

## MODERNIZATION, SELF-CONTROL AND LETHAL VIOLENCE

### *The Long-term Dynamics of European Homicide Rates in Theoretical Perspective*

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*The present paper examines secular trends of homicide rates by means of a systematic re-analysis of all available quantitative studies on pre-modern homicide. The results confirm, first, that homicide rates have declined in Europe over several centuries. Second, the empirical evidence shows, that unequivocal decline began in the early seventeenth century. Third, the data indicate that the secular decline begins with the pioneers of the modernization process, England and Holland, and slowly encompasses further regions.*

*These findings corroborate much of the civilizing process framework proposed by Norbert Elias. Yet, the diffusion of self-control was sustained not only by compliance to the state monopoly of power but by a variety of disciplining institutional arrangements. This includes, for example, the early expansion of schools, particularly in Northern Europe, the rise of religious reform movements, and the organization of work in manufacturing. Second, while social disciplining certainly is the central feature of the early modern period, it also served to push forward the rise of the specifically modern individualism that Durkheim sees as the cause of the decline of individual-level violence.*

About 20 years ago, in an article that has become highly acclaimed among historians of crime, Ted Robert Gurr (1981: 295) examined empirical evidence on secular trends in lethal criminal violence. Gurr primarily reviewed a number of historical studies on homicide in medieval and early modern England, each based on detailed analyses of records for specific periods and specific jurisdictions. While not originally concerned with computing homicide rates, the studies did provide counts that could be used for estimating the rates. Gurr plotted the some 20 estimates for the period from about 1200 to 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. It starts at about 20 homicides per 100,000 population in the high and late Middle Ages and ends after an extended downswing at about one homicide 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 development of increased internal and external control on aggressive behavior’ (Gurr 1981; also see Gurr 1989).

Since then, an impressive amount of research in the history of crime and criminal justice has greatly enlarged knowledge about historical manifestations of lethal violence. It has shown that the history of violence has to be firmly situated in the context of social and cultural history and the long-term development of the core institutions of modern

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society. Also, most historians of crime now agree on the notion of a long-term decline in lethal violence. Thereby, the work of Norbert Elias (1976, 1983) probably forms the most prominent theoretical framework discussed by those historians of crime who are interested in explaining this long-term trend. Elias's well-known theoretical model of the 'civilizing process' embraces long-term social dynamics at a macro level as well as changes in typical psychological traits and developments in characteristic modes of behaviour. In a nutshell, the theory of the civilizing process holds that over a period of several centuries a type of personality has come to prevail that is characterized by increasing affect control, decreasing impulsivity, and a rationalized manner of living—in brief: higher levels of *self-control*. Higher levels of self-control imply, in turn, the gradual pacification of everyday interactions, which becomes manifest by lower levels of violent behaviour.<sup>1</sup>

Both in the 'civilizing process' and the 'courteous society' Elias develops a coherent theoretical framework for explaining the assumed secular increase of self-control in European societies. He argues that the most important cause of this psychological change is state formation processes. In particular, he emphasizes the gradual transition from the knightly warrior societies in the Middle Ages to the relatively pacified court societies in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, where violence comes to be monopolized by central authorities. According to Elias, the decisive factor was the rise of monarchic absolutism (Elias 1976: 353). There, the state monopoly of power over a large territorial unit was accomplished in early modernity to the highest degree. Through this, 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 become increasingly differentiated, refined and civilized. This specific culture of the nobility then gradually diffuses from its very centre to other social groups and strata. As institutions enforcing the state monopoly of power become more stable, heightened levels of security in social life bring about more intense social interdependencies. The psychic corollary of this social process involves a personality structure, which emphasizes the inhibition of spontaneous emotions and the ability to distance oneself from open displays of aggression (Elias 1976: vol. 1, 320–5, 1978).

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 for attempts at interpreting the secular trend first described by Ted R. Gurr (Osterberg 1996a; Sharpe 1996). Yet there have been only limited attempts at systematically integrating the vast knowledge accumulated since the early 1980s, which now covers far wider geographic areas than Ted Robert Gurr was able to include in his review (but see, e.g. Rousseaux 1999).

The present paper therefore presents the results of a systematic re-analysis of all available quantitative studies on pre-modern homicide. When combined with the more

<sup>1</sup> From a criminological perspective, the striking correspondence between this argument and the 'general theory of crime' as proposed by Michael Gottfredson and Travis Hirschi (1990) is worth mentioning. As is well known, their theoretical model postulates that low self-control constitutes a generalized personality trait that is 'the individual-level cause of crime'. According to Gottfredson and Hirschi, low self-control involves a tendency to seek immediate gratification, a preference for simple tasks, a tendency toward risk-seeking behaviours, a preference for physical as opposed to mental and reflexive activities, a high level of impulsivity, and an indifference to the needs of others. They thus delineate a theoretical concept that coincides to an astonishing degree with Elias's definition of 'self-coercion' as a higher degree of control over spontaneous impulses, an increased ability for long-term planning, and a higher reflexive sensitivity to inner psychological states and processes.

recent official statistics, the data allow us to follow homicide trends in several European regions for over as many as 800 years. The primary aim of this work is to tentatively develop a more detailed description of the long-term trends in lethal violence across parts of the European continent. More particularly, I will address questions such as: How universal was the secular decline in homicide? In what historical period did the decline begin and possibly end? Do geographic regions show differences in the timing of the decline?

### *The Data*

The data for this study come from two very different types of sources. As regards the *age of statistics*, I have primarily relied on the counts of victims of murder and manslaughter according to the national vital statistics. In Sweden these statistics exist as far back as the middle of the eighteenth century, while in most other European countries respective data start in the second half of the nineteenth century. Data based on vital statistics are usually assumed to be good indicators of the actual frequency of homicide in a given society.

