

Homicide in the hood

A LONG VIEW

ERIC SCHNEIDER

In a suburban nation enjoying declining rates of violent crime, we forget that not all places are created equal. Homicide in America remains concentrated in African American urban communities. In my city—Philadelphia—over 70 percent of homicide victims in 2008 were African American males, and 56 percent were African American men between the ages of eighteen and forty. At twenty-five per hundred thousand people, “Killadelphia” has the highest murder rate of the top ten American cities. According to a 2006 study, an African American male in North Philadelphia had a better chance of dying from violence than did a U.S. soldier in Iraq. This is not new; for more than a century African Americans have been disproportionately represented in homicide statistics. Let’s look at what we know about homicide (which may not be what we think we know), then at differing explanations for high rates among African Americans, and finally at some solutions.

During the nineteenth century, the rural South and West, not urban areas, had the highest homicide rates in the country. Armed white men, prickly about insults to their honor and fond of drink, slaughtered each other in alarming numbers and used extreme violence to maintain their supremacy over African Americans and Native Americans. Cow towns, the mining centers of the West, and the rural South had some of the highest homicide rates in the world. Cities were far safer places for Americans to live.

Homicide also declined over time, at both the national level and in cities. Although there was a spate of violence leading up to the Civil War,

homicide rates fell at an irregular pace over the rest of the nineteenth century (with the exception of the South and West) and bottomed out during the 1930s and 1940s. The trend then reversed itself, beginning an almost meteoric increase from the late 1950s to the 1980s before falling again in the 1990s. Modern homicide rates are high, but there have been other eras and other places with higher ones.

Poverty is associated with homicide, but not directly. Unemployment, for example, has no demonstrable effect on the homicide rate, and poor communities do not necessarily have high homicide rates. Homicide dropped most dramatically during the Great Depression, perhaps because everyone was in desperate straits, as it had done during economic panics in the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century, homicide has been concentrated geographically in poor urban communities, perhaps because enduring poverty in a country of plenty is more galling than the temporary shared misery of economic downturns.

Homicide data confirm our expectations in one way: homicide is highly gendered. When we look across time and space, at preliterate peoples and at modern ones, at developing countries and at developed ones, at cities and at the countryside, we see that men commit approximately 90 percent of all homicides. The finding intrigues evolutionary psychologists, who argue that the tendency to kill unrelated men, stepchildren, and wives or lovers whose faithfulness is in doubt has a basis in natural selection as men compete to ensure procreative success. But even if homicide has always been a gendered activity, what changes is as important

as what is constant: homicide rates differ among different groups of men as well as in different societies, and social context is key to understanding what suppresses homicide and what causes it to increase.

*T*here are four plausible explanations for shifts in homicide. One is demographic and points to high gender imbalances that have reduced marriage rates and supported a violent masculinist subculture. A second explanation, rooted in an analysis of homicide in Western Europe, posits a “civilizing process,” in which the rise of centralized states, the democratization of manners, and an emphasis on bodily and emotional control led to a decline in personal violence. The third focuses on a southern culture of violence brought to the backcountry frontier by Scots-Irish settlers and then transmitted from whites to blacks, who carried it north when migrating. This honor-based culture fosters mistrust of the criminal justice system while encouraging reliance on oneself or one’s friends for safety. The last explanation is structural and emphasizes that participation in an urban-industrial economy pacified violent rural migrants.

Gender imbalances—and the consequent inability to form families—have been associated with excessive violence both in the past and the present, although in different social contexts. On the American frontier, for example, white men could not marry (cultural values meant that Native American and Mexican American women were generally not seen as appropriate partners) and created instead a violent male subculture that declined only as gender ratios among whites became normalized. Modern inner cities have the opposite problem, which is equally destructive: there are many more marriageable African American women than men. Women encounter a marriage marketplace in which their “goods” are discounted because of oversupply and there is little incentive for males to marry. In both of these instances, low marriage rates reinforce homosocial bonds and male irresponsibility associated with violence.

