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## **Homicide** Dispatch 1

# How to **Reduce Homicide** by **50%** in the Next **30 Years**



**Manuel Eisner**

Violence Research Centre at the Institute of Criminology  
University of Cambridge

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# How to Reduce Homicide by **50%** in the Next **30 Years**

**Manuel Eisner**, Violence Research Centre at the Institute of Criminology,  
University of Cambridge

## Summary

More than 8 million people were killed around the world due to interpersonal violence since 2000. This indicates that murder is a more important cause of death than all wars combined over the same period. Almost half of all homicides worldwide are committed in just 23 countries, home to one tenth of the global population. Research is showing that in these settings, state authorities lack popular legitimacy and are failing to deliver basic public goods, including security and justice. An effective rule of law, based on legitimate law enforcement, victim protection, swift and fair adjudication, moderate punishment, and humane prisons is critical to sustainable reductions in lethal violence.

## Introduction

Approaches to preventing and reducing interpersonal violence are undergoing revolutionary change. In May 2014, the 67th World Health Assembly adopted a historic resolution. It asked the World Health Organization (WHO) to prepare the first ever global plan of action to ensure that health systems effectively address violence. And in September 2015, the United Nations General Assembly will adopt the Sustainable Development Goals for the 2015-2030 period. In all likelihood the Goals will recognize peaceful and inclusive societies and the reduction of violence as core elements of sustainable development.

In particular, a specific Goal will be adopted focusing on the reduction of lethal violence, elimination of abuse and torture against children, the eradication of violence against women, and access to justice for all. The United Nations will also request that progress in preventing and reducing violence is monitored globally like climate change, school attendance, or HIV infections. But is it possible to significantly reduce interpersonal violence by means of evidence-based strategies? Can this be done in a single generation? Using homicide as an example, I believe that the answer is yes.

This Homicide Dispatch identifies a few key insights for future preventive strategies to prevent and reduce homicides. It underlines the strategic importance of reinforcing the functioning of the state and the accountability of its representatives. A cornerstone of homicide reduction is ensuring public authorities and societies are committed to the rule of law, improved governance and inclusive state-services. Over time and space, these are the foundations of a sustainable approach to meaningful reductions in interpersonal violence. This must include strategies to make the police more effective, accountable, and legitimate.

## Global patterns of homicide

Homicide is the only form of violence for which we have annualized indicators that are sufficiently reliable to track change at the global, regional and national level. The scale and dimensions of homicidal violence are significant. Each year an estimated 475,000 people die worldwide as a result of intentional homicide. This is equal to about eight million people over the past decade and a half (World Health Organization, 2014: 8). Roughly ten times more people die violently outside of war zones than in them (Krause, Muggah and Gilgen, 2008).



UN Photo/Martine Perret

There are some common patterns associated with homicidal violence. Across the globe the vast majority, between 90-95%, of all perpetrators of homicide are male with little variation between societies. Most homicides committed by females consist of acts against infants and children or entail self-defense in situations of domestic abuse (UNODC, 2013). The majority of victims, 79% worldwide, are also male but the proportion of male victims varies systematically between societies (UNODC, 2013: 13).

Where overall homicide is high, the proportion of male victims is typically much higher than in societies where homicide is relatively rare. Even so, the situations of male and female homicide differ. A very significant proportion of homicides involving women are perpetrated by intimate partners, including in the home or a private space. Men, in contrast, are much more likely to be killed by acquaintances, in public spaces as a consequence of altercations, in organized interactions between armed gangs, and by security forces.

