

Democracy and violent crime

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POLICY BRIEF

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Summary

Homicide rates, an important indicator of violent crime, are lower in societies with strong democratic institutions¹ and cultural values of nonviolence and equality. Though data limitations make conclusions about causality difficult to reach, current research suggests that nations undergoing transitions from autocracy to democracy experience the highest homicide rates. Meanwhile, strong democracies and strong autocracies tend to have the lowest homicide rates.

Scholars continue to explore various theories to explain these relationships between levels of democracy and violent crime. Explanations fall into one of two categories. First, institutional differences between regime types show that strong democracies provide more effective and peaceful means for settling disputes and easing socio-economic inequalities;² nations with weaker democratic institutions and practices do not enjoy these benefits. Strong autocracies manage to control violent crime through more repressive techniques of social control and punishment. The second category contends that democratic values promote nonviolent behavior, discouraging homicide.

To reduce homicide rates, democratic governments should pursue evidence-based policies to reduce inequality and maintain fair and effective criminal justice systems based on a combination of rehabilitation, retribution, deterrence, and incapacitation (for repeat offenders). They should also adopt

About the Project

This policy brief is part of a series of papers on democracy, security, and violent extremism prepared for the Community of Democracies' Democracy and Security Dialogue. The project seeks to foster greater collaboration among democratic governments, donors, civil society and academics to improve security outcomes and create a more conducive environment for the strengthening of democracy around the world. For more on the project and related materials, including the final report, visit www.brookings.edu/democracy-security-dialogue.

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customized strategies that concentrate law enforcement and social services resources on people and places with the highest levels of violent crime. Finally, they should foster inclusive democratic processes at all levels of government and actively promote societal values of human dignity.

What the evidence tells us

Most academic literature in the field of comparative cross-national crime research focuses exclusively on homicide rates because they are thought to be the most accurately collected crime statistic worldwide.³ Nevertheless, quality homicide data are largely restricted to Europe, North America, parts of South America, and highly developed countries in Asia. Moreover, different datasets and analytic techniques have been shown to yield contradictory results.⁴

While the debate on the exact relationship between democracy and homicide is far from settled, LaFree and Tseloni have found evidence for a “Modernization Perspective.”⁵ In this view, homicide rates are lower in stable regimes—be they democratic or autocratic—and higher in transitional democracies. Put another way, democratization is likely to be correlated with a higher level of homicides. Particularly convincing evidence of this stance is offered by Neumayer, whose study included 117 countries over the years 1980-97.⁶

Similarly, a Brookings working paper on democracy and crime observed the modernization perspective in its study of 83 countries between 2000 and 2014.⁷ Based on data from multiple democracy indices correlated with U.N. homicide data, it found the same “inverted U-shaped” relationship between democracy and homicides. Finally, its bivariate analysis suggested that both average homicide rates and the average volatility in homicide rates decreased dramatically in countries that surpassed a certain threshold level of democratization.

As explained by Nivette, researchers have identified other important factors to predict homicide, such as income inequality, divorce rates, and measures of social welfare expenditures and worker protections.⁸ Less powerful predictors included ethnic diversity, poverty indicators like infant mortality, and low levels of human development as measured in the Human Development Index.

Explanations

As Nivette points out, there are two types of explanations offered to explain cross-national homicide rate variation: structural and cultural.⁹ The structural kind includes socio-economic factors like inequality, gross domestic product, ethnic heterogeneity, and education levels. The second kind include “soft,” less quantifiable factors like cultural values, religious practices, and levels of trust. Modernization theorists who analyze the relationship between democracy and homicide offer explanations of both types, but they caution against drawing sweeping conclusions connecting various root causes and homicide.

On the structural side, theorists look to the chaos of periods of political transition to explain the initial increase, then decrease, in homicide rates. Their theoretical narratives usually follow the proceeding logic: Autocracies are often effective at maintaining law and order, albeit in repressive, inhumane ways. Democratization causes a shift in power allocations. As these allocations shift, the state temporarily loses its monopoly on violence, and social controls generally weaken. This weakening leads to a transitory increase in homicide rates. As democratic institutions come into their own, though, the government regains a monopoly on the use of force, and is able to use this monopoly for the wider social benefit.¹⁰

As democracies mature, they tend to establish institutions that give rise to fairer court systems, produce more humane penal systems, and are more widely held

as “legitimate” by their citizens.¹¹ All of these benefits flow from the establishment of substantively democratic institutions, which are argued to prevent homicide. Also, despite much disagreement in the literature, there is consensus that high levels of inequality drive up homicide rates, though the precise causal relationship is unclear. A number of authors find that robust welfare programs, strong workers’ rights, and poverty reduction initiatives are associated with lower murder rates.¹²

Latin America, however, despite experiencing significant though uneven progress over the last few decades in terms of its democratic characteristics, suffers the highest murder rates in the world. The region represents 8 percent of the world’s population but 33 percent of its homicides; between 2000 and 2016, 2.6 million people were murdered.¹³ One explanation for this is the high rates of impunity and lethal violence by police in many countries of the region, which only reinforces the importance of building strong and effective criminal justice systems. Latin American countries also have some of the highest rates of inequality in the world, further underscoring the general finding regarding this factor as a driver of violence. On the other hand, East Asian countries tend to experience lower rates of homicide, regardless of regime type.

