

Research Paper

Serial Killers in India and the United States: A Comparative Criminological and Psychological Analysis

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ABSTRACT

One of the most perplexing and unsettling types of criminal activity is still serial homicide, which frequently defies accepted criminological and psychiatric theories. This study compares serial killers in the US and India with the goal of examining the various psychological, neurological, and social factors that influence the development of these criminals. This study looks at how early childhood trauma, personality disorders, and potential neurobiological anomalies interact with cultural and environmental factors to influence serial killers' behavior patterns, using a few chosen case studies as examples. The analysis shows that the two countries' approaches to the manifestation, investigation, and social perception of serial killings differ significantly. India offers a comparatively unexplored landscape, where serial crimes are frequently misclassified or receive little media and scholarly attention, in contrast to the United States, which has developed profiling techniques and a substantial body of literature on serial murder. This discrepancy emphasizes how urgently context-specific research and the creation of culturally sensitive investigative frameworks are needed. The study investigates the applicability of current theoretical models across cultural boundaries and critically reviews them, including behavioral, psychodynamic, and neurocriminological viewpoints. It also takes into account how the media, the architecture of law enforcement, and public knowledge shape the narrative and handling of serial crimes. In order to inform both policy and practice in forensic psychology and criminal justice, this paper aims to advance a more nuanced understanding of serial homicide that cuts across disciplinary and geographic boundaries by incorporating cross-cultural insights and interdisciplinary approaches.

Keywords: *Psychopath, Serial killers, Neurological, Behavioural patterns, Child hood, Personality*

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Received: April 08, 2025; Revision Received: June 26, 2025; Accepted: June 30, 2025

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Serial killings represent one of the most disturbing and complex forms of criminal behavior, capturing the attention of criminologists, psychologists, and the public alike. Serial killers not only challenge law enforcement agencies but also pose significant psychological and sociological questions about human behavior and morality. Defined as the unlawful killing of three or more victims by the same offender, with a distinct "cooling-off" period between the murders, serial killings reflect a pattern of premeditation and psychological compulsion rather than spontaneous violence (Deepak & Ramdoss, 2020). Despite their relatively low frequency compared to other forms of homicide, serial killings generate widespread fear and fascination due to the brutality and psychological complexity of the crimes involved. (Gonzalez, 2022). The calculated nature of these crimes, combined with the often-ritualistic methods employed by offenders, heightens public intrigue and media sensationalism, reinforcing the perception of serial killers as uniquely dangerous and enigmatic figures within society. Psychological profiles and motivations driving these offenders remain the subject of extensive forensic and criminological research, as understanding the underlying mechanisms of serial homicidal behavior is critical for both crime prevention and criminal profiling (yang, 2023).

In the present era, research into serial killers has traditionally focused on Western contexts, particularly the United States, which has recorded the highest number of serial killings globally. In contrast, serial killings in India have received comparatively limited scholarly attention, despite media reports documenting around 60 cases between 1990 and 2019 (Deepak & Ramdoss, 2020). This discrepancy raises important questions about the influence of cultural, social, and psychological factors on serial homicidal behavior. The higher prevalence of serial killings in the United States compared to India may reflect differences in societal structure, law enforcement efficiency, media coverage, and offender profiling capabilities. Western societies, particularly the United States, tend to place greater emphasis on individualism and personal identity, which could foster the emergence of pathological behaviors rooted in narcissism and social alienation. Conversely, collectivist cultures like India may exert stronger social control through familial and community ties, potentially mitigating the development of isolated and psychopathic tendencies associated with serial killing. The nature of law enforcement and judicial systems also varies between the two countries, influencing how serial crimes are identified, investigated, and prosecuted.

Criminological and psychological theories provide valuable frameworks for understanding serial killers. The concept "state of nature," introduced by Thomas Hobbes, suggests that human beings are inherently self-interested and driven by survival instincts. In the absence of societal rules and governing authorities, human behavior would likely descend into chaos, characterized by violence and self-preservation. Hobbes proposed that to maintain order and security, individuals enter into a social contract, surrendering certain freedoms in exchange for protection and societal stability (Erhatić, 2024). Serial killers, however, defy this social contract, rejecting societal norms and engaging in acts that fundamentally oppose the principles of lawful coexistence. Their ability to operate within society while engaging in repeated acts of violence reveals a profound psychological detachment from moral and ethical constraints. This rejection of societal norms underscores the role of psychopathy and antisocial behavior in serial killing, where offenders manipulate social systems to evade detection while satisfying pathological urges for dominance and control (Reidy et al., 2017). Childhood trauma and adverse early-life experiences are frequently linked to the development of violent behavior in adulthood. Robert L. Listenbee Jr., Chief of the Juvenile Unit of the Defender Association of Philadelphia, argued that exposure to violence in

