

Violence Research Centre



INSTITUTE OF CRIMINOLOGY

From the Past to the Future of Violence

Prize Lecture

European Society of Criminology Conference

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Director, Violence Research Centre

My Question

What are the universal causal mechanisms that bring forth...

macro-level patterns across societies and over time...

between-individual differences...

within-individual change...

... in violence?

And how can we use this knowledge to reduce violence?

A little test...

... what emotion is this?



Why do we recognize this emotion?

Because we have learned that lowered brow, thinned lips and flared nostrils mean anger in Western Culture?

-> **Blank Slate Psychology**

Because the 'anger face' is a human universal that has evolved to signal intimidation?

-> **Evolutionary Psychology**

Evolution has shaped...

Your ears

Your guts

Your fingernails

Your brain

Your pain

Has it also shaped....

Manuel Eisner, Aja Louise Murray, Denis Ribeaud, Margit Averdijk,
and Jean-Louis van Gelder

From the Savannah to the Magistrate's Court

The Roots of Criminal Justice in Evolved Human Psychology

In: Jann, Ben and W. Przepioka (eds.) (2017) "Social
Dilemmas, Institutions, and the Evolution of Cooperation"

The mechanisms that trigger aggression?

Our intuitions about what is criminal behavior?

The desire for punishment and retaliation?

The procedures that make criminal justice?

The Revenge Mechanism



Pedro el Cruel killed by his brother

The desire for retaliation and revenge is a human universal.

It evolved as a result of three mechanisms:

- It deters potential aggressors from acts of violence.
- It prevents attackers from attacking again.
- It prevents egoistic actors from free-riding.

**O, from this time forth,
My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!**

Hamlet, Scene 4:4

Boehm, C. (1984). *Blood revenge: the enactment and management of conflict in Montenegro and other tribal societies*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas.

McCullough, M. E., Kurzban, R., & Tabak, B. A. (2013). Cognitive systems for revenge and forgiveness. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 36(01), 1-15.

The Revenge Mechanism

Pedro el Cruel killed by his brother

The revenge mechanism is consistent with ...

Game-theory models about conflict and cooperation, 2nd and 3rd party punishment.

E.g. Fehr and Fischbacher (2004) *Third party Punishment and Social Norms*, *EvolHumBeh*

Evolutionary theories about universal psychological mechanisms associated with fairness, revenge, forgiveness, reputation management, punishment.

E.g. Boehm (1984) *Blood Revenge*.

