

## A Brutality-Based Approach to Identifying State-Led Atrocities

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## Abstract

The comparative study of atrocities and atrocity prevention faces several obstacles including a lack of consensus on the universe of cases and too few cases to statistically test alternative theories. The brutality-based (BB) conception is based on the idea that widespread, state-led violations of physical integrity rights constitute an assault on the personhood and human dignity of the members of society—a mass atrocity. Applying this idea to all countries annually systematically identifies a larger number of atrocities and facilitates categorization into three levels of intensity. The BB methodology for generating annual atrocity lists is replicable and transparent. The findings show that, between 1981 and 2019, the frequency of atrocities as defined and identified by other projects has been decreasing, but BB atrocities have been increasing. The sequence of different types of widespread physical integrity violations suggests new avenues for research on atrocity occurrence, escalation, de-escalation, and cessation.

The comparative, cross-national, cross-temporal study of atrocity is a rapidly growing field where investigators develop and test general theories of atrocity occurrence and prevention. The field has already produced several theories of atrocity occurrence (Finkel and Straus 2012) focusing on a variety of causal mechanisms including intergroup societal conflict (Goldhagen 1996, 2009; Hagan and Raymond-Richmond 2008), regime type (Eck and Hultman 2007; Harff 2003; Krain 1997; Ulfelder and Valentino 2008), and strategic decision making by leaders (Gagnon 2004; Kiernan 2007; Mann 2005; Midlarsky 2005; Semelin 2007; Valentino 2004; Weitz 2003). A newer branch focuses on explaining atrocity escalation or de-escalation (Straus 2012). However, the research enterprise suffers from many problems including conceptual disagreement (limiting consensus on the universe of relevant cases), too much subjectivity in the identification of cases, too few cases to test alternative theoretical arguments, and a lack of synergy with related fields including the comparative study of human rights and political violence. This article suggests a way forward that alleviates several of these problems. We define atrocity as an instance of gross, systematic, and severe state-led violation of human rights including killing. We argue the requirement of group-selective intent found in other definitions of atrocity is unnecessary and is a source of bias in identifying the universe of cases.

Focusing on a particular atrocity or comparing a small number of cases has been the dominant method for studying atrocities. While it has proven useful for generating theoretical arguments and hypotheses, the case study method does not provide convincing tests because the problem of complexity usually overwhelms generalized explanations. Many possible reasons and explanations may apply to a given case or small set of cases and disentangling them is difficult. The causal mechanism itself may vary according to

context. A larger universe of cases provides more opportunities to take different contexts into account (King, Keohane and Verba 1994).

Conceptualizing atrocity as state brutality has some advantages for theory building, testing, and for public policy making. Comparative studies of human rights violations, especially the relationship between violations of human rights and internal political violence may provide new clues for theory building. Moreover, existing data measuring the scope of violations of various physical integrity rights annually since 1981 can be used in a systematic and objective way to identify the universe of cases. Human rights data can classify cases by level of intensity, providing a straightforward way to measure and study atrocity duration, escalation, and de-escalation. Perhaps most important, the lists of atrocities identified and the categorization by intensity are unaffected by confirmation bias—the tendency to search for, interpret, favor, and recall information in a way that confirms or supports one's prior beliefs or values (Oswald and Grosjean 2004).

The brutality-based (BB) definition of atrocity is rooted in the philosophy of human rights. It emphasizes that, besides killing, there are other critical ways a state can assault human dignity. When any human rights to physical integrity are severely compromised people lose their ability to live lives of dignity. Examination of the use of the word “dignity” in national constitutions and international human rights documents, and their elaboration by the relevant tribunals shows that the idea of human dignity is often used in the context of defending the integrity of the person. Dignity is about personhood in its various dimensions—physical, psychological, and social (Addis 2020). Physical integrity rights abuse is any government action likely to cause psychological or physical pain, or death that breaks rules of international law concerning acceptable uses of physical force by governments against non-

combatants likely to cause psychological or physical pain, or death (Hill 2016). International norms prohibiting all governments from violating physical integrity rights were included in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and numerous widely ratified human rights treaties including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. These norms are the basis for the most commonly used indicators of physical integrity abuse in the human rights literature.

As defined here, a BB atrocity is:

the widespread, direct, extrajudicial killing of non-combatant members of society by the state or by non-state organizations working in concert with the state resulting in fifty or more deaths in an annual period, accompanied by the widespread use of at least one other type of state brutality. The other types of state brutality that, when combined with killing, constitute the minimal definition of an atrocity are the widespread use of disappearances, political imprisonments, *or* acts of torture. The more types of widespread state brutality in addition to killing, the more intense the atrocity.

We assume atrocities result from strategic decision making by leaders, who are rational actors choosing whether or not to brutalize their people to achieve their goals. If they choose brutality, they assess the domestic and international costs and benefits of widespread killing versus other methods. Leaders pay higher costs when they engage in widespread killing than when they engage in any other type of brutality. The more capable the state, the more strategic it will be in making choices among types of brutality. These assumptions and the BB definition are consistent with, and build upon, previous research showing that types of physical integrity abuse are substitutable (Bell et al. 2013; Payne and Abouharb 2016; Demeritt and Conrad 2019; Sikkink 2011). Research also shows

there is a typical sequence in which regimes assault human dignity. That sequence is consistent with the idea that leaders pay the highest costs when they kill their people. For that reason, regimes are likely to engage in widespread torture and political imprisonment and disappearances before they orchestrate widespread killing (Cingranelli and Richards 1999).

The recent introduction of the Targeted Mass Killing (TMK) data set by Butcher, Goldsmith, Nanlohy, Sowmya, and Muchlinski (2020) also addresses all the atrocity identification problems outlined above. The TMK research project took a significant step towards the scientific study of atrocities. It served as an inspiration and foundation for this research so, in several places in this article, the BB and TMK conceptions and methods are compared. A TMK is:

“[The] direct killing of noncombatant members of a group by a formally organized armed force that results in twenty-five or more deaths in an annual period, with the intent of destroying the group or intimidating the group by creating a perception of imminent threat to its survival. A targeted group is defined in terms of political and/or ethnic and/or religious identity” (Butcher et al., 2020, 1528).

This article (1) describes four types of state brutality and explains why they should be considered when identifying atrocities, (2) reviews the literature on the rational substitution of brutality methods, (3) compares the BB and TMK atrocity identification methods, (4) justifies identifying and categorizing atrocities only using information contained in annual human rights reports, (5) categorizes the twenty-nine BB atrocities that occurred in 2017 by their degree of intensity, (6) shows that atrocity identification

projects disagree over the universe of cases, (7) demonstrates that the frequency of BB atrocities increased between 1981 and 2019, and (8) illustrates how the BB method for classifying atrocities by intensity can be used to study atrocity escalation and de-escalation.

### **Types of State Brutality**

International human rights law does not prioritize killing over other types of physical integrity abuse. All four types of physical integrity abuse harm the human body and are equally important in their potential negative effects on human dignity and personhood. The Nazi regime of Germany used all forms of brutality against victims of the Holocaust—arguably the greatest assault on human dignity in modern history. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, written in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust, prioritizes protecting people from all the forms of state brutality highlighted in the BB definition (United Nations, 1948).

It is difficult to think of any genocide or other lesser intensity atrocity that did not include multiple types of widespread physical integrity abuse along with lesser violations of human rights. Consider the ongoing atrocity in Myanmar, designated a genocide by the United Nations in 2017 (UN News 2020). The BB dataset shows Myanmar has a long history of human rights problems, making the BB atrocity list twelve times between 2000 and 2019. The US State Department's (USSD) and Amnesty International (AI) human rights reports for 2015 documented the government's brutality including killing, political imprisonment, and torture, foreshadowing the escalation to genocide status in 2017. The Myanmar case shows that violations of many other human rights usually accompany widespread violations of physical integrity rights. According to the Executive Summary of the USSD *Country Reports on Human Rights Violations for 2015*:

“Civilian authorities did not maintain effective control over the security forces.... Arrests of students, land rights activists, and individuals in connection with the exercise of free speech and assembly continued throughout the year, and the excessive sentencing of many of these individuals after prolonged trial diminished trust in the judicial system.... The government did little to address the root causes of human rights abuses, statelessness, violence, and discrimination against Rohingya.... While authorities started to return thousands of displaced Rohingya and other Muslim households to their locations of origin inside Rakhine State, more than 130,000 such persons remained displaced in camps.... Other significant human rights problems persisted, including rape and sexual violence, forced labor, politically motivated arrests, excessive use of force against peaceful demonstrators, widespread corruption, land-related conflict, and intimidation and occasional arrests of journalists. Authorities failed to protect civilians in conflict zones from killing, gross abuses, and displacement.... Although the government took some limited actions to prosecute or punish officials responsible for abuses, abuses by government actors and security officials generally continued with impunity.”

