THREE

AN ANATOMY OF SERIAL MURDER

Christina Powell's parents had grown increasingly upset about their inability to reach their 17-year-old daughter at school. At first, they assumed that she was probably out partying. After all, this was August, 1990, orientation week for freshmen at the University of Florida, and she more than likely was out making new friends and buying things for her new apartment before hitting the books. But after a few more days without a word from Christina, the Powells became frantic. As a last resort, they called the Gainesville Police Department to ask them to meet at their daughter's apartment in the Williamsburg complex. Suspecting that something was wrong, a Gainesville police officer entered the apartment by breaking down the door on the second floor to investigate. He was sickened by what he discovered.

Immediately, he saw the bloodied and ravaged body of Sonja Larson, Christina's 18-year-old roommate. She had suffered multiple stab wounds to her arm and right breast, and a large gash to her leg. From the pattern of blood marks on the sheets, she appeared to have been dragged across the bed so that her legs dangled over the edge in a hideous pose.

Moving cautiously down the stairs to the bottom floor, the officer then encountered the corpse of Christina Powell. Revealing evidence of ritualistic murder, the young victim lay spread-eagled on the living room floor, a bottle of detergent and a towel placed between her legs. The nipples of both her breasts had been removed with surgical skill, leaving almost perfect circles, nearly 3 inches in diameter, where her nipples had been.

As shocking as these murders were, they appeared to be an isolated case. The police expected that they would soon find the culprit, perhaps a disgruntled boyfriend who had been rejected and went berserk. That theory soon dissolved in the face of new and equally chilling events.

Only 2 days after the homicides at Williamsburg, 18-year-old Christa Hoyt, a part-time file clerk for the Alachua County Sheriff's Office, uncharacteristically failed to report for work. A deputy sheriff was dispatched to her apartment on 24th Avenue to check on her. After getting no response at the front door, he walked around to the rear of the apartment and peered through the sliding glass door leading into her bedroom. The deputy was unprepared for what he witnessed.

Hoyt's lifeless, decapitated body was slumped over on the waterbed, naked except for her pink-trimmed athletic socks and tennis sneakers. Her nipples had been cut off and her torso sliced open from the chest straight down to the pubic bone. Hoyt's severed head had been severed neatly at the neck and carefully placed on a bookshelf for all to see. The tranquil expression on her face masked the horror of her last moments of life.

Similarities between the Powell/Larson murders and the Hoyt killing suggested to the police that they probably had a serial killer on the loose in Gainesville. Any hope that these killings were linked only by coincidence evaporated with the discovery of two more victims the very next day.

Gatorwood was a popular off-campus apartment complex that had experienced a series of break-ins over the past year, but no one had gotten hurt. Tracy Paules and Manny Taboada were not so lucky. Longtime friends from American High School in Miami, they had moved into Gatorwood just prior to the fall semester at the University of Florida. Disturbed by Tracy's absence from class, a friend of hers contacted the maintenance man at Gatorwood, who used a master key to enter the apartment that Tracy and Manny shared.

Because of the recent slayings, the maintenance man was understandably apprehensive about what horror he might find inside. Still, he was stunned when he opened the door. Paules's nude body was displayed in the hallway. A trail of blood leading from her bedroom indicated that she had been stabbed in bed and then dragged into the hallway for effect. Manny Taboada also was dead, although it was clear from the defensive wounds on the insides of his arms and the blood sprayed on the wall behind the headboard that he had put up a frantic struggle.

News of the five murders spread quickly throughout the college community, igniting widespread anxiety, if not hysteria, on the campus. In a massive evacuation, thousands of frightened students left town. All the flights out of

Gainesville's community airport were booked solid, and long lines of cars and buses led students away from the campus.

