THE VALUE OF RESOURCES IN SOLVING HOMICIDES: THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN GANG RELATED AND NON-GANG RELATED CASES

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Introduction

In order to solve homicides, there are a number of important factors that contribute to the police's likelihood of success, such as the amount of time the investigation requires, the presence of witnesses and witness cooperation, the type of weapon, and the relationship between the offender and the victim. Some of these issues are more critical to success when the homicide is gang related, such as having witnesses and others cooperate with police investigators. In a gang related homicide, the absence of cooperation frequently makes identifying a chargeable suspect much more difficult when compared to a non-gang related homicide (Statistics Canada, 2010; Trussler, 2010; Roberts, 2008; Litwin, 2004; Silverman and Kennedy, 1997).

In 2003, as a result, in part, of the number of homicides, and the limitation of resources in each relevant jurisdiction, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) and various municipal police departments in British Columbia established the Integrated Homicide Investigative Team (IHIT). Given that the mandate of this provincial unit was to deal more effectively and efficiently with homicides in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia, the fact that IHIT's yearly homicide clearance rate is typically 20% to 25% lower than the Canadian national average at roughly 57% raised some concerns. Importantly, and is often the case, an examination of homicide clearance rates are used as one measure of a unit's performance. One possible explanation provided for IHIT's lower clearance rate is the higher proportion of gang related homicides that this unit investigates. In order to understand IHIT's clearance rate in context and the differences in investigating gang and non-gang related homicides, this study examines the characteristics of IHIT cases and the influence of these characteristics, in particular the effect of the homicide being gang related, on clearance rates.

Literature Review

Homicide clearance rates are affected by a number of factors. Over 30 years ago, it was proposed that differences in homicide clearance rates could be the result of police valuing certain people in society more than others, such as those of a higher social status, a particular race, or gender (Paternoster, 1984; Peterson and Hagan, 1984; Black, 1976). Conversely, Roberts (2007) suggested that it was situational factors related to the event that best predicted homicide clearance rates, rather than victim characteristics. Others have argued that physical evidence and event information are most relevant (Xu, 2008; Silverman and Kennedy, 1997; Klinger, 1997; Gottfredson and Hindelang, 1979). Welford and Cronin (1999) concluded that homicide clearance rates were affected by the accessibly of various kinds of police resources, such as timely search warrants, forensic services, informants, and surveillance measures. Similarly, Keel, Jarvis, and Muirhead (2009) examined the role of investigative procedures, analytical processes, agency demographics, and the influence of political variables on homicide clearance rates.

While there is a paucity of research focused specifically on the differences between gang and non-gang related homicides, a consistent finding in this body of research is that gang related homicides have a much lower clearance rate (Statistics Canada, 2010; Trussler, 2010; Roberts, 2007; Litwin, 2004; Silverman and Kennedy, 1997). This general finding has been attributed to the prominence of certain features of gang related homicides that make them more difficult for police to solve. In Canada, one difference between

gang related and non-gang related homicides is the method or type of weapon used to kill the victim (Trussler, 2010; Roberts, 2007; Litwin, 2004; Puckett and Lundman, 2003; Bynum, Silverman, & Kennedy, 1997). While gang related homicides typically involve the use of a gun, it is much more common in non-gang related homicides that edged weapons, blunt objects, and strangulation are used (Statistics Canada, 2009; Statistics Canada, 2010). This finding is understood as being related to the relationship between the offender and the victim (Trussler, 2010; Flewelling and Williams, 1999; Lattimore, Trudeau, & Riley, 1997; Silverman and Kennedy, 1997; Riedel and Jarvis, 1998; Gilbert, 1983). While most non-gang related homicides occur between people who know each other, gang related homicides tend to be more impersonal and occur at a greater distance (Trussler, 2010; Roberts, 2007; Addington, 2006; Litwin, 2004; Puckett and Lundman, 2003; Regoeczi et al., 2000; Wellford and Cronin, 1999).

