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Relationship Between Mode of Death and Homicide Dump Sites

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ABSTRACT

The present research examines the relationship between mode of death and homicide dump sites in a sample of 496 cases from southeast Louisiana. The research is an extension of K. S. Fowler's work dealing with the environmental differences in dump sites (Fowler, 1992). Fowler proposed that dump site victims have a higher frequency of fatal trauma resulting from methods other than gunshot wounds. In the present study, we examined this hypothesis using data from the city of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, comparing the mode of death in dump site homicides and non-dump site homicides using records from the Baton Rouge Police Department from 1991 to 1997. Results were consistent with Fowler's findings, showing that victims left at dump sites had a higher frequency of non-gunshot fatalities when compared to those victims left at the murder site. Our findings support the theory that perpetrators who leave victims at dump sites have planned the crime out more thoroughly and may wish to exert more power over their victim. However, in the more organized homicides the victim was left at the murder site, suggesting that although the mode of death may be thoroughly planned, the disposal of the body was not given as much consideration. Possible explanations are discussed.

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Relationship Between Mode of Death and Homicide Dump Sites

Crime is an everyday reality; it happens all the time, occurs in all places, and is carried out by all sorts of people. Crime has been a popular research topic in the past and the interest is growing as the crime rates increase. Many different disciplines study crime: sociology, criminology, law, history, anthropology, and psychology. No doubt some of this interest is due to the many different aspects of crime and its effects on the victims and society.

While crime is a common element in society, its occurrence raises many questions. As murder rates rise, we must ask why people commit these atrocities. To understand crime, we have to examine the act itself and try to gain insight into the offender's mental processes. Forensic psychology concentrates on the details of the crime scene to analyze the subtle clues left behind in the disarray. The evidence can be an indication of the criminal personality and behavioral traits. Finding patterns in behavior and linking them to personality types can be an invaluable tool in narrowing the search for potential suspects (Ressler & Burgess, 1985). For example, crime scene locations hold many clues that give insight into the criminal mind -- why did they choose this particular place, what makes it an accessory to the crime, how did they encounter this location, etc. Some offenders carefully plan this location and others choose it opportunistically.

The purpose of the proposed research is to examine whether homicide victims that have been moved to a dump site display a pattern in their mode of death. Previous research of K. S. Fowler suggests there is a significant difference between the mode of death in dump site victims and that of the homicidal victims left at the murder scene (non-dumped bodies). For the purpose of this study, a dump site will comply with the definition provided by Louis Eliopoulos: an area containing a homicide victim lying above ground in which it is apparent the victim was not killed in this location but brought to the site after the homicidal event (Eliopoulos, 1993).

This paper is organized as follows. First, I will introduce the general discipline of

environmental criminology and outline spatial behavior patterns found in crime. Second, I will discuss the criminal's actions and thoughts throughout the murder and detail a few specifics of the different types of crime scenes. In the third section, I will discuss my hypothesis and expected outcomes, and provide supporting groundwork for the hypothesis.

Historical Antecedents

It is not a new idea to consider crime as spatially patterned. Recognition of spatially patterned crime dates back to the 17th century (Brantingham & Brantingham, 1993). Some of the first criminal statistics were compiled by the French scientist A. M. Guerry in the early 1800s (Davidson, 1981). Simply concentrating security in one area more heavily than another recognizes geographic relationships between crime and the environment.

The notion of crime and correlations with the environment has been heavily considered in deviance sociology, the study of social control and those who will not be controlled by society. The pioneers Robert Park and Ernest Burgess landmarked the study of deviance when they created a model of urban deviance areas, stating that crime typically occurs in certain areas of cities according to social activity (1967). When research supported this theory, the great Chicago School theorists Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay followed this with their map of the social ecology of juvenile delinquency, strengthening the concept that certain sociological areas are consistently characterized by particular crime rates (1969). Since then, many interrelationships have been found. Numerous other disciplines, including geography, anthropology, criminal justice, and psychology, have provided evidence that crime is not a random behavior.

