

ALTON COLEMAN 'SMOOTH AS SILK' POLICE SAY FUGITIVE HAS FRUSTRATED JUSTICE

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WAUKEGAN, Ill. -- A year ago, **Alton Coleman** 's sister told police that **Coleman** tried to rape her eight-year-old daughter.

But now **Coleman** is one of the most wanted criminals in the country, and his 25-year-old sister defends him.

"I don't think he did any of the things the police said he did," she said last week as she picked up her youngest child from her porch at a housing project. "Why are they hounding him? The real killers could be getting away while they are chasing **Alton** ."

Three weeks after bringing the attempted rape charges, she dropped them. Now she calls the whole thing "a misunderstanding."

"A lot of families go through that," she said. 'It doesn't make any difference now."

That, Waukegan police say, has been the history of **Alton Coleman** : Although they are sure he has committed several brutal crimes, for the most part he has gone unpunished.

They said the "smooth as silk" con man eluded prison sentences because he was able to convince jurors that he was innocent and because he frightened many victims into refusing to testify against him. His relatives refused to admit that he committed the crimes.

MEANWHILE, according to Midwestern police agencies, he may have been involved in a trail of rape, kidnapping and murder.

The FBI charges that he is part of a growing crime phenomenon. They say he may be a "serial murderer," a new type of career criminal who goes from community to community, apparently randomly, seeking out and murdering victims.

On Saturday, police in Norwood, Ohio, a suburb of Cincinnati, said **Coleman** , 28, and his companion, Debra Brown, 21, were being sought for questioning in the bludgeoning death of a housewife and the beating of her husband.

ACCORDING to police agencies, **Coleman** also is sought for questioning about:

* The kidnapping and murder of a nine-year-old Kenosha, Wis., girl.

- * The murder of a seven-year-old Gary, Ind., girl and the severe beating and rape of the girl's nine-year-old aunt.
- * The strangling of a 25-year-old Gary woman, whose body was found in an abandoned house near Wayne State University.
- * The beating and robbing of seven people in Detroit and Dearborn Heights.
- * The slayings of a 30-year-old Toledo woman and her nine-year-old daughter, whose bodies were found in a crawl space under their Toledo home.

Coleman was named a "special addition" to the FBI's 10 Most Wanted Fugitives list last week, making him the 10th special addition to the FBI's list since it was started in 1950.

That puts him in a league with others such as James Earl Ray, who was wanted for the assassination of Martin Luther King, and H. Rap Brown, a political activist who was sought for skipping a court date, two who were also special additions to the list.

COLEMAN GREW UP in Waukegan, a town on the edge of Lake Michigan about 30 miles north of Chicago, where he was singled out by classmates because he constantly wet his pants.

Last week, police and people who knew him speculated that the teasing was the first cross he bore in his troubled, alienated life.

They described him as a loner in childhood who didn't easily show emotion. As a teenager, he was a troublemaker whose sexual needs made him "different," and as an adult he was a perennially unemployed "career criminal" who often dressed up as a woman and eluded prison terms.

Waukegan police say he first caught their attention by breaking windows in the housing projects he lived in. But, they said, his petty crimes soon turned into felony offenses -- rape and deviant sexual assaults.

According to Waukegan police, **Coleman** had been charged with five rapes in the Waukegan area before he disappeared. He served time in two cases, both on lesser charges.

His sister's decision to drop charges is typical of the problems police have faced when they've tried to convict him.

"There is no reason for him to be out now doing what he's doing. But you can't blame the prosecutors. You can't blame the judge, and you can't blame the police," said Lt. Marc Hansen, who has known **Coleman** since joining the Waukegan police force 12 years ago.

"He tells a convincing story in court. People are impressed with his testimony. He comes off as a decent person," Hansen said.

"He was good at conning jurors. He came off as a nice young black man who was wrongly accused. And young white jurors ate it up," said Fred Foreman, U.S. attorney for Lake County. "He's been prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law. In most cases the facts held up in court, but jurors felt there was not enough evidence to convict him of the charge."

ANOTHER REASON **Coleman** has escaped prison so often, law enforcement officials say, is that he picks victims very carefully.

