

U.S. NEWS

Missteps over years allowed a Detroit serial killer to roam free



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An Associated Press investigation has found that, repeatedly over 15 years, Detroit police failed to follow up on leads or take investigative steps that may have averted a killing spree (Dec. 21)(AP video: Mike Householder)

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DETROIT (AP) — The serial killer lured women one by one into vacant homes to be murdered, posing their nude or partially clothed corpses amid cheap booze pints, crumbling sheetrock and hypodermic needles.

The slayings set [Detroit on edge](#), prompting authorities to dispatch crews on overtime to scour the city's decrepit stock of abandoned properties for more bodies. When the killer was charged in 2019, the police chief at the time told reporters that his department had been "very diligent, relentless" in solving the crimes.

But now, a year after DeAngelo Martin was sent to prison for committing four murders and two rapes, it's clear that police were hardly diligent or relentless.



Over 15 years, Detroit police failed to follow up on leads or take investigative steps that may have averted the eventual killing spree, despite having received repeated warnings that Martin was a violent predator, an Associated Press investigation has found.

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Key takeaways from an AP investigation into how police failed to stop a serial killer

“It’s astonishing,” said Jim Trainum, a retired Washington, D.C., homicide detective who specializes in reviewing police investigations for possible wrongful convictions. “All the police had to do was one little thing, one little thing here or there, and they would have put a stop to this whole process and these women would still be alive. Just one thing.”

In uncovering the failures, the AP relied on more than a dozen interviews, hundreds of pages of court documents and records from prosecutors and police, including a lengthy internal affairs report, obtained through public information requests.

The files reveal that the bungling started in 2004, when evidence from the rape of a 41-year-old woman was stored in a kit — and then forgotten for years in a warehouse, [along with thousands of others](#). When police finally reopened the investigation, the victim had long been dead.

The lapses continued all the way into 2018, when police arrested the wrong man in a strangling. Even after a state crime lab linked Martin’s DNA to the death, police only sought his arrest weeks after he had raped a woman in his grandmother’s basement in 2019 and had killed thrice more.

Detroit’s internal affairs branch issued a 247-page report that found the agency’s sex crimes unit did not properly handle DNA hits. Officers were confused about what number of assaults would define a serial rapist, and they were also reluctant to re-approach victims to persuade them to cooperate.

No mistakes rose “to the level of criminality,” the report said, but several officers had “neglected their duties.” Two were briefly suspended. An internal affairs supervisor summed up the debacles as a “total systemic breakdown.”

“That’s one way of categorizing it,” Detroit police Commander Michael McGinnis told the AP.

“Sitting here today, would I have liked to have seen a more aggressive apprehension effort made in 2018? Yes, I absolutely would have,” said McGinnis, who formerly served as the head of the homicide unit and now leads the department’s professional standards bureau. “But that’s sitting here in hindsight knowing exactly what I know today.”

McGinnis said the department has since changed the way it deals with crime victims and manages DNA leads. Supervisors and command staff now are more involved, he said, especially in cases with a serial offender.

“We learn from our mistakes,” McGinnis said, “and we resolve to do better.”

Relatives of Martin's victims were furious when they learned through AP that police had chances to stop him before their loved ones were killed. They also wondered if the department would have been more aggressive if the victims hadn't been among the city's most vulnerable — and invisible — residents: women struggling with addiction, mental illness or homelessness.

“My sister would be alive today if the police had done their jobs,” said Anthony Ellis, the brother of Trevesene Ellis, who was found slain in May 2019. “She always looked out for everyone and didn't deserve to die this way.”



Lisa Hohnstreiter sits for a portrait in Warren, Mich., on Friday, Nov. 24, 2023. (AP Photo/Carlos Osorio)

Lisa Hohnstreiter, the daughter of Martin's second victim, Nancy Harrison, said she was overwhelmed by the information obtained by AP. “My mom's death could definitely have been prevented,” she said.

