GOVERNMENT LEGITIMACY, SOCIAL SOLIDARITY, AND AMERICAN HOMICIDE IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Violence Politics & Democracy

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Summary

The recent upturn in homicide in the United States did not begin with the spike of 2020 during the emergency phase of COVID. Homicide rates turned up in 2015, ending over 20 years of declining or stable rates. Randolph Roth puts the violence trends of recent decades in the context of historical patterns in homicide since the arrival of Europeans in what would become the United States, explaining fluctuations in homicide through a deft application of insights from social science and American history.

The factors that correlate most consistently with national and regional homicide rates are those that figure importantly in the never-ending process of nation building, including both governing institutions and social relations. Roth argues that shifts in citizens' beliefs about the legitimacy of government and the character of leadership, feelings of affinity for or alienation from fellow citizens, and acceptance or resentment of the social hierarchy affect the frequency with which Americans inflict lethal violence on each other.

INTRODUCTION

Why has the homicide rate in the United States risen by 60% since 2014, from 4.9 to 7.8 persons per 100,000 per year? And why, more broadly, have homicide rates changed over time in human communities and varied from one community to another? Historians and social scientists can't perform controlled experiments on societies that are changing in many ways at the same time. We can't measure the impact of a specific change while holding everything else in the human experience constant. We can't go back to the 1850s, for instance, and uninvent modern breech-loading handguns to see if the United States would have the high rates of homicide and armed robbery it does today if its citizens were equipped with nothing more than single-shot, muzzle-loading pistols. Our only hope is to engage in "non-experimental empirical research"—to study societies across vast stretches of time and space, looking for deep patterns in human behavior.[1]

Social science historians search for associations among seemingly unique events, as scientists do in geology, evolutionary biology, paleontology, and other "historical" fields. If the associations come up consistently over decades or centuries, they reveal historical patterns that are almost certainly causal. The associations between homicides and the circumstances in which they are most likely to occur have differed for particular types of homicides over the past 450 years in Europe and in European-dominated colonies, including the United States. This is true for intimate partner homicides, for homicides of children by parents or caregivers, and for the homicides that make up the overwhelming majority of homicides and are the focus of this essay: homicides among unrelated adults (friends, acquaintances, strangers).[2]

TODAY'S HOMICIDE PROBLEM
IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The recent rise in the homicide rate in the United States began in 2015, before the dramatic increase of 2020 and 2021 during the lockdown phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. Figure 1 tracks homicide victimization rates from 1928, when we have the first reliable national data on homicides, through 2021.[3] The homicide rate for each age group is indexed to 1959, the year in which the US homicide rate reached its lowest level over the past century. The index on the left indicates by how many multiples the rate for each age group rose from that low point—two times, four times, six times.

FIGURE 1. MULTIPLES OF 1959 HOMICIDE RATES BY AGE, 1928–2021
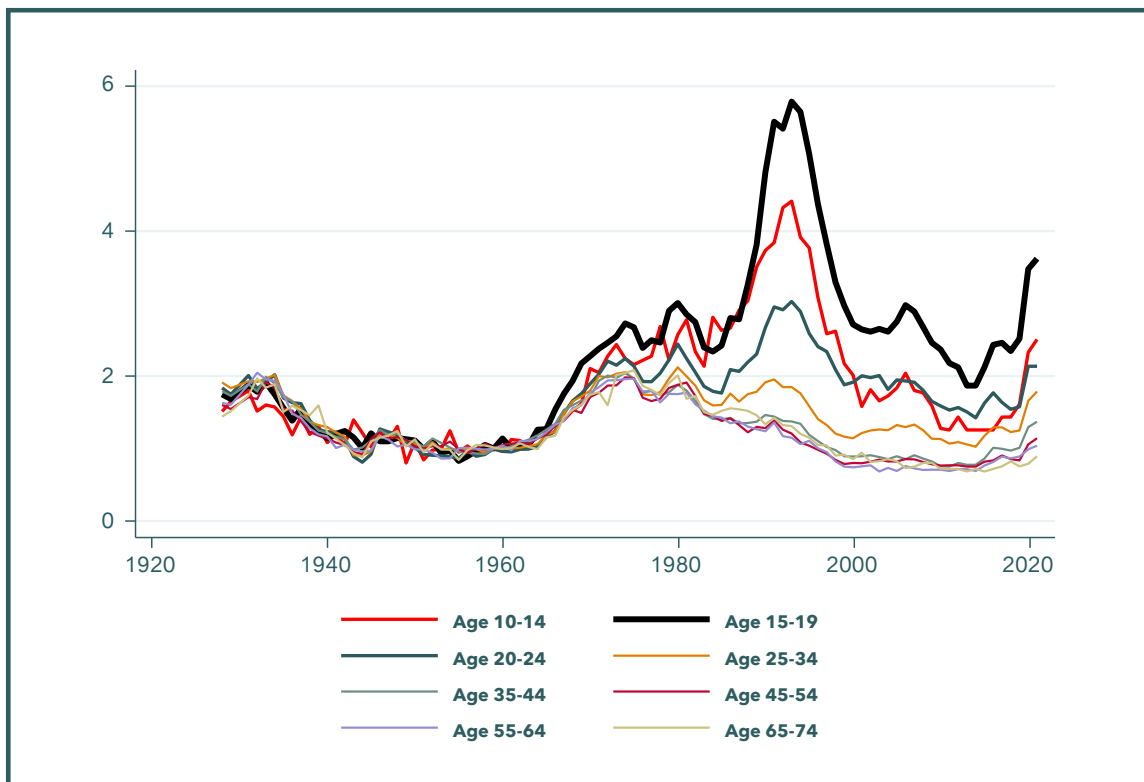
The homicide rates for every age group went up and down in unison from 1928 through the early 1960s. But since then they have diverged by age—a divergence that is unprecedented in US history. The divergence was especially wide in the 1980s and 1990s, when victimization rates for people ages twenty and older declined and youth homicides spiked up and then down. Since 2015, however, rates are once again rising in unison across age groups. Today's rise in homicides is broad-based.

Overall homicide rates aren't as high as they were in the late 1960s, late 1970s, or late 1980s, but they are as high for people ages ten through fourteen and twenty through twenty-four, and higher for those aged fifteen to nineteen. We should not blame this entirely on the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 didn't lead to rises in homicide in every nation across the globe. The United States stands out, as it did in the rate of COVID deaths. The pandemic played a role, but only in the context of broader forces that had already been driving rates up beginning in 2015.

THE DEEP PATTERN: NATION BUILDING, PAST AND PRESENT

In the 1990s, a number of social scientists interested in history, including Gary LaFree, Roger Gould, Manuel Eisner, Richard Rosenfeld, Steven Messner, and me, moved independently toward a new theory, or set of theories, about why homicide rates rise and fall, particularly homicides among unrelated adults.[5] My research shows that the key to low homicide rates is *successful nation building*. Scholars who have studied nationalism and state formation have long noted that to be successful, nations must not only establish and maintain governing institutions but also command the loyalty of their citizens. Loyalty, however, is difficult to win and sustain, even after nations have formed, because it depends on emotions and beliefs that ebb and flow, making nations stronger or weaker. Nation building is a continuous process—not something that can be declared complete at a specific point in time.[6]

The four correlates of successful nation building over the past 450 years in the Western world, each crucially entailing emotions and beliefs, have been:

> Political stability: The belief that government is stable and that its legal and judicial institutions will protect lives and property.

> Legitimate social hierarchy: The belief that the social hierarchy is legitimate, that one's position in society is or can be satisfactory and that one can command the respect of others without resorting to violence. In the United States, that has depended to a large degree on the promise of upward mobility for oneself and one's children.

> Fellow feeling: Patriotism, empathy, and sympathy arising from racial, religious, or political solidarity.

> Legitimate government: A feeling of trust in government and the officials who run it, and a belief in their legitimacy: their honesty, competence, fairness, and willingness to listen to the concerns of citizens.

These sentiments and attitudes can grow stronger or weaker, depending on the degree to which people trust each other and their society's institutions. When they are weak—which is especially the case during periods of political instability—homicide rates can soar into the tens and even hundreds per 100,000 persons per year. But when they are strong, homicide rates can fall below 1 to 2 per 100,000 persons per year. [7]

These emotions and beliefs are closely related as well; the absence of one usually means at least a partial absence of another. They also have a synergistic relationship with the homicide rate. When the homicide rate rises, for instance, because of a perceived loss of government legitimacy or a decline in fellow-feeling, the rise in homicide itself can undermine the belief that government can protect lives and that citizens care about each other and thereby bring about a further increase in homicide. An increase in homicide can also change the character of a society's social hierarchy and make violence a means of winning respect. Homicide rates can then soar. But when citizens believe their government is stable and legitimate, when they feel a strong bond with their fellow citizens, and when they believe that their society's social hierarchy is just and that violence isn't necessary for respect, homicide rates can fall. In most societies, these beliefs and emotions have been neither entirely absent nor universally shared, which is why historical homicide rates in most societies have fallen between the extremes.

