

Violence in the North West with Special Reference to Liverpool and Manchester 1850-1914

KEY FINDINGS

How violent was Victorian society? Which forms of violence caused most anxiety? Which forms of violence were tolerated by Victorian society? How far did popular attitudes correspond with those of the police and the judiciary? To what extent were women perpetrators, as well as victims, of violence?

Through pioneering case-studies of Liverpool, Manchester and the North West the initial findings of the project are:

- ◆ Official homicide figures grossly underestimated the actual amount of murder, manslaughter and infanticide in the second half of 19th century.
- ◆ Britain's first rail murder on a railway train, in London in 1864, led to a national panic and fear of travelling on the railways.
- ◆ Male on male violence was not always regarded as illegal if no weapons were used. Lancashire, however, achieved national notoriety for the frequent use of boots and clogs in fights.
- ◆ There was growing public awareness and criticism of police violence to members of the public. In Liverpool 40% of their alleged victims were women.
- ◆ Reported violence by women in Liverpool and Manchester was twice the national average.
- ◆ Alterations to licensing laws could lead to increased dangers for bar staff. Police shifts were heaviest between 9.00pm and 5.00am when alcohol-related violence was heaviest.
- ◆ Unlike recent notorious crimes such as the murders of James Bulger and Sarah Payne, Victorian equivalents failed to ignite widespread social anxieties.

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Unreported Crimes of Violence

Recent research on homicide statistics indicates that national figures have been remarkably constant at around 150 murders/year between 1860-1960. This project aimed to investigate suspicious deaths that were never included in the annual criminal statistics. Police and coroners showed a marked reluctance to investigate closely the sudden death of infants – in Manchester only one person was arrested for infanticide between 1847 and 1859, and in Liverpool a very high number of ‘accidental suffocations’ were returned. However, it has been found that many inquests returned ‘open verdicts’ on infants that had been born alive and then abandoned or strangled. Most dramatically in the Tranmere Baby Farming case of 1879 two defendants were found guilty for the manslaughter of three children but it was estimated that 18 children were unaccounted for.

Open verdicts were also returned in the case of adults who had died under suspicious circumstances, especially those fished out of canals or the River Mersey. In the case of Ann Dodds for example, whose body was recovered from the river, she had two black eyes and her arms, face and legs were covered with bruises. As there were no witnesses to her death the coroner’s jury returned an open verdict. More surprising was the case of a man, last seen walking through Manchester’s Belle Vue Gardens, whose body was found floating face down in the canal. He too was marked with bruises and had been robbed. In one small sample covering just 3 months/year for the 1870s there were over 100 suspicious deaths. (Manchester in the same period averaged 4 murders and 10 manslaughters a year). Only where the authorities were presented with irrefutable evidence did they prosecute.

Violence on the Railway

In July 1864 Thomas Briggs became the nation’s first known railway murder victim when he was battered to death in a 1st class compartment in North London. His death, which coincided with reports of an indecent assault on a train in Hampshire, triggered off a moral panic concerning the dangers of travelling on trains. In the North West newspaper headlines such as ‘Ladies in Danger’ made unaccompanied women especially fearful of travelling in compartments with male passengers. The rail panic differed from earlier scares, such as garotting (street robbery with violence), because in the past violent criminals had looked rough, possessed ‘low brows’ and were perceived as belonging to the criminal class. Murderers, rapists and assailants on trains, on the other hand, looked respectable and could afford to travel in 1st and 2nd class compartments. Rail scares resurfaced in the 1870s and early 1880s, and on each occasion raised important questions relating to crime prevention and personal security. Issues concerning communication cords, corridors, ladies-only compartments and lighting were either discussed or introduced. The actual murderer in the 1864 case was a German named Müller, who escaped to New York and was chased across the Atlantic, extradited and returned to Liverpool. His public execution in London was witnessed by a vast and unruly crowd and this event contributed to the ending of public executions in 1868.

Child Murder

Some Victorian cases offered striking parallels or contrasts with present day murders. In 1855 7-year-old James Fleeson was taken by two 10-year-old boys and knocked to the ground with a

half brick. Whilst unconscious they dragged him to the Leeds-Liverpool canal where they drowned him. All three children lived in the same street and very soon the entire street, except Fleeson's parents, knew what had occurred. It soon became apparent that the neighbourhood were shielding the perpetrators' identities from the police. Once caught they were convicted of manslaughter and imprisoned for one year, during which time they were taught to read and write.

