

The Cleared-Case Canon: Investigative Selection as a Structural Limit on General Homicide Theory Building

Zul Khaidir Kadir¹

¹ Universitas Muslim Indonesia, Indonesia

Correspondence: zulkhaidir.kadir@umi.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

Offender-specific homicide knowledge becomes available through investigative and institutional records that represent only some homicide cases. Police records may describe an event, while offender-known, court, correctional, and forensic records may provide motive, offender history, and victim–offender information for narrower populations. This article develops the cleared-case canon as a label for the risk that evidence from such cases becomes a default basis for general homicide theory. The article uses a focused qualitative analysis of 44 purposively selected scholarly publications. It treats published research as secondary literature and distinguishes variable missingness from investigative selection and case flow. The analysis shows that these are different problems. Missingness concerns absent information within a defined dataset. Investigative selection concerns whether a case can produce offender-specific information at all. Case flow further narrows the populations represented by prosecution, conviction, correctional, and specialist records. The claim-scope check classifies claims as aligned when they name the observed population, qualified when they explain a bridge to a wider population, and mismatched when they generalize beyond their evidence. The article does not estimate selection effects or claim fixed differences between cleared and uncleared homicides. It proposes evidentiary congruence between the research gateway, represented population, and conclusion.



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INTRODUCTION

Offender-specific knowledge rarely enters a homicide record at the moment a death is classified. Police may know the victim, location, weapon, and approximate circumstances while having no verified offender, relationship, or motive. Those details can emerge later through witness accounts, forensic work, surveillance material, admission, or prosecution. A homicide event and an offender-known homicide are therefore related but analytically different objects. Treating them as interchangeable can widen a conclusion beyond the information that made it possible.

Police-recorded homicide data can support valuable event-level descriptions. They can show where deaths occur, which victims are recorded, and which incident features are documented. They do not automatically support a proposition about all offenders or all victim–offender relationships. A conviction file can provide a richer narrative, although it represents a smaller institutional population. The empirical value of either source depends on the question being asked and on whether the conclusion retains the limits of the source.

Clearance research already shows that access to an offender is not evenly distributed across cases. Alderden and Lavery (2007) examine variation in Chicago clearance predictors. Litwin (2004) also treats clearance as an outcome shaped by case and contextual conditions. Jiao (2007), Lee (2005), and

Roberts (2007) analyse clearance through event history and related designs. These studies do not describe a hidden profile of uncleared homicides. They show why resolution cannot be treated as an administratively neutral gateway to offender information.

Comparative studies reach a similar institutional point. Aziani and Persurich (2023) distinguish discretionary from non-discretionary conditions in homicide clearance. Pastia, Davies, and Wu (2017) examine both probability and timing of clearance in Canada. Liem and colleagues (2019) describe variation across western Europe, while Trussler (2010) traces changing clearance conditions in Canada. Clearance rates also change across historical periods, as Cook and Mancik (2024) demonstrate for the United States. The route from recorded death to offender-specific evidence is consequently neither fixed nor uniform.

Investigative work also affects what enters a usable case record. Braga and Dusseault (2018) connect detective practice to clearance, while Braga, Turchan, and Barao (2019) examine investigative resources. Brookman and Jones (2021) show how CCTV evidence is constructed during homicide investigations. McEwen and Regoeczi (2015) document the role of forensic evidence in investigation and prosecution. These studies do not make official files unreliable by definition. They show that a case file is produced through institutional activity as well as through the event it records.

Missing-data scholarship addresses a related but different problem. Fox (2004) and Riedel and Regoeczi (2004) explain why unknown offender and relationship information can affect homicide research. Neuilly and colleagues (2020) demonstrate that missingness patterns deserve direct examination. Dong and Peng (2013) and Schafer and Graham (2002) clarify that appropriate treatment of absent values depends on assumptions about how information became unavailable. Those tools begin after a dataset and an analytical population have been specified. Investigative selection concerns the earlier process through which some cases supply offender-specific variables and others do not.

