



D36 The Police Detective in the United States: A Retrospective and Prospective Analysis of Crime Detection and Criminal Investigation

Robert Meesig, PhD, Grand Valley State University, Department of Criminal Justice, 401 West Fulton, Grand Rapids, MI 49504; and Frank Horvath, PhD*, Michigan State University, 512 Baker Hall, School of Criminal Justice, East Lansing, MI 48824

Attendees will learn what the best research and literature reveals about the historical development of the role and activities of detectives in U.S. police agencies. How that role and those activities have changed over time, and what the future holds for detective work in the light of changes in policing and the forensic sciences, will be discussed. The challenge of “new” crimes and new approaches to detectives’ investigative modes will provide the participant with a historically grounded perspective with which to consider the direction of detective work.

This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by providing perspective on the use, value, and role of forensic evidence as those have evolved over time in the work of police detectives.

As the historian Marc Bloch has pointed out, “Misunderstanding of the present is the inevitable consequence of ignorance of the past.” Or, as expressed in different words by Eddie in the movie, *Barbershop* – “You can’t get respect unless you know your history.”

It is within this context that the history and the role of the police detective is examined in society. Detectives of today essentially “get no respect,” partially because of the misconceptions that prevail about them in the media, in society, and, indeed, even amongst police officers themselves. By focusing on the historical development of the police detective, a better understanding of their current role is gained and, more importantly, the ability to chart a course for the future of the detective and the police criminal investigation process.

In this paper the authors address four fundamental questions. The first is: “Where Are We Today?” In response, a brief overview of crime, the agencies responsible for investigations, and the current role of detectives are given. The second question, “How Did We Get Here?” is answered by reviewing pertinent literature and research assessments regarding the changes over time in the detective’s role; the authors combine this account with material drawn from the policing, forensic science, and fictional detective literature. The third question: “Where Are We Going?” is answered by an examination of what is really known about the current situation extrapolated to where detective work seems to be headed. The fourth question, perhaps the most important, is: “Where Do We Want to Go?” Here, the authors draw upon lessons learned from the history of detective work to project what will be necessary in order to deal more effectively with the crime-related investigative challenges of the future.

In addressing the issues of interest most criminal behavior is conceptualized as a process consisting of a continuum of five temporal phases. There is first a crime Planning phase. This is followed by an Action phase, the time in which the crime is committed. After the Action phase, there is an Escape phase, during which the offender leaves the scene of the crime. The offender then enters a Fugitive phase, the time period between crime commission and when the offender is apprehended or the statute of limitation for the crime expires. Additionally, in many types of crime, there is a Disposal phase, in which the offender disposes of the fruits of the crime (i.e., sells stolen property, consumes illegally purchased drugs, etc.).

The conceptual framework of the crime continuum model can be expanded for different types of crime by describing each phase of an offender’s activities in terms of time (the amount of time an offender may spend in each phase for various types of crimes) and space (types of spatial areas such as a home, neighborhood, or workplace in which the offender may spend time). Additionally, the various sources of crime information (people and things) that might be available within the time frames and spatial areas of each crime phase can be inferred. Because it is information and its availability, quality and susceptibility to useful processing that is, at core, the driving mechanism for investigative activity, the stages of the conceptual model permit an examination of future prospects.

The presentation is closed with an overview of “new” challenges for the detective. An example is costly and socially devastating “political” crime, such as espionage and terrorism. Reactive bureaucracies will be forced to expand investigative goals and activities to include prevention and detection of crime, aside from merely reacting to it. Although detectives will always be expected to respond to reported crimes, their style and efforts will have to be expanded and enhanced in order to include proactive seeking of information, in both overt and covert ways. In many ways, this change is a completion of a circle from the present to the past in the world of the detective.

Detectives, Policing, Criminal Investigation