Tough Upbringing

Martin, who is serving between 45 and 70 years in prison, declined a request for an interview.

Born in 1985, he was raised by his mother, [Chantrienes Barker](#), in Detroit until she was arrested in 1998 for the kidnapping and murder of a 28-year-old Detroit man.

Barker had permitted the [kidnappers to hold a rival drug dealer](#) in her basement while they extorted money from his suppliers and family, court records show. Barker bought food for the kidnappers as they burned the 27-year-old captive with cigarettes and heated nickels, and stabbed him with a bayonet, records show.

When the ransom plan fell apart, the kidnappers killed the drug dealer and left his body on a city street.

It is not known if Martin, then 13, was home during the kidnapping. Barker was convicted of felony murder in 1999 and sentenced to life in prison.

Martin next lived with his grandparents, or on the streets. Kyle "Brother Joe" Hicks, [a minister](#), said he first met Martin two decades ago when the teenager was sheltering with other homeless men under a downtown amphitheater.

Martin was addicted to alcohol and drugs, Hicks said, and panhandled to earn cash. He dreamed of being a singer, Hicks said, and frequently tried to croon duets with another homeless man.

"I imagine they were pretty good singers when they were sober," Hicks said, "but they were never sober."

Around 15 years ago, Hicks said, Martin lost three toes on his right foot to frostbite.

"I was surprised when he was arrested," Hicks said. "He seemed nice. But do the math: He had a messed-up childhood with his mom going to prison for murder, and he had addictions to drugs and alcohol. That doesn't make you a serial killer, but it's not a recipe for success."

DNA Links

Martin had several run-ins with police over the years. He had at least two convictions by 2009, including one for receiving a stolen car, and, as a result, his DNA profile was on file in a national database.

He first was connected to a potential sexual assault in 2012. That's when a state crime laboratory alerted Detroit police that a national database had matched Martin's DNA to evidence collected in the 2004 rape of Sylvia Sampson.

Sampson, 41, told police she was walking down a deserted street when a gold-colored car pulled up, and the gun-wielding driver demanded she get inside, reports show. He drove Sampson to a nearby field strewn with tires where he warned her to "do what I say or I'll snap your neck." After the rape, Sampson told police, her assailant kicked her in the face and took \$10 from her coat.

Police collected evidence in a rape kit, which was stored in a warehouse. Five years later, prosecutors discovered that untested kit and more than 11,000 others in the building, sparking a push by Wayne County prosecutor Kym Worthy to clear the backlog.

Her office said the testing initiative concluded last year, having identified 841 serial offenders while netting 239 convictions. Worthy's efforts were highlighted in a 2017 documentary, "I Am Evidence," that explored similar backlogs of untested rape kits across the country. [The film was produced](#) and narrated by Mariska Hargitay, the star of NBC's "Law and Order: Special Victims Unit."

It does not appear that police at first did anything about the "hit" linking Martin to Sampson's assault. Four years after receiving it, records show, detectives looked into the assault and determined that Sampson was dead.

Without a living victim, they closed the case.

The state crime lab in October 2016 linked Martin's DNA to a specimen collected in a second rape kit.

A 50-year-old woman had reported the previous December that a male companion had thrown “her down and started hitting her in the face and possibly sexually assaulted her” in a vacant home, according to a police report of the incident.

Police noted in their report that the woman had suffered injuries consistent with an assault: “two black swollen eyes” and swollen lips, as well as bruises on her legs and scratches on her neck.

The brutality alarmed prosecutors. In an email to police shortly after learning about the DNA hit, assistant prosecutor Tanya Abdelnour told sex crimes investigators that “clearly a second hit to (a rape kit) is an indication of a possible serial offender.”

“It appears that that assault included some physical violence to the victim resulting in injuries,” she wrote. “It is concerning that the physical violence is increasing.”

Police did not get very far. The victim declined to be a witness, records show, though an officer called the woman a second time in a failed attempt to convince her to cooperate.

