American Homicide Supplemental Volume (AHSV)

Civilization Thesis (CT)

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Please note that this appendix is a working draft of an essay I plan to revise and publish in the future. That is why it is not under the Creative Commons copyright. I presented the working draft at the annual meeting of the Social Science History Association in Miami, Florida in 2008. The paper was titled "Are Moderns Less Violent? The Pitfalls of Elias's Civilization Thesis." The author reserves all rights to the material in this section of the AHSV.

Civilization Thesis

In recent decades, historians have looked to the past to help explain today's high homicide rate in the United States and low homicide rates in western and central Europe. Many scholars of Europe are persuaded that the United States is today more homicidal than other affluent societies because Americans and their institutions have not made satisfactory progress along the road to "civilization," as Norbert Elias defined the term. Elias argued that homicide rates have declined in Europe since medieval times because of the growth of powerful states and criminal courts, which suppressed lawlessness and deterred impulsive behavior, and because of improvements in manners, which encouraged self-control and greater regard for the feelings of others and led to a gradual decline in all forms of interpersonal violence. According to this theory, the civilizing process has been reversed from time to time, but the overall trajectory has been toward stronger states, self-control, and lower homicide rates, even in the United States, where rates remain higher than in other Western nations because of a weaker state, a "premature" democracy, more lenient courts, cruder manners, less regard for others, and a culture that values the defense of personal honor more than self-control.[1]

The civilization thesis, however, does not fit well with the accumulating evidence on the history of homicide. Once the impact of modern medicine on mortality is taken into account, it becomes clear that homicide rates in Europe were no higher through much of the medieval and early modern period than during the interwar years of the twentieth century or in the United States today. With modern wound care, antisepsis, antibiotics, anesthesia, fluid replacement, trauma surgery, and emergency services, three

of every four homicide victims killed before 1850 would probably survive today. With the benefit of modern nonemergency care alone, more than a third would probably survive.[2]

Modern nutrition has also made a difference. The survival rate for Union soldiers who suffered gunshot, artillery, or bayonet wounds during the Civil War declined dramatically when the scurvy rate shot up in 1864, even though the quality of field hospitals and battlefield surgery improved. As the number of cases of scurvy increased from 5 per 1,000 soldiers per month to 25 per 1,000 between the spring and summer of 1864, the morality rate for wounded soldiers who were transported to field hospitals rose from 10 percent to 25 percent. When the number of cases of scurvy fell in the fall of 1864 to 10 per 1,000 soldiers per month, the mortality rate for wounded soldiers fell back to 10 percent. The same correlation appears between the number of cases of night blindness (from vitamin A deficiency) and the mortality rate for wounded soldiers. The nutrition-poor rations available to Union soldiers in the summer of 1864 cost many lives.[3] Modern people are more successful at saving lives and at surviving injuries, because of modern medicine and nutrition; but they are probably not less homicidal than many of their predecessors.

Of course, homicide rates were sometimes much higher in the medieval and early modern period than they are today in Europe or the United States. At other times they were lower. These highs and lows cannot be explained by a theory that draws a sharp a line between pre-modern and modern states and personalities.

The available data, many of which have been compiled by Manuel Eisner for his long term study of European homicide rates, indicate that homicide rates did not decline in

Western Europe between the thirteenth and the early seventeenth centuries: they went up

and down (Figure 1).[4] They were higher in the second half of the fourteenth century and the

first quarter of the fifteenth century than at any other time in the past 900 years—probably

30 to 50 per 100,000 persons per year. But those were desperate years. Europe was

wracked by the Black Death, famine, war, and rebellion.[5] Through most of the medieval

and early modern periods the homicide rate was probably 15 to 20 per 100,000 per year,

except for a low in the early sixteenth century and in the thirteenth century. The median

rates calculated from indictments, inquests, trials, or pardons in jurisdictions studied to

date conform to this pattern (Figure 2).[6] It is important to note, however, that these data

are based on dissimilar sources and that they cover only a few decades in most

jurisdictions. They are hard to compare from place to place or over time.

       The data for early modern England, which are based in all but one instance on

county-level indictments, show a sharp increase in homicide in the late sixteenth century

and a drop in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century (Figures 3 and 4).

Homicide rates were probably much higher than these data indicate during the English

Civil Wars, when law enforcement and the criminal justice system were severely

disrupted. But otherwise, the data probably reflect an actual rise and fall in homicides of

adults and older children (infanticides are not included in these data). A similar pattern

appears in France, Switzerland, the Netherlands (except for the data that Pieter

Spierenburg gathered on Amsterdam), and in Scandinavia (except for the data on

Vadstena) [Figures 5 and 6]. Nearly every series moves up in the late sixteenth century

and down in the mid- or late seventeenth century, just as earlier European data move up

in the late fourteenth century and down in the mid-fifteenth century.

Rates in England may appear at first glance to have been lower in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries than in the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, but that is an artifact of the sources historians have used to determine homicide rates. Medieval scholars, including Hanawalt (1976, 1979), Given (1977), and Hammer (1978), use coroner's rolls and gaol delivery rolls to determine homicide rates. These rolls are excellent sources for studying homicide, because they include inquests, arrests, and criminal examinations into all suspicious and violent deaths, including homicides, suicides, and accidents; and because they were created by courts that had original jurisdiction over all felonies that occurred in their counties. Scholars of early modern England, including Beattie (1986), Cockburn (1990), and Hunnisett (1985), have used only indictment records or inquest records. These records are less complete than the sources used by scholars of medieval England. Indictment rolls include only homicides in which the evidence was sufficient to bring charges against a particular individual, and by the sixteenth century coroner's returns usually included only homicides that did not lead to indictments—that is, homicides in which suspects could not be identified or brought to justice.[7]

The records of England's early modern county courts are further incomplete because county courts no longer had original jurisdiction over homicides that occurred in towns that had achieved "borough" status. Homicides that occurred in towns with substantial populations, like Colchester in Essex or Rye in Sussex, did not appear in county court records. Only Cheshire, which was a palatinate, lacked borough courts— and it had a much higher indictment rate than all but one county studied to date, Middlesex, which is adjacent to London.[8] And demographers have concluded that the

population of England in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries was larger than scholars

had previously thought, which means the rates we have now for English counties in that

era will fall by around a fifth. Once the new demographic findings and the differences

between medieval and early modern records are taken into account, the homicide rate in

England will prove to have been in the range of 15 to 20 per 100,000 per year in the late

sixteenth and early seventeenth century, just as it was in the thirteenth and early

fourteenth centuries.[9]

The data from the Netherlands, except for Pieter Spierenburg's series on

Amsterdam, follow the same pattern (Figure 7). The 75 years that followed the Black

Death were extraordinarily homicidal, according to the data from Utrecht, as were the

late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, according to trial records in Leiden. The

downward homicide trend in late medieval and early modern Amsterdam may have been

anomalous.

