

Murder in America

However, when another person, generally a spouse, relative, former friend or ally, independently decides that your life is worth less than zero, the result can be homicide (e.g., justifiable, war), if not outright murder (There is a difference.). Although not the world leaders in this pursuit, Americans are well-equipped for the task. Polls reveal that roughly one-third of our citizens, predominately white men, Southerners, the elderly, and, politically, conservative Republicans, proudly claim gun ownership. Considering the darker implications of acknowledging such armament, that estimate clearly understates actual gun possession. So, it is not surprising that four out of five U.S. murders involve firearms.

Still, not all murders involve the use of firearms. Knives are a notable alternative. Thereafter, things get rather kinky as bludgeons, wire for strangulation, fire, asphyxiation, narcotics, and drowning claim a smattering of unfortunate victims. A grave weakness in our nation's fundamental understanding of chemistry is underscored by the very modest role that both newly devised, as well as old-fashioned, poisons play in modern murder stratagems.

It may come as no surprise that almost nine out of ten American murderers are male. Testosterone rules. However, only three out of four victims are male. Twice as many women are likely to be killed than to join in the sport. Moreover, it is largely a young person's enterprise. American killers average 27 years while their killees average 31 years.

Along with poverty and inner-city tensions, race and sex are factors. A little over one-half of domestic American killers are black while a little less than half are white. Proportionately this means that blacks are seven times more likely to commit murder than whites. Nine percent of America's murderers are female, again, somewhat evenly divided as to complexion.

33,636 Americans, most in the prime of their lives, were devalued and dispatched via firearm in 2013 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, CDCP). More than 60 percent of these deaths (21,175) were the result of suicide. Having survived their thirties, Americans appear to get safer with advancing age.

Abortion

Legalized by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1973, abortions among 'women of childbearing age' (defined as 15-44) peaked in 1981 at 29/1,000 and has since declined by half to 14.6/1,000 in 2014.

Confounding expectations, abortion rates rose in some states passing restrictive anti-abortion laws that closed clinics that served, primarily, young and poor women. (Midwest solons legislated restrictions that closed 22% of their clinics.) Alternately, in some states where access was expanded, rates decreased.

Not surprisingly, the progressively increasing use of long-term [birth control](#), such as intrauterine devices and contraceptive implants, are believed to be the primary reason for the decline in abortion rates.

U.S. Traffic Deaths - 'Belts, Booze, and Speed'

Airbags and still more airbags; improved driver and passenger restraints plus redesigned child safety seats; rearview cameras; electronic stability controls to prevent skids; advanced automotive lighting systems; constantly evolving highway design safety standards; public information campaigns to urge people to 'buckle up', avoid 'texting' while driving, and cautioning against the dangers of 'drinking and driving' - have all failed to stem a sharp increase in the recent highway death tolls in the United States.

An estimated 40,200 people died in motor vehicle accidents in 2016. (Happily, this rate of increase was down from the 7% increase in 2015.) And this is occurring not just because more miles are being driven owing to cheap gas. The number of deaths *per mile driven* has increased. About half the departed were reportedly 'unbelted'; one-third were drunk or drugged; but speeding was thought to be the '#1 problem'.

Speeding as a Measure of the Value of Life: The Time Saved versus the Cost in Lives

In 1987, the U.S. government allowed states to raise speed limits on rural interstate roads by 10 mph. As a result, the average speed increased 2.5 mph thereby increasing the fatality rate by 35%. Researchers then calculated that 360 lives were lost for a time savings of 45 million hours, or 125,000 hours per life. Multiplied by an average wage, the speeding motorists lives would be valued at a comparatively modest \$1.54 million each. [Source: The Daily Princetonian, 4-18-2011.](#)

By 1998, three states still maintained a 55 mph speed limit; 20 states @ 65 mph; 16 @ 70 mph; 10 @ 75 mph; while Montana had no daytime speed limit.

Due to popular demand, U.S. highway speed limits continue to rise. Perhaps not surprisingly, Texas has increased speed limits to 85 miles per hour in some rural areas. Currently, about 1,500 miles of U.S. roads enjoy a nominal limit of 75 miles per hour or higher.

Life Expectancy - States of the Art

It should not be surprising that the life expectancy of Americans varies by state - and income. Hawaiians can expect to enjoy their congenial climate for over 81 years. Mississippians manage just 75 birthdays.

Also, among U.S. citizens, Hawaiians were least likely to die from gunfire whereas Alaskans and residents of the former Confederate states (e.g., Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama) lead the nation in bullet-delivered fatalities. Gun death rates are approximately five times lower among the populations of the far less 'red' states of New York, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island.

