

# **A SCENARIO OF MASCULINE VIOLENCE: CONFRONTATIONAL HOMICIDE**

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THIS REPORT PRESENTS THE RESULTS OF A STUDY OF CONFRONTATIONAL homicide in Victoria. Confrontational homicide is a form of male-to-male homicide which centres most typically around some form of status contest between males. The lethal violence flows out of an initial argument, followed by a physical confrontation, and then by one or another of the parties involved becoming the victim of lethal violence. Concern for this form of homicide was set in motion by a previous study (Polk & Ranson 1991) of homicide in Victoria, which looked at all homicides in Victoria for the 1985-86 period. The present research focuses specifically upon the confrontational homicides and closely related forms of male-to-male violence, and extends the time frame to include data from 1987 to 1990.

The 1985-86 data reveal that, consistent with findings of other research (for example, Wallace 1986), a majority of homicides consist of male-to-male violence (Polk & Ranson 1991). Turning this around, women account for only a minority of victims of homicide and an even smaller proportion of homicide offenders. Wallace (1986), for example, found that women made up only 36 per cent of victims of homicide and 15 per cent of offenders.

What the previous research established, however, was that while masculinity was a major factor in most forms of homicide, there were significantly different patterns that male violence might take (Polk & Ranson

1991). First, there was homicide in situations of sexual intimacy where the violence represents an ultimate attempt of the male to control the life of his female sexual partner. In this instance, the major variation involves male partners reacting to the woman's attempt to move away from his control, while a minor variation involves exceptionally depressed male partners who have decided to end their lives through suicide, with the homicide of the woman being a part of the suicide plan.

Second, there were various forms of male-to-male violence. Among these are those homicides which were found to be a result of masculine confrontation which becomes a form of honour contest, leading to a fight which in turn resulted in the violence turning lethal. Such events were observed in public places such as pubs, discos, streets, train stations, parks or reserves, or perhaps at parties or barbeques. Most often they were closely tied to working class or underclass masculine scenes of leisure, with alcohol featuring in a great majority of the cases.

Male-to-male homicide was also observed to be a consequence of other criminal behaviour. A common scenario here was one where a robbery turned dangerously violent, and the robbery victim became a victim of homicide as well. These distinctively masculine events appeared to involve a willingness on the part of economically and socially marginal males to take exceptional risks regarding the lives of others, and often, in fact, their own lives.

Finally, male-to-male homicide was found to be a final act in a series of events which began with the intimate bond of friendship. Something happened over time and the friendship disintegrated to the point where it was terminated with lethal violence. These scenes again most often involved males who were highly marginal in an economic and social sense, and the violence could be seen as a form of ultimate conflict resolution.

It was this male-to-male violence, and confrontational homicide in particular, that provided the focus for the present research. While previous research has recognised that masculine confrontations may lead to lethal violence, in general it has not been identified as a separate and distinctive form of homicide in terms of the dynamics which link an offender and a victim. The purpose of the present research has been to expand a base of knowledge regarding this form of homicide, and the place that it occupies within more general patterns of male-to-male violence.

## **The Data**

The data for the present investigation, as was the case for the initial research, are drawn from the files of the Office of the Coroner of Victoria. These files contain a number of reports which are collected for the purpose of carrying out the coronial inquest, and include an initial police report of the incident, an autopsy report regarding the cause of death, a toxicology report if such is relevant, a Police Prosecutor's brief, and the report of the inquest itself. The most helpful of these documents is the prosecutor's brief, which typically contains lengthy witness statements as well as transcripts of interview with defendants where these have been taken.

In the first phase, data on 121 homicides were extracted from these files for the years 1985 and 1986. For each homicide a lengthy case history was prepared drawing upon the material in the coronial files. These case studies were then subjected to a qualitative analysis of the themes which characterised the relationship between the victim and the offender. Included among these themes was that of masculine confrontational homicide, which accounted for twenty-six (or 21 per cent) of the total homicides.

In order to explore in greater detail the characteristics of male-to-male violence, the present study was conducted which extended the data collection in the files of the Office of the Coroner of Victoria for the additional years of 1987 through 1989. This resulted in the identification of an additional 255 homicides. As before, a working file for each was prepared which included the initial police report, the report of the autopsy, toxicology reports (where relevant), relevant witness statements from the Police Prosecutor's brief prepared for the inquest, and the report of the inquest itself prepared by the Coroner. From these working files, a short case history for each was prepared, this case history providing information on the social character of the homicide, especially in terms of the dynamics which linked the offender and victim. When the cases for 1987 to 1989 are added to the original 121 cases from the period between 1985 and 1986, a total of 376 homicide cases are available for analysis.

