



Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

MEDIA VIOLENCE

Celebrity week for criminals

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It has been a big week for crime, yet a bigger week for law enforcement for bringing down elusive serial offenders.

Last Wednesday, of course, the Los Angeles police arrested a man suspected of being the Grim Sleeper□ serial killer who had evaded the authorities for more than a decade. With the capture of 57-year-old Lonnie David Franklin Jr., the police may have closed the book on 11 homicides dating back to 1985.

Then, on Sunday, law enforcement officials in the Bahamas closed in on 19 year-old Colton Harris-Moore, a young fugitive from Seattle, WA who is wanted in eight states and three countries for a two-year long string of burglaries and thefts. The various high-priced items believed to have been stolen by Harris-Moore, the so-called Barefoot Bandit,□ include luxury automobiles, pleasure boats, and as many as five airplanes. Having no formal flight training, Harris-Moore crash-landed on several occasions, but each time walked away with barely a scratch.



Suspected "Barefoot Bandit," Colton Harris-Moore, 19

The two cases offer an intriguing comparison in terms of how the public follows and reacts to elusive criminals. The Grim Sleeper's murders had been largely ignored outside of the South Los Angeles neighborhood in which the victims, all prostitutes and drug users, had been killed. And since the arrest of Franklin -- who resided in the vicinity of the crimes without calling attention to himself, the focus has been mostly on the controversial manner in which the police identified him. And, of course, the arrest has brought long-awaited relief to local community terrorized by the crimes.

By contrast, the travels and escapes of the Barefoot Bandit were watched closely by many Americans who actually cheered his uncanny abilities to elude the police. Countless admirers seemed to have been rooting more for the teen-on-the-run, drive, sail, and fly than the outwitted cops engaged in the manhunt (using the man in manhunt generically rather than descriptively). Over 85,000 of Harris-Moore's fans joined a *Facebook* page devoted to his exploits. "Dude bummer that u got caught," commented one *Facebook* poster, "but u made history and no one will forget that."

The celebrity status that Harris-Moore seems to have earned through his cunning and elusiveness cannot be explained or justified, however, by the fortunate fact that no one was harmed. Fascination and hero-worship for undeserving criminals is a pathetic piece of our popular culture. All sorts of offenders, no matter how despicable their crimes, have been revered by a sizable minority of Americans. Millions voraciously read or watch accounts of their misdeeds. Thousands purchase a variety of mementos and souvenirs of the crimes from artwork of serial killer John Wayne Gacy to dirt from the Dennis Rader's home, from tee-shirts bearing images of Charles Manson to a lock his hair.

I anticipate that some people may charge me with first-degree hypocrisy for condemning the celebrity afforded to certain criminals. After all, I have made a career from writing books and articles about infamous men and sometimes women, whose names (e.g., Bundy or Dahmer) or monikers (e.g., D.C. Sniper or Zodiac) are better known than the identities of many heads of state (other than the ones involved in salacious sex scandals, that is).

There is an important distinction, however between shedding light on the motivation and character of habitual offenders and shining a spotlight on their personalities and passions. Criminals, young and old, violent or not, are never deserving of celebration and fanfare.