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## **Solvability Factors and Psychological Stressors in Cold Case Sexual Homicides: Insights from Investigators and Detectives**

Jamie Borba  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Psychology and Community Services

This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

Jamie L. Borba

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
and that any and all revisions required by  
the review committee have been made.

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Walden University  
2025

Abstract

Solvability Factors and Psychological Stressors in Cold Case Sexual Homicides: Insights

from Investigators and Detectives

by

Jamie L. Borba

MA, Argosy University, 2011

BA, Roberts Wesleyan College, 2004

Proposal Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Forensic Psychology

Walden University

February 2026

## Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to explore solvability factors and psychological stressors experienced by investigators and detectives who work on cold case sexual homicides. The study includes eight participants' perspectives of conditions that influence case solvability and psychological challenges inherent in investigating unresolved sexual homicide cases. Guided by the resource-based theory, the research involved examining how investigative techniques, organizational support, and available resources contribute to the successful closure and clearance of cold cases. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using coding and thematic analysis. This involved understanding how resource and institutional constraints affect their ability to achieve resolution while managing occupational stress and emotional fatigue. The study also involved identifying internal and external factors that shape investigative persistence, decision-making, and overall case outcomes. Findings revealed key solvability factors, resource deficiencies, and psychological support needs that influenced the effectiveness of cold case investigations. These insights may inform practical recommendations to improve training, expand investigative tools, and implement structured support systems for investigators. Implications for social change include promotion of more efficient investigative frameworks, enhanced peer and organizational support mechanisms, and advancement of justice for victims and their families through improved resolution of cold case sexual homicides. By strengthening both investigative capacity and professional well-being, this study contributes to sustainable improvements in criminal justice practices and outcomes.

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## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my family, whose love and encouragement have carried me through every challenge and triumph of this journey.

To my husband, Mark, thank you for your endless patience, understanding, and unwavering belief in me. Your strength, support, and love made this achievement possible, and I am forever grateful for your partnership through every late night and early morning.

To my children, Austin, Raelynn, and Cassidy, you are my greatest inspiration and the reason I strive to achieve more. I hope this work shows you that with perseverance, faith, and determination, you can accomplish anything you set your mind to.

To my parents, William and Sherrie, your guidance, encouragement, and unconditional love have shaped who I am today. Thank you for teaching me the value of hard work, education, and integrity.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Cold case sexual homicides externally impact communities, families, and friends of victims, as well as assigned case investigators and detectives. This results from lack of closure and fears that unknown suspects are still unaccounted for. As police operate with limited budgets and finite resources, it is not always possible to revisit every unresolved cold case. Trying to understand why they remain unsolved as well as the efficiency of the investigation process is paramount to clear sexual homicide cold cases.

Sexual homicide cold cases do not receive funding and attention like active sexual homicide investigations. According to Keglovits et al. (2013), solvability priorities for cold case investigations first involve applying resources to the most likely suspects. Since there is a lack of workable evidence, limited resources for law enforcement, and the possibility for of errors, cold cases in general are challenging to solve.

Psychological stressors can affect sexual homicide cold case investigations. Assigned investigators or detectives may experience psychological stressors that can influence investigations. According to Roach et al. (2018), homicide investigators are most susceptible to operational stress due to the nature of police work. Therefore, what contributes to sexual homicide cold case solvability and whether there are influential psychological stressors experienced by investigators and detectives during these investigations requires attention.

Solvability factors and psychological stressors involving sexual homicides have been explored, yet effects of stress on solvability are unknown. Stressors include personal commitment, pressure of disappointing victim families, and responsibility to protect

society (Sewell, 1994). This foundational study provides insights regarding unique stressors that are specific to homicide investigations that may continue to still impact investigations even decades later.

Cold case investigations should be selected based on a hierarchy of solvability and risk factors, wherein probability trumps possibility (Keglovits et al., 2013). Implementing a hierarchy system can help guide investigators and detectives. Cold case sexual homicide investigators and detectives represent a subgroup that is regarded as elite and seasoned. Implementing administrative and personal tools for addressing psychological stressors involved in these types of investigations can also affect solvability of cases.

Exploring solvability factors and psychological stressors involved with cold case sexual homicides can lead to greater insights regarding developing methods that result in case closures and clearances. According to Keglovits et al. (2013), risk analysis for cold case investigations is based on assessment of likely risks coupled with consequences to communities, including level of risk for additional violence if offenders are at large as well as pragmatic considerations such as costs. Magnitude of cases and types varies across the United States, and there are limited units that handle cold cases. Cold case investigative units nationwide have different resources and detectives who handle cases differently. Addressing units that investigate unsolved cold case sexual homicides can lead to insights regarding solvability factors and psychological stressors.

In this chapter, I provide background information about the topic as well as the problem statement. This is followed by the purpose of the study and research questions. I

then address the theoretical foundation followed by the nature of the study. Definitions of terms follows as well as assumptions, scope and delimitations, and limitations. I then address the significance of the study, followed by a summary of Chapter 1 and transition to Chapter 2.

### **Background**

Cold cases are cases that remain unsolved and pending in hopes of new leads or evidence emerging. Hughes and Jonas (2015) stated cold cases should typically only be reopened when new evidence has emerged. New techniques enable more information to be extracted from evidence than was possible when cases were previously investigated. However, there may be other factors that could have affected investigations. Issues arise where previous investigations are improperly conducted or wrongly abandoned. Technological advances has led to evidence being reexamined.

An example of a cold case involving sexual homicide was the Golden State Killer. On April 24, 2018, a suspect in the case was arrested after decades of eluding the police by using a novel forensic approach in which investigators identified the suspect by first identifying relatives using a free online genetic database. This technology has been a catalyst for restarting investigations, providing substantial leads and becoming significant for cold case sexual homicides.

Cold case sexual homicides have unique factors that are crucial to solving cases. According to Akwada (2022), solvability factors refer to information about cases that assist with clearing and closing them based on physical evidence, witnesses, and confessions. These factors can help determine the likelihood of solving cases. Some tools

have been established for selecting and prioritizing cold cases. However, there needs to be more data to support whether they work and need to be explored. Interviews with investigators and detectives in the United States can lead to insights regarding solvability factors. Experience and organizational leadership along with recent advancements in forensic technology determine whether these cases remain unsolved.

According to Roach et al. (2017), cognitive stressors include intrusive thoughts, preoccupation with cases, and the influence of cognitive bias, with emotional stressors including disrupted sleep patterns, negative moods, and feelings of intense emotional pressure to resolve cases for the sake of victim families.

According to Beauregard and Martineau (2014), some sexual murderers exhibit signs of forensic and investigative awareness during the crime commission process. However, offenders generally do not that destroy and remove forensic evidence that is left on bodies or at crime scenes that could connect them to their offenses; instead, some offenders opt to conceal bodies, effectively increasing time until body recovery via selective use of concealment instead of removing DNA. The Golden State Killer did not plan for advancements in genetic genealogy during his crime sprees. This is true for most suspects involved in cold-case sexual homicides. Addressing present-day investigators and detectives in the United States and solvability factors involved with cold case sexual homicides as well as psychological stressors experienced by these investigators could lead to insights regarding closing and clearance of these cases.

### **Problem Statement**

As police operate with limited budgets and finite resources, it is not always possible to revisit every unresolved cold case (Nurthen & van der Laan, 2022). Cold case sexual homicides do not receive funding and attention compared to active sexual homicide investigations. As a result, it is difficult to identify precisely how many cases exist and what contributes to their solvability.

Although researchers have investigated this issue, there is a gap in understanding what factors influenced closure and clearance rates for cold case sexual homicides for law enforcement agencies in the United States. This affected clearance of cases as well as closure for victims' families, as well as psychological stressors for investigators and detectives who investigate them. Pessimism can have detrimental impacts on motivations and efforts to continue searching for more leads in cold case investigations (Toolin et al., 2022). The specific research problem is there is a lack of single validated process regarding solvability factors which influence case closures and clearances as well as psychological stressors experienced by investigators and detectives who investigate them in the United States.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine solvability factors and psychological stressors experienced by investigators and detectives involved with solving cold case sexual homicides in the United States. Even with advancements in technology, there is still an abundance of sexual homicide cold cases across the country. Examining current solvability factors and psychological

stressors experienced by assigned investigators and detectives can lead to insights. Literature lacks insights regarding experiences of cold case sexual homicide detectives as most research focuses on law enforcement. It is essential to seek out data regarding stressors and factors that may affect closure and clearances of cold case sexual homicides.

I explored lived experiences of law enforcement officers who were investigators or detectives and currently assigned to investigate cold case sexual homicides for law enforcement agencies in the United States. Law enforcement agencies across the United States may offer insights regarding varying solvability factors based on their training and experience within their agencies. Psychological stressors include cognitive stressors (i.e., intrusive thoughts, preoccupation with cases, and influence of cognitive bias) and emotional stressors (i.e., including disrupted sleep patterns, negative moods, and intense emotional pressure to resolve cases for a victim families).

To direct this study, a phenomenological approach was used to gather data. One-on-one interviews were conducted with selected qualified participants. I collected data regarding lived experiences of cold case sexual homicide investigators and detectives while discussing a possible hierarchy system for cold case sexual homicides, additional training that may generate investigative leads, and types of psychological support that are needed for them. Results of this study may impact how law enforcement agencies investigate cold case sexual homicides as well as how investigators and detectives address psychological stressors moving forward.

### **Research Questions**

This qualitative phenomenological study was guided by two research questions:

RQ1: What do investigators and detectives regard as solvability factors in cold case sexual homicide investigations in the United States?

RQ2: What are psychological stressors experienced by investigators and detectives who investigate cold case sexual homicides in the United States?

### **Theoretical Foundation and Conceptual Framework**

I used the resource- based theory as the theoretical framework for this study. According to Zhao and Fan (2018), resources can be used for enhanced results, which have already been widely employed in different fields. This theoretical framework was used to explore a unified approach for investigating cases, maximizing resources, and improving investigator/detective stress resiliency due to psychological stress. Therefore, via perspectives on lack of workable evidence, limited resources for law enforcement, and possibility of investigative errors, I gathered information on why cold cases are challenging to solve and explored psychological stresses that were experienced by investigators and detectives investigating these cases.

### **Nature of the Study**

To address research questions in this qualitative study, I used a phenomenological approach.

I designed a semi-structured interview in which I took notes and used audio recordings based on preplanned open-ended questions. I interviewed approximately 7 to 10 investigators and detectives who were currently assigned to investigating cold-case

sexual homicide cases. The participants will be purposefully recruited through law enforcement contacts. The data collection will come from the lived experiences of the investigators and detectives, and this will be the phenomenological type of data collected.

The data sources will come from any themes presented in a "snowball method" as solvability factors and stressors experienced by the participants assigned to unsolved cold case sexual homicides. Snowball sampling is applied when samples with the target characteristics are not easily accessible (Ghaljaie et al., 2017). This allows a sub-group of law enforcement to be examined through their personal experience through interview questions. The phenomenology philosophy allows for the study of that direct personal experience.

This research is based on a resource-based theory with a basis in phenomenology. Lived experience methods are most applicable when researchers examine a focused topic in depth within the phenomenon's context (Prosek & Gibson, 2021). The perceptions of the investigators and detectives are based on their experiences and qualitative data sources. Each investigator and detective have different experience levels and resources available to them across the United States. This may need to be improved based on location, experiences, and resources available.

The human proponent of lived experiences offers different perspectives on how cold case sexual homicides may be examined and varies the data. Also, the quality of data gathered depends on the cooperation of the investigator and detective participants and their willingness to share their shortcomings in reference to the unsolved sexual

homicide caseload and their stress resiliency from the psychological stressors experienced in investigating cold case sexual homicide cases.

The results of this study may help identify how law enforcement agencies investigate cold case sexual homicides and how investigators and detectives address psychological stressors moving forward. This can allow for streamlined application and improve upon training that can aid in developing a hierarchy system for cold case sexual homicides, exploring additional training that may generate new investigative leads, and designing psychological support for investigators and detectives investigating cold case sexual homicides.

### **Definitions**

For this study, the following terms were defined:

*Cold Case:* Cases aged 30 or more days from the event date or have never been cleared are cold by default (Rogers & Unnithan, 2021).

*Investigator/Detective:* A detective, otherwise known as a criminal investigator, is a type of police officer, typically a higher rank that requires more experience and training, who gathers facts and collects evidence related to criminal cases, which often involves interviewing suspects and victims (Goodwin University, 2022).

*Psychological Stressors:* The stressors will be presented as cognitive stressors (i.e., intrusive thoughts, a preoccupation with a case, and the influence of cognitive bias) and emotional stressors (i.e., including disrupted sleep patterns, low mood, and feelings of intense emotional pressure to resolve a case for the sake of a victim's family) that could be experienced by the investigators and detectives (Roach et al., 2017).

*Sexual Homicide:* For a homicide to be considered sexual, evidence of sexual activity of some kind by the perpetrator must be present (Kerr et al., 2013).

*Solvability Factors:* The factors will be presented as information about a case that aids in clearing and closing the case based on physical evidence, witnesses, and confessions (Akwada, 2022).

### **Assumptions**

This study makes assumptions based on the interpretive phenomenological data that will be gathered. For this study, I assumed that the investigators and detectives to be interviewed would provide me with honest and thorough answers based on the questions I posed as the researcher. However, I do understand there is a stigma that accompanies shortcomings and officer well-being, and their answers could lack transparency because of the vulnerability of the questions. As a result of the stigma around mental health, the law enforcement population is generally not open to discussing their mental health issues (Fraser Jr., 2021). Therefore, they may need to be more truthful in their responses.

I will mitigate the pressure by ensuring the interviews remain confidential and names/department associations will not be included. Also, conducting the interviews over the phone will encourage the investigators and detectives to answer the questions in the comfort of their own homes or locations outside of work, which may relieve the departmental pressure. By choosing this method, I hope to obtain unbiased and candid answers because of the relaxed interview technique and convenience of phone interviews. I also assume that their participation in this study will be of their own free will, without

fear of any influence or retaliation at their agency or department. Each participant will be provided an informed consent form and their integral confirmation of their status as a law enforcement officer holding their current rank as an investigator or detective currently assigned to cold case sexual homicides. I anticipate their willingness to help me further my research for the betterment of law enforcement and for the lives deeply affected by the cold case sexual homicides.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

The participants of this qualitative study will be required to be full-time, sworn police officers or deputy sheriffs with no minimum or maximum number of years of law enforcement experience. The participants only need to be assigned to cold case sexual homicides, regardless of their current details or unit location. The study will be limited to agencies and departments within the United States. Current data specific to the United States was needed to address a major gap in the literature. The scope will include varying ages, genders, and ethnicities but represent a homogenous sample within the sub-group of the law enforcement community. The snowball sampling technique allows me to obtain references for interviews based on other law enforcement contacts and from purposeful referrals during the study.

Asking for referrals can encourage participation, and like-minded individuals will help study positive social change for a sub-group of law enforcement. The number of individuals recruited for this study will be limited to 10. The participants will be asked ten questions to ascertain solvability factors and psychological stressors in cold case sexual homicides in the United States. However, this study is limited to a small number

of participants in the United States, which may only reflect upon some local, state, and federal departments/agencies. This may affect the resources they access through their department/agency, and the results may reach barriers within the research saturation.

### **Limitations**

There will be challenges in conducting this study. The first challenge will be contacting investigators and detectives willing to participate in the study. Only with the presentation of anonymity may reluctance dissipate. According to Prosek and Gibson (2021), the lived experience methods are most applicable when researchers examine a focused topic in depth within the phenomenon's context. This will be limited based on the participant's willingness to share their experiences with complete transparency because of the stigma that comes with shortcomings or law enforcement needing to be stronger.

In telling their stories, participants in this study could see that their vulnerabilities trigger posttraumatic stress experiences. Discussing the cases can trigger a negative response, or burnout could be exposed, which may appear to be a shortcoming in the participant. Occupational burnout is a pathological syndrome that develops in response to long-term, chronic, interpersonal, and occupational stress (Ogińska-Bulik & Juczyński, 2021). Presumptively, participants will be reminded to seek assistance through their agency or department employee assistance programs as a precaution. The confidentiality of the participants and the discussion of any sensitive content will be held with the highest regard.

The sensitive nature of the content and participants limits the researcher's total immersion in the study. Although this researcher has access to a large department and

case files, I will not access the files to avoid bias. I may have a different viewpoint on how the case should be investigated and want to remain unbiased. This will challenge keeping an open mindset based on my training and experience as a law enforcement officer.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study is significant in that it will support professional practice by examining the factors that may increase solvability and resiliency from stressors that may affect solvability by reviewing data and interviewing other investigators and detectives. Understanding the sub-culture through the lived experiences of the investigators and detectives can offer insight into the implementation of training or methods for the betterment of the law enforcement community. The current literature for unresolved cold cases does not appear to identify a single validated process or model for this or provide a unified view of what risk and solvability criteria should be used in the process (Nurthen & van der Laan, 2022). I intend to help bridge the gap in the research and the literature. This claim aligns with the problem statement to reflect the potential relevance of this study to society because exploring the solvability factors in cold case sexual homicides can affect positive social change.

