

Who Becomes a Killer? Explaining Why Most High-Risk Individuals Never Commit Homicide

Zul Khaidir Kadir¹

¹Fakultas Hukum, Universitas Muslim Indonesia, Indonesia

Corresponding author: zulkhaidir.kadir@umi.ac.id

Article Info

Article history:

Received July 27th, 2026

Revised August 3th, 2026

Accepted August 8th, 2026

Keyword:

Homicide; Homicidal threshold;
Lethality risk; Near-lethal violence;
Violence prediction.

ABSTRACT

Homicide research is much better at identifying people associated with serious violence than at explaining why only a small minority of high-risk individuals ever kill. The gap is obscured when homicide is treated as the extreme end of a single violence continuum. This article separates violence risk from lethality risk. The first concerns whether serious violence is likely to occur, whereas the second concerns whether a violent episode produces death. An integrative conceptual review of peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2020 and 2026, supplemented by foundational work on situated violence and weapon lethality, is used to develop a Homicidal Threshold Model. The threshold is not a numerical score or a stable property of an offender. It refers to an event condition in which serious violence becomes capable of producing death because the immediate motive and setting make lethal action feasible while effective restraints are absent, weakened, or bypassed. This formulation gives near-lethal incidents a central role. A victim may survive because an attack is interrupted, a weapon fails, an injury is less severe, or trauma care is reached quickly, even when the preceding configuration closely resembles a completed homicide. HTM is therefore limited to lethal differentiation where serious violence is already plausible and death is not predetermined. Its main implication is methodological. Completed homicide should be compared with attempted homicide, near-lethal injury, and closely matched serious non-lethal violence if the field wants to explain the boundary between violence and death rather than repeatedly rediscover broad correlates of dangerousness.



© 2026 The Authors. Published by Punggawa Legacy Center. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

INTRODUCTION

Many homicide studies begin with a sensible question and end with a less useful comparison (Kadir, 2026b, 2026e, 2026a). They ask who is likely to kill, then compare homicide offenders with people who have little or no serious violence history. Predictors emerge strongly, but the contrast says little about the harder case. Among people already exposed to recurrent conflict, prior offending, substance misuse, or other established risks, only a minority ever produce a homicide. Australian police data make that distinction visible because lethal, near-lethal, and non-lethal incidents differ not only in offender history but also in victim and situational characteristics (Eriksson et al., 2026). The unresolved problem is not simply why some people become violent. It is why death appears in one violent episode and not in another that begins with a similar level of danger. That difference is the real object of explanation.

A long criminal record looks persuasive after a killing because it supplies a ready narrative of escalation. That narrative is incomplete. Homicide can occur as a first conviction, so an observable

sequence of minor offending followed by increasing violence cannot be treated as a necessary route to lethal offending (Bojanić et al., 2023). Personality does not rescue the argument. Homicide offenders are not consistently the most psychopathic or sadistic members of offender populations, and some comparisons show greater levels of these traits among other offenders (Međedović & Vujičić, 2022). A person may therefore be highly assaultive without killing, while another person with a thinner official record may kill during a short period of acute conflict. Criminal history and personality still matter, but neither supplies a stable border between serious violence and homicide. The border is easier to see when the comparison group is not the general population but people whose violence came close to producing the same outcome.

The word “killer” can itself create confusion. In this article it describes an observed outcome, not a fixed human type. A homicide conviction tells us that a person caused a death under a legal definition. It does not prove that the person carried a permanent lethal essence before the act or retained one afterward. The distinction is not semantic. If “killer” is treated as an identity, research naturally looks backward for enduring traits that supposedly revealed the future act. If it is treated as an event outcome, the analysis has to ask what was different when the fatal episode occurred.

Risk assessment exposes the same difficulty in a more technical form. Structured tools generally outperform unstructured judgment for broad offending outcomes, yet their success does not remove the limits of individual prediction or the problem created by rare outcomes (Viljoen et al., 2025). Even in clinically selected populations, plausible predictors can become unstable when definitions narrow and statistical tests become more stringent. A 2026 meta-analysis of violence in non-affective psychosis found few robust predictors after correction, despite examining a population often treated publicly as intuitively dangerous (Ahle et al., 2026). Homicide pushes this problem further. A tool may correctly identify a population with elevated violence risk while still offering little help in distinguishing the few lethal outcomes inside that population. That is not simply a failure of calibration. It suggests that the predictors of violence and the conditions of lethality partly belong to different explanatory levels.

