

POLICE/PRISONS (/TOPIC/POLICEPRISONS) APR 17, 2023

Analysis: The state makes us vulnerable

State policies determine who is likely to be murdered, and the state can make us safer by giving people and communities the resources we need

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There is a road in northern British Columbia where, over the past 50 years, [dozens of people](https://highwayoftears.org/in-memory/) have either [disappeared or been murdered](https://www.aptnnews.ca/national-news/missing-and-murdered-indigenous-men-highway-of-tears-aptn-investigates/).

Many of them, when it happened, were hitchhiking.

Getting into a stranger's car can be dangerous, especially when there is no one else around for miles. But strangers' cars are often the only way people can get around. The region is rural and there is little public transit, but many can't afford cars. Some even have to hitchhike to [go buy groceries](https://thetyee.ca/News/2021/05/19/Indigenous-People-Barriers-Drivers-Licensing/).

The people forced to live under these inconvenient and risky conditions are disproportionately Indigenous. And almost all of the people who have gone missing or been murdered along Highway 16 are Indigenous.

The deaths and disappearances received little mainstream attention until 2002, when a white woman disappeared. Four billboards were installed along the highway, [informing people](https://www.jstor.org/stable/canajsociahican.41.3.299) that hitchhiking was risky. "Girls don't hitchhike on the Highway of Tears,"

one reads. But the state never addressed the inadequate transit along the road. Some still have no choice but to hitchhike.

In 1979, two criminologists published a [seminal paper](https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781439817803-12/social-change-crime-rate-trends-routine-activity-approach-1979-cohen-felson) (https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781439817803-12/social-change-crime-rate-trends-routine-activity-approach-1979-cohen-felson) showing how crime hinges on opportunity. They looked at the rise in crime in mid-century America, which defied conventions on the link between the economy and lawbreaking. They demonstrated that postwar prosperity actually caused much of the crime. The rise of women in the workforce left more homes empty and ripe for burglary. The increase in car ownership was also an increase in expensive, easy-to-steal objects lining American streets. People left the house more, too - travelling and spending nights out in public, instead of at home on the couch. Crime wasn't up because people became needier or greedier. It just got easier to get away with it.

The flipside is that crime had been lower back when people were less vulnerable - when there were fewer people out on the town, getting home late, travelling. Potential murderers in prior years were relatively deprived of easy marks. But they didn't lower their standards to start attacking the less-vulnerable. They just murdered fewer people.

Homicide is traditionally understood in personal terms: the woman and her violent boyfriend; the drug dealer and their rival; the victim and their killer. But the focus on individual dynamics obscures the bigger picture. The same people get murdered every year, demographically speaking, and the same people don't. Murder [isn't randomly distributed](https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/victims-personal-crime-empirical-foundation-theory-personal) (https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/victims-personal-crime-empirical-foundation-theory-personal) among the population - it's dictated by state policies, like forcing Indigenous people to hitchhike, or, say, ceding the housing market to private developers and landlords.

Last year, for example, Jeremy Skibicki allegedly murdered [four Indigenous women](https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/jeremy-skibicki-winnipeg-alleged-serial-killer-timeline-1.6681433) (https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/jeremy-skibicki-winnipeg-alleged-serial-killer-timeline-1.6681433) in Winnipeg. Skibicki met them at homeless shelters, where he used to go to eat his meals each day. If a woman couldn't get a bed, he would invite her back to his apartment. The women he allegedly murdered likely wouldn't have gone if they hadn't had to weigh their need for shelter against the risk of going to a stranger's home.

Homeless people are murdered at [astronomical rates](https://jacobin.com/2022/05/homeless-homicides-data-surge-victims-suspects) (https://jacobin.com/2022/05/homeless-homicides-data-surge-victims-suspects) compared to people with a door to lock. All four women would likely be alive today if they hadn't been homeless. By the same token, Skibicki also might not be an alleged serial killer if there were no homeless people in Winnipeg - if there were no extremely vulnerable people to prey on.

The fact that there is homelessness in Winnipeg is a result of state policies. Homelessness [simply did not exist](http://tdrc.net/uploads/file/2009_hulchanski.pdf) (http://tdrc.net/uploads/file/2009_hulchanski.pdf) in Canada until the 1980s, when the state stopped building public housing on a large scale.

Or, take the case of the woman and her boyfriend. Women are at much higher risk of violence if they have to rely on a romantic partner for housing. Many are forced to either share a home with an abusive partner, or be plunged into poverty or even homelessness - which is no choice at all. Intimate partner homicide is almost always [the culmination of a pattern of violence](https://sci-hub.se/https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1524838007303505?journalCode=tvaa) (https://sci-hub.se/https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1524838007303505?journalCode=tvaa). Whether the violence reaches a fatal peak depends, in large part, on [the victim's ability to leave](https://sci-hub.ru/https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1077801208330433) (https://sci-hub.ru/https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1077801208330433) - to meet her basic needs outside of her partner's orbit. But many can't afford to leave.

