

American Homicide Supplemental Volume (AHSV)

Maybe It Was My Fault: Responses to Misunderstandings by Reviewers of *American Homicide*

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Responses to Misunderstandings by Reviewers of *American Homicide*

Our son googled me for the first time during his senior year in college, the year before *American Homicide* was published. His first words were, “Gee, Dad, you get attacked a lot.” Scholarship is a full-contact sport, all the more so when historians or social scientists write on guns or violence, subjects on which people hold strong opinions. I thought it would be a good idea, therefore, to set the record straight in instances in which I could have been clearer about my theory of homicide and in which critics have misstated my argument. I hope these comments will be helpful to readers and spur further, more constructive debate.

1. Assertion: *American Homicide* attempts to graft the work of Gary LaFree onto American history.

Answer: Although I deeply admire Gary LaFree’s work, his comment in *Losing Legitimacy* about the correlation between murder and trust in government and elected officials only confirmed for me an aspect of the theory I had been working on since the mid-1980s. The theory of homicide in *American Homicide* is not a theory about legitimacy alone, but about nation-building in its broadest sense. “America became homicidal in the mid-nineteenth century because it was the only major Western country that failed at nation-building” (384). Successful nation-building requires more than legitimate government. It requires comity among elites, strong institutions, security, inspired leadership, and a sense of community that transcends differences over religion, gender, class, race, ethnicity, etc.

I should have stated my differences with Professor LaFree explicitly. I should also have noted more clearly my debt to the literature on nation-building and state breakdown—particularly Jack Goldstone’s *Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991). And I should have hit the theme of nation-building more strongly in the conclusion, because it is even more timely today than when I first articulated it in papers and grant applications in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Another difference between *Losing Legitimacy* and *American Homicide* is that Professor LaFree’s study conflates the causes of different kinds of homicide. The conflation is understandable, because his study relies on contemporary data. The rates of all kinds of homicide (including family and intimate murders) increased in the 1960s and 1970s in the United States. I had already discovered, however, that marital and romance murders have followed different patterns historically than murders among unrelated adults, and thus have different causes. The rise in marital and romance murders in the 1960s and 1970s had more to do with changes in gender relations and the economic balance of power between men and women than it did with the contemporary political crisis. One of the benefits of historical research is that it widens our horizons beyond the recent past and forces us to complicate our theories.

2. Objection: You can't measure the belief that government was legitimate in any one given year in the past.

Answer: I wouldn't even try. It is easier to gauge such beliefs over decades. For instance, few people would object to the claim that to most Americans government appeared more reliable and trustworthy in the 1950s than it did in the late sixties and early seventies. Similarly, few historians would object to the claim that national feeling and trust in government waned in the northern United States in the wake of the Mexican War, or that it grew in the wake of the Glorious Revolution of 1688. There were no systematic opinion polls before the late 1930s, but there is substantial evidence of people's feelings and beliefs, which historians have studied thoroughly.

3. Objection: We have no measures of people's feelings or beliefs in the past.

Answer: We do, although we have fewer than we would like to have. Scholars like Wilbur Zelinsky, Richard Merritt, and H. H. Lantz have measured changes in county names, in national symbols, and in ideas about marriage and romance. When I put my data and my theory of homicide at risk against their findings, I discovered that they supported each other. The proportion of new counties named after national heroes in a given decade—an indirect measure of the degree to which people identified with their national leaders and with each other—was high when the homicide rate among unrelated adults was low, and low when the latter was high. The proportion of articles in American newspapers that referred to the colonies as “British” declined in the 1760s and early 1770s as the homicide rate rose in advance of the Revolution. The proportion of articles in American periodicals that embraced the idea that women and men are destined for their “one and only” true love doubled in the 1830s and 1840s, the very decades in which the incidence of martial and romance homicide rose dramatically. As I said at the annual meeting of the Society of Historians of the Early American Republic in July, 2009, I hope cultural historians and social science historians will work together in the future to measure a wide range of feelings and beliefs, so that we can test our theories of violence, voting, political conflict, etc., against a wider range of evidence.

