

A Case Study of Murder in a Midsized Urban Area: Homicide in Eau Claire, Wisconsin in the Interwar Period

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Abstract:

The interwar period saw an increase in murder rates throughout the country. Views about urban murder in this period – both in popular culture and secondary historical literature -- focus almost exclusively on high profile sources of crime, such as drug dealing, the Mafia and Prohibition. These causes of homicide, however, were limited to large metropolitan areas such as New York and Chicago. In contrast, murders in midsized urban areas such as Eau Claire, WI occurred for different reasons. By examining primary source documents such as court records and coroner reports, this project focuses on homicides in Eau Claire to determine what factors influenced murder in midsized urban areas from 1920-1940.

Thesis:

Smaller urban areas such as Eau Claire represent murder in the urban United States during the interwar period more accurately, since issues that were endemic in American society, such as domestic violence, explicit issues of privacy, and racial and class conflict are more easily revealed when unclouded by the media glare covering criminals and crime trends in major metropolitan areas.

SUMMARY OF CORONER'S REPORTS, EAU CLAIRE 1920-40

Total Number of Cases	252	Cause of Death	Number of Male Deaths	Cause of Death	Number of Female Deaths
Total Number of Cases Ruled Homicides	9	Homicide	5	Homicide	4
Total Number of Male Deaths	207	Suicide	36	Suicide	9
Total Number of Female Deaths	45	Natural Causes	39	Natural Causes	10
Number of Cases Heard in Court	11	Accidental	119	Accidental	20
		Unknown	8	Unknown	2

Eau Claire, WI- a midsized urban area:

- The town of Eau Claire was the only town government organized at the inception of Eau Claire County in October of 1856.
- The population of Eau Claire between 1920 and 1940 was between 35,000 and 40,000.
- The factors that influenced the act of murder in larger urban areas, such as organized crime, were not present in Eau Claire, while other aspects that were present in both areas were not given proper attention in larger urban cities.

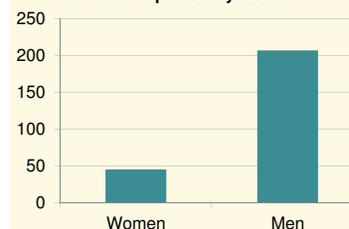
The Role of Coroners:

"Whenever the District Attorney shall have notice of the death of any person within his county and from the circumstances surrounding the same there is good reason to believe that murder or manslaughter has been committed, he shall forthwith order and require the coroner or some justice of the peace therein to take an inquest on the view of the dead body of such person..." (Weinmann, 34-58.)

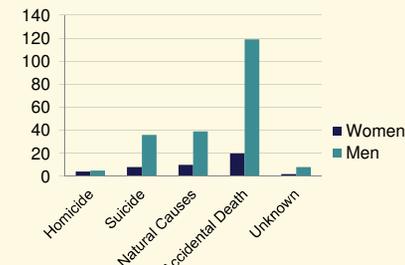
CAUSES OF HOMICIDE: Domestic Violence

- Women accounted for just under half population of Eau Claire County between 1920 and 1940, but only represent 17.7% of the deaths recorded in the coroner's reports.
- This gender biased most likely occurred due to women's lack of status in society during this time period; though the industrial revolution was well underway, the emergence of women in the work place was not.
- Of the 313,139 people engaged in manufacturing industries in Wisconsin in 1929, only 51,827 (or 16.5%) were women.
- Case of Harold and Mildred Johnson
 - Harold had shot his wife five times over her head and body, and then slit her throat. He then cut his own throat from ear to ear, around 4 am on January 22, 1932. (Coroner's Reports, page nr.)
- Case of Andrew and Orpha Easterson
 - Orpha was approached on the corner of Putnam and Galloway streets by her estranged husband Andrew, who attempted to draw her into conversation. When Orpha refused, Andrew tried to strike her with his fist, and as she attempted to flee Andrew took out a revolver and shot Orpha in the back of the head. (Coroner's Reports, page nr.)

Deaths Reported By Gender



Causes of Death: Women vs. Men



CAUSES OF HOMICIDE: Class and Race

- Race was only listed twice within the 252 deaths recorded between 1920 and 1940.
- One case that did shed light on the presence of racial tension and class conflict in Eau Claire was that of Henry Hudson, a black junk dealer who was murdered by John Sather, a white man who owned a detective agency.
 - Hudson was shot by Sather in April of 1920, and the coroner's jury also found that the cause of Henry Hudson's death was that of a bullet fired from a pistol, which was discharged from the hand of John Sather. The case was then sent to Circuit Court, where Sather was acquitted. (Coroner's Reports, page nr.)
- In 1920, there were only twenty three "negroes" living in Eau Claire County: twelve females and eleven males. This number decreased to nine females and eleven males by 1930, and the number of "negroes" living in Eau Claire County stayed at twenty by 1940.
- In this case, the small numbers of African Americans listed in the Coroner's reports is supported by their similarly miniscule presence in Eau Claire County. This is a direct contrast to the findings on women, who were just as present in Eau Claire as men were in life, but were not as well represented in death.

Issues of Privacy and the Media:

- When reporting the murders that took place in Eau Claire, WI, there were explicit issues of privacy at play. In short, if a murder took place at a location within the private sphere, such as a home, it was not reported within the media. But if it took place in public, and the newspaper was not sharing previously unknown knowledge with the public, the case was thoroughly covered in the media.
 - The Johnson murder- suicide was not only sensational but also especially gruesome, yet there no mention of their deaths found in the newspaper. Conversely, the Easterson case very similar to the Johnson case, but with one fundamental difference: the location of the murders. The Johnson case took place in the privacy of a residential house, while the Easterson murder took place in broad daylight in front of several witnesses.
 - Therefore, the newspaper wasn't exposing anything unsavory or previously unknown information by reporting it. As a result, the Easterson murder was given a front page spread in the *Eau Claire Leader Telegram*. (Eau Claire Leader Telegram, July 11, 1937, page 1.)
- This represents an essential difference between the ways in which murders are reported today and how they were reported in the interwar period. Today, it is assumed that because the law is broken, the crime automatically becomes public knowledge, especially in the case of lives being taken. But in the interwar period, murders were still considered private unless they actually occurred in public.

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