

# Demographic and Social Characteristics of Murderers and their Victims

A Survey on a Département of the Paris Region in the 1990s

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*Homicides reveal much about the fault lines in the societies in which they are committed. Criminal files do not only document the circumstances of the murders; they also provide much information concerning the biographical characteristics of the murderers, even though they are not very explicit on the victims. Relying on an exhaustive study of the criminal cases that were tried in the French département of the Yvelines during the 1990s, Laurent MUCCHIELLI shows that virtually all the murderers belong to the working classes, that typically they are men burdened with heavy family, school and social handicaps, that the majority are economically inactive and had no married life at the time of the crime. The victims belong to the same social categories, though unlike the murderers, they tend to be females. Certain life histories where individuals have not gained much in the past and have nothing to lose in the present, incite them to value the life of others cheaply as well as their own.*

During the 1990s, the French police and *gendarmerie* recorded an annual average of almost 2,000 cases of homicide, attempted homicide and fatal blows. What is the social context of this phenomenon in our society? The present study originates in the realization that it was difficult to answer such a question in the current state of our knowledge. Research on the subject has been very scarce in France. The earliest studies were linked to the development of research on juvenile delinquency from the 1960s on, mainly around the Vaucresson research centre (e.g. Henry and

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Laurent, 1974, pp. 71-87). In 1976 a thesis by J.-C. Chesnais on *Violent deaths in France since 1826* established the major historical, geographical and social characteristics of homicides. No further data on homicides were produced until J.-M. Bessette published his doctoral thesis in 1984, and much later some articles based on that research (mainly Bessette, 1994), but even then these relied on empirical materials dating back to the 1960s and 1970s. Finally, B. Michel's (1991) thesis on murder provided an interesting review of the legal, historical and social science literature, but by way of empirical evidence relied only on a few dozen French and Swiss newspaper articles that also dated back to the 1970s. In fact, in the French intellectual world, the social scientist must turn mainly to the historical school for extensive and informative work in this area, both in an empirical and a methodological perspective.

In the United States the situation is quite different. In the 1950s, the books published by Albert Morris (1955) and by Marvin Wolfgang (1958), a follower of Thorsten Sellin, soon became "classics" that inspired many studies that were usually based on long-term analyses of series of criminal cases processed by the police. Since then, there have been hundreds of empirical studies that are the staple every year of numerous American journals of sociology and criminology. As the end result, what was initially a mere research topic has become a fully-fledged sub-field of its own, as attested by the launching in 1997 of the journal *Homicide Studies*. A mere journal article like this one cannot begin to inventory that scientific literature. However, some of the major issues can be mentioned here. First, and most detailed, is the search for the factors through which behaviour can be analysed, both from the point of view of the individuals (perpetrators and their victims) and of the urban backgrounds in which they are to be found with particularly high frequency. Second, the analysis of the relationship between perpetrators and victims has been the object of fewer studies, but these are all the more interesting because they usually provide a foundation for attempts to construct typologies of homicides. Third, the investigation of the circumstances and the context (whether situational, material, relational, etc.) of criminal activity is the subject of a smaller number of studies. Finally, the important variability of homicide rates between and within countries is a common issue that elicits continued historical, anthropological and sociological studies.

For this article, we accept the general definition of homicides as acts that result from interactions between perpetrators and victims, in given situations and given historical, social and cultural contexts (Mucchielli, 2002, p. 148). The article addresses one aspect of that complex reality by presenting the demographic and social characteristics of the perpetrators and their victims on the basis of a local sample. The general sociological implications are discussed.

## I. Methodological problems of the survey

From now on, we will use the word “homicide” generically, for the sake of convenience, to include *any intentional blows inflicted by one or several persons on one or several other persons and resulting in death or very severe injury for that or those persons*. By using such material criteria, the notion of “intent to cause death” can be avoided. As will be shown below, intention is very much dependent on the processes of judicial reconstruction, and is moreover often difficult to establish, considering the circumstances in which the crime was committed and the state of extreme drunkenness of many protagonists. The field of study is moreover limited to situations in which persons are confronted in the private sphere, as opposed to intentional deadly force linked to acts of terrorism, situations of military or civil war, or police violence. Last, it should be stressed that the definition leaves for the time being as an open question the boundary between what is legally termed attempted murder and what in social reality is perceived as intentional blows that have caused severe injury without killing.

### 1. *The sample – its relevance and its limitations*

We present the characteristics of the sample used before discussing its representativity<sup>(1)</sup>.

— The survey deals with the cases handled by the Court of Appeal of Versailles. Though this study does not claim to have national scope, this jurisdiction covers the Yvelines *département* which had some 1.3 million residents according to the 1990 census and benefited from a highly contrasted social structure. Of course, in this respect, the profile of the *département* is not typical of the whole country (though it is of the Ile-de-France region), mainly because of the peculiarly high proportion of managers, professionals and higher-level intellectual occupations (IAURIF-INSEE, 1991-1992, vol. 2, p. 89 ff). But this only widens the social gap between those areas with a majority of middle and upper class residents on one side, and the areas inhabited mainly by the working classes or the poorest post-industrial areas such as some towns in the Seine valley, which

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<sup>(1)</sup> In France, during the ten years examined in this study, approximately 15,000 homicides were tried before jury in special sittings [assizes] of 33 Appeal Courts (henceforth referred to as *Cours d'assises*), 30 of which are situated in Metropolitan France and 3 in overseas *départements* (Guadeloupe, Martinique and Réunion). The Court of Versailles, where the survey was conducted, ranks third for the number of cases tried. About 80% of the trials concern one or several perpetrators who have been indicted (for the issue of indictment, see Mucchielli, 2004). The penal categories examined were “murder” (intentionally inflicted death or second degree murder) in two out of three cases, “assassination” (intentional and premeditated murder, or first degree murder) in one out of five cases, and “fatal blows” (manslaughter, causing someone’s death unintentionally) in one out of ten cases; the balance consists of infanticides and parricides.

have been regularly featured in the police blotter and the media during the last two decades, on the other side.

— The events occurred over a period of ten years, between 1987 and 1996.

— We have studied 102 cases, in which a total of 122 defendants were involved. Several perpetrators and accomplices may be involved in the same case. Virtually all the homicides in which co-perpetrators were involved, and the majority of those involving accomplices, were murders.

— The only method that conforms to the principles explained above consists of rejecting any kind of selection among the files. Consequently we have analysed every one of the files that were in the archives for that period.

The population under study is in no way representative of the French population. However, it may be considered highly representative of the penal population with regard to the three demographic indicators (age, sex and nationality) mentioned in the court statistics<sup>(2)</sup>.

## 2. *What the sources tell us and what they do not*

A criminal case tried by a *cour d'assises* consists of a series of documents regarding both substance and form. The main substantive element are the records of the investigation including the inquiries, the interviews of witnesses and interrogations, the psychiatric experts' reports, the re-enactment if one took place, supporting photographs and ballistic experts' reports if any. Sometimes there are also reports established by the medical and social workers from the prison where the accused was detained before the trial. The analytical framework and the coding scheme designed for the processing and input of this evidence underlie the results presented hereafter<sup>(3)</sup>. The length of a file depends on the number of persons involved but also on the complexity of the case and the quality of the investigation and the prosecution.

In a more general way, the critical assessment of the source materials raises two series of questions: what they reveal and what they do not.

