



Original communication

Survey of medico-legal investigation of homicide in the region of Epirus (Northwest Greece)



Kleio Fragkouli, Vassiliki Boumba, Theodore Vougiouklakis*

Department of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology, University of Ioannina, Greece

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzed the forensic features of homicides in North-West Greece (Epirus) from 1998 to 2013, a borderland area between Greece and Albania. Although Greece is critically influenced by both the increasing flow of refugees and the current socioeconomic crisis, very little information has been published regarding the patterns of homicide in the country. Fifty-eight autopsied victims (36 males; 22 females) were investigated. The median age was 37 years old. The average annual homicide rate was 0.85 per 100,000 inhabitants and showed remarkable fluctuation, with largest increase during Greek financial downturn. Sixteen victims were not Greek citizens. The most common method of commitment was the use of firearm (40%). The main motives were economical causes (26%) and passion (14%). Four cases were categorized as matricide (7%), 3 as homicide–suicide (5%), 2 as patricide (3%) and 1 as infanticide (2%). Toxicological analysis proved negative for ethanol and other psychotropic substances in the majority of the victims (50%). There is an urgent need for public actions both in Epirus and in Greece, with the application of effective strategies against criminality.

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1. Introduction

Violent crime trends in Europe have changed during the last twenty years, since the opening of borders across the continent. These changes have been reflected to the homicide rates presented by various European countries.¹ Although Greece is essentially affected not only by the increasing number of refugees crossing the borders but also by the current socio-economic crisis, very little data has been presented regarding the trends and patterns of homicide in the country.^{2,3}

This study was undertaken to identify and analyze the characteristics of homicides in Epirus, north-western Greece, a borderland region between Greece and Albania. One of our main purposes was to compare our results to those encountered in other European countries as well as in countries outside the continent. The study was based on the medico-legal autopsies performed on the victims of a geographically restricted area, which is appropriate for epidemiologic studies. Medico-legal autopsies contribute significantly in providing useful statistical data related to legal

occurrences in a given area. All available data was investigated; however, data regarding the offenders were restricted, mainly due to the existing private policies applied in Greece. The increased number of refugees who crossed the country borders during both 90s and the last 10 years streamed the study towards the impact of the nationality of the victims and perpetrators on homicide rates. Furthermore, the influence of the socio-economic crisis, which Greece undergoes the last 7 years, on the pattern of homicide is discussed.

Identifying essential features of homicides in the Epirus area may contribute to the collection of important data at the disposal of the police, local and national authorities. This would promote preventive measures and society's awareness.

2. Material and method

A retrospective investigation was conducted on a consecutive series of homicides that were autopsied at the Department of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology, Faculty of Medicine, University of Ioannina in Greece, in the 16-year period 1998–2013. Greece is a small, rather homogeneous country, with a population of approximately 10,820,000 inhabitants according to the National Statistical Service Bureau (2010).⁴ The region of Epirus is comprised of four prefectures and its population is 336,856 inhabitants, representing

* Corresponding author. Department of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology, University of Ioannina, University Campus, 1186, 45110 Ioannina, Greece.

E-mail addresses: kfragkouli@gmail.com (K. Fragkouli), vaboumba@cc.uoi.gr (V. Boumba), tvujuk@cc.uoi.gr (T. Vougiouklakis).

3.1% of the overall population of Greece. The cases were identified through the archives of autopsy cases maintained at our Department. The Department of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology, University of Ioannina, is legally authorized to perform all the medico-legal autopsies and investigate all the non-natural and violent deaths occurring at the region of Epirus. Information regarding the national statistical data of homicide was retrieved from Hellenic Police's archives.⁵

The investigation covered all cases of homicide, including violence or physical harm resulting in death. This applies to all intentional and unintentional deaths due to premeditated violence or other deliberate action resulting in injury and death. Unintentional homicides were excluded from the study. Thus, the material comprised all those fatalities where the manner of death at the autopsy report was registered as homicide-murder, infanticide, patricide, matricide and homicide followed by suicide.

Toxicological analysis was performed in the majority of the cases. Excluded from toxicological examination were the cases of skeletonization (involving principally firearm fatalities) and dismemberment of the victims, where no appropriate biological material was available for the analysis. The data examined included the age and gender of victims, the nationality, the time of the assault (time, day, season), type of weapon used, location of fatal wound, motive of commitment and number of offenders involved in the crime. Data regarding the individual characteristics of assassins and victims, circumstances, homicide category, method and motive of commitment was obtained from autopsy reports, police requisition forms and prosecution authorities' files. The data were analyzed using the R statistical software program (R 2.14.1 for Windows).

