

Just Improving Fatal and Non-fatal Shooting Investigations

Introduction [00:00:01] RTI International's Justice Practice Area presents Just Science.

Introduction [00:00:08] Welcome to Just Science, a podcast for justice professionals and anyone interested in learning more about forensic science, innovative technology, current research and actionable strategies to improve the criminal justice system. In Episode one of our National Case Closed Project, supporting Best Practices in Investigation Season, Just Science sat down with Dr. Kevin Strom, director of the Center for Policing, Research and Investigative Science at RTI International, and John Skaggs, retired homicide detective with the Los Angeles Police Department to discuss the goals of the Bureau of Justice Assistance's National Case Closed Project and strategic recommendations for law enforcement agencies to improve their violent crime cases outcomes. Nationally, law enforcement agencies clear an average of about half of all gun violence cases, with non-fatal shooting cases cleared at an even lower rate. To help address these low clearance rates, The BJA's National Case Closed Project conducts assessments of law enforcement agencies across the country to provide recommendations for improving their approach to fatal and non-fatal shooting investigations. Listen along as Dr. Strom and retired Detective Skaggs describe the need for a national initiative like the National Case Closed Project, what an agency assessment looks like, and the top recommendations to come out of the project so far. This episode is funded by the U.S. Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Assistance. Some content in this podcast may be considered sensitive and may evoke emotional responses or may not be appropriate for younger audiences. Here's your host, Julia Brinton.

Julia Brinton [00:01:37] Hello and welcome to Just Science. I'm your host, Julia Brinton, with the National Case Closed Project, a program of the Bureau of Justice Assistance. On today's episode, we will discuss top recommendations for criminal justice practitioners to improve fatal and nonfatal shooting investigations, as identified through BJA's National Case Closed Project. Here to guide us in this discussion is project director Kevin Strom and retired homicide detective of the LAPD, John Skaggs. Welcome, Kevin and John. Thanks for talking with us today.

John Skaggs [00:02:13] Thanks for having me.

Kevin Strom [00:02:14] Thank you, Julia.

Julia Brinton [00:02:15] Kevin, we're going to start with you. Can you talk a little bit about your background?

Kevin Strom [00:02:19] Yes. So my name is Kevin Strom and I'm a senior director here at RTI International where I direct our Center for Public Safety and Resilience, which includes all of our policing, research and work and also work related to workforce and workplace issues, victimization response and also community violence and harm reduction. So that center is part of our larger justice division at RTI. My background is in criminology and I've been working in the field for 20 plus years. I received my Ph.D. from the University of Maryland and then worked in the Department of Justice. And then since then, I came down to RTI and have helped grow our policing work and other work in investigations and related areas. So I've had the pleasure of working with law enforcement, community members, and a number of others on critical topics, including like the ones we're talking about today with the Case Closed project. So thanks for having me.

Julia Brinton [00:03:18] Thanks, Kevin. And how about you, John? Will you tell me a little bit about yourself?

Kevin Strom [00:03:21] Yeah, I retired in 2017 from the LAPD. I spent 24 years working in homicide as a detective supervisor and officer in charge of squad. And after I retired, I went to Inglewood Police Department and worked their Cold Case Squad for two years. I moved away from California and had to walk away from that. I do have other experiences working intimately with smaller agencies for an extended period of time. I work a large department, 10,000 officers, Inglewood police, which is about 280, and then a small sheriff's department in Illinois for six months. On top of that, I've been working with BJA programs for almost ten years, and I've been to many, many police departments around the country for assessments and to provide training.

Julia Brinton [00:04:09] Thanks, John. So back to you, Kevin. Can you give our listeners a brief overview of the National Case Closed project and the principal goals for the project?

