

# Is Serial Homicide Really Increasing?

Louis B. Schlesinger, PhD

Close examination of the available crime data reveals little scientific support for the widely held belief that serial homicide is frequent and increasing. The author argues that the dramatic changes in homicide clearance rates, incidence of murders with unknown motives, and victim gender data point to a likely increase, not in serial murder, but in contract murder. This type of killing appears to be having a significant impact on society; yet there has been a complete absence of forensic psychiatric study of this crime, a circumstance that needs to change.

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There is no universally accepted definition of serial homicide in all its particulars,<sup>1-3</sup> and U.S. crime statistics are not kept on the number of serial murders and murderers. Several researchers have, nevertheless, provided estimates of its incidence. For example, Holmes and DeBurger<sup>4</sup> believe that 100 serial murderers are operative at any given time, whereas Wilson<sup>5</sup> cites a recent (nonofficial) Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) estimate of between 300 and 500 such offenders. Hickey<sup>6</sup> estimates that as many as 4,000 to 5,000 U.S. residents are the victims of serial killers each year.

The media, and even some scientific publications, have sensationalized coverage of this topic. They use terms such as "epidemic"<sup>7</sup> and imply that serial murder is a recent American phenomenon that is suddenly increasing. Norris,<sup>8</sup> for example, states that the number of serial murders has been increasing since 1960. He believes that the United States has produced 75 percent of the world's serial murderers, and he fears that "as the influence of American culture spreads to the less developed countries. . . the disease of serial murder will spread as well" (Ref. 8, p 19). Lowenstein<sup>9</sup> postulates a 270-percent increase in the number of serial murders from 1982 through 1989 (compared with a 12% increase in the overall homicide rate for the same time period), whereas Leyton<sup>10</sup> finds that from 1970 through 1985 there has been a 400-percent increase in this crime. More recently,

Godwin and Canter have noted a "distinct increase in serial killings, even after taking better reporting methods into account" (Ref. 11, p 24).

## Suspected Increase Based on Two Findings

Ressler *et al.*<sup>12</sup> also argue that serial homicide is increasing. After studying the FBI Uniform Crime Reports, they based their reasoning on two findings: the dramatic decrease in the clearance (arrest) rate for homicide over the past 40 years and the concomitant dramatic increase in the number of murders with unknown motives. During this period, crime-solving techniques have become more sophisticated, and the number of police officers per capita has increased<sup>13</sup>; therefore, one would expect the clearance rates to increase or, at the very least, stay the same. Nevertheless, in 1960, 93.1 percent of homicides were cleared by law enforcement, but that figure declined to 86 percent in 1970. The decline continued to 72 percent in 1980, 67 percent in 1990, and 69 percent in 1998. Because the majority of murderers kill someone to whom they are closely connected,<sup>14</sup> homicide has always had the highest clearance rate relative to other violent crimes. However, serial killers can be much harder to apprehend, because they frequently kill strangers<sup>4,12,15-17</sup> and are often geographically mobile.<sup>4,18,19</sup> Thus, Ressler *et al.*<sup>12</sup> concluded, the declining homicide clearance rates demonstrate an increase in serial murders.

Homicides with unknown motives (i.e., the motivation for the murder is uncertain and does not fit

Dr. Schlesinger is Associate Professor of Psychology at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, City University of New York. Address correspondence to: Louis B. Schlesinger, PhD, 12 Tower Drive, Maplewood, NJ 07040-1008.

into any of the categories used by the Uniform Crime Reports) have increased significantly for several decades. In 1976, 8.5 percent of murders were committed for unknown motives; in 1981 this figure increased to 17.8 percent, in 1984 to 22.1 percent, and in 1986 to 22.5 percent. In 1990 and 1998, the number of murders committed for unknown motives increased to 38 percent. The researchers cited rely on the following logic: The number of crimes in the "unknown-motive" category has increased. Serial killings often appear to be motiveless (and therefore are placed in this category). Therefore, the number of serial homicides has increased.

### Another Look at the Data

Although the cited crime statistics are noteworthy, they may not necessarily point to an increase in serial homicide. While clearance rates for homicide have declined markedly (for a number of possible reasons, such as greater sophistication and mobility of perpetrators), so have the clearance rates for other violent crimes, according to the Uniform Crime Reports. For example, 72.6 percent of rapes were cleared in 1960, whereas 50 percent were cleared in 1998, reflecting a 22-percent decrease in the clearance rate for sexual assault. The clearance rate for (nonsexual) assault has also decreased just under 20 percent: 78.7 percent in 1960 to 59 percent in 1998. On the other hand, the clearance rate for larceny-theft has stayed about the same (20.8% in 1960; 19% in 1998) during this period. Thus, the conclusion that declining clearance rates for homicide indicate an increase in serial homicide (while the clearance rates for other violent crimes has also decreased) is not warranted on the basis of these data alone.

