“We’ve Got a Right to Fight; We’re Married”: Domestic Homicide in Chicago, 1875–1920

Between 1875 and 1920, Chicago’s murder rate ballooned, and the rate of domestic homicide kept pace. Although the Haymarket bombing, the bloody Race Riot of 1919, and exploits of Al Capone and Johnny Torrio cemented Chicago’s hard-won reputation as a city of violence, spousal murder, child murder, and fatal lovers’ quarrels played a more important role in making Chicago one of the most violent cities in the nation. The proportion of the city’s homicides committed by loved ones doubled between the late 1870s and late 1910s, and Chicago’s domestic homicide rate nearly tripled.¹

Social scientists generally link domestic violence to strains and tensions in gender relations, especially men’s efforts to preserve masculine authority. According to many criminologists, sociologists, psychologists, and anthropologists, wife beating represents a “strategy of patriarchal power,” typically employed either to discourage women from challenging men’s authority or to rein in those who stray from established or expected gender roles. Uxoricide, in particular, can be understood as the “ultimate attempt of males to ‘exert their power and control over their wives.’” ²


¹ Domestic homicide herein encompasses all forms of unlawful lethal violence between family members or loved ones, including infanticide and homicide involving lovers but not accidental deaths. To determine that the increase in the rate of domestic violence kept pace with the homicide rate, I compared 1879 to 1881 and 1919 to 1920. I did not use data from the mid-1870s because the number of homicides in the city was not large enough to yield reliable rates. Chicago Record-Herald, 31 July 1906. See also Lincoln Steffens, Shame of the Cities (New York, 1904; rpt. 1957), 163; Chicago Tribune, 23 Dec. 1915; Frederick L. Hoffman, The Homicide Problem (Newark, 1925).

Data from late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Chicago support this interpretation. In more than half of domestic homicide cases, a man killed a woman, usually his wife or lover, often explicitly to defend his sense of manhood. Husbands shot wives who disobeyed them, refused to turn over money to them, complained about their alcohol consumption, or otherwise threatened their identities. For many Chicago husbands, wife beating was a routine component of family life. After fatally stabbing his wife with a butcher’s knife on July 4, 1881, forty-two-year-old James Cunningham explained to the police that he had “beaten her often, but thought that he and she had lived together as happily as other couples in the neighborhood.” Another Chicago man brusquely prevented a city policeman from stopping his quarrel with a young woman by snapping, “We’ve got a right to fight; we’re married.” A short time later, he grabbed her by the hair and shot her four times. Chicago women also resorted to violence because of threats to their gender identity or their physical well-being.\(^3\)

Domestic homicides sometimes explicitly involved gender ideals. In 1902, Victor O’Shea shot his wife, after she complained that he had failed to live up to her “standard of a man.” In most cases, however, the allusions were more oblique. Henry Emda’s suicide note explained that he murdered his wife because “I didn’t want to give in at all and let her have her way and make me leave

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the house.” Similarly, immediately before Frederick Pflugradt beat his wife to death, he bellowed “I’ll teach you to oppose me.” She had defied him by refusing to share the comics section of the Sunday newspaper.4

The centrality of ideas about manhood, patriarchal authority, motherhood, and respectability was unmistakable. Changing demographic and material circumstances contributed to such tensions: Poverty and de-skilling undercut the authority of male breadwinners and drove women into the workforce; shifting social mores created conflicting expectations for dating, marriage, and gender identity; and rapid population turnover generated new patterns of social relations. In short, urbanization and industrialization so disrupted gender roles in Chicago during this period that death tolls soared in the city’s bedrooms, parlors, and kitchens.

But pressures on gender roles did not, by themselves, account for the character or the level of domestic homicide in industrial Chicago. Conflict over household power and authority was certainly at the core of most of the intimate violence in turn-of-the-century Chicago, but family homicide assumed distinct forms for different segments of the local population. Residents of middling ranks were more liable to murder their children than poor Chicagoans were, and wealthy Chicagoans were more likely to commit homicide/suicide than those of modest means. Moreover, aggression in general, and domestic violence in particular, had class-based meanings; in some working-class circles, ferocity and the violent control of others represented a crucial element of masculine respectability. Demographic conditions also affected the nature of domestic homicide. The age structure of Chicago communities exerted a predictable influence. Rates of violence were relatively higher among groups with a preponderance of young adults, and rates of child killing were relatively lower among groups with modest proportions of children.5

But just as gender conflict, by itself, did not account for the nature of domestic violence, the character and the level of

4 Chicago Evening Post, 24 Oct. 1902; Chicago Times-Herald, 4 Sept. 1899; Chicago Tribune, 21 Dec. 1903.
5 Age also varied with class; older killers tended to be relatively wealthier. For a particularly thoughtful discussion of working-class masculinity, See Elliott J. Gorn, “‘Good-By Boys, I Die A True American’: Homicide, Nativism, and Working-Class Culture in Antebellum New York City,” Journal of American History, LXXIV (1987), 388–410.
family homicide were not merely functions of class or age structure. Race and ethnicity also proved to be important factors. African-Americans differed from whites in the kinds of family murders that they tended to commit, just as Italian immigrants differed from German immigrants, and so on. The surge in domestic homicide in industrial Chicago was the product of a series of overlapping waves, in which threats to gender roles combined with specific cultural assumptions and material circumstances to produce violent explosions.

