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Series of Deaths Rattles a City

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La Crosse, Wis., Split on Whether Apparent Drownings Were Murder

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LA CROSSE, Wis. -- At night the Mississippi River here is black like pavement. Lights brighten the shoreline, where walkways end with a steep drop at the river's edge. There is no railing. Even to a familiar eye, the river looks like an empty parking lot.

This is where eight young men have apparently drowned in the past nine years, just blocks from the busy downtown bar district where many victims had been reported seen last. The latest victim was found in October.

Officials from the city and the three colleges and universities here -- as well as a group of vocal college students -- say the men became intoxicated and accidentally fell into the river.

Yet as the number of fatalities grows, so does the idea that a serial killer could be loose.

"There just ain't no people who want to walk by the water at night," said Yulonda St. Junious, 34, a hotel worker. "That makes you think someone else has had something to do with it."

All of the victims were young, athletic, and either visiting La Crosse or attending college in the city. Toxicology results have indicated that almost all had high levels of alcohol in their systems when they died.

Still, the similarities among the apparent drowning victims have many concerned that the students are being stalked -- lured into the black waters by a female posing as a police officer or a man wielding a gun, locals say.

"They must have been following someone they trusted," said resident Rusty Paar, 39, who is sure these deaths are murders.

While the idea of a serial killer is gaining credence in some quarters of La Crosse, other residents say the explanation is merely a way to deflect attention from the criticism that city and college officials are not working hard enough to crack down on underage drinking or to secure the waterline from accidental drownings.

"People would rather blame a serial killer than take responsibility," said Drew Gavrilos, a community services police officer who acts as a liaison between the police and the universities.

The idea among residents and some officials that a serial killer could be lurking in La Crosse and the Upper Midwest is not new.

For decades, this city of 50,000 has turned to that theory to explain missing persons and the few murders that happen, with many saying the river and bluffs along the city's borders are dumping zones for bodies.

"The rumor mill here is still alive and well," said Paula Knudson, dean of students at the University of Wisconsin at La Crosse. "But you can't think about what's happening here from a sober perspective. It is easy for those who drink a lot that they might be able to be disoriented and get lost downtown. It happens."

The chief of police has declined to comment on the cases, but late last month -- to either quell or confirm the serial killer rumors -- local police turned to the FBI for a formal review of the most recent death.

Linda Krieg, assistant special agent in charge of the FBI's Milwaukee office, told the Associated Press that her office will forward everything the La Crosse Police Department has on the drownings to the FBI's National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime in Quantico.

"They still believe these are drownings and they're accidental," she said. "They just asked if there's anything else they could be looking at."

Still, many say the city is not making efforts to slow or stop the deaths.

"I am frustrated that nothing was done, not only with this death, but with past deaths," said Viterbo University student Travis Bassett, 21, speaking of the most recent victim. "And when the government doesn't meet the peoples' needs, it is time to do it ourselves."

Bassett is one of at least 20 college students who have donated much of their late weekend nights over the past month to patrol Riverside Park, where many of the apparent drownings are suspected to have occurred. The students walk in pairs, wearing reflective vests and carrying police-issued cellphones and flashlights. Their goals are to prevent drinkers from falling into the water and to pull them out if they do.

In the past month, patrollers report having met at least two intoxicated college students in the park and calling police to take them home.

Several attempts to build a fence or barrier along the river have been blocked by the City Council, and city groups have also opposed proposals for video cameras along the walkways.

The city has created several task forces to evaluate limiting access to the park after hours, and it has instituted fees for beer-keg rentals and restrictions on bartenders' drinking as they serve customers.

But officials were slow to replace deteriorating portions of the levee at the park where many of the men apparently fell, and the city does not have plans to continue improving the area, including reducing a steep slope from the park onto the levee and into the river. The City Council is scheduled

to vote again in the coming weeks on recommendations to improve the park.

Mayor Mark Johnsrud said the city should not be responsible for a person's drinking or its consequences. He does not entertain the idea of a serial killer, either.

"The thing I keep hearing about these kids is that they are good kids," Johnsrud said. "The definition of a good kid to me is that they know the difference between right and wrong. And this means they didn't make the good choice by getting intoxicated and placing themselves in the situation where they could die."

Johnsrud, who has been mayor since 2005, says he is not interested in making major changes to a public park, including fencing it off at night, just to keep a few people out of a potentially dangerous area.

The debate has made its way to the opinion pages of the local newspaper, with some writers supporting the rumors of a serial killer and others claiming that the victims had simply stopped at the river to relieve themselves and toppled in.

Still, the most apparent sentiment is this: "It is shocking to me, and the government here grinds very slowly," said the Rev. Tom O'Neill, vice president for mission and ministry at Viterbo University. "We've got lots of fine minds in this town that we ought to be able to do other things than say 'College kids shouldn't drink' or blame a serial killer that might not exist."

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