

SERIAL KILLERS

Thanks in part to a fascination with anything that is “serial,” whether it be murder, rape, arson, or robbery, there has been a tendency to focus a good deal of attention on the timing of different types of multiple murder. Thus, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) distinguishes between spree killers who take the lives of several victims over a short period of time without a cooling-off period and serial killers who murder a number of people over weeks, months, or years, but in between their attacks live relatively normal lives.¹ In 2008, for example, Nicholas T. Sheley, then 28, went on a killing spree across two states, beating as many as eight people to death over a period of several days in an effort to get money to buy crack. Sheley’s victims ranged from a child to a 93-year-old man. At the time of these incidents, Sheley already had a long criminal history of robbery, drugs, and weapons convictions and had spent time in prison. Sheley is doing life in prison in Illinois for six of the murders and faces two additional homicide charges in Missouri.

Unfortunately, the distinction between spree and serial killing can easily break down. For example, over the course of 2 weeks in 1997, Andrew Cunanan killed two victims in Minnesota, then drove to Illinois, where he killed another person, and then on to New Jersey, where he killed his fourth victim. While evading apprehension, and on the FBI’s 10 Most Wanted List, Cunanan was labeled a spree killer. He then disappeared from sight, although citizens far and wide called the FBI claiming to have spotted the fugitive, hoping for a cash reward. Two months later, the elusive killer turned up in Miami, where he shot to death fashion designer Gianni Versace. Cunanan’s revised body count—five victims—was accumulated over a period of months, not days, and with a rather lengthy cooling-off period between the fourth and fifth murders. Should he be regarded as a spree killer or a serial murderer? Does it really matter all that much?

In 1990, Danny Rolling brutally murdered five college students in Gainesville, Florida, at three different crime scenes over a 72-hour period and thus appeared to be a spree killer. It turns out that Rolling had slaughtered a family of three in Shreveport, Louisiana, 8 months before his Gainesville attacks, making Rolling a serial killer. Again, does it really matter? Rigidly focusing on the timing of attacks, although interesting, is far less important to our understanding of multiple homicide than attempting to assess the killer’s motivation.

Recently discovered serial killer Todd Kohlhepp, 45, kidnapped and kept a woman chained in a shipping container on his South Carolina property for months in 2016 after he lured the woman and her boyfriend to his home under the ruse of hiring them to clean for him. Kohlhepp murdered the boyfriend immediately in front of the woman. When police traced the last of her cell phone pings to

Kohlhepp's property, they heard her banging on the walls of the storage shed. After rescuing the distraught woman, the police searched the property and turned up two more bodies that appeared to have been killed months earlier. The authorities thought they were dealing with a serial killer, but Kohlhepp then confessed to an unsolved mass murder of four at a motorcycle shop in 2003. Kohlhepp, a successful real estate agent, avoided the death penalty by pleading guilty to seven murders. But if he's linked to the other murders under investigation, including a triple homicide and bank robbery in 2003, he may not be able to avoid the death penalty after all. Is Kohlhepp a mass killer, a serial killer, or a hybrid of both?

Another issue related to defining serial murder surrounds the minimum victim threshold. Several years ago, the FBI broadened its long-standing definition (assailants who killed at least three victims) to include repeat killers with just two victims to their name, claiming that it would be helpful in conducting homicide investigations.² Some criminologists who research the topic of serial murder have followed the FBI lead, whereas others have maintained thresholds of three or even four. In an effort to identify the optimal threshold based on empirical data, Fridel and Fox found that offenders with two victims differed significantly in terms of motive, partnership, and crime scene behaviors from their more prolific counterparts. Whereas law enforcement may find it useful to operate with a different definition for law enforcement purposes of investigative work, maintaining a somewhat higher threshold appears to be better for distinguishing this particularly deadly breed of killers from a large pool of two-timers and serial murder wannabes who stop killing or are apprehended before accumulating more victims.³

A commonly held view concerning repeat murderers, perhaps because of the widespread fascination associated with their crimes, is that they are always driven to kill by sexual urges, and indeed many of them are. Still, at least some appear to be motivated by material gain, and their homicides tend to be more instrumental than expressive. They rob, burglarize, steal cars, and often kill their victims not for some emotional or sexual release but primarily to acquire money and possessions. Murder is just a means of covering up their tracks.

For example, over a 3-week time span in October 2002, the D.C. Snipers—John Allen Muhammad and Lee Boyd Malvo—gunned down 10 strangers, all chosen randomly, from a “sniper’s nest” situated in the trunk of their blue Chevy sedan. During this entire period, aside from eating and sleeping, their time was apparently consumed by planning, executing, escaping, and hiding from the police. Muhammad was executed in November 2009. His teenaged accomplice, Malvo, was not eligible for the death penalty because of this age and is serving life sentences without the possibility of parole. Malvo recently confessed that he and his murderous mentor were also responsible for an additional four killings, three of which were committed in the course of armed robberies. The motive for the D.C. area killings was profit: The killers attempted to extort \$10 million from the authorities in exchange for a “cease fire.”

