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Violent encounters

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VIOLENT ENCOUNTERS

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We homicide researchers constitute a very small part of the academic world. When equating the academic world to the global world, we would be Liechtenstein, but without the money. I think this is one of the reasons why we, as homicide researchers, want to draw attention to the importance of homicide as an indicator of other societal problems, crime being one of them. Homicide, we would argue, should be seen as the tip of the iceberg of underlying criminal behaviour. Homicide could thus be seen as an extreme manifestation of crime: the ultimate crime. By better understanding homicide, we would be better able to understand other types of crimes, and ultimately, be better able to prevent violent crime.

In the next 45 minutes or so, I would like to take you along on a journey to an icy landscape full of metaphorical icebergs. An imaginary tour of Antarctica, if you will, with some tips sticking out, but the vast mass covered under snow or hovering below water. And on this tour, I would like to assess the icebergs that cross our paths in many different shapes and sizes. During this journey, I would like to examine, first, whether the tip of the iceberg we call homicide is made out of the same ice as the parts that are hidden underneath the snow or water. Also, I would like to make a first call for questioning to what extent our iceberg is actually unique – or whether there are other icebergs in our icy, snowy landscape that may be similar to our homicidal iceberg. Third and finally, let us apply this iceberg metaphor to the individual level: do monsters of ice really exist or do they melt in our hands as soon as we try to capture them?

THE TIP OF THE ICEBERG

Homicide is generally considered the most serious of all crimes, with obviously the most serious consequences for the victim (Smit *et al.*, 2012) and the bereaved. Homicides, according to this line of reasoning, constitute the ‘tip of the iceberg’ of underlying crime. This metaphor has at least four implications. First, that homicide and other crime are part of the same iceberg; that they are made of the same ice, if you will. Homicide is, after all, a crime. A second implication is that homicide is at the tip of the iceberg, as the most serious type of crime. Here, homicide is considered as the end result of lesser forms of crimes, such as robberies, rapes and thefts (Ouimet & Tremblay, 1996). Simply put, the more robberies, rapes and thefts, the more homicides there are (Ouimet & Montmagny-Grenier, 2014). In other words, the higher the prevalence of lesser forms of crimes, the higher the homicide rate and vice versa. In this line of reasoning, the homicide rate (reflecting the number of homicides per 100,000 population) is frequently used as an indicator of the level of violence in a specific area or timespan (Nivette, 2011): as a tip of the iceberg. Third, the shape of the iceberg implies that the top is smaller than the vast amount of crime below. And finally, that homicide is the measurable tip of a much larger iceberg unobserved below the water or covered underneath the snow. From this perspective, using homicide data has a practical reason, as homicides are considered to be the most reliably measured of all crimes (Oberwittler, 2019; Pridemore, 2005). Here, the assumption is that different forms of crime are likely to share a common set of causes and that police practices for recording crime are much less likely to affect homicides than non-lethal crimes (O’Brien, 1996). Homicides, unlike other crimes, leave a body behind, making this type of crime more visible¹ and detectable by the authorities (Oberwittler, 2019; Ouimet & Montmagny-Grenier, 2014), regardless of reporting trends (Neapolitan, 1997). Other categories of international crime data are thought to suffer from considerable validity problems (Neapolitan, 1997). To name a few examples, crimes of violence are not defined in the same way in different countries and police also do not use the same thresholds of aggravation in the classification of violent offences in different countries (Zimring & Hawkins, 1997). More generally, as De Haan (2008) has pointed out, what we

1 With rare exceptions. These include people reported as missing for a long time, but (even though there were suspicions of their death) their bodies never having been found. It may be argued that such cases are particularly prevalent among the missing-missing (Quinet, 2007): those individuals reported missing, moving to another area and living under another name and then go missing again. But also among (illegal) sex workers and people experiencing homelessness. Also, this category includes neonaticides, which constitute a notorious dark number as they involve children who have never been reported or documented (Liem & Koenraadt, 2018) and homicides misclassified as suicides, accidents or undetermined deaths (Hsieh & Neuilly, 2019; Timmermans, 2006).