Nation building isn't necessarily a benign process. In the early years of their reigns, Mussolini and Napoleon were quite successful nation builders, and the homicide rates in Italy and France fell accordingly. Strong nations are not necessarily inclusive or democratic, nor are they unwilling to wage war against outsiders or engage in state-sponsored and vigilante violence against targeted minorities within their polities. Nation building can, however, be inclusive and democratic—and in a diverse society like the United States, with its strong democratic traditions, history shows that that is the only way forward, however much majorities or militant minorities may wish to impose their will on others. We need only think back to the first decades after the American Revolution, when the northern United States had in all likelihood the lowest homicide rate in the Western world, and the lowest in our nation's history, not only because of political stability and an outpouring of patriotic feeling, but because the promise of the Revolution was being realized with the end of slavery and indentured servitude, the rapid expansion of voting rights (for property-owning men), and widespread family ownership of shops and farms.[8]

5

POLITICAL STABILITY

The association between homicide rates and the first correlate, government stability, is especially evident on contested frontiers and during revolutions, civil wars, and hostile military occupations. If no government can establish uncontested authority and impose law and order, if political elites are deeply divided and there is no continuity of power or orderly succession, we can lose faith in the effectiveness or impartiality of political, legal, and judicial institutions. We may take up arms on behalf of political factions or ethnic or religious groups and kill without restraint.[9]

How can we measure political instability, apart from complete state breakdown? The most significant measure of political instability that I have found over the course of American history—one that correlates almost perfectly with the ups and downs of the rate of everyday homicides among unrelated adults—is the number of protests and riots that lead to fatalities. Not all protests and riots, but protests or riots that end in lethal violence by the authorities, against the authorities, or among civilians. I developed a broad-based measure of political instability for the colonial and revolutionary era based on incidence of deadly riots during political disputes as well as on executions for sedition or treason and on banishments of political dissidents (Figure 2).[10]

FIGURE 2. DEADLY RIOTS OR REBELLIONS, EXECUTIONS, AND FORCED EXILES FOR TREASON OR SEDITION, 1607-1800
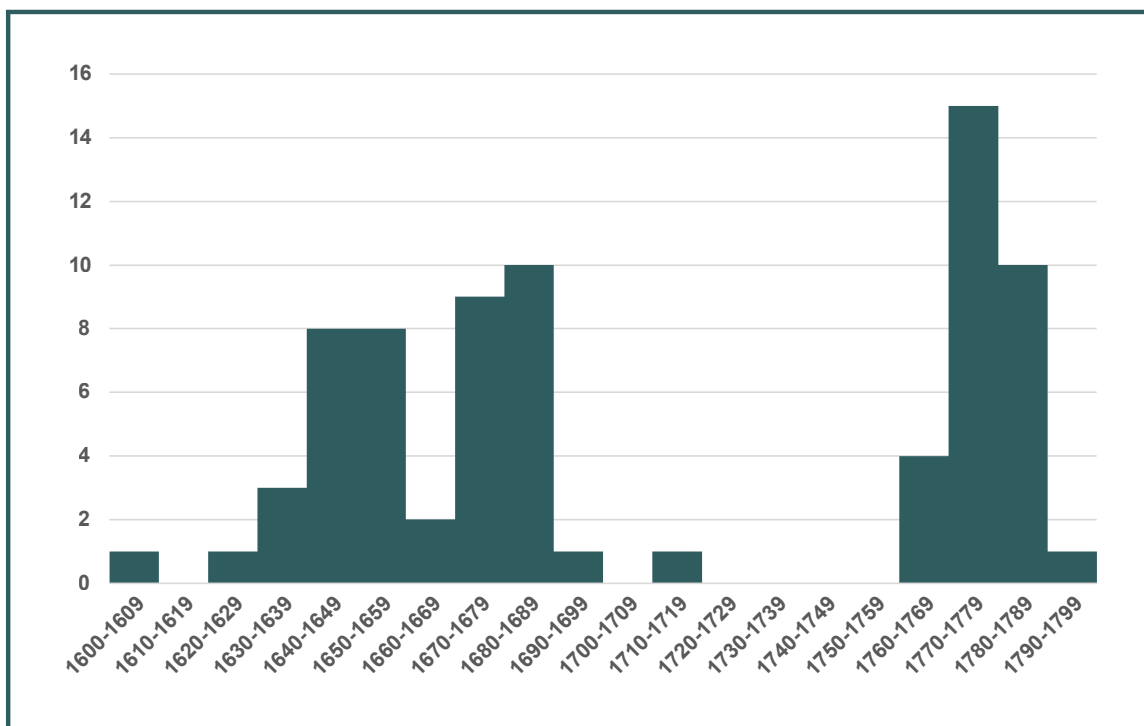
This measure mirrored the rate among unrelated adults of everyday homicides, such as those resulting from drunken brawls, honor killings, and deadly feuds over property. It was high in the seventeenth century because of domestic revolts like Bacon's Rebellion in Virginia (1675–1676), and because of political confrontations triggered in the colonies by upheavals in Britain such as the English Civil War (1639–1650) and the Glorious Revolution (1688–1689). Once political stability returned to Great Britain and its colonies, this measure fell. But it rose again during the Stamp Act crisis of 1765 and remained high through the Revolution, until political stability returned with ratification of the Constitution and the formation of the new national government.[11]

The same holds for the nineteenth century (as shown by Paul Gilje's database on the history of riots in the United States, compiled by Peter Turchin[12]): deaths in riots and protests correlated with the rate of ordinary homicides among unrelated adults. They surged during the Sectional Crisis from the Mexican War through the Civil War and Reconstruction, declined slightly at the end of Reconstruction as an uneasy peace settled on the nation, and rebounded in the South in the late nineteenth century with the imposition of segregation and disfranchisement and in the North with de facto segregation and disfranchisement of African Americans and immigrants from southern and eastern Europe (Figure 3).

FIGURE 3. DEADLY RIOTS IN THE UNITED STATES, 1800-1900
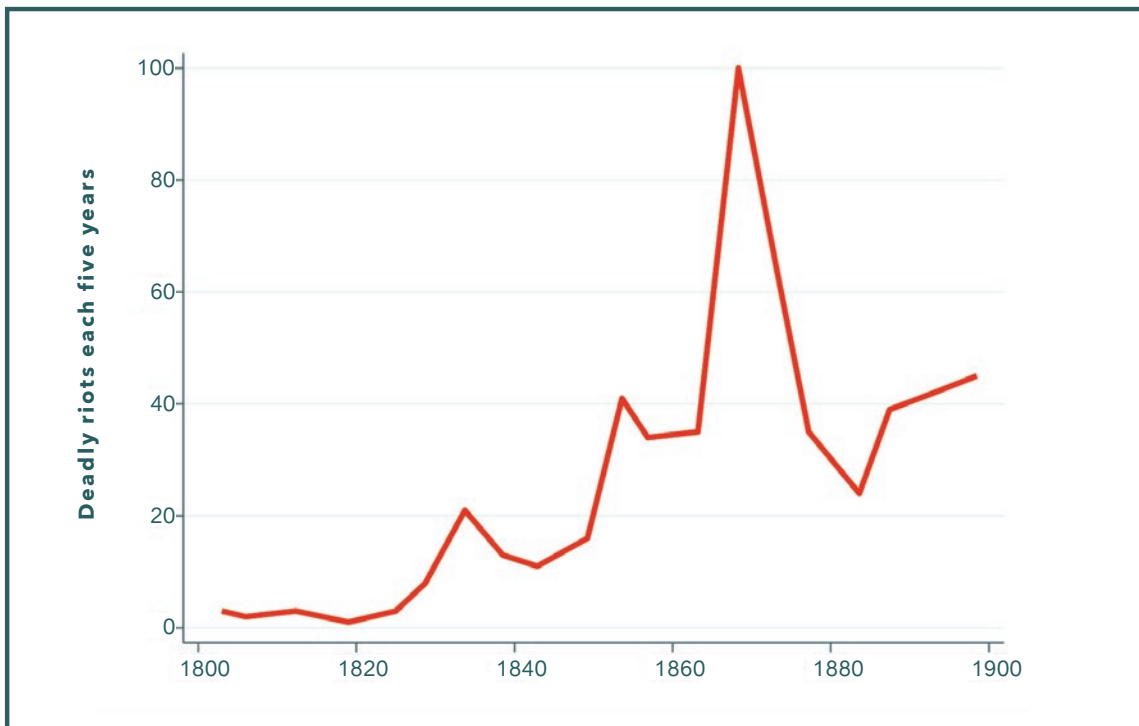
The surge in homicide from the mid-1960s through the early 1990s exhibited the same parallel with civil unrest, from the deadly riots in the summer of 1964 through the Rodney King riot in Los Angeles in 1992. Today's homicide crisis also follows the same arc, from the 2014 protests surrounding the death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, through the 2016 Malheur Wildlife Refuge uprising in eastern Oregon; the 2017 White supremacist protest and counter-protest in Charlottesville, Virginia; the riots that followed the death of George Floyd in 2020; and the January 6, 2021, insurrection in Washington, DC.

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. These deadly encounters in turn intensify the political instability of our society. There are many forces and factions in our society today, especially among elites, that are driving us toward political instability, wittingly or not: 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. All, I suggest, have contributed to the recent surge in homicide.

LEGITIMATE SOCIAL HIERARCHY

The perceived legitimacy of the social hierarchy is a somewhat independent variable. Whereas the other correlates rise and fall in lockstep with each other, it follows its own path, in a gradual, grinding way. It does not influence homicide as strongly as the other correlates do, but it can amplify or dampen their effects. In practice it means that when people feel that their positions in society are satisfactory and that they will be able to earn the respect of others in legitimate ways, they are more likely to turn the other cheek if they are slighted at a social gathering, take it in stride if someone beats them at a game of cards, seek a legal remedy if they are cheated in a business deal, or maintain their composure if someone bumps into them on a dance floor. Such encounters do not become matters of life or death as long as people's reputations are secure or improving. But when the social hierarchy loses its legitimacy—when there is a yawning gap between what society promises and what it delivers—any show of disrespect, imagined or real, can lead to violence.

Historically, illegitimate social hierarchies have been most likely to provoke violence when people previously free have been forced to the bottommost rung of society. That occurred in years when indentured servitude was common; when racial slavery was first established; and during the rise of legal segregation, disfranchisement, and lynching, when the Jim Crow system was established in the South. In those situations, both oppressors and the oppressed were more likely to kill and be killed. There have been many other instances, however, in which the legitimacy of the social hierarchy was undermined in a slow way, which increased the level of violence gradually. Two such examples are the decline by a third in the real wages of the poorest forty percent of the population in Western Europe in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries and the decline in self-employment in the United States in the nineteenth century, as fewer and fewer families had the capital necessary to own a shop or farm.

