

Has the Decline of Violence Reversed since *The Better Angels of Our Nature* was Written?

Steven Pinker

Many journalists, citing recent violence in Syria, Iraq, Gaza, and Ukraine, have asked me whether the decline of violence has gone into reverse since *The Better Angels of Our Nature* was written. The question betrays the same statistical misconceptions that led me to write *Better Angels* in the first place. People always think that violence has increased because they reason from memorable examples rather than from global data. If at any time you cherry-pick the most violent place in the world, then you'll discover that yes, it's violent. That has nothing to do with overall rates or trends in violence.

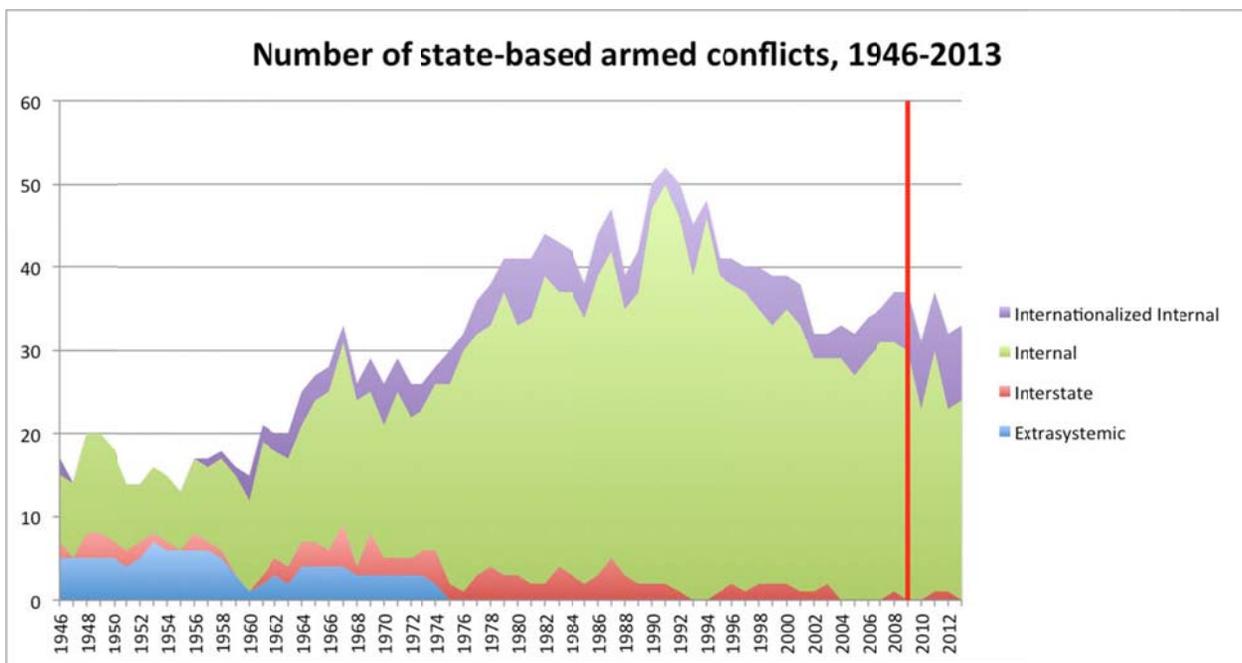
The basic problem is that journalism is a systematically misleading way to understand the world. News is about things that happen, not about things that don't happen. You never see a reporter standing on the streets of Angola, Sri Lanka, or Vietnam saying "I'm here reporting that a war has not broken out today." It's only by looking at data on the world as a whole that you get an accurate picture of the trends.

Objectively, there has indeed been an uptick in war deaths in 2013 compared to 2012 (it's too early to have data for 2014), mostly due to the war in Syria. But the overall level of deaths is still far below those of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, when the world was a *far* more dangerous place. Even putting aside the obvious examples (such as the Cuban Missile Crisis and the 3-million-death war in Vietnam), one sees that the conflicts of today are far less damaging than those of past decades. For instance, the 1980s saw an eight-year war between Iran and Iraq that killed more than half a million people and threatened to block the flow of oil from the Persian gulf, which would have brought the world economy to a standstill. A decade before, the Yom Kippur War killed 12,000 people (six times as many as died in Gaza in 2014), threatened the existence of nuclear-armed Israel, and led Richard Nixon to put American nuclear forces on a higher level of alert.

