

articles about the killer's string of seven murders. In January 1978, BTK sent a poem to a reporter at the *Wichita Eagle-Beacon*, in which he wrote about a victim he had slain a year earlier. In February of the same year, BTK wrote a letter to a Wichita television station complaining about the lack of publicity he had received for his murders. "How many do I have to kill," BTK asked, "before I get my name in the paper or some national attention?" In addition, the killer compared his crimes with those of Jack the Ripper, Son of Sam, and the Hillside Strangler.

It was believed that BTK's killing spree had ended in 1991. Then, after more than 13 years, BTK surfaced once again to terrorize the Wichita community. In March 2004, he sent a letter to the Wichita newspaper in which he claimed credit for the unsolved death of Vicki Wegerle, who was killed in September 1986. As evidence of his complicity, BTK enclosed with his letter a photocopy of Wegerle's driver's license and photographs of her body.

BTK was again communicating with the police and the media. The killer's sudden reemergence indicated that he was feeling insecure about being out of the spotlight. He apparently hadn't taken anyone's life in several years and wasn't getting much attention from the public. When later asked about his hiatus, BTK said that he was too busy with his children's activities to have time for killing.

BTK turned out to be 59-year-old Dennis Rader, a church council president, former Cub Scout leader, and compliance officer who had terrorized the city of Wichita over three decades. Among the items that Rader sent to the media was a floppy disk, which, unknown to the killer, contained an electronic imprint that could be traced back to its source—a computer in the Christ Lutheran Church where he had served as president of the congregation. After learning that Rader had access to the church computer, police were able to gain access to Rader's daughter's DNA from Pap smear results performed at the local university clinic and link the DNA specimen to some of her father's crime scenes.

Because the state of Kansas had no death penalty at the time that Rader committed his crimes, he was able to escape execution. But on June 28, 2005, BTK was given the most severe sentence possible under Kansas law—10 consecutive life terms with no possibility of parole for 175 years.

Serial killers are often described as nomads, who roam from city to city, state to state preying on unsuspecting victims whom they encounter in their travels. Of course, pinpointing the geographic area in which serial killers operate can be somewhat challenging. They can have separate abduction, murder, and body dumping sites.¹⁶ In addition, bodies dumped in one place, such as a river, can eventually be discovered somewhere far away. To complicate matters even further, a victim may be abducted and killed far from home (e.g., a prostitute who travels across the country), and the killer may live far from a kill site or dump site.

Notwithstanding the stereotypical drifter, most serial killers are fairly local in their pursuit of victims. Many have jobs, families, and various other responsibilities that would make it difficult to wander far and wide. In his analysis of U.S. male serial killers from 1975 to 2004, Hickey found that only 28% committed murders in more than one state, whereas 61% killed in a relatively limited area, and 11% murdered their victims all in the same location (e.g., their home or workplace). Female serial killers, according to Hickey's data, were even less likely to be nomadic.¹⁷

Our analysis of Radford/FGCU data revealed similar results. As shown in Table 7.2, 71.2% of serial killers are local, another 12.5% are regional, and only 16.3% are national serial killers. The location of serial killers by state typically mirrors the state populations; that is, larger states have more serial killers, and sparsely populated states have fewer. New Hampshire is frequently absent from

lists of places trolled by serial killers, but recent developments in an unsolved string of murders have changed that. In January 2017, a Pennsylvania man known as Bob Evans, who had died several years earlier, was implicated in the murders of four people whose bodies were discovered stashed in barrels in a park in Allenstown, New Hampshire. Evans was somewhat of a chameleon, having used different aliases over the years. Besides linking him to the crimes, DNA analysis determined that Evans was the biological father of one of the four New Hampshire victims. As a final oddity surrounding the case, months later, DNA revealed Bob Evans's real name was Terry Peder Rasmussen.

VICTIMS OF SERIAL MURDER

Table 7.3 presents characteristics of victims slain by U.S. serial killers operating since 1970. As shown, nearly half (45.6%) of the victims are 20 to 39 years of age, most are white (64.1%), and, surprising to many students of serial murder, the primary method is gunshot (40.9%) followed by strangulation (28.4%).

