

## **QUESTIONS ARISE OVER COVERAGE OF RAPE CASES SUBURBAN ASSAULTS RECEIVED MORE ATTENTION**

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Rape was in the news that slushy February day.

A Detroit newspaper reported last Feb. 19 that Birmingham police had not questioned a possible suspect in one of a string of sexual assaults in Oakland County. The story, prominently displayed by the Free Press on its front page, was the seventh article about the serial rapes that had rocked the county for 10 months.

Another news story that day, less prominently displayed, on Page 3A, told about an off-duty Detroit police officer who three days earlier helped arrest a Detroit man on charges of raping nine women on the city's east side. A story about Samson Fee Koger's arrest, which ran on the front page on Feb. 17, was the first public disclosure that a rapist had stalked women for seven months in the Lafayette Park area, just east of downtown. Residents and several Detroit City Council members exploded in anger over the Detroit Police Department's silence.

The way the police, the news media and the community handled the two serial rape cases, as well as another on Detroit's northwest side, raises troubling questions about crime and justice, media responsibility and community attitudes.

This much is clear: More residents mobilized in the suburbs, demanding answers from police, than in Detroit; suburban police divulged more information about their investigations than did Detroit police, and the media devoted more attention to the Oakland County rapes than to those in Detroit.

An examination of the role of the media, police and community raises other questions: Are the media guilty of bias toward the suburbs in coverage of serial rapes? Did reporters engage in a news-gathering frenzy, sometimes at the victims' expense, as police honed in on a suspect in the Oakland County case? Do police, particularly in Detroit, respond often and openly enough to the media and public?

Detroit Councilwoman Maryann Mahaffey, who criticized police handling of the east side rapes, said: "The knowledge people have that there was someone out there doing serial rape is enough to use as a prevention tool throughout the area, and not just the narrow area where he was."

Farmington Hills Police Chief William Dwyer, whose department was involved in the Oakland County investigation and who was a Detroit police officer for 23 years, supervising the public information unit for five years, put it more bluntly:

"If they had disseminated information, some of those rapes could have been prevented."

To prepare this article, the Free Press examined its own coverage of the three serial rape cases and that of two Detroit television stations, WXYZ-TV (Channel 7) and WJBK-TV (Channel 2).

The newspaper wrote more articles about -- and gave more prominent display to -- the Oakland County ski-mask rapist case than to the two Detroit cases combined. Through last week, the newspaper has published 21 stories about the Oakland County case, six of which ran on the front page.

In contrast, the newspaper wrote eight stories about the east side Detroit rapist, one appearing on the front page. It published six stories about the northwest side rapist, with none appearing on the front page.

The TV stations were not able to provide exact story counts.

One media expert argued that the fact that many news executives live in the suburbs unduly influences news coverage.

"It is true that if an influential newspaper executive hears something, it is much more likely to get coverage than an area that has no representation," said Ben Burns, director of Wayne State University's journalism program and former executive editor of the Detroit News.

Burns said with so many editors living in the suburbs, "The question becomes: Are they representative of the people they serve?"

Heath Meriwether, Free Press executive editor, rejected that claim and said, "It's a curious allegation because, if anything, it often seems that the media are accused of overreporting crime in Detroit and underreporting crime in the suburbs."

News executives attribute much of the difference in coverage of the three cases to police attitudes and practices. Departments in Oakland County -- in contrast to Detroit -- "let us know every time a suspected rapist sneezed," said Bob Rowe, WXYZ-TV news director.

"We do not care more about the suburbs than Detroit," Rowe said. "A rape is a rape; a crime is a crime. It doesn't matter where it happens."

Robert Trojanowicz, director of Michigan State University's School of Criminal Justice, agreed: "The more information you have, the more you can transmit to the public. That would far outweigh the potential bias of the reporters being of the same socioeconomic class."

### Oakland County incidents

In Oakland County, the first rape occurred April 8, 1987. Within a month, four women had been attacked at their homes in Birmingham, West Bloomfield Township and Bloomfield Township, prompting police, residents and reporters to realize the assaults probably were the work of a serial rapist.

The rapes seemed to be a larger story in a county that had 486 reported rapes and 60 homicides in 1987, compared with 1,417 reported rapes and 686 homicides that year in Detroit, with only a slightly larger population than Oakland County.

The nature of the assaults in Oakland County added to the fear, as well as to the coverage.

"Getting raped in the solemnity of one's home -- the more terrifying it is, the more fear people get and the more notoriety it gets," Trojanowicz, the MSU professor, said.

Police and some residents said the media provided a valuable service by publishing drawings of suspects, hot line telephone numbers, and tips on personal safety and home security. Others believe the media sometimes went overboard.

"At times, it seemed like a feeding frenzy; every time you turned around, reporters were trying to outdo each other," said Debi Cain, executive director of HAVEN, a domestic violence and sexual abuse shelter in Pontiac, where two Oakland County rape victims received counseling.

The outpouring of community reaction kept the heat on police and the media, prompting more news reports.

Only a month after the rapes began, a meeting at Seaholm High School in Birmingham drew 300 parents and children. Police urged them to take security precautions and heard criticism of their inability to solve the crimes.

