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Murder in a time of crisis: a qualitative exploration of the 2020 homicide spike through offender interviews

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how the COVID-19 pandemic and the civil unrest following George Floyd's murder influenced the 2020 homicide surge, focusing on individuals already at high risk for violence. Based on life history interviews with 18 people convicted of homicide in Minnesota, the research explores how the disruptions of 2020 intensified pre-existing vulnerabilities, accelerating pathways to lethal violence. Participants reported that the breakdown of social order, loss of routine, and economic instability created conditions that rapidly escalated violence within their lives and communities. This qualitative analysis complements existing quantitative research by offering a detailed account of the micro-level experiences behind the homicide spike, revealing how large-scale societal disruptions can shape individual trajectories toward serious violence. Findings underscore the need for policies that address structural inequalities and ensure continuity of social supports and mental health services during periods of widespread upheaval to prevent future escalations in violence.

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In 2020, the United States experienced an unprecedented 30% increase in homicides, the largest annual rise in over a century since records began (Gramlich 2021). Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) show that the murder rate jumped from 6.0 per 100,000 people in 2019 to 7.8 in 2020, with firearms involved in 77% of cases (Gramlich 2021). This dramatic spike has sparked extensive debate and research into its causes (Regalado, Timmer, and Jawaid 2022).

Explanations for the surge include the widespread social and economic disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, including the closure of schools and essential community services, which increased stress and reduced access to support systems (Lopez and Rosenfeld 2021; Rosenfeld and Lopez 2020). Reduced proactive policing and eroding trust in law enforcement following the murder of George Floyd on 25 May 2020, also likely contributed (Kim 2023; Nix et al. 2024; White, Orosco, and Terpstra 2022). Moreover, studies have shown that record numbers of gun purchases (Schleimer et al. 2021) and heightened legal cynicism – whereby individuals lose trust in government institutions (Moule et al. 2022) – fueled rising violence.

While homicide rates generally exhibit slow, gradual changes over time (Rosenfeld 2024), the unprecedented surge in 2020 demands a deeper understanding of its underlying mechanisms (Lopez and Rosenfeld 2021). Existing research has focused primarily on macro-level trends in gun

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violence (e.g., Boehme, Kaminski, and Nolan 2022; Kim and Phillips 2021; Larson, Santaularia, and Uggen 2023). In contrast, this study adopts a micro-level perspective on homicide specifically, exploring how these ‘exogenous shocks’ – significant, large-scale disruptions external to the individual (Rosenfield 2018), such as a global pandemic or high-profile death in police custody – impacted the lives of individuals already vulnerable to criminal behavior, particularly in the epicenter of the unrest: the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and Saint Paul, Minnesota.

George Floyd’s murder sparked serious civil unrest across the Twin Cities, leading to riots, looting, and \$500 million in property damage, including the burning of the Minneapolis 3rd Police Precinct (Phelps 2024). In response, Governor Tim Walz activated the Minnesota National Guard – the state’s largest deployment since World War II. This period also saw a sharp increase in homicides: the number of murders in Minnesota rose by 58% from 117 in 2019 to 185 in 2020, and increased again to 201 in 2021, with 70% of these homicides occurring in the Twin Cities. This study qualitatively examines the perspectives of 18 individuals convicted of homicide during this period, providing a micro-level understanding that complements existing quantitative research and offers insights to inform policies aimed at preventing similar violence in the future.

Literature review

Understanding the homicide spike in 2020 and 2021 requires situating it within developmental and life-course criminology’s focus on the intersection of time and place (Elder 1985, 1994). This framework emphasizes how historical and geographical contexts shape individual trajectories (e.g., Pyrooz et al. 2024). As Neil and Sampson (2021) argue, ‘when you are’ and ‘where you are’ are as crucial to life outcomes as ‘who you are,’ since the timing and location of social events influence experiences and developmental paths. Historical exogenous shocks, like the U.S. prohibition of alcohol production in 1920, had profound effects on organized crime in Chicago, for example, restructuring power dynamics and amplifying inequalities within criminal networks (Smith 2020). Large, shared experiences – such as the prohibition or pandemic – serve as ‘turning points,’ distinct from the individual events typically explored in the turning points literature (e.g., marriage, employment, or incarceration; Sampson and Laub 2005). These broader events create unique temporal and spatial contexts that can amplify social inequalities, destabilize local structures, and alter life courses in ways few studies have explored.