More details about these offenses were included in the main body of the USSD report and were corroborated by the AI report. Because these reports documented widespread killing accompanied by widespread torture and widespread political imprisonment, the BB project classified Myanmar as experiencing a medium intensity atrocity in 2015. The Myanmar example shows that, by the time a country reaches the BB atrocity killing threshold, other types of widespread



state-led brutality had already been used. Here, widespread use of torture and political imprisonment preceded widespread killings.

Like all other conceptual definitions of atrocity, the BB definition includes widespread killing as the necessary, defining characteristic. Killing refers to the deliberate, illegal, and excessive use of lethal force by the police, security forces, or other agents of the state whether against criminal suspects, detainees, prisoners, or others without due process of law (Cingranelli, Filippov and Mark 2021; Cingranelli and Richards 2010, 7). Killings include murders by private groups if instigated by the government. Killing does not include murders that result from application of legally adopted death penalties, murders by criminals or criminal gangs acting without government permission, murders by anti-government groups, murders committed by rogue state agents who are subsequently prosecuted by the state or murders by other national governments. One reason killing, even targeted killing, should not be the only defining characteristic of an atrocity is that the number of people killed in atrocities is usually contested. Inaccuracies and biases in counts of government and non-government killings are likely greatest for countries experiencing violent conflict such as Yemen and South Sudan (Dawkins 2020). Even long after atrocities end, disputes over the number killed and by whom continue (e.g. Davenport and Stam 2009; Meierhenrich 2020).

Torture refers to the purposeful inflicting of extreme pain, whether mental or physical, by government officials or by private individuals at the instigation of government officials and includes the use of physical and other force by soldiers, police, and prison guards that is cruel, inhuman, or degrading (Cingranelli, Filippov and Mark 2021). It also includes rape when rape is committed by the state or by non-governmental agents acting with the approval of the state. The use of rape as a strategic weapon of war may be

increasing in frequency and is a complex and hard-to-observe phenomenon (Swaine 2015). It is perhaps the most hidden form of wartime violence. In 2017, Afghanistan, the Dominican Republic, Kenya, and South Africa all made the BB list of atrocities because both state-led killings and torture were widespread.

Political imprisonment refers to the incarceration of people by government officials because of their speech, their non-violent opposition to government policies or leaders, their religious beliefs, their non-violent religious practices including proselytizing, or their membership in a group, including an ethnic or racial group (Cingranelli, Filippov and Mark 2021). In 2017, China and India made the BB list of atrocities because, according to human rights reports, both killings and government use of political imprisonment were widespread. International non-governmental organizations have condemned China and India for policies allowing mass political imprisonment of Muslims (Ma and Ioanes 2019). However, neither country was included on most other atrocity lists that year (see Table 3 below).

Disappeared people are those who have vanished. Political motivation appears likely, and the victims have not been found (Cingranelli, Filippov and Mark 2021). Knowledge of the whereabouts of the disappeared is, by definition, not public knowledge. However, while there is typically no way of knowing where victims are, it is typically known by whom they were taken and under what circumstances. People who are disappeared are often vulnerable to other abuses such as torture, and they are at high risk of being killed, since their “disappeared” status leaves them without the protection of the law or communication with the outside world (Payne and Abouharb 2016). In many cases, the bodies of disappeared people are later discovered to have been killed (Amnesty International,

n.d.a). In 2017, Bangladesh, Colombia, Egypt, Pakistan, and Yemen all made the BB list of atrocities because both state-led killings and disappearances were common.

### **Substituting Types of Brutality**

Costs to leaders of state-led killing have significantly increased since the Nuremberg Trials, which demonstrated that agents of the state who participated in widespread killing could and should be punished. Since then, post-atrocity trials and truth commissions have held perpetrators accountable numerous times. Besides the punishments meted out to perpetrators, potential costs of state-led killing can include reduced foreign direct investment, outside military intervention, reductions in bilateral foreign aid, bilateral economic sanctions, UN Security Council sanctions, and other actions justified under the Responsibility to Protect mandate for international intervention (Barry, Clay and Flynn 2013; Joyner 2007, 696; Payne and Abouharb 2016).

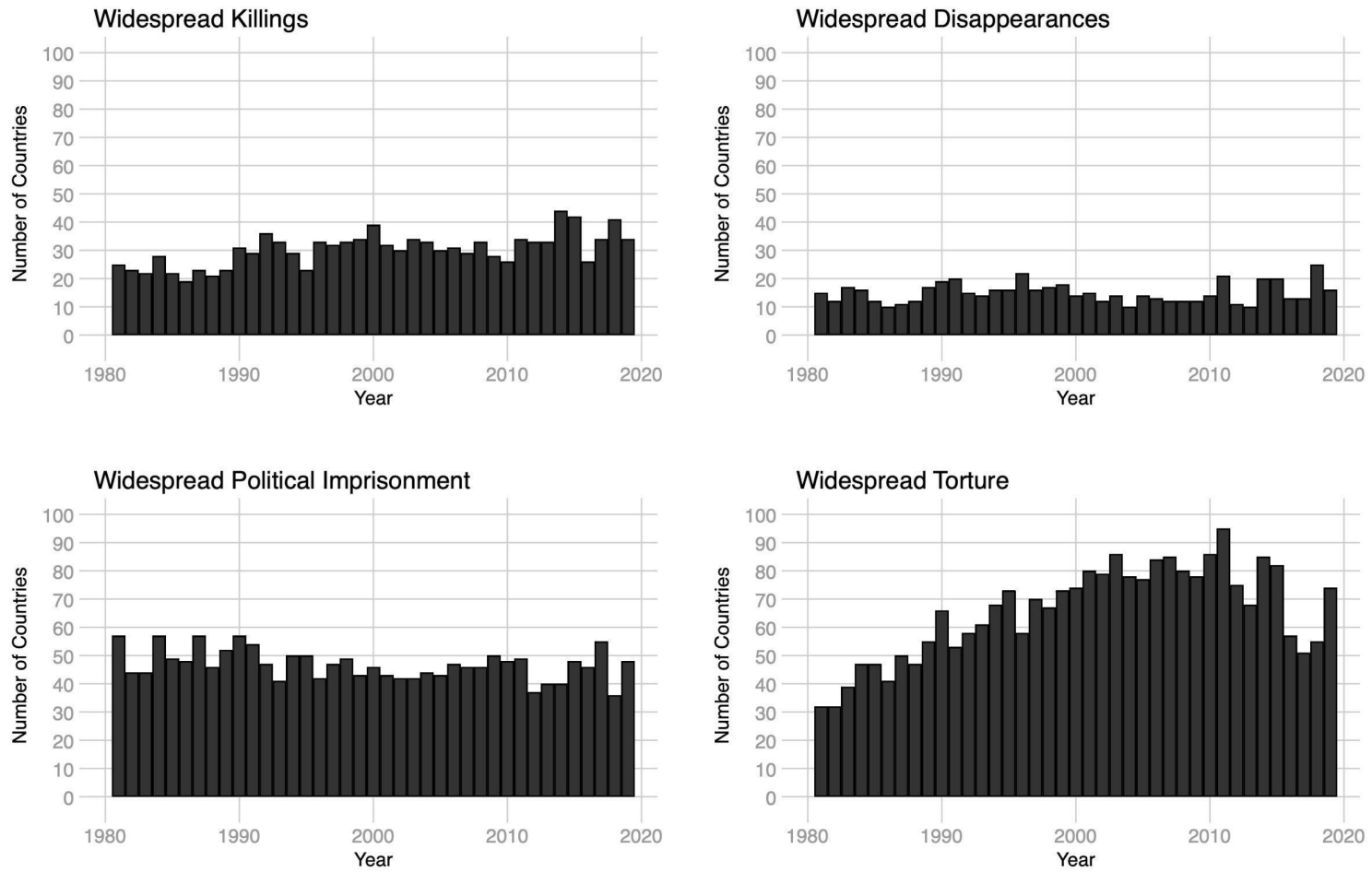
We assume political leaders are strategic utility maximizers. If they choose widespread brutality as a strategy for achieving their goals, they will choose the type of brutality that best avoids domestic and international accountability. Their ideal brutality tactic is the one least visible to the public and, if discovered, easiest to deny. Thus, disappearances and torture are better choices for regimes seeking to evade accountability and to avoid creating grievances that might lead to intranational conflict (Bell et al. 2013). This substitution strategy has been increasingly employed as the human rights promotion and atrocity prevention regimes have become more sophisticated.

