

24 hour news amnesia—how the public swiftly forgets murderers and their victims

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Almost eight out of ten people cannot recall the names of the UK's most notorious serial killers, paedophiles or their victims, despite the wall-to-wall media coverage of these cases over the past decade.

A majority surveyed by Birmingham City University criminologists failed to identify pictures of multiple killers Joanne

Dennehy, Levi Bellfield, Rose West and 'Suffolk Strangler' Steven Wright.

Only 24 per cent of respondents recognised an image of eight-year-old Sarah Payne despite the high-profile coverage of the [murder investigation](#) at the time, the subsequent campaign for 'Sarah's Law' and the publishing of the book 'Sara Payne: A Mother's Story.'

Raoul Moat made global headlines in 2010 when he sparked a major police operation after shooting three people in two days, yet just 41 per cent of respondents recognised him in the study. A dismal 2 per cent identified Chris Brown, the boyfriend of his ex-girlfriend who he shot dead.

Birmingham City University's Professor David Wilson said: "Media-saturated images of murderers and their victims often dominate news agendas for days and weeks at a time but this study suggests the public seems to consume these images in a very transitory way."

According to the study the most recognised victims and the most recognised perpetrator all related to the same case – the [murder](#) of Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman in August 2002 by school caretaker Ian Huntley. Over 70 per cent recognised the victims from the photograph of the two girls wearing matching Manchester United football shirts, an image which featured prominently in the headlines at the time of the murder investigation. Ian Huntley was the most recognised perpetrator, with 51 per cent able to recall his name.

The second most recognised victim in the study was Stephen Lawrence (64 per cent). One of his killers Gary Dobson was recognised by only 5 per cent of participants.

Researchers defined the murders of Holly Wells, Jessica Chapman and

Stephen Lawrence as 'signal crimes' that have entered the collective public conscious for specific reasons.

"The killing of the two young girls as they walked past the home of the school caretaker and the murder of Stephen Lawrence 'because the colour of his skin' deeply disturbed the general public," said Professor Wilson.

The research, by the Centre for Applied Criminology at Birmingham City University, used press images from ten prominent cases, including the [images](#) of [victims](#) and perpetrators, to test the public's ability to recognise and name them.

Provided by Birmingham City University

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