

Chapter 5

The Myth That Serial Murderers Are Disproportionately White Males

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The Myth

Prior to recent acts of domestic and international terrorism, perhaps no criminal phenomenon held the attention of the general public, the media, and the criminal justice system to the extent of serial murder. Towns have been gripped in terror, society has been engrossed with curiosity, the media frequently turned the phenomenon into a frenzied circus, and law enforcement quickly responded by developing a national computer-based data system to assist in the investigation and apprehension of serial murderers and other serial violent offenders throughout the United States.

Despite the ongoing fascination with serial murder, a common myth persists and remains relatively unexplored and unchallenged: Most citizens, media representatives, scholars, and even law enforcement officers tend to agree that serial murderers are disproportionately white males. However, there is a growing body of evidence that counters this belief and points to more than 100 African-American

serial murderers who have been largely ignored by the media and society. The evidence indicates that the proportion of African-American serial murderers may closely parallel their proportion of the population. In this chapter, we explore the myth of the white-male serial murderer, provide some evidence that there have been many African-American serial murderers throughout recent history, and discuss some reasons why these murderers have not achieved the notoriety of their white counterparts.

Holmes and DeBurger (1988) estimated that as many as 35 serial murderers claim between 3,500 and 5,000 lives annually, although such estimates are rather speculative and based on unfounded conjecture according to some (see, for example, Hinch and Hepburn 1998). More importantly, the probability that any particular individual will fall victim to a serial killer is extremely low; statistically, a person is more likely to be struck by lightning. Regardless, serial murder remains frightening because of its extreme violence and seemingly apparent randomness, and because it often victimizes women, children, the homeless, prostitutes, and others who are less able to adequately protect themselves, or whose untimely deaths may remain unnoticed for long periods of time.

According to a number of media sources, serial murderers are disproportionately white males in their 20s and 30s. The following quotes from various Internet sites on serial and mass murder generally agree on this common descriptive profile:

- "Serial killers tend to be white, heterosexual males in their twenties and thirties who are sexually dysfunctional and have low self-esteem" (www.mayhem.net).

- "A serial killer is a typical white male, 20–30, and most of them are usually in the USA" (www.fortunecity.com).
- "Serial killers are primarily handsome white males in their 20s and 30s" (www.geocities.com).
- "He is usually male, between the ages of 25–30, and he is usually white" (www.maclester.edu).
- "He is usually male, between the ages of 25–35, and he is usually white" (www.isuisse.ifrance.com).
- "Most are white males in their 20s or 30s, with varying levels of intelligence" (Fox 2004).

Further, many "true crime" books seem to perpetuate this general description by providing graphic case histories of white-male serial killers (The Editors of Time Life Books 1992; Publications International 1991), and recent popular movies such as *Silence of the Lambs*, *Manhunter*, and a series of movies on Ted Bundy and others continue to suggest that serial murder is generally a "white-male phenomenon." In fact, the number of movies that focused on serial murderers steadily increased in the twentieth century, and increased dramatically in the 1990s (Main 1997). There are even sets of trading cards depicting serial and mass murderers that further sustain the stereotype (Jones and Collier 1992), and video games have also been developed using white-male serial killers (Take-Two Interactive 2004).

The Kernel of Truth

This popular description of the serial murderer is not limited to online sites, popular culture, and Hollywood films. Many noted serial-murder scholars have also offered a general profile of a serial murderer consistent with the "white male between 20 and 30" description, both

within the United States (Holmes and DeBurger 1985, 1988; Prentky et al. 1989; Leibman 1989; Hickey 1997) and in other countries, including Australia (Pinto and Wilson 1990), Britain (Grover and Soothill 1999), and Germany (Harbort and Mokros 2001).

Based on a comprehensive encyclopedia of serial killers, Newton (1990) found that 82 percent of twentieth century American serial murderers were white and 85 percent were male. The gender of another 7 percent of his sample was unknown because the killers were not captured. All else being equal, presumably 85 percent of that remaining 7 percent was also male and a corresponding proportion would be white, which would raise the percentages of white-male serial killers slightly.

