CHAPTER 1

Random Violence

BEWARE!
There is a new GANG INITIATION!!

This new initiation of *murder* is brought about by Gang Members driving around at night with their car lights off. When you flash your car lights to signal them that their lights are out, the Gang Members take it literally as "LIGHTS OUT," so they follow you to your destination and kill you! That's their initiation.

Two families have already fallen victim to this initiation ritual. Be aware and inform your families and friends.

DO NOT FLASH YOUR CAR *LIGHTS FOR ANYONE!!*

flyer circulated in Chicago, 1993

Tales of gang members driving around, planning to kill whoever flashed headlights at them, spread from coast to coast during the fall of 1993 (Brunvand 1995; *FOAFTale News* 1993b, 1993c). Concerned citizens passed along the story via photocopies, faxes, and, of course, word of mouth. Employers warned their employees, law-enforcement agencies alerted one another, and the press cautioned the public. It seemed a plausible story: everybody knew that there were gang members out there; the notion that gang "initiation rites" required members to commit terrible crimes was well ingrained; and cars and guns seemed easy

to come by. *It could happen*, people told themselves. *That's just the kind of thing gangs do.*

The previous year's gang-initiation story had been about ankle grabbers at shopping malls (Brunvand 1993; *FOAFTale News* 1993a). It involved gang members who crawled beneath parked vehicles, waiting for the drivers to return. When a driver paused to open the car door, the gang member would reach out and grab the victim's ankles. There were different versions of what happened next: in one, when the victim reached down to pry the assailant's hands loose, the gang member chopped off a finger as a souvenir; in others, the gang member slashed the victim's Achilles tendon, dropping the victim to the ground—the first step in a robbery, rape, or murder. People believed the ankle-grabbing story, in spite of its improbable elements (e.g., gang members positioning themselves for criminal attacks by crawling under cars, overpowering victims by grabbing their ankles, easily slicing through the tough Achilles tendon, etc.). After all, it was just the kind of thing gang members do.

There is no evidence that either gang-initiation tale was true. Neither seems especially plausible, yet both were widely believed. What explains this credulity? Concern about random, senseless violence has become a central theme in contemporary culture. In addition to gang initiation rites, we worry about serial murders, carjackings, freeway shootings, sexual predators, wilding, hate crimes, kids with guns, stalking, drive-by shootings, copycat criminals, workplace violence, shootings in schools, and other unpredictable threats. Why shouldn't we also worry about ankle-grabbing attacks and lights-out killings?

The notion that our society is plagued by random violence has surprisingly broad appeal. Consider two recent quotations invoking the concept:

> Our greatest fear is of violence from a nameless, faceless stranger. . . . Citizens of all races who are fearful of random violence have good reason for their concern. Storekeepers, utility workers, police officers, and ordinary citizens out for a carton of milk or a family dinner are all increasingly at risk.

> We are terrified by the prospect of innocent people being gunned down at random, without warning and almost without motive, by youngsters who afterward show us the blank, unremorseful faces of seemingly feral, presocial beings.

The first quotation is from the liberal attorney Adam Walinsky (1995: 44, 47), the second from the conservative political scientist James Q. Wilson (1994:26). Although they bring different ideological assumptions to social analysis, and although they recommend different sorts of solutions for society's problems, both Walinsky and Wilson define random violence as a major social crisis.

Similar warnings abound. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (1994: 237) warns: "Every American now has a realistic chance of murder victimization in view of the random nature the crime has assumed." Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1993:27) charges: "Violent killings, often random, go on unabated. Peaks continue to attract some notice. But these are peaks above 'average' levels that thirty years ago would have been thought epidemic." The criminologist Jerome H. Skolnick (1994: 34–35) notes the intense media coverage given a few violent crimes:

> The message seemed to be that random violence is everywhere and you are no longer safe—not in your suburban home, commuter train, or automobile—and the police and the courts cannot or will not help you. . . . It is random violent crime, like a shooting in a fast-food restaurant, that is driving fear.