The literature supports these conjectures about substituting other types of brutality for killing. DeMerritt and Conrad (2019, 140-143) showed that naming and shaming a government's violation of any particular physical integrity right reduced violations of that right, while simultaneously increasing violations of other physical integrity rights. Payne and Abouharb (2016) found a general pattern of states shifting away from killing towards forced disappearances, and other studies support this finding (Bell et al. 2013). If people disappear, there is usually little or no evidence indicating state complicity, so many post-atrocity trials alleging forced disappearances have been unsuccessful (Sikkink 2011). Abouharb (2019) showed that, to avoid accountability during and after the second Chechen War, Russia dramatically reduced its use of killing, using forced disappearances of thousands of Chechen people instead. Similarly, leaders in Guatemala in the 1980s commonly made their victims disappear. Though the United Nations truth commission in Guatemala worked hard to locate the bodies of long disappeared persons, many were never found. Few perpetrators were identified, and even fewer were punished (Scovazzi and Citroni 2007, 87-93). As a final example, in a widely publicized case in 2018, the Saudi government initially attempted to disappear the journalist, Jamal Khashoggi. However, after video evidence emerged and Khashoggi's body was discovered, state involvement was undeniable. The state's leader then blamed the killing on rogue state agents.

Figure 1 below shows the number of governments that engaged in widespread brutality of each type between 1981 and 2019. Every year more countries brutalize their people by torturing them or putting them in prison for political reasons than by killing. This finding is consistent with the substitution argument and the findings of previous research. The frequency of use of different types of widespread brutality shown in Figure 1 is consistent with previous findings in the literature that there is a sequence to the state's use of

brutality. Regimes are likely to engage in widespread torture, political imprisonment, or disappearances before they orchestrate widespread killing (Cingranelli and Richards 1999, 411). The number of countries engaging in widespread killing increased modestly over time from twenty-five in 1981 to thirty-four in 2019. The much more substantial increase in the number of governments engaging in widespread torture from thirty-three in 1981 to seventy-four in 2019 suggests that, to evade accountability, brutal states usually chose torture first.

Figure 1: Number of Countries with Widespread Violations of Physical Integrity Rights, 1981-2019



## **Comparing the Brutality-Based and TMK Definitions**

There is no consensus on the universe of atrocity cases in any year. To illustrate this point, Table 1 below compares the BB and the TMK approaches to identifying atrocities. The BB data series begins in 1981 because high quality, objective human rights reporting on all nations of the world only became available in 1981. Over the 1981 to 2018 period, the BB-based definition resulted in the identification of 94 percent of the TMK-identified cases. However, application of the BB definition identified 823 more atrocity cases than the TMK project did, an average of 21.7 more cases per year. The substantially longer BB atrocity list is puzzling because the BB definition is more restrictive. For example, the BB minimum required threshold for killing is fifty, while the TMK threshold is twenty-five. The BB conceptual definition requires that the killing be state-led, while the TMK definition includes both state-led and non-state killings. The BB definition not only requires that a state meet the killing threshold of fifty, it also requires that the state engage in at least one other widespread assault on physical integrity rights. We contend the BB list of atrocities is longer for every year mainly because: (1) the BB definition does not require that investigators establish the intent of the killers to target the members of any particular group, and (2) the BB identification methodology is applied to all countries of the world every year without any preconceived ideas about which countries should be included on any annual list.

Table 1: A Comparison of Targeted Mass Killing (TMK) and Brutality-Based (BB) Atrocities

Characteristic	Targeted Mass Killing	Brutality-Based Atrocities
Period of Coverage	1946-2019, to be annually updated	1981-2019, to be annually updated
Number of atrocities, 1981-2019	265	1089
Number of atrocities in 2017	Four	Twenty-nine. Ten were high intensity.
The killers are	A governmental or nongovernmental organized armed force.	Agents of the government (usually police, prison guards, or soldiers).
Information used to identify atrocities was gleaned from	All available sources of info including historical accounts, existing data sets, and news stories.	Annual human rights reports produced by the United States Government and Amnesty International.
The victims are	Noncombatant members of an ethnic, religious, or political group.	Noncombatant members of society.
Intent of Killers to target some group	Important.	Irrelevant.
Minimum Threshold for killings	Twenty-five killings per year, adjustable upwards.	Fifty killings per year; a fixed threshold.
Additional Defining Characteristics	None.	Widespread use of disappearances, torture, or political imprisonment.
Intensity is measured based on	The number of victims, the degree of targeting, and other factors.	The number of types of brutality employed beyond the minimum of two.
Trend since 1981	Decreasing	Increasing



The TMK project defines atrocities as killing episodes where the intent is to “destroy or existentially intimidate” the members of ethnic, religious, or political groups (Butcher et al., 1529). However, the BB project considers the intent of the killers to be irrelevant. Including the criterion, “intent of the killers,” maintains some consistency with the definition of genocide contained in the UN Convention Against Genocide (UNCAG) but opens the door to selection bias. Intent is difficult to establish in many, if not most, cases. Since committing an atrocity is likely to provoke domestic and international outrage, all actors have reasons to hide their motive to target particular types of victims.

Using the intent criterion to identify genocides, as stipulated by the language of the UNCAG, has long proved to be problematic, because it opens the door to excessive subjectivity and political influence. Consider the “We Charge Genocide” petition levied by African Americans against the United States under the UNCAG in 1951 (Patterson 1951). In that case, the United States used its influence to prevent the United Nations from discussing the petition, and prominent human rights actors like Rafael Lemkin ignored the petition as communist propaganda. The effort to bury the charge was successful despite solid evidence of widespread lynching and police-perpetrated killings. Was this a genocide? Was there intent to destroy in part or in whole? Seventy years later these questions remain unresolved. Under the BB definition, the United States would have made the list for its behavior during the era of government sanctioned terror lynching. Similarly, many observers have charged China with committing an atrocity against the Uighur Muslims, but China’s government responded that it had no intent to harm the Uighurs (Stavrou, 2020). Partly because of the

challenges associated with establishing the intent of the perpetrators, the study of atrocities has been largely separated from other research on state-led violence, to the detriment of comparative research in both subfields (Verdeja 2012).

By not requiring intent, the BB approach identifies cases of state-led violence, which include genocides, allowing others to investigate intent if they wish, using whatever criteria they choose. The criteria for committing an atrocity should not be as restrictive as the criteria for classifying an atrocity as a genocide. The BB identification methodology also detects more cases because it is applied to all countries of the world every year without any preconceived ideas about which countries should be included in any year. It identifies cases where state-led killing and other forms of brutality are routine, having continued for decades, as it has in countries such as Colombia (Pappier 2020). The TMK criterion that the killing be group specific or targeted also is unnecessary and opens the door further to subjectivity in selecting cases. Widespread violation of any physical integrity right almost always disproportionately victimizes an ethnic, racial, religious, or political group.

