



The Decline in Global Violence Reality or Myth?

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In 2011, Harvard University's Steven Pinker asserted that, "we may be living in the most peaceful era in our species' existence."

In 2012, Martin Dempsey, Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff claimed that today's world has become, "more dangerous than it has ever been."

NEW YORK—These two statements illuminate the deep gulf between those who believe that the world has become much less war-prone, and the pessimists who argue the contrary—that the global security environment has become ever more dangerous.

Steven Pinker's 2011 study, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* is firmly in the camp of cautious optimism. It has won widespread critical acclaim for its scope, originality and scholarship. But its central claims have also become the focus of a wide-ranging and contentious debate.

Some of Pinker's key assertions, and the arguments used to support them, have been subject to sustained—and sometimes deeply hostile—criticism from across the political spectrum.

Critics have focused on two key claims in *Better Angels*—first, that the current era is unprecedentedly peaceful, and second, that the earliest human societies had dramatically higher rates of deadly violence than do those of the modern era. Against Pinker's "declinist" thesis the critics assert that the 20th century *was* the bloodiest in human history, while the earliest human societies were remarkably non-violent. The *Human Security Report's* analysis of the critiques and the counter-claims provides the most comprehensive review to date of what has become an increasingly heated debate.

Today there is broad agreement within the research community that the number and deadliness of interstate wars has declined dramatically since the end of World War II, and the incidence of civil wars has declined substantially since the end of the Cold War. But given the fragmentary nature of much of the historical data on war and homicide rates, debate on the extent of violence in earlier periods of history remains deeply contested and unlikely to abate soon.

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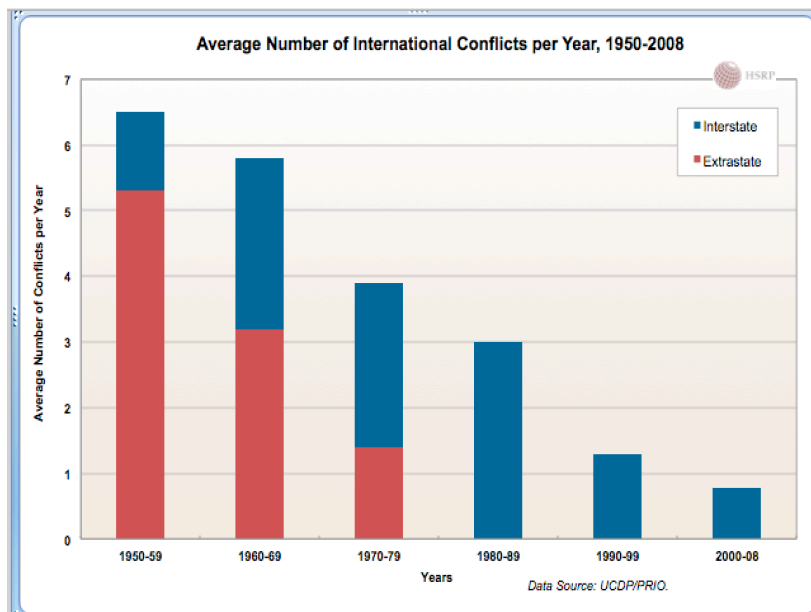
Challenging Popular Assumptions

Professor Pinker is well aware that his findings are sharply at odds with widely held popular beliefs:

In a century that began with 9/11, Iraq, and Darfur, the claim that we are living in an unusually peaceful time may strike you as somewhere between hallucinatory and obscene.

The post-World War II conflict data offer compelling evidence that both the decline in the number and deadliness of wars are real. The 2000s are indeed relatively peaceful compared with previous decades.

