

The origins of a criminal mind: John Wayne Gacy

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Abstract

John Wayne Gacy, is one of America's most ruthless serial killers, who used his charm to get away with his assaults and murders. Throughout his 6 years of active crime and murder, he had around killed 33 young boys after putting them through physical and sexual torture. His childhood had affected his growth and adulthood, as he was physically, sexually, and psychologically abused throughout his childhood. Due to his adverse childhood experiences, he showed signs of both sadism and antisocial personality disorder throughout his adulthood. Due to his internalized homophobia, he believed he was doing the right thing for killing these young men, even if he was the one sexually assaulting these young men. Due to having power and charisma over his community, he believed he could get away with the murders, since many people believed he did not commit these heinous crimes.

John Wayne Gacy, also known as the “killer clown,” is one of America’s most ruthless serial killers and rapists, who used his charm to get away with his assaults and murders until he ran out of space. He had killed 33 young boys after putting them through physical and sexual torture. We know for certain that he has killed 33 young men and teenage boys, but we do not know for certain if that was the true number of his victims. He was a closeted homosexual who used his charm and public figure status to manipulate others to get what he wanted as well as get away with his murders. However, his luck had run out and was caught, still believing that he would get away with everything he had done till his last breath. The question is what influenced him to go down this path; how did his childhood and early life affect his decisions to choose to hurt others?

John Wayne Gacy was born on March 17, 1942, in Chicago, Illinois. He was the middle child of two sisters. His father was both psychologically and physically abusive to both him and his sisters, beating them with a razor strap at times if he believed that they were behaving (McEvoy, 2023). Many times, his father would belittle Gacy, calling him stupid and even comparing him to his sisters. Verbal and physical abuse was not the only abuse Gacy had faced throughout his childhood. He was also a victim of sexual violence and abuse. Between the ages of 6 and 10, he was molested by one of his mother’s friends’ teenage daughter (McEvoy, 2023). He was undressed and molested by not just the teen but also by another family friend and contractor.

His school and peer life did not help him either. He was a sickly overweight child who was unable to play sports due to his poor coordination skills and sickness. Due to this, he was unable to bond with children his age. As a teen, he was constantly in and out of hospitals due to

a congenital heart condition, causing him to become more and more alienated from his peers. His heart condition was considered as another failing in his father's eyes, and many times his father claimed that he was faking many of his seizures and blackouts for attention (McEvoy, 2023). As he became a teenager, he realized he was attracted to men and started to form internalized homophobia due to his sexuality.

Due to his sickness and alienation from peers he did not graduate high school, but he was still able to graduate from Northwestern Business College in Chicago and become a successful businessman (McEvoy, 2023). He started to get involved in politics and became well-liked in his community, even joining a Chicago based clown club called "Jolly Joker." He performed in clown costumes at children's parties as well as charity fundraisers under what he would later call his alter egos. After his success in politics and becoming well-liked in his community, his father came around and said that he was wrong about his only son.

Although this was considered the happiest period of Gacy's life, he had started to show red flags. In 1968 he was accused of sexually assaulting a teenage boy and nearly another. Due to his status in his community, many community members believed Gacy over the victims. Gacy was only convicted of the assaults after persuading one of his employees to assault the victim from testifying, which was not successful. He was convicted and charged for the assaults, receiving a 10-year prison sentence, but only served 18 months of said sentence due to good behavior (McEvoy, 2023). He was then arrested again for the same charge one year later; the charges only being dropped due to the victim not showing up to court.

In 1971, Gacy started his own construction company, which was the main place he found his victims. Most of the employees at his construction company were high schoolers and young men, which were his main targets to his killings. His first known murder victim was a 16-year-old, luring the victim to his home for sex. The morning after he saw the victim at the bedroom doorway holding a knife, which caused Gacy to attack and kill him. He realized afterwards that the victim, Timothy McCoy, was not trying to kill him but had only made them both breakfast. He also discovered that he had sexual satisfaction after killing him, enjoying the power he had over his victims.

Many times, he lured his victims to his home to discuss overdue pay or an upcoming construction job. Many of the parents of his victims grew suspicious of Gacy but like before, many of the community members believed that he was innocent. Police questioned him but like many times in the future, he was let go. Most of his victims were buried under his home, in his crawlspace under the house. Once his crawlspace was full of his victims' bodies, he started to dispose of his victims in the Des Plaines River (McEvoy, 2023).