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<sup>(2)</sup> There is divergence with regard to nationality, but this is because foreigners are unequally distributed on the French territory and strongly concentrated in the Paris region. According to the 1990 census, 18.8% of the population of Metropolitan France was living in the Ile-de-France region, but the proportion was twice as high (38.3%) for foreigners (IAURIF-INSEE, 1991-1992, vol. 2, p. 70). The data concerning the *département* under study will be given in detail below.

<sup>(3)</sup> Since our approach did not refer to any *a priori* sociological or criminological theory, the analytical framework aims at capturing the totality of the factors involved (concerning the perpetrators and the victims as well as the circumstances of the action). The coding difficulties concerning certain aspects of social life will be explained below. The issue of the psychological categories implemented in the experts' reports was addressed in another article (Mucchielli, 2001b).

The critical assessment of what the sources reveal focuses usually on what is called “reconstruction”. This is “a ‘discourse on’, or reconstruction of, the raw material—whether persons or facts—that [the institution] has contributed so as to make it usable within the framework drawn by the institutional logic and its social function” (Robert, Lambert and Faugeron, 1976, p. 2). The sociologist will not observe facts, but an institutional narrative of facts, a reconstruction by the police and the court. In fact, the final information laid out by the public prosecutor upon completion of any criminal investigation is a two-way narrative—the narrative of the criminal facts, but also that of the criminal investigation itself, in which the more believable elements of the investigation, as well as those that are less so, can be highlighted (Macchi, 2001, pp. 181-182).

Such criticism should not be taken lightly, but it should not entail a rejection for the purpose of a sociological study of behaviour. It is a fact that judicial errors may happen, which constitute precisely an erroneous reconstruction of the facts. On completion of the study, however, it appears that the phenomenon is extremely rare—out of the 102 cases under study, only one seemed partly questionable. Moreover, the defendants seldom question the facts with which they are charged. In two out of every three cases, the perpetrator did not try to conceal the crime and was arrested—or even surrendered—without putting up any resistance (Mucchielli, 2004). In virtually all cases, the perpetrators soon confess their crime, and their defence usually will consist of denying *the intent* to cause death rather than the crime itself.

Finally, even though judicial reconstruction is necessary, the resulting picture of the facts is not an imaginary construct that misrepresents social reality. Except for extremely rare cases in which the magistrate and the investigators responsible for the prosecution charged the wrong person, the elements in the files that are most useful for analysing what happened do not seem to be fundamentally misrepresented or distorted or transformed by the institutional process.

Actually the data sources raise a problem not so much by what they reveal, but rather what they do not. *The main biases are not in the content of the judicial narrative but outside of it—in the topics on which it is silent and those that it ignores.* One of the glaring omissions is evidence on the victim. In their pioneering studies, von Hentig (1948), Morris (1955) and Fattah (1971) had already stressed that point. Homicide files often provide only the first and last name of the victim, the date of birth and the date of death. It is usually through the perpetrator and his human environment (his family, neighbours, colleagues) that pieces of information can be gathered concerning the victim, in virtue of the fact that the perpetrator and his victim knew each other in almost 80% of the cases.

## II. Trying to define the social and demographic profile of perpetrators<sup>(4)</sup>

### I. A male business

From time immemorial, the perpetrators of homicides have been very unequally distributed by sex. In the sample, 85% of the perpetrators are men, 15% are women, while the sex ratio is well balanced in French society (49.4% of the population in the Yvelines *département* were men and 50.6% women, according to the 1990 census). Such distribution is in keeping with the national police and court data. According to police and *gendarmerie* statistics, the share of women among perpetrators of all the homicides, attempted homicides and fatal blows was 15.7% in 1990<sup>(5)</sup>. As for the statistics concerning prosecutions for the period 1986-1990, they show a slightly higher ratio—87% of men and 13% of women (Laroche, 1994, p. 13)<sup>(6)</sup>. The distribution would be even more unequal if the cases of infanticide were excluded<sup>(7)</sup>.

Do women and men commit the same crimes? The fact that there are so many more men in the sample makes it difficult to interpret some of the relations presented in Table 1. However, it appears that men are more often involved in murders (as opposed to attempted murders and fatal blows) committed in the street, as a result of a poorly motivated conflict (originating in circumstances of the moment, not long brewed), between a perpetrator and a victim who did not know one another. To the extent that small numbers allow any conclusion, it may be broadly assumed that women commit crimes of a rather different type. In addition to infanticide, women are more often involved than men in crimes against a spouse, in the marital home, with a view to punishing him (for his treacherousness, his cowardice, desertion, etc.).

The contrast between crimes committed by men and by women can thus be accounted for, in a first analysis, by different modes of interaction and life style (public places, bars, night life are more characteristic of

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<sup>(4)</sup> The statistical analyses presented in this text are mostly cross-tabulations. A factor analysis was attempted but proved not to be helpful, probably because of small numbers ( $n=122$ ) and the social homogeneity of the survey population.

<sup>(5)</sup> The year 1990, which is right in the middle of the period under study, will frequently be used for comparisons.

<sup>(6)</sup> Similar proportions are observed in other western countries. In Switzerland, in the canton of Zurich (where the proportion of homicides is the highest in the country), men represented also 87% of the murderers in the years 1976-1988 (Massonnet, Wagner and Kuhn, 1990, p. 82). The proportion is identical in Canada for the 1961-1983 period (Silverman and Kennedy, 1987, p. 286).

<sup>(7)</sup> It should be noted, however, that infanticide is not as typically a women's crime as is commonly believed. In the sample studied here, there are as many men as women who have killed their newborn child. Here again, this finding is relatively close to national data. In 1990, the police and *gendarmerie* recorded 29 infanticides committed by women over the French territory, as against 20 committed by men.

TABLE 1. – MAIN VARIABLES DIFFERENTIATING THE PERPETRATORS OF HOMICIDE BY SEX

Variable	Modality	Proportion (in %)			Significance (1)
		Men	Women	Total	
Activity	Alternately in and out of work	58	11	51	**
Type of residence	Marital	29	56	33	*
Broken family origin	Yes	25	59	30	**
Criminal record	No record nor bad reputation	42	67	46	*
Category of crime	Murder	65	39	62	*
	Infanticide	5	28	8	***
Relation to victim	Did not know each other	28	6	25	*
	Family relationship	10	28	12	*
	Marriage or stable union	16	39	20	*
Scene of the crime	Marital home	16	72	24	***
	In the street	43	11	38	*
Apparent motive : to punish	Yes	5	25	8	**
Duration of conflict with the victim	None	37	6	33	**
	Over 5 years	5	28	8	***
Who knew about the conflict	No third person knew	54	28	50	*

(1) Significance level based on chi-square test: \* =10% level; \*\* = 5% level; \*\*\* = 1% level.  
Source: Author's survey on the homicides committed in the Yvelines *département* from 1987 to 1996.

men), and this is more broadly applicable to all physical assaults other than sexual ones (Pottier, Robert and Zauberman, 2002, p. 56). When a crime is committed not in some public place but within the family circle, the share of women perpetrators increases markedly, though not enough to reach parity with men. Beyond differences in behaviour and life style, the contrast also reflects social stereotypes and gender identities that encourage men's resort to physical violence. And the fact that, in criminal matters, the distribution of perpetrators by sex has not evolved over time—despite the deep transformation in the social status of both sexes in western societies—bears testimony to the strength of the stereotypes and the identities in question.

