EVOLUTION OF HOMICIDAL VIOLENCE IN ITALY: THE END OF MEZZOGIORNO'S EXCEPTIONALISM?

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Abstract. The homicidal violence of Mafia-type gangs has been the primary cause of the Mafia legend and has prompted the publication of numerous studies, which, however, have provided conflicting hypotheses about the determinants of this criminal phenomenon. The persistence, in Italy's Mezzogiorno, the traditional Mafia's turf, of a high rate of homicides has, in particular, attracted worldwide attention. The present study aims to analyse the evolution of Mezzogiorno's homicides and elucidate its causes. The analysis is based on panel data covering 4-decade cross-province time series. The time series showed a drop in Mezzogiorno's homicide rates. The longitudinal models, in turn, showed that this drop has been associated with structural changes that occurred in Mezzogiorno, particularly with the momentous rise in the youth's education and a surge in State enforcement. At the end of the time frame considered, the gap in terms of homicide rates between Mezzogiorno and the rest of Italy evaporated. Mezzogiorno's rate became lower than the average rate for West European countries, ending the long-lasting Mezzogiorno's exceptionalism in terms of homicidal violence.

1. Introductory remarks: Mafia and violence

Behind the interest aroused worldwide by Mafia-type criminal organisations is their violence. The amount and cruelty of such violence have captured people's imagination and prompted countless stories, novels, and films. All this, in turn, has generated the Mafia legend that has inflated an already gruesome reality. In contrast to the vastness of this folkloristic and fictional discourse, there is limited information about the Mafia's nature and determinants. What we know about Mafia-type organisations is that they are criminal gangs, territorially-rooted, close-knit and bound by the silence code. Making the most of the force of their associative bond, they use threat and violence to conduct otherwise legal business or to trade in illegal markets (e.g. that of drugs), recurring to murder to eliminate their competitors and, when expedient, to counter State enforcement. Numerous scientific publications have dealt with the issue of the roots of these organisations. However, the theories

meant to explain persistent criminal behaviour in groups of people do not seem well-suited to provide a convincing account of Mafia-type gangs.

Social disorganisation theory has long been regarded as a valid tool to elucidate the cross-time stability of criminal behaviour in specific territorial units. The reference to *stability* and *specific territories* seems to fit Mafia-type gangs. However, disorganisation theory states that criminal groups emerge in contexts where socioeconomic challenges – and, first of all, high mobility – break down family and community ties, destroy social control and finally, indirectly encourage the creation of criminal gangs (Shaw and McKay 1942; Earls and Visher 1997; Sampson et al. 1997). These characteristics seem lacking in Italy's Mezzogiorno,[1] the turf of Mafia-type gangs. In Mezzogiorno, there has been high mobility, especially in the decades immediately after WWII; but it has been mobility in terms of emigration, not immigration, as suggested by the disorganisation theory. And it would be hard to regard Mezzogiorno as a territory characterised by a breaking down of family ties and parental control. Those territories have always shown much lower separation and divorce rates than the rest of Italy, higher birth rates, a limited number of single-parent families, etc. Only recently emerged a new social disorganisation factor: foreign immigration. However, foreign immigration has been much lower in Mezzogiorno than in the rest of Italy.

Relative deprivation theory seems better suited to explain Mafia-type crime. This theory is indebted to the anomie conceptual framework (Merton 1949), according to which social pressure to succeed materially in the face of scarce legitimate opportunities leads to crime. There was undoubtedly a deprivation scenario in Mezzogiorno in the past. Per capita GDP was 56% of the rest of Italy in the early 1960s. In the early 2020s, Mezzogiorno's share was substantially the same, but from 1980, there had been a substantial increase (45%) in per capita GDP at constant prices all over the country, Mezzogiorno included. In the early 1970s, 32.8% of Mezzogiorno's people were in *absolute poverty* vs 14.4% in the rest of Italy; in 2008, the gap had shrunk to 9.2% vs 2.2% (Vecchi 2011). In 1961, people in the agricultural sector were, on average, 45.4% in Mezzogiorno and 24.1% in the rest of Italy. In 2020, the values had shrunk to 1.9 and 1.2, respectively.

In 1961, in Sicily, there were only 3.2 cars per 100 population; in Calabria, 1.8; in Basilicata, 1.2; while in Lombardy, there were 6.5 cars and, in Latium, 7.6. It was necessary to wait until the 2010s to see the disappearance of the gap, with Latium and Sicily presenting the same diffusion of cars (~65 per 100 population).