A sociologist conducting focus groups of women talking about crime finds that they describe "predatory, extremely violent, criminals who attack at random" (Madriz 1997:112). A reader writes to *Time* magazine about "the latest episode in the drama of random violence that airs almost every day in America," calling it a "spiraling epidemic" (Gerol 1994). And a commentator for *U.S. News & World Report* reacts to President Clinton's suggestion that schools begin the day with a moment of silence:

> Silence is a small, fragile thing. It cannot cure teen pregnancy or stop random violence. It cannot banish gangs or drugs. It cannot

> rebuild families or restore faith. But it can, at times, replenish the spirit. (Roberts 1994)

In short, references to random violence have become commonplace, indicating a widespread sense that random violence is a significant problem.

In part, this concern with random violence seems grounded in a general sense that crime is both out of control and on the rise. But this generalized sense of dread is heightened by specific fears, fostered by what sociologists call "moral panics"—exaggerated, heavily publicized reports of sudden increases in particular sorts of criminal violence, such as the stories that gangs had begun holding lights-out initiations.[1] And, unlike the lights-out story, which was not true, there is at least some basis for many of the claims that bring new crime problems into the spotlight of public attention.

Consider, for example, the focus on freeway shootings in Los Angeles in the summer of 1987 (Best 1991). The story began when reporters juxtaposed stories of two shootings on L.A. freeways during the same June weekend. When a third shooting occurred a few weeks later, the press declared that they had spotted a trend, and, for three weeks in late July and early August, news stories about L.A.'s "road warriors" riding "hair-trigger highways" attracted national attention. These reports emphasized the randomness of freeway violence: anyone in a vehicle could become the target of an unprovoked attack. However, it soon became obvious that freeway violence was not spreading across the country or increasing in southern California; it was not even all that common in L.A. There simply weren't enough serious freeway shootings to justify continued media coverage, and the moral panic faded almost as quickly as it arose.

Concern over freeway violence was an intense but brief episode. In contrast, other crime problems prove to have greater staying power once they gain our attention. Serial murder, for example, achieved high visibility in the early 1980s (Jenkins 1994). Whereas the press had always viewed reports of multiple murders as good news stories, it tradi-

tionally treated such killings as unrelated, aberrant episodes. However, after several notorious cases emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s, people began to view serial murder as a distinct type of crime, and there were claims about an epidemic of serial murders. One sensational book on the topic began with the words "America is caught up in the midst of what one expert calls 'an epidemic of homicidal mania,' plagued by ruthless predators—lately dubbed serial murderers or 'recreational killers'—who stalk their human prey at random, often for the sheer joy of killing" (Newton 1992:1), while the feminist Jane Caputi (1987:2, 3) characterized serial sexual murder as "sexually political murder, . . . functional phallic terrorism," and "male torturing and killing of women at random." Interest in the topic remains high: dozens of nonfiction books approach the topic from various angles, ranging from popular accounts to academic studies from disciplines as diverse as history, criminology, anthropology, psychiatry, and women's studies; and the diabolical serial murderer, striking at random, is a standard pop-culture icon in novels and movies.

Sociologists usually approach these topics through case studies of particular moral panics, examining the rise and fall of concern about lights-out gang initiations or freeway shootings or serial murders.[2] This book adopts another approach. I want to argue that such recent episodes of intense concern are part of the broader, more general, contemporary concern with random violence. As the examples concerning lights-out initiations, freeway violence, and serial murders suggest, claims about specific moral panics routinely invoke the notion of randomness. Although there are obvious differences among these moral panics (most notably, no killing was ever linked to a lights-out initiation, and there were only a handful of shooting deaths on L.A. freeways in 1987; but there have been hundreds of well-documented killings by serial murderers), these differences are less significant than the general sense that contemporary society is plagued by random violence.

