

Chapter Two

Trends in Violence

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this chapter is to explore trends in violence over the past several centuries and up to the present. First, in order to make meaningful progress in better understanding the phenomenon of violence our discussion must be based on fact. We can not allow popular media outlets to drive our perceptions of violence due to the fact that much of what is broadcast is significantly lacking in accuracy and also rarely framed in the proper context. Second, it is critical to examine trends in violence so that we are able to ask meaningful questions regarding its variance. We must be able to look at specific times in history and identify rates of violence in order to be better able to associate possible causes for either an increase or decline in violence.

Before getting into the main content of this chapter it is necessary to clearly illuminate that which we know to be true about violence and that which has been constructed socially, primarily as a result of what is commonly reported in the media:

1. Is the world more violent today than ever before? No.
2. Is the U.S. more violent today than ever before? No (Reiss & Roth, 1993). In fact, as will be discussed below there is evidence that suggests trends in violence have been declining since around the year 1200 in Europe and the early 1600's in the United States (Gurr, 1989).

3. Is the United States more violent today than most other countries? Yes, especially in relation to homicide.
4. Who is most likely to perpetrate violence? Young, minority, males.
5. Who is most likely to be a victim of violence? Young, minority, males.

Reliability of the data

When attempting to examine historical, medium and short range trends in violence we are quickly confronted with a very serious issue that must be presented at the forefront. Much of the data used to construct trends, especially historical trends, is less than reliable and certainly not precise. Instead, much of the data used is best described as general and simply the best we have in an attempt to draw basic conclusions of this phenomenon.

One of the best ways to illuminate the extreme difficulty in gathering reliable data is to consider the United States. In fact, it wasn't until 1930 that we began systematically collecting crime data. The first attempt, which is still heavily relied on today, consisted of the implementation of the Uniform Crime Report (UCR). The UCR is an annual publication that reports levels of crime throughout the United States for the previous year. The information is gathered locally by participating agencies and then sent to the FBI where it is compiled and eventually reported as an aggregate of overall rates and trends. At first blush this may appear to be a very effective way of gauging the rates of crime and violence but the truth is that even in today's technologically enriched era there are still many shortcomings.

The primary shortcoming of the UCR is that it is completely reliant upon information that has been reported. This is a significant problem because most of crime and violence is never reported.

In an attempt to address this shortfall another instrument was created called the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) where a sample of households are contacted by phone asking people if they have been the victim of crime at some point in the past year? The primary goal of the NCVS is to capture what is often called the “dark figure” of crime, or that which is never reported to the police. And, the NCVS does a pretty good job of enhancing what we know about crime and violence beyond that which is available through the UCR. In fact, the NCVS typically shows that the number of crimes and incidence of violence is doubled the figure reported by the UCR.

The NCVS has shortcomings of its own, however. Many victims of crime simply do not trust that the information will be kept confidential. Especially in cases of violence victims may be so traumatized and fearful of further attack should they tell someone, they simply refuse to provide any information. In addition, the NCVS is completely reliant upon the participant’s memory. Obvious problems result from this fact. Finally, some participants may simply make up information that contains no factual basis. In essence, we know only what is reported and have no meaningful ways of triangulating or verifying its accuracy. What does this mean in relation to trends of violence? Ultimately, it means that any information attempting to describe long or short term trends should be considered cautiously. There is no way of knowing for sure the exact trends.

HISTORICAL TRENDS IN EUROPE

For many, the actual trend in violence may be somewhat of a surprise. Based on data provided by both Gurr (1989) and Eisner (2003) there has been a steady decline in the overall rate (number of incidents per 100,000 population) of violence across Europe from about the year 1200 all the way through the late 20th century. An important note regarding this trend is that it is based only on homicide rates. Therefore what we do know, based on the available information, is that there has been a steady decline in the number of people killed in homicides. We do not know if other types of violence followed this same trend but the likely speculation is that they did. There is nothing to suggest any difference in the trends of homicide and other violent related incidents. According to Gurr (1989) the downward trend can be depicted as an elegant line showing a steady and sustained decrease in violence beginning at an average of 20 homicides a year per 100,000 population in the year 1200 to less than 5 per 100,000 population by the year 2000. According to Eisner (2003) the trend is depicted as a long and sustained decrease in homicide but not until after the 1400s. The only difference in the findings. Eisner (2003) reports an upswing of violence around the fifteenth century. Afterwards, however, the results are very consistent with Gurr's (1981) and signal a clear decline in the rate of violence. The safest and most reliable conclusion based on the work of Eisner and Gurr is that beginning in the latter part of the fifteenth century there has been a persistent decline in the rate of violence throughout Europe.

