

THE RAND CRIMINAL INVESTIGATION STUDY:
ITS FINDINGS AND IMPACTS TO DATE

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In 1973 The Rand Corporation was awarded a grant by the National Institute of Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice to undertake a nationwide study of the criminal investigation practices of major metropolitan police agencies.¹ The purposes of the study were to describe how police investigations were organized and managed and to assess the contribution of various investigation activities to overall police effectiveness. Prior to the Rand study, police investigators had not been subject to the type of analytic scrutiny which was being focused on other types of police activity. Most police administrators knew little about the effectiveness or day-to-day activities of their investigative units and even less about the practices of other departments. The purpose of this paper is to summarize the findings from the Rand study, which the author directed, and to describe some of the impacts which the study has had.

THE STUDY DESIGN

The Rand study concentrated on the investigation of index offenses---serious crimes against unwilling victims, as opposed to vice, narcotics, gambling or traffic offenses. Information on current practices was obtained by a national survey of all municipal or county police agencies that employed more than 150 officers or that served jurisdictions with a 1970 population in excess of 100,000. Interviews and observations were conducted in more than 25 departments selected to represent different investigative styles. Data on investigation outcomes was obtained from the Uniform Crime Report tapes maintained by the F.B.I.; samples of completed cases, which were coded for the

purpose of this study; and internal evaluations or statistics compiled by individual departments. Data on the allocation of investigation efforts was obtained from a computerized workload file maintained by the Kansas City Police Department.

The national survey and UCR data were combined for the purposes of analyzing relationships between departmental characteristics and apprehension effectiveness. The special case samples were analyzed to determine how specific cases were actually solved.

INVESTIGATIVE EFFORTS AND ARRESTS

One of the principal problems confronted in evaluating investigative units lies in determining how their effectiveness is to be measured. A number of earlier studies conducted in individual cities suggested that clearance rates were an inappropriate measure of police performance--a finding which was confirmed by the Rand study. Our own analysis of 1972 UCR data showed that the number of clearances claimed for each index arrest ranged from a low of 0.38 to a high of 4.04 among the departments we studied. These differences appeared to be related to differences in definition and administrative practice rather than any real differences in investigative outcomes.

Even arrest rates appear to be too gross a measure to reflect the contribution of investigative units. The Rand study disclosed that approximately 30 percent of all index arrests were produced by patrol officers responding to the scene of a crime. In roughly another 50 percent of all index arrests, the identity of the perpetrator was supplied by a victim or witness at the time of the initial crime

report--leaving only about 20 percent of arrests which could possibly be attributed to the efforts of investigative units.

But even in this 20 percent of initially unsolved cases, we found that investigators did not play a predominant role. Most of them were eventually solved by subsequent patrol arrests, spontaneous information provided by members of the general public (as opposed to informants) or routine clerical actions such as the checking of license plates. Only about three percent of all index arrests appeared to result from special investigative efforts where organization, training or skill could make any conceivable difference.

This finding was confirmed by our analysis of differences among departments in their individual arrest rates. The number of reported offenses resulting in an arrest was inversely related to a department's workload but not to its method of organization. Departments with higher numbers of reported crime per sworn officer, report lower rates of arrest. However, differences in the allocation of manpower between uniformed patrol and investigators, or different methods of organizing investigative functions did not result in different arrest rates.

HOW AN INVESTIGATOR'S TIME IS SPENT

Whether or not a department uses any type of formal screening system to weed out unsolvable cases, our survey disclosed that most property offenses receive only cursory attention. Although an investigator may carry a backlog of several hundred cases, only a small percentage are realistically considered active.

The Rand study revealed that an investigator's time on casework is predominantly consumed in reviewing reports, documenting files,

and attempting to locate and interview victims. In cases that are eventually solved, he spends more time in post-arrest processing than he does in apprehending the suspect. Almost half of a typical investigator's time is devoted to such activities as administrative assignments or general surveillance which are not directly related to casework and are unlikely to produce arrests.

We did not find much attention devoted to investigator training or management. Most departments do not offer any special training when an officer is promoted from patrol to investigations. Investigative skills are expected to be acquired on the job. Supervisors of investigative units do not ordinarily review or even remain aware of the day-to-day performance of their men. Their attention is normally devoted to more routine personnel matters or dealing with an occasional very hot case.

THE COLLECTION AND PROCESSING OF PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

Our survey disclosed that many departments had begun using special technicians to collect physical evidence--primarily fingerprints and photographs from crime scenes. From an analysis of six departments which utilized different evidence collection procedures, we established that the amount and quality of evidence obtained was positively related to the amount of effort devoted to crime scene search and the speed with which technicians were dispatched.

