

# What are the causes of serial murder?

## Part 1. Birth through early childhood

Barrie J. Ritter, Ph.D. ©2016



Hillside Strangler, Kenneth Bianchi Denied Parole  
*cbsnews.com*

Most people believe that this most extreme form of [murder](#) has *causes*. But when we examine what these causes are believed to be, we often find that they are *excuses* for killings: childhood abuse; brain damage; indifferent parenting. Here we want to deal with two issues: (1) why do people want to believe in excuses and (2) are they true or valid?

Throughout most of the history of serial murder, the killers have been white, usually male, and from homes that are generally middle-class, and two-parent families. This also describes the theorists. Some explanations of people reside in the people and some reside in the explainer. The latter is most likely to occur when the explanation borders on a justification, because, frankly, we have difficulty believing that someone who looks like us could commit a serious crime, much less a murder. In such cases, we want to know what caused such odious behaviors to occur. When the murderer is white and middle-class, we tend to find causes confined to the mental status of the perpetrator or his (or her) early childhood. For black and/or lower-class murderers, the causes are believed to lie in (sub)cultural patterns and urban correlates of crime, such as socioeconomic status.

To determine whether causes are valid, we need to bring available materials to bear on a representative

number of cases. A descriptive study of 27 well-known multiple murderers was completed in 1988 (Ritter, 1988); that study serves as the basis for the findings reported here. The 27 cases reflected the history of multiple murder in Western nations, and included French, German, English and American crimes from 1872 through 1983. Cases were also selected for their abundance of published materials covering the person and the crimes, for interviews are not possible with an historical, cross-national sample. In addition there are problems with interviews, the main problem being that we must accept the interviewer's word for what transpired, as well as the interviewer's ability to ask the right questions and record the answers correctly. With published materials, everyone has access to the record of what occurred.

Findings. Of the 27 subjects, 25 were male and 25 were Caucasian. Three subjects came from middle-class backgrounds, and three were upper middle-class. Seven ranged from working to lower middle-class, and five came from the lower-class.

The first characteristic of family life of importance is that of illegitimacy and adoption. Six of the 27 subjects were illegitimate. Three of these were adopted by parents who desired children and three were kept by their mothers. Only one, Charles Manson, spent his youth farmed out by his mother to relatives and institutions. The second issue considered is whether or not the parental marriage was intact. Of the 27 subjects, 18 (or 67 percent) were reared by parents whose marriages were intact. In two cases, the data was insufficient to determine. In six cases, the marriages ended in divorce. Divorce is not an inevitably adverse condition, however, for as Yochelson and Samenow (1976) reported in their study of criminals, as children, it is often the more troublesome parent who leaves, thus helping to stabilize the family. Most of the serial killers grew up in a home with other children, and the presence of siblings is another stabilizing factor.

A related characteristic of family life is the general level of stability in the parents' relationships during the early life of the subjects. As noted, in 22 percent of the cases there was divorce. But this percentage encompassed all of the observably troubled marriages—from irreconcilable differences to marriages involving spousal abuse. Two subjects were exposed to the abuse of their mother by their father and in two cases, this may have occurred. Multiple murderers, as a group, were infrequently exposed to violence as youths. Rather, future multiple murderers were found to more often be exposed to parents whose marriages remained intact, did not involve any spousal violence, and were described as relatively happy and stable.

*Findings will continue to be reported in subsequent articles.*

## SUGGESTED LINKS

- > [Part 2. School, Social Life, and Role Models](#)
- > [Part 3. Aspirations and Occupations](#)
- > [Part 4. Medical and Psychiatric History](#)
- > [Part 5. Psychopathy and Dominance](#)



**Barrie Ritter**

Crime & Justice Examiner