Exploring the Similarities and Differences in Offender Characteristics Across Aspiring, Probable, and Successful Serial Homicide Offenders: The Importance of an Inclusive Approach to the Study of Homicide

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**Abstract**

The current study examines potential serial homicide offenders (SHOs), a previously unacknowledged offender group comprised of aspiring and probable SHOs, and compares them to successful SHOs. Data on 17 aspiring, 46 probable, and 16 successful SHOs were collected. The study results indicate thatpotential serial killers share more in common with successful SHOs than they do with one-off homicide offenders. While there is overlap among these groups, there is insufficient evidence to suggest discreet transitions among categories or that being a potential SHO is the final step on a pathway towards becoming a successful SHO. Potential SHOs cannot reliably be thought of as prospective SHOs if all things were equal. An as yet identified factor, such as resiliency, still separates potential SHOs from successful SHOs. Early identification and timely intervention is important to interrupt impending murders by potential SHOs and halt them at this pivotal point in their developmental trajectory.

**KEYWORDS**: violent behavior, serial homicide, criminal victimization, crime prevention, critical criminology

“*Being able to find someone alone and hurting them without anybody seeing or any witnesses, it’s kind of really hard*.” – Daniel Spain, 25, aspiring serial murderer[[1]](#footnote-1)

Much has been surmised about perpetrators of serial murder (Watts, 2018) and their prevalence (Wilkinson, 2017). While the desire to kill serially may not have lessened, evidence suggests there is a decrease in serial murder due, in part, to early identification of wannabe and would-be serial homicide offenders (SHOs) (Yaksic et al., 2019). It is thought that these offenders have been prevented from committing new homicides (Bjorkly & Waage, 2005) by means of improved response by law enforcement organizations (LEOs), and better technology that aids potential victims to stay vigilant (Quinet, 2011; Yaksic, 2016), which has forced shifts in behavior patterns among SHOs (Yaksic, 2019; Yaksic, 2020). These developments have posed obstacles and diminished the SHO’s ability to kill multiple victims and escape apprehension. The aim of the current research is to classify two previously unacknowledged cohorts of SHOs, loosely identified in media sources as ‘wannabe’ and ‘would-be’ SHOs [herein aspiring and probable SHOs, respectively, or potential SHOs when grouped], and compare them to successful SHOs. We were also interested to know if these groups are distinct from one another or if they represent a stop along a continuum. It is important to acknowledge potential SHOs as they will conceivably impact the serial homicide phenomenon in the coming decades.

**Adapting Definitional Structures to Include Potential SHOs**

If researchers are to consider potential SHOs as a new offender cohort, they must first determine where they fit in current definitional structures. Even though semantic issues have slowed the broader criminological understanding of the topic (DeLisi & Scherer, 2006), a key distinction between potential (e.g., aspiring and probable) and actual (e.g., successful) SHOs is one of intentionality. Fridel and Fox (2018) argue that potential SHOs are not characterized by the more extreme levels of violent behavior demonstrated by actual SHOs who complete a series of three (or more) homicides. But researchers (Adjorlolo & Chan, 2014; Harbort & Mokros, 2001; Yaksic, 2018a) have suggested that intentionality provides a better account of serial murder than the simplistic measurement of body count and temporal sequences between murders. The idea that luck, coincidence, and chance can dictate the outcomes of a second act of violence and whether or not an attempt turns out to be fatal (Bjorkly & Waage, 2005) supports intentionality as a critical aspect of defining serial murder. For example, Reavis (2011) reports on a SHO that relied on luck since he executed his plans haphazardly due to an inability to learn from the first trial and apply that to a template for subsequent killings.

Even though Liem (2013) concludes that it is very rare for a ‘general’ homicide offender to commit a second homicide, SHOs who do originate from the general criminal population are excluded from study because they do not use exotic techniques (Trojan & Salfati, 2011; Yaksic, 2018a). But SHOs may not be psychologically different from ‘general’ homicide offenders given that Culhane, Hilstad, Freng and Gray (2011) report on a SHO that did not vary much from other criminals on certain basic psychological measures. Brantley and Ochberg (2003) introduce the concept of the lethal predator, a potential SHO that has killed only *once* and are likely to keep killing as long as they are free. Homant and Kennedy (2014) concur, stating that someone who has killed once may qualify as a SHO, as they may have yet to act or lacked the opportunity.

Given this variability, along with the finding of DeLisi, Ruelas and Kruse (2019) that prior homicide offending is significantly associated with future homicide offending, it is important to appropriately categorize these groups to better understand them. To that end, this study categorizes aspiring SHOs as those that harbor a propensity to kill and have taken an assaultive step towards homicide, probable SHOs as those that maintain the psychological proclivity to commit additional murders beyond a first, and a successful SHO as someone who acted perfectly on their intentions three times (Adjorlolo & Chan, 2014; Yaksic, 2018b).

**The Trajectory Towards Homicidal Behavior**

Over the last two decades, researchers and practitioners have tried to understand SHOs through direct interview (Beasley, 2004; Pino, 2005), one-to-one comparisons (Morton et al., 2010; Wolf & Lavezzi, 2007) and clinical instruments (Culhane et al., 2011; Culhane, Hildebrand, Walker & Gray, 2014; Leach & Meloy, 1999; Ostrosky-Solis, Vélez‐García, Santana‐Vargas, Pérez & Ardila, 2008; Porcerelli, Abramsky, Hibbard & Kamoo, 2001; Reavis, 2011). Results from these studies show that serial killing is a highly variable phenomenon, with diversity in offenders’ actions and individual psychopathologies. Consistency arises from these studies’ stable characterization of SHOs as victims of negative life events who have come to possess fractured identities. Because SHOs are the sum of deficits accumulated over their life course trajectory, credence is given to the hypothesis that they naturally yearn to graduate across categories, from potential to successful, and do so under the proper conditions.

And yet it is not possible to identify who among the population of potential SHOs will carry forth their plans to the point of murder. Gurian (2013)stated that while prediction of homicidal behavior eludes researchers, general trends have been identified that are multi-factorial with different influences. The first step to predict sexual homicide, according to Beauregard (2018),is to identify offenders who are violent, and to accept that the trajectory leading a violent offender to kill includes childhood characteristics such as sexual proclivities, criminal history, and modus operandi. Modus operandi is shaped by external constraints, such as victim resistance and early third-party intervention as well as situational factors, such as crime location and the aggressor's lifestyle and internal constraints, such as beliefs and attitudes (James & Proulx, 2016). Here, the offender’s threatening actions, words or thought patterns can sometimes be used to thwart near-acts of violence ahead of time (Sarteschi, 2016). For that reason, Culhane, Walker and Hildebrand (2017) focus on criminal thinking as a predictor of repeat criminal behavior and a core feature of antisocial cognition, a hallmark of serial violence. James and Gossett (2017) posit that SHOs use such thinking to form neutralization techniques to guide future behavior.

