

victimization—two to five times higher, depending on the age group—than do white females. In most age groups, a nonwhite female's risk of homicide victimization is roughly that of a white male.

Though we can say that everyone runs some risk of being a homicide victim—that homicides kill young and old, male and female, black and white—that broad generalization is fundamentally dishonest, because the risk of victimization varies so markedly. If we were actuaries, writing policies for homicide victimization insurance, we would not charge everyone the same premiums. Rather, we would charge males more than females, nonwhites more than whites, and adolescents and young adults more than children or older adults. To speak of homicide as random violence ignores the clear patterns in these deaths.

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POINTLESSNESS

In October 1994, Susan Smith attracted national attention when she claimed that a carjacker had forced her from her Mazda at gunpoint and then driven away, with her three-year-old and fourteen-month-old sons still strapped in the car. More than a week later, the nationwide hunt for the kidnapper and the two boys ended when Smith confessed to investigators that she had deliberately driven the car into a lake and left her sons to drown. Commentators made much of Smith's claim that the carjacker was a black male; they charged that white racism led people to accept Smith's story. But none of these commentators questioned the readiness of the press and the public to believe a story about a carjacker abducting two little boys and stealing a four-year-old compact car from a small town in South Carolina. Why would a carjacker do that? That's just the kind of thing they do.

The fear of random violence means we no longer expect violence to be purposeful. When we hear about Pamela Basu dragged to her death by carjackers, or an innocent passerby shot in a drive-by, or a teenager killed over a pair of gym shoes, we say the violence is pointless, that it lacks any reasonable motivation. No one should die in a fight over gym shoes. When such tragedies occur—and they do—the very pointlessness of the deaths makes them seem even more tragic.

Precisely because they are horrific, these cases become the subjects of extensive media coverage, coverage that transforms them from terrible tragedies—

remarkable incidents—into typical examples—or instances—of carjacking, drive-bys, or the larger problem of random violence. These horror stories make powerful examples precisely because they make no sense: “Random violence provides no such mark of intelligibility and moves with a heightened ambiguity. As explanations contest one another, the status of random crime increases to the level of general societal threat.” Because horror stories capture moments of seemingly random violence, they exemplify what the media claim is an epidemic of random violence bedeviling the larger society. Some people die in terrible, apparently pointless ways. If, instead of viewing those deaths as extraordinary tragedies, we turn them into typifying examples, then we’ve given shape to the larger problem of random violence.

Whether violence makes sense, of course, depends upon who is making the evaluation. People who commit violent acts have their reasons. When asked, they may say they attacked their victims because they were angry or because they wanted to maintain their reputation for toughness or because they wanted to intimidate the victim into compliance. Of course, we usually reject the reasons offenders give; we say they are not good reasons, not valid or sensible, that they are senseless from the larger society’s perspective. Thus, claims about senseless violence discount offenders’ explanations as irrelevant.

There are at least two problems with this line of reasoning. The first is one of perspective. We—the larger society—reject the notion that there is ever a good reason for a drive-by shooting or a lethal fight over gym shoes. This makes violence pointless—but pointless by definition. The logic is circular: violence is pointless because violence is pointless. But from a different perspective, that of the participants in the shootings and fights, the violence may seem sensible—a means of proving oneself or dominating others or getting revenge and so on.

Consider again the very high homicide death rates for young black males in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Criminologists offer a historical account for what happened during that period. When the inner-city trade in crack took off in the mid-1980s, the potentially high profits from dealing drugs created an intense, violent competition for control over the crack marketplace, and competitors spent a portion of their profits to arm themselves, buying more—and more powerful—guns. Gangs sometimes became participants in this struggle. In addition, a growing proportion of youths who were not involved in gangs or the drug trade became concerned for their safety, and they began carrying weapons to protect themselves. Increasingly, minor disputes involved youths who were armed, and who sometimes used their weapons. (According to this explanation, homicide rates began to fall in the

mid-1990s as control over the crack market consolidated, reducing the violent competition to control the drug trade.) The net result of these processes was a rising youth homicide rate, particularly in black ghettos. From the view of the larger society, each killing was a pointless tragedy, but for the participants, money, power, and prestige often were at stake.

