

**INCREASING THE PHILADELPHIA POLICE DEPARTMENT'S  
HOMICIDE CLEARANCE RATE**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### **Increasing the Philadelphia Police Department's Homicide Clearance Rate**

#### **Problem**

The Homicide Unit of the Philadelphia Police Department is required to increase its clearance rate in 2009 to eighty percent. The current global economic crisis has substantially lowered city revenue dollars creating a projected billion dollar deficit in Philadelphia's five year budget plan. Cuts in the police department's budget have reduced overtime hours worked by investigators, frozen staffing levels, limited equipment and other resources utilized by investigative personnel. Additionally, trends have shown that clearance rates have been declining for decades in the United States.

#### **Possible Solutions**

Some investigators and managers assigned to the Philadelphia Police Homicide Unit are currently employing a number of factors previously discussed which is having a positive impact on the clearance rate. Among the factors; case management, investigator ambition, following up on new leads, continuation of training, working with other department and outside agencies have help to raise the clearance rate to nearly eighty percent.

More possible solutions:

Assigning the case to multiple investigators

Decentralizing of homicide investigations

Utilization of checklist, containing the factors shown to improve homicide clearance rates

#### **Recommendation**

The author recommends the utilization of the "Homicide Investigator's Checklist" (Annex D). The checklist consists of the investigator activities proven to increase the clearance rate. The checklist also contains processes used by Philadelphia homicide detectives for years. The checklist can serve a model for newly assigned detectives to the homicide unit, as well as serving as a tool to assist during case reviews helping to determine if all of the appropriate investigative steps were taken.

# **INCREASING THE PHILADELPHIA POLICE DEPARTMENT'S HOMICIDE CLEARANCE RATE**

## **Problem**

The Homicide Unit of the Philadelphia Police Department has been directed by Police Commissioner Charles Ramsey to elevate its clearance rate in 2009 to eighty percent. Clearance rate is defined as the proportion of crimes in a jurisdiction for which the police report an arrest (Wellford C. and Cronin J. 2000). The clearance rate of the Philadelphia Police Department's Homicide Unit for calendar year 2008 was 75.2 percent (Philadelphia Police Department, 2009). The current global economic crisis has substantially lowered city revenue dollars creating a projected billion dollar deficit in Philadelphia's five year budget plan. In an effort to close the budget gap, Mayor Michael Nutter was forced to cut the operating budgets of all city departments including the Police Department.

Cuts in the police department's budget have reduced overtime hours worked by investigators, frozen staffing levels, limited equipment and other resources utilized by investigative personnel. Additionally, trends have shown that clearance rates have been declining for decades in the United States (Richardson, D. and Kosa, R. 2001). Without the development and implementation of a strategic plan designed to improve the clearance rate, the 2009 benchmark will likely be missed and possibly fall below the 2008 level.

## **Assumptions**

- Economic conditions are likely to worsen before improving
- Conditions of the collective bargaining agreement preventing arbitrary transfer or reassignment of personnel below the rank of captain
- Factors affecting declining clearance rates, uncooperative witnesses, stranger killings, drugs and gangs, are not likely to change dramatically
- Resources will become less available due to budget constraints including but not limited to staffing, overtime, vehicles, new technologies, new building, etc.

## **Facts**

- The Homicide clearance rate national trend has been declining steadily for decades (Wellford C. and Cronin J. 2000)
- From 2004 through 2008 the homicide clearance rate in Philadelphia has averaged 63.4% (Annex A)
- In 2006 and 2007 Philadelphia's homicide clearance rate was below the national level and below the level of comparative agencies

- Philadelphia has had an average of 368 homicides yearly between 2004 and 2008 (Philadelphia Police Department, 2009)

## **Discussion**

This staff study attempts identify methods to be used as part of a strategic plan that will increase the homicide clearance rate. An increased clearance rate will also provide closure to many surviving family members of murder victims. In recent years, Philadelphia has become nationally known for its problems of violence and murder. While campaigning for office, Mayor Michael Nutter made a bold statement that he would not seek reelection if the number of homicides did not decline by one hundred in four years. As part of his crime strategy, in 2008 Police Commissioner Ramsey established a clearance rate goal of sixty-five percent for the homicide unit. The clearance rate in Philadelphia was below the national average and the average of comparable agencies in 2006 and 2007 (Annex B). The homicide unit exceeded that goal by reaching 75.2 percent clearance rate at the end of 2008.

