

# Modernity Strikes Back? A Historical Perspective on the Latest Increase in Interpersonal Violence (1960–1990)

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# Modernity Strikes Back? A Historical Perspective on the Latest Increase in Interpersonal Violence (1960–1990)

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There is a plethora of criminological explanations why criminal violence increased during the three decades between the early 1960s and the early 1990s. This paper argues that most available interpretations are lacking in three respects: they lack a historical perspective that anchors the three critical decades in a wider understanding of long-term trends; they take the nation-state as their unit of analysis and disregard important commonalities across the Western world; and they pay insufficient attention to different trends in broad categories of physical violence.

This paper therefore takes a macro-level and long-term perspective on violent crime, focussing on European homicide during the past 160 years. It demonstrates that the period of increase was preceded by a long-term decline and convergence of homicide rates from the 1840s to the 1950s. Also, it shows that both the decline and the increase primarily resulted from temporal variation in the likelihood of physical aggression between men in public space. It argues that explanations of these common trends need to take into account broad long-term cultural change common to Western societies. In particular, the paper suggests that shifts in culturally transmitted and institutionally embedded ideals of the conduct of life may provide an explanation for long-term change in levels of interpersonal violence.

Most criminologists agree that rates of violent crime such as robbery, assault, and homicide started to increase across the Western world sometime in the late 1950s or early 1960s and continued to do so for the next three decades until the early 1990s (e.g. Gurr 1981; LaFree 2005; Thome and Birkel 2007). Yet the reasons for this have remained a mystery. Not that there is a lack of criminological explanations. Rather, there are too many and those that we have often contradict each other. The menu includes a rise in delinquent opportunities due to increasing wealth and time spent away from the family (Felson 1987); greater strain resulting from youth unemployment and lack of opportunities (Greenberg 1977); too much welfare state and the rise of an underclass (Murray 1994); too little welfare state and social exclusion (Young

1999): institutional anomie resulting from the conflict between the ethos of material success and growing inequality (Messner and Rosenfeld 1994); excessive individualism due to a loss of communitarian values (Fukuyama 1999); and a loss of legitimacy of economic, social, and family institutions (LaFree 1998).

A thorough discussion of these theories and the empirical evidence they rely on is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, it will take a broad view, arguing that many interpretations of the late-twentieth century-rise in violent crime lack a historical perspective in the sense of anchoring the critical decades in a wider understanding of trends before and after. In contrast, the current analysis will extend the

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time horizon back to the 1840s, a period that marks the beginning of a period of sustained decline in criminal violence across Europe.

Indeed, several historians of crime have pointed out that the increase of violent crime in the second half of the twentieth century may have been a minor deviation from an even longer declining trend that may have prevailed over several centuries (Gurr 1981; Rousseaux 1999; Spierenburg 1996, 2001). In particular, a patchwork of mediaeval and early modern estimates of homicide rates across Europe, collected through meticulous archival work by historians of crime, suggests that homicide has become significantly less common over several centuries, probably starting in the late sixteenth century and continuing into the nineteenth century (for an overview of the empirical evidence see Eisner 2003). Theoretically, explanations of this trend have mainly relied on the seminal work of the sociologist Norbert Elias, in particular his *Theory of the Civilizing Process*, first published in 1939 (Elias 1978). As is well known, the backbone of Elias' *Theory of the Civilizing Process* is the idea that increasingly civilized behaviour is brought about by the interplay between two structural forces. The first is the century-long expansion of the state monopoly of power that led to increasing control over behaviour. The second force are the growing "chains of interdependence" brought about by market exchange and capitalism, which put a premium on peaceful interaction guided by self-interest. As a result, researchers influenced by the ideas developed by Elias expect an increasing sensitization to violence (Wiener 2004), a decline in harsh and cruel public punishment (Spierenburg 1984), and a drop in interpersonal violence.

Faced with the observation of increasing violent crime during the second half of the twentieth century, commentators of Elias' work have suggested that this may merely reflect a short-term deviation, in the sense of a decivilizing process (Mennell 1990, 2001). However, from a perspective following in the footsteps of Elias it is not entirely clear how such a decivilizing process came about in Europe in the midst of an expanding state, growing interdependence, and relative peace during the second half of the twentieth century.

Indeed, one might argue that the notion of a decivilizing process is a different label for an increase in criminal violence rather than a genuine explanation.

This paper will therefore tentatively suggest a theoretical perspective that is based more on Max Weber than Norbert Elias. In particular, I will propose the notion of models of *conduct of life*, developed in Max Weber's studies on the Protestant ethic (Weber 1920, 1982), as a useful theoretical tool for understanding macro-level variation in levels of criminal violence over time. Weber used the term *Lebensführung* to describe the distinctive ethos of a society or social group regarding the right way of living a life. Unfortunately, the term has often misleadingly been translated into English as "life-style", a term that wrongly evokes associations with fashion and leisure-time. In contrast, *Lebensführung* or conduct of life refers to a much wider cultural script encompassing work, politics, beliefs, education, and individual character. These models of conduct of life become reinforced and stabilized through institutions such as schools, families, the church, and bureaucracies. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* Weber argued that models of conduct of life can be enormously powerful forces that mould the details of daily action and shape the trajectories of economic life. In a similar vein, I will argue that the major shifts in levels of interpersonal criminal violence over the past 160 years were associated with broad changes, across Europe, in shared cultural models of what constitutes a desirable and good "conduct of life". These are said to influence levels of interpersonal violence through their effects on patterns of socialization as well as by affecting expectations about adequate interaction in daily situations, especially in public space.

The paper is organized in three parts. In the first part I will introduce the *History of Violence Database* and present the data upon which the empirical analysis will be based. The second part will provide an overview of the main trends in homicide rates across western and central Europe between 1840 and 2005, based on data from seventeen countries. The third part will discuss three main trend periods and putative factors that may have been causally relevant.

## 1. The Data

The subsequent discussion will present national time-series of homicide rates covering seventeen European countries over a period of up to 160 years, i.e. from about 1840 to the present. To my knowledge, it is thus based on the most comprehensive collection of long-term national homicide rates in Europe to date.

Table 1 gives an overview of the seventeen countries that are included in the collection as well as the time-periods covered and the main data-source used. It shows that the data comprise most of western Europe while there are large gaps for Eastern Europe including, e.g. Poland, Russia, or Greece.

**Table 1: National series of homicide rates in the history of violence database: Time periods and countries currently covered**

Country	Time periods currently covered <sup>1</sup>	Number of years	Main type of source <sup>2</sup>
Austria (before 1918 Austrian part of Austro-Hungarian Empire)	1862–85, 1923–35, 1947–2003	94	Conviction and mortality statistics
Belgium	1870–1913, 1919–1997	123	Mortality statistics
Denmark	1921–2001	81	Mortality statistics
England and Wales	1833–2002	170	Police statistics
Finland	1754–2003	250	Mortality statistics
France	1827–1920, 1925–2003	162	Judicial statistics and Mortality statistics
Germany (before 1871 Prussia)	1836–1914, 1948–2004	146	Mortality statistics
Hungary (before 1918 Hungarian part of Austro-Hungarian Empire)	1882–87, 1923–32, 1950–2003	70	Judicial statistics and mortality statistics
Ireland	1842–1918, 1926–2002	154	Police statistics
Italy	1875–2003	129	Police statistics and Mortality statistics
Netherlands	1900–2004	105	Mortality statistics
Norway	1876–2003	128	Mortality statistics
Portugal	1950–2000	51	Mortality statistics
Scotland	1858–2003	123	Police statistics
Spain	1883–1918, 1947–2002	92	Judicial statistics and mortality statistics
Sweden	1754–2001	248	Mortality statistics
Switzerland	1877–2001	125	Mortality statistics

Notes:

1. As of April 2006.

2. See Appendix for more detailed information about the sources.

Additionally, the database includes disaggregated series for infanticide and for male and female victims whenever they were available over sufficiently long periods of time. Also, for two countries (England and Wales, Switzerland) there are series broken down by age and sex of the victim. Finally, contextual data on the age distribution of offenders, the modus operandi, or regional differences within countries are added on an ad-hoc basis where found during research in historical publications. These data convey additional

information about long-term change in contextual characteristics of homicide, which may provide important clues about underlying causal dynamics.

A mix of three strategies was used to collect the data, namely reviewing previous publications, retrieving data directly from official statistical publications, and approaching scholars and statistical offices for information and specific data.

The earliest study of cross-national homicide series was probably the one conducted by the Italian criminologist Augusto Bosco in 1889. Beyond being an excellent analytical piece of work, it provides series of data of police recorded or adjudicated homicides for various countries. Another set of national series was published a few years later in Enrico Ferri's *L'omicidio-suicidio* (1894) and updated in 1925 (Ferri 1925). For Scandinavian countries the most comprehensive source of long-term data is the work by Verkko initially published in 1931 in Finnish and later partly translated into German and English (Verkko 1937, 1951, 1967). Besides providing a detailed methodological discussion, Verkko presents complete series of homicides and infanticides according to the Swedish and Finnish cause of death statistics from 1754 to 1920. The most important recent major study on homicide trends is by LaFree and Drass (2002) covering forty-four countries over the years 1950–2000. It uses the mortality statistics compiled annually by the World Health Organization, overall the most valid and reliable source for more recent cross-national comparative homicide data.

Although these studies provided valuable insight, efforts were made to trace the data back to original official publications, in order to better understand what definition of homicide and what source had been used. Also, using original publications was the best way to ensure consistency of data collection over time and to trace possible changes in reporting or recording routines. Sometimes the data could be found in national statistical yearbooks, but often more specialized governmental publications had to be consulted.

Specialists in national statistics offices were often helpful in providing access to data and explaining differences between alternative sources. Also, for some countries specialist scholars provided most valuable information, including permission to integrate their data in this database. I am especially grateful to Ian O'Donnell for his series of homicides in Ireland from 1841–2001, to Martti Lehti for providing me with series of data on Finland, and to Gary LaFree for the dataset on cross-national homicide rates from 1950–2000.

## 2. Methodological Issues

Analyses of long historical series of homicide rates are invariably confronted with two key questions: Do available

data reflect *real* levels of criminal homicide? And is homicide an indicator of serious interpersonal violence more generally? I briefly explore both questions before moving on to the substantive findings.

*Measurement objectives.* The conceptual target variable of this study is criminal homicide. It is commonly defined as the intentional killing by a human being of another human being and comprises murder, manslaughter, and infanticide. By conventional standards this includes deaths due to injuries received in a fight, argument, quarrel, or assault, or during the committing of a crime – although in these cases the intention usually is not to kill a person but to inflict injuries. However, it excludes deaths inflicted by persons while acting within legitimate rules on behalf of the state (i.e. killing during war, executions, police officers while on duty) and it does not include accidental deaths (e.g. traffic accidents).

Most researchers now agree that homicide data are the most reliable and valid indicators for conducting comparative analyses between countries and over time (e.g. Marshall and Block 2004). There are several reasons for this. Homicide is similarly defined across countries and time, reporting is believed to be more complete than for any other crime, and recording by authorities is particularly scrupulous. But like other measures of crime, the fewer the procedural stages between the actual recording and the production of the statistics, the more likely data are to reflect actual occurrence. In this respect, police statistics and mortality statistics are generally assumed to be superior to conviction statistics. They are hence the preferred data source for this study.

