

Intoxication and Homicide: A Context-Specific Approach

The relationship between alcohol, drugs and homicide has received considerable attention from criminologists since Wolfgang's (1958) landmark study of homicide in Philadelphia, US, indicated that substantial proportions of homicide cases involved intoxicated offenders and/or victims. Research has subsequently affirmed a strong correlation between substances and fatal violence across the globe, however, there remains little consensus about the precise nature of the relationship. Although evidence suggests that the ingestion of particular substances increases the likelihood of subsequent violent conduct, the psychopharmacological effects of alcohol/drugs alone are not sufficient in explaining intoxication-related homicide.

Attempts to unravel this nexus (outside of the UK) have focused on the influences of structural and cultural level factors or alternatively have examined the micro-dynamics of homicide events. Although this work has substantially improved knowledge about the association between intoxication and homicide, many studies have been restricted by a uni-dimensional approach that struggles to account for the complexity of the phenomenon. In the UK, two criminological studies analysing police or prison case files to explore other aspects of homicide have peripherally reported the co-occurrence of intoxication and homicide (Brookman, 2000, 2005; Dobash et al., 2004, 2007) and one quantitative study analysing psychiatric reports for homicide offenders has also identified alcohol and drugs as factors in substantial proportions of homicide (Shaw et al., 2006). However, no research has analysed official homicide data to examine the nature of intoxication-related homicide and no criminological studies have explored the context surrounding this subtype of homicide.

The findings presented in this article derive from a three year ESRC-funded project exploring substance-related homicide in England and Wales, which sought to fill this gap in UK research and to bridge the micro-macro divide observed in much of the literature from elsewhere. A mixed-method approach was adopted, in which Homicide Index data collated by the Home Office were integrated with quantitative and qualitative data from police homicide files and interviews with convicted

homicide offenders. This is the first time these sources of data have been analysed to examine the characteristics of homicides involving intoxication in the UK. The research makes a unique contribution to a growing body of homicide research in the UK through its exploration of the context surrounding intoxication-related homicide and demonstrates the importance of incorporating multiple types of data in order to develop nuanced explanations of complex social phenomena.

The over-arching contention of the paper is that in order to adequately explain the relationship between intoxication and homicide, it is important to adopt a 'context-specific' approach (see Dobash and Dobash, 1983) in which the *immediate context* of homicide events (intoxication and situational dynamics) is integrated with the *background context* (trajectories and lifestyles of offenders and victims, antecedents to events and broader socio-cultural factors). The findings indicate an indirect relationship between intoxication and homicide whereby event intoxication interacts with particular individual, situational and socio-cultural factors to enhance the likelihood of fatal violence.

The prevalence of intoxication-related homicide

Wolfgang (1958) first highlighted the association between intoxication and homicide, reporting that 55% of homicide offenders in Philadelphia, US, were intoxicated by alcohol at the time of the offence and 64% of homicide cases involved intoxicated offenders and/or victims. Subsequent research has found that approximately half of homicides in the US involve some connection to alcohol and/or drugs (Goodman et al., 1986; Wieczorek et al., 1990; Spunt et al., 1993; Goldstein et al., 1989, 1992; Martin, 2001; Tardiff et al., 2002). Similar proportions have been reported in Australia (Wallace, 1986), Canada (Rossow, 2004) and across Europe (Gottlieb and Gabrielsen, 1992; Rossow, 2001; Kivivouri, 2002). In the UK, homicide literature is comparatively underdeveloped, yet an emerging body of research suggests that alcohol and drugs are factors in a substantial proportion of homicides (Brookman, 2010).

Brookman's (2000, 2005) analysis of police homicide files (n=54) in her study of male-male homicide in England and Wales revealed that in over half of the homicide events, the offenders and/or victims were intoxicated by alcohol. Similarly, Dobash et al.'s (2004, 2007) analysis of prison case files (n=786) for their Murder in Britain study found that 38% of male homicide offenders were intoxicated by alcohol and 14% were on drugs at the time of the offence. They also found that 49% of male homicide offenders reported high levels of previous alcohol use and 25% reported problems with drugs. The most extensive study reporting on the prevalence of intoxication-related homicide in the UK analysed court psychiatric reports (n=1,168) and found that 45% of homicide offenders were intoxicated at the time of the offence; 42% had a history of alcohol misuse/dependence; and 40% had a history of drug misuse/dependence (Shaw et al., 2006). This suggests that alcohol and drugs play an important role in homicides across the UK, however, in isolation these figures tell us little about the nature of the relationship or the context surrounding intoxication-related homicide.

Explaining intoxication-related homicide

There is some evidence that the psychopharmacological effects of alcohol and/or drugs may explain the association between intoxication and homicide. The effects of alcohol include impairment of reaction times and ability to notice inhibitory cues; reduced anxiety about the consequences of violence; increased psychomotor stimulation; decreased impulse control; and impaired cognitive functioning, all of which increase the likelihood of aggressive behaviour and reduce the possibility of non-violent conflict resolution (Jones, 2000; Martin, 2001). Parker and Rebhun's (1995) theory of 'selective disinhibition' holds that alcohol has a weakening effect on inhibitions that would normally prevent individuals from engaging in violence and enabling them to exercise *active constraint* (Parker, 1998). The effects of alcohol are often compounded by simultaneous drug intoxication (Tardiff et al., 2002; Pennings et al., 2002; Haggard-Grann et al., 2006) and there is evidence that certain drugs, such as metamphetamine (Wright and Klee, 2001; Stretesky, 2009) and crack cocaine (Baumer, 1994; Baumer et al., 1998; Riley, 1998) are particularly likely to lead to violent behaviour. However, the key association between illicit drugs and homicide is

attributed to the systemic violence surrounding the drug distribution network (Goldstein, 1985; Goldstein et al., 1989, 1992; Spunt et al., 1993).

