



The Value of Understanding the Absence of Social Problems in Cross-national Research:

An Example from Criminology

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This essay explores our disciplinary biases toward studying ‘high rates’ of social problems and presents an argument for equal consideration of ‘low rate’ places. By reorienting our research questions, explanatory frameworks, and analytical methods to also understand the low end of the incidence continuum, comparative sociologists can advance theoretical and methodological insights on social problems. The essay discusses the general value of researching low rate places and provides two examples from cross-national criminology to illustrate the benefits of this type of research. It also considers the methodological challenges of such an approach, but concludes that the effort is beneficial towards advancing knowledge on global social problems.

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Sociologists who study differences in the incidence of social problems across countries tend to focus on the question: Why do some places have *more* problems than others? For example, why are HIV prevalence rates higher in sub-Saharan African than other regions of the world (UNAIDS, 2016)? Why are there more children of primary school age not attending school in Pakistan compared to other South Asian countries (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2015)? Why is the violent crime rate in the U.S. higher than in other Western developed countries (World Health Organization, 2014)? This approach is logical if we aim to

alleviate social problems to improve quality of life. However, we could also improve the state of our knowledge about social problems if we asked the opposite question: Why do some places have *fewer* social problems than others?

By searching for answers to the first question, we assume that we are also answering this second question by default. On the contrary, I argue that by focusing only on high rates of occurrence of our problem of interest, we are artificially and uncritically limiting our understanding of the problem. In this article I discuss our disciplinary bias toward ‘high rates’ of social problems and argue that we can advance both our theoretical and methodological insights on these problems by reorienting our research questions, explanatory frameworks, and analytical methods to also understand low rate places. While studying the *absence* of social problems is typically unrealistic for most issues concerning sociologists (e.g., inequality, poverty, social disorder, substance abuse, etc.), we can nonetheless learn from places on the low end of the continuum of incidence, what I refer to as ‘low rate’ places for the rest of this essay. In the next sections, I will demonstrate the value of this approach with examples from cross-national criminology.

Why Do We Tend To Focus Only On High Rate Places?

Although the answer to this question seems obvious, we should be transparent about, and critical of, how we frame our research questions. There are two main forces driving research questions toward big problems: institutional incentives and quantitative methods. These factors can inadvertently bias the scope of our research questions.

First, sociologists who study social problems usually aim to contribute knowledge toward solving or alleviating those problems, so we are naturally drawn to high rate places to study. However, we cannot lose sight of the fact that social problems are social constructions framed by various actors to garner attention and resources to issues that are important to the ‘problem promoters’, including academics (Best, 2001, p. 16). The abundance of social problems competes for attention and resources from the public and policy-makers. In order to successfully acquire scarce resources, we need to emphasise the size and scope of the problem. ‘Big numbers warn us that the problem is a common one, compelling our attention, concern, and action’ (Best, 2001, p. 17). They provide justifications for our research.

Just as there are incentives for social advocates to emphasise ‘big problems’, there are institutional incentives for cross-national sociologists to focus on high rate places. Research proposals and products emphasising big problems are more likely to attract research funding or be accepted in top-tier publications. Framing research questions around the absence of a social problem is akin to trying to publish null statistical findings. Individual researchers may value such an approach for the purpose of scientific integrity, but it is rarely rewarded by institutional actors.