Achieving the goal of an eighty percent clearance rate in 2009 requires a plan. The current budget crisis has negatively impacted police department operations. The Homicide Unit has been forced to cut overtime hours worked, limiting hours available for investigating murders, pursuing murder fugitives as well as curtailing other administrative functions.

Raising the homicide clearance rate is a challenge facing many law enforcement agencies. The homicide clearance rate has been declining for decades. According to Uniform Crime Reports the homicide clearance rate has fallen from ninety-three percent in 1961 to sixty-five percent in 1993 (Richardson, D. and Kosa, R. 2001). Richardson further states a factor contributing to the decline of the homicide rate is the offender and victim relationship. The most prevalent type of homicide throughout the 1960's and 1970's were acquaintance homicides. In recent years we have seen the trend move towards greater occurrences of stranger homicides. Stranger to stranger homicides are more difficult to solve, due to lack of a clear motive.

Research projects designed to identify other factors impacting the clearance of homicide investigations have identified a number of factors. (Wellford C. and Cronin J. 2000) have grouped these factors into two categories; police practices and procedures, and case characteristics. Some of the factors which fall under the control of the police are; actions of the initial officers on the scene, actions of arriving investigative personnel, computer checks on available law enforcement databases, interviews of witnesses, medical personnel, acquaintances, friends and neighbors of the victim, completion of a body chart, and use of confidential informants. The case characteristics, which are outside of the police department's control, would include; type of weapon used, involvement with drugs, and the motive for the killing.

This study will focus on the factors under the control of the police agency. The first factor to be discussed is Case Management. Case management deals with monitoring the progress of the investigation from initial assignment to case closure (Richardson, D. and Kosa, R. 2001, page 12). Case management is the primary change credited by Captain James Clark, Commanding Officer of the Philadelphia Homicide Unit, as the reason for the high clearance rate in 2008.

Captain Clark assumed command of the homicide unit in May of 2008. During a personal interview, the captain explains the steps he has taken to improve the clearance rate.

The first step that was taken by the captain was to convene case reviews with each line platoon investigator. The case reviews covered all active investigations for 2007 and 2008. The purpose was to review specific aspects of each case including, interviews, evidence, suspect development, and the direction of the investigation. These reviews provided the captain with a sense of which investigators were likely to clear solvable jobs, and which ones lacked skills necessary for conducting homicide investigations. The review process also brought a sense of accountability to assigned investigators and supervisors.

One recurring problem identified by during case reviews was the failure of investigators to communicate with other department units and outside agencies which may provide assistance in solving murders. The primary units that are most likely to assist are Narcotics, Criminal Intelligence (gang unit), Uniformed and Non-uniformed patrol personnel, and field investigative personnel. Research has concluded that the networking between homicide investigators and other units is a factor among agencies with higher than average clearance rates (Richardson, D. and Kosa, R. 2001). The reason is homicide investigators will have access to other officers with in depth knowledge of any issues involving drugs, or gangs that can prove helpful in the investigation.

In a telephonic interview, Sergeant Al Elizondo of the Chicago Police Department stated Chicago P.D.'s decentralized structure benefits investigators. In the Chicago Police Department, investigations of violence, domestic, property crimes and homicides are regionally organized. The advantages of regionalized investigations in that it allows detectives to gain a working knowledge of all the crimes committed in a given area and making the appropriate connections necessary for their resolution. It also supports better coordination of investigations which may assist in the identification and prevention of crimes. A disadvantage of decentralized investigations is that investigators can become overwhelmed with excessive case loads if the decentralized investigative divisions lack sufficient manpower to handle more frequently occurring crimes, such as burglaries and thefts.

Additionally, it may be difficult to assign homicide investigations to teams of three or four investigators if they are responsible for investigations other than homicides. Research has shown that homicide investigations assigned to three to four investigators have a greater rate of clearance than those assigned to one, two, or more than four investigators (Wellford C. and Cronin J. 2000) and (Richardson, D. and Kosa, R. 2001). Wellford notes an advantage is the group offers the collective experience available to solve the case. The number of investigators allows the assigned team to conduct more interviews or neighborhood surveys than one or two investigators could. Multiple investigators also can help compensate for investigators lacking desired skills for solving homicide cases.