understand as ‘violence’ may be slippery, as the term covers a huge and frequently changing range of behaviours, situations and relationships. Violence is also a socially constructed concept and feelings regarding what violence is change under the influence of social, historical and cultural developments (Morris, 2017). Violence is, in short, a contested concept (Achterhuis, 2008; De Haan, 2008). Against this backdrop, homicide data are believed to have a greater external validity when compared with other types of violence, and other types of crime (Andersson & Kazemian, 2017). This is reiterated by UN organizations such as the United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime (UNODC), highlighting that ‘homicide is an act that is met with virtually universal condemnation’ and ‘because of its lethal outcome, homicide is particularly amenable to temporal (longitudinal) and cross-sectional (geographic) comparisons’ (UNODC 2019, p. 7). In short, much faith is put in homicide data as an indicator for underlying crime – so much so that scholars using these data do so in the belief that it reflects processes and dynamics of underlying violence (Andersson & Kazemian, 2017; Lauritsen *et al.*, 2016; UNODC 2019).

I have also argued this repeatedly: that homicide is the measurable tip of a much larger iceberg of violence and that homicidal situations are similar to normal conflict situations (Levi, 1980), the only difference being that they ended lethally. Just like other scholars, I have argued that if we take a closer look at this extreme outcome, we understand the invisible part of the crime iceberg a little bit better. And recently, I have started to doubt myself. Does this make sense? Homicide, as I have discussed before, is measurable, yes. But what about violence? Even among scholars there is no agreement on what exactly violence is (De Haan, 2008). And, to make matters even more complicated, the notion of what counts as violence, is changing over time (for an in-depth discussion, see Kivivuori, 2014). This leads to the main research question of my most recent research, namely to what extent can homicide be regarded as the violent ‘tip of the iceberg’ of underlying violent crime? Or, broader still, of underlying criminal behaviours?

We can approach this question conceptually, theoretically and empirically. Conceptually, taking our iceberg analogy, homicide and crime would be related in time, so that crime trends would move in similar ways as homicide trends and vice versa. For example, if we see a peak in homicide trends, we would expect overall crime levels to peak, too. Similarly, homicide and crime would be clustered in space, so that a region or neighbourhood that has high rates of homicide also has high rates of crime. And finally, at an individual level, following the iceberg analogy, homicide offenders would commit a homicide at the top of their criminal career, preceded by petty offences, gradually moving up the iceberg and commit the most severe crime of all.

These conceptual links can further be approached theoretically. Here, too, homicide is regarded as yet another type of crime, that could – simply put – be explained

by the same criminological theories used to explain other types of crime. It has been argued (see Tittle, 2009) that the criminological theoretical tool box is fully equipped to explain homicidal violence, by using elements such as self-control, social learning, strain, social integration and so on. From this standpoint, we do not need a special theory of violence – violence can be explained by the same criminological theories as the more general criminal behaviours. Even though classical criminological theories do not comment on violence and homicide specifically, if we take the iceberg analogy, homicide offenders constitute the tip of the iceberg of all criminal offenders and are thus implicitly considered as presenting the most extreme number of risk factors (Suonpää, 2021). For instance, from a strain theory perspective (Agnew, 1992, 2001; Merton 1968) homicide offenders would be the ones experiencing more negative stimuli and less positive stimuli compared to other offenders. From a social learning perspective (Bandura 1969), they would be exposed to more violent encounters than any other offender. And, by the same logic, homicide offenders would experience the highest degree of social disintegration (Junger-Tas, 2001) compared to other offenders. From a life course perspective (Laub & Sampson 1993; Sampson & Laub 1995), they would have the most extensive criminal record, most adverse family backgrounds, and largest degree of disadvantage. And, from a self-control point of view (Gottfredson & Hirschi 1990), homicide offenders would be the most impulsive offenders. Similarly, we may apply the iceberg analogy on a neighbourhood or country level and the same reasoning applies: with more strain, disadvantage, and so on, we would observe higher rates of homicide. From these conceptual and theoretical perspectives, in sum, homicide is reduced² to a varied account of criminal behaviour, that should be explained by the same common logics as other types of crime.

