

Robbery suspect linked to rapes?

Police caution that man isn't only person who may be the serial rapist

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Tracking down a rapist

Since June, seven women living on the North, Northwest and Far West sides of the city have reported being raped in their homes. Police think the rapist stalks his victims before breaking into their homes, restraining them and raping them.

A man named in Franklin County court documents as a suspect in a string of sexual attacks on women is only one of several potential suspects that Columbus police have been watching closely.

Police refused to discuss the man or the reasons for their interest in him. Yesterday, they cautioned the media and the public not to jump to conclusions or drop their guard, saying the investigation is much broader than it might appear.

"We are not solely looking at this individual as being *the* suspect," Sgt. Rich Weiner said. "There are other individuals that we are continuing to monitor."

The man has not been charged in the seven sexual assaults since June that police think are linked. But he has been jailed since Dec. 14 on charges that he robbed a Westerville tanning salon, court records show.

Police documents suggest that Columbus police already had him under surveillance when that robbery occurred.

The 50-year-old man is a registered sex offender with a 31-year criminal history. His previous crimes include the rapes of two women in their homes in 1983.

The Dispatch is not naming him because he has not been charged in the most recent assaults.

Columbus police have been searching this fall for a serial rapist who has been attacking women in the western half of Franklin County. The last assault linked to him occurred on Nov. 2. Police said he has taken items such as cell phones and bank cards from some of the women.

According to a search warrant, a tip helped lead to the man now in custody.

A woman told detectives she woke the morning of Oct. 22 to find her cell phone missing from her home. Her son called the phone and a man answered, leading to an argument. After that, the unknown man began texting sexually explicit messages to contacts on the woman's phone.

When the woman called back, the man "began verbally abusing the victim and made comments to the effect that he could have raped her while she was sleeping and then described the inside of her apartment and the people that were sleeping there the night before."

The man then apologized and promised to leave the phone at a bus stop at the North Market. The woman retrieved her phone there and notified police. The timeline of the woman's story is unclear in the warrant.

The list of dialed numbers included one that came back to the same neighborhood where a previous victim's cell phone had "pinged off a tower nearby, soon after the rape had occurred," the warrant reads.

Detectives also found a number from the stolen phone that led them to the suspect's home on Dresden Street in North Linden.

The warrant, noting that the suspect fits the general description of the assailant in several of the sexual assaults, indicates that police were given permission in late November to place a tracking device on the sport-utility vehicle the suspect had been seen driving.

The man was arrested Dec. 13, soon after a robbery at the Tan Pro salon in Westerville Plaza on W. Schrock Road.

According to a Westerville police report, a man entered the store just before 8:30 p.m. wearing dark clothes and a black ski mask.

In an interview yesterday, store manager Katherine Bradford said he had a gun but kept it pointed down. After Bradford gave him money, he asked about a back door and made her walk with him.

When they got to the door, he asked, "Are you ready?"

"That's when I started freaking out," she said.

But the man merely waved, said "Bye" and slipped out the back, Bradford said.

She said he never touched her or said or did anything sexual.

Westerville police documents say that an undercover Columbus SWAT officer responded and asked what was going on. Told there had been a robbery, the SWAT officer said that Columbus police had a man under surveillance who matched the robbery suspect's description.

The officers decided that Columbus police should stop the man's car, which they did on I-71 at Hudson Street. Officers found a BB gun and the bag with \$279 inside.

Columbus police still do not have a complete DNA sample from any of the sexual assaults to compare with any potential suspects, spokeswoman Amanda Ford said. Because of the suspect's criminal history, his fingerprints and DNA already are on file.

State prison records show the man has spent four terms in prison since 1980 for rape, arson and robbery, all from Franklin County.

A jury convicted him in 1984 of the rapes of two women at gunpoint the previous year. Court records show he climbed through their windows and attacked them in their bedrooms, shielding their eyes with his hand. In both cases, he threatened to harm their sleeping daughters if they did not cooperate.

Those circumstances are similar to some of this year's attacks.

The 1983 victims couldn't identify their attacker in court, but police linked the man to the assaults using fingerprints and other evidence. He spent 19 years in prison.

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