Police statistics report homicides known to the police, usually meaning that *prima facie* evidence suggests an intentional killing of a person. Depending on a country's legal framework, figures may be broken down by legal subcategories such as infanticide, murder, and manslaughter. Mortality statistics, on the other hand, are based on the death certificates completed by the coroner, pathologist, or surgeon. Classification as homicide implies that the death is believed to have been the result of an intentional act. As a rule, the verdict is based on an inquest that reflects the available forensic evidence.

Theoretically, both sets of data should be strongly correlated because a coroner's verdict of "homicide" requires further criminal investigation while a corpse found by the police should always lead to a forensic inquest. Yet differences may occur for various reasons other than slippage in record-keeping: First, the territorial reference differs as the police count events that happen *in a country* while mortality statistics register events that happen *to the residential population of a country*. Second, police statistics record the year when the crime became known while mortality statistics count the year when the death occurred. Third, police records and death certificates are not necessarily completed at the same time and the legal assessment of the death may have changed between both procedures.

The extent of overlap can be assessed in countries where statistical series from both recording systems are available over longer periods of time. Table 2 shows a sample of correlations between police and mortality statistics for selected periods and countries. The correlations are between  $r = .83$  and  $r = .92$  suggesting a good fit between series derived from the two sources.

**Table 2: Bivariate correlations between homicide rates according to mortality statistics and according to police statistics, selected countries and periods**

Country and data	Correlation
Finland: Police recorded homicides versus mortality statistics, 1951–2000	.83
Sweden: Police recorded completed homicide versus mortality statistics, 1950–2000	.92
Italy: Police recorded homicide, incl attempt versus mortality statistics, 1950–1986	.91
England: Police recorded homicide versus mortality statistics, 1872–1998	.91

This corresponds with research in the United States (Cantor and Cohen 1980; Rokaw, Mercy, and Smith 1990) and Australia (Mouzos 2003) where a good overall fit between mortality statistics and police data has been documented. Similarly, Birkel and Thome (2004) found correlations of .80–.95 between police and mortality statistics for the second half of the twentieth century in Germany, England and Wales, and Sweden.

*Advantages of mortality statistics.* However, in several respects mortality statistics are generally superior to police statistics for assessing long-term trends across nations. The essential pragmatic reason is that historically they are more widely available than police statistics (see Table 1). But there are also more substantive advantages. One is that classification in mortality statistics is based on medico-legal criteria that have remained relatively stable over time. In particular, "homicide" has always been a distinct category in the International Classification of Diseases (ICD) since its inception in 1900, being defined as "death resulting from an injury intentionally inflicted by another person" (for an overview of the history of the ICD see Israel 1978). But even before 1900 "homicide" was a standard category in mortality statistics, reflecting the fact that it distinctly required legal action to be taken.

Also, death statistics are less amenable to changing legal frameworks than police data. For example, the legal definition of "infanticide" varies significantly between countries and over time. Some countries subsume it under murder and manslaughter, others have specific provisions but with varying content. In contrast, the statistical definition as the intentional killing of a child below age one is much more universally applicable. Finally, as mentioned, mortality data often provide information on the sex and age-group of the victims, which makes it possible to examine trends for different types of homicide separately.

However, one should also note two limitations of mortality statistics (that equally apply to police statistics): The first is that mortality data are probably incomplete for some subtypes of homicide and that the extent of under-coverage is likely to have changed over time. A pertinent example is infanticide. It is almost certainly not fully documented in nineteenth century statistics as concealment was relatively easy, because midwives sometimes condoned the acts of desperate women, and because forensic technology was not always able to distinguish intentional killing from natural death due to suffocation (L. Rose 1986).

The second problem is that mortality statistics reflect the expert assessment before the case is fully investigated and a legal decision is returned. The category of "homicide"

may therefore contain a proportion of cases that are finally found not to have been an intentional killing. To account for this uncertainty some countries (e.g. England and Wales, Scotland) have created dynamic databases that update the legal classification as the investigation progresses. England and Wales, where a dynamic database was introduced in 1976, is an interesting case because it produces two sets of data that operate according to opposite logics. The *Criminal Statistics* operate according to a subtractive logic. They collect data on “initially recorded” homicides of which 10–15 percent become eventually reclassified as having had some other cause (Home Office 1999). The mortality statistics, in contrast, operate according to an additive logic. Cases of likely homicide are initially coded under a specific category “verdict pending” (ICD-classification E988.8 in ICD-9, Y33.9 in ICD-10) and only become classified under one of the homicide categories of the ICD when the final verdict is known. While the two datasets produce highly diverging numbers during any current year, their estimates converge two or three years later (Rooney and Griffiths 2004).

*Homicide rates and broader violence trends.* Homicide rates can certainly be analysed in their own right. But are they also an indicator of criminal violence in a wider sense? To explore this question, Hofer (2000) examined the relationship between the long-term trend in homicide rates as measured in the Swedish mortality statistics and the rate of convictions for assault according to court statistics during 1841–1998. Although there are short-term deviations between the two series (i.e. over 5–10 years), the long-term trends show a remarkable extent of co-variation. Other studies examining the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries also generally find good correspondence between homicide trends and broader violence indicators (e.g. Gattrell 1980; Gurr, Grabosky, and Hula 1977).

For shorter periods the most conclusive evidence relates to the United States. There the annual National Crime Victim Survey (NCVS) provides good estimates of change in the risk of being assaulted since 1974. Over the period 1974 to 2002 the correlation between assault as measured in the NCVS and homicide rates is  $r = .91$ , suggesting that in the United States homicide does reflect wider change in violent

behaviour (Langan 2005). Similar comparisons between trends in victim surveys and homicide data in Europe are less conclusive (Tonry and Farrington 2005), but they are based on shorter time spans and often on smaller survey samples than the U.S. National Crime Victim Survey. It is hence probably fair to say that the question of how closely change in levels of homicide is indicative of more general trends in violence is not fully resolved.

There are two main reasons why the ratio between non-lethal interpersonal violence and homicide may vary over long periods of time, namely change in *technologies of killing* and in *technologies of healing*. By technologies of killing I mean the destructive effectiveness of instruments in the hands of those who are capable and willing to use them. Where effective instruments such as swords or guns are readily available to people with a given level of propensity to engage in aggressive acts, a lethal outcome becomes more likely (Zimring and Hawkins 1998).

It is difficult to assess how technologies of killing have affected trends in homicide rates over the past 150 years. Firearms have become more precise and easier to conceal, whereas, at the same time, governments across Europe have put increasing controls on their availability. In the United Kingdom, for example, the Gun Licence Act of 1870 introduced a fee to be paid by anybody wishing to carry a firearm “outside the curtilage of his dwelling house” (Greenwood 1972, 17). The first effective restrictions were established by the 1920 Firearms Act, which, however, still considered self-defence a good reason to possess a firearm. This exception was eliminated in the early 1960s, followed by further legal efforts, culminating in the 1990s, at more effectively restricting access to firearms (Malcolm 2002).

Technologies of healing comprise the communication, transport, and medical technologies that influence the likelihood that a wounded person will die from the injuries. This includes telephones to contact emergency services, ambulances to bring a person to a hospital, and the medical expertise to operate on gunshot and stab wounds. Technologies of healing have dramatically advanced over the last two hundred years. For example, Monkkonen (2001a) finds that up to two thirds of nineteenth century victims of

homicide in New York suffered at least several hours before they died, the likelihood being that many of them would be rescued with contemporary technology. Also, Harris et al. (2002) estimate that US completed homicide rates in the late 1990s might have been up to three times higher than they actually were, had medical technology remained at the same level as it was in 1960.

Overall, the shifting interplay between the technologies of killing available to motivated offenders and the technologies of healing in the hands of medical experts must have affected the odds of a fight, a robbery, or a sexual assault resulting in a person's death. However, more research would be needed to express such change in more precise ways over longer periods of time.

*The denominator.* Homicide rates are usually computed as the total number of cases in a year for every 100,000 members of the national population. This is not without problems since the age distribution of offenders and victims differs significantly from the age structure of the total population. In most societies, for example, offender rates peak at age 20–35. Societies with a younger population may hence have elevated homicide rates simply because a larger proportion of the population is in the high-risk age bracket. For comparative purposes it is desirable, therefore, to control for differences in the age structure by computing age-standardized homicide rates (Monkkonen 2001b). However, this requires age-specific data for both offenders and victims, which are rarely available over long historical periods. In the current data-set such data could be found for

two countries (England and Wales, Switzerland). Computing age-standardized victimization rates suggests that the deviations from unstandardized rates are relatively small and do not affect the substantive conclusions. For these reasons all homicide rates are based on the total population as the denominator.

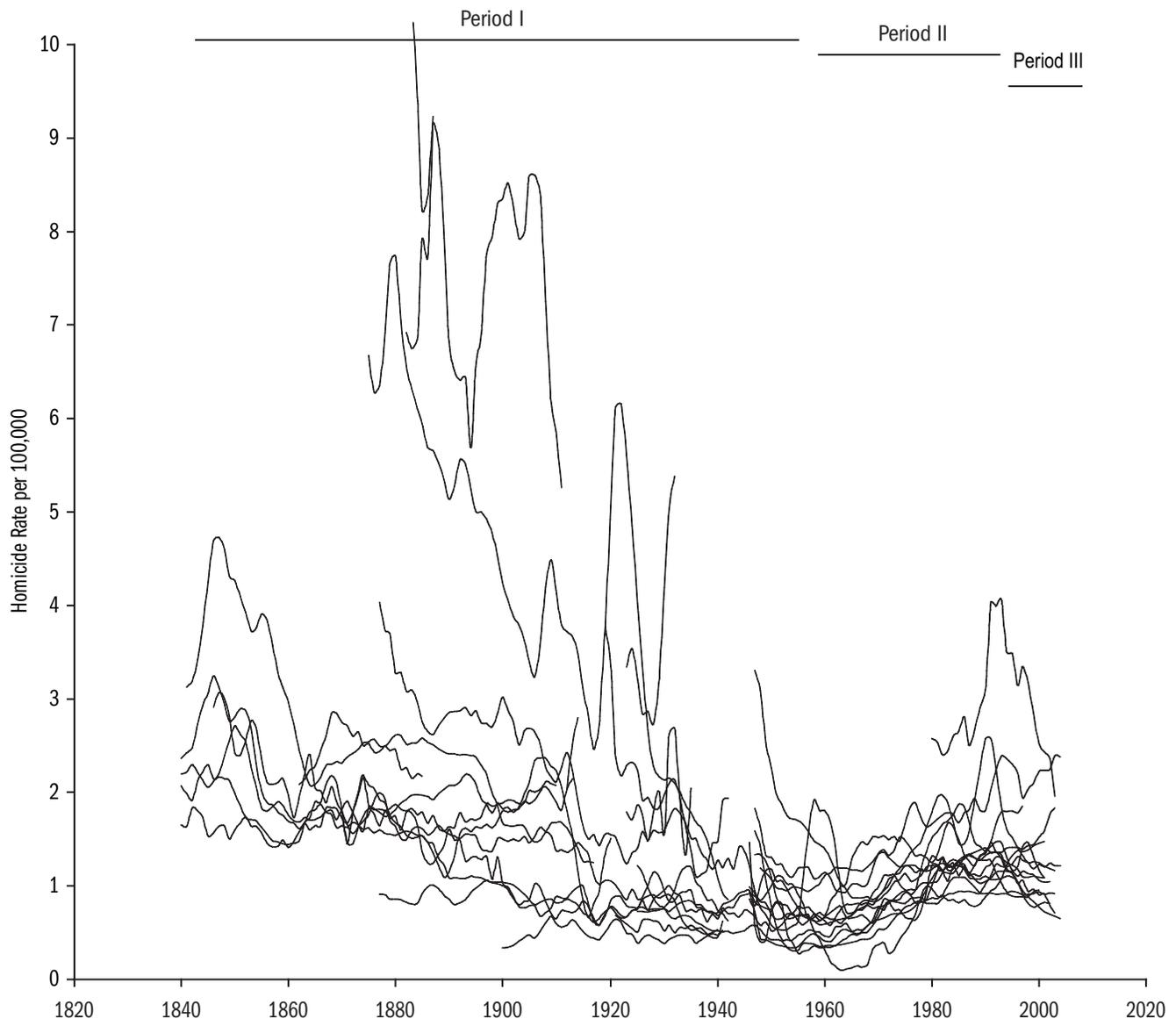
### 3. What has happened? An overview

The historical reference period of the subsequent analyses starts in 1840, although the national series for Finland and Sweden go back almost another 100 years. There are two reasons for this, one being that 1840 is the earliest period for which the database provides national series for a sizeable sample of European countries (England and Wales, Finland, France, Ireland, Prussia, Scotland, and Sweden), meaning that generalizations about trends can be based on a reasonably large evidence base.

