NIH Public Access
Author Manuscript
Br J Criminol. Author manuscript; available in PMC 2009 January 2.

Published in final edited form as:
Br J Criminol. 2007 March ; 47(2): 331–345. doi:10.1093/bjc/azl029.

Change and Stability in the Characteristics of Homicide Victims, Offenders and Incidents During Rapid Social Change

William Alex Pridemore*

* *William Alex Pridemore, PhD, Indiana University, Department of Criminal Justice, 302 Sycamore Hall, Bloomington, IN 47405, USA; wpridemo@indiana.edu*

Abstract

The Russian homicide rate doubled during the 1990s and is now among the highest in the world. During this same period, Russian citizens experienced swift, widespread, and meaningful political, economic, and social change. It is likely that this profound transition altered structural conditions, cultural norms, and interpersonal relations in a way that led to changes in the nature of interpersonal violence. Taking advantage of a unique set of homicide narratives drawn from court and police records in the Udmurt Republic, this study examined stability and change in the distribution of Russian homicide victim, offender, and incident characteristics before and after the fall of the Soviet Union. Odds ratios obtained from logistic regression showed no change in victim characteristics, but substantial changes in several offender and incident characteristics. We discuss the potential mechanisms through which the structural and cultural shifts are resulting in these changes and conclude that the ongoing transition is largely responsible for the changing nature of homicide in Russia. In doing so, we introduce the new term “criminological transition” and suggest that Russia (and perhaps other nations) may have experienced a change in its crime profile in much the same way as we discuss a “demographic transition” in terms of fertility and mortality profiles.

Introduction

During the 1990s, Russian citizens faced the effects of and tried to adapt to sweeping political, economic, social and ideological changes. Such large-scale fundamental change has likely altered community and individual behaviour and interpersonal relations. This study focused on one small but important aspect of such behaviour: interpersonal violence. Specifically, we took advantage of a very unique and carefully collected set of homicide narratives to examine stability and change in characteristics of Russian homicide victims, offenders and incidents over the course of the 1990s. An earlier article (Pridemore 2006) described in detail these characteristics and the general associations between them. More interesting, however, is determining whether the major societal changes in Russia have resulted in changes in interpersonal interactions that in turn are leading to changing characteristics of violent incidents.

Examining these individual- and contextual-level characteristics of homicide participants and events can provide important information about both macro- and micro-level causes. At the structural level, for example, given the significant increase in unemployment and poverty in Russia in the early to mid-1990s, we might expect a disproportionate increase in instrumental homicides with profit motives. Similarly, as a result of the exposure to criminogenic conditions of a much broader spectrum of the Russian population than in the past, the pool of homicide offenders may be decreasingly made up of serious and repeat offenders and instead becoming

NIH-PA Author Manuscript
NIH-PA Author Manuscript
NIH-PA Author Manuscript

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

more representative of the formerly financially secure but now newly poor. At the contextual level, the work of Luckenbill (1977) and Meier, Kennedy and Sacco (2001) provide frameworks for understanding the dynamics of violent incidents, such as the role of victims, offenders and bystanders and how characteristics of instrumental events differ from expressive homicides. Recent research of this type has studied the role of third parties in violent events (Planty 2002), defensive gun use (Wells 2002) and how the characteristics of the situation and the immediate environment can alter the outcome of alcohol-related violent events (Wells and Graham 2003).

There is little doubt that cultural context and place-specific structural factors play a role not only in the level of violence but also in the distribution of the characteristics of violent victims, offenders and incidents. It is thus important to push the envelope beyond what we have learned from studies in the United States and other Western nations. Not only will this provide information about the local situation, but it will help us determine the generalizability of criminological theories. Recent studies of homicide characteristics in other nations include those carried out in Japan (Finch 2001), the Netherlands (Smit et al. 2001), Fiji (Adinkrah 2003) and Pakistan (Hassan et al. 2005). Therefore, it should be clear that this study of Russia is relevant not only parochially, but much more generally to how the micro-level characteristics of interpersonal violence can be altered by larger social, economic and political change. Thus, while the current study is largely exploratory in nature, given the relative lack of prior research on this topic and in Russia, it provides important observations upon which to construct theoretical explanations for change and stability. For example, later in this paper, we argue briefly that the changes discovered in the present analysis may indicate what we call a ‘criminological transition’ in the crime profile of nations as they modernize, industrialize, democratize or transition to a market economy.

Background

At nearly 30 homicides per 100,000 residents annually, the Russian homicide victimization rate is among the highest in the world (Pridemore 2003). More importantly for the current study, the rate nearly quadrupled between 1987 and 1994, and, at the end of the 1990s, the homicide victimization rate was about twice as high as it was at the beginning of the decade. In the Udmurt Republic, where the current study was carried out, the overall trend was very similar. According to Russian State Committee for Statistics (Goskomstat) data, the homicide mortality rates in the Republic were 17.2 and 28.8 per 100,000 residents in 1991 and 1998, respectively.

A thorough description of the temporal, spatial and demographic trends and patterns in Russian homicide rates can be found in Gavrilova *et al.* (2005) and Pridemore (2003), and Gavrilova *et al.* (2000) examined the increases in violent mortality resulting from the economic reforms of the early 1990s. Further, Pridemore (2006) presented a detailed descriptive analysis of homicide victim, offender and incident characteristics in the Udmurt Republic using the same narratives employed here. The latter also provided general comparisons of these characteristics with those in the United States. It is interesting to point out the strong similarities between Russia and the United States in terms of the distribution of homicide victim–offender relationships and the proportion of (1) female victims who were victimized by men, (2) all homicides that were argument-related, and (3) all homicides that were felony-related and profit-motivated.

