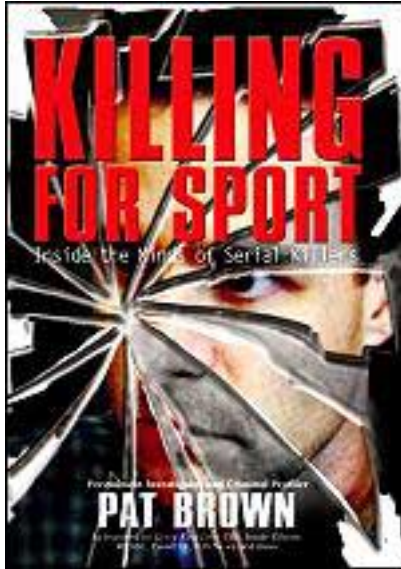


Serial Killer Myths Exposed

By Pat Brown

The real serial killer

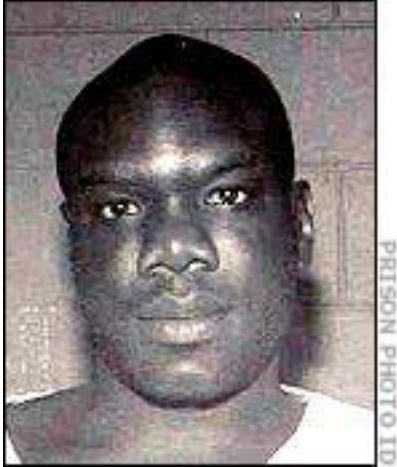
Serial killers are everywhere! Well, perhaps not in *our* neighborhood, but on our television screens, at the movie theatres, and in rows and rows of books at our local Borders or Barnes and Noble Booksellers. Everything we would like to know about how serial killers commit their crimes and how the cops catch these predators is detailed by profilers, ex-FBI men, true crime writers, and psychologists; we learn everything but the truth. While we are being fascinated by the tales of famous serial killers and how they were brought to justice, the real serial killer goes about his business with hardly a thought to being caught. Why? Because serial killers know they can get away with murder and most of the time we don't even know they are out there. Even when some of them do get caught, we may not recognize what they are because they don't match the distorted image we have of serial killers



Killing for Sport: Inside the Minds of Serial Killers

When I wrote the book, *Killing for Sport: Inside the Minds of Serial Killers*, I wanted to correct beliefs that have become ingrained in our minds as "common knowledge." I knew I would upset many of the experts in the field because I would dare to challenge the "truths" that years of research and study have developed in the field of serial killer expertise. So be it. In order to catch serial killers, we need to know exactly what we are dealing with.

Here are 10 of the myths that we all could do without.



Bobby Joe Leonard

Let me introduce you to Bobby Joe Leonard, a serial killer now serving a life sentence in Virginia. Never heard of him? Hmm, could be there are no books written about him. Most likely he isn't all that interesting; for that matter, some would say he isn't even a serial killer because he was only sentenced for kidnapping, rape, and attempted homicide. If you read the few newspaper stories about him, you will only hear about this one crime and it wasn't even a murder. The accepted definition of a serial killer is a person who kills at least three times with a cooling off period in between his murders. So, Bobby is not really a serial killer, I guess. Like heck he isn't! He is a major suspect in the murder of a woman killed in her Virginia apartment the previous year and had this later victim not survived his assault on her, he would have well been on his way to victim number three.



Ballou High School victim, Charmeka

Bobby Joe Leonard's victim, a 13-year-old girl I will call Janie, probably hadn't heard about any serial killer in her city. While it was true that just some time back two schoolgirls were found strangled near Ballou High School in Washington, D.C., the police never said a serial killer had anything to do with that and that woman who was murdered in her apartment in Virginia was supposed to have been killed by her boyfriend. The police even stated that the community had nothing to fear; there was no predator on the loose. Then there were some other homicides over the past few years, but she couldn't even remember the stories. Well, she *did* know about Chandra Levy because her disappearance had been on the news almost every night, but she didn't recall what happened to Joyce Chiang, Christine Mirzayan, Nia Owens, Margaret Perkins, Valerie Lalmansingh, Julie Ferguson, Dana Chisholm and whoever else there was. She guessed those murders were solved.



