For most people the chances of being murdered are the same or lower than they were 20 years ago. For young men in the poorest parts of the country, they are considerably higher. Murder is like a disease, says Danny Dorling – it affects different groups disproportionately, and its cause is an unequal society.
turning more violent. For a clue as to why we need to look at where, for whom and when this changed.

Gender differences are reinforced by profound residential inequalities. In all countries, where you live matters more than who you are. In Britain, growing inequality between neighbourhoods has occurred alongside more unequal patterns of murder. Between 1981 and 1985, people living in the poorest 10 per cent of areas were 4.5 times more likely to be murdered than those living in the richest ten per cent. By 2000, the poorest 10 percent were six times more likely to be murdered.

Some simple projections using figures for the 1980s and 1990s help illustrate these trends. In the richest neighbourhoods, for every 100 murders that we might ‘expect’ to take place if the national average were applied equally, only 50 occurred. In the poorest 10 per cent of council wards, using the same measure, there were around 300 murders compared to the 100 expected.

In fact, the rise in murders in Britain has been concentrated almost exclusively amongst men of working age living in the poorest parts of the country. Living in the areas most affected by the recession and high unemployment of the early 1980s, many of these men left school at 15 or 16 and were unable to find work. In each case, there is no simple causal relationship at play. Murders typically result from a complex interplay of factors – including social exclusion, esteem and status – as well as a considerable degree of bad luck. For every murder victim, dozens of others have been ‘almost murdered’. There is a common myth that gun crime is behind high murder rates in poor areas. In fact, a higher proportion of rich people are killed by guns than poor people. The most common way of being murdered in poor areas was through being cut with a knife or broken glass. Most murders are shockingly banal – such as a fight after a night out drinking in which a threat was made and someone died. Such murders do not make

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the headlines. Most are extensions of fighting, not carefully planned and executed events. Real life is not like Morse or Taggart, and cases very rarely take great detective work or remain unsolved for a generation. Murder, although extreme, is a fact of life – but it need not be a growing part of our lives.

Murder rates are still very low compared to the US, but murder is a stark and powerful social indicator and there can be no cause for complacency. The murder rate tells us far more about society and how it is changing than any particular murder tells us about the individuals involved. The changing pattern of the victims is consistent with new evidence that inequality kills. While the majority of people are less likely to become a victim, the poorest people in the most deprived communities are more and more likely.

I argued earlier that it helps to think of murder as a disease. As with many diseases, we do not have a cure for murder. There is no childhood inoculation. We can, however, increase our efforts to stop its spread and better protect those most likely to fall victim. There is nothing inevitable about murder and the falling rates for most of the population show that there is no need for the rest of us to experience the level of violence and inequality of which murder is such a powerful indicator.

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