Besides the spree–serial distinction, it is also valuable to distinguish full-time from part-time repeat killers. The D.C. Snipers devoted their full attention to selecting appropriate locations, killing victims, communicating with the police, and hiding out. For most serial killers, however, murder is a part-time hobby, thus the notion of “cooling off.” They typically return to their normal activities (e.g., holding a job, attending classes, playing with their children) after each murder. But during these dormant times, they often plan their next murder, putting hundreds of miles on their cars as they troll and surveil potential victims, reliving their past murders with pictures and souvenirs, or even returning to bodies yet undiscovered.

Given the role that murder occupies in their actions and thoughts, serial killers typically can recall even the smallest details of their crimes, even years after being captured.

THE MANY FORMS OF SERIAL KILLING

There is a multitude of different motives that provoke serial killers and help them to justify their actions. Some, such as Marybeth Tinning discussed in Chapter 4, have slain a series of children to satisfy a pathological need for attention and sympathy. As described later in Chapter 12, some serial killings have occurred in the context of cult activity. A charismatic cult leader such as Charles Manson or Adolfo de Jesús Constanzo inspires his followers to commit homicides, often ritualistic or excessively brutal in nature, both to achieve some political or spiritual goal and to nourish the leader's excessive need to be in charge. A few serial killers are driven not by a charismatic cult figure but by the commandments of delusional forces that place them on a relentless mission of murder. Still other serial killings are expeditious cover-ups. Railway Killer Ángel Maturino Reséndiz, for example, was charged in 1999 with killing nine people in Texas, Kentucky, and Illinois, all near railroad tracks, in the process of robbery and burglary, primarily to eliminate potential witnesses.

By far, however, the most common form of serial murder surrounds the killer's quest to satisfy his own sadistic urges or excessive need for control. He exploits his victims as a means of satisfying personal, and often sexual, desires.¹ Interviews with serial killers reveal that some experience psychological relief after killings, rather than guilt and disgust. Although serial murder has been loosely described as "motiveless," there is indeed one motive—to satisfy an intense appetite for sadism, power, and control. Many serial murderers kill not for love, money, or revenge but just for the fun of it—because it makes them feel good.

We tend to overlook certain serial killers, even with large body counts, simply because their motives seem mundane. Most media attention and public fascination are focused on sexual sadists. Far less attention is given to mothers who kill their children, nurses who poison their patients, or armed robbers who repeatedly take the lives of their victims to eliminate all witnesses. Although most definitions of serial murder do include women who kill their family members for insurance money and the murders committed by medical professionals, many scholars ignore those series of murders committed as part of a criminal enterprise related to gangs, drugs, or organized crime.

Because of the massive publicity devoted to such crimes as the grisly slayings of at least 17 males by cannibalistic necrophile Jeffrey Dahmer, the term *serial murder* has become part of everyday vocabulary. Serial killers such as David Berkowitz (Son of Sam), Kenneth Bianchi (the Hillside Strangler), and Theodore (better known as Ted) Bundy are featured in prime-time TV docudramas and mass-market paperbacks, no longer just in obscure detective magazines. Serial murder is a profitable industry. Stretching the limits of decency, moreover, serial killers have, as described earlier, clearly become a fixture in our popular culture, featured on trading cards and in comic books as well as on T-shirts and in games. Further glamorizing and romanticizing their crimes, journalists and true crime writers often assign colorful monikers to their murderous activities (see Table 7.1). Curiously, most people can easily name nine serial killers, yet not so many can identify the nine justices of the U.S. Supreme Court.

Table 7.1 Selected Serial Killer Monikers

Killer(s)	Moniker
Charles Albright	The Eyeball Killer
Richard Angelo	The Angel of Death
David Berkowitz	The Son of Sam
Paul Bernardo & Karla Homolka	The Ken and Barbie Killers
Kenneth Bianchi & Angelo Buono	The Hillside Stranglers
Ian Brady & Myra Hindley	The Moors Murderers
Jerry Brudos	The Shoe-Fetish Slayer
Ted Bundy	The Lady Killer
David Carpenter	The Trailside Killer
Richard Chase	The Vampire of Sacramento
Andrei Chikatilo	The Rostov Ripper
Douglas Clark	The Sunset Strip Slayer
John Norman Collins	The Coed Murderer
Adolfo de Jesús Constanzo	The Godfather of Matamoros
Dean Corll	The Candy Man
Juan Corona	The Machete Murderer
Jeffrey Dahmer	The Milwaukee Monster
Albert DeSalvo	The Boston Strangler
Nannie Doss	The Giggling Granny
Larry Eyler	The Interstate Killer
Albert Fish	The Cannibal
Lonnie David Franklin Jr.	The Grim Sleeper
John Wayne Gacy	The Killer Clown
Carlton Gary	The Stocking Strangler
Ed Gein	The Ghoul of Wisconsin
Vaughn Greenwood	The Skid Row Slasher
John George Haigh	The Acid Bath Murderer
Keith Jespersen	The Happy Face Killer
Theodore Kaczynski	The Unabomber