Making advancements for the betterment of society and the law enforcement community in this study may impact the success rate of unsolved cold case sexual homicides. Providing investigators and detectives with the best resources and tools to solve these cases while ensuring they operate at an optimum level can assist in their success rate for these investigations. A humanitarian approach to long-term missing and

unidentified persons and cold cases can increase case solvability and discuss the rights of families to have accountability and transparency, even if decades later (Kimmerle, 2014). Therefore, allowing for discussion, a process, or a model for a unified view on what risk and solvability criteria should be for unsolved sexual homicide cold cases and stress resiliency for the investigators and detectives that investigate them across the United States.

### **Summary**

Chapter 1 describes the purpose of the intended study, and the possible issues of closing and clearing cases in conjunction with psychological stressors. There is a plethora of cold case sexual homicides that remain unsolved and trying to understand why the cases remain unsolved, analyzing the efficiency of the investigation process and how it affects the investigators and detectives is paramount. Research suggests that investigative results, such as arrests are beyond the control of the investigator and robust case-screening procedures and effective management interventions could improve investigative units (Braga et al., 2019). The literature by Akwada (2022) has provided insight into the solvability factors regarding physical evidence, witnesses, and confession and has ascertained stressors that accompany homicide cases in general (Roach et al., 2017) This study will examine the investigator's and detectives' perceptions and lived experiences as cold case sexual homicide case agents. Investigators and detectives will likely experience several stressors unique to their job responsibilities beyond what law enforcement and investigators experience as stress (Sewell, 1994). The unique assignment can affect the investigator or detective differently because of the unique

stressors that other types of law enforcement. The common operational duties of homicide investigators present primary and secondary trauma from indirect exposure, different and more acute than other areas of policing (Roach et al., 2018). Chapter 2 will provide a thorough examination of present-day literature and also the intertwining relationship of solvability factors, psychological stressors, regarding closure and clearance of cold case sexual homicides.

In this study, I will extract data from interviews I conduct with investigators and detectives currently investigating cold case sexual homicides. Demographic information, researcher's notes, and questions related to investigator and detective experiences during the investigations will offer insight into the solvability factors and the psychological stressors the investigators and detectives experience. Studying cold case sexual homicide investigators and detectives in the United States addresses a gap in the literature. The findings will provide a perspective that addresses the humanistic side of the investigations and how it affects the assigned case investigator and the present-day solvability factors, even with advancements in forensic technology.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

Solvability factors and psychological stressors involving sexual homicides have been explored, yet information about effects of stress on solvability is limited. Stressors involve personal commitment, pressure of disappointing victim families, and the responsibility to protect society (Sewell, 1994). This foundational study provides insights regarding unique stressors that are specific to homicide investigations and may continue to impact investigations even decades later.

Examining solvability factors and psychological stressors can lead to greater insights regarding developing present-day methods that result in case closures and clearances for cold case sexual homicides. A cold case should normally only be reopened when new evidence has emerged or new techniques enable more information to be extracted from evidence than was possible when the case was previously investigated (Hughes & Jonas, 2015).

Solvability factors and psychological stressors can affect case closures and clearance rates of sexual homicide cold cases. According to Roach et al. (2018), cognitive stressors in homicide investigations include intrusive thoughts, preoccupation with cases, and the influence of cognitive bias, with emotional stressors including disrupted sleep patterns, negative moods, and feelings of intense emotional pressure to resolve cases for the sake of victim families. These factors can affect performance and in turn case closure and clearance rates. Literature has included insights regarding adverse effects of stressors on work performance in law enforcement within the law enforcement field. In this

literature review, I examined solvability factors, psychological stressors, and resolution of cold case sexual homicides.

Although researchers have investigated similar issues, the topic has not been explored further in terms of factors influencing closure and clearance rate for cold case sexual homicides in U.S. law enforcement agencies. Chapter 2 includes a literature review of prior and current research, as well as gaps within research. I addressed the lack of single validated process or unified view of what solvability factors influence case closures and clearances as well as psychological stressors experienced by investigators and detectives. Varying processes can affect closure and clearance of cases, closure delay for victims' families, and psychological stressors for investigators and detectives. Further investigation of this issue can offer insights regarding more efficient processes.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

Literature about solvability factors and psychological stressors involved with sexual homicide cold cases was obtained via the following databases: Thoreau, EbscoHost, ProQuest, PsycINFO, SAGE Journals, and SocINDEX. I used the following search terms in this study: *cold cases, unsolved murders, solvability factors, sexual assault, rape, sexual violence, sexual abuse, law enforcement, police, cops, officers, stressors, stress factors, sources of stress, and investigation*. Literature included insights regarding criminal justice techniques involving technology, mental health of homicide investigators, available resources for cold cases, and current training practices within the law enforcement field. Sources in this study were published between 1994 and 2022.

### **Theoretical Foundation**

I used the RBV theory for this study. According to Zhao and Fan (2018), this theory explains how internal assets can be utilized for enhanced results regarding the skillset of the investigators and detectives, the technology resources available to them in their unit, and their regard for cold case sexual homicides. This research is centered on the resource-based theory introduced by Edith Penrose 65 years ago in 1959 relative to competitive advantage and growth derived from a firm's unique resources and capabilities (Burvill et al., 2018). The theory has been utilized over several decades and modified with a new perspective to argue the correct mix of tangible and intangible resources under proper management, which are developed to a specific level to achieve change (Burvill et al., 2018). In this study, this theoretical framework will explore a unified approach for investigating the cases, maximizing resources, and improving investigator/detective stress resiliency from psychological stress in law enforcement.

Law enforcement is not generally deemed a business when described, but government agencies provide a service and operate based on resources. Resource View (RBV) stems from Penrose's ideas but has not been adequately traced within government agencies (Carrick, 2013). This theory has already been widely employed but is not commonly seen within a government agency such as law enforcement. Even though this theory applies to law enforcement because resources can be reconfigured to respond to rapidly changing environments (Carrick, 2013). According to Carrick's (2013) review of Penrose's and Wernerfelt's ideas, the superior quality of available resources coincides with superior performance from its assets. Carrick interprets Penrose's explanation of a

resource in RBV as physical or human capital, whereas physical consists of tangible property, and the human aspect is the knowledge and abilities within the worker (2013). Therefore, internal resources can be tangible or intangible and open for assessment.

According to Zhao and Fan (2018), Resource Views and Theories provide practical guidelines for assessing organizational resources and performance. According to Zhao and Fan (2018), government agencies collect and generate data for taxpayers' daily tasks. This offers tangible numbers to measure results and examine organizational structure effectiveness and human productiveness relative to an organization's skills, knowledge, decision-making ability, and unique assets (Zhao & Fan, 2018). The theory traditionally follows a business organization style, and government agencies are more bureaucratic and highly conservative (Zhao & Fan, 2018). However, Zhao and Fan (2018) believe the theory provides theoretical and practical guidelines for assessing organizational resources and performance.

This theoretical framework is pertinent when examining the solvability factors and psychological stressors in cold-case sexual homicides. Delving into the literature can explore the intertwining relationship between solvability factors, psychological stressors, and the case closures or clearances for cold-case sexual homicides. The framework will discuss the solvability factors and psychological stressors surrounding sexual homicides. Investigative resources have both direct and indirect effects on the likelihood that a homicide is cleared (Braga, Turchan, & Barao, 2019). Some homicide cases require minimal investigative effort, while others may require a substantial investment of resources (Braga, Turchan, & Barao, 2019). The framework will address the obstacles

and discuss how expenditures on increased resources for homicide investigators and detectives can improve homicide clearance rates (Braga & Dusseault, 2018).

## **Literature Review**

### **Sexual Homicides**

Sexual homicide has several different definitions in the literature. Sexual homicides are not new and have been encountered by law enforcement agencies for centuries. However, research is limited in detail about what universally constitutes a sexual homicide since they are rare (Kerr, Beech, & Murphy, 2013). According to Kerr, Beech, and Murphy (2013), there are key themes of anger and sadism, with evidence of sexual activity of some kind by the perpetrator present before, during, or after the killing by means of masturbation, penetration (oral, anal, or vaginal) with a variety of objects with possible symbolic expression.

The words can be interchangeable and can cause discrepancies based on word choice. There is a heavy reliance on the Federal Bureau of Investigation for guidelines. According to their parameters, the victim must be found totally or partially naked; the genitals are exposed; the body is found in a sexually explicit position; an object has been inserted into a body cavity; there is evidence of sexual contact; there is evidence of substitutive sexual activity, or a sadistic sexual fantasy (Kerr, Beech, & Murphy, 2013). These guidelines offer a baseline to assist law enforcement. However, the advancements in technology have revolutionized forensic science, revealing evidentiary value that offers proof of sexual homicide, thereby keeping law enforcement professionals and academics at the forefront of the field.

A foundation for sexual homicides is found within the Locard exchange principle. Beauregard and Martineau (2014) suggest that if the offender did not bring anything to the crime scene, they took something away, which can be revealed through forensic examination. Offenders have adjusted their methods as a result. With the dramatization of forensics in television, they are aware of DNA and have sophisticated crimes in a way that requires them to wear gloves to avoid detection. According to Beauregard and Martineau (2014), some offenders will adapt their modus operandi prior to or during the crime to thwart police efforts in the investigation by taking additional steps used in a crime to hide the evidence by avoiding interruption (targeting women who are alone), protecting their identity (masking of the face or use of condoms), preventing the victim from reporting (death) and ensuring a safe departure (victim incapacitated). These psychological stressors on investigators are often overlooked, but they play a significant role in the investigation process, evoking empathy and understanding from the audience.

Forensic awareness can affect the clearance rates for homicides. The case status variable (solved versus unsolved) is commonly used in homicide clearances (Beauregard & Martineau, 2014). A factor that can be pertinent for the solvability of a cold case sexual homicide. Having forensic experts on hand for cold case reviews can utilize cutting-edge research and innovation to bridge the gap between academics and cold case investigations (Keatley & Cormier, 2020). Keatley and Cormier (2020) present the importance of collaborative efforts for investigation methods through forensic expertise, media involvement in investigations, and the challenges of consulting with police, highlighting the enormous pressure they are under in law enforcement and the

nondisclosure agreements that transpire within cold case investigations. This stress on collaborative efforts emphasizes the need for engagement and cooperation in the investigation process.

### **Cold Case Investigators and Detectives**

Cold cases have several definitions, like sexual homicides, as discussed previously. According to Walton (2005), there is no universally accepted definition of a cold case homicide; rather, what constitutes a cold case varies depending upon the application and need or purpose. Cold case investigations are considered investigations of a crime that has not been actively pursued for years (Hughes & Jonas, 2015). This offers a commonality of the passage of time and activity on an investigation as a determining factor. There are focused efforts to delineate those cases that may be included within a police department parameter for assignment to a cold case squad, team, or unit rather than a specific definition (Walton, 2005). There is no statute of limitations in which a suspect must be charged for murder in the United States (Walton, 2005).

Cold case investigations are a natural response by law enforcement agencies to go after unsolved cases with a new arsenal of tools available (Davis, Jensen, Kuykendall, & Gallagher, 2015). Davis et al. (2015) further elaborate on high crime rates and low clearance rates, leaving a sheer volume of unsolved cases as far back as the 1980s, respectively, and large backlogs increased the need for resources to be applied to solve the cold cases. Davis et al. (2015) explored how cold cases work, how they are organized and funded, and what policies govern cold case work to law enforcement agencies among over 1,000 police agencies across the United States. However, it provided a baseline for

further examination of cold case investigation practices. Results offered perspective on the definition of cold cases, how they are selected, and how they are prioritized to be worked as cold case investigations (Davis et al., 2015). When asked what process was used to close an investigation formally, themes were found to be that either the investigative supervisor, the case investigator, or a committee of investigators make the decision to close the case, or the cases remain open without active pursuit; with some formally re-opening cases and even less having a formal protocol in which to do so (Davis et al., 2015). The reasons for re-opening the case can vary.

The decision to re-open investigations can be based on a series of factors. According to Davis et al. (2015), the most common reasons for re-opening cases had to do with physical evidence, new witnesses coming forward, a prior conviction being overturned, or recovered memory of a witness had been recovered and produced, and the availability of new DNA technology to retest old physical evidence. The re-opening of the cases was primarily dedicated to an actual cold case unit, in which the cases were either handled by one or more dedicated cold case investigators, either the original investigator or part of a group of detectives or civilians that regularly work them incorporated with their other caseload with either part-time or full-time investigators whether or not they had a full-time unit (Davis et al., 2015). In addition, agencies relied on funding the investigations based on grants or supplemental funding, with homicides as the most common crime investigated by cold-case investigators (Davis et al., 2015). The agency's support is also a factor in the success of the investigations.

Various levels of support can help facilitate investigations. Agencies offered overtime pay with supervisory permission, funds to travel outside of the jurisdiction to pursue leads, having a take-home car, working overtime hours without prior authorization, and incentives for working on the cases (Davis et al., 2015). The ability to have flexibility and knowledge was paramount in the furtherance of an investigation. Strategies of assigning senior investigators to cold cases and utilizing information sharing systems, coordination with state and federal law enforcement agencies, teams of investigators to maintain databases, offering elective specialized cold-case training, formal liaisons with the media, and requiring specialized training in cold cases (Davis et al., 2015). This provides a preliminary overview of how cold case units function and the strategies they use to investigate.

Once cases are investigated as thoroughly as possible but without resolution, they assume an inactive status pending the development of further leads or investigative follow-up information. At the same time, they may remain inactive and grow old, while more recent homicides consume investigative resources (Walton, 2005). According to Walton (2005), there are no states or national data banks that reflect the actual number of murder cases that remain unsolved and are, therefore, difficult to estimate. Advancements in technology have been a catalyst in reigniting some of those inactive investigations and have allowed some law enforcement agencies an opportunity to address large backlogs of unsolved cases with established homicide investigation units with a cold case component (Walton, 2005). According to Walton (2005), the responsibility of these groups is to focus on reviewing unsolved cold case homicides and identifying those that offer a

potential for investigation and resolution. Examining the solvability factors in sexual homicides can further elaborate on the barriers found within the literature.

### **Solvability Factors**

Investigative methods in cold case homicide investigations can expose barriers experienced in solving cold cases. The result of homicide investigations is generally viewed as successful if the killer is identified and brought to justice. However, there is room to consider multiple views of success (Hough, 2019). Research on criminal investigations has observed the interrelated factors seen regarding case clearance based on the type of homicide, the types of offenders and victims, and the types of settings in which the homicide takes place (Hough, 2019). Hughes (2019) discusses the challenges of data collection, investigative techniques, processes, and clearance factors, which are well known. Risk analysis for cold case investigations is based on assessing likely risks and consequences to the community (Keglovits, McCraryt & Ramsland, 2013).

Keglovits, McCraryt, and Ramsland (2013) examined the pragmatic considerations of the cost of the cold case investigation that examines the overall length of the investigation, methods, objectives, and staffing needs based on having a good suspect, available witnesses with new information, new evidence, and linkage analyses. This establishes a hierarchy for cases to be investigated. Top priority cases involve well-developed suspects and preserve evidence on which new technology can be used, and biological evidence can be tested with new techniques (Keglovits, McCraryt & Ramsland, 2013). According to Keglovits, McCraryt, and Ramsland (2013), cases with

many unknowns or those with high expense and little payoff are relegated to the lowest priority.

When progressive developments in scientific techniques enable DNA profiles to be established from biological material, increased opportunities for offenders to be identified, linked to, and eliminated from crimes (Allsop & Pike, 2019). As aforementioned, the Golden State Killer is an example of an unsolved sexual homicide case in which technological advancement in the use of genetic genealogy assisted in identifying a suspect. The advancements can place more pressure on the detectives because they now manage more technology-generated information, which is time-consuming and prolongs an investigation into any already heavy workload. In contrast, detectives need ongoing training to keep up with technological expansions (Allsop & Pike, 2019).

Allsop and Pike (2019) also discussed convictions in the past were based on confessions but now advances in DNA profiling technologies have been pivotal to the success of cold case homicide investigations. This is especially in sexually motivated offenses where the ability to create DNA profiles from items retained from the original investigation have helped to identify offenders and eliminate suspects. Technology-based solvability factors were identified as DNA, DNA/CODIS, and AFIS technology (Walton, 2005). The Golden State Killer case was a monumental case in which crime scene DNA was applied in advanced technology and contributed as a significant solvability factor in cold case sexual homicide investigation.

