

**Research Article**

## **Socio-demographic and Mechanical Profiles of Malaysian Male Murderers: a Descriptive Study**

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**Abstract**

**Objectives:** The present study aimed to reveal the socio-demographic and mechanical profiles of Malaysian male murderers.

**Methodology:** An observational cross-sectional methodology was applied using guided self-administered survey among Malaysian male murderers. The present study significantly differs from other studies as the information on murder was obtained from the respective murderer rather than from autopsy reports, official statistics, newspapers, or legal reports. 71 male murderers from 11 Malaysian prisons participated in this study on a voluntary basis. The murderers were queried on various mechanical variables of murder including: motives, methods of killing, weapon usage, targeted body parts, murder settings, murder concealment, relationship with victims, precipitating factors and socio-demographic variables.

**Results:** Based on the emerged mechanical profiles, majority of the murderers used single killing method (88.7%). Stabbing (31.0%) and knives (26.8%) were the most preferred killing method and murder weapon. This profile also revealed expressive motive (47.9%) as the apparent dominating cause of murder. Most of the murder incidents occurred at public areas (64.8%) during late evening to midnight hours (45.1%). Most of murderers targeted strangers (46.5%) and acquaintances (35.2%). The emerged profiles were discussed in relation to murder, criminology and victimology contexts.

**Conclusion:** The present study achieved the aim by documenting the socio-demographic and mechanical profiles of male murderers which may be beneficial to scholars, the public and enforcement officials.

**Keywords:** Malaysia; mechanical profile, male murderer, socio-demographic profile

### **1. Introduction**

Murder is an unlawful killing of a human being with malice aforethought. It is the serious of all common-law crimes and ranked as the most heinous crime of all crimes monitored in the Crime Index<sup>1</sup>. The global epidemic of murder challenges the mores of society and erodes a nation's moral and social wellbeing. In addition, as portrayed in local media; the nature and extent of murder are getting more severe and becoming increasingly complex.

In response to the World Health Organisation and United Nation's monitoring of health and crime trends, there is a need to investigate the socio-demographic and mechanical profiles of Malaysian murderers since modes of killing vary corresponding to the history and the cultural background of a country<sup>2-4</sup>. While many researchers from Western and Asian countries have delved in the field of murder, comparable murder studies in South-East Asia are fairly rare. Despite Malaysia's status as one of the Asian country, there is almost no literature available on murder. Thus, there is an urgent need to perpetuate empirical studies in order to advance the understanding of the Malaysian murderers' profiles.

Due to these realisations, the present study also seeks to determine the socio-demographic and mechanical aspects of Malaysian male murderers. An empirical assessment of socio-demographic and mechanical traits among Malaysian murderers would contribute to the body of knowledge of the relevant disciplines for example medical, legal, and criminology. Unlike past retrospective studies which focused on autopsy reports and official crime statistics, the present study focused on gathering information on murder from murderers themselves.

Gathering information on murder from the murderers will allow the enrichment of contextual knowledge related to triggers, victims' roles, and weapon usage which are unlikely to be obtained from autopsy reports and crime statistics. In addition, autopsy reports are unable to ascertain the actual motive and murderous relations in a murder incident. Therefore, the methodology that was implemented in this study would help to obtain a better perspective on the mechanical aspects of Malaysian murderers and identify high risk individuals more precisely compared to the retrospective reviews of autopsy reports and crime statistics.

### **2. Methods**

The present study was an observational cross-sectional study. For the purpose of this research, the sampling frame takes into account all the male murderers from eleven prisons in Peninsular Malaysia who committed murder and aged 21 and older. The participants were selected using purposive sampling method with predetermined selection criteria.

Prior to this study, ethical approval and permission was granted by Malaysian Department of Prisons (MDP) [JP/LTH/Rd/102/3 Klt.56 (66)] and Human Ethical Committee of Universiti Sains Malaysia [USM/KK/PPP/JePeM (264.3. (4))]. 71 Malaysian male murderers formed the cohort of the present study. The participation was on volunteer basis and the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses were highly assured and maintained. Written and signed consent from the participants was obtained prior to their participation.

