ARCHER
AND
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Violence & Crime in
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VIOLENCE AND CRIME IN CROSS-NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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For the future and, in particular,
for Zachary, Nathaniel, and Cameron

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COMPARATIVE EVIDENCE ON PATTERNS AND CAUSES OF CRIME

ONE

The Need for a Comparative Approach

This book is about crime and violence. What makes it unlike the very large number of studies of crime and violence already in existence is that it seeks to place these subjects in a cross-national perspective. The analyses and comparisons presented in this volume are based upon recorded patterns of crime and violence in 110 nations and 44 major international cities, covering the period from approximately 1900 to 1970. We call the data set upon which this project is based the Comparative Crime Data File (CCDF).

The plan of this work is straightforward. The creation and contents of the data archive are described in the first part of the book. In order to establish a context for later substantive chapters, these first chapters present a theoretical and methodological rationale for a cross-national approach to the study of crime and violence.

Chapters in part 2 attempt to use the CCDF to furnish some comparative insight into a series of specific questions about the pattern and etiology of violent crime. Some of these analyses center on questions which have lingered at the center of several social sciences for a considerable period. Others treat matters that have been untestable in the past. The final part presents the data set itself.

In preparing this work, we have attempted to serve four related ends: (1) to use our cross-national data to identify recurrent patterns in and some of the "causes" of violent crime; (2) to provide illustrative case studies of the kinds of investigation made possible by comparative research on violence; (3) to furnish a large data set of potential interest and value to investigators pursuing a wide range of emerging hypotheses; and (4) to present a series of admittedly rough guidelines intended to maximize the validity of future research designs in which these (and similar) comparative data can be employed.

THE NEED FOR A COMPARATIVE APPROACH

Research on crime and its causes has been lamentably insular. Systematic research on homicide, for example, has been limited to a handful of societies—chiefly the United States and Britain. The reason for this cul-

tural bias has not been a lack of interest. The need for a truly comparative approach to the study of crime and violence has been recognized at least since the Belgian statistician Adolphe Quetelet pioneered the collection of crime data in the 1830s.

Although comparative research on crime has been impeded by several analytic problems, described in a later chapter, the principal obstacle has not been methodological. The field has suffered from a spectacular lack of international information. Social scientists simply have not had access to adequate historical (or "time series") data on rates of homicide and other offenses in a large sample of societies. What has been missing, in short, is information from many nations over many years. Without such a cross-national data base, rigorous comparative research necessarily has been in short supply. As a result, our understanding of the nature and causes of homicide and other offenses remains provincial at best and, at worst, simply wrong.

Without knowledge of the experiences of other societies, we are greatly limited in our ability to anticipate the effects of changes within our own society. In the absence of a comparative record against which to evaluate specific policies, our own efforts to deal with crime and violence are guided by intuition, untested theories, and political expediency. A medical analogy may be appropriate: it is as if physicians in our society were attempting to prevent polio by means of a vitamin treatment while physicians in other societies had long before identified and used an effective vaccine.

The need for cross-national comparisons seems particularly acute for research on crime and violence since national differences on these phenomena are of a remarkable magnitude. In some societies, homicide is an hourly, highly visible, and therefore somewhat unexceptional cause of death. In other nations, homicides are so infrequent that, when they do occur, they receive national attention and lasting notoriety. The size of these differences invites examination and efforts at explanation. In most contemporary industrial nations, similarities outweigh differences on many dimensions: life expectancy, family size, literacy rates, and so forth. This is clearly not the case with violent crime. These differences also may have implications for efforts to influence offense rates. Since some societies appear to have escaped or minimized the costs of crime and violence, they may contain the answers to dilemmas which other societies are confronting with methods that are ineffective or even counterproductive.

Cross-national comparisons of crime and violence also can provide the empirical foundation for tests of theories about crime, law, demography, and social change. Tests using comparative records can add to our knowledge about the social origins of crime and violence. Although expla-

nations must exist for the dramatically high rates of violence in some societies and its near absence in others, these explanations are at present undeveloped and largely untestable. Despite some pioneering comparative efforts, our knowledge about the nature and causes of crime and violence remains disconcertingly provincial. It is possible, of course, that some of our conceptions about crime and violence will turn out to be well founded. Without rigorous cross-national comparisons, however, the generality of many propositions about crime and violence simply cannot be known.

