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Aggression and Violent Behavior



Sexual homicide offenders distinguished from non-homicidal sexual offenders: A review of the literature

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ABSTRACT

Sexual homicide (or sexual murder) is largely referred to as a homicide that is committed with an apparent or underlying sexual motivation. Although this topic has been increasingly studied in recent years, little is known about how sex offenders who kill their victims differ from those who do not. This article recaps empirical findings related to sexual homicide offenders and then synthesizes 17 empirical studies that distinguish the demographic and psychosocial characteristics of sexual offenders who killed (i.e., sexual homicide offenders) and those who did not kill (i.e., non-homicidal sexual offenders). This review spans a period of 28.5 years (1988 to mid-2016). A number of key distinguishing characteristics emerged between the two groups. Some inconclusive differential features between the two subpopulations of sexual offenders appear to be partly due to different sampling procedures in these studies (e.g., small sample size, recruitment of specific groups of sexual offenders). Implications for research, practice, and policy are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Notwithstanding great interest in sexual homicide from law enforcement, academic scholars, and the general public, sexual homicide

is a relatively understudied crime. Research into sexual murder clearly has been limited by difficulties in identifying these types of violent crimes. Numerous definitions of sexual homicide have emerged over the years. The lack of a standardized definition has hindered the accurate classification of sexual homicides and the accuracy in the reporting systems of national crime statistics (see Chan, 2015; Chan & Heide, 2009; Greenall, 2012; Kerr, Beech, & Murphy, 2013).

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Sex-related killing is often classified simply as a homicide in official crime statistics in both North America and the United Kingdom (U.K.; Adjorlolo & Chan, 2014; Burgess, Hartman, Ressler, Douglas, & McCormack, 1986; Milsom, Beech, & Webster, 2003). In a related matter, this definitional dilemma also applies to the term “serial” in homicide, both sexual and non-sexual nature (see Adjorlolo & Chan, 2014). Due to the classification dilemma, documented statistics of this unique type of violent crime are often misleading, difficult to estimate, or simply unavailable (Ressler, Burgess, & Douglas, 1988). The official U.S. national crime statistics source – Uniform Crime Reports (UCRs) – has indexed many cases of sexual homicide under the “unknown motive” category, reflecting the uncertainty of the nature of this crime even within the U.S. criminal justice system.

Reports of sexual murder documented by law enforcement constitute between 1% and 4% of the overall annual homicide rate in the United States (U.S.), Canada, and Britain (Chan & Heide, 2009). This percentage has remained relatively stable over the years. In a representative dataset for a 36-year period spanning from 1976 until 2011, sexual homicide accounted for approximately 0.86% out of a total of 686,398 individuals arrested for homicide in the U.S. (Chan & Beauregard, 2016a). Nonetheless, the proportion of sexual homicides is reported to be considerably higher in some European countries. For example, Francis and Sothill (2000) found in their 10-year study of 4860 homicide offenders in England and Wales that 3.7% ($N = 178$) of them were convicted of a homicide that occurred in sexual circumstances.

Despite the interest in sexual homicide offenders (SHOs), surprisingly little is known about how sexual offenders who kill their victims differ from those who do not kill their victims. One recently published study by Stefanska, Beech, and Carter (2016) reviewed 10 studies that empirically compared sexual killers with sexual aggressors. This study is arguably the first to provide a systematic review on these two types of sex offenders in the perspectives of the offender characteristics (e.g., emotions, mental problems, interpersonal relationship, criminal history, family structure, and own victimization) and crime scene behaviors (e.g., premeditation, sexual activity, victim humiliation, and victim control). Relative to Stefanska and colleagues' study, the current study differed in a number of ways. First, their study sampled 10 empirical studies and concentrated on a specific group of sexual killers (i.e., male, nonserial, and perpetrated against adult female victims). By doing so, they limited the number of studies to be reviewed. The current study, in contrast, sampled 17 empirical studies and did not limit to a specific group of sexual murderers. Moreover, in addition to the variables examined in Stefanska and colleagues' study, the current study also examined other offender characteristics (e.g., the offenders' racial background, intelligence, educational background, sexual deviation, and pre-crime characteristics) and crime scene behaviors (e.g., weapon used), and victim characteristics. Consequently, the current study further adds to the repertoire of the existing knowledge in understanding homicidal and nonhomicidal sexual offenders.

Increased understanding of the differences and similarities between SHOs and NHSOs is needed to facilitate strategized practical (i.e., clinical and investigation) and policy implications. In this article we first briefly recap empirical findings related to SHOs. Thereafter, existing studies that compared sexual murderers (i.e., homicidal sexual offenders) from sexual offenders who did not murder their victims (i.e., non-homicidal sexual offenders, NHSOs) across different victim groups are synthesized. Characteristics of these two subpopulations of sexual offenders that have emerged across 17 studies are distinguished. This article concludes with a discussion of implications for future research, practice, and policy.