## **The Findings**

A first observation is that these data support the general conclusion that there is a strong thread of masculinity which runs through homicide. Looking at all cases combined for the period from 1985 to 1989, males were the offenders in a great majority of all homicide cases, although it is important to be precise in the actual treatment of the data.

First, it is appropriate to remove from the analysis the thirty-one cases over the five year period where the gender of the offender could not be determined, reducing the base total to 345. Next, since the entry point for such data are victim files, some recognition must be given to the fact that there are accounts which involve multiple offenders, and in some of these one of the offenders is female. Of the 345 total victims where the gender is known, there were 287 which involved exclusively male offenders, which accounts for 83.2 per cent of cases. There were an additional twenty-three cases where there were multiple offenders involving both males and females, so that the total proportion involving male offenders is somewhat higher.

Slightly over half of the 345 cases where the gender is known involve situations where males play the roles of both offender and victim (178 accounts were male-to-male homicides, or 51.6 per cent). These findings are roughly consistent with the levels reported in other investigations. For homicides in the 1968 to 1981 period in New South Wales, for example, Wallace (1986) reported that 85 per cent of the offenders were male, and that 54 per cent involved a male accused and a male deceased.

For purposes of the present study, however, the general category of male offender/male victim is too broad, since it includes not only such homicides as those resulting from male confrontations, but also instances where step-fathers kill step-sons, where sons kill fathers, or brother kills brother, and a group of cases which involve odd behaviour where the fact that the victim and the offender are male says little about why the killing took place (as in cases where the offenders are driven to kill because they 'hear voices', or mass murderers who shower bullets in an indiscriminate pattern). Our interest instead is focused on those forms of homicide where the gender role plays a significant part of the homicide itself.

Specifically, our attention is directed to homicides involving males as both offenders and victims which derive from three general scenarios:

- 'confrontational' homicides which arise out of 'status contests' between males, whereby initial insults lead to fights which then spill over into lethal violence;
- 'conflict resolution on the margin', where the homicide represents a crude form of dispute resolution, most often involving highly marginal individuals; and
- 'homicides resulting from the course of other crime', where the killing can be viewed as an outcome which originates in other criminal activity.

These scenarios account for just under half (146 of the 345 cases where gender can be established, or 43 per cent) of all homicides.

The introduction of the additional data has resulted in some important modifications of the conception of these forms of masculine homicide from that suggested in the initial formulation (Polk & Ranson 1991). For one, it seems more appropriate to view these patterns as scenarios of violence, rather than as clear 'types' of homicide. What each represents is an idealised pattern of activity, with dominant elements which make up something akin to a script which can be found in the cases which fit the scenario. Within each of the groupings, some of the cases will fit the idealised scenario closely, whereas others will have fewer elements and thus fall more toward the outer boundaries of the scenario. In a few cases, as we shall see, the elements of one scenario blur into another, so that definitive boundaries for such accounts cannot be drawn.

### **The Confrontational Scenario**

Nearly one in five ( $n = 74$ ) of all homicides consisted of killings resulting from masculine confrontations. One central element of these killings is that homicide was not the initial intent of the encounter. This scenario typically begins in an argument, that dispute escalating to the point where a fight breaks out, and then the lethal violence follows. In its initial stages, then, the parties involved were not anticipating that a death would result. It is not uncommon, in fact, for many of the participants in such events to leave the scene unaware of the deadly consequences of the physical confrontation that has taken place.

A second feature of this violence is that it is fundamentally masculine in character, involving virtually only males in roles both of offender and victim. Only one account was found where a woman drew upon a confrontational script in carrying out her homicide (the victim was a woman as well).

A third feature which serves to exert virtually a definitional stamp on this violence is its class composition. Confrontational violence is fundamentally either underclass or working class behaviour. In only two cases were the participants drawn from professional or service occupations.

A fourth common feature of these killings is that they are most likely to occur in leisure scenes that are 'open' in character. These are settings where underclass or working class males congregate or at least come into contact with each other. One major venue is the pub or disco, where seventeen of these killings took place (23 per cent of the confrontational homicides). Somewhat more of the confrontations took place in streets, roads or laneways, often adjacent to pubs ( $n = 22$ , or 30 per cent). Other venues included parks or beaches ( $n = 4$ , or 6 per cent), at parties or barbeques ( $n = 4$  or 6 per cent), in transport settings such as trains or buses ( $n = 2$ , or 3 per cent), or in such scattered settings as car parks, public toilets or pin ball parlours. There were, as well, sixteen cases (24 per cent) which occurred in the home or flat of either the victim or the offender, most often the location being the scene of a party.

In most instances, the events leading up to the homicide were played out with a backdrop of male peers. There was an audience of such peers in forty-four (65 per cent) of the confrontational homicides. Confronted with a challenge to their honour with an audience of male peers, the central actors feel pressured to show that they are not 'wimps', or persons who 'can be shoved around'. In some instances, of course, these peers became directly involved in the initial fight which led to the death, with a small number involving two groups which were in conflict.

