

Familial, femicidal, and intimate partner homicide in early modern Nordic societies¹

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Abstract

Familial homicide (FH), intimate partner homicide (IPH), and femicide are serious problems in the modern world. Additional information on these phenomena can be gained from historical long-duration homicide research. This study draws on the Historical Homicide Monitor Database to discuss the relative salience of FH, IPH, and femicide in the general homicide patterns of early modern and contemporary periods. The Historical Homicide Monitor (HHM) is a standardized homicide analysis approach designed for long-duration comparisons (Kivivuori et al., 2022). The current data are derived from three regional study sites in Denmark, Finland, and Sweden, comparing homicide patterns in these research sites in the early modern period (1609–1699) and contrasting the patterns with the contemporary era (2007–2016). Two findings are discussed: the relative rarity of FH, IPH, and femicide in early modern Nordic homicide data, and the outlier position of Finland in this regard. The aim is to showcase the benefits of standardized homicide instruments in the further development of morphological analysis of violence transitions.

Keywords: Familial homicide, intimate partner homicide, femicide, Historical Homicide Monitor, early modern period, Denmark, Finland, Sweden, historical criminology

Introduction

Violence against women and intimate partner violence are major social problems in today's world (UNODC & UN Women, 2023). The long-term consequences of family violence are highly negative, with victims showing adverse psychiatric, psychosocial, and physical health outcomes (Burghart & Backhaus, 2024). But is this phenomenon particularly modern? Hardly. It is an aspect of violence which likely manifests both long-duration persistence and historical variation. As predicted by Verkko's laws, it may even be more stable than other types of violence, male-to-male homicide in particular (Verkko, 1951). Therefore, it is of interest to see what a quantitative historical-comparative approach can say about this phenomenon.

In this study, I showcase some of the potentials of long-duration homicide research by focusing on homicide types in which female mortality is of salience: familial violence (FH), intimate partner violence (IPH) and, of course, femicide. I draw on the Historical Homicide Monitor Database and its published

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findings (Kivivuori et al., 2024). I first describe this source and then present selected comparative findings from the 17th century, comparing Denmark, Finland and Sweden. Here, I focus on the composition of violence rather than the rate of violence. This focus has recently been coined '*morphological*' as part of the Criminologic Transition Model (Pridemore, 2025, p. 45). Thus, the description shows how large a share of all homicides was violence against women, familial violence, and intimate partner violence. In discussing the results, two angles are of special interest. First, how the temporal change in these homicide types can be explained; and second, are there signs that Finland is a cross-national puzzle (Savolainen et al., 2008), also regarding femicide and intimate partner violence?

Historical Homicide Monitor

One of the central aims of violence research is to compare areas and periods in a reliable manner. For historical criminology, this poses great challenges, especially when conducting long-term analyses. Homicide is typically considered the most valid indicator of violence. This is so for two reasons: first, the share of completely unknown and unrecorded crimes is lower than in other crime types, and second, homicide is less influenced by changing cultural perceptions.

Since 2011, a group of European countries have cooperated to build the European Homicide Monitor (EHM), a standardized indicator of homicide (see Kivivuori et al., 2024). Importantly, the aim of EHM was to disaggregate homicide by a research-informed selection of variables describing victim, offender and event features. A couple of years later, I suggested that standardized homicide data collection could also be expanded backwards in time, to historical periods. This goal was realized in a Nordic research project launched in 2018 (Kivivuori et al., 2022). That project aimed at substantial and methodological advances in long-duration homicide research, extending quantitative analysis to the pre-statistical age.² The project had three main results. First, we created a methodological classification manual of historical homicide (Kivivuori et al., 2020b), which is basically an instruction to change textual data into a numeric format and into variables allowing homicide disaggregation. Second, we applied this instrument to Nordic comparative pilot data from the period 1608–1699 (Kivivuori et al., 2022). Third, the data produced using the HHM coding manual was merged into a database called the Historical Homicide Monitor Database (HHMD).