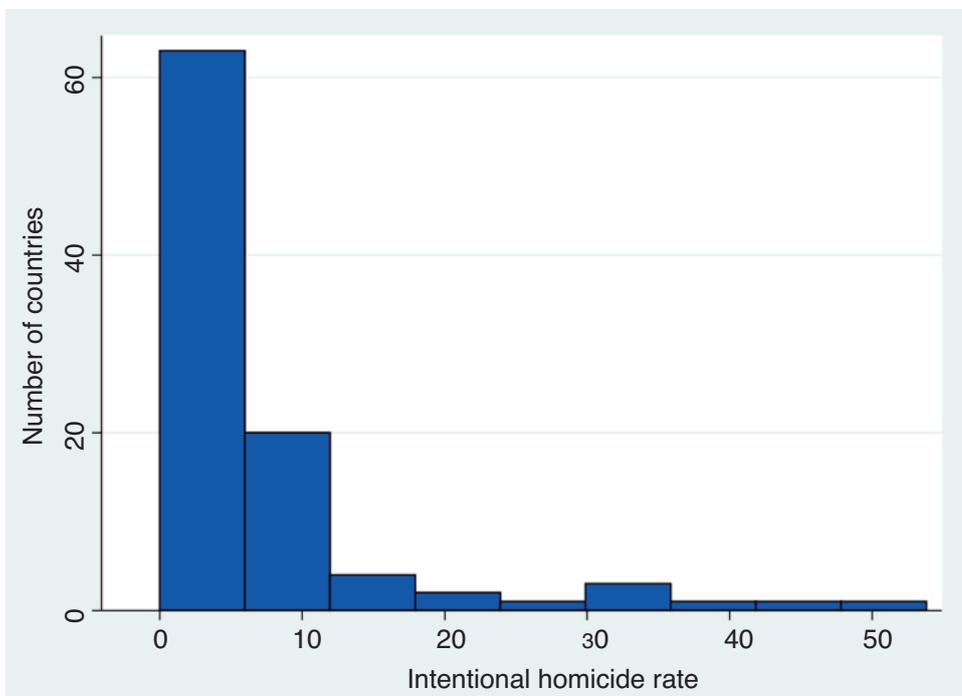
Secondly, the strong emphasis on quantitative methods in some areas of sociology, particularly criminology, shifts our attention to the study of frequent problems. If we limit our samples to only low rate countries, we are artificially create small sample sizes and oddly distributed dependent variables that create problems for quantitative analyses. Therefore, identifying common occurrences of a particular problem

and trying to explain what drives higher than average rates fits well with the rationale of most quantitative methods. Of course, regression can be used to identify what *lowers* rates as well, although given the institutional incentives discussed above, this is not the tendency in our field.

To illustrate this problem, Figure 1 is a histogram of intentional homicide rates from 2012 for 96 countries, as reported by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). The homicide rates per 100,000 population for this sample range from 0 to 53.8. The mean is 6.76, but the median is only 2.90, and the mode is 1.2 (with only 6 cases). The distribution has a standard deviation of 9.96. Many criminologists use Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression to analyse cross-national differences in homicide rates (e.g., Chon, 2013; Nivette & Eisner, 2013; Ouimet, 2012; Stamatel, 2009b, 2014, etc.) and then adjust for the violations of OLS assumptions due to the skewed nature of the dependent variables. Methodologically, this is a reasonable approach, but it glosses over a more fundamental conceptual issue: How useful is an analytical tool that relies on deviations from the mean when the mean is not a very good point of reference for a particular distribution?¹ Looking at Figure 1, the more pressing research question seems to be explaining why two-thirds of the sample falls at the fairly low range of the distribution of homicide rates rather than explaining what increases homicide rates? By framing the research question in favour of high rate places, we are ignoring important information coming directly from the data.

The bottom line of this example is not to devalue the important work that has been done to date to explain cross-national homicide variations. Instead, the point is to encourage researchers to think more carefully about how our methodological tools shape our research questions. In this case, the strong reliance on quantitative methods in criminology masks important research questions that lie in the tails of the distribution of this particular social problem.

Figure 1. Histogram of Intentional Homicide Rates for 96 Countries, 2012



Source: UNODC, 2013

What Are We Missing By Ignoring Low Rate Places?

While regression analyses can tell us what factors *lower* rates, that is not the same as identifying characteristics that low rate places share. By ignoring this question, we uncritically limit our theoretical reasoning and diminish our capacity to influence social policies. For example, in the last two decades there has been a considerable amount of research studying cross-national differences in violent crimes, primarily homicide. International agencies, such as the World Health Organisation and United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime have greatly improved their collections of data on crime and violence and we now have better methodological tools for studying crime differences across time and place (Phillips & Greenberg, 2008; LaFree & Tseloni, 2006; Marshall, Marshall, & Ren, 2009; Raffalovich & Chung, 2014).

