



# The effect of poverty and social protection on national homicide rates: Direct and moderating effects <sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Social protection is the ability of a government to insulate its citizens from the problems associated with poverty and market forces that negatively affect their quality of life. Prior research shows that government policies that provide social protection moderate the influence of inequality on national homicide rates. Recent research, however, reveals a strong association between poverty and national homicide rates. Further, theory and evidence suggest that social protection policies are meant to aid in providing a subsistence level of living, and thus to alleviate the vagaries of poverty not inequality. To this point, however, no studies have examined the potentially moderating effect of social protection on the strength of the association between poverty and homicide rates cross-nationally. We do so in the present study. Employing data for the year 2004 from a sample of 30 nations, we estimate a series of weighted least squares regression models to test three hypotheses: the association between poverty and homicide will remain significant and positive when controlling for social protection, social protection will have a significant negative direct effect on national homicide rates, and social protection will diminish the strength of the poverty–homicide association. The results provided evidence supporting all three hypotheses. We situate our findings in the cross-national empirical literature on social structure and homicide and discuss our results in the theoretical context of social protection.

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## 1. Introduction

Poverty is one of the most consistent predictors of homicide rates in the empirical literature on the structural covariates of violent crime in the United States (Messner and Rosenfeld, 1999; Pridemore, 2002; Sampson and Lauritsen, 1994). After a long absence in the analogous cross-national literature, a small number of recent studies have shown a positive and significant association between poverty and national homicide rates (Paré, 2006; Pridemore, 2008, 2011). Prior to this recent research on poverty, inequality had been the focus of many cross-national studies of homicide (for reviews see LaFree, 1999; Messner and Rosenfeld, 2006). As such, several studies that examined the potential buffering effects of social protection and related phenomena like decommodification (Esping-Andersen, 1990) concentrated on the ability of these constructs to moderate the effects of inequality on national homicide rates (Messner and Rosenfeld, 2006; Pratt and Godsey, 2002; Savolainen, 2000). While empirical results largely support this hypothesis, theoretical questions remain about the inequality–homicide association and exactly what social protection policies are meant to alleviate.

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Following the lead of earlier researchers (Conway and Norton, 2002; Paré, 2006; Pridemore, 2008, 2011), we argue that the economic components of policies aimed at social protection, social and economic welfare, and decommodification are directed at and meant to support those living in or near poverty in an attempt to provide at least a subsistence minimum level of living. An indirect consequence of such support may be to reduce inequality, but its direct aim is to decrease the social and economic harms caused by poverty. Therefore, we should not only expect a negative direct effect of social support on homicide rates, but we would expect that the strength of the positive association between poverty and homicide rates will be weaker in nations that offer greater social protection to its most vulnerable citizens. The poverty–homicide association has been tested in only a handful of recent cross-national studies, and the moderating effects of social protection on the association between poverty and homicide have yet to be assessed. Thus, our study (1) adds to the small but growing empirical literature gauging if poverty matters for the variation in cross-national homicide rates and (2) tests for the first time if any poverty–homicide association is moderated by social protection.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Poverty and cross-national homicide rates

Theoretical explanations for an association between poverty and homicide at the cross-national level may be drawn from multiple social structure theories, especially those situated within the anomie tradition. For example, Institutional Anomie Theory (IAT) makes the claim that, taken on its own, poverty cannot independently explain differences in crime rates across nations (Messner and Rosenfeld, 2006). Instead, it could be theorized that high poverty rates are symptoms of institutional imbalances within nations. If high decommodification scores are indicative of a nation that maintains a balanced institutional structure (Messner and Rosenfeld, 2006; Savolainen, 2000), and weak decommodification scores are symptomatic of nations that have an unbalanced institutional structure where the economic institution overpowers other institutions, then it seems logical high poverty rates would also be a symptom of an overemphasized economic institution with other social institutions weakened by this overemphasis on economic goals.

In addition, Paré (2006) proposed that one of the possible explanations for the relationship between poverty and crime could be understood through social disorganization theory. A socially disorganized community is a community that is impoverished and has high levels of ethnic heterogeneity, residential instability, and family disruption (Bursik, 1988; Sampson and Groves, 1989), resulting in the inability of the community to exert informal social control over the behavior of its members. At the cross-national level, it is suggested that there is an aggregating effect, meaning that on average those nations with a greater number or proportion of disorganized neighborhoods and/or neighborhoods with deeper levels of disorganization than other nations will exhibit higher crime rates.

Despite these and other theoretical explanations that lead us to expect an association between poverty and homicide rates, until recently a formal test of the poverty–homicide thesis was missing from the cross-national homicide literature (Paré, 2006; Pridemore, 2008, 2011). The lack of research regarding poverty and homicide rates at the cross-national level was intriguing because of the consistent relationship between poverty and homicide within the US literature (Pridemore, 2002; Sampson and Lauritsen, 1994). Utilizing various indicators of poverty (e.g., infant mortality rates and the UN's Human Poverty Index), the poverty–homicide thesis has recently been tested multiple times at the cross-national level, with results providing consistent evidence of an association across different samples, different types of crime, different data sources, over time, and with the inclusion of different control variables (Paré, 2006; Pridemore, 2008, 2011; see also Messner et al., 2010). In one test, Pridemore (2008) found a poverty–homicide association when the usual structural covariates (including inequality) were included in the model, but found no association between inequality and national homicide rates. In another test, the relationship between poverty and homicide remained significant even when measures of economic wellbeing (e.g., unemployment) and income inequality were included (Paré, 2006), though again inequality was not significant. In a time-series test of the poverty–homicide thesis undertaken on a sample restricted to 16 developed nations, Messner et al. (2010) found that when absolute and relative deprivation were included in the same model, both were associated with homicide rates. These findings were with a relatively homogeneous sample of nations that also have low poverty rates. Therefore, it appears that even within nations with low poverty, poverty still has an association with homicide rates. Finally, Pridemore (2011) replicated two previously published studies (Fajnzylber et al., 2002; Savolainen, 2000) that had shown an inequality–homicide association at the cross-national level. In two of three models (Savolainen had disaggregated homicide victimization rates by sex), the inequality–homicide association disappeared when a proxy for poverty was added to the original models, though the poverty–homicide association was significant in all models.

### 2.2. Social protection

Other theories postulate that cultural values create variation in the feelings of obligation to the community, and this in turn influences crime at the macro-level (Currie, 1997). Currie (1997) argues that market societies contribute to high crime rates across multiple nations because they offer little social protection from changes in the economy (Currie, 1997, p.152). According to Currie (1997), seven criminogenic mechanisms can be observed with the rise of a market society, including the destruction of livelihood, economic inequality and material deprivation, a reduction and in some cases removal of public ser-

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