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Violent deaths in the world

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The probability of violent death differs widely by world region, and has changed radically down history. Violent death here means a death caused by the wilful act of another person (homicide), or self-inflicted (suicide), or an unexpected external cause, known as an accident (see definition in box, page 4).

Russia has just half the population of the United States (143 million versus 285 million), but twice as many violent deaths (Table 1)—a total 319,000 in 2000 alone. This is an annual rate of 221 violent deaths per 100,000 population—a huge loss of human lives. Close on Russia's heels in the league table are those former Soviet Union countries with large Russian populations (Ukraine, Kazakhstan), with rates of about 150 and 120 per 100,000 population, ahead even of drugs cartel-ridden Colombia. What these different countries share is an unwonted share of violent mortality in total mortality (between 1 in 10 deaths in Ukraine, and 1 in 4 deaths in Colombia) and the level of their violent death rates (at least 100 deaths per 100,000 population a year). It may be conjectured that similar factors are at work in these different cases: the rolling back of the state, corruption in government, the army and police, trafficking of all kinds, widespread alcohol abuse, etc. [2], [3].

Although long classed as a dangerous society, the United States has recently experienced a drop in violent mortality to below Japanese and French levels. Even the universally recognized social evil of homicide has fallen significantly since 1990. But more spectacular still are cases such as Germany, whose pre-1980s spate of suicides has now subsided,

and the United Kingdom which, with a similar-sized population to France, has less than half the number of violent deaths, and where only 3% of all deaths are violence-related. In all these low-risk countries, violent deaths account for less than 8% of all deaths.

Let us take each of the three broad categories (homicide, suicide and transport accidents) in turn, in approximately thirty countries covering the spectrum of existing cases (Table 2).

◆ Colombia, top of the killings league

The homicide risk scale could not be wider, running from a ratio of 1 (Japan) to 100 (Colombia). With double the rate of Russia and an overwhelming majority of adult male victims (ongoing war between the state and criminal gangs, plus gang feuds), Colombia remains a

Table 1 - Violent death in selected countries, 2000

	Annual number of violent deaths (000s)	Violent death rate (per 100,000)	Share of violent deaths in all deaths (%)
Russia	319	221	18
Ukraine	74	149	10
Kazakhstan	18	119	15
Colombia	43	105	24
Brazil	115	76	13
France	44	75	8
Japan	75	59	8
USA	151	55	6
Sweden	4	48	4
Germany	34	41	4
UK	20	33	3

Source: WHO, 2003 [1].

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Table 2 – Violent deaths by cause in 2000 (or nearest year)