Chandra Levy, Joyce Chiang, Christine Mirzayan, Nia Owens, Margaret Perkins

Police are reluctant to label a murder as a possible serial homicide. Telling the community a serial killer is out there stirs up a lot of unpleasant attention. The bad publicity kills tourism, and citizens start asking police what they are doing about catching this creep terrorizing their neighborhood. Besides, if one follows the "gotta have killed three" requirement, unless there are at least those three and there is DNA matching the murders or the bodies are all dumped in the same place, the police aren't going to say there is a serial killer involved.

There is also the problem of determining the motive of the murderer.

Suppose a girl is found strangled in the bushes but she is fully clothed: was it a drug deal gone bad or an angry boyfriend? Or is this really a serial killer who didn't rape the victim? Or how about a body found in a field one year after she disappeared? There may be little evidence to determine what actually occurred in the crime. We also have to deal with people who have just gone missing. They may be buried in a forest, at the bottom of a lake, or under that new cement slab the man at the end of the block just laid down.

Without solid connections between homicides, we may have the reverse problem of believing three local murders are the work of one serial killer when they may actually be the work of three! We may just not know that there are yet other homicides connected to each one of the serial killers.

Many of the less prolific killers' stories go unheard because they simply don't make good books. Most well-known serial killers have victims numbering in the dozens, have sent taunting letters to the police or have done bizarre things to the bodies. The average serial killer will be ignored because he isn't "cool" enough or he simply didn't get convicted of enough murders to be considered a serial killer. Of course, it is also possible you will never hear about them because they never got caught.

Janie needs a place to stay because her boyfriend just ended up in jail and she has no place to go. She calls one of her co-workers, Bobby Joe Leonard, and asks if she can stay at his place. She isn't too worried about staying there because he lives with his girlfriend and kids. It never even occurs to her that he could be a dangerous predator. Serial killers aren't people you know; they are strangers who live alone or with their mothers, aren't they?

There are two kinds of serial killers as far as the victim is concerned: the kind that you don't see before they pounce on you and the kind you see and don't expect to pounce on you. Both kinds can be either someone you know or a stranger. There are those who simply hide behind a tree in the park and grab the first lone victim to come along and there are those who watch the houses on a street to see which woman lives alone with her cat. Then there are also those you chat with on the bus, or see every day at work, or perhaps he is the security guard you ask to walk you to your car (for the last time).

We assume people we know can't be serial killers. We think we would know if that guy in our church was a serial killer. Unfortunately, there really is no way of knowing. We can know that he is weird, know that he makes us uncomfortable and maybe even think that he is a psychopath. But, even knowing all that does not mean he is a serial killer. Most of the time we don't even give weirdoes that much thought.

Many times we believe that if we are working with the guy he must have passed a background check to get his job. Few people realize that almost no place actually does any kind of real background check. Those "references" we are required to give are always people who will say kind things about us. Some serial killers who can't find anyone to say nice things about them just make up a bunch of phony names and phone numbers. They know that few employers will waste their time making the calls. As one jaded manager of a mail room told me, "When everyone who applies for the job is pond scum, it is a waste of time to get references." Doing a real background check is next to impossible. Few agencies can afford to do any real investigation. Unless the employer is a federal or state agency using FBI or NCIC records, private investigators charging high hourly rates

will have to go to the local courthouse and try to find the applicant's criminal record. Some states have computerized information that pulls all the records from each county but other states actually require the investigator to go to each and every courthouse in the state to gather the information! If that isn't enough work, if the company wants a national background check, an investigator would have to repeat the effort in every state in the country to be absolutely sure the applicant had no record anywhere. Of course, we are seeing simpler methods now through Internet investigative services but the costs are clearly too high for a company to spend on every applicant.

Often, a serial killer has no felony record. So just because he is an armed guard and passed a rigorous background check doesn't mean he isn't a dangerous criminal.

How is it that serial killers can get away with killing people they know? The same way they get away with killing people they don't know. They make sure no one sees them together at the time of the crime. The man you work with stops by your house one night after dark and you let him in because you know him. When they find your body the next day, no one has a clue that your co-worker had dropped by. The security guard who walks you to your car has no worries if no one else sees you leave together. Or if there is someone who does see you leave together, all he has to say is, "I walked her to her car and she was fine when I left her there."

