A Survey of U.S. Mayors: Experiences of Violence

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**Abstract:**

In this paper, we examine the extent to which mayors in the United States experience violence on the job; explore the correlates of violence; ascertain the degree to which digital communication, especially social media, play a part in those experiences, and determine whether experiences of violence influence mayors’ decisions to leave politics. We find that: (1) U.S. mayors experience meaningful levels of violence; (2) social media were the most cited conveyers of this violence or threats of violence; (3) mayors’ experiences of violence are correlated with whether the mayor threatens the status quo (gender), visibility of the mayor (strong mayor system), age, and city size; (4) other independent variables, such as city partisan divide, political culture, and violent crime rates of cities are not associated with a greater propensity to experience violent actions; and (5) in some circumstances, experiences of violence cause mayors to rethink their career paths. The present situation compromises the safety, security, and health of our officeholders. It is also a concern for the quality, representativeness, and legitimacy of our democratic institutions.

In June of 2017, Member of Congress and Republican Whip Steve Scalise (R-LA) was shot at a practice for the Congressional Baseball Game for Charity. His injuries were severe and his recovery has been long and slow. Equally consequentially, in 2011, then Member of Congress, Gabrielle Giffords, Democrat of Arizona, was shot at a constituency event. Her injuries were so extensive and long-lasting that she resigned her congressional seat. In early 2017, Massachusetts Democratic State Representative Katherine Clark was home one evening when she heard sirens and police cars outside. Officers came to the door and told her they received an anonymous warning that there was an active shooter in her home. In the end, it turned out to be a hoax. Nonetheless, it reinforced Representative Clark’s determination to pass the Online Safety Modernization bill on which she had been working for six years.

Because these incidences have been dire, information has been widely reported. Less dramatic, but extremely consequential are the range of violent experiences that officeholders may face including harassment perpetrated in-person or online. Among the effects of violence is compromised safety, security, and health of our officeholders. It is also a serious concern for the quality, representativeness, and legitimacy of our democratic institutions. Violence may deter sitting officeholders from staying in politics and may deter others from seeking public service careers. The costs of doing so may be seen to outweigh the political, policy, and personal benefits of doing so.

There has been little research in the United States that addresses experiences of psychological and physical violence among officeholders at any level of government. Our study explores the extent to which elective officeholders are exposed to violence. We use a survey of mayors in cities with populations above 30,000. Our aims are to: examine how much mayors experience violence and the types of violence experienced, ascertain the degree to which digital communication, especially social media, play a part in those experiences, explore the correlates of violence, and determine whether experiences of violence influence mayors’ political ambition.

**Literature Review and Hypotheses**

Little research exists on violence against U.S. officeholders. Still, the literatures pertaining to workforce violence generally, and in the public sector, as well as mass-level on-line harassment supply clues for new work in this area and suggest that mayors may experience a meaningful amount of violence.

Workforce Violence: Because holding elected office is a job, the literature on workplace violence may provide a window into the experience of mayors. Studies report on physical violence in the workplace, such as being hit, pushed, shoved, struck by an object, or attacked/injured/murdered with weapons. Attempted violence also falls into this category. Those who study workplace violence also report on other behavior classified as psychological violence, which is defined generally as hostile behaviors, acts, or threats that cause psychological harm, such as suffering or fear (see also Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2016). Violence of the latter kind can be perpetrated in-person or in other ways, including social media.

A U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) longitudinal report shows the type and extent of violence experienced by governmental employees (a category that includes mayors). Included in the types of violence reported by the BJS were rape/sexual assault, robbery, aggravated assault, and simple assault against employed persons that occurred while they were at work. In 2011, excluding law enforcement and security employees, the rate of workplace violence against government employees was almost two times as frequent as the rate for private-sector employees. And, from 2002 to 2011, about 96% of workplace violence against government employees was against state, county, and local employees, who made up 81% of the total government workforce (Harrell 2013).