A review of recent press coverage provides evidence of growing concern about random violence. Figure 1 shows the number of articles

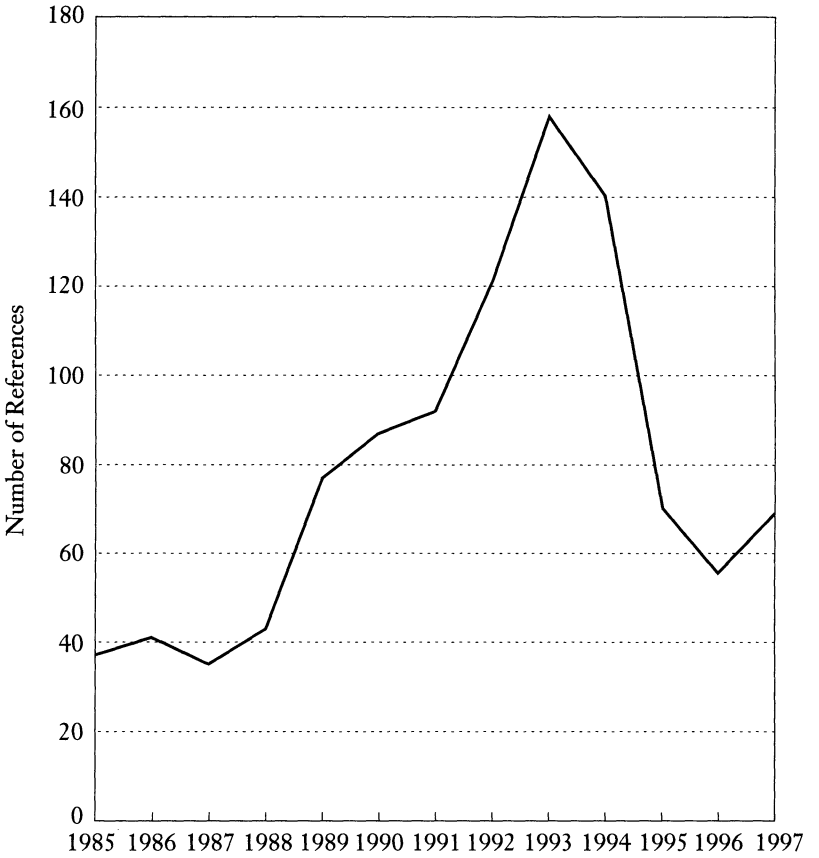

Fig. 1. References to "random violence" in major newspapers and newsmagazines, 1985–1997. SOURCE: NEXIS database for *Newsweek*, *Time*, *U.S. News & World Report*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*.

using the expression "random violence" that appeared in seven major newsmagazines and newspapers: *Time*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News & World Report*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post*, from 1985 to 1997.[3] Use of the term rose slightly during the 1980s, then increased markedly after 1989, peaking in 1993. This increased usage corresponds to the rise of several moral panics

about new crimes during the late 1980s and early 1990s, including freeway violence (1987), wilding (1989), stalking (beginning around 1990), kids and guns (1991), carjacking and ankle grabbing (both 1992), lights-out gang initiations (1993), and sexual predators (1994), to say nothing of other concerns—such as serial murder (1984–) and drive-by shootings (1985–)—that maintained high levels of visibility. There has been a general concern with random violence, and it is that general concern that is the subject of this book.

THE NATURE OF RANDOM VIOLENCE

Considering our readiness to talk and worry about random violence, we give surprisingly little thought to what the term implies. Warnings about the threat of random violence rarely define the term; instead, they illustrate the problem's nature with typifying examples.[4] These examples can be highly melodramatic: there is an "ideal victim"—usually a respectable person engaged in some innocent activity—who suffers a sudden, unexpected, unprovoked, violent attack by an assailant with no connection to the victim, no good reason to hurt this person in this way. Often the particular example chosen to illustrate the problem is especially horrifying. Consider the first paragraph in a *Newsweek* story on carjackings:

> Pamela Basu had no reason to believe she was in danger. The 34-year-old research chemist was driving her daughter, Sarina, to preschool on a warm morning last September when two young men approached her gold BMW at a stop sign one block from her suburban Maryland home. They forced her from the car and sped away, but Basu's left arm became ensnared in the harness strap of her seat belt. She was dragged for nearly two miles as her assailants swerved into a barbed-wire fence in an apparent attempt to dislodge her. Before finally ridding themselves of the fatally injured woman, they stopped to toss her 22-month-old daughter from the car. She was found, miraculously unhurt, still strapped in her car seat. (Turque 1992)

This grotesque story offers high melodrama—an upper-middle-class mother attacked and murdered, and her young child endangered, by callous strangers.[5] It justifies *Newsweek*'s title for the piece: "A New Terror on the Road: Carjacking Puts Fear in the Driver's Seat." The example of Pamela Basu suggests that everyone is in danger, that carjacking is random violence; as *Newsweek* warned: "Cars have been commandeered just about anyplace motorists congregate. . . . Routine errands have become a tense exercise in some communities."

Reports of terrible crimes committed by strangers are disturbing, but they do not justify broad generalizations about violence being random. The term "random violence" demands closer inspection. When statisticians speak of randomness, they refer to independent events that occur by chance, in no identifiable pattern. Imagine a set of numbered balls used in a lottery drawing. The balls are stirred into an unpredictable arrangement, then five are drawn. In a random drawing, each ball has an equal chance of being drawn, as does each combination of balls. That is, the number-one ball's chance of being selected is equal to the number-two ball's, and so on, and the combination one-two-three-four-five is just as likely to occur as one-two-three-four-six or any other possible combination. Such is the nature of randomness.

What, then, do we mean by random violence? The term has several implications. Imagine a society within which some number of violent incidents occurs, each incident involving an attacker and a victim. If this violence is truly random, then not only is each individual in that society at risk of being attacked, but all individuals run *equal* risks of victimization, and every individual also is a potential attacker, and everyone is equally likely to attack someone else. Immediately, we recognize that this sort of chaos is not what most people mean when they speak of random violence. Although many claims about random violence imply that everyone is a potential victim, they do not assume that everyone is a potential attacker. Rather, they imagine that attackers are somehow different from their victims, that they are gang members, or psychopaths, or at least males.[6] When most people speak of random vi-

olence, they imagine a world in which the general population of potential victims shares the risk of being attacked by these likely attackers. Depending on the crime, the population of victims may be all women (vulnerable to sexual assault), all children (molestation), all gays (homophobic attacks), all drivers (carjacking and freeway violence), and so on. In this sense, we imagine that violence is *patternless:* all potential victims share the risks, so that victimization can happen to anyone: "The list of homicide victims is endless. . . . Grandmothers and college students, prowling street kids and small babies in their walkers, neighbors chatting on city streets, young mothers getting ready for work" (Prothrow-Stith 1991).

What motivates these random attacks? We may acknowledge that violence can be deliberate and purposeful—what criminologists call "instrumental"—as when a bank robber steals money. But other violence seems pointless, meaningless: the bystander shot in a drive-by; the rape victim selected apparently by chance; and so on. This pointlessness is implied when we talk about random violence: gang members are killing motorists who blink their headlights. Why? Because that's what the gang initiation rite requires. Because it's just the kind of thing gang members do—or might do. The notion of random violence, then, refers to the risk that anyone might be attacked for no good reason. This is possible because the attacks are *pointless,* the victims chosen at random. Again, in a world of random violence, no one is safe.

In addition to patternlessness and pointlessness, there is a third theme that runs through claims about random violence: *deterioration.* Warnings about random violence imply that things are getting worse, that there are ever more violent incidents, that respectable citizens run greater risks of victimization than in the past. There are competing explanations for this deterioration: conservatives tend to blame a deteriorating culture (e.g., "the rising tide of immorality"), while liberals usually point to deterioration in the social structure (e.g., "the growing gap between rich and poor"). But, regardless of which causal explanations they prefer, when people worry about random violence, they assume

that things are worse today than they were yesterday, and they fear that things will be even worse tomorrow.

