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HOMICIDE RESEARCH IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE: AN ANALYSIS OF METHODOLOGICAL AND PRACTICAL CHALLENGES WITH PRELIMINARY FINDINGS ON THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF LETHAL VIOLENCE IN CROATIA

The paper critically analyses the methodology and practical aspects of conducting criminological homicide research in Southeast Europe. The analysis is based on two major studies of (lethal) violence: (1) the Balkan Homicide Study – a prosecution and court casefile-based study conducted between 2016 and 2019 in Croatia, Hungary, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Romania, and Slovenia, on a total sample of 2,073 cases involving 2,416 offenders and 2,379 victims; and (2) the Croatian Violence Monitor – a court casefile-based study conducted between 2021 and 2023 in four major Croatian cities (Zagreb, Split, Rijeka and Osijek). The discussion covers key aspects of conceptualising, designing and utilising unique data collection instruments, choice of sampling strategies, data representativeness, normative and statistical context data, as well as practical aspects of empirical fieldwork and data analysis. The aim is to transparently and critically analyse the main conceptual, methodological and practical (dis)advantages of both studies as well as (lethal) violence research more generally. The said

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discussion is rounded up by presenting preliminary findings on the phenomenology of lethal violence in Croatia based on data from the Croatian Violence Monitor. Thereby we aim not only to contribute to a culturally much more aware criminology of (conducting) homicide research, but also to provide for most recently available original empirical data about the phenomenology of lethal violence. Ultimately, the analysed challenges will also highlight specific regional opportunities for further empirical research in the Balkans with proposals on how these might best be explored in future international and European comparative research undertakings.

Keywords: homicide, (lethal) violence, Balkan Homicide Study, Croatian Violence Monitor, Violence Research Lab, casefile analysis

1. INTRODUCTION: (RE)IMAGINING AND (RE)CONSTRUCTING HOMICIDES AND (LETHAL) VIOLENCE

As early as spring 2016, when Hans-Jörg Albrecht and Anna-Maria Getoš Kalac initiated the *Balkan Homicide Study* (BHS)¹, the initial expectation of its overall outcome was to gain empirical insight into the question of whether the Balkans are indeed a rather violent European region, as portrayed in violent Balkan-images and stereotypes.² Due to consistently higher homicide rates throughout Southern Europe when compared to Western Europe, there appears to be a certain level of empirical justification for such violent images and stereotypes of the Balkans.³ Paradoxically, the Balkans do not fit the profile of a high crime region and thus appear to be much safer in terms of street and urban crime.⁴ Now, given that homicides are often used as a proxy for general levels of crime,⁵ this *Balkan-violence-paradox* of higher homi-

¹ For full detail on the BHS as well as relevant conceptual and terminological clarifications regarding key-terms used in the paper at hand (such as: Balkan, homicide, lethal violence etc.) see: *Getoš Kalac 2021a*.

² In more detail: *Getoš Kalac 2021a*, 24-25.

³ See: *UNODC, 2011*, pp. 24-26; *UNODC, 2014*, pp. 23-34. Since the initiation of the BHS more recent homicide data has become available. Although these confirm a steadily declining trend in homicide rates for Southern Europe, the rates still remain slightly higher than those found in Western Europe, see: *UNODC 2019*.

⁴ See: *UNODC 2008*, 23.

⁵ The usage of homicide rates as an indicator for overall levels or other forms of crime (for example violent crime), although quite common, is highly disputable. Not only due to the likely underestimation of the dark figure of homicides (see: *Getoš Kalac 2021a*, 36; *Getoš Kalac & Pribisalić 2020*, 655; *Thiel 2017*; *Bijleveld & Smit 2006*, 196), but also due to the lack of empirical evidence that would (a) confirm such a relationship between homicide rates and other forms of crime, and (b) explain how exactly such a potential relationship works. *Van Breen et al.* recently conducted an extensive literature review on this question and found that homicide might work as an indicator of violent crime in general, but it remains unclear how exactly the two relate. See: *Van Breen et al. 2023*.

cide rates on the one hand, and low general levels of crime on the other, remains extremely intriguing and still desperately awaits to be fully explained. With the BHS, a first attempt was made at addressing the said paradox, hoping that others might follow, especially given the complete lack of any relevant empirical data and comparable studies on the matter and in the region in question.

From a conceptual perspective, with the BHS we opted for a framework that considers homicides to be the deadly outcome of violence – *lethal* violence, and not a unique phenomenon with an essentially different nature – a beast of its own. Therefore, at the very least, the BHS needed to include not only lethal violence (*completed* homicides), but also cases of non-lethal violence (*attempted* homicides).⁶ Our findings justified this conceptual starting point, as we found no solid grounds that would clearly mark (completed) homicides as an essentially different phenomenon when compared to (non-lethal) violence, besides the obvious fact of the lethal consequence. Therefore, it is justified to presume that (completed) homicides – phenomenologically speaking – are not a special or even unique type of (lethal) violence, least of all a beast of its own. Thus, if homicide research that focuses exclusively on completed homicide incidents is considered legitimate and sound, then at least the same standard needs to apply to homicide research that in addition to completed homicides also includes attempted homicides, esp. with regards to those variables displaying no striking differences in their distribution patterns (see table 1).⁷

⁶ Clearly, from such a conceptual point of departure other types of (non-)lethal violence should have been included as well, but out of operational and funding constraints this was not possible. Although with the BHS it was not possible to consistently implement the said conceptual approach and cover a much broader range of violent incidents, the insights from the relevant debates together with the preliminary findings from the BHS pilot study led up to the founding of the *Violence Research Lab* at the Faculty of Law, University of Zagreb. Within its framework, though on a national, rather than a regional level, violence research is conducted based on such a broad conceptual understanding. For more details, see: <https://www.violence-lab.eu>.

⁷ For more details, see *Getoš Kalac* 2021a, 60-63.

Table 1. Similarities between completed and attempted homicides – distribution patterns of different characteristics within incident variables (counting unit: case; N 1,997)⁸

Variable	Value	% Completed	% Attempted
Incident place (N _{valid} 1,976)	rural	46.4	43.2
	urban	37.7	35.1
	capital	15.9	21.7
Incident location (N _{valid} 1,994)	private	74.6	66.7
	public	25.4	33.3
Incident time (N _{valid} 1,908)	evening	37.6	40.4
	afternoon	25.6	25.7
	night	21.8	20.8
	morning	15.0	13.1
Day of the week (N _{valid} 1,994)	Monday	16.8	12.8
	Saturday	16.2	17.7
	Sunday	15.9	17.2
	Friday	15.6	13.8
	Wednesday	12.7	13.3
	Thursday	12.1	12.3
	Tuesday	10.8	13
Number of offenders (N _{valid} 1,995)	one	87.8	90.2
	two	7.6	6.3
	three	3	2.3
	four or more	1.7	1.3
Number of victims (N _{valid} 1,995)	one	90.4	88.9
	two	6.9	8.3
	three	1.8	1.9
	four or more	0.9	0.9
Sexual (N _{valid} 1,903)	not sex-related	96	99.2
	sex-related	4	0.8
Cruel (N _{valid} 1,904)	not cruel	96.6	99.7
	cruel	3.4	0.3
Affective (N _{valid} 1,735)	premeditated	57.2	51.4
	affective	42.6	48.6
Main motive (N _{valid} 1,997)	unclear	43.2	50.6
	revenge	25.3	27.4
	greed	16.9	9.0
	(self-)defense	5.5	5.7
	vigilantism	3.7	3.2
Relationship (N _{valid} 1,966)	non-stranger	88	82.8
	stranger	12	17.2

⁸ Due to the unequal share of completed (42%) and attempted (58%) homicides within the overall sample and an inverted ratio found in the samples from North Macedonia (57/43) and Hungary (54/46) the analysis does not compare the values of the shares as such, but instead looks at the distribution patterns of different characteristics within each variable (Četoš Kalac 2021a, 60-61).

