

# Lynching

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Category: Chapter **Abstract** **Flowing Text**

## I. Definition

Lynching may be defined as an illegal killing by a group acting on the basis or the pretext of service to publicly held values. This definition is based on one adopted at a conference of leading organizations concerned with American lynching held in 1940 at the Tuskegee Institute, now University ([Waldrep \[2000\] \*passim\*](#)). Neither my nor Tuskegee's definition, which spoke of a group as usually three or more persons, refers to race; the great majority of mob killings around the world have been same-race, even same-village or same-family.

The words 'lynching' and 'lynch law' emerged from the American Revolution, when Judge Charles Lynch of Virginia 'presided over extra-legal courts claiming to fight lawlessness in general and Loyalist conspiracies in particular' ([Berg and Wendt \[2011\] 2](#); see also → [Law and Order](#)). The word 'lynch' has spread from English to other languages: Spanish, for instance, uses *linchamiento*, while the Russian term is *sud lincha* (the court of lynching). The linguistic origins of the act and its borrowing by other languages helped to establish the idea that lynching was a peculiarly American phenomenon (→ [USA](#)), but recent studies have shattered that notion ([Berg and Wendt \[2011\]](#); [Godoy \[2006\]](#); [Welsh \[2008\]](#); [Siegel \[2006\]](#); [Pfeifer \[2017\]](#); [Thurston \[2011\]](#)).

The manner of death does not matter; group homicides have been inflicted by rope, fire, gunshot, drowning or simply beating. Most frequently, mobs have killed by hanging. Using a rope slung over a tree limb or lamppost by no means guarantees a quick death and does not mimic a legal execution. An experienced, official hangman calculates the 'drop' of a body from a platform by its weight. The object is to break the person's neck immediately without ripping the head from the body. When amateurs have hanged people, the victim usually strangles to death – a form of torture (→ [Torture and Ill-Treatment](#)), perhaps unintentional, which could last for twenty to thirty minutes. In some cases, the process has been accelerated by shooting people as they dangle in the air. Beyond these relatively simple means of killing, elaborate rituals and tortures have characterized lynching in many cases around the world. Mutilation of bodies after death has been all too common in some areas.

Danielle F Jung and Dara Kay Cohen find that lynching 'is a persistent problem in dozens of countries over the last four decades'. They add that 'support for lynching most likely occurs in one of three conditions: when states fail to provide governance, when non-state actors provide social services, or when neighbours must rely on self-help' ([Jung and Cohen \[2020\] Summary](#); → [Crime and Criminal Law \(Theories on\)](#)). To this idea should be added that when politics and government are in flux and people are anxious about what kind of rule will emerge, they may take 'justice' into their hands (→ [Privatization of Criminal Justice](#)).

No matter what analyses of lynching are offered, it is always a grotesque crime. Every victim (→ [Victim and Victimology](#)) has been denied even the semblance of a serious judicial procedure. Lynching is a heinous act. Nothing in this article should be taken to suggest otherwise. Wherever it occurs, lynching is supposedly intended to serve public interests, among which may be racial prejudice, but not private interests. For example, if one man kills another in a dispute over money, that is a homicide in violation of publicly held values. The clearest public interest to be served by a mob killing is the removal from society of an ostensibly dangerous person, who has committed, in the minds of the group members, a serious crime. Thus, counting any death as a lynching requires trying to enter the mob leaders' minds to discern their motivation.

Examining lynching globally provides important perspectives beyond race on American lynching, although numerous studies showed decades ago that the rate of lynching per Black resident in the United States varied widely from state to state, or even within states. Something besides race was clearly involved in producing these differences. Especially considering lynching in countries like Guatemala or Indonesia, the question of race in American mob murders begins to appear as one factor among several, albeit the most important one in a large majority of cases. While race must always figure strongly in any discussion of lynching in America, other human or situational issues that have fostered or discouraged the crime also deserve serious attention.