The task of the current study, however, was to examine *changes* in Russian homicide characteristics before and after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, specifically between the final years of the Soviet Union (i.e. 1989–91) and 1998. Russian society faced massive and tumultuous change during this period that may have led to changes in the characteristics of

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

victims and offenders and in the nature of the homicide event (Chervyakov *et al.* 2002). For example, the proportion of the Russian population living below the subsistence minimum nearly tripled, with almost one-third of the population living below the poverty line in 1998 (Goskomstat 2001). Similarly, near-universal employment was common during the Soviet era but, in 1998, the official unemployment rate had risen to over 13 per cent. Marriage and fertility rates decreased substantially during this period, and divorce rates increased.

Aside from the specific and repeated political and economic crises, Russian citizens are facing more general and widespread social, economic, political and ideological changes. A highly planned centralized economy is transitioning toward a market economy. A closed totalitarian government dominated by one party has become relatively more transparent and democratic, with multiple parties fielding candidates for elections. A culture with a centuries-long tradition of privileging the group is suddenly facing a milieu in which individualism is more important (Kharkhordin 1999). In other words, the values that were championed less than a generation ago are now anathema, and vice versa. These truly fundamental changes in political and economic philosophies, as well as decreased formal social control, have likely created normative uncertainty. Further, Russians' aspirations are now less limited as a result of new individual freedoms and because a free market creates desires whereas totalitarianism and a planned economy stifle them. Similarly, conventional Soviet institutions are gone and enduring social institutions such as the family and education have been weakened by the ongoing changes and the collapse of the Soviet welfare system. Thus, we might suspect that the more general (but swift) changes to the underlying fundamental institutions, together with specific changes in social structure and the repeated political and economic crises of the 1990s, might have led to changes in interpersonal behavior and/or changes in social conditions that have altered the balance of the characteristics of homicide victims, offenders and incidents in Russia. If so, this may hint at a more general 'criminological transition' in the crime profile through which nations progress.

Data and Method

These data come from a unique set of narratives extracted from homicide court verdicts in the Udmurt Republic in 1989–91 (101 cases) and 1998 (124 cases). Udmurtia is a typical Russian industrial region (i.e. state) located in the western Ural mountains. It has a population of 1.6 million, a capital city (Izhevsk) of about 650,000 and 70 per cent of the population live in urban areas. There is a smaller proportion of ethnic Russians (60 per cent) in the region relative to the nation as a whole, but a little over 30 per cent of the population are ethnic Udmurt, which is an eastern Finnish group with hundreds of years of history in Russian culture. The age-standardized death rate due to homicide in the region (27.4 per 100,000 residents in 2000) is similar to that of Russia (25.3) as a whole (Russian Ministry of Health 2001). Due to its representative nature, the Udmurt Republic has been the site of past (Shkolnikov and Chervyakov 2000) and ongoing studies of Russian mortality, and it has also been the basis of previous studies of homicide (Chervyakov *et al.* 2002; Pridemore 2006).

Each of the one- to two-page narratives contains a description of the homicide event according to police and court records (often including firsthand reports taken from offenders and witnesses). Among other items, they usually contain information on the victim–offender relationship, motive, location, alcohol use, situational context and type of weapon.[1] In order to ensure coding reliability, all narratives were extracted from the records by one court

[1]Given the nature of the current study, there is little opportunity to include direct quotes from the qualitative narratives themselves. In several places, however, we do turn to and discuss the qualitative narratives to clarify our findings. Further, the Chervyakov *et al.* (2002) article contains excerpts from a few of the narratives that were relevant to the topics under study and the Appendix in the Pridemore (2006) publication contains several entire narratives taken verbatim (after translation from the Russian language) in order to illustrate the different 'types' of homicide events discussed in that article.

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

secretary. The narratives were originally created as part of a United Nations Development Programme-sponsored project completed by Shkolnikov and Chervyakov (2000) that examined the Russian mortality crisis of the 1990s. They were provided by Dr Shkolnikov to the present author, who translated them from Russian to English and coded them for analysis. In order to reduce errors and ensure reliability, each narrative was coded twice and the two records checked for consistency.

Several characteristics were examined. Victim characteristics included the proportion of victims that were female and the proportion that were drinking at the time of the event. Offender characteristics were the same as for victims, as well as a measure of the proportion of offenders who had been previously convicted of a felony. For the purposes of the present study, incident characteristics included measures of the proportion of events (1) that were victim-precipitated (as gauged by the current author based upon the description of the event contained in the narratives), (2) in which the victim and offender were strangers (i.e. no prior contact at all between them), (3) in which the victim and offender were friends/acquaintances, (4) in which a firearm (long gun or hand gun) was the primary means of assault, (5) in which a blunt object or bodily force (including strangulation) was the primary means of assault, (6) that were profit-motivated, (7) that were premeditated, (8) that occurred outside in a public place, and (9) in which there was more than one offender.

In order to examine change and stability in these characteristics, we employed binary logistic regression to estimate crude odds ratios, with each characteristic acting as a single independent variable and year as a dichotomous dependent variable (i.e. year = 0 for 1989–91 and 1 for 1998). We then estimated a full model that estimated adjusted odds ratios for each characteristic, controlling for the other victim and incident characteristics.

Results

The results by victim, offender and incident characteristics are shown in Table 1. Odds ratios in the table represent 1998 compared with 1989–91. For the purposes of this analysis, incident characteristics were based on each victim. Each homicide event may have multiple victims or offenders and thus coding a single victim–offender relationship, weapon or motive would make little sense and would result in lost information. In reality, there were only a handful of multiple victim or offender events. Nevertheless, treating each individual victim as an incident allowed us to retain and code all information available and to get a more detailed picture of the event.

