

# Curtailling serial murder: Modus Operandi and calling cards

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Last time we looked at [curtailling serial murder](#), we noted that we would be following the three-part breakdown of the author's serial murder research described in "[The Bundy letter, 1979: Suggestions for the investigation of serial murder](#)" (Ritter, June 26, 2013). We began by advising police to consider serial murderers as normal human beings who undergo normal human development. The second issue we will take up are the patterns involved in the killings—the Modus Operandi, which encompasses "calling cards." The 1979 Bundy letter, sent to the Department of Justice, contained two references to calling cards. In contrast, when the FBI began officially studying *sexual* homicides, they did not believe that MOs ever varied and did not discuss any term like calling cards or signatures. They would not do so until 1992, and it is unclear whether or when they did any research. In this article on curtailling serial murder, we will briefly explain what was meant by the term, based on research, and contrast it with other writers' later use of the term "signature."

As has been **previously mentioned**, police need to use an expanded focus on MOs in order to ascertain all the behaviors of killers at a crime scene. In developing methods to assist police in solving serial murders, one step undertaken by this researcher was to follow the prevailing investigative routes police were using in order to determine their utility. One of these consisted (and continues to consist) in exhaustively focusing on the

victims and on motives.

There are several problems in focusing on victims. First, just because we have much more data on the victims does not mean it has utility. In the past, efforts were made to search every facet of a victim's life— his or her relationships, activities, occupations, and emotional states— in order to locate the presumed link between the victim and killer. The result is a vast amount of information which no one knew how to use. This approach is essentially asking, what did the victim do to bring on the murder? It is pure victim-blaming. The question draws on the criminological idea of "victim-provocation" (see Wolfgang, 1958) and the idea that the victim and offender are either similar in circumstances or are close in relationship. However, after evaluating each case in which investigators pursued this line of thinking, we have never seen it lead to a solution in a serial murder case.

Second, the FBI's focus on motives and their profiling counterparts in England, called "Investigative Psychologists," who focus on the relationship between victim and offender are ignoring the nature of serial homicides and many unsolved homicides. That is, we can no longer count on a victim-offender linkage: Over the past 30 years, there has been an increase in crimes against strangers, or stranger-to-stranger homicides, and an even greater increase in murders involving *unknown relationships* between killers and victims. "By 1995, . . . an extraordinary 55 percent of victims were slain by strangers and persons unknown—a total of 11,800 people!" (Vronsky, 2004, pg. 15, using an FBI press release on *Crime in the United States*, 1996).

Third, there has been a decline in murders involving identifiable motives. In the 1960s, only about 5 percent of all murders lacked obvious motives— or were planned and premeditated (see Wolfgang & Ferracuti, 1967). But analysis of the circumstances of murders indicated that, while reporting methods had not changed and other categories (e.g. felony) had remained stable, the figure for unknown motives had dramatically increased to 22.5 percent by 1986 (Ressler, Burgess & Douglas, 1988), and constituted a third of all murders by 1997 (Best).

The rise in unknown victim-offender relationships and unknown motives intensifies the problems police were already having in the 1970s when the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA, predecessor of NIJ) funded a variety of studies and programs to improve the effectiveness of police investigations. Given the status of law enforcement and academic profilers and detectives today, it may come as some surprise to learn that the Rand Corporation's studies (see Greenwood, Chaiken, Petersilla & Prusoff, 1975) found that the once-glorified detective had little effect on crime, arrests or clearance rates, regardless of training or workload. Detectives produced little new or useful information in felony investigations. Offenders were either apprehended at the scene by the responding officer - or not at all. Most crimes received no follow-up investigation. The secret about the high crimes-of-passion clearance rates is that these homicides almost solve themselves, with the killer often waiting at the house or nearby to be arrested by police.

The primary problem in all investigations, particularly now when there is no obvious suspect or motive, is that police have trouble conceptualizing what the important variables are for purposes of solution. At a time when there may be no obvious, relevant material to be gathered at the crime scene, we have long known that case solutions hinge on documenting relevant crime scene information. For investigations to be improved, there must be a better understanding of the information that can be gathered and analyzed by any police department. That explains why LEAA's **Crime Analysis System Support** (CASS) found that police expressed a need for a crime report form. And Rand reported that the great diversity in crime report forms was indicative of

basic differences among police in terms of their understanding what types of information can or should be collected in a crime report for purposes of investigation and prosecution: "Documentation of relevant crime scene information by patrol heavily influences case solution. . . " ([Greenberg, Elliot, Kraft & Proctor, 1977](#)). Thus, knowing more about an unknown offender requires knowing more about **the salient features of a complex crime**.

It was for this reason that the author's primary objective in a 1979 LEAA (unfunded) grant proposal was the refinement of a one-page crime report form that could be used by police who had no suspect and were facing either a single or serial [homicide](#).

*Due to length, this discussion will continue in a follow-up article.*

## SUGGESTED LINKS

- [Ways to curtail serial murder: Considering normal human beings who kill](#)
- [No more hoopla for VICAP, the FBI's serial murder tracking system](#)
- [The study of murder to help police](#)
- [The study of murder to help police: Expanded MO analysis](#)
- [The serial killers' crimes: Assumptions about Modus Operandi \(Part 17\)](#)



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