

The 1964 Kitty Genovese Tragedy: What Have We Learned?

It was back on March 13, 1964 at 3 am that petite 28-year-old Kitty repeatedly screamed for her life when she was brutally attacked on her way home, but none of the reported 38 neighbors who heard Kitty's screams so much as phoned the police, as the [psychopath](#) brutally sliced Kitty to death in two attacks over an excruciating half-hour. The neighbors' inaction was so inexplicable that *New York Times* Editor A.M. Rosenthal was moved to write his classic book, *Thirty-eight Witnesses*, which transformed Kitty's tragedy from an unreported incident to a front-page headline around the world—that still impacts our society a half-century later.

When the killer was apprehended, and Chief of Detectives Albert Seedman asked him how he dared to attack a woman in front of so many witnesses, the psychopath calmly replied, "I knew they wouldn't do anything, people never do" (Seedman & Hellman, 1974, p. 100).

Thanks to Thirty-eight witnesses, Kitty's tragedy is now part of our popular culture, as even those not yet born in 1964 know of the "38 witnesses" and the "Kitty Genovese syndrome." Any social psychology textbook is incomplete if it omits the "[bystander effect](#)" and the Genovese tragedy.

Common yet unique. We quickly learnt that the Genovese tragedy was not unique, but probably occurs daily—people injured in front of inactive witnesses.

Yet the Genovese tragedy remains unique in many ways—a non-celebrity homicide victim who is better known than her killer. Like Anne Frank, Kitty was an unknown person who became a international public figure only in her death. Kitty is known only for the last 28 minutes of her life, not the first 28 years.

In the Sixties, the Genovese tragedy moved three separate [teams](#) of psychological scientists in New York to create what became new, data-based psychology specialties.

- Stanley Milgram at CUNY used field experiments to introduce what is now known as "urban psychology," studying the impact of city life on the individual.
- Harry Kaufmann at Hunter College used surveys to study what is now [cognitive forensic](#) psychology, the impact of law on moral reasoning.
- Bibb Latane at Columbia and John Darley at NYU used lab experiments to study what we now term "prosocial behavior."

Surely a prime reason why people around the world 50 years later remain so touched by Kitty's tragedy, is the haunting image of this terrified young woman, as she watched her neighbors ignore her desperate screams.