That people in a mob believed they were performing a service to the general public seems absolutely clear in some cases, particularly in the American 'spectacle' lynchings, which involved numerous direct actors and hundreds or even thousands of spectators. Although it has become common to insist that such lynchings were the norm, they were relatively rare among all cases ([Bailey and Tolnay \[2015\] \*passim\*](#); [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People \[NAACP\] \[1919\] 12–31](#)). When they did occur, they were horrible indeed. An especially notorious case of this kind was the slow torture and execution of Henry Smith in Paris, Texas in 1893. He was accused of the rape (→ [Sexual Offences](#)) and murder of a four-year-old girl. A photograph of the scene in a pamphlet published shortly after the incident shows relatives of the dead girl tormenting Smith with red-hot irons while thousands watched ([Anonymous \[1893\] 1, 8, 9, 34](#)). Smith was bound on a platform raised high enough for spectators to see; on the side of the structure 'Justice' was written in large letters.

## II. Issues and problems in counting incidents

Various problems plague efforts to count lynchings in the United States. The usual total figure for incidents from 1882 through 1968 is 4742, among them 3445 Black victims and 1297 'whites' ([Zangrando \[1980\] 4–7](#)). The year 1882 was the first for which anyone tried to count all American lynchings; that was an effort by the *Chicago Tribune*, based on newspaper reports it gathered that contained the word 'lynching'. The *Tribune* published an annual tally from 1882 through 1914. No official agency has ever tried to keep track of lynchings (→ [Evidence and Proof \(General Principles\)](#)). Eventually, the *Tribune* transferred its files to Tuskegee University.

The 'whites' in what is now called 'the Tuskegee figures' included some American Indians and Asian-Americans, who were hardly considered white in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. When the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was founded in 1909, the organization largely took over the task of tracking mob murder.

Some group killings listed at Tuskegee as lynchings do not, on re-examination, fit the definition. Several incidents in Virginia, for instance, appear to be private vengeance, not of service to any public values. These homicides were certainly illegal and were carried out by groups, but the long time lag, sometimes several years, between the alleged initial wrongdoing and the murder of the accused person suggests private motives rather than service to the public ([Brundage \[1993\] 18–19, 28](#)). Newspaper reports of mob action are sometimes vague not only about what exactly happened but even on whether someone was actually killed (see the Lynching Violence website, maintained by [Amy Kate Bailey and Stewart E Tolnay](#)).

There have been numerous efforts to show a larger death toll; it appears that many more Mexicans or Mexican Americans in Texas should be added to the total ([Carrigan and Webb \[2013\]](#)). Other studies, notably one by the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI), would boost the number of African American victims. The EJI maintains, for example, that in Phillips County, Arkansas, 245 Black people were lynched ([Equal Justice Initiative \[2021\]](#)). This number would be huge for any county in the US; it is vastly greater than the toll that the EJI or anyone else provides for neighbouring counties. The Phillips County figure has largely to do with a bloody incident in the summer of 1919, when African American farmers who had protested against low wages and poor conditions exchanged gunfire with white citizens and Army units. The fight was grotesquely unequal. While reportedly five whites died, probably at least 200 Black people died in what is generally called a massacre. There has never been a full accounting of the deaths ([Uenuma \[2018\]](#)).

Across the US, 1919 was a tumultuous year: a police strike took place in Boston; bombs went off in Washington, DC; and a bloody race riot erupted on Chicago's South Side. An air of anxiety about 'Reds' hung over the country, which helped to make violence more common than in the preceding or following years.

The difficulty with counting the Arkansas deaths of 1919 in the total of American lynching is that it opens the door to considering as lynchings any killing by whites, or for that matter by police or private detectives like the Pinkertons, say of American Indians at Wounded Knee in 1890, of white strikers in 1877 and 1894, and so on. Massacres and riots on the one hand and lynching on the other have different roots, dynamics and endings; the two categories need to be kept separate.

Attempts to count lynchings in specific states often differ (cf. Tuskegee and [Historical American Lynching](#) (HAL) for Arkansas 1882–92; Tuskegee (in [Zangrando \[1980\]](#)); [HAL](#) and [Brundage \[1993\]](#) for Georgia, 1882–92; [Bailey and Tolnay](#)). Yet by and large, the figures from Tuskegee are still accepted as generally valid for the United States, or at least as providing the most useful framework for thinking about when, where and how lynching occurred, including the rise and fall of the crime. The Tuskegee numbers are used in HR (House of Representatives Resolution) 55, introduced on 4 January 2021, a bill to 'specify lynching as a hate crime' ([House of Representatives \[2021\]](#); → [Hate Crimes](#)).