Modern Conceptualizations of Environmental Psychology

The study of how physical surroundings affect criminal behavior has progressed considerably in the last twenty five years. Although still a fairly new area of research, complex and intricate relationships have been found between the two. Canadian environmental criminologists

Patricia and Paul Brantingham have laid the groundwork to provide more research and theory (1981). Leading forensic psychologist and criminal profiler David Canter, from Britain, has coined the term investigative psychology. Canter has done extensive work, making the spatial behavior of criminals more of a science, and offering the "circle hypothesis" as evidence (Canter, 1994). Many people are aiding in the new research, with experts from environmental psychology, forensic psychology, criminology, sociology, math, and geography integrating their work to find out more about the patterns a criminal follows geographically. The ideas are still new, but as supporting research is being conducted, the mystery of criminal behavior is becoming easier to understand.

Many people forget that a criminal functions as a part of society -- he/she blends in when performing daily actions and they have no criminally distinctive features. They, too, shop at the same stores, travel the same roads, and perform the same activities. In other words, the criminal has the same access and knowledge of the same areas and is exposed to the same sights and scenes as rest of society. Using this knowledge of the same areas, they commit crimes, exploiting the territory and environment to their advantage (Brantingham & Brantingham, 1993). Routine activity space is the space encompassed by the daily actions of an individual in a local area. Action space is the total space of which one is aware. This space provides criminals with knowledge that they later translate into a criminal event. Frequent passing of an alley or knowledge of an alternate path to a certain location can aid in the performance or planning of a crime; through this the person develops an awareness space. Some areas are more well known than others and have a more detailed layout within the criminal's mind. For example, you probably know more about characteristics about the surroundings near your house than you know of a house two miles away. The more a perpetrator knows of his geography, the more he can use it to his advantage.

Cities are laid out according to a generalized structure pattern -- roads may have a grid pattern, businesses are separate from residential areas, etc. Major roads frequently have access

to a highway and have stores, restaurants, and other conveniences. The Brantinghams (1993) provide an analogy of how a criminal goes about in unfamiliar territory, following general knowledge.

In an unfamiliar city, we know how to find a gas station -- find a busy street and there should be one at an intersection or a shopping mall. Similarly, criminals analyze the environment the same way regarding a criminal event: evaluate the current situation, whether it is in an unfamiliar area or a predictable, logical region.

The distance a criminal is willing to travel to commit his deviant act is referred to as the criminal commute (Rhodes & Conly, 1981). This distance is variable, depending on the risk and familiarity of the area. However it generally remains small and within the activity space of the criminal (Canter, 1994). Also, it will generally be at the closest, most convenient location possible, which follows the "least-effort principle" -- of all the opportunities available, the closest one will generally be chosen. The crime will also not be committed too close to the criminal's home, for there is a greater amount of recognition possible. There is a buffer zone -- the area that offenders tend to shun because it is too close to home. Therefore, the crime occurs at an optimal distance, at a location close enough so as not to cause discomfort in unfamiliar territory, yet distant enough to avoid being recognized. However, it has been reported that the commute depends on selectivity of the crime -- a well-thought-out crime will be at a farther distance from the criminal's home base (Brantingham & Brantingham, 1978). Spontaneous, less planned crimes have been found to be closer to the criminal's home.

Crime Scene Classification

The area in which the crime has been committed is known as the crime location or crime site. Generally, a crime site has been found near major activity areas such as roads, but criminals can move away from such well-known regions. Their search does not carry them too far into unfamiliar territory, for the site choice must remain an easy place for the criminal to find again,

one that is close to a main route of travel, and has an escape route. Most studies involving the organization of crime are based on serial killers, rapists, and other confessions of convicted offenders. Homicides can be triggered by robbery, revenge, dislike, etc. Some murderers, however, do not follow this "usual" set of motives and may instead follow a fantasy or delusion (Ressler, 1985). In these types of crimes it is the actual process and the power of the crime that motivate the assault, as opposed to the gains, such as money or sexual gratification.

A crime must have certain elements for it to be carried out. These components are a willing offender, an opportunity, a target/victim, and a motivation to offend. Opportunity is a powerful determinant of crime, as one convicted killer testifies:

"Plenty of time I went out looking [for a victim],
but never came across nothing and just went back
home..." (Ressler & Burgess, 1985)

Following that logic, if a potential victim is present, there is opportunity to commit a crime. If a weapon is available, its presence creates an opportunity for crime to occur. Likewise, the surrounding environment can create opportunities. A criminal is much more likely to commit a crime in a dark alley than in the middle of a church. A good area for criminal activity may include things such as a dark, concealed area, shadows [for more concealment], a waiting place, a means of escape, etc. Things to consider when planning a crime can be time allotments, risks involved, elements of surprise, method, type of weapon, escape, alibis, and possible capture or disturbances. These factors, combined with others, can influence the criminal's thoughts and actions.