This article disaggregates intimate homicide, examining the ways in which ethnicity and race interacted with gender roles to generate a variety of forms of spiraling homicide. It focuses on three groups—German immigrants, Italian immigrants, and African-Americans—large enough to permit quantitative analysis, drawing on a data set that includes every homicide in Chicago from 1875 to 1920 and ultimately arguing that urbanization and industrialization disrupted gender relations in different ways for different groups in Chicago. Although all of the subjects of this study were involved in lethal interactions, the broad category of “domestic” homicide and the inclination to attribute such bloodshed to “gender conflict” obscure as much as they reveal about violence and about social tension in industrial America.

Although the different forms of domestic violence were (and are) related, it is difficult to determine the precise relationship between, for example, uxoricide and nonlethal wife beating. Many scholars argue that all such acts of aggression should be seen as points on a continuum and are thus related to one another. See D'Cruze, Crimes of Outrage, 21. For the data set, see “Homicides and Important Events,” Chicago Police Department, 1870–1910, 1911–1920 [microfilm]. The police ledger is virtually complete—when measured against other sources, such as annual tallies by the coroner and the Department of Health, and the year-end figures published by city newspapers. Each of the 5,645 cases from 1875 to 1920 was traced into a series of Chicago newspapers. Prison records and other sources were consulted as well. This material was combined into a data set and analyzed using quantitative methods. If deaths from automobile accidents, botched abortions, and other socially constructed (and newly criminalized) forms of homicide are excluded from the total, the number drops to 5,042. Nearly 1,100 Chicago homicides erupted within family lines (or between lovers) from 1875 to 1920. Ethnicity or race was coded cautiously, only if the sources explicitly identified the backgrounds. The sources, however, consistently identified the race of participants; and the tallies herein are similar to aggregate figures gathered by the police and the health department. African-Americans in Chicago committed 140 family homicides between 1875 and 1920. Detailed data on the ethnic backgrounds of killers and victims proved to be more elusive. Comparing the data set with police and health-department records indicates that the evidence herein for Italians is relatively complete, comprising sixty-five Italian family killers. Information on other groups was more difficult to find. Sources often failed to distinguish immigrants from the children of immigrants, particularly in the case of the Germans and the Irish; the
DOMESTIC HOMICIDE AMONG GERMAN IMMIGRANTS  The Chicagoans who killed loved ones tended to be men, in their thirties, from working-class backgrounds; they usually killed in the home, with guns. Between 1875 and 1920, more than one-quarter of all Chicago homicidal attacks occurred between loved ones, men comprising 78 percent of the killers and 31 percent of the victims. Women accounted for 55 percent of the victims, and children made up the remaining 14 percent. Almost half of the homicides erupted between husbands and wives, husbands committing 79 percent of the spousal killings. Men and women, however, were responsible for approximately equal proportions of child killings in Chicago from 1875 to 1920. The average Chicago family killer was 34.4 years of age, and 63.9 percent were between twenty and thirty-nine. Nearly 40 percent of killers were unskilled, but child killers were from the wealthiest group. More than four-fifths of homicides between loved ones in industrial-age Chicago occurred in the home, and approximately two-thirds of the killers relied on firearms. Over one-third of these killers immediately committed suicide, and an additional 8 percent (unsuccessfully) attempted suicide.

Domestic homicide among German immigrants reveals the complex relationship between socioeconomic conditions and cultural forces. Germans comprised one of the least violent groups in Chicago; their homicide rate hovered at less than one-half of the rate for the city as a whole. When German immigrants killed, however, they usually targeted loved ones. Over half of the homicides by Germans had relatives or loved ones as victims, a proportion more than twice the overall figure for Chicago during this era. Thus, their family homicide rate was similar to that of the overall city.

flow of immigrants from Germany and Ireland had fallen significantly by the end of the nineteenth century. Although some confusion between first- and second-generation German immigrants persists, the 103 cases in the data set provide a sound foundation for analyzing German family homicide.

7 This figure for child killing excludes infanticides. If infanticides are included, women committed 59.7 percent of child killings. If infanticides are excluded, the figures are 34.7 and 63.2%. Because the murders of infants were seldom treated as homicides, relying on figures that include infanticide cases is problematical. The percentage of child killers includes semi-skilled workers. People with skilled or white-collar backgrounds accounted for 45% of child killers.

8 Biennial Report of the Coroner of Cook County (Chicago, 1915), 109; Senate Committee on Immigration (Dillingham Commission), Report of the Immigration Commission: Immigrants and
German killers were disproportionately heads of established households. Nearly nine-tenths of them were men, and most of them were older than other Chicago killers, averaging slightly less than forty years of age, fully five years older than the overall figure for Chicago family killers. Homicidal Germans were also the wealthiest Chicago family killers. Over half held skilled or white-collar positions, compared with under one-third of all family killers.9

Children comprised a disproportionate share of their victims. Non-newborn children made up 13.8 percent of all victims of family violence in the city but 29.1 percent of the victims of German killers. No other group of Chicago child killers had a greater proportion of fathers than the Germans; men comprised two-thirds of German child killers, compared with one-half of child killers citywide. Moreover, 70 percent of the German men who murdered their children killed more than one, compared with just 9 percent of non-German child killers. German immigrants often murdered all of their children, though they did not commit infanticide.10