Macro forces are also at play for the drug dealer and his rival. In 2017, for example, [work-related killings](https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2018001/article/54980-eng.htm) (https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2018001/article/54980-eng.htm) of people with illegal jobs, like drug dealing, made up about one fifth of the homicides in Canada. Selling drugs is a terrible job. It's both dangerous and badly paid. Most dealers [make roughly minimum wage](https://academic.oup.com/qje/article-abstract/115/3/755/1828153) (https://academic.oup.com/qje/article-abstract/115/3/755/1828153). But for people hemmed in by bad schools, bad transit, and bad job opportunities, selling drugs is also one of the only jobs available, and sometimes the only one with [the opportunity for advancement](https://academic.oup.com/qje/article-abstract/115/3/755/1828153) (https://academic.oup.com/qje/article-abstract/115/3/755/1828153). Changing that would remove thousands of people from the ranks of potential victims (together with decriminalisation, so rivals can settle disputes with paperwork instead of guns).

Homicide is better understood as part of a nexus of [premature death](https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/464268-racism-specifically-is-the-state-sanctioned-or-extralegal-production-and-exploitation) (https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/464268-racism-specifically-is-the-state-sanctioned-or-extralegal-production-and-exploitation), similar to how some population groups are put at higher risk of being hit by a car, or [dying from diabetes](https://www.nccih.ca/docs/health/RPT-Diabetes-First-Nations-Halseth-EN.pdf) (https://www.nccih.ca/docs/health/RPT-Diabetes-First-Nations-Halseth-EN.pdf), or burning in a [house fire](https://www.northjersey.com/in-depth/news/2022/02/03/fire-in-bronx-philadelphia-pa-black-poor-americans-increased-deaths/6648081001/) (https://www.northjersey.com/in-depth/news/2022/02/03/fire-in-bronx-philadelphia-pa-black-poor-americans-increased-deaths/6648081001/). Black people in the US, for example, are [killed by cars](https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/news/press-releases/racial-disparities-traffic-fatalities/) (https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/news/press-releases/racial-disparities-traffic-fatalities/) at higher rates because of [racist highway design](https://www.npr.org/2021/04/07/984784455/a-brief-history-of-how-racism-shaped-interstate-highways) and poor pedestrian infrastructure. (https://www.npr.org/2021/04/07/984784455/a-brief-history-of-how-racism-shaped-interstate-highways) Any single death might be explained away by a lone bad driver, the way a homicide is laid at the feet of a lone murderer. But in the aggregate, the root causes are unmistakable - they date [back](https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/final-report/) (https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/final-report/) [centuries](https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015074197859&view=1up&seq=9) (https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015074197859&view=1up&seq=9). Black and Indigenous peoples, among others, are murdered at higher rates because of state policies.

For many, police are still the go-to solution whenever someone gets killed. Some believe that police protect the vulnerable and catch the predatory. But police [can't prevent homicides](https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/06/21/why-more-police-funding-no-route-public-safety) (https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/06/21/why-more-police-funding-no-route-public-safety) any more than they can provide bus service on the Highway of Tears. Worse, they [seldom solve any](https://www.themarshallproject.org/2022/01/12/as-murders-spiked-police-solved-about-half-in-2020) (https://www.themarshallproject.org/2022/01/12/as-murders-spiked-police-solved-about-half-in-2020) but the most obvious murder cases, which isn't going to deter predators. Meanwhile, the vulnerable usually can't trust the police for protection. The paradox of policing is that the state criminalises the same people murderers kill, like [homeless people](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1078087417690833) (https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1078087417690833) and drug dealers and [victims of domestic violence](https://search.informit.org/doi/abs/10.3316/agispt.20211206057920) (https://search.informit.org/doi/abs/10.3316/agispt.20211206057920). The state makes them vulnerable. Agents of the state aren't going to be their protectors.

There will always be murderers, but there don't have to be so many victims. Just as state policies make people vulnerable to [air pollution](https://www.lung.org/clean-air/outdoors/who-is-at-risk/disparities) (https://www.lung.org/clean-air/outdoors/who-is-at-risk/disparities) or [lead poisoning](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7084658/) (https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7084658/), they also jack up the murder risk for a swath of the population. The state can bring it down, too, by giving people and communities the resources they need to avoid risks like incinerators and shoddy housing – and murderers. Practical, realistic changes like decommodifying housing and decriminalising drugs, among other things, will keep people safer.

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