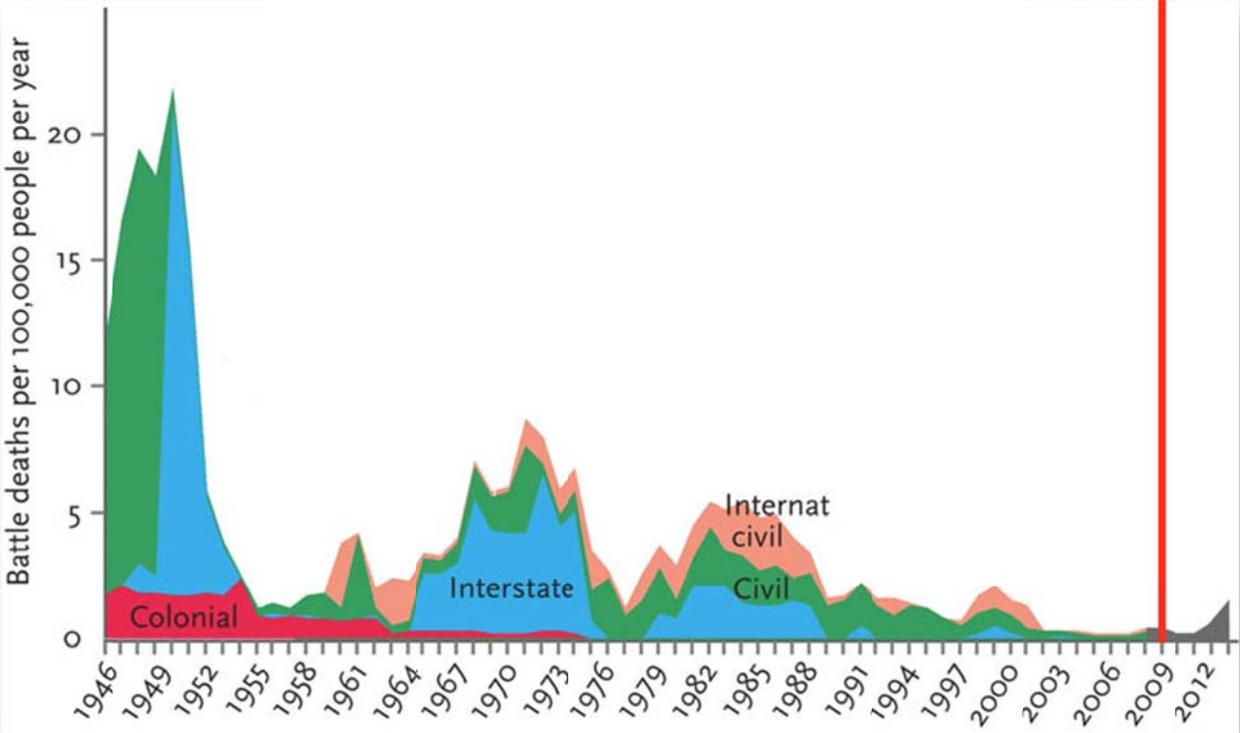
Here are some graphs (constructed with the help of Brian Atwood) which show the most recent available data on several categories of violence covered in *Better Angels*. The data analyses in the book were closed in September 2010, and thus included statistics no later than the preceding year, 2009. In all the graphs below I show that cutoff with a vertical red line.

War

Let's begin with the number of state-based armed conflicts (namely, organized violence involving a government which kills at least 25 people a year). According to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (June, 2014), "In 2013, there were 33 active conflicts in the world. ...[a number which] has remained relatively stable over the past ten years, fluctuating between 31 and 37. Compared to the period right after the end of the Cold War, where more than 50 conflicts were active, armed conflicts have declined by almost 40 percent. Conflicts claiming more than 1,000 lives, defined as wars, have declined by more than 50 percent, from 15 in the early 1990s to seven in 2013." They also note that "there were six peace agreements signed in 2013, which was two more than the previous year." Here are the data:

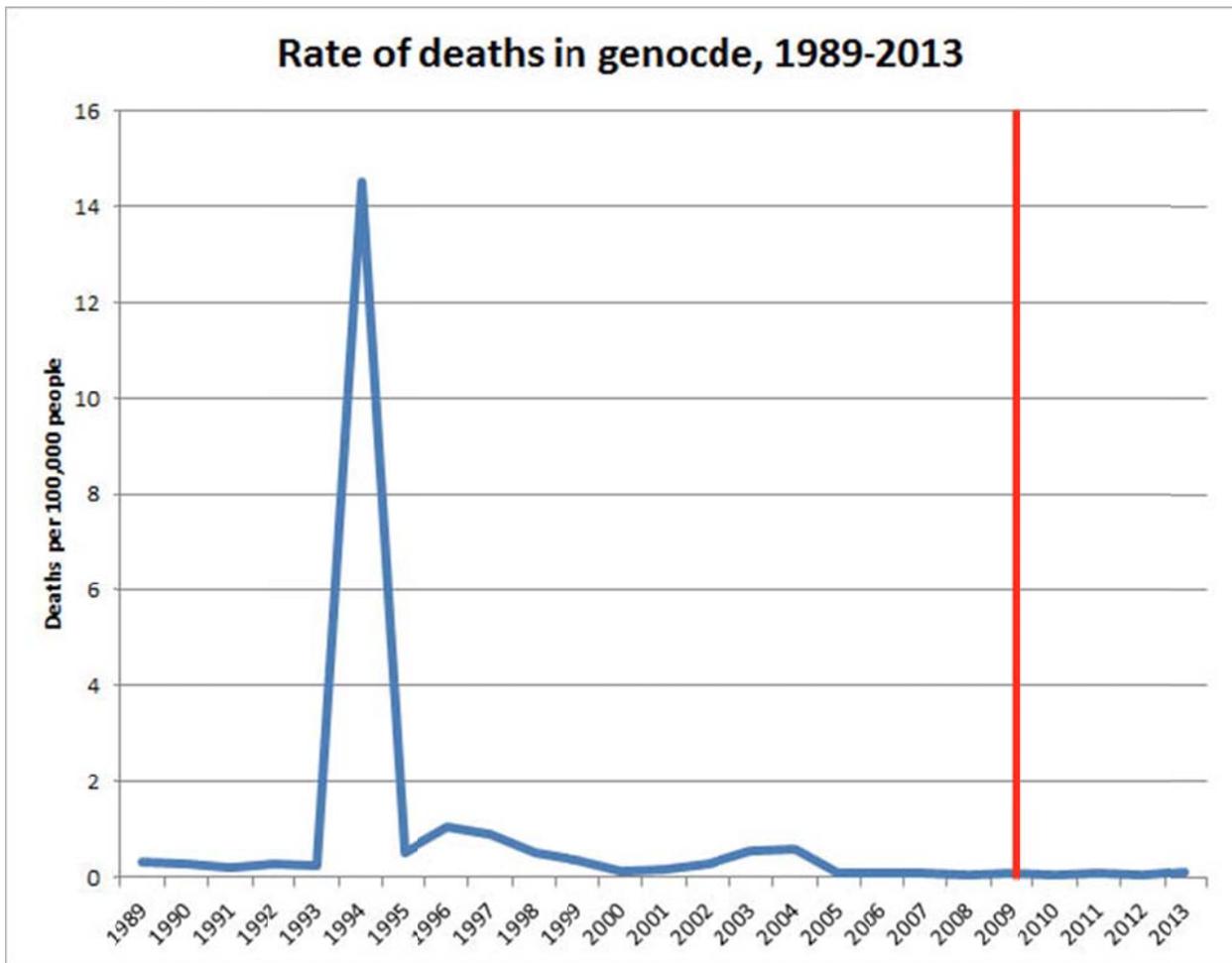


As I mentioned, the number of battle deaths in these conflicts did increase in 2013, and likely will be even higher in 2014, mostly because of the conflicts in Syria and Iraq. But the global rate still does not come anywhere close to the rate of death in past decades:



Genocide

Most definitions of “genocide” are too vague and politicized to allow objective counts. The Uppsala Conflict Data Project has a category called “One-Sided Violence” which includes all incidents in which organized armed forces kill substantial numbers of unarmed civilians; this includes anything that anyone would want to call a genocide, together with other atrocities and war crimes. Since 2009 there has been an uptick in deaths from one-sided violence which is barely noticeable compared to the decline since 1989, when the dataset begins. More extensive graphs on the history of genocide in *Better Angels* (pp. 338 and 340) show that even the 1994 peak (from Rwanda) is a tiny fraction of the levels from the preceding decades.

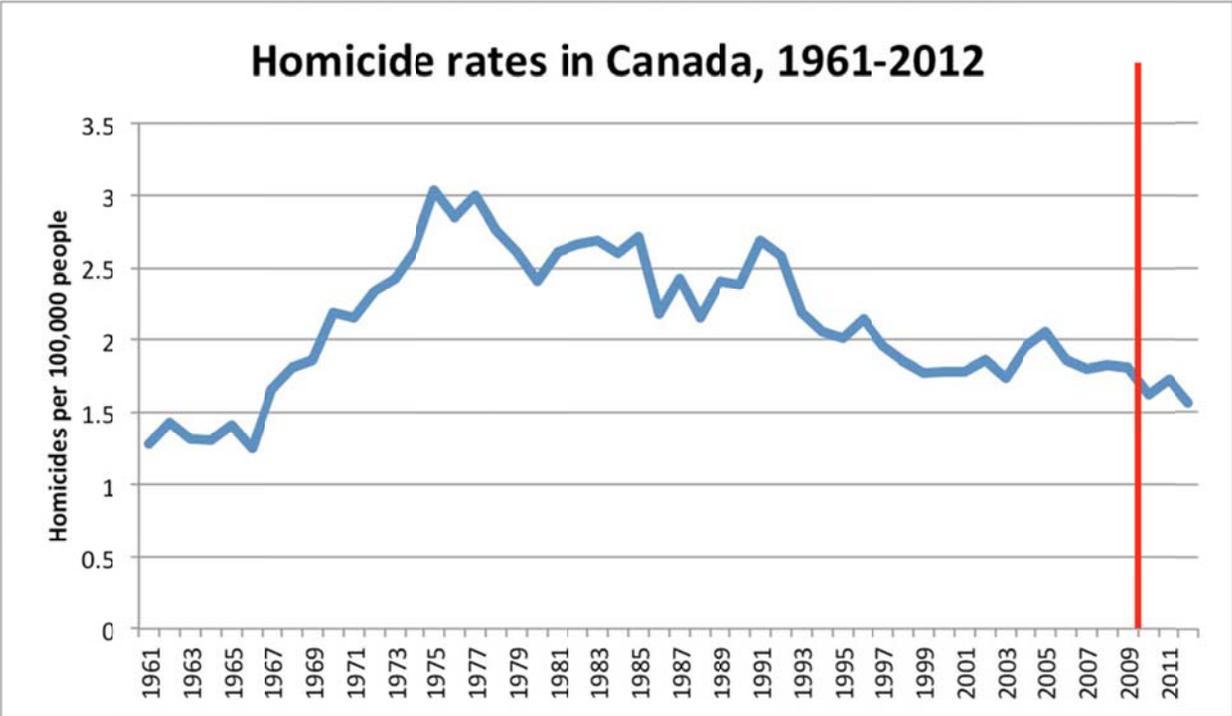


Homicide

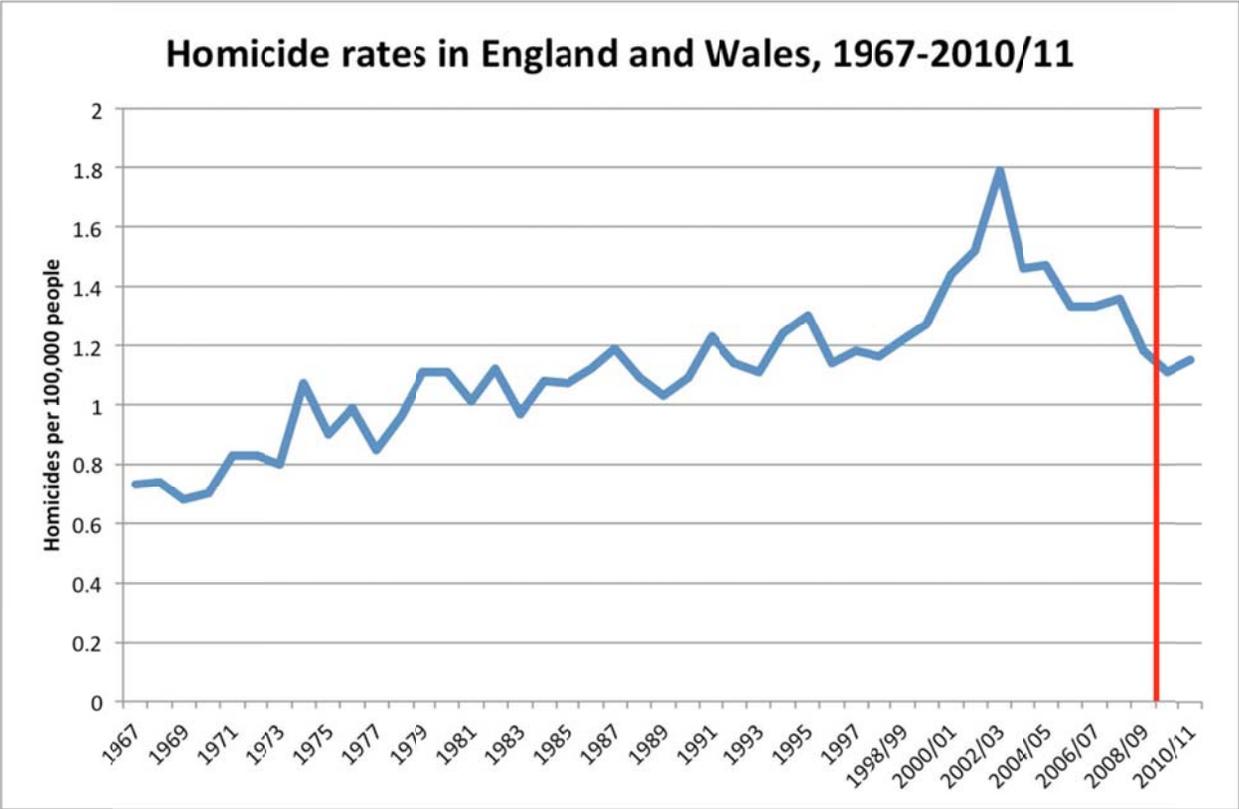
Battle deaths, in any case, are a misleading indicator of worldwide violence, because many more people are killed in homicides than in wars. (In 2012, for example, there were about 500,000 homicides worldwide, compared to 38,000 verified battle deaths.) In most countries the homicide rate has continued the Great Crime Decline that began in the 1990s, itself part of a much larger decline of homicide in the West since the Middle Ages, when the rate was about 50 homicides/100,000/year. Here are the recent data for the US:



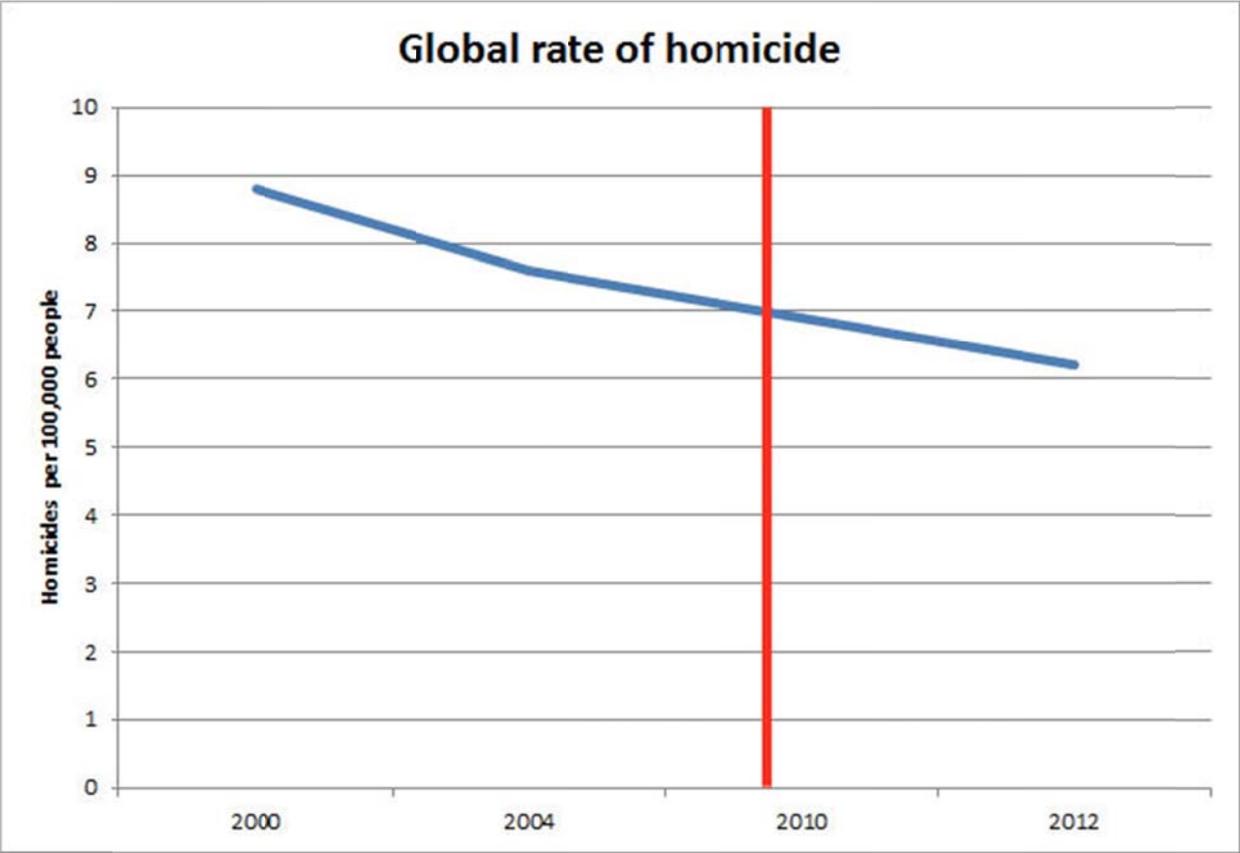
And for Canada:



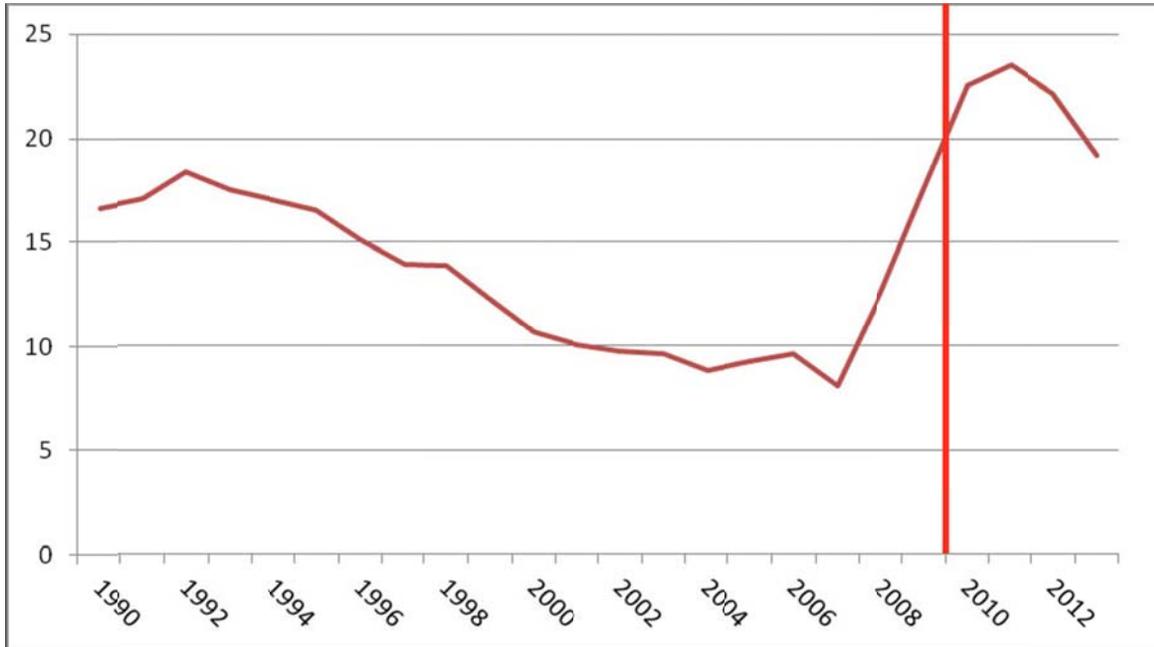
The UK has shown a random wiggle which has not undone its decade-plus-long decline:



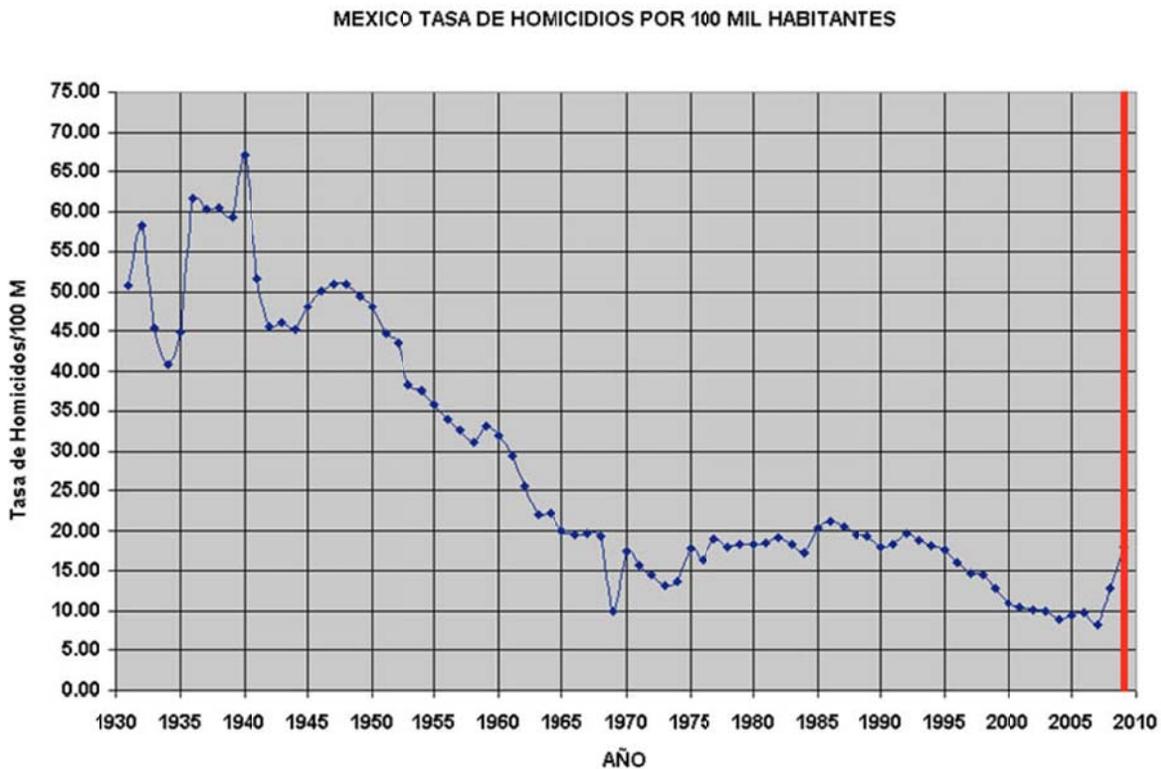
Homicide worldwide has also declined:



Even the parts of the world with relatively high homicide rates have to be put in perspective. Since *Better Angels* was published, much has been made of the horrific violence in Juarez and some other parts of Mexico. Here are the data from the past couple of decades for the country as a whole, which show no overall increase since 2009:

