

# B.C.'S MISSING WOMEN: SARAH'S STORY

## Introduction

### Focus

This *News in Review* story looks at the tragic story of Sarah de Vries, one of Vancouver's missing women. Between 1978 and 2002, 63 women—all of whom were drug addicts working in the sex trade—went missing from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. Robert William Pickton of Port Coquitlam, B.C., has since been arrested and charged with the murder of 22 of these women, including Sarah de Vries.

### Definition

In this situation, *Crown* refers to the lawyers working on behalf of the government. They are termed the Crown because although Canada is a democracy, it is also a constitutional monarchy, and the British monarch is the official Head of State. Those working on behalf of the government are often referred to as the Crown or Crown attorneys.

The Crown called 85 witnesses to the preliminary hearing of Robert William Pickton of Port Coquitlam, B.C. In the end, the judge ruled that there was enough evidence to send Pickton to trial. The man accused in the largest serial murder case in Canadian history is slated to stand trial for 15 murders in September 2004. Not long after the preliminary hearing, police laid seven new murder charges against Pickton. Listed among the murdered: Sarah de Vries.

The trial of Robert "Willie" Pickton promises to answer a number of questions. First, it will determine whether or not Pickton was directly responsible for the murder of many of the 63 women reported missing from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. Second, the trial will shed light on the fate of the victims. All 22 of the women Pickton is accused of murdering were drug addicts and prostitutes living on the margins of society. The police believe that Pickton travelled to the Downtown Eastside to pick up the prostitutes. He brought them back to his Port Coquitlam farm where he murdered them. The nature of what may have happened to these women has yet to be made public. Third, the trial will shed light on the investigation itself. The families of the victims believe that the police dragged their feet over the years and refused to admit that a serial killer was preying on women in the Downtown Eastside. Women had gone missing from the area as far back as 1978. A joint task force consisting of the Vancouver Police Department (VPD) and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) was not struck until 2001, and charges were not laid

until 2002. For many years, a team of only two detectives had handled the case of Vancouver's missing women.

All this acts as the backdrop for the tragic ending of the life of Sarah de Vries. In December 2003, police added seven new charges to the 15 already levied against Pickton. Sarah de Vries was listed as one of the victims. She was a sex-trade worker and a drug addict, and Sarah's story demonstrates the painful and bitter life of many women living in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. Sarah was adopted shortly before her first birthday by Jan and Pat de Vries. Her biological parents were a mixture of Aboriginal, black, and Mexican ancestry. Her quest to find herself was thwarted by racism coming from without and self doubt coming from within. Eventually, at the age of 14, Sarah abandoned her life in middle class West Point Grey and moved to the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver. It was in there that Sarah's life of drug use and prostitution began. For many women living in this neighbourhood—sometimes referred to as the poorest postal code in Canada—prostitution serves as a source of income for basic survival needs as well as a means of maintaining one's drug habit.

Sarah's story is a tragedy for many reasons. Questions arise when considering her life. Why did she abandon the love and comfort of her adopted family? Was she the victim of racism prior to leaving her family home? What drove her to pursue a life of prostitution and its companion, drug use? What circumstances caused her to go missing? Is Robert William Pickton responsible for her death? Some of these

**Update**

This is an ongoing tragedy and new evidence is being found all the time. As this story was going to press, the DNA of nine other women was found at the farm. Six of the women were identified while three remain unidentified. The number of women found and the number of charges laid may continue to change over time. As well, police are investigating whether others may have been involved in these terrible crimes.

questions may be answered when Pickton goes to trial. Others may never be answered.

In the end, Sarah's sister, Maggie, puts things in perspective. Looking back on Sarah's life she says, "It's impossible to piece together why she

ended up where she did," adding, "Sarah's story shows that it can happen to anybody's daughter or sister" (*Toronto Star*, February 15, 2002). The words of Maggie de Vries act as a chilling warning that many circumstances can conspire to create a tragedy.

**Responding**

1. How many witnesses testified at the preliminary hearing of Robert William Pickton?

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2. How many murder charges is Pickton facing?

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3. How many women have been reported missing from the Downtown Eastside? \_\_\_\_\_

4. What questions does the Pickton trial promise to answer?

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5. List five points regarding the life of Sarah de Vries.

