

Manuel Eisner

Long-Term Historical Trends in Violent Crime

ABSTRACT

Research on the history of crime from the thirteenth century until the end of the twentieth has burgeoned and has greatly increased understanding of historical trends in crime and crime control. Serious interpersonal violence decreased remarkably in Europe between the mid-sixteenth and the early twentieth centuries. Different long-term trajectories in the decline of homicide can be distinguished between various European regions. Age and sex patterns in serious violent offending, however, have changed very little over several centuries. The long-term decline in homicide rates seems to go along with a disproportionate decline in elite homicide and a drop in male-to-male conflicts in public space. A range of theoretical explanations for the long-term decline have been offered, including the effects of the civilizing process, strengthening state powers, the Protestant Reformation, and modern individualism, but most theorizing has been post hoc.

“Symonet Spinelli, Agnes his mistress and Geoffrey Bereman were together in Geoffrey’s house when a quarrel broke out among them; Symonet left the house and returned later the same day with Richard Russel his Servant to the house of Godfrey le Gorger, where he found Geoffrey; a quarrel arose and Richard and Symonet killed Geoffrey” (Weinbaum 1976, p. 219). This is an entry in the plea roll of the eyre court held in London in 1278. The eyre was a panel of royal justices empowered to judge all felonies and required to inquire into all homicides that had occurred since the last eyre (Given 1977). The story is

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typical of the situational structure of lethal violence in thirteenth-century London—a disagreement, a quarrel leading to a fight, and a fight resulting in a death. It could arise in different situations, often after drinking or over women, sometimes during a feast, but rarely premeditatedly. In two of the 145 instances of homicide recorded in the London eyre court rolls of 1278, the quarrel broke out after a game of chess.

For quantitatively minded historians, the completeness of the eyre court records, meticulously drawn up by the clerks of the justices, is a temptation to count. James Buchanan Given (1977) did this a quarter century ago, retrieving information on over 3,000 homicides recorded in twenty eyres in seven counties of thirteenth-century England. Beyond simple counts the data also include detailed information about the sex of offenders and victims, the personal relations between them, the number of cooffenders, the situations in which the events occurred, and the decisions taken by the judiciary.

The counts invite attempts at estimating a homicide rate. The 145 cases recorded in the 1278 London eyre court, for example, represent an average of about six cases per year, as twenty-five years had elapsed since the last convening of the court. And if the London population of the time was around 40,000 inhabitants, then the homicide rate—based on the cases reported to the eyre court—was around fifteen per 100,000.

Scientific enticements sometimes come in bunches, and Ted Robert Gurr (1981) took the issue one step further in an article in this series entitled “Historical Trends in Violent Crime: A Critical Review of the Evidence.” Besides the cluster of twenty homicide rates provided by Given (1977), he reviewed two studies that offered estimates for a few counties in Elizabethan England (Samaha 1974; Cockburn 1977) and a series of homicide indictments in Surrey for the period 1663–1802 (Beattie 1974). Gurr plotted the some thirty estimates between about 1200 and 1800 on a graph, added the London homicide rates for the modern period, and fitted an elegant S-shaped trend curve to the data points (see fig. 1).

The curve suggested that typical rates may have been about twenty homicides per 100,000 population in the High and Late Middle Ages, dropping to ten around 1600, and ending after an extended downswing at about one per 100,000 in the twentieth century. Gurr interpreted this secular trend as “a manifestation of cultural change in Western society, especially the growing sensitization to violence and the devel-

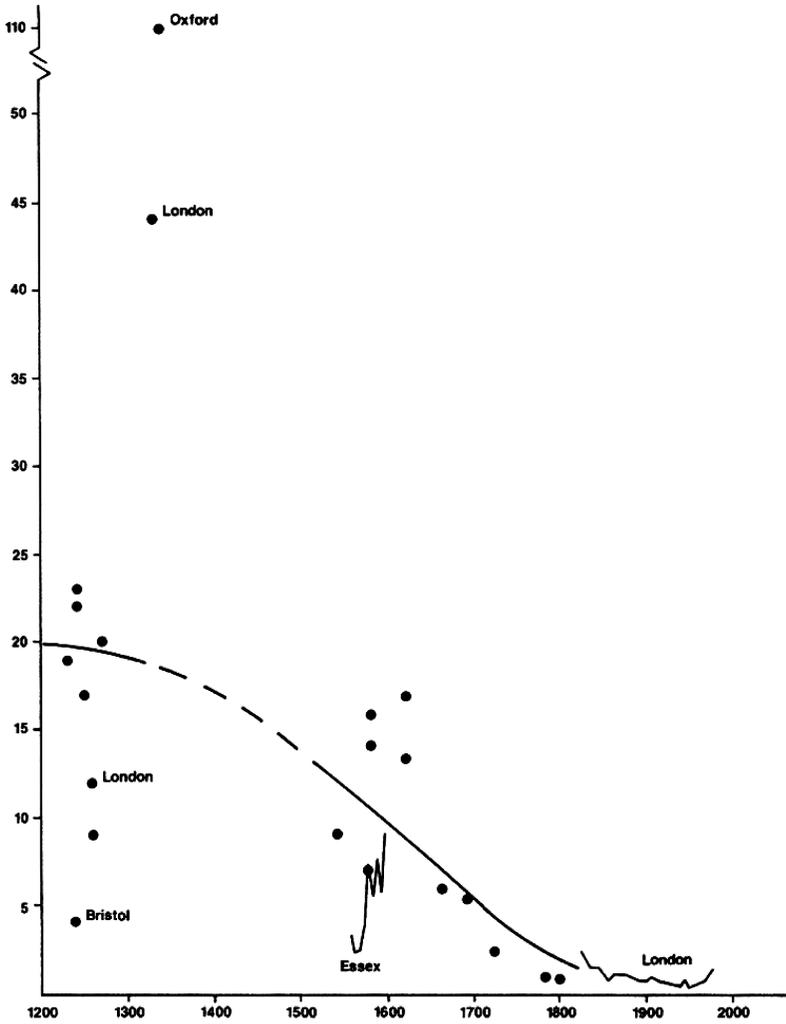


FIG. 1.—Indicators of homicides per 100,000 population in England, thirteenth to twentieth centuries. Note: Each dot represents the estimated homicide rate for a city or county for periods ranging from several years to several decades. Source: Gurr 1981, p. 313.

opment of increased internal and external control on aggressive behavior” (1981, p. 295; see also Gurr 1989). Gurr’s essay easily qualifies as one of the most influential studies in the field of history of crime research, and the suggestive figure has been frequently reproduced (e.g., Daly and Wilson 1988, p. 276; Ylikangas 1998*b*, p. 10; Monkkonen

2001). But it also has raised a large number of questions, most of which fall into three broad categories.

For one, many historians have questioned whether counting homicides documented in premodern records and comparing respective rates over eight centuries is scientifically sound. This problem has a methodological side, including issues of how complete premodern records are, what the historical “dark figure” of homicide might look like, what the relationships among homicide and other forms of interpersonal violence are, what impact changing medical technologies have, and how accurate population estimates are. But some historians of crime also raise a more substantive problem since the comparison of numbers over time assumes some comparability of the underlying substantive phenomenon, namely, interpersonal physical violence. Controversy about this issue divides scholars of more cultural science inclinations from those with more behaviorist backgrounds. The former argue that violent acts are embedded in historically specific structures of meanings, values, and expectations and claim that considering the cultural context is essential to understanding historical manifestations of violence. From this viewpoint, the comparison of homicide rates is futile and misleading. Behaviorists, by contrast, argue that aggressive interpersonal behavior is a human universal and that counting the frequencies in manslaughter or murder gives some information about violence in everyday interactions.

The second set of questions concerns the degree to which Gurr’s findings can be generalized and specified. Although extrapolation from a few counties in England to the Western world was probably inevitable at the time when the essay was written, it required a daring assumption. More recently, however, several historians of crime have put the hypothesis of a long-term decline in interpersonal violence to the test. Cockburn (1991) contributed an uninterrupted series of indicted homicide in Kent from 1560 to 1985. Possibly to his surprise, the data showed a more or less continuous tenfold fall from around three-to-six offenses per 100,000 to a rate of 0.3–0.7 over more than 400 years. During the 1970s, Ylikangas (1976) began to examine the long-term history of violence in Finland. His original findings were increasingly corroborated by a series of studies on Norway and Sweden, which suggested a coherent pattern in Scandinavia with a massive long-term decline of homicide rates during the early modern age (Naess 1982; Österberg and Lindström 1988; Österberg 1996). Finally, Spierenburg (1996) contributed evidence about the Netherlands, primarily focus-

sing on Amsterdam and covering some 700 years. The findings again coincided with the long-term decline anticipated by Gurr, showing a drop from about fifty per 100,000 population in the fifteenth century to about one per 100,000 in the nineteenth century. Thus, at least for those captivated by transhistorical numbers, there remains little doubt about the empirical cogency of the broad picture Gurr painted. Supported by a growing flow of empirical findings, therefore, many have now started to ask new and more detailed questions (see, e.g., Karonen 2001; Monkkonen 2001; Roth 2001; Eisner 2002*b*). How can the quality of the data be ascertained? Can the beginning of the downturn be more narrowly identified? Does the timing and pace of the decline differ between large geographic areas? Can processes of pacification be attributed to specific social groups? Are there sustained periods of increasing levels of homicide rates, and how do they interact with the declining trend?

The empirical examination of these issues is intricately connected with the third group of questions: Why? Answering requires some macrolevel theory of social, cultural, and political developments that is not among the usual stock of criminological theorizing. Many criminologists, when theorizing about the effects of long-term social change, are primarily equipped to explain why urbanization and industrialization should lead to more crime (Shelley 1981). But they are at a loss when asked to explain declining trends. Historians of crime, however, found that their empirical observations fit surprisingly well with the work of the late German sociologist Norbert Elias. In his major work, *The Civilizing Process* (1978), Elias assumed that an interplay between the expansion of the state's monopoly of power and increasing economic interdependence would lead to the growth of pacified social spaces and restraint from violence through foresight or reflection (Elias 1978, p. 236). In an attempt to bridge sociological macrotheory and psychological insight, he suggested that the average level of self-control would increase to the degree that state institutions stabilize the flow of everyday interactions. Since these expectations match so well what crime historians have been finding, Elias has become the major theoretical reference for scholars who are working in the field and interested in theorizing about the long-term trend. But it is open to debate and the refinement of empirical findings precisely how far the theory of the civilizing process goes toward providing a causal framework for explaining the long-term decline in lethal violence.

Departing from these groups of questions, this essay is organized in

three sections. Section I presents a reanalysis of quantitative estimates of homicide rates in Europe from the Middle Ages to the present day. It is based on a much larger set of historical studies than Gurr was able to examine and discusses the increasing degree to which we can distinguish different long-term trajectories in the decline of homicide in various European regions. Section II reviews evidence on various contextual factors. I examine historical evidence on sex, age, and class of violent offenders as well as studies that have examined historical patterns of the sex of homicide victims and their relationship with the offender. Section III explores theoretical approaches used in recent scholarship for explaining these secular trends, examining how theoretical arguments match the available data and in what ways future research might help to decide between alternative approaches.

I. The Secular Trend in Lethal Violence

What makes any assessment of our knowledge about the long-term trend in homicide rates relatively difficult is that relevant research has been published in many different languages, sometimes in difficult-to-find specialized historical journals, and with widely varying research questions forming the background of scholarly work. Therefore, this section builds on a systematic meta-analysis of more than ninety publications on premodern homicide rates in Europe as well as on a comprehensive collection of modern homicide time series in ten countries, based on national statistics and stretching over periods of more than 120 years. Taken together, these data first confirm the Europe-wide massive drop—roughly by a factor of 10:1 to 50:1 over the period from the fifteenth to the twentieth century—in lethal interpersonal violence first observed by Gurr on the basis of English data (1981). Second, the transition to declining homicide rates appears to have started earliest in the northwestern parts of Europe and then to have gradually diffused to the more peripheral regions of the continent. By the nineteenth century, therefore, homicide rates were lowest in the modernized, affluent, and urban regions of Europe, which were surrounded by a belt of high homicide rates in the periphery. By around 1950, most European countries experienced their lowest historically known levels of homicide rates. Since then, an increasing trend has prevailed.

A. Sources: History of Homicide Database

To examine long-term trajectories of lethal violence, I have assembled an extensive database of serial data on homicide in Europe. The

resulting “History of Homicide Database” is an attempt at a comprehensive collection of available quantitative information on homicide over several centuries. The database incorporates two very different types of sources. National vital statistics providing annual counts of homicide victims probably constitute the most reliable source. In most European countries, data series start during the second half of the nineteenth century, although Swedish national death statistics were introduced in the middle of the eighteenth century (Verkko 1951). The second main source are statistics on homicides known to the police or persons accused of murder or manslaughter. Partly based on earlier research (Eisner 1995), the database for modern national homicide statistics includes ten European countries with series of annual data stretching over more than 100 years.

