

# How America's elites may hold the key to lowering murder rates

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New crime laws, police funding and similar efforts may have some effect on homicide rates in the United States—but the biggest impact will come from the actions of our political and economic elites.

That's the conclusion of historian Randolph Roth, author of the 2009 book [American Homicide](#), in a new report he wrote for the [Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation](#).

Roth, who is a professor of history at The Ohio State University, provides evidence that homicide rates are linked to how citizens feel about the legitimacy of government and their sense of connectedness with their fellow citizens.

Right now, the United States is at a key point, Roth said.

"Over the past 450 years in the Western world, [political stability](#) has been the most powerful correlate of high homicide rates. The return of political stability could, if it continues over the next few years, lower our nation's homicide rate," Roth wrote in the Guggenheim report.

"What may matter most, however, is the behavior of America's political and economic elites. They have the power, for good or ill, over the homicide rate."

These elites include the wealthiest Americans, leaders of top corporations and institutions, and national and state political leaders of both parties, Roth said.

The new report is titled "[Government Legitimacy, Social Solidarity, and American Homicide in Historical Perspective](#)."

The theory that homicide rates are driven by feelings and beliefs that people have toward the government and their fellow citizens may seem strange at first, Roth said. But as he [details in his book](#) and new report, that theory fits the evidence much better than the usual theories revolving around guns, poverty, drugs, race or a permissive justice system.

The key is to ensure that people feel empowered, included in their community, believe they matter to the people around them, and feel the government will protect them and their family.

"Small slights and disagreements don't bother me as much as they might if I felt powerless in society, if I felt I couldn't get a fair shake from my government, and if I felt alienated from my neighbors," Roth writes in the report.

"Small disagreements and indignities that I might otherwise brush off as insignificant might enrage me and could even lead to violence."

Roth's research shows that the key to low homicide rates is successful nation building. And nation building is a continuous process—it is not something that can be declared complete at any point in time, he said.

There are four factors related to successful nation building, Roth explained. There is political stability, the belief that government will protect lives and property; legitimate social hierarchy, the belief that one can be respected in society without resorting to violence and that there is the promise of upward mobility for oneself and one's children; fellow feeling, which is patriotism, empathy and sympathy arising from solidarity with others; and legitimate government, a feeling of trust in government and the officials who run it.

[The Guggenheim report](#) includes analysis of how these factors have related to homicide rates since *American Homicide* was published. Roth said this recent evidence continues to support his theory.

The homicide rate in the United States rose by 60% between 2014 and 2021, from 4.9 to 7.8 persons per 100,000 per year. This was a period when all four of the factors related to nation building were under stress in the face of partisan division and conflict in the United States, Roth

said.

One key example was political instability. Roth said his research over the course of American history shows that the number of protests and riots that end in lethal violence—a significant measure of political instability—"correlates almost perfectly with the ups and downs of the rate of everyday homicides of unrelated adults."

The recent rise in homicides coincided with a spate of deadly protests around the country, from the 2014 protests surrounding the death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, through the 2016 Malheur Wildlife Refuge uprising in eastern Oregon; the 2017 white supremacist protest and counterprotest in Charlottesville, Virginia; the riots that followed the death of George Floyd in 2020; and the January 6, 2021, insurrection in Washington, D.C.

"Deadly riots and protests are symptoms of lost faith in the ability of government to protect our lives, property and basic rights, however we might define them," Roth said.

Another example is the growing loss of faith in America's social hierarchy, including the ability of our children to get ahead in society.

In the period 1999-2015, among families with parents in the bottom half of the U.S. income distribution, homicide rates increase threefold based on a comparison of counties with the highest rates of intergenerational mobility to those with the lowest rates of intergenerational mobility, Roth found.

When Americans feel they can't get ahead in society, that leaves them feeling resentful, frustrated and powerless, which can lead to hostile and defensive emotions that result in violence and murder, he said.

Most recently, there have been [reports](#) that [homicide rates](#) dropped sharply last year. According to provisional data from the CDC, the homicide rate fell from 7.8 per 100,000 in 2021 to 7.3 in 2022 and 6.7 in 2023: still more than a third higher than in 2014, but declining. Roth said that lines up with the fact that there haven't been significant deadly protests or riots in the United States since the insurrection in Washington, D.C., in 2021. The fact that many of the rioters have been brought to justice may have restored some sense that the government is working to protect Americans, Roth said.

But these short-term improvements are not guaranteed to last. In the Guggenheim report, Roth said there are forces and factions in our society today—especially among elites—that are driving us toward political instability.

Some of the negative forces include "the flood of dark money bent on vilifying and sowing hatred against political leaders; radical gerrymandering; voter suppression; the spread of disinformation through social media; and cynical efforts to discredit the electoral process and overturn the results of free and fair elections," he wrote.

But elites still hold the power to change things, Roth concluded.

"If they were to band together to confront the opportunity crisis for America's poorer citizens and communities, unite in defending the country's institutions and their legitimacy, and turn away from divisive rhetoric that vilifies their fellow Americans, it would go a long way toward forging a stronger nation and reducing the homicide rate in the United States."

**More information:** Government Legitimacy, Social Solidarity, and American Homicide in Historical Perspective, [www.hfg.org/hfg\\_reports/govern ... torical-perspective/](http://www.hfg.org/hfg_reports/govern...torical-perspective/)

Provided by The Ohio State University

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