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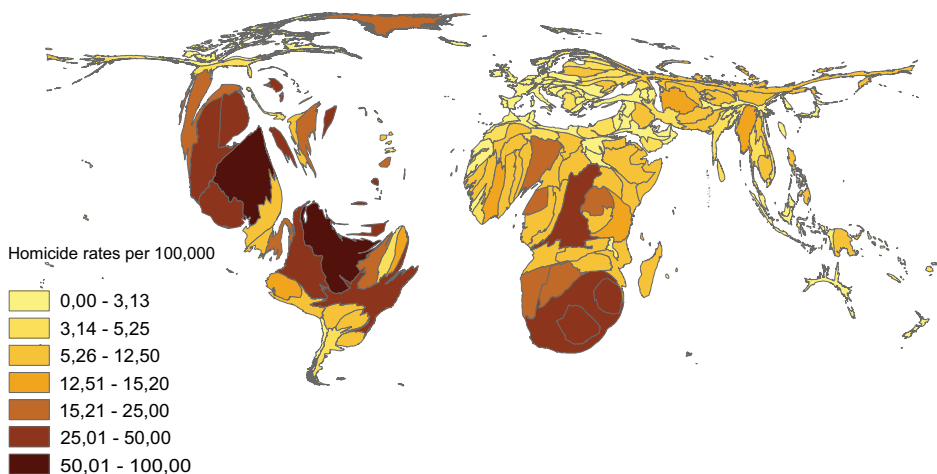
The probability that humans kill another human is highly dependent on social and environmental factors. Overall, the least homicidal cities on earth (e.g. Singapore with a rate of 0.4 murders per 100,000 people) have about 300 times fewer murders than the most violent cities (e.g. San Pedro Sula with around 187 per 100,000 or Caracas with about 120 per 100,000). However, the overall variation in *levels* of homicide is strongly correlated with variation in the typical *types* of homicide (Eisner, 2012).

Specifically, in societies exhibiting high levels of murder such as Honduras, Brazil, Jamaica, Venezuela or South Africa, many homicides have an instrumental component. In these settings homicidal violence is often committed in connection with other crimes such as robbery, kidnapping or burglary. It is often a function of confrontations related to dominance and control over turfs and illegal markets. Moreover, it is frequently regarded by perpetrators as a way of meting out private justice, defending themselves against the threat of an attack, or taking revenge for prior injustice. Consequently, a large proportion of young men prepare themselves for violent confrontations by carrying weapons.

Meanwhile, in societies featuring low levels of homicide, as in Canada, Japan or Singapore, murder is a much more pathological phenomenon. An outsized proportion occurs in the context of intimate partnerships and known acquaintances. Collective violence is much more rare. What is more, perpetrators often belong to marginal and disadvantaged groups, they rarely commit the acts in a group, and they often suffer from overlapping mental health issues.

Homicide is highly concentrated geographically. Almost half of all homicides worldwide occurred in just 23 countries that account for 10 per cent of the global population (Eisner and Nivette, 2013; UNICEF 2013; Igarapé Institute, 2015). All of these states are located in Latin America or Sub-Saharan Africa. Just four countries – Brazil, Colombia, Mexico and Venezuela – account for one in four murders around the world. In contrast, about half of the world population lives in low homicide societies that account for only 10 per cent of all homicides worldwide (Eisner and Nivette, 2013).

**Figure 1** - Proportional distribution of homicide rates around the world (2012)



The map represents the distribution of homicide rates around the world. In this way, Central America, South America and Southern Africa are disproportionately represented.