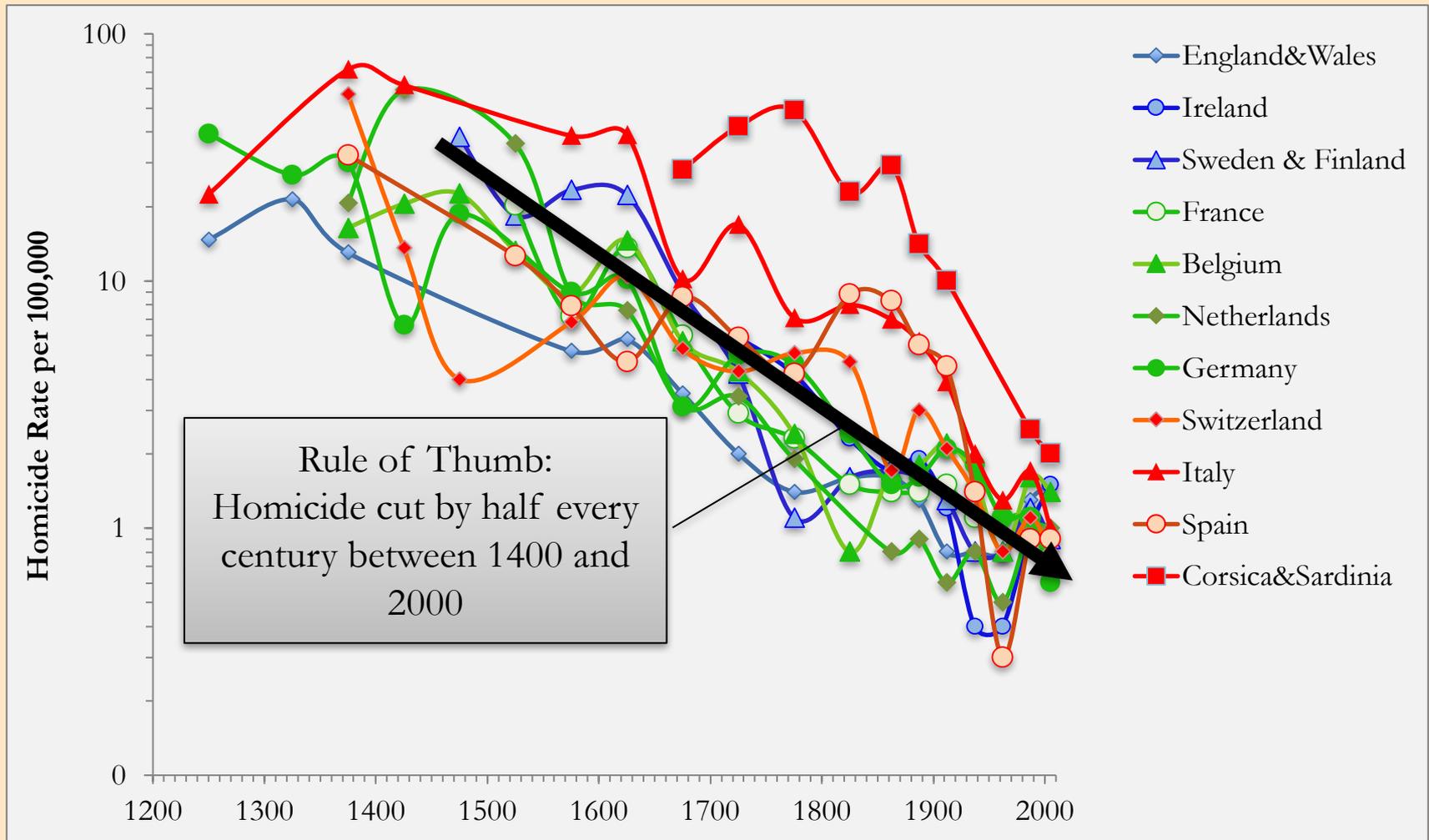
Theories of state-building, the centralization of power, emergence of the rule of law, decline of violence.

E.g. Norbert Elias, *Civilizing Process*

The Past

Was the long-term decline in homicide rates across Europe a result of increasing control over revenge and feud connected to the pacification of the elites?

Homicide Trends in 11 European Regions, 1200-2013



Eisner, M. (2014). *From Swords to Words – Does Macro-Level Change in Self-Control predict Long-Term Variation in Homicide Rates*. Crime and Justice.

The Norbert Elias Hypothesis

The wider pacification of society and the control of private vengeance as a type of justice requires the subordination of local warlords under rulers who successfully assert a monopoly of legitimate violence.

