The handle http://hdl.handle.net/1887/30118 holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation.

**Author:** Ganpat, Soenita Minakoemarie  
**Title:** Dead or Alive? The role of personal characteristics and immediate situational factors in the outcome of serious violence  
**Issue Date:** 2014-12-16
9 General discussion

9.1 Summary

This thesis dealt with violent events that result in a lethal or non-lethal outcome. To understand the difference in outcome, this thesis focused on the role of the personal characteristics of both offenders and victims, and on the role of immediate situational factors.

Overall, a person’s personal characteristics, especially as manifested in one’s criminal history, and immediate situational factors are commonly considered important determinants of interpersonal violence. Despite the importance of these characteristics, and while there is a robust literature about the criminal history of violent offenders in general, most literature (a) has ignored the criminal history of offenders and victims involved in serious violence, (b) has given less attention to the role of immediate situational factors in serious violent events, and (c) has not compared violent events with a lethal versus non-lethal outcome with reference to these characteristics. This study aimed to add to the current knowledge and remedy these shortcomings by answering the following two research questions:

I To what extent are personal characteristics of offenders and victims related to a lethal versus non-lethal outcome of serious violent incidents?
II To what extent are immediate situational factors related to a lethal versus non-lethal outcome of serious violent incidents?

To investigate the role of offenders’ and victims’ personal characteristics, criminal record data were examined, obtained from the Dutch Ministry of Security and Justice. These records contain the entire registered criminal history of those that have been prosecuted in the Netherlands from the age of twelve. To examine the role of immediate situational factors, detailed data were acquired from Dutch court files. Subsequently, to study the role of offenders’ and victims’ personal characteristics in conjunction with immediate situational factors, data from court files were combined with criminal record data of offenders and victims involved in serious violent events.
Main conclusion

The main conclusion of the overall study is that offenders’ and victims’ personal characteristics and immediate situational factors all influence the outcome of violent events. However, immediate situational factors appear to be the most important contributor to the outcome of violent events, even more so than offenders’ and victims’ personal characteristics.

Furthermore, the empirical evidence of this study seriously questions the view that the difference between attempted and completed homicide is merely due to chance. When comparing attempted and completed homicide cases, the evidence reveals substantial and systematic differences in both the criminal background of involved individuals and the immediate situational factors. For this reason, this thesis argues that attributing the difference in outcome merely to chance is too simplistic. A more nuanced and informed discussion on the topic is therefore warranted. Contrary to what is often assumed, this thesis shows that it is important and worthwhile to systematically compare attempted and completed homicide cases, rather than lumping these cases together.

The main questions led to a series of more specific questions, with findings (see Table 9.1) that will now be discussed in relation to each question. The section below summarizes the most important findings per empirical chapter. Then, section 9.2 and 9.3 deal with theoretical reflections and suggestions for future research. The final section offers recommendations for policy.
Table 9.1: Research questions and main findings per empirical chapter

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 2</th>
<th>Chapter 3</th>
<th>Chapter 4</th>
<th>Chapter 5</th>
<th>Chapter 6</th>
<th>Chapter 7</th>
<th>Chapter 8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research question(s)</td>
<td>What are the characteristics of Dutch homicide cases committed in the period 1992-2009?</td>
<td>What are the characteristics of homicide cases committed in Finland, Sweden and the Netherlands?</td>
<td>(1) To what extent does the criminal history of offenders convicted of lethal violence differ from offenders convicted of serious non-lethal violence?</td>
<td>(1) To what extent does the criminal history of victims of lethal events differ from victims of non-lethal events?</td>
<td>(1a) To what extent do event characteristics differ in lethal vs. non-lethal events?</td>
<td>(1b) To what extent does the behavior of victims, offenders and third parties differ in lethal vs. non-lethal events?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2) To what extent does the criminal history of offenders convicted of serious violence influence the likelihood that violent events end lethally?</td>
<td>(2) To what extent does the criminal history of victims influence the likelihood of lethal vs. non-lethal outcomes of violent events?</td>
<td>(2) To what extent do (a) event characteristics and (b) behavior of victims, offenders and third parties influence the likelihood that serious violent events end lethally?</td>
<td>(2) To what extent are offenders' and victims' criminal history as well as immediate situational factors related to the likelihood of a lethal outcome of violent events?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(a) What are the types of actions and the sequence of actions during violent events that lead up to a lethal or non-lethal outcome, and (b) how do the type and sequence of actions differ across male-to-male violence and intimate partner violence with a lethal or non-lethal outcome?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2</td>
<td>Chapter 3</td>
<td>Chapter 4</td>
<td>Chapter 5</td>
<td>Chapter 6</td>
<td>Chapter 7</td>
<td>Chapter 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main findings</td>
<td>- On an average, 223 persons died per year from homicide.</td>
<td>- The homicide rate is highest in Finland, the lowest in Sweden; the Netherlands takes an intermediate position.</td>
<td>- Perpetrators of non-lethal violence often have a more severe criminal history than perpetrators of lethal violence.</td>
<td>- Victims of non-lethal violence often have a more severe criminal history than victims of lethal violence.</td>
<td>- Concerning event characteristics, compared to non-lethal events, in lethal events it is more likely that: (a) events do not occur in the street or parking lot; (b) offenders carry a firearm; (c) third parties are absent, (d) a lower number of third parties are present, or; (e) if present, third parties have no ties with either offender or victim.</td>
<td>- No significant differences were found between lethal and non-lethal violent events in offenders’ criminal history.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Homicides predominantly occurred in the main urban areas among men, and about half of victims and offenders were of non-Dutch ethnicity.</td>
<td>In the three countries, most of the homicides occur between men.</td>
<td>A greater likelihood of committing lethal violence is associated with: (a) a prior criminal record.</td>
<td>A greater likelihood of lethal victimization is associated with the absence of a prior criminal record.</td>
<td>Concerning behavioral characteristics, in comparison with non-lethal events, it was found that: (a) lethal events are less likely to occur on the street or in a parking lot; (b) it is more likely that third parties were absent or that a lower number of third parties were present during lethal events; (c) not only are perpetrators of lethal violence more likely to display or use a firearm during the incidents, but (d) they are also more likely to inflict the most severe injury with a firearm, but are less likely to commit violence.</td>
<td>Both lethal and non-lethal violent events roughly unfold through similar stages, i.e., verbal or non-verbal actions – threats with a weapon – physical action.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- The two predominant subtypes are domestic homicide and homicide in the context of an argument.</td>
<td>- Dutch homicide offenders and victims are on average younger and more often born in a foreign country than offenders and victims in the Nordic countries.</td>
<td>- Most commonly used weapon to kill victims was a firearm,</td>
<td>- The majority of the Nordic homicides take place in a private setting and a</td>
<td>- Differences found in the sequential actions particularly concerned the moment at which third parties attempted to de-escalate.</td>
<td>- Considering the subtypes of conflict (and their outcomes), the sequential actions of male-to-male violence were different from those of intimate partner violence, especially when it comes to the moment at</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- No significant differences were found between lethal and non-lethal violent events in offenders’ criminal history.</td>
<td>- Concerning event characteristics, compared to non-lethal events, in lethal events it is more likely that: (a) events do not occur in the street or parking lot; (b) offenders carry a firearm; (c) third parties are absent, (d) a lower number of third parties are present, or; (e) if present, third parties have no ties with either offender or victim.</td>
<td>- In comparison with non-lethal events, it was found that: (a) lethal events are less likely to occur on the street or in a parking lot; (b) it is more likely that third parties were absent or that a lower number of third parties were present during lethal events; (c) not only are perpetrators of lethal violence more likely to display or use a firearm during the incidents, but (d) they are also more likely to inflict the most severe injury with a firearm, but are less likely to commit violence.</td>
<td>- Concerning behavioral characteristics, in comparison with non-lethal events, it was found that: (a) lethal events are less likely to occur on the street or in a parking lot; (b) it is more likely that third parties were absent or that a lower number of third parties were present during lethal events; (c) not only are perpetrators of lethal violence more likely to display or use a firearm during the incidents, but (d) they are also more likely to inflict the most severe injury with a firearm, but are less likely to commit violence.</td>
<td>- Both lethal and non-lethal violent events roughly unfold through similar stages, i.e., verbal or non-verbal actions – threats with a weapon – physical action.</td>
<td>- Differences found in the sequential actions particularly concerned the moment at which third parties attempted to de-escalate.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
followed by a sharp instrument.