**Source:** Igarapé Institute (2015)

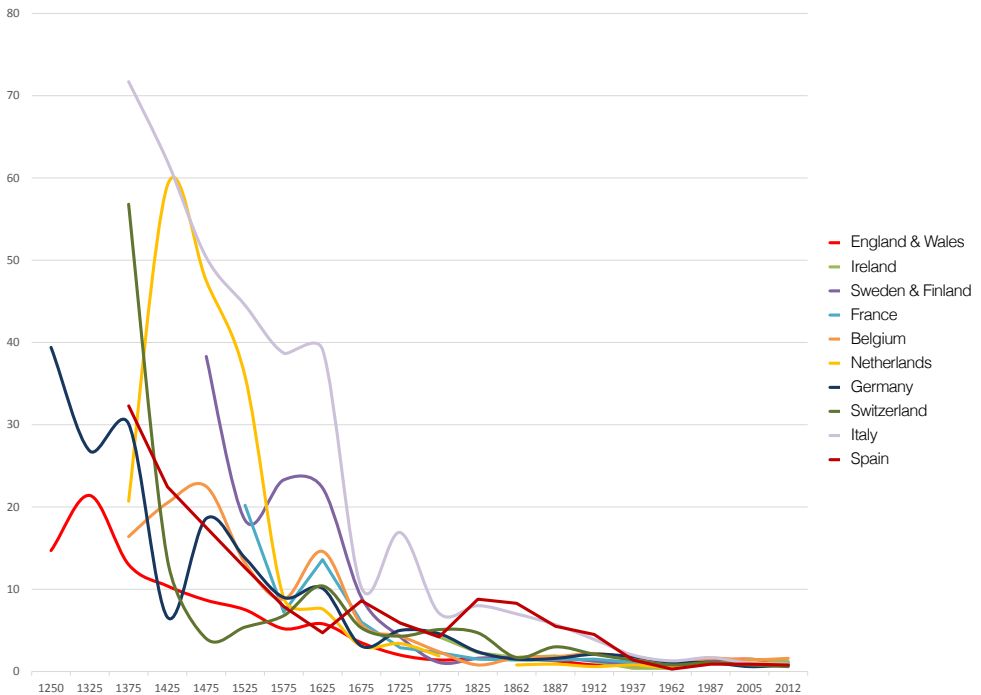
## Reducing homicidal violence

If homicide is to be reduced, efforts need to focus on those states, cities and neighborhoods where murder is highest. Paradoxically, those societies with the highest concentration of violence have very limited research capacity to study, much less support, prevention. Yet some 95 per cent of all scientific knowledge on effective violence prevention relates exclusively to the United States and a bundle of wealthy European countries, where homicide rates already are very low (Eisner and Nivette, 2013: 222). It is essential to build research capacity in low- and middle-income countries that can help to advance local knowledge on the causes of violence and effective ways to provide parenting support, change norms, reduce harmful alcohol consumption, or impose better control over firearms.

In order to cut the global homicide rate by 50 per cent over the next three decades we need to achieve an average annual reduction of at least 2.3 per cent (Eisner and Nivette, 2013). Is such a reduction realistic? One way to determine the answer is to examine past experiences. The fact is that murder is not inevitable and dramatic declines are more common than many assume. Around the world, societies at different periods of development have achieved sustained reductions in homicide rates at a speed greater or equal 2.3 per cent.

The examples are wide-ranging, but surprisingly common (Eisner and Nivette, 2013). The ongoing crime drop in the United States since the early 1990s corresponds to an annual decline of homicide by 3.7 per cent. Likewise, Italy experienced an annual decline by about 6 per cent since the early 1990s. Meanwhile, Singapore's average decline since the mid-1980s was about 5 per cent per year. Also, the fall in South Africa over the past two decades was about 4 per cent per year, approximately the same yearly rate of decline as in Colombia since the early 1990s.



**Figure 2** - Long-term series of homicide rates in Europe: 1250-2012

**Source:** Eisner (2014)

Research by Eisner (2014) identified trends in the frequency of murder across much of Europe since the Middle Ages. The findings show that homicide rates declined very considerably over the centuries. As a result many European countries currently have some of the lowest homicide rates in the world.

## What affects homicide trends?

While homicide is declining in many areas of the world, it is increasing in some others, notably in many parts of Central and South America and the Caribbean (UNODC, 2013, Lappi-Seppälä and Lehti, 2014). Scholars can't currently predict when and why declining trends begin and when they end. But we are beginning to disentangle the mix of factors that influence the ups and downs of murder rates in different societies. Some can be influenced by public policies while others are outside the control of governments. At a minimum, policy makers must address factors that are causally relevant for homicide if they want to achieve reductions in homicide rates.

So what factors drive homicide rates up and sometimes make them fall over years or even decades? I first want to highlight three factors that people often associate changing homicide levels over time but where the current evidence is still ambiguous: urbanization, change in income inequality over time, and economic growth.