One of the most striking dissimilarities between serial murder and criminal homicide generally is the nature of the offender–victim relationship. Unlike single-victim murder, which commonly arises from some dispute between partners, family members, or friends, serial murder is typically a stranger-perpetrated crime.¹⁸ Specifically, as shown in Table 7.3, 64.2% of serial murder victims were

Table 7.3 Characteristics Victims of Serial Killers, 1970–2016

Victim Characteristic	Victim Sex		Total
	Male	Female	
Number of cases	1,953	2,647	4,600
Victim age			
Under 5	4.5%	2.0%	3.0%
5–19	18.6%	24.0%	21.8%
20–29	25.6%	30.0%	28.2%
30–39	17.1%	17.5%	17.3%
40–49	10.9%	9.6%	10.1%
50–59	8.8%	5.2%	6.7%
60+	14.5%	11.8%	12.9%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Victim race/ethnicity			
White	59.7%	67.2%	64.1%
Black	26.6%	25.4%	25.9%

(Continued)

Table 7.3 (Continued)

Victim Characteristic	Victim Sex		Total
	Male	Female	
Hispanic	10.3%	5.5%	7.5%
Asian	3.2%	1.4%	2.1%
Other	0.2%	0.6%	0.4%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Method by which killed			
Bludgeoned	5.8%	8.8%	7.5%
Poisoning	6.7%	3.3%	4.8%
Gunshot	57.2%	27.9%	40.9%
Stabbed	11.4%	14.5%	13.1%
Strangled	14.0%	39.9%	28.4%
Smothered	2.6%	2.5%	2.5%
Other	2.2%	3.2%	2.7%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Relationship to offender			
Family	5.1%	5.0%	5.0%
Acquaintance	42.6%	22.3%	30.8%
Strangers	52.4%	72.8%	64.2%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

strangers to their offender. To some extent, the abundance of stranger victims reflects the predatory patterns of these killers as well as the greater ease with which stranger attackers can escape apprehension and, therefore, be free to amass a large tally of kills.

The gender characteristics of serial killer victims are quite different from those of homicide victims generally, as were described in Chapter 2. Given the strong sexual element in the motivations of many male serial murderers, their victims tend to be female—fully 67%. Despite the greater number of females slain, moreover, some serial killers are gay or bisexual and purposely target male victims for rape and murder.

Although some serial killers have targeted coeds, they are much more likely to prey on particularly vulnerable individuals—runaways, prostitutes, homeless people, or patients in nursing homes and hospitals. Serial killers rarely choose professional athletes, bodybuilders, or National Rifle Association (NRA)

conventioners as their victims. Some research in serial murder has suggested that the victim actually has a symbolic value for the killer; for example, Ted Bundy may have selected women who physically resembled a girlfriend who had dumped him. The problem with this line of reasoning is that so many of the women in high schools and colleges in the 1970s looked like his victims. It was popular to wear long, straight hair parted down the middle. Rather than a Norman Bates-like complex regarding their mothers or their girlfriends, serial killers more likely choose women in general because of their heterosexuality and the inability of most of them to defend themselves.

The marginality of prostitutes, drug addicts, and runaways gives the killer a special advantage. It may take considerable time for someone to report her as missing and even longer to recognize that a woman has become a victim of homicide. By the time the police locate a body, they are typically left with skeletal remains—no DNA, fingerprints, fiber, or hair from the killer. Indeed, they are lucky to be able to identify the victim, let alone the killer. In November 2003, Gary Leon Ridgway, the Green River Killer, in a plea bargain to avoid the death penalty, admitted to killing more than 49 prostitutes in the Seattle area over a 16-year period. In his statement, Ridgway said he targeted prostitutes “because I thought I could kill as many as I wanted without getting caught.” According to the serial killer, “they were easy to pick up without being noticed” and “they would not be reported missing right away, and might never be reported missing.” Most serial killers who prey on prostitutes do so because they are accessible and easier to dehumanize. Still, some repeat killers clearly hate women and especially detest prostitutes. Both Green River Killer Gary Leon Ridgway and John Eric Armstrong, for example, claimed to have loathed prostitutes. By choosing a vulnerable, transient victim pool, they expected their crimes would go unnoticed and, at the same time, would exact revenge against the gender that had rejected them in the past. When Robert Charles Brown, 52, was apprehended by the state of Colorado in 2006, he claimed his murders were triggered by his disgust for women and their lack of morality. Brown likely murdered as many as 48 women across nine states and two countries beginning when he was a 17-year-old medic in the U.S. Army stationed in Korea. He was successful for so long because, like many other serial killers, he had a lot of different jobs over the years that required travel; basically he was always a drifter. The son of a sheriff’s deputy, Brown was characterized as a handsome, bright loner. One of his favorite pastimes was to wear a Halloween mask, with which he delighted in scaring women and children outside their homes. Ironically, Brown was born on Halloween in 1952.

In addition to their lack of a prior relationship with their assailants, serial murder victims also tend to share one important trait—their vulnerability. Although virtually anyone can be targeted, serial killers tend to prefer vulnerable victims, and this victim preference reflects the relative ease with which the offenders can abduct and slay certain targets. Pedophile Wesley Allen Dodd of Washington State encountered little difficulty in snatching children from parks and other public spaces. Arthur Shawcross made a habit of trolling Rochester’s red-light district, not needing even an ounce of force to find sex workers willing to enter his web of control.