Prior to the introduction of national statistics, however, statistical data on homicides accrue from the painstaking archival work of historians who scrutinize large numbers of judicial sources produced for widely varying purposes and not originally intended for statistical analysis. Because of the fragmented judicial structure of premodern Europe, limitations on the amount of time researchers can spend in archives, and large gaps in surviving sources, we are left with a patchwork of local studies. Some of them aim at establishing long-term trends in serious violence. Many, however, are not primarily interested in estimating the frequency of homicide but aim at gaining insight, through judicial records, into the administration of justice, the mentalities of historical epochs, and the lives of ordinary people. However, departing from the elegant curve boldly drawn by Gurr through some thirty estimates of homicide rates, it is worthwhile to reassess the issue of long-term trends in violent crime by using the wealth of new research on the history of crime. Therefore, I systematically collected the results published in articles and monographs in several languages that present data on premodern homicide rates. A number of recent research reviews facilitated access to this literature (Johnson and Monkkonen 1996; Schüssler 1996; Rousseaux 1999*a*; Blauert and Schwerhoff 2000).

The History of Homicide Database at the time of writing includes approximately 390 estimates of premodern homicide rates based on more than ninety publications containing relevant data (Eisner 2001). Coded variables include information about the geographical area, the period, the counting units (offenders, victims, and offenses), the type of sources, the absolute number of homicide cases, the population estimates, and assessments of the quality of the data in the primary publi-

cation. When available, I also coded the percentages of female offenders and victims and the percentage of infanticides included in the data. Although the inclusion of infanticide is not wholly satisfying, it aims at improving comparability, since the majority of publications do not allow for separating infanticides and other killings. Three rules guided the coding process.

First, a threshold decision had to be made about whether to include a study. I excluded studies that are explicitly based on highly selective sources such as minor courts, that quote only approximate estimates without specifying the source, or that are based on extremely small samples. I included all studies, however, that at least present information on the respective territory covered, the type of source, and the time period covered. If it was sufficiently clear how the information had been gathered, I ignored occasional warnings by the original author against using homicide counts for computing rates. Schuster (2000), for example, extensively explains why he objects to computing homicide rates on the basis of medieval records. However, since he describes the origin of his data (judicial proceedings) and the territorial unit to which they refer, I decided to include his data on fifteenth-century Constance in the database.

Second, some publications present time series of counts for each single year or for short subperiods. This required a rule about how to aggregate these counts into larger units in order to reduce random variation. Generally, I summed up counts for single years and short subperiods and grouped them into ten-year periods. However, some flexibility was required to take varying sample sizes into account. Thus, series for small geographic units, providing low annual numbers, were aggregated to twenty-year intervals.

Third, whenever possible I used the population estimates quoted in a publication for computing the homicide rates. If a range of population estimates was given, the lower and upper bounds were coded separately, and the mean was used. Some publications cite counts of homicides without giving population estimates. In these cases I used demographic sourcebooks like Bairoch, Batou, and Chèvre (1988) and de Vries (1984) for population data.

Most data come from scholarship using one of three types of sources. A first type encompasses lists of coroners' inquests or body inspections of persons purportedly killed irrespective of whether the suspect was identified. Spierenburg (1996), for example, has used this kind of source in his analysis of homicide in Amsterdam. The second

type of source is records on the offenders indicted and tried by a court and constitutes the basis for the vast majority of the data included here. A third type comprises records of suspected or proscribed homicide offenders registered by local authorities. An example here are the so-called medieval *Achtbücher* in German urban jurisdictions, which list persons banished from a city because of homicide, often after they have fled from the city (see, e.g., Simon-Muscheid 1991; Schüssler 1998).

Geographically, the data cluster in five large areas. Among those, England remains exceptional in respect of the wealth of sources that cover significant territorial units and the number of excellent studies (for syntheses, see Sharpe 1984, 1988; Emsley 1996), yielding 137 estimates. Historical estimates of homicide rates start in thirteenth-century England with the impressive analysis by Given (1977) on the coroners' rolls submitted to the eyre courts. Hanawalt (1979) then examined some 16,000 crimes recorded in the jail delivery rolls during the first half of the fourteenth century. These documents, in which the key information (e.g., the name and residence of the victim, the type of crime committed, and the jury's verdict) was recorded, include almost 3,000 homicide cases. From the mid-sixteenth century onward, comprehensive studies by Beattie (1974, 1986), Cockburn (1977, 1991), and Sharpe (1983, 1984) have traced the development of homicides indicted at the assize courts of several counties over extended periods of time.

A second area with a wealth of data and a rich tradition of criminal history research is the Netherlands and Belgium. Beginning with work by Berents (1976) on crime in fourteenth-century Utrecht, several studies now cover medieval cities such as Antwerp (Heyden 1983) and Amsterdam (Boomgaard 1992). Studies by Rousseaux (1986) and Spierenburg (1996) provide evidence for the early modern period until the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Since the 1980s, a large body of scholarship has emerged in Scandinavia, exploring the very homogenous judicial sources produced by a centralized and uniform judicial system in existence since the fifteenth century. Österberg and Lindström (1988) have examined judicial records in Stockholm and some smaller cities from 1450 to the mid-seventeenth century. Recent studies by Karonen (1995, 1999), Ylikangas (1998*a*, 1998*b*), and Ylikangas, Karonen, and Lehti (2001) have added impressive series of estimates for various regions in both Sweden and Finland, some of which cover more than 200 years.

Fourth, a significant number of studies provide information on long-

term trends in Germany and Switzerland, although both the sources and the judicial structures are extremely complex. Some evidence comes from an old tradition of local studies on medieval crime and criminal justice (Buff 1877; Frauenstädt 1881; Cuénod 1891). Much recent scholarship has focused on the Middle Ages with detailed studies of Cologne (Schwerhoff 1991), Constance (Schuster 1995, 2000), Nuremberg (Schüssler 1991), Olmütz (Schüssler 1994), Kraków (Schüssler 1998), Basel (Hagemann 1981; Simon-Muscheid 1991), and Zurich (Burghartz 1990). The early modern period had received less attention, but there are now growing numbers of studies on various areas in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Schormann 1974; Henry 1984; Dülmen 1985; Behringer 1990; Lacour 2000).

Although somewhat less thoroughly covered than the other areas, Italy is the fifth region with a series of studies that permit empirically based extrapolations. Studies of medieval and renaissance cities include Bologna (Blanshei 1981, 1982), Florence (Becker 1976), and Venice (Ruggiero 1978, 1980). Romani (1980) has examined court records in late sixteenth-century Mantova, and a fascinating study by Blastenbrei (1995) analyzes wounding reports by medical professionals and judicial records in late sixteenth-century Rome. Finally, a series of studies on Padova (Zorzi 1989), Citra (Panico 1991), Sardinia (Doneddu 1991), Tuscany (Sardi 1991), and Rome (Boschi 1998) yields another cluster of estimates for the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries before the onset of national statistics.

B. How Reliable Are Estimates of Premodern Homicide Rates?

Historians who analyze extensive criminal justice records usually resort to statistical counts in presenting their findings. But they disagree whether retrieved historical data should be used to compute homicide rates, whether such numbers provide any useful information about the real incidence of killings, and whether long-term historical comparison is scientifically justifiable (for the recent debate, see Spierenburg 2001; Schwerhoff 2002). There are five major issues with regard to reliability and validity.

The first is whether murder or manslaughter cases in premodern sources qualify as homicides in a modern legal sense, or whether the data are inflated by cases that would nowadays be regarded as negligent manslaughters or accidents (see, e.g., Aubusson de Cavarlay 2001, p. 27). Legally, homicide represented a felony throughout Europe since the High Middle Ages, and definitions invariably included some

notion of intentional aggression. Philippe de Beaumanoir, officer of the French Crown in the thirteenth century, defined homicide in the following way: "Homicide: When one kills another in the heat of a fight, in which tension turns to insult and insult to fighting, by which one often dies" (cited in Rousseaux 1999*a*, p. 145). A reading of the case descriptions in historical sources suggests that, some exceptions notwithstanding, most cases would qualify as criminal acts. In this vein, DeWindt and DeWindt (1981, p. 54) conclude—based on a close examination of 111 presentments of homicide in the Huntingdonshire Eyre of 1286—that 90 percent were definite acts of aggression or violence.

Another important issue concerns the quality of the immensely varied judicial sources used in historical analyses. Spierenburg (1996), for example, has argued that homicide estimates based on court records may yield considerable underestimates because only a fraction of offenders were captured and brought to trial. His comparison between body inspection records and the judicial sources in late medieval and early modern Amsterdam suggests that possibly as few as 10 percent of all homicides may have resulted in a suspect being brought to court (see also Boomgaard 1992; Spierenburg 1996, p. 80). Even if this is an extreme estimate, it suggests that early court records constitute selective evidence. In order to examine this issue empirically, Monkkonen (2001) recently proposed the use of capture-recapture methods, which yield estimates of the size of the unknown underlying population of offenders based on comparisons between different types of sources (e.g., court records, coroners' inquests, proscriptions, reports in diaries, or printed sources). It remains to be seen whether such a strategy can clarify the issue of historical dark figures. Yet it is uncontroversial that the progressive shift toward more efficient prosecution has the effect of underestimating the long-term decline in lethal violence (Stone 1983, p. 23).

A related issue is whether homicide rates constitute a leading indicator of overall levels of violence through long historical periods (see, e.g., Schuster 2000). For present-day societies, homicide appears quite adequately to reflect variation in overall violence. In the United States and Great Britain, for example, trends in assault, as measured by the National Crime Victimization Survey, are highly correlated with fluctuations in homicide rates (Langan and Farrington 1998). Moreover, cross-national homicide rates are also significantly correlated with levels of robbery, assault, and sexual violence as measured by the Interna-

tional Crime Victimization Survey (Eisner 2002*a*). Yet until recently there seemed to be no way directly to address this question historically since alternative data for measuring historical levels of violence were not available. But recent research for several sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Swedish cities now suggests that time series of recorded assault and homicide are surprisingly parallel in both trends and fluctuations (Karonen 2001). However, since historical trends for other types of violence that differ from those for homicide cannot be ruled out, the subsequent analysis is based on the assumption that homicide may be cautiously construed as an indicator only of serious interpersonal violence.

A fourth, somewhat overemphasized, issue concerns the variability of homicide rate estimates because of the small sizes of geographic units, the small number of cases used for computing respective rates, or both (Aubusson de Cavarlay 2001). With only a handful of estimates based on a few killings each, this would be a serious issue. But with several hundred estimates, many based on large numbers of homicides, covering both urban and rural areas, and converging to coherent patterns despite heterogeneous sources, one may safely assume that the data are not random noise. Likewise, the low precision of population estimates, although important, should probably not be regarded as an insurmountable issue. Better population data are important for more accurate estimates. Fortunately, however, my interest is not to compare differences in the magnitude of 50 or 60 percent over time, but a ten- to possibly fifty-fold decline. Therefore, quite considerable inaccuracy in population estimates—especially if it is randomly distributed between the different studies—can be accepted.

Probably the most important “distorting” factor in comparisons of homicide across long periods is the interplay between changes in the technology of violence and growth in medical knowledge. The lives of a large proportion of those who died from the immediate or secondary consequences (e.g., internal bleeding, infections) of a wound in any society before the twentieth century could have been saved with modern medical technology. But until recently it seemed wholly impossible to estimate the size of this effect. Monkkonen (2001), however, has proposed to use information about the elapsed time from injury to death as a rough indicator of the potential impact of modern medical technology. He argues that most deaths occurring within the first one to two hours after the injury are probably not preventable even with modern medicine, while the vast majority of those occurring after

twenty-four hours could be prevented by modern technology. A series of studies yields quite consistent results in regard to the typical time from assault to death before the twentieth century. In mid-nineteenth-century New York, about one-fourth of victims died immediately and another fourth within the first twenty-four hours (Monkkonen 2001). In seventeenth-century Castile, about 37 percent of the victims died immediately and another third within the first twenty-four hours (Chalet 1997, p. 22); Spierenburg (1996) estimates that somewhat less than half of victims in seventeenth-century Amsterdam died immediately. Even if these estimates are far from precise, they give a rough idea about the order of magnitude, by which the lethal consequences of violence might have declined with late twentieth-century technology. Most authors agree, however, that changes in medical technology are unlikely to have had any major impact on the chances of surviving a wounding before the late nineteenth century.