Kevin Strom [00:04:18] Yes, be happy to. So the National Case Closed Project is a fairly new effort supported and funded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance. And it's an exciting project that builds off some of their previous efforts, but it's really targeted on supporting law enforcement agencies and their jurisdiction to increase their clearance rates for fatal or nonfatal shootings. So as we know that this has been an area, a challenging area, especially with rising levels of violent crime across many cities and other jurisdictions. And so this project is meant to support them in coming up with improvements on how they can respond to investigate and close these cases, which include both fatal shooting cases, So homicides, and then also nonfatal shootings, which is a topic area that, you know, with the rising number of these incidents, many police departments are struggling to clear these cases at a high level. So, clearance by clearance we mean either clear by arrest or through exceptional means, but ideally it's clearing them through arrest as much as possible. So as part of the project, we have a great team at RTI that includes experts such as John and others, along with members of our RTI staff. And so we're working with specific agencies to assess what they're doing and to provide follow-on Technical assistance support and addressing those recommendations. We're also trying to support the country at large. And so that includes things like the convening, we just held in September and RTI, but other ways that we can support the nation on advancing how they approach these really critical areas.

Julia Brinton [00:06:03] Thanks, Kevin. John, back to you. Why is there a need for this type of national initiative to improve case clearance numbers? And how did you decide to partner with RTI on this initiative?

Kevin Strom [00:06:14] Yeah. Nationally, a lot of departments are struggling with clearing their violent crime, including the non-fatal shootings and murders. RTI reached out to me at the beginning of this project and asked if I would be involved. They explained the process to me and what we would be doing and it was right up my alley, and it was really exciting. Since then, I've been involved with all five cities that RTI and the team have conducted assessments on, and it's been really challenging and rewarding to be able to help these departments.

Julia Brinton [00:06:48] Kevin Can you talk with our listeners a little bit about what an agency assessment looks like and how you decide which agencies are involved?

Kevin Strom [00:06:57] So one of the things we want to do is support agencies that have critical needs, but also ones that are able to work with us on these assessments and incorporate and address the recommendations, So ones that have leadership buy-in and are at a point where they have the bandwidth to support these types of changes. So

leadership buy in is absolutely critical and that goes into how we went into selecting agencies to participate so far. So we use an application based approach, we try to get it out there as broadly as possible, and we ask the agencies to really spell out some of those things that we talked about, including what is the need in terms of levels of violence and firearm violence specifically they're experiencing, what are some challenges they've experienced in maintaining or achieving high clearance rates for both the fatal and non-fatal cases, and then also explaining to some degree about how they would benefit from this type of assessment. So we've also tried to have some regional variation and involving agencies that are across the country. In terms of what an assessment looks like, it's multifaceted, so it involves several main components. One is a case review; Both fatal and non-fatal cases, And we code them out through a number of dimensions around what the incident look like, but also what the agency's response was to it. We also do a number of interviews inside and outside the agency, personnel interviews, and then we do a policy review and also look at their training for investigators and other relevant staff. So we really try to touch everything going on in the agency, but then also outside the agency when it comes to partners in the community and prosecution in other places involving the medical examiners and other dimensions. So really trying to be as holistic as possible in terms of what we're capturing. And then we document that and provide it back to the agency in the form of a draft report and then move that forward to a debrief with the agency. So we really try to keep them involved at all stages, but also provide something that's very concrete, practical, but also that pushes them ahead in some of the key areas that we line up. One last thing I'll mention is we really try to work from agency strengths. So this isn't a audit or anything that's meant to be negative. It's really trying to help agencies move ahead, build from what's working, but also apply things that have been shown to be successful and where there's an evidence base in the research. So working from what has been shown to work in other jurisdictions and bring that together for these agencies and as part of a national set of recommendations.

Julia Brinton [00:09:42] Thanks so much for that overview, Kevin. So, John, I'm going to turn it back to you to start. What are some of the findings and recommendations that you've gathered from these assessments? Are you seeing certain issues across several agencies? Are there common recommendations that have come out of these assessments or actionable strategies for agencies to improve in these areas nationally?

