

THE SOCIAL DISTRIBUTION OF FEMICIDE IN URBAN CANADA, 1921–1988

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How well do conventional perspectives on homicide account for the social distribution of femicide, or the killing of females? An analysis of 670 cases of femicide in Toronto and Vancouver from 1921 to 1988 provides stronger support for an alternative perspective that acknowledges both the intimate, domestic character of femicide and the historically contingent nature of opportunities and motivations for femicide. Rather than coming to resemble male homicide, femicide remains as concentrated in private, domestic locations and relationships as it was seventy years ago. However, the relationships between femicide and some social statuses, such as women's employment, have changed over time.

The killing of women is similar in many respects to the killing of men. In places and times where men are at unusually high risk of homicide victimization, women are as well. As homicide rates rise and fall for men, they rise and fall in a similar manner for women. In other words, both cross-sectional and longitudinal statistical correlations between women's and men's rates of homicide victimization are quite high (Gartner 1990). This feature of homicide has justified the use of total homicide rates, rather than gender-specific rates, in most analyses of the distribution of victimization risks over time or across place.

Women, however, are less likely to be killed than men in virtually all times and places. Total homicide rates, then, are dominated by victimizations of males. As a consequence, conventional theoretical perspectives and analytical models accounting for the social distribution of homicide often ignore gender differences in risk and implicitly assume a gender-neutral stance, because they typically are tested on total homicide rates.

Recent research suggests these practices may obscure important differences between the etiology of female and male victimi-

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zation. While female and male homicide victimization rates appear to share a number of structural and cultural causes, female rates also respond to some structural and cultural factors in ways different from male rates. For example, one study of female and male homicide rates in eighteen developed nations since 1950 found that female rates were significantly associated with female labor force participation whereas male rates were not (Gartner 1990). Results of another study of the gender gap in homicide suggest that women's roles and status in a society affect the risks of victimization for women more strongly than they affect the risks for men (Gartner, Baker, and Pampel 1990).

In other words, the killing of women may differ sufficiently from the killing of men to require a separate conceptual framework or, at the least, an examination of the adequacy of conventional perspectives on homicide victimization that ignore gender.

In this article, we examine the fit between two conventional perspectives on the social distribution of victimization risks and data on the killing of women in two Canadian cities between 1921 and 1988. We also offer an alternative perspective that reformulates concepts from conventional perspectives in light of important and distinctive features of female homicide victimization. Our goal is to gain a better understanding of the social processes and historically contingent conditions that have shaped the killing of women in Canada, and perhaps elsewhere, in the twentieth century. Specifically, we examine whether certain markers of women's social placement, such as their age, marital status, and employment status, are associated with women's risks of being killed; and whether these associations have changed as women's lives and the social context encompassing them have changed.

CONVENTIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE SOCIAL DISTRIBUTION OF HOMICIDE

Opportunity Perspectives

One approach to the explanation of variations in homicide rates has emphasized the *opportunities* for victimization in a population. Studies based on this perspective argue that opportunities for homicide occur when potential victims and offenders come into contact with each other in the absence of persons or things that protect the potential victim or discourage the potential offender (Cohen and Felson 1979). Traditionally, opportunity approaches have identified activities that take place in certain places or at certain times as particularly risky, including those that occur (1) outside of the home and in isolated public places, (2) away from family members or intimate others (who are viewed as "capable guardians"), (3) around others—especially young males¹—one does

¹ In most nations, between 80 percent and 90 percent of homicide offenders are male. An even higher proportion of the killers of adult women are

not know well, and (4) at night (Hindelang, Gottfredson, and Garofalo 1978).

The emphasis on the risky nature of such activities in part derives from the predominance of U.S.-based research on homicide. Compared to other developed nations, the United States has homicides that are more likely to take place in these circumstances.² But, as a consequence, conventional formulations of the opportunity perspective may be more appropriate for homicides in public places between acquaintances or strangers.

Applied to women, a conventional opportunity perspective would predict that women's risks should rise as their activities outside of the home increase. As women move away from the "protection" of homes, family members, and intimate others, and as they come into contact with a greater number of males whom they do not know well in situations where there are few guardians around, the opportunities for female victimization and killings of women should increase. More generally, such a perspective predicts that "as sex role expectations become increasingly less differentiated and sex-linked structural barriers become less rigid . . . rates of victimization for males and females will tend to converge" (Hindelang, Gottfredson, and Garofalo 1978:269).

Motivational Perspectives

Perspectives that emphasize motivations toward violence are more diverse than opportunity perspectives. For many motivational theories, the basic argument is that people kill others whom they feel threatened by or in competition with over scarce and valued resources (Daly and Wilson 1988; Gartner 1990). These threats may be status, reputational, or economic; similarly, competition may be over material or less tangible resources (Luckenbill 1977).

In contrast to conventional opportunity perspectives, motivational perspectives have often been applied to intimate and private acts of violence, rather than focusing primarily on public homicides or nonintimate violence. Applied to women, a motivational perspective would predict that women's risks should rise when they are perceived as threatening traditional status hierarchies or challenging the dominance of males in public and private relations. Female victimization should increase as well when men view women as competing for roles and resources that have traditionally been reserved for males. More generally, a motivational perspec-

male. For example, in Canada about 95 percent of the killers of females over the age of 14 are males. The overwhelming male dominance of homicide offending is typically assumed in conventional perspectives on victimization. We base our discussion of an alternative perspective on this fact, and assume a male offender in the predictions derived from it.

² Homicide victimization also tends to be more male dominated in the United States compared to other developed nations. For example, in the United States about 75 percent of homicide victims are male, compared to about 65 percent in Canada and just over 50 percent in Britain.

tive would expect that as women assume roles and statuses that disrupt the traditional distribution of gender roles and status, or take on roles and statuses that are atypical for women, males will perceive this as threatening, and the motivations to kill women and the killing of women will increase.

AN ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVE ON FEMICIDE³

Concepts from both opportunity and motivational perspectives are necessary for developing an understanding of femicide, but neither perspective is sufficient for the task. Formulating a more adequate perspective entails locating certain concepts from the two perspectives within a framework both more attentive to basic and distinctive characteristics of female victimization and more sensitive to historical and social contingencies shaping interpersonal violence.

