



# Mind of a murderer: A look into Calgary's domestic homicides and what makes an alleged killer

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*Robert Leeming brought into arrest processing by detectives of the Calgary Police Service on May 6, 2019. Photo courtesy of Mike Drew/Postmedia*

A grey Mazda sits on the approach to Stoney Trail Bridge on the morning of May 31st. A pink tarp is draped across the driver's window. The car's hazard lights flash as the sticky smoke from the High Level wildfires surround the scene. Two people are dead.

At approximately 9 a.m., first responders arrive to find the lifeless body of a 77-year-old woman, who has since been identified in media reports as Liisa Nukkala, within the vehicle. The body of her son is found on the river bank below the bridge.

The murder-suicide marks Calgary's sixth domestic homicide of 2019, with the most recent four occurring within a month-and-a-half of each other. According to the Calgary Police Service statistics, Calgary saw a 10 per cent increase in domestic conflict incidents in 2018, with a total of 21,535 reported to police.

Robert Leeming, Roberta Lynn Wolfchild, Heidar Dehdari, and the unnamed man at the bottom of the bridge. These are the suspects in Calgary's most recent domestic homicides. They come from different backgrounds and entirely different circumstances. Aside from their alleged ability to kill, what do they have in common? Is there a specific feature, a personality flaw, that connects suspects in these types of cases? An identifying mark that separates those that are capable of murder from those that are not? A homicide detective, forensic psychologist, and domestic violence expert explain the subtleties of what makes a murderer.

## **Domestic Homicide: A Flashpoint Crime**

Homicides can be divided into two categories: instrumental or reactive. The first is planned, deliberate, what lawyers classify as premeditated. The latter is emotionally driven and often irrational, what Calgary homicide detective Dave Sweet regards as a flashpoint; a point in time where an uncontrollable anger or violence is suddenly released.

***“A lot of people who commit homicide didn’t wake up in the morning knowing they were going to murder someone. It’s a series of circumstances that can bring it out in somebody.” -Dave Sweet, homicide detective***

Sweet adds he believes jealousy is a core reason behind many domestic homicides.

“It’s a very selfish position of ‘If I can’t have you, no one else can.’” This possessive attitude can make the hours after leaving the relationship some of the most dangerous. According to the Canadian Women’s Foundation, 26 per cent of women who are murdered by their spouse had left their relationship, and 60 per cent of all dating violence happens after the relationship has ended. Statistically, women are at the greatest risk of being victims of a domestic homicide in the first three months of separation from their partner.

Stressful life circumstances, the breakdown of a relationship, and/or infidelity may set the stage for murder, but it is raw emotion which often fuels the act.

“They’re angry at the person and likely have been for sometime, but it just boils over and gets out of hand,” says forensic psychologist Thomas Dalby of the Hotchkiss Brain Institute. The turbulent anger and emotions often lead to a more violent death than would be seen in a homicide when the victim is a stranger, says Dalby.

Many of the domestic homicides Sweet has investigated show an injury level past the point of what was necessary to cause death.

“It really shows that the anger is caused from some sort of very deep hurt,” says Sweet.

This coincides with a study done by Shea L. Alvarez Cussen from City University of New York, which found that the closer the relationship between the perpetrator and victim, the more evidence there was of overkill.

Stabbing and strangulation are common in domestic homicides, with knives often being easy to access in anyone’s home. Guns are less common, likely because of Canada’s strict gun ownership laws that require a firearm licence be obtained through a process of background checks and safety training. According to the RCMP, this licence is needed even if you are not the owner of the gun and have never handled it.

“The United States has a homicide rate three times ours. We put that down to more people owning guns,” says Dalby.

While classifying domestic homicides as a moment of uncontrollable anger may be accurate, it would be inaccurate to regard this as the only factor at play. People are complex, emotional, often irrational creatures, frequently dealing with multiple life stressors simultaneously, but the majority of us do not express this through murder.



**Panamount Blvd. in Panorama Hills in northwest Calgary. Sara Baillie was murdered and her daughter Taliyah Marsman was kidnapped on the street. Photo by Floyd Black Horse**

### **Domestic Homicide: Learned Violence**

Children learn how to act by what they see and hear. Communication skills, empathy, and other positive behaviours are observed, learned, and imitated. Violence follows a similar pattern.

