

A 2022 Update on Rates of Prestate Violence Steven Pinker

Among the most contentious claims in *Better Angels* was that pre-state societies had far higher rates of lethal violence than state societies—even those of the 20th C, with its wars & genocides, and much more so compared to the postwar era.

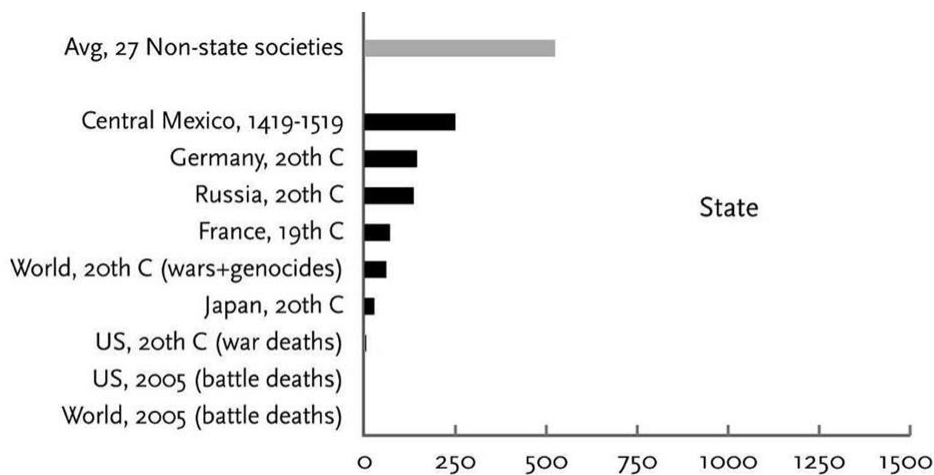


FIGURE 2-3.

Some of the controversy was political—despite my best efforts (and the flagrant counterexample of *Better Angels* itself), a “peace mafia” is wedded to the fallacy that if tribal peoples are violent, war is inevitable; war can’t be inevitable, therefore tribal peoples aren’t violent. For discussion, see <https://whyevolutionistrue.com/2016/05/22/steve-pinker-on-john-horgans-view-of-war/>. For an early cancellation campaign against a dissenter, see Alice Dreger’s report: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3178026/>

Some of the controversy was conceptual: I contrasted non-state societies (hunter-gatherer, hunter-horticultural, pastoralist, early agricultural) with state societies (ancient & modern), testing the Leviathan hypothesis that central states reduce violence. This is easy to confuse with a contrast of hunter-gatherer vs other societies, thought to be relevant to the evolution of aggression.

Some of the controversy was methodological: the data available to me in 2010 (mostly from archeologist Lawrence Keeley) were limited & noisy. They always will be, but *Better Angels* attracted new attention to the topic, and we now have much more comprehensive data.

This includes a review by Gomez et al. <https://www.nature.com/articles/nature19758>