An alternative perspective on the killing of women should take account of the features of female victimization that distinguish it from male victimization. Among these are the facts that (1) women are most likely to be killed by persons who are physically stronger than themselves, who are likely to perceive their victims as physically vulnerable, and who are members of a group with greater social power than their victims;⁴ (2) women are most likely to be killed by persons they are intimately involved with or closely related to; and (3) women are more likely to be killed in their own homes than in any other place.

There are other issues to which an alternative perspective should be sensitive. First, it is important to recognize that potential victims of violence (in this case, women) are not passive actors whose risks are determined solely by factors out of their control. Women can and do take actions to protect themselves from violence. Their ability to do so will, of course, be affected by a variety of factors, including their access to economic and social resources. Second, the meanings of social processes and characteristics relevant to interpersonal violence are historically and culturally contingent. Because both opportunities and motivations for violence are perceived and acted on within particular historical and social contexts, they may vary across these contexts.

A perspective on the killing of women sensitive to these issues would expect the social distribution of femicide to be somewhat

³ "Femicide" refers to the killing of a woman, whereas "homicide" is typically used as a more generic and gender-neutral term referring to the killing of a person. Neither is a legal term, nor do they indicate anything about criminal responsibility. The term "femicide" has recently come into use by such scholars as Radford and Russell (1991) and Stout (1989).

⁴ This means that the gender distribution of victims and offenders is much more asymmetrical for female victimization than for male victimization. In other words, the proportion of female victims killed by males is much larger than the proportion of male victims killed by females.

different from the distribution predicted by conventional perspectives. To illustrate some of these differences, we have derived predictions from each perspective about the relationships between markers of women's social placement and their risks of femicide, and tested the predictions against data on femicide.⁵ We focus on three characteristics of women: their age, their marital status, and their employment status. These and other personal characteristics tend to be associated with particular patterns of behavior and life styles and affect potential offenders' perceptions of particular women as more or less preferable targets. These three characteristics also have been featured in theory and research on victimization (Cohen, Kluegel, and Land 1981; Hindelang, Gottfredson, and Garofalo 1978). Each has the advantage of being measured reasonably consistently and reliably for samples of female victims and for women in the general population.

PREDICTED RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN WOMEN'S PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS OF WOMEN AND THEIR RISKS OF FEMICIDE

For each of the three personal characteristics of women, we derive predictions from each of the perspectives on victimization discussed above.

Age

An Opportunity Perspective

Because activity patterns and personal interactions vary by age, women's age and their risks of femicide will be related. Specifically, older women should be underrepresented in the population of femicide victims.⁶ This is because older women's activities tend to be more restricted in time and space, more home-centered, and less likely to put them in contact with potential offenders. Conversely, women in the late teen and young adult years should have higher than expected risks, because they will spend more time away from home and the supervision of family, out at night, and in places where they may come into contact with potential offenders.

A Motivational Perspective

Age should be associated with perceptions of the threat women pose in personal, economic, and other social relationships. Older

⁵ Our predictions and tests of them apply to the killing of women but not female children. There is substantial evidence that the circumstances and causes of child homicides differ in important ways from adult homicides (Fiala and LaFree 1988; Gartner 1991). We present and analyze data only for female victims and females in the general population who are over the age of 14.

⁶ Another way to put this is that older women will have lower than expected risks of femicide, or that the age-specific femicide rates of older women should be lower than the age-specific rates of young adult women.

women ought to have lower than expected risks of femicide, because they are less likely to be perceived as threats or competitors to males in personal and social relations.

In contrast, women in their young adult years ought to have higher than expected risks of both intimate and nonintimate femicide. Their risks of intimate femicide ought to be greater because their youth may be perceived as allowing them more alternatives in intimate relationships, making them less dependent on any one intimate partner.⁷ Their risks of nonintimate femicide should be greater because young adults are likely to be perceived as having more personal resources and being more ambitious, competitive, and status seeking than older persons.

An Alternative Perspective

In contrast to these predictions of a strong negative relationship between age and risk of femicide, an alternative perspective predicts that no age will be substantially more or less risky (or safe) for women. This is because age will structure women's risks in complex ways, by affecting not just the opportunities and motivations for victimization, but also women's ability to marshal resources for their own protection.

For example, younger women, compared to older women, tend to lead life styles that expose them to potential offenders and may be perceived as more threatening by intimate and nonintimate males. But younger women also may be seen as less physically and psychologically vulnerable to attack and may be better able to use economic and personal resources to protect themselves. In addition, older women, although they lead more restricted lives, may be perceived as more vulnerable and less able to protect themselves—making them more attractive victims to some offenders.

The historical context may condition this general pattern, however. For example, in recent years, younger women's lives have changed particularly markedly. With greater access to birth control, less restrictive divorce laws, and changing sexual mores, younger women's autonomy in personal relationships has increased. Younger women are also more economically independent now than in the past. Although these changes have increased young women's independence and resources, they also may have increased both the risks associated with younger women's activities and men's perceptions of younger women as threats. Thus, if an association between young adulthood and women's risks exists, we expect it to be confined to recent years.

⁷ Daly and Wilson's (1988) finding that younger wives are at greatest risk of being killed by their husbands, regardless of the age of their husbands, is consistent with this point.

Marital Status

An Opportunity Perspective

Because activity patterns differ according to a person's marital status, risk of femicide will be associated with marital status. Married women ought to have lower than expected risks of (nonintimate) femicide, because they will spend less time outside the home alone or in activities that expose them to potential offenders.⁸

Single and divorced women ought to have higher than expected risks of femicide because single and divorced persons tend to spend more time away from the guardianship of others and in places where they are exposed to potential offenders. Widowed women's activity patterns, like married women's, should lower their risks of exposure to potential offenders.⁹

A Motivational Perspective

Women who are part of traditional family structures should be perceived as less threatening to traditional status hierarchies and gender relations. Thus, married and widowed women should have lower risks of victimization, because they are in roles that are more traditionally normative for women. This should apply to both intimate and nonintimate femicide.