sharp instrument is the most commonly used weapon to kill victims. By contrast, Dutch homicides more commonly take place in a public setting and the most commonly used weapon is a firearm.

- Domestic homicide is the most common subtype of homicide in these countries.
- Most Nordic homicides involve victims or offenders who are under the influence of alcohol.

likely that the conflict is started by victims or by victim and offender, jointly; (f) it is more likely that lethal victims are the first to insult or to threaten the offender; (g) it is more likely that lethal victims are the first to threaten with a firearm or sharp instrument; and (h) third parties are less likely to intervene during lethal events.

- Immediate situational factors that are closely associated with an increased likelihood of a lethal outcome are: (a) alcohol use by victims, (b) absence of third parties, (c) a greater number of third parties present, (d) displaying or using a firearm by offenders, and (e) victim precipitation. Settlement, partisanship and inactivity by third parties are associated with a reduced likelihood of a lethal outcome.

by physical force; (e) lethal victims are more likely to precipitate; and (f) present third parties are more likely to remain inactive.

- Key factors that are closely associated with an increased likelihood of a lethal outcome are: (a) the absence of a prior violent record by offenders and victims, (b) the presence of alcohol use by victims, (c) absence of alcohol use by offenders, (d) the absence of third parties, (e) a greater number of present third parties, (f) victim precipitation, and (g) displaying or using a firearm by offenders.

which (a) victims performed an action with a weapon, (b) third parties showed escalating behavior, and (c) when they showed de-escalating behavior.
9.1.1 Lethal violence in the Netherlands (also in comparison with Finland and Sweden)

The study presented in Chapter 2 described the homicide characteristics in the Netherlands over a period of 18 years (1992-2009) as both limited systematic research on homicide has been conducted, and a reliable systematic overview of homicide characteristics has no long tradition in the country. Based on the Dutch Homicide Monitor, the results show that on average 223 victims die as the result of homicide in the Netherlands per year. The Dutch homicide rate is average compared to other West-European countries, and low in comparison to Eastern-European countries. The results show that Dutch homicides predominantly occur in the main urban areas among men, and that about half of Dutch victims and offenders were of non-Dutch ethnicity. Furthermore, the two predominant subtypes of homicides occurring in the Netherlands concern (a) domestic homicide and (b) homicide in the context of an argument between friends, acquaintances, or strangers. The most commonly used weapon to kill victims was a firearm, followed by a sharp instrument.

Chapter 3 presented a study based on the first joint European Homicide Monitor, describing and comparing the characteristics of homicide cases committed in Finland, Sweden and the Netherlands. The results showed that the homicide rate is highest in Finland and the lowest in Sweden, with the Netherlands taking an intermediate position, and that in all three countries most of the homicides occur between men. Important differences are that homicide offenders and victims in the Netherlands are on average younger and more often born in a foreign country than offenders and victims in the Nordic countries.

The results further reveal that the majority of the Nordic homicides take place in a private setting and that a sharp instrument is the most commonly used weapon. By contrast, Dutch homicides more commonly take place in a public setting. In spite of the fact that the Dutch firearm legislation is restricted and firearm ownership is far lower than in the Nordic countries (Chapter 3), even ranking among the lowest in Europe, the most commonly used weapon used by Dutch offenders is a firearm.

