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Why is violent crime so rare in Iceland?

Iceland is awash in guns, yet it has one of the lowest violent crime rates in the world. US law student Andrew Clark asks why.

Even though I grew up in New England, there was something novel about seeing an Icelandic blizzard. It was paralysing, with epic wind gusts that made snowflakes feel like razors.

As I dragged my bags along Reykjavik's snowy pavement, an older man in a Jeep pulled alongside me.

"You want to get in?" he asked.

It sounded crazy. Why would I ever get in a stranger's car?

Despite everything I was taught about riding in cars with strangers, I climbed in the backseat. And I knew nothing bad was going to happen to me.

After all, I was in Iceland for a week to study the nation's lack of crime, my second trip there in six months.

I had spent the last three years in Boston at Suffolk University Law School, where I was studying international law.

Before my first visit to Reykjavik in August 2012, my law school thesis was settled - a study of cyber warfare and the Geneva conventions.

But a week in Iceland changed my perspective. I was pleasantly flummoxed by what I saw.

Violent crime was virtually non-existent. People seemed relaxed about their safety and that of their children to the point where parents left their babies outside and unattended.

I'd spent time in Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, but those countries now appeared plagued with crime by comparison.

Once I got back to America, I changed my thesis topic.

I wanted to know what Iceland was doing right.

Frankly, there is no perfect answer as to why Iceland has one of the lowest violent crime rates in the world.

According to the 2011 [Global Study on Homicide](#) by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Iceland's homicide rate between 1999-2009 never went above 1.8 per 100,000 population on any given year.

On the other hand, the US had homicide rates between 5.0 and 5.8 per 100,000 population during that same stretch.

After visits with professors, government officials, lawyers, journalists and citizens, the pie-chart breakdown became clear - though admittedly, it is impossible to determine how much each factor contributes.

First - and arguably foremost - there is virtually no difference among upper, middle and lower classes in Iceland. And with that, tension between economic classes is non-existent, a rare occurrence for any country.

A study of the Icelandic class system done by a University of Missouri master's student found only 1.1% of participants identified themselves as upper class, while 1.5% saw themselves as lower class.

The remaining 97% identified themselves as upper-middle class, lower-middle class, or working class.

On one of three visits to Althing, the Icelandic parliament, I met Bjorgvin Sigurdsson, former chairman of the parliamentary group of the Social Democratic Alliance. In his eyes - as well as those of many Icelanders I spoke with - equality was the biggest reason for the nation's relative lack of crime.

"Here you can have the tycoon's children go to school with everyone else," Sigurdsson says, adding that the country's social welfare and education systems promoted an egalitarian culture.

Crimes in Iceland - when they occur - usually do not involve firearms, though Icelanders own plenty of guns.

GunPolicy.org estimates there are approximately 90,000 guns in the country - in a country with just over 300,000 people.

The country ranks 15th in the world in terms of legal per capita gun ownership. However, acquiring a gun is not an easy process - steps to gun ownership include a medical examination and a written test.

Police are unarmed, too. The only officers permitted to carry firearms are on a special force called the Viking Squad, and they are seldom called out.

In addition, there are, comparatively speaking, few hard drugs in Iceland.

According to a 2012 UNODC report, use among 15-64-year-olds in Iceland of cocaine was 0.9%, of ecstasy 0.5%, and of amphetamines 0.7%.

There is also a tradition in Iceland of pre-empting crime issues before they arise, or stopping issues at the nascent stages before they can get worse.

Right now, police are cracking down on organised crime while members of the Icelandic parliament, Althingi, are considering laws that will aid in dismantling these networks.

When drugs seemed to be a burgeoning issue in the country, the parliament established a separate drug police and drug court. That was in 1973.

In the first 10 years of the court, roughly 90% of all cases were settled with a fine.

There's an inimitable make-up of Iceland which, ostensibly and ideally, could provide guidelines for people in other nations who are looking for solutions to their crime issues.

As I climbed into the back of that man's Jeep that morning, he smiled and asked if I needed help with my luggage. And even though I knew nothing about him, I felt safe.

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