Notwithstanding the co-occurrence of intoxication and homicide, alcohol and drugs in isolation do not *cause* lethal violence (Fagan, 1990; Parker and Rebhun, 1995; Jones, 2000; Martin, 2001; Wright and Klee, 2001; Brookman, 2005). Macro-level research examining the impact of cultural and structural factors has found evidence of an indirect relationship between alcohol and homicide, whereby the effects of intoxication appear to be moderated by socio-economic status (Gottlieb and Gabrielson, 1992), gender (Rossow, 2001), cultural drinking styles and behavioural expectations surrounding intoxication (Parker and Rebhun, 1995; Rossow, 2001; Pridemore, 2004; Bye, 2008). Parker and colleagues have also identified that increased alcohol consumption enhances the impact of poverty on homicide rates; availability of alcohol interacts with poverty, routine activities and a lack of informal social control to increase homicide rates; and alcohol consumption rates as well as a nation's drinking style interact with its divorce rates to increase the male homicide victimisation rate (Parker, 1995; Parker and Rebhun, 1995; Parker, 1998).

Macro-level explanations further our understanding of intoxication-related homicide and explain variations in homicide rates across time and space. However, they are unable to explain why only some individuals in 'high risk' socio-cultural circumstances become involved in intoxication-related homicide, or to account for the dynamic processes through which events unfold. By contrast, situational-level analyses have identified the immediate physical and social context surrounding intoxication as a key mechanism in explaining lethal violence, particularly in homicide cases involving young men (Martin, 2001). Certain public drinking venues, overspill areas and neighbourhoods containing a large number of alcohol outlets are held to provide 'violent drinking situations' (Jones, 2000). Situations in which both victims and offenders are intoxicated and where third parties are present are also thought to be particularly 'high risk', with an increased likelihood of a trivial comment escalating into serious violence (Martin, 2001). This closely resonates with Polk's (1994, 1999) depiction of 'male honor contest violence' and Brookman's

(2000, 2005) description of 'confrontational homicide', both of which are associated with young adult males and 'scenes of leisure activity' in which perpetrators and victims of violence/homicide are likely to have consumed large quantities of alcohol.

Situational-level accounts illustrate the interactions that transfer 'high risk' drinking situations into homicide events and overcome some of the shortcomings of macro-level analyses. However, they are restricted by the lack of attention accorded to individual characteristics and the trajectories that lead victims and offenders to fatal events and they fail to link the micro-environment of homicide to socio-cultural factors associated with high rates of intoxication-related homicide (Parker and Rebhun, 1995). Furthermore, the micro-level analyses referred to above are concerned with transactions that occur in distinctive types of homicide and do not account for other subtypes of intoxication-related homicide, for example, those involving intimate partners.

The most often cited model of substance-related homicide is Goldstein's (1985) 'tripartite framework', which identifies three subtypes of drug-related homicide: psychopharmacological; economically motivated; and systemic. Although this taxonomy acknowledges the multi-faceted nature of substance-related homicide, it has been criticised for its lack of attention to the overlap and interaction between categories (Parker and Auerhahn, 1998), placing too much emphasis on the 'systemic' category, and neglecting the social and cultural context of drug-related crime (Bennett and Holloway, 2009). Bennett and Holloway (2009) argue that a more comprehensive model would account for 'crime lifestyle' factors and integrate different explanatory levels. Seddon (2000, 2006) suggests that when trying to explain the drugs-crime nexus, rather than seeking to establish deterministic, unidirectional models of causation, we should work towards developing models based upon 'soft-determinism', which observe 'a three-way relationship between structure, culture and agency' (2006: 692).

Research Design

The research sought to overcome problems in existing literature and fill a gap in the growing body of homicide research in the UK. The key aims were to explore the extent and nature of intoxication-related homicide across England and Wales and to provide a contextualised explanation of the relationship. The study integrated three sources of data: Homicide Index data for 1995-2005 (n=4,633); police homicide files (n=40); and interviews with convicted homicide offenders (n=20). This is the first time these data have been used to explore the homicide-intoxication nexus and, combined, they provide a unique insight into this complex phenomenon. A context-specific approach (see Dobash and Dobash, 1983) was developed, focusing on the *immediate context* (intoxication, situational dynamics) as well as the *background context* surrounding the event (victim/offender trajectories and lifestyles; antecedents to events; socio-cultural framework).

An important aspect of this design was the inclusion of victims, who are often excluded from explanations of homicide, despite the dynamic role they may play in events (see Luckenbill, 1977; Polk, 1994, 1999; Brookman, 2000, 2005). Research that has incorporated victims highlights that substantial proportions of homicide victims are intoxicated at their time of death (Wolfgang, 1958; Goodman et al., 1986; Polk, 1994, 1999; Brookman, 2000, 2005; Darke et al., 2009), and both alcohol and drug misuse have been found to increase the risk of criminal victimisation (Browning and Erickson, 2009; Stevens et al., 2007). Hence, in examining the processes and pathways leading individuals to 'high risk' situations the trajectories of both offenders and victims were explored.