The German-born Chicagoans who killed loved ones tended to plan the murders and to commit suicide immediately afterward. Many purchased guns just before engaging in the violence, and some told friends and even potential victims of their plans. Thirty-eight-year-old German immigrant John Tomachesski sent his estranged wife a letter “informing her he was going to call Sunday to kill her.” More than 61 percent of German family killers committed or attempted suicide; less than 40 percent of non-German family killers did so.11

These German family killers frequently explained their ac-

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9 The average age of German family killers was 39.4, compared with 34.4 for all Chicago family killers. Moreover, German family killers were older than the average age in every category (spouse killer, child killer, etc.).
10 No Chicagoan who was identified in the source material as a German immigrant was charged with, or linked to, an infanticide.
11 Chicago Tribune, 10 Oct. 1911.
tions in suicide notes, which revealed that they had acted in response to falling social or economic status. J. W. Lehman killed his three children and himself because he feared they would endure “hardship and toil,” though a newspaper reporter covering the murder-suicide termed Lehman “not poor, not dependent, in fact, prosperous for one in his station.” Paul Pallner shot his wife and himself because his wife “taunted him for not providing for his family.” German animal butchers were particularly prone to murdering their spouses. In the spring of 1899, the city jail held three German butchers awaiting trial for wife killing. To be sure, butchers were skilled with sharp knives and inured to blood, pain, and gore. But men in this position also confronted falling occupational status; de-skilling and the rise of assembly lines in slaughterhouses undercut their status and eroded their earning power. Accustomed to respectable economic standing and renowned for toughness, German butchers seemed to have been quick to kill their wives when they faced threats to their authority.  

Many German men resorted to murder in the face of public humiliation or failure in their capacity as heads of households. Women’s threats to leave their husbands or to initiate divorce proceedings often triggered homicide-suicides. Shortly after learning that his wife had summoned the police “to settle his domestic troubles,” Joseph Regnet purchased a gun and shot her and himself. Similarly, Frank Athenstadt cut his wife’s throat and then his own, thirty-five minutes before she was scheduled to meet with her divorce attorney.

German women rarely killed, but when they did, their murders were also tied to crises in gender expectations. Like their male counterparts, these women tended to be older, wealthier, and more inclined to kill children. More than 83 percent of the German women who committed homicide in the city between 1875 and 1920 killed their children, compared with 21.5 percent for

12 Chicago Times-Herald, 15 April 1896; Chicago Times, 11 Aug. 1882; Chicago Times-Herald, 29 April 1899. In some ways, the declining economic status of these men is similar to the “status inconsistency” experienced by many modern wife beaters. According to sociologists and criminologists, a man whose “educational background is much higher than his occupational attainment” often may respond to perceived challenges to his masculinity with violence. But the Germans who committed uxoricide more often killed out of despondence than rage. Thus, the status-inconsistency model does not completely fit the circumstances of turn-of-the-century Chicago’s German killers. For a discussion of status inconsistency and domestic violence, see Richard J. Gelles and Murray A. Strauss, Intimate Violence (New York, 1988), 88–89.

13 Chicago Tribune, 8 Sept. 1904; 2 Oct. 1906.
women killers in toto, and every German woman who killed her children committed suicide. In suicide notes, these women typically divulged that their failing health or that of their children had made life unbearable. Unable to provide adequate care or to protect them from pain, they opted to end the suffering. Probably battling postpartum depression, Amelia Bertat bemoaned that she was too sick to help her one-year-old daughter, who was “so impaired that play with other children would be denied.” “So,” Bertat recorded, “I took out my husband’s revolver. . . .”

The inability of these German women to fulfill their expected role as mothers resulted in violence. More than rage or anger, German family killers tended to act out of despondence. Their homicides, which were most often followed by suicides, represented a form of family suicide in desperate response to a perceived failure to fulfill culturally defined gender ideals.15

DOMESTIC HOMICIDE AMONG ITALIAN IMMIGRANTS  Chicago’s Italian family killers differed from their German counterparts in nearly every way. The gender identity in question in Italian domestic homicide took a distinctive form. Demographic conditions contributed to the differences between the groups. Since Chicago’s Italian residents tended to be poorer, younger, and more recently settled than the city’s long-established German residents, it is not surprising that Italian family killers were poorer and younger than German murderers. Differences in both the nature of Italian family homicide and the motives behind it, however, far exceeded the demographic differences between the two immigrant communities.

Unlike German-born Chicagoans, the city’s Italian immigrants endured extraordinarily high rates of homicide. During the 1910s, for example, the homicide rate for Italian-born residents was more than four times the overall level for Chicago and more than ten times the German homicide rate. Only a small proportion of the homicides committed by Italian residents, however, erupted within the family. Whereas 26.2 percent of homicides citywide occurred among loved ones, 17.5 percent of those with Italian as-

14  Chicago Tribune, 12 Feb. 1914.
15  For a fuller discussion of this issue, see Adler, “‘If We Can’t Live in Peace, We Might As Well Die’: Homicide-Suicide in Chicago, 1875–1910,” Journal of Urban History, XXVI (1999), 3–21.
sailants involved relatives or lovers. But because levels of Italian homicide were so high, the rate of family homicide for Italian Chicagoans was also high, reaching nearly three times the citywide level. In other words, although Italian immigrants killed within family lines in greater numbers than most other Chicagoans, these homicides represented only a modest proportion of their killings.16