In 2017, the crime lab linked Martin’s DNA to evidence collected in a third rape kit. That specimen had been submitted by a hospital, but police could find no record of the female victim having reported the crime.

The First Killing

The first homicide attributed to Martin took place in February 2018, though police initially arrested the wrong man.

It was a Monday afternoon when two Detroit police officers were flagged down by Rudolph Henderson, a 43-year-old vagabond. At Henderson’s feet was a dead, naked woman.

Detectives arrested Henderson on murder charges after discovering security video that showed him dragging Annetta Nelson, 57, from a vacant house where she had been strangled and beaten to death.

Henderson told police that he had stumbled across Nelson’s corpse in the living room as he was looking for crack cocaine. He said he decided to move the body because he didn’t think anyone would find it otherwise.

Henderson [was released a week](#) after his arrest when police uncovered other video evidence that prosecutors described as proving the homeless man “was not the perpetrator.”

Two months later, records show, the state crime lab linked Martin’s DNA to evidence collected from Nelson’s vagina. A scientist even told police they could find his name in other case files. Henderson, meanwhile, was cleared by the same DNA testing.

The case files do not indicate what police did with the information, though the internal affairs report suggests Det. Jesus Colon created a reward flier seeking information about him. The detective declined an interview request. His remarks to internal affairs investigators, like most others made by officers, were redacted in the report.

After obtaining the DNA hit, police dispatched an “apprehension team” to search for Martin, according to McGinnis, the police commander.

“I don’t know what specific actions they took to try to locate him but they were unsuccessful. Unfortunately, it takes time sometimes to catch people,” McGinnis said.

McGinnis told AP that other DNA was recovered from the crime scene, though homicide files only noted only Martin’s genetic material was found in the victim’s body. “For all we knew he might have been a consensual sexual partner, and the other male DNA could have been the murderer’s,” McGinnis said.

Two law enforcement experts — and the Detroit police chief at the time — say police missed an opportunity by not aggressively pursuing the lead.

At the very least, detectives should have obtained a search warrant to obtain a DNA sample from Martin to confirm the database match, according to [Julianne Himmelstein](#), who spent more than a decade prosecuting

sex offenders in Washington, D.C.

The warrant would have alerted other departments to detain Martin if they came across him, she said, and given Detroit police the chance to interrogate him.

“That is just crazy they didn’t get that warrant,” said Himelstein, a former federal prosecutor. “Confirming that link is step one in Investigations 101.”



FILE - Detroit Police Chief James Craig answers questions during a news conference, Friday, June 7, 2019, at the Detroit Police Headquarters in Detroit, addressing the police response to a possible serial killer. Investigators believe a “serial murderer and rapist” targeting prostitutes is at large in Detroit. (Kimberly P. Mitchell/Detroit Free Press via AP, File) [Read More](#)

In an interview with AP, Detroit’s police chief back in 2018, James Craig, said the DNA hit was “compelling” evidence and would have been enough to “to try to detain” Martin. He could not say why police didn’t take that step.

Not Hard To Find

In the months after the DNA alert, Martin had repeated contact with Detroit-area police officers. He was given a ticket for disorderly conduct by Wayne State University police in September. He was arrested that same month in Ferndale for lying about his identity.

Martin was arrested again in December 2018 on charges of repeatedly hitting a girlfriend in Southfield, another suburb. He pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor assault charge and spent about two weeks in the Oakland County jail.

Authorities in those jurisdictions did not inform Detroit police about their encounters with Martin because Detroit police never asked them to be on the lookout for him, records show.

“Had a more robust apprehension effort been made,” McGinnis said, “I would hope we would have learned that he had contact with these other agencies and been able to chase that down. That did not occur.”

Not long after Martin was released from jail, he killed for the second time. On March 19, 2019, the body of Nancy Harrison, 52, was discovered in an abandoned house on Coventry Street.

The medical examiner ruled she had died from being struck in the head (Martin would admit he beat Harrison to death with a two-by-four).