The rich and the poor. On the left is Kariakhan slum in Dhaka, Bangladesh. One billion people-one out of three urban dwellers-are living in slum conditions. UN Photo/Kibae Park

The idea that the growth of cities leads to disruption and crime is a time-honored assumption in the social sciences (Shaw and McKay, 1969). However, across societies there is no convincing evidence that more urban societies have more violence (e.g. Nivette 2011, Lappi-Seppälä and Lehti, 2014). To the contrary, some of the most urbanized societies such as Singapore, Hong-Kong, Japan, Switzerland, the Netherlands also have some of the lowest homicide rates (Lappi-Seppälä and Lehti, 2014: 166). And it is by no means clear that the growth of cities over time is associated with upward swings in homicides.

Some scholars find that at least in Europe the growth of cities may have been a civilizing force, contributing to the decline of homicide (Eisner, 2003, Lappi-Seppälä and Lehti, 2014). Others have found a small positive association between urbanization and change in homicide rates in recent international data (Baumer and Wolff, 2014). Yet there is consensus that growing cities in themselves are not the heart of the problem although, of course, we should make every effort to better manage the current and future growth of cities, provide infrastructure and education, and create jobs and opportunities (Muggah, 2015).

Inequality also needs to be re-examined as causal determinant of homicide. Studies that compare countries at one moment of time have repeatedly found that levels of homicide are correlated with levels of income inequality as measured by the Gini coefficient (Nivette, 2013). While this pattern holds across countries, the relationship is much less obvious when one examines trends over time (Baumer and Wolff, 2014). In the United States, for example, homicide rates effectively continued to decline as levels of inequality kept rising since the early 1990s (Brush, 2007). The same is true for Singapore, a country that has become increasingly unequal and has seen homicide rates plummeting.

The inverse holds for Mexico, where one might expect that the substantial decline in income inequality since the mid-1990s would lead to less homicide,

but it did not (Campos-Vazquez, Esquivel, Lustig, 2014). Reducing income inequality is an important policy goal, and high inequality has been shown to be associated with many adverse outcomes (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2006). But there is still currently no convincing empirical support for the idea that it necessarily leads to lower homicide rates.

Some analysts also contend that fluctuations in unemployment, economic growth or consumer confidence influence the booms and busts of homicide rates. This is likely based on the observation that perpetrators tend to come from disadvantaged neighborhoods and often have no or erratic employment. And yet the association between economic cycles and homicide is tenuous at best (Baumer and Wolff, 2014).

## Urbanization, inequality and economic growth have an impact on homicide levels, but evidence is ambiguous

Often homicide rates shoot up during periods of solid economic growth and declining poverty, such as in the United States in the 1960s, in Brazil in the 2000s, or in Colombia during the late 1980s and early 1990s. At the same time, periods of economic crises are seldom correlated with increasing homicide. For example, contrary to the expectations of many criminologists the 2008 global

financial crisis with its effects on unemployment and poverty has not been found to be associated with an uptick in homicide where such research has been conducted (Rosenfeld, 2014).

Other factors seem to be more consistently associated with the ups and downs of homicide. One is the demographic structure. Homicides are mostly committed by people aged 16-40, and the majority of victims are in the same age bracket. There is some support for the notion that societies where young people account for a greater population share also tend to have higher

homicide rates. In fact, as the population pyramid becomes more top-heavy the homicide rate also drops (Levitt, 2004).

What is more, homicide rates often seem to track periods of severe political unrest and transitions of political regimes (Pridemore and Kim, 2006; Stamatel, 2009; Kynoch 2005; Karstedt 2003). For example, one of the most remarkable patterns in homicide trends over the past 40 years was the explosion of homicide rates across Eastern Europe after the fall of Communism (Pridemore and Kim, 2006; Stamatel, 2009, Lappi-Seppälä & Lehtii, 2014). About five years after the fall of the Berlin Wall countries from Kazakhstan to Estonia and from Russia to Romania were gripped by a wave of murders.

The demise of the iron fist rule under Communism, the chaos during the transition years, the lack of legitimate and trusted institutions, and the rapid emergence of organized crime are some of the elements that are frequently cited as immediate causes (Karstedt, 2003). But this pattern is not limited to countries of the former East Block. Similar rises in criminal homicide occurred in South Africa after the end of Apartheid (Kynoch 2005) or in Brazil after the end of the dictatorship (Dellasoppa, Bercovich & Arriaga, 1999). As societies re-stabilize, the rule of law is established, and human rights are more rigorously respected, homicides tend to fall back to levels similar or below those before the transition period (Neumayer, 2003).