Secondly, homicide rates in Finland and Sweden increased noticeably from about 1770 to 1840 and evidence suggests possible increases elsewhere in Europe as well (Hofer 1991; King 2006). This increase comes to a halt around 1840 meaning that this decade probably constitutes a turning-point in the long-term development of homicide rates.

I present the data in two complementary ways. Figure 1 shows sixteen national series for periods of up to 160 years combined in one cluster of graphs. The main purpose here is to provide an idea of the shared underlying trajectory that has characterized the development of homicide in Europe as a whole.

Figure 1: Overall homicide rates in sixteen European countries, per 100,000, three-year moving averages



Notes:

The figure includes data for Austria (1862-1885, 1923-1935, 1947-2003), Belgium (1870-1997), Denmark (1921-2001), England and Wales (1840-2002), France (1840-2002), Prussia/Germany (1840-1913, 1947-2003), Ireland (1841-2001), Italy (1875-2001), Norway (1877-2002), Netherlands (1931-2002), Scotland (1847-2000), Spain (1883-1917, 1947-2001) Sweden (1840-2002), Switzerland (1877-2001). Finland is excluded because it has unique trends in homicide rates.

For sources see Appendix 1.

Periods excluded for Belgium (1914-1918, 1942-45), France (1942-45), Italy (1942-45), Netherlands (1942-1945), Norway (1940-1945).

**Table 3: Average homicide rates in seventeen European countries, 1840–2004**

Year	1840-49	1850-59	1860-69	1870-79	1880-89	1890-99	1900-09	1910-19	1920-29	1930-39	1940-49	1950-59	1960-69	1970-79	1980-89	1990-99	2000-04
England	1.7	1.6	1.7	1.6	1.5	1.1	0.9	0.7	0.7	0.8	0.8	0.7	0.7	1.0	1.2	1.4	1.7
Scotland	2.9	2.4	2.0	1.8	1.5	1.4	0.9	0.7	0.9	0.8	0.7	0.6	1.2	1.6	1.8	2.2	2.1
Ireland	4.0	3.7	2.4	2.5	2.5	2.3	1.6	1.5	1.0	0.6	0.5	0.4	0.4	0.8	0.8	1.2	1.5
Sweden	2.1	1.7	1.8	1.7	1.6	1.5	1.5	1.3	0.9	0.8	0.8	0.7	0.7	1.1	1.3	1.2	1.0
Norway	--	--	--	0.9	0.9	0.9	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.6	0.6	0.4	0.5	0.7	1.2	1.0	0.9
Denmark	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	0.6	0.5	0.9	0.8	0.5	0.7	1.2	1.2	1.1
Belgium	--	--	--	1.8	1.7	1.7	2.0	2.5	2.2	1.6	1.6	0.7	0.7	1.1	1.6	1.7	--
Netherlands	--	--	--	--	--	--	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.4	1.3	0.5	0.4	0.7	0.9	1.2	1.2
France	2.2	2.2	1.7	1.8	1.9	2.0	2.1	1.3	0.9	1.0	0.8	1.0	1.0	0.9	1.1	1.0	0.8
Germany	2.8	2.3	1.7	1.9	1.5	1.5	1.9	2.4	2.1	1.6	1.2	1.0	1.2	1.2	1.2	1.0	0.7
Austria	--	--	2.4	2.6	2.2	--	--	--	1.8	2.0	1.6	1.2	1.0	1.4	1.4	1.2	0.8
Italy	--	--	--	6.8	6.2	5.1	3.9	3.3	4.3	1.8	2.0	1.7	1.0	1.2	1.8	1.8	1.2
Switzerland	--	--	--	3.7	3.0	2.8	2.6	1.9	1.5	1.5	1.1	0.9	0.7	0.8	1.2	1.4	1.1
Spain	--	--	--	--	9.1	6.8	8.2	5.3	--	--	1.4	0.5	0.2	0.6	1.0	0.9	1.0
Portugal	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	1.2	1.0	1.3	1.4	1.5	1.0
Finland	3.2	2.9	3.4	3.3	3.7	3.0	4.8	12.3	9.5	7.0	4.0	2.6	2.2	2.9	2.9	3.1	2.5
Hungary	--	--	--	--	7.6	--	--	--	3.1	4.9	--	--	--	--	2.6	3.5	2.3
Mean <sup>1</sup>	--	--	--	2.51	2.31	2.09	1.81	1.56	1.47	1.06	0.99	0.79	0.77	1.02	1.33	1.43	1.29
Std. dev.	--	--	--	1.78	1.58	1.27	1.00	0.88	1.16	0.46	0.50	0.40	0.25	0.27	0.34	0.40	0.45

1. Unweighted mean of England&Wales, Scotland, Ireland, Sweden, Norway, Belgium, France, Italy, Switzerland.

Table 3, in contrast, shows the average rates per country and decade for the period 1840–2003, with data arranged by geographical proximity. Furthermore, the table presents two summary indicators. The first is a European average for each decade from the 1880s onwards. It is based only on those countries that have relatively complete series of data from 1880 to 2000 (England and Wales, Scotland, Ireland, Sweden, Norway, Belgium, France, Italy, Switzerland). The average is not weighted by population size. The second indicator shows the standard deviation of the homicide rates for each decade from the 1880s to the 2000s. The standard deviation can be interpreted as a measure of the average amount of “variability” of homicide rates in a comparison across countries at a given point in time.

Three methodological notes should be considered when interpreting these figures. First, all data include infanticide since consistently separating infanticide is currently only possible for a limited number of countries.

Second, during the last years of World War II both police recorded homicides and homicides recorded in mortality statistics soared in most occupied countries. A considerable part of the increase probably reflects partisan fighting against the German occupying forces and collaborators. But there may also have been a rise in conventional violence due to the breakdown of the state monopoly of power between the collapse of German administration and the reestablishment of regular policing after the end of the war (Rous-

seaux, Vesentini, and Vrints 2008). These periods need to be analysed separately and I therefore decided not to include them in the graphs and figures.

Third, Finland is not included in Figure 1 and not incorporated in the calculation of European averages and standard deviations in Table 3, although the respective national figures are shown in the table. The reason is that Finland has long been known to have both unusually high contemporary homicide rates and an atypical long-term trend in comparison with the rest of Europe (LaFree and Drass 2001). In particular, starting from already high average levels at the turn of the twentieth century, Finland experienced a “homicide wave” between about 1905 and 1935 leading up to rates averaging above 8 per 100,000 (Lehti 2001). Hence Finland was treated as an “outlier” since the main purpose of synthesizing the data was to illustrate the main shared trajectories across western Europe.

One might doubt the utility of combining sixteen national series in one single figure. However, the rationale is that the figure visualizes a number of important characteristics of the long-term trajectory across western Europe—while intentionally toning down the specificities of individual countries. More particularly, it suggests three main periods:

The first period roughly comprises the century between the 1850s and the 1950s and is described by the twin processes of *decline* and *convergence*. A second period comprises the three decades between the early 1960s and the early 1990s. During these thirty years homicide rates across Europe followed a joint upward trend, with national differences in any given year within a very narrow band. A third period starts in the early 1990s when homicide rates return to a declining trend in most European countries.

#### 4. 1850–1960: Decline and convergence

All national series included in Figure 1 followed a declining trajectory in the second half of the nineteenth century that continued until about 1950. This is documented for individual countries as well as for the averages shown in Table 3. For nine countries with continuous series since the 1880s the average homicide rate is about 2.4 per 100,000 in the 1880s and drops to about 0.8 in the 1950s.

This is a significant decline, which has been found to correspond to a wider fall in interpersonal criminal violence. In Sweden (Hofer 2000), Germany (Johnson 1995: 127), and England and Wales (Gatrell 1980) similar declining trends are documented for broader categories of recorded violence such as assault or robbery. This is particularly noteworthy, as police forces grew and record-keeping became more professional over the century – factors that would, if anything, have inflated crime statistics.

The second major characteristic of this period is convergence, visually represented by the inverted fan pattern in Figure 1 (see also LaFree 2005). This is documented statistically in the decline of standard deviations in Table 3, but one may also think of it in terms of the range of rates. Around 1880 national homicide rates varied by a factor of 1:10 between countries, ranging from a low of about 0.8 in Scotland to about 8.0 in Italy. By 1950, the range had dwindled to a ratio of 1 to 4.

A closer look at individual countries reveals where the convergence comes from. By around 1880 most countries in the northern and western Europe, primarily England and Wales, Scotland, Sweden, Norway, and France, already had low homicide levels. In contrast, countries in southern Europe – Italy, Spain, Switzerland, and Austria – still recorded significantly more homicides. Indeed, regional maps by Ferri (1895, 285ff) suggest that particularly high homicide rates continued to prevail in a rim of areas on the outskirts of Europe, including the rural areas of Spain, the southern rim of France, Corsica, the mountain valleys of Switzerland, the south of Italy, Greece, the eastern parts of the Austro-Hungarian empire, the eastern provinces of Prussia, and – although at lower overall levels – the border areas between England and Scotland. By 1950 these differences had mostly disappeared as a result of the fast decline in homicide rates in those peripheral areas where they had been highest seventy years earlier.

Upon closer inspection it also seems possible to tentatively distinguish three main groups of neighbouring countries with similar variations of the trend.

