

**Murder in a Comparative Context**

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The very scary, yet fascinating, thing about murder is the perception that it is a random occurrence that could happen to anyone at any time anywhere. These perceptions might seem validated by the FBI Crime Clock telling of a murder every 31.5 minutes (FBI, 2006) and by news stories detailing random killings, such as the recent execution-style killings of four college kids in Newark, NJ by robbers and the murderous gun rampage of a Virginia-tech student. Despite these images of murder, the reality is that murder most often is not “*random* violence.” That is, there are statistically identifiable, predictable patterns to murder offending. This chapter explores these statistical patterns of criminal homicide, primarily in the United States, and offers qualitative accounts of various types of murder. This chapter aims to answer the following questions: How common is murder? When and where has murder been most frequent? Who is most likely to commit murder? And, most importantly, Why would someone take the life of another?

Technically, the law enforcement definition of *homicide* is the killing of one person by another, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Homicide includes murder, manslaughter, justifiable homicide, and the accidental killing of one person by another (e.g., hunting accidents). Police use the term “homicide investigation” because at the time of the body’s discovery it is undetermined whether the killing was a murder or not. Homicides in which the killer could not anticipate or avoid the death are not considered criminal homicide. Examples of non-criminal homicide include a police officer justifiably killing a felon or when a citizen kills another in self-defense. In this chapter the primary focus is murder and non-negligent manslaughter – intentional, unlawful homicides. Murder and non-negligent manslaughter include willful actions that a reasonable person should realize will likely lead to a fatal outcome (Black 1990). First and second degree murder are distinguished by premeditation, or deliberation about whether to kill. What distinguishes murder from manslaughter is the intent to cause great bodily harm or death (murder) versus reckless actions that unintentionally lead to death (manslaughter). For example, an offender who intentionally beats a victim to death would likely be charged with murder whereas an offender whose victim later dies as a result of the assault would probably be charged with manslaughter. Manslaughter also might be charged if the offender were provoked in a way that would cause a “reasonable person” to lose control. Negligent manslaughter (aka involuntary manslaughter) is caused by recklessness or careless regard for others without a specific intent to kill, such as driving drunk or severely neglecting a child. State laws defining the specific parameters of murder and voluntary and involuntary manslaughter vary somewhat. Throughout, we use the term murder and criminal homicide to refer to murder and voluntary (non-negligent) manslaughter.

Criminologists and sociologists who study crime typically are interested in identifying common, systematic patterns of murder rather than detailing the specifics of unusual or atypical murder cases, such as those mentioned above. Criminologists use a variety of methods to get a complete and representative picture of homicide offending, ranging from qualitative interviews with a sample of convicted offenders to in depth analyses of legal documents generated in the criminal justice system to quantitative secondary data analyses of police records. Each methodology elucidates slightly

different aspects of homicide offending, making it important to look at multiple sources of evidence.

Regardless of methodology, findings must be interpreted and understood and this is more easily done with a *comparative perspective*. A comparative perspective simply means examining social phenomenon to assess similarities and differences across social groupings, such as nations, time periods, or demographic groups like men and women. Throughout this chapter, gender comparisons are emphasized because this example demonstrates especially well the need to explore both similarities and differences among groups to better understand homicide offending. The general causes and motivations for murder are similar across gender, but there also are important differences in the context and modes of women's and men' criminal homicide offending (Schwartz 2006b).

### The Extent of Homicide Offending

Homicide is a rare phenomenon. In comparison, deaths resulting from heart disease, accidents, and pneumonia are all far more common than deaths resulting from homicide, the #10 cause of death among men. In 2004, police identified 18,196 homicide offenders and 16,097 homicide victims out of a population of about 294 million. The homicide offending rate for 2004 was 5.5 per 100,000 inhabitants ( $18,196/294 \text{ million} * 100,000 \text{ residents}$ ). In comparison to other criminal offenses, murder is among the rarest crimes. Only about one-tenth of 1% of all offenses known to the police are murders. In comparison to the approximately 16,000 murders that occurred last year, there were over 1 million drunk driving arrests, 850,000 aggravated assault cases known to the police, and 400,000 robberies reported (FBI, 2006).

Given its statistical rarity and aside from the intrigue surrounding the offense, why do criminologists study homicide offending? This crime is the focus of much research by criminologists in part because of the severity of the offense. Importantly, characteristics of homicide events are very similar to those for other forms of violence. In fact, the similarities in circumstances, victim-offender relationship, and other characteristics between murder and aggravated assaults have caused some criminologists to deem murder an "overly successful" assault. Therefore, in studying homicide offending, we also learn about the causes and contexts of violence more generally. Criminologists also study homicide because it is the most accurately measured offense (Gove, Hughes, & Geerken 1985). Bodies rarely go undetected and, despite popular notions, most homicides cases are solved. Historically more than 90% of cases were cleared by an arrest, though this percentage has declined in recent years to just under 70% (FBI, 2006). Even so, the clearance rate for murder is higher than other offenses. For example, burglary and theft cases are rarely solved – an arrest is made in 13% of burglaries reported to the police, 13% of auto thefts, and 18% of larceny-thefts. The clearance rate for aggravated assault, 55%, is somewhat less than the clearance rate for homicide. Consequently, homicide is the offense for which we have the most statistical information on offenders and offenses at the national level. In a practical sense, detailed homicide data are simply more available than data on other crimes, owing to the FBI'S *Supplementary Homicide Reports (SHR)*.

