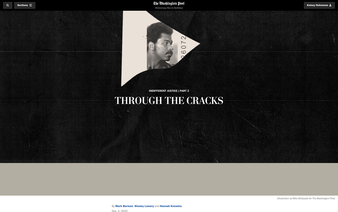


INDEPENDENT JUSTICE | PART 2

THROUGH THE CRACKS

Illustration by Mike McQuade for The Washington Post

By Mark Berman, Wesley Lowery and Hannah Knowles
Dec. 1, 2020

CONNECTION
A personal review of the story, extensively reported that Chicago lawyer, a prior prosecutor, Jennifer Bonjean, has been working on for years, involving the Central Park case, Jeffrey Epstein and others. In Chicago, she has taken on the Jussie Smollett case, and has an ongoing project to have a criminal law class added to Cook County Jail.

Late one night in October 1984, San Diego police set the lookout for a suspected rapist raiser upon a horrifying scenario. In an isolated lot, a Black man emerged from a Ford Thunderbird, zipping up his pants. In the back seat, a Black woman lay covered in blood, so badly beaten she appeared to be dead.

Caught in the act, the man was arrested and charged with sexual assault, kidnapping and attempted murder. The woman survived and testified against him. Police and prosecutors thought he would be locked up for years.

They were wrong.

The man, Samuel Little, is now believed to be the deadliest serial killer in U.S. history, having confessed to killing 93 people, virtually all of them women, over four decades in 26 states. So far, officials have positively identified more than 40 of them. Though he was arrested dozens of times and linked at least eight sexual assaults, attempted murders or killings, Little repeatedly managed to slip through the cracks of the justice system, nearly benefiting from the perceived unreliability of his victims.

Now locked up for life in a California prison, Little, 80, has told police that he intentionally targeted women who would not be missed if they vanished or believed if they survived — sex workers, people with addictions, people who were homeless, people who were victims of color. Interviews with dozens of police officials, prosecutors and defense attorneys involved in Little's cases — as well as a review of thousands of pages of police and court records, many of which have never been previously reported — reveal that the same elements that made Little's murders difficult to solve also made them difficult to prosecute.

While Little's crimes often failed to draw aggressive scrutiny by police, in several cases, authorities managed to connect him to brutal rapes, killings or assaults and launched sustained campaigns to lock him up for many years. But authorities in these cases repeatedly ran into the same roadblocks.

In the nearly overall where Little proved, witnesses either were tough to find or couldn't be counted on to show up in court. When they did show up, jurors often were not inclined to believe them, more than once, for example, Little beat rape charges by claiming his victim had accepted money for sex.

Authorities appear to have taken these cases seriously, hiring analysts to notify at trial and reaching out to their peers in other states. But real or perceived problems with witnesses repeatedly led prosecutors to accept convictions or plea deals on lesser charges, resulting in shorter sentences and a criminal record that betrayed few hints of the true scope of Little's crimes.

In San Diego, for instance, Little was tried for attacking the woman in the car, as well as another White victim who originally had alerted police to the man in the Thunderbird. Both testified against him in court. But both were sex workers, and he insisted that his only crime was beating the Black woman during a dispute over a consensual sexual transaction.

That was enough to sow doubt among jurors, who declined to convict Little on the most serious charges. Instead of risking another trial, prosecutors accepted his guilty plea on sound charges. After 19 months in prison, Little walked free.

"I was devastated," said Gary Rempel, who handled the case for the San Diego County district attorney's office. "This is probably the worst guy I ever prosecuted."

Rempel recalled the FBI in July 1985 and asked that Little be added to "their nationwide crime profile," according to a typewritten summary of the case he prepared at the time. Kenny Mack, a Florida sheriff's investigator aware of Little's connection to several murders in the South, said he, too, flagged the FBI in the mid-1980s.

Samuel Little, who was arrested in Sacramento County in 1989 and has confessed to 93 killings, in a photo provided by the Sacramento County Sheriff's Office.