Now, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, through his character Sherlock Holmes (1930 | 2009, p. 163), already warned us that ‘It is a capital mistake to theorise before one has data. Insensibly one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts’. What do the data, then, tell us? The main conclusion is that the existing data are messy: studies rely on different units of analyses, different definitions, different regions, and different timeframes. But, to the extent that we can speak of a relationship between homicide and crime, we found the most consistent relationships between homicide and violent crime, such as assaults, rapes and robberies and drug market activity. We did not find strong evidence for a relationship with non-violent crime such as property crime (Van Breen *et al.*, forthcoming). On an individual level, findings also point that way: that homicide offenders are not that unique compared to other violent offenders. Specifically, they are not necessarily the most crime-prone or disadvantaged

2 In her recent inaugural lecture, Janine Janssen (2021) has recently warned for the dangers of reductions of complexity into a single entity – particularly when it concerns violence.

individuals. Instead, the pathways in life of homicide offenders appear to be rather similar to pathways of those committing non-lethal violence (Suonpää, 2021).

Now, what does this tell us? I believe at least two things: namely that Doyle was right – and that we should first look at the data. Since the data is messy, and difficult to compare, I intend to devote a large part of my research agenda in the coming years to gather our own data, that is, European data. As in other areas, homicide research is very much dominated by US based research (Liem 2013; 2017; 2021). And, other than a different sociocultural and political background, what sets the US apart from Europe is the availability and possession of firearms. Firearms make violent behaviour more likely to result in lethal violence and the availability of firearms increases the willingness to use them. And this very element may cloud our findings. High homicide levels in the US, for example, should be explained by the prevalence of privately owned firearms and the willingness to use them, rather than by overall high crime rates (Zimring & Hawkins, 1997). This calls for us European homicide researchers to stand up and join the debate – with European data.

Secondly, and I may disagree with other criminologists here (Tittle, 2009), is that we may not have enough tools in our criminological toolbox to explain what we find. As a result, we may have to go to the store and get some new tools or, better still, in this day and age of the sharing economy, borrow tools from fellow disciplines. This includes archeology, education and child studies, law, philosophy, and psychology, to name a few. Against this backdrop, I feel honoured and excited to approach this question within our Interdisciplinary Research Programme Social Resilience and Security, by learning from our inspiring colleagues and borrow tools from their discipline, from their expertise. I am convinced that, by integrating such lateral thinking, we stand a better chance in making significant steps in our climbs in our proverbial icy landscape.

Now that we have hiked up to the tip of the iceberg, I think it is fair to conclude that the homicidal tip of the iceberg may not be made of the same ice crystals as the hidden parts. Also, the ice crystals may differ from one another: some homicides include intimate partner homicides, others drug-related homicides, still others child homicides, sexual homicides, robbery homicides, and so on. We may, in short, have to revisit our simplified model. However, now that we are up here, on this very tip, let us look out over the icy landscape, to other icebergs around us.

WHICH ICEBERG?

Looking over this vast landscape from our own iceberg, one of the questions that arises, is whether we, as homicide researchers, are not barking up the wrong tree. In other words, in order to better understand the underlying dynamics of homicide, should we not zoom out and assess to what extent homicide is related to other forms of harmful behaviour that lie outside the scope of criminal violence? In short, rather than finding the answer in our own criminal iceberg, or in our own microcosmos, we should expand our focus and assess to what extent homicide varies together with other adverse health outcomes and to what extent they are produced by a common set of fundamental causes. Homicide can then be viewed as one of many icebergs of harmful behaviours, that are all based on an underlying icepack of grave social problems. In doing so, we should approach homicide as a social problem, a *behavioural* problem, rather than as a sociopolitical problem alone – that is to say, as a problem that can be related to other harmful behaviours. This includes, to name a few, suicide, alcoholism, drug abuse, and other risk-taking behaviours. Similar to these behaviours, which are studied in the public health domain, I would like to make a case for homicide to be considered along these lines. This implies that we look at the environment and identifiers for the area to determine whether certain attributes are co-occurring or preceding homicide (Smith *et al.*, 2021). Recent studies suggest that neighbourhoods with a relatively high proportion of healthy persons experience less crime (Heckman *et al.*, 2013; Otsu & Yuen, 2020). Also, more two-parent families and more social cohesion in a neighbourhood is associated with less crime (Sampson 1987; Sampson & Groves, 1989). Conversely, communities with high rates of alcohol abuse, depression and anxiety symptoms have been associated with high community crime (Smith *et al.*, 2021). I should note that many of these observations may be circular in nature: those with a better health tend to live in more affluent areas, which also tend to be low-crime areas. Also, I am not saying that the aforementioned mental health problems cause crime, but rather, that they may be indicators of the same phenomena. Little work has been done in terms of homicide, specifically. Recently, we have taken some first steps in comparing homicides to other adverse health outcomes in the Netherlands and found correlations between homicide levels and teenage pregnancy and drug abuse, as proxies for risk behaviour (Van Breen & Liem, forthcoming). What we seem to observe, in short, is not the direct effects of these behaviours, but rather that these harmful behaviours cluster together – possibly produced by the same underlying community stress.