A disadvantage of having more than one investigator is the issue of accountability. It is difficult to address deficiencies of one investigator who is a member of a three or four person team. (Richardson, D. and Kosa, R. 2001) provided the results of interviews with New York Police Department detectives, who listed investigator accountability among factors that affected the clearance of homicide investigations. The other factors given by the detectives were investigator ambition, and time allotted for the case to be solved. Captain Clark states the review process he

initiated is also an accountability briefing for the investigator. The review covers the specific steps the investigator should have taken in an effort to solve the murder. If the investigator has not taken the appropriate steps necessary for solving the case, the investigator will be reassigned from active investigations to allowing more time for the case to be worked.

Another factor determined to be critical by research is officer ambition (Richardson, D. and Kosa, R. 2001). What exactly drives the investigator to clear cases was not discussed in detail, but the issue of media attention on a job was mentioned. The attention the media gives to a given homicide case can bring pressures on an investigator to solve the case. One reason is believed to be the agency's willingness to provide resources, mainly in the form of extra time, allowing investigators to thoroughly follow up on all leads. Although the factor of officer ambition is not specifically noted by (Wellford C. and Cronin J. 2000) as a factor in clearing homicides, the factors listed however, will require ambition to be completed. Factors such as following up on all witness information, attending postmortem examinations, having a detailed narrative of the scene in the report, as well as arriving to the scene as quickly are factors that could be influenced by ambition.

Following up on witness information can be a grueling process. Vernon Geberth is quoted during an interview with Evidence Technology Magazine as saying this about the interviewing process, "you have to be willing to sit down, ask questions, listen, talk, and come back later with even more questions. Of course, that kind of stuff doesn't make for good television. It requires hours and hours- maybe even days- of canvassing the neighborhood." (Geberth, V. 2007, page 23). With the time and attention necessary to fulfill this process, it is reasonable to see how ambition can be the engine that drives some investigators not to stop until they get the evidence they need to solve the case.

Another factor that will briefly be discussed is the initial response time of the investigators. Both (Richardson, D. and Kosa, R. 2001) and (Wellford C. and Cronin J. 2000) state the arrival of investigators in thirty minutes or less, improves the chances of the case being solved. The location and identification of witnesses, critical evidence, suspect location, and crime scene preservation can all be improved when investigative personnel arrive quickly on location. This may be difficult for some jurisdictions to implement, especially in cases where the homicide unit is centralized and the homicide location is more than thirty minutes away. The first responding officer on the scene can offset some these factors if they are well trained in their responsibilities at the crime scene. The actions of the first arriving officers can positively influence the clearance of a homicide by the officer completing to following actions; making immediate notifications to homicide unit, medical examiner's office and crime lab, securing the crime scene and attempting to locate witnesses (Wellford C. and Cronin J. 2000). There were no disadvantages to having a quick and thorough response by both uniformed and investigative personnel.

The final factor to be discussed in this study is education and training of investigators assigned for homicides. Education and training of investigators, beyond initial department training, is among four features of homicide units with high clearance rates (Richardson, D. and Kosa, R. 2001). The report illustrated how the Metropolitan D.C. Police Department developed and implemented a ten week training program for sixty detectives selected for assignment to the homicide unit. The program was developed to combat the low clearance rate for homicides during the 1980's and 1990's. The training included sessions covering forensic evidence,

interviewing and interrogations techniques, prosecutorial considerations, examinations of fingerprints, firearms, and handwriting, as well as administrative processes.

This is one example of the amount of training newly assigned detectives receive upon assignment to a homicide unit. The report indicates detectives are adequately trained when they are assigned to homicide units, but there is little investigative training conducted after the initial training is received. There is no formal training program for detectives assigned to the Philadelphia Police Homicide Unit. This may be a factor to consider when reviewing the average clearance rates for individual detectives in our agency (Annex C). As depicted by the chart, fifteen of sixty-two detectives assigned, or almost twenty-five percent, have an average clearance rate of less than fifty percent.