4. Assertion: The homicide rate is just a function of demographic changes. If the population of young men is diminished the homicide rate decreases.

Answer: Young men are more likely than other members of society to kill friends, acquaintances, or strangers, but societies with a high proportion of young men in their population are not necessarily more violent. I addressed the demographic hypothesis in the draft of *American Homicide* that I submitted to Harvard University Press in 2006, but I deleted it from the book both for want of space and because I thought everyone would be aware that the hypothesis has been discounted. I should have retained the passage. Here is what I wrote:

Teens and young adults are more likely to commit violent crimes than children or older adults, but the effect of baby booms and mass immigrations of young men on homicide rates has also been exaggerated. The proportion of teens and young adults in the population rose too slowly in the 1960s and 1970s to account for the sudden rise in the homicide rate, which occurred among all age groups, and the homicide rate among young men aged 14 to 17 tripled in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the proportion of teens in the population declined. When thousands of young indentured servants were immigrating to the colonies and the native population was getting younger because of high birthrates in the mid-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, New England, Pennsylvania, and the Chesapeake had moderate or low homicide rates. And when the homicide rate surged in the United States in the mid-nineteenth century, it did so not only in cities and on the frontier, where the proportion of young men in the population rose, but in the small town and rural North, where the proportion held steady, and in the rural South, where it fell because of the loss of a quarter million young men during the Civil War and Reconstruction. Homicide rates for teens and young adults have varied more widely than those for older adults because teens and young adults respond more violently to the conditions that make societies homicidal.

On the relationship between homicide rates and the size of age cohorts, see LaFree (1998: 42-7) and Blumstein and Wallman (2000: 10-11, 13-44, 130-63). For a typical, exaggerated view of the relationship between violent crime and the proportion of young men in the population, see Courtwright (1996).

Note that the baby “boomlet” in the United States in the 1980s (caused by the birth of the children of the baby boomers) did not lead to a surge in the homicide rate in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

5. Assertion: *American Homicide* claims that the homicide rate correlates with presidential approval ratings.

Answer: No, it doesn't. Here is the relevant passage from *American Homicide* (449-450):

The popularity of Eisenhower and Kennedy was not the ultimate cause of the continuing decline in the homicide rate. Homicide rates and presidential approval ratings have correlated weakly since the Gallup poll first sought in 1937 to determine how many Americans approved of the job their president was doing. The homicide rate declined in 1937-38, for example, when Roosevelt's poll numbers were declining, and fell again in the late 1940s and early 1950s, when Truman's ratings bottomed out at 22 percent. The lower homicide rates correlated with factors that were much less volatile than presidential popularity, which could plummet on the basis of a single bill or a bad week on Wall Street.

6. Assertion: The argument in *American Homicide* is circular. It asserts that rising homicide rates among unrelated adults are a sign of political instability, a loss of fellow feeling, loss of trust in government, and loss of faith in the social hierarchy, and then asserts that whenever those factors occur they signal rising homicide rates.

Answer: The theory of homicide in the book grew out of the evidence and has been tested in many ways. The theory emerged because my initial hypothesis “died a horrible death” in the face of the evidence from Vermont and New Hampshire, where my study began. I set out to understand why northern New Englanders were virtually non-homicidal. As I gathered data from beyond the time period I first studied, however, I discovered to my dismay that they were not: by the mid-nineteenth century they had become more homicidal than their counterparts in England. The book I had planned to write on northern New England’s “non-violent” culture was in ruins.

However, when I separated by type the homicides I had found in New Hampshire and Vermont, I discovered that the patterns of homicide made sense in terms of New England’s history. Murders of children by adult relatives or caregivers followed a long, smooth curve that was the inverse of the birth-rate: high fertility meant a low child murder rate and low fertility meant a high murder rate. Marital homicides and romance homicides jumped suddenly in the 1830s and 1840s: decades in which jobs opened to women in education and industry and in which the ideal of companionate marriage took hold. Homicides among unrelated adults peaked during periods of political turmoil: the Revolution, the Embargo crisis, and the sectional crisis. It appeared, as I put it in my grant application to the National Endowment for the Humanities (which I drafted in the fall of 1997), that “state breakdowns and political crises of legitimacy produce surges in nondomestic homicides and that the restoration of order and legitimacy produces declines in such homicides.” The same pattern was evident on the national level in the twentieth century, for which comprehensive homicide statistics were available. “The theory can be extended to the twentieth century: the crisis of legitimacy in the 1960s and 1970s (especially in the eyes of African-Americans) may have contributed to soaring homicide rates; and the establishment of state legitimacy through the New Deal, World War II, and the Cold War may have reduced homicide rates through the 1950s.”

