
SOC 3290 Deviance
Lecture 19: Homicide 1

Back in the early 1990's, a serial killer terrorized Southern Ontario. Two young schoolgirls had been abducted, sexually assaulted and murdered. Communities were panicky, the police were getting nowhere, and everyone was wondering who would be next. The intense public concern prompted police to unprecedented cooperation, and a Task Force was quickly set up. Soon, it was realized that there was a connection with the notorious "Scarborough rapist" case. When someone reported that the killer drove a certain-coloured Camaro, owners all over the area were asked to bring their cars in. Ultimately, an arrest was made - and, to their horror - there were two killers, both disarmingly conventional in appearance. The house where the murders occurred was searched extensively, graphic videotapes of the murders retrieved, and two controversial trials followed. Very quickly, one of the accused plea bargained and testified against the other (a matter that remains controversial to this day). What followed was one of the most sensational murder trials in Canadian history. Once the offender was convicted, the case continued to remain in the public eye due to a series of books, newspaper articles, a court case over the incriminating videotapes, and a disciplinary hearing against the offender's original lawyer.

While this case certainly sticks in the public mind, it is very far from being the typical homicide in this country. To correct the misconceptions that emerge from such sensational cases, today we will be examining general trends and patterns in Canadian homicide. Then, we will follow that up with an examination of various theoretical explanations that have been put forth for this crime.

(1) Canadian Homicide Statistics:

* Homicide offences are among the least frequent of all violent offences in Canada. There were 594 homicides in Canada in 2007 (lower than some American cities). This was 12 fewer than the previous year. The 2007 homicide rate of 1.80 homicides per 100,000 was down 3% on the year.

* Our homicide rate is about one-third the American figure and in the middle of the pack internationally.

* The long-term trend is downward in Canada, homicide having fallen 40% since its peak in 1975. However, this is still much higher than rates in the early to mid 1960's.

* The decreases were seen in most provinces, particularly B.C. and Saskatchewan, but Manitoba showed an increase. Quebec's homicide rate was the lowest in that province in over 40 years.

* The Western provinces have consistently had the highest homicide rates (between 2-3 per 100,000 vs. a rate of 1-2 east of the Manitoba/Ontario border. Manitoba's rate of 5.22/100,000 was the highest since 1961.

* The Atlantic provinces tend to have the lowest homicide rates. PEI had no homicides last year, and NL had a rate of 0.6/100,000.

* Larger metropolitan areas (over 500,000) have higher homicide rates, averaging 2.07/100,000 compared to 1.45 for smaller urban areas. Winnipeg, Edmonton and Calgary led the pack among larger centres. In smaller urban areas, the highest urban homicide rate was in Saskatoon (3.60).

* Toronto, Calgary and Trois-Rivières each reported their highest homicide rate since the early 1990s. Although almost one in every five homicides in the country occurred in Toronto in 2007, taking population into account, Toronto's rate ranked in the middle of the nine largest cities.

* Calgary's rate in 2007 was much higher than the average of the previous 10 years, as the homicide rate there has increased sharply since 2003.

* Quebec City reported having no homicides in 2007, marking the first time since CMA data were first available in 1981 that any metropolitan area with over 500,000 population did not have any homicides.

* For the past 20 years, Canadian homicide victims have been at equal risk of being shot or stabbed. This held true in 2007 as 190 homicide victims were stabbed and 188 were shot, with each method accounting for about one-third of all homicides.

* There were 116 victims killed by beating (20%), 50 by strangulation or suffocation (8%) and 16 by a motor vehicle (3%). This represented the most victims killed by an accused using a motor vehicle since these data were first collected in 1997.

* Although the overall rate of homicides committed with a firearm has generally been declining since the mid-1970s, the use of handguns has generally been increasing since the mid-1980s. However, the use of rifles or shotguns continues to decline.

* Of the 188 firearms used to commit homicide in 2007, two-thirds were handguns - 16 more than in 2006. There were also 32 homicides committed with rifles/shotguns and 17 with sawed-off rifles/shotguns in 2007, both down from 2006.