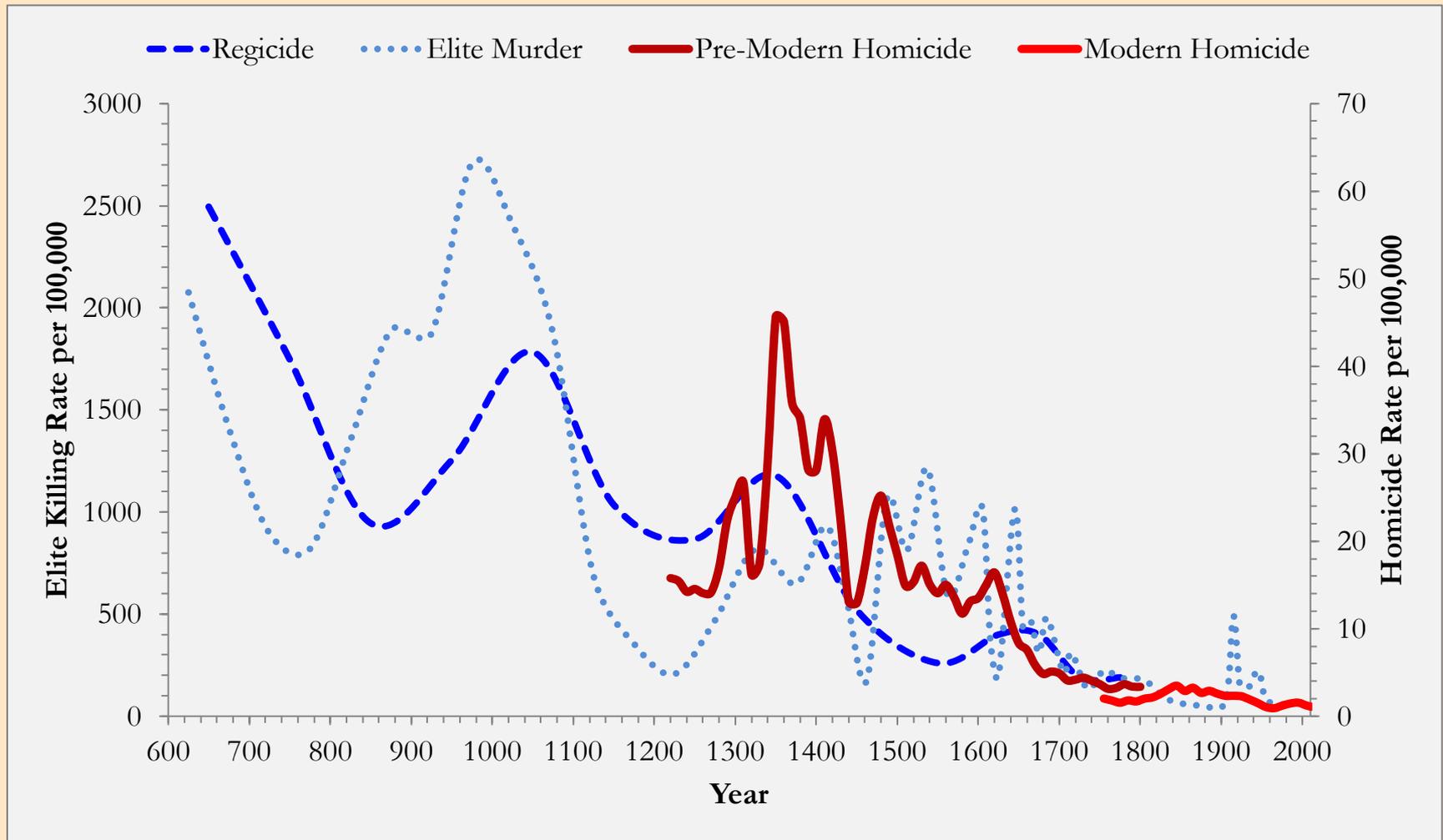
Measuring Elite Violence

- Code all 1628 monarchs in Europe, 600-1800
- Code 25,621 biographical entries of men in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 600-1945.

Eisner, M. (2011). Killing kings: Patterns of regicide in Europe, AD 600–1800. *The British Journal of Criminology*, 51(3), 556-577.

Eisner, M. (2014). *From Swords to Words – Does Macro-Level Change in Self-Control predict Long-Term Variation in Homicide Rates*. Crime and Justice.

Elite Violence and the Decline in Homicide, 600-2013



Source: Eisner, M. (2014). *From Swords to Words – Does Macro-Level Change in Self-Control predict Long-Term Variation in Homicide Rates*. Crime and Justice.

Conclusion

- The rise of centralized power-structures with formalized power-transition mechanisms and the decline in private elite violence preceded the decline in male-to-male homicide in the general population.
- Findings are consistent with the idea that state legitimacy and good governance are preconditions for control over the revenge mechanism.

The Present

Can we see echoes of the revenge mechanism among young people in a highly affluent postmodern society?

Zurich Project on the Social Development from Childhood to Adulthood, z-proso

Target Sample: All children entering year one of one of 56 primary schools in the city of Zurich in the autumn of 2004 (N = 1675).

Main Data Collections: 7 main data collection waves to date, Ages 7, 8, 9, 11, 13, 15, 17. Next wave age 20, 2018.

Participation Rates: 69-86%, last wave 77%, any wave 93%.

Main Study Outcomes: Aggression/violence/delinquency/substance use.

Publications: Around 70 papers in peer reviewed journals.

International Research Network: members in Switzerland, UK, Canada, Spain, Netherlands, Australia.

Funding: Five funding periods, 2003-2016 mainly Jacobs Foundation and Swiss National Science Foundation, since 2017 funded as National Research Infrastructure.

The Victim-Perpetrator Overlap

CRIMINOLOGY

VIOLENCE BEGETS VIOLENCE ... BUT HOW?
A DECISION-MAKING PERSPECTIVE ON THE
VICTIM-OFFENDER OVERLAP*

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Does the experience of victimization lead to feelings of anger and injustice and a desire for retribution, lower guilt and shame in relation to aggressive acts, and hence to more violent behavior?