The Golden State Killer was a burglar, stalker, peeper, rapist, and killer who terrorized California from 1974 to 1986 (Wickenheiser, 2019). According to Wickenheiser (2019), DNA from the original crime scenes was re-analyzed and compared through an open-source genealogical website in which investigators narrowed their search for male relatives fitting the age and description of Joseph James DeAngelo. Joseph James DeAngelo was placed under surveillance; discarded DNA samples were obtained without his knowledge, whereas these samples were found to match those from the crime scene directly, and DeAngelo was arrested

and charged (Wickenheiser, 2019). DeAngelo shows the classic features of recidivism coupled. With his experience as a police officer, he began as a burglar, referred to as the Visalia. Ransacker in 1974, with his crimes escalating to sexual assault as the East Area Rapist beginning in 1976, followed by murder as the Original Night Stalker in 1979, and continued until 1986 (Wickenheiser, 2019).

With advancement also comes setbacks, and modern technology can overregulate the use of technology. There are already allegations of sexual violence being thrown out because disclosure officers have failed to disclose pertinent information to the defense in cases (Allsop & Pike, 2019). Therefore, modern technology still must rely on other solvability factors to enhance the successful outcome of an investigation. According to Walton (2005), a commonly prescribed sequence of events occurs in a homicide investigation. Walton (2005) further describes standard police protocol starting with the dispatch and response of patrol to the scene, immediate crime scene protection, identifying witnesses as well as possible suspects, followed by the arrival and preliminary

investigations conducted by detectives/investigators, the photography and processing of the crime scene for evidence, in addition to the coroner/medical examiner roles in the autopsy, the continued follow-up investigation after the crime, and the eventual submission of the case for prosecution. A common theme in the literature is that there is not only one methodology for a homicide investigation since each homicide has unique factors specific to each incident. Categorizing the unique factors can assist with focusing applicable resources on areas that offer a higher probability of investigative reward.

According to Akwada (2022), solvability matrixes can be utilized in which points are assigned within a checklist that helps cold case units focus scarce resources on cases that have a higher potential of getting solved. Akwada (2002) further explained higher potential factors included if fingerprints are recovered, DNA profile was obtained, weapons recovered, victim was identified, victimology was completed, informants were available, eyewitness to the crime were available, and a suspect was identified or developed from the investigation, preferably local, there are case notes, audio records, and testimony. The availability of these reignited leads to offer the potential for the investigation is paramount. The recent advancements in DNA collection and analysis have impacted the investigations in a considerable breakthrough, comparable to the first use of fingerprints or when DNA first became available to be used forensically for leads, but it is not a replacement for good old-fashioned police work and do the traditional leg work ("A Great Time to Be a Cold Case Detective," 2019). Good old-fashioned police work presents factors that affect the overall outcome of the investigation.

## **Psychological Stressors**

The stress of homicide investigations is unique and can immensely affect an investigation. As a result of their routine contact with death and violence, homicide investigators are subjected to sources of stress unique to law enforcement (Sewell, 1994). The constant pressures of solving the case, coupled with being expected to be available to respond continually, leave little to no downtime for the investigator to cope effectively with stress (Sewell, 1994). According to Sewell (1994), the physical and mental demands placed on homicide investigators closely tied to time demands and the overall pressure to solve cases cause profound fatigue to personnel with event stressors that include traumatic stimuli of personal loss and injury, the impact of mission failure, inability to bring closure to the crime, and human error. Having to deal with an immense amount of stress can be undermining in an investigation.

Responding to stress is unique in the investigation process. The short-term responses to homicide investigations are desensitization, distancing oneself from an emotional response, dark humor and comedy as an escape, and jargon that provides alternative terms to death and violence (Sewell, 1994). This can only serve as a temporary buffer to the long-term effect it can have on an investigator or detective. The long-term difficulty in managing life can be affected by constant exposure to the occupational psychological stressors found within law enforcement. The reliance on technical jargon and working language to cope, the ability to fragment and escape into work, and the rationalization of the importance of the victim's condition. The job-related psychological pressure can cause burnout and immensely affect an investigation.

Job-related burnout is a significant concern for researchers, law enforcement administrators, and the government because of the effects on officer health, job performance, and the service provided to the public (McCarty et al., 2019). The burnout from exposure to constant high-stress events and trauma is astounding. Ogińska-Bulik and Juczyński (2021) examined police officers and their reports on experiencing various types of traumatic events related to their work, which consisted of events directly threatening their life or personal health, events threatening the life or health of a colleague, events in which victims died, were attacked, events in which children were harmed, participation in accidents, witnessing a frightening scene, and various others. These events led to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), withdrawal, and high levels of exhaustion, which are in turn associated with symptoms of apathy, fatigue, cynicism, sleep disorders, generalized irritability, and lack of interest in seeking help, and can result in low levels of social support. (Ogińska-Bulik & Juczyński, 2021). The overall variables that can affect anyone working in law enforcement are vast.

Lambert et al. (2018) conducted a study that examined the role of variables of job stress, job involvement, job satisfaction, affective commitment, and continuance commitment as associated with the three dimensions of burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a reduced sense of accomplishment. Lambert et al. (2018) further revealed that job involvement and job satisfaction were associated with lower levels of all three dimensions of burnout, with job stress associated with emotional and reduced accomplishment burnout. In comparison, high affective commitment was associated with lower levels of a reduced sense of personal accomplishment, with continuance

commitment associated with higher levels of emotional and depersonalization burnout (Lambert et al., 2018). According to Lambert et al. (2018), the results suggest that job stress, job involvement, job satisfaction, affective commitment, and continuance commitment affect burnout, and focus should be placed on reducing stress. Law enforcement is a high-stress career, and reducing stress is important but challenging to implement.

A review of research on the interventions of related stress in police officers indicates that there is practically no significant impact on psychological, behavioral, or physiological factors experienced (Ogińska-Bulik & Juczyński, 2021). Recommendations have been suggested for stress management interventions to be more specific to organizational or personal stress types. However, more research is needed to assess the actual effectiveness of the management (Ogińska-Bulik & Juczyński, 2021). Each officer is affected differently, and that makes it even more challenging. There is not a one-size-fits-all plan. According to Bhowmick and Mulla (2021), under the same working conditions, not all individuals are equally vulnerable to developing stress or burnout because certain aspects of the job influence burnout. Not all investigators and detectives exposed to the same conditions will develop burnout from their job since their characteristics and perception of stress vary. For example, an investigator who is a perfectionist may experience burnout faster versus their counterpart that is not conscientious about their work product. High stress can be sustained during periods of high burnout if certain aspects of the job are controlled. This indicates that police officers

working in different positions will experience different levels of stress and will have individual, personalized responses to the stress.

Cold case sexual homicide investigators and detectives could experience a unique type of stress, unlike any other law enforcement officer. Specific suggestions for long-term strategies were discussed by Sewell (1994), which focused on administrators providing appropriate organizational climate, development and implementation of support programs, and training. This establishes a foundational concept because it specifically focuses on homicide investigators. Recent literature does not offer the key historical contextual relationship regarding homicide investigations and unique types of stress, Sewell (1994) further expanded on organizational climate resting on practices that encourage communication, recognize individual needs, emphasize individual stress management with effective supervision. Having parameters in place that encourage fair, consistent, and enlightened practices, provision of appropriate equipment and investigative resources, and a supportive organizational environment coupled with critical incident de-briefings, psychologist and grief counselors effective in trauma debriefing are paramount (Sewell, 1994). Also, rotating investigators allows highly trained investigators to change while continuing their skills without less danger of burnout (Sewell, 1994). Additional training could also offer a change of pace and scenery. One of the most critical elements of long-term strategy is effective ongoing training in which the investigator can focus on individual investigator responsibility for techniques that mitigate the stress associated with homicide investigations and life balance, diet, nutrition, and physical fitness (Sewell, 1994).

## Summary and Conclusions

This literature review provided an overview of the foundation for the current study relating to the solvability factors and psychological stressors experienced by investigators and detectives in solving cold case sexual homicides in the United States. This review introduced the solvability factors and psychological stressors in cold-case sexual homicides. Further expanding on the literature, demonstrating the intertwining relationship between solvability factors, psychological stressors, and the effects on case closures and clearances for cold-case sexual homicides from a resource-based theory approach. The Resource Based Theory follows a traditional business organizational style and provides theoretical and practical guidelines for assessing organizational resources and performance (Zhao & Fan, 2018). According to Braga, Turchan, and Barao (2019), investigative resources influence the likelihood that a homicide is cleared, and homicide cases may require an array of investigative efforts that, in turn, may require a substantial or minimal investment of resources. Evaluating the needs of the organization and its personnel is imperative for the overall success and is not a new concept.

Even though the job duties are essentially the same 30 years later, the research has not stayed current to support the ever-changing world in which homicide investigators and detectives must function daily. Therefore, there is a strong need for further research to bridge the gap on our understanding of factors that influence cold calls sexual homicide cases and the perceived stress of investigating those cases. According to Mrevlje (2019), Homicide and Sexual Offence Investigators experience a greater trauma unique to specific police work where deaths and catastrophes, routine police work, and

sexual offenses are highlighted factors in the most distressing critical incidents versus investigators and detectives working general crimes without a sexual homicide component. The effects of the stress can be mitigated by training.

Preemptively offering training before investigating cold case sexual homicides can mitigate the overall effects of investigating cold-case sexual homicides. According to Sewell (1994), practical ongoing training is one of the most effective ways in which an investigator can focus on individual responsibility for techniques that mitigate the stress associated with homicide investigations and life balance, diet, nutrition, and physical fitness (Sewell, 1994). Maintaining overall mental and physical health can counteract the psychological stressors experienced and contribute to the solvability factors of a cold case sexual homicide.

The focus of this study is to gather information from sexual homicide cold case detectives and investigators about solvability factors and psychological stressors and what resources are currently available to them. Results of this study may be used to reduce psychological stressors experiences and prioritize solvability factors to assist investigators and detectives in conducting their jobs more productively while balancing their personal needs with work demands.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine solvability factors and psychological stressors experienced by investigators and detectives in terms of solving sexual homicide cold cases. This chapter includes information about the methodological design.

#### **Research Design and Rationale**

Research questions are as follows:

RQ1: What do investigators and detectives regard as solvability factors in cold case sexual homicide investigations in the United States?

RQ2: What are psychological stressors experienced by investigators and detectives who investigate cold case sexual homicides in the United States?

The phenomenological method has been used in prior literature to investigate strategies used by law enforcement officers when dealing with stressful situations. According to Katz-Buonincontro (2022), qualitative research involves studying people in naturalistic settings in which humanistic, holistic, and interactive data collection leads to themes and codes via inductive logic involving emergent and iterative data.

Solvability factors of homicide cases have changed, especially with genealogy as a tool. The Golden State Killer was identified using relative information via a free online genetic database. Still, police operate with limited budgets and finite resources, so it is not always possible to revisit every unresolved cold case. It is important to understand why these cases remain unsolved according to investigators and detectives. It is also

important to understand what contributes to sexual homicide cold case solvability and whether there are influential psychological stressors experienced by investigators and detectives in these investigations.

### **Role of the Researcher**

I served as the primary facilitator in collecting and analyzing data. Building a rapport with participants and addressing their experiences led to authentic themes.

I was an active participant during data collection. These interpretations were influenced by personal experiences, life stories, beliefs, thoughts, and worldviews. Even though there were preset questions, I was able to probe further into participant responses which led to additional authentic themes.

Researchers should maintain active listening roles while participants share their experience and be mindful of biases that can influence followup questions. According to Karagiozis (2018), qualitative research involves awareness and sensitivity to ethical issues, developing trustful relationships with participants, acknowledging and respecting their individuality, and understanding their perspectives and rights.

I was mindful of my role throughout the process.

### **Methodology**

#### **Participants**

Participants in this study were eight homicide investigators and detectives who actively worked cold case sexual homicides. The participants will be recruited using the snowball method. The method is commonly used in phenomenological studies in which

the process is essentially the same regardless of the field. A descriptive phenomenological design can be used to explore the experiences of eight participants recruited through the purposeful snowball sampling method. Initial participants can refer additional participants.

Through referrals, the researcher will immediately contact these participants and gather data directly from them. Once a potential participant has been identified, the researcher will email an introduction and a brief study synopsis. They will also receive a consent form (See Appendix B) via email once they agree to participate in the study.

During the interview, participants were asked a series of questions (see Appendix A).

Participants must fit the following study criteria to be included in the research process: (a) law enforcement working full-time in a sworn capacity with agency/department, (b) actively working in a homicide investigation unit/team or nexus to involvement in cold cases either in a full-time/part-time capacity, (c) working on at least one cold case sexual homicide in their caseload, and (d) willing to participate in a semi-structured interview that will be recorded.

### **Instrumentation**

After initial contact, all participants must return the completed informed consent form, preferably by email, before proceeding. Once the consent form is received, the participants will be contacted to schedule their interview at their convenience.

### **Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

The researcher will submit the projected study for approval through the Institution Review Board (IRB) for Walden University, and prior to recruiting participants.

Participants will be chosen through the snowball method sampling. The social networking will be initiated by the researcher and a colleague who works within a West Coast sheriff's department cold case unit within a homicide investigations detail. All the participants' information will be kept confidential in a protected file maintained by the researcher, securing their anonymity.

All the participants in this study will be interviewed in a semi-structured one-on-one format via video conference, through the Zoom Platform, based on their availability. Before the interview, each participant will be given a copy of the consent form and a synopsis of the study. Each participant will have an opportunity to ask follow-up questions and express any concerns about participating in the study. The consent form will outline benefits and risks associated with participating in the study, advising the rights of their confidentiality and their ability and right to withdraw from the process at any point during the study.

All participants will be advised that the interview will be recorded. The recordings will be made via Zoom meeting recording on the computer. The recordings will remain locked and secure, only available to the researcher and not for public access. After the interviews, all the data will be processed through a software program. The software program is called "NVivo". For this study, NVivo will be used for coding and qualitative data analysis, assisting the researcher in transcribing the data.

## **Data Analysis Plan**

After the data collection and processing, the data will be summarized to assist with relaying the findings of this study. A version of Seidel's Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA) (1998) will be utilized from an adapted version developed by Zahra Mohamed (Mohamed, 2022). The aforementioned QDA will be used to align the information collected within the framework of the study. Mohamed (2022) assists with summarizing findings within QDA by dividing the data into four categories (Recording, Noticing, Categorizing, and Reflecting), called the "Spiral-QDA process".. The process allows for a simple yet effective method to guide the researcher through the data analysis.

According to Mohamed (2022), QDA is an iterative, recursive, nonlinear process. Therefore, understanding that the QDA process may require the researcher to move back to a prior phase in the event, there are follow-up questions needed in addition to the initial interview based on themes that emerged and were identified after the semi-structured interview allows for the process to be fluid. According to Mohamed (2022), while categorizing data, the researcher may start noticing new things to add to the emerging themes, whereas a phase can be skipped when moving back. Mohamed (2022) further expands upon the process by explaining that the themes at the reflecting phase will sometimes require the researcher to look back at the coding they had done at the noticing phase and, if need be, move back to the recording in order to complete the process of interpreting the phenomenological data. Interpreting the emerging data will be the next step of the data analysis process in Phenomenology.

Phenomenology is known as both a philosophy and a research method, but it is not used to expose how individuals make sense of their experiences but to describe the essence or meaning of the phenomenon or event (Prosek & Gibson, 2021). Therefore, utilizing the area of interpretative phenomenology, Max van Manen, who was known for the hermeneutic phenomenological approach, conceptualized hermeneutic reduction as a process that leads to continually questioning assumptions and preunderstanding of the phenomenon (van Manen, 2014). According to Prosek and Gibson (2021), the biases and assumptions are not set aside or bracketed but are embedded and essential to the interpretative process. This methodological approach allows for the researcher to identify patterns in the data.

The primary goal of the researcher is to investigate how individuals make meaning of their experiences. Based on the experiences of the participants' experiences, the researcher identifies themes of the phenomenon, utilizing either a holistic, selective, or detailed approach (Prosek & Gibson, 2021). For this study, specific phrases and/or statements that may be most revealing about the experience may be highlighted using the selective approach. The researcher must be cognizant of themes or phrases that may present themselves. According to Allsop, Chelladurai, Kimball, Marks, and Hendricks (2022), coding the themes of what is being said rather than what the text means. Therefore, the researcher should minimize their personal thoughts during the coding process.

Before the interviews, the researcher will comprise a list of the researcher's biases that may present themselves within the study because of the researcher's personal life

experiences, pre-conceived notions and perceptions, and possible innate biases that may present themselves. Preparing such a list is known as bracketing. Bracketing (also called epoche) is fundamental in phenomenological philosophy and is a widely recognized practice where the researcher purposely sets aside their feelings to interpret the participants' experiences free of their judgment (Thomas & Sohn, 2023). Therefore, when themes present themselves within the data, the researcher can separate from the data and be fully immersed in what has emerged, regardless of opinion, and to identify meaningful and central themes. NVivo will be used to code these patterns. Allsop et al. (2022), NVivo provides a structure for efficiently and effectively performing qualitative inquiry that is replicable and rigorous.