Domestic homicide is the most common subtype of homicide in the three selected countries; however, certain subtypes are more prevalent in some countries than in others. In particular, homicides in the criminal milieu occur more frequently in the Netherlands than in the Nordic countries. The results also revealed that in most Nordic homicides, victims and/or offenders are under the influence of alcohol during the crime.
9.1.2 The role of offenders’ personal characteristics in lethal versus non-lethal violence

Chapter 4 investigated the role of offenders’ personal characteristics on the likelihood of committing lethal versus non-lethal violence. To do so, the criminal history of lethal violence offenders (i.e., those who have committed a murder or manslaughter) was compared to that of non-lethal violence offenders (i.e., those who have committed an attempted murder or attempted manslaughter). The research questions were as follows: (1) to what extent does the criminal history of offenders convicted of lethal violence differ from offenders convicted of serious non-lethal violence, and (2) to what extent does the criminal history of offenders convicted of serious violence influence the likelihood that violence ends lethally. This chapter discussed the view of self-control theory that some people are more prone than others to commit crime – including lethal violence – due to differences in personal characteristics (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). According to this theory, criminal propensity is conceptualized as having low self-control, understood as the personal and enduring tendency to ignore the long-term consequences of one’s act. To explore this view, the present study used criminal history as an indirect indicator for criminal propensity.

The results showed major differences in the criminal history between perpetrators of lethal and non-lethal violence, revealing that perpetrators of non-lethal violence often have a significantly more severe criminal history than perpetrators of lethal violence. From a theoretical point of view, this finding suggests that – when considering a person’s criminal history as a manifestation of a person’s criminal propensity – non-lethal violence offenders actually have a higher criminal propensity compared to lethal violence offenders. This stands in contrast to what Gottfredson and Hirschi’s self-control theory suggests.

Furthermore, only one of the hypotheses was supported: a higher number of prior crimes is associated with an increased likelihood of committing lethal violence. In contrast to most studies in the field of violence and contrary to what was hypothesized, this study has shown a greater likelihood of committing lethal violence is associated with (i) a later age of onset, (ii) the absence of a prior violent record, and (iii) a lower number of prior violent crimes.

A significant insight derived from this study is that, with regard to the role of criminal history among serious violent offenders, certain aspects of this history do not necessarily have the effect that they are generally assumed to have in criminology – especially regarding age of onset and the effect of a violent history. As an indicator reflecting offenders’ personal characteristics, this study shows that offenders’ criminal history does contribute to a lethal outcome, but only to a limited extent. For this reason, others factors must also be considered in order to determine their influence on lethal versus non-lethal outcomes, as will be elaborated in the following sections.
9.1.3 The role of victims’ personal characteristics in lethal versus non-lethal violence

As suggested in the literature, not only do individual characteristics of offenders matter, but also those of victims. The study in Chapter 5 therefore compared the criminal histories of victims involved in violent events with lethal versus non-lethal outcomes. Most previous research has neglected the role of victims’ criminal history involved in serious violent events, and even fewer have compared the criminal history of victims of lethal versus non-lethal violence. To remedy this lacuna, the main focus here was on (a) the extent to which the criminal history of victims of lethal events differs from victims of non-lethal events, and (b) the extent to which victims’ criminal history influences the likelihood of lethal versus non-lethal outcomes of violent events. This study examined self-control theory’s assumption that a low level of self-control makes certain individuals more vulnerable to victimization than others, especially if they commit crimes themselves (Schreck, 1999). To this end, this study used victims’ criminal history as an indirect indicator for the criminal propensity of victims.

This study reveals that victims of non-lethal violence are more likely to have a more severe criminal history than victims of lethal violence. In examining the extent to which one’s criminal history can predict lethal versus non-lethal violent victimization, the results further show that the only significant criminal history-predictor is the existence of a prior criminal record. Yet, contrary to the hypothesis, the existence of a prior criminal record was found to be associated with a reduced likelihood of lethal victimization. Overall, the results show no evidence to support self-control theory when looking at serious violence. By using victims’ criminal history as an indicator for personal characteristics, this study concluded that victims’ personal characteristics are related to violent outcomes. However, the extent to which victims’ personal characteristics influence the outcome of violence is quite limited. The results indicate that besides victims’ personal characteristics, other factors are probably also important for predicting a lethal outcome of violent events. The next section therefore examines the role of immediate situational factors.

9.1.4 The role of immediate situational factors in lethal versus non-lethal violence

The study presented in Chapter 6 investigated the role of immediate situational factors in serious violent events, which include both event characteristics and actors’ behavior. In the literature, only a limited number of studies have specifically compared violent events with a lethal and non-lethal outcome in respect of immediate situational factors. The few that exist mainly concern
descriptive studies and usually focus almost exclusively on offenders (e.g., the use of weapons and alcohol).

This chapter therefore sought to extend previous literature by addressing the following research questions: (1a) to what extent do event characteristics differ in lethal versus non-lethal events, (1b) to what extent does the behavior of victims, offenders and third parties differ in lethal versus non-lethal events, and (2) to what extent do (a) event characteristics and (b) behavior of victims, offenders and third parties influence the likelihood that serious violent events end lethally.

Theoretically, this study integrated notions of routine activity theory (RAT) (Cohen & Felson, 1979) – which states that crime occurs when there is a motivated offender, a suitable target/victim, and no capable guardian present – with situated transaction theory (Luckenbill, 1977), which asserts that a lethal outcome is the result of a dynamic interaction process between offender, victim and third parties.

Using data derived from Dutch court files, this study revealed distinct differences between lethal versus non-lethal violent events with respect to event characteristics and, in particular, actors’ behavior. In particular, in lethal events it is more likely that (a) third parties are absent, (b) victim precipitation is involved, (c) present third parties remain inactive, and (d) offenders use a firearm to inflict the most severe injury, than in non-lethal events.