Figure 2: The northern European pattern for homicide trends (per 100,000, 3-year moving averages)

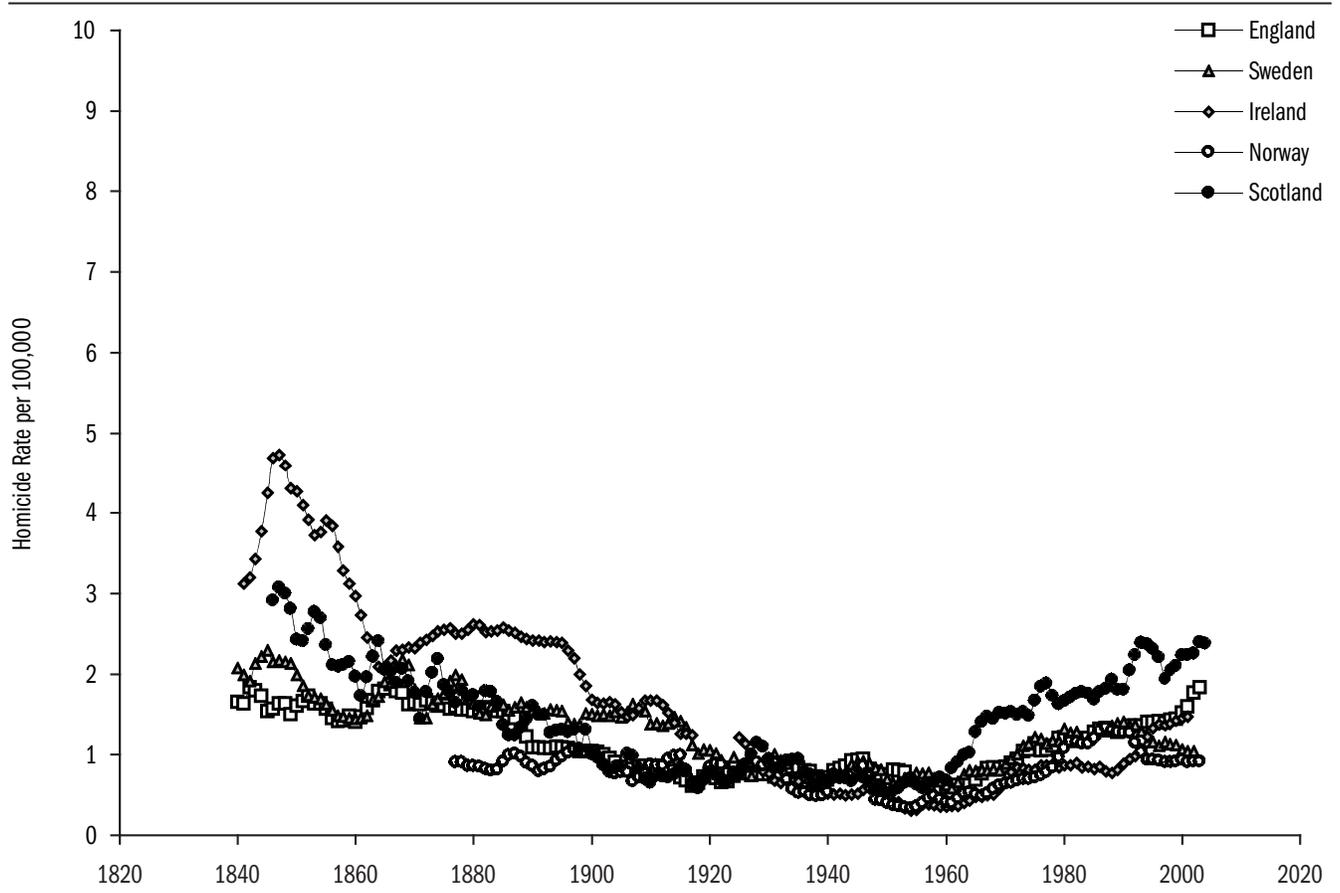


Figure 3: The continental European pattern for homicide trends (per 100,000, 3-year moving averages)

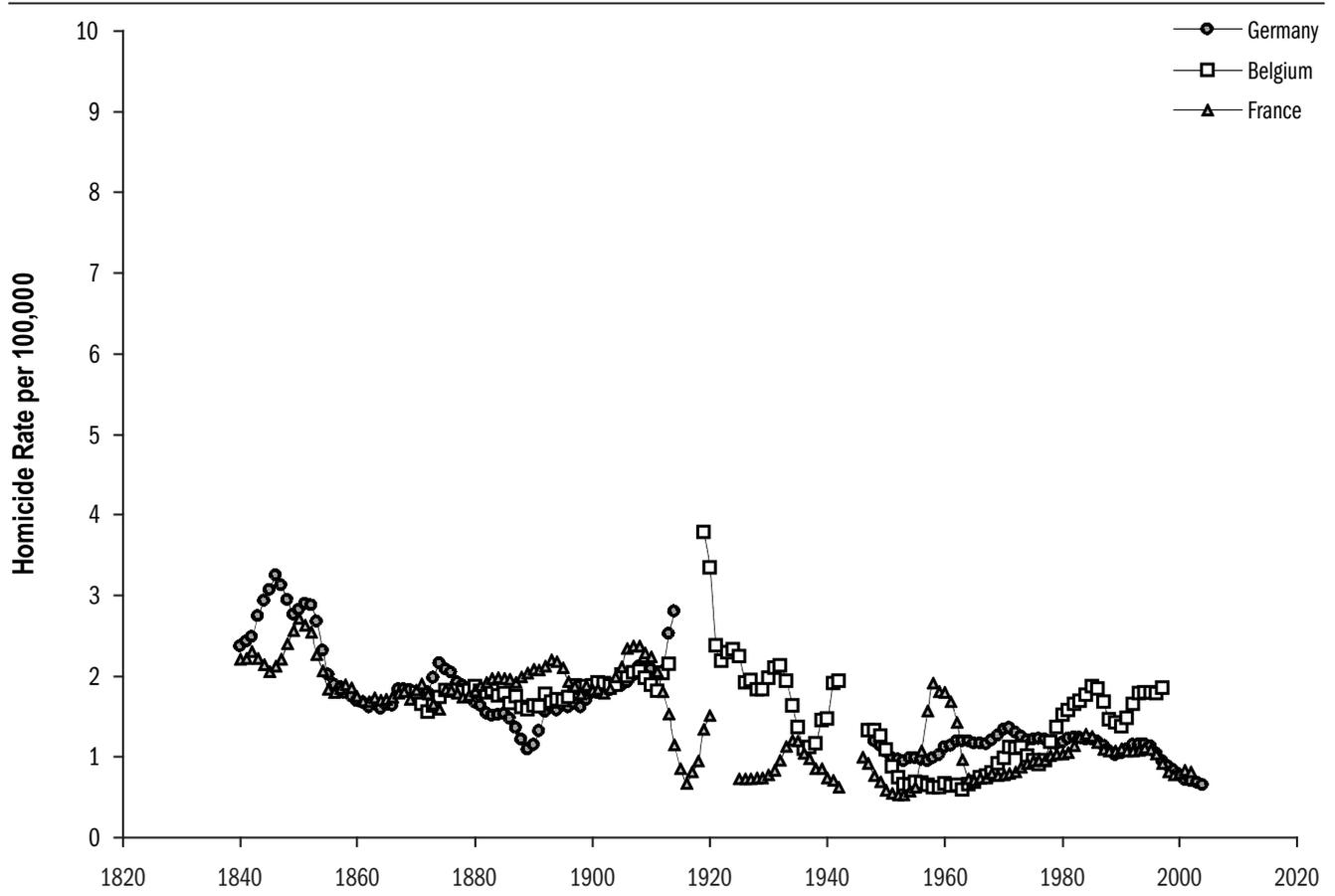
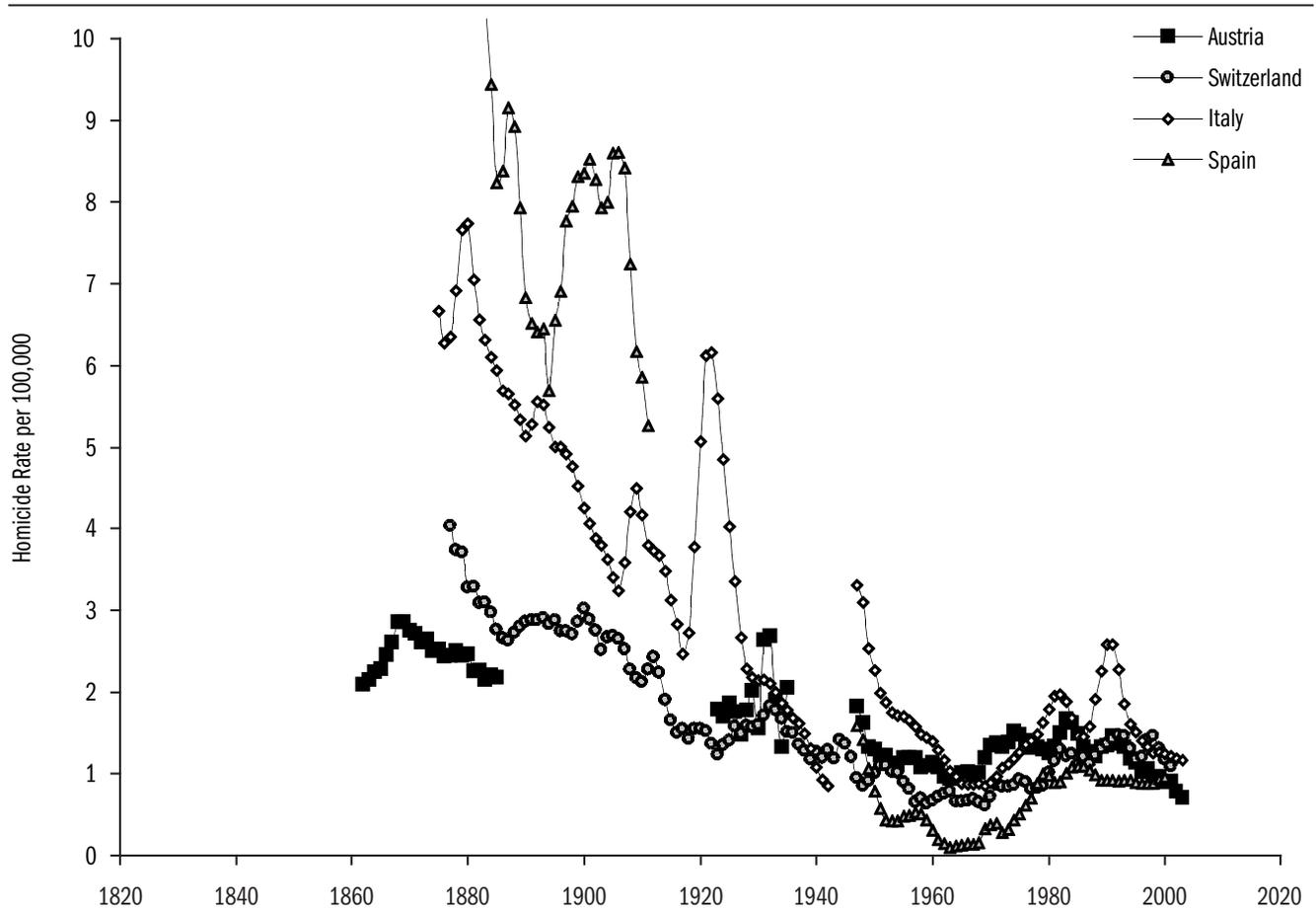


Figure 4: The southern European pattern for homicide trends (per 100,000, 3-year moving averages)



One group is the British Isles, Norway and Sweden with very similar trends of gradual, uninterrupted moderate decline between 1840 and 1950. A second is France, Belgium, and Germany, where homicide rates were significantly lower in the 1950s than at the beginning of the series but rose between about 1885 and the beginning of World War I. A third group are countries in southern Europe including Spain, Italy, Switzerland, Austria, and most probably also Greece, where homicide rates were much higher in the mid-nineteenth century and the decline was particularly steep.

