

## Why Do Young Males Attack Schools? Seven Discipline Leaders Share Their Perspectives

**Moderator:** Mary Ellen O'Toole, PhD

**Participants:** Jorge Folino, MD, PhD, James Garbarino, PhD, Steven M. Gorelick, PhD, Helinä Häkkänen-Nyholm, PhD, J. Reid Meloy, Stanton E. Samenow, PhD, and Yuki S. Nishimura, MD, PhD

**M**ASS SHOOTINGS IN PUBLIC PLACES such as political rallies in Arizona, movie theaters in Colorado, and grade schools in Connecticut and Norway are some of the most horrifying events we face in the 21st century. The time has come for us to research, understand, and communicate the causes for perpetrators who wreak such havoc on unsuspecting, unprepared, innocent people. The time has come for a peer-reviewed scientific journal to do everything possible to explore the contributing factors of such violent acts in order to mitigate or prevent them in the future. To this end, *Violence and Gender* has assembled a multidisciplinary panel of experts to look at the basic information regarding shooters—generally white males between fifteen and thirty years of age—from a wide range of scientific and behavioral perspectives as a foundation for understanding “why.”

When I became Editor-in-Chief of *Violence and Gender*, I knew this discussion had to be at the forefront of the Journal's focus. So I assembled a panel of international experts from different disciplines and areas of expertise and posed specific questions. I wanted to initiate a dialogue that would include new ideas, disagreement, consensus, and controversy—a conversation that will eventually lead to answers. The outcome of this roundtable, as you will read, is powerful. My hope is that all of these perspectives will be provocative to you, the reader, and we will continue to create and sustain great interest in this topic and stimulate new thought as well as many new manuscripts, perspectives, and roundtables for this publication. The importance of understanding why these mass murderers are motivated to commit such horrible crimes is far more than a research question. It is a matter of life and death.

Our expert panel includes **Jorge Folino, MD, PhD**, a professor of psychiatry at the National University of La Plata (UNLP) in Buenos Aires Province, Argentina. He is director of UNLP's post-graduate master's program in forensic mental health. **Dr. James Garbarino** holds the Maude C. Clarke Chair in Humanistic Psychology and was founding director of the Center for the Human Rights of Children at Loyola University Chicago. **Steven M. Gorelick, PhD**, is distinguished lecturer in the Department of Film and Media Studies at Hunter College, CUNY, and a board member of John Jay College of Criminal Justice's Academy for Critical Incident Analysis (ACIA). He was invited to Norway in 2012 to observe the trial of mass-

murderer Anders Bering Breivik and examine the impact and traumatic aftermath of the 2011 Utoya tragedy. **Helinä Häkkänen-Nyholm, PhD**, is the CEO and forensic psychologist of PsyJuridica Ltd. She has worked for more than ten years as a psychologist in the legal field and is a former criminal profiler of the Finnish police. She is one of the leading experts in Finland on psychopathy and narcissism and the editor of two books on psychopathy, and the author and coauthor of numerous scientific publications on violent behavior. **Reid Meloy, PhD** is a diplomat in forensic psychology of the American Board of Professional Psychology and consults on criminal and civil cases throughout the United States and Europe. He is a clinical professor of psychiatry at UC San Diego, School of Medicine, and a faculty member of the San Diego Psychoanalytic Institute. **Stanton E. Samenow, PhD**, is a clinical psychologist in practice in Alexandria, Virginia. He has served as a consultant and expert witness and has presented training seminars to professionals in corrections, mental health, education, law enforcement, social services, and the judiciary. Among his publications are *Inside the Criminal Mind* and *The Myth of the Out of Character Crime*. **Yuki S. Nishimura, MD, PhD**, is an expert on youth behavior at Keio (Japan) University Health Center.

Mass murder, including shootings, bombings, and stabbings at schools, universities, work places, and public venues are shockingly common. The level of lethality and the gratuitous violence in these cases is striking. While the majority of these cases have occurred in the United States, others have occurred throughout the world, including Europe, South America, Asia, and the Middle East. According to the FBI, most often in these cases the shooters are males.

From your professional perspective:

1. Though not exclusive to the United States, what are the primary reasons for the high incidence of these crimes occurring in the United States?
2. Why do we see mostly young males (15–29) responsible for these types of crimes?
3. What are some of the motives for these crimes, and does the copycat phenomenon play a role in this behavior?

