At Last, Some Good News about Violent Crime

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As recently as 1994, North Carolinians were so concerned about crime that the governor called a special legislative session on the problem. In that year and in the three following years, major legislative efforts emphasized sentencing changes and prison construction to incarcerate more offenders. Similar activity occurred in many other states.

Whether as a result of those legislative measures or for various other reasons, the per capita rate of serious violent crime has dropped in the mid-1990s, in North Carolina and in the United States. For young people the drop follows several years of rapid increase. For older people the drop is an acceleration of a long-term downward trend.

This article examines trends in violent crime in the United States and in North Carolina. It explains some basics of crime measurement and investigates the discrepancy between violent crime as measured by surveys of crime victims and violent crime as officially reported by police. The article concludes with a discussion of some possible explanations for the drop in the violent-crime rate.

Measurement of Crime

This article deals with four "serious violent crimes" (also called "violent index crimes"): criminal homicide (including murder and manslaughter except manslaughter by negligence), rape, robbery, and aggravated assault (an attack involving either a weapon or

substantial injury). The article also uses the term "total violent crime," which is defined as serious violent crime plus simple assault (assault without a weapon or substantial injury).

In the United States, there are three systems for measuring violent crime: the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) Mortality Database; the Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) system; and the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS).

The NCHS Mortality Database. The NCHS Mortality Database incorporates the reports that medical examiners and physicians throughout the United States must submit concerning every death. "Trends in Murder" (see page 12) relies on the NCHS database—in particular on data maintained by North Carolina's Chief Medical Examiner—as well as on police investigative data.

The UCR system. The UCR system—the system maintained by police—is based on crimes that victims or other observers report to police agencies. After receiving information about an alleged crime and investigating it, unless the investigation concludes that the allegation is unfounded, the police report the crime to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, which compiles and publishes UCR data. UCR data are available for individual states as well as for the nation as a whole. Law enforcement agencies throughout the country use the same concepts and forms to make their reports, but they differ in their techniques and skills of receiving crime information from the public, investigating it, and reporting it to the UCR system. Also, in any single police agency over time, the system for receiving, investigating, and reporting information on crime may vary.

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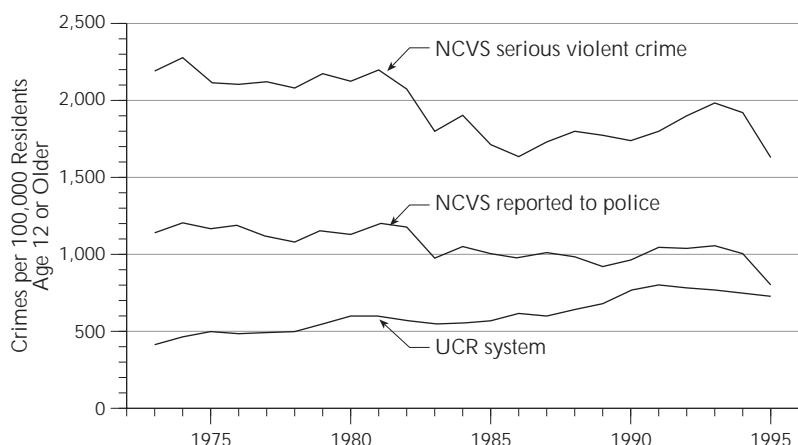
Figure 1

NCVS Violent-Crime Rates for U.S.
(Including Homicide from UCR System), 1973–96
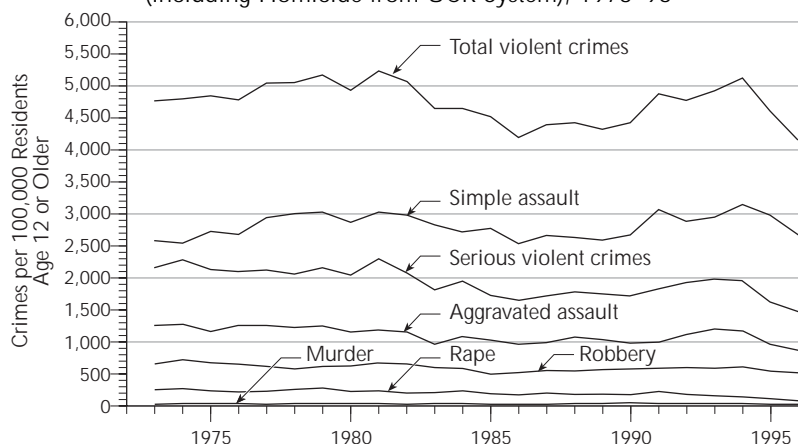
Sources: Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Uniform Crime Reports*; U.S. Bureau of the Census, National Crime Victimization Survey.
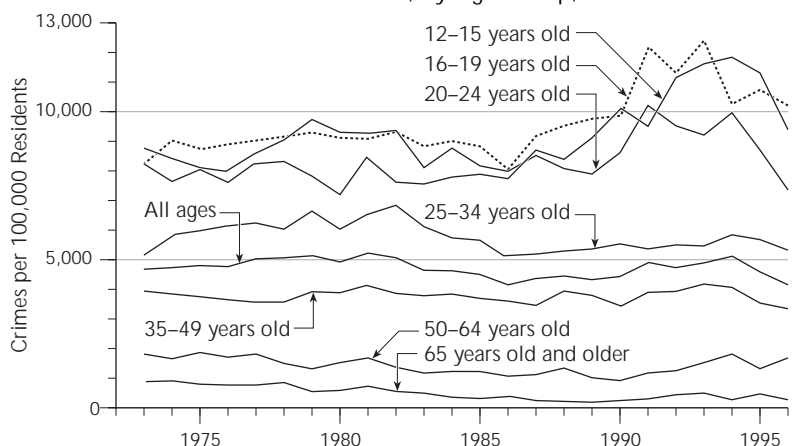
Figure 2

NCVS and UCR Rates of Serious Violent Crime for U.S., 1973–95

Sources: Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Uniform Crime Reports*; U.S. Bureau of the Census, National Crime Victimization Survey.

