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PRIMARY GROUP CHARACTERISTICS
AND INTRA-FAMILY HOMICIDE*

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OCT 14 1988

Abstract

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ACQUISITIONS

Data from the United States, Canada, and Denmark are presented which

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show that the percentage of homicides in which victims and offenders are members of the same family varies widely from nation to nation, from one time period to another within-nations, and from one geographic unit to another within nations. These data are used to test the hypothesis that the lower the homicide rate, the higher the percentage of homicides which are within-family. Almost all of the empirical tests, both cross-sectional, and time-series, supported the hypothesis. A theory, called the "primary group lag" theory, is presented to explain these findings. This theory holds that primary groups, and especially the family, tend have characteristics which engender a certain minimal rate of violence on the one hand, and to restrict serious violence on the other hand. Characteristics of the family which engender conflict and violence are identified, as are characteristics which tend to restrict the extent and severity of the violence. The paper concludes by discussing the implications of the primary group lag theory for understanding homicide, for designing research on homicide, and for primary prevention of homicide.

* This study was carried out under two of the programs of the Family Research Laboratory: the State and Regional Indicators Archive and research program and the Family Violence Research Program. Bibliographies listing books and papers of these programs are available from the Family Research Laboratory, University of New Hampshire, 128 Horton Social Science Center, Durham, NH 03824.

It is a pleasure to acknowledge the important contributions of a number of people. of the Federal Bureau of Investigation provided the supplemental homicide report data tape, and answered many questions concerning this data. Robert Flewelling performed the data processing miracle of converting the supplemental homicide data tape into rates for numerous specific categories of homicide. Kirk R. Williams's creative and critical mind provided the impetus which led me to resume research on homicide after a gap of 35 years. made many valuable suggestions which greatly aided the revision of the paper. Finally, I am grateful for financial support to the Graduate School of the University of New Hampshire, the National Institute of Mental Health (grant T32 MH15161), and the National Institute of Justice (grant 851JCX0030).

Homicides in which both the victim and offender are members of the same family are a large proportion of the total number of homicides in all societies for which data is available. However, the proportion also varies substantially from society to society. In the United States, intra-family homicides constituted about one quarter of the of the total during the period 1966 to 1984 (Straus, 1986). However, in Canada during

this period almost half of all homicides were intra-family (Silverman and Kennedy, forthcoming), and in Denmark the percentage was 67 (Bohannon, 1960:243). There are also large differences within-nations at different points in history.

The first part of this paper develops a theory to explain the large differences between nations and the large differences between historical periods in the percentage that family homicides are of all homicides. The second part of the paper reports the results an empirical study designed to investigate that theory.

THE PRIMARY GROUP LAG THEORY

The theory investigated can be called the "primary group lag" theory of intra-family homicide. This theory asserts that socio-cultural factors which affect the incidence of homicide, such as poverty and inequality (Loftin and Hill, 1974; Williams, 1984), urbanization (Baron and Straus, 1987a; Harries, 1980), or cultural norms condoning violence (Baron and Straus, 1987a,b; Wolfgang and Ferencuti, 1967) have less effect on homicides which occur when victim and offender have a primary group relationship than on homicides which occur among strangers or acquaintances who are not members of the same primary group.¹ Consequently, if socio-historical circumstances occur which tend to increase the homicide rate, intrafamily homicides are less affected than homicides involving other relationships and they become a smaller proportion of all homicides. Conversely, when societal conditions make for a reduction in the incidence of homicide, the family rate changes less rapidly and family homicides become a larger proportion of the overall homicide rate. In short, the higher the homicide rate, the lower the proportion of intra-family homicides. This negative correlation will be called the "primary group lag" effect.

Although the theory is derived from the distinctive characteristics of primary groups, the empirical tests of the theory to be reported in this paper focus on one particular type of primary group -- the family. There are two reasons for this. First, homicide statistics are not available for other types of primary groups such as close knit neighborhoods or small communities, small churches with stable memberships, etc.² However, even if data were available for other primary group, the family is the proto-typical primary group and therefore enables the clearest test of the theory.

A closely related theory is Verkko's "static law" of female homicide (Verkko, 1951 [1967]; Willbanks, 1981). The difference is that Verkko sought to explain differences between men and women, rather than differences based on primary group relationships between victim and offender. Verkko contended that female rates of crimes against the person tend to be stable over time and from country to country. The primary group lag theory subsumes Verkko's law as a phenomenon which occurs because homicides by women are overwhelmingly intra-family. In Canada, for example, 77.5% of homicides committed by women were intra-family, compared to 41.7% of homicides committed by men. In the United States, 68.4 percent of female offenders killed another member of their family, compared to 27.4 percent of homicides by men (Browne and Flewelling, 1987).

PRIMARY GROUP CHARACTERISTICS AND VIOLENCE³

What are the characteristics of primary groups which suggest that homicide and other violence is relatively less subject to variation according to the socio-cultural characteristics of the society or historical time period than is true for other types of victim-offender

relationships? To answer this question the family will be used as the example of a primary group because, as noted previously, the family is the proto-typical primary group.

Since the primary group lag theory hinges on the assumption that primary groups, and especially the family, tend have characteristics which engender a certain minimal level of violence on the one hand, and to restrict serious violence on the other hand, the following sections attempt to identify some of the family characteristics which might produce these floor and a ceiling effects.

Family Characteristics Which Engender Conflict and Violence

Previous theoretical analyses of intra-family violence (Gelles and Straus, 1979; Hotaling and Straus, 1980) noted the irony in the fact that certain of the basic structural characteristics of the family engender a relatively high level of conflict. Within the space of this article, only a few key parts of that analysis can be presented.

Family Structure. Since the family (like other primary groups) is an all encompassing relationship, concerned with "the whole person" there is almost nothing which cannot become the focus of a conflict. Moreover, the likelihood of conflict is enhanced because families typically include people of two generations. Hence the "generation gap" is built into the family. Similarly, since there are two genders, the "battle of the sexes" is structured into the very nature of the family. Moreover, these conflicts are likely to be exacerbated by the fact that family members have an intense emotional involvement with each other. It is not just that parents and children may have different tastes in clothing or music, in addition, each is deeply concerned about the taste and appearance of the other. Moreover, it is expected or permissible to openly voice these

concerns because the explicit and implicit norms of governing family relationships give family members the right (or obligation) to try to influence the behavior of others in the family.

Inequality. Another important structural characteristic of the family is the inherently asymmetrical power structure in the case of parents and children, and de facto asymmetry in the case of spouses. Inequality is almost always fertile ground for conflict. Coleman and Straus (1986) for example, found that male-dominant marriages have a higher level of conflict than equalitarian families, even when there is consensus between the spouses concerning the legitimacy of male-dominance. The conflict inherent in inequality is especially applicable to the family because of the intimacy of family relationships. The combination of intimacy and hierarchy, if not incompatible, is difficult to manage.