Like the serial killers who prey on them, at least through the decade of the 1990s, victims also tended to be white. Given the increasing detection of black serial killers and the intraracial nature of homicide, blacks are more likely than ever to be targeted. The age range of victims is quite broad, reflecting the disparate classes of favored victims. Perhaps most widely known are those serial killers who target prostitutes in their 20s and 30s. But some serial killers have targeted infants,

as in the case of Texas nurse Genene Jones, while others such as Orville Majors of Indiana, have targeted primarily elderly hospital patients.

KILLING TOGETHER

Like Kenneth Bianchi and his favorite cousin and killing partner, Angelo Buono, many serial killers have accomplices. Nearly one-third of the male killers and about half of female killers in the Radford/FGCU database operated in teams of two or more (although this figure is naturally elevated because of the multiple counting of those who are part of a team).¹⁹ The most common male serial killing team comprised of two or three males, whereas when a woman is part of a team she typically operates with a male. These male-female partnerships make up a small proportion (4%) of all teams. It is the two or more males working together that can create unimaginable horror. The folie à deux effect, otherwise known as the madness of two, suggests that one psychotic person can create psychosis in another. Although in many cases of folie à deux, two people may just think there are people living in the trees in their yard or they may begin planning against alien invasion for serial killer teams, the notion is more about sadistic murder than sheer madness. They encourage each other to do the wrong thing and are more likely to torture their victims than are their counterparts who operate alone. For Lawrence Bittaker and Roy Norris, for instance, killing was a team sport. They called it the "birthday game," seeking to kill teenage girls of different ages (13, 14, 15, etc.) like trophies. Bittaker and Norris preferred blondes and tortured them in the specially equipped van, which they called "Murder Mac." The pair tape-recorded the torture sessions so they could relive them later in their spare time. Chapter 10 on cults suggests that shared madness can transfer from one charismatic leader to hundreds, even thousands of people.

Serial killer teams sometimes involve family members—spouses such as Kaedon Homolka and Paul Bernardo, cousins like Bianchi and Buono, and father-son pairs like the Kallingers. Joseph Kallinger, dubbed the "The Shoemaker," recruited his 13-year-old son, Michael, in a series of brutal home invasion robberies, sexual assaults, and murders. Joseph, who had experienced horrible abuse as a child and was beaten by his adoptive parents, had a long history of sexual assaults, arson, and mental illness before he became a father. The father and son team brutalized a number of victims in several different families across three states, and three of the victims died as a result. The earlier death of one of his other sons was also linked to Joseph. A cobbler by trade and diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia, Joseph Kallinger was convicted and died in prison years later. Because his son was thought to have been under the control of his violent and twisted parent, Michael was held in a juvenile facility until he turned 21 and was then released.

Some of the more fascinating partnerships include men and women. Ray, and Faye Copeland, 69, looking like the couple in the famous *American Gothic* painting, were the oldest couple ever sentenced to death in the United States. Ray had a long cross-country history of scams, swindles, and cons and by 1986 decided that the best way to silence the drifters and hitchhikers he had recruited to work bad checks for his cattle purchases was to kill them. Five men were killed by the Copelands before their apprehension in 1989. Faye was thought to have been a victim of her domineering husband. But when the jury saw the quilt she had made from the dead men's clothing, she also was convicted and sentenced to death. Ray died in prison in Missouri before he could be executed, while Faye, after suffering a stroke, was paroled to a nursing home, where she died a year later.

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Although the Copelands' motive was financial, the most common male-female teams have a sexual motive. Doug Clark, the so-called Los Angeles Sunset Strip Killer, did the murdering and decapitating, while his girlfriend, Carol Bundy (no relation to Theodore), assisted. She even prepared the severed heads of victims for him to use as sex objects in the shower. She would do anything for her guy and for the sake of their love.

BEYOND U.S. BORDERS

It is hard to deny that the vast majority of ultra-notorious serial killers—the ones who have become household names (at least in American households)—are from the United States. Serial killers like Ted Bundy and Jeffrey Dahmer are as famous as the Hollywood actors who played them in films. Despite our focus here on patterns of serial murder in the United States, there are certainly many major cases occurring elsewhere around the globe. They simply do not receive the same level of attention in the media, at least not the American media.

Known as the Werewolf of Russia, former police officer Mikhail Popkov, 52, was convicted of 22 murders but recently admitted to killing more than 80 people. If true, Popkov's tally of victims would be third to Colombia's Luis Garavito (138 victims) and Pedro López (110 victims). Active for at least 20 years, Popkov, while in uniform, was able to lure often intoxicated victims into his police car, purportedly for rides home.²⁰ Although most of his victims were women leaving nightclubs and restaurants, Popkov thought of them all as prostitutes and claimed he was trying to cleanse the street of sex workers. Another Russian serial killer, Alexander Pichushkin, 43, who was called the Chessboard Killer, murdered at least 49 mostly homeless men and women from the 1990s until he was caught in 2006. His goal was to kill 64 people, one for each square on the chessboard.

