

It's No Mystery: Why Homicide Declined in American Cities during the First Six Months of 2009

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The *Washington Post* reported in late July that the crime rate fell sharply in most American cities during the first six months of 2009. Rates were down for homicide, robbery, and sexual assault. There is not enough data yet to say whether the crime rate fell in suburban and rural America, but urban America suddenly became less violent between November, 2008, and January, 2009, and remained that way through June.

A few cities, including Baltimore, Dallas, and New Orleans, reported no change in their homicide rates. But no major city reported a sharp rise in violence, and 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, with declines ranging from 11 percent to an astonishing 67 percent.

Why the sudden drop in urban homicide? Conservative theories about deterrence can't explain it, nor can liberal theories about economic well-being. 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 *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 urban 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.

The relationship between violence and feelings about government tracks separately by race. The black homicide rate peaked between 1971 and 1974, when black trust in government reached its 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.

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 greater self-respect and gain confidence in their dealings with people outside their families. What matters is that citizens feel represented, included, and empowered. When people doubt the honesty and competence of public officials and question the legitimacy of their government, especially on the national level, they can feel frustrated, alienated, and dishonored. And those feelings, in turn, can 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 inauguration of the first black president and the passing of the Bush administration re-legitimized the government in the eyes of most Americans for the first few months of 2009. African Americans and other racial minorities, who live disproportionately in America's cities, were especially affected by these events. Their greater trust in government and the political process and their positive feelings about the new president led to lower rates of urban violence.

The question is now whether feelings of trust will deepen over the next few years and encompass a broader share of the American people. It took twenty-five years of strong leadership and largely successful foreign and domestic policies to build trust to the level it attained in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and a willingness on the part of the American people to support policies that entailed great risk and enormous sacrifice. Whether Americans will be able to rebuild such trust in the absence of a Great Depression, a World War, and a Cold War will determine to a large degree whether the drop in violence will prove fleeting.

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Newspaper articles on the recent decline in homicide in American cities:

Allison Klein, "Major Cities' Plummeting Crime Rates Mystifying: Killings in the District, Prince George's Have Fallen." *Washington Post*, July 20, 2009.

Shaila Dewan, "The Real Murder Mystery? It's the Low Crime Rate." *New York Times*, August 2, 2009.

**Comparison of Homicide Totals in American Cities
during Early 2008 and Early 2009**

| | Homicides in early 2008 | Homicides in early 2009 | Percent change | Break month | Months included |
|---|----------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------|----------------|--------------------|
| Minneapolis, MN | 18 | 6 | -67 | 2/2009 | (thru 6/2009) |
| Seattle, WA | 15 | 8 | -47 | 1/2009 | (thru 6/2009) |
| Charlotte, NC | 46 | 28 | -39 | -- | (thru 7/2009) |
| New York City, NY | 296 | 204 | -31 | 11/2008 | (thru 7/2009) |
| Fort Worth, TX | 26 | 18 | -31 | 12/2008 | (thru 7/2009) |
| Birmingham, AL | 63 | 47 | -25 | -- | (thru 9/2009) |
| Los Angeles, CA | | | -17 | -- | (thru 8/15/2009) |
| Washington, D.C and Prince George's County | | | -17 | -- | (thru 6/2009) |
| Atlanta, GA | 50 | 43 | -14 | 1/2009 | (thru 6/2009) |
| Boston | 39 | 34 | -13 | -- | (thru 8/15/2009) |
| Chicago, IL | 290 | 258 | -11 | 12/2008 | (thru 7/2009) |
| Baltimore | 139 | 139 | 0 | -- | (thru 8/16/2009) |
| New Orleans | 94 | 97 | + 3 | -- | (thru 6/2009) |
| Dallas | 106 | 100 | + 6 | -- | (thru 8/18/2009) |

Note: Comprehensive data for American cities (and other jurisdictions) will not be available until mid-2010, when the F.B.I. releases its Uniform Crime Reports for 2009. The data in this table are from cities that have released their 2009 data on-line. The "break month" is the month in which the homicide totals first dropped sharply from the previous year's totals. Break months could be determined only for cities that have released monthly homicide totals from 2007 through mid-2009. The other cities have only released cumulative totals for the first months of 2009.