The Handbook of Homicide
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The Handbook of Homicide

Edited by

Fiona Brookman, Edward R. Maguire, and Mike Maguire
## Contents

Notes on Contributors ix  
Introduction: Homicide in Global Perspective xix  
*Fiona Brookman, Edward R. Maguire, and Mike Maguire*

### Part I  Homicide in Context  
1 Murderous Thoughts: The Macro, Micro, and Momentary in Theorizing the Causes and Consequences of Criminal Homicide  
*Helen Innes, Sarah Tucker, and Martin Innes* 3  
2 Geographic and Temporal Variation in Cross-National Homicide Victimization Rates  
*Meghan L. Rogers and William Alex Pridemore* 20  
3 Some Trends in Homicide and Its Age-Crime Curves  
*Alfred Blumstein* 44  
4 Social and Legal Responses to Homicide  
*Mark Cooney* 54

### Part II  Understanding Different Forms of Homicide  
5 Gang Homicide in the United States: What We Know and Future Research Directions  
*Jesenia M. Pizarro* 73  
6 Drug-Related Homicide  
*Sean P. Varano and Joseph B. Kuhns* 89
## Contents

7 Sexual Homicide: A Review of Recent Empirical Evidence (2008 to 2015)  
_Heng Choon (Oliver) Chan_  
105

8 When Women are Murdered  
_R. Emerson Dobash and Russell P. Dobash_  
131

9 Women Murdered in the Name of “Honor”  
_Aisha K. Gill_  
149

10 Hate and Homicide: Exploring the Extremes of Prejudice-Motivated Violence  
_Nathan Hall_  
165

11 Infanticide  
_Carl P. Malmquist_  
180

12 Parricide Encapsulated  
_Kathleen M. Heide_  
197

13 Corporate Homicide, Corporate Social Responsibility, and Human Rights  
_Gary Slapper_  
213

14 Empirical Challenges to Studying Terrorism and Homicide  
_Joseph K. Young and Erin M. Kearns_  
231

15 Multiple Homicide: Understanding Serial and Mass Murder  
_Jack Levin and James Alan Fox_  
249

16 Genocide and State-Sponsored Killing  
_Andy Aydn-Aitchison_  
268

---

Part III  Homicide around the Globe: International Perspectives  
289

17 Homicide in Europe  
_Marieke Liem_  
291

18 Comparing Characteristics of Homicides in Finland, the Netherlands, and Sweden  
_Soenita M. Ganpat_  
308

19 Homicide in Britain  
_Fiona Brookman, Helen Jones, and Sophie Pike_  
320

20 Homicide in Canada  
_Myrna Dawson_  
345

21 Typifying American Exceptionalism: Homicide in the USA  
_Amanda L. Robinson and Christopher D. Maxwell_  
368
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Homicide in Japan</td>
<td>Tom Ellis and Koichi Hamai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Homicide in Australia and New Zealand: Precursors and Prevention</td>
<td>Paul Mazerolle, Li Eriksson, Richard Wortley, and Holly Johnson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Drivers of Homicide in Latin America and the Caribbean:</td>
<td>Erik Alda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Does Relative Political Capacity Matter?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Homicide in Russia: Issues of Measuring and Theoretical Explanations</td>
<td>Alexandra Lysova and Nikolay Shchitov</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Understanding Homicide in China</td>
<td>Liqun Cao</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Homicide in India: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives</td>
<td>K. Jaishankar and Debarati Halder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Homicide in South Africa: Offender Perspectives on Dispute-related</td>
<td>Marie Rosenkrantz Lindegaard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Killings of Men</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Part IV Investigating Homicide</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Technology and Homicide Investigation</td>
<td>Patrick Q. Brady and William R. King</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Solving Homicides: Trends, Causes, and Ways to Improve</td>
<td>Thomas S. Alexander and Charles F. Wellford</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>Using DNA in the Investigation of Homicide: Scientific, Operational,</td>
<td>Robin Williams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and Evidential Considerations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>Cold Case Homicide Reviews</td>
<td>Cheryl Allsop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>A Damning Cascade of Investigative Errors: Flaws in Homicide</td>
<td>Deborah Davis and Richard A. Leo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Investigation in the USA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Part V Reducing and Preventing Homicide</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>Seeing and Treating Violence as a Health Issue</td>
<td>Charles Ransford and Gary Slutkin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>Identifying and Intervening in Homicide Networks</td>
<td>Andrew M. Fox and Olivia R. Allen</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>Focused Deterrence and the Reduction of Gang Homicide</td>
<td>643</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Anthony A. Braga</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>From Theory to Practice: Reducing Gun Violence and Homicide in Detroit</td>
<td>659</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Eric Grommon, John D. McCluskey, and Timothy S. Bynum</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>Preventing Homicide</td>
<td>676</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Edward R. Maguire</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Index</strong></td>
<td>693</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Erik Alda is a PhD candidate in justice, law, and criminology at American University, Washington, DC. Erik has conducted extensive research and published peer-reviewed articles on Latin America, the Caribbean and sub-Saharan Africa on issues related to crime and violence, policing, and related issues. Erik's main interest lies in the measurement of efficiency of criminal justice institutions and differences in crime and security in developing countries.

Thomas S. Alexander is Lieutenant of Police with the Hagerstown, MD, police department and the Director of Grants and Research. He is also an adjunct faculty member in the University of Maryland’s Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice and in the graduate Criminal Justice Management program. His current research interests are in homicide clearance, race and policing, and evidence-based policing strategies. He received his PhD from the University of Maryland.

