

Reduction in homicide and violence in Scotland is largely explained by fewer gangs and less knife crime

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Key points

- Scotland has a longstanding reputation for violence, especially involving gangs of young people using knives in public places.
- Since the mid-2000s, both homicide and non-lethal violence decreased significantly in Scotland; however, it was unclear whether this applied to all types of homicide and violence or reflected a change in the culture of gang violence and knife crime specifically.
- Analysis of both police and survey data found four main 'types' of homicide and four main 'types' of violence, all of which had decreased over time but by different amounts.
- This study shows that declining incidents involving gangs of young people using weapons in public places made the biggest overall contribution to the reduction in both homicide and other forms of violence in Scotland.
- Strategies introduced to tackle the problem of gang violence and knife crime seem to have been effective, although strategies to tackle other types of violence need greater attention.

Introduction

Throughout the 20th Century, Scotland was blighted by a reputation for gang violence and knife crime. From the 'razor gangs' of the 1920s and 1930s to the dubious honour of 'homicide capital of Europe' in 2005, these problems were predominantly located in the west of Scotland, on the streets and in the council estates of Glasgow. The rates for homicide and other (non-sexual) crimes of violence peaked in the early 1990s but remained relatively high for around another decade before declining significantly from the early to mid-2000s onwards. According to recent statistics, the number of homicides in Scotland has fallen by 56% since 2004/05¹ and (non-sexual) crimes of violence have declined by 55% since 2002/03².



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While it is difficult to attribute these declines in violence to any one cause, there has been much speculation that it is largely due to the work of the Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) which was set up in 2005 to tackle gang violence and knife crime in and around the city of Glasgow. While the overall reduction in homicide and violence is welcome, it is important to understand whether all types of homicide or violence have reduced or whether the trends are explained by major

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changes in one type of crime as opposed to another.

There is great variation between incidents of homicide and violence; for example, an incident that takes place at home between domestic partners is quite different from an incident that occurs between two members of a rival gang in a public place. And yet, both would simply be recorded as an incident of homicide or violence (depending on the outcome) in the statistics. So, while overall trends in crime have decreased, it is possible that certain types of homicide or (non-sexual) violence may have remained stable or even increased over time. This type of information could help to better inform policy makers and practitioners about which aspects of Scotland's violence problem have improved (i.e. whether there has really been a reduction in gang violence in public places) and which require further or different violence prevention strategies.

It is also important to examine whether patterns of change in types of homicide are similar to changes in other non-fatal types of (non-sexual) violence. Homicide is commonly used as a proxy measure of wider societal violence, especially in comparative studies involving different countries, as it is assumed that trends in homicide and violence follow a similar pattern. On a continuum of violence, homicide is often viewed as simply a lethal version of assault. However, few studies have examined whether types of homicide are similar to other types of violence and, if so, whether both these change in similar ways over time. This type of information would also enable policy makers and practitioners to make more nuanced decisions about intervention and prevention policies aimed at tackling both lethal and non-lethal forms of violence.

The aims of this research were: (1) to identify different 'types' of homicide and (non-sexual) violence in Scotland based on the characteristics of individual incidents; (2) to examine how the prevalence of these types of homicide

and violence changed over time; and (3) to compare how changes in types of homicide reflected changes in other types of non-lethal violence.

Data and Methods

Two datasets were used to examine homicide and violence over time. The Scottish Homicide Database (SHD) consisted of all police recorded murder cases from 2000 to 2015 and included 1,344 cases, involving 1,366 victims and 1,978 offenders. The Scottish Crime and Justice Survey (SCJS) provided data on (non-sexual) violence over five survey sweeps (2008-09; 2009-10; 2010-11; 2012-13; and 2014-15) and included 1,879 victims who experienced 2,097 incidents of violence. In order to identify 'types' of homicide and violence, a clustering technique called Multilevel Latent Class Analysis was used. This takes into account the hierarchical structures in the data, and groups cases so they are as similar as possible within type, and as different as possible between types. The types were identified using information about the victim and offender (such as age, gender, influence of drugs or alcohol, and employment status) and the incident of crime (such as whether it was committed in a public or private place, use of weapons, and the motivation for the crime).