## 2. *A matter for adults*

Court statistics tabulate the persons who were sentenced for intentional homicide and fatal blows by age groups. In 1990, for the whole of France, out of a total of 911 persons sentenced, none were aged under 13, 16 (or less than 2%) were aged 13 to 16, and 35 (less than 4%) were aged 16 to 18. Those who were over 18 but still very young were also very few (6.5% in the 18-20 age group). Approximately two-thirds of the condemned were between 20 and 40 years old.

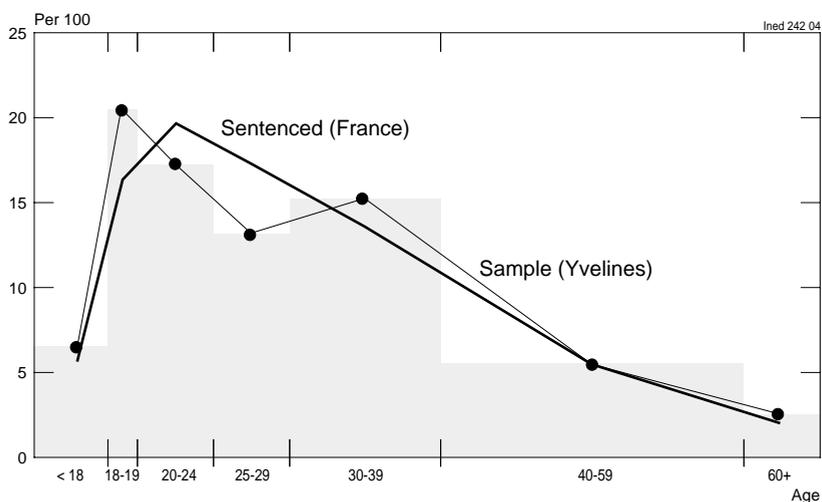


Figure 1.— Age distribution of all the persons who were sentenced for homicide in France in 1990 and in the survey population

Note: The surfaces are proportional to the number of persons in the age group.  
Sources: National court statistics and author's survey on homicides committed in the Yvelines *département* from 1987 to 1996.

The age structure of the population studied in the Yvelines is similar to that of all the persons sentenced for homicide at the national level (Figure 1). In France, the youngest perpetrator sentenced in 1990 was 15 years old at the time of the crime, and the oldest one was 62. Those, however, are exceptional cases. The age distribution is similar to that observed in other European countries, for example Switzerland (Massonnet, Wagner and Kuhn, 1990, p. 88) or the Netherlands (Smit, Bijleveld and Van der Zee, 2001, pp. 304-305). Homicides committed by young people under age appear to be extremely rare; in the sample, crimes are committed by men aged 18 to 50 in almost nine cases out of ten, and by men aged 18 to 30 in almost four cases out of ten.

Compared with the overall population, however, the perpetrators of homicides are rather young. Comparing them to the age distribution of the total population of the *département* in the 1990 census indicates that the criminals are definitely more numerous below age 35, and less over that age. The 20-24 and 30-34 age groups are markedly over-represented in the sample. Homicide is thus definitely a matter for young adults.

### 3. *Apparent over-representation of foreigners*

Table 2 shows that 23% of the perpetrators of homicides are foreigners. On this point, it is difficult to evaluate with accuracy how representative the population under study is, compared with national court data. In 1985, foreigners represented 26.6% of the persons implicated by the police for homicide or attempted homicide, as against 16.6% ten years later. Thus, the 23% figure fits within the range. It also represents a proportion about twice as large as the share of the foreign population in the *département* (10.2%, according to the 1990 census)<sup>(8)</sup>. How should such over-representation be interpreted? The effect of age should be noted first. As shown in Table 3, foreigners in the population under study are over-represented in the 15-24 age group (36%, as against 19% of the total number of foreigners in the *département*).

TABLE 2.— PERSONS SENTENCED FOR HOMICIDE,  
BY NATIONALITY

Nationality	Numbers	Distribution (in %)
French	94	77
Foreign	28	23
Total	122	100

*Source:* Author's survey on the homicides committed in the Yvelines *département* from 1987 to 1996.

<sup>(8)</sup> Among the foreigners involved, nationals of North African countries and Portugal are most numerous; these are also the nationalities most frequently encountered in the *département*.

TABLE 3.— AGE DISTRIBUTION OF FRENCH AND FOREIGN NATIONALS  
IN THE YVELINES DÉPARTEMENT ACCORDING TO THE 1990 CENSUS,  
AND IN THE STUDY POPULATION

	Population of the <i>département</i>				Perpetrators of homicides			
	French		Foreigners		French		Foreigners	
	Numbers	%	Numbers	%	Numbers	%	Numbers	%
15-24	182,934	19.8	19,046	19.0	29	30.9	10	35.7
25-39	275,806	29.9	35,089	34.9	43	45.7	10	35.7
40-59	299,920	32.5	38,665	38.5	20	21.3	7	25.0
60+	164,884	17.8	7,653	7.6	2	2.1	1	3.6
Total	923,544	100.0	100,453	100.0	94	100.0	28	100.0

*Sources:* INSEE, for the 1990 census, and author's survey on homicides committed in the Yvelines *département* from 1987 to 1996.

Foreigners in the population under study are also over-represented among employed and unemployed blue-collar workers in this post-industrial area in the southwest of the Paris region. One third of the foreigners sentenced for homicide are blue-collar workers (as against 12% of the French), and 21% are unemployed (as against under 10% of the French). These are very large differences (a ratio of 1 to 3 for the former and of 1 to 2 for the latter). The population in question is subjected to more precarious prospects<sup>(9)</sup>, and is largely concentrated in the socially supported housing schemes situated close to the former industrial sites<sup>(10)</sup>.

Finally, the statistical analysis shows that (i) foreigners do not commit racist crimes (though they are sometimes victims thereof), and (ii) in similar situations of conflict, foreigners react under the influence of panic more often than French nationals. The latter trait may reflect a greater vulnerability in every respect, not only on economic but also on legal, relational and emotional levels. Quite often, these persons are living in conditions that are characterized by great uncertainty. At this stage, however, these considerations are no more than hypotheses, although they are corroborated by other analyses on the delinquency of foreigners (Mucchielli, 2003).

#### 4. Working-class families

Among the 100 perpetrators of homicides whose social background is known, 55 had fathers who were blue-collar workers, 17 who were white-collar workers, 9 who were self-employed in crafts or trade, and one who was economically inactive (Table 4). Those fathers in intermediate-

<sup>(9)</sup> The analysis of the type of housing confirms that foreigners are living under markedly more precarious conditions.

<sup>(10)</sup> However, foreign perpetrators of homicides are slightly less often in the situation of "severe exclusion" that characterizes some of the French nationals in the sample—a profile that is usually identified by frequent breaks in their active life, by especially disrupted family histories, by poor physical and mental health, and in some instances by severe alcoholism.

level occupations were policemen, foremen or small sales representatives, with levels of income characteristic of the upper grades of the working classes.

TABLE 4.—SOCIAL ORIGIN OF THE PERPETRATORS OF HOMICIDES

Socio-occupational categories (SOCs) of the fathers	Numbers	Distribution (in %)	
		Total	SOC known
Farmers	8	6.6	8.0
Self-employed: business, trade and crafts	10	8.2	10.0
<i>Including craftsmen and tradesmen</i>	9	7.4	9.0
Managers, professionals and higher-level intellectual occupations	5	4.1	5.0
Intermediate-level occupations	4	3.3	4.0
White-collar workers	17	13.9	17.0
Blue-collar workers	55	45.1	55.0
Economically inactive	1	0.8	1.0
Known	100	82.0	100.0
Unknown	22	18.0	
Total	122	100.0	

*Source:* Author's survey on the homicides committed in the Yvelines *département* from 1987 to 1996.

