

# Pulling apart: notes on the widening gap in the risks of violence

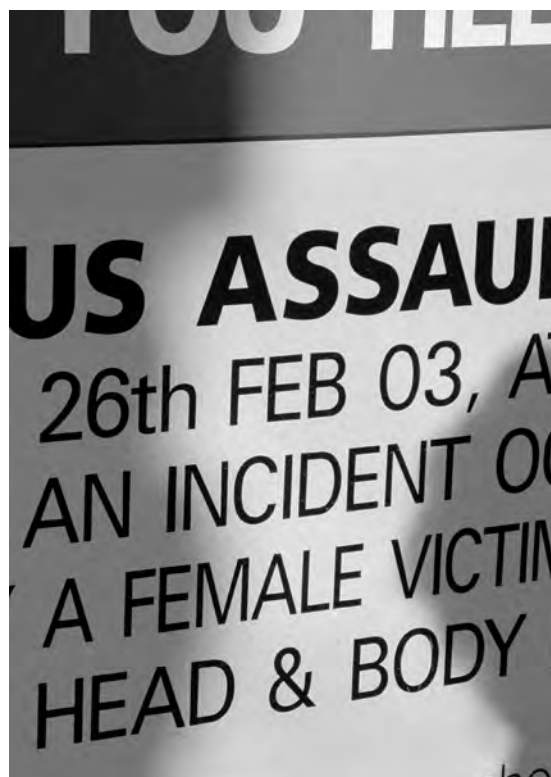
Elliott Currie on the uneven class distribution of violence and mortality.

The idea that the risk of being the victim of serious violent crime is unevenly distributed in modern societies is not new. But there is evidence that the gap between the risks faced by the most disadvantaged and the rest of society is growing. In countries around the world, violent crime is becoming more concentrated among people who are already most at risk of other social ills. Let me focus here on just two examples of this global trend – from countries that are at opposite ends of the social policy spectrum among the advanced industrial societies.

The first comes from the United States. A recent article by Gopal K. Singh and Michael D. Kogan (2007), shows that socio-economic disparities in overall mortality among children in the United States have been widening since the late 1960s. Children in the most deprived fifth of the population were 52% more likely to die, at ages one to 14, than their counterparts in the *top* fifth in 1969. By 2000, they were 82% more likely to die than their better-off counterparts. A part of this shift is accounted for by rapidly growing disparities in the risks of dying by violence. Children in the bottom fifth of the population, who had already had a 76% higher risk of dying by homicide in 1969, by 2000 had a risk of homicide death 159% greater than their counterparts in the most affluent fifth of the population.

A closer look shows that there have been two different processes at work. Childhood deaths from unintentional injuries, and medical conditions like cardiovascular diseases and cancer *fell* during this period for children of all income groups, but fell faster for children at the high end of the income scale than for those at the bottom – thus widening the gap. But for homicide, the trend was different. Throughout the early 1990s, there was an absolute *rise* in homicide rates among the most deprived children. Homicide was the only one of the leading causes of childhood death to sustain an increase over this period – and the increase was overwhelmingly concentrated among the young poor. (This research follows work charting similar growing divisions within the adult population in the United States (Singh, 2004).

A recent analysis by Anders Nilsson and Felipe Estrada (2006) shows a similar pattern in Sweden – a society with far lower rates of serious violent crime and far narrower social and economic inequalities. But, even in Sweden, research has shown increasing inequality of living conditions in recent years across a range of indicators of social and personal well-being.



*The poor are more likely to be victims of violence.*

Nilsson and Estrada defined the ‘poor’ in their Swedish sample as those with the lowest household income and the lowest ‘cash safety margin’ – that is, the least availability of funds to tide them over in case of an unexpected economic crisis. At the other end, the ‘rich’ were those with the highest incomes and the most secure cash safety margin. On the basis of victimisation surveys, they report that the proportion of the population experiencing any kind of violence is twice as large among the poor as among the best off in their sample. The poorest group’s exposure to violence or threats of violence increased from the mid-1980s through to the turn of the century, while the richest experienced an increase only until the early 1990s. For the more serious kinds of violence, the gap between rich and poor was much greater, the ‘polarisation’ more extreme. Violence that resulted in the need for medical attention was about seven times as likely at the end of this period among the poor than among the rich. Though there has been no overall increase in serious violent crime in Sweden in recent years, the risk for more affluent people has stabilised at relatively low levels while that of the poorest has risen, thus increasing the

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concentration of the incidence of crime amongst the poor. Nilsson and Estrada conclude that this 'has led to groups that are already characterised by low levels of resources having to bear a larger part of the burden associated with the crime problem' (2006, p. 406). And that growing burden has coincided with the widening disparities in other realms of life that have characterised other traditionally welfarist democracies under the impact of global social and economic change.

Similar findings have appeared in the United Kingdom and in some American research based, like Nilsson and Estrada's work, on victimisation data (see Thacher, 2004). The findings all point in the same direction, and they remind us that the widening gap between 'haves and have-nots' goes well beyond sheer material deprivation to more immediate threats to lives and bodies. They show another face of the social and economic policies that have further marginalised vulnerable groups – a cost largely hidden beneath the apparent stability or even decline of violent crime in various countries, which hides what may be absolute increases in violent injury or death among the most excluded.

One of the results of the growing concentration of violent crime is that it becomes easier to ignore – if, that is, you do not live where it is becoming concentrated. This has led, in the United States, to a somewhat schizophrenic view of the problem of violence. On the one hand there is a narrative about violent crime that has been with us since the mid-1990s, which says that everything is getting much better. Affluent people in many of the country's cities feel with some justification that the streets for them have become safer. This helps to explain a widespread sense of complacency about violence in America that is otherwise perplexing, since the level of serious violent crime, and particularly of homicide, remains far higher in the United States than in comparable industrial societies around the world.

Alongside the narrative about the victory over violent crime in America there is a different one, which decries the descent of our poorest communities into something like anarchy and chaos, and bemoans the tragedy of disadvantaged and disaffected young men – particularly black young men – who are once again killing each other in astonishing numbers. So, the disturbingly high level of violence in America has not become invisible. But its increasing concentration has bred a tendency to see the carnage among young black men as mysterious – as something elemental, and disconnected from the workings of larger social and economic forces.

It is widely argued in the media that most people of colour are doing quite well in the climate of tolerance in the decades since the civil rights laws in the 1960s. The problems that remain, in this view, are those of a relatively small and marginal group of people, detached from the mainstream of American life. *Why* that small group is still so troubled is a subject of debate, but the most common explanations focus

either on the self-destructive culture said to pervade many minority communities, or, increasingly, on the possible biological deficiencies of many people at the bottom of the social order. There is very little sense that these problems are connected with anything else about the society in which those people live.

And this points to the value of a comparative perspective on these trends. Once we recognise that a similar pattern of concentration of violence, poverty, and other ills is taking place in countries around the world, it becomes harder to explain away those problems as being simply the reflections of cultural or individual failings among the groups most afflicted by them. It raises the possibility that economic and social forces operating well beyond specific communities and even specific countries may be implicated in these deepening social divisions. And it forces us to think about the global economic forces that may be driving these trends – even in some of the countries that have historically tried the hardest to resist them.

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## References

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