

Where serial killers are likely to strike

January 31 2007

New research from two United States universities and Massey University is the first to throw light on regional differences in serial killing.

It shows that people who live in areas with high rates of divorce, one-person households and unemployment are more likely to become victims of serial killers.

The study was led by University of Connecticut Emeritus Sociology Professor James DeFronzo, working with researchers from Northeastern University in Boston and Villanova University in Pennsylvania, and Dr Jane Prochnow from Massey University's College of Education.

They looked at the considerable interstate and regional differences in serial killer activity in the United States, with people in Western states more likely to become victims than people in the Northeast, and people in California almost three times more likely to become victims.

The study examined male serial killers from 1970 to 1992 using sociological perspectives identified in earlier research by Professor DeFronzo and Dr Prochnow.

It found that social structural factors, such as higher percentages of urban population, divorced residents, one-person households and unemployed residents, all helped to explain why some states and regions are home to more male serial killers.

Dr Prochnow says this is partly explained by the increased vulnerability

of divorced people, those in one-person households, and the unemployed.

The researchers also looked at the socialisation of serial killers as children but concluded that the availability of targets or victims is a stronger factor in where serial killing occurs.

The study also found that states with more “legitimate violence (use of the death penalty, higher rates of hunting licences, subscriptions to magazines, enlistment in the national guard and higher rates of violent television viewing) had higher rates of serial killers.

The report says females have more diverse motives for serial murders, but a large majority of male serial killers are sexually motivated and about 10 percent appear to suffer from disorders, such as extreme forms of paranoid schizophrenia.

Dr Prochnow says psychiatric analyses have been used to understand male serial killer activity, but this has not explained the considerable geographic differences that exist. “Many serial killers have had typically traumatic childhoods and childhood behavioural problems like abusing little animals and younger children. We were interested in the relation of structural and cultural variables as opposed to explaining the brutal actions of these killers simply in psychological terms.”

The study is believed to be the first to show that both cultural and social structural factors play a role in the incidence of serial killing. Dr Prochnow says while it focused on the United States because of regional subcultures and state differences in laws, including the death penalty, the findings are relevant elsewhere. “The structural variables which are indicators of vulnerable targets for serial killers are relevant to most societies, especially more developed societies. You would expect that other places, including in New Zealand, Australia, Britain, or Canada,

which have higher percentages of one person households, divorced people and unemployed would also have higher rates of male serial killers.”

The full report is available at: hsx.sagepub.com/cgi/reprint/11/1/3.pdf

Source: Massey University

Citation: Where serial killers are likely to strike (2007, January 31) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2007-01-serial-killers.html>

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