*Differences by sex and age of the victims.* Data on victim characteristics such as age and sex provide important additional information about which types of homicide contributed most to the overall decline. Whereas overall national statistics are available for many countries, the data-set cur-

rently only comprises series with detailed victim categories for Switzerland, Sweden, and England and Wales. They reveal two main dynamics.

First, they suggest that the overall decline was mainly a decline in male-on-male violence. In Switzerland, for example, the ratio of male to female victims dropped from 2:1 in the 1880s to 1:1 in the 1950s. Over the same period the ratio in Sweden fell even more, from 3:1 to 1:1. The same is true for England where findings by Wiener (2004, 167) provide additional insight. From the 1860s to 1900 he finds that the overall decline in murder cases was composed of two trends: the rate of wife murder remained more or less stable while there was a disproportionate decrease in murder other than wives – overwhelmingly situations of men killing men.

Secondly, a disproportionate part of the decline was due to a reduction amongst victims aged 20–29 and 30–39. In Switzerland, for example, mortality statistics show a distinctive age curve for male victims in the 1875–84 period. The risk was highest in the 20–29 age group with a homicide rate of 7.1 per 100,000 and declined with increasing age to about 3.1 in the 60–69 age-group. Looking at male victimization eighty years later (1955–64) one can see a massive decline for all age groups, but by far the greatest decline amongst younger men. Amongst men at ages 20–29 the homicide rate was now a mere 0.4 per 100,000, which equals an astounding reduction by 94 percent over the period.

Data on more countries would be important, but I hypothesize that they would corroborate the same underlying trend: the bulk of the decline across Europe was a reduction in young men getting killed (Verkko 1967). What happened was primarily the pacification of interactions between male non-relatives in the public sphere. Across Europe, this change comes in different guises and affects various manifestations of interpersonal violence. In the south of Europe, rural banditry was still endemic in the mid-nineteenth century. It was widespread, for example, in the rural-pastoral societies of Sardinia, Sicily, Corsica, and Greece (Gallant 1997, 2000; Wilson 1988). In these areas, banditry was associated with other manifestations of violence, in particular feuding and blood revenge, themselves part of a culture of honour. By 1950 such manifestations of an archaic code of honour had not completely disappeared, but their occurrence had become massively reduced.

North of the Alps the code of honour, feuding and revenge already belonged to a relatively distant past by the mid-nineteenth century. However, there were other spheres of public interaction where violence was still common round the mid-nineteenth century and disappearing over the course of the long-term decline. Probably the most visible sphere here is public enjoyment. Prize fighting, for example was a common sport amongst working-class Englishmen in the first half of the century that became increasingly controlled and eventually eliminated as the century went on (Wiener 2004). Football, along with various other male sports, only gradually became the rule-bound game we

know today. Also, male fights and brawls related to alcohol consumption declined throughout Europe.

*Interpretive issues.* Several authors have already described the decline in criminal violence and homicide across Europe during the second half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century (Chesnais 1992; Gatrell 1980; Gurr 1976; Hofer 1991). Although the details of precisely where, when, and why it occurred are still poorly understood, researchers agree that it was a remarkable phenomenon that requires an explanation.

It is worth recalling at this point that the drop in homicide rates is set within a period of enormous social and economic change (for statistical indicators see, e.g. Flora et al., 1983). In 1850 most people across the continent were still working in agriculture, few cities had more than 100,000 inhabitants, and transportation of people or goods over land was mainly by foot, cart, or coach; large parts of the population constantly faced absolute poverty and struggled to produce enough to feed their families; 10–25 percent of newborns died within a year and average life expectancy was around forty, barely above the average typical throughout the early modern period. One hundred years later Europe was a different world in almost every respect: most people now lived in cities and the tertiary sector was about to overtake employment in the industrial sector; trains and cars had revolutionized transport while radio and telephone had annihilated distance as a barrier to communication; life expectancy was close to seventy and infant mortality was reduced to 2–3 percent.

Never before in human history had people been exposed to such a relentless stream of technological, economic, and social change; and there was no precedent to the modern society that emerged out of it. Would it not be plausible to assume that humans would react with increased interpersonal violence to the resulting strains? We know that they have not. None of the putative side-effects of industrial modernity – the loss of cultural traditions, the knowledge revolution, the growth of cities, migration, or repetitive factory work – had a noticeable negative effect on criminal violence. If anything, modernity was associated with decreasing homicide.

For these reasons some older versions of modernization theory which assume that the long-term dynamics of modernization and urbanization necessarily bring about social disorganization, alienation, and anomie (which in turn breeds crime) can be discarded, because they make predictions in the wrong direction (Clinard and Abbott 1973; Szabo 1960). Shelley (1981) in contrast, has developed a more complex criminological modernization theory. In a nutshell, she argues that violent crimes only rose during the most unsettling early stages of industrialization (i.e. before about 1840), but ceded their pre-eminent place to property crimes as the recently arrived rural migrants adjusted to city life (Shelley 1981, 36). Yet, as she notes, many types of property crime also seem to have declined throughout the second half of the nineteenth century (1981, 37). Also, to say that the decline of violent crime demonstrates the accommodation of the urban population to the forces of modernization perhaps begs the question rather than providing a true answer.

Also, we can probably reject more mechanistic implications of criminological opportunity theory – which assumes that the number of motivated offenders can be held constant and that crime levels are mainly influenced by the opportunities a society offers (Felson 1987). The reason is that several important potential drivers of violence in public space – income that can be spent on alcoholic beverages, low social control in anonymous city centres, and the amount of leisure time available for “risk” activities – certainly became more plentiful as the century progressed. A more complex argument about the effects of macro-level change on situational dynamics has been developed by Kick and LaFree (1985; also see LaFree and Kick 1986), who argue that modernization draws people outside the potentially conflictive environment of the family and primary relations, hence reducing the likelihood of murder. Yet one should probably expect that such a dynamic would result primarily in the decline of family homicide, while the empirical data suggest that most of the drop occurred amongst young men fighting each other.

Finally, there is little to suggest that increased state social control such as policing, deterrence, or imprisonment caused the sustained downturn in violent crime. Police

forces did become larger and more professional from the 1850s to the 1950s, but they were still small in comparison to the standards of the later part of the twentieth century when criminal violence soared. Also, the main trend in punitive policies during the period was towards less imprisonment (e.g. for England and Wales and the Netherlands see Downes 1989), less capital punishment, and more re-integrative reformation (Emsley 2007; G. Rose 1961).

Ultimately, in my view, the most convincing explanation assumes a leading role of culture. What provides unity to the period from 1850 to 1950 and can plausibly explain the long-term decline in male-to-male public violence is the diffusion, throughout Europe, of a cultural model of the conduct of life, reinforced and reproduced through social institutions (Gay 2001). This model includes three main elements: an emphasis on *self-control* as an ideal of personality; *domesticity and familialism* as guidelines for private life; and *respectability* as the yardstick for public appearance.

Self-control was probably the most pervasive element of the nineteenth century model of the conduct of life. It included the gospel of thriftiness, diligence, frugality, sobriety, order and, cleanliness. It was a theme that was reiterated by parents and teachers and resounded through schools, churches, labour unions, and the abundant advice literature (Gay 2001). It can be easily seen how and why self-control contributed to reducing male-to-male violence. For one, to the extent that self-restraint was inculcated in boys and young men through a variety of socializing institutions, their propensity to act impulsively in the face of provocation or frustration declined. Also, self-control was the guiding theme behind the successful efforts to reduce the consumption of alcohol. In Sweden, per capita alcohol consumption halved between the 1860s and the 1930s (Willner 2001). Similarly, alcohol consumption fell significantly in Switzerland from the 1870s onwards, particularly the consumption of massive amounts of spirits amongst the working poor during weekends. Finally, as Wiener points out, forethought, reasonableness, and command over oneself were the core qualities of the rising ideal of the “man of dignity” who replaced the older ideal of the “man of honor” (2004, 6).

The nineteenth-century devotion to domesticity was many things. Certainly it was an ideological tool to legitimate gender inequality and to confine women to the household. However, domesticity also fundamentally transformed notions of masculinity (Tosh 1999). In particular, the ideal of a harmonious family life, reiterated in nineteenth-century advice literature, crucially included the notion that men and women should root their identities in the family and the upbringing of children. It emphasized that consistent and caring parenting was essential, that men should refrain from beating their wife or their children, and that they should devote their time outside work to promoting the happiness of the family.

The third element was respectability and fear of embarrassment (e.g. Huggins 2000). Although related to self-control, respectability was more about the impression one made on other people. Importantly in the context of violence, respectability was the principal code that regulated interaction in public places (Croll 1999). In particular, respectability constrained behaviour in the expanding area of leisure time whether in middle class arenas such as seaside resorts and racing grounds, or working class activities such as football or gymnastics (Walvin 1978).

Of course this model for conducting life was not a monolithic phenomenon. It differed between classes, changed over the decades, and had varying nuances in the respective national discourses. However, it can easily be recognized as a distinctive code over the century, it powerfully moulded the working of social institutions such as schools and the family, and it effectively influenced the way people acted and expected to act in public space.

Finally, it seems worth mentioning as an aside that the decline in homicide cut through all the political faultlines and catastrophes of the century: it occurred similarly in democracies, monarchies, and authoritarian regimes; it continued through dramatic political change in the history of countries like Ireland, Italy, or Spain; and it also cut through the atrocities of the two world wars and the mass killings by the Nazi regime. This observation means – and this is a normative rather than a theoretical thought – that we should probably not equate declines in interpersonal criminal violence with civility in a wider normative sense. Disturbingly, populations in which fighting, feuding, and criminal killing are very unlikely can nonetheless support and engage in denunciation, deportation, and mass-killings (Goldhagen 1996; Johnson 2000).

#### **5. 1960 to 1993: The years of increase**

By around 1955 the double trend of decline and convergence comes to a halt and for about a decade homicide levels are very low across Europe before they start to rise again. Before commenting on the increase and its possible causes it is useful to more closely examine the timing of the trend reversal and the overall extent of the increase. To this goal mean homicide rates were computed for each country, for all overlapping five-year periods after the end of World War II (i.e. 1950–54, 1951–55, 1952–56, etc.). In a next step the five-year periods with the lowest and the highest average homicide rates were identified. Averages were computed because they reduce the impact of annual fluctuations and thus give a clearer picture of the main pattern. Table 4 shows the periods with the lowest and the highest homicide rates as well as the relative increase between the trough and the peak of the respective series.

**Table 4: Lower and upper turning points of homicide rates, 1945–2004, sorted by homicide rate at lower turning point**

	Lower turning point		Upper turning point		Increase, low to high
	Year	Rate	Year	Rate	
Netherlands	1957	0.32	1995	1.26	294%
Ireland	1957	0.34	2001	1.43	321%
Norway	1953	0.35	1989	1.30	271%
Denmark	1960	0.49	1994	1.26	157%
France	1953	0.55	1985	1.80	227%
Scotland	1955	0.56	1995	2.34	318%
England and Wales	1961	0.60	2003	1.69	182%
Belgium	1962	0.63	1996	1.82	189%
Sweden	1960	0.64	1991	1.38	116%
Switzerland	1968	0.64	1992	1.42	122%
Italy	1968	0.86	1991	2.26	163%
Germany	1955	0.94	1972	1.29	37%
Austria	1966	0.97	1985	1.50	55%
Finland	1966	2.04	1996	3.25	59%
Average	1960	0.71	1992	1.78	179%

Note: Lower turning point computed as the lowest average homicide rate over a five-year period, year shown is the middle year of the period.