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6. Maggie de Vries claims that the tragedy that befell her sister "can happen to anybody's daughter or sister." Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Explain.

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## *Video Review*

Carefully respond to the questions on this page as you review the video. Then consider the second part of this activity.

### **Further Research**

To learn more about the various women missing from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, consider visiting the Missing People Web site at [www.missingpeople.net](http://www.missingpeople.net).

1. How has the life of Pat de Vries changed?  
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2. What contributed to Sarah's slide into drug addiction and prostitution?  
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3. Where is Canada's poorest neighbourhood?  
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4. What did Sarah's family and friends discover once they started putting up posters?  
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5. How did the reward for garage robberies frustrate the families of the missing women?  
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6. What role did Kim Rossmo play in the investigation?  
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7. What role did Maggie de Vries play?  
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8. What happened to Sereena Abotsway?  
\_\_\_\_\_
9. How many women were missing by July 1999? \_\_\_\_\_
10. What happened in the fall of 2001 to change the course of the investigation?  
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\_\_\_\_\_
11. Describe the reaction of Sarah's children to the news that their mother's DNA was discovered on Pickton's property.  
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# B.C.'S MISSING WOMEN: SARAH'S STORY

## *Vancouver's Missing Women*

### Definition

A *john* is the generic name given to any customer of a sex-trade worker.

### Further Research

The RCMP presents information concerning the Joint Missing Women Task Force at [www.rcmp-bcmedia.ca/missingwomen.jsp](http://www.rcmp-bcmedia.ca/missingwomen.jsp) and the Vancouver Police Department maintains a Web site at [www.city.vancouver.bc.ca/police](http://www.city.vancouver.bc.ca/police)).

So many things went wrong in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside between 1978 and 2002. City officials watched the neighbourhood evolve into a wasteland of poverty, vice, and addiction. Police vacated the area, leaving the criminal element to all but govern itself. Vancouver turned a blind eye to an area of the city that would eventually prove to be the source from which a murderer could choose his victim.

### Vancouver's Downtown Eastside

Social problems in Vancouver were glaringly evident in the run-up to Expo '86. With the world fair slated to come to Vancouver, citizen groups and city officials felt they needed to do something about the growing prostitution and drug problem. Their strategy: chase the prostitutes out of the middle class West End and Mount Pleasant districts and crack down on drug dealers. The prostitutes and drug dealers did not disappear; instead they relocated to the Downtown Eastside. Soon this neighbourhood evolved into a seedy, violent, impoverished wasteland. Re-

duced police presence made the area a kind of "anything goes" zone (Trevor Boddy, *Vancouver Sun*, October 15, 2002).

While reports of "bad dates" were often shared among sex-trade workers in the Downtown Eastside, few of these incidents were reported to the police. Sex-trade workers were well aware of society's attitude toward prostitution, and the assumption was that the police were not interested in defending the rights of a prostitute over a john.

Over time, prostitutes became more and more vulnerable. Predators began to discover the ease with which crimes could be committed against them. Beatings and rapes became commonplace. And it appears that some people went further. Between 1978 and 2002, 63 women from the Downtown Eastside disappeared—vanishing without a trace.

### The Investigation

Many people have been critical of the investigation into the missing women of the Downtown Eastside. The following chart deals with some of those criticisms.

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### Perceived Police Perspective

The police felt that most prostitutes were transient—with no real roots in the community.

### The Perspective of Family and Friends of the Victims

Many of the missing women had regular contact with family and friends. Sarah de Vries frequently contacted family members and was in close contact with her friend Wayne Leng. Sereena Abotsway phoned her foster mother every day from the age of 17 until she went missing 13 years later. Both de Vries and Abotsway have been identified as victims of foul play after

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## Perceived Police Perspective

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The police continually pointed out that there was no evidence of wrong-doing in the case. No witnesses had come forward, no personal belongings had been found, and no crime scenes suggested that women were being abducted.

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City Hall and the police seemed more concerned about home garage robberies in more affluent neighbourhoods than they were about women going missing in the Downtown Eastside.

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Besides being reluctant to even admit the possibility of a serial killer being on the loose, the police were also reluctant to strike a task force dedicated to the case. Eventually, in 2001, the Vancouver PD joined the RCMP to form the Joint Missing Women Task Force.

