Five Hundred Homicides

Howard Harlan
This paper is an analysis of five hundred criminal homicides. It is an attempt to discover regularities and patterns in this type of personal violence with special attention paid to similarities and differences between race and sex categories in their respective homicide patterns.

The data on the five hundred cases of criminal homicide were obtained from the files of the Coroner of Jefferson County, Alabama, who maintains a chronological record of all deaths due to violence which occur in the county. The selection of cases was made in the following manner: First, there were eliminated all deaths occurring in the county outside the legal limits of the city of Birmingham, and all suicides, accidental deaths, homicides by negligence (nearly all of them manslaughters involving automobiles), and all justifiable and excusable homicides. This left only cases where the Coroner's verdict was criminal homicide—death by personal violence of the sort commonly called murder. Then, beginning with the first case of such criminal homicide occurring on or after January 1, 1937, all information on each successive homicide was taken from the records until data on five hundred consecutive homicides had been accumulated. The time interval covered by the cases so selected extends from January 1, 1937, to December 26, 1944, on which date the five hundredth consecutive homicide occurred. Personal or other bias in the selection of the cases for analysis is thus eliminated by taking consecutively all criminal homicides over the period necessary to get five hundred; the five hundred cases so selected should be representative and should be sufficient in number to reveal regularities and patterns if they exist.

The treatment of the data is of two sorts: first, a general analysis of such factors as race, sex and age of the actors in the homicide drama, the spatial distribution of the crimes, the temporal distribution by day of the week and hour of the day, and the nature of the weapons employed; and, secondly, a more specific analysis of the interpersonal patterns involved in the five
hundred homicides, the status relations of victims and agents, and the motives and circumstances surrounding the crimes.

**Table I**

**VICTIMS AND AGENTS IN 500 HOMICIDES, BY RACE AND SEX, BIRMINGHAM, ALA., 1937-44.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race and Sex</th>
<th>Victims</th>
<th>Agents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>Percent of Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>NEGRO</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>339</td>
<td>67.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>17.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>427</td>
<td>85.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>WHITE</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>10.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>14.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>GRAND TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>500</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*In 22 of the 500 homicides the agent is recorded as “unknown.” In 12 cases two or more agents are charged with the same crime.*

**GENERAL PATTERNS IN HOMICIDE**

**Race and Sex Distribution**

Table I summarizes the data on the incidence of the 500 homicides by race and sex. The most striking feature of the comparisons presented is, obviously, the extent to which Negroes, both victims and agents, males and females, exceed whites in the incidence of criminal homicide. Of the 500 victims, 427, or 85.4 percent, are Negro and only 73, or 14.6 per cent, are white; of the 492 known agents, 418, or 84.9 percent, are Negro and 74, or 15.0 percent, are white. During the period in which the 500 homicides occurred only about 40 percent of the population of Birmingham was Negro (40.7 percent in the census year of 1940; slightly less than that in the late 1930's; and less than 43 percent by the latest estimate for 1949), so it is clear that Negroes greatly exceed their “quota” of homicides.

Nor does consideration of the age and sex composition of the two racial segments of the Birmingham population alter this generalization. In 1940 Negro males accounted for 39.6 percent of the male population and Negro females 41.7 percent of the female population. Of the persons in the age range 20-49 years (the ages of highest homicide potential), 41.7 percent were Negro in 1940. All of these proportions correspond so closely to the “normal” proportion of Negroes in the Birmingham population...
that differentials in age and sex between Negroes and whites cannot account for the very marked racial difference in the incidence of homicide.

**Racial Traits or Life Circumstances?**

Lombroso and, more recently Hooton to the contrary notwithstanding, it is doubtful that the greater incidence of criminal homicide among Negroes is to be attributed to inherent, racial traits. Rather the explanation is to be found in the life circumstances of the Negro—the community setting in which he lives and the cultural tradition characteristic of his group life.

