

The Door the Cops Never Opened

By Daniel Glick, Sherry Keene-Osborn and Andrew Murr

Did mistakes in the early hours of the JonBenet investigation keep police from making a case?

IT WAS THE FIRST MISTAKE IN A DAY OF many. In the early morning of the day after Christmas 1996, Boulder, Colo., police officer Rick French responded to a frantic 911 call from a woman claiming her daughter had been kidnapped. It was just before 6 a.m. and still dark when he arrived at the Tudor home of John and Patsy Ramsey. French read the ransom note and later conducted a quick search of the house. In the basement, he came to a door secured with a wooden latch. According to police reports obtained by NEWSWEEK, he paused for a moment in front of the door -- but walked away.

As the world now knows, he should have opened the door. In the darkened room on the other side lay the bludgeoned and strangled body of 6-year-old JonBenet Ramsey. It wasn't until later that day that John Ramsey would open the door to the room and carry the body, which was under a white blanket, upstairs. In doing so, he contaminated the crime scene and may have disturbed critical forensic evidence the police could have used to help identify the killer.

Why didn't French open the door? And why did the police allow John Ramsey to wander through the house in the first place? As the investigation of the still-unsolved murder drags through its second year, questions like these continue to dog police investigators. The facts of the case remain confusing and contradictory. Prosecutors have publicly admitted they still don't have enough evidence to charge anyone in the case -- including the Ramseys -- though JonBenet's parents remain under what police have called the "umbrella of suspicion." The police haven't given up the chase. NEWSWEEK has learned that both police and prosecutors are pursuing more than one suspect outside the family. One clue: a still unidentified partial footprint found in the basement room. The authorities say they have also analyzed "fiber evidence" that may raise new questions about JonBenet's parents.

Why has this case been so hard to crack? A NEWSWEEK reconstruction of the crucial hours and days after the police first arrived at the Ramsey home sheds light on why the police and prosecutors are at a loss to solve it. Interviews with law-enforcement officials, family friends and eyewitnesses -- and close scrutiny of internal police reports -- paint a picture of an investigation that began badly and was slow to recover. Many of the facts about the crime that have been widely reported -- and presumed true by the public -- turned out to be misleading or false. Officers on the scene made serious, and irreversible, mistakes that may have resulted in the contamination or destruction of crucial evidence.

No new facts have emerged that prove the Ramseys' innocence or guilt, or that clearly

implicate someone else. But John and Patsy Ramsey, who have shunned reporters and refused to talk to police since just after the murder, have now broken their silence. The Ramseys gave their first wide-ranging and emotional interview with producers of a British documentary, which will air this week on the U.K.'s channel 4 (NEWSWEEK's Daniel Glick and Sherry Keene-Osborn were consultants to the documentary).

In the interview, the Ramseys angrily denied any involvement in the crime. "The American public has been led to believe that we went to bed that night after a wonderful Christmas, brutally beat JonBenet, sexually molested her, strangled her, went to sleep, got up the next morning, wrote a three-page ransom note, called the police, sat around the house for four hours, [and] then I went downstairs and discovered her body and was able to act distraught," Ramsey said. "Help me understand that."

In the police report French filed about the events that morning, he says he didn't open the door to the basement room because he was looking for exits the kidnapper might have used. He noticed the latch was on the wrong side for a door leading out of the house. So he kept moving. Soon other officers arrived, including detectives and a forensics team that began dusting the house for fingerprints and searching for other clues. For the most part, the police followed standard procedure. They put taps on the telephones inside the house and at John Ramsey's office. Detective Linda Arndt told Ramsey what to say if the ransomer called: demand to talk to JonBenet. John Ramsey took notes. "Must talk to JB," he scribbled.

But the police reports also show that officers did little to protect the integrity of the crime scene. Believing the crime was a kidnapping, the cops cordoned off JonBenet's bedroom with yellow and black crime-scene tape to preserve whatever evidence her abductor may have left behind. But strangely, they didn't seal the rest of the house -- also potentially part of the crime scene.