Table 1 shows that there were no significant changes in victim characteristics between the two time periods. The proportion of victims that were female did drop from 45.5 per cent in 1989–91 to 38.2 per cent in 1998, but the p-value for the odds ratio shows this difference to be non-significant. The proportion of victims who had been drinking remained essentially unchanged between the two time periods.

Unlike victim characteristics, Table 1 shows that the homicide offender characteristics changed substantially during this time frame. Only about 1 per cent of homicide offenders were women in 1989–91, but this increased to 10 per cent in 1998. While the absolute number of women offenders in each of the time frames is small, thus resulting in a wide confidence interval, this still results in a significant crude odds ratio (OR) of nearly 12 ($p = 0.012$). The results show an unexpected and significant decrease in the proportion of homicide offenders who were drinking at the time of the event, dropping from 77 per cent in 1989–91 to 58 per cent in 1998 ($OR = 0.44$, $p = 0.004$). Finally, there appeared to be a significant decrease in the proportion of homicide offenders who had been previously convicted of a felony. Information on this variable is presented only for descriptive purposes (and thus odds ratios were not calculated), however, as, from the narratives, it is impossible to be sure whether the absence of mention of

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

a prior felony conviction truly means the absence of a prior arrest or whether this information is unknown. Nevertheless, the descriptive data suggest a considerable drop in the proportion of offenders who had previously been in serious trouble with the law, decreasing from 27 per cent in 1989–91 to only 5 per cent in 1998.

Homicide incident characteristics are shown at the bottom of Table 1. Crude odds ratios suggest stability between the two frames in terms of the proportion of homicides in which (1) the victim and offender did not know each other (OR = 0.88, p = 0.626) and (2) a gun caused the death of the victim (OR = 0.88, p = 0.764). In both years, about one-third of the events were stranger homicides and about 10 per cent of the deaths were caused by firearms. The crude odds ratios suggest increases, however, in homicides in which the victim and offender were friends or acquaintances (OR = 1.54, p = 0.103), premeditated homicides (OR = 1.61, p = 0.089) and homicides that occurred outside in a public place (OR = 1.62, p = 0.081). Although these were not significant at the 0.05 level, the relatively small number of cases means standard errors will be larger, thus making it more difficult to find a significant difference between the two time frames even when the increases in these characteristics are fairly substantial (as suggested here by the odds ratios). Thus, these traits may deserve closer scrutiny in future research. Finally, there were significant increases in the proportion of victim-precipitated homicides (OR = 2.26, p = 0.012), homicides in which a blunt object or bodily force resulted in the death of the victim (OR = 2.68, p = 0.001), profit-motivated homicides (OR = 2.54, p = 0.002) and incidents with more than one offender (OR = 3.89, p = 0.002).

The results presented thus far are based on crude odds ratios. The final two columns of Table 1 show the results when a final full model was estimated controlling for the other characteristics, thus providing adjusted odds ratios.[2] Only victim and incident characteristics were employed in this model, since offender characteristics were estimated from the offender (as opposed to the victim) database. Further, the ‘stranger’ and ‘gun’ measures were dropped from the full model because they are largely dependent upon the ‘acquaintance’ and ‘blunt or bodily force’ characteristics, respectively. The ‘premeditated’ variable was highly collinear with the ‘profit-motivated’ variable, so it was also dropped from the model. Controlling for the other variables in the model, the results show that the increases between 1989–91 and 1998 in victim-precipitated homicides (Adj. OR = 2.56, p = 0.010), the use of blunt objects or bodily force (Adj. OR = 2.67, p = 0.001) and profit-motivated homicides (Adj. OR = 2.86, p = 0.002) remain significant and that the p-value for the increase in incidents with more than one offender (Adj. OR = 2.50, p = 0.056) is nearly significant.[3]

Methodological Limitations

There are a few methodological limitations that should be considered when interpreting these results. First, the Udmurt Republic is only one of 89 regions in Russia, and the typical characteristics of homicide victims, offenders and events for some reason may not be representative of Russia as a whole. It is important to note, however, that the Udmurt Republic is a relatively typical Russian industrial region that possesses a homicide rate very similar to

[2]It is important here to make a more general note about these and other characteristics. *Proportional* changes in these characteristics may not be directly associated with true changes in *rates*. For example, a hypothetical strict gun control law may lead to a decrease in gun homicides, which would result in an increase in the proportion of blunt object homicides, even if their rate remained unchanged. Therefore, I examined the *rate* of several characteristics (stranger, acquaintance, gun, blunt/bodily force and profit-motivated homicides, as well as homicides that occurred outside in a public place) as a check on the results presented in Table 1. In each case, any changes/similarities present were in fact being driven by changes/similarities in the underlying rates of these events, not by changes in the distribution of the other potential outcomes for that specific variable (e.g. the change in the proportion of deaths caused by blunt objects or bodily force was in fact due to an increase in the rate of such events, not from changes in the use of other weapons).

[3]Another incident-level characteristic not discussed here was coded ‘yes’ if the murder was committed to hide another crime. This had a fairly high (though not 100 per cent) overlap with the profit-motivated variable. When this variable was used to replace profit, its crude odds ratio was 2.05 (p = 0.02) and its adjusted odds ratio was 1.81 (p = 0.09).

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

the all-Russian mean, and that it has been the site of previous and ongoing demographic studies, partially because of its representative nature. Second, there are a relatively small number of cases represented by these narratives. While their total (about 100 in 1989–91 and about 125 in 1989) is not restrictively small for this type of analysis, the number with a particular characteristic in a particular year can be small and make estimates inefficient.

Finally, these narratives are drawn from court verdicts and may not be representative of all homicides in the Udmurt Republic. Certain types of homicides, such as those that are mafia-related or whose victims were homeless or sex workers, may be less likely to be reported, more difficult to solve and less likely to be resolved in court. Victim–offender relationships and other characteristics of such events, and of unsolved homicides in general, may differ systematically from those in which the cases are cleared and a court verdict entered (Decker 1993; 1996; Regoeczi and Miethe 2003).