Olivia R. Allen is a graduate student at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, where she graduated with her bachelor’s degree. She is currently the principal investigator of an evaluation of a summer jobs and life-skills program designed to prevent gang membership and violence among high-risk youth in Kansas City, Missouri. Her research interests include juvenile justice, gangs, and pretrial services.

Cheryl Allsop is Senior Lecturer at the University of South Wales, UK. In 2012 she completed a PhD on cold case investigations, looking at how the police seek to solve long-term unsolved major crimes, drawing on eight months spent with a major crime review team and interviews with UK Home Office, policing officials, and experts frequently involved in the investigation of hard to solve crimes.

Andy Aydın-Aitchison is Senior Lecturer in Criminology and Postgraduate Research Director at the University of Edinburgh School of Law. He researches and writes on the criminology of atrocity, with a primary focus on the former Yugoslavia, and on
Alfred Blumstein is the J. Erik Jonsson University Professor of Urban Systems and Operations Research and former Dean of Carnegie Mellon's Heinz College of Public Policy and Information Systems. He has had extensive experience in both research and policy with the criminal justice system since serving as Director of Science and Technology for the President's Crime Commission (1966–1967). He was Chair of the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency and was a member of the Pennsylvania Commission on Sentencing. He was awarded the Stockholm Prize in Criminology in 2007.

Patrick Q. Brady is a doctoral student in the Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology at Sam Houston State University. His research interests focus on campus crime, burnout, and decision-making practices among investigators of interpersonal violence. His work has appeared in the Journal of Interpersonal Violence, the Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice, and the Journal of Criminal Justice Education.

Anthony A. Braga is Distinguished Professor and Director of the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Northeastern University. Dr. Braga's research involves collaborating with criminal justice, social service, and community-based organizations to address illegal access to firearms, reduce gang and group-involved violence, and control crime hot spots.

Fiona Brookman is Professor of Criminology at the University of South Wales (UK) and Chair of the Criminal Investigation Research Network (CIRN) that she established in 2011. She received her PhD from Cardiff University in 2000. Fiona's research focuses on various aspects of violence and homicide and she is currently leading a British ethnographic study (funded by the Leverhulme Trust) exploring the role of science and technology in homicide investigation.

Timothy S. Bynum, PhD, is Professor in the School of Criminal Justice at Michigan State University. His research focuses on public policy evaluation in the area of crime and justice. He directed numerous projects evaluating criminal justice interventions and was a member of the evaluation team for the Weed and Seed Program, the Youth Firearms Violence Initiative, the Transition from Prison to Community Initiative, School Resource Officer Programs, and the Juvenile Accountability Block Grant Program.

Liqun Cao is Professor of Sociology and Criminology at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology, Canada. He is also an Adjunct Professor at Queensland University of Technology, Australia. His research essays have appeared in numerous professional journals. He is the author of Major Criminological Theories: Concepts and Measurement (2004) and the lead author of Policing in Taiwan: From Authoritarianism to Democracy (2014). He is also the lead editor of The Routledge Handbook of Chinese Criminology (2014).
Heng Choon (Oliver) Chan, PhD, is Assistant Professor of Criminology at City University of Hong Kong. His academic background is in criminology and forensic psychology. Oliver's research focuses on sexual homicide, offender profiling, sex offending, homicide, stalking behavior, and criminological issues related to the Asian population. He has published extensively in the area of sexual homicide, with his most recent research monograph, *Understanding Sexual Homicide Offenders: An Integrated Approach*, being published by Palgrave Macmillan (2015).

Mark Cooney is Professor of Sociology and Adjunct Professor of Law at the University of Georgia, USA. His work addresses various aspects of conflict and its management including the role of third parties in homicide, the long-term decline of lethal conflict among elites, and, most recently, family honor killing. His publications include a theoretical study of responses to homicide in human societies, *Is Killing Wrong? A Study in Pure Sociology* (University of Virginia Press, 2009).

Deborah Davis is Professor of Psychology at the University of Nevada, Reno, and a member of the faculty of the National Judicial College. She has published widely in the areas of witness memory, police interrogation and confessions, and communicating and understanding sexual intentions. She worked for more than 20 years as a trial consultant, has testified as an expert witness in close to 150 trials, and is a frequent speaker at CLE seminars across the country.

Myrna Dawson is Professor of Sociology, Canada Research Chair in Public Policy in Criminal Justice, and Director of the Centre for the Study of Social and Legal Responses to Violence, University of Guelph, Canada. Her current research examines intimacy, violence, and law as well as the rise and impact of domestic violence death review committees. Recent articles appear in *Trauma Violence & Abuse*, *Child Abuse & Neglect*, and *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*.

Russell P. Dobash and R. Emerson Dobash (Emeritus Professors) Criminology, School of Law, University of Manchester, UK, have conducted groundbreaking research on violence against women and published award-winning publications including: *Violence Against Wives* (Free Press, 1979); *Women, Violence and Social Change* (Routledge, 1992); *Rethinking Violence Against Women* (Sage, 1998); *Changing Violent Men* (Sage, 2000); and *When Men Murder Women* (Oxford University Press, 2015).

Tom Ellis is Principal Lecturer in the Institute of Criminal Justice Studies, University of Portsmouth, UK. He has published extensively on Japanese criminal justice, often with Koichi Hamai, and also in a number of other areas, including gambling in Japan. His current research interests and activities are comparative youth justice, police use of body worn video cameras, and combat sports.