I knew, however, that it would take more to prove my theory than evidence drawn from the history of Vermont and New Hampshire, my area of expertise. Therefore I put my theory at risk against a wider range of evidence. I extended my research to the colonial period, to early modern Europe, and outward to the South, the Midwest, the West, and the urban East. Everywhere I looked, the domestic murder rate for children followed the inverse of the birth rate up to the end of the nineteenth century (AHSV: Child Murder in America). Marital and romance homicides increased suddenly in the 1830s and 1840s across the northern United States, and in England and northern France. Everywhere I looked, homicides among unrelated adults correlated with political events. I conducted “natural experiments” to prove that correlation. I hypothesized, for instance, that the homicide rate would soar during the American Revolution and remain high for decades afterwards in the Georgia-South Carolina backcountry, where the Revolution was a genuine civil war. I also hypothesized that the homicide rate would hold steady or fall in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, which enjoyed political stability under patriot control throughout the Revolution, and where support for the war effort and the new

federal government was stronger than anywhere else in the South. My research in local archives confirmed these and other hypotheses. And every measure I could find of changes in people's feelings and beliefs supported the theory (see the response to criticism # 3).

I hope other researchers will put my theory at risk in the future against new evidence. My theory is after all a "working hypothesis," as I said in the foreword to *American Homicide*. I plan to test the theory further by gathering additional evidence on the history of violence and on the history of feelings and beliefs. But for better or worse, the theory of homicide in *American Homicide* is my own, developed independently in the course of my research, and the logic I used to confirm it was quite straightforward.

7. Assertion: "Murder victims are disproportionately black and poor." Murders of white people are "out of the ordinary."

Answer: Because one of the strongest correlates of murder is access to respect—"the belief . . . that one's position in society is or can be satisfactory and that one can command the respect of others without resorting to violence" (18)—the racial makeup of murderers and murder victims is not static. It changes over time. *American Homicide* shows that prior to the nineteenth century, the Americans most likely to kill and be killed were white males. In areas of the country where prejudice against certain minorities was strong, those minorities were more likely to commit murder. In San Francisco, for example, the Chinese had a high murder rate—much higher than the rate for blacks. In Los Angeles, Hispanics had the highest murder rate. In colonial Virginia and Maryland, white indentured servants were most likely to be victims of violence and nearly as likely as their owners to commit murder.

Two of the most important conclusions of *American Homicide* are that African Americans slaves were less likely to be murdered than white indentured servants, and that African Americans were on the whole less likely than whites to be victims or perpetrators of homicide from the mid-eighteenth century through the mid-nineteenth century. African Americans became more homicidal than whites only in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. *American Homicide* goes to great lengths to try to explain those findings.

8. Assertion 1: Widespread gun ownership and loose gun control laws have caused America's homicide problem.

Assertion 2: Widespread gun ownership and loose gun control laws have nothing to do with America's homicide problem.

Answer: Guns are not responsible for America's high homicide rate, but widespread ownership of modern firearms has probably made the homicide rate worse than it would otherwise have been. The historical evidence on the relationship between guns and homicide is clearer than the contemporary evidence social scientists rely upon, because historical evidence allows us to study the transition from muzzle-loading firearms to breech-loading firearms with self-contained ammunition, a transition that occurred between the 1850s and World War I. By the end of World War I, the modern

pattern of gun use in homicide in the United States was already set. I plan to draft an essay on the relationship between guns and homicide in American history, which I hope will clarify for readers the reasons why I believe firearms are not responsible for America's homicide problem, even though I believe modern firearms have contributed to the problem.