It is important to be cognizant of the structural makeup of successful SHOs in the attempt to discern the presence of such hallmarks within potential SHOs who have not yet achieved the benchmarks associated with the phenomenon. While there is not a single approach to understand their psychological state (Culhane et al., 2014), most SHOs have motivations that are sexual in nature (Harbort & Mokros, 2001; Morton, Tillman, & Gaines, 2015), have histories of drugs or alcohol use, work unskilled jobs, and have previous exposure to the criminal justice system. These troubled individuals lack emotional support networks, fail to manage depressed mental states, display high levels of obsessional thinking, and have authority problems, persecutory ideas, and emotional disorders. Their sexual murderers indicate a greater desire for affection, dysphoric rumination, and obsessional thinking (Porcerelli et al., 2001). While impulsivity is a significant predicator of sexual homicide, even after considering situational factors (Healey & Beauregard, 2017), sexual SHOs are part of a distinct subset of serial homicide, where offenders have chosen victims based on vulnerability, availability, and desirability (Morton et al., 2010). Abuse also appears to be a frequent feature in the history of violent criminals[[2]](#footnote-2) (Ostrosky-Solis et al., 2008), but Keatley et al. (2018) point out that abuse does not occur in life histories of all SHOs and does not lead directly to multiple murder; rather, this factor is part of a temporal chain of behaviors and events which themselves can lead to the serial killing pathway. For instance, when accompanied by brain abnormalities, the abused individual may be at a higher risk to engage in violence due to compromised impulse control(Ostrosky-Solis et al., 2008).

Intended violence is a process of discreet, sequential, and recognizable behaviors cataloged over behavioral stages; referred to by Calhoun and Weston (2015) as the path to intended violence. They argue that this path is comprised of 1) holding a grievance; 2) ideation; 3) research/planning; 4) preparations; 5) breach; and 6) attack. Given that many SHOs show marked differences in their actions from one homicide to the next (Harbort & Mokros, 2001), researchers must use the path model to understand why SHOs begin their killing sprees, how they adapt new tactics as they gradually develop and mature, and how they choose to recidivate. The main predictors of recidivism are often young age and prior criminal record at the time of the homicide (Liem, 2013), the commission of rape or burglary in concert with homicide (DeLisi & Scherer, 2006), arrests including sexual assault or theft (Keatley, Golightly, Shephard, Yaksic, & Reid, 2018), and the presence of both sexual and assault offenses (Trojan & Salfati, 2011).

**Mapping the Developmental Pathway of the SHO**

Most agree that the gestation period of a SHO spans from some period before plans are put into action, often in the offender’s youth. It begins when SHOs start exhibiting behavioral patterns related to their greater risk of suffering from personality disorders. Harbort and Mokros (2001) identify factors related to alienation and maladjustment that serve as precursors to serial homicide: emotional instability, lack of responsibility, egotistic tendencies, low frustration tolerance, reduced impulse control, low self-confidence, low affect, deficiency in maintaining attachments, deficits in conflict competency, and a hostile emotional state paired with lack of empathy. These influences could be traced back to early childhood, and may predispose individuals towards future offending (Liem, 2013). DeLisi et al. (2017)demonstrate that offenders with evidence of homicidal ideation have the highest mean scores for antisocial personality disorder and that this concept is predated by adverse childhood experiences. Vaughn, Carbone, DeLisi, and Holzer (2020) found that homicidal ideation, a necessary component of the will to kill, peaks during the ages of 14 and 15 and begins to significantly decline thereafter. This finding greatly elevates the risk posed by those with homicidal ideation that are sixteen years or older, or 37 percent of the potential SHO cohort in this study.

Even though there is a dearth of literature on SHOs under the age of 18 (Myers, 2004), some seminal studies relevant to the present research have focused directly on this under-researched cohort. Johnson and Becker (1997) traced the development of the sexually sadistic SHO across nine adolescents, responsible for two homicides and five attempted homicides. The behaviors and fantasies of their subjects are similar to successful SHOs. Much like many potential SHOs, subjects had obsessional thoughts and fantasies about murder, maintained specific goals to become SHOs, and professed to enjoy explicit movies or were inspired by fictional characters. Some even obtained sexual excitement from killing animals and dealt with feelings of anger or depression while abusing alcohol and marijuana.

Each juvenile SHO in the Myers (2004) cohort had a high prevalence of stranger victims, were largely driven not by anger but by the pursuit of sadistic pleasure, and displayed obsessive sadistic interest or fantasies. These offenders’ desire to murder had not declined, yet they did not kill again because before they could do so, their cognitive and emotional immaturity, impulsivity, feelings of invulnerability associated with their young age, and lack of criminal sophistication contributed to their apprehension. Relatedly, Williams and Vincent (2018) reported on two teenage offenders who teamed up to kill. The authors surmised that it is likely that these offenders will commit future violence, even given their lack of neurocognitive maturity, and the detention by LEOs derailed their future plans to kill again.

A major explanation for the development of SHOs is mistreatment during childhood (DeFronzo, Ditta, Hannon & Prochnow, 2007) which echoes the work of Arndt et al. (2004) and references Hickey (2002), who suggested that traumatization – combined with pre-dispositional factors – may lead to serial homicide.The authors caution that other factors and experiences that shape personality, promote predatory inclinations, and enable the realization of fantasies are necessary to explain serial murder. The consequences of these traumas are mistrust, feelings of worthlessness, and an inability to cope with stress. This often develops into severe depression, which may result in thoughts to harm others (Brantley & Kosky, 2005). Even non-serial sexual murderers develop negative affect and poor coping strategies for their emotional distress as a result of cognitions and situations that has left them dissatisfied (James & Proulx, 2016), but SHOs constitute a distinct type of homicide offender who are more prone to personality disorders with greater signs of alienation and social maladjustment, which are more likely to commit crimes that serve egotistical needs.

**Comparison of SHOs to Non-Serial Homicide Offenders**

While potential SHOs maintain unmet desires related to gratification, it is difficult to know how they compare to successful SHOs due to a dearth of studies and lack of access to data. Most academic studies echo support for the classic, yet stereotypical, characteristics attributed to SHOs such as their penchant for using torture, a singular kill method, and a habit for collecting totems (Fridel & Fox, 2018; Yaksic, 2018a). Because behavior displayed by successful SHOs provides evidence as to how future intentions to victimize others are formulated, we sought to identify characteristics inherent to potential SHOs by comparing them to those intrinsic to successful SHOs. We identified attributes common to one-off murderers to provide context for similarities and differences and consulted comparative studies to accomplish these comparisons.