The feasibility of reliable long-duration comparison is built on multiple foundations. Most importantly, it requires a clear definition of homicide. In the HHM project, the main aim was to apply the EHM definition: homicide is interpersonal violence leading to the death of the victim, so that the violence must be intentional, but the outcome of death does not have to be intended (for a detailed discussion, see Kivivuori et al., 2020b, pp. 8–11). Additionally, for purposes of long-term comparison, victims younger than one year of age were excluded from comparative analysis, even though they are included in the HHMD. Third, the use of court protocols requires source critique based on deep contextual information about the societies to be compared. Finally, explicit theoretical relevance is needed. In the HHM project, we used theory in two ways. Regarding stability, we rested the feasibility of long-term comparison on theories exploring human universals in motivation, social cognition, memory functions, and behavioral drivers (Daly & Wilson, 1988; Eisner, 2011). Regarding historical variation, we incorporated a rich variety of theoretical assets into the instrument. Importantly, the manual was designed to be pluralistic in this regard (see Kivivuori et al., 2020b, pp. 14–15, for a listing of how HHM variables link to criminological theories).

Nordic pilot data

In the Nordic HHM pilot project, the early modern period was chosen to focus on the steepest homicide decline in the Nordic area. Using original court protocols pertaining to this period from the years

1608–1699, the patterns of early modern homicide in Finland, Denmark, and Sweden were described using the HHM and compared with those in the 2007–2016 period. The data derived from the original hand-written court documents of incidents from Northern Jutland (Denmark, 1608–1622), Southern and Northern Ostrobothnia (Finland, 1640–1699), and the provinces of Östergötland, Kalmar, Jönköping, and Kronoberg (Sweden, 1640–1650). Thus, these regions are much larger units than individual cities, towns or villages, but smaller than full state formations. As regional data, they are thus more reliable than typical city or village samples, while still falling short of full national coverage.

In the three research regions combined, the homicide rate during the early modern study period was about six times higher (6.4 per 100,000 population) than in the modern comparison period (1.0). The findings, therefore, corroborated the general long-term homicide drop thesis. In terms of its morphology, early modern homicide was linked to everyday routines and time cycles (Kivivuori et al., 2020a; Kivivuori et al., 2022). Over the long term, there has been a clear trend towards social marginalization of homicide: Whereas early modern homicide often involved ordinary farmers, the modern homicide scene is dominated by socially disadvantaged victims and offenders. For an in-depth historical contextualization and source critique, readers are advised to consult the main project report (Kivivuori et al., 2022).

Violence against women is intimately connected to the social stratification and gender structures of the relevant eras. In the early modern period, women's social position depended on their marital status. However, these power structures were undergoing change during the 17th century. The husband's or father's position was empowered vis-à-vis that of his wife and daughter, at the expense of kin, in the aim of weakening the influence of the family and kin while strengthening the control of the central state. The rights of a wife sometimes resembled the position of a co-manager of the household (see Kivivuori et al., 2022, p. 161, and the historical literature cited therein). Yet she remained subjugated to her husband. The husband had both the right and the duty to castigate and punish his spouse, children, and workforce (Lidman, 2018, pp. 54–70). However, there were limits to male power. Domestic control was regulated by informal social norms and in legal practice. In particular, the husband was not allowed to commit too serious violence, like maiming or killing the spouse (Lidman, 2013).

Descriptive observations

In this section, I present descriptive results regarding familial homicide, intimate partner homicide and femicide in the period 1608–1699, comparing the three research regions in Denmark, Sweden and Finland (Kivivuori et al., 2022). I present these types of femicide in the order in which they focus on female victims.

Familial homicide

Compared to Danish and Swedish homicide, early modern Finnish homicide was more often linked to familial conflicts (Table 1). The relevant cases included a variety of familial or kin-related homicides: fatal intimate partner violence, the killing of offspring over one year of age, children killing family members, and killings involving siblings, in-laws and other blood relatives. So, this category is not exclusively about male-to-female violence. However, if the analysis of Table 1 is limited to female victims, the shares of familial violence increase to 9%, 33%, and 53% in Denmark, Sweden, and Finland, respectively (total 42%, $p < .05$). So, only in Finland was familial violence the most prevalent context of femicide.