In addition to the breakdowns in daily routines and weakened social controls emphasized by routine activities theory (Cohen and Felson 1979), life-course criminology thus provides a robust framework for understanding how large-scale disruptions intersect with existing vulnerabilities. Research shows that disruptions in 2020 disproportionately affected economically disadvantaged and predominantly Black neighborhoods near protest sites (Muhammad 2020). Reductions in police presence and increased social disorganization further destabilized these communities (Cassell 2020; Cheng and Long 2022). The concept of ‘cumulative disadvantage’ (Sampson and Laub 1997) illustrates how exogenous shocks exacerbate preexisting inequalities, as time and place interact with individual circumstances to amplify strain and vulnerability. As Agnew (1992) argues, sudden shifts in social, economic, and community contexts can generate new forms of strain, which may lead to a rapid escalation in criminal behavior as a maladaptive coping mechanism (Cubukcu, Darcan, and Aksu 2023).

This study extends the literature by examining how the COVID-19 pandemic and civil unrest following the death of George Floyd functioned as turning points, reshaping life trajectories in ways that accelerated pathways to homicide. Unlike much of the existing research, which has focused on macro-level trends and aggregate data (e.g., Lind et al. 2024), this study delves into individual-level experiences to reveal how the extraordinary pressures of 2020 influenced personal trajectories toward violence. The findings illustrate how exogenous shocks do not uniformly affect communities or individuals (Hoeboer et al. 2024), highlighting the importance of considering context-specific factors. By integrating insights from life-course theory, this study provides a nuanced understanding

of how time and place converge to influence pathways to violence, particularly for those already situated in contexts of extreme instability and disadvantage.

Methods

This qualitative study is part of a larger mixed-methods project examining over 600 homicides in Hennepin and Ramsey Counties, Minnesota, between 2018 and 2022. These counties include the state's largest cities, Minneapolis and Saint Paul. In collaboration with the Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension, we analyzed National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) records and gathered additional information from media, police reports, and trial documents to contextualize each case. These data allowed us to identify eligible participants for the qualitative component reported here.

Study recruitment and participants

Participants were recruited from two Minnesota Correctional Facilities: one medium-security and one maximum-security. We initially contacted all six state prisons, but only two responded. The wardens at these two facilities provided lists of eligible individuals convicted of first- and second-degree murder or manslaughter for offenses that occurred in 2020 or 2021. Eligibility was further refined based on additional criteria: individuals actively appealing their cases or deemed unfit to participate (e.g., for health or behavioral reasons) were excluded. At the medium-security facility, eight out of 13 eligible participants agreed to participate. The maximum-security facility housed about 100 eligible individuals, but owing to staffing limitations and the scope of the study, the warden requested we limit our sample. Therefore, we randomly selected 20 individuals from the eligible list, and 10 consented to participate. The study received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the Minnesota Department of Corrections, ensuring ethical compliance. The principal investigators are experienced interviewers and qualitative researchers with extensive backgrounds working in prisons and with people convicted of serious (violent) offenses, including in death penalty mitigation (Peterson and Densley, 2021).

The study involved 18 male participants, ranging in age from 18 to 62 years at the time of the interview, with a mean age of 27.3 years at the time of their offenses. Fourteen self-identified as Black and four as White. Geographically, the participants were primarily from urban areas in the Twin Cities, with 10 from Minneapolis, five from St. Paul, and three from suburban areas. They were incarcerated for a range of homicide-related offenses involving firearms (10 cases), knives (two cases), vehicles (two cases), physical force (two cases), and fire (one case). Their victims ranged in age from infancy to 75 years, with a mean age of 32.9. Of the 18 victims, 14 were male and four were female. They were predominantly Black (nine), followed by White (six), with one American Indian, one Asian, and one Latinx victim. Relationships between perpetrators and victims ranged widely: seven involved strangers, three were linked to gang or group affiliations, and the remainder involved close relations such as a child, sibling, girlfriend, spouse, or acquaintance.