The BB approach to measuring the *intensity* of atrocities is equally transparent and replicable and free of confirmation bias. It classifies countries on the basis of the *number* of physical integrity rights widely violated by a state in addition to widespread killing. The lowest level of intensity consists of states that meet the killing criterion accompanied by only one other form of widespread brutal treatment of non-combatants. Killing plus two other forms of brutality is the medium level of intensity. Killing plus pervasive violation of all three other forms of brutality is the highest intensity mass killing event. In contrast, the TMK project measures the intensity of an atrocity based on a wider set of factors including estimates of the number of people killed, how targeted the killings were, historical tendencies, and whether public statements indicated genocidal intent (Butcher et al., 1530-1531). Considering a wider

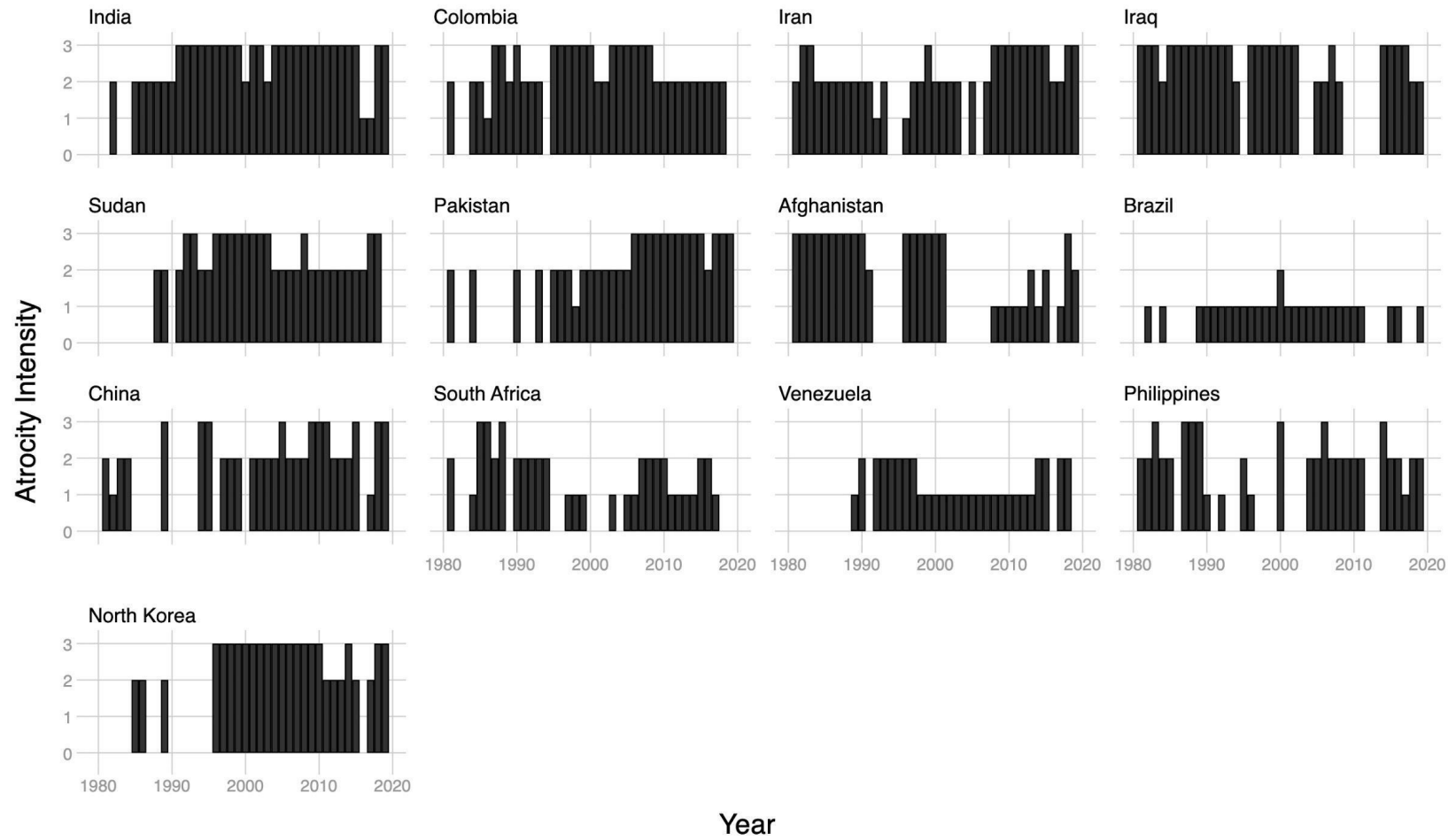
variety of factors also opens the door to greater subjectivity and confirmation bias. The BB methodology is more likely to identify bad acting countries that have not been the focus of media attention or whose unacceptable behavior has been ignored for “political” reasons. Other than Russia, permanent members of the United Nations Security Council have never appeared on any list of atrocities produced by the most respected atrocity identification organizations. In contrast, China was among the thirteen most frequently included countries on BB annual atrocity lists between 1981 and 2019.

A focus on identifying state-led brutality rather than brutality by all actors is justified in principle because, under international law (including the UNCAG), states bear primary responsibility for preventing atrocities (United Nations 1948). Under all other international human rights legal instruments, states also bear primary responsibility for protecting all human rights, including physical integrity rights. Moreover, in practice, states are the most common violators of physical integrity rights. Even when non-state actors cause violent internal conflict and violate human rights, the state still chooses how to respond. In practice, the “state-led” criterion adds precision but has little effect on the states identified as committing atrocities, because the state is almost always a participant in widespread killing events. As will be shown in Table 3, in 2017 only one country included on other atrocity lists was excluded from the BB atrocity list because the state did not participate in the killing.

Figure 2 displays the thirteen countries with twenty-five or more atrocity years between 1981 and 2019. Within the figure, countries are organized by number of atrocity years, regardless of the degree of intensity of the atrocities. India at the top left had the largest number of atrocity years, while North Korea at the bottom had the fewest. The vertical dimension is labeled “atrocity intensity.” A score of ONE means low intensity. A score of TWO means medium intensity, and a score of THREE means high

intensity. Brazil and Venezuela made the BB atrocity list often, but neither country ever experienced a high intensity atrocity. All other countries included in Figure 2 experienced at least one.

Figure 2: Countries with Twenty-Five or More BB Atrocity Years, 1981-2019 (Ordered by Number of Atrocity Years)



Seven of the thirteen countries with the most atrocity years between 1981 and 2019 (Afghanistan, China, Colombia, India, Iran, Pakistan, and South Africa) failed to make most other atrocity lists in 2017, while twelve of the thirteen countries made the 2017 BB list (see Table 3 below). Figure 2 above also provides some evidence that atrocity intensity may increase or decrease depending on which chief executive is in office. In Venezuela, the intensity of atrocity decreased for the years under former President Hugo Chavez, showing that the administrations of both his predecessor and successor chose to engage in greater state-led brutality than he did. For all of the countries depicted in Figure 2, once widespread killing began, it tended to persist.

Figure 2 also suggests interesting relationships between indicators of intrastate conflict and atrocity worthy of further exploration. Recent research supports a “legacy of violence effect”—that widespread killing of noncombatants by the government during an intrastate conflict tends to continue even after a conflict ends (Karreth, Sullivan, and Dezfuli. 2020). The legacy of violence idea also suggests that, other things being equal, that atrocities, even lower intensity atrocities (e.g., Brazil and Venezuela) tend to persist. Conflict and atrocity are related. We found a correlation of .52 between intrastate conflict and the occurrence of a BB atrocity (see Appendix Table B.1) and a correlation of .56 between the intensity of intrastate conflict and the intensity of a BB atrocity (see Appendix Table B.2). Still, as can be seen in Figure 2 above, many states including China, North Korea, and Iran experienced frequent atrocities, even high intensity atrocities, during peacetime.

