



# **Serial Offenders**

**Theory and Practice**

**Kevin Borgeson**  
**Kristen Kuehnle**  
Editors

# Serial Offenders

## Theory and Practice

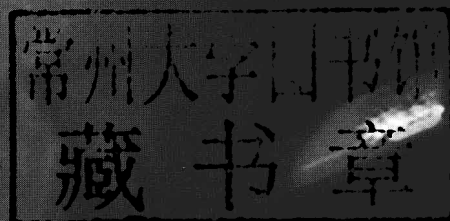
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# Preface

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OVER THE YEARS THE EDITORS have taught classes on violent offenders and used several texts. Teaching a class on serial offenders involved the process of gathering information from various sources and then integrating the materials into a comprehensive manner. Most of the research, though, has focused on serial murder. By omitting other types of serial offenders, students were limited in their understanding of the array of serial offenders. This means that the importance of other types of violent serial offenders has been overlooked.

The book provides an understanding of the different types of offenders while bringing up investigative issues surrounding these elusive offenders. The book specifically looks at murder, rape, cyber pedophiles, arson, multi-murder, and sex offenders. While other types of offenders could have been used, the editors felt that these offenders are the most complex to understand and investigate. The book explores several investigative issues: profiling, case linkage analysis, task force, and (the most overlooked) the victims.

We set out to produce a volume that is academically rigorous, grounded in research and theory, as well as accessible to the general public. It is our hope that this book will raise the public's awareness and concern about serial offenders, fostering a growing body of research about these offenders and stimulate efforts in understanding and investigating their actions.

# Acknowledgments ---

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## CHAPTER 1

# Introduction: Why Study Serial Crime?

*Kevin Borgeson and Kristen Kuehnle*

Understanding motivation and behaviors of offenders, particularly serial offenders, is critical to apprehending and convicting an offender. Practitioners in law enforcement continually seek patterns in their investigation and often look to researchers who present typologies from their studies of convicted offenders. These typologies appear to simplify the process, which is reinforced when the media portray these techniques in solving a crime within 45 minutes. Presently, we have consumers who feel competent to be experts on a jury, whether in the United States or elsewhere (as in Italy with the Amanda Knox case), based on their avid following of television shows such as *CSI* and *Law and Order*, or films such as *Dead Man Walking*, to name a few. How did we arrive at this perceived level of expertise? What drove the development of these typologies? Do other aspects need to be considered in the typology? And how have others developed typologies? These are questions that this book considers. A starting point is to answer the question, “Why study serial crime?”

## WHY STUDY SERIAL CRIME?

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Over the past 2 decades, Western society has become fascinated with serial murder. Although the media have presented this as a new phenomenon, in reality, it is not. According to one media source:

*The phenomenon of serial murder can be found throughout history and around the world, the most famous case being Jack the Ripper in England of the 1800s. But the 1800s brought a new and intensified spotlight on serial murder, inspired by the media, popular culture, and the political agenda of law enforcement agencies and certain advocate groups. (USA Today Magazine cited in Jenkins, 1994, p. 7)*

Although interest in serial homicide has existed for over 150 years, interest has increased since the early 1980s, exploding in the 1990s. Part of this explosion was a direct result of the overestimation in the late 1980s by professionals that there were over 5000 serial killers at large in the United States (Hickey, 2002, p. 2). Erick Hickey, who has compiled the largest data set on serial killers from 1800 to 1995, points out that from 1920 through 1989 there were a total of 67 films dealing with the theme of serial killers. In the 10-year period from 1990 to 1999, the film industry produced a total of 117 serial killer films (2002, p. 3).<sup>1</sup>

Networks, including CBS, NBC, ABC, and Fox, as well as the movie industry, have cashed in on the serial killer phenomenon. Serial murder became a staple on such shows as *The X-Files*, *CSI*, *Millennium*, and *Profiler*, and in Hollywood films such as *The Glimmer Man*, *The Silence of the Lambs*, *Manhunter*, and *The Bone Collector*. Although these programs are made for entertainment, they play a significant role in distorting the normalcy of serial offenders to the consuming public. Those who are saturated with media exposure of murder have problems differentiating fact from fiction, overestimating the number of killers in society, the number of such homicides, and the number of victims they are responsible for. As stated by one authority:

*People's enthrallment with serial killers represents a way of dealing with crime. Crime is boiled down to a single human face, representing the most frightening evil. Actually, it's easier to deal with emotionally than the faceless random crime of muggings and shootings. (USA Today Magazine cited in Jenkins, 1994, p. 7)*

While it may or may not be true that this “enthrallment” has desirable social effects, some effects are clearly undesirable. The overdramatization of murders, murderers,

