

# Introduction: Why Study Serial Crime?

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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.

## FEAR OF CRIME

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Apart from enthusiasm, media coverage contributes to the fear of crime, even something as improbable as serial murder. Gerbner and Gross (1976) examined the impact of violent television programs on children and adults. Their results revealed that children and adults exposed to heavy doses of violent television saw the world as more dangerous. In later studies (cf., Gerbner & Morgan, 2002; Gerbner & Signorielli, 1988), Gerbner discovered that individuals who watched 5 or more hours of television daily overestimated their chances of victimization from crimes, rated their communities as more unsafe, and overestimated crime rates—prompting these researchers to title their theory “mean world syndrome.” In short, this theory supports that those who are exposed to media saturation of murder have problems differentiating fact from fiction.

Lee and Dehart (2007, p. 1) conducted a study on serial killers and fear, finding that:

*The temporal trend in fear of crime is punctuated by a moderate increase during the serial killing spree, and a sharp decline after the apprehension of the serial killer. Moreover, post apprehension data reveal that nearly 56% of respondents report experiencing an increase in their fear of crime specifically in response to the serial killer.*

The study also found that the fear was:

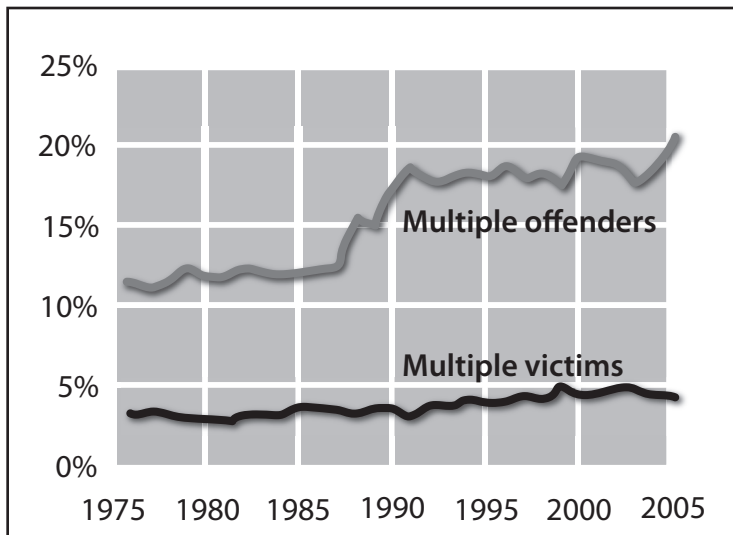
*Evenly distributed across races and marital statuses, but, as expected, females and younger people were more likely to report increases in fear. Additionally, 46% of the respondents took the extra step of implementing some sort of protective measure, with the most frequent being carrying mace or pepper spray or adding a security device to their home.*

The irony of the situation is that this rise in fear of crime (of both serial killers and crime in general) comes during a time when violent crime has actually decreased. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) classifies violent crime as composed of four offenses: murder and nonnegligent manslaughter, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault. According to the FBI, from 2000 to 2004, the rate of violent crimes decreased 4.1%. During the same period, aggravated assault was the largest category of crimes, with an estimated 291.1 offenses per 100,000 people. Murder, on the other hand, only constituted 5.5 murders per 100,000 people.

In *The Culture of Fear*, Glassner (2000) reports that while the nation’s murder rate went down, “the number of murder stories on network news increased 600% (not counting stories about O. J. Simpson)” (p. xxi). Most of this can be explained by what