Kevin Strom [00:10:05] Definitely. One of the things that we're seeing, almost across the board, is lack of case documentation. And that's where the case files that these detectives are building on their investigations are rather difficult to review if you're not the one assembling it, such as the primary detective. So for supervision review and even department review, it's not as easy as maybe reviewing a case package for 30 minutes or 60 minutes. It would take probably several hours to get through that. One of the things that we've been pushing in that area is the murder book concept where every case in the department is assembled identically. There's a consistent table of contents and a way that the case is put together that if a supervisor, a review of either department or even the detective is unavailable and somebody has to fill in his or her shoes, you can grab that case package, review a couple of sections in that murder book and really have an understanding of what's going on and makes that person able to move forward with that case in the absence of that primary Detective. Another big item is lack of supervision on those cases. Very common we're finding out that about the only department review or supervision review of a case, and we can't even really call it a review, but it's watercooler talk -The supervisor asking the detective how they're doing on that case. There's no official sit down, there's no official coordinated effort for the department to make sure that that detective has all the resources they need and things of that nature. And, of course, across the country, we're seeing a problem with personnel and police departments. And of course, that trickles down to the violent crime detectives. And my experience is these

departments need to make every effort to build those violent crime units, homicide and non-fatal shootings, to address the problem. One of the phrases I commonly used is I don't mind my car being stolen that much, but you hurt me or my family, then we can't let those cases fall through the cracks. Every effort by the detective, supervision, department management, has to be given to those cases and make sure that they're being worked the way they should be. You know RTI is also trying to figure out what a proper caseload is for an individual detective. And years back, it was often referred to, 5 or 6 cases per detective per year. But now, with all the telephone documentation, search warrants and obtaining phone records, those have to be reviewed. So many, many hours are going into phone records, tower dumps from cell sites and social media, and things of that nature. Another thing I'm seeing across the board is a lack of command staff involvement in these cases. And I've read several years ago now that for a department to be effective with a violent crime, everyone from the chief of police down to the junior patrol officer needs to have a hand in addressing the violent crime. And I don't see that as a concerted effort through a department, where every level is once again having a hand or direct contact and impact with those cases and detectives to make sure that everything the department can do is being done. One other issue is training. What we're finding is a lack of training for especially the advanced detectives working the nonfatal shootings and the murders. Often they're receiving some form of basic detective school, but as far as the advanced aspects of working these difficult murder cases, the training is just not there. So that's definitely one of the recommendations that we're seeing across the board, is to increase the training for these detectives that have not only a high caseload but all the related duties, and they need the training to improve their case clearance.

Julia Brinton [00:14:02] John, let's start with you. What are some actionable strategies for agencies to improve fatal and nonfatal shootings, coordination and case clearance?

Kevin Strom [00:14:11] One of the big issues in that area, the non-fatal shooting detectives generally don't have a strong working relationship with the homicide detectives. They both accused each other of holding back information and keeping things too close to the chest. So one of our recommendations is the communication, through those detectives individually, is coordinated by the department. So the department needs to have some form of a weekly crime control meeting, if it's even just based mainly on violent crimes, where the week prior crimes are discussed at length and in depth. And the department essentially requires these detectives to share that information that they're keeping too close. Of course, the same individuals that are committing the non-fatal shootings are committing the murders and there needs to be a stronger, unified effort between those two groups. And, of course, that's where the department comes in and mandates that weekly crime control meeting is a big problem solver for making sure the communication's open and in depth to work these difficult cases.

Julia Brinton [00:15:22] Kevin, do you want to supplement anything and react to some of what John is talking about?

Kevin Strom [00:15:27] Yeah, I completely agree with John. We've seen that in other agencies that have worked with us and provided information in terms of that cross connection between those units. And John also mentioned the importance of supervision there, making sure that these cases, whether they're fatal or non-fatal, are moving and have really achieved everything that the investigator can achieve in that case before they're considered closed out. Also sharing intelligence across these cases. So what we've seen from some successful agencies is utilizing other staff to support these investigations, and that includes crime analysts, even having an embedded analyst within investigative units. Advocates, they're dedicated to homicide, but also non-fatal cases can also be extremely effective and we've seen that in specific jurisdictions. And so building that out