### III. Theories of causation vs. contingencies in lynching

Several broad theories about the background and broad causes of American lynchings have been suggested, among them the low or fluctuating price of cotton ([Tolnay and Beck \[1995\]](#)), frustration-aggression theory ([Raper \[1933\]](#)), and a psychological transfer to Black men of white men's guilt about their rapes of Black women held as slaves ([Williamson \[1984\]](#); → [Function of the Criminal Law](#)). Donald G Matthews argues that Sam Hose, burned alive by a huge mob in rural Georgia in 1899, died in such a gruesome way because white male Protestants believed Hose had committed a heinous crime; their particularly vehement enthusiasm for his torture/murder grew out of a brand of vengeful Christianity, which cried out for a severe punishment to restore justice and balance in the world ([Matthews \[2018\]](#)).

Each of these ideas may well have figured in individual cases, although no clear and direct evidence connects any of them with specific lynchings. Each theory falls short of explaining lynching across the South and its variations over time and region, let alone across America or around the world. The price of cotton in the US moved up and down quite a bit from the 1870s on, yet lynching did not closely follow cotton, if at all. Frustration-aggression in bad economic times may have been behind the slight rise in lynchings during the early years of the Depression, but the numbers fell again by 1936. The theory does not work well for lynching during the severe economic 'panics' of 1894 or 1907, when the numbers continued to fall. No evidence exists for the purely speculative, Freudian idea of guilt transfer; in any event, the lynchings of the 1890s were the sons or grandsons of slave owners, not the owners themselves who by reputation often raped their human chattel (→ [Slavery](#)). The white South did live and die by a code of honour ([Wyatt-Brown \[1986\]](#)), but it flourished much more in the countryside, where people knew each other by family and reputation. A large mob of white Southern Protestants applauded Sam Hose's death, but other men of the same background despised and opposed lynching, as we shall see. 'Terror' lynching has become a common term in recent literature ([Equal Justice Initiative](#); [Public Broadcasting System \[2003\]](#); [Anderson Area Remembrance \[2021\]](#)); photos of whites apparently smiling up at murdered Black men are invoked to solidify the point ([Allen and others \[2000\]](#)). However, most men and children in such photos look fully serious or grim, and a smile can be an all-purpose expression available to cover a wide range of feelings, including embarrassment and shame.

Because lynching was highly erratic across the United States, any fear that it produced among the Black population would also have been highly uneven. Of Southern counties, 34.4 per cent never experienced a lynching ([Tolnay and Beck \[1995\] 45](#)), whether many Black people lived

there or not. Other counties had one or a few lynchings. South Carolina and Mississippi both had majority Black populations in 1880–1940, were overwhelmingly rural, and had agricultural economies. Yet, the rate of lynching per Black resident was twice as high in Mississippi as it was in South Carolina. In Louisiana, lynching was far more frequent in some cotton-growing areas than in others ([Pfeifer \[1999\]](#)). Mob killings occurred much less often per Black resident in former border slave states such as Maryland and Delaware than happened in the Deep South. Virginia had many fewer cases than did Georgia, not to mention Mississippi and Texas. In various parts of the rural South, whites and Blacks lived in relative harmony throughout the worst years of lynching, although African Americans always had to be careful in their behaviour and demeanour. This was true, for example, of Hancock County, Georgia, which recorded one mob murder ([Schultz \[1994\]](#) and [\[2005\]](#)).

Fear of lynching among African Americans surely drove some to migrate north. However, a number of eye-witness accounts of African Americans who knew of or witnessed lynchings did not indicate fear that they or their neighbours might be next ([Thurston \[2011\] 131–5](#)). When the idea appears in signs on bodies or otherwise in the sources that a lynching served to keep a segment of society 'in its place', it was invariably *after* a lynching. Such messages said 'Don't commit crimes', especially serious ones. No evidence has appeared that indicates any lynching was planned to terrorize Blacks. Again, lynching around the world has targeted alleged perpetrators of specific crimes, rarely trivial but much more typically of rape, murder, witchcraft, or presenting a threat to public order and solidarity.

The broad socio-economic ideas just mentioned cannot explain why 1892 was the peak year for lynching, when the American economy was relatively good, or why the number of incidents fell sharply until 1919. Nor do these theories take account of the particular factors that helped to produce lynchings, such as the alleged combination of rape and murder, sometimes of a young child or an elderly woman. None of the sociological or psychological theories can explain why mob killings in the US were – as they still are around the world – overwhelmingly rural. Even a reference to racial prejudice, which does much to explain why almost three-quarters of known victims in America were Black, does not help in understanding why lynching declined, with exceptional years, so much after 1892, while racism continued unabated. Among other issues, social class was important; it figured in the killing of Hose, a farm labourer.