Single and divorced women, on the other hand, should have higher than expected risks of victimization. Because they live outside of traditional family structures, they may be perceived as threatening to these structures. This increased risk could apply to victimization from both intimates and nonintimates. For example, intimate partners of single and divorced women cannot claim the same proprietary control over their partners that is implicitly granted in a legally recognized partnership. This may increase perceptions of the threat posed by single and divorced women, and increase motivations to violence by intimate partners of nonmarried women. Nonintimates also may view unattached women as more attractive targets for similar, if less personal, reasons.

An Alternative Perspective

The relationship between marital status and risk of femicide will be complex and will vary over time. Only widowhood will be

⁸ As typically formulated, the opportunity perspective is silent regarding married women's risks of femicide from their partners or close family members. One could draw on concepts from an opportunity perspective to argue that the home, because of its physical and symbolic privacy, exposes married women to potential intimate offenders in the absence of capable guardians—making it a highly risky place for them.

⁹ However, the lower risk associated with widowhood is largely an age effect. According to an opportunity perspective, controlling for age, widowhood may not be associated with lower risks, since unattached persons tend to spend more time alone and have fewer guardians. Unfortunately, we will not be able to test this proposition because of the low number of young widows in the population.

consistently (and negatively) associated with risk. Widows should have lower than expected femicide rates for the reasons given above, because they are older on average than other women and because their risks from intimate partners—the most common killers of women—will be reduced.

Relationships between risk and other marital statuses are less clear cut and are likely to vary over time; therefore, our predictions are more tentative. We expect single women to be at higher than expected risk of victimization, but we expect this elevated risk to be largely confined to the more recent time period. This is because single women's lives have become less home centered and their activities less restricted over time. Moreover, being single has come to be seen more as an active choice than an undesirable fate. Thus, single status may now be perceived as more threatening—as a conscious rejection of traditional gender roles and marital relations.

The risks associated with marriage also should vary over time as well as by type of femicide. In earlier years, marriage may have provided women some protection from victimization by nonintimates, since married women's activities were more circumscribed and supervised. However, in the past married women were also less free to leave abusive husbands; and married women's greater economic dependence may have emboldened abusive husbands to use violence against their wives. Thus, in earlier years the risks of violence by intimate partners may have been greater, whereas the risks of violence by nonintimates may have been less for married women. Because intimate partners are the most common killers of women, married women's overall risk of femicide may have been higher than expected during earlier years.

More recently, women have had greater freedom to leave abusive relationships and have become less dependent on their male partners. However, any reduced risk of intimate partner femicide because of this change may be canceled out by increased risk resulting from heightened motivations among male partners who feel threatened by women's greater autonomy. Moreover, married women's risks of nonintimate femicide may have grown in recent years as the range and scope of their activities have increased.

Divorced women should have higher than expected risks of femicide, for the reasons noted by both the opportunity and motivational perspectives. However, this disproportionate risk may be concentrated in earlier years, when divorce was less normative (and, thus, potentially more threatening to the status quo) and had more negative personal and financial consequences for women. These could raise both the opportunities and motivations for femicides of divorced women.

Employment Status¹⁰

An Opportunity Perspective

Employment is associated with greater activity outside the home, increased interactions with a wider range of persons, and greater independence (and thus lowered surveillance). Employed persons are also more likely to spend leisure time in public places and out at night. Thus, women who are employed should have higher than expected risks of victimization.

A Motivational Perspective

Employment has traditionally been seen as a male prerogative and a female privilege. Thus, employed women may be perceived as threats to male dominance of the status and economic resources employment provides. This may raise women's risks of both intimate and nonintimate femicide. Intimate partners of employed women may feel threatened or perceive their partners' employment as undermining their position in the relationship (Brown 1980; O'Brien 1971). Nonintimates may feel threatened more generally by women in nontraditional roles and may feel women are inappropriately competing with them for economic status and resources.¹¹

An Alternative Perspective

For the reasons noted above, employed women may experience higher than expected risks of femicide. However, employment for women may be a risk marker primarily when female employment is less normative, less common, or during the initial movement of women into the labor force.¹² As female labor force

¹⁰ This discussion primarily applies to lawful employment. Measures of lawful employment are relatively reliable and consistent for both the victim and the general populations. Women in illicit employment face particular types of risks and are likely to be at higher risk than unemployed or lawfully employed women. Information on illicit employment within our sample of female victims supports this conclusion; however, the data necessary to make comparisons with the general population are not available. We intend to explore this topic in future work. For now, we note that, especially in Vancouver, women involved in the illicit sex trade appear to be at especially high risk of femicide.

¹¹ There are more and less extreme manifestations of such backlash hostility. In December 1989, fourteen female engineering students at the University of Montreal were shot to death by a young male who denounced them as feminists, who he claimed had ruined his life. A less horrifying example is the finding that in sexually integrated work settings, males' hostility toward women increases as their well-being decreases (Wharton and Baron 1987).

¹² In part, this is because female employment is more likely to be viewed as threatening during early stages of growth in female labor force participation (Sanday 1981). In part, it may also be due to differences in the types of women who join the labor force at different stages of growth in female labor force participation. In the early stages, economically disadvantaged women may be overrepresented among women workers; these women also tend to have higher risks of victimization.

participation becomes more widespread, employment may not be associated with higher risks for women (Gartner et al. 1990). Over time, women may individually and collectively gain resources they can use for protection against violence. As employment increases women's ability to protect themselves, it may, in fact, lower their risks of both intimate and nonintimate victimization. For example, employed women are now more likely to have the resources to leave violent partners and may be able to afford safer life styles (e.g., choosing to live in safer neighborhoods or drive their own cars).

All these predictions are summarized in Table 1. To capture the historical contingency of the predictions for our alternative perspective, we have distinguished the periods prior to and after 1970. This choice of time periods is only somewhat arbitrary. While women's lives have changed considerably and continuously (though not necessarily uniformly) during the twentieth century, the late 1960s and early 1970s saw significant shifts in the rate of many of these changes (Jones, Marsden, and Tepperman 1990). In addition, awareness of gender inequality and women's rights increased among women and the general population after the 1960s. For these and other more pragmatic reasons,¹³ we compare characteristics of female victimization in these two periods in the subsequent analyses to test predictions of our alternative perspective.