Trojan and Salfati (2011) state that the true degree to which SHOs differ from one-off killers is not fully understood at present. Prentky et al. (1989) demonstrate that well over three-quarters of SHOs have fantasies that had driven their assaultive behavior, compared to less than one-quarter of one-off killers. Harbort and Mokros (2001) observed that one-off offenders killed their family and friends and displayed more reactive anger and impulsive behavior whereas findings by Kraemer, Lord and Heilbrun (2004) support the differentiation of serial homicides from other types of murder by their premeditated, predatory nature, and lack of provocation. These authors understood SHOs to target more women than men, kill more strangers than family or friends, and for sexual motivations. Furthermore, the use of a remote location to dispose the body is predictive of SHOs who were more ‘‘hands-on’’ (i.e. killing through strangulation or beating), while one-off offenders more frequently used guns and had anger-based motives.

Arndt, Hietpas, & Him (2004) note that sexually motivated SHOs chose female victims more than non-sexually motivated SHOs. Pakkanen, Zappalà, Bosco, Berti, and Santtila (2015) found that SHOs targeted significantly more sex workers and displayed a higher level of forensic awareness (i.e., the ability to evade law enforcement). The one-off homicide offenders killed victims known to them more often than SHOs. Chan, Beauregard and Myers (2015) realized that SHOs were more likely to select victims with distinctive physical and/or psychological characteristics. James and Proulx (2016) noted that SHOs were more likely to make their murders congruent with their fantasies, tortured their victims, tended to attack individuals when they were alone and recorded the murder. Sturup (2018) discovered that serial offenses more often involved planning and forensic awareness, whereas the one-off offenses involved non-planned violence preceded by interpersonal conflicts. Klier, Amon, Putkonen, Arias, and Weizmann-Henelius (2018) found that repeat perpetrators of neonaticide differed from one-off killers in that they were older and had a higher rate of diagnosed personality disorders.

**Present Study**

The first step to capture SHOs is to comprehend them (Ledezma, 2018), and this study will elucidate similarities and differences between potential and successful SHOs. We hypothesized that aspiring SHOs would seek attention for their crimes and have an immature grasp of what it means to be a SHO, while probable SHOs would be motivated by a search for pleasure, act logically, and be grounded in reality. It is hypothesized that aspiring SHOs will be younger and act at the behest of urges after excessive homicidal ideation. These offenders may struggle to kill their first victim, express their will to kill through threats or admissions to others, seem ready to embrace their interpretation of the killer lifestyle, and intend to harness powers they believe SHOs wield. Probable SHOs are speculated to be older in age and have a complete understanding of what they are, act logically, ideate minimally, and are grounded in reality. These offenders may fail to graduate to killing sequentially after the commission of their first or second homicide due to situational factors, such as the presence of an eyewitness or being caught retaining victims’ belongings, and the intention to recidivate is thwarted due to incompetence.

**Methods**

Distinguishing between characteristics of potential and successful SHOs should help us understand if these are distinct groups or are temporary stops on a continuum. We consulted available literature on topics of homicidal ideation, recidivism, and factors associated with serial murder to explain data of sixty-three potential SHOs responsible for fifty-four homicides over a period of five years. The findings from this analysis were systematically entered into an Excel workbook and compared with data resulting from in-depth interviews with sixteen successful SHOs culled from the literature to identify similarities and differences. All facts used in the current study were cross-validated using two independent sources. Inter-rater reliability testing was conducted by two authors until agreement met the threshold of 70 percent. Because identification of a motive can be problematic given the combination of influences on an offender and the variability of human behavior (Beasley, 2004), vague boundaries between categories, subjectivity, lack of empirical support (Gurian, 2015), and newer, unexplored subsets such as leisure (Williams & Vincent, 2018) we focused less on categorizingbehavior in this manner.

**Subjects**

Data on 17 aspiring (13 males, 4 females, mean age 26) and 46 probable (39 males, 7 females, mean age 27) SHOs responsible for fifty-four homicides were collected across seven countries: the United States (n = 53), the United Kingdom (n = 18), Australia (n = 3), Brazil (n = 1), Canada (n = 1), Denmark (n = 1) and Germany (n = 2). To be included, potential SHOs must have worked towards their will to kill with intentionality. If an offender outwardly expressed the desire to hurt someone, they must have paired that statement with at least one other indicator of violence such as an overt assaultive outburst. The sixteen successful SHOs were defined as any offender who killed three or more people and were gathered from nine academic articles that detailed the SHO’s background.

A purposive sampling strategy was used to gather information on offenders who displayed five of the eight following behaviors: 1) described by police, prosecutors or practitioners as a fledgling or budding SHO with hallmark characteristics, tendencies or traits[[3]](#footnote-3); 2) desired, intended or planned to kill more than one person; 3) made statements, utterances, and admissions to convince others of their capacity to kill serially; 4) attempted additional homicides before or after successfully completed acts; 5) obsessed with aspirations to attain the SHO designation; 6) membership of fandoms dedicated to admiring successful SHOs and celebrating their exploits; 7) possess a SHO mindset with numerous failures to amass sufficient victims; 8) engage in incessant comparisons to previous SHOs and possess a clearly delineated plan to emulate them.

*Data Collection Method*

Figure 1 demonstrates that our search of Lexus Nexis, Google News, Pittcat+ and Murderpedia for variations of the following terms that accompanied the words ‘serial killer’, ‘serial murderer’, and ‘serial homicide offender’ – ‘admiration’, ‘aspiring’, ‘attempt’, ‘avert’, ‘budding’, ‘desire’, ‘earmarks’, ‘fan’, ‘fantasy’, ‘ideation’, ‘idolize’, ‘in-the-making’, ‘influence’, ‘inspire’, ‘mindset’, ‘obsession’, ‘potential’, ‘probable’, ‘profile’, ‘progression’, ‘prospective’, ‘student’, ‘tendencies’, ‘thwart’, ‘wannabe’, ‘would-be’ – resulted in 368 articles containing information on 100 separate offenders responsible for 84homicides. Thirty-three offenders (responsible for 29 homicides) were excluded as they occurred outside of the 2013-2018 five-year timeframe, chosen to prioritize recent incidents and to ensure the availability of information. Four offenders (responsible for one homicide) were excluded after further review given that their actions only amounted to threats of violence to control one person. The final sample consisted of 17 offenders (responsible for a total of three homicides) who were classified as aspiring SHOs and 46 offenders (responsible for of total of 51 homicides) who were classified as probable SHOs by two raters (EY, DK). In five instances either the given and/or surname of offenders were withheld by an Institutional Review Board and/or the news media. The literature on apprehended SHOs was examined to allow a comparison between successful SHOs and potential SHOs in our dataset. Sixteen successful SHOs (responsible for a total of 112 homicides) were located in nine academic journal articles, the only sources to provide details of the offender’s lives gleaned from results of psychometric testing across numerous psychological measures, including the use of the Psychopathy Checklist - Revised (PCL-R, Hare, 1991), Thematic Apperception Test and the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI).