As for education, too, the gap was substantial. In the early 1980s, many Mezzogiorno provinces presented a secondary higher-school male enrolment rate

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[1] With "Mezzogiorno", we refer to the southern part of Italy, including Sicily, but excluding Sardinia where Mafia-type gangs are not present, corresponding to ITF and ITG in NUTS 1 classification.

between 35% and 45%. In contrast, the rate was at least 10 points higher in most Northern and Central provinces. Only at the end of the 2010s the gap evaporated, with gross enrolment rates of 90% and more in substantially all of Italy's provinces.

Summarising the above, Mezzogiorno's past educational and economic scenario was such to suggest that, owing to the shortage of legitimate opportunities, criminal gang activities would have provided alternative opportunities for economic success. However, the scarcity of legitimate opportunities is not the only requirement of relative deprivation theory. This theory incorporates a precondition: a high social pressure to succeed materially. This precondition does not seem to characterise Mezzogiorno: a macro-region that is more tradition-directed and more inclined to favour ascription against achievement than the Northern and Central regions. Little economic-success-driven mentality can be found, in particular, in the biographies of Mafia bosses, most of them known for their modest, peasant-like lifestyle.

Given all this, other hypotheses have been advanced to explain the diffusion of Mafia-type criminal organisations. A more cultural hypothesis has derived from a peculiar feature repeatedly identified in the Mezzogiorno society: the so-called *amoral familism,* a blend of familism, lack of trust and, consequently, limited social capital (Banfield 1958; Bell 1979; Putnam et al. 1993). Over the last decades, this peculiar feature – initially detected in Italy's Southern regions – has been widely employed to explain the weaker social fabric of some regions and countries worldwide (Coleman 1988; Fukuyama 1995; Putnam 2000). Proxies of social capital, such as turnout at elections and referendums and diffusion of volunteers, persistently present lower values in the Mezzogiorno regions (Solivetti 2020). Unsurprisingly, the dearth of social capital and the lack of trust in the State and people outside the family have been associated with Mafia-type criminal gangs (Hess 1973; Gambetta 1993; Paoli 2004).

On the other hand, the lack of trust in the State is partly explained by the State's weak presence in Mezzogiorno. A weak State, unable to control private violence and conflicts revolving around land possession and natural resources exploitation, would have encouraged the rise of the Mafia as an illegal but effective regulator (Buonanno et al. 2015; Acemoglu et al. 2020). Persistence of the Mafia diffusion would have been assured by its effectiveness as a provider of ''private protection'' (Gambetta 1988, 1993) in a context characterised by ineffective law enforcement.

In any case, Mezzogiorno's criminal exceptionalism seems to have markedly shrunk over the last years. The structural changes that occurred in Mezzogiorno's socioeconomic profile in the previous decades might have been the effective causes of the assumed decline of its traditional violent criminality. This decline might have also resulted from a cultural change generated, at least partly, by the increasing education of the Mezzogiorno's youth. Interestingly, since the 1990s, in the very regions most touched by Mafia-type criminality, people, for the first time, organised

public manifestations against criminal gangs and gave rise to anti-Mafia associations (Cayli 2013). The presence of students and, in general, young people was conspicuous in those manifestations.

A further relevant factor might have been the more robust enforcement action by the State. In 1982, the Italian Parliament passed a new act introducing the offence of *Mafia-type criminal conspiracy*, which entails much longer incarceration terms than the standard *criminal conspiracy*. The same act also introduced the precautionary seizure of all possessions (property, money) of suspicious origin. In a few years, the Italian judiciary performed an effective action against the various Mafia-type criminal organisations ('Ndrangheta, Mafia, Camorra, Sacra Corona, etc.) also by taking advantage of the (contentious) collaboration of Mafia's former affiliates (so-called *pentiti*), to whom reduced sentences were granted. Despite this, in the 1990s, the Mafia killed some high-ranking magistrates overseeing the enforcement actions against these criminal organisations. New acts were passed to make the fight against them more effective. The Parliament extended the hard prison regime to Mafia-type criminals (1992) and passed a new act providing more protection for criminal organisations' affiliates who turned into police co-operators.

