



Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

Absurd thinking on Bishop case

Posted by James Alan Fox, Crime and Punishment April 14, 2010

I've heard more than a few absurd things said by cops during my thirty-plus years as a criminologist. But a remark from the lips of retired officer Timothy Murphy of the Braintree Police Department takes the cake--or at least enough donuts to feed the entire police force. No contest, Officer Murphy wins the competition handcuffs down.

Commenting on why he and others failed to consider seriously enough the possibility that Amy Bishop's 1986 fatal shooting of her brother Seth wasn't an accident as she and her family claimed, Murphy noted, "Nobody would do something like that," apparently presuming that sibling rivalries never rise to murderous levels.

All Officer Murphy had to do was to take a peek at the FBI's annual crime report, which at that time was distributed to all law enforcement agencies, to see that 1.2% of criminal homicides back then--or about 250 cases nationally--involved siblings.

To be fair, most fratricides (brother killings) implicate males as the perpetrators, not sisters--although cases in which females murder their brothers do occur. In fact, during the decade prior to the shooting currently under scrutiny, as many as 335 females had murdered their siblings, with two-thirds of the victims being brothers.

Also to be fair, we all now have the benefit of hindsight--hindsight that includes the alleged execution-style slaughter of three colleagues at the University of Alabama in Huntsville by a much older Amy Bishop.

At this juncture, fully 23 years later, those involved in the decision not to investigate Amy Bishop's actions surrounding the death of her brother should say a collective "mea culpa," and then we should move on. Those who were responsible for the apparent lack of follow-through are now either retired, like Officer Murphy, or deceased.

The sole consequence of this week's inquest, besides full disclosure of the events following Seth Bishop's death, would potentially be to charge Amy Bishop with homicide. Of course, this would be little more than a symbolic gesture, as the likelihood that she would ever return to Massachusetts to stand trial is as remote as could be.