Li Eriksson is Lecturer with the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Griffith University. Her research forms part of the Australian Homicide Project, which is a national ARC Discovery project examining developmental and situational pathways to homicide. Her research interests include violence, intimate
partner homicide, filicide, and criminological theory. Before joining Griffith University, Li worked as a research analyst for the Swedish National Council of Crime Prevention.

**Andrew M. Fox** is Assistant Professor in the Department of Criminology at California State University, Fresno. He received his PhD from Arizona State University in criminology and criminal justice. His research interests include social network analysis, gangs, crime prevention, mental health, and communities. His work has been published in the *Pan American Journal of Public Health, Crime and Delinquency, Justice Quarterly*, and the *American Sociological Review*.

**James Alan Fox** is the Lipman Family Professor of Criminology, Law, and Public Policy at Northeastern University. With specializations in homicide and statistical methods, he has written 18 books, including *Extreme Killing, The Will to Kill*, and *Violence and Security on Campus*. He has published widely in both scholarly and popular outlets, and, as a member of its board of contributors, his column appears regularly in *USA Today*.

**Soenita M. Ganpat** is Lecturer and post-doctoral fellow in criminology at Nottingham Trent University, UK. She played an active role in maintaining and further expanding the Dutch Homicide Monitor to provide the most reliable overview of homicide in the Netherlands. Ganpat furthermore contributed to building the first joint database on homicide in Europe: the European Homicide Monitor. Her research focuses on homicide, violence, interaction between offenders, victims, and third parties, personal characteristics of offenders and victims, and immediate situational factors.

**Aisha K. Gill**, PhD, is Professor of Criminology at University of Roehampton, UK. Her main areas of interest and research are health and criminal justice responses to violence against black, minority, ethnic, and refugee women in the UK, Iraqi Kurdistan, and India. She has been involved in addressing the problem of violence against women and girls/“honor” crimes and forced marriage at the grassroots level for the past seventeen years and has published widely in refereed journals.

**Eric Grommon** is Assistant Professor in the School of Public and Environmental Affairs at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis. His research interests include community crime prevention, research methods, and the evaluation of criminal justice programs and policies. His work has been published in *Criminology & Public Policy, Evaluation Review, Journal of Experimental Criminology, Justice Quarterly, Police Quarterly*, and *Policing and Society*.

**Debarati Halder**, PhD, is an Advocate and legal researcher. She is the Managing Director of the Centre for Cyber Victim Counselling, India. She received her LLB from the University of Calcutta, her master’s degree in international and constitutional law from the University of Madras, and PhD degree from the National Law School of India University (NLSIU), Bengaluru, India. She has published many articles in peer-reviewed journals including the *British Journal of Criminology* and *Victims and Offenders*. 
Nathan Hall is Associate Head of Department at the Institute of Criminal Justice Studies at the University of Portsmouth, UK. He has published widely in the field of hate crime, and is a member of the Cross-Government Hate Crime Independent Advisory Group, the National Police Chief’s Council Hate Crime Working Group, and the Crown Prosecution Service’s Hate Crime Scrutiny Panel.

Koichi Hamai graduated from Waseda University, Japan. He worked in the area of offender rehabilitation in the Ministry of Justice of Japan including a secondment to UNICRI until 2003. His research focus has been in criminal justice statistics and the rehabilitation of offenders. He is the author of about ninety national and international publications. He currently holds a position as Professor of the Law School at Ryukoku University in Kyoto.

Kathleen M. Heide, PhD, is Professor of Criminology at the University of South Florida, Tampa. Professor Heide is an internationally recognized consultant and lecturer on homicide, particularly as it pertains to juvenile defendants and individuals who kill parents (parricide). She is the author or co-author of four books and approximately 100 other scholarly publications. Dr Heide, a licensed mental health professional and a court-appointed expert, has evaluated adolescents and adults charged with murder in 13 US states and Canada.

Helen Innes is a research associate at the Crime and Security Research Institute at Cardiff University specializing in the analysis of social survey and police data. Recent projects have reported on anti-social behavior (2013–2014, Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary), community support officers in Wales (2014, Welsh Government) and victims of crime (2014, OPCC South Wales). Her current research interests focus on the application of nudge theory to preventative crime behaviors.

Martin Innes is Director of the Crime and Security Research Institute, Universities’ Police Science Institute, and the Open Source Communications Analytics Research (OSCAR) Development Centre, all at Cardiff University. He is author of the books Signal Crimes (Oxford University Press, 2014), Investigating Murder (Oxford University Press, 2003), and Understanding Social Control (Open University Press, 2003).

K. Jaishankar is presently the Professor and Head of the Department of Criminology, Raksha Shakti University, Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India. He is the recipient of the National Academy of Sciences, India (NASI) – SCOPUS Young Scientist Award (2012)—Social Sciences. He is the founding president of the South Asian Society of Criminology and Victimology (SASCV) and an international ambassador of the British Society of Criminology (BSC).

Holly Johnson has been engaged in research on violence against women for 30 years, first at Statistics Canada and more recently as Professor of Criminology at the University of Ottawa. Her research interests center on primary prevention, improving societal responses to crimes of violence against women, and improving research methodologies for measuring women’s experiences of violence. She has been a visiting fellow at Griffith University and the Australian Institute of Criminology.
Helen Jones, PhD, is a research fellow at the University of South Wales, UK, and is working with Fiona Brookman on a British study exploring the role of forensic and digital technologies in homicide investigation. Prior to this, Helen worked for an English police force for over 12 years, which included roles as the protecting vulnerable people intelligence analyst and a review officer, reviewing undetected homicides, stranger rapes, missing persons, and “cold cases.”