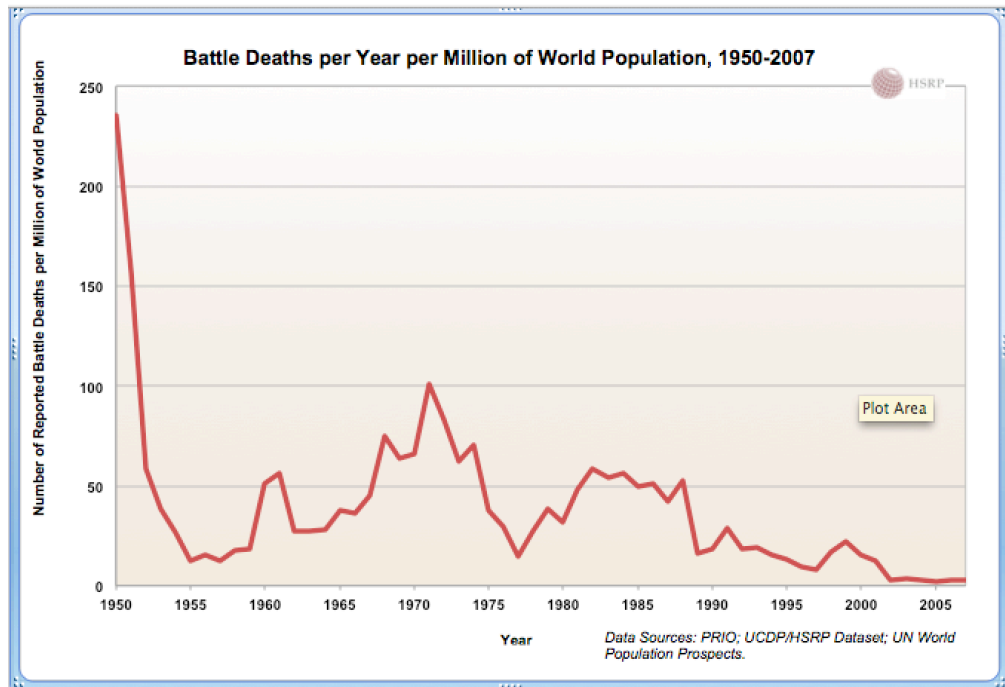
The HSRP graphic below shows the rapid decline in international wars (anti-colonial wars are included in this category) over the past 60 odd years. The average number of international wars being fought every year per decade shrinks dramatically—from over six in the 1950s, to less than one in the 2000s. This matters says Human Security Report Project Director, Andrew Mack, because, “international wars kill far more people on average than do the far more numerous civil wars.”



We should note however that the *total* number of armed conflicts of all types—i.e., not just international wars—increased threefold from the 1950s to the end of the Cold War. But most of these conflicts were low-intensity civil wars with relatively modest fatality counts. From the early 1990s to the present day, overall conflict numbers have dropped by some 40 percent, while the deadliest conflicts, those that kill at least 1,000 people a year, have declined by more than half.



What about wartime fatalities? Here the data are even more remarkable. As the graph below shows, between 1950 and 2007 the decline in the fatality rate from combat was dramatic. In 1950, the annual rate was approximately 240 reported battle-related deaths per million of the world's population; in 2007, it was less than 10 per million.



The extent of this decline, which is still viewed with surprise and sometimes skepticism by non-specialists, is relatively uncontroversial within the research community. What is blazingly controversial is Pinker's assertion that WWII may not have been the deadliest episode of mass killing in human history.

A Major Challenge to the "Declinist" Case?

Pinker does not dispute the fact that World War II killed more people than any other war in history, but he argues that the absolute number of war deaths is not an appropriate metric for estimating the deadliness of warfare. What matters, he says, is the number of war deaths *relative to the size of the population*.

So while World War II certainly killed far more people than did earlier episodes of mass killing, the global population was far larger in the twentieth than in earlier centuries. In fact Pinker argues, that *relative to world population*, WWII is only the 9th most deadly episode of mass violence in recorded history.



But the metric used to determine the deadliness of World War II is different from that used elsewhere in *Better Angels* where fatalities per 100,000 of the population *per year* is the preferred measure. If this latter metric is used, World War II is no longer the 9th deadliest episode of mass violence, but the deadliest in more than a 1,000 years.

This might appear to provide strong support for the critics' case. But Mack argues that:

Creating league tables of individual episodes of mass violence, while interesting, omits the huge numbers of deaths from lesser wars that occur the gaps between mega-episodes of blood-letting. In determining trends in the deadliness of warfare, death tolls from lesser, but more numerous, wars should also be taken into account.

There are more appropriate ways of determining whether or not violence *overall* is declining. One way is to ask what percentage of all deaths is caused by warfare as against by other causes. Research data drawn on in *Better Angels* indicate that in hunter-gatherer and other early human societies, warfare accounted for about 15 percent of fatalities from all causes. This is an astonishingly high figure—one that is substantially greater than the percentage of deaths caused by warfare in Europe since the Middle Ages.

