



Does the “Red State Murder Problem” Really Have Anything to Do With Gun Control?

There has been a recent deluge of articles claiming, citing studies, that “red” states flow red with blood — the blood of their lax gun policies’ victims. The data, indicating that conservative states have significantly higher homicide rates than liberal ones, have been widely touted by anti-Second Amendment activists as an argument for gun control. Their math is absolutely correct — but, as one observer puts it, their “parameters” are not.

In fact, their analysis reflects a comic-book (mis)understanding of the matter that overlooks relevant factors such as demographics, wealth, climate, and, quite significantly, the states’ actual gun-control policies.

One of the studies in question, presented at Third Way’s [website](#), contrasted Biden-supporting and Trump-supporting states’ homicide rates, analyzing data from 2000 to 2020. The source then writes, “Altogether, the per capita Red State murder rate was 23% higher than the Blue State murder rate when all 21 years were combined.” One problem is already apparent:

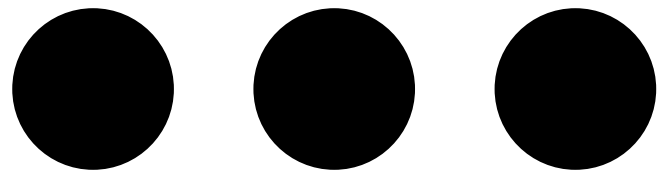
Not all states that supported Biden in 2020 voted for Democratic presidential candidates for the entire data period. Georgia, for example, went GOP in every national election from 2000 through 2016.

Put differently, while Third Way essentially lists it as a “Democratic president” state, it was a “Republican president” state for 20 of the 21 years in question.

Yet there’s more. At GunsAmerica Digest, Konstadinos Moros [presents](#) a Third Way chart, based on 2020 per capita data, showing that the “average murder rate is 40% higher in Trump-voting states.” Yet this analysis fails to account for the states’ actual gun-control laws.

Just consider New Hampshire, Maine, and Vermont, which boast our nation’s *lowest* per-capita murder rates. As Moros writes:

New Hampshire gets an “**F**” from the gun control group Giffords, because it does not have universal background checks, does not require any permit to carry, has no “assault weapon” restrictions or magazine capacity limits, and so on. The state voted for Joe Biden, but when



The unrecognized ordinary/iStock/Getty Images Plus



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it comes to gun laws, it is less strict than even some Trump-voting states. The same is true for Maine, another which gets an “[F](#)” from Giffords. Vermont, the original constitutional carry state, does mildly better because it has universal background checks and a magazine capacity law that was enacted in 2018 as a feel-good measure (the state had no serious crime problem). Still, it only gets a “[C-](#)” from Giffords because it lacks licensing laws, “assault weapon” restrictions, a carry permit requirement, and so on.

(Note, too, that New Hampshire has a lower homicide rate than does Britain, which is often touted as being safe because of its “strict gun-control laws.”)

Moros also cites other examples of “liberal” states with poor Giffords ratings but low murder rates, such as Oregon and Minnesota.

He then makes a common conservative argument: that “red” states’ “murder problem” is largely due to large “blue” cities within them. Most of Missouri’s 716 homicides in 2021, for example, occurred in just three areas of the state. “Specifically, Jackson County (containing Kansas City), St. Louis County, and St. Louis City.”

Liberals may counter this with a red/blue-state rural-area analysis. For example, in the “coal mining region of eastern Pennsylvania your chance of dying of a gunshot is about half that if you grew up in the coalfields of West Virginia,” *Politico* [wrote](#) recently. “Someone living in the most rural counties of South Carolina is more than three times as likely to be killed by gunshot than someone living in the equally rural counties of New York’s Adirondacks....” This is true — but, again, deceptive.

First, leftist writers often pull a fast one here: They’ll start out talking about gun-related *murders* but then later speak of gun-related *deaths*; since the latter can include suicides, the reader can be left believing homicide rates are higher than they are.

This matters because, returning to *Politico*’s above coal-region comparison, West Virginia has *one of the highest [suicide rates](#) in the nation*, whereas Pennsylvania has *one of the [lowest](#)*. Thus, “dying of a gunshot” comparisons are irrelevant if the issue is murder.

Second, rural counties most everywhere — including in liberal states — tend to vote Republican. Trump [won 65 percent](#) of rural voters in 2020, up from 59 percent in 2016. Moreover, widespread rural gun ownership is a *nationwide* phenomenon; in the “blue state” region cited by *Politico*, for example, the Adirondacks, guns are common.

Returning to Moros, he adds perspective and writes that there “isn’t really a red state murder problem, but a southern state murder problem.” Yet *one* reason for this is universally missed: weather.

It’s [well known](#) that violent crime rates are [significantly higher](#) during the [summer than winter](#). The obvious reason: Frigid temperatures keep everyone indoors more — including criminals (Jussie Smollett’s story notwithstanding). Notably, gang-bangers, who are responsible for a high percentage of our country’s homicide, are far less likely to be in the streets getting into conflict when it’s two below zero.

So the South’s having far warmer weather than the North would, all other things being equal, ensure higher murder rates. Thus, unless the comparison is only periods in which the South and North experience similar temperatures (e.g., peak northern and near-peak southern summer), it’s meaningless.



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Then there are economic factors. Urban and rural Northerners are generally richer than, respectively, urban and rural Southerners — and poorer people generally have higher murder rates than wealthier ones.

Speaking of heat, there's another factor virtually no one mentions — because it's a hot potato: demographics. As Professor Thomas Sowell once [wrote](#) on this matter, presenting one of many examples, "The rate of gun ownership is higher among whites than among blacks, but the murder rate is higher among blacks."

One can debate the reason for this — the black family's breakdown, fatherlessness, government-enabled irresponsibility, etc. — but here's the reality:

There is a notable, though not perfect, positive correlation between states' murder rates and their black population levels (charts [here](#) and [here](#)). For example, Mississippi and Louisiana rank, respectively, both one and two in per capita murder rates and black population level.

Of course, Southern whites' homicide rate is also higher than that of Northern whites. The point is that murder rate variation is a multidimensional issue that won't be elucidated well by people seeking only political advantage. If an analyst attributed homicide rates to *only* black population level, he'd no doubt be called a racist. So, then, what should we call people who exhibit the prejudice of focusing only on which party controls a state (or gun laws)?

The bottom line is that the recent hit pieces on "red" states may be rhetorically effective, but they miss the target by a mile.



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