Figure 3

Violent-Crime Rates in U.S., by Age Group, 1973–96

Note: Data include crimes of simple assault, murder, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault. *Source*: U.S. Bureau of the Census, National Crime Victimization Survey.

The NCVS. The NCVS, conducted by the United States Census Bureau for the United States Department of Justice, began as a regular published series in 1973. A semiannual survey conducted in person and by telephone, it samples approximately 100,000 people age twelve or older in 56,000 housing units to determine whether they recently have been the victims of various types of crimes.[1] (The survey covers property crimes as well as violent crimes. This article is concerned only with the latter.) NCVS estimates are reported for the nation as a whole, not for individual states. The NCVS does not include murder. Also, it does not include violent crimes committed against children under age twelve[2] or robberies involving solely the property of commercial establishments (much less numerous than robberies of individuals).

Differences between the UCR system and the NCVS. There are important differences between the UCR system and the NCVS. The UCR system relies on many law enforcement agencies, whereas the NCVS always has been conducted by a single organization using essentially the same methods. The UCR system deals only with crime reported to and by the police, whereas the NCVS is designed to estimate the total number of violent crimes (with the exceptions noted previously), whether or not the victims report the crimes to the police.

The UCR system generally has reported fewer violent crimes than the NCVS has. One reason for the difference is that victims often do not inform the police about crimes.[3] Another explanation is that the police do not report all the crimes that, according to the NCVS, victims say they have told the police about. Police may not be able to understand what a victim is saying, or they may lack the resources to investigate the victim's complaint or do the necessary paperwork.

There is good reason to believe that the NCVS provides more consistent information over time than the UCR system does. NCVS data have been collected in essentially the same way since 1973, using the same type of national sample. UCR data collection may vary from one police agency to another and may vary over time within any single police agency. Homicide is an exception to this last statement. The UCR system is believed to have reported homicide more completely and consistently than it has reported other violent crimes.

This article's crime data. In this article, to report violent crime per capita, I have converted the NCVS rates to rates of violent crime per 100,000 United

States residents age twelve or older. When NCVS rates are combined with UCR rates in the same figure, both exclude victims under age twelve. A note at the end of the article indicates sources of data.

National Trends in Violent Crime since the 1970s

National rates of violent crime from 1973 to 1994. According to UCR data on murder and NCVS data on the four other violent crimes, from 1973 to 1994, the rate of *total* violent crime varied, with no clear trend upward or downward. In 1994 it was 5,119 crimes per 100,000 persons, about what it had been in the late 1970s. However, the rate of *serious* violent crime (excluding simple assault) generally drifted downward from 1973 to 1994. It remained around 2,100 crimes annually per 100,000 persons until the early 1980s, then dropped until 1990. It then increased until 1994 but still remained below its levels of the 1970s. For serious violent crime, the rate in 1994— 1,969 crimes per 100,000 persons—was lower than at any time in the 1970s. (See Figure 1.) The rates of the various offenses constituting serious violent crime also generally drifted downward during the 1973–94 period. (Murder is so much less frequent than the other violent crimes that it barely appears on the scale.)

Comparison of the national NCVS and UCR rates of serious violent crime (simple assault is excluded because the UCR does not include it) reveals a discrepancy (see Figure 2). The UCR rate (the bottom line in Figure 2) increased from the 1970s to the 1990s. During the same period, the NCVS rate (the top line) was much higher but was not increasing. In fact, it was decreasing during many years when the UCR rate was rising.

The NCVS estimated rate of serious violent crime that victims say they reported to police (the middle line in Figure 2) is substantially below the NCVS total because a large proportion of victims (for example, about 45 percent of robbery and aggravated assault victims) did not report their experience to the police. The rate of reported offenses, although lower than the NCVS total rate, followed the same pattern as the NCVS total rate, gradually decreasing from 1973 and dropping more sharply after 1993.

Why did the UCR violent-crime rate increase from the 1970s to 1992 while the NCVS rate did not increase? A likely explanation is that police were listening better to victims and improving their investigation and official reporting of the crimes about which victims told them. As the police improved in these ways, the UCR rate gradually approached the rate based on the reports victims said they made to police (see Figure 2).

The improvement in police investigation and reporting of crime information may be due to growth in the number of police personnel and improvement in police systems of recording crime information and reporting it to the FBI.[4] Also, the incentives for police to report what victims tell them may have grown, along with the public's perception that crime is a major problem.

National rate of violent crime after 1994. After 1994 the rate of serious violent crime dropped more sharply than in previous years, reaching 1,497 crimes per 100,000 United States residents age twelve or older by 1996. The rate based on the UCR system also declined in the 1990s, from 799 in 1991 to 719 in 1995 (see Figure 2). The drop in both rates was due to decreases in each component violent crime—aggravated assault, robbery, rape, and murder.