This argument is appealing, but inadequate. In the early twentieth century, several European immigrant groups (Russians, Hungarians, Poles) had gender imbalances similar to (and

sometimes greater) than those of African Americans, but they had much lower homicide rates. (Italians are an exception discussed below.) Clearly something besides gender ratios has to explain African American homicide. And to take the contemporary example, African American men between the ages of eighteen and forty, besides having higher death rates than whites, are disproportionately out of the marriage market because of high rates of incarceration. Having been in prison may not make men less marriageable, but it does make them less employable in the mainstream economy and therefore less likely to be able to support a family. The gender imbalance argument identifies an association between gender and violence but is less successful in demonstrating causation.

The “civilizing” process is an attempt to explain the long downward trend in violence in Europe since the thirteenth century, and it is supported by national as well as urban data sets from a number of countries. The rise of stronger states pacified violent elites, and, as manners and forms of individual self-control spread from the upper classes to the lower ones, homicide declined. This hypothesis doesn’t hold up in the American context because homicide rates differed so dramatically in different parts of the country and among different groups during the same time frame. A civilizing process cannot operate differently in late-nineteenth-century Boston and Chicago without some mediating factors, and it is precisely these differences that must be explained.

A culture of violence, with an attendant mistrust of government and a strong personal sense of honor, has kept homicide rates in the South higher than in northern states. The roots of southern violence run deep and are shared by whites and blacks alike, but African Americans in particular found that local sheriffs were mainstays of white supremacy and sometimes indistinguishable from terrorist organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan. Proponents of this thesis argue that African Americans leaving the South brought with them a mistrust of the formal systems of order and relied instead on an informal code based on an ability to carry oneself on the streets and to deflect or handle threats when they arose. Nothing in African Americans’ encounters with northern police

changed their minds about the unreliability of the criminal justice system.

These claims contain important truths. Police investigations of black-on-black crime have usually been desultory, suggesting that black lives are not valued, and poor people, although they have higher crime victimization rates than wealthy ones, are less likely to report crimes, indicating an overall mistrust of “the system.” Over a third of homicides in Philadelphia in the middle of the twentieth century resulted from what were characterized as trivial disputes among acquaintances, and this remains a common cause of homicidal violence. Together with ubiquitous references to disrespect, it suggests that a prickly sense of honor is a core construct of personal identity that is likely to lead to violent confrontations from which others might walk away.

Yet one could have just as easily written those lines about Italian immigrants at the beginning of the twentieth century. Southern Italians arrived from a country with a weak state, where family honor was sacrosanct, and personal insults were avenged by the offended parties rather than redressed through mechanisms of law. Italians tended to emigrate as single males rather than in family units, and because they frequently intended to return to Italy, they made little investment in education. Coming from rural areas, they possessed few skills other than brawn and found work most frequently on the docks or in construction gangs rather than on industrial work sites. As a male group steeped in codes of honor and with no trust in institutions, they were prone to violence and had a homicide rate that was the highest among Euro-Americans and comparable to that among African Americans.

Over time that portrait changed, and violence abated. For one thing, Italians were adopted as white, albeit reluctantly, and they bought homes, created family units, and sent their children to school as it became clear that their futures were here rather than in the old country. More critically, they were incorporated into an expanding industrial sector that desperately needed workers as the United States moved into a mass production economy. African Americans enjoyed few of those advantages, but it is the failure to join an industrial economy that is most important.

Historians have argued that industrialization suppressed the high homicide rates that characterized preindustrial peoples. Industrialization forced men to tend soberly to their work, limit their time congregating on street corners or in bars to weekend evenings (times that still have the highest rates of homicide), and send their children to sit up straight in school. Over time, the industrial economy and the institutions that supported it instilled habits of self-discipline that suppressed violence. Differential access to this economy explains the different levels of violence among groups.

