

**The Trajectories of Lethal Violence: Analysing Long-Term Homicide Trends in England and Wales.**

Authors:

Dr. Emily Gray, (Corresponding Author) University of Warwick, Department of Sociology.  
[emily.gray@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:emily.gray@warwick.ac.uk)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2240-2783>

Professor Stephen Farrall, University of Nottingham, Faculty of Social Sciences  
[Stephen.Farrall@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:Stephen.Farrall@nottingham.ac.uk)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9783-4447>

Professor Andromachi Tseloni, Nottingham Trent University, School of Social Sciences.  
[andromachi.tseloni@ntu.ac.uk](mailto:andromachi.tseloni@ntu.ac.uk)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6443-7012>

**Abstract:** This review critically examines long-term trends of lethal violence in England and Wales. Notably, the timing, character, and distribution of the homicide ‘drop’ here deviates from trends observed in other forms of violence and comparable jurisdictions. Drawing on extensive research and multi-decade data from the Homicide Index (1977–2020), this review explores key theoretical frameworks, disaggregates offender and victim profiles, and investigates the structural, cultural, and interpersonal factors shaping lethal violence. Particular attention is given to the gendered and racialised dimensions of homicide, the increasing proportion of unsolved cases, and the importance of developing bespoke models. The review identifies critical data gaps, especially around ethnicity, and outlines priorities for future research. It argues for recognising homicide as a distinct phenomenon in England and Wales, requiring tailored theoretical and empirical attention.

**KEYWORDS:** Homicide; Violence; England and Wales; Longitudinal Analysis; Gender; Ethnicity

## **1. Introduction**

Homicide constitutes an alarming but infrequent event in England and Wales. While cross-national comparisons are complicated, homicide rates in this jurisdiction fall below the global average (8.5 per million population in 2023/24, ONS, 2025a). Still, lethal violence has profound and enduring consequences for all affected; it is unambiguously deemed the most serious crime since no recovery is possible, secondary victimisation among family and friends can be extensive (Rock, 1998; Hammond et al., 2023), and the estimated economic cost of each homicide in England and Wales is £3.2 million (Heeks et al., 2018). Communally, homicide has the potential to undermine public trust and erode a sense security in both public and private spheres (Krug et al, 2002; Green, 2008; Magliacane, 2021).

It is well established that homicide rates began declining in industrialised nations across continental Europe, the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Eisner, 2014; Tuttle et al., 2018; Tcherni-Buzzeo, 2019). The decline was unexpected and arguably remains under-theorised within the criminological literature (Aebi and Linde, 2014; Suonpää et al., 2022). Scholars have proposed various explanations for the reduction, comprising shifts in population demographics (e.g., aging populations – Santos et al, 2019), adjustments in criminal justice policies (e.g., mass incarceration, Levitt, 2004), improvements in medical interventions (Humphreys et al., 2019), changes in drug markets (Ousey and Lee, 2007) and transformations in routine activities and lifestyles (Farrell, 2013). However, drawing country-specific conclusions about these theories has been hindered by several key factors: i) the overwhelming empirical focus on the United States - where firearm usage differs markedly from other nations, ii) an emphasis on aggregated homicide rates that overlooks homicide subtypes (Skott, 2019), and iii) methodological constraints and insufficient data that prevent more rigorous comparative analysis.

Curiously, although the homicide rate in England and Wales declined, the reduction did not occur until 2004 - nearly a decade after other Western countries (Miles and Buehler, 2020). Moreover, it was almost a decade after the decline of other forms of violent crime, recorded by the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW- a national victimisation survey), which reached a peak in 1995 (ONS, 2025b). These different temporal patterns point to the importance of investigating the specific social, institutional, and historical factors shaping homicide trends in England and Wales.

This review commences by outlining the scope of homicide in England and Wales before critically engaging with the theoretical literature and considering its relevance to the region. We then examine the empirical research alongside multi-decade data analysis from the Homicide Index (1977–2020). We trace the long-term trajectories of lethal violence and interrogate their underlying drivers. The conclusion identifies key priorities for future research.

## **2. Homicide in England and Wales: Definition and Scope**

In England and Wales, homicide is a legal category that encompasses various forms of unlawful killing, including murder, manslaughter, infanticide, and corporate manslaughter. Each offence is defined by distinct legal criteria; murder entails an intentional act to kill or inflict grievous bodily harm. Manslaughter encompasses both voluntary and involuntary forms, with the former involving diminished responsibility, provocation, or a suicide pact, and the latter arising from negligence or unlawful acts lacking intent to kill. Infanticide applies to cases where a mother, influenced by postpartum mental ill-health, causes the death of her infant. Corporate manslaughter, by contrast, pertains to organisations deemed criminally liable for fatalities resulting from gross negligence in their duty of care.

Historical analyses suggest that homicide rates in England and Wales experienced a slow but steady decline from the Middle Ages until the 1960s, punctuated by intermittent spikes. This was followed by a prolonged increase over the next forty years, peaking in 2004, before entering a renewed downward trend that aligned with broader international patterns (Gurr, 1981; Soothill and Francis, 2012; Brookman et al., 2017). Then, since 2014, homicide rates have risen again - a trend scholars attribute to the increase in knife-related crime among young men (Miles and Buehler, 2022).

The UK government has raised alarm about contemporary upsurges in both lethal and non-lethal violence (Home Office, 2016). Yet, despite these concerns, homicide in England and Wales has not been subject to systematic scrutiny by either government agencies or academia (Brookman, 2010). While notable studies have examined epoch-spanning homicide trends (i.e. Eisner, 2003), the field has been criticised for insufficiently addressing the homicide decline of the early 21st century, failing to engage with the more recent increase, and demonstrating a reluctance to develop both theoretical and empirical approaches to the subject (Ellis, 2019).

### **3. Data Sources for Exploring Homicide in England and Wales.**

There are multiple data sources for examining homicide trends in England and Wales, each offering distinct advantages and limitations. The Home Office Homicide Index (established in 1977) provides the most detailed, case-based insights, while historical databases, such as Eisner's (2014), offer long-term trend analyses. Recorded crime statistics present a consistent modern record of homicide incidents dating back to 1898, whereas death certification data provide an alternative perspective, drawing on medical records rather than police classifications.