Data collection

Data were collected through open-ended, semi-structured interviews conducted over two days at each facility, with each interview, a combination of general and specific questions, lasting between 45 and 150 minutes (average of 90 minutes). Each interview began with the prompt, 'Tell us about where you grew up,' which helped participants feel at ease and allowed the conversation to flow naturally. From there, we inquired about their family, school, and work lives, followed by questions regarding their offending history and mental health. As the interviews progressed, we shifted focus to the circumstances surrounding the offense that led to their incarceration. This included asking what was going on in their lives at that time, which

served as a segue to discuss the broader context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the aftermath of George Floyd's murder. Although these topics emerged organically from earlier discussions, they were also probed more specifically to understand their direct impact, ensuring we captured participants' perspectives on these critical events. Owing to prison restrictions, interviews were not audio-recorded; instead, one principal investigator interviewed while the other took detailed notes. Interviews were held in private rooms where correctional staff could observe but not hear, ensuring safety and confidentiality. Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Analytical approach

We used inductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) to identify patterns within the data, focusing on themes related to the participants' experiences and their paths to homicide. The principal investigators independently coded the data, achieving 95% agreement, and refined the themes through iterative review to ensure consistency. This approach provided a comprehensive understanding of how external pressures, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and civil unrest, shaped their actions and led to violence.

Findings

This section highlights key themes that emerged from the interviews, supported by illustrative verbatim quotes (*in italics*).

Pre-2020: vulnerability and instability

The 18 interviewees described lives marked by early instability, exposure to violence, and entrenched criminality long before 2020. Many had been raised in environments of parental substance abuse and incarceration, which led to unstable upbringings. Interviewee 3 explained, '*I didn't have no guidance, I did what I wanted to do,*' encapsulating the lack of direction many interviewees faced in their youth.

Their early environments were characterized by constant violence. As Interviewee 8 said, '*That's all you're seeing,*' referring to the violence that permeated their neighborhoods. These interviewees often were involved with the criminal justice system early, getting into trouble in elementary school. Behavioral issues, mental health diagnoses, and associations with delinquent peers escalated during adolescence. Interviewee 7 recalled how he was expelled from school after posing with a gun and posting the image on social media, reflecting a common trajectory toward more serious criminal involvement.

Access to illegal firearms and drug use often began early. For many, significant turning points like the death of a parent or guardian further exacerbated their vulnerabilities. Interviewee 15 described discovering his stepfather had been murdered, recalling, '*I've never seen so much blood. It was everywhere, like a horror movie.*' Such traumatic experiences deepened their engagement in criminal activity as a coping mechanism.

Several interviewees cycled in and out of juvenile detention or jail, which further entrenched them in criminality. By 2020, many were already on precarious paths, shaped by adverse childhood experiences and longstanding systemic vulnerabilities.

2020: crisis and escalation

The events of 2020, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic and the civil unrest following George Floyd's murder, exacerbated these pre-existing vulnerabilities and pushed many interviewees into desperate circumstances that culminated in violence.

Interviewee 1, who had been homeless and involved in armed robberies before the pandemic, described how the closures of shelters during COVID-19 left him without any place to stay. *'I couldn't sleep, I was depressed,'* he said, noting how his mental health rapidly deteriorated. The situation became even more unstable following George Floyd's murder, with increased violence on the streets. *'I had to protect myself no matter what,'* he said, describing the night he shot someone in a confrontation near a homeless encampment. For Interviewee 1, the collapse of already fragile support systems, combined with heightened street violence, accelerated his path toward homicide.

Interviewee 2's crime was also shaped by the pandemic, though very differently. Wealthy and accustomed to luxury, the pandemic lockdown intensified problems in his marriage, leading to divorce. *'I was lonely and depressed,'* he explained, adding that he turned to younger friends and heavy drinking to cope. After a night of partying, he crashed his car, killing two passengers. He reflected that the pandemic stripped him of the social connections and structure that previously anchored his life.