Pridemore and Trent (2010) and Nivette (2011a) have provided recent reviews of the state of our knowledge about cross-national homicide differences. Most research in this area has been quantitative and has greatly emphasised economic and demographic predictors. These review articles demonstrate the inconsistencies in this body of work, but there are also some well-established conclusions. For example, we know that low levels of economic development, high levels of income inequality, and regional indicators (particularly for Latin America and the former Soviet Union) are positively related to higher homicide rates.

This research is primarily framed by three grand theories (modernisation, civilisation, and world systems), that have not evolved much since they became popular in international criminology after World War II (Eisner, 2001; Howard *et al.*, 2000; Neapolitan, 1997; Stamatel, 2009a). Perhaps this lack of new (and especially revolutionary) theories in this field is related

to underlying frequentist assumptions. In other words, would we consider different explanatory factors if we focused more on the tails of the distribution rather than the mean? The sparse research that has taken this alternate route affirms this approach. For example, of the countries in the top ten percent of the distribution of homicide rates shown in Figure 1, nine out of ten are in Central and South America. Including a regional dummy variable in a regression analysis will tell us that this region of the world has higher homicide rates on average, but it does nothing to explain this extreme concentration in the tail of the distribution. A more meaningful explanation would search for commonalities among these countries, beyond physical location. For example, Fajnzylber *et al.* (2002) argue that involvement in the drug trade and histories of violent political conflict contribute to high levels of criminal violence in Latin America. In contrast, the countries in the bottom ten percent of the distribution of homicide rates is much more diverse in geographic locations, which begs the question of what these countries have in common. Adler (1983) emphasised the role of socialising institutions and cultural cohesion in maintaining low crime rates in a sample of geographically diverse countries. As such, we now have four explanatory factors that were introduced into the literature only because these researchers were examining the tails of the distribution. These explanatory factors are distinctly different from the economic and demographic predictors most often studied in this area of research.

Aside from adding theoretical complexity to our explanatory models, studying low rate countries is especially relevant for our capacity to influence social policies. As ‘problem promoters’, sociologists do not draw enough attention to our successes. Studying low rate places provides reasonable expectations for the amelioration of social problems. Not only do low rate places illustrate the full range of possibilities, but they also serve as a marker for success. For example, recorded crime rates in the U.S. have been declining since the 1990s, but this fact is often lost on the American public (Aebi & Linde, 2010; Blumstein & Wallman, 2005; Farrell *et al.*, 2010). Rather than celebrating this success, policymakers still leverage fear

of crime to promote political agendas. As ‘problem promoters’, sociologists have not been successful in communicating our contributions to understanding crime in the U.S. and promoting policies that would contribute to further reductions in the crime rate. We do not know how to answer the question of ‘How low can it go?’

The U.S. violent crime rate in 2015 was over 40 percent lower than in 1996 and the homicide rate is currently below the global average. These are undoubtedly important accomplishments in crime control; but cross-national analyses of crime countries demonstrate that it is worthwhile to continue working toward even lower crime rates. The U.S. homicide rate in 2012 was 4.7 per 100,000, which was roughly four times higher than many Western European countries (see Table 1 below) (UNODC, 2013). American criminologists trying to develop new approaches to continue to reduce crime rates in the U.S. would benefit from a better understanding of how other countries have managed such an accomplishment.

Demonstrating the Value of Studying Low Rate Problems and Places

The main goal of this essay is to argue that by reorienting our research questions to give more consideration to the *infrequency* of social problems in some countries relative to others, cross-national sociology will expand its theoretical and methodological boundaries while simultaneously producing knowledge that has important policy implications. To further demonstrate the value of this approach, I elaborate on two examples from cross-national criminology that have changed the way that we think about important issues in our field.