A further problem is that most homicide studies cited by civilization theorists are

based on aggregated homicide rates, which mask sharp breaks in nondomestic homicide

rates and can create the illusion of gradual change. Since the seventeenth century, homicide

rates have spiked to medieval and early modern levels a number of times in a number of

places: during the Age of Revolution, during the sectional crisis in the United States, and

during the war and interwar years in twentieth-century Europe.

Civilization theorists have put forward promising theories to account for these

anomalies, which they attribute to "decivilizing" processes. These theories focus on the

impact of long-term swings in the economy (which have the power to strengthen or weaken

states), on the ability of states to protect their citizens (which can make states more or less

legitimate), and on discrimination (which can exclude certain groups from the civilizing process).[10] The revisionists are right, I believe, about the forces they have identified, but they have defined those forces too narrowly and have missed others, such as the presence or absence of national feeling or disruptive political ideas, or of government legitimacy, which can have a profound effect on homicide rates. That is why revisionist theories can account for only a portion of the anomalies, and why they fall short when they try to explain the twists and turns of homicide rates in Europe and the United States.

We can also test a variant of the civilization hypothesis developed by Roger Lane and Eric Monkkonen.[11] They hypothesized that the homicide rate declined in northern cities in the late nineteenth century because compulsory schooling and factory work suppressed impulsive and violent behavior among whites. According to this theory, factory workers, salaried clerical workers, and workers who had stayed in school until their teens were less likely to commit murder because they accepted the discipline that came with those jobs and with year-round education. To succeed, they had to control their tempers, obey orders, cooperate with others, delay gratification, and accept boredom and routine to a degree that skilled craftsmen, farmers, day laborers, and rural common-school students did not. Factory and clerical workers also spent more of their leisure time at organized sporting events, in city or amusement parks, or with their families, rather than in taverns, which became the haunts of less respectable whites.[12]

This theory has merit, but it cannot account for the breadth of the decline in homicide in the northern United States in the late nineteenth century. Homicide rates fell not only in industrial cities, like Philadelphia, but in maritime cities, like Boston, and in small towns and in the countryside, where industrial and clerical jobs were few and schools met for only five or six

months a year. They also fell in rural counties, as in Holmes and Ross in Ohio (Roth 2009:

Figures 4.2 and 5.3). The proportion of white children ages 7 through 14 enrolled in school held

steady in the North at 75 to 80 percent from the 1850s through the 1920s, both in cities and in the

countryside, even though the homicide rate among unrelated adults rose and fell over those years

(Figures 8-10).[13] And there is no sign that homicide rates rose or fell with the per capita

consumption of alcoholic beverages, which is probably the best proxy available for measuring

the degree of social and/or self-control and concern for personal reputation in the nineteenth

century (for example, Figure 11). The decline in homicide in the late nineteenth century cannot

be credited, therefore, to disciplinary forces like schooling, clerical work, or factory work, or

even the temperance movement. More instrumental were the changed political climate (which

re-legitimized the federal government in the eyes of Northerners after the Union victory in the

Civil War and the reconciliation of most white Northerners and Southerners at the end of

Reconstruction), the integration of Irish immigrants into white society (which enlarged the circle

of fellow-feeling among European Americans), and the widespread acceptance of the idea that a

majority of Americans would have to work for others (which legitimized a social hierarchy that

could no longer promise self-employment to a majority of adult men).

  The impact of modern policing should not be overstated, either. There were few police in

small towns or in the countryside, and the number of police who patrolled the streets of northern

cities remained stable from the 1850s to the 1920s at roughly 15 to 20 officers per 10,000

inhabitants (Figures 12-15). Urban officers confined unruly enterprises like cock fighting, dog

fighting, gambling, and prostitution to older, poorer, minority neighborhoods, but they were not

as professional, apolitical, or honest as reformers would have liked, nor were they much more

successful at catching violent criminals than ordinary citizens or rural constables were. And

officers were still enmeshed in the violence. One of seven homicides among unrelated adults in

Chicago involved a police officer: a third of the time as victims and two-thirds of the time as

assailants. Most officers were killed, as might be expected, by people disposed to violence:

murderers, burglars, or the mentally ill. But vast majority of the people officers killed were non-

violent offenders: fleeing thieves, drunks who resisted arrest, a saloon keeper who had violated a

zoning ordinance, an innocent bystander who was standing near an unruly crowd. The killing of

John Shea was all too typical. Shea and two of his friends had stolen beer kegs from a rail car

and were rolling them down a city street when Officer Walsh happened upon the scene. They

abandoned the kegs and fled, but Walsh was determined to stop them, and he opened fire,

shooting Walsh in the back. By the end of the century, the urban police did maintain order on

respectable streets and impose a degree of order in rougher neighborhoods. They also had more

authority than they had had in the mid-nineteenth century, because they were caught less often in

the middle of divisive political battles. But they had little to do with the decline in homicide

among Northern whites.[14]

  Where should we go from here? The most pressing need is to extend time series from the

medieval and early modern periods so that we can develop continuous series over long stretches

of time in particular places. We need to push the series on medieval English counties beyond

1347, so that we can judge the impact of the Black Death in a particular place. Also, we need to

estimate rigorously how many homicides would have been found in the early modern period if

similar records were available. That means, of course, that the surviving borough records must

be analyzed, and where they are not available the borough populations should be removed from

the county population totals. We must also use multiple sources and modern statistical methods

to make our homicide estimates in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries more precise. It is

impossible to compare cities if our homicide counts are based on different sources in each city: indictments in Philadelphia, thanks to Roger Lane, homicide detective reports in Chicago, thanks to Leigh Beinen, and newspapers in New Orleans, thanks to Giles Vandal. We must polish Eric Monkkonen's series on New York City, extend it beyond 1873, and use similar methods and sources to tackle other cities. Only then will we be able to decide whether rates fell faster in one city than another, which is the prerequisite for figuring out why.

