



Breakfast Seminars — 2019

BS8 The National Institute of Justice (NIJ) Cold Case Working Group and Its Best Practices Guide for Implementing and Sustaining a Cold Case Unit in Police Agencies: A Path Forward to Solving the Cold Case Crisis

James M. Adcock, PhD, Collierville, TN 38017; Thomas C. McAndrew, MA*, Pennsylvania State Police, Orefield, PA 18069; Charles M. Heurich, MFS*, National Institute of Justice, Washington, DC 20531*

Learning Overview: After attending this presentation, attendees will better understand the status of cold case investigations in the United States and be more familiar with the recommendations found in the newly published NIJ Best Practices guide for implementing and sustaining a cold case unit in police agencies.¹ Attendees will also be aware of how these guidelines will affect ongoing homicide and cold case investigations and will be presented with a novel approach, utilizing experience and donated funds, along with the NIJ guide's recommendations, to help these police agencies implement and sustain the process, furthering the intent of the NIJ cold case guide.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community primarily by outlining recommendations that will help police agencies better address the cold case crisis in America. Attendees will see research-supported concepts along with application guidelines on how to create, implement, and sustain a proper cold case unit. This process, coupled with the efforts of a community-based non-profit corporation, will produce maximum effectiveness through the solving of more cold cases while at the same time increasing the clearances of other homicides. The example given should be an incentive for other communities to follow.

From 1980 to 2016, the United States accumulated more than 242,000 cold cases or unresolved homicides.² Then, in 2016, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) reported our national clearance rate of homicides at 59.4%, the lowest in our history, while many cities saw a significant rise in homicide incidents.³ These unsolved homicides have, for the most part, just been added to the cold case status that is rising by the thousands each year.

In 2015, the NIJ started the Cold Case Working Group with the intent of formulating a “best practices” guide for the implementation and sustainment of a cold case unit in police departments. (At this writing, the NIJ document is scheduled to be published in the fall of 2018.) For many years prior to this working group, NIJ had funded millions of dollars for agencies to work cold cases through their (NIJ) DNA Cold Case Grants. While they were productive, it became clear that more research and work was needed to make the system better; therefore, the working group.

While there are approximately 50 recommendations in this manual, this presentation will only highlight certain ones that appear to have the most impact on police decision-making regarding their attempts to solve cold cases. The latest draft of the guide explicitly states that we are in a “cold case crisis”; that agencies must conduct a complete inventory of all unresolved cases along with associated evidence; that only a “dedicated” unit will provide maximum effectiveness with increased clearances; that the use of “vetted” outside sources are important to saving time and manpower; and, as a path forward, that sustaining the unit over time is critical to the solving of homicides and cold cases on a regular basis.³

Many police agencies suffer from manpower losses and insufficient funds to even consider implementing a sustainable cold case unit. These are all obstacles for the police supervisors to overcome. The first and foremost decision must be a commitment to have a “dedicated” cold case unit. Then, if the guide is to be a productive document, how does an agency get over the hump regarding manpower and funding and manage to sustain a viable unit? Hopefully, the funding from NIJ for cold cases will be reinstituted, but experience has shown that many times after the funds are depleted (one to two years), the cold case unit is dismantled, which defeats the “sustainment” intent of the process.

Detectives spend approximately 60% of their time conducting administrative duties. That, coupled with manpower shortages, can be partially resolved through the “vetting” of outside sources, such as retired detectives, professors, other professionals from the community, and grad students. These sources should come from the community at large and, when vetted by the police agency, can accomplish most of the administrative tasks that detectives would normally perform, leaving them to do what they do best—investigate.

Lastly, a community-based non-profit such as the Mid-South Cold Case Initiative could be a partial solution to the sustainment concern by funding the cold case unit over time. This corporation was specifically designed to raise funds in the mid-south that are earmarked specifically for police agencies to fund a dedicated cold case unit.

In conclusion, the design of the best practices guide is geared to help police agencies to not only grasp the concept of investigating cold cases for justice, families, and the safety of our communities, but to also prevent some communities from having a crisis that will drain their resources to the limits. The process of investigating cold cases is an intricate part of the equation to solving homicides while attacking the issue from both ends of the spectrum simultaneously, hot and cold.

Reference(s):

- ^{1.} National Institute of Justice (NIJ). *National Best Practices for Implementing and Sustaining a Cold Case Investigation Unit*. Latest draft April 2018.
- ^{2.} Murder Accountability Project, www.murderdata.org; accessed last July 2018.
- ^{3.} UCR 2016, www.FBI.gov; accessed July 2018.

Cold Cases, Unresolved Homicides, Best Practices