

H A R L A N   R I C H A R D S

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Killers On the Loose

It may surprise you to know that less than half of all homicides in Milwaukee, Wisconsin are solved. In other words, if you kill someone in Milwaukee you have a better than 50-50 chance of getting away with it.

The Milwaukee Journal/Sentinel published an article on March 24, 2019 detailing the Milwaukee homicide statistics from 2014 to 2018. Out of 594 killings during that period, 62% of them resulted in an arrest (or the main suspect was dead or otherwise unchargeable). In 58% of them, someone was charged. However, of the 494 homicides during 2014 to 2017, only 47% resulted in a conviction. There have been 233 unsolved murders in the last 5 years. What does this mean?

It means that there are literally hundreds of murderers walking the streets who have never served a single day in prison for an unlawful killing. It means that the next time someone lashes out at you during a road rage incident, or you take a parking spot someone else had their eye on, or you inadvertently offended someone at a concert or in a tavern, you may be signing your own death warrant. You have no way of knowing who (or what) any stranger you meet is. He or she could be one of the murderers who got away. He or she may take offense at something you did and you could become another one of the hundreds of the unsolved murders.

Of course, there are some people who can be excluded as possible suspects. The stereotypical suburban housewife, elected officials, attorneys and other similar people most likely are not killers. But that leaves millions of seemingly ordinary people among whom these murderers are hiding in plain sight.

This is a shameful state of affairs. But what makes it even more egregious is that because so many citizens are getting away with murder, it encourages other potential killers to take their chances as well. If a person has a poverty-level existence and can see a chance to get ahead by killing someone, he or she has a better than 50% chance of getting a successful outcome. That's a scary thought.

Another unintended consequence of all the unprosecuted murders is that those who do get caught and convicted receive harsher sentences. Judges, prosecutors and even the parole commission get tougher on crime by keeping the ones they do convict in prison longer to make up for the ones who got away.

When I came to prison in 1984, the maximum penalty for 1st degree murder was life with an automatic parole eligibility of 11 years, 3 months. 2nd degree murder was 20 years and manslaughter was 10 years. Parole eligibility was 25% of the total sentence. Killers were caught, convicted, did their time and got out - most of them becoming productive members of society. Lifers served on average 11-13 years. Now, they are locked up for decades, some receiving life without parole. Their lives are essentially over if they are caught. That gives them a strong incentive to do whatever is necessary to avoid conviction - including intimidation and/or killing of potential witnesses or fighting to the death in a gun battle with police. They know they will never see freedom again if convicted. Death is preferable to spending decades in the current prison system.

We need sentencing reform, tougher enforcement in high crime areas and a whole new way of addressing our social problems to fix this. But sadly, our elected officials don't have the courage to stand up to the Mass Incarceration Movement and the Prison Industrial Complex so we just keep on packing the prisons with people who will never see daylight again.