Killer(s)	Moniker
Patrick Kearney	The Trash Bag Murderer
Edmund Kemper III	The Coed Killer
Bobby Joe Long	The Classified Ad Rapist
Pedro Lopez	The Monster of the Andes
George Metesky	The Mad Bomber
Ivan Milat	The Backpack Killer
John Allen Muhammad & Lee Boyd Malvo	The D.C. Snipers
Dennis Rader	The BTK Strangler
Richard Ramirez	The Night Stalker
Melvin David Rees	The Sex Beast
Gary Leon Ridgway	The Green River Killer
Danny Rolling	The Gainesville Ripper
Arthur Shawcross	The Genesee River Killer
Harold Shipman	Doctor Death
Anthony Sowell	The Cleveland Strangler
Timothy William Spencer	The Southside Slayer
Peter Sutcliffe	The Yorkshire Rapist
Carl Eugene Watts	The Sunday Morning Slasher
Wayne Williams	The Atlanta Child Murderer
Randall Woodfield	The I-5 Killer

The most prolific serial killers tend to be organized psychologically. They methodically stalk their victims for the best opportunity to strike so as not to be seen, and they smartly dump the bodies far away so as not to leave any clues. The discovery of a body in a dump site does not provide investigators with the crime scene where most of the forensic evidence—hairs, blood, fibers, semen—is located. In a sense, becoming a serial killer is a process of self-selection. A confused assailant who kills in a frenzied way cannot successfully plan, execute, and cover up the crime. The most dangerous, cunning murderers are a great challenge for law enforcement authorities. Notwithstanding advances in forensics, computerized offender tracking, and even behavioral profiling, when these crimes are solved, luck generally plays a significant role.

It may not be completely fair to law enforcement to characterize these apprehensions as lucky, because they still involve the police doing their job. Although killers like Theodore Bundy and Gary Heidnik may have been caught in routine traffic stops and Berkowitz was linked to the Son of Sam killings as a

result of a parking ticket he received near one of the crime scenes, these obvious involved important police activities—even if not requiring tremendous technical skill—and highlight the significance of a police presence in our society.

There is also some evidence that the most organized killers can begin to deteriorate over time. Bundy began his killing career with a duffle bag filled with weapons, disguises, and tools and had several ruses he used to lure women (e.g., his arm was in a sling and he needed help loading something into his car). By the time he committed the Chi Omega sorority house murders at Florida State University, however, Bundy used a log he found at the crime scene as his murder weapon and left bite marks on his victim's body. Apparently, Bundy's transformation was from a highly organized to a quite disorganized killer.

The notion that serial killers subconsciously wish to be caught and for that purpose carelessly leave telltale clues at crime scenes or act impetuously and recklessly may hold in detective novels but has little validity when applied to most real cases. When spree/serial killer Andrew Cunanan traveled from the Midwest to the East in a series of stolen cars, killing his first four victims along the way, many law enforcement experts speculated that his incautious actions, such as using his victims' cell phones, indicated a latent desire to be apprehended. Despite this wishful thinking on the part of investigators, Cunanan remained hidden in plain sight before surfacing in Miami to kill again. Even as the police cornered him on a Miami houseboat, Cunanan still controlled when, where, and how the killing spree would end. On July 23, 1997, as police and media helicopters circled above him, the 27-year-old killer took his own life rather than be taken alive. Perhaps it was a death wish, but clearly not an arrest wish.

DECEIVING APPEARANCES

Several myths have long existed about serial killers, whereas other legends are rather recent in origin.⁵ One of the oldest misconceptions is that of the serial murderer as a human monster, derived from and reinforced by Hollywood creations such as Jason in the movie *Friday the 13th*. In one thriller after another, screenwriters have portrayed serial killers as glassy-eyed lunatics whose entire existence is centered on satisfying their compulsion for human destruction.

Actually, it would be somewhat comforting if the Hollywood image were at all accurate. If serial killers indeed looked like crazed maniacs and acted in a patently bizarre fashion, they would be easily identified and avoided on sight. Unfortunately, in very many respects, most serial killers are extraordinarily ordinary, and, as such, extremely dangerous.

Quite opposite to the Hollywood thriller stereotype, a more modern characterization describes these killers as unusually handsome and charming, perhaps generalizing from one of the most celebrated cases of modern times, that of Theodore Bundy, who murdered dozens of women from Washington State to Florida and was indeed a "lady killer," in more ways than one. During his trial, a number of female admirers came to court, their hair styled to look like some of Bundy's victims, and sat gazing at the "dreamy" defendant. Similarly, Richard Ramirez, the so-called Night Stalker of Los Angeles, also was sought after by numerous adoring women during his trial. They attended his trial dressed all in black as an expression of support and devotion. In 1996, while locked away in a California prison, Ramirez married one of his adoring fans.