For example, even the in blood-drenched twentieth century only 3 percent of all deaths were the result of warfare. This is still a *very* high figure, but it is only one-fifth the average rate death rate from warfare in early hunter-gatherer societies.

We should note here that the claim that early hunter-gatherer communities were extremely violent is highly controversial in some quarters—it was described by one senior anthropologist as, “Pinker’s Big Lie.” The critics claim that there is *no* evidence that the earliest human societies were warlike. This controversy is reviewed in Chapter 1.

Yet another metric looks at the percentage of the populations of the warring states that are killed in wars. In the seventeenth century, the so-called “wars of religion” killed some 2 percent of the populations of the warring states. Yet in the “deadliest” twentieth century just 0.7 percent of the population of the warring states succumbed in battle.

All these estimates are based on data that are often fragmentary and sometimes of dubious provenance, but Professor Mack argues that, “it seems unlikely that they are so inaccurate that the steep downward

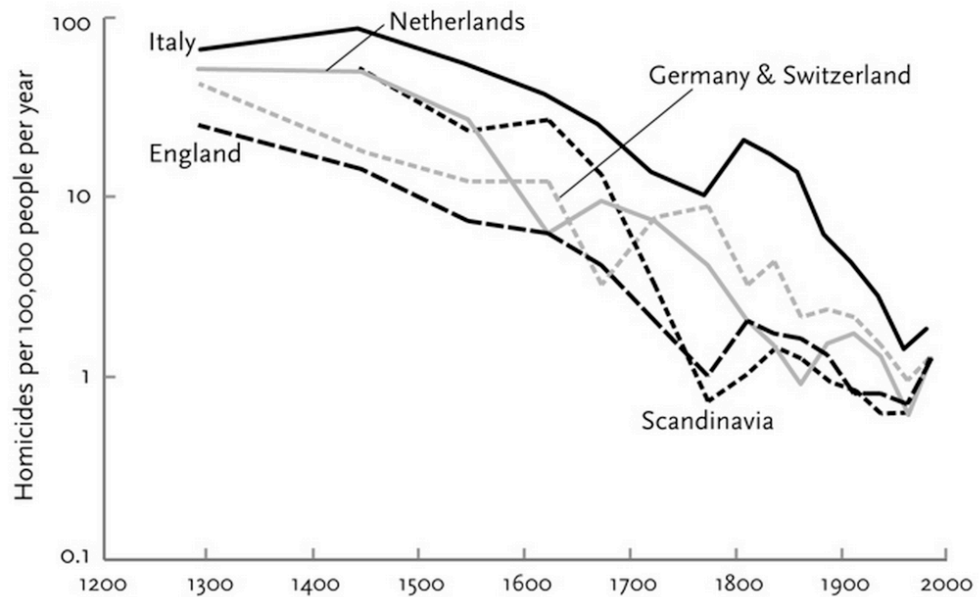
trends in violence that *Better Angels* describes are actually concealing a long-term *increase* in the deadliness of warfare.”

The Decline in Violence is About More than War Deaths

Critics who reject the idea that violence is declining tend to forget that Pinker is not looking simply at trends in warfare, but violence from *all* causes—not least homicides. This matters because war is responsible for only one in every 10 violent deaths today. The large majority of violent deaths result from murder, not from warfare. And here too there has clearly been an extraordinary long-term decline in deadly violence.

The fragmentary historical data we can access today reveal dramatic declines in reported homicide rates over the past 800 years.

The most instructive homicide data for this period come from Europe. As the graphic below indicates, homicide rates plunged throughout Western Europe and Scandinavia from the 13th to the 20th centuries. In the 13th century they ranged between 40 and 80 deaths per 100,000 of the population per year. By the end of the 20th century they were mostly below 2 per 100,000 per year.



