

# African Americans and Serial Killing in the Media

The Myth and the Reality

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*There were many expressions of shock and surprise voiced in the media in 2002 when the "D.C. Sniper" turned out to be two Black males. Two of the stereotypes surrounding serial killers are that they are almost always White males and that African American males are barely represented in their ranks. In a sample of 413 serial killers operating in the United States from 1945 to mid-2004, it was found that 90 were African American. Relative to the African American proportion of the population across that time period, African Americans were overrepresented in the ranks of serial killers by a factor of about 2. Possible reasons why so few African American serial killers are known to the public are explored.*

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**Keywords:** serial killing; African American; media stereotypes; racism

*In Copycat (Fiedler, Nathanson, & Amiel, 1995), Sigourney Weaver plays a criminal psychologist and expert on serial killing. In the opening scene, she is giving a lecture in an auditorium in which she asks all the males in the audience to stand, emphasizing that serial killing is primarily a male behavior. She then asks all African American and Asian American males to sit down, leaving only White males standing as representative of serial killers. The message that viewers of *Copycat* get is that only White males commit these heinous crimes and that members of other races or ethnicities never do.*

This stereotype is pervasive in the United States, so much so that the only African American serial killer that any of my criminal justice department colleagues could name was Wayne Williams (the Atlanta child killer), and the only mass or spree killer named prior to the 2002 John Mohammed and Lee Malvo sniper

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spree was Colin Ferguson, the Long Island train mass killer. A Bowie State University graduate thesis available online explicitly states that "there is an absence of African American murderers within the realm of serial homicide investigation" (Duncan, n.d., p.1). This statement apparently passed muster without comment by a thesis committee. A commentator in the *Harlem Times* expressed shock and disbelief when the D.C. Sniper turned out to be two Blacks, because "white guys have pretty much cornered the market on mass murders and serial killing" (Charles, 2002). Psychologist Na'im Akbar stated, "This is not typical conduct for us. I mean Black folks do some crazy stuff, but we don't do anonymous violence. That's not in our history. We just don't do that" (cited in White, Willis, & Smith, 2002, p. 2). Given this widespread "authoritative" opinion, it is no wonder that a columnist in the *Black Commentator* wrote, "'There aren't any black serial killers.' This refrain was on the lips of most Americans in the fall of 2002 before two suspects were apprehended in the Washington, D.C.-area sniper shootings" (Kimberley, 2003).

It is one of the mysteries of modern criminology that a group responsible for a highly disproportionate number of homicides of all other types has gained a reputation for not producing serial killers, or at least for producing a disproportionately low number of them. For instance, data from the period encompassing 1976 through 1998 reveal that African Americans committed 51.5% of the recorded homicides in the United States (Fox & Levin, 2001). Between 1946 and 1990, homicide rates among Black males have ranged from 6.56 times the White male rate in 1984 to 15.78 times the White male rate in 1952 (LaFree, 1996). Fox and Levin (2001) list 10 different types of contextual homicide (family, infanticide, sex related, etc.) and find that African Americans were overrepresented in every category, ranging from 66.7% of drug-related homicides to 27.2% of workplace homicides. Similarly, Petee, Padgett, and York's (1997) sample of 106 mass murder incidents that took place between 1965 and 1995 found that Whites constituted 50.8% of the total. Minorities were thus heavily overrepresented relative to their proportion of the population, although we were not informed as to what proportion of the 49.2 minority percentage was African American. The purpose of this article is to explore the prevalence of African American serial killers from

1945 to the present and to try to determine possible reasons for the myth that they do not exist and why so few of them are known to the public, or even to many criminologists.

The first attempt to dispel the myth that there are no Black serial killers was made by a prominent historian of serial killing, Philip Jenkins, in an article originally published in the *American Journal of Criminal Justice* (Jenkins, 1993, 1998). An extensive search of article databases revealed that this article remains the only one specifically related to exposing the myth, although Jenkins (1993) identified only 14 known African American serial killers operating between 1971 and 1990. The present article is an update and extension of Jenkins's (1993) article. In that article, Jenkins (1998) wrote, "African Americans make up a significant number of recorded serial killers, far above what might be expected from public perceptions and recollections" (p. 20).