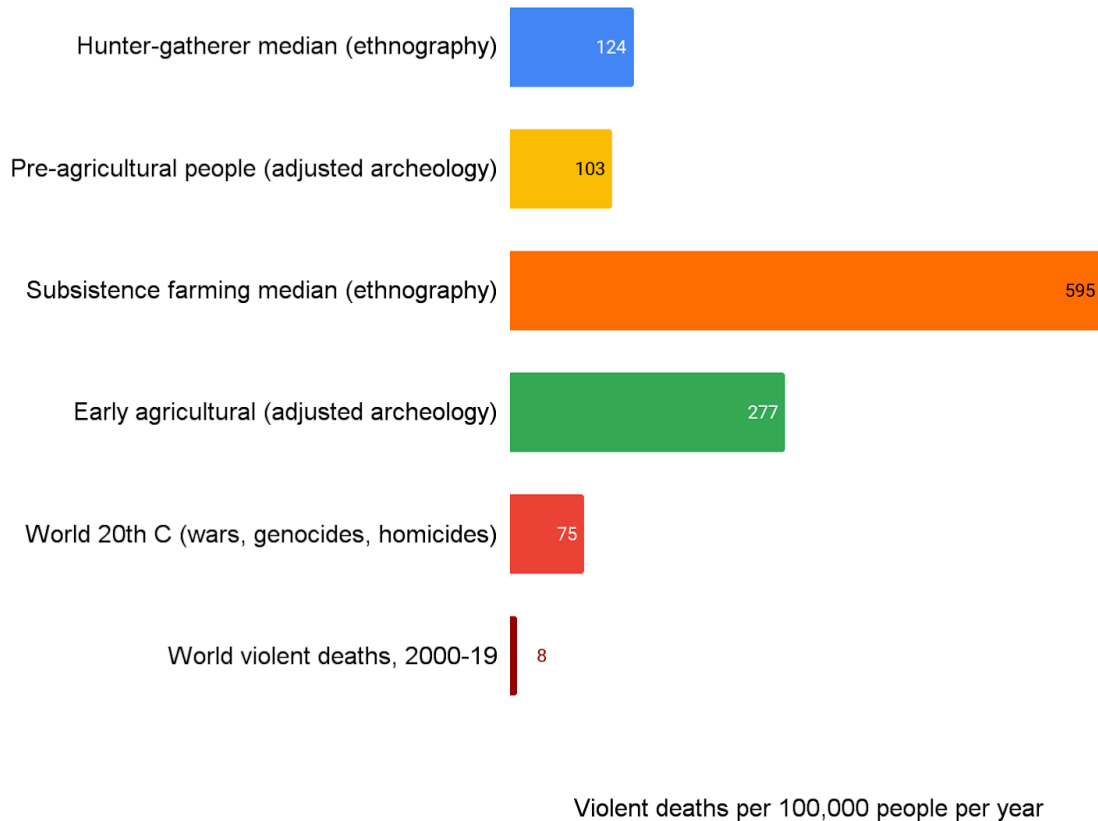
who confirmed the main comparison:

B) Sociopolitical organization					
Bands	Prehistoric	Archaeology	2609	3.34	0.72
Tribes	Prehistoric	Archaeology	36948	3.56	0.88
Chiefdoms	Historic	Archaeology	22080	14.08	5.95
States	Historic	Archaeology	372333	0.24	0.13
Bands	Contemporary	Ethnographic	12917	10.27	2.93
Tribes	Contemporary	Ethnographic	20850	3.90	1.71
States	Contemporary	Statistical Yearbooks	332798218	1.33	0.11

But the most sophisticated analysis to date (sponsored by the Effective Altruism movement) is by John Halstead & Phil Thomson. Summary: <https://violencetrends.substack.com/p/violence-before-agriculture-summary>; full report: <https://violencetrends.substack.com/p/violence-before-agriculture-full>. My blurb: “an admirably thorough and fair assessment of this difficult and emotionally fraught empirical question. I don’t agree with all of their conclusions, but this will surely be the standard reference for this issue for years to come.” They note shortcomings of my analysis; in particular, they adjust pre-state estimates downward.

But they confirm my key conclusions: Hunter-gatherers (124 violent deaths / 100K people / year), preagricultural peoples (103), subsistence farmers (595) & early agriculturalists (277) were more violent than the 20th century (75) and WAY more violent than the 21st (8).

Rates of violence among different groups



Final thoughts: The high rates of nonstate violence confirm Hobbes's Leviathan theory that governments reduce interpersonal & tribal violence. The pattern is seen throughout history. The necrometrician Matthew White summarizes history's 100 worst atrocities: "Chaos is deadlier than tyranny. More of these multicides result from the breakdown of authority rather than the exercise of authority." <https://www.amazon.com/Atrocities-Deadliest-Episodes-Human-History/dp/0393345238>

BUT: Tyrannies can kill massive number of people, too. The early big states were nasty, slave-holding, human-sacrificing theocracies, and we all know about the 20th century. The least bad system is liberal democracy: a Leviathan just strong enough to keep its citizens from killing each other without killing the citizens itself.