A guided self-administered survey was distributed among Malaysian murderers under the monitoring of prison officers. The guided self-administered survey consisted of two main sections. Section one contained questions on socio-demographic of the murderers themselves. Section two queried the respondents on the mechanical aspects of murder. In this study, the term mechanical aspect was adapted as a collective term to indicate several pivotal aspects of murder such as motive, methods of killing, type of weapon used, targeted body parts, murder concealment, time setting and location of murder.

In addition, murderous relations with victim were obtained from the respective murderers. Precipitating factors such as involvement of victims in illegal activities and victims' role were gathered. The participants were assured with anonymity and confidentiality of their responses in order to maintain validity and honesty of their responses. The procured data was compiled, organised, and analysed using SPSS version 21.0. The results were presented using descriptive statistics and graphical presentation.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1 Socio-demographic profile

In this section, the socio-demographic profiles of the 71 male murderers is presented (Table 1 is referred). The sample in the present research consisted of male murderers who were charged for murder. All of the respondents were Malaysians. All the murderers were single perpetrators (single-victim murder cases). The age of respondents during commission of murder ranged from 21 to 64 years old with a mean age of 29.94 years (SD = 10.76).

**Table 1: Socio-demographic profiles of Malaysian male murderers (n = 71)**

Variables	n (%)
<b>Ethnic</b>	
Malay	29 (40.8)
Chinese	17 (23.9)
Indian	24 (33.8)
Others	1 (1.4)
<b>Religion</b>	
Islam	32 (45.1)
Buddha	16 (22.5)
Hindu	19 (26.8)
Christian	4 (5.6)
<b>Marital status</b>	
Single	33 (46.5)
Married	24 (33.8)
Divorced/ separated	11 (15.5)
Widower	3 (4.2)
<b>Occupational status</b>	
Not working	8 (11.3)
Semiskilled	42 (59.2)
Clerical-skilled	9 (12.7)
Self-employed/ business	8 (11.3)
Government servants	4 (5.6)
<b>Educational status</b>	
Never been to school	1 (1.4)
Primary education	18 (25.4)
Lower secondary education	26 (36.6)
Upper secondary education	22 (31.0)
Pre-University	2 (2.8)
Diploma	2 (2.8)

#### 3.2 Mechanical profile

Several mechanical aspects of the Malaysian male murderers were obtained and presented in Table 2. Most of the participants murdered their victim using a single method (88.7%) and the remaining murderers used multiple methods to kill their victims. Here, 'multiple killing methods' of killings is defined as the combination of two or more different types of methods, such as strangulation and stabbing.

Of the entire sample, it was observed that around 90% of the participants used a single weapon and the remaining murderers used multiple weapons. Knives (26.8%) seemed to be the most preferred weapon in murdering the victim. Usage of 'parangs' (18.3%) and blunt weapon (19.7%) were noted among 13 and 14 participants respectively. Usage of other weapons such as firearms, ligatures and fire uncommon.

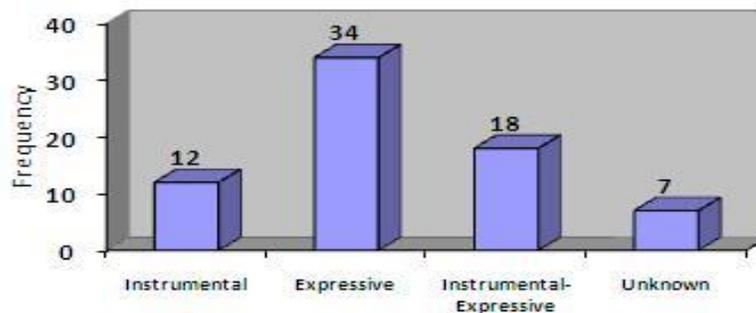
In the majority of murder cases (45.1%), the weapons were brought intentionally by the murderer themselves, indicating premeditation. 42.3% of murderers obtained weapons at the crime scene. As shown in Table 2, the majority of murderers (60.6%) targeted the weapon towards multiple body parts, head (14.1%) was the most common body part targeted.

