deficit in parenting that leads to children killing? Students need to understand the causes of this violence and what they can do to prevent or mitigate it.

This curriculum unit is part of a unit on Forensic Psychology for our Advanced Forensic Science course. It looks specifically at killers under the age of eighteen. Students will study factors that contribute to turning children into killers. They will evaluate the way the legal systems of various nations deal with youths who kill and to what success. Ultimately, they will develop a safety plan that includes warning signs of pending violence and action steps to take when faced with such a situation. While expanding students' knowledge about criminal psychology, this unit will also contribute to students' sense of empowerment, equipping them with knowledge and skills that can be put to practical use in their daily lives.

### **Demographics**

William Amos Hough High School is a large suburban high school of over 2500 students located in the small town of Cornelius, North Carolina just north of Charlotte. We opened our doors in 2010 to serve the northern part of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School District. Eighty-four percent of our graduates go on to either two- or four-year colleges while 16% join the military. Twenty-six percent of our students are minorities and 18% are free or reduced lunch students. Honors Forensic Science classes average 35 students during the 2019-2020 school year. Advanced Forensic Science classes are smaller with an average of 23 students per class. During the 2019-2020 year, forensic courses have enrolled students whose native languages are Albanian, Korean and Spanish in addition to English.

We offer a comprehensive college preparatory program in the arts and sciences. Classes are taught at the Standard and Honors levels and we offer 26 Advanced Placement courses in collaboration with the College Board. Students may explore their interest in the sciences through electives. We offer Honors Forensic Science and Honors Advanced Forensic Science to meet that need. With the overwhelming popularity of forensics in pop culture, these courses grab students' interest while teaching them valuable lab skills and critical thinking. The first-level course covers many of the basic areas of forensics such as crime scene processing, DNA

analysis, blood spatter analysis, footprint analysis and toxicology. The second-level course builds on some of the basic materials but extends them further and includes new topics such as Interviewing and Interrogation, Accident Reconstruction, Counterfeiting and Art Forgery. Honors Forensic Science is a pre-requisite for Advanced Forensic Science.

## Unit Goals

I have three main goals for this unit. First, I want students to explore the reasons children kill. Every year in the United States there are between 600 and 1200 murders committed by youths under the age of 18 at the time of the crime. Students will evaluate crime statistics to look for trends in youths committing murder. Students will seek to answer the question of why children kill by dissecting readings to develop an understanding of the backgrounds of young killers. They will use this information to develop a theory of why children kill. They will learn different ways to classify youth murderers using the circumstances of the event such as whether the killing was a result of a psychotic break in the child or whether the killing was the result of ongoing conflict with another individual. They will evaluate the “Nature vs. Nurture” argument to determine how each contributes to making children kill and study the changes in the brains of killers versus non-violent criminals. Students will learn about the monoamine oxidase A gene, the so-called “warrior” gene, and its’ effect on people who have it. Students will develop their analytical and critical thinking skills and their ability to take and defend a position.

Next, I want students to evaluate the way the legal system treats juveniles in this country compared to other countries. In the United States, we address the issue of juvenile homicide largely by treating youths the same as adults in the criminal courts system. In fact, if the crime is serious enough, we put children as young as 10 directly into the adult court system where we try them as we would any adult with no differentiation for their age or stage of development. In North Carolina, until December 1, 2019, every person aged 16 or older was treated as an adult for criminal court purposes. That means most of my students who are juniors and seniors would be in adult jails and adult court if they ever ran afoul of the law. That comes as a shock to most of them! As part of their look at the legal system, students will evaluate the way several other countries including Sweden, Scotland and Jamaica handle youths who kill and suggest ways that the U.S. system could improve its’ treatment of juveniles in criminal court.

Finally, I want students to develop practical, proactive strategies they can implement in their daily lives that have the potential to lessen the impetus to kill. Students will examine several school shooting cases and profile the killers. Students should find commonalities in the cases, such as the fact that most school shooters told someone about their plans before they carried out their attacks. Students should be aware of some of the factors that go into making a child killer, especially the ones they have some control over, such as isolation from peers. From this, they will develop an action plan to become more aware of their fellow students and to know what to do if they ever suspect trouble.

## Content Research

### Why Children Kill

To begin looking at child killers, we need to define some terms. “Juvenile” is a legal status set by legislatures.<sup>1</sup> In most states juvenile means anyone under 18 years of age. In North Carolina, until December 2019, juvenile meant under 16 years of age. Federal courts define a juvenile as anyone aged 17 or younger. The term “adolescent,” on the other hand, is a psychological term referring to development.<sup>2</sup> Adolescence can vary from person to person. The term “children” is generally applied to prepubescent persons.<sup>3</sup> “Youths” is a term that encompasses juveniles and adolescents.<sup>4</sup>

There is a surprising lack of current research on juvenile killers. A lot of work was done in the 1990’s when there was a huge spike in the number of people under the age of 18 who were charged with murder.<sup>5</sup> In 1986, the number of juveniles charged with murder was 1,255.<sup>6</sup> A decade later, in 1995, the number had jumped to 2,383, a 90% increase.<sup>7</sup> By the 2000’s, the number of juveniles charged with murder had dropped back to 1980’s levels and since 2008, the number has not topped one thousand per year.<sup>8</sup> For a look at the breakdown of murders by age group over the past several decades, see Appendix 2.

Several general characteristics emerge for youth killers. They tend to be male and a majority of young killers live in cities. They are likely to have experienced or witnessed violence in the home. They are unlikely to do well in school although they are not less intelligent than their peers. They come from all levels of wealth/poverty. Their victims come from all age ranges. When girls kill, they tend to kill people they know, such as family members, whereas boys are more likely to kill strangers. Girls are also more likely to use an accomplice, usually a male, and more likely to take a secondary role in the killing. The exception is unwed, pregnant females who kill their babies.<sup>9</sup>

Regarding mass murderers (those who kill 3 or more people in one continuous event), there are marked differences between adult and juvenile killers. Young killers are much more likely to be under the influence of some impairing substance when they kill than are adults. Children who kill are much more likely to know at least one of their victims than are adults who kill. Appendix 3 contains a table comparing more of the differences between juvenile and adult mass murderers.

When comparing groups of juvenile killers to groups of nonviolent juvenile offenders, four main differences become apparent.<sup>10</sup> First, young killers are more likely to come from criminally violent families. The violence may be witnessed, such as repeatedly seeing dad beating up mom, or it may be directed at the child themselves. Second, the killer group is more likely to be involved in gangs than the nonviolent group. Peer pressure during the teen years is as strong a motivator as anything else. Third, the youth killers are significantly more likely to suffer from severe educational deficits. The majority of violent youthful offenders were not attending school at the time of their crimes. Fourth, the violent group is much more likely to abuse alcohol. Additional studies have shown that juvenile killers are more likely to be cruel to animals, to start drinking at a younger age and to have been physically abused than their nonviolent juvenile counterparts.<sup>11</sup>

Studies conducted in the 1990's focused on the causes of youth killing. The results are mixed but there are several factors that seem to recur in young murderers. The majority of young killers suffer from some type of psychological disorder.<sup>12</sup> Depression is very common. Research shows that some young killers may suffer from brief psychotic breaks that spontaneously resolve after the incident.<sup>13</sup> There also seem to be personality and conduct disorders, such as oppositional-defiance disorder, that appear in some youth.<sup>14</sup>