There is no doubt that White males have constituted the majority of multiple murderers in the United States since such records have been kept, but that should be no surprise, because White males have constituted the vast majority of males across that time period. However, according to some prominent serial-killer researchers, between 13% and 16% of identified American serial killers operating in the 20th century (a period in which African Americans constituted between 8% and 12.8% of the population) have been African American (Jenkins, 1998; Newton, 1992). A study of 337 serial killers operating since 1825 found that 22% were African American (Hickey, 1997), and a study that included mass and spree murderers with serial killers put the figure at 20% (Levin & Fox, 1985). More recent data for the years 1976 through 1998 found African American representation among murderers with multiple victims (serial, mass, and spree combined) to have increased to 38.2% of all such offenders (Fox & Levin, 2001). African Americans are thus overrepresented among killers having multiple victims by about 3 times relative to their proportion of the population.

Pre-World War II African American serial killers such as Jarvis Catoe, Jake Bird, and Clarence Hill were among those claiming the largest number of victims (Jenkins, 1998). Bird was particularly prolific, with a verified 44 victims, a number just 4 victims short of White killer Gary Ridgeway's (the Green River killer) 48

victims, which is the record number of verified victims in the annals of American serial killing (Johnson, 2003). Coral Watts and Milton Johnson are two of the most notorious examples of Black serial killers of post-World War II years. Watts, known as the "Sunday Morning Slasher," confessed to 13 murders and was linked to at least 8 others between 1978 and 1983, and Milton Johnson was responsible for at least 17 murders in the 1980s.

More contemporary African American serial killers include Henry Louis Wallace, who raped and strangled at least nine women from 1993 until his capture in 1996. All of Wallace's victims were acquaintances, which, according to FBI experts, makes him unique among serial killers, who almost always seek strangers (Powell, 1996). Another recent example is Kendall Francois, who was indicted in 1999 for the murders of eight women, all but one of whom was White (Gado, 2001). Perhaps the most chilling of recent African American serial killers was Maury Travis, who was arrested in 2002. Travis had a secret torture chamber in his basement, where police found bondage equipment, videotapes of his rape and torture sessions, and clippings relating to police investigations of his murder victims (mostly prostitutes and crack addicts). Travis hanged himself in jail after confessing to 17 murders (Shinkle, 2002). Among the most recent African American serial killers at the time of writing are Derrick Todd Lee, Lorenzo Gilyard, and Daniel Jones. Lee was arrested in Atlanta in 2003 for the murders of five women in Louisiana and is a suspect in many other murders, rapes, and assaults going back to 1992. Gilyard and Jones were both arrested in Kansas City, Missouri, in 2004 for the murder of 12 and 4 women, respectively (Lambe, 2004).

Although the victim counts of these African American serial killers fall short of those attributed to notorious White killers, such as Ted Bundy (20-plus victims) or John Wayne Gacy (33), they exceed the figures attributed to more publicized killers, such as David Berkowitz (6) and Ed Kemper (8). The extensive media coverage of the Bundy, Gacy, and Berkowitz cases have made these killers almost household names, but African Americans such as Watts, Johnson, Francois, and Wallace are practically unknown, despite having operated within the same general time framework (1980s to 1990s). Before the Mohammed-Malvo sniper case, Wayne Williams (the Atlanta child murders) was the only

African American serial killer to gain a modicum of the notoriety attached to his White counterparts, and that may be because, as with the sniper case itself, the police believed that they were looking for a White perpetrator or perpetrators. (There are still those who believe that members of the Ku Klux Klan were behind the Atlanta child murders, however, and that Wayne Williams was framed; Jenkins, 1998.)

### RACE AS A VICTIM SELECTION FACTOR

Although most serial killers, like most killers in general, tend to kill within their own racial or ethnic group, there are a number who appear to purposely move across racial lines to secure victims. Michael Newton (1992) states that race is a dominant consideration in victim selection in about 2% of American serial killers. Given the added risks of apprehension trolling for victims in areas where the killer is likely to stand out, racial bigotry must be considered a partial motive for those who cross racial lines to kill. There are and have been White racist serial killers, but as Newton states, "Unlike their Caucasian counterparts, Black racists tend to murder in groups—De Mau Mau in Chicago, California's Death Angels, the Yahweh cult of Hebrew Israelites in Florida" (p. 67).