## The Perspective of Family and Friends of the Victims

their remains were found on the property of Robert William Pickton of Port Coquitlam, B.C. Pickton has since been charged with 22 counts of first degree murder.

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This claim is undisputed. The police had no evidence until they exercised a search warrant on Pickton's property in 2002. However, the police did have the missing person reports filed by concerned family members. They also had the report of Kim Rossmo, a Vancouver PD inspector and geographic profiler, who claimed that a pattern of missing person reports suggested at least the possibility of a serial murderer targeting women in the Downtown Eastside. Rossmo's working hypothesis was buried.

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The families of the missing women were shocked to hear that Mayor Philip Owen was offering a \$100 000 reward to solve a series of garage robberies, while he was reluctant to put reward money forward for the missing women investigation. Eventually, Maggie de Vries, acting as spokesperson for her sister Sarah—one of the missing women—and the families of the other missing women, appealed to the police board to strike a task force and issue a reward for evidence aiding in the investigation. The board granted the reward but refused to form a task force.

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As far back as 1998, the victims' families appealed to authorities to put more resources into the investigation. Until the formation of the task force, only two detectives were assigned to the case.

**Definition**

*Forensic* refers to forensic science. This is the application of scientific techniques, particularly biochemical, to crime-scene investigation. This type of work is popularized on television shows such as *CSI*.

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**Perceived Police Perspective**

The justice system apprehended Robert William Pickton—the man accused of killing 22 of the missing women—and they let him go.

Police indifference to the plight of the victims—all of whom were drug addicts and prostitutes—led to unacceptable delays in the investigation.

It seems convenient to blame city officials and the police for the fate of the missing women. However, the fact of the matter is that a number of circumstances working together led to an atmosphere that allowed for this type of crime to occur. Obviously, the police and the City of Vancouver never intended for something like this to happen. And, in the end, responsibility rests with the perpetrator or perpetrators of the crimes committed against these women.

**The Arrest of Robert William Pickton**

In February 2002, police descended on a property described as a pig farm in Port Coquitlam, B.C. The police raided the property with a warrant dealing with the unlawful storage of firearms. While exercising the initial warrant the police discovered objects related to the missing women case and obtained a second warrant for a more detailed search of the property. Within days, Robert William Pickton, one of the owners of

**The Perspective of Family and Friends of the Victims**

Pickton was arrested and charged with attempted murder and forcible confinement in April 1997 after he allegedly attacked a prostitute on his farm property. The charges were put aside when the Crown indicated that they did not have enough evidence to proceed.

By the time the investigation got serious, police were aware of 600 men who they felt were capable of killing many women\*. While they sifted through the suspects, women continued to go missing.

the property, was charged with the first degree murder of two women. By April 2002, between 45 and 85 investigators were combing the 4.5 hectare property located 35 kilometres away from the Downtown Eastside. Eventually a 50-person forensic team, including archeologists, scientists, and osteologists (experts in human bone identification) took part in a massive 21-month search for evidence at Pickton's farm.

Television images of the crews working on the property and soil sifters sorting earth became vivid, unsettling reminders of the investigation. The search of the property continued until November 2003.

Meanwhile, in the courtroom, lawyers introduced the charges against Pickton, and a preliminary hearing began on January 9, 2003. In order to protect the rights of the accused, the court put a publication ban on the proceedings. In Canada, a publication ban is designed to ensure that potential jurors do not receive advanced knowledge of evidence, thus causing them to form an

opinion of the accused, prior to the trial. The six-month hearing concluded with the determination that there was enough evidence for Pickton to stand trial on all 15 counts of the indictment.

Then, shortly after the search of Pickton's property ended, seven addi-

tional first-degree murdered charges were laid against Pickton. Sarah de Vries was listed among the victims.

\* Maggie de Vries, *Missing Sarah*. Toronto: Penguin Group (Canada), 2003, p. 219

## Questions

1. What contributed to the deterioration of the Downtown Eastside?

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2. Which of the criticisms of the investigation concerns you most? Why?

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3. Why do Canadian courts issue publication bans in high profile cases?

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4. Is there an area of high neglect and crime in your community? What is being done to improve the community?