In the first place, murder of the sort treated in this study (unselected, representative murder; killing which in the majority of cases is the terminal point in the series: argument-fight-murder) is definitely associated with class status. Personal violence, brawling, fighting, are violations of middle class mores and are far more characteristic of the lower class. And the lower class in the Negro community comprises a much larger proportion of the Negro population than the same class does in the white community. All writers who have attempted an analysis of the class structure of the Negro community are agreed that a majority of Negroes fall into this status. Thus, Frazier estimates that in border cities like St. Louis and Washington the lower class comprises "about two-thirds of the Negro population." Davis, Gardner and Gardner state that "in most American colored societies the middle and upper classes together . . . do not include more than one-fourth of the population." Whatever the proportion of whites who could be assigned lower class status, it is certainly very much less than this. So, if murder is a cultural adhesion to lower class status, the very class structure of the Negro society would greatly increase its incidence among Negroes.

At least three cultural characteristics of the Negro lower class have a direct bearing on the high homicidal incidence and deserve comment in any attempt to explain it. First, the Negro lower class (the lower class among whites, too, though probably to a lesser degree) is characterized by extreme instability in the sex-marriage-family complex. The institutional controls which regulate sex and family relations in the higher social levels are largely absent in this class. The result is a confused, unsystem-

atic and unregulated chaos in which individual desire, choice and whim govern behavior. Since powerful and gusty emotions are involved in the sex-marriage-family relations, absence of institutional patterning and control increases the probability of conflict and wrangling in these relations. It will be noted below how large a proportion of all homicides have their basis in the interpersonal relations within this field.

Secondly, the extremely low economic status of the lower class Negro is productive of living conditions conducive to homicide. The combination of low income, restrictive zoning (still practiced in Birmingham) and shortage of housing brings about a condition of severe over-crowding among Negroes, especially those of the lower class. The pattern of taking lodgers is very common. Frequently this means providing a bed (or even half a bed) in the room where other members of the household sleep. This kind of over-crowding, by multiplying the opportunities for contact, greatly increases the probability of friction among members of the same or neighboring households.

Finally, it may be said that the lower class Negro is only a marginal participant in the society. His participation in the legal and social institutions of the community is partial and largely passive. The individual of the lower class is less likely, because of his marginal position, to rely on community agencies (police, courts, associations, etc.) for the resolving of disputes and personal conflicts and is more likely to rely on force. In this marginal society the forceful individual comes to have prestige. His very formidability, toughness, "meanness," contribute to his status. It is not difficult to understand how the tradition of carrying weapons grows up in the lower class Negro society. Where combat is the cultural tradition for the settlement of disputes, armed combat is the logical extension.

One cannot read the records of the 500 homicides of this study (over 85 percent of which are Negro homicides) without forming a picture of an appalling world of violence, brawling, fighting that is almost jungle-like. It is the lower class Negro world where force and violence are the only cultural channels for aggression. When the knife, the pistol and the shotgun are brought into this situation where the tradition of violence prevails, a high incidence of homicide is the inevitable consequence.

**Representation of Males**

The representation of males in the homicide record, as shown in Table I, is much larger than their population "quota" would warrant. Of the 500 victims, 392, or 78.4 percent, are male and
of the 492 agents, 376, or 76.1 percent, are male. In 1940 males comprised 47.6 percent of the Birmingham population and 46.4 percent of the population 20-49 years of age, so the male share of more than 75 percent of the homicides is plainly excessive. But, again, the explanation is to be found in culture rather than biology. In all classes of the society the socialization process is such as to place stronger inhibitions against the exercise of physical force and violence on females than on males. Fighting, brawling and personal violence are traditionally male patterns, although in the lower classes of both white and Negro society the sex difference is less than in the higher levels.

**Age Distribution**

The age data on the homicidal agents are so untrustworthy (for the most part mere estimates made by hospital attendants or detectives of the homicide squad) that only data on the ages of the 500 victims are summarized here.

