

The psychology behind solving cold case homicides

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Probing unsolved crimes from years or decades ago is a challenge for

any police officer. But the task is made even more difficult because the very term "cold case" puts a dampener on expectations of success, according to a university criminologist whose latest book calls for a new investigative mindset in detectives who are assigned to re-open case files.

"Put bluntly, if you believe a case to be unsolvable before you've actually looked at it, then it most certainly is," writes Dr. Jason Roach, who is Director of the Applied Criminology and Policing Centre at the University of Huddersfield.

In tandem with ex-Metropolitan Police detective Mark Roycroft, Dr. Roach has jointly edited [Decision Making in Police Enquiries and Critical Incidents: What Really Works?](#) and co-written two chapters, including The Retrospective Detective: Cognitive Bias and Cold Case Investigation.

Dr. Roach outlines many of the challenges facing detectives who review unsolved cases.

"The cold case investigator has little more to work with beyond that provided by previous [investigators](#) and investigations. They cannot turn back the clock and begin the investigation afresh," he writes.

There might have been a recent breakthrough in the shape of new forensic evidence or criminal intelligence. But if not, "the frame for cold case homicides by definition is that they are difficult if not impossible to solve" and the "[psychological effect](#) on an officer(s) charged with investigating a cold case is likely to be one of pessimism, with the common psychological frame adopted by detectives for cold cases likely to be a far more negative one".

Dr. Roach—a psychologist and criminologist whose career has included

crime analysis for the Home Office—uses psychological theory to analyse the attitude of detectives to cold cases. This includes so-called System 1 thinking, which is more emotional and intuitive than its more rational System 2 equivalent. He argues that the term "cold case" is more likely to trigger a System 1 response.

The Retrospective Detective chapter includes a sequence of recommendations, including the need for research into the cognitive biases that influence the investigation of cold cases.

Dr. Roach also seeks to identify "whether a difference exists in the way that investigators think about and approach cold cases that are simply undetected and those cold cases that previously led to a miscarriage of justice". The chapter cites the murder of Lesley Molseed, when the innocent Stefan Kiszko was imprisoned for sixteen years until eventually being found not guilty by the Supreme Court.

Dr. Roach believes there are several reasons that the investigation of cold cases is important, including the correction of miscarriages of justice and the fact that undetected murderers could still be at large. He also sees cold cases as valuable learning opportunities and he has researched ten cases in which offenders were identified up to 25 years after the crime.

The new book, *Decision Making in Police Enquiries and Critical Incidents*, came about because there was a gap to be filled in the literature of criminology and forensic psychology.

"Most of it focusses on how offenders make decisions. But there is very little on how the [police](#) make decisions. This book is how do they do it in criminal investigations and in critical incidents such as [terrorist incidents](#) or the Grenfell fire," said Dr. Roach.

The book has nine chapters from seven authors, most of whom have been serving police officers in the UK and overseas. Topics include the operation of a major incident room and a European perspective, comparing decision-making in Norway and the UK.

Dr. Roach has recently returned from Oslo, Norway, where he presented a series of lectures on self-selection policing and police [decision-making](#) to detectives at the Norwegian National Police University College.

More information: www.palgrave.com/gb/book/9781349958467

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