#### **3.1 Homicide Index**

The Homicide Index is a 'live' dataset and is refined as new evidence emerges and court proceedings conclude. It represents one of the most comprehensive case-based records of homicide internationally. Its analytical potential grew after 1997 when further variables were added. It captures:

- Socio-demographic characteristics of victims and suspects
- Methods of killing
- Victim-offender relationships
- Aggravating factors, such as alcohol intoxication, gang involvement, and drug market dynamics
- Geographic location

### **3.2. Recorded Crime Statistics**

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) compiles recorded crime statistics (including homicide) dating back to 1898, when approximately 300 homicides were recorded annually. These statistics serve as a high-level indicator of homicide trends but lack the granular detail available in the Homicide Index.

### **3.3 Death Certification Data**

Death certification data is based on medical evidence rather than police classifications. Fatalities are coded using the International Classification of Diseases (ICD), primarily E960–E969 (homicide) and E988.8 (injury by other or unspecified means). Derived from coroner reports and medical examinations, this dataset is valuable when police accounts are ambiguous.

### **3.4 Manuel Eisner’s History of Homicide Database**

Criminologist and historian Manuel Eisner compiled a historical homicide dataset across multiple jurisdictions in the History of Homicide Database (Eisner, 2003; 2014). It synthesises estimates from studies from Europe, including England and Wales from the medieval period to the 21st century. It includes;

- Victim and perpetrator characteristics
- Social class distinctions in homicide trends
- Geographic variations in homicide rates over time

## **4 Theorising Homicide: Perspectives on Causes and Patterns Over Time**

This section outlines the key theoretical perspectives that seek to explain individual homicide events, as well as those aimed at understanding trends over time and across countries. It critically examines the extent to which these theories, often developed overseas, are capable of accounting for patterns of homicide in England and Wales.

### **4.1 Civilising Explanations**

One of the foremost perspectives on global homicide trends originates from German sociologist Norbet Elias and his theory of a ‘civilising process’ (1978). While it was Weber (1956) who argued that market economies would reduce violence between individuals, Elias’ work (1978) is credited with applying this logic to longer-term patterns of violent crime. Elias hypothesised that, over time, societies have demonstrated an increasing intolerance of violence, alongside an emergent capacity for self-restraint. These changes, he argued, impacted macro-level trends in violence, by prompting a pacification of society (Aebi and Linde 2014). In a similar vein, Lacey (2016) noted that from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the legal concept of ‘criminal responsibility’ in England signalled mounting concern about an offender’s capacity for ‘self-control’ and ‘self-regulation’.

Historical analysis has generally supported Elias’ theory; homicide rates in industrialised societies declined from the early-Middle Ages into the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Gurr 1981; Osterberg 1996; Spierenburg 1996). Eisner (2003) traced homicide trends from the 13<sup>th</sup> century, drawing on data for England and wider Europe and noted prolonged declines in homicide rates “often seemed to coincide with periods of rapid expansion and stabilisation of state structures” (2001:630). Nevertheless, Farrell (2013) has stressed the theory cannot account for short-wave rises or explain how sub-populations are variously affected.

#### **4.2 Everyday Routines**

Drawing on explanations informed by lifestyle perspectives, routine activities theory (Cohen and Felson, 1979; Felson, 1998) posits that changing patterns of crime can be understood in relation to reconfigurations of everyday life. Lifestyle factors, such as age, gender, and ethnicity have frequently been emphasised in the literature on homicide (Hindelang et al., 1978). Providing support for this framework, Miles and Buehler (2020) argued that the dynamics of violent crime may have been reshaped by advancements in both targeted crime prevention and medical treatments. Measures such as staggered pub closing times, increased policing of nightlife areas, and the expanded use of CCTV - initiated by the Home Office - are examples of situational crime prevention strategies (Zedner, 2007). At the same time, improvements in hospital emergency response and trauma care may have reduced the likelihood that serious assaults resulted in fatalities (Harris et al., 2002). As Lehti (2014) notes, such developments underscore the importance of analysing homicide trends in tandem with patterns of non-lethal violence.

A further example was identified by Morgan et al. (2020) who observed that in the mid-1960s the 'British System' of managing an individual’s heroin addiction - where general practitioners prescribed diamorphine to addicts - was rescinded (Dennis, 2020). An uptick in homicide rates quickly followed. Then, in the 1980s, the drug trade in England and Wales became increasingly embedded in organised crime, contributing to a further rise in male-on-male killings (Dorn et al., 2002).

However, lifestyle and routine theories struggle to account for recent spikes in youth-on-youth homicides in England and Wales. The shift from public to virtual modes of social interaction -

which one might assume would reduce opportunities for violent encounters - has, somewhat paradoxically, coincided with increases in youth violence (Aebi and Linde, 2014; Farrell, Tilley and Tseloni, 2014). Taken together, these studies highlight both convergences and divergences with the assumptions of lifestyle theories. While they offer useful insights into broad long-term trends, they prove less effective in explaining fluctuations embedded within these patterns.

#### **4.3 Individual-level Theories of Homicide**

Given that most homicides are often committed by individuals acting alone, theories that link individual-level traits to offending behaviour may appear compelling. For example, Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) argue that certain personal characteristics, such as biological (i.e. testosterone levels, intelligence) or psychological traits (i.e. antisocial behaviours) can predispose individuals to violence. Research has supported this view, highlighting the role of criminal propensity, impulsivity, and low self-control in explaining violent behaviour (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990; Moffitt, 1993, 2013; Jolliffe and Farrington, 2004). However, there is a lack of data that can connect these factors at the population level to changes in national homicide rates (Lafree, 1999). Moreover, individual characteristics and capacities do not operate in isolation. As Eisner (2014) notes, the ability to exercise self-control, is also shaped by contextual conditions, such as access to alcohol and illegal substances.

Relatedly, and echoing the civilising process theories discussed above, Cooney and Patterson (2023) attribute the historical decline in homicide (1250–1750) to the increasing ‘individualisation of society’. As communal institutions (i.e. families, occupational guilds) waned, conflicts shifted from collective to personal domains, resulting in fewer group-based and honour-driven confrontations. In short, the emergence of more individualised forms of conflict may help account for the long-term decline in homicide.

#### **4.4 Situated Transaction Theory**

Luckenbill’s Situated Transaction Theory (1977), draws on interactional sociology (Goffman, 1967) and conceptualises homicide as the product of a dynamic ‘transaction’ between offenders, victims, and, at times, third parties. Here, the process of decision making is crucial, as insults, dishonesty or threats can spark a succession of actions that culminates in violence, to defend honour, reputation, or achieve retribution (Luckenbill, 1977).