Bobbie Joe Leonard starts to hatch his plan after Janie comes to spend the night. Because he sometimes gives her a ride to work at the temp agency, he decides to tell her they have work early in the morning. He wakes her up and tells her they need to get on the road. They drive away toward the work site. However, when they arrive at the location (where they clean apartment buildings after they are constructed), no one is around. Janie thinks it is

odd but Bobby just tells her they will be there soon. He suggests they go smoke some pot in the building and although Janie really doesn't feel like it, she does what he wants. They enter the empty building, and Bobby begins his assault on her.

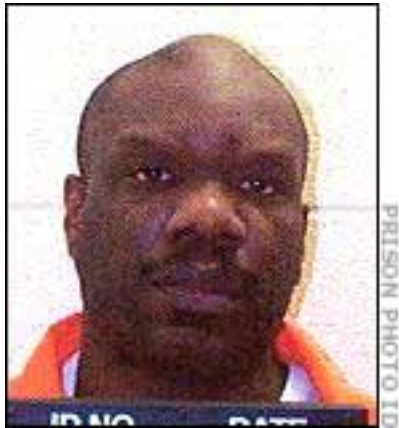
How is Bobby going to explain what happened to Janie when she doesn't show up with him at work and later when she turns up dead? After all, didn't they leave together in his car? Bobby isn't worried. He will tell police he dropped her off at the motel where she was staying before; that she changed her mind and was going to meet some people she knew. If the police don't find evidence at the scene of the crime, they will never be able to prove Bobby was involved.

The killer always leaves evidence at the scene

Don't we wish! There is a theory called Locard's Principle of Exchange which states when a crime is committed the killer will always leave some evidence at the scene and take some evidence away with him. The operative word here is "theory". In theory, this is exactly what happens, at least on the microscopic level. Without this theory, all those crime shows with their fantastic forensics wouldn't be able to go into their second and third seasons. There is always some DNA, some fiber, some spore from a plant, some tire tread, some tool mark...something...to link the murder to the bad guy. When that is accomplished, the happy district attorney goes to court and presents an airtight case and justice triumphs.

Then there is the real world. The world where the fingerprints found belong to everyone but the killer (including the cops, the emergency medical team and the mayor), the DNA is too minimal to test, and when the firefighters came in to put out the fire used to cover up the murder, they drowned every

shred of evidence under a foot of water. In reality, those rare few cases with good forensic evidence are the ones that make it to court. Prosecutors hate to lose their cases and ruin their reputations. They make darn sure they have a slam dunk case before they hit the courtroom doors. The rest of the cases aren't prosecuted even though we know who committed the crimes. The killer stays out on the street and his name falls through the cracks and by the time he commits his next crime one county over, the police department in that jurisdiction will have no clue as to who he is.



Bobby Joe Leonard, 2001

Bobby Joe Leonard has rarely been outside prison his entire adult life. His felonies cover pretty much every crime. By the time he chooses to commit murder, he has seen enough crime shows in prison to learn about the bad habit of leaving evidence. He brings along a condom with which to commit the rape. He also knows his victim. She is afraid of him and he knows she will not fight him. This means he doesn't have to explain scratches on his face or a bite mark on his arm. After he rapes his victim, he allows her to put her clothes back on. She thinks it is so they can leave but his real

reason is to cover up the act of rape. When they find her body, the medical examiner may not be able to prove there was a sexual assault.



A crime scene, police in woods

Evidence can vary depending on the circumstances, the weather, and how long it has been hanging around. Evidence left out in the woods is likely to be useless. The same goes for bodies that take a year to surface in the water. Other times the evidence is actually collected and stored, but because of human fallibility, "stuff" happens. The evidence locker may have caught on fire or someone simply threw away the evidence because he thought the case was closed. Evidence may become contaminated, as every defense attorney can attest. Evidence also degrades with time so that it becomes impossible to get much information from it.