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childhood whether through abuse, neglect, or witnessing criminal activity can significantly impair emotional and psychological development (Mroczkowski, 2023). Studies have shown that serial killers often exhibit a history of severe childhood trauma, including physical and emotional abuse, neglect, and abandonment (Hussain & Fazal, 2024). Early separation from caregivers and disrupted attachment patterns can contribute to emotional detachment, lack of empathy, and antisocial tendencies in adulthood traits commonly observed among serial killers (Hussain & Fazal, 2024). The absence of stable parental figures and consistent emotional support can impair moral development, leading to the formation of distorted cognitive schemas about relationships, trust, and human worth. As a result, serial offenders frequently exhibit profound emotional detachment and an impaired capacity for guilt or remorse. These developmental deficits create a fertile psychological foundation for the emergence of violent fantasies and the eventual transition to homicidal behavior. (Anderson & Keihl, 2014).

Role of psychopathy and other psychological disorders in serial killings is well-documented in forensic literature. Psychopathy, characterized by a lack of empathy, emotional detachment, manipulative behavior, and a diminished sense of morality, is frequently identified among serial offenders (Mitra, 2022). While not all psychopaths become serial killers, most serial killers display psychopathic traits, including high cognitive functioning, social adaptability, and an absence of emotional response to violence. Hare and colleagues (1990) argued that psychopathy has a strong biological basis, with environmental factors influencing its manifestation. Neurological research has identified structural and functional abnormalities in the brains of psychopaths, including reduced gray matter in the frontal lobes, abnormal hippocampal symmetry, and decreased activity in the amygdala regions involved in impulse control, emotional regulation, and moral reasoning (Pement, 2013). These neurological impairments limit the capacity for emotional bonding and moral reasoning, facilitating the detachment and callousness observed in serial killers. Furthermore, the presence of comorbid mental health disorders such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and borderline personality disorder may amplify the risk of violent behavior, particularly when combined with substance abuse or chronic social isolation (Varshney et al., 2016).

Motivational patterns among serial killers are often complex and multifaceted. Criminologists have classified serial offenders into several broad categories based on underlying psychological drivers: visionary killers, who act under the influence of psychotic delusions or hallucinations; mission-oriented killers, who seek to eliminate perceived social threats or undesirable groups; hedonistic killers, who derive pleasure from the act of killing; and power-control killers, who are motivated by a pathological need for dominance and control over their victims (Williams, 2021). These motivational frameworks highlight the diverse psychological landscapes underlying serial homicidal behavior, where a combination of cognitive distortions, emotional deficits, and environmental stressors converge to produce lethal outcomes (Williams, 2021). The cultural context also shapes the manifestation of these motivations. In Western societies, hedonistic and power-control motivations are more prevalent, reflecting individualistic values and the glorification of dominance and personal gratification. In contrast, mission-oriented killings and visionary motivations may be more prevalent in collectivist cultures, where ideological or religious factors exert a stronger influence on behavioral norms (Rajkumar, 2023).

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Media representation and societal responses to serial killings further complicate the psychological and criminological landscape. The extensive media coverage surrounding serial crimes reinforces public fear and fascination, often elevating serial offenders to a near-mythical status. This sensationalism can influence offender behavior, with some serial killers seeking recognition and infamy through their crimes (Raftar & Brown, 2011). The "copycat effect" highlights the role of media in shaping criminal behavior, where exposure to detailed crime narratives may inspire psychologically vulnerable individuals to imitate the methods or motivations of notorious offenders. Law enforcement responses to serial killings are also shaped by media pressure and public scrutiny, influencing investigative strategies and resource allocation. The development of offender profiling techniques, geographic mapping, and behavioral analysis has improved the capacity of law enforcement agencies to identify and apprehend serial offenders. However, the cross-cultural applicability of these techniques remains a subject of ongoing debate, as differences in legal systems, investigative infrastructure, and cultural attitudes toward crime complicate the transferability of Western profiling models to non-Western contexts (Snook et al., 2007).

