

# Inequality Kills

For most people the chances of being murdered are the same or lower than they were 20 years ago. For young men in the poorest parts of the country, they are considerably higher. Murder is like a disease, says **Danny Dorling** – it affects different groups disproportionately, and its cause is an unequal society

Inequality kills. It kills indirectly, of course, by robbing people of protection from physical and mental illness. But it also kills directly by increasing the rates at which people are murdered.

Between January 1981 and December 2000, over 13,000 people were murdered in Britain – a rate of just under two murders per day. But the chances of being a victim vary greatly according to gender and geography. The general rise in murder rates in the UK, with more murders committed in the past 15 years than in the preceding 20-year period, is almost exclusively concentrated amongst men of working age living in the poorest parts of the country. A more detailed look at these figures shows a close relationship between this fact and the rising levels of inequality in Britain since the early 1980s.

Before exploring this relationship further, it is important to understand the role of murder in our growing awareness of broader health inequalities. This connection may seem surprising, but murder is a form of death, just as all health inequalities eventually are, and increasingly research is showing that inequalities in health tend to both reflect and be caused by other inequities in society.

For instance, Richard Wilkinson, writing in the recent *UK Health Watch 2005* report, reviews research findings showing that levels of poor health and extreme violence are consistently worse in more unequal societies. High levels of inequality play a crucial part in corroding social relations,

reducing trust, increasing levels of shame and embarrassment, and reducing the positive feedback of friendship. In general, he concludes that inequality affects people's sense of their own 'worth':

"In more unequal societies it is as if some people count for everything and others for nothing, making us all more concerned with how we are seen. More hierarchical societies are marked by greater social divisions and more downward discrimination and prejudice against those lower on the social ladder."

Income differences are closely correlated to social mobility, with countries like Britain and the USA (the 'land of opportunity') enjoying significantly less social mobility than, for example, Norway and Sweden. These divisions also play out geographically, with inequality increasing 'the segregation of the population into rich and poor neighbourhoods', according to Wilkinson, who concludes that: 'it is unrealistic to pursue greater equality of opportunity without at the same time moving towards greater equality of outcome.' In Britain, income differentials have widened over the past two or three decades – which explains, Wilkinson says, why social mobility has actually decreased in the period since Margaret Thatcher became prime minister.

Understood in this context, patterns of murder in Britain can be seen in a new light, starting from an understanding that greater inequality causes worse health and poorer social relations. Looking at the changing rate of homicide in Britain (defined as murders and manslaughters combined) from the

viewpoint of who is most likely to be killed reveals some crucial patterns.

Think of murder as a disease that has been spreading. Tackling this disease is not simply a question of finding the immediate causes of individual cases – the person who wields the knife or pulls the trigger – but is a search for the underlying pattern of infection and the signs of susceptibility to that infection. In particular, we should be concerned with why the disease takes hold in certain areas and in particular circumstances most while other areas seem to be almost immune, and why some people are increasingly susceptible to it.

Analysing murder according to the age and gender of the victims, and how and where they were murdered, reveals an increasingly unequal picture. Despite regular panics in the mainstream media, the evidence shows that for the majority of the population the chances of being murdered have fallen, in some cases considerably. For males aged over 60 and under five, and for females of all ages, the chances of being murdered have either fallen or remained constant over the past 20 years.

The large majority of murders are committed by men and the large and growing majority of victims are men, especially young men. Women are now far less likely to be murder victims because they are in a better position than they were two decades ago to escape violent relationships before those relationships become deadly. By contrast, the chances of being murdered have increased significantly for most men – with those between 20 and 24 facing twice the risk now compared with 20 years ago. Today, men aged between 17 and 32 make up 7 per cent of the population but 25 per cent of all murder victims.

A more detailed look shows that most murders of men by men occur within relationships of friendship turned bad – situations in which the murderers and victims know each other well. For some reason, quarrels between men in western societies (and Britain in particular) are

turning more violent. For a clue as to why we need to look at where, for whom and when this changed.

Gender differences are reinforced by profound residential inequalities. In all countries, where you live matters more than who you are. In Britain, growing inequality between neighbourhoods has occurred alongside more unequal patterns of murder. Between 1981 and 1985, people living in the poorest 10 per cent of areas were 4.5 times more likely to be murdered than those living in the richest ten per cent. By 2000, the poorest 10 per cent were six times more likely to be murdered.

Some simple projections using figures for the 1980s and 1990s help illustrate these trends. In the richest neighbourhoods, for every 100 murders that we might 'expect' to take place if the national average were applied equally, only 50 occurred. In the poorest 10 per cent of council wards, using the same measure, there were around 300 murders compared to the 100 expected.

In fact, the rise in murders in Britain has been concentrated almost exclusively amongst men of working age living in the poorest parts of the country. Living in the areas most affected by the recession and high unemployment of the early 1980s, many of these men left school at 15 or 16 and were unable to find work. In each case, there is no simple causal relationship at play. Murders typically result from a complex interplay of factors – including social exclusion, esteem and status – as well as a considerable degree of bad luck. For every murder victim, dozens of others have been 'almost murdered'. There is a common myth that gun crime is behind high murder rates in poor areas. In fact, a higher proportion of rich people are killed by guns than poor people. The most common way of being murdered in poor areas was through being cut with a knife or broken glass. Most murders are shockingly banal – such as a fight after a night out drinking in which a threat was made and someone died. Such murders do not make

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#### Further reading

*Prime Suspect: Murder in Britain* by Danny Dorling in [http://www.crimeandsociety.org.uk/pdfs/monograph1\\_17Oct05.pdf](http://www.crimeandsociety.org.uk/pdfs/monograph1_17Oct05.pdf)  
*UK Health Watch 2005: the experience of health in an unequal society* (Politics of Health Group). The full report is available at <http://www.pohg.org.uk/support/downloads/ukhealthwatch-2005.pdf>  
*Health Inequalities: Lifecourse Approaches* by George Davey Smith (Policy Press, 2003)

the headlines. Most are extensions of fighting, not carefully planned and executed events. Real life is not like *Morse* or *Taggart*, and cases very rarely take great detective work or remain unsolved for a generation. Murder, although extreme, is a fact of life – but it need not be a growing part of our lives.

Murder rates are still very low compared to the US, but murder is a stark and powerful social indicator and there can be no cause for complacency. The murder rate tells us far more about society and how it is changing than any particular murder tells us about the individuals involved. The changing pattern of the victims is consistent with new evidence that inequality kills. While the majority of people are less likely to become a victim, the poorest people in the most deprived communities are more and more likely.

I argued earlier that it helps to think of murder as a disease. As with many diseases, we do not have a cure for murder. There is no childhood inoculation. We can, however, increase our efforts to stop its spread and better protect those most likely to fall victim. There is nothing inevitable about murder and the falling rates for most of the population show that there is no need for the rest of us to experience the level of violence and inequality of which murder is such a powerful indicator.

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