Interviewing the detectives and investigators will provide a plethora of data for the researcher to read through to discover nuances repeatedly. Allsop et al. (2022) emphasized that while conducting qualitative research, researchers do not want to put “words in participants' mouths” as it would be primary authors speaking rather than the participants. the researcher must focus on what is said during the open coding process. This focus makes the remaining processes more straightforward, as researcher thoughts and words have not been mixed in with the actual data. The software will assist the researcher in downsizing the data by preparing the data for analysis, finding core themes through open coding of the interviews, choosing core themes, systematically coding the data for those themes, and preparing the results in a publication form (Allsop et al., 2022). This data will provide a deeper understanding of the perceptions of the

investigators and detectives regarding solvability factors and psychological stressors that can affect cold case sexual homicides.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

Providing the most accurate and believable information should be a goal for the researcher. In trustworthiness, the degree to which the reader can assess whether the researchers have been honest in how the research has been carried out and reasonable in their conclusions is paramount (Pratt, Kaplan, & Whittington, 2020). It is important for the reader not to surmise that the researcher has altered their findings in support of one way or another for the participants. In qualitative research, the rich, thick descriptions through words (not numbers) persuade the reader of the trustworthiness of the findings (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). Therefore, the researcher should be cognizant of providing the right amount of data without interpretation that skews the findings. It is a balance that the researcher will have to find throughout the study in order to provide a sense of trustworthiness and dependability.

### **Dependability**

The dependability in qualitative research means the reliability of the research study. It means that if the study were conducted again with the same methods, similar participants, and similar contexts, similar results would be achieved, and the study would be reliable (Kakar, Rasheed, Rashid, & Akhter, 2023). The researcher will provide the experiences provided by the investigators and detectives across the United States regarding solvability factors and psychological stressors encountered while investigating cold case sexual homicides. This data will bridge a gap in the literature that can assist the

investigators and detectives in obtaining the resources needed for personal and operational needs. The community, especially the larger research community, will scrutinize the researcher's role and display dependable data that reinforces truthfulness and the resulting dependability of the outcomes (Katz-Buonincontro, 2022). Providing trustworthy and dependable data in the researcher's studies can provide credibility for the researcher.

### **Credibility**

The researcher should strive to provide the most accurate findings a study could reflect regarding its participants. This degree gives value to the written truth and is key in research. Credibility focuses on whether the findings of the study make sense, they are credible to the people being studied and the researcher's peers, the descriptions are context-rich, the descriptions are embedded into the specific context of the study, and the findings are generally consistent with one another (Meadows, 2003). Interviewing investigators and detectives across the United States will offer a national perspective that is unique to cold case sexual homicide experiences with an in-depth perspective from their lives. Showing data that support the interpretive analysis is one-way qualitative scholars establish the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings (Pratt, Kaplan, & Whittington, 2020). This will provide a deeper understanding of the importance of the study and how it may apply to other unique subgroups that may be similar.

### **Transferability**

Being able to apply research in similar contexts can open the possibility for it to be applied and beneficial for other sub-groups like cold case sexual homicide

investigators and detectives. The transferability shows the degree of application of the research finding in other exact natures of context, people, groups, and settings where transferability words are used in place of validity and reliability in qualitative research (Kakar, Rasheed, Rashid, & Akhter, 2023). By clearly explaining the results of the interviews conducted with the investigators and detectives, there is an opportunity to clearly explain the data collection, participant demographics, and rich context that offers transferability. The transferability can be found in the conclusions offering greater importance and the reach of how far the data can be applied (Meadows, 2003). The opportunity for a researcher's study to be replicated and pursued by another researcher to bridge yet another gap offers a great compliment to the confirmation of the research.

### **Confirmability**

When other researchers can replicate another researcher's work, it highlights the confirmability of the researcher's study. Confirmability is also simultaneously referred to as triangulation. Triangulation is one of the most common, popular, and important strategies to enhance the credibility and quality of research when another assessment and cross-check are conducted to improve credibility (Kakar, Rasheed, Rashid, & Akhter, 2023). The information relies solely on the data received and is free from bias. There is a process for verifying the data, and confirmability is a characteristic of the data, not the investigator (Pratt, Kaplan, & Whittington, 2020). The confirmability can be re-affirmed through the aforementioned bracketing attachment and the strict guidelines the researcher is expected to follow under university umbrella guidelines that protect the student and participants involved.

## **Ethical Procedures**

Ethics is essential in qualitative research because it protects vulnerable, sensitive, and personal information provided by the participants. The present-day real world is complex and shifting, and there are substantial ethical issues that may not lend themselves to easy resolution; specific ethical dilemmas that arise in the real-world settings of qualitative investigations may not always be preventable, but safeguarding depends on the exercise of ongoing judgment and personal integrity of researchers in the field (Pollock, 2012). Providing the investigators and detectives with a consent form, with confidentiality protection emphasized, and reassuring the participants that their participation is strictly voluntary, and their identity is always protected is ethical. According to Pollock (2012), the research depends on trust based on the promise of confidentiality and the core commitment of qualitative research as a primary means of protecting the participants from any adverse consequences and meaningful exploration of many intricate and sensitive areas of human activity and experience involving specialized groups. The vulnerability the investigators and detectives expose themselves to within the public and their agency is blatant. Therefore, making them feel secure and assigning them a numerical number versus exposing their personal identifying information will maintain autonomy and maintain their information in a password-protected drive. This is paramount within the ethics of methodological research. Protecting the participants, the student, and the school by utilizing guidelines and safeguards ensures an ethical and positive data collection and analysis environment.

### Summary

Chapter 3 presented the methodological research used in this qualitative study to examine the solvability factors and psychological stressors experienced by investigators and detectives involving cold case sexual homicides. The qualitative research focuses on the phenomenological approach to retrieve this essential information that can be utilized to bridge a gap in research and provide valuable information from an in-depth perspective into solvability factors in closing and clearing cold case sexual homicides, the psychological stressors involved, and the resources needed to assist the investigators and detectives in reaching a successful outcome in cases. The participants will be comprised of eight homicide investigators and detectives from across the United States who currently have at least one cold case sexual homicide on their caseload. In addition, they have exposure to solvability factors and psychological stressors and possess firsthand knowledge regarding resources that can affect the cases within their workload. The data for this study will be extracted from 8 questions from a semi-structured interview of the 8 participants. Each interview will last approximately 30 minutes to an hour, depending on the participant obtained from the snowball method. In Chapter 4, the researcher will reveal the study's results, and a discussion will explain the themes that emerged through the interviews.

## Chapter 4: Results

This qualitative phenomenological study involved examining solvability factors and psychological stressors among investigators and detectives working cold case sexual homicides. I used semi-structured interviews with selected participants to gather data based on their expertise.

Research questions were as follows:

RQ1: What do investigators and detectives regard as solvability factors in cold case sexual homicide investigations in the United States?

RQ2: What are psychological stressors experienced by investigators and detectives who investigate cold case sexual homicides in the United States?

Perceptions of cold case sexual homicide investigators and detectives may impact solvability factors and psychological stressors. I explored firsthand experiences of eight participants. There is a gap in understanding this subgroup of law enforcement. This affects clearance and closure of these cases. I examined hierarchy of solvability factors in cold case sexual homicides and reviewed resources that were available to investigators and detectives as they faced stressors associated with these investigations.

Semi-structured phenomenological interviews elicited information from participants. This chapter includes findings via in-depth video conference interviews with these participants. Each participant was a full-time sworn member of their agency or department. They were actively working in homicide investigation units or were involved in cold cases in at least a part-time capacity. Participants had at least one sexual homicide cold case in their caseload. They were willing to participate in recorded semi-structured

interviews. They shared their experiences regarding solvability factors and psychological stressors while investigating these homicides.

Interview questions guided participants as they provided insights regarding the topic. Data revealed common themes among participants. These insights helped identify ways to increase job performance and improve closure rates for these types of homicides.

Chapter 4 includes information about the setting, demographics, data collection, analysis, trustworthiness, and results. This is followed by a summary and transition into Chapter 5. I explain the setting and process to ensure participant confidentiality, followed by participant demographic characteristics, the data collection process, data analysis and results, steps to ensure credibility and trustworthiness of research, and results for both research questions.

### **Settings**

To encourage participation, interviews were conducted in a manner that prioritized both privacy and convenience for participants. Private settings were crucial to fostering confidentiality and ensuring comfortable and relaxed environment for both myself and participants. Prior to interviews, consent information was reviewed and emphasized to reassure participants about confidentiality, privacy, and the importance of maintaining integrity of research. I aimed to create a safe space for open dialogue. Participants were informed in advance that they would use Zoom, which suited their schedules and was compatible with their devices. All interviews were conducted in my private home office with no other occupants present to ensure confidentiality. Each interview was held behind closed doors or in an area away from the public to prevent

conversations from being overheard. I advised participants to take precautions to ensure their privacy. This reduced unnecessary distractions and interruptions for both parties.

### **Demographics**

This research included eight participants working full-time in their agencies or departments. They were actively involved in homicide investigation units or connected to cold cases in a part-time capacity. They had to be working on at least one sexual homicide cold case. Participation was voluntary and based on referrals as well as willingness to share. They offered valuable insights regarding the topic. The sample size was suitable for the study and I reached saturation. According to Creswell (2013), a reasonable sample size for snowball sampling in a phenomenological study ranges from three to 25 participants, depending on diversity. For this study, I did not exclude participants based on department, agency, age, gender, or religious affiliation.

Willingness to participate suggested participants were forthcoming during interviews. There was a stigma involving police officers and seeking help for mental health issues. I aimed to break this stigma via higher closure rates for sexual homicide cold cases while maintaining psychological wellbeing. My goal was to benefit current and future investigators and detectives working these cases. Anonymity was essential to ensure participants felt their answers were confidential. All precautions were taken in accordance with research ethics guidelines established by the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB).

## **Data Collection**

I began data collection after receiving approval from the Walden University IRB. As a result of snowball sampling referrals, eight participants were emailed information regarding the study, which included the required informed consent form (See Appendix A). All participants needed to reply to email documents with the words “I consent.” I also provided a contact number in case any prior concerns or questions needed to be addressed before interviews took place. I also reassured participants any communications and responses remained confidential. Thereafter, interview dates and times were set.

I conducted Zoom interviews with all eight participants based on preplanned questions. Interviews were guided by eight open-ended questions (see Appendix A) and took place within 1 week. I reached saturation. Interviews were slated to last between 30 and 60 minutes. This allowed participants to provide in-depth responses to preplanned questions. Anonymous codes were used for all participants to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

Before the start of each Zoom interview, I provided a brief introduction to the research. I preemptively encouraged all eight participants to ask questions throughout the interview or re-clarify any questions to ensure transparency regarding what was being asked of the participants. After the participants verbally consented and confirmed that their participation was voluntary, the semi-structured style interviews commenced. During the interviews, I listened receptively to their responses from a neutral mindset. I repeated responses to demonstrate my attentiveness, as well as open areas for further probing or clarification during the questioning. After each participant interview, I labeled

the recordings based on their anonymous coding. It was assigned as a unique number and letter for their interview segment. The recordings were backed up on a password-protected drive on the researcher's computer. Each interview was electronically transcribed, and I re-listened to it to ensure that responses were accurately reflected in the transcription document. The transcription service utilized was Rev.com, and the specific departments, participants' locations, participant names, and participant identifiers were masked to ensure confidentiality and maintain privacy for the 8 eight participants.

After the interview results, I saw (8) participants fully disclose their training and experience in investigating cold case sexual homicides. Some of the (8) participants were more forthcoming than others in their detailed responses; therefore, the slated 30–60-minute time slots accommodated the responses. However, I expected all of the (8) participants to share the most important lived experiences that fully answered the pre-planned questions thoroughly in their own respective context. At the end of all interviews, the 8 eight participants were thanked for their time and consideration in participating in such an important study. I debriefed all (8) participants on the process, during which I analyzed the data, and offered it to be available for them to access if they chose to view the results.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis for this chapter was grounded in the systematic examination of semi-structured interview transcripts from the eight participants. Utilizing an inductive content analysis approach, I, as the researcher, identified emergent themes through iterative, evidence-driven interpretation of participant narratives, consistent with

established phenomenological methodologies (Başkale & Solmaz, 2024). The process began with the transcription of all the interview recordings, ensuring the accuracy and completeness of the data. The transcripts were then imported into the NVivo qualitative data analysis software, which utilized coding procedures that I used for qualitative interpretation. The initial open coding was applied to segments of the text to capture key concepts. Afterward, similar codes were grouped into broader categories, identifying significant patterns within the data. I used axial coding to refine those categories and illuminate the relationships between emergent themes in the data. Throughout the qualitative data analysis, a constant comparison and iterative review of the coded data was enabled for both the identification and verification of central themes. This structured coding procedure enhanced the organization, traceability, and reproducibility of the results, while maintaining alignment with the phenomenological focus on capturing the participants lived experiences.

This allowed the researcher to follow the themes that emerged naturally from the participants, rather than imposing any preconceived notions of what the researcher may think. It was based on interpretative phenomenology. Therefore, utilizing the area of interpretative phenomenology, Ax van Manen conceptualized hermeneutic reductions as a process that leads to continually questioning assumptions and preunderstanding of the phenomenon (van Manen, 2014). Processing the themes was accomplished by following a version of Seidel's Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA), which was utilized to assist with summarizing findings within QDA by dividing the data into four categories (Recording, Noticing, Categorizing, and Reflecting), called the "Spiral-QDA process" (Mohamed,

2022). This allowed the researcher to manually organize the transcription codes from the recordings, identify themes, categorize these themes, and reflect on what themes emerged from the interviews.

Each interview was recorded, regardless of its duration, which ranged from 30 to 60 minutes. This helped reiterate statements and experiences, ensuring no detail was missed or lost in translation. Being able to revisit the interview multiple times to ensure accuracy was paramount. This emulated confidence in a thorough and accurate transcription, as well as the relevance of the participant's experience. True themes emerged from the in-depth interviews. The researcher could visually see the themes, and the software promoted themes, as well as sub-themes, from the unstructured audio. The patterns derived from the themes identified in the recordings enabled efficient and accurate categorization. This enabled the researcher to reflect on the interview results confidently.

### **Trustworthiness**

As discussed in depth in Chapter 3, providing the most accurate and believable data should be of utmost importance for the researcher. The researcher aimed to ensure trustworthiness, dependability, credibility, transferability, confirmability, and overall ethical conduct in the research study. According to Merriam and Grenier (2019), the rich, thick descriptions through words persuade the reader of the trustworthiness of the findings. The NVivo program enables a researcher to identify themes through the assistance of the software, thereby avoiding the researcher's sole interpretation of data and instead facilitating analysis that enhances data interpretation capabilities. It creates a

balance between the researcher and practical tools in presenting unbiased, organized data as it presents itself.

This approach enables researchers to present emergent themes that are identifiable and replicable, thereby solidifying the study's reliability and promoting transparency. By systematically documenting each stage of data collection and analysis, this study ensures that other scholars can scrutinize and reproduce the research process in the future. The credibility of the findings was further reinforced through thorough member checking; for example, after transcription, participants were provided with their respective transcripts and invited to review and verify that their perspectives and experiences were accurately represented in the transcription. This process of participant validation not only confirmed the authenticity of the data but also mitigated potential interpretive bias on the part of the researcher. Themes identified through this credible process could inform broader applications within subgroups, such as investigators and detectives working on cold-case sexual homicide cases, thereby supporting the transferability of the findings. The study's replicable procedures and participant-verified data enhanced its trustworthiness, affirming that the phenomenon had been examined ethically and with methodological precision, thereby contributing valuable and dependable insights to the field.

Providing investigators and detectives with an ethically guided study, the researcher could utilize a consent form that emphasized confidentiality protection, while reassuring participants that their participation is strictly voluntary and their identity is always ethically protected. The research relied on trust, based on the promise of confidentiality and the core commitment of qualitative research as a primary means of

protecting participants from any adverse consequences and facilitating a meaningful exploration of intricate and sensitive areas of human activity and experience involving specialized groups (Pollock, 2012).

## **Results**

The (8) investigators and detectives who participated in the study described their present and past experiences working on cold case sexual homicides. The lived experiences of investigators and detectives in solving cold case sexual homicides revealed multiple interrelated themes. The themes that emerged centered on two overarching domains: (1) solvability factors and (2) psychological stressors. Before presenting the themes in detail, it is essential to provide context for the participants' investigative backgrounds, caseloads, and training experiences.

### **Participant Background and Caseload**

The eight participants in this study had varying levels of experience and tenure in cold case sexual homicide investigations. Their caseloads ranged widely, including 2, 4, 40–50, 2, 4, 6–7, and 20 cases at the time of the study. Regarding tenure, some participants began working in cold case investigations as early as 2011, while others started in 2016, 2018, or January 2020. Several had been in the unit for approximately four years, one participant had been in the unit for eight years, another for a little over five years, and one participant had just started in January of the current year.

