



Violence and fear of violence in East and West Germany

David E. Clark^{a, b}, Manfred Wildner^{a, *}

^a*Bavarian Public Health Research Center, Ludwig-Maximilians University, Munich, Germany*

^b*Harvard Injury Control Research Center, Boston, MA, USA*

Abstract

The purpose of this research was to assess the effect of major social changes in Germany since 1989 on mortality due to intentional injury. Mechanisms and types of fatal intentional injury in East and West Germany between 1970 and 1995 were determined from death certificates and compared with judicial data on violent crime convictions and recent public survey data on citizen fear of crime. The number of homicides among East German males increased between 1989 and 1991, and the homicide rate remains high when compared with West German males (although lower than that of American males). Homicide among German females is less common, presently about equally likely in East and West. Violent crime in general has become more frequent in Germany, and citizen fear of crime has increased markedly, especially in the East. Non-citizens are convicted for an increasing number of homicides and assaults. Rates of suicide were declining in East and West before reunification, and these rates have continued to decline. Social changes in Europe since 1989 have led to noticeable increases in violence and homicide in Germany, which in turn have reduced feelings of security among German citizens, especially in the East. Suicide rates have not been affected. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Violence; Homicide; Suicide; Germany

Introduction

It has been just ten years since the World watched East and West Germans tear down the Berlin Wall and embrace each other after years of separation. Political union came more quickly than expected, but social reintegration is still incomplete. The process by which Germans address their problems in rebuilding a common society has important implications for the future integration of Europe.

The sudden reunification of Germany is also a unique opportunity to study the synthesis of radically different social systems within a relatively homogeneous population. We were particularly interested in comparing the incidence of intentional injury before and after the sudden events which led to this reunification.

Materials and methods

We use the term East to include East Berlin and five new states (Länder) which joined the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) after the dissolution of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +49-89-69349-100; fax: +49-89-69349-104.

E-mail address: wil@ibe.med.uni-muenchen.de (M. Wildner).

1990. We use the term West to include West Berlin and ten states which previously comprised the FRG.

Since reunification, the Federal Office of Statistics (Statistisches Bundesamt) has maintained mortality data collected from death certificates and categorized by region (East and West), sex, age, and International Classification of Diseases (ICD-9) including cause of injury codes (E-codes). These data, which also include population estimates, were obtained on computer diskettes for 1991–1995 inclusive. Death certificate data for several diagnoses comparing the GDR and FRG through 1989 had fortunately just been assembled and published prior to reunification (Bergmann, Baier, Casper & Wiesner, 1993).

Deaths were categorized using the International Classification of Diseases, Ninth Revision (ICD-9) E-Codes: Homicides included E960–E969, with sub-categories including homicide due to firearms (E965.0–E965.4) and homicide due to stabbing (E966). Suicides included E950–E959, including a subcategory for suicide due to firearms (E955.0–E955.4). Deaths related to firearms apparently of accidental cause (E922.0–E922.9) and deaths related to firearms but with unknown intent (E985–E985.4) were also recorded.

Time series graphs were constructed using previously developed age and sex categorizations (Bergmann et al., 1993), calculating and adding the comparable death certificate data for the years 1991–1995. Death certificate data were not available for the year 1990, and data on homicide from East Germany were not available between 1976 and 1988. Comparable mortality data for the United States are published by the US National Center for Health Statistics (National Center for Health Statistics, 1991).

Data on population, immigration, unemployment, and the numbers of persons convicted (*verurteilt*) for murder (*Mord*) or manslaughter (*Totschlag*) for West Germany are given in the German Statistical Yearbooks [Statistisches Bundesamt, 1980–98 (Annually)], which since 1987 have also reported these statistics separately for German citizens (*Deutsche*) and non-citizens (*Ausländer*), as well as for different age groups. East German judicial statistics with similar classifications are still not given in these standard publications. Partial data are available from the statistical yearbooks published by separate states (Thüringer Landesamt für Statistik, 1998; Landesamt für Datenverarbeitung und Statistik, Land Brandenburg, 1998).

Survey data relating to fear of violence in East and West Germany have been reviewed in numerous publications, including those cited below (Noelle-Neumann & Köcher, 1997; Kury & Obergfell-Fuchs, 1998; Schwind, 1998; Boers, 1996).

