

The League OF ORDINARY GENTLEMEN



Great Fact, Little Fact

by [JASON KUZNICKI](#) on *JANUARY 5, 2013*

in [GUNS IN AMERICA, POLITICS & FOREIGN AFFAIRS](#)

Note: This post is part of our League Symposium on Guns In America. You can read the introductory post for the Symposium [here](#). To see a list of all posts in the Symposium so far, click [here](#).

The Great Fact and Its Context

The Great Fact about violent crime in America is that for the last two decades, it has been in a sweet, blissful, wonderful decline.[1] Why is that so? What's causing it? And where do guns fit in?

The decline in violent crime is undeniably a Great Fact. But in several ways we must qualify, complicate, and hedge. So let's do that immediately. Then we'll get to the more interesting stuff.

First, a qualification: [The United States is still remarkably violent](#), given its level of development. It's only natural to ask — could it be the guns? But the answer would appear to be no. We're simply more violent in general.

Sure, we can point to individual countries where gun ownership was curtailed, and where gun violence then declined, like Australia. Or countries where gun ownership has never been high, and where violence in general is very low, like Japan. But across a wide range of countries, [guns per capita](#) and [firearm homicide rates](#) very obviously don't correlate too well.

Something else, however, does correlate with firearm homicide rates: [Virtually every country with more than 5 firearm homicides per 100,000 people is also a conduit for the U.S. drug supply](#). Indeed, being a conduit for our drugs would appear to be nearly the *only* thing that moves a country's gun homicide needle *at all*.

If I wanted to explain why the United States has so many gun homicides, I'd say drugs. End of story.

But, one might fairly ask, what about all the other forms of violence? It turns out [many countries have high gun ownership rates and very low murder rates](#), and it's also quite possible to have very high murder rates with very little gun ownership (Russia, that would be you).

Whence the Great Fact?

So drugs do much explanatory work, but they interact at best tangentially with the Great Fact. The Great Fact is interesting in its own right, it's undeniably important, and it is surprisingly difficult to explain.

First, the Great Fact of declining violence since the mid-90s is *not* the result of easing up on the Drug War. If anything, drug enforcement remains just as vigilant as ever, with as many or more resources devoted to it, particularly along the southern border.

Second, the most experimentally interesting of our laws about guns — allowing or not allowing the sale of assault-style weapons — appears to have had little effect on violence in our own country, while permitting their sale appears to have had [a large, deleterious effect in Mexico](#).

This suggests that with or without assault weapons, our rates of violent gun-related crime will likely remain very similar, other things being equal, but we could still help Mexico either by prohibiting assault weapons or, obviously, by ending the War on Drugs. Neither of which necessarily says much about the Great Fact.

[All violent crime is in decline](#). Violent crime specifically against children? [That's in decline, too](#). Ownership of firearms is also down, but that wouldn't necessarily explain declines in [rape, robbery, and aggravated assault](#). [Pickpocketing, purse-snatching, and shoplifting are all down too](#). Hell, *thefts from coin-operated machines* are down. Auto theft? Vandalism? You name it. Down, down, down.

These things are all great, you might say, but aren't mass shootings way up? [No, they're not](#). We see them more often, and in more lurid detail, owing to our pervasive news media. But mass killings are not becoming more common. They only seem like it.

The Great Fact means that we have apparently been doing something right.

Something *colossally* right. And anything we do about guns will be a drop in the bucket by comparison.

What we're looking for has to be huge. It has to prevent *a lot* of violence, not just gun violence. And it has to have kicked in sometime during the early to mid 1990s.

I grew up in the 1980s. It was a scary time to be alive. America believed itself to be in a downward spiral. Or it often said so, anyway. Crime rates had been rising since the 1960s. In the conservative environment where I was raised, I learned that it was all the liberals' fault, what with their drop-outs, divorce, drugs, and Dungeons & Dragons. Among other perversions. Or, if you listened to the liberals, it was all the conservatives' fault — for insisting that people have access to guns.

Then the crack epidemic hit, and people *really* got scared. Especially white people, who were — okay, fine, we were — told tales of an emerging class of [Superpredators](#): Babies who got crack with their mothers' milk and would grow up amoral, thrill-seeking, and impervious to pain (as, I note, Adam Lanza was initially rumored to be; there is, you know, [a typology to moral panics](#)). Pop science fiction told stories of a near future where a tiny sliver of plutocrats lived in walled cities while the rest of us fell prey to flying bullets or were, one imagines, occasionally crushed under all the crack vials.

And then it didn't happen. None of it happened. Sure, there are gated communities, but they're rather a joke, aren't they? Gated communities are for the chronically insecure. They're prissy, not prudent. Certainly not necessary.

Why did we get the Great Fact, and not the Superpredators? This should be nearly the biggest question in U.S. social policy right now, but it's not. It's sort of a fringe topic, almost as if it were impolite to talk about it.

Three Candidates

That reticence may be because the three best explanations are all more or less one-offs. They don't suggest massive new public policy initiatives, and that alone renders them vastly less interesting in Washington, whether or not they deserve to be. All three are also horrifically politically incorrect: I mean abortion, the Internet, and environmental lead abatement.

Abortion: This one's well-known thanks to Steven Levitt and Stephen Dubner's *Freakonomics*, and I hardly need to review it here. Unwanted children grow up neglected; neglected children become violent adults. We have fewer violent adults today because we have fewer unwanted children. Abortion became legal nationwide in 1973, and it takes about twenty years for a newborn to reach the age of peak violence... so there you have it.

The Internet: As a child of the 1980s, I also remember the anti-porn feminism of the 1990s: an ideology that insisted that objectifying women caused rape, and that pornography was suspect, possibly bad enough to be outlawed.