In any period prior to the invention of national statistics, however, any knowledge on homicides is based on local archival data of some sort, produced for widely varying purposes and not originally intended for statistical analyses. Therefore, as regards the pre-statistical period, the data used in this paper derive from a re-analysis of all available historical research that presents quantitative data on homicide frequencies prior to the beginning of national statistics. Due to the fragmented judicial structure of pre-modern Europe, and because there are large gaps in the surviving sources, we are here confronted with a patchwork of local historical studies on limited periods of time. A number of excellent recent research reviews, such as Spierenburg (1996) for the Netherlands, Österberg (1996a) for Sweden, Ylikangas (1998, 2001) for Finland, Eibach (1996) for Germany, and Rousseaux (1996) and Schüssler (1996) for a variety of European regions, greatly facilitated access to this literature. All together, I found 77 publications containing relevant data. These data were then systematically coded in a database. The coding includes information about the geographical area, the period investigated, the type of sources used, the absolute number of homicide cases, the population estimates used, and assessments of the quality of the data in the primary publication.<sup>2</sup> Where available, data about the proportion of female offenders and victims as well as the proportion of recorded infanticides were coded separately. However, these later data will not be examined in the present paper.

Four rules guiding the coding process may be noted: first, counts for sub-periods within a geographical unit are coded separately if they represent at least an interval of ten years. Second, if different population estimates are quoted in a publication, each is coded separately, and the mean is used for computing homicide rates. Third, some publications only cite absolute counts of homicides without giving population estimates. In these cases I used demographic sourcebooks like Bairoch (1988) and de Vries (1984) for respective data. Fourth, whenever separate counts of infanticide were given in the primary publication, I regularly included them in the homicide estimates. Although not

<sup>2</sup> A full documentation of the literature and the database can be obtained from the author.

wholly satisfying, this strategy is aimed at improving comparability, since the majority of publications do not allow for separating infanticides and other killings.

The data set includes 374 single point estimates for the pre-statistical period. On average, each estimate represents a time period of approximately 16 years and a population of about 130,000 individuals. Geographically, the estimates cluster in five large areas. England is covered most densely among all the investigated areas (137 estimates). For the Scandinavian area including Norway, Sweden and Finland the database comprises 75 observations. Belgium and the Netherlands are represented by 32 estimates. Germany and Switzerland constitute a fourth cluster 72 estimates. And various cities and territories in Italy yield another 36 observations. The remaining observations refer to widely scattered areas in France and Spain and will not be further analysed in this paper.

Historical scholarship has used a wide variety of different sources. However, with the risk of over simplification, one may distinguish three basic types of sources (Spierenburg 1996: 79): (a) Lists of coroner's inquests or body inspections of persons purportedly killed irrespective of whether the suspect was identified. This type of source has been used, for example, by Hanawalt (1976) for fourteenth-century England and by Spierenburg for Amsterdam in the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries. (b) Records on suspected homicide offenders registered by judicial authorities, which in some areas may also comprise fugitive suspects. This type of source includes, for example, records on indictments extensively analysed in England (e.g. Beattie 1986) and Sweden (e.g. Karonen 1998). (c) Records on offenders tried by a court and found guilty of manslaughter or murder. Besides court records in the conventional sense, one may include here the so-called medieval 'Achtbücher' in German urban jurisdictions, which list persons banished from a city because of homicide (see e.g. Schüssler 1998; Simon-Muscheid 1991).

### *Results*

For graphic display of the data, I follow the technique used by Gurr (1981). Each single local estimate is symbolized by a dot. This stands for the mean year of the investigated time period and the mean computed homicide rate if several population estimates were given. Lines show the continuous series based on the vital statistics as well as a few existing series for the pre-statistical period.

For two reasons I use a logarithmic scale for graphically displaying homicide rates. First, over the centuries the estimated homicide rates range between about 0.3 per 100,000 (the Netherlands and Norway in the 1950s) and about 150 per 100,000 (Florence in the fourteenth century). Because of these huge differences, a linear scale would render invisible variation at lower absolute levels. Second, a logarithmic scale is preferable for content reasons, because it makes relative differences comparable across the whole range of absolute levels.

#### *England*

England constitutes the only region in Europe where estimates of homicide rates are available over several centuries for larger geographic areas. This is due to its early judicial unification, the exceptional richness of judicial archives, and a long tradition of research

in criminal history. For the Middle Ages, most of the empirical evidence is based on the surviving eyre and coroners' rolls. Data start in the thirteenth century with the results presented by Given (1977). For the fourteenth century we then have Hanawalt's detailed studies (1976, 1979) and Hammer (1978). Because the eyre courts ceased to function in the late fourteenth century and records of the county assize courts left sufficiently detailed records only from the Elizabethan age on, no data are available for the fifteenth and most of the sixteenth centuries. Extensive analyses based on the extant assize courts in several counties are presented in, for example, Beattie (1986) and Sharpe (1984). Cockburn (1991) presents a complete time series of indicted homicides in Kent from 1570 to 1985. From 1834 onwards, Gattrell *et al.* (1980) provides national homicide rates, and we can extend this series up to the present time using the crime statistics of the Home Office. Together with some additional single estimates of local pre-modern homicide rates, this yields the pattern shown in Figure 1.

