

Violence in College Dormitories in Mid 19th Century America: Reexamining Rudolph

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Abstract

This research reexamines the claim that violence was rampant in college dormitories of 19th century America. This claim is most widely associated with Rudolph's (1990) seminal work, yet his claims do not hold up well to quantitative analysis, and it is revealed that there has been an over reliance on qualitative examples. Careful examination of the data reveals a very different picture: college dormitories were among the safer places of the era.

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In discussing early 19th century dormitories, Rudolph (1990) makes the case that “the dormitory helped to create an atmosphere that invited frustration, argument, and crime” (p. 97). In support of this claim he cites examples of murders and dueling involving students and faculty. This argument rests on both explicit statements and implicit assumptions which are not adequately explored but can be summarized in the statements that the murder rate at colleges was higher than in society in general and that these levels of violence were due to factors present in the dormitory culture itself --including among them density of population and too few outlets for young male angst.

There are several areas with this claim that deserve closer examination. Speaking of the slain students Rudolph comments “for their misfortune these victims of college life could thank the dormitory, the some time house of incarceration and infamy that sustained the collegiate way” (p. 97). Rudolph is making the above assumptions without demonstrating them quantitatively to satisfaction, and arguing here that densely packed urban centers cause increased anger, frustration through close contact that is more likely to result in violence because social norms are degraded under the friction of competing values of such a large population. There is little evidence to support this claim. Rudolph specifically cites the “close proximity... where tempers tightened until they snapped” (p. 96) and continually uses language stressing such factors as being “concentrated into groups”. But does an increase in population density, such as the removal from a country home to a dormitory, really result in increasing violence, and if not what factors would? Most importantly, has Rudolph actually demonstrated that the dormitories of the early to mid 19th century were more violent than American society at large? Answering these questions in greater detail is central to a reasoned discussion on the historical environment of college dormitories and key in examining the state of modern dormitories.

One question presents itself immediately upon examining Rudolph's homicide data: an uncontrolled variable is immediately obvious in that the university murders Rudolph outlines and blames on the dormitory environment and culture have something else in common. Seven of the ten murders happened in the south--in future confederate states-- representing a vastly disproportionate

percentage of the murders. This is relevant for two reasons: first, simply because it adds an additional uncontrolled variable that correlates strongly with the murders and second because being in the south and the near-future Confederacy correlates strongly with two known explanations for increases in violent crime: legitimacy of a strong centralized government and presence of an honor culture that legitimizes violence as a way to solve disputes. These factors are explored in depth by both Pinker (2011) and Elias (2000).

This objection-- that other causes for the violence ought to be explored-- is perhaps premature. The most critical question still remains. Rudolph's underlying assumption that dormitories cause violence rests on the unstated assumption that the cases of murder he has documented exceed that of the general population. Rudolph offers the criticism that "people actually believed the dormitory rationale" and that "they believed it regardless of what the evidence showed" (p. 96). But what precisely does the evidence show?

The first calculation necessary to test Rudolph's argument is to discover the chance of being murdered in 1833 in American society in general. In *American Homicide* (2009) Randolph Roth calculates the homicide rate at about 18 per 100,000. This is a number echoed two years later by Steven Pinker (2011), but for both Roth and Pinker it's important to note that substantial regional variation exists. The estimate of 18 per 100,000 is also consistent with Eisner's (2003) landmark study of violence in Europe.

The next step to fully quantify the Rudolph's data is to put his homicide figures in the context of the population he is describing. Rudolph cites 10 murders by students of either other students or faculty members (p.97). He begins by relating the story of two students who in 1833 "at the same moment grabbed for a plate of trout: only one of them survived the duel that ensued" (p. 97). It can be difficult to verify the precise number of students enrolled in college that year as poor records were kept, but when the US federal office of education began collecting data a few years later in 1869 there were 63,000 students enrolled in colleges in the United States. If we assume a similar percentage of the national population of 18 to 24 year-olds attended colleges in 1833 we arrive at a figure of 22,696 students. In 1869 there were also 5,553 professional staff present in college campuses (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1993) which Rudolph has included in his homicide population. A similar proportion of students to faculty give us an additional 1600 faculty members to our population for a complete population of 24, 496. With ten murders in this population we have, on the surface, a murder rate of approximately 40 per 100,000.

However, although Rudolph's narrative of homicides does not make it explicitly clear, he is not describing a single year but an entire era of dormitory life. While the first murder he recounts is an 1833 duel, the narrative culminates with the president of Oakland College being killed in 1853. Our narrative of forty murders thus encompasses twenty years reducing the murder rate to 2 per 100,000. This means that if Rudolph's scholarship is accurate, the murder rate in dormitories was 89% lower than the murder rate for society at large. Living in college dormitories correlates with a radically reduced probability of being murdered regardless of how rhetorically compelling the narrative of duels and murdered professors' strikes us. The claim that "what began in innocence often ended in tragedy" (p. 97) seems to be an extreme exaggeration.

But the statistics become even more compelling when we consider that the dormitories and faculty that comprise Rudolph's population are primarily young men. Young men commit crimes at higher rates than the population at large, so the murder rate for dormitories actually should have shown an increase in murders over the general population. It would be analogous, for example, if we gathered together all of the 17 year-old male drivers in Montana and put them in a big pink house. We could safely predict that people who live in the big pink house have more accidents than the population at large. In the case of early 19th century dormitories, the correlation somehow collapses.

Rudolph's claim of population density and lawlessness can be addressed specifically by putting it into greater context. According to Roth's (2010) work on violence in the 19th century west, in 1850 Los Angeles had a murder rate of 198 per 100,000 while all mining communities in California had a combined murder rate of 87 per 100,000. This means a person was almost 100 times more likely to be murdered in L.A. than if the same person were in a college dormitory. That's what a real hotbed of tempers and violence looked like in 1850.

How does this compare to the modern rate? A murder rate of 2 per 100,000 means the early 19th century college dormitories were about four times less dangerous to live in than Baltimore in 1997 where the homicide rate was 7.26 per 100,000. In fact, you were more likely to be murdered in Montana in 2009, 3.3 per 100,000, than in an early 19th century dorm room (U.S. Census, 2010).

Rudolph got it wrong. The sensational narrative of murder and dueling he relates makes for compelling reading, but it does not withstand quantitative analysis and does not support the conclusion that dormitories were violent. Setting this aside, the data does not support the conclusion that population density or close contact with people of different backgrounds results in higher homicide rates. Most important of all he has pointed scholarship in completely the wrong direction. By beginning with the assumption that dormitories were more dangerous than society at large, he invites debate only on the cause of the violence when in fact dorms seem to have either been a pacifying influence or correlated strongly with some other pacifying influence. The real question scholars should be asking is what could early 19th century dormitories have done so right?

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