### **Using Human Rights Reports to Identify Atrocities**

Annual lists of BB atrocities classified by degree of intensity are based entirely on human and machine coding of information

contained in the annual human rights reports issued by the United States Department of State (USSD) or by Amnesty International (AI) (Amnesty International, n.d.b; U.S. Department of State, n.d.). When the USSD and AI reports disagree, the coders treat the AI report as authoritative. The coding guidelines for physical integrity rights variables are available online as Appendix A. Both the USSD and AI reports contain descriptions of government violations of all physical integrity rights for all members of the United Nations since 1981 (Cingranelli and Richards 2010). Differences between the USSD and AI reports were substantial in the 1980s, but had disappeared by the mid-1980s (Poe, Carey, and Vazquez 2001). Hill, Moore, and Mukherjee (2013) argued that non-governmental organizations such as AI had biases in their reporting as a function of organizational incentives to increase membership and donations.

The TMK project uses a wide variety of sources of information to identify atrocities (Butcher et al. 1530). In deciding which and how many sources to consult, the goal of the BB project was to (1) maximize the validity of scores without sacrificing replicability, and (2) to maintain the ability to make comparisons of a particular nation's scores over time. The coding process assigns one numerical score to each country, each year, for each type of state-led brutality. CIRIGHTS project coders use detailed coding guidelines explicitly designed to be consistent with international human rights law to assign the scores (Cingranelli, Filippov and Mark 2021). Independent scholars have judged the CIRIGHTS coding guidelines for all four physical integrity rights as consistent with the provisions of international law (Satterwaite 2016, 526-528).

The lowest score for each right (ZERO) indicates violations of that right were widespread, occurring fifty or more times in a particular year. Other scores indicate some (ONE) or no violations (TWO). Intercoder reliability for the four physical integrity rights was above 80 percent for all years. The BB approach to identifying atrocities focuses on countries assigned scores of ZERO for each

of the four physical integrity rights. To be identified as an atrocity, a country must have a score of ZERO for killing plus a ZERO for one of the other three physical integrity rights variables. If this minimum criterion is not met, the country is coded as not experiencing an atrocity that year. If the “one more ZERO” criterion is met, the country is coded as experiencing a low intensity atrocity. Two more ZEROs merits categorization as a medium intensity atrocity and three more as a high intensity atrocity.

Knowing the exact numbers of victims of each type of brutality would be better, but the number of noncombatant people killed, tortured, disappeared, and politically imprisoned in a particular country each year is contested. Exact numbers or even ranges by different sources can be widely divergent and are often disputed. Thus, it is not surprising that USSD and AI human rights reports rarely include the actual numbers of victims. Instead, the reports signal many victims by using adjectives such as "gross," "widespread," "systematic," "epidemic," "extensive," "wholesale," "routine," "common" or "regular." Coders are instructed to assign scores of ZERO to each type of brutality each year if any of these or similar adjectives are used to describe state use of that type of brutality in either of the two human rights reports. We assume that the language used by the writers of the reports is adjusted to reflect the population size of the target country. Thus, when the term “widespread” is used in very large countries such as China and India, it means that there were probably hundreds or thousands of victims. For any country it is likely the use of an adjective such as “widespread” would mean that the actual number of those brutalized by the government significantly exceeded fifty. Most scores of ZERO are assigned because of the use of this kind of language by the writers of at least one of the reports consulted. Machine coding is particularly useful in identifying such cases.

The threshold of fifty events only becomes a meaningful coding criterion when less extreme adjectives such as "numerous,"



"many," "various," "dozens", or "multiple" are used. The meaning or numerical equivalent of such terms is unclear. In these less common cases, human coders must use judgement to decide whether to assign a score of ZERO or ONE. They are instructed to read more sections of the report, looking for language suggesting an established pattern of each type of state brutality. While in principle there is a potential data compression problem, where cases of fifty violations are scored the same as cases with five hundred, the problem rarely occurs in practice. In almost every case, a score of ZERO means that a general pattern of brutality exists of a particular type such as killing. Adding the "fifty or more" criterion for assigning a score of ZERO provided an explicit magnitude that coders could keep in mind when making judgements between a score of ZERO or ONE. Adopting the "fifty or more" threshold improved intercoder reliability and replicability. Governments prefer to hide their brutality, so the extrajudicial killings described in USSD and AI reports almost certainly represent the tip of a much larger iceberg.

One critique of using human rights reports to score country practices is the alleged "human rights information paradox" (Clark and Sikkink 2013). The proponents of this critique note that, on average, each country's report has gotten longer. As a result, the reports describe violations more extensively than before. The paradox is that the increase in information has led to the assignment of lower scores, but actual government practices have not worsened (Clark and Sikkink 2013; Fariss 2014). It is difficult to prove or disprove this contention. Additionally, there is some concern about a changing standard of accountability in the reports due to the emergence of new human rights issues and new forms of human rights abuse that lead to the assignment of lower scores (Fariss 2014). Recent work by Cordell et. al (2020) argues that the language and length of the USSD reports has changed over time for some rights but not for physical integrity rights, so the critiques affect physical integrity scores less, if at all. Other scholars have conducted

research showing that there is no convincing support for either critique (Haschke and Aaron 2020; Cingranelli and Filippov 2018; Haschke and Gibney 2017; Richards 2016).

### **A Closer Look at Atrocities in 2017**

Classification of atrocities by intensity level facilitates research on the factors leading to atrocity escalation and de-escalation. The BB definition allows for the generation of annual lists of atrocities, beginning in 1981, classified according to three levels of intensity. Categorizing atrocities into three levels of intensity makes it easier to build and test theories of atrocity escalation and de-escalation. Table 2 below classifies the twenty-nine BB atrocities in 2017 by their levels of intensity. The twenty-nine BB atrocities for 2017 were almost equally divided into the three categories of intensity.

Table 2: Brutality-Based Atrocities in 2017 Categorized by Intensity

<b><u>Low intensity</u></b>	<b><u>Medium Intensity</u></b>	<b><u>High Intensity</u></b>
Afghanistan	Burma/Myanmar	Bangladesh
China	Cameroon	Burundi
Dominican Republic	Colombia	Egypt
Ethiopia	Democratic Republic of the Congo	Iraq
India	Iran	Pakistan
Kenya	Israel	Russia
Nigeria	Libya	South Sudan
Philippines	North Korea	Sudan
South Africa	Rwanda	Syria
	Venezuela	Yemen

If one compares the atrocity lists produced by different atrocity identification projects, there is little agreement on the universe of cases or their intensities. This lack of consensus is an obstacle to theory development and policy evaluation in the subfield. This section compares the list of atrocities that occurred in 2017 according to the BB, Targeted Mass Killings (TMK), Holocaust Museum, and the Political Instability Task Force (PITF) Genocide/Politicide projects. Presenting lists compiled from multiple sources allows us to compare the set of atrocities that are generally agreed upon with those where there is less consensus. Since each list is based on a different definition of atrocity, we should expect different, but significantly overlapping, lists produced by the different research projects.

The Political Instability Task Force (PITF) State Failure Problem Set (Marshall et al. 2019) identifies genocides and politicides using the definition and guidelines set out by Harff and Gurr (1996). They define genocide and politicides as cases where authorities physically exterminate members of a target group to the point that it can no longer pose a threat. Target groups in genocides are defined by their communal characteristics, while those in politicides are defined by their political opposition. Cases are required to meet a six month period of physical destruction (or recurring shorter periods) in order to make their list. They do not set a minimum number killed to qualify as a genocide, but they only include cases where their estimate of annual deaths exceeded three hundred. Data was coded annually beginning in 1956 using a wide variety of sources.

The Early Warning Project (EWP) of the Holocaust Museum defines atrocities as instances of “large-scale, systematic violence against civilian populations” (Straus, 2016, 40). According to Straus (41), “mass atrocity” has no formal legal definition, but usually refers to genocide (as defined above), crimes against humanity, war crimes, and ethnic cleansing. The Early Warning Project’s

Statistical Risk Assessment (n.d.) project estimates the likelihood of a “mass killing” episode. They consider a mass killing episode to have occurred when the deliberate actions of armed groups, including but not limited to state security forces, rebel armies, and other militias, result in the deaths of at least one thousand noncombatant civilians targeted as part of a specific group over a period of one year or less. Thus, the EWP sets the highest minimum killing threshold.