An undesirably large part of existing research on crime and violence is grounded in the single case of the United States. In addition, research done outside the United States has frequently been done within the boundaries of a single society. The effects of these tendencies upon scientific rigor have been predictably limiting. The absence of comparative and longitudinal data on crime and violence has caused a proliferation of methods which are *known* to be of low analytic power and poor resistance to error. As an example, the field has been dominated by "cross-sectional" (i.e., nonlongitudinal) analyses. (The constraints inherent in this approach are described in some detail in chapter 3.) The empirical poverty and provincialism of the field has produced these formidable problems:

Generalization. It has been impossible to test the generality of a finding based on single-society research by means of replication in a sample of several societies. This has produced a scatter of single-nation observations, with little coherent notion of the degree to which they can be generalized.

Controlled Comparison. The absence of a sufficient number of cases (e.g., nations or cities) has hindered rigorous comparisons between those cases affected by some social change and "control" cases unaffected by the same change. Other types of controls are also of great potential importance—for instance, death penalty studies in which changes in homicide rates are compared to a control group of nonhomicide offenses. In general, adequate data for meaningful controls simply have not existed. This has precluded controlled or "quasi-experimental" comparisons, and researchers have had to settle for less powerful research designs.

Causal Inference. With longitudinal data unavailable, researchers have not been able to satisfy one of the classic requirements for making causal inferences: a temporal relationship among the variables under study. In the absence of continuous records on homicide and other offenses over time, it has not been possible to identify the factors which may precede changes in the rates of these offenses. This data scarcity has dictated the

widespread use of cross-sectional designs, and these comparisons can be misleading or meaningless.

Mediation and Intervening Variables. Without a reasonably large sample of nations, it is impossible to discover whether certain variables may mediate the effects of a social change. For example, worsening unemployment might increase homicide rates in one type of economic system but not in another. As a result, individual case studies may appear (perhaps incorrectly) to contradict one another. Without a large sample of societies, a general pattern that explains or orders these different outcomes will never be seen.

Methodological Uncertainty. Finally, without an archive of broadly comparative and longitudinal crime data, some key methodological issues have been largely uninvestigable. For example, it has not been possible to assess the reliability of different crime indicators like the number of "offenses known" or the number of "arrests" using data from a number of societies. While different indicators of the same offense almost certainly bear some relationship to one another, and to the actual incidence of the offense, these relationships have been the subject of much conjecture but inadequate scrutiny. Uncertainties of this kind have prompted a number of running debates about what types of research designs are justifiable given the nature of crime data. In the absence of appropriate test data, these debates have remained largely theoretical.

In summary, the absence of a versatile, reasonably general record of cross-national data on crime and violence has impoverished both policy and science. In the arena of policy, we appear unable to discern the "causes" of crime and incapable of predicting the effects of specific policies. The absence of comparative data has also created a ceiling on the scientific progress of the disciplines which address crime and violence, including sociology, economics, political science, psychology, anthropology, and of course criminology.

Specific illustrations of these problems are, unfortunately, not difficult to find. For example, it has been suspected for centuries that wars might somehow produce a postwar increase in violent crime. As will be seen in chapter 4, this hypothesis dates back at least to the time of Erasmus, More, and Machiavelli. In the absence of cross-national and historical records on rates of homicide and other crimes, however, investigations of this hypothesis have been limited to isolated case studies such as the experience of a single nation after a single war. For example, the eminent criminologist Hermann Mannheim in 1941 published an entire book on the effects of war. Solely on the basis of the English experience after World War I, Mannheim concluded that wars did not produce postwar "waves" of homicide.