Erin M. Kearns is a postdoctoral research fellow in the Global Studies Institute at Georgia State University. Her primary research seeks to understand the relationships among terrorism, counterterrorism, and security policy. Her publications include articles on why groups lie about terrorism, conditions that impact perceptions of counterterrorism practices, and relationships between communities and law enforcement. Her work has been funded through a number of sources, including the National Consortium for the Study of and Responses to Terrorism (START).

William R. King is a Professor and Associate Dean of Research in the College of Criminal Justice at Sam Houston State University in Texas, USA. He received his PhD in criminal justice from the University of Cincinnati in 1998. His research interests include the study of police and forensic evidence processing organizations from a theoretical perspective. He also studies the investigation of homicides and the operation and utility of ballistics imaging systems.

Joseph B. Kuhns is Professor in the Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte. He previously worked for the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services in the US Department of Justice. Joe has managed a number of research and evaluation projects that have focused on lethal violence against the police, adaption to residential burglary, reducing harms associated with prostitution, the impact of community policing, and the linkages between alcohol and drug use and violent crime.

Richard A. Leo, PhD, JD, is the Hamill Family Professor of Law and Psychology at the University of San Francisco. He is one of the leading experts in the world on police interrogation practices, psychological coercion, false confessions, and the wrongful conviction of the innocent. He has won numerous individual and career achievement awards for research excellence and distinction. His research has been cited by numerous appellate courts, including the United States Supreme Court, on multiple occasions.

Jack Levin is Professor Emeritus and Co-director of Northeastern University’s Center on Violence and Conflict. He has authored or co-authored more than 30 books, including Mass Murder: America’s Growing Menace, Extreme Killing, and Serial Killers and Sadistic Murderers as well as more than 150 articles in professional journals and major newspapers. Levin has received awards from the American Sociological Association, Eastern Sociological Society, Association of Clinical and Applied Sociology, and Society for the Study of Social Problems.

Marieke Liem is a Marie Curie fellow at the Kennedy School for Government at Harvard University and holds a position as Associate Professor at the Department of
Governance and Global Affairs at Leiden University, the Netherlands. She is chairing the European Homicide Research Group and is the coordinator of the European Homicide Monitor. Her work focuses on the causes and correlates of homicide as well as on the effects of long-term incarceration among those sentenced for homicide.

Marie Rosenkrantz Lindegaard is anthropologist, criminologist, and senior researcher at the Netherlands Institute for the Study of Crime and Law Enforcement (NSCR). Her work focuses on the social mechanisms behind violent acts and victimization, cultural explanations for crime, and micro-sociological approaches to violence. She did ethnographic fieldwork in South Africa and currently analyzes CCTV camera footage of robberies and street fights in the Netherlands and Denmark.

Alexandra Lysova, PhD, is Assistant Professor in the School of Criminology at Simon Fraser University, Canada. Her research interests focus on intimate partner violence, homicide in Russia, and international homicide statistics. She has received her Doctor of Sciences degree from the Russian Academy of Sciences and her PhD in criminology from the University of Toronto. Her recent publications appear in the Handbook of European Homicide Research, Theoretical Criminology, Aggressive Behaviour, and the Journal of Interpersonal Violence.

Edward R. Maguire is Professor in the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice and Associate Director in the Center for Violence Prevention and Community Safety at Arizona State University. His professional interests focus on policing, violence, research methods, and comparative criminology. His current research focuses on procedural justice and legitimacy in policing and corrections and on gangs and violence in the United States, the Caribbean, and Latin America.

Mike Maguire is part-time Professor of Criminology at the University of South Wales and Professor Emeritus at Cardiff University, UK. His work has covered many areas of crime and justice, including burglary, violence, criminal statistics, victims, policing, crime reduction, and offender rehabilitation. He co-edited five editions of the Oxford Handbook of Criminology. His current research concerns prisoner resettlement and the role of voluntary agencies in criminal justice. He is a long-standing member of the Correctional Services Accreditation and Advice Panel.

Carl P. Malmquist, MD, MS, is Professor of Social/Forensic Psychiatry at the University of Minnesota and board-certified in adult/child-adolescent and forensic psychiatry. Dr Malmquist teaches courses entitled “Killing” and “Criminal Psychopathology.” He also co-teaches a law school course on “Law, Society & Mental Health System.” Apart from this academic work, he consults on court cases with law firms or court-ordered cases. He has personally evaluated over 500 homicide cases.

Christopher D. Maxwell received his PhD from Rutgers in 1998 and is currently Professor in the School of Criminal Justice at Michigan State University, faculty associate at the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research, and honorary
senior research fellow at Cardiff University. Dr Maxwell formerly served as the director of the US Department of Justice's National Archive of Criminal Justice Data.

**Paul Mazerolle** is Professor and Pro Vice Chancellor at Griffith University, Australia. He also directs the Violence Research Program at Griffith and is co-editor of the *Journal of Developmental and Life-Course Criminology*. He undertakes research on the processes that shape criminal offending across the life course. Most recently, he led the Australian Homicide Project in collaboration with Li Eriksson, Richard Wortley, and Holly Johnson.

**John D. McCluskey** is Professor in the Department of Criminal Justice at the Rochester Institute of Technology. His current research projects involve evaluations of body-worn video in several departments and assessing the extent and causes of teacher victimization in San Antonio, TX.

**Sophie Pike** is a doctoral student and lecturer at the University of South Wales. Sophie's research explores changes to the investigation of homicide in England and Wales from the 1980s to the present day. During her fieldwork, she interviewed former and serving homicide detectives, analyzed homicide case files, and observed investigations and detective training. Her publications include an article for *Sage Research Methods Cases* detailing her fieldwork experiences.

