

The serial killers' crimes: How they obtain their victims, continued (Part 16)

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Police investigation into murder of prostitutes continues
(Photo by Bruno Vincent/Getty Images)

This research was first undertaken in the mid-1970s, at the precise time some of America's most famous but unresolved cases were still in the news. Something new was happening. New York's **David Berkowitz**, the Hillside Strangler, **Kenneth Bianchi**, and cross-state suspect **Ted Bundy**, were all vying for the label of the largest manhunts in history. "Task force" investigations of such multiple-victim killings had been rare. Prior to these three cases, there had just been Boston's **Albert DeSalvo** and Ann Arbor's **John Collins**. Since all five of these cases caused extensive law enforcement problems, the need for new research was evident to me. Yet it would be years before the criminological community in general would begin studying the topic. It started in 1984 with the *Senate Hearing on Serial Murder* (U.S. Congress, 1984) which publicized the issue, and at which it was discovered how little research had been done, and how little the FBI had contributed to the knowledge of serial murder *per se*.

This is significant because the nature of the research was necessarily different in the mid-1970s than it is now. The absence of other studies on serial murders meant that more attention had to be paid to the *facts* of each case, which were clear and directly obtainable from primary sources, e.g. original newspaper articles,

available to everyone. And the facts, rather than another researcher's review (or revision) of the facts, could be used as the basis for (new) theory and inductive research (i.e. research that progresses from specifics to generalizations. Most criminological research is deductive; it begins with a hypothesis or generalization, usually untested, which may or may not be born out, but is none-the-less used to generate case specifics.)

In the previous article in this series ([Part 15](#)), [David Berkowitz's](#) methods of obtaining victims were described: he shot at people who were either in their cars or getting out of them, or those who were walking, depending upon whether or not *he* had been driving or walking. Typical of the findings in general, Berkowitz demonstrates that intra-case consistency is more likely than consistency *across* killers. For example, in [Hickey \(2002\)](#), [Ted Bundy's](#) acquisition of victims was shown to have more variation than Berkowitz's, demonstrating this lack of inter-case consistency:

“ Ted was usually able to lure the intended victim to his car by asking them for assistance. He was always polite and friendly and sometimes wore his arm in a sling to appear as a harmless, well-bred young man simply in need of help. At other times he was known to lurk in dark shadows and attack women who were alone. An early victim was abducted from her basement apartment where she was sleeping (p. 165). ”

The appearance of this type of information again and again makes it clear that the best classification of the methods killers use to obtain victims is probably: “Seduction,” “Abduction,” and “Sudden Attack” (shown in Table 35, “Classification of Methods of Obtaining Victims,” in [Ritter, 1988](#), p. 316). One of the major findings regarding the methods was that 24 of the 27 murderers studied — almost 90 percent — were able to obtain some or all of their victims through some form of seduction. This finding indicates that the murderers' personality is a more critical factor than, for instance, the vulnerability of the victim, a popular but weak supposition.

A seduced victim is one who is not forced into being with the killer, but rather, a person who, having seen the killer, goes voluntarily. Seduction covers a fairly wide range of interactions, from the hitchhiker who enters the car to the woman who is wooed, swindled and murdered.

Abduction refers to the kidnapping, or otherwise forcing of a victim against her will, to go where she does not wish to go, with someone with whom she does not wish to be. Interactions were not classified as abductions unless force was used from the moment of initial contact. Abductions were relatively infrequent among the interactions studied: two subjects used abduction, but not as a primary method, and abduction may have occurred with some of the victims in three additional cases.

Sudden attack is the hurting or killing of a stranger, acquaintance or family member, usually without any warning and often from behind. Fifteen of the 27 murderers used sudden attack to obtain their victims, but in only 3 cases (Berkowitz, Williams Heirens and Charles Manson) was this method used exclusively. (In Table 35 of my dissertation, mentioned previously, the 27 names of the killers appear in a list, vertically, after which an "X" appears under one or more of the three categories: seduction, abduction or sudden attack. In a second table, Table 34, "Method of Obtaining the Victims," the name of each killer appears beside the specific methods used to obtain his victims, as well as a classification of his pattern as one of: consistent, changing, or too diverse to be considered a pattern.)

An additional finding that emerged from my study of how murderers obtained their victims was the lack of any evidence pertaining to any of the subjects, or to their individual murders, that substantiated the idea that victims were stalked. It is certainly possible that a given murderer stalked a given victim, but there is no solid evidence of this. Also, the relative absence of previous links between offenders and victims, together with the methods used to obtain victims, supported the notion of random murders, and did not support the notion of stalking.

*Note: Almost ten years after the publication of the author's doctoral dissertation (Ritter, 1988), at what is now the same university (Alliant), Stefanie Petrucci's (1997) Master's thesis was published. In Victim-acquisition Techniques of Serial Sexual Killers, chaired by **Eric Hickey**, Petrucci states that she is the first to study how serial murderers obtain their victims. This surprising announcement was followed by this coincidental finding — that there are three types of methods killers use: "luring," "abducting," and "attacking," or a combination of the three. In keeping with profiling based on Freudian-like theory, in contrast to this author's work, Petrucci found that killers act consistently throughout their crimes. Walking a fine line between Ritter's research and Hickey's career interests in stalking, Petrucci puts aside the obvious issue of whether or not physical stalking was found. She focuses instead on the killers' supposed involvement in psychological stalking — a form of stalking that exists only in the killer's mind. And, perhaps, only in those of the student and the mentor.*

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- **The crimes of serial killers: Motives, continued (Part 13)**
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- **The crimes of serial killers: Link between murderers and victims (Part 11)**



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