This study seeks to conduct a comparative analysis of serial killers in India and the United States, examining the underlying differences in psychological profiles, motivations, and social influences. By exploring the interplay of biological, psychological, and sociological factors, this research aims to identify distinct patterns in serial killings within these two cultural contexts. The findings will provide valuable insights into the criminological and psychological dimensions of serial homicidal behavior, contributing to the development of targeted prevention and intervention strategies. A nuanced understanding of serial killings across cultural boundaries can enhance forensic profiling techniques, inform law enforcement training programs, and improve mental health interventions aimed at identifying and addressing early markers of violent psychopathy. Through this comparative analysis, the study aims to bridge the gap in forensic research on serial killings in non-Western settings, expanding the global understanding of one of the most complex and chilling forms of human behavior.

Psychological and Neurological Factors in Serial Killers

Human behavior, influenced by intricate emotional and psychological mechanisms, can manifest in violence, particularly in societies marked by contradictions and social unrest. These dynamics underline the critical need to deepen our understanding of the psychological underpinnings of violent behavior and its increasing prevalence (Bjelajac, 2024). Serial killers have long captivated professionals in psychology and criminology due to the complex interplay of factors driving their behavior. The term "serial killer" was coined by an FBI researcher in the 1970s to describe offenders involved in two or more separate homicides. Understanding these individuals requires a thorough examination of their unique life experiences while identifying common psychological and neurological patterns (Hussain & Fazal, 2024). Research consistently reveals that psychopathy, personality disorders, and neurological abnormalities are common among serial killers, contributing to their repetitive and violent conduct. A comparative study of Indian and American serial killers reveals both universal and culturally specific elements influencing their development and behavioral patterns. While American serial killers often exhibit traits such as grandiosity, impulsivity, and sexual sadism, Indian serial killers are frequently motivated by socioeconomic hardship, political influences, and opportunism (Hussain & Fazal, 2024).

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Neuroscience discoveries have shown that aggressive behavior is associated with both anatomical and functional problems in the brain. Serial killers frequently exhibit poor impulse control, emotional dysregulation, and impaired moral judgment, all of which are linked to dysfunction in the prefrontal cortex, amygdala, and limbic system (Raine, 1997). Neuroimaging studies of American serial killers indicate frontal lobe and amygdala dysfunction. The prefrontal cortex governs executive functions, including inhibition, judgment, and empathy, while the amygdala processes emotions like fear and aggression (Blair, 2007). John Wayne Gacy's frontal lobe impairments likely influenced his aggressive impulses. Charles Whitman, responsible for the 1966 Texas Tower shooting, was found to have a brain tumor pressing on his amygdala, contributing to his violent behavior (Lilienfeld & Arkowitz, 2014). Whereas in India, limited access to forensic neuroimaging hinders in-depth analysis. However, the behavior of serial killers such as Raman Raghav and Mohan Kumar (the "cyanide killer") suggests similar neural deficits. Their calculated, emotionally detached actions indicate potential dysfunction in regions associated with moral reasoning and emotional regulation.

Neurological deficits, particularly dysfunctions in the amygdala and prefrontal cortex, appear to be persistent contributors to serial homicidal behavior across different cultural contexts. Despite variations in forensic resources and investigative capabilities, these neurobiological impairments are consistently linked to deficits in impulse control, emotional regulation, and moral reasoning, which are characteristic traits of serial offenders. This suggests that while environmental and sociocultural factors shape the expression of violent tendencies, underlying neurological dysfunctions play a fundamental role in predisposing individuals to serial killing.

Psychopathy and Personality Disorders

Psychopathy is one of the most prominent psychological traits observed in serial killers. Characterized by emotional deficits, manipulativeness, impulsivity, and a lack of remorse or empathy, psychopathy has been extensively studied in forensic psychology (Hare, 1999). Hervey Cleckley's seminal work *The Mask of Sanity* (1941) identified psychopathy as a disorder defined by superficial charm and egocentric behavior. Psychopathy is closely linked to Antisocial Personality Disorder (APD), recognized in the *DSM-5* as a pervasive disregard for others' rights (APA, 2013). Additionally, Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) and Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) have also been diagnosed in many serial killers, highlighting the significant role of personality pathology.