Findings

1) Victimization → Decision Making

Youth victimised at ages 12/13 report more positive feelings, more expected admiration by friends, less shame if imagining to attack others.

2) Decision Making → Offending

Youth who report more positive feelings, more expected admiration by friends, less shame at age 13 are more likely to commit violent acts at age 15.

3) Indirect (mediated) Effects

Victimization is partly linked to later offending through its effects on the expected emotional benefits of violent acts (“feeling good”).

Violent Ideations in Response to Victimization



Violent ideations are a psychological mechanism that mentally represents future situations of threat and that rehearses strategies of attack, retaliation, and punishment.

Violent ideations keep emotions of anger, hatred and aggression cognitively available and supply motivational energy for retaliation long after the victimization experience.

Does the experience of victimization lead to fantasies of murder, revenge, and cruelty?

Violent Ideations in Response to Victimization

At age 17 we asked z-proso participants about 15 violent ideations during the past 30 days. Three relate to homicide.

Example Item:

*Sometimes people think about things they would never actually do. How about you?
Please indicate how often you thought about these things in the last month.*

I thought about killing someone I know.

- Murray, A. L., Eisner, M., Ribeaud, D. (2016) Development and validation of a brief measure of violent thoughts: The Violent Ideations Scale. *Assessment*. Online First.
- Murray, A. L., Eisner, M., Obsuth, I., & Ribeaud, D. (2017). Situating violent ideations within the landscape of mental health: Associations between violent ideations and dimensions of mental health. *Psychiatry Research*, 249, 70-77.
- Murray, A. L., Obsuth, I., Eisner, M., & Ribeaud, D. (2016). Shaping aggressive personality in adolescence: Exploring cross-lagged relations between aggressive thoughts, aggressive behaviour and self-control. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 97, 1-7.

Findings: Scary Swiss Youth

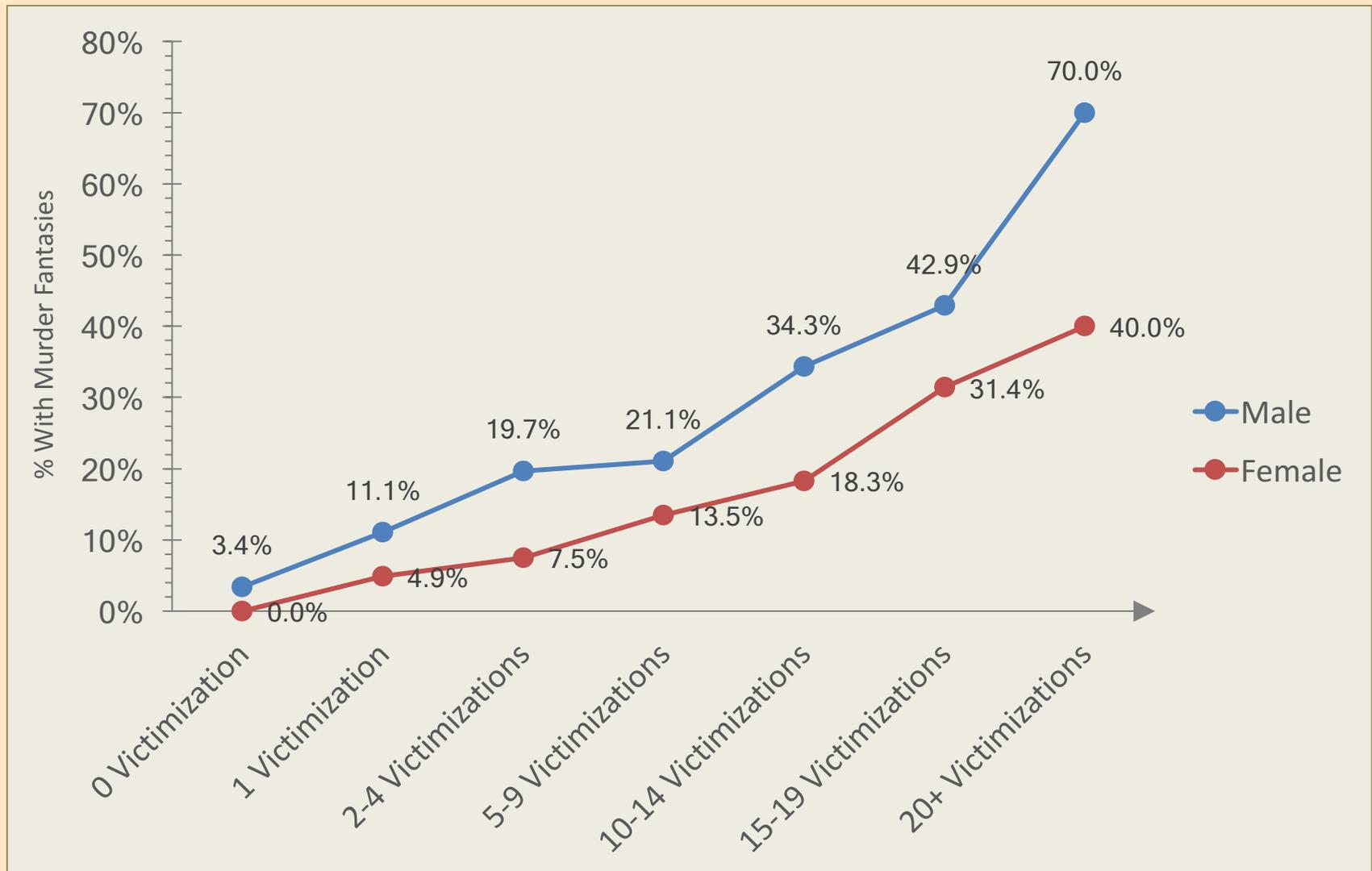
1.49 murder ideations per month per youth aged 17.