To have a successful case in court these days, the prosecutor needs DNA linking the suspect to the victim; either his DNA on, in or around the victim, or the victim's DNA somewhere on the killer's clothes or in his domicile or

vehicle. Barring that strong evidence, a lot of trace evidence (those fibers, for example) need to be matched in numerous situations where the jury will see it would be impossible to believe the defendant didn't commit the crime. On rare occasions the defendant will be convicted by circumstantial evidence, but usually this is only successful if the jury really dislikes the defendant.

Bobby Joe Leonard strangles Janie with a sleeper hold. He places her in a closet so her body won't be seen immediately upon entering the building. He gets back in his car and goes to work. He is feeling pretty confident that nothing links him to the crime since no one saw him go into the building with her and he didn't leave any forensic evidence at the scene.

Serial killers are super clever



Hannibal Lecter

If this is true, how come Hannibal Lector got caught? Oh, yeah, because the police are even smarter! This scenario makes both the serial killers and the cops feel good about themselves. In reality, serial killers are of average intelligence. Clearly, they never really made use of their brains which explains why most have low level jobs and make poor decisions. In fact, it is exactly these poor decisions that get them in trouble on their jobs, in their relationships, and in their crimes.

Killers can seem smart when you can't figure out who they are. Actually, it is just the nature of these kinds of crimes which make the killer seem to be a brilliant opponent. First of all, since no one sees the killer commit the crime, there is no one to identify and put in a lineup. Most serial killers operate in cities and suburbs as opposed to small towns for a reason. If the town has fewer than 500 residents, after you lop off the female percentage of the population and then eliminate the kids and people in wheelchairs, the townspeople could probably point out weird Johnny as the guilty party. However, in the middle of Manhattan, the police pretty much just shrug their shoulders and hope for a lucky break.



Ted Bundy

My favorite choice for disproving the "serial killers are brilliant" concept is to take a look at Ted Bundy, America's most famous serial killer. It is said how terribly smart he was; that this is why it took so long to catch him. Is this the same Ted who couldn't make it through law school, who drove a GOLD Volkswagen to the lake in broad daylight and went up to women he was planning to kidnap saying, "Hi! My name is TED!?" Is this the same brilliant guy who nearly strangled his girlfriend who then found in his bureau drawer the plaster of Paris he used for fake casts in some of his abduction ruses? This same girlfriend and a couple of other people who knew him went to the police with their suspicions. The police ignored the information because he didn't seem the type. I think the movie "Dumb and Dumber" comes to mind for the killer and cops involved here. Ted was finally caught, not by clever investigative work but because he was caught speeding. He was so bright that he lied to the police officer about seeing a movie the cop knew didn't exist and then he let the police officer look into his trunk and note his rather obvious rape kit. Ted was by no means brilliant and it was the solid work of a beat cop that got a killer off the streets.

Bobbie Joe Leonard was clearly also a few numerals short of a Mensa

invitation. Although he thinks his story about dropping the girl off at the motel was pretty good and that no one could actually prove he was with her at the time of the crime, it is rather curious that her body shows up in one of the buildings they work at, some 20 miles from that motel. I guess he could say she must have changed her mind and gotten a ride over to the work location but that is a bit of a stretch. Of course, he is still assuming that the prosecutor will not go to court without DNA evidence, so even if it is an odd coincidence that she got murdered after he dropped her off, there is still no absolute proof that he is guilty of any crime.

Serial killers are caught though DNA banks, profiles, and brilliant police deduction

While there are many wonderful police investigators out there doing some very fine work, the majority of the time it is not brains that catches serial killers. Usually it is just dumb luck. Ted was speeding. One Alabama serial killer I was investigating was doing just fine until he took a girl out to the woods to kill her. His car got stuck in the mud and he had to call a friend for a tow.