Neuroimpairment is one possible factor in youth killings. Severe brain injury, seizure disorders or abnormal EEG (brain wave) findings can indicate neuroimpairment.<sup>15</sup> Evidence that this is a factor in turning youths into killers is available but scant. While there is consensus that very few young killers are mentally retarded, there are mixed results as to whether they are below or above average intelligence.<sup>16</sup> Most studies agree that regardless of intellectual ability, most juvenile killers do poorly in school and engage in disruptive behavior in class.<sup>17</sup>

Home environment seems to play a huge role in developing young killers. The majority of these youths are from broken homes. They have typically witnessed one parent abusing the other and have often been abused themselves.<sup>18</sup> When youths kill their parents, especially their fathers and stepfathers, findings of child abuse and parental chemical dependency are common.<sup>19</sup> Substance abuse by the killer also presents as a factor. In 1990, more than 45% of young killers abused alcohol and half of all juvenile murderers were substance dependent.<sup>20</sup>

Young killers typically engage in several types of deviant behavior before they commit their first homicide. They may have a prior arrest record or a history of criminal behavior. Those prior bad acts may or may not have been violent in nature. Significant numbers of juvenile killers do not attend school regularly due to dropping out or expulsion. They may have a history of bedwetting and difficulty relating to their peers. Many have a history of running away from home. According to a policy brief by The Sentencing Project, an organization that works for reforms to the U.S. criminal justice system,<sup>21</sup> 79% of juveniles sentenced to life without the possibility of parole for murder witnessed violence in their homes on a regular basis.<sup>22</sup> Eighty percent of juvenile girls sentenced to life without parole were physically abused.<sup>23</sup> Less than half of juveniles sentenced to life without parole were in school at the time of their offense.<sup>24</sup>

Killings committed by juveniles can be categorized by the circumstances surrounding the offense. The first category is psychotic.<sup>25</sup> It is characterized by severe mental illness such as delusions or hallucinations. Very few youth killings fall into this category but they are the most sensational. The case of Mary Bell is one that fits this description. Mary was the child of a prostitute mother in England who repeatedly tried to kill her as a young child. One of the attempts – when Mary “fell” from a window – resulted in damage to her pre-frontal cortex, the brain’s decision-making center. Mary was also subjected to sexual abuse from the age of four by her mother’s clients. She was later diagnosed by a court-appointed psychiatrist as suffering from psychopathy – a mental disorder in which an individual manifests amoral and antisocial behavior, a lack of ability to love or establish meaningful personal relationships as well as exhibits extreme egocentricity.<sup>26</sup> When she was 10 years old, she strangled 4-year-old Martin Brown by herself. Two months later, she and a friend strangled 3-year-old Brian Howe. She was caught almost immediately and was sentenced to an indefinite term in prison. She was ultimately

released after serving 12 years in youth and adult prisons, having been determined to have paid her debt to society, and is currently living in England under an assumed name.

The second classification is conflict. These killings happen when the youth is engaged in an argument or dispute with the victim when the killing occurs.<sup>27</sup> Rage and impulse control issues lead to unplanned but tragic results. In June 2019, at a graduation party in Charlotte, two young men got into an argument. One youth pulled out a gun and began shooting at which time a second youth pulled out another gun and also began shooting. One person died and three others were injured. Charlotte police say more and more young people are trying to resolve disputes with guns.<sup>28</sup> As of August 2019, 6 out of 56 people arrested in Charlotte for homicide this year have been aged 14-17. Last year, 22% of all homicide arrests were of youths under 18 years old.<sup>29</sup>

The third classification is crime. These are murders committed during the course of another crime, such as an armed robbery or rape.<sup>30</sup> They may be planned or unplanned. Recently, in Dearborn, Michigan, three teens aged 13, 14 and 17 went on an armed robbery spree. After robbing several persons, they shot and killed a 29-year-old woman in her car while attempting to rob her. The 14-year-old suspect was wearing an ankle monitor from a previous crime, which is how the police were able to place the suspects at the scene of the crime so quickly.<sup>31</sup>

There may also be physical changes in the brains of some people that make them more susceptible to committing violence. Research has been conducted into the human brain to determine if there are physiological differences in the brains of children exposed to violence in their homes and neighborhoods as opposed to those raised in less violent circumstances. Two areas of the brain have shown significant changes with the presence of violent surroundings. The hippocampus is a curved structure that plays a role in learning and memory.<sup>32</sup> The amygdala is an almond-shaped structure involved in the regulation of emotions and threat-processing.<sup>33</sup> Several studies have shown that in youths exposed to community violence, these structures are smaller than in their peers.<sup>34</sup> A working theory is that kids who experience high levels of violence in their lives are always on alert, in fight-or-flight mode, which depletes the ability of these brain structures to accurately process threats and may result in these kids reacting more violently than they might have otherwise. Much more research needs to be done to study the impact of these structures being smaller and whether that can be directly tied to youth violence.

There is a relationship between the experience of violence and turning into a killer. This is borne out by very interesting research into the brains of psychopaths by a man who performed a fascinating experiment. Jim Fallon, a neuroscientist, was told by his mother that if he was interested in the brains of killers, he should study his own family, as they had several alleged killers in their lineage, including Lizzie Borden. Fallon studied PET scans of 10 relatives' brains as well as his own. All of the scans were normal – except his. His scan showed little to no activity in the area of the orbital cortex. The orbital cortex is involved in regulating ethical behavior, moral decision-making and impulse control.<sup>35</sup> It also controls the amygdala, which is involved in aggression. His scans of criminal psychopaths also showed little to no activity in this area.

Fallon also demonstrated the connection between the MAO-A gene and violence in criminals. He studied the DNA of his family members, focusing on one particular gene – monoamine oxidase A (MAO-A), also known as the “warrior” gene. In a normal person, serotonin is released in the brain and has a calming effect when the brain is over stimulated. The MAO-A gene interferes with the brain’s response to serotonin and the brain does not experience the calming effect.<sup>36</sup> He found that while all of his relatives had a normal MAO-A gene, his was the version that did not process serotonin.

So why isn’t Jim Fallon a serial killer? His theory is that it takes a third factor, combined with the lack of activity in the orbital cortex and the warrior gene to make a violent individual. He believes violence or abuse in childhood is necessary to “activate” these other factors and turn a person into a killer.<sup>37</sup> Fallon had a very loving childhood and formed close relationships with family members. He believes this is why he is not a killer. He studies the brains and DNA of criminals locked up for violent crimes and finds that childhood violence played a role in their lives. He believes it is this violence that activates the negative effects of the orbital cortex and MAO-A gene.<sup>38</sup> This conclusion correlates with accepted theories that witnessing violence, or being subject to violence, plays a role in who becomes a killer.

### The Juvenile Justice System

It is understood that the adolescent brain is still developing.<sup>39</sup> It is also known that the adolescent brain matures at different rates in different individuals. This creates problems when the criminal justice system wants to treat 10- to 17-year-olds as adults. Most are not fully developed at that age, yet the court system treats them as if they are full-fledged adults. In North Carolina, until December 2019, the age of adulthood for criminal court purposes was 16 years old. At the same time, most states recognize that juveniles are not the same as adults in other contexts. Juveniles cannot vote, serve on juries, buy cigarettes or alcohol or get married without parental consent. Juveniles cannot form contracts. They typically cannot even get an unrestricted driver’s license. Only in the criminal justice system are juveniles considered capable of adult reasoning and behavior.

