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Homicide and Suicide in America, 1900-1998

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The thought of violent death both fascinates and terrifies us, so it is understandable that homicide and suicide are the subjects of voluminous commentary. Regrettably, much of this commentary is based on emotion rather than reason, and it is propped up by incorrect "facts" that have been repeated so often that they have become widely accepted.

Examples of these "facts" include the following: Violence has reached "epidemic proportions." America is in the grip of an unprecedented wave of violence, with the highest homicide rate in our history, or in the industrialized world. Homicide and suicide rose in the 1980s in response to callous social policies of the Reagan administration. Homicide and suicide rise when leaders are "macho" but fall when the government is "caring." Homicide and suicide rise after wars, because veterans are "unstable" and bring home violent habits. Homicide rates show no relation to the death penalty. Homicide and suicide rise when guns are easily available but fall in response to gun-control laws. Homicide and suicide rise and fall together, showing that they are subject to the same influences.

These statements all seem reasonable because we have heard them so often, especially from those who blame America for the ills of the world. They are so widely accepted that attempts to refute them are met with amused disbelief, or even anger. But *they are all false*.

The wide acceptance of these statements is in part due to the difficulty of obtaining the facts needed to refute them. The purpose of this article is to supply these facts. Figure 1 shows rates of suicide and homicide in the United States for the years 1900 through 1998. Rates are per 100,000 population and come from the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS).(1-3) Homicide rates usually quoted are from the FBI Uniform Crime Reports, which began yielding nationwide data in 1960. Data from earlier in the century are available only from the NCHS. The NCHS homicide rates parallel the FBI rates but tend to be slightly higher. Only NCHS data are used here for uniformity.

Mortality data have been reported by all states since 1933. In 1900 only eleven states did so.(1) Figures from early in the century are thus incomplete. It has been claimed⁴ that the sharp rise in homicide in the early 1900s was an artifact due to adding states with higher rates to the data set, and that the national rate was actually between two- and six-fold higher than stated.

So huge an error seems unlikely, for the following reasons:

- 1) Even the 1900 figures comprise 27 percent of the U.S. population(1,5) and include New York, New Jersey, Michigan, and the District of Columbia, all of which have much higher homicide rates today. (The rate for the District of Columbia is now 46.7.) Hence the low homicide rates early in the century probably were realistic.
- 2) Suicide rates early in the century were as high as or higher than current rates, implying that underreporting was not a major factor.
- 3) The low homicide and high suicide rates resemble the rates in Europe, the birthplace of many Americans or their parents in the early 1900s.
- 4) There was a financial panic in 1905 and a severe recession lasting till 1908, perhaps in part explaining the rise in violent crime.
- 5) Homicide arrests in major cities⁶ rose sharply in the early 1900s, indicating that the sharp rise in the national homicide rate was genuine.
- 6) New York City police were not required to carry guns on duty until 1887,(7) implying that much of the Nineteenth Century was less violent than the Twentieth. Granted, criminal investigation in 1900 was hardly what it is today. Some deaths surely were misclassified, but the figures are the only ones

available. What do they show?

In 1900 there were few governmental welfare programs, though religious and community groups were active. New York City and other ports of entry were flooded with immigrants, who often arrived penniless. Whole sections of such cities were filled with recent immigrants who kept to their native ways and tongues. In 1900, 13.6 percent of Americans were foreign-born, compared with 7.9 percent in 1990.(8) Only a minority of children finished high school. Overcrowded housing and extreme poverty were widespread, the gap between rich and poor was enormous, and working conditions were deplorable. Racial and religious bias was rampant. There were few firearm laws; New York had not yet enacted its handgun law or California its waiting period. Guns of all types could be ordered by mail or bought anonymously. Yet despite poverty, lack of governmental welfare programs, massive immigration, multiethnic cities, bigotry, and easy access to guns, the homicide rate in 1900 was roughly one-sixth of what it is today.

What explanation can there be? The population in 1900 was more rural, and rural areas tend to have lower homicide rates than urban areas. Conversely, medical care was primitive. Antibiotics and resuscitation were unknown. Blood transfusion and surgery of the chest, brain, or blood vessels were in their infancy. Many died who would now survive. (A wounded man was 10 times more likely to die in World War I than in Vietnam.)(9) If modern care had been available in 1900, the homicide rate would have been even lower. Indeed, the number of homicides equals the number of serious attempts minus the number saved by medical care. The homicide rate should have decreased over time as medical care improved. That it did not implies an increasing tendency to violence.

Many problems of the early 1900s are milder now, and we attempt to alleviate them further by anti-poverty programs, child-labor and wage-and-hour laws, mental health clinics, immigration controls, bilingual education, more accessible higher education, anti-discrimination laws, and gun-control laws. Yet despite all this, we are killing one another more often than we did in what were clearly worse times. If the times are now better, but people act worse, could it be because people *are* worse? To answer that question requires standards by which to judge people. Since we have virtually abandoned such standards, the question becomes meaningless, saving us from the embarrassment of having to answer it.