The Ramseys and a steady stream of friends and visitors were allowed free access to the house. John and Patsy's close friends Fleet and Priscilla White and John and Barbara Fernie arrived early. Burke, JonBenet's 9-year-old brother, was taken to the Whites' home. The Ramseys' minister was also there. Early that morning, police had called in a team of victims' advocates, trained in helping families through traumatic situations, who arrived with bagels and coffee. After using the kitchen, the advocates began tidying it up, a law-enforcement official told NEWSWEEK. One friend helped clean the kitchen, wiping down the counters with a spray cleaner -- and possibly wiping away important evidence.

In the early afternoon, after the forensics team and other officers had packed up and left, Detective Arndt stayed behind to wait with the Ramseys. The mood in the house was quiet and tense. John Ramsey milled anxiously around the living room; Patsy sat virtually motionless in a chair. Arndt noted in her police report that she wanted to give John Ramsey something to do "to keep [his] mind occupied." She pulled Ramsey and friend Fleet White aside and told them to conduct a "top to bottom" search of the house to see if anything seemed amiss. When John Ramsey swung open the basement door -- the one French had by-passed hours earlier -- he saw JonBenet's body. "All I could do was scream, to try to attract attention," he says. Fleet White bounded up the stairs yelling for someone to "call

911." White later told police he had looked in the basement room earlier that morning but hadn't seen the body. Ramsey ripped the duct tape off JonBenet's mouth and carried her up the stairs, setting her down on the floor. Though it's unclear why, Arndt then picked up the body again and moved it to the living room near the Christmas tree, where Ramsey knelt beside her, repeating "My little angel," over and over. Friends carried Patsy, too stunned to walk, over to the body. Police reports describe her throwing herself over JonBenet.

Arndt quickly called for backup, declaring a "Code Black" -- police lingo for a murder -- over the radio. The forensics team returned to the house. But by then the basement room, and the body itself, had become contaminated. Once Ramsey, and then Arndt, moved the body, they compromised whatever evidence may have been left on it or in the room.

The police did little to correct sensational press accounts suggesting Ramsey had tried to keep officers away from the basement room. It was widely reported that officers noted no footprints in the snow outside the Ramsey house. But the weather was warm that Christmas season; there was only patchy snow on the property. JonBenet had ridden her Christmas present, a bicycle, on the backyard patio the day before.

Another seemingly incriminating and widely published piece of evidence was also misleading. Police found no signs of forced entry, which led to speculation that no outsider could have gotten in. In fact, law-enforcement officials told NEWSWEEK that the police knew several windows and a door had been unlocked that night. Two windows were open slightly, allowing electrical cords for the outside Christmas lights to pass through. And a basement window was also broken. Ramsey himself had smashed the glass and gone through it one day when he'd forgotten his house keys.

Other false reports persisted, and the Ramseys blamed police. One was that pornography had been discovered in the house, and that John Andrew, John's older son from a previous marriage, was a suspect, even though he was known to be in Atlanta at the time. The Ramseys soon stopped cooperating with the police and launched their own search for JonBenet's killer. The police "were not there to help us," Ramsey says, "they were there to hang us." The police deny focusing exclusively on the Ramseys. "We've looked at a lot of different people," says Boulder Police Chief Mark Beckner.

Recently, the Ramseys decided to fight back. They agreed to sit for interviews with prosecutors. Last April, John Ramsey wrote a letter to Boulder District Attorney Alex Hunter at home and offered to meet. The only ground rule: no Boulder police would be allowed in the room. The interviews, conducted by veteran homicide detectives from other cities, went on for 42 hours. At times, the questioning was rough, as the interrogators tried to break the Ramseys down. Hunter and his staff stood by in a nearby room, watching the proceedings on a bank of closed-circuit monitors.

Still, the relationship between the Ramseys and Boulder law-enforcement officials remains chilly -- and JonBenet's parents remain under police suspicion. But as any cop knows, every month that passes without a break in the case makes it less likely that the killer will be caught -- and the mystery of what happened in that house may never be solved.