In the last four decades or so, the greatest threat to the legitimacy of the social hierarchy in the United States has been the end of intergenerational upward mobility for the children of parents in the bottom half of the income distribution. As Raj Chetty and his colleagues have discovered, the promise that American children will be better off than their parents has not been kept for a growing number of families. The odds that children of parents in the bottom half of the income distribution would be better off than their parents by the age of thirty peaked for the generation that came of age in 1965 and has been declining steadily ever since. The odds today are only 50-50.[13]

The decline in intergenerational upward mobility in the United States has been caused by the increase in economic inequality since 1980, which has seen nearly all of the benefits of economic growth go to the wealthiest 1% of the population, at the expense of citizens in the bottom half of the income distribution. It is easy to blame the rise in inequality on deindustrialization, globalization, immigration, and technological change. But the redistribution of income from the poorest half of the population to the 1% has been far greater in the United States than in other affluent democratic nations, with the exception of Great Britain, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand—the other European-dominated societies of the former British empire (Figure 4).[14]

FIGURE 4. INCOME SHARE OF TOP 1% VS. BOTTOM 50%, US AND WESTERN EUROPE, 1980-2016
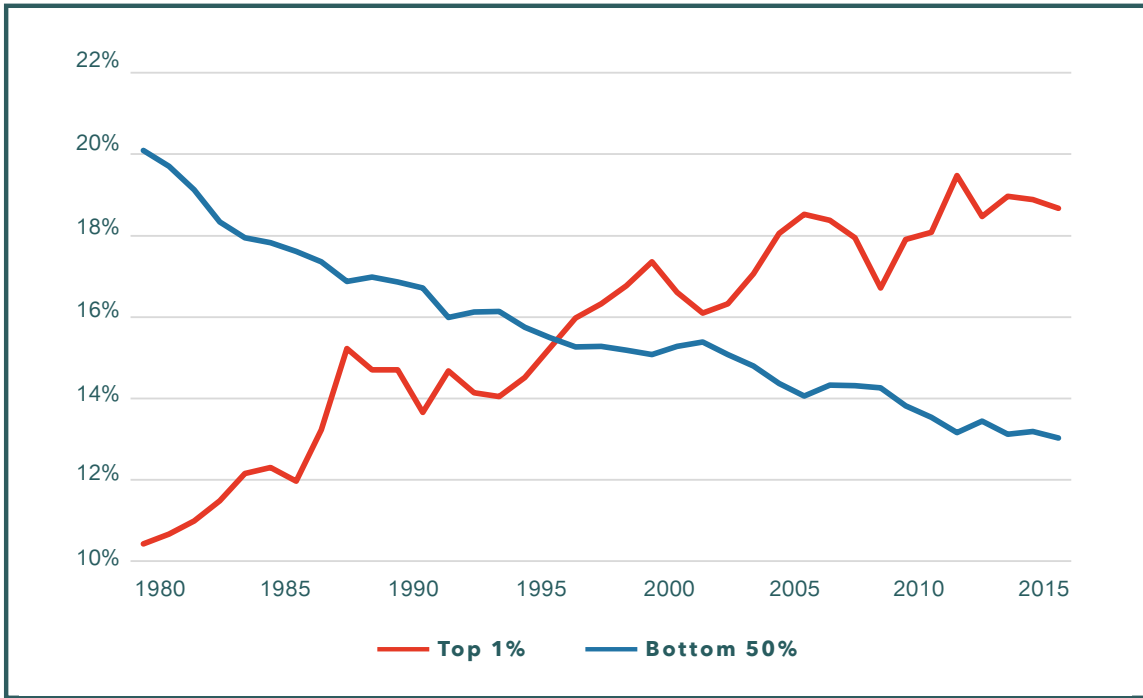
United States
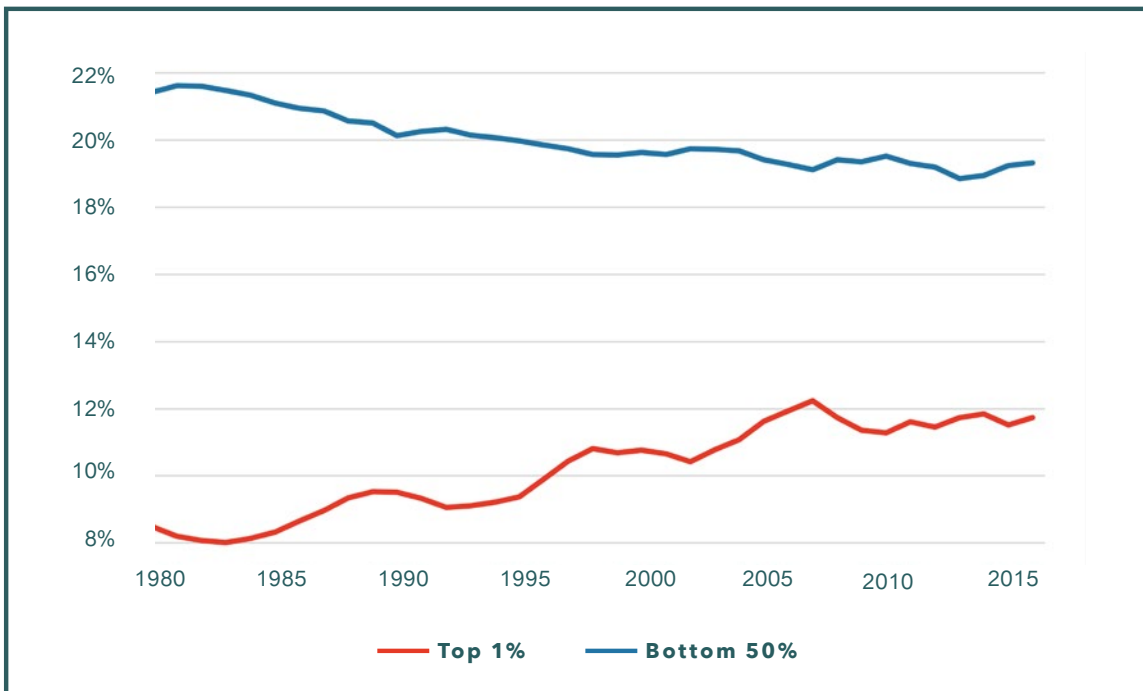
Western Europe

Continental Europe and Japan have not experienced an increase in inequality, largely because of public policy rather than because they have confronted different economic challenges.

The consequence of the growing loss of faith in America's social hierarchy has been stark. In the period 1999-2015, among families with parents in the bottom half of the US income distribution, homicide rates increase threefold if we compare counties with the highest rates of intergenerational mobility to those with the lowest rates of intergenerational mobility, using Chetty's index of relative intergenerational mobility.[15]

FIGURE 5. COUNTY HOMICIDE RATES FOR AFRICAN AMERICANS, 1999-2015, VS. INTERGENERATIONAL MOBILITY FOR CHILDREN OF PARENTS AT 25TH INCOME PERCENTILE

FIGURE 6. COUNTY HOMICIDE RATES FOR HISPANIC AMERICANS, 1999-2015, VS. INTERGENERATIONAL MOBILITY FOR CHILDREN OF PARENTS AT 25TH INCOME PERCENTILE

FIGURE 7. COUNTY HOMICIDE RATES FOR EUROPEAN AMERICANS, 1999-2015, VS. INTERGENERATIONAL MOBILITY FOR CHILDREN OF PARENTS AT 25TH INCOME PERCENTILE

The absolute homicide rates differ, because African American and Hispanic American parents and their children are more likely to live in poverty and concentrated disadvantage than European American parents and children. But the impact of the loss of faith in our nation's social hierarchy and the opportunities it offers for advancement has been broad-based. It will require additional research to determine who within hard-hit counties is most likely to commit murder or be murdered. But at the level of neighborhoods and communities, it is clear that the resentment, frustration, and feelings of powerlessness generated by the failure of the United States to live up to its promise of upward mobility have been associated with an increase in the hostile and defensive emotions that lead to violence, especially, I would argue, a heightened sensitivity toward any sign of disrespect and a willingness to embrace antisocial means of gaining respect.

FELLOW FEELING

Nothing controls homicide within a social group more powerfully than a sense of connectedness that extends beyond the bounds of family and neighborhood and forges a strong bond among people who share race, ethnicity, religion, or nationality. If the members of a group identify with other members, even those they do not know personally, the trust, empathy, good will, and fellow feeling that accompany this connection can deter homicide within the group. But solidarity is a double-edged sword: it can limit homicide within a group and at the same time incite homicides between members of different social groups. When humans draw the boundary between "us" and "them" in a way that excludes a substantial portion of the population, the potential for homicide is high. Nationalists who question the patriotism of fellow citizens are one group that is likely to turn violent. But people are also dangerous when they feel no bond with other members of their society, when they are isolated and unable to form close ties with people, when they fear or hate their fellow citizens, and when they fear domination, have a will to dominate others, or both. Ironically, they are most likely to take out their anger and frustration on people in their own communities—friends, neighbors, and acquaintances—people most like themselves—because they carry their anger and frustration with them everywhere, together with their fear of domination or determination to dominate others. Any sign of disrespect or effort to ride roughshod over them can set them off.

Historically, the strongest correlate of the homicide rate in the United States from colonial times through the nineteenth century was the percentage of new counties formed in any decade that were named after national heroes: notable Britons in the colonial era and notable Americans in the national era (Figure 8).[16]
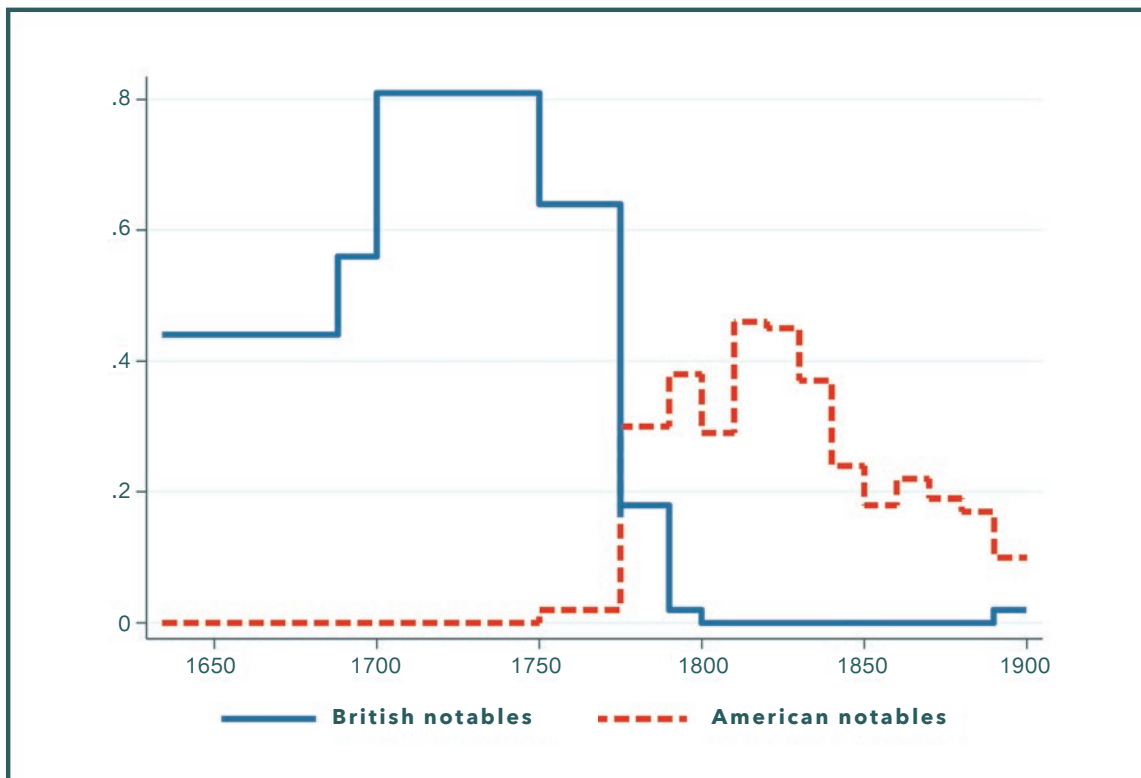
Naming counties after heroes was an unconscious way of expressing faith in one's nation and fellow citizens. When the percentages were high—as they were from the Glorious Revolution (1688–1689) through the French and Indian War (1754–1763), and from the War of 1812 to the Mexican War (1846–1848)—homicide rates reached the lowest point in our nation's history. When the percentages declined, as they did during the Imperial Crisis (the period when relations between England and America deteriorated, from 1763 to 1775) and during the Sectional Crisis (1845–1861), homicide rates soared.