The high share of familial cases in the Finnish data likely reflects routine activities and economic activities of the research sites. While the Danish and Swedish research areas were mostly based on village economy, the Finnish northern areas were characterized by labour-intensive slash-and-burn economies marked by familial isolation, in contrast to a more stable and village-embedded agriculture. This way of life may have involved conflicts in the comparative absence of capable guardians within the village community. Conflicts often targeted in-law relatives or other blood relatives rather than intimate partners,

offspring, siblings, parents or grandparents, sometimes over perceived unfair workloads.

Table 1 Type of homicide, % of incidents in Nordic countries, 1608–1699.

	Denmark	Sweden	Finland	Total
Familial	1	6	29	12
Criminal- or crime-related	1	9	14	8
Feud or property conflict	34	25	19	26
Other non-criminal	54	47	15	39
Nightlife & other, comb.	11	13	23	16
Total	100	100	100	100
N	148	154	149	451

p < .001. Adapted from Kivivuori et al. (2022)

Intimate partner homicide

The victim–offender relationship (VOR) is one of the classical variables in homicide analysis (Flewelling & Williams, 1999; Wolfgang, 1958). The distribution of main VOR categories in early modern homicide is shown in Table 2. As can be seen, by far the most common type of homicide in the 17th century took place between longer-term acquaintances, such as friends or neighbours (72%). Interestingly, killings of blood relatives are more prevalent than intimate partner homicides, likely reflecting the importance of kin networks in traditional societies.

Overall, the share of intimate partner killings (5% in the total data) is low by modern standards. Comparing the three research locations, Finland had the largest share of intimate partner homicide incidents. One in ten homicide incidents in Northern Finland was an intimate partner homicide, while the share of this crime type was much lower in Sweden and absent in Northern Jutland. Homicides against blood relatives and in-laws were also more prevalent in northern Finland than in the other two study regions.

Table 2 Victim–offender relationship, % of incidents in Nordic countries, 1608–1699.

	Denmark	Sweden	Finland	Total
Intimate partner	0	4	10	5
Blood relative	2	5	15	7
In-law relative	2	6	8	5
Longer-time acquaintance	93	68	53	72
New acquaintance, stranger or other	3	18	14	11
Total	100	100	100	100
N	165	131	155	451

p < .05, adapted from Kivivuori et al. (2022)

Intimate partner violence can include male victims. If the analysis is limited to female victims, the role of intimate partner violence is more marked. For Denmark, the zero level naturally remains, but for Sweden, the share of IPH of female victims was 18% and for Finland, 31%. These figures are still lower

than is typical in modern data. It also shows that femicide was diverse in the early modern North; among female victims, long-term acquaintance killing (49%) was the most prevalent, followed by IPH (24%) and killings by relatives (22%). Due to the rarity of femicide in Denmark and Sweden, these figures largely reflect northern Finnish conditions.

Overall, the findings suggest that the share of intimate partner homicides among all homicides was lower in early modern Nordic countries than today. In the country comparison, northern Finland was an outlier in terms of the composition of incidents. In some sense, Danish Jutland and northern Finland were extremes, while south-eastern Sweden stood in between them. The share of IPH homicides was highest in Finland. When only female victims were inspected, IPH was the most prevalent, but not the only context where females were killed.

Femicide

The concept of femicide has different meanings (Liem et al., 2024). In this description, all homicides targeted against women are considered femicides, excluding victims who were less than one year old at the time of the crime.

Of the homicide victims in our complete data from the period 1608–1699, 15% were women and 85% men. The share of female victims was higher in the Finnish data (29%) than in the Swedish data (11%) or the Danish data (6%). The common feature was, however, that in all three study regions, most victims were men. Men were typically killed in the context of acquaintance homicides committed in non-criminal milieus in Sweden and Denmark, while in Finland, intra-familial lethal violence targeting especially male in-laws and kin was also relevant. Estimated rates of female homicide victimization were higher in northern Finland than in the two other research sites. The high Finnish proportional share of female victims was not fully a function of a lower level of male-to-male violence, but the female homicide victimization risk was also highest in Finland, although the margin of difference was not very large.

