

## SPOTLIGHT 5

# Crime

How much reduction in crime is possible? A look at past trends indicates the degree to which crime can be reduced globally over the next 15 years. The broad crime drop in the United States between 1991 and 2014 amounted to an annual decline of about 2.9 percent a year, which included a range of manifestations of interpersonal violence such as homicide, child maltreatment, assault, and violence in schools. Meanwhile, Singapore has achieved its very low crime rates—including the lowest homicide, robbery, and domestic violence rates known in the world—through a sustained decline of about 5 percent a year over the last 25 years. Italy has experienced an annual decline in homicides of about 6 percent since the early 1990s. In South Africa, homicides have fallen about 4 percent a year since the mid-1990s, or just about the same yearly rate of decline as in Colombia since the early 1990s. Indeed, many countries have seen annual reductions in serious crime and violence of 2–5 percent over two decades or more. An average annual decline of 3 percent may therefore be possible at the global level, leading to a reduction of about 40 percent by the end of 2030 (Eisner and Nivette 2012).

### Why do interpersonal violence and crime decline?

Why interpersonal violence and organized crime are declining is still not possible to explain with any real accuracy. However, it is currently possible to disentangle the mix of factors that influence both the cross-sectional variation in crime rates among countries and the trends of crime levels over time. First,

it appears that trends in the levels of interpersonal violence and organized crime stem only partly from factors that governments can directly influence. For example, analyses of time series going back to the 1970s suggest that factors such as changing demographics, unemployment, technological change, drug epidemics, and changes in norms and attitudes toward violence have affected trends in crime levels generally and homicides specifically (Baumer and Wolff 2014). On the other hand, changes in income inequality over the last 100 years seem to be entirely unrelated to changes in homicide rates, despite income inequality being a robust and consistent cross-sectional correlate of homicide (Brush 2007).

However, there is increasing evidence of a positive correlation between homicide and organized crime levels, on the one hand, and corruption levels, on the other (Lappi-Seppälä and Lehti 2014; Pinotti 2015). This correlation can be interpreted as empirical evidence of a role for governance in the reduction of interpersonal violence, and specifically for the theory that the failure of governments to sanction and deter organized criminal groups is one important factor contributing to high levels of homicides.

### Three sets of factors explain homicide drops in the past

In addition to theories linking the decline in crime rates to demographics and access to economic opportunities (see, for example, Donohue and Levitt 2001 and de Mello and Schneider 2010), comparisons of major sustained declines in homicides by country and historical period across the globe suggest that declines in murder rates occurred when three factors

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WDR 2017 team, based on inputs from Manuel Eisner.

came together (Eisner 2013, 2014). The first factor is changes in relative power: homicide rates declined where states gained control over private organized providers of protection and enhanced their legitimacy through effective institutions that produced benefits for broader segments of society (see chapter 4 and Rotberg 2004).

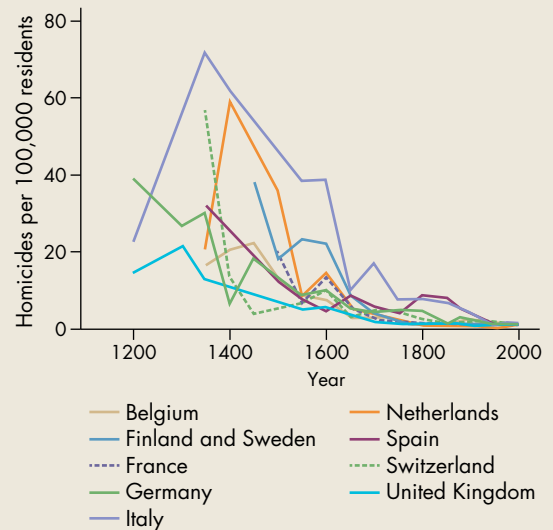
The second factor is changes in technological and human capacity: declines in homicides appear to be regularly linked to the spread of new social control technologies such as the monitoring and management of daily behaviors; increased control over disorderly conduct and substance use, especially alcohol; and systems aimed at early identification and treatment of offenders and victims (Eisner 2014). For example, the international fall in crime over the last 20 years is best seen as a result of investments in security technologies that have affected almost every aspect of daily routines (Farrell and others 2011). These technologies include electronic immobilizers to prevent car theft, burglar alarms, CCTV cameras in hot spots of disruptive behavior, a less cash-based economy, more private security personnel, and mobile telephones to call help and record crimes more easily. Many of these security and surveillance technologies are designed to reduce property crime, but they may have had an effect on violent crime as well.

The third factor is changes in norms of behavior: historical declines in homicides appear to have been catalyzed by a diminishing acceptability of violence and intentional harm to others. Historically, such change in social norms manifests itself in a growing repugnance for public executions and torture, disgust with blood revenge and duels, or increasing sensitization to child maltreatment and neglect. Political or religious leaders, philanthropists, intellectuals, and teachers are among those ushering in such changes in societal preferences (Pinker 2011).

## The state's monopoly over the means of violence is the overarching factor

This report argues that the changes in capacity and in norms of behavior that affect development outcomes, including reductions in levels of violence and crime levels, are ultimately derived from changes in the relative power among actors. The sharp declines in homicide rates that occurred in more than 10 Western European countries after 1650 illustrate how shifts in the balance of power toward the state and away from private providers of security, and the resulting

**Figure S5.1 Homicide rates across Europe have declined dramatically over the last 800 years**



Sources: WDR 2017 team, based on Eisner 2003 with data from Eisner 2014.

expansion in state capacity, brought about changes in societal attitudes toward homicide that over time led to a drastic reduction in homicide levels (figure S5.1)—see Eisner (2003).

Before the expansion of the capacity of courts and bureaucracies that accompanied the rise of the states' monopoly over violence in 17th-century Europe, government attitudes toward homicides were lenient if the motives were passion or the defense of honor, and society perceived private retaliation as an acceptable way of restoring order. Between the 16th and 17th centuries, dispute settlement moved out of the private sphere and became the prerogative of judges and government officials, and perpetrators of homicide came to be seen as criminals. Campaigns of social awareness; societal acceptance of increased bureaucratic control of everyday life; improved trust in and the legitimacy of the state as an overarching institution; the evolution of the notion of honor, which lost its cultural significance; and the liberation of the individual from his or her obligations to the group—in short, a change in norms—eventually led to this historical decline in homicide rates (Tilly 1992; Rousseaux 1999).

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