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POLITICS

Let's Hold Off Celebrating America's (and New York's) Declining Murder Rate

Posted: 12/09/2013 9:50 am

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In its story on Friday reporting that Mayor Bill de Blasio had selected William Bratton to head the NYPD, the *New York Times* noted that Bratton's "biggest challenge" would be "keeping crime at historic lows -- just more than 300 murders so far this year."

The *Times*' statement reflects the widespread feeling that New York City has become a safe place. Indeed, the *New York Post* recently boasted in a headline: "NYC on Track to be the Nation's Safest City." Outgoing Mayor Michael Bloomberg and his police chief, Raymond Kelly, like to take credit for the drop in murders, claiming that it was the result of better policing, especially its efforts to prevent crimes rather than simply respond to them.

But before we celebrate too much, let's put the decline of murder in New York City -- and across the entire United States -- in some perspective.

In its article about de Blasio's hiring of Bratton, the *Times* reported that, "After riots in London in 2011, David Cameron, the British prime minister, publicly entertained bringing in Mr. Bratton to lead the police there." In 2011, England, with over 56 million people, had 540 murders -- a murder rate about one-fifth of the United States figure. In London, a city of 8.3 million people (the same size as New York City), 113 people were murdered that year. Even so, the Brits viewed it as a serious crisis. And last year a total of 99 people were murdered in London, the lowest figure since 1970.

The reality is that Americans accept as "normal" a level of murder than would be considered alarming in any other affluent nation. No other well-off, democratic society has a murder rate even close to that of the United States, even after more than two decades of steady drops in homicides.

No police chief in the United States, on his or her own, can reduce the murder rate down to the levels found in Europe, Japan, Australia or Canada. The number of homicides in the U.S. is the result of the deadly combination of inequality, poverty, and guns. Among the world's wealthy nations, we have the most unequal distribution of wealth and income, the highest poverty level, and the greatest proliferation of guns, especially the number of military-style assault weapons.

This year, New York City is on pace to see 335 murders if the trend for the first 10 months (279 murders) continues. This is less than a murder a day. With a population of 8.3 million, that computes to 2.9 murders per 100,000 residents, which is how criminologists and government agencies compute the murder rate.

The last time NYC's murder rate was that low was in the 1950s. At its peak, in 1990, 2,245 people were murdered in New York City. NYC has also been successful at reducing other violent crimes -- such as rape, robbery, and felonious assault. The number of rapes dropped from 1,630 to 1,092 between 2000 and 2011; robberies fell from 32,562 to 19,773 during that period; assaults declined from 40,880 to 29,829, although there has been a slight increase in the past two years.

Last year only two other cities among the 10 largest had murder rates lower than New York, according to FBI statistics. New York City's murder rate (5.1) was higher than San Jose (4.6) and San Diego (3.5), but lower than Los Angeles (7.8), Chicago (18.5), Houston (10.0), Philadelphia (21.5), Phoenix (8.3), San Antonio (6.4), and Dallas (12.4). Among the nation's largest cities, Detroit had the highest murder rate with 54 murders per 100,000 people, followed by New Orleans (53), St. Louis (35), Baltimore (34), and Newark (34).

Overall, the murder rate in the U.S. has been declining. In 1995, there were 21,606 murders, a rate of 8.1 murders per 100,000. Last year, the US had 14,173 murders -- a murder rate of 4.8 per 100,000. Among cities with over 250,000 residents, the murder rate was more than double (10.5) the national figure.

New Yorkers have every reason to feel safer than they did a year ago, 10 years ago, and 20 years ago. "City goes 24 hours without a shooting, stabbing or slashing for the second time in year," proclaimed a headline in the *New York Daily News* in November. According to its subhead: "For the second time this year, 24 hours have gone by in New York without a single person being shot or stabbed. On average 3.6 people are shot every day in the city."

For New Yorkers, and for all Americans, the declining murder rate is certainly good news. But the same statistics would be very bad news elsewhere, as we can see by comparing the murder rate in New York City, and that within the U.S. overall, with murder rate in other affluent countries.