Variation in the declining rate of violence

Generally, the overall decline in violence throughout Europe did not take place simultaneously or evenly throughout the past centuries. As noted by Eisner (2003), for example,

beginning in the late sixteenth century England and the Netherlands experienced very substantial reductions in the rate of interpersonal violence. In Sweden a similar process occurred but the rate of decline started later than that of England and the Netherlands and the decline in Sweden is also reported as being sharper. This was not the case in Italy, however, as rates seemed to have moved very little from late medieval times, a trend that was even more exacerbated in the Southern regions of the country including the islands.

The question is why? Why did the trends differ not only across Europe but also within countries? These same questions will also be applied to trends in the United States where some cities were experiencing declines in violence while others were experiencing a rise. The question becomes what were the variables associated with the respective increases and decreases that seem to have been occurring simultaneously? Identifying these specific variables is enormously complex largely because we still have much to learn in the area of understanding human behavior. To complicate matters further is that we also must consider the interactions of certain variables across space and time which significantly increases the difficulty in being able to identify causes on non-correlating trends.

HISTORICAL TRENDS IN AMERICA

Similar to that of Europe there has never been a time in the United States where one could argue we were free from violence (Courtwright, 1996). In fact, historically America has been among the most violent of nations throughout the world. It is an interesting paradox to ponder when one considers the basic underpinnings of America that consist of freedom and democracy. One may expect that a country founded on equality and civil rights would be the land of plenty where people could relax and live in peace and harmony.

A few brief examples may help to remind us of our violent past. First, recall that the North American continent was inhabited by Native American Indians long before the arrival of English explorers and later settlers. Today, Native American Indians live on and operate reservations that have been provided to them by the United States Government. How did we go from Native Americans being free to roam and settle the entire continent to a handful of small reservations? The answer is through war, bloodshed, and extreme violence. In essence, English settlers systematically pushed the Indians from the East to the West until there was no more land on which to retreat. This entire process was enormously violent as both sides inevitably viewed their position as one of survival.

What do we know about violence in America? To begin it is important to first note the immense diversity within the United States. The “melting pot” is a widely recognized concept that describes the phenomenon of immigrants arriving in the United States from various parts of the world; dispersing throughout the land according to opportunity and in most cases eventually acculturating to the ways and laws of the United States. What makes this point important to this discussion is that this is a somewhat different phenomenon than that which was experienced in Europe. For example, European trends track rates of violence in aggregate form that are based on different countries throughout the continent. Therefore, the rates consist of what was happening throughout Europe but they consist of regions or countries that were made up of people who were mostly alike and shared many of the same cultural values, heritage and language. This is a very important distinction between Europe and the United States that seems to have had a significant impact on the manner in which trends vary.

In short, trends in violent crime in the United States seem to trend downward historically but at a much different rate than that of Europe. And, much more importantly one could argue that there have been two different rates of violence that need to be illuminated- one for White Americans and one for Black Americans- both separately and also collectively. Although violence has trended downward historically in the United States the rate has been much higher than that of Europe. In other words the United States has been and continues to be much more violent than Europe and all other first world civilizations.

Violent Crime in America Post 1900

At the turn of the twentieth century there were a number of factors that contributed to the rate of violence in the United States. One interesting note is that American rates of violence appear to diverge from rates of violence in Europe. Around the turn of the century European rates, especially in northern Europe were quite low. In America, however, the homicide rate increased from approximately 5.1 to 10.3 per 100,000 population between 1900 and 1924 (Hoffman, 1925). Some of this increase had to do with the burgeoning auto industry and the massive increase of vehicles on the roadway.

Another factor strongly associated with rates of violence in the early twentieth century was prohibition. The prohibition era consisted of the outlawing of alcohol which in turn generated a variety of criminal syndicates all vying for portions of the lucrative black market trade of alcohol. Similar to the drug trade of today much violence ensued as competition for territory and market share raged. This was an especially appealing enterprise for those members of society who felt disenfranchised or marginalized based on the changing economic market which was shifting toward industrialization. Not all member of society were able to adapt to

changing times. We are also seeing this phenomenon take place in current times. The current economic market is largely driven by the age of technology and moved in large part beyond the era of industrialism. Everyday more and more factories are becoming automated and jobs that use to require human input are now handled by the precision of computer generated application.

The most perplexing aspect of violence in America, however, and, that which supersedes any European group is the consistently high rate of violence that takes place among African Americans.

Murder Victimization Rates

	<u>Whites</u>	<u>Black</u>
1852-1860	6.5	19.3
1866-1875	5.4	10.7
1881-1890	4.2	10.2
1901-1910	4.2	12.7
1921-1930	4.8	22.2
1931-1940	4.2	31.3
1945-1953	1.9	24.3

THEORETICAL POSTULATIONS CONCERNING CHANGING RATES OF VIOLENCE

First it is important to reiterate that generally there has been a long term decline in rates of violence in Europe and it appears as though this trend loosely applies to the United States of America. In America, however, the factors are much more complex especially in regard to different cultural groups. As noted by Gurr (1989) the real questions consist of what are the factors associated with declines in violence and what are the factors associated with increases in rates of violence?