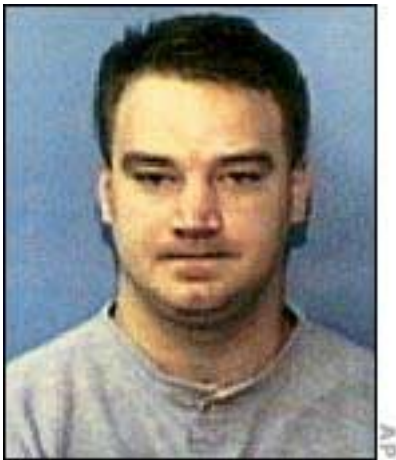
Technician working with DNA evidence

DNA banks only work if you have DNA. Then you have to match that DNA to someone. Either that someone must also be in a bank, like a felon DNA bank, or that person must already be a suspect and agree to the testing. If everyone in the United States were required to have DNA on record, this would work great. However, because of privacy issues, I don't think this is a methodology we will be able to depend on any time in the near future.

Profiles are the stuff television shows are made of. Profilers have become half psychic/half deductive beings that come up with the most amazing things to narrow down the leads. I wish I had the ability to tell that the killer has a stutter from just looking at the crime scene. Most real world profiles as they have been done in the past merely use inductive reasoning to give probabilities based on prior research in the field. Not only is this rather useless for a particular crime, but the conclusions are based on killers who were caught and clearly don't take into account the type that doesn't make those same mistakes. In other words, to base a profile on guesswork instead of crime scene analysis is of questionable benefit.

Brilliant police deduction rarely comes into play in the actual capture of

serial killers. This is not to say it does not occur but it isn't like the movies in that "the puzzle" is not solved by the likes of Sherlock Holmes. However, there are police detectives and profilers that make good use of crime scene analysis, crime scene reconstruction, and behavioral analysis to determine what happened at the crime scene, what the motive might be, and what particulars one should look for when investigating and interviewing. Perhaps if these techniques were used more often, we might see a higher rate of capture. Unfortunately, for police departments to do this level of work, there is a need for special training, proper funding, and enough manpower to spare the time. In a department that is understaffed, struggling financially, and seeing a homicide a day dumped into their workload, the ability to put such an effort forth may be near impossible.



Charles McCoy, Jr.

Outside of dumb luck, the number one way serial killers are caught is through the help of the public. The Columbus Ohio Shooter who stood on bridges and shot at cars was arrested after a tipster called the police with

suspicions that Charles McCoy, Jr. might be the guilty party. Getting out information to the public is the best way for police to identify suspects. After all, the police investigators can hardly know everyone in town but everyone in town is known by someone. If that someone gets enough information to send up red flags about the behavior of a friend, relative, or neighbor, then the suspect may be hand delivered straight to the police, saving them a whole lot of time and saving the lives of innocent people.

Bobby Joe Leonard got caught by dumb luck and a dumb answer. After he strangled Janie, he left the premises and went merrily on his way. But he didn't strangle her well enough because she didn't die. She regained consciousness and staggered to a nearby office where she called the police. She described to them what had happened and the police detective had her write it down on paper. When the detective brought Bobby in for questioning, he showed him the paper. When he told him Janie had written down what had happened, Bobby exclaimed, "That's impossible! She's dead!"

Realizing that this brilliant statement got him arrested and tried for kidnapping, rape, and attempted murder, Bobby Joe Leonard went on to represent himself at trial and managed to get himself a verdict of guilty on all charges and a life sentence plus 30 years. Way to go, Bobby!

The victims of a serial killer all look alike

This myth no doubt materialized when neighborhoods were not interracial or multicultural. Since serial killers tend to kill just around the corner from where they live or where they work, the victims are just local folks. The

most important issue for the killer is the ability to get a victim easily and successfully. He will therefore choose a place he will blend in well and not be noticed lurking around the community. If the area is mostly Irish, for example, the victims of serial killers would probably be of that group. If it is a Caucasian area, then the victims would most likely be white. Of course, if the serial killer broke into an apartment and found the one black woman in the area, he would probably not hesitate to add her to the victim list.

Nowadays, with much more racial and ethnic mixing, we are seeing serial killers murdering a variety of victims; whoever comes along will most likely do. One cannot stand around waiting all day and night for the perfect victim. This is not to say serial killers don't have a preference. Some will actually work pretty hard at getting their top choice; others just grab the first reasonable victim that comes along. Teenagers just starting out on serial killing often choose elderly women. It is not that they prefer them over young girls; it is just that they are home alone, theoretically easy to control, and live just down the block from Junior who has no driver's license yet.