Norms Permitting or Requiring Violence. Although there may be a particularly high level of conflict inherent in the family, it is far from the only type of group with a high level of conflict. Academic departments, for example, have some of these same characteristics, and for that reason and other reasons, also tend to have frequent conflicts. Yet physical assaults of even the most minor type are almost non-existent. Clearly, conflict alone is not sufficient to explain violence (Straus, 1979; Gelles and Straus, 1979). A fundamental difference between families and most other groups which helps explain the high rate of violence in families is that there are explicit and implicit cultural norms which give family members the right to hit.**

In the case of parents, there is almost an obligation to hit if the child misbehaves (Carson, 1986). Physical punishment is legal in every state of the United States. When the wave of child abuse legislation swept the states in the late 1960's and early 1970's, legislatures went out of their way to add provisions to declare that the statute did not restrict

the right of parents to use physical punishment. Carson (1986) found that parents who fail to do so when a child misbehaves experience subtle but powerful pressures to conform to the norm. They are forced into creating an "account" (Scott and Lyman, 1968) of their behavior which neutralizes the deviance (Matza, 1969).

In the case of spouses, until the early 19th century, the marriage licence was also a hitting licence because the common law gave husbands the right to "physically chastise an errant wife" (Calvert, 1974). Despite the demise of this common law principle, the marriage license lives on as a de facto hitting license (Straus, 1976: 1983b). Although the assault statutes of every state contain no provision excluding assaults between spouses, state after state has found it necessary to pass "spouse abuse" legislation which, in effect, say "yes, it is a criminal act to hit one's spouse." It was not until 1977 that the training manual published by the International Association of Chiefs Of Police was changed to make the same declaration. However, it remained until the late 1980's before any sizeable number of police departments actually began acting on that premise. Even now, people who do not question the appropriateness of arresting someone who punches a store clerk or employee, question the appropriateness of arresting a husband who punches a wife."³

The explicit and implicit norms permitting violence in the family are a key reason why the intra-family assault rate is many times the incidence of assaults between unrelated persons (see Straus and Gelles, 1987 for rates from two national surveys). Moreover, not only is there normative justification for violence (provided it does not go "too far"), but in addition, assailants and potential assailants perceive almost no risk of sanctions (Carmony and Williams, 1987).

Family Socialization In Violence. A third element of the theory is concerned with explaining why family norms concerning violence are

different than the norms for other types of groups. Because of space limitations, only one of the several factors accounting for this discrepancy can be presented: the modeling which takes place as a result of parental use of physical punishment. Physical punishment begins in infancy for about one out of four children (Newson, 1963:204; Mauchope and Straus, 1987). It reaches a peak of 97 percent at age three and declines steadily after that (Straus, 1983a). However, even at age 17, a majority of children are still at risk of physical punishment (Straus, 1971, 1983a).

These experiences indicate that the family is the setting in which most persons first experience physical violence, and also the setting which establishes the emotional context, meaning, and uses of violence. Physical punishment is used to teach behaviors that are required and to extinguish prohibited or dangerous behavior, but it also teaches several unintentional lessons.

The first of these is the association of love with violence. Parents are the first and usually the only ones to hit an infant. For most children this continue throughout childhood. Children therefore learn that those who love them the most are also those who hit. Second, since physical punishment is almost always used for the child's welfare, it establishes the moral rightness of hitting other family members. The third lesson is that anger or frustration justifies the use of physical force, especially against those who are weaker.

These indirect lessons become a fundamental part of the child's personality. When the child becomes an adult, they are applied to his or her role as a parent and as a husband or wife. Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz (1980), for example, found that the more physical punishment experienced as a child, the higher the probability of assaulting spouses later in life. Many children do not even need to generalize the pattern of

violent behavior to other family relationships because they can directly observe role models of physical violence between husbands and wives. At the societal level, the near universality of physical punishment, and the millions of children who observe violence between their parents, lays the groundwork for the cultural norms discussed above.

Some Other Factors. Three other factors need to be added to this volatile mix of family characteristics: "time at risk," the involuntary nature of family membership, and family privacy. Since family members spend more time with each other than with most other categories of people, it should hardly be surprising that they also spend more time fighting with each other than with non-family persons. Moreover, one of the most widely used methods of managing conflict -- leaving -- is for the most part not available to parents and children, and is extremely difficult for spouses. Hence, the family can be likened to a pressure cooker without a safety valve. Finally, family privacy is highly valued and almost always respected. The negative side of this is that deviant acts, including violence, can and do go undetected. All types of crime are partly a function of a favorable cost/benefit ratio. In the case of intra-family violence, the cost term in the equation is near zero (Caroody and Williams, 1987), partly because detection is prevented by family privacy.

In summary, family organization, cultural norms concerning the family, and social control processes which operate differently for family violence than other violence, combine to create an endemically high level of conflict and violence within the family. Most of these elements can be assumed to also apply to other primary groups, but not to the same extent as the family.

Non-Lethal Violence and Homicide. The final element in the theory which the available space permits me to discuss concerns the link between the high rate of non-lethal family violence and the high rate of intra-

family homicide. The most direct connection is that non-lethal violence is the immediate antecedent of most intra-family homicides (Straus, 1986; Wolfgang, 1958). It is part of a behavioral sequence which can culminate in a death. A study in Kansas city, for example, found that the police "...had responded to disturbance calls at the address of homicide victims or suspects at least once in the 2 years before the homicide in 90 percent of the cases, and five or more times in the 2 years before the homicide in 50 percent of the cases" (Breedlove et al, 1977).** Intra-family homicide is typically the final episode in a long-standing pattern of violence.

Family Characteristics Which Tend to Limit Homicide

Before the recent emergence of social movements and social science research on child abuse and spouse abuse, this section might have been thought to be an unnecessary academic exercise, and perhaps it still is. However, if, as argued in the previous section, violence is endemic to the family, it raises the question of whether it is true that the family also tends to limit the extent of violence -- lethal and non-lethal; and if so, how that occurs. Viewed in this context, it is just as important to identify the aspects of family organization and culture which limit violence as it is to identify aspects which engender violence. Nevertheless, this section is shorter, partly because it cannot draw on my previous empirical research and theory designed to explain intra-family violence; and perhaps also because, as a creature of my own culture, I may have more difficulty in perceiving it as problematic. In any case, the following three factors can be identified.

Social Bond. The intimacy, involvement, and attachment which characterize primary group relationships, and especially family relationships, are almost by definition, characteristics which leads to

concern for the well-being and the life of other members of the family. Consequently, although family members engage in frequent conflict and violence, these concerns typically limit the severity of the violence. Even among cases of child abuse which are serious enough to come to the attention of child welfare authorities, a serious injury occurs in less than five percent of such cases (Garbarino, 1986). Similar low injury rates characterize wife beating (Gelles and Straus, 1987). Family members may be extremely angry and may want to cause pain, but they rarely want to injure, and even more rarely want to kill.*7

Normative Injunctions. Just as there are social norms which grant permission to use violence, there are also norms which require and encourage love, support, and gentleness. Every society holds parents responsible for the welfare of children. As for spouses, the typical marriage vows contain a pledge to care for and protect the spouse. Since these are almost universally shared and supported norms, they are probably influential in limiting the extent of violence.