The San Francisco-based Death Angels may have killed more people in the early to mid-1970s than all the other serial killers operating during that period combined (Lubinskas, 2001). In Clark Howard's (1979) book-length study of these killings (dubbed the zebra killings by police, apparently because the perpetrators were Black and the victims White), he identifies 270 alleged victims, although a different source (Newton & Newton, 1991) indicated that the police believed them to have killed about 80. Whatever the true number is, convictions were obtained for only 23 of the murders. Death Angel killings often involved long torture sessions. Five Black Muslims apparently carried out the majority of the killings attributed to this group, believing it their Islamic duty to rid the world of "White devils."

The Yahweh Ben Yahweh cult, also sometimes known as the Death Angels, operated in Miami in the 1980s. The cult began by killing ex-members (all Black) for abandoning it but soon began to

focus rage on Whites. As with their San Francisco counterparts, members were instructed to kill "White devils" and to bring back various body parts to prove that they had done so. The most prolific killer was ex-NFL football player Robert Rozier, who confessed to seven killings. Altogether, the group was blamed for 23 murders and a series of fire bombings (Freedberg & Gehrke, 1990).

The De Mau Mau group consisted of at least eight disgruntled army veterans living in Chicago who shared a common grudge against White society. This group was not as cruel, long-lived, or successful in their efforts as their more religion-inspired counterparts, the Death Angels and the Yahweh cult. This group was responsible for at least 12 victims—whom they shot at random rather than abducted and tortured—between May and September of 1978 (Newton, 1992).

The sibling serial killer team of Anthony and Nathaniel Cook also targeted only White victims, who ranged from a 12-year-old girl to a 43-year-old male. Both men pleaded guilty in 2000 in Lucas County, Ohio, to eight murders committed in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Anthony was already in prison for the murder of a man trying to rescue his daughter, whom Cook was sexually assaulting) and were suspected of committing others outside Lucas County's jurisdiction (Emch, 2000). Reginald and Jonathon Carr are another Black sibling team that sought only White victims. They killed two women (a third woman survived a gunshot to her head) and three men in Wichita, Kansas, in 2001, making victims perform sexual acts on each other before killing them (Williams, 2002). Kendall Francois and Derrick Todd Lee are recent examples of African American solo serial killers who targeted only White victims.

The serial sexual murder of elderly females appears to be particularly an interracial affair, although such murders only account for 2% to 3% of all homicides (Safarik, Jarvis, & Nussbaum, 2000). Safarik, Jarvis, and Nussbaum (2000) found that Black offenders killed 82% of the White elderly female victims of sexual homicide (no elderly Black females were victimized by Whites). The rarity of such crimes limited this study to 33 victims, but, focusing on 128 nonserial sexual homicides of elderly female victims, the same researchers found that Blacks offended against Whites in 77% of the cases (Safarik, Jarvis, & Nussbaum, 2002).

## METHOD

It is well known that definitional problems plague this area of research (Keeney & Hyde, 1994; Petee & Jarvis, 2000). In this study, we follow many other authors (e.g., Egger, 1998; Fox & Levin, 2001; Hickey, 1997) who define a serial killer as a person who kills three or more individuals in separate events and who is motivated by various combinations of hedonism, sexual lust, desire for power and dominance, and/or misplaced missionary zeal to rid the world of "undesirables." In other words, serial killing is viewed as an expressive crime rather than an instrumental crime.<sup>1</sup> Not included in this definition are those whose murders are motivated by financial gain or by various criminal enterprises (such as gangland wars, hit men, revenge killings, "Bluebeard" killings, and so forth), or committed by groups for religious or political reasons, such as those committed by the Death Angels. We omit these groups because we do not know which of their members qualifies as a serial killer according to our criteria. Robert Rozier is the only member of any of these groups with a verified victim count (Rozier is included in our sample). Although most researchers exclude such cases, these limitations would not be acceptable to all.

The individuals named in Table 1 are those whose killings encompass the years 1945 up to the first half of 2004 and are males only. The year 1945 was chosen as the beginning year because the end of World War II may be considered a turning point in race relations in the United States and the beginning of the crumbling of Jim Crow barriers (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 1997). Prior to the war (and certainly to some extent after it), American law enforcement paid little attention to Black crime unless it involved White victims (Clarke, 1998). Given that situation, it is plausible to assume that serial killers operating in the Black community may have gone largely unnoticed and thus unrecorded (Fox & Levin, 2001). Cases were placed in a particular period, according to the year that the alleged killer killed his first known victim.

