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Maria Ioannou, Laura Hammond,

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## The changing face of homicide research: the shift in empirical focus and emerging research trends

Maria Ioannou and Laura Hammond

Dr Maria Ioannou and  
Dr Laura Hammond are  
Senior Lecturers, both at the  
International Research Centre  
for Investigative Psychology  
(IRCIP), University of  
Huddersfield, Huddersfield, UK.

### Abstract

**Purpose** – *Homicidal behaviour is influenced by a complex interaction of behavioural, situational and environmental factors that raise many challenging psychological questions. A large and continually growing body of research has explored the crime of homicide, its epidemiology, victims and perpetrators. The area is developing rapidly, opening up new avenues of study. The paper aims to discuss these issues.*

**Design/methodology/approach** – *This special issue of the Journal of Criminal Psychology brings together an exciting array of papers on homicidal behaviour, examining a wide range of issues including juvenile homicide perpetrators, school shootings, child homicide, homicide-suicide and differences in offence behaviours and victim characteristics between hard-to-solve one-off homicides and serial homicides.*

**Findings** – *The range of papers included in this special edition cover a wide range of aspects of homicidal behaviour, reflecting the importance of – and the need for – applied research moving away from examining general homicide to specialised research focusing on subtypes of homicide and subgroups of homicide offenders. A research agenda is proposed.*

**Originality/value** – *This editorial gives an introduction to the themes explored in this special issue and provides an overview of the selected papers.*

**Keywords** *Homicide, Violence, Homicidal behaviour, Homicide research, Murder*

**Paper type** *Research paper*

### Introduction

Homicide, considered to be the most serious of all crimes, can be lawful or unlawful and it covers the offences of murder, manslaughter and infanticide (Office for National Statistics, 2014). Criminal or unlawful homicide is defined as causing death to an individual without legal justification, whereas lawful homicide or state-sanctioned homicide is justified legally under particular circumstances (e.g. capital punishment, a soldier killing the enemy in combat and so on). Murder is usually an intentional crime while manslaughter is the killing of a human being in a manner considered by law as less culpable than murder. This category can range from accidental death to events very similar to murder. Manslaughter is further broken down into voluntary (intent to kill usually when there is provocation or evidence of mental illness) and involuntary (no intent to kill usually involving accidents). The focus of this special issue is on unlawful or criminal homicide.

Homicide rates vary greatly around the globe. While there have been attempts to collate international homicide statistics there are major issues surrounding the comparability of international homicide data. Global homicide levels are very difficult to estimate for many reasons, such as those outlined by Brookman (2005). These include: very limited availability of reliable measures in large

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parts of the world (e.g. Africa); legal systems and legal classifications vary; differing points in criminal justice systems at which homicides are recorded, for example when the offence is discovered or following further investigation or court outcome; figures are for completed homicides but, in some countries, the police register any death that cannot immediately be attributed to other causes as homicide (Office for National Statistics, 2014); changes in country borders; statistics are collected in different ways; a lack of clarity in definitions and varying definitions between countries (Koeppel *et al.*, 2015). Caution should be therefore exercised in comparing homicide rates across countries.

Eurostat's most recently published figures compare homicide rates averaged over the years 2008-2010. The Eurostat published homicide rate for England and Wales is 11.7 per million population. The highest rates in Europe are for Lithuania (77 per million population), Estonia (55.7 per million population), Albania (43.8 per million population), Turkey (36.4 per million population) while the lowest rates are found in Austria (5.8 per million population), Slovenia (5.6 per million population) and Iceland (3.1 per million population).

## The study of homicide

Homicide research has a long history dominated mainly by academics and researchers from the USA and more recently from Europe, and empirical research into the phenomenon is increasing. In the last decade, the journal *Homicide Studies* has published over 220 articles on the topic of homicide (Brookman, 2015).