Lynching did not serve to block African Americans from buying land, running their own businesses, migrating to the North, or even migrating into parts of the South where mob murders had occurred, such as Sabine County, Texas (to be sure, Black people were sometimes cheated out of the land or homes they had purchased). In two cases in which well-to-do Black men were killed – Anthony Crawford in South Carolina and Jerome Wilson in Mississippi in 1935 – their deaths followed violence between them and whites, including the death of a white deputy sheriff in the second case ([Finnegan \[1998\]](#); [Bond and Bond \[1997\]](#)). Before the killing of Wilson, Blacks and whites in the area had 'close relations', including calling each other by their first names and sitting down to eat meals together ([Bond and Bond \[1997\] 62, 135](#)). The violence that preceded the deaths of Crawford and Wilson does not in any way justify the lynchings, but it indicates that the victims were killed for a reason other than their economic success. During the wartime summer of 1918, an incident in Vicksburg, Mississippi also raises the issue of social class. A white man and a Black man, both tarred and feathered on the charge of disloyalty to the US government, were taken by whites to the town square. There the two, a white farmer and a Black physician educated in the North, received the same treatment; in effect, both were charged with impugning the honour of the town. How could a Black man have honour in the South? But the doctor, John Miller, did have honour in the eyes of Vicksburgers. As the historian J William Harris writes about the incident, 'class can be important – sometimes very important – in defining its [race's] contours'. Miller and the farmer, Dave Cook, received equal, violent treatment at the hands of a mob. Cook, incidentally, had 'mulatto' children with an African American woman ([Harris \[1995\]](#)). In the Vicksburg case and in the area where Jerome Wilson was killed, white men had consensual sexual relations and children with Black women, and no one seemed to care much.

A Sabine, Texas newspaper warned 'Worthless Blacks' to leave the area in 1907 ([Fort Worth Star-Telegram \[2005\]](#)), while 'industrious colored citizens' drew praise in Jackson, Mississippi ([The Clarion Ledger \[1890\]](#)). The Black middle and upper classes grew steadily in Atlanta from the 1880s on; the race riot of 1906 found numerous whites, including judges, who acted to defend their Black neighbours and to denounce the riot. In the South, race relations turned to a fair degree on the social status of African Americans. Race riots, such as in Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1921, certainly destroyed Black lives and property. The roots of the Tulsa events and the difference between them and the Atlanta riot need further investigation.

The occurrence of Black-on-Black lynchings in the US also undermines theories of white social control, vehement Protestant feeling, and other broad explanations. After 1882, these same-race killings, while far fewer in number than white-on-Black incidents, rose overall, although with some ups and downs, roughly paralleling the rise in all lynchings. The Black-on-Black cases peaked in the same year that white lynchings did: 1892, at 13. Then, except for the anomalous year 1901 (ten cases), the average number slain annually by Black mobs moved up and down but overall fell to single digits: to two in 1900 and one in 1902 ([Tolnay and Beck \[1995\] 30](#); [Thurston \[2011\] 35–6](#)). The uncertainty of social and political life in the late nineteenth century and the migration of many African Americans within the South, who were strangers to more settled Black folk, surely had something to do with the willingness of Black people to mob their own kind.

## IV. Lynching as an effort to deal with perceived criminals

However we define or try to understand lynching, it must be described as an effort to deal with a perceived individual criminal or small group of criminals. The alleged offence of the victim may be particularly vicious, as in the rape and murder of a little girl attributed to Henry Smith, or minor or 'trivial', a word often used to categorize some American lynchings. Theft of a chicken, wearing clothes that offend a community, writing a letter to a 'white girl', the mere accusation of stealing something inexpensive in a Nigerian marketplace: these have all served to spark mob murder ([Abani, \[2004\]](#); → [Nigeria](#)). Most lynchings in Guatemala during the 1990s were for small property thefts ([Godoy \[2006\] 18](#)). A Haitian focus group member told interviewers: 'If we see someone steal something small, we know that he might steal something bigger than that in the future'. Thus lynching can be both → [restorative justice](#) and an attempt to deter future, more serious crime ([Jung and Cohen \[2020\] section 1.2](#)).

