

## Violence in Society: Sources and Responses

The data on the increase in violence in America is mixed. Some studies and reports by law enforcement agencies and monitoring groups indicate the overall levels of violent crimes have been on the decline over the past several decades. Other studies, however, show that certain types of violent crimes, like gang violence in large cities, have been increasing. The public perception about the increase of violence in America, however, seems to have been heightened in recent years by the number of random, yet horrifyingly tragic, shootings at schools and public venues and by acts of violence by hate groups, gang warfare, or people suffering from mental illness.

Opinion surveys regularly find that Americans believe crime is up, even when the data show it is down. In a survey in late 2016, 57% of registered voters said crime in the U.S. had gotten worse since 2008, even though Bureau of Justice Statistics and FBI data show that violent and property crime rates declined by double-digit percentages during that span.

While perceptions of rising crime at the national level are common, fewer Americans tend to say crime is up when asked about the local level. In 20 Gallup surveys conducted since 1996, about half of Americans or fewer said crime is up in their area compared with the year before.<sup>1</sup>

Homicide rates have decreased from a peak of 10.7 per 100,000 persons in 1980 to 5.1 per 100,000 in 2013. Aggravated assault rates have decreased from a peak of 442 per 100,000 in 1992 to 242 per 100,000 in 2012. Nevertheless, annually, there are more than 16 000 homicides and 1.6 million nonfatal assault injuries requiring treatment in emergency departments. More than 12 million adults experience intimate partner violence annually and more than 10 million children younger than 18 years experience some form of maltreatment from a caregiver, ranging from neglect to sexual abuse, but only a small percentage of these violent incidents are reported to law enforcement, health care clinicians, or child protective agencies.<sup>2</sup>

Like the violent crime rate, the U.S. property crime rate today is far below its peak level. FBI data show that the rate fell 48% between 1993 and 2016, while BJS reports a decline of 66% during that span. Property crime includes offenses such as burglary, theft and motor vehicle theft, and it is generally far more common than violent crime. There was no documented increase in the property crime rate between 2014 and 2016.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> [Pew Research](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Violence in the United States](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Pew Research](#)

Part of the problem is that many news outlets follow the guide “If it bleeds, it leads.” Stories of violence are far more prevalent in the news than stories in a more positive vein. Many of the major outlets end their broadcasts with a positive story, but that is only a small portion of what they report.

There are large geographic variations in crime rates. The FBI’s data show big differences from state to state and city to city. In 2016, there were more than 600 violent crimes per 100,000 residents in AK, NV, NM and TN. By contrast, ME, NH and VT had rates below 200 violent crimes per 100,000 residents. And while Chicago has drawn widespread attention for its soaring murder total in recent years, its murder rate in 2016 – 28 murders and non-negligent manslaughters per 100,000 residents – was less than half of the rate in St. Louis (60 per 100,000) and far below the rate of Baltimore (51 per 100,000). The FBI notes that various factors might influence a particular area’s crime rate, including its population density and economic conditions.<sup>4</sup>

Most crimes are not reported to police. In its annual survey, BJS asks victims of a crime whether they reported that crime to police. In 2016, only 42% of the violent crime tracked by BJS was reported to police. And in the much more common category of property crime, only about a third (36%) was reported. There are a variety of reasons crime might not be reported, including a feeling that police “would not or could not do anything to help” or that the crime is “a personal issue or too trivial to report,” according to BJS.

Most of the crimes that are reported to police, meanwhile, are not solved, at least using an FBI measure known as the “clearance rate.” That’s the share of cases each year that are closed, or “cleared,” through the arrest, charging and referral of a suspect for prosecution. In 2016, police nationwide cleared 46% of violent crimes that were reported to them. For property crimes, the national clearance rate was 18%.

Specifically, violence is higher in communities (1) where there are limited economic opportunities; (2) where there are high concentrations of poor and unemployed people; (3) where people move frequently; and (4) where there are limited public, mental health, and social services available to residents and fewer civic and voluntary associations. Consequently, the evidence for other policy- and community-level approaches to address these characteristics points to (1) income-strengthening approaches (eg, subsidies or cash transfers), (2) urban upgrading (eg, improved transportation, lighting, buildings, green space), (3) economic development strategies (eg, business improvement districts), and (4) residential mobility programs that enable families living in disadvantaged

---

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

environments to resettle in more advantaged neighborhoods. Importantly, increasing family income through subsidies or cash transfers, for example, has been shown to reduce child abuse and neglect, youth violence, and partner violence.<sup>5</sup>

Another view argues that there is a strong cultural factor at work today in reducing the long-standing human proclivity towards violence with respect to our species. The study concludes by saying, “we can modulate the level of interpersonal violence by changing our social environment. We can build a more pacific society if we wish.”<sup>6</sup>

Some cultural anthropologists agree that human violence is rooted in more than instinctual survival or domination characteristics. A Scientific American article says, “A major take-away from the anthropological literature is that humans have the potential, which is different from the tendency, to be violent.”<sup>7</sup>

How to mitigate against or minimize violence within relationships seems to be the challenge facing us. Conflict resolution training, anger management classes, empathy development, and greater sanctions on the abuse of power, all seem to be aimed at reducing violence. As one sociologist has noted- “A deeper understanding of how and why violence emerges, or doesn’t, might help us achieve a less violent future—or at least one in which we can better comprehend and manage our violence.”

So, the question is where should we start? Do we work to reduce violence by changing the environment where violence is most prevalent or do we try to change people who show a proclivity towards violence? Are there other avenues that should be explored to reduce violence in American society?

---

<sup>5</sup> [Violence in the United States](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Violence and human evolution](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Are humans wired to kill?](#)