In the United States criminal justice system, youths are frequently treated the same as adults for serious crimes including murder, although research suggests that transferring children to adult court neither reduces the juvenile crime rate nor prevents recidivism.<sup>40</sup> In Texas, a 12-year-old boy broke into the home of a professional boxer and shot him to death. The boy is being tried for capital murder.<sup>41</sup> In Pennsylvania, a 10-year-old boy beat a woman to death and is tried as an adult.<sup>42</sup> In Wisconsin, a 10-year-old girl dropped a baby on its head and stomped on it to quiet it. She is being tried for first-degree murder as an adult.<sup>43</sup> The United States is one of the only countries in the world to try juveniles as young as 10 as adults.

The ability of prosecutors in some states and judges in other states to determine whether a case is adjudicated in juvenile or adult court results in rampant racial bias. While only 26% of youths arrested are African-American, they make up 58% of the youths sent to state prisons.<sup>44</sup> More than 50% of juveniles in state prisons were there for lower-level property and drug crimes while only 14% of youths in juvenile facilities were incarcerated for violent felonies.

The majority of youths in custody in the U.S. were detained in adult jails, even when authorities had discretion over where to detain them. In adult jails, youths are five times as likely to be raped as in a juvenile facility, twice as likely to be beaten by the guards and 50% more likely to be attacked with a weapon.<sup>45</sup> Youths whose cases are transferred to adult court are twice as likely to reoffend as youths whose cases remain in juvenile court.

Over the last several years, Courts have taken some steps towards recognizing that juveniles are not the same as adults in terms of criminal responsibility. In 2005, the United State Supreme Court in the case of *Roper v. Simmons*,<sup>46</sup> held that juveniles cannot be sentenced to death. They stated that the death penalty is a disproportionate sentence for juveniles as their immaturity diminishes their culpability, they are very susceptible to outside influences and they have an increased capacity for reform given their young ages. From the time the death penalty was reinstated in the U.S. in 1976 to when *Roper* was decided in 2005, 22 people were put to death for crimes committed as juveniles.<sup>47</sup>

In 2010, in the case of *Graham v. Florida*,<sup>48</sup> the Court banned the use of life without parole for juveniles not convicted of homicide. They stated that the most serious punishments should be reserved for the most serious crimes and noted that life without parole for a 75-year-old and a 16-year-old are not equivalent sentences.

In *Miller v. Alabama*,<sup>49</sup> decided in 2012, the Court banned mandatory life without parole sentenced for juveniles. Justice Kagan wrote that judges must be able to take into account the individual circumstances of each juvenile in order to craft a fair and just sentence. Juveniles can still be sentenced to life without parole for homicide, but it must be done on a case-by-case basis.

Finally, in 2016, the Court in *Montgomery v. Louisiana*<sup>50</sup> held that their ruling in *Miller* was retroactive to the approximately 2100 people who were issued mandatory life without parole sentences for crimes committed as juveniles. Those people were allowed parole hearings to determine if release was appropriate in their cases. The bottom line of this string of cases was stated by Justice Kennedy in *Montgomery*: “children are constitutionally different from adults in their level of culpability.”<sup>51</sup>

Other countries recognize that children are developmentally different from adults in all respects and hold a much different standard for the treatment of children involved with the law. In Sweden, for example, different legal rules are applied for children under 15 years of age, youths 15-17 years old, young adults 18-21 years old and adults over 21 years of age. There are two concurrent systems involved with youth, the social welfare system and the criminal justice system. The younger the child, the more the balance tilts towards the social welfare end of the spectrum with the standard of what is in the best interest of the child taking priority over the punitive objectives of the criminal justice system.

Scotland holds “children’s hearings” to determine disposition of cases involving minors. The hearing panel is made up of citizens of various backgrounds from the community and the aim is always reintegration of the child back into society. Even for serious crimes, which may be tried in adult criminal court, the case is generally remanded back to a children’s hearing for sentencing with the thinking being that the community knows best what the child needs. The citizen’s panel



reviews the child's case every 12 months to determine what progress the child has made and what should happen next. The standard for every decision made in the process is the best interest of the child, rather than punishment or retribution.<sup>52</sup>

Under Jamaican law, youths who are arrested, must be protected from the adult jail population. Upon a sentence of incarceration, youth are sent to special juvenile corrections facilities, which are more like homes where the children are free to grow and learn.<sup>53</sup>

## School Shootings

School shootings have become a reality for today's high school students. In less than five years (2015 through August 2019), there have been 58 shootings at high schools resulting in 49 dead and 136 wounded.<sup>54</sup> Those numbers do not include the numerous shootings at elementary and middle schools nor the multiple shootings on college campuses.

Two of the most infamous high school shooting are those at Columbine High School in Columbine, CO and Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland Florida. Before profiling those killers, it is necessary to define the differences between a sociopath and a psychopath. A sociopath is a person who has antisocial personality disorder. Before the age of 15, the person must exhibit traits such as:<sup>55</sup>

- Repeated violations of the law
- Pervasive lying and deception
- Physical aggressiveness
- Reckless disregard for the safety of self or others
- Consistent irresponsibility in work or home environments
- Lack of remorse

Psychopathy is considered a more severe form of sociopathy and may include the following traits:<sup>56</sup>

- Lack of guilt or remorse
- Lack of empathy
- Lack of deep emotional attachments
- Narcissism
- Superficial charm
- Dishonesty
- Manipulativeness
- Reckless risk-taking

A psychopath may present him or herself to society as charming but callous. They will appear to be organized in their thoughts and behaviors. They are able to maintain control over their emotions, responses and behaviors. A psychopath does not experience emotions as most other people do and is therefore not capable of feeling remorse, even if the victim was a friend or family member. A sociopath, on the other hand, will appear to be disorganized in their thinking and actions. They are easily agitated. They may feel remorse for their actions if they had some type of bond with their victim.

Eric Harris exemplifies the definition of a psychopath. He and his friend, Dylan Klebold, planned the events of April 20, 1999 at Columbine High School for over a year. It was supposed to be a bombing event and then the boys would shoot survivors who attempted to flee the scene. They planned to detonate additional bombs in the parking lot of the school as first responders and news crews arrived to maximize their death toll and to cause “the most deaths in the U.S.”<sup>57</sup> Their goal was to “create a nightmare so devastating and apocalyptic that the entire world would shudder at their power.”<sup>58</sup> As it turned out, the timers on their bombs did not work and none of the bombs detonated. The two boys were able to shoot 12 students and one teacher before taking their own lives.<sup>59</sup>

Klebold exemplified the classic sociopath. He was a hotheaded kid who was going through a period of depression. He was even suicidal at times. He had been in trouble with the law before the events of Columbine. He exhibited disregard for his own safety and irresponsibility in his school and personal life.

Harris, on the other hand, exhibited classic symptoms of a pathological killer. He was cold, calculating and homicidal.<sup>60</sup> Harris left behind a diary filled with hateful messages directed at people he considered inferior to himself. He expressed total contempt for most people, especially ones he deemed less intelligent than himself, which was almost everyone. He had a strong superiority complex. Harris was a perpetual liar. He lied not just to stay out of trouble, but also for the pure pleasure of deceiving people. He exhibited a total lack of remorse and empathy.

The boys spent hours immersed in violent activities for years before the killings. They both came from middle- to upper-middle class homes and there is no evidence of violence between the parents of the boys. However, the boys had numerous guns, which they shot on a regular basis while creating elaborate violent fantasy situations. They became fascinated with Hitler and the violence he perpetrated, even saluting each other with the Nazi salute. They scoured right-wing militia websites for information on bomb making and mass killings. They enjoyed playing various violent video games as well.