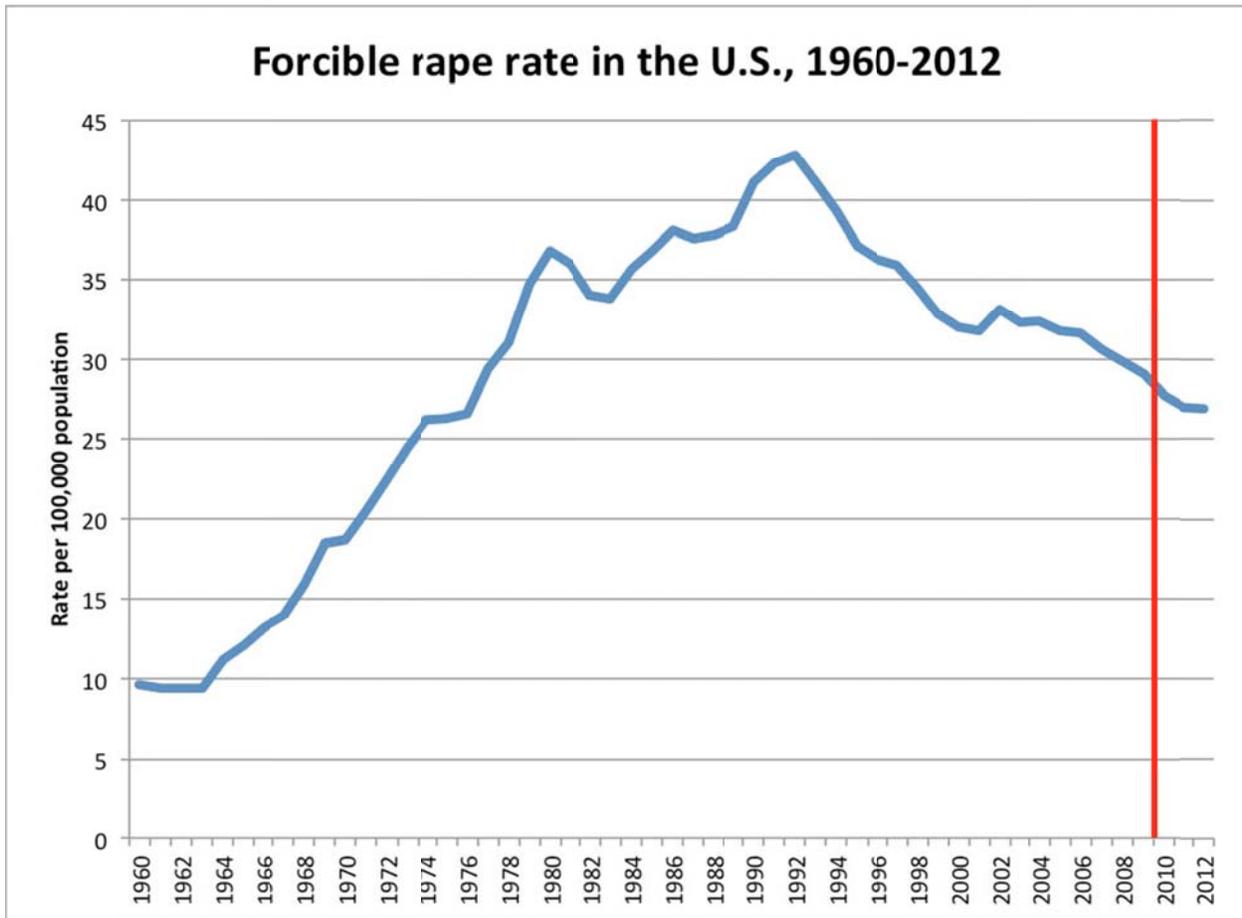


More importantly, when we zoom out, we see that even this local peak is less than *a third* of the homicide rate in Mexico of a few decades before:



Rape

According to another media-driven moral panic, the United States is in the middle of a rape epidemic, particularly on college campuses. But this is based on [bogus statistics](#); the latest FBI data show that rates of rape in the US have continued to decline:



In fact the decline is probably even more dramatic when more specific victimization survey methods are used; see *Better Angels* p. 402.

Worldwide data on sexual violence do not exist, but according to a report released earlier this year, “The United Nations’ top adviser on sexual violence in conflict, Zainab Bangura, said Thursday the last few years have seen ‘a political momentum that is unprecedented’ on the issue. ‘We’re crushing it on the normative front, kind of unexpectedly,’ agreed Samantha Power, United States ambassador to the United Nations. ... Bangura and Power spoke in unusually positive terms about the issue. Bangura catalogued high points of progress, including a U.N. declaration last year that 140 member states have since signed committing to end the use of rape in conflict, a similar declaration last year by the G8, and Democratic Republic of Congo President Joseph Kabila’s announcement in October that he would appoint a special adviser on sexual violence for the conflict-destabilized eastern African

region....[According to Bangura,] 'The foundation laid by various Security Council resolutions gave us the weapon and the opportunity to engage leaders... I think we've broken the backbone of it.'"

Violence Against Children

An equally virulent panic surrounds violence against children, such as bullying, cyberbullying, and sexual victimization. But according to a 2014 literature review by David Finkelhor and his colleagues, "Of 50 trends in exposure examined, there were 27 significant declines and no significant increases between 2003 and 2011. Declines were particularly large for assault victimization, bullying, and sexual victimization. There were also significant declines in the perpetration of violence and property crime. For the recession period between 2008 and 2011, there were 11 significant declines and no increases for 50 specific trends examined. Dating violence declined, as did one form of sexual victimization and some forms of indirect exposure."

The highly publicized 2012 Sandy Hook massacre has convinced many people that schools are becoming increasingly unsafe. Not true. According to a recent summary of a 2013 joint survey by the Departments of Justice and Education:

"•Since 1992, the rate of "victimization," which includes violent crimes such as assault and rape as well as non-violent crimes such as robbery, pursesnatching and pickpocketing, has plummeted, from 181.5 incidents per 1,000 students to 49.2 per 1,000 in 2011, the latest complete year for which statistics are available.

