

Why Solving Old Murders Can Help Prevent New Ones

By James M. Adcock | April 4, 2017



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When “hot” and “cold” cases are handled by the same detectives in a police department, both types of investigations suffer.

I wrote recently (<https://thecrimereport.org/2017/03/20/getting-away-with-murder-the-national-crisis-of-cold-case-homicides/>) in *The Crime Report* that the number of cold-case homicides is rising across the country at the same time as violent crime is increasing—a parallel that is not just a coincidence. According to data I compiled from various sources, the number of unsolved homicides since 1980 reached 230,355 by 2014—and indications are that the number has continued to rise through 2016.

That figure represents a threat to public safety, if you consider the possibility that even a small percentage of those un-caught murderers may find new victims.

Solving this crisis requires police agencies to create a “dedicated” unit that only handles issues related to their cold cases, and is not brought into a “hot” investigation when a new homicide occurs.

Why is that important? And, given the strain on many police budgets, can it be done?

The answer to the first question should be self-evident. In newly reported homicides, the situation is evolving quickly as an investigation proceeds—especially if officers are required to address the immediate threat of a perpetrator who may present a clear and present danger.

The nuances of a cold case are different. There’s plenty of time to carefully read and evaluate the documented evidence. There isn’t the constant push from supervisors and mayors—not to mention the media and members of the victim’s family—to clear the case.

Moreover, many of the relationships of the actors in a cold-case investigation have changed, and that could produce more and better information. There may also be physical evidence that hasn't been evaluated in years. There's no hurry: This case isn't going anywhere until you do something about it.

The only pressure that exists with cold-case investigations comes from either the investigator's own personal standards, or a supervisor pushing for clearances.

Ideally, a cold-case unit should consist of at least two primary detectives, a supervisory detective, a crime analyst, a dedicated prosecutor, and at least one person who can provide administrative support. My most recent research, presented in February at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences (not yet published), has shown that having a prosecutor assigned to the cold case unit significantly increases the chances of a proper resolution.

The problem with many newly formed cold-case units is that the two assigned detectives end up being the only members of the unit, and therefore spend excessive amounts of time doing administrative functions. If they had a little support, they could do what they do best: investigate.

Many jurisdictions have no idea how many cold cases exist on their docket.

What about the cost? The fact is, a dedicated cold-case unit can help a department arrange its priorities in a more efficient way.

Many jurisdictions have no idea how many cold cases exist on their docket. Identifying them and then organizing them according to a standard formula can help establish an efficient workflow. The most solvable ones should obviously lead the file. One colleague has suggested putting female victims first because they present the highest return for the presence of physical evidence.

Conducting a "triage" of the files based first on the availability of physical evidence, then on those where suspects have been identified, followed by cases where much more work is needed to develop either suspects and/or evidence, is both cost-effective and time-effective.

Technology is changing rapidly. That's why physical evidence that has not been tested in the last three to five years should be re-tested.

Efficiency is further assured by proper supervision. Case progress needs to be reviewed regularly to ensure all viable leads are followed, and to prevent tunnel vision—such as becoming fixated on a person or theory unsupported by the evidence.

Without good supervisory oversight, mistakes are inevitable. I have seen cases where persons of interest were named in the case file as the perpetrator(s). Yet after ten years, they still had not been interviewed— not even once.

Sometimes we can't see the forest for the trees. Having another set of eyes is always helpful. Research published in 2003 by Robert Keppel^[1] on serial killer cases identified many examples of cases where the perpetrator's name was most likely already in the case file during the first 30 days of the investigation.

Just as importantly, a separate cold-case unit ensures that it will not be held to the same rapid "clearance" standard by which other detectives are measured.

Due to the volume of the information in cold cases, which inevitably necessitates more time spent in reviewing, cold-case detectives need more latitude. They should not be expected to produce quick results.

When should police give up on a cold case? Ideally, never.

That's important to ensure sustainability. The fact that unsolved homicides that have been lingering in the file for years means it now takes a lot more patient and painstaking detective work to finally close them; supervisors should set more flexible standards, backed up by the documentation of every actions taken to solve the case.

When should police give up on a cold case? Ideally, never. But realistically, once all viable leads have been exhausted, it's time to move on. Not all homicides are solvable.

The ability of the cold case unit to be sustainable over time will go a long way towards getting killers off the streets and helping families move on.

And by implication, it will make a major contribution to public safety.

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) 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. In February, 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.

[1](#_ftnref1) Keppel, Robert D. and William J. Birnes; 2003. The Psychology of Serial Killer Investigations. Academic Press. San Diego, CA.

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