Economic Cost. The multi-billion dollar life insurance industry is but one visible manifestation of the fact that family members have a large economic stake in the health and life of others in the family. In previous times, children were also an important economic asset, and in contemporary society they represent a huge monetary investment. In a society where women earn considerably less than men, women are dependent on their husbands for their own economic welfare and that of their children. Economic dependency is an important factor in accounting for why battered women remain in such marriages (Gelles, 1976; Kaloupek and Straus, 1982). It seems plausible that it is also one reason why, even under the most extreme provocation, battered women rarely injure or kill their husbands, (Browne, 1987).**

HYPOTHESES

Much of the above theoretical discussion can be summarized in the form of the four propositions listed below. The hypotheses to be tested were deduced from these propositions.

1. Socio-cultural factors which make for an increase in the homicide rate from one time period to another, or from one society to another, affect homicides between members of primary groups less than they affect homicide between family members. Therefore:

Ho 1: The lower the overall homicide rate, the higher the percentage of homicides which are within the family.

(The negative correlation identified in Hypothesis 1 will be referred to as the "primary group lag effect.")

2. The more a relationship epitomizes primary group ties, the greater the primary group lag effect.

3. The "most primary" relationships within the family are between mother and infant and between husband and wife, followed by other family relationships. Therefore:

Ho 2: The "primary group lag" effect is greater for spouse and for infant homicides than for homicides involving other family relationships.

4. Homicides between acquaintances mix casual acquaintance relationships with relationships between members of non-family primary groups (see footnote 1). Therefore:

Ho 3: The primary group lag effect is weak or absent for homicides involving acquaintances.

METHOD

Data

Nine different data sets were used to provide multiple tests these hypotheses. The data are from both the United States and Canada, and include homicide victimization rates as well as homicide offense rates. For some data sets the primary group lag was tested using the percent of the total number of homicides, and for some it is measured by the percent that the family homicide rate is of the overall rate. Most of the data is from the criminal justice reporting system of the two countries, but a major section of the paper uses data generated by the health system. Some data sets are in the form of time series, and some are cross sectional. For some of the cross sectional analyses, it is possible to examine the robustness of the findings across units of analysis (cities, metropolitan areas, and states).

The strategy of using diverse data sets is an example of "methodological triangulation" (Webb et al., 1981). This strategy is intended to preclude the possibility that the findings are a result of artifacts characterizing a specific data set. The multiple data sets also permit repeated tests of the hypotheses under widely varying cultural, economic, and historical circumstances. Finally, since cross section and longitudinal analyses can sometimes produce different results, use of both types of data allows this to be investigated.

If all nine data sets were to be described at this point, it would be tiresome and confusing, and some of the information would be forgotten by the time it is needed to properly evaluate each analysis. To avoid those problems, each data set will be described at the beginning of the analysis using that data.

Statistical Analysis

Two methods of testing the hypotheses will be used: plots and correlations. The graphs permit one to inspect the actual data points and to identify non-linear relationships. The correlation analysis has the advantage of summarizing the relationships in the form of coefficients, and also provides tests of statistical significance.

The dependent variable is the percent of homicides which are categorized as involving a primary group relationship, or the percent that the incidence rate for a particular type of primary homicide is of the total homicide rate. These percentages will be correlated with the overall homicide rate. In some cases this will be a time series correlation or regression in which the units are specific years, and in some cases it will be a cross-sectional analysis in which the units are cities, metropolitan areas, or states of the United States.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

OF US STATES, CITIES, AND METROPOLITAN AREAS

The data for this analysis consists of rates calculated from a computer tape obtained from the Federal Bureau of Investigation. This tape contains the "supplemental homicide reports" for the period 1976-84. The design of the larger study of homicide in the United States, of which this paper is a part, required rates for two time periods: 1976-79 and 1980-84). Consequently, it was possible to cross-validate the analysis to be reported by replicating it in both time periods. The methods used to compute the homicide rates are described in Williams and Flewelling (1986a).

The independent variable for these analyses is the overall homicide rate for each state, metropolitan area or city. The dependent variable is

the percent that the intra-family homicide rate was of the overall homicide rate during the period covered by each replication.

(Table 1 about here)

The correlations shown in Table 1 are consistent with hypotheses 1 and 3 (hypothesis 2 was not tested with this data set). However, the relationship is not strong. Since there might be a non-linear relationship this was investigated using the test for deviation from linearity in the SPSS/PC program MEANS. No statistically significant deviations a linear relationship were found. The actual relationships are shown in Figure 1.

(Figure 1 about here)

The horizontal axis in Figure 1 is the overall homicide rate, expressed in units of one-half a standard deviation below and above the mean. The plot points at the lower right show that for both time periods, states, metro areas, or cities with a high homicide rate tend to have a somewhat lower percentage of family homicides. At the other end of the continuum, the plot points in the upper left of Figure 1 show that in social units with a low homicide rate, a somewhat larger proportion of these relatively few homicides occur within the family.**

The analyses shown in Table 1 were replicated using gender-specific homicide rates, i.e. male intra-family offenders as a percentage of the total male homicide offender rate, male intra-family victimizations as a percentage of all male homicide deaths, and the same for females. Most of the correlations were near zero.

In view of the relatively low correlations shown in Table 1 and Figure 1, and the absence of any relationships when they hypotheses were tested using gender-specific rates, the analyses reported in this section provide, at best, minimal support for the primary group lag theory.

HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF INTRA-FAMILY HOMICIDE IN CANADA AND THE UNITED STATES

Although the findings reported in the previous section are consistent with the primary group lag theory, they are a relatively crude test of the theory because intra-family homicides were aggregated into a single category. The analysis reported in this section provides a more focused test. It uses data which disaggregates family homicide into categories that represent different degrees of primary group bonding. In addition, the analysis is longitudinal, and can therefore help to determine if the findings just reported are a function of a methodological artifact connected with a cross-sectional analysis.

Canadian And American Patterns

Before turning to the time series analysis, it is pertinent to note that the difference between the Canadian and the United States pattern of homicide is consistent with Hypothesis 1, which holds that the lower the incidence of homicide, the greater the percentage which are within-family. The US homicide rate for the period 1966-1984 was approximately 8.5 per 100,000, whereas the Canadian rate for the period 1961 to 1983 was about 2 per 100,000 population.**° During this period, about 25% of US homicides were intra-family, compared to about 46% of Canadian homicides. Thus, the incidence of homicide in Canada about a fifth of the US incidence rate, but the percentage of homicides in Canada which occurred within the family was almost double the US percentage.

Canadian Trends

Data. The data in this section are the overall homicide victimization rate for Canada for the years 1961 though 1983, and the percent that each of the following is of the total number murders for those years: spouses

and lovers, other family relationships, friends and acquaintances, and strangers. The data are from Figures 1 and 2 of Silverman and Kennedy (1987 Forthcoming).²¹

The correlations of the overall homicide rate with each of these percentages are: spouse/lover % = -.69, other family relationships = -.58, friends and acquaintances = .67, and stranger = .37. The first of these correlations shows that as the Canadian homicide rate climbed from 1961 to 1983, the percentage of homicides involving spouses or lovers decreased, just as was predicted by Hypotheses 1. The second correlation shows a similar, but slightly weaker tendency the percent of homicides involving other family relationships to decline over this same period, as predicted by Hypothesis 2. Finally, third correlation is positive and non-significant, which is exactly what is specified in hypothesis 3.

