

## **POLICE JOIN FORCES TO TACKLE SLAYINGS OF 18 PROSTITUTES**

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Detroit's Mary Busby was strangled, her body dumped along the Middle Rouge in Plymouth Township in 1994. Debra Linkewitz of Warren met a similar fate in 1995. Velma Castaneda's body was found in March in Oakland County. Audrey Rogers' body was found in November in River Rouge.

And there are more.

At least **18 prostitutes** have been the victims of unsolved **slayings** in southeastern Michigan this decade. And the State **Police** are tired of seeing the numbers grow.

Beginning this week, two officers will be assigned the task of bringing together all the law enforcement agencies, crime labs and prosecutors involved in the **18 slayings**.

The goal: Find the killers -- or killer.

"We don't know yet whether the murders were connected," said Capt. Chris Hogan of the Michigan State **Police** Southeastern Criminal Investigation Division, which is launching the effort to **join forces**. "But the victims are all **prostitutes** and many are suspected drug users, and as we learn more, there does seem to be several similarities."

Hogan's department became interested in the issue last year as it investigated the **slaying of** Velma Castaneda, whose body was found in Holly Township. Officers in that case learned of other unsolved murders.

"Right now, we're looking at **18**," he said Monday. "And there may be more we're not aware of."

These are in addition to the 11 **prostitutes** who were raped and strangled by Benjamin (Tony) Atkins in Detroit and Highland Park during a nine-month period in 1991 and 1992. Atkins, 29, died of HIV infection in September, four years into the 11 life terms he was serving at the Engler Correctional Facility in Jackson.

Atkins followed a specific pattern in his killings -- choosing petite black women as victims, choking and raping them, then leaving them in abandoned buildings near Woodward Avenue.

Hogan said the possible links in the other **18** murders are not so obvious. Some victims were raped; others weren't. Some were dumped in desolate parks, while others were left in alleys. And they weren't all the same race.

Victims' families were pleased to hear Monday that **police** are going to take a second look at their cases.

"I'd love for them **to** find who did this," said Linda Linkewitz, whose 36-year-old sister-in-law, Debra Linkewitz, was last seen getting into a white car at a Detroit bar. Her body was later found naked in Hines Park in Plymouth Township. "They're sick people who prey on these women, and they deserve **to** be punished."

Waunita O'Day, whose daughter Mary Busby had just turned 39 when Frisbee players found her body in the Middle Rouge River, said finding the killer would bring some peace.

"We discuss it every once in a while: 'Why haven't we heard anything? Why haven't they done anything?' " she said from her home in Santa Claus, Ga. "It sure would be a relief if they could find out who murdered her."

O'Day said she wondered whether her daughter's status as a **prostitute** and drug user made solving her case a low priority.

Hogan said **police** have taken each **of** the deaths seriously. But because **prostitutes** often move around it can be more difficult **to** investigate their deaths.

"But a victim is a human being and under no circumstances deserves **to** lose their life," he said. "We're the **police** for everybody. Everybody has a right **to** protection."

Staff writer Beth Krodell can be reached at 1-734-432-6502.

How **to** help

Anyone with information about the murder **of** a **prostitute** in southeastern Michigan is asked **to** call Michigan State **Police** at 1-313-525-4149 between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. weekdays.

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