

Population Heterogeneity and the Sociogenesis of Homicide*

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ABSTRACT

It has frequently been suggested that a high degree of social heterogeneity is conducive to a high rate of crime. This paper explores that hypothesis by providing an explicit statistical test of the relationship between a society's homicide rate and various measures of the ethnic, linguistic, religious, and economic heterogeneity of that society's population, using nation-states as units of observation. The results lend support to the theory that the interaction within a society of heterogeneous cultural groups tends to increase the rate of homicide. The empirical analysis controls for the effect on homicide rates of the age structure of the population, per capita GNP, urbanization, and population density; the results suggest that the first two of these factors are also important in explaining variations in homicide rates.

Rates of crime, particularly rates of violent crime, vary enormously among nations. In the popular mind such varying rates of crime are commonly attributed to relative differences in the heterogeneity of population.¹ Informal arguments to this effect have also been advanced by several researchers. For example, in comparing Japan's low crime rate to that of the United States, Bayley suggested that the substantial cultural homogeneity of the Japanese population has helped to establish a moral consensus in Japanese society, which in turn has enhanced the effectiveness of both formal and informal authority. Likewise Porterfield (b), commenting on crime in Finland, emphasized the considerable ethnic diversity of the nation's population. He concluded that, because of the stress that it creates, "this heterogeneity may well account for the fact that the nation as a whole has a higher than average rate of both suicide and homicide" (173).

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