(Figure 2 about here)

Figure 2 plots the spouse/lover percentage of homicides for these years and the overall homicide rate (multiplied by ten to be able to plot it on the same scale as the spouse/lover percentage). The inverse relationship measured by the correlation of -.67 is evident. In addition, Figure 2 lets us see where the deviation from a perfect negative correlation occurs. The most evident deviation from a negative relationship is for the years 1981 to 1983. During this period both the overall rate and the spouse/lover percentage increased.

US Trends

Data. The data in this section are from the annual FBI publication Crime In the United States for 18 years between 1966 and 1984. The percentages of intra-family homicide are from tables entitled "Circumstances by Relationships," but with the following adjustments.

An initial plot of these data revealed a large decrease in the percent intra-family homicides in 1977 and thereafter. The drop was so precipitous and so constant thereafter that it raised the possibility of a change in the method of computing these statistics. Examination of the tables from 1977 on revealed that the decline occurred because, beginning in 1977, the distribution was percentaged with the "no information" category included as a type of relationship. The percentages from 1977 to 1984 were therefore recomputed to make the figures for all years comparable. In addition, 1976 data was not used because the published data did not permit a transformation to make the percentages consistent with other years.

Hypothesis Tests. Hypothesis 1 predicts a negative correlation between the homicide rate and the percentage of intra-family homicides. The correlation for the years 1966 to 1984, using all intra-family homicides, irrespective of the type of family relationship, is -.59. The relationship is plotted in Figure 3. For the years up through 1975 there is an almost perfect inverse relation. Thereafter the picture is less clear. From 1976 to 1980, when the overall homicide rate resumed an upward movement (after declining for two years), the intra-family percentage declined (as predicted by the primary group lag theory). However, as the overall homicide rate decreased from 1980 to 1984, the predicted increase in the intra-family percentaged did not occur.

(Figure 3 about here)

Hypothesis 2 predicts a stronger negative relationship for the closer family relationships. This hypothesis was supported since the correlation for spouse homicides is -.62; for parent-child homicides (many of which involve adult children) is -.57, and for other family relationships the correlation is .12.

HISTORICAL AND COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF
INFANT HOMICIDE IN THE UNITED STATES

There are several reasons for including a separate analysis of infant homicides. First, as indicated in the introduction, the parent-infant relationship is believed to be particularly close and all-encompassing, i.e. the most primary of all social bonds. If this is correct, analysis of infant homicides provides the most crucial test of the primary group lag theory. A second reason for the infant homicide analysis is that the data were generated from a different data source -- the medical rather than the criminal justice system. This permits a distinctive test of the theory, independent of the peculiarities of the police reporting system. Finally, the time series part of this analysis covers a somewhat broader range of years than was possible with the Uniform Crime Reports data. This helps rule out the possibility that the findings are attenuated by a limited time span or are an artifact of a specific limited time span.

Data

The infant homicide data are from the annual Vital Statistics Of the United States. The time series data is from Volume 2, Part A, Table 1-9 for the years 1960 to 1980. The rates for each state were computed from the number of homicides given in part B, Table 7-6 for the years 1975-80.¹²

Trends From 1960 To 1980

(Figure 4 about here)

The line marked with ~~triangles~~ ^{triangles} in Figure 4 shows the notoriously large increases in the US homicide rate during the 1960's and 1970's. The line marked with small boxes plots the almost equally dramatic decrease in the percentage that the infant homicide rate is of the overall rate. The

correlation of the overall homicide rate with the infant homicide rate is $-.94$. The regression coefficient indicates that for each increase of one per thousand in the overall homicide, there was an average decrease of 9.7 in the percent that the infant homicide rate is of the overall rate.

(Figure 5 about here)

Figure 5 shows the results of replicating this analysis separately for males and females, and for whites and minority racial groups. Three of the four plots are almost identical to those shown in Figure 4. However, the results in the lower ~~left~~ ^{right} chart of Figure 5 for minority racial groups are somewhat different. The main difference is that the increase in the overall homicide rate from 1960 to 1980 was less than that for other groups, and so was the decrease in the percent that the infant homicide rate is of the overall homicide rate. One possible reason why the primary group lag effect is less for minorities than for whites is that the effect was attenuated because the homicide rate for minority races was already extremely high at the start of the two decade period. In 1960 the homicide rate for minority victims was 22 per 100,000, which is ten times the rate for whites that year.¹³

State-To-State Comparisons

The dependent variable in this section of the paper is the percent that the infant homicide rate was of the overall homicide rate for each of the 50 states for the period 1975-80 (see footnote 12 for an explanation of how the state rates were computed). The independent variable is the overall homicide rate for each state. The correlation between these two variables is $-.60$.

(Figure 6 about here)

These results are graphed in Figure 6. The horizontal axis is the overall homicide rate, grouped in intervals of one-half a standard

deviation below and above the mean. The plot point at the lower right of Figure 6 shows that in states with a high homicide rate (1.5 or more standard deviations above the mean), the homicide victimization rate for infants is only about a third of the overall homicide rate. At the other end of the continuum, the two plot points in the upper left of Figure 6 show that states with a low homicide rate (.5 or more standard deviations below the mean of the states) the homicide rate for infants tended to be higher than the overall homicide rate. This does not mean that a large number of infants are killed in state with a low overall homicide rate. It means that, in states where homicide is relatively rare, infant homicide is a large piece of the small pie.**

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper presents data which shows that the percent of homicides in which the victim and offender are members of the same family differs greatly from one society to another, and from one historical period to another. The first part of this paper develops an explanation of these differences called the primary group lag theory of intra-family homicide. The theory can be summarized in the form of five interrelated propositions.

1. Family homicides are less subject to variation growing out of socio-cultural factors such as poverty and social disorganization than are homicides involving strangers.
2. The relative stability of intra-family homicide means that when socio-historical forces tend to drive up the homicide rate, intrafamily homicides are affected less than homicides involving other relationships. Similarly, when societal conditions make for a reduction in the incidence of homicide, the family rate changes less rapidly.

3. As a result of the relative stability of intra-family homicide compared to other victim-offender relationships, family homicides become a smaller proportion of the total when the homicide rate increases, and a larger proportion of the total when the overall homicide rate decreases.

4. Family homicides are relatively stable because certain characteristics of the family create a "floor" and a "ceiling" effect. These characteristics tend to be characteristic of all primary groups, and are epitomized in the family.

5. The family characteristics which create the floor and ceiling effects include a high level of conflict growing out of the organizational structure of the family, constraints against resolving these conflicts by leaving, and implicit cultural norms which tolerate a certain level intra-family violence, some of which becomes lethal.

Three hypotheses were derived from these propositions and tested using nine different data sets:

Ho 1: The lower the overall homicide rate, the higher the percentage of homicides which are within the family.

Ho 2: The "primary group lag" effect identified in Hypothesis 1 is greater for spouse homicides and infant homicides than for homicides involving other family relationships.

Ho 3: The primary group lag effect is weak or absent for homicides involving acquaintances.