* Homicides committed with handguns are primarily an urban phenomenon. Within the nation's metropolitan areas, 81% of all firearm homicides were committed with a handgun in 2007, compared to 29% in the rest of Canada. Although Toronto recorded the highest number of handgun homicides, controlling for population, its rate was below those of both Vancouver and Edmonton.

*Gang-related homicides, which include those of gang members as well as police officers and innocent bystanders, have been increasing since this information was first collected by the Homicide Survey in 1991. In 2007, 117 homicides were reported by police as gang-related, accounting for about one in five homicides. The 2007 total was 16 more than in 2006.

* Firearms were used more often in gang homicides than in other types of murder. In 2007, 69% of gang-related homicides were committed with a firearm, compared to about 20% of homicides which did not involve gangs. In total, 43% of all homicides committed with a firearm last year were gang-related.

* In Saskatchewan, 9 of the 30 homicides in 2007 were gang-related – the highest proportion among the provinces (30%). The Atlantic provinces (8%) and Ontario (14%) reported the lowest proportions of gang-related homicides.

* Most gang-related homicides occurred within Canada’s largest cities. The nine largest metropolitan areas accounted for about 60% of Canada’s homicides in 2007, but more than three-quarters of all gang homicides. Edmonton reported the highest rate of any of these large cities.

* In addition to gang-related homicides, there were 58 homicides in 2007 that were linked to illegal activities of the victim, such as the drug trade and prostitution, up from 40 the previous year. Police reported that 15 prostitutes were killed as a direct result of their profession in 2007, up from an average of 7 per year for the previous decade.

* In comparison, it is less common to be a victim of homicide as a direct result of legal employment. On average, there have been 17 victims killed each year since 1997 while “on-the-job”. In 2007, there were eight legal occupation-related homicides, including four police officers. Since reporting began in 1961, an average of 3 police officers have been killed each year.

* Taxi drivers have one of the highest at-risk homicide rates among legal occupations. Since 1997, an average of two taxi drivers have been killed each year while on the job, including one in 2007.

* Most victims knew the person who killed them – in 2007, a relatively small proportion (16%) of solved homicides were committed by a stranger. The rate of homicides committed by a stranger has been fairly stable over the past 30 years.

* Homicide victims in Canada are almost equally likely to be killed by a family member as they are an acquaintance. In 2007, of all solved homicides, about one-third of victims were killed by an acquaintance and a further one-third by a family member.

* The rate of spousal homicide has been declining since the mid-1970s. This trend continued in 2007, with 13 fewer spousal homicides than in 2006. The

spousal homicide rate is now at its lowest point since the mid-1960s.

* Women continue to be about 4 times more likely to be victims of spousal homicide than men. In 2007, there were 51 women and 13 men killed by a current or former spouse. For both men and women, more victims were killed by a common-law spouse than by a legally-married spouse in 2007.

* Women also continue to be at greater risk than men of being killed by a former spouse. In 2007, 11 of the 51 female spousal victims were killed by a separated or divorced spouse, compared to none of the male victims. In addition to the 65 spousal homicides, there were 16 homicides committed by a current or former boyfriend/girlfriend or intimate partner in 2007, similar to numbers seen in previous years.

* As has been the case historically, males accounted for about three-quarters of homicide victims and 9 in 10 accused persons in 2007. Male victims and accused tend to be younger than female victims and accused. In 2007, the median age of male victims was 29.5, compared to 35.5 for female victims. The median age of males accused of homicide was 24 compared to 27 for females accused of homicide.

* Males accused of homicide have been getting younger in recent years. The median age of males accused of homicide was down from 29 in 2002 to 24 in 2007, while the age of accused females has remained about the same.