Homicide Index

HI data on intoxication were analysed to gauge the extent of intoxication-related homicide across England and Wales and to explore the characteristics of these cases on a national level. HI data are compiled by the Home Office from information provided by the 43 police forces across England and Wales. For every offence initially recorded as homicide, police complete 'homicide returns' asking for demographic information about the suspect(s) and victim(s) and details of the homicide situation.

Offender intoxication may potentially be noted in a 'narrative' section of the form. As the only national source of homicide data, the HI provides an extensive dataset that can assist researchers in exploring broad trends and patterns in homicide. However, like all official statistics, the HI data are socially constructed and their usefulness has come under scrutiny due to their limited depth (Brookman, 2000, 2005; Dobash et al., 2004)¹.

The HI dataset covered all recorded homicides in England and Wales between 1995 and 2005 (n=10,797). This included cases 'no longer recorded as homicide' and counted multiple suspects and victims as separate cases. For the purposes of conducting an event-based analysis, the data were streamlined so that each 'case' represented a homicide incident involving one or more suspect(s) and victim(s). The revised dataset consisted of 4,633 homicide cases. The analysis used the details of the primary offender and victim in each case due to a degree of missing data for multiple suspects and victims, and because multiple suspects were often acquitted or convicted of a lesser offence than homicide.

Police files

Police homicide files complemented the HI by providing in-depth data about the circumstances leading up to and surrounding homicide events. While investigating homicide incidents, police collate a wide range of data including witness statements, forensic evidence, emergency service reports, post mortem reports, and medical records, which provide detailed information about the lifestyles of offenders/victims and the dynamics of the homicide situation. Although police files are limited in generalisability and subject to organisational bias (Brookman, 1999; Innes, 2003), case files such as these are strong in internal reliability due to the breadth of witness statements, which provide multiple versions of single events (Lewis et al., 2003). The documents are also stored electronically on the Home Office Large Major Enquiry

¹ Similar concerns regarding official homicide data have been well-documented in the US, where the Uniform Crime Reports are a widely used source, despite acknowledgement of their limitations (Goldstein, Brownstein and Ryan, 1992; Spunt et al., 1993; Flewelling and Williams, 1999).

System (HOLMES), which provides an excellent and under-used source of data for homicide research.

A sample of 40 files from one police force were analysed using the HOLMES database. In order to conduct a comparative analysis of substance and non-substance related homicide, access was gained to the 40 most recently solved cases available (some were unavailable due to ongoing appeals). Cases were categorised as intoxication-related if there was evidence within the file that the offender or victim had consumed alcohol and/or illicit drugs in the hours leading up to the homicide. Quantitative and qualitative data were extracted relating to offenders' and victims' demographic characteristics and backgrounds, antecedents to the homicide, and the situational dynamics of the event, providing a rich and intensive insight into the context surrounding intoxication-related homicide.

Interviews

Qualitative interviews were conducted in one prison with 20 convicted male adult homicide offenders. The sample consisted of any homicide offenders willing to be interviewed and for the purposes of a comparative analysis, included substance and non-substance related cases. Like case file data, interviews have limited generalisability and are subject to both interviewee and researcher bias (Silverman, 1985, Lewis et al., 2003). Homicide offenders have also been found to attempt to rationalise their actions and minimise their culpability through techniques of neutralisation (Cavanagh et al., 2001; Dobash and Dobash, 2011). However, in this study, the perpetrators' subjective versions of events and role of any intoxication were invaluable. The interviews generated detailed narratives about offenders' childhoods, adult lifestyles, experiences with crime and violence, antecedents to the homicide, and the contextual circumstances surrounding events. This level and depth of data was not available from any other source and proved to be key in exploring the context of intoxication-related homicide.

Research findings: Homicide Index data

The Homicide Index (HI) records offenders as either 'not intoxicated' at the time of the offence or 'intoxicated' by alcohol, drugs or both drink and drugs.² Analysis of this data revealed that only 18% (n=831) of homicides in England and Wales (n=4,633) between 1995 and 2005 were recorded as 'intoxication-related' (IH); 91% of which involved alcohol intoxication, either alone or concurrently with drugs. This is significantly lower than Scottish official statistics during this period, which reported 52% of Scottish homicide offenders in 2000 as drunk; 13% under the influence of drugs and a further 9% under the influence of both alcohol and drugs (Scottish Executive, 2001, in Brookman, 2005). The HI figures are also lower than those reported in UK-based research using police files, prison files and psychiatric reports (Brookman, 2000, 2005; Dobash et al., 2004, 2007; Shaw et al., 2006); which have consistently reported that approximately half of homicides involve intoxication. Although these studies did not use probability samples, the sample sizes were large and case file data collating multiple sources may be more accurate than HI data, which relies on police (or police administrators) making a note of intoxication on homicide return forms.

Despite the apparent under-reporting of intoxication-related homicide, the HI data were useful in identifying broad patterns and constructing a statistical profile that was further explored through qualitative data. Comparative analysis using chi-square tests revealed statistically significant differences concerning the demographic characteristics of offenders and victims and the circumstances surrounding events, depending upon the offender's intoxication. The results presented here focus on the demographic characteristics, providing an insight into structural level correlates of homicide involving intoxication.