The data show that in each country a long-term low of homicide rates was reached sometime between the early 1950s and the late 1960s, with a cluster of lower turning points between 1957 and 1966. During these years, several countries had sustained periods with rates significantly below 0.5 per 100,000. This includes Norway (homicide rate of 0.35 per 100,000, 1951–55), the Netherlands (0.32 per 100,000, 1955–59), Ireland (0.34 per 100,000, 1955–59), and Denmark (0.49 per 100,000, 1958–62). Rates in Sweden, England, Scotland, and Switzerland were only marginally higher.

These rates are quite remarkable. They represent the lowest levels of criminal killing documented in Europe since the start of written records eight hundred years ago and may well be the lowest rates ever recorded anywhere in the world. To compare them with contemporary rates, one should additionally take into account that they include a comparatively large proportion of infanticides and were achieved with far less efficient medical technologies. Considering both factors, these rates probably correspond to a benchmark of about 0.2 non-infant homicides per 100,000. This is equal to roughly a fifth of current levels in western

Europe and twenty times less than contemporary homicide rates in the United States (5.6 per 100,000 in 2006, see Bureau of Justice Statistics, <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs>).

Although a handful of criminological studies have examined why some societies have little crime (Adler 1983; Clinard 1978), none appears to have looked at how these northern European countries managed to keep homicide significantly below 0.5 per 100,000 during the 1950s. Based on the previous argument, my hypothesis is that its cornerstone was the successful generalization across class boundaries of a cultural model of conducting life that combined self-constraint, familialism, and the pursuit of respectability. Its corollaries were high integration and trust (Clinard 1978), a sense of civic responsibility embedded in moral individualism (Dicristina 2004; Durkheim 1957), and a system of reintegrative informal social control, possibly in part related to the relative smallness of the countries (Adler 1983; Braithwaite 1989). Mortality statistics for this period show where this model made the biggest cuts: homicide rates for young male victims were as low as those for all

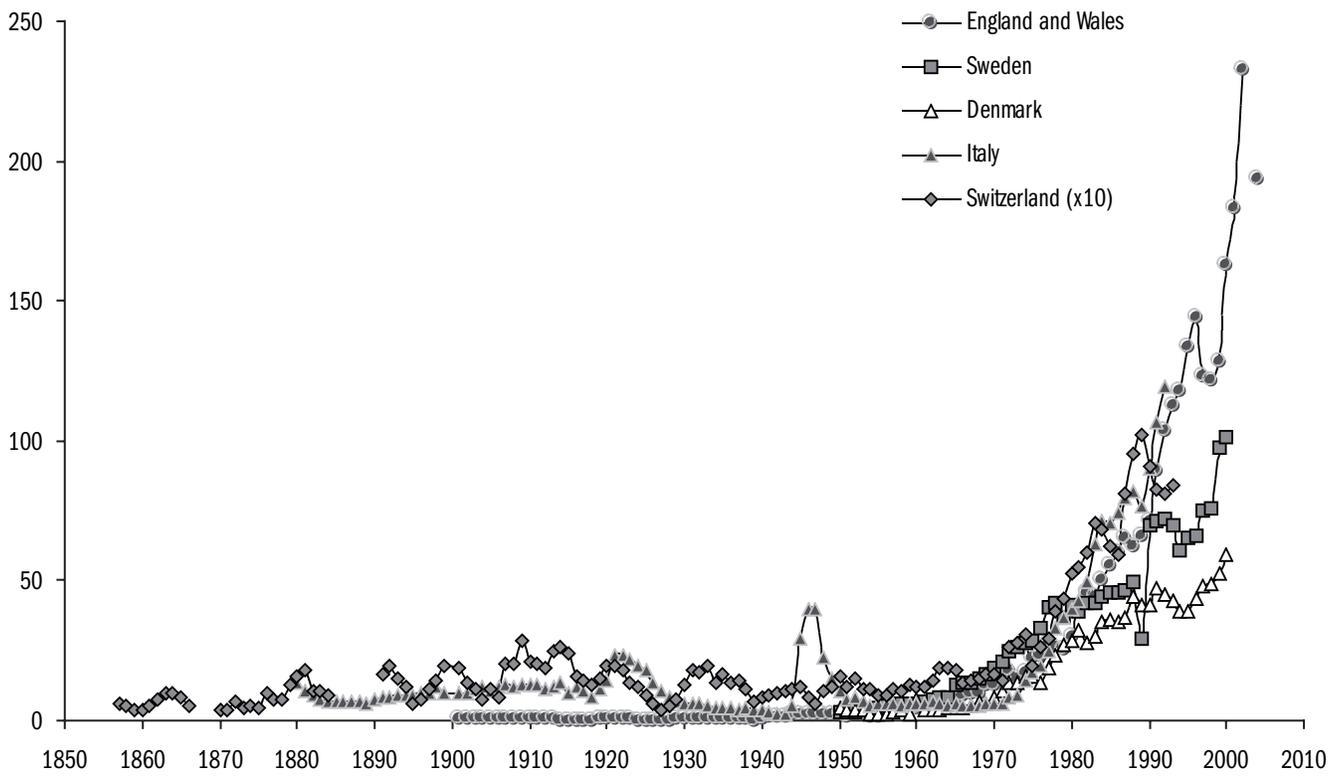
other age groups, while serious male-to-male violence was virtually absent.

But then things begin to change. From about 1960 onwards every series included in this analysis starts an upward trend that continues until the early 1990s (see also Thome and Birkel 2007). The average increase during this period was in the order of 100–150 percent, but the data in Table 4 also suggest a stronger surge in those countries that had the lowest homicide rates in the 1950s or early 1960s.

It is tempting to compare this increase to levels of deadly criminal violence in earlier centuries. This leads to the conclusion that a change from 0.7 to 1.4 killings per 100,000 inhabitants is almost negligible if compared to rates of

30–60 per 100,000 in the late Middle Ages (e.g. Eisner 2003; Spierenburg 2001). However, this is only true if counting criminal killings is our sole interest. Yet if we think of homicide as an indicator for wider levels of violence, then long-term and short-term progress in technologies of healing should be borne in mind. In particular, wound treatment with antiseptics (from about 1900), the use of antibiotics (from the 1940s), progress in the treatment of blood vessel injuries, and accelerated access to treatment thanks to better transportation reduced the lethality of injuries. This may be one of the reasons why homicides increased less than other indicators of criminal violence. For robbery, for example, things are more dramatic. Consider Figure 2, which shows trends in police recorded robbery rates for England and Wales, Sweden, Denmark, and Italy.

Figure 5: Robbery rates per 100,000 population for five European countries



Sources

- England and Wales: Police recorded robbery, Home Office, ed. Criminal Statistics, various years.
- Sweden: Police recorded robbery, Nordic Criminal Statistics (Hofer 2003b).
- Denmark: Police recorded robbery, Nordic Criminal Statistics (Hofer 2003b).
- Italy: Police recorded robbery, Istituto Nazionale di Statistica (2004)
- Switzerland: Convictions for robbery, Canton of Zurich only (Eisner 1992).

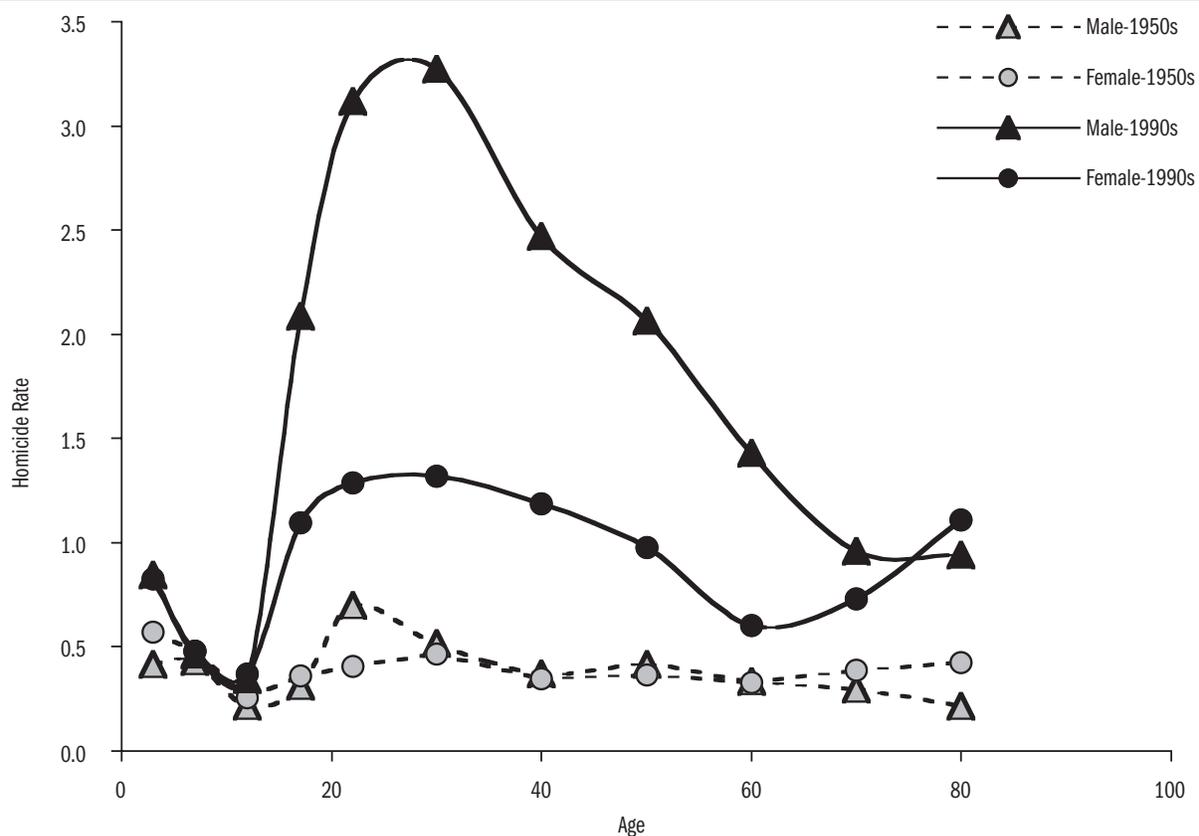
The figure illustrates that robbery was largely unknown in European cities throughout the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. But since the early 1960s the number of police recorded robberies has exploded. Maybe this can in part be attributed to more reporting and better recording, but a large proportion certainly reflects a real change that is unparalleled in the history of modern European society.

Even more than during the period before 1950, the course of homicide rates is essentially a phenomenon in which the boundaries of nation states are all but irrelevant. As far as homicide is concerned, the “European unification” is already complete by 1950. One way to express this similarity statistically is to compute the amount of variance in national series that is represented by the joint European trend.

Respective figures show that with two exceptions (Finland and France, the latter because of the increased levels of homicide during the Algerian War) about 40–60 percent of the variation are represented by the joint trend.

But the mere similarity in overall trends is not the only thing that is common across all countries. There is also sweeping correspondence in the types of homicide that became more frequent. Again, detailed mortality data prove to be helpful. They show that the increase was an increase in male victimization rather than female victimization and particularly an increase amongst younger people. To illustrate these changes Figure 6 shows the age distribution of male and female non-infant victims of homicide in England and Wales during the 1950s and the 1990s.