C. Results

Figures 2–7 graphically display the estimates collected for the five areas. Figure 2 includes all local premodern estimates for the whole of

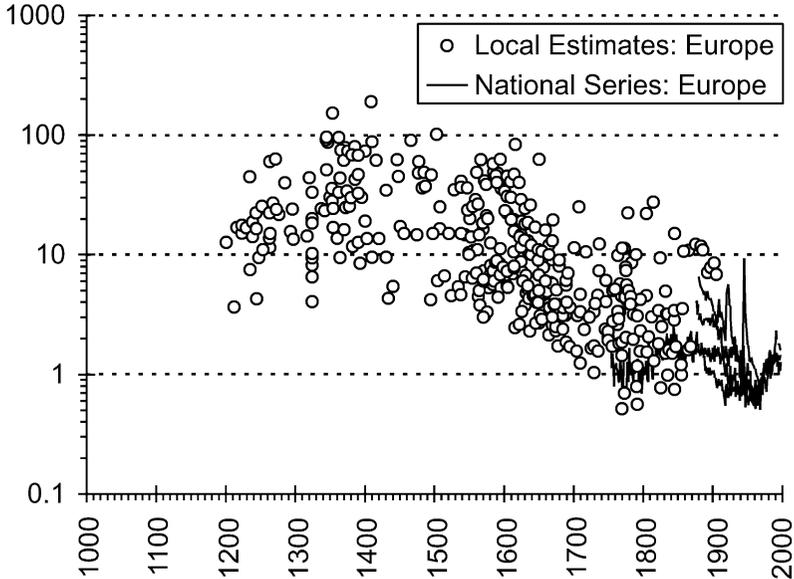


FIG. 2.—Overall trend in homicide rates, all premodern local estimates and four national series. Note: All 398 local estimates from the History of Homicide Database; national series for Sweden, England and Wales, Switzerland, and Italy.

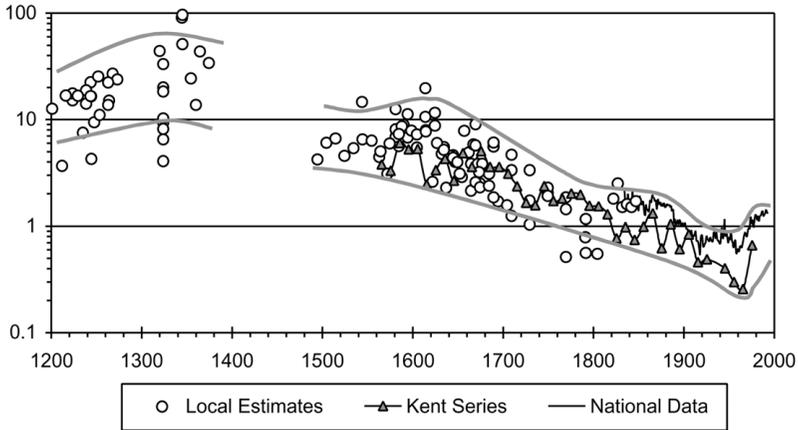


FIG. 3.—England: local estimates and national series. Source: History of Homicide Database; see text for details.

Europe along with national series for four countries. Figures 3–7 show trends for the five geographic areas over longer periods of time. In each figure, dots represent single local estimates based on the mean year of the investigated period and the mean homicide rate, if upper and lower bonds for the respective population were given. For the pre-modern period, lines show selected continuous series of estimates for one geographic subunit. During the modern period, lines show na-

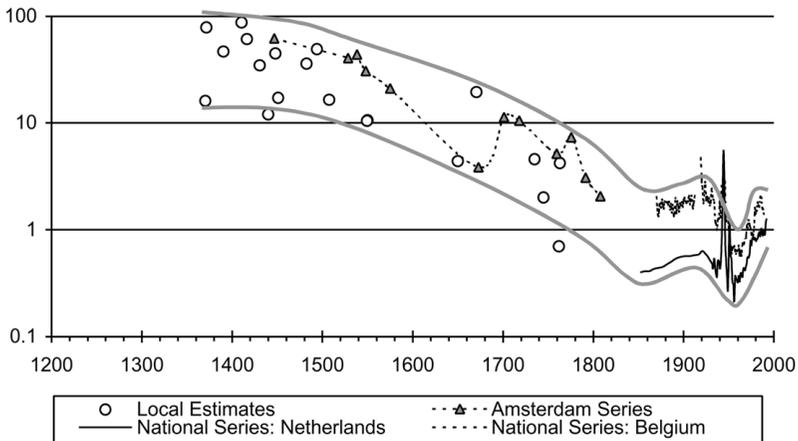


FIG. 4.—Netherlands and Belgium: local estimates and national series. Source: History of Homicide Database; see text for details.

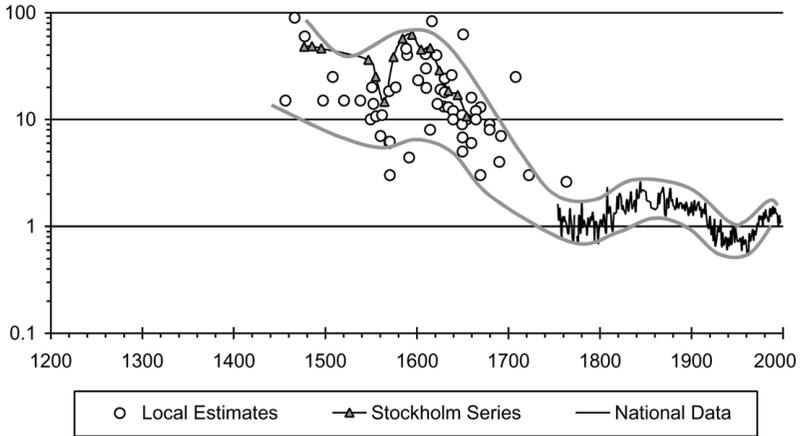


FIG. 5.—Scandinavia: local estimates and national series for Sweden. Source: History of Homicide Database; see text for details.

tional homicide rates based on vital statistics or police statistics. For two reasons, the graphs use a logarithmic scale for the vertical axis. First, estimated homicide rates range between over 100 and 0.3 per 100,000 population over the centuries. Hence, variation at lower absolute levels would become invisible with a linear scale. Second, a logarithmic scale has the advantage of making relative differences comparable across the whole range of absolute levels. In addition, table 1 shows

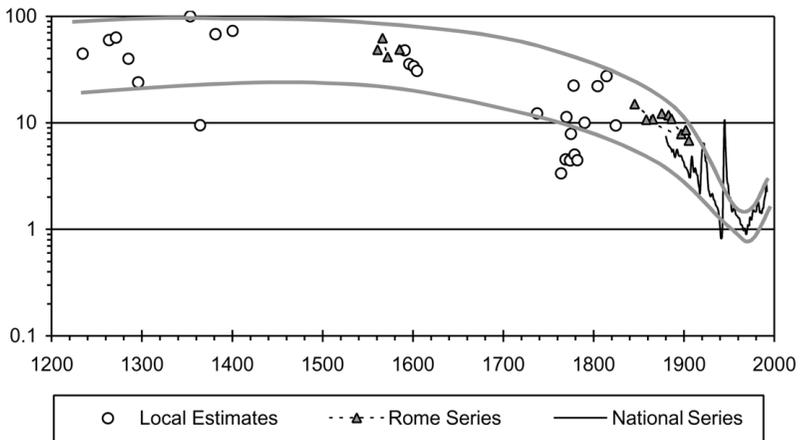


FIG. 6.—Italy: local estimates and national series. Source: History of Homicide Database; see text for details.

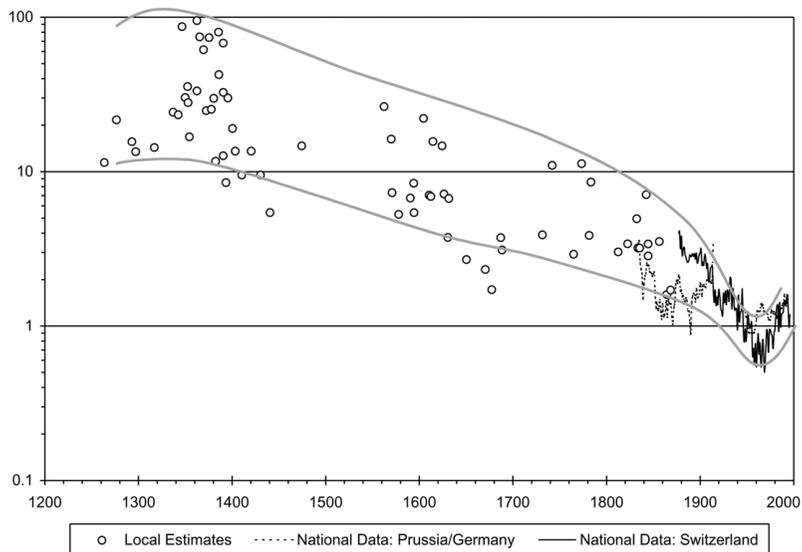


FIG. 7.—Germany and Switzerland: local estimates and national series. Source: History of Homicide Database; see text for details.

average estimates of homicide rates for specified subperiods. These estimates are based on the unweighted averages. It could be argued, though, that averages should be weighted for differences of population size and the length of the period on which the estimate is based. However, since the larger urban areas are more thoroughly covered anyway, it did not seem appropriate to increase their contribution to the overall mean even more. The results can be summarized in the following ways.

1. *Overall Secular Decline.* The data displayed in figure 2 suggest a common trend in homicide rates across western Europe. Three main conclusions can be drawn. First, the total of all estimates is located in a band in which upper and lower limits gradually move toward lower levels from around 1500 until the mid-twentieth century. Taken together, the empirical evidence suggests a continent-wide gradual decline of serious interpersonal violence. Computing averages per century and including all estimates yields the series displayed in table 2. Comparing these estimates with the original curve plotted by Gurr shows impressive consistency. Adding new data, it appears, has little impact on the overall pattern.

Second, for each century, the estimates show a large degree of dis-

TABLE 1
Homicide Rates in Five European Regions

Period	Netherlands and Belgium		Scandinavia	Germany and Switzerland		Italy
	England					
Thirteenth–fourteenth centuries	23	47	...	37	(56)	
Fifteenth century	...	45	46	16	(73)	
Sixteenth century	7	25	21	11	47	
Seventeenth century:						
First half	6	(6)	24	11	(32)	
Second half	4	9	12	(3)	...	
Eighteenth century:						
First half	2	7	3	(7)	(12)	
Second half	1	4	.7	(8)	9	
1800–1824	2	2	<i>1.0</i>	3	18	
1825–49	<i>1.7</i>	...	<i>1.4</i>	4	15	
1850–74	<i>1.6</i>	.9	<i>1.2</i>	2	12	
1875–99	<i>1.3</i>	<i>1.5</i>	.9	2.2	5.5	
1900–1924	.8	1.7	.8	2.0	3.9	
1925–49	.8	1.3	.6	1.4	2.6	
1950–74	.7	.6	.6	.9	1.3	
1975–94	1.2	1.2	1.2	1.2	1.7	

SOURCE.—History of Homicide Database.

NOTE.—Data are arithmetic means of all available estimates for a given period and region. Estimates based on local data are rounded to the next integer. Figures in parentheses are particularly unreliable because they are based on fewer than five estimates. Figures in italics are based on national statistics.

TABLE 2
Overall Homicide Rates in Europe, Thirteenth
to Twentieth Centuries

Period	Average	
	Homicide Rate	Number of Estimates
Thirteenth–fourteenth centuries	32	76
Fifteenth century	41	25
Sixteenth century	19	76
Seventeenth century	11	107
Eighteenth century	3.2	65
		(excluding national series)
Nineteenth century	2.6	Mostly national series
Twentieth century	1.4	National series

SOURCE.—History of Homicide Database.

persion with a ratio between the lowest and the highest bundle of estimates typically being around 1:10. This variation may arise from a number of different sources. There may be measurement errors (systematic or random) influencing each estimate for all kinds of reasons (e.g., gaps in the sources, unrecorded homicides, or faulty population estimates). Variability may be the result of historically contingent conditions, such as food crises, local warfare, or banditry, that influence the local level of serious violence. Based on our knowledge of the large local variability of homicide rates in present societies, we should not expect anything else when working with historical data. Finally, variation in each period may reflect large-scale systematic differences between areas of the European continent. As I argue below, the evidence suggests that a large-scale pattern of geographic variation emerges from the sixteenth century onward and is due to different trajectories in the secular transition from high to low levels of lethal violence. Third, there appears to be a significant process of convergence between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, when very little variation remains between various countries of western Europe.

2. *Relative Homogeneity in the Middle Ages.* Before 1500, the database includes about 100 different estimates of homicide rates. They come from a widely dispersed sample of areas, primarily larger cities (i.e., more than 5,000 inhabitants) but also some small towns and rural territories, and are based on a staggering variety of sources. However, the evidence suggests a startlingly homogeneous pattern throughout Europe. Evidence based on coroners' rolls in fourteenth-century Oxford and London result in estimates in the order of twenty-five to 110 homicides per 100,000 (Hanawalt 1976; Hammer 1978), while estimates for other areas of England typically vary between eight and twenty-five homicides per 100,000. In the south of Europe, data from judicial archives in Florence (Becker 1976; Cohn 1980), Venice (Ruggiero 1980), Bologna (Blanshei 1982), and Valencia (Garcia 1991) yield estimates between a low of ten and a high of 150 homicides per 100,000. And studies on an extensive sample of urban jurisdictions in what are now Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, and northern France again result in estimates between a low of six and a high of about 100 homicides per 100,000 of the population. Overall, there is considerable haphazard variation between individual estimates, which may result from peculiarities of the surviving sources or reflect local economic and social conditions, political conflict, or the intensity of law enforcement. However, and more important, there appears to

be little systematic difference during this period when larger areas of Europe are compared.