Situational work has warned against reducing homicide to offender characteristics for decades. Luckenbill’s analysis of homicide as a situated transaction showed how lethal encounters can develop through interaction rather than unfold from a pre-existing offender trait, while Felson and Steadman demonstrated that disputes leading to serious violence are shaped by the conduct of offenders, victims, and third parties (Felson & Steadman, 1983; Luckenbill, 1977). Contemporary motive research reaches a compatible conclusion from another direction. Homicide motives remain heterogeneous, which makes a single psychological route to killing difficult to defend (Finley et al., 2025). The weakness in much current work is therefore not ignorance of situations. It is that general person–situation interaction is often used to explain crime or violence broadly, whereas the narrower transition from serious violence to death remains under-specified. That narrower transition requires a different dependent variable and, just as importantly, a harder comparison group.

The Homicidal Threshold Model developed here is intended for that narrower task. It does not compete with general theories that explain why people perceive crime as an option or why criminogenic exposure changes across time. Situational Action Theory already provides a sophisticated account of how propensity and setting interact in criminal action (Wikström, 2019). The proposed model begins later in the causal sequence. It asks, conditional on serious violence being plausible, what makes an episode capable of producing death. The central claim is modest but demanding. Factors that explain violence are not necessarily the factors that explain lethality, and the difference becomes visible only when researchers study high-risk non-killers, near-lethal incidents, and completed homicides together. “Killer” is therefore retained in the title for the observed outcome, not as a claim that homicide offenders form a stable human category.

RESEARCH METHODS

An integrative conceptual review was used because the purpose is theory construction rather than pooled effect estimation. The empirical update window covered peer-reviewed journal articles published from 2020 through 2026. Targeted searches were conducted through PubMed and publisher databases, followed by citation tracing from highly relevant homicide, firearm, violence-risk, and desistance studies. Thirty recent journal articles with DOI identifiers were retained. Four older works were added because they establish the situational and weapon-lethality arguments against which the

proposed model must be positioned. Search terms combined homicide, lethal violence, near-lethal violence, violence risk, firearm lethality, protective factors, and desistance.

Selection was driven by the explanatory problem rather than by a fixed quota for disciplines or journals. Studies were retained when they helped distinguish general violence propensity from fatal outcome, compared lethal and non-lethal events, examined changing risk or protection, or identified event conditions that can alter survival. Evidence came from homicide studies, forensic psychology, criminology, psychiatry, public health, and trauma research. The corpus therefore includes developmental and clinical work, but those studies are not treated as homicide evidence merely because they identify violence risk. They enter the synthesis only where they clarify why a background risk can remain non-lethal or why a proximal condition changes the capacity of an episode to produce death. Foundational sources were used only to define prior theoretical territory and reduce the risk of presenting an established person–situation argument as a new theory. Preference was given to studies with direct lethal and non-lethal comparisons whenever such evidence was available. Purely descriptive studies were not used to support a causal mechanism unless the measured contrast bore on fatal versus nonfatal outcome. Studies centered on prevalence were retained sparingly when they clarified the denominator problem or showed how common exposure can coexist with rare lethal outcomes.

The synthesis was comparative. Each finding was read against a counterfactual: if two people or two incidents are broadly similar on conventional violence predictors, what would have to differ for death to occur in only one? This approach gives special weight to attempted homicide, near-lethal injury, and serious non-lethal assault. It also prevents the proposed threshold from becoming an actuarial score. The model requires later testing with matched offenders, event-level data, prospective cohorts, and designs separating intent from injury severity and survival.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. The Predictive Paradox of High Risk Without Homicide

Violence risk changes more quickly than a criminal history does. Repeated assessment after release improves prediction of imminent violence because current circumstances add information that a baseline score cannot preserve (Stone et al., 2021). Historical adversity has a similar limit. Adverse childhood experiences are associated with later violence, but their effects vary by offending outcome and do not specify a fatal endpoint (Craig & Zettler, 2021). A person may carry substantial developmental risk for years without entering a situation in which killing is desired, possible, or difficult to interrupt. Another person with fewer historical markers may encounter a much shorter period in which relationship loss, intoxication, weapon access, and acute grievance converge. The predictive paradox begins here. Stable indicators can identify vulnerability while the event that matters is temporally compressed. Consequently, the closer the outcome moves from general violence toward homicide, the less defensible it becomes to treat distant historical variables as though they contain the full causal explanation. They describe an elevated starting point. They do not tell us what changed on the day death became possible.

Substance use illustrates the difference without requiring an independent “drug causes homicide” pathway. Among drug-using populations, childhood maltreatment and conduct disorder can feed earlier criminal involvement and later violent arrest, showing how substance-related violence is often embedded in a longer developmental history (Guo et al., 2022). Alcohol-use disorder is likewise associated with violent offending and reoffending among justice-involved women (Mayer et al., 2023). Neither finding identifies who will kill. Intoxication may lower restraint during one dispute, but the same person may drink repeatedly without encountering an accessible victim or a lethal means. In another setting, substance use may matter mainly because it changes where the person spends time and with whom. The useful question is therefore not whether substances elevate violence risk. It is when they alter the short-term conditions under which violence can become fatal, and whether that alteration disappears when the setting changes.