The change in Mezzogiorno's crime might have also resulted from a shift in focus of the Mafia's interests. Traditionally, Mafia-type gangs used threat and violence in both the rural and urban contexts of a tradition-directed society, primarily controlling the land and the markets dealing with agricultural produce. However, social scientists noticed changes in the interests of these criminal organisations. This shift concerned the capability of adapting to new political situations and new market conditions (Catanzaro 1985; Shelley 1994) and the move from extortions and violence towards more entrepreneurial – though still illegal or semi-illegal – businesses (Arlacchi and Ryle 1986; Paoli 2008). A further change has regarded these criminal organisations' movement from their habitual Southern turf to the Central and Northern provinces, at least to invest the returns of their illicit activities.

Whatever the reasons for the decline of Mafia violence, investigating the determinants of this decline would lead to a better understanding of the causes of the entire Mafia phenomenon and would indirectly test the theories about its rise.

2. Purpose and hypotheses of the present study

We will begin by measuring the evolution of Mezzogiorno's homicide rates and comparing them to the rest of Italy's and other European countries'. We will check whether the alleged decline of homicides in Mezzogiorno is a mirror of the decrease in homicides registered from the 1990s in Western Europe or a specific phenomenon.

We intend to focus on the Mezzogiorno's exceptionally high rates of homicides because intentional homicides represent not only the ultimate crime but also the most striking fallout of traditional Mafia-type criminal activities.

Next, we intend to measure the impact on homicide rates of changes that intervened over time. In particular, in tune with the abovementioned potential factors of Mafia-type criminal organisations, we advance the following hypotheses:

- H1: because young people with educational aspirations are less likely to engage in crime (Braithwaite 1989: 44 ff.), an increase in their educational level could have had an impact on violent crime by introducing new values and attitudes;

- H2: if the origin and persistence of Mafia-type crime have been favoured by weak State enforcement, then an increase in State enforcement could have been the reason for the decrease in violent crime;

- H3: a general increase in the Mezzogiorno's well-being could have reduced the pressure exerted on the youth to recur to illegitimate routes to success;

- H4: a decrease in birthrate would have allowed families to better provide for their young generations, reducing their drive towards illegitimate means.

3. Data and methods

Most literature on the Mafia is qualitative. The few quantitative studies have usually focused on synchronic/pooled data of territorial units. Such studies are good at identifying the *between* differences, but they miss the *within* differences, i.e. variations in each observational unit. Thus, these studies explain differences across observations but not change over time. Secondly, crime densities could also derive from non-observed, time-invariant factors, which would bias the estimates. Fixed-effects (FE) panel analyses, being based on cross-time variations – i.e. the *within* differences – would bypass the effects of non-observed, persistent crime factors and identify the effects of change. Moreover, FE analyses may reckon the temporal order of events: therefore, they help distinguish between correlation and causality, a problem lurking beneath any synchronic analysis. With panel data, however, FE models would pinpoint the effects of over-time deviations from the mean, but they would say nothing about the pure cross-sectional relationships, those between response and explanatory variables, that transcend time. We expect these cross-sectional relationships to be particularly relevant to Mafia-type crime. To bypass this catch, we recurred to a model combining *within* and *between* effects via a random-effects (RE) estimator based on the average of the estimates produced by between and within estimators. Our regression models use a *within* effects formula (1):

$$(y_{it} - \bar{y}_i) = \beta(x_{it} - \bar{x}_i) + \tau_{t2,\dots,tnth} + (\varepsilon_{it} - \bar{\varepsilon}_i) \qquad (1)$$

where *y* is the crime rate in the province *i*, during the year *t*, *x* is the set of explanatory variables, τ represents time dummies, by which we controlled for the year-specific variations of *y*, and ε is the error term. This formula is combined with that of a regression based on the mean values for each territorial unit (i.e. province) (2):

$$\bar{y}_i = \propto + \beta \bar{x}_i + v_i + \bar{\varepsilon}_i \tag{2}$$

Little research has been conducted on panels of Mafia-type crimes. Moreover, those panels usually covered relatively short spans of time. In the present study, we made use of the longest possible panel dataset: ~40-year cross-province time series.

The present paper's response variables concern intentional, completed homicide (henceforth IH). We are interested in the total IH rates and the share of IH attributed to Mafia-type gangs (27.4% of Mezzogiorno's IH). Crime data were recorded by the police and operated by Istat. As for the determinants, we considered some socioeconomic measures. We used a lagged birthrate (t–14 years) to measure the juvenile population's impact on crime. As for education, we used higher secondary school male enrolment (gross) rates. Then, we considered infant mortality, which has been increasingly regarded as a barometer for a region's overall welfare. Next, to measure the evolution of State enforcement, we computed a killer's probability of being brought to justice (3):

$$y_{it} = (cm_{it} + \overline{\overline{cm}}) / (m_{it} + \overline{\overline{m}}) \tag{3}$$

where *y* is the probability in province *i*, during the year *t*, *cm* is the number of people charged with IH, and *m* is the number of IHs. A further proxy for State enforcement was calculated as above, using the homicide clearance rate (cleared homicides divided by all homicides). We also considered a standard control variable, namely population density. All the previous variables came from Istat. To measure economic well-being, we used per capita GDP, from Eurostat and Unioncamere. We also used cars per population, from ACI.