Internationally, Harbort and Mokros (2001) studied 61 convicted serial murderers in Germany, all of whom were German citizens. Although racial composition was not examined, 91 percent of this German sample was male. Further, 12 of 14 (86 percent) convicted serial killers in Australia from 1900 to 1987 were also male; although again, race was not examined in this study (Pinto and Wilson 1990). In sum, the literature in the United States and abroad supports the contention that a serial murderer is most likely to be a white male, both within the United States and in other countries.

The Truth or Facts

As a basis of comparison, consider murder and population demographics in general. In 2002, there were 15,813 murders committed in the United States (murder and most crimes decreased in the late 1990s and early 2000s). Among murders for which the gender of the offender was known, males committed 90 percent of

them. As such, it is probably fair to suggest that murderers are likely to be males (Federal Bureau of Investigation 2002).

A racial breakdown of U.S. murderers in 2002 for which the race of the offender is known indicates that 48 percent of murders were committed by white offenders and 50 percent were committed by black offenders (Federal Bureau of Investigation 2002). Therefore, it would be inaccurate to conclude that murderers in general were more likely to be white or black. In fact, murderers in the United States in 2002 were just as likely to be white as they were to be black.

Finally, it is important to keep in mind that murders are typically intraracial, such that white offenders kill white victims and black offenders kill black victims. In 2002, for example, in cases where the race of the offender and the victim were known, 84 percent of white victims were murdered by white offenders and 91 percent of black victims were murdered by black offenders (Federal Bureau of Investigation 2002). As such, it seems reasonable to conclude that murderers are likely to take the life of someone within their own race.

In 2000, the United States had an estimated population of 281 million citizens: 75.1 percent were white, 12.3 percent were African American, and 12.5 percent were Latino (U.S. Census Bureau 2000). Given these demographics and comparing the percentages with homicide statistics, it is rather apparent that African-American murderers are significantly overrepresented relative to their population figures. Blacks represented approximately 12.3 percent of the 2000 population (population figures are not collected each year, so the most recent 2000 Census figures were used), but accounted for 50 percent of the 2002 murders for which the race of the offender was known. Disproportionately

high black homicide rates have been the subject of study by many scholars (see, for example, Hawkins 1986). Whites, on the other hand, were underrepresented in murder statistics, accounting for 75 percent of the 2000 population while committing 48 percent of the 2002 murders. Latinos were not distinguished in the Uniform Crime Reports so comparisons within that group are not possible here.

Considering serial murderers, specifically, Newton (1990) determined that about 85 percent of serial murderers were male, and 88 percent of Hickey's (1997) sample of known serial murderers were male, although that number decreased to 84 percent in a later, but much broader, assessment of known serial killers from 1800 to 1995 (Hickey 2002). Since the population is roughly split 50/50 by gender, it is apparent that males are overrepresented among known serial murderers. Therefore, it is probably reasonable to assume that serial murderers are likely to be male, although scholars have spent considerable time studying female serial murderers as well (Keeney 1994, 1995; Hickey 2002).

Further review of Newton's (1990) encyclopedia of serial killers in the United States suggests that approximately 82 percent of his sample was white, 15 percent was African American, and another 2.5 percent was Latino. Hickey (1997) indicated that 85 percent of his sample of known serial murderers were white and 13 percent were African American, although his broader sample indicated that as much as 20 percent of 399 known male and female serial murderers were black (Hickey 2002:243).

In contrast to murder in general, it appears that the proportion of white and black serial murderers is slightly higher than their corresponding representation in the population. Specifically, about 75

percent of the U.S. population is white, while 80–85 percent of serial murderers are white. Blacks accounted for about 12 percent of the 2000 U.S. population and from 13–20 percent of serial murderers in the United States, depending on the source used or the timeframe examined. Finally, Latino serial murderers may be somewhat underrepresented, accounting for 12.5 percent of the population but only 2.5 percent of serial murderers. Given the small numbers of serial murderers overall, the percentage differences could and should be considered insignificant, because smaller samples yield larger percentage differences when making comparisons among groups. Nevertheless, the proportion of white serial murderers and black serial murderers in the United States appears to closely parallel their overall demographic representation in the population. So, if white serial murderers and African-American serial murderers appear in numbers that roughly correspond to their respective proportions in the general population, is it reasonable and responsible to assume that serial murderers are disproportionately white?