This idea is, strangely enough, not new at all. Perhaps the most well-known harmful behaviour of our times is suicide. The idea that suicide and homicide are related can be traced back to Augustinian thought, in which suicide was regarded as self-murder and hence was prohibited by the church. The similarities between the two behaviours

continued to be recognised until the nineteenth century by scholars such as Tissot (Bills & Li, 2005), who understood suicide as a direct response to larger societal issues of the time. According to Tissot, homicide and suicide share a common aetiology (abnormal behaviour), result (death), and method (by one's own hands or by another's). Around the end of the nineteenth century, Italian criminologists such as Morselli (1897) and Ferri (1882) distilled the idea of homicide and suicide both emerging from underlying societal issues, into a 'dual law' or 'law of inversion' (cf. Unnithan & Whitt, 1992). In this line of reasoning, aggression can be inwardly directed – in the form of suicide – or outwardly directed – in the form of homicide.³

This very arbitrary selection of harmful behaviours would suggest that there are particular links between them and raises the possibility of the existence of common mechanisms (Karstedt & Eisner, 2009). Why, then, if we used to study suicide and homicide and other health outcomes together, did we ever stop doing so? Why did we start to study homicide just as a crime problem rather than as a public health problem? The answer seems to lie in the rise and growth of criminology as a discipline, in which homicide as a criminal phenomenon was dragged along in its slipstream. What further contributed to the neglect of this line of research was that in the decades that followed, with the emergence of a range of social science disciplines, the study of violence became fragmented, or, as Felson (2009) has pointed out: 'Those who study violence (from a variety of disciplines) often ignore both theories of aggression and theories of crime. They study particular types of violence: youth violence, sexual violence, violence against women, child abuse, gang violence, hate crimes, workplace violence, homicide, and mass murder. As a result, the study of violence has become Balkanized.' Criminology, one could argue, is also guilty of this crime: criminologists study homicide as a type of crime. Psychologists study homicide as an extreme type of transgressive behaviour. Pathologists study homicide as a cause of mortality. Epidemiologists study homicide as one out of many health indicators or health outcomes, and the list continues. Over the course of a century, it seems, we have successfully separated these extreme types of behaviour – both in theory and in practice.

3 In my PhD thesis on homicide followed by suicide, I delve deeper into the similarities between homicide and suicide, from historical, sociological, psychological and psycho-analytical perspectives (Liem, 2010). Let me also acknowledge that suicidologists and dear colleagues such as Ad Kerkhof have pointed out that on an individual level, violence against others can be understood as hurting the other, taking away threats and thereby diminishing fear and anxiety, whilst suicide should be considered as a type of protection. Suicide, from this view, is a means to escape tormented thoughts, including thoughts and feelings of self-hatred (Kerkhof, 2020), defeat, humiliation and entrapment (O'Connor & Krittley, 2018). A way to end suffering. I am not disputing these observations, but rather, wish to focus on the commonalities of two extreme types of behaviour – homicide and suicide – that may reveal themselves on a societal level.

I am pleading, in short, for homicide to be pulled out of the criminal justice realm alone and to be studied from non-judicial perspectives, too, including, perhaps most predominantly, public health. This shift of focus may result in a body of research showing that similar factors, such as harm produced by concentrated disadvantage, produce phenomena that at first seem rather different, yet upon closer inspection share more commonalities than expected. Increasing awareness that a range of adverse social and health phenomena are driven by a few common causes can be an important first step to change ways in which we approach, and ultimately, seek to prevent violence (Ousey, 2017).

