

## **Catching a Coming Crime Wave**

*Profile: James Alan Fox*

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College deans do not seem to make suitable protagonists in movies, unless they are the butt of fraternity pranks. So the idea of an academic who moonlights as a sleuth of serial murder might appear downright improbable. Still, the script is being written, an actor is lined up, and in a year, James Alan Fox, the dean of the College of Criminal Justice at Northeastern University, will likely see himself portrayed in a movie made for television.

Television and Fox are hardly strangers. The criminologist has studied serial killings and mass murders for almost 20 years. Whenever bodies turn up or some multiple shooting occurs, the media look to Fox for the usual commentary. In addition to being quoted in thousands of articles, he has appeared hundreds of times on network programs, from Good Morning America to the Late Late Show with Tom Snyder. "I've done the Oprah show eight times," Fox states.

"Not all my colleagues think it's a good idea to appear on television," he adds. "There's a gut feeling that it's not appropriate, that it's beneath the role of a serious academic. I don't agree with that. The way I look at it, I'm teaching a class of millions. It's an opportunity lost and a responsibility shirked if we don't publicize important research findings."

That's why Fox freely gives out his beeper and home numbers to journalists, returns their calls promptly and answers the telephone that frequently interrupts our conversation in his office. He even pauses midsentence to allow me to flip the recording tape.

"Academics don't know how to say things in a concise manner. Most people want straightforward answers. I know, sound bites," Fox winces. "But they're not always bites. Sometimes they're whole meals."

Wearing an Italian suit and a Movado watch, the boyish 44-year-old media maven is a far cry from the shy, short, fat teenager with Coke-bottle glasses. Back then, he was a math whiz, although by the end of his college years at the University of Pennsylvania, he had turned to sociology in the search for a topic that had more immediate applicability. Inspired by a summer course in criminology, Fox earned master's degrees in criminology and statistics before completing his doctorate in sociology at Pennsylvania at the age of 24.

Soon after, he assumed a professorship at Northeastern. There he combined criminology with his love of mathematics and computers--programming is a hobby of his, and he says he would be a computer scientist if he had to do it all over again. Fox began to use statistics and demographics to forecast crime patterns, showing, for example, how trends in homicide depend largely on the number of 18- to 24-year-olds, the most crime-prone age group.

His interest in multiple killings developed when his colleague Jack Levin approached him at a party with the idea to conduct a study on mass murder. Their first effort was published in 1985, and since then the two have collaborated on several other books and articles.

Fox began honing his media skills with Levin as well, when they broadcast an interview program from the campus radio station. "I worked hard at getting rid of my Boston accent in that show," Fox--who grew up in the city's suburbs--recalls. The thick eyeglasses are gone as well. The only obvious indications of his legal blindness--resulting from the high oxygen content in his incubator after his premature birth--are the size of the fonts displayed on his monitor and the fact that he brings reading material to the tip of his nose.

The television movie (appropriately, to appear on the Fox network) is based on the criminologist's involvement with a 1990 case in Gainesville, Fla., in which five college students were brutally slain. The news broke while Fox and his wife were vacationing in Maine, and Fox soon found himself in Florida appearing on a talk show. On it, he stated that the suspect in custody was the wrong man, even though he matched the profile supplied by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. "He was an impulsive, young hothead who could not control himself. Someone as impulsive as he could not carry out such a methodical, meticulous crime," Fox explained, noting how the killer carefully mutilated the corpses. Moreover, the suspect was only 18, rather young for a serial killer.

Harboring their own doubts about the suspect, the local police hired Fox as a consultant. Culling records of previous murders in the area, Fox was struck by crime-scene photographs of a murder in Shreveport, La., months earlier. "The FBI did not think the connection was so strong," Fox says, but he was not misled by the differences, pointing out similarities in the way the killer had cleaned up, then posed the corpses in both cases.

So he told the police to look for someone who had a connection between the two towns. After compiling hospital records, college rosters and other lists, the police came across a man from Shreveport who was in custody in Ocala, Fla., for stealing a car from Gainesville near the time of the murders. Soon, the authorities genetically matched Danny Harold Rolling to the crimes.

Although the study of mass murder seems to have made Fox the country's most quoted criminologist, it no longer holds the same fascination for him. "It got to a point that it was not satisfying, because there's not much you can do about it," Fox confesses, remarking that there is no real way to identify potential mass killers. So he branched out to research violence in the workplace and among juveniles. These topics have led him back to 'number crunching' to explain and predict patterns. He and others have recently used statistics to argue that the current downturn of crime rates in many cities reflects the drop in the population of young adults.