The literature also points to the nature and level of cooperation from witnesses as another main difference between gang related and non-gang related homicides (Trussler, 2010). Understandably, friends and associates of gang members or organized criminals are less likely to provide helpful information to police than pro-social members of society. The main explanations for this are fear of retaliation from gang members and a general desire to avoid contact with or to be viewed assisting the police (Trussler, 2010; Litwin, 2004; Riedel and Jarvis, 1998). Another important difference between gang related and non-gang related homicides are that in gang related homicides there are fewer direct connections between the victim and the perpetrator (Regoeczi, Jarvis, & Riedel, 2008). While police may know that a particular rival gang killed the victim, it may be extremely difficult to identify a specific perpetrator (Silverman and Kennedy, 1997). In other words, in general, stranger on stranger homicides are more difficult to solve and this is more of a similarity in gang related homicides than non-gang related homicides. Because they are more difficult to solve, these homicides take longer to solve, and research has demonstrated that the amount of time it takes for a homicide investigation to conclude is a good predictor of clearance rates (Regoeczi, Jarvis, & Riedel, 2008).

In effect, the literature points to a number of factors that can affect homicide clearance rates and explain the differential clearance rates between gang and non-gang related homicides. A primary issue seems to be that detectives do not always have the necessary information and evidence to routinely solve gang related homicides. As a result, to solve gang related homicides, it becomes more necessary for investigators to rely on surveillance, wiretaps, or undercover operations. One outcome of requiring these investigative tools is that it typically takes longer to solve gang related homicides, which is primarily due to investigators having to wait for the additional resource to be approved (Keel et al., 2009). Therefore, the additional steps, time, and resources associated to a gang related homicide reduces the likelihood of successfully clearing these homicides when compared to non-gang related homicides (Regoeczi et al., 2008). Given this, the purpose of this study was to determine differences between gang and non-gang related homicides, and the extent to which certain characteristics of gang and non-gang related homicide cases handled by IHIT affected clearance rates.

Methodology

In order to analyze the characteristics of IHIT cases, a coding manual consisting of 95 variables was created. The variables included: victim and suspect characteristics, such as age, gender, ethnicity, relationship, and criminal history; event related characteristics, such as time of day, location, and method of homicide; investigative characteristics, including time frames; investigative outcomes; and post-arrest judicial elements respecting each case. The motivation associated to the homicide was also coded, which allowed for a comparison between gang and non-gang related homicides. Importantly, gang related homicides were designated based on the same guideline used in the Canadian Homicide Survey (Statistics Canada, 2010). As per the guidelines, all organized crime groups, street-level gangs, and small rival groups were included, as were selected drug associated cases.

The coding manuals were populated by IHIT detectives who, as a group, completed manuals on a 50% random sample of the 280 single victim homicide cases IHIT investigated between its inception in 2003 and December 31st, 2010. Having IHIT detectives complete the manuals ensured the anonymity of the data before being turned over to the researchers for analysis. Once the coding forms were completed, the data was entered into an SPSS database for analysis.

Results

Of the 140 cases analyzed, half (n = 71) were classified as gang related homicides. However, as the classification of homicides can vary from year to year, the proportion of gang related homicides ranged from a low of 39% of IHIT investigations in 2007 (n = 18 homicides) to a high of 64% in 2008 (n = 24 homicides). Of note, for the years that this study focused on (2003 to 2010), 2008 was the year with the highest number of homicides and 2004 had the fewest (n = 10). Further, of the 71 gang related homicides, there were 49 suspects involved in 26 cleared homicides and 45 unsolved cases. Of the remaining 69 non-gang related homicides, there were 59 suspects identified who were involved in 55 cleared homicides and 14 unsolved cases.

As mentioned in the literature review, one of the distinguishing characteristics of gang related homicides compared to non-gang related homicides are the use of a firearm (Trussler, 2010; Roberts, 2007; Statistics Canada, 2005; Litwin, 2004; Puckett and Lundman, 2003; Bynum, Silverman, & Kennedy, 1997; Cordner and Green, 1982). In this sample, 70% of the gang related homicides had a firearm as the cause of death, while only 49% of non-gang related homicides involved the use of a firearm.