The aim of this enterprise, in short, is to assess whether the same conflicts and underlying social conditions that produce other adverse health outcomes, also lead to homicides – or whether we are (partially) dealing with an entirely different phenomenon that should be studied in its own (theoretical and empirical) realm. Again, this calls for a truly interdisciplinary approach, in which we do not only look out to other icebergs in the distance, but pack our bags, hike up to these other mountains of snow, study them, and perhaps discover that they may be quite alike our own iceberg.

FROZEN DE-MYTHOLOGIZED

From a distance, all ice crystals have this bright white colour. And thanks to Disney, ice is now a mysterious and very powerful material that can be transformed into castles and monsters and talking snowmen; just ask our daughters Saga and Lise. This brings me to the third and final part of my iceberg analogy, namely the mythological properties that ice is thought to have: the myth of homicide offenders as monstrous creatures.

Homicide fascinates and repulses. We morally refute it, whilst at the same time we binge-watch the most violent Netflix series. In this day and age, we mythologize killing and those doing the killing. We tend to dehumanize offenders, referring to them in terms of madness or monsters – by resorting to Hollywood stereotype of strangers, of wolves waiting in the dark to attack their prey. Similarly, in public discourse, we tend to point to psychopathological explanations for their crimes. These images are based on myths, rather than on facts. We know from extant empirical research worldwide that the vast majority of homicides take place between people who know each other (Granath *et al.*, 2011; UNODC, 2019) and involve offenders *not* suffering from severe psychopathology (Liem & Vinkers, 2012). For me, there are at least two reasons for wanting to break this myth of the monstrous creature.

First, I am intrigued by homicide as a social phenomenon academically. I am devoted to finding out, what ‘material’ this ice is made of. To what extent does it constitute the tip of underlying criminal behaviour? Or to what extent does it constitute a solitary iceberg, drifting by itself in an ocean? Or is it just one of the many mountains in a mountain range, in a landscape with mountains made out of similar material?

Homicide fascinates me, because I believe it can tell us something about the way in which society works. In his book on homicide in thirteenth century England, James Buchanan Given (1977) already spoke to this: ‘Each society [...] has its own specific patterns of violent behaviour, patterns that are as characteristic of it and as unique to it as the way in which its members secure their food, raise their children, and choose their leaders. The study of the patterns of [homicide] in a given society dramatically reveals the web of interrelationships that unite its members, and the tensions and conflicts that these relationships engender. A study of homicide is therefore of value to anyone interested in the dynamics of social interaction.’ Others, such as the anthropologist Paul Bohannan (1960) have reiterated this idea, in that ‘[...] in studying homicide] we have a series of situations with which some people in the society felt they could only deal by killing. Repetition of these situations indicates weak points, or points of stress, within the social organisation of the group concerned’. Homicide offenders, in their narrative of events, reiterate this view, namely that conflicts that give rise to homicidal intents are similar to everyday conflicts (Levi, 1980). Homicide thus does

not constitute a mythological phenomenon only perpetrated by monsters, lurking in the dark, who target doe-eyed innocent victims by moonlight. It is a very real phenomenon, perpetrated in our midst, that therefore should be demythologized in order to be properly understood.

Other than my academic interest to demythologize this phenomenon, I also have a keen human interest to do so. One of the key persons who inspired me in this approach is my mentor, my ‘Doktervater’ as they say in German, Frans Koenraadt. Him, and the Utrecht school⁴ as represented in the Willem Pompe Institute, advocated the ideal that ‘the delinquent in the judicial system was to be treated as an *equal*, a fellow human being and not an abject object’ (De Jong, 2015, p. 2). In addition to this delinquent-centered approach, Frans and the Utrecht School have influenced me in taking a multi-dimensional approach to the subject at hand. Following this approach, what is needed to obtain a complete picture of the crime and the accused, is intensive cooperation between criminology, penology, sociology, and forensic psychiatry and psychology. In practicing this multi-disciplinary and humanistic approach, lawyers should engage with psychiatrists, criminologists with psychologists, and criminal law officials from one side of the coin with delinquents on the other (De Jong 2015). We can come to a true understanding, in other words, by engaging in encounters. Encounters with one another, amongst scholars of different disciplines and professionals, but importantly, also with the ones we study, in a shared interest. And in practicing this offender-centered approach, I believe we are able to demythologize the myth of the ‘Murderer’, the idea that there is a specific ‘type’ of person who may commit such violent acts.

