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Term Paper

Richard Ramirez's Case and Its Relation to the Traumatic Brain Injury Theory

Richard Ramirez was an American serial killer who murdered 14 people and tortured dozens in California, in 1984 and 1985. Over time several criminological theories have been associated to explain Richard's attitudes, but one of the most common is Traumatic Brain Injury. An injury that alters the way the brain functions is known as a traumatic brain injury, or TBI. In this essay, I will explain in depth the case of Richard Ramirez, what TBI is, other cases associated with this theory, and how it relates to Richard's case.

Ramirez grew up in El Paso, Texas, the youngest of five children born to Mexican immigrants. Richard Ramirez experienced two traumatic brain injuries at an early age. It also is mentioned in reports that when he was 12 years old Richard Ramirez started a close relationship with his cousin who was a Vietnam War veteran, his cousin showed him pictures of Vietnamese women who he said he raped, tortured, and killed. At 13 years old, Ramirez was witness to how his cousin shot his wife. Then, Ramirez started breaking into homes, dropped high school, and moved to Los Angeles, where he continued committing crimes and was in prison for a brief time for stealing a car. It is also mentioned that when he was a child he developed epilepsy, became a drug user, and a fan of Satanism. (Piccotti, 2024)

He committed more than 30 violent crimes, that included rape and torture during the spring and summer of 1985 . The first victim was Jennie Vincow, 79 years old, on June 28, 1984. It started with theft and turned to violence, Vincow was sexually assaulted, stabbed, and killed during a burglary in her house. What followed this was a spree of murders, rapes, and robberies in Ramirez's hands. Nearly nine months later, on March 17, 1985, the same evening, Ramirez attacked Maria Hernandez and killed her roommate, Dayle Okazaki, without enough satisfaction, he also shot and killed Tsai-Lian Yu. Just 10 days later, on March 27th, Ramirez murdered a couple, Vincent Zazzara and Zazzara's wife. The husband was shot first and then Ramirez sexually assaulted and stabbed the wife to death, also he took her eyes out. During the police investigation, they never had concrete results, so Ramirez repeated his attack pattern. In May 1985, Ramirez did the same with another couple, William and Lillian Doi. Over the next few months, the number of attacks went up, claiming another dozen victims of burglary, assault, violence, and Satanic rituals.

The Los Angeles Police Department responded by putting a dedicated task force and the help of the FBI. The pressure of the Police and the descriptions from his surviving victims made Ramirez leave Los Angeles and go to San Francisco, where he took two more victims, Peter and Barbara Pan. Thanks to that most of his assaults took place at night, the press quickly gave him the name "Night Stalker". On August 24, 1985, on his last night of terror, in the Los Angeles area, he left some evidence that helped police to capture him. A footprint, a witness took note of his car and license plate, and a victim that he raped and killed her husband that night, also provided a detailed description of her assailant.

The car of Ramirez was found abandoned a few days later, with enough evidence and fingerprints to make a match. On August 31st, he was captured when residents from east Los Angeles beat him while attempting two carjackings. After the conclusion of his trial in 1989, he was sentenced to death. He spent the rest of his days at California's San Quentin Prison, before dying from cancer in 2013. (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024)

The theory that I chose because is more relative to the case that I'm studying, Night Stalker: Richard Ramirez, is Traumatic Brain Injury. Aggression and antisocial behavior have been observed at higher levels in the aftermath of head trauma. These modifications can be linked to brain abnormalities that typically affect the limbic system, insula, and frontal lobe. The specificity of violent behavior in connection to traumatic brain damage was examined in a descriptive review that examined many factors, with an emphasis on age at the time of trauma and neuroimaging studies.

It's been proposed that traumatic brain injury (TBI) has a role in the development of aggressive conduct by way of its aftereffects, which include impulsivity and behavioral dysregulation, which in turn lead to violent and criminal behavior in the patients. Aggression has been observed to be increased during the acute phase after head trauma. Numerous mental illnesses, both violent and non-violent, manifest in post-acute periods. Antisocial actions are particularly prevalent in these phases. Activities at the end of the socially unacceptable conduct range, such as rule-breaking, delinquency, nuisance behavior, vandalism, and physical and verbal aggressiveness, are referred to as "antisocial behavior." It has been shown that alterations in mood, personality, and behavior are correlated with traumatic brain injury (TBI), and there may be associated consequences.

In children and young adults, traumatic brain injury (TBI) is the leading cause of mortality and disability. TBI raises the risk of behavioral disorders and psychiatric morbidity and impairs critical neural processes for self-regulation and social conduct. (Chibbaro, 2023)

There are several different connections between TBI and crime. Offenders may be risk-takers with a low threshold for avoiding harm. Nonetheless, a variety of pre-injury variables that may be criminogenic may worsen its effects. One to two out of every ten persons in detention have a complicated mild traumatic brain injury (TMBI) or a moderate to severe head injury, and three or four more may have a milder type of TBI. (Williams, PhD et al., 2018)

As an example, that explains this theory, we have the case of the ex-American footballer Aaron Hernandez. He was a professional football player who played in the National Football League (NFL) for three seasons with the New England Patriots. Hernandez was arrested on June 26, 2013, and charged with the murder of Odin Leonardo John Lloyd, a semi-professional American footballer from the New England Patriots as well. On April 15th, 2015, Hernandez was found guilty of first-degree murder as well as 5 weapon charges which meant a sentence of life in prison without possibility of parole.

