

DA's Target: Ghosts of Murders Past

CRIME: The O. C. prosecutor hopes to use new technology such as DNA testing to solve about 110 murders.

By STUART PFEIFER, *The Orange County Register*, December 20, 1995

A sketch of the killer's pock-marked face once was posted across Orange County, where his notorious acts caused such a panic in 1979 that many residents bought guns or moved out of town.

He would slip into women's apartments to sexually assault his victims and then savagely beat them. Police said six of his victims _ three of them in Costa Mesa _ died.

At the time, there was little police detectives could do with skin, semen or hair samples the killer left behind and those crimes, like hundreds of others in Orange County, went unsolved.

Now the District Attorney's Office hopes DNA testing and other new technology can help pinpoint suspects in those killings and more than 100 other unsolved killings.

Prosecutors hope to begin working with detectives and sheriff's criminalists early next year to re-examine unsolved killings stretching back to 1972, said Deputy District Attorney Mike Jacobs.

"We need to reopen some of these cases like they're new cases and just start over," Jacobs said. "We'll completely re-examine them."

The sheriff's crime laboratory has already sent DNA evidence from some unsolved cases to a California Department of Justice laboratory in Berkeley, where the DNA "fingerprints" of more than 4,000 of the state's sex offenders are filed.

The program will focus on about 110 unsolved homicides _ a majority of them involving sexual assaults _ that would be susceptible to new crime-solving techniques.

Those are only a fraction of the county's homicides that have yet to be solved. Between 1972 and 1994, Orange County police agencies investigated 2,479 homicides and cleared 1,591 _ meaning almost 900 murders have likely gone unsolved, according to state Department of Justice statistics.

In several of the older cases, fingerprints may have not yet been entered into a state fingerprint database _ a simple task that could identify a suspect.

In others, prosecutors and detectives will try to obtain suspects' blood samples and match DNA markers against evidence a killer left behind.

"We felt there was a high likelihood there would be evidence we could apply new technology to that has not been available until recently," Jacobs said. "There's a number of cases with semen stains on objects, clothing or obtained from autopsy. Even in some cases from the '70s, the evidence has been properly preserved." Jacobs said many of the killers who have gotten away with murder could be serving time for similar crimes.

"Wherever they are, whether they're down the street from you and me, whether they're in prison or whether they're dead, we want to get the answers to that," Jacobs said.

Jacobs, who is working on the project with Deputy District Attorney Mel Jensen, said he noticed similarities in many of the homicides and believes the project may uncover several serial killers.

"There are some striking similarities in a number of these," Jacobs said.

The scope of the program depends in large part on a \$500,000 grant application to a county agency that prosecutors said could be used to staff two attorneys, two investigators and two sheriff's criminalists. If the county provides less money, prosecutors can apply for a federal grant.

"These are some of the most aggravated cases that we have," said Orange County District Attorney Michael R. Capizzi. "I don't know if you can put a price tag on the value of identifying these people and getting them off the streets."

Capizzi said he hopes sheriff's officials will agree to assign criminalists from their crime lab to the project _ something that would be more likely if the grant is approved.

"They have just an outstanding lab that is recognized as one of the finest in the nation and they would be an integral part of making it a success," Capizzi said. "Once we get the money ... I certainly anticipate that they would eagerly embrace it."

Sheriff's Lt. Ron Wilkerson said he could not comment about the project until his department has a chance to review it.

Jacobs said it is important to begin working on the project soon because the Department of Justice will expand the number of sex offenders on its database from 4,000 to about 34,000 by 1997.

The database has already been used to solve one crime in Northern California.

"It's going to be extremely valuable," said Michael Van Winkle, a Department of Justice spokesman. "Sex offenders tend to commit sex crimes over and over again. They also leave the kind of evidence, sperm and semen, that allows for real good typing for DNA."

Jacobs said he hopes the program will include regular meetings where detectives from across the county can exchange information about open homicide cases.

"Up until now there has never been one place to go to compare unsolved murders," he said. "We want to change that."

The program will not succeed without the cooperation of county police agencies, Jacobs said.

"Some of the response initially may be lukewarm because some people may view it as intervening," he said. "You know what, we have a lot of unsolved murder cases out there and something has to be done."

The program was praised by detectives contacted by The Orange County Register.

"If there was a murder that took place in 1980 or 1979 and we still haven't made an arrest, we've obviously had it long enough to do everything we can with our resources," said Lt. Timm Browne, spokesman for the Orange Police Department.

"Our primary goal is to ensure our community remains a safe place to live, work and raise children. If that means sitting down with a D.A. to talk about some expertise that was not available at the time ... we're going to be part of that."

Costa Mesa police detective Lynda Giesler, who investigated the string of beating deaths in 1979, said she would consider coming back from retirement to work the cases with the District Attorney's Office.

"Your most memorable cases are the ones with innocent victims who could be your daughter, your wife, your sister and they are unsolved," she said. "Nothing would please me more than to use the new things on the scientific horizon to solve them before my lifetime is over."

Register news researchers Jan Rose and Sharon Ostmann contributed to this report.

CHART:

STILL UNSOLVED

Between 1972 and 1994, Orange County police agencies took reports on 888 more homicides than those they cleared.

Year	Homicides	Cleared Homicides
1972	74	58
1973	50	42
1974	60	38
1975	63	57
1976	83	70
1977	71	55
1978	77	46
1979	91	72

1980	113	70
1981	96	85
1982	83	64
1983	100	62
1984	102	67
1985	115	71
1986	100	75
1987	90	66
1988	122	72
1989	145	88
1990	149	87
1991	155	75
1992	173	77
1993	196	105
1994	171	89
Totals	2,479	1,591

Source: California Department of Justice