Like the ploy used by John Wayne Gacy in Des Plaines, Illinois, Colombian Luis Garavito was able to attract and control young boys by offering them employment. Beginning in 1992, young males ranging in age from 6 to 16, many of them homeless street kids, were disappearing without a trace. But with the country steeped in political unrest, rather few of the disappearances resulted in missing person reports. After mass graves were discovered in 1999, an investigation led the authorities to Garavito's doorstep. Garavito was definitively linked to as many as 138 victims, but may have raped, mutilated, and killed more than 300. Nicknamed "The Beast," Garavito was convicted and sentenced to 1,853 years in prison.

A very different fate became of Pedro López, another Colombian citizen, who killed women and girls in the 1970s in Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru. Although convicted of 100 murders in Ecuador, he was released from prison and deported to his home country. In 1998, after a few years in a psychiatric facility, López was released on good behavior. As of this writing, his whereabouts are unknown.

Justice came swiftly for China's Yang Xinhai after he confessed to 67 murders and an additional 23 rapes from 1999 until 2003. Following his release from prison on an attempted rape conviction, Yang was dumped by his new girlfriend when she learned about his past. At that point, Yang turned from rape to murder. Breaking into the homes of unsuspecting families, he viciously bludgeoned his victims with axes, shovels, and hammers. Yang was convicted on murder charges on February 1, 2004, and was executed 2 weeks later.

South Africa's most prolific serial killer, Moses Sithole, was convicted of committing 38 murders in less than a 2-year time span, although he claimed to have actually killed twice that number. Released from prison in 1994 after serving

several years on a rape conviction, Sithole began killing almost immediately. His access to victims came easily through his job at an agency designed to fight child abuse. He abducted women who came to interview for positions at the children's homes, and then beat, raped, and strangled them. He then scrawled the word *bitch* on their dead bodies before dumping them. Sithole was captured in 1995 and sentenced to a total of 2,410 years for the 38 murders and 40 additional rapes.

Using the full range of cases in the Radford/FGCU database (i.e., all repeat killers since the 15th century from around the globe), Aamodt found that over half the world's serial killers were located in the United States. In part, this is a function of population size. The United States is nearly three times the population of Japan and two times the population size of Russia, but it has 30 times the serial killers of Japan and 39 times the serial killers of Russia. Moreover, despite exceptionally large populations in India and China, Aamodt reports only 63 known Indian serial killers and 41 from China. However, rarely do serial killer scholars recruit translators for the world's non-English newspapers, and thus language barriers may explain the lack of information about serial killers in some parts of the world. It may also be possible that cultural differences make it less likely that serial killers in some other parts of the world will be featured and glorified in the mass media.

There are certainly other reasons why there is a disproportionate number of known serial killers in the United States. These include better law enforcement investigation techniques, better crime reporting by law enforcement, better reporting by media and the sheer number of media outlets, freedom of the press, and the freedom to move from one place to another (mobility). If bad childhoods play a role in the development of serial killers, there is no evidence that U.S. parenting is worse than parenting in China, Russia, or India.

THE MURDERING MIND

Many people assume that anyone who kills for fun, pleasure, or sport must be psychotic and out of touch with reality. Indeed, some serial killers have been driven by severe mental illness, such as Herbert Mullin of Santa Cruz, California, who killed 13 people in a span of 4 months in order to avert an earthquake—or at least that's what the voices told him.²¹

However, based on his analysis of more than 100 offenders, Godwin found little evidence that serial killers suffer from profound mental disorders. Only 28% of the murderers in his sample had a history of receiving any kind of treatment for mental illness; even fewer (20%) had a history of being treated for alcoholism or drug abuse. Most serial murderers are not insane in a legal sense or psychotic in a medical sense. Although they know right from wrong, know exactly what they are doing, and can control their desire to kill, they typically choose not to do so. Even the serial killers who remember childhood abuse, experience hallucinations, and “discover” multiple personalities at trial time may be suffering from mental disorders manufactured to support an attempted insanity plea as a last resort.

Psychologically, most serial killers are sociopaths (or antisocial personality types), a condition that was discussed in Chapter 3. They possess a disorder of character rather than of the mind, involving a lack of conscience and feelings of remorse, an inability to feel empathy for others, pathological lying, a manipulative style, impulsivity, and a total concern for maximizing their own pleasures in life.²² Other people are seen merely as tools for fulfilling their own needs and desires,

no matter how perverse or reprehensible. The serial killer is more bad than mad—simply put, he is evil.

