



Breakfast Seminar - 2016

BS2 Death From a Distance: The Etiology of Serial Sniper Homicides

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After attending this presentation, attendees will better understand the unusual nature of serial sniper homicides and the difficulties faced by law enforcement, forensic specialists, and prosecutors in dealing with these cases.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by highlighting the etiology of serial sniper homicides, the problems involved in determining case linkage between the different shootings, the circumstantial nature of the forensic evidence, and the difficulties involved in the prosecution of these infrequent crimes.

This presentation is designed to provide a historic overview of serial sniper homicides within the context of murder in general and serial murder, specifically. This presentation will also provide the statistical instances of serial sniper homicides compared to other types of murders as well as outline the investigative and forensic difficulties faced by law enforcement and the forensic community when dealing with one of these rare cases. Additionally, an extensive case study will be presented regarding a serial sniper case that took more than ten years to successfully convict the offender.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI's) National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime (NCAVC) is routinely consulted by federal, state, and local authorities in a variety of bizarre and repetitive violent crimes, especially homicides. NCAVC assistance was requested by local authorities regarding the case of a serial sniper. The four shooting incidents occurred during a highly contested divorce proceeding involving the offender. The first and second shootings were directed at the lawyer representing the offender's wife and the judge presiding over the divorce hearing, both of whom were shot at while inside their residences. Both were uninjured. The lawyer representing the offender's wife was shot at a second time while in his law office. The bullet struck him in the left eye, causing the loss of the eye; however, he survived the attack. The last attack occurred seven years later and targeted the male coworker with whom the offender's wife had previously had an affair. The victim, who was now a married father of three, was shot and killed in the yard of his residence. The laboratory determined the recovered bullet fragments from the shootings were consistent with a .22 caliber centerfire bullet and were fired through a similar rifle.

The investigation quickly focused on the offender; however, a series of search warrants failed to locate the specific rifle or similar ammunition involved in the attacks. The lack of evidence emboldened the offender and he began a public campaign professing his innocence and crusading against the "corrupt" criminal justice system. After one of the search warrants had been served, the offender placed a written response on the front porch of the judge who had signed the warrant, even though he lived in a different jurisdiction located more than an hour away. Additionally, the offender became active in the local political party and attempted to exert pressure on the local authorities to stifle the investigation.

Based upon the highly charged nature of this case, the "fear factor" generated by the shootings, the defiant demeanor displayed by the offender, and the lack of direct evidence, the police department requested assistance from the FBI. Both the local FBI office and the NCAVC provided assistance. During the joint consultation with the NCAVC, it was decided to convene a grand jury to address the four shootings. The strategy involved calling the offender as the first witness and outlining the legal ramifications for contacting and/or intimidating other witnesses testifying before the grand jury. The offender subsequently interfered with several witnesses, was charged and convicted of four counts of witness tampering, and was given a 21-year sentence. He was also indicted on numerous charges for the four sniper shootings, including murder and attempted murder.

The complex trial lasted more than two months. While there was no direct forensic evidence linking the offender, a variety of circumstantial evidence was presented outlining the unusual nature of the series of shootings, the relationship of the victims who were targeted, the offender's skill with weapons, and the various statements made by the offender. During the trial, numerous witnesses were called including forensic experts, investigators, the shooting victims, the offender's ex-wife, a member of the NCAVC, and a police department Special Weapons And Tactics (SWAT) sniper. The jury found the offender guilty of 31 separate counts and sentenced him to a life sentence plus 288 years.

This case highlights the complex nature of sniper murders, the value of circumstantial evidence, and the benefit of forensic experts, investigators, subject-matter experts, and prosecutors working cooperatively.

Serial Sniper, Serial Murder, Sniper

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