Table 3 compares the lists produced by the four projects for 2017. Countries are listed in an order reflecting the number of lists on which they appeared in 2017. For example, Ethiopia, Iraq, Myanmar, and South Sudan are listed as the top four, because they were included in three of the four lists. The Central African Republic is listed last because it was only included on the PITF list. No country is included in all four project lists. All of the projects identified atrocities as occurring mostly in weak Asian, African, and Latin American states. The BB project methodology does identify a few stronger states such as Russia, China, and Israel. The BB list was expected to include nearly all TMK atrocities once the TMK killing threshold was set to fifty or more, the same as the threshold for BB atrocities, but the two lists are more dissimilar than we had expected. It was also expected that nearly all of the EWP and PITF cases would be included in the TMK and BB lists, but they are not. The BB methodology identified twenty-nine atrocity countries—all five countries listed by the TMK project, all nine countries listed by the EWP, and two out of the three countries listed by the PITF.

Table 3: Countries Identified as Having Atrocities by the Different Identification Projects in 2017

<b>Brutality-Based Atrocities</b>	<b>Targeted Mass Killings</b>	<b>PITF Genocide/Politicide</b>	<b>Early Warning Project</b>
Ethiopia	Ethiopia		Ethiopia
Iraq		Iraq	Iraq
Myanmar (Burma)	Myanmar (Burma)		Myanmar (Burma)
South Sudan	South Sudan		South Sudan
Dem. Republic of the Congo	Dem. Republic of the Congo		
Nigeria			Nigeria
North Korea			North Korea
Philippines			Philippines
Sudan			Sudan
Syria			Syria
Venezuela		Venezuela	
		Central African Republic	

**Countries Only Included on the BB List:** Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Burundi, Cameroon, China, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Egypt, India, Iran, Israel, Kenya, Libya, Pakistan, Russia, Rwanda, South Africa, and Yemen.

\*Note for the Early Warning Project we only include those countries where a state-led atrocity occurred.

Conceptual and operational definitions of atrocity matter. There is significant overlap between the BB atrocity list and the list produced by the other three projects. Except for the Central African Republic (CAR), the BB list included all the countries included on any other atrocity list. Nearly all atrocities identified by the TMK and other identification projects also make the BB atrocity list but many BB atrocities are absent from the lists produced by the TMK and other identification projects. The exclusion of so many countries from all other lists is surprising because both the US Department of State and Amnesty International reported that the government killed fifty or more noncombatants in 2017. There are other surprises in Table 3. Five of the BB *high intensity* atrocities were omitted from all of the other lists—Bangladesh, Burundi, Egypt, Pakistan, and Yemen. Seven countries that experienced twenty-five or more BB atrocity years between 1981 and 2019 (Figure 2), including China and India, were omitted from the other lists for 2017.

These omissions suggest that other identification projects pay less attention to longstanding atrocities. There are some highly publicized, longstanding atrocities left off other lists. For several decades, the Uighur Muslims and Tibetan Buddhists have been subject to brutal treatment by the Chinese government (Enze and Park 2014). According to the conservative estimate of the USSD Human Rights Report, in 2017 the Chinese government caused the deaths of 111 noncombatant civilians. In India, the 2017 USSD report and journalistic accounts also suggest that there has been a longstanding, state-led program of systematic brutality directed towards lower caste members, political opponents, and Muslims (Abi-Habib 2020).

The BB conceptual definition of atrocity requires that the killing be state-led. Application of this criterion resulted in the exclusion of only one country, the Central African Republic (CAR), where both the USSD and AI reports noted widespread brutality that was not state-led. The murders were described as having been primarily perpetrated by “armed rebel groups, particularly members of the various factions of ex-Seleka and anti-Balaka” (U.S. Department of State 2017, 2). The CAR was also excluded from all the 2017 lists except for the one produced by the PITF Genocide/Politicide project.

The Political Terror Scale (PTS) project is also relevant here. The project has never attempted to identify atrocities, but it annually provides scores for all countries on their political terror scale, another indicator identifying the most brutal states in the world. The PTS and CIRIGHTS data are similar in important ways. Like the BB atrocity identification project, the PTS project systematically analyzes the language of human rights reports concerning violations of physical integrity rights. Their goal is to identify states where citizens are experiencing the highest levels of “political terror.” Like the BB project, their coding rules are explicit, they apply their coding criteria to all countries every year, and their scores are replicable (Haschke and Gibney 2017; Wood and Gibney 2010). Therefore, data generated by the PTS project can be used to identify a list of countries each year where brutality and terror was extensive. The project assigns such countries a score of FOUR or FIVE on their five-point scale of political terror.

It should not be surprising that the countries identified as brutal by the PTS and BB atrocities projects are mostly consistent. This consistency provides important evidence that the BB methodology for identifying atrocities is valid. Over the 1981-2019 period, 86.4 percent of the countries that received a PTS score of FIVE and 65.8 percent of countries that received a PTS score of FOUR also were identified as experiencing a BB atrocity. As one would expect, countries with PTS scores of ONE, TWO or THREE rarely were



identified as having experienced a BB atrocity (Appendix Table B.3). After 1984, the PTS-generated annual lists include roughly five more countries each year as atrocities. For example, in 2017, the BB list of atrocities included twenty-nine countries listed in Table 2 below, while the PTS project identified thirty-four countries as scoring FOUR or FIVE.

The PTS-generated lists each year are different in other predictable and important ways from the lists generated using the BB and other atrocity identification methodologies. Specifically, the PTS project produces scores reflecting the overall ability of noncombatants to live lives free from terror. It does not separately score the extent each government uses each type of brutality. While all other definitions of an atrocity include widespread killing as a necessary criterion, the PTS project does not. A government could achieve a high political terror score only by specializing in other forms of brutality. For example, disappearances and political imprisonment were the tools of choice for Soviet bloc countries during the cold war, while killing was rare. The BB project also requires that the brutality be state-led, while the PTS project does not. Widespread brutality exercised by nonstate actors such as the Islamic militants or narco-traffickers also can produce a high PTS score.

### **Long-term Trends**

Understanding whether atrocities are increasing or decreasing in frequency has important implications for the development of atrocity theories and prevention policies. Many observers have claimed that the frequency of atrocities has declined (Fariss 2014; Gutierrez-Sanin and Wood 2017), but some disagree. Human Rights Watch (Bolonion 2018) recently argued that state-led atrocities have become the “new normal.” As was the case for identifying the governments of countries as perpetrators of atrocities, conclusions

about trends in atrocities crucially depend upon the definition of atrocity adopted. Figure 3 maps the frequency of atrocities for all countries in the world between 1981-2019 as identified by the BB, TMK, and PITF Genocide/Politicide identification projects. The y-axis consists of the number of countries experiencing an atrocity in a year, while the x-axis is marked by the year. All atrocities identified by each project are included regardless of intensity.