Dalby says some perpetrators of domestic homicide have developed hostility and aggression because of the model of violence they witnessed as a child. Studies have shown it is not uncommon for girls raised in abusive homes to end up in an abusive relationship as an adult, nor is it uncommon for boys from abusive homes to become abusers.

Andrea Silverstone, executive director at Sagesse Domestic Violence Prevention Society, notes how as humans, our desire to build connections will drive our choices in building relationships.

“If we don’t have the skills to build connections appropriately, we often use tools that are inappropriate, like violence, abuse, power, and control,” she says.

On their website, the RCMP list a myriad of negative symptoms children may develop from growing up around violence. Some symptoms include: self-blame, anxiety, developmental delay, self-harm, low self-esteem, high levels of anger and aggression, fighting with peers, eating disorders, difficulty problem solving and relationship problems.

Despite the potentially devastating side-effects of coming from a violent home, Dalby and Silverstone note that there is no general rule that applies. A violent past does not guarantee a violent future.

### **Domestic Homicide: Mind of a Murderer**

Where do murderers stand on the spectrum of sanity and insanity? Are they normal or mentally ill? The reality is most perpetrators of homicide are sane,

seemingly normal individuals. According to Dalby, people suffering from serious mental illnesses like schizophrenia are not the normal perpetrators of homicide.

“This group of people who we think are mentally disturbed and can’t think properly, they in fact commit much less violent acts than the average person,” says Dalby.

Several questions are asked of the perpetrator to determine if they are fit to stand trial. The first is if they can comprehend what they have been charged with, followed by the question of if they understand the serious nature of the charge. The final question is if they are able to communicate with their lawyer.

“It takes a person who is seriously mentally disturbed to not meet those very basic criteria,” explains Dr. Dalby.

Sweet agrees that it is rare to see mental illness as a viable defence in court.

“Off the top of my head I can think of a couple cases over the last decade where mental illness played a role in the homicide,” he says. “I would say typically, it’s not a factor in most domestic homicides.”

Although most perpetrators of domestic homicide are sane, mental health issues like depression and substance abuse can increase the risk of homicide. Dalby explains how depression in men can often manifest with signs of anger and irritability.

Silverstone adds that mental health and addictions are not the direct causes of domestic violence but they often go hand-in-hand.

So does the mind of a murderer differ from a normal individual? Or does the capability to kill exist in us all, a deadly impulse that remains dormant in most our minds?

***"Think of what it takes to kill someone. It takes a lot. It's a threshold most of us don't think of crossing." -Dr. Thomas Dalby, forensic psychologist***

"But the interesting thing is, a lot of people who kill someone, it's the first time they've done it, and they're actually going to suffer some trauma because it's so extreme," says Dalby. "It's a traumatic event they've witnessed, and they wonder how they could have done it."

This remorse can sometimes lead to the perpetrator committing suicide, with police finding two bodies, like in Nukkala's death on Stoney Trail, which Calgary police deemed a murder-suicide.

However, guilt and remorse do not apply in every domestic homicide case. Dalby says he has seen perpetrators that are happy with what they've done, believing the victim finally got what they deserved.

### **Edward Downey: A Case Study**



A callous and remorseless individual. Those are two adjectives used by Justice Beth Hughes in her written sentencing decision for Edward Downey, who was convicted by a jury last year of killing Sara Baillie and her five-year old daughter, Taliyah Marsman. (He has since filed a notice of appeal of his conviction and sentence.)

Downey was viewed as a trusted figure by the five-year old, as he was the partner of her mother's best friend, a woman identified during the trial as AB. Baillie had witnessed Downey strike AB during an argument and had told AB's sister of the incident. The relationship between AB and Downey ended shortly thereafter, and Downey seemed to hold a resentment toward Baillie for this, according to court documents.

On the morning of July 11, 2016, Baillie was running late for work. At 9:04 she sent a text to the tanning salon where she worked, telling them to cancel her first appointment. Jacket on and ready to go, Baillie was about to leave when Downey entered her house.

Did Downey go to Baillie's house with the intention of murdering her? Or to confront her about the end of his relationship?

The why is not known. What is known is Downey wrapped duct tape over Baillie's nose and mouth, attempting to suffocate her. Baillie was able to rip the tape from her nose, causing Downey to bind her wrists with the tape and strangling her, breaking her hyoid bone.

Downey then stuffed her into a laundry bag and placed the bag in Taliyah's bedroom closet, piling clothes on top in an attempt to hide the crime.