Involvement of young people in violent crime. Thus far this article has been considering violent-crime rates for youth and adults combined. Examination of the rates for people from ages twelve to twenty-four versus those for older Americans reveals very different patterns (see Figure 3).Young people are victimized by violent crime at a much higher rate than older people are. Also, for young people the rate of total violent crime began a rapid increase in the late 1980s that lasted into the early 1990s. After 1994 this surge ended and the rate dropped sharply. The sharp but temporary surge did not occur in the violent-crime rate for older people. Despite the drop for young people, the rate of total violent crime for teenagers (about 10,000 crimes per 100,000 teenagers) was still higher in 1996 than it had been in any year from 1973 to 1990.

That the violent crime rate among youth has dropped recently is certainly welcome news. However, no one knows whether the decline will continue.

Young people's involvement as *perpetrators* of violent crimes has decreased along with their involvement as victims. Their involvement as perpetrators can be approximated from the NCVS interviews, in which respondents estimate the age of those who have attacked them. According to the NCVS data, the number of serious violent crimes committed by youth ages twelve to seventeen increased in the late 1980s and early 1990s but dropped substantially afterward,
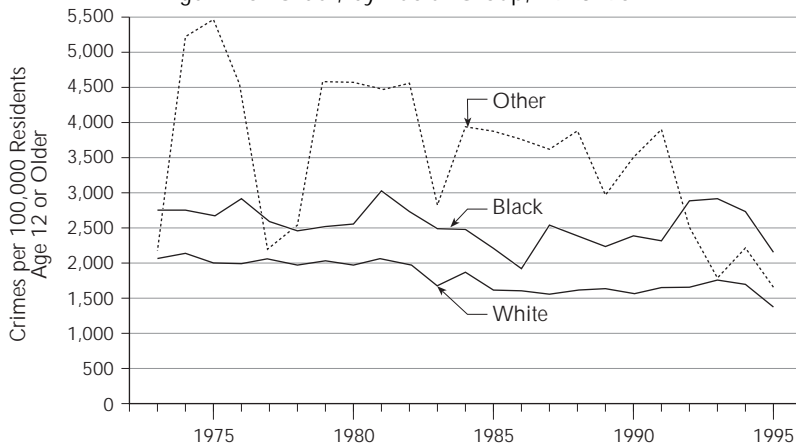
Figure 4

Number of Serious Violent Crimes in U.S.,
by Age of Offender as Perceived by Victim, 1973–96
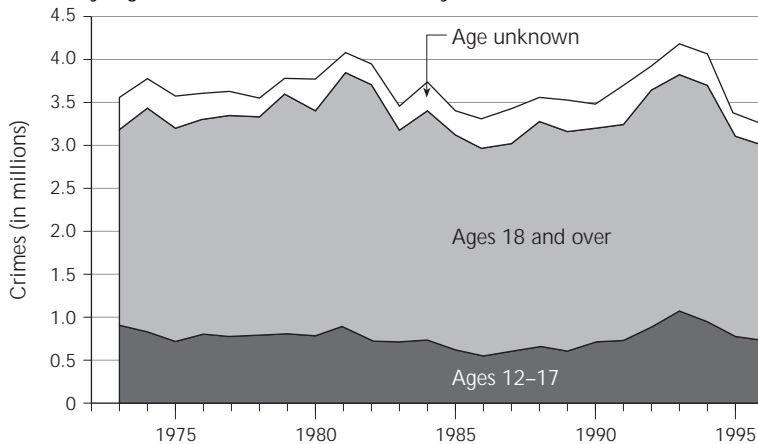
Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, National Crime Victimization Survey.
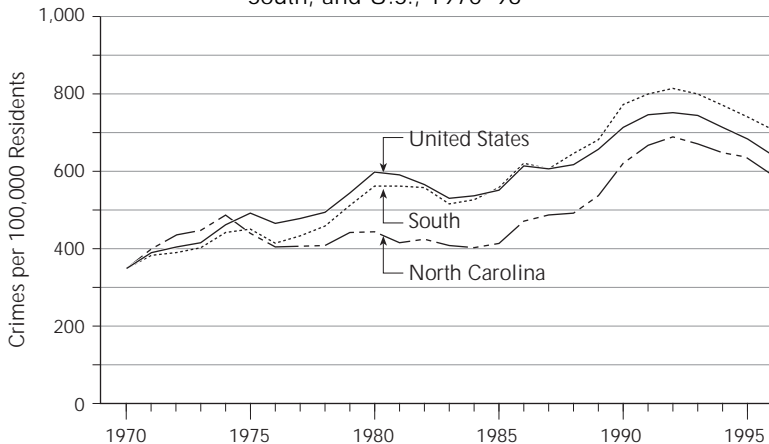
Figure 5

Rates of Serious Violent Crime in U.S., per 100,000 Residents
Age 12 or Older, by Racial Group, 1973–95

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, National Crime Victimization Survey.

Figure 6

UCR Rates of Serious Violent Crime for North Carolina,
South, and U.S., 1970–96

Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Uniform Crime Reports.*

from 1,107,700 in 1993 to 811,600 in 1995 (see Figure 4). The decline was not due to a decreasing population in this age group; the number of teenagers was increasing during that period, according to Census Bureau estimates.