The most comprehensive data analysis of workplace violence relative to our study comes from Schat et al. (2006). The authors report that a National Survey of Workplace Health and Safety survey administered between January 2002 and June 2003 reveals that 41.4 percent of U.S. workers experience psychological violence (defined here as behavior meant to intimidate) at work in the course of a year. Six percent of workers experienced physical violence. This violence came from co-workers, supervisors, and members of the public - with the largest proportion coming from the public. That finding holds for both psychological and physical violence. Public administrators, the profession that most closely resembles the mayoral focus of our study, experienced the most psychological and physical violence of any category – and both types of violence as perpetrated most often by members of the public. Bivariate and multivariate analysis of the data indicates that younger workers are more likely to experience violence. The frequency of psychological violence was greater for females and the frequency of physical violence as greater than for males, although these finding did not hold up in multivariate analysis. One caveat is needed here that the survey did not distinguish between experiences of general psychological violence and sexual harassment. Further, no questions were asked related to workplace sexual violence.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Mass-level research on online harassment: In 2017, the Pew Research Center released a report from a nationally representative survey of U.S. adults’ experiences with one specific type of violence assessed in this study: online harassment. The main finding is that these behaviors are widespread. Forty-one percent of Americans have been subjected to online harassment and 66 percent have witnessed it. Critically, 18 percent of respondents experienced physical threats, long-term harassment, and sexual harassment or stalking. Further, social media were reported as the most common conveyor of harassment in the Pew study. Fifty-eight percent of respondents named social media as their most recent harassment experience. The use of social media to harass others is unsurprising considering Baron and Neuman’s (1996) research detailing that aggressors of violence prefer to engage in actions that harm their victims while trying to avoid danger to themselves. Social media’s ability to allow people to disguise their identities fits squarely into that dynamic.

Hypotheses: Based on the literatures of workplace violence and social media’s role in conveying threats of violence, we expect that:

* U.S. mayors will have experienced meaningful levels of harassment and violence and do so at rates consistent with existing nation-wide data.
* U.S. mayors are likely to cite social media as vehicles for meaningful portions of that violence.

Additional hypotheses concern the correlates and effects of violence.

Correlates of Violence: although the literature discussed above suggests that mayors are likely to have experienced violence, it does not offer much information about why some mayors may experience violence and others will not. Here, we offer a model that hypothesizes that, the higher the visibility of the mayor, the higher the level of partisan disagreement in the city, the nature of the political culture, and the extent to which a mayor’s personal demographics or perspectives threaten the status quo, the more likely they will be to face violence.

**Figure 1: Model of Correlates of Violence**

**Visibility of Mayor** (selection process; strong mayor; previous experience) » violence

**City Partisan Division** (politicians work together; partisanship » violence  
 non-congruence)

**Political Culture** (Individualistic/Moralistic/Traditionalistic) » violence

**Status Quo Threats** (Gender; ideological non-congruence w/ city) » violence

Mayors who are visible to constituents are more likely to issue an opinion or take an action that will catch the eye of someone with a propensity toward violence. One thing likely to affect mayors’ visibility is their city’s mayoral selection process. Mayors who are elected by the public, rather than by the city council, may be more visible because they run city-wide campaigns. The strength of the mayoral position in cities may also increase visibility. Strong mayors -- those with appointment and veto power -- are more likely to receive press coverage than those lacking significant power. Finally, mayors with previous political experience may be more likely to be known by constituents and face more violence.

In cities that are more politically polarized, mayors may face more violence than in cities that are more ideological homogeneous. The polarized nature of 21st century politics is cited in the press as a cause of violence against politicians (see for example Zanona, 2017). Research also suggests that heated rhetoric can contribute to violence. Kalmoe (2014) reported on three experiments that tested the effect of mildly incendiary political rhetoric and found that 6-13 percent of respondents supported throwing bricks, 5-6 percent endorsed using bullets, and 10-16 percent reject non-violence in politics. Nine percent said that citizens should threaten political leaders. We measure polarization with variables on whether politicians in the city work well together and whether the city is evenly divided on partisanship or otherwise.

Political culture is also hypothesized to be related to violence against mayors. Elazar (1966) defines political culture as “the particular pattern of orientation to political action in which each political system is embedded”. He identified three main cultures: traditionalistic, individualistic, and moralistic. In the traditionalistic culture, politics is characterized as hierarchal and aimed toward maintaining social order; in the moralistic culture, participation is encouraged for all and government is seen as able to enhance the public good; in the individualistic culture, government is there to help those in power and is associated with patronage. Levels of violence against mayors may be higher in Individualistic cultures because politics is perceived as beneficial for those in power rather than as accountable to average citizens. Thus, people left out may feel greater anger toward officials.