But there was a witness: Taliyah.

Downey did not kill Taliyah immediately, court documents indicate. He took her to the house he had shared with AB. He fed her some blueberries. And then sometime between 1:27 pm and 3:47 pm, he killed her.

As he was disposing of Taliyah's body, at 4:15 pm he texted a woman he had been flirting with: "How's your day going sweets?"

They exchanged between 90 flirtatious texts in the next two hours, as Taliyah's tiny body lay lifeless in a secluded area outside of the city.

### **Domestic Homicide: A History of Crime**

Downey was born in February 1970 in North Preston, Nova Scotia. He moved to Calgary when he was 13 to live with his mother. In 1990, at the age of 20, he was convicted of three counts of possession of a stolen credit card. Convictions of cocaine trafficking, weapons offences and pimping followed.

"We call it criminal versatility," explains Dalby. "They've committed property offences, assaults, maybe a sexual offence. And the versatility shows the person has pretty lax boundaries."

These flexible boundaries translate to a higher probability of a more serious crime being committed in the future.

Sweet agrees a criminal history is not uncommon in perpetrators of domestic homicide.

“Stalking behaviour or abusive behaviour in the past. There’s usually something in their background.”



**Police escort Edward Downey into the Court Services Section in downtown Calgary on July 14, 2016 after he was arrested in the murders of Taliyah Marsman and her mother Sara Baillie. Photo courtesy of Gavin Young/Postmedia**

## **Domestic Homicide: A Faceless Crime**

Silverstone notes that the most recent domestic homicides in Calgary have all had radically different profiles.

Roberta Lynn Wolfchild is the accused in the recent domestic homicide stabbing of her common-law partner, Dwane Charles Lanois.

“The face of domestic violence is not what we think it is,” Silverstone says. “Anyone can be abused and anyone can be the abuser.”

Dalby explains when it is a woman who has committed domestic homicide, the “burning bed” defence is common. Based on the case of Francine Wilson, who killed her abusive husband by setting fire to their bed as he slept, the defence builds on the idea that the woman is committing the crime in response to being abused.

***“Domestic violence knows no boundaries, it knows no socio-economic boundaries, ethnographic-cultural boundaries. The face of domestic violence is not what we think.” - Andrea Silverstone, executive director at Sagesse Domestic Violence Prevention Society***

Maybe they're young with a history of crime, or maybe they're old with a spotless record. Married. Separated. Upper-class, middle-class or struggling to pay rent. Male. Female. There is no one type of person capable of murder.



**Memorial site for homicide victims Jasmine Lovett and her daughter Aliyah Sanderson in Cranford Court, S.E. Calgary. Photo by Kate Mackenzie**

### **Domestic Homicide: An Epidemic**

It is not fully understood why Alberta has one of the highest rates of domestic violence across Canada. Silverstone suggests Alberta's boom-bust economy and the high number of natural disasters are likely contributing factors.

Alberta also has one of the lowest rates of women employed outside of the home, meaning more women are financially dependent on their partner.

In Canada, a woman is killed every six days by her intimate partner.

The high rates of domestic violence, and consequently homicide, are an irrefutable problem. Silverstone suggests it be treated like an epidemic; similar to if

someone has a fever, cough, or rash, there are recognizable symptoms that are presented by those suffering from the epidemic.

“If you see someone displaying the signs, you ask ‘are you feeling okay?’... If you know the things to look for and you’re able to say, ‘it looks like you’re not okay, how can I help you?’ I think it changes everything,” says Silverstone.

Although there are symptoms, not everyone presents the same way. Like a flu, sometimes there are no warning signs of the sickness until the fever spikes.

Silverstone suggests the best method of recognizing if a relationship is, or may become, abusive, is asking the following questions to yourself: does this feel like a healthy relationship? Do I feel afraid of my partner? Do I feel like I’m experiencing a pattern of behaviours that don’t allow me to be the person I want to be? Do I feel like the things that give me independence are going to make my partner angry?

“So it’s not so much about warning signs, but more about knowing intuitively, and checking in with yourself, your friends and family, that their relationships are healthy ones,” says Silverstone.

If you or someone you know is suffering from domestic abuse, the Connect 24-hour (<http://www.connectnetwork.ca/>) family violence helpline can be reached at 403-234-7233 or toll-free at 1-866-606-7233. If you are in immediate danger, call 911.