Homicide			Suicide (1)			Transport accident (2)			Total (2)		
Rank	Country	Rate (3)	Rank	Country	Rate (3)	Rank	Country	Rate (3)	Rank	Country	Rate (3)
1	Colombia	60.8	1	Lithuania	44.1	1	Latvia	27.7	1	Russia	95.9
2	Russia	28.4	2	Russia	40.1	2	Russia	27.4	2	Colombia	81.7
3	Brazil	23.3	3	Latvia	37.0	3	South Korea	25.4	3	Latvia	80.0
4	Kazakhstan	18.8	4	Belarus	34.9	4	Greece	22.6	4	Lithuania	72.8
5	Latvia	15.3	5	Hungary	31.6	5	Brazil	20.8	5	Kazakhstan	65.3
6	Estonia	13.9	6	Kazakhstan	30.0	6	Lithuania	20.8	6	Estonia	60.3
7	Ukraine	13.1	7	Ukraine	29.6	7	Estonia	18.9	7	Belarus	60.2
8	Moldavia	11.9	8	Estonia	27.5	8	Poland	18.8	8	Ukraine	57.3
9	Belarus	11.4	9	Japan	25.1	9	Colombia	17.7	9	Brazil	49.2
10	Mexico	10.8	10	Finland	23.8	10	Kuwait	16.9	10	South Korea	40.7
11	Lithuania	9.3	11	Belgium	21.3	11	Cuba	16.9	11	Moldavia	38.8
12	Kyrgyzstan	7.7	12	Switzerland	20.2	12	USA	16.5	12	Belgium	38.6
13	USA	6.2	13	Austria	19.0	13	Kazakhstan	16.5	13	Cuba	38.5
14	Cuba	5.2	14	France	17.5	14	Belgium	15.7	14	Japan	36.2
15	Albania	4.2	15	Denmark	17.0	15	Mexico	14.9	15	USA	34.0
16	Georgia	3.3	16	Poland	14.3	16	Spain	14.7	16	Poland	31.9
17	Rep. Macedonia	3.0	17	Germany	14.2	17	Ukraine	14.6	17	France	31.1
18	Poland	2.1	18	Sweden	14.2	18	Italy	13.5	18	Mexico	28.9
19	Belgium	1.9	19	South Korea	13.6	19	France	12.9	19	Kyrgyzstan	27.8
20	Peru	1.8	20	Norway	12.1	20	Hungary	12.9	20	Albania	26.4
21	South Korea	1.7	21	USA	11.3	21	Chile	12.0	21	Germany	24.8
22	Canada	1.5	22	Netherlands	10.1	22	Austria	11.9	22	Canada	24.3
23	Netherlands	1.4	23	Spain	8.6	23	Canada	10.6	23	Spain	24.2
24	Italy	1.2	24	Italy	8.2	24	Japan	10.5	24	Italy	22.9
25	Sweden	1.2	25	UK	7.5	25	UK	10.5	25	Sweden	20.9
26	Germany	0.9	26	Brazil	5.1	26	Germany	9.7	26	UK	18.7
27	Spain	0.9	27	Greece	3.8	27	Australia	9.4	27	Netherlands	18.4
28	France	0.7	28	Colombia	3.2	28	Finland	9.2	28	Georgia	18.4
29	UK	0.7	29	Mexico	3.2	29	Norway	8.4	29	Macedonia	15.7
30	Japan	0.6	30	Kuwait	2.2	30	Sweden	5.5	30	Peru	10.6

(1) The number of self-inflicted deaths worldwide is estimated at 1 million a year (including 20% in China and 5% in India). Singularly, China has a higher suicide rate among rural women than men (WHO [1]).

(2) Unlike Table 1, which aggregated all accidents, including home accidents, only transport accidents are shown here; this is why total violent mortality in Table 2 is lower than that shown in Table 1, the difference being attributable to non-transport-related accidents (see definition in box).

(3) Annual deaths per 100,000 population.

Source: WHO [1].

special case: whole regions are beyond government control, and, even with help from the United States, the situation is worsening. Russia's comparatively high number of female victims is a product of drink-fuelled domestic violence [4]. Brazil is more a cocaine transit than producing country, but the big cities (Rio, Sao Paulo) are major markets that can rapidly turn into the scene of turf wars. Mexico is arguably much less lethal. Finally, as mentioned, the United States is no longer a case apart but has fallen into line: a prison population of close to 2 million, and a crackdown on offenders ("zero tolerance") are reflected in a sharp drop in crime.

This contrasts with countries previously part of the USSR (Slavic countries, Baltic States, southern countries like Moldavia, Kyrgyzstan and Georgia), all placed in the upper half of the ranking. In some, a breakdown in state authority has led to growth in criminal gang activity, especially organized crime, which has a hand in all forms of trafficking and racketeering.

Countries where law and order is least challenged, where the police are most effective and there is least corruption in government (e.g., Germany, Spain, France, United Kingdom and Japan) is where homicide rates are lowest at less than 1 death per 100,000 population.

◆ Russia and former USSR countries suffer high suicide rates

The suicide table has a smaller range than that of homicide. Here, Colombia and Mexico are on the bottom rung with only 3 suicides a year per 100,000 population or thereabouts, i.e., a thirteenth to a fifteenth of those of Lithuania and Russia which hold the gloomy world record of 40-plus. In Hungary, long the undisputed leader with an unprecedented rate of 45, suicide deaths fell by nearly a third as the country was restored to freedom by the end of the Soviet occupation (1956

had marked the beginning of a moral crisis and a sharp rise in suicides which lasted about thirty years), combined with prevention campaigns run by health workers among vulnerable groups (alcoholics, people with depression or incurable diseases, the low-skilled and those experiencing family breakdown). Again, the Slavic and Baltic states, suffering the alienation brought by a collapse of social structures (unemployment, loss of bearings, the end of imperial grandeur, disintegration of community-spiritedness, loss of self-esteem) top the table.