When African Americans entered the industrial economy, it was temporarily as strikebreakers or to fill a shortage in labor supply during the first and second world wars. Once a strike ended or peacetime conversion generated less demand for labor, African Americans were fired. Systematic exclusion from the industrial economy remained the norm for African Americans well into the 1950s, by which time cities had already begun to shed manufacturing jobs. Over the next six decades, the cumulative effects of the decisions to move jobs to the suburbs, the sunbelt, and finally overseas have become increasingly obvious in inner-city communities where the illegal economy offers the most reliable employment opportunities—and in high rates of homicide.

African Americans already had extraordinarily high homicide rates in mid-twentieth century Philadelphia, when homicide rates nationally were quite low. In 1948-1952, when African Americans constituted 18 percent of the city's population, they made up approximately 75 percent of its homicide victims—and perpetrators. More than half of the city's homicide victims were black males as were about 60 percent of the murderers. Put another way, while the city had an overall homicide rate of 5.7 per 100,000, the rate among whites was 1.9 and that for African Americans was 22.5. A long history of exclusion from the discipline of industrial labor reinforced the effects of segregation and racial oppression, producing extremely high levels of homicidal violence.

The question is, what can be done?, which is why this history is important. The homicide crisis was not created in years or even decades, and any attempt to solve it will de-

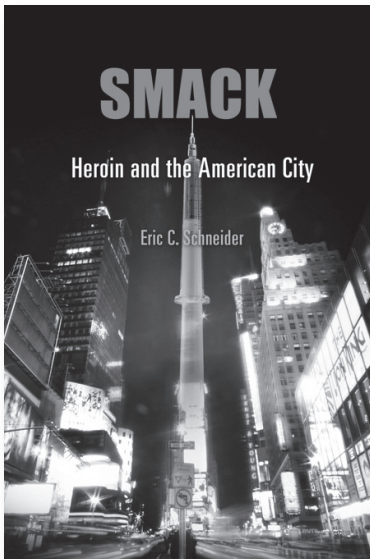
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mand time and patience. Policing and gun control can help: there is evidence that anti-gun patrols force men to keep weapons at home and introduce enough of a time delay in confrontations that reason can trump passion. But such aggressive policing also aggravates community relations in the very communities it intends to protect. Limiting the number of weapons that may be sold to a single individual, enforcing background checks for any gun sale, including private sales, and forbidding the sale of automatic weapons might prevent some homicides, but there are already so many weapons on the street that such politically costly measures are not likely to have much effect.

A more permanent solution is a federal jobs policy. Work has been the antidote to violence in the past, and it can be so again. The long-shuttered factory windows in North Philadelphia are not about to reopen, but we have both a need and an opportunity to invest in infrastructure, in mass transit, and in low-income housing. Such proposals, which less than a year

ago seemed radical, are now seen as key to any economic stimulus package. I would add one caveat: any federal programs introduced to solve our economic crisis must be focused on the residents of those communities hardest hit by the economic restructuring of the last five decades. It is here that the cumulative effects of historic discrimination have been felt the most and where the “negative externalities” of globalization have been concentrated. It is only fair that any remedies should be similarly concentrated. Such a targeted jobs policy provides long-term support for the formation of families and the creation of stable communities. It is our best chance of reshaping this landscape of death, this American necropolis.

Eric Schneider is a historian and Associate Director of Academic Affairs in the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Pennsylvania. His most recent book is *Smack: Heroin and the American City* (2008).



SMACK

Heroin and the American City

Eric C. Schneider

“Schneider’s absorbing history of heroin’s proliferation in America draws a parallel between the evolution and decline of American cities and the rise of heroin use. Rather than treating the city as a “backdrop,” Schneider interprets cities as ‘the organizers of the world opium market,’ and meticulously traces heroin’s ascendancy from early 20th century opium dens to the 1920s jazz milieu and into the suburbs of the late 20th century when heroin finally attracted the attention of the mainstream media.”—*Publisher’s Weekly*

Politics and Culture in Modern America
2008 | 280 pages | 14 illus. | Cloth | \$39.95

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