



Homicide rate and the death penalty

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9th November 2005 marked the 40th anniversary of the abolition of the death penalty for murder in the UK. This note shows the trends in the homicide rate in England and Wales since the war, allowing comparisons to be made with the rate before and after the abolition of the death penalty for murder. The note concludes with details of public opinion on this issue

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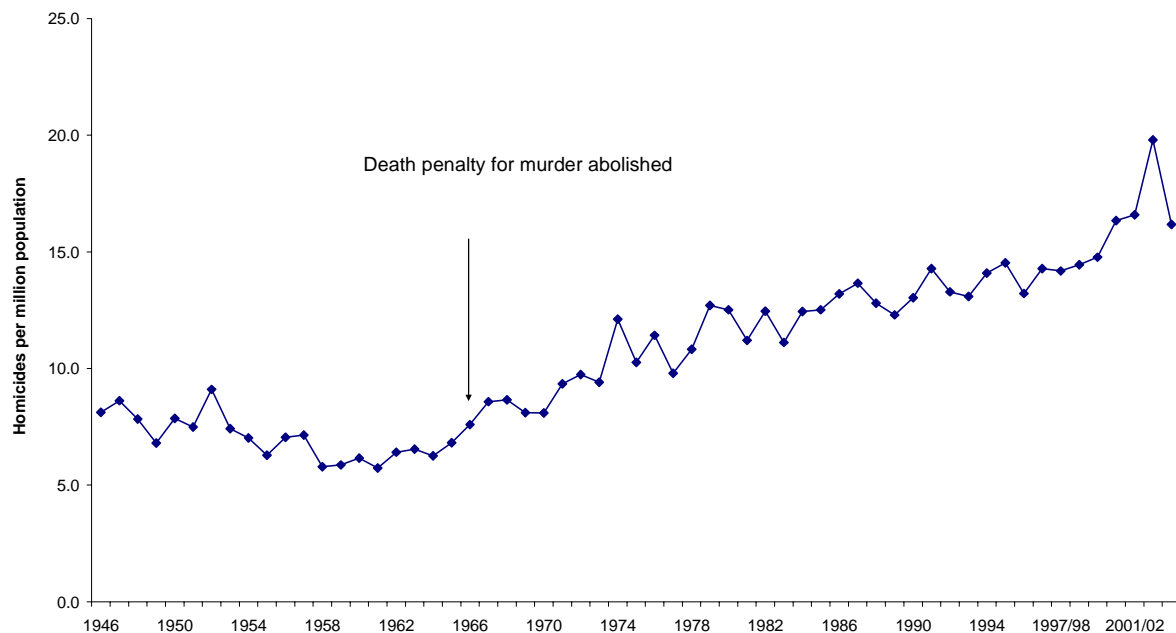
A. Homicide rate

The term 'homicide' covers the offences of murder, manslaughter and infanticide. Offences are shown in the chart and table according to the year in which the police initially recorded the offence as homicide. This is not necessarily the year in which the incident took place, or the year in which any court decision was made. The data refer to the position as at 22 October 2004 when recording closed down for the purpose of analysis. Subsequent court hearings or other information received will change the figures given. Where the police initially record an offence as homicide, it remains so classified unless the police or the courts decide later that no homicide took place.

Dr Harold Shipman was convicted in January 2000 of murdering 15 of his patients while he was a general practitioner in Hyde, Greater Manchester. He was sentenced to life imprisonment. The independent public enquiry produced its first report in July 2002, in which it identified a further 172 victims. These extra homicides were then recorded by Greater Manchester Police and thus appear in the 2002/03 homicide figures, distorting the figures for that year.

The post war homicide rate is provided in the graph below and the attached table. The graph shows the number of offences initially recorded as homicide per million population. The table also provides information on the number of offences currently recorded as homicide, but this information is only available for the years after the abolition of the death penalty.

Homicide rate, England and Wales, 1946 - 2003/04



The graph clearly shows that there has been an increase in the murder rate since the abolition of capital punishment. In 1965, the year of the abolition of the death penalty for homicide, the murder rate was approximately 6.8 per million population, by 2001/02 this figure had doubled to 16.6 per million, the highest murder rate over the period shown (when adjusted for Shipman).

It is very difficult to say how much the abolition of capital punishment has been responsible for this increase. In 1952 the murder rate was higher than in the years immediately following the abolition of the death penalty.

B. Public opinion on capital punishment

In August 2002 the News of the World commissioned an ICM Research poll on child safety in the light of high profile child murder cases¹. The final question discussed capital punishment.

There have been calls recently for the reintroduction of the death penalty for the most serious crimes. Do you think that the death penalty should be reintroduced in the UK or not?

Fifty nine per cent of respondents thought the death penalty should be reintroduced, with just over a third (34%) disagreeing.

MORI has asked about the use of capital punishment four times in the past 24 years. They have consistently found three quarters of all respondents (76%-78%) saying the death penalty can be sometimes justified, there was one exception in 1990, when less than two-thirds - 63% - said they were in favour. Older people are most supportive of the idea, with four in five of the over 55s in favour, as opposed to 68% of the under 25s.