Of course, it is always possible to identify cases where no one claims that the violence made sense—for example, the uninvolved bystander accidentally killed by a stray bullet fired during a drive-by. There are true, terrible reports of such events. The question is what we should make of these stories. This is the second problem with assertions of pointlessness: when we use, say, the death of an innocent bystander to typify the problem of contemporary violence, we stack the deck. We ignore the killings that occur between rival gangs, between competing drug dealers, between people who have become so angry or ashamed or jealous or frightened of each other that violence escalates. There is a paradox: although we consider homicide to be especially terrible, the most serious crime, most homicides are products of mundane motives; they aren't all that newsworthy and they don't get that much press coverage. In contrast, the press is drawn to the most bizarre, the most frightening, the most pointless killings. Reporters rush to tell these stories, but then convert them into representative instances of contemporary violence. To call violence pointless is to ignore the situations in which it emerges, and the meanings most violence has for the perpetrators and, often, their victims.

DETERIORATION

Warnings about random violence usually imply not only that things are bad, but that they are getting steadily worse. This is one of the great taken-for-granted assumptions about modern life: society is becoming ever more violent. We describe violence in terms of epidemics and plagues—imagery that conveys a sense of devastation, decline, and deterioration.

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... [T]he commonplace assumption that violence is escalating out of control can be challenged. Although violent-crime rates have risen considerably since 1960, part of this increase may be due to improved reporting. If more victims report crimes, or if police keep more complete records of the crimes reported, the crime rate will rise, even if the actual incidence of crime goes unchanged. We know that reporting rates have risen and police record keep-

ing has improved, while rates of reported victimization have declined somewhat. This suggests that claims about dramatic increases in the overall level of violence are at least exaggerated. Moreover, the changes in homicide victimization serve as a reminder that different subgroups within the population may experience very different changes in the level of violence.

Warnings about rising random violence rarely incorporate such subtleties. More often, they typify the problem with a horrific example, add a dramatic statistic or two, and mix them with the taken-for-granted notion that violence is on the rise throughout society. The resulting claim—"the random distribution of risk by a society that is fundamentally out of control"—seems so obvious that it needs no close examination. However, the evidence reveals that claims of society-wide deterioration are exaggerated and overly simplistic.

THE APPEAL OF RANDOM VIOLENCE

Although random violence has become a central image in contemporary discussions of crime, the notion of randomness distorts what we know about criminal violence. It exaggerates the degree to which violence is patternless, pointless, and increasing. It is imagery calculated to promote fear rather than understanding.

Then why is this melodramatic imagery so popular? The answer, of course, is that melodrama is powerful. The idea of random violence is unsettling, disturbing, frightening; it challenges our most basic assumptions about social order. If violence is patternless and pointless, then anyone—women as well as men, children as well as adults, the middle class as well as the poor—might become a victim. If violence is increasing, then everyone is in growing danger:

Drive-by shootings are particularly distressing . . . because it may appear that the target was chosen at random and that innocent bystanders may be hit. Any person's concern about his vulnerability is heightened. . . . When there is a sense that more murders are being committed against strangers, any person can conceive of himself as a target.

Rhetoric about random violence implies that everyone has a vested interest in supporting efforts to stamp out the problem. If violence is random, then everyone is at risk, and anyone who is at risk—that is, everyone—has reason to be concerned and to demand action. Typifying a problem with frightening

examples, and then democratizing the risk—defining the threat as universal—is a recipe for mobilizing maximum social concern.