**Jorge O. Folino:** The study of cases of multiple homicides not followed by suicide in Argentina allowed for the exploration of different causal factors and the social response

according to the type of multiple homicide involved. When multiple homicide occurs within the family and the perpetrator is a woman, a pathological factor is generally identified and the social response is homogeneously paternalistic (noncriminal responsibility verdicts and media exoneration, sanitary services involvement, and social comments on suffering and solidarity).

However, when the perpetrator of the homicide within the family is a man, the most relevant factors are chronic conflict and intolerance to separation or rejection. After a dentist killed his two daughters, his wife, and his mother-in-law in 1992—a case that was in the Argentine mass media for a long time and a polarized social response was seen—news, comments from acquaintances and patients, jokes, graffiti and jingles, and even popular songs exhibited four types of social responses. Specifically, the four types included the lack of understanding the attributes of mental disease; rage/reproval; chauvinist identification/permissiveness; and liberation identification.

I will not comment on the first type of response. For the second type, the representation of the perpetrator was that of a strong kind of gender violence and stimulated the actions of activists with reasonable complaints. The senate of the province of Buenos Aires sanctioned a law that ordered the expropriation of the house where the murderer shot his family. The house was destined to become the “Municipal Centre for the Memory, Preservation and Treatment of Gender Violence” and the headquarters of a nongovernmental organization that promotes those values.

The response of chauvinist identification/permissiveness, on the contrary, has an implicit underestimation of the seriousness of the situation. In the social sector that exhibited such chauvinist identification/permissiveness ideals, permissive cultural values precede the broadcasting of such intrafamily violence. Because of this theory, I cannot say that the effect was purely a copycat phenomenon but an addition to the accumulation of accounts of gender violence.

Finally, the response that I call “liberating identification” is seen in subjects in a permanent and stressful family conflict situation. This particular response can be detected in the health-care field or in psychiatric forensic examinations and carries unique personality traits for the person experiencing the family tension. The dentist executed a violent and devastating alternative to handling family stress, thus becoming a prototype for those who are severely stressed. Fantasy was not the path taken to arrive at this extreme alternative; the mechanism was the transference from a collective representation to an extremely demanding personal situation. Thus the individual might learn that such violent action is an alternative solution for his problems—a privileged pathway for the copycat phenomena.

Additionally, in 2004 I had the opportunity to research the first school shooting case in Argentina. Social upheaval and mass media dissemination of the news were extraordinary and poignant. The inhabitants of the small city of Carmen de Patagones were shocked by the sudden grief caused by a 15-year-old adolescent, who killed three of his classmates and wounded five. The impact was nationwide; the government provided assistance at both the community and school level to deal with the aftermath. The two experts

that carried out the forensic report recommended the judge limit the reporting of the mass media to avoid copycat activity. And although government agencies took special care when talking to the media, the news organizations still reported on the incident for a long period of time as an “engaging” story that was repeated every anniversary of the tragedy. In spite of such circulation, the social and personal reactions were primarily of astonishment, lack of understanding, empathy with the victims, and in some way, punitive to the perpetrator, who claimed to be non-responsible because of his age. It is possible that this negative assessment of the crime prevented the appearance of copycat activity.

I would assert that in our community, the copycat phenomena of multiple homicides could operate when there is a combination of characteristics of the homicide with the values held by a subsector of society and/or when there are severe conflicting and stressful situations.

**James Garborino:** I believe the primary reason for the disproportionate incidence of these crimes in the United States is our “gun culture.” It is the physical, psychological, and cultural “availability” of firearms that allows young, disturbed, angry, and hurt boys and young men to act lethally. This is particularly true because many, if not most, of these attacks have a suicidal component to them (in which either the attack is followed by self-inflicted shooting death by the perpetrator or in which the perpetrator invites “death by cop” when law enforcement responds to the initial attack). I believe research demonstrates that access to lethal weapons is an important facilitator of suicide.

The starting point is that young males are disproportionately responsible for most forms of lethal violence. Perhaps the only exception is the killing of infants and young children by parents in the form of child abuse. But researchers have calculated that if we examine the rate of killing young children in proportion to the amount of time in which they are being “cared for” by males and females, the rate for males is actually higher than for females. Thus, the disproportion of males among mass murderers is not surprising. The proportion among school shooters is much higher than in other forms of killing, of course. This appears to be related to the vulnerability of young males to feelings of disrespect and humiliation during adolescence and early adulthood (including bullying and teasing about sexual orientation) that lead to fantasizing about revenge.

