

The State of Cold Case Investigations



2025 REPORT OF MICHIGAN LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES

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Introduction and Purpose

The School of Criminal Justice (SCJ) at Michigan State University (MSU) conducted a survey on cold case investigations within law enforcement agencies both nationally and in the State of Michigan. This report presents the results of the survey from responding agencies in Michigan.

Over the past three decades, there has been a growth in law enforcement agencies investigating unsolved cases previously determined to have no viable investigative leads. The motive for these efforts, in part, is to apply investigative technologies that were not previously available and insight from a different investigator to determine if new leads can be developed. However, there has been limited research examining the presence of these units, along with the structure and practices. The National Institute of Justice published a report on the best practices for implementing and sustaining cold case investigation units (Barcus et al., 2019), and this research aims to explore how practices are being implemented across agencies. An additional study was conducted by Davis et al (2015) exploring policies and practices in cold cases, and the intent of this survey was to expand on their knowledge nearly a decade later and provide insight to agencies on the efforts and practices of their peers.

Methodology

The origin of this study is a partnership between the Michigan State Police First District Cold Case Unit and the MSU SCJ to support cold case investigations. A national survey was conducted using a disproportionate random sample where 1193 agencies were surveyed. Due to the high survey response rate of Michigan agencies in the national study, the research team sent an additional round of the survey to all agencies in the State of Michigan to specifically explore their practices in cold case investigations. A total of 495 Michigan law enforcement agencies were sent the survey and asked to respond either by returning the paper copy they received or accessing an electronic copy through Qualtrics. The response rate for Michigan agencies was 41.4%, with 205 agencies returning the survey. The following summarizes the results of the cold case survey. Of the agencies that responded, almost half had between 10 and 49 sworn personnel (52.0%). An additional 31.4% of agencies reported less than 10 sworn, 9.3% reported having 50-99 sworn officers, and 7.4% reported having 100 or more.

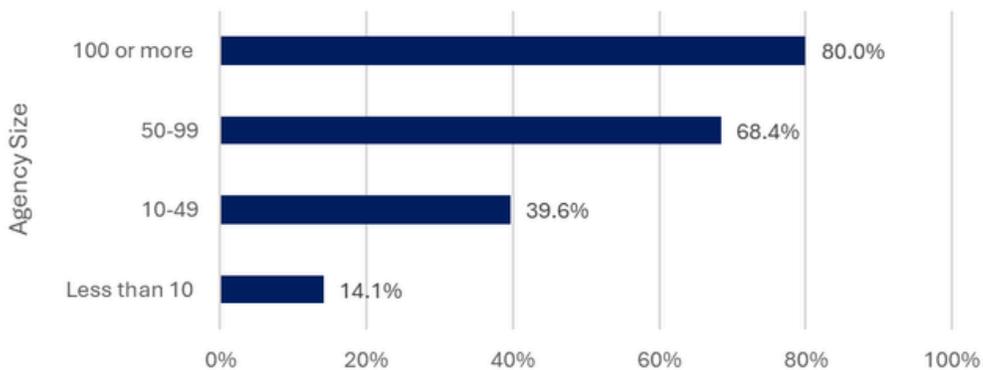
Agencies Investigating Cold Cases

The survey initially asked agencies questions regarding how homicides are investigated in their department and recent experience with investigations being designated as a cold case. Agencies were asked whether they investigate homicides in their jurisdiction or such investigations are handled by another agency. The assumption is agencies that do not investigate their own homicides are less likely to report having experience with cold case investigations. The largely majority of agencies (86.3%) reported they handle the homicide investigations within their jurisdiction.



The survey then asked agencies if they have cases that had been designated as cold cases over the last five years, with 37.1% of agencies (n=76) reporting this experience. Supporting the assumed link between in-house management of homicide investigations and cold cases, only one of the agencies reporting they designated one or more cases as cold over the last years reported their homicide cases are investigated by another agency. Furthermore, the likelihood of recent experience in designating investigations as cold cases is related to agency size (Figure 1). Agencies with more than 100 sworn personnel are most likely to report this cold case experience (80.0%), followed respectively by agencies 50-99 sworn personnel (68.4%) and agencies with 10-49 sworn personnel (39.6%). Agencies with less than 10 officers were least likely to report this cold case experience at 14.1%.