Figure 6: Homicide victimization rates by age in 1950-59 and 1990-99, England and Wales, non-infant death



Source: Home Office (various years), Criminal Statistics for England and Wales.

Notice, first, that the age curve during the 1950s was characterized by the virtual absence of any peak during early adulthood and no gender difference in the victimization risk. By the 1990s, this had changed dramatically. The increase was stronger for male than for female victims and more pronounced for young adults. Amongst men aged 20–40, the risk of being a victim of criminal homicide rose five- to sevenfold during this period. Corroborating evidence comes from the Criminal Statistics of England and Wales (Home Office, various years), which since 1969 have included tables on the relationship between offender and victim. They show revealing differences: A moderate decline in family homicide, a moderate increase in homicides against acquaintances, and a massive eightfold surge in homicides against strangers (from about fifty cases around 1970 to about 400 cases around 2000. For a similar finding in Stockholm see Wikström 1992).

This leaves us with the conclusion that the notion of increasing violence since the early 1960s misses the point. Rather, disaggregation reveals different trends for different types of violence (for a similar observation see Blumstein and Rosenfeld 1998): Across Europe infanticide continued to decrease throughout the period; also, family homicides did not increase and probably were slightly decreasing; what soared dramatically, though, were killings that involved men, predominantly in public space. One may think of fights between youth gangs, armed robberies, conflicts between drug addicts ending in a knife being pulled, or simple pub brawls going wrong.

There are certainly gaps in the data presented here. But despite undeniable shortcomings they suggest a remarkable symmetry between the decline in 1850–1950 and the increase from about 1960–1990. While the decrease occurred mainly because fewer men killed each other in public space, the surge since the 1960s primarily resulted from soaring numbers of young men getting killed in public space by people they hardly knew.

*Interpretive issues.* This descriptive summary leads back to the question of plausible explanations: what could have caused the almost simultaneous rise, across Europe, of

lethal violence between young men? Let me again start by eliminating a number of candidates.

First, it seems difficult to see how any version of deprivation theory could work. Take the example of Jock Young's *Exclusive Society* (1999), one of the most elaborate attempts at explaining the increase of crime in late modernity from a structural perspective. Basically, Young argues that the increase was linked to the "crisis" of the post-war "Fordist" regime of production, which had provided stable employment combined with a welfare state that furnished social protection "from the cradle to the grave". That model was replaced by a post-Fordist mode of production characterized by unstable employment for many, a devaluation of manual labour, increasing disparities in income distribution, and a dismantling of the welfare state. It created social exclusion, which, in turn, propagated frustration, resentment, and reactive violence on the part of the excluded (for a critical discussion see Yar and Penna 2004).

There are several problems with this argument. First, it implies a degree of stability and inclusion of the "Fordist" regime that hardly stands up to historical scrutiny. If anything, late nineteenth and early twentieth century workers were significantly less protected from the vagaries of economic change than late twentieth century working classes, yet nonetheless homicide continued to decline through the protracted Long Depression of 1873–96 and the Great Depression of the 1930s. Also, why did violence and crime start to increase more than a decade before the first oil crisis of 1973, which triggered a deep economic crisis across the world economy? Finally, increasing social inequality and the dismantling of the welfare state since the late 1970s were very much phenomena linked to the political history of the United Kingdom and the United States, but violence similarly increased in Sweden, Denmark, and Switzerland, where there is no evidence for increasing income inequality and where the welfare state remained intact – or was extended – during the relevant period (Alderson 2002).

Another group of explanations attributes the increase of criminal violence to an "excess" of modernity, meaning that violence is caused by the pathologies of modern society. There are materialist and culturalist versions of

this argument. The scholar best known for the materialist version is Charles Murray (1984, 1994). He basically argues that the expansion of the welfare state symbolized by the Kennedy years in the United States started to give away too much to too many. The consequence was that a dependency culture developed, that the work ethic eroded, and that family values crumbled. Over the years this led to the growth of a socially irresponsible “underclass”, whose growth is visible through two main indicators: the rise in violent crime amongst young men and the rise of illegitimate births among young women. The problem with this argument is that there was a lot of variation – over time and between countries – in the expansion of the welfare state since the 1950s while the trends in homicide rates are so surprisingly similar. Also, it is hard to see why the rise of the “underclass” should only have affected street violence while domestic homicides probably continued to decline.

The culturalist version is essentially about too much individualism, too much materialism, and too much egoism. Two well-known versions are *Crime and the American Dream* by Messner and Rosenfeld (1994) and *The Great Disruption* by Fukuyama (1999). Similarly, Thome and Birkel (2007) have recently argued that over the past decades structural factors have promoted a disintegrative individualism at the expense of an older model of cooperative individualism.

*The Great Disruption* is particularly interesting in this context because there is some overlap with the argument developed here. Fukuyama correctly observes that the simultaneous rise in indicators of crime and violence across all Western societies precludes explanations that rely on national politics. I also concur with his analysis that deprivation-based explanations are implausible. And I agree with him that the decay of the Victorian model of selfhood based on restraint, domesticity, and respect was an important element in the story and that it contributed to the increase in male-on-male violence since the early 1960s.

However, I believe Fukuyama is imprecise in what he identifies as the underlying cultural shift. Informed by the communitarian ideas developed by Etzioni (1993) Fukuyama argues that the “great disruption” was caused by a

dramatic swing towards “excessive” individualism that corroded virtually all forms of authority and weakened the bonds holding together families, neighbourhoods, and nations. Conceptually, however, the notion of “excessive” individualism remains vague and the empirical question of how much individualism is “excessive” is unanswered. Also, why it should lead to more crime and violence is rather unclear. For example, Fukuyama sees the main characteristic of excessive individualism in the “preoccupation with one’s private life and family” to the detriment of engagement in public affairs, hardly the standard characteristics that criminologists would associate either with parents of problematic adolescents or with people at risk of committing violent offences. However, there is no doubt that the period of the late 1950s and early 1960s saw a fundamental shift in culturally transmitted values that fundamentally altered views about how to conduct life and how to interact in public space.

There are two concepts in the toolbox of cultural sociology that may be better able to capture the nature of this transition. Both have been developed in and with a view to the United States, but both describe the cultural shift equally well in Europe. The first is the notion of a transition from the “inner-directed” to the “outer-directed” character developed by Daniel Riesman. In his best-selling book *The Lonely Crowd* – first published in 1950 – Riesman documented the transition from the ideal inner-directed self, deeply rooted in the commitment to work and occupation, to an imagery of the outer-directed self associated with affluent society. The outer-directed self is dependent on the opinion of others, is anxious to be loved and accepted, needs excitement, pleasure and consumption to find fulfillment. This pessimistic story of the “lonely crowd” reunited in mass consumption is retold in many sociological accounts of the changing conception of the self in the decades of the 1970s and 1980s. Most prominent are the accounts offered by Bell (1976), Sennett (1977), and Lash (1978). Although arguing from different theoretical vantage points, these authors come to the conclusion that the inner-directed, self-contained, and disciplined self has rapidly vanished and lost its significance as the guiding cultural ideal. According to their views, the cultural notion of the

self as endowed with *character* has been corroded (Sennett 1998) giving way to the glorification of *fluid identity*.

The other element that begins its rise in the cultural landscape of the 1950s is what Bellah et al. (1985) called *expressive individualism*. Its core element is self-actualization, the goal of expressing one's own unique nature, emotions, and desires, while at the same time reducing the emphasis on observing society's rules and constraining one's own impulses. They argue that the cultural model of the expressive self greatly emphasizes the deeper expression and cultivation of the self, which articulates the inner world of feelings and emotions, emphasizing virtues such as sensitivity, emotionality, authenticity, openness, and empathy. In a similar vein, but with even more obvious ties to criminological thinking, Turner (1976) argued in the mid 1970s that the dominant cultural code of the self has shifted from what he labels the "institutional self" to the "impulsive self", making the potential link to our theme even more evident. Under the institutional locus of the self, the real self is revealed only when the individual is in full control of its faculties and behaviours. Rules that govern interaction in public space are as perceived resources and failure to adhere exposes moral imperfection. Under the cultural code of the impulsive self, in contrast, institutions are external, artificial constraints and the true self is revealed only when inhibitions are lowered or abandoned (Turner 1976, 993).

Many of these broad cultural shifts are well documented empirically, although there are hardly any quantitative indicators. They are evident, for example, in the rapid spread of distinct youth subcultures across Europe starting in the mid 1950s (Fyvel 1966; Kurme 2006; Marvick 1998). It is amongst the teddy boys, mods, rockers and hippies where the rise of an expressive self seeking for true fulfilment outside the oppressive rules of society and anchored in excitement, consumption, and pleasure finds its purest expression. The gang in *A Clockwork Orange* – written by Anthony Burgess in 1962 – that commits crime for pure enjoyment epitomizes this new culture. It is certainly not primarily individualistic. Quite to the contrary it appears, from the vantage point of the moral individualism that Durkheim had in mind, primarily anti-individualistic, condoning masculinity and its code of honour – a remarkable

return to some patterns that were associated with violence around 120 years before.

#### **Epilogue: 1993 to present – Back to the civilizing trend?**

It is well known that in the United States the year 1992 constitutes a major turning-point as regards the frequency of homicide. In 1992, the United States experienced a peak rate of about 10 homicides per 100,000 including particularly high victimization rates among teens and young adults (Blumstein 2000). Since then the United States have experienced a much-debated decline in violent crime including a drop in homicide rates by more than 40 percent and a current rate of about 5.6 per 100,000 (roughly five times the current average rates in most western European countries).

However, while the crime drop in the United States has received a lot of public and academic attention (e.g. Blumstein and Wallman 2000), few observers have noticed that a very similar change has occurred in Europe. Consider the data shown in Table 4 above. They demonstrate that in many European countries homicide rates also reached a peak in the late 1980s or early 1990s and that the mean year of the upper turning point is precisely the same as in the United States, namely 1992. Since then, homicide rates in most European countries have been falling, in some cases quite dramatically. In Austria, the mortality statistics suggest a fall in the homicide rate by 62 percent from 1.49 in 1992 to 0.55 in 2003. Germany had a similar decline from 1.18 in 1992 to 0.63 in 2003. Italy counted over 1,600 violent deaths in 1991 (homicide rate of 2.84 per 100,000) dropping to a mere 550 in 2001, a decline by over 60 percent (Piacenti 2005). Declining trends can also be found in France, Switzerland, Portugal, and across Scandinavian countries, while the British Isles with increases continuing in England and Wales, Scotland, and Ireland are the major exception.

It is tempting to extrapolate the interpretive sketch developed on the preceding pages to this most recent change in the long evolution of homicide rates. Especially as we are looking at a phenomenon that transcends national borders yet again. The years between 1990 and 1993 were a watershed as regards homicide rates across the Western world. They started declining in the United States, but they did the same across much of Europe with the notable exception of

the United Kingdom and Ireland. Similarly, homicides rates have been declining since the late 1980s in Australia (from a peak of 2.3 in 1989 to 1.3 in 2005, see Mountzos 2003) and in Canada (from 2.6 in 1992 to 1.8 in 2004). The extent of decline differed and it is relevant to ask why these differences exist. But this does not detract from the main argument developed throughout this paper, namely that the primary unit of analysis for the kind of questions addressed in this paper must be the Western world. Also, I find many of the more conventional explanations offered in the criminological literature rather unconvincing. The similarity of trends across the Western world, for example, makes discussions of how the merits or faults of American criminal policy caused the drop in violence look rather parochial (Blumstein and Wallman 2000). Finally, the recent drop in homicide does not line up well with economic success or failure. Homicide rates continued to increase over the last fifteen years in England, Scotland and Ireland, where unemployment dropped significantly, while homicide went down in France and Germany where unemployment levels remained high.