The cleared-case canon is used here as an analytical label, not as a measured prevalence or an accusation against individual researchers. It identifies a recurring inferential risk. Evidence from cleared, suspect-identified, prosecuted, convicted, or institutional cases may be used in ways that imply a theory of homicide generally. The article asks how research gateways shape the empirical population of offender-specific claims. It then examines when a conclusion remains aligned with that population, when cautious extension is possible, and when a scope mismatch appears. The argument is deliberately narrower than a claim that clearance determines the substantive nature of homicide.

RESEARCH METHODS

This article uses a focused qualitative analysis of secondary scholarly literature. The material comprises 44 scholarly publications listed in the reference section. Thirty-six peer-reviewed studies carry DOI identifiers. Eight additional published articles by the author were included as topic-specific conceptual material on honour-related lethal violence. They are used only for bounded propositions about legal narrative, classification, motive, collective role, and cultural context. No homicide case records, interviews, surveys, experiments, or statistical estimates were analysed. The unit of analysis is the relationship between a study's research gateway and the scope of the claim attached to its evidence. Published articles are treated as conceptual material for examining how offender-specific information becomes available and how authors define the population represented by that information.

The literature was selected purposively because it speaks to homicide clearance, investigative and forensic knowledge production, case flow, missing data, or inference in homicide research. The review is focused rather than exhaustive. It does not claim PRISMA coverage, a bibliometric census, or a prevalence estimate for the literature. Sources were retained when they helped identify a research gateway or clarify the relation between information availability and claim scope. The supplementary author publications were read in the same way and were not treated as empirical proof of a fixed difference between resolved and unresolved cases.

Each source was considered for its reported data source, the institutional point at which central information became available, the population named in the study, and the breadth of language used in its discussion. Police-recorded events, offender-known cases, court files, correctional samples, and specialist forensic records were treated as distinct gateways. They were not assumed to be consecutive stages or equivalent forms of clearance. The reading compared the observable population of a source with the population invoked by an explanatory statement.

Interpretation produced a simple claim scope check. An aligned claim names the same population represented by its evidence. A qualified extension identifies the sample boundary and states the reason for cautiously discussing a wider population. A scope mismatch occurs when a conclusion describes homicide generally even though the central variables are available only in a narrower offender-known group. The analysis does not declare a theory false, estimate the size of a selection effect, or recover missing information about uncleared cases. It clarifies the conditions under which a broader theoretical claim would need an additional bridge.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Institutional Gateways to Homicide Knowledge

A recorded homicide event can contain extensive information without yielding an identified offender. Victim characteristics, location, time, weapon, and scene conditions often enter official records early. Relationship, motive, offender history, and interactional sequence may remain uncertain. The difference matters because a theory built around those latter variables does not rest on the same population as a theory built around event characteristics. It rests on cases that generated, preserved, and verified offender-linked information.

Event records, offender-known records, court files, correctional material, and specialist forensic samples should be treated as alternative research gateways. Their relation is often connected in practice, yet they do not form a single universal chain. A case can be cleared without producing a conviction. A court case can contain a contested account. A forensic sample can be selected for a specialised question that differs from both event-level and prosecution-level research. Figure 1 therefore maps gateways rather than a funnel of inevitable case progression.

