



Underage victims and perpetrators of murder in Italy: 2007–2015

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ABSTRACT

From the epidemiological and criminological points of view, murders committed by minors, including both victims and perpetrators, differ from those observed in adults. Analysis of trends and characteristics of murders at national level could provide useful information to assess the phenomenon and address political and social choices aiming at preventing violence involving children and adolescents. This study focuses on the trends of murders in Italy during the period 2007–2015 and compares the data with those for other age groups. Data on murders regarding trends, gender, age and ethnic group from the Italian Institute of Statistics were analysed by chi-square with odds ratio and linear regression. Results show that, after standardization, murders involving minors as victims and perpetrators were less frequent with respect to data observed in all age groups. Trend analysis showed that murders involving minors remained stable in the period considered, but the stability of the rate of murders of minors was in contrast with reduced rates in other age groups. Among minors, males aged 14–17 are at higher risk of being the perpetrators and victims of homicide. The rate of perpetrators and victims among foreign-born minors was higher than that among the native-born. Further studies are needed to determine risk factors associated with these results and to propose preventive strategies through appropriate policies and interventions.

1. Introduction

Minors may be both victims and perpetrators of violent crimes such as murder, attempted murder or voluntary personal injury.¹ Studies concerning minors mainly describe homicide^{2–4} and, to a lesser extent, attempted murder and personal injury.⁵

The incidence of violent deaths on the total number of deaths increases with age⁶; 28% of deaths between 10 and 14 years and 44% between 15 and 19 years are due to factors of a violent nature (both intentional and unintentional).⁵ Ninety-five thousand minors in the world, 25% of them in Latin America and the Caribbean, and in general in low- or middle-/low-income countries, were victims of homicide in 2012⁵, both within and outside the context of war. The World Health Organization estimates a global homicide rate of 2.4 per 100,000 children (under the age of 18) with substantial differences among countries, related not only to rate (e.g., in 2012, in subjects aged 0–19, the homicide rate in Latin America and the Caribbean was 12 per 100,000 population; in the South African Region 6 per 100,000, and in Central and Eastern Europe 1 per 100,000)^{5,7} but also to victims' age and gender. The age of a child is an important factor which influences the context of murder, the type of perpetrator, and the number of cases.

Children in their first year of life may be victims of murder^{8,9} by parents^{10–12} or siblings,¹³ with differences in the ratio of infanticide among countries (e.g., in the Republic of South Africa and Tanzania, infanticide is relatively more common than in high-income countries).^{7,14}

When the perpetrator is a parent, gender differences have been noted regarding victims' age, perpetrators' state of intoxication, methods used, and previous history of family violence.^{9,10,15} Gender may influence the greater or lesser vulnerability of males and females, according to country. Gender differences are usually evident from the age of 10, with a mortality pattern which diverges with increasing age.⁵ Males are generally at greater risk of murder and represent 70% of victims under the age of 20⁵, with a dramatic increase in the mortal homicide rate in adolescent boys aged 14 and over.⁵ Homicide levels may be more than 10 times higher among males compared with females in countries like Brazil⁵; in almost 50% of cases, female homicide is committed by a family member or intimate partner.^{16,17} The differences between males and females also reflect the context of the murder, and a higher risk of death due to interpersonal violence.¹⁸

Crimes committed by minors may represent a significant percentage of felonies committed in developed and developing countries, according to population structure.

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Depending on the type of crime, risk factors may be biological,¹⁹ environmental, or an interaction of both.²⁰ These risk factors may be interpreted in terms of socio-ecological models^{21,22} that view interpersonal violence as the result of interactions among factors at four levels: individual, relationship, community, and societal. Factors at the individual level include genetic factors²⁰; psychiatric disorders such as behavioral or substance-related disorders^{23,24} (in particular, psychoactive substances are closely associated with homicide); poor education; and previous violent behavior. At the relationship level, risk factors include poor parenting practices and anti-juridical family behavior. Risk factors at the community level include unemployment level, population density and urban context. Finally, risk factors at the societal level include low socio-economic level, social isolation, low socio-cultural development, and availability of firearms.^{1,25}

The rate of homicide by minors also varies significantly in different countries, independently of income: in England and Wales, it is approximately 0.1 per 100,000 population,²⁶ in the United States it is 9.3 per 100,000 population.²⁷ The percentages of homicides committed by minors in the United States,²⁸ Canada,²⁹ Finland,³⁰ and England and Wales²⁶ were approximately 10%, 12%, 8% and 6%, respectively.

Violent criminal conduct mainly involves male subjects over the age of 14³¹; pre-teen subjects have rarely been studied due to their low offense rate, accounting for a very small number of all arrests for murder (e.g., pre-teen subjects only represented 0.1% of all arrests for murder in the US throughout the 1980s and 1990s³²). Murders committed by girls have also been rarely studied, usually in case reports or studies on small samples.³³

Criminal behavior by juvenile delinquents may be perpetrated by individuals or groups of individuals, more frequently in densely populated urban contexts, and/or in areas without social support systems. Gang delinquency may explain the differing murder rates in countries with various forms of criminality.⁵

Murders involving minors as perpetrators and victims have epidemiological and criminological characteristics which differ from those observed in adults. Analysis of the trends and characteristics of murders at national level could provide useful information for assessing the phenomenon and making political and social choices for preventing violence toward children and adolescents.³⁴

Any political choices should be guided by a greater awareness of how the phenomenon may have changed in recent times—for example, rapid social or family changes (e.g., population aging, migratory flows, changes in family structure) or the emergence of new delinquent phenomena (e.g., gang delinquency, synthetic drugs etc.). Such changes might render the current legislative system inadequate, even in the case of Italy. Techniques such as trend analysis could inform discussion of issues like the age of criminal responsibility (which is 14 in Italy).

