

# Ways to reduce tense relationships between detectives and homicide victims' families suggested in study

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Systemic changes may be needed to improve the relationship between police detectives and the families and friends of murder victims, according to a Georgia State University study.

Homicide detectives and the families and friends of murder victims regularly experience some of the most challenging and mutually unwelcome relationships in the criminal justice system, according to the study by criminologists Mark Reed and Dean Dabney.

Mismatched efforts to make sense of the stress and trauma during an investigation can lead to negative perceptions on both sides, contributing to interpersonal tension.

Reed and Dabney collected data from homicide detectives in a single metropolitan unit by accompanying them during an eight-hour shift, recording notes and conducting on-site interviews. They interviewed the victims' families and friends in focus groups.

"Three strategies detectives employ in interactions with victims' families and friends—avoidance, organizational shields and information control—may exacerbate already tense relations," said Dabney, chair of the Department of Criminal Justice & Criminology in the Andrew Young School of Policy Studies.

An organizational shield occurs when detectives use other professionals, such as homicide unit secretaries, as a buffer between themselves and the victim's loved ones. Information control happens when detectives withhold details about the [murder investigation](#).

"Detectives may use these strategies because they may not feel equipped to emotionally support bereaved families or believe they cannot eliminate the suffering of the victims' loved ones," Dabney said. "Their primary goal, a successful prosecution, explains why they control information about the investigation in an effort to protect the outcome of the case."

The victims' [family](#) and friends indicated in the focus groups an unmet need for compassion from detectives during the death notification and when they provided more information about the progress of the investigation. From their perspective, the detectives' strategies and demeanors were seen as unsympathetic or uncaring.

In contrast, the detectives revealed respect for the weight of the death notification and a strong sense of responsibility to victims' families and friends. They felt their focus on a successful prosecution was their way of bringing closure.

"These misunderstandings suggest the need for systemic changes within [law enforcement agencies](#) to improve the experiences of both detectives and victims' loved ones," said Reed.

The study recommends formal training for death notifications and written protocols to inform detectives and victims' families what information detectives can divulge, and when. Victim Assistance Divisions, where detectives are trained to quickly and appropriately provide assistance to victims' loved ones, are an innovative solution that would allow detectives to focus completely on investigations while

families and friends of the victim receive the support they need. A few of these divisions exist nationally.

"There remains work to be done towards correcting the negative perceptions that damage these important relationships," Reed said.

"Policymakers, law enforcement professionals and victims' loved ones alike can advocate for policies and practices that could reduce these tensions and facilitate healing."

**More information:** Mark D. Reed et al. Tense Relationships between Homicide Co-Victims and Detectives in the Wake of Murder, *Deviant Behavior* (2019). [DOI: 10.1080/01639625.2019.1574256](https://doi.org/10.1080/01639625.2019.1574256)

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