What is distinctive about this theory is its emphasis on the roles played by victims and third parties. Such dynamics may be further influenced by alcohol or drugs, which can heighten aggression and/or impair an individual’s capacity for self-defence (Wolfgang, 1957). Although there is little evidence of situational factors shaping homicide trends, in England and Wales or internationally - policymakers have called for further research on the inhibitors of lethal violence, particularly among individuals who come close to killing but ultimately refrain.

#### **4.5 Economic and Structural Theories**

Structural perspectives illuminate forces such as capitalism, economic dislocation, and inequality in generating higher rates of homicide. Two strands of this tradition are conflict theories and institutional anomie theory. Contrary to those who argue that market economies will become less violent over time, conflict theorists (Taylor, Walton, and Young 1973; Chambliss 1976; Bohm 1982) maintain that capitalist economies are inherently criminogenic; as income disparities between the rich and poor widen, values such as greed, selfishness, and aggression become more acceptable (Quinney, 1977).

A more recent development building on this tradition is institutional anomie theory. Messner and Rosenfeld (1994) argue that crime is more likely to flourish in societies where the economy supplants social institutions such as families and communities. In these contexts, economic values - particularly the pursuit of material success - permeate other social institutions, weakening their capacity for social control. Messner and Rosenfeld (1997) and Rosenfeld (2009) have examined this theory with data from America (see also Savolainen, 2000; Batton and Jensen, 2002), but maintain the model has broader application.

When we examine these theoretical traditions for England and Wales, there is credible evidence of a correlation between economic stress and homicide. Exploring two decades of data Dorling (2006) discovered that the most economically deprived areas had the highest homicide rates, a trend the ONS confirmed persisted in 2024 (ONS, 2024). However, as Morgan et al. (2020) note, this relationship is not fixed. Historically, periods of economic growth in England and Wales have at times coincided with increases in homicide, while some economic downturns have not prompted a corresponding rise in lethal violence. This suggests a non-linear relationship in which economic factors play a role, but are insufficient on their own to account for fluctuations in homicide rates. McCall and Brauer (2014) likewise observed these complexities in a 16-year cross-European analysis of welfare retrenchment and homicide rates. They concluded that an impact on homicide rates was detectable, but the effects were lagged by several years, highlighting the slow-moving nature of such influences and the need for nuanced, longitudinal statistical modelling.

#### **4.6 Summary: Theorising Homicide in England and Wales.**

Reviewing theories of lethal violence, one appreciates that homicide, particularly when examined over centuries, is a heterogeneous and temporally sensitive phenomenon. In England and Wales, as in other jurisdictions, this complexity challenges attempts to interpret trends within a single, unified framework. From certain perspectives or points in time, theoretical models are compelling, while at others they lose their explanatory power. We have also come to understand homicide as a crime with multiple and interconnecting trajectories. For example, specific features of homicide overlap (i.e. the presence of alcohol and decision-making) which if not recognised might oversimplify our conceptual clarity (Dobash and Dobash 1979; 2020). While there are distinct era-spanning trends in homicide rates - associated with aspects of social progress and social change - there are also periodic instabilities that require discrete analysis (Pinker, 2011).

Empirical support for theoretical explanations of homicide in England and Wales is still lacking, not least because of the low rates in the region. The theories explored above were often conceived with US data/thinking (Farrell 2013), and as a result, there is substantial disagreement about what has driven contemporary homicide trends in England and Wales (Caneppele and Aebi 2017). The few studies which have utilised data from England and Wales have typically been i) limited to descriptive and univariate analysis and ii) overlooked the intersections between sex, age and homicide subtypes.

## **5 Homicide in Context: Offenders, Victims, and Their Interpersonal Ties in England and Wales**

This section will review recent empirical evidence on lethal violence in England and Wales. We will trace existing research, accompanied by multi-decade data from the Homicide Index (1977–2020).

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### **5.1 Lethal and Non-lethal Violence**

We begin by examining the top-line trend in lethal violence for England and Wales, drawing on data from the Homicide Index (Figure 1).<sup>1</sup> Given that homicide is a relatively low-incidence crime, short-term fluctuations are readily apparent. Nevertheless, a broader trend is discernible: a gradual increase in the homicide rate from 1977 through to the early 2000s, followed by a sustained decline beginning 2004, lasting for approximately a decade. From around 2015 however, the data indicate a renewed upward trajectory.

FIGURE ONE ABOUT HERE

The significance of Figure 1 is especially evident when considered alongside broader trends in violent crime in England and Wales. Figure 2 for presents estimates for non-lethal violence (distinguishing wounding, and assault with and without minor injury) from the CSEW 1981-2019/20.<sup>2</sup> This graph demonstrates that non-lethal violence peaked sharply around 1995, before a long and sustained decline. This pattern parallels trends in overall crime (excluding homicide) in England and Wales (ONS, 2025), and reflects the substantial downward shifts in crime observed across the Global North, which became known as ‘the crime drop’ (Blumstein and Wallman, 2000; Rosenfeld and Messner, 2009; Farrell et al, 2010; Tseloni et al, 2010). The ‘drop’ was first studied in the United States, where violent offences - including homicide

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<sup>1</sup> These figures exclude corporate manslaughter and mass-incidents due to the exceptionally low numbers, recording delays, and their potential to distort long-term trends. Following Home Office practice, the focus is on routine rather than exceptional events (Morgan et al, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> First conducted in 1982, the CSEW is a victimisation survey. It moved to an annual collection from 2001. The survey is representative of i) residential households in England and Wales, and ii) adults (aged 16 years and over) living in those households.

- simultaneously fell during the 1990s, prompting significant scholarly inquiry and widespread media attention (Zimring, 2007).

Contemporary trends reveal that homicide in England and Wales has followed a separate trajectory from other forms of violence. This divergence poses challenges to explanations of the ‘crime drop’ - such as routine activities (Felson, 1998), the security hypothesis (Farrell et al., 2011), and demographic fluctuations (Santos et al., 2019) - which can only partially explain shifts in homicide rates. Clearly, homicide should be recognised as both empirically and analytically distinct from non-lethal violence, potentially warranting its own theoretical framework. In England and Wales homicide is not exclusively the extreme end of a violence continuum.