But the traffic into town was just as heavy. Journalists and camera crews from around the country, and as far away as Italy, rushed to Gainesville, transforming the usually peaceful college town into a three-ring circus. Newspapers across the state competed fiercely to be the first to uncover and publish the gruesome details of the case. Even talk show host Phil Donahue did a live telecast from the center of town, despite the efforts of some residents to sabotage the broadcast. Citizens of Gainesville were outraged by the invasion of their privacy and by what they perceived to be an undeserved stigma against their hometown. To the chagrin of University of Florida officials, students nicknamed the school "Murder U."

Given how grotesque and hideous the Gainesville slaughters were, it is not surprising that Americans were repulsed by the gory details. At the same time, however, many found themselves drawn to learning precisely what the killer did to the victims. Others demanded to know how the investigation was being handled. Eventually, everyone wanted to understand what motivated the Gainesville culprit not only to kill, but to kill in such a gruesome, savage way.

PREVALENCE OF SERIAL MURDER

Serial murder involves a string of four or more homicides committed by one or a few perpetrators that spans a period of days, weeks, months, or even years. Although the most publicized and prominent form of serial killing consists of a power-hungry sadist who preys upon strangers to satisfy his sexual fantasies, the motivations for and patterns of serial homicide are quite diverse. Included within our definition of perpetrators of serial homicide are, for example, a nurse who poisons her patients in order to "play God," a disturbed man who kills prostitutes to punish them for their sins, a team of armed robbers who execute store clerks after taking money from their cash registers, and a satanic cult whose members commit a string of human sacrifices as an initiation ritual.

Judging from the increasing number of criminologists who recently have become attracted to the study of serial murder (not to mention students hoping to pursue a career investigating such crimes), it might seem that the United States is in the throes of an epidemic. The scientific evidence to substantiate or deny the presence of such an upsurge is, however, limited. Indeed, it is not possible to trace, with a high degree of precision, recent or long-term trends in

the prevalence and incidence of serial murder in this country (see Egger, 1990; Jenkins, 1994; Kiger, 1990).

Using a variety of sources—newspaper reports, books on the topic, and Internet profiles—we have pieced together a list of 558 serial killers operating in the United States since 1900, in order to develop a sense, albeit imperfect, of the trends and patterns in serial killing. Some killers work as pairs or teams in their predatory activity; overall, this collection of 558 assailants represents 494 unique individuals or partnerships.

Determining the 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. Using conservative minimum victim counts, the 558 offenders, as a group, are responsible for at least 3,850 homicides, and almost certainly many more. In fact, using more speculative upper estimates, the offenders may account for as many as 5,650 murders.

In addition to these known serial killers, a number of unsolved cases across the country—for example, in New Bedford, Massachusetts, where 11 female prostitutes and drug users were murdered in 1988, and Kansas City, Missouri, where the BTK killer boasts in letters to the press of murders he has committed since the 1970s—continue to stump investigators. Furthermore, despite recent advances in technology and communication, law enforcement may still be unaware of the presence of many other serial killers. In what Egger (1984) termed "linkage blindness," investigators are not always able to connect homicides, separated over time and space, to the activities of a single perpetrator, particularly murder sprees that cross jurisdictional boundaries (see Levin & Fox, 1985). The unsolved or open cases and the undetected cases, taken together, would account for hundreds of additional victims.

These data on 494 known killers or killing teams can be used to examine long-term trends in serial homicide, subject to important methodological caveats concerning the completeness of the database. Not only do these data exclude unsolved and undetected cases, as already noted, but it is further possible that some more obscure killing sprees have escaped the attention of those who have chronicled such events. Notwithstanding these cautions, Figure 3.1 displays counts of serial killers, partnerships, and teams each year since the beginning of the 20th century, using the midpoint of a killer's career as a