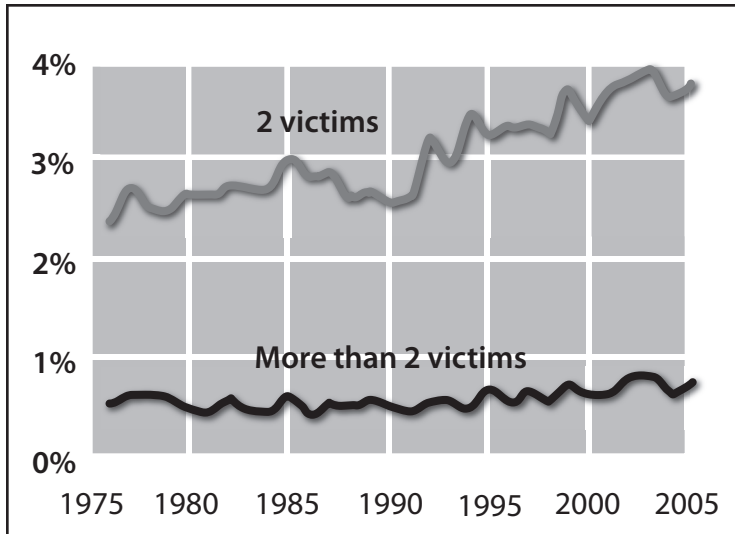
Lavrakas (1982) calls “vicarious victimization.” Fear of crime can be vicariously experienced by those who have not been victims as a result of media contact alone, regardless of the crime rate. This may be part of why people believe that serial killing is at a crisis level. Although the individual has not been victimized, each instance of media coverage heightens the individual’s degree of fear, which manifests itself as both curiosity and a desire for increased protection.

Contrary to popular belief that serial killings have increased dramatically, Figure 1.1 shows that homicides involving multiple victims “increased gradually during the last 2 decades from just under 3% of all homicides in 1976” to just under 5% in 2005 (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2010). As Figure 1.2 demonstrates, homicides involving two victims have increased slightly over the years, while the percentage of those involving more than two victims has remained relatively steady. Moreover, serial homicides are extremely rare among crimes. The fear associated with so rare an event draws on the belief, fostered by the media, that it is not rare. Similarly, because of the media’s coverage of school shootings, high school students now fear becoming a victim. According to an April 30, 1999, CNN/*Time* magazine poll, students are fearful that a shooting could take place at their school.



**FIGURE 1.1** Percentage of homicides involving multiple offenders or multiple victims, 1976–2005.

Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics, n.d.



**FIGURE 1.2** Homicides involving multiple victims by number of victims.

Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics, n.d.

Still, there are instances of multiple homicide that are so dramatic and frightening that even recognizing their rarity does not reduce their impact on individuals, communities, and the legislation passed in response to the offender's actions. One example is the Port Arthur murders in Tasmania. As reported by Bellamy (2004):

*On April 28, 1996, Martin Bryant entered a café in the tourist town of Port Arthur, Tasmania, to get a bite to eat. The town is known for having been one of the first Penal settlements in Australia[n] history, where thousands of tourists flock annually to see a piece of Australian history.*

*After several minutes of solitude, Bryant stated, "There's a lot of wasps about today." After a few more minutes he made another remark about the lack of "Japanese tourists." Without notice, Bryant picked up his belongings, moved to the rear of the building, opened up his bag, pulled out an automatic rifle and opened fire upon those in the building. In a brief span of seconds, Bryant killed twelve tourists, along with injuring several others.*

*Bryant moved outside where he continued his rampage, execution style, randomly choosing victims hiding under vehicles and behind trees. He eventually made his way to a cottage on the periphery of the property where there was a standoff*

*with authorities. In a period of just over 19 hours, Martin Bryant, a man described by locals as being “a quiet lad and a bit of a loner,” had killed 35 men, women, and children and wounded another 18 making him the most notorious spree killer of all time.*

As a result of the Port Arthur murders, the Australian government adopted the National Agreement on Firearms, “which effectively banned self-loading rifles and self-loading and pump action shotguns; and introduced stringent limitations to firearm ownership (namely, minimum age of 18 years and satisfactory reason and fitness for ownership). And [a] 12-month firearms amnesty and compensation scheme (the gun buy back scheme) was also introduced” (Mouzos, 1999, p. 2). These measures responded not just to the probability of such an event recurring but to the effect its magnitude had on citizens and their confidence in the social environment. While this example refers to mass murder, it shows the complex relationship between high-media cases of homicide and the public’s fear as well as the public reaction to these events.