FIGURE TWO ABOUT HERE

## **5.2 Shifting Patterns of Homicide Offenders**

### **5.2.1 No Suspects Found**

A significant emerging trend in England and Wales is the growing proportion of homicide cases in which no suspect is identified. Drawing on the Homicide Index between 1977 and the early 1990s, the proportion of homicide victims without an identified suspect remained stable at around 5%. From the early 2000s however, this figure rose sharply, reaching around 20% by 2016 and continuing at that level. While the Homicide Index is subject to continual update, which may retrospectively reduce these figures (as suspects are detected and convicted) the wider trajectory points to a growing proportion of unresolved homicide cases. Unsurprisingly, these results raise concerns about the capacity of the criminal justice system - particularly the police forces in England and Wales - to deliver accountability in the most serious of crimes, with potential implications for public confidence (House of Lords Library, 2023).

### **5.2.2 Gender**

Studies focusing on homicide offenders in England and Wales point to a set of unambiguous findings. Morgan et al (2020) reports that since the introduction of the Homicide Index in 1977, 81% of homicides over the following 40 years involved male suspects. The authors further note that from 1980 male-on-male homicides rose and exerted a driving influence on overall homicide trends (Morgan et al, 2020) (See also Figure 4). Globally, the role of male offenders in shaping homicide rates is well established; according to the United Nations, approximately 90% of individuals formally identified as suspects in intentional homicides in 2021 were male—a pattern that was consistent across 50 countries (UNODC, 2023).

Examining the distribution of offenders within the Homicide Index, by age and gender we can distinguish *which* male offenders dominate the trends in England and Wales. Specifically, young men aged 18–24 are the key demographic advancing the upward momentum,

particularly after the early 1990s - a period which conversely overlaps with the height and subsequent decline of overall crime rates. The highpoint in homicide that occurred around 2004 appears to be largely driven by this 18–24-year-old cohort, whose rates increase more sharply than others. These findings highlight the importance of disaggregating offending patterns and call for a deeper interrogation of distinct socio-demographic trajectories (Miles and Buehler, 2020).

Female homicide offenders represent a consistently small proportion of offences. Even the most prolific female sub-group (aged 18–24) is surpassed by juvenile males (aged 10–17), both in absolute terms and in rates per 100,000 population. Certainly, these patterns not only highlight the profoundly gendered dynamics of lethal violence, but also compel a more critical, gender-informed analysis of the structural and situational factors that produce such divergent trajectories (Condry and Miles, 2022; Femicide Census, 2025).

### **5.2.3 Juvenile Homicide Offending**

A further notable feature of recent trends is the increasing rate of homicides committed by male children (under 18). While juvenile homicides are rare overall, in the early 2000s the combined rate for males and females (per 100k of the population) began to rise and reached a high of 1.75 in 2007, compared to an average of .7 between 1977-1999. These cases are often notable for the deep public response they provoke, not least the killing of two-year-old James Bulger by ten-year-olds Jon Venables and Robert Thompson in 1993. This event triggered intense media coverage, international scrutiny and marked a defining step-change youth justice policy (Hay, 1995; Green, 2008). Nevertheless, juvenile homicide in England and Wales has arguably remained under-researched, due to its low incidence and the separation of youth and adult justice systems. Drawing on ten years of Homicide Index data (2010–2020), Condry et al. (2023) found that over 95% of juvenile homicide perpetrators were male, with male victims similarly over-represented within this subgroup. The analysis also revealed a disproportionate representation of Black individuals among both juvenile perpetrators and victims. The authors argue that juvenile homicide constitutes an empirically and theoretically distinct category from adult homicide, warranting dedicated scholarly attention and tailored policy and institutional responses (Condry et al, 2023).

### **5.2.4 Criminal Histories of Homicide Offenders**

Previous research has established that homicide offenders in England and Wales often have varied offending histories, with many holding prior convictions for violent crimes (Soothill et al., 2002; Dobash et al., 2007; Farrington et al., 2012). Offences, such as blackmail, kidnapping, and threats to kill, have been linked to a heightened risk of future homicide (Soothill et al., 2002; Farrington et al., 2012). However, these relationships differ according to the homicide-population studied (i.e. intimate partner, gang-related). In light of concerns about homicides committed by known offenders, the Home Office has, since 1997, recorded suspects' prior convictions, violent histories, and bail status in the Homicide Index. More recently, HM Inspectorate of Probation has also tracked homicides and serious violent or sexual

offences committed by individuals under probation supervision through its Serious Further Offences Annual (since 2022).

### **5.2.5 Joint Enterprise**

Legal and ethical debates over secondary liability in violent crime have intensified, particularly in relation to the doctrine of ‘joint enterprise’ in England and Wales. Rooted in medieval common law, the doctrine permits the conviction of all participants in an offence, even where only one individual committed the principal act. The expansive use of this legislation from around 2007 (Justice Committee, 2012), particularly in gang-related prosecutions in urban centres such as London, Manchester, and Liverpool, led to sustained criticism and legal challenges (i.e. *R v Jogee* 2016). During a House of Commons debate in 2018, it was estimated that at least 4500 adults and children had been detained or sentenced for crimes that ‘they did not commit’ (Hansard, 2018). Legal scholars have also noted the enduring discriminatory and racialised application of this doctrine (Carvalho, 2022; Mills et al, 2022).

### **5.2.6. Bystanders**

Research on bystanders in street-based violence in North-West England suggests that third-party interventions often contribute to the de-escalation of aggression, with the likelihood of such interventions increasing in larger group settings (Levine et al., 2011). In line with Collins (2008) findings in the United States, this analysis supports the view that socialisation processes can, under certain conditions, inhibit violent behaviour. Still, contrasting evidence from Levin (1999), based on a study of bystander responses during an English murder trial, indicates that when observers were informed of a familial relationship between the parties involved, they were less inclined to intervene. This suggests that familial ties may act as a deterrent to bystander intervention, posing challenges for the prevention of violence within domestic or kin-based contexts.

## **5.3 Homicide Victims**

### **5.3.1 The Gender Divide**

A long-term analysis of homicide victims in England and Wales reveals two distinct trajectories. Between 1960 and 1980, rates increased across all categories, including male-on-female violence, child victims, and sexually motivated homicides (Morgan et al., 2020). In the decades that followed, these trends altered considerably, particularly in relation to victim-gender. Figure 3, which presents gender-specific victimisation rates from the Homicide Index (1977–2020), shows that while male and female victimisation rates were initially similar, a clear divergence emerged from the mid-1980s. Male victimisation rates rose disproportionately, marked by volatility and peaks in the mid-1990s, early 2000s, and 2017.