Thus, just as the rate of violent crime against youth has recently decreased, so has the rate of perpetration of violent crime by youth. These coinciding trends reflect the fact that young people, if victimized, usually are victimized by other young people. In 1994, for example, 74.4 percent of assaults on victims ages twelve to nineteen, and 61.4 percent of robberies, were committed by offenders ages twelve to twenty, according to the NCVS.[5]

Victimization of minority groups by violent crime. African Americans and other minority groups more often are the victims of violent crime than white Americans are. Nevertheless, the rate of serious violent crime against these groups in the United States came down in the mid-1990s, just as it did for whites (see Figure 5). Whereas for whites the rate generally has remained below 2,200 crimes per 100,000, for blacks it generally has been closer to 3,000. (But note that, for both whites and blacks, the rate generally was declining from 1973 to 1991.) After a sudden surge in the early 1990s, the rate for blacks returned to 2,700, about the same level as in the 1970s. For other racial groups, the rate generally was higher and much more volatile, making it difficult to generalize. (The extreme fluctuation in this rate may reflect changing definitions or measurements of race membership as much as real changes in the phenomenon itself.) In any event, for these other minorities, the rate seems to have dropped substantially in the 1990s, reaching a lower level in 1995 (1,700 per 100,000) than at any time since 1973.

Comparative Trends: North Carolina, the Region, and the Nation

As noted earlier, NCVS data are not available for individual states. Thus for North Carolina the only available source of data on violent crime other than homicide is the UCR system. Comparing the UCR rate of violent crime in North Carolina with the UCR rates for the South and the entire nation shows generally similar trends. If a victimization survey were available for North Carolina, the victimization rate might bear about the same relationship to the state's UCR–based violent-crime rate as the NCVS rate does to the national UCR–based violent-crime rate.

Starting in 1985, UCR rates of serious violent crime rose in the South[6] and throughout the nation. North Carolina's rate rose as well, closely following the South's rate but remaining well below it. After 1992, as the other two rates began to decrease, so did North Carolina's. In 1996 North Carolina's rate was 588 per 100,000 residents, 17 percent less than the rate for the South (707) and 7 percent less than the rate for the nation (634). (See Figure 6.)

Involvement of North Carolina youth in violent crime. For individual states, data are hard to find concerning the ages of people involved in nonlethal violent crime.[7] The State Bureau of Investigation in North Carolina reports some characteristics of persons arrested for various crimes. From 1980 to 1993, North Carolina's youth arrest rate (the number of arrests of persons under age eighteen for serious violent crimes, per 100,000 residents ages five to seventeen) more than doubled, from 102 to 259. In the 1993–96 period, the rate remained about the same. (See Figure 7.) An alarming development is that, in the mid-1990s, the youth arrest rate (around 250) is two-and-a-half times what it was in the early 1980s (around 100). On the positive side, if North Carolina follows the nation's recent downturn of youth involvement in violent crime, it would be reasonable to expect arrests of youth to decline in the near future.

A cautionary note: the trend in youth arrests may not accurately reflect a trend in youth involvement in violent crime. Nationally, violent crimes reported to police result in arrests only about half the time. Thus arrest data are missing for many crimes. Also, varying policies and practices from one law enforcement agency to another, and over time within the same agency, distort the reporting of arrests of young people, particularly juveniles.[8] More arrests of juveniles may be the result of extra effort by the police rather than increased crime by juveniles.

Public Concern about Violent Crime

Fear of crime has diminished in some respects in recent years. For example, in the nationwide Gallup Poll, the proportion of respondents saying that they were afraid to walk alone at night in any area within a mile of their residence decreased from 45 percent in 1975 to 38 percent in 1997, and the proportion who felt unsafe at home at night dropped from 20 percent to 9 percent.[9] In the Carolina Poll of North Carolina residents, a similar pattern emerged: the proportion

Figure 7
Arrest Rate of Persons Ages 5–17 for Serious Violent Crimes, for North Carolina, 1980–96
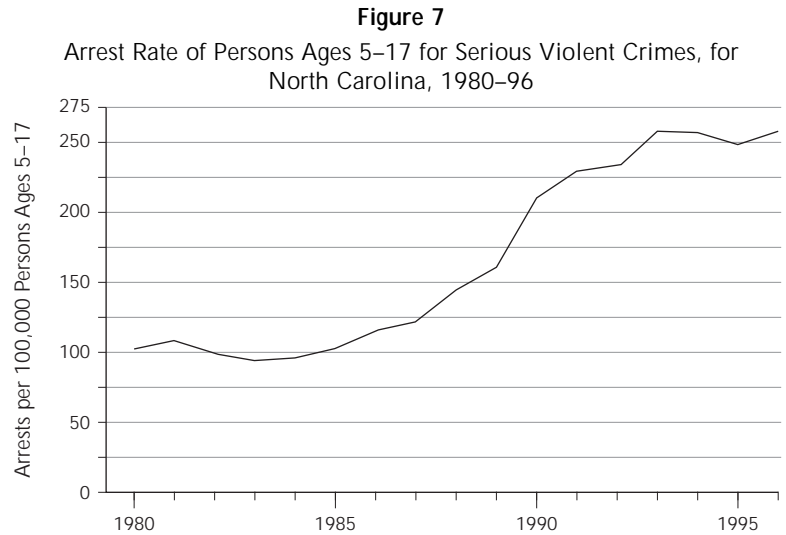
Source: State Bureau of Investigation, *Crime in North Carolina.*

responding that they were "very" worried that they or their families would become victims of crime dropped from 32 percent in 1992 to 22 percent in 1994.[10]

These changing attitudes may reflect the actual drop in the rate of serious violent crime, described earlier. On the other hand, each year from 1972 to 1997, about half of Gallup Poll respondents have said that there was more crime in their own area that year than in the previous year. Perhaps they were thinking of nonviolent crime or crime that did not threaten them personally.