Prior educational and professional experiences were similarly diverse. Participant A4 described attending multiple training sessions over several years, including NCIS courses and additional specialized programs, emphasizing that they transitioned from

regular homicide investigations to cold case investigations. Participant B4 began in homicide, then applied for the cold case unit after their previous supervisor retired and was selected through an interview process by the lieutenant overseeing the unit.

Participant A1 noted that their early experience with cold cases did not include sexual assaults, but the investigative methods overlapped with other types of homicides.

Participant A2 transitioned from the state police and road patrol assignments, through narcotics and weapons investigations, into the cold case unit after attending a two-week detective school, highlighting the importance of experiential learning alongside their formal training.

Participant A3 had been an investigator for nearly seven years before selection to the cold case detail, noting that while formal training was helpful, it was not required.

Participant B3 brought fourteen years of homicide experience to the unit and emphasized that it is common for investigators nearing the end of their careers to transition into cold case work. Participant B2 reported limited prior cold case-specific training, gaining most expertise through hands-on mentorship. Participant B1 drew on over five years of experience in sexual assault and child abuse investigations before joining the homicide and subsequently cold case teams, noting the critical value of updated DNA and genealogical training for successful case outcomes.

Across participants, professional growth in cold case investigations was supported by conferences, Networking, and inter-agency collaboration, which were consistently cited as valuable for sharing case strategies, understanding new technologies, and leveraging available resources. Collectively, the participants' varied tenure, caseloads,

and professional experiences provided a rich foundation for examining solvability factors and psychological stressors in cold case sexual homicide investigations.

### **Pathways Into Cold Case Work**

The pathways that led participants into cold case sexual homicide investigations differed considerably. For some, the assignment came late in their careers. As Participant B3 explained, "I had been working active homicide for 14 years, and as I got closer to retirement, I told my sergeant if a spot opened in a cold case, I would take it. Many times, it is the people toward the end of their careers who get moved into cold cases."

Others entered through formal selection processes. Participant B4 recalled, "When my supervisor retired, I applied along with several others. The lieutenant interviewed us and selected the person they thought would do the best job. " Still others transitioned after building a foundation in related investigative work. Participant B1, for example, emphasized their prior experience: "I worked on sexual assault and child abuse for six and a half years, then homicide for over five years before cold case. That experience really helped me get the spot."

### **Training and Professional Development**

Formal training opportunities were described as sporadic but valuable when available. Several participants reported little to no specialized preparation for cold case sexual homicides. Participant B2 stated, "I had not received any cold case-specific training. I went through active homicide training, but as far as cold cases, it was mostly hands-on and learning from whoever was before me." Similarly, Participant A3

emphasized that while special training "was not required," it "definitely helps once you get there."

Other participants actively pursued professional development opportunities. Participant A4 reported extensive training, including courses through NCIS and ongoing instruction: "You start with regular murders, and then you run into cold case sexual homicides. I have had a couple of courses down in Annapolis and plenty of trainings over the years—I am even going to another one soon."

Networking and conferences were consistently described as essential resources. Participant A2 explained, "Networking is probably one of the biggest things that has helped. You meet someone at a conference who you did not realize could help, such as obtaining a DNA swab in Texas or assisting with an interview. That is huge." This participant also discussed their agency's efforts to host conferences to include prosecutors: "We made it more of a prosecution-type training so prosecutors could understand the DNA side and feel more confident taking these cases to trial."

Others highlighted the importance of emerging forensic techniques. Participant B1 reflected, "The genealogy training was super important knowing all the current stuff with DNA technology and progress. That is what really moves these cases forward."

The diverse experiences of caseload management, training, and professional development provided a foundation for participants to offer their personal insights into the factors that influence solvability and the psychological stressors associated with cold case sexual homicide investigations. The following sections describe the identified

themes in detail, supported by the narratives deciphered from the interviews with all participants.

### **Contextual and External Factors**

These factors emerged, including narratives surrounding community support, media involvement, and the availability of resources. Participants described how the external pressures shaped the direction and momentum of some of their investigations.

#### ***Crime Scene Factors***

A recurring theme based on the condition of the crime scene, including the preservation of physical evidence and initial documentation, was consistently emphasized as a determinant of solvability in cold cases.

#### ***Forensic Evidence***

A common topic emerged regarding the advances in DNA technology and how laboratory processing was regarded as pivotal in reopening and progressing cold cases.

#### ***Investigative Circumstances***

The staffing, or lack thereof, as well as case assignment protocols and interagency collaboration, influenced the ability to pursue leads for both big and small agencies.

#### ***Victimology***

Vaguely, the information about the victim's background, lifestyle, and social networks could provide a critical context for the development of the case, but it was not a common theme.

### ***Witness and Reporting Factors***

The availability, reliability, and willingness of witnesses to provide testimony were described as highly variable yet crucial to the resolution of cases. For some, witnesses were no longer living and able to reiterate crucial details.

### ***Psychological Stressors***

Participants also reported a range of personal psychological stressors they experienced that were associated with investigating cold case sexual homicides.

### ***Cognitive and Professional-Related Stressors***

Investigators and detectives discussed commonality in mental fatigue, case complexity, and professional responsibility as persistent challenges that they face across the United States.

### ***Emotional and Victim-Related Stressors***

The participants described feelings of empathy for victims and families in their cases, as well as the reality of the emotional strain from prolonged exposure to traumatic material seen in their case files.

### ***Long-Term Psychological Consequences***

Many investigators and detectives reported cumulative long-term effects such as sleep disturbances, intrusive memories, or burnout associated with their assignments.

### ***Operational and Case-Related Stressors***

The high caseloads, limited resources, and organizational constraints also contributed to the work-related pressures that some investigators and detectives experienced.

### ***Organizational and Systematic-Related Stressors***

The bureaucratic barriers, leadership dynamics, and systemic shortcomings of law enforcement were identified as sources of frustration within the field.

### ***Personal and Secondary Stressors***

The balancing of work demands with family life, along with secondary exposure to trauma, created additional strain on some of the investigators and detectives.

### ***Contextual and External Factors***

Participants described a wide range of contextual and external factors that influenced the solvability of their cold case sexual homicides. These included the availability of specialized resources, the role of laboratories, prosecutorial decision-making, interagency communication, funding streams, and the influence of public perceptions shaped by media and popular culture.

### **Access to Specialized Resources**

Several participants emphasized the importance of accredited laboratories and specialized experts. Participant A4 highlighted the diverse professionals available to support investigations: "We have our own accredited lab, plus the medical examiner's office, forensic dental experts, and even anthropologists or geologists when needed. Every case is different. We have used graphic people to reconstruct faces, and just last week we worked with an environmental specialist to figure out how a body ended up in the harbor with the currents."

Other participants reinforced the value of partnerships with skilled colleagues and technical experts. Participant A3 described the long learning curve associated with

genealogical techniques: "When I was allowed to stay in the position long enough to learn, it took me almost four years to go from the first time I saw the process in 2018 until I made my first independent identification. However, once I taught it, I was able to make successful identifications." Similarly, Participant B3 credited colleagues and in-house expertise for their effectiveness: "The contextual factor for me is the people I work with—partners who have been doing it longer and having a genealogist in the office. Plus, we have a good working relationship with our labs and our DAs."

### **Laboratory and Communication Challenges**

While some investigators and detectives had a strong relationship with their laboratories, others encountered structural challenges when working with a laboratory. Participant B4 described difficulties after their department's lab became an independent entity: "Even though our lab always had issues, it is worse now that they are separate. Communication is not great. Luckily, because we have been here a while, we know which analysts to call to get things done." In contrast, Participant B2 emphasized the benefits of grant funding and collaboration with genealogists: "We have had success sending evidence to private labs thanks to grant money. Plus, being part of a task force with other cold case investigators and having two full-time genealogists on the team has been huge."

### **Prosecutorial Barriers**

Prosecutors were often hesitant to take on older, more complex cases. Participant A3 explained, "New prosecutors are used to having today's technology. When that did not exist 30 or 40 years ago, they were reluctant to prosecute without it." To counter this,

some investigators worked to educate prosecutors through conferences and seminars.

Participant A1 shared, "On the last day of our cold case conference, we brought in prosecutors who have successfully tried a cold case homicide. It is about showing them these cases are hard, and it is okay to lose, but you still need to give it a shot."

### **Influence of Media and Public Expectations**

Media portrayals were viewed as shaping unrealistic expectations among victims' families and juries. Participant B4 explained, "Because of the crime shows and the Golden State Killer case, families think we should solve every case and that labs get results back in an hour. That is just not reality. Sometimes we do not have the DNA, or the technology is not yet sensitive enough. Families do not always understand that."

Participant A2 echoed this concern regarding jurors, noting, "Jurors watch TV shows and expect things to happen instantly, but that is not real life. That is one reason cold cases can be so tough to take to court."

### **Case Selection and Investigator Buy-In**

Participants also described the importance of personal investment in case selection. A1 explained, "Each detective has a sexual assault case and two cases they pick themselves. That way, they have buy-in—it is not like they are being forced to work it. Often, detectives choose cases from towns where they grew up or have a personal connection. That connection keeps them going when they hit the inevitable roadblocks."

### **Interagency Complexity**

Navigating multi-agency records posed additional barriers. A1 noted, "For one case, the state police had reports, the county had reports, and the town had its own

reports. That meant three different agencies, each with its own kind of report. It is a challenge to pull everything together and make sure nothing is hidden behind a closed door when you are preparing for trial."

### **Grant Funding and Institutional Support**

Finally, participants stressed that solvability often depended on financial resources. Some, like Participant B1, described the advantages of multiple grant sources: "We do not have our own lab, so we use the county lab and a couple of private labs as part of the regional cold case team. The district attorney's office helps fund it with grant money, plus the sexual assault kit initiative grant covers things the department would not normally spend on." Others underscored the role of larger funding streams, with Participant A1 recalling, "We had three million dollars just for cold cases, and that made a huge difference." In contrast, participants from smaller agencies described relying almost entirely on state or federal grants to pursue forensic testing.

Taken together, these narratives illustrate how solvability depends not only on the quality of the original investigation but also on the broader ecosystem of laboratories, prosecutors, funding, interagency cooperation, and public perceptions that surround each case.

### **Crime Scene Factors**

Another key theme that emerged involved the quality and management of crime scene evidence. Participants consistently noted that solvability often hinged on how evidence was initially collected, preserved, and documented.

### **Collection Practices and Integrity of Evidence**

Several participants emphasized that the solvability of older cases often depended on whether evidence was properly collected at the scene. Participant A4 explained, "A big factor is whether people collected it the right way. You look at the photographs and then check the box, and sometimes what is in the photos is not actually in the box anymore." Similarly, Participant A1 stressed how early investigative practices sometimes contaminated or degraded evidence: "Back then, evidence was not always collected right, or right away. Many investigators did not use gloves, so sometimes you are pulling up an investigator's DNA profile instead of the suspect's." This participant also emphasized the influence of time, concluding, "The solvability, I think, is just the age of the case."

### **Storage Conditions and Preservation**

The way evidence was stored was another critical concern. Participant A2 highlighted improper storage as a recurring barrier: "Crime scene factors come down to whether they even took the evidence in the first place, or if the storage was not proper." They added that understanding the victim's actions at the time was also important: "You have to remember, these victims fought back. They were brave and strong. However, in the past, investigators did not always realize DNA could be recovered, so that opportunity was lost."

### **Technological Limitations of the Past**

Participants also described how advances in modern forensic technology underscore the absence of comparable resources in earlier decades. Participant A3 explained, "When you are looking at cold cases compared to current ones, the difference

is huge. Today, you have got cell phone records, video, digital footprints—but back then, none of that existed. You cannot go pull up cell phone records from 1980."

### **Documentation and Chain of Custody Issues**

Several detectives described frustrating inconsistencies in how evidence was recorded and tracked. Participant B3 explained, "We have run into cases where evidence was supposedly tested years ago, but there is no documentation. Sometimes it was consumed, sometimes it was never even booked, or you will find an empty bag logged back into evidence." These lapses created obstacles for re-analysis and undermined confidence in the chain of custody.

### **Systemic Recordkeeping Challenges**

Finally, navigating outdated or incomplete record systems further complicated investigations. Participant B1 summarized, "We all face the same challenges—just trying to get through the systems and records that have been changed or never kept up in the first place."

Taken together, participants described crime scene factors as a central solvability issue in cold case sexual homicides. While modern investigative tools have expanded the possibilities for utilizing biological evidence, older cases often bear the legacy of inconsistent collection practices, improper storage, missing documentation, and the absence of today's technological infrastructure.

### **Forensic Evidence Factors**

Participants consistently emphasized that the presence, quality, and availability of forensic evidence were one of the most decisive solvability factors in cold case sexual

homicides. Advances in technology, particularly in DNA testing and investigative genetic genealogy, have transformed investigative potential. However, these same advances also highlighted the fragility of evidence collected decades earlier and the systemic issues in how evidence was historically preserved and retained.

### **Preservation and Retention of Evidence**

Participants described significant challenges tied to the preservation of forensic materials over time. Participant A4 explained, "It comes down to whether the evidence was preserved the right way. Back in the day, warehouses had limited space, and people did not realize this evidence would one day be valuable. They would go through boxes and throw things out to clear space." Similarly, Participant A3 noted that retention policies varied across agencies and often resulted in the disposal of rape kits or other critical materials: "In some cases, the kit was collected but later discarded because the retention period expired. Once it has gone, there is nothing left to test."

### **DNA and the Centrality of Biological Evidence**

Detectives overwhelmingly described DNA as both a tool of possibility and a source of limitation. Participant B4 underscored the reliance on DNA for prosecutorial acceptance: "We can have the strongest circumstantial case in the world, but if there is no DNA, the DA usually will not take it. Even when we do have DNA, sometimes they still hesitate." Participant A1 elaborated on the difficulty of working with degraded or consumed evidence: "A lot of what we have left are swabs or scrapings, but sometimes that evidence was bad then and it is still bad now. We have to retest everything, hoping something usable comes out."

Participants also reflected on how evidence had sometimes been consumed in prior testing, leaving nothing for modern re-examination. Participant B1 explained, "When they went to submit DNA years ago, the testing consumed all the evidence. There is nothing left now for us to go back to, and with contamination or loss, it is even harder to track down." Participant B3 echoed this challenge: "We will send evidence to the lab, and they open the package, and there is nothing in there to test."

### **Advances and Limitations of Investigative Genetic Genealogy**

While recent innovations in genetic genealogy offered new pathways, participants described both opportunities and restrictions. Participant A4 highlighted obstacles with consumer databases: "Genealogy is coming full circle, but there are hindrances. Ancestry.com and 23andMe will not let us search for suspects, so it is a roadblock. Only certain databases allow us to do that." Others, like Participant A3, emphasized how genealogy had reinvigorated previously stalled cases: "The invention of new technology has given these cases new life. Using genealogy to identify both victims and suspects has been transformative when biological material is available."

### **Degradation and Contamination Issues**

Multiple participants pointed to the fragile condition of older forensic samples. Participant A2 explained, "It is mostly the issue of degraded DNA. We have ballistics, yes, but DNA is the key, and so often it just does not hold up." Participant B2 also described the tension between degraded evidence and new investigative possibilities: "A lot of the evidence is degraded, but genealogy has evolved. We are finally able to start working on possible suspects in cases that were stuck for years."

### **Systemic Barriers Involving Using Forensic Evidence**

Even after DNA profiles were developed, participants described limitations in their application. Participant B1 gave the example of profiles uploaded into CODIS but never linked to suspects: "We have had cases where the DNA is in CODIS, but we cannot locate the suspect, or the suspect died, so we cannot confirm anything." These systemic limitations left investigators with partial answers that could not be fully acted upon.

Taken together, forensic evidence factors reflected both the most significant source of solvability and the most persistent obstacle to solving the case. While modern technology, such as investigative genetic genealogy, has expanded possibilities, solvability is ultimately constrained by the historical handling, preservation, and consumption of evidence, as well as institutional barriers to prosecution without definitive DNA.

### **Investigative Circumstances**

Participants described investigative circumstances as a complex mix of historical investigative practices, recordkeeping systems, and evolving interview techniques, all of which influenced the solvability of cold case sexual homicides. The quality of the original investigation and the availability of complete records often determine whether a case can be successfully reopened.

### **Variability During Initial Investigations**

Several participants pointed out that the strength of a case often depended on the quality of the original investigation. Participant A4 reflected on the inconsistency between how cases appeared on paper versus the reality when evidence was revisited

decades later: "Some cases look good on paper, but when you actually open the boxes and see what you have, or check with the medical examiner's office for slides, they may not be there. They were never done in the first place." Similarly, Participant A3 noted, "Maybe the initial investigation did not uncover any real leads. Even with new technology, if those things were not in existence back then, you cannot create evidence out of thin air. That becomes an inhibiting factor."