In 18% of cases, it is impossible to know the father's occupation with any certainty. This is the case mostly when the parents are unknown or dead and the children were fostered out by the DDASS (*Direction départementale de l'action sanitaire et sociale*)<sup>(11)</sup> from an early age, usually after they were abandoned. In most cases, however, the incidental mention of an occupation, of the standard of living or the housing conditions in a court document, a hearing or a police report makes it possible to infer that the family also belongs to the working classes. Reading the whole of the file may even suggest that the father was usually an agricultural labourer or a small craftsman<sup>(12)</sup>.

Taken together, those results thus stand out sharply—about four out of five individuals in the sample belong to the working classes. Inasmuch as they have themselves largely reproduced that general social position, as shown below, it can be stated that one characteristic of the social history of the families of homicide perpetrators is the reproduction of a lower social position. It could also be termed “inherited poverty” (Chambaz and Herpin, 1995, p. 124).

<sup>(11)</sup> The DDASS assists residents who experience social difficulties at the level of the *départements*.

<sup>(12)</sup> In two cases, however, we assume that the perpetrators were wealthy, that they were “in business”, as mentioned in accounts given by some of the witnesses, which in this context apparently means that they had partly illegal trading activities.

### **5. *Leaving school – a wrong start in social life***

Over two out of every three perpetrators of homicides (68%) have no diploma, which means that they were in failure mode when they left the educational system. Barely one out of five (18%) have reached only the CAP (*Certificat d’Aptitude Professionnelle*)<sup>(13)</sup> level. Fewer than 7% have the *baccalauréat* or a higher education diploma and had therefore performed in the educational system according to the norm promoted by the institution. Thus it appears that by far the most common profile is that of a person who took a very “wrong start” in social life, since they started with a failure at school. Hence the major difficulties they experience in economic integration.

### **6. *Over-representation of economically inactive persons and of blue- and white-collar workers***

The data from the 1990 census in the Yvelines may be compared with the sample only in the case of the employed, and not for persons out of the labour force (who are the majority in the sample). The comparison is thus quite limited. As shown in Table 5, however, it underscores the fact that blue- and white-collar workers are over-represented (as apparently is the “self-employed: crafts, trade, business” category, but only because of the number of craftsmen and petty tradesmen).

Considering their level of schooling and the period studied (the years 1987-1996), which was characterized by a very high rate of unemployment particularly among blue-collar workers, it comes as no surprise that only 39% of the perpetrators of homicides had a job and were economically active. However, it is more surprising that the rest are much less often unemployed (a bare 10% of all perpetrators) than simply economically inactive (about four cases out of ten). After examining the files, it appears moreover that among the economically inactive a high proportion of persons do not have a permanent home (over 1 out of every 3 cases); the proportion would probably be twice as high if some had not been able to rely on family solidarity<sup>(14)</sup>. The other situations are comparatively unimportant (two retired persons, six students, a few housewives and one young man drafted in military service).

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<sup>(13)</sup> A lower-level vocational training certificate obtained in four years.

<sup>(14)</sup> Though the information is not decisive in itself, we note the data available concerning the perpetrators’ housing. Only 42.5% have a personal home (mostly marital), 25% live with their parents, 15% live with a third party and 16.5% live in temporary conditions (shelters, hotels, or furnished rooms, when they are not simply homeless, as is the case for 8% of the individuals in our sample).

TABLE 5.—SOCIO-OCCUPATIONAL CATEGORIES OF THE POPULATION OF THE YVELINES DÉPARTEMENT IN 1990 AND OF THE PERPETRATORS OF HOMICIDES

Socio-occupational categories	Population of the <i>département</i>		Perpetrators of homicides			
	Numbers	%	Economically active		Total	
			Numbers	%	Numbers	%
Farmers	2,388	0.4	0	0.0	0	0.0
Self-employed: business, trade and crafts	35,112	5.6	6	12.5	6	4.9
Managers, professionals and higher-level intellectual occupations	132,348	21.2	2	4.2	2	1.6
Intermediate-level occupations	150,044	24.0	2	4.2	2	1.6
White-collar workers	177,506	28.4	18	37.5	18	14.8
Blue-collar workers	127,844	20.4	20	41.6	20	16.4
Total	625,242	100.0	48	100.0		
	Total economically inactive				72	59.0
	<i>Including:</i>					
	<i>Unemployed</i>				15	12.3
	<i>Secondary school or university students, national service</i>				7	5.7
	<i>Retired</i>				2	1.6
	<i>Other inactive</i>				48	39.4
	Unknown				2	1.6
	Total sample				122	100.0

*Sources:* INSEE, for the 1990 census, and author's survey on homicides committed in the Yvelines *département* from 1987 to 1996.

Among the 48 perpetrators of homicides who are in the labour force, the vast majority belong to the working classes and to the category of lowest wages<sup>(15)</sup>. Blue- and white-collar workers account for almost four fifths of the total number (79%). This includes individuals with a CAP or a *baccalauréat*, as well as some with no diploma. There are also six self-employed craftsmen, tradesmen or businessmen, who were actually all in small enterprises (two restaurant owners, one fruit and vegetables market vendor, one electrician, one owner of a small scrap yard, and one scrap dealer). These occupations require hardly any qualification and are not very lucrative. At the other extreme, only one administrative manager and one of the restaurant owners (who was in fact running a medium-sized business) obviously belong to a higher social stratum. (To them we should perhaps add a retired businessman.) Finally, the group includes two individuals with middle-level occupations—a teacher in a secondary school and a computer technician in a bank, and perhaps the manager of a small supermarket. On the whole, about 90% of the perpetrators of homicides who are employed belong to the working classes, with many of them at the

<sup>(15)</sup> Although the files were examined systematically, an accurate estimate of the income of the persons involved is available in only half of the cases. As for the others, we infer their income level from their type of occupation.

lowest salary levels. And if those who are economically inactive are included, the proportion exceeds 95%.

Let us take another look at the opposition between the economically active and the economically inactive. Does this opposition make sense, when we know that inactivity is often temporary, and that in fact many young men alternate employment and inactivity? The computations make two elements clear.

— The economic inactivity of the perpetrators of homicide is strongly related to the fact of having never been married, of living under very precarious housing conditions, of being in bad physical health (all 7 drug addicts in the sample were economically inactive), of having hostile relations with the victim independently of marital or family connections between them, and moreover of having used a blade weapon for the crime.

— The perpetrators of homicide who are economically active show to some extent opposite characteristics — they usually lived married in the family home at the time of the crime and the victim is usually their spouse; they are usually in good physical health (few of them are alcoholics, and none drug addicts), they have no criminal record or bad reputation, they are in the middle of the age range (25 to 49) and finally, they used firearms in a majority of cases.

Thus, it appears that the “economic activity” variable is of no trivial importance. Moreover, it is closely linked to marital status and general health.