It is also possible to measure fellow feeling at the level of communities in the colonial and revolutionary eras by looking at divisive events such as executions for witchcraft or heresy; banishments of religious dissidents; and deadly riots over such matters as bread, labor disputes, suspected arsons, or dissections of bodies.

FIGURE 9. DEADLY COMMUNITY RIOTS AND EXECUTIONS OR FORCED EXILE FOR HERESY, WITCHCRAFT, OR MORAL OFFENSES, 1607-1800
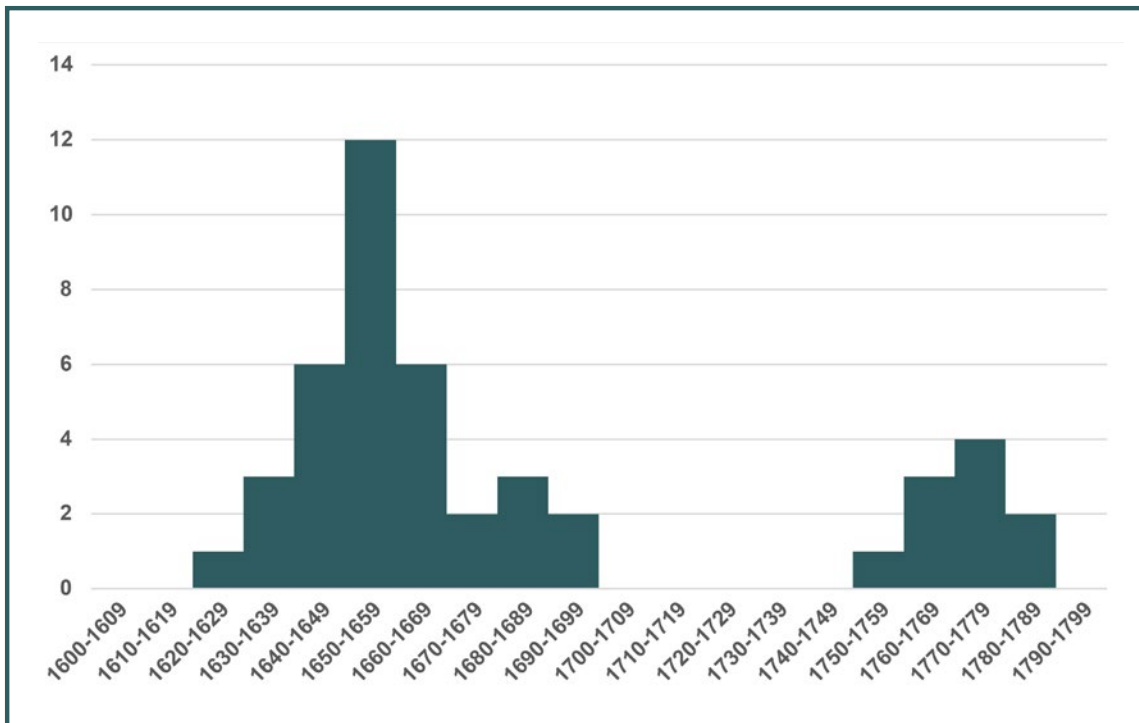
These measures of hostility among neighbors are positively correlated with the homicide rate among unrelated adults.

The connection between fellow feeling and homicide can also be traced in the nineteenth century through the incidence of hateful language in publications, such as the use of the N-word to slander African Americans and their allies, and the use of the phrase "Slave Power" to foment anger against slaveowners and their allies.[17]

**FIGURE 10. RELATIVE FREQUENCY OF N-WORD
IN AMERICAN BOOKS, 1800–1890**
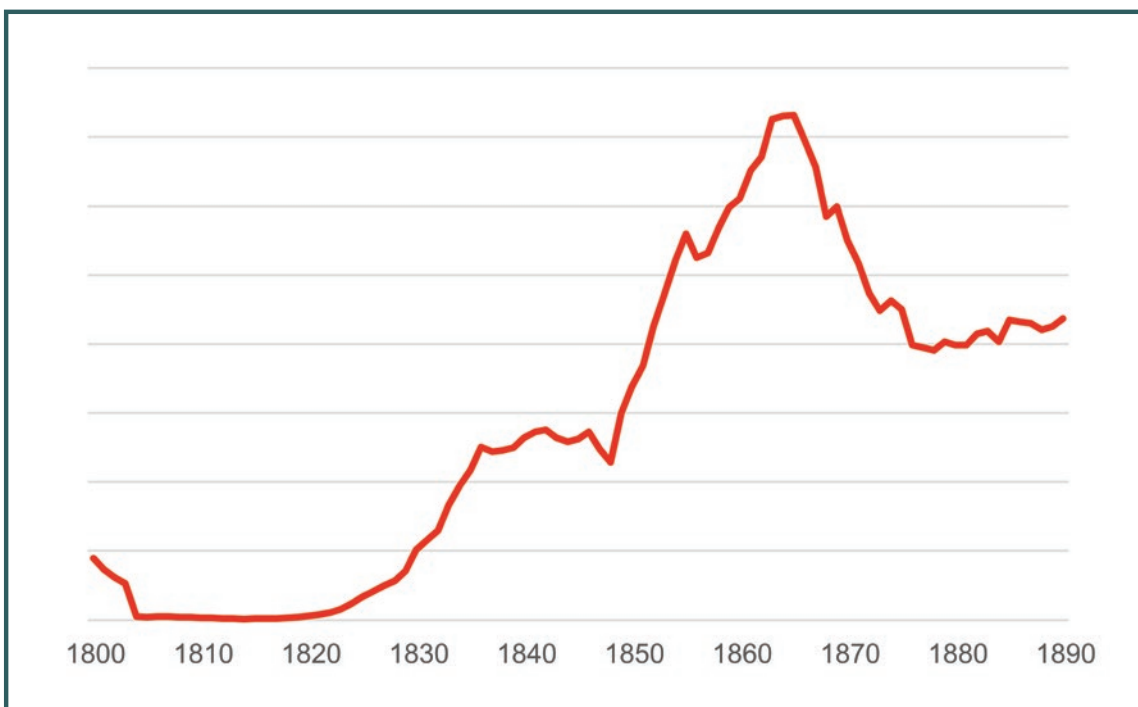
**FIGURE 11. RELATIVE FREQUENCY OF "SLAVE POWER"
IN AMERICAN BOOKS, 1800–1890**

Note that the use of hateful language generally followed the same pattern as deadly riots and protests in the nineteenth century (Figure 3). When Americans have felt estranged from their fellow Americans, homicide rates have soared, especially when alienation has led to hatred and a sense that other Americans are trying to oppress them, smear them, deny them opportunities, steal their wealth or work, take away their freedom, or destroy their way of life.

The decline in fellow feeling has played out most dramatically in recent decades among young men of color in the most disadvantaged urban neighborhoods. Their anger toward many of their fellow Americans, along with their determination to dominate in response to perceived efforts to dominate them, has led to high levels of violence, especially when they have been challenged or have felt disrespected. But the same appears to be true for European Americans who resent people of color, especially in our most disadvantaged rural neighborhoods. Who are angry European Americans and non-European Americans most likely to kill? The people most likely to disrespect them in their daily lives—friends, neighbors, and acquaintances of their own race.

Consider the impact of racial resentment among European Americans, measured by an index based on the presidential vote for George Wallace in 1968 and recent opinion polls that include separate measures of resentment toward immigrants, African Americans, and affirmative action.[18] Again, it will require additional research to determine who within counties with high levels of racial resentment engages in particular kinds of behavior. We can only look at associations at this point. But we can see at a glance, from the Cook Index of firearms ownership,[19] that gun ownership at the county level rises with hostility toward people of color.
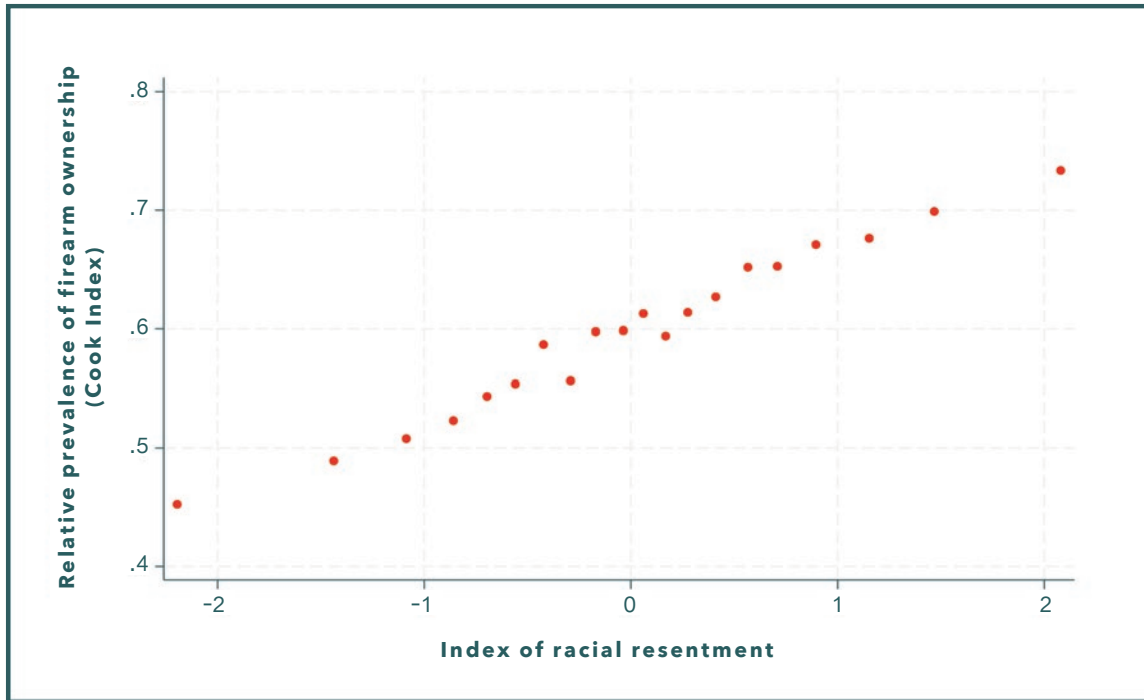
That is not to say that gun owners are ipso facto racist, but rather that European Americans who live in counties with a high proportion of residents who resent their fellow Americans on the basis of race are far more likely to own firearms. That pattern extends back deep into the colonial and Revolutionary eras, when Southern slaveowners were by far the most heavily armed Americans. And it extends down to the present in opinion polls that show that European Americans who resent people of color are far more likely to hold extreme positions on gun rights, especially in counties in the South that had the highest proportion of people enslaved in 1860 (not the highest proportions of African Americans or other minorities today but on the eve of the Civil War). These are attitudes that have been handed down through generations of White residents in these areas—a sign of their defensiveness and hostility toward their fellow Americans.[20]

What happens in counties where resentful White people are so heavily armed? One consequence is that, because there are guns in their homes, they and their loved ones die at higher rates of firearms accidents and suicide.

