

Strange facts about violent death

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A civilian is much more likely to die in a firearms homicide in some parts of the U.S. than in terrorism-linked violence in Iraq, Afghanistan or Jammu & Kashmir

Imagine walking down a quiet street in the United States of America, flanked by beautiful brownstone houses and shady elm trees, and being more fearful for your life than someone living in insurgency-torn Jammu and Kashmir. Imagine standing in front of the magnificent Capitol building in Washington DC and thinking it might have been wiser to risk the car-bombs in Baghdad. Imagine being at Louisiana's Mardi Gras and wishing you'd have been less afraid in Kabul.

Imagine these things, and then know this one thing: your fantasy is, in fact, the unvarnished truth.

From 2006 to 2010, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) data shows that a civilian was much more likely to die in a firearms homicide in the U.S. than in terrorism-linked violence in Jammu and Kashmir. Even adding-in the number of Indian security force personnel and jihadists killed in fighting, Jammu and Kashmir is only marginally more dangerous than the U.S. In 2009 and 2010, Louisiana residents were more at risk of being killed by a murderer with a gun than Iraqis — and have been consistently more vulnerable than Afghans. Bar one single year, Sri Lanka's civilians were less likely to be shot dead in their civil war than U.S. residents.

Last week's Batman-inspired carnage in Colorado has sparked off an intense debate on the assailant's sanity, motives and possible grievances against society. These aren't, and ought not be, important questions. The FBI's data shows Mr. Holmes' psychopathic assault fits in a larger, terrifying landscape of firearms homicides in the U.S. — a consequence of a loose weapons-control regime giving far too easy access to lethal weapons. It also tells us something important, though, about the way we comprehend terror, be it political or psychopathic.

Terrorised by terror

Ever since 9/11, scholars have worked hard to place fears about terrorism in some kind of context. Michael Rothschild, a former business professor at the University of Wisconsin, pointed out that even if terrorists were to entirely destroy one of the 40,000-odd shopping malls in the U.S. every single week, the chance of an individual being there at that time was less than 1 in 1,000,000. Dr. Rothschild estimated that, similarly, if terrorists succeeded in crashing one of the estimated 18,000 commercial flights that traverse the country each week, the chance of a resident of that country becoming a victim of the attack was 1:135,000.

In a 2006 article, the journalist Ronald Bailey provided a long list of greater risks to U.S. residents than terror: among them walking across the street (1:48,500) and drowning (1:88,000).

To that list, scholars John Mueller and Mark Stewart added such improbable causes: drowning in a bathtub or crashing into deer. In a 2010 article, they pointed out that developed countries deemed risks unacceptable if they involved a prospect of fatality higher than 1 in 100,000 — less than a sixteenth, for example, of Washington DC's firearms homicide rate in 2010. For the risk of terrorism to reach that 1:100,000 benchmark, Mueller and Stewart pointed out, "the number of fatalities from terrorist attacks in the United States and Canada would have to increase 35-fold; in Great Britain (excluding Northern Ireland), more than 50-fold; and in Australia, more than 70-fold. For the United States, this would mean experiencing attacks on the scale of 9/11 at least once a year, or 18 Oklahoma City bombings every year."

Last year, the South Asia Terrorism Portal Database records, India suffered 602 fatalities, of combatants and civilians, in Maoist violence, another 183 in Jammu and Kashmir, 95 in Assam, 65 in Manipur, 28 in Meghalaya, 15 in Nagaland, and one in Tripura — all told, 387. For each of the victims' families and loved ones, the deaths are unacceptable but for a country of 1.2 billion people, they involve too many decimal places to constitute an existential threat. Even the 134,000 people who died in Indian traffic accidents in 2010 — an order of magnitude greater than terrorism victims — don't reach anywhere near the 1:100,000 serious risk benchmark.

None of this is a reason for India — or anywhere else — not to take terrorism and violent crime seriously. Terrorism can, as the cases of Afghanistan and Iraq demonstrate, degenerate into civil war — and then cross any acceptable benchmarks, just as firearms violence

in the U.S. has. The data does, however, give reason for countries like India to rethink just how serious the threat posed by terrorism in fact is.

Firearms and insurgency

For two reasons, comparison between firearm fatalities in the U.S. and global insurgencies should be treated with care. The first is obvious: wars don't make for easy body counts. Then, firearms fatalities in homicides are clearly different to terrorist attacks.

In the U.S., much of the worst violence is the consequence of gang-linked warfare, targeting bystanders far less than participants. In this sense, the data compares apples and, if not oranges, not quite apples. Nonetheless, the data gives a clear sense of the scale of carnage small arms can inflict.

Experts like Tara Kartha have long argued that the critical determinant of the intensity of conflicts isn't the causes that underpin them, but their access to weapons and ordnance. The Geneva-based Small Arms Survey has detailed studies that make this point. Populations across the world have a welter of grievances, some of whom choose to seek redress through violence. Those with access to weapons are, obviously, most likely to inflict carnage.

Small arms treaty

Last week, the United Nations completed negotiations on a small arms treaty that is intended to regulate the \$60 billion trade in small arms, hopefully cutting back the lethality of insurgents and criminal groups. Few believe, though, that such treaties will have much on-ground impact. For one, nation-states are themselves the principal agents of illegal weapons transfers — witness Pakistan's support for jihadists in Jammu and Kashmir, or the Saudi Arabia-backed coalition now supporting Islamist-led rebels in Syria. No treaty, moreover, will stop criminal syndicates with vast cash reserves at their disposal from tapping corrupt suppliers.

Even as nations have invested billions in fighting terrorism, precious little has been done to shut down the tools with which terrorists fight. New Delhi, sadly, has made the same mistakes. In the years since 26/11, millions have been spent on enhancing the counter-terrorism capacities of India's police forces. However, little has been done to reduce access to means of terror — like switching to non-ammonium fertilisers that cannot easily be used to make explosives.

In his 1835 masterwork, *Democracy in America*, the French scholar Alexis de Tocqueville enthusiastically hailed the invention of firearms as among a series of world-historic events which had “turned to the advantage of equality,” since they “equalised the villain and the noble on the field of battle.” This it did — but not quite to the utopian, democracy-inducing ends de Tocqueville imagined.

For decades now, policy-making on terrorism has focussed on how to fight terrorists. The U.S.' homicide figures show it is even more important on keeping guns out of those who might wish us harm.