In short, when we use the expression "random violence," we characterize the problem in particular terms: violence is patternless (it can happen to anyone); it is pointless (it happens for no reason at all); and it is becoming increasingly common. This is, of course, a very frightening combination. A society that cannot control the growth of patternless, pointless violence seems on the verge of chaos, anarchy, collapse.

Those who speak of random violence rarely examine these three assumptions. For the most part, they assume—and their listeners take it for granted—that patternless, pointless violence is on the rise. However, even a cursory examination of the most basic, familiar criminological evidence calls all three assumptions into question: most violence is not patternless; nor is it pointless; nor is it increasing in the uncontrolled manner we imagine.

PATTERNLESSNESS

We often have a difficult time thinking about patterns in social behavior. I am reminded of this difficulty at the end of each semester, when my students turn in term papers about such social problems as child abuse, rape, incest, and other forms of victimization. Almost every paper features a passage along these lines:

> What sorts of people suffer this victimization? All sorts. The victims are rich and poor, male and female, black and white, of every age.

These papers always make me feel that I've failed: after spending a semester trying to teach my students to recognize and understand the patterns in social problems, I find their papers cheerfully announcing that there are no patterns to be found.

Yet, in spite of my students' eagerness to deny it, the patterns are there. And, if randomness is the absence of a pattern, then violence isn't

random. There are thousands of social-scientific studies, enough to fill a small library, proving that violence is patterned.

Consider one example: homicide in the contemporary United States.[7] According to FBI statistics, the U.S. homicide rate in 1994 was 9.0 per 100,000 population. That is, for every 100,000 Americans, there were nine homicides. But not everyone runs the same risk of being a homicide victim; in fact, the risk of victimization—the homicide rate—varies wildly depending on one's age, sex, and race. Consider the pattern among white males in 1990 (shown in fig. 2): during the first fifteen years of life, rates of victimization are low (2.7 or less per 100,000); the figure rises to 12.5 for white males aged fifteen to nineteen, peaks at 18.1 for those twenty to twenty-four, then gradually declines until it reaches about 4.0 for the oldest white males. In other words, the chances of a white male being killed in a homicide are relatively low during childhood, are highest during adolescence and early adulthood, and then decline in middle and old age. This seems reasonable. Few small children become homicide victims: children spend most of their lives under the protection of adults; their greatest risk of homicide is at the hands of an abusive adult caretaker. But adolescents and young adults spend much less time under older adults' supervision, and they take more risks: they experiment with sex and alcohol and illicit drugs; they get into more fights, drive more recklessly, and commit more crimes than older adults; and this independence is more likely to get them killed. As adults mature, they tend to settle down—get married, hold steady jobs, spend more time at home and less on the town—and their risk of becoming a homicide victim falls.

The same general pattern emerges when we add nonwhite males and white and nonwhite females to the graph (see fig. 3; note that, although the graph's vertical scale has changed, the line drawn for white males runs through exactly the same points as in fig. 2): for each group, the risk of being a homicide victim is low in childhood, reaches a peak in adolescence and young adulthood, and then declines with age. However, there are striking differences in victimization rates among the four

