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# World Becoming Less Violent: Despite Global Conflict, Statistics Show Violence In Steady Decline

By [Seth Borenstein](#) 10/22/11 02:31 PM ET



WASHINGTON -- It seems as if violence is everywhere, but it's really on the run.

Yes, thousands of people have died in bloody unrest from Africa to Pakistan, while terrorists plot bombings and kidnappings. Wars drag on in Iraq and Afghanistan. In peaceful Norway, a man massacred 69 youths in July. In Mexico, headless bodies turn up, victims of drug cartels. This month eight people died in a shooting in a California hair salon.

Yet, historically, we've never had it this peaceful.

That's the thesis of three new books, including one by prominent Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker. Statistics reveal dramatic reductions in war deaths, family violence, racism, rape, murder and all sorts of mayhem.

In his book, Pinker writes: "The decline of violence may be the most significant and least appreciated development in the history of our species."

And it runs counter to what the mass media is reporting and essentially what we feel in our guts.

Pinker and other experts say the reality is not painted in bloody anecdotes, but demonstrated in the black and white of spreadsheets and historical documents. They tell a story of a world moving away from violence.

In his new book, "The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined," Pinker makes the case that a smarter, more educated world is becoming more peaceful in several statistically significant ways. His findings are based on peer-reviewed studies published by other academics using examinations of graveyards, surveys and historical records:

- The number of people killed in battle – calculated per 100,000 population – has dropped by 1,000-fold over the centuries as civilizations evolved. Before there were organized countries, battles killed on average more than 500 out of every 100,000 people. In 19th century France, it was 70. In the 20th century with two world wars and a few genocides, it was 60. Now battlefield deaths are down to three-tenths of a person per 100,000.
- The rate of genocide deaths per world population was 1,400 times higher in 1942 than in 2008.
- There were fewer than 20 democracies in 1946. Now there are close to 100. Meanwhile, the number of authoritarian countries has dropped from a high of almost 90 in 1976 to about 25 now.

Pinker says one of the main reasons for the drop in violence is that we are smarter. IQ tests show that the average teenager is smarter with each generation. The tests are constantly adjusted to keep average at 100, and a teenager who now would score a 100 would have scored a 118 in 1950 and a 130 in 1910. So this year's average kid would have been a near-genius a century ago. And that increase in intelligence translates into a kinder, gentler world, Pinker says.

"As we get smarter, we try to think up better ways of getting everyone to turn their swords into plowshares at the same time," Pinker said in an interview. "Human life has become more precious than it used to be."

Pinker argued his case in a commentary this past week in the scientific journal *Nature*. He has plenty of charts and graphs to back up his claims, including evidence beyond wartime deaths – evidence that our everyday lives are also less violent:

- Murder in European countries has steadily fallen from near 100 per 100,000 people in the 14th and 15th centuries to about 1 per 100,000 people now.

- Murder within families. The U.S. rate of husbands being killed by their wives has dropped from 1.2 per 100,000 in 1976 to just 0.2. For wives killed by their husbands, the rate has slipped from 1.4 to 0.8 over the same time period.
- Rape in the United States is down 80 percent since 1973. Lynchings, which used to occur at a rate of 150 a year, have disappeared.
- Discrimination against blacks and gays is down, as is capital punishment, the spanking of children, and child abuse.

But if numbers are too inaccessible, Pinker is more than happy to provide the gory stories illustrating our past violence. "It is easy to forget how dangerous life used to be, how deeply brutality was once woven into the fabric of daily existence," Pinker writes in his book.

He examines body counts, rapes, sacrifice and slavery in the Bible, using an estimate of 1.2 million deaths detailed in the Old Testament. He describes forms of torture used in the Middle Ages and even notes the nastiness behind early day fairy tales, such as the evil queen's four gruesome methods for killing Snow White along with a desire to eat her lungs and liver.

Even when you add in terrorism, the world is still far less violent, Pinker says.

"Terrorism doesn't account for many deaths. Sept. 11 was just off the scale. There was never a terrorist attack before or after that had as many deaths. What it does is generate fear," he said.

It's hard for many people to buy the decline in violence. Even those who deal in peace for a living at first couldn't believe it when the first academics started counting up battle deaths and recognized the trends.

In 1998, Andrew Mack, then head of strategic planning for U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan, said a look at the statistics showed the world was becoming less violent. The reaction from his professional peacekeeping colleagues?

"Pffft, it's not true," they told Mack, arguing that the 1990s had to be the worst decade in U.N. history. It wasn't even close.

Joshua Goldstein, a professor of international relations at American University and author of "Winning the War on War," has also been telling the same story as Pinker, but from a foreign policy point of view. At each speech he gives, people bring up America's lengthy wars in the Middle East. "It's been a hard message to get through," he acknowledged.

"We see the atrocities and they are atrocious," Goldstein said. "The blood is going to be just as red on the television screens."

Mack, who's now with Simon Fraser University in Canada, credits the messy, inefficient and heavily political peacekeeping process at the U.N., the World Bank and thousands of non-governmental organizations for helping curb violence.

The "Human Security Report 2009/2010," a project led by Mack and funded by several governments, is a worldwide examination of war and violence and has been published as a book. It cites jarringly low numbers. While the number of wars has increased by 25 percent, they've been minor ones.

The average annual battle death toll has dropped from nearly 10,000 per conflict in the 1950s to less than 1,000 in the 21st century. And the number of deadliest wars – those that kill at least 1,000 people a year – has fallen by 78 percent since 1988.

Mack and Goldstein emphasize how hard society and peacekeepers have worked to reduce wars, focusing on action taken to tamp down violence, while Pinker focuses on cultural and thought changes that make violence less likely. But all three say those elements are interconnected.

Even the academics who disagree with Pinker, Goldstein and Mack, say the declining violence numbers are real.

"The facts are not in dispute here; the question is what is going on," John Mearsheimer, a professor of political science at the University of Chicago and author of "The Tragedy of Great Power Politics."

"It's been 21 years since the Cold War ended and the United States has been at war for 14 out of those 21 years," Mearsheimer said. "If war has been burned out of the system, why do we have NATO and why has NATO been pushed eastward...? Why are we spending more money on defense than all other countries in the world put together?"

What's happening is that the U.S. is acting as a "pacifier" keeping the peace all over the world, Mearsheimer said. He said like-minded thinkers, who call themselves "realists" believe "that power matters because the best way to survive is to be really powerful." And he worries that a strengthening China is about to upset the world power picture and may make the planet bloodier again.

And Goldstein points out that even though a nuclear attack hasn't occurred in 66 years – one nuclear bomb could change this trend in an instant.

Pinker said looking at the statistics and how violent our past was and how it is less so now, "makes me appreciate things like democracy, the United Nations, like literacy."

He and Goldstein believe it's possible that an even greater drop in violence could occur in the future.

Goldstein says there's a turn on a cliché that is apt: "We're actually going from the fire to the frying pan. And that's progress. It's not as bad as the fire."

■ Researcher Julie Reed Bell contributed to this report.