

HIFS Briefing Note

Co-locating Specialists with Major Incident Rooms

Aim

This briefing note has been prepared at the request of a Detective Superintendent from one of the police services where our research was conducted. The aim is to outline what our data reveal about the practice of co-locating specialists with major incident rooms (MIRs).¹ Senior investigating officers (SIOs) rely on detectives, forensic scientists, experts and specialists from within and beyond the policing organisation when investigating homicide. Some roles, for example forensic scientists, pathologists and forensic anthropologists, are necessarily separate from the MIR as they are part of external organisations. However, there are a number of specialists within the police service, such as crime scene co-ordinators, analysts, intelligence officers and police search advisors, who are usually managed independently and are brought into the team temporarily (Murder Investigation Manual, 2006: 58). Other specialist roles might include financial investigators and CCTV officers. Some of these specialists are employed as police staff whereas others are sworn police officers. In this briefing note, we reflect on findings gathered as part of a four-year ethnographic study of homicide investigation across Britain funded by the Leverhulme Trust.²

Overview of the Research

The HIFS project aims to provide an in-depth understanding of how, and what, forensic sciences and technologies (FSTs) contribute to the police investigation of homicide in Britain. We adopt a broad and inclusive definition of FSTs, including, for example, DNA profiling, fingerprint examination, blood pattern analysis, ballistics interpretation, trace evidence analysis, and digital evidence from mobile phones, computers and CCTV. Four police services from across Britain and three major private forensic science providers participated in the project. Over the past four years we have gathered in-depth data including: (1) case papers for 44 homicide investigations; (2) interviews with 144 detectives, forensic scientists and other specialists from across these cases; and (3) over 700 hours of observations of 11 'live' homicide investigations, during which the Principal Investigator and Research Fellow entered crime scenes, accompanied detectives on house-to-house and CCTV enquiries, and attended daily briefings, forensic strategy meetings, senior management meetings, barristers' conferences and different stages of the trial process.

¹ There is variation across police services regarding the location and specification of MIRs (Murder Investigation Manual, 2006: 41). We use the term MIR to refer to a group of detectives and specialists who are brought together temporarily for the purposes of a single investigation.

² The Leverhulme Trust awarded the University of South Wales (USW) £216,000 to fund the 'Homicide Investigation and Forensic Science Project' (HIFS). The project commenced in January 2015 and involves a collaboration of academics from three universities: Professor Fiona Brookman, Principle Investigator (USW); Dr Helen Jones, Research Fellow (USW); Professor Robin Williams, Emeritus Professor (Northumbria University) and Professor Jim Fraser, Research Professor (University of Strathclyde).

Preliminary Findings

Drawing largely on data relating to intelligence analysts, with supplementary data regarding CCTV officers and financial investigators, our findings illustrate how there are various distinct practices within the police services studied. In the following sections we outline arrangements in the four police services studied and consider how some arrangements may benefit homicide investigations, whereas others present SIOs with challenges. The findings presented here represent a snapshot of a complex and very detailed dataset. We present them here for a particular purpose but acknowledge that there are broader issues and themes not discussed here (such as physical, mental and virtual organisational arrangements and their impacts and consequences on investigative processes and actors).

The Co-location of Specialists: Practice across Police Services

Across the four police services that we studied, we observed various practices in terms of how the major crime units are organised and also in how some specialists with distinct roles (such as intelligence analysts, CCTV officers and financial investigators) are organised. As examples, in one police service, detectives and police staff investigators are organised into large major crime teams. When a MIR is opened, available staff are physically seated together. Intelligence analysts sit adjacent to these major crime teams on the same open-plan floor but at a separate bank of desks. When a homicide investigation commences, intelligence analysts remain at these desks rather than moving to a separate smaller office which houses the MIR.

In a second police service, detectives are also organised into large teams and are physically seated together when a MIR is opened. However, intelligence analysts are centrally managed and located at a different police station. Whilst the analysts attend the MIR for briefings whenever possible, this is not always practical.

In a third police service, permanent teams of detectives are maintained and managed who investigate homicide and other major crime – the team as a whole is responsible for investigating a homicide and so for ease, we will refer to these teams as MIRs. Again, intelligence analysts are centralised and although they work on the same open-plan floor as the MIR, they are separated some distance apart and operate a different shift pattern. These arrangements were introduced in recent years as a cost-saving measure; formerly, an intelligence analyst and researcher were dedicated to each MIR.