This brings us to the first valuable insight gained from the BHS and from studying other relevant homicide studies, which also reflects well the current state of the art in criminological violence and homicide research, thus explaining why much of our internationally gathered data remains clustered and mutually incomparable:

Unsurprisingly, much of what we currently know about (lethal) violence [...] depends on how and why we look at it. Some would argue that violence is any kind of (non)action causing any sort of harm to any living being. Others, myself included, would argue that violence is the human infliction of physical harm upon another person. Yet others would add to this the need for intentionality, criminal liability or lack of justification on the side of the perpetrator and a lack of consent or provocation on the side of the victim. Thus, one might want to distinguish between violence with a lethal consequence (lethal violence) and homicides, or rather not. This is not merely a minor variation in different approaches to (lethal) violence or (attempted) homicides, but a fundamental conceptual discrepancy, a *Balkanisation of concepts*, which undoubtedly also impacts violence and homicide research, as much as the knowledge it produces. I wonder what the current state of the art in property crime research would look like if we were to start off from comparably distant or Balkanised concepts of the terms 'property' or 'stealing'... we would probably end up at considering all types of crime as some manifestation of stealing, like stealing someone's life, sexual freedom, personal dignity etc. Although legit reasoning lies behind it, such diffusion of different phenomena under the umbrella of property crime would almost certainly create more confusion and misunderstandings than actual criminological knowledge. Violence and its lethal extreme are a tangible, capturable and measurable phenomenon that occurs in reality. As such it can and therefore should be conceptualised and then defined based primarily on objective and empirically measurable elements. Normative constructs are most certainly not among such objective and empirically observable or measurable elements. Criminology in general would do well to develop its own 'criminal vocabulary', just as (lethal) violence/homicide research might want to discuss more vigorously its fundamental concepts and definitions of violence, independently from preconceived disciplinary paradigms or practical convenience. The operational implementability of a purely criminological concept and definition of (lethal) violence is a consequential, but also solvable methodological issue, and therefore no excuse for the ongoing confusion in violence research.⁹

However, as the following table demonstrates, the BHS was never designed to solve the said conceptual challenges and, therefore, to a certain degree it also adds to further *Balkanisation of (European) Homicide Research*¹⁰, by following the well-established include-exclude tactics of research operationalisation (see table 2).

⁹ Cit. *Getoš Kalac* 2021a, 101-102.

¹⁰ See: *Liem* 2021.

Table 2. BHS definition of homicide in 6 participating countries¹¹

	BHS	HR	HU	SI	MK	RO	XK
Attempts	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	-
Lethal assaults	X	X	X	X	X	X	-
Euthanasia	X	✓	X	X	✓	✓	-
Assisted suicide	X	X	✓	X	X	✓	-
Infanticide	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	-
Dangerous driving	X	X	X	X	X	X	-
Abortion	X	X	X	X	X	X	-
Unintentional homicide	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	-
Lethal traffic offences	X	X	X	X	X	X	-
Lethal sexual offences	X	X	X	X	X	X	-
Lethal property offences	X	X	X	X	X	X	-
Counting unit	Case & Offender & Victim						

Legend: HR – Croatia; HU – Hungary; SI – Slovenia; MK – North Macedonia; RO – Romania; XK – Kosovo; ✓ – yes; X – no.

We see that even in the case of regionally and culturally ‘close’ societies, there is considerable variation in the national normative definitions of homicides. However, a far bigger challenge than simply reconciling these rather obvious national offence variations, is to resolve the countless normative complexities and methodological pitfalls inherent to comparative homicide research justice case files and thus covering a certain period of time. In our study's sample this turned out to be a maximum period of 28 years between the year in which the oldest and the most recent homicides occurred. With the BHS, being an observational study, we aimed for a cross-sectional snapshot of the most current features of (non)lethal violence. But by having to sample the casefiles according to the years in which the decisions/verdicts became final (2010 and 2016), without any sampling data obtainable on the years in which the homicides actually occurred, we necessarily ended up drawing incidents predating the target period from 2010 until 2016, occasionally dating back as far as 1989. Now, notwithstanding the added value of empirically confirming that the BHS coun-

¹¹ In order to enable comparison of BHS homicide definitions by country, the classification purposely adopts the outline of a classification introduced by *Smit et al.* 2012, 15, which highlights differences in four international sources of homicide statistics (United Nations Surveys on Crime Trends and the Operations of Criminal Justice Systems, Eurostat, European Sourcebook of crime and criminal justice statistics, World Health Organization) (*Getoš Kalac* 2021a, 48).

tries' criminal justice systems are devastatingly slow even in cases of the most severe types of crime, such a long period essentially undermines any meaningful analysis of sentencing features within the overall sample. As the following table shows, the national variations in the normative homicide and sentencing frameworks in view of the country sample's oldest and most recent cases analysed (the year when the homicide occurred) are extreme (see table 3).

Table 3. Classification of homicides and sentencing ranges (in years) in BHS countries¹²

	Basic homicide	Sentencing range	Qualified homicide	Sentencing range	Privileged homicide	Sentencing range	Negligent homicide	Sentencing range
HR	Murder	5-20	Aggravated murder	10-40	Manslaughter	1-10	Negligent homicide	0,5-5
					Infanticide	0,25-8		
					On demand	0,5-8		
HU	Murder	5-15	Aggravated murder	10-Life	Voluntary manslaughter	2-8	Negligent homicide	1-5
	Aiding & abetting suicide of vulnerable person	5-15	Infanticide					
XK	Murder	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
MK	Murder	5-15	Aggravated murder	10-Life	Manslaughter	1-5	Negligent homicide	0,5-5
					Infanticide	0,25-3		
					Murder out of noble motives	0,5-5		
RO	Murder	10-20	Aggravated murder	10-Life	Infanticide	1-7	Professional negligent homicide	2-15
					Determining or helping suicide	1-20		
					On demand	1-5	Negligent homicide	1-5
SI	Murder	5-15	Aggravated murder	15-30	Manslaughter	1-10	Negligent homicide	0,5-5

Legend: HR Croatia; HU Hungary; XK Kosovo; MK North Macedonia; RO Romania; SI Slovenia

In terms of data analysis and interpretation of findings this essentially means that (looking at the overall BHS sample) sentencing outcomes normatively may range from 5 to 20 years for basic homicides, from 10 years to life imprisonment for qualified homicides, from 1 month (0.08 years) to 20 years for privileged homicides, and from 6 months (0.5 years) to 15 years for negligent homicides. Given such large normative range the analysis and comparison of sentencing decisions appears questionable. Thus, in Croatia, for example, in certain cases even a maximum of 50 years of

¹² Getoš Kalac 2021a, 51.

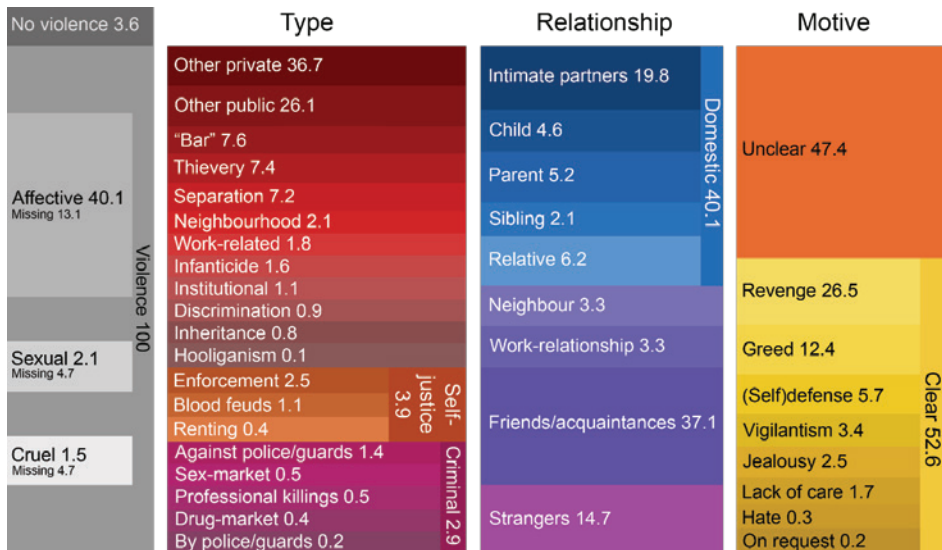
imprisonment can be imposed, compared to Romania's type of life sentence, which in practice only exceptionally turns out to be 50 years, whereby criminal law commonly also foresees both judicial and normative mitigation of sentences below the legally prescribed minimums in the phase of verdict delivery. Considering the aforementioned together with the arbitrariness of prosecutorial strategizing that usually determines an incident's qualification as a basic, qualified or privileged offence, one wonders what the sentencing data we collected essentially reflect, let alone actually measure. Most sentencing data collected through homicide research, particularly cross-national one, faces the same challenge. Due to such normative disparities across space and time, it remains an open question whether and how the data on sentencing decisions – from the BHS or any alike comparative homicide study – might best be utilised in the analysis and how their findings might add to our understanding of violence (in the Balkans).

