



Breakfast Seminars - 2017

BS4 Cold Cases: An Exploratory Study of the Status of Unresolved Homicides in the United States

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After attending this presentation, attendees will have a better understanding of the status of unresolved homicides in the United States. More specifically, attendees will: (1) realize the total number of unresolved homicides in the country is far greater than previously believed and is increasing each year; (2) understand how each jurisdiction varies in their own definition of what constitutes a “cold” case; (3) see the varying degrees of perspectives as to what does and does not solve cold cases; and, (4) be more informed as to the status and influence of the unidentified dead and missing persons in our system and how this relates to open homicides.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by providing information new to this forum that will hopefully guide future decision making as it relates to: (1) the funding and efforts put forth toward the investigation of not only the unresolved homicides, but also the “hot” cases that are presently being investigated; and, (2) how we can improve the manner in which we are investigating the unidentified dead.

In 2010, *ScrippsNews* reported that from 1980 to 2008, based on Uniform Crime Report (UCR) clearance data, the United States had accumulated nearly 185,000 unresolved homicides.¹ Until now, that figure had not been validated or refuted. In the fall of 2015, an exploratory study was initiated that consisted of three phases: Phase I — survey law enforcement agencies regarding the status of their unresolved homicides; Phase II — survey the coroners and medical examiners concerning the status of their unidentified dead; and, Phase III — perform an analysis of the UCR clearance data for homicides from 1980 to 2014.

Phase I: Utilizing Survey Monkey®, solicitations were emailed to 10,500 law enforcement agencies. After a 90-day solicitation period, approximately 1,230 responses were received. After culling out those with inconsistent or incomplete information, the survey concluded with 992 responses that were demographically balanced as to population, department sizes, and geographic location.

Some of the overall findings suggest that approximately 73% reported the “lack of investigative leads” as the primary reason for a case going cold; 56% of the agencies said they have cold cases, yet only 19% of those have a dedicated cold case team consisting primarily of one to two detectives; and only about 24% of the teams have a prosecutor assigned to the team, while very few utilize the services of an analyst.

In rating the importance of factors contributing to solving cold cases, DNA was first, followed by interviewing skills of the detectives, detective decisions, cooperation of witnesses, availability of witnesses, latent prints, and other physical evidence. It was not surprising to see DNA identified as the leading solvability factor for cold cases, but this is contrary to what the research tells us about ongoing homicide investigations where DNA’s role is minimal compared to detective decisions.²⁻⁴ A further review and analysis of this data with significant correlations will be provided.

Unresolved Homicides, Unidentified Dead, Death Investigation

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