

Civilization, economic change, and trends in interpersonal violence

Ph.D Dissertation

Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice
University of Missouri St. Louis

Dennis Matheus Mares

Abstract

This dissertation seeks to describe and explain long-term trends in violence. By combining homicide data from a variety of sources between 1200 and 2000 this dissertation finds that trends in violence in Western societies have declined markedly over the last eight centuries. While some nations display a larger decline than others, the downward trend is visible in all nations for which long-term data are available. Further analysis of the data reveals that the decline in homicide is driven by marked declines of homicide in certain social groups, ultimately leading to a concentration of offending among young lower status males. Whereas a downward pattern qualifies the overall trend, recurrent periods of increasing violence can also be found in the data. Upward trends in homicide are largely driven by increases in offending among young lower status males.

Unfortunately, no theoretical perspectives exist to explain both the long-term decline in lethal violence, and the upheavals that occur within that decline. This dissertation argues that a combination of theories be used to explain these historical trends. As a starting point, this dissertation proposes to use Norbert Elias' theory of the civilizing process. Elias (2000[1939]) argues that Western societies have seen a growing aversion against violence over the seven last centuries. This distaste for violence grew out of increasing interdependencies between people, and between people and social institutions. Elias particularly focuses on the centralization of nation states, which fosters the growth of institutions that control violence, but also aids in the development of controls from within individuals (self-control). Elias further argues that at times this civilizing process is interrupted and violence resurfaces. This occurs mostly when the interdependencies between 'established' (high status) and 'outsider' (low status) groups erode (Elias 1996).

While Elias helps further our understanding of trends in violence, he overemphasizes the role of the state to the detriment of economic processes. The focus on processes of state formation makes it difficult to predict exactly when and where violence increases and decreases. This dissertation amends that problem by incorporating elements of world-system theory. World-system theorists (Arrighi 1994) argue that hegemonic cycles have marked the development of state and economy. During these hegemonic cycles, distinct phases can be distinguished in which either state formation, or economic processes are more dominant. It is hypothesized in this dissertation that trends in violence are highly dependent on the specific phases in each hegemonic cycle. In the beginning stage of a hegemonic cycle strong economic growth, resulting in high levels of urban growth and immigration, undermines the effectiveness of the state monopoly of force and levels of violence are expected to rise during this period. During the second phase, economic growth stabilizes allowing state institutions to grow and extend their control over the use of force. The growing affluence of societies promotes the internalization of controls; levels of violence are expected to subside during this period. In the final phase of each hegemonic cycle economic growth is undermined, leading to a process in which state formation is undermined and the interdependencies between 'established' and 'outsider' groups erode. This leads to an increase in levels of violence, particularly among 'outsider' groups.