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## B.C.'S MISSING WOMEN: SARAH'S STORY

### *The Story of Sarah de Vries*

The life story of Sarah de Vries was brought to reality by her sister, Maggie, who wrote a book in her honour. *Missing Sarah* weaves the reader through the fabric of Sarah's life. Two things proved troubling for Sarah in her younger years. First, she was an adopted child of mixed race—Aboriginal, Mexican, black and white—being raised in an all-white family of Dutch origin. Sarah always knew she was different. Her skin told her so, as did some insensitive family friends and acquaintances. The knowledge that she was different was abundantly clear when she went to school. A 1996 entry in Sarah's journal tells the story: "Elementary school sucked. I guess you could say I was one of the loser loners. I had peace of mind when I was alone . . . . It was walking home after school that I had a deep inner fear for. Some kids used to wait for me to start walking home. They would then push, shove, kick, punch, yell, throw stones, and swing sticks at me. Chasing me half a block from my house. Nigger, coon, spook, jungle bunny, moon cricket, spear chucker, spade, and a few more." (de Vries, p. 12) The de Vries family had no idea that Sarah was being tormented in this way. Perhaps she thought they wouldn't understand.

The second troubling thing that Sarah had to deal with was the divorce of her parents. In the journal entry listed above, Sarah makes a passing reference to her parents' break-up. Like any child, Sarah found the whole situation confusing and wondered what role she played in the separation. In reality, the divorce of Jan and Pat de Vries came out of a realization that the two adults could not live together any longer, that the mar-

riage was irreparable. However, the pull of the emotional self is powerful and tends to cloud one's view of reality and, in Sarah's case, preyed on her self concept whether she could recognize it or not.

By the age of 14, Sarah had started sneaking out of the house. Eventually, she moved away for good, taking up residence in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. In time, she became addicted to drugs—heroin and cocaine—and used prostitution as a means of financial survival. Maggie de Vries does not try to suggest that Sarah did not have choices in life. She does not judge the path that her sister chose. Instead, she paints a compassionate and sympathetic portrait of her sister. She was able to accept Sarah for her positive and negative qualities in a touching display of unconditional love.

Sarah went missing in April 1998. She was working the corner of Princess and Hastings. A prostitute working on the corner across the street saw Sarah there just before she got picked up by a potential john. She and the john drove around the block, haggled over price, failed to agree to terms, and she returned to the corner. The entire exchange took about a minute. By the time she got back to her corner, Sarah was gone.

The fate of Sarah de Vries is not yet known. What is known is that her DNA was found on the Port Coquitlam property of Robert William Pickton. Sarah knew the dangers of the lifestyle she had chosen. She had been beaten and raped on "bad dates" before. And she was well aware of the fact that women had gone missing. She even wrote about it in her journal.

### Further Research

To see a picture of the memorial visit [www.missingpersons.net/parkmemorializes.htm](http://www.missingpersons.net/parkmemorializes.htm).

### December 11, 1995

So many women are missing in action. It's getting to be a daily part of life. That's sad. Somebody dies and it's like somebody just did something normal. I can't find the right words.

I can't shake it, this feeling that creeps over me all the time. Loneliness, emptiness. Lost in a vast void of nothingness. Groping my way through life like a blind woman with no cane, crawling on my hands and knees afraid to stand, unsteady upon my feet. No sense of direction, balance or time. Drifting endlessly through the icy cold nights trying to hide my

pathetic, growing fear that maybe, just maybe, my time draws near.\*

Everybody has fears that grip them in times of weakness. What is particularly sad about the story of Sarah de Vries is that her fears were realized.

Maggie de Vries does not want to think about Sarah's last moments alive. She just hopes that she died fighting. Today, a memorial bench rests in Portside Park. It acts as a memorial to the missing women of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. Sarah's name is listed among those commemorated.

### To Consider

1. What two incidents from Sarah's childhood contributed to her low sense of self esteem?

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2. What is your reaction to Sarah's journal entry?

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### Extension

Maggie de Vries's book is called *Missing Sarah*. The back cover of the book is a reproduction of Sarah's journal entry listed above. Next time you are in a bookstore, look for the book and read the back cover. Seeing Sarah's words, in her own handwriting, highlights her humanity.