Finally, we expect that mayors who are perceived as threats to the status quo will be more likely to experience acts of violence. Mayors may be seen as threats for two sets of reasons. Mayors who are more liberal or conservative than their city may be less likely to be given the benefit of the doubt by substantial portions of the population. Additionally, as executives, female mayors may be perceived as a greater threat than male mayors. That is, not only have political institutions been created by men with men’s experiences in-mind, societal expectations of executives are even more masculinized than legislative ones (Duerst-Lahti and Kelly,1995; Acker 1992). The proportion of female mayors across the nation speaks to this: of mayors of U.S. cities with populations 30,000 and above, **21 percent** were women (CAWP 2018). Related to but distinct from their proportion of local level executives, female officeholders in the U.S., including mayors, have distinctive policy priorities pertaining to women, children and family concerns (Mezey 1978; Beck 1991; Boles 2001; Tolleson-Rinehart 2001; Weikart et al. 2007; Holman 2014, 2015).[[2]](#footnote-2) These distinctive priorities may be seen to upset the status quo.

Effects of Violence: Research on political ambition tells us that when the structural, political atmospheric, and personal costs of running for or continuing to hold office exceed the personal, political, or policy benefits of doing so, prospective candidates will decline to run or decline to seek re-election. That is, the cost of doing so exceeds the anticipated benefits (Schlesinger, 1966; Black, 1972; Rohde, 1979; Fowler & McClure, 1989; Kazee, 1994; Moncrief, Squire, & Jewell, 2001; Gaddie, 2003; Maisel and Stone 1997; Lawless and Fox 2015; Carroll and Sanbonmatsu, 2013; Shames 2017). Being a victim of violence is a big cost. Mayors who have experienced violence may be less willing to continue their political careers.

There is little, if any, extant information about whether experiences of violence deter officeholders from continuing in politics. One comparative study suggests that experiencing violence does not deter most female parliamentarians from continuing in politics (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2016). Thus, our hypothesis pertaining to the effects of violent experiences for mayors is that, in general, it will not affect their continuing commitment as measured by a desire to leave office, the nature of their plans, and regrets mayors may have about their choice to serve.

**Data and Methods**

Definitions of Violence: For our survey, violence is defined as purposeful actions that harm mayors either psychologically or physically, they include images and disrespectful comments in social media, traditional media, and during public meetings; threats of death, rape, beating, or abduction; family members’ experiences of any of those events; violence against property, and physical violence ranging from having something thrown at them to being assaulted or shot.

Survey: Our measurement instrument was a survey of U.S. mayors in all cities of 30,000 and above. Among levels of government and types of representatives, we chose to survey mayors for two primary reasons: (1) mayors live full-time in their communities which may make them more visible than other officials, such as state legislators and members of Congress, who do their legislative work primarily outside of their local communities; and (2) mayors are executives so they may be held more accountable than city council members for public policy decisions.

The survey was administered during May and June of 2017 to all 1360 mayors in cities over 30,000 (including individuals with similar roles but different titles, such as president, and supervisor). The names were collected from the U.S. Conference of Mayors website from January to March of 2017.[[3]](#footnote-3) The website had email addresses for most mayors; when available, we used these emails. Then, we went to each city’s website to collect physical addresses and any missing email addresses. These efforts resulted in contact information for all the mayors.

Using a modified Tailored Design Method (Dillman 2007), there were five contacts to the mayors: 1) a pre-notice letter by mail informing respondents that a survey was coming; 2) the mail survey to mayors; 3) a mailed reminder/thank you; 4) an emailed replacement survey; and 5) a final email reminder. Additionally, the survey was mixed mode that combined an internet version and a mail version. This was meant to offer mayors the version with which they are most comfortable and found most convenient. A concern with mixed mode surveys is that the mode affects responses (Dillman, 2007). However, much of the research on this phenomenon has focused on differences between surveys with interviewers and self-administered surveys. With our design, both modes were self-administered. Fisher and Herrick (2013) report that administered in this way, surveys of politicians produce high quality, reliable, and representative results.

The survey was short to increase the likelihood that mayors would respond. The questions were formatted in three sections. All were structured so that each question could be answered by simply using a check mark or writing in a number. Section A of the survey focused on experiences of violence during the most recent campaign, during service as mayor, and over the careers of mayors. The approximate number of times mayors experienced specific types of violence was also requested. These questions were adapted from a 2016 Inter-Parliamentary Union *Issues Brief: Sexism, Harassment and Violence Against Women Parliamentarians* questionnaire (IPU 2016). Questions in Section B of the survey concentrated on the psychological and political costs of experiencing the negative behaviors. Section C collected demographic, political, and structural information. There was also a section at the end of the survey in which respondents could offer comments if they wished. See Appendix A of this paper for more detail on the survey questions.

Of the 1360 subjects, 283 responded to the survey, resulting in a response rate of 20.1%. Although survey responses among politically elite populations in the United States and elsewhere have been declining over time, this response rate is similar to other surveys of mayors in recent years (Einstein and Glick, 2017).