The analysis of offender characteristics revealed no significant differences in the gender or age of offenders depending on intoxication. Both IH and NI cases were likely to be perpetrated by males (91% in each category) aged 19-35 (59% in each

² In 2007 the Homicide Index was expanded to include data on victim intoxication.

category). However, a statistically significant relationship was found between intoxication and the offender's ethnicity: IH cases were significantly more likely to have been committed by a white person (92% compared to 80% of NI cases, $p < .01$). The percentage of Black offenders in the NI category was double that of those in the IH category (13% compared with 6%, $p < .01$), and nearly four times as many Asian offenders were sober as were intoxicated (7% compared with 2%, $p < .01$).

The analysis of victim characteristics revealed statistically significant associations between intoxication and gender, age, ethnicity and economic status³. Three-quarters of IH cases involved a male victim compared with only two-thirds of NI cases; IH cases were significantly more likely to involve a victim aged 36-55 (38% compared to 30%, $p < .01$) and significantly less likely to involve a child victim (9% compared to 16%, $p < .01$); and IH cases were significantly more likely to involve a white victim than NI cases (93% compared to 82%, $p < .01$). Again, double the proportion of NI cases involved Black victims as did IH cases (10% compared to 5%, $p < .01$) and just 2% of IH cases involved an Asian victim compared with 7% of NI cases. Intoxicated offenders were significantly more likely to kill an economically inactive victim (66% IH cases compared to 51% NI cases, $p < .01$) and significantly less likely to kill a student/child (5% IH cases compared to 16% NI cases, $p < .01$).

Despite the limitations of the HI and its apparent under-estimation of intoxication-related homicide rates, this national data enabled an extensive statistical analysis and provided a valuable overview of the key characteristics associated with homicides involving intoxication across England and Wales. The findings illustrate that they are distinguishable from those involving no intoxication and highlight potential risk factors. Both offenders and victims are most likely to be white adult males and victims are likely to be economically deprived, which may point to particular lifestyle and cultural factors associated with this demographic. The data from police files and interviews allow for an intensive exploration of these findings

³ Economic status is recorded in the HI for homicide victims but not offenders.

and provide a more in-depth insight into the immediate and background context surrounding homicides involving intoxication.

Research findings: Police file and interview data

Data from police files (n=40) and interviews (n=20) support existing literature suggesting that intoxication-related homicide is more common than the HI indicates. This could be due to sample bias, the inclusion of victim intoxication, and also a reflection of inadequate recording practices for official statistics. 67% (n=40/60) of the cases examined through police file analysis and interviews were categorised as intoxication-related, compared to just 18% of the HI cases⁴ (for the interview cases, data on victim intoxication was not always available; hence, the actual figure may be higher). Of these, 48% (n=19/40) involved alcohol intoxication; 45% (n=18/40) involved alcohol and drug intoxication; and 7% (n=3/40) involved drug-only intoxication, implicating alcohol as a fundamental factor in fatal violence.

Given the small number of cases involving drug-only intoxication, the analysis focused on homicides involving alcohol or alcohol and drug intoxication (n=37/60). The findings below provide detailed observations from these cases, focusing initially on the immediate context surrounding events (intoxication and situational dynamics) before examining the background context (pathways, antecedents and socio-cultural framework). The key themes deriving from a content analysis are supported by illustrative quotes from interviewees and examples drawn from police files.

Offender intoxication

Analysis of the combined police file and interview data revealed that 65% (n=39/60) of homicide perpetrators were intoxicated by alcohol and/or drugs at the time of the event. The level of reported intoxication at the time of the homicide varied from two pints of beer (in one case) to substantial amounts, as indicated in the following quotes:

⁴ In addition, 17% (n=10) were categorised as systemic and 3% (n=2) as economic-compulsive. A number of these cases involved concurrent intoxication but are excluded from this analysis.

Maybe 3 or 4 or even 5 cans each [offender and victim], and then we'd started off because we'd actually drunk about a litre, couple of litres of cider to start with and so basically that increased it anyway so we'd had about 5, 6 litres, 7 litres so we'd been, it was intense. (Int.3)

I must have had like ten pints during the day, eleven pints, and then went up town about 7 o'clock, and they were selling like those pitchers of lager, 4 pints for 4 pounds, and we had like one of them each, so it could have been like sixteen or seventeen pints.

What about any drugs?

Yeah, amphetamine, like I said during the day I went round to my friend's house and I was smoking cannabis with him ... (Int.19)

Many interviewees described a link between their intoxication and subsequent use of violence; both in their previous lifestyles and at the time of the homicide:

I couldn't hold my anger like, when shit happened, it [alcohol] would lower my inhibitions. If it even kicked off like I wouldn't be able to hold myself back like, I'd just put my head down and steam in. (Int.12)

They said if it wasn't for the alcohol I would have been alright, but with the amount of alcohol I'd consumed there was no way I would have knew what I was doing [...] It was just drinking all the way through the day and the night. It just took over. (Int.13)

Offenders who were under the influence of both alcohol and drugs seemed to place a particular emphasis on the psychopharmacological effects of the substances, and combinations of alcohol with cannabis, amphetamine or cocaine were described as particularly 'lethal':

Well if you mix alcohol with cannabis it's a lot worse, if you have alcohol on its own it's not as bad, but if you're mixing both it just escalates everything. (Int.13)

