

As stated previously, the period between 1870 and 1930 included a number of significant events related to changes in the homicide rate, including instances of civil unrest. During the latter half of the nineteenth and into the early twentieth century, several notable instances of civil disturbance—most notably involving labor struggles—occurred in many cities including Chicago. These events, coupled with rapid population growth in the city, definitely influenced social life in many ways, including increased violence. Two sets of circumstances are important. First, some incidents were associated with an event itself, such as 1877, when thirty strikers were killed during a railroad strike.⁶⁸ Second, in some instances, the impact of labor disputes and struggles may have influenced violent behavior beyond the event itself, straining relations between groups and facilitating a milieu that increased the likelihood of violence.

Particularly during the later part of the nineteenth century the massive influx of immigrants was viewed negatively by the predominantly Anglo-Protestant establishment. For the most part, immigrants were viewed as anarchists intent on undermining the existing social order. Added to this notion was the concern that stores of weapons were being amassed for this purpose. In that regard it is possible that increased restrictions on the possession of concealed weapons were motivated by these concerns.⁶⁹

In addition to the railway strike of 1877, the gun homicide rate often increased during those years when key incidents occurred. Surprisingly, one of the most notable instances, the McCormick Strike of 1886, occurred as homicide rates experienced a brief decline. The gun homicide rate also experienced an increase during 1893 and 1894, during which time the mayor of Chicago was murdered and federal troops were mobilized in the city to end a strike against the Pullman Palace Car Company.⁷⁰ Between 1898 and 1905, during another general upturn in the gun homicide rate, the city experienced the Stockyard Strike of 1902 and the Teamsters Strike of 1905. In 1902 National Guard Troops were mobilized during an incident in which numerous injuries resulted. The 1905 strike was a continuation of the former action, in which several conflicts between police and strikers resulted in the deaths of fourteen persons.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Matthew Taylor Raffety, *Chicago*, in *VIOLENCE IN AMERICA: AN ENCYCLOPEDIA* 213–16 (Ronald Gottesman, ed. 1999)

⁶⁹ Kates, *supra* note 26, at 7–30.

⁷⁰ Raffety, *supra* note 68, at 213–16; SPINNEY, *supra* note 10, at 107–213.

⁷¹ SKOGAN, *supra* note 67, at 103; LINDBERG, *supra* note 7, at 73–75.

Following declines in the gun homicide rate during the latter half of the first decade of the twentieth century, the city experienced a reversal in this trend. Over the following twenty years, the total gun homicide rate in Chicago more than doubled.⁷² In 1911, the year of the Garment Workers Strike, the gun homicide rate was 4.36.⁷³ However, influenced by conflicts related to control of labor unions (primarily between 1911 and 1920) and Prohibition, the gun homicide rate peaked (for the period) at 11.51, by 1929.⁷⁴ Perhaps the best example of how tension between the groups can result in violence is the race riots of 1919. An economic recession exacerbated by racial tension contributed to the events of July 1919, when a young black male was killed as he swam on a white-only beach on Lake Michigan. This even triggered six days of rioting throughout the city.⁷⁵ By the time the National Guard was called in to restore order, thirty-eight persons had died and thousands were injured.⁷⁶

The preceding events, however, were quite overshadowed by Prohibition, which began in January 1920. During the first year the gun homicide rate was 6.07 and steadily increased during the decade. With Prohibition came competition over the illegal alcohol market and not surprisingly, violence followed. After 1923 when the tenuous agreements between rival bootlegging gangs dissolved, a marked increase in violence resulted as a consequence.⁷⁷ In 1926, for example, 76 of the 575 homicides for the year were "gangland murders."⁷⁸ Figures 1 and 2 reveal a marked continuation of the increase in both total and gun homicide rates through 1928. In addition to influencing the passage of stricter firearm legislation, the St. Valentine's Day Massacre of 1929 ironically slowed the continuation of increasing homicide rates at the end of the decade. This event consolidated the power of Al Capone and his organization.⁷⁹ As a consequence, the necessity of employing violence when dealing with rival gangs diminished.⁸⁰

⁷² LINDBERG, *supra* note 7, at 73–75.

⁷³ *Id.*

⁷⁴ *Id.*

⁷⁵ SPINNEY, *supra* note 10, at 172–74.

⁷⁶ *Id.*

⁷⁷ Mark. H. Haller, *Organized Crime in Urban Society: Chicago in the Twentieth Century*, 5 J. OF SOC. HIST. 210, 210–34 (1971–72).

⁷⁸ SPINNEY, *supra* note 10, at 177.

⁷⁹ *Id.* at 177.

⁸⁰ *Id.* at 177–78.