A further aspect of these leisure scenes is the likelihood that alcohol will be involved. Alcohol use of the victim or the offender, or both, was noted in sixty-six (89 per cent) of these confrontational homicides. The involvement of alcohol, which in some cases resulted in extraordinary blood alcohol levels being observed, provides a further fix on the masculine recreational nature of the settings where the violence is likely to flare.

There are other aspects of confrontational violence that are more variable. One of these concerns the time frame over which the violence takes place. Some of the encounters are exceptionally brief and the lethal violence sudden. The male participants meet, words are exchanged, a fight starts, the violence escalates rapidly with the death being the result. Over half ( $n = 41$ , 55 per cent) of the confrontational homicides involved events that took place within one half of an hour, many of these within five or ten minutes.

Other confrontational encounters extend longer through time, often being interrupted. In some cases the interruption occurs because one of the participants leaves the scene to fetch a weapon (generally a knife, but in some accounts a gun): this took place in twenty-three (31 per cent) of these homicides. In other accounts, the conflict escalates over time, and takes many hours, or even days, to reach its lethal conclusion.

It is characteristic of some confrontational encounters that the roles of the participants may become confused. In about half of the cases, for example, the homicide falls into the category of what Wolfgang (1958) termed 'victim precipitated homicide', that is, the individual who first initiated the violence ultimately became the victim of the lethal violence. There are other examples of what are clearly confrontation violence, where the killing was a result of some form of honour contest between males, but where the specific victim of the violence was not part of the actual conflict that led to the taking of his life.

The specific provocation may be difficult to establish. At times, it is a simple and direct challenge to the masculinity of another male. Sometimes the provocation results from an insult to the woman friend of a male. A reasonably common scenario in the multicultural environment of Victoria is that ethnic tensions or slurs may provide the spark for the violence. In some cases where the conflict between the parties has extended through time, it may not be possible to isolate an initial provocation which has resulted in the chain of events which lead ultimately to the taking of the life of the victim. In general, then, while masculine 'reputation', 'status', or 'honour' is at the heart of most confrontations, the specific form of the provocation in individual cases may be difficult to determine.

In the previous research (Polk & Ranson 1991), a distinction was drawn between homicides which resulted from masculine confrontations and those which emerged from the intimate relationship of friendship. Additional data, however, have made it clear that such a differentiation cannot be maintained in all accounts. In some instances, the males caught up in situations where a status contest resulted in homicide were also friends (this occurred in fourteen of the seventy-four accounts, or 19 per cent of the confrontational homicides). Most commonly this might occur at a scene such as a party where a group of males are drinking together, where insults flare between victim and offender, and the confrontation ends in the death of the victim. While in general the interactional dynamics of these 'friendship/confrontational' killings were identical to other confrontational homicides, one difference of these was that they were more likely to occur in the home of one of the parties (seven of the fourteen, or 50 per cent, of the confrontations involving friends, compared with 26 per cent for all confrontational homicides).

### **Theoretical Accounts of Masculine Violence**

Despite the fact that males dominate the statistics on homicide, relatively little attention has been paid to the issue of masculinity in much of the literature on homicide (with the exception of the work of Daly & Wilson 1988). One potentially useful line of inquiry, especially in terms of confrontational homicide, was that suggested in the work of Luckenbill (1977).

Luckenbill argued that homicide can be viewed as the outcome of a dynamic interaction involving a victim, an offender and the audience in front of whom these actors play. He observed that such interactions can be seen as moving through six stages. The first stage consists of an 'opening move' performed by the victim and defined by the offender as an offence to 'face'.

This opening move could be a direct, verbal expression by the victim: it might consist of the refusal of the victim to cooperate or comply with the requests of the offender, or it might consist of some physical or nonverbal gesture which the offender subsequently defines as offensive.

The second stage where murder was involved resulted when the offender interpreted the victim's opening move as offensive. Luckenbill makes clear that it may not be the victim's intention to be offensive. What is at issue is the interpretation on the part of the offender.

In the third stage the offender, rather than excusing or ignoring the provocation, or leaving the scene, responds with a 'retaliatory move aimed at restoring face and demonstrating strong character' (Luckenbill 1977, p. 181). In most cases, this consisted of a verbal or physical challenge being issued to the victim. In a small number of cases, the interaction ends at this stage, since the offender in issuing the challenge actually kills the victim.

In the fourth stage, the victim has been placed in a problematic position by the challenge laid down by the offender. A range of options potentially exist, an apology might be extended, the behaviour perceived by the offender as offensive might be discontinued, or the victim might leave the scene. Instead, the victim stands up to the challenge, and enters into an '... agreement with the proffered definition of the situation as one suited for violence' (Luckenbill 1977, p. 183).