Example 1: Nations Not Obsessed with Crime

The post-World War II era in the U.S. and many other Western developed countries was characterised by rising recorded crime rates (Eisner, 2001; Gurr, 1977, 2981; LaFree & Drass, 2002), accompanied by increases in citizens’ fear of crime and a growing sense of personal insecurity and calls from politicians to ‘get

tough on crime' (Hagan, 2012; Sacco, 2005). Social scientists were tasked with explaining the apparently alarming growth in crime rates and most did so only within the context of their own countries. Nonetheless, international criminologists approached the problem through a comparative lens, particularly contrasting high-crime societies like the U.S. with crime countries. For example, Bayley (1978) compared cultural differences related to crime and social control between the U.S. and Japan. In the same year, Clinard (1978) argued that crime rates were relatively low in Switzerland due to structural factors such as demographic composition and a decentralised political structure. A few years later, Adler (1983) published *Nations Not Obsessed with Crime*, in which she compared ten crime countries to identify common characteristics. She argued that crime countries had high levels of synnomic or normative cohesion, in contrast to Durkheim's (1951 [1897]) state of anomie and normlessness that characterised high crime countries.

These works were later criticised by other scholars for being U.S.-centric, theoretically vague, and not methodologically rigorous (see Nivette, 2011b). Some of these limitations were due to the relative newness of comparative criminology, the lack of reliable international crime data, and weak institutional support for international collaborations. While there have been some more recent explorations of crime countries, particularly Japan (Johnson, 2008) and Saudi Arabia (Wardak, 2005), the idea of systematically studying crime places has not yet become a popular topic, which I argue is a detriment to our field. Theoretical explanations for crime countries in earlier research went beyond simply looking for the absence of criminogenic factors, like inequality or ethnic factionalisation, to consider new ideas to explain the uniqueness of these places. For example, Adler argued that crime countries were characterised by synnomic, 'a convergence of norms to the point of harmonious accommodation' (Adler, 1983, p. 158). Drawing upon Durkheim's (1951[1897]) work on collective conscience, synnomic is the convergence of shared norms with strong socialising institutions (like families, religions, and educational institutions) to exert

social control in order to reinforce these norms (Adler, 1983, p. 157).

Nivette (2011b) provided a thorough critique of the limitations of Adler's formulation of synnomic, including vague definitions of prosocial norms, an uncritical acceptance of ideology over reality, and a linear conception of social change. Rather than dismissing the study of crime societies as unimportant, tackling some of these theoretical problems would benefit cross-national criminology. For example, elaborating on what 'normative cohesion' looks like across countries and how it is related to formal crime control would introduce a systematic analysis of culture in a field dominated by structural explanations.

Additionally, examining the relationship between social change and low crime rates would encourage new theoretical developments. Examining how societies move from high- to crime states could shed light on explaining the international crime drop (Farrell et al., 2011), whereas understanding the opposite pattern of moving from low- to high- crime societies has brought greater attention to the role that political systems play in controlling crime (Stamatel, 2014). Finally, understanding how some countries maintain low crime rates over time would make us consider causes of stability rather than only causes of change. These are just a few examples of how studying nations with low crime rates can push the theoretical boundaries of comparative criminology.

Example 2: Studying Sex-specific Homicide Rates

The second example examines a low rate problem in low rate places. Most cross-national violence research focuses on explaining differences in overall homicide rates rather than sex-specific rates. This is due in part to data availability, but also to the reality that males comprise the vast majority of criminal offenders and victims of homicide. As such, female rates of offending, and usually of victimisation, are relatively low. For example, Table 1 shows homicide victimisation rates for select European countries for both males and females.

Globally, homicides involving males dominate the rates so much that if our overarching goal is to reduce

the amount of homicides, then those are the events most likely to make a difference in lowering the rates. As Table 1 shows, female homicide victimisation rates in some countries are exceptionally low (under 1 per 100,000), even in countries where male rates are also low. Since reducing the number of female homicide victims is unlikely to have much of an effect on total homicide rates, what is the value of studying cross-national variations in female homicide victimisation? Again, I argue that the value lies in expanding our theoretical possibilities.

Table 1 Average homicide victimisation rates per 100,000, 2006-2010

Country	Females	Males
Austria	0.67	0.62
Cyprus	0.74	2.47
Finland	1.06	3.01
Italy	0.31	0.97
Latvia	3.50	11.03
Netherlands	0.60	1.18
United Kingdom	0.21	0.53

Source: World Health Organisation, 2014

While some scholars support a gender-neutral approach to studying violence, arguing that the etiology of violence is the same across gender (Felson, 2010; Felson & Lane, 2010), feminist scholars contend that a gender-specific approach is necessary to understand violence against women (Barberet, 2014; Ferraro, 2013; Renzetti, 2013; Taylor & Jasinski, 2011). In particular, they argue that gender inequality and women's social status are keys to understanding violence against women.