Mob murders did take place in America for ostensibly trivial reasons, for example, 'not turning out of road for white boy in auto', although no place, time or source is given for the incident ([NAACP \[1919, 1969\] 6](#)). Once again, the documentation of any lynching, whether in newspaper reports, communications to officials or memoirs, can be obscure; but a close examination of incidents in Texas found that 'lynching for trivial causes shrinks to very minor proportions' ([Ross \[1983\] 273](#)). It is also difficult to take some documented cases of lynching at face value, such as the killing of a Black man by a Black mob at Pine Level, North Carolina in 1908 for 'giving poor entertainment' ([Raper \[1933\] 37](#)). We do not know the background of a lynching for 'indecent remarks' in 1889. The vast majority of lynchings in the US took place following accusations of serious crimes. Above all, murder, or rape and murder, occupy first place as 'causes'. Arson was another common charge. However, always a specific accusation was attached to a specific person or small group.

Lynchings anywhere go after those persons directly accused of wrongdoing; here is the difference between lynching and a race, ethnic or religious riot, in which a group is targeted for its skin colour or other shared characteristic. Any attack by members of one group against members of another, regardless of what they have done, falls under the general term '*pogrom*'. A lynching may turn into a pogrom, but rarely if ever on a large scale.

Wherever they lived, Black people who enjoyed some stability, those who owned property or were well educated, do not appear to have been especially problematic in white eyes. Married African American men who were heads of households were much less vulnerable than single Black men ([Bailey and Tolnay \[2015\] 108](#); → [Profiling](#)). Across the South, land ownership among

African Americans rose steadily beginning in the 1880s. In a poor region, whites were eager to sell land for the best price they could get; of course, discrimination in real estate sales remained strong in many parts of the country, but less prevalent in rural areas. Southern white spokespersons, even some who had sharply denigrated Blacks in the past, applauded the rise of education and property ownership among them by the early twentieth century (cf. [Bruce \[1889\]](#), with his statements approving Black land ownership and education [\[1905\] 21](#)). Virginia banks became eager to lend money to Black clients.

Rural or small-town settings have been common for lynching for several reasons. First, mob killing requires a sense of community and shared values among the perpetrators. They often knew and understood, or thought they did, each other on a face-to-face basis (as in the case of a late white-on-white lynching in Missouri ([Washington Post \[1981\]](#)). The similar locus of mob killings around the world further suggests that social control was not the object; otherwise, lynching would have been at least as common in urban areas.

The overwhelmingly rural location of mob killing has also resulted partly from a low level of police and even government presence, promoting the idea among local residents that they have to take the law into their own hands. Before Southern police had cars or, much better yet, cars with radios and good roads to move on, a county sheriff might have taken hours to get to the scene of an alleged crime. Brooks County, Georgia, the scene of lynchings in 1918, covers an area of 498 square miles, or about 1290 square kilometres. It would have been unusual for residents to see any sort of government or law enforcement official. At the time of the murders, few decent roads existed in the county, and hard-surfaced roads were almost non-existent ([Georgia Roads](#)). When the white man Leo Frank was lynched in 1915, a white mob kidnapped him from a state prison farm in Milledgeville, Georgia. A caravan of cars took all night to go about 118 miles (191 kilometres) through east central Georgia to the spot designated for his death, in downtown Marietta. Daylight caught the group on the outskirts of the town, and the mob had to settle for murdering Frank there.

During the first quarter of the twentieth century, roads and communications improved greatly in the US. Police could react far more quickly to a charge of crime, making local residents more confident that official help would come soon. However, in more than a few cases, lawmen turned prisoners over to mobs or arranged to be conveniently 'ambushed' by a group, which then took the victim away to be murdered. In such instances, the elected sheriff either shared the mob's zeal to kill or feared failure in the next election, or possibly even violence from local white citizens. Nonetheless, these cases declined along with the general rate of lynching.

## **V. Political instability as background**

Another basic factor in provoking lynching in the first place, especially when waves of it occurred, as in Guatemala and Indonesia but also in the US South, has been political instability. When governmental authority is in question or has suddenly changed in nature or intensity, people feel more of a need to react to crime on their own. White Southerners had to construct new modes of behaviour and interaction with freed Black people after the Civil War. The development of new rules, laws and customs involved a great deal of white violence against African Americans, which can be called terrorism. The Jim Crow laws of the South were not well established until the 1890s or early 1900s; segregated rail cars, for example, became required in Louisiana only in 1890. New and unusual movement of people, especially of African Americans looking for work, added to the sense of uncertainty. Who were these strangers?

