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Big case a big lure to 'confess'

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John Mark Karr may or may not have killed JonBenet Ramsey, but he's certainly not the first person to become an instant celebrity by confessing to a spectacular homicide.

Reports of serial killings regularly attract serial confessors who slow police investigations with bogus claims of being the next Ted Bundy, experts said.

In the 1930s, hundreds of nobodies tried to become somebodies by claiming to have kidnapped Charles Lindbergh's baby.

"Often in high-profile cases, people come out of the woodwork to take credit for a crime they didn't do," said Saul Kassin, a Williams College professor and expert on false confessions.

"Some people have a pathological need for attention, fame or recognition," Kassin added. "Others admit to a crime because they feel guilt for something else they did."

Fordham Law School Prof. James Cohen said, "Sometimes people confess when they're under a great deal of pressure by law enforcement."

The best-known New York example of this was in the Central Park Jogger case, where the convictions of five youths who confessed to the crime were overturned when DNA evidence pinned responsibility on another man.

"The defense claimed those confessions were coerced from the very beginning," Cohen said. "The problem is most jurors listen to a confession and believe it because they say to themselves, 'They could interrogate me for 90 days and I'd never admit to this.' The reality is people will do anything to stop an interrogation."

There have also been instances when suspects have tried to burnish their criminal credentials by exaggerating their roles in a caper.

Take Zacarias Moussaoui, the only person convicted in the 9/11 attacks. Although his lawyers tried to save his skin by portraying him as a bit player, Moussaoui bragged that he was supposed to pilot a fifth plane into the White House, thus improving his chances of becoming an Islamic martyr.

The most prolific serial confessor, however, was Texas drifter Henry Lee Lucas. He told cops in the 1980s that he killed 350 people.

In the end, Lucas was convicted of just eight murders. But he did get a measure of immortality by

becoming the inspiration for the movie "Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer."