

Violent Crimes In Violent Times

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They're startling, and can put everyone on edge, but according the FBI, violent crimes have been on the decline across the country. Yet in the last six months, murders and violent rapes have grabbed headlines here in South Dakota.

November 2009, the Mitchell fire department responds to a suspicious fire just outside of town, where a car burns while parked in a grove of trees. At the same time, the Mitchell police department is investigating the disappearance of 16-year-old Jasmine Guevara.

Later Guevara's body is discovered burned inside the car. Authorities say she had been stabbed and cut in the throat, before the being stuffed in the car's trunk.

"What struck me is this is an extremely violent murder. Often times, that's someone that you're really close to, like in a domestic case. Now granted, these were acquaintances and presumably jealousy and so on, but nothing that should have triggered that kind of extreme violence," Rosemary Erickson said.

Now, 21-year-old Alexander Salgado and a 15-year-old female face arson and murder charges for the death of Guevara.

"What's also unusual is to have a female murderer. That isn't a domestic situation. If a woman is going to murder someone, it's more likely to be her husband or her boyfriend. And a young girl is not likely to murder anybody at all, so that's incredibly unusual," Erickson said.

Rosemary Erickson is a Forensic Sociologist for the Athena Research Corporation. Basically that means she's an expert in crime. We had Erickson analyze the violent crimes of KELOLAND from the past six months. That includes the murder in Mitchell, the three rapes and robberies by knifepoint in Brookings, and the robbery and shooting death of Michael Stevens at the WH Lyon Fairgrounds. It didn't take her long to notice similarities.

"Another point to make here is that they were young perpetrators, but there were also young victims. So it was young on young in terms of all three of these crimes," Erickson said.

She also noted that nearly all of the suspects fit the most common age group to commit a violent crime. Across the nation, those between 18 and 24-years-old are behind most murder, rape, robbery and assault cases. But she noticed something else. In each of those cases, the suspect had recently moved to South Dakota, from another state.

"It isn't going to be across the board that the people are from out of state, but it is unusual that in all three of these recent cases, the perpetrators were from other states," Erickson said.

Salgado moved to Mitchell from Indiana. The suspect in the Brookings rape cases, 21-year-old Chris Jones had just moved from Omaha in February. And Samuel Lint, the 19-year-old arrested for the fairgrounds murder of Michael Stevens is originally from the Iowa Lakes region.

Erickson says while that's unique it does point out that times have changed, even in mostly rural communities.

"You really have to be much more alert and you have to be much more alert for your own safety, but also just your community in terms of keeping your eyes and ears open and helping to keep the crime down," Erickson said.

Not to be alarmed, like the nation, most of KELOLAND is seeing a decline in violent crimes. But if the recent headline grabbing crimes can be a lesson, it's that no matter where you live, violent attacks have become a real possibility.

Rosemary Erickson adds that often times the young people who commit violent crimes are caught because they tell a girlfriend or wife about what they've done, and they turn them in.