

Understanding the declining charging rate in homicide offences in England and Wales

Exploring the reasons behind the significant decline in homicide charge rates across England and Wales since 2014/15.

Key details

Lead institution	University of South Wales
Principal researcher(s)	Rebecca Nicholls rebecca.nicholls@southwales.ac.uk
Police region	Wales
Collaboration and partnership	University of South Wales; Home Office.
Level of research	PhD
Project start date	May 2022
Date due for completion	May 2025

Research context

Since 2014-15 the number of homicide offenders successfully charged with murder, manslaughter or lesser offences has significantly dropped and continued on a downward trend since.

Little is known regarding what caused this decline. However, international literature suggests many environmental and organisational factors may influence charging rates such as witness engagement, availability of evidence, incident characteristics and investigative effort.

The Home office has designated this concerning downward trend as a priority area of research and this project aims to explore factors which influence criminal justice actors' decisions and actions

taken in relation to the charging of homicide suspects.

Aim

To explore why homicide charge rates in the UK have been steadily declining since 2013/14.

Objectives

- To understand what factors influence charging decisions and processes within homicide investigations.
- To understand how criminal justice actors (that is, police and prosecutors) make charging decisions.
- To identify what factors do or do not support the charge of a homicide suspect.
- To map the trajectories of past homicide investigations to provide a detailed account of the decisions and actions taken in relation to charging suspects.

Research methodology

The project will involve up to three police services from across England and Wales.

Combining qualitative and quantitative methods, it will involve the following.

- A systematic literature review of international research to determine what is already known about the challenges to charge homicide suspects.
- Analysis of national quantitative data to include police recorded crime and outcomes open data tables and the Home Office Homicide Index to enable detailed analysis of homicide outcome trends.
- Mapping the trajectories of 10 homicide investigations using existing information held by the police and Crown Prosecution Service (CPS). To include different offence types (murder, manslaughter and infanticide) and cases outcomes. To provide a detailed account of decisions and actions taken in relation to the charging of suspects.
- Ethnographic observations of meetings between detectives, senior investigating officers (SIOs) and CPS representatives within 3 'live' homicide investigations to unpack complex decision-making processes. Where possible, different types of investigation will be included (for example, complex 'whodunits' or multiple-suspect cases versus more straightforward cases where the offender is readily apparent, such as some domestic homicides). Detailed fieldnotes assembled

during observations will be taken and analysed. These will include records of interactions, deliberations and decision-making amongst key actors, informal discussions with them and diagrams documenting organisational processes and workflows.

- To supplement the ethnographic observations, 20 semi-structured in-depth interviews will examine how detectives, SIOs and CPS representatives explain their work and decision-making processes and how current processes can be improved. Participants will be selected from across the homicide investigations to represent a variety of roles.
- An additional 10 semi-structured in-depth interviews will be undertaken with other relevant stakeholders such as policy leads within the CPS and representatives from the Homicide Working Group and the College of Policing, to gather their views and how current processes may be improved.