

## No charges in murder of JonBenet

### Why did Karr confess?

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For more than 10 years, questions have swirled around the unsolved murder of six-year-old JonBenet Ramsey, found dead in her parents' Colorado home in 1996.

Another question emerged yesterday when police announced they would not pursue charges against John Mark Karr: Why would a man confess to a murder he did not commit?

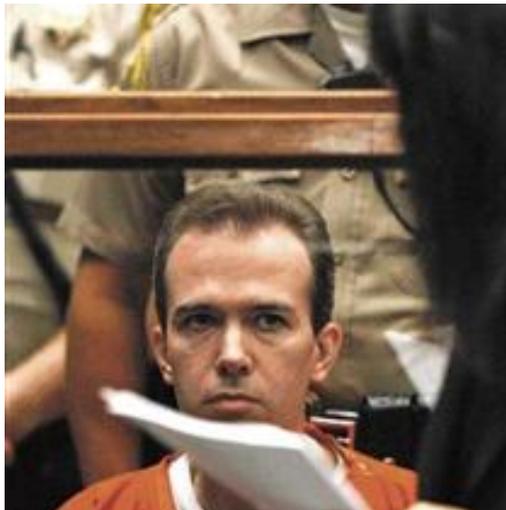
Mr. Karr, a former schoolteacher who fled the United States for Thailand after being charged with possession of child

pornography, had told reporters this month that he was with JonBenet at the time of her death, which he characterized as "an accident."

But DNA taken from the Ramsey murder scene did not match samples taken from Mr. Karr, and his lawyer said yesterday he will not be charged with her murder.

Saul Kassin, a professor of psychology at Williams College in Williamstown, Mass., has researched false confessions and said it has yet to emerge whether Mr. Karr truly believes he is JonBenet's killer.

"I understand he had been in some way or another talking about and taking credit for this crime long before the police became involved," he said of Mr. Karr. "It's possible in this case that he immersed himself in this case to such an extent that he has become somewhat confused, if not delusional, about what involvement he actually had."



CREDIT: Mario Anzuoni, Reuters

John Mark Karr in court on Aug 22.

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Most individuals who admit to crimes they did not commit do so as a result of delusions of guilt, he said, or because of a pathological need for attention.

"The more often people imagine something, the more likely they are later to think it actually happened," he said. "[Mr. Karr] could be somewhat delusional."

Dr. Kassin said such high-profile cases as the Ramsey murder often lead to false confessions, the most famous example being the kidnapping of the Lindbergh baby in 1932, a crime confessed to by more than 200 people.

More recently, a woman named Laverne Pavlinac confessed that she and her boyfriend murdered a man named Tanuja Bennett in Oregon in 1990.

She had studied the investigation of his death closely, and decided that confessing to the crime would be a good way to end her relationship with her abusive boyfriend, John Sosnovske.

After contacting police, Ms. Pavlinac and Mr. Sosnovske were charged with the murder, the latter eventually pleading guilty to avoid the death penalty.

Ms. Pavlinac recanted after being handed a 10-year sentence, and both she and Mr. Sosnovske served four years in prison before the real killer confessed to the deed.

Voluntary false confessions occur with some frequency in the United States, Dr. Kassin said, but are usually quickly exposed as lies.

"Police are pretty good at weeding them out," he said. "They are inherently suspicious when somebody walks in and makes a statement of guilt. The next step is, OK, prove it."

Dr. Kassin said he has never heard of anyone being charged criminally for offering a false confession, and said individuals are often simply "sent on their way" after their innocence is established.

But in some cases, district attorneys will pursue a murder charge against someone who has confessed even in the face of contradictory DNA evidence.

"I applaud them for not continuing with this without corroboration," he said of the latest development in the Ramsey case.

Mr. Karr still faces criminal charges in California, and Dr. Kassin said that he appears to require psychiatric attention whether or not he believes he killed JonBenet.

"What happens when you shatter the delusion?" he asked. "I think he needed help long before he gave this confession."

JonBenet's parents found their daughter's body in their wine cellar the day after Christmas in 1996.

Police were from the start criticized for their handling of the case, but DNA evidence was recovered, and it did not match Mr. Karr's.

Mr. Karr was arrested in Thailand on Aug. 16 on a California warrant for charges of possessing child pornography.

Thai police said he had confessed to killing JonBenet unintentionally, and told them he was "in love" with the girl, who wore makeup and glamorous outfits and struck precocious poses in her appearances at child beauty pageants.

District Attorney Mary Lacy said Mr. Karr's family was able to provide "circumstantial evidence" that he spent Christmas with his family in Atlanta, Ga., at the time of the murder.

Mr. Karr's motive for the confession remains fodder for speculation, along with the identity of the real murderer.

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