Figure 3: Brutality-Based, TMK, and PITF Episodes from 1981 to 2019

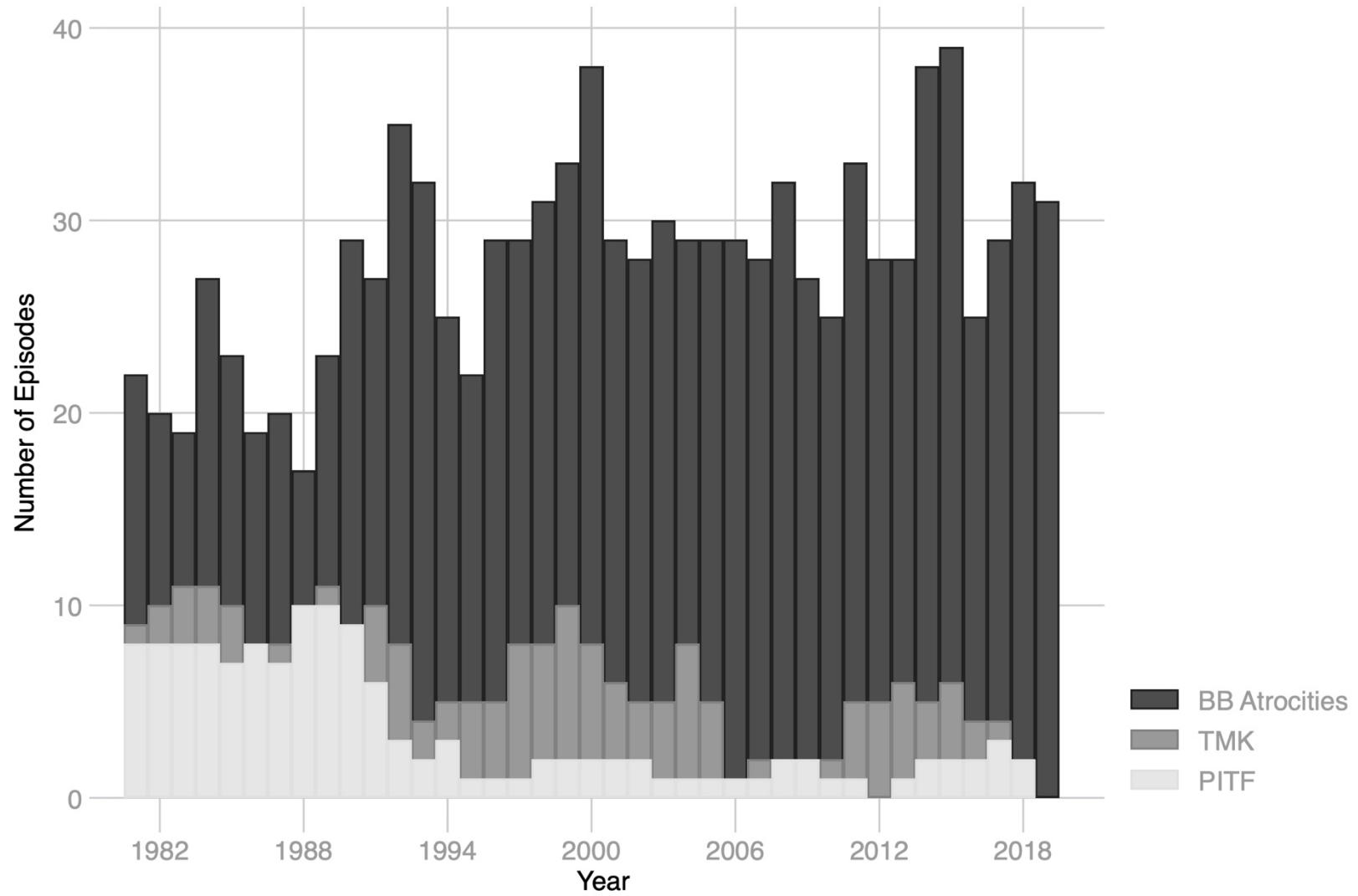
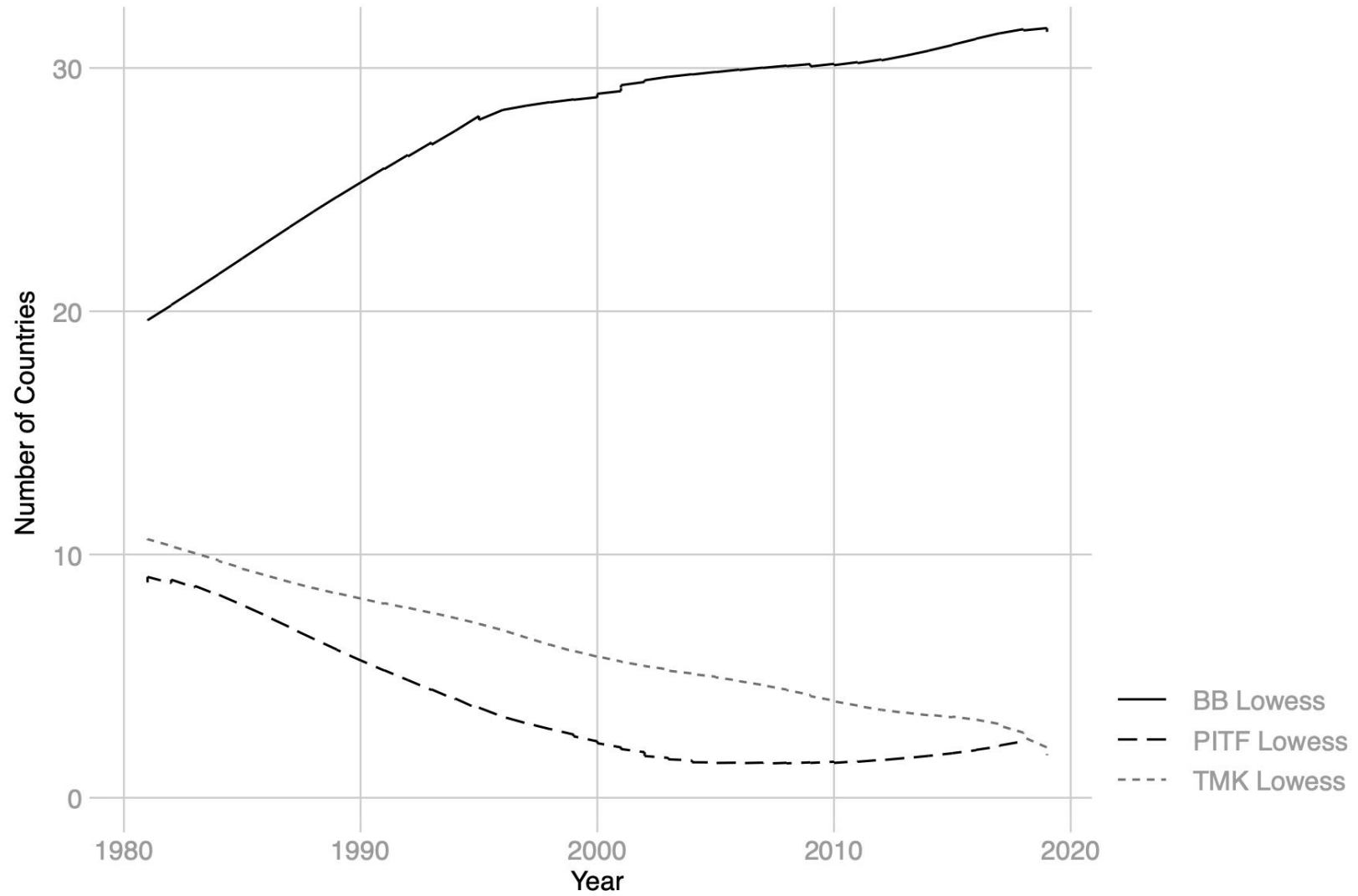


Figure 4: Smoothed Trends in Brutality-Based, TMK, and PITF Episodes from 1981-2019



As shown in Figures 3 and 4, according to the BB atrocity identification project, the frequency of atrocities has been increasing, supporting the “atrocities as the new normal” argument. Appendix Figure B1, which graphs trends in the frequency of PTS scores of FOUR and FIVE also shows a pattern of increasing terror over time. In contrast, the TMK and PITF projects both support the idea that the frequency of atrocities has declined over time.

### **Escalation and De-escalation**

Table 4 below categorizes all twenty-nine BB atrocities in 2017 by their changes in intensity between 2017 and 2018. Measures of changes in intensity are especially useful for evaluating policies designed to prevent, de-escalate, reduce the duration of, or heal from atrocities. The left column labeled “De-escalated” lists the two countries where atrocity status continued, but intensity declined (Cameroon, Iraq). In each case, the year-to-year decline was a magnitude of one level of intensity. Both countries were involved in violent internal conflicts, so these small improvements may have been temporary. In contrast, the decreased level of atrocity in Iraq from “high” to “medium” might have resulted from the continued reduction in the number of US troops stationed in Iraq, the decline in the activities of the Islamic State, or both. If the decline in atrocity intensity in Iraq continued into 2019 and 2020, then there may be lessons about atrocity prevention to be learned from that case. The second column labeled “Stayed the Same” lists the fourteen BB atrocity countries that continued their brutality in 2018 at their 2017 intensity levels. More than half (nine) of those countries continued as high intensity conflicts, showing that, once a country reaches the high intensity atrocity level, reducing the intensity of the atrocity is difficult (Karreth et al. 2020).

