

# Presence of Core Investigative Variables in Incident Reports

2020

Released August 2021



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## **Introduction**

The Rochester Police Department's Major Crimes Unit is responsible for investigating shootings in the City of Rochester. In investigating these cases, police officers must use an investigative protocol to ensure consistency throughout the investigation. However, while one can assume that an investigative protocol is used, the Rochester Police Department has not released any information regarding such. Therefore, in completing a systematic content analysis, it is vital we use existing research and other investigative protocols to identify core investigative variables. Investigative practices that influence clearance rates were identified as core variables in this study.

The primary source of data used in this study are incident reports completed by police officers in 166 non-fatal shooting cases in 2015 collected from the Rochester Police Department. This report examines the presence of core investigative variables in these cases, not the outcomes. If the investigative file mentioned the variable, regardless of whether or not the investigative practice was carried out, it was coded as present. For instance, if the investigative report said it did *not* search the scene, the variable was still coded as present. In other words, it is possible the investigative practice was carried out but not mentioned.

## **Event Characteristics**

Rochester Police Department officer incident reports begin with collecting information on event characteristics such as the date, time, location, and type of incident. These variables are crucial in documenting that a crime has occurred. The absence of these variables may present challenges to arresting officers and prosecutors due to the uncertainty of the crime. Variables pertaining to crime scene characteristics also play a role in clearance rates. According to Braga, Turchan, & Barao (2018), two distinct characteristics of a crime scene influence clearance rates: (1) whether the crime occurred indoor or outdoor, and (2) "the broader neighborhood context in which the homicide occurred." Several studies have suggested that indoor homicides were significantly more likely to be cleared than those that occurred in an outdoor location (Braga et al, 2018, 341). Furthermore, neighborhood dynamics, specifically those in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods, were proven to influence clearance rates.

Out of the 164 variables coded in this study, six variables that directly addressed event characteristics and crime scene settings were identified as core variables. As seen in Table 1, event characteristics such as date, time, location, and type of incident were present in all 166 cases. However, crime scene setting characteristics were less likely to be included in the case files. Approximately ninety percent of cases contained information on where the crime occurred, whether it was indoor or outdoor. While the neighborhood dynamic, specifically the criminal activity of the neighborhood, was rarely present.

Table 1. *Event Characteristics Present in Investigative Files* (N=166)

<b>Event Characteristics</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
Does it mention the date of the incident?	166	100%
Does it mention the time of the incident?	166	100%
Does it mention the type of incident?	166	100%
Does it mention the location of the incident?	166	100%
Does it mention where the crime occurred?	150	90.4%
Does it mention if the location is known for criminal activity?	18	10.8%

### **Victim Characteristics**

Event characteristics are followed by basic victim information in incident reports. This information includes the name, age, gender, race/ethnicity, and status of the victim. These variables strongly influence the outcome of the case. For instance, if the status of the victim is stated as deceased, the case is no longer an aggravated assault but rather a homicide. According to Braga et al. (2018), victim demographic characteristics and criminal history of the victim influence the likelihood of a case being cleared. Previous studies have suggested that “cases involving victims who are racial and/or ethnic minorities tend to have a lower likelihood of being cleared” (Braga et al., 2018, p.340). Victims with known gang affiliations and victims that were presumed to be under influence during the time of their killing were less likely to have their cases cleared (Braga et al., 2018, p.340).

The variables seen in Table 2 have been identified as core variables under this criteria. These findings revealed that very minimal information is collected on the background of the victim. The name, number, and status of victims were included in all cases, with the exception of one case that failed to mention the victim status. On the other hand, the criminal history and gang association of the victim was rarely ever known. This suggest that information regarding the victim *only* at the time of the incident was prioritized during the course of the investigation.

Table 2. *Victim Characteristics Present in Investigative Files* (N=166)

<b>Victim Characteristics</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
Does it mention the name of the victim?	166	100%
Does it mention the number of victims identified?	166	100%
Does it mention the victim status?	165	99.4%
Does it mention if the victim has a criminal history?	38	22.9%
Does it mention if the victim is associated with a gang?	27	16.3%

### **Evidence**

Physical evidence is the most valuable tool in investigations for several reasons: (1) it cannot be retracted the way witness testimony can be, (2) it is not subject to subjective analysis, (3) it can scientifically link a particular person to an event, and (4) it is not precluded by the Fifth Amendment ([Guidebook for Indiana Coroners](#)). Thus, it is very important that police officers and technicians search for evidence, collect evidence, preserve evidence, and process the evidence for examination. Moreover, it is important for officers and technicians to recognize and protect physical evidence. This consists of securing the crime scene, recording the scene, and conducting several searches. Preserving the integrity of the evidence is crucial because “every second the crime scene is unprotected could mean valuable evidence is destroyed” ([Guidebook for Indiana](#)

[Coroners](#), p.80). Unprotected evidence presents great risk for arresting officers and prosecutors. Thus, officers and technicians on scene must follow the appropriate protocol to ensure consistency.