The data for this study were derived from a variety of sources. Unfortunately, no comprehensive list of serial killers exists that would enable researchers to arrive at a precise answer to the question of racial or ethnic proportionality among serial killers. One has to rely on a variety of secondary sources for data of this type

(Jenkins, 1998; Petee, Padgett, & York, 1997). The major sources of information are the encyclopedias written by Newton (1990, 1992, 2000) and by Wilson and Seaman (1983, 1990) as well as the works of other authors cited herein. Newspaper (particularly Newspaper Source) and Internet sources were used for cases that occurred after 1999. Newton's (2000) *Encyclopedia of Serial Killers* is the most comprehensive resource available at this time. Using these resources, 90 African American serial killers were identified. Using the same method, 323 White American serial killers were identified as operating in the same time framework. This number includes the latest White serial killer known at the time of writing, David Maust, who was charged in Hammond, Indiana, in December of 2003. This provided us with a combined sample of 413 known Black or White serial killers operating in the United States between 1945 and the first 6 months of 2004 (Hispanic and Asian Americans are not included in this study).

## FINDINGS

Table 1 provides the names of the 90 identified post-World War II African American serial killers and the time period and state(s) in which they operated. Cases ranged from Monroe Hickson in 1945 to Lorenzo Gilyard and Daniel Jones in 2004. It is noted that African American serial killers were particularly well represented during the 1980s (as were White serial killers). There were 34 known African American serial killers in the 10 years from 1980 through 1989 (an average of 3.4 per year) compared with only 24 in the 34-year period between 1945 and 1979 (an average of 0.70 per year). Based on these figures, there were approximately 5 times more African American serial killers operating in the 1980s than there were from 1945 to 1979. Likewise, the 13-year period between 1990 and the first half of 2004 revealed 32 African American serial killers—an average of about 2.3 per year.

The 90 identified African American serial killers compose 21.8% of the sample of Black and White killers. This figure approximates the 22% estimate made by Hickey's (1997) sample of 337 serial killers of all races operating in the United States across a 165-year period. Far from being absent or severely underrepresented in the ranks of serial killers, then, African Americans are represented



TABLE 1  
African American Serial Killers 1945 to May 2004

Name	1945 to 1979		1980 to 1989		1990 to May 2004			
	Number of Victims	State(s)	Name	Number of Victims	State(s)	Name	Number of Victims	State(s)
Carlton Gary	7	GA	Clinton Bankston	5	GA	Benjamin Atkins	11	MI
Vaughn Greenwood	11	CA	Norman Bernard	3	NC, CA	Lucious Boyd	3+	LA
Vincent Groves	14	CO	Vernon Brown	5+	IN, MO	Eugene Britt	11	IN
William Hance	3	GA	Nathaniel Code	13	LA	Andre Crawford	10	IL
Anthony Cook, Nathaniel Cook	8+	OH	Alton Coleman	8	MI, OH, IN	Reginald Carr, Jonathon Carr	5+	KS
Lester Harrison	7	IL	Louis Craine	5	CA	Jerome Dennis	5	NJ
Monroe Hickson	4	SC	Lorenzo Fayne	5	MO	Paul Duroseuseau	6	GA, FL
John Henry	3	FL	Thomas Hawkins	3	PA	James Swan	3	DC
Calvin Jackson	9+	NY	Harrison Graham	7+	PA	Lorenzo Gilyard	12	MO
Deveron LeGrand	6+	NY	Ronald Gray	4	NC	Kendall Francois	8	NY
Laskey Postel	7	OH	Richard Grissom	3	MO	Hubert Geraldts	6	IL
Bobby Joe Maxwell	10	CA	Kevin Haley, Reginald Haley	8	CA	Samuel Ivery	4+	CA, AZ, IL, AL
Winston Moseley	3	NY	Ray Jackson	6	MO	Daniel O. Jones	5	MO
David Roberts	4	IN	Wilbur Jennings	4	CA	Henry Lee Jones	4+	Several
Winford Stokes	3	MO	Milton Johnson	17	IL	Arohn Kee	3+	NY
Clarence Walker	14	TN, OH, MI	Bryan Jones	4	CA	Gregory Klepper	8	IL
Coral Watts	13+	TX, MI	Jeffrey Jones	4	CA	Derrick Todd Lee	10	LA
Robert Williams	3	NE, IA	Anthony Joiner	6	PA	David Middleton	3	CO
Wayne Williams	5+	GA	Horace Kelly	3	CA	Christopher Peterson	7	IN
Ben Cheney, Martin Rutrell, L. L. Thompson	4	FL, SC	Michael Player	10	CA	John Mohammed, Lee Malvo	11+	Several