These conceptual and methodological challenges are not unique to the BHS as a casefile-based study and in hindsight numerous research design decisions would probably have been taken differently. However, due to the underlying conceptual clustering and lack of uniformity in international and European homicide research, it all inevitably comes down to two alternatives: (1) replicating previously conducted studies and applying their (tested) methodologies while (unconsciously or even unwillingly) having to adopt the same conceptual and disciplinary perspectives they build upon, or (2) developing unique methodologies for a research design deemed best fitted to the research questions, a study's purpose and its specific cultural setting. Neither one of these two alternatives appear to be superior to the other. On a side note, it needs to be stressed that most (inter)national research funding agencies explicitly declare ineligible research proposals that are a replication of previously conducted studies, or even part of cross-national comparative data collections that utilise existing and/or joint methodology or research design. Although this is clearly not a valid scientific consideration when it comes to deciding on replicating or rather innovating homicide research, it is however a key practical decision that instantly rules out either replication or most (inter)national research funding.

What is to be gained from replication in terms of international comparison (presuming that this is even possible and feasible in highly diverse cultural settings) is adequately compensated by the scientific value of continuously re-imagining and re-constructing homicides and the way in which we study violence. Case in point: if with the BHS we had (mainly) replicated previous homicide studies, attempted homicides surely would not have been included in our analysis, and most certainly there would have been no need for developing a data-based violence typology (see figure 1), which in principle is the best fit and the most meaningful approach

for an explorative study that does not work from a specific theoretical perspective, nor aims for testing any specific theory on (lethal) violence. Thus, the whole endeavour of developing a solemnly data-based typology of homicides in a very profound way provided deep insight into the countless weaknesses of the current typologies that are commonly used in criminology to systematise lethal violence. This becomes particularly evident when designing, defining and then classifying offenders' motives,¹³ as well as determining whether an incident was committed premeditatedly or rather affectively, relying exclusively on data contained in court and prosecution case files.¹⁴

Figure 1. BHS Violence Typology with shares of subcategories within each category (N_{violence} 1,997; counting unit: case; 0.1% missing data for type; 1.6% missing data for relationship; 0% missing data for motive)¹⁵



¹³ The general lack of a coherent transdisciplinary conceptualisation of crime motives across all major fields engaged in crime research, such as psychology, criminology, law, sociology or (forensic) psychiatry, to name but a few, is not only a well-recognised obstacle to homicide classifications (see for example Parker & McKinley 2018, 78-79), but also a fundamental practical sticking point with far-reaching consequences for distinguishing between legitimate and criminal violence (see Decker 1996, 427-428), as well as between homicidal violence and other types of violence.

¹⁴ See in more detail: Getoš Kalac 2021a, 40-46.

¹⁵ See in full detail: BHS Typology 2021 available online at <https://www.balkan-criminology.eu/bhs-typology> and Getoš Kalac 2021a, 42.

In sum – there are numerous (more and less) evident conceptual challenges encountered in homicide research that significantly impact the methodology and thus eventually the findings of any given study. With the BHS we faced all of them and resolved most of them, while conducting the study in a research setting that is incomparable to that in which the *European Homicide Monitor*¹⁶ (EHM) for example was being carried out. This brings us to the next topic – the relevance and impact of diverse cultural settings on (conducting) homicide research and analysing its findings.

2. CONTEXTUALISING HOMICIDE RESEARCH IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE

It is needless to point out that even within Europe, let alone globally, we find an extreme diversity of social, cultural, economic and thus criminal justice and research settings. Looking at a rather straightforward indicator of national research settings in the European Union (EU), such as the R&D expenditure (as % of GDP) in EU member states in 2021, one instantly realises that for example core EHM countries such as Sweden (3.35%), Finland (2.99%) and the Netherlands (2.25%) in all likelihood provide for a far better research setting, than core BHS countries such as Hungary (1.65%), Croatia (1.24%) and Romania (0.47%), with core EHM countries being well above (or around) the EU average (2.26%), compared to core BHS countries that all fall well below the said EU average.¹⁷

The question, therefore, is neither whether nor how such settings differ, but rather whether and how such difference impacts criminological (homicide) research and to what extent this might be relevant in terms of the knowledge produced. Here with the BHS we obtained valuable insights into all relevant aspects of research operationalisation, whereby we argue that the key aspect is not necessarily (only) the subaverage R&D state expenditure, but rather the informal “working around the official system” when conducting research and securing its funding in a “Balkan Way”.¹⁸

The building and maintaining of research networks throughout the Balkans predominantly relies on personal contacts, rather than formal institutional cooperation frameworks. The same can be said for obtaining access to research funding stemming from national sources, gaining access to criminal justice agencies and their data, or even successfully conducting the fieldwork when it comes to data collection. In this sense we argue that researchers’ personal reputation and individual status

¹⁶ See *Liem et al.* 2013.

¹⁷ See *Eurostat* 2023.

¹⁸ In more detail: *Getoš Kalac* 2021a, 28-32; *Getoš Kalac* 2021b.

(which might, but do not need to overlap with scientific reputation and professional status) regionally play a key role in securing a broad variety of assets which eventually determine the rise or demise of research undertakings. Although this might on first thought be seen as a regional handicap, in essence it is quite comparable to Western Europe, whereby here the most striking difference seems to be the prominence of the institutional reputation and status, which more often than not clearly overlaps with scientific reputation and professional status.

In such a culturally defined criminological research and criminal justice setting domestic academics commonly successfully navigate their research endeavours through a complexly intertwined labyrinth of various informal networks and gatekeepers, provided they are equipped with the necessary personal reputation and individual status. In contrast, foreign academics more often than not simply fail to recognise the prominent importance of such a cultural setting, or even (unknowingly) try to impose their own research culture, quite frequently insisting on its (scientific) superiority. Now, whoever has managed to successfully conduct comparative international criminological research will know that the more diverse the different research and criminal justice cultures in question are, the less likely it is that such a culturally insensitive approach will be feasible. This might to a large degree also explain, why the Balkan region in many criminological areas still is an empirically uncharted territory.¹⁹

In an attempt to briefly describe the Balkan's criminological research setting, it is worth mentioning that criminology's standing as a discipline is largely impacted by its frequent institutional anchoring at public universities, whereas criminological research institutes are almost non-existent. Research focuses on national rather than comparative issues and approaches, with homicide research currently being heavily dominated by research on femicides and intimate partner violence. We find a rather low level of scientific competitiveness embedded in a context of booming privately funded universities and faculties that puts the focus of the public ones on "struggling for students". Here scientific research is not perceived as an asset, resulting in its underappreciation and marginalisation. That is also well reflected in research funding which is mainly state-funded due to a non-existent culture of private foundations. Thus, the region lacks the tradition of state-commissioned independent research into crime phenomena, leading to a lack of interest by both researchers and practitioners to jointly investigate crime and its prevention or to engage in evidence-based crime policy. In sum, if homicide research is conducted in the Balkans at all, and that

¹⁹ With the *Balkan Criminology Network* (BCNet), a former Max Planck Partner Group established between the University of Zagreb's Faculty of Law and the former Max Planck Institute for Foreign and International Criminal Law in Freiburg, this challenge was addressed and the region (re)introduced to European criminology. For more details, see: www.balkan-criminology.eu.

is truly a rarity,²⁰ then it is commonly done on a solely national level and mainly by replicating existing research designs from abroad, with only limited expertise on adjusting such designs to the country- or region-specific cultural context.²¹ Even in the case of comparative homicide studies like the BHS, their data and findings for all the aforementioned reasons remain largely non-comparable to data and findings from other relevant homicide studies.²²

Coming back to the question on the extent to which all the afore discussed issues might be relevant in terms of the knowledge that such *Balkan settings* produce, we would answer: to the extent the researchers' personal reputation and individual status actually overlap with their scientific reputation and professional status. The larger the overlap, the higher the probability that the knowledge produced is of solid scientific quality. In terms of a culturally aware criminology, this is surely a valuable insight to bear in mind, particularly when building research collaborations and undertaking data collection efforts initiated from outside the region, but also when utilising research findings and various types of publications originating from the region. With the BHS we were well aware of the briefly outlined challenges as well as their probable impact and likely relevance for the findings of our research. Unable to fully resolve all these challenges we opted for maximal transparency, esp. regarding a cautious use of the BHS typology and data.²³

At the bright side of things, however, and despite a unfavourable research setting with extremely modest funding, the BHS is proof that solid scientific homicide research in the Balkans is both possible and feasible, as the following figure shows (see figure 2). Especially in those regions of the world where comparative homicide studies have not been conducted at all, the value of obtaining and publishing first data is in itself tremendous, as it paves the way for further explorations, analyses and theory testing.