Free by Christmas

Nearly a decade before Little's arrest in San Diego, police hundreds of miles away in suburban St. Louis found him in strikingly similar circumstances.

Just before noon on Sept. 11, 1976, a 19-year-old Black woman — naked, bruised and beaten — began frantically tapping on the back door of a home in Sunset Hills, Mo. The woman told police that a man had grabbed her as she walked home from breakfast, wrapped a black cord around her neck and forced her into a black Chevy Impala. He kept her unconscious, she said, when she came to, forced her to perform oral sex and raped her. When the man fell asleep, she ran for her life.

Within minutes, police found the car still parked on the gravel road where the woman said the attack occurred. Little, then 28, was snoring in the back seat.

Little denied raping the woman, claiming he'd paid her for heroin and sex. He told police he grew enraged when the woman suggested a crack pipe, and he insisted: "I only beat her."

In the Impala, police found the woman's clothes and a black electrical cord. Little was arrested and charged with rape and sodomy.

By that time — by his own account years later — Little had murdered more than a dozen women. Yet he would not be serious prison time for the Missouri attack.

Samuel Little, who could not be reached for comment, and where The Washington Post is not naming because she is the victim of a sexual assault — told police she was willing to testify. But prosecutors feared that a jury would not believe her. By her own admission, she had a flip-flop, drug-addicted life. Little had a lawyer and police said the man is known sex worker, though she insisted she wasn't.

Meanwhile, Little wasn't denying the assault, just the rape.

So prosecutors struck a deal. They would drop the charge to "assault with intent to rape" — which carried a significantly lighter sentence than rape — and he would plead guilty and accept a six-day sentence and from free.

The prosecutor who brokered the deal has since died. Little's public defender, St. Louis lawyer Richard Rodmaster, said that he doesn't recall the case but that the deal suggests prosecutors were worried they couldn't win in court.

"Normally, this would have been a predeterdiny-time case, given how serious the allegations were against him," Rodmaster said. But "victims can disappear, sometimes they can be unreliable." And if she left St. Louis, Rodmaster said, "the prosecutor has to make the best deal he had to use."

Instead of a lengthy prison term, Little was given credit for the three months he spent in jail while awaiting trial, court records show. He was free by Christmas.

A shoplifting duo

Little's next close call came six years later, when a landscaper found the naked body of 22-year-old Melinda "Mindy" LaPree in a cemetery near Pascagoula, Miss.

LaPree and her boyfriend had moved to Pascagoula from Florida about eight months earlier and were living at the King William Motel. Initially, they worked as shampoo. More recently, a friend told police, LaPree had begun working as a prostitute in Carver Village, a neighborhood on the seedier side of town.

Melinda "Mindy" LaPree in a photo provided by her family. LaPree, 22, was raped and killed in Pascagoula, Miss., in 1985. (Via Jackson County Police)

That friend, a fellow sex worker named Katherine Cousins, told police that on the night of LaPree's disappearance, a man in a T-shirt and khaki pants had pulled up in a beige station wagon and asked Cousins for a blow date. Cousins turned him down, but as they spoke, the man pointed to other prostitutes gathered nearby.

"They're the type that like to rip a man off," the man declared. "I'm going to tell them if I can get them."

Cousins tried to warn the other women to stay away from the beige station wagon, but she soon saw LaPree climb into the car and drive away.

Just before Thanksgiving, police picked up a man and woman shoplifting turkeys from Jitney Jungle, a local grocery store. They were driving a beige station wagon. Police soon became convinced that the pair were linked to LaPree's death.

The woman was Orelia "Jean" Dorsey. Little had met her in Cleveland a decade earlier, and though she was 10 years older, the pair were inseparable, a petty crime Bonnie and Clyde who shoplifted thousands of dollars' worth of clothing, electronics and cigarettes from stores across the country until Dorsey died in 1987.