Notable American cases exemplify these disorders. Ted Bundy demonstrated extreme narcissism, charm, and manipulativeness, enabling him to evade detection while committing heinous crimes. Bundy's high score on the Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R) underscores his profound psychopathic tendencies (Michaud & Aynesworth, 1989). In India, while psychopathy is less formally studied, cases such as Auto Shankar and Raman Raghav offer insight into its manifestation. Auto Shankar, active in Tamil Nadu in the 1980s, exhibited callousness and deceit, with his criminal behavior shaped by political connections and organized crime (Mukherjee, 2006). Raman Raghav displayed paranoid schizophrenia alongside psychopathy, characterized by delusions and compulsive homicidal behavior, further enabled by his lack of empathy. Jeffrey Dahmer also had psychopathy and schizotypal tendencies; his ritualistic and emotionally cold murders revealed a neurotic craving for control. (Palermo & Bogaerts, 2015). John Wayne Gacy maintained a respectable public image while murdering over 30 victims, showcasing classic psychopathic

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traits of manipulation and emotional detachment (Kiehl, 2014). Charles Sobhraj, known as the "Bikini Killer," exhibited narcissistic and antisocial traits, methodically targeting victims while eluding law enforcement with calculated manipulation (Kapoor, 2015).

The mental conditions can manifest as impaired reality testing, disorganized thought processes, impulsivity, and poor problem-solving skills, increasing an individual's vulnerability to committing violent acts (Varshney et al., 2016)

Although psychopathy is a common trait among serial killers worldwide, its manifestation is deeply influenced by social, economic, and cultural factors. American serial killers often exhibit pronounced traits of grandiosity, sadism, and a calculated approach to their crimes, whereas Indian serial killers are more likely to be shaped by socioeconomic hardships, systemic corruption, and structural constraints that influence their motives, methods, and victim selection. These contextual differences highlight the complex interplay between individual psychopathology and broader societal influences in shaping patterns of serial homicide across different regions.

Childhood Trauma and Criminal Development

36% of serial killers describe physical abuse, 26% mention sexual abuse, and 50% report psychological abuse. Compared to people who have experienced other types of trauma, victims of sexual abuse frequently die faster or with greater violence. One known risk factor for violent conduct is childhood abuse. Early trauma and subsequent criminality were found to be strongly correlated by Widom (1989). Early emotional development is disrupted by physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, which breeds rage, separation, and violence (Mroczkowski, 2023).

Psychopathic tendencies of Bundy and Dahmer were cultivated by their early experiences of emotional deprivation and detachment. Charles Sobhraj's manipulative personality was driven by parental abandonment and racial persecution. The combination of biological predispositions and environmental deprivation in Sada's case highlights the complex causes of serial homicide, it's also possible that his surroundings influenced his motivations and personality. It's possible that his lack of socialization, education, discipline, and supervision kept him from growing up with moral principles and compassion, his exposure to abuse, violence, and poverty rendered him insensitive to human pain and led him to believe that life is pointless and inexpensive (Modi, S., & Nishar, K. 2023).

Children who have experienced abuse or neglect may grow up to have a strong mistrust of others and struggle to form sincere relationships. Additionally, they may display traits like guilt, hostility, antisocial behavior, or a lack of empathy that are frequently associated with serial homicides. Children who have experienced abuse or neglect may grow up to have a strong mistrust of others and struggle to form sincere relationships. Additionally, they may display traits like guilt, hostility, antisocial behavior, or a lack of empathy that are frequently associated with serial homicides (Saxena, G. 2024). Antisocial behavior can stem from exposure to parental figures with prior convictions, flawed family structures, and ineffective child-rearing practices, thereby demonstrating antisocial behavior to children and either creating or intensifying a conflict-ridden family environment, thus amplifying the family (Anderson & Keihl, 2014).

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Many serial killers in America have experienced traumatic childhoods that contributed to their violent tendencies, often selecting victims who resemble their past abusers. While not all serial offenders follow this pattern, some reenact aspects of their own trauma, whereas others kill solely for personal gratification. Research on Indian serial killers, particularly concerning their early life experiences, remains limited, resulting in a significant gap in knowledge. Indian family structures often emphasize strict values and can be complex, with limited interaction leading to neglect and insufficient emotional support. Additionally, physical discipline is sometimes employed to instill fear and deter misconduct, with maintaining the family's reputation being a primary concern.