**Jesenia M. Pizarro** is Associate Professor in the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Arizona State University. Professor Pizarro has worked with various police departments throughout the United States in joint efforts to curb violence. Her work focuses on the social ecology and social reaction of homicide. Her work has appeared in the *American Journal of Public Health, Justice Quarterly, Criminal Justice and Behavior*, and *Homicide Studies*.

**William Alex Pridemore** is Dean of and Professor in the School of Criminal Justice at the University at Albany, State University of New York. His primary criminological research interests include social structure and homicide, alcohol and violence, cross-national homicide rates, and rural criminology. He also carries out research on alcohol epidemiology, the Russian mortality crisis, and the sociology of health and illness.

**Charles Ransford**, MPP, is the Director of Science and Policy for Cure Violence where he leads the campaign to make violence a health issue, oversees all research, and plays a central role in the development of the organization's strategic and operational plans. At Cure Violence, he previously served as Director of Communications, responsible for leading the overall communication strategy, and as senior researcher, producing research, reports, and papers on the program.

**Amanda L. Robinson** received her PhD from Michigan State University and has worked as a criminologist at Cardiff University since 2001. She has undertaken qualitative and quantitative research in the United States and the United Kingdom focused on violence, policing, specialist courts, and multi-agency approaches.
Dr Robinson has served as an expert advisor on several UK committees that have shaped professional practice in responding to violent crime. She is currently an editor of the *British Journal of Criminology*.

**Meghan L. Rogers** is a postdoctoral research associate in the School of Criminal Justice at the University at Albany, State University of New York. Her research interests include cross-national research, violence, quantitative research methods, criminological theory, social structures and crime, and measurement of crime.

**Nikolay Shchitov**, PhD, is affiliated with the School of Criminology at Simon Fraser University, Canada. His main research interests include sociology of punishment, deviant behavior, and sexual violence. His recent publications appear in the *Handbook of European Homicide Research* and *Theoretical Criminology*.

**Gary Slapper**, LLM, LLB, PhD, was Global Professor at New York University, a legal consultant at the London barristers’ chambers, 36 Bedford Row, and director of New York University in London until his death in December 2016. He was educated at University College London and the London School of Economics. He has published 20 academic legal books, including *How the Law Works*, and written prolifically on corporate crime. The philosopher Noam Chomsky described his work on corporate manslaughter as “path-breaking.”

**Gary Slutkin**, MD, is a physician and Professor of Global Health and Epidemiology at the University of Illinois at Chicago School of Public Health and founder and CEO of Cure Violence, a scientifically demonstrated health approach to violence reduction using behavior change and epidemic control methods. In 2016, Cure Violence was ranked fourteenth in the Top 500 nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in the world by NGO Advisor and listed as the top NGO dedicated to reducing violence.

**Sarah Tucker** was formerly a research associate at the Universities’ Police Science Institute, Cardiff University, UK, having previously served as a police officer for over a decade. Sarah gained experience in policing working as both a uniformed officer and a detective. This experience is now being applied to academic interests focusing on policing research, specifically in the areas of operational policing and investigation of serious crimes.

**Sean P. Varano** is Associate Professor in the School of Justice Studies at Roger Williams University. His research interests include juvenile justice policy, violent crime reduction strategies, gang violence, police technology, and program evaluation. Dr. Varano earned his BA from the Pennsylvania State University, and his Masters and Doctorate degrees from Michigan State University.

**Charles F. Wellford** is Professor Emeritus in the Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of Maryland. He is past Chair of the Department, President of the American Society of Criminology, and Chair of the Committee on Law and Justice of the National Research Council. His current research focuses on
patterns of crime clearance and on the epidemiology of gun crime. He received his PhD from the University of Pennsylvania.

**Robin Williams** is Professor Emeritus at Durham University, Professor of Forensic Science Studies at Northumbria University, and a Visiting Professor at the Policy, Ethics and Life Sciences Research Centre at Newcastle University. He is the NUCFS (Northumbria University Centre for Forensic Science) lead researcher on EUROFORGEN, a FP7 “Network of Excellence” in forensic genetics, and is actively engaged in several empirical studies of the investigative uses of forensic science in the United Kingdom and the United States.

**Richard Wortley** has been Director of the Jill Dando Institute for Security and Crime Science at University College London (UCL) since 2010. A psychologist by discipline he began his career as a prison psychologist and he is a past national chair of the Australian College of Forensic Psychologists. His research interests center on the role that immediate environments play in criminal behavior and how such behavior may be altered through situational crime prevention.

**Joseph K. Young** is Associate Professor with appointments in the School of Public Affairs and School of International Service at American University. He is an expert on terrorism and political violence. His work has been published in journals across scholarly disciplines, including political science, criminology, economics, and international studies. His research has been funded by the National Science Foundation and the National Consortium for the Study of and Responses to Terrorism (START).
Introduction

Homicide in Global Perspective

Fiona Brookman, Edward R. Maguire, and Mike Maguire

Homicide—the killing of one human being by another—captures the public imagination like little else. Homicide ignites widespread curiosity and dominates popular novels, television shows, and movies. It makes headlines and takes over the evening news. People are simultaneously disturbed and fascinated by the idea that some human beings are willing and capable to taking the lives of others, sometimes in a distant or impersonal manner and other times in an up-close and personal manner. The impacts of homicide are far reaching. As well as the loss of a life and the obviously devastating consequences for the victim’s family, the ripples spread throughout the local community and beyond.