Figure 1. % Reporting a Cold Case in Last 5 Years

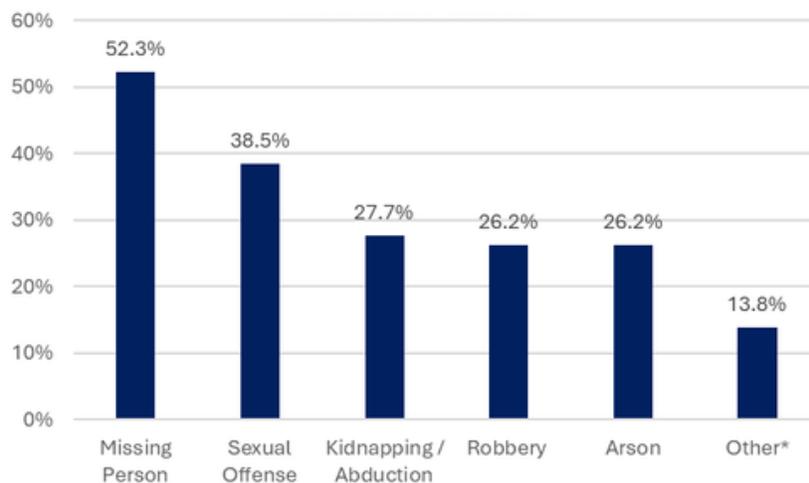


Agencies with Cold Case Experience

The 76 agencies who reported having designated investigations as cold cases in the last five years were then asked a series of additional questions on cold cases experience, the management of these investigations and practices. These 76 agencies are the basis for the remaining sections of this report. To clearly reference these agencies in the following discussion, they are defined as cold case agencies. Of these cold case agencies, 85.5% currently have a cold case within their case load.

The cold case agencies were asked what type of cases, in addition to homicide, their agency has worked as part of their cold case workload, with the responses presented in Figure 2. The most common additional crime type reported by the agencies was missing person, with 52.3% identifying this offense. Other crimes worked as cold cases included sexual offenses (38.5%), kidnappings/abductions (27.7%), robberies and arsons (both 26.2%), and other (13.8%).

Figure 2. Types of Cold Cases Agencies Have Besides Homicide Cases



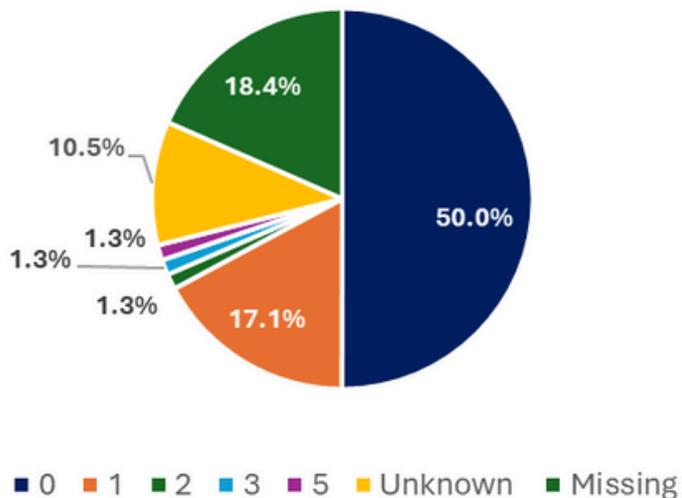
*Other: Found body parts, traffic hit and run, and assault

Agencies were also asked to indicate if they worked other types of cold cases and provide examples. Other types of cold cases were worked by 13.8% of reporting agencies. Other types of offenses included examples such as found body parts, traffic hit and runs, and assaults.

Cold case agencies were then asked how many cold cases they currently had on their caseload. Results were categorized according to agency size. Agencies with less than 10 sworn personnel reported between 0 and 2 cold cases, agencies with 10-49 sworn personnel reported between 0 and 30 cold cases, agencies with 50-100 sworn personnel reported 3-10 cold cases, and agencies with more than 100 sworn personnel reported the largest range, anywhere from 3-200.