* There were 74 youth aged 12 to 17 accused of homicide in 2007, 11 fewer than in 2006. Despite recent fluctuations, the rate of youth accused of homicide has remained relatively stable over the past 30 years. The 2006 rate of youth accused (3.29 per 100,000 youth) was the highest since recording began in 1961. Even though the 2007 rate was lower, it was still the 2nd highest ever recorded.

* Compared to adults, a higher proportion of homicides involving youth were gang-related or were incidents where more than one person was accused of committing the crime. Among incidents with an accused youth, 57% involved multiple accused compared to 17% where an adult was accused. Similarly, 32% of incidents with a youth accused involved gangs compared to 11% of incidents with an adult accused.

* Homicides committed by youth in 2007 also differed from those committed by adults in the method used. While the most common method employed by a youth to commit homicide was a physical beating (38%), shootings were the most common method used by adults (37%).

(2) Why Do People Kill?

Now that we have examined the patterns of homicide in Canada, we will go on to discuss theories that attempt to explain why people kill. In general, there are 3 kinds of theory attempting to explain why some people commit murder - essentially differing in their emphasis on where the cause

of murder can be found: either the in body (biogenic), the psyche (psychogenic), or the social environment (sociogenic). Each will be dealt with in turn.

Biogenic theories - those that search for the cause of homicide in the human body - may be broken down into two types. The first, known as ethological theory, asserts that humans are not just biologically the same as other creatures in having the instinct to kill, but far more homicidal by nature. This is evidenced by the fact that while other dangerous animals rarely kill others of the same species, in comparison humans often kill other humans (e.g. wars, homicides). Ethologists have attempted to explain why this intraspecies aggression is so much more common among humans. Their explanation is that while other ferocious animals are endowed with the instinct to inhibit their killing, humans are not. This is because humans are not endowed with natural features like sharp teeth and claws, but physically more like other harmless creatures not easily able to kill their own. Thus, there was no natural selection pressure at work to breed into humans the instinctual mechanism for inhibiting their instinct to kill their own kind. Suddenly, however, humans developed artificial weapons even more dangerous than the fangs and claws of carnivores. This artificial weapon development was just too sudden for evolution to catch up. Thus, the mechanism of inhibition against their killing instinct failed to evolve in humans. Without this inhibiting instinctual mechanism, humans use their artificial weapons to kill - and this may explain why the human race as a whole is the most homicidal in the animal kingdom. All the same, this theory can't explain why some humans are more homicidal than others, nor takes into account the power of human civilization to inhibit killing.

The second biogenic theory is based in genetics. The argument is that while most genetically normal males are born with X and Y chromosomes (the X supposedly gentle and passive; the Y tough and aggressive), in a tiny percentage of the male population is born with an extra Y chromosome (XYY males). With this extra Y, such men are supposed to be overly tough and aggressive. Most such males are somewhat mentally challenged, have acne, are tall, and do have strong aggressive tendencies. It has thus been theorized that this extra Y chromosome can drive such individuals into committing dangerous, violent crimes such as murder. Indeed, some geneticists have found an unusual number of violent inmates in prisons and mental hospitals to have the extra Y chromosome. Nevertheless, the validity of this theory is quite limited for 2 reasons. First, most XYY boys do not grow up to be murderers, and most murderers do not have the XYY. Secondly, the XYY may at best serve only as potentiator - not a determinant - of violence. In fact, sociocultural factors may largely determine whether this potential turns into actuality (e.g. teasing such youth for their appearance, thus provoking violence).

Moving on to consider the second group of theories, these differ in that they focus in on psychological factors - and are thus known as psychogenic theories. These are also broken down into two varieties: psychoanalytic theory and the theory of frustration-aggression.

Psychoanalytic theory, rooted in the work of Freud, divides our psyche into the id, the ego and the superego. The id includes the basic desires and drives that we are born with - our inborn desire to live, enjoy ourselves, make love or celebrate life. But such desires can't be fulfilled unless we have learned how to fulfill them. Thus we have learned many ways to live as best we can. The knowledge that results from this learning becomes our ego. In trying to help us enjoy ourselves, the ego tells us there is a limit to our id satisfaction. If we want to satisfy our sex drive, we can't just grab someone off the street. This limit to our self-enjoyment is imposed on us by society in the form of rules and injunctions. Our acceptance of these social rules becomes the cornerstone of our superego - very similar to our conscience.