Several other serial killers, including Randall Woodfield, Ángel Maturino Reséndiz, Henry Louis Wallace, and Arthur Shawcross, found love and marriage

after being convicted and imprisoned for vicious crimes. A few states—California, Connecticut, Mississippi, New Mexico, New York, and Washington—allow for conjugal visits from spouses. Bundy managed to become a father while in prison (semen was somehow smuggled out of the prison), and his then-wife had a daughter in 1982.

Aspiring to marry a convicted and imprisoned serial killer may say much more about the mental health of the bride-to-be than the charm of the killer himself. Marrying someone in prison is one way an insecure woman can be assured that her man is not cheating on her (at least with other women). He may be behind bars but not in the bars looking for a good time. She always knows where he is, even at 3 a.m. Women who are attracted to men who have committed atrocious crimes, referred to as *hybristophiles*, may suffer from their own mental health issues and seek attention as the wife or girlfriend of a notorious murderer.

It is tempting to focus only on the defects of killer groupies (e.g., their lack of self-esteem and their bad judgment) to explain their attraction to serial killers. Some of them find a mission in their relationship. They must attract the attention of the world and tell everyone that their man is innocent, that he is only a victim of injustice and not a vicious criminal. Still other women may feel special because their man shared his most personal and intimate thoughts. Only she sees his gentler side.

Aside from the needs of killer groupies, however, what deserves to be acknowledged as well is society's complicity in making these murderers into appealing celebrities. In some cases, serial killers have received more national publicity than many rock stars or rap artists. Moreover, most serial killers are extremely manipulative. They know exactly how to lure vulnerable women into a relationship, just as they understood how to lure their poor victims into a position of total vulnerability in order to take their lives.

It would be wrong, however, to characterize all, or even most, serial killers as charming, charismatic, and attractive. Some are, by conventional standards, decidedly undesirable in appearance, and still others suffer from intense shyness. Interestingly, shyness has been identified as a factor that may protect against delinquency, apparently as a trait that limits the number of peer contacts. However, shyness—and particularly shyness with women—is a characteristic that appears in many case histories of male serial killers.

For some serial killers, in fact, murder can be their only strategy for seeking sexual gratification and even "enjoying" the "company" of others. Leonard Lake, a middle-aged recluse who lived in the woods just east of San Francisco, was painfully aware of his limitations when he outlined on videotape, with chilling calmness and clarity, his motives for abducting women. Preparing to build an elaborate underground bunker in which to imprison young women as sex slaves, Lake described in logical, although patently selfish, terms why he felt the need to proceed with what he called "Operation Miranda":

I am a realist. I am 38 years old, a bit chubby, with not much hair, and I'm losing what I have. I am not particularly attractive to women—or I should say particularly attracting to women. And all the traditional magnets—the money, the position/power—I don't have. And yet I am still very sexually active, and I am still very much attracted to a particular type of woman who almost by definition is totally uninterested in me.

Dirty old man, pervert, I'm attracted to young women, sometimes even as young as 12, although to be fair certainly 18–22 is pretty much an

ideal range as far as my interests go. I like very slim women, very pretty of course, petite, small breasted, long hair, if I am allowed. And, such a woman, by virtue of her youth, her attractiveness, her desirability to certainly the majority of mankind, simply has better options. There is no particular reason why such a woman should be interested in me.

But there is more to it than that. It is difficult to explain my personality in 25 words or less, but I am in fact a loner, I enjoy the peace, the quiet, the solitude, I enjoy being by myself. And while all my relationships with women in the past have been sexually successful, socially they have almost always been a failure. I've gone through two divorces, innumerable women, 50-55, I forget exactly the count, I counted recently. I'm afraid the bottom line statement is the simple fact that I'm a sexist slob.

I enjoy using women, and of course women aren't particularly interested in being used. I certainly enjoy sex. I certainly enjoy the dominance of climbing on a woman and using her body. But I'm not particularly interested in the id, the ego, all the things that a man should be interested in to complement a woman's needs. Now I can fake these emotions, and I can fake them very well. In the past, I've been very successful at attracting fairly interesting and attractive women simply because I did fake fairly well an interest in their needs and their requirements. So momentarily I had what I wanted and they thought they had what they wanted. But in the long term I don't want to bother.

What I want is an off-the-shelf sex partner. I want to be able to use a woman whenever and however I want. And when I'm tired or satiated or bored or not interested, I simply want to put her away, lock her up in a little room to get her out of my sight, out of my life, and thus avoid what heretofore has always been the obligation to entertain or amuse or satisfy a particular woman or girlfriend's whims of emotional whatever.

Such an arrangement, of course, is not only blatantly sexist, but highly illegal. There's no doubt about it. It violates all of the human rights and blah blah, blah blah blah. To spare posterity my concept of other people's morality, I'm explaining my morality—what I feel, what I want. And as of this moment I am going to try to get it.