Another example is David Berkowitz. Berkowitz became infamous when he began a 13-victim killing spree from July 1976 through August 1977. Berkowitz’s trademarks were choosing young women who had long dark hair, using a .44-caliber pistol, and leaving behind taunting notes for the police. Upon his arrest in August 1977, he told law enforcement officials that he went on the killing spree because he was taking orders from his neighbor’s dog. Upon hearing this, the media went into a frenzy to get any information on Berkowitz. After a lengthy trial, Berkowitz was offered money to sell the rights to his story for a movie. The public became so enraged by the idea of an infamous brutal killer profiting from his deeds that people began lobbying for laws that would restrict any prisoner from profiting from a crime while in prison, such as by running a business, signing a book deal, or selling rights for a movie. Consequently, “Son of Sam laws” were enacted to prevent prisoners from profiting from their crimes. Instead, money made from the crime would go to the family of the victims.

As a result of increasing fear of crime, coupled with beliefs about incidence and evaluations based on magnitude and drama, more and more Americans are taking reactionary precautions to defend themselves, their property, and their families. For instance, in a national survey on fear of crime, Saad (2001) reports that 32% of respondents had bought a dog for protection, 32% had locks installed, 21% purchased a gun, and 11% kept a gun on their person for defensive purposes. The effects of fear go beyond encouraging people to take such measures. Fear introduces tensions in communities (see Ferraro, 1995; Warr & Ellison, 2000; Wilson & Kelling, 1982). Making celebrities out of serial criminals contributes to anomie. Conklin (2004) concludes that

“emphasizing dramatic crimes and persistently high crime rates seem[s] to breed mistrust, insecurity, and weakened attachment to the community” (p. 319). Given these adverse effects, it seems clear that more rigorous studies of serial crime and more accurate information about it can help to mitigate some of the effects of media coverage.

## PROBLEMS OF GENERALIZING

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Our knowledge of certain offense types is limited. Many studies have relied on the statements of apprehended offenders who are willing to admit they have committed the act and give their consent to talk to authorities or social scientists about their crimes. Even though these offenders talk, it does not mean researchers are getting a complete and accurate snapshot of their motivations, in part because most offenders stick to the “con code” that you only discuss those cases you have been convicted of. Another shortcoming of these studies is that they rely on a small sample of offenders (Balachandra & Swaminath, 2002; Kocsis, 1997; Taylor, Thorne, Robertson, & Avery, 2002), which from a social science model limits their generalizability to a larger population of criminals. Additionally, previous studies do not include perpetrators who have not been caught for their offenses. As a result, these studies may tell us more about those involved in the criminal justice system than about the reality of serial offenses. While these studies are useful in developing hypotheses about those killers willing to talk, there is a lot we do not know about those who have either eluded detection or prefer not to talk to authorities or researchers.

The problem with current typologies used within the criminology community is that typologies such as organized and disorganized offenders are based on data limited in sample size to a population of 36 serial offenders. With such a small sample serving as the basis for theories and predictions, generalizability to larger populations of criminals is limited. Therefore, existing typologies should be seen as a beginning but not the definitive description of offender behavior. In addition, these studies’ methodologies are exploratory, not explanatory. Studies of this nature have a tendency to group offenders into broad categories. In the criminal justice field, attempting to use these broad typologies to identify an unknown serial offender can lead to false positives. The characteristics that make up the typology fit too many people and do not accurately identify the concept being investigated.

An additional barrier to solving a case that may result from relying on a typology is that of a mental set. A mental set occurs when individuals persist in using a problem-solving strategy, in this case a typology, they have relied on in the past that does not work in the current situation. As a result, a set of zero-sum thinking emerges in which

an individual doing research or investigating serial criminals becomes entrenched in one way of looking at the world.