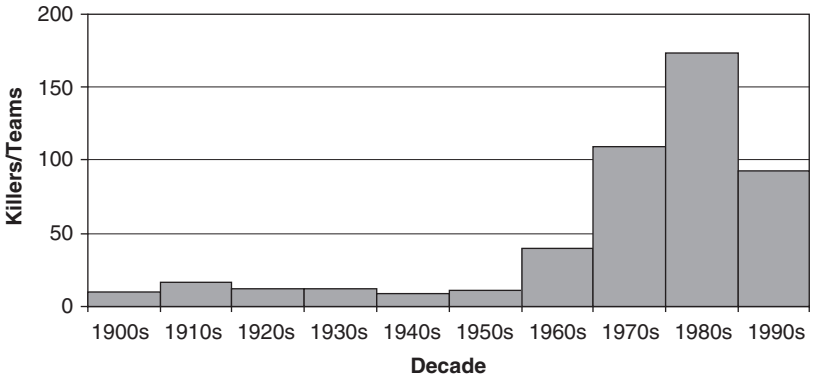

Figure 3.1 Killers/Teams by Decade

reference point. That is, for example, Theodore Bundy, whose murders spanned the years 1974 to 1978, having a career midpoint of 1976, is counted in the 1970s. Unabomber Theodore Kaczynski, who was at large from 1978 to 1996, had a career midpoint of 1987 and thus is included among killers of the 1980s, even though he operated both before and after this decade.

The trend is relatively flat for the first half of the century, hovering around 10 serial killers per decade. The pattern emerging in the second half of the century is radically different. In the 1960s, the number of killers or killing teams reached nearly 40. Remarkably, over the course of the next two decades, the 1970s and 1980s, the number of killers or partnerships quadrupled, surpassing the 150 mark in the 1980s.

Although rapid growth into the 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. Notwithstanding these concerns, the trend in serial killings into the 1980s is quite consistent with a more general rise in violent crime, including homicide, as well as in resident population, strongly suggesting that the rise in serial murder is more than just an artifact of increased reporting and improved detection.

Whatever the actual increase in the prevalence of serial murder in the 1970s and 1980s, it is fairly clear that fear associated with such crimes also grew during that time. Prompted by some exaggerated media reports (e.g., Darrach & Norris, 1984), the American public was scared into believing that there was an epidemic of serial murder in the United States, totaling as many as 5,000 victims annually (for critical discussions, see Fox & Levin, 1985; Jenkins, 1988, 1994).

This grossly distorted estimate was not restricted to the popular press. Many academic researchers also accepted the 5,000 per year benchmark, at least initially. Although he has since modified his view (Egger, 1990), Egger (1984) placed the annual number of serial murder victims in the 4,000–6,000 range. Holmes and DeBurger (1988) also estimated that between 3,500 and 5,000 victims were murdered each year by serial killers.

A close assessment of the reasoning behind the often-cited annual estimate of 3,500–5,000 victims exposes a fatal semantic flaw. Each year in the United States, there are approximately 4,000–5,000 homicides with unknown motive (i.e., the "unknown circumstance" code from the FBI's *Supplementary Homicide Reports*, an incident-based compilation of homicide victim and offender age, race and sex, weapon, victim/offender relationship, and circumstance). Moreover, serial murder is popularly known as "murder for no apparent motive" or "motiveless" (Ressler, Burgess, D'Agostino, & Douglas, 1984). At some juncture, "unknown motive" was wrongly equated and confused with "no motive," leading to the erroneous inference that serial murder claims 5,000 victims per year (see Fox & Levin, 1985; Jenkins, 1994). Even when the flawed reasoning was uncovered, there remained a tendency to inflate uncritically the extent of the serial murder problem. When asked how many of the 5,000 homicides with unknown motives could be the work of serial killers, Justice Department sources speculated it to be two-thirds of the 5,000, or approximately 3,500 (Starr, 1984).

In contrast to the Justice Department's early estimate of thousands of victims annually, our data suggest that during the peak in the 1980s, between 1,190 and 1,760 Americans were slain by serial killers, or about 120–180 per year. This significant discrepancy—the FBI's thousands per year as opposed to our hundred or two per year—may reflect more than just the difference between estimating and enumerating; nor can it be dismissed as the mere result of definitional inconsistency or methodological dissimilarity. More likely, according to Kiger (1990) and Jenkins (1994), organizational vested interests were at least partially responsible

for the gross exaggeration in the "official" estimates of the prevalence of serial murder. That is, congressional approval of expenditures for FBI initiatives related to serial homicide may have depended, at least in part, on establishing a convincing case that the problem had reached alarming proportions.