Information about crime and violence in Soviet Russia was rarely published (Butler 1992; Shelley 1990). Today, the increasing availability and validity of data on these topics allow studies of interpersonal violence in Russia to be undertaken for the first time in decades. Thus, while the limitations outlined here preclude us from drawing definitive conclusions, these narratives are unique and provide a rare glimpse at violence in a rapidly changing society in which studies such as this were impossible until very recently.

Discussion

The first interesting aspect of these results is that despite the substantial changes in the Udmurt Republic during the 1990s in offender and incident characteristics, the two victim characteristics examined (proportion female and proportion drinking at the time of the event) remained stable. This is even more curious as these two characteristics did exhibit significant changes for homicide offenders. This suggests that offender and incident characteristics may be more sensitive to social change than victim characteristics. The absence of substantial change may also be tied to the nature of changing offender and incident characteristics. For example, the small but non-significant drop in the proportion of victims that were women may result partially from the increase in the proportion of offenders that were women, as, generally, and in this sample specifically (Pridemore 2006), women most often kill men, usually intimates and usually as the result of an ongoing abusive relationship.

Offender characteristics showed significant change during the 1990s on the same traits that remained stable for victims. For example, the proportion of offenders who were female increased more than tenfold during this time. There may be several direct and indirect reasons for this increase. First, while Russian men have felt the most destructive force of the transition in terms of mortality, women have faced increasing stress from several fronts. Female unemployment rates increased substantially immediately following the break-up of the Soviet Union, since their traditional clerical and other peripheral jobs were among the first to be eliminated due to budget cuts and the new leaner model required by a developing market economy (Klugman 1995). Similarly, occupations that employ a large number of women in Russia, such as education and health care, are still largely government-funded and thus substantially underpaid (World Bank 1997). At the same time, women may be feeling the detrimental effects of the stress faced by their intimates, against whom they are normally striking back when they commit homicide. For example, recent evidence suggests that Russian males are more likely than females to drink heavily in the context of stress (Koposov *et al.* 2002). This self-destructive behaviour on the part of men, and the potential violence associated with it (Pridemore 2002a), may lead to a backlash effect by women who have been the victims of domestic violence. We might especially expect an increase in such events during a time of rapid social change, when traditional norms and values have been uprooted (Kharkhordin

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

1999) and the distinction between right and wrong have been blurred, thus potentially opening the door for a retaliatory response. Finally, women may be reacting to the increasing difficulty of finding satisfaction from the criminal justice system when they have been victimized, thus making it necessary to respond to the desperate situation on their own. For example, Johnson (2005) has shown that meeting the legal elements necessary for prosecuting rape actually became more difficult under the new Russian Criminal Code, and Pridemore (2002b) has shown that official rape rates as reported by police decreased significantly during the 1990s while all other violent crimes increased significantly. This situation is likely mirrored in cases of domestic violence, as well. Given the failure of the law, the police and the legal system as a whole to respond effectively to female violent victimization, women in desperate situations may be left with few alternatives, especially in the context of Russian housing shortages that often mean that women have nowhere to go to escape the abuse.

The significant decrease in the proportion of offenders who were drinking at the time of the event was unexpected. There is a growing literature on the detrimental effects of stress on Russians during the transition (Leon and Shkolnikov 1998; Shkolnikov and Meslé 1996), including higher levels of drinking in the early 1990s. More generally, even without this increase, the Russian level of alcohol consumption is among the highest in the world (Bobak *et al.* 1999; Nemtsov 2000), and alcohol has been found to be associated with homicide in Russia and Eastern Europe in a growing number of studies (Andrienko 2001; Pridemore 2004; 2002a; Razvodovsky 2003). Nevertheless, the findings presented here show a significant drop in the proportion of those convicted of homicide who were drinking at the time of the event. One possible explanation coincides with the potential decrease in hardcore and repeat offenders in this group and the broadening social spectrum of those caught up in violence in Russia. Another plausible explanation is that this is confounded with changing incident characteristics (as discussed in the next paragraph). For example, there were significant increases in premeditated and profit-motivated homicides in the Udmurt Republic during this period. Relative to homicides resulting from ongoing or immediate arguments, these types of incidents are probably less likely to involve drinking offenders. In fact, Pridemore (2006) has shown with these same data from the Udmurt Republic that of those offenders (from 1989–91 and 1998 combined) who were drinking at the time of the event, only 14 per cent committed a felony-related homicide, while 41 per cent committed a homicide in the context of an argument. In the end, however, while there was a definite reduction between the early and late 1990s, it is still important to point out that well over half of all the homicide offenders in this sample had been drinking at the time of the incident.

The final offender characteristic was the proportion of offenders who had a prior felony conviction. Although the substantial decrease in this characteristic was expected, we are wary of drawing strong conclusions based solely on these narratives, as the absence of mention of a prior felony conviction in the narrative probably does not always mean that one did not exist. Given that the data collection and coding process, as well as the single person creating the narratives from the available records, remained the same over the two time periods, however, this initial finding provides compelling evidence. Further, using more refined and complete official data from police and court records in the Udmurt Republic, Chervyakov *et al.* (2002) also found a significant drop in this offender characteristic. While this decrease may result from a variety of factors, several of them probably fall under a more general explanation. For example, as a result of the economic reforms known as *shock therapy* and the concomitant anomie resulting from the social, political and ideological changes in the country, a large segment of the Russian population were abruptly faced with the criminogenic conditions of impoverishment and social disorganization (Walberg *et al.* 1998). This population had before been protected from the worst of such conditions by the all-encompassing social safety net provided by the Soviet government, but were suddenly and without warning faced with spreading unemployment, poverty and the weakening or loss of the social and governmental

