American Homicide Supplemental Volume (AHSV)

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A supplement to Randolph Roth, *American Homicide*
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The theory of homicide in *American Homicide* emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s out of a project that failed. I had planned to write a history of why northern New Englanders were seldom homicidal, but I discovered as my research progressed that their homicide rate varied considerably over time and that by the late 1860s and 1870s it was higher than the rates in Great Britain, Canada, and many other Western nations. I articulated the theory in scholarly papers and then in grant applications to the National Science Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities. I drafted those applications in 1997 and was awarded the grants in 1998. With the permission of those agencies, I took up the grants sequentially (NSF first, NEH second) in 1998-2000. The tests supported the theory, as did data that my colleagues had gathered on homicide in cities and the nineteenth-century West. That is why I decided in 2001 to extend the project to the entire United States (and much of the Western world), rather than confine it to northern New England.

I had identified three correlates of low homicide rates among unrelated adults by 1997: political stability, legitimate government and legitimate status hierarchies. As the research proposal and the bibliography show, those ideas grew out of the data, the scholarship on the history of New England, and the literature on state-formation, nation building, and cultural and historical geography. The fourth correlate, fellow feeling and patriotism, emerged in 1998-1999, as I focused on the decreases in homicide rates in New England and the Chesapeake in the late seventeenth century.

Death Is God's Work:

A History of Why Northern New Englanders Seldom Commit Murder

A grant proposal to the National Endowment for the Humanities

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Since the late nineteenth century, scholars have written voluminously on homicide in the United States in an effort to explain why this country has the highest rates of violence among industrialized nations. Taking their cues from H.V. Redfield's *Homicide, North and South* (1880), Frederick Jackson Turner's "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" (1893), W.E.B. DuBois' *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899), and Robert Park and Ernest Burgess' *The City* (1925), scholars have focused on the South, on the frontier, on Afro-Americans, on immigrants, and on northern cities, for those are the places and peoples believed to have produced the highest rates of murder and other violent crimes in America. Very little work has been done on homicide and other violent crimes where rates were low. Scholars have largely neglected northern New England, where state health departments reported the lowest murder rates in the nation throughout most of the twentieth century.

That neglect poses a problem for criminologists, sociologists, and historians. Studies of Southern, frontier, black, immigrant, or urban violence rest explicitly or implicitly on assumptions about why homicide rates were low among white natives of the rural North, and even the most sophisticated of these studies rely on untenable or unproven assertions about the character of small town and rural Northerners. Edward Ayers, in *Vengeance and Justice* (1984), claims that Northerners were less violent than Southerners in the nineteenth century because they lived in a culture of "dignity" rather than "honor." According to Ayers, Northerners were not as likely to respond violently to challenge or insult, because they were taught from birth that they "possessed an intrinsic value at least theoretically equal to that of every other person," and that belief gave them "a hard structure at the center of the self" that was deaf to public opinion and unsolicited criticism. Recent studies of Northern rural communities show that Northerners were

deeply stung by dishonor and public scorn, however, and that a number of people in northern New England were drawn to violence on account of it. Southerners may have turned to violence not because they were peculiarly obsessed with honor or sensitive to criticism, but because they could not compete for honor or respect in the multiplicity of nonviolent ways open to rural Northerners. Only a detailed study of the peculiarities of the North's "codes of honor" and of the customs and sanctions that militated against violent resolutions of disputes over honor in the rural North can fully illuminate the Southern tradition of violence.

A study of the rural North is also needed to provide comparative data for studies of urban violence in the North. In *Violence in the City* (1979), Roger Lane ascribes the decline in homicides in Philadelphia from the 1850's to the early 1960's to the decline of rough-and-ready preindustrial work habits, and the toleration of boredom and acceptance of discipline that factory life and compulsory public schooling fostered. But factories were scarce in northern New England in the nineteenth century, and schooling was irregular, and still there was little lethal violence. That suggests that the psychological impact of work and education may not have been as uniform or straightforward as Lane suggests. It appears that the schooling northern New Englanders did receive, along with their private reading and Bible study, helped them think critically and independently. The habit of critical thinking may have diminished violence by reshaping the psychology of rivalry and conflict, by providing new sources of esteem and self-esteem, by identifying prowess with wit and imaginative response to challenge, and by alienating people from the roles assigned them in ritualistic dramas of honor.

I have undertaken a study of homicide in Vermont and New Hampshire in the hope of understanding more clearly the nation's "tradition" of violence and of discovering how and at what cost some Americans have been able to break away from that tradition. The study includes

suicides, accidental deaths, and casualties of war, because the history of homicide is intricately intertwined with the history of reckless behavior, of violence against the self, and of collective violence. The study includes nonlethal violent crimes as well. But the focus will remain on homicide, which was the least likely cause of violent death in northern New England.

My initial hypothesis was that northern New Englanders shared a unique subculture of nonviolence that enabled them to resolve conflicts peacefully and to get the better of adversaries in nonviolent ways. Much of my research has been institutional and ethnographic. I have tried to determine from literary sources and oral tradition how humor, education, and religious values shaped the personalities and interpersonal relationships of northern New Englanders. I have also studied the impact that northern New England's laws and institutions had on homicide rates. Its divorce laws, for example, were the first to grant women the right to divorce on the grounds of physical or emotional cruelty and to protect women's rights to property and child custody; and its asylums institutionalized at public expense mentally ill persons who had been violent or who threatened violence.