Equals approx. **12,516,000** murder ideations per year for Swiss population aged 13-19.

7 actual homicides by perpetrators aged <20 years.

Why does the human (specifically the male adolescent) brain produce such an excess of murder fantasies?

Prevalence of Murder Fantasies at Age 17 as a Function of Poly-victimization at Ages 13-17



Conclusions

- The findings on the victim-perpetrator link and the triggers of homicidal ideations are consistent with evolutionary arguments on revenge mechanism and historical evidence on violence as self-help.
- The findings raise questions about the inner psychological and outer institutional mechanisms that moderate the likelihood that ideations translate into action.

The Future

What needs to be done to reduce violence?

What do we have to better understand?

Our attempt to address the gap....

Evidence for Better Lives



*A global cohort study to tackle violence
against children*

<https://www.vrc.crim.cam.ac.uk/vrcresearch/EBLS>

Evidence for Better Lives Study

Three Main Components



RESEARCH ON CHILD DEVELOPMENT

The EBLs cross-cultural birth cohort study will generate the knowledge required to support positive psychosocial development from the very beginning of life.



POLICY IMPACT

The EBLs impact strategy will ensure that knowledge generated will be widely disseminated and influences national and international violence reduction policies and practices.



CAPACITY BUILDING

Capacity-building activities will support the local expertise in each site as well as strengthen the research infrastructure and collaborative networks needed for sustainable capabilities for promoting positive psychosocial development from early childhood.

Core Features of EBLS

- Consortium of 14 Universities worldwide
- Interdisciplinary
- Policy support by WHO, UNODC, UNODC, Global Partnership to End Violence against Children
- Eight study sites across the world.
- Same methodology, sampling strategy, measurement instruments in all sites
- Geographic focus on medium-sized cities.
- Representative sample of 1500 children and their families in each site.
- Start at last trimester of pregnancy. Data collections at ages pregnancy – 6 months, 18 months 30 months.
- Study design from the onset to allow for long-term continuation of cohort study.

Evidence for
Better Lives



SITES INCLUDED IN THE FEASIBILITY ASSESSMENT AND
POTENTIAL FUTURE SITES FOR THE MAIN STUDY

KINGSTON
University of the West Indies

CLUJ-NAPOCA
Babes-Bolyai University

TARLAI KALAN
Health Services Academy

HUE
Institute for Community Health Research (ICHR)