Harris and Klebold were the perfect partners. Harris was the leader and Klebold the follower. When Klebold would get agitated, Harris calmed him down. Klebold provided the boost that Harris’ ego needed. They played off each other to hatch what was up to that point the worst school shooting in American history.

In Parkland, Florida, on Valentine’s Day 2018, seventeen students and teachers were killed by a lone gunman named Nikolas Cruz.<sup>61</sup> Cruz had shown warning signs of sociopathy for years. Since middle school, he was continually suspended from school for violent behavior in the classroom.<sup>62</sup> It was known that he liked to torture and kill animals. His teachers kept notes about his aberrant behavior including how he would get excited at the mention of guns, and would use his pencil as a gun and shoot around the classroom.<sup>63</sup> During his eighth-grade year, he actually asked another student how he was still allowed to be in mainstream middle school.<sup>64</sup>

After months of documenting his bad behavior, his teachers were given a “Positive Behavior Intervention Plan” for Nikolas, which included such nuggets of wisdom as “walk away and do not pay attention to his behavior” and “calmly let him know he has not followed one of the

expectations.”<sup>65</sup> Within weeks of this plan being implemented, Nikolas tried to commit suicide at school. This did nothing to get him into an alternative school that could handle someone with his special needs.

Finally, in February 2014, Nikolas was sent to a specialized school for students with behavior problems. He continued his fascination with and research of all things guns and war. The school psychiatrist and Nikolas’ school therapist informed his private psychiatrist that his behavior was aggressive in the classroom and that he destroyed property at school on many occasions. They stated that Nikolas dreamed of killing others and being covered in blood. <sup>66</sup> They told the private psychiatrist that Nikolas’ medications did not seem to be working.

By the fall, Nikolas’ behavior had calmed down somewhat so he was allowed to attend regular high school – Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. The school evaluation team recommended that Nikolas be allowed to take JROTC as he wished. Shortly thereafter, his JROTC instructors gave him an air gun shaped like an AR-15 and allowed him to practice shooting it.<sup>67</sup>

The Cruz’s adopted Nikolas and his brother as infants into what appears to be a loving middle-class family. Unfortunately, the boys lost their adoptive father at a very young age and then lost their mother when they were in high school. Nikolas frequently stayed with family friends who saw his struggles but were unable to help him.

Nikolas made videos of himself bragging about what he was going to do before the shooting. In the videos, he appears calm and even pleased with what he was about to do.<sup>68</sup> He shows no regard for the lives he is about to take. He exhibits a reckless disregard for the safety of others, physical aggressiveness, lack of remorse, repeated violations of the rules and consistent irresponsibility in his school environment, all classic signs of a sociopath. On the other hand, Nikolas does not show the manipulateness and superficial charm that would lead him to be classified as a psychopath. He made no attempts to mimic normal people’s feelings or to try to fit in with his peers. The fact that he is not classified as a psychopath is confirmed after his arrest when he falls apart and all of his bravado about the killings is gone. A true psychopath would not change like that and would continue to believe that they could manipulate the system.

## Conclusion

The overarching factor in determining whether a child becomes a killer appears to be the experience of violence in childhood. Whether the violence is physically directed at the child, the child witnesses violence in the home, or the violence is experienced through games and research, child killers have that common thread.

The most effective methods of dealing with child killers are those that recognize the developmental differences between a child and an adult. Countries that focus on treating minors as lacking adult insight and impulse control report lower recidivism rates than countries that try children as adults in the criminal justice system.

Children who commit school shootings exhibit signs before the act. They typically tell someone about their plans. There are also behavioral warning signs that should be heeded in an effort to head off another tragedy.

## **Instructional Strategies**

### Teaching strategies

This unit begins with showing students pictures of several young people and asking them to identify which are killers. This will lead to a general discussion of what makes child killers different from other children and what makes a child into a killer. We will examine what is different in children versus adults who kill. We will study several notorious cases to pull out elements that went into creating violent youth. We will look at research into physical changes in the brain of violent youths and the effect of genetics on the propensity towards violence. We will engage in a research-based “nature vs. nurture” debate.

Next, we will look at how the juvenile justice system handles killers under age eighteen. We will study several cases of youths being tried as adults and discuss the ethical and practical considerations in that practice. We will study the case law that has been established in recent years recognizing differences in child and adult killers and explore the effects of these cases on sentencing outcomes in court. We will look at how other countries treat children in their juvenile justice systems. Students will prepare a position and defend it on one of several issues in juvenile justice including trying youths as adults and sentencing youths to life without the possibility of parole.

Finally, we will bring all of this home to students by looking at some infamous school shootings. We will profile the killers in an attempt to find early warning signs that could have prevented the tragedies. Students will develop a plan to be aware of these factors in their daily lives and what to do if they encounter them.

### Classroom Lessons and Activities

#### *Lesson One*

Start by asking the class to define the age of adulthood. You should get different answers (eg. 18, 21, etc...) and different reasons. Use this discussion to define the terms adult, juvenile, child, and youth so that everyone has a common vocabulary to use for these lessons.

Next, project or pass around pictures of 4-8 children under the age of eighteen. Two to four of the pictures should be of child killers and the remaining pictures should be of kids who have had no involvement with the criminal justice system. You can use the pictures in Appendix 4 or find your own. Have the students study the pictures carefully. Ask them what they see. Write down student responses near each picture. Then ask them to identify which of the children are killers and which are not. Discuss the reasons behind their responses. This should lead into a discussion of the profile of the “typical” child killer. Assign small groups of students articles to read about the killers you just showed them.<sup>69</sup> In their groups, they should develop a profile of their killer,

focusing on factors in the child's life that led them to do what they did. Have the groups share and compare their results.

Then, show them case studies from each of the categories of juvenile killings: mental illness, conflict and crime. (See Appendix 5.) You may want to print and laminate the case cards. Again, working in small groups, have them develop a system to sort the cases into three categories. Have the groups share the different ways they categorized the cases. Discuss the categories of juvenile killings that researchers have used.

### *Lesson Two*

Show the TED Talk by Jim Fallon ([https://www.ted.com/speakers/jim\\_fallon](https://www.ted.com/speakers/jim_fallon)) where he discusses his brain research and findings as a way to introduce the topic of physical changes in the brain that play a role in people becoming killers. Have the students develop arguments for “nature” vs. “nurture” based on what they have learned so far and conduct a class debate. The proposition could be something like “the propensity to kill is present at birth and manifests as the child ages regardless of upbringing” or “the propensity to kill is solely a result of factors experienced in childhood and is not innate in children.”

### *Lesson Three*

Select readings from *Graham v. Alabama*, *Miller v. Florida* and *Montgomery v. Louisiana*. Have the students read excerpts from the original cases and analyze the Court's logic in reaching the decisions they did. Have them follow the evolution of the cases from banning life without parole (LWOP) sentences for non-homicide cases with juveniles, to banning mandatory LWOP for homicide cases with juveniles, to applying the ban on mandatory LWOP to people in jail already sentenced to LWOP.

Introduce them to how the courts treat juveniles who commit crimes in other countries. Look specifically at several cases of youths being tried as adults. Discuss the ethical and practical considerations that come into play in that situation. Have them select a country they are interested in and research how the juvenile justice system works in that country.

After learning about various systems, ask them what changes to the juvenile justice system they think should come next in the United States. Have them write a position paper defending their choice.