3. *Increasing Geographic Differences from the Late Sixteenth Century Onward.* By the late sixteenth century, however, significant large-scale differences begin to emerge. They suggest that the secular trajectory from high to low levels of lethal violence may have had different shapes in different areas. More particularly, homicide rates, as estimated on the basis of indictments brought before the assize courts in Elizabethan and early Stuart England, typically range between three and ten per 100,000 (see fig. 3). Experts in the field seem to agree that these estimates indicate a real decline compared with the late Middle Ages (Sharpe 1996, p. 22). Yet because of the lack of records between the late fourteenth and the mid-sixteenth centuries, the precise period when the secular downturn started cannot be identified.

In the Low Countries, too, evidence indicates a marked shift from the high homicide pattern during the sixteenth century (see fig. 4). Studies by Boomgaard (1992) and Spierenburg (1996, pp. 80 ff.) based on body inspection reports suggest that homicide rates in Amsterdam may have declined from about forty to twenty per 100,000 during the sixteenth century. For Brussels, Vanhemelryck (1981) suggests that the rate of homicides recorded by the judiciary may have declined from about twenty per 100,000 in the fifteenth century to about ten per 100,000 in the sixteenth century. The pattern becomes even clearer by the end of the seventeenth century, when Spierenburg (1996, p. 86) calculates a homicide rate of about four per 100,000 for Amsterdam. The estimate for Brussels, based on the whole century, is four to five per 100,000 (depending on the population estimate). And another century later, a few scattered figures suggest that the homicide rate in late eighteenth-century Belgium or the Netherlands typically ranged between 0.7 and about three per 100,000.

The Scandinavian countries show similar trends but differences in timing. Figure 5 shows that homicide rates remained at very high levels until the first decades of the seventeenth century. Estimates based on the thorough work by Karonen (2001) yield homicide rates of thirty to sixty per 100,000 in Turku, Arboga, and Stockholm around the turn of that century. These rates, considerably higher than anything found in England or the Netherlands at this time, may have been the result of an upsurge from the mid-sixteenth century, when estimates tend to be considerably lower. From about 1620 onward, however, Scandinavian scholars observe a staggering decline in homicide rates. By the

second half of the seventeenth century, rates had dropped to around eight to ten homicides per 100,000, while estimates for early eighteenth-century Sweden were in the region of about four per 100,000. By 1754, when national death statistics were initiated, the Swedish homicide rate had dwindled to a mere 1.3 per 100,000.

Although lethal interpersonal violence had declined to both historically and cross-culturally remarkably low levels by the late eighteenth century throughout northern Europe, a very different trend is found in southern Europe (see fig. 6). Admittedly, the data from Italy have large gaps, and we lack long-term continuous series similar to those available in England, the Netherlands, and Sweden. However, the contrast is so stark that there is no reason to doubt its main characteristics. Departing from the handful of estimates for late medieval and early Renaissance cities, studies by Blastenbrei (1995) on Rome and by Romani (1980) on the Duchy of Mantova give some idea of typical homicide rates around 1600. Blastenbrei shows that medical professionals in late sixteenth-century Rome were registering some twenty-five to thirty-five killings per year, which yields an estimated homicide rate of thirty to seventy per 100,000. In a similar vein, the criminal justice records in Mantova include some ten to fifteen cases of murder or manslaughter each year. Romani (1980) estimates the population at 30,000–40,000, which in turn suggests a homicide rate of between twenty-five and fifty-five per 100,000.

Another two centuries later a sample of figures suggests some decline. In this period, the rate of convicted homicide offenders in Tuscany or Padova can be estimated at between four and ten per 100,000 (Zorzi 1989; Sardi 1991). In the south of Italy as well as in Sardinia, however, late eighteenth-century homicide rates were still well above twenty per 100,000 (Doneddu 1991), and Boschi's figures for Rome around 1840 put the homicide rate at over ten per 100,000 (Boschi 1998).

It is hard to say whether Germany and Switzerland followed the northern European pattern of a sustained decline or whether the long-term trajectory resembles the Italian pattern of high homicide rates well into the beginning of the industrial revolution. Because of the heterogeneity of the sources and the political fragmentation of territories, but possibly also because of a lack of scholarly interest in examining quantitative long-term trends, the existing data make solid conclusions impossible.

As figure 7 shows, the data first suggest a dramatic drop in homicide

rates at the beginning of the fifteenth century. However, this apparent trend probably reflects a shift in the sources used for historical research rather than any real change. Most estimates for the fourteenth century are based on banishment records. These documents include a large proportion of suspects, who had fled an urban jurisdiction after a crime and may never have been put to trial (Schüssler 1994). In the early fifteenth century, the practice of banishment without formal trial fell out of use, and studies for this period are mostly based on proceedings of the local judiciary. Yet many scholars argue that early modern judiciaries may have been able to deal with only a small fraction of actual crimes, including homicide. By around 1600, estimates for the cities of Cologne and Frankfurt range between six and sixteen homicides per 100,000, a figure similar to those in England or the Netherlands in this period (Dülmen 1985, p. 187). However, a series of estimates for several areas in southern Germany and Switzerland and primarily based on offenders tried by the judicial authorities typically hover between two and ten during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. These are consistently higher estimates than are found during this period in northern Europe, and they suggest that the frequency of serious violence in Switzerland and southern Germany may have been somewhere between the low rates found in the north and the high rates found in the south of Europe.

4. *Center-Periphery Structures in the Nineteenth Century.* By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the impact of different long-term trajectories in the evolution of serious interpersonal violence since the Middle Ages had created a pattern of large-scale regional differences within Europe. Since the late sixteenth century, England and the Netherlands had moved a long way in the transition from a high violence society to one characterized by a much more pacified mode of everyday behavior. In Sweden, the same process seems to have started later, occurred faster, and produced a similar result. In Italy, however, homicide rates appear to have moved little from their late medieval and early modern levels, especially so in the south and on the islands. The development in Germany and Switzerland is hard to track, but by the early nineteenth century a north-south divide may have come into existence, with higher levels characteristic of many areas in Switzerland and southern Germany.

Against this background, it seems worthwhile to summarize the large-scale ecology of lethal violence in Europe around 1900, originally described by Ferri (1925) and Durkheim (1973) but discernible

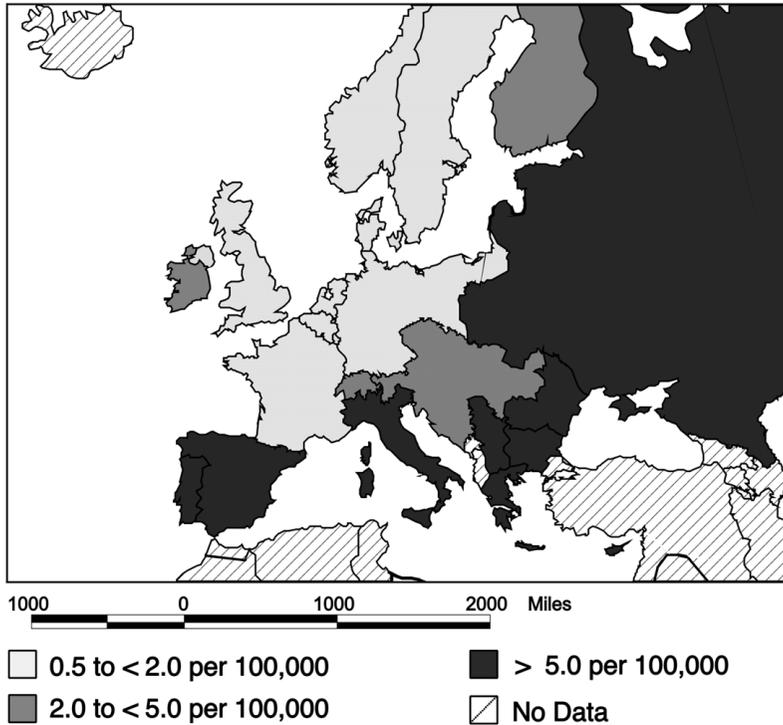


FIG. 8.—Homicide rates around 1880. Sources: History of Homicide Database; Verkko 1951; Chesnais 1981.

in much greater detail now thanks to additional recent work (see, e.g., Chesnais 1981; Johnson 1995; Eisner 1997; Thome 2001). On the level of nations, the pattern resembles a trough with low homicide rates across the highly industrialized countries of northern Europe, including Germany and France. A rim of high-homicide countries surrounds the trough and includes Portugal, Spain, Italy, and Greece in the south, and all eastern European countries and Finland (see fig. 8). By the end of the twentieth century, this large-scale geographic pattern changed. While homicide levels in eastern Europe remained high, rates in southern European countries have converged to levels typically found in northern and western Europe (see fig. 9).

Within countries, nineteenth-century regional differences appear to have followed a distinctly similar pattern. In Italy, homicide rates were higher in the rural south with its low literacy rates than in the more industrialized north. In 1880–84, for example, the homicide rate varied

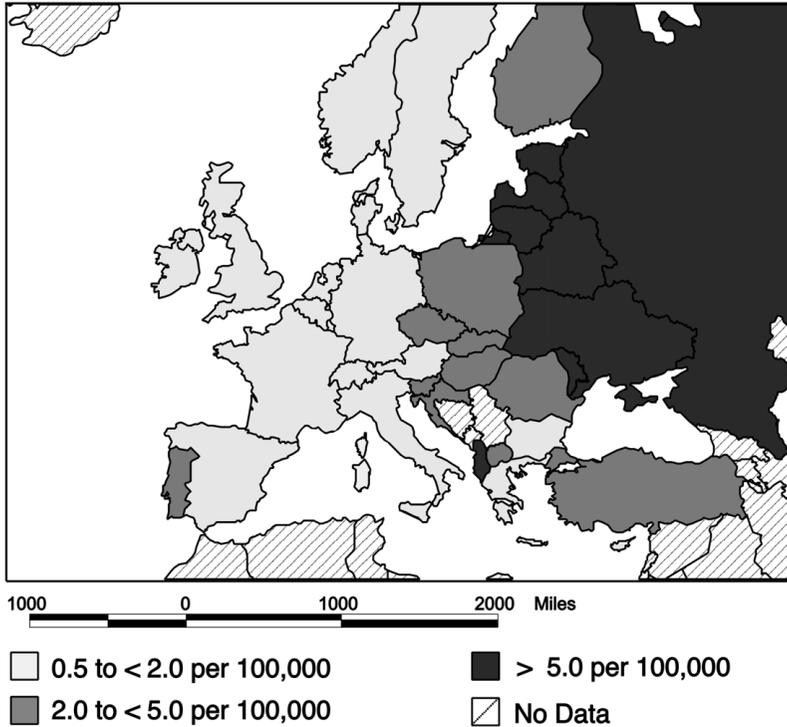


FIG. 9.—Homicide rates around the end of the twentieth century. Note: Data refer to completed homicides known to the police, 1998–2000. Source: Interpol at <http://www.interpol.int/Public/Statistics/ICS/downloadList.asp> (last accessed February 2, 2003).

from a high of 45.1 in the district of Palermo to a low of 3.6 in the district of Milan (Chesnais 1981). French maps suggest higher levels of homicide in southern France than in the prosperous and urbanized north (Durkheim 1973). Within Germany, homicide and assault rates were generally higher in areas characterized by low urbanization, low proportions of professionals and public servants, and a high overall death rate (Johnson 1995). In late nineteenth-century Poland, homicide and assault were more common in the countryside than in cities; in Switzerland, too, homicide rates were negatively correlated with levels of urbanization and industrialization (Kaczynska 1995; Eisner 1997).

All in all, it seems, a center-periphery dimension characterized the geographic distribution of lethal violence across late nineteenth-

century Europe. Homicide was low in the centers of modernization characterized by high urbanization, industrialization, literacy, and education. Elevated levels of violence, in turn, were found throughout the peripheral areas with high birth rates, high illiteracy rates, and a predominantly rural population. This pattern, I tentatively conjecture, was the result of differential long-term pathways, some of which can be traced back to the beginning of the early modern period.