On the cultural side, the story is quite similar. In a central article of the field, Karstedt contrasts the autocratic values of “repressive inclusion” with the democratic values of “liberal inclusion.”¹⁴ The former seeks to erase differences between individuals and groups in order to

avoid conflict. But the violence entailed by this erasure breeds resentment, distrust, and anger between citizens. Democratic societies’ values, on the other hand, seek to balance the plurality of private interests with the understanding that all individuals are equal. Both sets of values limit violence, but the democratic one promotes peaceful means of settling disagreements, while the autocratic ones promote violent means. Countries that are partially democratic and partially autocratic have a mixture of both value sets, but this mixture is unable to prevent interpersonal conflict effectively. This last point in particular echoes what Nelson Mandela once said about his country’s period of transition: “We often talk about how a culture of violence can take root. This is indeed true—as a South African who has lived through apartheid and is living through its aftermath, I have seen and experienced it.”¹⁵

In light of this theory, Karstedt finds that countries with strong egalitarian and individualistic cultural values have the lowest homicide rates.¹⁶ Neumayer complements this insight when he argues that government policies “set an example” for their citizens.¹⁷ He shows that nations without the death penalty, for example, have lower homicide rates; “where governments engage in unlawful violation of human rights, political executions, disappearances, and so forth ... [they] set a bad example and encourage violent crime amongst [their] citizens.”¹⁸ Stamatel reinforces this argument with evidence that strong democratic values lower homicide rates directly by promoting nonviolence and indirectly by strengthening democratic institutions.¹⁹

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To reduce homicide rates, democratic states should adopt policies to combat inequality and provide substantive social safety nets. In addition, they should:

- ➔ Establish effective criminal justice systems that uphold due process and balance retribution with rehabilitation;
- ➔ Promote democratic values of individual rights and responsibilities, nonviolence, and nondiscrimination;
- ➔ Strengthen transparent and accountable law enforcement and rule of law institutions, particularly at local levels; and
- ➔ Set nonviolent examples for their citizens by abandoning practices like the death penalty, torture or cruel and unusual punishment, disappearances and extrajudicial killings, and controlling lethal violence in prisons.
- ➔ For governments with mixed records on democracy and human rights, building legitimacy in the eyes of their citizens will help consolidate democratic norms and practices and reduce societal conflict and homicide rates. This can be done, e.g., by avoiding all forms of corruption, reducing rates of impunity, and strengthening the democratic process. Ensuring that democratic processes remain inclusive of all ethnic and religious groups will help reduce societal strife and discourage homicide.

Specific strategies to reduce violent crime should include the following elements:

- ➔ “New, vulnerable democracies” should avoid responding to upticks in crime rates with short-sighted and heavy-handed crackdowns that threaten civil liberties and human rights; instead, they should “introduce evidence- and rights-based counter crime policies in collaboration with civil society.”²⁰
- ➔ Across the spectrum of anti-violence programming, it is well established that interventions focused on the highest risk places, people, and behaviors generate the strongest effects.²¹
- ➔ Violence reduction strategies should include focused deterrence that combines law enforcement, social services, and community resources for targeted interventions in specific areas known to experience high levels of violent crime.²²
- ➔ Cognitive behavioral therapy to help violent offenders deal with anger management and interpersonal problem solving has been shown to reduce recidivism substantially.²³

The epidemic of homicides and other violent crime in Latin America deserves special attention from politicians, policymakers, civil society, donors, and the research community. A concerted campaign coordinated by the Igarapé Institute in Brazil, with participation from leading civil society organizations around the region, has developed a comprehensive list of best practices for reducing homicides by 50 percent in 10 years.

Endnotes

- References to the strength or weakness of democratic governance and human rights are derived from quantitative and qualitative assessments contained in three comparable indices of liberal and electoral democracy (V-Dem), civil liberties and political rights (Freedom House), and regime type (Polity IV). The term “hybrid regimes” refers to countries that fall in the category of weak democracy or weak autocracy, without specific regard to current trends forward or backward.
- It should be noted that stronger democracies with low homicide rates also share a number of other characteristics (higher income levels, stronger social welfare programs, relatively effective criminal justice systems, etc.) which may also affect the results in disparate ways.
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- Amy Nivette, “Cross-National Predictors of Crime: A Meta-Analysis,” *Homicide Studies* 15, no. 2 (2011): 103-31.
- Ibid.
- The contrast between the democratic and autocratic means of suppressing violence is drawn especially clearly by Garoupa and Klerman, who argue that democratic governments are “welfare-maximizing,” whereas autocratic governments are “rent-seeking.” See Nuno Garoupa and Daniel Klerman, “Optimal Law Enforcement with Rent-Seeking Government,” *American Law and Economics Review* 4, no. 1 (2002): 116-40.
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