



Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

MURDER AND MAYHEM

Catching the Grim Sleeper

Posted by James Alan Fox, Crime and Punishment July 8, 2010 11:00 AM

In television dramas like CBS's *Criminal Minds*, serial killers are apprehended swiftly and surely. In real death and murder situations, as in the investigation and recent capture of the so-called Grim Sleeper killer of Los Angeles, it can take years, even decades, to bring an assailant to justice. Police are now saying that the arrest of 57-year-old Lonnie David Franklin, Jr. closes the book on at least 11 unsolved murders that occurred since 1985.

Unlike most homicides, which are solved in a matter of days, if not hours, crimes committed by a prolific serial offender are, by definition, the most challenging for law enforcement investigators. There is an element of self-selection: Only those perpetrators who possess the level of skill, street savvy or cunning can remain at-large long enough to amass a large victim count and, therefore, achieve the special status of serial killer. A careless wannabe would likely be stopped long before that point, and certainly before reaching double digits as did the Grim Sleeper.

However, the difficulties that homicide detectives confront when searching for unidentified serial murderers are not so much about their being master criminals as most are not, but are related to their offense pattern and modus operandi.

Such factors as victim selection (targeting strangers, especially marginal groups such as prostitutes and drug users) and victim disposal (transporting the body away from the evidence-rich crime scene to a remote dump site) make solving these cases rather difficult to solve. Plus, they generally appear so extraordinarily ordinary -- innocent and trustworthy. Neighbors would never suspect the worst of them, nor would have had their victims before it was too late to escape.

Serial killers, when eventually discovered, are often captured because of luck bad luck for them and great luck for the rest of us. Sometimes they are identified through a routine traffic stop or an ill-timed parking ticket. Or, it can be something as simple as a discarded slice of pizza like the police used to identify the Grim Sleeper based on a DNA sweep of prison populations that singled out his incarcerated son as a familial match.

But often serial killers just get a bit too overconfident for their own good. After years of eluding law enforcement, they can begin to see themselves as absolutely unstoppable. At that point, they may become careless and take unnecessary risks. Ultimately, their own arrogance becomes their downfall.

Privacy concerns raised by the use of familial DNA to crack the Grim Sleeper murders may create significant problems for the prosecution, should a defense attorney challenge the evidence. Laws permit the collection and storage of DNA data on certain convicted offenders for use in potentially linking future crimes to these same criminals, but not to

their blood relatives who happen to have similar genetic profiles. This is not so much a concern for the slippery slope of privacy invasion, but a case of legal quicksand.

For more detail on the factors that make serial killers especially challenging and what law enforcement can do to increase their chances of capturing them, see [my column](#) on CNN.com.