5. *The Past 120 Years: The U-Shaped Pattern.* From about the 1880s onward, death statistics and police statistics cover the majority of western European countries. These data permit us quite accurately to trace main trends in homicide rates over the past 120 years. The main message can be summarized in three points. First, a comparison of the 1950s with the 1880s suggests that the frequency of lethal violence fell by at least another 50 percent even in northern European countries, and considerably more in the south. Indeed, as Gurr, Grabosky, and Hula (1977; see also Gurr 1989) had shown, declining trends were the predominating pattern for other types of violence (e.g., serious assault, robbery) as well as for property crime in many Western societies (Gatrell 1980). In a sense, therefore, homicide rates around 1950 may serve as a benchmark for the lowest level of interpersonal lethal violence as yet attained in any known Western society. It stands at about 0.4–0.6 deaths per year per 100,000 inhabitants. Second, the data demonstrate a rapid convergence of homicide rates between the late nineteenth century and the 1960s. By then, cross-national differences within western Europe had become inconsequential and have remained small since. Third, the data from 1950 until the early 1990s point to an upsurge of homicide rates throughout most of Europe accompanied by a much sharper rise in recorded levels of assault and robbery.

These increases occurred despite advances in medical technology throughout the twentieth century, which are likely significantly to have dampened this latest increase. The main trend over the past 150 years, therefore, corresponds to the U-shaped pattern identified earlier by Gurr and his collaborators (Gurr, Grabosky, and Hula 1977).

6. *Countertrends.* The well-documented increase in criminal violence between the 1950s and the early 1990s may well be just one of several periods in which violence rates increased over several decades. For obvious reasons, we know very little about earlier medium-term periods of increasing interpersonal violence. It might be interesting to know, for example, whether the upswing in lethal violence documented

for Sweden between the 1790s and the 1840s also occurred in other European areas. But there is too little evidence to address this question even tentatively. Recently, however, Roth (2001) offered a fascinating observation on trends between 1550 and 1800. Comparing time series for England, Scandinavia, and France, he found evidence of a similar trend of sharply increasing homicide rates between the 1580s and the 1610s, followed by a continuous drop thereafter. The coincidence between areas far apart from each other is remarkable. As for England, Roth suggests that demographic pressure, economic depression, crop failure, the militarization of culture, and military demobilization together may have caused homicide rates to soar in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Yet the relative importance of those factors remains to be explored. Furthermore, one might wonder whether similar factors played a role in other areas during that time or if the parallel trends are coincidental.

7. *Some Evidence for Other Areas.* Research in recent years has explored long-term trends for geographic areas that I have not discussed. For example, there is now good evidence for developments in Ireland from the beginning of the eighteenth century until 1914 (Garnham 1996; Finnane 1997). The data from indictments in two Irish counties through 1801 suggest homicide rates of around four to seven per 100,000 population in the 1740s and 1750s. These are considerably higher rates than those found in any of the English counties investigated by Beattie (1986) and Cockburn (1991). By around 1900, national homicide rates were down to below two per 100,000, and Finnane (1997) concludes that there is strong evidence of a declining trend in interpersonal violence during the nineteenth century.

Furthermore, Roth (2001) has recently presented data on European-American adult homicides in Connecticut, Massachusetts, Maine, and New Hampshire from 1630 to 1800. His work is particularly notable because it uses sophisticated capture-recapture methods in order more accurately to estimate homicide rates for European colonists. Before 1637, during the era of frontier violence, he finds that the homicide rate in colonial New England stood at over 100 per 100,000 adults. It then dropped to about seven to nine for the next four decades, which—assuming some underreporting in the English assize court data—may have been quite similar to the rate that probably prevailed in southeastern England. It fell again at the beginning of the eighteenth century and reached a low of about one per 100,000 adults at the end of the century. Examining the causes of this massive decline,

Roth argues that the sudden decline correlated with increased feelings of Protestant and racial solidarity among the colonists (2001, p. 55).

II. Contextual Trajectories

To this point I have primarily traced the long-term trajectory of overall levels of lethal interpersonal violence. But historians of crime have long underscored that these trends need to be embedded in an analysis of contextual change, including, for example, the cultural meaning of violence, the typical situations giving rise to conflict and aggression, the characteristics of offenders and victims, and the framework of legal and judicial reactions (Rousseaux 1999*a*). Similarly, criminologists increasingly have become interested in disaggregating violence trends by, for example, offender-victim configurations (Wikström 1992), offender age groups (Blumstein 2000), or weapons used in the offense (Wintemute 2000). And they found such distinctions highly valuable for understanding the determinants of change in overall crime levels.

As the consensus about the overall decline grows, therefore, establishing the long-term variation, and stability, of contextual characteristics of violent crime will become increasingly important. A better understanding of contextual dimensions may provide the decisive cues for more refined interpretations of the transition from high to low homicide levels during the process of modernization. The following analyses explore some relevant dimensions. They primarily stick to a statistical framework, presenting numerical evidence on factors that criminologists find relevant when describing the basic characteristics of violent crime. The evidence partly derives from the publications comprised in the History of Homicide Database. I also include data from a series of studies that have examined historic patterns of robbery or assault.

The available evidence suggests impressive historical stability in some respects. Most particularly, both the sex distribution and the age distribution of serious violent offenders appear to have remained within very narrow limits over several centuries. However, changes are apparent along other core dimensions. First, the overall decline in homicide rates regularly appears to coincide with a decline in the proportion of male-to-male killings. In a similar vein, the drop appears to be inversely related to a (relative) increase in family homicides. Finally, evidence suggests that the overall drop in homicide rates may have been accompanied by a gradual withdrawal of elites from interpersonal violence.

A. Sex of Offenders

Among contextual characteristics of violent crime, the sex distribution of offenders is the most obvious starting point. This information should be ascertainable from any historical source that provides offenders' first names. Unfortunately, however, many historical studies on crime do not present individual-level data, and only recently have historians of crime become interested in variability in gender ratios among offenders. In this respect, research by Feeley and Little (1991) and Feeley (1994) has exposed fascinating observations on historical variation in overall female participation rates. Feeley and Little (1991) first examined Old Bailey Sessions Papers from 1687 to 1912. They found that women constituted well over one-third of the caseload during the eighteenth century, after which the proportion steadily declined to about 10 percent around 1900. Feeley (1994) reviewed a number of studies that had examined female criminality in early modern Europe. He found a pattern that should be surprising for those who believe, with Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990, p. 45), that gender differences are invariant over time and space. Research on urban areas in the eighteenth-century Netherlands shows that women accounted for up to 75 percent of the criminal cases. And even after discounting the various types of "moral offenses," the figures remain high and striking. In Amsterdam, women comprise 50 percent of the persons accused of property offenses, and similar proportions were found in other northern European cities (van de Pol 1987; Diederiks 1990). Feeley (1994, p. 263) argues that the exceptionally high involvement of women in property crime—found in many eighteenth-century urban areas throughout northern Europe—reflects their high participation in the preindustrial mercantile economy. As production shifted away from the family to the factory, however, women were again relegated to the home, which in turn may explain their gradual retreat from property crime throughout the nineteenth century.

A series of estimates for the percentage of female offenders from 1200 to 2000 show that female involvement in violent crime has been much less susceptible to social change. Records across Europe over 800 years consistently show that the proportion of women committing homicide (excluding infanticide), assault, or robbery was hardly ever above 15 percent and typically ranged between 5 and 12 percent. Table 3 summarizes the major findings. Exceptions most probably result from problems in classifications (e.g., inclusion of verbal insult in assault) rather than real differences.

TABLE 3
 Female Offenders as a Percentage of All Offenders in Various Historical Studies

Region	Assault	Robbery	Homicide	Property Crime		Source
				Homicide	Crime	
Fourteenth–sixteenth centuries:						
England, 1202–76	...	...	8.6	...	...	Given (1977, p. 48)
England, various counties, 1300–1348	...	5.1	7.0	9.8	...	Hanawalt (1979, p. 118)
Cracau, 1361–1405	1.0	.0	1.0*	10.0	...	Schüssler (1998, p. 313)
Zurich, 1376–85	1.4	...	...	4.0	...	Burghartz (1990, p. 80)
Avignon, 1372	21.0†	...	...	23.7	...	Chiffolleau (1984, p. 250)
Arras, 1400–1436	13.7‡	...	...	...	...	Muchembled (1992, pp. 34, 89)
	4.6 [§]	
Constance, 1430–60	4.7	...	.0*	17.2	...	Schuster (2000, p. 71)
Douai, 1496–1519	...	...	1.0	...	...	Fouret (1984)
Amsterdam, 1490–1552	14.0	...	3.0	15.0	...	Boongaard (1992)
Arras, 1528–49	5.0	...	...	20.0	...	Muchembled (1992, pp. 34, 89)
Brussels, 1500–1600	8.2	...	...	7.4	...	Vanhemelryck (1981, p. 314)
Cologne, 1568–1612	4.4	4.7	5.7*	22.9	...	Schwerhoff (1995, p. 91)
Seventeenth and eighteenth centuries:						
Rural areas near Trier, late sixteenth to early eighteenth centuries	12.3	4.5	3.7*	5.2	...	Lacour (2000, p. 535)
Castle, 1623–99	...	...	1.4*	...	...	Chaulet (1997, p. 17)

Bavaria, 1600–1649	4.5	...	2.9*	12.4	Behringer (1995, p. 65)
Bavaria, 1685–89	5.0	.0	4.5*	13.2	Behringer (1995, p. 67)
Surrey, 1663–1802	18.2	7.9	13.0	23.9	Beattie (1975, p. 81)
Leiden, 1678–1794	7.8	41.0||	5.5*	47.3	Kloek (1990, p. 8)
Gent, 1700–1789	10.2	...	...	24.6	Roets (1982)
Stockholm, 1708–18	41.0	...	43.0	67.0	Andersson (1995)
Alençon, northern France, 1715–45	20.0	...	...	33.5	Champin (1972)
Armagh, Ireland, 1736–95	6.5	...	7.6	9.7	Garnham (1996)
Neuchâtel, 1707–1806	6.2	...	...	14.7	Henry (1984, p. 660)
Nice, 1736–92	...	...	3.0	...	Eleuche-Santini (1979)
Rural northern Germany, 1680–1795	3.5	...	...	18.5	Frank (1995, p. 235)
Late nineteenth-century Germany	8.0	...	16.0	...	von Mayr (1917, p. 754)
Late twentieth century:					
England and Wales, 1997	14.7	8.5	11.9*	23.0	Home Office (1998)
Italy, 1998	16.0	6.9	5.2	15.2	Istituto Nazionale di Statistica (2000)
Germany, 1997	12.0	7.5	10.0*	23.0	Bundeskriminalamt (1998)
United States, 1997	15.0	8.0	10.0	32.0	Federal Bureau of Investigation (1998)

* Infanticide explicitly excluded.

† Includes insult.

‡ Minor assault only.

§ Serious assault only.

|| Includes pickpocketing.

This is not the place to discuss the causes of that apparent long-term stability. But accepting these data as reasonably valid estimates of involvement in violent crime probably means that sex is not a relevant variable in explaining the decline in overall levels of serious violence. Neither increasing economic prosperity, historical variation in female participation in the labor market, nor changing cultural models of the family and gender roles appear to have had a significant impact on male predominance in serious violent crime.

There is one major exception to this pattern. In early eighteenth-century Stockholm, women not only accounted for more than 60 percent of property crime offenders but also 45 percent of murder and manslaughter offenders and 41 percent of assault offenders (Andersson 1995). These are probably the highest female participation rates in serious violent crime found anywhere in the world. Scholars examining this phenomenon emphasize a combination of factors including—besides demographic imbalance—a highly specific cultural configuration, which embraced some kind of otherworldly calculus. More particularly, for fear of eternal punishment in hell, suicidal women appear often to have chosen to kill somebody else, usually their offspring, and then suffer the death penalty imposed on them by the judiciary (Jansson 1998). Homicide would bring them to purgatory for a limited period of time, after which they would enter heaven for eternity, which was definitely to be preferred to consignment to eternal hell because of suicide.

B. Age of Offenders

If sex differences have remained more or less constant over 800 years, variability in age patterns should attract scholarly curiosity. Hirschi and Gottfredson's seminal 1983 article precipitated a heated debate among criminologists (see, e.g., Baldwin 1985; Greenberg 1985, 1994; Steffensmeier and Streifel 1991). Hirschi and Gottfredson argued that the age curve of criminal offending is basically invariant across time and place, demographic groups, and social and cultural conditions. Various researchers have produced evidence with the intent of showing the contrary. The debate may be said to have resulted in a stalemate. Studies convincingly suggest that police-recorded offenders in the past two decades tend to be somewhat younger than, for example, in the 1950s (see, e.g., Steffensmeier et al. 1989; Junger-Tas 1991). However, the variability of the age-crime curve appears to remain within relatively narrow limits, and the overall shape does not

appear fundamentally to differ between different subperiods of modernity.

It therefore is useful to explore age patterns in violent crime before the onset of criminal statistics. However, important limitations of such an effort should first be noted. Above all, age was not generally recorded before the seventeenth century, and most early sources offer no information whatsoever about offenders' ages. Second, historians of crime have not been particularly interested in the age variable (with the notable exception of King 2000, pp. 169 ff.). Hence, very few studies on crime in the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries include relevant analyses, although the information is probably available in many primary sources. Third, even when historians have gathered data on age, the age structure of the underlying population is almost always unknown, thus making estimation of rates per population impossible.