With the help of his buddy Charles Ng, Lake constructed a holding cell inside a bunker next to his home in which he kept a steady supply of slaves. He used them as long as they were appealing and satisfying, and then violently discarded them as human trash. Surely, Lake could have hired prostitutes to fulfill his sexual needs and housekeepers to perform the other assorted chores. But there was much more to his fantasy: ownership. He sought to possess total power over his victims as if they were indeed his slaves. Leonard Lake committed suicide by taking a cyanide pill as soon as he was apprehended by police, and Charles Ng, whose shoplifting brought him and his partner to the attention of police, was convicted of 12 murders and is currently on death row in California. His trial was one of the most expensive in history.

Although Leonard Lake was as intelligent as he was self-absorbed, it is also part of the modern mythology that serial killers are typically brilliant—like the Hannibal Lecter character from Thomas Harris's novel, *The Silence of the Lambs*. Although some serial killers, such as Lawrence Sigmund Bittaker and Edmund Kemper, have genius-level IQs, many others clearly have sub-par intelligence.

Based on data drawn from the Homicide Investigation and Tracking System (HITS) database in Washington State, Godwin determined that only 16% of the 107 serial murderers he studied had attended college and only 4% graduated with a bachelor's degree. The majority were employed in blue-collar jobs working for other people.⁶ Using a much larger database, Aamodt found that roughly 15% of serial killers attended at least some college. Although partially a result of a large amount of missing data on educational attainment, Aamodt reported that as many as 43% of serial killers had no academic degree at all, not even a high school diploma.⁷

Regardless of social class, IQ, or level of education, most serial killers—at least those who successfully remain at large for long time periods—typically possess a certain degree of cunning, criminal savoir faire needed to accumulate a significant body count. Many of them are exceptionally skillful in their presentation of self, so much so that they appear beyond suspicion and thus are difficult to apprehend. But many of them just target the most vulnerable and only have to offer drugs or money to trap a victim. They are hardly engaging in complicated art thefts or bank heists. Like terrorists, they mostly go after soft targets.

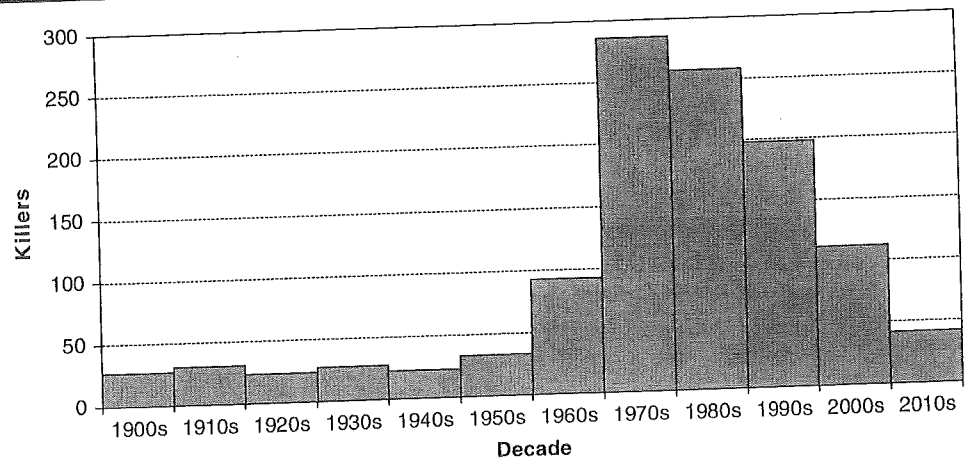
PREVALENCE AND TRENDS

It is difficult to gauge the full extent of serial murder. Because of complexities in linking murders committed by the same perpetrator but at different times and often different locations, no precise estimate of the prevalence of serial killers is even possible. Early estimates of serial murder suggested there was an emerging epidemic with hundreds of active killers and thousands of victims killed every year, but this was largely media hype and hysteria.⁸ Although a large percentage of all killers featured in TV dramas, news magazine programs, and true crime books commit serial murder, most research places the death toll linked to known serial killers at about 1% of all murders in the United States, a couple hundred victims per year at most. However, there is also research that suggests there may be many more overlooked victims of serial killers. Some proportion of missing persons and unidentified dead are likely serial homicide victims, as well as deaths that are misclassified as natural deaths (as in the case of a medical murderer or deaths wrongly classified as sudden infant death syndrome [SIDS]). Additionally, some missing persons are never reported as missing by anyone. These “missing missing,” including runaways, prostitutes, homeless persons, and drug addicts, are particularly vulnerable to serial killers. Including these typically undercounted victim pools could easily double or triple the known annual serial murder death toll.⁹

Notwithstanding these limitations in measuring the prevalence of serial murder, the best available source of information pertaining to serial killers and their victims is the Radford University/Florida Gulf Coast University Serial Killer Database (hereafter called the Radford/FGCU database).¹⁰ The Radford/FGCU database includes information of offender demographics, childhood life events, family variables, education, military history, substance use, locations and dates of murders and other crimes, motives, types of victims, weapons, and sentencing outcomes on nearly 5,000 repeat killers (with at least two kills) and 14,000 victims from around the globe and dating as far back as the 15th century.