We collected information on all 1360 mayors to gauge the representativeness of our sample. First, since none of the respondents presided over cities of more than 601,000, we redefined our population to mayors of cities with populations of 601,000 and fewer. Using that definition, we found two types of bias: (1) mayors in the Northeast were less likely to respond and those in the Midwest more likely to respond. We did not, however, find regional biases in levels of violence; (2) our sample is biased toward reports of violence in smaller cities. Because violence levels tend to be higher in larger cities than smaller ones, levels of violence among mayors are likely greater than we report.

Comparison of Respondents and Non-Respondents: accounting for bias in the sample, the comparisons yielded the following:

* Gender: 23.8 percent of respondents were women, 19% of non-respondents were women (overall 20%), p. = .12. This roughly matches the proportions of women and men among the full mayoral population of 21 percent female and 79 percent male (CAWP 2017 *Current Numbers* Fact Sheet). [[4]](#footnote-4)
* The average respondents entered office in 2011.56; the average non-respondent entered in 2011.04 (overall 2011.15) p. = .18.
* The average-sized city whose mayor responded had a population of 69.76; the average sized city for mayors who did not respond was 82.08 (overall 79.49); p. = .015. The medians were 48.80 and 55.30 respectively (overall 53.8).
* Region: .06 of respondents were from the northeast; .16 of non-respondents were from the northeast (.14 overall) p =.000; .37 of respondents were from the Midwest; .28 of non-respondents were from the Midwest (.30 overall); p =.002; .25 of respondents were from the south; .27 of non-respondents were from the south (.26 overall) p =. 46; and .32 of respondents were from the west, .29 of non-respondents were from the west (.30 overall) p = .39.

Variables:

The *key dependent variable* measuring whether mayors experienced these actions was: Did the mayor experience any of these violent actions?” See Appendix A for list of actions. (“Any” coded 1; otherwise 0).

Three d*ependent variables* pertain to the consequences of experiencing violence of any type and include:

(1) “Leave Elected Office” which asked mayors if their experiences of violence encouraged them to think about leaving public office or suspending their campaign (coded 1 for yes; coded 2 for most likely, yes; coded 3 for don’t know; coded 4 for most likely, no; and coded 5 for no.)[[5]](#footnote-5)

(2) “Future Plans” asked mayors which of the following best described what they planned to be doing in the next 5 years: hold same or similar office; hold a higher office; hold a lesser office; work for a party or other political organization; or hold no political office.” This variable was recoded to so that those who said they planned to hold no political office, or planned to work for a party/other political organization were coded 1; other responses were coded 0.

(3) “Regret”, which asked mayors If you had to do it over again would you still want to be mayor? Options ranged from yes (coded 1) to definitely no (coded 5).

Our *independent variables* include the following measures of: (1) Visibility; (2) City Partisans Division; (3) Political Culture; (4) Threats to the Status Quo.

To measure Visibility, we used the following variables:

* Mayor Selected by the City Council/ not elected? (Yes=1; No= 0)
* Strong Mayor System? (Yes=1; No= 0);[[6]](#footnote-6)
* Prior Elective Office? (Yes=1; No= 0);

To measure the Partisan Division of the City, we used the following variables:

* Mayor’s Ideology (Very Conservative/Very Liberal=1; otherwise 0);
* Whether city politics are evenly divided in partisanship (Yes=1; No= 0);
* Whether city politicians work well together (Yes=1; No=0)

To measure Political Culture, we use Elazar’s typology:

* Traditionalistic=1; others= 0;
* Moralistic=1, and others= 0; and
* Individualistic= reference group.[[7]](#footnote-7)

To measure Threats to the Status Quo, we use the following variables:

* Gender/ Female (female=1; male= 0);
* Whether voters are more conservative than the mayor (Yes=1; No= 0);
* Whether voters are more liberal than the mayor (Yes= 1; No=0)

Our *control* variables are city-level variables and individual-level variables about the mayor that may affect violence as explored in the BJS study discussed above:

* City Population less than 50,000 (Yes=1; No=0). City population sizes came from the Conference of Mayors website.
* City Population greater than 100,000 (Yes=1; No= 0)
* Violence Rates of cities. Here, we rely on the FBI’s Violent Crime Reports.[[8]](#footnote-8) We divided violence numbers by the city population (in thousands).[[9]](#footnote-9)
* Age of Mayor[[10]](#footnote-10)
* Mayor’s Party ID (Democrat=1; others=0; Independent and Other coded 1; others=0; and Republican=reference group);
* How long the mayor had served in her/his position;

