

Homicide Offending and Victimization of Toronto in Canada

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I. Introduction

Homicide has long been considered to be a primarily male phenomenon. Substantiating this view is the general trend constructed by cross-national studies which shows that males are typically both the victims and the instigators of homicide.

In Toronto, during the past 10 years, this trend seems to have become all the more pronounced. Since the year 2000, approximately 90% of offenders and 75% of victims of homicide have been males, a substantial increase from previous decades where the proportions were 85% and 66% respectively. This means that the percentage of homicide offenders and victims that are female has decreased. These changes, then, can be

explained by trying to account for an increase in male homicide victimisation and offending, or by trying to account for a decrease in female victimisation and offending.

The paper discussion will attempt to do both. More specifically, it will illustrate how patterns in marriage rates, domestic violence, and changes in women's status and opportunities can explain a decrease in both homicide offending and victimisation of females. Additionally, the masculinity theory of crime will be used to explain how changing social and economic factors in Toronto may have contributed to an increase in male homicide victimisation and offending.

The research methods adopted in this study are secondary analysis of qualitative data gained from various sources, such as official government documents, previous literature, mass media outputs, etc. The aim of the study is to incite Koreancriminal justice system, especially police service to Homicide offending and victimisation, by introducing the Canadian experiences in terms of perspectives, regulations and practice despite certain limitations specific to the country.

II. Patterns in Female Homicide and Declining Marriage Rates

When confronted with a shift in female offending and victimisation homicide rates without an accompanying male shift in the same direction it is instructive to look at the major differences between male and female homicide. These differences have been most clearly observed in the victim-perpetrator relationships: female homicide victims are most likely to be killed by people they know, particularly a spouse, while males are more likely to be killed by a stranger (Frye et al. 2005: 205). Canada is

no exception to this pattern: according to Statistics Canada out of the total 162 female homicide victims in 2006, 56 were killed by a spouse (35%) (Statistics Canada 2007). Moreover, it appears that female victims involved in intimate partner homicides are younger than other female victims. Research has shown that young-adult age groups, early 20s to early 30s, have the highest levels of risk for intimate-partner violence (Blumstein et al. 2000: 53). Also, homicide victimisation rates are highest for younger women: 40% of female victims in intimate partner killings are under 30 (Frye et al. 221). However, spousal violence is also an important factor to consider when looking at female homicide offending. The killing of a spouse makes up a significant proportion of female instigated homicide and this is typically done in response to continued male aggression and threats (Browne et al. 1993: 80). Thus, it appears that a change in marriage rates may also be accompanied by a change in female patterns of homicide offending and victimisation through the simple mechanism of opportunity. Declining marriage rates could mean a significant reduction in the number of females being killed by a spouse (which make up a significant proportion of total female homicide victims) and could mean a reduction in female homicide offenders.

Canadian demographics do point to steadily declining marriage rates over the past 30 years. Moreover, when marriages do take place, brides and grooms are approximately 5 years older than they were in the past, 30.1 years and 32.6 years respectively (Statistics Canada 1996: 1–9). These changes in marriage rates would then explain declining female homicide victimisation in two ways. Those not getting married at all would not contribute to the victims of spousal homicide, and thus lower the overall victimisation rate, and those that do get married marry at an age where the chances of victimisation at the hands of a spouse have decreased. Furthermore, since spousal homicide does make up a considerable

proportion of homicides committed by females, a decline in marriage rates may also help explain a decline in female offending. However, declining marriage rates alone cannot wholly account for these considerable changes in women's offending and victimisation. Instead a more complete picture can be constructed by looking at the public and police's response to domestic violence as well as women's changing roles and status in society.

