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Serial killers – The investigation (Part 20 of Ritter study)

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New investigation into the disappearance Madeleine McCann

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Some people seem to believe that there are not more serial killers today. Rather, we are catching more of them. This would require that we know more about how to investigate serial murder or even complex, single-victim homicides. Here is the background on why this could not be true. First, we are catching far less of all killers today than we did in the 1960s, when the solution (or “clearance”) rate for homicide was 92 percent. **Now that figure is less than 65 percent**, and in some cities, homicides are solved in only around 20-30 percent of the cases. In all probability, the cases that are solved today are the type we had in the sixties, crimes of passion homicides, involving those with close relationships and identifiable motives. Such cases

almost solved themselves: in these cases, the killer usually waited at the crime scene for the police, if not turning him – or – herself in to the police. Consequently, while homicide has always had the highest clearance rate of any crime, police did not have to know much about homicide or its investigation in order to achieve such high clearance. And then the nature of homicides changed in a way that made them much more difficult to solve. And still, no one had studied homicide investigation until **Wellford and Cronin's 1999** landmark study.

Over the past four decades, the percentage of homicides in which there is no known relationship between killers and victims has grown. The category includes both stranger-to-stranger homicides and homicides with “unknown relationships.” According to the **Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics, 2003**, there were 16, 204 homicides nationally, with data on over 14,000 of these. The growth in relationship-types has been primarily in the “unknown” category, but there were 1963 murders committed by strangers and 6015 murders with unknown relationships. In fact, the category of “unknown relationships” had the greatest number of homicides, greater than spousal murders or murders by acquaintances. As for circumstances or motives, 1955 were in the “non-felony, other-not specified category” (which is another way of saying “unknown motives”), but the highest number of homicides were in the “Unknown” category: 4576 murders had no identifiable motives. By comparison, in the 1960s, only about six percent of all murders had no identifiable motives.

How can serial murder be differentiated against a mass of unsolved homicides? In the 1960s such cases could be discerned against a U.S. homicide clearance rate of over 90%. But official records no longer supply adequate definitions of “the” murderer. Yet there *are* reasons to believe that within the unknown, unsolved murders in America lie more serial murderers than previously thought. “Every year in America, 6,000 killers get away with murder. Nearly 185,000 killings went unsolved from 1980 to 2008, **Scripps Howard News Service (SHNS) reporter Thomas Hargrove's** study found.” Hargrove created a database of these same unsolved murders committed since 1980. “Crime experts say it is the most complete accounting of homicide victims ever assembled in the United States.”

Studying these [unsolved cases](#),

. . . turned up alarming clusters of unsolved killings of women across the nation that strongly suggest the work of serial killers. The SHNS study focused on communities where



police failed to solve at least three-quarters of murders of women of similar age killed by similar methods. The reason for singling out women in the study is that they represent 70 percent of all known serial murder victims.

The search turned up 161 clusters in which 1,247 murdered women met the criteria (McFeatters, 2011).

As Hargrove reported, some police departments acted quickly by initiating new investigations into cases that were considered possible serial murders. Authorities in Indiana and in Ohio were two such areas, while Nevada law enforcement admitted a probable serial murder case involving seven women, most of whom were prostitutes, whose remains were scattered across three different states.

A final reason for believing we are not just apprehending more serial murders is, as **Levin and Fox (1985, p. 166)** put it, "The serial killer. . . must be considered a skillful practitioner. If he weren't, his murder spree would have been curtailed early on." The authors further pointed out that "The hard truth is that serial killers, like [John] Gacy, [Dean] Corll, and [Wayne] Williams, are extremely skillful killers – 'the cream of the crop'" (Levin and Fox, p. 186). These killers were finally stopped, but there were probably, as Levin and Fox observed, many unknown multiple murderers with the expertise to protect themselves from ever being caught.

That specific serial killers have long known how to elude police will be the subject of the next article on the investigation of serial murder.

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