"He's street smart," Foreman said. "He's been to the penitentiary. He knows what kind of case holds up in court and which ones don't. He's a career criminal."

Hansen said that **Coleman**'s relationship with his victims also made a difference: "It's difficult to get people in court to prove these charges because they are sexual assault charges, they involve kids, they involve family that don't want to see him go to jail."

Does **Coleman**'s sister love her brother, or does she fear him?

In court testimony, she was vague in her recollection of what her daughter told her **Coleman** had done. The judge called her fuzzy statements "completely implausible," suggesting she was changing her story out of fear.

"I think the woman, as she stands here today, is terrified by this man," the judge said, according to court records.

But **Coleman**'s sister, who did not want to give her name because she fears community harassment, said that was not so.

"I love my brother. I couldn't hate him. I think he should come and talk to a minister or somebody so they will stop taking this out of proportion."

His blind grandmother, Alma Hosea, refuses to speak about him.

"I ain't seen him, I ain't heard from him -- I don't know nothing," she shouted through a partly open front door to her three-room apartment.

His brother, Donnie Bates of Kenosha, also refuses to speak to reporters.

His juvenile probation officer, Kenneth Ryckman, said **Coleman** was a "difficult" youth.

"Nobody really knew him. He was a very quiet loner and unshowing of emotion. I don't think the mother even knew the kid," said Ryckman, now Waukegan's police chief.

Court records say **Coleman** dropped out of Waukegan East High School in the 10th grade, saying he wanted to get a job so he could help supplement his mother's welfare checks before she died in 1974.

HIS COURT HISTORY includes these incidents:

- * In 1973, according to court records, he and another man kidnapped an elderly Waukegan woman, robbed her, raped her and left her half-clothed in Evanston, Ill. The woman would not testify about the rape, so **Coleman** was sentenced to six years in prison for robbery. He served two.
- * Three months after he was paroled, he returned to Waukegan, where he was arrested on rape charges. He was acquitted but served six months on a lesser charge.
- * Four years later he was acquitted of another rape charge, and a year later he was charged with attempted rape. That charge was dismissed.
- * Last July he was charged with trying to assault his niece, but the charges were dismissed.

In February, **Coleman** was indicted for the rape at knifepoint of a girl in North Chicago, a community next to Waukegan. He was to have been tried June 11 on that charge, but he disappeared.

Two court-appointed psychiatrists remember him as a well- adjusted, likable young man.

Dr. Leo Goldman wrote in 1976, according to court records: "Mr. **Coleman** is a well-developed, handsome young man who was extremely friendly and somewhat effusive. I felt he was trying to impress me and disarm me."

Dr. Edward Leslie wrote: "He appeared to be of average intelligence, although perhaps under-educated. His manner is fairly easygoing, fairly open in his remarks, logical and coherent. There was no evidence of significant depression, anxiety or any signs of psychosis."

That's a far cry from the way some Waukegan residents remember him.

A CLOSE FRIEND of **Coleman** 's mother, who did not want his name used, said **Coleman** 's problems were rooted in early homosexual tendencies.

"He knew he was different," the friend said. "He couldn't deal with that.

"He was bisexual -- even as a young child. He used to dress up like a woman a lot. It was well known that he had different habits than a normal male."

As he grew older, the friend said, **Coleman** "was deeply into insidious kinds of sexual gratification."

Harold Evans, a Waukegan alderman from the city's black neighborhoods, said **Coleman** "wasn't a brutal type of individual. He's never been a violent individual. People are now looking at him in a different light."

Evans blamed the two years **Coleman** spent in prison for his behavior.

"What has probably happened is the result of him being sent to a correctional institution. He was abused there. When he came out, he started doing female impersonation acts. He would put on dresses and act like a girl. He would walk down city streets like that."

Police have blamed **Coleman** 's murder spree on an intense hatred of blacks, but Evans, who knew **Coleman** "since he was in diapers," said he doesn't believe that.

"That sounds crazy to me," said Evans. "Why does he victimize blacks? Black neighborhoods are the logical place for him to go. If he went into a white community, they would have found him a long time ago."

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