Traditionally research has been descriptive and epidemiological, focusing on the aetiology of homicides, their victims and perpetrators. Testing various theoretical hypotheses has been in the centre of research (i.e. social control, anomie theory, learning theory and so on), while some researchers have introduced new concepts (cognitive dissonance, legitimacy, victim precipitation) (Kivivuori *et al.*, 2012). Various academics have studied homicide subtypes according to the relationship between the victim, with the majority of the research focusing on intimate partner homicides, perpetrator and homicide subtypes according to motive (Decker, 1996), behavioural classification systems (Salfati and Canter, 1999; Salfati, 2000; Santtila *et al.*, 2001), offence and offender typologies (Horning *et al.*, 2015) and various individual factors (c.f. Gerard *et al.*, 2014), including socio-demographic characteristics, family background, social integration, intellectual capability, personality disorders (Kivivuori *et al.*, 2014).

There are numerous challenges that researchers face when examining the crime of homicide, which Brookman (2015) summarises in her discussion of the benefits, challenges, pitfalls and promises of homicide research. As she notes; it is difficult to obtain large and reliable samples of data on homicide offences, mainly because of the sensitive nature of such data and the difficulties associated with obtaining access to it in the closed world of crime investigation. Further, it is immensely difficult to get access to killers, to homicide detectives or to prosecutors, in order to obtain first-hand data on offence details and case attributes. Moreover, in contrast to other crimes such as domestic violence or rape, there are no living victims from which to obtain information (Brookman, 2015). The argument could be made that attempted homicide victims could provide some insights in this respect; however, for a number of reasons these offences are not necessarily directly comparable with actual homicides. Finally, it is very difficult to obtain detailed and reliable information on the backgrounds and histories of homicide perpetrators, and even more so the victims of homicide (Gerard *et al.*, 2014). For such information, research must invariably rely on third-party accounts, which may be subjective and error prone.

As such, then, researching homicide presents unique problems and challenges (Brookman, 2015), and because of this limits exist in our understanding of the true nature of homicide and a number of unanswered questions about the causes of this extreme form of violence remain. It is some of these that the works presented in the current volume seek to address.

## Changing patterns and trends in homicide research

More recently, homicide research has seen a shift in the focus of studies, and in the aims and objectives that work is setting out to achieve. First, there has been a move away from the classic, traditional, descriptive types of homicide study, towards more inferential analyses and

an increase in multivariate considerations of homicide data (Kivovuori *et al.*, 2012). Alongside this, alternative methods have been embraced, with recent years having witnessed an ascendance of qualitative forms of analyses and mixed methods approaches (Kivovuori *et al.*, 2014). Brookman (2015) discusses in detail the potential values of utilising qualitative research methods for studying homicide, highlighting the many ways in which such approaches circumvent traditional difficulties in studying homicide (Brookman, 2015). In the present volume, a paper presented by Joakim Sturup and Shilan Caman seeks to harness the benefits of a mixed methods approach in examining cases of homicide followed by suicide. In addition, both the studies of Ioannou *et al.* (2015) and Hammond and Ioannou (2015) utilise qualitative information and case study materials in order to alleviate problems associated with quantitative analyses and enable larger scale considerations of school shootings and juvenile-perpetrated homicide, respectively.

Further, research has begun to explore new ways of classifying offences and offenders (e.g. Horning *et al.*, 2015), addressing the issue of whether aggregate analyses of large data sets are suitable for addressing the subtle distinctions between different types or subsets of homicide offences. One notable consequence of this has been a shift from nomothetic analyses towards more individually focused, ideographic approaches to studying homicide. Koeppel *et al.* (2015), in their extensive review of the extant homicide literature, draw attention to the problem of the previous lack of disaggregated studies of homicide, discussing the notable impacts that this was having on the development of the field more generally. Recent research has therefore begun to explore in more detail variations between different homicide sub-groups or sub-sets (cf. Liem and Pridemore, 2012). This, as Kivovuori *et al.* (2014) discuss, is a generally positive development, for it allows for more detailed analysis of the subtleties of the crime of homicide. In fact, they propose that the combination of a range of nomothetic and ideographic approaches, which supplement and nourish one another, is what is needed to take homicide research to the next stage in its evolutionary lifespan. It is this combined approach that many of the studies presented in the present volume take.