Using this information, we have identified the variables listed in table 3 as core variables. Contrary to expectation, only 54.2% of cases mentioned if the scene was searched and only 47.6% of cases mentioned if the officer secured the scene. Furthermore, checking for documentary evidence such as camera footage was prioritized over evidence found at the scene. Moreover, the collection of bullet evidence was most likely to be mentioned compared to physical evidence, DNA evidence, and firearm evidence. Even if the evidence were to make it past the collection stage, only 16.3% of case files included a lab report of the results.

*Table 3. Evidence Variables Present in Investigative Files (N=166)*

<b>Evidence</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
Does it mention if they checked for private cameras?	109	65.7%
Does it mention if they checked for city cameras?	108	65.1%
Does it mention if the scene was searched?	90	54.2%
Does it mention if the officer secured the scene?	79	47.6%
Does it mention if bullet evidence was collected?	68	41.0%
Does it mention if photos were taken of the crime scene?	67	40.4%
Does it mention if physical evidence was collected?	50	30.1%
Does it mention if a lab report was submitted?	27	16.3%
Does it mention if DNA evidence was collected?	20	12.0%
Does it mention if the firearm was collected as evidence?	16	9.6%
Does it mention if physical evidence tests were completed?	6	3.6%

## **Interviews**

### *Witnesses, Persons with Knowledge, Victim*

Perhaps the second more important piece of evidence is testimonial evidence. According to Braga et al. (2018), “several landmark studies suggests that the most serious crimes were solved by responding patrol officers through information obtained from victims and witnesses, rather than leads developed by criminal investigators.” Moreover, Braga et al. (2018) have suggested that societal changes such as “declining community support for the police and greater tolerance for and desensitization to violence,” is an important factor that influences clearance rates (p.339). In other words, cooperation on behalf of witnesses, persons with knowledges, and victims is indicative of the outcome of the case.

For these reasons, the variables listed in table 4 have been identified as core variables. The findings suggest that interviews were conducted in almost all cases, with most being with a victim. Moreover, neighborhood canvases were conducted in approximately 90% of cases, most resulting in additional information about the incident. Furthermore, persons with knowledge were more likely to be interviewed by officers than witnesses. Approximately a quarter of cases mentioned whether the case was dispute related and whether depositions were obtained. Officers that filled out case files were more likely to mention if the victim was cooperating compared to persons with knowledge and witnesses. This high percentage may be due to the fact that officers can “office” a case if the victim is uncooperative and there are no further leads. Meanwhile, the

cooperation of a person with knowledge and witness may not be seen as a jeopardizing factor in the outcome of the case.

*Table 4. Testimonial Evidence Present in Investigative Files (N=166)*

<b>Interviews</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
Does it mention if interviews were conducted?	165	99.4%
Does it mention if a victim was interviewed?	162	97.6%
Does it mention if a neighborhood canvas was conducted?	149	89.8%
Does it mention if information was obtained during the neighborhood canvas?	132	79.5%
Does it mention if a person with knowledge was interviewed?	127	76.5%
Does it mention if a witness was interviewed?	71	42.8%
Does it mention if depositions were obtained?	46	27.7%
Does it mention if this case is dispute related?	43	25.9%
Does it mention if the persons with knowledge were cooperating?	25	15.1%
Does it mention if the witness is cooperating?	21	12.7%
Does it mention if the victim was cooperating?	89	53.6%

### **Clearance**

The FBI Uniform Crime Reports recognizes two types of clearances: clearance by arrests or clearance by exceptional means. Although the federal government measures clearance in only two ways, the UCR program does recognize that certain jurisdictions have departmental polices that allow investigators to clear cases with alternative methods. The Rochester Police Department clears cases by administrative clearance, exceptional clearance, and cleared by arrest. For the purpose of our analysis, we are interested in measuring cleared by arrest only. This is primarily because this is the only type of clearance ensures the apprehension of the suspect.

Contrary to expectation, not all case files contained the method and date of clearance. Furthermore, only 18.1% of cases were cleared by arrest in 2015. These findings suggest that the vast majority of offenders are not apprehended for their crimes.

*Table 5. Clearance Variables Present in Investigative Files (N=166)*

<b>Clearance</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
Does it mention the method of clearance?	162	97.6%
Does it mention the date of clearance?	162	97.6%
Was this case cleared by arrest?	30	18.1%

### **Conclusion**

The results of this analysis indicate that basic information regarding the incident and the victim are the most prioritized pieces of information in the investigative process. Specifically, information pertaining to the victim and their current status rather than background information on the victim. Moreover, officers and investigators are more likely to mention documentary evidence in incident reports than physical and DNA evidence found at the scene. Officers and

investigators also failed to mention in approximately half of all cases whether officers secured and searched the scene. Furthermore, testimonial evidence was highly prioritized in the investigation process. Victims were more likely to be interviewed than persons with knowledge and witnesses. Officers that filled out case files were more likely to mention if the victim was cooperating compared to persons with knowledge and witnesses. Officers were also very likely to mention if neighborhood canvases were conducted in the neighborhood and whether information was obtained.

The results of this analysis also indicated that the vast majority of cases were not cleared by arrest. In other words, very few cases involved the apprehension of suspects. These low clearance rates have serious consequences in the communities in which they occur in. Therefore, it is important we research this topic further. Specifically looking at investigative practices that directly influence clearance rates. We hope this report serves as a valuable tool for local investigators and officers in their attempts to evaluate current practices that may lead to higher clearance rates.