

Murder on Hold: Rural Cops Need Help to Solve Rising Cold-Case Backlogs

By James M. Adcock | May 25, 2017



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In an [earlier column](https://thecrimereport.org/2017/04/04/why-police-units-dedicated-to-solving-old-murders-help-prevent-new-ones/) for *The Crime Report*, I wrote that the number of unresolved or “cold case” homicides accumulating around the country represents a major public safety challenge.

Since 1980, the national total of such cases has grown to more than 240,000—and with present clearance rates of about 61%-62%, the number of unresolved homicides nationwide is increasing by 6,000 to 7,000 each year.

I suggested that one way to tackle the cold case issue is to form “dedicated” cold case teams.

But for smaller departments, that represents a significant challenge. A research project I completed in 2016, entitled “[Cold Cases: An Exploratory Study of the Status of Unresolved Homicides in the USA](http://www.investigativesciencesjournal.org/article/view/17644/11423),” found that of those agencies which reported having cold cases but do not have a cold case team, 83% of them were departments with less than 100 sworn officers.

That should concern all of us. The evidence suggests that resolving these cold cases saves lives and reduces crime by getting criminals off the streets.

In smaller jurisdictions, the public safety challenge represented by these cold cases is no less serious. But even with the best will in the world, the kind of multi-disciplinary team I suggested is often beyond their reach—because of lack of adequate staffing, lack of funding, or both.

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More tax dollars allocated to crime labs would help turn around evidence more quickly, especially considering that it can take more than 12 months in some jurisdictions to process DNA evidence. But a smart way to tackle the larger manpower and funding issues felt most keenly in smaller jurisdictions would be forming regional cold case teams with surrounding agencies.

Police have successfully used “Multi-Agency Task Forcing” for decades to combat drugs, gangs, human trafficking, and locating fugitives. Why not use the same multi-agency task forcing concept to investigate cold cases?

Here are two ways such a task force can be structured, the first using combined police agencies themselves; and the second by working through District Attorneys’ offices.

The Police Agency Model

City and county agencies can easily form their own multi-agency cold case team where the burden of manpower and even funds can be evenly distributed and not bankrupt one single agency.

One department will have to take the lead, but the contributions should be equally distributed based on size of the agencies, number of cases involved and the availability of funding. Consideration should also be given to including the State Police in cases where broader powers and jurisdictions are involved—or even to including a federal representative such as the FBI.

A good example of such a state-sponsored regional unit can be found in the Grand Rapids area of Michigan where the team is configured with multiple agencies and run by a Michigan State Police detective. According to the team leader, 18 murders have been solved through this process between 2007 and 2016—which is a satisfactory figure for a good working unit.

The District Attorney Model

A significant number of district attorneys (DA) in this country have legal jurisdiction over several counties that include multiple police agencies. Under the leadership of the DA, each police department in his/her jurisdiction can provide a representative to the cold case team to supplement the DA’s investigative staff.

Each team member brings with them his or her department’s own cold-case homicides. Consolidating them will maximize efforts.

This concept has already had successful roll-outs in places like [Orange County](http://www.ocreger.com/2016/07/18/these-investigators-get-results-on-very-cold-cases-deliver-long-delayed-justice) (<http://www.ocreger.com/2016/07/18/these-investigators-get-results-on-very-cold-cases-deliver-long-delayed-justice>), FL, and [Hamilton County](http://www.chattanooga.com/cold-case-unit.html) (<http://www.chattanooga.com/cold-case-unit.html>) (Chattanooga), TN. Data available so far from the Hamilton County program shows that nine cold cases have been resolved in the last few years—again an impressive result.

If such regional teams didn’t exist, the likelihood of any cold cases begin resolved would be slim to none.

Can either the regional law enforcement or DA model work in other parts of the country?

It is time to stop chasing our tails reactively by putting out fires, from one hot homicide to another.

I believe it can. Dedicated teams enable jurisdictions to attack the cold-case problem at both ends of the spectrum—hot cases and cold cases—at the same time. That’s as much of a priority for smaller jurisdictions as for larger ones.

It is time to be pro-active, and to stop chasing our tails reactively by putting out fires, from one hot homicide to another.

Working them from both ends will reduce the number coming in the door, and help create a better and safer environment for all— which will in turn restore confidence in local police.

The research makes clear that in jurisdictions with populations of less than 100,000 and/or departments with less than 100 sworn officers, there is very little effort to resolve the problem.

So why not consolidate efforts?

Any effort to resolve cold, unresolved homicides is worth applauding. But, as we know from experience and research, without a “dedicated” team, properly trained in the nuances of cold case investigations and utilizing an organized process that maximizes effectiveness, the effort is counter-productive. Time is being wasted.

A colleague of mine who works on a non-dedicated cold case team related that about 70% of the cases he works on come either through news media inquiries or from a family’s request through the police command and staff.

Research tells us that this is the least likely method to bring about a successful resolution; yet we do it all the time.

It’s time to think differently.

James M. Adcock, PhD, a retired US Army CID agent, a former Chief Deputy Coroner of Investigations in Columbia, Richland County, SC, and a former Tenured Professor at the University of New Haven, 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) 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), both second editions. He also lectures on cold case investigations at the Dutch Police Academy, Apeldoorn, the Netherlands. Readers’ comments are welcome.

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