2. Empirical findings related to sexual homicide offenders

Existing studies typically provide limited demographic information on sexual homicide offenders. Arrest data indicate that the

overwhelming majority of sexual homicides in the United States (U.S.) were perpetrated by males (95%; Chan, Myers, & Heide, 2010; Myers & Chan, 2012), with the remaining 5% committed by female offenders (Chan & Frei, 2013; Chan, Frei, & Myers, 2013). Among male sexual homicide offenders¹ in the U.S., 88% of them were adults (aged 18 and above) and the remaining 12% were juveniles under the age of 18 years (Chan & Heide, 2008; Chan, Heide, & Myers, 2013; Chan et al., 2010). A large majority of the offenders arrested for sexual homicides in single-victim, single-offender incidents were also adults (92%) with the remaining 8% being juveniles (Chan & Beauregard, 2016a).

Depending on samples recruited in different countries ($N = 18$ to 2472), the reported offenders' mean age at arrest was between 24 and 34 years (Beauregard & Field, 2008; Beauregard & Martineau, 2013; Chan, 2015; Chan & Beauregard, 2016a, 2016b; Greenall & Richardson, 2015; Häkkänen-Nyholm, Repo-Tiihonen, Lindberg, Salenius, & Weizmann-Henelius, 2009; Koch, Berner, Hill, & Briken, 2011; Rettenberger, Hill, Dekker, Berner, & Briken, 2013; Spehr, Hill, Habermann, Briken, & Berner, 2010; Vettor, Beech, & Woodhams, 2014). According to Myers, Chan, and Mariano (2016), the most likely age at arrest for sexual homicide was 21 years, with two-thirds of the offenders committing a sexual homicide between the ages of 18 to 35 years. In Beauregard and Martineau's (2013) sample of Canadian sexual killers, the offenders generally did not possess a large physical build with 80% of them being either thin or of average body build.

Most sexual homicides were committed by white offenders (59% to 93%; Beauregard & Martineau, 2013; Chan, 2015; Chan & Beauregard, 2016a; Chan et al., 2010; Chan, Frei, & Myers, 2013; Chan, Beauregard, & Myers, 2015; Greenall & Richardson, 2015; Myers & Chan, 2012; Vettor et al., 2014). Chan et al. (2010) found in their sample of American sexual murderers that black offenders were disproportionately overrepresented in the SHO population (41%) given their considerably low representation in the overall population in the U.S. (13%). Also in their study of SHOs, Chan et al. (2010) reported that white offenders were highly likely to murder within their own race (i.e., intra-racial killing), whereas black offenders murdered both intra- and inter-racially (i.e., outside of their race) with their tendency to kill inter-racially increasing as the victim's age increased.

Previous research has found that most of the victims of male SHOs were females (Beauregard & Martineau, 2013; Chan & Beauregard, 2016a; Chan, Beauregard, & Myers, 2015; Smith, Basile, & Karch, 2011; Van Patten & Delhauer, 2007) and a large proportion of the victims, from 70 to 80% in most recent empirical studies (Chan et al., 2010, 2015; Greenall & Richardson, 2015; Henry, 2010; Smith et al., 2011), were at least 18 years old. Depending on the samples recruited, the victims of sexual homicide were, on the average, between 27 and 37 years (Beauregard & Martineau, 2013; Chan, 2015; Chan & Beauregard, 2016a; Greenall & Richardson, 2015; Myers & Chan, 2012; Myers et al., 2016). The study conducted by Chan et al. (2015) indicated that the victims' mean age of serial SHOs (23 years) was found to be significantly younger than victims of nonserial SHOs (29 years).

Although female sexual homicide offenders are mentioned in several past studies (e.g., Gacono, Meloy, & Bridges, 2000; Harbot & Mokros, 2001; Myers & Chan, 2012), information about this subpopulation of sexual murderers is limited, primarily due to its rarity. To date, only two empirical studies on sexual homicides have been conducted solely on female offenders (Chan & Frei, 2013; Chan, Heide, & Myers, 2013). A large majority of female SHOs were adults (87%; Chan & Frei, 2013). Similar to their male counterparts, slightly more females who committed sexual homicides were white (53%; Chan & Frei, 2013; Chan, Heide, & Myers, 2013). White female SHOs in the U.S., relative to black SHOs, were significantly less likely to kill males (opposite-sex sexual homicides; 68% vs. 81%; Chan & Frei, 2013). White females were found to

¹ Sexual homicide offenders, sexual murderers, sexual killers, homicidal sexual offenders, and sexual offenders who killed are used interchangeably in this article to refer to the same group of sexual offenders.

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