ASSAULTIVE VIOLENCE AS A CONTAGIOUS SOCIAL PROCESS*

COLIN LOFTIN, PH.D.
Professor
Institute of Criminal Justice and Criminology
University of Maryland
College Park, Maryland

In epidemiology there is a fundamental distinction between infectious diseases transmitted by social contact and those that have an etiology independent of social contact. Infectious diseases are not necessarily more costly in human terms than others, but unchecked they are especially pernicious because the incidence can rise explosively (geometrically), affecting a whole population.

In criminology there is an analogous distinction between offenses that are subcultural—those that are encouraged by social contact—and those that are impulsive. My argument is that serious assaultive violence is subcultural and therefore analogous to disease. Most important, it has the potential to spread explosively in a vulnerable population.

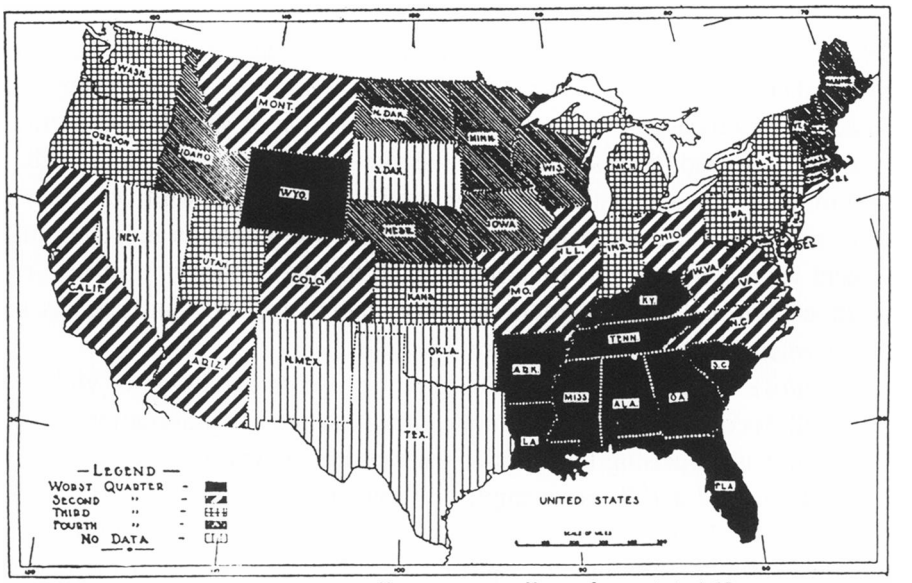
In developing the argument, I shall first describe some evidence that serious assaultive violence is distributed socially in ways that suggest contagious transmission. This is followed by some hypotheses about how the transmission occurs.

EVIDENCE OF CONTAGIOUS TRANSMISSION

Assaultive violence is spatially clustered. My first example of a pattern that suggests contagious transmission is the fact that serious assaultive violence is usually distributed spatially in clusters. Figure 1 is from my favorite study of homicide, Harry C. Brearly's *Homicide in the United States* (1932). The pattern in the figure is the classic one that has been documented since the 19th century; the highest rates of homicide are clustered in the southeastern states.

It is not surprising that the crude homicide rates are concentrated in the

*Presented as part of a *Symposium on Homicide: The Public Health Perspective*, held by the Committee on Public Health of the New York Academy of Medicine October 3 and 4, 1985, and made possible by a generous grant from the Ittleson Foundation.



DISTRIBUTION OF HOMICIDE IN THE UNITED STATES, 1918-1927.

Fig. 1. Distribution of homicide in the United States, 1918-1927. Source: Brearly, H.C.: *Homicide in the United States*. Chapel Hill, NC, University of North Carolina Press, 1932.

South, but what has fascinated researchers for at least the last 15 years is that residuals from regression analysis which includes known causes of assaultive violence are spatially clustered so that they are correlated between the residuals and a variable representing the South. (I refer, of course, to the literature on the regional subculture of violence: Hackney,[1] Gastil,[2] Loftin and Hill,[3] Messner.[4, 5, 6] The clustering may be because spatially clustered causes have been omitted from the regression equation, but it is also consistent with a spatial diffusion process.

Spatial clustering of assaultive violence is not confined to regional arrays. It is especially prominent in data for small areas such as census tracts and blocks (see, for example, Schmid,[7] Bensing and Schroeder,[8] Schmid and Schmid,[9] Curtis,[10] and Georges-Abeyie and Harries[11]).

Assaultive violence is reciprocal (internecine). The clustering of assaultive violence is not a result of aggregation bias (ecological fallacy), it is also a common observation with individual-level data. Marvin Wolfgang's observation that more than a quarter of the Philadelphia homicides that he studied were victim-precipitated—in the sense that the victim was the first to strike a blow or show a deadly weapon—is a case in point.

A better example is found in a recent paper by Simon Singer.[12] Using

data from a follow-up to the 1945 Philadelphia male birth cohort,[13] he shows that two thirds of cohort members who indicated having committed an act of serious assaultive violence (rape, homicide or assault with serious victim injury) had, themselves, been the victims of serious violence (either shot or stabbed). A logistic regression model predicting assaultive violence from race, gang membership, weapon use and victimization indicated that violent victimization is the best predictor of the prevalence of a serious assaultive offensive in the careers of cohort members, and that race has no effect when the other variables are controlled.