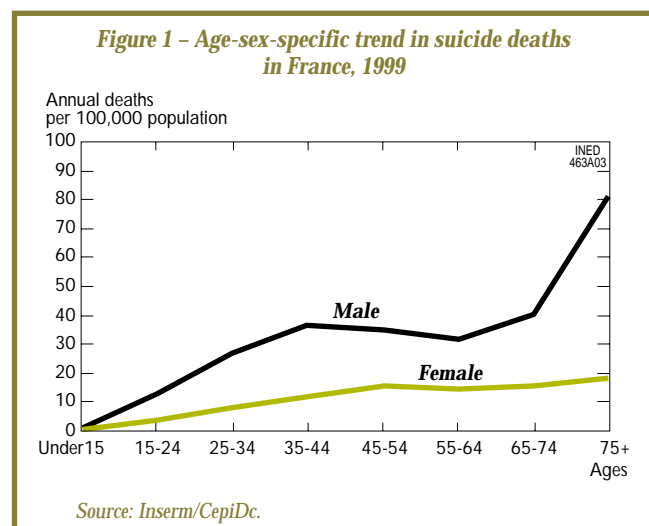
Japan had suffered a similar trauma in the 1950s (military defeat, foreign occupation, feelings of humiliation and a sense of loss), but had successfully reinvented itself from a bellicose to a trading nation (the drive for excellence in world exports). This new ideological tack helped salve the consciences, especially of the rudderless young in search of direction.

France has a comparatively high suicide rate, approaching that of traditionally suicide-prone countries (Denmark, Austria) and significantly above those of the United Kingdom, its southern neighbours and, more recently, Germany where post-1980s society seems less prey to existential angst.

Suicide rates are highly age-specific. Pre-adolescent child suicide is non-existent in France (Figure 1), but rises age-specifically thereafter to level off in early middle to old age (40 to 70), peaking at the oldest ages. Men are more suicide-prone than women.

◆ Wide between-country variations in transport accident frequency

Despite advances in road accident prevention and improved accident and emergency units, transport (essentially road traffic) accidents still take a high toll [5]. Sweden has achieved what is arguably the lowest possible with an annual death rate of just 5.5 per



100,000 population. The higher homicide rate countries (Colombia, Brazil, and especially the Baltic and Slavic states) come at the other end of the scale. This suggests a violent mortality syndrome specific to the old Soviet bloc countries, where all the main forms of violent death—homicides, suicides, accidents of all kinds (drowning, fires, falls, transport accidents, poisoning, industrial accidents, etc.)—are rife. Russia alone records 8,000 industrial accident fatalities a year, most, like the other violent deaths, attributable to alcohol abuse.

◆ Modernization brings fewer homicides ...

Modernization tends to be followed by a falling homicide count, but a rising suicide count.

The United States stands alone in the Western world for a high and long-unabated rate of killings, with 20th-century homicide rates approximately ten-fold those of similar European and Asian developed nations. The “nonwhite” population has a victim rate 6 to 7-fold that of the “white” population and, in both cases, there are 3 to 5 times fewer female than male victims. Most significantly, however, the decrease seen from around 1970 began to accelerate from 1990, mainly to the benefit of the “nonwhite” community, where as late as 1970 the rate was similar to that of Colombia today: it has since been reduced by two and half (Table 3).

◆ but more suicides

Suicide, classed as an offence before God, was recorded in parish registers from an early date. Some countries have time series stretching back to the 18th century and in some cases, point observations dating as far back as the 13th century. To ensure coverage of a sufficient range of countries, this examination went no further back than the mid-19th century (Table 4). Suicide rates are closely tied to a society’s economic and political

Table 3 - Homicide death rates in the USA (annual murder count per 100,000 population)

Year	“White” population		“Non-white” population		All Both Sexes
	Male	Female	Male	Female	
1940	6.7	1.8	79.9	18.5	8.4
1950	5.3	1.9	67.4	16.2	7.2
1960	5.3	2.0	56.2	15.6	6.9
1970	9.5	2.9	95.9	18.5	11.6
1980	10.9	3.2	66.6	13.5	10.7
1990	9.0	2.8	69.2	13.5	10.0
2000	5.6	2.2	37.5	7.8	6.2

Source: US Bureau of the Census [6].

