



Game Theory 101: The Murder of Kitty Genovese

William Spaniel

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New York City. 1964. Winter. 3 am. Twenty-eight year old Kitty Genovese was wrapping up a late night shift as a bar manager. She got into her car and headed back to her apartment.

Kitty never made it back. After she parked her car, a stranger named Winston Moseley stabbed her as she approached the building. Kitty yelled for help. Mosley ran off.

No one came to her rescue. Bleeding out, Kitty crawled into a hallway, but a locked door prevented her from advancing any further. Mosley eventually returned, stabbed her, and raped her before finally fleeing the scene for good. Almost an hour later, an ambulance finally arrived, but Kitty died before reaching the hospital.

Days later, a New York Times reporter discovered that many witnesses saw the murder but did not call the police. Psychology textbooks blame this on the "bystander effect" and situational paralysis. But in this Game Theory 101 parable, William Spaniel shows how nice people rationally do not call the police on occasion. The witnesses, caught in coordination problem, ignore the situation because they believe someone else will make the phone call for them.

The Murder of Kitty Genovese shows how the coordination problem works from a game theoretical perspective. It also proves that the police are less likely to receive a phone call as the number of witnesses increases and that punishing allegedly irresponsible bystanders does not fully resolve the problem.

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