

Violent America

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [December 28, 2010](#) issue



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During the past year, Chicago has experienced a disturbing spate of murders of police officers. Just a few days ago a 20-year veteran of the Chicago police force, a husband and father of four, was killed during a routine investigation, along with a former police officer for the Chicago Housing Authority whose car had been burglarized. A 19-year-old parolee who returned to the scene, concerned that his fingerprints would implicate him, is charged with shooting both men several times.

Police officers have been killed four other times this year: three times during attempted robberies and once when an off-duty officer was sitting inside his SUV. Each time, the press covers a public wake and funeral. Each time, families grieve.

A large contingent of Chicago police in dress uniforms is present, the police bagpipe and drum corps plays "Amazing Grace," and politicians eulogize the deceased and lament mindless violence. Each time, I sense a deepening of public anxiety. *Chicago Tribune* columnist John Kass concludes that when thugs are no longer afraid of the police the barbarians have taken over.

That may be an exaggeration, but police officers being gunned down prompts me to wonder why this is happening.

In *American Homicide* (see [review](#)), Randolph Roth points out that "America was one of the least homicidal societies in the Western world in the mid-18th century and again in the early 19th." Since then, however, the murder rate has risen steadily, though sometimes leveling off and occasionally declining a little, as it has very recently. Whatever the rate, the U.S. remains "two and a half to eight times more homicidal than any other affluent democracy."

Roth says that explanations for the country's violence vary depending on politics. Liberals tend to blame violence on systemic poverty, while conservatives blame weak policing. Obviously there is no single explanation and consequently no single solution. But there are some glaring realities, and acknowledging them would give us a starting point for meaningful conversation.

For instance, regardless of one's interpretation of the Second Amendment to the Constitution, something is seriously wrong when guns can be so easily obtained that a 19-year-old parolee with a lengthy criminal record is walking around with two guns, or when a toddler picks up the handgun on a coffee table and kills his older brother, or when gang drive-by shootings are a nightly occurrence.

We can start now to reduce the number of guns by requiring reasonable licensing, as we do for someone to drive a car or own a dog. It will take years to accomplish, but we can get started.

Ron Huberman, who recently resigned as CEO of the Chicago Public Schools, argues that urban violence is related to school dropout rates. When a child has never heard a book read by an adult or heard someone ask, "Did you do your homework?" the child is deprived. By third grade, the child is so used to failure and humiliation that he or she simply gives up on school and is on the road to being either a victim or a perpetrator of violence.

What can be done? We can support organizations that lobby and work for gun control. And we can reach out to the children who are most likely to become involved in violence. After-school tutoring programs in church basements provide one of the key antidotes to the failure-dropout-violence syndrome. There is power in offering a stable adult presence—in being the one to say, "Did you bring your homework?"