When I was on crack I was insane [...] You put both of them together and it's like a bomb. Just the crack on its own does make you angry, but both of them together, because I smoked crack, the alcohol makes it worse. (Int.16)

These quotes indicate that alcohol and drugs play a significant role in intoxication-related violence and that in their absence, the homicides may not have taken place. Many of the men who were interviewed were severely intoxicated when they killed their victims and believed that the psychopharmacological effects of the substances contributed to their actions. However, some maintained that regardless of their intoxication, they were responsible for their actions, and that personal issues played more important roles than alcohol and drugs:

The drink and the drugs were partially to blame but they only affect you the way you want it to. I used to like the buzz I got, I was fearless on drink and drugs. But I don't blame the drink and drugs, it was just me. (Int.2)

I think it just exacerbated and made me ... maybe that was a slight factor in the reason I didn't stop at the opportunities I had [...] I wouldn't say it was the reason, [...] I wouldn't blame it, it was me, [...] it did bring out that nastiness inside me a little bit more than normal. (Int.11)

It probably lowered my inhibitions a lot more, and I would have done things, it probably gave me the Dutch Courage to do things that I wouldn't have done, but it just does what it does really, the alcohol, you know it played a part but it wasn't a major part, you know, there was other things that contributed at the time. (Int.19)

This illustrates the complexity of homicide involving intoxication. Despite the psychopharmacological effects of alcohol and drugs appearing to play a role, for these offenders intoxication was just one explanatory factor and, in isolation, insufficient in explaining their actions. In order to understand the outcome of events it is important to consider other factors that may have contributed, including victim intoxication, situational and background circumstances surrounding the homicide.

Victim intoxication

In addition to high levels of offender intoxication, 55% (n=22) of the 40 police file cases⁵ involved intoxicated victims, and a number of these were described as vulnerable or unable to defend themselves due to their level of intoxication. For example, the victim in Case.2 had a blood alcohol level four times over the driving limit, which the pathologist stated would have significantly impaired his ability to resist assault and get himself out of the loch in which he drowned (Post Mortem Report). Similarly, the victim in Case.17 had alcohol, methadone, heroin, cocaine and cannabis in his blood, with methadone levels indicating a high level of tolerance and significant incapacitation at time of death (Post Mortem Report). In Case.22, the pathologist noted that the victim had high enough levels of cocaine and heroin in her blood to kill a non-habitual user, indicating a high tolerance and recent usage in the hours before her death: 'the possibility that this drug may have impaired her ability to defend herself cannot be excluded' (Post Mortem Report). These findings highlight the importance of including victims in the analysis. Their lifestyles, intoxication, and interactive role in the homicide event may be equally important

⁵ Information regarding victim intoxication was not available for most interview cases.

factors as those concerning the offenders and help us to more fully understand the context surrounding intoxication-related homicide.

Situational dynamics

In support of the HI data, the majority of intoxication-related homicide cases (n=37) examined here involved white, adult, economically inactive, male offenders and victims, and occurred between strangers or acquaintances. Previous micro-level research has identified intoxication-related homicide as a 'pub-culture' phenomenon involving spontaneous conflicts between males (Polk, 1994, 1999; Brookman, 2000, 2005). However, the analysis of police file and interview data revealed a variety of situational dynamics surrounding this subtype of homicide and also indicated differences between alcohol-related homicides and those involving alcohol and drugs:

[Table 1 here]

The circumstances surrounding alcohol-related homicides included spontaneous conflicts between male strangers/acquaintances, which predominantly took place in public in the aftermath of a night out; intimate partner or family killings, which involved a previous history of violence towards the victim and, in all but one case, took place in the victims' homes; and economically motivated homicides, which all occurred in the victims' homes and were characterised by the use of weapons, no history of conflict, and little interaction between the victim and offender. Homicides involving concurrent alcohol and drug intoxication on the other hand were more homogenous (see Table 1); these events were largely characterised by long-term feuds between acquaintances culminating in highly interactive homicide situations or spontaneous, non-interactive attacks on strangers.

The situational context of the homicide events in this sample reflects the multi-dimensional nature of intoxication-related homicide. Although many of the cases concur with the image of spontaneous fights between non-acquainted males in the aftermath of a night out; alcohol and drugs also appear to play a role in homicide

events involving intimates, family members, and acquaintances. The differences observed between homicides involving alcohol intoxication and those involving alcohol and drugs reflect not only differential psychopharmacological effects of substances, but also, distinguishable background factors. Cases involving concurrent alcohol and drug intoxication were associated with particularly severe histories of substance misuse, chaotic lifestyles and more complex antecedents to events. Understanding intoxication-related homicide therefore requires focusing beyond the environment surrounding the night-time leisure economy and considering the individual, cultural and socio-economic context within which events take place.

