

# Psychotic Motivation for Sexual Homicide: A Review of the Literature and Summary of Forensic Psychiatric Cases



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## Introduction

Sexual homicides are rare but present serious challenges. In 2004 in the United States, out of 14,121 murders in which circumstances were known, only 1.1% of these murders were sexual homicides (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2005).

While there has been accumulating research on psychotic motivation for homicides (e.g., Nielsens & Large, 2010) and psychosis-driven sexual offences (e.g., Smith & Taylor, 1999), research on psychotic motivation for sexual homicide is limited.

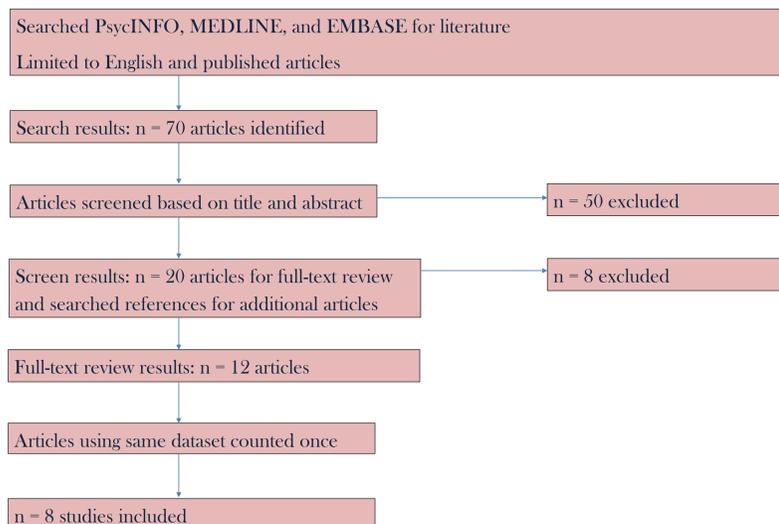
Researchers have highlighted the need for further study into the nature of psychotic motivation for violence more broadly (e.g., Penney, Morgan, & Simpson, 2016), and for sexual violence in particular (e.g., Bloom & Schneider, 2017). Motivation is commonly conceptualized as the cause of action, referring to the reason or reasons why a person does something.

## Methods

**OBJECTIVE.** The objective of this study was to estimate the prevalence of psychotic motivation for sexual homicide. We hypothesized that psychosis is a motivating factor for sexual homicide in a minority of cases.

Original studies focusing on the connection between psychosis and sexual homicide were considered for this study.

**Figure 1.** Study selection and exclusion process.



## Results

**Table 1.** Data from studies that reported the percentage of participants diagnosed with psychosis among individuals who committed sexual murders.

Study (By order of % diagnosed with psychosis)	Diagnosis of psychosis (%)	Sample size (n / N) <sup>1</sup>	Sampling method	Sample source	Information source(s)
Langevin et al. (2003)	27.3%	9 / 33	Convenience	Cases referred to the Clarke Institute of Psychiatry <sup>2</sup>	Standard tests and interviews
Revitch (1965)	20.9%	9 / 43	Convenience	Primarily from the New Jersey Diagnostic Center <sup>3</sup>	Not stated
Firestone et al. (1998)	14.6%	7 / 48	Convenience	Cases from the Sexual Behaviors Clinic, Royal Ottawa Hospital	Standard tests and interviews
Warren et al. (1996)	5.0%	1 / 20	Population-based	FBI's National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime	Multiple sources, including police investigation reports, psychiatric reports, and interviews with the offender
Hill et al. (2007)	3.0%	5 / 166	Convenience	Reports by forensic psychiatrists	Assessments by forensic psychiatrists
Oliver et al. (2007)	2.3%	1 / 44	Convenience	Sex offender treatment programs in prisons	Interviews and file reviews
Folino (2000)	0%	0 / 16	Population-based	Files from the Judiciary Department of La Plata, Argentina	File reviews
Rosman & Resnick (1989)	0%	0 / 16	Convenience	Available literature and unpublished clinical cases	Case reviews

<sup>1</sup> Where n = number of individuals diagnosed with psychosis and N = number of individuals who have committed sexual homicides.

<sup>2</sup> Formerly named.

<sup>3</sup> Source(s) not stated for the other cases.

Overall, the prevalence of psychosis among individuals who have committed sexual homicide ranged from 0% to 27%. All but two studies were convenience samples of referrals for assessment and at risk of being biased by the referral process. The two population studies of Warren et al. (1996) and Folino (2000) found a percentage of psychosis of 5% and 0%, respectively.

**Table 2.** Summary of Forensic Psychiatric Cases.

	Index offense(s)	Legal determination	Diagnosis(es)
Case 1	Sexual assault causing death of four-month old infant	Unfit to stand trial (unclear if found permanently unfit)	Psychotic disorder, not otherwise specified
Case 2	Sexual assault during assault with weapon and attempted murder against adult sister	Not criminally responsible on account of mental disorder	Schizophrenia
Case 3	Sexual assault and attempted murder against girlfriend	Not criminally responsible on account of mental disorder	Brief psychotic disorder
Case 4	Aggravated sexual assault and aggravated assault against child/niece	Not criminally responsible on account of mental disorder	Chronic paranoid schizophrenia and substance use disorder

We searched the Ontario Review Board (ORB) database (1988-2012; 2,533 total cases of NCRMD/NGRI in the database) for individuals with both a severely violent (e.g., murder, attempted murder) and a sexual offense. Four cases were identified.

## Discussion

In five studies, a majority of the studies, the presence of psychosis was reported to be 5% or less. This suggests that psychosis plays a minor motivational role in sexual homicide generally, though it might be causative in a small proportion of cases.

From our review, no study has directly measured or examined psychosis as a motivating factor for sexual homicide. In general, they employ either the presence of psychotic symptoms at the time of the index offending or a lifetime diagnosis of a psychotic illness.

Bloom and Schneider (2017) presented a theoretical framework outlining possible routes through which psychosis may motivate sexual offending, providing a possible framework for future investigation.

Clarifying the extent to which psychosis is a motivational factor for sexual homicide is important, both in terms of identifying reliable risk factors for this serious type of offending, and informing broader public safety discussions on the role of mental illness in the commission of violence.