Long-duration change

Above, homicides against females, familial homicide, and intimate partner homicide were compared in the early modern period. Next, I examine how these patterns have changed, comparing the early modern period to the 21st century. Again, the focus is on morphology, i.e., the relative shares of homicide subtypes. Table 3 presents the relative shares of relevant homicide subtypes for each research region during the early modern and the contemporary period (2007–2016).

Table 3 Share of female victims, familial homicide, and IPH in early modern period and 2007–2016, Nordic countries

	Denmark		Sweden		Finland	
	Early modern	Contemporary	Early modern	Contemporary	Early modern	Contemporary
% Female (of all victims)	6	37	11	38	29	27
% Familial homicide (of all homicides)	1	57	6	39	29	31
% Intimate partner (of all homicides)	0	26	4	26	10	24

Source: Kivivuori et al. (2022). Note that the early modern data period differs across the three study regions: 1608–1622 in Denmark, 1640–1650 in Sweden, and 1640–1699 in Finland. Regional data.

As can be seen, the share of female victims, familial homicides, and intimate partner homicides has drastically increased over the long term, especially in the Danish and Swedish study regions. Finland appears to be an outlier with a relatively stable share of female victims and FH. However, even in Finland, the share of IPH has increased from 10% to 24% of the victims.

The comparison shown in Table 3 is limited to the study regions and does not, therefore, form a national series. Since the analysis is morphological and not rate-based, the patterns do not necessarily translate to shifts in homicide mortality risk. The findings refer to two distinct time periods; we do not know what has happened in between, or if the observed changes reflect gradual or abrupt changes. Some tentative indications based on the comparison of Finland and Iceland suggest that the rise of IPH in homicide morphology may be a relatively recent phenomenon, taking place during the 20th century in conjunction with the transition from rural to urban-industrial society (Lehti et al., 2021). The timing of this crime pattern transition is a matter for future research.

Discussion

I have explored violence against women using the Historical Homicide Monitor approach and focusing on three types of homicide in which females are typically overrepresented as victims. Thus, familial/kin violence, intimate partner violence, and femicide were described in three historical research regions. Several interesting morphological patterns emerged from these descriptive comparisons between countries and over time.

It is true for the early modern period that female homicide victims constituted a diverse group, and that women were killed in a range of different contexts, as they are today (Liem et al., 2024, p. 187; see also Lehti et al., 2019). However, the share of familial, femicidal and IPV-related homicides has increased quite considerably in the long-duration comparison between the 17th and the 21st century. When analyzing the total data, this relative increase reflects the huge absolute decrease in male-to-male violence. The rate of female homicide victimization has also decreased from the early modern period, but less steeply (Kivivuori et al., 2022, pp. 231–32). It is beyond doubt that familial, intimate and femicidal homicide today constitutes a major societal problem. While homicide overall has decreased, in the remaining homicides, the role of femicide, familial violence, and IPH is highly salient and relevant. This represents a morphological change in violence patterns (Pridemore, 2025, pp. 31–32).

Second, when compared with Sweden and Denmark, Finland stood out as an outlier: in the early modern period, the share of these private-sphere homicide types was higher in Finland than in the two other research sites in Denmark and Sweden. This contrasts with the modern (21st-century) point of comparison, where the three countries are more similar (Table 3). There has been a convergence of morphological homicide patterns toward isomorphism (see Pridemore, 2025, for such a prediction). The early modern variation between regions could reflect differences in economic contexts: Northern Finland was more dependent on slash-and-burn economies than the other two research regions, characterized by presumably more stable village communities.

The Nordic HHM pilot project observed very low levels of intimate partner homicide in our Danish study region during the early modern period, with comparatively low shares of this type noted also in Sweden and to some degree in Finland. Does this finding reflect behavioural realities or validity limitations in the data sources? The discussion of this question is challenging, as it involves conjectures about unrecorded criminality. If we suggest that intimate partner homicide was prevalent but not visible, this conclusion should be validated by other sources or studies. In modern criminology, hidden crime research is a highly developed empirical methodology (Kivivuori, 2011). Unfortunately, we lack hidden crime research resources for historical periods and must resort to a discussion of indirect evidence. In the original HHM pilot project, other studies supported the notion that low IPH against women was a real phenomenon, rather than an artefact caused by the exclusion of female victims from the sources. The relative rarity of

IPV has been indicated in studies using other official sources and even bio-archaeological skeletal assemblages (Kjellström, 2009; Maddern, 2002; Thomsen, 2017). What could account for these observations? Two substantive interpretations emerge: social control and functional interpretations.

