

The myth that serial murderers are disproportionately white males essay sample



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Serial killing is a spree of random murders of innocent targets in a senseless and pointless manner. This mayhem of killing is horrific and shocking, to say the least! Several serial killers live in lore as icons of butchery and infamous murderers, recklessly taking lives of hapless victims. In a majority of serial killers, the urge to kill far outweighs their human and rational side. These disturbed individuals appear mainstream, charming, loving, and trustworthy, while they continue to sexually assault and murder.

They kill under a compulsion, which may be deep-rooted in their dysfunctional childhood or youth, or is a result of psychopathological disorders. Serial killing, as opposed to mass murders or spree killing, involves three or more murders over an extended period of time, with consistent breaks after every life taken. In these breaks the serial killer returns to his everyday life, which never catches a glimpse of his evil side. Moreover, all the murders have something in common, for instance, sex, age, colour, line of work, origin, and almost all of them tend to have a sexual aspect. [1]

Several studies have been conducted to find a conclusive answer to the haunting question- what brings a person to actively commit such unspeakable acts? Several theories of genetics or unfortunate circumstances have been put forward. Bits and pieces of reality have been exposed, and along with that have emerged certain myths that confuse. The most common and mistaken of these stereotypes is the myth that serial murders are disproportionately white males in their 20's or 30's.

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The FBI outlines the profile of a serial killer as, among other things, male and white. According to a study conducted by the FBI behavioural Unit, 85% of all serial killers in the entire world are in America. [2] The youngest recorded serial killer is Mary Bell of Newcastle, England, who first killed at the age of 11. The oldest known serial killer was seventy five year old Ray Copeland, who was sentenced to death along with his wife for the series of brutal murders committed by them. Thus, serial killers are not merely men aged 20 to 40. Also, serial killers, contrary to popular belief, include women, African Americans, Hispanics and other nationalities other than white males.

52.8% of the American population is of white people, with African Americans forming a mere 15.4%. Hispanics take up 24.5%, Asians and other nationalities take up 8.7% and Eskimos a mere 1.1%. Out of this total population, 52% of US serial killers are non-Hispanic whites. 21% of serial killers in America are African American. 10% of US serial killers are Hispanic, Asian and American Indian, 17% of US serial killers are Women.

Out of these women 44% operate with a partner, 56% percent act alone and can be just as violent and cruel as any man. Only one Eskimo has been known to be a serial killer.[3] These numbers prove that approximately 48% to 50% of serial killers in America are non-white individuals, both men and women! Thus, the numbers shatter the myth that serial murderers are disproportionately white males.

Typifying serial killers as white males has been grossly unfair! .[4]
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It was because of the myth that serial killers are disproportionately white men that a great deal of shock and surprise was displayed by the media at D. C. Sniper turning out to be two black men, John Mohammed and Lee Malvo sniper. The stereotype that only white men can indulge in repeated anonymous violence is intensely pervasive across America. This is evident by what we read over and over again in newspapers. For instance, a commentator wrote in the Harlem Times that “white guys have pretty much cornered the market on mass murders and serial killing” (Charles, 2002).

This biased view is strangely common, when statistics reveal that Blacks were responsible for a disproportionate 51.5% of all homicides committed throughout America, from 1976 to 1988. The over presence of African Americans in every category of homicide such as family, infanticide, sex related etc, as found by Fox and Levin (2001), leaves us to wonder why African Americans along with other ethnicities are not considered for the heinous crime of serial killing and why only white men stand as representatives of serial killers?

“African Americans make up a significant number of recorded serial killers, far above what might be expected from public perceptions and recollections” wrote Philip Jenkins, who was the first historian of serial killing to research and expose the myth that black people do not have a history of serial killing. In his article, originally published in the *American Journal of Criminal Justice*, Jenkins was however able to list only 14 African American serial killers that operated in the years from 1971 to 1990.

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Several other serial killer researchers have found that 13% to 18% of all serial killers in the 20th century were African Americans, which is an excessive representation, keeping in mind that African Americans are a minority in America. More recent data encompassing the years through 1976 to 1988 reveals the incidence of serial killing by African Americans to have increased to an alarming 38.2%. [5]

African American serial killers like Jarvis Catoe, Jake Bird and Clarence Hill claimed maximum lives in their unbridled serial killing spree, before world war II. Bird killed as many as 44 innocent victims. Post world war African American serial killers include Coral Watts who was known as the "Sunday Morning Slasher" and confessed to 13 murders and was linked to 8 others between 1978 and 1983. Milton Johnson was another notorious serial killer of the time who murdered as many as 17 people in the 1980's.