The FBI typology of serial killers is the best example of these drawbacks. Problems arise when hypotheses are treated as fact. For instance, the FBI's study of serial murderers is broken down into two main types: organized and disorganized. An organized offender is someone who lacks a moral compass and attends to a great deal of detail at the crime scene. Most organized offenders are thought to have some or all of the following qualities:

- Highly intelligent
- Socially adequate
- Skilled worker
- High birth status
- Sexually competent
- Lives with a partner
- Experienced harsh discipline in childhood
- Controlled mood
- Masculine image
- Charming
- Follows crime in the media

The disorganized offender does not pay close attention to detail, and crime scenes are relatively sloppy and show evidence of passion and incompetence. Most disorganized offenders are thought to have some or all of the following qualities:

- Below average intelligence
- Socially inadequate
- Unskilled worker
- Low birth status
- Sexually incompetent
- Lives alone
- Received harsh/inconsistent discipline as a child
- Anxious mood
- Exhibits poor personal hygiene
- Minimal interest in crime in the media

For a study's conclusion to carry weight, the sample must be representative of a greater population. More participants are therefore needed, and they are obtained through a probability sampling technique. Additionally, more caution must be exhibited when choosing and applying the typologies. A useful step in refining the typologies may be to compare

and contrast noncriminals who possess the qualities described in the typologies with actual criminals. (See the work of David Canter.) In other words, having a small nonprobability sample creates problems regarding generalizability and hinders identification.

An example can be found in the Maryland sniper case mentioned earlier. From October 2 through October 23, 2002, John Allen Muhammad and Lee Boyd Malvo went on a 23-day killing spree, involving 14 sniper incidents that resulted in 10 deaths. During this time, the media airways were flooded with experts giving profiles of the sniper. On October 3, speculation about the use of a white vehicle in the sniper attacks began to surface. The involvement of a white vehicle, although later shown to be inaccurate, would be the focus of the investigation for several weeks. The lookout for a white van resulted in hundreds of daily calls by people claiming to see suspicious individuals in white vans to the hotlines set up by Chief Moose and his task force. In hindsight, we know that there was neither a white van nor a white man involved. However, these inaccurate leads cost investigators valuable time. What we can learn from this lesson is that overinvesting in one typology, hypothesis, or witness statement can get in the way of serial crime investigation, thus affording offenders more time to carry out such heinous acts. More studies need to be carried out on serial killers, and serial crime in general, in order for law enforcement and academics to understand the complexity of these types of criminals.

A number of social scientists have attempted to overcome the pitfalls of the original FBI study (Hickey, 2002). For example, Hickey constructed a data set of 62 women and 337 men over a period of 195 years (1800–1995), drawing from biographical case study analyses. Although Hickey's study has a larger sample than the original FBI study, it represents an average of only 2.05 cases per year. In addition, it is a post-hoc analysis of existing data without a comparison group. To conduct good social scientific research—as well as scientific crime scene investigations—we need to keep developing, testing, and refining hypotheses to determine if the typologies currently being used are representative of the behaviors demonstrated by current offenders under study. Despite the limitations of his sample population, Hickey has created such a model (Hickey, 2002, p. 33). Hickey utilizes two variables: victims and methods. As Table 1.1 demonstrates, the two variables exhaust combinations of specific victims, a variety of victims, specific methods, or a variety of methods. Hickey believes that this model will help researchers in reevaluating specific typologies as social behavior changes.

As a field, we need to emphasize care in using typologies and also emphasize the value of cases in appreciating the conditions under which certain criminals repeat or serialize their acts. It is important to identify and understand different typologies, their constructs, and their applications.

**TABLE 1.1 Factors of Constructing Typologies**

Specific victims	Variety of victims
Specific methods	Specific methods
Specific victims	Variety of victims
Variety of methods	Variety of methods

*Source:* Hickey, 2002.