All but one of the empirical tests supported the hypotheses. The consistency of the findings is remarkable given the diversity of the data and the fact that it covers both time-series and cross-sectional analysis, and that the cross-sectional analyses are replicated for four different

types of units: cities, metropolitan areas, and states of the United States, and nations (Canada and the United States).***

However, there are grounds for caution. First, we have not been able to formulate a plausible explanation for the finding that hypothesis 1 and 2 were not supported when gender-specific homicide rates were used in the cross-sectional analysis of US data. Second, it is important to note that the theory was not tested directly in the sense that no variable directly measuring one of the presumed primary group characteristics of the family was included in the empirical analysis. Consequently, although the hypothesis derived from the theory were strongly supported, and this increases confidence in the validity of the theory, it remains for future research to provide a more direct test of the theory.

Theoretical Contributions

The primary group lag theory is not intended as a comprehensive theory of primary group homicide. Rather it was developed to explain one specific aspect of homicide: society-to-society differences in the percentage of intra-family homicide. The theory seems to accomplish that limited objective remarkably well.

Another theoretical contribution is that the primary group lag theory integrates Verkko's "static law of female homicide," into a more comprehensive theory. The relative stability of female homicide rates seems to be a specific case of the primary group lag theory. Finally, the close fit of the empirical data to the hypotheses serves also supports the more general theory of intra-family violence (Hotaling and Straus, 1980; Gelles and Straus, 1979) which was the basis for identifying the characteristics of the family which make for a high level of conflict and violence.

Implications For Homicide Research

The findings have implications for other research on homicide. One of these is illustrated by a previous paper on infant homicide (Straus, 1987). That study tested models involving 22 independent variables--variables which, in combination, explain almost all the state-to-state variance in adult homicide rates. However, not a single one of these variables was significantly related to infant homicide. Thus, theories which explain adult homicide are powerless in the case of this particular aspect of intra-family homicide. The findings of that study and the present study indicate the need for a distinctive theoretical and empirical approach if we are to explain intra-family homicide.

This study also supports the those who hold that progress in research on homicide is more likely to occur if the practice of using a single overall homicide rate is avoided (Parker and Smith, 1979, Smith and Parker, 1980; Williams and Flewelling, 1986b). Rates that are specific to different social groups such as family role-specific rates, race-specific rates, gender-specific rates, and context-specific rates seem to be more likely to yield new insights about the etiology of homicide. At a minimum, the results of this study suggest that it is important to disaggregate the overall homicide rate, at least into the three broad categories of family, acquaintance and stranger because, a single overall rate is likely to attenuate relationships which might be clear if disaggregated rates were used.

Another methodological point suggested by this study is the possibility that some of the discrepancy between studies of homicide occur because of differences in the percentage of intra-family homicides in the geographic and historical source of the data used in those studies. If so, it again points to the importance of disaggregating the overall rate to produce more specific rates.

Policy Implications.

The findings of this study do not mean that societal characteristics such as poverty, urbanization, violent subcultural group norms, and social disorganization have no effect on intra-family homicide; only that these characteristics have less effect on family than on non-primary group homicides. Therefore, efforts to reduce the level of intra-family homicide cannot ignore these more general structural causes of homicide. On the other hand, the results of this study, and the experience of countries such as Denmark, suggest that even in a society which has succeeded in reducing the effect of these factors, and in virtually eliminating homicide, the relatively few remaining cases will tend to be within-family. Thus, reduction of intra-family violence also needs to be based on remedial actions which focus on the distinctive characteristics of the family which tend to engender violence within the family (including lethal violence) even in socio-cultural contexts which are otherwise relatively non-violent.*1*

FOOTNOTES

1. The terminology used in this paper is slightly different than that used by Parker and Smith (1979) and Smith and Parker (1980). They include all acquaintances in the "primary homicide" category, whereas in this article "primary group" is used to refer to relationships characterized by "intimate fact-to-face association and cooperation." (Cooley 1909: 23). Interaction of members of primary groups is based on extensive knowledge of the other person and mutual identification with the group. Obviously, many of the acquaintances whose murder was classified as "primary homicide" by Parker and Smith did not involve a primary group relationship.

2. Both the US and the Canadian time series statistics used in this paper differentiate familial relationships from those involving other acquaintances and from strangers. But within the "acquaintance" category, we do not know whether the victim and offender are members of any other type of primary group.

3. The term "violence" is used in such widely varying ways that, except in cases of homicide, it is essential for anyone writing on this topic to inform readers of the way in which the term is being used. For purposes of this paper, "violence" is used to refer to physical violence, defined as an act carried out with the intention of causing physical pain or injury to another person. Obviously, simply stating the definition does not address the difficult conceptual issues surrounding attempts to define and measure violence. These issues are covered in other papers; especially Gelles and Straus, 1979, which analyzes the concept of violence and related concepts; and Straus (1979), which is concerned with measurement of violence.

4. The necessity of discussing norms concerned with violence within a few paragraphs imposes language which suggests a monolithic normative structure. In fact, there are multiple, and often contradictory norms. See Gelles and Straus, 1979 for an explication.

5. I do not mean to imply that there are no grounds for concern about "criminalization" of intra-family activities. Indeed, the relationship between the state and the family is fraught with contradictions and dilemmas. On the one hand, the state has an interest in avoiding interference in family matters, and at the same time it has an interest in intervening to uphold normative standards. See Straus and Lincoln (1985) for a discussion of these issues.

6. A less direct but also important connection is what I have elsewhere termed "cultural spillover" but which a psychologist might identify as "generalization of effect" or mass behavior researchers might identify as a "contagion effect." See Baron, Straus, and Jaffee, (1987) for an explication of this theory, and its application to an empirical study of rape in the United States.

7. The public, of course, has the opposite impression because their knowledge of child abuse and wife beating is based on cases which are sufficiently outrageous to be featured in the press and on television. The typical case, however, is a child or a wife who is treated as no child or spouse should be treated, but who nevertheless does not require medical attention.

8. Economic factors might also provide part of the reason why intra-family homicide is frequent among people living in poverty. Specifically, the economic value of the husband is limited, and in many cases negative. The huge incidence of murder of black men by their wives (Plass and Straus, 1987) might have more than a coincidental relationship to the fact that the income of so many of these men is minimal and undependable.

9. The left side of the axis stops with the -1.0 to -1.5 category because there were no states more than 1.5 standard deviation below the mean, and the right side stops with the 2.0 to 2.5 category because no state had a homicide rate more than 2.5 standard deviations above the mean. The correlations in Table 1 were computed using the ungrouped rates, not the z score categories shown in Figure 1.

10. The discrepancy between the years for Canada and the US occurs because FBI did not begin publishing statistics on intra-family homicide until 1966.

11. Although the data are those shown in Figures 1 and 2 of Silverman and Kennedy, I am indebted to those authors for providing the data in tabular form because this avoids the risk of error which occurs when it is necessary to interpolate from a presentation type graph.