The theory in *American Homicide* (Roth 2009) focuses not on the civilization thesis, but on the four correlates of homicide among unrelated adults. The correlates of low homicide rates were not in place in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, when the Black Death destabilized and delegitimized governments, turned citizens against each other, and unsettled class relations (leading to emancipation in Western Europe and serfdom in the East, as rich and poor struggled to come to terms with the sudden scarcity and high price of labor).[15] We should know within a few years whether England saw a general increase in homicide once the Black Death struck, an increase that is already apparent in the records from Oxford. If future research confirms that pattern, we'll be well on our way to ending the misperception of the middle ages as uniformly homicidal and to figuring out why homicide rates go up and down.

Figure CT 1

Homicide Rates in Western Europe, 1200-1800
(per 100,000 persons per year)

Eisner (2001). Mininum homicide rates.
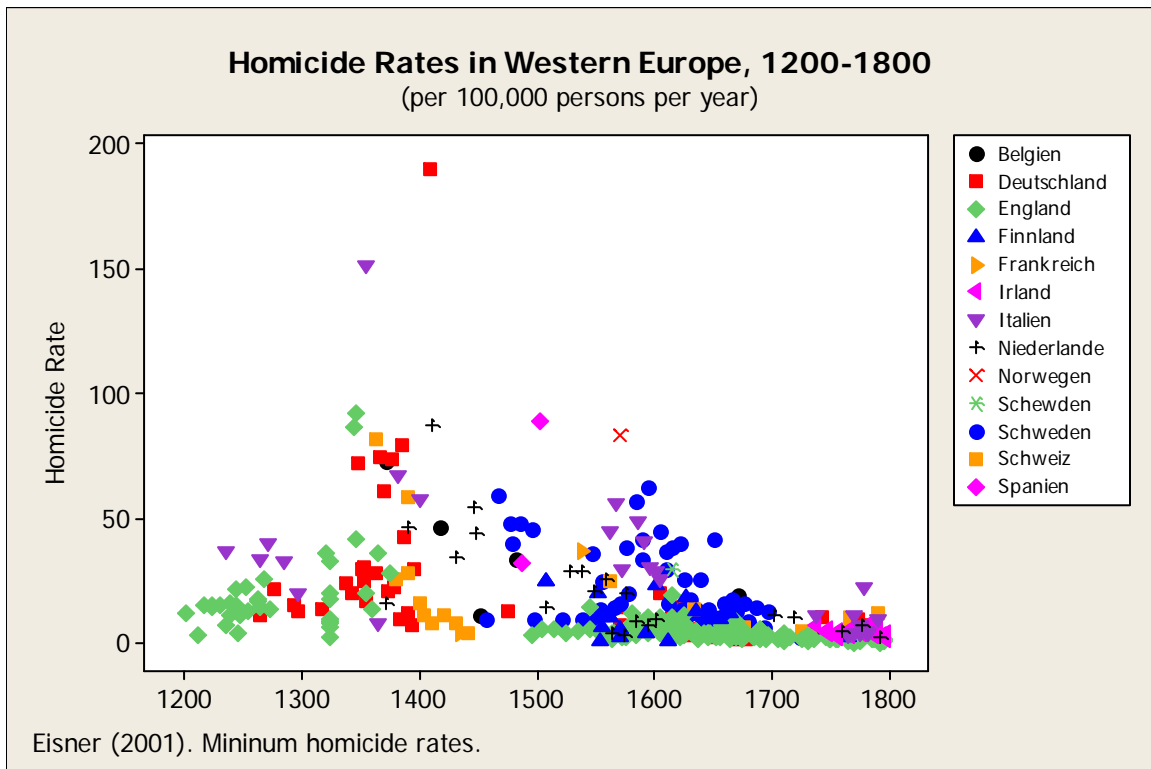
The data are dissimilar. They include indictment, inquest, indictment, and arrest rates.

Figure CT 2

Homicide Rates in Western Europe by Period, 1200-1800
(per 100,000 persons per year)
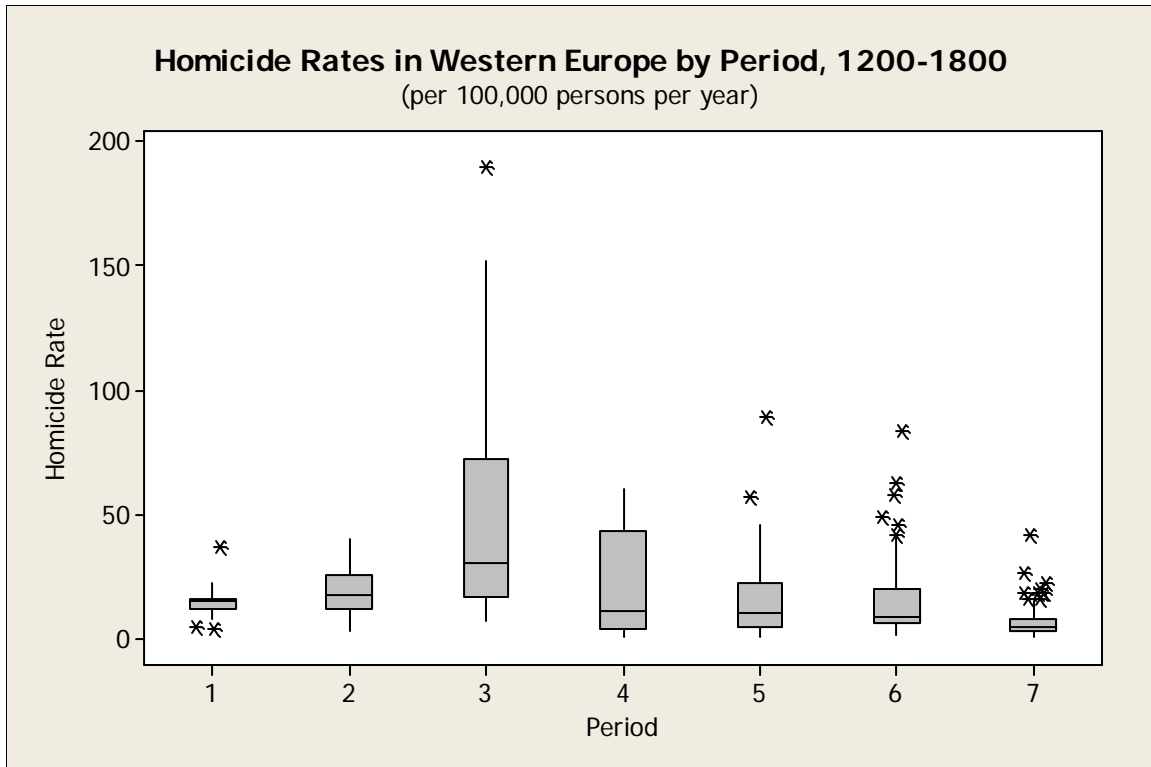
Periods	Median Homicide Rate
1: 1200-1250	11.5
3: 1251-1346	17.5
2: 1347-1425	30.2
4: 1426-1500	10.9
5: 1501-1570	10.0
6: 1571-1630	8.6
7: 1631-1800	7.9