A strong yearning to understand the nature and causes of homicide, and to find ways of preventing it, has led to a considerable body of research and scholarship on the topic. Unfortunately, the vast majority of such evidence comes from just a handful of developed nations. Ironically, in the nations with the highest homicide rates in the world, the topic is often relatively unstudied. The Handbook of Homicide is the first genuinely international sourcebook of information and scholarship on the nature, causes, and patterns of homicide, as well as policies and practices for investigating and preventing it. The volume was carefully prepared with an international readership in mind. The contributors come from all over the globe and bring with them a variety of unique experiences and vantage points through which to think about homicide.

In addition to its international focus, the Handbook aims to capture the significant range and complexity of homicide in its many different forms. The kinds of cases featured on the evening news and in popular “whodunits” provide a very narrow perspective on homicide and its causes. Homicide is a multifaceted phenomenon. Moreover, certain aspects of this crime have been widely studied while little is known about others. The work included in the Handbook was purposely selected to illustrate the many complexities of homicide, including types of cases and regions of the world that are often overlooked.
Introduction

The Handbook was compiled at a time when homicide rates in many regions of the world had been declining, and scholars continue to debate why this is the case. In the United States, for instance, homicide rates in 2014 (the latest full year available) were the lowest they had been in more than fifty years. By contrast, particularly in certain parts of the developing world, some nations continue to experience epidemic levels of violence, including homicide, associated with street gangs, illegal guns, and the distribution of illegal drugs.

Outline of the Handbook

We cannot hope to summarize every chapter of such a lengthy volume in a short introduction. Our aim here is simply to provide an overview of the main themes and arguments to be found in each of the five parts into which it is divided. In doing so, we outline the contents of a number of individual chapters, principally as illustrative examples of common themes; there is of course no suggestion that those we specifically discuss are any more important than others we do not.

Part I, Homicide in Context, provides some broad theoretical and research-based insights into how we may begin to explain homicide, account for its changing patterns and trends, and assess social and legal responses. In the first chapter, Innes and co-authors outline the main theoretical frameworks that social scientists have used to understand homicide and its consequences. While acknowledging the value of both macro and micro frameworks, they argue that scholars would benefit from a greater focus on the “momentary”—the “specific spatial-temporal intersections when significant events take place”—which has been relatively neglected.

Chapters 2 and 3 look at patterns and trends. Rogers and Pridemore (Chapter 2) outline key features of global homicide victimization rates, introducing a theme that reappears many times in this volume: the huge variations in crime rates—and in the characteristics of victims and perpetrators—that are found across the globe and over time. Blumstein (Chapter 3) identifies some interesting patterns in homicide rates in the United States associated with the rapid increase that occurred between 1985 and 1993 and subsequent substantial falls. He shows that the rise was largely accounted for by increases in homicides by people under 20. Indeed, he goes as far as to say that “by 1993 murder had become almost exclusively a crime of the young,” identifying the key factors as the growth of lucrative and highly competitive crack cocaine markets combined with the recruitment of younger, more reckless dealers to replace older offenders removed from the scene through the mass incarceration resulting from the “war on drugs.” His analysis underlines important general messages for understanding crime patterns, particularly around the role of markets and the unintended consequences of social policies. Finally, Cooney (Chapter 4) draws attention to the fact that, like the crime itself, social and legal responses to homicide (and to individual kinds of homicide) vary widely across space and time. He puts forward a theoretical framework, based on “pure sociology,” for beginning to understand and explain this variation.
Part II, Understanding Different Forms of Homicide, features 12 chapters that explore some of the most important types of homicide. These include gang homicides, drug-related homicides, sexual homicides, the killing of women, honor killings, hate killings, the killing of children by parents, the killing of parents by children, corporate homicide, terrorism, multiple homicide (including mass, spree, and serial killing), and genocide and state-sponsored killings. A number of common themes emerge from these chapters. Several authors note that the precise causes of particular forms of homicide are still unclear. For example, Varano and Kuhns (Chapter 6) acknowledge that the causal linkages between drugs and homicide are not fully understood. Similarly Pizarro (Chapter 5) observes that it is still unclear how the various individual, situational, and structural factors interact to culminate in gang homicide. Moreover, even within particular subcategories of homicide there is significant variation in the circumstances and causes of these events. For example, as Malmquist (Chapter 11) recognizes, some cases of infanticide are heavily driven by the psychopathology of the offender, while others have a clearer socioeconomic basis. It is for such reasons that some of our contributors have highlighted the importance of disaggregating homicide into ever more refined categories. For example, Dobash and Dobash (Chapter 8) suggest that within the category of femicide, a further disaggregation into three main types is required: the murder of intimate partners, sexual murders, and the murder of older women. Similar arguments are put forward by Young and Kearns (Chapter 14) with respect to terrorism and by Heide (Chapter 12) about parricide. Heide adds that the gathering of more detailed insights from working with different kinds of parricide offenders may provide a blueprint for preventing these events.

Aydın-Aitchison (Chapter 16) and Slapper (Chapter 13) discuss some of the difficulties in prosecuting the perpetrators of genocide and corporate homicide respectively, noting that this is often due to a lack of political will or institutionalized coercive power to back up the law. It is notable that disproportionately little attention is given to these important forms of homicide. This contrasts, most notably, with the excessive and undue attention given to serial and mass murder (see Chapter 15).

Finally several contributors to this part of the Handbook (and in fact other parts of the Handbook too) set out their ideas for further research. These include more cross-national and comparative studies, more mixed-method approaches to gathering data and evidence, and improvements in the quality of and access to official homicide data.