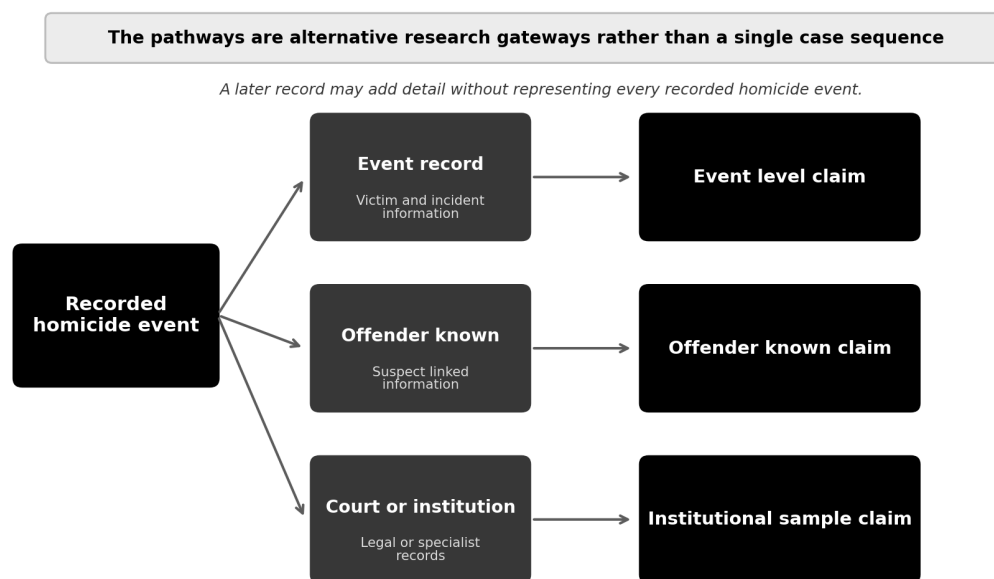


Figure 1. Institutional Gateways to Offender-Specific Homicide Knowledge

Police clearance is especially important because the term can cover different administrative and investigative realities. An arrest clearance, an exceptional clearance, a suspect identification, and a conviction do not supply the same kind of information. Each can change the evidentiary basis available to a researcher. Using the general label solved case without definition hides those differences. Studies should report the threshold through which cases entered the analysis and identify whether the central variables depend on that threshold.

Court and correctional records can support detailed questions about legally processed offenders. They may contain offender histories, trial narratives, psychiatric assessments, and documentary material unavailable in event-level databases. Their strength lies in that detail. Their limitation lies in the population they directly represent. A conclusion about convicted offenders remains analytically strong when it is stated as such. Kadir (2026f) similarly situates deliberation and preparation in the evidentiary

record of honour-killing cases rather than in a population-wide account of homicide. Difficulty arises only when the legal route that created the record disappears from the language of the conclusion.

Table 1. Research Gateways and Directly Supported Homicide Claims

Research gateway	Information usually available	Population directly represented	Claim most directly supported
Recorded event data	Victim, incident, scene, weapon, place, and time	Recorded homicide events	Event-level description and patterning
Offender-known data	Named suspect, offender-linked evidence, and relationship coding	Cleared or suspect-identified cases	Explanation of offender-known cases
Court record	Tested legal narrative, charges, and disposition	Prosecuted or adjudicated cases	Analysis of legally processed cases
Institutional or forensic sample	Detailed history, assessment, or specialist material	Sampled correctional or forensic population	Analysis of the specified institutional sample

Research on solved and unsolved cases supports this distinction without authorising a presumed difference between the two groups. Bänziger and Killias (2014) examine unsolved homicides in Switzerland. Ferguson and Pooley (2019) compare solved and unsolved no-body homicides in Australia. Granath and Sturup (2018) study clearance in Sweden, while Ferrandino (2021) examines clearance by arrest in Chicago. Vaughn (2020) also examines solvability and devaluation in clearance research. These studies show that resolution is itself an empirical process. Kadir (2026c) compares legal responses in Pakistan, India, and Nepal, illustrating why a processed-case pattern should not be carried across jurisdictions without a stated bridge. They do not permit a universal claim about the motives or social character of all uncleared cases.

Missingness and Investigative Selection

A missing value concerns an absent entry within a specified dataset. A researcher may know that a homicide belongs to the dataset while lacking the offender's age, the victim-offender relationship, or a motive category. The methodological question concerns what can be inferred from the observed and unobserved values. Missing-data analysis is appropriate because the population and the variable have already been defined. It does not decide whether the variable was ever obtainable for a large portion of the cases.

Relationship coding illustrates the distinction. Quinet and Nunn (2014) show that relationships in initially unsolved homicide cases can later be established. An early unknown relationship may reflect an unfilled field, but it may also reflect the absence of a named suspect, corroborated account, or documented connection. Kadir (2026b) further distinguishes collective role structures in honour killing and blood feud, showing why relationship categories may extend beyond a simple victim-offender dyad. Treating every unknown category as a routine missing value can conceal this difference. The problem is not simply that a box in a dataset is empty. It is that the institutional conditions for classifying the relationship have not yet been met.