Clinical histories are easily overread for the same reason. In a large forensic psychiatric cohort, repeated adverse childhood experiences were associated with violent criminal behavior among men and with several forms of psychopathology (van Beeck et al., 2026). Those associations matter for treatment, but they do not turn adversity into a homicide marker. Two people with similar trauma histories can have very different relationships, routines, weapon access, treatment engagement, and ways of responding to threat. Their shared history does not imply a shared lethal future.

Protective factors complicate the picture further because non-killing is not always the passive absence of risk. In juvenile and young-adult offenders, structured assessment of strengths adds predictive information beyond risk-focused assessment (Kleeven et al., 2022). Some high-risk individuals maintain a relationship they are unwilling to lose, remain engaged in treatment, or repeatedly leave a conflict before it becomes physically dangerous. Others live in environments where weapons are difficult to obtain or where third parties interrupt escalation. These restraints are not all durable traits. A protective factor can disappear during separation, housing instability, relapse, or a sudden change in peer group. What looks like “the same risk level” on paper may therefore contain very different capacities for interruption, and those differences may be more informative near the lethal boundary than another historical risk marker. This is especially important when risk is reassessed only at long intervals.

Protection should not simply be scored as the negative pole of danger. Meta-analytic evidence from the Structured Assessment of Protective Factors for violence risk shows that protective information has incremental predictive value, while other work on recidivism similarly supports modeling strengths rather than inferring them from low risk (Burghart et al., 2023; Eisenberg et al., 2022). For homicide theory, the sharper implication is that repeated non-lethal outcomes may be produced. A person can reach severe anger many times and still stop because a child is present, a weapon is absent, a victim leaves, or a moral boundary remains intact. Those endings are data, not failures of a risk factor to “work.” Repeated restraint may reveal a mechanism that ordinary case-control comparisons never record, particularly when the same person encounters conflict more than once.

The size of the non-lethal pool also matters. In a California cohort of 29,156 people treated after a nonfatal firearm assault, only a small fraction later died from firearm homicide despite the group’s obvious exposure to severe violence (Pear et al., 2020). The study concerns victimization rather than perpetration, but it demonstrates the broader base-rate problem vividly. Even after an event serious enough to involve a firearm injury, fatal outcomes remain uncommon relative to continued survival. “High risk” is therefore a relative category, not a forecast of homicide. The denominator cannot be treated as background noise because it tells us how many people share danger without reaching the outcome under study.

2. Violence Risk Is Not Lethality Risk

Violence risk is the probability that serious aggression or physical harm will occur. Lethality risk, as used here, is narrower: the conditional probability that a serious violent episode produces death. The second probability depends partly on the offender, but it also depends on the means used and what happens after the attack begins. Zimring’s classic work showed that firearm characteristics can affect whether an assault becomes fatal, challenging the assumption that death simply reveals greater murderous intent (Zimring, 1972). A recent analysis of injurious school shootings reached a related conclusion by separating indicators of firearm lethality from indicators of aggressors’ intentions to kill (Klein et al., 2025). The distinction is crucial because a more lethal event is not always evidence of a more lethally disposed person. If two offenders intend serious injury but one has access to a more lethal weapon, a difference in mortality can emerge without an equivalent difference in underlying violent propensity. Homicide research should not infer the latter merely from the former.

Household firearm exposure makes the same point from the relational side (Kadir, 2026f). Firearms in the home are associated with homicide risks that extend to cohabitants, and women living with handgun owners face particularly elevated intimate-partner homicide risk (Butler et al., 2020; Studdert et al., 2022). The causal problem is therefore located partly in a setting. Two relationships can contain coercion, jealousy, and prior assault, yet the immediate capacity to produce death differs when a firearm is accessible during an escalating conflict.

Survival makes the boundary even less personal. In Philadelphia, people shot in interpersonal violence had higher adjusted mortality as predicted ground transport time to a trauma center increased. Wound location and the number of wounds also strongly differentiated fatal from nonfatal shootings (Byrne et al., 2022). A homicide classification can thus depend on facts that occur after an assailant has acted. One victim reaches definitive care rapidly and survives. Another sustains a less survivable wound or is farther from treatment and dies. The offender’s intent may be similar in both cases, yet the legal and epidemiological outcomes diverge. This does not make intent irrelevant. It means that completed homicide is jointly produced by violent action and survivability. The same conceptual problem appears when intervention stops an attack midway. A victim who survives because a neighbor arrives, a weapon

jams, or an ambulance reaches the scene quickly may have been exposed to a configuration no less homicidally dangerous than one recorded as completed murder. Any theory of lethality that treats death as a pure readout of offender dangerousness will misattribute part of the outcome.