The Negro victims are found to be somewhat younger than the white victims (mean age of Negro victims is 32.8 years; and mean age of white victims is 38.0 years). The difference between the sexes is also marked. The mean age of the female victims is 29.4 years and the mean age of the male victims is 35.5 years.\(^8\) The findings here correspond closely to those of similar studies. For example, Hoffman found that the average age at death of homicide victims in Birmingham during the period 1927-29 was 31.6 years.\(^4\) Brearley's study of homicide in South Carolina in the period 1920-24 revealed an average age for homicide victims of 36.7 years for whites and 31.5 years for Negros.\(^5\)

**Spatial Distribution**

As has been shown to be true of other types of crime, the spatial distribution of homicides throughout the city is by no means uniform.\(^6\) There are 52 census tracts in Birmingham, but the five central tracts (the central business area plus the four immediately surrounding and contiguous tracts) provide the scene for 185 of the 489 homicides for which the place of

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3. Complete tabular material on age is in the files of the writer but is omitted here because of limitations on space. The writer invites correspondence from anyone interested in greater detail than is given in this brief summary. Incidentally, this same note applies to tables and maps of the special distribution of the homicides and to tabular data on time of day and day of week when the homicides occur, features treated below.


injury is recorded. Thus, these five central tracts which by the
1940 census include only 11.9 percent of the population are the
place of injury for 37.8 percent of the homicides. Conversely,
the 24 peripheral tracts with 42.6 percent of the population
account for only 22.1 percent of the homicides. So the same
type of gradient that Shaw found for delinquency and adult
crime in Chicago and other cities and that Lottier found for
crimes against the person in Detroit is found for criminal homicide in Birmingham.

Another aspect of the distribution of homicide is revealed in
Table II where the 500 homicides are classified as to the nature
of the place where the injury was sustained. Table II indicates
that private homes are more lethal than public places
since a clear majority of the 500 homicides are shown to occur
at home. Interesting differences by race and sex in the place of
occurrence of the homicidal injury appear. For example, 61.8
percent of the Negro homicides occur in private homes while
only 42.4 percent of the white victims are injured at home. A
significantly higher proportion of white than Negro homicides
occur at the place of employment of either the victim, the agent,
or both and in public recreational places such as cafes, dance
halls, pool rooms, etc. This last is probably to be explained by
the income difference between whites and Negroes which permits
whites to purchase commercial recreation more frequently than
Negroes. It is also apparent from the reading of the reports of
homicide investigations that a considerable number of Negro
homes in the disorganized Negro areas are actually unlicensed
"speakeasies" where liquor is sold for ten or fifteen cents a
drink. As will be shown below, many of the Negro homicides
occur in such places.

Table II
PLACE OF OCCURRENCE OF THE HOMICIDAL INJURY IN 500 HOMICIDES,
BY RACE AND SEX OF VICTIM, BIRMINGHAM, ALA., 1937-44.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place of Injury</th>
<th>Negro Percent of Cases</th>
<th>White Percent of Cases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home of Victim</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>26.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home of Agent</td>
<td>18.0</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home of Both</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>31.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home of Another</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>13.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total, Private Homes</td>
<td>57.0</td>
<td>30.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public commercial place: cafe, dance hall, pool room, etc.</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public street, alley or field</td>
<td>27.7</td>
<td>14.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place of employment</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7. See footnote 3 above.
8. Incidentally, the census tracts showing the highest rates of homicide in Birm-
ingham are also the tracts with highest delinquency rates. Cf. Harlan, H. and
The sex differences are equally marked. Among women of both races the murder is far more likely to occur in the home of the victim than in the home of the agent; the reverse is true of men. And a much higher proportion of women are killed in the home common to both victim and agent than is true of men. This is undoubtedly because so many female victims are killed by husbands or lovers who live in the same house. (See the discussion of interpersonal patterns below.)

**Temporal Distribution**

The temporal distribution of the 500 homicides is no more uniform than their spatial distribution. Homicidal incidence reaches its peak on week-ends and at night. Of the 500 homicides 123 (24.6 percent) occur on Saturdays and 136 (27.2 percent) occur on Sundays. No other day of the week shows any such concentrations, the range for the remaining days of the week being from 44 (8.8 percent) on Mondays to 56 (11.2 per cent) on Fridays. Most of the murders occur during the night hours; thus, 53.4 percent take place between the hours of 8:00 P.M. and 2:00 A.M. Twenty-five percent of the murders are perpetrated between 6:00 P.M. Saturday and 6:00 A.M. Sunday morning, making this the most lethal twelve hour period during the week.\(^9\)

For the most part homicide occurs in leisure time; it is frequently associated with recreational pursuits. Drinking is a common accompaniment of crimes of personal violence, as will be shown below, and Saturday night is the traditional period of the drinking spree. Homicide is generally committed against persons with whom one has personal feelings—friends, family members, lovers, acquaintances, companions in recreation, etc. —and the opportunities for personal contacts are much greater during leisure time.

