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Police link 6 more slayings to Grim Sleeper suspect

The new allegations bring to 16 the killings linked to Lonnie Franklin Jr. But officials do not plan to seek criminal charges now in the new cases, fearing that would slow progress toward a trial.

By Joel Rubin, Los Angeles Times

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Los Angeles police detectives have linked six more slayings to the suspect in the Grim Sleeper serial killings after reviewing hundreds of unsolved homicide cases and missing person reports, as well as a cache of photos of unidentified women found at the man's home.

Law enforcement sources told The Times that the new cases bring to 16 the number of killings linked to Lonnie Franklin Jr., 59, , who is already charged with murder in the slayings of 10 women whose bodies were found on the streets of South Los Angeles over two decades. Police also have now identified a second woman who they say survived an attack from Franklin.

Police investigators had long suspected that they would eventually find that the person responsible for the Grim Sleeper slayings had killed more than 10 women. Franklin was arrested in July 2010 and linked to the 10 slayings by ballistic and DNA evidence.

Detectives continued look for additional victims, taking the unusual step of releasing photographs of dozens of women found at Franklin's home, hoping the public could help determine if they too were victims.

Three of the newly identified six victims were allegedly tied to Franklin through physical evidence, said a police source with knowledge of the investigation, who requested anonymity because the additional cases have not been made public. In two of those cases, ballistic evidence showed that the bullets used to kill the women were fired from a gun Franklin is accused of using in other killings, while DNA and ballistic tests connected him to a third woman, the source said.

Franklin's link to the other three cases is more circumstantial. Police concluded Franklin killed one woman based on a 911 call made at the time of the slaying to report the location of the body. According to the source, police have matched the caller's voice to Franklin's. Police believe Franklin made a similar call to dispatchers in one of the cases in which he has been charged. The remaining two victims recently linked to Franklin were reported missing years ago and have never been found. However, possessions of theirs were discovered at Franklin's house, leading police to the conclusion that he killed them.

Police have made the strategic decision not to seek additional criminal charges from prosecutors

in the new cases, the source said. With the case against Franklin moving slowly toward trial as prosecutors and Franklin's attorney wade through massive amounts of complex evidence, adding more charges, police feared, could lead to long delays and unnecessarily complicate matters, the source said.

"There is some wisdom to that," said Laurie Levenson, a criminal law professor at Loyola Law School and former federal prosecutor. "Every life counts, but they have to balance the work it would take to thoroughly prepare these new cases against the benefit that would bring." Levenson added that the district attorney's office could decide to file additional charges in the future and that the new cases could serve as a "safety net" for prosecutors in the event that Franklin prevails against the current charges.

Prosecutors have alleged that Franklin, a former LAPD garage attendant and city garbage collector, sexually assaulted and then killed women on the margins of society — including some prostitutes and drug addicts — over nearly a quarter century. Seven of the women he is accused of killing died between 1985 and 1988 and the others between 2002 and 2007. That apparent dormant period led the L.A. Weekly to dub the killer the Grim Sleeper, although the detectives investigating the case have long been skeptical of the idea that the killer had taken a break.

Police at first speculated the killer may have been in prison during the gap in known killings, but that theory was tossed out when Franklin was arrested and investigators realized he had not been behind bars. That spurred them to launch the review of unsolved cases and missing person reports in search of victims that had gone unconnected to Franklin.

Franklin has pleaded not guilty and remains in custody. Along with 10 murder charges, he also is charged with one count of attempted murder.

Police officials would not comment about when the new cases occurred or reveal the identities of the victims, saying they would discuss them in detail at a meeting scheduled for Wednesday evening at Bethel AME Church, in the neighborhood where Franklin lived and where the killings occurred.

Franklin's attorney, Louisa Pensanti, angrily rebuked the department's plan to publicly announce findings of the new killings, but not seek new charges. "So, they're just going to yell out that he killed these people? Why would they make allegations like that and then not give us the chance to defend against them and to test their conclusions in court?"

At the meeting, detectives plan to renew their call for help identifying women seen in the hundreds of photographs and videos police discovered at Franklin's house. Fearing that some of the women may have been victims, police in December made the controversial decision to publish the faces of the roughly 160 women in hopes that people would come forward with information about them. Dozens of the women remain unidentified.

In April, detectives went public with their suspicions that Franklin had killed seven women who had been missing for years, plus a woman killed in a style similar to other victims. The fate of

three of those women were of particular concern: Ayellah Marshall, a high school senior when she disappeared in 2005; Rolenia Morris, a 25-year-old who also was reported missing in 2005; and an unidentified woman whose photograph was found at Franklin's residence when he was arrested. Police found identification cards or photos of the three in a refrigerator in Franklin's garage, where photos of Janecia Peters, one of the 10 women Franklin is charged with killing, were also discovered. Police have said they suspect that Franklin kept mementos of special significance in the refrigerator since they were separate from the other photographs found elsewhere in his residence.

It was not immediately clear if any of the six women police have now linked to Franklin were part of that group of eight.