Assaultive violence escalates. The rapid spread or escalation of violence is a well documented pattern in collective violence and international conflict, but it is surprising that similar patterns occur with interpersonal violence. Figures 2 and 3 are examples of epidemic-like patterns of violence from Detroit. Figure 2 shows the number of homicide victims in the city between 1920 and 1980 while Figure 3 combines two series for the period 1950 to 1977: the number of licenses to purchase a handgun issued annually by the Detroit Police Department and the fatal firearm accident rate.

Clearly, something like an epidemic occurred in Detroit in the decade between 1964 and 1974. Specifically, what I believe happened was a type of mass movement in which large numbers of individuals armed themselves because of anxiety about the ability of normal institutional means to provide protection. The phenomenon is something like collective behavior in a burning building: The chances are that everyone will be better off if they line up and egress in an orderly way, but if others don't cooperate those near the front of the line will make it out alive and those at the end are likely to perish.

In Detroit armed violence spread rapidly during the decade between 1964 and 1974. It is an oversimplification to say that violent crime increased because gun ownership increased. Undoubtedly, the relationships are reciprocal, with violent crime stimulating the acquisition of firearms and vice versa.

I do not argue that the legally registered handguns accounted for in Figure 2 are the very same ones that were used in violent crimes. (McDowall and I do show[14,15] that the number of fatal firearm accidents increased with gun sales and that gun sales increased with violent crime.) The point is that in Detroit something like a mini arms race occurred. Law abiding citizens armed themselves and there is every reason to believe that offenders did the same thing. For a brief period in 1974, store keepers in Detroit actually killed more robbers than robbers killed keepers. Swartz[16], as did Rose and

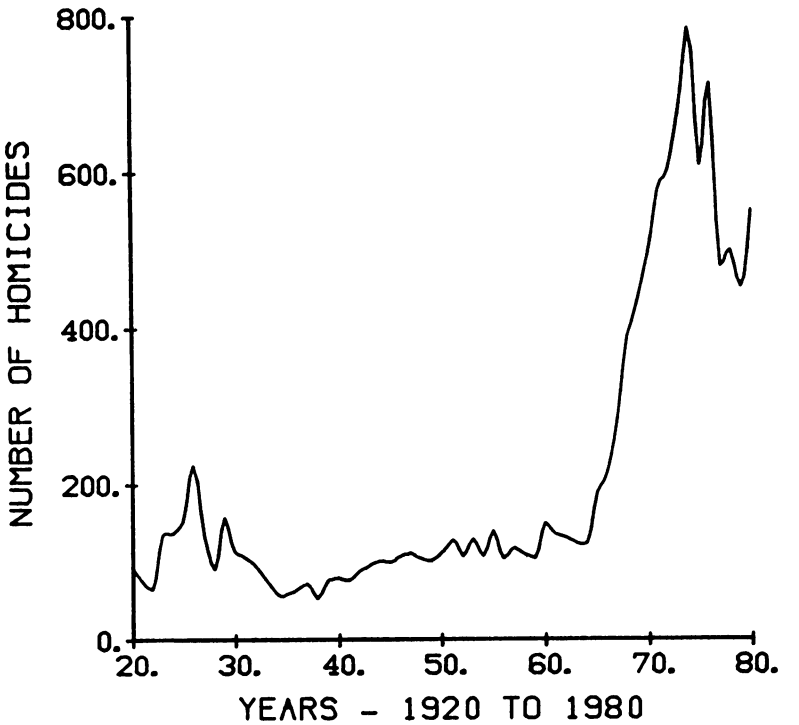


Fig. 2. Detroit homicides

Deskins,[17] found that in that year more robbers than patrons and employees were killed in commercial robberies in the city. Violence and gun possession spread in an explosive fashion in Detroit during this period. Both robbers and law-abiding citizens found it prudent to arm themselves.

There are other examples of mutually reinforcing patterns of violence leading to the rapid growth and spread of aggression. Vigilantism and capital punishment are two examples that come to mind. They are violent responses to violent provocations. Another is Black's[18] argument that many violent crimes are examples of self-help—the unilateral expression of grievance by force. Rather than pursuing these, I shall turn briefly to some possible explanations for the spread of assaultive violence.