The racial difference in the temporal pattern of homicide is not great, but there is a somewhat greater tendency for Negro homicides to pile up on Saturday and Sunday. For example, 53.2 percent of the Negro victims were killed on these two days while the proportion of white victims is 43.9 percent. The Saturday night spree is probably even more of a tradition among lower class Negroes than among whites.\(^10\)

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9. See footnote 3 above.

10. There is a joke, commonly told in the South in which a Negro says, responding to the chiding of a white man about the frailties of his race: "Mister, if you could be a Negro for just one Saturday night, you would never want to be a white man again."
Kinds of Weapons

Table III shows the weapons employed by the 492 known agents. Murder in fact turns out to be greatly different from murder in fiction. No mysterious South American poisons, nor any other of the strange and baffling means by which the creatures of Carter Dickson, Agatha Christie and other whodunit writers kill their victims appear in the present data. Murder is seen to be brutal, direct and simple: a slash or stab with a knife, a shot from a pistol or shotgun, a crashing blow from a billiard cue or a rock. Firearms prove to be the most popular weapon with the 492 agents, 49.2 percent of them employing this type of weapon; but the various cutting and piercing instruments run a close second, being used by 40.4 percent of the agents.

Significant race and sex differences are revealed in the choice of homicidal weapon. While the old myth that the razor is the favorite weapon of Negro killers is not supported by the data (only once was the weapon referred to as a razor in the Coroner's records of the 500 homicides; that case is classified under "Knife" in Table V), it is nonetheless plain that cutting and piercing instruments are employed far more commonly by Negro than by white murderers. Of the 418 Negro agents, 45.7 percent used such weapons while only 10.8 percent of the 74 white agents used them. Firearms are much more popular with white murderers than with Negroes; 71.6 percent of the white agents using them as compared with only 45.2 percent of the Negro agents. Part of this difference may be economic—the greater expense of firearms making them prohibitive to Negroes. It is probable, too, that a greater proportion of homicides by whites are deliberate and premeditated with the agent arming himself in expectation of committing murder. Most of the Negro killings grow out of arguments and disputes and involve no planning. The carrying of knives is in the cultural tradition of the lower class Negro.

The most notable sex difference is the greater predilection of women for knives and icepicks than is true of men, and their lesser reliance on firearms. Thus, 54 percent of the female agents employed cutting or piercing instruments while the

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11. It is possible that such murders occur in Birmingham, but if they do, they do not get into the Coroner's records. They may be registered as deaths due to natural causes.

12. The type of knife most commonly used, the type which is carried by a large number of lower class Negroes, is known as the "switch-blade knife." It is usually fairly long with the blade shaped much like a hunting knife. The blade springs out of its case when a small button at the top of the case is pressed. Thus, it requires only one hand for preparation, and it can be drawn from the pocket and brought into use very swiftly.
### TABLE III

**KIND OF WEAPON EMPLOYED BY 492 MURDERERS, BY RACE AND SEX, BIRMINGHAM, ALA., 1937-44.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weapon</th>
<th>Negro Percent of Cases</th>
<th>White Percent of Cases</th>
<th>Grand Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knife</td>
<td>40.7</td>
<td>49.5</td>
<td>43.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Icepick</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ax</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All cutting or piercing instruments</td>
<td>42.0</td>
<td>55.9</td>
<td>45.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pistol</td>
<td>33.2</td>
<td>29.7</td>
<td>32.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shotgun or rifle</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>13.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All firearms</td>
<td>47.2</td>
<td>39.8</td>
<td>45.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blunt instrument</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous: fists, strangling, drowning, etc.</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not recorded</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The proportion of male agents is but 36 percent; and 40 percent of the women used firearms as compared to 52 percent of the men.