According to Freud, our id and our superego are always at war - one wants to satisfy all kinds of desires and fantasies, the other prohibits them. If we fail to satisfy the id, we feel unhappy; if we fail to obey our superego, we feel guilty. So we are always caught between feeling unhappy or guilty. Fortunately, in most of us, the rational part of our mind - the ego - can resolve the conflict by acting as mediator. It attempts to find a way to satisfy the id without disobeying the superego, or obey the superego without frustrating the id. If the ego fails in this mission, unhappiness or guilt will so overwhelm the person that they may become mentally ill. This, in turn, can lead to such violent acts as murder. Thus, many psychiatrists attribute homicide to mental disorder.

The ego has yet another problem to deal with. Freud suggests that we are all born with both eros (the life instinct) and thanatos (the death instinct). These, taken together, comprise our id. Part of thanatos is an aggressive drive directed at other people. Since this is as normal as the sex drive, it too demands expression. But the superego still stands guard, and another battle looms. If our aggressive drive demands life threatening violence against another, our superego stands in the way. Again, our ego has to step in and play a mediating role. To reconcile these matters, our ego usually employs sublimation - enabling us to satisfy our aggressive drive in socially acceptable ways (e.g. engaging in sports, politics, business takeovers). Through sublimation, then, we turn out to be normal.

However, it is argued, if we are deprived of love or subjected to brutal attacks in childhood, our aggressive drive would become too irrational for our ego to cope with - and too powerful for our superego to subdue. Thus, we could very easily engage in an extremely violent and bizarre murder (e.g. Emil Kemper). Conversely, if our parents were too strict with us, severely

punishing us for even minor misconduct, we would develop a superego so powerful that it would completely suppress our aggressive drives. Without the normal release of aggressive energy, it could build up to such a point that it explodes. This could explain why the normally "very nice" person suddenly commits murder to the shock of everyone.

Despite the apparent logic of this approach, there are two basic problems with psychoanalytic theory. First, it is applicable to only a small, unusual sample of murderers rather than to the majority of them. Second, the theory cannot be empirically tested. It is impossible to observe and measure the so-called id, ego and superego, as well as the aggressive instinct. But psychiatrists find the theory convincing because of its logical reasoning, with support from many anecdotal illustrations.

The second major psychogenic theory relating to homicide is known as the frustration-aggression perspective. First proposed by John Dollard in 1939, this posits that aggression is always a consequence of frustration. Later moderated, the most common form of the argument is that a frustrating event increases the probability that the thwarted organism will act aggressively soon afterward.

Such psychologists define frustration as the blockage of one's attempt to achieve a goal, whatever that goal may be (e.g. a man wanting to have sex with a date). As for aggression, this can be any act that hurts a person in any way. (e.g. the man responds to the above frustration with hostility and/or violence).

Although this theory can be empirically tested, and has been generally supported by various kinds of research evidence, it has been rarely applied to murder. Still, Palmer (1960) did compare 50 convicted murderers with their brothers, finding that the murderers had experienced a much greater amount of frustration in their earlier lives than did their brothers - who did not murder. The frustrations included abuse by parents, beatings by others, and a general frustration with peers and recreational activities. We must be cautious about this study, however, because most of the data came from retrospective interviews with subjects' mothers who might paint a distorted picture of their sons' childhoods. Besides, we should point out that many people suffer frustrations in their lives and this rarely leads to murder. Indeed, frustration may be worked out in any number of non-violent ways.

Turning now to the third group of theories - those that point to social factors in the causation of murder. Such sociogenic theories of violence can be broken again into two types: external restraint theory and subculture of violence theory.