These limitations notwithstanding, the existing evidence offers some necessarily crude but nevertheless noteworthy insights. The earliest evidence that I could find refers to early sixteenth-century Douai, a city located in the northeast of modern France close to the Belgian border (Fouret 1987). The archives include information on the ages of some 100 out of 623 indicted violent offenders and their victims. The average age of violent offenders in this sample was 26.6 years, while victims had a mean age of 29.6 years. If these figures represent the overall age structure of violent offenders in sixteenth-century Douai, their similarity with modern data is astonishing. In the United States in 1999, the average age of homicide offenders was 28.6 years, and the age of victims was 32.3 years. A study by Wikström (1985) on violent crime in Stockholm in the 1980s found a mean age of 31 years for offenders and 34 years for the victims. Thus, not only is the age difference between offenders and victims almost identical (three years), but there may also be little difference in the effective mean age, since we can safely assume that the average population was considerably younger in the sixteenth century.

This is corroborated by other evidence. I found four studies that include data on the distribution of violent offenders in the period before the onset of statistics. The earliest details the age of more than 85 percent of the 1,500 offenders delivered to jail in the Duchy of Mantova in northern Italy at the end of the sixteenth century (Romani 1980). These data include all offenders, but violent offenses constitute 40 percent of the total. A second age distribution is based on a small sample of eighty-three people publicly punished for wounding and attacking

in the city of Amsterdam between 1651 and 1749 (Spierenburg 1984, p. 321). The third series, based on data presented in Ruff (1984, p. 90), concerns persons convicted for physical violence in two *sénéchaussées* in southwestern France near Bordeaux in the period 1696–1789. The fourth age distribution comes from a study by Champin (1972) of 230 violent offenders indicted in the rural community of Alençon in Brittany between 1715 and 1745.

Some of these studies use detailed age brackets. For comparative reasons, however, I recalculated all distributions for ten-year intervals. Figure 10 shows the average percentage of offenders per year of age in the respective age group. Overwhelmingly, the data show a very similar pattern, with roughly 35–45 percent of the offenders in the twenty-to-twenty-nine-year age group and a steady decline thereafter. Certainly, one should bear in mind that these data may be imprecise in themselves and that no correction for the age distribution of the population could be made. The extent to which these data support the notion of an “invariant” age curve of violent offending is open to debate. Future research may come up with more detailed data allowing for a more elaborate assessment of the age-violence relationship in

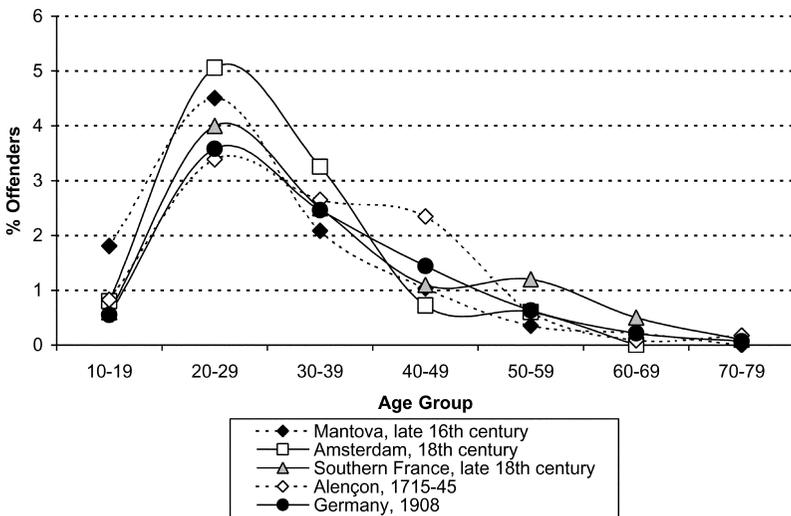


FIG. 10.—Age distribution of violent offenders across time and space. Note: Persons convicted of assault in 1908 in Germany added for comparative reasons. Sources: Mantova: Romani 1980; Amsterdam: Spierenburg 1984, p. 321; southern France: Ruff 1984, p. 90; Alençon: Champin 1972, p. 55; Germany: von Mayr 1917, p. 766.

early modern Europe. However, at present, one may cautiously conclude that evidence from six different areas in Europe and extending over a period of some 400 years shows a strikingly similar overall pattern. If this finding can be generalized, we may conclude that historical variation in overall levels in serious violence does not covary with differences in the age distribution of violent offenders. That would imply that changing cultural definitions of youth and young adulthood, changing marriage patterns, or varying economic prospects for young men did not result in major changes of the age distribution of serious violent offenders.

C. Social Status of Offenders

Class is the third primary variable used to describe demographic characteristics of violent offenders. Research in contemporary society consistently shows that serious violent offenders are heavily overrepresented among socially disadvantaged groups. Historical studies on the nineteenth century tell a very similar story, even if the official statistics of the time are likely to have a stronger class bias. About 50 percent of a sample of assailants indicted in Bedfordshire between 1750 and 1840 were recorded as laborers or servants (Emsley 1996, p. 45). Similarly, in late nineteenth-century German crime statistics, offenders from a working-class background were more strongly overrepresented for aggravated assault and homicide than for any other crime (Johnson 1995, p. 208).

Many contemporary historians of crime have been strongly interested in retrieving information about the social background of offenders recorded in the written sources. Examination of these studies yields a surprisingly consistent pattern. During the Middle Ages, interpersonal physical violence was not at all a class-specific phenomenon. Only to the degree that overall levels of violence fell throughout the early modern age did violence become correlated with class.

Ruggiero (1980) has done probably the most thorough analysis of the social status of premodern violent offenders. In a detailed study of violence in Venice between 1324 and 1406, he was able to identify the social standing of more than 1,600 offenders dealt with by the secular judicial authorities. He distinguishes four groups in Venetian society, for which he also provides estimates of their approximate share of the total population. The nobility, a group demarcated by its access to political power, accounted for about 4 percent of the population. Below it came a group of "important people," which included merchants,

TABLE 4
 Social Status of Violent Offenders in Early Renaissance Venice,
 1324–1406

	Type of Crime					Population (%)*
	Speech (%)	Assault (%)	Rape (%)	Murder (%)	Total (%)	
Nobles	35	22	20	4	18	4
Important people	8	11	8	9	9	10
Workers	52	61	65	70	63	75
Marginal people	5	5	7	16	9	8
Number of cases	223	566	416	424	1,629	

SOURCE.—Data based on Ruggiero 1980.

* Clerics, who may have constituted 3 percent of the population, are not included in these figures. Therefore, population total is less than 100 percent. Clerics were not referred to the secular courts.

professionals, and civil officials, and which constituted some 10 percent of the population. Below them came the large group of workers and artisans, such as laborers in the textile industry, butchers, bakers, and marine workers, who may have totaled 75 percent of the population. At the bottom end came the marginal people, vagabonds and beggars, who may have been about 8 percent of the population. Ruggiero's data show the relative shares of these groups among the cases of recorded violence, which may be roughly compared with their respective share in the total population (see table 4). The data suggest that people of lower standing were not overrepresented among violent offenders and that nobles had a highly overproportionate share in all but homicide cases. As Ruggiero points out, these data may be considerably skewed since much violence among the lower classes may have gone unnoticed or have been handled with summary justice without leaving traces in the records (Ruggiero 1980, p. 96). Nonetheless, disregarding the evidence from nonlethal violence and assuming some unnoticed lower class murders still leaves the impression that the higher ranks of fourteenth-century Venetian society engaged in their fair share of violent behavior. In addition, upper-class people seemingly victimized people of lower standing more often than vice versa, which again contrasts strikingly with modern patterns. Nobles, it appears, did not scruple to assault, rape, or kill people of lower standing.

Although probably unparalleled in their detail, these figures do not

seem to be unusual. Several historians of medieval crime have found similar patterns. In thirteenth-century Bologna, 10 percent of 521 banishment cases for major crimes were urban magistrates and nobles, who were aptly labeled by the *popolo* government as rapacious wolves (Blanshei 1982, p. 123). In fourteenth-century Lyon, Gonthier (1993) observes a recurrent involvement of nobles in violent behavior, including the organization of gangs to revenge failures to comply with their interests. Also, tax returns of offenders in fifteenth-century Constance reveal that wealthy groups were at least as likely to engage in violent offending as the poor (Schuster 2000, p. 137). Hanawalt (1979, p. 131) found that members of the oligarchy in a small fourteenth-century English rural area committed about one-third of all homicides recorded in the Gaol Delivery Rolls (Hanawalt 1979, p. 131). She concluded that members of the higher status groups committed at least as much violence as lower classes since they were likely to become involved in conflicts over rights and goods, which, in the absence of reliable state control, often escalated into violent conflicts.

No one has yet attempted to provide comparative data on the social status of offenders across longer periods. Yet some evidence suggests that upper classes in northern Europe may have become more pacified and less prone to physical aggression from the sixteenth century onward. Spierenburg (1998), for example, argues that homicide rates declined in Amsterdam after 1620 because wealthy, churchgoing citizens renounced violence, while lower-class violence in the form of knife fighting remained undiminished. Similarly, Sharpe (1984, p. 95) assumes a gradual decline in the involvement of the upper class in criminal violence in the century after 1550.

In the south of Europe the retreat of the nobility from aggressive behavior appears to have occurred later. In the French Auvergne, a mountainous and very poor area, the decisive shift occurred between the beginning and the end of the eighteenth century, when the upper classes increasingly withdrew from violent behavior. This transformation was paralleled by the increasing acceptance, among the nobility, of merit and competence as core social values, to the detriment of honor and the military ethic (Cameron 1981, p. 202). Further south, late eighteenth-century Sardinia offers striking evidence (Doneddu 1991). Ridden by chronic banditry as well as the vendetta, Sardinia had an overall homicide rate of thirty-five to forty per 100,000 in the years 1767–89. During that period, members of the nobility were recorded for committing fifty-one homicides. Since the island's nobility counted

some 6,000 members at that time, this puts their homicide rate at thirty-seven per 100,000, the same as the approximate rate in the total population.

If this interpretation of upper-class involvement in violent behavior, based on a few scattered studies, withstands further scrutiny, it may lead to an important generalization. The transition to lower overall levels of interpersonal criminal violence, one might hypothesize, was accompanied by an overproportional withdrawal of the elite from the use of physical aggression to seize and defend their interests.

D. Sex of Victims

Few studies on premodern homicide tell us anything about the sex distribution of the victims, although most judicial and nonjudicial sources presumably include relevant information. Although female criminality has increasingly become a topic of historical scholarship, no study has as yet systematically examined female victimization. The premodern homicide database only includes some thirty estimates of the proportion of female victims (see table 5).

Most of these estimates are based on work by Given (1977), Hanawalt (1979), Schüssler (1991, 1998), and Spierenburg (1996). The period up to the sixteenth century is covered by a comprehensive sample of data, including various counties in England and cities scattered throughout Europe north of the Alps. The pattern revealed is concordant in suggesting that male victims considerably outnumbered female victims. The average proportion of female homicide victims during the period between the thirteenth and the sixteenth centuries is 7 percent

TABLE 5
Average Estimates of Gender-Specific Victimization Rates before the
Nineteenth Century

	Female Victims (percent)	Male/Female Ratio	Approximate Homicide Rate
Thirteenth–sixteenth centuries	7	12.5:1	≈30 per 100,000
Seventeenth century	13	6.7:1	≈8 per 100,000
Eighteenth century	27	2.7:1	≈3 per 100,000

SOURCE.—History of Homicide Database.

NOTE.—All estimates refer to various regions in England, the Netherlands, Germany, and France.

and has a range of between 0 and 20 percent. From a criminological perspective, this figure conveys an air of inevitability. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Verkko (1951, p. 52) examined the proportions of female victims in countries with high homicide rates (Finland, Serbia, Bulgaria, Italy, and Chile). The average proportion of female victims in these countries was 7 percent, the same as the medieval pattern.

Only a few relevant observations are available for the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Those suggest that the proportion of female homicide victims increased as the overall level of lethal violence declined throughout northern Europe. National death statistics for various countries corroborate these findings. Trends in overall homicide rates appear to concur with shifts in the male-to-female victim ratio, thus confirming the “dynamic law” put forth by Verkko (1951, p. 52), which holds that fluctuations in overall homicide rates primarily result from variation in male victimization rates. Generally, the shift toward lower homicide rates appears to have been primarily—but not exclusively—a drop in male-to-male violent encounters.

E. Personal Relationship between Offender and Victim

This finding can be further substantiated by examining another variable, the relationship between offender and victim. A number of studies have examined the proportions of homicides involving family members (spouses, offspring, and parents). Table 6 shows a series of estimates from the thirteenth through the twentieth centuries that can be fleshed out with qualitative evidence on circumstances likely to result in a (recorded) killing.