**Summary**

The principal findings of the general analysis above may be summarized as follows: Murder is more common among Negroes than whites, males than females, and persons of the young adult years (20-49) than those of other ages. It is most likely to occur in the central business area of the city, the low-grade residential areas (especially Negro areas) immediately surrounding the business district, and in the areas of residence around heavy industrial areas. It occurs most commonly in private homes (for Negroes), on public streets, and (for whites) in places of commercial recreation where alcoholic drinks are available such as cafes, pool halls, dance halls, juke joints, etc. The act of violence is more likely to occur on week-ends and at night with the period from early Saturday night to early Sunday morning being the most probable. And the homicidal injury is most commonly inflicted with a knife or a pistol.

**B. INTERPERSONAL PATTERNS IN HOMICIDE**

Table IV shows the variety of interpersonal patterns into which the 500 homicides fall. The most striking feature of this tabulation is the extent to which murder is shown to be an ingroup phenomenon. The homicide involves persons of the same race in 92.8 percent of the 500 cases, persons of the same sex in 59.4 percent of the cases, and persons of both the same race and sex in 56.6 percent of the cases. The very personal nature of
homicide (in contrast, say, to crimes against property) accounts for its intraracial nature. The caste barrier which prohibits personal contacts between the races operates to reduce interracial homicides so that only 2.8 percent of the 500 homicides cross race lines. However, intimate and personal contacts, frequently with high emotional content, do take place between the sexes (within the racial bounds) so that 36.2 percent of the 500 homicides involve victims and agents of opposite sex.

The same in-group character of homicide has been shown in other studies of the crime, notably those by Brearley, De Porte and Parkhurst, and Barnhart. Sutherland, in summarizing the research on homicide, says:

In crimes of personal violence the victims and the offenders are generally of the same social group, and have residences not far apart. Negroes murder Negroes, Italians murder Italians, and Chinese murder Chinese. These crimes of personal violence are generally committed against persons with whom the offenders have personal dealings. They develop out of conversation, romantic relations, and business transactions, and are committed against friends or acquaintances.

Of the various type of interpersonal patterns into which the 500 cases of homicide fall, six include enough cases to make pos-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interpersonal Pattern</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Percent of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Male Negro kills Male Negro (MN/MN)</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>45.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Male Negro kills Female Negro (MN/FN)</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>13.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Male Negro kills Male White (MN/MW)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Female Negro kills Male Negro (FN/MN)</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>17.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Female Negro kills Female Negro (FN/FN)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Male White kills Male White (MW/MW)</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Male White kills Female White (MW/FW)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Male White kills Male Negro (MW/MN)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Female White kills Male White (FW/MW)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Unknown Agent kills Male Negro (U/MN)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Unknown Agent kills Female Negro (U/FN)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Unknown Agent kills Male White (U/MW)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

13. If justifiable homicides were included this figure would rise. During the period covered by this study a considerable number of such homicides occurred. For the most part they were killings of Negro burglars by white householders and killings of Negro prisoners and fugitives by white policemen.


sible a more detailed analysis. These are MN/MN, MN/FN, FN/MN, FN/FN, MW/MW, and MW/FW.

**MN/MN Pattern**

Of the 226 cases in which a male Negro kills a male Negro, the Coroner’s record is sufficiently complete on 182 of them to permit a reasonably full reconstruction of the circumstances surrounding the crime, the precipitating cause of the conflict, and the ostensible motive behind the killing. The evidence for this reconstruction consists of testimony from witnesses taken under oath by the Coroner in his investigation and/or reports by officers of the homicide squad who investigated the case. For the other 54 cases the record is too sketchy to permit such reconstruction and provides only the personal data about the victim and agent such as have been described above.

The 182 cases where the evidence is more detailed tend to fall into five classes as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Specific Type of Homicide</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Type I. (Killing of member of family)</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type II. (Sex triangle: quarrel over wife or lover)</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>18.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type III. (Quarrel over cards, dice, money, etc.)</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>29.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type IV. (Quarrel of relatively trivial origin: an insult, curse, jostling, etc.)</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>36.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous circumstances and motives</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>182</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Type I, comprising about one-tenth of the cases, includes the killings where the conflict is between family members. Nearly all of these murders occur in homes (either the home of the victim or the home shared by both victim and agent) where, of course, the probability of personal contact and the frictions arising out of such contacts is greater.