The difference between attempted and completed homicide is consequently not a clean measure of intention. Criminal law must decide cases through evidence of *mens rea*, conduct, causation, and result, but empirical homicide research often inherits the completed outcome as though it were a direct behavioral category. Near-lethal incidents expose the mismatch. Two attacks can involve comparable intent and force while only one produces death because of injury trajectory or rescue. For theory building, fatality should therefore be modeled as an outcome with its own determinants rather than as an automatic indicator that the offender belonged to a more dangerous class. This does not erase legal distinctions. It prevents those distinctions from being mistaken for causal ones.

Places also distribute lethal capacity unevenly (Kadir, 2026c). Firearm dealers and shooting incidents are patterned along street networks and interact with concentrated disadvantage rather than appearing randomly across urban space (Semenza et al., 2022). Young people in large U.S. cities are likewise exposed to nearby gun homicide at very unequal rates across disadvantaged neighborhoods (Kravitz-Wirtz et al., 2022). These patterns can change who encounters weapons, how often retaliatory conflicts arise, and whether violence is normalized in daily routines. Still, most residents of high-violence neighborhoods never kill. Structural exposure can widen the pool of dangerous situations without deciding which encounter becomes fatal. It changes the frequency of opportunities and the resources available within them.

Macro-level findings need the same restraint. Poverty has been associated with homicide variation in China, although the relationship between deprivation, inequality, and lethal violence depends on how those conditions are measured and where they operate (Dong et al., 2020). North American evidence likewise shows that income inequality does not predict homicide uniformly across Canada, the United States, and Mexico (Vilalta-Perdomo & Fondevila, 2026). Structural conditions matter because they change exposure to conflict, illicit markets, institutional protection, and lethal means. They are poor candidates for a direct individual threshold.

Fatal and nonfatal violent events should be compared only after violence itself is held roughly constant. Research on intimate-partner violence found that weapon use, offender alcohol use, and several victim or offender characteristics differentiated homicide from aggravated assault (Overstreet et al., 2021). Both groups had already crossed a serious violence boundary. The remaining variation therefore speaks more directly to lethality than a comparison between homicide offenders and peaceful populations. HTM treats that contrast as primary, especially when intent can be measured independently of the final result.

3. The Homicidal Threshold Model

The homicidal threshold is not a score and not a point on a personality scale. It is the event condition at which an already plausible course of serious violence becomes capable of producing death under an alignment of motivation, means, opportunity, victim accessibility, and inhibition. “Capable” is important. Crossing the threshold does not guarantee death because the attack can fail, the victim can escape, intervention can occur, or medical treatment can succeed. The model therefore separates the production of a potentially fatal event from the final biological outcome. It also avoids a familiar circularity. A person is not said to have crossed the threshold merely because someone died. Evidence for threshold conditions must be observable in completed homicide, attempted homicide, and near-lethal episodes, including cases where the victim survives. The construct is thus conditional and event-based. It should be measurable before the final outcome is known, otherwise it becomes only a retrospective label for homicide.

Background vulnerability remains part of the model, but it is not given the explanatory burden of the homicide itself. Developmental adversity, prior violence, coercive relationship patterns, and chronic substance problems can make violent responses more available or more likely. Protective-factor research shows why the same history cannot be read as a one-way trajectory. People with substantial risk can also possess active strengths that reduce later violence, and those strengths are not adequately represented by simply subtracting points from a risk total. The threshold approach therefore treats history as a reservoir of vulnerability whose relevance depends on what later activates it.

Motivation is proximal rather than synonymous with personality. A person can carry resentment for years without moving toward homicide. What changes may be the meaning of a particular event.

Separation can be interpreted as intolerable loss of control. A perceived betrayal can become a demand for retaliation. A confrontation can suddenly be understood as a threat that requires immediate defensive force. Intimate-partner homicide research on “leaking” shows that some offenders communicate violent intent before killing, but warning behaviors are heterogeneous and do not translate neatly into prediction (Rumpf et al., 2024). Motive matters in the model because it changes the subjective value of lethal action at a particular time, not because every motive corresponds to a stable killer subtype.

Timing becomes visible once motivation is treated this way. Canadian intimate-partner homicide research shows that criminal-career and contextual factors shape the timing of homicide without supporting a simple assumption that lethal violence is merely the late stage of a steadily escalating career (Chopin et al., 2024). A short period can therefore carry more lethal potential than years of prior offending. Relationship breakdown, new access to a victim, acute intoxication, and a weapon may overlap briefly. Afterward, the same configuration may disappear. Retrospective case files often make the pathway look smoother than it was because scattered warning signs are assembled after the outcome is known.