Table 4 - Suicide death rate per 100,000 population

Country	1846 1855	1896 1905	1926 1935	1960	1980	2000
Germany	11.5	20.4	27.4	18.8*	20.9	14.2
Austria	4.9	18.6	38.0	23.1	25.7	19.0
Denmark	25.9	22.4	17.6	20.2	31.6	17.0
Finland	4.0	5.1	19.7	20.4	24.7	23.8
France	8.9	20.8	19.8	15.9	19.4	17.5
Hungary	3.2	20.5	31.5	24.9	44.9	31.6
Italy	3.1	6.3	9.3	6.1	6.4	8.2
Russia	2.6	3.3	4.5	–	36.0	40.1
Sweden	6.9	14.6	15.7	17.4	19.4	14.2
USA	5.8	10.3	14.7	10.6	12.2	11.3
Japan	–	18.0	21.3	21.6	17.6	25.1

* DDR: 17.5; West Berlin: 37.0; FRG: 18.7.

Sources: for the period 1846-1960: Chesnais [9] – for periods post-1960: WHO [1].

history. In traditional agrarian societies (Russia, Italy, Hungary, Finland circa 1850), they are very low, no more than 4 a year per 100,000 population, as evidenced by past records. They are higher in France, Germany, and especially Denmark—traditionally prone to suicide according to the pioneering studies of Durkheim and Morselli [7], [8]—whose rate of 26 per 100,000 population sets it noticeably apart.

The uprooting effect of industrialization and urbanization produced a sharp rise in suicide rates, other than in still-agrarian economies (Finland, Russia). Of the 11 countries studied, 6 had comparatively high suicide rates of approximately 15 to 20 per 100,000 population in 1900. By circa 1930, the trend had deepened—apart from Russia, which was still lagging. Suicides soared in Hungary and especially in Austria following the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian empire in an era of melancholia, gloom, morbid literature and introspection. Suicide also rose sharply in Germany, rocked by economic (hyperinflation since 1923 followed by mass unemployment) and political (Nazi dictatorship seizing power in 1933) collapse. The mild improvement which began in the post-war period picked up speed after 1980. German society, arguably more at ease with its new identity and having recovered its pride, now has one of the lowest suicide rates in the Western world.

Hungary's suicide rate has fallen, but still remains quite high in 2000, albeit lower than that of inter-war Austria. Most striking, however, given the low historical propensity to suicide in Russia, is the tenfold increase in its suicide rate since the period 1926-1935, contrasting with the general downtrend, probably largely due to the use of increasingly less fatal means (barbiturates) and faster emergency service response times.

Japan remains a case apart. Having overcome the

Definition of violent death

Violent death is a “non-natural” death. It is a death caused by the wilful act of another person (homicide), or self-inflicted (suicide), or an unexpected external cause, known as an accident.

Its uncertain parameters make it difficult to pin down. Between undeniable acknowledged suicide and accident (or even other forms of death) lies a whole range of very different acts. All suspicious deaths are a matter for forensic science (post-mortem of the victim) and police investigation (to determine whether death has resulted from a criminal offence, i.e., whether there is a presumption that an indictable or non-indictable offence has been committed). Accidental deaths are not defined in the same way everywhere, especially deaths that occur some time after the incident. Such accidental deaths cover a wide range of occurrences from falls through drownings and poisonings to fires. This study has singled out transport accidents, not simply because they represent the overwhelming majority, but because they have long been rising, seemingly to little concern, while taking a toll of human life akin to mass slaughter.

Comparisons are possible only between countries that keep cause-of-death statistics. As a result, many African and Asian countries are not included in the tables because they lack reliable or any figures. Had South Africa been able to be included, however, it would probably have featured in the upper echelons of the high-risk country ranking, for homicides at least.

humiliation of defeat in 1945 and the spate of suicides that followed it, Japan settled back within international norms; now, its suicide rate once more tops that of 1960. In a country where suicide is an act of honour, the evidence suggests that this resurgence in self-inflicted deaths has something to do with the moral and cultural crisis that Japanese society has been going through for the past fifteen years.

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