Few of the cold case agencies reported they solved cold cases in the last 5 years. As Figure 3 illustrates, of the 76 respondents, 50% reported they had not solved a case (n=38) and another 28.9% reported they did not know or did not answer the question (n=22). Of the remaining cold case agencies, 17.1% reported they had solved one case (n=13), 1.3% responded they had solved two cases (n=1), 1.3% responded they had solved three cases (n=1), 1.3% responded they had solved five cases (n=1).

Figure 3. Number of Solved Cases in Last 5 Years



Characteristics of Cold Case Units

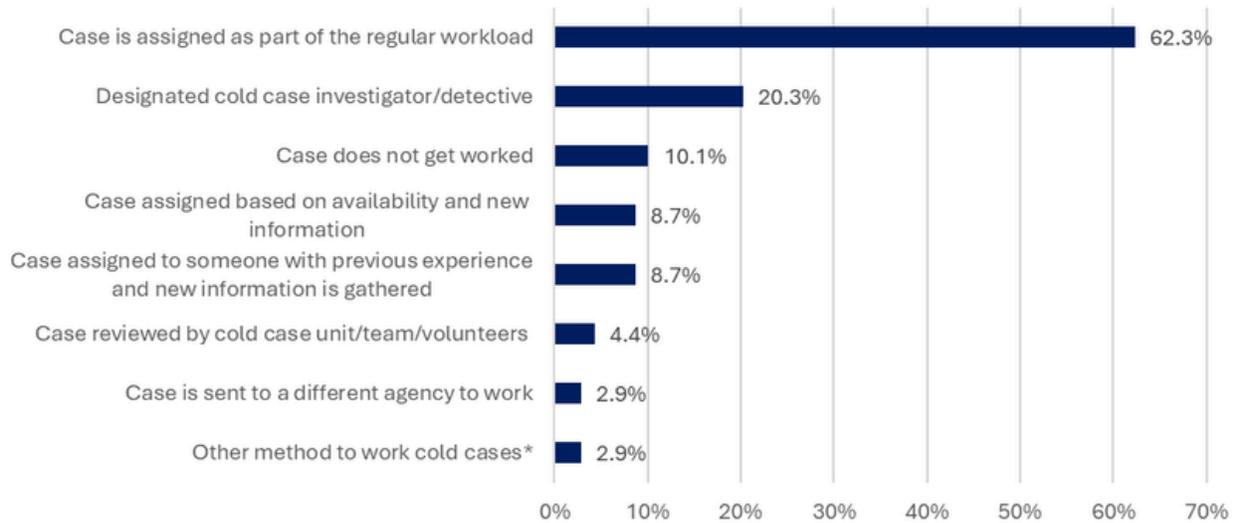
Agencies were asked if they had a designated cold case unit to work their cold cases. The overwhelming majority of agencies who responded reported they did not have a unit (92%) with only 8% reporting they had a cold case unit. When asked about staffing of their units, the agencies reporting a cold case unit indicated they used full time sworn personnel, part time sworn personnel, part time civilians, volunteers, local university interns/students, retired law enforcement, and FBI task forces.

8%

Agencies with a dedicated unit for cold case investigations.
The remaining 92% use other investigative strategies.

Figure 4 illustrates the different approaches agencies without a dedicated unit use to work cold cases. The most common approach was to assign the case as part of the regular workload (62.3%). Some agencies used a designated cold case investigator or detective (20.3%) while others stated the cases do not get worked (10.1%). Other approaches included cases getting worked based on availability and with new information (8.7%) or the cases getting assigned to someone with previous experience to gather new information (8.7%). A small percentage of agencies use a cold case review team or volunteers (4.4%), while an even smaller percentage send the case to a different agency to work (2.9%). Some agencies specified other approaches (2.9%) as well, which included working cooperatively, being worked by another officer who has experience, or revisiting a case annually.

Figure 4. How Agencies without a Dedicated Unit Work on Cold Cases



When asked about agency funding for cold case investigations, 92.1% reported their efforts were supported by the agency’s operational budget. Only four agencies reported receiving outside funding, either from a government or private source. Of those receiving government grants, three received them from the state, and one received support from a local source.