Information on homicide in the United States is recorded in the *Supplementary Homicide Reports (SHR)*, official, police-recorded statistics on almost all murders and

non-negligent manslaughter incidents in the country (Fox 2007). Though voluntary, police record information on over 90% of the homicides of which they are aware. The FBI has accurately and consistently compiled these reports since the late 1970s, which include information on victim and offender demographics, their relationship to one another, and situational features of the homicide incident, such as weapon use and motives. Because the *SHR* include information on homicides still under investigation, information is incomplete for about 25% of the cases, but by using advanced statistical procedures to gain precision, we can “guess” the characteristics of offenders based on similar solved homicide cases. This procedure infers unknown offender characteristics based on recent events with similar victim profiles, situational characteristics, and locale (for more detail, see Fox 2004). Therefore, the *SHR* data present a fairly detailed nationwide portrait of homicide incidents, offenders, and victims and how these characteristics have changed over time. These data also allow criminologists, law enforcement, and others to track geographic patterns of homicide. To do so, they often use offender or victimization murder *rates*, usually expressed per 100,000 people, that take into account differences across places, time periods, or subgroups in the number of people at risk of offending (or victimization). Rates are a standardized measure of how many murders there are per population. International data sources on homicide are more sporadically available than the *SHR*. INTERPOL, the international police organization, suddenly ceased releasing cross-national offending statistics, for reasons that are not entirely clear. The World Health Organization (WHO) publishes mortality statistics that include figures for criminal homicide *victimization*. Though countries differ slightly in definitions of homicide and in the quality of data, definitions are far more consistent and data collection efforts more sophisticated for homicide compared to other offenses.

#### *Geographic Comparisons: International and Within the United States*

In comparison to other industrialized nations, the United States has a fairly high murder rate. The US murder rate is about three times higher than that of Canada, the United Kingdom, France, and Australia. The US murder rate is *more* than three times greater than that of Japan, Germany, Spain, Italy, and the Scandinavian countries, which all have among the lowest homicide rates in the world. In fact, there were less than 50 murders last year in Norway (~1 per 100,000 residents) compared to more than 16,000 in the United States (~5.5 per 100,000 residents). Columbia and South Africa, however, have far higher murder rates than the US – 10-15 times higher. Other countries with high per capita murder rates include Jamaica, Venezuela, Mexico, and several countries in the former Soviet Republic, such as Russia, Latvia, and Ukraine. Regionally, Africa and the Americas have higher rates of homicide than Asia, Europe, or other regions. That the United States has comparatively high murder rates is puzzling to many given our high level of wealth, industrialization, and incarceration. There are a variety of explanations, including better record-keeping in the US, the high level of inequality within a competitive culture, widespread gun ownership, or lack of extensive social welfare.

Within the United States, however, there is much variation in the extent of homicide. States in the South and West, for example, tend to have higher rates of homicide offending than other areas of the country, according to FBI data (2006). Regardless of region, though, urban areas have higher per capita murder rates than suburban and rural areas. For example, cities have an average homicide rate of 6.9 per

100,000 whereas suburban and rural areas have average homicide rates of around 3-4 per 100,000. Recall that rates are standardized measures that take into account population size differences across places. Even among large cities, though, some cities, like Baltimore and Detroit, have very high homicide rates (~40 per 100,000 residents), whereas other cities, such as Seattle, Honolulu, and El Paso, have comparatively low homicide rates (~2-4 per 100,000). Because homicide has predictable geographic patterns, many criminologists focus on types of places rather than types of people in trying to understand homicide offending.

#### *Demographic Comparisons: Gender, Race, and Age*

The large majority of perpetrators and victims of homicide are men. Based on FBI statistics, homicide offending rates for 2004 were 11.5 per 100,000 men and 1.2 per 100,000 women. Females make up only 10% of homicide offenders and 22% of homicide victims. Among both female and male homicide offenders, young adults (ages 18-24) have the highest rates of offending (and victimization). About 40% of those arrested for murder are between the ages of 18-24, though they comprise less than 10% of the population. Comparatively, about 8% of murderers are juveniles (under 18); they make up 12% of the population.

Black males have higher homicide rates than white males and black females have higher homicide rates than white females. The offending rates of white adolescent girls (14-17) are exceptionally low – less than 1 in 100,000 girls are arrested for homicide yearly. Black males ages 18-24 have the highest homicide offending rates (203 per 100,000). White males have higher arrest rates than comparably aged women of either race. Within race groups, women make up a similar proportion of all homicide offenders – 11% of white and 8% of black homicide offenders are women.

Taken together, the most typical criminal homicide offender is a young black male living in an urban environment. Victim characteristics often match closely the offender's demographic characteristics; homicide tends to be intra-racial and the victim and offender are usually close in age. Males most often murder other males, though women are more likely to kill a male too. Therefore, men are the large majority of homicide victims (78%) and young adults have the highest risk of victimization, especially young black men. The victimization rate of young adults (18-24) is at least two times greater than the victimization rate of juveniles under 18 or those over 35. These demographic patterns in murder offending and victimization have not changed all that much over time, despite that the amount of overall homicide decreased in recent years.

#### *Temporal Comparisons: Changes in Homicide over Time*

Between the mid-1960s and the early 1970s, the homicide rate nearly doubled, from 4 or 5 per 100,000 to 8 or 9 per 100,000 (Fox & Zawitz 2003). It remained high over the 1970s, peaking in 1980 at over 10 per 100,000. Though the murder rate declined somewhat after that, it rose again, in 1991 reaching nearly the same peak level of 1980. The murder rate then declined so that rates now are lower than those of the late 1960s (Fox & Zawitz 2003). In fact, the current murder rate is almost half what it was at its peak in 1980. Since 2000, there have been no further declines; the national murder rate has been stable for the past 5 years. [To place current murder trends in a historical

perspective, see the Bureau of Justice Statistic's murder trends since the 1900s. <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/glance/tables/hmrftab.htm>

The notable declines in murder took place across all sex-race-age groups, albeit to somewhat varying degrees. Focusing on the period since 1990, Black male offending rates dropped sharply in the mid-1990s, continuing to decline over the 2000s. The trends of white males mirror those of black males, but the decline was not as steep and leveled off by the early 2000s. The movements in homicide rates of black and white females match one another and are characterized by steady declines since the 1980s. Thus, the homicide spike in the early 1990s and the decline thereafter was primarily driven by men's offending patterns (see Blumstein & Wallman, 2005).