### **Challenges with Recordkeeping and Evidence Tracking**

Poor recordkeeping practices from earlier decades were a recurring theme. Participant A1 explained: "Back then, there were no computers. Things were handwritten, and people threw items into boxes, so evidence was often lost. It was not malicious; it was just common practice. However, now, when you try to locate evidence and files, they are not always where they are supposed to be, and it makes it hard to hang anything over a suspect's head." Participant B3 echoed this difficulty when describing the process of reconstructing an evidence history: "We are trying to follow the life history of a piece of evidence—what has been done with it, where it has gone. If no one documented it, then you start combining papers to guess what happened. That seems to be the hardest thing."

### **Impact of Investigative Practices**

Participants described how different standards of evidence handling had long-term consequences for solvability. Participant A2 gave a vivid example: "Some detectives handled the evidence very well back in the 70s. Others were like, 'Oh, that is a great piece of DNA,' and in the next crime scene picture, he is holding it barehanded.

Now we do not have a good piece of DNA." Similarly, Participant B1 noted that investigative thoroughness varied widely, and even well-handled cases faced obstacles when suspects fled: "If you had a good homicide team and good detectives, they did everything they could at the time. However, if a suspect was identified and fled out of the country years ago, and their family says they died, but you cannot get a death certificate, that is still a barrier."

### **Evolving Interview Techniques**

The role of interview strategies also emerged as a significant factor. Participant A1 explained the difficulty of eliciting confessions without leverage: "I do not feel like many people would want to tell you their deepest, darkest secrets 30 years later unless you had something to hang over their head." Participant A3 highlighted concerns with outdated interview methods, contrasting older techniques like the Reid method with newer approaches: "The Reid technique has fallen out of favor because it can lead to false confessions. The newer methods are supposed to eliminate that possibility, but it takes years of practice to learn the nuances."

### **Barriers Via Suspect Circumstances**

Finally, the passage of time created obstacles that exceeded the evidence's capabilities. Participants noted instances where suspects were no longer alive or were otherwise inaccessible. Participant B2 remarked, "Sometimes we ran into the suspect, now being deceased." Similarly, Participant B1 shared challenges in confirming suspect death: "The family told us he died, but without a death certificate or official record, it is just another dead end."

In summary, the investigative circumstances are of prime importance regarding how case solvability is influenced not only by technological limitations but also by the quality and consistency of past investigative practices, the accessibility of documentation, and the evolving tools of modern interviewing. The exhaustive process of these cases means detectives and investigators must contend with decades of procedural and systemic variability while still striving for closure.

### **Victimology Factors**

Participants emphasized that understanding the victim's context, lifestyle, and social environment was critical for solvability in cold case sexual homicides. The complexity of Victimology often influenced both the investigative strategy and the interpretation of forensic evidence.

### **Understanding Victim Lifestyles and Relationships**

Participants noted that reconstructing the victim's social and relational context was essential. Participant A4 explained, "You have to talk to their friends and find out who they were dating or who they might have been with, and the types they preferred. It is tough, especially with sexual cases involving working girls or those involved in prostitution. DNA alone is not the magic solution—you have to put everything into context." This perspective emphasizes the importance of considering even strong forensic evidence within the broader context of the victim's life circumstances.

### **Victim Cooperation and Historical Reporting**

The willingness and ability of victims to provide complete information were also identified as factors influencing solvability. Participant A2 described challenges with

victims' reticence: "In the past, victims often downplayed what happened instead of letting investigators fully document it. You end up with degraded DNA, and trying genealogy or CODIS databases becomes more challenging, making it harder to move forward. If they had been more open and upfront, we would have had a better chance of obtaining samples and solving the case."

### **Identification of Previously Unknown Victims**

Participants also highlighted the role of new technology in resolving cases involving unidentified victims. Participant A3 shared an example: "Both of my sexual assault cases involved unknown victims. Using new technology, we were able to identify them, and four years later, we could contact their loved ones to say, Unfortunately, your loved one was a victim of a homicide." This illustrates how modern methods, combined with a thorough understanding of the victim's background, can generate breakthroughs in otherwise stalled cases.

Overall, the participants' narratives highlight that victimology factors extend beyond forensic evidence. The social context of the victim, historical reporting practices, and the ability to identify previously unknown victims can all shape investigative strategy and the potential for case resolution.

### **Witness and Reporting Factors**

Participants identified witness availability, cooperation, and memory reliability as critical influences on the solvability of cold case sexual homicides. These factors often intersect with the passage of time and the circumstances surrounding the initial investigation.

### **Reinterviewing and New Information**

Several participants emphasized the potential value of re-interviewing witnesses who may not have been fully cooperative during the initial investigation, but due to time constraints, circumstances have changed. Participant A1 explained, "Maybe we should start re-interviewing people who have some connection to the case because they may no longer be with the suspect. Some of the hardest cases to solve might be just one interview away, like a family member coming forward and being told what happened." They also noted that even in cases with little evidence, revisiting witnesses could yield critical information: "Some cases have no physical evidence, but maybe there are two or three witnesses who were not cooperative then. Let us go talk to them now—you never know what you are going to get."

### **Temporal and Legal Considerations**

Participants described how the age of a case could influence investigative strategy. Participant A2 observed, "With older cases, you can be more lenient because you do not have to worry about the court side of it. If it is a case from the 1950s or '60s, the suspect may be deceased, and DNA evidence might point in their direction. However, then you have to consider the other people who were not interviewed back then." This highlights the balance investigators must strike between pursuing leads and accounting for limitations imposed by time.

### **Memory Decay and Witness Mortality**

The passage of decades also posed challenges for detectives and investigators in recalling witnesses. A3 noted, "When you are talking about cold cases, memories fade.

People do not recall details from several years ago the way they did immediately after the event." Witness mortality further complicated investigations. A3 said, "some witnesses have since died, and that definitely affects the case, especially key witnesses. Sometimes there are no definitive eyewitnesses that this particular crime occurred."

### **Implications for Case Resolution**

Taken together, participants' reflections underscore that witness and reporting factors are highly time sensitive. Solvability can hinge on whether witnesses remain alive, are willing to cooperate, and can recall critical details. Re-interviewing witnesses and strategically leveraging new investigative tools may provide the key pieces of information needed to advance a cold case toward resolution.

### **Cognitive and Professional-Related Stressors**

Participants consistently described cognitive and professional demands as significant sources of stress in cold case sexual homicide investigations. These stressors arose from the complexity of cases, conflicting responsibilities, and the challenges of balancing investigative optimism with frustrating limitations.

### **Frustration with Case Progress**

Several participants described the cognitive strain that is associated with investing several hours and emotions into a case only to encounter multiple setbacks. Participant A4 explained, "You always get aggravated because you think you have a great case. You open the box, look at the photographs, and think, 'This is awesome, we are going to get this guy. The guy's name might even be in the case.' And then you finally investigate it, the lab tells you, 'Well, there is no DNA there.'" This highlights the emotional and

cognitive toll of repeatedly reconciling high expectations with the practical realities of forensic limitations.

### **Balancing Multiple Professional Responsibilities**

Participants also described stress arising from competing workload demands, as they wore several hats. Participant B1 stated, "We assist on the current homicide team while maintaining our cold case caseload, so it is a push and pull. Sometimes we have to drop our cold case work to respond to a current case, then come back to it." The need to constantly switch focus between ongoing investigations and cold cases compounded cognitive load and contributed to professional stress.

### **Implications for Investigator Performance**

These personal stressors were noted to affect not only workflow but also decision-making and morale. The combination of high expectations, inconsistent case outcomes, and competing responsibilities created a persistent cognitive burden. Participants emphasized that managing these constant demands required adaptability, resilience, and careful prioritization to maintain investigative effectiveness over time.

### **Emotional and Victim-Related Stressors**

Participants described emotional and victim-centered stressors as a pervasive challenge in cold case sexual homicide investigations. These stressors arose from both the nature of the crimes and the emotional impact on families, particularly when dealing with children or unidentified victims.

### **Exposure to Graphic and Distressing Evidence**

Several participants noted the emotional burden of encountering graphic crime scene materials. Participant A2 explained, "The biggest one is the kids and the babies seeing the pictures, even though they were not on scene because it happened in the past. Seeing the kids, the pictures, and then conducting an exhumation of a baby... now you see the baby emerge from the grave. That is a huge emotional and victim-related stressor." They further highlighted that unidentified victims added additional emotional weight: "Regardless of the victim's family, just seeing those pictures is difficult. Some of these babies do not even have a name; they are completely unidentified, and other kids as well."

### **Vicarious Emotional Investment**

Participants also described how long-term engagement with cases led to personal emotional investment. Participant A3 noted, "Personally, each of these cases takes a little piece out of you, shall we say. You become vested in these cases and put a lot of time and effort into trying to get answers for the family. You are trying to provide them with closure about whatever happened to their loved one." This highlights how the emotional connection to victims and their families exacerbates the inherent stress of cold case investigations.

### **Implications for Investigators**

Overall, participants emphasized that emotional and victim-related stressors are intrinsic to cold case work. The combination of exposure to graphic evidence in the case files, handling cases involving children or unidentified victims, and the desire to provide

answers for grieving families creates a persistent and significant emotional burden in this field of work. These factors highlight the need for strategies to support investigators' well-being while maintaining professional effectiveness.

### **Long-Term Psychological Consequences**

Participants described enduring long-term psychological impacts as a key stressor in cold case sexual homicide investigations. These long-term consequences stemmed from the persistent cognitive and emotional demands of the work, often extending beyond the workplace and affecting personal life.

### **Compartmentalization and Continuous Cognitive Load**

Several participants discussed using compartmentalization as a coping mechanism. Participant B4 stated, "I am very good at compartmentalizing. I do not allow myself time to truly be affected by what I see, what I read, or the phone calls I receive. Once I finish a task, there is always another task waiting." Participant A added, "Being off is just not my thing. Even on vacation, I could not help but think about work. It never shuts off because you are constantly thinking about your cases. It is like a browser in the back of your head—always running." These narratives illustrate how the work creates a persistent cognitive load, where case-related thoughts remain present even during personal time.

### **Emotional Numbing and Desensitization**

Participants also described emotional numbing as a long-term adaptation to repeated exposure to death and trauma. Participant A1 reflected, "You get immune to death. You dissociate yourself from many cases. You just become numb. It does not

bother me at all... It is like, let us do what we have to do and get out of here." They provided a specific example: "A 4-year-old was hit by a car, and I was playing golf two days later. Everyone else was bent out of shape, and I was just... okay, it was an accident. I have gone completely numb to that kind of thing." This desensitization reflects a coping strategy that, while functional professionally, also highlights the psychological toll of repeated exposure to trauma.

### **Persistent Engagement Beyond Work**

Even when not on duty, participants reported continued cognitive and emotional engagement with cases. Participant A2 explained, "You go to sleep, but you always bring it with you. I would love to be able to leave work behind, but it always seems to be there. You have to occupy your time with other things, like your kids, to keep your mind off it." Similarly, Participant A3 emphasized the need to separate oneself from day-to-day public interactions to manage this ongoing engagement.

### **Balancing Work and Personal Life**

Some participants highlighted strategies for mitigating long-term stress through their personal connections. Participant B3 noted, "When I walk away from my desk, I am done. I am pretty involved with my daughters' lives, and that is how I decompress." These examples suggest that maintaining boundaries and engaging in meaningful personal activities are crucial for maintaining long-term psychological well-being.

Overall, the participants' narratives illustrate that cold case sexual homicide work exerts a persistent psychological influence, combining emotional numbing, continuous cognitive engagement, and the need for deliberate personal strategies to manage the

extensive stress. These long-term consequences underscore the importance of systemic support and self-care for investigators working in this uniquely challenging field.

### **Operational and Case-Related Stressors**

The participants identified operational and case-related factors as persistent sources of stress in their cold case sexual homicide investigations. These stressors stemmed from limitations they found in the available evidence, the ever-growing expectations of victims' families, and the constant external pressures related to technology and public perception.

### **Challenges with Evidence Availability**

A central stressor involved the degradation or loss of critical forensic evidence. Participant A4 explained, "There is no DNA there because it was not preserved the right way or handled properly. The environment just destroyed it." Participant A1 noted that this limitation also impacted the investigative role, emphasizing the importance of being a consistent point of contact for families: "A lot of the younger guys do not want to be the guy behind the wall. You need to be the face that the family can talk to."

### **Interacting with Victims' Families**

Participants described the emotional difficulty of communicating with families when cases had limited solvability. Participant A2 remarked, "You want to help them get answers, but some cases do not have them. You still must talk to them. It is like talking to a wall because you do not have the answer to give them." Participant A3 added, "Because these are cold cases, they can go on for several years. Sometimes you may not get answers. There is a little guilt in contacting families and having to say, 'Sorry, there is

still nothing we can do.' You put an added burden on the family—they become hopeful, and sometimes you cannot resolve it."

### **External Pressures and Misperceptions**

Participants highlighted stressors stemming from public expectations shaped by media and elected officials. Participant A3 observed, "People watch television and documentaries and think old cases are easy to solve. They think you can get DNA results in an hour and know exactly where the suspect was. That technology does not exist, but they become victim of that stereotype." The participant further explained that political and public pressures amplify stress: "Elected officials come forward and say we should be able to solve every case. That is not always possible. However, the adrenaline of trying to provide resolution for families becomes somewhat addictive—you want to try for every case."

### **Training and Knowledge Gaps**

Operational stress also arose from gaps in specialized training. Participant B3 noted, "DNA stuff is difficult to understand. It would be nice if our department sent us to classes, but that is not going to happen. We have to seek training on our own." Participant B2 described the frustration inherent in learning new investigative steps: "Sometimes it is frustrating as you learn all these new procedures for cold cases."

In sum, operational and case-related stressors encompass both the limitations of historical evidence and the broader pressures of family expectations, public perception, and knowledge gaps. These factors highlight the multifaceted nature of stress in cold case

investigations and emphasize the need for both institutional support and self-directed professional development.

### **Organizational and Systematic-Related Stressors**

Participants identified organizational and systematic factors as key stressors affecting cold case sexual homicide investigations. These stressors encompassed technology adoption, staffing patterns, caseload management, training opportunities, and bureaucratic or funding challenges.

### **Adapting to Technological Advancements**

Keeping up with evolving technology emerged as a significant organizational stressor. Participant B4 explained, "Keeping up with technology is sometimes a hindrance because I have to push the guys, and some of them are resistant—they are just used to working cases the way they always have. When you come here, you have to level up constantly, and not everybody does." The need to balance past successful practices with new investigative methods highlights the ongoing cognitive and professional demands imposed by technological change.

### **Caseload and Workflow Management**

Participants emphasized the effect of caseload size on their ability to progress cases. Participant A1 noted, "If you have more than three cases at a time, you are only doing a little bit on each case. You are like a hamster spinning the wheel—never really moving any of these cases further." This underscores how organizational structures and workload allocation can limit investigative effectiveness.

### **Staffing and Training Challenges**

High personnel turnover and limited opportunities for in-depth training also contributed to stress. Participant A3 stated, "Sworn personnel experience much turnover. Whether it is transfers or promotions, they are often not afforded the time to stay in a position long enough to learn the necessary techniques. If they are, it is highly recommended." Participant B3 added, "The department has not been good about sending people to classes because of budget constraints. You have to seek out information on your own and tap into others' experiences."

### **Supervision, Funding, and Bureaucracy**

Organizational and bureaucratic factors further compounded stress. Participant B1 explained, "I have support, but sometimes it feels like I am fighting for money and funding to do what is necessary. With changing supervision—new lieutenants or sergeants—we have to start over, train them, and get them up to speed from the ground floor." These challenges underscore the ongoing need to maintain operational effectiveness in a rapidly evolving institutional landscape.

Overall, participants emphasized that systematic and organizational constraints—from technology adoption to caseload, staffing, and supervisory changes—pose persistent stressors. Addressing these factors is critical for sustaining investigator performance and optimizing outcomes in complex cold case sexual homicide investigations.

### **Personal and Secondary Stressors**

Participants described personal and secondary stressors as ongoing challenges that extend beyond professional duties, encompassing coping mechanisms, work-life balance, and the personal burden of responsibility for cases.

### **Defense Mechanisms and Overcommitment**

Many participants discussed using busyness as a coping mechanism to manage stress. Participant B4 explained, "As soon as I leave work, I go to my extra job. I work seven days a week, literally. I complete one task, and then I have something else to do. That is my drug... I have almost 4,300 hours of time off, and when I take it, it is because I have got something else to do." This pattern of continuous activity reflects a method of emotional regulation and stress management, though it may contribute to long-term strain.