The 1980s were an unusual era in terms of the serial murder phenomenon. Not only was the term itself coined at the beginning of the decade, and the prevalence of serial killing surely peaked during that time, but both fear and fascination surrounding serial killers were widespread during those years. Even as the attention from the popular media and the academic community remained strong during the 1990s, however, the prevalence of serial homicide appears to have diminished. To a large extent, this decline parallels a sharp downturn in all forms of murder during the 1990s and is to some extent due to many of the same factors. The growth in prison populations, for example, kept many violent predators, and many potential serial killers, safely behind bars. It may also be that improved law enforcement investigative techniques—the development of DNA profiling and databases as well as interagency communication—thwarted many would-be serial killers before they amassed a large victim count and a prolonged career in killing. It may also be that some cases occurring in recent years have not as yet been identified and solved, causing them to be absent from the database of known perpetrators. Finally, as society has become somewhat jaded, perhaps accustomed to seeing serial murder as a commonplace part of American culture, the more "routine" cases may not receive the same kind of publicity they would have in an earlier era.

Whatever the extent of decline during the 1990s and whatever the reasons for it, the problem of serial murder remains a difficult and perplexing one for law enforcement and, of course, for the general public that could be victimized by these predators. Even with about 10 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.

EXTRAORDINARILY ORDINARY

In recent years, Americans have been fascinated but at the same time shocked by murder machines, operating here and abroad, commonly known as serial murderers. Although they occasionally surface in other countries, these killers

are much more common in the United States. Taking as many as 200 American lives per year in total, serial murderers kill repeatedly, generally not stopping until they are caught.

With each discovery of another serial killer, the level of brutality and gore seems to sink even deeper into the abyss of inhumanity. In the 1970s, we became acquainted with the concept of serial predators in the context of the hideous rapes and murders committed by Theodore Bundy. In the 1980s, we were introduced to new and even more grotesque atrocities—a Philadelphia man who kept sex slaves shackled to a post in his basement and a gruesome twosome who operated a torture chamber at their Northern California hideout. The 1990s produced even more chilling abominations, such as the crimes of Milwaukee's Jeffrey Dahmer, who cannibalized at least 17 young men, and the 2-month killing spree perpetrated by Andrew Cunanan, who took the lives of five people including fashion designer Gianni Versace. Then, early in the new century, in October of 2002, two buddies—John Allen Muhammad and Lee Boyd Malvo—terrified the residents of the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area by shooting to death 10 innocent victims, on a random basis, over a period of 3 weeks.

Perhaps because they do not fit the popular stereotype of a crazed lunatic, serial killers who seem like the "boy next door" have become household names. But underneath the trustworthy and smooth veneer often glorified by the media lies the heart of a monster whose supreme passion is stalking his prey.

A PROFILE OF THE TYPICAL SERIAL KILLER

It certainly would be comforting if real-life serial killers acted like those in classic horror movies. If they looked like Jason from the *Friday the 13th* film series, we would be wary whenever they approached. If they were introverted loners like Norman Bates from Alfred Hitchcock's classic film *Psycho* (1960), they could not charm their victims so easily into their deadly clutches. The frightening truth is that serial killers such as Gary Ridgway, Ted Bundy, and Jeffrey Dahmer are incredibly credible and, therefore, so very dangerous.

The problem is that serial killers just don't look or act like the strangers that our mothers always warned us about. Even when it is known that a serial killer is on the loose, the precautions that worried citizens take may be inadequate. Many serial killers are clever and inventive. Some will pose as police

officers or as stranded motorists in need of assistance. Others will answer classified newspaper ads to get into the homes of unsuspecting victims eager to sell a television set. Still others simply grab victims off the street by force, in broad daylight. If they really want to get someone, they will likely find a way.

