

Gun Violence is not an “Inner City” Problem

by Jeffrey A. Butts

Policy debates about gun violence focus on cities. Every year, when federal law enforcement authorities release the latest compilation of U.S. violent crime statistics, news media across the country publish stories ranking cities on the severity of violence, with some labeled as “America’s deadliest cities.” Big city mayors and police chiefs anxiously await this annual data cycle, hoping their cities avoid the new list of “murder capitals.”

Voices from the political Left and Right make cities the central focus of discussions of violence, especially gun violence. During the 2016 Presidential campaign, Donald Trump repeatedly referred to gun violence in cities. “You can’t walk on the street; you buy a loaf of bread and you end up getting shot.” Our “inner cities,” he claimed, are “more dangerous than some of the war zones” (CNN.com, October 26, 2016).

Progressive advocacy organizations rebut these warnings by publishing their own analyses of violence in urban areas. In 2017, the Brennan Center at New York University School of Law published a review of crime statistics that focused on rates of crime and violence in the “30 largest American cities.” Intentional or not, the report reinforced the idea that violence is concentrated in cities.

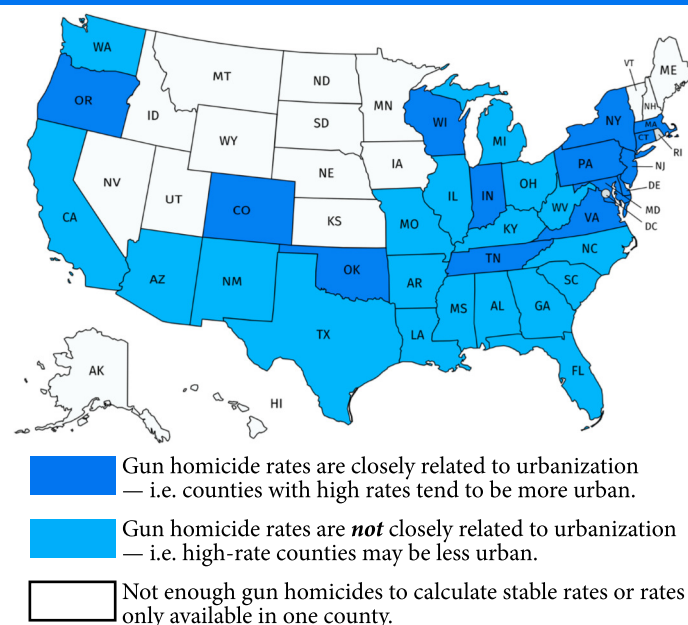
This is akin to saying that problems like cancer, car crashes, and teenage heartbreak are concentrated in cities, and indeed, they are—cities have more people. But, do city residents face disproportionate rates of such problems? The gun violence issue looks entirely different when viewed through the lens of per capita rates—i.e., gun homicides per 100,000 population.

Using data from the National Center for Health Statistics and the U.S. Census Bureau in the 33 states with sufficient data, this analysis tests whether states conform to the conventional narrative of “urban gun violence.” Conforming states are those with linear associations between gun homicide rates and urbanization, either perfectly linear or those in which a linear association could be achieved by changing no more than one value among the five counties with the highest gun homicide rates. (A linear relationship means the county with the highest gun homicide rate is the most urban, the county with the second highest rate is the second most urban, etc.)

Of 33 states in this analysis, 19 failed to conform to the urban gun violence narrative. Gun homicides in those states are just as likely (often, more likely) to occur in small, rural communities (see Table 1 on the following page).

In South Carolina, for example, the highest rate of gun homicides during the years 2008 to 2014 occurred in Jasper

County-Level Gun Homicides in 2008-2014 by Urban Density



DATA SOURCE:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and U.S. Census Bureau. See Table 1 on next page.

County. With a population of 25,000 and two-thirds of those residents in non-urban areas, Jasper County’s gun homicide rate was 16.3 per 100,000. The State’s largest and most urban counties, Charleston and Richland, had gun homicide rates of 7.5 and 6.1 per 100,000, respectively.

Similarly, the highest gun homicide rate among Texas counties was in Waller County with a population of 43,205, 38 percent urban. Waller County’s firearm homicide rate was 7.2 per 100,000—higher than the very urban counties of Harris and Dallas (6.4 and 5.8 per 100,000, respectively).

