Serial killers may kill more victims than we think

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Serial killers might be responsible for up to 10 times as many U.S. deaths as previously estimated, according to an analysis by a criminologist at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis.

Kenna Quinet, associate professor in the School of Public and Environmental Affairs at IUPUI, makes the case for the higher death figures in an article titled, "The Missing Missing: Toward a Quantification of Serial Murder Victimization in the United States." It was published recently in the journal *Homicide Studies*.

Quinet writes that a lack of reliable data about the "missing missing" -- including marginalized groups such as prostitutes, transients, gay street

hustlers, foster children and "thrown-away" teens -- is likely to contribute to undercounting of the victims of serial killers. Recent academic estimates of the average number of serial killer victims each year range from 67 to 180. Quinet's analysis, based on conservative extrapolations from existing data, would add at least 182 and possibly as many 1,832 victims.

"We're talking about a factor of two clear up to a factor of 10," she said. "And this is not new -- these are victims that we've always been not counting."

The article marks a return to a subject of early professional interest for Quinet, who is also a Faculty Fellow at the Center for Urban Policy and the Environment at IUPUI, teaches a course each spring titled, "Murder in America," and is a member of the Indiana Violent Crime and Homicide Investigator's Association.

In research published in 1990, she debunked wildly inflated claims about the number of serial killer victims that had been circulated by special interest and advocacy groups and in the news media. But the much more conservative calculations of victim numbers that followed were also inaccurate, she said, because they were based on incomplete data.

"The true number of serial murder victims in the United States is a function of what we know -- apprehended killers and strongly suspected serial murder cases -- as well as what we do not know -- serial murder cases that for one reason or another are off the radar of police, coroners, medical examiners and others officials," she writes in the Homicide Studies article. "The exaggeration and hype of the 1980s have been replaced by more reasonable estimates, but we may yet be undercounting the number of serial murder victims in the United States by discounting what we do not know."

What we do not know includes: How often are the bodies of murder victims never found or never identified as victims? What happens to members of marginalized groups who disappear but are never reported missing, because no one cares enough about them or knows enough about them to file a report? How often do we fail to detect murders of people who were expected to die, such as hospital patients and nursing home residents?

Quinet applies known information about serial murderers and their victims to available data about missing persons, overall U.S. deaths, hospital census figures and information about the "missing missing" -- missing persons who were never reported as missing -- to calculate that current estimates may be failing to account for between 182 and 1,832 victims of serial killings a year.

The article cites the case of the Green River serial killer in Washington as an example of how including the "missing missing" could change the numbers. One-third of the killer's 48 known victims were never reported missing, had been mistakenly deleted from police missing-persons databases, or were never identified.

Perhaps the biggest potential pool of overlooked victims is the "misidentified dead," including hospital patients and nursing home residents who are thought to have died from natural causes. In their book The Will to Kill: Making Sense of Senseless Murder, Quinet and co-authors James Alan Fox and Jack Levin point out that "medical murderers" have, in a few cases, killed dozens of people and estimate their victims to total 500 to 1,000 a year.

Quinet said gaining a better understanding of the numbers and identities of victims of serial killing is of more than academic interest. It could help in designing surveillance systems and targeting police resources to do a better job of preventing murders -- possibly by devoting more

resources to protecting forgotten groups such as prostitutes, runaways and homeless people.

"From a humanitarian standpoint, the idea that some deaths don't matter as much as others infuriates me, particularly if they could have been prevented," she said.

Quinet plans to continue her research by developing a database of information about the victims of serial killers, seeking to understand what properties and traits are most likely to be shared by the victims. She also intends to write policy recommendations based on her research for a series published by the Department of Justice.

Source: Indiana University