Serial killers have often been characterized as suffering from low self-esteem. Although some killers are undoubtedly motivated by feelings of inadequacy, the relationship between low self-esteem and violence has little empirical support. Rather, anecdotal evidence suggests that many serial killers (including the medical murderers described in Chapter 8) may suffer from narcissism or “self-love.” They have a very inflated sense of themselves and demand that the rest of the world recognize their greatness. They have a godlike complex and believe that the society’s rules simply do not apply to them.²³ Whereas therapy and medication can help and even cure attention-deficit disorders, depression, anxiety, and obsessive-compulsive disorders, personality disorders are fairly intransigent. People suffering from antisocial, histrionic, and narcissistic personality disorders often fail to acknowledge that they even have a problem. Confronting the nurse who is murdering her patients, the Munchausen mom drawing attention to herself, or the boss who thrives on the misery and humiliation he causes in his employees rarely results in a confession or any insights about their behavior.

As noted, for many serial killers, murder makes them feel superior and feel good about themselves, as though they have actually achieved something important. Robert Berdella’s collection of souvenirs served several important purposes. First, for a man who had otherwise led an unremarkable life, his treasures made him feel accomplished. They represented the one and only way in which he had ever distinguished himself “as a real pro.” More important, the souvenirs became tangible reminders of the “good times” Berdella had spent with his “playmates.” With the aid of his photographs, he could still get pleasure, even between captives, from reminiscing, daydreaming, fantasizing, and masturbating. In fact, serial killers have lasting memories as well as incredibly vivid and elaborate fantasies. Through murder and mayhem, they literally chase their dreams.²⁴

Even though serial killers tend to be sociopaths, totally lacking in concern for their victims, some actually do have a conscience and the capacity for remorse but are able to neutralize or negate their feelings of guilt. There is a powerful psychological process—known as dehumanization—that allows many serial killers to slaughter scores of innocent people by viewing them as worthless and, therefore, expendable. By targeting marginalized groups—prostitutes, the homeless, runaways—they can rationalize (if they need to for their own sense of emotional comfort) that they are doing something good for society . . . or at least nothing that bad.

Jeffrey Dahmer actually viewed his crimes as a sign of love and affection. He told Tracy Edwards, his final victim, who managed to escape and led the police to Dahmer’s apartment of horrors, that if he played his cards right, he, too, could give his heart to Jeff. He meant it literally of course, but, according to Edwards, he said it in an affectionate, not a threatening, manner. In a strange turn of events, Edwards, once the hero who helped catch Dahmer, was charged in relation to a drowning death in 2011.

Many serial killers skillfully compartmentalize the world into two groups—those whom they care about and everyone else. Kenneth Bianchi, for example, could be kind and loving to his wife and child as well as his mother and friends, yet be vicious and cruel to those he considered expendable. He and his cousin started with prostitutes, choosing victims for whom they had very little concern. Later, when comfortable with killing, he branched out to middle-class, more respectable targets. Angelo Buono died in prison of a heart attack in 2002, while Bianchi, having been denied parole multiple times, resides at Walla Walla State Penitentiary in Washington, awaiting his next hearing, which is not scheduled until 2025.

According to Stephen Giannangelo, serial killers are also eased into their murderous avocation by the clumsiness and impulsivity of their first kill.²⁵ He likens the first murder to the sexually inexperienced teenager who fumbles in the backseat of a car as he attempts to have sex with his date. For a serial killer, what might begin as a rape or an assault is transformed, in the excitement of the moment, into an act of homicide. Almost inadvertently, the killer crosses the threshold separating fantasy from fact. Whatever shame he may feel for having committed a serious offense is completely overshadowed by the "rush" that he acquires from finally discovering what he needs.

In addition to sociopathy, another critical ingredient to the profile of many serial killers is a strong tendency toward sexual sadism. More generally, these men have a craving for power and control. They tie up their victims in order to watch them squirm and torture their victims to hear them scream. They rape, sodomize, degrade, bludgeon, and mutilate their victims in order to feel powerful, dominant, and superior. One of Lawrence Bittaker's victims pleaded, "Please, if you're going to kill me, tell me so that I can pray first." Bittaker was exhilarated by his victim's begging. He assured her that she would not die and then slammed an ice pick in her ear. He just loved the control.

The sexual sadist derives intense pleasure through the pain, suffering, and humiliation of another person. In a pure sense, sexual sadists enjoy the act of inflicting pain on another, a nonconsenting victim. Yet the pleasure may also flow from the result—the screams and degradation of the recipient—rather than from just the act itself. Sexual sadists can also relish vicariously when another person (an accomplice or even an actor in a film) causes a victim to suffer. Thus, not only can a pair or team of serial killers enjoy personal satisfaction from raping and torturing a victim, but also their feeling of superiority can be enhanced by the power of the partnership.