**[Figure 1 about here]**

**Dimensions Coding**

Information was completed for twenty-six variables, sixteen of which are presented in Table 1 given their salience.[[4]](#footnote-4) ‘Zeitgeist/iconography’ is a binary variable that refers to any offender who consumed popular media dedicated to serial murder, and/or studied real-life SHOs and/or celebrated the concept of serial murder. SHOs ‘believed in the zeitgeist’ if they displayed an abnormal attraction to objects or topics that they believed actual SHOs would surround themselves with (i.e. knives, binding material, violent pornographic media) or be enamored with (i.e. dissection, dismemberment and other indicators of violence). ‘Fantasy/ideation’ is a binary yes/no variable that encompasses SHOs who devoted time to thinking about the concept of serial murder, and/or laid out plans to become a SHO and/or were motivated based on an urge to kill. ‘Self-identified’ is a binary yes/no variable that catalogs SHOs with adequate insight into themselves to understand what is transpiring inside their minds and to commit their thoughts to page or spoken word to others, either before or after the crime. ‘Law enforcement action’ is defined as proactive actions taken by LEOs independent of other factors. Other variables allowed for the capture of narrative information: ‘Forensic Countermeasure’ is comprised of steps taken by the offender to delay or render impossible the location of evidence of a forensic nature that could be used to link their crimes together; ‘Record Plans Pre/post’ refers to any effort made by the offender to document their plans or desires in written, visual or auditory form; and ‘Factors of Capture’ tabulated the amount of factors that led to an offender’s apprehension.

**Results**

This study reports on results of transformations undergone by offenders into individuals with a desire to hurt others, a process that began long before their intentions were made known and their subsequent capture. Among the SHOs in our cohort, the average mean age of aspiring (26), probable (27), and successful SHOs (30) when they were first detected to have begun their killing sprees finds them victimizing older individuals more often than not (average mean age of 33, 29 and 39 respectively). Out of fifteen attempts to kill a victim among the aspiring SHOs, only three were successful compared to all but one instance being successful among the probable SHOs (that offender was killed during his attempt).

Table 1 contains a breakdown of the descriptive comparison of variables across aspiring, probable and successful SHOs. The stark difference between aspiring and successful SHOs is apparent in Table 1. If one factor is high among aspiring SHOs it will generally be low among successful SHOs, and vice versa. Probable SHOs are unlike both aspiring and successful SHOs on most metrics.

**[Table 1 about here]**

**Interactions Between Variables**

The following review of the interaction between variables will provide depth beyond the descriptive statistics in Table 1.

*Disposal of the body in the context of relationship to victim*

The majority of probable SHOs dispose of their victim’s by leaving their bodies at the murder site (n=30, 65%). Of those SHOs, 13 (43%) knew their victim while 17 (57%) did not know their victim. Victims of successful SHOs are generally left at the murder site (n=11, 69%). Of those SHOs, two (18%) knew at least one victim and did not know at least one victim. Nine SHOs (82%) that left their victims at the murder site did not know any of their victims. When it comes to the victim-offender relationship, 15 (93.75%) successful SHOs killed at least one person unknown to them, and six (37.5%) killed at least one victim who was known to them. Of the 15 (100%) aspiring SHOs where disposal information was available, all of them left the body at the murder site. Of those SHOS, five (33%) knew their victim while 10 (67%) did not know their victim.

*Use of forensic countermeasures in the context of victim disposal*

Of the 18 (39%) probable SHOs that took forensic countermeasures, nine (50%) left the body at the murder site, five (28%) dumped the body at an off-site location, and four (22%) concealed the body. Of the 10 (63%) successful SHOs who took forensic countermeasures, six (60%) left the body at the murder site and four (40%) used multiple methods to dispose of their victims. Of the 17 aspiring SHOs where forensic countermeasure data was available, none of them used forensic countermeasures.

*Iconography, ideation, self-identification, recording, criminal histories and illicit substances*

Almost half of aspiring SHOs (n=8, 47%), but far fewer probable SHOs (n=3, 6.5%), engaged in the consumption of iconography, used it to fuel their fantasies and ideation, and self-identified as SHOs. Out of the 29 (63%) instances where probable SHOs recorded their feelings and plans pre- and post-crime, only one (3.4%) offender also consumed iconography, ideated and self-identified as a SHO. There were no aspiring SHOs that took part in all four of these processes in concert. There were only twelve (26%) probable SHOs and one (5.8%) aspiring SHO that did not engage simultaneously in the three processes of ideation, consumption of iconography, or self-identification as a SHO. All other offenders took part in at least one of the three processes. Of the eight (47%) aspiring SHOs who consumed iconography, ideated, and self-identified, six (75%) were motivated by sexual violence. All five (100%) probable SHOs who consumed iconography, ideated, and self-identified as a SHO killed for sexual reasons under these conditions. Of the 14 probable SHOs with a criminal history (30.4%), three (21.4%) of them killed for sexual reasons. Of these three offenders, only one (33.3%) took forensic countermeasures. The one aspiring SHO with a criminal history (5.8%) did not kill for sexual reasons. This offender did not take forensic countermeasures. Only two (12.5%) successful SHOs engaged in the consumption of iconography and in neither instance did it fuel their fantasies. Of the 13 (81.2%) successful SHOs who reported abusive incidents in their past, nine (69.2%) consumed alcohol and/or drugs and five (38.4%) were diagnosed with depression or as mentally ill. Five (31.2%) successful SHOs consumed both alcohol and/or drugs and were diagnosed with depression or as mentally ill. Of the 10 (62.5%) successful SHOs with a criminal history, eight of them killed for sexual reasons (80%). Of these eight offenders, four (50%) took forensic countermeasures.

*Apprehension and capture*

When only one method of apprehension resulted in the capture of an aspiring SHO (n=9, 52.9%), it was usually eyewitness reports (n=4, 44.4%) and LEO action (n=4, 44.4%) that facilitated an arrest, and once, the offender’s actions (a mistake or confession) led to his or her arrest (11.1%). When two methods of apprehension resulted in the capture of an aspiring SHO (n=8, 47%), the combinations were the offender’s actions and a forensic link (n=3, 37.5%), the offender’s action and LEO action (n=1, 12.5%), the offender’s actions and eyewitness contributions (n=2, 25%), and then a forensic link combined with eyewitness accounts (n=1, 12.5%). In one instance (n=1, 12.5%), the offender contributed solely to his own arrest through a mistake and confession. Consumption of alcohol and drugs enhanced aspiring SHO’s willingness to confess and surrender rather than to foster slipups.