Pathways to intoxication-related homicide

The processes and pathways leading individuals to intoxication-related homicide have been neglected in previous research, which tends to focus on macro-level data or the micro-environment of homicide events. Analysis of data regarding the background experiences and lifestyles of offenders and victims verified the importance of analysing individual level data and yielded valuable insights into their trajectories. Many of the offenders who were interviewed described problematic childhoods, characterised by instability, deprivation and abuse. They also reported witnessing domestic violence from their fathers to mothers from a young age, which eventually led to them using violence in retaliation:

[T]he violence started between my parents, and I didn't like that so I was always striking out at my dad then, and it just escalated from there, just telling him I'd kill him if he ever hit any of us again [...] I've had scars all over because of him, where he's cracked me or thrown plates at me, anything he could get his hands on just to get to me. (Int.13)

I know it sounds horrible but I'd watched him for most of my life growing up, beating my Mum up, you know, it wasn't a nice experience watching that all the time, and beating me up. I got to the age where I could fight back, and I did do. (Int.16)

Problems experienced in their younger years continued into adulthood and many men described social and economic deprivation, instability, and difficulties in their adult relationships and lifestyles. Many of the interviewees talked about involvement in crime from an early age, and recounted regular use of violence, which for some appeared to be a routine aspect of life:

I just used to fight, violence was part of my every day existence [...] at some point of every day I was, yeah it would be no surprise if I was, if I ended up in a fight. (Int.8)

It could be anything really, you could be sat in a pub and you'd say something, a bit of banter would maybe escalate, something like that kind of situation, that's one thing, or you could be out and you'd probably make up an excuse to yourself like that guy's looking at me funny or whatever, or somebody else has egged you on or winding you up, just from there really, I mean multiple situations really, you'd just create excuses to start something. (Int.19)

What was particularly striking about these offenders' backgrounds, and perhaps the most intriguing finding of the research, was their prolific use of alcohol and drugs. Many offenders started drinking and taking drugs from a young age; experimented with a broad range of substances; combined alcohol and drugs; and were regularly heavily intoxicated:

It started with gas and glue and then it went onto cannabis, acid, speed, drinking, ecstasy, magic mushrooms, err, and then eventually heroin. (Int.3)

Overall, analysis of the offenders' past experiences provided a crucial insight into the trajectories leading them to intoxication-related homicide. Rather than occurring 'out of the blue', their actions at the time of the homicide followed a pattern of behaviour that characterised day to day life and ultimately culminated in fatal violence. This individual level context is paramount in explaining the unfolding of events at the time of the homicide, especially when combined with often severe levels of intoxication.

Data concerning victims' histories of alcohol and drug misuse indicated that in many cases, they had similarly chronic backgrounds of alcohol and/or drug dependency. Of the 40 police file cases, 19 victims (48%) appeared to have a history of alcohol/drug misuse, and a number of interviewees who knew their victims claimed they had problems with alcohol and/or drugs. The victim in Case.2 was referred to as a user of cannabis and ecstasy and an alcoholic: 'I think [he] was an alcoholic and hung around with younger people because he was lonely'; '[he] had a drink problem and was referred to as a piss-head by the local kids in the area' (Witness Statements). The victim in Case.3 was described as a former heroin user and alcoholic, whose drinking habits and antisocial behaviour had led to several evictions: 'his flat and life was a mess, due to his excessive drinking'; '[He] would spend the majority of his days sat in his flat drinking cider and smoking weed' (Witness Statements). The victim in

Case.14 was described as a former heroin addict who had been on Subutex (a heroin substitute) for four years; and the victim in Case.17 was known in the area as a heroin addict who dealt drugs from his flat:

For about the last twelve months [the victim] had been using heroin more frequently. In order to fund his habit he had been dealing drugs from his flat. [He dealt] about £200 of heroin every two or three days. (Witness Statement)

Police file data also indicated that it was common for victims (particularly in cases involving alcohol and drugs) to have a previous history of violent and criminal behaviour. For example, the victim in Case.1 was described by police as a gang member involved in dealing drugs and guns. According to his girlfriend's statement, 'I was also aware that [he] was snorting cocaine [...] I believe that [he] may have been doing a bit of dealing in cocaine'. A few days prior to his death he assaulted the (Black) offender and punched and scratched his own girlfriend in the face, accusing her of being on the side of the 'nigger', because she was friends with the offender's girlfriend. 'He was a nasty piece of work, a racist who was always threatening people with hammers and other forms of violence' (Witness Statement).

These insights demonstrate the importance of including victims in the analysis. Their trajectories often appeared similar to those of the offenders and in some cases the victims played important and dynamic roles in events. In other cases, the past experiences and lifestyles of the victims help to explain their vulnerability at the time of the homicide. The pathways leading victims to homicide situations form an important part of contextualising the event and constructing an interactionist understanding of intoxication-related homicide.

Antecedents to the homicide

The antecedent circumstances varied enormously, highlighting the multi-dimensional nature of intoxication-related homicide. In some cases there was a history of conflict between the victim and offender that escalated prior to the homicide. For example, in Case.3, a number of witnesses reported that the offender had publically threatened the victim (his neighbour) over the weeks preceding the homicide and had told support workers at a drop-in centre that he was going to kill

the victim. In all but one of the cases involving domestic homicide (involving intimates or relatives), the homicide event was preceded by a history of violence from the offender towards the victim. For example, in Case.39, involving twin sisters with a long history of alcohol-related physical abuse from the offender towards the victim, over 100 domestic incidents had been reported to the police. Int.3 described how in the weeks leading up to the offence, his relationship with his wife had become increasingly violent:

There was [...] a lot of scuffling and there was a time when she actually had to go to hospital, [...] she fell on the floor because I dropped her [...] and she broke her cheek bone because I held her up and it was in a strangle position kind of thing, but suddenly I came to my senses and let her go and she just, her body hit the deck, you know? (Int.3)

In other cases however, the homicide did not appear to be preceded by any history of conflict, and instead involved a rapid escalation at the scene. For example, in Case.24, the offender and victim were out 'clubbing' with their respective groups of friends. At the end of the night, the two groups became involved in a verbal altercation on the street. In a scuffle involving numerous individuals, the offender punched the victim in the face, causing him to fall and hit his head on the pavement and suffer fatal brain injuries.