FUNDING FOR AGENCIES COLD CASE INVESTIGATIONS

92.1% of agencies investigating cold cases in the state report they are funded within the agency’s operating budget.



Only 4 agencies report receiving outside funding, either government or private. Of those receiving government grants, 3 received from the state, one from a local source.



Figure 5. Agencies with Standard Operating Procedures for Cold Case Investigations

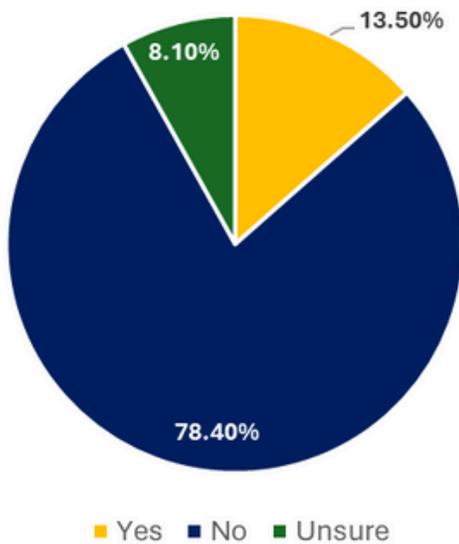


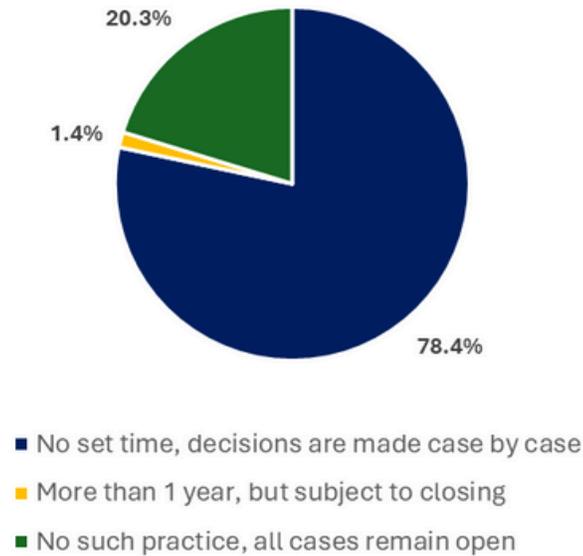
Figure 5 illustrates that most agencies (78.4%) did not have a standard operating procedure (SOP) or set of policies to guide their cold case investigations (n=58) and 13.5% of agencies did report they have an SOP (n=10). The remaining 8.1% of respondents were unsure if their agency had an SOP in relation to cold case investigations (n=6).

To explore the nature of collaboration in investigations, respondents were asked if they worked with other agencies or jurisdictions on their cold cases, with 67.1% of respondents indicating they did work with other agencies (n=49) and 30.1% of respondents not working with other agencies (n=22). A small percentage (2.7%) of respondents were unsure of their working relationship with other agencies or jurisdictions (n=2).



Figure 6 displays the responses when asked about the time frame on designating a case as 'cold'. Agencies were asked how long it takes for a case to move to an inactive status. Most respondents (78%) indicated there is no set time for designating a case as cold (n=58), the decision is made on a case-by-case basis. Just over 20% of agencies reported they have no practice for taking a case to an inactive status (n=15), the case remains open, and 1.4% of agencies reported cases are considered inactive after one year, but subject to closing (n=1).