### **Conclusion**

A strategic plan will be necessary in order for the Philadelphia Homicide Unit to have a clearance rate of eighty percent for 2009. Among the obstacles facing the achievement of this goal are; the number of investigators with clearance rates that are below fifty percent, a declining national trend in the homicide clearance rate, and the current budget crisis currently facing the City of Philadelphia.

Some investigators and managers assigned to the Philadelphia Police Homicide Unit are currently employing a number of factors previously discussed which is having a positive impact on the clearance rate. Among the factors; case management, investigator ambition, following up on new leads, continuation of training, working with other department and outside agencies have help to raise the clearance rate to nearly eighty percent.

Two factors proven to positively impact homicide clearance rates, but are not being recommended are assigning the case to multiple investigators, and decentralizing homicide investigations. Assigning the investigation to more than one investigator could make holding investigators accountability difficult. Decentralizing homicide investigations would likely result in forcing seasoned detectives to work on crimes other than homicides, increasing workloads, ultimately resulting in a decreasing clearance rate.

### **Recommendation**

In an effort to better assist investigators in solving homicide cases, the author recommends the distribution of the "Homicide Investigator's Checklist" (Annex D). The checklist consists of the investigator activities proven to increase the clearance rate. The checklist also contains processes used by Philadelphia homicide detectives for years. The checklist can serve a model for newly assigned detectives to the homicide unit, as well as serving as a tool to assist during case reviews helping to determine if all of the appropriate investigative steps were taken.

