

Bernhard Bogerts

# Where Does Violence Come From?

A Multidimensional Approach  
to Its Causes and Manifestations



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# Preface

For many people, violence is an incomprehensible phenomenon that occurs in a multitude of forms and can affect all areas of life. A prerequisite for curbing violence is knowledge of its manifold manifestations and causes. Due to the importance of this topic, it is not surprising that several excellent and quite comprehensive books have been published recently. However, these books illuminate the problem of violence from the perspective of various different disciplines. These include the influential book by Pinker [1], which focuses on evolutionary, historical and psychological aspects, the books by Raine [2], Sapolsky [3] and Haller [4] with an emphasis on neurobiological views, the books by Dwyer and Micale [5], as well as by Gerlach [6], from a historical perspective, the book by Lee [7] focusing on psychological, social and political approaches, and the book by Armstrong on religion and violence [8], to name but a few. In the available interdisciplinary literature on the subject [9] there are usually subject-specific individual contributions by various authors, while integrative approaches are neglected.

The motivation for writing this book was to offer an updated multidimensional view of the phenomenon of violence, summarizing the various sub-disciplines, in a manageable and generally understandable form, taking into account the state of literature worldwide. In order to achieve this goal, the complexity of the subject matter often made it necessary to simplify the presentation of neuroscientific, genetic, psychological and social science issues. References to scientific details and further publications can be found in the extensive bibliography.

The author of this book is a psychiatrist and neuroscientist, so his core competencies lie in the clinical and neurobiological fields. However, the complex set of conditions of the many facets of violence can only be understood through an integrative view of neurobiological, psychological, psychopathological and sociological points of view. The inclusion of sociological knowledge in this book was accomplished with the help of Christian Steinmetz, MA, research associate at the Salus Institute.

The book is structured in such a way that first the extent and type of occurrence of various manifestations of physical violence are presented. Subsequently, the principles of evolutionary biological, genetic and neuroscientific causes are explained

in language understandable for lay people. This is followed by a summary of theories and findings from psychology, psychiatry and the social sciences with special emphasis on mental disorders, hedonistic and collective violence as well as the sensitive topic of religion and violence. The chapters on brain pathology, amok, terror and hedonistic violence are presented with striking examples.

A summary of several different scientific fields in such a far-reaching and complex subject area by a single author will imply that some subject areas cannot be presented in their entire complexity and that experts of partial disciplines will know how to present additional information. Intensifying a cross-disciplinary dialog to explore the causes of violence is a major concern of this book, thereby setting the stage for improving prevention.

Magdeburg, Germany  
May 2021

Bernhard Bogerts

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I am indebted to Christian Steinmetz, research assistant at the Salus Institute in Magdeburg, for his help with socio-scientific content and illustrations. My special thanks go to Thomas Kluger, who contributed helpful comments on all chapters of the book in many friendly discussions, and also to Prof. Dr Anne-Maria Möller-Leimkühler for her valuable suggestions on the overall concept of the book. I thank my sisters for critically checking the text for lay comprehensibility and readability. Last but not least, I have to thank Mr. Fietz-Mahlow, Managing Director of Salus-Altmark Holding, for creating excellent conditions for writing this book.

# Where Does Violence Come From?

Why do people do such things? This is often the first question that arises when we witness violence in the in real life or read about it in the media. This book provides comprehensive answers: rather than explaining the causes of violence from the limited perspective of a single discipline, it combines explanatory approaches from criminology, sociology, psychology, psychiatry, brain research, genetics, pedagogy, historical sciences and justice into a big, exciting and comprehensible picture in an entertaining way and according to the current state-of-the-art science(s). And always close to case studies that show us the frightening diversity of human violence: acts of violence by individual perpetrators, violence between groups, riots by gangs and hooligans, violent ethnic and religious conflicts, extreme violence in the form of amok and terror, and armed conflicts, pogroms and genocide. Last but not least, the knowledge gained from this book can help answer another big question: how can violence be contained or even prevented?

