

Edited by Tapio Lappi-Seppälä

Homicide in Finland

*Trends and Patterns in Historical and
Comparative Perspective*

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HOMICIDE IN FINLAND — TRENDS AND PATTERNS
IN HISTORICAL AND COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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PREFACE

Finland has an exceptionally high homicide rate compared to other Scandinavian (and Western European) countries. Finland's peculiar position has remained unchanged throughout the 20th century. In May 2000, the National Research Institute of Legal Policy organized a small international seminar on this subject. The present publication includes most of the papers from this seminar. More extensive Finnish versions of some of the papers can be found in the *Research Reports* series of the institute.

Helsinki, on 28 April 2001

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION, <i>Tapio Lappi-Seppälä</i>	1
HOMICIDE TRENDS IN FINLAND AND 33 OTHER NATIONS SINCE 1955:	
Is Finland Still Exceptional? <i>Gary LaFree & Kriss A. Drass</i>	5
Cross-National Homicide Data	6
Testing for Convergence and Divergence	8
Comparing Finnish Homicide Trends to those of other Nations	11
Convergence with Total World Rates	11
Finland Compared to Industrialized Nations	13
Finland and the European Union Nations	15
Convergence among the Nordic Countries	17
Discussion and Conclusions	19
References	21
PATTERNS OF CRIMINAL HOMICIDE IN FINLAND 1960–1997	
<i>Janne Kivivuori</i>	23
The Data	24
<i>NBI/RIKI dataset</i>	24
<i>The Problem of Victims under One Year of Age</i>	25
<i>The Relevance of the Clearance Rate</i>	27
Results	27
<i>Sex</i>	27
<i>Age</i>	28
<i>Method of Inflicting Death</i>	30
<i>Place of Death</i>	31
<i>Victim-Offender Relationship</i>	32
Conclusion	35
<i>The Problem of Infanticide</i>	35
<i>Other Findings</i>	36
Notes	38
Literature	39
Appendix	40
CRIME IS PART OF THE PROBLEM: Contexts of Lethal Violence in Finland and the United States, <i>Jukka Savolainen & Steven F. Messner & Janne Kivivuori</i>	
Abstract	41
The Independence of Lethal Violence from Other Crime	43
Finland as the Case of Comparison	46
Data and Methods	47
Results	50
Conclusion (in progress)	55

References	57
Appendix : The original and harmonized homicide variables	59
Acknowledgement	60
Authors' bionotes	60
REGIONAL VARIATION AND PSYCHOSOCIAL BACKGROUND	
FACTORS OF FINNISH HOMICIDE IN 1980–1999, <i>JussiPajujoja</i>	61
Regional Variations in Finnish Homicides	61
Social Change in the Eastern and Northern Regions	64
Forensic Psychiatric Examinations	65
Psychosocial Background Factors	67
Conclusion	70
Bibliography	70
RECORDED ASSAULT OFFENCES 1950–1997. Changing Structure and	
Influencing Factors of Assault Crime from the 1950s to the 1990s, <i>Reino Sirén</i>	71
Changes in the Volume of Assault Offences	71
Factors Influencing the Volume of Assault Offences	73
<i>Alcohol Consumption</i>	73
<i>The Economy</i>	74
<i>Migration</i>	75
Predicting Crime Trends – the Best Fitting Statistical Determinants of	
Assault Volume	76
References	79
THE HOMICIDE WAVE IN FINLAND FROM 1905 TO 1932, <i>Martti Lehti</i>	81
The Finnish Exception	81
Three Coinciding Crime Cycles	83
<i>The Long Term Trend</i>	83
<i>The Surge of Violence in 1905–06</i>	85
<i>The Years 1920–32</i>	86
<i>The Change of the Trend in the Late 1930s</i>	91
The Homicide Wave of 1905–32 as a Result of Many Coinciding Factors	92
Literature	92

INTRODUCTION

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In the early 1930s the Finnish criminologist Veli Verkko published his pioneering comparative statistical analysis of lethal violence in Finland and a number of other countries. His main finding was that Finland shows an unproportionally high homicide rate, especially compared to our Scandinavian neighbours. The decades following the publication of these results did not alter the picture. Finland still has many more killings than Sweden, and three times as many crimes as Denmark and Norway. This state of affair seems to have been relatively stable during the last 50 years, as the figure below

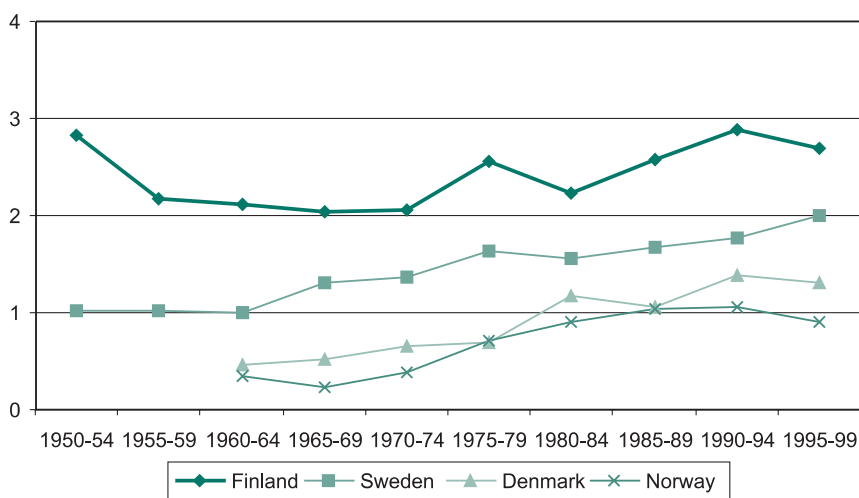


Figure 1 Murder and manslaughter per 100,000 population in four Scandinavian countries 1950–1999 (crimes reported to the police)