On the contrary, early in the century law enforcement was often harsh. Trials were brief and punishment prompt. In 1901 President McKinley was shot with a handgun that was advertised in the Sears catalog for \$3.27 including postage.(10) But the assassin was executed 53 *days* after the crime. The homicide rate in 1901 was only 1.2. Which factor seems to have a greater effect on homicide: easy access to guns, or prompt punishment of murderers?

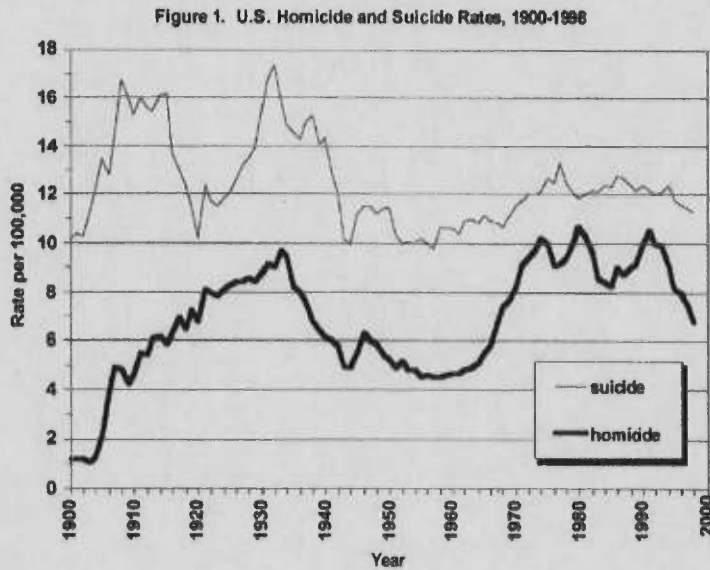
Continuing across the graph, we see slow rises in both suicide and homicide up to the time of World War I. After the war, suicide fell while homicide rose. Both rates rose slowly through the "Roaring Twenties." Both then rose sharply after the 1929 crash and into the Great Depression. Suicide reached its 99-year peak of 17.4 in 1932, a level 54 percent above its current rate. Homicide reached a high of 9.7 in 1933, a level far above its current one. Franklin Roosevelt took office in 1933 and promised a New Deal. Both suicide and homicide then fell dramatically.

The high in homicide did not occur until the fourth year of the Depression, so the subsequent fall was probably related to hope for recovery, not to the Depression itself. Also, prohibition of alcohol was repealed in 1933. Repeal ended bootlegging, thus decreasing gang-related crime. But repeal also increased alcoholism, which leads to violence, especially in the home. The net effect of repeal is uncertain, but homicide did decrease.

Both suicide and homicide continued to fall during and after World War II, and the fall continued to a lesser degree after the Korean War. Suicide reached its 99-year low of 9.8 in 1957, when homicide was also fairly low. Perhaps the boring 1950s were not so bad after all. Suicide and homicide then rose, with some variations, through the 1960s and 1970s, including the Vietnam era. The homicide rate rose after two wars (World War I and Vietnam) and fell after two (World War II and Korea). That is, homicide is as likely to fall as to rise after a war. International and interpersonal violence appear to be unrelated. The great majority of veterans bring home honor, not violence.

The homicide rate reached its 99-year peak of 10.7 in 1980. Homicide then fell 22 percent in the first four years of the Reagan administration, in the absence of new anti-gun laws, but in the presence of anti-crime laws and attitudes. This welcome news was almost ignored by the media. Homicide then rose again, but not quite to its 1980 peak, and then fell recently. The fall in homicide from 1991 to 1998, including (and preceding) the Clinton administration, equaled 35 percent and was the subject of front-page stories. Perhaps good news becomes more newsworthy when the president is of the same party as

most journalists. Note that preliminary homicide data for 1999 show a continued decline, so the 99-year highs and lows are actually 100-year highs and lows.



What caused the recent fall in homicide? Liberals point to a robust economy, low unemployment, and a fall in crack cocaine use. Conservatives credit increasing use of the death penalty, higher incarceration rates, and three-strikes laws. But three-strikes laws *alone* might have increased homicide, as those with two convictions killed their victims rather than risk being identified and sent away for life. Three-strikes laws *plus* a credible death penalty might be expected to reduce homicide. From 1991 to 1998, the portion of the population made up by males aged 15-24, the most crime-prone group, fell by 5 percent,⁽¹¹⁾ so this can account for only a fraction of the 35 percent fall in homicide. We must admit that we are uncertain which factors to credit for the recent fall in homicide.