Concern about crime as a public policy issue has recently become quite strong, even as the fear of personal danger has subsided. In the Gallup Poll's national survey concerning "the most important problem facing the country today," the percentage responding "crime" or "violence" never exceeded 5 from 1982 to 1992. The percentage in this category increased to 9 in 1993, then surged to 37 in 1994 and 52 in August 1995. By January 1997, though, it had dropped to 25. The drop may be the result of the decline in the rate of serious violent crime in the mid-1990s. Nevertheless, the proportion regarding crime as the most important problem was higher in 1997 than before 1993.

There are several possible explanations for the growing perception of crime as a major national problem. One is that the growth occurred soon after a period—from the late 1980s to the early 1990s—of increase in the rate of serious violent crime. The surge in violent crime among young people in the late 1980s, in particular, has been widely reported and

lamented. Another reason may be the many years of increased police (UCR) reporting of violent crime, as well as improvements in policing, growing numbers of arrests for violent crimes, and broadening news coverage of the crime problem. Whatever the reason for substantial numbers of Americans seeing crime as a major national problem, perhaps their concern has helped to ameliorate it.

Possible Explanations for the Recent Drop in Violent Crime

Several explanations are possible for the drop in the rate of serious violent crime: a shift in the age distribution; abating of the crack cocaine epidemic; innovations in law enforcement; and increased incarceration of offenders.

A Shift in the Age Distribution

There has been some speculation that the decrease in violent crime in the mid-1990s stems from a lessening number of youth in the population relative to older persons. This explanation is incorrect because, during the early 1990s, youth did not decrease in numbers. The estimated proportion of the national population ages ten to nineteen remained about 14 percent from 1990 through 1996.

During the next two decades, the age distribution of North Carolina's population is expected to continue changing as a function of the aging of the post–World War II baby-boom generation. This may reduce the overall rate of violent crime. As baby boomers grow older, the proportion of persons ages fifteen to twenty-four, who are at a high risk for involvement in violent crime, is expected to drop slightly, from 14.5 percent of the state's population in 1995 to 13.1 percent by 2020. Meanwhile, the proportion of persons age fifty or older, whose risk of involvement in violent crime is much lower than that of younger people, will grow steadily, from 26.7 percent in 1995 to 36.9 percent in 2020.

The aging of North Carolina's population tells nothing, though, about future involvement of youth in violent crime. If that involvement surges again as it did in the late 1980s and early 1990s—for example, if another phenomenon like the crack cocaine epidemic occurred—violent crime could continue to be a major concern for persons of all ages.

Abating of the Crack Cocaine Epidemic

The rise in the use of crack cocaine that began in the early 1980s is widely believed to be partly responsible for an epidemic of serious violence among young people, especially among impoverished minority-group members. The distinguished criminologist Alfred Blumstein explains the relationship this way:

> An important feature of crack is its low price, which brought into the cocaine market many low-income people who could only buy it one "hit" at a time; this significantly increased the number of transactions in those drug markets. . . . In order to accommodate the increased demand, the drug sellers had to recruit a large number of new sellers. Juveniles were the natural source of supply for that labor market. They were probably willing to work more cheaply than adults. . . . But juveniles also tend to be daring and willing to take risks that more mature adults would eschew. The economic plight of many young urban African-American juveniles, many of whom see no other comparably satisfactory route to economic success or even sustenance, makes them particularly amenable to the lure of the drug markets. . . . These juveniles, like many other participants in the illicit-drug industry, are likely to carry guns for self-protection, largely because that industry uses guns as an important instrument for dispute resolution. . . .[11]

Blumstein theorizes that, in response to teenage drug dealers' being armed, teenagers who are not involved in the drug trade arm themselves, either for protection or for enhanced social status. Thus an escalation begins: "as more guns appear in the community, the incentive for any single individual to arm himself increases."[12]

Following Blumstein's reasoning, if crack use were to decline, the armed violence that accompanies it would subside. Recent evidence indicates that crack use has declined. The University of Michigan conducts an annual survey for the National Institute on Drug Abuse on the prevalence of illegal drug use among high school seniors. This survey reveals that, from 1987 to 1992, the percentage of students who said they had ever used crack dropped from 5.4 to 2.6, and the percentage who said they had used it during the past year dropped from 3.9 to 1.5. There is some bad news as well: since 1992, students' crack use has increased, although not to pre-1990 levels.[13]

Another source of data also indicates a recent decrease in crack use closely connected with crime. In 1987 the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) began annually to measure illicit drug use among persons arrested for crimes in most large cities. Unlike the

survey of high school seniors, this measurement includes persons above high school age. The NIJ employs urinalysis to detect use of cocaine within the previous forty-eight to seventy-two hours. (The test does not distinguish crack from other forms of cocaine, but other research indicates that the source of a positive test usually is crack.) Of twenty-four large cities examined in a recent publication,[14] ten showed a decline of at least 10 percent in cocaine use among arrestees of all ages, beginning in the early 1990s (the starting year varied among the cities) and continuing through 1996.[15] For example, in Washington, D.C., the percentage of arrestees testing positive for cocaine dropped from more than 60 percent in 1989 to below 40 percent in 1996. In seven other cities, although the rate of detected cocaine use did not decline among arrestees of all ages, it did decline among youthful arrestees ages eighteen to twenty.[16] Given that cocaine use usually begins at this age, the finding for the seven cities suggests that fewer people are becoming users and therefore that a decline in the rate for all ages can be expected soon. In five additional cities, the crack epidemic continued to rage, with detected rates in the 40–60 percent range.[17]