Figure 6. Timeframe for Moving Case to Inactive Status



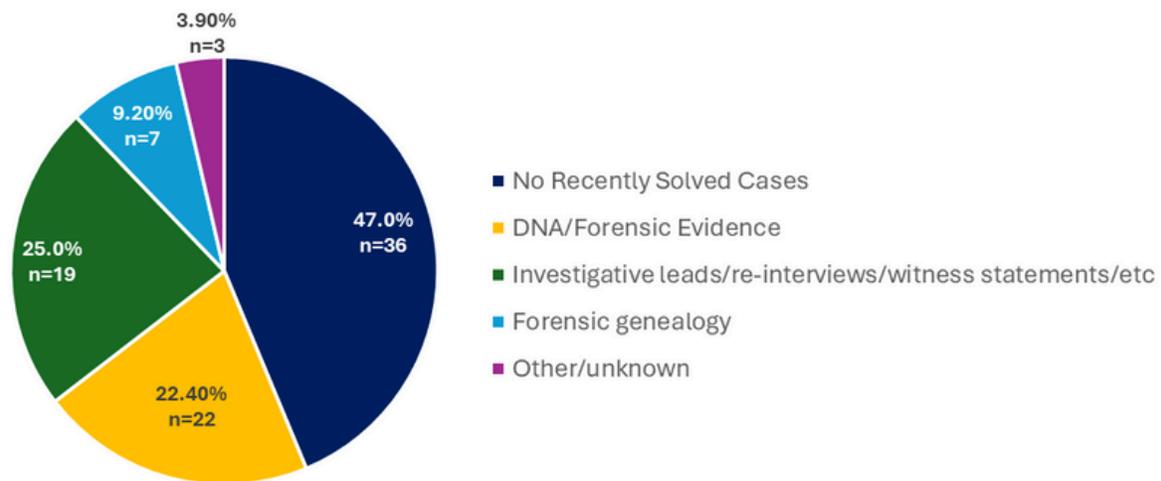
Decisions must be made on which cases to prioritize and where to expend investigative resources. One common mechanism used in cold case units is a solvability matrix. A solvability matrix scores a case on several dimensions, indicating how likely a case is to be solved. Points are awarded for each dimension, then summed—the cases with the highest points should be more solvable (Moran, 2019).

97.4%
Agencies do not use a scoring instrument.
The remaining 2.6% did not respond.

When agencies were asked in the survey about their use of a scoring instrument such as a solvability matrix, 97.4% responded they did not use such an instrument (n=74), and the other 2.6% did not respond (n=2), indicating no agencies utilize a scoring instrument in their cold case investigations.

Figure 7 displays responses about cold cases the agencies had solved and the mechanisms that led to their resolution. When agencies were asked about cold cases they had solved, 47.0% reported they had no recently solved cases. Agencies with solved cases reported DNA/forensic evidence (22.4%) and investigative leads/re-interviews/witness statements (25.0%) as the top contributing factors to their resolution. Forensic genealogy was reported as key by 9.2% of agencies, and 3.9% of agencies reported their cases were solved by another or unknown method.

Figure 7. Mechanism Used in Recently Solved Cases



A critical component to cold case investigations is the ability to send or resend items to a laboratory for follow-up or additional analyses. Property items may not have been tested in earlier investigations, or there may be items that could benefit from technological advances since the last time they were tested.

96.1%
Agencies use the state crime lab to process evidence

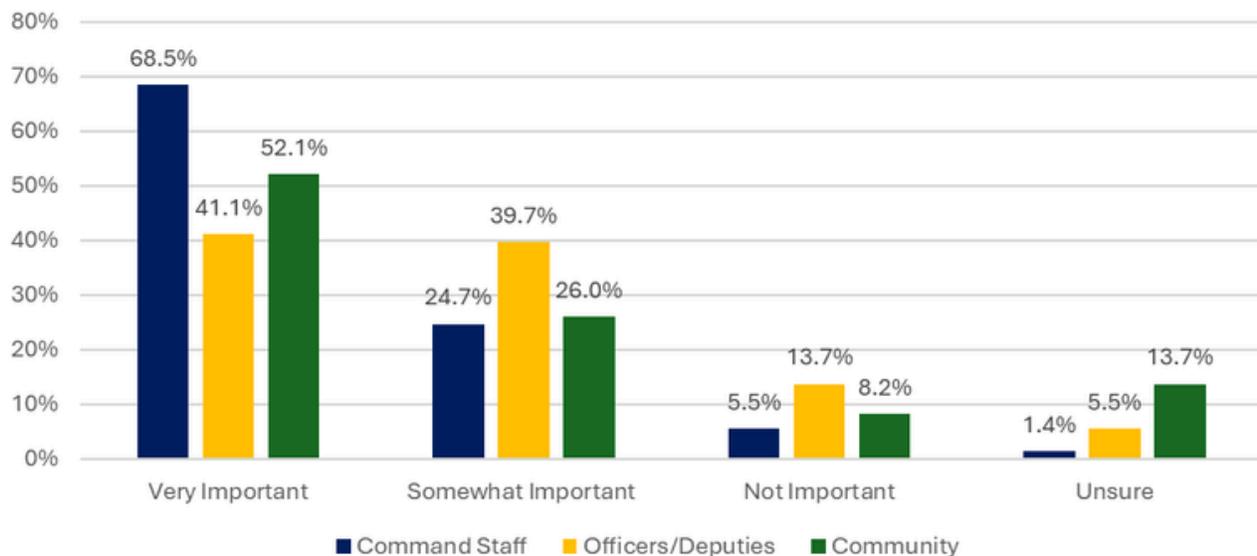
Agencies were asked which type of laboratories they use to process evidence in their cases, and almost all responding agencies utilize a state lab for evidence processing (96.1%, n=73). Some agencies have access to a local lab (17.1%, n=13), and some utilize a federal (10.5%, n=8) or private lab for evidence (10.5%, n=8). Only 2.6% of reporting agencies indicated they had their own lab to process evidence (n=2).