This study also brought to light a number of key immediate situational factors that are closely associated with an increased likelihood of a lethal outcome, namely: (a) alcohol use by victims, (b) absence of third parties, (c) a greater number of third parties present, (d) displaying or using a firearm by offenders, and (e) victim precipitation.

This study concluded that several immediate situational factors are crucial predictors of a lethal outcome of violent events. Furthermore, overall support was found for the study’s integrated theoretical framework, in which situated transaction theory is expanded by demonstrating that this theory still holds when lethal events are directly compared with non-lethal events.

9.1.5 The role of offenders’ and victims’ personal characteristics and immediate situational factors combined

Whereas the studies in the previous chapters examined personal characteristics of offenders and victims, or immediate situational factors separately, the study presented in Chapter 7 combined these three aspects in one study. Prior research examined the role of personal characteristics and of immediate situational factors mostly independently of each other. Consequently, most previous research has neglected to combine the study of a person’s individual characteristics and situational factors in lethal versus non-lethal violent events. The few studies that have been published were mainly offender-focused – lack-
ing information on victims and third parties – and did not use multivariate analyses to determine the influence of both types of factors on the lethality of violent events. This study extended previous research by filling these gaps. Here, violent events with a lethal and non-lethal outcome were compared on offenders’ and victims’ criminal history and immediate situational factors. The research questions were twofold: (1) to what extent do differences exist in the criminal history of offenders and victims and immediate situational factors between lethal and non-lethal events, and (2) to what extent are offenders’ and victims’ criminal history as well as immediate situational factors related to the likelihood of a lethal outcome of violent events.

To explain the lethality of violent events, the present study used an integrated theoretical framework consisting of routine activity theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979), situated transaction theory (Luckenbill, 1977) and self-control theory (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990).

From this study, the following main results were obtained: (1) contrary to the results in Chapter 4, no significant differences were found between perpetrators of lethal and non-lethal violence in terms of their criminal history; (2) similar to what was found in Chapter 5, victims of lethal violence generally have a less severe criminal history than victims of non-lethal violence, providing no evidence to support self-control theory; and (3) similar to the findings in Chapter 6, notable differences were found in immediate situational characteristics between lethal and non-lethal violent events, and particularly in terms of actors’ behavior.

Additional findings from this study provided evidence that the following key factors are closely associated with an increased likelihood of a lethal outcome: (a) the absence of a prior violent record by offenders and victims, (b) the presence of alcohol use by victims, (c) the absence of alcohol use by offenders, (d) the absence of third parties, (e) a higher number of present third parties, (f) victim precipitation, and (g) displaying or using a firearm by offenders. However, mediation, partisanship and inactivity by third parties are associated with a decreased likelihood of a lethal outcome compared to events where third parties were absent. In sum, victims’ and offenders’ criminal history (which was treated as an indicator for personal characteristics) and immediate situational factors are important in influencing violent outcomes, thereby providing general support for the study’s integrated theoretical framework. The findings of this study have shown that immediate situational factors are relatively more important in influencing the outcome of violent events than personal characteristics of offenders and victims. In particular, displaying or using a firearm by offenders, the absence of third parties, and victim precipitation exert a significant stronger influence than the other variables on the likelihood that serious violent events will end lethally. Immediate situational factors appear, therefore, to be the most important contributor to the outcome of violent events.
9.1.6 The role of the sequence of actions in lethal versus non-lethal violence

The final empirical study presented in Chapter 8 examined the interaction sequence during serious violent events with a lethal versus non-lethal outcome, by also taking into account the subtypes of conflict and third parties’ roles. For a greater understanding of the dynamic interaction process during serious violent events, two research questions were investigated: (a) what are the types of actions and the sequence of actions during violent events that lead up to a lethal or non-lethal outcome, and (b) how do the type and sequence of actions differ across male-to-male violence and intimate partner violence with a lethal or non-lethal outcome?

When comparing lethal with non-lethal violent events, the results show similarities in sequential patterns: roughly, both types of violent events progress through the following main stages: verbal or non-verbal actions – threats with a weapon – physical actions. However, the present study also identified distinct differences in the sequence of actions between lethal and non-lethal violent events, specifically the moment when de-escalation by third parties occurs. When accounting for whether or not the subtype of conflict involved male-to-male violence or intimate partner violence, critical differences were found in the order of actions, especially regarding the moment in which (a) victims performed an action with a weapon, (b) third parties showed escalating behavior, and (c) when they showed de-escalating behavior.

What became clear from this study is that there are key differences in how lethal and non-lethal violent events unfold, suggesting that what matters especially is when and how third parties intervene during the sequence. Stressing the relevance of comparing the dynamics across subtypes of violent events (and their outcome), the results also indicate that sequential actions of male-to-male violence differ in important ways from those of intimate partner violence, and especially if and when (de-)escalation by third parties and weapon use by victims occur in the chain.

9.2 THEORETICAL REFLECTIONS

To explain a lethal outcome of violent events, this thesis derived important insights from the self-control theory (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990), routine activity theory (RAT) (Cohen & Felson, 1979), and situated transaction theory (Luckenbill, 1977). Self-control theory asserts that certain personal characteristics of individuals – also conceptualized as criminal propensity – influence the likelihood of crime taking place, including lethal violence. Routine activity theory and situated transaction theory offer a more detailed insight into the importance of certain immediate situational factors conducive to crime such as lethal violence, including the role of the offender, victim and third parties. Thus, the underlying assumption of self-control theory is that especially stable
individual personal factors are conducive to crime including lethal violence, whereas the other two theories stress the immediate situational factors to explain the occurrence of crime including lethal violence. By using these theoretical frameworks – focusing either on personal characteristics (“criminality”) or situational characteristics (“crime”) – this thesis has sought to elucidate the relative importance of these characteristics in influencing whether a violent event will end lethally or non-lethally.