Results

Crude mortality rates due to homicide for men and women in East and West Germany from 1970 to 1995 are depicted in Fig. 1. Although the trend is less definite because of missing data, the most obvious finding is a large increase in the rate of homicide among East German men between 1989 and 1991; this rate has remained relatively constant since that time, as has its age distribution. A smaller rise in the homicide rate for West German men is also apparent. Rates of homicide among East and West German women have not shown a major change.

Age-specific rates of homicide for East and West German men during 1991–95 are compared to the rates for the year 1989 in Fig. 2. Both East and West German male victims of homicide show a trimodal age distribution, with the majority of cases occurring in the middle adult years, but significant elevations in the rate of victimization also among the defenseless at the extremes of age. The highest rate in 1991–95 was for East German men aged 35–44, with about 3.2 homicides per 100,000 population. For comparison, the 1991 homicide rate per 100,000 population for American males aged 35–44 was about 18 and the rate for ages 20–24 was over 40 (National Center for Health Statistics, 1991).

Rates of suicide for East and West German men and women are shown in Fig. 3. While rates have been higher in the East for both sexes, the rates for all groups had been declining before 1989 and have continued to fall since then. For 1991–95, crude rates for men over 55 years of age in East and West were 56.6 and 35.9 per 100,000 respectively; for women over 55, the respective rates were 23.7 and 15.1. Under age 55, regional differences were much less (Eastern men 19.5, Western men 15.5, Eastern women 4.7, Western women 4.8).

Mechanisms of homicide, suicide, and accidental or unspecified violent death during 1991–95 are shown in Table 1, with particular attention to the frequency of firearm related mortality. Homicide using firearms is particularly rare when compared to American data, and indeed most German homicides are committed without weapons other than blunt objects. Suicide with firearms is also uncommon; the most frequent method of suicide in Germany is hanging. The number of firearm-related deaths of unassigned intent is large compared to the number of firearm-related homicides; however, the relative proportions are not much different between East and West and there was little change in these proportions over the five years of this study.

Judicial statistics from West Germany show an increasing percentage of those convicted of homicide to be non-citizens (Fig. 4) [Statistisches Bundesamt, 1980–98 (Annually)]. Non-citizens now make up more