Due to the increased attention in the media about cold cases and stories of cases being solved sometimes decades later, survey respondents were asked about their perspectives of how important cold cases were to various groups in their jurisdiction. Figure 8 illustrates sizable differences in the level of importance across command staff, officers/deputies and the community. When asking about command staff, 68.5% of the respondents believed cold case investigations were very important to them, with 24.7% reporting it was somewhat important, 5.5% reporting it was not important, and 1.4% reporting they were unsure of their command staff's view of the importance of cold case investigations.

The reported perception of importance to officers/deputies was much lower than command staff. In 41.1% of the surveys, respondents believed officers/deputies perceived cold case investigations as very important, 39.7% reported it was somewhat important, 13.7% reported it was not important, and 5.5% were unsure how officers/deputies in their agency felt about the importance of cold case investigations.

Finally, when asked about the perceptions of their community, 52.1% reporting cold case investigations as very important to their community, somewhat important to 26%, not important to 8.2% and 13.7% were unsure how their community felt about the importance of cold case investigations. This collection of questions suggest command staff view these cases as very important, while they are less important to officers and deputies.

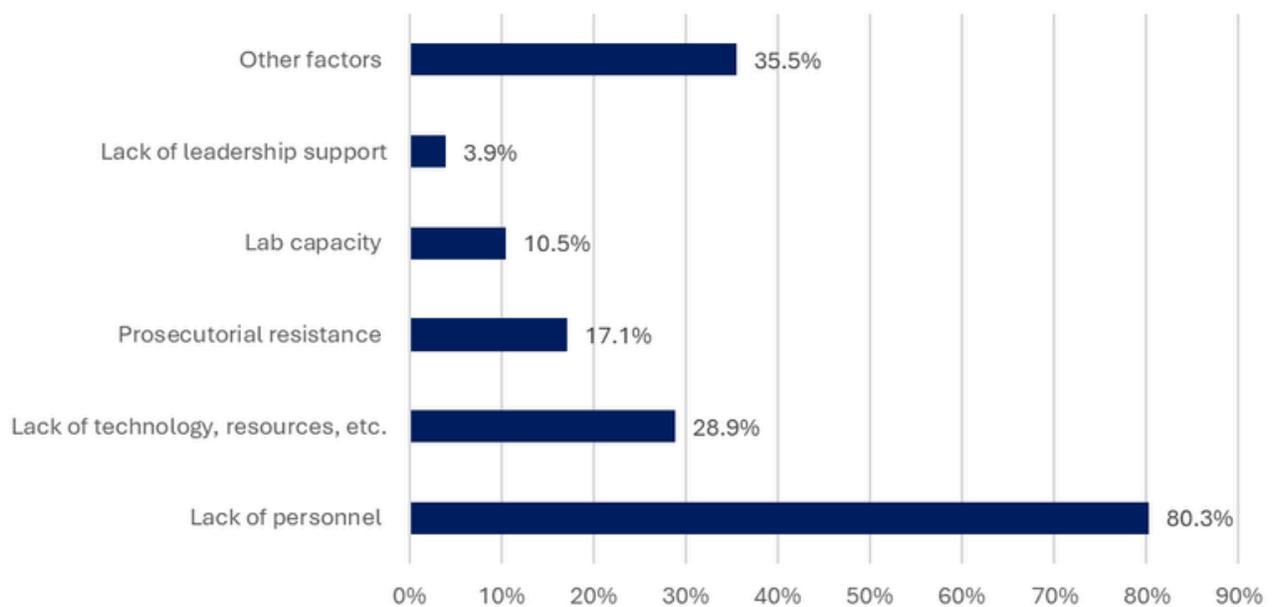
Figure 8. Perspective on Importance of Cold Case Investigations



