



# Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

CRIME PATTERNS AND TRENDS , MURDER AND MAYHEM

## Why killers target prostitutes

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For the families of the eight women or more who were apparently murdered and dumped on Long Island, NY, by a serial killer, it must be some small consolation that the case is finally receiving wide-ranging media attention. The victims, all believed to have worked as prostitutes, disappeared months or even years ago. But only after the remains of four bodies were discovered in December and an additional four more recently did word of a likely serial killer become a page one story.

This is a familiar scenario to those, like me, who pay attention to such crimes. Serial murders of prostitutes have been tracked in virtually every part of the nation, with many of the cases unsolved and frustratingly cold.

For a number of reasons, prostitutes are the most frequent victims targeted by serial murderers. Foremost is their easy accessibility to these predators. A sexual sadist can hunt the streets of the city or browse the ads on *Craigslist*, seeking out an available woman (and sometimes the man), looking selectively for the one who he finds most appealing, the one who can best satisfy his violent fantasies. And for money or drugs, the unfortunate prostitute will willingly participate in making his dream a reality, until it becomes too late to escape.

From the killer's perspective, it is also psychologically easier to prey upon those he devalues. Seeing them as "sex machines," programmed to please, he feels little hesitancy or remorse. By dehumanizing his victims, he is killing someone that he views as beneath humanity.

Most important, however, is that the killer who victimizes prostitutes can count on a slow response from law enforcement and minimal attention from the general public. Were he to abduct and kill some middle-class co-ed, the police response would be intense and immediate. But the disappearance of a known prostitute is not necessarily considered foul play, at least not until the remains of several victims are discovered in a remote dump site.

The advantageous selection of marginal and vulnerable victims is a recurrent pattern in serial murder cases. Just after his arrest for killing dozens of prostitutes in Washington State, the so-called "Green River Killer" Gary Ridgway admitted his disdain for prostitutes and his view of why he was able to remain at-large for two decades:

"I picked prostitutes as my victims because I hate most prostitutes and did not want to pay them for sex. I also picked prostitutes as victims because they were easy to pick up without being noticed. I knew they would not be reported missing. I picked prostitutes because I thought I could kill as many of them as I wanted without getting caught."

Now that the heat has been turned up on the Long Island investigation, the odds of identifying the killer increases. With little to go on besides some remains on a beach, investigators will need to get lucky.

Thus far, the Long Island killer has proven his cunning and elusiveness. Hopefully, his sense of superiority and invincibility will get the best of him, and he will make a major strategic mistake. For the sake of the families, that day can not come too soon. No matter what we think of their chosen profession, there are still families who thought the world of them.