Some cases illustrating Type I slayings are sketched below:

1. Son objects to his father beating his mother. Fight between son and father ensues with son drawing knife and fatally stabbing his parent.
2. V comes to home of wife’s parents to persuade wife to return to him. Her father tries to prevent son-in-law’s entrance and tries to block reconciliation. Altercation between V and his father-in-law ends in the shooting of the former.
3. One brother charges another with failure to contribute to maintenance of mother’s household. They argue, tempers rise, a fight begins. It ends with both brothers slashed and cut by knives, but one fatally.

Type II is more common than Type I and includes almost one-fifth of the cases. Here the major factor in the homicide is
conflict over sexual rights to a woman, either the wife or the lover of one of the disputants. The two sketches which follow typify so perfectly the kinds of situations involved in this pattern that all 34 cases, with only slight variation, correspond closely to them.

(1) V had lived as common-law husband with woman for two years. Was then arrested on liquor charge and served nine months sentence. On return, learns that wife is living with another man. Goes to their home, upbraids woman and her lover. Fight starts in which former husband is shot and killed by wife’s lover.

(2) Two men, drinking beer in cafe, argue over which is entitled to sexual favors of a woman both claim. Dispute grows into fight. Knives are drawn and one fatally stabs the other.

The general picture that is created by a reading of the records of these 34 cases is one of an almost complete absence of stable marital arrangements and a sort of "cave-man" code of sexual ethics in which the strongest and most formidable males win their sexual rights. Many of these homicides occur in streets and alleys or in places of commercial recreation as well as in homes. They may occur wherever the claimant male meets his rival.

Types III and IV may be treated together since the distinction between them is entirely arbitrary. In Type III the quarrel arises over gambling, debt, some sort of conflict over property, and in Type IV the conflict is over any other trivial matter whatsoever: an insult, a curse, a jostling, disparagement, etc. The relative triviality (according to standards of the larger society) of the cause of dispute is common to both. Taken together these two types include about 65 per cent of the MN/MN cases.

Ideal-typical cases of Type III murders are the following:

(1) In a game of "Skin" (a gambling game played with cards) one player accuses another of being "short a nickle in the pot." The argument brings out knives, threatening words and gestures, a fight, and the consequent killing.

(2) V goes to a house where liquor is sold for 10¢ a drink. After several drinks an argument starts as to whether he paid for last round or not. The dispute over the 10¢ grows into a fight in which the "speakeasy" operator shoots the knife-wielding victim.

Most of the Type III homicides occur in private homes, commonly the "home of another" referred to in Table III. They take place in those houses which serve for lower class Negroes the same function that clubs, bars, and other places of commercialized recreation and vice perform for whites and Negroes of higher social levels: the places where gambling, sex and liquor
are provided for a price. A clear majority of the Type III cases involve the use of a knife as the weapon.

The Type IV cases are typified by the following:

(1) In a crowded beer joint, V claims that A cut off his juke box record. Argument turns into fight when knives are drawn. V cuts A but is himself fatally stabbed.

(2) Two laborers unloading railroad cars get to arguing over the number of cars on the siding. Much loud talk, cursing, threats, etc., and the resulting knife fight ends in stabbing.

(3) V comes in home where a wake is going on. His cursing and loud talk bring remonstrance from A. When V persists, A goes to his room, gets pistol and shoots V.

(4) At a dance V makes an improper remark about one of the girls present. Her brother and two of his friends threaten V who runs from dance hall. The three men catch him outside, beat him with fists, and then pound his head against a pile of rocks until he is dead.

It is clear that most of the MN/MN slayings begin with a fight. Fighting is undoubtedly a more common pattern among lower class Negroes than in other classes in the society, but the most significant thing is that the lower class Negro fight is more likely to end in homicide because of the traditional pattern of carrying a weapon. The kind of fight which in other segments of the society would end in damaged facial features frequently ends in homicide among lower class Negroes; the cultural tradition of fighting with lethal weapons is the major factor responsible.