Another case which failed to ignite widespread panic was the sexual assault, murder and dismemberment of Emily Holland of Blackburn by William Fish in 1876. Probably the most notorious of all the cases examined by the project, this murder excited universal disgust and horror. Special trains were laid on from Blackburn and other towns for the trial in Liverpool. Yet Holland's murder failed to set off a panic about paedophiles. This was, in part, due to the quick arrest of Fish, but more importantly it was due to the fact that he was physically grotesque. The monstrosity of the crime had demanded a monstrous culprit, and it would appear that Fish fulfilled this role. His peculiarly shaped head was minutely described and the Liverpool Waxworks had a likeness made of him and exhibited before his execution had even taken place. Of all the Lancastrian murderers during this period, Fish was the only one who failed to generate any support for a petition of reprieve. Once he was executed public excitement rapidly diminished, which suggests that the murder was not seen as emblematic of a wider social malaise.

Police Violence

One theme which is probably one of the hardest to recover historically concerns police violence to members of the public. From the 1860s onwards increasing numbers of complaints and charges against the police were brought before the magistrates. By 1869 one newspaper reported that the 'arbitrary despotism of the Liverpool force is progressing at a most rapid and cheerful rate. Instances of police terrorism are as plentiful as blackberries.' Of the cases collected 54% can be described as unprovoked police assaults in which they have misidentified alleged culprits or were found drunk on duty, 31% arose out of the arresting process, 15% occurred in police custody back at the bridewell. Forty percent of the alleged victims were female and may reflect the fact that, in Liverpool's case, they had been mistaken for prostitutes whom the police felt they could assault with little fear of prosecution. Policing cities at this time was a hazardous business and the beat constables may well have been getting in the first punch because so many of them were injured in the course of their duties.

Male Violence

Men then, as now, were responsible for most cases of interpersonal violence whether in the home to their partners and children, in the street to strangers and neighbours, in the pubs to their drinking companions or at work to their work mates. In many cases male-on-male fights could be condoned. In what were termed 'fair fights' or 'up and down' fights, men would agree to certain rules of combat. These displays of masculinity were common and could occasionally end in death. Magistrates, however, could be sympathetic since bare-knuckle fighting and wrestling were

seen as 'English and manly' forms of combat. Knives, which every Victorian man carried, were perceived as foreign and cowardly, consequently punishments for stabbings could be harsh by the standards of the period. For many urban males suffering underemployment, poverty and appalling social conditions, fighting was a way of gaining status among one's peers; a reputation for hardness was one of the few positive attributes a man could gain. Much male violence was, unsurprisingly, alcohol-related. Saturday night was the most violent time of the week, although closing time on any night of the week in the larger towns and cities brought many cases of arrest. In contrast with policing in some present day conurbations the police shift between 9.00pm and 5.00am was the most heavily manned in the Victorian period. Changes to licensing laws, opening times and landlord responsibility for ejecting drunken customers for example, brought increased risks of attack to bar staff who had to enforce the new regulations.

Violent Women

North-West Women had a fearsome reputation for being more violent than anywhere else in the country. The figures for prosecuted female assaults in Liverpool and Manchester were twice the national average – women often accounted for over 30% of those convicted for common assault. Their victims were usually male partners and policemen, other women neighbours, relatives and moneylenders. It would be wrong to believe that women were invariably defenceless victims of male brutality.

About the Project

This project is one of the 20 sponsored ESRC projects belonging to the Violence Research Programme. A three-month sample from every year between 1850 and 1914 was taken of Liverpool and Manchester newspapers. All crimes of interpersonal violence – from common assault to murder – were selected as well as suspicious deaths that came before the coroners' courts. Further research was conducted using court, police, parliamentary and home office records and other contemporary literary evidence. The North West, and Liverpool and Manchester in particular, was selected because the region epitomised the new industrial society of the nineteenth century. These two cities, being the 2nd and 3rd largest in England, experienced at this time enormous population growth which in turn brought many social problems, not least overcrowding, slum housing, high mortality rates and some of the highest recorded crime statistics in Britain. Liverpool and Manchester were, at various times in the 19th century, considered the two most criminal cities in England.

As crime statistics are considered unreliable in gauging the 'true' or 'real' level of crime this project investigated everyday interpersonal violence with a view to gauging public attitudes towards violence, perceptions of fear, the role of the police in combating violence and the location of offences by neighbourhood. In addition violence within the home, the street, the pub and the workplace are being examined and compared with one another. Further analysis of the evidence is presently being conducted on violent children, the use of firearms and violence within the home.