The one noticeable similarity with almost all serial killer victims is their short height and low weight. "Five Foot Two, Eyes of Blue" should be the serial killer theme song. These small lightweight victims are easy to attack, easy to beat up, easy to carry or drag, easy to put in the trunk of a car, and easy to dispose of. Big victims are far too much work. Smallish men, smallish women, and children are easy for the killer to handle. This is one reason why the top choices for women serial killers are invalids and babies. All serial killers want to win. They choose victims they can kill successfully. Serial killing is not about sex at all, but about power and control and revenge on society. What is done to the victims is immaterial as long as they end up dead and the serial killer gets away with it. Winning is the

name of the game for these losers and victims are chosen for their vulnerability and usefulness.

Bobby Joe Leonard is an African American serial killer. His 13-year-old victim was also African American. They work together and live in close proximity. Janie is a runaway who had been living with her boyfriend in a local motel. When her boyfriend goes to jail, she becomes even more vulnerable. Bobby knows this. He knows she is young, alone, and much of society is not all that concerned about what happens to her. She is an excellent victim. At least she would have been if she hadn't survived. She turned out to be his worst enemy when in court he grilled her for hours and hours on the stand. Imagine such a young girl having to be questioned by the very man who raped and tried to kill her! Janie, however, turned out to be quite a strong young lady and when Bobby tried to get her to say he didn't really rape her, she looked him dead in the eye and said, "Yes, you did, Bobby, yes, you did!"



Andrea Cincotta

The woman Bobby Joe Leonard is suspected of murdering the year before was a 53-year old Caucasian woman. Andrea Cincotta was murdered in her condominium; she was also strangled and found in a closet. Bobby Joe had visited her home just a few weeks prior while doing work on the property. What would make her a possible choice of victim? Andrea was also a small woman. While she did not live alone, she was alone that day in the condo and most of the other residents were at work. She also had some money and jewelry around that might be an added incentive for a burglar/serial killer type. It is possible that the motive for the crime was actually a burglary and the killer did not expect the woman to be at home. Sometimes a budding serial killer will kill unexpectedly during a crime and when he finds he enjoys killing people, he may decide to add murder to his future criminal behavior.

Signature is the mark of a serial killer

I can count on one hand the number of signatures I have seen in the serial murders I have worked, and I think I am probably exaggerating. Signature is extremely rare, and the belief that it commonly exists confuses police investigators and makes for a lot of foolish assumptions.

What does signature mean? Supposedly these are the added touches that make the crime personal to the killer. I am not sure what exotic added touch the killer left at a crime scene where the woman was found strangled under a bush. Or drowned in a bathtub. Or buried in a national park. On occasion, a serial killer will want to horrify the police or public passing by

and will pose the body on the side of the road in some shocking position or do some other insult to the victim's body with cutting or writing or object insertion. Rarely do they leave notes, but, when they do it is their way of mocking society and law enforcement. Most of the time killers hit victims over the head, rape them, strangle them, and leave them wherever they drop. It usually happens very quickly. There are only a small percentage of serial killers who make the effort to imprison their victims and torture them. Women who kill their children, nurses who kill their patients, and shooters who randomly shoot their victims from afar don't employ any obvious personal touches when they kill. Signature is just some fancy way for nonserial killers to imagine how serial killers feel about their killing.

The kinds of signatures we see in the movies are always very clear. Each victim has something done to them. This helps in linking those cases to a particular serial killer in a way we almost never see in real life! Wouldn't it be nice if the French Fry killer stuffed french fries in every victim's mouth and the Smiley Face killer drew a smiley face on the victims' abdomens? This would be very useful. Unfortunately, it doesn't happen like that and because it really doesn't, profilers and psychologists will claim that signature is not that obvious but it is more of a feeling one gets at each of the crime scenes that signify one killer is at work. Signature is usually described after the serial killer is caught because no one knows what it is until after the homicides are analyzed. Confused? I am.

On rare occasion a serial killer will have a fetish that is mistakenly called a signature. Roger Kibbe, a serial killer active in the 1980s in northern California, liked to do what is called nonfunctional cutting of women's clothes. He was not "signing" his work; he was just enjoying himself in a way which turned him on. These fetishes can indeed be useful for linking

certain serial homicides, but I still wouldn't call them signatures. It is too bad so many serial killers are rather boring and don't have any outstanding oddities to make investigation easier.