Rather than include all cases contained in the Radford/FGCU database, we focus on the most deadly serial predators—those who killed at least four victims.

Figure 7.1 Serial Killers by Decade of First Murder



In addition, given the questionable reliability of data from cases outside the United States, we limit the analysis to those who stalked victims in the United States.

Figure 7.1 displays counts of serial killers operating in the United States whose first killing took place between 1900 and 2016 (members of serial killer teams are each counted as separate offenders). As shown, there were relatively few known cases during the first half of the twentieth century. The pattern emerging during the past few decades is radically different, however. The number of known serial killers grew rapidly from the 1960s into the 1980s. Following the 1970s peak, the number of cases declined somewhat in the 1980s, 1990s, and since 2000.

Although rapid growth into the 1970s and 1980s clearly suggests significant shifts in the prevalence of serial murder, these results are vulnerable, at least in part, to alternative explanations related to changes in data accessibility and quality of record keeping. As interest in serial murder increased, so did the likelihood that case histories would be published in some fashion. Additionally, as law enforcement became better equipped to identify linkages between victims slain by the same killer or killers, the detection of serial crimes and criminals became more likely. To some extent, therefore, the surge in serial murder may have been at least partially an artifact of increased reporting and improved detection. Notwithstanding these concerns, the trend in serial killings into the 1980s is quite consistent with a more general rise in violent crime, including homicide, in the United States as well as an increase in population size.

As the incidence and public awareness of serial murder grew through the 1980s, so did the sense of fear and panic. However, in recent decades the number of serial murderers has tapered off. Aside from mirroring the overall drop in homicide discussed in Chapter 2, a number of factors have contributed specifically to the decline in serial murder victimization, including the Amber Alert system, sex offender registries, GPS tracking, better insurance fraud detection, hospital death surveillance systems, DNA analysis, reduced prevalence of hitchhiking and broken-down cars on the road, and fewer free-range kids and more hovering parents.¹¹ These changes and technologies may also mean that some would-be serial offenders never killed anyone or killed only a few victims before being

apprehended. Books such as Gavin de Becker's *The Gift of Fear* and the constant inundation of murder shows may have contributed to the decline by making people hypervigilant and less likely to take risks. Easy online access to hardcore pornography may also have given the sexually violent an alternative to acting out their fantasies on real victims.

Even though many technological advances have shielded potential victims from the clutches of serial killers, in certain ways technology may also make us more vulnerable. For example, social media such as Facebook and internet-based services such as Craigslist have been a boon for predators trolling online for victims. The convenience of online shopping also brings potential assailants to the homes of possible victims when packages are delivered. For example, using his part-time job at UPS to access records, 30-year-old Jason Thomas Scott murdered five women in Maryland, including two cases in which he killed both mother and daughter.

Whatever the reasons for the decline over the past couple of decades, the problem of serial murder remains a difficult and perplexing one for law enforcement and, of course, for the citizens concerned for their personal safety. Even with fewer than a dozen serial killers per year captured by the police plus an unknown number of others undetected or on the loose, the fear and suffering provoked by serial murderers is extraordinary, warranting an attempt to understand who these offenders are and why they kill.

CHARACTERISTICS OF SERIAL KILLERS

Much of what comprises "common knowledge" about serial killers is based on case studies of the most unusual and bizarre crimes as well as fictional accounts in books and film. For the longest time, there was little in the way of hard data on large numbers of cases to provide a reality check on the many widely held assumptions about the characteristics of serial killers, their crimes, and their victims. In recent years, however, several criminologists have assembled data sets on serial murder specifically to provide perspective. As mentioned, the most complete resource is the Radford/FGCU database.

In addition to focusing only on serial killers operating in the United States, for whom the data are more complete and reliable, we also limit our analysis to cases from the past several decades for the very same reason. Details on cases occurring long ago are rather difficult to obtain. Thus, the offender and victim characteristics to be provided in the tables to follow involve cases in the United States from the 1970s forward in which the assailant is confirmed to have murdered at least four victims spread over some period of time. Following these criteria, the Radford/FGCU database for the years 1970 through 2016 contains 897 offenders who were responsible for more than 4,600 killings (some of which are linked to two or more offenders acting as accomplices).

Determining the precise number of victims killed by these offenders is, unfortunately, next to impossible. Often, the full extent of their murder tolls can only be suspected, and the documented cases for which they are convicted or linked with a high degree of certainty may understate the extent of carnage. On the other hand, some offenders, grandiose in their self-image as killing machines, exaggerate their victim tallies as they boast to the press and even the police about how powerful and superior they are.