## **7. *Work history***

The analysis of activity at the time of the crime provides only a snapshot. Since we are interested in the biographical itinerary, we tried to collect as much information as possible on the work history of the individuals. This brought out several facts. First, only about 20% of those who are economically active have always been employed. In contrast, one fourth of those who are economically inactive are young people who had never worked. Between the two, about half of the economically inactive are individuals whose relation to employment was characterized by precariousness, with employment and unemployment alternating throughout their lives. This significant central group can be divided into two categories. The first one, in which one individual out of six can be included, is made up of those who did work at one time, but have given up on an active life after they experienced a variety of problems — divorce, illness, accident, dismissal, start of chronic alcoholism or hard drug addiction, prison. Virtually all those in the sample who are homeless or live in very bad housing conditions are to be found in this group. The second and larger category includes about one individual out of four and consists of persons

who are in and out of work by turns<sup>(16)</sup>. Some of these young men have steady occupations; others remain without a steady occupation for long periods. We suspect an important proportion of them have undeclared or criminal activities, but this can only be ascertained when the police record mentions it. From a psycho-sociological point of view, these are persons whose attitude seems to indicate that the commitment to an honest occupation is not a major element in their lives. In that respect, they are not very different from the last category, which includes those who have never worked. These are again mostly young men from the working classes, who probably draw, like the previous category, some income from undeclared or criminal activities.

### **III. The main family characteristics of the perpetrators**

On the topic of life circumstances during childhood and family relations, the problems of ordering and coding the data must be emphasized from the start. Family histories are often complex, or even unstable. Again, the data given below will not be presented in the form of arguments, and our main focus will be on the comments.

#### ***1. Life circumstances during childhood and family relations***

Table 6 shows first that, contrary to a common prejudice that incriminates the one-parent family and divorce in the genesis of delinquency (in the face of repeated lack of confirmation by research, see Mucchielli, 2001a), the circumstances during childhood do not appear to be a determining factor. In almost two cases out of three, the murderers were raised for most of their childhood by a parental couple, either the initial or a re-composed one (the latter situation representing a clear minority in the sample). Conversely, the instances where a perpetrator was raised by a single parent almost all the time (during the whole of his/her childhood) are very rare (under 5% of the cases). This reminds us that a one-parent family at a given time will often be re-composed later.

We note the frequency, seldom mentioned in the specialized scientific literature, of situations where the individuals were not raised by either parent, or had only distant and occasional contacts with their parents. One characteristic of the population under study is the large proportion of par-

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<sup>(16)</sup> This category does not include individuals who were on the dole, whose statements show that they were actually looking for work and that they had practically always worked throughout their life.

ticularly unstructured family situations. In close to 20% of cases, the perpetrators were raised for several years by a third party (their grandparents, for example), by foster families selected by the DDASS, or by educators in homes for the youth. This is an important variable because statistical analysis makes it possible to identify certain consequences of the family histories on the psychological profile of the perpetrators. Emotional deprivation, immaturity and a tendency toward depression are strongly linked to the fact of not having been raised by their parents. The analysis also shows that the perpetrators of homicide who experienced that type of childhood are more likely to have committed the crime after a one-to-one fight for a reason resulting from immediate circumstances (as opposed to a bitter, long-standing conflict). In total, the family factor constitutes a personal handicap and a considerable social risk.

TABLE 6.— LIFE CIRCUMSTANCES OF HOMICIDE PERPETRATORS DURING CHILDHOOD

The perpetrator was raised mainly by:	Numbers	Distribution (in %)
Both parents <sup>(a)</sup>	79	64.7
A single parent	5	4.1
Other relatives	3	2.5
A foster family or home selected by the DDASS	1	0.8
Several situations in succession	34	27.9
<i>Involving the DDASS at least once</i>	19	15.6
Total	122	100.0

<sup>(a)</sup> These may be either biological or adoptive parents; it may be either one stable parental couple throughout childhood, or several successive parental couples (usually two, after one parent has set up home with or remarried someone else). In the latter case, we selected only the cases of “rapid” family re-composition (within two years) during the perpetrator’s childhood. On the contrary, when the period in a one-parent family has been very long, the perpetrator is considered to have been raised by “a single parent”, or to have been through “several situations in succession”.

Source: Author’s survey on homicides committed in the Yvelines *département* from 1987 to 1996.

Confirming another firmly established fact (Mucchielli, 2001b), *family conflict* is one more factor that strongly contributes to making individuals vulnerable, even though it is usually hidden behind apparently stable forms of family relationships. The nature of the perpetrators’ relations with their parents is tentatively delineated below, as far as the information collected made it possible. In 18% of cases, it proved impossible. And even in the other cases, the data presented in Table 7 are only rough approximations that are probably well below the real figures. Violence within the family is typically under-reported (and is even sometimes not perceived as such by the victims). Nevertheless, certain tendencies are clearly noticeable. In cases where we know the nature of the relations between parents and children, they are usually conflictual, and in more than one case out of two (34 out of 59), the conflict involved physical violence. In at least 18 cases the father (or stepfather) used violence against the mother, and also in at least 18 cases, he used violence against the children; in at least 4 cases the mother (or stepmother) used violence against the children, with those situations sometimes occurring concurrently.

TABLE 7.— PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS IN THE FAMILY OF ORIGIN OF HOMICIDE PERPETRATORS

Family relationship	Numbers	Distribution (in %)
Apparently peaceful relationship <sup>(a)</sup>	41	33.6
Including pathological systems <sup>(b)</sup>	4	3.3
Relation of conflict <sup>(c)</sup> with physical violence	34	27.9
Relation of conflict with no physical violence	25	20.5
Not specified <sup>(d)</sup>	22	18.0
Total	122	100.0

<sup>(a)</sup> Based on the individuals' statements. It should be noted, however, that several persons who told the psychiatry expert that they had "normal" relations with their families also declared that they had had a "strict" or "stern" education, which may mean that their parents were emotionally cold or frequently punished them. Note too that peaceful relations may be accompanied by various types of psychological trauma (e.g. as a result of a death early in life), as suggested by several cases of depression.

<sup>(b)</sup> On the basis of psychiatric and/or psycho-medical experts' reports, we believe that there exists a system of pathological relations among certain families. The figure on this line is therefore likely to be an underestimate.

<sup>(c)</sup> Only those relations that lasted throughout the childhood were considered to be conflictual. This excludes the challenges to parental authority and the disagreements between parents and children occurring only during the "crisis of adolescence".

<sup>(d)</sup> Including cases of children who were placed in foster homes or families by the DDASS.

Source: Author's survey on homicides committed in the Yvelines *département* from 1987 to 1996.

We attempted to measure the impact of those conflictual relationships on the other variables. It can be established that being raised in a conflict-ridden family atmosphere, apparently free from physical violence, is on the one hand very often linked with a highly emotional psychological profile, and on the other hand quite often associated with economic inactivity and occupational instability. Moreover, being raised in a conflict-ridden family atmosphere that involves physical violence is very frequently linked to a psychological profile characterized by immaturity, emotional deficiency and, possibly, psychotic tendencies (the three cases recorded in this category are also the only three in the sample). This element is also present in the history of the only three cases where the conflict between the perpetrator and the victim had lasted for more than 10 years, as though having undergone violence made a conflict-ridden, long-term relationship — usually in married life or married-like situations — tolerable until the day when it resulted in an act that was more violent than usual.

