

STUDYING AND PREVENTING HOMICIDE



Issues and Challenges

**M. Dwayne Smith
Margaret A. Zahn**
Editors

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PART I

The Study of Homicide

1

Introduction

M. DWAYNE SMITH
MARGARET A. ZAHN

Homicide is a topic that holds an incredible fascination for academic researchers as well as the American public. To get some sense of this fascination, one need only scan the current offerings of U.S. popular culture, ranging from the nightly news to popular fiction to various components of the electronic media (television, motion pictures, music, etc.). On the other end of an information spectrum, a search of academic references using the key words *murder* or *homicide* will produce enough citations to tie up a library printer for an inordinately long period.

Unfortunately, the "facts" about homicide are often jumbled along this information spectrum, and what the public frequently *believes* to be true about various aspects of homicide may not be supported by empirical evidence. Too often, public policy is spurred by single highly publicized incidents or short-term trends. The professional literature assumed to provide a more informed sense of direction, however, is vast, complex, confusing, and, at times, simply contradictory.

A recognition of these difficulties has motivated and guided the development of this book, along with an expanded companion volume, *Homicide: A*

Sourcebook of Social Research. Although *Homicide* was designed to meet the needs of professionals, *Studying and Preventing Homicide: Issues and Challenges* consists of a selection of chapters from the larger volume that have been edited to make them accessible to a larger audience. In doing so, we have attempted to provide a broad spectrum of readers with a better understanding of homicide as a form of human behavior and, at the same time, to expand our readers' knowledge regarding *the study of homicide*. The topics selected for presentation reflect a variety of issues associated with the study of homicide from a *social* perspective.¹ We have been fortunate to have the chapters exploring these topics prepared by a group of authors whose own work is quite prominent within the relevant literatures.

The research on some of the topics has produced a large, complex literature, whereas research on other topics is, so far, rather limited. Regardless of the topic, however, the contributors have provided summaries of the existing literature, interpretations of the major findings emerging from this literature, and an identification of issues that await further study. In a few chapters, original research that has been conducted for this publication is presented.

The two chapters in Part I that follow this introduction offer a framework for the remaining contributions. Margaret A. Zahn and Patricia L. McCall begin by providing readers with an overview of homicide trends in the United States during the 20th century. The trends discussed have been the object of much research, and their explanations have often been controversial. Zahn and McCall point out, however, that trends involving total rates of homicide often conceal considerable shifts in *patterns* of homicide that are embedded within these trends. In particular, they take note of changes in patterns of age, circumstance, and victim-offender relationship, concluding that an understanding of the "big picture" regarding homicide in the United States requires us to comprehend the more subtle changes that have occurred during this century.

Before proceeding into specific topics, it is desirable to have a firm grasp of the sources of data that are the focus of homicide studies. Marc Riedel reminds us in Chapter 3 that although homicide data are considered to be among the most complete, accurate crime information available to researchers, it is far from ideal. Through comparisons of the major sources of homicide data, Riedel reviews their strengths and weaknesses. In some cases, the news is good. Depending on the particular focus of the study, however, homicide data are rife with pitfalls of which researchers must be aware. A

careful reading of Riedel's chapter will assist readers in becoming more informed consumers of reports on homicide and also provide sound advice regarding the use of homicide data for those who are engaged in research.

Part II shifts to a consideration of topics whose literatures are particularly complex and/or have generated considerable controversy. Angela Browne, Kirk R. Williams, and Donald G. Dutton point out in Chapter 4 that the topic of intimate-partner homicide has particular implications for women because a substantial proportion of female victims are killed by men with whom they have (or have had) a personal relationship. Recent years have seen an expansion of the intimate-partner concept to include such relationships as boyfriend-girlfriend and former lovers. This expansion alters both the pattern and trend of homicides in which persons, especially women, are killed by perpetrators who can be classified as intimate partners. The trend itself is complex; married-partner homicides seem to have declined, but homicide among non-married intimate partners appears to have increased. Equally perplexing is another trend whereby the killing of men by female intimate partners has declined during the past two decades, yet the reverse situation (the killing of women by male intimates) has shown little change. Browne, Williams, and Dutton analyze these multifaceted trends and speculate on what accounts for them. They also offer suggestions regarding the research needed to more adequately address the questions that remain in this area.