III. Domestic Violence: Changes in Policies and the Public's Response

Since both female homicide victimisation and offending often take place within a context of spousal violence, a change in judicial policies and public response to ending such violence may contribute to a decline in female victimisation and offending (Walklate 2007: 72). Such changes appear to have taken place in Canada at the same time as female homicides began declining. For example, since 1999 the Toronto Police has offered the services of highly trained Threat and Risk Assessment specialists who are available to domestic violence investigators across the service. These specialists, who use tools designed by psychologists and psychiatrists from around the world, help increase the level of awareness of investigators and victims of domestic violence to risk and threat which in turn helps reduce the chances of another violent encounter.¹⁾ These changes at the local level are also reflected in changes taking place at the level of the Supreme Court which noted in *R. v. Lavallee* (1990) that, "legislated initiatives designed to educate the police, judicial officers, and the public, as well as

1) Toronto Police. *Domestic Violence E-newsletter*. 2008.
<http://www.torontopolice.on.ca/communitymobilization/domesticviolence/20081120-e-newsletter0711.pdf>, accessed 15 February 2008.

more aggressive investigation and charging policies, all signal a concentrated effort by the criminal justice system to ensure the protection of women and children who may be at risk²⁾. These changes in judicial responses are also mirrored by changes in public response to domestic violence and social services available. One example of this is the White Ribbon Campaign that began in 1991 where a handful of men in Canada decided to speak out about violence against women by wearing a white ribbon showing their opposition to such violence. Within weeks, 100,000 men across Canada wore the white ribbon and others were drawn into the discussions and debates.³⁾

Also, organizations such as Interval House provide legal information, self-esteem building programs, and housing to abused women and children⁴⁾. Taken together, these initiatives not only curb the cycle of domestic violence, but they may also prevent homicide by the male spouse, as well as offer alternatives to females in an abusive situation who might otherwise have resorted to killing their spouse. As such, the indirect effect of these policy initiatives and public responses has been to reduce the rates of female victimisation and offending.

2) Palmer, Janet. *Sentencing in the Context of Domestic Violence: A Review of Literature and Analysis of Dispositional Data*. www.bafv.org.

3) White Ribbon Campaign. www.whiteribbon.ca

4) Interval House. www.intervalhouse.on.ca

IV. Women's Roles and Status

It has been hypothesized, even before the women's movement, that the gender stratification in industrial Western societies has an impact on the gender gap in crime, including homicide rates (Daly 2006: 343). However, when it comes to explaining how gender stratification influences the gender gap in crime, two opposite theories are proposed. The Gender Equality Theory proposes that a decrease in gender stratification will result in a narrowing of the gender gap in crime (Choi 2009: 81). That is, as women's roles and status come to resemble those of men, they are more likely to commit crimes and more at risk of being victims of crimes, resulting in a decrease in the gender gap. The second theory suggests the opposite: women's increased participation in the workforce which results in changes to female roles and status should widen the gender gap in crime since discrimination and poverty have long been associated with increased criminality (Setffensmeir et al. 1996: 470). While seemingly incompatible, the two theories are reconciled by Gartner and others in "Gender Stratification and the Gender Gap in Homicide Victimization" in a way that can explain changes in homicide rates in Toronto in the past 10 years. Gartner proposes that women's non-traditional roles decrease the gap between males' and females' risk of victimisation, but higher female status increases this gap. Initially, when women begin entering the workforce in large numbers and thereby change their traditional roles of homemakers and care givers to occupational roles, they may experience increased victimisation. The reason for this is twofold: by being outside the home more often they are more likely to encounter possible perpetrators and by working outside the home they are more likely to experience interpersonal conflict in and outside the home. That is, increased employment or educational advancement may be perceived by the male spouse as

challenges to his dominance in the home, while overall male hostility towards women may increase as they perceive women's increased opportunities affecting their own job advancement and well-being. Thus, the process of women taking on non-traditional roles may not immediately translate into similar gains in women's status and attendant protection from victimisation. However, "in the long term, as more and more women gain credentials and achieve higher occupational status, this status can translate into greater protection" (Gartner et al. 1990: 595-598). This pattern can be seen when looking at the homicide victimisation rates for females in Canada since 1974. Assuming that the women's movement in the 1970s drew a large number of females into the workforce and away from traditional roles, the homicide victimisation rates show no decline throughout the 70s and 80s as Gartner's theory would assume. However, starting in 1993, there is a substantial decline that continues until 2005. This would then suggest that women's roles had no effect on women's status throughout the 70s and 80s resulting in no decrease in homicide victimisation, but by the 90s they started influencing women's status and contributed to a decline in victimisation rates. This pattern in changing roles and status can also be used to explain female offending rates. As the Gender Equality theory would hypothesize, the initial changes in women's roles may have given them more opportunities to commit crimes; however, when their status allowed them to achieve greater academic credentials and higher occupational positions they no longer had the same impetus to engage in crime. In the case of spousal homicide then, the greater academic and occupational status of women along with the changing public and police response to domestic violence presents the female victim of violent abuse with more alternatives and prevents her from committing homicides.