The third column labeled “Escalated” lists the nine countries where the intensity of atrocities worsened. In six of those countries, the increase from 2017 to 2018 was one level of intensity—low to medium or medium to high. In three cases (Afghanistan, China, and India), the increase in atrocity intensity was from low to high. The worsening quantitative scores of atrocity intensity in China and India are consistent with journalistic and NGO reports of increasing government brutality against Muslim minorities in both countries. The fact that both countries showed up on the BB low intensity atrocity list in 2017 but did not make any of the other atrocity identification lists that year shows the value of the BB approach to identifying state brutality at the low intensity stage.

Table 4: BB Atrocity Intensity Changes from 2017 to 2018

H = High (4), M = Medium (3), L = Low (2), K= Only Killing (1)

<b>De-escalated</b>	<b>Stayed the Same</b>	<b>Escalated</b>	<b>New</b>	<b>Ended</b>
Cameroon (M to L)	Dominican Republic (L)	Nigeria (L to M)	Indonesia (L)	Ethiopia (L to K)
Iraq (H to M)	Kenya (L)	Philippines (L to M)	Malawi (L)	Israel (L to K)
	Colombia (M)	Afghanistan (L to H)	Mexico (L)	Rwanda (L to K)
	Libya (M)	China (L to H)	Somalia (L)	South Africa (L to K)
	Venezuela (M)	India (L to H)	Eritrea (M)	
	Bangladesh (H)	Democratic Republic of the Congo (M to H)	Mali (M)	
	Burundi (H)	Iran (M to H)	Nicaragua (H)	
	Egypt (H)	Myanmar/Burma (M to H)		
	Pakistan (H)	North Korea (M to H)		
	Russia (H)			
	South Sudan (H)			
	Sudan (H)			
	Syria (H)			
	Yemen (H)			

The countries listed in the last two columns show that there was a net increase of three BB atrocities from 2017 to 2018. The fourth column labeled “New” lists the seven atrocities that occurred in 2018 that were not identified as atrocities in 2017. One might have expected that new cases would first appear as low intensity atrocities. However, in 2018 two (Eritrea and Mali) of the seven new atrocities first appeared as medium intensity atrocities, and one (Nicaragua) first appeared as high intensity atrocities. This is most likely because regimes use widespread violations of other physical integrity rights before they begin to engage in widespread killing. Over the period of the study, medium intensity atrocities were the modal type (See Appendix Table B2 and Figure B2). Whereas there were seven new atrocities in 2018, only four 2017 countries listed in the far-right column labeled “Ended” changed from “atrocities” to “no atrocities” status. In all four countries, widespread killing continued, but the widespread use of other forms of brutality stopped. This may indicate that atrocity prevention efforts were successful in those four countries.

The continuation of state killing but the lessening of use of other forms of brutality is inconsistent with the previous finding about the hierarchy and sequence of state violations of physical integrity rights. In these four instances, accusations of state brutality from the domestic and international communities did not lead the accused governments to shift their brutality from killing to other, less detectable types of brutality. The sequence may be different for de-escalation because, once widespread killing began, perpetrator governments had already paid their domestic and international accountability costs. Their incentives to stop killing may have been reduced.



## Discussion

Conceptual and operational definitions of atrocity matter for research and policy making. Each definition when applied generates a different universe of cases for analysis, leads to different pictures of atrocity frequency over time, and produces different results when evaluating theories about why atrocities occur, escalate, or deescalate. The application of each definition also is likely to lead to a different conclusion when assessing the effectiveness of alternative atrocity prevention policies. Presently, there is little consensus over the universe of atrocity cases or in many research findings about atrocities. As an example of an important difference in research findings, we showed that brutality-based (BB) atrocities have increased in frequency since 1981, while the frequency of atrocities identified by the Targeted Mass Killing (TMK) and other atrocity identification projects has decreased over the same period (Fariss 2014).

We contend that multiple forms of state-led brutality, not just targeted killing, should be considered when deciding which states are committing atrocities and which are not. The brutality-based (BB) conceptual definition of atrocity is rooted in the philosophy of human rights. More specifically, it is rooted in the idea that human rights to physical integrity are needed for people to maintain lives of human dignity: lives that are richer and more fully human. Emphasizing that atrocities result from a variety of types of brutality in addition to killing appropriately puts the spotlight on bad actor national governments that have been able to avoid the spotlight in the past. Brutal regimes able to escape the “atrocity” label often have been more capable states with greater influence in international affairs, which are more able to brutalize their populations without engaging in widespread killing.

To maintain consistency with previous definitions of atrocity, the BB definition of atrocity includes widespread state-led killing as a necessary, but not sufficient identification criterion. A focus on *state-led* killing and other forms of brutality is appropriate because

international human rights law makes national government responsible for protecting human rights. A focus on the state is also useful, because it brings the study of atrocity closer to the mainstream of research in political science and sociology. If the BB approach is widely adopted, comparative studies of human rights violations, especially the relationship between violations of human rights and internal conflict, will provide new, previously unexplored clues for theory building. Moreover, existing data measuring the scope of violations of various physical integrity rights annually can be used in a systematic, objective way to identify relevant cases. The same data and method also can be extended to classify cases by level of intensity, providing a straightforward way to measure, explain, and forecast atrocity duration, escalation, and de-escalation.

Besides definitional differences, subjectivity, an enemy of the scientific method, is another reason for the lack of consensus over atrocity cases. Subjectivity can enter the atrocity identification process when investigators choose among available sources of information which may disagree on important points such as the number of people killed or when they apply the “intent to target a group” criterion. Intent is notoriously difficult to authoritatively establish. Confirmation bias and the occasional influence of financial supporters may also influence the decision to identify any government as having committed an atrocity or to leave it off the list. Finally, subjectivity may lead investigators and policy makers to give too much attention to countries where brutality changes the most over the short term while ignoring countries where brutality has been the norm for many years.

Though complete objectivity is impossible, the BB identification method brings us closer. The intent of the perpetrators of other of brutality is irrelevant. The methodology requires systematically comparing the BB criteria against the accounts of state-led brutality provided in two widely respected human rights reports issued for every country of the world every year using content analysis. This

method produces lists that do not and cannot suffer from confirmation bias. Moreover, methodological transparency allows others the ability to exactly repeat the identification process, using the same data to produce the same annual lists. It also allows others, who accept the brutality-based argument, to conduct sensitivity analyses of the effects of changes in the identification criteria.

The findings and arguments presented in this article suggest additional research exploring the strategic decision-making approach to explaining and forecasting atrocities. Future research should examine the substitution hypothesis, which proposes that states prefer other types of brutality to widespread killing. Previous research has focused on the tendency by many states to substitute disappearances for killing. The evidence presented in this article demonstrating the frequency of widespread use of different types of brutality (Figure 1) and the Myanmar case example suggests that states may be increasingly substituting torture for killing. Future research should also examine the sequence hypothesis, which suggests that states are likely to engage in widespread torture, political imprisonment, and disappearances before they engage in widespread killing. The findings presented here are generally consistent with this hypothesis, but also suggest the possibility that the sequence of escalation may be different from the sequence of de-escalation.

Focusing on multiple forms of state brutality also aids atrocity prevention in several ways. Research showing a sequence of violations of physical integrity rights supports the hypothesis that states engaging in widespread torture, political imprisonment, or disappearances are at highest risk of perpetrating widespread killing and, therefore, of achieving BB atrocity status. Thus, the BB approach can be used to develop a predictive or warning system for when a country experiencing an atrocity is going to rise in intensity, thereby putting it “on the radar” of policy makers. By identifying low intensity atrocities, the BB approach enables the study of interventions likely to prevent escalation. Studying changes in atrocity intensity is crucial for discovering interventions that work.

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