The essence of the sadistic drive lies in the desire to achieve total domination and mastery over another person. From this point of view, the pleasure derived from killing depends, at least in part, on the sadist's role in having caused the victim to suffer. An alternative argument holds that the sexual or psychological pleasure that a sadistic killer derives from the act of torturing his victim may be more a result of observing the victim's agony than from the actual infliction of pain. This hypothesis appears to be supported by experimental research in which aggressive sex offenders become sexually aroused when shown simulated scenes of men inflicting pain on women.²⁶

This begs the question, however, of whether the arousal stems from observing the victim's suffering or from identifying vicariously with the aggressor. Regardless of whether the critical component is the stimulus (the direct infliction of pain) or the response (the victim's suffering itself), the fundamental objective in the actions of the sadistic serial killer is to achieve complete mastery over his victims. In other words, humiliation, enslavement, and terror are vehicles for attaining total domination over another human being.

Power and control may be critical themes in the character of serial murderers, yet these traits are also common in many successful people in the worlds of business, politics, and even academics. The willingness to win at all costs, no matter who is hurt in the process, may insulate many winning individuals from looking back at those they exploit along the road to success. A vital difference between serial killers and those who backstab only figuratively may be access to legitimate opportunity.

At the same time, the sadistic sexual fantasies of the serial killer may also reflect his search for power. It appears that many serial murderers, from an early age, become absorbed deeply in a rich fantasy life involving images of sex and

violence. As they mature into adolescence, their fantasies become more and more consuming, increasing in their power as internal drive mechanisms that motivate them to cross the line into murderous behavior.

Robert Prentky and his colleagues compared the nature and prevalence of sexual fantasy between groups of sexually motivated serial killers and single-victim murderers also with sexual motivation to their crimes. Self-report interview data showed the serial murderers were more apt to describe a strong and intrusive fantasy life involving violent themes and paraphilias.²⁷

Paraphilias—unusual sexual attractions or practices—are common among sexually motivated serial killers. Rather than just a relatively harmless fetish (e.g., an attraction to nonhuman objects such as feces or shoes), some serial killers exhibit far more serious passions, including cannibalism, pedophilia, necrophilia, and, especially, erotophonophilia (i.e., becoming sexually aroused from mutilation and murder, or at least fantasizing about it).

The BTK Strangler, Dennis Rader, admitted to investigators that his attraction to violence and death began early in life. He recalled that at the age of 8 he would get aroused watching his grandmother kill chickens by strangling them with a leather shoestring. He also admitted to shoplifting issues of *True Detective* magazine as a kid. Rader had rich fantasies involving images of bondage and sexual violence. Even in high school, he wasn't sexually excited about girls unless he imagined tying them up.

Courts rarely view paraphilias as being beyond the perpetrator's control or a legitimate excuse for murder. For example, Jeffrey Dahmer's plea of insanity based on his necrophiliac and cannibalistic desires was rejected at his Wisconsin trial.

Not all children who fantasize about sadistic forms of violence grow up to be serial killers. The fact that most serial murderers do not initiate their murder sprees until well into their adult years indicates the important role of adult experiences—failures in relationships and at work—in the making of a serial killer. Many individuals who have suffered profoundly as children grow into healthy and nonviolent adults. They benefit later from positive experiences with peers, romantic partners, and coworkers who give them the support and encouragement that they lacked when they were young.

This was unfortunately not true of Danny Rolling, who turned to murder at the age of 36, killing three in his hometown of Shreveport, Louisiana, and five more in Gainesville, Florida. Not only had Rolling been the victim of an abusive parent, but also his adjustment and personal problems continued through adolescence into early adulthood. A brief marriage ended in divorce, his adult relationship with his parents continued to be severely strained, and he couldn't manage to hold a job. Instead, he drifted first from job to job, next from state to state, then from prison to prison, and finally from murder to murder.

Amazingly, given the abuse and horror in many of their childhoods, serial killers rarely kill themselves. Their own suffering is not internalized but rather externalized—they blame others. Occasionally, a serial killer will attempt suicide. Gary Heidnik, for example, tried to take his own life 13 times, and murdering nurse Charles Cullen also had multiple suicide attempts throughout his life. How can someone who is so skilled at killing others be so inadequate at killing himself? Clearly, the answer is that neither Heidnik nor Cullen truly wanted to die.

Herbert Baumeister, an exception to the rule, committed suicide in 1996, but only after the discovery of thousands of bone and teeth fragments on his family's estate in Westfield, Indiana. Although only 8 of Baumeister's victims were positively identified, the fragments were of at least 11 bodies. A father, husband, and businessman, he may have also been the so-called I-70 Killer who operated

during the late 1980s, as work often took Baumeister from Indiana to Ohio over this highway. Baumeister's victims were gay men whom he had picked up in bars in Indianapolis. This case is also an example of how serial killers can remain undetected and uninvestigated for so long when their victim pool is a marginalized group. It is unlikely that Baumeister's murderous career would have been as lengthy had he elected to slay college students or other middle-class victims.

