



VIOLENCE & THE STATE

War and Domestic Homicide: The Unanticipated Consequences of State Role Models

The ravages of war are well known to humankind. While studies of war have examined such issues as the number of battle deaths, and the chaos created in the economies and infra-structures of warring nations, little attention has been paid to the effects of war on violence among civilians in their homelands.

The question of the effect of war on rates of domestic homicide was resurrected after decades of neglect by Dane Archer and Rosemary Gartner in their influential 1976 work, *Violent Acts and Violent Times* (1).

This research was conducted on data they collected in the Comparative Crime Data File. This archive contains crime rates on a variety of offences, including homicide, from 110 nations during the period 1900-1970.

Comparing the homicide rates of nations at war with similar nations not at war during the same time period, they concluded that war increased postwar rates of domestic homicide. Their three major findings were:

- 1) Nations at war experienced increases in postwar homicide rates more often than did the noncombatant nations.
- 2) Victorious nations were more likely to experience increased homicide rates than were defeated nations, and
- 3) Nations suffering a large number of deaths were the most likely to experience increases in homicide rates following wars.

Unfortunately, the Archer and Gartner analysis excluded the Korean War since it occurred so soon after World War II, and only included a limited analysis of the effects of the Vietnam War. In spite of this, they felt able to conclude that there was a tendency toward more consistent increases in homicide rates among the combatants during the Vietnam War. Fishman (1983) studied the effects of the Six Day War (June 1967)

and Yom Kippur War (October 1973) on domestic homicide rates in Israel. Homicide rates dropped during each war and increased in the postwar periods. This spill-over effect was most pronounced after the Yom Kippur War when homicide rates were substantially higher than during the pre-war levels.

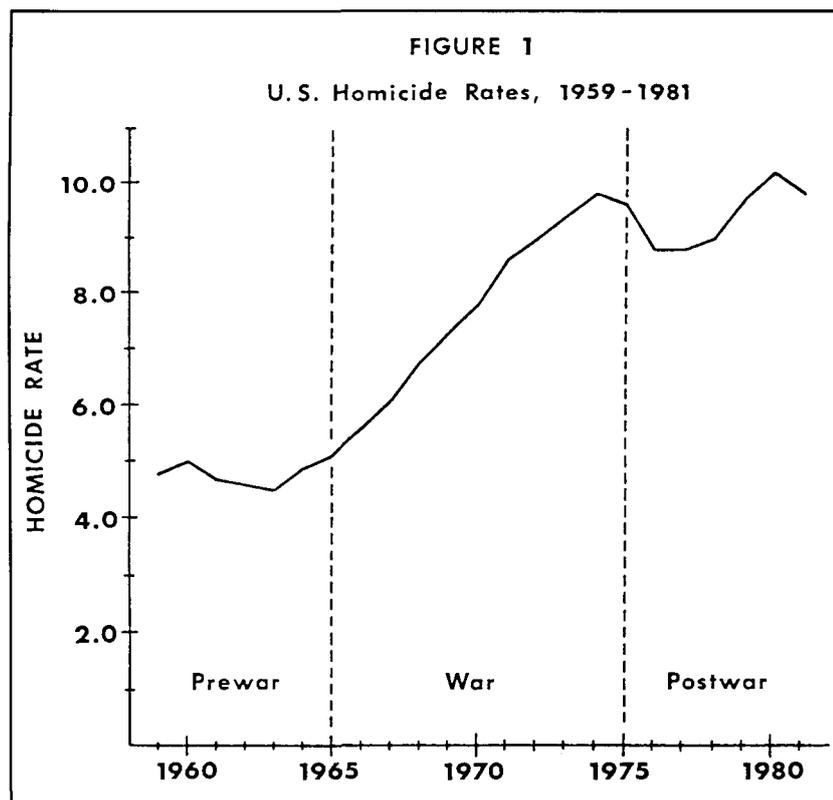
In a similar vein, Landua and Pfeffermann (1988) studied the effects of war-related stress on violent crimes in Israel from the period July 1967 to June 1982. They found that war-related stress as measured by the number of military and civilian casualties, and economic stress as measured by inflation, had significant independent effects on homicide rates. These effects on homicide rates occurred several months after the war-related events.