Women's rates have declined primarily because of the precipitous drop in women's rates of intimate partner homicide. Interestingly, men's rates of partner homicide did not decline as sharply. Experts attribute the drop in lethal partner violence by women to the increasing availability of non-violent alternatives, such as domestic violence shelters (Browne, 1987). Shifting family formation patterns, such as divorce and delayed marriage, also have placed fewer women "at risk" of offending against a partner (Dugan, Nagin, & Rosendfeld 1999). We discuss in more detail shortly the importance of intimate partner homicide for understanding female homicide.

#### The Nature of Murder

##### *Who are the Killers and How do they do it? Offender and Offense Characteristics*

Like many offenders, female and male homicide offenders tend to come from economically and educationally disadvantaged backgrounds and communities. Educational attainment is usually low; the average offender does not have a high school diploma (Richey-Mann 1986). Homicide offenders, if employed, tend to work in a menial occupation, though for women it is usually in the service sector and for men it is more likely in a blue collar occupation (Jurik & Winn 1990; Scott & Davies 2002).

Male homicide offenders are likely to have a prior arrest history; upwards of 75% of male homicide offenders had previously been arrested, many repeatedly and for felony offenses. About one-fifth of male homicide offenders have been previously incarcerated (Jurik & Winn 1990). In contrast, most (70%) female homicide offenders *do not* have a prior felony record, though many (about 60%) have prior arrests for misdemeanors (Mann 1993; Jurik & Winn 1990). These arrests are likely for assault, possibly related to domestic abuse, status violations as a juvenile, such as running away from abuse in the home, or minor property crimes, such as shoplifting, credit card fraud, or check forgery. Very few women had ever been previously incarcerated (Jurik & Winn 1990). Female homicide offenders are not immersed in criminal subcultures to the same extent as male homicide offenders (Suval & Brisson 1974). As further evidence female homicide offenders were likely to be from a solid family background, to have children, and to have stable living arrangement prior to the offense (Figuiera-McDonough 1981).

Alcohol is a factor in many, but not most, male "decisions" to kill. Estimates vary widely, but the best guess is about 40% of male offenders were drinking alcohol at the time of their offense. This percentage is comparable to that for other violent crimes, such as assault and robbery. About 20% of male offenders were using drugs of some sort at the time of their offense (Karberg & James 2005). Female murderers, compared to other female offenders, appear to have somewhat higher levels of problem drinking, but lower

levels of drug use (Suval & Brisson 1974). However, women were not necessarily drinking at the time of the offense. Fewer female than male offenders were drinking – perhaps one-third of women compared to 40% of men (Mann 1993).

Similarly for females and males, homicides occur more often on weekends and late at night (Richey-Mann 1986). Female homicide offending usually takes place in her and/or the victim's home; male homicides are more likely to occur in public places, such as bars, on the street, or other public locations (Jurik & Winn 1990). This gender difference occurs primarily because women tend to kill intimate partners and children whereas men tend to kill acquaintances and strangers.

In terms of weapon use, men are far more likely than women to use guns. In fact, a woman is as likely to use a knife to commit her homicide, a change from 20 years ago when guns were more prevalently used by female murderers. Men's homicides still tend to be committed with guns – roughly 70% of male murderers used a gun (based on the SHR). Men's second most common weapon are knives or other sharp weapons (22%). In comparison, only about 7% of male murderers used brute force (e.g., strangulation, beating).

#### *Why Do People Kill Each Other? Offender Motivation*

The immediate motivation for the majority of both women's and men's homicides are fights and arguments (see Figure 1).<sup>1</sup> Nearly half of all homicides, committed by men or women, were preceded by some sort of argument or fight, such as a conflict over money or property, anger over one partner cheating on another, severe punishment of a child or abuse of a partner, retaliation for an earlier dispute, or a drunken fight over an insult or other affront. As discussed shortly though, qualitatively the fights and arguments of women and men differ markedly.

-- FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE [placed at end of chapter]--

The second most common male homicide circumstance is felony-related (see also Wilbanks 1983). About 25% of men's homicides compared to about 15% of women's homicides occur within the context of committing another felony. Almost half the time, the felony-related homicide occurs in the course of a robbery attempt. Note, however, that most robberies do not lead to murder or even to injury. A fraction of 1% of robberies, including attempted robbery, end in homicide; victims are injured in about 1/3 of robberies, according to the *National Crime Victimization Survey, 2004*. Other felony-related homicides occur in the course of drug activity (1 in 5 felony homicides for men; 1 in 8 for women) or, less commonly, burglary, arson, sex offenses, or theft. Female felony-related homicides are often perpetrated in the context of prostitution; to some extent these homicides may be self-defensive because prostitutes may be severely victimized by their clients (e.g., beaten, robbed, raped). Prostitutes also sometimes rob

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<sup>1</sup> The circumstances surrounding homicide events increasingly are unknown or unrecorded (16% in 1980 compared to 30% in 2004), many because the homicide is unsolved. In unsolved cases, the victim and offender are usually strangers; most stranger homicides are perpetrated by men. Sometimes, however, the offender is known even though the circumstances are not. In 90% of these cases, the offender is male. Given these patterns, the inability to assign a motive to the homicide event likely has a larger effect on what we know about men's homicide than women's homicide.

their clients, perhaps with the help of “their man,” so “prostitution-related” homicides may also reflect robberies gone bad.

Female felony homicide offenders often co-offend with male partners (Schwartz & Steffensmeier 2007), though females typically play an assisting role (Jurik & Winn 1990; Miller 1998). Many of the women charged with a robbery-related homicide are ultimately considered accessories rather than major actors and men usually have brought the weapon (80% of the time) and initiated the violence (Jurik & Winn 1990). Women who co-offend are often romantically involved with their crime partners (~75%); men, by comparison, mainly co-offend with other men and therefore are far less likely to be romantically involved with their crime partner (14%). As we will see again shortly, women’s violence is intimately tied with men’s violence because women often offend *with* or *against* their intimates.

The smallest proportion of homicides for both men and women are those that are gang-related. Only about 1-2% of women’s homicides are gang-related. Less than 50 women in the entire United States were identified as being a participant in a gang-related homicide between 2001 and 2003. For men, the percentage of homicides that are gang-related is also low, about 9% of the total.