This conclusion, which appears to have been premature, provides an excellent illustration of the need for a comparative approach. Mannheim was evidently misled by generalizing from a single nation's experience—an experience which, unknown to him, was idiosyncratic. In most of the social sciences, a sample size as small as a single case is regarded as highly problematic. In research on crime and its causes, however, a sample size of one has been the rule rather than the exception. Without a larger sample of societies, it has not been possible to test the limits of generalization—just as Mannheim could not have known that the English case was atypical.

As a second example, consider the well-known but still curious phenomenon of urban crime rates. Using comparisons of large and small U.S. cities in a single year, researchers have established that larger cities have dramatically higher homicide rates. This conclusion has become one of the most generally accepted "findings" about violent crime. Virtually every criminology textbook dutifully reports that a city's absolute size is an excellent predictor of its homicide rate. Whether or not this assertion is generally true, it is a rather remarkable instance of ethnocentrism in that it rests almost exclusively on American data; the effect of city size on homicide rates in other societies remains largely uninvestigated. Chapter 5 addresses this matter in some detail.

The subject of urban crime rates also contains an intriguing paradox. Even if it proves to be the case that larger cities *always* have higher homicide rates than smaller cities, can this difference be attributed to the absolute size of the larger cities? There is little conclusive historical evidence that urban homicide rates have increased as the cities have grown in size. This suggests the following paradox: How can the allegedly high homicide rates of large cities be explained if *not* by the growth of these cities from small to large size? The reason for our continuing ignorance on this question is again the frustrating absence of rich historical data on homicide in a broad cross-section of societies. What one would like to have in order to explore this paradox of urban crime is a cross-national file of historical data for large cities in many societies.

A third example is the "deterrence hypothesis"—the idea that specific qualities of criminal penalties (such as the certainty or severity of punishment) will affect whether or not an offense is committed. A classic instance concerns the deterrent value, if any, of the death penalty and this question is the focus of chapter 6. Many studies of this question have been severely flawed in design or limited in scope and, as a result, the effects of capital punishment remain disputed. Some researchers have made direct comparisons of the homicide rates of two states, one with the death penalty and one without it. Such cross-sectional comparisons cannot inform us about the longitudinal effects of imposing or abolishing

the death penalty. Similarly, most deterrence studies have been confined to a single society. There are several complex issues inherent in any test of criminal deterrence but, as indicated in chapter 6, the presence of homicide data from a sample of societies can enable a researcher to construct previously impossible comparisons as a test of this important question.

There are many other areas in which our knowledge about homicide and crime generally is both deficient and culture-bound. Some of these areas are of fundamental importance both to scholars and to public policy makers. Here are a few examples of such unanswered or unexamined questions:

1. How do fluctuations in unemployment affect rates of homicide and other offenses?
2. How do major economic events such as recessions and depressions influence the incidence of specific offenses? If economic events do appear to affect crime rates, are the effects the same in capitalist and noncapitalist societies?
3. Are major social changes such as revolutions or coups d'état foreshadowed or followed by increases in acts of "private" violence?
4. The argument is sometimes made that all industrial societies have undergone dramatic crime rate increases. Are there any nations with *declining* rates of homicide and other crimes in the twentieth century?
5. What is the relationship between judicial or legislative change and crime rates? For instance, have changes in rules regarding admissible testimony resulted in changes in the reported incidence of rape?
6. Can cross-national data help us to gauge, or even predict, the likely consequences of specific changes in policy or law? For example, what crime rate changes, if any, have occurred in societies which have abolished (or reinstated) the death penalty for capital offenses?
7. Despite much speculation about the "causes" of crime, one suspects that different crimes may have quite different causes. Are crime "waves" uniform across all types of offenses, or do the rates of some offenses consistently increase at the same time that others decline?
8. Do changes in the extent of gun ownership in a society have an effect upon the rates of violent crimes? Do changes in the laws relating to weapons ownership have a discernible effect upon crime rates?
9. Since societies presumably vary in their incidence of violent crime, what are the patterns of this variation? For example, do "frontier" societies have high rates of violent crime? Do societies with relatively egalitarian distributions of wealth have low rates of property crime?