and making sure that there's resources that are there, and then the other pieces that strong integration with forensics, whether it's through NIBIN and ballistics, processing and intelligence, and also the use of cell phone information and data. So agencies that have that in their policy but also carry it out in practice, we've seen some very successful outcomes in terms of not just doing that occasionally, but building in those practices regularly and consistently in these situations. The last thing I just wanted to bring up was twofold. One was prosecutor partnerships, and maybe we can get to that a little bit later. But I did really want to highlight community engagement, and this project is spending a good amount of time talking to community groups, also talking to individuals in the police departments that are tasked with community-based responsibilities and others. But I think we've really starting to identify both some needs, but also some promising areas of how the police can engage with the community before, during and after these investigations. And so that's something we hope to share more of as this project evolves. But some early points that we wanted to emphasize - One is it's important for agencies to have a stop snitching programs that are coordinated across the police community and prosecution. Also to successfully address concerns about why individuals perhaps are not coming forward as witnesses or victims. And finally, to really understand the full scale of what community agencies can offer and not to sort of treating every community organization as a one size fits all. We've seen some very successful efforts where community organizations can serve as a bridge to the community, but also where the community feels comfortable providing information on a case, maybe to that community based organization instead of law enforcement, but that can still serve to help address these cases and address larger issues around violence in these communities. So we'll try to share that more broadly as part of this project. But those are a few things I wanted to touch on. John, I was curious if you could talk maybe a little bit about some of your experience in L.A. in terms of how you went about building these relationships with families and possible witnesses as part of your investigative work?

Kevin Strom [00:18:42] Sure. I learned early in my homicide career that the more friends I had on the streets, the more effective I was, in clearing my cases, clearly. So what I did at that point was started making sure that I walked away from every case with at least one friend that I had on speed dial. Oftentimes, there was a victim's mother, sister, brother. I really focused on making friends in the community because those people loved the cops when they solve their loved one's case. One of the common complaints we all hear across the country, there's a lack of participation and cooperation from the communities that these crimes are happening in. Personally, I never found that to be a problem. When I learned how to solve cases, which generally involve identifying witnesses and getting the story of what happened and then figuring out how to build my case, my clearance rate skyrocketed. What I'm finding around the country is that most detectives don't have that mindset or confidence that they can make friends in these tough communities, that a lot of these crimes are occurring in. And when I go to these cities, I'll often ask the homicide detectives, Where's your hotspot in the city? They all have an answer - Lincoln Park or whatever the response is. And I say, how many people have a friend in the area of Lincoln Park? And most of the time I get zero hands raised. So that is a problem. But a lot of these detectives are doing a class-A on their telephone evidence, their social media evidence, and all these things that are sitting down at a computer and writing a search warrant. But when we look at these cases in these cities, I'm not seeing a lot of interviews where they're finding somebody. There may be 2 or 3 witnesses that were identified as scene that may or may not have told the truth to the officers or the detectives when they responded. But there's very little door knocks, canvases, and basically just reaching out to community members and community groups that these detectives are clearly not doing. So that's one of the things that we've been pushing in this project. I'm sure that the success rate is going to improve if they take that advice.

John Skaggs [00:20:52] John, one follow up for you - Do you think there's steps that agencies can take to improve those communication skills, both for patrol and investigators? Because we've seen some preliminary evidence in the research that shows that certain training programs, for example, that are focused on training patrol on evidence collection and also communication skills, can be beneficial. So I'm just wondering from your perspective, are these things that individuals in those roles can learn and they can show improvements on, in terms of, you know, in-person communication skills with community members?

Kevin Strom [00:21:31] That's a great question, Kevin. A lot of these detectives may think that there's a racial divide with the people they're talking to. They may think there's a generational divide with the people they're talking to. I think it's going to be a trial and error. They're going to have to talk to as many people as they can, see what works for them, to break any barriers that there may be to succeed.

Julia Brinton [00:21:55] Thank you both for highlighting how agencies can improve their responses, especially in terms of connecting with their community. I know our listeners are interested in hearing about these efforts, especially those who are seeing the effects of gun violence in their own communities firsthand. John, as a follow up, can you talk a little bit about involving support staff in these investigations?

