Strategies to Improve Homicide Investigations and Increase Clearance Rates

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CAPTAIN BRIAN RUSSELL (RETIRED)
Objectives of This Webinar

- Learn about proven strategies for investigating homicides and improving clearance rates based on the collective experience of seven law enforcement agencies
- Discuss the relationship of homicide investigators with other law enforcement units and prosecutors
- Identify resources available for homicide investigators and law enforcement executives at the local and state levels
- Examine the critical tasks during the first 48 hours of a homicide investigation
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Findings from two BJA homicide technical assistance projects at law enforcement agencies showed that each agency had high homicide rates and very low clearance rates.

- With these two projects, we learned what did not work.

This prompted BJA to ask: What are law enforcement agencies with high homicide clearance rates doing to achieve that success?
CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATION OF THE HOMICIDE PROCESS MAPPING PROJECT

- Purpose: Identify best practices in homicide investigations that will result in an increase in quality homicide investigations and homicide clearances
- Identify investigative practices that were consistent across multiple agencies (this adds validity and reliability)
- Identify critical factors in the first 48 hours of the investigation that lead to a clearance
AGENCY SELECTION CRITERIA

- Geographically representative law enforcement agencies
- Both municipal and county agencies
- Had at least 24 homicides in 2011
- Had a clearance rate of 80 percent or higher
AGENCIES SELECTED

- Baltimore County, Maryland, Police Department
- Denver, Colorado, Police Department
- Houston, Texas, Police Department
- Jacksonville, Florida, Sheriff’s Office
- Richmond, Virginia, Police Department
- Sacramento County, California, Sheriff’s Department
- San Diego, California, Police Department
IMPORTANT OVERARCHING FINDINGS

- Executive buy-in to the approach of homicide investigations and support of resources is essential
  - This ranges from ensuring there is an adequate overtime budget and providing organizational flexibility to support homicide investigation needs
- The fundamental role of the lead homicide investigator is changing—from “individually persistent investigator” to “communicator and information manager”
- A solid foundation of community support is essential
- The effective use of intelligence can be an important factor, particularly when the homicides are tied to criminal enterprises
The role of the patrol force in homicide investigations was expanded in agencies with high clearances
- In these agencies, first-responding patrol officers essentially began the investigation
- Providing attention and support to family members and witnesses not only supports the investigation but is also “the right thing to do”
- Successful homicide clearances can more readily be achieved when different units within the agency work cooperatively with homicide investigators
- An effective public information capability—including social media—not only aids in the investigation but also reduces the fear of crime among community members
STRATEGIC INITIATIVES AND PRACTICES

- Selection of homicide investigators
- Staffing
- Staff scheduling
- Training and professional development
- An effective community foundation
- Crime and intelligence analysis capability
- Sufficient equipment and resources
TACTICAL INITIATIVES AND PRACTICES

- Understanding the character of homicides in the jurisdiction
- Overtime funding
- Ensure that homicide investigators have sufficient committed case time
- Role of patrol/uniformed officers
- Crime scene investigators (CSI)
- Forensics laboratory
- Team approach to investigations
- Working with external agencies
TACTICAL INITIATIVES AND PRACTICES

- Fugitive squads
- District/prosecuting attorney relations
- Medical examiner
- Victim-witness advocate
- Technology investigations and analysis
- Public information
- Crimestoppers and citizen tips
Properly trained patrol officers perform and document a neighborhood canvass as soon as possible after arrival at the crime scene.

First-responding patrol officer’s “Homicide Callout Worksheet”
Valuable Tools

- Patrol Supervisor “Homicide Investigation Briefing Script”
Valuable Tools

- Timely requests for cell tower data download for the towers covering the crime scene
- Working with other relevant units and agencies provides the most productive approach
  - Violent crime units, gang and drug units, regional and federal task forces
- Resources make a difference: adequate staff vehicles, cell phone, digital camera, digital recorder, and laptop with mobile networking
**Valuable Tools**

- Crime analysts and intelligence analysts provide important information.
- Digital forensics analysis is as important as a crime lab.
- Victim-witness advocate engagement is vital.
- Crimestoppers and other methods for anonymous tips can be invaluable.
The "First 48"

- The first 48 hours after the report of a homicide are critical to clearing the homicide because:
  - Evidence is present and has experienced minimal degradation
  - Witnesses are more easily identified
  - Witness recollections are clearest and less likely to be distorted
  - The suspect is likely to still be within a reasonable proximity

- What can be done in the first 48 hours to maximize the impact of these factors?
- The project identified three distinct time intervals in the first 48 hours that have a somewhat different purpose
  - Tasks in each time interval are directed toward each interval’s purpose
**The “First 48”**

**Interval 1**
- Crime Scene Response
- Crime Scene Security
- Witness Identification
- Evidence Collection
- Crime Scene Management

**Interval 2**
- Case Management
- Focusing the Investigation
- Verification of Evidence and Witnesses

**Interval 3**
- Follow-Up on All Leads
- Follow-Up on All Evidence
- Move the Case Forward

Some Tasks Overlap Intervals
The “First 48”

- Roughly 90 specific tasks were identified to be performed in the first 48 hours—including many persons, not just homicide investigators.