In short, the 99-year peak in homicide occurred under Jimmy Carter. Attempts to point this out often result in helpful suggestions to seek psychotherapy. But the figures show that homicide was at its 99-year low under Teddy Roosevelt, rose under Herbert Hoover, fell under Franklin Roosevelt, reached its 99-year peak under Jimmy Carter, and fell under Ronald Reagan. So much for the idea that "macho" leaders evoke violent behavior. But homicide also fell under Bill Clinton. Perhaps the man in the White House has less effect on violent behavior than the man in our house.

Homicide as well as other violent crimes have fallen gratifyingly. Indeed, the homicide rate is at its lowest level since the 1960s. So why are we frightened? Television news plays a role --- it is mainly bad news. ("If it bleeds, it leads.") When we see corpses carted off by the coroner every night just before bedtime, we conclude that violence is rampant. *Media Monitor* notes that while the homicide rate decreased in recent years, the number of homicide stories in newscasts *increased* in the quest for ratings. Also, when crime was largely confined to the inner cities, many ignored it. Now that crime has hit the suburbs, the same people tend to panic. Besides, politicians love to proclaim a "crisis," so that we will give them more power. Much of our fear is media-driven, not event-driven. Violent crime is a serious problem, but not so serious as to justify shredding the Bill of Rights.

This brings us to the end of the graph, so we can ask whether suicide and homicide rates move up and down together. Statistical analysis⁽¹²⁾ shows a weak correlation ($r = 0.25$). The only time in 99 years when highs in suicide and homicide coincided was the early 1930s. The correlation disappears ($r = 0.16$) when this period is omitted. Except for times of extreme economic and social distress, suicide and homicide show little tendency to move in the same direction. Hence it is unrealistic to expect a single factor, such as gun-control laws, to produce major reductions in both of them.

Does the death penalty⁽¹³⁾ deter homicide? In 1950 the homicide rate was 5.3; there was one execution for every 67 homicides. By 1960 the homicide rate was 4.7, but now there was only one execution for every 151 homicides. The courts blocked all executions from 1968 through 1976, and from 1977 through 1980 there were three in the entire nation. Homicide reached its 99-year peak of 10.7 in 1980 --- a coincidence? Executions then increased slowly. By 1992 the homicide rate was 10.0; there were 31 executions and 23,760 homicides, or one execution for every 766 homicides. Even if capital punishment

deterred murderers when it was used on one in 67 of them, could it still deter when the odds improve to one in 766, and that after an average 11 year delay? But by 1995 executions had increased to 56, or one for every 386 homicides, perhaps in part explaining the recent fall in homicide.

Other factors were at work. We cannot say that the thirteen-year virtual moratorium in executions *caused* the peak in homicide, though it did precede the peak. But we can say that the moratorium clearly did not cause a *fall* in homicide. Those who claim that abolishing the death penalty would teach nonviolence ignore the evidence from this thirteen-year, nationwide experiment, which is the best evidence we are likely to see. Abolishing capital punishment may be argued on religious or philosophical grounds, but not because it is a promising idea worth trying. It has been tried and did not work.

Numbers require context. In the early 1990s, the homicide rate was almost the same as it was in 1933. But 1933 was a time of severe economic and social upheaval. Recent economic problems were milder, so one might expect the homicide rate to be lower. This suggests that other factors are raising it. What could they be? Conservatives would propose fatherless boys, gangs, drugs, a revolving-door justice system, or perhaps violent rap music. Liberals might suggest racism, poverty, inadequate gun laws, or perhaps violent films. Religious persons would stress declining moral standards. No one can be sure without a controlled experiment, but we can make an informed guess.

Many believe that poverty causes violent crime. This is largely false, as shown by the early 1900s. However, homicide did rise in the depths of the Depression. Homicide then fell as people regained hope from Roosevelt's New Deal. The fall preceded real improvement in the economy. The same thing happened in 1981 and 1982. A recession marked the early Reagan years, but the fall in homicide from its 1980 peak began then, before the boom started. Indeed, unemployment continued to *rise* until 1983.(14) That is, the fall in homicide preceded the fall in unemployment by two years. Here, unlike the 1930s, instead of new social programs the president promised cuts in old ones. What Reagan shared with Roosevelt was hope provided by a confident new leader. What Carter shared with Hoover was weak leadership. To the unemployed, weak leadership plus a weak economy equal despair. Desperate people may do desperate things.

This hypothesis is supported by the recent fall in homicide. During the severe economic distress of the 1930s and 1970s, the hope provided by Roosevelt and Reagan seems to have caused the fall in homicide to precede economic improvement by two or more years. The distress of the late 1980s and early 1990s was milder, and neither Bush nor Clinton was seen as strong. Here the fall in homicide led the fall in unemployment by a shorter time (a year) and a lesser amount.(14) Strong leadership, and the hope it evokes, may be needed only during truly bad times. Poverty may not cause violent crime, but hopelessness may. This point should be noted by those who spread gloom by predicting economic collapse, ecologic disaster, or lack of opportunity for minorities. Robbing one of hope may be worse for him and for society than stealing his money.