**Results**

Types and Levels of Violence: Table 1 displays mayors’ exposure to the types of violence. The data are separated by time periods: during the mayors’ most recent campaign; as mayor, and either in most recent campaign or as mayor. The results are clear: mayors experience a range of violence and do so from campaigns through their officeholder service. Regardless of time period, mayors encounter the highest levels of violence, psychological violence, via social media. The second most experienced psychological violence is harassment or exposure to insistent and uninvited behavior, attention or verbal contact. This finding is also present across time periods. At the other end of the scale, but particularly worrying, over the course of their careers, 12.8 percent of respondents had experienced threats of death, rape, beating, or abduction, 11 percent had experienced violence against property, and 1.1 percent had experienced significant physical violence, such as being shot at or assaulted with a resultant injury. Finally, in the aggregate, 79.5% of mayors experienced some type of violence, 78.8% experienced some type of psychological violence, and 13.4% had experiences of physical violence. Almost all mayors who faced an act of physical violence also faced psychological violence. The average mayor had 2.2 types of violence.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Table 1 about here

Not only do the data in Table 1 suggest that social media are the dominate form of violence faced by mayors, but qualitative evidence from our survey is abundant. Below are a few examples of comments by respondents:

* Facebook has become a very dark place- lots of rumor, bad info, etc. Majority of negativity is there, or at least born there. Very timely study. Good Luck, interested in findings.
* People send insulting, maligning, dehumanizing emails directly to me and to the whole city council at times. This negativity can affect my views of how much I enjoy/desire this role.
* Very common in anonymous blogs; including comments against family members - feels like some may physically threaten, don’t feel safe.
* Social media is making the office less of a positive experience! Anyone can make comment on commission work product without any facts or experience. The amount of bulling and outright misinformation is on an upward swing and many hours are required to combat misinformation and sometimes outright lies.
* In the 25 years that I have held elected office, politics have become increasingly nasty and base. In my opinion, the largest contributor to the deterioration of civility is social media. The ability to post anonymously and to make unsubstantiated accusations has led to biter divides among voters. I would not want my children to follow my path into politics. In the current climate, and I believe that the situation will continue to get worse as people become more entrenched in their partisanship
* While social media has served as a medium for connecting with voters and constituent groups, it has also become a medium for personal attacks which lead to bullying. Social media has definitely impacted the world of politics and campaign.
* I believe the faceless nature of social media will lead to more misinformation and character assassination. We see it on the state and national level to the extent that it is difficult at times to discern fact from fiction. It has affected us locally to a great extent but the trend is heading that way. Debate is good but it should not be anonymous on one side.
* For the most part, our citizens are well behaved and act civilly at public meetings. However, the increase of use of social media seems to embolden many people to verbally 'act out'.

Correlates of Violence: Although most mayors experienced some type of violence, many did not, so we test our model, described earlier, to explore which mayors were more likely to experience violence than others. Table 2 reports the findings for the dependent variable: “any violence”.

Table 2 about here

In Table 2, column 1, the data indicate that, all else equal, city partisan division, and political cultural are not significantly associated with violence against mayors. In contrast to our expectations, none of the polarization variables (how well politicians work together, and the measures of partisan congruence), and none of the political culture variables were significantly related to violence. Among the control variables, none of the characteristics of mayors including mayor’s party identification or length of service mattered. Neither did the violent crime rates of cities. So, far it seems that violence against mayors is a pervasive experience.

Among the visibility variables (type of election, previous experience, and strong mayor), only strong mayors were more likely to experience violence. The relationship was significant at the .076 level (using a two-tailed test).[[12]](#footnote-12) Since logistic coefficients are difficult to interpret, we calculate probabilities assuming the other variables are at their median. The probability that a strong mayor experienced violence was .874 and the probability for a weak mayor was .753.

There was mixed evidence to support our expectation that mayors who threaten the status quo are more likely to experience violence. Although mayors who were ideologically different than their city were not more nor less likely to face violence, female mayors were more likely to do so. The statistical significance of the gender association was .068. To give an idea of the substantive importance, we calculated the probability of experiencing violence (all the other variables at their median). The probability that a female mayor experienced any type of violence was .874; for men it was .753. These results conform with our previous work examining violence against female and male mayors. In Herrick et al. (2017), we found that female mayors tended to have higher levels of violence compared to men.