Such conclusions agitate law-enforcement officials, most notably William J. Bratton, until this past April the New York City police commissioner. Bratton claims that his revamping of the department and aggressive policing sparked the 39 percent drop in homicide from 1993 to 1995, with equally impressive double-digit declines in most other major crimes. Last year Bratton set out to disprove the theories of Fox and his academic ilk, promising to "knock them down like ducks in a row" and declaring that the police are winning the war on crime.

The ducks quack right back. "I hate that stuff," Fox groans. "We're not winning the war on crime. Bratton deserves a lot of credit in terms of expanding community policing and bringing a greater sense of order to the city. But he doesn't deserve all the credit."

In fact, [Fox's studies of homicide lead him to conclude that the U.S. is headed for a crime wave. "Hidden beneath the overall drop in crime is this tremendous surge in youth crime," Fox asserts. Historically, young adults--between the ages of 18 and 24--were responsible for the vast majority of murders. But since the mid-1980s, when the crack epidemic struck, juveniles began committing more murder: the rate among those in the 14- to 17-year-old group more than doubled between 1985 and 1994, from seven to 19.1 per 100,000.

The baby-boom generation has produced 39 million people who are now under the age of 10. During the next decade, this "baby boomerang," as Fox calls it' will enter their most crime-prone years. Unless steps are taken immediately, "the next crime wave will get so bad that it will make 1995 look like the good old days." Although some investigators disagree with his conclusions and choice of language, few argue with his statistical analyses.

The notoriety he has achieved with media appearances has helped him gain an audience for his glum forecast. During the past year, he has testified before members of Congress, dined with President Bill Clinton and briefed U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno. "People are listening. I hear the president talking about it, the senators. And now Janet Reno is appointing a juvenile violence czar," the criminologist enthuses.

Fox rattles off several reasons why teenagers are more violent today, such as access to weapons, lack of parental supervision (crime among juveniles peaks at 3 P.M.) and the brutal aspects of American society. "We have a culture that glorifies violence," Fox complains, citing as an example serial killing, which is mostly a U.S. phenomenon. Killers often become celebrities, their visages appearing on trading cards and on the covers of entertainment magazines.

Videocassettes have made it easy for children to view violence. And the proposed ratings system for television and the incorporation of the V-chip (a device that can block out adult-oriented programming) provides an incentive for producers to include more gratuitous scenes to achieve higher ratings, Fox comments. "It's a myth that parents will be able to tune this stuff out," he opines, arguing that parents would not know how to manage the technology.

Threats of severe punishment will not stem the coming tide. "Many kids face violence and death in the classrooms by their peers," Fox emphasizes. "As far as they're concerned, the criminal justice system might as well take a number and stand in line with all the other people who want to get them.

"It might make us feel better that an offender is getting a hard sentence," he continues, "but that's not accomplishing anything. We need to put him in an environment that is therapeutic." Given that many working parents cannot afford child care, Fox thinks government and corporations should develop programs that keep teens engaged, rather than try to hold parents responsible for their children's crimes.

Not surprisingly, he is vociferously opposed to the death penalty. "Nothing is gained by execution, and a lot is lost," Fox maintains. It costs more, largely because of the legal

machinery needed to ensure a fair trial and not, as many people believe, because of repeated appeals. Given the sentence, prosecutors take more care in preparation, and judges give the defense a wider latitude. The argument that it is expensive to lock up murderers for life does not wash with Fox, either. He disputes the typically cited estimate of \$30,000 to \$40,000 a year, which comes from dividing the correctional budget by the number of inmates. Most costs are fixed and do not drop when prisoners are executed. "You can't call up the commissioner and tell him we're going to cut his salary because there IS one fewer inmate," Fox sneers. "The actual expendable cost for incarcerating that one person is probably a couple of thousand dollars."

"We have a very good alternative to the death penalty, which is life in prison," he explains. "One reason so many Americans thirst for the death penalty is that they don't trust the criminal justice system." They fear that such offenders will be given parole after only a brief jail term. But to Fox, the system works pretty well, given the millions of people that pass through it. It is the rare instance of a corrupt judge or a recidivist parolee that captures the front pages. "Good news is no news," he concludes, "and bad news is big news."

A reporter from USA Today calls for the second time. Fox obliges with more of his statistics and prognostications. And of course, he speaks in concise, brief statements, sure to read well on the front page.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): JAMES ALAN FOX