James Alan Fox and Jack Levin begin Chapter 5 by noting the recent public attention focused on a small subset of homicides, those committed by serial killers. A spate of television shows and motion pictures have featured serial killers/killing as a central theme, and uninformed observers could easily conclude that this variety of murder is a rather common occurrence. Addressing this misperception, along with nine other myths regarding serial killers/killing, they provide an overview of more recent academic research that places this form of homicide in a context that departs considerably from what have become popular, but erroneous, beliefs.

In Chapter 6, Kathleen Auerhahn and Robert Nash Parker tackle the difficult subject of the role played by drugs and alcohol in the commission of homicide. Various models of drug/alcohol use are explored in the chapter, with an emphasis placed on uncovering their direct and indirect links to homicide. In answering the question "Is there a homicide-drugs/alcohol linkage?" Auerhahn and Parker offer a definite "yes." Their response to the question, however, is qualified throughout the chapter as they suggest *multiple* pathways by which homicide can be related to drug and alcohol use. These pathways,

they suggest, even when empirically verifiable, are far from straightforward. Auerhahn and Parker conclude with a discussion of the necessity of sorting through these complexities when attempting to formulate reasonable, effective public policy initiatives.

Although the chapters of this volume concentrate almost exclusively on homicide in the United States, Gary LaFree reminds us in Chapter 7 that considerable homicide research has been conducted on a cross-national basis. The research issue common to this literature is to identify factors that predict the relative incidence of homicide across a variety of countries. A number of researchers have attempted to overcome the many difficulties faced in cross-national research and have produced rich, informative literature. LaFree has prepared a table that paints a vivid picture of the cross-national literature and provides readers with a synthesis and summary of the major findings from this research.

The chapters of Part III consider the manifestation of homicide among different social groups. As argued by Darnell F. Hawkins in the early sections of Chapter 8, the story told by national trends of homicide may be an informative, but incomplete, tale. Hidden within the larger general trends are multiple stories that emerge from different population groups, especially within the United States. Hawkins proceeds to demonstrate the importance of disaggregating national data by focusing on trends and patterns of homicide among African Americans, a group that suffers a particularly high rate of homicide in the United States, both as offenders and victims. Through analyses of race-specific data that move beyond simple comparisons with Whites, African American homicide is shown to be at once different because of its prevalence and predictable in the forces that appear to drive it. More than anything, Hawkins stresses, African American homicide is a diverse phenomenon that demands separate study to fully develop significant public policy.

In Chapter 9, Ramiro Martinez, Jr., and Matthew T. Lee echo Hawkins's contention by making a case for the separate study of Latino homicide. The authors note that Latinos are frequently classified as "White" in both offending and victimization data. Yet an emerging literature based on more precise ethnic group categorizations finds Latino homicide to have its distinct characteristics. Furthermore, similar to Hawkins's argument concerning African Americans, Martinez and Lee maintain that Latino homicide is resistant to simple generalizations because considerable variations in levels and patterns of homicide can be found among the diverse groups that compose this broad ethnic grouping. Martinez and Lee conclude with their thoughts on research

issues that if properly addressed can expand our knowledge of homicide among an increasingly prominent segment of the U.S. population.

Few aspects of homicide have caused more alarm than an apparent downward shift in the age of offenders, as well as the increased representation of juveniles among the victims of homicide. The furor surrounding these shifts has contributed to federal and state laws aimed at juveniles, many of which are arguably ill conceived and potentially counterproductive. Kathleen M. Heide takes on the difficult task of addressing this controversial topic in Chapter 10. In doing so, she employs a multidisciplinary approach that unlike most of the other chapters in this volume, assesses the psychological as well as the sociological literature in her exploration of juvenile murderers. In addition, she considers a sociobiological literature that she finds largely undeveloped but that cannot be capriciously discarded. Although conceding the daunting task involved, Heide offers a summary of the factors most pertinent to the incidence—and changes in that incidence—of murder by youths.