While American men average 78 years before succumbing, their European counterparts can imbibe beer and wine for two additional years. Surplus deaths from firearms, drug poisonings and automobile accidents are thought to account for half of the observed disparity.

Still, by any measure, healthy Americans are really valuable. Stanford economists have calculated that the average value of a year of quality American life is about \$129,000. This would amount to almost \$10 million for an entire 78-year male life span. Not surprisingly, insurance gurus have one good year pegged at a maximum payout of just \$50,000.

The Beneficial Influence of Affluence

And then, there is the well-known influence of affluence. It has long been known that rich aristocrats live longer than their hard-working lackeys. Similarly, in today's U.S. economic hierarchy, if you are an oligarch of the 1%, you should live to 87 whereas members of our *'paycheck-to-paycheck'* constituency tend to expire after 78 years. As a consequence, our already wealthy class of citizens collect social security benefits far longer than blue collar workers, thereby achieving a far higher *'return on investment'*.

To make matters worse, the gap in longevity between America's rich, middle and poor classes has been rapidly spreading. For men born in 1920, there was a 6 year difference in life expectancy between the top and bottom 10% of wage earners. For those born in 1950, that difference had increased to 14 years. For women, the gap had grown from 4.7 to 13 years. These trends have been attributed to differences in smoking, obesity, drug use, access to advanced health care, and, to a *degree*, educational opportunities.

America's 'middle class'

U.S. middle-income households – those with an income that is two-thirds to double the U.S. median household income – had incomes ranging from about \$42,000 to \$125,000 in 2014. This range encompasses just about half of Americans. Still, perhaps optimistically, nine out of ten Americans self-identify as *'middle class'* (Pew Research Center).

Old MacDonald Had a Farm

In 1963, Engineering Professor Harold Thomas published a seminal paper in the Quarterly Journal of Economics, Harvard University Press, entitled *"The Animal Farm: A Mathematical Model for the Discussion of Social Standards for Control of the Environment"*. Using a farm scenario where the sale value of members of a herd and the cost of preventing animal disease and death are both known, his mathematical formulation demonstrated that when a quality standard is imposed, it effectively establishes a value for a life. (Whimsically, his paper ends, *"not with a Q.E.D., but with an E.I.E.I.O."*)

By extension, air, water, and food quality standards - even speed limits and worker protection regulations - are effectively a reflection of the value that society places on human life. Among populations where life is cheap, standards are weak - or absent. Nations with high standards value their citizens.

In 2017, it appears safe to project that many standards and social benefits in the U.S. are on their way to being diminished - with many rescinded - both in the name of fiscal responsibility and, ideologically, as a reactionary reversal of centuries of *creeping socialism*. As a consequence of these broad-based social safety net reductions, the extrinsic worth of the lives of the majority of Americans can be expected to decline.

When the Value of Human Life goes Negative

At the other extreme, thousands of really young humans (a.k.a., children) are now deemed worthless in parts of the world where the natural resources needed to sustain human life have been compromised by millennia of resource exploitation and overpopulation. (*Mean streets hold little magic for young African 'witches'*. Sharon LaFraniere, *The New York Times*, November 13, 2007.)

Besides near-perpetual war, an evolving tactic for population control in parts of Angola and the Congo involves accusing one's own child of being a *witch* (one who can eat the life force of another). As a remedy, generally with the paid blessing of a fundamentalist pastor, the child undergoes a painful and traumatic exorcism.

After ritual exorcism (deliverance), some of the '*cleansed*' child witches have been '*burnt, poisoned, slashed, chained to trees, buried alive or simply beaten and chased off into the bush.*' Most are simply abandoned to the streets, never to be fed by their family again. (These may be the lucky ones.)

Although lucrative for the pastor, this bizarre religious practice doesn't say much for the effectiveness of the exorcism. If the '*cleansed*' kids are still feared, tortured and murdered, what good did the exorcism do? Shouldn't these African mommas get their money back?

One might suspect that the whole purpose of making frivolous accusations of witchcraft, followed by religious exorcism, beatings, and banishment, is to lay blame for poverty on these accused child victims. Their mommas may not care to take them back. These children want to eat. They require care. They take up space. They need clothing. They are living symbols of the inability of their parents to provide them with nourishment plus a safe and livable home.

As a result, their value has become negative. ("*You want them; you can have them!*", one Nigerian father reportedly yelled at an investigative reporter in an unwitting validation of the real motivation for the witch hunts.) The perverted religious charade the children are forced to endure merely provides a rationalization and local social shield for the heinous behavior of the parents.

So, which is worse, using contraception to limit family size or continuing to have children until their numbers become economic burdens so intolerable that the most vulnerable of them are dispatched to the streets to fend for themselves?



(Photo, *The Guardian*, Tracy McVeigh: The child '*witches*' of the Niger Delta)