

Homicides in War and Peace in Croatia

REFERENCE: Požgain I, Mandić N, Barkić J. Homicides in war and peace in Croatia. *J Forensic Sci* 1998;43(6):1124–1126.

ABSTRACT: This work shows the interdisciplinary investigation of homicides in the Osijek area during the war and prewar periods. Similarities between the prewar and wartime perpetrators are related to social-demographic characteristics. Nevertheless, significant differences are found in the homicidal method of selection among victims and participation of victims involved.

The major contributing factors in homicide genesis were acute alcohol intoxication and personality disorder among perpetrators. Besides these factors, the war stressors and access to firearms were significant factors during the war homicides.

Prevention efforts should be directed toward consequential measures and further investigation suggests that the emphasis must be put on victimological aspects of the homicide problem.

This work is a review of an interdisciplinary investigation of prewar and war homicides in the city of Osijek district.

It provides confirmation of how the number of war homicides relate to the prewar number.

KEYWORDS: forensic science, forensic psychiatry, homicide, incidence, wartime, peacetime, Croatia

The first research on postwar violence was published at the beginning of this century and was related to the French-German and French-Russian wars, as well as the period after the French Revolution in 1789. The most extensive research about postwar violence was done by Archer and Gartner (1). During three years of research they completed a file that contained a time series of homicide rates for approximately 110 nations and states with war experience starting in 1900. The majority of nations and states within the research, in comparison with a group of nations with no war experience, had postwar increases in homicides. Lester (2) studied the relation between war participation and homicide rates in the time period between 1933 and 1986. He found a correlation between war activity participation and homicide rates. At least one author found decreases of homicide rates in wartime and increases in the postwar period (3).

Methods

The main research goals were: (a) scientific confirmation of the hypothesis that homicides were more frequent in wartime within the Osijek district than otherwise; (b) comparison between characteristics of prewar and postwar perpetrators; (c) definition of possible causes that increased the number of homicides during the war; and (d) recommendation of prevention based on the research

results. The retrospective method has been used. The expert psychiatric opinions about each of the perpetrators have also been analyzed. Homicides in the period between July 1988 and June 30 1994 were included in the study. This six-year period has been divided into two equal periods: before and after the war that started in East Croatia on July 1, 1991.

The results are reported in numbers and in percentages. Chi-square tests of significance and Yate's correction were applied to the data as appropriate.

Results

Over the six-year period we found 137 cases of homicide: 131 (95.6%) were committed by male perpetrators while six (4.4%) were committed by female perpetrators (Table 1). In the prewar period, there were 36 homicides (one with two victims). In the war period there were 119 homicides; 102 perpetrators committed 93 homicides with one victim, 4 with two victims, 4 with three victims and 1 with six victims. The average homicide rate for the prewar period was 1.6 per 100 000 inhabitants, and for the war period 5.1 per 100 000 inhabitants. Sixty-eight, or 66.7%, of the 102 war perpetrators were Croatian soldiers or policemen. Fifty-five, or 80.9% of them, had direct combat experience. More than one-third of the perpetrators had suffered the loss of a family member or property, had some handicap of their own, or were exiled from their families. Motivations for the crimes are given in Table 2.

Almost one-half of the prewar homicides were the results of marital conflict (15 cases or 42.8%), while in the war period there were only 6 (5.9%) of these cases. The difference was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 24.674$; d.f. = 1; $p < 0.05$).

During the war period a small number of homicides were committed by knife, metal, etc. These kinds of weapons were used in the peacetime period in 19 cases (54.2%), while in the wartime period they were used in 17 (16.7%) cases ($\chi^2 = 17.144$; d.f. = 1; $p < 0.01$). In the same wartime period significantly more homicides were committed by firearms (guns, bombs) in 77 cases (75.6%), while in the peacetime period they were used in 10 (28.6%) cases ($\chi^2 = 22.768$, d.f. = 1; $p < 0.01$).

Table 3 shows the relationship between perpetrators and their victims. Within the group of war homicides, there were significantly fewer wives or husbands victimized than in the prewar period—in the peacetime 15 (41.7%) cases, and during the war 9 (7.5%) cases ($\chi^2 = 22.027$; d.f. = 1; $p < 0.05$). Likewise, during the war there were significantly more unknown victims—36 (30.3%), and during peacetime 3 (8.3%) ($\chi^2 = 5.936$; d.f. = 1; $p < 0.05$).

Percentages on direct contact between perpetrator and victim are given in Table 4. In the group of prewar homicides there were more victims that caused a conflict—17 (48.5%)—in comparison

¹ Psychiatrists and psychologist, respectively, Clinical Hospital Osijek, Psychiatric Clinic, 31000 Osijek, Croatia.

Received 5 March 1997; and in revised form 12 May 1997, 18 Feb. 1998; accepted 10 March 1998.