Instead, it may be more accurate to conclude that race, in and of itself, provides little help in distinguishing who may be serial murderers in the United States and, perhaps, abroad. Therefore, it seems prudent to eliminate racial descriptions from the typical profile of a serial murderer altogether (more discussion about this later). Some experts, including former FBI agent Robert Ressler, who spent several decades chasing down serial murderers, determined that there is no such thing as a “typical” serial killer (Sunde 2002). It follows that there may not be a typical serial murderer profile. Therefore, to create and perpetuate such a profile has both investigative and societal implications that merit further attention.

Interests Served by the Myth

Perpetuation of this myth may intentionally or unintentionally serve a variety of interests. This recurring stereotype was most likely created from and further perpetuated by several sources, including (1) historical and contemporary attempts by psychologists, psychiatrists, and law enforcement to profile serial murderers; (2) mass media attention on specific and extreme or spectacular cases of white serial murderers, notwithstanding comparable cases of spectacular black serial murderers; and (3) a possible failure of law enforcement to link black victims of homicide to possible serial murder investigations.

Criminal Profiling

The Federal Bureau of Investigation’s Violent Criminal Apprehension Program (VICAP) uses psychological profiling strategies to identify and apprehend serial offenders, including serial killers. The basic purpose of psychological profiling is to construct a personality sketch, based on evidence derived through investigation of the crimes, for use in the investigation and subsequent prosecution. A personality sketch (it is assumed) provides information about an individual’s behavior, genetic make-up, cultural characteristics, sexual patterns, victim preferences, and historical experiences. Much of the information on which profiles are based comes directly from crime scenes. Crime scenes can be very informative, yielding not only physical evidence (e.g., DNA), which can link an individual to a crime scene, but other indirect abstract evidence that can be psychologically and forensically analyzed.

Criminal profiling has been used extensively in serial murder investigations (Holmes and DeBurger 1988; James 1991;

Keppel 1989; Norris 1988); however, it is important to note that criminal or psychological profiling has some significant limitations. The accuracy and reliability of profiling has yet to be determined. In fact, some historical evidence suggests criminal profiling helped identify a primary suspect in only 17 percent of 192 cases for which profiles were developed (FBI 1980). For example, in the case of Albert Desalvo, "The Boston Strangler," for example, the criminal profile suggested the killer was a homosexual who was unable to express hatred toward his mother and was likely well-acquainted with the victims. In fact, Desalvo was married, had an insatiable heterosexual appetite, and in most cases the victims were strangers. Unfortunately, such inaccurate profiles are fairly common, although profiling has certainly helped capture some serial killers and serial rapists over the years. Focusing exclusively on white serial killers provides law enforcement and the media with a finite construct that makes investigating the serial murderer phenomenon easier, similar to focusing a sexual assault investigation on men exclusively, and subsequently ignoring potential women offenders (of which there are few).

Media Attention

Media attention regarding the issue of serial murder has also perpetuated the myth of the white-male serial murderer. As discussed previously, the number of films on serial murder increased steadily over the last 50 years or so, and increased significantly in the 1990s. Many films have focused on serial murder in general, but there were also a number of films and documentaries that examined specific serial killers including Jack the Ripper, Ted Bundy, Jeffrey Dahmer, Albert Desalvo, Henry Lee Lucas, and other white serial murderers. Recently, *Monster: The Life*

and Death of a Serial Killer was one of the first movies focusing on a female serial murderer (Aileen Wuornos), who also happened to be white.