Table 1. Predicted Relationships Between Personal Characteristics of Women and Their Risks of Femicide: Opportunity, Motivational, and Alternative Perspectives

	Predicted Relationship with Risk of Femicide			
	Opportunity Perspective	Motivational Perspective	Alternative Perspective	
			Pre-1970	Post-1969
<i>Females who are</i>				
Young adults	+	+	0	+
Middle aged	0	0	0	0
Elderly	-	-	0	0
Single	+	+	0	+
Married	-	-	-	0
Divorced	+	+	+	0
Widowed	-	-	-	-
Lawfully employed	+	+	+	-

SAMPLE AND DATA

Two Cities and Sixty-eight Years

As part of a larger project, we have been collecting homicide data from two of Canada's largest cities, Toronto, Ontario, and Vancouver, British Columbia, for the twentieth century. Because

¹³ Because the number of femicides known to police was relatively small in the earlier part of the century, there are too few cases to compare shorter spans of time prior to 1970. A comparison of femicide victims in the 1970s with those in the 1980s yielded no notable differences in the characteristics we analyze, which permits us to pool cases for these two decades.

of limitations in police records and the small number of femicides prior to 1920, in this article we use data for the years 1921 through 1988 (the most recent year for which we were able to collect data).

These sixty-eight years capture an enormous variety of changes in Canadian society generally, and in the lives of Canadian women in particular. At the beginning of the period, women in both Ontario and British Columbia had been granted the vote and could hold office at the federal and provincial levels. By the end of the period, the "new feminist" movement that began in the late 1960s had renewed attention to women's rights and gender relations and produced a resurgence of political activity by organized women's groups (Prentice et al. 1988). During these sixty-eight years, fertility rates declined, and divorce rates and the use of birth control increased; women's share of the labor force and of college enrollments both increased from less than 20 percent to more than 50 percent. However, working women remained concentrated in clerical and service occupations and continued to earn about 60 percent of males' earnings (Jones, Marsden, and Tepperman 1990). Thus, while some changes were dramatic, they were not consistently in the direction of greater rights for women or decreased gender inequality.

We chose to study femicide in Toronto and Vancouver for both practical and substantive reasons. Because femicide is a relatively rare event, we needed cities large enough to yield sufficient cases for analysis. We also wanted to capture the important regional variation in violent crime in Canada; historically, violent crimes rates have been highest in the western regions of Canada and closer to the national average in Ontario. Finally, we needed the cooperation of police departments that could provide us with time-series data on femicides. Toronto and Vancouver fit all these criteria.

The two cities are similar in many respects. Both have thrived economically, have grown substantially in population, and presently serve as centers of finance, trade, and immigration for Canada. Both began the century culturally dominated by the British but have become increasingly diverse ethnically. Vancouver, however, is a much younger city than Toronto. Incorporated in 1886 with a population of only 1,000, its growth from a regional outpost to a major metropolis has been much more rapid than has Toronto's. In 1921, Toronto's population was 522,000 and Vancouver's was 117,000. By midcentury Toronto had grown to 676,000 (over 1 million in the census metropolitan area) and Vancouver to 345,000 (over 500,000 in the census metropolitan area). The last census reports a population for the metropolitan areas of Toronto of almost 3 million and Vancouver of just over 1 million.

Data Sources

Our primary source of femicide data was police department records on all homicides known to police in each year in each city. From these, we collected information on victims, offenders, and the circumstances of the crimes. Where this information was not comprehensive, we supplemented it with newspaper reports on the crimes and information from jail and court archives.

The problems with official statistics on crime are well known and the limitations of newspaper accounts easily imaginable. We have attempted to collect the most reliable and valid information available on the 1,387 homicides known to police in Toronto and the 822 known to police in Vancouver between 1921 and 1988. However, we are well aware that this information is flawed in known and unknown ways. For some types of information, data for many of the cases are missing. For other types of information, data are of questionable validity and may reflect reporting practices, official concerns, or individual biases of particular officers at least as much as the characteristics of the crimes. For these reasons, we have confined ourselves to analyses of data in which we have the greatest confidence—victims' basic demographic characteristics. While these data are certainly not error free, we do not expect them to be systematically biased.

We are less concerned about the problem of underreporting of femicides than we are about the quality of the available data on reported cases. Criminal homicide (i.e., murder and manslaughter) should have the lowest underreporting rate of any crime (Archer and Gartner 1984). Moreover, our concern is not with establishing the true number or rates of femicide in the two cities. Rather we are interested in determining the characteristics of cases of known femicide, and we assume these are representative of all cases of femicide in the two cities for the sixty-eight years of the study.

Our other major data source is the decennial census of Canada for the years beginning in 1921, supplemented with midterm censuses beginning in 1956. These census data are used to provide estimates of the total female population of each city and of the age structure, marital status, and employment status of the female population.

FEMICIDE IN TORONTO AND VANCOUVER, 1921–1988

A Comparison with Rates for Canada as a Whole

While our focus is on only two Canadian cities, the rate and characteristics of homicide and femicide in these cities are similar in many respects to those in the nation as a whole.¹⁴ For the sixty-

¹⁴ The similarities between Canadian urban and national patterns in homicide is notable because in the United States urban homicide rates are much higher than rates for the nation as a whole, and many characteristics of homicide differ markedly between large urban centers and other U.S. areas.

eight years of the study, the average femicide rate was 1.1 for the nation as a whole,¹⁵ compared to about 1.1 in Toronto and 1.4 in Vancouver. The rates for Toronto and Vancouver were also quite similar to their respective provincial rates: 1.1 in Ontario and 1.8 in British Columbia. So, while the expected regional difference in femicide rates is apparent, femicide rates in these two cities do not differ substantially from provincial or national rates. A comparison of other characteristics of homicides (e.g., victim-offender relationships and age and gender distributions of victims and offenders) indicates that patterns in these two cities are similar to those for the nation as a whole. This suggests that the relationships we describe below may well be representative of those across Canada.

