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JONBENET RAMSEY CASE

Murder confessions may be false

Investigators in the JonBenet Ramsey case are learning that details of her alleged killer's confession may not add up.

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Twenty-seven years ago, Jerry Frank Townsend toured northwest Fort Lauderdale with a convoy of detectives and recounted grisly details of a series of rapes and murders only the killer could know.

That September night in 1979, Townsend confessed to strangling 19-year-old Terry Cummings with a piece of wire.

He confessed to killing 23-year-old Ernestine German with a knife.

And he confessed to raping Sonja Marion, 13, in the ballfield at Dillard High School and then smashing her skull with a concrete block.

In all, Townsend confessed to at least six murders in South Florida -- and others across the country.

The only problem: Townsend made it all up.

A confession is one of the most powerful pieces of evidence in any murder case: The suspect says he did it, the cops take credit for solving a crime and the public feels safe.

International attention is refocused on the phenomenon of false confessions after John Mark Karr told police he drugged, strangled and assaulted 6-year-old JonBenet Ramsey.

His confession already is being scrutinized. Key details he has described don't match the evidence in the 10-year-old murder. Authorities say the autopsy uncovered no signs of drugs in JonBenet's body. And Karr's own ex-wife insists that he was in Atlanta or Alabama on Dec. 26, 1996, the day JonBenet was killed in Boulder, Colo.

Karr, 41, a former teacher, was arrested in Bangkok. At a frenzied news conference, he flatly told reporters he killed JonBenet.

"Her death was an accident," he said.

Some experts are now wondering whether he is lying or simply deranged.

'I took a look of the tape of him [Karr] speaking and said, `This is a problem,' " said Barry Scheck, co-founder of

the Innocence Project, the Cardozo School of Law program based in New York that works to free the wrongly convicted.

Scheck, who worked as a consultant on the JonBenet case, said people make false confessions for myriad reasons.

"There are wannabes out there who confess to committing murder, perfectly sane people can give coerced confessions," Scheck said. "And there are people who come to believe they did it, the mentally vulnerable, like the young and the mentally challenged."

Particularly with high-profile crimes, it's not unusual for people to confess. And at times, those who provide false confessions often believe they committed the crime. Psychologists say they are often driven by a need to punish themselves or others.

The convictions of Tim Brown and Keith King, accused of the 1990 slaying of Broward Sheriff's Office deputy Patrick Behan, were largely the result of false confessions. Brown, 14, at the time of the murder, and King, 17, both confessed. Both teens, like Townsend, have subpar IQs and marginal verbal skills.

King pleaded guilty to manslaughter and served a reduced sentence. In a 2001 interview with The Miami Herald, King said he "didn't know why he confessed."

"These are complex, distorted personalities," said Ed Griffith, a spokesman for the Miami-Dade state attorney's office. "These cases are actually very rare."

Saul Kassin, a professor of psychology at Williams College and co-author of *Confessions in the Courtroom*, said false confessions are more common than one might think.

"There are two myths that have to be debunked in this country," Kassin said. One is that "I would never admit to a crime that I didn't commit -- and the second is that if someone does give a false confession, I'd know it."

People in an interrogation room will do almost anything to get away, Kassin explained -- even wrongfully confess.

Since 1989, the Innocence Project reports, 183 people have been exonerated of crimes they didn't commit. About 20 percent of those involved false confessions.

And in a comprehensive review of murder confessions in South Florida, The Miami Herald found that between 1990 and 2001 at least 38 false or questionable murder confessions were thrown out by Broward County courts -- rejected by juries or abandoned by police or prosecutors. In at least six cases, innocent people languished in jail while killers remained free.

After the series was published, Fort Lauderdale police and BSO started video taping homicide interrogations to prevent coercion, improper promises of leniency, off-the-record threats and beatings by detectives.

Scheck said that while Broward is videotaping interrogations, the rest of the country has failed to follow suit.

"We should not have any interrogations in homicide cases unless it's videotaped from the Miranda warnings on," Scheck said. "Particularly to see if the details of the case can be corroborated, details that presumably only the killer would know."

Townsend, with an IQ of 58, confessed falsely to murders in Broward, Miami-Dade, Tampa and San Francisco. In 2001, DNA exonerated Townsend of three Broward homicides. He was released after 22 years behind bars.

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