In a fourth police service, because of building constraints, detectives are assigned to a homicide investigation but remain based in their managed teams rather than being physically located together in a MIR.³ As such, detectives working in one office may be investigating a number of different homicides. Intelligence analysts sit in a separate office within the

³ Since the end of our fieldwork, these arrangements have changed and we will discuss these further in the 'discussion and conclusion'.

intelligence cell but are a central resource and are not managed by major crime. Consequently, at the time of the fieldwork, major crime were unable to authorise analysts' overtime for weekend working (this has since changed).

The various arrangements outlined here illustrate how specialists may be physically and/or temporally distanced from the MIR.

The Benefits of Co-Location

The findings below reveal some of the benefits of co-locating intelligence analysts and other specialists, such as researchers, CCTV officers and financial investigators, with the MIR. Our data suggest that locating specialists in the MIR can be beneficial in two distinct ways: (i) it facilitates the two-way flow of critical information between multiple actors, in a timely and efficient manner, and (ii) it enables detectives and specialists to act upon findings quickly, helping them to progress and drive lines of enquiry. These benefits appear to be particularly important within the context of major crime investigations because HOLMES⁴ does not capture all of the available information, there are inherent delays associated with entering information onto HOLMES and processing it, and there are difficulties in gathering all relevant staff to attend briefings, as illustrated by the following two quotes:

"We've got access to all of the information that's coming into the MIR and try to maintain a close working relationship with the Exhibits Officer because as much as people think about physical devices, we need to be aware of all the other bits of information that could be equally as relevant like address books, phone books, physical phone books, bits of paper with numbers written down on it and things like that... There's a bit of a delay before everything comes into HOLMES, not everything is available from HOLMES". (Intelligence Analyst, Operation E09)

"It's one of the problems we have with analysts and for a job like this, an analyst for this was absolutely key, but they're based in [another police station]... you have people working different shifts for whatever reason and trying to get everybody at every briefing. We had briefings for this... at least weekly or every few days and that's hard when you've got other jobs coming in and other people have got other jobs on and trying to get everyone involved at every single briefing is nigh on impossible". (SIO, Operation C03)

⁴ The Home Office Large Major Enquiry System is a computerised information management system used for the investigation of major crimes.

The following quotes illustrate how co-locating specialists with the MIR facilitates information sharing in a timely manner:

“Ideally the analyst and researcher would sit within the MIR, so we’re getting updates as they’re coming in, we could just pick up every report from the box and we’ve got access to that... quite often then, sometimes key updates aren’t shared with everyone in the investigation”. (Intelligence Analyst, Operation E12)

“Now we’re sat away from the [MIR], we kind of rely on personal interactions with officers and team meetings... So it can be a day or two before I know whether a phone I’ve got is actually in the car that goes to the scene because I’m not privy to that kind of information”. (Intelligence Analyst, Operation W13)

More importantly, co-locating specialists facilitates the two-way flow of information; specialists gather critical information but are also able to impart key information to others in the MIR. This two-way process enables specialists and detectives to act upon key information and findings, progressing investigative actions, as illustrated in the following quotes:

“It was more useful when we were on the [MIR] because it felt like we were helping to drive the investigation forward and we were aware of developments as they happened”. (Intelligence Analyst, Operation W13)

“Sometimes we get phone data coming in. So the phone officer and the CCTV officer can work in conjunction with one another quite heavily in a job like this. [The phone officer] was telling me there’s phone data pinging off masts in the M1 motorway services... So we can plot [the suspects’] course from A to B to C”. (CCTV Officer, Operation W13)

In the above example, detectives within the MIR perform the roles of CCTV officer and phone officer, hence they work closely with one another.

The Challenges of Separating Specialists from the MIR

Our findings suggest that when specialists are physically separated from the MIR or are working on a different shift pattern, distinct challenges are presented which can pose difficulties for SIOs and others working on homicide investigations. Specifically: (i) it can interrupt and impede the smooth flow of information through the enquiry, in some instances resulting in potential evidence being lost, and (ii) it can inhibit productive working relationships between detectives and specialists.

