

It's No Mystery: Further Thoughts on the Decline in Homicide in American Cities during the First Half of 2009

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This update of my essay of November 22, 2009 is based on homicide data released by the Federal Bureau of Investigation at the end of December, 2009.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation reported in December that the murder rate fell by 10 percent in the United States during the first six months of 2009, its steepest drop since the mid-1990s. The decline was widespread, but it was larger in metropolitan areas (14.4 percent) than in non-metropolitan areas (8.5 percent). A few cities, such as Lexington, Kentucky, and Toledo, Ohio, saw their homicide rates rise, but most cities, from Boston, New York, Charlotte, and Atlanta in the east to Seattle, San Francisco, and Los Angeles in the west, reported dramatically lower homicide rates. Some rates declined by an astonishing 50 to 65 percent. The United States, and especially its cities, suddenly became less murderous between November, 2008, and January, 2009, and remained that way through June.

Why the sudden drop in homicide? Theories about deterrence can't explain it, nor can theories about economic well-being or demographics. Because of the recession there have been fewer police on the streets and the unemployment rate is high. Drug use is still widespread. The proportion of teenagers and young adults in the population has grown now that the baby boomers' children are coming of age. The *New York Times* suggested that it was "time to call in one of those clairvoyants who help detectives solve the case," since "no one else can explain what criminals have been doing in the first half of 2009."

But not all criminologists were surprised by the sudden decline in homicide. In fact, in 2008 a number of people predicted that the homicide rate might decline, depending on who won the presidential election. Psychologists, sociologists, and historians now have a growing body of evidence that suggests that the rate of violence among unrelated adults is determined by the feelings people have toward their society and their government and the degree to which they trust their elected officials. Gary LaFree, the past president of the American Society of Criminology, pointed out that in recent years the strongest correlates of violence have been the proportion of Americans who trust the government to do the right thing most of the time and the proportion who believe most government officials are honest. When public opinion polls show that those

proportions are high, as they were in the 1950s during the Eisenhower administration, the rate of violence has been low. When those proportions are low, as they have been more or less since the mid-1960s, the rate of violence has been high.

Why does faith in government have a profound impact on interpersonal violence? How people feel about the government plays an important role in determining how they feel about themselves and society. If people believe that their government shares their values, speaks for them and acts on their behalf, they feel empowered, have greater self-respect and gain confidence in their dealings with people outside their families. When people feel that the government is antagonistic toward them and they question its legitimacy, especially on the national level, they can feel frustrated, alienated, and dishonored. And those feelings, in turn, can alter hormone levels and stimulate the hostile, defensive, and predatory feelings that lead to violence against friends, acquaintances, and strangers. Trust in government is not the only prerequisite for lower rates of violence, but it is a powerful one, and we have now traced a persistent correlation between such trust and low homicide rates through the histories of dozens of nations reaching back at least as far as the seventeenth century.

The relationship between violence and feelings about government has often tracked separately by race in this country. In the last five decades, the black homicide rate peaked between 1971 and 1974, when black trust in government reached a post-World War II low. The white homicide rate peaked in 1980 during the final year of the Carter administration, when white trust in government reached its postwar low because of accumulated anger over busing, welfare, affirmative action, the defeat in Vietnam, and the seizure of American hostages in Iran. That rate—7 per 100,000 white persons per year—was by itself three to fifteen times the homicide rate in other affluent nations.

The inauguration of the first black president and the passing of the Bush administration re-legitimized the government in the eyes of many Americans during the first few months of 2009. African Americans and other racial minorities, who live disproportionately in America's cities, were more deeply affected than anyone else, and it is likely that their greater trust in the political process and their positive feelings about the new president led to lower rates of urban violence. Of course, not everyone is enamored of President Obama. In Alabama, Arkansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Tennessee, the states with the largest percentage of counties that voted more heavily Republican in 2008 than they did in 2004, the homicide rate rose 11 percent in cities of over 100,000 that have reported to date. Until the F.B.I. releases full data next year on the race of homicide victims and suspects, we will not know for certain whether homicide rates fell farther for minorities than for whites or whether the downward trend in homicides was countered in certain regions by an increase in homicides by whites. What we do know, however, is that the homicide rate fell farthest in cities, where African Americans and other minorities predominate, and that it appears to have risen in the states where the most politically alienated whites live.

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