The most recent comparative data, collected from national crime statistics by the United Nations, is for 2011. As can be seen in the table below, the murder rate in the U.S. (4.7 in 2011) is more the twice the size of the next most murderous nation, Norway (2.3). It is three times greater than the murder rate in Canada. It is almost five times larger than the murder date in Australia, England, Ireland, Italy, New Zealand, the Netherlands, and Sweden. It is six times greater than the rate in Austria, Denmark, Germany, Luxembourg, and Spain. It is 15 times greater than Japan's murder rate.

Now that New York City has reached an all-time low murder rate (at least since it began collecting good statistics), let's compare murder in the Big Apple to countries of comparable size.

- New York has 8.3 million residents. It is likely to have 335 murders this year.
- In 2011, Austria, with 8.4 million residents, had 71 murders.
- Switzerland has 7.9 million residents and 46 murders.
- The Netherlands, with 16.7 million people - more than twice the population of New York City - had less than half the number of murders (144) in a year.
- Or, put differently, if New York had the same murder rate (0.8) as Germany, Austria, and Spain, there would have been only 67 murders this year - slightly more than one each week.
- Toronto -- a city of 2.8 million residents -- had 55 murders in 2012, a rate of 1.9 per 100,000 people. That year Chicago, a city with a similar population size, had 506 murders. Detroit, a city of 701,475 people just across the river from Toronto, recorded 411 homicides last year. Chicago's murder rate was almost 10 times larger than Toronto; Detroit's was about 28 times greater. Detroiters and Chicagoans are so used to the epidemic of killings that they often go unreported in the local media. In Toronto, almost every murder is a front-page story and a topic of public soul-searching.

Using slightly different data than the FBI, the federal Centers for Disease Control calculated that in 2011 there were 15,953 murders in the U.S. and that 11,101 (30 a day) were caused by firearms. (Suicides and unintentional shootings account for another 20,000 deaths by guns each year. Of course, many more people are injured -- some seriously, and permanently -- by gun violence).

The U.S. ranks first in the world -- by a wide margin -- in gun-related civilian deaths and injuries.

Compared with every other democracy, we have the most guns and the weakest gun laws.

Most gun-related deaths are committed by people who purchase their weapons legally. Others purchase or steal them illegally, but their ability to get access to guns is due to our lax laws on gun ownership.

America's outrageous murder rate is not inevitable. Other societies have much lower rates. We can reduce ours if we address the problems of inequality, poverty, and the easy availability of guns.

America's widening income gap and the persistence of poverty (almost 50 million Americans live in poverty) can't be solved quickly, but we know what works. Addressing the proliferation of deadly guns is something we can do quickly, if we can muster the political will.

Country	Population (million)	Murders	Murder rate (per 100,000)
Australia	22.6	244	1.1
Austria	8.4	71	0.8
Belgium	10.9	198	1.8
Canada	34.5	529	1.5
Denmark	5.5	44	0.8
Finland	5.4	116	2.2
France	63.3	743	1.2
Germany	81.8	662	0.8
Ireland	4.5	42	0.9
Italy	60.7	552	0.9

Data collected from the United Nations

Peter Dreier is the E.P. Clapp Distinguished Professor of Politics and director of the Urban & Environmental Policy Department at Occidental College. His latest book is *The 100 Greatest Americans of the 20th Century: A Social Justice Hall of Fame* (Nation Books, 2012). A third edition of his book *Place Matters: Metropolitcs for the 21st Century*, coauthored with John Mollenkopf and Todd Swanstrom, will be published next year by University Press of Kansas.

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Japan	127.8	442	0.3
Luxembourg	0.5	4	0.8
New Zealand	4.5	39	0.9
Netherlands (2010)	16.7	144	0.9

Norway	4.9	111	2.3
Spain	46.1	387	0.8
Sweden	9.4	81	0.9
Switzerland	7.9	46	0.6
United Kingdom (England & Wales)	56.1	540	1.0
United States	311.6	14,612	4.7