

Research shows middle-aged men led the violence in 1994 genocide in Rwanda

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Although most people who commit violence tend to be teens and young

adults, a new study found that the perpetrators of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda were mostly middle-aged men.

Researchers found that 88% of people who participated in the [genocide](#) were men with an average age of 34 (when life expectancy peaked below 50), and who census statistics indicate were likely to be married. Between 229,069 and 234,155 individuals were found guilty of a violent offense.

"These are not the people that criminology theories would say are most likely to engage in [violent crimes](#)," said Hollie Nyseth Nzitatira, lead author of the study and associate professor of sociology at The Ohio State University.

"Our results show that individuals involved in genocide don't always fit the characteristics generally connected to other violent crimes."

But the study did find one way in which participants in the 1994 genocide in Rwanda were like other violent criminals: A small number of them were responsible for a great many of the crimes. Findings showed 6% of people accounted for 25% of crimes in the genocide.

The study, published recently in the *Journal of Peace Research*, provides the most comprehensive information about the participants in one of the deadliest episodes of violence during the 20th century. Up to 1 million people were killed in the genocide in Rwanda, mostly members of the Tutsi ethnic group.

The researchers are the first to have obtained access to the complete records of nearly all 1.9 million trials of the gacaca courts, which the Rwandan government set up to try people suspected of participating in the genocide.

"The court data are certainly not perfect, but they provide the best way to know how many people and which people participated in crimes of genocide," Nyseth Nzitatira said.

Study results showed that between 847,233 and 888,307 people participated in the genocide in Rwanda. About one-fifth of them participated only in violent crimes, with the great majority only involved in property crimes—most often looting victims and their homes. A small number committed both property and violent crimes.

While women were less likely to perpetrate genocide, over 10,000 women committed violent offenses, with many more committing property crimes.

Overall, 88% of all participants were men, while about 95% of those who committed only violent offenses were men.

This goes along with other research showing that men commit most crimes and especially violent crimes, and it is also consistent with research showing that the Rwandan government encouraged men of the dominant Hutu ethnic group to kill Tutsi, Nyseth Nzitatira said.

The government rationale that Hutu men had to protect their families may also help explain why this study found that participants were relatively older.

"Our data indicate there was wide participation among Rwandans who were older than theories of 'youth bulges' in criminal activity would suggest," Nyseth Nzitatira said.

"Many stories about the genocide focus on youth militias that became prominent, such as the Interahamwe. So, many people think it was 19- and 20-year-olds who were engaging in most of the violence, when it was

really men who were in their early- to mid-30s."

The [median age](#) for all participants was 34—and that age did not change much when the researchers looked at just those who committed violent crimes or those who committed multiple crimes.

The [life expectancy](#) in Rwanda just before the genocide began was less than 50, Nyseth Nzitatira said, so the perpetrators were truly middle-aged.

Participants in the genocide were also likely married, which is not surprising given their age. Statistics show that about 87% of 33-year-old men in Rwanda at the time of the genocide were married or had been married. "These men were told they had to protect their families, their wives and children, from the Tutsi who were supposedly invading their country," Nyseth Nzitatira said.

Results showed that about 75% of those found guilty of any crimes of genocide, property damage or violence against people, were found guilty of only one [crime](#). But 6% of participants accounted for 25% of all crimes.

That included 11% of people who accounted for 25% of violent crimes and 6% who accounted for 25% of all property crimes.

"The fact that a small number of people are responsible for a large proportion of the violence is very striking, and researchers have found that across many different types of crimes and many different contexts," she said.

The results showing who participated in the genocide may help prevent and de-escalate future conflicts, according to Nyseth Nzitatira. The information may help in development of targeted interventions for those

more likely to engage in violence.

In addition, having these more accurate numbers of how many participated in the genocide is important for the country of Rwanda, Nyseth Nzitatira said.

"More accurate figures can help in the country's rebuilding and healing, which continues today."

More information: Hollie Nyseth Nzitatira et al, Analyzing Participation in the 1994 Genocide in Rwanda, *Journal of Peace Research* (2022). [DOI: 10.1177/00223433221075211](https://doi.org/10.1177/00223433221075211)

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