However, the percentage of case solutions resulting from latent print identifications was unrelated to the print recovery rate. The

reason for this somewhat surprising finding appeared to be that most police departments did not have adequate resources devoted to their latent search capability. They were unable to utilize those prints that were lifted. In most departments, latent prints were only utilized to confirm the identity of a suspect which had been established in some other way. "Cold searches" of latent prints against "known offender" files were rarely attempted, although some departments had demonstrated that they can be quite productive.

PREPARING A CASE FOR PROSECUTION

In general, we found police investigators more oriented toward clearing cases, rather than the problems of successful prosecution following an arrest. The inability to convict a defendant was looked on as a problem for the prosecutor and the courts rather than a matter over which the police could exercise much control.

Subsequent to the Rand study, a number of researchers have shown that less than half of all felony arrests result in successful prosecution. The predominant reason for this high case drop out rate appears to be witness cooperation. Research has also established that efforts by the police to obtain corroborating physical evidence or the testimony of more than one witness results in higher conviction rates.²

The Rand study examined the relationship between investigation thoroughness and conviction rates by comparing two jurisdictions which differed significantly in the quality of information contained in their investigation reports. Using a checklist of 39 evidentiary

questions which might be pertinent to a robbery prosecution, the more thorough jurisdiction averaged 45 percent coverage of these items while the less thorough jurisdiction averaged only 26 percent coverage. As a result, the more thorough jurisdiction was able to achieve a much higher conviction rate and much greater likelihood of conviction to the original charge.

OTHER FINDINGS

One of the frequent rationalizations which is offered for the policy of routinely assigning an investigator to all offenses is that the public demands it. Administrators express a reluctance to close unsolvable cases without some token efforts by an investigator to keep the victim happy. A small victim survey conducted in one jurisdiction, as part of the Rand study, disclosed that this concern on the part of police management was not justified. Most victims would appear to accept the police department's decision to suspend their case without any great resentment. Nevertheless, most say they would appreciate being informed if a suspect is eventually caught, regardless of whether the offender is ever charged with their particular crime or their property is returned.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on our research findings, we offered a number of policy suggestions which might increase a police department's investigation effectiveness by either reducing resources, increasing apprehension rates or both.

First, we suggested that post-arrest investigation activities be coordinated more directly with the prosecutor by either assigning investigators to his office or by allowing him to exert more guidance over the policies and practices which they follow. This move was expected to result in a higher percentage of prosecutable cases.

Secondly, we suggested that patrol officers be given a larger role in conducting preliminary investigations, both to provide an adequate basis for case screening and to eliminate the need for redundant efforts by an investigator. It appears that most cases can be closed on the basis of the preliminary investigation and that patrol officers can be trained to conduct them adequately. This expanded role for patrol officers is also consistent with other moves toward geographic decentralization and patrol officer job enrichment.

We also recommended that additional resources be devoted to processing latent prints and that improved systems be developed for organizing and searching latent print files.

Finally, in conducting follow-up investigations for those cases which a department elected to pursue, we recommended that they distinguish between those cases which involved only routine clerical processing and those involving special investigation or legal skills. The former could be handled by lower level clerical personnel while the latter could be assigned to a major offense bureau for careful monitoring and continuous evaluation.

IMPACT OF THE FINDINGS

Following its release, the Rand study was given extremely wide

coverage in the popular media and was the subject of heated controversy within the police profession. Many police officials, especially those who had not come up through the detective ranks, were sympathetic to the study in that it supported their own impressions of how investigators functioned. Some went so far as to criticize the report for "telling us what we already knew." A number of police chiefs were hostile to the report because it was being used by other city officials as an excuse to cut police budgets. Others refused to accept the findings because of the limited number of departments from which some of the principal findings were drawn.³

Although there have not been any major attempts to replicate or extend the findings of the Rand study, there have been several reports published which contain findings that are consistent with our own. Bloch and Weidman's (1976) analysis of the Rochester, New York police department's investigation practices and Greenberg's (1977) efforts to develop a felony investigation decision model both resulted in findings supportive of the notion that the preliminary investigation conducted by patrol officers produce the majority of arrests and can provide adequate information for screening out unsolvable cases. A report by the Vera Institute (1977) on felony arrest dispositions in New York City supplied evidence that a substantial portion of felony arrests for street crimes involve offenders who are known to their victims. A report by Brian Forst (1978) on the disposition of Washington D.C. felony arrests demonstrates the importance of physical evidence and multiple witnesses in securing convictions for felony street crimes.