Two months after discovering Harrison's body, police were dispatched to the home of Martin's grandmother, where a 26-year-old woman told them that Martin had stabbed her in the neck and raped her in the basement.

A relative of Martin's corroborated the woman's account. An aunt, Linda Martin, told police that she had heard screaming from the basement and found the victim bleeding from a stab wound.

Police would not seek charges in the rape until two days after Martin's final known homicide victim was discovered.

City On Edge

A few days after the assault in his grandmother's basement, Martin was arrested 30 miles away in Chesterfield Township after flagging down police for help in a parking lot.

Officers discovered that he was wanted in Southfield for ignoring the conditions of probation in the earlier assault of a girlfriend.

"In your favor, please look out for me," Martin wrote to the judge overseeing his return to court. "You have my word. ... I wanna do what's right."

He spent 10 more days in jail. Southfield Judge [Cynthia Arvant](#) encouraged Martin to seek social services and take his medication.

"Mr. Martin, I wish you the best of luck," said Arvant, who had no way of knowing that Martin could be a murder suspect. "Hopefully you'll be done with this. Put it behind you and move forward."

The day after Martin was released, Trevesene Ellis' decomposed body was found in a Detroit house. She was murder victim No. 3. Authorities could not determine a cause of death, though Martin would later admit to having killed her.



This photo provided by the family shows Tamara Jones. Jones, 55, was found on June 5, 2019, in a vacant house on Mack Avenue in Detroit. (Family Photo via AP) [Read More](#)

The corpse of a fourth victim, Tamara Jones, 55, was found on June 5 in a vacant house on Mack Avenue. She had been beaten to death.

Martin's DNA was later linked to both crimes, as well as to Harrison's slaying in March.

The discovery of the bodies shook Detroit, especially after police warned that the culprit was likely a serial killer.

[At a June 7 press conference](#) about the slayings, Mayor Mike Duggan and his police brass pledged that they were racing to inspect buildings for more bodies and scrambling to board up 2,000 properties.

Later that day, police named Martin a person of interest in the killings. Detectives obtained a warrant charging him with the rape in his grandmother's basement and arrested him without incident that night at a bus stop.

Prosecutors subsequently charged him in the four homicides and the two 2019 rapes after DNA testing linked him to all the crimes. Police declined to say whether they suspected Martin in other killings, but reports and court files suggest he was suspected in at least one disappearance and another death.

Martin eventually pleaded guilty to killing Nelson, Harrison, Ellis and Jones. He also admitted he raped two women.

[At his sentencing last year](#), Martin said he wanted to apologize but in the next breath denied wrongdoing. His lawyer acknowledged "these crimes were horrible, demeaning," and a prosecutor described Martin as a serial killer and rapist who brought immeasurable pain into the world.



Lisa Hohnstreiter holds a cell phone displaying a photograph of herself and her mother, Nancy Harrison, in Warren, Mich., on Friday, Nov. 24, 2023. Not long after DeAngelo Martin was released from jail, he killed for the second time. On March 19, 2019, the body of Nancy Harrison, 52, was discovered in an abandoned house on Coventry Street. (AP Photo/Carlos Osorio) [Read More](#)

When it was their turn to address the judge, the victims' relatives spoke of deep anger and loss.

A father lamented his daughter would never meet her grandchildren.

A daughter said she suffered from repeated nightmares and struggled with explaining to her own children how their grandmother died.

And a twin sister marveled at how it had taken a serial killer to snuff out the life of a loving and caring woman who had beaten the odds and survived nearly two decades on Detroit's streets. She urged the judge to throw the book at Martin because he "is not fit to live in society."

A year since the sentencing, family members of the victims say their emotions have grown only more complicated.

Their fury, once directed at a man, is now also focused on Detroit police. The relatives all have the same question: How did police miss so many chances to stop a killer?

Peek reported on this story while a student in the Howard Center for Investigative Journalism at the University of Maryland. AP reporter Mike Householder in Detroit also contributed to this story.