In the fifth stage, the offender and victim are committed to battle. Fearful of 'displaying weakness in character and consequent loss of face', the two evolve a 'working agreement that violence was appropriate' (Luckenbill 1977, p. 184). In some cases, the parties seek out and secure weapons to support their verbal threats and challenges.

In the sixth stage, after the victim has fallen, there are three ways that the situation is terminated. Sometimes the offender flees the scene, sometimes the offender either voluntarily remains or is held for the police by members of the social audience.

There are many of the male-to-male homicides, especially the brief confrontational killings, which seem to fit particularly well with the model of conflict posed by Luckenbill. It is in these encounters where it is possible to trace the movement from the initial move by one of the actors, through the stages which result in the lethal violence. The case of Gabe is one such example:

Gabe W. (32, soldier) boarded a train at Flinders Street Station after an evening of drinking with his friends (his blood alcohol level was subsequently established to be .224). When Gabe attempted to take a seat, Mike M. ordered him, 'offensively', to move on to another seat. Challenged, Gabe refused, and attempted to force his way onto the seat. Mike leaped up and struck Gabe, and the two fought. Although Gabe received a number of blows, and was kneed in the face, he finally managed to pin Mike down.

Witnesses relate that at this point Gabe said: 'If you don't stop now, I'll break your neck'. Then, believing that Mike would stop, Gabe released him. Mike instead produced a knife, stabbing Gabe three times in the

chest. One of the blows penetrated the heart. Gabe collapsed and died in the aisle.  
(Case No. 4714–86)

In this account, the opening move is made when Mike tells Gabe to find another seat. Stage two follows when Gabe interprets the move as offensive, and then stage three occurs when Gabe, rather than looking for a seat elsewhere, challenges Mike by attempting to take the seat. Mike in moving to stage four then 'must stand up to the challenge' which he does by springing up fists ready, which then leads to the actual fight (stage five), and then Gabe's fatal stabbing. Mike then left the scene, and was apprehended later by police (stage six).

It became clear as an attempt was made to apply the six-stage model to other homicides that there apparently were some differences between the Victorian data and those available to Luckenbill. Despite the fact that the records were reasonably extensive, at times it simply was not possible to trace all of the stages, even in confrontational homicides.

One persistent problem was that posed by the homicides whose events were extended in time. There was one account, for an example, where the only information available was that P.C., a male, walked up to P.K., another male, who was drinking in a pub, and shot him with a rifle (stages four and five of the model). P.C. then fled, and was apprehended later by the police (stage six). While P.C. alleged that P.K. and some of his friends had 'set him up' sometime in the past, the specific form of stages one, two and three—the opening moves—could not be determined from the Coroner's files.

In another account, two groups of young males had been feuding from many months. The death resulted when one group finally decided to corner a small number of members of the other group at a meeting hall where they were practising martial arts. When the group broke into the hall, a collective fight began. One of the members of the group being attacked broke out a rifle, firing a number of shots which wounded several members of the attacking group, one of whom was fatally hurt. Here the problems with the model are multiple. For one, the origins of the feud (the initial stages one, two, three) have been lost in time. For another, given the group character of the conflict, whatever the original stages were, they may not have involved those who played major roles in the final stages of the drama. While the groups could be seen as moving through a series of stages in building up to the lethal encounter, the specific individuals who became victim and offender may have had limited roles in the stages prior to the final lethal encounter.

There were other cases which moved through developmental phases, but the ultimate victim played no part in the evolving interactions. In one account, a young male spent an evening drinking in a pub, becoming drunk and abusive. The bartender and bouncer begin the specific train of events by ejecting the man from the pub. The man's honour was offended by this affront. To retaliate, he climbed in his van (he was by occupation a plumber) and proceeded to drive at great speed in circles around the pub parking lot, swerving first toward, then away from, patrons as they came out of the pub. On his final pass at a patron, piping material detached from the roof, and a patron who had just left the pub was struck and killed.



Here there was a complex interaction involving an offender and 'others' as events built up toward the homicide, but there was no evidence that the victim played any role other than to walk out of the pub at the wrong time. This was not a unique case. In another, males in two cars exchanged insults, and were in the process of chasing and harassing each other, when one of the cars spun off the road and killed a bystander who happened to be walking along the road.

These events involve interactions, the interactions may flow through stages, those stages may involve challenges and counter-challenges to masculine honour, but as events proceed to their final lethal conclusion, the roles of victim and offender may not be as neat and clear as implied in the model laid out by Luckenbill.