As stated before, the overall conclusion of this study is that personal characteristics of offenders and victims as well as immediate situational factors all influence the outcome of violent events. That said, the most important finding is that immediate situational factors play a more important role in influencing the outcome of violent events than offenders’ and victims’ personal characteristics. Put differently, a lethal outcome of violent events seems not so much due to offenders’ relatively stable personal characteristics nor victims’ relatively stable personal characteristics (i.e., criminal history), but appears to depend more importantly on what actually happens during the incident. This thesis thus does not confirm the underlying assumption of self-control theory in the case of serious violence. Overall, this thesis confirms Luckenbill’s assertion that a lethal outcome is not always unilaterally determined beforehand by the offender. Instead, it is more often the immediate situation (and in particular the interaction between actors) that is decisive, so that it is not only the offender but often also the victim and third parties that play a key role in shaping violent outcomes. Finding that immediate situational factors contribute substantially to the outcome of violence has several theoretical implications. One key implication is that, in explaining violent outcomes, the immediate situational factors (“crime”) deserve more extensive consideration in criminological theories than they have received so far. Particularly, given the importance of interpersonal interaction emerging from this thesis, it would be highly valuable to closely examine the dynamics between victims, offenders and third parties. This not only applies for serious violence, but potentially for less serious forms of interpersonal violence as well.

Given third parties’ influence on violent outcomes, when explaining the occurrence of violence it seems particularly relevant for criminological theory to incorporate much more systematically third parties’ presence and their behavior (inaction, settlement and partisanship), as well as the moment at which they intervene during violent conflicts, rather than to disregard these aspects. Especially worthy of further theoretical exploration is the finding that the higher the number of third parties present, the higher the likelihood of a lethal outcome (Chapter 6 and 7), which seems to point to the bystander effect (Latane & Darley, 1968). As features of third parties’ behaviors in violence are usually underexplored in the criminological theoretical literature, the classic work by Latane and Darley and successors (e.g., Levine & Crowter, 2008; Van Bommel, Van Prooijen, Elffers, & Van Lange, 2012) on the mechanisms of the bystander effect could serve as a fruitful starting point to further
theoretically disentangle and understand the underlying mechanisms of third parties’ role in violence, and to elaborate in more detail how the bystander effect applies for serious violence. Also, because this thesis recognizes offenders, victims and third parties as major players influencing the lethality of violent events, another implication for criminological theory is to avoid a one-dimensional focus on either offenders or victims. Criminological theories should therefore broaden their scope and explain violence with a more multi-dimensional focus by considering all actors present, preferably by putting the event center-stage rather than the characteristics of the offender or victim (e.g., see the criminal event perspective: Meier et al., 2001).

In conclusion, criminological theories would benefit from seeking to explain why some events end lethally, while others do not. This will not only enhance our general understanding of how certain crimes arrive at their outcome, but specifically yield a more thorough insight into the underlying mechanisms that distinguish lethal violent events from those that end non-lethally.

9.3 REFLECTIONS ON AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The limitations of this study and related suggestions for future research will now be discussed according to the following structure: (i) data and methods, and (ii) new research questions.

Data and methods

This thesis offers several important suggestions related to data and methods. A first suggestion is to conduct more research on the role of offenders’ and victims’ personal characteristics and immediate situational factors, by using method triangulation. In this regard, a limitation of the current thesis is that it primarily relied on data from official criminal records and court files: one disadvantage of relying on official criminal records is that not all committed crimes are reported (e.g., intimate partner violence), causing a certain dark number in the data. Several disadvantages of using court files concern the inability to look into the mind of the offender, the voice of lethal victims is missing, and an eye-witness report is not always included since events do not always take place in front of third parties. Also, since court files are primarily constructed for judicial purposes, certain information that is of interest for scientific studies is not always included in these files (e.g., the amount of consumed alcohol). Future research would therefore benefit from triangulation as this method can potentially strengthen the research findings.

Another recommendation for future studies is to use a design that permits the comparison of several violent events committed by the same person, which was unfortunately not possible in this study. A preferred way to do this is by using matched case-control design, or examining court files concerning
several violent cases committed by the same person. Although the matched case-control design is a relatively unknown method in criminology (for exceptions, see Bernasco et al., 2013; Phillips et al., 2007), this design presumably offers a more robust design than the design used in this thesis. Future criminological studies that use this type of design could presumably unravel more accurately and comprehensively the role of situational factors in violent events. The reason for this is not only that this method makes it possible to control for time-stable individual factors; especially promising is the possibility to unravel complex relationships between variables and to control for spurious relationships (Phillips et al., 2007). It may ultimately even yield insight into the causality of several immediate situational influences on lethal versus non-lethal outcomes of violent events (for a recent Dutch study using this method: see the study of Bernasco et al. (2013) that focused on three types of robbery situations committed by the same person, namely attempted robbery, and completed robbery with and without using physical violence).

A third suggestion relates to the study’s inability to measure criminal propensity more precisely. Since criminal propensity was measured indirectly by considering one’s criminal history, it remains to be considered whether these findings still hold when more direct measures for individuals’ criminal propensity are included. One way of doing so would be by means of the self-control scale developed by Grasmick and his colleagues (1993), and – for more precision – to include behavioral rather than attitudinal measurements (e.g., DeLisi, 2001). This thesis encourages further research to include more direct measures of criminal propensity so that more comprehensive insight may be gained into the role of criminal propensity in determining violent outcomes.

Fourth, given the specific focus on serious violent events, the extent to which the findings hold for less serious forms of violence is unclear. For example, as a consequence of the focus on comparing completed and attempted homicide, other violent cases with a lethal or non-lethal outcome such as aggravated assault resulting in death versus non-lethal aggravated assault were not dealt with in this thesis. Therefore, to confirm whether the findings also apply to types of violent crimes that were left unexplored, future studies are recommended to also include data on such cases. It should be noted, however, that Dutch judges and Public Prosecutors tend to classify violence more severely than previously (see also Egelkamp, 2002; Smit & Nieuwbeerta, 2007). In particular, what used to be legally classified as aggravated assault is nowadays more often classified as attempted manslaughter. Given this current development the overall conclusions will probably not change significantly when including cases of aggravated assault.