Finally, there has been a notable movement in the theoretical argumentation that homicide studies are now making. Those theories that were given much weight previously, such as modernisation/social disorganisation perspectives, have seemingly been replaced by a greater emphasis on, for example; aspects of economic inequality, stress, deprivation or poverty (Koeppel *et al.*, 2015). Newer theoretical frameworks that have emerged in the past few years also include social support and sex ratio theories, as well as perspectives related to gun possession and availability, and alcohol sales, use and consumption (Koeppel *et al.*, 2015). Underlying this shift is the embracement of macro-social approaches to understanding homicide, rather than a reliance on simplistic social-psychological explanations. It is also becoming more common to draw from or combine multiple theoretical approaches in explicating homicide (Kivovuori *et al.*, 2014).

### **A focus on specific types/sub-types of homicide**

One of the biggest shifts in homicide research over recent years has been a move towards more focused empirical evaluations of different types and sub-types of homicide. Increased realisation of the essential fact that the crime of homicide can take many forms, each of which is likely to be subject to different underlying processes and influences and will have different characteristics and attributes, has led to greater focus on sub-groups of homicide offences and/or offenders. As Kivovuori *et al.* (2014) discuss, specialized homicide research is increasing at an exponential rate, and is gaining favour relative to more general studies of homicide.

What became evident in the preparation of this special issue was an increased focus on the following.

#### **1. Different types of homicide offence**

For example, in the present volume Maria Ioannou, Laura Hammond and Olivia Simpson examine “rampage” school shootings, a relatively recent phenomenon that is seemingly increasing in prevalence. Also in the present volume, Pakkanen, Zappalà, Bosco, Berti and Santtila evaluate the core attributes of one-off, hard-to-solve homicides and homicides committed as part of

a series, and how the two differ in meaningful ways that offer up different types of practical opportunity. There are even studies emerging which examine sub-types within types; Sturup and Caman (2015), for example, evaluate evidence for the existence of different sub-types of homicide-suicide event.

## **2. Different types of homicide victim**

Research has more recently begun to pay more empirical attention to the targets of homicide, and how different types of offence manifest in relation to these. For example; a recent issue of the journal *Homicide Studies* focused on elderly homicides. Elsewhere, research has looked at types of victim such as prostitutes (Youngs and Ioannou, 2013). In the present volume, Jason Roach and Robin Bryant examine risk factors associated with children being killed.

## **3. Different types of homicide perpetrator**

Some recent works have also focused on specific perpetrator sub-groups, such as youth homicide perpetrators (Gerard *et al.*, 2014) and sexual homicide perpetrators (Chan *et al.*, 2013). In the present volume, Laura Hammond and Maria Ioannou present a novel study examining the differences between child and adolescent homicide perpetrators.

## **A move towards a more holistic understanding of the crime of homicide**

To sum up the above, then; what we are seeing in homicide research is a move towards a more holistic understanding of the crime of homicide, with studies – between them – considering all aspects of the offence as a whole, in its entirety. There appears to be increased recognition of the fact that by examining differences between different types of homicide event it is possible to unravel the complexities and subtleties of the crime of homicide to a far greater extent (see, e.g. the recent “Global Study on Homicide” published by the UNDOC).