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

institutions that had before shielded them. This increased the proportion of people and communities exposed to stressful and anomic conditions, which likely resulted in a broadening cross-section of those taking part in crime and violence, thereby decreasing the proportion of hardcore offenders and recidivists. This is consistent with the results of Chervyakov *et al.* (2002), who found that the proportion of homicide offenders in the Udmurt Republic with a specialized secondary degree[4] and with an incomplete secondary education was increasing. During the Soviet era, the latter were protected by the social safety net and the former had stable employment and relatively comfortable conditions. Similarly, Russian divorce rates increased and marriage rates decreased during the time of troubles in the mid-1990s, thus reducing the number of people afforded the protective effects of marriage against homicide that Pridemore and Shkolnikov (2004) found to be important in Russia.

Turning to the incident-level characteristics, these results suggest no changes during the 1990s in the use of guns, the proportion of homicides involving a victim and offender who were strangers, or homicide events occurring outside in a public place. The first is no surprise given strict gun control measures in Russia. It may be that gun use is more prevalent in areas with larger cities, such as Moscow or St Petersburg, but, in the Udmurt Republic, there has not been a proportional increase in the use of firearms. Knives and other sharp instruments continue to be the favourite weapon of choice in lethal violence in Russia. Second, the stability of the proportion of stranger homicides is somewhat unexpected. Since instrumental events such as profit-motivated homicides are usually thought to occur among strangers, and since profit-motivated homicides have increased significantly, we might suspect that stranger homicides would have increased. Recent evidence shows, however, that it is not necessarily the case that instrumental/profit-related violence occurs solely between strangers (Decker 1996; Regoeczi and Miethe 2003). In fact, examining the written narratives themselves shows that in several cases the profit-motivated homicides began with theft from or burglary of those with whom the offender was acquainted. Third, while the proportion of all homicides occurring outside in a public place did increase from 28 to 38 per cent during this period, the adjusted odds ratio (Adj. OR = 1.20, $p = 0.549$) shows that this increase was not significant and was perhaps confounded with changes in other victim or incident characteristics.

The crude odds ratios reveal proportional increases in all the other incident-level characteristics. For example, the proportion of homicides involving friends or acquaintances rose from 34 per cent in 1989–91 to 44 per cent in 1998, though the p-value for the adjusted odds ratio (Adj. OR = 1.54, $p = 0.136$) for this trait indicates that this increase was not significant and was probably the result of changes in other characteristics. Nevertheless, given the outcomes for the other variables, this finding may suggest that the stress faced by Russian individuals and communities during severe economic depression and social insecurity is resulting in interpersonal violence that is manifested against those that one knows and spends time with. This more general association between negative socio-economic change and homicide rates has been found by kim and Pridemore (2005), who showed that those areas that faced greater negative effects of socio-economic change in Russia during the 1990s were those areas that experienced the greatest increases in homicide rates.

According to official figures (that probably underestimate the true level of economic insecurity), the economic problems left nearly 30 per cent of the Russian population with incomes below subsistence minimum and over 13 per cent of the working-age population unemployed in 1998 (Goskomstat 2001), and that year saw yet another serious economic collapse in the country. Further, the social safety net that had formerly protected Russian citizens against hardships also disappeared, becoming a political football for politicians while citizens suffered (Cook 2005). The rising prices and falling economic fortunes likely resulted

[4]In Russia, a specialized secondary education usually means one to two years of vocational training in a specific occupation.

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

in the increase found here in the proportion of homicides that were motivated by economic gain. The proportion of homicides that were profit-motivated rose from 16 per cent in 1989–91 to 33 per cent in 1998. The increase from 26 to 36 per cent during this period in the proportion of homicides that were premeditated was also likely driven by similar forces. Again, an examination of the narratives reveals that many of the premeditated homicides in the latter period were part of schemes to rob someone or burglarize their home.

There was also a substantial increase in the proportion of all homicides that were carried out by more than one offender, rising from 6 to 20 per cent. This was probably associated with the rise in profit-motivated and premeditated homicides, as the narratives reveal that most of the incidents with more than one offender were of these types. This increase in multiple-offender homicides coincides with the Russian Ministry of the Interior's (2001) data for Russia as a whole, and with Chervyakov *et al.*'s (2002) findings from similar data for the Udmurt Republic. While it is tempting to suggest that this finding hints at the rise of violence by organized criminal groups, the qualitative narratives themselves provide a clearer picture of events than the coded data, and they show definitively that these incidents were not organized crime-related. Such a conclusion is only warranted for these data from the Udmurt Republic, however, and says little about such events in the rest of the country. Nevertheless, it is important to point out that while the behaviour (including violence) of the mafia and organized crime in Russia has garnered considerable public attention, those studying homicide analytically in the country state clearly that such events are an extremely small and statistically uninfluential proportion of the approximately 40,000 homicides in the country annually (Andrienko 2001; Gavrilova *et al.* 2005).

Next, the results show a significant proportional increase in victim-precipitated homicides (Adj. OR = 2.56, p = 0.010), even after controlling for other victim and incident characteristics. The proportion of all homicides that were victim-precipitated rose from 16 per cent in 1989–91 to 29 per cent in 1998. While it is difficult from these data and the qualitative narratives to discern a cause for this increase, it appears to be associated with the rise in homicides involving acquaintances. Though speculative, if we take into account (1) the earlier argument that a broader cross-section of the population is being exposed to difficult conditions that may increase their risk for involvement in crime and violence, (2) the increase in female-offender homicides, almost all of which were victim-precipitated by abusive intimates, and (3) the stressful and anomic conditions and blurred distinctions between right and wrong brought about by the massive and rapid social, ideological, political and economic changes in the country (kim and Pridemore 2005), it may be that certain social situations are now (relative to the past) more likely to result in acute arguments between family or acquaintances that in turn are more likely to result in violent outcomes.

