

American Homicide Supplemental Volume (AHSV)

Ethnicity Estimates (EE)

Randolph Roth

October, 2009

A supplement to Randolph Roth, *American Homicide*
(The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009)



Ethnicity Estimates

It is difficult to determine accurately the ethnicity of European Americans. Most sources say little or nothing about the ethnicity, religion, or national origin of white homicide victims and assailants. The United States census reported the number of foreign-born residents in various jurisdictions, and beginning in 1880, it recorded as well the birthplace of the mother and father of enumerated citizens. The census offered no information, however, on the ethnicity of native-born whites whose parents were native-born.

McDonald and McDonald (1980) developed a method for estimating the number of persons of Welsh, Scots, or Irish ancestry in each state's population in 1790. The method relies on lists of last names from Wales, Scotland, and Ireland in the late eighteenth century and on the list of household heads in the U.S. Census in 1790. Scholars determined that in Great Britain in the late eighteenth century, 40 percent of the Welsh had one of 12 distinctively Welsh names, 25 percent of Scots had one of 72 distinctively Scots names, and 19.2 percent of the Irish had one of 53 distinctively Irish names. By counting the number of white household heads in the 1790 federal census who had those names and by multiplying the number of those names by the appropriate multiplier (2.5, 4.0, and 5.2, respectively), the McDonalds estimated the number of Welsh, Scots, and Irish household heads in each state. Here the procedure was performed on lists of white homicide victims and suspects in New England and Virginia, 1676-1800, and the proportions who were Welsh, Scots, and Irish were estimated. Using the

McDonalds' estimates for New England and Virginia in 1790 as rough estimates for the entire period, it was possible to estimate whether the Welsh, Scots, and Irish were more or less likely than other European Americans to commit murder or be murdered. The results are in AHSV: AH Tables 8 and 9.

Two methods were used to estimate ethnicity in the nineteenth century. Using multiple sources, including the manuscript rolls of the federal census, it was possible to determine (or infer) the ethnicity of most homicide victims and suspects in New Hampshire and Vermont, as well as in Holmes and Ross counties in Ohio. Mullen (2005) does the same for most homicide victims and suspects in San Francisco, using newspapers and local histories. The ethnicity of the general population in these locations, 1847-1880, was then estimated from the proportions of the population ages 16 and older that had foreign-born mothers and/or fathers according to the 1880 census (North Atlantic Population Project); and the ethnicity of the general population, 1881-1900, was estimated from the proportions of the population ages 26 and older that had foreign-born mothers and/or fathers according to the 1900 census (Integrated Public-Use Manuscript Samples). The method understates, of course, the number of victims, suspects, and inhabitants who were not English, Scots, or Welsh, but at present it is the best means available for estimating ethnicity. The results are in AHSV: AH Tables 26 through 28. It will require a similar effort to obtain reliable estimates of ethnicity in other jurisdictions.

The McDonalds' method was used as well to estimate the ethnicity of the general population and of homicide victims and suspects in New Hampshire, Vermont, and New York City in the nineteenth century. It is likely, however, that more than 19.2 percent of Irish immigrants who arrived after 1820 had one of the 53 distinctively Irish names cited

by the McDonalds, because a greater proportion of came from the south and west of Ireland, where such names were more common. Thus, the McDonalds' multiplier probably overstates the proportion of Irish in a given population in the nineteenth century. Assuming, however, that the method leads to a similar overestimate of the proportion of homicide victims and assailants who were Irish, it is possible to estimate likelihood that Irish Americans committed murder and were murdered, if not the exact proportion of victims, assailants, and inhabitants who were Irish. The names of household heads in the federal census, 1800-1860, were used to estimate the proportion of the population in New Hampshire, Vermont, and New York City that was Irish (Tables AHSV: EE 1 and 2).

The McDonalds' method cannot, however, yield accurate estimates for small populations. The multiplier for the Irish is so large (5.2) that a difference of one or two names in a small population can make a huge difference in the estimated proportion of assailants and victims who were Irish. Only New York City was large enough for the method to work effectively when homicide rates were estimated for the Irish for separate time periods. For New Hampshire and Vermont, the method did not provide plausible estimates for specific time periods, but it did provide reasonable estimates of the number of Irish victims and assailants over the entire period, 1794-1900. The estimates suggest that there were 9.7 percent more Irish victims than could be identified by ethnicity from other sources, and 32.5 percent more Irish assailants. Those multipliers were used in AHSV: EE Table 1 to turn the hard counts Irish victims and assailants in each period in New Hampshire and Vermont into estimates.

AHSV: EE Table 1

Comparison of Methods for Determining Irish Homicide Rates

New Hampshire and Vermont

	Proportion of population	Ratio of proportion of victims to proportion of population	Ratio of proportion of assailants to proportion of population
McDonalds' method			
Irish			
1794-1846	.050	1.66	1.78
1847-1880	.124	1.84	2.22
1881-1900	.129	1.61	1.85
Non-Irish			
1794-1846	.950	0.97	0.96
1847-1880	.876	0.88	0.83
1881-1900	.871	0.91	0.87
Census data / Ethnicity counts: Irish			
1794-1846	N/a	N/a	N/a
1847-1880	.089	2.55	2.66
1881-1900	.116	1.74	1.70

AHSV: EE Table 2

Comparison of Methods for Determining Irish and Non-Irish Homicide Rates

New York

	Proportion of population	Ratio of proportion of victims to proportion of population	Ratio of proportion of assailants to proportion of population
McDonalds' method			
Irish			
1823-1846	.250	2.09	1.90
1847-1874	.413	1.47	1.65
Non-Irish			
1823-1846	.750	0.64	0.70
1847-1874	.587	0.64	0.54

References

McDonald, F. and E. S. McDonald. 1980. "The Ethnic Origins of the American People, 1790." *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 37: 179-99.