FIGURE 13. FATAL COUNTY FIREARMS ACCIDENT RATES FOR EUROPEAN AMERICANS, 1999-2015, VS. INDEX OF RACIAL RESENTMENT AMONG EUROPEAN AMERICANS
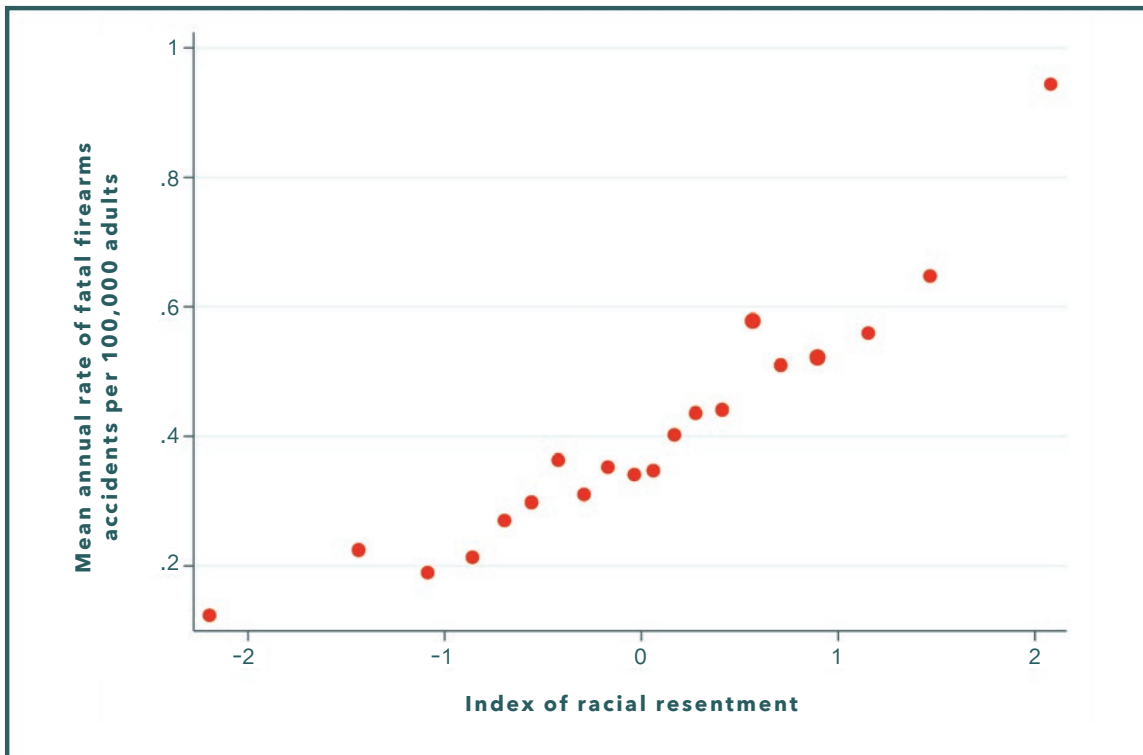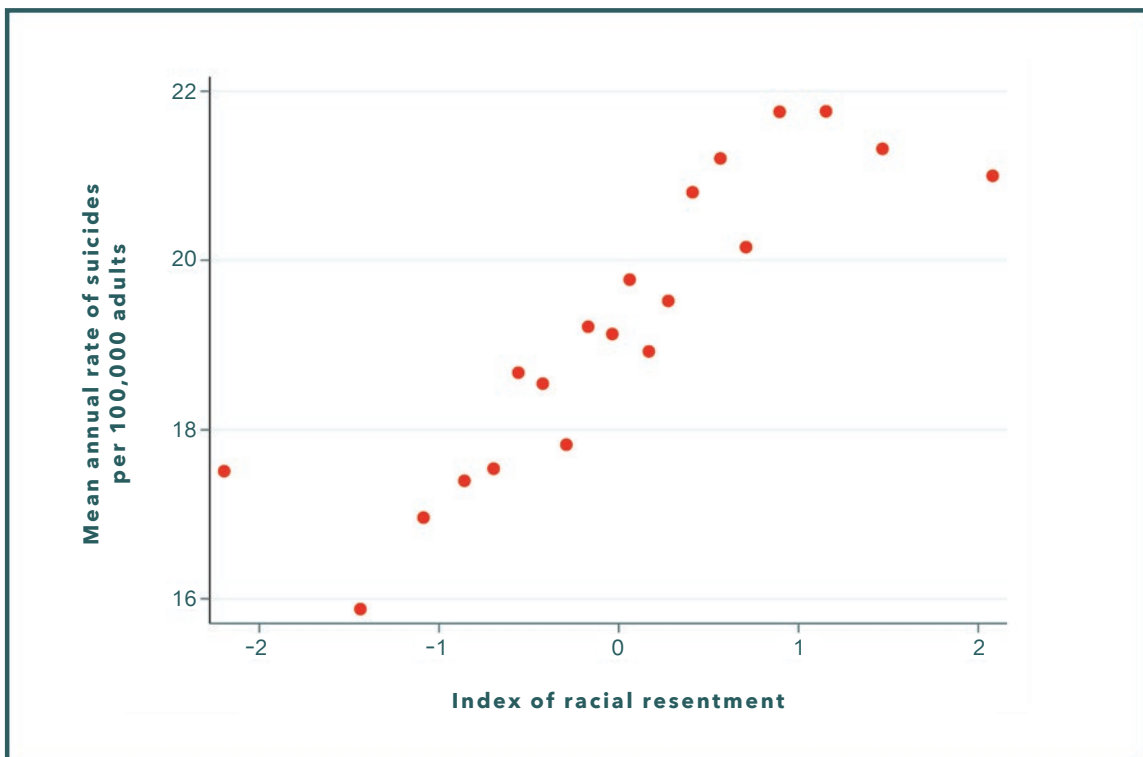

FIGURE 14. COUNTY SUICIDE RATES FOR EUROPEAN AMERICANS, 1999-2015, VS. INDEX OF RACIAL RESENTMENT AMONG EUROPEAN AMERICANS

Their resentment, which is rooted in the feeling that they are in danger of being dominated, displaced, or replaced, appears to make them as jealous of their reputations as disadvantaged men of color and as quick to lash out at any sign of disrespect. So, like angry men of color, angry White men are more likely to kill. And, as is universally true, their victims are almost always people of their own race.[21]

FIGURE 15. COUNTY HOMICIDE RATES FOR EUROPEAN AMERICANS, 1999–2015, VS. INDEX OF RACIAL RESENTMENT AMONG EUROPEAN AMERICANS
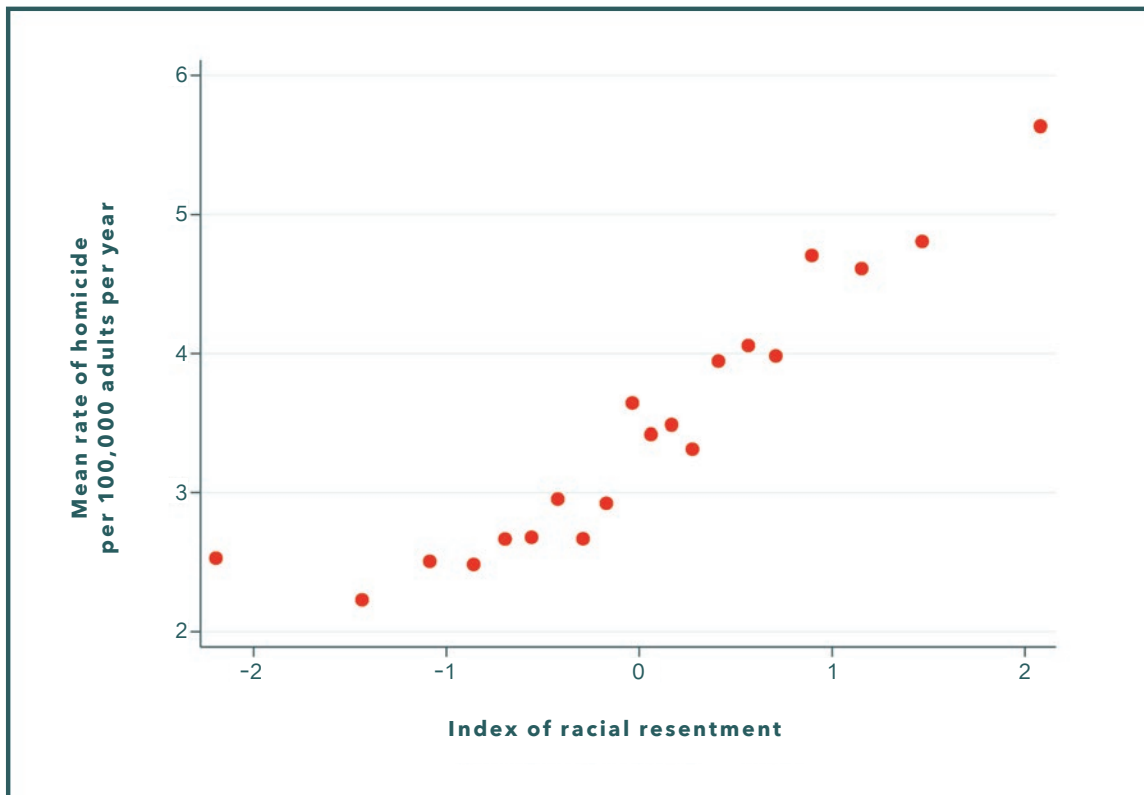
Those who wish to restrict teaching and research on the history of race in America are in denial about an important fact: racial antagonism doesn't just hurt people of color. It hurts everyone—in our cities, suburbs, small towns, and rural communities.