Finally, after adjusting for other victim and incident characteristics, there was a significant increase—from 19 per cent of all homicides in 1989–91 to 38 per cent in 1998—in the use of blunt objects or bodily force as the means of assault in these homicide cases. Again, while difficult to find a direct cause for this change, it is likely the indirect effect of other shifting characteristics. The increases in victim-precipitated and acquaintance homicides, for example, suggest argument-related homicides. In such unplanned violent incidents, the offender is likely to use a weapon of opportunity: anything that is readily available to inflict physical damage. Further, a reading of the homicide narratives shows that many of the profit-motivated murders were not well planned and premeditated, and thus offenders were likely to select opportunistic ‘weapons’ to carry out the homicide. Finally, this change may be associated with the significant decrease in the proportion of offenders drinking at the time of the event, as a more detailed analysis of this overall sample has shown that those who were drinking were significantly more likely to use a knife (relative to other weapons) as the means of assault (Pridemore 2006).

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

A New Hypothesis: Criminological Transition?

Although formal statistical comparisons between two different time frames have been made in this study, the analyses presented here are nevertheless largely exploratory and descriptive. This is due both to the relatively small number of studies that examine changes in homicide characteristics over time and to the very small number of studies of interpersonal violence in Russia, especially at the individual and event levels. Yet, if exploratory studies are to have any meaning, their descriptive results must serve as the initial observations upon which theory is developed. While I have made several speculative suggestions about the possible causes of the change and stability in homicide characteristics shown here, when taken together with findings from other research from other nations, these results may serve as the foundation for a more formal hypothesis that I discuss briefly here.

The concept of a demographic transition has been very influential in international research in demography and related fields. In idealized form, the demographic transition model reveals the developmental paths taken by nations as they move from high birth and death rates to low birth and death rates. In general, nations tend to have fertility and mortality profiles that shift as they develop from pre-modern to industrializing to industrialized to post-industrial nations. It is important to point out, however, that not all causes of death respond similar to transition. Automobile accidents and some types of cancers, for example, may increase even as overall death rates decrease. The point is that multiple economic and health factors associated with development lead to the changes in a nation's fertility and mortality profiles. Though not without limitations, as well as exceptions to the general pattern outlined here, the idea of demographic transition has been extremely influential to several disciplines and has found substantial empirical support.

It may be that such a thing as a ‘criminological transition’ also exists. By this I mean that, similar to a demographic transition, a nation's crime profile—including not simply its crime rate but characteristics of victims, offenders and incidents—may change over time with modernization, industrialization, democratization or (as used in the transitional nations of Eastern Europe) marketizaton. Initial historical work on changing victim, offender and incident characteristics and on changing crime profiles over time suggests such a possibility. Potentially changing characteristics over time may include decreasing ages of violent offenders and victims (see Monkonnen (1999) and Zahn and McCall 1999, (especially Figure 2.3 on p. 14) for evidence of this in the United States, and Chervyakov *et al.* (2002) and Pridemore (2003) for evidence of this in Russia), increasing rates of violence in urban relative to rural areas (again, evidence of this exists from nations with high rates of violence like the United States and Russia), and an increase in profit-motivated violence (and thus probably an increasing distance in the victim–offender relationship). Recent research by Gruenewald and Pridemore (2005) using newly available historical data on Chicago homicides from more than 100 years ago also reveals significant changes in several victim, offender and event characteristics over the course of the twentieth century. This concept is not entirely new and is not unrelated to prior discussions of the response of crime to civilization, development or modernization. Nevertheless, the idea of a criminological transition does provide a point of departure for further research as it relates to specific characteristics of victims, offenders and events and how they may change together with shifts in social structure, culture, technology and other aspects of society. Further discussion of this issue is not appropriate for the current article, but a more complete and refined statement concerning this preliminary hypothesis will be forthcoming from the author.

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

Conclusion

Russia has faced widespread and dramatic social, political and economic change during the last 15 years. The country's homicide rate currently is more than twice what it was in the final years of the Soviet Union, is among the highest in the world and has not decreased in recent years, even given Russia's increasing political and economic stability relative to the 1990s. We hypothesized that this fundamental transition was leading to structural conditions and cultural changes that would have consequences for the nature of violence and thus the characteristics of homicide victims, offenders and incidents. Thus, the profile of Russian crime and offenders may be facing a 'criminological transition' in the same way that we speak of a demographic transition changing fertility and mortality profiles.

We employed a unique set of Russian homicide narratives to test these ideas, and the results provided evidence for this hypothesis and hinted at even broader changes. First, while victim characteristics remained stable during this period, several offender and incident characteristics appeared to be sensitive to the structural and cultural changes, exhibiting considerable change themselves in less than a decade. Second, other research has shown that the mean age of Russian homicide victims and offenders is rapidly decreasing (Chervyakov *et al*. 2002), and the findings from this study show that homicide offenders are less criminally experienced and that the proportion of offenders who are women, while still small, has increased sharply in a short time. Third, while alcohol continues to play an important role in the variation of homicide rates in Russia, in this sample the proportion of offenders who were drinking dropped significantly—perhaps a function of the increase in profit-motivated and premeditated murders. Finally, significantly more homicides are now profit-motivated, victim-precipitated, involve more than one offender, and involve the use of blunt objects or bodily force as the means of assault.