Another element the survey intended to capture was the factors that impeded the success of cold case investigations across the nation and State of Michigan specifically. Figure 9 shows the various challenges in cold case investigations. Over 80% of agencies reported a lack of personnel as a factor (n=61), with 28.9% of agencies also reporting a lack of technology, resources, etc. as a factor (n=22).

Other factors that were reported as impediments to success were prosecutorial resistance (17.1%, n=13), lab capacity (10.5%, n=8) and lack of leadership support (3.9%, n=3). Agencies were also asked to identify other factors that made cold case investigations challenging, and 35.5% of agencies reported additional factors (n=27). Key themes were evident in the collection of other factors identified by agencies—lack of cooperation from parties involved, lack of evidence, lack of original leads to follow, and difficulty in balancing cold cases with an active investigative caseload. Understanding the factors that impede the success of cold case units can help agencies identify possible solutions.

Figure 9. Factors that Impede the Success of Cold Case Investigations



To conclude the survey, respondents were asked to rank a collection of factors on how important each was in cold case investigations on a scale from 1 to 10. The mean or average scores are presented below. This information can help highlight key factors for case investigators and serve as a guide for where to allocate resources.



The most important factor agencies identified as important in cold case investigation was physical evidence with an average score of 8.75. Other important factors scoring with an average score between 8 and 9 were new information provided by a witness, citizen, or informant ($\bar{x}=8.71$), available outstanding leads to pursue ($\bar{x}=8.65$), and suspect identification ($\bar{x}=8.09$). Factors with scores averaging between 7 and 8 included victim identification and availability of original detectives, officers, and/or notes, with averages of 7.72 and 7.03, respectively.

Factors scoring lower in terms of importance were a complete and retrievable casefile ($\bar{x}=6.80$), inquiries from family members or media ($\bar{x}=6.62$), and aggravating circumstances ($\bar{x}=6.55$). Survey respondents were least concerned with the age of the case or approaching statute of limitations, with a mean score of 5.81. It is interesting to note that all ten items on the scale scored above 5.0, indicating they are all important to an investigation to some extent.

Conclusion

The findings from the statewide survey of Michigan law enforcement agencies highlight that few agencies have cold cases. Most agencies reported not designating any cases as cold in the past five years, with those that did being primarily larger agencies. Smaller agencies, which generally experience lower overall crime rates and fewer homicides, are less likely to have cold cases within their jurisdictions. Additionally, dedicated cold case units are rare, with only 8% of agencies reporting having one. This suggests that most cold cases are handled as part of an investigator's regular workload and only receive attention when time allows or when new leads emerge.

The second key theme emerging from the survey responses is the challenge of resource allocation for cold case investigations. Over 90% of agencies reported that funding comes from their agency's operating budget, which is often stretched thin. With law enforcement resources heavily committed to active cases, dedicating personnel or creating specialized cold case units becomes difficult. Additionally, most agencies rely on state crime labs to process evidence, highlighting internal resource limitations. The primary barrier to progress, as reported by agencies, is a lack of personnel. These responses underscore a significant challenge—most agencies simply do not have sufficient resources to allocate toward solving cold cases effectively.

Finally, the survey responses highlight key investigative factors in cold case investigations and the role of external resources. Physical evidence, new information, and viable leads are crucial for advancing these cases. Although various training organizations and national entities offer resources to support cold case units, their adoption among agencies appears limited. This raises important questions about how investigators prioritize cases and whether they approach cold cases with the same strategies used for active homicide investigations.

References

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