**Article #2: The Killing of Kitty Genovese**   
**Her public slaying in Queens becomes a symbol of Americans' failure to get involved**

By Michael Dorman   
It was just after 3 a.m.

A red Fiat rolled slowly through the darkness into a parking space adjacent to the Long Island Rail Road station in Kew Gardens. The young woman behind the wheel emerged from the car and locked it. She began the 100-foot walk toward her apartment house at 82-70 Austin St.

But then she spotted a man standing along her route. Apparently afraid, she changed direction and headed toward the intersection of Austin and Lefferts Boulevard -- where there was a police call box.

Suddenly, the man overtook her and grabbed her. She screamed. Residents of nearby apartment houses turned on their lights and threw open their windows. The woman screamed again: ``Oh, my God, he stabbed me! Please help me!''

A man in a window shouted: ``Let that girl alone.'' The attacker walked away. Apartment lights went out and windows slammed shut. The victim staggered toward her apartment. But the attacker returned and stabbed her again.

``I'm dying!'' she cried.

Windows opened again. The attacker entered a car and drove away. Windows closed, but the attacker soon came back again. His victim had crawled inside the front door of an apartment house at 82-62 Austin St. He found her sprawled on the floor and stabbed her still again. This time he killed her.

It was not until 3:50 that morning -- March 13, 1964 -- that a neighbor of the victim called police. Officers arrived two minutes later and found the body. They identified the victim as Catherine Genovese, 28, who had been returning from her job as manager of a bar in Hollis. Neighbors knew her not as Catherine but as Kitty.

Kitty Genovese: It was a name that would become symbolic in the public mind for a dark side of the national character. It would stand for Americans who were too indifferent or too frightened or too alienated or too self-absorbed to ``get involved'' in helping a fellow human being in dire trouble. A term ``the Genovese syndrome'' would be coined to describe the attitude.

Detectives investigating Genovese's murder discovered that no fewer than 38 of her neighbors had witnessed at least one of her killer's three attacks but had neither come to her aid nor called the police. The one call made to the police came after Genovese was already dead.

Assistant Chief Insp. Frederick Lussen, commander of Queens detectives, said that nothing in his 25 years of police work had shocked him so much as the apathy encountered on the Genovese murder. ``As we have reconstructed the crime, the assailant had three chances to kill this woman during a 35-minute period,'' Lussen said. ``If we had been called when he first attacked, this woman might not be dead now.''…

When detectives asked Genovese's neighbors why they had not taken action, many said they had been afraid or had not wanted to get involved. But Lt. Bernard Jacobs, in charge of the investigation, asked: ``Where they are in their homes, near phones, why should they be afraid to call the police?''

Madeline Hartmann, a native of France, was 68 at the time of the murder and lived in the building where Genovese died. On the 20th anniversary of the murder, she said in an interview she did not feel bad about failing to call the police. ``So many, many [other] times in the night, I heard screaming,'' she said. ``I'm not the police and my English speaking is not perfect.''

There was no law, police officials conceded, that required someone witnessing a crime to report it to police. But they contended that morality should oblige a witness to do so.

**What is the bystander effect?**

The term *bystander effect* refers to the phenomenon in which the greater the number of people present, the less likely people are to help a person in distress. When an emergency situation occurs, observers are more likely to take action if there are few or no other witnesses.

A person witnessing an emergency situation, particularly such a frightening and dangerous one as a stabbing, is in conflict. There are obvious humanitarian norms about helping the victim, but there are also rational and irrational fears about what might happen to a person who does not intervene (Milgram & Hollander, 1964). “I didn’t want to get involved,” is a familiar comment, and behind it lies fears of physical harm, public embarrassment, involvement with police procedures, lost work days and jobs, and other unknown dangers.

In certain circumstances, the norms favoring intervention may be weakened, leading bystanders to resolve the conflict in the direction of nonintervention. One of these circumstances may be the reasons of other onlookers. For example, in the case above, each observer, by seeing lights and figures in other apartment house windows, knew that others were also watching. However, there was no way to tell how the other observers were reacting. These two facts provide several reasons why any individual may have delayed or failed to help. The responsibility for helping was diffused among the observers; there was also diffusion of any potential blame for not taking action; and finally, it was possible that somebody, unperceived, had already initiated helping action.

When only one bystander is present in an emergency, if help is to come, it must come from him. Although he may choose to ignore it…any pressure to intervene focuses uniquely on him. When there are several observers present, however, the pressures to intervene do not focus on any one of the observers; instead the responsibility of intervention is shared among all the onlookers and is not unique to anyone. As a result, no one helps.

A second possibility is that potential blame may be diffused. However much we may wish to think that an individual’s moral behavior is divorced from considerations of personal punishment or reward, there is both theory and evidence to the contrary (Aronfreed, 1964; Miller & Dollard, 1941, Whiting & Child, 1953). It is perfectly reasonable to assume that, under circumstances of group responsibility for a punishable act, the punishment or blame that accrues to any one individual is often slight or nonexistent.

Finally, if others are known to be present, but their behavior cannot be closely observed, any one bystander can assume that one of the other observers is already taking action to end the emergency. Therefore, his own intervention would be only redundant perhaps harmfully or confusingly so. Thus, given the presence of other onlookers whose behavior cannot be observed, any given bystander can rationalize his own inaction by convincing himself that “somebody else must be doing something.”

These considerations lead to the hypothesis that the more bystanders to an emergency, the less likely, or the more slowly any one bystander will intervene to provide aid.