The following quotes illustrate some of the challenges associated with specialists being physically or temporally distanced from the MIR. Specifically, the quotes reveal that the flow of information through the MIR can become diminished and compromised because specialists are unavailable or because key players are less able to communicate effectively:

“Not having an analyst immersed within the [MIR] means that they don’t pick up on the discussion about who said what to whom, what priority they might have in the investigation. It slows down those sort of snippets of information which you might grab that’s not in an analytical product but we can provenance it and get some more enquiries done at the same time”. (SIO, Operation W04)

“I like to be involved in office meetings because not being part of the office you do miss out on key elements, like CCTV being sighted, what they’ve said in interview. I have no idea what they’ve said in interview unless you ask the case officer and then you’ve got to wait for him to log on and email it to you... we can be invited [to office meetings], it depends if our shift coincides with when they’re having a meeting”. (Intelligence Analyst, Operation W13)

“Analysts are very good when you’ve got effectively a manhunt which we had. We had a guy accused of murder, potentially in possession of a firearm at large. So that is a vast amount of intelligence that we’re looking at and information, and an analyst can sit with the intel cell and look at all that, live cell site from phones, data billing, they can pull together all this information of locations, associates, where they might be. They’re trained to do that, they can do it really quickly and they’re really slick at it. That would have been much better having an analyst in there at the weekend to assist with that”. (D/SIO, Operation N13)

Although in the following example, the intelligence analyst felt that being distanced from the investigation team meant they didn’t have anyone “sitting on your shoulders” and they could complete their work without interruptions, the flow of information was hampered to the point that the SIO chose to travel to the intelligence analysts:

“Because everyone was down [at another police station], we were up here in our own little room. No-one was around us. We had to keep phoning them up and telling them updates, to the point that [the SIO] got in the car and came up. He was like right, there’s too much going on up there, I need to know what’s going on”. (Intelligence Analyst, Operation E09)

Moreover, the flow of information can be fractured to such an extent that potential evidence is lost. In the following example the SIO recounts how the financial investigator was working away from the MIR. This hampered timely communication resulting in evidence (CCTV footage of the suspects) being erased before it could be seized:

“We needed to prove movements during the relevant time and what we didn’t know for months is that [the suspect] had made a cash withdrawal at a shop... The financial investigator was working remotely and wasn’t working as part of the [MIR]. So there was clearly a breakdown in communication... By the time we knew about it, the [CCTV] footage [of the cash withdrawal] had gone, which was extremely, extremely, extremely frustrating... For those early days [the financial investigator] should have been [in the MIR]”. (SIO, Operation C03)

Lastly, when specialists are separated from the MIR it can hamper productive working relationships across the team. The following quote suggests that when specialists are not co-located with the MIR, relationships are harder to build and communication can become fractured:

“I’m not aligned to any team anymore... it means that you don’t build up the relationships like you’d do when you’re with one team... So, yes, not being on the team has hindered communication, I think, with the teams a lot”. (Intelligence Analyst, Operation W13)

Bringing Together Specialists from the Same Discipline

Whilst our data illustrate the benefits of at least temporarily co-locating specialists with the MIR, the following quote shows that there are some benefits of specialists from the same discipline being located together. For example, it facilitates the sharing of ideas and knowledge, and provides some resilience if a team member is absent:

“Everyone does their own thing differently and when you’re on your own little team, you don’t consider quite what other people do. So it’s good to be able to bounce ideas off each other within the hub, so I think it’s increased my knowledge a bit in that regard... for me, it’s not necessarily a bad thing us being all centralised because we can help each other out and if someone is off. It used to all be on you when you’re on the team... If, at the start of a big job, you’ve got a lot of phones you can say, can you have a look at this one, so you can share it out a bit”. (Intelligence Analyst, W13)

Discussion and Conclusion

Our data illustrate that there is variation across and within police services in terms of how specialists are managed and organised. Whilst some specialists are co-located with MIRs, others (for example, intelligence analysts and financial investigators) are generally separated from MIRs. Our findings suggest that there are advantages in co-locating specialists with MIRs. The examples provided here also point to the difficulties faced by SIOs and other team members when specialists are physically and/or temporally distanced from those working on homicide investigations. Moreover, our data suggest it is important for all those who play a role in the investigation of major crime that they *feel* part of the investigation team and appreciate the importance of their contribution towards the progress of the investigation.

Our findings suggest that police services recognise the value of co-locating specialists with the MIR but are sometimes constrained by circumstances. Since our observations at one police service, in which detectives and specialists sat in their managed teams rather than being physically located together in a MIR, the major crime unit has moved to larger premises. The intention is to bring the SIO, detectives, HOLMES team and 'intel' (including intelligence analysts) together in an open-plan office when investigating category A homicide. This offers one option of responding to the problem of specialists being distanced from the core investigative team.

It is beyond the scope of our research to make specific recommendations about co-locating specialists but our findings suggest that there is value in considering whether and how particular specialists can be physically or virtually brought 'closer' to the main hub of major crime investigations at key moments. Ultimately, however, whilst there may be benefits in co-locating specialists with MIRs, factors specific to the investigative trajectory of particular homicide inquiries will necessarily determine whether, and when, an investigation requires particular specialists.

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