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HEADLINE: THE DEAN OF DEATH / Expert seeks 'classroom of millions'

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BODY:

There have always been precursors of death.

Ancient Greeks would hear it in the cry of a hawk. Roman augurs would read it from the entrails of a goat. On the island of Tahiti, it was foretold by the song of a bird.

James Fox sees it in a computer.

Dean of the criminology department at Northeastern University, Fox, 43, has spent his career studying murder. Homicide, patricide, serial murders, mass murders, cult murders. Killers, young and old. He is a professor of murder. The nation's dean of death.

Using computer modeling, he looks into the future, and what he sees is grim.

"This is the lull before the crime storm," says Fox. "There is a tremendous crime wave coming in the next 10 years," fueled not by old, hardened criminals, but by a group he calls "the young and the ruthless" -- children in their early and midteens who are turning murderous.

After four decades of steadily rising crime rates -- a six-fold increase in armed robbery and aggravated assault, a tripling in the number of rapes, a doubling of the murder rate -- people do not want to believe things will get worse. But that is what Fox sees, and that is the message he is trying to get out.

For nearly 20 years, he and his software have predicted where the nation's murder rate would go. He has been wrong only once, when he underestimated in the late 1980s.

"I didn't envision crack," he says.

His prediction, like his others, is based on statistics and demographics. The numbers boil down to this:

There is a huge group of teens moving through the nation's population. They are the so-called "baby boomlet," the sons and daughters of the baby boomers.

The number of teens age 14-17 began ratcheting up this year and will peak in 2005. Because this age group is committing far more murders than it used to -- up 165% between 1983 and 1993 alone - the nation's overall murder rate will rise as well.

It is that simple, says Fox. And that complex.

"We have seen a radical change in the nature of violence," he says. "Murderers are getting younger and younger."

Databank of murders

Even his colleagues, who may disagree with some of his conclusions about crime or his recommendations for fighting it, have respect for his statistical projections.

"I wouldn't say anything directly critical of his work in this area," says Arnold Barnett, a sociologist at the MIT-Sloan School. "Those are facts, and he has done a great job bringing them to the public."

Fox has a databank of more than 380,000 murders in his computer, equipped with a 22-inch monitor and software that allows him to enlarge the type. (Fox is legally blind, the result of his premature birth.)

He studies them by age, by race, by region, by style, by almost any factor that can be measured. He can define who is most likely to commit mass murder, who will commit serial murder, who will kill his parents.

His resume -- listing his published scholarly works, popular books, newspaper and magazine contributions -- is 14 pages long.

Fox is arguably the nation's foremost criminologist. He certainly is its most quoted.

He has appeared, frequently, on Oprah, Donahue, 48 Hours, Face the Nation, Hard Copy, Inside Edition, The CBS Evening News, The CBS Morning News, Good Morning America, The Today Show, Larry King Live, A Current Affair, Unsolved Mysteries, Sally Jessy Raphael, Montel Williams and others, as well as hundreds of radio shows. He's testified before Congress, been joked about on Saturday Night Live. He is interviewed, on average, three to four times a day.

If you spend any time in his tidy office at Northeastern in downtown Boston, you can almost see the media crosshairs on his telephone.

"That was Newsweek," he says.

It rings again.

"New York Times."

Then the Norfolk Virginia-Pilot.

Another ring.

"James Fox. Really? Well, would you mind if I call you back? I'm talking to somebody else from USA TODAY in my office right now."

"Some of my colleagues are critical of my profile in the media. They somehow feel it is undignified," he says without apology. "My students love it, and so do their parents. So I don't concern myself."

Besides, he's well aware of what the university's president thinks.

"Jamie brings prestige to the university. We get a large number of students who want to come to the College of Criminal Justice as a result," says Jack Curry, Northeastern's president, who compares Fox's recruitment power to that of a high-profile athlete or tournament level basketball team. He is, says Curry, "a fund-raising asset."

Crime a hot-button issue

It helps, of course, to be doing research into what Curry calls "the red-hot issues" of serial murder, workplace violence and youth crime -- issues that both entrance and upset the public.