Another recommendation relates to the inclusion criteria used in this study. When it comes to immediate situational factors, this thesis considered only cases involving one-on-one cases registered in the Dutch urban regions of The Hague and Rotterdam, which might limit extrapolation to other Dutch regions and to cases involving multiple offenders or victims. Examining also cases
of other regions and multiple offenders and victims is relevant to determine whether similar patterns of findings emerge with regard to the role of offenders’ and victims’ personal characteristics and immediate situational factors. For example, it may be so that when multiple offenders are involved in serious violent cases, third parties may be far less likely to intervene out of fear of getting hurt themselves, and especially if they are the only third party present.

Besides these suggestions, four specific recommendations for future data collection are provided. To begin with, as this thesis revealed that the role of third parties is especially relevant to whether a violent event results in a lethal or non-lethal outcome, national data collection paying attention to the role of third parties – as is done in some countries such as the United States (Planty, 2002) – is recommended particularly for the Netherlands. As Dutch national data on this matter are currently unavailable, and this thesis demonstrated the need to understand more about third parties’ impact on violent outcomes, it would be highly valuable to collect Dutch data on, for example, the proportion of violent incidents in which a third party is present and on how they behave during violent incidents. As a way to realize this, researchers could for example start a joint project with the Dutch police in order to register this type of data.

Also, and more broadly, since the Dutch Homicide Monitor – i.e., the only scientific database comprising all homicide cases in the Netherlands – only contains information on basic characteristics of offenders, victims and the event, it would be valuable to expand this monitor with data on the presence and behavior of third parties, substance use by offender and victim, and other behavioral aspects. This is particularly important as a stimulus to help Dutch researchers explore these aspects more systematically in the Netherlands. To realize this requires intensive cooperation with the Dutch police and the criminal justice system, as these are the organizations that administer this information. To explain this more clearly: as mentioned earlier in this thesis, the Dutch Homicide Monitor was initially created because no uniform registered data on homicide was available in the Netherlands before 1992 (Leistra & Nieuwbeerta, 2003; Nieuwbeerta & Leistra, 2007). This Monitor is based on information from (among other sources) the police and other criminal justice systems in the Netherlands. Although valuable, an important lacuna of this Monitor is the lack of data on alcohol use by homicide offenders and victims, and on the role of third parties. These data are lacking, either because they turned out to be unavailable or were not registered systematically. To remedy this lacuna, and thereby to contribute to the overall goal of reducing lethal violence, this thesis therefore calls on criminal investigation authorities to also register this type of information systematically. In the end, by not restricting this effort to just a few regions in the Netherlands, this would also be a significant step toward building and maintaining a national overview of the immediate situational factors that are conducive to lethal violence.
To go a step further, this is also recommended for other European countries, as this would encourage and facilitate cross-national comparisons on the role of offenders’ and victims’ personal characteristics and immediate situational factors, rather than limiting the scope to regional or national level. Preferably, for example, the first European database in the field of lethal violence, referred to as the European Homicide Monitor (Chapter 3), could be supplemented with such data.

Ideally, this would be expanded by creating a monitor for non-lethal violence, containing data on offenders, victims and third parties, to permit a more extensive comparison of lethal versus non-lethal violence in and outside the Netherlands.

Research questions

This thesis offers several suggestions for new research questions. Given the overall finding of this study, which highlights the salient role of immediate situational factors for the outcome of violent events (such as the presence and number of third parties, alcohol use of victims, victim precipitation and firearm use by offenders), it is recommended to further investigate the role of immediate situational factors, and especially the (dynamic) interaction between offenders, victims and third parties. Especially with a view to prevention policies, future criminological research should examine the role of third parties in violent events. More specifically, one essential avenue for future research is to examine why a greater number of present third parties is associated with an increased likelihood of a lethal outcome (Chapter 6 and 7). In this respect, the classic study by Latane and Darley (1968) has previously provided some insight, arguing that a higher number of third parties makes third parties’ intervention less likely, due to the bystander effect and its diffusion of responsibility. However, a more recent study by Levine and Crowther (2008) has shown that an increase in group size can either encourage or discourage intervention by third parties, depending on the relationship between these third parties. Further research is warranted to determine exactly how the number of third parties affects violent outcomes.

Future research could also examine in more detail (a) third parties’ background characteristics (e.g., sex), (b) the relationship between the offender, victim and other third parties, and (3) what third parties can do to stop further violence, especially because research indicates that there is a lack of knowledge about how to intervene (see also Nelson, Dunn, & Paradies, 2011). In addition, as all these aspects can affect the course of events, further criminological research could investigate (a) under which conditions third parties are most likely to intervene, (b) how third parties’ intervention can be most effective, and (c) to what extent substance use by third parties plays a role in the event. For example, a recent social-psychological study on the role of third parties in non-lethal barroom conflicts discovered that alcohol use by third parties
was related to the type of intervention: drunken third parties were more likely to intervene in an aggressive manner than third parties who were not intoxicated (Parks et al., 2013). To enrich the knowledge on the presence, number and behavior of third parties in violent events, it is highly recommended that criminological researchers draw on insights from other disciplines, as most research on third parties comes from other disciplines, particularly social psychology.

Given the finding that the behavior of actors can shape the outcome of violent events (Chapter 6 and 8), further work is required to assess more systematically the behaviors that could reduce the severity of conflict (i.e., conflict resolution), such as violent and non-violent resistance (e.g., see Bernasco et al., 2013). These insights are important because they can potentially contribute to preventive programs in this area.