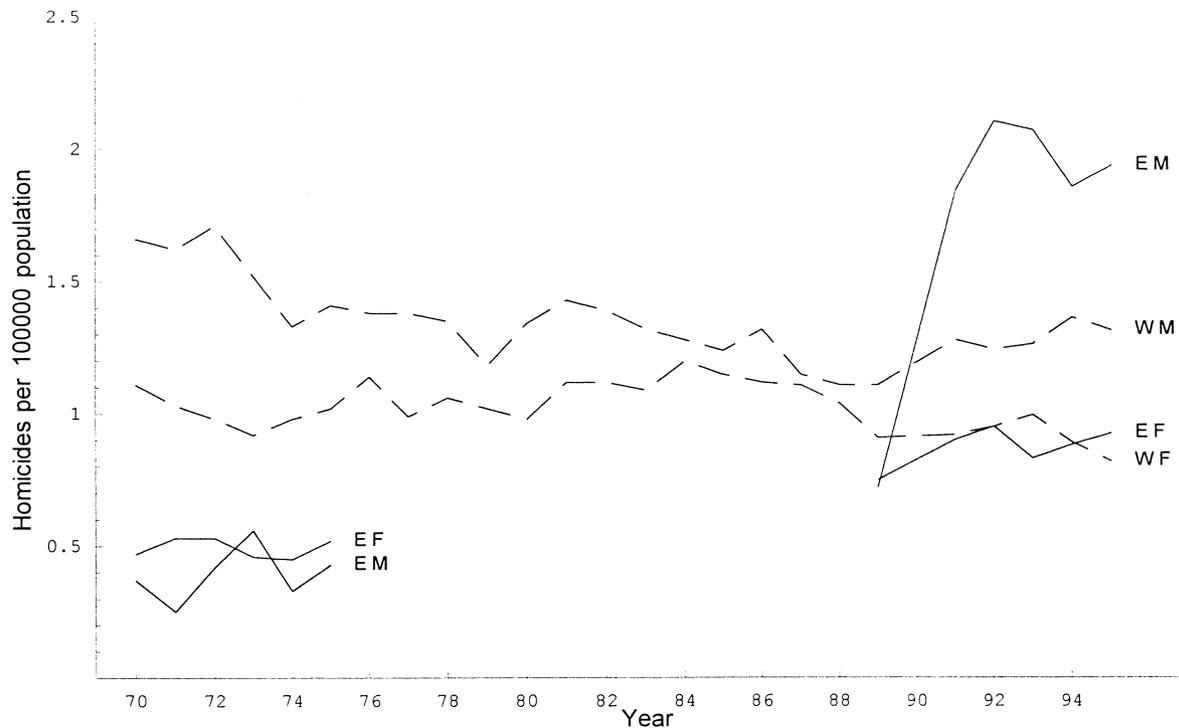


Fig. 1. Crude rates of homicide for the years 1970–1995. EM = East German Males, WM = West German Males, EF = East German Females, WF = West German Females.

than 10.4% of the population in the West, up from 7.2% in 1980 and 7.6% in 1989, but account for nearly 30% of convictions for homicide and assault. Although in comparison to their population, the rate of conviction for violent crimes (homicide and assault) is greatest among young men (whether citizens or not), 88% of homicide convictions in 1996 were in adults over 21.

Non-citizens comprise only 1.8% of the population in East Germany, up from 1.1% in 1989, and we were

not able to gather comparable data for their contribution to violent crime. Young men in the Eastern states of Thüringen and Brandenburg had higher rates of conviction for violent crimes when compared to others in their respective states (Thüringer Landesamt für Statistik, 1998; Landesamt für Datenverarbeitung und Statistik, Land Brandenburg, 1998), but here also homicide convictions involved older adults in 77 and 79% of the cases in 1997.

Public opinion surveys in Germany since political

Table 1

Total numbers of deaths in the given categories among East and West German men and women during the five years 1991–1995

	East Germany		West Germany	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
<i>Homicides</i>	741	365	2065	1540
Firearms	77 (10.4%)	20 (5.5%)	428 (20.1%)	217 (14.1%)
Stabbing	225 (30.4%)	100 (30.4%)	772 (37.4%)	471 (30.6%)
<i>Suicides</i>	11,466	4821	34,828	14,650
Firearms	252 (2.2%)	11 (0.2%)	3711 (10.7%)	191 (1.3%)
<i>Other deaths due to firearms</i>				
Accidents	53	5	82	10
Unknown intent	82	4	502	55