Ironically, the Jim Crow system, which was much firmer in towns than in the countryside, at least provided whites with a veneer of clarity about the political and racial situation. During the 1890s, the new laws and degrees of separation were just taking hold. However degrading Jim Crow was to African Americans, it did provide its own kind of stability and predictability for race relations. Lynching in the South was more a failure of Jim Crow than its application; after all, the codified separation of the races was intended to keep them apart and to maintain peace between them, however demeaning it was to African Americans.

The Tuskegee figures for ten-year intervals beginning with 1892 show that in that year, 69 whites and 161 Blacks were lynched. In 1902, the numbers were 7 and 85; 1912: 7 and 60; 1922: 6 and 51.

The toll of lynched African Americans rose during the tense years during and after the First World War when, by various accounts, fear among whites of trained, Black ex-soldiers increased the violence. The total of African Americans lynched was 36 in 1917, 60 in 1918 and 76 in 1919. It was not until 1936 that the number fell below ten, never to reach double digits again. The big story, though, is the overall decline of lynching; the number of Black deaths in 1912 was about 37 per cent of the 1892 toll; the 1922 number was 32 per cent, despite the large growth of the Black and the white populations in the South. In short, the relative incidence of lynching fell especially dramatically ([Zangrando \[1980\]](#)).

Black-on-Black lynchings fairly closely followed the curve of white-on-Black incidents. The trend of mob killings within the Black community likely followed that of all lynchings because African Americans, like their white neighbours, felt uneasy about the ability of any authority to deal with crime. In a time of great political uncertainty, Black residents, especially in rural areas, also took the law into their own hands. This pattern applies to same-race actions in Guatemala, Indonesia, and isolated villages of India. American Black-on-Black lynchings further undermine the notion that the crime was a means of racial control.

Outside the United States, other problems have fostered outbreaks of lynching. Even the end of a particularly repressive regime could set off mob murder. As the civil war in Guatemala wound down by 1996, uncertainty grew about who would run the country and what form a new government would take. The hideous expectation that 'men with guns' – as a movie title has it ([Men with Guns, dir. John Sayles \[1997\]](#)) – would arrive to enforce a version of order, sometimes through mass murder, disappeared. Left to themselves, indigenous communities began to act on their own to deal with perceived criminals or even those whose behaviour or clothing seemed to challenge local strictures. Again, such murders took place in rural, face-to-face communities. Ordinary residents of Haiti and Guatemala have shown widespread support for lynching ([Godoy \[2006\] 31](#); [Jung and Cohen \[2020\] section 1.2](#)).

Mob murder can rise and fall quickly. As the Suharto regime began to collapse in Indonesia in 1997, a sense of unease grew about political instability and the ability of the government to accomplish much of anything. A storm of lynching broke out in 1998–99 as villagers accused each other of witchcraft. These acts often involved mutilation of bodies and their display in public for days after death ([Siegel \[2006\]](#); [Welsh \[2008\]](#)). Certainly the killings were intended to intimidate part of the populace, but the message – as it has been in some African cases ([Ogembo \[1997\]](#); for more recent cases, [Luzerner Zeitung \[2021\]](#)) – was 'do not commit witchcraft'. The Indonesian episode has not reoccurred.

In Guatemala, Indonesia, and to some extent in → [South Africa](#), political stability has more or less returned. In Kenya, the factors that produced a spate of lynching in 1992, among them a malaria epidemic and the initial spread of AIDS, faded in importance. Violence in the country hardly ended then, but it has more often taken the form of ethnic attacks. In any case, lynching has sharply declined in those countries.