Samuel Little and Orelia "Jean" Dorsey in a photo provided by the Jackson County Sheriff's Department. Little and Dorsey were a couple for many years and shoplifted together across the country until Dorsey died in 1987.

The two occasionally picked up accomplices. Danny Beckham, then 19, was arrested in connection with the Jitney Jungle theft. In interviews with police, he said he had met the pair in August 1985 at the Colonial Court motel in Little Rock. They spent the fall making along the Gulf Coast, with stops in Ocean Springs, Biloxi and Natchez, Miss.; Mobile, Ala.; and Brownsville, Pensacola, Perry, Ocala and Gainesville, Fla.

In each town, Beckham told police, they spent their days shoplifting, forced the stolen goods and checked into a budget motel. There Little would lure a male sex worker, sometimes not returning until late the next morning.

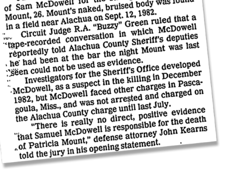
Little "didn't talk about ladies or nothing because Ms. Dorsey was, you know, the jealous type," Beckham told police. But when the men were alive, Little would brag, "He'd say, you know, he'd like to take places and, you know, have sex with them and have them."

Samuel Little and Orelia "Jean" Dorsey in a photo provided by the Jackson County Sheriff's Department.

Suspect Says He Dated 'Jean' Dorsey

Suspect Says He Dated 'Jean' Dorsey

Samuel Little, 28, of Cleveland, Ohio, who is being held in Pascagoula, Miss., on charges of murder, said he had dated Jean Dorsey, 32, of Cleveland, Ohio, for about 10 years. Little said he had met Miss Dorsey in Cleveland and had been with her in Mobile, Ala., Pensacola, Fla., and Natchez, Miss. Little said he had been in Pascagoula for about two weeks. He said he had been in Mobile when he had met a woman who was murdered in Pascagoula. He said he had been in Pensacola when he had met a woman who was murdered in Pensacola. He said he had been in Natchez when he had met a woman who was murdered in Natchez. Little said he had been in Mobile when he had met a woman who was murdered in Mobile. Little



of Sam McDowell... Mount, 26. Mount's naked, bruised body was found in a field near Alachua on Sept. 12, 1982.

Circuit Judge R.A. "Buzzy" Green ruled that a "tape-recorded conversation in which McDowell reportedly told Alachua County Sheriff's deputies he had been at the bar the night Mount was last seen could not be used as evidence.

Investigators for the Sheriff's Office developed McDowell as a suspect in the killing in December 1982, but McDowell faced other charges in Pascagoula, Miss., and was not arrested and charged on the Alachua County charge until last July.

"There is really no direct, positive evidence that Samuel McDowell is responsible for the death of Patricia Mount," defense attorney John Kearns told the jury in his opening statement.

Regional/Local section B

Gainesville Sun

Evidence Grows Against Suspect in Slayings

The jury deliberated less than 30 minutes before finding Sam McDowell not guilty in the 1982 slaying. The victim, Patricia Mount, was last seen alive leaving a tavern with McDowell.

Jury acquits man of strangling woman

By GEORGE BAYLISS

‘A great miscarriage of justice’

While investigating the LaPree case, Pascagoula police interviewed two other sex workers, both Black, who said they had been choked by a man who looked like Little. Investigators began to suspect that he might be a serial strangler.

They referred the two new attacks to a grand jury, but the jurors refused to indict.

Darren Versiga, a Pascagoula police lieutenant who works on cold cases, said the race and profession of the victims no doubt played a part. At that time in southern Mississippi, Versiga testified in court in 2014, "if you were [an] African-American female, and you were in the process of any kind of prostitution or illegal stuff, we just did not treat those crimes as crimes, to be perfectly honest with you."