Do you think the death penalty is ever justified? - Mori poll

	1978	1981	Jan 90	1995				
				All	18-24	25-34	35-54	55+
Yes, sometimes	77	78	63	76	68	73	75	80
No, never	21	19	33	19	27	23	20	14
Don't know	2	3	4	5	5	4	5	6

Source - www.mori.co.uk

However, those who feel that public opinion is clear cut need to be cautious before they suggest taking another look at the law. This is because the trends above are based on simply asking whether the death penalty can ever be justified.

If one asks a slightly different question and asks the public to choose between either life in prison, a long prison sentence or the death penalty, one gets a different picture, which suggests that less than half the public are really passionate advocates of execution. The data referred to in the following paragraphs can be found in the attached tables.

For example, in the immediate aftermath of the Sarah Payne murder in 2000, MORI asked, in a poll for the News of the World, what the most appropriate punishment was for child killers - almost three in five (58%) chose the death penalty and a third (33%) a life prison sentence.

¹ Sarah' Law Poll, August 2002, www.icmresearch.co.uk

What sentence should be passed for the following offences? July 2000

	Death penalty %	A life prison sentence %	A long prison sentence %	A short prison sentence %	None %	Don't know %
Murder of an adult stranger	31	50	15	*	1	3
Serious sexual abuse of an adult stranger	11	43	41	2	1	2
Murder of a child	58	33	7	*	1	1
Serious sexual abuse of a child	30	45	21	1	2	1
Kidnap of a child	8	39	44	4	2	4
Murder of a husband or wife in a fit of rage	8	28	37	10	4	13
Murder committed in prison while already serving a life sentence	35	43	10	1	3	8

Source: Mori/News Of The World Poll, July 2000

But by the time Roy Whiting was convicted and sentenced for her murder in December 2001, the proportion saying the death penalty was appropriate for the murder of a child had fallen to only two in five (41%) and more chose life in prison (49%).

What sentence should be passed for the following offences? December 2001

	Death penalty %	A life prison sentence %	A long prison sentence %	A short prison sentence %	None %	Don't know %
Murder of an adult stranger	22	55	19	1	*	3
Serious sexual abuse of an adult stranger	7	38	51	2	1	1
Murder of a child	41	49	9	*	*	*
Serious sexual abuse of a child	22	50	25	1	1	*
Kidnap of a child	5	31	57	5	5	*
Murder of a husband or wife in a fit of rage	5	23	41	17	2	12
Murder committed in prison while already serving a life sentence	29	47	13	2	1	7

Source: Mori/News Of The World Poll, December 2001

Offences initially recorded by the police as homicide¹ and current classification

England and Wales 1946 to 2003/04

	Offences initially recorded as homicide		Offences currently ² recorded as homicide	
	Number	Per million population	Number	Per million population
1946	347	8.1	..	..
1947	371	8.6	..	..
1948	341	7.8	..	..
1949	298	6.8	..	..
1950	346	7.9	..	..
1951	328	7.5	..	..
1952	400	9.1	..	..
1953	327	7.4	..	..
1954	311	7.0	..	..
1955	279	6.3	..	..
1956	315	7.1	..	..
1957	321	7.1	..	..
1958	261	5.8	..	..
1959	266	5.9	..	..
1960	282	6.2	..	..
1961	265	5.7	..	..
1962	299	6.4	..	..
1963	307	6.5	..	..
1964	296	6.3	..	..
1965	325	6.8	..	..
1966	364	7.6	..	..
1967	414	8.6	354	7.3
1968	420	8.7	360	7.4
1969	395	8.1	332	6.8
1970	396	8.1	339	7.0
1971	459	9.3	407	8.3
1972	480	9.7	409	8.3
1973	465	9.4	391	8.0
1974	599	12.1	526	10.7
1975	508	10.3	443	9.0
1976	565	11.4	488	9.9
1977	484	9.8	418	8.5
1978	535	10.8	471	9.6
1979	629	12.7	546	11.1
1980	621	12.5	549	11.1
1981	556	11.2	499	10.1
1982	618	12.5	557	11.2
1983	552	11.1	482	9.7
1984	619	12.4	537	10.8
1985	625	12.5	536	10.7
1986	660	13.2	563	11.2
1987	686	13.7	599	11.9
1988	645	12.8	547	10.9
1989	622	12.3	521	10.3
1990	661	13.0	555	10.9
1991	725	14.3	623	12.3
1992	681	13.3	581	11.4
1993	673	13.1	565	11.1
1994	727	14.1	632	12.4
1995	753	14.5	663	13.0
1996	678	13.2	585	11.4
1997	734	14.3	609	11.9
1997/98	729	14.2	608	11.8
1998/99	745	14.5	650	12.6
1999/00	764	14.8	679	13.1
2000/01	848	16.3	772	14.9
2001/02	864	16.6	808	15.5
2002/03	1,045	19.8	964	18.4
2003/04	858	16.2	833	15.8

.. not available

¹ Murder, all manslaughter and infanticide.

² At 22 October 2004. The latest figures are subject to revision as cases are dealt with by the courts and police, or further information becomes available.

Sources:

Crime in England and Wales 2003/04: Supplementary Volume 1: Homicide and Gun Crime, HOSB 2/05
Monthly Digest of Statistics, Population Trends