Unlike most family killers, Italians did not typically kill their spouses or their children. Husbands and wives accounted for nearly 45 percent of all intimate homicides but less than one-third of the victims of Italian immigrants’ family homicides. Moreover, 13.8 percent of the victims of family homicide citywide were the children of their killers, though only 3.1 percent of Italian family homicide victims were killed by their parents. Women were rarely involved in Italian family violence—either as killers or victims. No ethnic group in Chicago had a lower proportion of women as victims, and the proportion of female murderers was among the lowest.17

Neither did Italian immigrants typically kill themselves. They committed or attempted suicide at approximately half the rate of other Chicago family killers and at less than one-third the proportion of German family killers. In part, this characteristic reflects the specific nature of Italian intimate violence. Those who murdered children were especially prone to suicide. Because Italians rarely killed their sons and daughters, they had low rates of homicide-suicide. But within every category, Italian family killers committed or attempted suicide at a lower rate than other Chicagoans. In other words, Italian child killers and Italian spouse killers committed or attempted suicide less frequently than any other child killers or spouse killers in the city. Furthermore, although Chicago’s Italian community experienced high rates of homicide, Italian family murderers had more difficulty in killing themselves than those of any other group. Citywide, for every family killer who failed a suicide attempt, more than four succeeded. Among Italian family murderers...
killers, however, more failed than succeeded. Religious injunctions against suicide probably contributed to this pattern, though Italian family killers committed suicide (both as a proportion of family homicides and relative to attempted suicides) at a lower rate than even Irish family killers, most of whom were also Roman Catholic. The motives and cultural ideals that generated Italian family violence discouraged suicide.

Italian family killers disproportionately murdered brothers, fathers, brothers-in-law, or fathers-in-law. These relatives comprised half of the victims of Italian family killers. By comparison, only 22.6% of all victims of Chicago family killers were adult (non-spouse) relatives. As a consequence, men made up the majority of the victims of Italian family homicide, whereas they comprised under one-third of the victims of family homicide citywide. Italian killers also tended to be young, more than four years younger, on average, than the overall age for Chicago and almost ten years younger than German family killers. More than half of Italian family killers were under thirty, compared with about one-third of family killers overall.18

Italian men often killed in the defense of their families, murdering brothers-in-law who deserted their sisters, fathers who mistreated or abused their mothers and sisters, or other relatives who impugned the respectability of the family. Bernard Barasa, a prominent Italian attorney, reported that the murders in Chicago’s Italian neighborhoods “in nearly every instance grow out of some violation of the sanctity of the home.” Even Italian residents eager to downplay the role of honor and vengeance in Chicago’s Little Italies community acknowledged such violence. The newspaper L’Italia, comparing the violence of 1911 with that of earlier eras, reported that such behavior was beginning to wane: “Today, not [as] many crimes are committed to avenge the honor of wives, sisters, or children as in the past.”19

Acting as heads of the family, young men often committed

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18 The figure for non-Italian family killers in Chicago was 20.8%. Nearly 28% of the victims of Italian killers in their twenties were older than forty. The comparable figure for all Chicago killers was 11.9%.

homicide to protect their sisters’—and, thus, the family’s—reputations. Describing the “family honor” embraced in the southern Italian villages that sent immigrants to Chicago, Vecoli explained that “a disgrace suffered by any member cast obloquy upon the family as a whole. Pride in the family’s reputation demanded that any violation of the family honor be punished severely.” “A Sicilian never forgets nor forgives,” noted an 1879 Chicago commentator, “and an injury done to the father is handed down as a legacy of vengeance to the son.”

Such a code of honor compelled Emilio Filippi to shoot and kill James Palermo, his brother-in-law, in 1912. A thirty-year-old day laborer, Palermo left his wife—Filippi’s sister—in Italy and refused to support her, insisting that she had been unfaithful while he was away. Filippi tracked his brother-in-law to a local boarding house and “assassinated” him. Immigration patterns in which young newcomers predominated may have forced men like Filippi to assume patriarchal roles in the absence of fathers who either remained in the old country or assumed truncated roles in the new setting.

Far from denying their violent deeds, Italian family killers frequently proclaimed them. The defense of family honor required a decisive response to affronts and afforded the right of personal vengeance. According to Vecoli, “the Sicilian code of manliness, omerta, required the individual to secure justice with his own arm.” Such strident justifications for violent behavior represented the public face of honor-based violence, providing an opportunity for a man to defend and reclaim his family’s honor and to dishonor the transgressor. The violence had both a private and a public function.