Another dynamic homicide situation with no history of conflict was described by a young man who killed a woman working as a prostitute on his way home from a drinking and cannabis-smoking session with friends (Case.22). Recounting the homicide as a 'struggle that turned into a crisis', he claimed that whilst experiencing side-effects from anti-depressants as well as the effects of alcohol and cannabis, he began arguing with the victim after failing to get an erection and attempting to retrieve the money he had paid her. He told police that the victim started screaming at him and he was trying to 'shut her up':

I've definitely hit her on the head with a bottle of beer and it smashed and that's resulted in the loudest scream of all time [...] this is when I really am panicking, hyperventilating [...] so I've turned round to leave and she's jumped on my back [...] I was pissed and stoned and on anti-depressants and very, very, very distressed and shaken by this and I've gone to the ground [...] she's kind of gone down with me. (Police Interview Transcript)

And in other cases there was no evidence of any interaction between offenders and victims, prior to or during the event. In these cases, the offenders' actions appeared

to be spontaneous and somewhat random, often following substantial intoxication and encouragement from friends/accomplices. For example, Int.19 described a unilateral attack by himself and a friend upon two men (one of whom died) whilst walking home after a day and night of heavy drinking and drug-taking:

Yeah and it was kind of a dare, to see, because they were like biggish blokes, and we'd not had any confrontation that night but we were like egging each other on kind of thing and one of my friends said 'listen, I bet you can't knock that big guy out', so I initiated the attack and it just went on from there. (Int.19)

Similarly, the economically-motivated homicides (involving burglary/robbery of the victims) were characterised by a lack of interaction. The victim in Case.9 (who was described as an alcoholic and severely intoxicated at his time of death) was unconscious in bed when he was beaten to death by offenders who stole his bank cards; in Case.25 the (intoxicated) landlord of a pub was beaten to death with pieces of wood by four (intoxicated) youths who stole cash tills; and in Case.28 an elderly woman was stabbed to death in her kitchen when she returned home and disturbed her (intoxicated) son's friend burgling her home.

The antecedents to intoxication-related homicide events examined here illustrate how complex a phenomenon it is. The homicides of strangers and those stemming from burglaries or robberies not surprisingly involved little interaction between the offenders and victims. By contrast, those involving acquaintances, intimates or family members were characterised by a history of conflict and a spiral of events immediately prior to the homicide. The most consistent feature of the antecedent circumstances was the ingestion of substantial quantities of alcohol and/or drugs, often by both victims and offenders. It seems that this interacted with their individual trajectories and the situational circumstances at the scene, culminating in a lethal outcome.

Socio-cultural framework

The socio-cultural backdrop to intoxication-related homicide was ascertained from data pertaining to demographic characteristics; the apparent lifestyles, values and norms of individuals involved in intoxication-related homicide; and the social context

surrounding the homicide events. In support of the Homicide Index data, individuals were most likely to be young, white adult males (victims tended to be slightly older than offenders) who were unemployed at the time of the homicide. This suggests that social and cultural norms amongst this demographic enhance the likelihood of involvement in intoxication-related homicide through facilitating particular lifestyles, approaches to drinking and drug taking and behavioural expectations associated with intoxication. For example, 'being male' may involve going out, consuming large amounts of alcohol, showing off, getting involved in confrontations and using violence to resolve disputes.

Although the research did not involve analysis of aggregate data regarding consumption rates, drinking patterns and drug use; individual level data depicted a pervasive culture of binge drinking, often accompanied by poly-drug use. The situational environment of the homicide events varied from overspill areas and routes home from pubs and clubs to residential locations; however, the over-riding social context of the homicide events was one in which large quantities of alcohol/drugs had been consumed, often by both victims and offenders. The descriptions provided in interviews and witness statements also indicated that substantial proportions of intoxication-related homicide offenders and victims had long-term histories of alcohol and/or drug misuse and were frequently involved in heavy drinking/drug-taking sessions in the lead up to the event. Inextricably bound to this 'intoxicated' lifestyle was the routine adoption of violence as a means of dispute resolution, particularly (although not exclusively) for the offenders.

An examination of the socio-cultural framework is essential in developing a contextualised understanding of intoxication-related homicide. These findings identify potential risk factors for intoxication-related homicide, including white masculinity, economic deprivation, persistent heavy use of alcohol and drugs, and aggressive behavioural expectations surrounding intoxication. When this background context interacts with 'high risk' individual characteristics, intoxication and situational environments, the likelihood of lethal violence appears to be substantially enhanced.

Discussion and conclusion

The research underpinning this paper integrated multiple sources of data to facilitate a context-specific analysis of intoxication-related homicide. Homicide Index data were combined with data from police homicide files and interviews with convicted homicide offenders to explore the prevalence of homicide involving intoxication; the situational circumstances surrounding events; the pathways leading offenders and victims to the events; the antecedents leading to events and the socio-cultural framework within which intoxication-related homicide occurs. The findings demonstrate that intoxication-related homicide is a complex phenomenon requiring a comprehensive and nuanced analytical framework. Rather than taking a uni-dimensional approach to understanding the association between alcohol, drugs and homicide, it is important to adopt a multi-level analysis drawing on various data sources and thereby examine the interaction between individual, situational and socio-cultural factors.