Trends in femicide rates over these years are consistent with this conclusion. Both in the two cities and in the nation as a whole, femicide rates declined after the 1920s through the 1930s, then fluctuated with no particular trend through the 1960s. In the early 1970s, the rates began to rise and continued generally upward into the mid-1980s. As expected, the trend in male homicide victimization rates parallels this pattern.

Characteristics of Victims of Femicide in Toronto and Vancouver

Between 1921 and 1988, 2,269 homicides were recorded by the police in Toronto and Vancouver; 818 of these (36 percent) were femicides and 675 (30 percent) were femicides of females 15 and older. While twice as many of these femicides occurred in Toronto (448 compared to 227 in Vancouver), victims in the two cities were similar in a number of respects, including their age distribution, marital status, and employment status (see Table 2). For example, in both cities over half of the victims were between 25 and 49 years old, two-thirds were married, and about 40 percent were lawfully employed.¹⁶ Over 95 percent of them were killed by males.

There also are some differences worth noting in the characteristics of femicide in Toronto and Vancouver. In Toronto, the majority of victims were killed by their intimate partners (i.e. current or former legal and common-law spouses, boyfriends, or former boyfriends), whereas in Vancouver, the majority of victims were killed by less intimate acquaintances, strangers, or unidentified assailants. The fact that Toronto femicides were most likely to occur in the victim's home, whereas Vancouver femicides were most likely to occur elsewhere, also indicates femicide in Toronto was more intimate and domestic compared to Vancouver. Comparing

¹⁵ This estimate is calculated from annual vital statistics reports on causes of death. The rates are calculated per 100,000 females in the population.

¹⁶ In Vancouver, police records indicated that 14 percent of the victims of femicide were illicitly employed, most of these being prostitutes. In Toronto, less than 5 percent of femicide victims were reported to have been illicitly employed.

Table 2. Selected Characteristics of Victims of Femicide, Their Killers, and the Crimes, Toronto and Vancouver, 1921–1988

	Toronto (Femicide Victim > 14)			Vancouver (Femicide Victims > 14)		
	% of All Femicides (N = 448)	% of Intimate ^a Femicides (N = 289)	% of Non-intimate ^b Femicides (N = 159)	% of All Femicides (N = 227)	% of Intimate ^a Femicides (N = 82)	% of Non-intimate ^b Femicides (N = 145)
Age:						
15–24	20.8	15.7	30.5	22.9	20.7	24.1
25–34	26.2	27.6	23.6	26.0	23.2	27.7
35–49	34.3	40.3	22.9	29.5	39.0	24.1
50–64	10.8	9.4	13.4	14.1	13.4	14.5
65 or older	7.9	7.0	9.6	7.5	3.7	9.6
Marital status:						
Single	24.2	14.1	43.7	22.5	14.3	28.6
Married	67.0	79.4	43.0	66.5	83.1	54.3
Divorced	3.8	3.8	4.0	5.5	0.0	9.5
Widowed	5.0	2.7	9.3	5.5	2.6	7.6
(N)	(443)		(152)	(182)	(77)	(105)
Employment status:						
Lawfully employed	41.5	40.0	44.1	39.2	46.7	39.9
(N)	(318)	(200)	(118)	(138)	(45)	(93)
Gender of assailant						
Killed by males	97.3	99.0	93.5	94.9	97.6	93.0
(N)	(414)		(123)	(181)		(99)
Victim-offender relationship:						
By intimate partner ^c	59.0	89.0		35.5	96.3	
By other family ^d	9.8	11.0		3.5	3.7	
By acquaintance ^e	14.4		46.3	31.9		54.5
By stranger	8.7		23.8	9.3		14.5
By unknown assailant	8.2		29.9	19.8		31.0
Location of killing:						
In victim's home ^f	70.4	78.5	55.3	43.6	65.4	31.2
In other home	9.9	10.1	9.7	7.6	9.9	6.4
In hotel/roominghouse	3.2	1.4	6.5	23.0	16.1	26.9
Indoors, public place	4.5	1.7	9.7	10.0	3.7	13.5
Outdoors	12.0	8.3	18.8	15.9	4.9	22.0
(N)	(436)	(284)	(152)	(222)	(81)	(141)

NOTE: Where percentage is based on less than the total number of femicides, the base number is indicated in parentheses.

^a Includes killings of women by intimate partners or immediate family.

^b Includes killings by friends, acquaintances, nonimmediate kin, strangers, and unknown assailants.

^c Includes current and former legal and common-law spouses and lovers/boyfriends.

^d Includes parents, siblings, or children of victim.

^e Includes friends, roommates, neighbors, lawful and illicit business relations, etc.

^f Includes homes shared by victim and offender.

the cities on characteristics of intimate and nonintimate femicides¹⁷ separately reveals only one substantial difference: in Toronto, even nonintimate femicides occurred more often in the victim's home than elsewhere. Thus, the circumstances associated

¹⁷ By intimate femicides, we mean femicides committed by intimate partners or immediate family members of the victim. Nonintimate femicides include all other types of victim-offender relationships and include unsolved cases.

with femicides appear to be more casual and more public in Vancouver compared to Toronto.¹⁸

A Comparison of Victims of Femicide with Women in the General Population

One way of determining whether women's age, marital status, or employment is associated with their risks of femicide is to compare the distribution of these characteristics for femicide victims and the female population as a whole. We do these comparisons separately for each personal characteristic.¹⁹ To examine changes over time, we also compare differences between the 1921–69 and 1970–88 periods for each characteristic. Table 3 reports the figures used in all of these comparisons.

Does the Distribution of Victims by Age Differ from the General Female Population?