Note: The homicide rates are from various sources: trial records, indictments, inquests, jail records, or a combination.
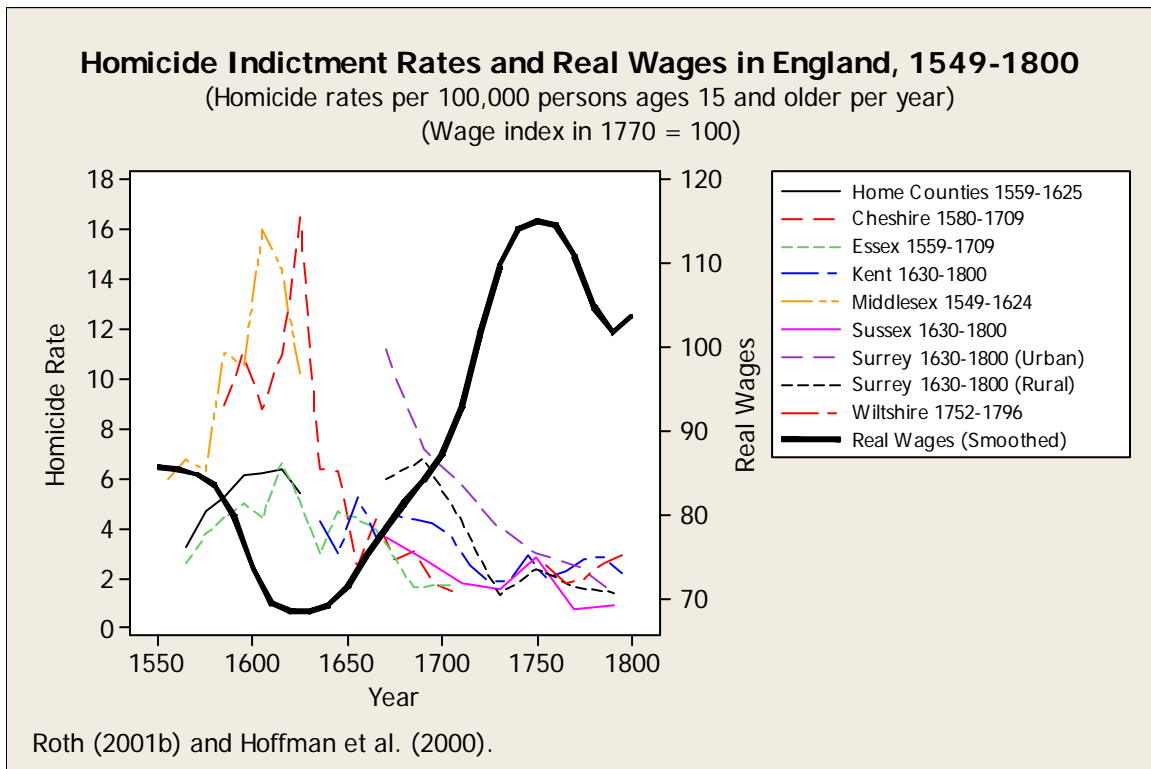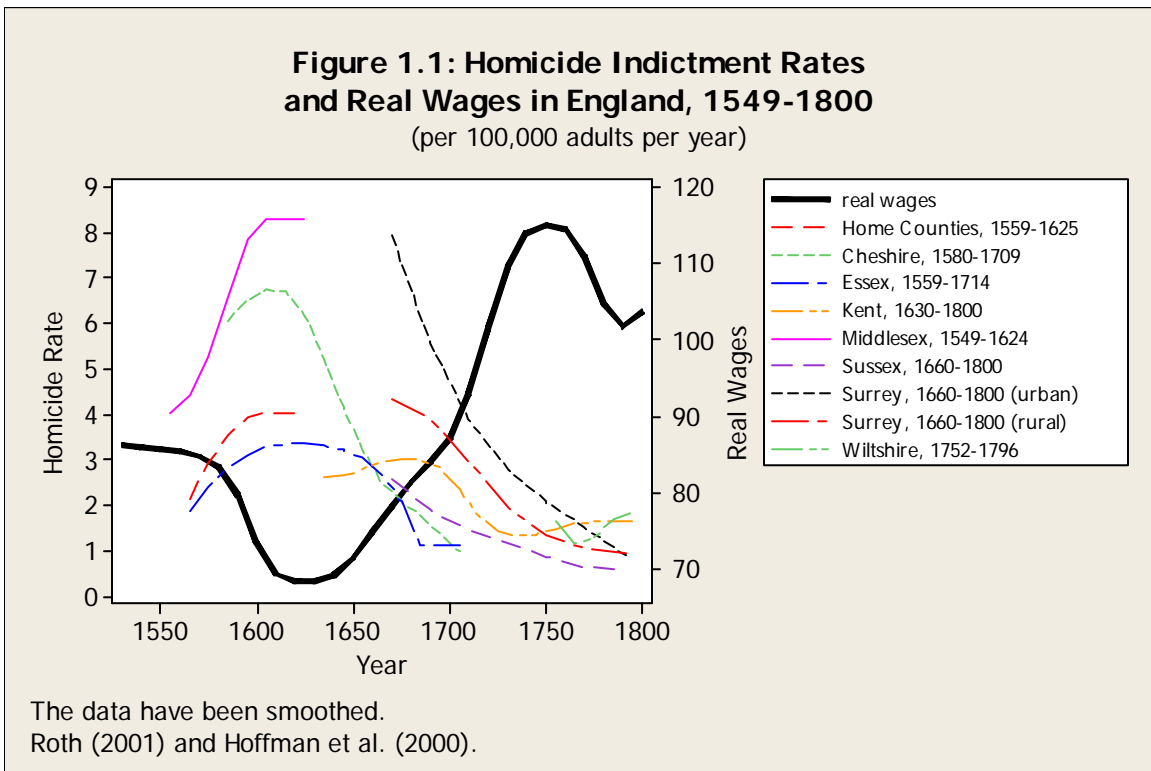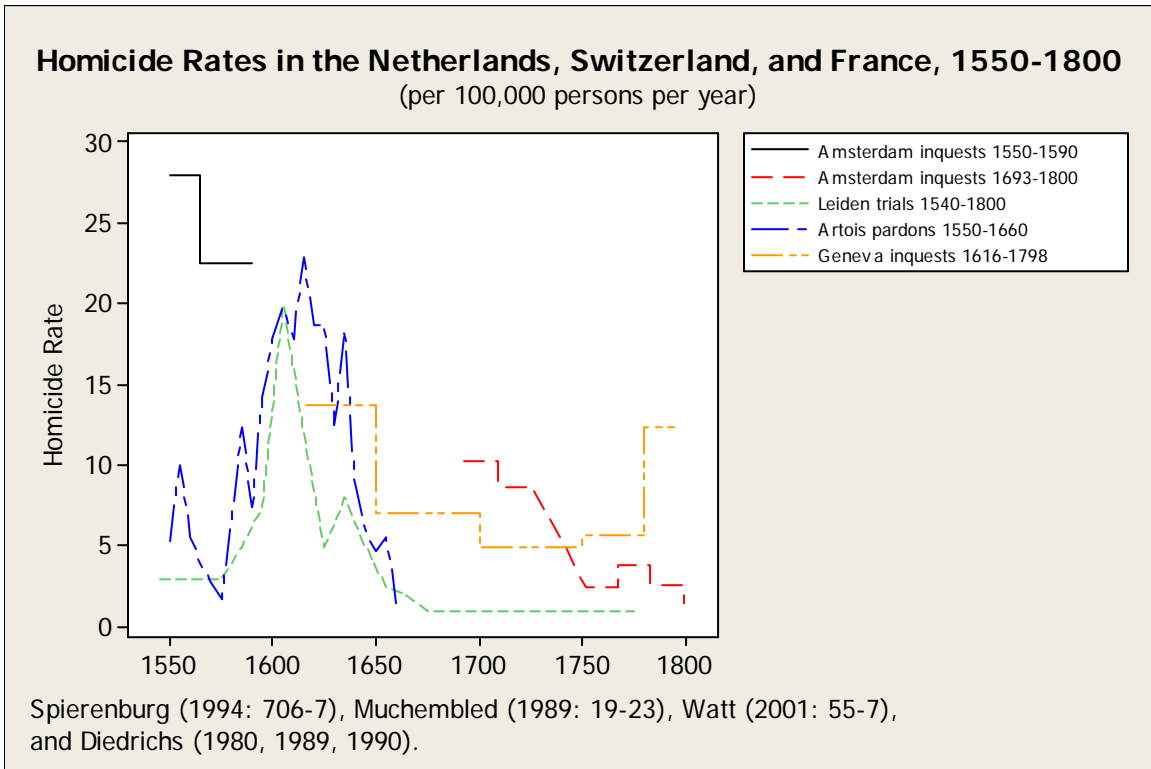
Figure CT 3