We are unaware of any popular movies that depict fictional or nonfictional accounts of black serial killers, and if such movies do exist they are few in number. Jenkins (1993) provided some explanations for this apparent absence, including Hollywood concerns with creating movies categorized exclusively as "Black interest" (which may limit the audience and the subsequent box-office draw), or filmmaker concerns with the fear of being accused of depicting crude or controversial racial stereotypes. Jenkins pointed out that there were many cases of "spectacular" black serial killers (those who claimed more than eight victims). He identified 13 such cases from 1960 to 1987, but those cases have been largely ignored by the mass media and perhaps by scholars as well. Further, an incomplete and unpublished work in progress by Ellington (2004) identified as many as 115 black serial murderers in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, and additional cases were identified recently (CNN News 2004). Using Jenkin's indicator regarding the number of victims, as many as 31 (27 percent) of the black offenders in Ellington's preliminary study would be considered spectacular serial killers, or those who have claimed at least eight victims.

Selective or Ineffective Law Enforcement

Finally, Jenkins (1993) noted that law enforcement may have unintentionally failed to link cases of serial murder within black communities, and that African-American serial homicide may be a largely underrecognized phenomenon. Because murder in general occurs at disproportionately higher rates among blacks than would be expected, given their

proportion of the population, law enforcement may systematically, but unintentionally, fail to consider that murders in black communities could be linked to cases of serial murder. Again, murder is most often intraracial. The majority of serial murder victims in Hickey's (2002) sample were white, as was the majority of his sample of serial murderers. Nevertheless, a serial murderer that chooses black male (or more likely black female) victims may end up eluding capture for long periods of time if investigators are not attentive and open-minded to the possibility that any given homicide may be one in a series of murders. For example, Henry Louis Wallace, a black serial murderer who operated in Charlotte, North Carolina, was arrested and convicted of nine killings of black females. Local law enforcement was initially informed by the FBI that there was no serial killer. This example shows that a number of stereotypes, including racial assumptions, can inadvertently hamper an investigation. Whether the failure of law enforcement to recognize potentially related cases and limitations associated with profiling serial killing impedes linking investigations on a larger scale should be the focus of future research.

Policy Implications of Belief in the Myth

The issue of addressing racial profiling related to serial murders is further complicated by recent media and legal attention to racial profiling by police. As the fiftieth anniversary of *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* is celebrated, the United States remains focused on race relations, and racial profiling has become a major concern within the law enforcement community and across the country. Using a suspect's race as part of a criminal

profile has met with severe scrutiny within the court system, among law enforcement agencies (McMahon et al. 2002), and within cities and towns as an attempt is made to move away from unfair historical practices and toward a community policing style (Peak and Glensor 2002).

The irony of the white-male serial murderer myth is that this "profile" of the serial murderer may represent an obvious example of majority racial profiling. By "majority" racial profiling, we simply mean that the profiling impacts the *majority* race as opposed to a *minority* race. In this case, suggesting and commonly accepting that serial murderers are white should be no less of a concern than suggesting that murderers are black. However, there appears to be little concern within the community, among scholars, or within the media about describing serial murderers as white males. On the other hand, attempts to describe murderers as black males might quickly make the front page of the newspaper, and be followed by civil suits alleging racial discrimination or racial profiling.

If serial murder is unrelated to race (as evidence tends to suggest) and if murder and serial murder are primarily intraracial crimes (notwithstanding racially-based hate crimes), then law enforcement investigators should be particularly attentive to local community demographics during homicide investigations. There is evidence which suggests that some serial murderers kill locally; in fact, Hickey's (2002:137) research suggested that more than half (55 percent) of his sample of serial murderers killed locally, and 65 percent of the murderers never killed outside of the state in which they began their killing. This evidence also tends to refute the common notion of a serial killer as a loner who travels across the country in search

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of random victims. Many serial killers do seek out victims who are strangers; however, those strangers are often not that far away from his or her home.

The implications of this analysis for law enforcement are important. If serial murderers are more often racially representative of the population, more likely to seek victims of their own race (the majority of offenders and victims are white, although more specific racial patterns were not discussed [2002:249]), and likely to be local jurisdictional killers, then law enforcement should use these patterns to assist and facilitate investigations. Further, given the disproportionate numbers of homicides among African Americans, investigators should be mindful of the potential for local homicides involving black victims to be linked to serial murder cases.

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