12. There are no published homicide mortality rates by age for the states of the United States. Consequently, the state-by-state rates were computed from the number of homicide deaths reported in the vital statistics Table 7-6, for 1975 through 1980. The deaths were summed for these six years and divided by the 1980 population age under 1, and 1-4, as given in the 1980 census. The sum of the six years was used because this produces a more reliable estimate of the rate, which would otherwise be subject to year-to-year fluctuations typical of rare events, especially for the low population states. Note that the mean of these state-by-state rates will differ from the published rates for the US for the following reasons: (1) The mean of the states disregards the fact states vary tremendously in population size. (2) The 1980 population of the appropriate age was used as the denominator to compute the rates, even though the homicides in the numerator are for 1975 through 1980. Since the population has been increasing, this means that the state-by-state rates reported in this paper are slightly underestimated. However, this is probably not an important problem because the purpose of the state-by-state rates in this paper is to compare states, and because approximately the same degree of underestimation occurs in the various states.

13. It is hard to determine that difference from Figure 5 because the vertical scales in Figures 4 and 5 were adjusted so as to be able to plot the overall homicide rate and the percent scores within the same graph. Specifically, the overall rate was multiplied by 10 for Figure 4, the male homicide rate in the upper right of Figure 5 was multiplied by 5, the

female rate in the upper left was multiplied by 50, the white rate in lower left was multiplied by 25, and the minority rate in the lower right of Figure 5 was multiplied by 2.

14. The left side of the axis stops with the -1.0 to -1.5 category because there were no states more than one standard deviation below the mean, and the right side stops with the 1.5 to 2.0 category because no state had a homicide rate more than 1.5 standard deviations above the mean. The correlation given in the previous paragraph was computed using the ungrouped rates, not the z score categories shown in Figure 4.

15. Recalculation of the data from Smith and Parker (1980) provides additional support for hypothesis 3. Their list of state data was used to compute the percent of "primary homicides." The correlation of this variable with the overall homicide rate was found to be .15, which is almost identical to the correlation given in Table 1 for acquaintance homicide (.16). See also footnote 1.

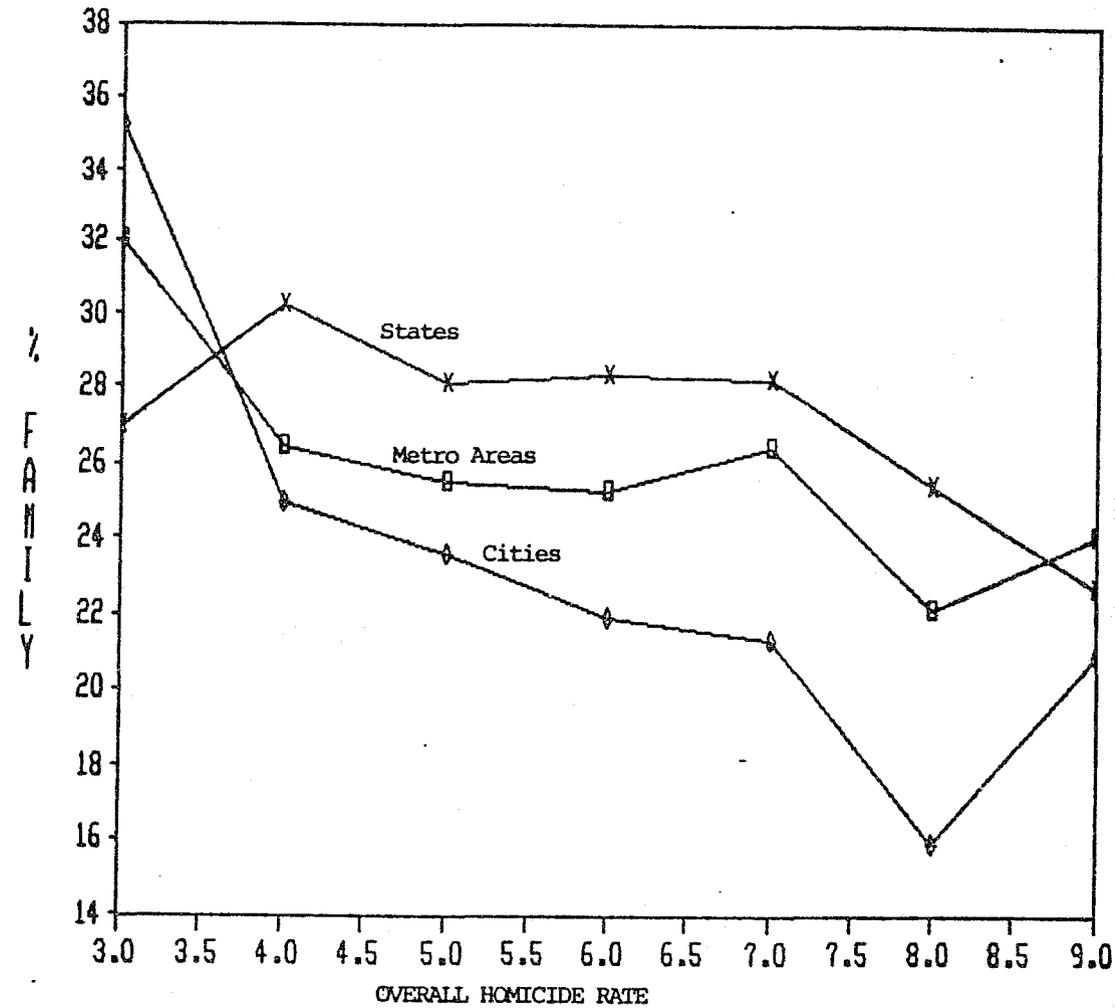
16. A number of these steps are described in my chapter on "A Sociological Perspective on the Prevention and Treatment of Wife-Beating" in Straus and Hotaling (1980).

Table 1. Correlation of Total Homicide Rate with Percent that the Intra-Family Homicide Rate is of the Total Homicide Rate, 1976-79 and 1980-84.

Period	Type of Homicide	Correlation of Total Rate with % Intra-Family For:		
		Cities	SMSA'S	States
1980-84	Intra-Family	-.34**	-.31**	-.35**
	Acquaintance	.04	-.01	-.23
	Stranger	.21	.21	.45**
1976-79	Intra-Family	-.27*	-.07	-.33**
	Acquaintance	.13	.12	.46**
	Stranger	.11	-.07	-.09

Figure 1.

Family % by Homicide Rate; USA, 1980-84



STEN

Figure 2.