Homicide Indictment Rates and Real Wages in England, 1549-1800
(Homicide rates per 100,000 persons ages 15 and older per year)
(Wage index in 1770 = 100)

Roth (2001b) and Hoffman et al. (2000).

Figure CT 4

Figure 1.1: Homicide Indictment Rates
and Real Wages in England, 1549-1800
(per 100,000 adults per year)

The data have been smoothed.
Roth (2001) and Hoffman et al. (2000).

Figure CT 5

Homicide Rates in the Netherlands, Switzerland, and France, 1550-1800
(per 100,000 persons per year)

Spierenburg (1994: 706-7), Muchembled (1989: 19-23), Watt (2001: 55-7),
and Diedrichs (1980, 1989, 1990).

Figure CT 6

Urban Homicide Rates in Finland and Sweden, 1550-1700
(per 100,000 persons per year)

Karonen (2001: 104-10) and Osterberg (1996: 44).

Figure CT 7

Homicide Rates in the Netherlands, 1361-1800
(per 100,000 persons per year)

Figure CT 8

School Attendance in the Northern United States, 1850-1900:
Children Ages 7 through 14

	1850	1880	1900
White			
% Urban	.75	.83	.81
% Rural Non-Farm	.74	.82	.81
% Farm	.77	.84	.82
Nonwhite			
% Urban	.59	.73	.76
% Rural Non-Farm	.41	.65	.73
% Farm	.34	.71	.81

Source: IPUMS samples of 1850, 1880, and 1900 censuses for New England, Middle Atlantic, East North Central, and West North Central states.

Figure CT 9

School Attendance in the Northern United States, 1850-1900:
Children Ages 15 through 18

	1850	1880	1900
White			
% Urban	.21	.22	.27
% Rural Non-Farm	.37	.39	.37
% Farm	.55	.51	.43
Nonwhite			
% Urban	.19	.22	.25
% Rural Non-Farm	.04	.33	.26
% Farm	.26	.30	.33

Source: IPUMS samples of 1850, 1880, and 1900 censuses for New England, Middle Atlantic, East North Central, and West North Central states.