Results

Homicide Types

Using the SHD, four main types of homicide were identified. The most common type of homicide (32% of all cases, n=630) was an '**Indoor Stabbing type**'. These mainly involved the use of sharp weapons against relatively young men inside a private dwelling or location. The victims tended to be under the influence of alcohol or drugs and the homicide typically occurred in the context of some sort of fight or argument between

the offender and victim. Most of the victims were unemployed, which could indicate a high level of deprivation among the victims of this type of homicide. The choice of weapon was commonly improvised at the scene which suggests that Indoor Stabbing type homicides were mostly spur-of-the-moment in nature. Around a quarter (27%, n=540) of all homicides were an **'Indoor No Weapon type'**. In these cases the victim typically died as a result of a physical assault, usually without the use of a weapon, inside a private location. The victims were often under the influence of drugs or alcohol and tended to be slightly older than the victims in the Indoor Stabbing Type. The offender and victim commonly knew each other (in a quarter of the cases they were related) and the homicide was typically motivated by some sort of conflict or fight.

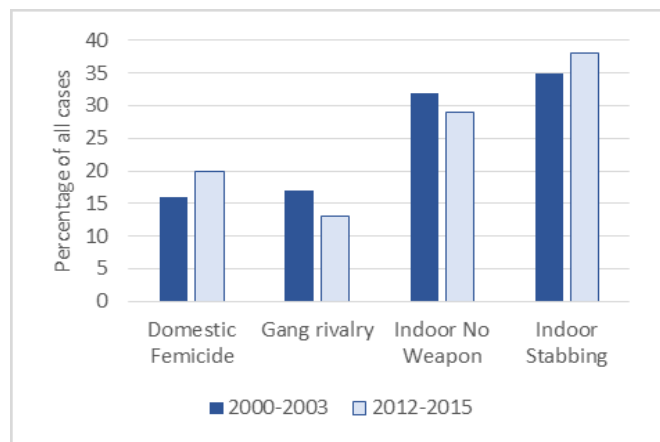
Another quarter (25%, n=492) of all homicides were a **'Gang Rivalry type'**. These cases were typically committed in a public place between young men who were enemies or rivals. The homicide was often motivated by an ongoing feud and most victims were under the influence of drugs or alcohol when they were killed. The most common method of killing was stabbing, but almost a fifth of cases involved firearms. Offenders mostly brought the weapon to the scene, suggesting some level of premeditation.

Least common was the **'Domestic Femicide type'** (16%, n=316). These involved the killing of female victims by an intimate partner, typically in a private setting indoors. The most common motive recorded was some sort of fight or conflict, but a substantial number were noted as being motivated by a domestic dispute. These could, therefore, largely be considered domestic femicides. Most incidents involved stabbing, but strangulation and murder without the use of a weapon were also quite common.

Analysis of change over time between 2000-2003 and

2012-2015 found that all four homicide types decreased in absolute terms, but at different rates. Figure 1 illustrates the relative change in the distribution of all four homicide types. It shows that there was a relative increase in Domestic Femicide and Indoor Stabbing cases, but a relative decrease in Gang Rivalry and Indoor No Weapon cases. Overall, Gang Rivalry homicides decreased the most, while Domestic Femicide cases reduced the least.

Figure 1: Relative change in distribution of homicide types, 2000-2003 to 2012-2015



In simple terms, these findings mean that the reduction in homicides in Scotland reflects a larger proportionate decline in homicides committed between rival gangs in public places using weapons, but a much smaller proportionate decline in domestic homicides and deaths that involve the use of weapons that occur indoors.

(Non-sexual) Violence Types

Analysis of data from the SCJS also found four types of non-fatal violence. Of all violent incidents, 29% (n=583) were a **'Domestic type'** which typically involved violence between intimate partners, motivated by some sort of previous history or fight between the offender (usually male) and victim (usually female), and mostly taking place inside or adjacent to the victim's home. The offenders tended to be 25-39 years old, and were more than twice as likely to be under the influence of drugs

and alcohol as the victim.

A further 28% of violence incidents were a '**Public No Weapon type**', involving mostly young, male offenders, under the influence of alcohol and committing violence in a public place. The victims and offenders were most commonly not known to each other and the violence was usually motivated by the fact that the offender was under the influence of alcohol or drugs. None of the Public No Weapon types involved the use of a weapon.

