**Homicide Rates in Medieval England, 1198-1348**

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Thanks to James Given (1977) and Barbara Hanawalt (1979), data on homicides in medieval England have been gathered from six counties and the city of London in the thirteenth century, and from eight counties in the first half of the fourteenth century. The thirteenth century data are from Eyre Courts, which were to record every suspected homicide that had occurred since the last session of the court was held. The fourteenth century data are from Gaol Delivery rolls, which were less inclusive. They were to list every person arrested for homicide. Historically, roughly two-thirds of suspected homicides ended in indictment or arrest. So even though it is impossible to know, in the absence of Eyre rolls from the early fourteenth century, how many homicides were known to the public, it is best, when comparing rates from Gaol Delivery rolls to those from Eyre Courts, to raise the rates from the Gaol Delivery rolls by at least fifty percent.

If we use the “Estimates of County and Borough Populations of England, 1200-1589” from the Historical Violence Database, and homicide totals from Eyre Courts in Givens (1977: 14, 36), we get the following homicide rates per 100,000 persons per year:

Court Months Homicides Population Rates

Years covered years

Bedford 1222 22 47 224453 9.8

Bedford 1227-8 58 104 517662 11.2

Bedford 1247 69 83 409950 16.8

Bedford 1276 172 172 1020793 16.8

Kent 1227 173 99 1436172 12.0

Kent 1241 112 61 912448 12.3

Kent 1255 209 83 1191865 17.5

Norfolk 1250 127 62 1458738 8.7

Norfolk 1257 193 78 1849469 10.4

Norfolk 1268-9 399 130 3510089 11.4

Oxford 1241 59 69 473704 12.5

Oxford 1247 116 78 517258 22.4

Oxford 1261 134 99 678947 19.7

Warwick 1221-2 158 155 1034620 15.3

Warwick 1232 114 67 508146 22.4

Warwick 1247 104 82 602528 17.3

Bristol 1221 11 212 187758 5.9

Bristol 1248 5 83 84622 5.9

London 1244 54 216 840737 6.4

London 1276 145 290 1236053 11.7

When we use the series of population estimates and the homicide totals from Gaol Delivery rolls in Hanawalt (1979: 66-67), we get the following homicide rates, one set from the raw data, the other by multiplying the rates from the raw data by 1.5. Note that these rates do not include years for which Hanawalt reports missing data in each particular county.

Arrests Population years Rate Rate \* 1.5

Norfolk 491 15861795 3.1 4.6

Northamptonshire 297 4440944 6.7 10.0

Yorkshire 1311 15739081 8.3 12.5

Huntingdonshire 84 1005886 8.4 12.5

Essex 319 5974903 5.3 8.0

Somerset 186 3201628 5.8 8.7

Herefordshire 179 1172296 15.3 22.9

Surrey 85 1741358 4.9 7.3

These rates overstate the homicide rate, however, because so many homicides in medieval England led to multiple arrests. Working from Professor Hanawalt’s notes for Herefordshire and Surrey, which are available on the Historical Violence Database, I determined that the number of homicide victims list in the Gaol Delivery records in those counties, as opposed to arrests, were only 149 and 68, respectively. I have not yet had time to work through Professor Hanawalt’s notes for the other counties in her study, but the homicide victimization rates were lower than the arrest rates by a fifth for Surrey and a sixth for Herefordshire.

Herefordshire 149 1172296 12.7 19.1

Surrey 68 1741358 3.9 5.9

If we aggregate the data from all of the counties with data from Eyre Courts, we arrive at a homicide rate of 13 per 100,000 persons per year in the thirteenth century. And if we aggregate the data from all the counties with data from the Gaol Delivery rolls, multiply by fifty percent, and discount that rate by a sixth to account for the lower number of homicide victims than homicide arrests, we arrive at a homicide rate of 7.5 per 100,000 persons per year in the first half of the fourteenth century.

Rate for thirteenth century 13.0

Rate for early fourteenth century 7.5

However, it may prove that even the Eyre records understate the homicide rate considerably. Extrapolating from the surviving coroner’s records from Bedfordshire, which cover roughly the same period (1265-1275) as the last Eyre Court studied by Givens (1261-1276), it appears that there were 73 percent more homicides reported per year by the county’s coroner’s than by the county’s Eyre Court. The difference would mean a homicide rate of 25.2 per 100,000 persons per year, rather than 16.8 per 100,000. See “Homicide Rates in Bedfordshire” (Historical Violence Database).

Note, however, that probably half of all homicide victims in medieval England would have survived today with the help of modern emergency services, surgery, wound care, antisepsis, and antibiotics. So even if we assume a 73 percent undercount in the Eyre records, the rate at which people suffered life-threatening assaults in medieval England would be comparable to the homicide rate in the United States from the late 1960s through the early 1990s, which averaged around 9 per 100,000 per year. And it would be far lower than the rate in the Russian Federation since the collapse of the Soviet Union, which rose to 35 to 40 per 100,000 persons per year.

NOTE: It will be possible, using the research notes that Barbara Hanawalt contributed to the Historical Violence Database, to create victim-based datasets of the homicides that were reported in the counties she studied. I have completed those datasets for two of the counties she studied.

EXCEL and CSV files

Herefordshire Homicide Victim Data 1300-1355 from Hanawalt

Surry Homicide Victim Data 1302-1344 from Hanawalt

**References**

Given, James Buchannan (1977) *Society and Homicide in Thirteenth-Century England*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Hanawalt, Barbara A. (1979) *Crime and Conflict in English Communities, 1300-1348*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.