There has not been a lot of research yet on gender-specific homicide rates cross-nationally, but existing studies show a fair number of similarities in regression results for male and female homicide rates, but there are also enough differences to not rule out gender-specific explanations. What is most interesting, however, is some evidence that factors expected to explain violence against women may *also* explain violence against men. For example, in a recent study of gender-specific homicide rates across Europe, I

found that financial inequality between men and women was a significant predictor for *both* male and female homicide victimisation rates. This surprising finding would have not been found if we ignored female homicide victimisation because of its relative infrequency (Stamatel, 2016). Such a finding now requires us to think differently about the negative consequences of gender inequality for both sexes.

The point of both of these examples is to illustrate how examinations of low rate places and problems contribute to our knowledge base in unexpected ways. By ignoring low rate places we are limiting potential insights into high rate places that could be used to alleviate those social problems.

Challenges of Studying Low Rate Places

Researching the 'absence' of social problems introduces distinct methodological problems. In trying to identify low crime countries, Nivette asked the pressing question of 'how *low* is "low crime"?' (2011b, p. 89). Because policy makers and social scientists rely on official statistics to quantify the extent of various social problems, under-reporting can compromise the classification of countries on a high-low continuum. This is especially problematic for studying crime because of the 'dark figure' of unreported crime that is not captured even with victimisation surveys. 'When a concept hinges on the *lack* of reported crimes, underreporting becomes a major threat to explanation' (Nivette, 2011b, p. 88).

An equally pressing challenge is how to establish a threshold for 'low crime'. High crime countries tend to be defined as those above average, where more is simply constructed as 'bad'. Yet we do not evaluate low crime countries in the same manner. Is it sufficient to be below the mean? Ideally, the public would like to see a 'no crime' society, which is both practically and theoretically impossible; but this means that being average or even below average with respect to crime rates is typically still 'not good enough'. Being able to identify crime societies is necessary for sociologists to construct a viable narrative for reasonable crime control goals. If we never consider crime

countries in our research, we cannot set reasonable expectations for success.

These challenges are not insurmountable and, in fact, open possibilities for more qualitative and mixed methods approaches to studying cross-national crime differences. For example, Nivette (2011b) suggested using qualitative methods to analyse common characteristics of different types of countries, such as traditional versus modern, to see if crime levels emerge as defining characteristics. Marshall *et al.* (2009) advocated for a mixed methods approach, specifically qualitative comparative analysis, for a more robust understanding of cross-national patterns of violence. Broadening our methodological tools will help avoid the trap of allowing quantitative methods to influence our research questions.

Conclusions

There are many valid reasons for studying factors that increase social problems and places that have high rates of social problems, particularly if we aim to produce knowledge that will help alleviate these problems. But there are also structural factors, such as institutional and methodological biases, that draw our attention toward high rate places. In this essay, I argued that it is also necessary to understand low rate places. There is the obvious benefit to studying countries that have successfully managed particular social problems because they are clearly doing something right. However, I also contend that by focusing mainly on high rate places we are unnecessarily limiting our theoretical reasoning. By not examining the full range of the problem, we are not considering the full range of social causes. Additionally, we are not able to set reasonable expectations for success when we ignore low rate problems. This leads the general public to expect the complete eradication of a social problem, which is not realistic for most of the issues sociologists study.

Researching low rate places introduces some methodological challenges with respect to small sample sizes and the analysis of rare events, but these are also opportunities to refine our methodological tools. The bigger challenge is convincing publishers, fund-

ing agencies, and peer reviewers that this is a worthwhile endeavour. The examples provided above in just one area of comparative sociology illustrate that this line of inquiry is worth the effort.

Notes

¹ Of course, there are other quantitative methods better suited for a variable with this kind of distribution, like maximum likelihood estimation, but they introduce other problems, such as lack of power and unreliable estimates due to small sample sizes. They also do not address the underlying conceptual problem of *what* we are trying to explain.

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