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<sup>1</sup> Collective behavior literature refers to such overemphasis on a subject, and the general population's need for information on the subject, as a moral panic.

and their apprehension clearly distort the facts. People are led to believe that serial killers are different from the rest of us, that they possess identifiable characteristics that can be readily identified—e.g., they look different, they act different, and they are different. Such a construct has negative effects during investigations of serial killers. For instance, during the Maryland Sniper crimes of October 2002, the general public believed the police would eventually capture the sniper; however, a palpable sense of anxiousness developed around the perceived slowness in identifying and apprehending the perpetrators. Part of the anxiousness stemmed from the familiar media portrayal of a “typical” investigation process and viewers’ acceptance that media depictions are accurate. In movies or on television, law enforcement officials readily identify culprits and bring them to justice. Anxiety around such things as catching serial killers, in movies, is supposed to only last an hour or two. As a result, the public is conditioned to expect such a time frame for catching a real-world serial killer, not the 21 days that it took to apprehend the Maryland Snipers.

The media construct of a serial killer as a monster of heroic proportion is designed to sell a product—a movie or television show. Today’s serial offender has replaced the werewolf and Frankenstein as the modern boogeyman (Fox & Levin, 2001). This is part of the reason why the audiences for these depictions are growing; drama is enhanced by suspense and fear. Additionally, the simplistic view of the world as a division between good and evil is gaining in legitimacy. Showing the existing faces of evil to all who are willing to watch reinforces the perception that there is clearly and easily identified evil in the world.

Public fascination does not end with serial murder. Over the last decade, it has been extended to mass killings, such as school shootings (which will be discussed later). One possible explanation for the public’s fascination with serial murder and mass killings could be 20th century geopolitics, which have made death an increasingly public and, therefore, publicized feature of life itself. The images necessary for producing a sense of drama and moral significance are increasingly becoming images of death and the battle of the righteous against those who stand against humanity. This trend may help us to understand why, over the years, slasher films have become so popular. Films such as *Friday the 13th* and *Halloween* are box office smashes because they fulfill society’s fascination with death and evil. While some may believe that such films are merely entertainment, others disagree. For example, Grossman’s work argues that there is more harm than good done by these films. He believes that the techniques used to create such scenarios resemble techniques used by government to desensitize assassins during war. Grossman speculates that desensitization begins subtly:

*It begins innocently with cartoons and then goes on to the countless thousands of acts of violence depicted on TV as the child grows up and the scramble of ratings steadily*



*raises the threshold of violence on TV. As children reach a certain age, they then begin to watch movies with a degree of violence sufficient to receive a PG-13 rating due to the brief glimpses of spurting blood, a hacked-off limb, or bullet wounds. The parents, through neglect or conscious decision, begin to permit the child to watch movies rated R due to vivid depictions of knives penetrating and protruding from bodies, long shots of blood spurting from severed limbs, and bullets ripping into bodies and exploding out the back in showers of blood and brains.*

*Finally our society says that young adolescents, at the age of 17, can legally watch these R-rated movies (although most are well experienced with them by then), and at 18 they can watch movies rated even higher than R. These are films in which eye gouging is often the least of the offenses that are vividly depicted. And thus, at that malleable age of 17 and 18, the age at which armies have traditionally begun to indoctrinate the soldier into the business of killing, American youth, systematically desensitized from childhood, takes another step in the indoctrination into the cult of violence. (1996, pp. 308–309).*

Grossman concludes:

*[With this] classical conditioning process, adolescents in movie theaters across the nation, and watching television at home, are seeing the detailed, horrible suffering and killing of human beings, and they are learning to associate killing and suffering with entertainment, pleasure, their favorite soft drink, their favorite candy bar, and the close intimate contact of their date. (1996, p. 302)*

While Grossman's speculations may be extreme, he is not alone in his opinion. Fox and Levin (2001) point out that this "selling of evil" is damaging to youth, saying, "The lesson for youngsters may be: Behave yourself and adults won't notice; go on a rampage at school, and you become a big-shot superstar." Whatever research ultimately proves, it is widely believed that the celebration of serial killers and pervasive representations of violence are problematic. It is interesting to note that "serial killer web sites" rank order offenders by the number of people they have killed. In this way, murderers who have the highest body count are afforded the highest status, while those having lower body counts are afforded lesser status. Fitting murders into the more general template of status associated with celebrity and heroism may well account for desensitization toward the effects that go beyond the moral pale. Any study of serial crime needs, first of all, to sift out what is factual from what is false. Researchers also need to explore the possibility that the same conditions that produce the public's enthusiasm for viewing violence also produce a serial criminal's motivation for violence. Research may help reduce the public's fear and allow people to be more rational about their vulnerability to atrocious violence.