

Research Insight: Sensemaking & Dialogue

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF HOMICIDE INVESTIGATION

Aim: The research sought to provide a detailed understanding of how forensic sciences and technologies (FSTs) contribute to the police investigation of homicide in Britain. We adopt the phrase 'forensic sciences and technologies' to reflect the broad array used across homicide investigations including DNA, blood pattern analysis, fingerprints, ballistic evidence, fibres, CCTV, mobile phone data and computer downloads.

Backdrop: Homicide investigation has been subject to cascading pressures, including: time pressures | austerity measures | forensic science arrangements | legal pressures | disclosure issues | increasing homicide rate | shortage of detectives

METHODS AND DATA:



TRAJECTORIES OF HOMICIDE INVESTIGATIONS

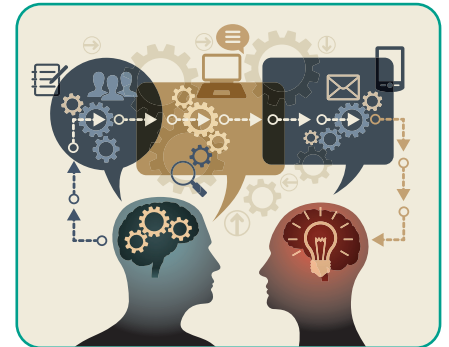
Within the first 24 hours of an investigation, human sources (particularly accounts from eyewitnesses or witnesses) played a crucial role in identifying offenders.

Of all the FSTs used, data gathered from CCTV and mobile phones played the most significant role in identifying offenders within the first 24 hours.

Rarely were findings from forensic sciences and technologies used on their own; offenders were more likely to be identified and charged when findings from forensic sciences and technologies were used in conjunction with human sources.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

At different points of the homicide investigation trajectory, a variety of practitioners come together to perform 'sensemaking work'. Sense is made from what are often messy and chaotic scenes, and from the emerging information, intelligence and evidence. It is a **collaborative, social process**, involving many experts both within and beyond the policing organisation.



Dialogue is a crucial mechanism of sensemaking, allowing information, ideas and opinions to be shared and meaning to be negotiated. It helps practitioners to evaluate information, to resolve uncertainty and 'troublesome knowledge', and clarify accounts.

From our preliminary analysis, we have found instances where practices and organisational arrangements might be limiting collaboration and constraining efficient and effective dialogue, with consequences for sensemaking. These include:

Limited awareness of forensic sciences and technologies

Scientists are involved in fewer case conferences with investigators and prosecutors

Contextual information is not always passed to scientists or in a timely manner

Police services decide who to invite into places of dialogue and sensemaking and some are limiting those included

Forms can be considered a bureaucratic and administrative function rather than a cognitive process

SIGNIFICANCE OF FINDINGS TO PRACTITIONERS

There are many benefits of including scientists and other experts in effective and timely dialogue, particularly when science and digital data are becoming more complex and complicated, it:

1 Provides opportunities to **CLARIFY TERMS AND FINDINGS**



2 Allows exhibits to be **fast-tracked**



3 Assists with **MANAGING EXPECTATIONS**

4 Supports more **EFFECTIVE TASKING**



5 Enables **CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION** to be **SHARED**, which is of particular **IMPORTANCE FOR SCIENTISTS**

ENABLES EXAMINATIONS TO BE **DIRECTED/TARGETED**

Assists with setting strategies and undertaking examinations that are **FIT-FOR-PURPOSE**

Ensures a **STAGED EXAMINATION** of exhibits to **prevent evidence from being destroyed**

ENCOURAGES creativity and exploration

ASSISTS WITH THE **interpretation of findings**

DIALOGUE CAN TAKE DIFFERENT FORMS (e.g. phonecalls, paperwork, email) and some are more effective than others. Scientists and experts prefer **face-to-face** meetings where **up-to-date information** can be **fully shared** and where **results** can be discussed



Some scientists are attending fewer homicide scenes, are having less involvement in setting strategies and are invited to fewer forensic strategy meetings and case conferences with investigators and prosecutors.

Consequently, scientists are reporting that they no longer feel part of the 'team' and are starting to feel de-valued and de-skilled

Particular experts, such as those in cybercrime or internet investigation units, are rarely invited to attend forensic strategy meetings or team briefings. Therefore, opportunities are sometimes being missed to utilise these experts



Where scientists are included in early forensic strategy meetings and have the opportunity to collaborate with investigators, they are able to effectively consider and prioritise a range of examinations

Utilising technology, such as Skype or conference calls, encourages effective dialogue when face-to-face meetings are not possible



Many investigators do not receive specialist forensic or digital training and may lack awareness of in-house specialisms



Providing investigators with knowledge of forensic sciences and technologies assists with tasking experts in an effective and timely manner, and facilitates creativity



There are many and varied roles within the homicide investigation team. **Effective collaboration** is dependent upon **good team motivation** and individuals **understanding** how their own role fits within the Major Incident Room and the **value** that all roles can contribute to dialogue and sensemaking



"Scientists think like scientists, and investigators think like investigators, and the value is getting them both together" (SIO, Op. E06)

SIOs are in an influential position where they can ensure the right people come together at the right time and can encourage open and effective dialogue