- How and where does violence originate in our brain?
- Why has a tendency towards violence become established as part of our behavioral repertoire in the development of humankind?
- What influences on personality development can lead to violent characters? How often is violence the product of a pathological psyche? Do genes play a role?
- Which social constellations contribute?
- What are the causes of rampage and terror?
- What is known about the relationship between religion and violence?



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## About the Author

**Prof. Bernhard Bogerts, MD** is a neuroscientist and psychiatrist. From 1994 to 2015, he was clinical director and full professor of psychiatry at the University of Magdeburg, Germany. Since his retirement, he has been the director of the Salus Institute in Magdeburg, whose scientific focus is research into the causes of violence. He has received several awards for his research on the brain-biological basis of mental disorders. He also became known for his work on psychological and brain pathological findings in violent offenders.

# Chapter 1

## Introduction



Human coexistence is mainly characterized by peaceful cooperation; interpersonal harmony determines our lives much more often than dissonance. Violence, however, sometimes appears as spontaneous or planned behavior of single persons or whole groups, but sometimes also—and there are numerous examples of this at present and in history—as a looming mass phenomenon that can eventually take on apocalyptic proportions.

Why does violence exist in its various forms at all? Violent acts of individual perpetrators, violence between groups, vandalism and riots by gangs and hooligans, violent ethnic and religious conflicts, extreme violence ranging from rampage or terror to armed conflicts and genocide. How and where does violence arise in our brain? Why has the propensity for violence established itself in the development of mankind as a not inconsiderable part of our behavioral repertoire? What influences on personality development can lead to violent characters? How often is violence the product of a mental disorder? Do genes play a role? Which social constellations contribute to this?

This book offers an integrative view of the phenomenon of violence, which various disciplines such as criminology, sociology, psychology, brain research, genetics, pedagogy, history and justice otherwise try to explain from different perspectives, often without further consideration of the findings of neighboring fields of science. In particular, the social sciences, which currently dominate the formation of opinion on this topic, will be supplemented by neuroscientific, phylogenetic, psychological and psychiatric aspects.



## Chapter 2

# Manifestations of Violence



Aggression and resulting violence are complex phenomena with multiple interrelated causes. Violence occurs not only in its physical form with the aim of physically damaging, subjugating, eliminating or annihilating others. More common are practices ranging from psychological aggression in the form of intrigue, stalking, bullying, cyber-bullying, defamation, exclusion up to psychological terror with all its variants, the inventiveness of which sometimes seems unlimited. No less significant is so-called structural violence, which refers to the oppression and exploitation of entire groups of people.

Due to the multidimensional character of violence, which is often the subject of controversial discussions between social scientists, psychologists and neurobiologists, it is not surprising that there are different views on the causes, definitions, classification criteria—and prevention—of violence.

This book is mainly devoted to physical violence, which aims to physically damage, subjugate, repress or kill others. The many forms of psychological violence and structural violence, which can have consequences as disastrous as direct physical violence and often precede it, are not the focus of this book.

The following forms of physical violence can be distinguished.

### Classification into Individual or Group Violence

- (a) **Individual violence**, in which an individual person becomes violent against one or more other persons, for example, in the form of assault, deprivation of liberty, rape, murder, manslaughter or even rampage.
- (b) **Collective violence**, where a group of people attacks another group or individuals, ranging from riots and brawls by hooligans, clashes between gangs, tribes, radicalized political groups and religious communities to pogroms, wars and genocide. Collective violence also includes expulsions, deportations and

resettlements, which, even without the use of direct physical violence, have often resulted in mass deaths of those affected.

The protagonists of collective violence—similar to terrorists—usually invoke ideologies justifying their actions.