3. Results

3.1. Homicide rates

The investigation included 58 homicide victims (36 males, 62%; 22 females, 38%) among 4005 autopsy cases (1.4%) performed during the study period. These victims were killed in 55 homicide episodes. The exact number of migrants (mainly Albanian) was not specified. The annual homicide death rate was 0.85 per 100,000 inhabitants for the 16-year period. The number of homicides per year (mean = 4 homicides per year) in Epirus was independent of each other, showing no particular pattern or significant variation of homicide rate over time during the period 1998–2013 ($\chi^2 = 7.25$, p [by randomization, 5000 permutations] = 0.39). Comparing the yearly homicide rates in Epirus with the respective Greek national rates, there was a significant difference between the median

($W = 69$, $n_1 = 16$, $n_2 = 16$, $p = 0.03$) annual homicide rates of Epirus and Greece, respectively, with the national rate (median = 1.29 per 100,000) being higher than that of Epirus (median = 0.85 per 100,000). However, the homicide rate in Epirus fluctuated more than the national homicide rate, with a relative decrease during 1998–2005 and a steep increase during 2011–2013 (Fig. 1).

3.2. Gender, age and nationality of homicide victims

In the total material of the study, 62% of the homicide victims were male ($N = 36$), 38% being female ($N = 22$). The median age of the victims was 37 years, with a significant gender difference (Kruskal–Wallis test: $\chi^2 = 4.34$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.03$); males were significantly younger than females (medians: 35 years old for males and 51 years for females). Fifty percent of the individuals were within the age range of 21–40 years, whereas 22.4% were over 60 years old (Table 1). Only two victims (3.4%) were under the age of 16. The majority of the victims (72.4%) were of Greek nationality, 19% were Albanians (due to the geographical position of the region, close to the border with Albania) and only 5% were migrants from an Asian country.

3.3. Toxicological analysis

Seventy-four percent ($n = 28$, 12 males and 16 females) of the 38 biological specimens sampled for toxicological analysis (including blood, urine and vitreous fluid) were negative for alcohol, drugs of abuse or other substances. Eight individuals (21%) were positive only for alcohol, with an average blood alcohol concentration (BAC) of 0.84 g/l. In one victim, BAC exceeded 2 g/l. One 28-year-old man killed by his father was found positive for heroin and in another 31-year-old man toxicological examination revealed carbamazepine in his blood.

3.4. Location and time of homicide

Half of the victims were killed in a rural deserted area or close to agricultural terrain, 15 (26%) were killed in a public place and 14 homicides (24%) took place at home. In 16 cases (28%) the event occurred during afternoon and 14 homicides took place late at night (24%). The majority of homicides occurred during the week (Thursday, 18%; Friday, 18%) and during spring and summer (65% for both).

3.5. Homicide characteristics

The present data was classified into five categories, with 48 victims (82.8%) being cold-blood murdered or physically injured

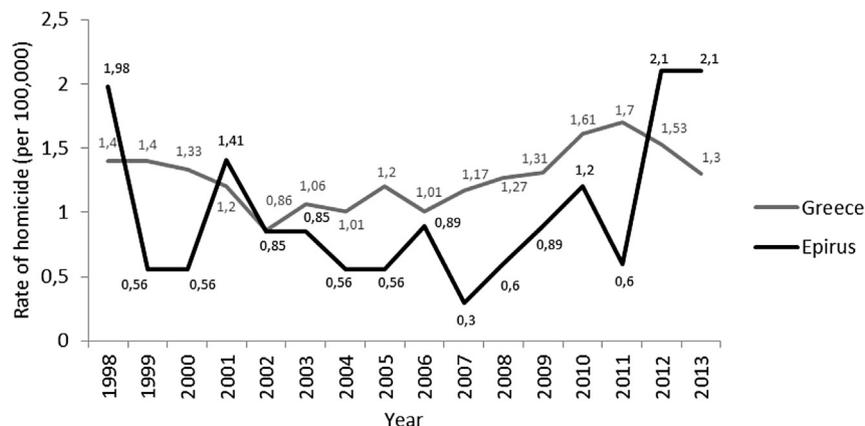


Fig. 1. The homicide rate in Epirus compared to the national Greek homicide rate, between 1998 and 2013.

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