CANADA 1A. HOMICIDE RATE & SPOUSE%, 1961-83

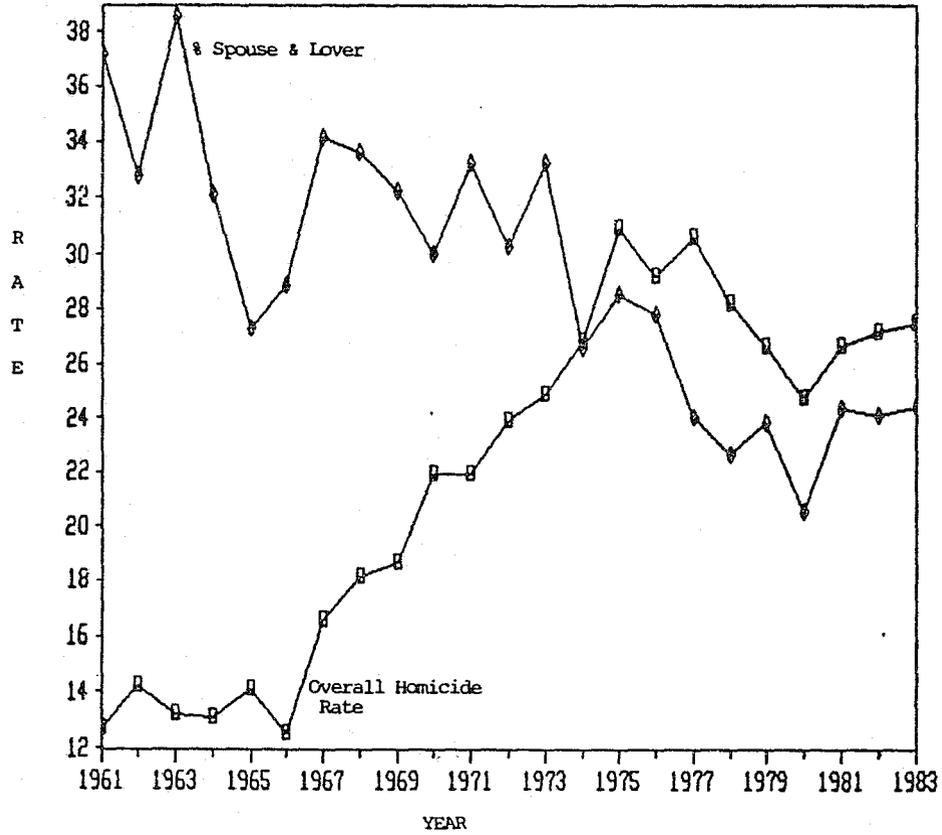


Figure 3.

Homicide Rate and Family % of Homicide USA

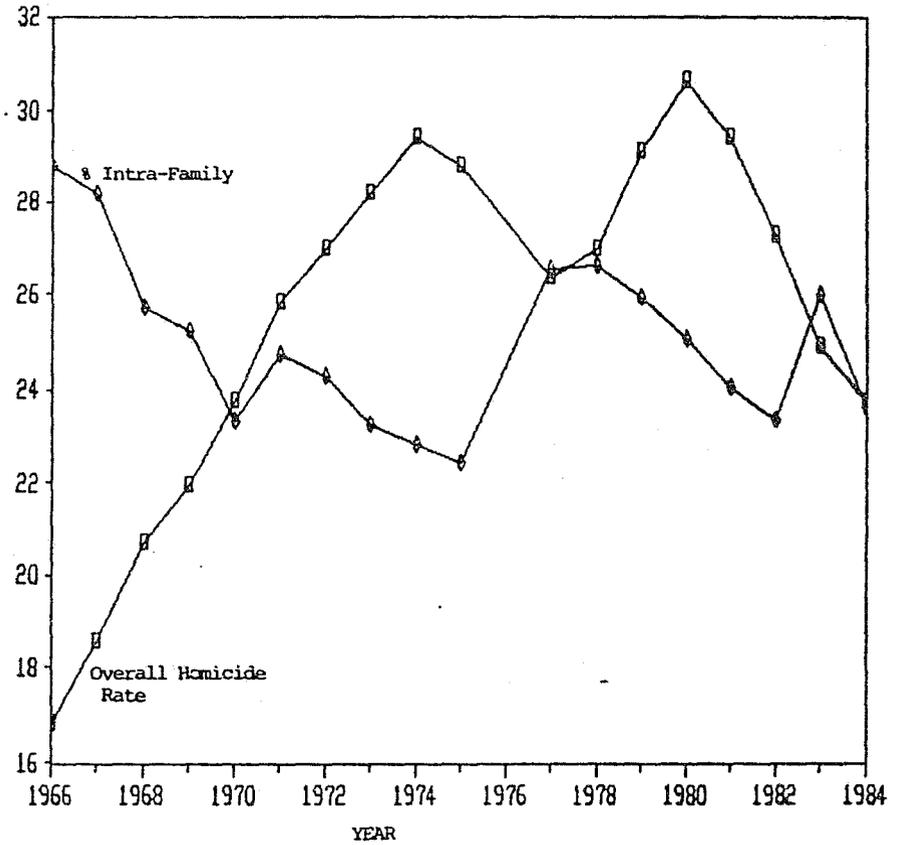


Figure 4.
Percent that Infants are of All Homicide Victims by Overall Homicide Rate

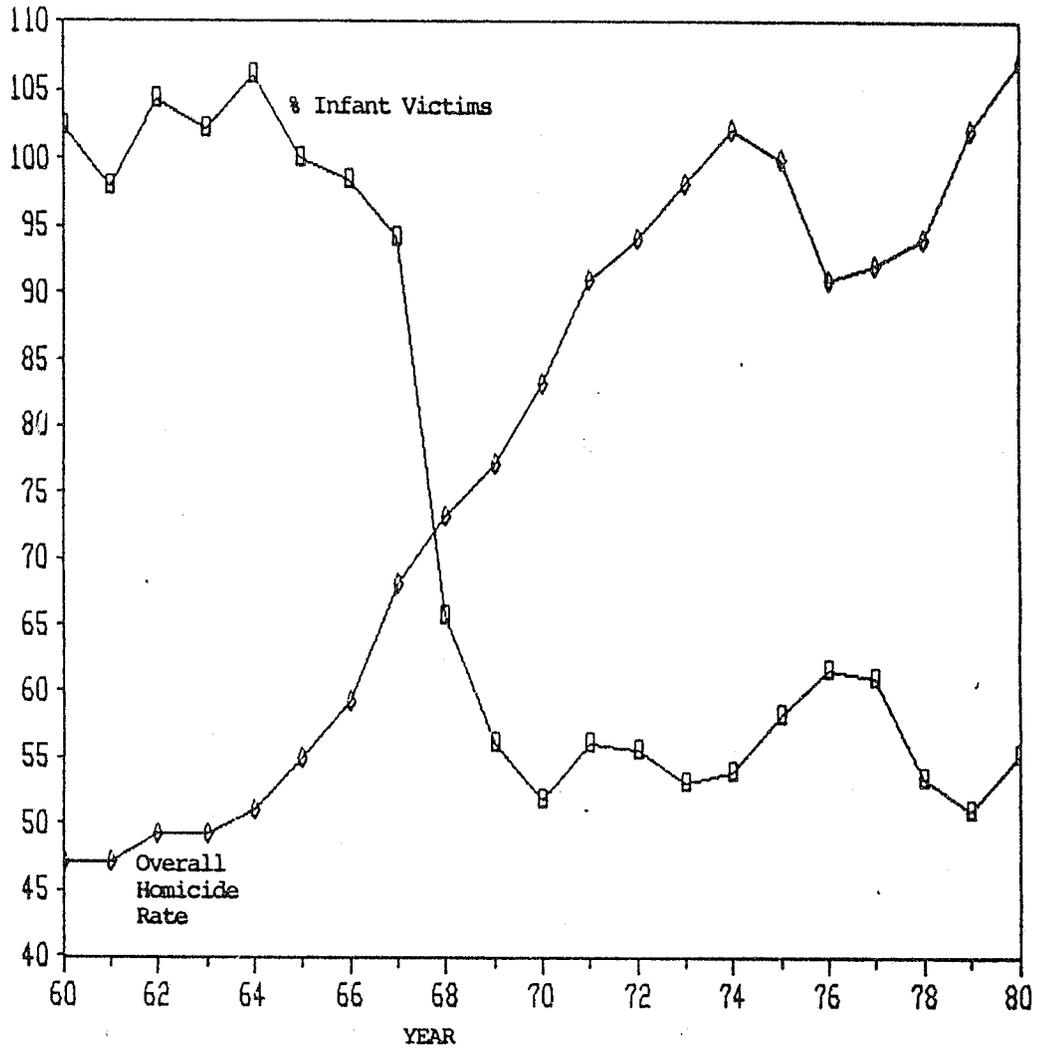


Figure 5.
Percent That Infants are of All Homicide Victims by Overall Homicide Rate,
Gender of Infant, and Race of Infant