Figure 3
Percentage Firearm Homicides, 1870-1930

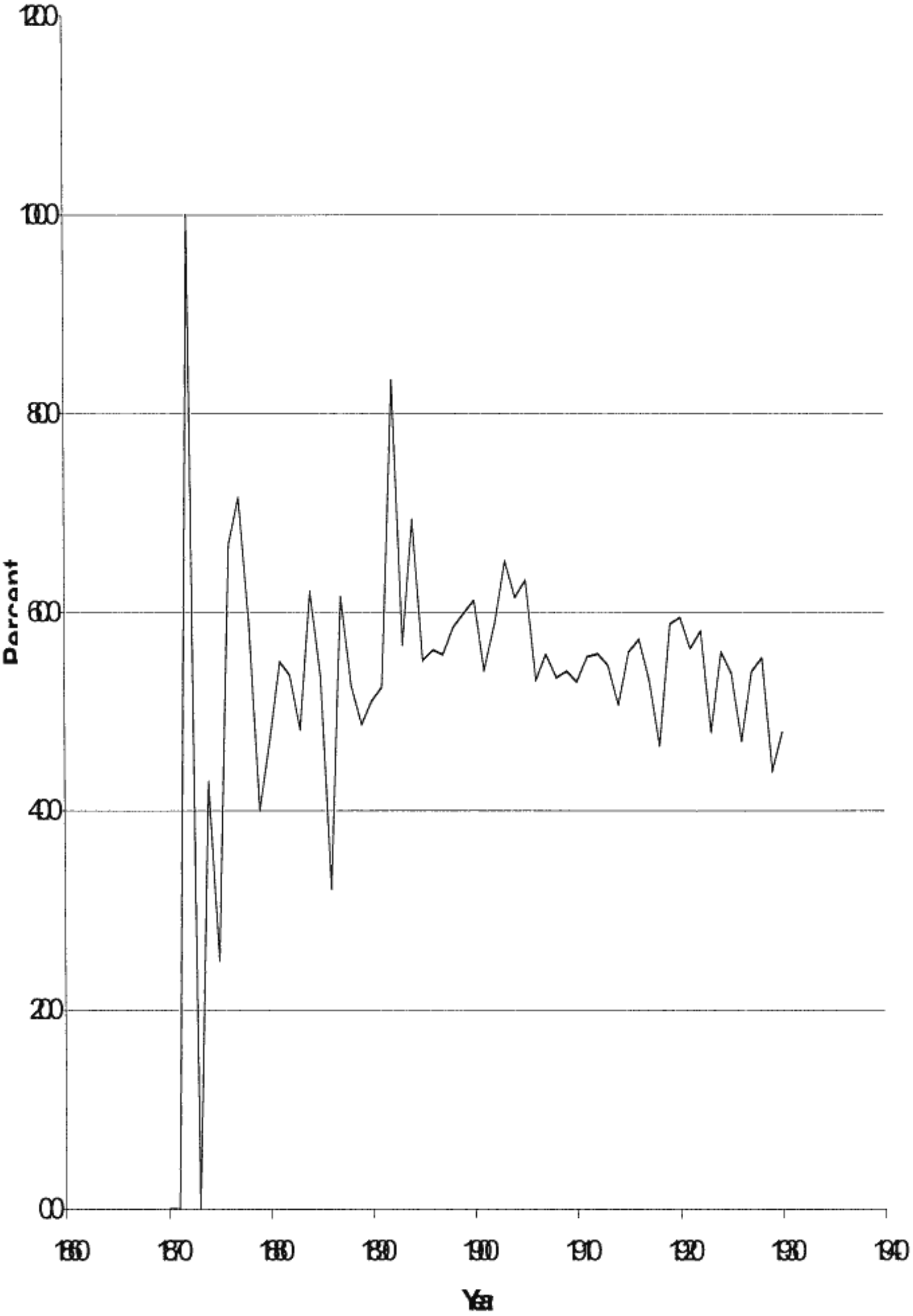


Figure 3 reflects the percentage of gun homicides for each year between 1870 and 1930. For the entire period, the average percentage of homicides committed with firearms is 52.7%. As indicated on the graph, there is greater fluctuation between 1870 and 1889. From 1890 to 1928, however at least fifty percent of homicides were committed with a firearm each year, excluding 1918, 1923, and 1926, in which 46.5, 47.9, and 47.0% of the homicides, respectively, a gun was used.

Also, viewing the yearly percentage of homicides committed with a firearm in the context of the aforementioned instances of civil unrest, labor disputes, and Prohibitions is quite telling. Generally speaking, the gun homicide percentage increased in those years when these events occurred. This finding suggests that the availability and efficiency of firearms was acknowledged. For example, in 1877, 71.4% of homicides for that year involved a gun. In 1887, the year following the McCormick Strike, this figure increased to 61.5% from 32.1% the previous year. Similarly, the gun homicide percentage is higher in the years of the Garment Workers Strike (1911) and the Race Riots (1919) than in the years previous to each event, respectively. Furthermore, Figure 3 reveals that guns were utilized in at least fifty percent of homicides that occurred in eight of the ten years of the decade of the 1920's.

The relative consistency and stability of the percentage of homicides committed with a firearm, when viewed in the context of changes in the gun homicide rate is striking and raises a number of important questions. Recall that between 1870 and 1930 the firearm homicide rate increased approximately by a factor of 10—thereby augmenting the importance of the previous discussion of the firearm availability—and indicating, as suggested, that firearms became more readily accessible over time.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

It is not surprising that as the homicide rate increased in Chicago between 1870 and 1930, so did the homicide gun rate. As a consequence, restrictions on firearms implemented prior to 1870 increased during and after the period, but the effectiveness of these statutes remains in question. Restrictions on firearms, particularly handguns, increased during the 1880's and 1920's. The former may best be characterized as a time of civil unrest that included a number of incidents of violence. During the decade a number of labor disputes and