

There is a place where the police apologize when they kill an armed man.

By [James W. McCarty III](#)

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And [that place is Iceland](#). On December 2 the police in Iceland shot and killed a man for the first time since it became an independent republic in 1944.

I first learned about this story while following closely a then-developing story near my childhood home. Last week, [a man died](#) during a shootout with a SWAT team on a street I have traveled many times. This is not the only time police have shot someone or been shot at in the place I called home for many years. Every time I drive to my in-laws' home I pass a coffee shop where, just a few years ago, several policeman were killed by a man who was eventually killed by police in Seattle. In fact, if the [running list on Wikipedia](#) of people killed by police in the US this year is any indication, roughly one person is killed by police per day in the U.S.

I have known too much violence in my life as a citizen of the United States. How do I know? My only reaction while following last week's developing story was, "Again?"

And then the headline about Iceland came up on my computer screen and I was shaken out of my complacency.

There is a place in the world where people being shot to death by the police is not a daily occurrence. There is a place in the world where people do not shrug off the killing of another person, or assume the worst of their now-dead fellow citizen, but mourn. There is a place in the world where the police apologize that such a tragedy occurred.

Can you even imagine such a place?

Marc Champion has [suggested several reasons](#) for why Iceland's rate of people killed by the police is so much lower than ours. He has suggested that relatively little income inequality, strict gun laws, and low drug abuse might be among them. And there is merit to such analyses. Great income inequality, for example, exacerbates violent crime and, therefore, violent police responses to such crime. However, Champion overlooks cultural reasons for the lack of police violence.

[I've written before](#) about how the United States has a problem with violence rooted in our own cultural myths. Something that stood out to me in the reporting about the killing in Iceland is that many citizens responded by saying something like, "This is like a scene out of an American movie." For them, people being killed by the police is more fantasy than reality. For us, it is a mundane occurrence.

We, Americans, are a violent people. We took this land through violence, and we have maintained our global power through violence. We have one of the highest violent crime rates in the world. [1.3 million women](#) are victims of domestic violence every year. The violent crime rate in the US is [more than twice that of Iceland](#). Five hundred people were murdered in Chicago in 2012. Three hundred-eighty were killed [through November of this year](#).

How can we unlearn violence? There is no one solution. As a social ethicist, I am convinced that reducing income inequality, combatting our residential segregation based on class and race, bettering educational opportunities for poor children, and changing our approach to drug crime are important institutional changes that can make a large impact. However, we also need a deeper change. We need a change in culture, a collective change in character. We need a conversion.

As long as we believe and live into the American myths of manifest destiny and "look out for number one" and rugged individualism and racism and our moral purity and a host of other myths, we will continue to be violent toward one another. We will continue to believe that violence is redemptive. It is not. It is killing us.

*Originally posted at [McCarty's blog](#)*