We can build a robust statistical model of the social and geographical context of homicides of European Americans by drawing on county-level indices of racial resentment and intergenerational mobility, together with three well-established correlates of homicide risk (socioeconomic disadvantage, drug deaths, and gun ownership) and a measure of collective efficacy (faith in the ability of a community to work together to accomplish shared goals). One of the best measures to assess collective efficacy, which depends on fellow feeling, is the Gallup-Healthways survey's community well-being index: the degree to which residents are proud of their communities, feel safe and secure, have access to parks, safe water, and affordable fruits and vegetables, and are recognized for their efforts to improve their communities.[22] Together, these six variables can explain 69% of the county-level variation in European American homicide rates (Table 1).[23]

TABLE 1. FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH HOMICIDE RATE OF EUROPEAN AMERICAN ADULTS, 1999-2015

|	Beta	Interquartile spread	10th to 90th percentile spread
Disadvantage (EA)	.29	.74	1.44
Drug deaths (EA)	.29	.68	1.35
Gun ownership (EA)	.19	.48	0.93
Racial resentment (EA)	.16	.38	0.78
Intergenerational mobility	-.11	-.29	-0.57
Community well-being	-.13	-.36	-0.68
r2 = 0.69			

As we might expect, the most powerful correlates of homicides of European Americans are socioeconomic disadvantage, drug deaths, and gun ownership. These factors are in themselves symptoms of unsuccessful nation building in a society that is affluent but in which poverty, despair, hostility, and fear are nevertheless all too common. But when we look at the substantive impact of the variables by examining the interquartile spreads—the degree to which the homicide rate rises or falls as we move from the 25th percentile to the 75th percentile in the measure of each variable, holding the other variables constant—it is clear that fellow feeling and the legitimacy of the social hierarchy have important impacts, raising or lowering the homicide rate for European American adults above or below its mean. Across its interquartile spread, racial resentment is associated with an increase over the mean of 0.38 homicides per 100,000 adults per year, and intergenerational mobility and community well-being are associated with decreases of 0.36 and 0.29 per 100,000 adults per year. Since the mean rate for European American adults was 3.05, each variable accounts for roughly a 10% difference in the mean homicide rate across the middle half of that variable's distribution. If we consider the degree to which the homicide rate rises or falls as we move from the 10th percentile to the 90th percentile in the measure of each variable, the respective impacts of the measures of racial resentment, intergenerational mobility, and community well-being are even greater: 0.78, -0.57, and -0.68. Each variable, in other words, accounts for roughly a 20-to-25% difference in the mean county homicide rate across the middle 80% of the variable's distribution. Fellow feeling and belief in the legitimacy of the social hierarchy are powerful deterrents to homicide.

LEGITIMATE GOVERNMENT

The final requisite for building and maintaining a strong nation is legitimate government. It has to do with trust and perceived fairness. If I feel empowered, if I feel included in the community, if I feel as if 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 as they might if I felt powerless in society, if I felt as if I couldn't get a fair shake from my government, and if I felt alienated from my neighbors. Small disagreements and indignities that I might otherwise brush off as insignificant might enrage me and could even lead to violence.

Gary LaFree discovered a robust association between trust in the federal government and the homicide rate. He focused on two questions that had been asked by the American National Election Survey since the 1950s.[24] The questions were prefaced by asking respondents to answer not on the basis of their political affiliation, but as citizens, as they thought about the state of the nation.

FIGURE 16. PERCENTAGE OF AMERICANS WHO "TRUST THE GOVERNMENT TO DO WHAT IS RIGHT MOST OF THE TIME" VS. HOMICIDE RATE, 1958-2002 (R2 = .66)
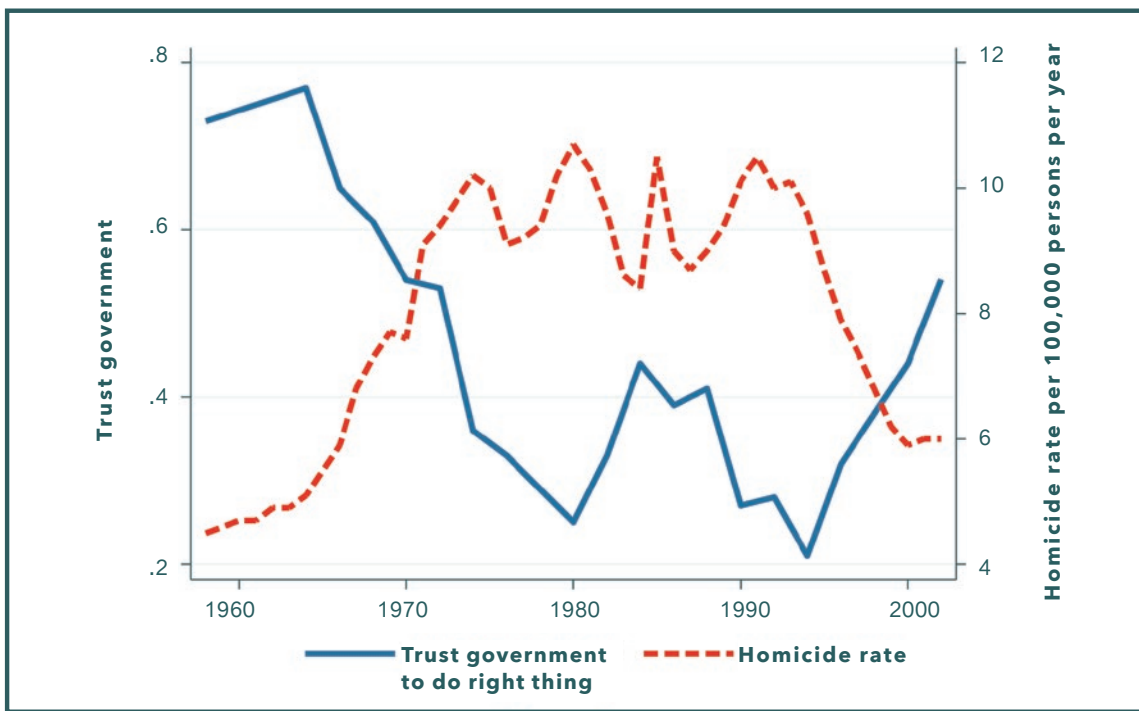
The other question asked if they believed many public officials are crooked.

FIGURE 17. PERCENTAGE OF AMERICANS WHO BELIEVE THAT "QUITE A FEW PEOPLE RUNNING THE GOVERNMENT ARE CROOKED" VS. HOMICIDE RATE, 1958-2002 (R2 = .63)
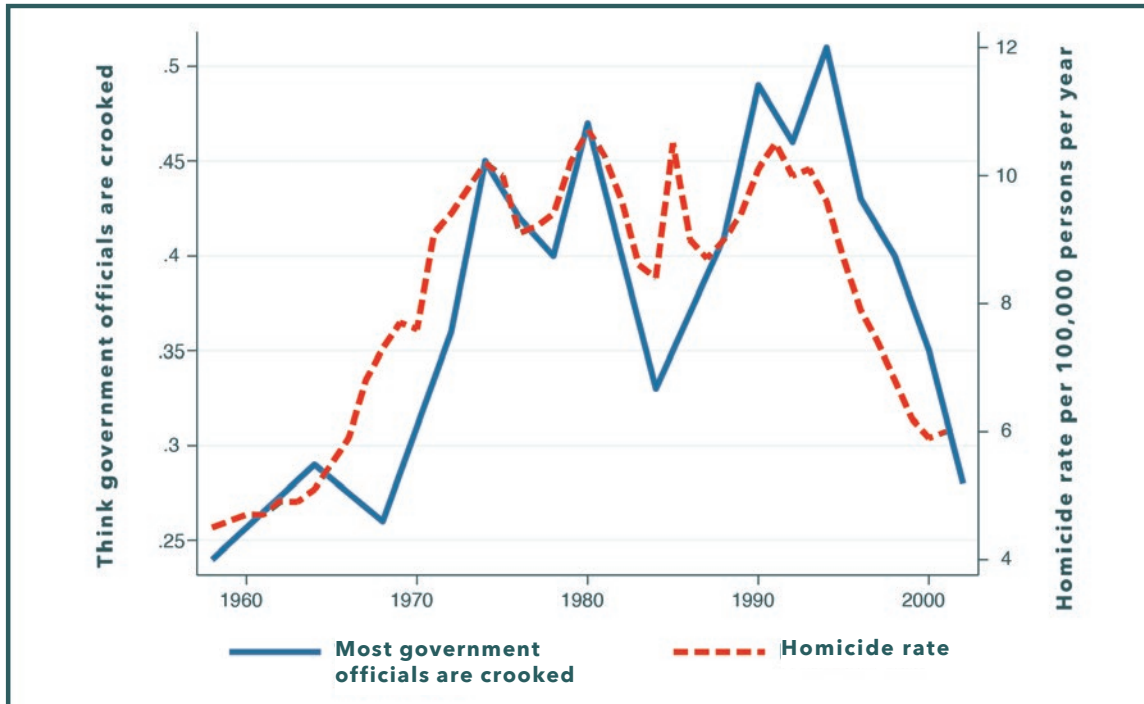

Legitimacy matters.

Unfortunately, the survey on which LaFree relied has since been fouled by partisanship, so it is no longer a reliable measure of government legitimacy. Respondents have registered their level of trust in government largely on the basis of whether or not the party they support has been in power. But there are other signs that trust in government affects the homicide rate. Shytierra Gaston, Jamein Cunningham, and Rob Gillezeau tested the importance of legitimacy when they studied the rise in homicide in 2015 and 2016 that followed Michael Brown's death in 2014. They found that the rise in homicide was greatest among Black men in cities where an unarmed Black man had been killed by the police.[25]

We can also consider the impact of Obama's 2008 election as the first African American president, and of the optimism and hope for change he represented, not only for African Americans, but for all youths and young adults. Young people's hopes for the future for themselves and their children did indeed rise after the election, despite the hardships of the Great Recession.[26] Obama's election posed a threat, however, to those White non-Hispanic voters who were hostile to the idea of electing a person of color and whose trust in government and belief in its legitimacy declined, as evidenced by the rise of the "Birther" movement, animated by the lie that Obama was born outside of the United States and thus not a legitimate president; the movement also fostered the lie that Obama was Muslim.

