



Homicide Investigation Assistance

In 1965, the national homicide clearance rate was 91 percent. Unmatched over the past 45 years, the rate has plummeted to hover between 61 percent in 2006 and 2007 to a high of 66.6 percent in 2009, and since 1990, has never exceeded 67 percent. A third of all homicides reported over the past two decades go unsolved.

Research findings are decidedly mixed when attempting to explain the low closure rate. Under the circumstance-result hypothesis, solvability rates are substantially impacted by factors beyond the control of law enforcement with offense locations, witness reluctance, and increasing stranger-on-stranger violence often cited as frustrating elements. Keppel and Weis determined that increases in time and distance among evidence sites (victim last seen, initial victim/offender contact, initial assault/kidnap, murder, and body disposal) negatively affected closure rates. Getting witnesses to come forward is difficult when “snitches get stitches” and the “code of the street” requires personal retaliation for perceived slights.

The effort-result hypothesis, in turn, suggests that factors with law enforcement control can positively affect closure rates. In a homicide clearance study that examined 798 homicides in four large American cities during 1994 and 1995, Wellford and Cronin identified 51 factors that were significantly and positively associated with closing a homicide investigation. In “Clearing Up Homicide Clearance Rates,” 37 of those factors were within the control of law enforcement. Indirectly supporting the first 48 hours axiom, many of the 37 factors worked to build a rapid, quality response composed of uniform and investigative personnel.

A recent Federal Bureau of Investigation survey of 55 departments reporting more than 25 homicides annually disclosed that workload, prompt case reviews, standardized car-stop and neighborhood canvass forms, and investigative/forensic tools such as polygraphing, bloodstain, pattern, and statement analysis, were associated with higher clearance rates. (See “Homicide Investigations: Identifying Best Practices” by Timothy Keel.)

Current Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) programs are based on the effort-result hypothesis and are directed toward improving the quality and outcomes of homicide investigations. The intent of these programs is to identify the characteristics of high-quality investigations for agencies seeking to improve their investigative response to homicide. BJA believes that consistent high-quality investigations will support police legitimacy, avoid wrongful convictions, and ensure that offenders are identified and prosecuted. In addition, BJA believes that investigative personnel can play a more important role in preventing crime. Investigators,

including homicide detectives, have skillsets and collect information that extend beyond closing specific cases to assisting develop and enforcement crime control strategies.

Institute for Intergovernmental Research (IIR)

BJA and IIR have assembled a cadre of experienced homicide investigators, supervisors, and law enforcement executives to process map homicide investigations of high-clearance rate agencies on those murders where the suspect is not immediately known. Upon request, IIR will also provide technical assistance under the Major Case Investigative Team (MCIT) project. MCIT, based on the St. Louis Major Case Squad, is a multi-agency/mutual aid response to serious cases and is particularly helpful for small agencies working complex, difficult homicides. The expected completion date for the process mapping report is April 2013. MCIT training and technical assistance is ongoing for the life of the project.

International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP)

BJA and IACP are working with subject matter experts to develop a publication for agencies determined to conduct high-quality homicide investigations. This publication, "Homicide: Investigation to Closure—The Chief's Role," will guide executives and managers as they develop performance measures, analyze resource needs, and communicate to their agency and community that investigations are thorough, impartial, and consistent with the ideals of a democratic society. The publication date is projected for Summer 2013.

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Additional Reading

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