Source: Steven Pinker

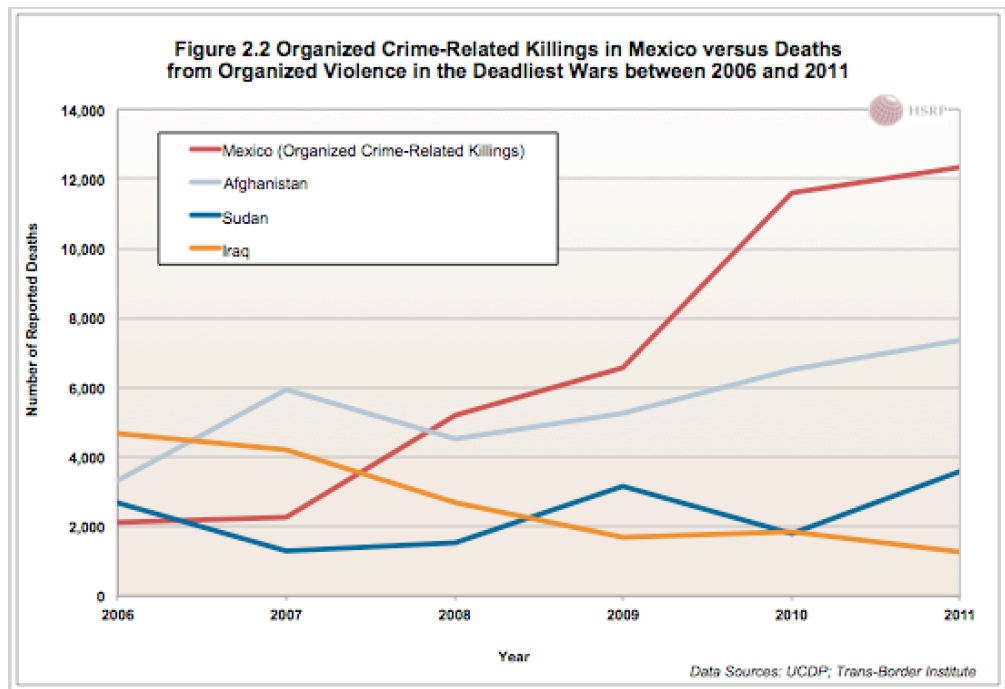
No reliable homicide data were available from the developing world until very recently and even today a substantial number of states either don't collect data, or collect it, but don't share it with the UN.

The global average homicide rate today is some 8 deaths per 100,000 per

year and it seems highly probable that there has been a centuries-long decline homicide rates in the developing world similar to that in Europe and likely for essentially the same reasons. The homicide rates from the early hunter-gatherer societies were certainly dramatically higher on average than those of today's developing world.

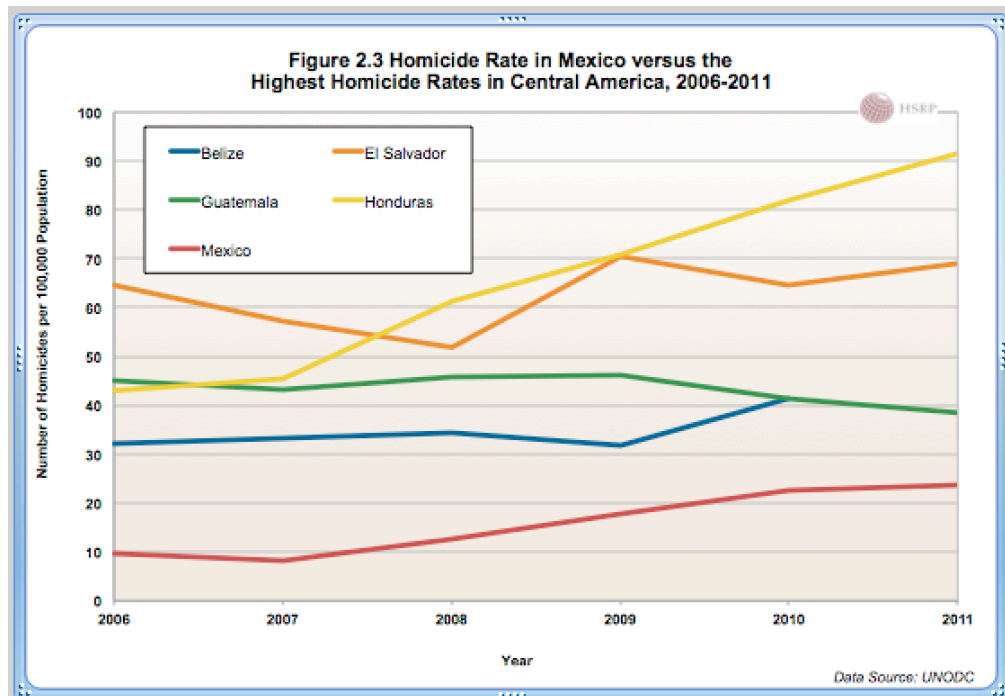
Organized Criminal Violence—a Greater Threat Than War?