Opportunity is not only proximity to a victim. It is the practical availability of a method that can turn violent purpose into a fatal act without effective interruption. The setting can make that opportunity easier or harder. A locked door, a third party, distance, surveillance, or the absence of a weapon can end an episode that would otherwise escalate. None of those conditions changes the offender’s childhood history. They change what can be done at that moment. That is why opportunity belongs inside the causal account rather than being treated as background context.

Inhibition is equally easy to misunderstand. It should not be reduced to low aggression or weak motivation. Contemporary work on self-control argues that aggression can sometimes be planned and deliberately regulated in pursuit of a valued goal rather than simply result from a loss of control (Chester, 2024). A person may therefore cross a homicidal threshold by eroding inhibition during rage, but another may do so by intentionally bypassing restraints while remaining behaviorally controlled. Internal inhibition can consist of a moral boundary against killing or attachment to consequences that the person refuses to risk. External inhibition appears when escape, intervention, physical separation, or rapid police response prevents the intended act from being completed.

Near-lethal violence is the most useful stress test of the model. If a victim survives an attempted killing because a weapon malfunctions, a third party intervenes, or trauma care is reached in time, the offender may have entered a configuration that was just as homicidally dangerous as a completed homicide. Conversely, an impulsive assault can become a homicide because the weapon is unusually lethal or the injury happens to strike a vital organ. These cases are awkward for theories that infer dangerousness from the final outcome. They are expected under a threshold model because the model separates lethal capacity from death itself. The closer the comparison group is to the fatal event, the less room remains for broad risk factors to masquerade as homicide-specific explanations. Near-lethal cases also expose where the model could be wrong. If they consistently look more like ordinary assaults than completed homicides on proximal conditions, then the proposed threshold has been drawn at the wrong place. Their analytic value lies precisely in that possibility.

HTM also assumes that its components are not simply additive. A firearm does not add the same amount of lethal risk in every dispute, and intense grievance does not have a fixed effect regardless of access or inhibition. The model expects interaction. Weapon access may matter little when the victim is physically absent, while a highly activated motive may remain non-lethal when separation is maintained. Conversely, modest changes in several conditions can become consequential when they occur together. This proposition is empirically demanding because it requires event-level measurement and sufficient numbers of near-lethal cases. It is nevertheless preferable to a threshold defined by an arbitrary total score, which would reproduce the accumulation logic the model is intended to move beyond.

HTM is designed for lethal differentiation where serious interpersonal violence is already plausible and the final outcome is not predetermined. It should be most useful for confrontational violence, retaliatory events, intimate-partner violence, robbery-related violence, and other episodes in which person and situation interact over a relatively short period. It is not offered as a complete account of every form of intentional killing. Highly organized assassination, some serial homicide, or killings embedded in command structures may require mechanisms that operate over longer planning horizons

and at different levels of analysis. Restricting the model in this way makes its claims testable rather than universal.

4. Discussion and Implications

Person–situation interaction is not a new claim in criminology. General theories already explain why a person commits crime or violence in a setting. HTM begins after serious violence is a credible possibility and asks why the event acquires the capacity to produce death. That change in dependent variable alters the comparison group, the relevant timing, and the meaning of several predictors. Prior assault may explain why violence was available as a response, while weapon lethality or victim accessibility may explain why this particular event became fatal. A theory that predicts assault well may therefore remain a weak theory of homicide without being a poor theory of violence. HTM stands or falls on whether those levels can be separated empirically, not on a claim to have discovered that situations matter. Its proposed novelty is lethal differentiation conditional on serious violence risk.

Research design should move away from easy contrasts. Completed homicide should be compared with attempted homicide, near-lethal injury, and serious non-lethal violence using matching or weighting strategies that reduce differences in age, sex, prior violence, substance history, and other background risks. The analysis can then concentrate on proximal changes and failed lethal opportunities. Desistance research supports this move because non-offending is understood as an active and socially embedded process rather than an empty remainder (Farrall & Shapland, 2022). Cognitive shifts and changing life circumstances can also alter the feasibility of continued offending (Giordano, 2022).

Homicide is too heterogeneous for one threshold configuration to fit every case. A lethal transition in intimate-partner violence will not necessarily resemble one in gang retaliation or psychosis-related violence. The model does not require identical motives. Its common proposition is narrower. Once serious violence is plausible, death should be more likely when proximal motivation and lethal capacity align while effective inhibition is weak, bypassed, or unavailable. Different homicide types may reach that condition through different routes, and some may sit outside the model's useful scope.

There is also a legal and ethical reason to keep outcome and identity apart. Completed homicide often carries far greater punishment than an assault that, by chance or medical rescue, produces survival. That distinction is a legitimate matter for criminal law, but criminological explanation should not quietly convert the harsher result into evidence of a permanently more lethal person. A threshold framework instead asks which parts of the fatal outcome belong to intent, which belong to method and opportunity, and which belong to survivability. The answer may differ across cases. That uncertainty should be preserved rather than hidden inside the label "homicide offender," particularly when causal explanation is later used to justify risk classification, sentencing narratives, or release decisions.