This does not mean that all or even most serial killers are handsome and smooth super-geniuses. Many people consider Ted Bundy a prototype serial killer in large part because of his attractiveness, charm, and intelligence. Although these qualities are important in understanding his keen ability to lure his victims and allude the police, Bundy is more the extreme.

At the other end of the spectrum are some serial killers who are high school dropouts and some who might even be called ugly by conventional standards. Most, however, are fairly average, at least to the casual observer. But there is one trait that tends to separate serial killers from the norm: They are exceptionally skillful in their presentation of self. Rather than coming across as evil monsters, they are able to project a "nice guy" image that places them beyond suspicion. This is part of the reason why they are so difficult to detect or apprehend. Baton Rouge serial killer Derrick Todd Lee, for example, stayed on the loose at least in part because he was able to blend in so well. He came across to many as "friendly "and "charming." He cooked barbeque for friends and neighbors and led a Bible study group. Those who grew to know him certainly regarded Lee as more the "preacher type" than the "serial killer type."

Table 3.1 displays the demographic characteristics of serial killers based on the database of 558 offenders operating in the United States since 1900. Overall, 86% of the killers are male and 82% are white. In terms of age, 41% began killing in their 20s and another 29% started murdering in their 30s, with an average of just over 30, an age distribution much older than murderers in general. It is quite rare for a teenager or young adult 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.

The proportion of serial killers who are black (15%) is roughly the same as their representation in the population, and considerably below the substantial percentage of blacks among single-victim killers (more than half). However, the involvement of black serial killers may be understated proportionately as a

Table 3.1 Characteristics of Serial Killers Active Since 1900 ($N = 558$)

Offender Category	*Percentage*
Sex	
Male	85.8
Female	14.2
Total	100.0
Race/ethnicity	
White	81.5
Black	14.6
Hispanic	3.6
Other	0.3
Total	100.0
Age	
Under 20	13.0
20-29	41.2
30-39	29.1
40-49	12.3
50+	4.4
Total	100.0
Partnerships	
Solo	80.8
Pair	12.2
Team	7.0
Total	100.0

consequence of racially disparate linkage blindness. Serial murder, like murder generally, tends to be intraracial (i.e., whites killing whites and blacks killing blacks); 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 disproportionate involvement of males in serial homicide in part reflects, of course, their greater numbers in murder rates generally. Curiously, however, according to these statistics, the gender ratio among serial killers (86% male) is slightly less pronounced than for murder generally (about 88%), a finding that is at odds with the prevailing view among most researchers that almost all serial killers are men (e.g., Holmes & DeBurger, 1988).

This seeming discrepancy between our data and the common view can, however, be understood as a difference in definition. We have cast serial

homicide in the broadest terms to encompass any personal motive for repeated homicide (including profit and revenge, as well as dominance); others (e.g., Ressler, Burgess, & Douglas, 1988) restrict their attention almost exclusively to sexually motivated killers, virtually all of whom are men.

Using a broad definition of serial killing, we can see in Table 3.2 significant gender differences in victim preference. Male serial killers, frequently sexual predators, tend to target prostitutes, women, or young boys and girls as victims—strangers whom they can stalk, capture, control, and kill to satisfy their sadistic impulses and violent fantasies. About two-thirds of victims of male serial killers fit this characterization.

Female serial killers, by contrast, generally kill victims with whom they have shared some kind of relationship, often in which the victim is dependent on them. More than 70% target family members or patients of some kind. Gwendolyn Graham and Catherine Wood of Grand Rapids, Michigan, suffocated to death at least six nursing home patients under their care. At the extreme, Marybeth Tinning of Schenectady, New York, killed nine of her own children, not all at once in a murderous fit or rage, but one at a time in a cold, deliberate, and selfish attempt to win attention. More than half of the female serial killers target family members, including a number of so-called black

Table 3.2 Victim Preference by Sex of Serial Killer

	Sex of Offender (percentages)	
Victim Category	*Male*	*Female*
Family	4.2	53.7
Acquaintances	2.2	1.7
Children	2.6	12.7
Boys	5.5	0.7
Girls	3.0	0.0
Men	8.0	1.4
Women	33.0	2.8
Patients/elderly	7.8	16.9
Prostitutes	12.2	0.7
Varied	21.4	9.3
Total	100.0	100.0

Note: Classification is by killer's primary target. Entries in the columns do not add to 100.0% because of rounding.

widows who sequentially marry and then murder several men to collect on their inheritances.