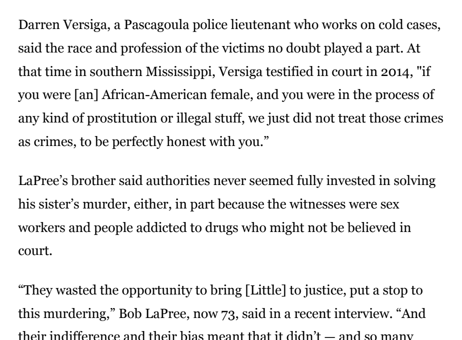
LaPree's brother said authorities never seemed fully invested in solving his sister's murder, either, in part because the witnesses were sex workers and people addicted to drugs who might not be believed in court.

"They wasted the opportunity to bring [Little] to justice, put a stop to this murdering," Bob LaPree, now 73, said in a recent interview. "And their indifference and their bias meant that it didn't — and so many other people lost their lives because of that."

Gerald Brooks Sr., a former Pascagoula police investigator who worked on the LaPree case, said the identities of the victims and witnesses played no role in how authorities handled it. But Brooks said he sympathizes with Bob LaPree: "I would probably feel the same way, if something like this happened to my family. I would feel like they never did enough."

Unable to tie Little directly to LaPree's slaying, Pascagoula shipped him to Florida, where he was wanted in connection with a killing that had occurred just a few days before LaPree died. Patricia Ann Mount, 26, was last seen alive at Mae's Lounge, a Gainesville bar where she was a regular.

Little appeared at the bar on Sept. 11, claiming to be in town from San Diego for that afternoon's football game between the University of Florida and the University of Southern California. As he worked the room, his gaze settled on Mount, a mentally disabled woman with an IQ of 40, according to court testimony, who was then stumbling around the dance floor. Within 15 minutes, witnesses told police, Little had whisked her away in his station wagon. Her body, naked and bruised, was discovered early the next morning.



Patricia Ann Mount, who was 26 when her body was found. Her family could not be located by police or The Washington Post. This is the only known photograph of Mount, a mug shot from a previous arrest included in police files after she was killed. (Obtained by The Washington Post)

Once delivered to Florida investigators, Little was quickly charged with Mount's murder. But in this case, too, police had little concrete evidence to counter his protestations of innocence.

"I ain't killed nobody," Little insisted. "I've done a lot of things in my life, but I ain't never killed nobody."

Police launched a desperate search for Beckless, who they hoped would place Little in Gainesville on the night of the killing. But Beckless had disappeared. In December 1983, a Florida police captain sent the chief of detectives in Little Rock, Beckless's hometown, an urgent plea for help.

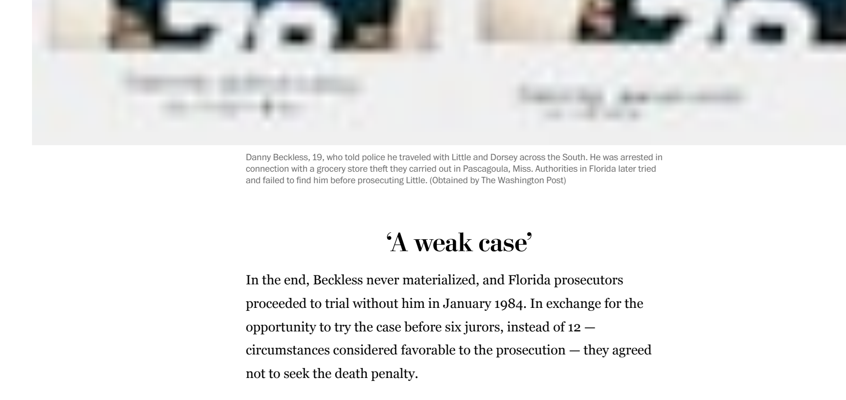
Little had "told a defense attorney that he could be responsible for the deaths of approximately 60 prostitutes throughout the United States," Gainesville police Capt. B.E. Roundtree wrote. "This letter is a last ditch effort in trying to locate this witness, as prosecutors here state they will probably have to drop charges against [Little] without Beckless' testimony."