I have interviewed teenagers who attempted “school shootings” (but in both cases were apprehended before shooting anyone). I believe their motives cluster around two issues: 1. Responding to feeling marginalized and humiliated, and 2. seeking glorification among real and “imaginary” audiences. The mass attacks fulfill both of these interests. There is indeed a “copycat” element to many of these cases. The boys I have interviewed admitted to “studying” earlier incidents and aspiring to the kind of social recognition obtained in the mass media by earlier perpetrators.

**Steven Gorelick:** I don’t want to seem like I am ignoring the many complex explanatory variables that would fill in a complete answer to this question. Anything short of a serious multivariate inquiry—the gold standard when trying to

understand any complex social phenomenon—will only reveal fragments of an answer. But I do have less of an answer than a hypothesis that I offer, along with full awareness of its limitations.

We have now had enough of these roughly similar incidents—with just enough superficial similarities of types of dress, weapons, and tactics—that it may be time to consider whether a very rough script, in essence, a set of instructions, has slowly developed that may simplify the planning of such an act by an angry or frustrated individual. And whether or not you choose to call this a copycat crime, this collective “script” has to some extent reduced the amount of unique planning, creativity, and initiative required of someone intent on creating mayhem.

Think of all the details that—because of the amount of publicity these incidents have received—are now known by a large segment of the population: types of weapons, specific ammunition clips, means of entering buildings, the amount of time it takes to fire a certain number of rounds, protective gear to wear, amount of time to reload, the types of victims who generate the most public grief and outrage, and on and on. I’m not suggesting that these are merely copied, but they certainly have simplified matters for inexperienced perpetrators.

My concern (and, I admit, speculation) is that this cultural narrative may provide criminology’s equivalent of an ongoing Broadway show. The task for the actor replacing the lead after several months is very different from the challenge faced by the original cast. The new star steps into existing costumes, sets, and learns the lines of a familiar script.

I don’t want to make too much of this non-existent script. Perpetrators have unique personality profiles. Incidents are unique. Motives can be complex and idiosyncratic. But we do live in an age in which someone intent on causing serious harm has access to significantly more detailed instructions than his or her predecessors *and* has seen first-hand which types of acts of violence against which types of victims are certain to generate the most public shock and outrage.

**Helinä Häkkänen-Nyholm:** From a European perspective, the United States is seen as a country with a large number of guns and relatively easy access to them, even for young males. Households in the Nordic countries also have a large number of guns, but they center on hunting and are kept very safe and away from the young family members. My experience is that many of the school shooters and mass murderers are loners, who have a history of bullying and related behaviors. The school system in the United States promotes social class, racial, and other differences among students more than the European school system, and it’s easier to find “enemies” in such a system.

Belonging to a group is essential for human beings. Young males are at a very vulnerable age for feeling like outsiders. This kind of experience shapes their self-image, and together with violent fantasies and computer games may lead to the belief that “I have nothing to lose.” In both instances of the Finnish school shootings this was very much the case.

In my experience, revenge is the primary motive. For sure the copycat phenomenon plays a role. For every

school shooter we have at least ten potential followers in Finland, which was clearly evident while investigating the shootings a few years back. Because of this, I consider it extremely important to carefully consider how the media handles these cases. For example, I do not understand what they were thinking at *Rolling Stone* magazine when they put Dzhokhar Tsarnaev on the cover. Plain stupidity in my opinion.

**Reid Meloy:** Mass murder cases in the United States, contrary to public perception, have not increased nor decreased since 1976. There are now approximately 20 of these cases per year in the contiguous U.S., with a population in excess of 300 million people. These figures alone render this behavior shockingly *rare*. The more disturbing figure is the stability of mass murder despite a dramatic decline in single homicides over the same period of time. Although not predictive of mass murder, the proliferation of firearms in the United States contributes to the lethality risk if someone intends to commit a mass murder.

We found in our studies of adult mass murderers that the average age was 35, substantially older than those who usually commit a single homicide. The reason that most single homicides are committed by young males is likely biological—*androgenic* drivers increase aggression and tend to peak in early adulthood in males, and the prefrontal cortex of their brains are not fully developed until their mid-twenties. One should never underestimate the capacity for impulsivity or aggression in a young male. However, most mass murders are not impulsive; they are the result of methodical planning and preparation, what we describe as a predatory or instrumental mode of violence.