## 2. Siblings

Concerning siblings, the first observation is that a very high proportion of perpetrators of homicide had lived in large families (22% had three or four brothers and sisters), and above all very large ones (43% had at least five brothers and sisters)<sup>(17)</sup>. This is a characteristic of working-class and foreign families. The second observation concerns a peculiar trait of

<sup>(17)</sup> Or half-brothers and half-sisters when they were raised together.

the children who were raised alone, not so much in that they represent a sizable proportion of the sample (16%), but because of their family history. Statistical analysis indicates that the fact of having been an only child is strongly related not only to family instability (which is logical enough), but also to the lack of a family, as suggested by the fact that half the only children were placed by the DDASS and that, more generally, over two thirds were raised by several persons or institutions. This second finding is undoubtedly the most important. Such isolation early in life appears to constitute an indicator of great vulnerability in the area of family relationships in the social context studied here. This variable is also significant in crimes related to situations of marital or marital-like conflict.

### 3. *Marital history*

We now leave the childhood of individuals for their emotional life as adults. Here too, we should be careful. The files mention only those couple relationships that resulted in the sharing of a common residence. Unless specified otherwise, “living as a couple” refers to life together in a home that is independent from that of the parents.

Here, the sample can be roughly divided into two groups. On one side, half the perpetrators are “solitaries”, in that they have never lived in a couple (32%), are separated or divorced with no children (9%) or have children that they never see (9%). On the other side, we find couples with children who live in their home (25%) or away from home (3%), then childless couples (11.5%) or separated or divorced individuals who still see their children (10.5%). If the latter category were to be added to the first group, one might say that a clear majority (about 60%) of the individuals in the sample had no married life at the time of the crime<sup>(18)</sup>.

## IV. Some data concerning the social and demographic profile of the victims

### 1. *Sex of the victims*

Whereas women represent only 15% of the crime perpetrators in the sample, they constitute 34% of the victims (Table 8). There lies the main difference between perpetrators and victims. The proportion is similar to the results of earlier research conducted in France (Bessette, 1994, p. 162) and abroad (e.g. in Canada: Wilson and Daly, 1996, pp. 49-50)<sup>(19)</sup>. Women are also observed to fall victim to murders and attempted murders more

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<sup>(18)</sup> This proportion is the same as that observed for the total prison population (Cassan and Mary-Portas, 2002).

often than to fatal blows. This is related to the fact that they are very seldom involved in individual or collective fights. They are more often victims (and also perpetrators, but in lower proportions) of marital crime rather than of other types of homicide. This is an important topic on which further studies are required.

TABLE 8.—SEX OF THE VICTIMS

	Men	Women	Newborn children	Total	Distribution (in %)
Murders	38	20	0	58	56.9
Attempted murders	7	8	0	15	14.7
Infanticides	3	3	4	10	9.8
Fatal blows	15	4	0	19	18.6
Total	63	35	4	102	100.0
<i>Total in %</i>	<i>61.8</i>	<i>34.3</i>	<i>3.9</i>	<i>100.0</i>	

*Source:* Author's survey on homicides committed in the Yvelines *département* from 1987 to 1996.

The age distribution of the victims corresponds roughly to that of the perpetrators, though there are fewer minors and more individuals aged over 50 among the victims. Close to 85% of the victims are aged between 20 and 50.

Finally, a look at the occupation of the victims confirms the observation of a close social proximity of perpetrators and victims (Table 9). The economically inactive and the blue- and white-collar workers are clearly over-represented once again (though there are more white-collar than blue-collar workers as a result of the large proportion of women among the victims). The proportion of victims who belong to higher social strata is slightly higher, but the number is too low (4 cases) to formulate a hypothesis at this stage of the research.

TABLE 9.—SOCIO-OCCUPATIONAL CATEGORY OF THE VICTIMS

Socio-occupational categories	Numbers	Distribution (in %)
Farmers	0	0,0
Self-employed: business, trade and crafts	10	10.9
Managers, professionals and higher-level intellectual occupations	4	4.3
Intermediate-level occupations	1	1.1
White-collar workers	22	23.9
Blue-collar workers	7	7.6
Economically inactive	39	42.4
Unknown	9	9.8
Total	92	100.0

*Source:* Author's survey on homicides committed in the Yvelines *département* from 1987 to 1996.

(19) For a review of the research published in English, see the "Femicide" special issue in *Homicide Studies* (1998, n° 4).

## 2. *French and foreign nationals: intra- and inter-racial crimes*

In this respect too, the profile of the victims is not very different from that of the perpetrators, as we encounter a similar over-representation of foreign nationals (18% of the victims)<sup>(20)</sup>. The issue of the respective share of crimes among persons of different or of the same race may be raised at this point, since it is commonly raised in other countries<sup>(21)</sup>. For example, by cross-tabulating the nationalities of perpetrators and victims with the nature of the perpetrator-victim relationship, a study conducted in Switzerland has shown that in most cases, both nationals and foreigners commit murders in their own group (Massonnet, Wagner and Kuhn, 1990, p. 91). This confirms a classic finding in the United States — derived among others by Garfinkel (1949), and later confirmed by Wolfgang (1958, pp. 223-224) —, that young African-Americans, who are the main perpetrators as well as the main victims, mostly commit murders among themselves<sup>(22)</sup>.

TABLE 10. — NATIONALITY OF THE VICTIMS

	French	Foreign	Unknown	Total	% of foreign nationals
Murders	38	14	6	58	24.1
Attempted murders	13	2	0	15	13.3
Infanticides	8	0	2	10	0.0
Fatal blows	15	2	2	19	10.5
Total	74	18	10	102	17.6

*Source:* Author's survey on homicides committed in the Yvelines *département* from 1987 to 1996.

How about France? On close re-examination of the 58 cases of murder and the 75 perpetrators involved, it appears that the intra-racial character is also observed in France. Out of the 75 perpetrators, 51 are of French origin, and 24 are either foreign nationals or French nationals of foreign origin. Among the murderers of French origin, 39 (or 76%) had murdered other persons of French origin, and among the 24 foreigners or French nationals of foreign origin, 20 (or 83%) had murdered other foreigners or French nationals of foreign origin. In total, only in one fifth of cases (16 out of 75) were French nationals of French origin involved with foreigners or French nationals of foreign origin. The qualitative analysis of these files

<sup>(20)</sup> The proportion of foreign perpetrators was 23%, but the percentage of foreign victims is underestimated because of lack of information on nationality in 10% of cases.

<sup>(21)</sup> We resort to the usual terms in the scientific literature in English, which are based on individuals' skin colour and geographic origins. The terminology seems necessary to analyse events that could not be fully understood in the context of high levels of immigration if the mere legal divide between French and foreign nationals were used. Moreover, those terms are common among the population under study, so that by refusing to use them, we would miss an opportunity to understand a very specific type of murder: racist murder.

<sup>(22)</sup> For a recent review of the research conducted on the other side of the Atlantic, see Parker and McCall (1999).

brings out a few specific characteristics that lead to certain hypotheses, even though the reasoning is based on a very small number of cases. Among the four inter-racial murders in which the victim was of French origin, one was a case of marital conflict, one was a group fight and two were settling a score between delinquents. The twelve inter-racial murders in which the victim was a foreign national or a French national of foreign origin also include a few fights and marital crimes; they include no settling a score, but three crimes with a strong racist connotation.

In fact, at this level of generalization, the victims' profile proves to have only one special characteristic if compared to that of perpetrators — there are more women involved. In terms of age, occupation and nationality, the perpetrators and the victims form a homogenous population. This comes as no surprise, considering the weight of marital and family crimes, the fact that perpetrators and victims live geographically very close to one another, and the high degree of concentration of the poor in certain urban areas.