Italian family killers sometimes invoked the remarkably malleable “unwritten law” to justify their actions. In its purest form, it meant that a man who caught his wife engaged in sexual activity with another man could justifiably attack, and even kill, the rake who destroyed the matrimonial bond and sullied the family name. Variations on this concept “permitted” fathers to use lethal vio-

21 Chicago Tribune, 18 Jan. 1912.
lence against men who seduced or molested their daughters, or brothers acting as family patriarchs to avenge their sisters. Women sometimes claimed that the unwritten law allowed them to use deadly force against abusive or unfaithful husbands.23

Partly because Italian killers publicly defended their behavior and partly because their rhetoric conformed to popular stereotypes about Sicilian immigrants, their trials often commanded a wide audience, generating a great deal of information about their motives. Local newspapers, for example, giddily reported the sordid details of Michael Pacellano’s 1909 murder trial. Twenty-three-year-old Frank Serino eloped with Pacellano’s sister, transported her to New York City, and, according to Pacellano, “detained her in a disorderly house.” Pacellano, who was nineteen, hunted down Serino, “induced” him—at gun point—to return to Chicago, where he shot and killed him. Immediately after his arrest, Pacellano announced that Serino “had ruined [his] sister’s life” and that he “would [kill him] again if [he] had the chance.” As the trial approached, Pacellano remained defiant, citing the “unwritten law” as the justification for his act. As a result, several potential jurors admitted that “under no circumstances would they convict.” In court, his lawyers used the same defense, and the jury acquitted him.24

Similarly, Joseph Tamprullo and Earlerogo Piro explained that they shot and stabbed Piro’s cousin, Pasquale Piro, on August 18, 1919, “because he talked about our wives.” “It is not wrong to kill a man who speaks ill of one’s wife,” Tamprullo announced. “We will defend ourselves under the unwritten law. We do not repent.” Cook County jurors agreed, acquitting the men. A local jury also acquitted Filippi, the young immigrant who “ambushed” his brother-in-law as he left his boarding house.25


24 In some newspaper accounts, Pacellano’s sister was already married at the time that Serino persuaded her to “elope” to New York City. See Chicago Record-Herald, 9 June 1909, 30 June 1909. The prosecution also produced witnesses who testified that Pacellano’s sister had moved “willingly” to New York City and that “Serino had not taken the young wife to a disorderly resort.” Chicago Tribune, 8 March 1909; Chicago Record-Herald, 30 June 1909.

25 Chicago Record-Herald, 30 June 1909; Chicago Tribune, 19 Aug. 1918. For the use of the term ambushed, see Chicago Evening Post, 17 Jan. 1912.
Like the Germans, Italian immigrants killed family members in response to threats or challenges to gender roles, though they defined these threats in different terms. More than any other group of family killers, Italian immigrants murdered in order to fulfill their role as the protectors of women and defenders of their families’ reputations.

DOMESTIC HOMICIDE AMONG AFRICAN-AMERICAN CHICAGOANS
African-American intimate homicide was profoundly different from Italian intimate homicide. In many respects, the two communities faced comparable experiences. Mired in poverty, both groups were comprised of newcomers who arrived with modest skills, and both included small proportions of children and elders and a large percentage of young adults. Furthermore, African-American and Italian-born Chicagoans endured overt discrimination—though the levels were by no means commensurate. The two groups also migrated from areas with high rates of homicide and were ravaged by violence in Chicago. In fact, African-Americans, who suffered from a homicide rate five times that of the overall population of the city and twelve times the homicide rate of German-born residents, were the only major group in Chicago with a higher rate of homicide than Italian immigrants.26

Not only did African-Americans experience the highest homicide rate in turn-of-the-century Chicago; they also suffered from the highest family homicide rate, by far. White observers were quick to argue that such bloodshed reflected a combination of the “savage” tendencies of the inhabitants and the influence of knife-wielding young ruffians from the Deep South, who reveled in slaughtering one another in street brawls, or as one writer put it, the “vicious negro from the countryside of the South.” Even African-American newspapers expressed concern, much of which reflected the class-based anxieties of long-time residents. But contrary to the impressions of these writers, African-American residents engaged in street violence and lethal barroom brawls at relatively modest levels. Instead, the kitchens and bedrooms of Chicago’s Black Belt were the places where homicide disproportionately tended to explode. The family homicide rate among African-Americans in Chicago was six times the overall family homicide rate for the city, six and one-half times the family homicide rate for the city, six and one-half times the family homicide rate of German-born residents, were the only major group in Chicago with a higher rate of homicide than Italian immigrants.26

26 During the early 1910s, the Cook County coroner reported an Italian homicide rate of 41 per 100,000 residents and an African-American rate of close to 50 per 100,000 residents.
cide rate for German immigrants, and double the family homicide rate for Italian residents.27

The character of this violence proved to be as distinctive as its frequency. Although much of the bloodshed was rooted in conflict over gender roles, African-Americans responded more brutally to family- and gender-based tensions than other groups. The Germans killed in reaction to a perceived failure in fulfilling gender roles; the Italians killed in defense of family honor; and the African-Americans killed in the struggle to form families and establish lines of familial authority.

African-Americans were more prone to attack their spouses and lovers, instead of other relatives, than any other group of family killers. Spouses and lovers comprised more than four-fifths of their family homicide victims, compared with 63.6 percent for all Chicago family homicides. Sons and daughters made up 13.8 percent of all victims of intimate homicide in the city but only 2.9 percent of the victims of African-American family killers. The gap was smaller for other relatives; African-Americans killed (non-spouse) adult relatives in 16.4 percent of family homicides, compared with 22.6 percent for Chicago’s total population.

