



Cold Cases: Strategies Explored at NIJ Regional Trainings

by Beth Schuster

A prisoner, up for parole in a week, is charged with raping a mother and her daughter more than 14 years ago.

Officials arrest a man for murdering 11 women between 1977 and 1993.

A man convicted of raping and murdering a 6-year-old girl is linked to an earlier sexual assault of a disabled woman.

These are just three stories shared during a series of regional cold case trainings sponsored by the National Institute of Justice (NIJ). Funded under the President's DNA Initiative and hosted by the National Forensic Science Technology Center, these trainings leverage strategies and resources to help law enforcement officers solve cold cases. During the trainings, cold case investigators share information on how to prioritize cases, conduct interviews and maximize the use of forensic technologies.

In 2007, more than 200 people participated in six NIJ-sponsored cold case trainings across the country. An expert planning group made up of law enforcement officials, forensic scientists and NIJ staff members directed development of the training topics.

In 2008, the Institute plans to hold five trainings: one under the current format and four additional trainings — complete with an interactive virtual cold case file — hosted by the Virginia Center for Policing Innovation. In addition to the trainings, which help spread promising practices from the field, NIJ has launched a multiyear effort to build, evaluate and improve the effectiveness of cold case investigations (see sidebar on page 25, "Developing an Evidence-Based Model for Cold Case Units").

According to Charles Heurich, physical scientist in NIJ's Investigative and Forensic Sciences Division, the goal of the trainings is to have an "immediate and positive impact" on the people most affected — victims and their family members. "Cold case victims are often known as the 'forgotten victims,'"

Heurich explained. “But to their families and friends, they are never forgotten.”

“You are not just solving an old rape or murder case,” he said in September 2007 at a workshop in Scottsdale, Ariz. “You are bringing answers to families.”

The Cold Case Team

A theme that echoed at the training sessions was the high value of having a full-time cold case unit within a police department. Whether the unit is made up of one detective or, as is the case in New York City, 30 detectives, it is crucial to have officers dedicated to investigating and analyzing cold cases, experts agreed.

The specific makeup of the cold case team varies from agency to agency. The Kansas City (Mo.) Police Department’s cold case squad — formed in December 2002 — consists of an experienced homicide sergeant, six senior detectives and a reserve detective. Meanwhile, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg (N.C.) Police Department has two homicide detectives, one supervisor and one FBI agent on its cold case unit. It also has a civilian review team of six volunteers who organize, review and draft summaries of cases.

Regardless of makeup, a unit’s relationship with the department is critical, said Rockne Harmon, senior deputy district attorney (retired) in Alameda County, Calif. Buy-in from the top is essential when looking to establish or maintain a cold case unit. “If the commitment doesn’t come from the top, it doesn’t come,” he added.

Greggory LaBerge, director of the Denver Police Department Crime Laboratory, noted that actively engaging crime laboratory personnel and prosecutors in the process can substantially increase the success in investigating and analyzing cold cases.

Which Cold Case?

Many departments have dozens of unsolved cold cases. The Palm Beach County (Fla.) Sheriff’s Department alone identified

DEVELOPING AN EVIDENCE-BASED MODEL FOR COLD CASE UNITS

In 2007, NIJ funded the RAND Corp. to identify factors in current cold case investigations that improve the chances of solving the crime. RAND will conduct a national survey of police and sheriffs’ departments to determine what policies and procedures are most effective in solving cold cases. RAND will also select four jurisdictions with cold case units and examine 200 cases — open and closed — per agency. It will conduct a cost-benefit analysis of cold case investigation strategies and ultimately produce an evidence-based model program for cold case units.

225-250 cold cases for review. With so many, how does an agency determine which cases to reopen?

Checklists can help a department set priorities. Factors like statutes of limitation, availability of witnesses and victims, and whether any evidence exists are assigned a point value. Cases with high point totals are considered to have a high solvability rating and thus are reopened.