Table 2: Mechanical profiles of the Malaysian male murderers (n = 71)

Variables	n (%)
<b>Number of killing methods</b>	
Single	63 (88.7)
Multiple	8 (11.3)
<b>Method of killing</b>	
Stabbing	22 (31.0)
Shooting	3 (4.2)
Slashing	13 (18.3)
Physical force	18 (25.4)
Smothering	1 (1.4)
Burning	2 (2.8)
Strangulation	3 (4.2)
Cut-up	1 (1.4)
Multiple methods	8 (11.3)
<b>Number of weapons</b>	
Single	64 (90.1)
Multiple	7 (9.9)
<b>Type of weapons</b>	
Knives	19 (26.8)
Parangs	13 (18.3)
Sharp objects	4 (5.6)
Blunt weapons	14 (19.7)
Firearms	3 (4.2)
Ligatures	3 (4.2)
Physical strength	6 (8.5)
Fire	2 (2.8)
Multiple	7 (9.9)
<b>Availability of weapons</b>	
Crime scene	30 (42.3)
From offender	32 (45.1)
From victim	3 (8.5)
Physical strength	6 (8.5)
<b>Number of targeted body parts</b>	
Single	28 (39.4)
Multiple	43 (60.6)
<b>Targeted body parts</b>	
Face	3 (4.2)
Head	10 (14.1)
Neck	7 (9.9)
Chest	5 (7.0)
Abdomen/ stomach	4 (5.6)
Multiple body parts	42 (59.2)

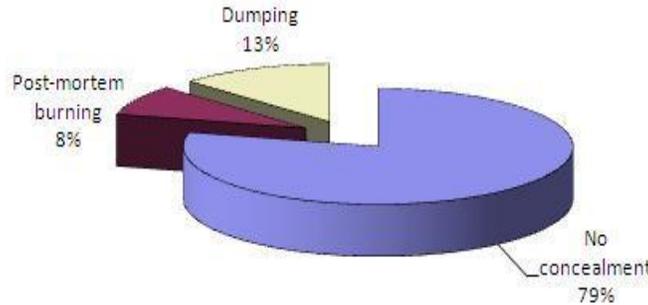
As for motives of murder, systematic classifications by Block and Block<sup>5</sup> and Decker<sup>6</sup> were adapted in which motives were categorized as instrumental, expressive, or instrumental-expressive [referring to incidents in which the murder was committed out of anger (expressive) which was instrumentally motivated]. Based on the responses from the murderers, expressive motives (47.9%) seemed to be more prevalent than instrumental-expressive motives (25.4%) and instrumental motives (16.9%). Seven participants declared that they were ‘unsure’ of their motives for killing victims.

Figure 1: Self-reported motives of murderers



As shown in Figure 2, dumping method was the most preferred style of murdered victim concealment. Post-mortem burning was noted in six murder incidents. In contrast, the majority (78.9%) of murderers reported that they did not conceal their crime or murdered victim as the bodies were left at the crime scene.

**Figure 2: Classification of murder concealment**



In this study, the details on the place and time settings of murder were also obtained from the murderers as part of the mechanical aspects of the murder itself. Referring to place settings, the majority of murders took place in public areas (64.8%) such as restaurants, alleys, and remote areas. This was followed by the victim’s place (19.7%). Late evening to midnight seemed to be the peak time for the murder incidents to take place (45.1%). The least murder incidents were recorded during morning time (12.7%). The distributions of place and time settings are summarised in Table 3.

**Table 3: Place and time settings of murder**

Settings	n (%)
<b>Place settings</b>	
Offender’s place	5 (7.0)
Victim’s place	14 (19.7)
Offender-victim place (shared)	6 (8.5)
Public areas	46 (64.8)
<b>Time settings</b>	
12.01 am – 6.00 am (late midnight-early morning)	19 (26.8)
6.01 am – 11.59 am (morning)	9 (12.7)
12.00 noon – 6.00 pm (afternoon-evening)	11 (15.5)
6.01pm – 12.00 am (late evening-midnight)	32 (45.1)

The present study also revealed the relationship between the murderer and his victim. In respect of this, the terms primary and secondary were utilised to address the bond shared by the victim and the offender<sup>6-7</sup>. Under this dichotomy classification scheme, primary relationships refer to intimates such as relatives, friends, and romantically linked partners while secondary relationships reflect those with little or no prior relationships (e.g., strangers or acquaintances).