## V. Overview and discussion

Let us first revisit the issue of the representativity of the sample under study. It is quite high with respect to the three demographic criteria available in the national court statistics (the age, sex and nationality of the convicted individuals). One problem, however, remains unresolved: that of the homicides which have eluded all judicial proceedings. This includes first the unknown crimes committed by perpetrators who concealed the victims' bodies so that they could not be found or identified. It also includes the cases of identified victims whose murderer remains unknown. In a total of 7,536 criminal cases prosecuted in France from 1986 to 1990, the perpetrator was unknown in 20% of cases (with the proportion rising exceptionally to 52.5% in the jurisdiction of the Court of Appeal of Bastia, in Corsica) (Laroche, 1994, p. 12). Finally, cases are also included where the perpetrator was identified but was not indicted as a criminal. This may occur because penal law does not define the act as a crime, as in the case of deadly force used by a policeman while placing a person under arrest, and not acting in self-defence; such cases are judged by the lower courts, and are treated as offences rather than crimes. Another possibility is that the perpetrator dies in the course of the proceedings and the trial is immediately halted. Except for these qualifications, the sample is sufficiently representative of the country to allow some general considerations.

### ***1. Homicide and the lack of economic resources***

It may seem surprising that 95% of the murders under study were perpetrated by persons belonging to the working classes, or even to the most underprivileged social strata. And yet Wolfgang (1958, pp. 36-39) had found the same proportion, almost half a century ago, in a study of 620 homicide cases solved by the Philadelphia police. Twenty years later, Green and Wakefield (1979, p. 175) estimated that the proportion was even higher in New York City, on the basis of the "murder" chronicle of the *New York Times* from 1955 to 1975. Many other local American studies could be cited that mention proportions of 95% or more. The relation between intentional deadly violence, the individuals' belonging to the working classes and a low level of economic resources is therefore particularly strong. The geographical concentration of intentional deadly violence is also a well-established fact<sup>(23)</sup>. The interpretation of such observations, however, has sparked off a debate in the United States. Blau and Blau (1982) and Messner (1982) have defended Merton's thesis that links homicides to inequality and the accumulated frustration festering in the ghettos of large cities (cf. also Bailey, 1984). After examining several series of homogenous data running over several decades, however, Williams (1984) contended that the explanation that could best be validated empirically was that pertaining to poverty in an absolute sense, i.e. the lack of economic resources. At the end of the decade, Land, McCall and Cohen (1990, pp. 951-955) showed that some clear results emerged from all these studies and that they might be considered established research findings. Three of them are relevant here:

- The most significant statistical relation is between homicides and the lack of economic resources;

- Urban concentration is systematically related to homicide;

- Positive, though less significant relations exist between homicide rates and unemployment rates on the one hand, and the percentage of young people aged 16 to 30 in the total population on the other hand.

Though the debate is not quite settled in American statistical criminology<sup>(24)</sup>, the relation between homicides and the lack of economic resources remains one of the most solid results of research. The puzzle remains as to why, as a rule, the poor kill so frequently, while the rich

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<sup>(23)</sup> In the *département* under study, the two communes where the number of murders was highest (13 cases out of 102) are located in a decaying industrial area characterized by very high rates of unemployment and poverty, as well as by strong concentrations of a foreign or foreign-born population severely affected by unemployment and poverty. This confirms many studies conducted in the United States (Sampson, 1985; Williams and Flewelling, 1988; Patterson, 1991; Wilson, 1987; Sampson and Wilson, 1995). In most of the other communes, it would be necessary to refine the survey at the neighbourhood level, but we could not do so. The size of the population under study is too small to measure the phenomenon. But here too, the American example is quite impressive. For instance, in Chicago during the 1970s and 1980s, homicide rates could vary from 1 to 200 between neighbourhoods, and the highest rates were found in certain ghettos (Block, 1986).

seem not to. Wolfgang thought that, among the upper classes, homicide was quite clearly different from what it was among the working classes—much more often linked to mental pathology or rational calculation (premeditation) on the perpetrator's part. This has been generally confirmed by subsequent studies, however scarce. The best known was based on a selection of 119 criminal cases involving a perpetrator who belonged to the upper or middle classes, and featured specific homicide scenarios. Green and Wakefield (1979, p. 175 ff.) believed that about one quarter of the murderers who belonged to the upper classes committed murder for financial reasons (insurance, property, inheritance); this is a higher proportion than the murders related to theft among the poor. Another part of the perpetrators seemed to have acted because they were severely depressed (most of them in fact later committed suicide or attempted to). Conversely, the most important type of homicide among the poor, i.e. quarrels that unexpectedly break out between young men and then get out of hand, usually with drinking as a factor that relaxes inhibitions, is virtually nonexistent among the higher classes. As noted by Wolfgang (1967, p. 7), murder among the upper classes seems to be more related to the marital and family private sphere, with greed as the main motivation (hence the much greater recurrence of premeditation) or with a depressive condition as an associated factor. If we had to propose a general hypothesis at the close of this study and of the review of the American literature, we would suggest the following: in the vast majority of cases, individuals are the more likely to kill the less they have to lose in social life—no high status occupation or reputation to preserve, no personal or family projects, no real prospects for the future.

## ***2. Accumulation of emotional and social handicaps over a lifetime***

The picture would not be complete, however, if we did not take the weight of biographic, family and relational factors into account. Durkheim (1897) had shown that family and marital ties are an indispensable factor for social integration. Many American authors have also insisted on the fact that, in addition to economic factors, marital instability (divorce

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(24) Cf. for example Kovandzic, Vieraitis, Yeisley (1998) on the debate about inequality and absolute poverty in the United States, or Kapuscinski, Braithwaite and Chapman (1998) on the relation between homicides and unemployment in Australia. The recent study by Matthews, Maume and Miller (2001) is also a very interesting contribution to the debate. For the first time, it examines systematically the relationship between homicides and the social and economic context in small and middle-sized towns of a large depressed industrial region of the United States. The conclusions strongly support the socio-economic model elaborated most definitively by Sampson and Wilson, which is very close to our own position. (On the debate in the US over the notion of *Urban Underclass* proposed by Wilson, see also the analysis by Herpin (1993), who contends that this is a process of social exclusion and urban poverty, and not the creation of a new social class in the Marxist sense).

rates), family disruption and loneliness are factors that strongly influence the level of homicide in any social context.

Such macro-sociological profile of murderers, in which the lack of economic resources and the fragility of marital and family ties are combined, is very similar to the profile of other “outcasts” in French society (the “disqualified”, “disaffiliated”, “dis-inserted”), as emphasized in works by Castel (1995), Paugam (1991, 1993) and Gaulejac and Taboada Léonetti (1994). Over time the same studies have started taking into account the disruptions of social links that occurred early in individuals’ childhood and left their mark for the rest of their lives on both the social and the psychological plane (Marpsat, Firdion and Meron, 2000; Paugam and Clemencon, 2002)<sup>(25)</sup>. This is a lead that we had decided to explore from the beginning of this research, in 1998, because we believe that the biographical approach is important, both from a statistical point of view, with event history analysis, and from a qualitative point of view, with life histories (Bertaux and Léomant, 1987).