In contrast, female homicide victimisation rates have followed a relatively stable downward trajectory since the 1980s, with only minor fluctuations. Notably, these trends have received limited empirical or theoretical attention. Their decline may partly reflect broader social change, such as shifts in domestic norms, increased gender equality and improved institutional responses to domestic violence (e.g. legal protections and support services). Conversely, the rise and volatility in male victimisation suggest a different constellation of explanatory factors. These might encompass patterns of criminality, constructions of masculinity, and the structural tensions shaping the lives of successive male cohorts. Indeed, research points to the influence of illicit drug markets (Schifano and Corkery, 2008; Miles and Buehler, 2020), the availability of weapons (Hales et al., 2006), and the disproportionate exposure of marginalised Black communities to lethal violence. Notably, in 2023, Black males accounted for 19.8% of all homicide victims, despite Black individuals comprising just 4% of the population of England and Wales at the time of the 2021 Census (ONS, 2022).

FIGURE THREE ABOUT HERE

### **5.3.2 Hidden Ethnicities**

Kumar et al. (2020), in their analysis of two decades of ONS data for England and Wales, identified significant and evolving racial disparities in homicide victimisation. They estimated that, between 2000 and 2019, homicide rates among Black victims were consistently 2 to 8 times higher than those among the White population, whose rates remained low and stable. Asian homicide victimisation rates also remained stable but were approximately twice as high as those for the White population. In a subsequent study focusing exclusively on London, Kumar et al. (2022) found comparable patterns but also highlighted that Black female victimisation was disproportionately high. Poignantly, in both publications (2020; 2022), the authors emphasised that official statistics, based on raw victim counts rather than standardised rates per 100,000 population, often obscured racial disparities in homicide. This methodological choice, they argued, diminished public awareness and concealed the scale of under-policing relative to victimisation risk.

Certainly, researchers motivated to explore long-term and intersectional trends among ethnic groups are restricted by the lack of historical ethnic population estimates for England and Wales. While the Census has collected data on country of birth and nationality since 1841, ethnicity was only introduced as a demographic category in 1991, with the adoption of a seven-category classification system (Cabinet Office, 2019). Ethnic data thus remain a relatively recent analytical resource. Moreover, the Homicide Index only began recording the ethnicity of victims and suspects in 1997, further restricting the ability to analyse racial disparities in homicide trends over the longer term.

Acknowledging these limitations, the Homicide Index demonstrates that Black individuals were over six times more likely than expected to be homicide victims in 2001, with substantial overrepresentation persisting in 2011 and 2021. Asian individuals were modestly overrepresented in 2001, but their victimisation rate was broadly proportionate to their

population share in 2011 and 2021. White individuals were consistently underrepresented across all three census years. While limited in scope and granularity, these findings align with prior research (Kumar et al., 2020, 2022) and highlight the ongoing racial disparities in homicide victimisation—disparities that remain largely absent from mainstream public discourse.

### **5.3.3 Deprivation and Spatial Distribution**

Homicide victimisation in England and Wales has been closely aligned with regional deprivation (McDonald, 1976; Pridemore, 2011; Chopra et al, 2022). Dorling (2008) examined UK death certification between 1981–2000 and found that while homicide rates doubled nationally from 1980 to 2000, this rise was disproportionately concentrated in poorer areas. Relatedly, the geographical distribution of homicides has undergone prominent shifts in recent decades. Research suggests that the decline in homicide rates after 2004 was largely driven by a reduction in public-space killings, particularly in urban centres such as London and Greater Manchester (Miles and Buehler, 2020).

Nevertheless, the relationship between location and lethal violence is complex (Soothill and Francis, 2012). While homicide victimisation is disproportionately concentrated in deprived areas (Morgan et al, 2020), its temporal trends remain inconsistent. Fluctuations in economic conditions do not reliably correspond with shifts in homicide rates for example. Morgan et al, (2020) also note that gangs are more prevalent in deprived areas and may contribute to elevated homicide levels beyond the direct effects of deprivation. Finally, a significant gender disparity is evident: in the least deprived areas, male and female victimisation rates are comparable, whereas in the most deprived areas, male homicide rates are markedly higher (Morgan et al, 2020).

### **5.3.4 Victim-Offender Overlap**

As increasingly acknowledged in both academic (McAlinden, 2014; Van Gelder et al., 2015) and practitioner-oriented literature (Sandal et al., 2018), the political framings of victimhood and offending often obscure the considerable overlap between these categories. Studies have consistently shown that a significant proportion of homicide victims have prior convictions for violence (Wolfgang, 1958; Sampson and Lauritsen, 1990; Ezell and Tanner-Smith, 2009). This victim–offender convergence is not limited to lethal violence but extends across various categories of offending (Farrall and Maltby, 2003). In response, the Home Office began recording whether homicide victims were gang-affiliated or linked to ‘county lines’ activity in the Homicide Index from 2021. ‘County lines’ refers to a drug distribution model where urban dealers expand into rural areas, often exploiting vulnerable individuals (i.e. children and drug users) who may be coerced into trafficking and involved in practices such as ‘cuckooing’ local residences (Coomber and Moyle, 2017). Emerging evidence indicates that the expansion of

county lines networks into new areas is associated with increases in recorded violence, including homicide (Morgan et al., 2020).

#### **5.4 Gender and Interpersonal Violence**

Homicides in England and Wales increasingly involve individuals known to one another, with domestic violence and lethal family violence remaining significant factors (Miles et al., 2022; NSPCC, 2024). This is particularly evident in child homicides, where parents or stepparents were the most common perpetrators, accounting for 43% of cases in 2024 (ONS, 2025). Allen and Mansfield (2023) found that, in cases where the victim-offender relationship was established, 40% of male homicide victims were killed by someone they knew.

Drawing on data from the Homicide Index, we can chart the gendered dynamics between victims and offenders over time (Figure 4). These longitudinal patterns reveal that the gradual, yet sustained, decline in femicide since the 1980s (see Figure 3) has been largely driven by reductions in male-perpetrated violence against women. Notwithstanding this overall decline, the interpersonal nature of lethal violence against women has exhibited striking continuity. From 1977 to 2020, the proportion of female victims killed by an intimate partner or family member has remained relatively stable - a continuity that, as Dobash and Dobash (1979) argue, reflects a longstanding and deeply entrenched pattern of gendered violence extending back over a century.