### *Lesson Four*

Teach the students the differences between a sociopath and a psychopath. Select several school shooting cases for which there is an abundance of information available about the shooters. Have students study the cases, looking for similarities and differences. Have them classify the killers as either a sociopath or a psychopath. Have them focus on the time before the killing, looking for visible warning signs that might have been noticed by someone. Have them develop a list of the most common warning signs that someone is contemplating committing a school shooting. Be

sure to discuss alternative, innocent explanations for these signs so that they do not become paranoid about everyone around them.

Once they have constructed a list of signs, have the students brainstorm actions they can take in the event they see any of these signs themselves. For example, many school shooters were loners. Students could suggest looking out for people eating lunch alone and asking them to join their group. Be sure to educate your students about the resources available to them in case someone makes them uncomfortable. Besides the school counselors, a trusted teacher or the school resource officer, our school offers the “Sources of Strength” program designed to promote all of the resources, internal and external, that students have available to them. The program is primarily aimed at suicide prevention, but finding sources of strength would apply equally well to troubled students who could be showing signs of an impending violent outburst. Students should finish this section with an action plan of what to do if they ever suspect someone is planning violence at their school. You should include the phone numbers to call if something happens outside of school hours.

### Assessments

Formal grades for this material can include the nature v. nurture debate and the position paper on changes to the U.S. juvenile justice system. Additionally, you can administer a test such as the one in Appendix 7 that covers material from the whole unit.

## **Appendix 1. Teaching Standards**

The following standards are from the Criminal Psychology Unit of the Advanced Forensic Science course offered in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools:

- Students will be able to discern psychological and/or familial factors that may cause, aggravate or mitigate criminal conduct; and
- Students will be able to differentiate between different types of murders and murderers; and
- Students will apply the profiling process to a case; and
- Students will be able to distinguish between sociopaths and psychopaths and apply their knowledge to infamous cases; and
- Students will be able to take and defend a position regarding issues related to criminal justice

## Appendix 2. Murder Arrests by Age Group

The FBI keeps arrest statistics for various crimes, including murder, and breaks that data down by age groups. The chart below shows what that data looks like over the past two decades.

Table 1. FBI Murder Arrest Data by Age Group

Year	2017	2015	2013	2011	2009	2007	2005	2003	2001
<b>Total</b>	17251	15326	14132	14548	15760	17040	17029	16043	15488
<b>&lt; 18</b>	803	667	595	695	923	1063	944	813	835
<b>1-4</b>	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>5-8</b>	1	2	3	1	1	0	0	1	0
<b>9-12</b>	7	9	11	14	10	10	11	12	14
<b>13-16</b>	405	341	288	327	465	542	467	432	454
<b>17-19</b>	1467	1263	1227	1487	1765	1966	1801	1585	1695
<b>20-24</b>	2519	2448	2496	2417	2682	2772	3016	2780	2767
<b>25-29</b>	2053	1814	1541	1649	1794	1891	1935	1641	1571
<b>30-34</b>	1465	1251	1131	1122	1123	1109	1090	1054	992
<b>35-39</b>	1662	840	701	745	800	811	873	800	855
<b>40-44</b>	754	594	564	604	602	680	700	713	645
<b>45-49</b>	566	449	477	521	562	540	586	471	455
<b>50-54</b>	421	453	415	448	402	371	330	277	272
<b>55-59</b>	335	278	230	227	215	231	200	166	158
<b>60-64</b>	179	149	140	148	145	130	100	94	85
<b>65-69</b>	93	88	104	72	72	75	78	66	59
<b>70-74</b>	53	52	43	50	42	26	43	44	37
<b>75+</b>	92	91	87	63	89	55	68	73	54

Data adapted from <https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s.>



### Appendix 3. Comparison of Adult and Juvenile Mass Murderers (1949-1999)<sup>69</sup>

Characteristic	Adults (age 19-59) n=30	Juveniles (age <19) n=34
Described as loners	94%	70%
History of substance abuse	10% (used alcohol before or during event)	62% (used substance before or during event)
Psychiatric History	50% (paranoid, schizophrenic, delusional, major depression)	63% (depression)
Psychotic	40%	6%
No direct threat to target beforehand	80%	42%
Precipitating event	90% (loss of job, bankruptcy, loss of relationship)	59% (loss of relationship, family dispute, school problems, bullying)
Offender survival rate	67% suicide or killed by police	14% suicide or killed by police
Relationship of victim to suspect	50% knew at least one of their victims	81% knew at least one of their victims

## Appendix 4. Opening Activity

### The Killers<sup>70</sup>

#### 1. Mary Bell



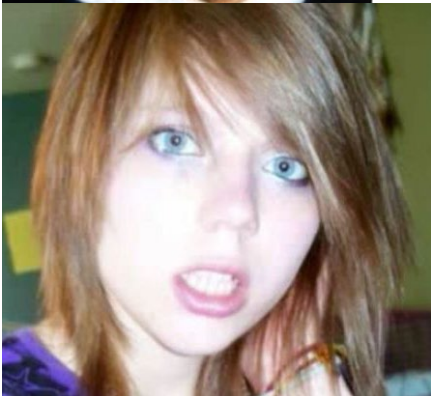
Mary Bell was 10 years-old when she strangled to death 4-year-old Martin Brown. A month later, she enticed a friend to help her strangle 3 year-old Brian Howe to death and carve her initials into his stomach. As a youngster, Mary's prostitute mother repeatedly tried to kill her and Mary was subject to sexual abuse from the age of four.

#### 2. Jon Venables



Jon Venables and Robert Thompson were 10 years-old when they beat 2 year-old James Bulger to death and left his body across a set of train tracks to be dissected.

#### 3. Alyssa Bustamonte



Alyssa Bustamonte lured her 9-year-old neighbor, Elizabeth Olten, into the woods where she strangled the girl before slitting her throat and wrists and burying her in a shallow grave. Alyssa had a history of depression, self-harm and suicide attempts.

#### 4. Lionel Tate



At age 12, Lionel Tate was left alone with 6 year-old Tiffany Eunick. After playing with her for 45 minutes, he told his mother that she wasn't breathing. She had a fractured skull and a lacerated liver. He was the youngest American citizen sentenced to life without the possibility of parole.

### The Non-Killers

(You can use pictures of your nieces and nephews or photos from generic websites; just try to get pictures of kids of the same age, clothing, backgrounds, etc...)



## **Appendix 5. Child Killer Case Cards to Catagorize**

I would suggest that you print out and laminate the case cards on the following pages so they can be reused. The articles and information on the cards were taken from Wikipedia pages on each individual.



Willie Bosket, 15 (1978)

Willie Bosket was born in Harlem, New York to a father who killed two people shortly after his son was conceived, and thereafter spent his life in prison. Bosket junior was in and out of trouble growing up, a violent child and wore this as a badge of honor, telling juvenile authorities that he would be a killer just like his father. He committed his first murder when he was 15-years-old, shooting and killing two men during separate robbery attempts. He also killed a transport worker before the police got to him. He was tried as a minor and was given 5 years in a youth facility - a sentence seen as extremely light.

The outcry against his sentence led to the Juvenile Offender Act of 1978, which ruled that children as young as 13 could be tried in New York's adult courts for crimes as serious as murder, and receive the same penalties as adults.

Upon release at age 20, Bosket continued his life of crime, leaving and re-entering jail until receiving a life sentence for assault and arson while in prison in 1989.



