

Social Changes and Their Effects on Homicide Rates

Journal article, "A Comparison of Changes in Police and General Homicides: 1930–1998," Robert Kaminski and Thomas Marvell, Criminology 40(1) (2002): 701–719.

Two researchers compared the rate of police officers killed in the line of duty to the rate of homicides among the general public. They wanted to determine if changes in the Nation's economic condition, prison population, or other major events over a 68-year period resulted in significant parallel effects on homicide rates. Robert Kaminski, with NIJ, and Thomas Marvell, with Justec Research, reviewed the number and rate of murders in the comparison groups (police officers and the general public) from 1930 to 1998 to determine if they shifted in similar fashion.

The researchers found that three separate factors in American society appeared to have the largest impact in reducing the number of police officers killed in the line of duty: declining inflation, economic growth, and increased prison populations.

The lowest homicide rate among police officers was recorded in 1943–44, when

the United States was fighting in World War II. Fifty officers were killed in 1941, compared to 33 in 1944. The researchers observed that during that war, any potential criminals serving in the military were probably partly incapacitated and thus less able to try to kill police officers.

These same factors also decreased public homicide rates, but the effects were generally smaller. For example, for each 1 percent added to the prison population between 1932 and 1998, police homicides declined by about 2.1 percent while total homicides dropped by 1.1 percent. The researchers also noted that the impact of growth in personal income was apparently larger in reducing police homicides than general homicides.

The researchers pointed out that the harder the economic times and the greater the economic uncertainty, the higher the murder rates were for both police officers and the general public. Following that trend, the highest police homicide rate was in the 1930's during the Great Depression. In contrast, when the economy was booming in 1998, the rate for police homicides was more than 80 percent lower than in 1930.

Explaining the Effects

Existing police homicide theories cannot explain why these factors caused greater decreases in police homicides compared to those among the general public. One possible explanation, though, is that these same variables could affect criminals' opportunity and motivation to commit murder. The researchers again cited the importance of incapacitation through imprisonment and military service. As noted earlier, the impact of factors such as the growth in the prison population was nearly twice as strong for police homicides.

Although police generally have more frequent contact with offenders than do members of the general public, providing more opportunities for officers to be killed, this fact by itself cannot explain the greater reductions in homicides among law enforcement officers. The researchers speculate that because criminals have more opportunities than the general public to assault police, the effect of their lack of availability—due to imprisonment or military service—on police homicides may be magnified. The authors suggest that opportunity factors, such as criminals' motivation and availability to commit crime, might help to explain the rate differences during the period studied, but they call for more research in this area.

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Correcting Past Research on Risk

Police homicide research in the 1990's found that the riskiest period per capita for officers in American history was during the 1970's. But based on analysis of new data compiled by the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund in 1998 and used in this study, it turns out that the highest rate of murders per capita among police officers was actually during the late 1920's and early 1930's, when Prohibition was in effect.

For more information

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