Overall, the chapters in this section show that homicide is a complex and heterogeneous phenomenon driven by a wide variety of motivations, and that the forces or conditions that foster it operate at many levels including the individual, situational, community, societal, and even global. This point is perhaps made most graphically in Chapter 10 where Hall sets out some of the many causal explanations that have been put forward for “hate homicide.” These include: reactions to social strain and relative deprivation, expressions of relative power and dominance, thrill, retaliation, territoriality, xenophobia, fundamentalism, anger, fear, inadequate self-control, mental disorder, social learning, social identity, in-group loyalty, cultural norms, conformity, and persuasion.
Part III, Homicide around the Globe: International Perspectives, contains 12 chapters that chronicle the nature and predominant causes of homicide in different parts of the world. All but one of the world's continents are represented in this section (Antarctica is the exception). Eight of the chapters focus on individual nations, namely Britain, Canada, the United States, Japan, Russia, China, India, and South Africa. The remaining four chapters cover either a whole continent or regions within particular continents. The chapters in this section illustrate the wide variation in the nature and extent of the homicide problem across the globe, from countries with very low homicide rates like Japan, Australia, Britain, and Canada, to those whose rates reach epidemic proportions—notably Russia, South Africa, and many nations in Latin America. In fact, nearly half of all homicides take place in countries with only 10 percent of the planet’s population (UNODC 2014: 11).

Just as homicide is unevenly distributed across the globe, it is also unequally distributed among citizens within particular countries. Hence, one of the key messages to emerge from the chapters in this part of the Handbook is the extent to which the risk of falling victim to homicide varies persistently along sociodemographic lines, most notably gender, race, and age. For example, the homicide rate for Aboriginal Canadians is almost seven times higher than it is for non-Aboriginal peoples (Chapter 20). Similar disturbing disparities are found in the United States between black and white citizens (see Chapter 21) and between indigenous populations of Australia (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders) and New Zealand (Maori) as compared to Caucasians/Europeans (see Chapter 23). In terms of age, the youthfulness of homicide victims and offenders is a pattern replicated across most parts of the world, yet there are some interesting exceptions. For example, in Japan, older people (aged 40 or over) are now committing a much larger share of homicides than was previously the case. Perhaps most unusually in comparison with other countries, people aged 60 or over commit 22 percent of all homicides. This is partly a consequence of a dramatic (and as yet unexplained) decline in homicide among young Japanese males since the 1970s (see Chapter 22).

Part IV, Investigating Homicide, contains five chapters that examine some of the approaches used by police agencies and forensic science/crime laboratories to investigate homicide cases. The chapters in this section examine the role of technology in homicide investigations, the factors that influence investigative success, the use of DNA as an investigative tool, the investigation of “cold case” homicides, and factors that contribute to investigative errors and miscarriages of justice. While homicide investigation is a common theme in popular television shows and movies, much of what is portrayed in the popular media is misleading. These pervasive depictions can have important impacts in the real world where justice is at stake. For example, the notion that DNA can and should solve crime has led to the so-called “CSI effect,” whereby the public and jurors expect DNA evidence to be a pivotal part of evidence in homicide cases and may be hesitant to convict in its absence.

Importantly, too, the five chapters in this section provide empirically informed discussion of homicide investigation as it is actually practiced. A number of common themes emerge, including the rhetoric and reality of the value and impact of science
and technology, the (sometimes forgotten) role of human factors in such investigations, and, perhaps most importantly, the dearth of empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of science and technology in homicide investigations. For example, in Chapter 29, Brady and King explore the use of various technologies in homicide investigations (including DNA and ballistic databases, cell tower and location data, and social networking sites) and discover a lack of clear evidence available on the impact of most technologies on homicide investigations. Nevertheless, they demonstrate that training in the use of technology and legislation surrounding its use often lag behind advances in (and use of) such technologies, and that this can pose challenges to individual civil liberties and the legitimacy of policing. They also suggest that in order to be effective, technology must be part of a three-pronged process that also includes people and processes. The importance of the human factor in the investigative process is a theme elaborated upon by Alexander and Wellford (Chapter 30) in their consideration of the factors that contribute to homicide cases being solved. It is once again striking that the evidence base for understanding homicide closure is limited. In Chapter 31, Williams examines the 30 year history of developments in forensic DNA analysis as well as the available evidence of its impacts in homicide investigations. Once again, a stark conclusion from this chapter is the need for more intensive and detailed research in order to establish the effectiveness of DNA evidence within homicide investigation. In Chapter 32, Allsop discusses the importance of advances in forensic techniques and technologies in enabling cold case homicides to be progressed. She considers the cost implications of such investigations during times of austerity and highlights how cold case homicides are not easily detected, despite how they are portrayed in the media and in fictional accounts. Bringing this section to a close, Davis and Leo (Chapter 33) examine wrongful convictions and demonstrate how they often flow from a cascade of investigative errors. They discuss, among other things, the role of heuristics, bias, and stereotyping in the misidentification of homicide suspects; coercion in suspect interrogations; and forensic science errors. Moreover, they conclude that little has been done (in the United States) to address the various problems that can lead to miscarriages of justice. Clearly this is not an issue unique to the United States and there is a long way to go in terms of improving criminal justice systems around the world, protecting suspects’ rights and, ultimately, ensuring that innocent people are not convicted.