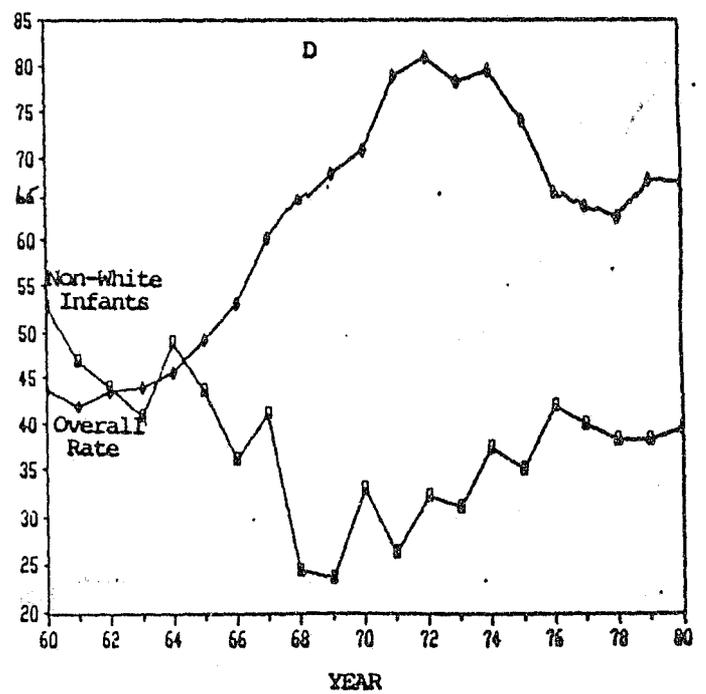
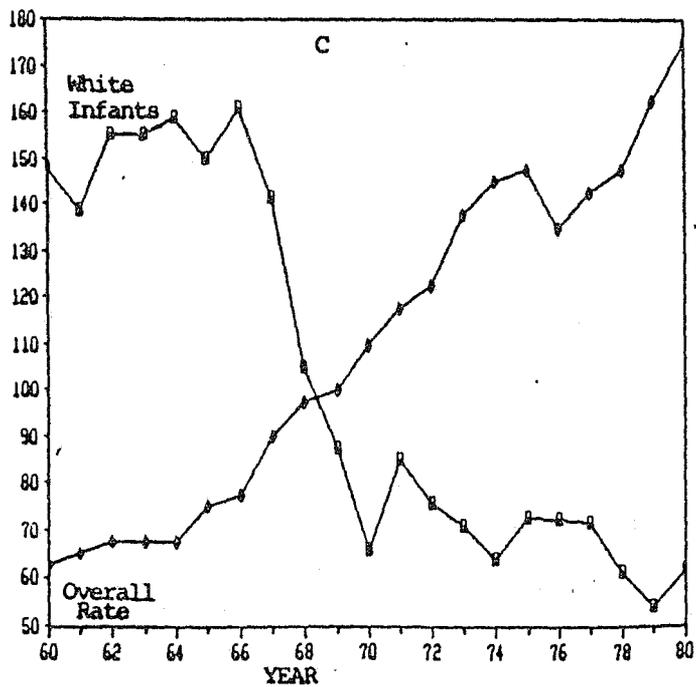
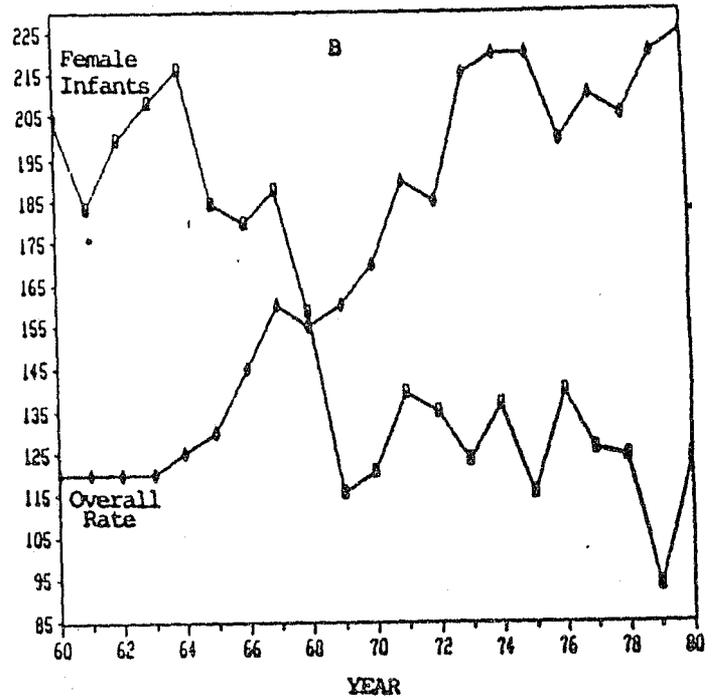
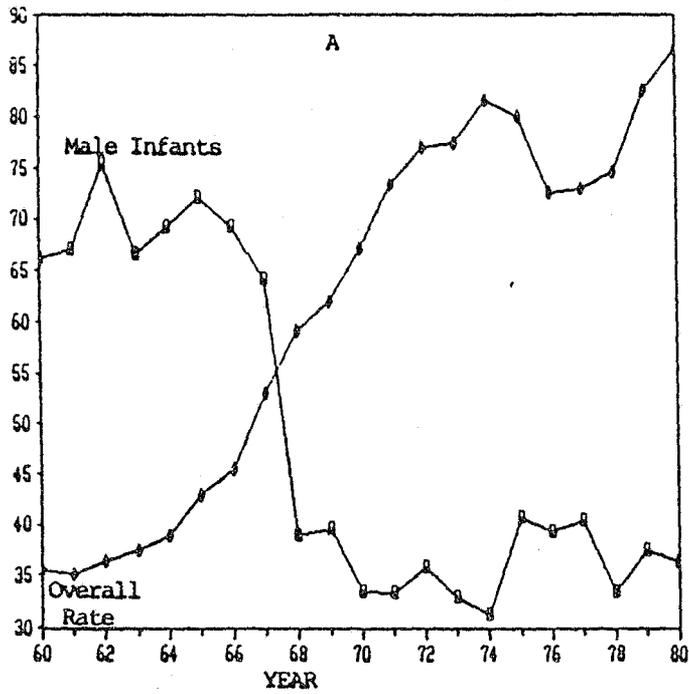


Figure 6.
Percent That Infant Homicide Rate is Of Overall Rate, 50 States, 1975-80