The quantitative data I have gathered, however, have complicated my initial hypothesis. Northern New England was extraordinarily nonhomicidal from the mid-1770s through the mid-1840s and from the late 1930s through the early 1960s. But northern New England, like British North America and northwestern Europe as a whole, was a homicidal society in the early seventeenth century (Figure 1). The data also show that homicide rates in northwestern Europe, the South, the Middle colonies, and New England were nearly identical in the 1690s and early 1700s. Northern New England's "subculture of nonviolence" and the South's "subculture of violence" emerged later than historians thought.

Homicide rates dropped sharply across the Northern Atlantic world from the 1650s through the 1750s. But that decline, which continued in England and the Netherlands down to the 1960s, was reversed in northern New England by a brief increase in nondomestic homicides from the mid-1760s through the 1780s, and by a dramatic increase from the late-1840s through the 1870s. Northern New England was more than twice as homicidal as England or the Netherlands by the mid-nineteenth century, even though it was the least homicidal region of the United States. My research, which has extended to a number of colonies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and to selected counties in Virginia, Georgia, and Ohio in the nineteenth century, shows that northern New England's subculture of nonviolence did not have the power to isolate northern New England from the forces that caused homicide rates to surge periodically across British North America and the United States.

My research has thus led to a second hypothesis: that state breakdowns and political crises of legitimacy produce surges in nondomestic homicides and that the restoration of order and legitimacy produces declines in such homicides. Early modern state breakdowns correlated closely with demographic pressure, inflation, government debt, and rivalry among elites (Goldstone, 1991). These measures correlate perfectly with the surge in homicides in the Anglo-American world from the 1590s through the 1640s. They also correlate well with the appearance of revolutionary pressures in the American colonies in the 1760s and 1770s (when nondomestic homicides rose) and with the absence of revolutionary pressures in Great Britain and the Netherlands (where homicide rates continued to decline). Southern homicides surged again in the 1830s, as the sectional crisis over slavery took shape in the South, and Northern homicides in the late 1840s, as the political crisis became national. White homicide rates declined in the

North after the mid-1870s, when political order was restored in the North, but they remained high in the South until the late 1890s, when legal segregation and white supremacy had been restored. African-American homicide rates rose, however, after the mid-1870s, as African-American political power (and faith in the political system) declined.

The theory can be extended to the twentieth century: the crisis of legitimacy in the 1960s and 1970s (especially in the eyes of African-Americans) may have contributed to soaring homicide rates; and the establishment of state legitimacy through the New Deal, World War II, and the Cold War may have reduced homicide rates through the 1950s.

Of course, proximate causes, such as surges in immigration and changes in weaponry, also shaped the history of homicide. But these causes do not correlate as well with long-term surges in nondomestic homicide as state breakdowns do. The extraordinary legitimacy of northern New England's egalitarian political order in the eyes of its inhabitants in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries may itself have diminished interpersonal violence.

My research has also led to a third hypothesis: that domestic homicide rates follow a different pattern from nondomestic rates. Domestic homicide rates declined in northern New England from the early seventeenth century into the nineteenth century. But wife murders increased dramatically in the late 1820s, and possessive and rape murders of women in the 1860s and 1870s--the same pattern that Martin Weiner of Rice University has discovered in England. Neonaticides, infanticides, and child murders show a more gradual increase through the nineteenth century. It may prove that the decline of the household economy and the economic value of child labor, and the rise of family limitation and the economic independence of women, changed relationships between men and women and parents and children in ways that increased

lethal violence.

What began as a study of a regional subculture of nonlethal violence has thus become an interregional study of why the United States has become a homicidal society compared to the societies of northwestern Europe and why murders of women and children have become more common in the modern era. Over the past ten years, I have worked through hundreds of thousands of documents--vital records, case files, inquests, newspapers, etc.--to create comprehensive, disaggregated time series on violent crime and violent death in Vermont and New Hampshire from colonial times to present, and to create complementary time series for other regions of colonial and nineteenth-century America. The work has been difficult, but it has revealed, as I had hoped, unanticipated patterns in the history of homicide.

I would appreciate the support of the Endowment for a final year of work on the project, during which I shall complete the statistical analysis of my data and the manuscript of my book, *Death Is God's Work*. I anticipate spending no more than a month or two in Vermont and New Hampshire during the grant year to research questions that arise during the writing of the manuscript. I have already published essays on sexual violence, capital punishment, and spouse murder, and I have written conference papers on honorific violence, child murder, and long-term trends in homicide. I plan to publish the quantitative findings of my research in social science journals and to make my data available through the National Institute of Justice and the National Council on Violence Research. I hope to reach a wider audience with *Death Is God's Work*, which will be a narrative (and comparative) history of violent crime and violent death in northern New England.

Abstract

Since the late nineteenth century, scholars have written voluminously on homicide in the United States in an effort to explain why this country has the highest rates of violence among industrialized nations. Very little work has been done on homicide and other violent crimes where rates were low. I have undertaken a study of the history of homicide in New Hampshire and Vermont in hope of understanding more clearly our nation's tradition of violence and of discovering how and at what cost some Americans have been able to break away from that tradition. My research has been comparative, however. I have studied selected jurisdictions in southern New England, the Mid-Atlantic, the South, and the Old Northwest, to determine when and why northern New England's distinctiveness emerged.

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