In the remaining 14 states, gun homicides were correlated with urban density. In New Jersey, for example, the largest and most urbanized county (Essex) had the highest rate of gun murders (12.1 per 100,000) while each subsequently lower rate county had a lower degree of urbanization as well.

Most Americans live in cities, and cities are responsible for most of the nation’s gun homicides. It is incorrect, however, to characterize cities as uniquely susceptible to gun violence, and it is highly misleading to insert the adjectives “urban” or “city” before all mentions of gun violence. Using these terms to address American gun violence is an act of political rhetoric.

Table 1: U.S. Counties with Highest Rates of Gun Homicide by State, 2008-2014 (Limit of 5 counties per State)

State County	Gun Homicides per 100K	Pct. Urban	Total Pop.	State County	Gun Homicides per 100K	Pct. Urban	Total Pop.	State County	Gun Homicides per 100K	Pct. Urban	Total Pop.
NON-CONFORMING STATES											
Alabama				Missouri				Indiana			
Macon	23.4	44.45	21,452	St. Louis City	28.16	100.00	319,294	Lake	12.24	96.03	496,005
Dallas	20.9	54.36	43,820	Jackson	13.46	96.16	674,158	Marion	10.26	99.4	903,393
Montgomery	13.0	89.51	229,363	St. Louis County	6.79	98.86	998,954	Allen	5.22	88.12	355,329
Jefferson	12.2	90.17	658,466	Boone	2.16	81.21	162,642	St. Joseph	4.12	91	266,931
Mobile	11.0	79.98	412,992	Clay	2.03	90.18	221,939	Madison	2.40	76.91	131,636
Arizona				New Mexico				Maryland			
Pima	5.1	92.48	980,263	Chaves	10.68	75.75	65,645	Baltimore City	24.96	100.00	620,961
Apache	4.4	25.94	71,518	Rio Arriba	7.48	50.24	40,246	Prince George's	7.56	98.03	863,420
Maricopa	4.1	97.64	3,817,117	Lea	7.15	78.97	64,727	Baltimore County	3.76	93.47	805,029
Pinal	3.6	78.10	375,770	Valencia	5.82	83.27	76,569	Wicomico	3.30	74.19	98,733
Cochise	3.5	63.70	131,346	Santa Fe	4.03	74.84	144,170	Charles	2.88	70.50	146,551
Arkansas				North Carolina				Massachusetts			
Phillips	27.6	52.03	21,757	Robeson	16.19	37.39	134,168	Suffolk	5.51	99.93	722,023
Jefferson	19.1	69.08	77,435	Vance	14.27	45.92	45,422	Hampden	2.73	91.43	463,490
Mississippi	14.0	63.73	46,480	Scotland	11.86	51.61	36,157	Bristol	1.43	90.17	548,285
Pulaski	10.4	87.72	382,748	Halifax	10.01	45.29	54,691	Plymouth	1.41	89.69	494,919
Crittenden	8.8	79.11	50,902	Columbus	9.94	19.41	58,098	Essex	1.20	95.76	743,159
California				Ohio				New Jersey			
Monterey	7.89	90.18	415,057	Mahoning	8.31	84.84	238,823	Essex	12.07	99.99	783,969
San Joaquin	7.58	91.53	685,306	Hamilton	7.81	97.77	802,374	Camden	7.80	98.38	513,657
Alameda	6.95	99.61	1,510,271	Franklin	6.88	98.65	1,163,414	Mercer	5.20	96.52	366,513
Merced	6.69	85.73	255,793	Montgomery	6.67	95.67	535,153	Atlantic	4.83	87.29	274,549
Tulare	6.28	84.52	442,179	Cuyahoga	6.19	99.42	1,280,122	Cumberland	4.73	76.97	156,898
Florida				South Carolina				New York			
Duval	9.76	97.09	864,263	Jasper	16.30	33.33	24,777	Bronx	5.23	100.00	1,385,108
Miami-Dade	7.21	99.60	2,496,435	Colleton	11.89	24.43	38,892	Kings	4.62	100.00	2,504,700
Columbia	5.71	37.94	67,531	Williamsburg	11.78	18.06	34,423	Erie	4.58	90.60	919,040
Escambia	5.63	91.70	297,619	Orangeburg	9.97	36.22	92,501	Monroe	3.81	93.55	744,344