(continued)

TABLE 1 (continued)

Name	1945 to 1979		1980 to 1989		1990 to May 2004	
	Number of Victims	State(s)	Number of Victims	Name	Number of Victims	State(s)
			7	Anthony McKnight	7	CA
			16+	Eddie Lee Moseley	16+	FL
			5	Donald Murphy	5	MI
			5	Calvin Perry	5	IN
			4	Craig Price	4	RI
			10	Michael Player	10	CA
			4	Yusef Rahman	4	KS, NY
			7+	Robert Rozier	7+	FL, NY, MD
			3	Beoria Simmons	3	KY
			7	Morris Solomon	7	CA
			4	Timothy Spencer	4	VA
			3	James Stuard	3	AZ
			6	Micheal Terry	6	GA
			3	Anthony Wimberly	3	CA
				James Pough	11	FL
				Cleophus Prince	6	CA
				Earl Richmond	5	NJ, NC
				George Russell	3	WA
				Marc Sappington	4	KS
				David Selepe	11	OH
				Maurly Travis	17+	MO, IL
				Henry Wallace	9	NC
				John Williams	5	NC
				Nathaniel White	6	NY

among serial killers at a rate approximately twice one would expect based on the average percentage of African Americans in the population (approximately 10.5%) across the 58-year time period examined. Given these findings, the next task is to try to determine why the reality is so far removed from the myth.

### WHY SO LITTLE MEDIA COVERAGE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN SERIAL KILLERS?

The mass media (newspapers, television, movies) are the major sources of public information and perceptions about crime and criminality (Jerin & Fields, 2005). The media are the gatekeepers of what the public is entitled to know, and the media are very anxious not to attract accusations of racism by zeroing in on heinous crimes committed by African Americans with the same zealotry it exhibits when such crimes are committed by Whites (Greek, 2001; Perazzo, 1999). Charges of racism and all the negative consequences that accrue when such charges are made may feature prominently in the maintenance of this double standard. As Walsh (2004) opines, "Even the most conservative media types will be exquisitely sensitive to charges of racism under such threats [boycotts, demonstrations] and will maintain the 'conspiracy of silence' about such matters" (p. 53).

Jenkins (1998) lists three more specific reasons the media ignore or downplay stories about African American serial killers. The weakest reason he gives is that the language often used to describe serial killers (e.g., "primitive," "monsters," "animals") by commentators (but not by the reporters themselves) would be deemed racist if applied to African Americans by a mostly White media. When an official of Nassau County, New York, for instance, called Colin Ferguson (the African American who killed 6 and wounded 17 others on a commuter train in 1993) an "animal," he was soundly rebuked by many civil rights leaders, none of whom have ever been heard to complain when such terms are applied to White killers. This is a weak explanation because the media can obviously report incidents committed by members of any race without the offending language. If news accounts do print such language, it is invariably a quote from an interested observer rather than a judgment of the reporter.

A more convincing argument made by Jenkins (1998) is that until recently, law enforcement agencies were less likely to take Black crimes seriously unless the victims were White. Given this relative lack of interest, Jenkins is of the opinion that African American serial killers may have been more hidden from the mainstream culture and thus more prevalent than the record indicates, especially during earlier periods of the 20th century. Pre-World War II African American Jarvis Catoe, for instance, drew little attention when he concentrated on killing Black women, but his switch to White women in 1941 proved to be his undoing (Newton, 1992). Likewise, White killer Albert Fish was able to remain at large for about 25 years by concentrating on killing Black children, but when he killed a White girl in 1928, he was arrested (Warf & Waddell, 2002). Other serial killers operating exclusively in the Black community may have likewise escaped notice by the police and thus are not known to us today. On the other hand, Jake Bird murdered White women almost exclusively in his years of travel across the United States, until captured in 1947 (Newton, 1992).