Two other sets of findings pertaining to “any violence” are worthy of note. First, the age of the mayor matters, with younger mayors being more likely to experience violence. Also, all else being equal, the probability that a mayor of 51 years of age (one standard deviation below the mean) experienced violence was .834 compared to .669 for a mayor 71 (one standard deviation above the mean). This finding comports with the BJS data on workplace violence. It is also possible that younger mayors who, by virtue of age, have limited experience and have not built up political capital, are seen as more vulnerable. It is further possible that younger mayors are seen as greater threats to the status quo since the traditional politician is older.

Second, the size of the city matters with mayors from smaller cities experiencing less violence. The relationship is statistically significant and the estimated probabilities indicate the substantive affects. With the other variables at their medians, a mayor in a small city has a .677 probability of experiencing violence compared to .817 for a mayor of a larger city. It may be that when anonymity is more difficult such as in a small town, violence against public officials is riskier. Or it may be that there are just more constituents to commit acts of violence in large cities*.*

To summarize our findings so far, quantitative and qualitative data indicate that: (1) U.S. mayors experience meaningful levels of violence – and do so at levels that cause concern; and (2) social media were the most cited conveyers of this violence or threats of violence; (3) in contrast to our expectations, few of the sets of independent variables in our model yielded statistically significant results: City Partisan Division, and Political Culture are not correlated with violence. Consistent with expectations, among the Status Quo Threat variables, gender is significantly associated with violent acts with women being more likely to experience violence. And one visibility variable was significantly associated with violent acts: strong mayors were more likely to experience violence than weak mayors. Among the independent variables, age of mayor (younger mayors), and size of city (smaller cities) are statistically significantly correlated with experiences of violence.

In all, violence is not limited to specific types of cities beyond size, not limited to specific political cultures, and not limited to partisanship. Mayors in almost every type of city must be concerned with their physical and psychological safety.

Effects of Violence: To understand the effects of violence on mayors’ political careers, we explore three of the dependent variables explicated above: “Leave Elective Office,” “Future Plans,” and “Regrets”. Of the mayors who reported experiencing some act of violence, 5.11% said the action encouraged them to think about leaving office; an additional 11.16% said that the violence most likely did so. A larger share of the mayors who experienced some type of violence, though, said that it likely did not result in them thinking about leaving politics, and 61.49% said the violent action definitely did not encourage them to think about leaving.[[13]](#footnote-13) Thus it appears that experiences of violent actions had a modest effect on mayor political ambition.

To offset the possibility of social desirability bias in answers on the effects of violence, we asked all respondents about their political plans, and if they regret being mayor. These questions were asked in a different part of the survey than the “leave office” question. Bivariate results indicate that the correlation between the “any violence” variable and the regrets variable was .15 (p =.014). Although all mayors who did not experience violence said they definitely would or most likely would continue as mayor, of those who experienced violence, 94.2% wanted to continue in their position, and 5.8% either did not know or said they most likely would not want to continue. The “political plans” question indicates that mayors who experience any type of violence are less, not more, likely to plan to leave office (the coefficient is -.107 with p.=.071). However, since older people are less likely to experience violence and are more likely to be close to retirement age, we tested to determine whether the relationship was spurious. Indeed, controlling for age, the relationship was no longer statistically significant.

In sum, having experienced violence in office causes some mayors, although not a majority, to think about planning their political futures differently than they might have without being subjected to violence in office.

**Discussion**

Mayors in the United States face meaningful levels and types of violence and social media are a prime conveyer of violence. Further, mayors in almost all circumstances are likely to experience violent acts; for the most part, it is not isolated to certain types of people or certain types of cities. The exceptions to that conclusion are that mayors who threaten the status quo, particularly female mayors, those who are more visible (strong mayors), those who are younger, and those who serve in larger cities are more likely than others to experience violence.

The levels, types, and venues of violence causes at least some mayors to doubt the worth of future public service. For example, one of our respondents said: “In the 25 years that I have held elected office, politics have become increasingly nasty and base… I would not want my children to follow my path into politics in the current climate…”

The role of social media as conveyers and amplifiers of violence is a concern raised in this study. It is beyond its’ scope to theorize about responses to and solutions for social media violence against officeholders, or even to assess whether it is more or less potent than social media violence in the general population. Perhaps it suffices to say that researchers consider social media violence a public health threat and one larger than some other public health threats (Huesmann, 2009).

Most critically, violence against officeholders compromises the safety, security and health of our officeholders. Our findings also raise concerns about the quality, representativeness, and legitimacy of our democratic institutions going forward. Although there were not many of our mayors who said the violence they experienced would deter them from future service, we are not able to comment about people who are discouraged from running in the first place. As the costs of running for and holding office rise, fewer people may want to serve. If concerns about mayors’ personal safety and the safety of their families rise, it is possible that the caliber of our officeholders will be weakened and that elective public officeholders will be even less fully representative of the full diversity of our population than they are at present. The present political moment is an indicator of the effects of lack of diversity in representation.

