

Bleeding Out: The Devastating Consequences of Urban Violence and a Bold New Plan for Peace in the Streets

Thomas Abt

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Since its peak in the early 1990s, violent crime in the United States has been trending downward. Per capita victimizations remain near record lows despite a recent uptick in homicides in several major U.S. cities. On net, America is safer than it has been in two generations, and perhaps it is the safest it has ever been.

In spite of this era of low violence, there are nearly 40,000 gun deaths in the United States every year. This number is cited often in the gun control debate as “victims of gun violence,” but most gun deaths are suicides, comprising nearly two-thirds of the annual gun death total. Contrary to the violence trend, American suicides are on the rise, particularly among white men, and thus these tens of thousands of deaths merit greater attention than they are currently receiving. But suicides are separate from “gun violence,” understood most commonly as bodily harm inflicted upon another person. And while interpersonal violence is down in the country as a whole, where it remains—in segregated, often impoverished areas of American cities—gun violence is an acute public policy crisis.

In his book, *Bleeding Out: The Devastating Consequences of Urban Violence and a Bold New Plan for Peace in the Streets*, Thomas Abt of the Harvard Kennedy School confronts urban violence with public policy triage. Drawing from many sources, including evidence-based policing research, sociological explanations for criminogenic stressors, and psychological treatment literature, Abt provides an often compelling, though incomplete, proposal for addressing the root causes of urban violence.

The greatest strength of the book is its multidisciplinary approach to explaining what urban violence is and who is committing the crimes he describes. It is too easy to treat urban violence as simply bad guys doing bad things, or worse, the racial/cultural scapegoating that dominates a lot of the anti-crime rhetoric on the political right. Abt dismisses the “easy answers” that come from these and other simple assumptions about crime that lead to bad policies. For example, while guns, gangs, and drugs all contribute to urban violence, policies that do not differentiate between drug use and violent drug markets, or that encourage police to treat all suspected “gang-affiliated” youths

like murderous criminals, will ultimately fail to make a community safer and more often will cause more problems than they solve.

Abt proposes three “fundamentals” to undergird his anti-violence vision: focus, balance, and fairness. In very broad strokes, these fundamentals instruct stakeholders to

- focus on the highest priority individuals who are most at risk to fall victim to or perpetrate urban violence;
- balance the approach between “carrot and stick” incentives to keep the high-risk individuals out of trouble with community support and the increased likelihood of consequences for bad behavior;
- use fairness as a tool to establish the essential legitimacy of the government and its rules to increase compliance with the laws.

But the devil, as always, is in the details.

Conspicuously absent from Abt’s otherwise fair critique of the dominant views and failed programs of the past is a serious discussion of police responsibility for the current state of affairs in the communities suffering from violence. He spends some time discussing the lack of trust of police in the black and Latino communities and rightfully blames aggressive mis-policing for some of that ire. But Abt also glosses over the problems endemic in many cities and police departments. In the chapter “How Talk Informs Action,” he writes:

[N]ot all members of law enforcement are to blame for the actions of a corrupt and brutal few. Characterizing the current criminal justice system as a tool for racial subjugation is not constructive. Cops and communities plagued by violence need one another, and politicians in both parties should recognize that.

Even if one grants that problem officers are a small minority among the vast majority of good cops, our current systems for holding police officers accountable are ineffective from top to bottom. Administrative discipline for misconduct is largely shielded from public view and very rarely results in officer termination. Criminal charges for on-duty misconduct is even rarer, despite some high-profile arrests of officers caught on camera. And the doctrine of qualified immunity has rendered civil remedy even more rare than it

otherwise may be. As a result, people who don't trust the police after they or someone they know have been abused have little reason to change their minds.

But what researchers and residents know about how police generally operate undermines the "bad apples" hypothesis. Aggressive policing that is focused almost exclusively in black and brown neighborhoods is racial subjugation in effect, if not necessarily in intention. Dismissing such complaints as "not constructive" relieves the police of their obligation to face the harsh consequences of their actions. Without an acknowledgment of the wrongs of the past and present, there is little realistic hope for establishing police legitimacy in the future.

Moreover, while many police departments are primarily guilty of implementing bad policy in good faith, some departments are corrupt or significantly captured by self-serving officers that they can operate with near impunity. As the saying goes, "culture eats policy for breakfast," and too many departments have toxic cultures that are flatly incompatible with establishing the fairness and legitimacy Abt rightly prescribes. As such, those communities whose police departments have long histories of corruption and torture will likely have to rely heavily on nongovernmental methods to reduce violence without significant police involvement. If readers are to take Abt's triage metaphor seriously, and they should, dismantling and reconstructing the most problematic police departments must be part of the long-term care of those communities.

Bleeding Out is an ambitious book that provides a welcomed context to the problem of urban violence. Abt commendably collects and accessibly presents the broad array of academic literature and practical studies to prescribe necessary changes to how we think about and address violent crime. Abt correctly recognizes the perceptions of the illegitimacy of American police, particularly by black Americans, but he misplaces the responsibility to fix that perception onto activists and critics rather than the police themselves. Where the police are competent to adjust and cooperate to community needs, the onus is on them to prove it. Where police are not able to do so, they must be removed and replaced—or, at least, they must get out of the way.

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