Do gun laws(15) reduce violence? Homicide was lowest in the early 1900s, when few such laws existed. Most states and some cities passed laws regulating purchase and carrying of handguns in the 1910s and 1920s, but homicide and suicide tended to rise despite this. It seems that it was not only fear of crime that led to passage of these laws, but fear of immigrants, union organizers, and "reds." Revealingly, earlier laws in the South forbade blacks to own guns.(15) Machine guns and sawed-off shotguns were banned in 1934; these weapons were rarely used, so little effect would be expected. The Gun Control Act of 1968 required records of the buyer's identity and banned sales by mail or to felons or mental patients. Homicide and suicide rose after its passage.

A waiting period for handgun purchases(16) (the Brady law) and restriction of "assault" weapons(17) went into effect in 1994. However, most criminals (about 84 percent) obtain guns from illegal sources that are unaffected by waiting periods, and "assault" weapons are used in fewer than three percent of homicides.(17) Two studies of the Brady law showed no effect.(16,18) It is unlikely that these laws played a part in the recent fall in homicide, which had begun two years earlier in 1992. On the contrary, 31 states now license law-abiding citizens to carry guns. A careful study by Dr. John Lott(16) shows that these states enjoyed a *greater* fall in violent crime than states with stricter laws. Even if one questions Lott's conclusions, the argument now centers on *the extent of the fall* in violent crime in states that license law-abiding citizens to carry guns. Violent crime clearly *did not rise* in these states, as proponents of strict gun laws would have predicted. The test of any hypothesis is its ability to make accurate predictions. If the gun-control hypothesis yields inaccurate predictions, it must be rejected.

Suicides in the young rose; gun-control advocates blamed guns. But suicides in older persons *fell*.(19) Homicides in young black males rose; guns were blamed. But homicides in older black males *fell*.(20) Homicides rose after a virtual gun ban in Washington, D.C.; the advocates blamed guns brought in from

nearby areas with lenient laws. But these areas have *lower* homicide rates.(21) Suicides for ages 15-24 were more frequent in Seattle than Vancouver; an article in a leading journal blamed lax gun laws in Seattle. But overall suicide rates were identical for both cities, because suicides for ages 35-44 were more frequent in *Vancouver*.(22) The Brady law reduced neither homicide nor suicide.(16,18) But its backers remain fervent.(23) Homicide rose in Britain(24) and Australia(25) following virtual gun bans. But the bans remain in force. Meanwhile, the U.S. homicide rate fell markedly, the suicide rate fell slightly, and the death rate from gun accidents is near its lowest level since records began.(26) But a leading medical organization declared, "The growing incidence of firearm violence has reached epidemic proportions."(27) If you torture the data long enough, it will tell you anything you want to hear.(28)

Advocates of gun laws point to any fall in homicide or suicide as evidence that the laws are working, and to any rise as evidence that more laws are needed. Whether homicide or suicide rates rise or fall, and whatever age, gender, ethnic, or regional group is affected, the advocates insist that more gun laws are needed. An idea that cannot be disproved by any obtainable evidence is an irrational belief, not a logical conclusion. For some persons, the idea that gun laws reduce violence may fall into this category.

Proponents of gun-control laws claim that gun "availability" causes violence, but what does the term mean? Clearly, if guns were totally unavailable, none would be used. This situation existed in the Middle Ages, prior to the invention of guns, but the period was very violent. There were sword deaths, dagger deaths, arrow deaths, and axe deaths. But there were no "gun deaths," so presumably gun-control advocates would have been happy living at the time of the film *Braveheart*. However, if "availability" means lack of legal restrictions, then 1900 should have been the heyday of homicide. Guns of all types could be bought by mail or at the local hardware store or pawnshop, anonymously and without records. Yet most boys and men of that era expressed anger with their voices or fists. Guns were "available" in the sense of being readily accessible with few legal restrictions, but not in the sense of being an acceptable response to annoyance.

We cannot say exactly what it is that inhibits human beings from killing one another, but we can say some things about it. First, whatever it is, there is less of it now than there was in 1900 or even 1960. Second, the evidence suggests that it has little to do with guns, poverty, racism, war, "macho" leaders, social programs, education, immigration, or most things within the grasp of government. But if we have the courage to admit that we may have been looking in the wrong places, we will be freed to look elsewhere. For example, we could look more closely at intact family structure, reverence for human life, awareness that rights come with responsibilities, hope based on the anticipation that hard work will be rewarded, and an expectation that crimes will be promptly punished. At the very least, if we recognize that these factors could be important, we may stop eroding them still further.

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