#### *Who Kills Whom? Victim-Offender Relationship*

Gender differences in whom women and men kill are greater than gender differences in motives. Overwhelmingly, females kill family members (see Figure 2). In fact, almost 60% of female homicide offenders kill an intimate partner, child, or other family member, such as a (step)parent, (step)sibling, or extended relative. Men, in comparison, kill a family member about 20% of the time. In almost one-third of female homicides, her victim is a boyfriend, husband, or former partner. Children are the next most common targets of women’s homicide (19%). In comparison, about 13% of men’s homicides are against intimates and 3% are against children. Consequently, the large majority of women’s victims are men (~75%). Likewise, 75% of males’ victims are men, but male offenders’ targets are mostly acquaintances – about half the time. Men kill strangers (29%) more often than they kill family members (22%).<sup>2</sup> In contrast, women rarely kill strangers (10%) and only sometimes kill acquaintances (33%).

-- FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE [placed at end of chapter]--

To more directly compare men’s and women’s homicide offending, I use a measure called the “gender gap” – that is, the female share of homicide offending, relative to men.<sup>3</sup> Women’s relative involvement in homicide is lowest for stranger homicides – only about 5-7% of identified perpetrators of stranger homicide are women. In other words, about 95% of those who killed a stranger were men. This “gender gap” in homicide is also large for homicide against acquaintances. Less than 10% of homicides against acquaintances were perpetrated by a woman. The gender gap is narrowest for homicides against family members. Over 25%

<sup>2</sup> This likely underestimates the percentage of male homicides committed against strangers because this type of case is least likely to be solved or have offender characteristics recorded. The percent of stranger homicides committed by women is probably somewhat underestimated as well, but given the comparatively low numbers of women who offend against strangers (n=321) the effects are more apparent in men’s statistics.

<sup>3</sup> We calculate the gender gap as: female rate/(male rate + female rate)\*100. The resulting percentage is interpreted as the percent of homicide offenders who were women. If you subtracted this percentage from 100, this would yield the percent of offenders who were men.

of homicides against family are committed by female offenders; this represents a drop from the 1980s, when 40% were women.

Women are more heavily represented as homicide offenders when we examine child victims (ages 0-12).<sup>4</sup> Almost half the offenders arrested for child homicide were women. Female involvement in child homicide declines with victim age so that the gender gap is even for infanticides (50% killed by women), 33% for toddlers (ages 1-5), and 21% for older kids (ages 6-12). Women more often offend against infants, males against older kids. Overall, toddlers are most vulnerable, making up about half of both women's and men's victims. Toddlers spend much time with mothers and/or caregivers, a riskier situation than school (Mann 1993); behavioral developments and basic language skills also make this age challenging.

### *Male-on-Male Violence: Honor Contests and Street Violence*

By far the most common homicide situation is male-on-male violence, usually resulting from an argument. The nature of male disputes with other males, however, differs markedly in character from the types of domestic arguments that spur women to violence. Male-male homicide events often result from what appears to be a minor or trivial provocation, such as a shove, insult, or the "wrong look," among friends and acquaintances, or, less often, strangers. These events typically occur in a place of leisure, such as bars, parties, barbecues, parks, or on the streets, where groups of young men congregate. Insults or threats appear to escalate and develop "spontaneously" into violence, though amplification is often facilitated by the use of alcohol and the presence of an "audience" of young male peers. At some point, both parties come to interpret the exchange as requiring retaliation and mutually agree to aggression (Polk 1998).

Why would such seemingly trivial slights with so little consequence cause a person to risk death? What seems absurdly trivial to some provides males the opportunity to demonstrate masculinity through these "honor contests." Lower class men may develop a stronger allegiance to street norms and aggressive means of demonstrating masculinity than middle- and upper-class men who more strongly prescribe to mainstream norms relating to problem solving. Whereas middle- and upper-class males may have a myriad of opportunities to "do masculinity," lower class males living in concentrated urban poverty may, over time and as an adaptation to persistent economic strain, place stronger collective emphasis on more achievable goals than financial success, such as respect and prestige conferred to those with a street reputation (Anderson 1999; Messerschmidt 2004). Violations of the "code of the street" – sustained eye contact or a disrespectful demeanor, for example, occasionally can be lethal.

Male homicide offenders are more likely to be immersed in street culture as evidenced by their tendency to have lengthy arrest and imprisonment histories and long bouts of unemployment. Though male-male status contests are the predominant form of male homicide, two other distinctly male patterns are felony-related homicide and gang-related killings. These types of homicide also stem from male involvement in criminal subcultures. Upwards of 95% of gang homicides are perpetrated by males against males, both of whom are likely to be in (rival) gangs. Motives for gang homicide often are

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<sup>4</sup> The majority of child victims were killed by a family member; the few who were killed by a stranger were highly likely to have been killed by a male (Alder & Polk 1996).

similar to those for non-gang homicide – retaliation in order to save face and to establish social position (Papachristos & Kirk 2006), though gang interactions tend to be more conflict-oriented than for other groups of youth (Short & Strodbeck 1965). Felony-related homicide is also viewed by some as a means of displaying masculinity via demonstrating willingness to engage in risky behavior with the potential for violence (e.g., robbery) (Polk 1998; Miller 1998). In sum, much of men’s violence results from attempts to demonstrate masculinity.

*Female-on-Female Violence: Preserving Reputation and Relationships*

Female-on-female violence is often directed against neighbors, their intimates’ other sex partner, or friends and acquaintances (Scott & Davies 2002); however, as many as a third of female-on-female homicide victims are daughters. Offenders who kill another (unrelated) woman tend to be younger than the average female offender. Females kill other females in fights over men, to prevent a romance from occurring, to preserve their sexual or social reputation, and as a result of an ongoing feud. For example, two neighbors had an ongoing feud over neighborhood matters. On this occasion, the two women were struggling in the kitchen and, as a result, the offender’s 3-year old child was inadvertently injured, though not seriously. The offender responded by stabbing the other woman in the chest one time, killing her (Scott & Davies 2002). Though extreme, this incident also reflects female offenders’ greater willingness to aggress to protect a loved one. Other female-female violence may result from fights related to gossip or jealousy, disrespect (e.g., negatively evaluating another girl’s appearance), and interactions with another woman’s boyfriend– all of which may be regarded generally as reputational challenges, or female sorts of honor contests (Miller & Mullins 2006). Female-on-female homicide is rare though – these homicides make up less than 2% of total homicides. Roughly 25% of women’s victims are other women.