"I feel it would be a great miscarriage of justice and a danger to society to have to release" Little, Roundtree wrote.

It is unclear when and to whom Little may have confessed killing 60 women. Both Roundtree and the Little Rock detective have since died. Little's public defender in Pascagoula has long denied being the source of the information, according to police; the lawyer did not return calls seeking comment.

But Mack, the retired Alachua County, Fla., sheriff's investigator who worked the Mount case, says he called the FBI's national Behavioral Science Unit in Quantico, Va., about the 60-women story — as well as the killings in Gainesville and Pascagoula, and an Ocala, Fla., killing in which was Little suspected. Little has since confessed to all three.

Mack remembers an analyst saying the agency would look into it. He figured an FBI agent might reach out at least to get fingerprints, photos or background information. But, he said, "we never heard another word."



Danny Beckless, 19, who told police he traveled with Little and Dorsey across the South. He was arrested in connection with a grocery store theft they carried out in Pascagoula, Miss. Authorities in Florida later tried and failed to find him before prosecuting Little. (Obtained by The Washington Post)

‘A weak case’

In the end, Beckless never materialized, and Florida prosecutors proceeded to trial without him in January 1984. In exchange for the opportunity to try the case before six jurors, instead of 12 — circumstances considered favorable to the prosecution — they agreed not to seek the death penalty.

Prosecutor Ken Hebert told the all-White jury that the victim was a "strange, retarded White girl strangled by the dark, enticing stranger." Though witnesses placed Little and Mount together on the night of her death, prosecutors had little physical evidence linking him to the crime.

They focused on a single hair found on the dead woman's clothing, calling an out-of-state fiber analyst to testify that it had similar characteristics to samples taken from Little. On cross-examination, however, the expert acknowledged that the hair's presence could be explained by something as innocuous as the two bumping into each other.

"It was just nonsense," Little's defense attorney, John Kearns, recalled in a recent interview. "I pulled a hair out of my head and the expert had to admit that my hair could also possibly have similar characteristics to the one found on her clothing."

The trial lasted a single day. Jurors deliberated just half an hour before pronouncing Little not guilty.

"It was a weak case," Hebert told reporters after the verdict. Contacted recently, he declined to comment further.

If the case had been tried today, Kearns said, Little might have been convicted given advances in forensic science, particularly DNA technology. But DNA evidence barely existed in 1984. So Little "was acquitted, released from jail, and we got him a bus ticket out of town," Kearns said.

Little told Kearns he was headed for California. "And I didn't hear his name again for 30 years."

Brenda Gordon looks at photos of her mother, Carol Alford, at her apartment in Los Angeles in 2013. Little was convicted in 2014 of murdering Alford in the late 1980s. (Jae C. Hong/AP)

Caught in the act

Nine months later, a rookie cop working the graveyard shift in San Diego spotted the black Thunderbird.

The car matched the description provided by a 22-year-old woman who told police a man had grabbed her, tied her arms behind her back, forcibly performed oral sex and choked her until she passed out. When the man pushed her limp body out of the car, she said, she played dead until he drove away. When she tried to flag down passing drivers, she later testified, "nobody wanted to help."

Now, here was a Thunderbird — and a man who matched the suspect's description emerging from the back seat.

"He's pulling up his pants and zipping them up," Officer Wayne Spees recalled in a recent interview. The man claimed that he and his wife had been in the process of making up after a fight. Peering into the car, Spees saw a woman, her clothes pulled off, her body battered, bloodied and contorted.

"He had done a number on her," Spees said. "I thought she was dead."

Little soon changed his story, repeating a version of what he had said in Missouri nearly a decade earlier: The woman was not his wife, he said, but a sex worker who had ripped him off.

He denied raping the woman, but said, "I did kick the shit out of her." Then he asked a question of his own, Spees recalled: "Did the bitch make it?"

