

Book Review

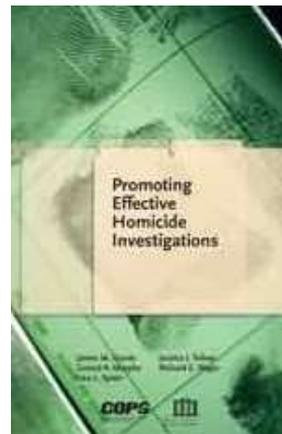
Promoting Effective Homicide Investigations

by James M. Cronin, Gerard R. Murphy, Lisa L. Spahr,
Jessica I. Toliver, and Richard E. Weger

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Reviewed by Christina Witt

This book is a collaboration of practitioners and academics who gathered together in May 2006 at the two day conference *Promoting Effective Homicide Investigations* in Washington, DC, to discuss concerning trends of increasing violent crimes and decreasing homicide clearance rates across the US. The authors are part of the US Police Executive Research Forum (PERF), which has been publishing reports focusing on critical issues in policing since 1976.

Although this book is nearly a decade old, it remains one of the very few books examining best practices for homicide investigations from the perspective of subject matter experts such as police chiefs, commanders, various law enforcement personal, academics, and attorneys (Cronin, Murphy, Spahr, Toliver, & Weger, 2007, p.5). In addition, across North America, there has been a continuous decline in homicide clearance rates since the 1960s, making the examination of homicide clearance an important area of inquiry.

The authors hold to the key conference goals; namely to identify successful approaches to homicide investigations utilised by individual law enforcement agencies, as well to examine factors affecting the decline in homicide clearance rates. As defined in the book and common to homicide clearance studies, a ‘successful’ homicide investigation results in the arrest and charging of a suspect for the offence of murder, and subsequently turning them over for prosecution (Cronin et al., 2007, p.8). ‘Exceptional Means’ (such as a murder suicide) are also considered cleared. Exceptional circumstances occur when enough

evidence has been gathered to arrest and charge a suspect, however due to extenuating circumstances, no arrest can be made (Cronin et al., 2007, p.8).

Existing homicide clearance research is deficient in explaining factors that enhance and/or inhibit solving murders. Homicide clearance research often identifies several issues as significantly affecting outcomes. These can be divided into two categories: organisational/structural and case specific. The authors address the changing nature of homicide investigations from a practitioner perspective by describing some of the contributing case factors and organizational changes, affecting homicide clearance rates. Case factors such as increase in stranger—stranger homicides as well as a rise in gang violence, negatively impact homicide solution. Lack of community support and reduction in witness cooperation make solving homicides more difficult.

The book provides one of the most thorough practitioner perspectives on the organisational changes within police agencies believed to contribute to the reduction in homicide clearance. As a result of this conference, the following seven organisational changes were identified as negatively impacting police agencies ability to solve homicides: 1) changes in structure and placement of homicide units; 2) lack of resources; 3) loss of senior investigators; 4) poor interagency relationships; 5) agencies unable to keep pace with changing technology; 6) backlogs in assisting agencies such as the coroner's office and crime labs; and 7) the personal strain of these homicide cases on the investigators.

Traditionally academic perspectives as to why homicide clearance is declining have been based on theory such as Black's theory of law (1976); which suggests that police use discretion when solving homicides based on victim and area characteristics (as cited in Litwin, 2004). Alternatively, researchers argue that police investigators apply the same amount of effort and resources to every homicide investigation regardless of victim characteristics (Riedel, 2008, & Litwin, 2004). Trussler (2011) suggests that the decrease in homicide clearance rates are related to organisational factors such as police workload and environment, as well as case specific factors such as offence characteristics and socio-economic factors. This book provides insight from a field perspective of the changing environment of homicide investigations and adds considerable depth and context to the existing literature.

The authors divided the book into seven chapters and seven appendices. The book begins with a summary on why homicide clearance is important, examines the variables affecting homicide solution and the consequences associated to unsolved homicides. The authors provide practical detailed information regarding managing homicide units for effectiveness, as well as best practice information on obtaining eye witness identifications and the use of video /audio recordings of police interrogations for best evidence. Moreover, the book examines the role of DNA in homicide investigations, policy considerations, the changing DNA forensics and interagency relationships between crime labs and police agencies. Finally, the book outlines the use of cold case units and factors affecting cold case investigations.

The appendices provides practical resources for law enforcement agencies including: 1) full contact list of all conference participants; 2) external resources and strategies for homicide units; 3) guidelines for conducting eyewitness identification procedures; 4) guidelines for standard operating procedures for videotaping police interrogations; and 5) two sample cold case solvability matrixes.

The authors did an excellent job of providing practical information generated from the collaboration of academics and homicide practitioners, highlighting innovative policies and practices adapted by individual police agencies to increase their homicide clearance rate, as well provided a detailed examination into the complexity of the criminal investigation function as it relates to homicides. The book lays the foundation for law enforcement managers to assess their agency policies and practices and encourages them to adapt to the changing environment of homicide investigations in order to increase their overall investigative effectiveness.

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ABOUT THE REVIEWER

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