Suicide, homicide and crime in Ireland: What are the relationships?*

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Abstract. The relationship between suicide and homicide has long been of interest. It has often been written that the two are inversely related though more recent reports, especially from North America, suggest that the two vary in parallel. In 1970, Kendell hypothesised that suicide and homicide should be inversely related. This study tested this prediction in an Irish context by examining the suicide and homicide rates of the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland for the years 1950–1990. The results suggest that, in general, suicide and homicide are positively related and that the inverse relationship hypothesis is limited to periods when a society is in a war-like situation. There is a positive relationship between suicide and indictable crime in both countries, more so in the Republic of Ireland. In light of these findings a new hypothesis is proposed that, in general society, suicide, homicide and indictable crime are positively related and reflect the level of disorder in society.

Key words: suicide, homicide, Ireland

The following account, which is by no means exhaustive, looks at the relationship between suicide and homicide in the literature over the last one hundred and fifty years. The relationship between suicide and homicide has been a topic of study since the early 19th century. An inverse relationship was first suggested by Guerry (1833), then by Maury (1860) and later again by the Italian criminologist Morselli (1879) who wrote “the polar character of suicide and homicide is an absolutely general law . . . always found changing inversely with one another” (p. 243). This relationship was studied further by Ferrie (1895) but it was the work of the French sociologist Emile Durkheim in 1897 which was to have considerable influence throughout the 20th century (Durkheim, 1951).

Durkheim’s work deserves further consideration. He commented that Ireland, Spain and Italy had the highest homicide rates but the lowest suicide

* Funding: Grant-assisted by the Health Research Board and the Southern and Mid-Western Health Boards.
rates in Europe. In fact he stated that "there is very little suicide in Ireland where the peasantry leads so wretched a life" (p. 245). He gave the Irish suicide rate as 21 per million though his data was speculative rather than empirical. However, Durkheim stated that this inverse relationship between suicide and homicide was not always verified. In particular when discussing anomie suicide (i.e., suicide occurring in the setting of social disorganization), he noted the similarity between the two: "anomic begets a state of exasperation and irritated weariness which may turn against the person himself or another according to circumstances" (p. 357).

Other writers subsequently pointed out the many exceptions to this inverse law (e.g., Halbwachs, 1930; Tarde, 1912).

The relationship between suicide and homicide was examined by Freud in psychodynamic terms; he wrote in “Mourning and Melancholia” in 1917 that "we have long known that no neurotic harbours thoughts of suicide which are not murderous impulses against others redirected upon himself" (Freud, 1955, p. 162).

Henry and Short (1954) favoured the inverse relationship between suicide and homicide. They proposed a theory of external restraint, where an individual's choice of behaviour is limited by others when there is a high degree of external restraint but is more an individual choice when there is less external restraint. They hypothesised that the more an individual is externally restrained, the more likely that person will commit homicide rather than suicide. Those in the lower social classes and those involved in intimate relationships (e.g., married) were more externally restrained. Higher social classes being less externally restrained were more likely to commit suicide rather than homicide.

Henry and Short (1954) also examined the suicide and homicide rates with reference to economic changes. They found that as the economy prospered the homicide rate increased and suicide decreased. The opposite occurred in times of economic depression. They suggested that the higher and lower social classes showed different responses to frustration, the former choosing suicide when their financial well-being was threatened, the latter attacking others, blaming them for their misfortune. In terms of the inverse relationship, Henry and Short (1954) found that this was the case using the suicide and homicide rates for the U.S.A. for the year 1940. However, when the relationship was re-examined using the 1964 rates the correlation was insignificant.

The concept of internalization/externalization of aggression was discussed by Banen (1954) and he wrote "just as love and hate, passivity and aggressiveness, sadism and masochism and all its variants; the difference being that in the former the aggression is internalized, whereas in the latter it is externalized" (pp. 349–357).