In the aftermath of a crime, a killer must think of what to do with the body:

"I got a dead body on my hands. People see me come
in here. How am I going to pack this out? Am I
gonna put it in a double bag or sheet and carry it

out of here?" (Ressler & Burgess, 1985)

In a homicide, the body can be treated in several different manners following the murder. It can be buried, burned, or left out in the open for discovery. While it has been noted that most homicides are manslaughter (crimes of outburst), as opposed to murder (premeditated harm or a death inflicted during the process of another crime), murders have a higher tendency for the body to be transferred to another site (Ressler & Burgess, 1985). Manslaughter victims tend to be left at the site of death, whereas murder victims may be transported to other areas. The final location is the dump site, which often provides insight into the killer's behavior and mental functions. For example, characteristics of the dump site may provide clues as to how and why the killer follows his violent fantasies. Further, the dump site can tell us about the possible routine activity space, as well as things about the criminal commute - - why did the person choose this particular place, and what type of person would have knowledge of this area? Other clues, such as visible signs of struggle or the absence of disorder, can provide information about the precipitation of events and how long the murderer spent at the scene of the crime (this indicates a certain level of comfort with their actions and environment). There is a higher probability of the criminal hiding the body in such a case than if the murder was a sudden act.

FBI studies have established classifications of organized crime scene and disorganized crime scene (Ressler & Burgess, 1985). These two types of scenes have been outlined according to observations from previous crime scenes. A disorganized crime scene is more impulsive, with the criminal acting spontaneously and having no prior procedural plan. The manner of attack is that of a "blitz style" - - sudden, quick, unexpected, and powerful; if someone is murdered, it is frequently due to gunshot trauma. The body is typically left at the crime site, with no thoughts to dispose of it, possibly because of fear. After death, the disorganized killer may further mutilate the body, presumably to dehumanize the victim and help the killer distance himself from the person.

An organized crime scene will have the crime planned and simply needs an opportunity to assault a victim. Generally, the victim is a stranger and the offender will commit the crime, leaving behind little, if any, of a trail or evidence. The weapon is usually removed from the scene, as well as the body. The offender has complete control over his actions and the victim, and it is illustrated throughout the crime scene; the post-crime actions are well orchestrated.

A crime scene that includes a dumped body site implies a well-planned crime and most probably has been thought out or fantasized (according to previous studies: Ressler & Burgess, 1985; Rhodes & Conly, 1981, etc). In the case of serial killers, it is the ritual of murder that is appealing. In other words, it is the actual killing that fulfills the murderer's desires; for their satiation, the method of killing needs to be more powerful and torturous than a quick shooting, which is the predominant mode of manslaughter. This allows them to display their power over the victim. If this inference is true, it would explain the possible relationship between dump sites and manner of death.

Specific Aims

The present research examines the relationship between dump sites and the mode of death. On the basis of Fowler's previous research and the FBI crime scene classifications, we expect to observe a higher occurrence of more personal, violent forms of assault, such as blunt force trauma, strangulation, etc. in the dump site victims. Victims left at the crime scene, or "nondump site" victims, are expected to have a higher rate of gunshot fatalities, which are quick and mechanical.

The present study focuses on an area with a variety of different types of geography and topography, which provide a large selection of different types of crime sites. Baton Rouge is located in southern Louisiana and has access to rivers, lakes, urban areas, and rural areas. Also, Baton Rouge is highly populated with a diverse set of residents, ranging from politicians, business

people, farmers, college students, and tourists, which could account for a variety of motives, general types of areas encountered during routine activity, and different levels of power or reasoning involved. Baton Rouge also has a significant crime rate which allows for an adequate sample size.

Method

The cases selected for inclusion were victims of homicide and other forms of unnatural death. Whether the body was transported before or after the death did not affect the inclusion in this study, the body must have been brought to a specific site for the purpose of disposal to be considered a dumped body.

The cases were taken from the police records of the Baton Rouge Police Department Homicide and Armed Robbery Division, spanning the years from 1991 - 1997. Information about the circumstances of death must have been included to determine if the body was a dumped body case; any case in which there were no details about the circumstances was considered as a non-dump site case. Records kept by the police include the Coroner's Day Record, Case Synopsis, transcripts of interviews, and records of any actions taken. This study obtained most of the information from the Homicide Case Synopsis Sheet (see Appendix A).