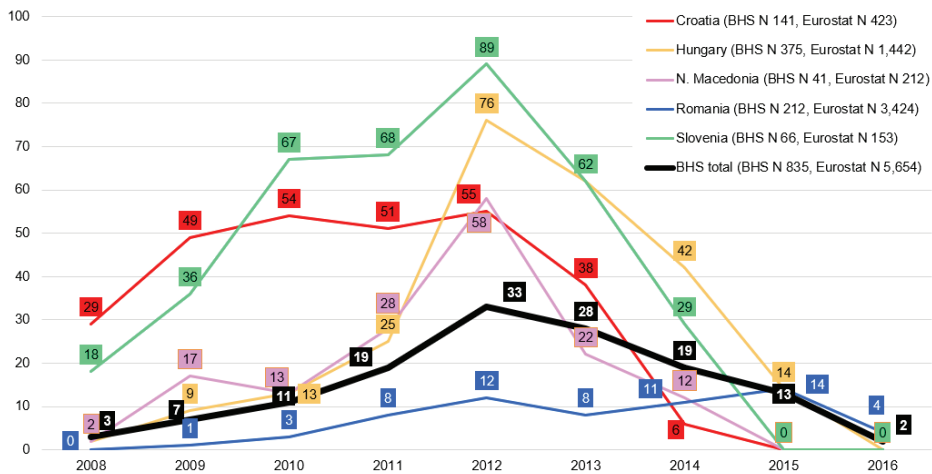
²⁰ So, for example, none of the Balkan countries participated in the EHM.

²¹ Here the BHS is no exception, as it builds on a research instrument initially designed to investigate lethal violence in Uruguay, whereby its adjustment to the Balkan context surely would have benefited from a more informed input on lessons learned by conducting homicide studies such as the EHM.

²² *Liem & Getoš Kalac* 2019.

²³ *Getoš Kalac* 2021a, 44-46.

Figure 2. BHS representativeness for BHS suspected homicide offenders as a share of Eurostat suspected homicide offenders between 2008 and 2016²⁴



On a last note it also needs to be underlined that there is most certainly a lack of capacity and resources in every meaning of the two words, which hinders an optimal scientific utilisation of the BHS data. That explains why thus far only one major publication could be made available based on our study, whereby this too depended considerably on capacity and resources stemming from outside the Balkans.²⁵ Here in particular the kind advice and expertise provided by Marieke Liem and Hans-Jörg Albrecht must be thankfully acknowledged, together with the funding provided by the former Max Planck Institute for Foreign and International Criminal Law. This challenge of lacking capacity and resources for a full (national) utilisation of empirical research undertakings that are part of larger international comparative studies might best be solved by teaming up national researchers with foreign ones that already have experience and proficiency in complex homicide data analysis and English language publishing. That is also the approach being currently explored for a prospective in-depth analysis of the BHS datasets. Needless to point out that this is one major reason why it would be extremely feasible for studies like the BHS to include a core set of standard basic variables compatible with methodologies of previous firmly established homicide studies. Further reasons demonstrating the necessity of such an inclusion are briefly discussed in the following section.

²⁴ Getoš Kalac 2021a, 48.

²⁵ As to date and to the best of our knowledge, none of the nationally available BHS datasets, let alone the regional dataset, have been explored by any of the BHS researchers for national or international dissemination of findings.

3. LESSONS LEARNED FROM DESIGNING AND CONDUCTING THE BHS AND THE CROVIMO

Regarding many aspects of designing and conducting the BHS, and later on the CroViMo, but most of all the actual fieldwork, there is, generally speaking, a certain lack in expertise on relevant methodological and practical issues. This includes sampling, recruiting and training of field workers, on-the-spot case analysis, continuous data quality control etc., sometimes turning the whole exercise into a “learning by doing” lesson, occasionally leading to a waste of resources that are scarce anyway and late detection of research design deficits. Now, one would be mistaken to think that such challenges might be solved by simply copy-pasting the “what works” from previous European and/or international homicide studies, as all of the encountered challenges we faced with the BHS and thus with the CroViMo are simply a reflection of the specific cultural contexts that the studies had to be conducted in. This cultural context clearly also includes the lack of basic research funding, institutional support and broadly speaking the sheer impossibility to get anything done without connections and/or status. In view of this, the question arises to what extent (and if at all) methodologies, standards and protocols adopted in other relevant homicide studies could have been utilised for the BHS and whether this indeed would have been practicable and eventually ensured a higher quality of data?

What is the protocol for a field worker's encountering of an empty court registry on the day of an agreed access to court files? Or how to handle a registry employee that simply did not pull out the agreed upon court files and is reluctant to do so on-the-spot? What project budget could justify as eligible the cost of a large box of chocolate and a “brick of coffee” or a similar “token of appreciation” that would please a registry employee into pulling out the files? How would one even formulate the fieldwork manual for such a commonly encountered situation? “In case of encountering difficulties with access to files, be instructed to persuade the relevant official with ‘small tokens of appreciation’ you previously acquired by either paying for them out of your own pocket, or by charging the costs to the research budget based on a fitting receipt for any other actually eligible cost”? There are countless practical issues which would be needed for a similarly worded provision in a “Balkan/Croatia field work manual” of a homicide study in order to resolve travel requests and insurance while conducting fieldwork, implement and enforce confidentiality agreements when handling sensitive data from court files and many other issues, whereby the whole endeavour commonly relies on everyone's volunteering, with funding only covering the basic costs such as travel and accommodation, excluding per diems or provisions.

Even after having gathered valuable experience through designing and conducting the BHS, only a few years later we conducted the CroViMo, still facing many of the same challenges, including the different counting units for analyses (CroViMo cut it

down from 5 to 3: case, offender and victim), sampling issues (lack of publicly available sampling data), missing data in the court files, to name but a few.

Clearly, a simple copy-pasting of the “what works” in other cultural contexts and research settings is not the answer. Obviously, the diversity of research cultures in conducting homicide research has an impact on the research itself and should be considered as relevant when assessing a given study's findings, but also such studies' overall value and contribution to criminology as a discipline. With regard to the diversity of research cultures, this is not necessarily to be considered in terms of the categories of “good” or “bad”, but should rather be more transparently utilised in contextualising homicide research as such, not only its findings, but also by disclosing the relevant background information one seldomly reads about in the final publications. Such information would be extremely valuable to collect as well and a comparative analysis based on this type of information might lead the way to a culturally diversified standardisation of the operational aspects all homicide research struggles with.

In sum, and looking back at how we designed and conducted the BHS, if we were to do it all over again within the same setting and bound by the same parameters, the two crucial aspects we would potentially revise would be to (1) vastly reduce the amount of procedural details based on case files, while increasing the amount of information about the incident itself by designing a standardised incident textual description (as we did with the CroViMo based on BHS experience), and (2) include a set of core variables compatible with previous homicide studies, such as for example the EHM and the BHS within the CroViMo (as we did with the CroViMo). We doubt that any intervention with regard to all other aspects of the BHS (and later on the CroViMo) would have made a significant difference, particularly not in terms of quantity or quality of data, let alone usability of data or ease of analysis. Even in case of a considerably larger research budget the BHS's rise and demise would still have been dependent on sheer force of will, luck and good will of all involved researchers – this being an insight we doubt to be applicable exclusively for the Balkan- or Croatia-setting, but rather reflective of empirical criminological research in general, although compared to other European regions this is an aspect that is clearly far more consequential in this part of the world due to the mediocre research (funding) setting.

Although the CroViMo drew lessons from the challenges encountered and solutions found by conducting the BHS, it still faced many obstacles that proved difficult to overcome. Issues such as the lack of publicly available sampling data, or the complexity of the questionnaire with three different counting units (case, offender, and victim), continued to present significant hurdles. Additionally, the CroViMo encountered new challenges, including the pandemic and the earthquake in Zagreb, which significantly impacted the fieldwork and physical access to case files. Despite these challenges, the CroViMo made numerous improvements based on the lessons

learned from the BHS. Four regional labs were established early on, which were primarily responsible for conducting fieldwork in their respective regions. We also organized multiple workshops for field workers to clarify the project's scope and the questionnaire, esp. focusing on unification of data collection methodology. Efforts were made to reduce and rephrase variables in the questionnaire where we observed a high incidence of missing data. Furthermore, we transitioned from paper-and-pencil questionnaires to an online format – a change that came with its own set of (dis)advantages. Overall, the experience gained from the BHS was invaluable, and while with the CroViMo we successfully navigated some challenges, others persisted. The journey from the BHS through the CroViMo underscores the dynamic and evolving nature of conducting comprehensive empirical research in a changing social, environmental and research contexts.