As shown in the top of Table 7.2, the 897 serial murderers fitting the stated criteria were implicated, on average, in 6.77 killings each over a span of nearly

five years, with the 842 male assailants slightly deadlier than the 55 females (6.82 and 6.04 killings, respectively). Of course, the most notorious serial killers (e.g., Theodore Bundy, Gary Ridgway, and John Wayne Gacy, to name a few) can be linked to dozens of murders over much longer time frames. Since 1970 about 35% of serial killers had four victims, another 21% had five victims, and 12% had six victims. The remaining third had seven or more victims.¹²

In addition to these known serial killers, a number of unsolved cases across the nation continue to baffle investigators. Furthermore, despite recent advances

Table 7.2 Characteristics of Serial Killers, 1970–2016

Offender Characteristic	Offender Sex		Total
	Male	Female	
Number of cases	842	55	897
Average victim count	6.82	6.04	6.77
Average career length (yrs)	4.9	4.3	4.9
Killing rate (victims/yr)	5.3	5.6	5.3
Offender age at first kill			
Under 20	15.9%	9.1%	15.5%
20–29	51.7%	50.9%	51.7%
30–39	23.8%	27.3%	24.0%
40–49	7.2%	5.5%	7.1%
50+	1.3%	7.3%	1.7%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Average age	27.3	29.1	27.4
Offender race/ethnicity			
White	48.9%	72.7%	50.4%
Black	41.1%	18.2%	39.7%
Hispanic	8.0%	5.5%	7.8%
Asian	1.2%	3.6%	1.3%
Other	0.8%	0.0%	0.8%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Type of motive			
Profit	35.0%	40.0%	35.3%
Pleasure	44.0%	32.7%	43.3%

Offender Characteristic	Offender Sex		Total
	Male	Female	
Anger	12.3%	7.3%	12.0%
Other	8.8%	20.0%	9.5%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Scope of killing			
National	16.4%	14.5%	16.3%
Regional	12.7%	9.1%	12.5%
Local	70.9%	76.4%	71.2%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

in technology and communication, law enforcement officials may still be unaware of the presence of many other serial killers. The unsolved or open cases and the undetected cases, taken together, could account for hundreds of additional victims.

Table 7.2 features information on the demographic and other key characteristics of serial killers, indicating that certain widely held beliefs about these assailants are not completely accurate. Overall, 93.9% of serial killers are male. The disproportionate involvement of males in serial homicide in part reflects, of course, their greater numbers in murder rates, generally. However, according to these statistics, the gender ratio among serial killers is slightly more pronounced than the 90% for murder overall, a finding that is consistent with the prevailing view among most researchers that almost all serial killers are men.

Even when the serial murders committed by women are heinous, cruel, and sexually predatory, the tendency is still to portray them as victims. Karla Homolka fully and willingly participated with her husband in the brutal rapes and murders of three girls, one of whom was her own younger sister, to satisfy her own sexual fantasies. Gwendolyn Graham and Catherine Wood, convicted of killing five elderly people in a nursing home (and suspected of as many as 10 deaths in total), used their murders as foreplay, sneaking away afterward into vacant rooms to have sex and discuss fondly their victims' dying moments. Aileen Wuornos, a Florida prostitute who murdered seven men, told the jurors during her trial that she hoped their daughters would be raped.

Dozens of women have murdered children, stepchildren, husbands, and parents for the benefit of collecting on their life insurance. Given the reluctance to label the most brutal female killers as serial predators, profiles of the female serial killers may be off the mark. Much more weight appears to be given to a female killer's past history of child and domestic abuse, portraying her as a victim, as mentally ill, and as not responsible for her actions.¹⁵ Nevertheless, criminologists are beginning to recognize the existence of a female sexual predator. Women, like men, can develop deviant psychosexual needs. Women can only begin to achieve equality with men if their predatory, violent, and murderous behavior is acknowledged as a product of their free will to kill and be punished accordingly.

In terms of age, 51.7% of serial murderers started killing in their 20s and another 24.0% started in their 30s, with an average age of onset at about 27. Of course, most have killing careers that last years, and the average age at mid-career is 30 years old. It is not very common for a teenager to have acquired an insatiable taste for murder. It is equally uncommon for such a youthful offender to have developed the level of skill and cunning needed to carry out a prolonged career of killing without being caught after one or two murders or attempted murders. Typically, the toxic ingredients that create a serial killer take time to ferment.

Table 7.2 also shows that 50.4% of serial killers are white, less than the proportion of the population that is white and non-Hispanic (61.3%). The proportion of serial killers who are black (39.7%) is three times greater than their 13% representation in the general population but still below the substantial share (slightly more than half) of all homicides committed by blacks. However, at least historically, the involvement of black serial killers may have been understated. The percentage of serial killers who are black has increased with each successive decade, exceeding 50% among those who began killing since 2000 and nearing convergence with homicide in general.

Why were black serial killers overlooked for so long? In part, it was the serial killer stereotype, promulgated back in the 1980s by the FBI, of the white, middle-aged male with above-average intelligence. In addition, racism contributed to the greater media coverage of cases with white victims and a hesitancy to use the terms *monster* and *animal* when referring to black offenders. Moreover, serial killings of black victims, especially those who are impoverished and marginalized politically, are less likely to be connected, prioritized for investigation, and subsequently solved.