EXPLANATIONS FOR SERIAL MURDER

Isolating those factors that encourage someone to kill repeatedly has been the focus of a large body of research dating back many years. The ingredients in the metaphorical toxic soup include a combination of biological, psychological, social, and cultural factors that simmer inside the developing individual for decades until they boil over in the form of relentless and hideous brutality.

Whenever the case of an infamous serial killer is uncovered, be it a cannibalistic sadist or a not-so-merciful mercy killer, journalists and behavioral scientists alike tend to search for clues deep within the killer's biography that might explain his or her seemingly senseless or excessively brutal murders. Many writers, for example, have emphasized Theodore Bundy's concerns over having been born "illegitimate," and biographers of Hillside Strangler Kenneth Bianchi capitalized on his having been an adopted child.

Biological Factors

Researchers are not of one mind, however, in explaining what produces the psyche of the serial murderer. Some stress genetic or biological factors in accounting for such defects as sociopathy. Moffitt and Henry suggest, for example, that damage to the right hemisphere of the brain may be responsible for losses of "social sensibilities," including lack of empathy and difficulties with bonding.²⁸ Some neurologists and psychiatrists have suggested that many killers—especially killers who commit senseless acts of brutality—have incurred severe injury to the limbic region of the brain as a result of profound or repeated head trauma, generally during childhood. Dorothy Otnow Lewis and colleagues, for example, examined 15 murderers on Florida's death row and found that all showed signs of neurological irregularities.²⁹

Recent research finds that a significant proportion of multiple murderers may have various neurodevelopmental disorders, including autism spectrum disorders (ASD) and head injury.³⁰ Obviously, most people with some form of autism never harm anyone, and some studies suggest people with autism are less likely to be aggressive or violent. However, a condition that has been called "criminal autistic psychopathy" reflects a particularly virulent form of Asperger's syndrome.³¹ Several serial killers, including Danny Rolling and Andrei Chikatilo, had suffered significant head injuries as children (and sometimes additional head injuries as adults), and a number of serial killers had possible or probable autism, including Jeffrey Dahmer, Robert Berdella, and Keith Jespersion. For a few killers, there were indications of both autism and head injury.

Significant scientific progress has been made regarding the possible links between various neurobiological factors and violent behavior. A 2017 study of the development and current state of scientific knowledge about possible biological factors as pathways to serial murder has identified a number of different risk factors, including head trauma, brain damage and dysfunction, serotonin/adrenaline

dysfunction, ASD, various childhood illnesses, in utero exposure to toxins, and birth complications.³² Of course, none of these factors are present in the histories of all or even most serial killers. It is likely that these biologically based risk factors become associated with violence only in certain social contexts when combined with other psychological and social predisposers.

There is compelling reason to believe that traumatic brain injuries resulting from severe head trauma can potentially have dire effects on behavior, including violent outbursts, learning disabilities, and epilepsy. Henry Lee Lucas was reportedly beaten by his mother with lumber and broom handles. He later claimed to have experienced frequent dizzy spells and blackouts. Bobby Joe Long, who was convicted of a total of nine counts of murder, also appears to have endured several severe head injuries. In three different episodes, at the age of 5 or 6, Long fell off a swing, from a horse, and off his bicycle, suffering repeated brain concussions in the process.

There are important possible causal order problems with theories that connect brain damage and violent behavior. If the individual is a thrill seeker and engages in dangerous pastimes (e.g., reckless driving), then the same set of personality traits may also lead to head injuries. In the presence of other negative social contexts (e.g., physical and sexual abuse, substance use and abuse), the same thrill-seeking need may act as a predisposing factor to violence. Thus, in some cases, head injuries may be a result of aggressive and violent behavior rather than their cause.

Childhood Factors

While considerable attention has been paid to biological and neurological factors, other investigators point instead to early childhood experiences and repeated psychological trauma during development, such as insufficient bonding of the child to his parents as well as physical and psychological abuse. Children who are abused, neglected, or abandoned tend to grow into needy adults who have difficulty bonding with others, a so-called attachment disorder. Lacking control over their own lives as children, many remain insecure as they mature, continuing to possess an intense need to control their social environment. From an early age, they are unable to trust others and instead learn to manipulate people in order to fulfill their needs.

There is a long tradition of research on the childhood correlates of homicidal proneness. For example, John Macdonald long ago hypothesized a triad of symptoms—bed-wetting, fire setting, and cruelty to animals—which he viewed as reactions to parental rejection, neglect, or brutality.³³ Although the so-called Macdonald's triad was later refuted in controlled studies, and bed-wetting and fire setting appear to have no causal link with future violent behavior, the connection between animal cruelty and subsequent violent behavior remains a continuing focus of investigation.