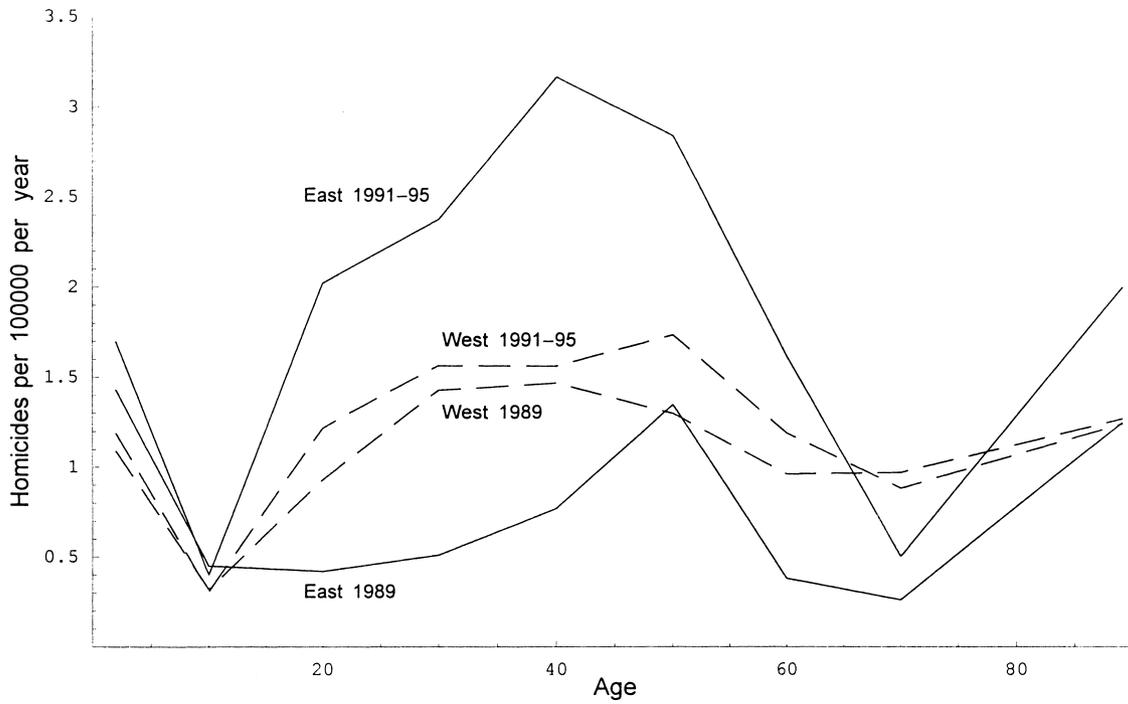


Fig. 2. Age-specific annual rates of homicide for East and West German Males for the year 1989 and the five years 1991–1995.

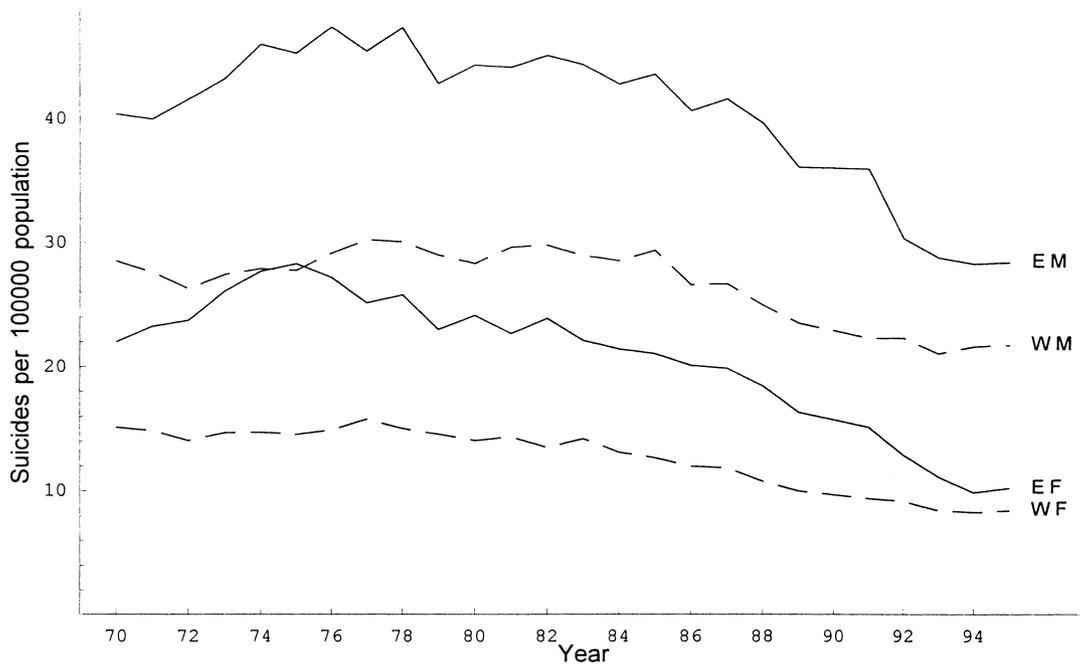


Fig. 3. Crude rates of suicide for the years 1970–1995. EM = East German Males, WM = West German Males, EF = East German Females, WF = West German Females.

reunification have consistently revealed increased concern about crime and public safety (Noelle-Neumann & Köcher, 1997; Kury & Obergfell-Fuchs, 1998; Schwind, 1998; Boers, 1996). When German citizens in early 1995 were asked by Allensbach about their feelings of external and internal security, 63% in the East and 36% in the West felt that they were not well-protected (nicht gut geschützt); 88% of respondents in the East felt that the old GDR had protected them better from criminals than the new FRG (Noelle-Neumann & Köcher, 1997).

By the end of 1996, 48% of West Germans responded that they were not well-protected, while the percentage in the East remained at 64%. 89% in the East and 78% in the West felt that public safety had deteriorated following reunification. 80% in the East and 72% in the West also felt that the fall of the Iron Curtain and opening of borders to the East had contributed to this rise in crime (Noelle-Neumann & Köcher, 1997). Non-citizens (Ausländer) were mentioned by 22–24% of respondents in East and West as contributing to this rise in crime, but by far the most frequent cause cited was unemployment. Indeed, the rate of unemployment has risen since 1992 from 6.6 to 10.5% in the West and from 14.8% to almost 20% in

the East [Statistisches Bundesamt, 1980–98 (Annually)].

