



H154 “Who Dismembers Mama?”

Reema Khan, MD, Chicago, IL 60612; Michael D. Eckhardt, MD, Cook County Office of the Medical Examiner, Chicago, IL 60612; Adrienne Segovia, MD, Cook County Office of the Medical Examiner, Chicago, IL 60612*

Learning Overview: After attending this presentation, attendees will be familiar with cases involving dismemberment, including the different modes of dismemberment, patterns used to classify them, causes of death, and concealment locations in a large metropolitan area.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by familiarizing death investigators with different patterns of, and implements used in, dismemberment.

Dismemberment is uncommon and is typically performed to hinder identification and/or facilitate the disposal of the decedent. Dismemberment poses specific challenges to the forensic community, including not only in identification of remains, but also in the determination of cause and manner of death. There are different classification systems that describe dismemberment. One classification system encompasses postmortem mutilation and dismemberment. This classification emphasizes the psychology of the perpetrator and describes the postmortem mutilation/dismemberment as motivated by: (1) defensive (disposal of the remains and/or hindering identification), (2) aggressive (outrage and involves mutilation of face and genitals), (3) offensive (necrophilia urge and sexual sadism), and (4) necromanic (necrophilia and retaining a body part as a trophy). Understanding a perpetrator’s motive is useful, but knowledge of specific patterns of dismemberment is also very helpful. Dismemberment patterns can be described as localized (removal of body parts to hinder identification) or generalized (segmenting the body for disposal). Both localized and generalized dismemberment are further subdivided by the method of dismemberment. Patterns can also be described as involving disarticulation, transection by sawing or chopping, or a combination of the two.

In this study, the Cook County Medical Examiner’s Office records were retrospectively searched from 1991 to 2018 to identify cases in which the manner of death was homicide or undetermined, and included the following terms: dismemberment, decapitation, disarticulation, and unidentified bones. Seventeen cases were identified that met these criteria. The dismemberment pattern, cause of death, recovery location, demographic data, type of implements, and other postmortem artifacts were recorded.

The manner of death was homicide in 94% of the cases. An undetermined manner accounted for the remaining 6% of the cases. Female victims accounted for 53% of deaths and their ages ranged from 3 to 81 years. Of the female victims, 44% were black, 44% were White, and the race could not be determined in one case. The cause of death for female victims ranged from sharp force injuries to blunt force injuries with each accounting for 11.1% of the causes of death, for a total of 22.2%. Homicide by unspecified means accounted for 66.7% of the cases. The cause and manner of death was undetermined in 11.1% of the cases.

Male victims made up 47% of the cases, with ages ranging from 2 to 70 years. Of the male victims, 37.5% were Black and 62.5% were White. Cause of death was blunt force injuries in 25% cases. Decapitation, sharp force injury, head trauma, and gunshot wound to the head comprised the remainder of the male victims’ cause of death when one was identified. Each of these four cases accounted for 12.5% for a total of 50%. Homicide by unspecified means made up the remaining 25%.

The entire body was recovered in 52.9% of the cases (i.e., 29.4% of the female victims and 23.5% of the male victims.) Dismemberment and removal-disposal/concealment was an element in 94% of the cases. In only one case was there an element of display rather than concealment. No correlation was found between the cause of death, gender, age, race, or type of dismemberment pattern among the female and male victims. Implements used in dismemberment were identified in 64.7% of the cases. No correlation was identified between cause of death and type of dismemberment/transection pattern (i.e., transection by saw, by chop, or by disarticulation).

Transection by saw predominated. Disarticulation, which appears to be a logical mode of dismemberment, was rare in this and other studies. One can only speculate as to the possible reasons for this; although disarticulation requires less force, it may be more time-consuming and require an understanding of anatomy that an average perpetrator may lack. Additionally, the prevalence of hardware stores and the availability of tools that can be used to dismember a body make transection easier. Recognition of this fact in at least one of the cases reviewed permitted the implements used to be traced to purchases made at a hardware store with subsequent identification of the perpetrators.

Dismemberment, Disarticulation, Transection