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978-0-521-54058-2 - Rethinking Homicide: Exploring the Structure and Process
Underlying Deadly Situations

Terance D. Miethe, Wendy C. Regoeczi and Kriss A. Drass

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Rethinking Homicide

Using multiple data sources and methods, this book involves a micro-historical analysis of the nature of change and stability in homicide situations over time. It focuses on the homicide situation as the unit of analysis, and explores similarities and differences in the context of homicide for different social groups. For example, using Qualitative Comparative Analysis, we investigate whether various social groups (e.g., men vs. women, teenagers vs. adults, strangers vs. intimates, Blacks vs. Whites) kill under qualitatively different circumstances and, if so, what are the characteristics of these unique profiles. The analysis of over 400,000 U.S. homicides is supplemented with a qualitative analysis of narrative accounts of homicide events to more fully investigate the structure and process underlying these lethal situations. Our findings of unique and common homicide situations across different time periods and social groups are then discussed in terms of their implications for criminological theory and public policy.

Terance D. Miethe is currently Professor of Criminal Justice at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. He is the author and coauthor of several books, including *Crime and its Social Context*, *Whistleblowing at Work: Tough Choices in Exposing Fraud, Waste, and Abuse on the Job*, *The Mismeasure of Crime*, and *Crime Profiles*.

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with assistance from

Kriss A. Drass



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**This book is dedicated to Kriss A. Drass, a friend and collaborator,
whose untimely death has left a major void in our personal and
professional lives.**

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Preface

We are exposed to a phenomenal amount of information about homicide in everyday life. It is the focus of local and national news, a primary theme in TV dramas and motion pictures, and the prime material in “true crime” magazines and the widely popular murder mystery. Homicide sells in most Western countries because of its novelty and seriousness. Although statistically the least frequently committed major crime, the public is often totally enthralled and mesmerized by homicide. This fascination with homicide is understandable given that it offends the basic values we place on human life and vulgarizes the presumed civility and moral supremacy of modern culture.

Criminologists in the social sciences are not immune to these forces. We are equally captivated and appalled by lethal violence, devoting far more attention to homicide than any other criminal act. The scientific literature on homicide is absolutely enormous. Lethal violence is an omnipresent topic in major criminological journals. Most critical tests of existing theories of crime causation and its distribution have focused on lethal violence because it is widely held that official counts of homicide are more reliable and valid than for any other major crime category. Furthermore, public policies on crime prevention and research on risk factors are disproportionately directed toward violence.

Using this vast scientific literature on lethal violence as the background, our goal in this book is to encourage “rethinking” about homicide as it relates to how we describe, explain, and study it. Our rethinking of homicide has led us to depart from existing traditions in the following three ways. First, we focus on the homicide *situation* as the unit of analysis, exploring the structure and process underlying these deadly encounters. Second, homicide situations are defined by the nexus of offender, victim, and offense elements in time and space. It is the combination of these elements, not

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their operation in isolation, that provides the context for lethal violence. Third, we apply a relatively new comparative method for the study of combinatorial or conjunctive events like homicides. This comparative method (called Qualitative Comparative Analysis) provides a systematic means of identifying the most prevalent situational contexts for homicide and the distinct combinations of attributes that underlie them. It also allows us to address the question of whether the nature of homicide situations is qualitatively unique for different social groups.

The specific focus of this study involves a microhistorical analysis of U.S. homicides over the last three decades. Both national homicide data and narrative reports for select cities are analyzed to examine the following substantive questions:

- What are the major situational contexts for U.S. homicides in the last three decades? Have homicide situations become more or less diverse over time? What dominant offender, victim, and offense characteristics are found among the most prevalent homicide situations in each decade?
- Has the structure of homicide situations (i.e., combinations of offender, victim, and offense attributes) changed over the last three decades? What are the particular combinations of characteristics that underlie emergent forms of homicide in the 1990s, historically stable contexts, and those that have become relatively extinct over time?
- What is the nature of subgroup variation in homicide situations? Are the situational contexts for homicide unique or similar for each of the following subgroups: (a) male vs. female offenders, (b) teenage vs. adult offenders, (c) White vs. Black vs. Hispanic offenders, (d) homicides within instrumental vs. expressive motives, and (e) killings involving strangers vs. acquaintances vs. family/intimate partners? Have the structural profiles of homicide situations for each group changed or remained stable over time?
- Are major themes underlying homicide (e.g., character contests, status threats, masculine competitiveness, sexual possessiveness) diffuse across various situational contexts or are they more restricted to particular social groups and context-specific?

Our findings about the nature of homicide situations challenge many of the basic assumptions in previous work. For example, we discover that homicide situations are representative of both simple and complex crime events, subgroups kill in both unique and common situational contexts, and the structures of homicide situations exhibit both change and stability over time. Our primary conclusion is that a more complete understanding of homicide involves conjunctive thinking and attention to the interaction between offenders and victims within particular situational contexts. We also

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challenge public policy analysts and commentators to redirect their attention to the dominant situational contexts of homicide rather than focusing on the exceptional case. These dominant situations involve lethal disputes with guns that reflect the interplay of gender, race, class, and urban locations. It is hoped that the current research will provide an empirical and conceptual framework for future study of the process and structure underlying interpersonal violence.

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Acknowledgments

This book is a collaborative project that has benefitted from the efforts of many people. The previous insights of several researchers have provided the theoretical and conceptual framework for our study of homicide situations. Others have given us the general moral and intellectual support that provides a context for thinking about new ideas and maintaining a sense of curiosity about social issues.

Our interest in studying homicide situations as the unit of analysis has been motivated by the previous work of Gary LaFree and Chris Birkbeck on the “neglected situation” in criminological research. Jim Short has long recognized the importance of levels of explanation, and his seminal research on group processes and gang delinquency has provided a blueprint for our microsocial study of crime. Our conceptualization of homicide situations is similar to the “crime event” perspective developed by Bob Meier, Les Kennedy, and Vince Sacco. They call for theoretical integration and the wider study of process and structure, which are central themes in the current study. Ken Polk’s research on homicide has provided both a conceptual and analytic framework for integrating and interpreting narrative accounts of lethal violence. We are indebted to Charles Ragin’s work on comparative methods and his incredible insights on the link between theory and method, the value of conjunctive thinking, and bridging the traditions of qualitative and quantitative methods. This study is our attempt to follow in this tradition.

This book could not have been completed without the contributions of several people. We especially appreciate the assistance of Rick Rosenfeld who provided us with homicide narratives that were collected as part of the St. Louis Homicide Project and Marc Riedel for providing us with the California homicide data. We would also like to acknowledge the assistance of the Los Angeles and Las Vegas Police Departments for access to their homicide narratives. At Cambridge University Press, we are indebted to

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This book is dedicated to Kriss Drass. Kriss has been a major collaborator in our previous work and was involved in the initial formulation of this book at the time of his death. He developed the initial computer program for Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA), introduced us to the enormous potential of this method for studying crime events, and has been a major contributor to the growing application of QCA to large-*N* studies. More importantly, Kriss fundamentally altered our views about understanding and describing human behavior. This book's focus on conjunctive thinking and combinatorial methods is a direct result of many daily conversations with Kriss.

Finally, we acknowledge the continued assistance of family, friends and colleagues to this project. They have listened to us for years talking about homicide and have provided the moral and intellectual support that piques our curiosity and feeds our passion for research.

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