An ingenious map in the *New York Times* tried to gauge the level of hostility to electing an African American president by looking at the shift between 2004 and 2008 in the Republican presidential vote share.[27]

FIGURE 18. GROWTH IN REPUBLICAN PRESIDENTIAL VOTE BETWEEN 2004 AND 2008

Percent Change
0   0.2
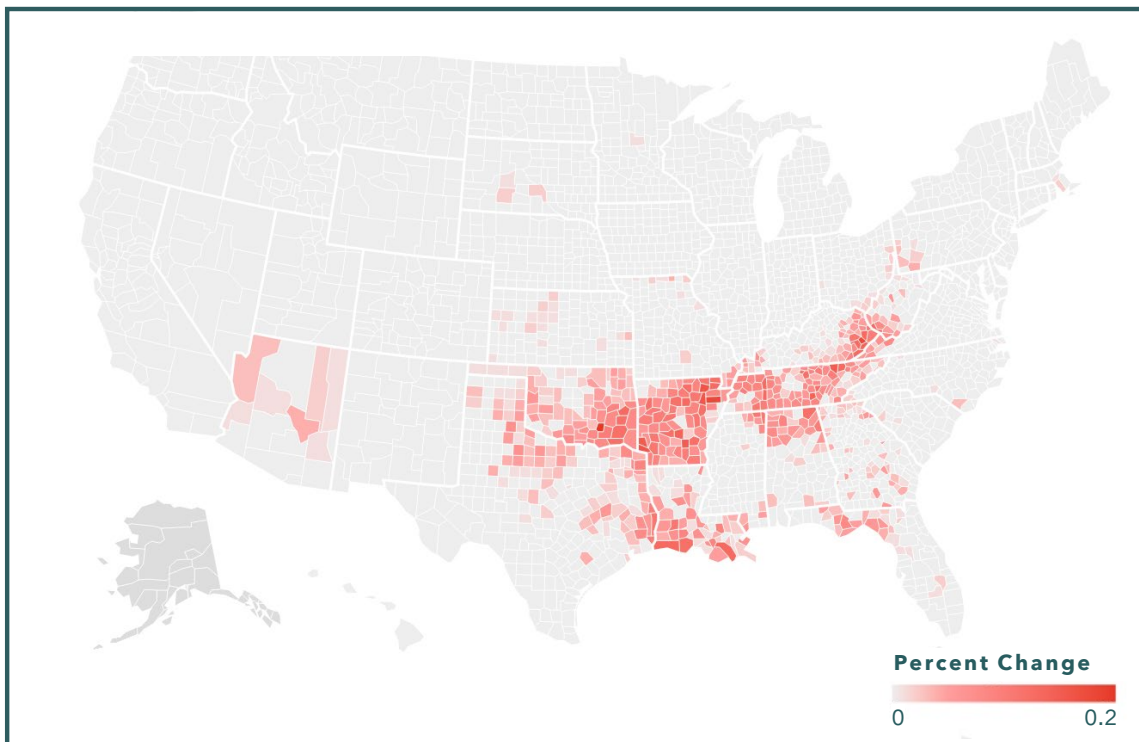
The shading represents the county-level percentage shifts toward the Republican candidate, with darker shades indicating greater shifts. The map identifies a swath of Appalachia from New York to Mississippi in which Obama carried only forty-four counties. Heavier vote shifts toward the Republican Party occurred in counties with greater degrees of racial resentment among European American voters, as shown in Figure 19.

FIGURE 19. PERCENTAGE GAIN IN COUNTY REPUBLICAN PRESIDENTIAL VOTE FROM 2004 TO 2008 VS. INDEX OF EUROPEAN AMERICAN RACIAL RESENTMENT
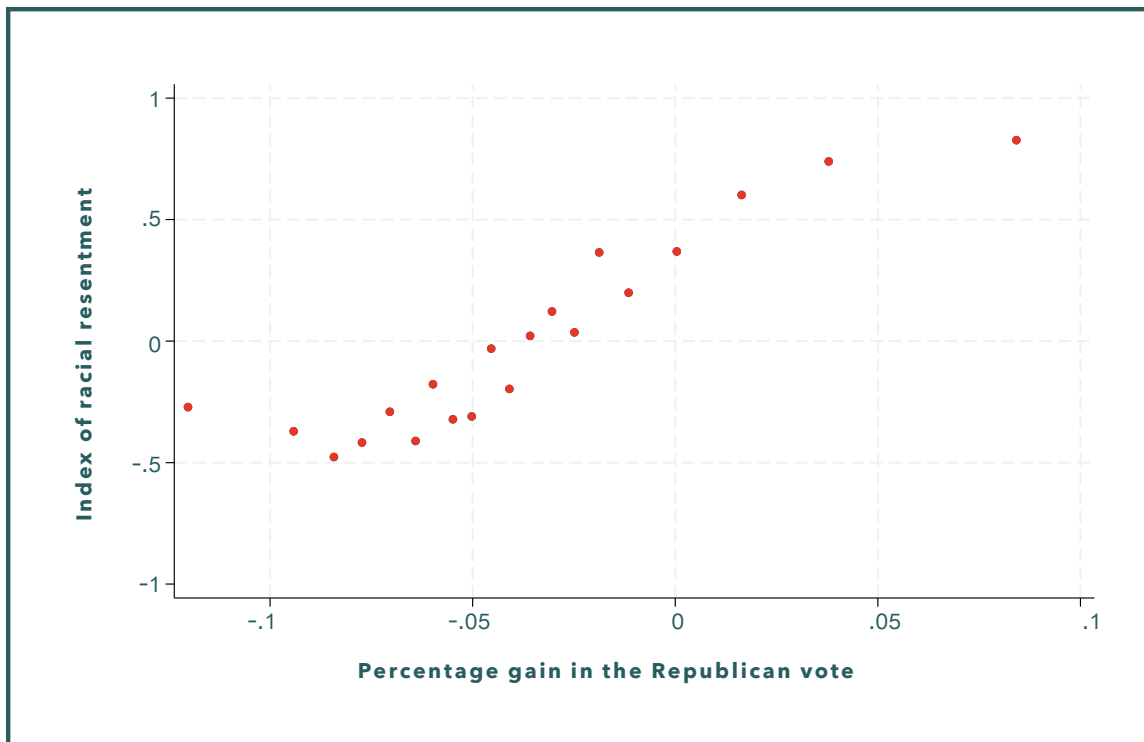
Homicide rates fell dramatically after the 2008 election, not only for people of color but for almost all Americans. The exception was those in counties where racial resentment was strongest among European Americans, those for whom Barack Obama's presidency may have felt threatening or illegitimate. Those counties were above the 75th percentile in the level of shift to the Republican candidate after the previous (2004) election (Table 2).

TABLE 2. RATIO OF ADULT COUNTY HOMICIDE VICTIMIZATION RATES, 2009-2010 VS. 2008, BY PERCENTILE CHANGE IN THE COUNTY REPUBLICAN PRESIDENTIAL VOTE BETWEEN 2004 AND 2008

	European Americans	African Americans	Hispanic Americans
75th percentile and above	1.01	0.89	0.72
74th percentile and below	0.88	0.93	0.89

LOOKING FORWARD

It is difficult to forecast the future with confidence, even the near future. But there are hopeful signs, despite the pessimism that has gripped the people of the United States in recent years. There has been a lull in casualties in riots and protests since January 6, 2021, and all but a handful of election deniers were defeated in the fall of 2022. Over the past 450 years in the Western world, political instability 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, even in the absence of progress on other fronts.

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

As well, scholars need to gather more historical data on homicide rates and potential correlates to test competing theories and improve our understanding of homicide. Did different forms of political organization—hunter-gatherer bands, chiefdoms, ancient empires, medieval kingdoms—encourage different patterns of cooperation and aggression than early modern and modern nation states? Why were some peoples who were incorporated by conquest into larger empires, including the French Canadians of British Quebec and the Sinhalese of the Sri Lankan interior, able to maintain relatively low homicide rates? Was it because the property and institutions within their ethnic enclaves were left relatively undisturbed, so that a degree of government legitimacy and social solidarity was preserved at the local level? And why did some peoples who were oppressed, such as Catholics in nineteenth-century Ireland and enslaved African Americans, murder one another at lower rates than their oppressors killed one another? Was it because they forged a strong sense of solidarity among themselves—a solidarity that has proved elusive for other oppressed peoples? There will be no universal or timeless pattern. But if we are to understand the circumstances that increase or decrease homicide rates, it is essential for us to determine how the correlates of homicide among unrelated adults differed from one historical situation to another.

CONCLUSION

The theories that I and other scholars of historical trends in US crime developed in the 1990s are rooted deeply in the work of the great historians and social scientists of previous generations: in Hans Kohn's and David Potter's appreciation of the psychological as well as institutional dimensions of nation building; in Max Weber's theories of state legitimacy; in Émile Durkheim's writings on social cohesion; in Robert Merton's understanding of the strains caused by failures of societies to deliver on their promises; and in Charles Tilly's studies of political instability, collective violence, and institutional breakdown.[28] They each lived a significant portion of their lives during one of the most violent eras in human history, from the mid-1880s into the early 1950s. They knew first-hand the promise and perils of nation building. We are in their debt as we think today about the prospects for building a stronger nation.

The patterns discussed in this essay have been with us since modern nations first appeared in the mid-sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. As nations have become the focus of our social lives, identities, hopes, and dreams, our fates have been determined to an overwhelming degree by the character of the nations in which we live. We are, after all, social animals, and the degree to which we cooperate with or compete against one another, sometimes violently, is driven above all by the character of our communities and the degree to which we have faith in those communities.[29] When that faith wavers, hostile, defensive, and predatory emotions can course through our societies and lead to deadly violence: bar fights, violent property disputes, robbery murders, rape murders. It's important to look at the sparks that light the fuses in deadly encounters. But it's most important to look at what fuels such explosions in our societies as a whole.