Figure CT 10

**Months of Attendance for Children in School
in the Northern United States, 1900**

	0-4	5-6	7-8	9 or more
Ages 7 to 14				
White				
% Urban	.03	.02	.11	.83
% Rural Non-Farm	.07	.11	.38	.44
% Farm	.14	.27	.41	.18
Nonwhite				
% Urban	.06	.06	.16	.71
% Rural Non-Farm	.15	.15	.33	.37
% Farm	.33	.25	.25	.21
Ages 15 to 18				
White				
% Urban	.06	.03	.11	.80
% Rural Non-Farm	.12	.11	.32	.46
% Farm	.30	.26	.29	.15
Nonwhite				
% Urban	.11	.02	.18	.70
% Rural Non-Farm	.09	.24	.24	.42
% Farm	.38	.38	.13	.13

Source: IPUMS samples of 1850, 1880, and 1900 censuses for New England, Middle Atlantic, East North Central, and West North Central states.
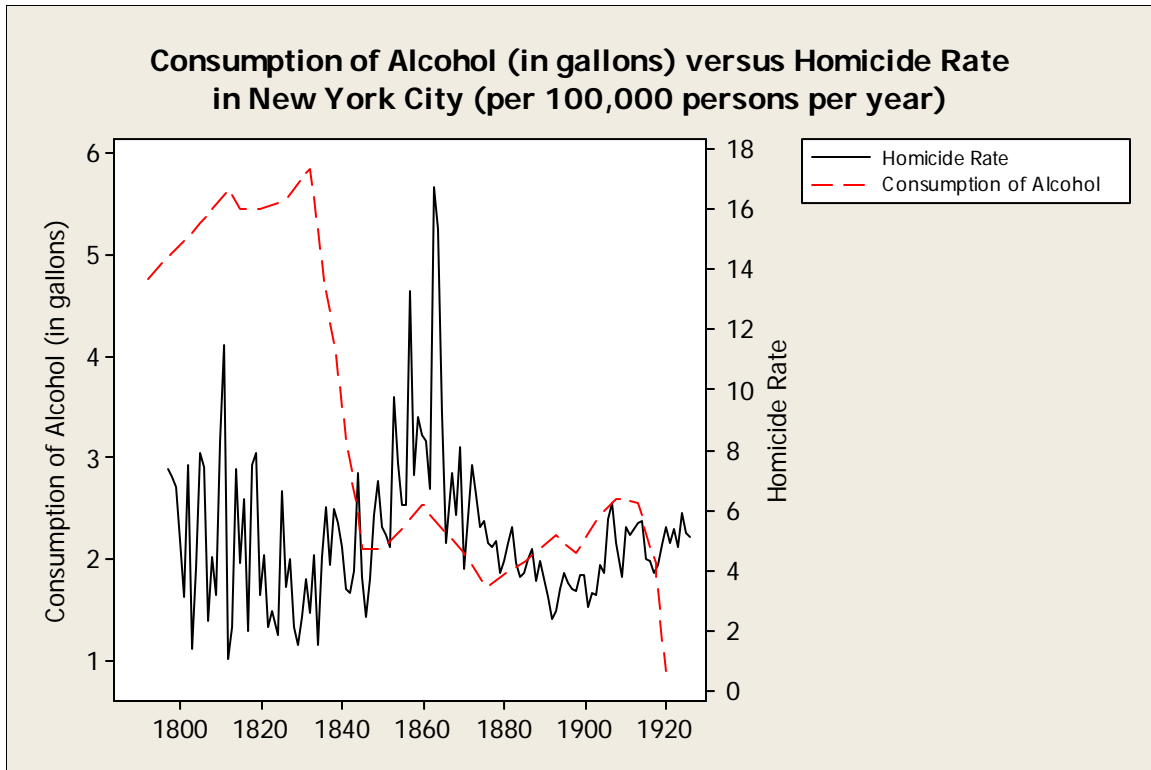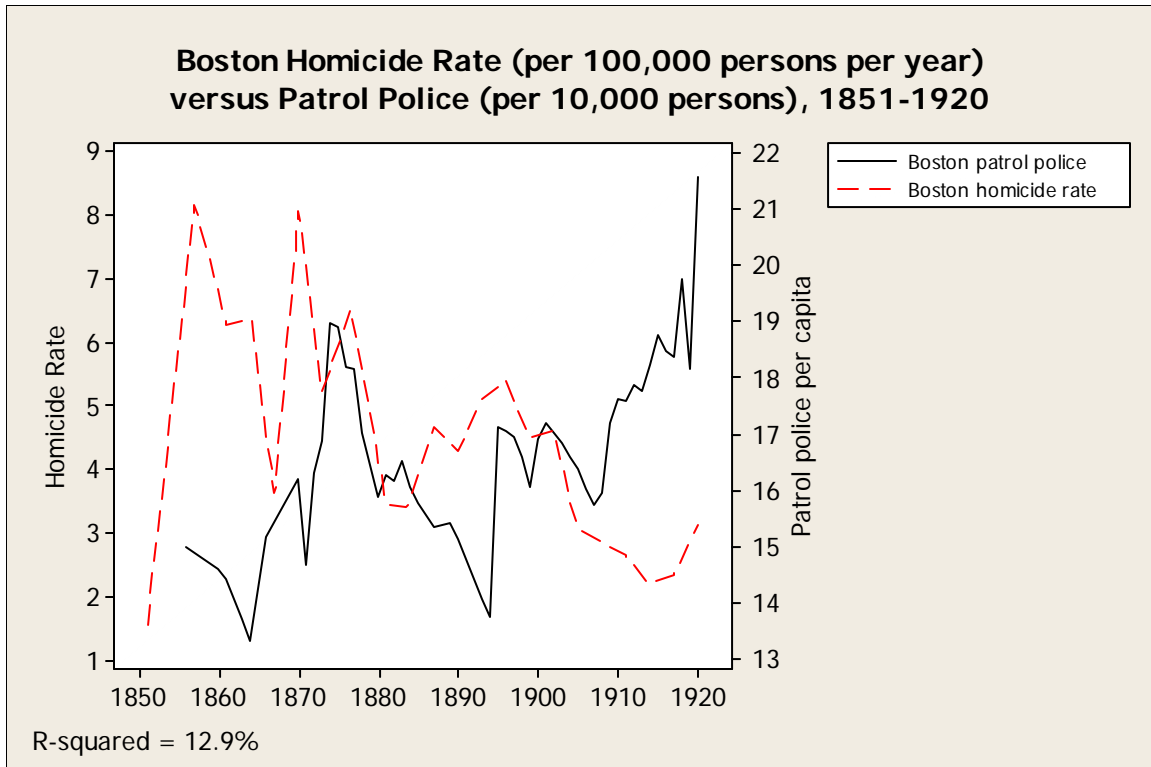
Figure CT 11