The third reason Jenkins (1998) gives for why African American serial killers do not attain the notoriety of their White counterparts is the entertainment media's (as opposed to the news media) perception that books and movies featuring African American characters are not likely to appeal to mass audiences. There does appear to be a reluctance to cast African Americans in negative roles. A survey of more than 600 prime-time television programs aired across 3 decades found that "nine out of 10 murders on TV were committed by Whites. Only three in 100 murders on TV were committed by Blacks. Blacks are about 18 times less likely to commit homicide on TV than in real life" (Lichter, Lichter, & Rothman, 1991, p. 198). However, movie producers have no concerns about casting African Americans in the star roles of lead investigators in serial killer movies, such as Morgan Freeman in *Seven* (Kolsrud, Kopelson, Nunnari, & Fincher, 1995) and *Along Came a Spider* (Freeman, Hornstein, & Tamahori, 2001) or Denzel Washington in *The Bone Collector* (Jinks, Klawitter, & Noyce, 1999). These movies are box office successes, which indicates that Black characters do have appeal to White audiences and that producers are willing to cast them in major roles—at least in "good guy" roles.

It could be argued that fear of being branded racist prevents the depiction of African Americans as villains in the entertainment media rather than their alleged lack of appeal to mass audiences. For instance, *The Silence of the Lambs* (Goetzman & Demme, 1991) has been condemned as racist simply because the main character in the movie, Hannibal the Cannibal, could be linked in the minds of some with his North African namesake, the general who marched his army and his elephants across the Alps (Coffee, 1992). The TV series *Hill Street Blues* (Bochco & Kozoll, 1981-1987), which realistically featured both Black and White criminals, has been depicted as racist for encouraging the stereotype that African Americans are criminals, as has the *Cosby Show* (Leeson, Weinberger, & Cosby, 1984-1992), because it paints an overly positive picture of Black life in America and thus absolves White society of any responsibility for the welfare of African Americans (D'Sousa, 1995). Given this "damned if you do, damned if you don't" situation, producers might be forgiven for their reluctance to negatively cast African Americans. Then again, African American Danny Glover actually played the serial killer role in the popular 1997 movie *Switchback* (Efros, Samples, & Stuart, 1997), which does not seem to have attracted any accusations of racism.

Although all of Jenkins's (1998) reasons must play at least a part, we believe that the primary reason for the lack of coverage of African American serial killers, like the lack of coverage of African Americans in other sensitive areas, such as organized crime and hate crime, is that the print and electronic news media (as opposed to the entertainment media) largely ignore them. The media have tended to avoid more than minimal coverage of heinous crimes committed by African Americans at the same time as they extensively publicize the same kinds of crimes committed by Whites. The differential coverage of the trial of the White police officers who beat Rodney King in Los Angeles and the trial of members of the Yahweh Ben Yahweh cult in Miami for killing "White devils" is a case in point. Almost everyone is aware of the first trial because we were bombarded daily with images of the King beating, the riots, and the trial itself, but few outside Miami have heard of the second trial, which took place concurrently with the police officers' trial (Taylor, 1992). Few doubt that the media response would have been quite different if a group of Whites had been on trial for hunting down and killing "Black devils." On a

similar note, commenting on the lack of media coverage of Reginald and Jonathon Carr's killing of five Whites, African American columnist Armstrong Williams (2002) wrote that these crimes received little national media attention "largely because the victims were White, which meant no Jesse Jackson screaming into his megaphone."

It would be difficult to find a better example of the media's reluctance to portray real African American criminals than the differential coverage of White killer Gary Heidnik and Black killer Harrison Graham. Both men kidnapped and kept a number of women imprisoned in their basements where they raped and tortured them and killed some of them. Although unknown to each other, Heidnik and Graham lived only 3 miles apart in Philadelphia and both were arrested only 5 months apart in 1987 (Jenkins, 1998). Gary Heidnik received widespread national attention, became the subject of books and television shows, and served as a model for the fictitious Buffalo Bill in *Silence of the Lambs* (Goetzman & Demme, 1991). Harrison Graham received virtually no media attention outside of Philadelphia, despite having been convicted of four more murders than Heidnik (seven vs. three), and despite the obvious public interest such attention would generate, given the almost uncanny demographic and modus operandi similarities involved.