"What I do is combine hard data with seasoned speculation," says Fox, who correctly predicted -- based on a radio report -- that the mass killer in the 1984 attack at the San Ysidro, Calif., McDonald's would turn out to be an unemployed security guard.

"I don't like . . . hunches. But if you only use data, your conclusions will be uninspired."

The public cannot seem to get enough. Crime ranks first on national polls as an issue of concern. It is the basic fiber of popular fiction, television, movies, even music.

And though the extent of the coming surge in teen murders may not yet have captured the attention of the nation, Fox's prediction has made an impression in Washington.

Thomas Constantine, administrator of the Drug Enforcement Administration, used Fox's study of the homicide rate of young teens in presenting his 1996 budget to the House Appropriations Committee. It was cited again by Constantine when he and FBI Director Louis Freeh testified before the Senate Judiciary Committee. The White House requested a copy.

Teens are much more threatening than adults, Fox says, "because they will kill over trivial matters -- a jacket, some sneakers, a dirty look. For them, murder is just not the taboo that it once was. A lot of that is television.

"We used to blame television and the movies for not showing consequences of violence. Now, they do. And kids have become desensitized. They'll rent these movies . . . and play their favorite scenes - often the most violent -- over and over.

"What do you think the effect on a young kid is when his first exposure to sex is a brutal rape scene? That is a very powerful image."

While advocates for unfettered artistic freedom may not like Fox's implicit attack on these forms of expression, others on the opposite side of the political spectrum may not appreciate his message about crime prevention: It does little good to "get tough" with this group.

"Kids are the least deterrable," he says. "They don't consider the consequences of their actions and many of them don't expect to live to be 21 years old. Why would they worry about prison?"

"You can . . . try a 14-year-old as an adult. But a 14-year-old is not an adult," he says.

Fox has plenty of opinions and ideas about how to address this problem -- ranging from boys clubs to after-school activities to athletic programs. He's even pleaded with major league baseball to televise one afternoon game a day so there's something decent for kids to watch after school.

Most juvenile crime, he notes, occurs from 4 p.m. to 7 p.m.

But these are not the crime issues that the public wants Fox to talk about.

"People are fascinated by the kind of crime that is so bizarre it might as well be fiction," Fox says. "They aren't really interested in the common and ordinary crimes like mugging and burglary. The more bizarre the better."

A very public professor

Fox's criminology course on homicide is the most popular in the college, in part because it does deal with the grim and grisly mass murders and serial killings. Because of the demand, he used to try to teach 320 students at once. But "it got to be a zoo." Now, it's capped at 90.

And so, he turns to the electronic media to spread his message.

"There are only so many people I can reach in the classroom or through academic publications," he says. "With just one appearance on Oprah, I have a chance to reach a classroom of millions."

In 1985, Fox and Northeastern sociology professor Jack Levin collaborated on the first of many efforts - a book for the popular press called *Mass Murder: America's Growing Menace*. They established themselves as the experts on serial killers and mass murders.

Then came Jeffrey Dahmer, the murders of five college students in Gainesville, Fla., a spate of indiscriminate killings in the workplace and a string of other incomprehensible atrocities that both fascinated and repulsed the nation. The media turned to Fox and Levin for explanations and information, and they readily obliged.

"Donahue had gone down to Gainesville to do a show on those murders, and it was right in the heat of it," Fox says. "The people there were very much against this. They wanted nothing to do with it. He invited me and I agreed to go on. He did the show outside and I remember people were yelling and holding up signs and honking horns, trying to disrupt the show.

"And right in the middle of it, I said that Humphrey wasn't the killer. He was the leading suspect at the time, but he did not fit the profile of that kind of murderer."

Fox wasn't the only one with doubts that Edward Lewis Humphrey had committed the grisly series of stabbings on the campus.

The Gainesville police wanted to know more about Fox's theories, and they brought him back for interviews. The Florida Department of Law Enforcement put him under contract, and he went to work on the case, analyzing data and using his knowledge of serial killers to help draw a crucial link to murders in Shreveport, La. - work that ultimately helped lead to the conviction of Danny Harold Rolling.