Consumption of Alcohol (in gallons) versus Homicide Rate in New York City (per 100,000 persons per year)

Figure CT 12

Boston Homicide Rate (per 100,000 persons per year) versus Patrol Police (per 10,000 persons), 1851-1920

R-squared = 12.9%

Figure CT 13

New York City Homicide Rate (per 100,000 persons per year) versus Patrol Police (per 10,000 persons), 1851-1920

R-squared = 1.9%

Figure CT 14

Philadelphia Homicide Indictment Rate (per 100,000 adults per year) versus Patrol Police (per 10,000 persons)

Figure CT 15

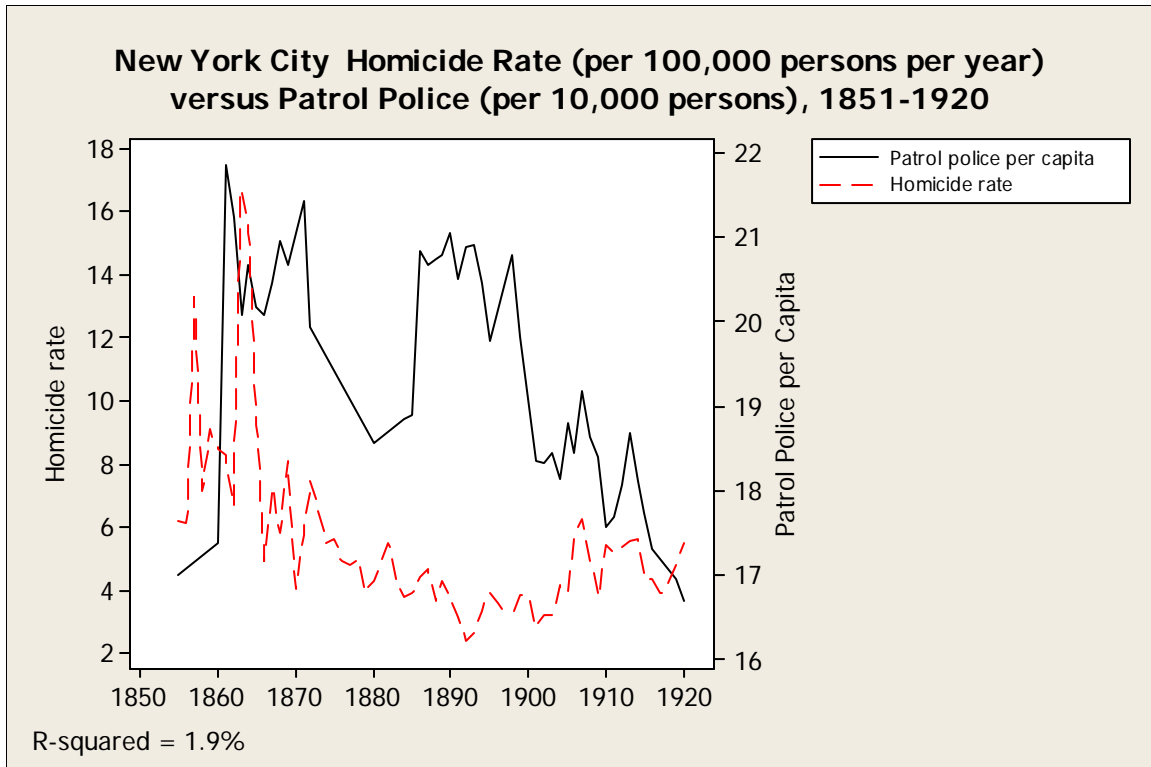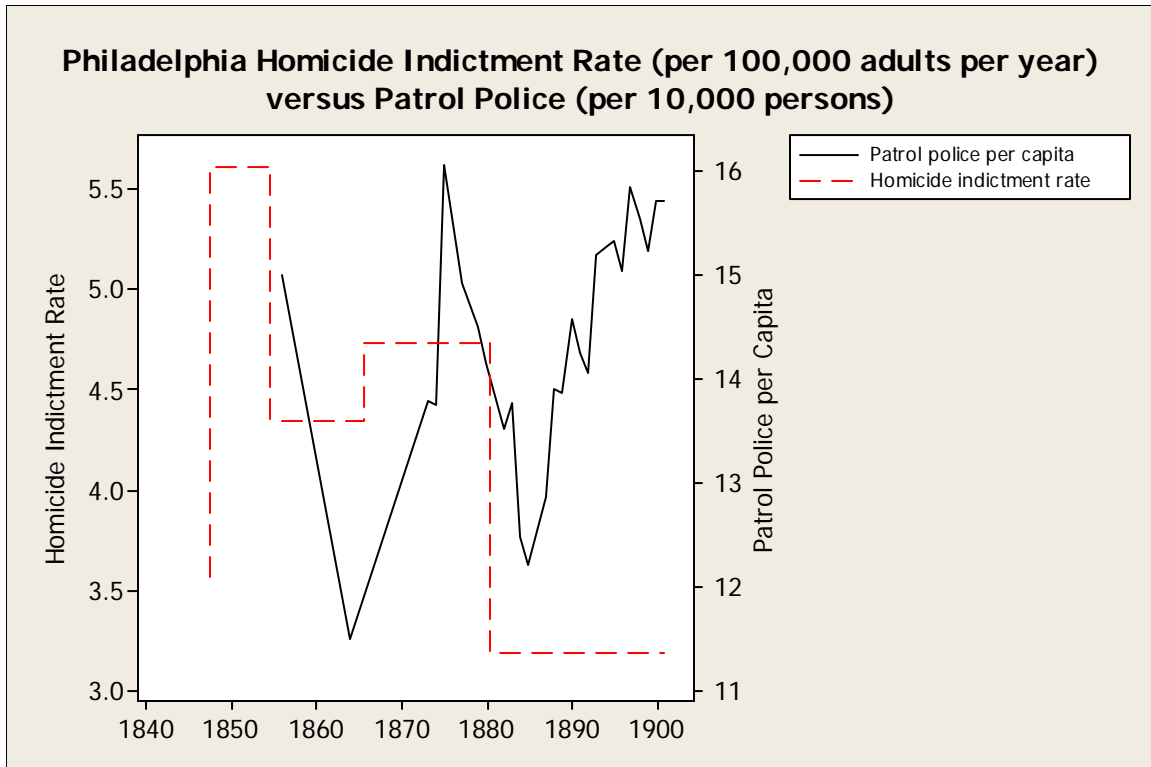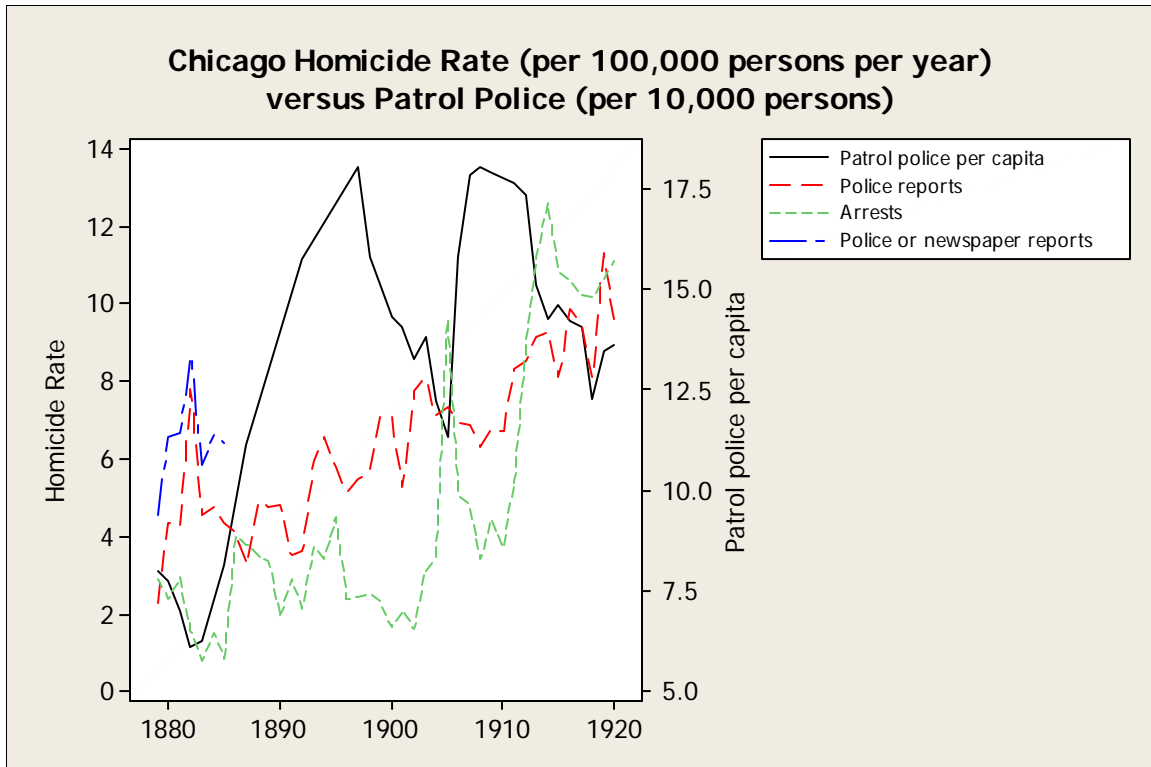Chicago Homicide Rate (per 100,000 persons per year) versus Patrol Police (per 10,000 persons)

