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# Los Angeles Times

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## Town Finds Horrible Secrets Behind White Picket Fences : Crime: A 13-year-old girl was found murdered in a neighbor's house, and the local police chief and a patrolman were accused of raping youngsters in separate incidents.

February 07, 1993 | ANNE STUART | ASSOCIATED PRESS



KINGSTON, Mass. — Parents in this sleepy New England town never used to think twice about letting their children play up and down Main Street.

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That was before a 13-year-old girl disappeared in 1990, only to be found dead several days later in a shallow grave in her next-door neighbor's basement.

And it was before a patrolman was indicted last July on two counts of raping a child.

And before the police chief was charged a month ago with raping three girls who had visited him at home.

"The reason we moved here was that it was a very quiet little town," said Janice Nickerson, a 15-year resident. Now she worries about her 3-year-old daughter.

"I've changed it from saying: 'Go to a police officer if you get lost at the mall,' to saying: 'You should find a nice old lady who looks like Grammy and tell her you've lost your mommy,'" Nickerson said.

The latest charges have prompted some of the 9,000 residents of this town 35 miles south of Boston to take a second look at their neighbors and to think twice about letting their children out of their sight.

"You lose your sense of trust," said Michael Mehrman, an attorney and town resident.

For years, the town's biggest issue was the development of a large regional shopping center. Many residents feared that the Independence Mall, which opened in October, 1989, would increase traffic, crime and other problems.

Then in September, 1990, 13-year-old Melissa Benoit disappeared while visiting her father's grave at a nearby cemetery. Dozens of volunteers searched for her, including her neighbor, Henry Meinholtz Jr., a

family friend and former church deacon.

After an 11-day search, investigators found the girl's body in a shallow grave in Meinholz's basement, across the street from the police station. In 1991, he was convicted of murder and sentenced to life in prison.

Heading the investigation was Alan Ballinger, promoted from sergeant to police chief two months before the murder. He took a high-profile approach, holding news conferences and speaking to grieving residents at a community meeting.

Two years later, Ballinger himself was led into court in handcuffs, charged with sexually assaulting three girls, ages 12 to 15, in the early 1980s.

The 23-year police veteran has been suspended without pay to await his trial but is free on his own recognizance.

In an unrelated case, Patrolman Robert Sarson was indicted last July on two counts of raping a child. He, too, has been suspended without pay while awaiting trial.

Some residents said the latest case has ripped open wounds that had just begun to heal. "Everybody's still talking about it. There's been a lot of upheaval," Nickerson said.

But many residents remain staunchly protective of Kingston.

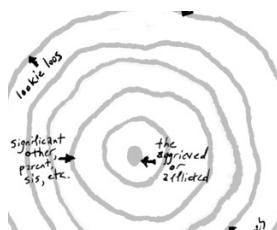
"It's still a nice community. It really is," said the Rev. Walter Braman, pastor of the First Parish Unitarian Universalist Church, one of several white-steepled churches lining Main Street.

Residents may be more cautious, but they believe their problems, unfortunately, are not unique.

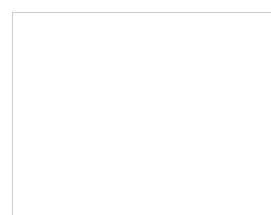
"It's not just Kingston," Nickerson said. "It's everywhere."



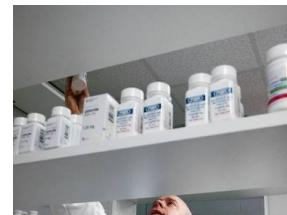
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