Finally, there is the claim by Luckenbill that these six stages characterised all homicide cases regardless of such factors as 'age, sex, race, time and place, use of alcohol, and proffered motive' (Luckenbill 1977, p. 186). In the present study the greatest applicability seems to be in the three forms of masculine violence which are the primary focus here. While possibly relevant in some accounts of intimate violence, these stages would not be found, for example, in cases involving sexual intimates where the extremely depressed male plans suicide, to be preceded by the homicide of his female partner; nor would it apply to cases of infanticide, where the offender is engaged in a complicated denial of the existence of the victim.

It is our general conclusion, therefore, that while of some heuristic value, the observation of Luckenbill that his model fits all homicides cannot be confirmed. While in general it seems that our data are rather deep and rich in comparison to some other data sets of homicide, there are a number of events where it simply is not possible to identify each of the six stages in the model. Furthermore, in several of the scenarios of homicide that we have found (especially involving intimates), the dynamics clearly do not unfold in the stages laid down by Luckenbill.

In many of the killings, however, especially those confrontations which move quickly to the point where it becomes lethal in its consequences, it is possible to identify a developing dynamic that has some correspondent to Luckenbill's model. In these situations, we can agree with Luckenbill when he asserts:

... homicide does not appear as a one-sided event with an unwitting victim assuming a passive, non-contributory role. Rather, murder is the outcome of a dynamic interchange between an offender, victim, and, in many cases, bystanders (Luckenbill 1977, p. 185).

### **Issues of Class, Gender and Economic Marginality**

Perhaps the most important failing of Luckenbill is that, while he describes an important pattern of interaction, and that both victim and offender may play significant roles in that interaction, the model does not provide any clues as to why the offender and victim become involved in what proves to be a homicide, nor does he address the question of why such killings involve virtually exclusively males. Luckenbill (1977, p. 186) comes closer when he underscores

the importance of the role of '... maintaining face and reputation and demonstrating character'—language which implies a masculine motivation for the violence. As his description stands, however, it provides a potentially helpful accounting of the interactive dynamics that make up a confrontational encounter, but it does not address either the gender characteristics or the economic marginality that feature so strongly in male-to-male violence.

It is the present contention that it is important to see confrontations as 'contests of honour' in which the maintenance of 'face' or reputation is a central matter. Further, these are seen as quintessential masculine matters. We agree, then, with Daly and Wilson (1988) who have argued that it is males who become involved in violence around the issue of reputation.

The theoretical account provided by Daly and Wilson is one of the few that recognises the diverse forms of masculine violence that make up contemporary homicide patterns. It is their argument that the general thread of masculinity that runs through homicide reflects forms of male aggressiveness can be accounted for by biological processes of adaptation. One problem with such a biological view is that, while it potentially moves us toward an understanding of the masculine character of violence, it is less satisfactory in its ability to account for the social class component of masculine violence.

The lethal violence being examined here is defined both by its class and gender characteristics. It is predominantly male and working/under-class behaviour. How is it that we can account for these two features of confrontational homicide?

A possible line of argument which might help here has been advanced recently by the anthropologist Gilmore (1990). In reviewing data on masculinity across a number of cultures, Gilmore concluded that there were three essential features to masculinity:

To be man in most of the societies we have looked at, one must impregnate women, protect dependents from danger, and provision kith and kin (Gilmore 1990, p. 223).

In many societies, these 'male imperatives' involve risks, and masculinity can be both dangerous and competitive:

In fulfilling their obligations, men stand to lose—a hovering threat that separates them from women and boys. They stand to lose their reputations or their lives; yet their prescribed tasks must be done if the group is to survive and prosper (Gilmore 1990, p. 223).

At this level, the argument is consistent with that of Daly and Wilson, and needs extension to encompass the class data we have observed regarding masculinity and violence. A possible line of reasoning is established in Gilmore's argument about the impact of differential social organisation on masculinity:

The data show a strong connection between the social organisation of production and the intensity of the male image. That is, manhood ideologies are adaptations to social environments, not simply autonomous mental projections or psychic fantasies writ large. The

harsher the environment and the scarcer the resources, the more manhood is stressed as inspiration and goal (Gilmore 1990, p. 224).

If Gilmore is correct, it would seem reasonable to argue by extension that the contemporary male who possesses economic advantages is able to provide for the base for the procreative, provisioning and protective functions through his economic resources, and these same resources provide the underpinning for his competition with other males for a mate. In other words, physical prowess and aggression no longer become necessary for the economically advantaged male to assure his competence in reproduction, provision or protection.

