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Data give hope after Charlottesville violence

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It was strange seeing the picturesque college town where I attended graduate school appear on the news, transformed into a painful spectacle of angry tiki torch-bearing protesters and violence. In the aftermath of what happened last weekend in Charlottesville, it can be easy to feel as though the world is deteriorating into ever-greater brutality and chaos, and to lose hope.

There is reason for hope. Just look at the data.

Humanity has overcome far worse savagery before. Hard as it is to believe, empirically, violence has declined and this is in many ways the most peaceful era in history.

White supremacists are estimated to be only 0.02 percent of the U.S. population, hardly a dominant social movement. That is not to say that complacency is acceptable — violence has declined precisely because of the actions of individuals working towards greater peace and tolerance.

Amplifying the voice of the small number of white supremacists with wall-to-wall media coverage and lengthy profiles of the movement's leaders, headed by glamorous photographs, is probably inadvisable.

The media's tendency to highlight that which is rare and dramatic instead of long-term trends is one of the reasons that the public has such a distorted view of the world. Most people have no idea how much life has improved in the past few decades, for example.

The website HumanProgress.org, of which I am managing editor, aims to bridge the gap between widespread perceptions and reality by making data from reliable third-party sources more widely available.

Judging the state of the world by looking at empirical evidence, rather than by how grisly the headlines are, leads to surprisingly heartening conclusions.

International wars between nation states have almost disappeared. Homicides are becoming rarer globally, and despite a recent slight uptick, the U.S. homicide rate is still at an historic low point. Violence against women has declined in the United States, as has child abuse.

Despite the overall trend away from violence, it is important to note that progress is not linear nor inevitable, and that human action determines the course of the future.

Terrorism represents one of the few areas where violence has become worse, although it remains rare. On an average day, terrorists kill 21 people worldwide, while natural or technological disasters kill more than 100 times as many. Perspective is as important as vigilance against threats.

You are unlikely to die at the hands of an Islamist terrorist, and even less likely to be killed in a right-wing terrorist attack like the one that occurred in Charlottesville.

My colleague Alex Nowrasteh calculated the breakdown of deadly U.S. terrorist attacks by ideology and found that Islamists committed 92 percent of such murders, right-wing extremists committed 7 percent and left-wing terrorists were responsible for less than 1 percent (although that is increasing).

The threat of terrorism, whether by white supremacists, Islamists, or any other group, should be guarded against but not blown out of proportion. While honoring the victims of tragedies and taking care not to magnify the views of a few fanatics or overreact with policies that pointlessly restrict human liberty, we should take heart from the facts.

Although some violent extremists may stand opposed to the trend towards greater peace and tolerance, violence is slowly receding.

As Harvard University's Steven Pinker put it: "For all the tribulations in our lives, for all the troubles that remain in the world, the decline of violence is an accomplishment we can savor, and an impetus to cherish the forces of civilization and enlightenment that made it possible."

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