Criminological literature has offered a number of competing explanations for these differences, differences which find no match in other forms of crime (for example, the level of property offenses has traditionally been lower in Finland than in most of its Scandinavian neighbours). Verkko himself tended to stress the impact of our specific “violent national character” and our poor tolerance of alcohol as key explaining factors. As pointed out by later criminological research, this phenomenon also has its roots in social, historical and cultural factors specific to our own history. The articles collected in this publication sharpen and deepen the picture and characteristics of homicide in Finland, both in a historical and a comparative perspective.

The opening article by Gary LaFree examines homicide trends in Finland and 33 other countries since 1955. The focus in these analyses is to conclude to what extent the Finnish homicide figures and trends converge or diverge from similar trends elsewhere (from total world rates, rates in industrial countries, the European Union nations and the Scandinavian countries). One of the key findings is that Finland still in many ways is exceptional when compared to other industrialized European countries, and especially to the Scandinavian countries. However, the main reason for this exceptionalism is not the simple fact that we have higher homicide rates (as we do), but that our homicide rates during the past decades have increased much less than those of our Scandinavian neighbours.

Janne Kivivuori’s article “Patterns of Criminal Homicide in Finland 1960–1997” gives a broad descriptive profile of Finnish homicide and changes that have occurred during the last decades. Five aspects of homicide patterns are analysed: sex and age distribution of victims and offenders, the method of inflicting death, the scene of the offense and the victim-offender relationship. Perhaps the most striking finding is the radical decrease of homicide against children under one year of age. Kivivuori suggests that a combination of policy changes – i.e. control-dependent welfare provisions to mothers and medicalization of childbirth – account for this “transition from infanticide” in the general context of welfare state building.

The article by Jukka Savolainen, Steven Messner and Janne Kivivuori offers an interesting piece on comparative criminological analysis. Partly basing themselves on results from Kivivuori’s research, they examine the hypothesis proposed by Zimring-Hawkings in their work “Crime Is Not the Problem” (1998), according to which the high level of American homicide is unrelated to the nation’s overall crime problem. Using a unique comparative database, Savolainen et al. show that homicide that occurs in the context of other crime is much more prevalent in the

USA than in Finland. The difference should not be explained by the fact that handguns are much more prevalent in the USA. The authors conclude that it would be premature, in terms of both criminological theory and public policy, to treat lethal violence as a problem entirely independent of other crime.

In his paper Jussi Pajuojala discusses on the regional variations as well as the psychosocial background factors of Finnish homicide in 1980–1999. His main thesis is that the overall analyses of Finnish homicide rates have largely neglected the fact that crime is in highly uneven way distributed across the country. The homicide rate is much higher in the northern and eastern parts of Finland while homicide rates in the western parts are quite similar to neighbouring Sweden. At the same time psychosocial background factors seem to differ in different areas. For example, criminal insanity is connected to the high homicide rate of rural northern and eastern areas, but not to the rates of urban southern areas.

Martti Lehti's historical analysis of the homicide wave in Finland from 1905–1932 touches the very core of the Finnish homicide issue by pointing out that our exceptional international position of Finland in fact has quite a short history. From the Middle Ages to the second half of the 19th century the crime trends seemed to follow the general patterns of Europe. But during the first decades of the 20th century Finland experienced a crime wave while these figures in many industrialized countries were dropping. This wave left deep traces in Finnish homicide figures which ever since then remained on a higher level than in other West-European countries. Lehti examines possible explanations for this crime wave and includes social, political, economic and situation-related factors. This wave, as he points out, was a result of many coinciding factor: the frustrations produced by the “unsuccessful” general strike in 1905; radical changes in the attitudes towards violence among working class youth, partly also triggered by the Civil War in 1918; the concentration of youngsters in isolated violent-breeding communities created by the growing forest industry; the rapid increase of the consumption of, particularly strong, alcohol, reinforced by the prohibition act etc.

Reino Siren's article widens the scope from lethal violence to less severe forms of violent crime. His paper focuses on giving an overall picture of the development of assault offenses in 1950–1997 and the main factors influencing this development. He focuses is on recorded crime but makes several observations of the relationship between recorded and unrecorded crime as well. Siren concludes his analyses of the statistical regression model by examining the relative weight of some basic explanatory factors

(such as the consumption of alcohol, Gross Domestic Production, the clearance rate and the sentence level). In this model the public consumption of alcohol turned out to be of overriding importance as a factor explaining changes in reported crime, while the (lagging) correlation of sentence severity and recorded crime turned out to be plain zero.