

Violence: A New Frontier for Scientific Research

Alfred Blumstein

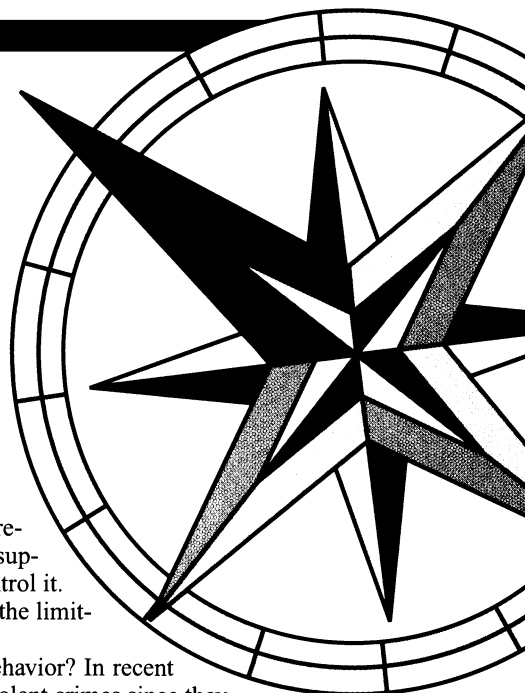
Fear of interpersonal violence is a major concern of many in the United States; a similar concern is escalating in many other nations. Yet it is hard to imagine a public-policy arena that has been more impervious to input from research. Policies designed to control violence, especially those related to punishment, are driven far more by ideological and emotional perspectives than by research on their cost-effectiveness. This is a result of two related failures: One is the past failure of our funding agencies to adequately support research on violence—its causes and the effects of various means to control it. The second is the failure of our legislators and public officials to apply even the limited knowledge that we do have to policies that address violence.

What is the present state of our knowledge about the causes of violent behavior? In recent years, the United States has been reveling in a steady decline in the rates of violent crimes since they hit a peak in 1991. Part of the decline is attributable to a reversal of the factors that contributed to the rise in violence after 1985: The growth in homicides from 1985 to 1991 was entirely attributable to murders with handguns committed by people under age 25.* Similarly, the decline after 1993 was predominantly due to a reduction in handgun homicides. (Nevertheless, there is still stiff resistance to any efforts to become more effective at keeping guns out of the hands of identifiably irresponsible individuals.) The decline in demand for crack cocaine and the booming economy have also contributed to the decline of violence.† Much more investigation is still needed to identify the contributions of these factors to the fall in violence, and to evaluate their synergistic interaction.

As discussed in some of the news reports and articles in this special issue of *Science*, understanding the biological underpinnings of individual violent behavior is an important aspect of the problem. Eventually, clarifying the biological basis of violent behavior may even lead to some effective therapies. But we also need more immediately available options for dealing with violence. One direct response to violent acts is incarceration, and this has been the sledgehammer most often chosen. We also must learn more about individual development (biological factors and parenting styles, for example) and how these interact with community environments (that condone or discourage violence) and situational dynamics (when a gun enters a teenage dispute, events move much more quickly and lethally than when only fists are involved). Greater understanding of this complex network of causality presents multiple potential targets for intervention.

To identify the most attractive targets, much more intensive research is needed into the interaction among the factors that contribute to serious violence. The National Science Foundation took a bold step in the right direction when they created a National Consortium on Violence Research (NCOVR) in 1996. That consortium now functions as a multidisciplinary, multi-university virtual consortium to bring together all the perspectives, data, and research needed to address these problems in their full complexity, including a Web-accessible Data Center.‡ Results from NCOVR and from other investigators in the social and behavioral sciences are starting to emerge, and these will help to generate legislation and determine policy. As stronger research findings accumulate—both showing the futility of some current policies and indicating more fruitful directions—we might hope that the growing public demand for accountability will lead to more informed action addressing the critical issue of violence in today's society, both in the United States and abroad.

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*A. Blumstein, F. Rivara, R. Rosenfeld, *Annu. Rev. Public Health* 21, 505 (2000). †A. Blumstein and J. Wallman, Eds., *The Crime Drop in America* (Cambridge Univ. Press, Cambridge, in press). ‡www.ncovr.heinz.cmu.edu