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# Murder Clearance Rates: Guest Editors' Introduction

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## **MURDER CLEARANCE RATES GUEST EDITORS INTRODUCTION**

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# Murder Clearance Rates

## Guest Editors' Introduction

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The journal *Homicide Studies* has long been devoted to empirical studies addressing issues pertinent to the study of homicide and violence. Although a large variety of theoretical papers, research summaries, and public policy reviews of issues concerning homicide and violence have been explored in the journal over the past 10 years, at least one issue has garnered relatively little attention—the law enforcement response to homicide. This special issue attempts to begin filling this gap in the literature. Consequently, its contents should be viewed as a beginning rather than an end in the exploration of murder solvability and the police dynamics associated with such processes. Prior to embarking upon this journey and accepting the offer to serve as coeditors of this issue, we had each explored this area of study both in our writings and at various professional meetings and conferences. Through these experiences we discovered this void in the literature and felt that an issue of this nature would be a valuable contribution for the readers of *Homicide Studies*. With this in mind, the works contained herein explore various dimensions of the police responses to reported homicides with the hope that they will inspire others to further develop this line of research.

The special issue opens with Roberts' consideration of homicide clearances using FBI National Incident-Based Reporting System data to conduct an event history analysis. In doing so, she finds that the significant impact of victim characteristics disappears after controlling for situational variables related to physical evidence, information, and witnesses. Additionally, this analysis shows that situational characteristics such as under-the-influence offenders, non-stranger offenders, contact weapons, and concomitant serious offenses are significant predictors of homicide clearance. Litwin and Xu extend this line of research by examining homicide clearances in Chicago from 1966 to 1995 to examine both the consistency of factors commonly identified in research as being related to clearances and how community area characteristics are related to clearances across time. The results suggest that victim's race and firearm usage may account for some of the decrease in homicide clearance rates over time. Additionally, they find that community area characteristics do

enhance our understanding of homicide clearances, although to a lesser extent than the victim and situational characteristics of a homicide.

In contrast, Alderden and Lavery, again using Chicago data from 1991 to 2002, offer several logistical regression models examining various predictors of homicide clearance across different types of homicide. They find specific differences in the impact of incident and victim characteristics on clearances of expressive, instrumental, and gang-related homicides. As such, their work suggests that what works in clearing homicides may be contingent on the type and nature of the homicidal incident.

Davies considers the issue from a different yet interesting perspective by examining the issue using a mix of methods. She offers a city-level quantitative model of homicide clearance and an in-depth qualitative case study exploring the political dimensions of case clearances. By contrasting and comparing the null findings of the quantitative modeling effort with the more substantive insights of the in-depth case study, she shows the demonstrable impacts of the “authorizing environment” on the political dynamics that govern police responses to homicide. Through this case study lens, Davies’ work underscores the significance of this political process and emphasizes how it must be traversed by law enforcement on a daily basis. Although some may argue that the quantitative modeling has little to offer here, its inclusion highlights a perplexing problem in this area of study. That is, the statistical measurement and analytical modeling of police processes have often failed to produce clear evidence of the issues that matter most in successful case closures.

Finally, Riedel and Boulahanis also utilize Chicago data to analyze not the usual homicide clearance processes but the more rare instances of exceptional clearances. Here Riedel and Boulahanis focus upon those exceptional clearances that are deemed by the authors as barred to prosecution. They suggest that, in Chicago, as many as 70% of exceptional clearances fall into this barred category. Such large percentages demand exploration regarding whether these cases are occurring systematically. Implying the possibility of political influences on case clearance decisions, Riedel and Boulahanis explore these cases to examine whether lack of sufficient evidence, witness availability, or other incident characteristics associated with investigative hurdles are more likely determinants of these case outcomes than political decisions to simply not pursue the case.

In closing, we would like to thank the editors of *Homicide Studies* and the anonymous reviewers who carefully deliberated the scholarship that was submitted for this issue and provided important guidance to all of the authors represented here. We believe all of these works further the literature devoted to understanding the dynamics of homicide and police responses to this problem. In doing so, these papers, like many other social science endeavors, also raise many additional meaningful questions concerning the challenges that law enforcement confronts in the investigation of homicide. Our intention was to both invite and inspire such inquiries. We think

this issue has achieved that goal and hope these works will spark further study of this important issue.