Cases were first categorized according to whether the body was transported from the original scene of murder to another area specifically for the purpose of disposal of the body. All cases that are not dump site victims were analyzed as the control group for the mode of death. All cases were then classified according to mode of death.

The mode of death is the specific way in which the death was caused; this information was obtained from the police reports. The modes of death in the cases sampled include gunshot, stabbing, blunt force, asphyxiation, drowning, and any others explicitly specified.

Results

Of 496 total homicides from 1991 - 1997, there were 33 dumped body cases. The cases represented a total of 6.6% of all homicides.

Table 1 shows the number of homicides per year and their classification into dump site/nondump site. Of the total homicide cases per year, an average of 6.5% were dump site cases, which ranged from as little as two in 1992 and as high as seven in 1996. If it was unknown as to whether the body was brought to the site specifically for disposal, the case was classified as nondump site.

Table 2 presents the percentage of cases per year classified according to mode of death. The categories included are gunshot, stabbing, asphyxiation/strangulation, blunt force, drowning, burning, abandonment/negligence (typically of children). The "other" category includes "shaken" syndrome in infants, vehicular homicide, sharp instrument trauma, and unknown modes of death. If there were two modes of death listed, the case was classified by the mode listed first. Although the gunshot mode was the most frequent mode of death occurring in both nondump site and dump site cases (73% and 45%, respectively), the frequency of nongun modes at dump sites was higher than at nondump sites. For example, the dump site cases were most frequently blunt force (18%), which represented only 4.6% in nondump site cases. Blunt force was followed by a 12% occurrence of asphyxiation/strangulation in dump site cases, as opposed to 2% in nondump site cases. This was followed by an equal number of negligence/abandonment cases and "other" cases (9%). However, the most frequent non-gun mode of death, stabbing, occurred at a rate of 10% in nondump site cases, and only at a 6% rate in dump site cases.

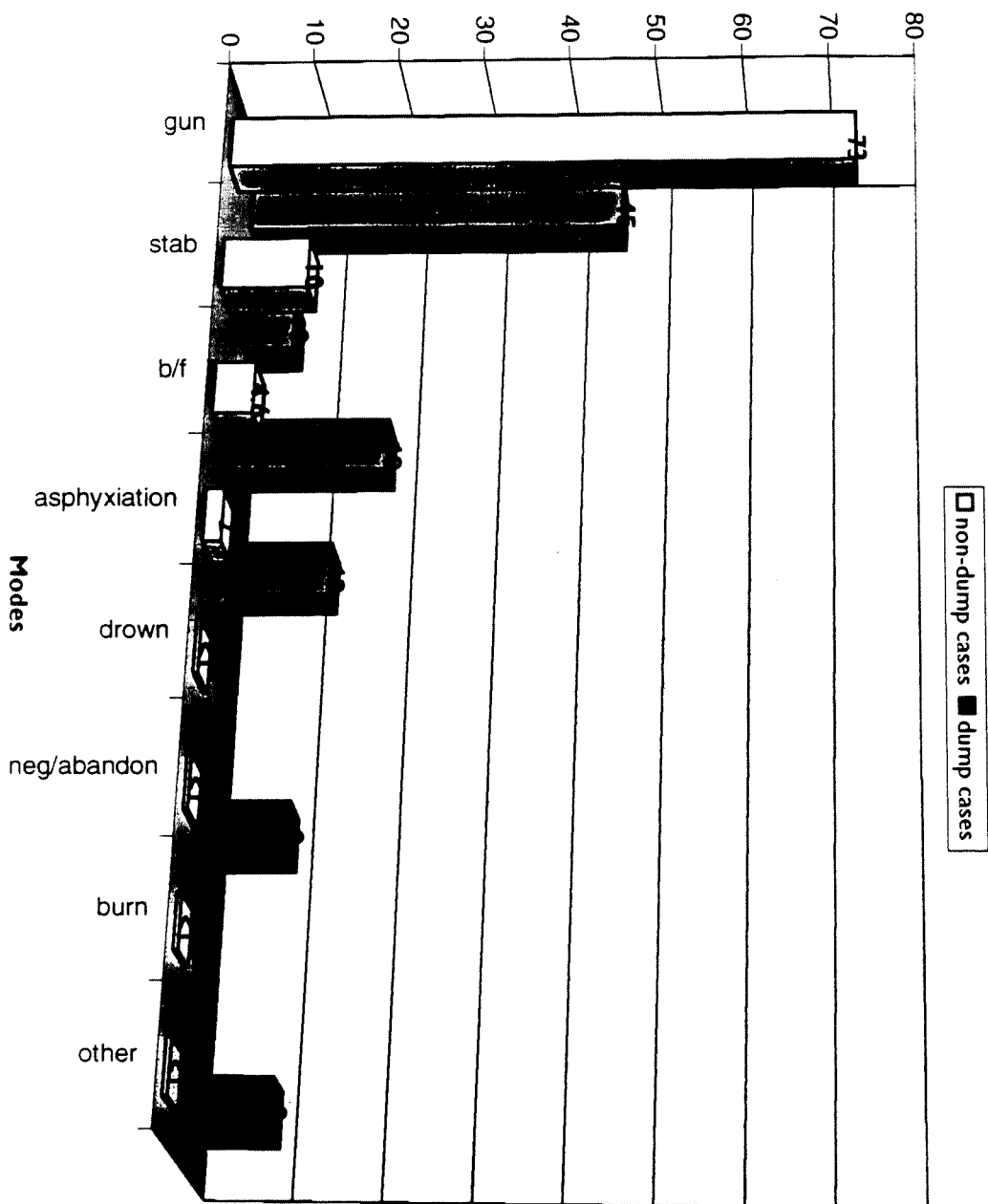
Table 3 is divided into two tables: 3A displays the percentage of modes of death that are gunshot and non-gunshot in nondump site cases, and 3B is the percentage of gunshot and non-gunshot modes of death in dump site cases. This evidence supports the hypothesis, showing that