For the entire time period, the age distribution of victims is similar to the age distribution of the female population in both Toronto and Vancouver. In other words, no age group was disproportionately over- or underrepresented among the femicide victims. This result contradicts predictions of the opportunity and motivational perspectives but is consistent with our alternative perspective. Combining age groups more broadly provides some support for predictions of the two conventional perspectives: Women aged 50 and older were somewhat underrepresented in the victim population. However, for women younger than 50, those aged 25–49, but not the youngest women, were overrepresented among victims.²⁰

Time differences in the relationship between age and femicide risk are neither large nor consistent across cities. In Toronto, the age distribution of victims is similar for both periods. In Vancouver, the disproportionate risks faced by women aged 35–49 in the earlier period shifted to women aged 25–34 in the later period.

In sum, women's risks of femicide were distributed fairly proportionately across age groups. The absence of consistently strong

¹⁸ This is confirmed by detailed reading of cases from both cities which indicates Vancouver femicides (and homicides more generally) are more likely to involve people with criminal histories and employment (e.g., the illicit sex or drug trade), transient persons, and persons under the influence of alcohol or drugs than was the case in Toronto.

¹⁹ Although a multivariate analysis would be preferable, it is not possible given data constraints; the type of cross-tabulated census data that would be required is not available. We also do not discuss comparisons between the sample of victims and the general population in terms of statistically significant differences, since the large number of cases in the comparisons would render small substantive differences statistically significant. Instead, we treat differences between the two groups that exceed approximately ± 10 percent as substantively meaningful and worthy of note.

²⁰ This pattern varies by type of femicide, as discussed below.

Table 3. Comparison of Victims of Femicide and Females over 14 Years of Age in the General Population on Selected Democratic Characteristics, Toronto and Vancouver

	1921-1988		1921-1969		1970-1988	
	% of Female Victims	% of General Population	% of Female Victims	% of General Population	% of Female Victims	% of General Population
Toronto						
<i>N</i>	(448)		(149)		(299)	
Age:						
15-24	21	22	21	21	21	22
25-34	26	22	27	22	26	22
35-49	34	27	33	28	35	25
50-64	11	18	11	17	10	18
65 or older	8	11	7	12	8	13
Marital status:						
Single	24	29	21	30	26	25
Married ^a	67	59	72	58	65	62
Divorced	4	1	4	1	4	3
Widowed	5	11	4	11	6	10
(<i>N</i>)	(443)		(145)		(298)	
Lawfully employed	42	41	48	35	38	56
(<i>N</i>)	(318)		(107)		(211)	
Vancouver						
<i>N</i>	(227)		(86)		(141)	
Age:						
15-24	23	21	23	21	23	22
25-34	26	21	22	22	28	21
35-49	29	27	36	27	25	23
50-64	14	19	15	19	14	19
65 or older	8	12	4	11	10	15
Marital status:						
Single	22	25	21	26	23	23
Married ^a	67	62	70	62	64	62
Divorced	6	2	3	1	8	4
Widowed	5	11	6	11	5	11
(<i>N</i>)	(182)		(78)		(104)	
Lawfully employed	40	34	52	28	31	50
(<i>N</i>)	(138)		(57)		(81)	

NOTE: Where percentage is based on less than the total number of femicides, the base number is indicated in parentheses.

^a Includes legally married, common-law spouses, and separated legally married spouses.

associations between age and femicide coincides with expectations of our alternative perspective.

Does the Distribution of Victims on Marital Status Differ from the General Female Population?

For the entire period, single women appear to be *underrepresented* and married women *overrepresented* among victims of femicide, which is contrary to all predictions.²¹ However, divorced women were overrepresented and widowed women underrepre-

²¹ This pattern varies with type of femicide, as discussed below.

sented among victims, which coincides with predictions of each perspective.

These patterns are confined largely to the years prior to 1970. In recent years, with the exception of widowhood, no marital status was substantially more or less risky than any other for women. The absence of any relationship between marriage and femicide in recent years and the overrepresentation of divorced women among victims in Toronto in earlier years are consistent with our alternative perspective.

In sum, the relationships between marital status and risk are complex, and many were unexpected. Prior to 1970, both single and widowed women were underrepresented among victims, whereas since 1970 only widows had lower than expected risks of femicide.

Does the Distribution of Victims on Employment Status Differ from the General Female Population?

For the total period, employed women were not overrepresented among victims, as the opportunity and motivational perspectives predicted. However, the relationship between employment and femicide differs markedly before and after 1970. As the alternative perspective anticipated, employed women were only overrepresented among victims in earlier years. In contrast, in later years employed women in both cities were substantially underrepresented among victims.

It appears that the opportunities and/or motivations for victimizing employed women declined over time in Toronto and Vancouver. In addition, the types of women who were employed and their ability to protect themselves also may have changed, altering the relationship between employment and risk.

A Comparison of Victims of Spousal Femicide with Married Women in the General Population

Recent research on homicide rates has shown that killings between intimates differ in circumstances and causes from killings between nonintimates (Parker and Smith 1979; Williams and Flewelling 1988). To determine if the risk markers for femicide also differ by the relationship between victim and offender, we describe victim characteristics separately for different types of femicide.

The most common relationship between female victims and their offenders is as spouses. This category has the analytical advantage of having a comparison group in census data for the total population, that is, married females. In this section, then, we compare the age distribution and employment status of women killed by their legal or common-law husbands with married (legal or common-law) women in the general population. The results for each city and each time period are reported in Table 4. Because of

Table 4. Comparison of Victims of Spousal Femicides with Married Female Population, Toronto and Vancouver^a

	1921-1988		1921-1969		1970-1988	
	% of Spousal Femicide Victims	% of Married Female Population	% of Spousal Femicide Victims	% of Married Female Population	% of Spousal Femicide Victims	% of Married Female Population
Toronto						
<i>N</i>	(193)		(69)		(124)	
Age:						
15-24	10	9	17	9	6	10
25-34	29	27	28	27	29	27
35-49	48	42	42	43	51	42
50-64	9	13	10	12	8	12
65 or older	5	9	3	9	7	9
Lawfully employed	40	33	39	20	40	52
(<i>N</i>)	(131)		(51)		(80)	
Vancouver						
<i>N</i>	(62)		(23)		(39)	
Age:						
15-24	15	9	9	8	18	10
25-34	24	26	30	26	21	26
35-49	42	35	35	38	46	31
50-64	16	22	26	21	10	23
65 or older	3	8	0	7	5	10
Lawfully employed	39	35	60	24	25	46
(<i>N</i>)	(33)		(17)		(16)	

NOTE: Where percentage is based on less than the total number of femicides, the base number is indicated in parentheses.