From amongst the murderers who participated in this study, information in Table 4 reveals that the majority of murderers targeted strangers (46.5%). This was followed by acquaintances (35.2%). Very few murder incidents involved primary relationship murder such as wives, familial, and spousal relationships.

**Table 4: Victim-offender relationships profile (n = 71)**

Type of relationships	n (%)
Wife	4 (5.6)
Familial relationship	2 (2.8)
Spousal relationship	3 (4.2)
Relatives	4 (5.6)
Acquaintances	25 (35.2)
Strangers	33 (46.5)

Table 5 below portrays precipitating factors that lead to the violent crime as perceived by murderers themselves. The majority of murderers perceived that their victim played a role in their own murder (69.0%). When further queried on whether they knew victims were involved in any form of illegal activity, around 52.0% murderers knew that their victims were not involved in any illegal activities that might have led to a violent altercation ending in death. Out of 13 victims who were perceived as involved in illegal activities, three were involved in illegal drugs activities, three in sexual related activities, and another three were considered as ‘Along’ (illegal debt collectors).

**Table 5: Precipitating factor from the perspective of murderers**

Variable	n (%)
<b>Victims’ role</b>	
No	13 (18.3)
Yes	49 (69.0)
Unknown	9 (12.7)
<b>Type of illegal activities</b>	
No illegal activities	37 (52.1)
Illegal drugs related	3 (4.2)
Sexual related	3 (4.2)
Gang related	2 (4.2)
Along	3 (4.2)
Burglary	1 (1.4)
Illegal labour supplier	1 (1.4)
Unknown	21 (29.6)

#### 4. Discussion

A review of the available Malaysian literatures indicates that many studies were focused on less serious crime offenders and generally ignored the hardcore criminals like murderers and serial rapists. Although the prevalence of murder is low compared to other crimes, this matter should not be overlooked. Researches on murder and murderers are pivotal as it helps the criminal justice personnel to tackle this crisis based on empirical evidence. Bearing this in mind, the present study attempted to focus on murder in Malaysia, specifically by focusing on the socio-demographic and mechanical aspects of Malaysian male murderers. Socio-demographic characteristics of murderers are the first concern in any investigation in order to gain insight into the nature of murder and determine a likely pool of suspects. The most important aspects are gender, age, ethnicity, and social class. Ideally, these socio-demographic characteristics help to evaluate the background of murderers and also indicate high risk individuals as they forecast the 'typical' murderers.

In terms of ethnicity, Malays formed the majority of the murderers. This is a reflection of the majority ethnic group in Malaysia. It is important to note here that the numbers of Indian murderers are almost similar to number of Malay murderers. This information is important considering the total population of each ethnic distribution in Malaysia; Indians seem to be most vulnerable as murderers despite having the least population compared to Malays and Chinese.

The higher prevalence of Indians engaged in murder can be explained by several factors which include the involvement in petty crime, gang related activities, and other social deviancy such as alcoholism and substance abuse<sup>8</sup>. In relation to this, information released from the Malaysian Ministry of Home Affairs<sup>9</sup> revealed that nearly 72% of wanted gangsters were of Indian ethnicity, followed by those of Chinese ethnicity (20%). It is also apparent that majority of murderers were from middle class occupational group either as semiskilled or clerical. Very few murderers were from the upper class occupational division. As regards to marital status, the majority of murderers were single. A possible reason for the involvement of single people murderers is due to economic and social demands as young single people tend to go out in public and interact with high-risk peers more often and are eventually exposed to higher risk of being an offender or victim<sup>10</sup>.

