POVERTY, INEQUALITY AND JUSTICE
Homicide in Scotland

THE NEED FOR A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING

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HOMICIDE in Scotland remains at a historic low, according to the most recent homicide statistics published on September 29th (Scottish Government, 2015a). The Homicide in Scotland statistical bulletin reports that there were 59 homicides (including murder and culpable homicide) in 2014-15, the lowest number since 1976. The homicide rate has decreased from 2.1 to 1.1 per 100,000 population since 1995-96, which means that homicide has halved over the past twenty years.

This sharp decrease in homicide is, of course, good news. However, we still do not know if this decline applies to all forms of homicide. Recent research has highlighted the diversity of homicide, and underlined the importance of examining the circumstances of homicide in greater detail. A murder that takes place indoors between two partners is for instance quite different from a murder that occurs between two acquaintances outside a pub. These different types of homicide might in fact be related to different causes as well as different social structures, and it is therefore of great importance to better understand homicide in Scotland if it is to be further prevented. Yet, if we combine all homicides into one single measure we are essentially treating all types of murders as if they were the same.

Dividing homicide into different subtypes would provide more detailed information about these various forms of homicide, which could help to reduce and prevent this crime. The identification of subtypes has previously been found to enable the detection of hidden trends in the data.

The annual Homicide in Scotland statistical bulletins show that although some aspects of homicide has remained stable over the past twenty years, some things have changed. The majority of both homicide offenders and victims over the past twenty years have been male, and the most common weapon is still a sharp instrument, for both male and female victims. People are also still more likely to be murdered by someone known to them than a stranger.

However, a higher proportion of both offenders and victims are older now compared to twenty years ago, and although most homicides still occur within a residential location, the proportion of homicides occurring in public places has decreased. While the overall picture of homicide in Scotland might be one of decline, there might be certain forms of homicide that follow a different pattern. Perhaps only certain types of homicide are decreasing, while other types of homicide remain stable or are even increasing.

Further research about homicide in Scotland is therefore necessary, but in order to understand the scope of the problem, it is also important to compare trends in homicide to those of other violent crime in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2015b). Although homicide is the most serious violent crime, the annual numbers of both attempted murder and serious assault are much greater than the number of homicides. While the homicide rate in 2014-15 was 1.1 per 100,000, the rate for attempted murder was almost five times higher, while the number of serious assaults reported during the same year was almost 50 times higher. In other words, it is safe to say that homicide is not particularly common compared to other violent crimes in Scotland.

Despite the vast differences in numbers and rates of these violent crimes, the trends over time are remarkably similar. These trends were also strongly and significantly related to each other over time. As can be seen in chart 1, despite an overall pattern of decline, up until 2004-05, all three categories of violent crime actually demonstrated a slow increase.

This peak in violent crime in 2004-05 co-incided with the introduction of the Scottish Crime and Recording Standard (SCRS). The implementation of the SCRS, which removed the requirement of corroborative evidence before a crime was recorded,
might have artificially increased the crime figures, adding to the peak in violent crime. However, whatever the reason for the peak in violent crime at this time, it was followed by a dramatic and parallel decrease in all violent crime. All of the three violent crimes had halved in 2014-15 compared to twenty years earlier. The decrease in homicide could however also be related to improved medical care and emergency services. Fewer people die as a result of their injuries today compared to twenty years ago. This can also make comparisons between homicide and non-fatal violence somewhat problematic.

This would suggest that while homicides occur far more infrequently compared to other violent crimes in Scotland, all violent crimes are demonstrating similar trends over time. But like homicide, we do not know if all types of violent crime have decreased. As with homicide, non-fatal violence is a very diverse set of crimes and the identification of subtypes of violence is necessary if the relationship between homicide and serious violence is to be fully explained. We are currently only aware of the overall trends, but in order to understand what types of violence have decreased, and perhaps more importantly which crimes have not decreased, we need to examine these crimes on a more detailed level.

Homicide and violence compared to other crime

So, it would seem that homicide constitutes a very small part of violent crime in Scotland, and that homicide is declining in tandem with other violent crimes. But how does homicide and violence compare to the number of non-violent crimes in Scotland, or put differently; how much of the criminality in Scotland is really constituted by violent crime?

When the number of other forms of crime are examined (see chart 2), it becomes apparent that homicide and other forms of non-sexual violent crime only constitute a tiny part of all crimes recorded in Scotland. Similar to the numbers of both homicide and non-sexual violence, the number of total crimes (excluding offences) has decreased by 46% over the past two decades. Of the total crimes that were reported in 2014-15, non-sexual violent crime (excluding homicide) only constituted approximately 3% of that figure. Furthermore, homicide only contributed by 0.02% to the total number of crimes in Scotland in 2014-15. To compare, there were more than 20 times as many crimes of dishonesty than non-sexual violent crimes in 2014-15.

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