My own work compares major sustained homicide declines in different countries and different historical periods across the globe (Eisner 2011, Eisner 2014). It seems that murder rates declined when three elements came together. First, it declined where states established good governance and an effective rule of law, curbing the corruption of state officials, gaining control over private protection markets, and enhancing state legitimacy through inclusive institutions (Rotberg, 2004). This conclusion is in line with an increasing body of research that shows that low homicide rates are correlated with the legitimacy of state power in the eyes of its citizens, the

ability of the state to deliver key political goods such as justice based on the rule of law, and low levels of corruption by state officials (Nivette and Eisner, 2013, Chu and Tusalem, 2013, Lappi-Seppälä & Lehti, 2014).

Second, they regularly appear to be linked to bundles of social control technologies, including monitoring technologies, increased control over disorderly conduct, and systems aimed at early identification and treatment of offenders and victims (Eisner 2014). Some of the decline in violent crime across the Western world is likely a side-effect of more effective security and surveillance technologies built into everyday life including, for example, central deadlocking systems, better and more widespread home protection technologies, more CCTV cameras, and the transition away from a cash-based economy (Farrell et al, 2011; van Dijk, Tseloni and Farrell, 2012; Orrick and Piquero, 2015). This raises important issues for violence reduction action plans, as they imply that effective action needs to consider how violence prevention can be built from the onset into the infrastructure of daily life. changing systems of, for example, communication technologies, public health, education and urban infrastructure.

Third, historical homicide declines were apparently often catalyzed by coalitions of officials, community leaders, philanthropists and teachers who emphasized the importance of self-control, civility, and respect, and thereby changed societal beliefs about the wrongfulness of doing harm against others (Pinker 2011). Over the last two decades, there is considerable evidence indicating that humans have become less tolerant to violence, may be as part of a civilizing process that stretches over centuries (Eisner, 2015). In many parts of the Western World, for example, bullying is no longer regarded as a normal part of going to school, corporal punishment has ceased being seen as an acceptable, and tolerance of racially and sexually abusive language has diminished (Pinker 2011).

## Where to spend the money

Without exception societies with high homicide rates suffer from dysfunctional law enforcement and criminal justice systems. This includes high levels of impunity for offenders, corrupt and ineffective policing, suspects who spend years languishing in pre-trial detention together with convicted criminals, overpopulated prisons that are often coopted and managed by organized criminals, and limited reintegration and rehabilitation options for people released from prison. Consider, for example, that only 3 per cent of all homicides committed in Honduras between 2010 and 2013 ended with the conviction of the perpetrator. The average cost of taking a life in Honduras therefore is probably around six months imprisonment, if we assume that the small minority who is effectively convicted serves an average of fifteen years.

**Table -** Likelihood of criminal conviction in selected countries and homicide rates

Country	Convictions per Homicides Committed	Homicide Rates per 100,000
Honduras, 2010-13 <sup>1</sup>	<b>3 per 100</b>	<b>87</b>
El Salvador, 2011-13 <sup>1</sup>	<b>5 per 100</b>	<b>58</b>
Guatemala, 2011-13 <sup>1</sup>	<b>7 per 100</b>	<b>40</b>
Colombia, 2005-2012 <sup>2</sup>	<b>5 per 100</b>	<b>32</b>
Mexico <sup>3</sup>	<b>15 per 100</b>	<b>22</b>
United States, 2006 <sup>4</sup>	<b>51 per 100</b>	<b>4.7</b>
England and Wales, 2003/4-2008/9 <sup>5</sup>	<b>79 per 100</b>	<b>1.0</b>