Prediction should remain a secondary ambition. A framework built around short-lived configurations could easily be misused to justify broader labeling of people as potentially homicidal. That would reproduce the problem the model is intended to correct (Kadir, 2026d). Even high-risk populations contain many false positives for homicide (Kadir, 2026g). Juvenile homicide offenders themselves show substantial variation in persistence and later desistance, which is inconsistent with a permanent lethal identity (Khachatryan & Heide, 2025). HTM is therefore better understood first as an explanatory model and only later, if prospective evidence supports it, as a basis for narrowly timed prevention. It should never be converted into a simple additive score in which more factors automatically mean a person is closer to killing. The relevant combinations may be interactive, and some components may substitute for or suppress others.

Prevention looks different when the target is a configuration rather than a type of person. Long-term interventions still matter because they can reduce violent propensity and exposure. The immediate task, however, is to identify conditions that make the next episode more capable of producing death. Weapon separation during an acute relationship crisis, physical distance between antagonists, interruption of retaliatory contact, or rapid access to emergency care can alter lethality without changing an offender's biography. The model therefore connects criminal justice prevention with public health and trauma systems in a way that offender-centered frameworks often miss. A death prevented through survival is still a homicide prevented, even when the violent act itself was not prevented. This point also changes evaluation. Programs should not be judged only by whether all violence disappears. Reductions in fatality among otherwise comparable violent events may represent a meaningful prevention effect that ordinary recidivism measures overlook.

Empirical testing should be unforgiving. Evidence would count against HTM if matched lethal and near-lethal events were explained almost entirely by stable offender characteristics, or if proximal means, opportunity, inhibition, and survivability added little once conventional violence risk was controlled. The model would also need revision if its proposed components could not be measured before the outcome was known. Those are useful risks to take. A theory that can explain every homicide retrospectively by saying that “enough factors converged” explains very little. The next stage of research should therefore predefine threshold indicators, test them across homicide types, and examine whether they improve lethal differentiation without producing an unacceptable expansion of false-positive classifications. Prospective coding and blinded assessment would reduce the temptation to reconstruct threshold conditions after death is known.

CONCLUSION

Homicide studies have spent effort identifying dangerous people, yet dangerousness and lethality are not the same outcome. The evidence reviewed here suggests that developmental, clinical, and criminal-history factors are better understood as conditions of violent vulnerability than as markers of a distinct homicidal class. Death depends more heavily on what happens when that vulnerability enters an encounter. A weapon may change the injury that violence can produce. A victim may be trapped or able to leave. Intervention may arrive or fail. Medical care may convert what would have been a homicide into survival. The Homicidal Threshold Model gives these contingencies a defined place without denying background propensity. Its threshold is an event condition, not a numerical score, and its scope is limited to cases in which serious violence is plausible but death is not predetermined. This keeps the model focused on lethal differentiation rather than on a general theory of criminality.

The most useful comparison is therefore not killer versus ordinary citizen. It is completed homicide versus the violent events that came close to the same endpoint and did not reach it. If future research can identify what repeatedly separates those outcomes, homicide theory may become less dependent on retrospective profiles and more precise about the boundary directly it is actually trying to explain. The high-risk person who never kills is not a failed case. That person is part of the answer, and the near-lethal event is part of the evidence needed to find it.

REFERENCES

- Ahle, G., Henriksen, M. G., Mølstrøm, I.-M., Rasmussen, A. C. R., Brandt-Christensen, M., & Nordgaard, J. (2026). Predictors of violence against others in non-affective psychosis: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Schizophrenia Research*, 291, 68–79. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.schres.2026.02.015>
- Bojanić, L., Baird, A., Ash, K., & Shaw, J. (2023). Homicide as the first conviction: A retrospective cohort study. *Aggressive Behavior*, 49(6), 595–601. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ab.22097>
- Burghart, M., de Ruiter, C., Hynes, S. E., Krishnan, N., Levtova, Y., & Uyar, A. (2023). The Structured Assessment of Protective Factors for violence risk (SAPROF): A meta-analysis of its predictive and incremental validity. *Psychological Assessment*, 35(1), 56–67. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pas0001184>
- Butler, E. K., Boveng, H. M., Harruff, R. C., Duchin, J. S., Vavilala, M. S., Rivara, F. P., & Rowhani-Rahbar, A. (2020). Risk of suicide, homicide, and unintentional firearm deaths in the home. *JAMA Internal Medicine*, 180(6), 909–911. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamainternmed.2020.0806>
- Byrne, J. P., Kaufman, E., Scantling, D., Tam, V., Martin, N., Raza, S., Cannon, J. W., Schwab, C. W., Reilly, P. M., & Seamon, M. J. (2022). Association between geospatial access to care and firearm injury mortality in Philadelphia. *JAMA Surgery*, 157(10), 942–949. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamasurg.2022.3677>
- Chester, D. S. (2024). Aggression as successful self-control. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 18(2), e12832. <https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12832>
- Chopin, J., Guay, J.-P., Fortin, F., Paquette, S., Pélouquin, O., & Chartrand, E. (2024). Earlier or later? A survival analysis of criminal career and contextual factors associated with intimate partner homicide in Canada. *The British Journal of Criminology*, 64(6), 1362–1384. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/zaae023>