What would Bobby Joe Leonard's signature be? I don't know. Maybe that he likes to put women in closets because that makes the crime personal to him. No, maybe that is just his MO, which includes the elements of the crime that are necessary to accomplish it. Did he put women in closets because it was his unique way of finalizing the crime? "Ta-da! Bobby Joe finishes his work and closes the door!" Signature? Or did he just think it was a good idea to hide the bodies and delay discovery, which would be part of his MO? This brings us to the next confusion.

You can link a serial killer to crimes by his MO

Method of operation (modus operandi/MO) has been another rather distressing concept in the investigation of serial killers. Perhaps when criminals commit other crimes they stay fairly consistent. For crimes you commit on a regular basis, say a couple times a week or maybe daily, it would be rather silly to reinvent your method of committing the crime each time you set out to do it again. If you found a good way to burgle a house, it makes sense to bring the same tools and repeat the previous steps.

Serial killers, however, don't kill very often. Really, they don't. Some wait years in between crimes and so when they do cross that line again they may fix something that didn't work last time or didn't feel right last time or didn't give enough of a thrill last time. A serial killer may decide to change from stabbing to strangling because last time he cut himself and he got too much blood in the car. He may decide he wants more time with the victim so he moves from an outside location to an inside location. He may decide

to tie up the victim this time because the last one was hard to handle and it really ticked him off.

Using MO to link crimes can be problematic. If the MO changes within a series of homicides, the murders may not be seen as linked and a serial killer may go unnoticed. Gary Taylor is one such serial killer whose MO was all over the map. He started his criminal career by hitting women over the head with a wrench at bus stops. Then he started shooting women with a rifle. Next he chased women with a machete. He went on to using a ruse to get women out of their apartments. He would call up the victim and claim there was a fire at her place of employment or an emergency of some sort and attack her when she was getting into her car. He also posed as an FBI agent at the door of one of his victims. Near the end of his killing career, he kidnapped two women, tied them up in the basement, shot them in the head, and buried them in the backyard. Then he stopped killing and went about the country raping but letting his victims live.

Clearly Taylor's MO changed as his needs to control the situation changed. If one took MO to be a way to link these homicides together, one would end up with five different killers! Likewise, if one assumes that the use of the same MO signifies one killer, then the investigator runs into the opposite problem. Since there are only so many ways to kill a person, a good portion of homicides look pretty much alike. One group will be a bunch of strangled victims and another group will be a bunch of stabbed victims. A smaller group will be a bunch of shot victims. I guess there are just three killers out there for the entire United States.

Bobby Joe Leonard strangled Janie. He put her body in a closet. If there had been a next time, he might have liked cutting someone's throat. He might not have needed to put the victim in a closet if he felt no one would

find the body for a long time anyway. It is difficult to know at this time if there actually were other victims in the past. Unless somehow he is linked to the proximity of another homicide or was an acquaintance of another murdered woman or DNA pops up to link him to another crime, we may never know for sure.

VICAP catches serial killers

The FBI has something called VICAP (Violent Criminal Apprehension Program). When a murder occurs, the police investigator fills out an ungodly long form with details of the crime scene. This form (if it is actually filled out and many times detectives don't bother) is sent to the FBI where all the data is added to a database. Somehow, the incredible mass of information with MO details and particulars (was the victim naked or not, was she tied up or not, etc.) is matched with other crimes and, lo and behold, crime linkage is accomplished.

Or at least some similar looking crimes are noted. With the number of serial murders and the difficulties with ever-changing MO and signatures and the added problem of unexpected occurrences at a crime scene (like the rape never happened because someone interrupted the killer or the normal five stabs turns into 50 because the victim mouthed off at him), how accurate can any of this be? While VICAP may be valuable in retrieving other useful law enforcement information, I have yet to understand how it works in making a major difference in identifying serial killer suspects.