\*Maggie de Vries, *Missing Sarah*. Toronto: Penguin Group (Canada), 2003, p. 159

# B.C.'S MISSING WOMEN: SARAH'S STORY

## *Running Away*

Sarah de Vries first ran away from home when she was 14 years old. Eventually she took up residence in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. Sarah's story is not an uncommon one. If anything, it highlights a disturbing

trend of people under the age of 18 running away from home or going missing. Take a look at the following missing children statistics from 2000 to 2002:

Year	Kid-napped	Parent Abduction	Runaway	Unknown	Accident	Wandered Off	Other	Total
2002	35	429	52 390	10 994	38	594	2 052	66 532
2001	48	387	53 434	10 364	49	742	1 990	66 994
2000	42	416	50 633	10 031	35	597	1 958	63 712

Source: Canadian Police Information Centre, National Report 2002

### Category Definitions

**Kidnapped** — abducted by strangers or relatives other than one's parents

**Parent Abduction** — abducted by a parent

**Runaway** — children under 18 who run away from parental home or foster home.

**Unknown** — circumstances where the police have no previous record of the missing child. In other words, the child had never run away, walked off, or been reported missing to police before.

**Accident** — cases where the body of the missing child was not recovered. Accidents include an accidental drowning, an avalanche, or a fire.

**Wandered Off** — when a child wanders off and is lost

**Other** — when children do not return to a detention home or an institution housing young offenders

At first glance, the statistics appear quite startling. It is hard to fathom that 66 532 children went missing in 2002.

In reality, the high number is accounted for by the number of entries placed in the Canadian Police Information Centre (CPIC) database. Some cases deal with the same individual, as in the case of a person under the age of 18 who habitually runs away from home. Analysis of the numbers for 2002 put the statistics in perspective. According to the Canadian Police Information Centre (CPIC):

- Of 66 411 cases, 62 per cent were solved within a day and 86 per cent were solved within a week.
- Statistically, runaways account for the highest number of cases. More females were listed as runaways than males.
- 96 per cent of missing children are between the ages of 12 and 17.
- Children under the age of 5 constituted .9 per cent of the total number of cases.

## To Consider

1. What is your personal reaction to these statistics? Explain fully.

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2. Why do you think girls are more likely to be runaways than boys?

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3. Are you personally aware of any runaways? What happened to the individual?

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4. If a friend of yours was considering running away from home, what would you say to them?

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## Extension

Go to [www.ourmissingchildren.ca](http://www.ourmissingchildren.ca) to find the current National Report. Compare the statistics for any year you choose to research with the statistics listed above. Note the major differences and similarities.

# B.C.'S MISSING WOMEN: SARAH'S STORY

## *Final Activity*

This activity gives you the opportunity to come to grips with the magnitude of the tragedy in the Vancouver missing women case. Read the following material and then complete the questions that follow each section.

### **Preliminary Information**

- Women have been going missing from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside since 1978.
- Total number of missing women is 63.
- Joint Missing Women Task Force was established in 2001 (Vancouver Police and the RCMP)
- First of 22 murder charges laid against Robert William Pickton of Port Coquitlam, B.C., were introduced in February of 2002.

### **Section 1: Joint Missing Women Task Force Media Release — January 15, 2002**

Shortly after its formation, the Joint Missing Women Task Force consisting of the Vancouver Police Department (VPD) and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) issued this media release:

**FIVE WOMEN ADDED TO LIST OF MISSING FROM DOWNTOWN EASTSIDE**  
January 15, 2002

Vancouver, BC: The Vancouver Missing Women Review Team has added five women to the list of those missing from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. These women have been added to the official list of missing women as a result of the continuing review of all missing persons cases and homicides of Vancouver street trade workers.

These additions bring the total of missing women to 50.