Another difference between gang and non-gang related homicides were the demographic characteristics of the offender and the victim, and nature of the relationship between the victim and the offender (see Table 1 and Table 2). With respect to the victim's gender, in gang related homicides, nearly all victims were male (98 per cent) compared to a slight majority (54 per cent) of non-gang related homicide victims. As expected, half of the victims in the gang related homicides were either gang members themselves or an affiliate, while less than 1% of non-gang related homicide victims had any gang affiliation. Moreover, a slightly smaller proportion of victims of gang related homicides were Caucasian (54 per cent) compared to the victims of non-gang related homicides (63 per cent), and gang related homicide victims were

younger (31 years old) compared to non-gang related victims (41 years old). Of note, this age difference is consistent with previous research suggesting that younger males are more likely to be the victims of gang related homicides (Statistics Canada, 2010).

TABLE 1: HOMICIDE VICTIM CHARACTERISTICS

Characteristics Considered	Gang Related	Non-Gang Related
Age	31 Years Old	41 Years Old
Male	93%	54%
Caucasian	54%	63%
South East Asian	18%	14%
Gang Member/Associate	50%	0
Total	N = 71	N = 69

TABLE 2: HOMICIDE SUSPECT CHARACTERISTICS

Characteristics Considered	Gang Related	Non-Gang Related
Age	25 Years Old	30 Years Old
Male	100%	90%
Caucasian	62%	63%
South East Asian	14%	13%
Gang Member/Associate	98%	0
Prior Record	86%	57%
Prolific Offender	30%	15%
Record of Violence	84%	37%
Drug Charges	74%	30%
Total	N = 49	N = 59

As demonstrated in Table 2, there were some differences in the characteristics of suspects when comparing gang and non-gang related homicides. While racial differences were not statistically significant, criminal history was an important distinction. Specifically, in the case of gang related homicides, the suspect was not only more likely to have a criminal record, but was more than twice as likely to have a record of violence and drug charges. They were also twice as likely to be a prolific offender.

Another potential difference between gang and non-gang related homicides are the nature and extent of police resources applied to the case and the degree to which particular resources contribute to solving a homicide. Hypothetically, since gang related homicides are considered more difficult to solve, these homicides would be more likely to involve the request for and the use of specific resources. In this study, five types of resources were analysed; wiretaps, surveillance, undercover operations, interview teams, and the use of a police agent. A comparison of the data provided by Tables 3 and 4, which deal with cleared cases, suggests that, regardless of the added resource being considered, gang related cases were more likely to be seen by investigators as cases where it would be appropriate to use wiretap, surveillance, interview teams, and police agents. It can also be seen through a comparison of the data provided by Tables 3 and 4 that investigators used each of these resources in a greater percentage of cleared gang related cases than they did in the case of cleared non-gang related cases. Moreover, lending credence to the value of these resources in clearing cases for both gang related and non-gang related homicides, it can

be seen from the data on both Table 3 and Table 4 that, with the exception of the use of undercover operations in gang related cases, in the majority of cases where the resources were used, they proved useful gathering evidence. Arguably, even though the use of undercover operations in gang related cases proved useful only 40% of the time, the level of usefulness was still significant.

TABLE 3: USE OF RESOURCES DEEMED APPROPRIATE IN CLEARED NON-GANG RELATED HOMICIDE CASES FROM 2003 – 2010 (N = 55)

Resources Considered	% of Time Deemed Appropriate	% of Time Used	% of Time Proven Useful	Why Request was Denied
Wiretap	28%	20%	75%	-
Surveillance	36%	26%	62%	-
Undercover	68%	51%	68%	-
Interview	75%	56%	66%	-
Police Agent	15%	7%	57%	Lack of Resources

TABLE 4: USE OF RESOURCES DEEMED APPROPRIATE IN CLEARED GANG RELATED HOMICIDE CASES FROM 2003 – 2010 (N = 26)

