



INVESTIGATING SERIAL CRIMES

Part I



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Article Source: http://www.patc.com/weeklyarticles/serial_crimes_1.shtml

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The topic of serial murder occupies a unique niche within the law enforcement community. There are significant investigative challenges associated with working serial crimes, but in addition to the complexity of the crime scene, serial cases attract an overabundance of attention from the media, mental health experts, academia, and the general public.

Serial murder is neither a new phenomenon, nor is it uniquely American. Dating back to ancient times, serial murderers have been chronicled around the world. In 19th century Europe, Dr. Richard von Krafft-Ebing conducted some of the first documented research on violent, sexual offenders and the crimes they committed. Best known for his 1886 textbook *Psychopathia Sexualis*, Dr. Kraft-Ebing described numerous case studies of sexual homicide, serial murder, and other areas of sexual proclivity.

Much of the general public's knowledge concerning serial murder, and some law enforcement investigators for that matter, is the product of Hollywood productions. Story lines are created to heighten the interest of audiences rather than to accurately portray serial homicide. By focusing on the atrocities inflicted on victims by deranged offenders, the public is captivated by the criminals and their mind set. This only lends more confusion to the true dynamics of serial murder.

A growing trend that compounds the fallacies surrounding serial crimes is the talking heads phenomenon. Given credibility by the media, many of these self-proclaimed authorities profess to have an expertise in serial homicide. They appear frequently on television and in the print media and speculate on the motive for the murders and the characteristics of the possible offender, without being privy to the facts of the investigation. Unfortunately, inappropriate comments may perpetuate misperceptions concerning serial murder and impair law enforcement's investigative efforts.

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Common Myths and Misconceptions of Serial Crimes:

1) Dysfunctional loners:

The majority of serial criminals and especially serial killers are not reclusive, social misfits who live alone. They are not monsters who appear strange. Many serial criminals hide in plain sight within their communities. Serial murderers often have families and homes, are gainfully employed, and appear to be normal members of the community. Because many serial murderers can blend in so effortlessly, they are oftentimes overlooked by law enforcement and the public.

2) White Males:

Contrary to popular belief, serial killers span all racial groups. There are white, African-American, Hispanic, and Asian serial killers. The racial diversification of serial killers generally mirrors that of the overall U.S. population.

3) Motivated by Sex:

All serial murders are not sexually-based. There are many other motivations for serial murders including anger, thrill, financial gain, and attention seeking. Actually, when analyzed most serial murders are not sexually-based, even though the crime scene at first glance may appear so.

4) Travel and Operate Interstate:

Most serial killers have very defined geographic areas of operation. They conduct their killings within comfort zones that are often defined by an anchor point (e.g. place of residence, employment, or residence of a relative). Serial murderers will, at times, spiral their activities outside of their comfort zone, when their confidence has grown through experience or to avoid detection but very few serial murderers travel interstate to kill.

5) Cannot Stop Killing:

It has been widely believed that once serial killers start killing, they cannot stop. There are, however, some serial killers who stop murdering altogether before being caught. In these instances, there are events or circumstances in offenders' lives that inhibit them from pursuing more victims. These can include increased participation in family activities, sexual substitution, and other diversions.

6) Insane or are Evil Geniuses:

A major myth that exists is that serial killers have either a debilitating mental condition, or they are extremely clever and intelligent. As a group, serial killers suffer from a variety of personality disorders, including psychopathy, anti-social personality, and others. Most, however, are not adjudicated as insane under the law. The media has created a number of fictional serial killer "geniuses", who outsmart law enforcement at every turn. Like other populations, however, serial killers range in intelligence from borderline to above average levels.

7) Want to Get Caught:

As serial killers continue to offend without being captured, they can become empowered, feeling they will never be identified. While most serial killers plan their offenses more thoroughly than other criminals, the learning curve is still very steep. They must select, target, approach, control, and dispose of their victims. The logistics involved in committing a murder and disposing of the body can become very complex, especially when there are multiple sites involved. As the series continues, the killers may begin to take shortcuts when committing their crimes. This often causes the killers to take more chances, leading to identification by law enforcement. It is not that serial killers want to get caught; they feel that they *can't get caught*

The public's interest in serial murder cases makes serial murder an attractive story line for the media, but it also puts added pressure on law enforcement to solve the case. When conducting serial crime investigations, it is important for investigators to identify the potential for a serial crime early on and if not properly trained, seek guidance from appropriate experts. In the past two decades, there have been tremendous advances in technology, laboratory testing, and forensic psychology. However, not every law enforcement agency has the resources to solve or identify serial crimes. Therefore, it is extremely important for all investigators to get a basic understanding of serial crimes and their complexity.