According to the above premises, the first aim of this study was to analyse the trend of murders committed and suffered by subjects under the age of 18 in the period 2007–2015; the second aim was to compare data on both minors and other age groups.

2. Materials and methods

This is a population-based study on murders committed against and by minors in Italy in the period 2007–2015. According to the Italian Civil Code, a minor is a person under the age of 18. Data are collected by law enforcement agencies (State Police, Carabinieri and Guardia di Finanza) and transmitted to the Italian Institute of Statistics (ISTAT),³⁵ a public research organization and the main producer of official statistics serving citizens and policy-makers (<http://www.istat.it/en/>).¹⁸ The European Statistical System guarantees that European and Italian statistics produced in all EU Member States are reliable, based on the same methodology, and contain data comparable among different countries (<http://www.istat.it/en/>).¹⁸ Following acquisition by ISTAT, the data are processed, validated (i.e., compared with data from other independent sources) and disseminated.³⁵ The data (in the form of an

interactive worksheet) can be found on the website of the Italian Institute of Statistics at < dati.istat.it > and can be extracted as an Excel spreadsheet. Data, freely available to users¹⁸ and contained in the Excel spreadsheet were imported into IBM SPSS Statistics 23.0 for Windows (Chicago, IL)³⁶ and GraphPad Prism 5.01 (GraphPad Prism, 2009).³⁷

Statistics on murder were analysed and evaluated in this study. Murder is defined as any intentional homicide (independently of the reasons for it, i.e. homicide due to interpersonal violence, socio-political reasons or related to other criminal activities).

The phenomenon was analysed in relation to gender, age, ethnic group, and changes over time. Individuals under the age of 18 were subdivided into two groups aged < 14 and 14–17. Other age groups used for comparison with individuals under the age of 18, were 18–24, 25–34, 35–44, 45–54, 55–64, and over 65. The subdivision of age groups reflects the data provided by ISTAT. Nevertheless, dichotomizing individuals under 18 as < 14 and 14–17 might help to differentiate criminal involvement among people above or below 14, the age at which the Italian penal code deems a subject liable and punishable. Direct standardization for all ages was performed according to European Standard Population (2013).³⁸ Data were analysed by linear regression using number of murders (grouped by variables such as age, gender, ethnicity) as the dependent variable and time as the independent variable; t-test for analysis of means for continuous normally distributed variables; chi-square test to compare murder frequency (both victims and perpetrators) by age group, gender and ethnic group; calculation of the odds ratio with a 95% confidence interval.³⁹ All analyses were performed with SPSS. IBM SPSS Statistics 23.0 for Windows³⁶ and GraphPad Prism 5.01³⁷.

3. Results

3.1. Victims

In the period 2007–2015, minors represented 16.7% of the Italian population; they were victims of homicide in 4.3% (211, out of a total of 4854 cases) with a mean and standard deviations (SD) per year of 23.4 ± 8.7 . Foreigners, representing 9.6% of the total minor population, were victims of murders in 20.8% of cases. Table 1 shows frequency distribution by age and gender, with significant differences between foreign-born and native-born victims. In particular, non-Italians aged 14–17 had a six-fold increase in the risk compared with Italian peers, with similar trends in males and females.

The mean homicide rate per million minors was 2.33 per year in the period 2007–2015. Males aged 14 and over had the highest rate per million. Table 2 lists the mean homicide rate per million in relation to gender and age and Table 3 in relation to ethnic group.

After direct standardization, mean \pm SD were 0.045 ± 0.01 homicides per 100,000. Table 4 lists the homicide rates after direct standardization for all age groups. According to linear regression analysis, murder trends remained stable during the study period, in contrast with a significant decrease in trends observed in age groups 18–24 ($F = 8.49$; $P = 0.02$), 25–34 ($F = 9.06$; $P = 0.01$), 35–44 ($F = 28.16$; $P = 0.001$) and 55–64 ($F = 8.79$; $P = 0.02$). Fig. 1 shows trends of murders per 100,000. Linear regression analysis showed that murders were less frequently committed against minors compared with all other age groups (Fig. 1).

3.2. Perpetrators

In the period 2007–2015, minors represented 2.7% of the total number of subjects reported or arrested for murder (266, out of a total of 9683 cases) with a mean \pm SD per year of 29.5 ± 5.3 . Thirty-one percent of the subjects reported/arrested for murder were non-Italians. Distributions by age and gender are shown in Table 5, revealing significant differences between foreign-born and native-born victims. Among people aged 14–17, the risk was seven times higher in non-

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