4. PRELIMINARY FINDINGS ON THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF LETHAL VIOLENCE IN CROATIA

Within this section we first analyse in what way the lessons learned from the BHS were utilised in order to conceptually and methodologically upgrade the CroViMo. This is followed by providing insights into the continuities between the BHS and the CroViMo in terms of both studies' scope and aim, in order to allow for an assessment of the compatibility of both studies' findings. Last but not least, the final part of this section contains an analysis of first findings on the phenomenology of lethal violence in Croatia based on the most recently available CroViMo data.

4.1. CroViMo Conceptualisation and Methodology – Lessons Learned from the BHS

Conceptually, as with the BHS, the CroViMo builds on a framework that understands homicides as the fatal outcome of violence – lethal violence, rather than a distinct 'homicide phenomenon' of a fundamentally different nature – a beast of its own. Consequently, at a minimum, the BHS was designed to encompass not just lethal violence (completed homicides) but also non-lethal violence (attempted homicides). Ideally, other forms of (non-)lethal violence would have been included as well, but operational and financial limitations made this infeasible. Although it was not possible to fully implement this conceptual approach within the BHS, the insights from relevant discussions and the preliminary findings from the BHS pilot study culminated in the establishment of the Violence Research Lab at the University of Zagreb's Faculty of Law. Here, violence research was undertaken on a national scale, guided by this comprehensive conceptual understanding including a broad spectrum of violent incidents.

The BHS revealed that, even among regionally and culturally similar societies, significant variations exist in the national normative definitions of homicides. Addressing this variability within the CroViMo, especially when translating our definition into a normative framework, was crucial. A key insight from the CroViMo is the profound and positive impact that a truly multidisciplinary dialogue with peers from a wide array of disciplines can have on the direction and conception of research, particularly on violence. This field attracts interest from a diverse range of disciplines beyond criminology and criminal law, including social work, psychology, forensic medicine, psychiatry, pedagogy, sociology, and criminalistics. Thus, engaging in discussions about concepts, definitions, and terminology with CroViMo team members from the criminal justice sector provided additional insights and valuable advice on system operations and strategies to enhance the early detection and prosecution of violence, especially against particularly vulnerable victim groups.

The CroViMo also gained substantial insights from the BHS fieldwork. The CroViMo team acknowledged the challenges that they would face in sampling, such as the fact that Croatia still needs to enhance the accessibility of state-provided data. Thus, the CroViMo team adopted best practices from the BHS, initially utilizing data from the Croatian Bureau of Statistics (DZS), then from court records, focusing on the year of the final judgment for sampling. From the BHS experience, the CroViMo team understood the importance of having an expert from the specific region where the fieldwork was to be conducted. Consequently, the CroViMo established Regional Labs in each region of fieldwork (Zagreb, Split, Rijeka, and Osijek) and appointed experienced researchers as heads of these Regional Labs.²⁶ Their responsibilities included coordinating fieldwork in their regions, recruiting field workers, liaising with courts, organizing court visits, coordinating meetings with headquarters, and writing reports. The lessons learned from the BHS highlighted the importance of field workers having a legal background, as their tasks involve collecting data from court files. They must know where exactly in the case files to look for the relevant data, how to interpret the information, and understand the flow of the criminal justice process, all of which affect the quality and duration of fieldwork. The CroViMo team organized workshops for field workers in each region to familiarize them with and clarify the CroViMo questionnaire and to present the project's scope. It is crucial for field researchers to comprehend both the project's scope and the instruments used, as this influences both the quantity and the quality of the data collected. The CroViMo questionnaire reduced the number of counting units from 5 to 3 (case, offender and victim). Additionally, the CroViMo team revised and rephrased the variables that had a high incidence of missing data in the BHS.

²⁶ Assist. Prof. Dr. Reana Bezić, Head of Violence Research Lab in Zagreb, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Lucija Sokanović, Head of Violence Research Lab in Split, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Marko Mrakovčić, Head of Violence Research Lab in Rijeka, Prof. Dr. Goran Livazović, Head of Violence Research Lab in Osijek.

Incorporating the lessons learned from the BHS, the CroViMo team recognized the limitations associated with employing paper-and-pencil questionnaires for data collection. Such traditional methods posed significant logistical challenges, including the physical distribution and collection of questionnaires, data entry errors, and the time-consuming process of manually inputting data into electronic formats for analysis. To mitigate these issues and enhance efficiency, the CroViMo opted for an online questionnaire platform. Transitioning to an online format for questionnaires indeed addressed many of the logistical and data management challenges inherent to paper-based methods. It facilitated broader and more rapid distribution, simplified the process of data collection, and significantly reduced the risk of data entry errors. Moreover, the online platform allowed for real-time data analysis and enabled the team to easily reach field workers across diverse geographical locations without the constraints of physical distribution. However, this shift introduced a different set of challenges that the CroViMo team had to navigate. First, there was the issue of using digital platform for data collection. Not all field workers were comfortable or familiar with using the digital platform. Concerns regarding internet access and digital divide became apparent. In response to these challenges, the CroViMo team employed several strategies, including simplifying the questionnaire interface, providing instructions and support for field workers.

Despite these hurdles, the transition to an online questionnaire platform represented a pivotal step forward for the CroViMo field work compared to the BHS, offering valuable insights into the trade-offs between traditional and digital methods of data collection in violence research. This experience underscored the importance of flexibility, adaptability, and the continuous evaluation of methodologies to address emerging challenges and leverage new opportunities in the field of social science research.

It is important to note that while the CroViMo team was aware of some obstacles and challenges related to the design and execution from the BHS, it was not possible to overcome all of them with the CroViMo (as mentioned in chapter 3). However, the CroViMo also encountered new obstacles and challenges, such as the pandemic and the earthquake in Zagreb, which significantly impacted fieldwork. The most valuable lesson learned from the BHS and confirmed by the CroViMo is that with sufficient time and commitment, it is possible to overcome any challenge encountered.

4.2. Scope and Aim of the CroViMo and Compatibility with BHS

The CroViMo project confirmed the complexity of defining and researching violence within criminological and normative frameworks. The primary challenge of the CroViMo project was not crafting a flawless normative definition of violence that unravels centuries of legal doctrine. Instead, the challenge lay in adapting a crimino-

logical definition of violence to work within specific normative contexts. This adaptation involved embracing “subject-elasticity” and “scope-flexibility”, which reflects a broadening and dissolving of disciplinary boundaries to include various manifestations of violence that may not fit traditional legal paradigms but are crucial for criminological research.²⁷ Subject-elasticity allows for the inclusion of acts that only partially meet the CroViMO definition of violence, such as attempted murder or threats, acknowledging the fluid nature of human behaviour and violence itself. The CroViMo working definition of violence is straightforward: any intentional physical harming or killing of another person.²⁸ This definition is intentionally broad to capture the full range of violent behaviours. All crimes and misdemeanours were scrutinized both through their legal definitions, found within the Croatian Criminal Code (CCC) and misdemeanour codes, and their practical applications as detected from relevant case law. This analysis aimed to determine the extent to which the said normative definitions align with the CroViMo definition of violence. As presented in the relevant CroViMo Manuals²⁹ three categories of violence-related offenses emerged:

- The first category encompasses offenses that are clearly violent, aligning perfectly with the criminological definition of violence. This includes crimes such as genocide, terrorism, murder, and rape, and thus fits the BHS definition.
- The second category covers offenses that are somewhat ambiguous or borderline. While they fit the criminological definition of violence, they do not do so completely, for example the crimes of aggression, kidnapping, sexual harassment and domestic violence. These borderline cases are included in the CroViMo to explore their characteristics and boundaries in real-world scenarios. Although their legal definitions might not fully match the criminological perspective, specific instances categorized under these offenses could indeed represent clear cases of violence when examined individually. The BHS does not contain this category.
- The third category includes offenses that, from a strictly legal standpoint, do not qualify as violence at all. These are considered misfits when viewed through the normative lens. However, practical instances of violence in this category may still be found behind these legal classifications.

²⁷ See in full detail the 3 CroViMo Manuals on the empirical and normative aspects of criminological violence research and on criminological violence research in more general terms, available online: <https://www.violence-lab.eu/publications/manuals/>.

²⁸ Thereby the CroViMo definition purposefully and in line with its transdisciplinary conceptual framework focused on the violence itself and the victim-perspective, rather than on normative perceptions of the offenders' internal or external characteristics, such as their mental capacity, culpability or excusability. Whether or not a violent offender *tempore criminis* is held mentally capable or acted violently in a normatively justifiable way therefore becomes irrelevant for the criminological analysis of the phenomenology of violence itself and the suffering it imposes on the victim. The victims' suffering is undisputable in case of both completed and attempted lethal violence and exists regardless of whether or not the offender may be normatively excused, justified, etc.