We arranged these data as cross-territorial-units panels: they cover the period 1983-2021 and all the Italian provinces, ranging from 95 to 106. All the variables, except car diffusion, were not available as time series and had to be prepared ad hoc. The statistical analysis of Mezzogiorno's homicides was carried out on data concerning all its provinces, ranging from 30 to 33.

4. Results

Figure 1 shows the evolution of IH rates. It is possible to detect two facts. Firstly, the huge gap that existed at the beginning between the Mezzogiorno's rates and the

rest of Italy's: 3 to 6 vs ~1 IHs per 100K pop., when, in the other West European countries, the average rate was ~1.4. Secondly, the fall in the Mezzogiorno's rates after the spike that occurred around 1990. At the end of the four-decade period, the gap in IH rates between Mezzogiorno and the rest of Italy was substantially over. We also notice that there was no shift in IHs from Mezzogiorno to the rest of Italy because as well the latter's rates decreased: from 1.1 to 0.45 per 100K pop. Most recent IH rates for all of Italy (0.5) and Mezzogiorno (0.6) are lower than the average rate in the other Western European countries, which is 0.9 per 100K pop.

Figure 1 – *Evolution of the provinces' mean homicide rates for Mezzogiorno and the rest of Italy; upper and lower bounds (mean +/– 1 s.e.); 1983-2021.*
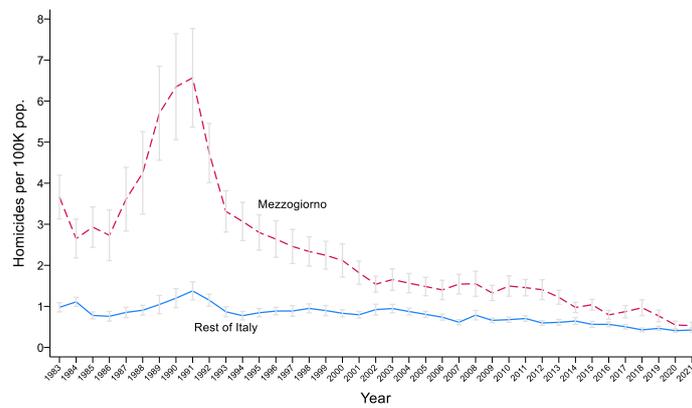
Figure 2 – *Evolution of the provinces' mean Mafia-type homicide rates for Mezzogiorno and the rest of Italy; upper and lower bounds (mean +/– 1 s.e.); 1983-2021.*
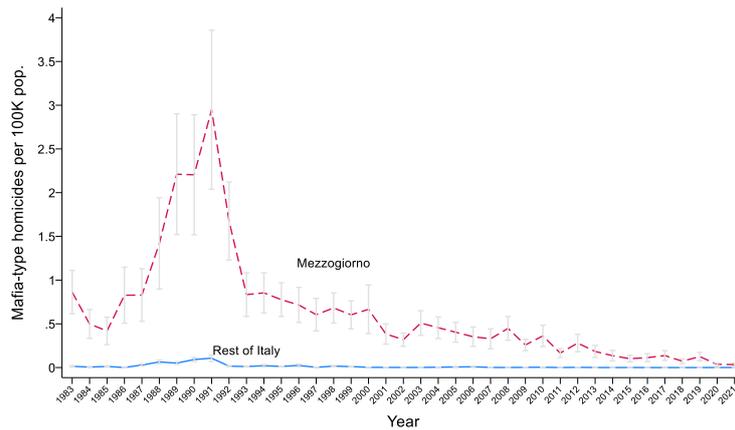
Figure 2 shows the evolution in the rates of only IHs attributed to Mafia-type organisations. In this case as well, by the end of the time frame, Mezzogiorno's rates became very close to those of the rest of Italy, where, too, Mafia-type IH rates declined. The decline in IH and Mafia-type IH rates did not affect only the average values. Some *Spaghetti graphs* (available on demand) of fit lines of evolution of homicide rates for each of Mezzogiorno's provinces or regions show that the decline occurred substantially in all of them: primarily in those regions where homicide had reached its highest incidence: i.e. Calabria (organisations of the *'Ndrangheta* type), Sicily (specific *Mafia* organisations), and Campania (*Camorra* organisations).