Finally in 1978, the police searched his home after a 15-year-old went missing after he met with Gacy. When police investigated his home, they found many items that belonged to his prior victims and soon found the trenches in his crawl space that were filled with the human remains of his victims. Soon after, Gacy confessed to killing about 30 people. His trail began on February 6, 1980, and the biggest argument was whether or not Gacy could be declared insane. He went through many psychological tests and spent countless hours with doctors, as he claimed to have multiple personality disorder. On March 12, 1980, he was found guilty of 33

murders and was imprisoned for 14 years. He later tried to claim he was innocent and tried to appeal his court order. However, he was set for execution by lethal injection on May 10, 1994.

Throughout his life, you can see how his childhood and early life experiences had influenced his behavior. Throughout his early childhood, he was abused in multiple ways: psychologically, physically, and sexually. Child abuse is defined as “all forms of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment or commercial or other exploitation, resulting in actual or potential harm to the child” (World Health Organization, 1999). The three main types of abuse are physical, sexual, and psychological abuse; in which Gacy had endured all three throughout his childhood.

There is a correlation between childhood abuse and crime, especially sexual abuse in childhood. Research has shown that there was a strong link between early childhood abuse and individuals who kill for sexual gratification (Mitchell & Aamodt, 2005). We can see that this is true due to the link between Gacy's crimes and his childhood. Gacy was sexually abused and molested at a very young age, so seeing that he tortured his victims (physically and sexually) before killing them for sexual gratification proves the study is true.

Due to being a sex offender on many accounts, you can consider him a sexual murder. He had sexually assaulted his victims before killing them for more sexual gratification. Many sexual murderers have psychiatric disorders, which are usually in the domains of sadism, antisocial personality, and schizoid (Hill, Berner, & Briken, 2006). Sadism is considered the general arousal through dominating, controlling, humiliating and inflicting pain on others. Antisocial personality is the known as the lack of feeling guilt or empathy and Schizoid

personality is having severe social and attachment deficits (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). With Gacy's actions throughout his life and his killings, we can see that he does have a few traits of each. While Schizoid personality is extremely rare, we can see more attributes of sadism and antisocial in Gacy.

As stated above, Gacy had sexual gratification with killing his victims. He enjoyed having power over them and putting them through all sorts of different pain, whether it was sexual, physical, or even psychological pain. When the victims went to his home, he already had complete control over them without even realizing it, even if he had to drug them or persuade them a little bit, he had complete control. This can be seen as sadism, as he enjoyed having control and inflicting pain onto his victims. This could be due to the fact that his father made him feel weak all throughout his childhood, only believing that he was actually something when he became successful as a politician. He was an outcast due to his chronic illness, so being in power gave him a sick sense of accomplishment, more so than when he was a politician.

We can also see some antisocial traits in Gacy. Gacy believed he was not doing anything wrong due to his internalized homophobia. He thought he was getting rid of the problem by assaulting and killing these young men, either not realizing or caring that he was hurting these young men. Although he was a politician and had his community in the palm in his hand, it is clear that he lacked true empathy. He used his power in the community to get away many times when he should have been arrested. He knew how to get what he wanted at the expense of others. He still believed that he was innocent even when he was being executed, showing he lacked guilt for what he had done. It was all about power and his own satisfaction.

Throughout the 6 years that John Wayne Gacy was torturing and killing his victims, it could have been avoided. One of his victims, John Butkovich, an 18-year-old who was employed at his construction job, his parents had called the police over 100 times trying to get the police to investigate further into Gacy. There were many missing reports, in which the police did not believe that Gacy had anything involved with them. If the police and many of the community members believed the victims that Gacy had sexually assaulted before the killings happened, it would be more than likely that he would not have started his murder spree. It is a case of either the police not having enough evidence on Gacy or completing brushing it off due to Gacy having great persuading skills or having a high status in the community.

It is hard to say if treatment could have worked for Gacy. Getting Gacy out of his father's care would have stopped the abuse that Gacy was facing, as well as the future abuse he would put on others. If Gacy had a supportive and caring family, this would likely have been avoided. It is an unfortunate case of hurt people hurt other people.

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