

# **Prosecution or Persecution? Extraneous Events and Prosecutorial Decisions**

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In 2004 in Amsterdam, a Dutch-Moroccan Islamic extremist brutally murdered Theo van Gogh, a Dutch filmmaker known for his critique of Islam. Using a difference-in-difference approach, we show that, in the Amsterdam region, the assassination resulted in more than a 19-percentage-point increase in the likelihood of prosecution for unrelated violent crimes of male suspects born in Muslim-majority countries. The effect is detectable during the first month following the murder but dissipates thereafter. We find no evidence of the murder's effect for analogous cases processed in other regions in the Netherlands and for non-violent crimes. Our findings are consistent with the interpretation that the heinous killing elicited an availability heuristic-based connotation in the minds of prosecutors between male suspects born in Muslim-majority countries and culpability for violent crimes. Our paper adds to an emerging empirical literature demonstrating that extraneous events can critically shape criminal justice outcomes.