Orange	5.39	97.96	1,145,956	Dillon	9.50	30.49	32,062	Onondaga	2.60	87.41	467,026
Georgia				Texas				Oklahoma			
Clayton	9.60	99.11	259,424	Waller	7.18	38.36	43,205	Tulsa	6.82	95.22	603,403
DeKalb	9.43	99.74	691,893	Jefferson	6.64	91.60	252,273	Oklahoma	6.53	93.72	718,633
Richmond	9.34	90.78	200,549	Gregg	6.44	86.64	121,730	Comanche	6.13	78.21	124,098
Fulton	8.98	98.92	920,581	Harris	6.40	98.79	4,092,459	Muskogee	6.08	58.88	70,990
Chatham	8.92	95.50	265,128	Dallas	5.77	99.31	2,368,139	Cleveland	1.76	83.12	255,755
Illinois				Washington				Oregon			
St. Clair	11.78	90.25	270,056	Yakima	5.39	76.48	243,231	Multnomah	1.95	98.66	735,334
Cook	8.89	99.95	5,194,675	Grant	4.29	61.25	89,120	Jackson	1.46	79.95	203,206
Peoria	5.28	85.35	186,494	Pierce	2.27	93.41	795,225	Marion	1.35	86.91	315,335
Winnebago	4.68	92.09	295,266	Spokane	1.63	86.33	471,221	Lane	1.21	82.48	351,715
Vermilion	4.58	68.74	81,625	King	1.58	96.79	1,931,249	Clackamas	1.05	81.92	375,992
Kentucky				West Virginia*				Pennsylvania			
Jefferson	6.41	98.63	741,096	Mercer	5.75	59.27	62,264	Philadelphia	15.77	100.00	1,526,006
Christian	5.41	71.44	73,955	Raleigh	5.26	60.74	78,859	Allegheny	6.57	97.51	1,223,348
Fayette	3.43	96.93	295,803	Kanawha	3.94	74.81	193,063	Delaware	5.36	99.54	558,979
* Not enough homicides in other areas for stable rates.				* Not enough homicides in other areas for stable rates.				Dauphin			
Louisiana				CONFORMING STATES				Lawrence			
Orleans	39.75	99.41	343,829	Colorado				Tennessee			
St. John the Baptist	17.39	86.55	45,924	Pueblo	4.11	85.85	159,063	Shelby	13.05	97.24	927,644
East Baton Rouge	15.09	93.12	440,171	Denver	3.88	100.00	600,158	Madison	8.88	74.17	98,294
Jefferson	13.57	98.86	432,552	El Paso	3.02	91.07	622,263	Davidson	6.91	96.59	626,681
Washington	9.76	33.33	47,168	Adams	2.53	96.38	441,603	Hamilton	5.37	89.98	336,463
Michigan				Arapahoe	2.32	98.42	572,003	Mauzy	4.36	58.41	80,956
Wayne	16.53	99.3	1,820,584	Connecticut*				Virginia			
Genesee	10.76	83.24	425,790	Hartford	3.21	94.59	894,014	Petersburg	21.63	97.89	32,420
Saginaw	8.69	68.88	200,169	New Haven	3.10	96.36	862,477	Richmond	12.66	100.00	204,214
Muskegon	3.41	76.69	172,188	Fairfield	2.51	95.42	916,829	Danville	11.63	95.48	43,055
Calhoun	3.05	69.02	136,146	* Not enough homicides in other areas for stable rates.				Portsmouth	9.98	100.00	95,535
Mississippi				Delaware**				Norfolk	9.32	100.00	242,803
Coahoma	23.27	68.00	26,151	New Castle	6.18	95.40	538,479	Wisconsin*			
Hinds	18.72	84.72	245,285	Kent	2.51	73.03	162,310	Milwaukee	7.56	99.81	947,735
Washington	17.23	82.48	51,137	Sussex	1.71	58.70	197,145	Racine	2.05	87.72	195,408
Holmes	17.18	13.15	19,198	** State has only three counties.				Rock	2.05	79.58	160,331
Wayne	15.20	20.36	20,747					Dane	0.72	87.67	488,073
								* Not enough homicides in other areas for stable rates.			

DATA SOURCES:

Counties with highest gun homicide rates in 33 States that reported complete and sufficient information. Gun homicide data are from the National Center for Health Statistics, National Vital Statistics System. Population and urbanization data are from the United States Census Bureau's county-level population estimates.