Following up on the interest in investigation policy, which was generated by the Rand study, LEAA's National Institute sponsored a series of regional workshops to assist police administrators in assessing the reforms which had been suggested and planning for their implementation. These workshops were developed and run by the University Research Corporation and drew heavily on the materials contained in the Rand, Bloch and Greenberg studies.⁴ These workshops were extremely well received by the police officials who attended them with a majority reporting that they intended to implement policy changes they had developed as a result of attending the workshop.

In an additional effort to demonstrate the practical value of recent research on investigation practices, the National Institute awarded grants to five police departments⁵ which had indicated an interest in implementing a number of investigative reforms. Although the demonstration was to have been evaluated by an outside contractor, it was not conceived as an experimental test of any particular reforms. Rather, its purpose was to determine how police departments would go about implementing reforms when they were given the freedom and resources to do so.

The participating departments were encouraged to concentrate on reforms in the following five areas:

1. Initial Investigations. Patrol officers were to be given greater responsibility for initial investigations with their attention focused on the presence or absence of specific "solvability factors" which would determine whether a case should be continued or closed.

2. Case Screening. A formal system of case screening was to be developed to select cases which merited continuation, based on the information disclosed by the patrol officer's initial investigation.
3. Managing the Continuing Investigation. Investigation supervisors were to develop techniques for the systematic assignment of cases and periodic review of their progress.
4. Police-Prosecutor Relations. The degree of coordination between police investigation and prosecution activities was to be expanded with the objective of increasing the percentage of cases accepted for prosecution.
5. Investigation Monitoring System. Each department was to develop a statistical reporting system which could be used to evaluate the effectiveness of specific investigative units.

Unfortunately, the experiences of the five demonstration sites do not provide an adequate basis for determining the value of any particular reforms, due to major program differences between sites and the failure of the national evaluator to produce a final report. Nevertheless, a limited number of lessons can be drawn from the demonstration, based on interviews with the participants and observations by outside observers.⁶

1. Those departments which substantially expanded the patrol officer's role in conducting initial investigations experienced a significant increase in the time

required for these investigations to be conducted.

2. Regardless of the criteria which were formally specified for case closure decisions, case screening appeared to be highly subjective in most departments.
3. Although case screening resulted in substantially lower investigator caseloads, only one department elected to make any substantial reduction in its number of investigators.
4. None of the departments met with any significant community dissatisfaction as a result of instituting a policy of early case closure without investigator follow up. All of them adopted some form of written notification to inform victims of the status of their case.
5. The two departments which worked with their prosecutors to improve the quality of their cases, and kept records of the results, reported a significant increase in the percentage of cases accepted for prosecution.
6. None of the departments developed a statistical reporting system which was adequate for evaluative purposes.
7. None of the departments reported a significant change in arrest or clearance rates which could be attributed to changes in their investigation practices.

In addition to whatever reforms were prompted by the workshops and demonstrations programs, a number of departments have instigated investigative reforms under other LEAA programs.⁷ The Career Criminal Program, which focuses prosecution resources on locally identified career criminals, has resulted in much closer working relationships between police investigators and deputy prosecutors in many of the participating jurisdictions.⁸ Departments participating in the Integrated Criminal Apprehension Program (ICAP) have been encouraged to improve the quality of their patrol officers' preliminary investigations and to focus the efforts of their investigators on series of crimes which can be identified by statistically analyzing the patterns of reported incidents. No specific results from these programs have been reported to date.

In summary, recent research on criminal investigation practices, and the demonstration projects it has prompted, tells us more about what doesn't work than what does. The Rand study demonstrated that investigative activities play only a minor role in contributing to overall arrest rates, and that much of an investigator's time is consumed with administrative paperwork or attempting to locate and interview witnesses on cases that empirical evidence show have a small likelihood of ever being solved. Although the Rand study and other researchers have suggested a number of innovations which could conceivably improve the performance of investigative units, the effectiveness of these reforms has not been demonstrated to date.

FOOTNOTES

1. The results of the Rand study are described in Greenwood, P., Chaiken, J., and Petersilia, J. (1977) The Criminal Investigation Process. Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath and Company.

2. Forst, B. (1978) What Happens After Arrest. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.

3. For a formal critique of the study and a reply by the authors see NILECJ (1977) The Criminal Investigation Process: A Dialog On Research Findings. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.

4. See Cawley, D., and Myron, J. (1975) for the text which was used in these workshops.

5. Rochester, New York, Montgomery County, Maryland, Birmingham, Alabama, Santa Monica, California, and St. Paul, Minnesota.

6. In addition to my own conversations with project staff, I have had the opportunity to review a draft program designed by Ilene Greenberg and Robert Wasserman of ABT Associates who visited each of the project sites.

7. The workshops and 5-site demonstration program were both called "Managing Criminal Investigations."

8. See Dahman, J., and Lacy, J. (1977).

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