This view lasted only barely long enough for most males to click over to their favorite “adult” Internet site for some sweet, flesh-colored relief, and for their significant others to check their browser history. (Hey, it was the 90s, we didn’t know any better...) Anti-porn feminism got buried under exabytes of wonderful, lust-abating smut — and a rape rate that fell despite all predictions to the contrary.

As anyone who has been around the male anatomy is well aware, it’s not always equally eager to perform, and the urge to do so can be sated in a wide variety of ways. If porn substitutes for rape rather than encouraging it, our explanation for this segment of the Great Fact is already complete.

But what about crimes that don’t involve sex? Might we include them? Sure! Perhaps violent video games are cathartic. Perhaps shooting orcs and robots can substitute for shooting people. I’m not the violent type, so I can’t speak from experience, but it seems at least not completely absurd. The data is sparse, but it’s an interesting theory, much like abortion. Also like abortion, it’s not really actionable.

Lead Abatement: This one’s by far the most interesting to me. Like legal abortion, [environmental lead abatement began in earnest in the 1970s](#). Certain paints, gasoline for new cars, engine components, and toys and household products all have been required at various times to stop using lead. There is still plenty of lead around in the soil and water, and there will be for many years, but we’re contributing vastly less to the problem, and, after eliminating most lead paints and gasolines, there’s not a whole lot left to be done.

It’s [well-established](#) that [lead exposure](#) is associated with [increased violence](#). As lead exposure varies across states or cities, violence does too. If the scientific consensus here is right, we may well have found the origin of the Great Fact.

Said origin turns out to be... awkward.

Let us be frank for a moment. Ideologies — all of them, not just mine — are attempts to explain unbelievably vast quantities of data by reference to an incredibly constrained set

of abstract principles. There is nothing necessarily wrong with the attempt; in many cases we must undertake it simply for reasons of mental economy. In other cases, ideology can produce startling insights into the nature of the good society; consider Frederick Douglass' ideology of self-ownership, and the powerful arguments it produced against slavery and the subjection of women. Or Rawls' original position. Or Kant's kingdom of ends. Wonderful, all of them.

But we ought at least to be aware of when we have started performing our ideology, and recognize that empirical conclusions about a data set will not always square with it. *And* recognize that that's perfectly okay, too. At various times, the real world is going to surprise just about any ideology.

Shall I talk about lead ideologically? Very well. Rights are to be understood as side-constraints, as Robert Nozick would have it: We don't get to violate rights just because we would achieve some outcome we might personally desire. We don't get to violate rights, like those of the lead industry, simply because we predict a possible future rights violation, like those visited on future murder victims.

Yet Nozick famously left at least one escape clause here: Side constraints *may* be violated after all, he argues, in order to avert a "catastrophic moral horror."

Would being the most violent industrialized country qualify? Why *wouldn't* it?

Would I *love* it if our old friend lead turned out to be biologically inert? Yes! Ghastly neurological effects aside, lead is some wonderful stuff. There were some very solid reasons why 20th-century industry used it so much. But does ideology have the power to make lead harmless? No, of course not. (Nor, I might add, does ideology have the power to render saccharin or daminozide harmful. These powers are not given to the mind; nature, to be commanded, must be obeyed.)

The best that ideology can do is assess the appropriate *response* to such facts. So I might say: If we wish to live in a society with minimal violence, where person and property are respected — and where such respect is *the primary reason for our government's very existence* — then giving up on industrial lead shouldn't be a high price to pay.

So Why Now?

If I had to pick any one cause, I would have to say that lead abatement is why we enjoy such low levels of violent crime today. Given the fact that violent crime *is* low, and that lead abatement is apparently the reason, it might be fair to ask why we are having an

Important National Conversation about gun control just now. Apart from, say, the need to couch a foregone legislative conclusion — the assault weapons ban, whose return I fully expect — in the condescending pretense of having had a conversation.

That galls a bit.

Let's abstract away the horror of Newtown, just for a moment. I promise we'll bring it back in later. Suppose I were to find a \$100 bill on the street in Washington, DC. That's an exceptionally rare event, but not an unwelcome one.

Afterward I would not — I mean, not ever — think to have an Important Family Conversation about whether I should quit my job and devote more time to searching the gutters of our nation's capital. I'd probably buy a bottle of champagne, or give the cash to malaria prevention, or maybe just put it in Alice's college fund. I *might* consider finding the money's owner, but I don't seriously think I'd be able to. So there things would stand, just as they should.

I would take what happened, not lose my composure, and recall the words of Chrysippus: "We must live according to the experience of what usually happens in nature." And not by whatever grabs our monkey brains in a given moment.

This past month, we all got our brains grabbed. A variety of factors played a role: Our otherwise laudable instinct to protect children. A contemptible madman with a gun. A news media specializing in such matters, and designed, seemingly, to play on the monkey brain. A feeling of helplessness, induced by those events, and the sense that doing something, anything, would be better than doing nothing. Something, anything at all — even a solution that would punish innocent gun owners, while contributing not at all to reducing crime. Even a solution that ignores what appears to have worked in the past. Just as long as it's something, because we would feel — I infer — ashamed to have done nothing. (Even if, all along, we'd been doing something, and that something turned out to be enormous.)

This was the Little Fact. There will be other Little Facts, some perhaps even more horrible. The opportunity costs of paying attention to a Little Fact may well be that we lose sight of a Great Fact, and of what we might be doing to cause it.

Note

[1] Yes, I've borrowed the term "Great Fact" from Deirdre McCloskey, who used it for something else entirely. But really, what other term would do?