Note on Alcohol. One cannot read the evidence available on these MN/MN killings (or, for that matter, the evidence available on all 500 of the homicides) without being impressed by the extent to which alcohol plays a role in criminal homicide. In the 387 cases where the record consists of more than just a death certificate and the Coroner’s verdict, there is direct or indirect mention of drinking in the records of 226 cases. The evidence is not in such form as to permit a very accurate estimate of the proportion of homicides in which alcohol is a factor, but it would be no exaggeration, certainly, to guess that it is significantly involved in more than 50 per cent of the cases.16

MN/FN Pattern

Of the 67 cases where a male Negro kills a female Negro, 54 of the records are sufficiently complete to permit more detailed analysis. These 54 cases may be classified into three types:

16. One estimate is that 40 percent of the victims of homicide are intoxicated at the time they are murdered. (Kilmer, T. W., “Alcoholism, Its Relation to Police Work and Jurisprudence,” Correction, v. 3, 1933, pp. 11-12.) Brearly (op. cit., p. 60) cites studies giving estimates ranging from about 30 percent to over 70 percent.
Most of these homicides across sex lines involve a sexual factor. Almost 60 percent of the completed cases involve the killing of a wife by a husband or of a woman by her lover, and in all of these cases the conflict arises over the alleged infidelity of either the woman or the man. The situations and motives in the sex triangle type of killing are so familiar as to require no illustration.

Type II killings, almost one-fourth of the total, are the outgrowth of a drinking-sex party situation. In the disorganized setting of lower class Negro society, revelry and release are frequently channeled into the pattern of the Saturday night orgy. This situation, involving as it does drunkenness and sexual license, heightens emotion and lowers inhibition so that trivial arguments and disputes easily magnify into fights which result in homicide. And since the taboo against striking or beating a woman, which is operative in the culture of the higher social levels, is relatively absent among lower class Negroes, the fight may often involve both men and women.

A typical case is the following:

(1) A, in company of three other men, goes to house where liquor is sold. After several drinks, he goes into back room with one of the women "lodgers." Argument arises when woman makes disparaging remark about A's sexual prowess. When A beats woman she attacks with knife. In the fight A seizes knife and fatally stabs the woman.

The cases of the MN/FN pattern that fall into the third category are just like the Type IV cases of the MN/MN pattern. Almost any trivial difference may provoke a fight, and the fight may take on lethal proportions when the omnipresent weapon of the lower class Negro is brought into use.

**FN/MN Pattern**

The Negro female appears to be somewhat more deadly than the Negro male when the conflict involves both sexes. Of the 156 cases with Negroes of both sexes, the male is the victim in 89, or 57 percent, and the female is the victim in 67, or 43 percent. The explanation is probably that the male with his greater strength is less likely to use a weapon in a fight with a female than the latter who uses it to offset her weakness.
The FN/MN pattern is very similar to the MN/FN pattern described above. Of the 71 cases where the record is sufficiently complete, a higher proportion (69 percent) fall into the sex triangle type of slaying where the female agent kills her husband or lover in a conflict based on alleged infidelity of either the agent or the victim. In a considerable number of these murders (22 in all) the husband or lover is killed when the woman defends herself against a beating. Most of these killings occur in the home of the agent or the home shared by the agent and victim, and the weapon is more commonly a knife and less commonly a firearm than when the agent is a male. Five of the icepick murders occur in the FN/MN category.

**FN/FN Pattern**

There are only 20 cases falling under this category and the description of the circumstances of the murder is detailed for only 17. These are divided equally into the sex triangle and the trivial quarrel types of killing. One of the cases is an infanticide accomplished by an unmarried mother and her father.

Two typical cases of the FN/FN pattern may be sketched:

(1) Woman goes to home of another girl who has been reported as intimate with the common-law husband of the first, warns the girl to stay away from her husband. Argument begins, loud talk, insults, threats. Girl runs into kitchen, returns with butcher knife. In the knife fight that results both are cut badly, but the younger girl is killed.

(2) Two lodgers get into argument about a 15¢ debt one is alleged to owe the other. Fight starts; much scratching, hairpulling; ends when one seizes an icepick and stabs the other.