NOTES

1. Stanley Lieberson, *Making It Count: The Improvement of Social Research and Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 3–13. On the high rates of homicide and armed robbery in the United States compared to the rates in other affluent nations, see Franklin E. Zimring and Gordon Hawkins, *Crime Is Not the Problem: Lethal Violence in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

2. On intimate partner homicide, see Randolph Roth, *American Homicide* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), 108–138, 250–290. On homicides of children, see Roth, "Biology and the Deep History of Homicide," *British Journal of Criminology* 51 (2011): 535–542; and Roth, "Child Murder in New England," *Social Science History* 5 (2001): 101–147.

3. Bureau of the Census (1929–1937), *Mortality Statistic*s, 1928–1936 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office); Bureau of the Census (1938–1959), *Vital Statistics of the United States* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office); and National Center for Health Statistics, *Compressed Mortality Files, 1959–2016*, and *Multiple Cause of Death Files,* 2017–2021, available at Vital Statistics Mortality Data at the NBER (National Bureau of Economic Research), https://www.nber.org/research/data/vital-statistics-mortality-data-nber, and CDC Wonder (National Center for Health Statistics), https://wonder.cdc.gov. The federal government has compiled these data consistently over the years from vital statistics reports submitted by the states.

4. See, for example, Amy E. Nivette, et al., "A Global Analysis of the Impact of COVID-19 Stay-at-Home Restrictions on Crime," *Nature Human Behavior 5* (2021): 868–877; and Lin Liu, Jaiyu Chang, Dongping Long, and Heng Liu, "Analyzing the Impact of COVID-19 Lockdowns on Violent Crime," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 19, no. 23 (2022), https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph192315525.

5. Gary LaFree, *Losing Legitimacy: Street Crime and the Decline of Social Institutions* (Boulder: Westview, 1998); Roger V. Gould, *Collision of Wills: How Ambiguity about Social Rank Breeds Conflict* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Manuel Eisner, "Modernization, Self-Control, and Lethal Violence: The Long-Term Dynamics of European Homicide Rates in Theoretical Perspective," *British Journal of Criminology* 41 (2001): 618–638; Steven Messner and Richard Rosenfeld, *Crime and the American Dream* (Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 1997); and Roth, *American Homicide*.

6. See Hans Kohn, *The Idea of Nationalism: A Study in Its Origin and Background* (New York: Macmillan, 1944); and David M. Potter, "The Historian's Use of Nationalism and Vice Versa," *American Historical Review* 67, no. 4 (1962): 924–950.

7. Roth, *American Homicide*, 16–26.

8. Roth, *American Homicide*, 183–198.

9. The essay relies throughout, unless otherwise noted, on the associations and homicide rates in Roth, *American Homicide.*

10. Randolph Roth, "Measuring Feelings and Beliefs that May Facilitate (or Deter) Homicide," *Homicide Studies* 16 (2012): 197–216. Banishments include prisoners being sent to England in chains for trial, forced exiles by nonjudicial means, transportation, and life imprisonment.

11. For homicide rates in the colonial and revolutionary eras, see Roth, *American Homicide*, 27–107, 145–179, especially Figures 1.2, 1.3, and 2.2.

12. Peter Turchin, "Dynamics of Political Instability in the United States, 1789–2010," *Journal of Peace Research* 4 (2012): 577–591; Paul A. Gilje, *Rioting in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996); Paul A. Gilje, *Riots in the United States*, 1635–2003, scans and spreadsheets by Peter Turchin, available at the Historical Violence Database, Criminal Justice Research Center, Ohio State University, https://cjrc.osu.edu/research/interdisciplinary/hvd; and Roth, "Measuring Feelings and Beliefs," 208–209.

13. Raj Chetty, et al., "The Fading American Dream: Trends in Absolute Income Mobility since 1940," *Science* 356 no. 6336 (2017): 398–406; and Yonatan Berman, "The Long-Run Evolution of Absolute Intergenerational Mobility," *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* 14, no. 3 (2022): 61–83.

14. Facundo Alvaredo, et al., *World Inequality Report 2018: Executive Summary*: 8, https://wir2018.wid.world/files/download/wir2018-summary-english.pdf; Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twentieth Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014), 304–335; and Max Rashbrooke, "New Zealand's Astounding Wealth Gap Challenges Our 'Fair Go' Identity," *The Guardian*, August 30, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/aug/31/new-zealands-astounding-wealth-gap-challenges-our-fair-go-identity.

15. The graphs were created with the Binscatter command in STATA with mortality data from the National Center for Health Statistics, 1999-2015. The dataset is described in Richard Rosenfeld, Randolph Roth, and Joel Wallman, "Homicide and the Opioid Epidemic: A Longitudinal Analysis," *Homicide Studies* 27, no. 3 (2023): 321–337; and Rosenfeld, Wallman, and Roth, "The Opioid Epidemic and Homicide in the United States," *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 58, no. 1 (2021): 1–46.

16. Roth, "Measuring Feelings and Beliefs," 205. The data in Figure 8 are from Wilbur Zelinsky, *Nation into State: The Shifting Symbolic Foundations of American Nationalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 124–125, modified with new period breaks.

17. The graphs for the use of the N-word and the phrase "Slave Power" in books were created in the Google NGram Viewer, https://books.google.com/ngrams/.

18. The opinion data, from 2006 through 2018, are from Harvard University's Cooperative Election Study, https://cces.gov.harvard.edu/.

19. The Cook Index is an estimate of gun prevalence using the percentage of suicides that are committed with a gun and has been validated against survey-based estimates. Deborah Azrael, Philip J. Cook, and Matthew Miller, "State and Local Prevalence of Firearms Ownership: Measurement, Structure, and Trends," *Journal of Quantitative Criminology* 20(1) (2004): 43-62; and Noah R. Cypher, "Challenges of Measuring Firearm Prevalence: A Test of Cook's Index across the Rural-Urban Continuum" (PhD diss, The Graduate Center, City University of New York: 2019).

20. Randolph Roth, "Guns, Gun Culture, and Homicide: The Relationship between Firearms, the Uses of Firearms, and Interpersonal Violence in Early America," *William and Mary Quarterly* 59 (2002): 223–240; and Avidit Acharya, Matthew Blackwell, and Maya Sen, *Deep Roots: How Slavery Still Shapes Southern Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018). The correlation at the county level in the opinion polls of the Cooperative Election Survey between pro–gun rights attitudes and racial resentment among European Americans is .57.

21. For complementary analyses of anger and despair among European Americans, see Jonathan M. Metzl, *Dying of Whiteness: How the Politics of Racial Resentment Is Killing America's Heartland* (New York: Basic Books, 2019); and Anne Case and Angus Deaton, *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

22. The Index of Community Well-Being here combines the GH indexes for Basic Access and Community. The GH survey changed its measure of community well-being from "Basic Access" (2008–2013) to "Community" (2014–present). See "Updates to the Gallup Well-Being Index in 2014," https://news.gallup.com/opinion/thrive/170396/updates-gallup-healthways-index-2014.aspx. The survey questions for the Community Well-Being Index are available at https://news.gallup.com/poll/146822/gallup-healthways-index-questions.aspx. The survey questions for the Basic Access Index are available at https://news.gallup.com/poll/150122/americans-access-basic-necessities-recession-level.aspx.

23. The analysis was conducted in STATA with OLS regression, with robust standard errors to correct for heteroskedasticity.

24. LaFree, *Losing Legitimacy*, 102–103. LaFree's time series has been extended through 2002 with data from Virginia Sapiro, Steven J. Rosenstone, and the National Election Studies, "American National Election Studies Cumulative Data File, 1948–2004," computer file, Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research, Ann Arbor (2004).

25. Shytierra Gaston, Jamien P. Cunningham, and Rob Gillezeau, "A Ferguson Effect, the Drug Epidemic, Both, or Neither? Explaining the 2015 and 2016 U.S. Homicide Rises by Race and Ethnicity," *Homicide Studies* 23, no. 3 (2019): 285–313.

26. Randolph Roth, "Why Homicide Declined in American Cities during the First Six Months of 2009," History News Network, https://historynewsnetwork.org/article/120373; and Gallup, "In U.S., Optimism about Future for Youth Reaches All-Time Low: The Highest-Income Americans Are among the Least Optimistic about the Future," May 2, 2011, http://www.gallup.com/poll/147350/optimism-future-youth-reaches-time-low.aspx. The title of the poll does not support my analysis, but the substance does. Nationally, the percentage of Americans with hope for the future was among the strongest on record since the question was first asked in 1983: 62% in January 2010. And when that optimism tailed off in polls in October 2010 and April 2011, as the Great Recession persisted, optimism among young Americans, the most frequent perpetrators and victims of homicide, remained high: 57% for ages eighteen to twenty-nine, but only 45% for ages thirty to forty-four, and 36% for ages fifty to sixty-four. Also important: 52% of low-income Americans (less than $30,000 per year) were optimistic for the future, versus 44% of middle-income Americans ($30,000 to $74,999 per year) and 37% for high-income Americans ($75,000 and above per year).

The percentage of African Americans who believed "the situation of black people in this country" was better than five years ago doubled, from 20% in 2007 to 39% in 2009; and the percentage who believed life would be better for African Americans in the future "than it is now" rose from 44% to 53%. CNN, "Poll: Blacks Optimistic about Future," January 13, 2010, http://www.cnn.com/2010/US/01/13/poll.black.progress/index.html.

27. The map is no longer available online from the *New York Times*, but the pattern it revealed was discussed in Adam Nossiter, "For South, a Waning Hold on National Politics," *New York Times*, November 10, 2008, http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9403E0DE1E3FF932A25752C1A96E9C8B63&pagewanted=all=. The voting data for my reconstruction of the map are from the MIT Election Data Science Lab: County Presidential Election Returns 2000–2020, https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/VOQCHQ.

28. Kohn, *Idea of Nationalism*; Potter, "The Historian's Use of Nationalism and Vice Versa"; Max Weber, "The Three Types of Legitimate Rule," trans. Hans Gerth, *Berkeley Publications in Society and Institutions*, 4, no.1 (1958): 1–11; Émile Durkheim, *Suicide, A Study in Sociology*, ed. George Simpson, trans. John A. Spaulding and George Simpson (Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press, 1951); Robert K. Merton, "Social Structure and Anomie," *American Sociological Review* 3, no.5 (1938): 672–682; Charles Tilly and James Rule, Measuring Political Upheaval (Princeton: Center of International Studies, Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton University, 1965); Charles Tilly, *The Politics of Collective Violence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003); and Ernesto Castañeda and Cathy Lisa Schneider, eds., *Collective Violence, Contentious Politics, and Social Change: A Charles Tilly Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

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