Among East German citizens surveyed by the Max-Planck-Institute in 1990, 14.7% believed it was likely or very likely that they would be assaulted in the next year; a similar survey in 1995 found 24.3% with this opinion; comparative figures in the West were 6.9 and 9.6% (Kury & Obergfell-Fuchs, 1998). However, the actual incidence of victimization among those surveyed was not much different between East and West. Nevertheless, the fear of crime in Germany is rising, greater in the East than in the West, greater in larger cities, greater in those who have already experienced a crime, and greater among women than among men; contrary to some theories, but consistent with reality, fear of crime is also greater in the young than in the old (Kury & Obergfell-Fuchs, 1998).

Discussion

Most people who experienced the sudden removal of the strict political barriers dividing Europe since the Second World War had no memory of Europe unaffected by the threat of external violence. Real and

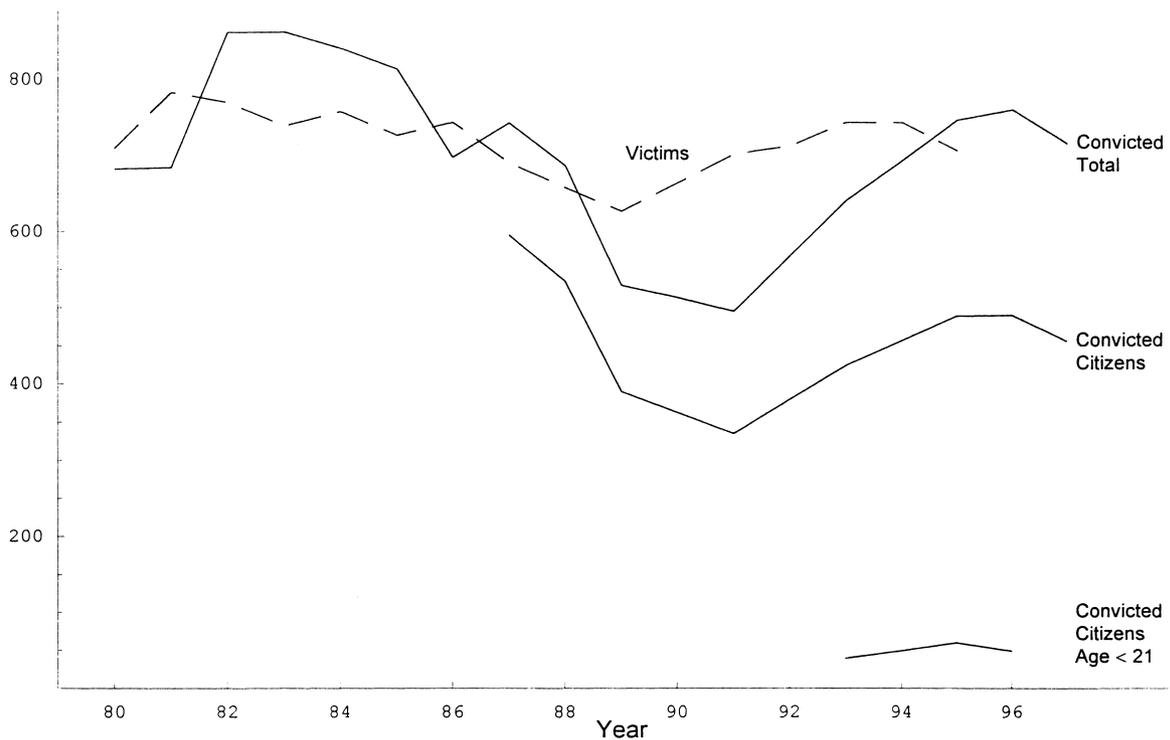


Fig. 4. Victims of homicide (recorded on death certificates) in West Germany, compared with convictions for homicide (murder or manslaughter) in West Germany and the number of German citizens included in this total where data are available.

counterfeit pieces of the Berlin wall have since been distributed around the world as symbols of peace and freedom, but real and perceived problems, including those related to internal violence, remain to be solved in the new Europe. These problems have received little attention in the public health literature, but are interesting and highly relevant.

Historians are only beginning to record the dramatic events of our time and put them in perspective, but it is clear that social differences between Eastern and Western Europe can be traced back through centuries, and are not simply the result of postwar Communist domination (Longworth, 1997). Even within Germany, regional differences have always been present, and a unified German state was not created until 1871, with tragic results.