Jesse Pomeroy, 11 (1871)

The son of a Civil War veteran, Jesse Pomeroy was born in Boston in 1859. By the age of 11, he had begun luring younger boys to remote areas and beaten them with extreme brutality, using fists, a belt and a knife.

In 1872, he was finally arrested for the ongoing attacks and sentenced to reform school. The Boston Globe covered the story, and the last line of the article said: "It is generally concluded that the boy is mentally deficient."

In 1874, Pomeroy was living back with his family, and attacked 10-year-old Mary Curran, and later, four-year-old Horace Mullin.

He killed both youngsters, and their bodies were later found hidden in the basement of the house. They had been slashed, stabbed and decapitated with a knife.

Pomeroy was found guilty of murder in the first degree and sentenced to death by hanging. However, two years later, in 1876, his sentence was commuted to life in solitary.



Danny, 13 and Ricky Preddie, 12 (2000)

Only after a third trial were teenage brothers Danny and Ricky Preddie jailed for killing 10-year-old Damilola Taylor.

The young boy was walking home from Peckham Library in south-east London on a November day in 2000, when he received a gash to his left thigh from a broken bottle, as caught on CCTV.

Damilola ran to a stairwell and bled to death in 30 minutes in the grim surroundings.

Several theories around what caused his fatal wound were presented by forensic scientists in court, with the Metropolitan Police accepting that he was attacked and fell onto a broken bottle.

The first trial led to acquittals after the key witness - a 14-year-old girl - was ruled unreliable by the judge.

The jury in the second trial could not reach a verdict on the charges of manslaughter.

At the end of the third trial, the two brothers - by now over 18 years old - were sentenced to eight years in youth custody.

Ricky was released in 2010, and Danny followed the next year.





Eric Smith, 13 (1993)

While riding his bike through a local park in Steuben County, New York, 13-year-old Eric Smith bumped into four-year-old Derrick Robie who was walking alone.

Smith lured the small boy into a wooded area, strangled him, dropped two large rocks on his head and then sodomized the body with a tree limb.

He was eventually convicted of second-degree murder and sentenced to the maximum term then available for juvenile murderers: a minimum of nine years to life in prison.

He has been refused parole eight times since 2001, and will next be up in 2018.

In 2005, Smith claimed that his family life was abusive, and the effect upon him was devastating.

However, his inability to express emotion while saying such words leads court psychologists to believe that Eric Smith could ever be fully rehabilitated and released into society.





Mary Bell, 11 (1968)

On the day before her 11th birthday, Mary Bell lured 4-year-old Martin Brown to an abandoned house in Newcastle, north-east England.

Two months later, she strangled 3-year-old Brian Howe to death.

The story of Bell's childhood is particularly brutal. Her mother Betty was a prostitute who had tried to kill her daughter on more than one occasion, trying to make it look like an accident. On one such occasion, an independent witness saw Betty giving the pills to her daughter as sweets.

Mary herself says she was subjected to repeated sexual abuse, her mother forcing her from the age of four to engage in sexual acts with men.

During her trial, court-appointed psychiatrists said Bell displayed classic signs of psychopathy. The judge described her as dangerous and still posing a risk to children.

After serving her 12-year sentence, Bell was released in 1980, and has lived under a series of pseudonyms since, which have been extended to cover the daughter she had at age 27.



Morgan Leppert, 15 (2009)

Leppert and her 22 year old boyfriend at the time, Toby Lee Lowry, were [convicted of the brutal murder of James Stewart, 62](#), in his own Florida home.

Stewart was found lying on the floor of his Florida home after being stabbed multiple times with metal rods and a knife and suffocated with a plastic bag over his head.

In the police tapes, she told detectives: "[My boyfriend] told me to stab him... I poked him, it didn't even go through for god's sake."

She places most of the blame with her ex-boyfriend, who testified against her in order to avoid the death penalty.

The pair claimed that they killed Stewart to steal his car.



Jordan Brown, 11 (2009)

On February 20, 2009, the then 11-year-old Jordan Brown murdered his father's 26-year-old fiancée Kenzie Houk, who was eight months pregnant at the time—her unborn son was also killed. While the soon-to-be mother was sleeping in her bed in their New Beaver, Pennsylvania farmhouse, Brown shot her in the back of the head using a gun given to him by his father. Houk's youngest daughter alerted nearby adults to the situation after Brown had gotten on the school bus. Police arrived later that day to find a shotgun in the house with the smell of burnt gunpowder.

Jordan was interviewed by Pennsylvania State Police twice the day of the incident before being arrested the following morning. It was later confirmed that Houk was killed by a youth-model Harrington & Richardson 20-gauge shotgun. Prosecutors speculated that Brown killed his stepmother because he was angered by the pending birth of a new sibling and was jealous about the attention his stepsisters received. Initially, Brown was to be tried as an adult but was eventually found guilty of first-degree murder as a juvenile. In 2018, Brown was exonerated as the court determined that the evidence could have been planted by an unknown assailant, and thus was insufficient to find him culpable beyond a reasonable doubt.

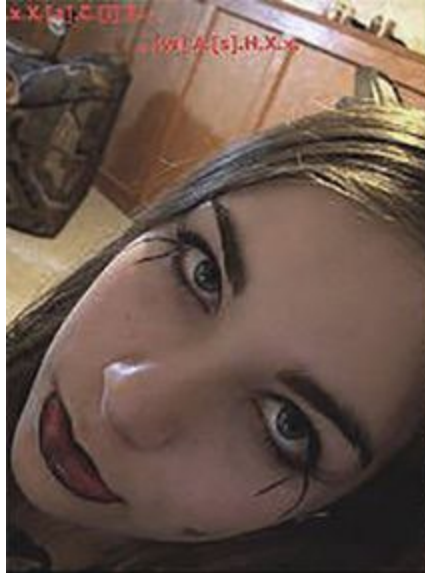


Graham Young, 15 (1962)

- Photo Credit: [Alchetron](#)

Fascinated with poison from a young age, Young would poison his father, step-mother, younger sister, several classmates, and at one point even himself. He used a poison that made them violently ill; the symptoms included vomiting, diarrhea, and excruciating stomach pain. When he was only 14, in November 1961, Young served his sister Winifred a cup of tea exposed to poison that would later cause her hallucinations. She was taken to the hospital where doctors came to the conclusion that she had consumed the poisonous *Atropa belladonna*. Young's father was suspicious of his son, but unable to find anything incriminating in his room. Regardless, he warned his son to stop using chemicals.

Young eventually killed his stepmother, and after the 15-year-old was sent to a psychiatrist, the police were brought in. Young landed himself in a psychiatric facility for people who have committed criminal offenses and was diagnosed with a personality disorder. Dubbed the “Teacup Poisoner,” he killed a fellow inmate and poisoned several staff members before being released nine years later, deemed “fully recovered.” He would eventually land back in prison in the early 1970s to live out the rest of his days, after poisoning at least seven more people and killing one.



Jasmine Richardson, 12 (2006)

Photo Credit: [Murderpedia](#)

In April of 2006, the bodies of Marc and Debra Richardson and their eight-year-old son were found in their home. The murderers were the Richardsons' 12-year-old daughter, Jasmine, and her 23-year-old boyfriend, Jeremy Steinke, who she had met at a punk rock show that same year. The two had an interest in dark horror and creatures like vampires. Steinke even claimed he was a 300-year-old vampire: He told friends he liked the taste of blood, and wore a small vial of blood around his neck. Richardsons' parents did not approve of Steinke and punished her for dating him because of the age difference.