In this study, based on the mechanical profiles of murderers, it was understood that majority of murderers used a single method of killing and very few of them used multiple killing methods. According to Block and Block<sup>3</sup>, the usage of a single weapon is more prevalent in expressive murder which has been described as a result of expression, emotions, and psychological states. On contrary, multiple killing methods or weapon is more evident in instrumental murders.

In this study, the use of multiple method of killing was evident in 'premeditated' murders compared to 'spontaneous or passion' murders. The usage of multiple weapons has been highly associated with premeditated murder. This is in order to ensure that murder is successful. The number of weapons that were used by murderers may reflect the 'premeditation' element of murder. In spontaneous or unplanned murders, what was available on the spot was used as murder weapon. Common weapons obtained from crime scenes include sticks, wood, and iron rods. Revenge was the common motive when multiple methods of killing were used. For example, from amongst those who participated in this study, murderers tend to use a combination of methods, i.e.: slashing and strangulation or stabbing and physical force as means for actions of revenge to be satisfied and to ensure that the victim suffered before death. Therefore, from the present findings, it appears that the majority of murders in Malaysia have expressive motives. These types of expressive murder seem to be the result of emotional instability or uncontrolled emotions. Anger was the common cause for the most expressive murders in Malaysia compared to frustration, hostility, and other volatile emotions.

In terms of number and type of weapon, the use of weapons in a murder scene reflects the 'intent' of the murderer as it authorises a permissive inference intent to cause harm and kill the victim. Indeed, once found; the weapon that was used in murder would be one of the first evidence examined by forensic scientist and investigating officers as it helps to direct the murder investigations. In countries with more restrictive gun ownership, such as Malaysia, knives are more prominent than firearms as the tool of violence<sup>11</sup>. As such, it was not surprising to find in this study that stabbing using knives was found in both instrumental and expressive murders. This was due to the easy availability of knives over firearms. Furthermore, when stabbing was the method, murderers were more likely to use knives over tools for example ice-pick, swords, or other sharp objects.

The present finding of this trend is similar to previous national studies by Bhupinder *et al.*<sup>12</sup> and Kumar *et al.*<sup>13</sup>. The similar findings were noted in studies in India<sup>14-15</sup> and Hong Kong<sup>16</sup>. As pointed out earlier, the prevalent use of sharp weapons in Malaysia can be explained by the easy availability of such instruments. Physical force was more common in expressive and instrumental-expressive murders. From the participants themselves, an example of physical force included beating and kicking using blunt weapons; cumulating in prolonged massive injury. Physical force was also evident among child murders and abuse-cum-murders. Slashing is also another common method of killing which was found to be prevalent in expressive and instrumental-expressive murder. In most instances, slashing using '*parangs*' were common during retaliation and gang-fights which involved acquaintances and strangers.

Although firearm is restricted in Malaysia, in three murder cases, firearms were used. In two shooting cases, the motive of murder was financial gain. In the remaining incident, instrumental-expressive murder; the use of firearm to murder was due to unsatisfactory drug dealing. The usage of firearm can also be observed in instrumental murder which often performed for some benefits like financial gain, territory, and status. For example, more than one-third murder in USA<sup>17</sup> and Italy<sup>18</sup> were committed using handguns. Another important element in this study was the number and type of targeted body parts. Surprisingly, it was documented herein that the majority of Malaysian murderers inflicted injuries on multiple body parts of his victim. In the available literature, multiple and specific targeted areas appear to be linked to the relationship between the murderers and victim<sup>16</sup> and motivation of killing<sup>19</sup>.

First, retaliation between offender and victim often resulted in multiple injuries on victims. Secondly, the multiple targeted body parts may be considered as 'over kill' injuries. Multiple injuries were noted on victims when weapons like blunt weapons, knives and '*parangs*' were used. It is likely that murderers wanted to ensure the death of his victim as prior wounding may be perceived as unlikely to result in death.