*Partner Homicide: Women’s Self Help and Men’s Attempts to Control*

Exploring homicide directed against intimate partners paints a very different portrait of female and male homicide offenders. A woman’s decision to kill her partner may be motivated by a desire to protect her children (or herself). Angela Browne’s (1987) landmark study of in-depth interviews with women who killed their abusive husbands compared to women who escaped abuse showed few differences among the two groups of women. Their victims, however, differed – men who more frequently and severely assaulted or raped their partners, made more death threats, frequently used alcohol or drugs, and abused the children were more likely to be killed. Patterns of violence had escalated more among the women who killed their husbands, prompting Browne to conclude “women’s behavior seemed to be primarily in reaction to the level of threat and violence coming in.” What appears to trigger the homicide, despite the long history of abuse, is the feeling that her death or, importantly, the safety of her children is at stake based on an event out of proportion with past “normal” violent events (e.g., physical abuse of a child or discovery of sexual abuse). Indeed, one study reports that as many as 60% of women were being abused at the time they killed their partner (Canestrini, 1987). Another study based on police data and self-reports indicates that women who kill their partners were unlikely to be the first to use force in the event precipitating the homicide (Johnson & Hotton 2003).

Qualitative analyses suggest that women's homicide and violence often revolves around relational concerns (Steffensmeier & Allan 1996). Female motives for violence often involve responses to abuse occurring in domestic relationships, risk taking to protect emotional commitments and valued relationships (such as hurting a female rival, as described above), or co-offending with male partners. Moreover, a myriad of studies show that female violence mainly occurs mainly under extreme stress, such as in the case of aggression against small children, or repeated provocation, such as in response to on-going domestic abuse and assault (Bailey & Peterson 1995; Browne 1987; Dobash et al. 1992; Schwartz & Steffensmeier 2007). Males, on the other hand, are more likely than women to kill as a result of jealousy, trivial arguments, or in the course of committing another felony.

Male homicide offenses against partners are dominated by motives of possessiveness, jealousy, and abuse and control. For example, in a study of 155 partner homicides, including both marital and dating relationships, Rasche (1993) found that the offender's inability to accept termination of the relationship was one of the greatest factors in men killing their partners. Men's violence in these cases is aimed to prevent the woman from leaving, retaliate for her departure, or force her to return. Some studies indicate that women who are separated from their partners are at an elevated risk of violent victimization, including homicide (Johnson & Hotton 2003).<sup>5</sup> When men kill partners this often represents the culmination of a prolonged history of abuse. Another motive related to possessiveness is sexual jealousy, such as over a suspected or known infidelity (e.g., love triangles). Motives relating to perceived infidelity or termination of the relationship center on themes of male domination and control whereas the motive of self-defense is more prevalent among female offenders.

A portrait of female homicide offenders as women acting in self-defense and only out of desperation would be one-dimensional, though. For example, some researchers claim that women are as likely as men to engage in violence against their partner (Straus & Gelles 1990), though the nature and severity of those acts tend to differ by gender (Schwartz and Steffensmeier 2007). Of the women who killed their partner, self-defense claims were not held up in court in 30% of cases and some women did have prior criminal records (Mann 1993). Moreover, some female offenders kill not a partner but rather another female or even a stranger. And some women are motivated by material wealth and financial gain, revenge, involvement in a criminal subculture or gang, or in order to continue an illicit affair (Weisheit 1993).

### *Child Homicide*

A predominantly female form of homicide is neonaticide, when a mother kills her newborn child. These offenders are often young, unmarried women who may conceal pregnancy, give birth alone, and, commit homicide using more "delicate" methods such as exposure, suffocation, or strangulation. These women may kill their newborn in fear of stigmatization should their pregnancy be detected, due to feeling unable to care for the child, or because of extreme stress or mental illness (Gartner & McCarthy 2006). Until an infant is a week old, her largest threat is her mother.

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<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that some scholars attribute female declines in partner violence to declining rates of marriage and increased rates of divorce (i.e., decreased exposure to risk), though the increased presence of resources for domestic violence victims has helped as well (Browne 1987; Dugan et al. 1999; Rosenfeld 1997). It is equally important to note that changing marital and family structures does not appear to have decreased women's risk of partner victimization, though.

Almost uniquely male are murder-suicides and family massacres (familicides), where a man kills his child(ren), his partner, and possibly himself for reasons such as jealousy, anger or vindictiveness towards a partner, loss of children through separation, or sometimes, the inability to financially support his family any longer (Alder & Polk 1996). The victims are usually biological children who are killed with a gun (Daly & Wilson 1988). Like the women who commit neonaticide, these men may express feelings of anger, pain, powerlessness, and of matters having gone beyond their control.

Both sorts of homicide often demonstrate planning, such as the infanticide of a child found “dressed in an infant suit, wrapped in a blanket, and placed inside a gunnysack...in a garbage dump. Death was caused by asphyxia and exposure” (Gartner & McCarthy 2006:101). Yet other offenses seemed to occur with little forethought, with the offenders showing signs of irrationality or mental illness.

The more common scenario for child homicide, for both women and men, arises not out of the intent to kill the child; rather it is the end result of harsh punishment. Consider the following two examples, the first a female description, the second a male description.

I was packing up my stuff [to move] and my son was acting up and I didn't know what to do 'cause I don't understand nothing about disciplining a child 'cause how I was raised by my own family, how they abused me and I didn't know what to do, so I took it out on my son and sent him to his room and I made him go to bed and he went to bed. I went near and he wasn't breathing, he stopped breathing, wouldn't breathe. I know he was sleeping and he didn't wake up. I hit him, I only hit him twice in the head with my hand. I don't know, with my shoe, my flat shoe in the head twice and that was it, and I sent him to his room 'cause I didn't want to hit him no more...It was very hard for me 'cause I didn't know what to do. The only thing I knew was to take him to the doctor when he needed to go to the doctor and feed him and keep him clean, that was it. I didn't know how to love him, 'cause I didn't have, didn't love myself, I didn't know how to love him (from Crimmins et al., 1997: 58).