One of the very few female serial killers to target strangers was Aileen Wuornos, a Florida prostitute who murdered seven middle-aged "johns" in 1989–1990. Erroneously labeled by the press as the "first female serial killer," Wuornos was indeed exceptional only in her victim selection and modus operandi—her style of killing closely resembled that of a male predatory killer. By contrast, female serial offenders usually murder victims they know, either in their personal life or on the job.

Overall, the victim-offender relationship pattern is one of the most striking dissimilarities between serial murder and criminal homicide generally. Unlike single-victim murder, which commonly arises from some dispute between partners, family members, or friends (less than one-quarter of solved murder cases involve strangers), serial murder typically is a stranger-perpetrated crime (see also Riedel, 1993). Among 399 serial killers from 1800–1995, Hickey (1997) reported that 61% targeted strangers exclusively, and another 15% killed at least one stranger among their lists of victims. The unusually large share of stranger-perpetrated crimes in serial homicide may reflect more than just the killer's tendencies for victim selection. A more practical issue related to apprehension may also be involved. Because stranger-crimes are far more difficult to solve, those killers who target victims known to them are less likely to remain at large long enough to accumulate a victim count that satisfies the definition of serial murder.

Another well-studied pattern of serial murder is its geographic location (see Rossmo, 1996). In the modern mythology of serial murder, the killer is characterized as a nomad whose compulsion to kill carries him hundreds of thousands of miles a year as he drifts from state to state and region to region, leaving scores of victims in his wake. This may be true of some well-known and well-traveled killers such as Ted Bundy, Andrew Cunanan, and Henry Lee Lucas, but not for the majority. John Wayne Gacy, for example, killed all of his 33 young male victims at his home in Des Plaines, Illinois, conveniently burying most of them there as well. Gacy, like Milwaukee's Jeffrey Dahmer, Kansas City's Robert Berdella, and Long Island's Joel Rifkin, operated within driving distance of home. Moreover, most serial killers are not the recluses that movies often portray them to be. They typically have jobs and families, go to church on Sunday, and kill part-time . . . indeed, whenever they have some free time to kill.

Table 3.3 Pattern of Killings (494 killers/teams)

Location of Killings	*Percentage*
Scope of killing spree	
Local	72.9
Regional	15.7
National	11.4
Total	100.0
Region of killing spree	
Northeast	18.9
Midwest	25.4
South	28.3
West	27.4
Total	100.0

Note: The region of killing spree classification is based on cases with local or regional scope only.

According to Hickey's (1997) data, 14% of the killers operated in a specific location (e.g., at their home or workplace), and another 52% confined their murder sprees to the same general location or area (e.g., a city or state). Only 34% traveled wide distances, in a nomadic fashion, to commit their crimes. Our 494 serial killers or teams reflect a similar pattern. As shown in Table 3.3, nearly three-quarters (73%) localized their killing within a particular city or state. Another 16% killed within the same general region of the country. Only slightly more than 1 in 10 traveled long distances, region to region or even coast to coast, in search of their prey. The prevalence of mobile serial killers may be especially attenuated, however, as a result of linkage blindness. That is, law enforcement authorities are less likely to identify connections between homicides that are widely dispersed and cross jurisdictional lines (Egger, 1984, 1990).

Whether road warriors or stay-at-home predators, serial killers develop a certain level of comfort with regard to murder. With cool deliberation, they murder with great ease in order to satisfy a variety of urges and needs at the expense of us all.