As a third reason, multiple body parts were prevalent in abuse-cum-murder and expressive murders which were provoked by arguments and brawls. Multiple targeted body parts were purposive to cause constant or lingering pain. In contrast, the single target body part was noted when a firearm was used as a weapon. As pointed out earlier, this may due to the high lethality of the firearm itself. In targeting a single body part, the head was the most common choice amongst murderers, The reason why the head was shot because the murderers were aware that the consequences of shooting the head is likely to end in instantaneous death without lingering pain. Other than head, the face and neck were the single targeted body parts in several murder cases. Here, the face and neck were often common targeted body part when the murderer was an intimate or romantically linked partner of the victim<sup>16</sup>. When these areas were targeted, strangulation and/or smothering were the most preferred methods.

Murder concealment has become a common practice among murderers worldwide. Burying, postmortem burning, and dumping corpses into water have been recognized as frequent methods to hide acts of murder<sup>20</sup>. It appears that concealing murder by dumping or postmortem burning (*see* Figure 2) are the most preferred method among murderers in Malaysia. Victims were burnt by the assailants after being killed for the purpose of crime concealment and to prevent recognition of the corpse. The burnt corpses are then often discovered in remote areas like abandoned places (for example: bankrupt factories, abandoned housing projects and derelict buildings) or in unfamiliar outdoor places (for example: cemeteries, isolated farms, and oil palm plantations). The present study findings are in accordance with a study conducted in Turkey<sup>20</sup>.

Place settings play a vital role in criminal events especially when urban and rural areas are involved and compared<sup>21-22</sup>. Generally, place setting was found to be related with the social interaction between the offender and the victim. Public areas were the most frequent location that murder occurred. These public areas include streets, alleys, entertainment outlets, and hotels. When the primary murder setting is within a home environment, it has been found that the murdered victim was either the wife or romantic partner of the murderer<sup>1</sup>. This was also evident in the present study. In addition, when murder occurred in a public area it was likely an incident of rape-cum-murder or robbery-cum-murder. In other words, murder occurred during or after another

crime was being committed. In these incidents, the victims were either acquaintances or strangers. As pointed out by routine activity approach<sup>23</sup> and social disorganization theory<sup>24</sup>, murder among strangers are more prevalent outside home.

As for the time settings of murder, the majority of murder occurred between late evening and night time. This similar pattern of time settings was noted in India in which most of the murders occurred during late evening and at night<sup>25-27</sup>. However, this observation was in contrast with a Sri Lanka study, where the majority of murders took place during daytime<sup>28</sup>.

The present study also looked into the role of the victim in a murder incident. In this study, participants were asked whether they perceived that victim contributed to his or her own victimisation. Based on the murderers' response, a new category of precipitating factors emerged: victim precipitated murder (VPM). The term VPM was first coined by Wolfgang<sup>29</sup> to reflect the role of victim that initiated and contributed to his or her own murder. The present study operationalize the VPM term as the extent to which a victim is responsible for his or her own murder victimisation. In this way, determining the triggers originating from a victim, including lifestyle, choices, and interactions with murder; may be addressed in order to reduce risks.

Based on the findings (Table 5 is referred), the role of victim is widely acknowledged in the majority of cases. In other words, many of the murder incidents that occurred in Malaysia can be placed under the category of VPM, at least from the perpetrator's perspective. It is noted here that the perpetrator's perspective may be unrealistic or simply trying to shift the blame of the crime to someone else. Despite that blaming victim is a form of cognitive distortion<sup>30</sup>, the role and triggers from the victim from the perspective of murderers can be understood. This bears more research.

## 5. Conclusion

The present study is the first national study that conducted among Malaysian murderers which intent to obtain socio-demographic and mechanical profiles of Malaysian male murderers. The sharing of these analysed profiles increases the knowledge repertoire of criminal justice personnel in carrying out their duties and offers an opportunity to the public to expand their knowledge on murder prevention strategies which is vital for crime prevention efforts in ensuring a safer society. Other than having the potential to inculcate awareness among the public regarding murderers' profiles, the present study provides an impetus for similar studies on murderers in other countries, especially in non-Western societies. Finally, the contradictory findings in Malaysia compared to other countries suggest cultural and national difference in profiling murderers and victims as well as explanations of the murder incident itself.

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