The Kansas City Police Department’s checklist is separated into three categories — evidence, witnesses and suspects — each with factors that have point values. For example, evidence factors include whether the murder weapon was recovered, fingerprints were recovered and DNA analysis was requested. The factors add up to give the total “solvability” points. Such criteria and tools can help investigators whittle a large number of unsolved cases down to a more manageable number.

Asking Questions

Experts agree that once a cold case has been identified and selected for investigation, a number of questions should be considered:

- **Victim.** What were the circumstances surrounding the victim’s death? Can a motive be established for the death?
- **Witnesses.** Were there witnesses? Can they be located? If so, are they still willing to assist in prosecution? As LaBerge told participants, reinvestigating a case may cause renewed psychological trauma to the victim’s family.

INVESTIGATIVE AND FORENSIC RESOURCES

Several tools are available to support cold case units in their work.

National Crime Information Center (NCIC): This online computer and telecommunications system contains millions of property and personal records from across the U.S. During an investigation, information that cannot be obtained from an online search of NCIC may be needed. In these cases, an offline search of the database can be requested. In an offline search, personnel from the FBI's Criminal Justice Information Services can search files on boats, guns, license plates, securities, missing persons, unidentified persons, sex offenders and wanted individuals. Possible uses of an offline search include placing an individual at the scene of a crime or miles away from the scene, substantiating or discrediting an alibi, and tracking the route of an individual. For more information, see <http://www.fbi.gov/hq/cjisd/ncic.htm>.

Integrated Automated Fingerprint Identification System (IAFIS): IAFIS is a national repository of criminal history, fingerprints and photographs as well as information regarding military and select civilian employees. Maintained by the FBI, IAFIS provides positive identification based on fingerprint data (10-print and latent) and tentative identification based on person descriptors. For more information, see <http://www.fbi.gov/hq/cjisd/iafis.htm>.

National Integrated Ballistic Information Network (NIBIN): Through NIBIN, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives deploys Integrated Ballistic Identification System equipment to federal, state and local law enforcement agencies for use in imaging and comparing crime gun evidence. The equipment allows firearms technicians to get digital images and comparisons of the markings made by a firearm on bullets and cartridge casings. If a possible match emerges, firearms examiners compare the original evidence to confirm the match. For more information, see <http://www.nibin.gov>.

"A phone call from an investigator years later may not be a welcome event," he said. To help lessen the potential impact, a victim advocate accompanies Denver investigators on visits to the family.

- **Suspects.** Were any suspects identified? If so, where are they now? Has anything occurred in the suspect's life that might now cause someone to speak out?

- **Crime scene.** The original crime scene should be revisited, if possible, and attempts should be made to reconstruct the scene. Original crime scene reports, photographs, diagrams, etc., should be reviewed.
- **Physical evidence.** Physical evidence is likely the most important consideration in a cold case investigation, according to Sgt. John Jackson, supervisor of the Kansas City Police Department's cold case squad. Some questions to be considered, he said, include: What are the benefits of reexamining evidence with new technology not available at the time of the original offense? Is the evidence still available and intact? Is proper chain of custody documented for the evidence?

Investigators are urged to study original police reports, statements by witnesses or suspects, laboratory reports, autopsy reports, and other related documents and, if possible, to locate and re-interview original police officials and personnel involved in the case. Media could also be used as a resource for getting information out to the public.

'Working for the Victims'

A large portion of NIJ's cold case training is dedicated to sharing stories from the field — not only stories about solved cases, but also stories about unsolved cases. At each training, detectives from several units present the details of cold cases on which they are currently working. The goal is to help generate new investigative strategies or leads by reviewing the cases with fellow investigators ... and ultimately to help colleagues solve cases.

"We work for the victims," Jackson said. "We speak for the victims. That's why we do what we do."

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About the Author

Beth Schuster is the managing editor of the *NIJ Journal*. In June, she received a Gold Quill Award of Excellence from the International Association of Business Communicators.

For More Information

- To learn more about NIJ's regional cold case trainings and additional training resources, see <http://www.dna.gov/training>.