



# Investigative Issues in the Victimology of Violent Serial Crimes: An Australian Perspective

Natalie Scerra  
[n.scerra@uws.edu.au](mailto:n.scerra@uws.edu.au)





# Overview

- Serial crimes defined
- Why victims?
- Police culture and serial crime investigation
- Methodology
- Findings



# What is 'serial'?

## **Serial Murder**

...there are 2 or more separate homicide events which occur over a period of time.... There is a cooling-off period between episodes. These crimes are predatory. The offender frequently stalks his victims. The motive is clearly psychological. The offender's behaviour and the crime scene evidence typically indicate sexual and sadistic features, and may involve torture and mutilation to the victim (Cook & Hinman, 1999, p.364).

## **Serial Rape**

two or more related rape or sexual assault offences (Turvey, 2002) and usually refers to predatory rapists who victimise strangers (Deu, 1997; Stevens, 1994)



# The victims

- ‘Study of victims’
  - Crime committed
  - Victim response
  - Characteristics of victim
  - Why chosen
    - Represent to offender
    - Marginality and vulnerability = stereotypes
- Are victims of serial crime subject to stereotypes by police?



# Police culture

- Term often limited to discussion of
  - ‘boys club’
  - ‘corruption’
- Role of officer in the organisational context
- Not universal- many subcultures



# Cultural knowledge

- According to Janet Chan (2003:31) dictionary knowledge:
  - ...provides definitions and labels for persons, things, and events that police encounter in the course of their work
- Police use this knowledge to develop a routine of categorising actors in a situation
- Directory Knowledge (Chan, 2003: 32)
  - ...how operational work is routinely carried out
- Enables quick decision making based on this knowledge



# Aim

- How does police dictionary knowledge influence the investigation of serial murder or serial rape?
  - Is there a dictionary knowledge of the victims of these crimes?



# Methodology

- Case Studies
  - 5 incidents of serial murder, 4 incidents of serial rape.

Name	Dates	No. Vics	State
Paul Denyer	1993	3	VIC
Kathleen Folbigg	1989-1999	3	NSW
John Glover	1989-1990	6	NSW
Ivan Milat	1989-1992	7	NSW
Snowtown	1994-1998	11	SA
Anthony Daley	1998-2000	7	NSW
David Johnson	1995-1997	8/26*	NSW
Bruno Presta	1997	5	NSW
Wayne Trindall	1995-2004	6	NSW



# Methodology cont...

- Semi-structured interviews
  - 5 former and current detectives NSW Police
  - 1 former consultant (criminal profiler) NSW Police



# Findings: The Male Victim

- Children as vulnerable (Presta)
  - “These were just regular kids. They weren’t crooks, they weren’t out using [drugs].”*
  - “...these kids were on their way home from parties-decent kids just on their way home...”*
- Subcultural: varying views by other detective



*...he [the victim] was in the hospital one of the police officers that had went [sic] to take the original report had an argument with him and told him he was lying about it. Because his story kept changing. Turns out his story didn't change at all it was just a long story and he was telling parts of it and he had been given Rohypnol and so he was having [sic] in and out of memory. That report was nearly not made because they didn't believe him. He had cigarette burns all over him and whip marks everywhere but they still hadn't believed a word he said. And every one of the kids interviewed had said if they hadn't been picked up by an ambulance they wouldn't have reported it at all.*

Different understanding of male victim (dictionary knowledge)

=

Different response to victim (directory knowledge)



- Reflective of myths and stereotypes of male victims of sexual assault
- McAdam & Fitts (1999)
  - Males cannot be victims of sexual assault
  - Homosexuality as a feature or outcome



# Finding: Sex workers

- Trindall (1995-2004)
  - Minimal investigation at initial report
  - Substantial amount of evidence was not analysed
    - None of the SAIKs analysed prior to 2004



- Bridgett & Robinson (1999)
  - Marginalisation of sex workers
  - High incidence of violence, reporting low
  - Inadequate criminal justice response
- Victim mobility additional issue for investigators



# Finding: Outcasts

- Snowtown
  - *“a group that preyed upon itself”*
    - Homosexuality
    - Alleged paedophiles
  - Task force initiated after traditional victim linked to other disappearances



# Finding: Missing

- Milat

*“It was not a serious case in the eyes of the police- two nineteen-year-olds off on a bit of a skylark. If they investigated every such case, they’d be doing nothing else, especially in mid-summer” (Whittaker & Kennedy, 1998)*

- Initial investigation:

*There would have been very limited investigations undertaken at that time because they were simply...they were backpackers. They had no friends or relatives here, their contact had been... the reporting by them of their movements had been quite intermittent, so you really had very little to go on*



*...the victims were backpackers which meant they had no close connections in the immediate Sydney area or the Bowral-Belanglo area, so your opportunity for leads were less than might be the case. You also had the fact that there had been a degrading of the crime scene simply because of the weather over several years, and trying to track the immediate movements of the victims was also very difficult. Because they were simply backpackers travelling alone.*



# Concluding Thoughts

- Cultural knowledge reflective of the victim
- Internalisation of social stereotypes into dictionary knowledge of detectives
- Resultant outcomes on the way in which the crimes were investigated initially