When only one method of apprehension resulted in the capture of a probable SHO (n=19, 41%), it was usually the offender’s actions that led to his or her arrest (n=9, 47%), a forensic link led LEO to the suspect in three instances (15.7%), eyewitnesses reported leads three times (15.7%), LEO proactively arrested the offender three times (15.7%), and a victim killed the offender once (5.2%). When two methods of apprehension resulted in the capture of a probable SHO (n=19, 41.3%), it was the offender’s mistake and LEO action (n=4, 21%), the offender’s confession and LEO action (n=2, 10.5%), the offender’s confession and eyewitness contributions (n=4, 21%), the offender’s confession and a forensic link (n=4, 21%), the offender’s mistake and a forensic link (n=2, 10.5%), a forensic link combined with eyewitness accounts (n=2, 10.5%). In one instance (5.2%), the offender contributed solely to his own arrest through a mistake and confession. When three methods of apprehension resulted in the capture of a probable SHO (n=7, 15.2%), it was the offender’s mistake, confession, and LEO action (n=1, 14.2%), the offender’s confession, forensic link, and LEO action (n=1, 14.2%), the offender’s confession, mistake, and eyewitness contributions (n=1, 14.2%), the offender’s confession, mistake, and a forensic link (n=2, 28.5%), the offender’s mistake, forensic link, and eyewitness (n=1, 14.2%), a forensic link combined with eyewitness accounts and LEO action (n=1, 14.2%).

When only one method resulted in the capture of a successful SHO (n=12, 75%), it was usually the offender’s actions (mistake or confession) that led to his or her arrest (n=11, 92%), and an eyewitness that reported a lead in one instance (8%). When the combination of two methods of apprehension resulted in the capture of an offender (n=4, 25%), they were an offender’s mistake and confession in two instances (50%) and an offender’s confession and eyewitness identification in two (50%) other instances.

*Motivations*

Aspiring SHOs (n=17) pursed their obsession with serial murder in the majority of instances (n=7, 41.1%), acted on urges to fulfill a need to become a SHO (n=4, 23.5%), sought to satisfy their need for power (n=3, 17.6), were driven to sexual assault their victims (n=2, 11.7%), and killed randomly (n=1, 5.8%) in the remaining cases. No offender explicitly sought fame. Probable SHOs (n=46) sought to satisfy their need for power (n=16, 34.7%) in the majority of instances, pursed their obsession with serial murder (n=13, 28.2%), were driven to sexual assault their victims (n=5, 10.8%), killed randomly (n=4, 8.6%), for thrills (n=3, 6.5%), acted on urges to fulfill a need to become a SHO (n=3, 6.5%), and to appease voices (n=2, 4.3%) in the remaining cases. No offender explicitly sought fame. Successful SHOs (n=16) were primarily driven to sexual assault their victims (n=8, 50%), to quell their anger (n=4, 25%), obtain revenge (n=2, 12.5%), and profit (n=2, 12.5%) from their homicides. No offender explicitly sought fame.

**Discussion**

The aim of the current study was to classify two groups of offenders that had been previously identified using the layman terms of “wannabe” and “would-be” SHOs, separate them out from the more established successful SHOs, compare the three groups, and look for evidence of a graduation from one group to the other. A number of hypotheses were made in terms of offender age, motivation, ideation, the circumstances contributing to career longevity, and grasp of the skills needed to be a SHO. Previous research characterizes one-off homicides as interpersonal events in which offenders impulsively react in anger to provocation from acquaintances (Harbort & Mokros, 2001; James & Proulx, 2016; Kraemer, Lord & Heilbrun, 2004; Pakkanen, Zappalà, Bosco, Berti, & Santtila, 2015; Sturup, 2018). Potential SHOs mostly did not conform to this archetype except for the small proportion being acquainted with their victims. As is partly evident from data presented in Table 1, potential SHOs utilized hands-on methods, planned their crimes, lured and abducted their victims, and preyed on sex workers and the homeless, much like successful SHOs. Successful SHOs have been classified in the literature as deliberate planners motivated to appease their sexually predatory nature and deviant fantasies by targeting female strangers with distinctive physical and/or psychological characteristics, killing them with hands-on methods, and disposing of the body in a remote location after utilizing forensic countermeasures and recording the homicide. Our successful SHO cohort mostly conformed to this archetype but deviated in their lack of consistent engagement in fantasy, body disposal in remote locations, and recording the homicide.

The extent to which successful SHOs allowed ideation to guide their behavior is unclear. Some of the successful SHOs identified a vague but eventually overwhelming feeling that compelled them to act but only if the opportunity presented itself. This haphazard and nonchalant attitude towards killing contrasts that of the potential SHOs who embraced their obsession with killing and fixated on the idea that anyone could be a victim at any time. This ability to compartmentalize and ‘switch on/off’ (Hoffman, 2018) probably comes from a conscious decision to fantasize less and contributes to the successful SHO’s ability to better blend in with society. Potential SHOs prioritize the process of killing and allow it to consume their identity to the point of obsession. This may make it more difficult to “drift between conventional society and criminality” (James & Gossett, 2017)or at least as seamlessly as successful SHOs. This counterintuitive process, where thinking less about killing translates to real life success and deep pondering does not effectively contribute to the SHO’s goals, is similar to Hurt and Grant’s (2018) finding that threateners who eventually made good on their statements were less preoccupied with violent ideation that their violence obsessed counterparts that never realized their pledges to harm. The potential SHO’s obsession with serial murder may be the mediating factor that prevents them from fully realizing their goals.

Potential SHOs may be more introspective, self-analytical, and open to being inspired and influenced by others than successful SHOs who compartmentalize their lives. Refusal to question their own identity is a mechanism of defense for successful SHOs as these exercises can lead to existential questions and self-doubt. Probable SHOs spend less time than aspiring SHOs trying to introspect and discover themselves, as evidenced by the lower percentage of probable SHOs that engage in the consumption of iconography, fantasy, and self-identification. Successful SHOs began their campaigns without much ideation or intensive planning, wasting little time engaging in these behaviors while aspiring SHOs may have prematurely exhausted their energy by using fantasy to convince themselves that it is time to act. Potential SHOs keep a journal to merge pre-offense fantasies into the execution of the crime, whereas successful SHOs journal to preserve the experience. They would find their incorporation of – and linkage to – their victims incomplete and unsatisfactory without a collection (Warren, Dietz & Hazelwood, 2013).

The lack of the use of firearms among aspiring SHOs could be due to their adherence to portrayals in popular culture and academic literature stating that successful SHOs do not kill by gun (Madan, 2017). This theory does not explain why aspiring SHOs preferred blunt force injuries and stabbing weapons over strangulation. Perhaps potential SHOs would utilize multiple methods and expand their weapon selection if they were given more time to realize their goals before they were apprehended (Yaksic, 2016). Aside from the low occurrence of depression and mental illness among probable SHOs, the near identical rates among aspiring and successful SHOs may speak to deeper similarities than the other variables account for. The inexperience of aspiring SHOs is obvious when considering body disposal and forensic countermeasures since all victims were left at the murder site with no effort taken to transport or conceal them or to alter the murder site. In contrast, Morton et al. (2015) conducted a study of 92 successful SHOs of which half of all victims were left at the murder site and just over one third engaged in forensic countermeasures. The aspiring SHOs were also more likely to be found through eyewitness reports than either probable or successful SHOs.