**MW/MW Pattern**

The 37 cases of a white male killing a white male show some similarities to the MN/MN pattern but also some differences. The cases may be classified as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Specific Type of Homicide</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Type I. (Quarrel over woman: wife or lover)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>23.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type II. (Drunken quarrel)</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>52.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type III. (Quarrel over property, business, etc.)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous motives and circumstances</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insufficient evidence in record</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>37</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Type I killings are much like the same type in the MN/MN pattern except that the murder appears to be more deliberate and planned and less often the result of an argument and fight.
The WM agent in all 8 cases used a pistol, and in three of the cases killed his wife as well as her alleged lover (a rare happening in the Negro slayings). Although there are but a few cases of this type and generalization is therefore risky, it would seem that the class range covered by the participants is greater than among Negroes where this type of killing is almost exclusively confined to the lower class. Infidelity may be more common among middle class whites than middle class Negroes.

Type II slayings show some differences from their counterpart among Negroes. For one thing, the basis of the conflict (by common standards) appears to be more serious and less trivial. Again, most of these white homicides occur in cafes, drinking places and juke joints; fewer occur in private homes and on the street than is true of Negro killings. However, the familiar drinking-gambling-fight pattern also appears (in 5 cases) among lower class whites.

Typical situations in Type II homicides are these:

1. Man with longstanding grudge against his nextdoor neighbor gives a poker party. Late in evening when host and guests have had many drinks, nextdoor neighbor comes to door to say that guests’ cars are blocking his driveway. When no effort is made to move cars, he goes to front, releases brake and shoves one of the cars down the street. Car rolls into tree and damages a fender. At the sound, the host, cursing and threatening, goes to bedroom, gets pistol, runs outside and shoots the neighbor.

2. As party is leaving a juke joint after an evening of drinking, one man in party sees an old enemy with whom he had had several fights. Drunk and “mean,” he goes over to enemy’s car, curses and threatens. When enemy gets out of car the man stabs him with knife.

Type III killings (only 4, but 11.8 percent of the completed cases) arise over business dealings. A typical case is the following:

1. Two men who had been parties to a business deal involving sale of real estate meet in lobby of downtown office building. One charges the other with cheating him in the deal. After considerable loud talk and cursing, the aggrieved party strikes the other with his fist, knocking him down. As the man falls his head hits a marble urn and he sustains a fatal head injury.

The miscellaneous killings include one case of careless and reckless use of firearms in which a bystander is killed, the shooting of a policeman by escaping prisoners, the killing of a bystander by a restaurant proprietor when he was shooting at two persons who had created a disturbance in his restaurant, and the shooting of a drunken intruder by a householder.
MW/FW Pattern

Of the 18 cases with fairly complete records where a white man kills a white woman, 13 of the cases are of the common sex triangle type in which the male kills his wife or his lover. Where this type differs most markedly from its counterpart among Negroes is in the far greater use of firearms (suggesting greater deliberation and planning) and in the tendency for the agent to kill himself after the murder. This murder-suicide pattern is found in four cases of the 13, and is not evident a single time in the MN/FN pattern. Three of these cases involve the "hopeless love" situation (where a married man falls in love with another woman or a married woman with another man, and circumstances prevent a continuation of the relationship), and murder-suicide is the way taken to resolve the problem.

Two cases typical of the MW/FW pattern are sketched below:

(1) A successful and respected professional man, happily married and with two children, falls in love with a younger woman. After several months, one afternoon he calls his wife, tells her he loves her and wants her to forgive him for what he is about to do, turns from the telephone and kills his lover, then goes to his office and kills himself.

(2) A salesman who spends a lot of time away from Birmingham returns from a long trip to discover that his wife, a waitress in a cafe, has been going out with other men. A few days later he appears at the cafe about the time his wife goes to work, drinks two bottles of beer, and when his wife appears, draws a pistol and kills her.

Of the remaining categories there are not sufficient cases within any one to reveal clearcut patterns. In most of the U/MN cases the body is discovered in a street or field and no evidence as to the agent is found. However, in a number of these cases it would seem that robbery or burglary is the probable motive. (Of the 15 U/MN cases and the six U/MW cases, four of the victims were night watchmen.) In the 14 interracial slayings that remain, robbery or burglary is associated with the killing in seven.