A number of studies in the years since Macdonald's work have purported to support the hypothesis that violent individuals are also abusive toward animals.³⁴ For example, Kellert and Felthous found significantly more childhood animal cruelty among aggressive criminals than among either nonaggressive criminals or noncriminals.³⁵ Moreover, tracking the criminal records of 153 animal abusers compared with 153 nonabusers, sociologist Arnold Arluke and colleagues determined that the animal abusers were five times more likely to commit acts of human violence, including murder, rape, and assault.³⁶

As described in the case studies of Steven Egger's *The Killers Among Us*, serial murderers don't just abuse animals but also torture and dissect them.³⁷ Egger's description of serial killer Jerry Marcus notes how the killer set pregnant cats on fire

and poured hot water on hungry dogs and, after these sadistic acts, felt exhilarated and proud. Jeffrey Dahmer started his killing spree on neighborhood pets when he was a child. He had a pet cemetery and a long history of animal decapitation and vivisection. It appears that much more attention should be given to those who abuse animals, as there is ample evidence that in many cases, the "animals" just get bigger.

People of any age who derive pleasure from the suffering of living creatures may come to have a long future of child abuse, partner violence, rape, or murder. Of course, countless youngsters experiment with abusing animals, including birds, reptiles, and rodents, yet outgrow their morbid fascination to become decent, well-adjusted adults. Serial killers are qualitatively different, however. As children, they may have tortured dogs and cats—animals that are loved by others as pets—in a hands-on sadistic manner, long before shifting to human prey.³⁸

It is often suggested that because of deep-rooted problems stemming from childhood, serial killers suffer from a profound sense of powerlessness, which they compensate for through extreme forms of aggression to exert control over others. But many people who suffer from a feeling of powerlessness go on to help others avoid this experience and work as volunteers, advocates, and philanthropists. The biographies of many serial killers reveal significant physical and psychological trauma at an early age. Based on in-depth interviews with 36 incarcerated murderers, Ressler and his colleagues found evidence of psychological abuse (e.g., public humiliation) in 23 cases and physical trauma in 13 cases.³⁹ Eric Hickey reported that among a group of 62 male serial killers, 48% had been rejected as children by a parent or some other important person in their lives.⁴⁰ Of course, these same types of experiences can be found in the biographies of many "normal" people as well. More specifically, although useful for characterizing the backgrounds of serial killers, the findings presented by Ressler and Hickey lack a comparison group drawn from nonoffending populations for which the same definitions of trauma have been applied.

Although many serial killers do have horrific childhoods, they are also very manipulative and may exploit the "child abuse syndrome" to their own advantage in an effort to receive a sympathetic ear. As a sociopath, the serial killer is a particularly convincing and accomplished liar. As a professional trained to be supportive and empathic, his psychiatrist may be easily conned. The case histories of such malingerers as Kenneth Bianchi and Arthur Shawcross, both serial killers who fooled mental health professionals with fabricated tales of child abuse, remind us to be skeptical about the self-serving testimony of accused killers eager to escape legal responsibility for their crimes.

As a related matter, more than a few serial killers—from David Berkowitz to Joel Rifkin—were raised by adoptive parents. In the "adopted child syndrome," an individual displaces his anger for birth parents onto adoptive parents as well as other authority figures. According to Kirschner, the syndrome is often expressed early in life, in "provocative antisocial behavior" including fire setting, truancy, promiscuity, pathological lying, and stealing.⁴¹

The apparent overrepresentation of adoption in the biographies of serial killers has been exploited by those who are looking for simple explanations for heinous and senseless crimes. In reality, the way in which this link operates has not been completely explained. That is, possible triggering mechanisms might include the effects of rejection by birth parents, maternal deprivation during the critical first few months of life, poor prenatal care by the birth mother, or genetic deficiencies passed on from one or both biological parents.

It is often said that "hindsight is 20/20." This is definitely true in terms of explaining serial murder. Following the apprehension of a serial killer, we gener-

hear mixed reports that “he seemed like a nice guy, but there was something about him that wasn’t quite right.” Of course, there is something about most people that “isn’t quite right.” However, when such a person is exposed to be a serial murderer, we tend to focus on the red flags in his character and biography that were ignored. Even the stench emanating from Jeffrey Dahmer’s apartment, which he explained to the neighbors as the odor of spoiled meat inside his broken freezer, was unexceptional until after the fact.

The methodological problems of predicting violence in advance are well known. For a category of violence as rare as serial murder, the low base rate and consequent false-positive dilemma are overwhelming. Simply put, there are thousands of white males in their late 20s or 30s who are sadistic, thirst for power, lack strong internal controls, tortured animals as children, and were adopted or abused, but the vast majority of them will never kill anyone. Although we might be able, after the fact, to explain why someone became a serial killer, we cannot predict in advance who will become one in the future. The best we can usually do is retrospective postdiction, looking back and seeing how all the risk factors come together.⁴²

ENDNOTES

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