A quarter (24%, n=503) of incidents were '**Public Weapon type**', which was similar to the Public No Weapon type, except they typically involved a weapon (usually a knife or other sharp instrument) and so the injuries sustained by the victims tended to be more serious than the other three violence types. The offenders were mostly young men, and alcohol or drugs was the most common motive reported by the victims of these cases. The offenders and victims of these cases tended to be strangers or people who only knew each other by sight.

Finally, the '**Work Related type**' was the least common type of violence (19%, n=403). They typically occurred in or around the victim's workplace or during the course of their employment. Most victims did not know the offender, but in a third of cases the offender was a work colleague. The offenders tended to be slightly older compared to other violence types and were most commonly male.

Most of the victims were sober, but the most common motive for the violence was that the offender was under the influence of drugs or alcohol. Many offenders also had mental health problems.

As with the homicide types, there was an absolute reduction in all four types of violence between 2008/09 and 2014/15; however, some types decreased by more than others. Figure 2 shows the relative change in the

distribution of violence cases over time.

By far the biggest relative decrease was in Public Weapon cases.

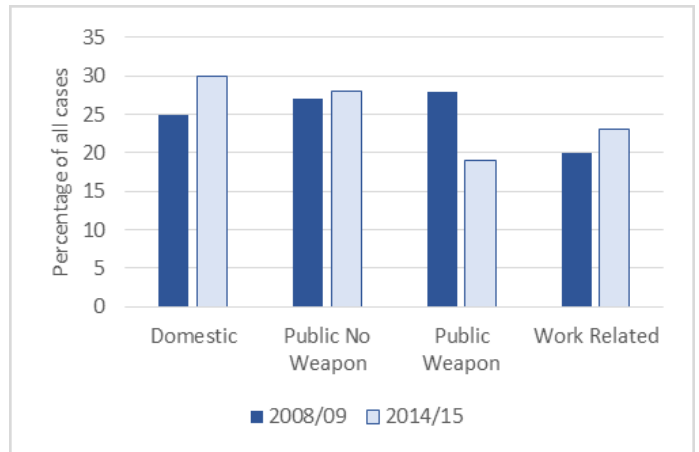


Figure 2: Relative change in the distribution of homicide types, 2008/09 to 2014/15

There was little relative change in the Public No Weapon type, but the Work Related and Domestic types increased in relative terms. So the main contributor to the drop in non-fatal violence was a decline in fights amongst young men in public places involving knives or other sharp instruments. Whereas, the decline in Domestic violence contributed far less to the overall reduction in violence.

Conclusion

Despite a longstanding reputation for violence in Scotland, especially in and around Glasgow, both homicide and other forms of (non-sexual) violence have fallen significantly in recent years. Until now, there was no detailed analysis of the underlying changes in different 'types' of homicide and violence. This study found four typical types of homicide and four types of violence in Scotland. There were considerable similarities between the 'Gang Rivalry type' of homicide and the 'Public Weapon type' of violence, which showed that the largest declines were amongst street-based fights between rival gangs of young males, typically involving weapons. There were also similarities between

the 'Domestic Femicide type' of homicide and the 'Domestic type' of violence, which indicated that incidents involving intimate partner violence perpetuated in a domestic environment declined the least in Scotland.

These findings have important implications for policy and practice. There have been many claims that the reduction in violence mainly reflects the success of public policing initiatives such as the Violence Reduction Unit³ and educational strategies such as the No Knives Better Lives campaign⁴ which were aimed at reducing street-based gang violence and knife crime, especially amongst young men. Unfortunately, there has been very little evaluation of these initiatives and so it is difficult to establish the effectiveness of such interventions. Nevertheless, it is clear that the largest declines in homicide and violence are in line with the policies and intervention strategies put in place during the mid 2000s to tackle gang violence and knife crime.

If it is the case that the strategies and policies aimed at reducing public violence involving sharp weapons amongst young men have been effective, then it appears that strategies aimed at reducing domestic forms of violence and homicide have been less so. This suggests that a one-size-fits-all approach to tackling violence is unlikely to be successful, and more bespoke strategies and policies may be needed to tackle different forms of violence. These research findings also indicate that using more sophisticated methods to analyse and disaggregate available crime data can reveal

important patterns and trends that are concealed within aggregate data.

References

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⁴ NKBL (2018) No Knives Better Lives About Us. noknivesbetterlives.com/info/about-us/

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