Why Gun Ownership Rates Tell Us Little About Homicide Trends in America

Every time a homicide committed with a firearm makes the national news, it happens like clockwork: a variety of pundits in the corporate media quickly pen columns advocating for ever broader and stricter gun control laws. If only government agents were entrusted with a strict monopoly (or near-monopoly) on firearm ownership — we are told — then the United States would have much lower homicide rates similar to those found in most other so-called "developed" countries like Norway or Canada.

The journalists and pundits who write these articles present their argument as if they were merely repeating a consensus among scholars who all agree that guns are the reason homicide rates are significantly higher in the United States — well, in many parts of it — than in Canada and Europe.

But there's a problem with this claim: there is not at all a consensus among criminologists, sociologists, and historians that guns are the primary or driving factor behind the United States' relatively high homicide rates.

Gun-Driven Crime vs. Culture-Driven Crime

Contrary to the simplistic narrative often pushed by columnists at the *Washington Post*, *et al*, homicide scholars frequently debate the most important factors behind the US's homicide numbers.

To be sure, the "more guns, more homicide" position is influential among researchers. Numerous studies have appeared

in the past twenty years attempting to draw a causal relationship between total gun-ownership numbers and homicide. Some of the more notable studies include "The Social Costs of Gun Ownership" by Philip J Cook and Jens Ludwig;" [More Guns, More Crime](#)" by Mark Duggan; and "[Examining the Relationship Between the Prevalence of Guns and Homicide Rates in the USA](#)," by Michael Siegel, Craig Ross, and Charles King.

Also influential within this line of thinking is the book *Crime Is Not the Problem* by Franklin Zimring and Gordon Hawkins. Their claim is not that more guns produce more crime, but that American crime is more lethal thanks to the high availability of guns.

There have always been two big problems with these types of studies, and both were covered in [a 2018 Rand Corp. analysis](#). One is that there is no data which directly tells us how many guns are owned by or available to Americans. Researches attempting to show correlations between crime and gun ownership must rely on proxies such as the "FS/S" proxy, which is the proportion of suicides that were firearm suicides. Other proxies include the proportion of residents who are military veterans, and "subscriptions per 100,000 people to *Guns & Ammo*."

Writing for Rand, researcher Rouslan Karimov finds this reliance on these proxies problematic, and notes "many such study designs are currently hampered by poor information on the prevalence of gun ownership and the consequent reliance on proxy measures of availability and prevalence."

A second problem with the more-guns-more-crime hypothesis is the fact that [a high crime rate may *itself* be a driver of high rates of gun ownership](#). Karimov [notes](#):

> *In the past 12 years, several new studies found that increases in the prevalence of gun ownership are associated with increases in violent crime. Whether this association is*

attributable to gun prevalence causing more violent crime is unclear. If people are more likely to acquire guns when crime rates are rising or high, then the same pattern of evidence would be expected.

Efforts to overcome this problem in establishing gun ownership as the driver of high crime rates remains a serious problem for researchers attempting to establish causation.

Homicide Driven by Perceptions of Government Legitimacy

In contrast to this view, we find crime scholars who instead suggest that "a lack of legitimacy of the state and its institutions predicts variation in levels of crime." The idea's origins are summarized by Manuel Eisner and Amy Nivette:

But amongst empirical criminologists the idea that legitimacy could explain macro-level variation in crime only gained some prominence in the late 1990s. In 'Losing Legitimacy' [Gary] LaFree (1998) argued that three key social institutions — family, economic, and political —motivate citizens to abide by the rules, participate in social control, and obey the law. When these social institutions are seen as unfair, useless, or corrupt, they lose legitimacy and subsequently the ability to maintain social control.

Since then, other authors have explored how a lack of confidence in government's ability to deliver on its promises leads to greater lawlessness. Examples include " [Beyond Procedural Justice: A Dialogic Approach toLegitimacy in Criminal Just ice](#)" by Anthony Bottoms and Justice Tankebe and "[Procedural Justice, Legitimacy, and the Effective Rule of Law](#)" by Tom R. Tyler.

Perhaps the largest study within this theoretical framework is Randolph Roth's *American Homicide*. Roth is doubtful of the pat answers given by both pundits and academics "who claim that they can measure the impact of gun laws or unemployment or the death panlty on homicide rates by controlling statistically for the impact of other variables." According to Roth, "Those claims are false."

Roth contends that any serious analysis must take into account trends in homicide measures over numerous decades in a wide variety of times and places. With this data, Roth concludes is it reasonable to accept LaFree's contention that the variables that correlate most clearly with homicide are "the proportion of adults who say they trust their government to do the right thing and the proportion who believe that most public officials are honest."

Roth then adds the following variables as central to understanding movements in homicide rates:

1. The belief that government is stable and that its legal and judicial institutions are unbiased and will redress wrongs and protect lives and property.

2. A feeling of trust in government and the officials who run it, and a belief in their legitimacy.

3. Patriotism, empathy, and fellow feeling arising from racial religious, or political solidarity.

4. The belief that the social hierarchy is legitimate, that one's position in society is or can be satisfactory and that one can command the respect of others without resorting to violence.