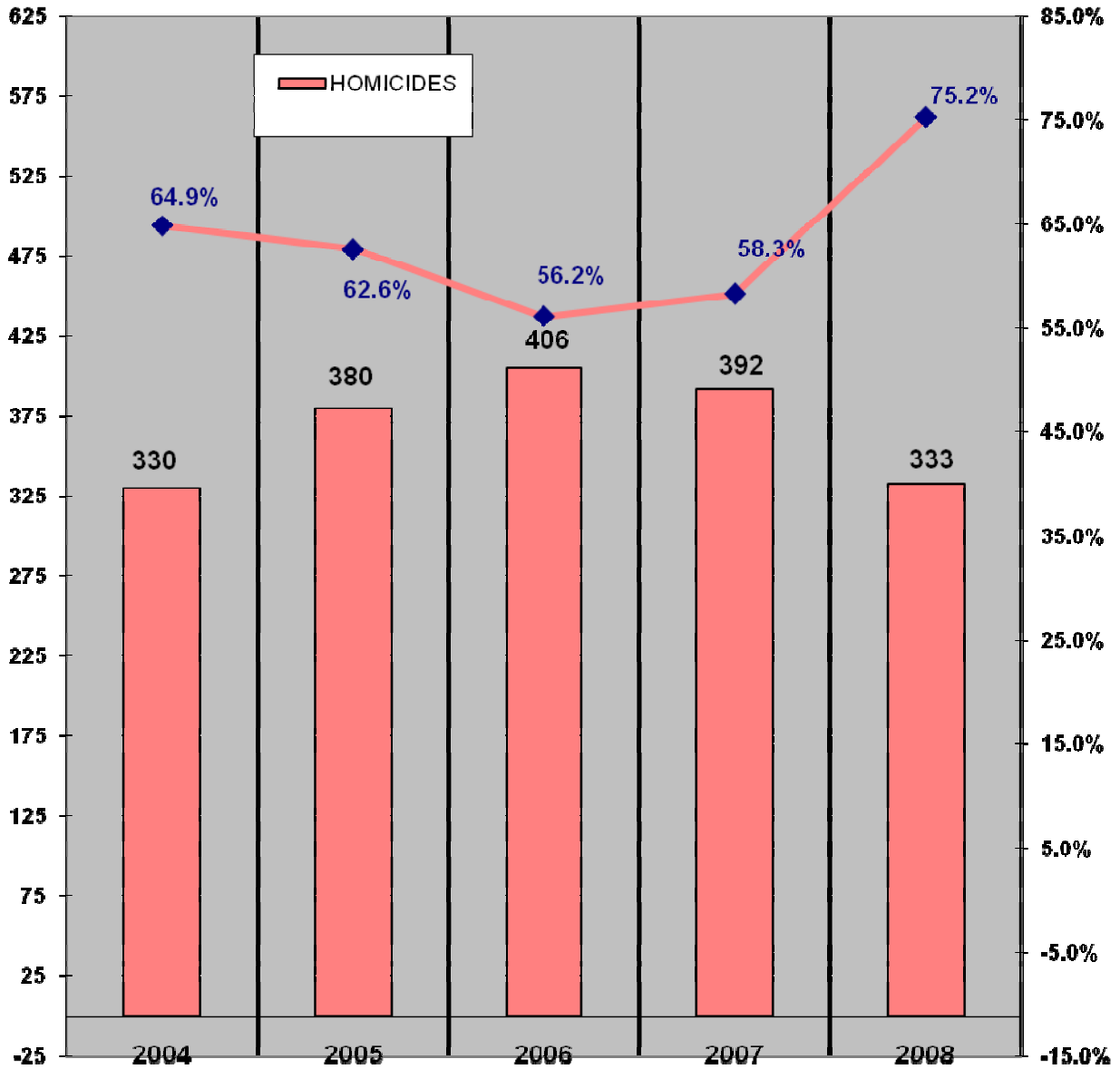
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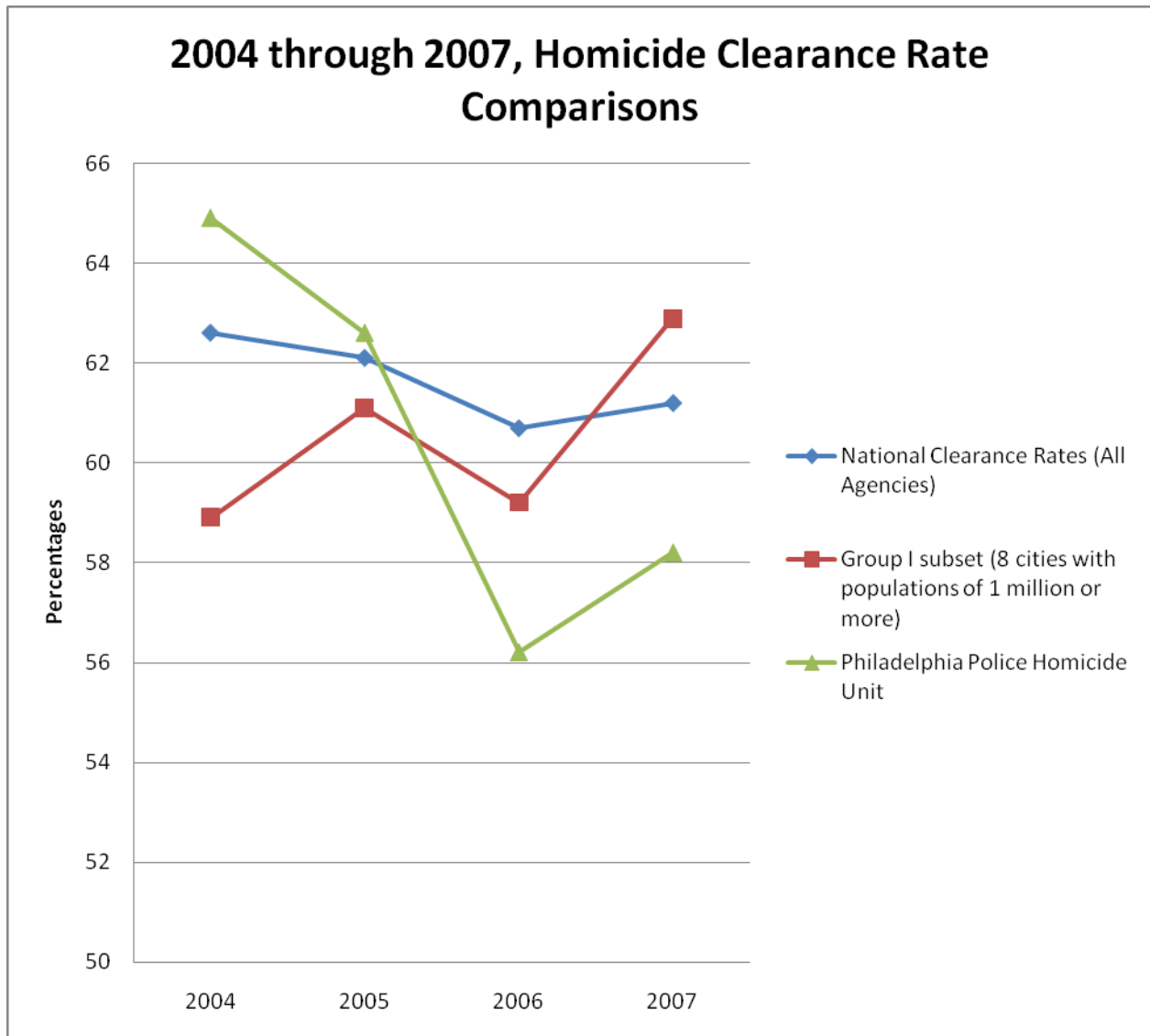