Motive requires similar care. An account of motive can be supported by statements, witness testimony, forensic findings, or legal narrative. It may become more fully observable or more confidently classified after investigative progress, although some motive information can appear earlier. Bitzer and colleagues (2022) show why forensic decisions matter in sexual homicide investigations. Kadir (2026e) treats honour motive as a question of reason-giving and weight at sentencing, showing why a label can carry evaluative content from a later legal record. Kadir (2026a) likewise cautions against treating provocation frames as a general account of motive or culpability. The evidence does not establish that all motives are post-clearance facts. It shows why researchers should state the stage at which their motive classification becomes defensible.

Table 2 separates missingness, investigative selection, case flow, and conclusion scope. The distinctions are not intended to multiply jargon. They identify different locations of uncertainty. A missing value concerns information within a defined dataset. Investigative selection concerns access to the cases that can generate a particular variable. Case flow concerns movement through institutions. Claim scope concerns whether an explanation travels farther than the evidence from which it was built.

Table 2. Missingness Selection Case Flow and Claim Scope

Issue	Analytical location	Question	Implication
Variable missingness	Within a defined dataset	How should an absent value be handled	Concerns estimation and uncertainty within the named population
Investigative selection	Before offender-specific data become available	Which cases can generate the central variable	Defines the population from which the variable is observed
Case flow	Movement across institutions	Which cases progress to later records	Narrows later samples relative to recorded events
Claim scope	Relation between evidence and conclusion	How far does the conclusion travel	Shows whether the population boundary remains visible

Treating these issues separately also prevents an inflated use of the word bias. A directional bias would require a comparison between a selected population and a target population or a defensible model of their relation. This article supplies neither. It identifies a limit on what can be claimed from offender-known material alone. Regoeczi, Jarvis, and Riedel (2008) show why time to clearance matters, and Liem, Krüsselmann, and Eisner (2020) map attrition from homicide to imprisonment. Their work makes the institutional narrowing visible without revealing a uniform substantive profile for cases that do not progress.

The Cleared Case Canon as an Inferential Risk

The cleared-case canon describes a risk in the formation of homicide knowledge. Research tends to rely on cases with the information required to study offenders, motives, and relationships. That practical reliance is often unavoidable. The risk arises when a conclusion no longer names the conditions under which the information became available. A study may correctly describe offender patterns among cleared cases and still be read as a general account of homicide. The framework asks that the source population remain visible at the point where theory is stated. The danger is linguistic rather than moral. Broad nouns can make a selected evidentiary base appear to speak for every homicide in the jurisdiction under study.

Calling this pattern a canon does not mean that homicide scholarship follows a fixed doctrine. The term refers to a recurring default in which information that is more accessible, classifiable, and narratively complete becomes more likely to shape theoretical categories. It is a warning about inferential reach, not a claim that every clearance study overgeneralises. It also does not reduce research quality to a single criterion. A well-bounded study of convicted offenders can be more useful than a vague study of all recorded homicide events.

A theory of victim–offender relationships illustrates the issue. Relationship categories observed in suspect-identified cases may accurately describe that population. Mappaselleng and Kadir (2025) offer a culturally bounded account of Siri’. Kadir et al. (2026) examine honour narratives in the killing of women in South Sulawesi. Extending such accounts to all homicide events requires a reasoned bridge, which might be comparative evidence or an event-level design that covers different clearance conditions. The bridge cannot be assumed merely because each case is legally classified as homicide. The same reasoning applies to offender histories and motivation narratives.

Investigative practice provides another reason to retain source boundaries. Brookman, Maguire, and Maguire (2019) describe how detectives understand factors affecting solved cases. Hawk and Dabney (2014) show that detectives’ orientations can shape practical case framing. Brookman and Innes (2013)

question how investigative success should be defined. Those insights do not turn case narratives into fiction. They show that knowledge of a homicide is assembled and assessed through institutional practice before it becomes academic material. Their accounts are valuable precisely because the investigative process remains part of the object of analysis. Their practical judgments also shape which facts are recorded, tested, and available for later interpretation by researchers across separate studies and settings.