Socioeconomic and cultural factors

Serial homicide is not solely rooted in psychological and neurological abnormalities. Environmental and sociocultural factors significantly influence the development of serial killers. Childhood trauma, socioeconomic deprivation, and cultural context shape behavioral patterns and personality formation. Social interactions and cultural norms inform emotional and cognitive development, which can solidify maladaptive behavioral patterns (Hegheş & Şchiopu, 2021). In the U.S., media glorification of serial killers often contributes to their infamy. Many American serial killers come from neglectful or abusive backgrounds, seeking attention and notoriety through their crimes. The pursuit of fame and recognition is a significant motivator, reinforced by societal fascination and media portrayal. In contrast, Indian serial killers often emerge from poverty and sociopolitical instability. Lack of media attention and public awareness has historically limited understanding of serial homicide in India.

Issues of racial bias also shape public perception. The stereotype of serial killers as White males, perpetuated by media and early profiling, marginalizes Black serial killers, despite empirical evidence of their presence. This stereotype creates a flawed narrative that underrepresents racial diversity among serial killers (Wallenborn, 2025). In contrast to racism in the United States, caste and religion are more significant in India than human life. Honor killing is one example of a crime that occurs when someone feels their religion is superior to others. Racism exists in Indian society, even among family members, where the appearance of one individual may differ from another, potentially leading to feelings of inferiority in that person.

Criminals like Amarjeet, who was abused by family members and lived in poverty, serve as a reminder of how hardship and neglect can encourage criminal activity (Bhadade, 2023). Known as "Cyanide Mallika," Kempamma sought money through planned killings since her socioeconomic goals were greater than her meager resources. India faces poverty at a far higher rate than the United States. Since the majority of criminals come from lower-class backgrounds and hope to live lives where all of their needs are met, when those requirements are not met, crime ensues. In India, socioeconomic considerations account for the majority of criminal activity.

CONCLUSION

Serial homicide is a complex phenomenon shaped by an interplay of psychological disorders, neurological impairments, and sociocultural factors. Psychopathy and personality disorders serve as core psychological components, while neurological deficits impair emotional regulation and impulse control. Environmental factors such as trauma, socioeconomic deprivation, and cultural dynamics further mold these individuals'

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behaviours. While American serial killers often reflect individualistic, fame-driven motives reinforced by media, Indian serial killers are more likely to act out of necessity and survival within socio-political constraints. A comprehensive understanding of these variables is essential for developing effective profiling, prevention, and rehabilitation strategies globally.

Limitations and Future Implication

Scholarly research that focuses only on Indian serial killers is severely lacking. Many examples lack enough documentation in official publications or peer-reviewed journals. There are restrictions on research access to case files, inmates, and crime scenes. In legal or law enforcement contexts, the phrase "serial killer" is not always used consistently in India. Different jurisdictions have different definitions, which makes classification difficult. Many serial killers remain undiscovered or unconvicted as a result of overworked police departments and insufficient forensic equipment. Because of the backlog of cases and the absence of interconnected databases, some murderers are misidentified as one-time offenders.

In order to prevent political repercussions or public fear, cases are occasionally minimized. For fear of criticism or administrative failure, police departments may be reluctant to make a serial killer public. A unified public database similar to the FBI's VICAP (Violent Criminal Apprehension Program) does not exist in India. Because of this, it is practically impossible to perform comparative or trend analysis without creating your own dataset from scratch. In Indian academic environments, there is little intersection between criminology, sociology, psychology, criminal profiling, and law. It is challenging to develop a thorough understanding of serial crimes since researchers sometimes operate in silos.

Insights on the psychological and environmental elements that fuel serial killing in India. Early identification of severe antisocial conduct in violently inclined people suggestions for the legal treatment of serial killings, such as trial protocols, sentencing guidelines, or mental health assessments. a drive for improved documentation of violent crime trends and unified databases.

raising awareness of the fact that serial killers are found in a variety of cultural situations and are not solely a "Western phenomenon" dispelling myths about the types of people who commit serial killings. Responsible media coverage that refrains from sensationalizing or glamorizing offenders could be guided by research. From an Indian perspective, the expanding true crime literature and media may be influenced by Indian serial killer instances. New international criminological theories may result from comparisons between serial killers who are Indian and those who are not.

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Acknowledgment

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Manhakkat, N.G., Aswathy, S., Favas, C.M.M. & Chempanayil, K.T. (2025). Serial Killers in India and the United States: A Comparative Criminological and Psychological Analysis. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 13(2), 4834-4843. DIP:18.01.427.20251302, DOI:10.25215/1302.427