

The Nurse Who Pioneered Criminal Profiling

By Maureen Georgiadis, RN



Imagine starting out as a nurse and seeing your career extend beyond the hospital to help catch serial killers. Nurses do incredible work caring for patients and improving health outcomes. With their skills and training, nurses can make a difference in extraordinary ways beyond traditional settings. One such nurse is Ann Wolbert Burgess, Professor of Psychiatric Mental Health Nursing at Boston College Connell School of Nursing (Cold Case Foundation). Her extensive research on rape victims led to the cofounding of the first hospital-based crisis counseling program and her later collaboration with the FBI to develop criminal profiling still used today.

United with co-researcher Lynda Lytle Holmstrom, they conducted research regarding rape victims. They interviewed the victims, assessed their experiences, and turned those experiences into concrete data. By quantifying the psychological stages of recovery, a framework was developed to help juries understand victim testimony (Amar, 2026). The other nurses at the hospital took an interest in what they were doing, so they taught them how to interview victims and established the first rape crisis intervention program at Boston City Hospital. (McSpedon, 2026)

Their research caught the FBI's attention, and Ann found herself at Quantico,

teaching Behavioral Science agents how to conduct interviews and research to develop offender profiles. Investigators excelled at investigating but lacked research training, and interviews focused on what happened rather than why. Ann recognized connections between childhood development, psychiatric patterns, and victimology. She used her observational skills to teach the Behavioral Unit how to interview victims for pertinent details and to code variables to reveal patterns. Most agents were male and unfamiliar with communicating with rape victims. Agents John D. Douglas and Robert Ressler relied on Ann's guidance. (Amar, 2026; McSpedon, 2026)

Together, the three of them developed a foundation for criminal profiling. They studied the motives and methods of 36 killers. The killers were placed into different categories that ranged from people who committed organized, premeditated crimes to people who committed disorganized, impulsive crimes. They developed profiles of individual killers that helped authorities hunt them down. They were also the first to examine the connection between a killer's crimes and past trauma. (Piccotti, 2024)

Since then, Ann has been involved with various high-profile cases. Some of her cases include Jon B. Simonis, Louisiana's "Ski Mask Rapist"; John Joubert, an assistant scout master who killed three young boys; Brian Dugen, a rapist and serial killer active between 1983 and 1985; The Mendez Brothers; and Bill Cosby. (Piccotti, 2024)

Ann has written several books, including *Expert Witness: The Weight of Our Testimony When Justice Hangs in the Balance* and *A Killer by Design: Murderers, Mindhunters, and My Quest to Decipher the Criminal Mind*. (Boston College Connell School of Nursing). She is still teaching

multiple courses at Boston College Connell School of Nursing, including Victimology, Forensic Science, Mental Health, and case studies in Forensics and Forensic Science Lab. On top of that, she is also involved in research involving elder abuse, nursing homes, cyberstalking, and internet sex crimes. She has been the recipient of multiple awards, including the Sigma Theta Tau International Audrey Hepburn Award, the American Nurses' Association Hildegard Peplou Award, and the Sigma Theta Tau International Episteme Laureate Award. (Boston College Connell School of Nursing)

Ann Wolbert Burgess is an influential nurse whose groundbreaking research and teaching have shaped both modern criminal profiling and the nursing profession. Through her leadership, victims, students, investigators, and colleagues have benefited from her dedication to expanding the scope of nursing. ■

Reference List

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