²⁹ For more details, see: Getoš Kalac & Šprem 2018; Getoš Kalac & Bezić 2019.

This approach also involves reinterpreting and reorganizing legal materials to better align with criminological objectives, as demonstrated by the Violence Lab's creation of its own list of criminal offences from various chapters of the CCC (classified into 3 categories) that are seen as violence. This reorganization is crucial for addressing the challenges posed by the broad or imprecise descriptions of prohibited behaviour in criminal law, which may conflate physical violence with other forms of violence or overlap in their coverage of violent acts. The CroViMO project emphasizes the necessity of adapting criminological research methodologies to overcome the constraints of normative legal frameworks, thereby enhancing the understanding of violence in its various forms and contexts. This innovative approach seeks to capture the entirety of criminally relevant violence, including less severe and borderline cases, to provide a comprehensive view of violence's societal impact.

In conclusion, methodologically, the CroViMo and BHS complement each other perfectly. However, when comparing the scope of both studies, it is evident that the BHS out of practical reasons needed to limit itself to a narrower scope of violent offences (category 1), whereas the CroViMo was able to capture a much broader scope of violent incidents (categories 1 and 2) and on a deeper level of phenomenological detail.

4.3. First Findings on the Phenomenology of Lethal Violence in Croatia

As mentioned previously, the scope of the CroViMo is much broader than that of the BHS. Therefore, the following analyses focuses only on those findings on the phenomenology of lethal violence in Croatia that are comparable to the BHS: Homicide Art. 110 CCC, Aggravated Homicide Art. 111 CCC and Serious bodily harm resulting in death Art. 120 CCC. The sample includes only cases finally adjudicated between 2017 and 2021 (a five-year period), whereas the sample includes cases from four municipal courts in Croatia: Zagreb, Split, Osijek, and Rijeka. The fieldwork was conducted in Zagreb in 2021 and 2022 and in the other three jurisdictions in 2022 and 2023.

4.3.1. Completed vs attempted homicide

Considering that an attempted crime (in legal terms, at least) means that the offender has taken all the steps necessary for the crime to be completed, it is quite dubious when homicide research relying on data sourced from the criminal justice system does not include attempted but only completed homicides.³⁰ The CroViMo analysed 38% completed and 62% attempted homicide cases where the counting unit is the offender (Nlethal 57; Nnon-lethal 35). Such an approximate 40/60 ratio

³⁰ For more details, see *Getoš Kalac* 2021a, 60-63.

of completed vs. attempted homicides in the total sample corresponds to the BHS sample. There are no major differences between completed and attempted homicides in the CroViMO sample when it comes to the distribution pattern of different characteristics within the following variables (Table 4.), with comparable findings obtained through the BHS.

Table 4 shows that most completed and attempted cases in the sample are homicide cases under the jurisdiction of County Court in Zagreb, committed in a private location³¹, involving one offender and one victim, as non sex related and non-cruel offences. There is not much difference between completed and attempted homicides within the variables except in the case of cruelty. Completed cases have more cases defined as cruel than attempted cases (40/14). The CroViMo sample contains a larger share of cases defined as cruel³² than the BHS sample.

Table 4. Similarities between completed and attempted homicides – distribution patterns of different characteristics within incident variables (counting unit: offender; N 92, except in case of number of victims where the counting unit is victim N=94)

Variable	Value	% Completed	% Attempted
Criminal offence (N _{valid} 92)	Homicide	60.0	82.5
	Agg. homicide	37.1	17.5
	Serious bodily harm resulting in death	2.9	0.0
File location (N _{valid} 92)	Zagreb	37.1	38.6
	Split	31.4	22.8
	Osijek	14.3	21.1
	Rijeka	17.1	17.5
Incident location (N _{valid} 92)	private	74.3	75.4
	public	25.7	24.6
Number of offenders (N _{valid} 92)	one	71.4	71.9
	two	22.9	28.1
	three	5.7	0.0
Number of victims (N _{valid} 94)	one	71.4	71.9
	two	22.9	28.1
	three	5.7	0.0
Sexual (N _{valid} 92)	Non sex-related	100.0	96.5
	sex-related	0.0	3.5
Cruel (N _{valid} 92)	not cruel	60.0	86.0
	cruel	40.0	14.0

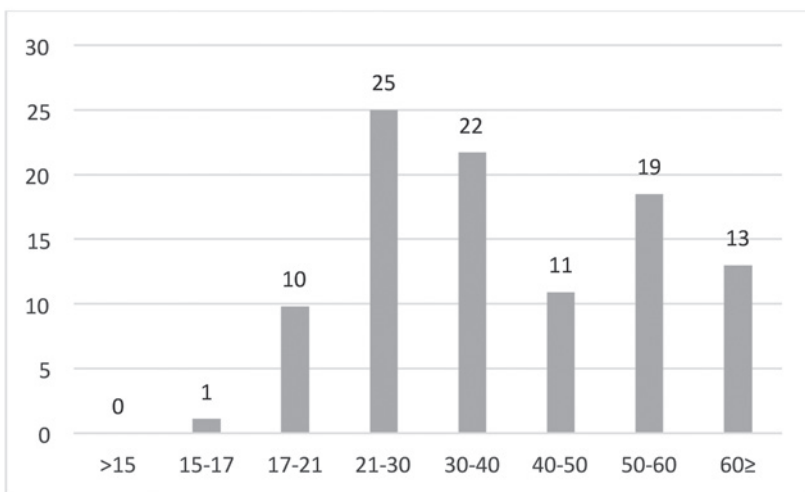
³¹ Private location means that the offence occurred in a private setting, usually at home.

³² For more details about the cruelty-variable see Getoš Kalac 2021a, 74-75.

4.3.2. Offender Characteristics

The following analysis focuses on the primary characteristics of offenders, acknowledging instances of missing data for each finding, which notably remain under 10%. This analysis explicitly excludes sex from its analysis, given the fact that the CroViMo sample consists predominantly of male offenders (96.7%). This sex composition mirrors broader criminological research indicating a significant overrepresentation of males in criminal activities, particularly violent crimes.³³ The age distribution of offenders presents a pronounced peak within the 21-30 age group, a finding that aligns with the BHS findings regarding male offenders. Sex and age are not the only predictors of criminal behaviour, thus the analysis also includes relationship status, parenthood, educational attainment, employment status and income level.

Figure 3. Share of CroViMo offenders by age (counting unit: offenders; N_{valid} 92; 0% missing data)



Upon examining the relationship status of offenders, it becomes evident that a significant majority, 59.8%, are single. This share of single offenders is notably higher compared to that found in the BHS (42% single males; 19% single females). Among those offenders who are in a relationship, a larger portion is married, with a smaller fraction living in extra-marital relationships (cohabitation). Intriguingly, the CroViMo reports a greater number of individuals who are either divorced or currently undergoing divorce than those living in cohabitation. This observation hints at a complex interplay between marital status and a potential propensity for violent behaviour.

³³ Steffensmeier & Allan 1996, 460-462.

Moreover, the high share of single offenders naturally leads to a higher share of offenders without children (56.5%). This finding stands in contrast to the findings of the BHS, where offenders are more likely to have children (54% males; 73% females). The divergence between CroViMo and BHS in this aspect underscores the potential influence of familial responsibilities and ties to violent behaviour. Parenthood, often associated with increased responsibilities and emotional attachments, could serve as a deterrent against violent activities. The absence of such responsibilities among single offenders might contribute to their greater representation in violent incidents, either directly or by way of likely different lifestyles.

These findings prompt a deeper reflection on the role of social and familial bonds in shaping individual behaviour. The data suggests that being single or divorced, particularly without the anchoring presence of children, may remove a layer of social and emotional support that potentially discourages engagement in violent incidents.

Table 5. CroViMO offenders by relationship status (counting unit: offender)

Relationship status	%	Parenthood	%
Single	59.8	No	56.5
Married	15.2	Yes	43.5
Divorced	10.9	N _{valid} : % m.d.	92; 0
Cohabitation	9.8		
In process of divorce	4.3		
N _{valid} : % m.d.	92; 0		

The differences observed between relevant CroViMo and BHS findings highlight the need for an in-depth analysis of the sociocultural and economic backgrounds of violent offenders. By examining how relationship status and parenthood intersect with employment, education, and socioeconomic status, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that feed to violent behaviour. Accordingly, table 6 in the CroViMo details the education, employment, and income status of offenders, offering valuable key insights.