FIGURE FOUR ABOUT HERE

Meanwhile, Figure 4 shows that the rise and volatility in male victimisation over time is largely attributable to increases in male-on-male homicide. Then, in contrast to the relative stability of femicide's interpersonal affiliation, male homicide exhibits greater variability in victim-offender relationships, with a predominance of killings involving acquaintances and strangers. This signals an emphasis away from the domestic sphere toward more public, situational, or spontaneous forms of violence among males. The findings underscore the need for differentiated theoretical models that are attentive not only to structural drivers, but also to the gendered social practices through which lethal violence is (re)produced.

### **6 Homicide Trends in England and Wales: Contextual Circumstances.**

Homicide patterns are shaped by a combination of temporal, cultural, and situational factors. Elements such as firearm availability, alcohol consumption, illicit drug markets, and demographic shifts have variously played a role in influencing i) homicide rates and ii) the theoretical frameworks developed to explain them. This section considers how these contextual dynamics have manifested in England and Wales.

#### **6.1 Firearms, Methods and Homicide Trends**

While firearm availability is a key factor in explaining cross-national differences in homicide rates, its role in shaping temporal fluctuations within individual countries is comparatively

limited (van Dijk, Tseloni, and Farrell, 2012). In England and Wales, gun-related homicides are rare; the Home Office tracks data on offences involving weapons (as recorded by police and hospital episode statistics). In 2021 they estimated that 35 homicides involved a gun - accounting for 6% of all homicides, a proportion that has remained relatively stable over time (Allen and Burton, 2022). By contrast, in the United States, firearms were implicated in approximately 79% of homicides in 2023, among the highest percentages since 1968, and more than half (58%) of all suicides in the same year involved a firearm (Pew Research Center, 2025).

Examining longer-term data through the Homicide Index uncovers the pronounced gendered pattern of firearm-related homicides in England and Wales. Between 1997 and 2020, 85% of gun-shot victims were male ( $n = 1,180$ ), stressing the strong association between gun violence and male-on-male conflict. While the presence of firearms clearly exacerbates the lethality of violent encounters, sharp instruments (i.e. knives), as well as 'blunt' instruments remain the predominant weapon in homicides in the region. Since 1977 the Homicide Index has recorded the method of killing, although the classification system remains relatively crude and is compromised by a degree of missing and 'unknown' data. Among cases with available data ( $n=26,153$ ), the most frequently recorded methods between 1977 and 2020 include: (1) poisoning (including drug-related deaths), (2) blunt instruments, (3) manual strangulation, (4) kicking or hitting without a weapon, and (5) sharp instruments. These categories illustrate a broad typology of lethal violence, encompassing both physically immediate and instrumentally mediated forms of homicide.

## **6.2 Alcohol and Homicide**

Historically, strong correlations have been observed between alcohol consumption and homicide (Bye, 2008; Eisner, 2014). More recently however, fatal assaults between young men outside pubs and bars in England and Wales have declined, suggesting that increased socialisation in private spaces, alongside other lifestyle changes, have played a key role (Miles and Buehler, 2020). This interpretation would also align with Eisner's (2001; 2008) theory that links shifting homicide patterns to broader adjustments in cultural norms, particularly expectations around male behaviour in public spaces (cf. Aebi and Linde, 2014).

Supplementing a sub-sample of Homicide Index data with psychiatric reports and individual clinical data, Shaw et al (2006) found that 42% of homicide perpetrators had a history of alcohol misuse. Similarly, Miles (2012) conducted one of the most comprehensive analyses of intoxication-related homicide, drawing on the Homicide Index, police case files, and offender interviews between 1995-2005. The Homicide Index records identified only 18% of perpetrators as intoxicated at the time of the offence, however police reports and interview data pointed to a substantially higher figure. Alcohol or a combination of alcohol and drugs was implicated in approximately two-thirds of the sample examined. The study also highlighted a frequent socio-demographic profile: both perpetrators and victims were predominantly young, white, economically disadvantaged men with histories of alcohol misuse and early life

instability, situating intoxication within a broader pattern of structural and biographical risk factors.

These findings emphasise two issues; first, although the Homicide Index has included data on the alcohol levels of both victims and suspects since 1997, the usefulness of this information is limited by patchy recording practices, incompleteness, and other forms of missingness (c.f. Shaw et al, 2006; Miles, 2012). Second, the findings above re-open longstanding debates about the relationship between alcohol and homicide. Specifically, whether it operates as a causal factor, or a proxy for broader social harms—such as mental ill-health, poverty, or cultural norms surrounding masculinity and intoxication.

### **6.3 Illicit Drugs and Lethal Violence**

There is substantial evidence linking drug markets to violence and homicide. Goldstein (1985) proposed a tripartite framework identifying three key pathways: homicide may result directly from an individual's drug use; occur in the context of economically motivated crime to obtain drugs or the profits of dealing; or arise through territorial disputes. In the UK, drug markets expanded significantly in the 1960s and 1980s, the latter of which was characterised by profit-driven street gangs and organised crime networks. A similar trajectory was observed in the United States, where the crack cocaine epidemic of the 1980s was associated with a sharp rise in urban homicide (Blumstein, 1995).

More recently, Hopkins et al. (2012) estimated that homicides linked to organised drug networks were rare in England and Wales, accounting for approximately 2.4% of total homicides in 2005/6. However, both Hopkins et al. (2012) and de Bont et al. (2018) have stressed the challenges in monitoring drug markets and organised crime-related homicides. Inconsistent data collection practices and definitional ambiguities hinder accurate assessments of the scale and nature of the issue, which has limited the development of an evidence-base.

As with alcohol, variables relating to illicit drugs involvement in the Homicide Index are methodologically limited and often missing. However, the scope of these drug-related indicators is broader, capturing multiple dimensions. They include whether the victim was a drug user or intoxicated at the time, whether the suspect was motivated by the acquisition of drugs or drug-profits, and whether the homicide was linked to drug markets, organised crime, or 'county lines'—a more recent distribution model (see above). Introduced incrementally in 1997, 2007, and 2021, these variables enhance the potential for detailed analysis of drug-related violence but remain limited for long-term trend analysis. Additionally, the evolving nature of drug markets necessitates a critical appraisal of the consistency, reliability, and interpretation of these data (Coomber and Moyle, 2018).