Now, perhaps we may also argue the other way around: that it is not only encounters that make us debunk the myth of the stereotypical monster we have in mind, but that a *lack* of encounters similarly feeds into the creation of myths and associated fears of murderous monsters. Arguably, the reason for us resorting to bogeyman clichés can partly be sought in the absence of offender narratives, at least outside the field of narrative criminology. There is no absence of offender stories, as the vast number of studies on this theme shows (for an overview, see Maruna & Liem, 2021). Also in my prior work on homicide offenders, their offending and incarceration (Liem 2016; Liem & Garcin, 2014; Liem & Richardson 2014; Liem, Kuijck & Raes, 2016) I have been trying to search for meaning and understanding in their stories. What I plead for, thus, is that it is our academic duty to share these narratives, that essentially constitute a result of encounters, with a wider public than a scholarly public alone. I join my colleagues Maruna and Matravers (2007) in believing that encounters and the sharing of narratives resulting from encounters, in turn, have the power to change patterns of crime and justice.

4 The ‘Utrecht School’ was a term first introduced by the French criminal law scholar Jacques Léauté in 1959. For a discussion on the legacy of the Utrecht School, see De Jong, 2015.

In addition to the absence of encounters, I think that another reason for resorting to monstrous stereotypes can be found in the *absence* of homicidal violence. In previous studies, we have shown that the homicide rate in Western Europe, including in the Netherlands, has declined for almost two decades now and is currently at an all-time low (Aarten & Liem, 2021). In the Netherlands, at this point, the risk of getting killed in a homicide is similar to one dying of a stomach ulcer (152 deaths in 2019, CBS 2020), less than dying of accidental poisoning (204 deaths in 2019, CBS 2020) and lower than the risk of dying in suicide *per month* (1823 deaths in 2020 total or on average 152 deaths *per month*, CBS 2020).

Internationally, the homicide rate in the Netherlands (about 0.7 per 100,000), and elsewhere in Western Europe, is very low – particularly compared to areas such as Latin America and mid-and South Africa. We are objectively safer than ever before and live in objectively one of the safest countries in the world, but we tend to *feel* unsafer than before. Dutch scholar Hans Boutellier (2002) has captured this dynamic in the notion of the ‘security paradox’, crudely summarized as follows: the lower the actual likelihood of victimization, the higher the fears of victimization. One of the answers of this conundrum lies in our lowered tolerance for violence. Because Western Europe experiences so few cases of lethal violence, of homicides, each and every case that occurs is broadly discussed in the news. Experts gather around tables at talkshows, podcasts highlight every single detail of the case and newspapers devote entire front pages to the ins and outs of these acts – which results in the lingering sense that violence is everywhere and that we can become the next victim. It has been noted in several studies, however, that media representations of crime do not correspond to actual levels of crime in society (Näsi *et al.*, 2021; Smolej & Kivivuori, 2006). Violent crime in particular has risen towards its current status as the sensational news topic (Smolej & Kivivuori, 2006). In a low-violent society such as ours, our notion what violence is shifts and is subjected to inflation. In other words, in a context where hard violence, such as homicide, is comparatively low, notions of what I call ‘soft violence’ by lack of a better term, are increased. Behaviours that, some decades ago, we may have thought of as remarkable, or perhaps strange, are increasingly perceived through a security lens, regarded as violent and possibly dangerous behaviours and as such as potential threats to security. When they occur, such behaviours tend to be highlighted or even enlarged. One may argue that this is especially the case nowadays, in a complex society with no clear religious or state authority. Here, zooming in on transgressive behaviours and their offenders may have a unifying function: transgressing a certain boundary serves to make that boundary visible, to generate order and meaning. Also, the offender, the person who transgresses is not *us*, but someone other than us, which in turn helps define who we are in our individualized society, that is, we are not the transgressor, the evil or the violent stranger (see, for example, Furedi 2013 for an extensive discussion). In a context of increased cultural sensitivity toward violence (Achterhuis, 2008), the concept of ‘danger’ and ‘dangerousness’ are inflated, whilst our tolerance for types

of behaviours that we previously thought of as within the realm of normal behaviour, decreases. Let me use two examples to illustrate this and make a case for the importance of *encounters*, or offender narratives, to debunk this prevailing myth.