^a For both spousal femicide victims and the married female population, includes legal and common-law spouses.

the small number of cases, especially in Vancouver and in earlier years, we emphasize those patterns that are consistent across the two cities.

Does the Age Distribution of Victims of Spousal Femicide Differ from Married Women in the General Population?

Similar to the patterns for all femicide victims, married women aged 35-49 were at somewhat higher than expected risk of being killed by their partners, whereas married women over age 50 were at lower than expected risk. The former relationship, however, is restricted largely to recent years. Married women under age 35 were not consistently over- or underrepresented among victims of spousal femicide.

Does the Employment Status of Victims of Spousal Femicide Differ from Married Women in the General Population?

Also similar to the pattern for femicide victims as a whole, employment is associated with higher than expected risks for married women only in earlier years. In more recent years, married

women who were employed were underrepresented among victims of spousal femicide.

A relationship between women's employment and victimization by their husbands has been observed in other research (Allen and Straus 1980; O'Brien 1971), and is particularly relevant to a motivational perspective on femicide. A motivational perspective would predict that married women should be at especially high risk of spousal femicide if their husbands feel their status or dominance in the relationship is being undermined or challenged. A wife's employment could be perceived as such a challenge. This implies that a woman's risk of femicide could be raised if her employment is of higher status than her husband's or if she is employed and her husband is not.

Although we could not test these predictions fully (comparable census data are not consistently available), we were able to collect cross-tabulated data for Toronto since 1970 on the employment status of wives and husbands in the general population. We compared these figures with Toronto data on the employment status of spousal femicide victims and their killers since 1970.

During these years, 18 percent of the Toronto victims of spousal femicides were employed and married to unemployed husbands. In the general population, only 3 percent of married women were employed and had unemployed husbands. In contrast, 21 percent of the victims of spousal femicides were not employed and were married to employed husbands; whereas 30 percent of married women in the general population were not employed and were married to employed husbands. These patterns support the prediction that married women will be at greater risk of femicide if their employment status exceeds their husbands' but at lower risk if their husbands' employment status exceeds theirs.

However, apparently the "safest" situation for married women (at least in Toronto) was to be employed with an employed husband. Almost 60 percent of married women in the general population fit this picture, whereas only 23 percent of the victims of spousal femicides were employed with employed husbands. This suggests a woman's employment may not be perceived by her husband as threatening if he is employed as well.

Clearly the "riskiest" situation for married women was to be unemployed with an unemployed husband. While this situation characterized only 9 percent of married women in the general population of Toronto, 38 percent of the victims of spousal femicide were unemployed with unemployed husbands.

Together these findings suggest that having an unemployed husband may be the more important determinant of risk than whether a woman is employed herself; and that the relative employment status of husbands and wives is less important than implied by motivational perspectives. This does not challenge a motivational interpretation of the above patterns, however. Unem-

ployed men may feel their status in a relationship is undermined, regardless of whether their wives are employed. For men, work is the major status-granting activity, and to be deprived of this may produce feelings of hostility and threats to their status in intimate (and nonintimate) relations.

Comparison of Victims of Nonintimate Femicide with Women in the General Population

We have just seen that women killed by their spouses differ in certain ways from married women in the general population. The data in Table 5 allow us to determine if women killed by nonintimates also differ from women in the general population. Early analysis of our data revealed distinct differences between acquaintance and stranger killings, and prior research has also suggested the persons and circumstances involved in acquaintance killings differ in many ways from those involved in stranger killings (Wolfgang 1958; Williams and Flewelling 1988). Therefore, rather than grouping all nonintimate killings together, we distinguish between femicides by acquaintances and those by strangers or unknown assailants. As in the preceding section, we focus on comparisons for the total time period, since the number of cases for comparison are quite small for the separate time periods.

Does the Age Distribution of Victims of Nonintimate Femicide Differ from Women in the General Population?

Younger women were disproportionately represented among victims of acquaintance femicide in both cities and among victims of stranger femicide in Toronto. This is consistent with opportunity and motivational perspectives. However, contrary to predictions of these perspectives, women aged 65 and older were not substantially underrepresented among victims of nonintimate femicide. The ages at which women had lower than expected risks of nonintimate femicide were between 35 and 49.

Our alternative perspective predicted that younger women would be overrepresented among victims primarily in more recent years, and this appears to be true for nonintimate femicide. Although the small number of cases requires cautious interpretation, in both cities the disproportionate representation of younger women among victims of nonintimate femicides is concentrated in the years since 1970.

Does the Distribution of Victims of Nonintimate Femicide on Marital Status Differ from Women in the General Population?

Consistent with the predictions of opportunity and motivational perspectives, single women faced disproportionately higher risks and married women disproportionately lower risks of nonintimate femicide in both cities. This contrasts with the relationships

Table 5. Comparison of Victims of Acquaintance and Stranger/Unsolved Femicides, Toronto and Vancouver^a

	% of Acquaintance ^b Femicide Victims			% of Stranger/Unsolved Femicide Victims		
	1921-88	1921-69	1970-88	1921-88	1921-69	1970-88
Toronto						
<i>N</i>	(74)	(29)	(45)	(86)	(30)	(56)
Age:						
15-24	28	14	38	33	27	36
25-34	24	28	22	23	20	25
35-49	24	35	16	23	27	21
50-64	17	14	18	11	17	7
65 or older	8	10	7	11	10	11
Marital status:						
Single	47	44	53	41	36	43
Married	40	48	31	46	48	45
Divorced	6	0	4	3	4	2
Widowed	7	8	11	11	12	11
(<i>N</i>)	(70)	(25)		(81)	(25)	
Employment status:						
Lawfully employed	34	44	29	52	61	48
(<i>N</i>)	(53)	(19)	(34)	(65)	(23)	(42)
Vancouver						
<i>N</i>	(99)	(39)	(60)	(66)	(24)	(42)
Age:						
15-24	29	26	32	21	33	15
25-34	33	23	40	17	13	19
35-49	21	31	15	30	46	21
50-64	10	15	7	18	4	26
65 or older	6	5	7	14	4	19
Marital status:						
Single	39	29	48	24	35	28
Married	45	52	40	59	65	40
Divorced	5	5	5	13	0	24
Widowed	11	14	7	4	0	8
(<i>N</i>)	(75)	(35)	(40)	(45)	(20)	(25)
Employment status:						
Lawfully employed	37	50	29	42	53	35
(<i>N</i>)	(67)	(26)	(41)	(43)	(17)	(26)

NOTE: Where percentage is based on less than the total number of femicides, the base number is indicated in parentheses.

