

1-1-1991

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### Recommended Citation

UB Law Forum (1991) "Charles P. Ewing Predicts Epidemic of Juvenile Killings," *UB Law Forum*: Vol. 5 : No. 2 , Article 33.  
Available at: [https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/ub\\_law\\_forum/vol5/iss2/33](https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/ub_law_forum/vol5/iss2/33)

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# Charles P. Ewing Predicts Epidemic of Juvenile Killings

By Sue Wuetcher

Juvenile homicides will increase to epidemic proportions in the 1990s, possibly tripling or quadrupling by the end of the century, warns forensic psychologist Charles Patrick Ewing, Ph.D., professor of law and clinical associate professor of psychology at UB.

The number of homicides committed by juveniles under age 18 is approaching 2,000 a year. And that number could skyrocket to as many as 6,000 to 8,000 annually within 10 years, according to Ewing.

"What we're going to see by the end of this century is the highest annual number of juvenile homicides in American history," he says.

Ewing bases his prediction on psychological data on juvenile homicide, child abuse, poverty, gun access, drug abuse and population demographics. He details his research findings in his just-released book, *Kids Who Kill* (Lexington Books, \$18.95).

This "epidemic" of juvenile homicides is not surprising, Ewing notes, because several factors that contribute to these killings also are increasing. The key factor is child abuse.

"Most kids who kill have been the victims of child abuse or have witnessed violence within the home," Ewing says. "Usually they have been victims themselves. Most of these kids who are so brutal have been brutalized themselves."

The number of reports of child abuse in the United States from 1976 through 1987 shows a meteoric rise, he says. Moreover, child abuse is becoming more severe, with a recent dramatic increase in the number of fatalities.

Ewing, who received a doctorate in child and family psychology from Cornell University and a law degree from Harvard, cites several other factors that contribute to juvenile homicide.

• **Accessibility of guns.** "It's incredible how any kid who wants a gun can get a gun," he says. "And now we're not talking just about cheap handguns, we're talking about Uzis, semiautomatic

rifles and pistols."

In his book, Ewing describes countless cases in which victims were killed with firearms. He asserts that many of these homicides, especially the intrafamilial killings, would not have occurred if guns were not accessible to the juvenile killers.

"If you cut out the availability of guns to juveniles, you probably would



cut half off the juvenile homicide rate," he says.

• **Drugs.** Drugs contribute to juvenile homicides by creating a market for teenage gangsters who sell drugs, enforce for dealers and collect drug debts. These teens think nothing of killing someone under these circumstances, Ewing says, noting that these are crimes that wouldn't occur except for the drug problem.

Drugs, he adds, have an even more insidious effect through parents who are drug addicts and abusers neglecting and abusing their children.

"Today's drug abusers are creating tomorrow's killers, or tomorrow's criminals, at least," he says.

Babies who are born while their mothers are addicted to crack cocaine often have neurological problems, he says. While they may not be so emotionally disturbed that they don't function, they often have serious learning and social problems. And these problems are compounded by the disturbed families they grow up in.

• **Poverty.** The percentage of children in the United States living in poverty has grown rapidly, mostly since Ronald Reagan was elected president in 1980. Ewing says. Between 1980 and 1987 the number of individuals under age 18 living in poverty increased in all but three states and grew nationally from 11 million to 13 million.

The link between poverty and crime is almost universally acknowledged, and that link extends to juvenile homicide, Ewing notes. It is in impoverished urban areas that the drug trade is flourishing, child abuse is increasing most rapidly, and where other crimes, such as robbery, are most likely to occur, he explains.

• **Turnaround in population trends.** During the past decade, there has been a steady decline in juvenile population, yet the number of juvenile homicides has risen steadily, Ewing says. Now the U.S. Census Bureau projects a demographic shift in which the juvenile population — those between 5 and 17 years of age — will increase by 7 percent

between 1990 and the end of the century after a 3.4 percent decline between 1980 and 1990.

"If nothing else happened, if we ended all child abuse, drug abuse, poverty, access to guns, which of course we can't, there would be at least a 7 percent increase in juvenile homicide just by virtue of the population shift alone," he says.

While a 7 percent increase in juvenile homicides — roughly 150 killings a year — may not seem terribly high, Ewing says, the number of homicides certainly would be tripled or quadrupled if the other factors were added in.

In order to turn this problem around, "the first and foremost thing you have to do is stop beating kids," he says. No matter what kind of killing it is — a teen who kills his father or mother; a juvenile who kills a woman he's raping; a teen street gang who kills — the link is that the killer is a victim himself or herself, Ewing says.

"I can't emphasize that enough: If you want to stop juvenile violence, especially extreme juvenile violence, you have to stop abusing children."

A member of the law faculty since 1985, Ewing previously conducted a private practice in clinical and forensic psychology. In addition to *Kids Who Kill*, Ewing also has written *Battered Women Who Kill: Psychological Self-Defense as Legal Justification* and edited the text *Psychology, Psychiatry and Law: A Clinical and Forensic Handbook*. He serves as co-editor of the journal *Behavioral Sciences and the Law*.

Ewing is the recipient of the Psychological Association of Western New York's 1990 Distinguished Achievement Award. A Diplomate in Forensic Psychology (American Board of Professional Psychology), he has examined many homicide defendants and testified as an expert in numerous murder trials. ■

*Sue Wuetcher is a staff writer for the UB News Bureau.*

## Professors Are Featured on Radio Series

Once again, UB Law professors were featured speakers for a special radio series. Eight commentaries on legal issues in the news aired on Wednesdays in October and November at 9:25 a.m. on WBFO-88.7 FM radio. WBFO is the public radio station of the University at Buffalo. UB Law alumnus Kevin O'Shaughnessy '87 was co-producer with Ernie Galavan.

Topics and speakers were: "Issues in the Confirmation of Supreme Court Nominee David Souter," presented by Professor George Kannar; "Fetal Protection Policies in the Workplace: Johnson Controls," presented by Professor Lucinda Finley; "A User's Guide to the Great Lakes Watershed: Health Effects of Toxic Contamination," by Professor Barry Boyer; "The Social Effects of Population Control: The Choice Between Overcrowding and a Generation of Spoiled Brats," by Professor Isabel Marcus; "Babies With Guns: The Drug Wars in American Cities," by Professor Muhammad Kenyatta; "Employee Ownership of Business," by Professor Peter Pitegoff; "The Right to Die," by Professor Ken Joyce; and "Are Corporate Takeovers Over?" by Associate Dean John Schlegel. ■