This widespread concern helps explain why warnings about random violence transcend the obvious ideological divisions within contemporary society. These warnings come from feminists and fundamentalists, liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans. The frightening imagery of random violence can be tailored to fit almost any ideological agenda. But there is another reason why rhetoric about random violence is so popular. By implying that pointless violence is a general, patternless threat to society as a whole, warnings about random violence gloss over the potentially awkward or embarrassing issues of class and race. As we have already noted, there are dramatic racial differences in violence: in particular, African-Americans are far more likely to both commit violent offenses and be victimized by violence than are whites. These racial differences, of course, reflect class differences: rates of violence are highest among the poor, and blacks constitute a disproportionate percentage of the poor. Any discussion of patterns in violence must confront class and race—two of the most awkward topics in American political discourse.

Confronting race and class is awkward for both liberals and conservatives. Liberals fear they will have difficulty arousing sympathy for the poor and minorities, particularly if they propose publicly funded programs to benefit those groups. Opponents of these measures may argue that Middle America has no stake in solving the problems of the poor, saying, in effect, “That’s not our problem” or “We’ve already done enough to help the poor, and we shouldn’t have to do more.” It is easier to finesse such potential opposition and arouse widespread concern by implying that a problem affects (and the programs to solve it will benefit) everyone. Because references to random violence imply that everyone is at risk, they can help mobilize such general concern. Depicting violence as random, and therefore patternless, also lets liberals circumvent potentially awkward questions about the patterns of violence. In particular, liberals are reluctant to call attention to evidence that blacks commit violent offenses at higher rates than whites. The subject of black criminality may invite all sorts of critiques, ranging from arguments that race somehow biologically fosters criminality to various critiques of black culture and institutions. Moreover, liberals fear both that minority criminality can be used as evidence that social programs don’t work, and that focusing on the link between ethnicity and violence will result in a form of “blaming the victim.” It is not that liberals lack rejoinders to these arguments—they can respond that social structure, particularly class and racial inequality, should be blamed

for crime—but rather that the issue of race is volatile, and it seems easier to ignore it rather than confront it. Talking about essentially patternless random violence offers liberals a way to avoid raising this troublesome subject.

Warnings about random violence serve parallel purposes in conservatives' discussions of crime. For conservatives, it is class, rather than race, that seems awkward to address. Poor people are more likely to both commit violent crimes and be victimized by violence, but acknowledging this seems to invite arguments that more should be done to help the poor by improving job opportunities, increasing social services, and the like. (In an earlier era, conservatives might have found reassurance in the higher rates of criminality among the poor, which could be taken as a sign of the inherent viciousness of the lower orders, but such explanations have lately fallen out of favor.) Most conservative interpretations locate the causes of criminal violence in culture. In this view, violence is part of a web of interlocking social problems, including broken families, teenage sexuality, premarital pregnancy, welfare dependency, substance abuse, delinquency and criminality, and gangs, all caused by and reflecting a damaged or dysfunctional culture. A potentially embarrassing counter to this argument, of course, is that all of these problems are associated with poverty, with social class: might not these "cultural" problems have their roots in social structure? This is where references to random violence offer conservatives a convenient distraction. Random violence is patternless, and claims about patternless random violence gloss over the links between class and crime. Similarly, random violence is pointless, senseless. And pointless crime need not be understood as an act of frustration, rebellion, or some other more or less comprehensible reaction to the barriers of class. Rather, random violence, in its pointlessness, is just further evidence of the criminals' cultural pathology. In this view, random violence is a symptom of a sick culture, and talking about random violence helps conservatives keep the focus on culture, and play to the fears of the middle class, by invoking the sense that no one is safe from the likes of Willie Horton and other predatory criminals.

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In sum, there are two principal advantages to describing the crime problem in terms of random violence. First, the phrase "random violence" evokes rhetorically powerful imagery: it demands our attention and concern, because it questions the stability of the social order and makes us fear for our own safety, and for the safety of everyone around us. Second, defining the crime problem as one of ever-increasing, patternless, pointless—that is, random—violence eliminates the need to explain the patterns in crime. Focusing atten-

tion on random violence allows ideologues to skip over embarrassing or awkward issues: liberals can avoid talking about race and culture, just as conservatives can avoid confronting issues of class and social structure.