### **6.4 Divorce Rates and Homicide**

An initially persuasive theory emerged in both the United States and England and Wales, suggesting a positive relationship between divorce and homicide rates (Parker et al, 1999;

Messner et al., 2011). Across various regions and time periods, rising divorce rates appeared to correspond with increases in homicide. Several explanations were proposed, including weakened social cohesion, economic instability, and shifts in family structures, yet no single framework achieved a broad consensus (Morgan et al, 2020).

Similarly, relationship breakdown and divorce were identified as factors associated with homicides in a case study of Domestic Homicide Reviews in England (Benbow, 2018).<sup>3</sup> Conversely, conducting a meta-analysis, Amato (2000) found that divorce could - in some cases - improve outcomes for individuals within violent family environments, by providing an escape from domestic violence and chronic dysfunction.

Contemporary research suggests that the relationship between divorce and homicide is more contextually contingent than previously understood. For example, the homicide rates in England and Wales began to rise after 2014, although divorce rates remained relatively stable during this period (Morgan et al., 2020). Moreover, the relationship between divorce and homicide is likely mediated by intersecting factors such as gender, age, and class, particularly in cases of femicide, which are frequently embedded in interpersonal and familial violence.

## **7. Summarising Long Term Homicide Trends in England and Wales.**

Our review reveals a set of complex and divergent patterns of lethal violence in England and Wales. Although there has been a general decline in homicide that mirrors trends in other industrialised nations, the timing and character of this decline have been notably distinct. In England and Wales, the ‘drop’ in homicide occurred almost a decade later than in i) comparable nations and ii) the significant decline observed in other forms of inter-personal violence, as measured by the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW). Moreover, the decline has not been evenly distributed across the population, as certain groups, often young men, have experienced increased levels of violence.

These asynchronies highlight the empirical and theoretical uniqueness of homicide in England and Wales. Homicide here follows a unique trajectory, requires regionally-specific analysis and cannot be understood as solely the extreme indicator of a violence continuum. Rather, homicide is a heterogeneous phenomenon that both reflects and reproduces existing social inequalities. This is especially evident among young men, Black individuals and those living in economically disadvantaged communities, who face rising rates of victimisation and an increasing prevalence of unsolved cases.

At the same time, we can identify a gradual but consistent decline in male-on-female homicide in terms of volume, which is perhaps the positive outcome of considerable institutional and cultural efforts. Nevertheless, the gendered nature of lethal violence persists, with approximately two-thirds of female victims killed by intimate partners or family members.

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<sup>3</sup> Statutory ‘Domestic Homicide Reviews’ came into force in 2011 in the UK. They are multi-agency reviews that examine the circumstances surrounding a domestic homicide.

Patriarchal violence continues to pose a lethal risk to women and girls, despite overall reductions.

Theoretically, research on homicide has often been filtered through frameworks developed in other nations, particularly the United States. These ideas may be valuable, but they also struggle to account for the distinctive patterns observed in England and Wales. As a result, there remains a significant gap in our understanding of lethal violence in this setting, and these blind spots are further exacerbated by critical data deficiencies—especially regarding ethnicity and other axes of social vulnerability.

## **7.1 Future Research Directions**

Looking ahead, there are substantial (and inspiring) opportunities for researchers to tackle these knowledge gaps. Future work should focus on the development of bespoke explanatory models, investment in richer longitudinal models, and a willingness to explore both long and short-term shifts. As further data becomes available, it will be possible to conduct more sensitive analysis relating to ethnicity, the victim–offender overlap and wider intersectional questions. As demonstrated in this review, homicide data can be effectively supplemented with additional data sources. For example, more sophisticated models could draw on national datasets—such as the Households Below Average Income (HBAI) Survey (to explore links between material living standards and homicide); enable comparative analyses with non-lethal violence using police-recorded crime or CSEW data; and incorporate structural indicators such as employment rates, prison rates, GDP, or relational factors like divorce and abortion rates.

Finally, with reliable and integrated data sources, opportunities for methodological innovation can emerge. For example, statistical approaches that incorporate interaction effects, or the generational dimensions of violence, such as age–period–cohort (APC) analysis (e.g. Santos et al., 2021; Luo and Hodges, 2020). Politically informed longitudinal modelling (cf. Farrall and Gray, 2024) similarly offers promising directions. These approaches would facilitate a means to understand homicide not merely as an individual-level event, but as a barometer of deeper structural, cultural, and institutional dynamics.

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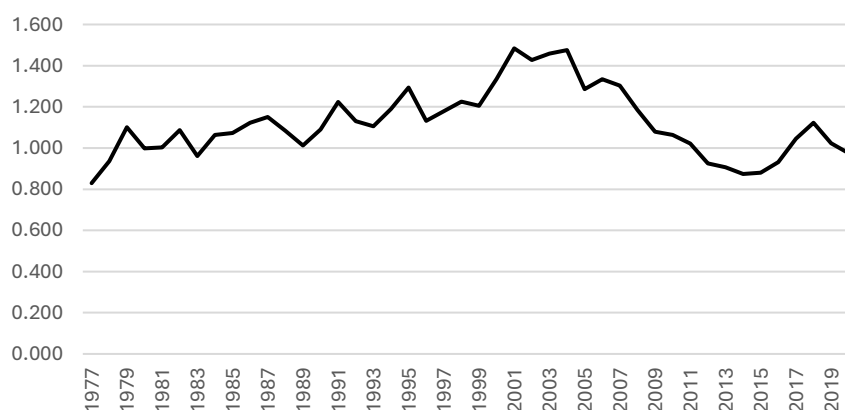
### Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge the support of the ESRC (as award number ES/ESRC - ES/X000575/1) in enabling our research on long term homicide trends.