Despite the limitations of the data mentioned above, an astonishingly clear picture emerges (also see Sharpe 1988). In the thirteenth and fourteenth century, the mean of almost 40 different estimates lies around 24 homicides per 100,000. The average homicide rates are higher for the late fourteenth century than for the thirteenth century, but it seems impossible to say whether this is due to the difference in the sources used or reflects a real increase related to the social and economic crises in the late Middle Ages. When estimates start again after a gap of some 150 years, the average calculated homicide rates are considerably lower with typical values of between 3–9 per 100,000. From then onwards, the data for Kent line up with surprising precision along a straight line that implies a long-term declining trend for more than 350 years. This impression is further corroborated by the other estimates of pre-modern regional homicide rates that cluster

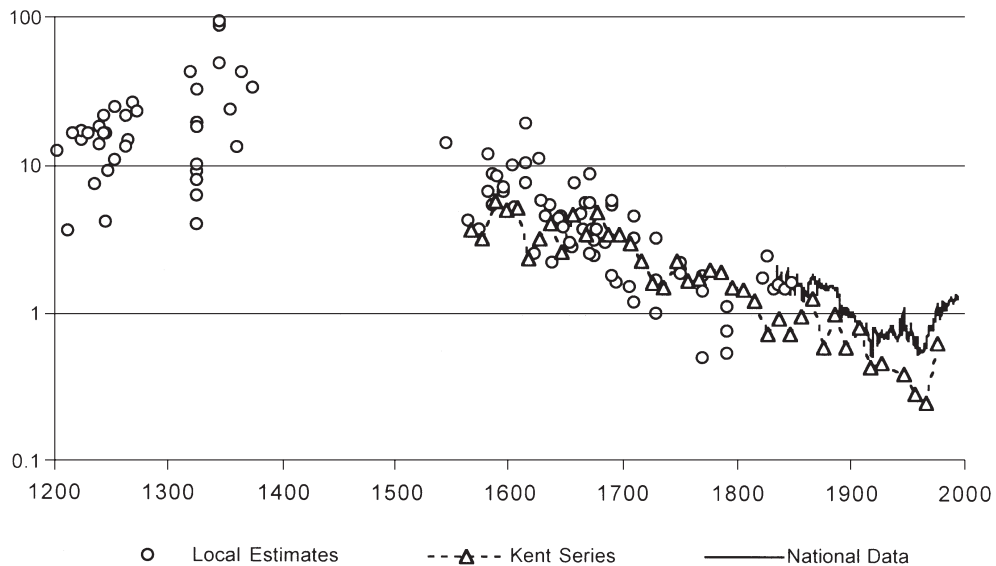


FIG. 1 Homicide rates in England

randomly around the Kent data. Furthermore, the national data support the notion that homicide rates continued to decline until the 1960s. National estimates for the mid-nineteenth century are at about 1.8 and come to an all-time low of 0.6 per 100,000 in the early 1960s. Since then, an increasing trend prevails, which may well be underestimated because of drastically improved possibilities for medical intervention. Furthermore, there is evidence suggesting that there may have been at least two other periods of sustained temporary increase in lethal violence. Sharpe (1984: 70) argues, for example, that serious crime including homicide increased considerably during between the 1580s and the 1620s. It also seems that there was some relevant increase between the late eighteenth century and the early decades of the nineteenth century (see also Emsley 1996).

*Belgium and the Netherlands*

Belgium and the Netherlands is the second large geographic region for which extensive historical research on homicide rates exists. When plotted on a graph, the respective secular trends are very similar to those found for England (see Figure 2). During the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, counts of murder and manslaughter cases in cities like Antwerp (Goris 1926; Heyden 1983), Leuven (Delpont 1986), Utrecht (Berents 1976) or Amsterdam (Boomgaard 1992) consistently result in estimated homicide rates of between 30 and 60 cases per 100,000. Spierenburg (1996) presents a series of estimates for Amsterdam between the sixteenth and the early nineteenth centuries based on autopsy reports. He finds somewhat lower levels of about 20 per 100,000 in sixteenth-century Amsterdam. He assumes that these data can be interpreted

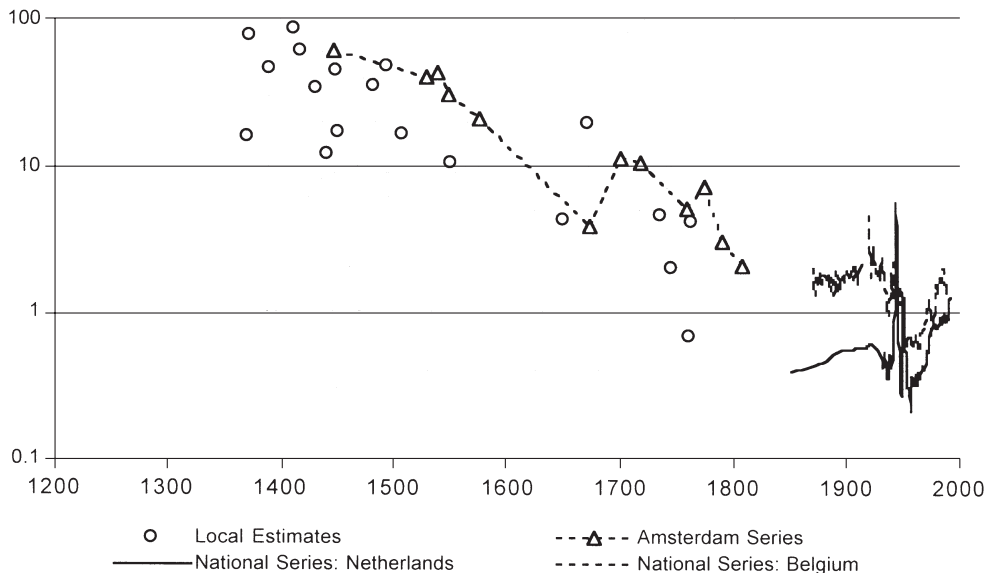


FIG. 2 Homicide rates in Netherlands and Belgium

as evidence of some decline as compared to the late Middle Ages. Seventeenth-century homicide rates in both Amsterdam (Spierenburg 1996) and Brussels (Vanhemelryck 1981) are considerably lower and range between four and 11 per 100,000. They continue to decline during the eighteenth century and Spierenburg (1996: 86) gives a rate of approximately 2 per 100,000 for early nineteenth-century Amsterdam.

In both countries national statistics start at the end of the nineteenth century. In this period the Dutch homicide rates are well below 1 per 100,000, while the respective rates in Belgium are at around 2 per cent. Except for a spike during World War II, national homicide rates continue to decline slowly until the 1950s, when they reach an all-time low. As in England, both in the Netherlands and in Belgium the rate has increased notably since the early 1960s.