In this context, the problem of interpersonal violence and insecurity in Germany today is of particular importance. Measuring rates of violence even in a stable society is not easy, and comparisons using numbers reported over time in changing social environments must be viewed with caution. Our interest arose from the observation of a rise in the rate of homicide in the East after 1989. We have restricted our attention to death certificate reports and actual convictions for homicide, which represent only the most serious cases of violence, but have the most definite data. These may allow inferences about the wider problem of intentional violence.

The determination of homicide as a cause of death has such major consequences that these figures must underestimate the actual totals. Some violent deaths of undetermined cause may actually be due to homicide, and these are notable especially if they are relatively numerous (Statistisches Bundesamt, 1998). It is unfortunate that homicide figures were suppressed by the GDR during the period 1980–1988, but unlikely that the numbers differed greatly from those reported before and since. Ironically, government officials of that era could now have used these numbers to demonstrate one benefit of their more rigidly controlled system.

The classical causes of criminal activity (unemployment, alcoholism, frustration, anomie, etc.) (Schwind, 1998) are certainly present today, especially in East Germany, as recognized in citizen surveys (Noelle-Neumann & Köcher, 1997; Kury & Obergfell-Fuchs, 1998). All of Central and Eastern Europe is struggling with these new realities and moral disorientation (Krus, Nelsen & Webb, 1997; Watson, 1995). In some ways the East Germans were fortunate to be absorbed directly into a prosperous Western state. However, in other ways the transition is more difficult since these new citizens of the FRG must also contend with the nearly total rejection of their former social system by the citizens of West Germany, economic inequalities

within the reunified nation, and continuing economic and social obligations of the FRG to the European Community.

As in other societies, young men in Germany contribute disproportionately to crime statistics. One psychological study comparing young adults in East Germany after reunification to their counterparts in West Germany suggests that the former group may have significant problems with “locus of control” (Schauenburg, Kuda & Rüger, 1992), while another study contends that they are coping well (Tomaszewski, Adam & Hinze, 1997). A recent comparison between teenagers in Sachsen (East) and Nordrhein-Westfalen (West) found little difference between them after controlling for other factors (Mansel, 1999). We anticipate further psychological and sociological investigations of adolescents in East Germany, who are struggling with unique conditions added to the usual problems of their age.

A numerically larger problem is related to the influx of foreigners into Germany, which has accelerated since 1989. Criminal activity in the states of West Germany is correlated with numbers of foreigners (Chapin, 1997). Convictions for homicide in West Germany increasingly involve non-citizens (Fig. 4). We were unable to find data recording whether the victims of these crimes were also foreigners. Further studies of the possible causes of criminal behavior among the growing immigrant populations of Germany would be valuable.

Analysis of the population by division into citizens (Deutsche) and non-citizens (Ausländer or Nicht-deutsche) is complicated by current laws which make it difficult for persons not of German ethnic origin to become citizens, even if they were born in Germany. Conversely, many new immigrants able to demonstrate German ancestry have been granted citizenship. Possible redefinition of the citizenship laws is currently a major political issue.

Gang violence against non-European immigrants has been a well-publicized concern. Fear of neo-Nazism has produced intense scrutiny of this type of crime, both in Germany and internationally, including a 1993 symposium in Pennsylvania resulting in several published studies of the problem. (Maier-Katkin, Stemmler & Stretesky, 1995; Albrecht, 1995; Von Trotha, 1995; Sack, 1995; Geis, 1995). Fortunately, the number of violent crimes attributed to right-extremists appears to have peaked in 1992 and now fallen to a much lower level (Schwind, 1998; Boers, 1996).

One might have expected that the economic, social, and moral uncertainties in the East, particularly among men (Watson, 1995), would also lead to an increase in depression and suicide, or conversely that the loss of restrictions would lead to a decrease in depression and suicide. In fact, neither of these effects is

apparent (Fig. 3). A detailed study of suicide in East and West Germans prior to reunification showed that the increased risk for suicide in the East had been mostly attributable to men and women born before 1945 (Dinkel & Görtler, 1994). Our data show that this older group continues to be responsible for most of the discrepancy between East and West.