At the intersection of news and entertainment lies the documentary. In a 1998 documentary called "Heidnik and Dahmer: Killers for Company," Heidnik was compared to Jeffrey Dahmer. The choice of Dahmer to "costar" with Heidnik was a curious one given that Dahmer's crimes occurred in a different city in another decade, that his modus operandi was very different from Heidnik's, and that his victims were male rather than female. Given the similarities of the Graham and Heidnik cases and the differences between the Heidnik and Dahmer cases, it is difficult to see why Dahmer was chosen instead of Graham, except that Dahmer was also White and thus fit the stereotype. A more appropriate counterpart to Jeffrey Dahmer would have been African American Marc Sappington (the "Kansas City Vampire"). Sappington's killing career lasted only about a month (March to April 2001), but before his capture, the 21-year-old Sappington had killed four young males and ate body parts or drank the blood of three of them (McGraw, 2002).

## AFRICAN AMERICAN SERIAL KILLERS AND CRIMINOLOGY

The overrepresentation of African Americans in serial killing is rarely explicitly (although it may be tacitly) stated in the criminological literature, even by criminologists actively working in the area. Neglecting to point out Black overrepresentation in crimes generally considered a White domain allays any fears of being smeared by allegations of racism. Schatzberg and Kelly (1996) have addressed this concern as it relates to organized crime research and have opined that the primary reason for the academic community's neglect of African American organized crime is that anyone interested in the topic has to "consider the question of race and [accusations of] racism" (p. 21). Likewise, Martens (1990) states that Black involvement in organized crime "is one topic that dare not be discussed, for fear of racism being attributed to the discussants" (p. 43). Other criminologists may practice self-censorship out of a genuine concern that an already disadvantaged group will be further stigmatized if findings pertaining to race are discussed too forthrightly. Whatever the reason may be, Sampson and Wilson (2000) assert that it has resulted in "an unproductive mix of controversy and silence" (p. 149).

Criminologists who specialize in homicide studies are obviously aware that Black serial killers exist and do name them in their work. However, African American serial killers are never represented in the works of these criminologists in proportion to their share of the serial killer population. For instance, of the 19 serial killers discussed in Sears's (1991) book, 2 (10%) were Black; of the 45 discussed in Holmes and Holmes (1998), 2 (4.3%) were Black; Egger (1998) mentions 2 out of 48 serial killers (4.2%); and Fox and Levin (2001) name (but do not discuss) 5 Black serial killers out of 45 (11.1%).<sup>2</sup> What we do see often are statements such as the following: "[Serial killers] were almost never drawn from the ranks of the truly oppressed; there are few women, Blacks or native Americans in our files" (Leyton, 1986, p. 288) and "Serial killing is perpetrated predominantly by white males on white females" (Holmes & Holmes, 1998, p. 31).

Although the words *almost never* and *predominantly* qualify the above statements, making them without further comment gives the reader the impression that White males exhaust the serial

killer category. As we have previously noted, it is no surprise that Whites constitute the majority of serial killers in absolute numbers, but it is a surprise that the concepts of proportionality and disproportionality are never mentioned in the works of serial killer researchers. No writer, to our knowledge, has ever pointed out that in relation to their proportion of the population, African Americans are overrepresented among serial killers.

Ironically, not focusing on African American serial killers has also been deemed racist because serial killers are seen not only as exclusively White, "but also White and brilliant, thus alluding that Blacks aren't smart enough to carry out organized murder" (Chehade, 2002).<sup>3</sup> The exclusion of African Americans based on underlying assumptions of inability has been made in other areas widely assumed to be the sole domain of Whites. The New Jersey State Commission of Investigation into "Afro-lineal" organized crime, for instance, stated explicitly that "law enforcement has long been reluctant to accept the existence of Afro-lineal organized crime, based primarily on the opinion that such ethnic groups were incapable of structuring syndicates of any consequence" (Clark, Betzler, Best, & Sowney, n.d., p. 1). Similarly, Adamson (2000) opines that Black gangs "lack the organizational structure, leadership, and discipline needed to operate highly sophisticated illegal drug manufacturing and selling business" (p. 290). An unconscious albeit well-meaning paternalistic racism may thus be another factor in the neglect of African American serial killers among White scholars.

## CONCLUSION

This article has attempted to distinguish between the myth and the reality of race and serial killing. The widespread belief that only Whites are serial killers and that African Americans almost never commit this type of crime has been found to be false. We found that approximately 21.8% of the identified Black or White serial killers in our sample across a 59-year period were African American. African Americans are thus overrepresented in the ranks of serial killers by a factor of about 2, relative to their proportion of the United States population during the years examined. This does not mean that 21.8% of the known serial killers



operating since 1945 were Black and that the remaining 78.2% were White. The intention of this article was to examine to stereotypes applicable to Blacks and Whites relative to serial killing; thus Hispanic, Asian, and Native American killers were not included in the study.