Table 1

Number of Homicides per Year

CLASSIFICATION	YEAR						
	<u>91</u>	<u>92</u>	<u>93</u>	<u>94</u>	<u>95</u>	<u>96</u>	<u>97</u>
Non-Dump Site Cases	62	59	72	74	62	74	60
Percentage	94	97	94	95	91	91	92
Dump Site Cases	4	2	5	4	6	7	5
Percentage	6	3	6	5	9	9	8
<hr/>							
TOTAL PER YEAR	66	61	77	78	68	81	65

Table 2
MODE OF DEATH
 Non-dump site vs Dump site

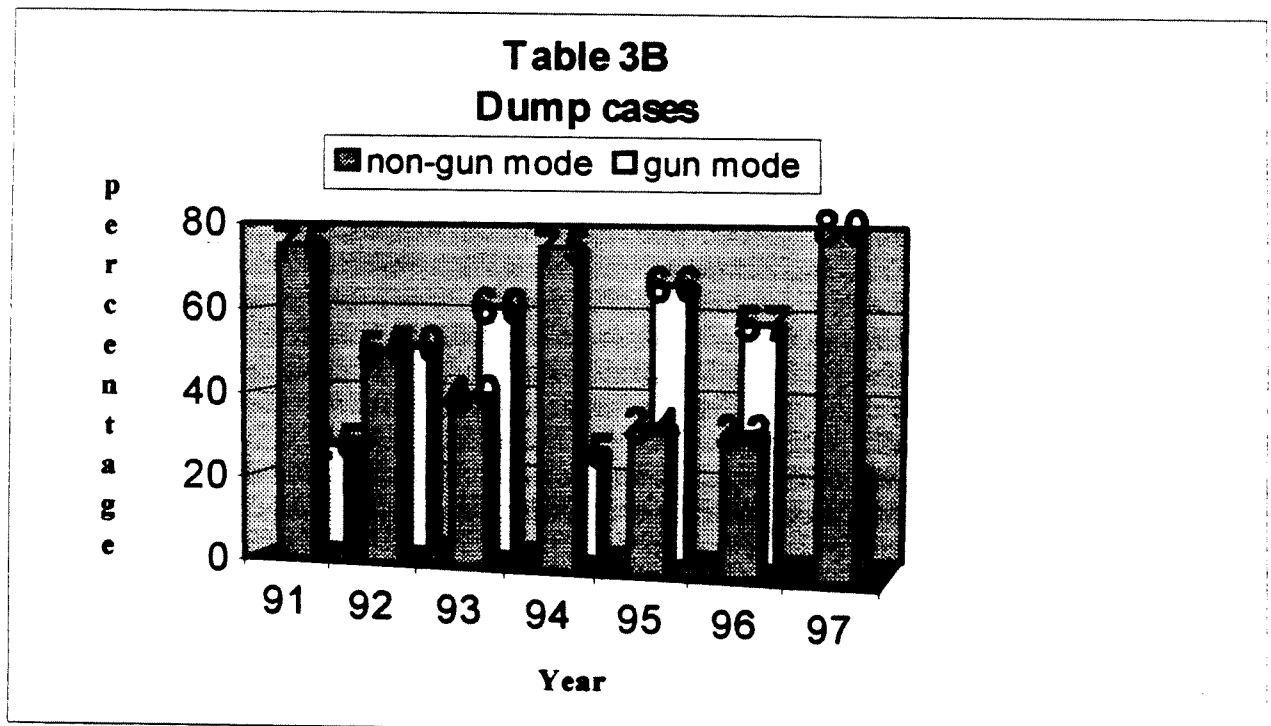