Interviewee 18, who had been managing his schizophrenia and staying sober before the pandemic, lost his job when the bakery he worked at closed due to COVID-19. The loss of routine and the stress of unemployment caused his mental health to spiral. *'Everything collapsed,'* he explained, recalling how he stopped taking his medication and began experiencing intense paranoia and hallucinations. In this state, he tragically beat and killed his newborn child: *'That night the voices were saying you aren't good enough, she [the baby's mother] doesn't think you're worthy.'* His narrative highlights how the pandemic disrupted delicate balances in the lives of those managing mental health conditions, leading to devastating outcomes.

Interviewee 6 legally obtained a handgun permit under Minnesota law after the 2016 election, driven by rising fears of racial tensions and police violence. He purchased multiple firearms – a *'shotgun, handgun, and assault rifle'* – as he described the social atmosphere as *'toxic.'* His decision to carry a gun in public during the COVID-19 pandemic stemmed from escalating fears of *'martial law'* and a need *'to protect my family.'*

After George Floyd's murder, his anxiety deepened. *'I didn't feel safe. It was fine in the winter, but it was World War III in the summer,'* he explained. Seeing violent protests and looting, particularly at a nearby Target, reinforced his fears. Following a local crime-monitoring app, he noticed fewer police and more reports of break-ins, gun violence, and carjackings, leaving him convinced his neighborhood was unsafe.

Living with his girlfriend and her two sons, tensions escalated with the boys' father, involved in gang activity. One morning, feeling threatened during an altercation, Interviewee 6 shot and killed the father, marking the first time he had fired a gun at someone. His case shows how fear, civil unrest, and personal security concerns during the pandemic can lead individuals to fatal decisions, even those without prior criminal histories.

Interviewee 11 told us that COVID-19 heightened his agitation and stress levels, leading to increased confrontations and physical altercations. In this context, he stabbed and killed a stranger during a fight inside a grocery store. Interviewee 16, who stabbed his brother to death during a fight at home, similarly recalled how living on top of one another during the pandemic escalated domestic disputes, but also that *'after George Floyd, things were crazy'* on the streets. He vividly described how his cousin drove 350 miles from Milwaukee to Minneapolis just to participate in the looting. Interviewee 13's crime also stemmed from the unrest following George Floyd's murder. The disruptions of the pandemic escalated his substance abuse, leading him to drive intoxicated into a group of Black Lives Matter protesters, killing one.

For several interviewees, the events of 2020 created a cycle of violence that was difficult to escape. Interviewee 4's experiences vividly illustrate how repeated victimization and fear led to a deadly outcome. Initially, he viewed the pandemic as *'fun'* and a *'big summer break'* due to school closures. But after being shot at five times in under two years, he began carrying a gun for protection. The constant threat of violence weighed heavily on him, and after his friend was killed, he became

'angry at the world.' His rage, fueled by people disrespecting his deceased friend online, pushed him into a retaliatory shooting, leading to his imprisonment.

Interviewee 7, who had been shot twice during the civil unrest, described the pervasive fear he felt in 2020. *"People were waking up, hitting the streets... like 150 people in the parking lot, partying all day. ... Running wild, [wearing] 'ski masks, not COVID masks' he recalled. He estimated being involved in at least 10 shootouts, with each violent encounter reinforcing the sense that carrying a gun was necessary for survival. His actions culminated in a fatal shooting, where an innocent woman was caught in the crossfire. Interviewee 3 added: 'All around, there was a lot of shit going on. Nobody give a fuck about no police.'* Interviewee 3 referenced two tragic cases: nine-year-old Trinity Ottoson-Smith, shot while playing on a trampoline, and six-year-old Aniya Allen, killed while sitting in her family's car. He said, *'Even little kids' getting shot.'*