Our lack of knowledge of African American serial killers, almost by definition, implies a strong media bias against highlighting it. This may be because of fears about being branded racist, a reluctance to further stigmatize an already stigmatized group, or in the case of the entertainment media, the perception that African American characters have little appeal to White audiences. We can largely dismiss the accusation that a racist police force has little interest in Black crime in modern America when the victims are themselves Black, as evidenced by the 90 African Americans that constitute our sample. If there were still any truth in the accusation, it would mean that even more African Americans than we were able to account for have been engaged in this activity.

Regarding the stereotype that African Americans do not commit serial murder, we concur with Jenkins (1998) that "this apparently favorable stereotype is both inaccurate and as pernicious as any of the more familiar racial slurs" (p. 30). It is pernicious because on one hand, it implies that African Americans lack the requisite "brilliance" to commit such crimes, as Chehade (2003) intimated, and on the other, because it can lead to law enforcement neglecting to protect potential victims in the African American community. One wonders how many additional victims have been lost because law enforcement succumbed to the stereotype and concentrated their efforts on White males.<sup>4</sup>

## NOTES

1. Expressive and instrumental crimes are "distinguished by their goals or rewards they offer the perpetrator" (Salfati, 2000, p. 266). Expressive acts of aggression (including homicide) center on the victim as a specific person and on "making the victim or a specific person suffer" (Salfati, 2000, p. 277). Instrumental acts of aggression (including homicide) focuses on the attainment of some material good regardless of the cost to any person seen as a hindrance to that goal (Salfati, 2000). Salfati (2000) points out that criminal acts cannot always be so neatly categorized, but as Holmes and Holmes (1998) point out, "only a few serial killers murder for extrinsic motivations" (p. 38). The Holmes and DeBurger (1985) typology of vision, mission, hedonistic, and power and/or control serial killers makes it

plain that they do not consider most serial killers to be motivated by consideration of extrinsic gain. As mentioned in the body of the article, serial killers who were primarily motivated by material gain are not included in this study.

2. All four authors mentioned Wayne Williams, but only Sears (1991) went beyond a mere mention. Three (Fox & Levin, 2001; Holmes & Holmes, 1998; Sears, 1991) mentioned Coral Watts, but again, only Sears had anything to say about him beyond the number of his victims. Egger (1998) mentioned Benjamin Atkins but not Watts, and Fox and Levin (2001) named, without discussion, Carlton Gary, Vaughn Greenwood, Timothy Spencer, and Williams and Watts.

3. Some may object to Chehade's (2003) characterization of those who commit such heinous acts as serial murder as "brilliant." Chehade's statement, however, is a comment relating to the killers' cognitive abilities that he takes as factual; it is not a comment about their moral qualities. The high intelligence attributed to the "typical" serial killer may be a false stereotype that has entered the folklore of serial killing, derived from the known IQs of a selected few killers. Sears (1991) states that "many serial killers are usually quite intelligent" (p. 43) and goes on to list the IQs of Ted Bundy (124), John Wayne Gacy (118), Kenneth Bianchi (106 to 116), David Berkowitz (115 to 118), and Edmund Kemper (136). Whenever we read of the brilliance of serial killers, the same names (particularly Bundy and Kemper) continually crop up as exemplars.

4. One reviewer stated that my article "could" (indicating that the word was being used loosely) be construed as being critical of African Americans and that some may construe it as racially insensitive. However, I do not see it as being critical of African Americans any more than writing about White serial killers is critical of Whites. My criticism is aimed at the media (and at some criminologists) who perpetuate the myth that Blacks almost never commit serial killing and the corollary myth that it is an almost exclusively White phenomenon (a falsehood that never draws charges of racial insensitivity). We obviously cannot blame African Americans for the lack of attention paid to serial killers among them by others. The charge of possible racial insensitivity is, of course, one of the reasons stated in my article by myself and other authors that the topic of Black serial killing is a neglected area. No one wants to be accused of racial insensitivity, which may morph into charges of racism, so researchers tend to avoid topics such as this or to approach them in circumspect ways.

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