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Detroit's Jack the Ripper?

Slayings of 11 Women Have Neighborhood Angry, Police Baffled

By Dean Schabner

Police believe the slayings of four Detroit prostitutes are linked. They're trying to determine whether seven other murders may be the work of the same killer.

(Detroit Police Dept.)

Feb. 19 Some were stabbed, some were strangled, some were bludgeoned to death. In all, the bodies of 11 women have been found in one Detroit neighborhood, and police fear they have a serial killer on their hands.

Three of the 11 have been tied to the same killer by DNA testing, and a fourth has been linked because of where the body was found and how the woman was killed, but investigators are looking at all the killings, trying to get a break.

Sgt. Odell Godbold of the Detroit Police Department's Homicide Cold Case Squad said so far the only common threads linking all 11 victims is that they are all women, all prostitutes and all black.

A joint task force has been formed with agents from the FBI and the state police, and an FBI profiler is being brought in to try to develop an understanding of who the suspect might be, Godbold said.

In the meantime, he said, police are hoping for a lead from the public.

"Until we get a lead or a suspect, all we can do is work with what we have," he said. But the longer the killings go on, the more the residents of Detroit's Mack neighborhood, where the slayings took place, say they worry the cases won't be solved.

The bodies began turning up in 1999, and the most recent was found in December. The cause of death wasn't always the same, but all of the victims were prostitutes, and many in the community believe they are linked.

"I don't think it's coincidental," said Chaunci Wyche, the executive director of Mack Alive, a nonprofit group working to redevelop the neighborhood. "I think to some degree they are linked where they are happening, how the women are killed."

Police are not so sure.

The four that are being investigated as the work of one killer were found between August 2001 and November 2002, but unless new evidence comes up to tie the other seven deaths together, they are being treated as the work of other people, even if one or more of those other people are copycats.

When community leaders went public last week with a call for help, and a nudge aimed at police, they said they hoped the investigation had not been put on the back burner because of what the victims did for a living.

"We're talking about someone's mother, someone's child," Wyche said. "These women were part of the community, whatever lifestyle they chose."

She said that since the recent publicity including a news conference with members of the state's black caucus, a group of pastors and police last week she has been happy with the response from law enforcement.

"Because of the pressure that's been put on, they've been very responsive," she said. "But it shouldn't have gotten this far. This issue should have been given more attention. If this had been a suburban community, I don't think we'd be counting 11."

State Rep. Artina Tinsley-Hardman said her goal in attending the news conference was not to point a finger at police but to try to get law enforcement and the community working together.

"This was not about putting blame on someone for why something wasn't done," she said. "It was just about making sure that we now do something."

Police had never disregarded any of the deaths, Godbold said, but he pointed out the difficulty of solving murders involving prostitutes.

"They get into a vehicle not knowing the person and become a victim," Godbold said. "The individual that picked up these people might be nomadic, and there is no connection between them."

Several of history's most notorious serial killers often preyed on prostitutes, including Jack the Ripper, whose identity has never been established, and most recently Gary Ridgway, the Green River Killer, though among Ridgway's 48 victims there were also women who were not prostitutes.

The first of the four killings that police believe are linked occurred in August 2001 and the last happened in November 2002.

Shortly after that, local media reported on the murders and the possibility there was a serial killer. Since then, though there have been other homicides in the area, police believe the serial killer has not struck again.

"We believe he may have stopped because of the publicity," Godbold said. "That could tell me that this individual is waiting until the publicity dies down."

If the publicity did put an end to the killer's spree, the most recent publicity generated has had another positive effect, according to Wyche, Tinsley-Hardman and Craig

Yaldoo, the president of the Alliance for a Safe Greater Detroit.

Yaldoo declined to say how many calls have come in to the group's crime hotline, 1-800-SPEAK-UP, but he said the response has been overwhelming. Godbold agreed that some of the tips that have been passed on to police are producing leads.

"There is an irony in this, in that it really has mobilized the community," Yaldoo said. "People have really responded to the fact that somebody is preying on these defenseless women who walked a very difficult road in life."

Although some of the response from the public has been to criticize police for not having solved these murders, Tinsley-Hardman, who has met with investigators, said she believes the cops were getting a bad rap.

"The police department really understands that these women are family members of our community," she said. "I can't understand why they chose that lifestyle, but we can't let their deaths be forgotten and we can't let the perpetrators get away with this."

Goldbold said he and the other investigators working the case feel the same way. "I understand the frustration," he said. "But I think the public has the false impression from watching these crime shows that a crime is solved in an hour because of the technology available. That's not how it happens."

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