Social control interpretation. The low prevalence of intimate partner homicide in the early modern period could reflect differentials in the intensity and character of social control in families and villages. Local communities could control excessive disciplinary violence by males, as the informal social control practices of the medieval and early modern epochs regulated patriarchal violence (Maddern, 2002; Lidman, 2018; Thomsen, 2017, pp. 147–149). Research from the early modern Netherlands indicates that neighbours protected women against domestic violence (Van der Heijden, 2016, p. 238). Note that this control interpretation does not necessarily mean that there was less intimate partner violence, but that control could limit such violence to sublethal levels.

Functional interpretation. This refers to the historically specific character of marriage. In early modern Nordic society, “to marry someone was the same as setting up an economic partnership with that person” (Ling et al., 2016). Randolph Roth, the American historian, has discussed the violence-related implications of such arrangements in the Anglo-American context. There as well, marriages were based on practical economic arrangements and division of labour, so that “mutual dependence encouraged restraint”. Discipline could be violent, but the victim “was expected to go back to work the next day”. Therefore, “maiming or killing would have been impossible”. The mutual economic dependence thus explained why the murder of spouses was so rare in early modern and medieval communities, even though other homicide types were common (Roth, 2014, p. 180). Consistent with this hypothesis, research from Spain suggests that historical traditions of multi-generational households increased the productivity of wives in outside activities such as farming, and that this type of family system was linked to lower rates of intimate partner violence, even from a long-duration perspective (Tur-Prats, 2019).

The second finding, the outlier position of Finland, calls for more research with larger and geographically more inclusive datasets. In terms of the relative share of femicidal lethal violence, the available evidence points towards a long-duration problem in Finland (see Table 3 above). From the point of view of the social control hypothesis, the comparatively higher Finnish intimate partner homicide share in the early modern period could be related to community structure, population sparsity and routine activities, all of which could lead to less effective informal social control of what happens within family and kin units. How and if the Finnish excess violence is linked to the economic roles of spouses is beyond the current note and calls for further research. The general social marginalization of homicide means that in many cases of contemporary homicide, neither party is part of the active workforce (Kivivuori & Lehti, 2012; Kivivuori et al., 2022, pp. 284–286). Even advanced welfare state regimes vary in the degree to which they help and require people to attach to sources of control such as employment or education, something that has been suggested as partially explaining the ‘excess’ violence in postwar Finland (Kivivuori & Lehti, 2006, pp. 77–78; Savolainen et al., 2008).

Finally, the low IPH share in early modern society does not imply any endorsement of patriarchal society. Rather, the emerging findings suggest that homicide against intimate partners remains a major problem. In terms of violence morphology, it has become very central. The overall share of IPH and female victims has increased in the total homicide phenomenon. If modern societies cannot strengthen informal social controls against violence, perhaps they must look for answers in the formal criminal justice system – restraint orders, electronic monitoring, and/or other incapacitation types limiting the action of offenders. The persistent problems of femicidal and intimate partner violence show that the civilizing process has not yet sufficiently reached the private sphere of homes.

Endnotes

1 This text is based on parts of the Mauno Koivisto lecture given on 14 Dec 2024. Both the lecture and this text rely on the book “Kivivuori, J., Rautelin, M., Netterstrøm, J. B., Lindström, D., Bergsdóttir, G., Jónasson, J., Lehti, M., Granath, S., Okholm, M., & Karonen, P. (2022). *Nordic homicide in deep time: Lethal violence in the early modern era and present times*. Helsinki University Press. <https://doi.org/10.33134/HUP-15>.” I wish to thank all members of the HHM pilot study. I thank research assistant Peppiina Heikkilä for support in the preparation of this text.

2 In criminology, the pre-statistical era ends with the creation of the first modern national crime statistical framework in France in 1827 (Kivivuori, 2024). Most numerized crime series preceding that date can be described as penetrating the ‘pre-statistical age’.

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