

Captured! The apprehension of a serial killer (Part 24)

Barrie J. Ritter, Ph.D.© 2016



John Mark Karr Deported To U.S.A In JonBenet Ramsey Murder Case
Photo by Paula Bronstein/Getty Images

There is no doubt: [murder](#) has changed. Gone are the days when offenders sat hopelessly at the crime scene, waiting for police, or went to the police department to turn themselves in ([Lunde, 1976](#)). Murder used to be a crime with the highest solution rate – not because the police were so good at detection, but because the crimes were almost self-solving. In the past, the police never needed to know much about the nature of homicides ([Egger, 1984](#)). This has become particularly problematic because police are focusing on less serious felonies, and are reinforced by the laws on felony murder. “Felony murder” defines murder as a secondary component in a compound crime such as a burglary during which a homicide happens to take place. This is because the laws are written by the powerful, and they are more concerned with *loss of property*, involving nonlethal felonies, believed to be committed by the lower classes. As [Lundsgaarde](#) wrote in his study of Houston murders (1977, p. 190):

“ *We should also examine why it is felt to be necessary to punish a marijuana smoker more severely than a killer and why low income workers pay a higher income tax [rate] than many millionaires. . . . The Houston [homicide] data illustrate how a large community can [negatively] affect social control [through sanctioning]. One such process, so clearly demonstrated in the cases in this book, demonstrates how a community positively rewards private citizens who defend their rights, personal honor, or their property by taking the lives of those who threaten them. [Citizens are not required to take actions to reduce the potential for violence.]*

You are probably familiar with this information. But there is something you may not know –something that has been minimized, or in some way hidden or reframed. Despite all the new technology, despite all the research interest in serial murder, none of it is helping police: *American police response in solving serial murder has failed in comparison to the police response in other nations.*

Jenkins (1988) compared serial killing, as well as the justice system response, in England (and Wales), from 1940 to 1985, to that of America. English serial murder is quite easy to study because there are so few single-victim homicides relative to the U.S., and because public fascination with murder has led to a long tradition of reference works and biographies that help to ensure accurate case descriptions of major cases. Jenkins found 12 cases, with a marked increase in serial murder, similar to that in the US, since the 1970s. English cases have common outcomes, with arrests occurring in all but one case, in an average of four years. The offender may attempt an insanity defense, but it is extremely unlikely to succeed. All but one of the 12 went to trial and the remainder received at least one life sentence, the mandatory minimum for murder. When Jenkins wrote his article, there were no known unsolved serial murder cases. Compare this to the U.S., below.

In their study of “Serial Murderers in Germany From 1945 to 1995,” Harbort and Mokros (2001) reported a surprisingly high number of German serial murderers. In the five years prior to their article, German newspapers reported 212 serial murderers who had killed approximately 2,400 victims around the world. They found a steady increase in the numbers in Germany since 1965, with 62.7 percent more such killers between 1986 and 1995 than in the previous decade. The German Federal Police Bureau reported a total of 1,855 sexual and robbery-related homicides annually, with serial killers committing an estimated 8.4 percent of these crimes.

The important point in the German data (Harbort & Mokros, 2001) is that the clearance rate for serial homicides between 1945 and 1995 was 82.6 percent, which was only slightly below the 91 percent clearance for all registered homicides between 1986 and 1995. This is a rate almost 30 percent higher than in the U.S. (Wellford & Cronin, 2000).

But there are a significant number of serial murderers who remain at large in Germany. Beyond the 61 convictions for serial murder, there were at least 21 series of homicides that could not be solved, and another 12 suspects identified between 1996 and 2000. Nineteen individuals were under suspicion of having killed three or more victims, but could only be convicted of killing two. Another ninety had been convicted of killing two; (this is now the official number of homicides needed for a case to be considered serial).

Certainly, Germany has its problems with serial murder, but its police forces and other authorities appear truthful and willing to specify what they know so that they have a good idea of what Germany's problems are. Such appears not to be the case with local or federal law enforcement agencies in the United States.

By the mid-1980s, American local law enforcement was reporting their problem with serial murder. True to form, the FBI began exploiting the situation to extend their jurisdiction, and their own role as official experts. Some official, as well as academic, exploitation of the numbers of serial killers led to misleading assessments of the extent of the problem. This occurred because there was an increase in murders by strangers, without apparent motives and by persons unknown. After this, it became fashionable to downgrade estimates and contend that serial killers make up an extremely small fraction of murders, far less than one percent. When homicide researchers are asked about the problem of unsolved murders, they are at pains to steer clear of answers that could imply any association with unsolved *serial* murders. Instead they contend that unsolved murders are little different than those that are solved – they occur in urban areas, among poor black males, in communities plagued by gangs, guns and drugs and people who refuse to talk to or help the police. In other words, it's *their* fault.

Into this climate have come two voices of reason that inform this debate: Kenna Quinet's (2009) "The Missing Missing," and Thomas Hargrove of Scripps Howard News Service, who wrote such articles as "Nearly 185,000 U.S. homicides since 1980 remain unsolved" (2010) and "Connecting the Dots: Shoe Leather, Data Analysis Help Scripps Howard Team Identify Possible Serial Killings" (2014).

So, stay tuned for the most interesting part, next, in "Captured! The apprehension of a serial killer, continued (Part 25)."

SUGGESTED LINKS

- [No more hoopla for VICAP, the FBI's serial murder tracking system](#)
- [The study of murder to help police](#)
- [The study of murder to help police: Expanded MO analysis](#)
- [Captured! The apprehension of a serial killer \(Part 23\)](#)
- [The Bundy letter, 1979: Suggestions for the investigation of serial murder](#)



Barrie Ritter

Crime & Justice Examiner