The demographic character of the city’s African-American community contributed to this pattern, but it did not account for it. As newcomers to Chicago, African-Americans lived in households with a low proportion of children. Poverty, malnutrition, and a stillbirth rate double that of the white population contributed to the dearth of African-American children. In 1910, children under the age of five accounted for 5.6 percent of African-American residents, compared with 10.2 percent of all Chicago residents. By 1920, the disparity had widened. Between 1875 and 1920, children aged five or under comprised 2.4 percent of African-American family homicide victims but 9.4 percent of all family homicide victims in the city. Furthermore, no African-American was charged with, or identified as, the perpetrator of an infanticide during this era. Chicago’s African-American commu-

27 George Kibbe Turner, “The City of Chicago: A Study of the Great Immorality,” McClure's Magazine, 28 (April 1907), 580; Chicago Broad Ax, 6 May 1905; Turner, “City of Chicago,” 580; James R. Grossman, Land of Hope (Chicago, 1989), 138–160. The proportion of African-American homicides committed during drunken brawls (and in saloons) was below the citywide average. But since the African-American homicide rate was so high, the number of African-American-drunk-brawl homicides was not low compared with that of other groups. It was, however, low in proportion to the African-American homicide rate.
nity suffered fewer young homicide victims than the age structure of the population would have predicted.28

Other demographic conditions, however, helped to fuel violence in Chicago’s African-American neighborhoods. The Great Migration included a disproportionate number of young adults, particularly those in the age groups most likely to engage in violent behavior. In 1920, people in their twenties comprised 19.9 percent of the city’s residents but 26 percent of its African-Americans. Nor was this fact lost on contemporaries, even those sympathetic to the newcomers. In 1922, for example, the Chicago Commission on Race Relations reported that the city’s African-American population was “overbalanced” in the “‘violent ages,’ or between eighteen and thirty.” African-American family killers were young—on average, four years younger than Chicago family killers overall—and the paucity of older killers and victims reflected, at least partly, the age structure of the city’s African-American community.29

Demographic factors affected African-American homicide in complex ways. Although young adults were overrepresented among killers, women were particularly overrepresented. Women committed 24.95 percent of all family homicides in the city between 1875 and 1920. African-American women, however, accounted for 30.7 percent of African-American family homicides. Moreover, African-American women had different victims than other Chicago women. When white women killed loved ones, more than half of the victims were children. But daughters and sons comprised only 2.3 percent of the victims of female African-American family killers. Instead, African-American women targeted men; 95.4 percent of the loved ones killed by African-American women were men, compared with 47.6 percent of the victims of white women family killers.30

Unlike most family killers except Italian immigrants, the

28 Chicago Commission on Race Relations, The Negro in Chicago (Chicago, 1922), 159–160; William M. Tuttle, Jr., Race Riot (New York, 1970), 164. The figures for children exclude infanticides. If infanticide cases are included, the figure for African-American-family-homicide victims remains at 2.4%; the figure for all family-homicide victims swells to 15.3%. Data from the 1920s reveal the same absence of infanticide. See Arthur V. Lashly, “Homicide (in Cook County),” in John H. Wigmore (ed.), The Illinois Crime Survey (Chicago, 1929), 604.

29 Negro in Chicago, 331.

30 If infanticide cases are excluded, the figure for white women family killers with male victims rises to 60.1 percent.
African-Americans who committed intimate homicide rarely attempted suicide. Only one African-American family homicide in five was accompanied by a suicide or an attempted suicide. Much of the gap can be traced to the behavior of African-American women. Nearly 44 percent of the white women who killed loved ones during this period committed or attempted suicide. Not one African-American female family killer, however, either committed or attempted suicide.\(^{31}\)

Conflict over gender roles triggered much of this violence. But the pressure points in African-American gender relations were bound up in a shifting matrix involving cultural ideals, demographic conditions, and economic circumstances. Poverty, particularly in combination with cultural and demographic factors, disrupted African-American households in early twentieth-century Chicago. African-Americans were the poorest family killers in turn-of-the-century Chicago. Of these killers, 79 percent held unskilled positions, compared with 34 percent of white family killers. African-Americans were latecomers to Chicago. They arrived with modest skills and faced intense discrimination in employment, housing, and education.\(^{32}\)

Extreme poverty created special problems for young African-American men struggling to establish households. It threatened their status as breadwinners and often triggered spousal homicide. Unable to find stable work and compelled to pay especially high rents in the city’s South Side ghetto, African-American men experienced great difficulty supporting their new families. The urban setting magnified the cultural impact of poverty for young men accustomed to—or expecting—the patriarchal authority commanded by the heads of Southern farm families. The shift to a cash nexus jeopardized the patriarchal hierarchy that many of them had learned in a rural setting. In industrial Chicago, African-American men had to depend on other family members to maintain the household.\(^{33}\)

\(^{31}\) The assailant died in nearly 80% of the suicides attempted by African-American family killers, compared with 40% for Italian family killers.  
\(^{32}\) Only 23.3% of German family killers and 51.2% of Italian family killers were in households headed by someone with an unskilled background. Report of the City Council Committee on Crime of the City of Chicago (Chicago, 1915), 51.  
Many African-American women left, or threatened to leave, young husbands who “failed to properly provide” for the household, leading many African-American men to respond with lethal violence. Samuel Jackson, for example, murdered his wife after she left him because he failed to support the family. When she “threatened to have him taken to the Court of Domestic Relations to get support,” he went to her sister’s house and shot her. Similar feelings of desperation and humiliation prompted Andrew Williams—a twenty-two-year-old day laborer unable to secure “steady employment”—to shoot and kill his nineteen-year-old wife—a Chicago native from a solid, respectable family—after they separated, and her father had persuaded her to file a complaint against her husband “on a charge of abandonment.” For men such as Jackson and Williams, poverty amounted to a loss of masculinity.