But at 3 am, on April 19th, 2017, Aaron Hernandez was found dead in his prison cell for suicide, apparently hanged himself. After his death, he was diagnosed with Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE), a neurological condition linked to aggression, melancholy, and signs of dementia. After Hernandez's body was removed, his brain was transported to the Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE) Center at Boston University. Hernandez was diagnosed with an advanced case of CTE following an investigation. Repetitive mild traumatic brain injuries—possibly sustained on the football field—are thought to be the cause of CTE. (Gregory, 2020)

There are numerous links between traumatic brain injury and criminality. TBI plays a part in the emergence of violent behavior. Most cases of traumatic brain injury are caused by a forceful hit or bump to the head. It has been suggested that impulsivity, depression, aggression, and problems with the behavior, are aftereffects of the traumatic brain injury. Just as we saw in the case of Aaron Hernandez, traumatic brain injuries can lead to criminal behavior, this one being guilty of murder for several brain injuries caused by the heavy blows he was subjected to from Football, confirmed by a study of his brain after he was found dead in his cell, by suicide.

As I mentioned before, Richard Ramirez experienced two severe brain injuries as a young child, the first of which was when he lost consciousness after being struck by a heavy dresser when he was two years old. Once in the hospital, he underwent forehead surgery involving thirty sutures. At five years old, Richard's sister knocked him out while swinging, resulting in his second traumatic head injury, for which he needed stitches. Eleven years old, he was diagnosed with temporal lobe epilepsy after suffering a seizure at school during the fifth grade. (Business Bliss FZE, 2023)

Epilepsy is a neurological illness characterized by abrupt repeated episodes of sensory disruption, loss of consciousness, or convulsions caused by aberrant electrical activity in the brain. Epilepsy can be caused by brain disorders that affect the brain. Many argue that the brain impairments he experienced, as well as the torture he endured as a child, contributed to his becoming a killer. (*Richard Ramirez: Head Injuries Galore – Beautiful Minds*, 2019)

However, there are several ways to prevent Traumatic Brain Injuries. As previously stated, traumatic brain injury (TBI) is caused by a bump, blow, or jolt to the head, as well as a penetrating

head injury that alters the brain's normal function. Falls are the most common reason for TBI, that is why many ways to prevent this by asking your doctor about the risk of a fall, doing enough exercise, having your eyes checked, making your shower safer by putting bars inside it, putting railings on your stairs, and mentioning your doctor in case of a fall.

Another cause of TBI is sports. It is important to teach youngsters about the various ways the brain can be harmed during sports activities and how crucial it is to alert a coach, parent, or other adult when an injury happens. The coach should talk to the athletes about concussion safety and reinforce safe play.

Motor vehicle accidents are another main cause of TBI. Everyone should use seat belts on all trips to improve vehicle safety, adjust car seats, booster seats, and seat belts for children, encourage others not to drive after drinking or taking drugs, and understand your state's graduated driver's license laws. (*Let's Prevent Traumatic Brain Injury*, 2024)

Law enforcement and specialists are crucial in preventing TBI from influencing criminal activity. Rehabilitating after a recent TBI is advised for affected individuals. There is little doubt that the rehabilitation plan will help brain injury victims with a great deal of their problems if it is properly funded. It follows that providing victims, their families, and their support system with proper therapy and neuropsychological and neuropsychiatric support will unavoidably educate the victims, their families, and their support network about the impacts of brain injury and how they could be comprehended and managed. (Brazington, 2023)

People with serious brain injuries may need careful supervision in a controlled environment to prevent violent outbursts and other impulsive behavior, as they lack the ability to regulate their impulses and actions and may constitute a threat to others as well as themselves.

(Traumatic Brain Injury and Criminal Responsibility, Health Law & Policy Institute, n.d.)

Although there are many arguments as to how Richard's criminal behavior could have been prevented, not everyone reacts the same way to a Traumatic Brain Injury. Then to study his case, there is a chance that with attention during his adolescence thanks to early diagnosis, rehabilitation, and therapy, Richard would have responded differently to his injuries and not ended up committing crimes. However, there is no evidence to confirm that with help, Richard's ending would have been different.

To sum up, Richard Ramirez was a serial killer in California during 1984 and 1985. Several studies have explained his behavior and how it could have been prevented. The most prevalent theory in these studies is Traumatic Brain Injury. It explains that severe head injuries can injure the brain and cause a person to commit criminal behaviors. If at any time you suffer a severe fall or head injury, I recommend that you visit your doctor, keep a constant checkup and if necessary, go to therapy. A large percentage of people in prison have suffered from a head injury but did not give it the attention it deserved in time. Do not ignore these types of injuries.

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