

Police Task Forces Learn to Cooperate

The Green Ribbon Task Force was formed in 1991 to catch a killer after the raped and dismembered body of 14 year-old Leslie Mahaffy was discovered in a lake near St. Catharines, Ontario. Today, the sequence of events is common knowledge, and Police Task Forces are learning from those mistakes. Cooperation is key.

Long before Bernardo's murderous sexual depravity became front page fodder in Canadian newspapers, his penchant for raping and beating up women had been reported to the Metro Toronto Police. First, when his ex-girlfriend laid a complaint about his violent behaviour. Then, in 1988, he was tagged as "suspect" in a string of rapes in the Scarborough area. Two years later, he was described by a victim and a composite drawing was publicly circulated. A second woman subsequently identified him. Around this time, Toronto police obtained a series of DNA samples from Bernardo and sent it to the under-staffed forensics lab for testing. With the heat cranked up, and his drawn likeness getting some press, the Scarborough rapist decided to leave town.

In 1991, Bernardo and his complicit assistant Karla Homolka moved to St. Catharines to start a new life together as husband and wife. The rapes ceased in Scarborough, and began in the Niagara region. Bernardo continued to elude retribution, and the Toronto police never shared their suspicions about him. The Niagara police investigated the new attacks as isolated incidents. It would be more than two years, three murders and a few sadistic rapes later before his DNA sample was dusted off, tested, and linked to one of the Scarborough rape cases.

In the meantime, the Green Ribbon Task Force interviewed Bernardo as a *person of interest* and let him go. It wasn't until 1993, following results of the DNA test, that Toronto police shared with their task

force counter-parts suspicions that Bernardo was the Scarborough rapist. At the time, the former head of Green Ribbon, now Ottawa Police Chief Vince Bevan, was stunned. "When I saw the detailed descriptions of the acts committed, and words spoken by the Scarborough Rapist, it was clear that he was also responsible for the rape on Henley Island (Niagara region) in April 1991," writes Bevan in a report published by the FBI National Executive Institute in June of this year. "Had the information been available, that connection likely would have been made earlier, perhaps even before Leslie Mahaffy was abducted and murdered in June 1991."

The Bernardo case provided agonizing proof that the only benefactor of a disconnect – or worse yet, competition – between police forces in an investigation is the serial offender. It is horrendous mistakes like these that the leadership of Project KARE is trying to avoid. Like the Green Ribbon investigation, Project KARE is also on the trail of serial killers.

Spearheaded by RCMP 'K' Division in 2003, the Project KARE Task Force was formed to investigate 83 so-called "high risk" missing or murdered people, mostly women, in Alberta. The investigation (now conducted by a staff of 40, including RCMP officers and four detectives from the Edmonton Police Service) follows fact-gathering and still-ongoing analysis phases by police forces across the prairies and the north.

Night view of 118th Street, Edmonton, commonly referred to as "the Stroll."





KARE investigator gathers intelligence from sex trade worker.

A top KARE priority is the High Risk Missing Persons Project (HRMPP) that was initiated in 2002 as a result of the “Vancouver experience,” says Mike Sekela, KARE command leader (referring to the continuing investigation into the 60-plus missing and murdered Vancouver women, and Willy Picton, the man who is, so far, charged with killing 27 of them). From the initial 315 cases, HRMPP analysis determined that 125 missing or murdered people in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta fit the criteria of “high risk,” through their lifestyle or crime scene circumstance. Besides meeting specific high risk criteria, these cases also share commonalities or information that potentially, or probably, indicates that the files could be linked.

Did Alberta and the prairies have a serial killer of its own? KARE officers spent the next two years analyzing and investigating, eventually whittling the cases down to 72. Of those still under scrutiny, 40 are murdered women and 29 are missing females. The rest involve men.

This year, Alberta RCMP finally announced what had long been rumoured – they believed one or more serial killers were responsible for at least some of the homicides. Police refuse to say how which, or how many, of the cases may be linked. But, in the past 30 years, the bodies of 25 murdered women have been found around Alberta’s capital.

Similar to the Bernardo and Vancouver investigations, KARE is dealing with a serial killer whose crimes span several jurisdictions. The majority of the west coast women who were killed or went missing, did so from Vancouver streets, while their bodies were found in the Lower Mainland. Many of the Edmonton women were associated with prostitution and disappeared while working the city’s stroll, only to be later dumped in rural areas outside municipal boundaries.

Interoperability was a recurring theme in the 400-plus page report written by Superior Court Judge Archie Campbell following a judicial inquiry into the Bernardo investigation. Among many other issues, Campbell lambasted a criminal justice system that allowed tips to be disregarded, police forces to operate in isolation from each other and, despite knowing what it did about him, enabled a criminal like Bernardo to slip away... again and again.

From the start of HRMPP, through the KARE investigation, information-sharing between police entities has been the *modus operandi*. Hindsight from other investigations of similar size and scope has proven that open communication is integral to success, and the speed of success, in solving crimes. “The interaction with police forces and agencies outside Project KARE is large,” says

Sekela. “We’ve had leads... to follow up from Nova Scotia to Vancouver – could be persons of interest, could be witnesses, could be numerous different investigational avenues to pursue. We have gone across the country, we’ve interacted, on a regular basis, with other police departments across the country.”

KARE works closely with several Alberta RCMP detachments and municipal police forces, including the Edmonton Police Service (EPS). KARE investigators have access to the EPS database through the four city officers who work as part of the Task Force team. The Task Force emails developments and updates to about 150 agencies, including local support groups that work directly with women in the sex trade. KARE also utilizes a computer program tailored to assess and track persons of interest in this specific investigation and an electronic major case management system that is accessible to all investigators working on the file.

Last November, they hosted a workshop of invited representatives from police forces across North America, including experts and members of other high profile serial killer investigations. The intent was to share Best Practices in every area of operation, says Sekela. Once the group had gathered, KARE officers rolled it all out: details of each case, investigational strategies, analytical components, and information management systems. It turned out to be a learning experience all around. “It also reassured me, as a team commander, that we’re doing some unique things and are on the right track in our efforts,” Sekela says. Which doesn’t mean Project KARE won’t make errors, like other task forces before it, just hopefully, not the same ones. **FL**

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