External restraint theory points out that the frustration-aggression

hypothesis is useful only for suggesting aggression as a possible consequence of frustration. It doesn't specify the kind of aggression that will ensue. The reason for murder as a specific result of frustration is spelled out in Henry and Short's (1954) theory of external restraint. This is intended to show why some frustrated people commit suicide while others turn to homicide. The argument is that intensely frustrated people choose self-directed aggression (suicide) if they experience weak external restraint, but choose other-directed aggression (homicide) if they suffer strong external restraint.

Henry and Short define the strength of external restraint as the "degree to which behavior is required to conform to the demands and expectations of other persons" (i.e. the amount of social control imposed on them thereby limiting their freedom/behaviors). People who suffer a great deal of this kind of social control are more inclined to homicide than suicide because they can legitimately blame others for their frustration.

Martin Gold (1958) has extended this theory to include a mediating factor: the socialization in aggression by physical punishment. Gold believes that there are two kinds of socialization (1) that involving physical punishment to deter the misbehaving child; (2) that involving psychological punishment (e.g. inducing guilt or withdrawing affection). Gold suggests that physical punishment leads to outward aggression against others while children punished psychologically turn their aggression against themselves. When they become frustrated adults ready for aggressive action, those who have been physically punished will likely choose murder over suicide, while those who have undergone psychological punishment would choose suicide.

There is some evidence to suggest that strong external restraint is associated with homicide (e.g. the lower class and some minorities have significantly higher external restraints as well as higher homicide rates). There is also some evidence to support Gold's theory that physical punishment received in childhood increases the likelihood of homicide in adulthood. Still, all this doesn't mean that external restraint or physical punishment has a direct, causal impact on homicide. Instead, as recent studies suggest, external restraint can lead to homicide only through a third variable called "external attribution of blame" - blaming others rather than oneself for one's own frustration. In other words, excessive external restraint or physical punishment encourages people to blame others rather than themselves for their own problems in life, which in turn causes them to engage in physical violence against others.

The second sociogenic theory of homicide is known as "subculture of violence theory." Wolfgang (1958) suggests that "there may be a subculture of violence that doesn't define personal assaults as wrong or antisocial, in which quick resort to physical aggression is a socially approved and expected

concomitant of certain stimuli, and in which violence has become a familiar but often deadly partner in life's struggles." He theorizes that the subculture of violence is the basic cause of high homicide rates in poor neighbourhoods.

According to Wolfgang, the violent subculture has such a grip on the poor that they engage in a wider variety of violent behavior than the non-poor. This is because they associate and identify with the model of violence as provided by their parents, peers, and others in the poor neighbourhood. Simultaneously, they are discouraged from following the countermodel of non-violence from the larger society. Thus, violence becomes part of their lifestyles and their way of solving interpersonal problems. Not surprisingly, they consider the use of violence not only normal but necessary for survival. They do not feel guilty about their aggression as a result.

Critics, however, have questioned the implication that a violent act necessarily reflects the actor placing a high value on violence. Indeed, studies have shown that people who engage in violence do not value it any more than those who don't (e.g. inmate studies). Other studies have suggested that the cause of high homicide rates among the poor and certain minorities is not a subculture of violence so much as poverty, relative deprivation, or social inequality. Nevertheless, as it propagates the belief that using violence to solve interpersonal problems, the subculture of violence does encourage - though not cause - homicide, especially among those frustrated by the structural problems of poverty and inequality.

So these are the three basic kinds of theory purporting to explain homicide, along with their major variants. Certainly more could be added to the sociogenic category (e.g. Wolfgang's victim-precipitation, Luckenbill's study of murder as a "situated transaction," feminist arguments about patriarchy, and the longstanding arguments about the "cycle of violence."). Nevertheless, these are the major explanations.

Now that we have discussed the patterns in Canadian homicide and reviewed various explanations of murder, next class I want to shift to a specialized, though complementary topic: the experiences of victims - in particular the surviving family members. This sheds light on another side of this crime - with some surprising results for the sociology of deviance.