Figure 3 – *Pearson pairwise correlations of response and explanatory variables for all provinces of Mezzogiorno, 1983-2021 (N=1157-1233).*
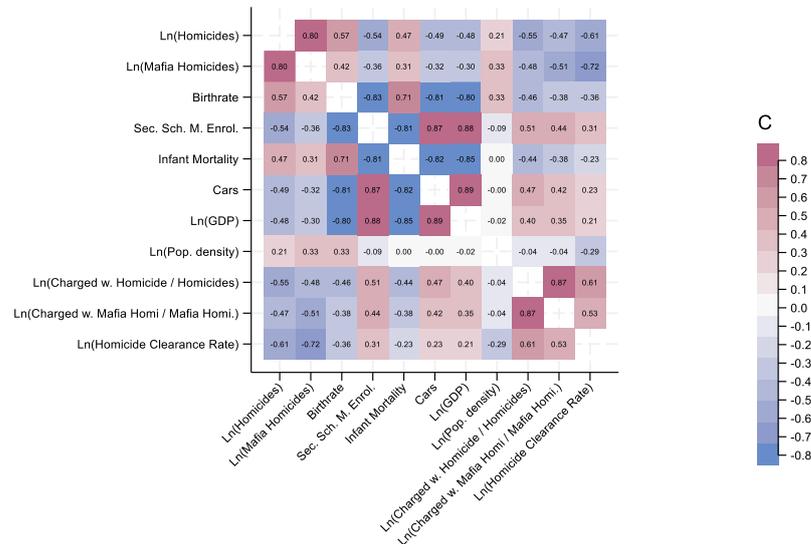

Figure 3 shows the correlations between all response and explanatory variables. All correlations between IHs rates and explanatory variables are significant at <0.000; the same occurs with Mafia IHs. IH and Mafia-type IH rates are closely correlated. IH correlations with birthrates, infant mortality and population density are positive; those with car diffusion, GDP, school enrolment, people charged with IH, and clearance rate are negative. Figure 3 also shows some close correlations between explanatory variables. School enrolment is correlated negatively with infant mortality and birthrate. GDP is correlated with car diffusion; both are correlated with school enrolment and negatively with birthrate and infant mortality. People charged with IH and clearance rates are correlated with each other. All this throws light on

the inwoven set of forces associated with IH. It also suggests the existence of other, unknown factors impacting IH rates. However, pooled-data correlations discard the over-time information in the data, and they do not control for the mentioned factors.

Multiple regression RE models are expected to provide a full test of this paper's hypotheses. Before applying the RE models, we used a Fisher-type test (Phillips–Perron option) to check the existence of a unit root. The results (available on demand) reject the null hypothesis that the panels contain unit roots. The RE regression models (Table 1) show that the variations in all IHs and Mafia-type IHs are negatively associated with school enrolment, car diffusion, the ratio people-charged-with-IH by number-of-IHs, and the IH clearance rate. Mafia-type IHs, in addition, are positively associated with population density. School enrolment and State enforcement measures emerge as the most impactful explanatory variables.

Table 1 – *Random effects regression models: Homicides and Mafia-type homicides on various explanatory variables, Mezzogiorno's provinces, 1983-2021: coefficients, prob. and (s.e.).*

Explanatory variables	Ln(homicides)		Ln(Mafia homicides)	
Birthrate (t–14)	0.011	0.202	–0.050	0.001
(s.e.)	(0.009)		(0.016)	
Higher secondary school male enrolment	–1.100	0.000	–1.120	0.009
(s.e.)	(0.246)		(0.428)	
Infant mortality	0.011	0.052	0.007	0.485
(s.e.)	(0.006)		(0.010)	
Cars per population	–0.013	0.001	–0.016	0.017
(s.e.)	(0.004)		(0.007)	
Ln(Population density)	0.082	0.075	0.352	0.000
(s.e.)	(0.046)		(0.073)	
Ln(Charged with IH / IHs) (t–1)	–0.288	0.000		
(s.e.)	(0.028)			
Ln(Charged with Mafia IH / Mafia IHs)			–0.272	0.000
(s.e.)			(0.024)	
Ln(IH clearance rate)	–0.239	0.000	–1.112	0.000
(s.e.)	(0.045)		(0.073)	
Within – between effects	yes		yes	
Fixed years	yes		yes	
Intercept	1.391	0.000	–1.301	0.022
(s.e.)	(0.340)		(0.568)	
R-squared within	0.638		0.569	
R-squared between	0.331		0.543	
R-squared overall	0.557		0.573	
Number of observations	1157		1157	