Part V, Reducing and Preventing Homicide, features five chapters that cover state-of-the-art research on what can be done to reduce and prevent homicide. The chapters in this section cover public health approaches to homicide prevention, the use of network theory and social network analysis to intervene in violent social networks, the use of focused deterrence strategies for reducing urban homicides, the role of gun-related initiatives in reducing homicides, and a final chapter that provides an overview of the available research evidence on how to prevent homicides. Taken together, these chapters illustrate a number of novel and evidence-informed strategies and practices that can be adopted by jurisdictions seeking to lower their homicide rates. These chapters also demonstrate where there remain significant gaps in our knowledge about how to reduce and prevent homicide.
In Chapter 34, Ransford and Slutkin suggest that violence should be viewed as a health issue and that public health methods should be used to prevent or “interrupt” violence. A key aspect of a public health approach to violence is the use of data to improve understanding about the nature of the problem. Data also play a central role in Chapter 35 in which Fox and Allen discuss the role of social network analysis in “identifying and intervening in” networks of people with a heightened risk of either committing murder or being murdered. Social network analysis is being used not only to improve scholarly knowledge about violence, but also in a practical sense to help develop more targeted interventions. In Chapter 36, Braga discusses a specific type of targeted intervention called focused deterrence which is often used to address gang homicides (though it can also be adapted for use with other types of violence). There is strong scientific evidence to support the conclusion that focused deterrence reduces homicide and saves lives. Other violence reduction initiatives focus on the role of guns. In Chapter 37, Grommon, McCluskey, and Bynum discuss a gun violence reduction initiative that was implemented in Detroit. Making sense of the many approaches to reducing violence can be very challenging, particularly when considering the wide variability in both the availability and quality of evidence on how to prevent homicide.

In conclusion, we hope that this Handbook is not only interesting and informative for the general reader, but provides a valuable resource for scholars, researchers, and students with an interest in homicide and for policymakers and practitioners involved in responding to it. We also hope that it will stimulate others to undertake further research. Finally, we would like to take this opportunity to thank each of the contributors to this volume. We are delighted to have been able to include such an impressive range of experts from across the world and are hugely grateful to them for sharing their unique research and insights with us all.

Reference


Note of Condolence

The editors are sad to report that Professor Slapper passed away in December 2016. We extend our sincere condolences to his family.
Part I

Homicide in Context
Introduction

“Who shall heal murder? What is done, is done.”

Lord Byron, “Cain: A Mystery” (1826: 433)

Our culture is replete with representations of murder as the prototypical crime. For as captured in the above quotation, there is an intrinsic, irrevocable, and irreversible sense of harm involved in the act of one person deliberately killing another. Stories of the causes and consequences of murder provide the basic ingredients for the kind of morality tales that anthropologists suggest are necessary conditions for the production of a sense of collective identity and belonging. Following Mary Douglas (1966), such narratives function as social devices through which “the pure” and “dangerous” are delineated, providing resources for many of the stories that we tell ourselves about ourselves in the ordering of social reality (Geertz 1973).

In contra-distinction to these cultural representations of criminal homicide, social research has consistently evidenced that the modal homicide is not the “cold-blooded” calculated act so beloved of fiction writers, but rather a “hot blooded” conflict most often involving protagonists well known to each other (e.g., Polk 1994; Collins 2008). In this sense, such incidents are the epitome of C. Wright-Mills’s (1959) private troubles that travel to become public issues.

Our aim in this chapter is to discuss how social and criminological theory can help to illuminate and interpret such issues, explaining both how and why criminal homicides happen and the social implications that flow from these patterns.
To frame and organize this discussion, we draw a distinction between theoretical accounts that focus upon the causes of criminal homicides and those that attend more to the consequences of such actions. Cutting across this meta-distinction we argue that broadly speaking there are three principal theoretical frames applicable to such an endeavor: the macro, the micro, and the momentary.

The distinction between macro- and micro-theoretical approaches is well rehearsed across the social sciences (Giddens 1984). The former focus upon how structural forces shape and influence patterns of human behavior and action. Micro-accounts privilege and emphasize the ability of individuals and groups to exercise agency, power, and a degree of self-determination. One of the most influential movements in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century social theory was the derivation of positions that, in different ways, sought to bridge macro and microexplanations (Parker 2000; Mouzelis 2008). Following this lead, in this chapter we seek to advance the view that attending to key “moments” in a case of criminal homicide can shed unique insights that are unobtainable when the issues are perceived from either a “pure” macro or micro vantage point. The concept of the “moment” seeks to recognize that there are specific intersecting points in space and time where especially influential and consequential processes occur to construct and define the situation as homicide. Such processes directly configure how the events and situations associated with a specific case come to be constructed and reconstructed through sequences of differently oriented actions and reactions. Attending to these moments, where structure and agency intersect in interesting ways, can be extremely useful in distilling forms of cause and consequence that are of interest to the student of society.

Table 1.1 summarizes how we adopt these frames to organize our discussion of social theory and criminal homicide, enabling a structured analysis of a large amount of potentially relevant material according to whether their primary accent is upon accounting for the causes or consequences of murder. The cells in the table list the “headline” themes and issues to be addressed by the sections of this chapter.

Before expanding upon these issues, the chapter commences with a brief commentary on the status of theory in the social sciences. This is to recognize a range of different theoretical standpoints that can be, and have been, used to think about murder and criminal homicide. These are founded upon different epistemological foundations and values, and their very different disciplinary backgrounds need to be taken into account. The discussion then progresses on to consider several influential macrostructural positions on criminal homicide before attention then switches to the more “high resolution” focus of microsocial theories. The penultimate section turns to consider what unique insights can be obtained by attending to key moments.

**Thinking about Theory**

In seeking to account for how people think about and understand criminal homicide as a social problem, there is a critical point of separation in the literature between the more descriptive and more explanatory approaches. There are many