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The Declining Culture of Guns and Violence in the United States

by John Sides on [July 21, 2012](#) · [104 comments](#)

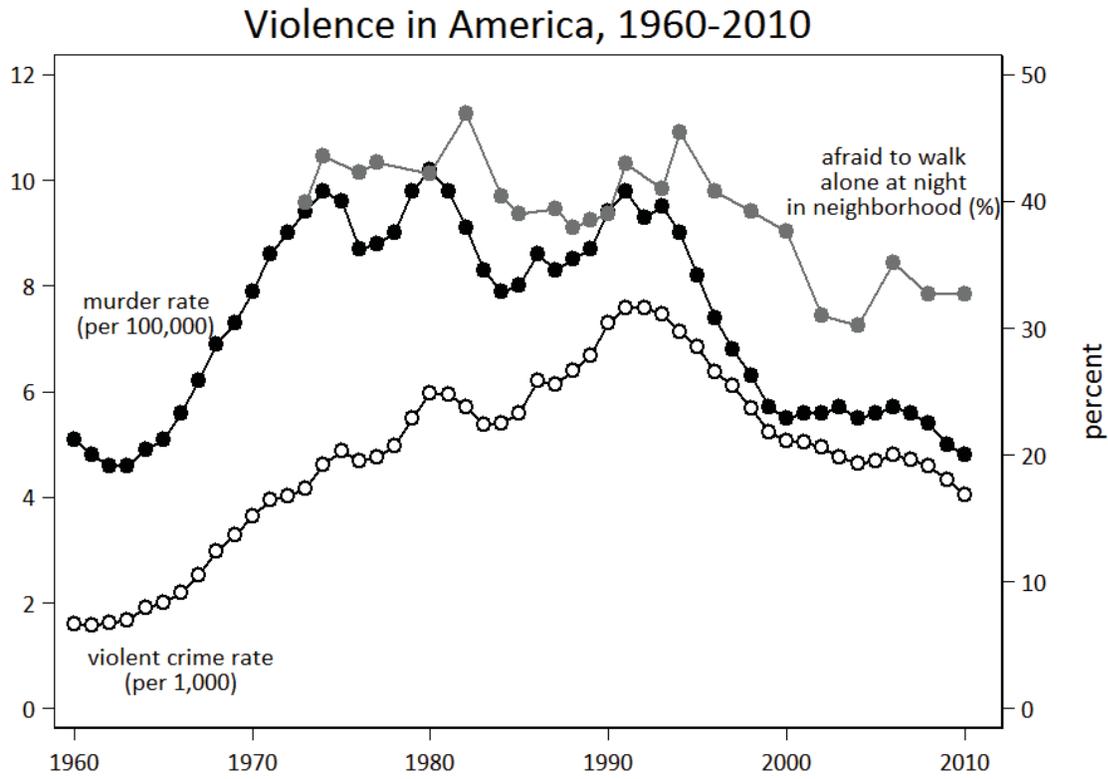
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This is a guest post by political scientist [Patrick Egan](#).

The massacre unleashed by [James Holmes](#) in Aurora, Colo. shortly after midnight on Friday is a tragedy of national proportions. Like other mass shootings before it—Columbine in 1999 and Virginia Tech in 2007 come to mind—it leaves us desperate for explanations in its wake. There are [those](#) who blame our nation’s relative paucity of gun control laws and [others](#) decrying the power of the gun lobby. Cultural explanations abound, too. On the right, [one Congressman](#) has pinned the blame on long-term national cultural decline. On the left, fingers are pointed at America’s “[gun-crazy](#)” culture.

But as pundits and politicians react, they would do well to keep in mind two fundamental trends about violence and guns in America that are going unmentioned in the reporting on Aurora.

