

# Homicide rates linked to trust in government, sense of belonging, study suggests

December 1 2009, by Jeff Grabmeier

---

When Americans begin routinely complaining about how they hate their government and don't trust their leaders, it may be time to look warily at the homicide rate.

In researching the new book *American Homicide* (Harvard University Press, 2009), an Ohio State University historian tried to make sense of changing homicide rates by sifting through records of tens of thousands of homicides in the United States and western Europe over the past four centuries.

He concluded that people's views about the legitimacy of government and how much they identify with their fellow citizens play a major role in how often they kill each other - much more so than the usual theories revolving around guns, poverty, drugs, race, or a permissive justice system.

"The predisposition to murder is rooted in feelings and beliefs people have toward government and their fellow citizens," said Randolph Roth, author of the book and professor of history at Ohio State.

"It is these factors, which may seem impossibly remote from murder, that hold the key to understanding why the United States is so homicidal today."

While Roth said his theory may seem strange at first, it fits the evidence much better than all the other theories about what drives people to murder.

"You look at all the other theories, and they die a horrible death in the face of the evidence," he said.

That includes theories held dear by both conservatives and liberals. If you look at the evidence over time, poverty and unemployment don't lead to higher murder rates, as many liberals argue, he said. But locking up criminals, using the death penalty, and adding more police don't hold the murder rate down either, as conservatives claim.

At any one point in time, researchers may find an association between one of these causes and homicide rates in a particular area. But once you try to apply those theories more broadly, at different places and in different eras, the links disappear.

For example, during the [Great Depression](#) the homicide rate in the United States went down, even while poverty was increasing. In the 1960s, the United States had more police and more people in prison than nearly any other nation on earth, along with strong economic growth - and yet the murder rate skyrocketed.

"Criminologists make a case for one theory or another by going through records for a short period of time. But if they try the same theory in colonial America or the early 20th century, it won't fit. That's where it helps to have a historical perspective," Roth said.

In his analysis, Roth found four factors that relate to the homicide rate in parts of the United States and western Europe throughout the past four centuries: the belief that one's government is stable and its justice and legal systems are unbiased and effective; a feeling of trust in government

officials and a belief in their legitimacy; a sense of patriotism and solidarity with fellow citizens; and a belief that one's position in society is satisfactory and that one can command respect without resorting to violence.

When those feelings and beliefs are strong, homicide rates are generally low, regardless of the time or place, Roth said. But when people are unsure about their government leaders, don't feel connected to the rest of society, and feel they don't have opportunity to command respect in the community, homicide rates go up.

This theory helps explain why the United States generally has had one of the highest murder rates since the mid-nineteenth century of any advanced Western democracy, Roth said.

"As Americans, so many of us hate or distrust our government. You can see it today in the anti-government rallies in Washington, D.C. and elsewhere. It's been part of our culture since the very beginning, but especially since the Civil War, and it is one reason why we have such a high homicide rate," he said.

Roth said the results of his analysis provide some warnings for the future. Data from early this year suggests the homicide rate in the United States fell during the first half of this year, which makes sense as the nation rallied around a new president who promised to help unite the country.

But events of recent months suggest the tide may be turning, and that we may soon return to the divisive, polarized politics that the candidates of both major parties tried to transcend in the recent presidential election, he said.

Roth said his analysis applies to murder among unrelated adults.

Domestic violence follows a different trajectory.

Many people wonder how seemingly remote and abstract feelings about the government can lead to murder, he said.

"It has to do with trust. If I feel empowered, if I feel included in the community, if I feel like I matter to the people around me, if I feel the government will protect me and my family, I can go about my daily life with confidence. Small slights and disagreements don't bother me as much," he said.

"But if I feel powerless in society, if I feel like I can't get a fair shake from my government, and feel cut off from my neighbors, it affects how I live my life. Small disagreements and indignities that you may otherwise brush off as insignificant can enrage you, and can in some cases lead to violence and murder."

But how can researchers measure things like trust and belief in government a hundred or more years ago, when there weren't public opinion polls tracking how people felt?

As a historian, Roth said he has found many different indirect indicators that show how people felt about their political leaders and their fellow citizens.

For example, Roth has found that one of the best predictors of increases and declines in America's homicide rate in the past was the percentage of new counties named for national heroes - an indirect measure of how Americans felt about their nation and one another.

The homicide rate was lowest in the 1820s and 1830s when the proportion of new counties named for American heroes reached its peaked. When the proportion of new counties named for national heroes

plummeted, as it did during the sectional crisis that tore apart the North and South, homicide rates increased dramatically.

"When Americans stopped identifying with each other through national heroes, they killed each other more often," Roth said.

While measuring trust in government and fellow citizens provides one challenge for historians, the other is figuring out homicide rates before the advent of national crime statistics.

To do this, Roth created the Historical Violence Database, housed at Ohio State, which allows researchers to examine data from many studies of homicides from a variety of time periods and places. This database now includes information on tens of thousands of homicides in different areas of the [United States](#) and western Europe from medieval times to the present.

The database includes detailed studies of [homicides](#) in places as different as New York City, Holmes County, Ohio, and regions in the far West and Deep South.

"We have been able to test theories in a lot of places at a lot of different time periods," he said.

The lesson he takes away from the research, Roth said, is that the best way to reduce homicide rates has nothing to do with guns, or police, or courts or even economics.

"Political leadership has the greatest opportunity to have a real impact on homicide rates," he said. "It is difficult, I know, but we need a leader who can unite the country around some values and beliefs that we can all accept. That said, leadership can be effective only if the conflicts within a society are manageable. When they become unmanageable, as they did

during the Civil War, even a great leader like Abraham Lincoln can't pull the nation together and keep homicide in check."

Source: The Ohio State University ([news](#) : [web](#))

Citation: Homicide rates linked to trust in government, sense of belonging, study suggests (2009, December 1) retrieved 20 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-12-homicide-linked.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.