For males at the bottom of the economic heap, however, the lack of access to economic resources has the consequence of rendering these issues, and therefore their sense of masculinity, as problematic. For such males, the expression and defence of their masculinity may come through violence. Messerschmidt, for one, has argued along these lines:

Some marginalised males adapt to their economic and racial powerlessness by engaging in, and hoping to succeed at, competition for personal power with rivals of their own class, race and gender. For these marginalised males, the personal power struggle with other marginalised males becomes a mechanism for exhibiting and confirming masculinity . . . The marginalised male expresses himself through a 'collective toughness, a masculine performance' observed and cheered by his 'buddies'. Members of the macho street culture have and maintain a strong sense of honour. As he must constantly prove his masculinity, an individual's reputation is always at stake. (Messerschmidt 1987, p. 70).

There are deeply-rooted aspects of culture which place men in a competition with other men in terms of their reputation or honour. Assuming that Gilmore (1990) is correct in his assertion that the bases of masculine rivalry derive from competition regarding mating, provisioning and protecting, males who are well-integrated into roles of economic success are able to ground their masculinity through methods other than physical confrontations and violence. For economically marginal males, however, physical toughness and violence become a major avenue by which they can assert their masculinity and defend themselves against what they see as challenges from other males.

It is the defence of honour that makes what another might consider a 'trivial' provocation for some to be the grounds for a confrontation which builds to homicide. It was Wolfgang who first observed the phenomenon of the apparent triviality of events which provokes some homicides:

Despite diligent efforts to discern the exact and precise factors involved in an altercation or domestic quarrel, police officers are often unable to acquire information other than the fact that a trivial argument developed, or an insult was suffered by one or both of the parties (Wolfgang 1958, p. 188).

It seems clear, however, that what is trivial to a firmly respectable observer may be quite central to the marginal actor's sense of masculinity. Daly and Wilson (1988) have argued along similar lines:

A seemingly minor affront is not merely a 'stimulus' to action, isolated in time and space. It must be understood within a larger social context of reputations, face, relative social status, and enduring relationships. Men are known by their fellows as 'the sort who can be pushed around' or 'the sort that won't take any . . .', as people whose word means action and people who are full of hot air, as guys whose girlfriends you can chat up with impunity or guys you don't want to mess with. In most social milieus, a man's reputation depends in part upon the maintenance of a credible threat of violence (Daly & Wilson 1988, p. 128).

These comments are, in fact, not inconsistent with Wolfgang's observations. After the sentence noting the apparently 'trivial' character in some of the disputes leading to homicide, Wolfgang goes on to observe:

Intensive reading of the police files and of verbatim reports of interrogations . . . suggest that the significance of a jostle, a slight derogatory remark, or the appearance of a weapon . . . are stimuli differentially perceived and interpreted . . . Quick resort to physical combat as a measure of daring, courage, or defence of status appears to be a cultural expectation, especially for lower class males . . . (Wolfgang 1958, p. 189).

Further, Wolfgang (1958, p. 189) is explicit in his statement that it is the observers in the criminal justice system who, drawing upon middle and upper class values which have influenced the shaping of legal norms, have seen the disputes which lead to homicide as trivial in origin. For the lower class players in the homicide drama, the challenge to manhood is far from a trivial matter.

### **The Issue of Gangs**

The highly visible forms of gang conflict in the USA have raised questions about the possibility that this form of masculine violence may be spreading to Australia as well. In Victoria, the media have focused attention on the behaviour of groups such as the '3147 gang' (so-called because of the postal code of the neighbourhood), and one forensic specialist was quoted as being concerned that Victoria was ' . . . heading towards becoming a state of warring gangs' (Melbourne *Herald-Sun*, 7 August 1991, p. 2).

Answering the question of the degree to which there is a 'gang problem' requires some clarity and agreement regarding the use of the term 'gang'. There is nothing new, obviously, in collective crime in Australia. In the nineteenth century there was the 'Kelly gang' and the 'larrikin' problem in cities such as Sydney and Melbourne. In the USA, however, the gang problem tends to have a more specific meaning. One concise definition offered was:

A youth gang is a self-formed association of peers, bound together by mutual interests, with identifiable leadership, well-developed lines of authority, and other organisational features, who act in concert to

achieve a specific purpose of purposes which generally include the conduct of illegal activity and control over a particular territory, facility, or type of enterprise (Miller 1980, p. 121).

Some have argued that such a definition is too general, and somehow fails to capture some of the common features of the American street gang. As an alternative, Spergel has suggested the following as a description of gang activity:

The gang, particularly the violent street gang, can be distinguished from the delinquent or criminal group. It usually has a primary commitment to achieving its interests through violence. It tends to be larger and better organised than most delinquent or criminal groups. It may comprise individuals of similar or varied ages, often aggregated or designated by age limits such as 'futures', peewees or midgets, juniors and seniors or 'old heads'. Its structure includes leaders, core or regular, and marginal or peripheral members. Its leadership may be individual or corporate . . . The gang usually has a name, an insignia, or colours; a tradition, sometimes extending over decades; and a turf or territory, or many turfs or territories, to which it establishes special claims and rights. It may engage in a wide range of activities, criminal and non-criminal. An underlying characteristic is not so much conflict as peer competition for status or notoriety through violent activities, as well as protection and maintenance of turf or income producing interests (Spergel 1984, p. 201).