Another important avenue for future research is to examine the extent to which personal characteristics of offenders and victims interact with immediate situational characteristics, which has not been subjected to much empirical scrutiny in previous studies. Unfortunately, this was also not possible in the current study due to the relatively low number of serious violent cases and large number of variables included. Further studies are therefore needed to elucidate more fully how personal characteristics of offenders and victims interact with immediate situational factors.

Another area for future research pertains to a more detailed examination of certain subtypes of violence, preferably also investigating more thoroughly the concept of victim precipitation and the role of sex differences (e.g., strength and stature). Findings of this thesis have shown that victim precipitation is significantly related to a higher likelihood that violence will end lethally. However, future research is needed to clarify the underlying reason why some victims initiate certain behavior.

Lastly, future studies would benefit from distinguishing between and comparing attempted and completed homicide cases much more systematically than extant studies have done so far. As mentioned earlier, there is a discussion among scholars concerning the question of the importance of comparing cases labeled as either completed or attempted homicide. Some scholars downplay the importance of comparing these cases, as they assume or argue that there is little difference between a completed and an attempted homicide except for a dead body, and that the difference in outcome is generally due to certain random occurrences (e.g., Heide, 2003; Putkonen et al., 1998; Putkonen, 2003). Others criticize this view, instead emphasizing the relevance of comparing attempted and completed homicide cases on the grounds that substantial differences exist between them (e.g., Bjørkly & Waage, 2005; Smit et al., 2012). By explicitly comparing these cases, the current study sheds significant empirical light on this question, contributing to a more informed and evidence-based debate and highlighting the relevance of comparing attempted and completed homicide. More precisely, this study was able to demonstrate
empirically that the distinction between attempted and completed homicide is far more complicated than is usually thought and that substantial differences exist between the two types of serious violent cases with respect to personal characteristics of offenders and victims and immediate situational factors. Therefore, to understand more fully the difference in outcome, further studies would benefit from continuing to distinguish between and to compare attempted and completed homicide cases.

9.4 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY

Since personal characteristics have been shown to be comparatively less important and are generally much harder to change than concrete circumstances, this thesis offers the following policy recommendations, specifically in the area of public education. First, given the finding that third parties are present during most serious violent incidents and can partially determine the difference between life and death (Chapter 6 to 8), this thesis recommends that public education campaigns invest in increasing the public’s awareness that third parties can actually influence the course of events and even save lives. This may happen by (a) encouraging a sense of responsibility among the public to stop violence, and (b) spreading knowledge on what one can do to stop further violence. A recent review by Nelson et al. (2011) showed for instance that a sense of responsibility and intervention skills encourage third parties to intervene, whereas a lack of knowledge and/or skills discourages third parties to intervene. As an example to illustrate this point, consider a notable Dutch homicide case involving an argument between neighbors, also known as the Dutch roof murder. Here, camera footage – made by a third party – showed that while the victim was stabbed to death, a direct neighbor witnessed the event but continued to hang out her laundry, remaining utterly inactive. Possibly, rather than not caring, awareness to care (as Van Bommel and his colleagues put it [2012]) could have helped prevent the victim’s death. As such, as a way to encourage people to care and as an example, a promising Dutch campaign for the public which could be re-started is ‘Knowing what to do when it comes to violence’, which was launched in 2001 in the Netherlands. This national public campaign aimed to instruct the public on how to act when encountering street violence, such as calling the emergency number, activating other third parties, or making noise to deter the offender. Thus, future programs could invest more in providing the public with concrete tools on what to do when encountering serious violence, as this could help prevent a further escalation of the conflict; for example by developing an action plan for third parties (see also Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, 2013). In today’s society, another means of informing the public is through social media. Using this medium to spread educational information can be a powerful tool to boost awareness on how to behave when witnessing violence, as this reaches
many people in daily life. That said, preventive programs should also emphasize the following two precautions: (a) taking the law into one’s own hands is prohibited, and (b) one’s own safety should be put first.

Second, as conflicts do not necessarily lead to violence, prevention programs could consider investing more in conflict resolution – for example through training courses – to learn how to deal with and defuse aggression. Such training could especially be valuable for people who are particularly at risk of being confronted with aggression or violence (see also Ufkes & Giebels, 2014). Conflict resolution is important because it can teach people how to adequately resolve conflicts and may even help prevent an escalation into lethal violence. This would make people more aware that how they behave during conflicts can determine the course of the conflict (whether or not under the influence of alcohol), and it can provide concrete behavioral alternatives or tools to deal with conflicts (e.g., what to do when somebody threatens you with a weapon and/or threatens to kill you). It might also be helpful for such trainings to take account of sex differences, as conflict resolution styles can differ between males and females (Holt & DeVore, 2005). Such trainings could also instruct people on how to effectively enlist the help of third parties when confronted with violence (Ufkes & Giebels, 2014).

This thesis also has a more general recommendation concerning the Dutch government’s safety policy. Although the findings show that homicide is a relatively rare phenomenon in the Netherlands, the fact remains that it is a serious crime with extremely far-reaching consequences. Reducing lethal violence should therefore be a clearer priority on the Dutch political agenda, for example by devoting specific attention to this issue in the Dutch government’s safety program. To start, as mentioned earlier, findings of this thesis show that a higher number of third parties present at the crime scene is associated with an increased likelihood of a lethal outcome, which may be interpreted as support for the bystander effect. The government could for example promote the social norm that helping a person in need is socially appropriate behavior (Nelson et al., 2011), or that the public should “be aware to care” (Van Bommel et al., 2012, p. 930). Possibly, by caring, the bystander effect may be overcome or even reversed in future violent events (see also Van Bommel et al., 2012). Although the recent Dutch government's safety program has increasingly focused on encouraging third parties to contribute actively to a safer society, in practice, however, the attempt to mobilize third parties is mainly directed at violence in the private domain (e.g., recognizing cases of intimate partner violence and child abuse, including how to act when there are suspicions of domestic violence). Although valuable, since serious violence not only takes place in the private domain prevention programs are encouraged to also invest in mobilizing third parties in the (semi-) public domain. Ideally, restarting a campaign on activating third parties similar to the aforementioned ‘Knowing what to do when it comes to violence’ campaign,
and by expanding it to both the public and private domain, could ideally contribute to reducing serious violence.