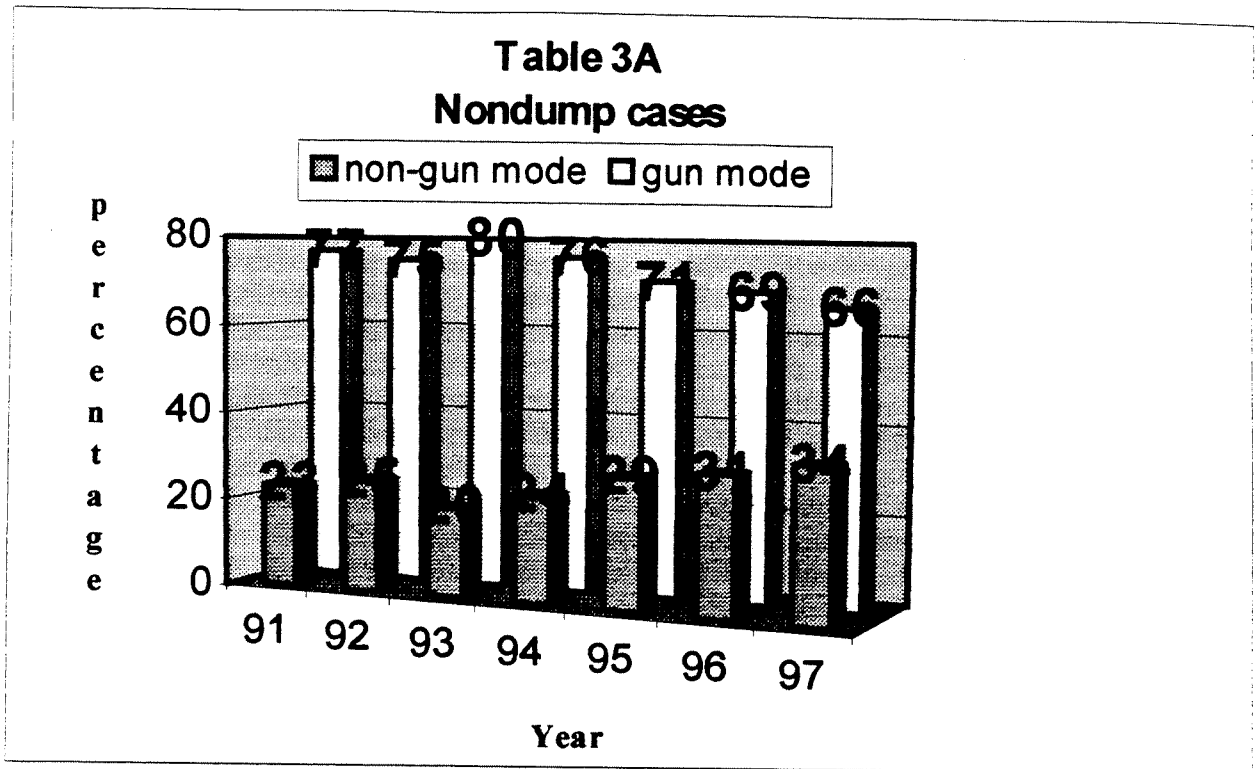


Percentage

TABLE 3

MODE OF DEATH

CLASSIFIED BY GUN OR NONGUN



even though there is a high number of deaths due to gunshot in dump site cases, there is a larger percentage of non-gunshot trauma when compared to the nondump site victims (generally 100% more). Exceptions are 1995 and 1996 as the only years in which the frequencies were comparable (1995: 3% difference, 1996: 12% difference).