Resources Considered	% of Time Deemed Appropriate	% of Time Used	% of Time Proven Useful	Why Request was Denied
Wiretap	52%	35%	54%	-
Surveillance	70%	60%	79%	-
Undercover	83%	58%	40%	Too High Risk
Interview	88%	70%	61%	Lack of Resources
Police Agent	29%	15%	53%	-

One of the things that can be inferred from a comparative review of the data on Tables 3 and 4 was that there was clearly less readily available evidence in the case of cleared gang related homicides. Interestingly though, the difference between gang related cases and non-gang related cases were not as pronounced when considering unsolved homicides. Specifically, as can be seen through a comparison of the data provided by Tables 5 and 6, the use of wiretap, undercover operations, and interview teams were more frequently seen as appropriate in gang related cases than in non-gang related cases, but the opposite was true with respect to police agents. Nevertheless, the fact remains the added resources were seen as important to the investigation of both gang related and non-gang related homicides. The difference is that, for the most part, these added resources were less likely to be used in the case of gang related homicides (see Tables 5 and 6). That said, what is more noteworthy is regardless of whether one is looking at gang related or non-gang related homicides, compared to cleared cases, in unsolved cases, the added resources were not applied anywhere near as frequently. Specifically, as demonstrated in Tables 5 and 6, the added resources were only applied in a fraction of the instances where they were deemed appropriate to apply, and the discrepancy is greater in gang related cases than in non-gang related cases. When the added resource was applied, it proved useful in a significant percentage of cases. The interview team, for example, proved useful 100% of the time in both unsolved gang related and non-gang related cases.

As is the case with respect to cleared homicides, one of the things that can be inferred from a review of the data on Tables 5 and 6 with respect to unsolved homicides is that certain added resources are less

likely to be used in the case of gang related homicides. In fact, that is the case despite the fact that they were more often seen as appropriate for use, as in the case of unsolved non-gang related homicide cases, and despite the fact that, when used, these resources proved to be useful. Regardless, Tables 5 and 6 lends further credence to a conclusion that the issue is not only one of evidence being less readily available in the case of gang related homicides, but that there are also important differences in the extent to which resources are applied. Namely, relative to the perceived need for added resources, these resources were less likely to be applied to gang related cases.

TABLE 5: USE OF RESOURCES DEEMED APPROPRIATE IN UNSOLVED NON-GANG RELATED HOMICIDE CASES FROM 2003 – 2010 (N = 14)

Resources Considered	% of Time Deemed Appropriate	% of Time Used	% of Time Proven Useful	Why Request was Denied
Wiretap	40%	7%	0	Lack of Resources
Surveillance	64%	40%	33%	-
Undercover	30%	0	-	Lack of Resources
Interview	36%	7%	100%	-
Police Agent	70%	0	-	Lack of Resources

TABLE 6: USE OF RESOURCES DEEMED APPROPRIATE IN UNSOLVED GANG RELATED HOMICIDE CASES FROM 2003 – 2010 (N = 45)

Resources Considered	% of Time Deemed Appropriate	% of Time Used	% of Time Proven Useful	Why Request was Denied
Wiretap	48%	2%	0	Lack of Resources
Surveillance	59%	19%	37%	Lack of Resources
Undercover	52%	5%	40%	Lack of Resources
Interview	41%	2%	100%	Lack of Resources
Police Agent	52%	0	-	Lack of Resources

In terms of the factors that contribute to IHIT's clearance rates, the first important consideration is the proportion of IHIT's caseload that is gang related. For the time period considered in this study, Canada's national average of gang related homicides was 18% with a range of 12% in 2004 to 23% in 2008 (Statistics Canada, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, Homicide Survey, 2011). This finding includes British Columbia. Therefore, when British Columbia's gang related homicides are removed, the national gang related homicide average drops to 15%. However, as discussed above, over the same time period, IHIT's caseload was typically made up of 50% gang related homicides with a year-to-year range of 39% to 64%. Given this, and the aforementioned challenges associated with clearing gang related homicides, it should not be surprising that IHIT's overall gang related homicide clearance rate (38 per cent) is lower than the national average gang related homicide clearance rate (50 per cent) (Statistics Canada, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, Homicide Survey, 2011). Of note, IHIT's clearance rate for non-gang related homicides (78 per cent) is similar to the national average (80 per cent) (Statistics Canada, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, Homicide Survey, 2011).

