

LIFE / SOCIETY & CULTURE / SOCIAL ISSUES

Captured! The apprehension of a serial killer, continued (Part 25)

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Photo by Ross Land/Getty Images

More evidence that the police response to homicides is less effective in the U.S. than in some other nations can be seen from the results of two researchers, [Quinet \(2009\)](#), a professor, and [Hargrove \(2010; 2014\)](#), a journalist. Their studies were entirely different, but both innovative and useful.

[Quinet \(2009\)](#) examined the databases for often over-looked populations of potential serial murder victims. She looked first at estimates for missing persons, talking to law enforcement officers at agencies that investigate or collect the data to try to determine how many of the missing is considered to be homicide victims, and then calculated how many of these might be serial murder victims. Prostitutes are now considered to comprise perhaps the largest pool of

serial murder victims, then gay males, runaways, “throwaway” children, illegals and all the subcategories of those who are regarded as “transients.” Because police believe that no one reports them missing, just as they believe most teenagers are runaways, and other such beliefs, even a larger number of such missing and/or transients than usual fail to set off alarm bells for police. More prostitutes die of homicide than of any other cause, with an astounding homicide rate of 229 per 100,000. Depending upon the cohort (the population being studied with similar characteristics living in the same area) and decade, murder estimates range from 29 percent to 100 percent of all prostitute deaths (Potterat et al., 2004 in Quinet, 2009, p. 323).

The best estimate of the number of missing persons nationally is over 800,000 reported cases on any given day, but only 106,000 of them are actively investigated, with most of those investigated missing for over a year. The likelihood of any quick action, much less solution, in such cases is slight, for in addition to police hesitancy in telling the public about a serial murder case, there is an even greater hesitancy to take missing persons reports seriously. The “missing missing” - those for whom no reports were ever filed – and the unidentified dead – are among the saddest of victims: Unless they are found or identified, the missing missing “do not exist,” (Quinet, 2009, pg. 397). Quinet also examined databases for unidentified dead, misidentified dead, and foster care children, 20 percent of whom are missing at any given time and for victims of institutionalized murders, in her search for valid estimates of serial murder victims from each source. As for her estimates, suffice it to say that even a tripling of the current estimates of serial murder yearly would scarcely bring the total to 3 percent of all reported homicides. But this is where the real “dark figure” in crime lies. But Quinet was calling for other researchers to follow her lead, to go past the doors that she had opened, so that one day we might see the faces among the ignored populations and recognize them as people who deserve a better chance for life.

Scripps Howard News Service journalist, **Hargrove (2010)**, with little financial assistance and even less expert staff, determined that “America does a poor job tracking murder victims or finding their killers.” So he developed a database of 185,000 unsolved murders since 1980, using not only the FBI Supplementary Homicide Reports, but also data on approximately 15,000 additional unsolved homicides that local police had not reported to the FBI. The intent of the database was to see if ordinary citizens couldn’t find a way to determine whether, or how many, of these unsolved murders might contain clusters of serial murder cases. They developed an algorithm to detect clusters of unsolved murders, focusing on female victims killed by similar methods. The journalists found one case after another – a total of 161 – clusters in cities where police had previously been hiding their perceptions of unsolved serial murder cases.

The clusters involved at least 1,247 women of similar ages killed through similar means, which were the parameters given by the FBI. At least 75 percent of the cases in each cluster were

unsolved at the time they were reported under the FBI's Supplementary Homicide Report program. This omits a large proportion of cases and is a low estimate of possible serial murder victims because it omits men, killers who change their methods – and most do - and killers who cross multiple jurisdictions – all problems with the FBI's computerized approach. The last omission is particularly curious since the FBI was able to extend its power because it was the only police force that was national. It is also curious because the FBI's automated computer program, VICAP, was specifically funded to assist police in apprehending killers who crossed state lines and multiple police jurisdictions. And these are the cases they leave out?

The journalists found enormous gaps in information: There were more than 565,000 citizens murdered in America between 1980 and 2008, but only 510,000 were recorded by the FBI. Scripps Howard closed some of the gap by using local Freedom of Information laws to force information from police in Florida, then Washington, D.C. then elsewhere.

Hargrove (2010) found an unusual number of women who had been strangled in their homes in Gary Indiana. The police would not respond, but the Coroner did, ordering an investigation and adding 3 more victims to Hargrove's cluster of 14. In Youngstown, Ohio, officials conceded that they had been investigating a serial murder case they had never been disclosed to the public. Police confirmed in 7 of the 10 cities that Scripps had correctly pinpointed their area as one containing serial murder activity.

Hargrove and others (2010) correctly identified previously known “serial murder victims in Anchorage, Alaska, Buffalo, N.Y., Los Angeles and Seattle. The study flagged 32 of the Green River Killer's estimated 48 victims in Seattle.” The study identified 4 clusters of unsolved female killings in Las Vegas, and in other areas of Nevada. It had taken two years to identify the first victim in one of the purported series and more years elapsed before the head of the Las Vegas Homicide Unit admitted publicly any knowledge of any ongoing series. Approached by **the journalists** of the Scripps Howard News Service, Lt. Lew Roberts said, "We think we have one serial killer who's out preying on these women [prostitutes]." Another previously unidentified victim was believed to be part of a cluster of 14 homicides of women who the FBI had simply listed as being of "unknown age" killed by "type unknown weapons" in the San Bernardino area. None of those cases was solved at the time they were reported to federal authorities. In defense, a spokeswoman for the San Bernardino authorities claimed of one victim that she was believed to be “strictly a body dump,” one of a few yearly finds of victims who were presumed not to have been killed in their jurisdiction. And so, apparently, they were not counted, possibly not reported and certainly not investigated.

Another victim whose body parts had not been identified by the Scripps Howard News Service, had been found along a highway south of Springfield, Ill. That case prompted the Illinois State

Police to look "at almost every highly publicized case from here to Las Vegas involving dismembered bodies," said Mike Jennings, a special agent of that force.

"You start to realize that there are a lot of these people (serial killers) out there. One's bad. But to know that there are dozens or possibly even more ... The general public has no idea."

Potential cases of serial murders were found in Detroit and Phoenix, although city officials denied it. But in Dallas, the reception was more welcoming. Hargrove reported to Dallas that Scripps' findings indicated six clusters of mostly unsolved killings of more than 70 women in the Dallas area. Although none were confirmed at the time, city officials agreed with their assessment generally, saying that serial killings were likely among the more than 350 unsolved killings of women. "We've had some horrendous murders here," Sgt. Larry Lewis of the Dallas Cold Case Homicide Unit admitted, adding "I'm sure there are serial killers in that pile [of unsolved]," but I don't know how to find them.

These are only a portion of the identified clusters of possible serial murder victims. We cannot even begin to specify a clearance rate for serial murders because we have not begun to collect the information on how many serial murder offenders or victims there are. It is not police who should be ashamed as much as researchers, who study homicides, but ignore the more problematic cases that are unsolved. If these aren't departments that need the help of researchers, then it's hard to know if researchers *will* ever be needed for *anything*.

SUGGESTED LINKS

- **Part 10. Serial killers: The Crimes**
- **The crimes of serial killers: Are there victim-types? (Part 14)**
- **The serial killers' crimes: How they obtain their victims (Part 15)**
- **The serial killers' crimes: How they obtain their victims, continued (Part 16)**
- **The serial killers' crimes: Assumptions about Modus Operandi (Part 17)**

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