Thus, the decline of female homicide victimisation and offending rates in Toronto can be explained in several ways. Firstly, declining marriage rates and marriage in later life lower the risk of victimisation by spousal homicide, which makes up a significant proportion of total female homicide rates. Secondly, since females are more likely to kill their spouse than a stranger, declining marriage rates can also contribute to a lowering of overall female homicide offending rates. Furthermore, since female homicide taking place between spouses is often the response to, or culmination of, domestic violence by the male spouse, recent changes in judicial policies and public response to ending such violence in Canada may have contributed to the decline of female homicide rates. Also, the decline in homicide rates may be explained by the duration of time that women have held non-traditional roles that have eventually resulted in higher statuses.

While these changes explain the decline in female homicide rates, it has been hypothesized that in fact a decline in female homicide victimisation and offending may be more the result of a rise in male victimisation and offending than an actual decline in female rates (Heimer et al 2006: 205). Thus it is useful to look at possible explanations for a rise in male homicide victimisation and offending in order to better understand the changes taking place in Toronto over the last 10 years.

V. Masculinities and Changing Social Factors

Since men generally commit the vast majority of crimes, some criminologists have suggested that it stands to reason that crime is strongly associated with masculinity (Collier, 1998: 2). However, masculinity theorists do not believe in one sole way of practicing

masculinity instead, “men construct masculinity in accordance with their position in social structures and therefore access to power and resources” (Barri 2003: 35). Despite the fact that there are more ways of constructing masculinity, it is generally accepted that one masculinity, “hegemonic masculinity”, is preferred over all others. In any given culture, hegemonic masculinity is the idealized form of masculinity in a given historical context and it is constructed in relation both to subordinated masculinities and to women. In contemporary Western industrialized societies, for example, it is defined through “work in the paid-labour market, the subordination of women, hetero-sexism, and the driven and uncontrollable sexuality of men” (Messerschmidt, 1993: 82). Men who embrace hegemonic masculinity, but do not have these resources available for accomplishing such masculinity may resort to criminal acts including homicide.

Since hegemonic masculinity is partially defined through work in the paid labour market and the subordination of women, changes in these resources in the past 10 years may have created a “crisis” in masculinity and contributed to increased homicide rates (Cole et al. 2007: 15). This type of crisis is documented by Bourgois in his ethnography studying Puerto Rican men in New York. He shows how the traditional working-class patriarchy exercised by males in their household has lost its legitimacy as a result of their increased unemployment and has led to them constructing masculinity through participation in crime (Bourgois 1996: 412). The same phenomenon may have taken place in Toronto in the past ten years beginning with the economic recession of the early 90s. Unemployment rates skyrocketed throughout the 90s and only began declining in 2003, but have never returned to pre-1990 levels. While high unemployment rates alone do not necessarily lead directly to an increase in homicide, they are known to lead to criminal behaviour, which, as

discussed in the next section, may lead to homicide. Furthermore, the subordination of women which also defines hegemonic masculinity has become harder to attain due to the social changes and initiatives described above. Declining marriage rates make it difficult to “control” a woman within the home, while the rise in women’s status makes it harder to subordinate them outside the home, for example in the workplace or educational institutions. Thus, recent changes in the past 10 years in unemployment rates, marriage rates, and women’s status have made it increasingly harder for men to construct hegemonic masculinity and so they may have had to turn to criminal lifestyles to achieve such masculinity. Support for this theory of masculinity can be found by looking at the circumstances under which male homicide occurs.

VI. Male Homicide - The Situational Context

When males kill females it is typically within the context of sexual intimacy, with the victim and offender either married or common law partners. When men kill men, the contexts vary but can be broadly categorized as confrontational homicide, homicide in the course of other crimes, and homicide as a form of conflict resolution.