10. What are the effects of major demographic events? For example, what happens to a society's crime rates as the shape of its demographic "pyramid" changes—for example, as a "baby boom" population enters (or passes out of) young adulthood?

THE COMPARATIVE CRIME DATA FILE (CCDF)

Having charted a brief overview of this volume, it may be appropriate to confess that the scope and nature of this project have evolved in ways that were entirely unanticipated. At the outset, it was not our intent to create a cross-national data set like the CCDF. Instead, we had planned to locate and use an existing comparative data file to test a specific hypothesis concerning the effect of wars upon domestic violent crime rates in postwar societies. We then discovered that a comprehensive cross-national data file on rates of homicide and other offenses did not exist. With some trepidation, we decided to see if one could be created.

In 1972, we set out to assemble a cross-national file of longitudinal data on rates of homicide and four other offenses. The resulting archive, which we have called the Comparative Crime Data File (CCDF), now contains data on up to five offenses for 110 nations and 44 major international cities between the years 1900 and approximately 1970.

It soon became clear that the data archive we had assembled had research potential much greater than the particular question which had prompted its creation. The historical depth and comparative breadth of the CCDF exceeded even our most optimistic expectations. In the past few years, we have tried to use the records in the CCDF to address a number of classic and contemporary questions about the patterns and antecedents of violent crime. The results of these inquiries are presented in this volume.

Apart from the unique substantive concerns of these individual studies, it has been our hope that they could provide illustrations of the potential analytic power of the comparative approach which data like those in the CCDF can make possible. Although our own analyses are certain to contain limits of their own, we have attempted to illustrate the relative advantages of a data-rich, comparative approach to the study of crime and violence. As we conceive it, this approach seeks to combine distinctive features of the *scientific method* (controlled comparison, longitudinal analysis, replication, data quality control, etc.) with the principal objectives of *comparative analysis* (the search for cross-national consistencies, sensitivity to both patterns and exceptional cases, and an effort to explain cross-national differences).

Having outlined a project of such sweeping scope, it is perhaps prudent to add a few cautious qualifications. Some of these have to do with the nature and contents of the CCDF. First, although our cross-national data file begins in 1900, many of the records are discontinuous, and others exist only for more recent periods. Second, as a great many scholars have learned (sometimes to their considerable chagrin), societies vary—sometimes incommensurably—in the ways in which they define, act upon, and record the different behaviors included under the same crime label. For the unwary researcher, these differences pose a veritable methodological quicksand, and one must try to understand the limits of different types of comparison or lapse into serious error. For example, although simple comparisons across nations are extremely tempting, they are often of questionable value and murky methodological rigor.

Each of these concerns poses formidable problems which will be discussed in later chapters. With appropriate caution, some of these problems are readily solvable while others defy solution by all imaginable means. Throughout this project, one of our most important premises has been that while some cross-national comparisons clearly have meaning, there are some that do not.

The data file reproduced in part 3 can assist researchers in testing an almost infinite variety of hypotheses about crime and violence. With the file, we have included a parsimonious guide that lists the contents (years of data, time period covered, and specific offense categories) of each national and urban entry in the CCDF. One of our objectives has been to try to identify optimal research designs in terms of their resistance or immunity to various methodological problems. These issues and some pragmatic cautions to guide users of the CCDF are discussed in detail in chapter 3.

Some of the topics treated in this volume, such as the questions examined in chapter 3, are devoted to basic findings about the CCDF itself. These issues are internal to the data set and concern the methodological properties of rates of homicide and other offenses, matters of central interest to researchers of crime and violence. Other chapters reflect preliminary efforts to use the CCDF to examine more general questions—for example, the effect of various types of social change on a nation's rate of homicide. These studies are partly external to the CCDF, since they attempt to relate other variables to the crime data, but none could have been undertaken without the CCDF.

In each study, we have tried to be guided by a kind of "methodological parsimony." In each case, we have tried to answer a research question using the most widely understood, least esoteric method available. We believe that this strategy imposes the fewest restrictions on potential readers and users of the CCDF. This may be of particular importance