The findings show that the majority of offenders holds only secondary education and is predominantly unemployed, with no source of income. The data completeness varies across variables, with no missing data for employment, a 4.3% missing share for income, and a 13% missing share for education. This suggests that criminal proceedings may prioritize information related to offenders' employment over their educational background. Notably, about 80% of all offenders have obtained either secondary or elementary education, highlighting a trend towards lower and

mid-level educational attainment. Interestingly, the proportion of offenders who hold a university degree is equal to those with no education whatsoever.

The offenders' employment status reveals that a significant share of offenders is unemployed. This is particularly relevant given the commonality of unregistered employment and informal economic activities across the region and in the private sector.³⁴ Unlike the BHS, the CroViMo includes 'student' as a distinct category, capturing as much as 10.9% of the offender population.

Given the substantial proportion of offenders without employment, it follows that a large number of them also lack any registered income, with none reporting earnings above the average. This economic profile underlines the potential link between socioeconomic disadvantages and the propensity for violent behaviour, emphasizing the importance of addressing these foundational issues in crime prevention and rehabilitation efforts.

Table 6. CroViMO offenders by education, employment and income (counting unit: offender)

Work %	No	58.7	Income %	No income	52.2
	Yes	25		Below average	31.5
	Student	10.9		Average	12
	Retired	5.4		Above average	0
	N _{valid} , % m.d.	92; 0		N _{valid} , % m.d.	88; 4.3
Education %	Secondary	59.8			
	Elementary	22.8			
	Higher	2.2			
	None	2.2			
	Other	0			
	N _{valid} , % m.d.	80; 13			

Among the factors frequently identified as playing a significant role in violent incidents, alcohol intoxication *tempore criminis* by the offender is arguably the most notable. This is supported by findings from the CroViMo, which shows that 37% of offenders were under the influence of alcohol at the time of the incident. Furthermore, 42.4% of offenders suffer from an addiction, including alcohol, various drugs or even multiple substance addiction.

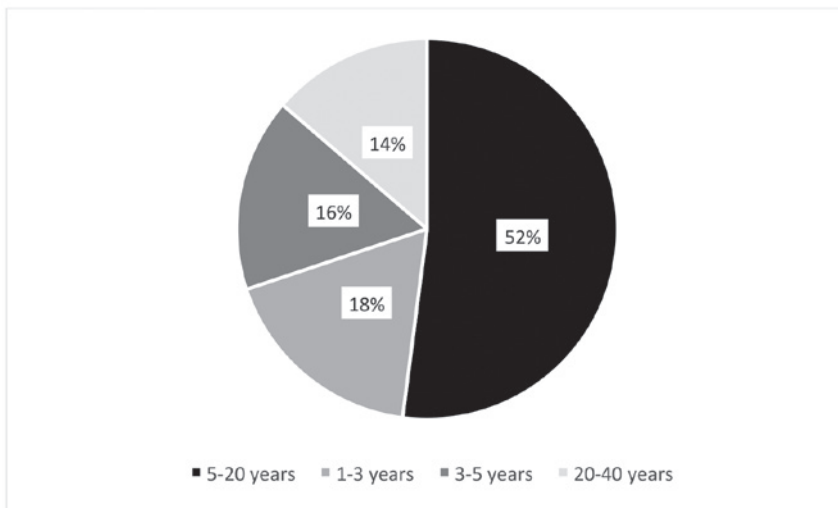
³⁴ For more details, see Getoš Kalac 2021a, 80-81.

Table 7. CroViMO offenders by alcohol intoxication *tempore criminis* and addiction (counting unit: offender)

Alcohol	%	Addiction	%
No	58.7	No	57.6
Yes	37	Yes	42.4
N _{valid} : % m.d.	88;4.3	N _{valid} : % m.d.	86;6.5

Figure 4 illustrates the distribution of prison sentences.³⁵ The sentencing analysis excludes those offenders that were declared insane, as their inclusion in the sentencing sample would have distorted the findings. The share of such offenders in the sample would have constituted 20%. However, there are three offenders that were found to be of significantly diminished criminal responsibility, out of which two are included whereas one is not included as he was sentenced to 0 days of imprisonment. The majority of offenders (52%) received prison sentences ranging from 5 to 20 years, whereas 14% of offenders were sentenced to long-term imprisonment.

Figure 4. Share of CroViMo offenders sentenced (counting unit: offender; N_{valid} 73; 0% missing data)



³⁵ For more about the classification of homicide and sentencing ranges see *Getoš Kalac* 2021a, 50-51.

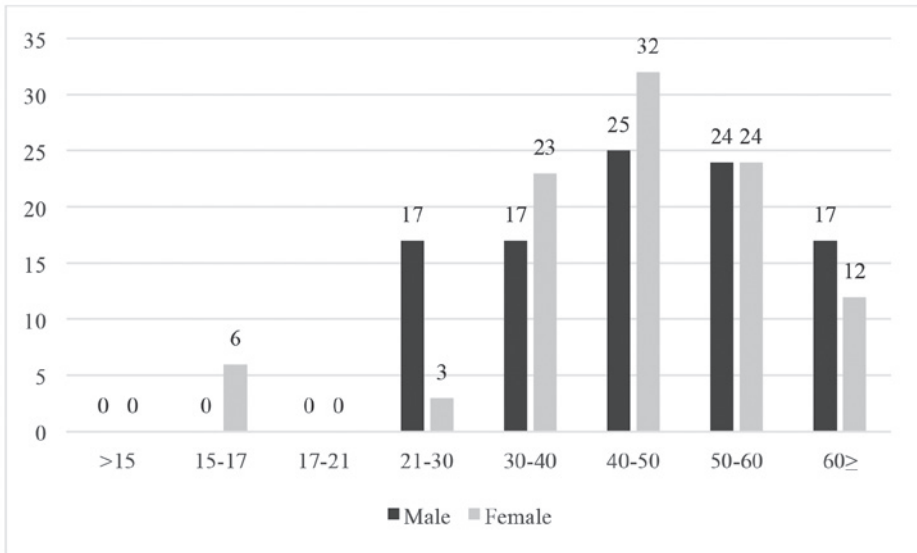
4.3.3. Victim Characteristics

The CroViMo findings indicate that victims of violence, in terms of sex, are predominantly male, accounting for 59% of victims, compared to 39% female victims. However, it is noteworthy that there is a 2% rate of missing data regarding the victims' sex. The existence of missing data, even on such a fundamental aspect as the victim's sex, underscores a significant issue within the Croatian judicial system, as has previously been established by the BHS as well. This gap in data is indicative of a judicial system that has historically been oriented more towards the offender, rather than the victim. Despite this, the presence of such missing data can also be seen as a compelling reason for Croatia to continue moving towards a more victim-oriented approach in its criminal justice system.

The shift towards a victim-oriented system is critical for several reasons. Firstly, it acknowledges the importance of the victim's perspective in the judicial process, ensuring that their rights and needs are considered alongside the pursuit of justice for the crime committed. Secondly, a victim-oriented approach can enhance the support and resources available to victims, aiding in their recovery and rehabilitation following violent incidents. Finally, by focusing on the victim as well as the offender, the system can work towards more holistic solutions that address the root causes of violence, potentially leading to a reduction of future incidents.

The most common age group among female and male victims is 40-60. In terms particularly vulnerable groups of victims, it appears that male and female make up a considerable share of victims of violence. However, there is a significant share of victims, male and female, older than 60 years of age, whereas the share of victims younger than 18 years of age is very small. Data suggests a broad age range among victims of violence, indicating that both male and female victims constitute a significant portion of violence victims across various age groups. The identification of particularly vulnerable groups of victims underscores the need for targeted interventions and support mechanisms. The diversity in age among victims highlights the complexity of violence as a social issue, requiring nuanced understanding and approaches to effectively address and mitigate its impact on different segments of the population.