TABLE 1—Homicide numbers and rates during equal periods of peace (July 1, 1988–June 30, 1991) and war (July 1, 1991–June 30, 1994).

Year	Male	Female	Total	Rates/100 000 Inhabitants
1988 July 1–Dec. 31	4	0	4	1.2
1989	9	2	11	1.4
1990	12	1	13	1.8
1991 Jan. 1–June 30	7	0	7	2.1
1991 July 1–Dec. 31	24	0	24	7.3
1992	48	2	50	7.6
1993	20	0	20	3.0
1994 Jan. 1–Dec. 31	7	1	8	2.4
Total	131	6	137	

TABLE 2—Homicide perpetrators in peace and war classified by motive.

Motive	Peace		War	
	No.	%	No.	%
Marital conflict	15	42.8	6	5.9
Family conflict	5	14.3	14	13.7
Sexual conflict	0	0	6	5.9
Greed	1	2.9	6	5.9
Simple quarrel	11	31.4	51	50.0
Coincidence	2	5.7	10	9.8
Ethnic conflict	1	2.9	9	8.8
Total	35	100.0	102	100.0

TABLE 3—Relationship between perpetrators and victims in peace and war periods.

Victim	Peace Period		War Period	
	No.	%	No.	%
Acquaintance	12	33.3	59	49.6
Spouse	15	41.7	9	7.5
Unknown	3	8.3	36	30.0
Relative	4	11.1	12	10.1
Neighbors	2	5.6	3	2.5
Total	36	100.0	119	100.0

TABLE 4—Immediate criminal relation between perpetrators and victims.

Criminal Relation	Peace		War	
	No.	%	No.	%
Victim caused a conflict	17	48.5	25	24.5
Victim passive, but with behavior-induced aggression	12	34.3	23	22.5
Victim passive, with no behavior-induced aggression	5	14.3	48	47.2
Victim “culprit”	1	2.9	6	5.8
Total	35	100.0	102	100.0

with the war period, where there were 25 such cases (24.5%) ($\chi^2 = 6.010$; d.f. = 1; $p < 0.05$). In the war homicides, however, there were more victims who were passive within the conflict—48 (47.2%)—in comparison with 5 (14.3%) such peacetime cases.

In terms of the motivation for killing, 25 (71.4%) were under

the influence of alcohol, while in the war period there were 84 (82.3%) intoxicated perpetrators.

The most frequent psychiatric diagnosis in the prewar period was alcoholism (16 perpetrators or 45.6%) and personality disorders (10 perpetrators or 28.6%). During the war period there were 53 (52.8%) cases of personality disorder while 16 (15.7%) perpetrators did not have any psychiatric diagnosis. There were 3 (8.7%) perpetrators with psychotic disorders in the prewar period (8.7%) and only 2 (1.8%) in the war period. Only 3 (2.9%) war perpetrators were diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In relation to that disorder, incompetence was estimated: more than 90% of the perpetrators in both groups were estimated as less competent or significantly less competent while 2 (5.7%) perpetrators in the prewar period and 3 (2.7%) perpetrators in the war period were estimated as incompetent. Ten (28.6%) perpetrators in the prewar period were sentenced to obligatory psychiatric treatment, as were 20 (19.4%) perpetrators in the war period.

Discussion

Homicide rates are different according to different regions of the world. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), in 1966 the homicide rates were from 0.2 per 100 000 inhabitants in Spain to 21.2 per 100 000 inhabitants in Columbia. European countries had lower rates: Germany 1.1, Italy 0.9, France and Great Britain 0.7, all per 100 000 inhabitants (4).

In the Slavonia and Baranja regions the homicide rate in the 20-year-period 1970–1989 was 2 per 100 000 inhabitants. The lowest rate was in 1977—1 murder per 100 000 (5).

It is obvious that we have a multiple increase of homicides in time of war compared with the prewar period in these regions of Croatia.

The influence of war, which is one pathoplastic factor, was analyzed in relation to the participation of the homicide population also in war. Experiences from the front line and losses were first considered. There were smaller numbers of displaced persons among perpetrators than was expected since they pre-dominated in the army and police in comparison with the domicile population. Likewise, they suffered further frustrations related to exile (problems of lodgings, dislodging, financial problems, humiliation, dependence on humanitarian organizations, and hostile attitude among the domicile population).

Most of the war homicides were a result of a simple quarrel that would end with physical violence, unless they were armed. The American judge George Edwards stated that possession of a weapon increased the possibility of a homicide, to him or to a close person. As a result, he proposed strict legal control over the usage of guns (6).

The relation between the perpetrators and the victims was analyzed according to their previous relationship. It should also be considered a conflict, possibly a pre-criminal conflict, as well, if the victim had been responsible for the earlier crime in any way.

According to the results it could be stated that it was easier to become a victim of a murder in the war period than in the prewar period.