"We'd have solved it with or without him, but he was good," says Lee Strobe, a special agent who worked on the case. "He was one of the few who believed that Shreveport was connected to the Gainesville homicides."

Strobe admits some of the other officers resented the intrusion of a "civilian" on their case. "He'd have to hold papers about three inches from his face to read them. Some of the guys would mimic him a lot."

Nevertheless, Fox says he enjoyed the experience, and liked the work he did for the prosecution in other cases, including the Robert Berdella serial killings in Kansas City and the Randy Kraft killings in California.

He's the first to admit, though, that he is not a cop -- nor did he ever want to be.

And though he has spent his career studying homicide, and poring over the specifics of hundreds of thousands of them, he has never been on the scene of a murder.

"I wouldn't be of much use at a crime scene," he says. "I'd probably step on something important."

A strain on family life

On the other hand, he might discover something serendipitously, just as he did his profession.

"I got into this field by accident. I needed a course to finish my undergraduate degree -- I was trying to do it in three years." Criminology was available, and convenient. So he took it. He was hooked.

Still, Fox seems an unlikely personality to be consumed by such a grim topic. Small and trim, he is neat to a fault. Even his language is squeaky clean. "I find I only swear when I'm around cops," he says.

There's nothing about him that suggests his fascination with the century's most heinous criminals.

He even lives on Pleasant Street, although life there is not always tranquil.

The combination of the media pursuit -- reporters have his home number, his home fax number, his pager number and his Internet address -- and the nature of his specialty, can be a strain.

"My 10-year-old son knows the names of more serial killers than any of his friends. That's not because I teach him. That's just from his overhearing me talk on the telephone," Fox says.

His wife, Sue Ann, however, does not share these homicidal fascinations, and finds the constant discussion of murder abhorrent.

"I think what really bothers her is that my adrenaline starts to pump when there is a mass murder somewhere," Fox says. "The media calls start coming in and I'm just overtaken by it."

"He's a workaholic," says Sue Ann. "But he loves what he's doing and that's a gift. Of course, when the phones are ringing off the hook and the TV crews are setting up their cameras and lights, and the rest of us are upstairs trying to be quiet while Jamie does his interviews, it can be . . . disrupting."

Even over cocktails or at parties, everybody wants Fox to talk homicide. "There are a lot of serial murder groupies out there," he says. "I frequently get asked, 'Who is your favorite serial killer?'"

"I just say, 'I don't like any of them.' " Though he's interviewed and written about some, "I don't spend my life introducing myself to serial killers. They are not very insightful and they are all pathological liars."

Plus, they can be a bother. Clifford Olsen, Canada's most notorious serial killer, got in the habit of calling. "He'd call me collect from his cell, on his cell phone. I had to tell him to stop."

But if his job has made him famous, it hasn't exactly made him rich. "People see you on television (and) . . . they wonder, 'How much does that pay?' In fact, the only time I ever got paid by a television show is when I didn't actually get on." (The show was trying to make up for the inconvenience.)

"The fact is, what I love is being a professor. I just happened to end up as a professor of criminology. I'd be just as happy teaching math."

Still, there is a sense of resignation about him, a sadness about his inability to steer the country off the murderous path it is on.

"There has been a pervasive disinvestment in American youth over the last 30 years -- negative forces such as drugs, guns, gangs, television and movies have grown more powerful as the positive forces of family, school, church and community have grown weaker.

"Too many kids are unsocialized and unsupervised."

He says the USA is about to see the results of that disinvestment.

"Unfortunately, Americans are obsessed with quick solutions and easy answers when it comes to crime, and none of the popular ideas like 'three strikes and you're out,' the death penalty or even high school mediation programs will work against this kind of youth violence," he says.

"You have to start much earlier -- in the primary grades -- when you have some hope of reaching them. But those programs are expensive and don't show results for eight to 10 years and nobody has the patience for that."

And so the dean prepares for yet another round of testimony before Congress, another interview, another talk show appearance. Hoping to change the future, rather than merely predict it.