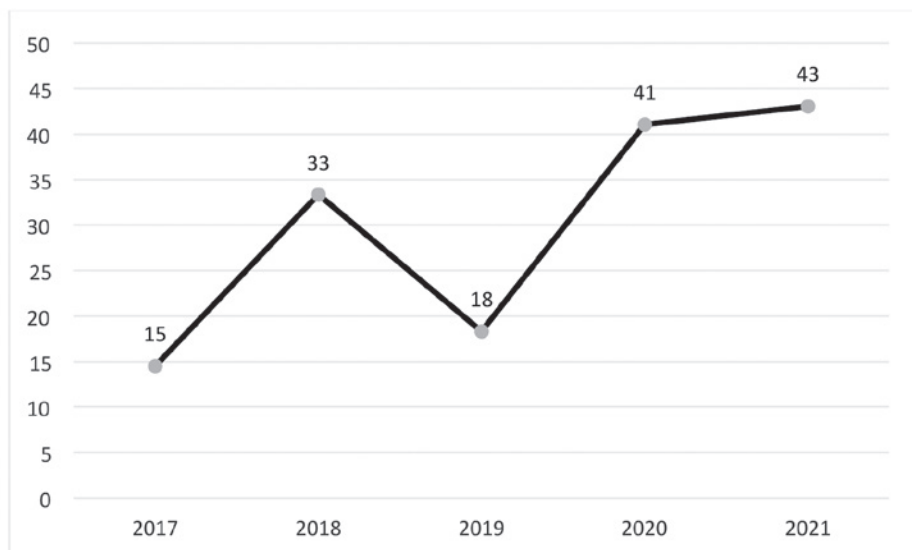
Figure 6. Share of CroViMo victims based on sex and age (counting unit: victim, N=87, m.d. 7.5%)



As a final step we highlight the representativeness of the CroViMo sample as analysed for the purpose of the paper at hand. Figure 7 displays the number of offenders convicted (using the final judgment as a reference point) for a specific crime in a given year. Consequently, the CroViMo dataset, in the case of homicide, accounts for a share of 13% to 45% of all finally adjudicated adult offenders in Croatia³⁶, varying by the observed year. In the case of aggravated homicide, the CroViMo dataset covers between 19% and 63% of a full national sample. The least represented criminal offense in the CroViMo dataset is serious bodily harm resulting in death, with only one case in 2021. However, this criminal offense is also rare in the national sample over the last five years. The analysis of the CroViMo dataset offers significant insights into the landscape of criminal offenses and judicial outcomes in Croatia, specifically through the lens of case files from the four largest county courts (Zagreb, Split, Rijeka, and Osijek). Overall, the CroViMo provides valuable insights into the dynamics of violent crime and criminal justice responses in Croatia, offering a first foundational understanding that can inform future research, policy-making, and practice in the field of criminal justice.

³⁶ Both presented data sets use offenders as a counting unit.

Figure 7. Representativeness of the CroViMo data set as a share of DZS data – counting unit: offender (CroViMo N=92; DZS N=311)



5. CONCLUSION

One reason in particular seems to be chronically hampering the further advancement of comparative homicide research throughout Europe, but also more globally: the high level of cultural diversity that shapes not only crime and lethal violence itself or the respective criminal justice systems, but also homicide research as such and the way in which homicide studies are designed, implemented, utilized and eventually made available to the scientific community and general public. There is an obvious need to initiate a discussion about cultural aspects in homicide research and to generate a broad exchange of experience, lessons learned and best practices in successfully conducting comparative multi-country homicide studies within the criminological community. Only limited knowledge is currently available on fruitful avenues for overcoming the challenge of cultural diversity in homicide research, since most of current international homicide research relates to crime and research settings that are far less culturally diversified.³⁷ Thus, most of such knowledge is not readily available in publications, but needs to be acquired either through experience or by way of seeking and obtaining advice from (only a handful of) seasoned colleagues involved in homicide research in highly diverse cultural settings. With the paper at hand, we hope to have done both – shared our own experience as well as the

³⁷ Liem & Getoš Kalac 2019.

advice gathered from more seasoned colleagues, while thus presenting key findings from two regionally and nationally important homicide studies.

First findings on the phenomenology of lethal violence in Croatia based on most recently available CroViMo data provides insights into various dimensions, including age and sex distribution of offenders and victims, other socio-economic offender variables, sentencing patterns, and the nature of offences. Some of the key findings demonstrate that a significant share of offenders is single (59.8%), and a large percentage of these individuals do not have children (56.5%), suggesting potential socio-familial factors influencing violent behaviour. The majority of offenders hold a secondary education (59.8%) and are predominantly unemployed (58.7%), with no registered source of income reported for a significant portion (52.2%), highlighting socioeconomic factors. Substance abuse and addiction play a considerable role, with 37% of offenders under the influence of alcohol *tempore criminis* and 42.4% suffering from an addiction. The distribution of prison sentences shows that no offender received a sentence of less than one year, whereas the majority (54%) receiving sentences of 5 to 20 years. The analysis of victim characteristics indicates a predominance of male victims (58.5%), with a notable portion of missing data on victim sex (2.1%), suggesting gaps in judicial data collection and the need for a more victim-oriented approach by criminal justice actors. The CroViMo findings offer insights into the demographics, socioeconomic status, and behavioural patterns of offenders, as well as the sentencing outcomes and characteristics of victims, contributing valuable information to the field of criminological research and policy-making in Croatia. The findings are thus in line with the previous BHS findings.

Now, on a final note, it needs to be stressed that whoever wants to conduct criminological research in the Balkans, esp. empirical (homicide) research, without already having firmly established close personal contacts in the region might do well to invest considerable efforts into building such contacts and maintaining personal relationships – this is in our experience *a conditio sine qua non* for any successful (research) undertaking in the Balkans. A culturally aware approach that does not impose its own research culture on the local context, ideally combined with food and drinks, goes a long way in this part of the world, probably in many other parts too.

In conclusion, regardless of the differing conceptual perspectives any homicide study builds upon or the modalities it uses to define homicides, there should be a standardised set of core homicide variables we all include in our research designs. If not out of conviction that this is needed for enabling the advancement of our global knowledge about (lethal) violence, then at least due to recognising the benefits such standardised core valuables entail when it comes to data analysis, far broader international collaborations and eventually dissemination and publication of findings.

Therefore, we would also recommend to take a comparable approach to designing and collecting data on the diverse research cultures of conducting homicide studies themselves, so that others might be able to contextualise not only the studies' findings, but also the specific cultural research settings that shaped the investigation. By doing so we would simultaneously be able to learn from each other while constantly upgrading our appreciation of the cultural diversities not only crime, but also its research is deeply embedded in.

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Sažetak

ISTRAŽIVANJE UBOJSTVA U JUGOISTOČNOJ EUROPI: ANALIZA METODOLOŠKIH I PRAKTIČNIH IZAZOVA S PRELIMINARNIM NALAZIMA O FENOMENOLOGIJI SMRTONOSNOG NASILJA U HRVATSKOJ

Rad kritički analizira metodologiju i praktične aspekte provođenja kriminološkog istraživanja ubojstava u jugoistočnoj Europi. Analiza se temelji na dvama glavnim istraživanjima (smrtonosnog) nasilja: (1) *Balkan Homicide Study* - istraživanje utemeljeno na sudskim spisima, provedeno između 2016. i 2019. godine u Hrvatskoj, Mađarskoj, Kosovu, Sjevernoj Makedoniji, Rumunjskoj i Sloveniji, na ukupnom uzorku od 2,073 slučaja s 2,416 počinitelja i 2,379 žrtve; i (2) *Hrvatski monitor nasilja* - istraživanje utemeljeno na sudskim spisima provedeno između 2021. i 2023. godine u četirima velikim hrvatskim gradovima (Zagreb, Split, Rijeka i Osijek). Glavni predmet rasprave su ključni aspekti konceptualizacije, dizajniranja i korištenja jedinstvenog instrumenata za prikupljanje podataka, odabira načina uzorkovanja, reprezentativnosti podataka, normativni i statistički kontekst podataka kao i praktični aspekti empirijskog terenskog rada i analize podataka. Cilj je transparentno i kritički analizirati glavne konceptualne, metodološke i praktične prednosti i nedostatke obaju istraživanja kao i istraživanja (smrtonosnog) nasilja općenito. Rasprava završava prezentacijom preliminarnih nalaza o fenomenologiji smrtonosnog nasilja u Hrvatskoj utemeljenih na podacima iz studije *Hrvatski monitor nasilja*. Na taj je način cilj ne samo uključiti kulturološki aspekt u (provođenje) kriminoloških istraživanja ubojstava, nego i pružiti najnovije dostupne izvorne empirijske podatke o fenomenologiji smrtonosnog nasilja. Konačno, analizirani izazovi također će istaknuti specifične prilike u regiji za provođenje daljnjih empirijskih istraživanja na Balkanu s prijedlozima za najbolje načine i metode istraživanja u budućim međunarodnim i europskim komparativnim istraživačkim poduhvatima.

Ključne riječi: ubojstvo, smrtonosno nasilje, *Balkan Homicide Study*, *Hrvatski monitor nasilja*, *Laboratorij za istraživanje nasilja*, analiza spisa