Other interviewees echoed the sentiment that 2020 created a self-reinforcing cycle of violence. Interviewee 10 described how *'four of my friends got shot that summer, and one of them was doing the shooting.'* Interviewee 9 reflected that the influx of money from looting combined with government assistance checks worsened the situation: *'Too many people who never had money before was getting money... People didn't know what to do with it.'* Despite the *'quick money,'* Interviewee 8 felt growing emptiness and despair, largely due to constant violence. He dropped out of his COVID-enforced virtual school, dismissing it as impractical for his circumstances: *'I wasn't doing that.'* Without *'rules'* and *'routines,'* he described his life as *'nothing'* and *'empty,'* feeling *'lost.'* This eventually led to the shooting and killing of a drug dealer during a robbery planned on social media.

In the broader context of 2020, these narratives reveal how the convergence of pandemic-induced fear, economic instability, and social unrest led to increased violence, often in tragic and unintended ways. The quote from Interviewee 9, *'You can't ride the wave when the wave is riding you,'* encapsulates the experience of many interviewees who felt swept up in events beyond their control, pushed toward violence in a period marked by chaos and uncertainty.

Discussion

The insights provided by the 18 individuals convicted of homicide in this study illustrate how the COVID-19 pandemic and the George Floyd protests created a volatile environment that contributed to their involvement in lethal violence. These findings offer a unique perspective on the personal experiences of those affected by these 'exogenous shocks' (Rosenfield 2018), providing a counterpoint to the predominant focus on macro-level trends (Rosenfield 2024). While interviewees were already navigating complex life circumstances marked by trauma, economic hardship, and instability, the unprecedented disruptions of 2020 further exacerbated these challenges, pushing some towards deadly outcomes. However, framing 2020 as a deterministic 'turning point' oversimplifies the nuanced interaction between historical context and individual trajectories, as suggested by life-course criminology.

Life-course criminology emphasizes the importance of time and place in shaping individual pathways (Elder 1985, 1994). This study underscores how the timing of major societal disruptions can alter life trajectories, with outcomes depending on individuals' social locations within their cohort and geographic contexts (Neil and Sampson 2021). Rather than treating 2020 as a singular turning point, it is more accurate to view these events as amplifying pre-existing trajectories already influenced by structural inequality and personal instability. Many participants had longstanding histories of criminal involvement and exposure to violence. For example, Interviewee 1 was already struggling with homelessness and mental health issues when the pandemic struck, pushing him further into instability. Similarly, Interviewee 18's struggles with undiagnosed schizophrenia and addiction predated the pandemic, but the sudden loss of his job exacerbated his mental health crisis, leading to a tragic outcome. These findings align with the concept of 'cumulative disadvantage' (Sampson and Laub 1997), where early disadvantages compound over time, making individuals more vulnerable to later crises.

The events of 2020 can be understood as exacerbating these existing trajectories of violence, rather than serving as a distinct turning point. This perspective is consistent with Agnew's (1992) general strain theory, which posits that negative experiences such as job loss, social isolation, and increased stress can heighten the risk of criminal behavior. The societal disruptions triggered by the pandemic and civil unrest introduced new, substantial stressors that, when combined with past trauma, led to increased violence among those already at risk (Regalado, Timmer, and Jawaid 2022). As Hatchimonji et al. (2020) noted, 'Trauma does not quarantine' during a pandemic; rather, it proliferates under such conditions.

While routine activities theory (Cohen and Felson 1979) traditionally explains how the convergence of motivated offenders, suitable targets, and lack of capable guardians leads to crime, it does not fully account for how abrupt social disruptions can alter perceptions of safety and provoke extreme behaviors. In this study, participants viewed carrying firearms not as opportunistic, but as a necessary response to chaotic circumstances. For instance, Interviewee 6 described how the perceived 'lawlessness' following George Floyd's death compelled him to arm himself for protection, ultimately leading to a fatal confrontation. This suggests that theoretical frameworks need to better incorporate how exogenous shocks can transform perceptions of safety and self-defense, influencing the situational dynamics that drive violent outcomes.