One hypothesis in the present paper was that potential SHOs would be undone by mistakes caused by their own incompetence but those occurrences were more common among successful SHOs perhaps accelerated by their high rate of drug and alcohol usage. It is not surprising that LEOs did not take proactive action against successful SHOs as many of their murders took place between 1969 and 1998 as police were still developing best practices to intercept SHOs. LEO’s proactive involvement in addressing potential SHOs lends credence to the theory that they are quicker to make the conceptual leap about a SHO theory now than they have been in the past (LePard, Demers, Langan, & Rossmo, 2015) in addition to the fact that they are better equipped to handle cases of potential SHOs in the modern era.

We were correct in hypothesizing that aspiring SHOs would be younger than their probable and successful SHO counterparts, and that they would have an immature grasp of what it means to be a SHO give their excessive ideation and consumption of iconography. We were also correct in hypothesizing that probable SHOs would be motivated by a search for pleasure - which they obtained through power – and fully understand who they are while functioning logically, as a sizeable portion self-identified and a minimal portion were motivated to appease their obsession with serial murder. Our hypothesis that aspiring SHOs would seek attention for these crimes was incorrect, as no offender explicitly sought fame as their primary motivation, and their need to quell their obsession with serial murder drove them to act, not an urge to become a SHO as we initially suspected. Our hypothesis that probable SHOs would be thwarted due to their own incompetence was unproven given that all three groups were apprehended in similar ways.

The history of prevalence in abuse and consumption of drugs and alcohol for potential SHOs is far lower than reported by successful SHOs (Mitchell & Aamodt, 2005). Perhaps potential SHOs can attribute their lack of success to weak or non-existent personal triggers, given that no aspiring SHOs and only five probable SHOs reported abuse in their past. The potential SHOs in our cohort draw their inspiration from other, less definitive or tangible sources, such as proclaimed preoccupations and desires to kill another person that are sometimes picked up as a contagion from popular media sources. Since SHOs have been exposed to society and culture, they are aware of normative expectations (James & Gossett, 2017); thus, it may be possible that the young age of some potential SHOs have impeded them from participating in the full scope of life, from the elation of positive events to the crushing lows of pitfalls. Without such experiences to provide perspective, potential SHOs might be destined to function far below the capacity of their peer’s capabilities, aptitude, and stamina, all aspects necessary to enjoy a lengthy criminal career.

Comparing potential SHOs against the successful SHOs may have inadvertently contributed to an overemphasis on differences between these groups because sexual SHOs are the focal point of previous studies. In these studies, interviewers engaged in selection bias in choosing sexual killers to better comply with previously entrenched stereotypes. Regardless, the potential SHOs in the present study were motivated by sexual gratification at less than half the rate of successful SHOs. While findings from Keatley et al. (2018) add support to the expectation of sexual elements in serial murder, the authors stipulate that involvement of a sexual element is not a prerequisite for serial killing. Adjorlolo and Chan (2014) criticize upholding sexual aspects as the only motive in serial murder as it may present a challenge to understanding the construct. Motives dominated by sexual desires were present in the research cohort of Beasley (2004), but in some cases this did not appear to be the sole, or even primary, motivation. SHO’s motives are complicated and nontraditional so much so that describing a model as one-dimensional would prove inaccurate (Brantley & Kosky, 2005). For instance, profit motives and emotions such as anger and revenge were found in combination in the series of homicides reported on by Sane, Mugadlimath, Farooqui, Janagond & Mishra (2017) where the SHO became furious with beggars and decided to take revenge, and therefore selected, followed, killed, and robbed his victims. For these reasons we chose not to conduct a thorough assessment of motive, a decision that may dilute our findings.

Furthermore, grouping offenders into separate subclasses may inhibit correctly classifying offenders, which can impact progress into learning about them. One case written about by James and Proulx (2016)illustrates the limits of a dichotomous, serial/non-serial, approach: this offender exhibited the profile of a SHO but was arrested after his second murder, which led the authors to classify him as a non-serial murderer. Because there are inherent dangers in comparing offenders with great variations in backgrounds, motivations, and in the nature of their crimes(Wolf & Lavezzi, 2007), Giannangelo (2012) reminds researchers that SHOs are more individualized than how they are presented.

It is likely that the current research co-mingled one-off offenders with potential SHOs due to the prevalence of false positives. These individuals display most or all of the hallmarks associated with serial murder but go no further in developing into a multiple killer. Such an exemplary case would be John Balyo where he displayed many of the traditional hallmarks of serial homicide, yet has only committed sexual assault (Agar, 2014). In another instance, the sexual assault of one victim was followed by the singular death of another victim several years later (Rabin, 2018). Michael Ryan Brown (Edwards, 2017) behaved like a SHO by inflicting genital mutilation, binding, raping, strangling, and stabbing his victim but did not progress beyond one homicide. Elton Walters’ extensive travel paired with the rape and stabbing death of his victim, made it appear as if further victims were possible (Trischitta, 2013). Offenders like Jeffrey Willis (Moore, 2018) who amassed lists of SHOs, thousands of murder porn videos, and items to construct a rape kit probably had the intention to recidivate. Warren, Dietz and Hazelwood (2013) emphasize that simply because some SHOs amass a collection of fantasy materials does not mean that all who do so will eventually offend. Many normal people experience deviant sexual fantasies including sadism, but not everyone acts them out; with few taking their fantasies to the extent of murder and even less to the point of multiple homicide (Johnson & Becker, 1997).

**Limitations**

There are a number of potential limitations with the present study. We were limited to gathering information from secondary sources for the potential SHO group. Reliance on such sources introduces the potential for missing and misreported information with little consistency in the level of available detail. While we clearly defined parameters for inclusion criteria in these groups, it is possible that miscategorization occurred when attempting to analyze certain variables. For instance, results gleaned from the factors of the offender’s capture should be interpreted with caution since a ‘forensic link’ can be considered both a mistake on the part of the offender and the result of law enforcement action, and that eyewitness accounts must be acted upon by law enforcement to have an impact. However, researchers ensured that all facts used in the current study were cross-validated from two independent sources, to increase validity. The impact of limited life experience on potential SHOs cannot be discerned from the current research. There is a possible selection effect in that certain countries may be more or less forthcoming with information about prospective murderers that would cast their populations in a negative view. A person that has killed once but has neglected to state or document their desire to kill again will escape the scope of this research.Drawing any meaningful conclusions of risk from the present sample is not currently possible given that the amount of people with violent fantasies that do not act on them is quite large. There may be a selection effect in that potential SHOs, who are not immune to the behaviors of their generation and can be influenced by others in their age cohort, are able to share their intentions openly on social media platforms today. The successful SHOs in this study were active anywhere from 1969 and onward. While they may have wished to share their intentions openly, no such platforms existed for them to do so. For these reasons, it may be more difficult to identify a cohort of potential SHOs from previous years and, as a result, we have held off on naming the appearance of potential SHOs as an emerging trend. It is likely that potential SHOs have always been active but had not received attention from the news media and thus from researchers.