Wherever the decline occurred, my guess is that it was primarily a decline in male-to-male homicides between strangers or acquaintances. And my favourite candidate for explaining the downturn would again be culture, the only phenomenon that travels fast enough to affect such vast areas roughly simultaneously. More specifically, I would look out for a manifest shift in culturally embedded images of conducting life, for example, in changed ideas of how to bring up children well. Such change is visible, for example, in the resurgence of good parenting as a major domain of prevention research and policy, in a partial shift of parenting values towards re-emphasizing self-control and respect, it can be traced in changed attitudes towards drugs, which have lost their revolutionary aura, and it is manifest in a greater emphasis on discipline, respect, and responsibility as guiding principles in primary and secondary education.

### Conclusions

The main interest of this paper was whether an explicit macro-level and long-term perspective can add anything to the question of what caused the increase in criminal violence in most European countries during the second half of the twentieth century. Looking at trends over 160 years

for up to sixteen countries this study found three broad empirical patterns that have a bearing on the range of plausible generalizing explanations.

First, the findings suggest that very low rates of homicide found across most of Europe during the late 1950s, when the period of sustained increase begins, should probably be seen as a rather exceptional phenomenon. Any attempt at explaining the trend of increasing violent crime from the early 1960s onwards thus probably needs to entail some understanding of how the uniquely low homicide levels of the 1950s came about. The findings presented in this paper suggest that they may have emerged as the result of a century-long dynamic that probably started in around 1850, can be summarized as the twin trend of decline and convergence, and was surprisingly unaffected by major economic crises or the political catastrophes of a very troubled century.

Secondly, the data presented in this paper suggest that some previous explanatory approaches may have significantly overestimated the importance of national-level endogenous forces such as national welfare and criminal justice policies or the national specificities of demographic change and migration patterns. More specifically, this study found that both the lower and the upper turning points in violence trends across Europe were surprisingly synchronized with many national series only deviating a few years from the mean year of the lower (1960) and the upper (1992) turning points. Furthermore, it was pointed out that the early 1990s emerge as an upper turning point in homicide rates – followed by at least ten years of sometimes significant decline – not only in Europe, but also in the United States, in Canada, and in Australia. Highlighting these surprising similarities does not imply that nation states and their political idiosyncrasies are completely irrelevant. However, the findings presented in this paper do favour an analytic perspective that gives logical precedence to the temporal variation that is shared within large geo-cultural units (e.g. north-western Europe in the nineteenth century, affluent Western societies since the 1950s, etc.) and then considers nation-states as special cases within a broader picture.

Thirdly, this paper presented additional evidence on an empirical regularity initially found by Verkko (1967) whose

theoretical significance may not yet have been fully appreciated. More specifically, analyses of victim characteristics suggest that an over-proportional part of the decline in homicide rates during the nineteenth and early twentieth century may have been due to a reduction in the deaths of young men, and that, symmetrically, an over-proportional part of the increase since the late 1950s was due to an upsurge in killings of young men. Although more thorough data would need to be collected to fully document this pattern this paper hypothesizes that most of the long-term variation in overall homicide rates is due to male-on-male conflicts in public space. If confirmed by more data, this would suggest that a theoretical explanation of the increasing levels of criminal violence would need to focus on how Western societies regulated the interaction between young men in public space.

Overall, this paper thus suggests that an elegant theory of the increase in deadly interpersonal violence during the second half of the twentieth century should also be able to account for the declining trend that prevailed through most of Europe during the century before 1950, that it should be able to explain the coincidence in lower and upper turning points across the continent and beyond; and it should be able to elucidate the disproportional contribution of conflicts between young men to the grand fluctuations in homicide rates.

Of course, there are many possible theories that can account for these three observations. This paper tentatively suggests a perspective that builds on Max Weber's notion of culturally embedded models of *Lebensführung*, reinforced and reproduced through social institutions. It proposes linking the major fluctuations in homicide rates to change in norms and expectations about how young men interact in public space. But without any doubt such a suggestion paves the way to many new questions, unaddressed in this paper, not the least of which is whether such a theoretical perspective could be moved beyond the level of speculation and be subjected to more rigorous empirical tests.

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## Appendix

### Data Sources

This appendix documents the main data used for the History of Violence Database and the respective sources.

*Austria.* There is a series of convictions for completed murder and manslaughter from 1862–1887 based on tables in the *Österreichisches Statistisches Jahrbuch* and published in Bosco (1889). From 1924 to 1936 I use the data published in Hacker (1938) that are also based on conviction statistics. From 1947 onwards data are based on the death statistics as published in the WHO tables.

*Belgium.* From 1870 onwards the *Annuaire Statistique de la Belgique* has published the number of victims of homicide as counted in the national death statistics. From 1980 data are based on the WHO death statistics (identical to the national death statistics).

*England and Wales.* England and Wales have two major national systems for registering homicides, namely the causes of death statistics and the police statistics. Except for minor divergences both series have always been very close. For the total homicide rates displayed in Figure 1 through 5 I rely from 1857 on the number of police recorded homicides. Gattrell (1980) presents an earlier series of homicide rates covering the period 1834–56. For the period from 1967 onwards the data used here refer to the number of cases “initially recorded as homicide”. A proportion of these cases will eventually be found not to have been a homicide and the Home Office statistics regularly update their data base as to the final outcome of the police investigation. However, the series of initially recorded homicides seemed to be more compatible with the data covering the period before 1967. The figures for victims of intentional killing by sex and age group have been published in the *Annual Report of the Registrar General* since 1857 (Registrar General, 1837ff). Furthermore, the National Crime Statistics publications regularly include a separate section with detailed analyses of the circumstances of homicides and the demographic backgrounds of offenders and victims.

*Finland.* Finland and Sweden have the oldest national causes of death statistics in the world, going back to 1754.

The data on infanticides and male and female non-infant victims for 1754–1944 were published by Verkko (1951). Data for subsequent years up to 2003 are also based on national death statistics compiled by Statistics Finland and made available to me by Martti Lehti (e.g. Lehti 2001).

*Germany.* The earliest series used here is the series published by Starke (1884) on persons accused of murder, manslaughter or infanticide in Prussia from 1854 to 1873 (which is virtually identical to the series presented by Ferri in *Lomicidio-suicidio*). From 1873 to 1914 I use the number of homicides recorded in the causes-of-death statistics for Prussia. Johnson (1995) published the full series up to 1914. Data since 1947 are based in the national causes of death statistics published in the WHO volumes. There is a gap in the series between 1914 and 1947.

*Ireland.* O’Donnell (2004) has done pioneering work on the development of homicide and infanticide rates in Ireland, discussing, inter alia, the various sources and possible methodological problems. The series is based on various sources but primarily relies on crimes known to the police from 1841–1919 and 1947–2003 while relying on the Registrar General’s mortality statistics for 1935–1946. I am grateful to Jan O’Donnell for having given me access to the data. Data include a separate series on infanticides and a series of non-infant deaths. The “homicide” series used here includes both.

*Italy.* Italy has a complete series of police recorded homicides called “Delitti denunciati per i quali l’Autorita giudiziaria ha iniziato l’azione penale” published in the Italian justice statistics. An overview for 1872–1955 can be found in the *Summary of Historical Statistics* by the Istituto Centrale di Statistica (Istituto Centrale di Statistica, 1958). Later years are recorded in the annual judicial statistics (Istituto Nazionale di Statistica, 2000) It should be borne in mind that this series also includes attempted homicides. To correct for inflated levels of the police statistics I also collected a series of homicide victims as recorded in the national causes of death statistics and reported in the WHO publications. Comparison of the death statistics and the police statistics for the 1947 to 2000 period suggest that both series are highly correlated ( $r=0.90$ ). A regression analysis

revealed that the police series includes 59 percent attempts and that this fraction has remained basically stable over the comparison period. I hence decided to use the police series over the whole period but to correct for the inclusion of attempts by multiplying by a constant conversion factor of 0.41 over the whole period.

*France.* France has national causes of death statistics with separate figures on homicide from 1925 onwards. Detailed data by sex and age category are available online at <http://www.ined.fr/bdd/causfra/intro.html> (accessed 24 April 2006) and are discussed by Vallin and Meslé (1996). Data for 1827–1920 are based on the number of accusations at the *cours des assises* and can be found in the *Compte general de l'administration de la justice criminelle en France* (Ministère de la Justice 1832–1930). For the total number of homicides I rely on the series compiled and published by Ferri (1925). The series includes the total number of cases referring to murder (*meurtre*), manslaughter (*assassinat*), parenticide (*parricide*), poisoning (*empoisonnement*), infanticide, and assault leading to death. For cases of infanticide there is a separate series of cases adjudicated by the *cours des assises* covering the years 1826–1963 published in.

*Netherlands.* From 1900 to 1930 I relied on the convictions for homicide series presented by Archer and Gartner (1984). From 1931 onwards the data used here are based on causes-of-death statistics as presented in the *National Statistical Yearbook* and published by the World Health Organisation. For the period between 1931 and 1972 I also compared both series. Excluding the periods of war (1942–1945) the correlation between both series is 0.74, suggesting a fair validity of the conviction data.

*Norway.* The data for Norway are based on the national death statistics. From 1876 to 1914 numbers broken down by the sex of the victim were published in the *Statistical Yearbook Norway* published by the Office of Statistics. From

1915 to 1980 I currently only have the grand total. From 1980 onwards data are based on the WHO statistics and broken down by sex of the victim.

*Scotland.* The series used here is based on the Criminal Statistics for Scotland (known as Judicial Statistics before 1898), for 1847 onwards and refers to the number of completed homicides (murder and culpable homicide) recorded by the police authorities (Home Office 1868ff; for recent overviews see, e.g., Scottish Executive 2005). Like the statistics produced by the Home Office for England and Wales, the Scottish data distinguish between “initially recorded” and “currently recorded” counts since 1978. I use the series of “initially” recorded crimes for comparability with earlier periods.

*Spain.* The current series for Spain has major gaps. For the 1883–1911 period I rely on the series published by Ferri (1925) and based on the Spanish Judicial Statistics. I then have a series of data based on national death statistics from 1950–2003, originating from the WHO tables.

*Sweden.* Sweden has the oldest national series of causes-of-death statistics starting in 1754. Series up to 1944 are presented in Verkko (1951). Data for subsequent years are based on the data published in the *Swedish Statistical Yearbook* and the World Health Organisation data. The data have been previously discussed by Hofer (1991; 2003a).

*Switzerland.* Switzerland has had a national registry of causes of death since 1876. Unpublished tables by the Swiss National Office of Statistics include the number of homicide victims by sex and age group for the period before 1950. For the 1950–2002 period data can also be found in the WHO yearbooks. Killias (1991) first analysed Swiss homicide trends, Bieri (1998) has examined the data quality and analysed the demographic structure of the victims.