Kevin Strom [00:22:18] Certainly. I mentioned earlier that one of the downfalls that I'm seeing in some of these departments is that the detectives are keeping cases too close to their chest, which means they're not reaching out outside of their unit or throughout the department to make sure that they're getting the resources that they need. Most of the time, these agencies do have some form of support, whether it's crime analysts, computer technicians, things of that nature. And what we're seeing is detectives are not utilizing those folks as best they could. And of course, that's where supervision needs to step in and ensure that those detectives have the support that they need and mandate it when they're having those weekly meetings.

Julia Brinton [00:23:00] Thank you, John. Kevin, do you want to supplement anything that John has said?

Kevin Strom [00:23:04] No, I agree completely. It's really important for agencies, but also for these investigative units to think about how they can leverage the assets and the resources within their agency, also outside their agency where necessary. So it can make for better investigative efficiency and outcomes and also help address some of those challenges around caseload sizes that John referred to before. So investigators to still, you know, lead the case, but not have the mindset that they have to do everything within the case to be successful.

Julia Brinton [00:23:38] So we're hearing that there are a lot of benefits to participating in this project from you both. If agencies are interested in getting involved, Kevin can you talk a little bit about how they can do that?

Kevin Strom [00:23:48] Yeah, absolutely. So to date, we've had five agencies participate in these assessments. We've also had a number of other agencies that we've connected with in addition, to have discussions around a variety of topics including supervision, forensics, prosecution, collaboration. We're trying to build out this community of practice, but we are looking for new sites and interested sites. They can contact the case closed team or visit our website at NationalCaseClosed.org, and, you know, we'd love to have additional agencies participate, even if they're achieving high levels of success with these cases, we'd still like to engage with them and learn more about what they're doing. Every

agency can improve, but we'd also like for them to be part of our overall program. So they can contact us via the website or directly via email. The other thing that I wanted to mention is that several of the agencies, we've had five participated so far, But for Greensboro, North Carolina, and also Lansing, Michigan, which were two of our first sites, we finalized their assessment reports and recommendations. And those are available on our website and we anticipate that similar reports for our other sites will also be made available once those are finalized. We're working with Greensboro, Lansing, and several of our other sites already on now implementing those recommendations. And the Greensboro police chief and the assistant police chief from Lansing Police Department both participated in a convening we held at RTI in September and talked about some of the things they're already doing to make changes in their agency based on our recommendations. Those include changes at the organizational level, changing the structure, for example, for what their non-fatal unit looks like and how it's connected to their homicide unit. Changes around staffing positions within these investigative units. I know Lansing's made some changes in that regard. Greensboro is also adding additional advocate positions so that they can support homicide cases and survivor families, but also non-fatal victims and to provide a more holistic support for all those cases and a number of other changes. So we're really excited about what's happened to date. And our RTI team, which includes John Skaggs and a number of other experts in the field, are providing support to these agencies, but also others through written briefs, through webinars, through in-person training for direct work with our participating agencies. So we're really looking to elevate not only the specific agencies we're doing assessments with, but agencies across the board so that we can see improvements across the nation. So, John, I don't know if you wanted to talk a little bit more around things we're doing to support jurisdictions on the project.

Kevin Strom [00:26:45] Yes, I know that the departments that we've delivered our assessment report to have truly appreciated the recommendations and understand how much that they feel that it will help their department improve their case closure. But it's very rewarding for all of us and very hopeful that they're going to be able to implement the recommendations that we've delivered and increase the clearance rate.

Julia Brinton [00:27:08] You've both given such excellent information so far on why agencies should feel encouraged to get involved. Are there any other lessons learned that you want to share with our listeners?

Kevin Strom [00:27:18] Yes. First of all, I know we've talked about the agencies and maybe their struggles or deficiencies. These agencies are also doing many, many things well above average. First of all, the personnel that we've dealt with have welcomed us with open arms, and I think that they understand as coming in as outsiders and spending a brief amount of time with them, we are were giving them solid tools and recommendations to help them improve. I think all these agencies, step number one, in addressing this violent crime is having the right personnel in the right position. And we're seeing quite a bit of that. And so I'm very hopeful that we're going to continue to help these agencies out and look forward to the additional agencies.

