

Declining Homicide Clearance Rates

by Ryan Vasquez — March 24, 2009

TUSCALOOSA, AL — Homicide clearance rate is defined as the percentage of arrests made in homicide cases occurring within the same year. According to the FBI, the national homicide clearance rate, once as high as 91 percent in 1963, now rests at 61 percent as recently as 2007. With advances in forensic science, especially the emergence of DNA testing, how could clearing homicides be that much harder in this modern age? Alabama Public Radio's Ryan Vasquez takes a look at this trend and how it affects Alabama.

[Transcript]

A call comes in the early hours. A homicide has been committed.

"Two people have been shot, one was dead at the scene at an apartment complex in town." That's Lloyd Baker, commander of the Tuscaloosa County Metro Homicide Unit.

"On the way there, you start thinking about what your needs are going to be. You're going to need the crime scene unit, you're going to need extra investigators, not just the two-man on call team that typically responds to other calls. [You] start planning an investigative game plan as you're in route and getting the amount of help there that you need."

According to the national average for homicide clearance rates, this homicide has a 61 percent chance of being cleared before the end of the calendar year. This represents a 30 percent drop in the national homicide clearance rate since 1963.

Adam Lankford is an assistant professor in The University of Alabama's Department of Criminal Justice. He says there are a few reasons that explain the decline.

"People look at three main factors. Are the homicides themselves changing? Are the police getting worse at solving them? Are the criminals getting smarter at committing them?"

The greatest change may actually be the technology used to investigate homicides. Lankford believes that with improved methods of investigation comes higher expectations.

"Since technology is getting better and since crime shows like CSI suggest that clearing a homicide is just the result of hard work and being relatively intelligent, the demands are pretty high from the public to solve all crimes--but particularly homicides."

"Who Are You" by the Who--a popular rock song in its own right--graces the opening of crime drama CSI, or Crime Scene Investigations. Procedural dramas have made forensic science entertaining and more prominent in the public eye.

But does TV measure up to reality?

"They can get a DNA profile in 20 minutes on CSI--it may take us six months to a year," says Captain Baker, "and that can really slow down the pace of your investigation. You can lose a lot of momentum in six months on a murder or a rape investigation. Some of the things they do on those shows are just bordering on ridiculous."

Investigating each homicide can be time consuming on the forensic level. But law enforcement's increased reliance on DNA testing to solve crimes, especially homicides, can also slow down their investigations.

"In the last two years alone, the number of submissions of new cases has increased 36 percent." That's Angelo Della Manna, chief of forensic biology and DNA for Alabama's Department of Forensic Science.

"If we solve unsolved cases, then local agencies submit a lot more cases. They see the kind of success [with] which we can recover DNA profiles and they're submitting a lot more cases--so that adds to the backlog, which extends the time it takes to get the cases back."

Thanks to technology, cases can now be investigated well beyond the year they were committed in. That can be seen as a negative for a department's yearly homicide rate, but Captain Baker has other means of measuring success.

"A calendar year just isn't a good gauge to go by. We typically go by longer time periods--maybe ten years to see what our success rate is. In this unit we have maintained around an 83 percent clearance."

Fair or not, homicide units know their clearance rate is how they're judged in the public eye. But as Captain Baker has illustrated, there are better ways to gauge success, and perhaps public perception should focus on homicides being solved, rather than on a set time period.