- Craig, J. M., & Zettler, H. R. (2021). Are the effects of adverse childhood experiences on violent recidivism offense-specific? *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, 19(1), 27–44. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1541204020939638>
- Dong, B., Egger, P. H., & Guo, Y. (2020). Is poverty the mother of crime? Evidence from homicide rates in China. *PLOS ONE*, 15(5), e0233034. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0233034>
- Eisenberg, M. J., van Horn, J. E., van der Put, C. E., Stams, G. J. J. M., & Hendriks, J. (2022). Protective factors as uni- or bipolar factors and their incremental validity and accuracy in predicting general recidivism. *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry*, 81, 101772. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijlp.2021.101772>
- Eriksson, L., Allen, J., McGee, T. R., Lockwood, K., Martin, P., & Mazerolle, P. (2026). It's not just a matter of chance when no one dies: Characteristics of offenders, victims, and situations in lethal versus non-lethal violence. *Homicide Studies*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10887679251407105>
- Farrall, S., & Shapland, J. (2022). Do the reasons why people desist from crime vary by age, length of offending career or lifestyle factors? *The Howard Journal of Crime and Justice*, 61(4), 519–539. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hojo.12494>
- Felson, R. B., & Steadman, H. J. (1983). Situational factors in disputes leading to criminal violence. *Criminology*, 21(1), 59–74. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-9125.1983.tb00251.x>
- Finley, J.-C. A., Sen-Gupta, N., & Hanlon, R. E. (2025). The Homicide Offender Motive Scale (HOMS): A classification system for homicide motives based on a qualitative systematic review. *Journal of Forensic Sciences*, 70(6), 2129–2142. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1556-4029.70170>
- Giordano, P. C. (2022). Some cognitive transformations about the dynamics of desistance. *Criminology & Public Policy*, 21(4), 787–809. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9133.12609>
- Guo, X., Zhang, Z., Liu, Y., Mei, C., & Yang, B. (2022). The violent offending of drug users: The pathway from childhood maltreatment to violent arrests mediated by conduct disorder and crime age. *The Journal of Forensic Psychiatry & Psychology*, 33(2), 267–290. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14789949.2022.2046134>
- Kadir, Z. K. (2026a). Beyond Firearms: Mapping Global Patterns of Non-Firearm Homicide in Comparative Criminological Perspective. *Punggawa Global Research: Jurnal Multidisiplin*, 1(2), 1–10.
- Kadir, Z. K. (2026b). Mapping Recorded Homicide in Indonesia: An Ecological Criminological Analysis Using BPS Data. *Punggawa Law Review*, 1(2), 9–18.
- Kadir, Z. K. (2026c). Narrative Closure in Honor killing Cases: How Judgments Stabilise Meaning, Eliminate Ambiguity, and Produce Sentencing Certainty. *Punggawa Law Review*, 1(1), 1–10.
- Kadir, Z. K. (2026d). Neurocriminology and the Next Generation of Criminological Theory: Integration, Limits, and Ethical Risks. *Punggawa Global Research: Jurnal Multidisiplin*, 1(1), 1–8.
- Kadir, Z. K. (2026e). Preventing Murder Without Expanding Punishment: Rethinking Homicide Policy Beyond Deterrence. *Punggawa Law Review*, 1(3), 49–58. <https://doi.org/10.67707/plr.v1i3.40>
- Kadir, Z. K. (2026f). Rural Criminology and the Cultural Authorization of Homicide: How Lethal Violence Becomes Socially Permissible. *Punggawa Social Inquiry: Journal of Crime, Culture, and Social Dynamics*, 1(1), 1–10.
- Kadir, Z. K. (2026g). Siri'Killing dalam Masyarakat Bugis-Makassar: Konstruksi, Pola Pembunuhan, dan Respons Hukum Pidana. *MUTIARA: Jurnal Ilmiah Multidisiplin Indonesia*, 4(2), 158–172.
- Khachatryan, N., & Heide, K. M. (2025). Juvenile homicide offenders: Persistence in offending and late desistance. *Victims & Offenders*, 20(8), 1550–1576. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15564886.2025.2515093>
- Kleeven, A. T. H., de Vries Robbé, M., Mulder, E. A., & Popma, A. (2022). Risk assessment in juvenile and young adult offenders: Predictive validity of the SAVRY and SAPROF-YV. *Assessment*, 29(2), 181–197. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1073191120959740>
- Klein, B. R., Schnell, C., Chermak, S. M., & Freilich, J. D. (2025). Examining the effects of firearm lethality and aggressors' intentions to kill on injurious firearm violence at American schools: A research note. *Criminology*, 63(3), 673–686. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9125.70005>
- Kravitz-Wirtz, N., Bruns, A., Aubel, A. J., Zhang, X., & Buggs, S. A. (2022). Inequities in community exposure to deadly gun violence by race/ethnicity, poverty, and neighborhood disadvantage