The data suggest that the proportion of family homicides was very low throughout the Middle Ages. Typically, the killing of family members made up less than 10 percent in medieval societies. In contrast, a large proportion of cases occurred in situations of conflict between (primarily male) acquaintances, with the offender and the victim often sharing a similar social background or being neighbors in a rural community. Not only in fourteenth-century Oxford, did “quick tempers, strong drink, and the ready availability of weapons” contribute to the great frequency of homicides among men (Hammer 1978, p. 20). In many urban areas, the tavern was the place where violence occurred. In sixteenth-century Arras, 45 percent of ninety recorded homicides were committed in or just outside taverns (Muchembled 1992, p. 94). Likewise, about half of all violent crimes in sixteenth-century Douai,

TABLE 6
 Proportion of Homicides against Members of the Family in Various Historical Periods

	Period	Family Homicide (percent)	Homicide Rate	Source
Thirteenth–sixteenth centuries:				
England, various counties	Thirteenth century	5	22.0	Given (1977, p. 144)
England, various counties	1300–1348	2–8	35.0	Hanawalt (1979, p. 159)
Germany, Nurnberg	1285–1400	9	14.0	Schüssler (1991, p. 174)
England, Huntingdonshire	1286	5	20.0	DeWindt and DeWindt (1981, p. 54)
Seventeenth century:				
Essex	1620–80	15	6.0	Sharpe (1983, p. 126)
Amsterdam	1651–1700	11	3.9	Spierenburg (1994, p. 710)
Kent	Seventeenth century	26	4.5	Cockburn (1991)
Castile	1623–99	12	35.0	Chaulet (1997, p. 20)
Eighteenth century:				
Amsterdam	1701–50	14	10.0	Spierenburg (1994, p. 710)
Amsterdam	1751–1810	48	6.0	Spierenburg (1994, p. 710)
Kent	Eighteenth century	28	2.0	Cockburn (1991)
Surrey	1678–1774	36	4.0	Beattie (1986, p. 105)
Nineteenth century, England	1850s–1860s	55	1.0	Emsley (1996, p. 43)
Twentieth century:				
England and Wales	1998	39	1.4	Home Office (2000)
Germany	1996	30	1.4	Bundeskriminalamt (1997)

and probably an even greater proportion in Cologne, occurred in the context of alcohol drinking (Schwerhoff 1991). In a similar vein Sharpe argues, summarizing the English evidence, that “Stuart homicides were characteristically unplanned acts of violence arising spontaneously from quarrels, being simple assaults that went too far in most cases” (Sharpe 1983, p. 131).

However, many historians point out that what seems to have been impulsive and spontaneous violence often was more culturally guided than might first be suspected. Male honor seems to have played an important role here. Thus Lilliequist (1999, p. 197) finds that boxing ears, issuing challenges, fighting and combat interrupted by temporary reconciliation, and drinking rituals constituted the pattern of a culture of fighting, which was the backdrop of the vast majority of homicide cases in early modern Scandinavia. Hence, insults constituted a serious affront and a large class of crimes dealt with by any court of medieval and early modern society; throughout Europe knife fighting appears to have been the appropriate reaction if efforts for reconciliation failed.

During the transition to lower overall homicide rates, however, the relative share of family killings appears to have increased continuously, which in turn suggests that overt public fights between men resulting in serious injury became progressively less frequent. Knife fighting, for example, became restricted to the lower classes in late seventeenth-century Amsterdam and all but disappeared as a distinct culture of violence by the late eighteenth century (Spierenburg 1998). In a similar vein, the decline of homicide in late nineteenth-century Italy, to a large extent, probably resulted from the disappearance of public fights between men over issues of honor. The decline of private revenge and the vendetta—an almost exclusively male prerogative, too—also appear to be associated with the overall drop in homicide rates. In countries such as England or Sweden, as a result, family homicide accounted for more than half of the killings by the end of the nineteenth century, when the overall level of homicide rates was at most one-tenth of that before the sixteenth century.

The patterns with respect to homicide victims’ sex and the relation between offenders and victims suggest another far-reaching generalization. Declines in homicide rates primarily resulted from some degree of pacification of encounters in public space, a reluctance to engage in physical confrontation over conflicts, and the waning of honor as a cultural code regulating everyday behavior.

III. Theoretical Approaches

Gurr's (1981) original study, though innovative in its pathbreaking synthesis of empirical developments, has little to offer by way of theoretical interpretation. Stating that the long-term decline can be explained by "the rise of nonaggressive modes of behavior" (Gurr, p. 304) and a sensitization to violence amounts to little more than rephrasing and describing the empirical pattern. Since then many historians of crime, nourished by the flow of empirical findings, have developed and debated theories that might explain the long-term trends.

The following discussion is based on two prior decisions: first, any theoretical discussion of the trend in violent crime must assume that it describes real changes in behavior rather than methodological artifacts or consequences of the operations of criminal justice systems. There is still debate about this, but many historians of crime accept the basic inferences drawn here from existing data. Second, there is debate over whether the observed patterns require local and specific interpretations of manifestations of violence or whether we may profitably attempt to develop general theories. A large part of the craft of historical research consists in meticulous analysis of specific historical sources resulting in rich and thick descriptions of some historical reality, sometimes at the detriment of theoretical generalization. One might argue, for example, that the declining trend in seventeenth-century Sweden requires a wholly different explanation from the drop observed in nineteenth-century Italy. The following discussion, however, starts from the premise that the existing evidence asks for a generalizing theory, which takes into account commonalities across large geographic spaces.

These general patterns, partly resting on admittedly shaky empirical evidence, may be summarized in five points. First, in the long run, there appears to have been little change in the sex and age structure of serious violent offenders. Second, serious interpersonal criminal violence has declined considerably over the past six centuries throughout Europe. The decline probably started as early as the fifteenth century, but it is well documented for the long period between the early seventeenth and the mid-twentieth centuries. Third, areas in Europe appear to differ in respect of the timing and pace of the drop in serious violence. The process may have started earliest in the Netherlands and England; in Sweden, the main transition may have occurred between the early seventeenth and mid-eighteenth centuries; and in Italy, homicide rates dropped dramatically only from the mid-nineteenth century onward. Fourth, historically, high overall levels of violence appear to

be associated with high levels of elite involvement in physical violence. Drops in lethal violence were disproportionately related to a decline in elite violence. Fifth, in any high-homicide society, the majority of cases are male-to-male encounters, often between people of similar social status, arising out of situational conflicts involving clashes over honor, property, or other entitlements. Sustained declines in homicide rates, in turn, are accompanied by some degree of pacification of interactions in public space.

A. The Theory of the Civilizing Process

Theories may be suspected of being good theories if they predict something that is corroborated by ensuing empirical work. For this reason, the work of Elias (1976, 1983) provides the most prominent theoretical framework discussed by historians of crime who are interested in explaining the decline in homicide rates. Elias's theory of the civilizing process, developed in the 1930s and primarily introduced into the history of crime and punishment research by Spierenburg (1984, 1995), embraces long-term social dynamics at a macrolevel as well as changes in typical psychological traits and developments in characteristic modes of behavior at a psychological microlevel.

At the microlevel, the theory of the civilizing process holds that, over a period of several centuries, personality structures have become transformed in a distinct cumulative direction. The change is characterized by an increasing affect control, a greater emphasis on long-term planning, a rationalized manner of living, a higher reflexive sensitivity to inner psychological states and processes, and a decreasing impulsivity—in brief, higher levels of self-control. Higher levels of self-control imply, in turn, the gradual pacification of everyday interactions, which becomes manifest in lower levels of violent behavior. The idea that, on the personality level, criminal violence is the result of low self-control should be an attractive starting point to (many) criminologists. Many empirical studies now convincingly show that, in contemporary society, violent and serious offending strongly correlates with a tendency to seek immediate gratification, a tendency toward risk-seeking behavior, a high level of impulsivity, and an indifference to the needs of others (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990, p. 90; Farrington 1998). For the historical past, a direct measurement of personality structures is obviously impossible. But assuming causal mechanisms at a microlevel that do not contradict current criminological knowledge

certainly constitutes an advantage for theorizing about long-term macrolevel dynamics.

The overlap between the theory of the civilizing process and current criminological thinking ends, however, with the question of why and how levels of self-control may differ. Criminology has as yet offered pitifully little on this subject. Elias, by contrast, proposes a coherent sociological theory. This is partly because of a difference in focus. Elias was not interested in individual-level variation in self-control, found in every society, but, rather, in explaining historical variation in population averages. On the most general level, he argues that these changes result from the internalization of outer social control, which, in turn, results from the increasing interdependency between social actors. Higher interdependency in complex and extended chains of interaction—buttressed by stable social institutions—promotes self-control, since it creates advantages for those able to dampen affect and rationally plan their behavior (Elias 1978, p. 322).

Two interrelated macrolevel dynamics promote this long-term change since the Middle Ages: the expansion of the state with its monopoly on violence and the extension of the market economy resulting in increasing functional interdependency. In respect of the first factor, Elias argues that the elites of the knightly warrior societies of the Middle Ages gradually became transformed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries into relatively pacified court societies, where violence came to be monopolized by central authorities. The decisive factor was the rise of monarchic absolutism, in which the state monopoly of power over a large territorial unit was accomplished to a high degree (Elias 1976, p. 353). The nobility lost its bellicose functions, which in turn facilitated the rise of complex economic and social chains of interdependency. As a result, courtly manners became increasingly differentiated, refined, and civilized. This culture of the nobility then gradually diffused from its very center to other social groups and strata. In regard to the effects of functional interdependency, Elias basically relied on classical Enlightenment ideas. The view that increasing commercialized exchanges of goods and services creates incentives for restraint from violence was commonplace among liberal thinkers. Adam Smith, for example, assumed that “commerce and manufactures gradually introduced order and good government, and with them, the liberty and security of individuals, among the inhabitants of the country, who had before lived in a continual state of war with their neighbors, and of

servile dependency upon their superiors” (quoted in Beattie 1986, p. 137).

Some historians of crime, such as Spierenburg (1996), accept Elias’s wide-ranging theoretical model of the rise of European modernity. Others refute the model as insufficient (Schuster 2000). Many, however, view the theory of the civilizing process as a fruitful point of departure (Österberg 1996; Sharpe 1996). Thus, if nothing else, most historians of crime would probably agree that the long-term trajectory in homicide rates is an indicator of a wider dynamic that encompasses some sort of pacification of interaction in public space. Beattie, for example, when commenting on the decline of homicide in England between 1660 and 1800, notes that

men and women would seem to have become more controlled, less likely to strike out when annoyed or challenged, less likely to settle an argument or assert their will by recourse to a knife or their fists, a pistol, or a sword. The court record suggests that other ways of resolving conflicts became increasingly favored and that men became more prepared to negotiate and to talk out their differences. This supposes a developing civility, expressed perhaps in a more highly developed politeness of manner and a concern not to offend or to take offense, and an enlarged sensitivity toward some forms of cruelty and pain. (1986, p. 112)

But the problem that divides scholars is the identification of the causal factors that have brought about sensitization to violence.

B. Social Control

Exploring the notion that there may be a link, however indirect and complex, between the rise of bureaucratic state structures and the decline of violence, several historians of crime have become interested in changing patterns of judicial and social control. Two strands of inquiry can be distinguished. First, scholars have paid progressively more attention to immediate patterns of official attitudes to homicide and violence, including prosecution and punishment. Second, changes in the wider context of social control over everyday behavior may constitute an important element for understanding the secular change in violent interpersonal behavior.

In regard to official attitudes toward homicide, a decisive shift occurs

during the sixteenth century (Rousseaux 1999*a*). During the late Middle Ages, although official authorities had become increasingly involved in the regulation of lethal interpersonal violence, homicide was regarded with lenience if it was perceived as the result of passion or occurred in defense of honor. Only the most premeditated cases of murder invariably required the death penalty (see, e.g., Blanshei 1982, p. 125). However, when the peace between two families was broken because of a mortal aggression, retaliation by means of private vengeance was still regarded, in popular perception, as a legitimate pathway to reestablish order. Increasingly, however, the parties would be likely to resort to the courts, where peace treaties comprising a wergild payable to the victim's family could be accomplished. In England, because of early unification under the Normans, jurisdiction of homicide was the exclusive prerogative of the crown within the jurisdiction of the royal courts. This led to the normative distinction of three categories of homicide, namely, culpable homicide punishable by the death penalty; excusable homicide, which could be pardoned by the crown with a letter of pardon; and justifiable homicide, which was liable to be acquitted by a jury.