Austin was sitting on the floor eating a packet of chips and he started crying. I picked him up and whacked him on the bum three or four times with an open hand. I put him down and he was still crying. I picked him up and shook him (to) shut him up . . . I didn't lose my cool, I was just annoyed . . . I was just annoyed because I couldn't hear the video. He was getting on my nerves (from Alder & Polk 1996:404-5).

Though these statements do not reflect it, the homicides of these and other preschool children tend to be more brutal than those of infants killed by their mothers as evidenced by multiple wounds, more severe injury, and prolonged histories of abuse (Mann 1993). Many of the women, usually the primary caretaker, report having felt socially isolated, trapped by their responsibilities at a young age. The male child homicide offenders shared more in caretaking responsibilities than most men (Alder & Polk 1996). The males were often stepfathers or other men living with the mother and child(ren).

Female child homicide offenders, often married or partnered, tend to commit the crime alone, in the bathroom or bedroom, using manual force (hitting, kicking, choking, drowning) (Mann 1993). Female offenders are seldom under the influence of drugs or alcohol at the time. Women filicide offenders often claim innocence or that it was an accident, although many victims had multiple wounds. Half the women arrested for child homicide, particularly those who killed a toddler (ages 2-5), had recorded child abuse histories. A large minority of the women reported having been abused themselves as children. Conviction charges typically are lower than the initial murder charge in 80% of cases, suggesting less culpability or some mitigating circumstances.

Men initially attempt to deny or cover up their role in the homicide, sometimes persuading their partners to support their story. Case files (Alder & Pollok 1996) include male offenders saying “I was just playing;” that the child was “accident-prone;” or that “the child fell downstairs.” The child’s death was seldom premeditated, but the physical evidence often showed signs of prior abuse and that extreme aggressive acts precipitated the child’s death.

Oftentimes, these families were enmeshed in stressful circumstances: money troubles and unemployment, frequent fights with their partner, or residence in a high poverty community. As many as 70% of murdered children resided in severe urban poverty. This suggests that child homicide is, in part, rooted in the social organization – or disorganization – of society.

### Understanding Homicide Offending Patterns

In trying to understand how one person can kill another, many people probably look for something inside the individual – mental illness or insanity, profound rage or inability to control one’s emotions, or some other individual “deficiency.” Individual risk factors are important, but focusing solely on individual factors cannot explain geographic, temporal, or demographic homicide patterns (see also Nash, 1995). Because murder is not an idiosyncratic event but distributed in a patterned way, macro-level sociologists focus on social forces *outside* the individual that influence his/her evaluations of homicide (violence) as a viable solution to a problem or situation. Researchers look for *contextual effects*, patterns of social organization and social arrangements that promote or discourage homicide.

Accumulated research has identified a set of contextual features associated with homicide, including family structure, concentrated poverty and inequality, and racial heterogeneity (see reviews in Pratt & Cullen 2005; Parker, McCall, & Land 1999). These social-structural sources of homicide are similarly related to women’s and men’s lethal violence (Schwartz 2006a; 2006b; forthcoming, 2008; Steffensmeier & Haynie 2000a; 2000b). These factors also are related to all sorts of homicide offending, including partner homicide, child homicide, gang killings, and so on (Gauthier et al 2003; Papachristos & Kirk 2006; Kubrin 2003).

The detrimental effects of these structural conditions may result from *social disorganization*, where residents lack the informal social control capabilities to prevent violence. For example, communities with many single-parent families likely have fewer public guardians and weaker parental control networks. Contextual effects are also interpreted from a *strain/relative deprivation* perspective that highlights the stress-

producing aspects of poor social and economic conditions. For example, communities with many single-parent families are likely to be economically disadvantaged because single-parent households are usually less well off than dual-parent families. Living in concentrated poverty might over time lead to altered success goals that are more achievable than occupational status, such as reputational status conferred by demonstrating violence and street smarts (Anderson, 1999). Inequality and perceptions of an unjust distribution of wealth can lead to hostility and weakened support for mainstream norms, including the restrained use of violence (Blau & Blau 1982).

### *CONCLUSION*

Homicide is rare, but it is more common in some groups, places, or time periods than in others. Homicide offending (and victimization) is more common among young, African-American males living in urban settings and those living in the South and West. Homicide is least common among women, the young and old, and those living in rural settings. The motives of homicide offenders tend to be similar – people are most often killed by someone they know in the course of an argument or fight occurring late at night on a weekend. Homicide offenders and victims tend to be concentrated more heavily in communities characterized by economic and social disadvantages.

Homicide patterns, including victims, motivation, and commission, differ across groups in some important ways. For example, men and women kill in ways that uniquely reflect their gender roles and opportunities. Thus, women's aggression tends to be directed at those who are closest to them – intimate partners and children with whom these women spend much of their time. Only rarely do women kill strangers. When a woman kills, it is likely she was under extreme pressure and/or provoked by fear for her life or for the sake of someone close to her (e.g., children), though sometimes her motives are less altruistic. Men's homicide occurs more often in the context of the criminal underworld. Men's relational patterns of homicide are more heavily weighted by friends and acquaintances or strangers and the event typically takes place in public, perhaps where alcohol and an audience are present. Men often kill over matters that appear to be trivial – minor insults or minimal physical contact – yet these challenges are viewed by participants as requiring a response in order to defend one's masculinity. When a man kills his partner it is rarely out of mortal fear but usually in response to jealousy or other control motive.