In the sample of cases analysed here, alcohol and drugs were situational factors in two thirds of homicide events. This supports existing research in the UK suggesting that intoxication-related homicide is more common than official statistics indicate (Brookman, 2005; Dobash et al. 2004, 2007; Shaw et al., 2006). In some cases there was evidence of Parker and Rebhun's (1995) 'selective disinhibition' and the psychopharmacological effects of alcohol and drugs appeared to play important roles in events. However, intoxication *per se* is insufficient in explaining subsequent fatal violence; the findings from a context-specific analysis indicate that intoxication interacts with a number of other micro and macro level 'risk' factors that, combined, ultimately lead to a lethal outcome.

In the cases reported above, the immediate context involved multiple types of situation including domestic violence, burglaries/robberies, feuds between acquaintances, and spontaneous conflicts between strangers and acquaintances. Although there was evidence of Polk's (1994,1999) 'male honor contests' and Brookman's (2000,2005) 'confrontational homicides', which tend to involve male strangers/acquaintances engaging in a public 'face-off' that rapidly escalates to

physical violence; the findings demonstrate that alcohol and drugs also play a role in other types of homicide and that factors beyond the physical or social environment are important in explaining intoxication-related homicide.

The common denominator in the majority of cases was heavy drinking/drug-taking in the hours preceding the homicide, often by both the victim and offender. Many of these individuals had a history of substance misuse, supporting the findings of Brookman (2005), Dobash et al. (2004, 2007) and Shaw et al. (2006), and illustrating the importance of examining pathways to intoxication-related homicide, which have to a large extent been neglected in previous research. The personal trajectories of victims and offenders were often characterised by problems dating back to childhood, chaotic lifestyles involving personal, social and economic difficulties and routine involvement in violence. Rather than intoxication-related homicide events occurring 'out of the blue', the cases examined here suggest that they tend to follow a declining pattern of behaviour. The past experiences and lifestyles of victims and offenders are key contextual elements that help us to understand actions and reactions at the time of the homicide event.

In previous research, social, economic and cultural factors have been associated with intoxication-related homicide (see Rossow, 2001; Gottlieb and Gabrielson, 1992; Parker, 1998; Pridemore, 2004; Bye, 2008) and may be fundamental to the development of appropriate policies and intervention strategies. In this research, data from all three sources indicated that white adult males and those with a low socio-economic status are most likely to become involved in homicide involving intoxication. This suggests that cultural values surrounding white masculinity may promote the use of violence as a form of conflict resolution and also influence the social context surrounding drinking and drug-taking. There was undoubtedly evidence of a 'binge' drinking culture within the police file and interview cases, often accompanied by illicit drugs; alongside aggressive behaviour expectations associated with intoxication. Finally, the findings suggest that there may be a relationship between social and economic deprivation and the cultural norms described above,

which within the right situational context, places particular individuals at higher risk of involvement in intoxication-related homicide.

The policy implications are multi-faceted. First, given that alcohol and drugs appear to be situational factors in substantially more homicide cases than officially recognised, there is justification for placing alcohol and drugs at the centre of the homicide prevention agenda, and for reforming recording processes so that the Homicide Index data more adequately reflect the prevalence of intoxication-related homicide. Secondly, in light of the findings regarding previous alcohol and drug misuse amongst many homicide offenders and victims, any policy aimed at reducing substance misuse may potentially reduce intoxication-related homicide. Thirdly, the data provide substantial evidence that offenders and victims of intoxication-related homicide have often experienced long-term difficulties and that problematic lifestyles enhance the likelihood of involvement in violent conflict. The over-arching implication of the findings is that tackling a complicated problem such as this requires a multi-pronged, holistic approach involving criminal justice agencies, social agencies, the voluntary sector and communities working together. Measures to reduce the problem include addressing long-term structures facilitating socio-economic deprivation and social exclusion; challenging cultural norms and expectations surrounding drinking, drug-taking, gender and violence; manipulating environmental circumstances surrounding night-time leisure activities; and intervening at the individual level to address substance misuse, chaotic lifestyles and abusive relationships.

The research presented in this paper makes a unique contribution to our understanding of homicide in the UK. This is the first criminological study in this country explicitly examining the homicide-intoxication nexus through a context-specific approach incorporating multiple sources of data. The findings reveal shortcomings in official recording practices for event intoxication and justify raising the profile of intoxication-related homicide. Crucially, the research highlights the importance of examining the immediate and background context surrounding intoxication-related homicide events in order to fully explain the role of alcohol and

drugs. Through this approach, it was possible to overcome limitations of single-level explanations and observe an indirect relationship between intoxication and homicide whereby intoxication interacts with particular individual, situational and socio-cultural level factors to enhance the likelihood of fatal violence.

Table 1: Situational dynamics of intoxication-related homicide events

	Alcohol (n=19)	Alcohol + Drugs (n=18)
Strangers/acquaintances	12 (63%)	16 (89%)
Intimate partner/family	5 (26%)	1 (5%)
Economically motivated	4 (21%)	1 (5%)
Public event	9 (47%)	12 (67%)
Multiple offenders	4 (21%)	7 (39%)

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