The NIJ's measurement indicated that two small cities exhibited no evidence of having experienced a crack epidemic.[18] Therefore, perhaps some small cities will be spared. But the epidemic may simply arrive later in some small cities than it did in large cities. For example, the *New York Times* recently reported a surge of murders in Louisville, Kentucky, and Nashville, Tennessee, a substantial part of which police attribute to the spread of crack and other illegal drugs. Federal law enforcement officials interviewed by the *Times* reporter speculated that drug dealers in large cities had "reached a market peak, prompting them to stake out customers in smaller cities and escape turf wars that are thinning their ranks."[19]

News that crack use has apparently been decreasing in many parts of the United States is welcome. But there seems to be no clear answer to why it has decreased and whether the trend will continue.

Research in New York City, where crack use among youthful arrestees has been going down, helps describe the shape of a typical crack epidemic.[20] Use began among a small group who already were using other hard drugs and were looking for a better "high." Once crack caught on around 1984, it spread rapidly among hard-drug users. These users were then joined by youth around age eighteen, who experimented with crack. This swelled use of the drug to its maxi-

mum point. Around 1989, youth started to avoid crack use, and the epidemic went into its declining phase. The researchers are unsure precisely why youth began resisting crack use:

> The coming of the decline phase [of the crack epidemic in New York] chronologically followed the implementation of aggressive anticrack policies [such as intensive policing and severe punishments for crack offenders], suggesting these policies may have helped contain this social conflagration by acting as a general deterrent to crack use. *It is not clear which of the myriad programs, if any, effected the decline in crack's popularity among youths or whether the crack epidemic started to fizzle out on its own. Further research on this topic is clearly needed.*[21]

Innovations in Law Enforcement

A full discussion of police management and tactics, and their possible effects on crime, is beyond the scope of this article. I deal briefly with two innovations in police practice that have recently received much public attention and been credited with reducing certain kinds of crime: community policing and problem-oriented policing.

Community Policing

The concept of community policing arose from the urban race riots of the 1960s, which several prestigious study commissions blamed in part on the police. The police were spending most of their time patrolling in radio cars and had lost contact with residents, the commissions said. Police were urged to get out of their cars and have more frequent, and more positive, interactions with citizens. Thus, in general, community policing means (1) the police increasing the quantity and the quality of their interactions with residents of a community, rather than just apprehending lawbreakers and responding to emergencies; and (2) the police seeking residents' notions of their needs and problems as a guide to policing strategies, rather than just following priorities set by police administrators. (For more information on community policing, from a different point of view, see "The Police Are the Public," page 18.)

Reviewers in a recent study for the United States Department of Justice[22] found that the most promising aspect of community policing was its effect on "police legitimacy"—the public's sense that the police are respectful toward residents and are pursuing goals that address citizens' concerns. Research indicates that crime goes down as police legitimacy goes up. A study in Chicago, for example, found that community

Table 1
Community Policing Practices
Reported by Agency Heads, 1993

Practice	Percent Reporting Use
Patrol officers/deputies make door-to-door contacts in neighborhoods.	81
Citizens work with police to identify and resolve community or neighborhood problems.	73
Citizens participate in Neighborhood Watch Program.	72
Foot patrol is a specific assignment for patrol officers.	49
Agency conducts citizen surveys to determine community needs and priorities.	44
Citizens serve on neighborhood advisory councils concerning police policies and practices.	39
Agency's command or decision-making responsibility is tied to neighborhoods or geographically defined areas of its jurisdiction.	37
Agency has permanent, neighborhood-based offices or stations.	32
Citizens help develop policing policies.	21
Citizens help evaluate officer performance.	15

Source: Data from Mary Ann Wycoff, "Community Policing Strategies" (Washington, D.C.: Police Foundation, 1994, unpublished monograph), *passim*.

policing was most effective in preventing crime where people most strongly believed that the police were responsive to their concerns.

The Justice Department reviewers also looked at research on several kinds of programs that are considered forms of community policing, including Neighborhood Watch, community meetings, door-to-door visits, and police storefronts. Following are some highlights of the findings:

Neighborhood Watch, a program in which residents of a neighborhood observe activity and conditions and report problems to police, has not been effective. The main problem has been that, in the areas with the most crime—poverty-stricken areas—the residents are the most reluctant to organize. In middle-class areas, organization has been easier, but there is no indication that Neighborhood Watch has reduced crime, which already was relatively low.

Community meetings, in which police meet with neighborhood residents to learn about local crime patterns and get ideas on how to prevent crime, have had some success. In Chicago, residents of high-crime areas participated well in the meetings, and, after eighteen monthly gatherings, some kinds of crime had lessened.

Door-to-door visits involve police going to residents' homes to introduce themselves and develop a more personal acquaintance; to seek information (for example, who is carrying guns on the street); and to give information (such as how to guard against burglary). In some studies, door-to-door visits have had effects on crime, but the crimes primarily have been minor property crimes, and the program has tended to benefit middle-class homeowners rather than less-affluent minority groups.