But the analyses by Spierenburg based on the autopsy records suggest another important long-term development. They show that the lower rate of homicide victims was primarily due to a decrease of adult men being killed in a stabbing. Above all, homicide seems to have declined, because male-to-male fights became less frequent. Isolated data presented in some other publications examined for this study indicate that this trend may be observed in all European areas. Extant evidence for England (Hanawalt 1979) and Germany (Schüssler 1998) suggests that during the Middle Ages about 90–95 percent of the adult victims of homicide were typically men. Yet by the mid-twentieth century, when the lowest overall homicide rates were attained throughout Europe, about half of the victims were men.

### *Scandinavian countries*

The Scandinavian countries make up the third European region that is relatively well documented. Recent research in Sweden (Karonen 1999, 1996a; Österberg and Lindström 1988) and Finland (Ylikangas 1998, 2001) has closely examined the extremely rich judicial sources. Available data cover Stockholm, a variety of smaller cities as well as rural areas from the mid-fifteenth century onwards. Figure 3 shows all available local estimates along with the national data for Sweden since 1754. It suggests first that homicide rates typically ranged from 10 to 60 cases per 100,000 between the mid-fifteenth and the mid-seventeenth centuries and that the average rate may have been at about 25. Strikingly, the Scandinavian evidence shows no sign of declining homicide rates until about 1600. Yet by 1740, when the first Swedish national vital statistics are available, homicide rates are already below 1 per 100,000. The data thus suggest a spectacular decline of lethal personal violence by a factor of at least 10:1 within a period of only 150 years. This conclusion corresponds well with the interpretations of specialists in the field. Both Österberg (1996a) and Naess (1982) date the beginning of a sustained decline in homicide rates in the first decades of the seventeenth century, while Ylikangas (1998) assumes that the decreasing trend in Finland may have already begun during the late sixteenth century.

However, one may also notice three periods characterized by medium-term increase of lethal violence. First, both Österberg (1996a) and Karonen (1998) argue that homicide rates have risen considerably in several Swedish areas during the last decades of the sixteenth century and peaking around 1590–1600. Second, that national data for Sweden suggest a substantial increase between the 1780s and the 1830s as well as from the late 1950s onwards.

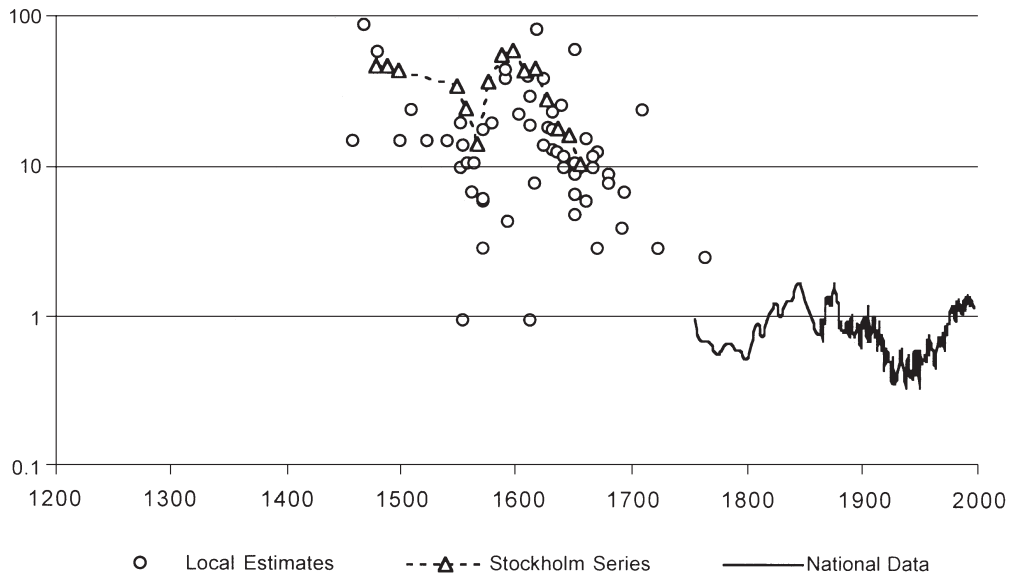


FIG. 3 Homicide rates in Scandinavian Countries

*Germany and Switzerland*

A fourth area for which a relatively large number of medieval homicide rates have been quoted in the literature includes Germany and Switzerland. The rationale for including both countries is that many of the pre-modern data refer to areas either in Southern Germany or Switzerland, which may be regarded as one geographical and historical area. For the Middle Ages, Schüssler (1991, 1994, 1996) reviews most of the literature that uses quantifying approaches. The sources used vary widely, but they always refer to urban jurisdictions. In total, I found more than 30 estimates referring to various cities in the thirteenth and fourteenth century. They range between approximately eight and 80 homicides per 100,000, with an overall mean of 35. Similar to England, the highest rates cluster in the decades after the Black Death in the second half of the fourteenth century. Yet again this may well reflect idiosyncrasies of the sources rather than a real trend. From the mid-fifteenth century up to the age of statistics I found little data and there are enormous gaps in the fifteenth as well as the seventeenth century. Also, the scanty geographic coverage as well as the heterogeneity of the sources makes firm conclusions impossible. Yet, the available data may best be summarized as supporting the notion that there has been a gradual secular decline. Schwerhoff (1991) and Eibach (1998) present homicide rates based on convictions in the city of Francfourt am Main between the sixteenth and the late eighteenth centuries. A cluster of estimates around 1600 yields an average homicide rate of about 10 per 100,000. And by 1800 another group of data, primarily referring to Southern Germany and Switzerland, yields values of between 2 and 6. Although corroborating the declining trend, these rates suggest noticeably higher levels of lethal personal violence than what appears to have been typical in England, the Netherlands and Sweden at this time. In a similar vein, the Swiss national statistics



