

WHY DO THEY DO IT?

THE GREEN RIVER KILLER



Gary Leon Ridgway was convicted and sentenced in 2003 after many decades of acting as the Green River Killer; he had stabbed his first victim at age 16, in 1965. He confessed to killing 71 victims (although he was convicted of only 48), virtually all of them women. He appeared to live separate lives. In one aspect of his life in the Seattle area, he was the father of a son and husband to his third wife. The other side involved picking up women, mostly prostitutes and strippers, who were willing to engage in sexual activity with him in remote locations.

He claimed that he would hide or bury the bodies of the victims he really “liked” because he knew he would want to go back and have sex with them later, which he did on occasion. He would also place various objects, such as a fish, bottle, or sausage, at the crime scene to throw off authorities, because these objects didn’t match the modus operandi they were expecting to help link the crimes together. So he did appear to plan his crimes, at least in terms of manipulating the crime scenes (whether the primary scene, where the killing took place, or the secondary scene, where the body was dumped).

He also notably said, “I would choke them . . . and I was really good at it.” But when asked by an investigator in an official interview where he ranked on a scale of evil from 1 to 5, he said he was a 3. So there appears to be a disconnect between the way he thinks and the way society at large thinks.

Ridgway was caught after DNA from crime scenes was matched to a saliva test he had taken years before, when authorities had suspected him but didn’t have enough evidence to make an arrest. So he continued his killing spree for many years, until they finally obtained further evidence linking him to some of the murders. Ridgway is now serving 480 years in prison for 48 life sentences, due to a bargain that got him out of the death penalty.

But why did he do it? Obviously, he has some psychological issues. But he passed the psychological test to determine readiness to stand trial, so he was not ruled legally insane. Virtually all his victims easily fit within his lifestyle, as he traveled around in his truck and picked up women in essentially the same area where he worked and lived. He never went far out of his way. In fact, none of his victims seemed to come from outside the Seattle area. And he would almost always dump or bury the bodies within a relatively limited radius in that region—hence his label, “the Green River Killer.”

In one notable instance, he claimed that his son was with him in the truck when he picked up a woman. He had his son stay in the truck while he took the woman a distance away and killed her. But we know that he tended to pick up and kill these women as part of his daily routine, which included working at a truck-painting factory. Thus, this case applies to the routine activities theory and lifestyles perspective covered in this chapter. Also keep in mind that even at the time when he was apprehended for these murders, he had a relatively stable marriage, which is not atypical for serial killers. They often lead separate lives, and both lives can seem fairly routine despite extreme contradictions.

THINK ABOUT IT:

1. What was the Green River Killer’s typical method of operation (MO), or how he carried out most of his killings?
2. How is the Green River Killer’s case a good example of routine activities theory?