## INVESTIGATION

A good starting point is to recognize that the investigation of serial offender cases is the most difficult to undertake. Part of the problem is the sheer number of victims involved. According to the FBI (1990), serial murderers average about 9.7 victims. Although the public believes that serial killers have a large number of victims, other serial offenders average more victims. Table 1.2 shows serial killers to have the fewest victims among serial offenders. Several chapters in this book delve into the complexities of serial offenders and consider why they are so elusive to law enforcement.

In Chapter 2, Jack Levin and James Alan Fox discuss the normalcy of serial killers. The serial killer, and all serial offenders for that matter, are not easily identified in the general public. Levin and Fox's chapter discusses the complexity of serial killers and shows that warning signs are not that obvious for these types of offenders. Some offenders do have a history of cruelty to animals or violence against others, but this type of offenders is rare. More often than not, serial killers can go undetected.

**TABLE 1.2 Base Rates of Serial Offences**

<b>Offender Type</b>	<b>Average Number of Victims</b>
Serial Murderer	9.7
Serial Rapist	20.4
Serial Arsonist	31.5
Pedophile	100–200

*Source:* FBI, 1990; Sapp, Huff, Gary, Icove, & Horbert, 1994; Hazelwood & Warren, 1995.

In Chapter 8, Labuschagne shows how culture can complicate the distinction between serial murder and muti murder. What law enforcement sees as serial murder, others may see as having religious-cultural importance. Not knowing the motivations for an

offender can slow down an investigation. When cultural-religious elements are added to the crime, it makes the investigation of such a crime that much more difficult.

In Chapter 3, Poland, Kilburn, and Alvarez-Rivera discuss the complexities of rapists in our midst. These offenders are so complicated that research on the motivations of serial rapists is continually changing. The chapter details the progression in serial rape and the social-psychological makeup of these offenders. In Chapter 4, Bernier, Kuehnle, and Howerton take a similar approach to the complexities of sex offenders and how the use of technology has assisted in their ability to groom victims. The chapter adds to the field by looking to see if rehabilitation works, and, if so, on which type of offenders.

While serial killers, serial rapists, and sex offenders have had the most attention by researchers, arson has received the least. Research on serial arson has barely scratched the surface of this topic, and a good portion of the research is outdated. In Chapter 8, Parenteau deals with the complexities of this subject, considering the role juvenile offenders play in the makeup of these offenders. Stalking is a relatively new phenomenon, and the vast majority of the research has looked at the unwanted pursuit of one offender and one victim. In Chapter 6, Spitzberg, Dutton, and Kim review the current research on stalking and discuss the omission of serial stalking by other researchers.

While several chapters deal with the social psychology of serial offenders, the remainder of the book looks at issues that may be pertinent to investigation of such cases. Borgeson (2008) points out two distinct problems with serial offender investigation: linkage blindness and department image. Linkage blindness is a term that:

*refers to the lack of sharing crime scene data with other agencies to help determine whether or not similar cases exist in a surrounding area or state. In order to see if similarities exist agencies need to compare notes on the MO (the way a perpetrator commits the crime) and any type of signature (behaviors unique to that individual person) that the offender uses in committing the crime. (p. 15)*

Another investigative issue centers on public image by police departments:

*Sometimes agencies are reluctant to reveal that they have a serial killer working in the neighborhood. Having a killer on the loose looks bad for departments and sends the image that the department is ineffective in protecting the public from harm. As a result, the agencies that have suspicions will try to keep this under wraps and work the case slowly in order to find evidence that points to the theory of a multiple killer. (p. 15)*

Schmink's review of task forces in Chapter 12 takes these details into consideration. Because not much information has been made available on this subject, this chapter

advances the academic discussion in this area and identifies the complexities of trying to deal with multiple agencies in carrying out the investigation.