Motives vary greatly among those who commit mass murder and can range from revenge against those who have actually angered or humiliated the perpetrator, to a paranoid and psychotic state of mind wherein the perpetrator believes that a certain group of people are conspiring against him. Motives are also both conscious (e.g., palpable hatred felt toward the targets) and unconscious (e.g., the acting out of an omnipotent and violent fantasy). In addition to individual contributors to risk, there may be macro-factors in the situational or social environment that contribute to risk, such as the perception of mistreatment by a government agency or the anticipation of an intolerable loss of status or occupation due to economic conditions. A common mistake is to assume that there is one motivation, seek evidence to support that motivation, and ignore other plausible reasons for the act—what is referred to as confirmation bias. We professionals are also guilty of this cognitive bias, depending on our discipline: psychologists tend to favor internal psychological reasons for behavior, while sociologists tend to favor more situational and social processes for their explanatory weight. Copycat or contagion effects do occur, especially with high profile crimes, but if present, they are typically one of many causal factors.

**Stanton E. Samenow:** The ultimate form of power and control is to take the lives of others. In nearly all cases, the homicides that shock us represent the tip of the iceberg of other criminal activity. Anger in search of a target motivates these homicides—anger on the part of people who think the

world is not giving them what they are due. These are people who have unrealistic expectations of others as well as themselves. When others do not meet these expectations, which happens quite frequently, the result is simmering anger. That anger is like a cancer that metastasizes until there is what the individual considers one incident too many—the slight or the rejection. These crimes are usually fantasized and thought about well before they occur.

The so-called copycat phenomenon does exist but has little or nothing to do with these mass murders. Millions of people read about these massacres. To them, it is news. They do not think for an instant of enacting what they read about. For a person who is already angry and inclined to violent solutions, a report of a mass murderer does not compel him to act in a similar manner.

**Yuki S. Nishimura:** I reviewed the cumulative history of serial shooting in Japan. There were only two incidences, and they occurred in 1984 and 2007. So, as you see, the incidents of shootings and bombings are extremely low in Japan.

In Japan, there are fewer offenses involving murders using guns as the modus operandi (m.o.). Strangulation following stabbing is the most popular m.o. in Japan; therefore, most Japanese police officers are said not to experience gun shootings in actual crime scenes during their career as a police officer. Explaining the details of gun control policy and history is not the aim of this manuscript; however, I would like to suggest one point. The main industry in ancient Japan was agriculture. Since the ancient Japanese primarily lived as agricultural people rather than hunters, guns have never been familiar tools in daily life. If someone used a gun in Japan, a member of “Yakuza”—Japanese gangsters—or another gangster-related person would be investigated first, because it is difficult to obtain guns in this country.

In the most recent two decades, some researchers had indicated that violent TV programs and video games had a great impact on the offenses of youth not only in the United States but also in Japan. Moreover, not limited to games and TV programs, various kinds of U.S. cultural elements are becoming popular among Japanese people. Thus, we have to consider the changing differences of youth characteristics between Japan and the United States.

The current generation of Japanese youth are called the “Satori generation,” or the “enlightenment generation.” Mr. Hiroyuki Nishimura has been said to originate this term. Satori is a Buddhist term defined as understanding the true meaning of things. Satori primarily indicates that people reach to comprehend the implications beyond the experiences of hardships. According to Mr. Nishimura, people in the Satori generation are involved in matters only if positive consequences are expected. They place importance on the results, not the process, and don’t want to waste money and energy on anything that does not provide positive consequences. Adding to the term Satori, Japanese young men are not hungry for anything and are herbivorous rather than predatory. They don’t want to suffer, and they avoid making any efforts that are likely to come to nothing. It is suggested that they don’t see an end to this depression and time of high unemployment because their parents have provided them with material satisfaction.