It is easy to see the appeal of framing issues in terms of random violence, but it is less clear that this is an effective way to think about crime problems. Defining violence as patternless not only discourages us from searching for and identifying patterns; it keeps us from devising social policies to address those patterns. Defining violence as pointless eliminates any need to consider and address the motivations for violence. Assuming that violence is increasing causes us to ignore patterns in change, and thereby fail to notice which policies are working. Denouncing random violence may work as crowd-pleasing rhetoric, but it does not offer much help in designing effective anti-crime policies.

Obviously, there is an element of chance—randomness—in every social encounter. Incalculable contingencies shape whether we fall in love (and with whom), whether specific investments earn a profit, whether our next automobile trip ends in a fatal accident. We cannot identify, let alone control, many of the factors that shape these outcomes. Still, we know that our individual actions can affect the likelihood of different outcomes: by buckling up, obeying the traffic laws, and not drinking and driving, we can reduce our chances of being killed in a car wreck. And social policy can also influence those outcomes: requiring cars to have seat belts and mandating their use significantly reduced death rates from automobile accidents. As individuals—and as a society—we do not simply throw up our hands in the face of “random traffic accidents.” Instead of emphasizing the role of randomness, we search for patterns in risk and devise policies based on the patterns we identify.

In much the same way, if we want to understand criminality and violence, we need to think in terms of their patterns, in terms of the motivations and behaviors of offenders and victims. Random violence is a powerful image, so powerful that it threatens to short-circuit constructive thought about the nature of our society’s problems.

THE LANGUAGE OF CRIME

The expression “random violence,” then, has become a commonplace in talk about contemporary crime, a sort of cliché of pop criminology, not because it accurately summarizes the nature of crime—it decidedly does not—but because it is rhetorically convenient, arousing intense interest in and concern about crime while diverting attention away from awkward questions of race

and class. It is, of course, just one term in the contemporary vocabulary for discussing crime. This vocabulary constantly changes: new crimes (e.g., carjacking) appear and come into vogue, while once familiar expressions (e.g., "garroting" [the nineteenth-century equivalent of mugging] or "soiled dove" [a nineteenth-century euphemism for prostitute]) fall out of favor.

The implications of describing violence as random suggest that the turnover in terms used to talk about crime and other social problems reflects more than a faddish attraction to novel language. People invent new words to describe social problems, sometimes quite deliberately, because those words evoke some connotations and avoid others; consider the different implications of "crippled," "handicapped," "disabled," and "differently abled"; of "drunkard" and "alcoholic"; or of "sexual deviate," "homosexual," and "gay." But it is not enough to create a word; some new words are ignored and soon forgotten. Successful terms get picked up, sometimes self-consciously at first, then used by more and more people, until they seem normal rather than novel. The example of "random violence" suggests that some terms may prove attractive to a broad range of users, and that this broad popularity encourages their adoption and widespread use.

The words we choose when we talk about crime and other social problems are consequential. Describing crime in terms of random violence has implications for how we think about crime, about criminals, and about prospective criminal justice policies. It becomes, therefore, important to stop taking our vocabulary of crime for granted. We need to explore the ways in which this language emerges, spreads, evolves, and influences.

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QUESTIONS

1. Best argues that seeing violence as random involves three assumptions: That violence is patternless, pointless, and on the rise. What is each of these assumptions about specifically?
2. Find a recent newspaper article that discusses a specific violent crime. Some of the types that Best identifies include school shootings, carjackings, rape, and murder. Jot down how the article characterizes each of the three assumptions underlying the randomness frame.
3. According to Best, how does the randomness frame misrepresent the causes of violent crime?
4. Despite its tendency to distort reality, why is this frame so powerful and so popular?