**Practical Recommendations:** **Early Identification and Timely Intervention**

While Warren, Dietz and Hazelwood (2013) presume that no treatment exists that might reconstitute the SHO’s personality to render them harmless, Johnson and Becker (1997) wonder whether treatment could identify potential SHOs and prevent them from starting their streams of killing. This notion of prevention features sporadically in the literature. One of the implications from our findings, that early identification and timely therapeutic intervention can be used to divert future killers, compliments recent research from the FBI on active shooters (Silver, Simons & Craun, 2018) which states that troubling observable behaviors appear months or even years before offenders carry out their plans. For example, Reisner, McGee and Noffsinger (2003) believe that adolescents who admit to fantasies involving homicide may be at risk and should receive cognitive behavioral therapy to retrain or extinguish deviant fantasies.

Could treatment divert potential SHOs who have yet to enact their plans? There are at least two documented cases of patients that did not kill anyone because of such treatment. A 27-year-old man, Mr. X, had a history of depression and substance abuse, journaled about admiring SHOs and believed that killing someone was the only thing that would make him feel better (Reisner et al., 2003), like many in our data. Mr. X paired murder with erotic feelings of anger, hate, rage and depression which became overwhelming, as did homicidal intent directed toward people that had wronged him. Similar to others in our cohort, Mr. X was obsessed with violent movies and reading about other SHOs and these activities strengthened his fantasies. Mr. X displayed grandiose and narcissistic investment in becoming a SHO where page after page of his journal detailed homicidal ruminations discussing the glory associated with becoming a proficient SHO and, by default, smarter than the rest of society. Another patient, Tamara, expressed fear regarding her intrusive thoughts of hurting people close to her and believed that she must be becoming a SHO. She was instructed to avoid activities that she suspected would trigger these feelings, such as popular media depicting SHOs (Gelinas & Hadjistavropoulos, 2015),a common pastime of several of the potential SHOs in our cohort.

**Future Research Directions**

The present research opens several avenues for future research. Future research should compare our results to two-victim SHOs and seek to understand what sets these groups apart. The emotional intelligence of potential and successful SHOs should be compared once psychometric data becomes available. The specific type of role model influence that motivates certain potential SHOs towards initial or subsequent attacks should be explored as well as what draws these groups to prior perpetrators (Langman, 2018). The effect that forensic countermeasures have on the longevity of a SHO’s series should be studied, as the current research counterintuitively found that the successful SHOs who did not engage in this activity remained free for an average of one additional year more than killers who implemented such measures. These findings raise the question of just how much of a successful SHO’s longevity is due to their own actions and what proportion benefits from lucky breaks (Yaksic, Allely, Pettigrew, Taylor, Matykiewicz, Geyer, Denisov, De Silva, Synnott, & Ioannou, 2019; Yaksic, Allred, Drakulic, Mooney, De Silva, Geyer, Wills, Comerford, & Ranger, 2020).

Future studies should take into account previous criminal convictions to look for patterns in criminal behavior and whether or not evidence of escalation type behaviors are more prevalent in one group over another. Additional research is needed to explore the presence of mental health disorders in these groups to deepen our understanding of which may contribute to forming the aspiration to engage in serial homicide offending. The pathways that lead potential SHOs to ideate and attempt to realize their goals should be mapped in the hopes that some useful distinctions can be found between these groups. Although the present study defies Calhoun and Weston’s (2015) six steps by showing how potential SHOs do not fully walk the ‘path’ (but are more likely to do so than one-off killers), the application of the “path to intended violence” model to cases of potential SHOs could still be useful. This model has been applied to attempts to understand such pathways in a number of contemporary mass shooters (Allely & Faccini, 2017, 2018) and has been found to be useful to identifying the crucial factors involved in contributing to the extreme violence in each case. The overlapping characteristics that potential SHOs share with the profile of those yearning to commit a massacre, identified by Mullen & Pathé (2018) and involuntarily celibate men, should be interrogated.Finally, a longitudinal analysis that follows the cohort as they age would be beneficial as some potential SHOs will be paroled and are likely to recidivate.

**Conclusion**

The present research represents the first effort to investigate similarities and differences between potential and successful SHOs. While these groups may be subgroups of the same SHO phenomenon, our findings suggest that they are distinct; placement in one cohort does not translate into an eventual graduation to another. This study also demonstrates that it is possible to identify the precursors of serial homicide with relative stability. For instance, successful SHOs typically had a criminal history, killed for sexual reasons, and took forensic countermeasures. Only one of the probable SHOs in our cohort behaved in this manner and could reliably be thought of as being on the pathway to becoming a successful SHO. This low frequency can be interpreted as the culmination of a number of factors, such as a more aware public and better equipped LEOs. It is crucial that people remain aware of indicators to identify an individual on the transformational path towards further violence, because well over half of all SHOs have been captured because of the direct observations provided by surviving victims, witnesses, and family members of SHOs (White, Lester, Gentile & Rosenbleeth, 2011). It is exceedingly possible to understand potential SHOs today and even find fraudulent reports of fabricated psychological symptoms, including depression, auditory hallucinations, and homicidal ideation (Fischer, Beckson & Dietz, 2016).

While there is overlap among potential and successful SHOs, there is insufficient evidence to suggest discreet transitions between them; there is no guarantee that being a potential SHO is the final step on a pathway towards becoming a successful SHO. In other words, potential SHOs cannot reliably be thought of as prospective SHOs if all things were equal. Successful SHOs engage in a number of processes (e.g., resiliency, adaptation) to ensure their freedom (Yaksic, Allely, Pettigrew, Taylor, Matykiewicz, Geyer, Denisov, De Silva, Synnott, & Ioannou, 2019) and potential SHOs are ill equipped to undertake such a journey. Even so, scholars, policymakers, and LEOs need to address how biological, social, and psychological features operate, interact, and flourish to shape the developmental trajectories of SHOs (Keatley et al., 2018). As opposed to placing emphasis on the changing dynamics of individual SHOs, Jenkins (1992) recommends looking to the environmental contexts in which SHOs operate as a guideline for understanding future trends. The present research does demonstrate that potential SHOs can be unrelenting once they become fixated on their intention to carry out homicides (Myers, Husted, Safarik, & O’Toole, 2006), and that there is a danger in ignoring so called “budding” SHOs on the cusp of realizing their own dangerousness. This is an area worthy of additional larger scale, empirical studies and we encourage other researchers to scrutinize our findings and build upon these early foundational efforts.

