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American Homicide

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BOOK REVIEW

American homicide, by Richard M. Hough and Kimberley D. McCorkle, Los Angeles, Sage, 2016, 267 pp., \$58 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-4833-8414-6

In this thorough handbook, Hough and McCorkle provide a complete and nuanced overview of the most prevalent types of American homicide. As opposed to inaccurate perceptions of increasing homicide rates, the abundance of serial killers and other myths about homicide, this book debunks common stereotypes and, without neglecting rare homicides, addresses the most frequently occurring types of homicide.

The book comprises 15 chapters, of which the first 4 chapters provide an overview of homicide. Chapter one introduces the reader to homicide, chapter two depicts a general picture of available homicide data sources, chapter three provides statistical information about various aspects of homicide, and chapter four introduces the reader to a broad treatment of criminological theories implicated in much of the study of homicide today.

In chapters five through twelve, the authors aim to provide a full picture of criminal homicide. As they rightly point out, 'the disproportionate coverage by the media of extraordinary homicides such as mass and serial killings are notable' (p. 3). Such attention to rare forms of homicide impedes people's understanding of the most numerous types of homicide, such as confrontational homicides and intimate partner homicides. Therefore, in chapters five and six, the book addresses in depth these two types of homicide that are responsible for the largest number of homicidal deaths. Chapter seven looks at forms of homicide within the family structure aside from intimate partner homicide, which mostly include familicides, child homicides, siblicides (the killing of siblings) and parricides (the killing of parents). Multiple murders are addressed in chapter eight (school killings) and chapter nine (workplace and mass killings). Chapters ten through twelve each discuss relatively rare types of homicide, including terrorism, serial killing and finally, killings in cults and gangs.

While these individual chapters also include the findings from much international literature, chapters thirteen and fourteen are particularly focused on the US context. Chapter thirteen describes how law enforcement agencies go about solving criminal homicide, while chapter fourteen covers the proceedings of a homicide case in the US court system. Finally, chapter fifteen provides the reader with some observations on victim impact, criminal justice responses and broader community effects related to homicide.

One of the main strengths of this book is its detailed examination of a crime that is often sensationalised, and associated with various myths. By offering a range of academic findings – in which the authors do not shy away from tackling contradictory findings or diverging definitions – they have accomplished a deeper understanding whilst keeping the text accessible throughout.

In these 15 chapters, Hough and McCorkle tackle misconceptions with solid argumentation and adequate incorporation of the literature to date. They emphasise throughout the book that contrary to public perception, '[...] many criminal homicides are the result of a rapid escalation of circumstances that do not involve preplanning' (p. 193). Their nuanced approach is evidenced in each of the homicide subtypes they discuss. In a treatise on mass workplace homicide, for example, they put forward that 'the most frequently documented mass workplace killer is a middle-aged man, though within this brushstroke lies quite a bit of nuanced age and race or ethnicity variation' (p. 125). Similarly, when discussing serial homicide, the authors make sure to point out that

the public [...] has a fairly monochrome view of serial killers. What we know is that there are a number of reasons for multiple, sequential killing and it is carried out in various ways. In addition, serial killers come in all shapes and sizes; there is no tried-and-true description of killers. (p. 151)

In doing so, they succeed in debunking so-called 'CSI effects' associated with the study of homicide.

Aside from its nuanced, non-sensational approach, what sets this book apart from other homicide textbooks is the integration of convincing academic work. This does not only include classical criminological theories, such as Wolfgang's (1958) theoretical perspectives, but also new approaches such as Messner and Rosenfeld's (2012) hybrid theories. Further, despite what the title seems to suggest, in many of its chapters the book incorporates an international scope by pulling in international statistics on homicide and offering recent international case illustrations.

In an attempt to be as complete as possible, I believe the authors may have overstretched the inclusion criteria of homicide by including terrorism as a subtype of homicide. Even though homicide and terrorism share the characteristic that violence is inflicted on other human beings, resulting in death, their differences are paramount. Homicide and terrorism differ vastly in terms of legal definitions, terrorism's occurrence in a war or genocide context, and the dynamics that set terrorism apart from interpersonal violence such as homicide. As the authors admit, terrorists 'focus on the act being a message' (p. 138). Contemporary terrorism is a global theatre. Homicide, particularly the most common types of homicide, are most certainly not.

Overall, this textbook is a great introduction to the multifaceted homicide phenomenon, suitable for both undergraduate and postgraduate courses on homicide, criminal violence or interpersonal violence. Each chapter provides a text box with student learning outcomes, a summary and discussion questions. Particularly illustrative are the case descriptions in each chapter, as they do not only contribute to the liveliness of the text, but also debunk common stereotypes around highly publicised types of homicide. Even though the title suggests that it deals with American homicide alone, with the exceptions on chapters discussing particular American law enforcement approaches and sentencing practices, the book may also be very well suited for an international audience. The value of this book is that it dissects the many layers of homicide, by including relevant academic literature, by applying a broad scope, but most of all by offering a much-needed, nuanced approach.

References

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