"We wanted to let people know about the attacks so they could protect themselves, but we did not want to harm the investigation," said Bloomfield Township Police Lt. Jeffrey Werner, chief of the Oakland rape task force.

The ski-mask rapist became a top story in the newspapers and on TV.

"The media caused the hysteria to continue," said Randy Burnett, director of public information for Birmingham Community House. "I knew one of the victims, and every time she picked up the paper, she saw a story. She couldn't get away from it. She couldn't get on with her life."

The extensive coverage continued, and so did the attacks. Twelve assaults eventually were linked by police to the ski-mask rapist. The attacks ended March 31; soon after the media reported that police found evidence in the Cleveland area that was linked to an Oakland County rape, a turning point in the investigation. After that, there was little coverage until November.

A front-page Free Press article Nov. 15 confirmed that police believed Steve Szeman, arrested for a rape in Ohio, also was the prime suspect in Oakland County. But he was not the possible suspect the Free Press earlier said investigators had not questioned.

The article put pressure on police and prosecutors who were trying to build a case to charge Szeman.

"There was a terrible push at the end from the media for information," said Werner. "The pressure was very unnerving. We needed to do a good job and build our case even after the guy is in custody."

Not all of those involved agreed. Oakland County Prosecutor L. Brooks Patterson, who acted as spokesman at a news conference called after the article about Szeman's arrest appeared, said: "The press was more than fair. I responded to their questions to a point where I fulfilled my responsibility, but not to a point where it jeopardized the case with pre-trial publicity."

No outcry on city's east side

There was no news conference, no media frenzy, no community outcry in Detroit, where Samson Fee Koger, 19, had stalked women in parking lots and other public places since July 1987. Not a word was printed or aired about nine attacks on Detroit's east side until Koger's arrest Feb. 18 on 25 counts of first-degree criminal sexual conduct and six counts of armed robbery.

Councilwoman Mahaffey, who criticized police handling of the case, contended: "If people had known, maybe he would have been caught a lot earlier."

Koger began his assaults July 5, 1987. That fall, police set up undercover surveillance. Police Cmdr. Robert Hislop, head of the Detroit Police major crimes division, said he decided not to announce to the media that a serial rapist was at work.

He said that because the rapes were confined to a relatively small area, police believed publicity might drive the rapist to other neighborhoods and set back efforts to apprehend him.

Hislop said police made available a report whenever a rape occurred, without drawing attention to it. Free Press City Editor Chip Visci said that, with about two dozen Detroit Police crime reports available daily, it would have been nearly impossible to spot a trend over a seven-month period.

Hislop maintained that police quietly alerted residents in Lafayette Park and adjacent Elmwood Park about the rapist through its crime prevention bureau, which distributed a flier, including a sketch of a suspect. He said an off-duty officer eventually recognized the suspect from such a flier.

Hislop said: "We had a really high upgrading of the police personnel in that area. We saturated the area pretty heavily. We were successful in it."

Koger was sentenced in August to four prison terms that will keep him behind bars for at least 60 years.

Interviews with residents and apartment managers in the area suggest that fliers were distributed, though not widely. And with no media coverage, far fewer people were aware of the rapist.

In one case, after a tenant was raped Nov. 6, 1987, at the 230-unit Parkview Tower and Square, near Chene and Lafayette, manager Walter Brewer said he asked police "if they wanted me to put anything out to my people."

Brewer said police replied, "How do we know that this person or persons don't live in your development?" Which to me made common sense: You don't want to let somebody who lives next door to you know that you know something they're doing.

"I didn't inform the tenants," said Brewer.

To Mahaffey, however, the surveillance approach posed a threat to women: "What that does is it uses the women in that area as decoys, but without any consent."

Koger committed four more rapes on Dec. 12, 1987, and Jan. 11, 17 and 30 of this year before he was apprehended, according to the Wayne County Prosecutor's Office.

Coverage in northwest city

There was more media coverage of a rapist who was suspected of preying between January and August on as many as 20 women in their homes in northwest Detroit. A Highland Park man, **Michael Champion**, 32, is charged with four counts of criminal sexual conduct, three counts of armed robbery and three counts of breaking and entering with intent to commit larceny in seven of the attacks.

Detroit newspapers and TV stations ran police sketches of the suspect and carried reports about the fear among neighborhood women and what steps they were taking to protect themselves.

Unlike the Koger case, police said the suspect in the northwest Detroit attacks ranged over a relatively large area, and police hoped to get tips from citizens who saw police sketches in the media.

But the amount of citizen mobilization was far less than in Oakland County, where meeting after meeting drove home the point, and that in itself may have influenced the extent of news coverage of the rapes in northwest Detroit. The media also initiated far fewer stories about the northwest side rapes.

"We certainly have tried to put the overall issue of crime in Detroit in perspective," said Meriwether of the Free Press. "We've chosen our spots, to wit . . . the crack cocaine story that we've continued to hit on and hit on and hit on." The northwest Detroit rapes story "is one of these cases in which we didn't say, 'Let's put this in perspective.' "

Overall, the media have followed the flow of police information, the Free Press examination of coverage shows.

Said Trojanowicz, of MSU: "There's no formula as to how much information you should get to people so that it becomes alarming. Yet we can't just sit back and pretend we have a rose-colored world."

#### CUTLINE

Debi Cain, executive director of HAVEN

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