The Transmission of Assaultive Violence

Assaultive violence spreads rapidly in many human populations for two reasons. The first was suggested in the discussion of the Detroit data. Crimi-

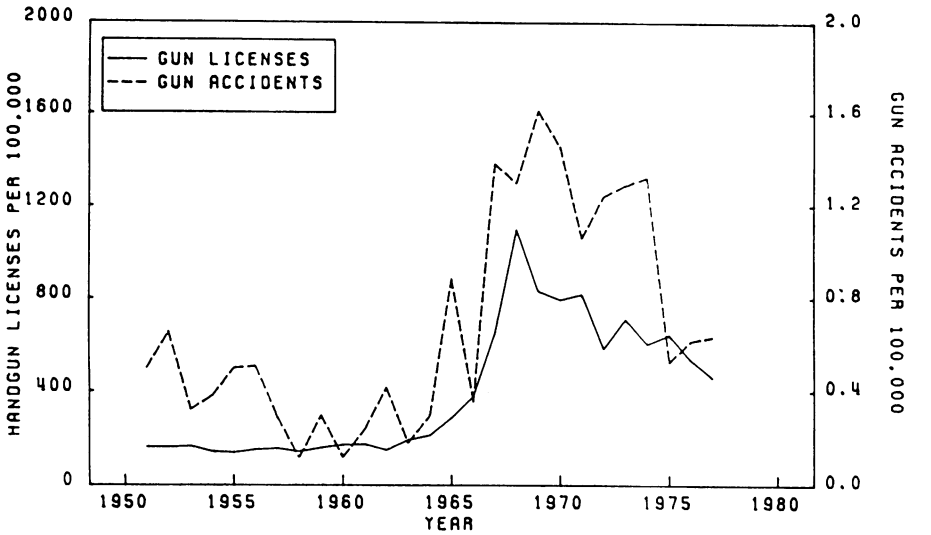


Fig. 3. Handgun licenses and gun accidents, 1951-1977

nal justice and public safety are collective goods that are provided by community institutions, but individuals and primary groups (family and allies) have a powerful interest in protecting themselves and punishing anyone who attempts to exploit them. When instances of assaultive violence occur there is a tendency for individuals to prepare for their own protection. Preparation includes not only the acquisition of weapons, but a wide range of behaviors that are seen by others as threatening. And, of course, the best defense is a good offense. Preemptive violence is as common in personal violence as it is in international violence. This is the state of "war" in Hobbesian terms, where force and fraud are the normal interactions between actors.

The second reason for the rapid spread of assaultive violence is that violence is subcultural. I remain a critic of the way the term has been used in the literature, especially in the interpretation of regional patterns of violence, but am not willing to throw the concept out with the bath water. Social networks are the channels through which assaultive violence, like other types of communication, flows. It seems reasonable to refer to the language, lore, tastes, myths, skills and artifacts that develop around violent interaction as subcultural, and there is no doubt that they involve commitment and motivation. Be that as it may, the point is that personal violence spreads because offenders and victims are part of social and moral networks. When violence

occurs it draws multiple people into the conflict and spreads either the desire to retaliate or the need for preemptive violence throughout the network, potentially involving ever increasing numbers of individuals in the fight.

REFERENCES

1. Hackney, S.: Southern violence. *Am. Hist. Rev. 74*:3 906-25, 1969.
2. Gastil, R.: Homicide and a regional subculture of violence. *Am. Sociol. Rev. 36*:412-27, 1971.
3. Loftin, C. and Hill, R.H.: Regional subculture and homicide: An empirical examination of the Gastil-Hackney thesis. *Am. Sociol. Rev. 39*:714-24, 1974.
4. Messner, S.F.: Poverty, inequality, and the urban homicide rate: Some unexpected findings. *Criminology 20*:102-14, 1982.
5. Messner, S.F.: Regional and racial effects on the urban homicide rate: The subculture of violence revisited. *Am. J. Sociol. 88*:997-1007, 1983a.
6. Messner, S.F.: Regional differences in the economic correlates of urban homicide. *Criminology 21*:477-88, 1983b.
7. Schmid, C.F.: A study of homicide in Seattle, 1914 to 1924. *Soc. Forces 4*:745-56, 1926.
8. Bensing, R.C. and Schroeder, O.: *Homicide in an Urban Community*. Springfield, IL, Thomas, 1960.
9. Schmid, C.F. and Schmid, S.E.: *Crime in the State of Washington*. Olympia, WA, Law and Justice Planning Office, 1972.
10. Curtis, L.A.: *Criminal Violence: National Patterns and Behavior*. Lexington, MA, Lexington Books, 1974.
11. Georges-Abeyie, D.G. and Harries, K.D., editors: *Crime: A Spatial Perspective*. New York, Columbia University Press, 1980.
12. Singer, S.I.: Victims of serious violence and their criminal behavior: Subcultural theory and beyond. *Victims 1*:61-69, 1986.
13. Wolfgang, M.E., Figlio, R.M. and Sellin, T.: *Delinquency In a Birth Cohort*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1972.
14. McDowall, D. and Loftin, C.: Collective security and the demand for legal handguns. *Am. J. Sociol. 88*:1146-61, 1983.
15. Loftin, C. and McDowall, D.: Collective security and fatal firearm accidents. *Criminology*. In press.
16. Swartz, R.D.: A spatial analysis of Retail/Commercial Homicides in Detroit: 1968-1974. In: *Crime: A Spatial Perspective*, Georges-Abeyie, D.G. and Harries, K.D., editors. New York, Columbia University Press, 1980.
17. Rose, H.M. and Deskins, D.R., Jr.: Felony murder: The case of Detroit. *Urban Geog. 1*:1-21, 1980.
18. Black, D.: Crime as social control. *Am. Sociol. Rev. 48*:34-45, 1983.