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Notes

[1] Elias (1982). The theory has been elaborated by Gurr (1981), Stone (1983), Spierenburg (1994, 1996, 1998), Österberg (1996), Karonen (2001), Ylikangas (2001), and Eisner (2001). Americans have contributed to this theory with discussions of the civilizing influence of schools, factories, and police forces in cities in the late nineteenth century (Lane 1979 and Monkkonen 2001).

[2] On the impact of improved trauma care and nonemergency care, see Eckberg (2007) and Roth (2007).

[3] Bollet (2002: 189-91).

[4] Eisner (2001).

[5] See, for example, Jones (2000) and Tuchman (1978).

[6] (Eisner 2001 and Roth 2001).

[7] Roth 2001.

[8] Roth 2001.

[9] On the new democratic findings, see Clark (2007a, 2007b) and Wrigley (2006).

[10] Elias and Scotson (1994), Lane (1986), LaFree (1998, 2005), and Eisner (2001).

[11] Lane (1979) and Monkkonen (2001).

[12] Lane (1979: 53-114; 1986: 6-16), Rosenzweig (1983), and Adler (2006: 6-44).

[13] On trends in education, see AHSV: Time Trends. Rural children were as likely to attend school as urban children, but they spent fewer months in school. Among whites in 1900, only a fifth of farm children and two-fifths of rural non-farm children spent 9 or more months in school each year, but four-fifths of urban children did.

[14] On the size of police forces, see Monkkonen (1981) and Roussey (1996: 24, 163-4). On the character of policing, see Lane (1967: 157-224), Monkkonen (1981: 74-5, 83, 129-47), and Johnson (1979: 122-46, 182-8). Twenty-five of 188 known homicides among unrelated adults in Chicago, 1879-1885, involved police officers: 16 as assailants and 9 as victims. See especially the murders of John Ebert, John Marzek, and John Shea, *Chicago Tribune*, 18 and 19 January 1885, 10 and 11 January 1883, 19 June 1882. Homicides by law enforcement officers comprised a smaller proportion of homicides in northern New England and the rural Midwest, but the victims there were also non-violent offenders. See, for example, the homicides of Dean McVoy, *Mercer County Observer* (Celina, Ohio), 3 November 1892; and Henry Burnham, *Burlington Free Press*, 21 May 1894.

[15] See, for example, Jones (2000) and Tuchman (1978).