# Annex A

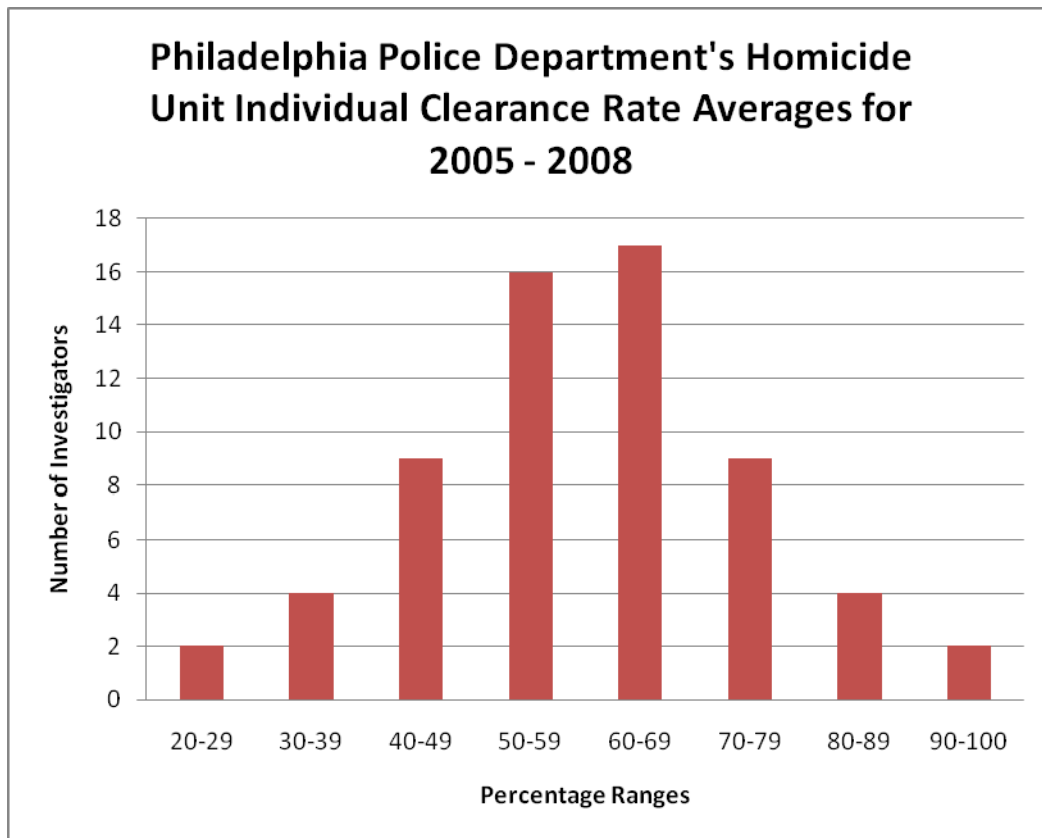
## Number of Philadelphia Homicides & Clearance Rates 2004 TO 2008



## Annex B



## Annex C



**Annex D**  
**PHILADELPHIA POLICE HOMICIDE INVESTIGATION**  
**CHECKLIST**

Homicide Case # \_\_\_\_\_ District Control # \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Decedent \_\_\_\_\_