Police storefronts in neighborhoods often are requested by residents and staffed by a mix of police and volunteers. So far, study of such programs has found no effect on crime.

Problem-Oriented Policing

Problem-oriented policing involves analysis of the characteristics and the immediate causes of specific crimes, and police activities to reduce or interfere with these causes. (Although problem-oriented policing and community policing are distinct concepts, the two may be combined and often are.) The Justice Department's reviewers examined research on two problem-oriented policing programs: reducing the carrying of concealed weapons in public; and evening curfews for juveniles.

Reducing the carrying of concealed weapons in public is based on the notion that carrying concealed guns illegally in areas where or during times when the risk of crime is high, makes violent crime more likely. Studies in Boston and Kansas City showed that targeted efforts to enforce concealed-weapon laws reduced gun carrying, increased seizures of illegally carried guns, and reduced crimes committed with guns.

Evening curfews for juveniles are intended to get youth off the streets and thereby to reduce crime both against them and by them. A preliminary NIJ study has found no consistent crime reduction across cities that have adopted curfews.

Effects of These Initiatives on Violent Crime

Although some programs that are considered community policing or problem-oriented policing are promising, on the basis of the Justice Department's review of research, there is insufficient evidence to conclude that programs of this type are primarily responsible for the downward trend in the rate of violent crime.

In particular, it is difficult to say whether community policing is responsible for the downward trend in serious violent crime. One reason is that the trend

began long before community policing. Another reason is that there is confusion about the meaning of community policing. Community policing is more a philosophy than a specific program. Many police managers believe that their agencies practice community policing, yet it seems to mean different things in different places. A study by the Police Foundation conducted in 1993–94 reveals the confusion.[23] Researchers questioned the heads of a random sample of 2,337 agencies across the country—municipal police departments, county police departments, and county sheriff's offices.[24] Ninety-eight percent of the 1,606 agency heads who responded agreed that community policing is "something that law enforcement agencies should pursue"; however, 47 percent agreed that "it is not clear what community policing means in practical terms."[25] Responses from 734 agencies reporting that they had been implementing community policing for at least a year indicate wide variation in actual practices. In most agencies whose heads report adoption of community policing, citizens work with police to identify neighborhood problems. However, few agencies have citizens help in developing their policies, a kind of participation that would seem to be central to the idea of community policing. Further, few have citizens assist in evaluating officers. Most agencies have patrol officers making door-to-door contacts, but fewer than half have specifically assigned foot patrol, neighborhood-based stations, or neighborhood-based command systems. (See Table 1.)

In a report released this year, the Police Foundation stated its view that community policing and problem-oriented policing have not yet made a strong case that they are effective in preventing crime. The foundation called for rigorous evaluation of these concepts:

> Nearly every major police department, and most smaller ones, now boast some type of problem-oriented or community policing program. . . . The rhetoric of such programs has become a common part of the language of policing. . . . It is surprising how little
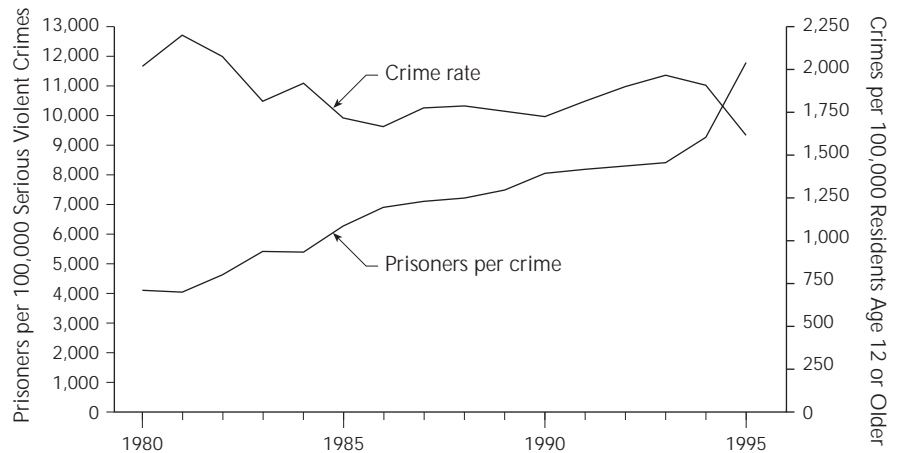
Figure 8
State Prison Population in U.S., by Type of Offense, 1980–95
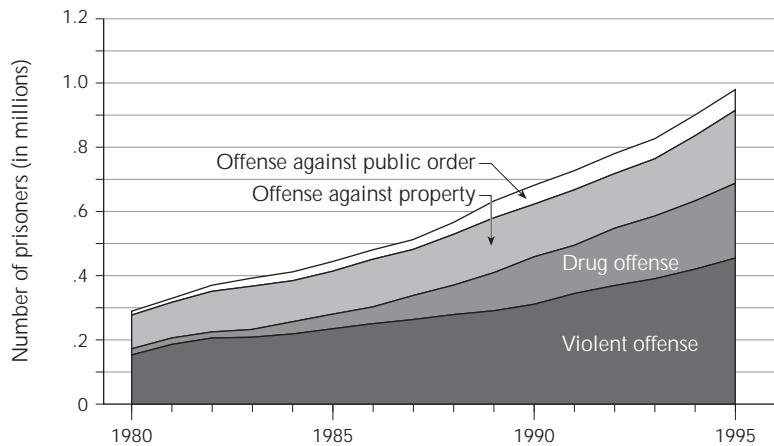
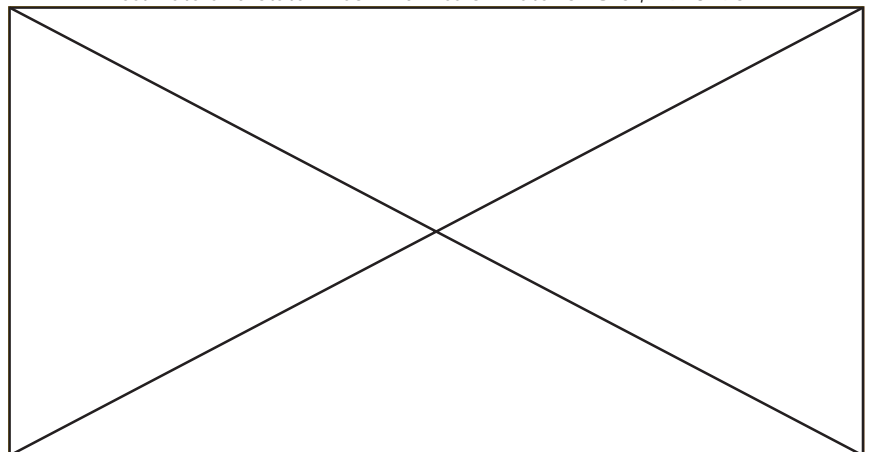*Source*: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Figure 9
Imprisonment Rate and Rate of Serious Violent Crime for U.S., 1980–95