34 The presence of boarders in African-American households often intensified marital strife. Ghetto landowners gouged African-American renters, typically charging them 20 percent more than whites for comparable apartments. Discrimination at the workplace exaggerated the strain on African-Americans, compelling many families to take in single, young, male boarders. One contemporary study found that nearly two-thirds of African-American households included a lodger, prompting the Chicago Commission on Race Relations to conclude that “the prevalence of lodgers is one of the most conspicuous problems in the Negro Housing situation.” The Commission reported that the presence of outsiders posed a “danger to the integrity of the family.” Jealousy about the actions and affections of boarders sparked an especially high proportion of African-American homicides.

35 Economic pressures also forced many African-American women to seek employment outside of the home, which further challenged gender roles and blurred lines of household authority.

34 Chicago Board Ax, 14 March 1908; Chicago Defender, 4 May 1918; Board of Pardon to Charles S. Deneen, Governor (undated), recommendation of the Board of Pardons, petition for commutation of the sentence to imprisonment for life of Andrew Williams, Illinois State Archives; Affidavit of Thomas Pearson, October 7, 1909, petition for commutation of the sentence to imprisonment for life of Andrew Williams, Illinois State Archives; Benedict J. Short (Assistant State’s Attorney) to the Illinois State Board of Pardons, October 2, 1908, petition for commutation of the sentence to imprisonment for life of Andrew Williams, Illinois State Archives.

35 Tuttle, Race Riot, 164; Negro in Chicago, 199, 155, 158, 341.
In 1920, more than one-third of married African-American women worked; only one-eighth of native-born white women and one-twelfth of foreign-born white women did. These African-American women were probably more independent and less willing to submit to patriarchal authority than others. Moreover, they often insisted on controlling the wages that they earned and resisted their husbands’ demands for control over household resources. To their husbands, such behavior represented a challenge to patriarchal authority and triggered many violent episodes.36

Both the diminished authority of African-American husbands and the enhanced autonomy of African-American wives created a second crisis in gender roles that erupted in still more spousal homicide. Accustomed to looser gender roles than white women, African-American women were particularly quick to resist abusive men. Some of those who left their marital homes employed lethal force to defend themselves against violent husbands demanding their return.

African-American women killed loved ones at a significantly higher rate than white women and were much more likely to kill their husbands, typically shooting or stabbing them in self-defense, often after unsuccessful attempts to secure legal protection from them. “Don’t look for Jim,” Belle Benson told the police in 1918. “I just killed him.” Benson explained that her husband “started to beat me again and I shot him.” Twenty-three-year-old Minnie Smith ended her two-year marriage the same way after frequent beatings and multiple separations. She had filed a complaint and had her husband arrested, but when a judge dismissed her case for insufficient evidence, she went back to their neighborhood and shot her husband three times. Standing over his body, she screamed “I didn’t get you this morning [in court], but I got you now.” At the coroner’s inquest, she calmly reported that “he had always said if I ever had him arrested he would kill me, and I know he would do it . . . so I shot him—and then I shot him some more.”37

It is impossible to determine whether African-American women were less willing to endure abuse than white women or

37 For additional evidence, see Lashly, “Homicide (in Cook County),” 625. Chicago Defender, 18 May 1918.
whether greater levels of abuse forced them to defend themselves more often than white women. Surviving sources suggest both. But more important, the two forces operated together, and the combination of strong women and emotionally besieged men proved to be explosive. Such circumstances also account for the absence of suicides or attempted suicides by African-American husband killers; Benson, Smith, and most other African-American husband killers felt justified in their actions.

Imbalanced sex ratios, especially among young adults, added to the volatile mix. Throughout this period, Chicago’s African-American community had a disproportionate number of men in their twenties. Sociologists, criminologists, and evolutionary psychologists have long argued that such a “surplus” of bachelors is a prescription for crime and violence. Young men, the conventional wisdom holds, become more aggressive and daring to capture the attention of potential mates and to intimidate competitors. But African-American bachelors engaged in fewer deadly barroom brawls or brothel melees than this argument would predict. Rather, the surfeit of aggressive behavior flared between lovers; African-Americans in Chicago experienced high rates of jealousy-related homicide. 38

Again, contrary to the received wisdom, African-American women were particularly murderous in such fights. In lethal lovers’ quarrels, women comprised 17.3 percent of white killers but 41.7 percent of African-American killers. Nor was this high proportion merely a reflection of imbalanced sex ratios or a lopsided marriage market. Immigrant sex ratios were even more imbalanced than African-American ones, though immigrant women rarely killed their lovers. Moreover, 45.5 percent of the white women who killed their lovers attempted suicide; no African-American women did. In short, demographic conditions contributed to the violence but not apart from social and cultural forces. The interaction among sex ratios, economic factors, and gender ideals produced extraordinary levels of deadly lovers’ quarrels in Chicago’s Black Belt.