Limitations of Research and Future Research

It is important to note limitations of this work that caution us against over-interpreting the data. First, we have just begun the study of violence directed toward officeholders: we have surveyed U.S. mayors only and have no information on governors, state legislators, city council members, or members of the U.S. Congress. It may be that mayors are more or less likely to face violent attacks than other leaders. Second, our survey had a respectable response rate, but not one that would yield definitive conclusions. Third, even though we specifically told mayors we were interested in their responses *whether or not* they had experienced problems, it is possible that only or mostly mayors who experienced violent actions responded. Conversely, it is possible that individuals who experienced violence did not want to bring up bad memories and, thus, did not respond. Fourth, our sample size is not large enough to uncover possible important differences in experiences of violence among groups of mayors. Fifth, we have no longitudinal data so we cannot say how many, if any, of these findings are new or part of a temporal pattern. In sum, there is a great deal of work that must be done to gain a handle on this important subject.

**Table 1: Level of Exposure to Psychological and Physical Violence by U.S. Mayors**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Event | Most Recent Campaign | | As Mayor | | Ever Experienced | |
| # | % | # | % | # | % |
| Harassment  (exposure to insistent and uninvited behavior, attention, or verbal contact) | 87/282 | 30.9 | 126/282 | 44.7 | 138/283 | 48.8 |
| Social Media  (images or disrespectful comments) | 135/283 | 47.7 | 163/283 | 57.6 | 192/282 | 68.1 |
| Traditional Media  (images or disrespectful comments) | 55/283 | 19.4 | 79/283 | 27.9 | 85/282 | 30.1 |
| Public Meeting  (images or disrespectful comments) | 50/283 | 17.7 | 107/283 | 37.8 | 114/283 | 40.4 |
| Threats  (death, rape, beating, abduction, or similar act) | 11/283 | 3.9 | 34/283 | 12.0 | 36/282 | 12.8 |
| Threats to Family Member  (death, rape, beating, abduction, or similar act) | 6/283 | 2.1 | 7/283 | 2.5 | 9/282 | 3.2 |
| Violence against Property | 18/283 | 6.4 | 19/283 | 6.7 | 31/282 | 11.0 |
| “Minor” Violence  (such as having something thrown at you) | 4/283 | 1.4 | 7/283 | 2.5 | 7/282 | 2.5 |
| Significant Violence  (such as being shot at or experienced assaults that resulted in injury) | 1/283 | 0.4 | 3/283 | 1.1 | 3/282 | 1.1 |

**Table 2 - Logistic Regression – Experiences of Any Violence**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | | **B** | **S.E.** | |
|  | Years as Mayor | .007 | .028 | |
| Selected by Council | -.092 | .472 | |
| Prior Elective Office | .230 | .401 | |
| City politics - Evenly divided | .193 | .379 | |
| City politics – Politicians work well together | -.126 | .373 | |
| City politics - Voters more conservative than mayor | -.398 | .443 | |
| City politics – voters more liberal than mayor | .340 | .614 | |
| Strong Mayor system | .824 | .464† | |
| Democratic | .226 | .401 | |
| Independent and Other | -.260 | .440 | |
| Very Ideological | -.606 | .582 | |
| Gender | .825 | .452† | |
| Age of Mayor | -.045 | .018\* | |
| Population less than 50,000 | -.744 | .368\* | |
| Population 100,000 + | .392 | .630 | |
| Traditionalistic | -.250 | .479 | |
| Moralistic | .070 | .454 | |
| Violence per 1000 | -.018 | .054 | |
| Constant | 4.224 | 1.248\*\* | |
| Chi-square | | 29.74\* | |
| Log Likelihood | | 120.187 | |
| Pseudo R2 (Nagelkerke) | | .110 | |
| N | | 270 | |

†p<=.10, \*p<=.05, \*\*p<=.01, \*\*\*p<=.001. Two tailed tests.

Variables: Years as Mayor (2017 base year); Partisan Vote (dummy); Selected by Council (dummy); Elective Office Prior to Mayor (dichotomous); How would you describe your city's politics? The people are pretty evenly divided in their partisanship; How would you describe your city's politics? The politicians work well together even if they are of different parties; How would you describe your city's politics? Most voters are more conservative than I am; How would you describe your city's politics? Most voters are more liberal than I am; How would you describe your city's politics? The city has a "strong mayor" (veto power and makes appointments); Democratic (dummy); Independent and Other (dummy); Very Ideological (Very Conservative/Very Liberal); What is your sex (dichotomous); Age (as of 2017 year); Small Population (less than 50,000); Large Population (100,000 and above).

