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Frozen in time – does the public police’s monopoly control of cold case homicide investigations limit victims’ opportunities for justice? A comparative study of private policing and regulatory policing in the investigation of historic cold case homicide

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This research project will explore whether non-police actors can help the public police deliver justice for victims.

Key details

Lead institution	York St John University
Principal researcher(s)	Jen Jarvie j.c.jarvie@2020.ljmu.ac.uk
Police region	North West
Level of research	PhD
Project start date	October 2020
Date due for completion	June 2024

Research context

Those investigations largely have been controlled, directed, and undertaken by the police in accordance with directions set out by the Home Office. In the information age, other actors (such as private investigators, Internet investigators and armchair detectives) have sought – and in some cases gained – access to that space.

The research will examine:

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- how the involvement of a non-police actor is perceived by the police and prosecutors
- how the former may perceive their actions in that context
- in the extent to which there is, or may be scope for, rapprochement – can non-police actors help the public police deliver justice for victims

Research question

To what extent can non-police actors help police homicide, cold case, investigators deliver justice for victims?

The aims of the research are:

- to critically analyse the systems, processes and methods used by the public police to investigate cold case homicides; (see below for definitions of terms)
- to critically examine the systems, processes and methods used by private detectives, Internet investigators and armchair detectives to investigate cold case homicides
- to critically assess the normative legal, organisational, political, social, cultural, moral, and ethical constraints on the duties and actions of public police investigators employed in cold case investigations
- to critically examine the extent to which the actions of non-police actors are limited by those same constraints
- to critically analyse the extent to which there is, or should be, a rapprochement between the public police and non-police in this context, in the name of justice for homicide victims

Those aims will be achieved using the following objectives.

- A structured review of the literature on homicide investigation.
- A systematic evaluation of the systems, processes and methods used by the public police and by non-police actors, to investigate cold case homicide.
- A critical review of selected cold cases will be undertaken.

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Research methodology

The researcher will complete a systematic review of relevant literature. This will be a continuous process up until preparation of the final draft of the thesis. Empirical research will be undertaken in the form of semi structured interviews with investigators who have identified themselves as research participants (both police and non-police).

Initially, the aim is to interview 40 participants but interviews will continue until the point of saturation is reached (that is, when nothing new is being learned from participants). Further participants will be identified using the snowball method.

Empirical data collection will be done via semi structured interviews conducted using the Zoom platform. Interviews, which will be recorded and transcribed, can provide rich data in relation to the processes and strategies used by private and public investigators to conduct cold case murders.

Observational studies will be initiated on 20 internet investigations from armchair detective websites, YouTube, and Facebook channels. The 20 participant groups will be producers of true crime investigation cases, and will be chosen from the top 20 true crime podcasts in the Spotify, BBC, and Crimecon, 2021 league tables.

Each organiser will be contacted directly and consent gained to observe the flow of the interactions of followers during a set period of time following a UK true crime murder case being published. All participating groups will have linked social media discussion and message boards.

The researcher will observe the comments documented and these will be collated from the multiple entries from followers. These comments will be downloaded, anonymised and analysed against the set thematic framework and university available computer software. Cases are published on a weekly basis and thus participation is plentiful, and contemporary.

Case study analysis will provide another dimension to the research. The collected data will be analysed thematically. Codes will emerge as data is sorted but, initially, the focus will be on assessing the significance of procedural factors such as: investigative strategies; investigator effectiveness; and investigator methodologies.

The researcher is conscious of the legal, organisational, political, social, cultural, moral, and ethical constraints on investigators and believes that there is much to be learned in the context of

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Frozen in time – does the public police’s monopoly control of cold case homicide investigations limit victims’ opportunities for justice? A comparative study of private policing and regulatory policing in the investigation of historic cold case homicide victimology. The researcher will use a CAQDAS product to support the analysis (NVivo).