

Getting Away With Murder: The National Crisis of Cold-Case Homicides

By **James M. Adcock** | March 20, 2017

The murder rate in 2016 was up nationally. But that's not the worst of it. The unsolved rate of homicides is also on the rise.

That means every year, there are more people who get away with murder than the year before.

Between 1980 and 2014, according to data I compiled from the FBI's annual Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) and the Bureau's Supplemental Homicide Reports, we accumulated well over 230,355 unresolved homicides. Nationwide, police agencies on average clear—where an arrest is made—about 62% of the cases, which means that over one third of those cases remain unsolved. Sadly, for 2016, there are indications this clearance number will drop below that percentage to its lowest in our nation's history.

This isn't justice. It is also not good for public safety.

Those who kill will continue to commit violent crimes, perhaps even more homicides, until they are arrested and convicted. At the same time, relatives of the victims will continue to suffer as long as those who took their loved ones from them remain unidentified and un-caught—a population that is likely to grow.

That's why authorities must make resolving these cold cases as much of a priority as solving the "hot" ones. If we are going to successfully address this problem, we cannot do just one without the other.

The national figures for unresolved homicides are alarming, but they look even more disturbing at the local level. To take some random examples, listed by order of magnitude:

- **Chicago—9,757**
- **Detroit—7,500**
- **Washington DC—3,884**
- **Philadelphia—3,392**
- **Phoenix—2,136**
- **St Louis—1,629**
- **Memphis, TN—1,480**
- **Birmingham, AL—1,364**
- **Nashville—1,213**

And these just reflect the figures for 1980-2014. The nationwide numbers continued to grow in 2015 and 2016.

Focusing on the problem of open homicide cases means that law enforcement leaders must first identify the unresolved homicides still on their books. That seems obvious, but in fact, many police chiefs have no idea how many cases exist in their jurisdiction.

Yes, you read that correctly. How can this be the case?

First, they are concentrating their efforts more on the present than the past. Smaller agencies might justifiably claim they are constrained by budget or staffing issues, but for the larger ones cold cases just do not have the same priority as more recent homicides.

In fact, avoiding the cold cases only makes their problems worse.

Second, they also must come to understand that by resolving cold cases they will in turn take bad actors off the streets who are committing other crimes. This is accomplished by creating a dedicated cold case team trained on how to properly conduct a cold case investigation.

A dedicated cold case team is defined as a team that does nothing else but investigate unresolved homicides. The team members should not be introduced to—or brought in—to investigate the hot cases that occur on a regular basis.



Photo by The Whiteness via Flickr

The national figures for unresolved homicides look even more disturbing at the local level.

Finally, the over-reliance on technology can actually impede quick resolution of these cases. Research suggests that good, old-fashioned detective work can solve more cases than resorting to poring over physical evidence like DNA.

Have our officials bought into the CSI effect?

Cold case detectives tell me that if there isn't a DNA "hit" or other evidence that comes back from their crime laboratory which is positive for the identification of a perpetrator, then the case is not pursued further.

Have our officials bought into the CSI effect? This type of approach is wrong and it's making the matter worse. Technology is no silver bullet. If it were, we would not be suffering the huge backlog of unresolved murders that we face today.

For the sake of justice, and the surviving family members, we should demand that our police agencies properly address this problem with dedicated cold case teams that have received specialized training into the nuances of investigating decades old homicides.

If they don't, the unresolved homicides and an untold number of surviving victims will continue to increase by the thousands each year. It's a national crisis that can no longer be ignored.

James M. Adcock, PhD, a retired US Army CID agent, and a former Chief Deputy Coroner of Investigations in Columbia, Richland County, SC, has spent the past 19 years specializing in cold case homicides by training law enforcement, researching, and reviewing cold cases for agencies around the U.S. He has written two books one on [Cold Case Investigations](https://www.amazon.com/Cold-Cases-Evaluation-Strategies-Investigators/dp/1482221446/ref=sr_1_3?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1489724077&sr=1-3&keywords=james+adcock) (https://www.amazon.com/Cold-Cases-Evaluation-Strategies-Investigators/dp/1482221446/ref=sr_1_3?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1489724077&sr=1-3&keywords=james+adcock) and the other on [Death Investigation](https://www.amazon.com/Death-Investigations-2nd-James-Adcock/dp/1533174369/ref=sr_1_12?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1489724077&sr=1-12&keywords=james+adcock) (https://www.amazon.com/Death-Investigations-2nd-James-Adcock/dp/1533174369/ref=sr_1_12?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1489724077&sr=1-12&keywords=james+adcock), both second editions. Last month, he presented the results of a 15-month study on the status of unresolved homicides to the American Academy of Forensic Sciences. He welcomes comments from readers.

Load Comments