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**APPENDIX A: Description of the Survey.**

Section A of the survey concentrated on experiences of harassment and violence during each mayor’s most recent campaign and as mayor as well as the approximate number of times the mayor experienced specific types of harassment/violence. These included:

* Harassment (exposure to insistent and uninvited behavior, attention, or verbal contact)
* Saw images of yourself or experienced disrespectful comments about you in social media
* Saw images of yourself or experienced disrespectful comments about you in the traditional media
* Saw images of yourself or experienced disrespectful comments about you at a public meeting
* Received threat(s) of death, rape, beating, abduction or similar act
* Someone in your family received threat(s) of death, rape, beating, abduction or similar act
* Experienced violence against your property
* Experienced “minor” violence against yourself, such as having something thrown at you
* Experienced significant violence against yourself, such as being shot at, or experienced assaults that resulted in injury.

Section B concentrated on the psychological and political costs of experiencing any of the array of negative behaviors and provided check boxes for responses.

* Did any of the above experience(s) encourage you to think about leaving public office or suspending your campaign?
* Following any of the above experiences, did you have intrusive memories of the event, nightmares, or did you avoid reminders of the event?
* Following any of the above experiences, did you experience increased levels of irritability, sleep disturbances, problems with concentration, or an exaggerated startle response?
* Were any of the negative experiences mentioned above sexual in nature?

Section C collected demographic, political, and structural information including:

* Year when first became mayor
* Whether the mayors held elective political office prior to being mayor and which office(s)
* Type of mayoral selection (popular vote/nonpartisan; popular vote/partisan; selected by council; other)
* Description of city politics (evenly divided in partisanship; politicians work well together even across parties; voters are more conservative or liberal than the mayors; the city does/does not have a strong mayor)
* What mayor expected to be doing in the next 5 years (same or similar office, higher office, lesser office, work for a party or other political organization, no political office)
* If mayors had to do it all over again, would they still want to serve as mayor   
   (definitely, yes, most likely yes, don’t know, most likely no, definitely no)
* Party Identification
* Ideology
* Gender
* Year of Birth
* Race/Ethnicity

1. Elsewhere we have found that female mayors are more likely than male mayors to experience (Herrick et al. 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For other levels of office, see: Adams 2007; Barrett 1995; Barnello and Bratton 2007; Bratton, Haynie and Reingold 2006; Dodson 1998, 2006; Epstein, Niemi, and Powell, 2005; Frederick, 2011; Hogan 2008; Orey, Smooth, Adams and Harris-Clark 2006; Poggione 2004; Reingold and Smith, 2012; Swers 2002; Thomas 1990, 1994, 2014; Vega and Firestone 1995). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. About 15 cities had mayoral elections in May and early June in 2017 and a couple of mayors resigned during the period between collecting names and surveys. Since some of these mayors responded, they are included in the total figure. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. It was not possible to analyze data on race/ethnicity as the n’s in each category were too small. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Since this question was only asked of people who experienced violence, we can only describe responses but not see how experiencing violence affected it. The question may also suffer from social desirability bias: officeholders may want to look strong. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Respondents were asked about mayor’s appointment and veto powers. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. We used mean substitution for the 17 cities that did not report to the FBI. Doing so did not significantly affect the results. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2016/crime-in-the-u.s.-2016/tables/table-6/table-6.xls/view [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. These data are not perfect as several cities do not report to the FBI, and there is accuracy variation from city to city. Mean substitution was used when data were missing. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. We asked respondents to put in their year of birth and about 10 respondents either did not answer the question or wrote in a number that did not make sense, such as 55 or 165. To avoid losing these cases. we used mean substitution to create scores on these variables. Doing so did not significantly affect the relationship between age and violence. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. We report the number of types of actions here. This figure may lack reliability, however, as some mayors may have listed one action as falling into more than one type of violent action. That is, harassment could be on through social media. We also had an open-ended question about how often mayors experienced a type of violent action, but many either did not answer the question or put in a vague answer like all the time, or rarely. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Since we have a directional hypothesis we use the lower threshold of significance of .10 (two tailed test) or .05 (one tailed test). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. This does not equal 100% because some mayors selected undecided (3.8% women and 5.5% men). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)