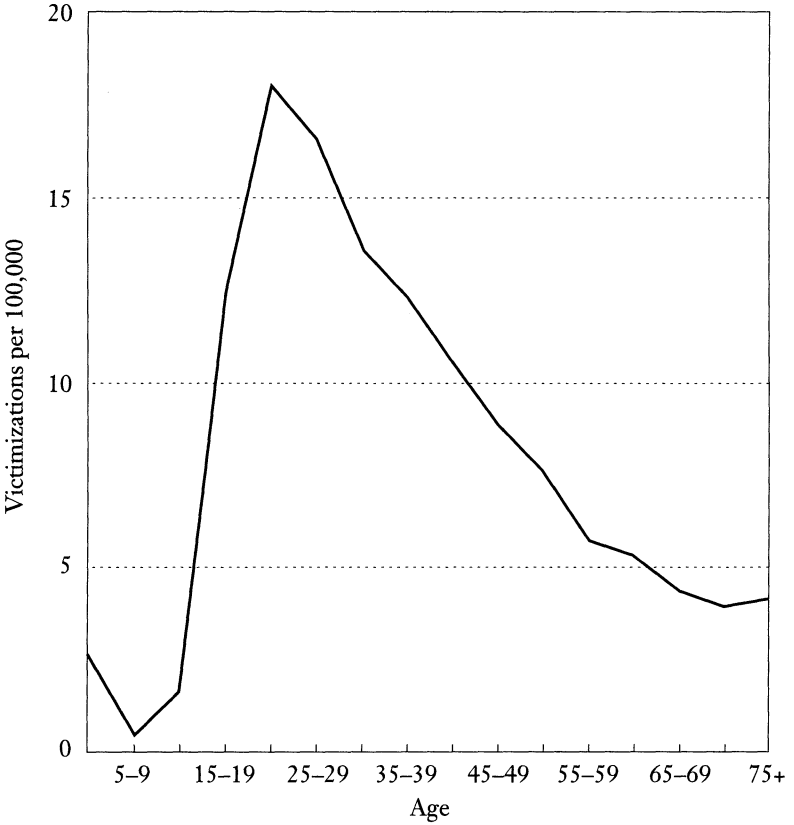

Fig. 2. Homicide victimization rate for white males by age, 1990. SOURCE: MacKellar and Yanagishita 1995.

groups. White females have the lowest rates of victimization: through age nine, white males and females run essentially the same risks; but for whites aged ten and older, females are victimized far less often than males. For instance, the peak age of victimization is twenty to twenty-four for both white males and white females, but the victimization rate for white males is 18.1, about four times greater than the rate of 4.5 for white females.

If white females consistently have the lowest homicide victimization rates, nonwhite males have the highest.[8] In every age category, the

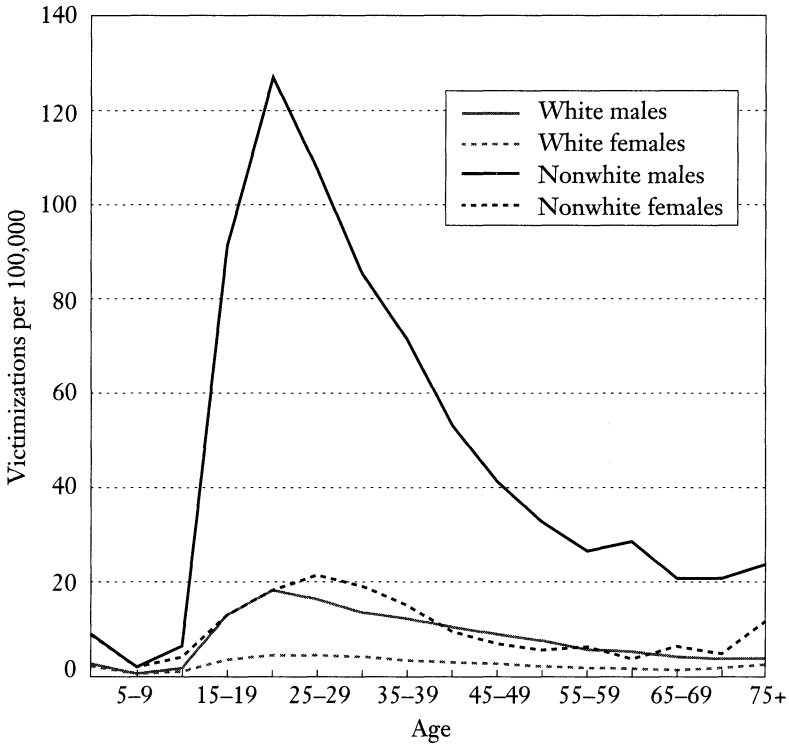

Fig. 3. Homicide victimization rates by age, race, and sex, 1990. SOURCE: MacKellar and Yanagishita 1995.

homicide rate for nonwhite males is three to seven times higher than it is for white males. Again, the age of peak victimization is twenty to twenty-four, but the rate for nonwhite males is 126.8—seven times greater than the rate for white males, and twenty-eight times greater than the rate for white females.

