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Family killers reveal patterns

By Blythe Bernhard

It's hard to make sense of stories about a family man accused of killing his wife and two children. But experts in domestic violence say there are behavioral patterns associated with the crimes that can help answer some troubling questions.

Sheri Coleman, 31, and sons Garrett, 11, and Gavin, 9, were found dead in their Columbia, Ill., home on May 5. Police last week arrested their husband and father, Chris Coleman, charging him with three counts of first-degree murder. He has pleaded not guilty.

Police allege Coleman strangled all three and then staged the crime scene. Coleman formerly served as a military police officer in the Marines and was working as security chief for Joyce Meyer Ministries in Jefferson County.

Men who have killed their immediate families usually fall into two groups: those who also commit suicide and those who don't, said Richard Gelles, dean of the University of Pennsylvania's School of Social Policy and Practice and author of "The Violent Home."

Murder-suicides can be a desperate action from someone with despair over their finances or an untreated mental illness, like severe depression, Gelles said. Research shows about 30 percent of men who kill their wives go on to kill themselves. In general, men who kill their families and not themselves display more savage behavior.

"This is not, 'If I can't have you no one can,' this is actually more brutal," Gelles said. "This is someone who feels he's entitled to erase his history."

Gelles said that in cases of familicide, or murders of entire families, there is usually a history of domestic violence. Men who kill their families are typically domineering, possessive and feel an ownership over their wives and children, he said.

Research into familicides, which happen fewer than 50 times each year in the U.S., points to possible triggers for the murders. When a spouse files for divorce, takes out a restraining order or moves away from an abuser, it can be dangerous, criminologists say.

Police have said they are investigating a romantic relationship between Coleman and a woman in Florida. Detectives traveled to Florida to interview the woman this month.

In some domestic violence homicide cases, a spouse wants to start with a clean slate or move on to a new relationship.

Divorce may be considered too expensive, time-consuming or shameful, experts said.

Most domestic violence is targeted at the romantic partner. When children are killed by their parents, it can be because they were witnesses to the killing of a spouse. It can also be seen by the perpetrator as a form of punishment waged against the spouse.

A father killing both of his sons would be highly unusual, Gelles said. When a man kills his own children, detectives might look for other children fathered outside of the marriage.

"Males are not wired to wipe out their genes unless they have some confidence that their genes are going to pass on in another way," Gelles said.

FEELINGS OF OWNERSHIP

Gelles said a classic case of a man charged with familicide involves Jeffrey MacDonald, an Army sergeant from North Carolina who was convicted in 1979 of killing his wife and two young daughters. MacDonald maintains that he is innocent and that intruders attacked him and his family.

In the case of Coleman, who had complained of work-related threats, someone spray-painted messages including "I told you this would happen" and "punished" on walls at the home, according to police and court sources.

The possibility of a plot to frame someone else in a domestic murder goes back to the feelings of ownership some men feel over their families, Gelles said.

"It's a bio-chemical phenomenon in a certain small group of men who feel better when they're in a control mode," Gelles said. "As some guys try to control the situation they become more rational. The plotting and planning keep them calm."

It would be easier to get away with the crime if there was an illusion of a happy and healthy family, said Dr. Phillip Resnick, director of forensic psychiatry at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland.

"If there is domestic violence and the wife ends up dead, the husband is usually a main suspect," Resnick said. "If someone really expects to get away with it, you would expect to have more of the appearance of the marriage not falling apart."

While some men might see financial advantages in killing a spouse and not having to divide assets in a divorce, the killing

of children is more senseless. Resnick said he was reminded of the case of Scott Peterson, a California man who was convicted of killing his pregnant wife.

"In general, it's possible for someone to be so selfish they just want to make a new life and are willing to sacrifice children for that new life," Resnick said.

SOME PATTERNS EMERGE

On the flipside, Resnick points to Andrea Yates, the Texas woman who said she drowned her five children out of love in 2001.

"She was psychotic and believed she was doing what's in the best interest of the children," said Resnick, who testified at Yates' trial.

Resnick said in cases like Peterson's, there may be a personality disorder such as narcissism, but there usually aren't any psychotic or depressive tendencies.

"If someone is just not that attached and wants to go out and make a new life, there would be no suicide in the plan; this is just getting rid of what's now problematic baggage," he said.

Donna Cohen of the Violence and Injury Prevention Program at the University of South Florida also looks at patterns among people who commit familicides.

The crimes are typically committed by white men, according to Cohen's research. Those who have served in the military or worked as policemen are at higher risk because of the association with order, responsibility for the well-being of others and accessibility to weapons.

Typically some family members or friends have been aware of problems in the home, she said.

"In all of these situations that we've investigated, somebody knew there was a problem and they just never thought it would get out of hand," Cohen said. "Don't be afraid to be a good neighbor if you think people are having problems."