

A RETROSPECTIVE STUDY ON DISMEMBERMENT IN NEW YORK CITY,
1990-2006

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Abstract

Body mutilation, especially postmortem dismemberment, is typically motivated by five major objectives: to transport the victim's remains; to conceal the body and other evidence of a crime; to prevent the investigators from identifying the victim; as a demonstration of extreme loathing or disregard for human life; and to fulfill fantastic or ritualistic urges. This research is a retrospective analysis of postmortem dismemberment from 1990 to 2006 in New York City. During this time, 45 dismemberment cases were handled by the Office of Chief Medical Examiner, NY. I use these cases to examine dismemberment trends in an urban environment.

Based on homicide rates and population size, I hypothesized that the majority of dismemberment victims in New York City would be young males from the boroughs of Brooklyn and the Bronx, and that the dismemberments would be mostly accomplished by severing the bone at the level of the cervical vertebrae, the glenohumeral joints of the upper extremities, and the femoroacetabular joints of the lower extremities, resulting in a minimum number of six body parts per case. Based on the biological profile, circumstantial evidence, including packaging material and disposal locations, and the dismemberment pattern for each, coupled with census data from the Bureau of Vital Statistics, I confirmed these hypotheses and found the following trends. Similar to overall homicide rates, male dismemberment victims outnumbered females 2.5:1. However, female victims were more likely to be found in bodies of water and to be dismembered into more body segments than were males. Many of the victims were young adults, ranging from 15 to 34 years of age; however, there were also a surprisingly large number of dismemberment victims between 45 and 54 years of age. Similar to prevailing homicide rates, African-American and Hispanic individuals formed the largest proportion of the dismemberment cases. Remains were most often found packaged in garbage bags and rigid containers (such as suitcases). As predicted, severed or transected body parts outnumbered disarticulated body parts nearly four to one. A combination of both dismemberment types were seen in 25% of the cases in the sample. As physical cut mark evidence was rarely retained, tool analyses could not be included; however, the high-frequency of transection suggests that valuable evidence could be attained if such remains are retained in future cases.

The data suggest several patterns of dismemberment that may attest to the intentions of the perpetrator. These patterns include transportation, concealment, hindering identification, loathing or extreme disregard for human life, and fetish or ritual. Combinations of all five dismemberment types were discovered in a majority of the sample; however, a clear primary dismemberment type was observed in most of the cases.

Transportation dismemberment patterns consisted of the removal of the upper and lower extremities from the torso, or the division of the body into large, equal pieces suited for carrying and transportation, and was seen in 62% of the sample. *Concealment* dismemberment patterns were seen in 13% of the sample and consisted of asymmetric or oddly dismembered body segments, which may be explained in the context in which the remains were disposed of or by the material restrictions in which they were packaged. *Hindering Identification* consisted

of the removal of particular body segments that are typically used to identify victims, and includes the head (dental records) and the hands (fingerprints). There were 29% of the sample cases that were associated with this dismemberment pattern. *Loathing or extreme disregard for human life* consisted of all dismemberments that showed excessive force or excessive mutilation. This category contained three male juveniles between the ages of one and 14 years of age and one female adult between 35 and 45 years old. Loathing or disregard was the second least common dismemberment types in the sample and it was only seen in 9% of the cases. Finally, *fetish or ritual* dismemberment patterns were seen in two cases (4%) and it was least common dismemberment type in this study. Fetish or ritual patterns consisted of dismembered body parts that were negligible for deterring identification processes, or to ease transportation or concealment. The two cases with this dismemberment pattern both involved the removal of the chest plate and the motivation behind this type of dismemberment is more consistent with personal gain.