The delayed identification and apprehension of two recently captured serial murderers illustrate how the victims' race may play a role in how aggressively law enforcement responds. In both cases, moreover, many of the murdered women, living on the margins of society, were never reported as missing by anyone—examples of Quinet's "missing missing."

It took 25 years for Lonnie David Franklin Jr., a 57-year-old black male, to be arrested as the "Grim Sleeper" killer. Franklin's apprehension in July 2010 apparently closed the book on the unsolved murders of 10 black residents of Los Angeles. However, Franklin may not have been sleeping at all. Recently, the LAPD released 160 photos of unidentified women found in Franklin's possessions. Since the release of the photos, at least 20 women have been identified and are alive, but more than 100 of the photos have yet to be identified and may be additional victims of Franklin. Franklin was convicted of killing nine women, linked to at least 25 murders, and sentenced to death in 2016.

In October 2009, 51-year-old Anthony Sowell, also a black man, was convicted of 11 counts of murder after 10 bodies of black women and one human skull were discovered buried in the yard of his Cleveland, Ohio, home. Sowell was able to evade detection and arrest for years, despite the noticeable stench coming from the decaying remains. In addition to the 11 known victims, Sowell is also being investigated for several other missing person and unsolved homicides cases. Whatever the full extent of his crimes, Sowell remains on Ohio's death row.

Many other black serial killers, including Lorenzo Gilyard, John Floyd Thomas, and Chester Turner, were able to stay under the radar for lengthy periods of time because of the type of victims they targeted. The media focus far more attention on murdered or missing white females, which in turn impacts the level of pressure placed on the police to find the person responsible. This phenomenon, known as "the missing white woman syndrome," can certainly be seen in the

extensive media coverage and law enforcement resources cases like Laci Peterson, Elizabeth Smart, Lauren Spierer, and Caylee Anthony received.¹⁴

The typical serial killer is someone like Hillside Strangler Kenneth Bianchi, who, along with his cousin Angelo Buono, raped, tortured, and murdered 10 young women in the Los Angeles area in the late 1970s. The Hillside Strangler moniker is quite telling. Although 40% of serial killers use a gun, that percentage is much lower than the 65% for murderers generally. When serial killers do employ guns, they often only use them initially for coercion and intimidation but then prefer a more hands-on method for the actual murder. Too easy, too clean, and much too distant, a gun would only rob the serial killer of his greatest pleasure: exalting in his victim's suffering.

Serial killers will often change their modus operandi (MO), or method of killing. They may change methods over time because they improve their techniques. Dennis Rader, the BTK Strangler, started out trying to strangle victims with leather shoe ties, but they broke so he then switched to stronger strangulation methods. Serial killers may also change their MO in response to actions taken by the victim or the presence of others nearby. Whereas they may prefer to strangle, a highly resistant victim could force them to use a firearm or another, more practical method. The serial killers may also change the MO in response to police investigations and media release of case details so as to make their crimes appear unconnected to one another. However, although they may alter their MO, the serial killers rarely change their signature—their personal sexual fantasies embedded into the crime scene. They may have a compulsion to display bodies in elaborate poses, insert foreign objects into the bodies, or cut, bite, or dismember the body. Analysis of U.S. serial killers active since 1970 finds 40% of serial killers raped their victims, 15% tortured their victims, and 4% engaged in cannibalism or necrophilia.¹⁵

It is well known that some serial killers keep totems, or souvenirs from their crimes. Joel Rifkin, for example, who in 1993 confessed to murdering 17 prostitutes in New York, kept his victims' underwear, shoes, sweaters, cosmetics, and jewelry in his bedroom. Jeffrey Dahmer, who was killed by a prison inmate in 1994, proudly displayed pictures of his victims on the walls of his apartment and kept body parts in his refrigerator. Missouri's Robert Berdella, a 40-year-old man who held captive six male sex slaves, had a particularly rich collection of souvenirs, including two human skulls and over 200 photographs of his victims in a variety of degrading poses before and after death, and with various vegetables inserted into their body cavities. He also chronicled his "human experiments" in a detailed diary of his tortures. But these cases may reflect the activities of a subset and a more Hollywood version of serial killers, as analysis of the Radford/FGCU data finds that only about 9% of serial killers kept some sort of memento.

A few serial killers feed their need to feel important and powerful by taunting the police and making the headlines. The self-named Zodiac Killer, who killed at least five people during the 1960s and 1970s in the San Francisco Bay area, sent several cryptic notes to newspapers. These notes contained a code that has never been broken, and the Zodiac case remains unsolved.

During the 1970s, a serial killer in Wichita, Kansas, phoned a local newspaper reporter directing him to a section of the public library where he located a letter claiming credit for the recent massacre of a local family. In his letter, the killer wrote: "The code words for me will be . . . Bind them, Torture them, Kill them." He signed the letter "BTK Strangler," for bind, torture, and kill. From that point on, the BTK moniker was commonly used by newspaper reporters in their