Education had a larger impact on the whole of IHs, whereas enforcement on Mafia-type IHs. The *between* effects are much more relevant in Mafia-type IHs,

confirming that this specific category of IHs is particularly affected – as expected – by persistent structural differences between the Mezzogiorno's provinces.

5. Discussion

Apart from a spike around the 1990s, IH rates in Italy's Mezzogiorno exhibited a drastic decrease since the early 1980s. The fraction of IHs attributed to Mafia-type criminal organisations also exhibited a parallel drop. At the end of the lengthy period considered in the present research, both the IH measures concerning Mezzogiorno reached levels only fractionally different from the rest of Italy's. There was no substantial transferral of IHs from Mezzogiorno to the other regions, and indeed, the IH rates in the rest of Italy exhibited a concurrent decrease. The longitudinal analysis conducted on panel data showed that the sharp rise in secondary school male enrolment was a good predictor of the decrease in homicides, also at parity of economic well-being measures. This supports the hypothesis (H1) that an increase in the educational level would have introduced values and attitudes actively opposing those characterising a low-social-capital society.

As for the economic well-being measures, car diffusion emerged as a resilient predictor of the decrease in IH rates. Although GDP was significant in single regressions, it resulted non-significant in multiple regressions when the car diffusion variable was introduced. This is probably due to the fact that cars per population is a well-being indicator that – in contrast to GDP – is expected to take in also the shadow economy profits. These results are in tune with the hypothesis (H2) of an association between traditional homicidal violence and Mezzogiorno's relative deprivation. The same results are instead in conflict with the social disorganisation theory. The vanishing of the traditional socioeconomic scenario and the new foreign immigration would have suggested an increase in violence as a consequence of an increase in social disorganisation: the opposite of what happened.

Birthrate impact on homicides did not meet the expectations (H4 hypothesis) when this variable was used in the multiple regressions together with other predictors closely (and negatively) correlated with birthrate, such as school enrolment.

Population density impacted Mafia-type IHs, suggesting that an increase in population has been relevant to Mafia-type criminal organisations.

What is certain is that an increase in State enforcement (H2) was matched by a decrease in IH rates. The ratio people-charged-with-IH by number-of-IHs and the homicide clearance rate exhibited a large impact on IH and an even larger one on Mafia-type IHs. The impact of State enforcement suggests that increased enforcement would deter criminals and make a criminal career less attractive for aspiring gangsters. This also indicates that being charged by the police probably

tarnishes the prestige not only of the charged individual but of the entire criminal underworld. Therefore, criminal gangs would be perceived as less trustworthy when claiming to be able to take care of their protegees as illegal but effective regulators.

The rise in education had a larger impact on the whole of IHs, whereas variations in enforcement a larger impact on Mafia-type IHs. This can be ascribed to the fact that the whole of Mezzogiorno's IHs contains, together with homicides officially attributed to Mafia-type gangs, some homicides lacking evidence enough to be classified as such, plus other IHs due to passion, domestic disputes, interpersonal violence, etc. These other IHs are more affected by education, values, and attitudes. In contrast, Mafia-type IHs, which are premeditated, are expected to be more affected by a rational calculation of the probability of being brought to justice.

Ultimately, educational progress and enforcement resurgence emerged as the most meaningful determinants of the decline in Mezzogiorno's IH rates. The final outcome was such a fall in IHs that not only all Italy's but also Mezzogiorno's rates became neatly lower than the average IH rate for the West European countries. This drop in homicides, therefore, was not so much the mirror of a universal decreasing trend in homicides as something associated with specific changes in the region.

All this does not mean that homicides disappeared from Mezzogiorno and the rest of Italy, nor that the Mafia-type gangs vanished. However, because in history, and not only in folklore and fiction, homicides have always been the Mafia's trademark, the above means that both surviving and new criminal organisations in Italy are other than traditional Mafia-type gangs. The primary consequence has been the end of the long-lasting Mezzogiorno's exceptionalism in terms of homicidal violence.

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