Moreover, a close examination of crime victim data does not support an increase in serial homicides. If serial homicides were actually increasing, we would expect to see a proportionate increase in the number of female murder victims, because serial murderers are overwhelmingly men who kill women.<sup>12,16,19,20-22</sup> This, however, is not the case: the overall percentage of female homicide victims has actually decreased, from 33 percent in 1960 to 23 percent in 1980 and 24 percent in 1998. In addition, as Zahn and Sagi<sup>23</sup> have demonstrated, the victims in homicides committed by strangers are overwhelmingly (85% to 92%) male. This finding is significant because serial killers, who mainly target females, also are usually strangers to their victims. If the victims in

"stranger homicides" are predominantly males, the purported increase in serial homicides is called into question. Thus, the crime victim gender data, as well as the declining clearance rates for nonhomicidal violent crimes, do not support the contention that serial homicide is increasing.

### An Alternative Explanation: Contract Murder Could Be Increasing

What else might account for the decrease in homicide clearance rates and the increase in murders with unknown motives? Rather than reflecting an increase in serial homicide—which seems unlikely, especially given that there has been no increase in female victims—the same data might point to an increase in another poorly understood type of homicide: contract murder (taking the life of a stranger for profit). Because contract murderers always kill strangers<sup>24</sup> and they are usually geographically mobile, such murders often remain unsolved<sup>25,26</sup> and many even go undetected.<sup>27</sup> In addition, a majority of the victims of contract killings seem to be male,<sup>28</sup> a finding consistent with the victim gender data.

There is even some anecdotal evidence that suggests a possible increase in contract murder. One report<sup>29</sup> cites a crime analyst who tracked more than 1,000 cases of contract murder from 1988 through 1995. This report also points out that several states, having found an increase in contract murder, have tightened laws and have even used undercover agents in an attempt to unmask such plots. An increase in contract murder has also been reported in the United Kingdom,<sup>30</sup> beginning around 1960, as well as in Russia<sup>31</sup> over the past few years.

### Discussion

The impact of serial homicide reaches not only the victims and their immediate and extended families, but the community and even the entire country, in highly publicized cases. Excessive media attention can leave an impression that the crime is frequent and increasing; however, a close examination of the available crime data suggests that there is little scientific support for such a conclusion. In fact, Stote and Standing<sup>32</sup> recently studied press reports of suspected cases of serial homicide and found no actual increase in the crime. Thus, Liebert's belief that "the excitement generated. . . upon identification [of a

serial murder] far exceeds its morbidity and mortality risks" (Ref. 33, p 188) appears to be accurate.

Serial homicide has been reported since premodern times, always as an extremely rare occurrence.<sup>34</sup> In fact, Dietz<sup>35</sup> has attributed the relative dearth of scientific study of serial murder to its extremely low base rate, which does not permit ordinary behavioral science research methods to be easily employed. Serial homicide undoubtedly has a complex etiology, with a likely biopsychosocial base.<sup>21,34,36,37</sup> Those who believe that the offense is increasing offer no clear reason(s) for such an increase, beyond referring to nonspecific sociogenic factors, such as changing U.S. culture.<sup>4,38</sup> Thus, it is hard to understand, on theoretical grounds alone, why serial homicide would be increasing.

Contract murder, unlike serial murder, is largely a result of a value system shaped by general environmental influences as well as specific sub-cultural standards.<sup>28,39</sup> Social changes over the past 40 years, particularly the increase in drug use and related criminal activity, could, at least in principle, account for a possible increase in contract murder. Yet, despite its apparent frequency and possible increase, there is an almost complete absence of forensic psychiatric study of this type of killing. In fact, several investigators<sup>25,27,40</sup> have concluded that a thorough psychiatric evaluation of a professional hit man has not yet been reported. Thus, it is not surprising that contract murder would not even be considered as a likely explanation for the crime statistics noted herein.

The enormous difficulties in interpreting crime data<sup>41</sup> are amplified with serial and contract murder, because national crime statistics are not kept on these offenses. Indirect data sources, with their inherent problems, must therefore be used in order to hope to understand these criminal acts. With such an approach, it is inevitable that questions will linger, such as the puzzling decline in clearance rates for nonhomicidal violent crime. Nevertheless, at this point, an analysis of the available information leads to three conclusions: (1) There is no real evidence that serial homicide is increasing. (2) Contract murder may be increasing and could explain some of the striking changes in the homicide rates over the past 40 years. (3) There must be a concerted effort made to study contract murder, an offense that we know little about but

that appears to be having a significant impact on society.

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