To support, reinforce and further elaborate measures at the local level, local authorities (such as mayors together with the local police) have an especially important role to fulfil, given their responsibility for public safety in municipalities. To help prevent violence in the community, it would for example be beneficial if local authorities explicitly promote the message of intolerance towards violence, not only to set an example for the community but also to reinforce the aforementioned campaign. Organizing information meetings and offering specific de-escalation training programs to teach citizens how specific actions can defuse a potentially dangerous situation can help strengthen the safety and social norms in the community. Such meetings would also provide local authorities with the opportunity to explicitly communicate to citizens that they do not stand alone in the fight against violence, and should therefore not hesitate to seek help if they or others encounter potentially dangerous situations. This seems helpful for domestic violence in particular, as these conflicts typically go unnoticed by others.

Furthermore, based on findings of this thesis, it would be advisable for local authorities to offer a violence support service that goes beyond the domestic sphere. This is advisable given that current Dutch local authorities predominantly offer a domestic violence support service. Such an expansion would enable the local government to reach a wider audience, helping and advising citizens on how to deal with violence that occurs both inside and outside the home, and referring them to professional help if necessary.

Although the firearm policy in the Netherlands is already quite strict, given the finding that showing or using a firearm is associated with a substantially greater likelihood of a lethal outcome, this thesis moreover advises the authorities responsible for firearm control to invest even further in hindering access to firearms, especially those that are illegal. This should include rigorously investigating the source of found firearms, including whether a third party provided the firearm. In particular, mayors and the head of the National Police Department should ensure a stricter enforcement of firearm legislation, both in cases where a gun license is requested and when a license needs to be renewed. Finally, to help tackle illegal firearm trafficking, mayors of large Dutch cities could intensify efforts such as police raids. To do so obviously requires having sufficient police capacity.

Implications for the Dutch criminal justice system

Finally, and specifically for the Dutch criminal justice system, this thesis has the following implications. An important first step in preventing serious violence is to identify which factors play a role in the escalation of an event into lethal and non-lethal violence. Accordingly, this thesis urges the various actors within the Dutch criminal justice system to contribute to achieving this
major goal. To this end, since it has emerged that third parties were present in most of the investigated incidents of serious violence, it is recommend that the Dutch police organization particularly invests in securing the cooperation of third parties present in the immediate setting. After all, they could be key witnesses providing vital insights into the arising and further development of conflict situations that eventually lead to lethal violence.

As a way to realize this, the police could interrogate much more systematically those third parties who witnessed up close what happened, so as to obtain as many details as possible about how the conflict arose and evolved. The police also could invest in strategies to encourage third parties (e.g., in case of domestic violence; particularly neighbors) to notify the police when they have witnessed or have suspicions of violence. For example, after a case of non-lethal domestic violence has been reported, the police could possibly approach the direct neighbors to inform them that an assault case has occurred, and to encourage them to keep an eye on the situation and not to be reluctant to call the police when there are suspicions of further violence. Obviously, when doing so, privacy issues should be considered here. Nevertheless, increasing informal and formal social control can help prevent future violence.

As findings of this thesis also show that some third parties joined the violence or instigated the conflict in some way (Chapter 6 to 8), however, it also appears warranted for criminal justice systems to think about how to tackle third parties who instigated the conflict. One possible way to do this is, for example, by interrogating other third parties (e.g., neighbors in case of violence occurring in a private setting) about the behavior of possible involved third parties, or by studying camera footage in public arenas, including the nightlife scene, or by tracking down third parties who recorded an incident of assault for entertainment purposes. Findings of this thesis not only appear to justify the discretionary power of judges to penalize instigating third parties, but they also encourage a critical examination of how best to treat instigating third parties, including whether they should be punished as co-offender or accomplice.

Based on the finding of this thesis, it furthermore seems worthwhile for legislators to seriously take into consideration whether the Dutch Criminal Code should be amended to provide for more possibilities to legally penalize certain third parties who did not provide help in serious violent situations. Although the current Article 450 of the Dutch Criminal Code offers judges the opportunity to criminalize third parties for not aiding a person in an emergency situation (e.g., if a person is drowning), this currently only applies for circumstances where the person eventually dies. Possibly, the Dutch Criminal Code should also be expanded on this point to include both lethal and non-lethal violent situations that are potentially life-threatening (see also Ramdas, 2011).

Moreover, as this study demonstrated an important relationship between firearms and lethal violence, it would be worthwhile for legislators to consider
whether illegal firearm trafficking and illegal firearm possession should be punished more severely.

Lastly, the overall finding that substantial differences exist between cases of completed and homicide cases suggest that critical scrutiny is warranted with regard to what judges can impose as a maximum penalty for completed and attempted homicides. Specifically for the Dutch situation, findings indicate that making a legal difference in the maximum penalty between completed and attempted homicide is appropriate. Findings of this thesis could serve to stimulate a more informed debate, especially in countries such as Iceland, where there is no difference in the maximum penalty for attempted and completed (Smit et al., 2012). Although countries obviously differ in their legal systems and additional elements may be required to convict a person for attempted homicide, it seems worthwhile to stimulate judges to critically reflect on whether the same maximum penalty for completed and attempted homicide is warranted.

All in all, this thesis recommends that various organizations join forces to systematically build up knowledge on the factors that contribute to the lethality of violent events. In doing so, it is crucial to not lose sight of the importance of considering all parties involved in serious violent events, that is: offender, victim and third parties. In the end, these efforts could contribute significantly to the fight against lethal violence, and ideally, may make an essential difference for those victimized – i.e., the difference between ending up dead or alive.