**Sources:**

1 Chaves; Avalos (2014)

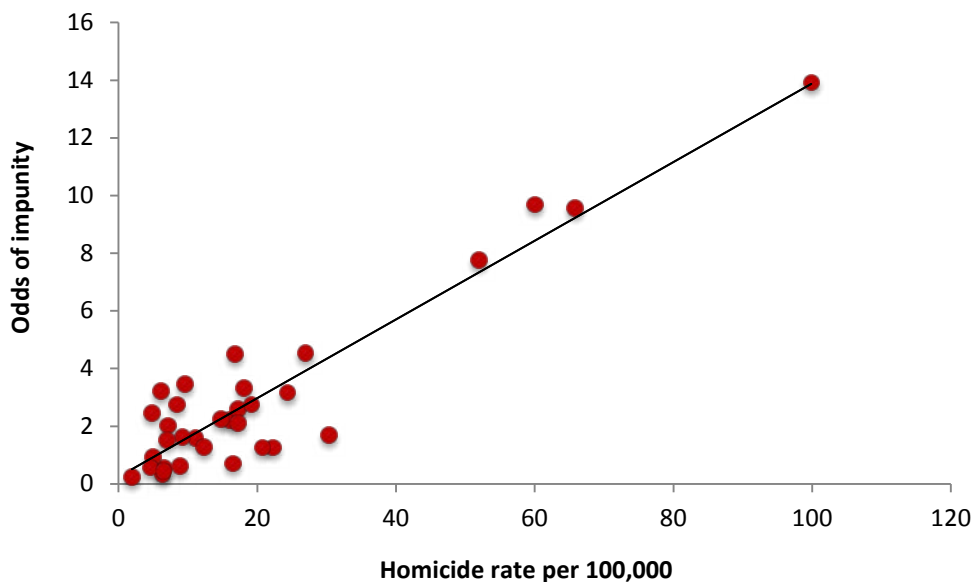
2 La Rota; Uribe (2014)

3 Nestares (n.d.)

4 Bureau of Justice Statistics (2009)

5 Office for National Statistics (2015)

**Figure 3** - The relationship between impunity and homicide rates in 32 regions of Mexico, 2011-2013



**Source:** Mexico Evalua (2012)

The likelihood of being convicted for a murder varies very substantially between the 32 states of Mexico. In some states it is more than 10 times more likely to get away with a murder than to be convicted. The graph shows that states with a high impunity also have higher homicide rates. Partly this is because homicides resulting from organized crime and committed with firearms are more difficult for the police to solve. But the association also suggests that states with a less effective crime control and criminal justice system are more likely to experience serious violence.



Countries with high levels of violence need evidence-based interventions that address parenting, social skills development, fair and effective schools, and urban planning. Yet an effective rule of law, based on professional and legitimate law enforcement, effective victim protection, swift and fair adjudication, moderate punishment, and humane prisons is the backbone of sustained violence reduction. Making the police, justice, and penal systems more effective, fair and accountable is something that governments can achieve if there is the political will to do so – and there is considerable evidence showing how this can be done (Braga, Papachristos and Hureau 2014; Mazerolle et al, 2013, Gomez et al, 2014).

The key conclusion of this Homicide Dispatch, then, is that the reform and revitalization of law and order systems should be prioritized in countries and cities where homicide rates are highest. This is not an argument against broader preventive measures including urban planning, early developmental prevention, cultural change, and broader socio-economic development. But without an effective rule of law all other approaches will remain fragile and unsustainable.

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The **Homicide dispatches** are a series of short analytical articles highlighting the underlying causes and far-reaching consequences of murder, ways that governments count homicide, and innovative strategies to prevent and reduce intentional violence. The homicide dispatches are part of the Homicide Monitor, a data visualization tool developed by the Igarapé Institute in partnership with the Open Society Foundations (OSF) and the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), with contributions from the United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime (UNODC).



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**Editors:**

Robert Muggah and Renata Giannini

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Raphael Durão - STORM DESIGN

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IGARAPÉ INSTITUTE  
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Rua Conde de Irajá, 370  
Botafogo, Rio de Janeiro – RJ – Brasil - 22271-020

Tel/Fax: +55 (21) 3496-2114

[contato@igarape.org.br](mailto:contato@igarape.org.br)

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