The first one constitutes the case of the *Candlelight thrower*. In September 2010, as the Golden Carriage with the royal family passed, a man by the name of Erwin L. threw a candlelight the size of a kiwi to the carriage, hitting its side. He was arrested and held in custody for two years. When I interviewed him, he expressed his frustration over having to hand in his DNA, over the royal family being involved in a child pornography network and people being out to get him. When he was arrested after throwing the candlelight an assessment of his mental health pointed out that he suffered from a delusional disorder. Following release, he continued protesting and has been arrested about 27 times, which, he told me, is 'more times than Martin Luther King'. Not infrequently, these arrests seemed to have taken place pre-emptively, in other words, before he acted in a violent manner or engaged in actual criminal behaviour. Framed in the current discourse, confused, but not necessarily dangerous, individuals like him seem to be approached as a potentially violent person, arrested 'just in case'.

A second example concerns the case of the *Dam screamer*, by the name of Gennaro P., who I interviewed on a windy day in Amsterdam, along the IJ canal. More than ten years ago, during the two-minute silence on Memorial Day at Dam Square, he screamed. For a full four seconds. A tumultuous situation erupted as a result of the scream, people panicked and started running. It turned out to be a very expensive four seconds for Gennaro, as he was detained for sixteen months and fined with 10.000 euros. His story, on the other hand, reveals that he had been drinking all day in a local bar next to the Dam square, beers and gin, and by 8 PM on that day, May 4th, he was simply too drunk to sit up straight. He went outside to get some air, but, so he told me: 'People stood in the way, I wanted to get through. Everyone was so quiet. And they didn't let me through. So I screamed.'

What I wish to illustrate with these two cases is that our idea of 'dangerousness', hand in hand with the notion of 'security threat' and our idea of 'violence', is subject to considerable inflation, in a risk-averse, individualized society where shared identities are becoming increasingly rare. In the present risk society (Beck, 2006), characterized by a culture of fear (Furedi, 2002), we have become more sensitive to seeing phenomena as violent or criminal, as a result of which notions such as 'violence' and 'crime' are expanding (Kivivuori, 2014, p. 291). Arguably, this tendency is not new. In the last few decades, under the influence of political and advocacy groups we have moved from considering a 'marital disagreement' as intimate partner violence, a 'corrective tap' as violence against children. In recent years, the notion of violence has expanded to also include verbal violence such as hate speech, micro-aggressions, bullying, humiliation and intimidation (De Haan, 2008). What seems to be going on is not an increase of

actual violence, but rather that as ‘old’ crimes decrease, new crimes take their place in a process of cultural change (Kivivuori, 2014).

The danger of such inflation is, I believe, that we also inflate our idea of violent offenders and perceive them as potential security threats accordingly. In creating such a threat, society paradoxically also has to manage, debate and prevent these threats that it itself has produced (Beck, 2006). This implies, as Constantijn Kelk (2018, pp. 198-199) has pointed out, that criminal law is also repeatedly invoked, sometimes monomanically, as an instrument for the political goal of security rather than as an instrument in the context of a reasonable and proportional ‘criminal policy’ for the sake of justice in society. Now that the notion of violence is wider than ever before, the more we ask criminal law to curb it. To solve this conundrum, I plead for a renewed appreciation of the encounter, to help us avoid such framing and taking offender narratives seriously. This should bring us closer to demythologizing those who offend, those who throw or those who scream. It may just bring us to a situation in which we try to hold this monster of ice in our hands, only to find out it melts as soon as we touch it.

In doing so, let us also take violence – including homicidal violence – out of the criminal justice realm alone and approach it with new eyes and toolkits from public health, social sciences, and humanities. These efforts combined allow us to demythologize such events and their offenders and bring about a layered understanding in which we give voice to the relationship between victim and offender, the conflict, the setting and its underlying dynamics. Layers that only become visible when we engage in encounters and when we regard homicidal violence as one of the many manifestations of underlying adversities, as one of the many outcomes of an interplay of the lives we lead.

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