In Europe there is little question that the rates of violence have trended downward for centuries. In America this same trend can be argued however clarification is needed. In essence, America consists of two different trends; one for White Americans and one for minorities and especially African Americans. The trend for White Americans has been much more stable and much lower throughout the late 1800s through the twenty first century. For African Americans the trend has been much less stable and also much higher. Within the African American population there have been much sharper increases in violence and the increases have been sustained for longer periods of time.

In regards to the long term decline Elias (1976) proposes the concept of a civilizing process. In essence, he is arguing that throughout time human beings have continuously evolved mentally, physically and emotionally to a state where more often people are able to respond to aversive stimuli without resorting violence. A central component Elias's theory of civilization is self control. He believes that much of the past violence has been reduced as a result of more refined and humane methods of dealing with conflict. Thome (2001) focuses on modernization

and describes it as a series of conflicts. On the one hand there is anomic contribution to violence and on the other civilizing forces. The thesis is that during times of rising rates of violence, especially those noted previously (1860, 1930, 1970-1990), it could be that anomic contributions were more dominant. As people tired of the violence, the civilizing process gained back some ground.

Another interesting factor highlighted by Gurr (1989) is the connection between waves of violent crime and times of war. Gurr (1989) even goes as far as to say, “In fact, war is the single most obvious correlate of the great historical waves of violent crime in England and the United States.” Of course there are other factors but the main upswings in violence throughout the United States have been associated with times of war:

CONCLUSION

Across Europe, rates of violence have trended downward for several centuries. Within this downward trend, however, there have been periods of increased violence embedded within the long-term historical decline. In the United States, the historical rate of violence is much more complex. Part of this rate complexity lies in the fact that two different rates have coexisted – one rate for whites and a separate for minorities, especially black Americans. The rate of violence for non-whites has been much higher and much more prone to rapid and very sharp increases in violence.

Multiple Choice Questions

1. Historically, trends in violence have generally been
 - a. Increasing

- b. Decreasing
- c. Stable
- d. None of the above

Answer: B

2. In America rates of violence are typically higher among
- a. Whites
 - b. Non-whites
 - c. Adolescents
 - d. None of the above

Answer: B

3. Some of the factors commonly associate with increasing rates of violence include
- a. Poverty
 - b. War
 - c. Low levels of education
 - d. All of the above

Answer: D

4. Which of the following would be considered a myth in relation to violence?

- a. The world is more violent today than ever before.
- b. The United States is more violent than most other countries.
- c. Young minority males are most likely to be a victim of violence
- d. None of the above

Answer: A

5. The data used to study violence should be considered
- a. Reliable
 - b. Mostly reliable
 - c. Less than reliable
 - d. All of the above

Answer: C

True/False Questions

1. Historically violence has been declining over the past several centuries.
- a. True
 - b. False

Answer: True

2. Rates of violence in Europe are much more complex to interpret than rates in the United States.

- a. True
- b. False

Answer: False

3. The primary shortcoming of the UCR is that it is completely reliant upon information that has been reported.

- a. True
- b. False

Answer: True

4. The NCVS is completely reliant upon the participant's memory.

- a. True
- b. False

Answer: True

5. Rates of violence in Italy have historically mirrored the rates in other European countries.

- a. True
- b. False

Answer: False

6. Ecology is the study of how people interact with their environment and provides a foundation for understanding some of the variations in violence.

- a. True
- b. False

Answer: True

7. In the United States, it is likely that differing groups forced to assimilated based on one set of values and cultural expectations experienced an amount of strain that was significantly higher than that experienced by people in other parts of the world.

- a. True
- b. False

Answer: True

8. Although violence has trended downward historically in the United States the rate has been much higher than that of Europe.

- a. True
- b. False

Answer: True

9. Throughout the past 150 years significant upsurges in violence have been associated with wars including the two world wars.

- a. True
- b. False

Answer: True

10. Prohibition should not be considered a factor strongly associated with rates of violence in the early twentieth century.

- a. True
- b. False

Answer: False

Essay Questions

- 1) Discuss the general trend of violence throughout Europe over the past several centuries.
- 2) Throughout pre-modern Europe, where were the rates of violence higher, in rural or urban areas? Is this still the area in which most violence takes place today?
- 3) Discuss what we know about violence in America. How has the American trend of violence differed from that of European trends?
- 4) What is the most significant factor influencing rates of violence in America that was not experienced to the same degree in Europe?
- 5) Discuss the three major upswings in violence that have taken place in America. During which years did they occur and what are the variables common to each?