### **Perceived Responsibility to Families**

Participants also noted the emotional weight of serving as the primary point of contact for the families of victims. Participant A2 stated, "They expect an answer or some progress. It is as if we tried, and there is nothing. You hang up the phone, and you feel like a failure." They further emphasized the responsibility inherent in the role: "They are not mad at you—they are mad at the situation. However, you almost have to take responsibility because it is law enforcement, and we are the only contact for real answers."

### **Challenges with Work-Life Separation**

Maintaining clear-cut boundaries between work and personal life was another notable stressor that the investigators and detectives experienced. Participant A3 reflected, "The hardest thing for me was not taking it home every night." Similarly, Participant B1 described the lifestyle adjustments required to manage risk and stress: "Sometimes you just change your pattern in life because you know the reality of what could happen. You might be more careful and situationally aware than the average person would."

### **Implications for Investigator Wellbeing**

Overall, the personal and secondary stressors demonstrate how cold case work permeates both professional and personal spheres. Investigators rely on self-directed coping strategies, including overcommitment and lifestyle adjustments, to manage the emotional and operational demands of their work. These strategies, while adaptive, emphasize the cumulative burden of working in high stakes, emotionally charged investigations in law enforcement.

### **Coping Strategies for Psychological Stressors**

Participants described a variety of strategies they utilize to manage the psychological stressors inherent in cold case sexual homicide investigations. These strategies spanned physical activity, social support, professional development, and engagement with personal interests.

### **Physical Activity and Recreational Outlets**

Many participants emphasized the importance of some physical activity as a tool for stress management. Participant B4 described, "I take time off to do Spartan races, even though it costs money and time. The stuff is constantly with you, especially when you know you are almost there. It is on your mind, so this helps." Similarly, Participant A4 discussed fishing as a longstanding personal outlet: "I go out on the boats before work or on days off. Even if I am not fishing, just being on the boat is my habit—it is my way to decompress." Other participants cited gym workouts, running, hockey, and engaging in hobbies such as music as important ways to relieve stress and maintain balance.

### **Peer and Social Support**

Social support, both professional and personal, was consistently identified as critical for support. Participants highlighted the value of peer assistance and unit-based support. Participant A2 noted, "Having peer assistance is huge. You need someone who gets what you are doing and can provide guidance." Participant A3 reflected, "Talking about the successful resolution of a case is kind of like talking to someone about your problems. It helps to communicate with someone in the same field who understands what you do." Participant B3 added, "Being a parent and playing with my daughters, or talking with colleagues in roundtable discussions, allows me to vent and process the work. Being part of a team lets you bounce ideas off each other and come up with solutions."

### **Professional Development and Training**

Continuous learning and professional development were also emphasized as coping mechanisms. Participant A1 advised that training is essential for young detectives

entering the unit: "The biggest thing is training. It helps you approach cases more effectively and build confidence." Participant B2 noted the need for a focused cold case task force with dedicated training: "In a cold case unit, you need a team that works and focuses on these cases. Training is huge." Participants also mentioned utilizing resources such as interdepartmental knowledge sharing, conferences, YouTube, books, and discussions with experienced colleagues to stay updated on investigative techniques, including DNA and genealogical methods.

### **Integration of Personal Life and Support Networks**

Participants highlighted how having supportive personal relationships mitigates stress. P# explained, "Being fortunate enough to have a partner in the same field who speaks the same language helps immensely. You can communicate daily, and they understand what you are going through." Other participants emphasized that consistency in physical activity and involvement in county-level teams provided a sense of community and resilience.

Overall, coping strategies for psychological stressors in cold case investigations encompass a combination of personal habits, physical activity, peer support, professional development, and strong personal relationships. These mechanisms collectively help investigators manage the emotional, cognitive, and operational demands of their work, supporting both well-being and investigative effectiveness.

### **Summary**

This qualitative phenomenological study systematically investigated the factors influencing case solvability and the psychological stressors encountered by investigators

and detectives engaged in cold case sexual homicide investigations. Employing semi-structured, in-depth interviews with purposively selected participants, the study drew upon the expertise and lived experiences of these professionals to elucidate key themes relevant to both investigative efficacy and occupational well-being, as reflected in the study's findings.

The participants' responses in the interviews were analyzed and presented in terms of themes identified under solvability factors and psychological stressors.

Under solvability factors, participants identified several factors influencing the solvability of cold case sexual homicides. First, contextual and external factors included community support, media involvement, and the availability of resources. Participants described how external pressures shaped the direction and momentum of investigations. Secondly, crime scene factors, which addressed the condition of the crime scene, including the preservation of physical evidence and initial documentation, were consistently emphasized as a determinant of solvability. Third, forensic evidence, which dealt with advances in DNA technology and laboratory processing, was regarded as pivotal in reopening and progressing cold cases. Fourth, investigative circumstances, which addressed staffing, case assignment protocols, and interagency collaboration, influenced the ability to pursue leads. Fifth, victimology, which dealt with information about the victim's background, lifestyle, and social networks, often provided critical context for case development. Sixth, witness and reporting factors, which addressed the availability, reliability, and willingness of witnesses to provide testimony, were described as highly variable yet crucial to the resolution of cases.

Under psychological stressors, the participants also reported a range of psychological stressors associated with investigating cold case sexual homicides. First, cognitive and professional-related stressors regarding Investigators discussed mental fatigue, case complexity, and professional responsibility as persistent challenges. Second, emotional and victim-related stressors regarding participants described feelings of empathy for victims and families, as well as emotional strain from prolonged exposure to traumatic material. Third, long-term psychological consequences, where many investigators have reported cumulative effects, such as sleep disturbances, intrusive memories, or burnout. Fourth, operational and case-related stressors, including high caseloads, limited resources, and organizational constraints, added to work-related pressures. Fifth, organizational and systematic-related stressors, discussing bureaucratic barriers, leadership dynamics, and systemic shortcomings, were identified as sources of frustration. Lastly, personal and secondary stressors regarding balancing work demands with family life, along with secondary exposure to trauma, created additional strain.

The findings revealed that solvability in cold case evidence quality, investigative practices, victim context, witness availability, and technological access influenced sexual homicides. Participants highlighted the importance of mentorship, caseload management, and inter-agency collaboration in navigating these factors. Investigators and detectives experience intense psychological stressors, including emotional fatigue, cognitive strain, operational frustrations, and long-term consequences. Strategies to mitigate these stressors included peer support, physical activity, hobbies, compartmentalization, and structured training.

Overall, the results demonstrated the complex interplay between investigative challenges and psychological demands, offering insights into both improving solvability and supporting the investigator's well-being. These findings addressed the research questions and provided a foundation for recommendations in Chapter 5. In Chapter 5, I will present and discuss the findings, as well as the limitations of the qualitative study, provide recommendations, and outline the implications of social change following this phenomenological study.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to assess solvability factors and psychological stressors via real-life experiences of investigators and detectives working in cold case sexual homicide investigations. Eight participants who were full-time sworn investigators or detectives working in homicide or cold case units shared their personal lived experiences and expertise via semi-structured interviews. The following two research questions were used:

RQ1: What do investigators and detectives regard as solvability factors in cold case sexual homicide investigations in the United States?

RQ2: What are psychological stressors experienced by investigators and detectives who investigate cold case sexual homicides in the United States?

This chapter includes interpretations of findings in relation to existing literature, applicable theoretical frameworks, highlights of the study, and limitations. Participants from several agencies across the United States shared experiences that generated themes during data collection. Based on findings, recommendations for further practice were examined, in addition to policy recommendations and possible areas of future research. The chapter concludes with implications for positive social change.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

Participants in this qualitative phenomenological study offered their firsthand knowledge and experience regarding solvability factors and dealing with psychological stressors while working on cold case sexual homicides. This study included personal experiences of this understudied subgroup, revealing five solvability factor and six

psychological stressor domains. Collectively, this contributed to a unique understanding of working cold case sexual homicides. Themes that emerged centered on two overarching domains: solvability factors and psychological stressors.

### **Solvability Factors**

#### ***Crime Scene and Evidence Preservation***

Participants emphasized the importance of proper evidence preservation and documentation. Whenever evidence is used in an investigation, the signature, date, and time must be recorded. Physical possession of evidence must be maintained by investigators or detectives in secure locations that are inaccessible to unauthorized personnel and protected from potential tampering in order to ensure if attorneys raise concerns about the chain of evidence, records are never compromised. If prosecution is unable to prove the flawless chain of evidence, defense attorneys can seek annulment based on evidence in court, including any toxicological analyses that are performed on blood and urine (D'Anna et al., 2023). Properly preserving the scene and evidence as well as documenting them can significantly impact outcomes of cases, even if based on technicalities.

If crime scene evidence is mishandled during investigations, or it is degraded or even lost, solvability decreases significantly. This demonstrates the importance of the chain of custody and quality of evidence in resolving cold cases, particularly in terms of securing resolute prosecutions. Quality of documentation is not necessarily a point of concern regarding evidence being contaminated at the time of some cold case sexual homicides from decades ago, because it was unknown DNA would be a primary

investigative tool in some of these cases. Advancements in forensic science and increasing accessibility of DNA as an investigative tool have provided new avenues for solving cases.

### ***Forensic Advances and DNA***

Participants in this study described DNA analysis and investigative genetic genealogy as a standard tool that is used for solvability in investigations. This aligns with research from the last few decades which has presented the transformative role of forensic genealogy as a primary investigative tool in facilitating closure of decades-old cases. However, participants also noted there were still systemic barriers involving restricted database access due to lack of funding or unavailability, sample consumption issues because of prior testing or degradation, and prosecutorial hesitancy because of issues with evidence and documentation or deceased suspects, as well as circumstantial evidence that is lacking for prosecuting these types of cases.

There are lingering constitutional protections against unreasonable searches and seizures. Even though courts have ruled the interest in public safety outweighs individual privacy, it is essential to evaluate attendant policy, ethical, and legal implications, as well as their valuable investigatory potential. This expands on existing literature by highlighting there are real-world constraints that serve as barriers for clearing cold case sexual homicides rather than solvability factors or subpar investigations because of human error and time.

### ***Investigative Circumstances***

According to Keel et al. (2009), prior investigative practices have a direct impact on solvability factors because outdated interview methods, poor case documentation, and evolving forensic standards can limit progress. There could be many more cases that are solved if adequate staffing, investigative procedures, and analytical processes are employed to respond to criminal homicides; however, each department and organization may not have the ability to accommodate these circumstances. Some departments lack funding, and others do not have access to grants for these specialty units and types of cases.

Not all homicide cases can be solved, regardless of adequate staffing and unlimited resources. Some of criminal homicides are so laden with evidentiary deficiencies, identification problems involving victims, witnesses, or offenders, and situational or contextual factors that investigative efforts are unlikely to solve (Keel et al., 2009). The media portrays unrealistic expectations that every crime can be solved onsite with technology, as is often depicted on television, which creates an unrealistic expectation for the public outside of law enforcement. This study adds nuance by demonstrating how investigators must now bridge the gap between historical practices and modern expectations.

### ***Victimology***

Participants noted a contextual understanding of victim lifestyle and relationships informs both solvability of case and direction of investigations. This finding extends Pizarro et al.'s work on victim-offender dynamics by emphasizing victimology not only

aids offender profiling but also contextualizes forensic evidence in terms of differentiating consensual from nonconsensual contact. Changes to investigative procedures can affect homicide clearance rates related to victim and police devaluation, event characteristics, and victim lifestyle. This can influence approaches detectives or investigators may take when investigating sexual homicide cold cases.

Since investigative tactics affect odds of clearance, even after controlling for other theoretically relevant variables, approaches and tactics that police departments implement within their investigative units are important.

### ***Witness and Reporting Factors***

Participants identified witness availability and memory degradation as major obstacles. This study adds to information regarding reengaging families and witnesses, which can yield breakthroughs involving solvability. According to Avdija (2019), overall, there is a positive relationship between decreased social distance between witnesses and victims/suspects and willingness to report crimes.

In some cases, witnesses may have been close to either victims or suspects at the time of the crime, and they did not want to get involved. However, as time passed, relationships changed with either victims or suspects, and they may now be willing to report facts of the crime as they occurred. Avdija (2019) stated if witnesses know both victims and offenders, they are more likely to report crimes to authorities compared to when they did not know offenders and only knew victims, and witnesses who did not know victims were less likely to report crimes if they knew offenders. This is a factor

which affects solvability of sexual homicide cold cases, but it is not the overall determining factor, because eyewitness testimony can be fallible.

## **Psychological Stressors**

### ***Cognitive and Professional Stressors***

Participants in this study described experiencing the overwhelming cold case caseloads and the cognitive strain of balancing those cases with current homicide cases in their caseloads. This parallels research on investigator workload and burnout (McCreary & Thompson, 2006), but this study emphasizes the unique dual burden of working both active and cold cases simultaneously. The unique nature of this study and the type of participants open the experience into an area where little recent research has been conducted. Perhaps it is not surprising that workload is such a prominent driver of both emotional exhaustion and depersonalization among law enforcement personnel and is referred to as the "burnout in blue" (McCarty et al., 2019). The routine of caseloads being overwhelmed with cognitive and personal stressors, especially in the unique category of death and homicide, subjects them to the most unique stressors for a unique and understudied subgroup.

Investigators and detectives who investigate cold case sexual homicides are a unique subgroup of law enforcement. The burden and constant pressures of their responsibilities, the need to deal with significant others and families of the victims, as well as the judicial and human service systems, all contribute to frustration, anger, and fatigue (Sewell, 1994). So, the balance of not only current homicides but also shifting roles and the type of investigations needed for cold case sexual homicide. The cognitive

and professional stressors are compounded with the emotional and victim-related stressors that follow.

### ***Emotional and Victim-Related Stressors***

Viewing traumatic evidence from the cold case sexual homicides and managing family expectations related to the cold case sexual homicides emerged as emotionally taxing for most of the participants. This aligned with Papazoglou and Tuttle's (2018) findings regarding law enforcement trauma exposure. Stress and trauma experienced by law enforcement can hurt their health and well-being because of the likelihood of them being exposed to potentially traumatic incidents and extreme stress over the course of their career, upwards of 30 to 35 on average, in which they could be exposed to at least 900 potentially traumatic events over the course of their career (Papazoglou & Tuttle, 2018). The viewing of traumatic evidence and emotionally charged encounters with families of the victims can be taxing.

Traumatic exposure can take an immense toll on law enforcement's health and well-being in the short term and long term. The current study extends it by situating these stressors within the long-term investigative timelines of cold cases. These cases can often take years to work, especially when leads have been exhausted, and investigators and detectives are awaiting new technological advancements to produce more investigative tools that may generate new potential avenues to assist with the cold case sexual homicide investigations. The long-term effects these cases can have also compound the stressors for the investigators and detectives.

### ***Long-Term Psychological Consequences***

The participants' descriptions of the compartmentalization, emotional numbing, and intrusive thoughts they experience while investigating cold case sexual homicides mirror Figley's (1995) theory on secondary traumatic stress. Figley (1995) described how compassion fatigue left an emotional residue strain due to the exposure of working with those suffering or those who suffered a traumatic event, which, over time, with repeated exposure, has symptoms like those of post-traumatic stress, leading to emotional exhaustion and detachment. The traumatic evidence with the case they examined over time left what the participants described as an enduring psychological weight that persisted even after a case was completed, remaining vivid in their minds even decades later. This resonates with the emotional imprint of repeated exposure to suffering, tragedy, and unresolved trauma from unresolved justice.

The intrusive recollections, avoidance, and emotional numbing are some of the long-term consequences of investigating cold case sexual homicides. Investigating these types of cases can place a unique strain on a sub-group of law enforcement, which can result in compassion fatigue as a natural consequence of long-term exposure, leaving an emotional residue that affects sleep, relationships, and overall well-being. This study confirms that cold case investigators are not immune to cumulative trauma effects, even when they appear detached, and there is a need for organizational support and interventions specific to this subgroup of law enforcement.

### ***Operational and Case-Related Stressors***

Participants discussed how barriers such as degraded evidence and systemic limitations produced frustration and helplessness for them. During the interviews participants repeatedly emphasized that some of the most significant operational challenges they encountered in cold case sexual homicide investigations came not only from the profound emotional consequences of their frustration, the helplessness and diminished morale, but one comment resonated the most, Participant A2 explained, "You expect an answer or some progress...and when you realize there is nothing, you hang up the phone and feel like a failure." Carter et al. (2015) found that barriers such as compromised or missing forensic evidence, limited access to investigative resources, and institutional inefficiencies often hinder case advancement, contributing to investigator frustration and feelings of hopelessness.

These operational limitations obstruct outcomes but can also compound the mental load on investigators and detectives working under the pressure of unresolved cold case sexual homicides. This aligns with Carter et al. (2015). However, this study adds depth by demonstrating how operational stressors intersect with emotional stressors, organizational stressors, and systemic stressors when cases stall in subgroups of law enforcement.