Between the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries in continental Europe, settlement fell out of the hands of families and into the hands of judges and sovereigns whose aim was to deliver punishment rather than to reconcile factious families. Only then, Rousseaux (1999*a*, p. 154) argues, did homicide invariably become seen as a crime and the offender as a criminal; its perceived character shifted from an unfortunate accident to a rigorously repressed heinous crime. Manifestations of this change can be found throughout Europe. In Zurich, for example, the concept of honorable manslaughter, punishable by a penalty only, became the object of intensive judicial conflict and political negotiation between 1480 and 1530, when the primacy of "urban peace" finally won out over the notion of legitimate defense of honor (Pohl 1999). For the small city of Nivelles, the origins of a new model of social control can be traced to the period between 1520 and 1530, when "the aim is no more to re-establish peace between the citizens but to subordinate the subjects to the social order determined by the prince" (Rousseaux 1999*b*, p. 266). In Germany, too, evidence suggests that private reconciliation had become an unusual way of settling homicide by the end of the sixteenth century (Schwerhoff 1991, p. 280). Rousseaux argues that more rigorous repression may have played a role in the decline of homicide in early modern Europe: "Mortal aggression

became the object of a campaign of ‘moralization’ and ‘civilization’ around the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, between the religious wars and the Thirty Years War. This undertaking was visible mainly in the development of criminal law and in the growing sophistication of legal definitions as well as in the emergence of homicide as a matter for the gallows. This undertaking was relatively successful if we take into account the drop in the number of homicides and the virtual disappearance of private dispute settlements” (Rousseaux 1999a, p. 157).

However, the replacement of the primacy of private reconciliation by the dominance of state repression was embedded in a much wider pattern of increasing social control. From the mid-sixteenth century onward, social historians find a wave of intensified magisterial social control spreading throughout Europe that restructured the relationship between the state and its citizenry. It included the creation of more centralized administrative and judicial organizations, the greater continuity of bureaucratic intrusions into everyday life, and the construction and expansion of professional armies (Tilly 1992). Particularly, this period saw a flood of ordinances regarding feasts, child rearing, appropriate clothing, consumption of alcohol, and church attendance (Oestreich 1968, 1982). Together, these activities resulted in an acceleration of social disciplining, a process that can be seen as the result of complex interactions among different social, political, and economic forces (Dülmen 1993, 1996). The consolidation of state power is only one of them. Yet factors such as the increased religious zeal following the Reformation movements, the expansion of literacy and schooling, and early capitalist organization of work constitute independent sources of the disciplining process in the early modern age. Their similar effects on the structures of the self were both to enforce self-control rigidly and to provide the cultural and social resources needed for a more orderly conduct of life.

C. Limitations of the “State Control” Model

Strangely one-sided in respect to the role of the state as an internally pacifying institution, Elias almost exclusively emphasizes the state’s coercive potential exercised through the subordination of other power holders and bureaucratic control. Echoing the old Hobbesian theme, the decline in interpersonal violence should thus develop out of increased state control. Although the long-term expansion of the state and the decline of lethal violence appear to correlate nicely on the surface, a closer look reveals several inconsistencies. Muchembled (1996),

for example, points out that the decline of homicide rates in early modern Europe does not appear to correspond with the rise of the absolutist state. Rather, he argues, the example of the Low Countries shows that homicide rates declined in polities where centralized power structures never emerged and the political system much more resembled a loose association of largely independent units. Neither does intensified policing nor the harsh regime of public corporal punishment, both probably the most immediate manifestations of state power in any premodern society, seem to aid understanding of the trajectories into lower levels of homicide rates. Police forces in medieval and early modern Italian cities were surprisingly large—Schwerhoff (1991, p. 61) cites per capita figures of between 1:145 and 1:800—but they did not effectively suppress everyday violence. Furthermore, no historian seems to believe that the popularity of the scaffold and the garrote among sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European rulers decisively reduced crime.

Rather, the Italian case exemplifies a more general problem. For whatever the deficiencies of early modern Italian states may have been, they were certainly not characterized by a lesser overall level of state bureaucracy and judicial control than, for example, states in England or Sweden during the same period (see, e.g., Brackett 1992). England was not centralized in bureaucratic terms, and the physical means of coercion, in terms of armed forces, were slight (Sharpe 1996, p. 67). The mere rise of more bureaucratic and centralized state structures thus hardly seems to account for the increasingly divergent development of homicide rates in northern and southern Europe. Examining Rome, Blastenbrei (1995, p. 284) argues that the divergence may, rather, be related to the evolution of different models of the relationship between the state and civil society. While northern European societies were increasingly characterized by a gradually increasing legitimacy for the state as an overarching institution, the South was marked by a deep rupture between the population and the state authorities. In respect to state control, Roth emphasizes a similar point when examining the massive drop in homicide rates in New England from 1630 to 1800: “The sudden decline in homicide did not correlate with improved economic circumstances, stronger courts, or better policing. It did, however, correlate with the rise of intense feelings of Protestant and racial solidarity among the colonists, as two wars and a revolution united the formerly divided colonists against New England’s native in-

habitants, against the French, and against their own Catholic Monarch, James II" (2001, p. 55).

Both Roth and Blastenbrei emphasize, from different angles, a sociological dimension whose importance for understanding the long-term decline in serious violence has not yet been systematically explored, namely, mutual trust and the legitimacy of the state as foundations for the rise of civil society. Both are, of course, clearly to be distinguished from the coercive potential of the state—strong states in terms of coercion can be illegitimate, while seemingly weak states may enjoy high legitimacy. And on the level of macro-transhistorical comparison, the decline of homicide rates appears to correspond more with integration based on trust than with control based on coercion.

Intertwined with the rise of legitimate state structures and political integration, honor probably is an important concept to consider systematically. Much research emphasizes the crucial role of insults in triggering situational conflicts in medieval or early modern societies. Indeed, insult constituted a major class of criminal offenses, frequently brought to court and often resulting in severe fines to be paid to the victim. This is in accordance with a society in which "honor" constituted a highly important symbolic, and therefore also economic, resource to be legally protected and publicly regulated (Muchembled 1984; Burghartz 1990; Schwerhoff 1991; Schuster 1995). It required retributive violence as a potential and culturally accepted means for maintaining one's honor (Schmidt 1994). In late fourteenth-century Zurich, for example, the butcher Welti Oechen stabbed another butcher in a quarrel (Pohl 1999). The judges decided that the case had been an "honorable manslaughter," because the victim had insulted Oechen by alleging that the Oechen family were villains. The offender had to pay a fine to the victim's family and is known to have continued to live a respectable life thereafter. The example is similar to many others found in late medieval records.

Homicide here seems to originate in the necessity to react personally to any challenge to one's reputation or honor, which is persistently found in any high-violence society; the judicial reaction is based on accepting the legitimacy—not necessarily the legality—of the course of action taken by the offender. The long-term decline in violence, in turn, appears to have been consistently paralleled by the loss of the cultural significance of honor. From about the mid-seventeenth century in northern Europe, verbal violence—blasphemy, slander, and in-

sult—began to cause much less alarm, and rashly spoken statements, formerly regarded as unwitting but inevitable revelations of nefarious purposes, lost their awful significance (Soman 1980). The gradual withdrawal of honor from constituting a symbolic resource to be defended, if necessary, by physical force may be related to the expansion of reliable state structures. But cultural change may also have played an important role.

D. Culture

Culture, it is true, is an elusive concept, and explaining the decline in violence by an increasing sensitization to violence is not likely to be very helpful. However, systems of values and ideas, when embedded in social institutions, do have the potential of changing everyday routines and interaction patterns. But if cultural explanations of the long-term decline in serious violence are to be kept from being tautological, they must start with possible causes outside the more narrow subject matter of attitudes toward violence. This might include, for example, culturally transmitted and widely shared views of the role of the individual in society or assumptions about adequate patterns of child raising in the family. These, in turn, would then have to be shown to impinge directly on variables that can plausibly be assumed to correlate with violence.

At least two broad cultural streams in Western society may have been associated with the decline in interpersonal violence, namely, Protestantism and modern individualism. Max Weber (1922) interpreted the Protestant ethic primarily as a gigantic disciplining project that emphasized fulfillment of one's duty, sobriety and frugality, and a methodic conduct of life. Also, inner-directedness and a conscientious life were among the principal commands of early Protestantism, making relentless introspection and the cultivation of shame and guilt pervasive cultural goals, especially among the Puritan and Pietist strands of the Reformation. Furthermore, both Reformation and Counter Reformation brought about an encompassing wave of church religiosity, legitimating the intrusion of clerics into the private sphere but also serving as a backbone of increasing literacy and education.

The rise of modern individualism from the sixteenth century onward is interrelated with Protestantism but clearly distinguished from it (Dülmen 1997). It embraces the cultural diffusion of a specifically modern ideal of the self, which is characterized by "disengagement" and "inwardness" as its preeminent qualities (Taylor 1989). It implies

a methodological reflexive distance from the immediate outer and inner world and an orientation toward guiding ideals such as autonomy, self-responsibility, and authenticity. This development, while following its own cultural and philosophical logic, is at the same time linked to mutually reinforcing religious, political, economic, and artistic practices (Taylor 1989, p. 206). Examples include the permanent self-scrutiny of the religious reformation movements; the sharper delineation of an independent, private sphere; the rise of a market based on contractual guarantees; and the production of art aimed toward individual uniqueness.

Emile Durkheim—forty years earlier than Elias—explicitly assumed that the rise of modern individualism may constitute a crucial variable for explaining the long-term decline in lethal violence. He argued that individual violence should always be interpreted as the “product of a specific moral culture,” which regulates the relationship between the individual and society (Durkheim 1991). Hence, he interpreted the decline of homicide rates primarily as resulting from the liberation of the individual from collective bonds. High levels of lethal violence mirror the intensity of “collective emotions,” which bind the individual to “groups of things that symbolically represent these groups” (my translation, see Durkheim 1991, p. 161). He explicitly refers to the tradition of the vendetta as an example. Violence thus declines to the degree that the person becomes liberated from his or her sacred obligation to the group, and individualism brings about both subjective reflexivity and emotional indifference in conflict situations (Thome 1995, 2001).

Many specialized historians, when interpreting the contextual circumstances of declining levels of violence, find that culture change may have been at least as important as state control or the extension of economic networks. Commenting on the downturn of interpersonal violence in Swedish cities after about 1630, Jarrick and Söderberg (1993) emphasize that there is no concomitant increase in state intervention that could explain the shift. Rather, the decline appears to have coincided with an increased concern, disseminated by the Lutheran church, about the expiation of sin and an intensified attention to issues of human dignity and empathy for the weak. Likewise, the decline in serious violence in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England appears to have been embedded in a distinct cultural climate where principles of Protestantism combined with notions of individual responsibility (Gaskill 2000, pp. 203 ff.). A pervasive culture of Protestantism, disseminated through cheap print, embedded violence in a dense rhet-

oric of providence, sin, and repentance. Pamphlets and ballads told an interested audience about how murderers—"troubled in conscience"—felt remorse for their acts, how dying victims piously forgave their assailants, and how the justice of heaven and earth would combine to punish the evildoer.

To criminologists, the rise of moral individualism should not be an implausible candidate for explaining the fall in criminal violence. Rather, a large number of recent survey studies find that violence is correlated with low autonomy, unstable self-esteem, a high dependence on recognition by others, and limited competence in coping with conflict, which together may well be interpreted as subdimensions of low moral individualism (Agnew 1994; Baron and Richardson 1994; Heitmeyer 1995). To this we might add the hypothesis that the secular decline of lethal violence occurred when institutional structures and educational practices supported the stabilization of that type of individualized identity that is shaped to meet the challenges of modern life.

E. Conclusions

Considering the vast field—temporally, geographically, and theoretically—covered in this essay, it may be wise not to attempt an even more condensing conclusion. Rather, I am tempted to speculate about elements of further research that may help to clarify some of the issues pertaining to the long-term development of serious interpersonal violence in Western society. These suggestions are premised on the idea that more sophisticated theories and comparison of theories only make scientific sense to the degree that we dispose of detailed empirical data, which permit the appraisal of alternative explanations. It therefore seems obvious to ask for more and better data. There are several dimensions to this aim. First, we can improve our understanding of the accuracy and comparability of historical estimates of homicide rates. Monkkonen (2001) and Roth (2001) have proposed promising strategies, and it remains to be seen how far capture-recapture methods, better population estimates, or more broadly based information on the effects of improved medical technology can improve estimates of homicide rates. Second, as our knowledge of overall levels of lethal violence increases, it may become more important to examine developments in subtypes such as family homicide, infanticide, or robbery-related killings. Third, existing research has not yet fully explored historical variation in contextual variables. Qualitative dimensions are obviously important here. However, examining to a fuller extent quan-

tifiable information about offenders, victims, and situations—possibly using some degree of standardized tools across studies—may also significantly contribute to our knowledge. Finally, it would be useful to fill in some of the blank spots on the geo-historical map of homicide in Europe. France and Spain are conspicuously missing, and more information about trends in Italy and different areas in the German-speaking parts of Europe would enrich comparative analyses.

Further empirical research may particularly profit from a more coherent set of theoretically based questions. Thus far, attempts at explanation were primarily post hoc interpretations in the light of cultural, social, and political covariates of the secular trend in homicide rates. But it might be fruitful to adopt systematically comparative perspectives in future research. Findings from social history research may provide, for example, indicators of historical and geographic variation in patterns of formal social control, levels of literacy, political conflict, and the commercialization of the economy. By comparing regions that systematically differ in these respects, we might be able to learn more about what variables contribute to changing levels of homicide.

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