The current Japanese educational system has also had an impact on social violence. From the time of daycare or

preschool, children are educated by their teachers to avoid fights or struggles. When a child gets angry, cries, and hits, teachers quickly intervene to prevent the situation from progressing into a fight. Most of the time, teachers can’t afford to let children solve the problem themselves. Moreover, often the event is reported to the children’s parents, and the parents make apologies or excuse each other. If teachers or instructors strongly scold a child, they are criticized as strict, and their treatment is considered violent or abusive. In this environment, children rarely experience negative responses directly from others, including disgust and the uncomfortable feelings of resolving these situations. Therefore, young people are sometimes unable to express their emotions in the community, even to their friends. Typically, children think it’s better to ignore negative responses from other people than confront them.

This generation is apparently very gentle and mild. They repress their emotions and try not to acknowledge their stress. Consequently, their repressed emotions suddenly erupt, and they can’t control their impulsivity, so it escalates until their excitement is overwhelming.

The author and his colleagues have studied psychopathic traits among undergraduate students of a Japanese university using *Self-Report Psychopathy*, fourth edition (SRP-4). Although the data is still preliminary, the score distribution among Japanese students is quite similar to that of Canadian students (sponsored by Newman K.) except for the criminality facets. Criminality scores of SRP-4 in Japanese students is lower than that of Canadian students; therefore, this finding indicates that there might be psychopathic traits or dissociative personality disorder among Japanese people. But we in Japan have fewer predatory criminals such as serial murderers and sexual recidivists than in the United States. What is called “primary psychopaths” or “white-collar psychopaths” might be more adapted to Japanese psychopathy than predatory traits. We need to do further research to generalize this concept.

## Summary

I would like to thank each of our experts for their participation in this important discussion about mass murderers and for providing us with their thoughtful perspectives on this very complicated issue. Their expertise gives us significant insights into possible motives and causality for these crimes, which I hope will inspire additional articles and much-needed research on this topic.

The experts agree these crimes are not impulsive acts but rather well planned, deliberate, revenge-motivated crimes committed by individuals immersed in negative feelings about their lives and others around them. This includes feelings of alienation, humiliation, and extreme anger as well as feeling disrespected and marginalized. Suicide ideation also likely plays a significant role in the motivation of these crimes.

An interesting perspective that was raised concerns the culture of schools in the United States, which several experts suggest cultivates a class system that reinforces feelings of alienation, resentment, anger, and being marginalized. Most of the experts agreed the copycat phenomenon does play a role in these cases; however, it was suggested that its influence might have evolved from one of stimulation to

functioning more as a “script” or blueprint. Widely available information from prior cases about how to plan and carry out a mass shooting might actually simplify the process for new shooters who no longer have to reinvent the wheel, but simply learn from their predecessors.

I doubt anyone is surprised that these experts felt it important to address the issue of firearms. Simply put, the availability of firearms raises the level of risk for an individual contemplating an act of violence. Despite the presence in suicidal and homicidal ideation, mass homicide cannot occur without weapons.

*Violence and Gender* journal will continue to explore the many factors involved in these mass shootings, from causality to prevention. For example, a key area of focus for future research and study could involve identifying the phases of development for this behavior in order to highlight when teachers and others can first expect to observe the manifestation of behaviors consistent with a student beginning to feel alienated, marginalized, and angry. Later phases of devel-

opment would include the fantasy phase in which the individual considers their options for acting out, and the final phases would involve the actual planning of a shooting. If we can identify the evolutionary process of this behavior, we buy time—time for intervention, treatment, and prevention.

Right now most of our resources are directed at the planning phase of these crimes or the active shooter aspect of the crime, when the crime is actually taking place. But if we can go back to the time when this behavior and ideation is formulating and being reinforced, we can provide a much wider range of intervention services and support at a time when the situation has not yet risen to the level of crisis.

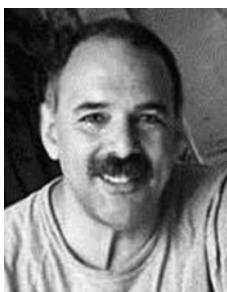
We don't intend to dumb down the answers or oversimplify the solutions to this crime but rather address the complexities and the evolution of these cases as they continue to occur. We hope that this initial expert panel discussion will be the springboard for much more discussion and in-depth analysis of what many of us would consider the worst crime phenomenon of the 21st century.