The pattern continues when we look at nonwhite females. Like their white counterparts, nonwhite males and females share similar rates of victimization through age nine; thereafter, females have consistently lower rates of victimization than males. At the same time, nonwhite females run higher risks of victimization—two to five times higher, depending on the age group—than do white females. In most age groups,

a nonwhite female's risk of homicide victimization is roughly that of a white male.

Though we can say that everyone runs some risk of being a homicide victim—that homicides kill young and old, male and female, black and white—that broad generalization is fundamentally dishonest, because the risk of victimization varies so markedly. If we were actuaries, writing policies for homicide victimization insurance, we would not charge everyone the same premiums. Rather, we would charge males more than females, nonwhites more than whites, and adolescents and young adults more than children or older adults. To speak of homicide as random violence ignores the clear patterns in these deaths.

This extended example concerns homicide victimization, but essentially the same patterns appear when we examine other sorts of criminal violence. Whether we look at victimization rates for rape, robbery, or assault, or whether we look at homicide offenders, rapists, robbers, or other violent criminals, the basic patterns are the same: males are both more likely to be victimized (with the obvious exception of sexual assault) and more likely to commit violent offenses; adolescents and young adults have the highest rates of both victimization and offending; and nonwhites are more likely to be both victims and offenders than whites (Maguire and Pastore 1996; Snyder and Sickmund 1995; Zawitz et al. 1993). If random violence refers to risks spread evenly among society's members, then contemporary criminal violence is patterned, not random.[9]

POINTLESSNESS

In October 1994, Susan Smith attracted national attention when she claimed that a carjacker had forced her from her Mazda at gunpoint and then driven away, with her three-year-old and fourteen-month-old sons still strapped in the car. More than a week later, the nationwide hunt for the kidnapper and the two boys ended when Smith confessed

to investigators that she had deliberately driven the car into a lake and left her sons to drown. Commentators made much of Smith's claim that the carjacker was a black male; they charged that white racism led people to accept Smith's story. But none of these commentators questioned the readiness of the press and the public to believe a story about a carjacker abducting two little boys and stealing a four-year-old compact car from a small town in South Carolina. Why would a carjacker do that? That's just the kind of thing they do.

The fear of random violence means we no longer expect violence to be purposeful. When we hear about Pamela Basu dragged to her death by carjackers, or an innocent passerby shot in a drive-by, or a teenager killed over a pair of gym shoes, we say the violence is pointless, that it lacks any reasonable motivation. No one should die in a fight over gym shoes. When such tragedies occur—and they do—the very pointlessness of the deaths makes them seem even more tragic (O'Neal 1997).

Precisely because they are horrific, these cases become the subjects of extensive media coverage, coverage that transforms them from terrible tragedies—remarkable *incidents*—into typical examples—or *instances*—of carjacking, drive-bys, or the larger problem of random violence. These horror stories make powerful examples precisely because they make no sense: "Random violence provides no such mark of intelligibility and moves with a heightened ambiguity. As explanations contest one another, the status of random crime increases to the level of general societal threat" (Acland 1995:49). Because horror stories capture moments of seemingly random violence, they exemplify what the media claim is an epidemic of random violence bedeviling the larger society. Some people die in terrible, apparently pointless ways. If, instead of viewing those deaths as extraordinary tragedies, we turn them into typifying examples, then we've given shape to the larger problem of random violence.

Whether violence makes sense, of course, depends upon who is making the evaluation. People who commit violent acts have their reasons.[10]