The five missing women are:

Rebecca Louisa GUNO  
Date of Birth - May 25th, 1960  
Reported Missing - June 25th, 1983 to Vancouver Police Dept.  
Last Seen - June 22nd, 1983

Heather Kathleen BOTTOMLEY  
Date of Birth - Aug. 17th, 1976  
Reported Missing - April 17th, 2001 to Vancouver Police Dept.  
Last Seen - April 17th, 2001

Mona Lee WILSON  
Date of Birth - Jan. 13th, 1975  
Reported Missing - Nov. 30th, 2001 to Vancouver Police Dept.  
Last Seen - Nov. 23rd, 2001

Dianne Rosemary ROCK  
Date of Birth - Sept. 2nd, 1967  
Reported Missing - Dec. 13th, 2001 to Vancouver Police Dept.  
Last Seen - Oct. 19th, 2001

Elaine Phyllis DUMBA  
Date of Birth - March 12th, 1955  
Reported Missing - April 9th, 1998 to Coquitlam RCMP  
Last Seen - 1989

The review team is working closely with various agencies in the Downtown Eastside to ensure the women working in that area remain vigilant, not only for themselves but for each other, and we are encouraging them to contact the police with information that may help solve these disappearances.

(Source: Joint Missing Women Task Force: [www.rcmp-bcmedia.ca/missing\\_women.jsp](http://www.rcmp-bcmedia.ca/missing_women.jsp))

## Questions

1. The media release states that the total number of missing women was 50 by January 15, 2002. How many women were eventually reported missing? How many women do the police suspect have been murdered?
2. Organize the information in the media release into a chart. Column headings: Name, Date of Birth, Reported Missing, Last Seen.
3. Describe the tone of the media release. What are the police trying to communicate through the media release?
4. Heather Bottomley, Mona Wilson, and Dianne Rock all disappeared after the formation of the Joint Missing Women Task Force. Why were some people surprised that women continued to disappear even after extensive police resources were directed toward the investigation?

### Section 2: The initial cluster of murder charges against Pickton

Charges laid against Robert William Pickton between February and October 2002:

Mona Wilson, 26; last seen in November 2001

Sereena Abotsway, 29; disappeared in August 2001

Jacqueline McDonell, 23; last seen in January 1999

Diane Rock, 34; last seen in October 2001

Heather Bottomley, 25; disappeared in April 2001

Andrea Joesbury, 22, last seen in June 2001

Brenda Wolfe, 32, last seen in February 1999

Georgina Papin, last seen in 1999

Jennifer Furminger, last seen in 1999

Helen Hallmark, last seen in 1997

Patricia Johnson, last seen in March 2001

Heather Chinnock, 30; last seen in April 2001

Tanya Holyk, 23; last seen in October 1996

Sherry Irving, 24; last seen in 1997

Inga Hall, 46; last seen in February 1998

Source: [www.cbc.ca/news/features/bc\\_missingwomen.html](http://www.cbc.ca/news/features/bc_missingwomen.html)

## Activity

1. Cross reference the material from section one with the material from section two to determine which of the women were listed as missing on January 15, 2002. List the names of the women who were allegedly killed by Pickton.
2. Organize the information above into a chart. Column headings: Name, Age, Last Seen.

### Section 3: More charges against Pickton

Additional charges laid in December 2003:

Sarah de Vries, last seen April 14, 1998

Angela Jardine, last seen November 10, 1998

Cindy Feliks, last seen November 26, 1997

Marie Frey, last seen in August 1997

Diana Melnickl, last seen December 27, 1995

Tiffany Drew, last seen December 31, 1999

“Jane Doe” (an unidentified woman)

Source: *Vancouver Sun*, December 16, 2003

### Questions

1. What is the total number of charges levied against Pickton?
2. The last woman listed in the charges against Pickton is referred to as “Jane Doe.” Why is her disappearance particularly tragic?
3. Organize the above information into a chart. Column headings: Name, Age, Last Seen.

### Summary Activity

The questions focused on compiling and organizing information. This is the kind of work police and criminologists would do on an ongoing basis over the course of any investigation. However, such exercises can be very objective and impersonal. Nobody would want to see their life reduced to a statistic. Thus, in an effort to remember the women who died, create a memorial that lists the names of all of the women and the time when they disappeared. You can do this on a sheet of paper, on a sheet of construction paper, as a three dimensional sculpture, or you can make a Web page commemorating these women. Use your compassion and your imagination.

For the purposes of this activity, it would probably be helpful to visit Wayne Leng’s Web site at [www.missingpeople.net](http://www.missingpeople.net). Pictures of the women can be found there along with stories and newspaper articles related to their lives and the case against Robert William Pickton.