Future studies should expand upon this research in at least two main ways. First, this study examined only one region of Russia and only those homicide cases in which a verdict was reached. To ensure that the changes outlined here are valid indicators of change taking place in the country as a whole, similar research should be carried out elsewhere in the vast country. Second, we have introduced briefly the idea of a 'criminological transition'. Future historical research that examines this issue more closely and within different nations may provide evidence for or against such a hypothesis.

Russia is a large industrialized nation in transition, making it a prime laboratory for the study of the impact of political and economic change on social institutions and on interpersonal behaviour. Such a setting not only allows us to provide a test of the generalizability of theories developed to explain violence in Western nations, but also provides an exceedingly rare opportunity to test fundamental criminological and sociological theories about the effects of social change. Thus, despite the limitations of this study, it is one of the first of its kind and provides an important glimpse at the changing nature of violence in Russia, using the specific example provided here to generate a new general hypothesis about the influence of social, economic and political change on a nation's crime profile.

Acknowledgements

I thank Vladimir Shkolnikov for providing the narratives, which were originally collected under United Nations Development Programme Project RUS/98/G51. Research support was provided to the current author by a seed grant from the American Sociological Association and National Science Foundation. Points of view do not necessarily represent the official position of these organizations.

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

References

Adinkrah M. Homicide-Suicides in Fiji: Offense Patterns, Situational Factors and Sociocultural Contexts. Suicide and Life Threatening Behavior 2003;33:65–73. [PubMed: 12710541]

Andrienko Y. Understanding the Crime Growth in Russia during the Transition Period: A Criminometric Approach. Ekonomicheskii Zhurnal Vyshei Shkoli Ekonomiki 2001;5:194–220.

Bobak M, McKee M, Rose R, Marmot M. Alcohol Consumption in a National Sample of the Russian Population. Addiction 1999;94:857–66. [PubMed: 10665075]

Butler WE. Crime in the Soviet Union: Early Glimpses of the True Story. British Journal of Criminology 1992;32:144–59.

Cook, LJ. Russian Political Parties, the Duma, and the Welfare State. In: Pridemore, WA., editor. Ruling Russia: Law, Crime, and Justice in a Changing Society. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield; 2005. p. 39-58.

Decker SH. Exploring Victim–Offender Relationships in Homicide: The Role of Individual and Event Characteristics. Justice Quarterly 1993;10:585–612.

Decker SH. Deviant Homicide: A New Look at the Role of Motives and Victim–Offender Relationships. Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency 1996;33:427–49.

Chervyakov VV, Shkolnikov VM, Pridemore WA, McKee M. The Changing Nature of Murder in Russia. Social Science and Medicine 2002;55:1713–24. [PubMed: 12383457]

Finch A. Homicide in Contemporary Japan. British Journal of Criminology 2001;41:219–35.

Gavrilova, NS.; Gavrilov, LA.; Semyonova, VG.; Evdokushkina, GN.; Ivanova, AE. Patterns of Violent Crime in Russia. In: Pridemore, WA., editor. Ruling Russia: Law, Crime, and Justice in a Changing Society. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield; 2005. p. 117-46.

Gavrilova NS, Semyonova V, Evdokushkina GN, Gavrilov LA. The Response of Violent Mortality to Economic Crisis in Russia. Population Research and Policy Review 2000;19:397–419.

Goskomstat. Russian Statistical Yearbook. Moscow: Author; 2001. Rossiiskii statisticheskii ezhegodnik—2001.

Gruenewald, J.; Pridemore, WA. Stability and Change in Homicide Victim, Offender, and Event Characteristics in Chicago between 1900 and 2000. paper presented at the annual meetings of the American Society of Criminology; Toronto. November; 2005.

Hassan, Q.; Shah, MM.; Bashir, MZ. Homicide in Abbotabad. Journal of Ayub Medical College. 2005. available online at www.ayubmed.edu.pk/JAMC/PAST/17–1/22Qudsia17-1.htm

Johnson, JE. Violence against Women in Russia. In: Pridemore, WA., editor. Ruling Russia: Law, Crime, and Justice in a Changing Society. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield; 2005. p. 147-66.

Kharkhordin, O. The Collective and the Individual in Russia: A Study of Practice. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press; 1999.

Kim SW, Pridemore WA. Poverty, Social Change, Institutional Anomie, and Homicide. Social Science Quarterly 2005;86:1377–98. [PubMed: 16900262]

Klugman, J. World Bank publication; 1995. Poverty in Russia: An Assessment. available online at www.worldbank.org/html/prddr/oct95/oct-ar2.htm

Koposov RA, Ruchkin VV, Eisemann M, Sidorov PI. Alcohol Use in Adolescents from Northern Russia: The Role of Social Context. Alcohol and Alcoholism 2002;37:297–303. [PubMed: 12003922]

Leon DA, Shkolnikov VM. Social Stress and the Russian Mortality Crisis. JAMA 1998;279:790–1. [PubMed: 9508158]

Luckenbill D. Criminal Homicide as a Situated Transaction. Social Problems 1977;25:176–86.

Meier, RF.; Kennedy, LW.; Sacco, VF. Crime and the Criminal Event Perspective. In: Meier, RF.; Kennedy, LW.; Sacco, VF., editors. The Process and Structure of Crime: Criminal Events and Crime Analysis. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers; 2001. p. 1-27.

Monkkonen E. New York City Offender Ages: How Variable Over Time? Homicide Studies 1999;3:256–70.

Nemtsov AV. Estimation of Total Alcohol Consumption in Russia,1980–1994. Drug and Alcohol Dependence 2000;58:133–42. [PubMed: 10669064]

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

Planty, M. Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report, NCJ 189100. Washington, DC: US Department of Justice; 2002. Third-Party Involvement in Violent Crime,1993–1999.