Cheryl L. Maxson, in Chapter 11, concludes this portion of the book with a consideration of a unique form of homicide, one heavily involving youths—that committed by members of gangs. Maxson reviews the difficult problems faced by gang researchers, beginning with the deceptively simple issue of what constitutes a “gang” homicide. From there, we learn of the complexities that appear to make some cities with gangs prone to high levels of violence, whereas others are reasonably immune to these dramatic manifestations of gang activity. That is, gang presence, in and of itself, does not necessarily mean that a city will have high rates of homicide. Further, a relative absence of gang activity does not ensure low rates. Maxson presents original research that aids in sorting out these and other issues regarding the relationship between gangs and homicide.

The final section of the book, Part IV, contains a series of chapters discussing possible remedies that if successful could be expected to prevent and therefore reduce the incidence of homicide. The policies selected for discussion represent differing ends of the political spectrum. We begin with a consideration of the effects of the death penalty, a response favored by political conservatives who see punitive responses as essential for deterring people from crime. In Chapter 12, William C. Bailey and Ruth D. Peterson consider the impact of the death penalty in serving as a general deterrent to crime, a controversy that figures prominently in the homicide literature. Their careful assessment of a vast array of literature leads them to conclude that the

deterrence hypothesis remains unsupported, that is, the weight of the evidence suggests that use of the death penalty has little connection to levels of homicide, especially across differing states of the United States. At the same time, Bailey and Peterson find little support for the competing hypothesis of a "brutalization effect" thought to actually increase the incidence of homicide, a counterposition frequently offered by death penalty opponents.

When advocating ways to reduce homicide, conservative fervor for the death penalty is easily matched by the faith that political liberals place in restrictions on the sale and possession of firearms. Liberals will therefore take heart with the conclusions of Philip J. Cook and Mark H. Moore in Chapter 13. Following an exhaustive review of another large, complicated body of research, Cook and Moore find the weight of evidence to support the notion that selected controls on firearms can bring about a reduction in homicide. They warn, however, that the values underlying efforts to achieve such legislation clash bitterly with other sets of values; for many people, the trade-off in reduced incidence of homicide is simply not worth the loss of rights necessary to achieve that goal. In such an atmosphere, Cook and Moore maintain that it is especially important to decipher "what works," and they provide readers with a contemporary assessment of gun control programs that seem to achieve the specific goals to which they are directed.

Few responsible persons argue that significant reductions in homicide can be achieved via legislation alone. Instead, the effort will require an investment of considerable social and financial resources. There is a wide array of suggestions, however, as to what form such investments should take. In Chapter 14, James A. Mercy and W. Rodney Hammond outline a public health approach, one that they maintain strives to be comprehensive in addressing the multiple factors contributing to homicide. In essence, homicide is approached from the perspective of a disease model, one for which an integration of multiple solutions is appropriate. Mercy and Hammond explore various options but draw from the literature to present the framework for a comprehensive program aimed at homicide reduction. They are firm in their belief that a notable reduction in U.S. homicide rates is entirely possible with the appropriate application of this model.

Overall, the chapters ahead represent some of the best information available on the subject of homicide. We hope this book will provide a firm foundation for the great amount of work that remains to be done in the study of homicide. Sound research that guides carefully constructed public policy offers our best hope for achieving a significant reduction in what Marc Riedel,

writing in Chapter 3, has so appropriately termed the “rare but exceedingly tragic crime of homicide.”

Note

1. Although several chapters mention and even offer overviews of some aspects of a psychological or sociobiological literature, the major focus of this volume is on research whose topics address the larger social dynamics that influence levels of homicide across time, geographic space, and social groups.

2

Homicide in the 20th-Century United States *Trends and Patterns*

MARGARET A. ZAHN
PATRICIA L. McCALL

This chapter reviews trends and patterns of homicide in the United States for almost a full century, from 1900 to 1996.¹ It presents an analysis of changing trends, a portrait of the dominant types of homicide in different periods of American history, and some analysis of the populations who are differentially affected through time by this type of violent death. Because no fully national databases exist for the entire century, the portrait of American homicide that follows is a composite derived from available national sources and a review of major studies in different periods.

Homicide Data Sources

The next chapter by Marc Riedel will discuss the sources of data that are used in the study of homicide. Several of those sources, however, have provided