- (c) **State violence** in the form of a monopoly on the use of force to maintain and secure a political or social system, to enforce legal norms and to protect citizens. Numerous examples from history show, however, that state violence is not only intended to maintain order and serve security-guaranteeing goals but can also, depending on the type of political system and ideologies sanctioning violence, take on immense forms of state terror.

## Classification by Cause and Motivation

Irrespective of the number of people involved and the type of exertion, violence can be classified according to cause or motive.

- (a) **Reactive violence**, which is triggered by provocation or threat and aims to eliminate it. Reactive violence in a broader sense also includes revenge, that is, the urge to repay the damage in equal measure. Reactive perpetrators of violence often include the delinquents described by the judiciary and forensic psychiatry as perpetrators of affect.
- (b) **Proactive violence**, which is deliberate violence planned in advance to gain personal advantage by harming others. The aims are the exertion of power, the pursuit of dominance, enrichment, greed, subjugation, expulsion or elimination of others without prior provocation by the victims. This includes predatory and exploitative violence, sexual violence, violence for the purpose of dominance or to maintain power, but also hedonistic violence, which is exerted for its own sake because it is fun and thus serves to increase pleasure, as well as sadism and torture.
- (c) **Revenge and retribution** as a combination of reactive and proactive violence. In the transitional area between reactive and proactive violence there is also violent rebellion against actual or perceived oppression and exploitation.
- (d) **Violence as a result of a mental disorder or brain damage**. This includes delusional symptoms in psychotic disorders, mood disorders, pathological fanaticism and damage of certain violence-controlling areas of brain tissue.

This division of violence is not to be understood as a drawer-like separation of the different forms listed here; often, seamless transitions or combinations are encountered. Reactive violence can be combined with planned or disease-related violence, individual with collective violence.

Galtung [1] introduced the terms “**structural violence**” and “**cultural violence**” into the discussion. Distinct from direct personal violence, this refers to repression by political and social structures, cultural systems or ideologies, which prevent

people from realizing their own potential [1] without concrete actors exercising physical violence being identifiable. The consequences of oppression, exploitation, exclusion, extreme income inequality, ramshackle legal systems, modern slavery, associated poverty, inadequate medical care, and lack of food and other essentials can undoubtedly be even more disastrous than the consequences of direct physical violence [2].

The term “structural violence”, however, was criticized as being blurred and open to arbitrary interpretation, since almost all social injustices could be described in this way [3–5]. In addition, it was objected that any form of direct physical personal exercise of violence in the experience of those involved is completely incomparable with what is referred to as structural violence. Also, it is always concrete social actors or groups of people who, motivated by the desire for power, dominance or possession, make use of certain structures, political systems or ideologies in order to expand their own possibilities and restrict those of others [3]. There are always persons behind structures. Thus, the concepts of structural and cultural violence always include an—albeit indirect—form of personal oppression of others.

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# Chapter 3

## Incidence, Frequency and Consequences of Violence



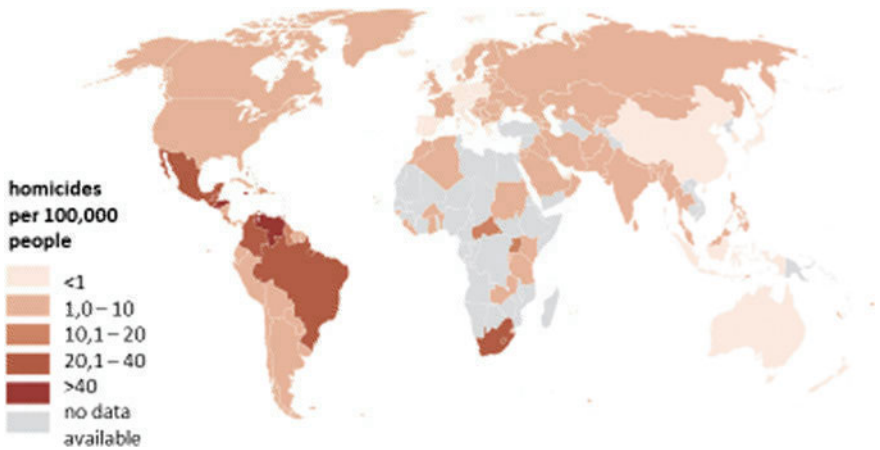
The frequency and extent of individual and collective violence is subject to considerable fluctuations depending on the world region as well as the historical and social situation. A short description including some statistical data on the intensity of the worldwide problem of violence is presented in the following.