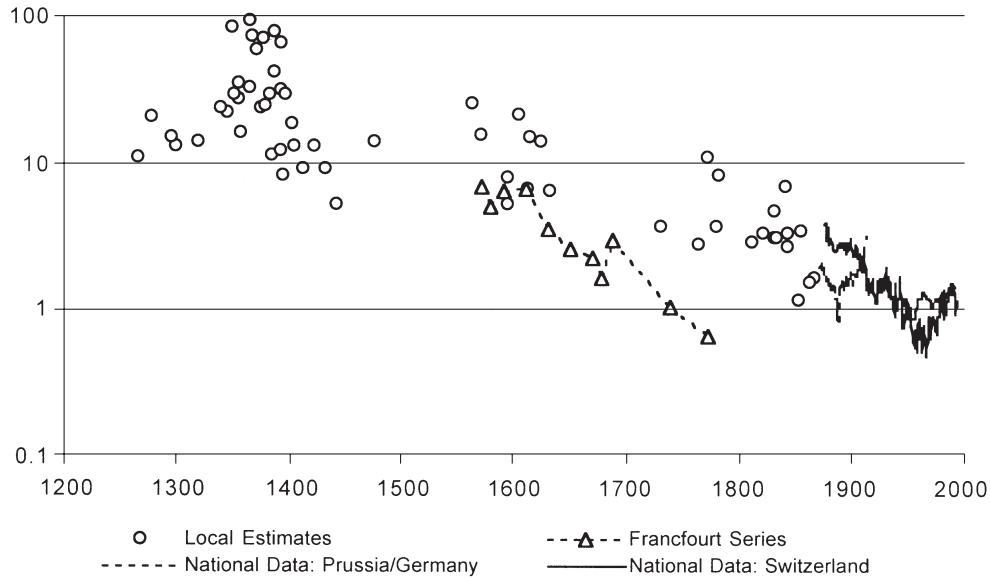


FIG. 4 Homicide rates in Germany and Switzerland

starting in 1876 suggest homicide rates of approximately 3.5 per 100,000 in the 1880s and 1890s. They then decline at a fast pace, however, until the mid-1960s. Except for the well-documented rise in homicide rates from the early 1960s onwards, the lack of data prevents firm statements about medium-term counter-trends. However, according to van Dülmen the late sixteenth century may have been characterized by a considerable increase of serious crime. Also, local data in Southern Germany might support the notion that lethal violence also increased during the early decades of the nineteenth century.

### *Italy*

The well-documented steep decline in Switzerland after 1880 is noteworthy because it shows a certain similarity to later developments in Italy. The secular pattern in Italy, however, diverges decisively from the trend found for northern Europe. There exist isolated estimates for a number of Italian cities, such as Bologna (Blanshei 1982), Florence (Becker 1976), Mantova (Romani 1980) and Venice (Ruggiero 1978), whereby Florence shows the absolute highest homicide rate with 150 homicides per population of 100,000 in the fourteenth century. Blastenbrei (1995) provides homicide rates of 30 to 80 per 100,000 for Rome in the sixteenth century. A few isolated counts for various Italian regions in the eighteenth century (e.g. Berlinguer and Colao 1991) are followed by Boschi's (1998) work on homicides in Rome in the early nineteenth century, which now lie at a rate of slightly higher than 10 per 100,000. These large gaps in data and the lack of continuous data over longer periods make definitive conclusions impossible. Yet the extant estimates do indicate that for a long period between the high Middle Ages and

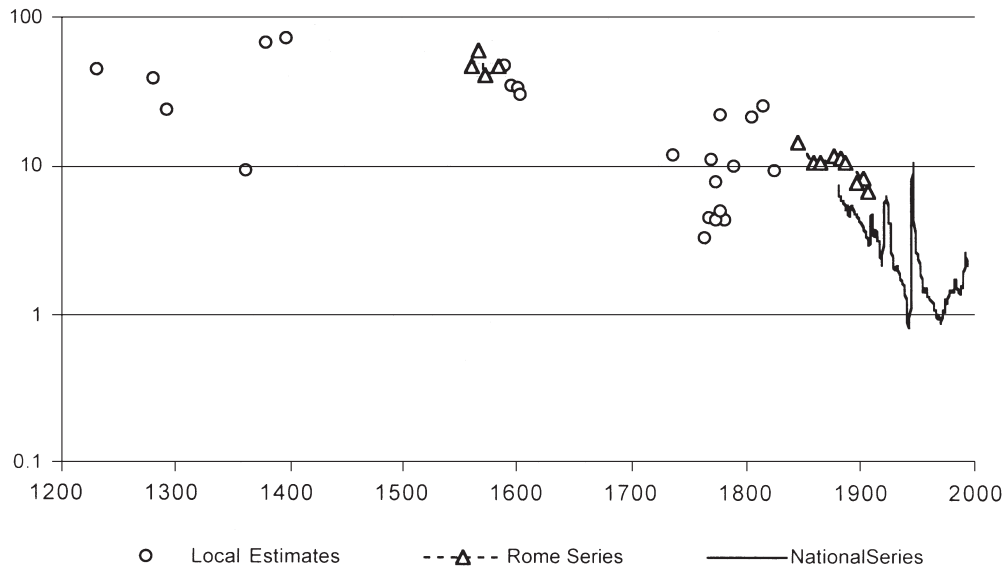


FIG. 5 Homicide rates in Italy

the seventeenth century in Italy, there was a slight decline in the frequency of homicides. However, Italy may be a particularly problematic case because of the vast differences between different areas. For example, Doneddu (1991) gives a homicide rate of 22 for late eighteenth-century Sardinia, while the data presented by Sardi (1991) for the duchy of Tuscany yield a rate of 4–5 per 100,000. Starting from 1881, causes of death statistics provide national homicide rates. The rate begins at about 8 per 100,000 and then—with the exception of higher rates during the final years of both world wars—falls steeply up to the mid 1960s. Since then, the homicide rate in Italy has increased noticeably, in accordance with the overall pattern in Europe.