The occurrence of criminal homicide, of all sorts and for all groups, is higher in places with entrenched, concentrated poverty, inequalities, and more vulnerable family structures. Solutions often do not address the difficult to observe social forces that influence individual decision-making and situational characteristics regarding the use of violence in various circumstances. Perhaps the failure to address social-structural sources of homicide offending is, in part, attributable to the popular misperception that homicide is a random occurrence among strangers when, in fact, most real-world murder mysteries have a fairly predictable ending.

### INTERNET RESOURCES

Bureau of Justice Statistic's murder trends since the 1900s:

<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/glance/tables/hmrmtab.htm>

Easy Access to FBI's Supplementary Homicide Reports:

<http://www.ojjdp.ncjrs.gov/ojstatbb/ezashr/>

Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics

[http://www.albany.edu/sourcebook/ind/MURDER\\_AND\\_NONNEGLIGENT\\_MANSLAUGHTER.ind.html](http://www.albany.edu/sourcebook/ind/MURDER_AND_NONNEGLIGENT_MANSLAUGHTER.ind.html)

FBI's Murder Statistics

[http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/cius\\_04/offenses\\_reported/violent\\_crime/murder.html](http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/cius_04/offenses_reported/violent_crime/murder.html)

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How "random" is murder? Is fear of this crime justified? For whom?
2. Statistically, what are the most common forms of murder? Is this what you expected? Why (not)?
3. In what ways are men's and women's homicide offending similar? Different? What are the sources of these differences?
4. Do you think gun control policies would help reduce murder? What other social policies could decrease murder? Would gun control (or other policies) be effective for all sorts of homicide? Explain.

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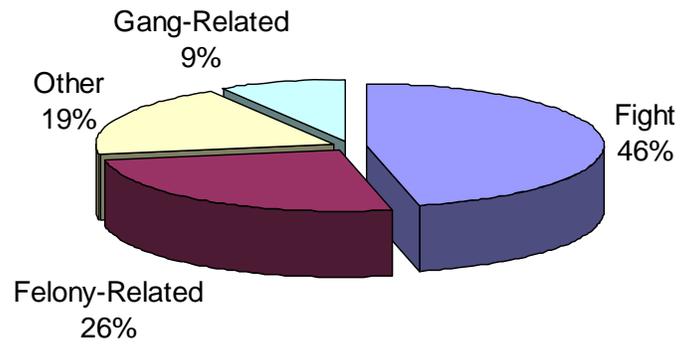
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Figure 1. Motives for Murder by Sex, *Supplementary Homicide Reports*  
Panel A: Males



Panel B: Females

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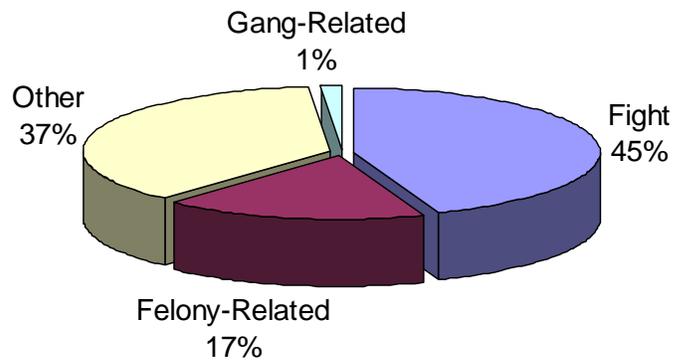
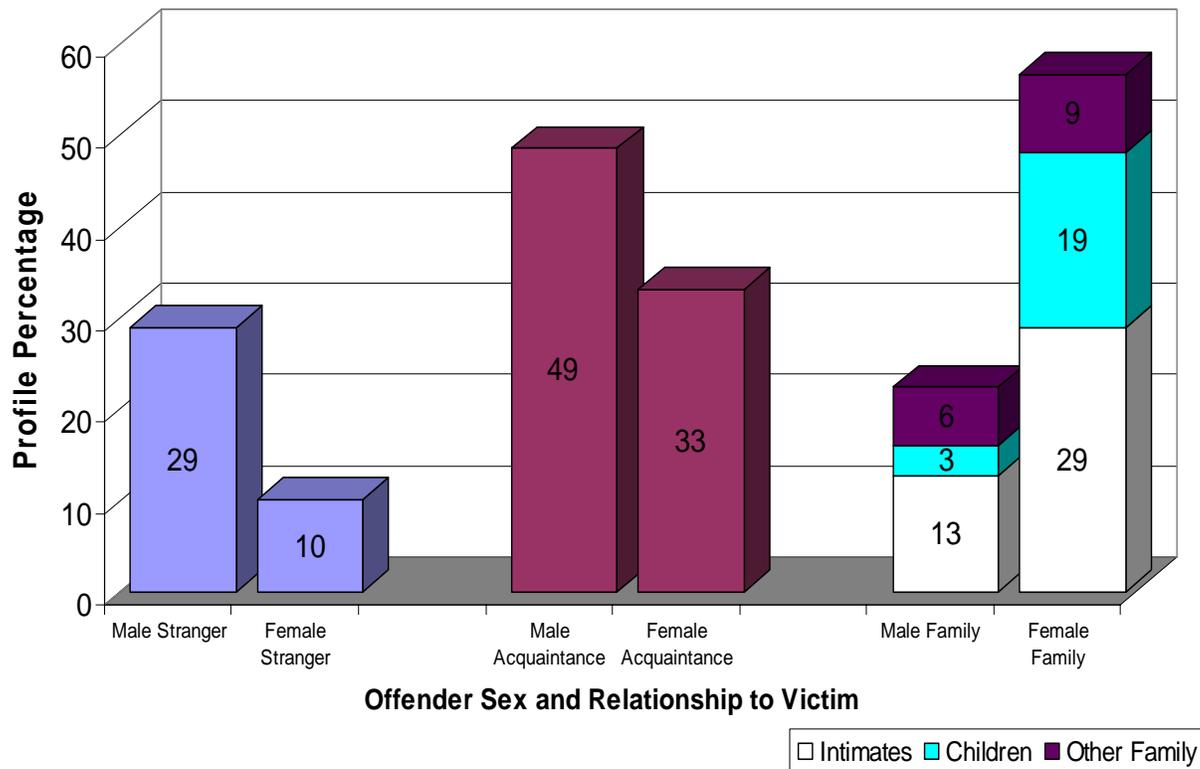