- Keys are:
  - Timeliness
  - Documentation
  - Communication
  - Coordination of effort
## The “First 48”

### INTERVAL 1

**Hours 0-1**

**Patrol Supervisor**
- Serves as crime scene manager until investigators arrive
- Assigns patrol officer as crime scene scribe
- Assigns officer(s) for traffic control at scene
- Contacts child protection services if child is a witness or abandoned at scene
- Establishes a media assembly point staffed by a patrol officer that is safe and does not interfere with the investigation but is convenient (send all media representatives to that point)
- Conducts initial assessment at scene to determine whether there is gang or narcotic involvement—if so, notifies those units

**Patrol Officers**
- Render aid if needed
- Apprehend suspect if at scene
- Assess safety at scene
- Confirm death of victim
- Determine whether to request homicide to respond
- Secure crime scene—officer assigned for security
- Evaluate to determine whether possible second scene—if so, locate and secure
- Create crime scene access log
- Identify suspects and witnesses at scene
- Record weather and environmental conditions
- Ensure that chain of custody is maintained
- Document vehicles in area and check licenses/vehicle identification numbers
- Conduct neighborhood canvass
- Conduct preliminary interviews of witnesses
- Brief investigators on actions and circumstances

**Homicide Investigators**
- Arrive at scene
- Apply for search warrant if required
- Contact intelligence analyst for information needs
- Receive briefing from patrol supervisor
- Receive briefing from first-responding officer
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<tr>
<th>INTERVAL 1</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Hours 1-4</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Homicide Investigators</strong></td>
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<td>• Lead investigator assigns investigative tasks</td>
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<td>• Check with communications for related calls around time of homicide call</td>
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<td>• Establish command post if warranted by facts</td>
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<td>• Notify and brief command</td>
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<td>• Establish and confirm identity of victim</td>
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<td>• Crime scene measurements and sketch</td>
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<td>• Temporary witness relocation if warranted</td>
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<td>• Investigator and family advocate contact victim’s family</td>
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<td>• Make “all cars” broadcast of suspect as applicable</td>
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**Homicide Investigators**

• Investigator and family advocate contact victim’s family
• Locate security cameras at businesses in area—seize recordings
• Debrief with all personnel after scene is processed
• Conduct extended crime scene search if warranted
• Document victim’s predeath circumstances and facts
• Contact personnel from other units within the department who may assist (e.g., gangs)
• Contact other federal, state, and local agencies that may assist

**Crime Scene Investigators and District Attorney**

• CSIs continue to process scene
• CSIs confer with investigator after scene has been processed
• District Attorney arrives on scene (if appropriate)

**Public Information Officer (PIO)**

• Arrives at the scene
• Briefed by investigators to determine information to be released
• Prepares statement for media release
• Plans press conference as determined by circumstances
• Tweets available suspect information and community safety information

**Crime Scene Investigators and Medical Examiner**

• Medical examiner investigator (MEI) arrives at scene
• Briefs CSIs and crime scene “walkthrough”
• CSIs process scene with advice from investigators
• MEI coordinates/communicates with investigators

**Crime Scene Investigators and Medical Examiner**

• CSIs secure evidence and transport for analysis
• Medical examiner’s office removes body from scene
• Medical examiner performs autopsy
### The “First 48”

#### INTERVAL 2

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<th>Hours 8-16</th>
<th>Hours 16-24</th>
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<td><strong>Homicide Investigators</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Develop profile/description of suspect—all cars be on the lookout (BOLO)</td>
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<td>• Notify other agencies, fusion center, and PIO of suspect information</td>
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<td>• Document decedent’s medical, social, and mental health histories</td>
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<td>• Consult District Attorney on case status and evidentiary needs</td>
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<td>• Prepare case report</td>
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<td>• Notify community stakeholder organizations</td>
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<td>• Conduct second neighborhood canvass</td>
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<td>• Confer with analyst on leads</td>
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<td>• Have strategy meeting with team members to decide next steps</td>
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#### INTERVAL 3

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<th>Hours 24-36</th>
<th>Hours 36-48</th>
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<td><strong>Homicide Investigators</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Case review team meeting—identify next steps in investigation and responsibilities</td>
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<td>• Command briefing update</td>
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<td>• Temporarily assigned personnel return to unit</td>
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<td>• Reinterview family for additional information</td>
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<td>• Meet with lab analysts to discuss evidence</td>
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<td>• Verify case file is current</td>
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<td>• Meet with District Attorney and advise of case status</td>
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<td>• If no clear suspect emerges and/or if the modus operandi is distinctive, compare facts and characteristics to other cases to determine whether this is a possible repeat offender (particularly in gang-related homicides)</td>
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#### Public Information Officer (PIO)

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<td>• News release, information push, press conference</td>
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#### Digital Forensics

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<tr>
<td>• Digital forensic analyses of phones, computers, and digital storage media</td>
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#### Homicide Investigators

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<tr>
<td>• Engage fugitive/major case squad to search for suspect14</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Follow up on tips from Crime Stoppers and tip lines/Web site</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Continued contact with victim’s family by investigators and victim advocate15</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Determine whether surveillance/undercover is needed—follow department procedures, including notification of supervisor since these may require coordination with different units and/or overtime</td>
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<td>• Work suspect leads, including checking diverse information sources (e.g., phone records, credit histories, civil courts, FBI ViCAP)</td>
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CLOSING OBSERVATIONS

- Higher-quality investigations and increases in homicide clearance rates can be accomplished through policy changes that have little cost associated with them.
- The greatest challenge is changing attitudes and behaviors of personnel within the agency regarding their role in homicide investigations.
RESOURCES

- Homicide Process Mapping
- 10 Things Law Enforcement Executives Can Do to Positively Impact Homicide Investigation Outcomes
- Promoting Effective Homicide Investigations
- National Institute of Justice: Law Enforcement Investigations Website
- Milwaukee Homicide Review Commission Website
- Peer exchanges with select law enforcement agencies
QUESTION-AND-ANSWER SESSION
Strategies to Improve Homicide Investigations and Increase Clearance Rates

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