Tensions surrounding the process of family formation were responsible for the lion’s share of African-American intimate ho-

micide. Both the killers and their victims tended to be young adults who were either dating or recently married. In a young, poor community facing intense hostility from the larger society, dating, supporting a household, controlling dependents and household resources, and establishing lines of familial authority proved to be rife with conflict. These wellsprings of intimate violence stand in contrast to the homicides occurring within German or Italian households, which more often involved reactions to failed expectations, in the case of the former, and threats to family reputation or to women, in the case of the latter.

As Chicago’s African-American ghetto took shape during the first two decades of the twentieth century, the nature of family violence changed. Between 1900 and 1920, the city’s African-American population nearly quadrupled, resulting in a more equal sex ratio and a more variegated community. This process affected the form of family violence, though the family homicide rate, like the overall rate of African-American homicide, continued to soar. The age of African-American family killers, particularly women, rose, and the fact that women were more apt to kill husbands than lovers reflected the rising proportion of married women within Chicago’s African-American community.\(^{39}\)

The distinctive characteristics of African-American family homicide persisted. Women remained especially violent. In fact, the proportion of intimate homicides committed by African-American women increased during the first decades of the new century. Furthermore, these women still targeted adult men and refrained from killing children or committing homicide-suicide. Between 1890 and 1910, men were the victims in 85.7 percent of the homicides committed by female African-American family killers. The figure for the period from 1911 to 1920 was 100 percent. African-American family homicide continued to involve young adults, to include a preponderance of female killers of adult males, and to revolve around group-specific conflicts about gender roles.

Much of the spiraling domestic violence in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Chicago represented an effort to control gender roles during a period of crisis and turmoil. Although not

\(^{39}\) In 1910, 68.3% of African-American women between twenty-five and thirty-four were married. A decade later, 74.2% were married.
every German, Italian, or African-American family homicide fit into a larger pattern, both quantitative and qualitative evidence reveal three distinctive patterns of family homicide. Members of these groups killed loved ones under very different circumstances and responded to different gender-role threats, at least when they resorted to lethal violence.

German-born men and women with established households tended to kill because of their perceived failure to fulfill gender-based expectations, especially as it related to bleak economic and social prospects for the future of their families. For them, respectability was intimately connected with the ability to safeguard the long-term status of the household. Thus, they often murdered all of their children and then committed suicide. De-skilling in the occupations in which these immigrants were concentrated weakened the tenuous hold of many German Chicagoans on middle-class standing, exaggerating the weight of household problems. By killing their loved ones and then themselves, they could maintain some semblance of control. German men could thereby affirm their ability to determine the fate of their family, and German mothers could permanently remove their sons and daughters from pain and suffering.  

Italian men also killed family members to fulfill a gender-based ideal of respectability that entailed patriarchal control over women and the reputation of the family. They rarely grew violent about their economic fortunes or the long-term prospects of their households, even though as newcomers to Chicago, they were concentrated on the lower rungs of the local labor force and struggled to support their families. Instead, Italian men employed violence purposefully and deliberately, as protectors of women and the family name.

An unstable blend of cultural traditions and local conditions produced specific forms of family violence in Chicago’s Italian neighborhoods. Why did young men, for example, feel a need to kill their brothers-in-law? Migration patterns and the openness or anonymity of urban society eroded patriarchal control over women, and young Italian men, who were more aggressive and reckless than their fathers and uncles, believed that the obligation for protecting family honor fell on their shoulders. Their attempts

40 For a discussion of homicide-suicide as a mechanism of masculine control, see Polk, *When Men Kill*, 44–49.
to re-affirm patriarchal authority sometimes erupted into lethal violence.

African-Americans in Chicago killed loved ones to defend a third definition of gender role. Like their German counterparts, they often engaged in deadly fights ignited by economic issues, but they seldom killed in desperate resignation about the future, despite their dim economic prospects. Like their Italian counterparts, African-American family killers tended to be young, though unlike the Italians, they nearly always killed their spouses and lovers. Nor were questions of family honor typically at stake. Rather, their major motivation concerned the status of the individual in the household. Men fought to establish patriarchal control over women, especially to regain control of wives and lovers who resisted them. African-American women, more than any other group of women in Chicago, resorted to lethal violence to defend themselves and preserve their autonomy.

Poverty, discrimination, demographic pressure, and cultural tradition combined to create tremendous insecurity and instability among these young African-Americans in the early stages of family formation. Loss of authority proved to be particularly unsettling for them. When wives left their husbands, they instantly usurped control over the marriage, and when African-American women worked outside the home and made their own money, they threatened to upset the gender hierarchy. Racism in the public realm undermined African-American men on the street and in the workplace, producing a kind of insecurity that could easily be exacerbated by events at home.

Social conditions in industrial Chicago posed particular challenges to the gender roles embraced by German, Italian, and African-American residents, and the specific levels and forms of family homicide reflected a complex interaction among economic, social, cultural, and demographic factors. But the mixture of elements that triggered conflict, and the weights assigned to them, changed over time. As urbanization, industrialization, and the accompanying social and cultural transformations unfolded, the flash points within Chicago households shifted. In 1902, Amy O'Shea had specific gender ideals in mind when she complained that her husband failed to meet her “standards of a man.” Her husband retaliated as he did because her words had particular significance to a man of his age cohort, social status, and, especially, ethnic background.