### Dimensions of Violence in Global Comparison

In Europe, we currently live in a relatively safe region of the world. The number of homicides in Central Europe is, at about 0.8 per 100,000 inhabitants per year, [1, 2] at a statistically low level compared to four to ten times higher rates in several Eastern European regions and the United States and up to 40 times higher rates of murder and homicide in some countries in Africa and Latin America [2, 3]. The relatively high homicide rate in the United States of about 6 per 100,000 is due to the general availability of firearms. More than two-thirds of all homicide victims in the US are shot [4]. In addition, there is an even higher number of suicides by firearms (2018: 7/100,000) [4]. An overview of the frequency of homicides in different regions of the world is given in Fig. 3.1.

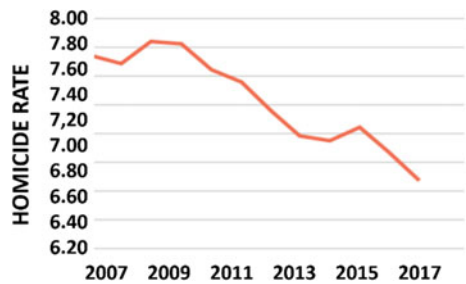
The risk of being a victim of homicide varies by more than a 100-fold across world regions. In 2017, the lowest homicide rates were in Singapore and Japan (0.2 and 0.3 per 100,000 population/year, respectively), and the highest were in Central America: El Salvador 62 per 100,000 population, Venezuela 57, Honduras 41, followed by South Africa 34. Despite a significant increase of murder and manslaughter in several Central American and African countries, the global average rate of homicides has decreased by about 20% in the last 15 years from 7.80/100,000 in 2006 to ca. 6.4/100,000 in 2018 (see Figs. 3.1 and 3.2) [2, 5].

Globally, violence is one of the leading causes of death among younger and middle-aged adults. Depending on the institution collecting the data, fatality figures



**Fig. 3.1** Global homicide rates (per 100,000 population) in 2017. *Source* UNODC Global Study on Homicide [2]

**Fig. 3.2** Course of global homicide rates since 2007. *Source* Global Peace Index 2020 [5]



for 2015–2017 ranged from 460,000 to 600,000 each year [2, 6, 7]. Of these, two-thirds were victims of individual violence, and one-third of collective violence [8, 9]. Young men aged 14–29 were five times more likely to die than other age groups.

Criminal homicide causes more deaths than armed conflicts and terrorism combined. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), in 2017, the global death toll from homicide was 464,000, significantly higher than that from armed conflicts (89,000) and terrorist attacks (26,000) [2]. Organized crime alone killed approximately as many people around the globe in 2017 as all armed conflicts combined.

Forty percent of global homicides occur among children, adolescents and young men, with an estimated 200,000 deaths in this age group, according to the WHO (2015) report [10]. Nearly half of boys and about a quarter of girls aged 13–15 report having been involved in acts of physical violence either as perpetrators or victims.