#### *Measurement Issues*

Some historians of crime have repeatedly cautioned that the comparison of quantitative data on pre-modern homicide is fraught with difficulties (see, e.g. Powell 1981; Stone 1983). First, some authors point out that the *legal concept* of intentional killing was not fully developed in earlier periods and that, hence, many recorded murder and manslaughter cases might have been accidents rather than intentional acts. However, my impression from reading through a variety of mediaeval sources rather suggests that most cases would also be likely to qualify as a likely manslaughter in present society. Furthermore, a large proportion of recorded killings in pre-modern society were committed by means of knives and there is no plausible reason why knives should have caused large numbers of accidental deaths. Second, *population estimates* for pre-modern society are notoriously imprecise and one might assume that therefore the results might

become distorted. Yet, substituting the mean population estimates used in the present figures by either the lowest or highest population estimates quoted by historians does not significantly alter the overall trends. Some systematic distortion occurs, however, as a result of the changing age-structure of the population. Since young men have always committed most homicides and because their share of the total population has considerably declined throughout the twentieth century, the recent rise in lethal violence tends to be underestimated (Monkkonen 1999).

A third problem discussed by Spierenburg refers to the potential *incompleteness* of the extant data. More particularly, by comparing autopsy reports and conviction records in Amsterdam, Spierenburg (1996) shows that in pre-modern societies as few as 10–20 per cent of homicides may have resulted in the offender being arrested and convicted. He therefore assumes that data based on judicial records may seriously underestimate historical homicide rates. Given the lack of systematic findings, however, no attempt was made in this study to correct for potential bias due to the recording of homicides.

In my view, the potentially most serious systematic distorting factor is the advance *in medical technology*. Undoubtedly, a significant proportion of people who died some time after having been wounded in pre-modern societies would be rescued by means of modern medical technology. Spierenburg (1996) and Monkkonen (2000) have attempted to estimate the proportion of pre twentieth-century homicide victims who did not immediately die and who might therefore be rescued nowadays. Spierenburg estimates that about a quarter of victims in Amsterdam around 1700 might have been saved by contemporary medical technology. Monkkonen (2000) finds that about half of the violent deaths in nineteenth-century New York could have been prevented by modern technology. Thus again, the increase of homicides since the 1960s may well underestimate the actual rise of violence levels when compared to earlier historical periods. However, most scholars agree that medical technology is not a candidate for explaining the massive decline of homicide rates, which occurred mostly before the twentieth century.

#### *The Main Patterns and Secular Trends*

Accordingly, the quantitative data discussed above should not be regarded as precise measurements. However, they show that the huge amount of sophisticated historical work done over the past 30 years has resulted in a remarkable convergence as to a number of secular patterns in lethal violence that can not plausibly be interpreted as a result of systematic distortion.

First, the data confirm the notion, now hardly controversial among historians of crime, that homicide rates have declined in Europe over several centuries. Typical estimates referring to the late Middle Ages range between 20 and 40 homicides per 100,000, while respective data for the mid twentieth century are between 0.5 and 1 per 100,000. The notorious imprecision of population data, deficiencies of the sources, shifts in the legal definition of homicide, changes in the age structure as well as improved medical possibilities, surely have to be accounted for. But the evidence is so consistent, the secular decline so regular, and the differences in levels so large, that it seems difficult to refute the conclusion of a real and notable decline.

TABLE 1 *Homicide rates in five European regions*

Period	England	Netherlands and Belgium	Scandinavia	Germany and Switzerland	Italy
13th and 14th c.	23	47	–	37	(56)
15th c.	–	45	46	34	(73)
16th c.	7.0	25	21	11	47
17th c. First half	6.2	(6.0)	24	11	(32)
Second half	4.3	9.2	12	(2.4)	–
18th c. First half	2.3	7.1	2.8	(2.5)	(12)
Second half	1.4	4.1	<i>0,7</i>	5.5	9
1800–24	1.5	1,5	<i>1,0</i>	3.2	18
1825–50	<i>1,7</i>	–	<i>1,4</i>	4.1	15
1850–74	<i>1,6</i>	<i>0,9</i>	<i>1,2</i>	2.0	12
1875–99	<i>1,3</i>	<i>1,5</i>	<i>0,9</i>	2.2	<i>5,5</i>
1900–24	<i>0,8</i>	<i>1,7</i>	<i>0,8</i>	2.0	<i>3,9</i>
1925–49	<i>0,8</i>	<i>1,3</i>	<i>0,6</i>	<i>1,4</i>	<i>2,6</i>
1950–74	<i>0,7</i>	<i>0,6</i>	<i>0,6</i>	<i>0,9</i>	<i>1,3</i>
1975–94	<i>1,2</i>	<i>1,2</i>	<i>1,2</i>	<i>1,2</i>	<i>1,7</i>

Data are arithmetic means of all available estimates for a given period and region. Figures in brackets are particularly unreliable because they are based on less than five estimates. Figures in italics are based on national statistics.

Second, the empirical evidence may help to narrow down the *historical period* in which unequivocal decline can be observed in large parts of Western Europe. Both the results of the meta-analysis and the judgments of experts in criminal history suggest that the early seventeenth century may be regarded as a decisive turning point. The average rates already decline somewhat from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries. But in view of the low precision of estimates it seems impossible to draw any firmer conclusions from this evidence. However, we are on much firmer ground as regards the considerable decline in homicide rates starting in the early seventeenth century and continuing well into the twentieth century.

Third, the data suggest that the secular trajectories of low homicide rates differ among large geographic areas. It appears that *English* homicide rates were already considerably lower in the late sixteenth century than during the late Middle Ages and that they declined continuously along a log-linear trend over several centuries. Extant estimates for the *Netherlands and Belgium* suggest a very similar secular trend in these areas. In the *Scandinavian countries*, the transition to the decreasing trend occurs notably later, namely in the first decades after 1600. Despite huge gaps in the data, the *German-speaking areas* may also be assumed to have joined the declining trend from the early seventeenth century onwards. For *Italy*, however, all the available data indicate that acts of individual-level lethal violence remained very frequent until the early nineteenth century. It is not until the mid-nineteenth century that the rate begins to decline, but then very steeply.