Discussion

The findings from this study confirm what has been already established in the literature about the differences between gang and non-gang related homicides and highlights the value of resources in successfully solving a case. Beyond the consideration of resources, it was important to note that in gang related homicides, investigators were able to identify a chargeable suspect on the same day the homicide occurred just 12% of the time compared to 55% for non-gang related cases. This inability to identify a chargeable suspect quickly is an especially important issue because time is a critical factor in whether a homicide case is cleared (Regoeczi et al., 2008). From an investigative viewpoint, these differences further highlight the challenge of having less evidence initially in gang related cases. In essence, the fact that there are important differences between gang related and non-gang related homicides, especially in terms of timely and available evidence, has already been established. In gang related homicides, evidence is neither as readily available nor as easy accessible. There are a variety of reasons for this, but chief among them are that a firearm is more commonly used as a method in gang related homicides and the nature of relationship between suspect and victim (Trussler, 2010; Roberts, 2007; Addington, 2006; Litwin, 2004; Puckett and Lundman, 2003; Regoeczi et al., 2000; Wellford and Cronin, 1999). Importantly, these realities suggest that investigators need added resources to clear a case. As the analysis has shown, in the case of IHIT, those resources have not been applied to the extent deemed appropriate by investigators, even though added resources have shown in IHIT cases to be important in increasing the clearance rate for both gang and non-gang related homicides.

In effect, there is simply less evidence and information available in gang related homicide cases. This results in the need for additional resources to adequately investigate these cases. However, in the case of IHIT, there are differences in the extent to which resources are applied relative to the perceived need of investigators. Moreover, as this analysis has shown, this is clearly more often the case with the unsolved gang homicides, regardless of the finding that when these resources are applied, they contribute to the successful clearing of the homicide. Moreover, if one were to consider the issue of time as a critical factor in solving a case, the extent to which information and evidence is available in gang related homicides, and the extent to which, when requested, additional resources are applied, it would appear that additional resources should be used when requested by investigators, especially in gang-related homicides.

Conclusion

The findings presented in this study will not come as a surprise to homicide investigators as the results confirm what has been established in the literature. Specifically, there are important differences between gang related and non-gang related homicides. Of particular difficulty in gang related homicides is establishing a link between the specific offender and the victim that will assist in clearing the homicide, in part due to the use of a firearm. In addition, the level of cooperation provided by witnesses is typically less in gang related homicides, leaving investigators with few options in identifying a suspect. Commonly, gang related homicides provide investigators with less to work with, which results in the need for more resources and time to gather the necessary evidence to recommend charges. In the case of IHIT, it appears that requested resources have not been applied to the extent deemed appropriate by investigators. This is critical because, while not to the same level as non-gang related homicides, added

resources have shown themselves in IHIT cases to be important in increasing their gang and non-gang related clearance rates. Given the distribution of IHIT's gang and non-gang related homicides, IHIT should not be expected to have as good a clearance rate when compared to national rates. However, it is possible that IHIT's clearance rates could be higher with the appropriate and considered increase in timely, valuable resources, such as the use of surveillance, wiretaps, interview teams, undercover operations, and police agents.

In terms of the generalizability of the findings, there are several important considerations. Without a complete understanding of the nuances of homicide units in other jurisdictions and the factors that affect their operation, there is the possibility that direct comparisons are inappropriate. For instance, difference units or departments may have different definitions or criteria for gang related and non-gang related homicides. Further, as with most homicide studies in general, this analysis was based on a relatively small sample size, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Collectively, these cautions speak to the need for more research on the issues of general homicide clearance rates, the differences between gang and non-gang related homicides in terms of the challenges that these types of homicides have on successful investigations, and the affect that these different types of homicides have on clearance rates.

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