



Social welfare support and homicide: Longitudinal analyses of European countries from 1994 to 2010



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 11 May 2013

Revised 18 April 2014

Accepted 21 May 2014

Available online 4 June 2014

Keywords:

Europe

Welfare

Decommodification

Homicide

Longitudinal

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to explore the extent to which retrenchment in welfare support is related to homicide trends across European countries between 1994 and 2010. Using a longitudinal decomposition design that allows for stronger causal inferences compared to typical cross-sectional designs, we examine these potential linkages between social support spending and homicide with data collected from a heterogeneous sample of European nations, including twenty Western nations and nine less frequently analyzed East-Central nations, during recent years in which European nations generally witnessed substantial changes in homicide rates as well as both economic prosperity and fiscal crisis. Results suggest that even incremental, short-term changes in welfare support spending are associated with short-term reductions in homicide—specifically, impacting homicide rates within two to three years for this sample of European nations.

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1. Introduction

Longitudinal, cross-national research is important for identifying shifting population demographics and national policy changes that might affect the social lives of residents. In criminology, such research has examined and provided evidence for the over-time effects on homicide rates of various social and economic forces, including development/modernization (Bennett, 1991; LaFree and Tseloni, 2006; Neumayer, 2003; Savage et al., 2008; Stamatel, 2009), rate of economic growth (Bennett, 1991), economic inequality (Bennett, 1991; Neumayer, 2003; Stamatel, 2009), family dissolution (Gartner, 1990; Stamatel, 2009), labor force participation (Gartner, 1990; Savage et al., 2008), urbanization (Bennett, 1991; Savage et al., 2008), youth age structure (Bennett, 1991; Pampel and Gartner, 1995; LaFree and Tseloni, 2006; Stamatel, 2009), democratization (LaFree and Tseloni, 2006; Neumayer, 2003; Stamatel, 2009), and, pertinent to the present study, social welfare spending (Gartner, 1990; Neumayer, 2003; Savage et al., 2008).¹ Recently, criminologists have focused specifically on social support's potentially ameliorating influence in curbing the criminogenic effects of financial strain and economic inequality. Drawing primarily from institutional anomie (Messner and Rosenfeld, 2001) and social support (Cullen, 1994) theoretical traditions, these studies typically demonstrate that countries with higher per capita levels of social support expenditures have lower homicide rates (Messner and Rosenfeld, 1997; Pratt and Godsey, 2003; Pridemore, 2008; Savolainen, 2000).

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¹ Other factors have been explored in these studies but, as Pampel and Gartner (1995:248) note, most are relatively stable over time, such as ethnic-linguistic heterogeneity, economic discrimination, national war experiences and the use of the death penalty.

Few cross-national studies have employed within-country longitudinal designs to examine associations between changes in social support spending and subsequent changes in homicide rates (see [Gartner, 1990](#); [Neumayer, 2003](#); and [Savage et al., 2008](#) for exceptions). As a result, it remains unclear whether the social support/homicide relationship observed in prior work spuriously reflect a general tendency for nations that provide substantial support for their residents to also have lower homicide rates, or whether decreases (increases) in social support spending actually tend to cause subsequent increases (decreases) in homicide rates. In the present study, we build upon previous efforts by examining homicide trends in 29 European nations from 1994 to 2010 to determine whether cross-national differences and intra-national changes over time in social support are associated with homicide trends.

This study contributes to prior work on this topic in two fundamental ways. First, our analytic design allows for stronger causal inferences compared to typical cross-sectional designs by modeling average associations between within-country changes in social support and homicide while controlling for key time-varying covariates and all time-invariant covariates. This allows for further elucidating the nature of the causal relationship between welfare and homicide. Second, we examine these potential linkages between social support and homicide with data collected from a heterogeneous sample of European nations, including twenty Western nations and nine less frequently analyzed East-Central nations, during recent years in which European nations generally witnessed substantial changes in homicide rates as well as both economic prosperity and fiscal crisis.

We begin with a cursory history of broad political and economic trends in European countries over the past few decades, with the caveat that these welfare states have varied forms and that each country's history and culture influence their political and economic uniqueness in ways that cannot be readily generalized ([Esping-Andersen, 1990](#); [Savolainen et al., 2008](#)). We then briefly describe macro-level theoretical perspectives that posit linkages between social welfare support and homicide rates at the national level. Finally, we present results from multi-level panel regressions that examine whether countries with higher average levels of social welfare support spending across the observed years have lower homicide rates compared to countries with lower average levels of support spending, as well as whether changes over time in social welfare support spending within countries are associated with concurrent and lagged changes in homicide rates in these countries.

2. Economic trends and social welfare support in Europe

Prompted by public and labor union pressure, the aftermath of World War II led many Western European governments to establish social democracies and adopt social contracts ensuring full employment ([Korpi, 2003](#)). Since the economic recession of the mid-1970s, many of these nations' governments were pressured toward retrenchment of their welfare states to restore economic stability. The promise of full employment was abandoned as governments were forced to cut or reduce welfare spending, including social transfers and/or social services ([Korpi and Palme, 2003](#); [Korpi, 2003](#); [Pierson, 2001](#)). Scholars attribute the impetus for welfare reform to a variety of factors—such as established welfare practices that stifle changing market demands, demographic challenges of aging populations and economic competition in the wake of globalization—with no consensus on the source of these welfare reforms ([Esping-Andersen, 1990, 1996](#); [Pierson, 2001](#)).

In addition to major political and economic transformations and challenges across European countries in recent decades, postindustrial transformations of labor markets and aging populations have contributed to increasing demands on social welfare programs that, in turn, have diminished the financial security and stability of residents of most European countries ([Esping-Andersen, 1996](#); [Korpi and Palme, 2003](#)). Furthermore, the global economic crisis that began in 2008 has pressured some national leaders to implement new or additional austerity measures to maintain their nations' financial stability.

3. Theoretical links between social welfare support and homicide

[Esping-Andersen \(1990\)](#) developed the notion of decommodification to refer to the extent to which social rights, entitlements and social welfare support are granted to a society's citizenry. Decommodification (commodification) of labor refers to the extent to which citizens are (not) protected from market instability. Social policies and institutionalized welfare support in a decommodified system offer citizens non-conditional entitlements and benefits covering various types of assistance (e.g., unemployment, old age, sickness, families with children, etc.). In contrast, countries with more commodified policies place stricter eligibility requirements on citizens to merit assistance, with the extreme being complete market dependence for survival. Changing political climates and economic crises have led some advanced industrial countries to “commodify” or privatize what were once public services and industries, and also to decrease certain types of social welfare support, especially beginning in the last quarter of the 20th century. Numerous scholars have addressed the ramifications of these welfare retrenchment trends across developed nations, which include increasing levels of poverty and inequality among citizens of those countries ([Esping-Andersen, 1996](#); [Korpi, 2003](#); [Lipset, 2001](#); [Pierson, 2001](#)).

Although [Esping-Andersen](#) did not address the relationship between decommodification and crime, [Messner and Rosenfeld \(1997\)](#) made this connection by employing the concept of decommodification in their theoretical explanation for variations in cross-national homicide rates. [Messner and Rosenfeld's \(1997, 2001\)](#) institutional-anomie theory takes Merton's classic strain/anomie theory as a point of departure, positing that the amount of crime in a society depends on the (im)balance between elements of culture and social structure. [Messner and Rosenfeld \(2001\)](#) theorize that countries (such as the United States) will have higher rates of violent crime when the economic sector dominates other societal institutions

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