My research examines the effects of the Vietnam War on domestic homicide rates in the United States. For purposes of analysis, the Vietnam War period is divided into pre-war (1959-1964), wartime (1965-1975), and post-war (1976-1981), based on the wartime designation of Small and Singer (1982). Homicide rates are then compared between these periods.

An initial inspection of the changes in homicide rates during the period of 1959 through 1981 showed a substantial increase (see figure 1). The mean homicide rate for the pre-war period was 4.75 per 100,000 population. This rate increased to 7.74 during the Vietnam War and rose further to 9.38 during the post-war period. This represents a 95% increase in mean homicide rates from the pre-war period to the post-war period. This dramatic increase in lethal violence has been a matter of grave national concern.

The analysis indicates that the Vietnam War was a major influence on higher rates of domestic homicide during the war period (1965-1975), and that the generally declining poverty rates of this period had a significant, negative association with homicide rates.

After considering a number of alternative explanations for the relationship between war and rates of domestic homicide, Archer and Gartner (1976, 1984) concluded that a legitimization of violence model is the most appropriate way of



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explaining this phenomenon. The legitimization of violence model proposes that the State serves as a role model for violent behaviour among its citizens by glorifying violence on a massive scale.

During a war, a society reverses its customary prohibitions against killing and instead honours acts of violence which would be regarded as murderous in peacetime. Several researchers have suggested that this social approval or legitimization of violence produces a lasting reduction of inhibitions against taking human life. (Archer and Gartner, 1976: 943).

My research on the Vietnam War and Landau and Pfeffermann's in Israel are supportive of the legitimization of violence model. Fishman (1983), concluded that increased social cohesion during the two wars he studied lowered homicide rates in Israel, but that the legitimization of violence during wartime created a spill-over effect during the postwar periods. This spill-over effect increased rates of

homicide after the Six Days War and the Yom Kippur War. The legitimization of violence model also appears to be applicable to the effects of widely publicised executions. (Bowers and Pierce 1980).

Whilst more research is needed on this important issue, it is clear that the lethal violence and destruction produced by international war does not appear to be confined to the battlefield. State support and public approval of this most brutal of human enterprises appear to have a legitimising effect on homicides among civilians.

References

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THE ALTERNATIVES to VIOLENCE PROJECT

The Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) is a volunteer programme that provides weekend workshops for prisoners in a number of U.S. states. These examine the causes of violence and attempt to find alternative paths of action to take when confronted with potentially violent situations.

The programme was started in 1975, in Greenhaven Correctional Facility in New York State, after a group of long-termers and lifers approached the New York Quakers and asked them to develop a programme to address the high levels of violence within the prison. The result of this collaboration was AVP.

Each AVP workshop is an intensive 22 hour, 8 session experience beginning on Friday morning and ending on Sunday afternoon. During the weekend, 15 to 20 participants take part in a variety of sequential exercises designed to affirm the self, break down barriers, build a sense of community, and examine the many facets of violence - its escalation and skills required for intervention - as

well as allowing time for relaxation and fun.

AVP Programmes are now taking place in certain prisons in the UK.

A three-day workshop was organised by AVP (London) Friends in Pentonville Prison last November. These are some of the comments made by the prisoners who took part:

"It gave me an insight to where violence stems from and what things promote or demote it."

"It has helped me to be more open and it has taught me to stand back and listen to the other party's side of a story before I react. Also to understand people better and helped me to share my problems."

"Showing me that it can help you with problems you may have if you open up and discuss them with people instead of bottling them up inside yourself. Also I found it satisfying listening to other people's problems and trying to help them find a constructive way of solving those problems."

"It has shown me that there are alternatives to violence, ie, not to hit-first-think-later, but to think, full stop."

For further information about AVP, please write to:

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Thanks to the Prison Reform Trust for permission to use part of an article by Mark Bitel, a prisoner in Sing Sing, which first appeared in Prison Report.