The more contemporary serial killers include Henry Louis Wallace who was involved in the rape and murder of nine unfortunate women, all acquaintances of his, between 1993 and 1996. Another African American serial killer Kendall Francois, was indicted in 1999 for the brutal killings of eight women. Maury Travis, arrested in 2002, had a secret torture chamber in his basement equipped with bondage paraphernalia and replete with video tapes of his rape and torture sessions as well as newspaper clippings of the murder investigations of his victims, who were mostly prostitutes and crack addicts.

The most recent African American serial killers include Derrick Todd Lee, Lorenzo Gilyard and Daniel Jones. The point is that in spite of a large number of known African American serial killers in America, these names are overshadowed by a couple of white serial killers who received extensive media coverage and became household names, for instance Ted Bundy and John Wayne Gacy. The DC Sniper case became well known only because the police had been working on the premise that the serial killer would be a white man and it came as a big surprise that Snipers were in fact two Black men.[6]

While Kendall François and Derrick Todd Lee were solo African American serial killers who only targeted white victims, several African American Serial killers have been known to operate in racist groups to murder only white people. De Mau Mau in Chicago, California's Death Angels, the Yahweh cult of Hebrew Israelites in Florida are few such groups. Of these San Francisco based Death Angels are said to have allegedly murdered 275 "white Devils", after long torture sessions.

The Yahweh Ben Yahweh cult, blamed for 23 murders and a number of fire bombings, began by killing ex-members as punishment for abandoning their cause, but later moved back to killing white people. The De Mau Mau was a group of disgruntled ex-army men with a common hatred for white men. They killed 12 victims between May and September of 1978. The black sibling serial killer teams of Anthony and Nathaniel Cook and Reginald and Jonathon Carr targeted

white victims, the latter making victims perform sexual acts on each other before killing them.[7]

Primarily, mass media fires the prevalence of the myth that serial killers are disproportionately white men, in order to avoid accusations of racism by focussing on the heinous crimes committed by African Americans. In an effort to avoid controversy, the mass media, including newspapers, television and movies, diverts its attention towards the serial killings committed by Whites. Jenkins (1998) gives three reasons for the attitude adopted by the media to de-emphasize the stories about African American serial killers. Firstly, Jenkins states that the media chiefly composed of whites avoids using derogatory adjectives such as , “ primitive,” monsters,” “ animals”, to steer clear of being deemed racist.

Secondly, Jenkins points out that until recently the law enforcement agencies did not take Black crimes seriously. That does not however entail that they were any less prevalent. They were only less reported! For instance, Jarvis Catoe went on killing black women without being detected, but his switch to white women immediately got him into trouble. Albert Fish killed black children for 25 years but was found out when he killed a white girl in 1928. Annals of serial killers are replete with such examples. Another reason for the African American serial killers not attaining notoriety is the perception of entertainment media that African American characters and actors do not appeal to an audience like their white counterparts do.

Thus, Blacks are rarely given negative roles to play on TV or in movies. [8] Pat Brown, an investigative criminal profiler, Chief Executive Officer of Sexual Homicide Exchange (SHE), author and American TV show host adds to this “ I don’t believe I’ve ever seen an accurate portrayal of a profiler on television or in the movies. These myths, oddly enough, weren’t only created by fiction writers but by profilers and the police themselves!”[9]

The following words put everything in the right perspective, “ the irony is this: To see blacks as fully human, we have to see them as fully capable of the whole range of evil as well as good. Not as either more or less prone to either than whites or any other group. Otherwise, we are refusing to see them clearly, to accord them full humanity”.[10]

This stereotype of serial killers being male, white and smart loners, created and encouraged by the media, is further to be shattered by the fact that women are serial killers too! Women commit 15% of violent and 28% of all property related crime, and this trend is constantly on the rise . Erick Hickey describes female serial killers in the following words, “ These are the quiet killers, every bit as lethal as male serial murderers, but we are seldom aware of one in our midst because of their low visibility.” Otto Pollak uses the word “ hidden” to characterize female crime and Kelleher & Kelleher describe female serial killers as “ more successful, careful, precise, methodical, and quiet” in carrying out their brutal acts.

However, according to interviews of convicted female serial killers conducted by Alarid, Marquart, Burton, Cullen et. al. (1996), 86% of women serial killers claimed to have played a secondary role in the killings, working in collaboration with a male or female accomplice. 8% of all serial killers in America are women and American female serial killers account for 76% of female serial killers worldwide. Female serial killers have been known to mostly, but not always target victims they know.

