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The psychopathic offender

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Dr. Robert Hare, an authority in the study of psychopaths, characterizes these people as "intraspecies predators who use charm, manipulation, intimidation and violence to control others and to satisfy their own selfish needs." Although only one per cent of the general population is psychopathic, that percentage is much higher among convicted offenders. This article by Sgt Matt Logan of the RCMP's Behavioral Science Unit and his colleagues, looks at the nature of this mental disorder and why it is imperative that police officers focus on this small but dangerous group.



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Psychopaths are characterized by shallow emotions, impulsiveness, irresponsibility, egocentricity and a lack of empathy or guilt. Psychopaths simply do not experience emotions in the same way that we do. They don't experience love in the way that we do.

"They are lacking in conscience and in feelings for others," explains Dr. Robert Hare, a specialist in psychopathy at the University of British Columbia. "Psychopaths cold-bloodedly take what they want and do as they please, violating social norms and expectations

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without the slightest sense of guilt or regret.”

Is it really worth paying attention to them? Absolutely. There may only be small number of psychopaths relatively speaking, but the damage they inflict on society is widespread. It is estimated that 20 to 25 per cent of the prison population is psychopathic, but this group is responsible for more than half of the violent crimes in our society.

It is critical that those who work in law enforcement, whether in corrections or policing, understand these people. It is unlikely that a police officer on patrol will encounter a psychopath every day. But when he or she does, identifying the traits could make the difference between solving a crucial case, or not. In the case of serial killers—90 per cent of whom are psychopathic—solving the crime could also mean saving a life.

Detecting a potential psychopath may also be paramount to officer safety. A 1992 FBI report on police killers was noteworthy and chilling. The killers' characteristics, which were identified as 'antisocial personality' traits in the FBI report, were listed as follows: sense of entitlement, unremorseful, apathetic to others, unconscionable, blameful of others, manipulative, disregardful of social obligations, nonconforming to social norms and irresponsible. These killers were not simply anti-social individuals who met the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV) criteria for anti-social personality disorder (ASPD). They were psychopaths—remorseless predators who used charm, intimidation and cold-blooded violence to attain their ends.

Characteristics of the psychopath

Many of the characteristics important for inhibiting anti-social and violent behavior—empathy, close emotional bonds, fear of punishment, guilt—are lacking or seriously deficient in psychopaths. Moreover, their egocentricity, grandiosity, sense of entitlement, impulsiveness, general lack of behavioural inhibitions and need for power and control constitute what might be described as the perfect prescription for asocial, anti-social and criminal acts. This explains why psychopaths find it so easy to victimize the vulnerable and to use intimidation and violence as tools to achieve power and control over others.

In a study conducted in 2000 within Her Majesty's Prison Service in England, Hare and his associates tracked the re-conviction rate of 268 released inmates over two years. They found that psychopaths were re-convicted for general offences at twice the rate of non-psychopaths. The most startling finding, however, was that psychopaths were re-convicted at nine times the rate for violent offences compared to their non-psychopathic inmates.

The violence of psychopaths is more gratuitous and sadistic than that of other offenders. It is also more instrumental than impulsive, a fact that further reveals the callous and predatory nature of the violence. These factors are significant for crime scene investigators.

Many of the attitudes and behaviours of psychopaths have a predatory quality about them. Psychopaths apparently see others as little more than emotional, physical and financial prey, and they feel justified in their belief that the world is made up of givers and takers and that they are “natural-born takers.” They are skilled at deception, manipulation, stalking and locating their “feeding grounds” and “watering holes.”

The reactions of psychopaths to the damage they have inflicted are more likely to be cool indifference and a

sense of power, pleasure or smug satisfaction rather than regret or concern for what they have done. The ease with which psychopaths engage in violence has very real significance for society in general and for law enforcement personnel in particular.

Understanding the mind of the psychopath and the personality and behavioural traits associated with this disorder allows us to predict strategies that are more likely to work as we investigate and communicate with the psychopath. Although psychopathy should be diagnosed by a mental health professional with specialized training, the traits specified in the Psychopathy Check List (revised), or PCL-R, can be detected by others. Researchers are currently working on a computer-based "I-Scan" to be used by police investigators to detect psychopathy. Police will be able to score a suspect by using a simple rating scheme. An immediate feedback document will be returned to the investigator with recommendations for communication, interviewing strategies, negotiation strategies and undercover project strategies.

The high-risk psychopathic offender

Placing a focus on the estimated 30 per cent of dangerous offenders who are at an elevated risk of re-offence allows police to provide safer homes and communities. This can be accomplished through the RCMP Behavioural Sciences Group's Partnerships, Assessment, Selection, Training and Enforcement (PASTE) initiative. The initiative is accomplished in the following ways:

Partnerships

Law enforcement agencies work alongside corrections officials who provide file information on high-risk offenders, psychiatric diagnosis of psychopathy and other statistical risk assessments. Police work with their correctional partners to monitor high-risk offenders, paying close attention to observations or information indicating movement into a crime cycle.

Collaboration with other police agencies is also key. For instance, RCMP and municipal police officers in British Columbia are working together on Integrated Sexual Predator Observation Teams (ISPOTS) to follow high-risk offenders who have release conditions as a result of parole or probation. The teams look for behavioural evidence that the dangerous offender is returning to a crime cycle and intervene before they re-offend.

Police in behavioural sciences also educate Crown prosecutors and judges to provide information on psychopathy, crime-cycle progression and breaches.

Assessment and selection

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Police use a five-point scale to assess high-risk offenders based on factors that research has shown are highly predictive of violent recidivism. These factors include psychopathy, deviant arousal, low impulse control, previous violence and the offender's immediate environment. Once assessed, police can determine which individuals are the most dangerous to the public and the most likely to re-offend.

Training

To solidify the partnership between corrections and policing, training is offered to help all stakeholders develop skills and knowledge in detecting crime-cycle progression. They receive training in how to identify high-risk indicators such as predatory behaviour, deviant fantasy and paraphilia—an individual's sexual arousal to unusual or socially unacceptable objects or acts.

Enforcement goals

The goals of law enforcement officers are to reduce sexual violence and sexual exploitation by focusing on those offenders deemed to be a high risk for sexual re-offending. By conducting short-term surveillance on dangerous offenders living in the community under court-imposed conditions, investigators can establish their level of non-compliance with those conditions. Non-compliance is the most evident indicator that an offender is returning to the crime cycle.

By developing a clear understanding of psychopathic traits and identifying the progression of a crime cycle, police can play a critical role in keeping the most dangerous offenders from repeating their cycle of violence.

For more information on crime scene analysis, crime cycle analysis, indirect personality assessment and direct personality assessment, contact the RCMP's Behavioural Sciences Unit in the Pacific Region at (604) 598-4569.

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