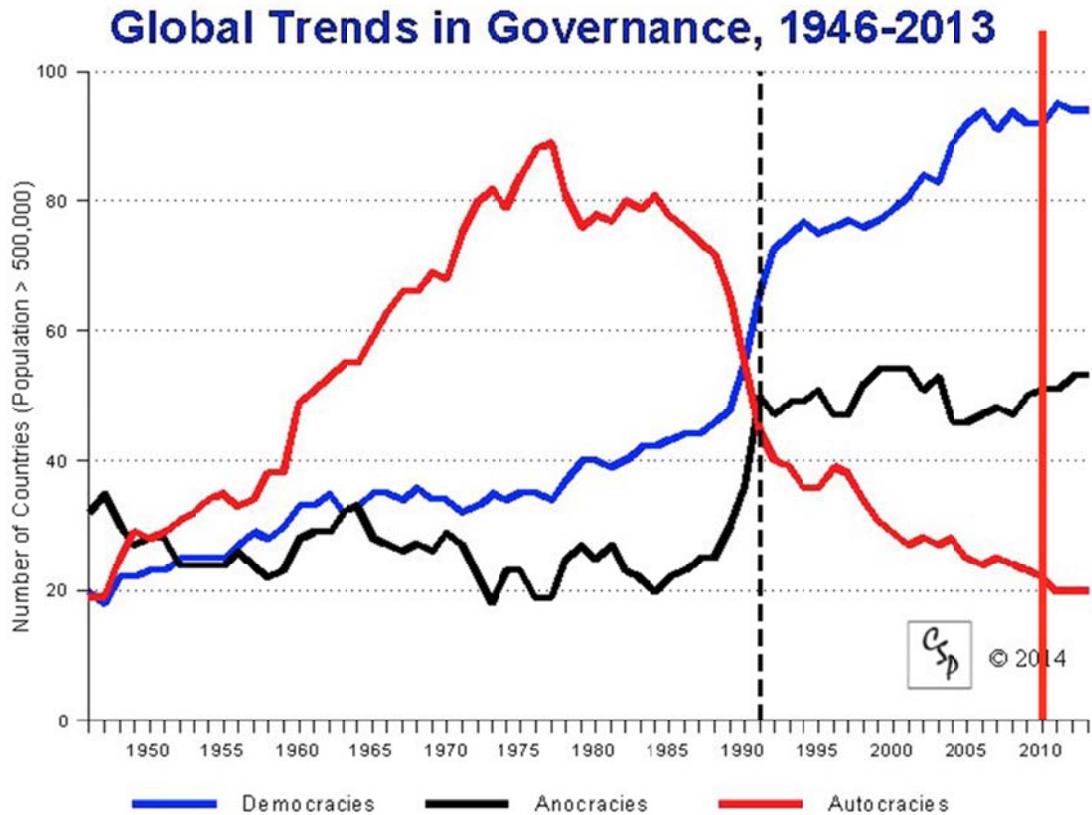
•Overall, the number of reported "non-fatal victimizations" has dropped by 71%, from 4.3 million in 1992 to 1.2 million in 2011.

•During the 2009-2010 school year, researchers found 1,396 homicides with victims ages 5 to 18. Of those, only 19 took place at school. During the 2010 calendar year, only three of the reported 1,456 youth suicides took place at school.

•Though rare, homicides, suicides and deaths involving intervention by police at school or on the way to or from school dropped 46%, from 57 in the 1992-1993 school year to 31 in the 2010-2011 school year. Over 19 years, researchers counted 863 deaths, or about 45 per year."

Democracy

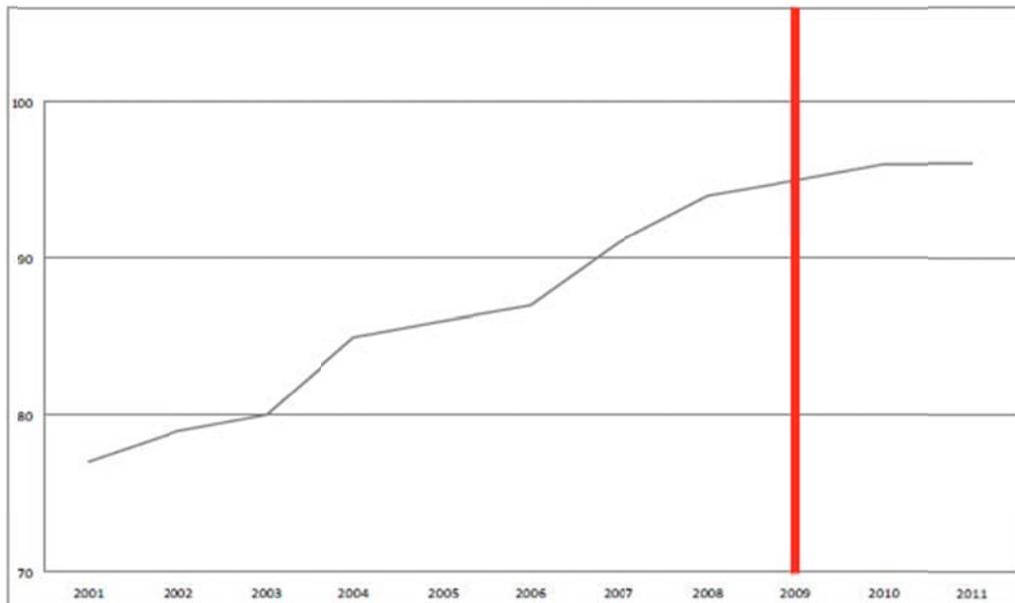
According to another popular meme—again based on a few examples rather than global data—democracy is in retreat. The data say otherwise. The number of autocracies has fallen since 2009, and the number of democracies has increased:



Capital Punishment

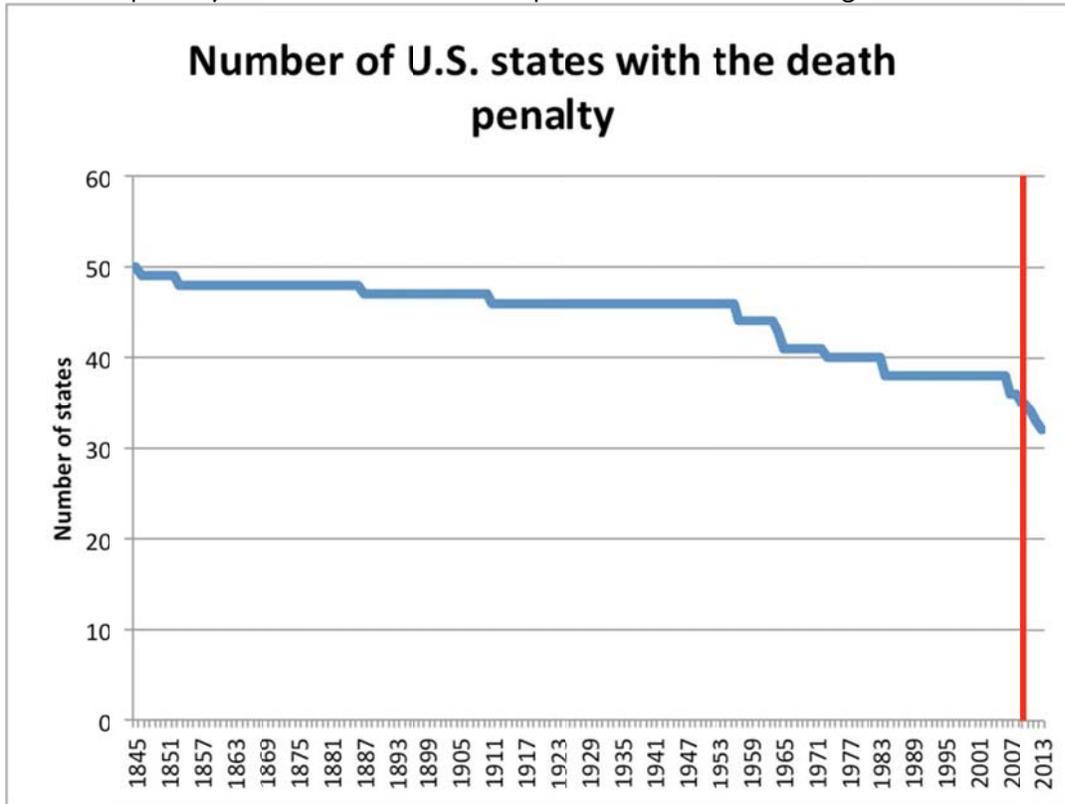
Finally, capital punishment continues its long-term swan song. In the past 35 years, between two and three nations have abolished the death penalty *every year*, and today only about a fifth of the world's countries have the death penalty and only about a tenth actually carry out executions.

Number of countries abolitionist for all crimes (2001-2011)

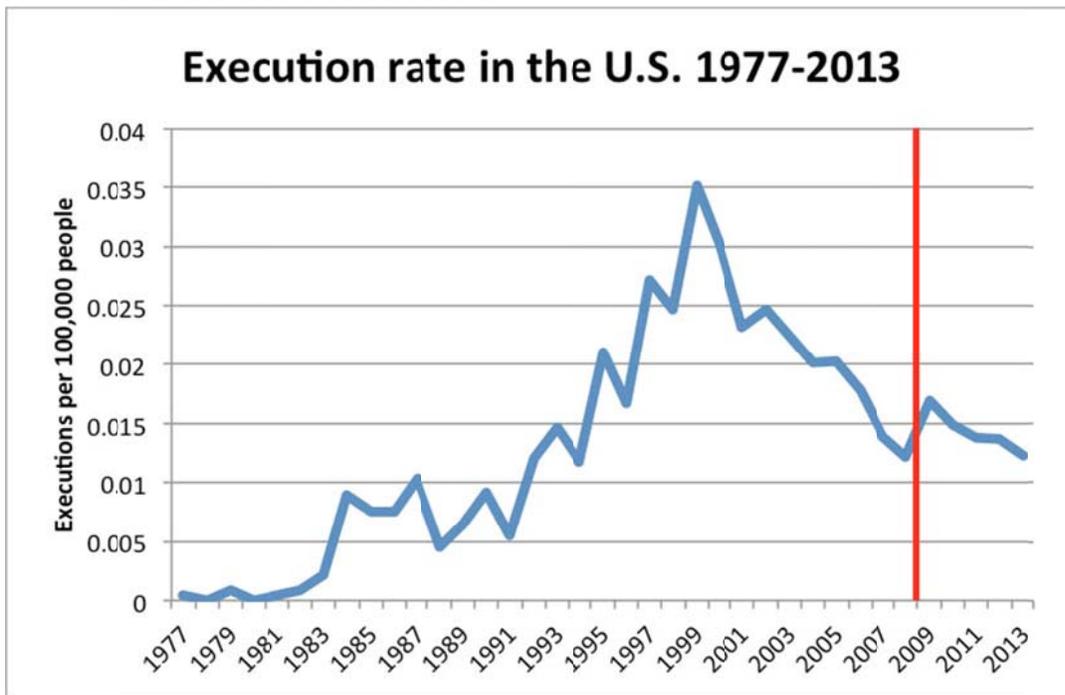


Source: Data derived from Amnesty International, *Death Sentences and Executions in 2011* (London, 2012).

Even in the United States, an outlier among Western democracies, the number of states with the death penalty has declined since the publication of *Better Angels*:



As has the national rate of executions:



If current trends continue, the death penalty will vanish from the face of the earth by 2026.

Concluding Remarks

If you base your beliefs about the state of the world on what you read in the news, your beliefs will be incorrect. This is not because of a conspiracy among journalists to hide or distort the truth. It's because of an interaction between the nature of news—it's about things that happen, particularly bad things—and the nature of human cognition. Forty years ago Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky showed that people base their estimates of risk on how easily they can recall examples from memory. As long as rates of violence have not fallen to zero, the news media will always have examples of violence to serve us. It's only by (1) counting the violent incidents, (2) scaling them by the number of opportunities for violence to occur, and (3) seeing how this ratio changes over time that one can get an objective sense of trends in violence. When one does this, one sees that global trends since the completion of *The Better Angels of Our Nature* show no reversal of the historical decline of violence, and in every case except the effects of the war in Syria, a continuation of the decline.