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**Figure 1. Derivation of the Study Cohort**

Extensive literature and database searches resulted in **16** offenders (responsible for **112** homicides) that met the inclusion criteria for successful serial murderers

Our search of Lexus Nexis, Google News, Pittcat+ and Murderpedia resulted in **100** potential serial murderers responsible for **84** homicides

**33** offenders (responsible for **29** homicides) were excluded as they occurred outside of the project’s 2013-2018 five-year timeframe

**4** offenders (responsible for **1** homicide) were excluded after further review of the details surrounding their case

**17** offenders (responsible for **3** homicides) were classified as aspiring serial killers

**63** offenders (responsible for **54** homicides) met the inclusion criteria

**46** offenders (responsible for **51** homicides) were classified as probable serial killers

**Table 1**. **Descriptive Statistical Breakdown of Aspiring, Probable, and Successful SHOs**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Factor** | **Level** | **Aspiring (N=17)**  **N %** | | **Probable (N=46)**  **N %** | | **Successful (N=16)**  **N %** | |
| **Offender**  **Gender** | **M**  **F** | 13  4 | 76  24 | 39  7 | 85  15 | 16  0 | 100  0 |
| **Victim**  **Gender** | **M**  **F**  **Both**  **N/A∆** | 4  11  0  2 | 24  64  0  12 | 11  32  3  0 | 24  69  7  0 | 2  11  3  0 | 12  69  19  0 |
| **Offender**  **Age** | **13 - 20**  **21 - 30**  **31 - 40**  **41 - 50**  **51 - 60** | 6  8  2  0  1 | 35  47  12  0  6 | 15  16  11  2  2 | 33  35  24  4  4 | 1  10  4  0  1 | 6  63  25  0  6 |
| **Victim**  **Age** | **Young**  **Teen**  **Adult**  **Elderly**  **Varied**  **Unknown**  **N/A** | 0  4  4  0  3  3  3 | 0  23  23  0  18  18  18 | 1  11  20  10  2  2  0 | 2  24  43  22  4  4  0 | 0  0  10  1  5  0  0 | 0  0  63  6  31  0  0 |
| **\*Type of**  **Weapon** | **Stab**  **Firearm**  **Blunt Force**  **Strangle**  **Other**  **Multi** | 9  0  6  0  0  0  2 | 53  0  35  0  0  0  12 | 25  6  7  4  1  2  1 | 54  13  15  9  2  4  2 | 1  3  0  5  0  7  0 | 6  19  0  31  0  44  0 |
| **Victim**  **Known/Unknown**  **to Offender** | **Known**  **Unknown**  **Both** | 6  11  0 | 35  65  0 | 19  27  0 | 41  59  0 | 1  10  5 | 6  63  31 |
| **¥Type of Body Disposal** | **Left**  **Dump**  **Conceal**  **Multi**  **N/A∆** | 15  0  0  0  2 | 88  0  0  0  12 | 30  9  7  0  0 | 65  20  15  0  0 | 11  0  0  5  0 | 69  0  0  31  0 |
| **Number of**  **Factors of Capture** | **1**  **2**  **3**  **Unknown** | 9  8  0  0 | 53  47  0  0 | 19  19  7  1 | 41  41  15  2 | 12  4  0  0 | 75  25  0  0 |
| **Forensic**  **Counter** | **Y**  **N** | 0  17 | 0  100 | 18  28 | 39  60 | 10  6 | 63  37 |
| **Fantasy/Ideation** | **Y**  **N** | 15  2 | 88  12 | 8  38 | 17  83 | 4  12 | 25  75 |
| **Self-Identification** | **Y**  **N** | 13  4 | 76  24 | 25  21 | 54  46 | 0  16 | 0  100 |
| **Zeitgeist/Iconography** | **Y**  **N** | 12  5 | 71  29 | 18  28 | 39  61 | 2  14 | 12  88 |
| **Record**  **Pre/Post Crime** | **Y**  **N** | 5  12 | 29  71 | 29  17 | 63  37 | 1  15 | 6  94 |
| **Abuse** | **Y**  **N** | 0  17 | 0  100 | 5  41 | 11  89 | 13  3 | 81  19 |
| **Drugs/Alcohol** | **Y**  **N** | 7  10 | 41  59 | 18  28 | 39  61 | 10  6 | 63  37 |
| **Depress/Mental** | **Y**  **N** | 7  10 | 41  59 | 2  44 | 4  96 | 7  9 | 44  56 |
| **Criminal**  **History** | **Y**  **N** | 1  16 | 6  94 | 14  32 | 30  70 | 10  6 | 63  37 |
| **Sexual**  **Assault** | **Y**  **N** | 8  9 | 47  53 | 9  37 | 20  80 | 13  3 | 81  19 |

\* exclusive use of one method of killing

¥ exclusive use of one method of body disposal

**∆** two offenders merely threatened victims without taking action against them

**Table 2. Summary of Defining and Distinctive SHO Cohort Characteristics**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Aspiring** | Young and inexperienced with an immature grasp of what it means to be a SHO  Journal to work out the merger of pre-offense fantasies into the execution of crime  Preference for blunt force injuries and stabbing weapons over strangulation  Obsession with serial murder overtakes their identity  Introspective, self-analytical, and open to being inspired and influenced  Engagement in excessive ideation that prematurely exhausts their energy  Failure to formulate the necessary components of homicide |
| **Probable** | Use serial murder to seek controlled means of satisfying a need for power  Function logically and are cognizant of their pursuit of a “serial killer” identify  Proclaimed preoccupation to kill as a contagion from popular media  Fixated on the idea that anyone could be a victim at any time  Less interested in the process of homicidal ideation and fantasy  Prioritize the process of killing and allow it to consume their identity  Target victims known to them |
| **Successful** | Heightened aptitude, stamina and ability to compartmentalize  Controlled and deliberate planners motivated to appease their predatory nature  Selectively target strangers with desirable physical characteristics  Kill with firearm, and dispose of bodies after utilizing forensic countermeasures  Rely on luck given history of drug/alcohol consumption and mistakes  Journal to archive crimes and preserve the experience  Easily drift between conventional society and criminality |

1. Keneally, M. (2015). Mother Turned in Son Because He Allegedly Wants to Become a Serial Killer. ABCNews.go.com. Retrieved from <http://abcnews.go.com/US/mother-turned-son-allegedly-serial-killer/story?id=28837259> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Mitchell and Aamodt (2005)report that SHOs were likely physically abused six times more, and sexually abused nine times more than the general population [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In twelve instances, LEOs, prosecutors, judges and members of the victims’ families labeled aspiring and probable SHOs as prospective SHOs using words or phrases such as ‘budding,’ ‘earmarks,’ ‘profile,’ ‘tendencies,’ ‘progression,’ ‘mindset,’ or ‘in the making.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Examples of demographic variables not presented in Table 1 are ‘Offender Name,’ ‘Year,’ ‘Victim Name,’ ‘Country,’ and ‘Information Source.’ We thought it inappropriate to list the names of offenders and victims given that some offenders commit crimes merely to gain attention and notoriety. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)