In the context of confrontational homicide one can see most clearly how constructions of masculinity play a role in crime. This type of male on male homicide is not premeditated, takes place between males who do not know each other or are casual acquaintances, involves a social audience, and the issue at stake is typically “honour” (Polk, 1994: 59). In these contexts the “essential nature” of a man is questioned, undermined and threatened through insults or taunts and the target defends himself through violence when lacking other legitimate resources. Such violent acts that

end in homicide are the real life examples of masculinity at work and therefore when one has difficulty establishing his masculinity due to changing social and economic conditions a rise in such violence is expected.

Two factors that seem to be common in confrontational homicide are the use of alcohol by both the offender and victim and the unemployment status of both. Thus, the background of unemployment in this type of homicide creates a causal link between one's inability to establish a hegemonic masculinity through legitimate resources, attempts to establish it through violence, and the resulting homicide (Campbell 2004: 700). Thus, the recent trend in high unemployment rates would explain a rise in such violence. Also, an increase in alcohol consumption may be partially explained by declining marriage rates since it is documented that individuals who never marry are more likely to have chronic, heavy alcohol consumption (Power 1999: 1477). Therefore, the changing social and economic factors in Toronto in the past 10 years may explain the increased difficulty of men to establish a hegemonic masculinity and how this difficulty comes into play in actual scenarios of male homicide.

These factors, mainly unemployment, play a role in other types of male on male homicide, such as homicide as a form of conflict resolution and in the process of committing other crimes. When males who have previously been close friends or acquaintances choose homicide as a form of conflict resolution, it is usually because they are at the margins of conventional society and so their dispute cannot be solved within the boundaries of legitimate dispute-resolution procedures (Polk 1994: 114). Thus, homicide as conflict resolution and homicide in the process of committing another crime can both be seen as stemming from a broader criminality. The explanations used to account for crime more generally may therefore be applied to these types of homicides more particularly. Unemployment and

poverty then can, at least partially, explain these types of homicides. And although these types of homicides do not occur exclusively between two males, in the majority of cases both the offender and victim are males and only rarely are the victims female.

The rise in male homicide victims and offenders in Toronto over the past 10 years can therefore be explained by recent economic and social changes that shape the resources men use to construct their masculinity. Rising unemployment rates can push more men into a criminal lifestyle for pragmatic reasons – financial well-being – which may lead to homicide in different contexts and by limiting their resources in constructing a hegemonic masculinity. Declining marriage rates and a rise in women's status may also limit men in their construction of masculinity through the subordination of women as well as contributing to patterns of alcohol consumption that have often been present in situations of male on male homicide.

VII. Conclusion

Over the course of the last decade, Toronto has experienced a percentage increase in male homicide victimisation and offending. This increase could be the result of either female homicide victimisation and offending rates going down or male rates going up. The above discussion has accounted for both possibilities, outlining a number of potential causes behind the phenomenon.

A decrease in female homicide victimisation and offending rates might be explained by the decline of marriage rates and the fact that the average age of both brides and grooms has increased significantly over the past 30 years. Additionally, a decrease in female homicide victimisation and

offending rates might also be explained by increasingly effective policy changes and public initiatives aimed at curbing domestic violence. Lastly, the adoption by women of non-traditional roles outside the home since the 1970s has led to a higher socio-economic status for women which can also translate into lower female homicide victimisation and offending rates.

An increase in male homicide victimisation and offending rates might be explained by the erosion of hegemonic masculinity through times of unemployment and female emancipation. These conditions have increased the likelihood that males will commit and/or be the victim of homicide, be it confrontational, in the course of other crimes or as a conflict resolution mechanism.

In retrospect, the recent increase in male homicide victimisation and offending could be the result of either female homicide victimisation and offending rates going down or male rates going up. The above discussion has accounted for both possibilities, providing an overview of potential causal mechanisms behind the phenomenon. Future research on the topic might narrow the focus of the discussion to particular age groups and their respective homicide rate fluctuations. Since homicide rates have been known to vary greatly by age group such an approach could yield additional insight into this complex phenomenon.

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Abstract

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Key words: Homicide Offending, Victimisation, Domestic Violence, Toronto, Canada

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