A recent empirical study of gangs in the USA offered the following more complicated definition:

. . . a gang is an organised social system that is both quasi-private (not fully open to the public) and quasi-secretive (much of the information concerning its business remains confined within the group) and one whose size and goals have necessitated that social interaction be governed by a leadership structure that has defined roles: where the authority associated with these roles has been legitimised to the extent that social codes are operational to regulate the behaviour of both the leadership and the rank and file; that plans and provides not only for the social and economic services of its members, but also for its own maintenance as an organisation; that pursues such goals irrespective of whether the action is legal or not; and that lacks a bureaucracy (that is, an administrative staff that is hierarchically organised and separate from leadership) (Sanchez-Jankowski 1991, p. 28-9).

While there is not complete agreement among these writers, it would seem that in the American scene the term 'gang' is likely to refer to a group that has a relatively high degree of organisation, with an explicit leadership structure, a defined territory which is part of the gang identity, and clear colours or other insignia which set them apart. Using these rough guidelines, it would appear that such formalised gangs are rarely encountered in Australian communities. While for a short time after the appearance of the movie *Colors* there was a bit of faddish copying of American gang characteristics (including the wearing of colours), in the Melbourne environment there is little that resembles American street gangs.

At the same time, there are groupings of young people, especially originating in lower and underclass environments, whose collective behaviour is seen by the wider community as 'troublesome'. The groupings tend to be loosely organised and lack a clear leadership structure. While they may emerge from a particular neighbourhood, their activities are spread over a reasonably wide geographical area. There may be some amount of activity in the neighbourhood, but it is highly likely that the group will be mobile, often flowing through the major spokes of the public transportation system (buses, trams and trains) into such readily available public scenes as train stations, shopping malls, pubs, parks or reserves, or even the streets and sidewalks.

There is some amount of masculine group behaviour which involves violence. What seems distinctive about the violence in Australia is that much of the conflict between groups seems to result from what can be seen as the 'social friction' that occurs as groups flow past each other in these public scenes. When conflict between two groups took place and led to a homicide, it often happened outside the neighbourhood of both groups. For examples, there was the account of a young Chinese lad who with his friends had come into the central Chinese district of Melbourne, and as he was walking down the street, he called out in Chinese insults aimed at Vietnamese. The lad and his friends stopped in at a pinball parlour and begin to play the games, when they were suddenly attacked by a group of young Vietnamese, and the Chinese teenager receives a fatal stab wound. In another account, a Vietnamese teenager became the victim of a homicide when he and his group of friends were assaulted by a group of youth 'Old Australians' on the Flinders Street Station steps, and the lad was felled by a punch and struck the back of his head on the steps when he collapsed.

Sometimes the frictional effects between groups occur closer to home, as in the case of a group of western suburbs young males who were sharing New Year's drinks at their local park when another young male came by in his car. Insults were exchanged, and the car was surrounded by the group in the park. They proceeded to kick at the car, and throw beer bottles at the driver. The driver sped off, but only to gather up reinforcements to return for a major brawl, in which one of the park group suffered fatal head injuries when bashed on the head by the driver.

Through these accounts it can be seen that there is a theme of collective violence involving competing groups of young males which runs through these accounts of homicide. Further, the violence is closely linked to the dynamics of the groups and the styles of conflict that develop between them. In this, there is much in common with data from the USA on violence, including probably a fair proportion of events which become classified as 'gang homicides'. Consider the following clash between two differentiated groups:

Colin (age 17) was a member of a loosely organised group known as 'Bogans', while Charles (age 19) was part of the 'Headbangers'. Both were at a disco in a local tennis centre, when a group of the Bogan males became involved in an argument with a group of girls who were with the Headbangers. After a brief exchange of taunts and insults, one of the girls punched Colin, who retaliated with a punch in return. Charles came over and attempted to pull the girl away. Colin called Charles a coward

and a wimp, and began to throw punches at Charles. At this point, a general fight began between the two groups, involving ten to twelve people. Charles then pulled out a knife, and stabbed Colin several times in the chest and abdomen. Colin died shortly after (his blood alcohol level was found to be .079). (Case No 1931-87)

While this narrative establishes that there are distinctive collective styles around which young people recognise and respond to, where such group identities exist—such as 'Bogans', 'Headbangers', 'Wogs', or 'Skips'—these appear to be loosely defined and derive more from the presence of general and widely spread lifestyles, rather than from the existence of and identification with territorial-based gangs. As indicated in the accounts above, group identities can nourish collective violence. The nature of that collective violence, however, seems tied more to issues having to do with conflicts around the common uses of public spaces, rather than in protection of home territory. As groups move through such public scenes as pubs, parties, streets, parks, or similar spaces, the frictional contact between individuals and groups may result in contests of honour between males. The conflict, as can be seen in the case studies, may involve individuals or perhaps even groups. Without question, the collectivity of males is a central feature of the conflict, with group members on both sides providing both participants and social audience for the contest as it emerges and erupts into violence. In this, it is suspected that there is much in common with a large proportion of male violence in the USA, including homicides which become identified as 'gang violence' in American cities.