Date/Time \_\_\_\_\_ Location: \_\_\_\_\_

Assigned Detective \_\_\_\_\_

Investigative Supervisor \_\_\_\_\_

**NOTIFICATIONS**

- Time Line Chronology
- CCIC of Radio Calls
- 911 Tapes
- Crime Scene Unit
- First responding officer
- "Shot spotter system"
- Google Maps of crime scene

**VICTIM**

- Identification
- Family Notification (possibly on location)
- Body Injury Sketch/Summary Sheet
- Attend post, inspect body, collect evidence found of body
- Medical Records
- M.E. Reports
- Prior crime victim (assault)

**CRIMINAL HISTORY (Local, State, Federal and International)**

- Police Photo
- Prison Research
- Phone records
- Visitor Logs
- Call logs

## **INTELLIGENCE**

- Known Associates
- Gang Affiliations
- Family Members
- Intelligence – nicknames
- Areas of Frequency
- Last seen with
- Last known whereabouts
- Who was victim supposed to be with

## **EVIDENCE/SCENE PROCESSING**

- Crime scene notes
- Sketching of scene
- Physical evidence
- Surveillance video
- Still photos
- Ballistics
- Firearm Identification
- Firearm Tracking
- Investigation of Owner
- Investigation of Stolen Gun Report
- Investigation of Purchase and Purchaser
- Latent Prints

### **DNA**

- Blood
  - Firearms
  - Ballistics
  - Vehicle
  - Skin cell lifts
  - Other
- Crime Scene Photos and Videos
- Vehicle Processing
- Investigation of items recovered

## **INTERVIEWS (Initial and subsequent)**

- Police Officers
- Witnesses
  - Eyewitness

- Informative
- Neighborhood Surveys
- Confidential Informant Contacts
- Family, Friends and Coworkers

### **CELLPHONE CHECKS**

- Tower Info
- Text Messages
- Warrants
- Photos
- Accurint

### **DATA BASES**

- Intelligence Databases
  - Shooting
  - CIU
- HIDTA

### **ASSISTANCE FROM OUTSIDE UNITS**

- Narcotics
- CIU
- SIU
- Traffic Court (Tickets, Vehicles driven)
- Local, State and Federal Agencies
- Divisional detectives

### **MEDIA ASSISTANCE (Only after other means have been exhausted)**

- TV coverage
- Citizens Crime Commission
- Newspapers

### **SEARCH WARRANTS**

- Residential
- Vehicles
- Phones
- DNA

- CCIC
- Suspect (DNA/Photographs/Fingerprints)

### **SUSPECTS**

- Criminal History
- Intelligence
- Narcotics
- Confidential Informants
- Family members
- Gang Affiliations

### **PHOTO SPREADS**

- Identifications

### **PROSECUTORS CONSULTATION**

- D.A.'s Office

### **DEFENDANT(s)**

- Arrest Warrant
- Service of Warrant
- Fugitive Info (if applicable)
- Statement if any
- Girlfriends
- Children's mother(s)
- Notify decedents family of arrest and hearing date

### **PAPERWORK**

- Statement of Admission
- Arrest Report
- Activity Report
- Update of "H" Record
- Slate in Arrest Book and District of Arrest
- Vehicle/BMV information
- Property Receipts
- Search Warrants
- Divisional Reports
  - 75-48
  - 75-49

- 75-48A's
- 75-229
- Tells
- White Papers
- Case Folder (organization and completeness)

**MISCELLANEOUS**

- Police Radio Information
  - C.C.I.
  - Radio tapes reviewed (voice recognition & information provided)
- Halfway houses in area of murder
  - Attendance logs (sign in and out time)
- Homeless shelters
  - Attendance logs
- Crime patterns in area
- Youtube.com
- Facebook.com
- Myspace.com

**\*Note\*** (Each case and its circumstances dictate what is needed or necessary for a successful investigation. The checklist should be viewed as a guideline, not a document cast in stone.

**CASE REVIEWS**

Peer \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_

Sgt \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_

Lt. \_\_\_\_\_

Capt. \_\_\_\_\_