At a first level of analysis, the perpetrator’s loneliness does appear to be a factor correlated with homicide. In the sample, about 60% of the individuals had no marital life at the time of the event, whether they had never lived as a couple or were separated or divorced, and whether they were childless or had children they saw frequently or not. As to the economic factor, we have seen that it is even more decisive. But such accumulation of handicaps or situations of disaffiliation are encountered too frequently in the general population to be a sufficient macro-sociological characteristic of homicide perpetrators. In our opinion, one weakness of American studies on homicide (as well as of many statistical studies in macro-sociology, for that matter) is that their perspective is too “horizontal” — in other words, that they are concerned exclusively with the current situation of individuals, and neglect their biographic itinerary or, to put it in simpler words, their history. At least three additional general results, which seem impossible to ignore both empirically and in theory, came out of our study. First, we have seen that in 60% of the cases where their nature was known, the relations between the murderer and his or her parents during childhood were conflict-ridden (the conflict involving physical violence endured by the murderer-to-be in at least half the cases). Second, we have recorded the fact that less than one murderer out of ten had a “normal” school career (i.e. one conforming to the norm promoted by the institution), that over two thirds left school without any qualifications, in a situation of complete failure. Third, we have noted that in about one case out of five, the murderers had a particularly unstable and emotionally deprived childhood, as they were raised by third parties (such as grandparents), by foster

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<sup>(25)</sup> A study by Ménahem (1992), based on a survey conducted at the end of the 1970s, had shown the influence of parental conflicts on the physical and psychological health of the children throughout the latter’s lives. This was abundantly confirmed by more recent research on depressive and suicidal states in youth by Archambault (1998).

families selected for them by the DDASS, or educators in institutions. Last, we have suggested that those deficiencies and handicaps, which left their mark throughout the murderers' life histories, also had a major impact on their psychological state. In particular they are the determining factor of the very high proportion of individuals characterized by immaturity at the affective level, but also by anxiety and a tendency to be highly emotional and depressive. And this psychological state resulting from the family background and the social history of the individual can also be considered as one of the structural data discussed here. Murderers are not only individuals, as suggested above, who find it easy to commit murder because they have nothing to lose in the present and nothing to expect for the future. They are also individuals, in many instances, who never got much in the past from (family and social) life. It seems as though individuals value human life less to the extent that nothing had ever suggested that their own life could be worth anything. The past, the present and the future are truly the three segments of a time chain that must be reconstructed. Such an approach also applies on a more general level in the sociology of deviance<sup>(26)</sup> and certainly in other areas of sociological research.

These are the general conclusions that emerge from this study at the macro-sociological level. This level of analysis is undoubtedly insufficient and many more developments should be pursued at a micro-sociological level. In particular, the relationship between perpetrators and victims should be studied, as well as the context and actual circumstances in which the crime was committed. Such developments would be needed to construct an operational typology and encompass the complexity of the real world. Although the macro level is insufficient, however, it remains indispensable. In their writings on homicide, some criminologists refuse to take into consideration those massive research findings and limit themselves to the study of the perpetrators' apparent motives and the circumstances in which the crime was committed (cf. for example Cusson, 1998, pp. 22-35). Such neglect of the social contexts is very questionable. From a statistical and macro-sociological point of view, homicides are not committed randomly anywhere, in any social environment or at the end of any life itinerary. Homicide is a social phenomenon that undoubtedly reminds society that it cannot complete its process of policing mores as long as pockets of poverty subsist, where men and women are concentrated whose life histories incite to value life cheaply, be it that of others or their own.

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<sup>(26)</sup> For example, the study on adolescents and young adults monitored by the *Protection Judiciaire de la Jeunesse* (the Judicial Protection of Youth) also reveals the crucial importance of such accumulation of family, school and social handicaps, as well as its impact on the physical and mental health of those youths (Choquet et al., 1998).

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**MUCCHIELLI Laurent. – Demographic and Social Characteristics of Murderers and their Victims: A Survey on a Département of the Paris Region in the 1990s**

Based on about one hundred criminal cases which were tried by a Court of Appeal in the southwest of the Paris region over ten years (1987-1996), this article presents the demographic and social characteristics of 122 murderers and their victims. It brings out the very high proportion of individuals from the working classes or from the poorest strata of the population among the population of murderers as well as of victims, and the weight of economic inactivity and unemployment. The importance of family disruption (desertion, various types of foster care) and still more importantly, of family conflicts, is emphasized. On an empirical level, these findings are compared with those of studies conducted in other countries, particularly the abundant quantitative literature from North America. On a theoretical level, this article takes its place among discussions initiated by American authors who have worked on the notions of disorganization and social disintegration, and by French authors who have worked on the notions of disaffiliation, disqualification and dis-insertion, and who suggest that researchers move beyond the mere social and family characteristics of the individuals at the time of the crime and take into account their life histories and particularly the family and school elements that left their marks on their entire life itinerary.

**MUCCHIELLI Laurent. – Les caractéristiques démographiques et sociales des meurtriers et de leurs victimes. Une enquête sur un département de la région parisienne dans les années 1990**

À partir du dépouillement d'une centaine d'affaires criminelles jugées en cour d'appel dans le sud-ouest de la région parisienne durant dix ans (1987-1996), cet article présente les caractéristiques démographiques et sociales de 122 meurtriers et de leurs victimes. Il met notamment en évidence la très forte surreprésentation des milieux populaires et même des couches les plus pauvres de la population, tant dans la population des meurtriers que dans celle de leurs victimes, ainsi que le poids de l'inactivité et du chômage. Il souligne aussi l'importance des déstructurations familiales (abandons, placements divers) et, plus encore, des conflits familiaux. Sur le plan empirique, ces résultats sont comparés à ceux d'études réalisées dans d'autres pays, notamment l'abondante production quantitative nord-américaine. Sur le plan théorique, cet article rejoint les discussions initiées par des auteurs américains travaillant sur les notions de *désorganisation* et de *désagrégation* sociale et par des auteurs français travaillant sur les notions de *désaffiliation*, de *disqualification* ou de *désinsertion* pour proposer de dépasser la seule analyse des caractéristiques sociales et familiales des personnes au moment des crimes afin de considérer leurs histoires de vie et intégrer notamment les composantes familiales et scolaires qui ont marqué toute leur trajectoire.

**MUCCHIELLI Laurent. – Las características demográficas y sociales de los asesinos y de sus víctimas. Una encuesta en un departamento de la región parisina en los años 1990**

A partir del análisis de un centenar de asuntos criminales juzgados en tribunales de apelación del suroeste de la región parisina durante diez años (1987-1996), este artículo presenta las características demográficas y sociales de 122 asesinos y de sus víctimas. Este análisis revela la sobre representación de los medios populares e incluso de las capas más pobres de la población, tanto en lo que respecta a los asesinos como a las víctimas, así como el peso de la inactividad y del paro. Aparece también la importancia de la descomposición familiar (abandonos...) y en particular de los conflictos familiares. Estos resultados son comparados a los de estudios realizados en otros países, y sobre todo a los de numerosos trabajos norteamericanos. En el plano teórico, el artículo aborda las nociones americanas de desorganización y de desagregación social y las de autores franceses sobre la desafiliación, la descalificación o la exclusión, a fin de sobrepasar el simple análisis de las características sociales y familiares de las personas en el momento del crimen y considerar sus historias de vida, integrando en particular los componentes familiares y escolares que han marcado sus trayectorias.