Although this supports the hypothesis concerning mode of death and dump site victims, the more organized cases, representing the lower frequency modes of death, more severe trauma, and confessed elaborate plans, were non-dump site victims. The planning and reasons involved in dump site cases are reconsidered.

Discussion

The hypothesis was supported, with fatal trauma in dump site cases resulting from a higher frequency of modes of death other than a gunshot when compared to the frequency of modes of death in nondump site cases. However, it was found that a number of the more "complex" or organized crimes are not dump site cases. Several of the homicides that had modes of death that occurred only once or twice within a seven-year period and involved obvious (if not confessed) detailed planning were not transported to a dump site. There are several possible explanations.

Much of the literature that involves dump site cases is based on serial killers, who wish to display their victims in a mocking gesture of power. The dump site cases included in this study were not known to be committed by any serial killers. This may lead one to conclude that although the criminal planned the crime well, he did not hold any sort of fantasy that required just any victim and a particular manner of death. For many of the complex crimes, the crime was planned with a specific victim in mind with a personal motive, such as revenge, robbery, or infanticide. Therefore, the dump site may indicate that the motive was not necessarily personal.

It seems that many of the dump site cases involved planning of the murder, but not

planning of the disposal. One offender confessed that after the murder, he panicked and dismembered the body to hide at different spots; another stated that she did not know what to do and disposed of the body quickly for peace of mind. These cases in which the criminal confessed panicking over disposal support the criminal commute theory (Rhodes & Conly, 1981) - - the victims were dumped at a site close, available, and previously known or encountered by the victim. It is unfortunate that police interrogation does not ask why or how a certain spot was chosen from a range of options when a confession is obtained.

Another possibility is that the complex crimes involved a certain level of comfort with the victim - - the offender was comfortable enough to arrange the body in a certain position on the couch or did not mind setting the body on fire in the house. It may be concluded that the amount of planning makes the offender more comfortable with his act, enough to not need any of the "protection" that a dump site may offer, such as solitude, less chance of discovery, etc. The offender may have no fear of leaving the body at the murder site, as did the offenders in which the victims were left to die in a gassed house after the robbery was planned for three years.

Another point of consideration is that some of the dumped bodies may be well hidden and simply not found yet. These cases may provide evidence of well-planned body disposal. Crime scenes that displayed evidence of an organized crime may have been classified as non-dump cases due to the cases being unsolved; the circumstances regarding the homicide were unknown as was the intent of the offender.

Classification and incomplete information in the synopses also posed a problem. Circumstances regarding nature of the death were available, but none regarding why a person was walking along the levee at 2:00 AM. Incomplete and inconsistent information, such as trauma and motive [when available], was not always reported. Another problem was that the synopses records were not always updated and follow-up information on the cases was

inaccessible in some instances. This led to many possible or likely dump body cases to be classified as nondump site cases. Standardized computer records might be considered; although it may be inefficient, the potential benefits for research, as well as an advancement towards future technological applications.

Other relationships that can be examined are whether certain surroundings favor certain modes of death, (i.e., provide better opportunities), or if the environment can increase the murder rate of a city. Factors to consider would include the actual site of death and the average distance to dump sites. Also, an important but difficult factor to control for is the commercial aspect of geography. The environment can be essential to murders, providing a seemingly secluded, quiet area that can conceal the brutal violence that occurs. The actual magnitude of the influence of the environment on crime has yet to be discovered. However, once such questions are answered, it will be easier to delve into the criminal mind.

APPENDIX A

CASE SYNOPSIS FORM

HOMICIDE/ROBBERY
CASE SYNOPSIS

DATE _____

FILE # _____ YEAR _____

TIME _____

PROPERTY: YES _____ NO _____

LOCATION _____

VALUE _____

ACCUSED

OFFENSE _____

1. _____

RACE _____ SEX _____ AGE _____

VICTIM _____

ADDR _____

RACE _____ SEX _____ AGE _____

ADDR _____

2. _____

RACE _____ SEX _____ AGE _____

PHONE _____

ADDR _____

INJURY: YES _____ NO _____

HOSPITAL _____

VEHICLE _____

WARRANT ISSUED. YES _____ NO _____

ARREST MADE, YES _____ NO _____

SYNOPSIS

DETECTIVE _____ DETECTIVE _____

DATE OFFENSE TURNED IN TO LT.

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