- among youth in large US cities. *Journal of Urban Health*, 99, 610–625. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11524-022-00656-0>
- Luckenbill, D. F. (1977). Criminal homicide as a situated transaction. *Social Problems*, 25(2), 176–186. <https://doi.org/10.2307/800293>
- Mayer, J., Streb, J., Steiner, I., Wolf, V., Klein, V., Dudeck, M., & Franke, I. (2023). Alcohol use disorder as a risk factor for violent offending and reoffending in delinquent women with substance use disorders. *Archives of Women's Mental Health*, 26, 331–339. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00737-023-01316-1>
- Mededović, J., & Vujičić, N. (2022). How dark is the personality of murderers? Psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and sadism in homicide offenders. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 197, 111772. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2022.111772>
- Overstreet, S., McNealey, S., & Lapsey, D. S., Jr. (2021). Can victim, offender, and situational characteristics differentiate between lethal and non-lethal incidents of intimate partner violence occurring among adults? *Homicide Studies*, 25(3), 220–238. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1088767920959402>
- Pear, V. A., McCort, C. D., Kravitz-Wirtz, N., Shev, A. B., Rowhani-Rahbar, A., & Wintemute, G. J. (2020). Risk factors for assaultive reinjury and death following a nonfatal firearm assault injury: A population-based retrospective cohort study. *Preventive Medicine*, 139, 106198. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ypmed.2020.106198>
- Rumpf, T., Horn, S., Vogt, C., Göbel, K., Görgen, T., Zibulski, K. M., Uttenweiler, V., & Bondü, R. (2024). Leaking in intimate partner homicide: A systematic review. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 25(4), 3005–3019. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15248380241237213>
- Semenza, D. C., Griffiths, E., Xu, J., & Stansfield, R. (2022). Firearm dealers and local gun violence: A street network analysis of shootings and concentrated disadvantage in Atlanta. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 59(5), 627–658. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00224278221077626>
- Stone, A. G., Lloyd, C. D., & Serin, R. C. (2021). Dynamic risk factors reassessed regularly after release from incarceration predict imminent violent recidivism. *Law and Human Behavior*, 45(6), 512–523. <https://doi.org/10.1037/lhb0000463>
- Studdert, D. M., Zhang, Y., Holsinger, E. E., Prince, L., Holsinger, A. F., Rodden, J. A., Wintemute, G. J., & Miller, M. (2022). Homicide deaths among adult cohabitants of handgun owners in California, 2004 to 2016: A cohort study. *Annals of Internal Medicine*, 175(6), 804–811. <https://doi.org/10.7326/M21-3762>
- van Beeck, M., van Koppen, M. V., Verbruggen, J., & Harte, J. M. (2026). Adverse childhood experiences and their relationship with psychological disorders and violent criminal behaviour within a forensic psychiatric cohort. *Criminal Behaviour and Mental Health*, 36(3), 130–140. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cbm.70038>
- Vilalta-Perdomo, C., & Fondevila, G. (2026). Income inequality and homicide in North America: A contextual analysis of Canada, the United States and Mexico. *Journal of International Development*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jid.70100>
- Viljoen, J. L., Goossens, I., Monjazebe, S., Cochrane, D. M., Vargen, L. M., Jonnson, M. R., Blanchard, A. J. E., Li, S. M. Y., & Jackson, J. R. (2025). Are risk assessment tools more accurate than unstructured judgments in predicting violent, any, and sexual offending? A meta-analysis of direct comparison studies. *Behavioral Sciences & the Law*, 43(1), 75–113. <https://doi.org/10.1002/bsl.2698>
- Wikström, P.-O. H. (2019). Situational Action Theory: Toward a dynamic theory of crime and its causes. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Criminology and Criminal Justice*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264079.013.456>
- Zimring, F. E. (1972). The medium is the message: Firearm caliber as a determinant of death from assault. *The Journal of Legal Studies*, 1(1), 97–123. <https://doi.org/10.1086/467479>