In sharp contrast to most of the rest of the developing world, murder rates in Latin and Central America are high and have been climbing. Indeed the number of people killed by organized criminal violence in Mexico in 2011 was greater than the death toll from combat in Afghanistan, or in Sudan, or in Iraq—the three deadliest armed conflicts in the world that year. Gang murders in Mexico, most of them drug-related, increased six-fold from 2006 to 2011.



Equally remarkable is just how *low* Mexico's murder rate from organized crime has been compared with drug-related homicide rates in Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala and Belize.

This is clearly evident in the next graphic.



Does this mean, as some have suggested, that as wars have become less numerous and less deadly, organized criminal violence is becoming an ever-greater threat to human security.

This doesn't seem likely.

First, there are no reports of comparably high levels of lethal organized criminal violence in other parts of the world. Second, the limited country data from the UN indicate that while organized criminal violence is responsible for between 25 and 30 percent of homicides in Latin American countries, the figure is only 5 to 10 percent in Asia, and less than 5 percent in Europe. Third, homicide rates are declining in every region of the developing world except Latin and Central America. Fourth, there have actually been substantial declines in the homicide rates in Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador in the past year.

Over the long-term Professor Mack argues there are grounds optimism given the association between economic development, increased state capacity and declining homicide rates:

As national incomes continue to rise throughout the developing world, states will have more resources to deter violent crimes and address their long-term causes.

Increased state capacity also helps governments repress violent rebellions and address the grievances that often drive them.



Increased state capacity is of course is only one mechanism for reducing homicides and civil wars, albeit an important one. In seeking to better understand the extraordinary millennia-long decline in all forms of violence *Better Angels* employs a wide range of explanatory mechanisms that embrace agency, contingency, proximate causes, and long-term deep-lying ideational and sociocultural transitions.

Pinker makes the case that human beings have impulses that can restrain and prevent violence—their “better angels.” But they also have impulses that can catalyze and exacerbate violence. To explain the decline of violence we need, he suggests:

... to identify the changes in our cultural and material milieu that have given our peaceable motives the upper hand.

Some of the most interesting challenges to *Better Angels* come from critics who accept that there has been a long-term decline in violence, but offer different explanations for what has caused it. Some of these are reviewed in Chapter 1.

Looking forward

The post–World War II era has witnessed terrible wars, genocides that have slaughtered hundreds of thousands and savagely brutal terror campaigns. It has also seen a dramatic decline in the number and deadliness of international wars since the end of World War II, and—in the wake of the Cold War—the reversal of the decades-long increase in civil war numbers.

What are the chances that these latter positive changes will be sustained? No one really knows. There are too many future unknowns to make predictions with any degree of confidence. And Pinker makes it very clear that his thesis seeks to explain the decline of violence in the past, not to predict the future.

Moreover, the case for pessimism about the global security future is well rehearsed and has considerable support within the parts of the research community. Major sources of concern include the possibility of outbreaks of nuclear terrorism, a massive transnational upsurge of lethal Islamist radicalism, and wars triggered by mass droughts and population movements driven by climate change.

Better Angels notes reasons for concern about each of these potential future threats, but also expresses skepticism about the more extreme claims of the conflict pessimists.



Many of the security-enhancing changes that Pinker and other “declinists” have identified are enduring and likely to continue to have an impact well into the future. They include, for example:

- The strong normative proscription against the use of military force—except in self-defence, or sanctioned by the UN Security Council.
- Peacekeeping, peacebuilding and “peacemaking” (UN-speak for seeking to stop ongoing wars.) These are inefficient, but also effective.
- Increased economic interdependence—which in turn increases the costs and decreases the benefits of the resort to war.
- Inclusive democratization—at its best a form of non-violent conflict resolution.
- Increased economic development—the politics of economic growth are much less conflictual than the negative sum politics of economic decline.
- Enhanced state capacity—meaning access to greater resources to address grievances and deter violence.
- The end of colonialism and the Cold War—which removed two major causes of international conflict from the international system.

Any assessment of future security threats needs to factor in the enduring changes that have enhanced security over the years along with those that threaten it.

The world remains a dangerous place, but it has become less so. As Pinker puts it:

The decline has not been steady; it has not brought violence down to zero; and it is not guaranteed to continue. But it is a persistent historical development, visible on scales from millennia to years, from world wars and genocides to the spanking of children and the treatment of animals.

At the very least these are grounds for guarded optimism.