Their weapon of choice is poison 80% of the times and money is the main motive. Other methods utilized by female serial killers to victimize innocents include shooting, bludgeoning, drowning, stabbing and suffocating. In addition, control, money, sex, drugs and feelings of inadequacy may be cited as their motives to kill over and again! [11]

The female serial killer typology as suggested by Kelleher & Kelleher is based on whether women act independently or in partnership with a male or female accomplice. Acting alone serial killers have been described as mature, socially adept, careful, deliberate and highly organized. In keeping with these characteristics, they restrict the scene of crime to a particular familiar location such as their home or office. Their weapon of choice is the same for all murders they commit, such as suffocation, poison or lethal injection. According to the Kelleher & Kelleher typology, acting alone female serial killers include five categories. The *Black Widow* systematically kills family members, spouses and even children.

An Angel of Death murders people placed under her care ; *A Sexual Predator* kills because of a fantasy driven compulsion to kill. Female serial killers may kill repeatedly , out of *jealousy* and hatred and have also been known to kill for *profit*. Acting in partnership female serial killers have been characterized as younger, aggressive, vicious, disorganized and careless planners. Unlike acting alone female serial killers, these women kill at random locations using guns, knives and torture.

An acting in partnership female serial killer is a *team Killer* , who kills or tortures to death a victim, in partnership with another serial killer, male or female. Such a felon kills in a *random , unexplained* manner for unknown or inexplicable motives, to be judged insane later. Thus, unsolved series of serial killings may be attributed to a woman. Three female serial killers who received extensive media coverage (none of them typical female serial killers) include Aileen Carol Wuornos, who put to death seven men while hitchhiking; Susan Smith of Union, South Carolina strapped her two sons to safety car seats and rolled them off into a lake and Louise Woodward, popularised the “ shaken baby syndrome” in Massachusetts.[12]

Philip Jenkins opines that the number of women serial killers, white or black, is probably 50%. He attributes this number to the fact that due to the quiet means of murder used by women serial killers, most of them go undetected. Cases of murder by smothering and poisoning go without autopsy half the time, and the crime never comes to attention.[13]

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In a discussion on serial killers on National Radio, Louis Schlesinger, a forensic psychologist, and Associate Professor of Psychology at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York, and an expert in the area of serial offenders states, “ there’re many black, or African-American, or non-white serial killers: Asian serial killers, black serial killers, Hispanic; from every country, from every culture; from earliest times, even from pre-modern times.”

However, the main focus remains on white serial killers because the police pay less attention to minority victims, not investigating the crime as they would if the victim were white. Since serial murders are mostly (but not always) intraracial, blacks mostly kill blacks, these crimes go undetected due to lack of proper investigation and consideration.[14]

Thus, it is a mere notion that serial killers are disproportionately white men. This stereotype has been created together by the mass media that continues to depict serial killers as young, white and depraved. Also playing a huge role in this incorrect depiction are the police, profiling experts, and psychologists who firmly believe serial killing to be a white man’s domain. This was proved without doubt when several experts stated the possible profile for DC sniper on TV and in print media as being white and young.

These assumptions were proved wrong and the stereotype shattered, when DC sniper turned out to be two Black men. In addition, the black society is so pervasive with violence, with hundreds of blacks

being killed everyday. This routine behaviour has probably led to laxness in investigation of black murders. Unless a white individual is victimized, black serial killers are most likely to get away with their series of killings.[15]

Thus, this misconception of a serial killer being mostly a white male needs to be eradicated using those very means that worked to create the stereotype. Media, plays a large role. An example of the spreading of awareness regarding Serial killing would be the broadcast of a discussion on serial killing on Radio National in which crime writer and author, Patricia Cornwell, ex-FBI agent, Robert Ressler, forensic psychologist, Louis Schlesinger and many others participated. The discussion dispels quite a few stereotypes related to serial killing including the one that states that serial killers are disproportionately white men.

Serial killers are not disproportionately white men. In America the number of white serial killers would be more than African American, Hispanic, Asian or any other race put together, only because more than half of the American population is white. The number, thus cannot be called disproportionate. Also, it has been amply proved that blacks as well as women commit serial murders more than is ever discovered. Representing the accurate truth is what the media must work towards. Besides what can be more racist than to avoid reporting the truth for fear of racial slurs or claiming to protect a section of society that is already stigmatised.

Regardless of colour, and creed, a serial killer is a modern day monster and must be dealt with as such! This will be possible only when prevalent stereotypes are given up. Consider the damage being done to society, the suffering being inflicted and lives being taken by ignoring serial killers just because they do not fit the bill that requires a serial killer to be white, young and male. The truth of the matter is, not all serial killers are white! And not all of them are men!

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