Pridemore WA. Vodka and Violence: Alcohol Consumption and Homicide Rates in Russia. American Journal of Public Health 2002a;92:1921–30. [PubMed: 12453810]

Pridemore WA. Social Problems and Patterns of Juvenile Delinquency in Transitional Russia. Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency 2002b;39:187–213.

Pridemore WA. Demographic, Temporal, and Spatial Patterns of Homicide Rates in Russia. European Sociological Review 2003;19:41–59.

Pridemore WA. Weekend Effects on Binge Drinking and Homicide Mortality: Preliminary Evidence for the Social Connection Between Alcohol and Violence in Russia. Addiction 2004;99:1034–41. [PubMed: 15265100]

Pridemore WA. Contextual Characteristics of Homicide Events in a Transitional Society. International Criminal Justice Review 2006;16:5–23.

Pridemore WA, Shkolnikov VM. Education and Marriage as Protective Factors against Homicide Mortality: Methodological and Substantive Findings from Moscow. Journal of Quantitative Criminology 2004;20:173–87.

Razvodovsky YE. Association between Distilled Spirits Consumption and Violent Mortality Rate. Drugs: Education, Prevention, and Policy 2003;10:235–50.

Regoeczi WC, Miethe TD. Taking on the Unknown: A Qualitative Comparative Analysis of Unknown Relationship Homicides. Homicide Studies 2003;7:211–34.

Russian Ministry of Health. Smertnost(Naseleniia Rossiiskoi Federatsii, 2000 god [Population Mortality of the Russian Federation, 2000]. Moscow: Author; 2001.

Russian Ministry of the Interior. Prestupnost(i pravonarusheniya, 2000: Statisticheskii sbornik [Crime and Offenses, 2000: Statistical Collection]. Moscow: Author; 2001.

Shelley L. Policing Soviet Society: The Evolution of State Control. Law and Social Inquiry 1990;15:479–520.

Shkolnikov, VM.; Chervyakov, VV. Policies for the Control of the Transition's Mortality Crisis. Moscow: United Nations Development Programme; 2000.

Shkolnikov, VM.; Meslé, F. The Russian Epidemiological Crisis as Mirrored by Mortality Trends. In: DaVanzo, Julie, editor. Russia's Demographic “Crisis”. Rand; 1996. p. 113-62.

Smit PR, Bijleveld CCJH, Van der Zee S. Homicide in the Netherlands: An Exploratory Study of the 1998 Cases. Homicide Studies 2001;5:293–310.

Walberg P, McKee M, Shkolnikov VM, Chenet L, Leon DA. Economic Change, Crime, and Mortality Crisis in Russia: Regional Analysis. British Medical Journal 1998;317:312–18. [PubMed: 9685275]

Wells S. Aggression Involving Alcohol: Relationship to Drinking Patterns and Social Context. Addiction 2003;98:33–42. [PubMed: 12492753]

Graham K. Aggression Involving Alcohol: Relationship to Drinking Patterns and Social Context. Addiction 2003;98:33–42. [PubMed: 12492753]

Wells W. The Nature and Circumstances of Defensive Gun Use: A Content Analysis of Interpersonal Conflict Situations Involving Criminal Offenders. Justice Quarterly 2002;19:127–57.

World Bank. World Bank publication; 1997. Annual Report 1997. available online at www.worldbank.org/html/extpb/annrep97/chal.htm

Zahn, MA.; McCall, PL. Trends and Patterns of Homicide in the 20th-Century United States. In: Smith, MD.; Zahn, MA., editors. Homicide: A Sourcebook of Social Research. 1999. p. 9-23.

NIH-PA Author Manuscript NIH-PA Author Manuscript NIH-PA Author Manuscript

Table 1

Proportion of victim, offender and incident characteristics and odds of characteristic being present in 1998 relative to 1989–91[a]

Characteristics	Proportion		OR (95% CI)	p-value	Adj. OR (95% CI)	p-value
	1989–91	1998				
Victim						
Female	45.5	38.2	0.74 (0.45–1.23)	0.246	0.92 (0.51–1.65)	0.772
Drinking	42.6	40.8	0.92 (0.55–1.56)	0.776	1.13 (0.63–2.02)	0.677
Offender						
Female	0.9	10.1	11.87 (1.54–91.78)	0.018		
Drinking	76.7	57.6	0.44 (0.25–0.77)	0.004		
Priors[b]	27.1	5.0	—	—		
Incident						
V-precipitated	15.6	29.4	2.26 (1.19–4.26)	0.012	2.56 (1.26–5.20)	0.010
Stranger	33.0	30.1	0.88 (0.51–1.50)	0.626		
Acquaintance	34.0	44.1	1.54 (0.92–2.58)	0.103	1.54 (0.87–2.70)	0.136
Gun	10.8	9.6	0.88 (0.39–2.02)	0.764		
Blunt or bodily force	18.9	38.2	2.68 (1.49–4.83)	0.001	2.67 (1.46–4.88)	0.001
Profit	15.8	32.5	2.54 (1.41–4.57)	0.002	2.86 (1.45–5.63)	0.002
Premeditated	26.1	36.3	1.61 (0.93–2.79)	0.089		
Outside public place	27.9	38.2	1.62 (0.94–2.77)	0.081	1.20 (0.67-2.14)	0.549
> 1 offender	6.3	20.1	3.89 (1.63–9.29)	0.002	2.50 (0.98–6.38)	0.056

[a] Offender-specific data used for offender characteristics (n = 107 in 1989–91 and n = 139 in 1998). Victim-specific data used for victim and incident characteristics (n = 112 in 1989–91 and n = 136 in 1998).

[b] Prevalence of priors is given for descriptive purposes only, as, in most cases, information is missing (i.e. because of the way in which the narratives are constructed, one is unable to discern whether no information means no prior convictions or information about prior convictions is unknown).