To overcome the shortcomings of serial offender investigation, some agencies have turned to the use of profiling and case linkage analysis. Chapter 9 deals with the types of profiling used in serial offender investigation and offers an inside look at how a profiling unit is run. Chapter 10 looks at using case linkage analysis as a tool in helping to link behavioral aspects of offenders over a series of crimes to see whether they may be committed by the same offender. Such a tool is relatively new, and this chapter helps define what case linkage analysis is and how it has been used in criminal investigation. Chapter 11 looks at the least studied part of serial crime, the victim. This chapter is important for researchers because it can help in understanding the victimology of women who are killed by serial murderers.

We believe that a book focusing on behavioral and investigative issues of serial offenders can be useful in policy formation, particularly in regard to comparing different paradigms for developing profiles and in regard to mitigating some of the effects of media coverage by providing facts not only about incidence but about the conditions that influence rates. It can also contribute to a greater clarity in distinguishing between the moral aspect of popular responses to dramatic instances of crime and the types of evidence relevant for reducing harm to society.

## **CONCLUSION**

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This book brings together two unique aspects in regard to serial offenders: social-psychological explanations of their behavior and investigative issues. Firstly, when we look at offenders' serial aspect, we may discover that the mere presence of repetition is relevant to our understanding of causation, the role of personality traits and pathology, and other factors connected with such crimes. Secondly, by bringing together the various types of problems with investigation, we may be able to form hypotheses about how to better handle these offenders.

There is another purpose in writing this book, namely to contribute to the ongoing efforts of some scholars and researchers to mitigate the negative social and political consequences of the ways in which crimes such as serial murder are represented in the media to society at large. We assume that increasing the amount of information by applying rigorous methods and presenting it in a more comprehensive format than those available on television and in the press can increase the likelihood of better public understanding and, therefore, better policies.

The difficulties in achieving these goals cannot be overemphasized. To some extent, they are methodological. That is, given that increasing the number of cases is largely out of the hands of researchers, the small number of cases available requires greater attention to each case than is typical. This means increasing the intensiveness with which each case is investigated, which calls for something that anthropologists refer to as the “thick” description. It also means that there needs to be more emphasis on comparative studies, including the employment of control groups. Yet, the sort of access necessary for the advancement of such a program is difficult, often impossible, to obtain, even more so when some of the more prolific serial criminals remain at large. Despite these problems, it is at least possible to avoid the sorts of hasty generalizations that one finds in both the media and, to a certain extent, in the area of policy.

It is understandable that pressures from the public and from law enforcement agencies can lead otherwise responsible researchers to generalize prematurely and to overgeneralize. In this regard, the research community faces the same problems as responsible policy makers who have little choice but to respond to the same pressures. In attempting to bring information together that ordinarily appears apart and out of context, we are also trying to introduce a note of caution in interpreting findings and evaluating both case studies and statistics.

Beyond the study of crimes and criminals, more can be done to clarify the various influences on public perceptions of crime and its dangers and how those perceptions influence the process of policy formation. While this is not represented in the book, it remains a vital topic about which all the authors are aware, and it is one that comes up in one way or another in many studies that have nothing ostensibly to say about it. So it is appropriate in this introduction that several questions be raised in anticipation of future research. The media are often accused of creating misperceptions, increasing fear, decreasing empathy, and perhaps even creating future serial offenders. To what extent are these accusations accurate? For example, to what degree are the media responsible for misperceptions of serial crimes? Is media coverage determined by other more general factors than those directly associated with the television, radio, and print (e.g., social, cultural, political, and economic factors)?

Clearly causation is complex, all the more so when public perception and social policy reflect the total operation of the social system. In any case, it seems clear that policy is more rational and more likely to be focused on the reduction of harm to society when there is an abundance of information and considerate evaluation of it. At the very least, information can increase policy makers’ abilities to negotiate the difficult waters of public opinion and to base their ideas and proposals on relevant and accurate evidence.