The concept remains useful only if its claim stays modest. It does not say that clearance creates a distorted theory in every jurisdiction. It does not say that uncleared cases are more complex, more anonymous, or more marginal. It says that offender-specific theory must account for the route through which offender-specific evidence entered the sample. Maguire and colleagues (2010) and Avdija, Gallagher, and Woods (2022) show that clearance conditions vary across time and setting. A theory assembled from one gateway should therefore carry its population boundary into its conclusion. It should remain qualified.

Claim Scope and Population Boundaries

Source population and conclusion scope can be assessed without a complex statistical model. The first question is simple. What cases made the central variable observable. A study of relationship patterns may include all recorded homicide events in its denominator, yet use only a subset with known relationships for the analysis. A study of convicted offenders may describe all persons in a correctional archive. Neither design is defective. Each requires a conclusion that identifies the relevant population whenever it makes a substantive explanatory claim.

An aligned claim names the population represented by the data. A conclusion such as among cleared homicide cases in a defined jurisdiction preserves the source boundary. It does not make the result trivial. It states exactly where the evidence is strongest and allows later research to examine whether the pattern travels. Kadir (2026d) compares legal responses across England, Germany, and Canada, showing why a cross-jurisdictional extension needs to preserve the settings that make the comparison meaningful. Clear population language is a form of analytic precision rather than a ritual caveat. It gives later work a clear point of comparison.

A qualified extension can be reasonable when authors disclose the boundary and explain why a wider implication may be considered. Comparative evidence may show similar patterns across research gateways. A theory may also be framed as a proposition for future testing rather than as a settled description of homicide. The point is not to ban extension. It is to distinguish an argued extension from an extension that occurs through vague nouns such as murder, homicide, or perpetrators when the sample is much narrower.

Scope mismatch appears when a conclusion makes a general claim while the evidence depends on a selected offender-known group and no bridge is offered. The mismatch concerns the relation between evidence and language. It does not establish that the finding is wrong. It establishes that the conclusion reaches a population the study did not directly observe. A reviewer can identify that problem by comparing the method, the variables, and the final paragraphs of an article. No estimate of selection effects is required for this initial check. The problem is readily correctable when authors retain the actual sampling boundary in the abstract, discussion, and final claim. It is not a flaw in the cases themselves.

Table 3 turns the distinction into a compact reading guide. Its examples are illustrative claim forms, not scored evaluations of the studies cited in this article. The table should be used to revise titles, abstracts, and conclusions where necessary. It asks whether the population named in those places can be reconstructed from the data source and from the stage at which the decisive variable became available. It is not a substitute for empirical comparison.

Table 3. Claim Scope Guide for Homicide Research

Claim form	Evidence boundary	Wording in the conclusion	Assessment
Aligned claim	Cleared homicide cases in one jurisdiction	Among cleared cases in this jurisdiction the pattern was	Evidence and conclusion name the same population

Claim form	Evidence boundary	Wording in the conclusion	Assessment
Qualified extension	Convicted offender sample with stated limits	The pattern may inform wider theory if later research tests the boundary	Extension is explicit and open to challenge
Scope mismatch	Offender-known cases only	Homicide is primarily explained by the observed pattern	Conclusion describes a wider population than the evidence directly represents

Reviewers and editors can apply the same test without demanding artificial generality. A paper may use cleared cases because that is the only ethical and defensible source for its question. It should then say so clearly. A paper may use a full event-level database and still restrict part of its analysis to cases with identified offenders. It should then identify the narrower denominator for that claim. These practices make a study easier to evaluate and easier to compare with later work.

Research Implications

Victim–offender relationship is not a simple background variable. It can be an investigative achievement, a legal classification, and an analytical category at the same time. Researchers should identify which of those meanings is present in their data. A relationship drawn from a police coding field may differ from one reconstructed from court testimony. A study that treats the categories as equivalent should provide a reason for doing so. Otherwise, the theory may merge information acquired at different institutional moments. This distinction is especially important when a study compares groups, because apparent similarity in labels can conceal different evidentiary foundations and different opportunities for verification across individual cases.

Motive demands the same discipline. The relevant issue is not whether motive categories are valuable. They often organise important questions about lethal violence. The issue is whether the motive was recorded at the event stage, inferred during investigation, or stabilised in legal proceedings. Pizarro, Terrill, and LoFaso (2020) show that investigative strategies and tactics can affect clearance. That context matters when a later motive account becomes central to a general explanation of homicide.