## VI. The decline of American lynching

In the campaign to end American lynching, the efforts of Black activists like Ida B Wells reached the consciences of some whites, particularly those who helped to found and support the NAACP. Yet, Wells was not often mentioned in white, mainstream newspapers (as searched in the *New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *Cincinnati Enquirer*, 1890–1930); nor is she credited in these papers with speaking to white audiences. More influential were the words and deeds of white leaders. Governor WJ Northen of Georgia, in office 1890–94, and Thomas Goode Jones, who headed the Alabama state militia (1876–94) and then served as governor (1890–94), tried to stop lynching in their states ([Thurston \[2011\] 118–19](#)). 'Pitchfork' Ben Tillman, the rabidly racist governor of South Carolina in those same years, reportedly did a dance in his office whenever he

heard about a lynching; but behind the scenes, he repeatedly demanded that sheriffs protect prisoners and called out the state militia to assist them. Tillman 'walked a tightrope between the mob and the state' ([Kantrowitz \[2000\] 156](#)). That is, he had a public face about lynching which catered to the worst instincts of white voters. He also had a responsibility to preserve law and order in South Carolina; mobs, many white leaders understood, presented a direct challenge to law, which might grow into even stronger action against authority and its chief agents, the white elite. In 1915, Georgia Governor Nathaniel E Harris deplored the 'wave of lawlessness that seems to be spreading through the State. Mob law should never take the place of statute law. There will be no safety to life, liberty, or property until this is recognized by our people' ([New York Times \[1915\]](#)).

At times, a keen sense of injustice also figured in the actions of Southern leaders. Perhaps the best exemplar of this stance was Georgia governor Hugh Manson Dorsey. A pamphlet he published in 1921 listed many abuses of 'the Negro' in his state, including lynchings. Dorsey also helped with the prosecution of a white farmer who had murdered or ordered the deaths of Black labourers on his land ([Dorsey \[1921\]](#)). Dorsey had been strongly influenced by his mother. According to Will Alexander – another white leader who felt great sympathy for African Americans in the South, and who was a founding member of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation in 1919 – Dorsey's mother 'had been one of those Methodist women who had grown up in this sort of anteroom that the women had in the Methodist Church, with freedom and liberty to think and act' ([Alexander \[n.d.\] 200–201A](#)). Southern Protestantism could move people to act for justice as well as to lynch.

In numerous cases, white American officials tried hard, sometimes successfully, to stop mobs. In the grim year of 1892, Roanoke, Virginia found the mayor, Henry Trout, and the local militia resisting a mob to the extent of firing upon it, killing eight and wounding others. Trout was shot in the foot. He then left town. Unfortunately, even the deaths did not deter the lynchers, who finally found and killed Thomas Smith, a Black man accused of robbing and beating a white woman; but when Mayor Trout returned to Roanoke days later, a large and enthusiastic crowd of well-wishers greeted him ([Thurston \[2011\] 44–5](#)).

A sheriff from Alabama, Sam Reeves, risked his life in 1899 to cross into Georgia and take charge of a Black prisoner. Dodging mobs for several days, Reeves returned with his prisoner to Pike County, Alabama. Eventually Reeves took this suspect and one more back through Georgia to Atlanta, where a grand jury freed them.

In that same year, a former governor of Georgia, William Y Atkinson, went to the town square at Newnan and tried hard to dissuade whites gathered there to lynch Sam Hose. Atkinson even threatened to swear out warrants against some in the crowd whom he knew. In July 1903, the 18-year-old daughter of a sheriff in South Carolina held off a mob with a rifle. The jailer of Paris, Kentucky shot and killed a mob leader, called a prominent citizen, in September 1914. Sheriff Sherman Ely of Lima, Ohio was nearly beaten to death by a mob in August 1916. Angry whites had demanded to know the whereabouts of a Black prisoner. Mayor Edward P Smith of Omaha refused in 1919 to cater to a mob and was hauled up on a rope tossed over a trolley wire until he became unconscious. At the last possible moment, police rescued him. A mob killed the sheriff of Winnsboro, South Carolina in June 1915. More cases of white resistance to mobs intent on killing Black people could be added.

Besides the efforts of leading whites to prevent lynching, the advance of 'civilization' seems to have reduced mob murder. A new dedication to the → [rule of law](#) among the elite increased police presence and better communications; a turn to greater use of legal capital punishment (→ [Death Penalty](#)); and a feeling that mob action was at best unseemly, at worst an indication of barbarism, took hold gradually across much of the United States. These trends gained strength even in the South. New railroads covered much of Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas, which became more densely settled by Blacks and whites; those states ceased to be frontier zones. Yet, to the whole country's great misfortune, race riots erupted several times more over the next few decades.

Lynching will surely continue in various parts of the world. Let us hope that stability, reason and a sense of justice will serve to reduce the crime, if not to stop it altogether.

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