## PARTICIPANTS



**Jorge Folino, MD, PhD**, is professor of psychiatry at the National University of La Plata (UNLP) in Buenos Aires Province, Argentina. He is director of UNLP's post-graduate master's program in forensic mental health and was chief of the psychiatric service in a female prison in Argentina and expert for judicial power of the Province of Buenos Aires. He served on the Board of Directors of the International Academy of Mental Health and the Law, was a member of the Advisory Board to the International Association of Forensic Mental Health Services, and was president of the Society of Psychiatry in La Plata. Dr. Folino authored 7 books, 19 book chapters, more than 100 scientific articles, and numerous policy papers and technical reports for the Judicial Power. He also is member of the editorial board of several scientific journals.

**James Garbarino, PhD**, holds the Maude C. Clarke Chair in Humanistic Psychology and was founding director of the Center for the Human Rights of Children at Loyola University Chicago. Previously he was Elizabeth Lee Vincent professor of human development and codirector of the Family Life Development Center at Cornell University. He earned his BA from St. Lawrence University in 1968 and his PhD in human development and family studies from Cornell University in 1973. He is a fellow of the American Psychological Association. Dr. Garbarino has served as consultant or advisor to a wide range of organizations, including the National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse, the National Institute for Mental Health, the American Medical Association, the National Black Child Development Institute, the National Science Foundation, the U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect, and the FBI.

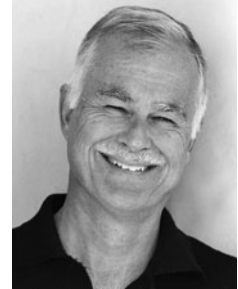


**Steven M. Gorelick, PhD**, is distinguished lecturer in the Department of Film and Media Studies at Hunter College, CUNY. He received an MA degree in mass communication at Columbia University, and a PhD in sociology (criminology; media studies) at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Dr. Gorelick studies the representation of crime and violence in media and culture, with special emphasis on the impact of catastrophic violence on society. He serves on the Advisory Council of the Dart Center on Journalism and Trauma at Columbia University. In 2005, he was named a delegate to the Madrid International Summit on Terrorism and Democracy and in 2007 was awarded a Fulbright German Studies Seminar grant. As a board member of John Jay College of Criminal Justice's Academy for Critical Incident Analysis (ACIA), Dr. Gorelick was invited to Norway in 2012 to observe the trial of mass-murderer Anders Bering Breivik and examine the impact and traumatic aftermath of the 2011 Utoya tragedy.



**Helinä Häkkänen-Nyholm, PhD**, is a CEO of the psychology and law firm PsyJuridica Ltd. and an adjunct professor in the University of Helsinki and University of Eastern Finland. She has studied and written widely on psychopathy, violent crime, and police interviews. Dr. Häkkänen-Nyholm worked as a criminal profiler and researcher for more than 10 years at the Finnish National Bureau of Investigation before going to private practice.

**Reid Meloy, PhD**, is a diplomat in forensic psychology of the American Board of Professional Psychology and consults on criminal and civil cases throughout the United States and Europe. He is a clinical professor of psychiatry at UC San Diego, School of Medicine, and a faculty member of the San Diego Psychoanalytic Institute. He is a fellow of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences and is past president of the American Academy of Forensic Psychology. Dr. Meloy is an affiliate member of the International Criminal Investigative Analysis Fellowship. He has received a number of awards from various professional organizations and is chairman of Forensis, Inc., a nonprofit, public benefit corporation devoted to forensic psychiatric and psychological research ([www.forensis.org](http://www.forensis.org)). Dr. Meloy has authored or coauthored more than 200 articles published in peer-reviewed psychiatric and psychological journals and has authored, coauthored, or edited 11 books.



*Image not available at press time.*

**Yuki S. Nishimura, MD, PhD**, is an expert on youth behavior at Keio (Japan) University Health Center.

**Stanton Samenow, PhD**, received his BA (cum laude) from Yale University in 1963 and his PhD in psychology from the University of Michigan in 1968. After working as a clinical psychologist on adolescent inpatient psychiatric services in the Ann Arbor, Michigan, area, Dr. Samenow joined the Program for the Investigation of Criminal Behavior at St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Washington, D.C. From 1970 until June 1978, he was clinical research psychologist for that program. With the late Dr. Samuel Yochelson, he participated in the longest in-depth clinical research–treatment study of offenders that has been conducted in North America. The findings of that study are contained in the three-volume publication *The Criminal Personality* (Lanham, Md.: Roman and Littlefield), which he coauthored with Dr. Yochelson.