Moreover, the absence of social supports and formal institutions left participants feeling increasingly isolated and trapped in cycles of violence. This dynamic resonates with theories of social disorganization and opportunity structures (Cloward and Ohlin 1960), where the breakdown of social routines and diminished police presence in certain neighborhoods increased exposure to violence and shifted normative behaviors. For example, Interviewees 4 and 7 described how the erosion of law and order led them to adopt new strategies for self-preservation, escalating conflicts in ways that might not have occurred under more stable conditions. These narratives offer a nuanced perspective on the 'Minneapolis Effect' (Cassell 2020), showing that changes in routine activities and social control do not merely create opportunities for violence but can also reshape threat perceptions and self-preservation strategies, ultimately contributing to the tragic outcomes observed in 2020.

Limitations and future directions

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. The small sample size, cross-sectional design, and geographical focus on Minnesota limit the generalizability of the findings. Moreover, the retrospective nature of the narratives may be influenced by participants' current perceptions and prison experiences. Notably, the study does not capture the experiences of those who faced the same disruptions and stressors but did not resort to homicide. This is a critical gap, as most individuals who experienced the societal upheavals of 2020 did not engage in lethal violence. Understanding why some individuals escalated to homicide while others did not is a challenging but essential theoretical puzzle that warrants further investigation. This study's findings point to several potential factors that may have mediated or moderated these pathways, such as pre-existing mental health conditions, histories of trauma and instability, and immediate situational pressures. Future research should aim to disentangle these complex interactions, perhaps through comparative studies involving both those who turned to violence and those who maintained pro-social behavior under similar conditions.

Expanding to larger, more diverse samples and incorporating longitudinal designs would allow for deeper insights into how crises like the pandemic influence criminal trajectories over time. Additionally, exploring the role of resilience and protective factors in buffering against the escalation to serious violence could provide valuable contributions to crime prevention strategies. By examining the full spectrum of responses to societal disruptions, future studies can build a more comprehensive understanding of the conditions under which individuals are pushed toward or pulled away from criminal behavior.

Implications for policy and practice

Focusing on Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota – the epicenter of the George Floyd protests – provides crucial insights into how overlapping crises interacted with local conditions to hasten violence. The intensity and duration of unrest in these areas likely had a more immediate and amplified effect on vulnerable individuals compared to other regions. While similar crises occurred nationwide, the geographic concentration of civil unrest in Minnesota exacerbated preexisting inequalities in policing, housing, healthcare, and employment (Phelps 2024). These conditions increased exposure to violence and limited access to resources that might have otherwise helped mitigate escalation. Policy responses tailored to address the complex and unique challenges faced by these communities are critical, not only to interrupt pathways to violence but also to provide preventative support that can reduce the overall risk of lethal outcomes in future crises.

The study demonstrates that while robust social and mental health support during crises is essential, these measures must be coupled with long-term strategies to address structural inequalities. Preexisting disparities played a key role in determining how interviewees experienced the pandemic and civil unrest, and without addressing these root causes, social support will be insufficient to prevent future violence. Structural reforms aimed at reducing poverty, improving access to mental health services, and providing stable housing will be crucial in building more resilient communities and reducing the likelihood of violence during times of societal upheaval. At the same time, Group Violence Intervention (GVI) and violence interrupters, which have shown success in reducing gun violence, could help de-escalate the tensions and cycles of violence exacerbated by large-scale disruptions (Braga, Weisburd, and Turchan 2018; Butts et al. 2015).

In sum, this qualitative study sheds light on the complex interplay between personal vulnerabilities and broader societal disruptions contributing to an unprecedented surge in homicides in 2020, previously only explored quantitatively. By focusing on individual experiences, this research provides a critical perspective that underscores the need for comprehensive support systems and proactive policy measures to mitigate the impact of future crises on vulnerable populations, helping them regain control over their lives even in the face of overwhelming societal disruptions. The findings call for a deeper understanding and a more empathetic approach to addressing the roots of serious violence in times of social upheaval, contributing to a richer understanding of the human dimensions of crime and violence.

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Notes on contributors

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