It would be far more effective to have a suspect bank that would match suspects with victims through relatives, mutual friends and acquaintances, residences, work, hobbies, amusements, and travels. It would be nice if this

bank would detail any odd behaviors on the part of the suspect that would help identify him in another crime. It would be advantageous for a police department to know that one of the people they were interviewing was actually a suspect in two other homicides in two other jurisdictions. However, at present, this information is not shared, and the detective may simply let that suspect walk out of his office and cross him off the suspect list without even realizing another police department had already investigated him in connection with another homicide.

When Ray Biondi, one of the finest serial homicide investigators in the field to date, was investigating the serial murders of Roger Kibbe, wouldn't it have been helpful to be able to plug in "weird cutting up of clothes" and get a match to Roger Kibbe who was one of the persons of interest in the investigation? They did eventually find out that there were records of just this sort in an old juvenile case file from 30 years earlier in another jurisdiction. Tracking this kind of information could really make the difference in identifying suspects.

Let's say that Janie never woke up from her encounter with Bobby Joe Leonard. The police now bring Bobby in for questioning. They look at his felony record which is rather concerning. However, while he is clearly a criminal, there is no identical crime that would link Bobby Joe to the murder of Janie or even hint that he abducts, rapes, strangles, and puts people in closets. Let's pretend, for a minute, that even though Bobby Joe Leonard is not called a suspect in the Arlington County murder of Andrea Cincotta, his information is still entered into a data bank because he was a person of interest in the crime. Wouldn't the detectives in Janie's case be rather interested in the fact that Bobbie Joe was physically in the apartment of a woman who was strangled and placed in a closet just three weeks later?

Wouldn't they be interested to know he had no alibi for that day and that Andrea Cincotta's car ended up halfway across the city parked just a few blocks from his mother's house? Wouldn't they be interested in the fact that the day Andrea was murdered was also the birthday of Bobbie's girlfriend and he didn't have money for a present? Wouldn't they like to know that a day after the murder he went to Philadelphia where items like Andrea's missing jewelry could be pawned without identification? If the police were wondering if they should focus harder on Bobby or not, the creation of this kind of data bank could save them a whole lot of time.

Our present methods of catching serial killers work



Gary Ridgway

Yes, we have finally caught the Green River Killer. Only 48 (give or take) women later, we have him in custody. Fifty-four year old Gary Ridgway enjoyed his decades of free reign and now he will hardly suffer all that much in his later years since the prosecution handed him a life sentence on a silver platter. God knows how much money was spent on the

investigation by taxpayers while one woman after the other was brutally murdered by Ridgway. I don't know how you view success, but, if a private business failed to accomplish its mission 48 times over, I would think they wouldn't be in business long.

The typical scenario in a serial homicide investigation follows a well trodden path. First, the police try not to let the public know there is a serial killer out there. If they get lucky, there will be only a small paragraph in the local paper and within a short time, everyone will forget about the murder. Then, hopefully the killer will move to another jurisdiction. If he doesn't stop killing in your jurisdiction, just keep denying that the string of murders in your community are linked. Before DNA actually linked the death of five women in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in 2002 the police steadfastly told the community there was no serial killer on the loose. This was rather hard to believe considering how many women were dead. The words of victim Pam Kinamore's brother-in-law, Ed White, sum it up rather well. "The truth is I don't care how many of these cases have been linked by DNA evidence. The truth is either we have one serial killer in Baton Rouge or we have a lot of killers in Baton Rouge, and either way we've got a serious problem here."

When the citizens start to get surly like this, then you hold a bunch of news conferences and say law enforcement is doing everything possible and you guarantee this guy is going to be caught

Finally, as time goes on and the killer doesn't get caught, don't worry. No one will remember that promise. Eventually people will even forget a serial killer is on the loose. Fear fades away and we go on with our lives.

Multiply this scenario across the nation and you can see why there are far

more serial killers out there than most people realize.

Bobby Joe Leonard might have been working in your office building or picnicking at the table next to you in the park. He might have been planning to knock on your door the very morning the police showed up. You might never know how close you came to being a victim of a serial killer.

There are many more serial killers living outside the prison walls than inside. Until we improve our methods of catching and convicting these predators, we can "safely" assume one of our neighbors is the real Hannibal Lector you should be on the look out for.

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