If these conditions do not exist, Roth concludes, then homicide rates will climb as residents view others in their community as being outside the community. Furthermore,

community members feel they must engage in vigilante justice to make up for a lack of fair or reliable action on the part of police and other state actors.

What Makes the United States Different

Within this theoretical framework, Roth examines the historical data in the United States to note how a American views of government legitimacy (or lack thereof) have driven homicide rates over time. Moreover, if we apply this "legitimacy theory" of homicide to Americans, we can reasonably conclude Americans have exhibited lower levels of confidence in their legal and governmental institutions than in most places known for especially low homicide rates. That is, the legitimacy theory holds across time and across national borders.

Other factors lend credence to these ideas. Feelings of political and ethnic solidarity are threatened in the US by a variety of factors which do not occur to the same degree in many other developed countries. For example, Americans are [far more mobile](#) than Europeans, frequently moving to new cities and even across the continent in pursuit of new jobs and amenities. The US is also [far more ethnically diverse](#) than most European countries. In spite of much recent talk about immigration to Europe, the US has been more open to immigrants than European states over the past two centuries. The sheer size and scope of the US helps to reduce feeling of solidarity thanks to large distances separating different populations. And a history of (relatively recent) slavery and inter-ethnic strife is an important factor in this regard, as well.

The legitimacy theory also appears plausible in light of comparisons with Latin America. Like the United States, many Latin American countries are very ethnically diverse, have histories of slavery and inter-ethnic strife in many cases,

and suffer from low levels of confidence in government institutions. Indeed, a lack of faith in government is a central theme in Jorge Castañeda's *[Manana Forever?: Mexico and the Mexicans](#)*. Mexicans, Castañeda shows, have some of the world's lowest rates of "community engagement." That is, outside of the family unit, Mexicans rarely take part in political activism or take part in community institutions like charitable non-profits or even social clubs. Casteñeda regards this is as problematic. He's probably right.

Moreover, racial politics and a racial divide continue to be significant factors across Latin American politics from [Brazil](#) to [Mexico](#).

These may all be factors driving Latin America's notoriously high homicide rates.

Why Don't We Hear About the Legitimacy Theory of Crime?

So why do we hear so little about the problem of violence and institutional legitimacy? The answer may lie in the fact the theory doesn't fit well within the narratives preferred among activists on both left and right.

Naturally, the left is committed to the idea that gun control is the single most important factor in reducing homicide rates in the United States. Gun control activists often insist — or at least strongly imply — that a lack of more strict gun control laws is all that lies between the status quo and Swiss-style ultra-low homicide rates. Moreover, the left is committed to identity politics and strives to *reduce* feelings of solidarity between racial and ethnic groups. The suggestion that this strategy could worsen violent crime runs afoul of the identity-politics narrative.

In spite of all this, however, the legitimacy theory is not

necessarily in conflict with gun-control advocates. Roth is himself hardly *laissez-faire* on the gun-control question. When it comes to policy, he does not inveigh against gun control laws. Nevertheless, his research conflicts with the contention that gun-control laws will "solve" the US' problem with elevated homicide rates. In an interview with HistoryNet, Roth [reiterates](#) "[w]e would be a relatively homicidal society today even if we were using baseball bats and dinner knives."

The fact that the root causes of homicide lie far deeper than guns, however, would force gun-control advocates to prove that reducing access to legal guns would actually make Americans less homicidal. If Americans really are more homicidal due to deep-seated cultural and historical factors, then homicide may persist at similar rates even in the absence of legal guns. The result, it seems, would be continued feelings among the population that government institutions cannot be trusted to reduce homicides and provide judicial fairness. Consequently, the population would be likely to conclude guns — including illegal ones — are necessary for self-defense and to execute true justice. Indeed, if a lack of legitimacy is the problem, this would suggest tighter gun control laws would not push the US in the direction of high-legitimacy Canada; but instead in the direction of low-legitimacy Mexico.

The legitimacy theory doesn't fit well into right-wing narratives either. Many conservatives are reluctant to push a narrative which suggests the police and the courts administer justice unfairly. Few conservatives are also likely to be enthusiastic about a theory which suggests harsh sentencing laws or more aggressive policing have done little to reduce homicide rates. At the same time, some libertarians push the theory that more guns *necessarily* lead to less crime. But if homicides are driven by factors other than legal gun ownership — as the legitimacy theory suggests — then increased gun ownership is no more an automatic cure for homicide than is gun control.

In spite of its lack of partisan usefulness, however, the research of Roth and other researchers analyzing the role of perceptions of state legitimacy offer numerous insights. The role of government legitimacy in crime may prove to be quite helpful in understanding the role of the state in both encouraging homicidal conflict, and in failing to address the needs of victims and potential victims. The likelihood that gun control measures would do little to address the core problem — or perhaps even make it worse — ought to be taken more seriously by students of homicide trends in the United States.

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