

What are the myths of serial killers vs the facts?

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What are the myths of serial killers vs the facts?

Your mysterious weird neighbor who lives alone and spends time reading satanic books is not that likely to be a serial killer even though he fits the look of one. But what is the look of a serial killer and how did we all agree that certain features fit the look? Serial murder is one of the most popular types of crime to explore by documentaries and thriller movies particularly due to how scary and realistic it is. These are people among us who do these crimes for a variety of complex reasons that are not even fully studied yet. Due to the popularity of these documentaries and shows, people have crafted the look of a serial killer: white middle-aged man, who lives alone, is mysterious and most likely is a psychopath. Might perform satanic rituals as well. Even though the likes of Dahmer, Bundy, the BTK killer (Bind, Torture, Kill), Son of Sam, Richard Ramirez etc. might have fitted the image of a serial killer, research shows that the average serial killer looks much different. Looking at the statistics throughout the years, the myth of serial killers being white is false, along with the idea that they're all men. The idea that they are highly intelligent also has been proved to be untrue, and it is most likely an exaggeration by the media to make the story seem even more fascinating. Serial killers are not unique to the US despite what might be the common perception, and to ruin most plots of thriller movies, they don't tend to have their own signature left behind at the crime scenes.

The first name that might come to mind when someone is thinking about serial killers is Ted Bundy whose case has been heavily covered by the media. Charismatic, mysterious, and ruthless and a sociopath who only targeted women that looked like his mother. Or perhaps Jeffrey Dahmer, the quiet weird guy who hunted men, invited them into his home to end up killing and eating them. Both cases had a large media coverage, documentaries based on them

and even TV shows with great rating. Since these cases became extremely popular, people started generalizing the characteristics of serial killers based on these few popular cases. The image of a serial killer is ingrained to be someone crazy, weird, and vicious who does horrible acts to people before murdering them. In reality most serial killers are much simpler than that. In an article published by the FBI, Robert J. Morton (2008) defined serial murder as "The unlawful killing of two or more victims by the same offender(s) in separate events." By this definition serial killers are more common than people would imagine. Most of serial murder happens as a gang related crime, also in the terms of paid hitmen who also is classified as serial murder.

A common myth is this idea that serial killers are all white lone men. On the contrary research suggests that serial killers are not a specialty of white men, as there has been many serial killers of color or women. Although serial murderers in the U.S are predominantly male, approximately 16% are female and between 2004-2011 57% of male serial murderers were African American (Hickey, 2013). An interesting fact is that a black woman as a serial killer is extremely rare according to the research by Hickey.

Another misconception about serial killers is that they are highly intelligent individuals that have an uncontrollable desire to kill. They are portrayed as evil geniuses who long for the thrill of the hunt. On the other hand, research shows that most of them have an average IQ. According to research by Walters, Drislane, Patrick, and Hickey (2015), serial murderers tend not to be legally insane (i.e., most are able to distinguish fantasy from reality at the time of committing their crimes and recognize their actions as legally wrong). This means that they do have the capacity to stop themselves from killing and recognizing their behavior as wrong. The same research notes that true cases of insanity are rare among serial murderers and only a small minority use insanity for their legal defense.

In addition, people believe that serial killers are similar to hunters, they travel for miles and track down their target until they catch them. This way they can cover their tracks and are able to keep their identity hidden. In fact, this is not the case as most of serial killers target people locally, most likely due to living in large cities which help keep their identity unknown without having to travel far. This was the case of Jeffrey Dahmer who targeted local pubs in his area in late hours. According to Hickey (2013), 74% of serial killers choose their victims within a specific geographic area. This myth though has some base as some of them do travel far, sometimes in different countries. For example, Sobhraj known as “the serpent” has been linked to more than 10 murders in Nepal, India, Pakistan and Thailand, and is suspected of more, but has been convicted of just two (Sharma, 2023).

One of the most popular myths is that the phenomenon of serial killers is an American thing, and that there aren't many serial killers outside of the US. While the serial killers might be more popular within the US due to the media's fascination with them (they make a great story), statistics show that there is a large number of serial killers outside of the US. This is true also based on the fact that most of the world's population live outside of the US so makes sense that other countries would host a large number of serial killers; we have just never heard of them. This might be due to the lack of publicity surrounding those cases, or might be a cultural component, as other people from other countries are not as fascinated by serial killers as those in the US. World Population Review published the list of top ten countries based on the number of serial killers, with the top three being the US, the UK and Russia. Something to note is that the myth has some basis due to the US being the top country with most serial killers in the world. There are many factors that contribute to the reason why the US holds this position, ranging from cultural, historical and the media coverage. The culture of hitchhiking was common in the 60s-

80s which makes the perfect scenario for a serial killer. World Atlas (2024) suggests that this might be simply because the US is better at policing and reporting these cases.

It is perceived by the public that serial killers have their own unique signature when committing their crimes, such as tying the victim in an unique way or carving some symbol onto the victim. One of these cases is the BTK killer who signed the letters to the police with his own symbol created by the letters BTK. This is not common to all serial killers though, on the contrary it is rare. While it is true that some serial killers have their own rituals when performing a murder, but research has shown that they change their ritual over time, and they rarely engage in the exact same behavior in every murder (Schlesinger, 2010). According to Schlesinger, the killer changes his pattern every third of victims, the early victims, the middle ones and the last victims all having differences in the pattern of killing. To add up the murderers are rarely connected with satanic rituals either and the occult being a motivation for serial crimes is quite rare.

To sum up, due to how the media has portrayed serial killers, there are a lot of myths surrounding them. A typical serial killer in people's eyes is a lone white male, American, operating in different states, extremely intelligent and a psychopath who cannot control his urges to kill and probably does demonic rituals during the murder. Even though there is still a lot of unknowns about their nature and the reasons why they commit these crimes, research has shown that none of these myths are entirely true. The phenomenon of serial killers is unique, and it fascinates many, so it is easy to jump into fantasies about them and creating a certain image. Unfortunately, media has portrayed serial killers based on a few selected cases, handpicked to appeal the public. As to why most of the famous cases happen to fit the stereotype, this might be due to many reasons, such as the media being biased and choosing what they think would attract

people's attention more. By creating this persona of a highly intelligent psychopath, who cannot control his urges to kill and wants to leave a name for himself, like the Zodiac killer, the media has installed fear into people, which is based into misconceptions. There are a few reasons why we indulge into stories of true crime, such as wanting to get educated in order to avoid it, or simply enjoying the thrill of escapism from the mundane reality. This might be the same the reason why people enjoy apocalypse or war themed shows as well. In the US though, it seems like the phenomenon has become more of an obsession instead, and this indicates that our society is desensitized to violence or even attracted to it. The news programs are covered with violence and people of all ages are exposed to it constantly. Other type of violence as well, such as the mafia, gang activity, or school shootings also have their own myths created by the media and our own misconceptions. This is why it is important to do some research to really understand these crimes. By letting go of the myths, we can let go of stereotypes. People might finally stop fearing the loner middle age white man and realize that anyone is a candidate to be a hidden serial killer.

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