Every year, 9 out of 10 violent crimes, such as murder, manslaughter, rape, grievous bodily harm and damage to property, are carried out by men [1]. However, in the statistics of non-violent crimes, such as fraud, slander and theft, both genders



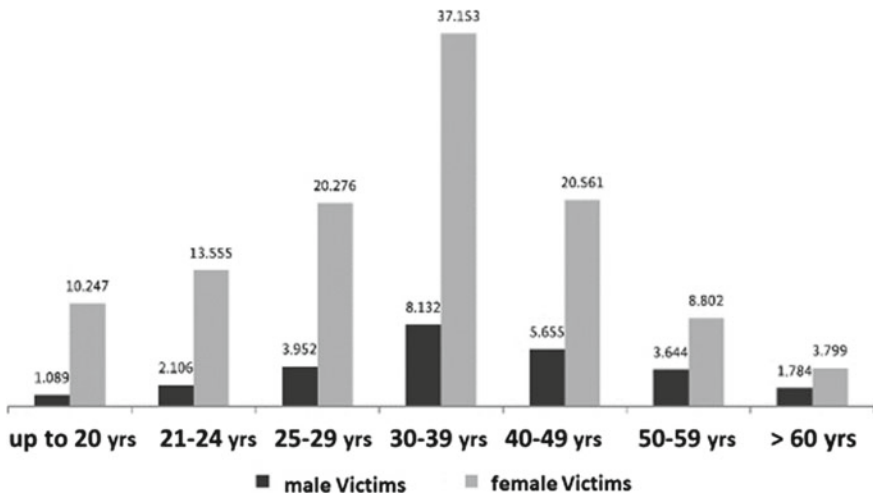
**Fig. 3.3** Suspects by age group and gender per 100,000 persons of the same age and gender. *Source* Constance Crime Development Inventory [12]. *Data source* German Police Crime Statistics 2017

come quite close (see Fig. 3.3). In addition to male gender, age is a second risk factor for violent offenses; the 15–25 age group is disproportionately represented; as age increases, the incidence of such offenses decreases substantially [11]. Thirty times more men than women are imprisoned for assault. Acceptance of violence, right-wing extremist orientations and the use of violence by hooligans are the domain of male youths.

### Partner Violence

Violence in partnerships is multifaceted: physical violence, manslaughter, murder, sexual violence, threats, psychological violence in the form of humiliation, coercion and isolation, kidnapping and stalking. The perpetrators are predominantly those characters with an already low empathy and an increased tendency to violence with an absolute claim to power, which they can live out at home with the least inhibition towards the physically weaker female partner. They hardly ever blame themselves for their actions, but regularly blame the victim [13].

Globally, the proportion of women who experience intimate partner violence or sexual violence is estimated at 35% [14, 15]. 80% of all murders of women are perpetrated by intimate partners; this amounted worldwide to 50,000 cases in 2017 [2]. The figures are only an approximation of the actual situation, as no reliable data are



**Fig. 3.4** Victims of intimate partner violence by gender and age group. *Source* Bundeskriminalamt (German Federal Criminal Police Office) 2019 [16]

available from many countries; this is particularly true for the Eastern Mediterranean region, Arab countries and African states. Violence against women rarely occurs in public, but mainly in private, which is why many such acts escape public attention.

As a representative example for Western Europe, figures for Germany show that almost a quarter of the cases of murder and manslaughter occurred in a partnership; men were seven times more likely to be perpetrators than women. More than half of the victims lived in the same household as the perpetrator. 80% of the victims were female, 20% male (see Fig. 3.4). Violence within partnerships accounted for about 17% of all violent acts [16]. The number of unreported cases might be significantly higher; only about 20% of those affected file a report.

Violence at home is experienced as particularly traumatizing because the place of domestic security is no longer available.

## Violence Towards Children

According to UNICEF's 2017 report, [17] three-quarters of two- to four-year-olds worldwide (nearly 300 million) and more than half of six- to ten-year-olds suffer violence in the form of physical punishment or psychological aggression at the hands of parents or caregivers. However, the actual numbers are difficult to estimate because the child victims hardly have the means of reporting it themselves.

In 2017, 21,000 children under the age of 14 died a violent death worldwide [18]. Every seven minutes, somewhere in the world, an adolescent is killed by an act of violence [17]. Male adolescents are particularly at risk; they are four times more