Mortality from intentional injury is indeed higher in East Germany than in West Germany, but the absolute difference in rates between East and West is not large, and both have much less of a problem with interpersonal violence than the United States (National Center for Health Statistics, 1991; Statistisches Bundesamt, 1998). Nevertheless, the increased fear of crime can be logically based upon the accurate perception of a proportionately significant increase in risk in the last decade, especially in the East. Reduction of this fear can only come from actually reducing interpersonal violence, by identifying and addressing its causes. The sudden union of different political systems and increasing heterogeneity of the population have made this area of study particularly interesting.

References

- Albrecht, H.-J. (1995). Ethnic minorities, culture conflicts and crime. *Crime, Law, and Social Change*, 24, 19–36.
- Bergmann, K., Baier, W., Casper, R., & Wiesner, G. (1993). *Entwicklung der Mortalität in Deutschland von 1955–1989*. München: MMV, Medizin-Verlag.
- Boers, K. (1996). Sozialer Umbruch und Kriminalität in Deutschland. *Monatsschrift für Kriminologie und Strafrechtsreform*, 5, 314–337.
- Chapin, W. D. (1997). Ausländer raus? The empirical relationship between immigration and crime in Germany. *Social Science Quarterly*, 78, 543–558.
- Dinkel, R. H., & Görtler, E. (1994). Die Suizidsterblichkeit der Geburtsjahrgänge in beiden Teilen Deutschlands. *Sozial- und Präventivmedizin*, 39, 198–208.
- Geis, G. (1995). Is Germany's xenophobia qualitatively different from everybody else's? *Crime, Law, and Social Change*, 24, 65–75.
- Krus, D. J., Nelsen, E. A., & Webb, J. M. (1997). Changes in crime rates and family-related values in selected East European countries. *Psychological Reports*, 81, 747–751.
- Kury, H., & Obergfell-Fuchs, J. (1998). (January). Kriminalitätsfurcht in Deutschland. *Kriminalistik*, 1, 26–36.
- Landesamt für Datenverarbeitung und Statistik and Land Brandenburg. (1998). *Statistisches Jahrbuch*. Potsdam.
- Longworth, P. (1997). *The making of Eastern Europe: From prehistory to postcommunism*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Maier-Katkin, D., Stemmler, S., & Stretesky, P. (1995). Immigration and the emergence of right-wing violence in unified Germany. *Crime, Law, and Social Change*, 24, 1–18.
- Mansel, J. (1999). Brutalität ohne Grenzen? Befunde aus Dunkelfeldforschungen über die Entwicklung der Häufigkeit aggressiven Verhaltens Jugendlicher. In H. Timmermann, & E. Wessela, *Jugendforschung in Deutschland*. Opladen: Leske & Budrich.
- National Center for Health Statistics. (1991). *Vital Statistics of the United States*.
- Noelle-Neumann, E., & Köcher, R. (1997). *Allensbacher Jahrbuch der Demoskopie 1993–1997*. München: Saur.
- Sack, F. (1995). Socio-political change and crime. *Crime, Law, and Social Change*, 24, 49–63.
- Schauenburg, H., Kuda, M., & Rüger, U. (1992). Unterschiedliche Kontrollüberzeugungen (locus of control) bei ost- und westdeutschen Studierenden. *Zeitschrift für Psychosomatische Medizin*, 38, 258–268.
- Schwind, H.-D. (1998). *Kriminologie*. Heidelberg: Kriminalistik-Verlag.
- Statistisches Bundesamt, (Annually) (1980–98). *Statistisches Jahrbuch für die Bundesrepublik Deutschland*. Stuttgart: Metzler-Poeschel.
- Statistisches Bundesamt. (1998). *Gesundheitsbericht für Deutschland*. Wiesbaden.
- Thüringer Landesamt für Statistik. (1998). *Statistisches Jahrbuch*. Erfurt.
- Tomaszewski, K., Adam, I., & Hinze, L. (1997). Gesundheitsrelevante Verhaltensweisen und Problembewältigung von Jugendlichen unter den Bedingungen des sozialen Wandels in den neuen Bundesländern. *Sozial- und Präventivmedizin*, 42, 268–275.
- Von Trotha, T. (1995). Political culture, xenophobia and the development of the violence of the radical right in the Federal Republic of Germany. *Crime, Law, and Social Change*, 24, 37–47.
- Watson, P. (1995). Explaining rising mortality among men in Eastern Europe. *Social Science & Medicine*, 41, 923–934.