The pair, who were deeply infatuated, refused to be separated—and so Richardson came up with a plan. She proposed the idea to kill her parents so she and Steinke could finally live together. Hours before the murder, the two had watched [\*Natural Born Killers\*](#). During a conversation with an undercover cop while in police custody, Steinke said that the movie was “the best love story of all time.”

Richardson was found guilty of three counts of murder in the first-degree and sentenced to the maximum allowance for juveniles, 10 years. Steinke received three life sentences. It is believed that Richardson is the youngest person to be convicted of multiple murder in Canada. She was released after serving her full sentence in 2016. Reportedly, she has shown genuine remorse for her crimes.



Mitchell Johnson, 11 & Andrew Golden, 13 (1998)

Mitchell Scott Johnson (born August 11, 1984) and Andrew Douglas Golden (May 25, 1986 – July 27, 2019) were the 13 and 11-year-old perpetrators, respectively, of the [massacre](#) on March 24, 1998, at Westside Middle School in [unincorporated Craighead County, Arkansas](#) near the city of [Jonesboro](#).<sup>[2]</sup> Johnson and Golden fatally shot four students and a teacher with multiple weapons, and both were arrested when they attempted to flee the scene. Ten others were wounded. Golden and Johnson were convicted of five murders and ten assaults, and were imprisoned until each turned 21 years of age. After the [Cleveland Elementary School shooting](#) in [Stockton, California](#), the massacre was the second deadliest non-college school shooting<sup>[3]</sup> in contemporary U.S. history until the April 1999 [Columbine High School massacre](#).



### Sean Sellers, 16 (1986)

Sean Richard Sellers (May 18, 1969 – February 4, 1999) was an American serial killer, one of 22 persons in the United States since the reinstatement of the death penalty in 1976 to be executed for a crime committed while under the age of 18, and the only one to have been executed for crime committed under the age of 17. His case drew worldwide attention due to his age as well as his jailhouse conversion to Christianity and his claim that demonic possession made him innocent of his crimes.

On March 5, 1986, Sellers killed his mother and stepfather, Vonda and Lee Bellofatto, while they were asleep in the bedroom of their Oklahoma City home. Wearing only underwear to limit blood spatter on himself, he first shot his step-father. The shot awoke his mother, whom he shot in the face. Sellers tried to disguise his guilt by arranging the crime scene to look as if an intruder had committed the killings.<sup>[4]</sup>

Sellers also later confessed to the 1985 killing of Robert Paul Bower, a thirty-two-year-old Circle K convenience store clerk who had refused to sell him beer.

Human Rights Watch observed in 1999 that since 1990, the only other countries known to have executed juvenile offenders besides the United States of America were Bangladesh, Iran, Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Yemen.

Sellers was executed by lethal injection on February 4, 1999 at the Oklahoma State Penitentiary in McAlester, Oklahoma at 12:17 a.m., five minutes after the lethal drugs were injected. For his last meal, he had Chinese food: eggrolls, sweet-and-sour shrimp, and batter-fried shrimp.





Brenda Spencer, 17 (1979)

On the morning of Monday, January 29, 1979, Spencer began shooting at children waiting for Principal Burton Wragg (age 53) to open the gates to Cleveland Elementary. She injured eight children. Spencer shot and killed Wragg as he tried to help children. She also killed custodian Mike Suchar (age 56) as he tried to pull a student to safety. A police officer (age 28), responding to a call for assistance during the incident, was wounded in the neck as he arrived. Further casualties were avoided only because the police obstructed her line of fire by moving a garbage truck in front of her house.

After firing thirty times, Spencer barricaded herself inside her home for several hours. While there, she spoke by telephone to a reporter from *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, who had been randomly calling telephone numbers in the neighborhood. Spencer told the reporter she shot at the schoolchildren and adults because, "I don't like Mondays. This livens up the day." She also told police negotiators the children and adults whom she shot were easy targets and that she was going to "come out shooting." Spencer has been repeatedly reminded of these statements at [parole](#) hearings. Ultimately, she surrendered and left the house, reportedly after being promised a Burger King meal by negotiators. Police officers found beer and whiskey bottles cluttered around the house but said Spencer did not appear to be intoxicated when arrested.

Spencer was charged as an adult and pleaded guilty to two counts of murder and [assault](#) with a deadly weapon. On April 4, 1980, a day after her 18th birthday, she was sentenced to 25 years to [life](#). In prison, Spencer was diagnosed as an epileptic and received medication to treat her epilepsy and depression. While at the California Institution for Women in Chino, she worked repairing electronic equipment. <sup>[7][15]</sup>





Willie Francis, 16 (1945)

Willie Francis (January 12, 1929 – May 9, 1947) is best known for surviving a failed execution by electrocution in the United States. He was a black juvenile offender sentenced to death at age 16 by the state of Louisiana in 1945 for the murder of Andrew Thomas, a Cajun pharmacy owner in St. Martinville who had once employed him. He was 17 when he survived the first attempt to execute him, as the chair malfunctioned. After an appeal of his case taken to the U.S. Supreme Court failed, he was executed in 1947 at age 18.

In 1944, Andrew Thomas, a pharmacist in St. Martinville, Louisiana, was shot and killed. His murder remained unsolved for nine months, but in August 1945, Willie Francis was detained in Texas due to his proximity to an unrelated crime. Police claimed that he was carrying Thomas' wallet in his pocket, though no evidence of this claim was submitted during the trial. <sup>[2]</sup>

While under interrogation, Francis confessed to Thomas' murder, writing, "It was a secret about me and him." He had no counsel with him. The meaning of his statement is still uncertain. Author Gilbert King, in his book, *The Execution of Willie Francis* (2008), alludes to rumors in St. Martinville of sexual abuse of the youth by the pharmacist. Francis later directed the police to where he had disposed of the holster used to carry the murder weapon. The gun used to kill Thomas was found near the crime scene. It belonged to a deputy sheriff in St. Martinville who had once threatened to kill Thomas. The gun, and the bullets recovered from the crime scene and Thomas' body, disappeared from police evidence just before the trial.

Despite two separate written confessions, Francis pleaded not guilty. During his trial, the court-appointed defense attorneys offered no objections, called no witnesses, and put up no defense. The validity of Francis' confessions were not questioned by the defense, although he had no counsel at the time. Two days after the trial began, Francis was quickly convicted of murder and was sentenced to death by twelve jurors and the judge despite Francis having been underage at 15 at the time of the crime. As Louisiana had disenfranchised nearly all blacks at the turn of the century by its new state constitution, the jury was all white (only voters could serve).



Leonard Shockley, 16 (1958)

Leonard Melvin Shockley (1941/1942 – April 10, 1959) was a juvenile executed in the [United States](#) on April 10, 1959, for a murder committed when he was under the age of 18. Shockley, a black male, was executed in Maryland in a gas chamber for the murder of shopkeeper Sarah Hearne on January 16, 1958. Shockley (then 16) was involved in the robbery of a small shop in [Dorchester County](#), Maryland. He was accompanied by his older brother, 23-year-old Harold Edward Shockley. Hearne was found stabbed several times in the back and breast, and her throat had been cut. The young culprits were identified by an eye witness. Leonard was 17 years of age at the time of his execution<sup>[2]</sup> making him the last instance of a juvenile being executed in America. His brother received life in prison but was eventually released.