KOFORIDUA
University of Ghana

RAGAMA
University of Kelaniya

VALENZUELA CITY
University of the Philippines

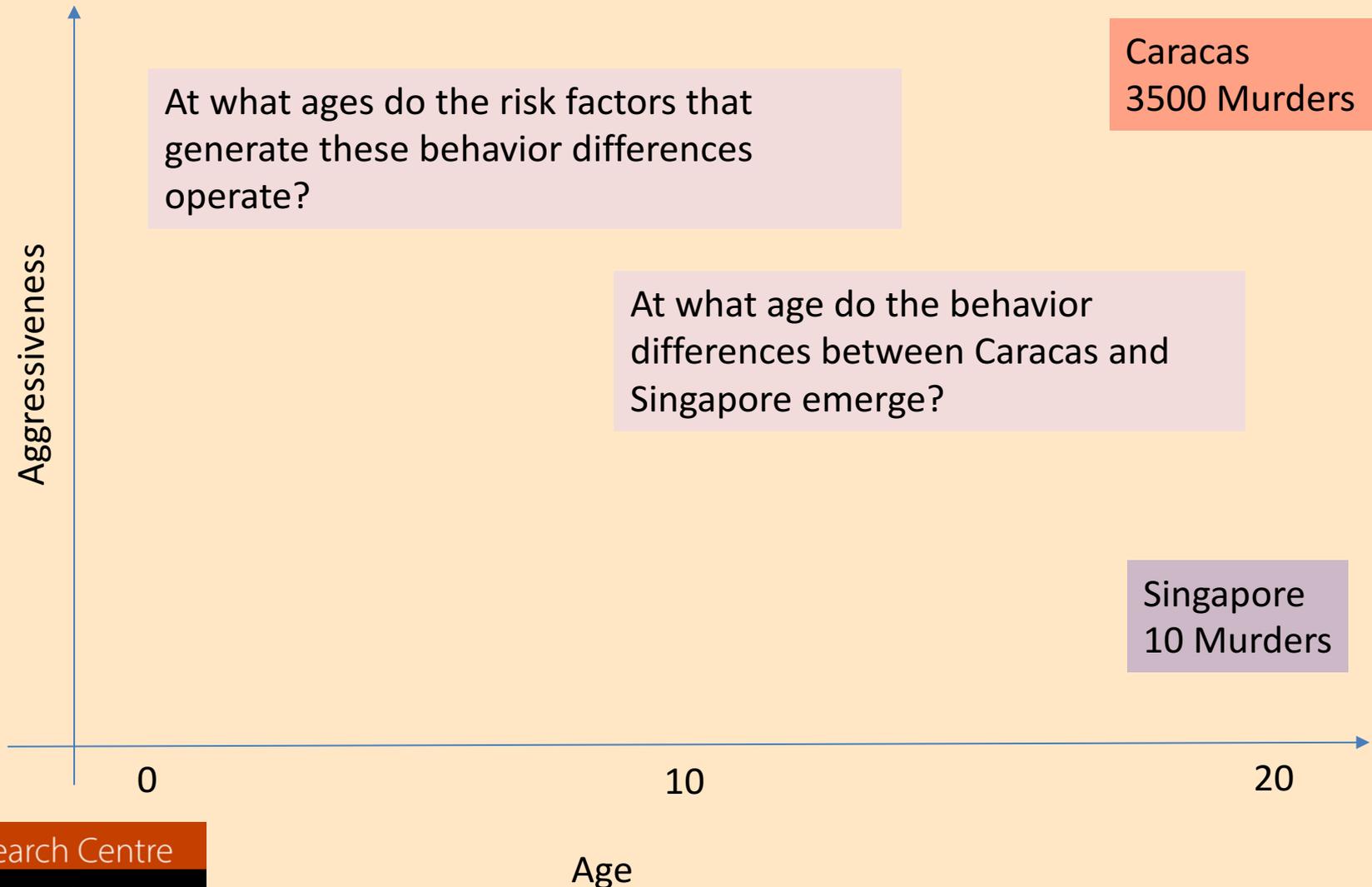
STELLENBOSCH
University of Cape Town /
Stellenbosch University

SEE PROSPECTIVE PARTNER SITES AT THE END OF THIS DOCUMENT

THE STUDY

What big questions could EBLS answer?

The Singapore-Caracas Problem



Could differences already emerge before birth?

- Massive differences globally in exposure of pregnant women to domestic violence, e.g. Jamaica 22%, Denmark 1.8%.
- High levels of IPV during pregnancy seem to map to locations characterised by high levels of patriarchy, conservative values, and where violence and abuse are more normative (Stewart et al., 2017).
- Maternal exposure to violence leads to higher stress.
- Prenatal exposure to violence may lead to epigenetic change that prepares new-borns for a harsher environment including an increased long-term propensity to act out and retaliate.

To Finish - My Plan for the Future

Macro-level historical and
comparative work on violence

Individual-level work on the
developmental dynamics of violence

Policy-related work on the
prevention and reduction of
violence