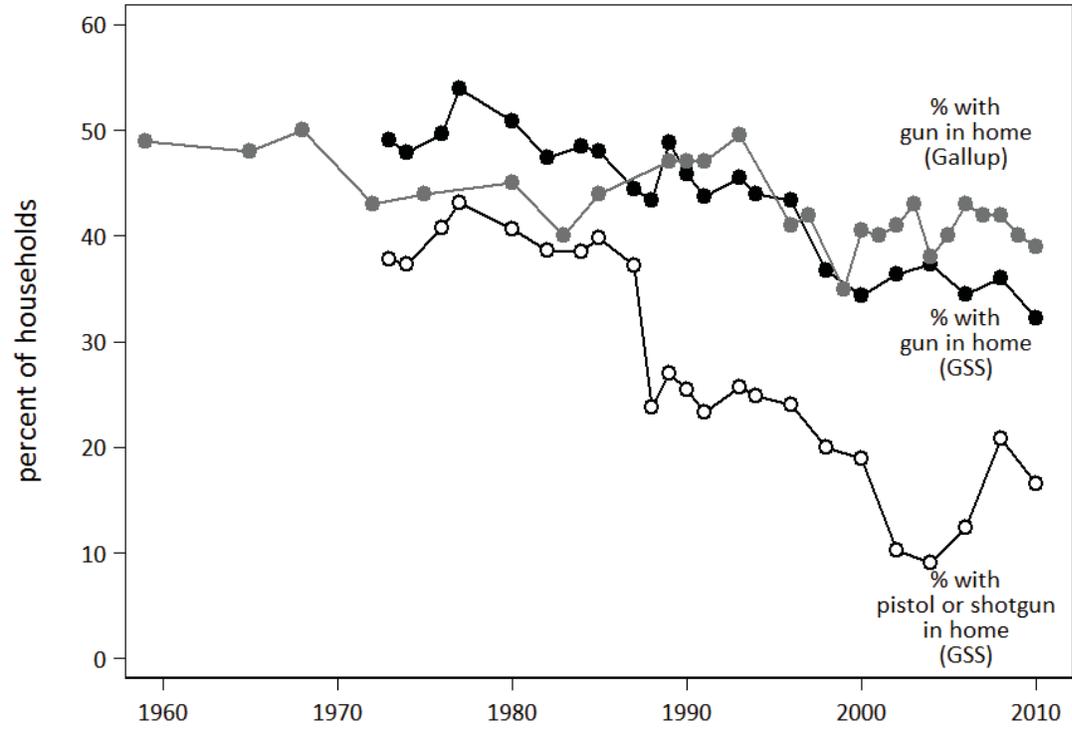
First, *we are a less violent nation now than we’ve been in over forty years*. In 2010, violent crime rates hit a low not seen since 1972; murder rates sunk to levels last experienced during the Kennedy Administration. Our perceptions of our own safety have shifted, as well. In the early 1980s, almost half of Americans told the General Social [Survey](#) (GSS) they were “afraid to walk alone at night” in their own neighborhoods; now only one-third feel this way.



Source: FBI Uniform Crime Reporting Statistics; General Social Survey.

Second, for all the attention given to America's culture of guns, *ownership of firearms is at or near all-time lows*. Since 1973, the GSS has been asking Americans whether they keep a gun in their home. In the 1970s, about half of the nation said yes; today only about one-third do. Driving the decline: a dramatic drop in ownership of pistols and shotguns, the very weapons most likely to be used in violent crimes.

Gun Ownership in America, 1959-2010



Source: Gallup Poll; General Social Survey.

Gallup has been asking a similar question since 1959 and has found a less dramatic, but still unmistakable decline. The erratic behavior of the Gallup series may be driven a bit by politics; unlike the GSS its questions about gun ownership are [asked](#) directly after questions about gun control. (Not shown on the figure is Gallup’s October 2011 [finding](#) that 47 percent of Americans reported owning a gun when asked if they kept a gun “anywhere else on your property;” this time series unfortunately only extends to 1991.)

Thus long-term trends suggest that we are in fact currently experiencing a *waning* culture of guns and violence in the United States. This is undoubtedly helping to dampen the public’s support for *both* [gun control](#) and the [death penalty](#). There are growing partisan gaps on attitudes regarding the two policies, but enthusiasm for both has declined recently in lockstep with the drop in crime and violence. The total effects of these trends on opinion and policy remain to be seen, but one thing is clear: they defy easy ideological explanation.

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 [Emily Kennedy](#) July 21, 2012 at 8:54 pm

That’s really useful information. Thank you for the post.

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 [NoDeuces](#) July 21, 2012 at 9:57 pm