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Homicide reconsidered

Murders go up when rich-poor gap grows: expert

By STEVE BUIST

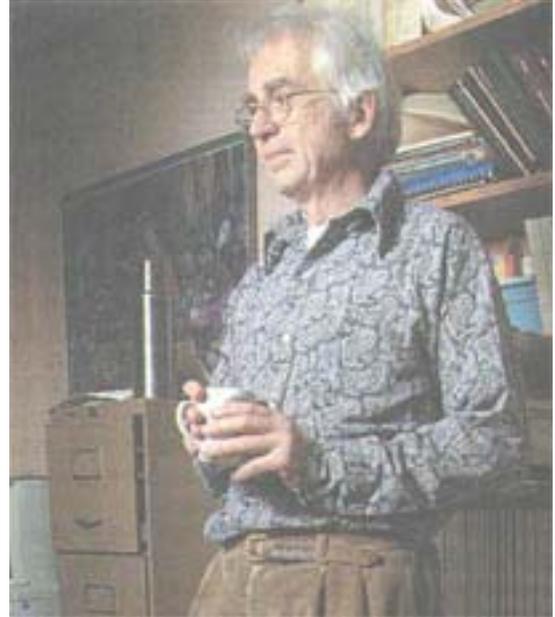
Science reporter

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Capitalism is great for business, especially if you're a homicide detective.

That's a conclusion that can be drawn from the research of Martin Daly, a professor of psychology at McMaster University who has looked at the connection between homicide rates and income distribution in Canada and the United States.

Daly will be delivering a lecture called "Competition, Inequity and Homicide" on Tuesday night in The Spectator auditorium as part of the Science in the City lecture series sponsored jointly by McMaster and The Spectator.



What Daly has discovered is that when the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, the morgues get busier.

He used an economic indicator that measures income distribution and compared it to homicide rates for different populations, including the 10 Canadian provinces and 50 states in the U.S. At one end of the scale would be a society where everyone's income is identical, while at the other end of the scale would be a society where one person earned all of the wealth and everyone else earned nothing.

Daly found that the greater the inequality in the distribution of income between rich and poor, the higher the homicide rate. "The more inequitable the rewards, the higher the rates of violence," said Daly, "presumably because it's more desperately competitive at the bottom." The reasons behind this connection are intriguing.

In places that have high homicide rates, what increases most is the proportion of men killing unrelated men in some type of social dispute.

"(It's) poor, unemployed guys in a macho dispute in a bar, something like that," Daly explained. "Most often, somebody has disrespected somebody publicly or somebody chats up somebody else's girlfriend, that kind of stuff.

"It's a huge proportion where the homicide rate is high," he said. "Where the homicide rate is really low like in Scandinavia, there's almost none of these cases."

The American criminal justice system calls these "trivial altercations" - disputes that don't seem important enough for anyone to risk their life over, yet someone ends up dead. Most of them attract little attention from the media.

"In a city like Detroit or Chicago or Washington, on an average Friday night, there's one or two of these," said Daly, "and on an average Saturday night, there's two or three.

"Mostly, they're poor black guys that nobody gives much of a damn about." It's an evolutionary spin on socioeconomics that suggests the same type of survival of the fittest strategies that play out in the jungles and the forests are playing out on the streets of North America.

"Why are guys so competitive that they take their life in their hands over disputes about space and status?" Daly wonders.

"Clearly they live in what they perceive as a very competitive milieu and where this kind of stuff is worst, a huge proportion of guys are unemployed, their life prospects suck, and they don't have recourse to the law to defend them."

One possible explanation is that the people stuck in this competitive underclass may decide that riskier behaviour may be worth the potential rewards -greater status, more money, perhaps a woman's attention.

"The fact that there's enormous wealth trickles down through North American society as a kind of perception that we live in a winner-take-all society," said Daly.

"The idea (is) that somebody's making out like a bandit and it ain't me, so if I escalate my tactics and I'm more ruthless, then I can make out better."

What's also interesting is that the index is an accurate predictor of homicide rates regardless of whether it measures American states or Canadian provinces.

New England states with the same measure of income distribution as Canadian provinces also have the same murder rates.

It suggests that Canada's lower rate of homicide compared to the U.S. is a function of a more equitable distribution of wealth than anything else.

"I think this is an important arrow in the quiver of social democrats and people on the left to argue that apart from just the plain justice of incomelevelling policies, they actually reduce the levels of violence," said Daly.

Tuesday's lecture is free and open to the public.

To register for a spot, call 905-5259140 ext. 24934 or e-mail at sci-encecity@mcmaster.ca. Doors open at 6:30 p.m.; the session starts at 7 p.m. sbuist@thespec.com or 905-526-3226.

JOHN RENNISON, THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

McMaster University psychology professor Martin Daly, who lectures on homicide on Tuesday, has found there are more murders among the poor than rich.