Time adds another boundary. A case can move from unknown to known relationship status, from an unidentified suspect to a named suspect, or from an arrest to a conviction. Variables acquired at those moments should not be treated as if they were observed simultaneously. Regoeczi, Jarvis, and Mancik (2020) demonstrate that homicide investigations operate in context, while Rydberg and Pizarro (2014) link victim lifestyle to clearance. Temporal and contextual information belongs in the interpretation of the record, especially when a theory rests on variables that become available only after a case has progressed.

Research design can address the problem without pretending to solve it. Authors can state their denominator, identify the cases used for each central variable, and separate event-level description from offender-level explanation. They can also describe unresolved cases as an evidentiary boundary rather than as a residual category with presumed substantive traits. These steps require little additional data collection. They require careful language in the method and in the conclusion. The reporting burden is modest.

Figure 2 summarises this claim scope check. Evidence gateway, central variable, named population, and conclusion scope should remain connected throughout the article. A clear alignment allows strong claims about the observed population. A qualified extension makes its bridge open to scrutiny. A scope mismatch signals that the conclusion should be narrowed or supported by additional evidence. This framework does not replace empirical research on clearance. It identifies the point at which such research becomes necessary for a broader claim.

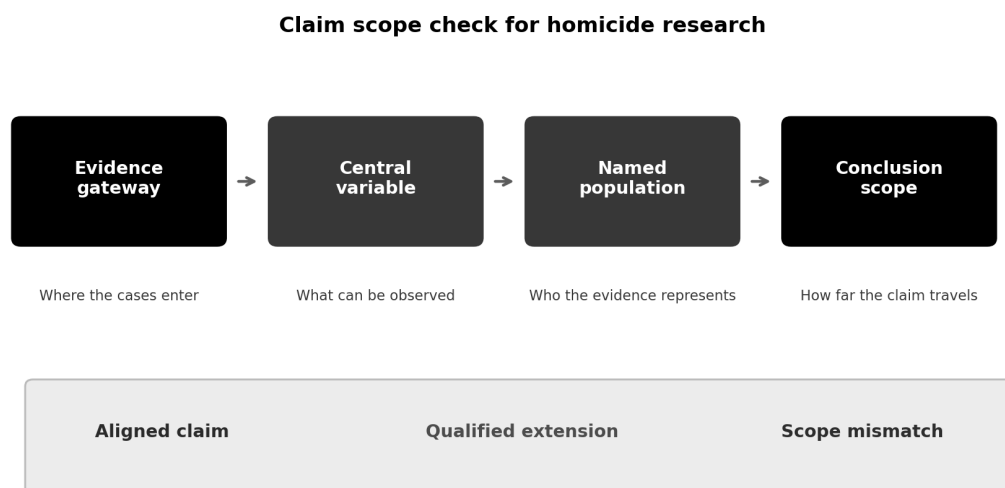


Figure 2. Claim Scope Check for Homicide Research

CONCLUSION

Homicide theory often depends on records that become more detailed as an investigation proceeds. That fact is neither surprising nor discrediting. It becomes consequential when offender-specific evidence from a procedurally limited group is presented as if it directly described all homicide events. The cleared-case canon names that inferential risk. It does not assume that cleared and uncleared homicides differ in any predetermined way. It asks researchers to identify the information route through which a motive, relationship, offender history, or legal narrative became available. The distinction between missing data and investigative selection provides the central analytical safeguard. Missing-data methods address absent values within an established population. Investigative selection concerns the institutional route that determines whether a case can supply the variable in the first place. Case flow then shapes the populations represented by prosecution, conviction, correctional, and specialist records. Keeping those issues separate prevents the article from turning incomplete data into a claim about substantive difference.

Authors should state the research gateway, the variable-dependent denominator, and the population named by the conclusion. That practice does not weaken offender-centred homicide research. It makes the contribution more precise and leaves room for carefully argued extension where suitable evidence exists. Homicide scholarship can use cleared cases, court files, and correctional samples without treating them as transparent substitutes for homicide in general. The route to knowledge should remain visible in the theory built from it.

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