The objective of many murder studies in Slovenia is the relationship between the perpetrators and their victims. Pecar found that the victim had caused his own murder either by physical confrontation or verbal provocation (in 51%) and perhaps that two-thirds of the victims were wrongly established to be within their surroundings (7).

The number of alien victims is insignificant. Pesic found it in

only 5%. Jelacic found it in 9% and Marković in 8% (8–10). Significantly increased numbers of alien victims were related to the war and the concentration of army forces in these regions from all over Croatia.

The most significant factor found by most authors for criminal motivation was alcohol abuse (5,8,11,12). Numerous psychological problems caused by the war in Croatia increased alcohol abuse and other addictions (13). During the war, alcohol was widely used as a tranquilizer for stress either on the front line or in the background (if available, since the cities and populations were intensively shelled all of the time).

The feeling of chronic anxiety caused by the war resulted in extensive alcohol drinking, which became a kind of refuge. The prognosis proved true that the problems of extensive alcohol drinking, alcoholism, and other addictions would increase in the afterwar period (14).

Diagnosis of PTSD was found only in the war period; three perpetrators were found to have PTSD.

More than 90% of the perpetrators in both periods were estimated as less, or significantly less, competent. Experts from the Centre for Forensic Psychiatry, Clinical Psychiatric Hospital in Vrapce, testified that about 50 soldiers and policemen had committed murder. The results showed that most of them had various personality disorders that were due to the selection process while recruiting at the beginning of the war. The same authors concluded that these problems would form a basis for forensic testimony (15).

Conclusion

Data obtained by this research show that the homicide rates in the war period increased significantly. The perpetrators were usually men. In the prewar period the motive for homicide was marital conflict, while in the war period it was simply a quarrel between acquaintances or unknown persons. In the prewar period homicides were committed by “cold” weapons and during the war by guns and firearms. Victims in the prewar period were spouses or acquaintances, while in the war period the victims were acquaintances or unknown persons. During the prewar period there was a bigger number of victims “causing” the crime than in the war period.

Most of the perpetrators were under the influence of alcohol during the crime. The perpetrators from both periods usually had some personality disorders while only an insignificant number of

psychiatric patients were among the perpetrators. In both groups there were no recidivists.

Increased numbers of homicides during the war period can be explained by the war itself and to the social changes that follow exposure to the war stressors: losses, exile, alcohol abuse and access to guns.

The prevention of homicides should be directed toward preventive measures: prevention of unlimited alcohol intoxication, legal control over weapons, estimation of violence in society, and family well-being as a result of better social politics.

References

1. Archer D, Gartner R. Violent acts and violent times: A comparative approach to postwar homicide rates. *Am Soc Rev* 1976;41:937–63.
2. Lester D. Relationship between war and homicide rates. *Psychol Rep* 1991;69:1097–8.
3. Singer M. *Kriminologija*. Zagreb: Nakladni zavod Globus, 1994.
4. Gastil, RD. Homicide and regional culture of violence. *Am Soc Rev* 1971;36:412–27.
5. Marcikić M. *Ubojstva u Slavoniji i Baranji sa sudskomedicinskog aspekta (disertacija)*. Zagreb: Sveučilište u Zagrebu, 1995.
6. Edwards G. Murder and gun control. *Am J Psychiatr* 1972;128(7): 811–4.
7. Pečar J. Vloga žrtve pri ubojih na Slovenskem. *Rev Kriminalist Kriminol* 1971;4:258–65.
8. Jelačić O, Tolić B, Strinić M. Ubojstva na području Splita od 1964. do 1973. godine. *Jug Rev Kriminol* 1974;3:487–501.
9. Pešić V. *Ubistva u Jugoslaviji*. Beograd: Institut za Kriminološka i Sociološka Istraživanja, 1972.
10. Marković T. *Krivična djela lišenja života na području NR Hrvatske (1946–1955)*. Zagreb: Ured za kriminološka ispitivanja DSUP-a NRH 1959.
11. Slade M, Daniel LJ, Heisler CJ. Application of forensic toxicology to the problem of domestic violence. *J Forensic Sci* 1991;36(3): 708–13.
12. Lester D. Alcohol consumption and rates of personal violence in Australia. *Drug Alcohol Depend* 1992;31:17–17.
13. Lang B, Kozarić-Kovačić D. Pijenje alkoholnih pića i alkoholizam u ratnim uvjetima. U: Klain E, ur. *Ratna Psihologija i Psihijatrija*.
14. Lang B. Značenje alkoholizma i drugih ovisnosti kod psihotraumatiziranih osoba. *Soc Psihijatr* 1992;20:255–61.
15. Goreta M. Forenzičko—psihijatrijski aspekti ratnih psihičkih trauma. *Soc Psihijatr* 1992;20:285–93.

Additional information and reprint requests:

Ivan Požgaj
 Vijenac Ivana Meštrovića 20
 31000 Osijek
 Croatia