John Skaggs [00:28:08] Julie, a couple lessons learned to add to what John said. One is that we recognize that, in some instances, the police, prosecution, the community, each of them have sometimes taken on different responsibilities or perspectives when it comes to addressing gun violence. But, you know, my hope is that, and I think our hope as a project team is that we can really help jurisdictions look at these things collectively as, you know, they're all in it together, they're all trying to improve safety and well-being in their communities. And so when it comes to a community organization or community members supporting the police and investigation, it's really about trying to improve safety and well-

being in their community, and it's not necessarily, it doesn't have to be about helping the police, it's really about helping their community. And we've seen that that shift in some places, and we hope that can continue. You know, another important kind of lesson learned is, is really the value of a multidisciplinary approach in these investigations. As John mentioned, some really dedicated, smart, innovative investigators across the country that are working very hard. But when they when they recognize that an embedded advocate, a crime analyst, forensic technician or forensic scientist supporting them, having that team approach and working proactively with the community, it can help them with their caseload, but it can also help them have others carry out tasks on that investigation that maybe they're better suited for and they have more time for, including engaging with a witness or with a victim to support them. So those are some really important steps, we think. And there can also be steps to improve trust over time so that communities recognize that the law enforcement are working to solve these cases, and helping them solve these cases can improve the safety in the community over time. I did want to highlight on our website, when it comes to resources, we do have a tool kit that we've put up that's around six different areas. Individuals can visit our website at NationalCaseClosed.org, and then under tool kit you will find there's six different sections that resources are organized. One is around investigating shootings, the second is around engaging the community, A third on prosecuting shooting cases, More around tools and strategies around improving relationships with prosecution, Another around engaging victims and witnesses, And then a fifth around maximizing gun intelligence. And finally, some resources on how agencies can perform self-assessments and evaluations on their own practices to identify some of these needs proactively. So just wanted to highlight that for our listeners.

Julia Brinton [00:30:57] Kevin, can you talk a little bit about some of our collaborators on this project?

Kevin Strom [00:31:01] Yes, we have a really great team on this project, as alluded to earlier, at RTI we have a range of different individuals that work at RTI, including some former practitioners and forensic, including forensic scientists like John Grassel. So we have a number of folks coming at this from the RTI perspective, but also individuals such as John Skaggs that have a significant background in homicide investigations, also other forms of violent crime investigations. Some individuals that have served in leadership, commander, deputy chief roles within organizations are also part of our assessment team. So overall in investigations, we have some of the leading experts across the nation. We also have AEquitas, which is a partner for us, and John Wilkinson to represent our prosecution side and help us engage with state and local prosecutors across the country and federal prosecution. We have individuals with a background in advocacy, crime analysts as well. So I think we really have a strong collective team that can help us come at this from a holistic standpoint.

Julia Brinton [00:32:09] Kevin and John, thank you both so much for your time discussing this project. It has been an absolute pleasure talking with both of you today.

Kevin Strom [00:32:16] Thank you, Julia. It was my pleasure.

John Skaggs [00:32:20] Thank you, Julia, and look forward to hearing from listeners on how we can work with them on this project.

Julia Brinton [00:32:23] If you all enjoyed today's episode, be sure to like and follow Just Science on your platform of choice. If you'd like to learn more about the National Case Closed project, please visit our website at NationalCaseClosed.org. You can explore resources through our tool kit, other recommendations from our site assessments, and you

can get in touch with us. You can send us an email, if you like, through caseclosed@rti.org. I'm Julia Brinton and this has been another episode of Just Science.

Introduction [00:32:55] Next week, Just Science sits down with Fabio Sanchez and Yaneisy Delgado, to discuss the application of forensics and other technology in advancing shooting cases, including gun crime intelligence and digital evidence. This project is supported by grant number 15PBJA-21-GK-04008-JAGP, awarded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance. The Bureau of Justice Assistance is a component of the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the Office of Victims of Crime, and the Office of Sex Offender Sentencing, Monitoring, Apprehending, registering and tracking. Points of user opinions in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.