Finally, the data also reveal repeated *counter-trends*. Some of these counter-movements may reflect regional peculiarities, possibly related to phases of rapid social and political change. Others seem to occur simultaneously in several large geographic areas of Europe. It appears, for example, that lethal individual-level violence has increased during the last decades of the sixteenth and possibly the first two decades of the seventeenth century both in England, in Sweden, and in Switzerland. Also, there is some

evidence suggesting that the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century may have seen another wave of augmenting homicide rates in several parts of Europe. Finally, all European countries (with the exception of Finland) have experienced a period of unbroken increase in homicide rates between the early 1960s and the mid-1990s. While present rates in no way correspond to the frequencies of homicide in the pre-modern world, improvements in the field of medicine and the changed age structure of the population (smaller proportion of younger age cohorts) tend to lead to statistical underestimation of the magnitude of the increase.

### *Discussion*

Assuming that this summary adequately describes long-term trajectories of homicide rates in different European regions, we would of course now like to know why the rates declined and why there are geographical and temporal variations. In the following section I will address core issues to be taken into account when attempting to explain these broad patterns.

#### *The secular declining trend*

Many of the trajectories described above broadly support Elias's concept of a long-term civilizing process. The gradual secular decline of homicide rates is precisely what the theory of the civilizing process had expected. Importantly too, other cultural and social processes signalling a growing sensitization to violence mirror the decline in homicide rates. Historians find consistent evidence suggesting a growing moral concern about cruelty and violence from the seventeenth century onwards. Infanticide becomes an important and severely punished crime (Soman 1980: 22). Throughout Western Europe, the number of public executions gradually declines, particularly cruel penal practices are progressively discontinued, and elite groups increasingly abhor the sight of the scaffold (Spierenburg 1997: 119).

Also, as Elias's theoretical framework would lead us to expect, several authors find that the decline in personal lethal violence occurred first among members of the upper classes and then gradually extended to other groups in early modern society (Österberg 1996b: 55; Sharpe 1988: 129). Hammer (1978), for example, finds that academics in fourteenth-century Oxford may have been involved in lethal violence just as often as other groups in urban society. And Sharpe (1984) argues that gentry violence seems to have become less frequent since the late sixteenth century, while the poor and marginalized increasingly became perceived as the dangerous classes.

Finally, we find that the phases of accelerated decline in homicide rates often seem to coincide with periods of rapid expansion and stabilization of state structures. In Sweden, the decisive transition to lower rates as described above coincides most precisely with the triumph of monarchic absolutism and intensified, centralized, bureaucratic state control structures. And in Italy the spectacular decline in homicide rates from the 1870s onwards corresponds well with the triumph of the nation state and the withering away of local powers.

*Social disciplining*

Other geographic units correspond less well to the general argument made by Elias, however. We thus find a continuous decline in homicide rates in England after the Glorious Revolution, which brings about the definite failure of the absolutist project there. Also, homicide rates declined early and consistently in the libertarian state project of the Dutch Republic, which probably constituted the most important counter-project to absolutism in Europe. These examples suggest that the dynamics of internal pacification do not depend exclusively upon the absolutist social 'figuration' emphasized by Elias (see e.g. Muchembled 1996).

Recent historical research suggests, rather, that the period between the mid-sixteenth and the mid-seventeenth century was characterized by greatly intensified magisterial social control patterns across diverse state models. To describe these changes, the German historian Gerhard Oestreich (1968, 1982) has introduced the concept of *social disciplining* (also see, e.g. Hsia 1992). The concept includes the creation of more centralized administrative and judicial organizations, the higher continuity of bureaucratic intrusions into everyday life, and the construction and expansion of professional armies (Tilly 1992). In addition, Oestreich particularly emphasizes the regulating and disciplining grip on daily life that originates in the impressive flood of ordinances regarding appropriate clothing, the consumption of alcohol, the fulfilment of religious duties, etc. Therefore, van Dülmen (1993a, 1993b, 1996) argues that the acceleration of social disciplining in the early modern age is the result of a highly complex interaction between different cultural, political, and economic forces.

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. Although intertwined with state building, each of these dynamics had its own contingent and irreducible historical logic. Their effects on structures of the self were both to rigidly enforce self-control *and* to provide the cultural and social resources needed for a more orderly conduct of life. These effects may have been particularly penetrating among those groups and areas, where intensified moral control by the church, expanded schooling, pervasive state structures, and work discipline intertwined into mutually reinforcing power structures.

Such a perspective may help to theoretically understand some of the broad geographic differences in the long-term trajectory of lethal violence. A schematic interpretation of the charts described above may result in the visual metaphor of a gradually expanding 'trough in violence'. It originates in the sixteenth century with the pioneers of the modernization process, England and Holland and slowly encompasses further regions. Statistics on the regional distribution of homicide rates in Europe in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries support such a perspective. They take on the shape of low homicide levels among the most modernized parts of Europe surrounded by higher levels at the periphery. For example, Durkheim (1973) showed that in the late nineteenth century an arc of high murder rates ranging from Ireland over Spain, Italy, Austria, and Hungary encircled a zone of low homicide rates. And on the level of late nineteenth century sub-national regions, Bongers (1905) showed that high levels of homicide were associated with high illiteracy, high poverty, low urbanization, and low industrialization throughout the European continent (also see e.g. Johnson 1995).

*The Decline of Honour and the Rise of Individualism*

The theoretical concept of ‘social disciplining’ allows for a broadening of the theoretical perspective developed by Elias, which considers the expansion of the state monopoly of power as the primary causal force. However, the causal scheme remains firmly rooted in a control theory paradigm: with increasing social control aimed at discipline, there will be greater self-control and less individual-level violence. Contrariwise, Elias argues in the civilizing process, medieval society with its high levels of violence represents some kind of an uncivilized state devoid of inner and outer controls on everyday behaviour. Many contemporary historians find this evolutionary perspective hard to reconcile with historical evidence. In particular, they emphasize that the notion of an unrestrained and child-like pre-modern individual constitutes a completely inadequate description of mediaeval reality. Schwerhoff (1991), for example, argues that mediaeval and early modern violence was strongly embedded in cultural and social practices.