^a See Table 3 for comparisons with total female population in each city.

^b Includes friends, roommates, neighbors, nonimmediate kin, lawful and illicit business relations, etc.

between marital status and risk we observed for total femicides. (For total femicides, single women were at lower than expected risk and married women at higher than expected risk.)

As the alternative perspective predicted, however, the higher risks for single women are largely concentrated in recent years.²²

²² Because the numbers of divorced and widowed victims are so small when categorized by type of homicide and time period, we do not describe relationships between these two marital statuses and risks of nonintimate femicide.

Does the Employment Status of Victims of Nonintimate Femicide Differ from Women in the General Population?

Employed women were not consistently overrepresented among victims of nonintimate femicide. Only prior to 1970 did employed women face disproportionately high risks of nonintimate femicide. Since 1970, employment actually appears to have been a protective factor for women. This pattern is the same as that observed for all femicide victims and for spousal femicide victims.

Review of Findings

Our analyses of the relationship between women's risks of femicide and their age, marital status, and employment status revealed the following patterns.

First, variations in femicide by age group were neither strong nor consistent, contrary to predictions of conventional perspectives on homicide. In other words, certain ages are not substantially more or less risky for women; women's risks of being killed are much more evenly distributed over the life course than are men's risks.

Second, marriage did not appear to provide women protection from femicide, which, again, fails to support predictions of conventional perspectives on homicide. In fact, prior to 1970 married women, along with divorced women, were overrepresented among femicide victims. In neither time period were single women at disproportionately high risk of femicide. Only widows were consistently underrepresented among victims.

Third, employed women did not face consistently higher risks of femicide, contrary to predictions of conventional perspectives. Only prior to 1970, when employment was less normative for women, were employed women overrepresented among victims. In contrast, after 1970, employed women had lower than expected risks of femicide.

For the most part, these relationships held in separate analyses of victims of spousal femicides and nonintimate femicides. Predictions of the conventional perspectives fared better for nonintimate femicides, however. As predicted, single women and younger women were overrepresented among victims of nonintimate femicide, whereas married women and women in their middle adult years were underrepresented.²³ This suggests that conventional perspectives are better at accounting for the types of femicides that are more similar to male homicides—that is, killings of acquaintances and strangers—but fall short at accounting for more typical types of femicide.

²³ Recall, however, that women over age 50 were not underrepresented among victims of nonintimate femicide, which contradicts predictions of the conventional perspectives.

DISCUSSION

Our findings indicate that none of the three perspectives we tested was correct in all its predictions. However, the alternative perspective we proposed was the most consistent with observed patterns of femicide in Toronto and Vancouver.

While this perspective requires further development and modification, two points it stresses should be central to any conceptual framework on femicide.

First, any search for a general explanation of femicide must take account of historically specific contexts and contingencies. Our data on femicide in Toronto and Vancouver clearly indicate that risk markers for femicide are time-dependent. The statuses and roles associated with femicide in one time or place may not be so associated in other times and places—not because the social processes producing femicides vary substantially but because the social meanings of these statuses and roles do.

Future work needs to elaborate how opportunities and motivations to kill women are perceived and acted on by men in particular historical and cultural contexts and how women in particular times and places experience and act to protect themselves from threats of violence. Delving into details of individual cases of femicide from different times and places can provide insights into these processes, but more is needed. An understanding of the particular social context of gender stratification and gender relations, as well as knowledge of the daily lives of different types of women and men, are also needed. Only a few women become femicide victims, but all women face some risk of femicide; analyses must be sensitive to this wide-ranging distribution of risk.

The second crucial point for future work is recognizing the much more intimate and private character of femicide compared to homicides of males. Importantly, this feature of femicide has changed little over time, despite myriad changes in women's lives, changes that have increased women's public and casual activities and relationships (Jones, Marsden, and Tepperman 1990). For example, across these two cities, the proportion of women killed by intimate partners remained constant at about 50 percent over time. In other words, femicides by intimate partners *did not* decrease relative to other types of femicides even as women began to spend more time in a wider variety of public relationships. Moreover, the proportion of femicide victims killed in their own homes actually increased slightly over time, from 60 percent prior to 1970 to 63 percent since 1970. Although women now spend more time outside the home, they are more likely than ever to be killed in their own homes.

These features of femicide challenge the assumption that the home and family provide a refuge from victimization which is implicit in some perspectives on interpersonal violence. We have

found that, at least in urban Canada, femicide remains as concentrated in private, domestic locations and relationships as it was seventy years ago. Rather than coming to resemble male homicides, as some analysts predicted (e.g., Hindelang, Gottfredson, and Garofalo 1978), femicides have retained these distinctive characteristics.

Both of these features of the social distribution of femicide—the time-varying relationships between personal characteristics and risk, and the intimate nature of femicide—have important policy implications. The first feature suggests that the risks associated with certain statuses and roles can be alleviated (or magnified) by social policies. If time can change the social meaning of statuses and roles, and thus affect the risks associated with them, so can other factors—such as public education, legislation, or criminal justice practices. The second feature suggests that policies to reduce violent crime that are formulated primarily in terms of crimes by strangers or acquaintances outside of domestic settings may have very little effect on femicide rates. To reduce femicides will require a great deal more attention to ways to increase resources and services that protect women and allow women to protect themselves from victimization in their own homes and by men they know well.

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