### ***Organizational and Systematic Stressors***

Participants reported insufficient staffing, training gaps, and resistance to technology. A consistent theme emerged because of the organizational and systematic stressors affecting the ability of the participants to investigate cold case sexual homicides

effectively. The organizational limitations that the participants experienced included insufficient staffing, high turnover in investigative units, turnover among supervisors, and outdated procedural practices, which the participants identified as barriers that impeded solvability and exacerbated their professional frustration and fatigue. These findings extended Shane's (2010) work on organizational stress by highlighting how systemic inertia can compound case-related stress in specialized investigative units.

Participants expressed the challenges of keeping pace with emerging technology, as well as the reluctance of some investigators and detectives to adapt to new forensic methods. Participant A1 noted that when investigators carry more than three cases at a time, "all of the cases start interfering with each other," which leads to inefficiency and diminishes the momentum of the case and feels like the investigator is making only incremental progress on multiple cases at a time which feels like a "spinning wheel" and not any closer to a case closure. Especially when leadership changes and they have to "re-train" a new supervisor and divert time away from their caseload.

The cumulative impact of resource scarcity, administrative turnover, and systemic inertia produces a sustained strain that undermines the capacity for long-term engagement in complex, emotionally taxing investigations. Consistent with Shane (2010), these findings suggest that institutional reform would be beneficial, specifically in areas such as workload management, training investment opportunities, and leadership continuity amongst units, because it would be paramount in reducing the systemic stress that impairs both investigative outcomes and officer well-being. Overall, this shows the experiences shared by the participants and reinforces that organizational systemic stressors are central

concerns. This compounds with the personal and secondary stressors that are also emergent in cold case sexual homicide investigations.

### ***Personal and Secondary Stressors***

The participants in this study discussed their lifestyle changes, feelings of hyper-vigilance, and reliance on work as a coping mechanism to help them deal with the unique stress associated with these cases. The investigators and detectives described a constant balancing act between professional objectivity and the inevitable emotional impact of the repeated exposure to death. The ever-looming stress of homicides is recognized because of the undeniable emotional toll it causes from viewing the traumatic material, dealing with the victims' families, and the daily immersion in violence and death. Papazoglou and Tuttle's (2018) findings mirror the repeated exposure to trauma, which fosters emotional residue and burnout among investigators. Participant B4 articulated this consumption by describing how they "literally work seven days a week" to avoid dwelling on the emotional burdens associated with their cases. This serves as a poignant reminder of how constant activity, whether it be secondary employment or physically demanding activities, can not only serve as a method of coping but also be a form of avoidance, providing only a temporary distraction.

Personal and secondary stressors emerge as a significant domain amongst participants in this study. It delves into the deep emotional toll of cold case sexual homicides as the participants described their struggles, not outweighing the emotional high of the actual solving of a case. Violanti et al. (2017) noted that the adrenaline-driven satisfaction of solving cases can temporarily mask more profound emotional exhaustion.

This provides insight into the police stressors and their psychological and physiological impacts because of the chronic exposure to the trauma, emotional exhaustion, and organizational stress, which are not satisfied merely because one case is solved; it does not erase the long-term trauma this sub-group experiences. The results are eye-opening for an understudied subgroup of law enforcement. There is a need for further research as well as addressing the limitations this study revealed during the research process.

### **Limitations of the Study**

There were several limitations considered when the results were interpreted in this study:

#### **Sample Size and Diversity**

The study relied on eight participants from select agencies across the United States. While the eight participants were sufficient to accommodate saturation for this type of phenomenological research, the findings may not have captured all the potential perspectives across the United States or perhaps even globally. The parameters of this study are aligned and are sufficient for conducting this type of research, as it prioritizes understanding over representation through saturation. However, it can constrain the scope because it lacks multiple different perspectives across cold case units. Being able to capture a diverse range of lived experiences across different agencies and departments within several jurisdictions and geographic regions offers insights into the varying resources, policies, and communities within the United States and possibly globally. Even though saturation was satisfied in this study, it may limit the transferability to a broader representation of law enforcement officers involved in cold case sexual homicides. A

future study could offer insight with a larger and more demographically diverse participant pool to provide a broader, comprehensive understanding of the solvability factors and psychological stressors involved in cold case sexual homicide investigations.

### **Snowball Sampling Bias**

Because participants in this study were recruited through referrals, there may be an inherent bias towards those more willing to share their experiences versus those who wished not to participate due to stigmas. Those most negatively impacted may have opted out, which would have provided greater insight. Even though snowball sampling can facilitate access to specialized investigative units through referrals in an often difficult-to-reach subgroup, the investigators and detectives working these cold case sexual homicides may have a shared perspective, culture, or operational experience. This can influence the data because it may appear homogenous and indicative of shared cultural norms of a subgroup of law enforcement. Although it is well-suited for this specialized population of participants, future research could explore a purposive or stratified sample across multiple agencies across the United States to mitigate this limitation and provide a more representative participant base in this subgroup.

### **Self-Reported Data**

All findings in this study were based on self-reports, which may be subject to recall bias, selective disclosure, and self-censorship. These were potential limitations that identified concerns regarding the reliance on self-reported data that was obtained through semi-structured interviews. The self-reporting limitation introduced a potential for recall bias. Selective disclosure and self-censorship are required because of the high stakes and

sensitive nature of law enforcement work, cold case sexual homicides. The participants may have minimized their experiences due to concerns about confidentiality, reputation, or the image of their department.

Additionally, the cases discussed were emotionally charged and had occurred over extended periods. Memory degradation may have occurred for the involved participants, which in turn could have negatively influenced their recollections. Even though the participants were reassured that confidentiality measures were in place to encourage their openness, the inherent subjectivity of self-reported data cannot be ignored. The triangulation with other data, such as case records, psychological assessments, and organizational reports, could strengthen the validity of this study through future research if the participants agree to the intrusion.

### **Generalizability**

As with all qualitative studies, the findings were not generalizable to all cold case sexual homicide investigators and detectives, even though they provided transferable insights. The goal was not to be statistically generalizable across all law enforcement investigators and detectives. The goal was indeed to provide a contextualized and plentiful understanding of the lived experiences of those investigators and detectives working cold case sexual homicide cases. However, the lack of generalized data remains a limitation because these results cannot be applied across diverse organizations and settings. The differences in department sizes across the United States, as well as available resources, forensic technological availability, and department policies, could alter both the solvability factors and the psychological stressors experienced. Although the study

provided valuable insights, further research using a mixed-methods or quantitative approach may be necessary to test these findings across broader participant pools and to validate emerging patterns on a larger scale, both within the United States and globally.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations for professional practices, policies, and future research have emerged.

#### **Recommendations for Practice**

Expanding specialized training for detectives and investigators working on cold case sexual homicides is a recommendation for professional practice. The agencies should provide ongoing training in forensic investigative genealogy, trauma-informed basic interviewing, and evidence preservation techniques to enhance solvability, as it is critical for improving both case solvability and psychological resilience. Multiple participants emphasized how the evolution of forensic technology and investigation methods has been a major factor. However, several also reported that there were insufficient opportunities to advance or access refresher training, which was perceived as a hindrance to growth. Agencies should prioritize ongoing professional development in forensic techniques, new approaches, and methods for trauma-informed interviewing and digital evidence analysis to encourage investigators and detectives to stay current with the latest technology.

Another recommendation for professional practice is to strengthen existing or add peer support programs. There is an apparent emotional toll of investigating cold case sexual homicides, and agencies should prioritize peer support and normalize seeking help

without a stigma attached. Enhancing this support through institutionalized emotional support promotes help-seeking behavior. It reduces the stigma associated with seeking help among peers and like-minded individuals who understand the job because they also live it, rather than relying on outsourced therapy from a mental health professional who has never worked in the law enforcement field.

A final recommendation for professional practice is regarding caseload management. Agencies should establish dedicated cold case units with manageable caseloads to prevent investigator overload. It should be addressed systematically. Limiting the number of cases assigned to investigators or detectives, while providing adequate and additional staffing, can help mitigate burnout, reduce fatigue, and improve case outcomes due to the overall improvement in the well-being of investigators and detectives. It can foster a healthier, more sustainable environment in the long term within a unit, helping to mitigate a high turnover rate and enhance the efficiency of investigations.

### **Recommendations for Policy**

Funding for forensic technology would be the first policy recommendation. There is an apparent need for funding for cold case sexual homicide investigations. To support these types of investigations, a policy for cold case initiatives needs to be in place. This enables secure federal and state funding for private laboratory testing and genealogical research. The participants commented on several accounts that outdated and degraded evidence often hindered their progress, which also suggests that agencies need to invest

greater financial resources in forensic technology, such as DNA analysis, digital evidence preservation methods, and laboratory expansion to avoid capacity constraints.

Another policy recommendation would be for policymakers to advocate for standard evidence-based processes across the United States. In turn, this allows for law enforcement jurisdictions to be consistent regarding long-term storage of evidence and the integrity of its retrieval and re-examination. This standardized evidence preservation can be solidified in protocol and policy. Overall, this has the potential to reduce loss, unnecessary contamination, and stall the degradation of evidence.

A final recommendation for policy change would be regarding mental health resources. Suppose departments can mandate mental health check-ins for cold case investigators, like critical incident debriefings. In that case, it provides an opportunity for wellness checks that do not require the investigators or detectives to seek them out. This makes it more palatable when they are approached, and it becomes a regular part of their job, such as a debriefing. Hopefully, this can destigmatize the mental health resource aversion that law enforcement officers have long been known to avoid.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Obtaining a broader sample would be the first recommendation for future research. To replicate this study across multiple agencies, a broader sample would facilitate a more comprehensive comparison of investigator and detective perspectives, both within the United States and globally. Future research can build upon the present study's findings by broadening the participant scope to encompass multiple agencies across the United States, rather than relying on a small national representation of

participants. This would strengthen the understanding of cold case solvability and the investigator's well-being. By expanding the sample sizes to include multiple investigators and detectives from across the United States or even globally, within accounts of multiple jurisdictions and varying agency sizes, the study offers demographic backgrounds that enhance the generalizability of the results and their applicability to cold case investigative units across the United States and possibly globally.

A second recommendation would be conducting a longitudinal study for future research. Being able to examine the long-term psychological effects of working on cold case sexual homicides over a span of decades can offer rich insight into how investigators' and detectives' psychological health, coping strategies, and case outcomes evolve and affect them over time, especially with the advancement of forensic technology and organizational changes.

A final recommendation would be to incorporate the family perspectives of those involved in cold case sexual homicides. Investigating how the families of cold case sexual homicide victims perceive solvability, and the support of investigators/detectives can offer an additional emotional and procedural impact from their perspective. Offering this type of insight could help address community gaps caused by ignorance, enhance deeper trust in law enforcement, and improve how justice is perceived, potentially providing greater insight for empathetic and effective investigative practices that incorporate the families' perspectives as well. Utilizing mixed methods designs can offer richer data and a multifaceted understanding of the solvability factors that influence cold case sexual homicides, as well as the lived human experiences of those involved in them.

### **Implications for Social Change**

The findings of this study have meaningful implications for social change within the criminal justice system because this study underscores both the potential for increased solvability of cold case sexual homicides and the human cost endured by investigators and detectives. Cold case sexual homicide investigators and detectives face unique operational and psychological challenges that often go unrecognized outside of the law enforcement profession. By addressing the noted solvability barriers and examining the apparent stressors that impact investigator and detective performance, agencies can improve both case outcomes and employee overall well-being, ultimately promoting longevity in law enforcement careers. Implementing measures such as personalized peer support programs, wellness initiatives in law enforcement, and specialized mental health resources can reduce burnout, enhance job satisfaction, and sustain the motivation necessary to pursue justice for the victims and their families. Healthier investigators are more effective investigators—creating a cycle of improved morale, productivity, and ultimately providing case resolution.

At the criminal justice level, the study highlights the need for systemic reform to strengthen the infrastructure that is needed for cold case sexual homicide investigations. Participants' accounts revealed that insufficient funding, inconsistent evidence preservation, and administrative turnover often delayed or prevented case closure for them. Enhancing their access to new forensic technology, establishing a standardized evidence-handling protocol, and maintaining specialized cold case units can increase solvability and promote public confidence in closing cold case sexual homicides. When

the criminal justice system operates transparently and consistently in these types of cases, it not only serves the victims more effectively but also rebuilds community confidence and demonstrates institutional accountability. Overall, this fosters a positive and effective working environment for investigators and detectives.

On a broader societal scale, recognizing and mitigating the psychological impact of prolonged exposure to traumatic material can shift law enforcement culture toward greater openness and empathy for this type of work, and utilizing mental health resources. Destigmatizing the current mental health care available and embedding trauma-informed practices into investigative work supports not only individual resilience in investigators and detectives but also ethical and practical methods for cold case sexual homicide investigations moving forward and promoting partnerships among law enforcement investigators and cement entities through the use of entities forensic specialists, advocacy groups, and community organizations for a shared responsibility for and healing for both investigators/detectives and families. A multifaceted team offers greater insight as well as accountability across the board. Together, these shifts provide a criminal justice system that prioritizes both the procedural excellence of investigators and the well-being of detectives. It facilitates a lasting, multidimensional, and advancing social change that encourages a more equitable, effective, and compassionate approach to solving cold case sexual homicides.

### **Conclusion**

This qualitative phenomenological study examined the solvability factors and psychological stressors experienced by investigators and detectives who work cold case

sexual homicides in the United States. Through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with eight participants, the study examined the lived experiences, actual investigative strategies employed, and current coping mechanisms of the individuals working in this uniquely complex and emotionally charged area of law enforcement. The results revealed intertwined themes that appeared across two major domains: solvability factors, which included evidence preservation, investigative collaboration, and technological advancement, and psychological stressors, which encompassed operational strain, organizational challenges, and a lasting emotional toll. Together, these findings highlighted both the structural and human dimensions influencing investigative outcomes in cold case sexual homicides.

The results highlighted that the successful resolution of cold case sexual homicides depends on the convergence of investigative diligence, proper resource allocation, and overall psychological resilience in cold case sexual homicides. Participants described the crucial role of proper evidence documentation, interagency cooperation, and consistent training in helping to increase solvability. At the same time, they emphasized the weight of cumulative exposure to trauma, bureaucratic obstacles, and systemic limitations that intensify professional stress in cold case sexual homicide investigations. These experiences reflected the delicate balance experienced between pursuing justice in cold case sexual homicides and preserving the well-being of the investigators and detectives during their law enforcement careers. Addressing these factors through target-specific training that is specifically adept to cold case sexual homicides, personalized peer support, and practical administrative reform for cold case

units can improve both clearance rates and occupational sustainability for detectives and investigators working these demanding cases.

Ultimately, this study contributes to the limited body of research on this specialized subgroup of law enforcement that conducts cold case sexual homicide investigations by giving voice to those directly engaged in this unique type of work. The findings of this study offer valuable insights into potential policy-relevant changes and updated scholarly perspectives for future research. These insights can encourage law enforcement agencies to reassess their investigative priorities, enhance their mental health resources, and implement organizational evidence-handling practices that improve both prosecutorial justice methods and investigator resilience. By fostering environments that value psychological health and professional competence equally, agencies can better serve victims, their families, and the communities they serve and protect. The insights gained through this study not only offered informed immediate procedural improvements but also inspired a broader cultural transformation toward compassion, collaboration, and systemic accountability in the pursuit of justice. By implementing the recommendations outlined, agencies can improve closure rates and promote healthier investigative environments—ultimately advancing both justice and social change.

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## Appendix A: Interview Guide

Hello Detective or Investigator, \_\_\_\_\_ (insert name) \_\_\_\_\_,

Thank you for participating in my research and video conferencing with me today on \_\_\_\_ (insert date) \_\_\_\_\_. As you know, this is for my doctoral program and proposed research regarding solvability factors in closing and clearing cold case sexual homicides, the psychological stressors involved, as well as the resources needed to assist in a successful outcome for those cases.

If, at any point, you need me to repeat a question or need me to restate a question, I would be more than happy to do so. Also, feel free to add information you think is applicable, which I may not have asked during our interview. Do you have any questions, comments, or concerns before I begin? If not, let us start with the questions.

1. How long have you been working with cold case sexual homicides?
2. How many cold-case sexual homicides do you currently have in your caseload?
3. Do you have or need any specific educational requirements, work experience, or training that were required or assisted you with being selected for cold case sexual homicides?
4. What are some of the solvability factors associated with your cold case sexual homicide/s in your caseload?
5. What resources are currently available to you for investigating the cold case sexual homicide/s?

6. What are some of the issues you have experienced closing or clearing these types of cases out successfully?
7. What psychological stressors have you faced working with cold case sexual homicides?
8. What types of resources could you recommend that would assist an investigator or detective working on cold case sexual homicides? i.e. training, peer support, task force assistance, etc.

Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to help me with my research and share your knowledge. Is there anything you would like to add, or do you suggest any areas I should include that are relevant to this topic?

Thank you again for your participation,

Jamie L. Borba

Doctoral Candidate

Walden University