At the same time, while there is group violence, what is not present in the current Australian scene are formally organised and structured gangs. These Australian groups do not have a formal leadership structure, they do not wear insignia which sets them apart from other gangs, and there is not a clear identification with and protection of their local territory. Homicide in Australia can be seen to be a frequent product of group activity, but not as a feature of the ritualised and formalised gang conflict found in the larger cities of the USA.

### **Some Policy Considerations**

From the patterns observed in the present data, it has been suggested that the major sources of violence appear to reside in behaviour patterns closely identified with masculinity and economic marginality. These have to be seen as deep and enduring features of social life in Australia, and certainly they are not amenable to any quick fix. At the same time, there are some policy directions that are worth considering.

There are some educational directions that might be examined, especially in light of the implications of the notion of 'scenarios' of violence. Confronted with a situation which might follow a path toward violence, what are the available scenarios which might deflect the action along non-violent directions? An argument could be made that teenage males (and females) in the classroom setting of the school might be confronted with various situations which have a potential for violence. The educational task could

then be to create or demonstrate the various scripts by which the action might be played out, in particular those which serve to reduce conflict and violence. The young people could then role play these scenarios, and thus gain a form of direct experience both with potential scenes of violence, and then more importantly, with some of the alternative scripts that might deflect the collective action in non-violent directions.

The underlying premise is that, in general, young people have only the vaguest outlines of the rules that hold for scenes that are violent. While there is a general awareness of the need to defend one's honour, there is little opportunity to practise ways that an individual can move in and out of difficult scenes in such a way that the sense of honour is preserved, yet violence is avoided. Schools, in other words, might give specific attention to the teaching of personal techniques for conflict resolution and conflict avoidance.

At the same time, a persistent feature of extreme violence is that it appears to be tied closely to conditions of economic marginality. This implies that violence reduction may require policies that are directed at coming to grips with the exceptional levels of unemployment now being experienced by young people in Australia. Significant changes have occurred in the shape of the labour force in Australia so that a large percentage of young people find that after leaving school their transition to adulthood through finding a job is blocked. For such individuals, this presents a major problem in identity formation. The disruption of the transition means that the routine ways of gaining access to conventional adult identities are put out of reach. Unemployment for them, in short, is about much more than simply not finding a job. Those caught in this social limbo, disconnected from much of conventional community life, readily drift into the various forms of marginal masculine cultures which are supportive of violence.

Solving this emergent problem of disrupted transition requires that major effort be given to the development of strategies aimed at structural change of the labour force so that new entry portals are created allowing access to work for those who are young, inexperienced, with relatively little to offer in the way of skills or qualifications. If Australia fails to meet this challenge, it may face the major consequences in terms of various forms of troublesome behaviour posed by underclass youth. Certainly, from the data reviewed here, an expansion of the pool of underclass may increase pressures both to engage in exceptional risk taking—which in extreme circumstances result in armed robbery and homicide—and to force males into positions where they see violence as the available mechanism to define and preserve their sense of masculine honour.

At a much more direct policy level, these data serve to reinforce the need to maintain and increase controls on guns. What the various case histories demonstrate is that violence is a basic feature in the lifestyles of some young males, either in terms of drawing upon violence to defend their masculinity, or the willingness to risk violence in engaging in criminal behaviour. Given this propensity to resort to violence, it follows that if guns were more accessible, it could be expected that there would be a significant increase in fatalities among males resulting from gunshot wounds. While it is unrealistic to assume that illegal gun use could be completely eliminated, it can be argued that any steps that would decrease access to guns would save lives,



especially in those circumstances involving the rapid escalation of violence where there is a spontaneous use of whatever weapon is at hand.

In conclusion, this research has underscored the significance of masculinity in any understanding of homicide in Australia. What the investigation has outlined are particular scenarios within which male-to-male encounters lead to fatal consequences. Further research is needed to establish if the patterns found here are generalisable to other settings, both in Australia and overseas. Another goal of future research would be to examine how it is that males, having set themselves on a course which might lead to exceptional violence, then deflect their behaviour along a non-violent path. A better understanding of these restraining judgments might create some important avenues for interventions for the control of violence.

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