## **Appendix 6. Sample Unit Test with Key**

### **Criminal Psychology Test**

1. How does the U.S. federal government define “juvenile?” Before December 2019, how does North Carolina define adult?” How does North Carolina define “adult” after December 2019?

The federal government defines a juvenile as anyone aged 17 or younger. Prior to December 2019, North Carolina defined a juvenile as someone under the age of sixteen. As of December 2019, North Carolina defines it as anyone under the age of eighteen.

2. Name three factors that can influence a child to become a killer.

Children who become killers are likely to have experienced or witnessed violence in the home. They are likely to be failing in school, if they are still in school, although they are not less intelligent than their peers. They are also likely to be addicted to some impairing substance such as alcohol or drugs.

3. Discuss the similarities and differences between a sociopath and a psychopath. Give an example of each.

Both sociopaths and psychopaths have a lack of emotional attachments, a lack of remorse and a reckless disregard for the safety of others. Sociopaths tend to be more disorganized and can feel emotions such as remorse if they had some type of bond with their victim. Psychopaths tend to be organized and charming and are not capable of experiencing normal human emotions. Eric Harris was a psychopath while Dylan Klebold was a sociopath.

4. Discuss the three ways to classify child killings. Give an example of each.

Child killings can be classified by the circumstances surrounding the killings. First are psychotic killings where the child kills because they are mentally ill. Mary Bell was this type of killer. Second, are conflict killings where the child is first in a stressful, heated situation with someone and the conflict escalates to the point the child kills. Jasmine Richardson is an example of this type of killer. The third is crime where a child kills during the commission of another primary crime such as robbery or rape. Morgan Leppert is an example of this type of killer.

5. Discuss three factors common to school shooters. Give examples of something you can do to help prevent a school shooting.

They usually tell someone about their plans before they actually carry out their plans. They tend to be loners. They tend to have a fascination with violence and violent games. If you see someone who looks like they are sitting alone a lot, you could ask to sit with

them at lunch. If you hear a rumor that someone is planning something, you must call the police, or the school immediately. While it won't prevent a shooting, you should think about what you would do and where you would go from different areas in the school if a situation happened.

### **Student Resources (annotated)**

Fallon, Jim. "Exploring the Mind of A Killer." presented at the TED Talk, 2009.  
[https://www.ted.com/talks/jim\\_fallon\\_exploring\\_the\\_mind\\_of\\_a\\_killer?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/jim_fallon_exploring_the_mind_of_a_killer?language=en).

Interesting and understandable story of one man whose brain looks like those of many violent criminals. Good introduction to the science of brain chemistry and violence.

Yousef, Mosab Hassan. *Son of Hamas*. Tyndale House Publishers, 2010.

Very readable novel about a young man who was radicalized by Hamas and then found Christianity and began helping the Israelis.

### **Teacher Resources (annotated)**

Fallon, Jim. *The Scientist and the Psychopath*. Snap Judgment, n.d.  
<https://snapjudgment.org/scientist-and-psychopath>.

In depth interview of Jim Fallon regarding his own brain scans and the finding that he has the brain of a psychopath.

Heide, Kathleen M. *Young Killers: The Challenge of Juvenile Homicide*. SAGE Publications, 1999.

Excellent resource for basic information about what makes children into killers and how child killers can be classified and treated. Includes many case studies.

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## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Heide, *Young Killers*, 5.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> “Crime in the United States.”

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Heide. *Young Killers*, 32.

<sup>10</sup> Heide, *Young Killers*, 34.

<sup>11</sup> Heide, 35–36.

<sup>12</sup> Heide, 30.

<sup>13</sup> Heide, 33.

<sup>14</sup> Heide, 31.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Heide, *Young Killers*, 31.

<sup>18</sup> Heide, 31.

<sup>19</sup> Heide, 33.

<sup>20</sup> Heide, 33.

<sup>21</sup> The Sentencing Project is an organization that works for fair changes to the U.S. criminal justice system by publishing policy briefs, addressing racial disparities in sentencing and practices and advocating for alternatives to incarceration. It was founded in 1986.

<sup>22</sup> Rovner, “Juvenile Life Without Parole: An Overview.”

<sup>23</sup> Rovner.

<sup>24</sup> Rovner.

<sup>25</sup> Heide, *Young Killers*, 35–36.

<sup>26</sup> “Dictionary.Com.”

<sup>27</sup> Heide, *Young Killers*, 35–36.

<sup>28</sup> Smith, “‘Here We Go Again’: CMPD Frustrated by Deadly Violence between Youth.”

<sup>29</sup> Grant, “Charlotte Homicide Rate Continues to Rise, Increase in Teen Suspects.”

<sup>30</sup> Heide, *Young Killers*, 35–36.

<sup>31</sup> Walker, “Dearborn Police: 3 Teens Arrested in Woman’s Fatal Shooting, Robberies.”

<sup>32</sup> “Brain Science Is Reforming Juvenile Justice Policy and Practice.”

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Hagerty, “A Neuroscientist Uncovers a Dark Secret.”

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> “Brain Science Is Reforming Juvenile Justice Policy and Practice.”

<sup>40</sup> “For the Good of the Child, for the Good of Society: Using Scotland and Jamaica as Models to Reform U.S. Juvenile Policy” p.1966.

<sup>41</sup> Chuck, “12-Year-Old Charged with Capital Murder Spotlights Justice System Ill-Equipped for Juveniles.”

<sup>42</sup> Moraff, “10-Year-Old Murder Defendant Shows Failure of U.S. Juvenile Justice System.”

<sup>43</sup> Chung, “Should a 10-Year-Old Be Held Responsible for Murder as an Adult? Wisconsin Case Presents a Rare Legal Conundrum.”

<sup>44</sup> “For the Good of the Child,” p. 1969.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. p. 1970.

<sup>46</sup> *Roper v. Simmons*, 543 U.S.

<sup>47</sup> Rovner, “Juvenile Life Without Parole: An Overview,” 1.

- <sup>48</sup> Graham v. Florida, 130 S.Ct.
- <sup>49</sup> Miller v. Alabama, 132 S.Ct.
- <sup>50</sup> Montgomery v. Louisiana, 136 S.Ct.
- <sup>51</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>52</sup> “For the Good of the Child”, p. 1981.
- <sup>53</sup> Ibid. p. 1983.
- <sup>54</sup> List of School Shootings. Wikipedia.
- <sup>55</sup> Tracy, “Psychopath vs. Sociopath: What’s the Difference?”
- <sup>56</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>57</sup> Cullen, “The Depressive and the Psychopath: At Last We Know Why The Columbine Killers Did It.”
- <sup>58</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>59</sup> “Columbine High School Shootings Fast Facts.”
- <sup>60</sup> Cullen, “The Depressive and the Psychopath: At Last We Know Why The Columbine Killers Did It.”
- <sup>61</sup> Chuck, “17 Killed in Mass Shooting at High School in Parkland, FL.”
- <sup>62</sup> Eden and Pollack, “Parkland Dad Uncovers How District Enabled Deranged Student-Turned-Shooter.”
- <sup>63</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>64</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>65</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>66</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>67</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>68</sup> Olmeda, “Parkland Shooter Nikolas Cruz Brags on Cellphone Videos, ‘I’m Going to Be the next School Shooter.’”
- <sup>69</sup> Meloy, “A Comparative Analysis of North American Adult and Juvenile Murderers.”
- <sup>70</sup> Murderpedia.com has articles on all four of these killer children.