

A high-quality source on femicide: the Finnish homicide monitor (FHM)

Finland 2002 - 2019

In brief

Since 2002, the Finnish homicide monitor (FHM) has been maintained jointly by the Institute of Criminology and Legal Policy (University of Helsinki), the National Police Board and the Police College Research Unit. The aim of the FHM is to monitor the homicide phenomenon, to create a database for in-depth research, and to serve crime prevention and prevention-targeting purposes. The FHM uses victim-based data architecture and is updated on an ongoing basis. Each row of the data matrix corresponds to a homicide victim. For each case, only one offender is included. This offender is the main offender identified by the police. The data is collected directly from the chief investigator of each individual homicide case on a standard electronic form after the crime has been solved and the investigation has been closed. On crimes that are not cleared within a reasonable time, the available data are registered about one year after the initiation of the investigation. It is compulsory for the investigating officers to fill in the questionnaire. The database is a high-quality source for femicide since it contains information on, for example, relation of the victim and the perpetrator (partner, ex-partner, mother, father, child, other relative, acquaintance, stranger), demographic variables (gender, age, marital status), the main characteristics of the homicides committed, prior criminal career of the perpetrator and so-called warning signs (restraining order, shelter, threats, fears). It has provided more in-depth data on femicide since the national statistics on causes of death have not included for example data on homicides committed by ex-partners or partners not cohabiting with the victim. The database also includes information on motives of the crime such as revenge, ending a violent relationship, domestic quarrel and honour-related crime. The Institute of Criminology and Legal Policy publishes reports on a regular basis and the figures concerning femicide are widely used, also by NGOs working on gender-based violence (GBV). The data retrieved from the database was used as background material concerning female homicide victims when drafting the national action plan to reduce violence against women 2010–2015 and provides quality data on femicide in accordance with the Istanbul Convention (data collection: Chapter 2, article 11). The current agreement between the partners involved extends to 2019 and the collection and maintenance of the data is carried out under governmental funding (through ministries). FHM has been used as a base in developing the European homicide monitor (EHM). Partners include currently Finland, the Netherlands, Sweden, Norway, Estonia and Switzerland.

A national homicide monitoring system

Homicide rates have been higher in Finland than in the other Western and Nordic European countries for decades. In the 1990s, the Institute of Criminology and Legal Policy (formerly known as the National Research Institute of Legal Policy) initiated a series of research projects on homicide, seeking to describe the Finnish homicide patterns in detail. These studies used project-specific research materials and depended on the information originally collected by the police for the purpose of solving the offences. However, it was recognised early on that an in-depth analysis of homicide could not rely on the data collected primarily for the purpose of solving cases. Instead, there was a need for a data source whose

information content would be defined by the researchers. A specific initiative to create a national homicide monitoring system was implemented. The Finnish homicide monitor (FHM) was launched in June 2002. The Institute of Criminology and Legal Policy is responsible for the continuous reporting of the descriptive results but the FHM is based on cooperation between the research unit of the Finnish Police College and the National Police Board.

The initiative is in line with the Finnish institutional framework for gender equality. In 2010, Finland adopted a first national action plan to reduce violence against women. The plan included over 60 detailed goals that cover further development of methods aimed at supporting, inter alia, GBV victims, training of professionals in different sectors, research and data collection. The action plan was in force until the end of 2015. The Istanbul Convention came into effect on 1 August 2015 in Finland, and includes provisions on data collection and research (Chapter 2, Article 11).

A database for prevention

The aim of the FHM is to monitor the homicide phenomenon, to create a database for in-depth research, and to serve crime prevention and prevention-targeting purposes. The FHM uses victim-based data architecture. Each row of the data matrix corresponds to a homicide victim; the number of variables for each case is about 90. For each case, only one offender is included and this offender is the main offender identified by the police. The FHM database is based on the police data, i.e. information produced during preliminary investigations (closed cases). The data are collected directly from the chief investigator of each individual homicide case on a standard electronic form after the investigation has been concluded; on crimes that are not cleared within a reasonable time, the available data are registered about one year after the initiation of the investigation. It is compulsory for the investigating officers to fill in the questionnaire. Since the database contains case and person identification numbers, it is possible to locate co-offenders by specific additional data collection. However, the standard procedure is to enter only the main offender. A separate variable records the possible existence of co-offenders.

The FHM is considered a most accurate and in-depth source of femicide in Finland. It has provided more in-depth data on femicide since the national statistics on causes of death have not included for example data on homicides committed by ex-partners or partners not cohabiting with the victim. The data comprise information on crimes investigated by the police under the penal code titles: murder, voluntary manslaughter, killing, infanticide (Penal Code 21:1–4) as well as involuntary manslaughter (Penal Code 21:8 – 9) committed in a single act with a voluntary assault crime (Penal Code 21:5 – 7). Attempts at these crimes are not included.

Warning signs are crucial

The FHM contains more in-depth information on the victim and the perpetrator than other statistical sources before (partner, ex-partner, mother, father, child, other relative, acquaintance, stranger), demographic variables (gender, age, marital status) and for example the main characteristics of the homicides committed, the prior criminal career of the perpetrator and so-called warning signs. The idea is to know more about the prior criminal justice contacts of the victim and the offender. This is done at the moment through court statistics from the Legal Register Centre (identifying only the label of the crime) but in the future the previous crimes will be retrieved directly from the police data. This means it will be

possible to identify whether the crime was committed against the homicide victim by the suspect of the homicide. The database also includes information on motives of the crime such as mental illness, jealousy, revenge, ending a violent relationship, domestic quarrel and honour-related crime. Some questions relate to the putative warning signs preceding the offence (restraining order, shelter, threats, fears). This is significant especially in intimate partner violence (IPV) cases where research has shown that a homicide is likely to happen after years of continuous violence.

Political commitment and funding as main success factor

The FHM is updated on an ongoing basis. The current agreement between the partners involved extends to 2019 and the collection and maintenance of the data is carried out under governmental funding (through ministries). It is more detailed than other sources of homicide in Finland. The collection is made in a systematic manner and enables comparisons through time and different geographical regions. The FHM is widely used for including by NGOs working in the field. It has been stated that women are 4 times as likely to be killed by their ex-partner or current partner than men in Finland and that several of the homicides where the victim was female could most likely have been prevented if appropriate measures had been taken by authorities when violence had come to their knowledge before the homicide took place ⁽¹⁾.

The experts maintaining the FHM have also been developing a joint European homicide monitor (EHM) and FHM has been used as one of the base datasets in the development work of EHM. Due to differences in definitions, data sources and criminal justice procedures, comparing homicides (including femicide) between countries is not without problems. To overcome these limitations Finland, the Netherlands and Sweden have worked together to construct a joint database ⁽²⁾. The Institute of Criminology and Legal Policy in Finland recommends the use of EHM to build a database for international comparison purposes. Main success factors are related to the fact that the database has been constantly updated since 2002 on an ongoing basis. The commitment (also in financial terms) of national ministries ensures this continuity. The amount of information and quality of data is high and this allows for a wide use of the database statistics from both institutional and non-institutional organisations.

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Links (material in English)

<http://optula.om.fi/material/attachments/optula/julkaisut/verkkokatsauksia-sarja/KoRbDTYm7/hominfin2007.pdf>

¹ Action plan to reduce violence against women 2010 – 2015, p 22.

<https://www.julkari.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/112013/URN%3ANBN%3AFi-fe201504223100.pdf?sequence=1->

² <http://hsx.sagepub.com/content/17/1/75.short>

<http://law.leiden.edu/organisation/criminology/research/homicide/europeanhomicidemonitor.html>