Figure 2. Gender Differences in Victim-Offender Relationship in Homicides Known to the Police, 2003



*CASE STUDIES*  
Wife Kills Husband

When Teresa was 12, her father beat her until her back was purple because she balked at washing the dishes, covered with maggots in the sink. At 13, she was raped by a neighbor man. She drifted into alcohol and drugs, sleeping with older men, and staying out all night, drifting from house to house, or living on the streets. Then, at 14, she met Erin through a mutual friend. He, too, was involved with drugs and petty crime. They quickly moved in together – with Erin’s mom and 6 siblings – then were thrown out for Teresa fighting with Erin’s sister. Teresa was 15 when Erin first behaved violently toward her. In response to her threat of breaking up with him for flirting with another girl, Erin grabbed Teresa by the hair, dragged her to a bedroom, and held a gun to her. He then put it in his own mouth, putting her finger on the trigger. He later apologized profusely, as he often did after a violent fight.

Over the next seven years, Teresa and Erin Turner-Schaefer had three children together and got married. He joined and was medically discharged from the Army. Then he worked at Lowe’s. During this time, Erin’s father, David Schaefer, heard rumors his son abused Teresa but was reassured that everything was fine after talking to his son. “If [Erin] had been hitting her, I would have known it,” he said. The police never received reports of abuse, but Teresa’s family members and friends said they knew Erin had a history of beating Teresa.

On Sunday, December 11, 2005, the Turner-Schaefer family threw a party. Around 11pm everyone had left and the kids, ages 3, 5, and 7 and Erin’s brother, 15, were asleep. Teresa was on the phone making sure one of their guests had gotten home safely. Erin overheard part of the conversation and was suspicious Teresa was having an affair with one of his friends. An argument began.

As Teresa describes it: “He pushed my head against the wall and I pushed him away and went to the kitchen to get a bottle of medicine [for my headache]. I was putting water in the glass when I heard him yell ‘I’m going to kill you, you [expletive.]’ It just scared me. He’d choked me before until I blacked out. It was just a spontaneous act. I grabbed a knife that was drying on a towel on the counter. I turned around just as he lunged.”

The 6-inch blade sliced through Erin’s chest and lung. A family member called the police. When questioned by Prince William Detective Paul Materson, Teresa at first said she didn’t know what happened, then that Erin must have been so drunk he stabbed himself, but then she quickly confessed saying it was an accident. When Det. Materson told Teresa Erin died in the hospital, “She asked me to shoot her.”

She served 11 months in county jail with 5 years probation for pleading guilty to involuntary manslaughter, avoiding a 10 year prison sentence if convicted of the first-degree murder charge. Circuit Court Judge Rossie Alston said Teresa was “a very decent person” who was amenable to reform, as evidenced by her successful completion of GED and life-skills courses while in jail, cooperation with counselors, and attending Bible study.

To her victim’s family she said “I apologize, and despite the problems, Erin and I love each other...I loved him before I knew him, I will continue to love him all my days...The words ‘I’m sorry,’ I know are little and petty, but if you knew the pain, sorrow and regret I feel each day, maybe you would know how I feel.”

Teresa then returned to her home in Dale City where she killed Erin a year earlier. Her thoughts were of Erin, but also how she was going to regain custody of her kids from Erin's mother, find a job with no prior experience and a violent record, learn how to drive, and fill out confusing life insurance claims forms.

### Husband Kills Wife, then Self

Cheryl, a 35-year old divorced mother of two, met Billy, 45, in 2002 where they both worked as substance-abuse counselors. Billy was a fun, athletic man who enjoyed working with children. They fell in love and were married in 2003. "Every time we saw them, they were lovey-dovey" said their boss, Ernest Cantley. Cheryl's family, too, thought the couple was happy. Neighbors, however, knew otherwise. "Billy and Cheryl were lovey-dovey, but behind closed doors it was a mess," said neighbor and friend Mishall Miller. Few knew of Billy's prior arrests for DUI and assault, though Billy's ex-wife, Mildred, became well aware of his volatile, violent side over their two year marriage. What ultimately prompted Mildred to seek a protection from abuse order and divorce was when Billy hit her, dragged her out of the bar they were at, slammed her face against the car, and held her hostage in their apartment, threatening to kill her. She escaped while he was in the bathroom.

After their marriage, friends saw a change in Cheryl – she dyed her hair blonde, began dieting, got plastic surgery, and, in 2004, filed for bankruptcy. She also began to complain that her husband tried to control what and when she ate and how she dressed. Even before Billy and Cheryl were married there were heated arguments. Cheryl's ex-husband called the police in December 2002 because he was concerned about a verbal argument between the couple he overheard during a phone call, but Cheryl refused to tell her ex-husband where she and Billy were.

Then things started to spin out of control. Police records show that officers responded to at least one domestic disturbance call on March 31<sup>st</sup> 2005, though neighbors said the police had come to the house at least six times over the past several months. A neighbor said "Everybody heard them [fighting]...[Cheryl] was the kind of person who threw things. She broke a few pictures along the way." Port Orange Cmdr. William Schultz said of the March incident there were signs of a verbal argument, but not physical contact and no arrests were made.

For several months in early 2005, Cheryl tried to get Billy out of the house and, finally, on Tuesday, May 10 she confided to friends that she was going to divorce him. Friend Lavon Berry said Cheryl called her panicked and crying several times that day, saying she had a bad feeling that something was really wrong. Lavon went to the couple's house to watch the kids – and Billy get drunk – until Cheryl got home. Billy was totally out of it; when he tried to speak, all he could do was drop his head into his hands and cry.

No one knows what happened over the next 24 hours. On Wednesday evening, Rebecca, Cheryl's daughter, returned home to get permission to play across the street. Sometime between 4:30 and 7:30 pm, Billy had fired one bullet into Cheryl's head and then one into his own with a .40 caliber gun. Rebecca found them in their bed, facing each other, dead, Billy with the gun still in his hand.