

Link found between early post office locations and modern crime rates

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A pair of researchers with New York University Abu Dhabi has found a connection between the location of post offices in the formative years of the United States and modern crime rates. In their paper published in

Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, Jeffrey Jensen and Adam Ramey describe collecting data on early U.S. post office locations and mapped them with data from modern crime statistics and what they found.

When the U.S. declared and won its independence from England, it already had a networked postal system connecting its 13 colonies. In the years that followed, most of the people that worked for the [federal government](#) actually worked for the postal system. In this new effort, Jensen and Ramey wondered if the choices early Americans made for post office locations had any lasting impact on the growing nation.

To find out, the pair collected [data](#) on early post offices, finding their locations in 1890 and comparing them graphically with modern data. In mapping their data, the pair took note of possible factors that could impact the history of an area that was the site of a post office, such as [racial makeup](#), degree of manufacturing in an area, railway connections and even how many people in a given area turned out for presidential elections. They then added modern [crime](#) rates to the maps to see if there might be anything that stood out.

The maps showed lower crime rates on average in the areas surrounding the former post office sites—most particularly, murders and rapes. They also found that people who live in those areas in modern times tend to live longer on average than the general populace and tended to be more likely to vote in the 2012 presidential election.

The researchers acknowledge that their findings could be coincidental, but they also say that there are possible explanations for what they found. They note that early post offices tended to be built close to newspaper publishing entities, which meant both types of operations tended to be located near government buildings. They suggest that the local presence of the newspapers may have helped to push governments

to put in place local laws to keep crime rates down—and that could have been perpetuated through the years to the present day.

More information: Jeffrey L. Jensen et al. Early investments in state capacity promote persistently higher levels of social capital, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2020). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1919972117](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1919972117)

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