In order to take these criticisms into account, the work by Emile Durkheim offers some valuable insights. Forty years earlier than Elias, he argued in a very similar vein that ‘with the progress of civilization homicide decreases’ (Durkheim 1957: 113). In order to explain this axiom, Durkheim developed an argument that can be read as a counter-thesis to the theory of the civilizing process proposed by Elias. This is so because first, he strongly argues against interpreting high levels of interpersonal lethal violence as a manifestation of some primitive state devoid of culture. Rather, individual violence should always be interpreted as the ‘product of a specific moral culture’ (Durkheim 1957).

Second, and in striking contrast to Elias, Durkheim saw the decline of homicide rates as resulting from the liberation of the individual from collective bonds rather than as the consequence of the coercive potential of the state. High levels of lethal violence thus mirror the intensity of ‘collective emotions’, which bind the individual to ‘groups of things that symbolically represent these groups’. Violence thus declines to the degree that the person becomes liberated from its sacred obligation to the group, and the rise of moral individualism brings about both subjective reflexivity and emotional indifference in conflict situations (Durkheim 1957: 115).

This theoretical approach offers valuable insights into the historical patterns of declining homicide rates (also cf. Thome 2000, 2001). First, the Durkheimian argument offers a theoretical framework for understanding the multifarious cultural meanings of violence in medieval society. Much empirical research on the topic emphasizes the crucial role of insults in triggering situational conflicts. This is in accordance with a society in which ‘honour’ constitutes highly important social capital of the male person as a representative of his group (Burghartz 1990; Muchembled 1984; Schuster 2000; Schwerhoff 1991). It requires retributive violence as a potential and culturally accepted means for maintaining one’s honour (Schmidt 1994). Such a theoretical framework may help to better understand why the secular decline in homicide rates primarily seems to have been due to a decrease in male-to-male fights. And it may also offer a point of departure for understanding the high violence rates in Italy, where a culture of honour persisted despite the early development of administrative and judicial structures in the city states (Zorzi 1997).

A perspective inspired by Durkheim, then, would emphasize the cultural diffusion of a specifically modern ideal of the self during the early seventeenth century (Dülmen 1997;

Junge 1996; Taylor 1989). It has been described by Taylor (1989) as being characterized by 'disengagement' and 'inwardness', a methodological reflexive distance from the immediate outer and inner world and an orientation towards guiding ideals such as autonomy, self-responsibility, and authenticity. Its diffusion, while following its own cultural and philosophical logic, is linked to mutually reinforcing religious, political, economic, and artistic practices (Taylor 1989: 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. Where these broad processes intertwine, so we might conclude, violence should recede from higher levels and enter a declining trend. To this we might add the hypothesis that the secular decline of lethal violence occurred when institutional structures and educational practices supported stabilization of that type of individualized identity that is shaped to meet the challenges of modern life.

#### *Counter Movements*

In his 1981 article, Ted Robert Gurr hypothesized that the European-wide increase in violent crime since the early 1960s may have only been the last and best-documented reversal of the underlying secular trend (Gurr 1981: 328). The data discussed in this paper yield some limited evidence for the existence of two further historical periods, in which there may have been a general tendency towards increasing homicide rates. A first period seems to have occurred during the last decades of the sixteenth century and another period before and just after 1800. Undoubtedly, the present data are far from sufficient to establish with any confidence, whether such European-wide counter movements did actually exist before the twentieth century and how important they were. But if they did, each may possibly be interpreted as the result of disintegrating dynamics related to a fundamental transformation in the social and cultural structure of European societies. The first period of rising individual-level violence may then have been the result of social and cultural disintegration due to the radical transformation of European society in the second half of the sixteenth century. The rise around 1800, in turn might then have been a response to the coming of industrial society. And we might finally speculate that the new rise in homicide rates since the 1960s reflects the negative consequences of the transition from modern to post-modern society.

#### *Conclusion*

The results presented in this paper obviously raise more questions than they answer. Both criminologists who are used to the problems of examining crime trends over periods of 10 or 20 years, and historians aware of the manifold pitfalls of historical sources may question the usefulness of quantitative statistics stretching over a period of some 800 years. Powell (1981), for example, has compared the statistical approach to the history of crime to riding statistical bulldozers that level the important features of a landscape that needs much more sensitive methods. Sharpe (1984: 43), on the other hand, takes a more pragmatic approach by saying that quantification, if nothing else,



‘provides a framework for future research, and a starting point for future debate about the history of crime’. This may be especially true for any attempt at examining patterns and changes across long periods of time and large geographic areas. Homicide, however, is most probably the only crime for which we may ever come near to realistic estimates of actual prevalence rates through longer periods of time. The convergence of diverse local homicide estimates in a given society and a given historical period certainly supports this idea. But undoubtedly future research will create a much firmer ground for assessing both qualitative and quantitative trends in lethal violence over long periods of time.

In particular, this holds for cross-national and temporal variations. The main issue addressed by the present study was to see if we could go beyond that most general of statements that individual-level lethal violence has declined over past centuries. Despite wide gaps in the empirical data, the tentative answer seems to be positive. It appears, that by combining all available quantitative evidence, we can trace the broad outlines of the development of murder and manslaughter in Europe across eight hundred years of history, can describe crucial turning points at least approximately, and specify different long-term trajectories in several large geographical areas. Future research may show that some of the patterns described above do not hold up to closer scrutiny. However, it seems worthwhile to establish with greater confidence possible turning points and patterns of geographic variation. Not least, because any fruitful theoretical reflection critically depends on observing structured differences.

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