"It's not often that you catch a rapist or a murderer in the act," said Spees, who retired in 2015. "I thought, you know, this guy is going to go away for a long time."

By now, however, Little was well versed in how to beat these cases. At trial, he "told this story about how she was trying to steal his money or cheating him in some way," Rempel, the prosecutor, recalled. "He kept saying, 'She cheated me, and she attacked me, and I was fighting her off,' and that's why he was found with his hands around her neck by the cops that saved her life."

In the courtroom, Little adopted a hunched stance, his head stooped low; Rempel suspected it was an attempt to appear less imposing. And his defense attorney, who has since died, "was the nicest guy in the bar association," Rempel said, with an "aura of respectability [that] would attach to anybody he was sitting next to."

The trial began to go sideways, Rempel said, when the first victim admitted lying to police about having been a sex worker. Then the second woman showed up intoxicated on the day she was due to testify, he said. (The Post was unable to reach either woman and is withholding their names because they are sexual assault victims.)

Rempel also recalled that Little produced a "solid alibi witness" — apparently Dorsey — who showed up "with a church hat and church clothes and carrying a large Bible" and insisted under oath that she and Little had been out of town on the night of the first attack.

Jurors deliberated for days before delivering a mixed verdict in April 1985. Little was convicted of falsely imprisoning the second victim, but acquitted of kidnapping and sexually assaulting the woman in the first attack. Jurors deadlocked on a host of other charges; Rempel thinks they discounted the victims' testimony because they were sex workers.

In a recent interview, juror Stephen Harobin said the victims' profession was not a factor for him. "I don't have any problem believing prostitutes. They're human beings just like the rest of us," Harobin said. "They had the bruises, they had the pictures, they had the stories. Both of them told basically the same story."

Harobin said he and some other jurors "wanted to convict the guy on all the charges." But, he said, "it's hard to get 12 people to agree a lot of the time."

Soon, one of the victims stopped cooperating with law enforcement. Without her testimony, Rempel said, it would have been tough to persuade a new jury to convict Little on the more-serious charges. So instead of pursuing a second trial, Rempel offered Little a deal.

Little pleaded guilty to two counts of assault and was sentenced to four years in prison. After just 19 months behind bars, he was paroled in early 1987.

Decades later, Spees got a phone call from a detective in Los Angeles who wanted to know if he remembered the case. Newly tested DNA evidence had linked Little to three unsolved killings in Los Angeles, three women, all of them strangled.

The first body was found in July 1987 — six months after Little's release.

Julie Tate contributed to this report.

To contact the authors with information about Samuel Little, send us an email at indifferentjustice@washpost.com.

About this story

Story editing by Lori Montgomery. Copy editing by Mike Cirelli. Design and development by Lucio Villa. Photo editing by Nick Kirkpatrick. Project management by Julie Vitkovskaya.

Mark Berman Follow
Mark Berman is a national reporter for The Washington Post who covers law enforcement and criminal justice issues. He has been with The Post since 2007.

Wesley Lowery Follow
Wesley Lowery was a national correspondent covering law enforcement, justice and their intersection with politics and policy for The Washington Post. He previously covered Congress and national politics. In 2015, he was a lead reporter on the "Fatal Force" project awarded the Pulitzer Prize and George Polk award. He left The Post in February 2020.

Hannah Knowles Follow
Hannah Knowles is a reporter on the General Assignment team. Before joining The Washington Post in June 2019 as an intern, she worked at CBS News, the Sacramento Bee and her hometown paper, the Mercury News.

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Murder with Impunity: Where killings go unsolved

The Post has mapped more than 52,000 homicides in major American cities over the past decade and found that across the country, there are areas where murder is common, but arrests are rare.

Six black girls were brutally murdered in the early '70s. Why was this case never solved?

The case of the Freeway Phantom has faded into history — but not everyone has forgotten.

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