In addition and alongside to this increased recognition of the considerable variety of forms of offence that the term “homicide” encompasses is a growing awareness of the need to look at homicide, including how and why it happens and how it is dealt with, as an overall process; examining not just the nature and characteristics of the crime itself, but also how it is investigated, prosecuted and managed, along with associated assessment, intervention and treatment strategies at each stage of the criminal justice process. The study by presented by Tom Pakkanen, Angelo Zappalà, Dario Bosco, Andrea Berti and Pekka Santtila in the present volume, for example, explores what can be inferred from the way in which a homicide is committed and how this can be used in guiding investigations. More specifically, Pakkanen *et al.* (2015) show that you can predict with a reasonable degree of accuracy whether an offence is likely to be part of a series on the basis of offence behaviours and victim characteristics; a finding which has notable implications for crime linking in investigations and for prosecutorial purposes. Roach and Bryant (2015) identify a range of risk profiles both for the perpetration of child homicide and for victimisation, which offer a range of important implications for the investigation and management of this particular sub-set of homicide. Ioannou *et al.* (2015) identify a range of risk factors associated with different types of school shooting incident. Their findings offer a means of identifying and targeting those at high risk of becoming a school shooter, which has notable implications for various practitioner groups. By examining the full range of issues relating to the crime of homicide in such a way, these works take notable steps in enhancing our overall understanding of the offence.

## **The future: a research agenda**

There is no simple answer as to why one human being kills another. However, whilst the human experience is inextricably linked with violence, with it being very difficult to disentangle the relationship(s) between the two, that does not mean that we should not try to prevent homicide or reduce it. While, as mentioned earlier, the history of homicide research is long there are still many unanswered questions and directions that future research should take. Although homicide comprises of different types, research has failed to account for these variations. While murder and

manslaughter are treated differently within the legal system and societies in general this has been ignored in much research. Research therefore should focus on whether we can differentiate both in terms of offence and offender characteristics for different classes of homicide such as murder, manslaughter, infanticide and even as diverse as euthanasia and execution.

Furthermore, academics, researchers and practitioners have long speculated whether it is possible to predict in advance who will commit lethal violence or hypothesise about factors that may differentiate those who murder from those who do not, as while we all have the potential for violence not all of us act on these impulses. Despite the recognition of the significance of developmental predictors of violent behaviour, a small body of research has examined the predictors or predictive causal factors of homicidal behaviour. Future research should expand in this area including control groups and longitudinal studies. At present it is unknown whether factors that define homicide offenders would apply to other groups who either do not commit crime or commit other types of crimes or crime in general. In addition, not much is known about individuals who while at a younger age exhibited factors associated with homicide offenders did not subsequently commit murder. Most research has relied on retrospective information about putative causes of homicide that is generally derived from official court reports or third-party reports that may provide incomplete or inaccurate archival information about possible risk factors. Data reported by family members or friends may be biased and inaccurate or incomplete due to mistaken recall of events. Future studies should therefore need to move away from being descriptive to being predictive, incorporating clinical, behavioural and environmental predictors, control groups and study the developmental antecedents of violence in general and homicide specifically longitudinally (Farrington *et al.*, 2012).

Lastly, while violence committed by individuals with mental disorders has increasingly called the attention of academics, researchers, clinicians, law enforcement officials and the general public, and various studies have shown an association between mental disorders and violent behaviour it is difficult to interpret the data related to the risk of violent behaviour among individuals with mental disorders. Traditionally studies has focused on "major mental disorders" such as schizophrenia, major depressive disorder, bipolar disorder and have examined homicide rates among mentally disordered people and the level of mental disorder among homicide offenders. Most studies, however, are not able to reliably determine that the mental disorder is a pre-existing factor that is directly responsible for homicide. Future research should therefore examine this link especially in relationship to specific groups of patients with mental disorders and different types of mental disorders, especially as most studies has focused on Axis I disorders (as appeared in the previous edition of the *DSM-IV*). In addition, studies need to incorporate and take into account other risk factors for violence and homicide. Many individuals present a mental disorder in combination with antisocial personality disorder and substance abuse and this should be taken into account when examining the relationship. Mentally disordered individuals who are violent are not a homogenous group, and their violence reflects various biologic, psychodynamic and social factors that future research should take into account. While most researchers and clinicians agree that a combination of factors plays a role in violence and homicidal behaviour, the importance of individual factors has not been studied in any detail.

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## Corresponding author

Dr Maria Ioannou can be contacted at: m.ioannou@hud.ac.uk

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