### SIDEBAR:

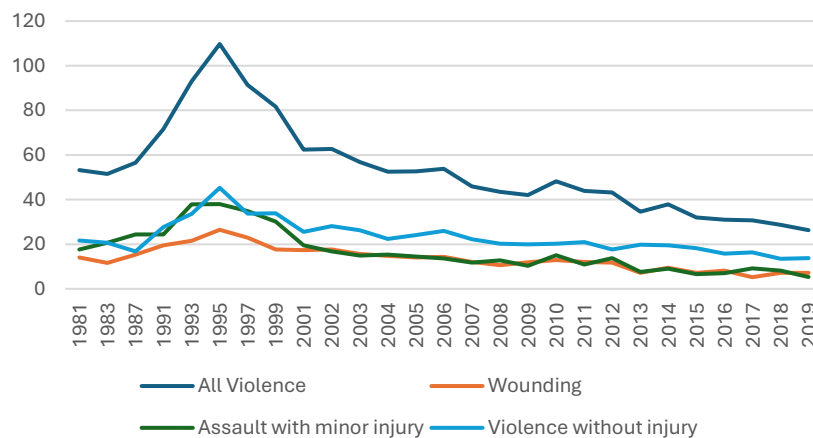
**Reporting Rates:** Homicide rates are typically calculated as the number of killings per 100,000 of the population. Reporting rates at the relevant population level allows for fair comparisons across different regions and periods by accounting for population size. This approach helps identify genuine trends, enables meaningful international comparisons, and provides a clearer context for public dissemination.

**Figure 1 Homicide Trend England and Wales 1977-2020 (rate, per 100k population). Homicide Index.**



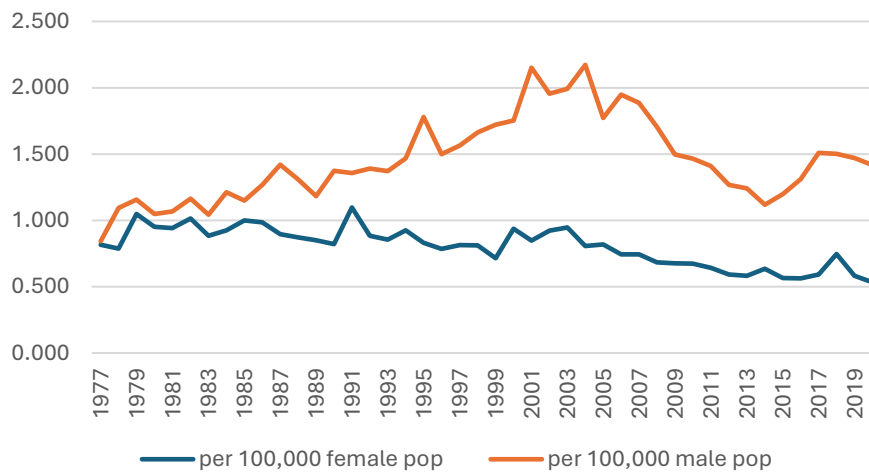
**Annotation:** This is a simple one-line graph plotting homicide trends over time (rate per 100k of the population). The data is taken from the Homicide Index. The Y-axis plots the homicide rate, while the X axis plots each year between 1977-2020. It demonstrates an uneven but steady upward trajectory from 1977-2001, it remains high till around 2004, before reducing consistently for a decade. It peaks once more, but sharply in 2017 and quickly declines.

**Figure 2 Violent Crime Trends 1981-2019/20 (rate, per 1k population over 16). CSEW.**



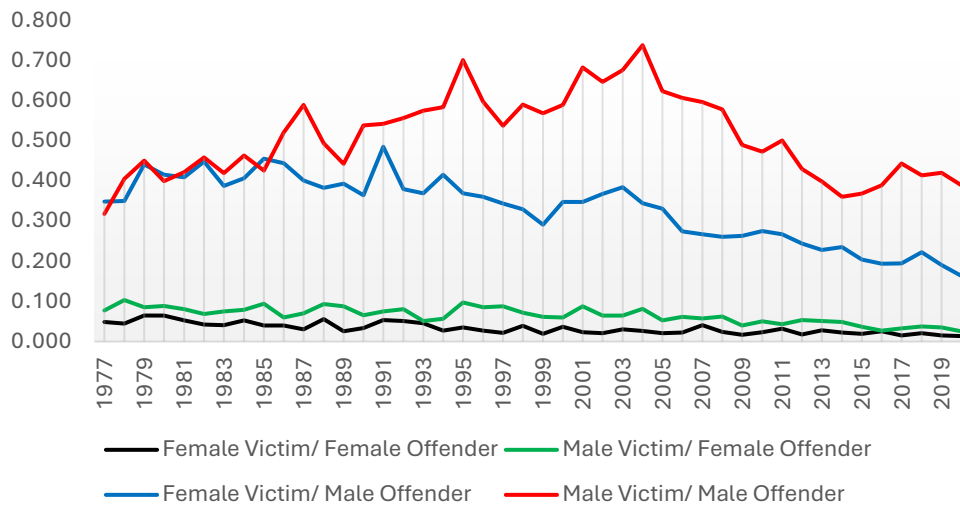
**Annotation:** This is a four-line graph of violent crime trends. The data is taken from the Crime Survey for England and Wales and reports rates per 1k of the population over 16. The Y-axis plots the crime rate, while the X axis plots the years 1981-2019/20, although not annually until 2001. There are lines for ‘all violence’, ‘assault with minor injury’, ‘wounding’ and ‘violence without injury’. ‘All violence’ reflects the collective and broad trends of the others, which illustrates a sharp peak in the mid-1990s, followed by a deep decline and then gradual decline to the end of the series.

**Figure 3 Homicide Victims by Gender, 1977-2020 (rate, per 100k population by gender).  
Homicide Index**



**Annotation:** This is a two-line graph plotting the homicide victimisation rate between males and females 1977-2020. The data is taken from the Homicide Index and reports rates 100k of the population of the respective gender. The Y-axis plots the rate while the X axis plots each year between 1977-2020. Initially, male and female rates track closely, but begin to diverge in the mid-1980s. From that point, the female victimisation rate steadily declines, while the male rate increases, peaking at a notably higher level and remaining elevated through to the end of the period.

**Figure 4 Homicide Victimization, by Gendered Relationship 1977-2020 (rate per 100k).  
Homicide Index**



**Annotation:** This is a four-line graph plotting the homicide victimisation rate, disaggregating by the genders of the victim and offender (Male-on-male, male-on-female, female-on-female and female-on-male) 1977-2020. The data is taken from the Homicide Index and reports rates 100k of the population. The Y-axis plots the rate while the X axis plots each year between 1977-2020. Homicides committed by females—both female-on-male and female-on-female—remain low and stable across the period. Male-on-female homicide shows a gradual but consistent decline, despite some year-to-year fluctuations. Male-on-male homicide stands out as the most prevalent pattern, with marked increases and peaks over time, indicating its persistent and disproportionate contribution to overall homicide rates.

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