*Source*s: U.S. Bureau of the Census, National Crime Victimization Survey; U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Figure 10
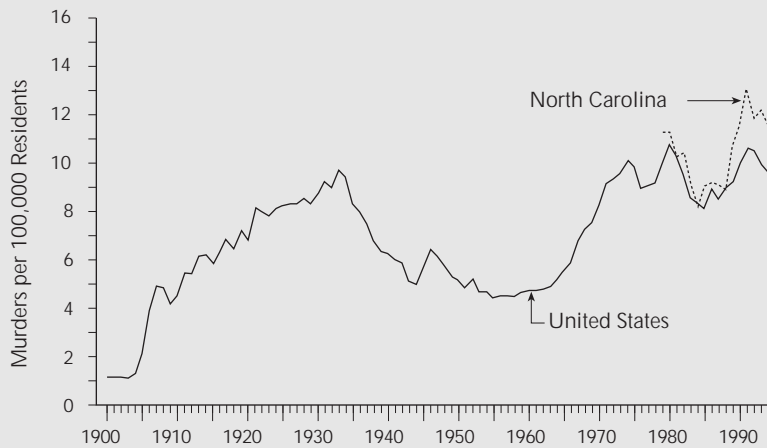Arrest Rate and State Prison Admission Rate for U.S., 1973–96

Source: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Figure 11

Murder Rates for North Carolina and U.S., 1900–1994

Source: National Center for Health Statistics Mortality Database.

Figure 12

Rates of Victimization by Murder and Committing of Murder, for U.S., 1976–96

Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Uniform Crime Reports*, Supplemental Homicide Reports.

Although the murder rate in the United States has declined in the last few years, it remains near its highest levels since the century began. Data from the NCHS Mortality Database indicate that the rate climbed from about 1 murder per 100,000 residents in 1900 to 9.7 in 1933. During the Great Depression, World War II, and the Korean War, the rate dropped, reaching a low of 4.5 in 1955. In the late 1950s, it began another surge, rising to 10.7 in 1980, a high for the century. It dropped during the early 1980s but increased again in the late 1980s, reaching 10.5 in 1991. From 1991 to 1994, it declined somewhat, dropping to 9.6 in 1994. (See Figure 11.) NCHS data are not available after 1994, but the UCR system, which records fewer murders than the NCHS database does (apparently because of underreporting by police),[1] indicates that the murder rate has continued to drop through 1996, from 9.8 in 1991 to 7.4 in 1996.

In the United States, young people are at a greater risk of being involved in murder than older people are. Nevertheless, for both groups, murder involvement has decreased recently. The rate at which young people ages fourteen to twenty-four become the victims of murder, and the rate at which they commit murder, both rose from the mid-1980s to 1991. This is not surprising because the killers of young people usually are young themselves. After 1991, both rates generally declined, although by 1996 they still were higher than at any time during the 1976–89 period. (See Figure 12.)

In North Carolina, as in the rest of the nation, the murder rate surged in the late 1980s, especially for youth, but declined sharply in the early 1990s. From 1979 (the earliest year for which data are available) to 1988, the North Carolina murder rate remained close to the national one. Also like the national rate, North Carolina's rate surged in the late 1980s, then generally dropped after 1991, reaching 11.5 in 1994. It was well above the national rate, 9.6, in that year. (See Figure 11.) UCR

data indicate that the North Carolina murder rate has continued to drop, reaching 8.5 by 1996.

Young men and teenage boys have a high risk of murder victimization compared with older people and females, and African-American males have a high risk compared with white males.[2] In North Carolina the murder rate for black males ages fifteen to nineteen soared in the late 1980s, reaching 103 per 100,000 in 1991. Thereafter it dropped sharply, reaching 63 in 1996. For black males ages twenty to twenty-four, the pattern was similar: a rapid increase to 127 in 1991, then a rapid decrease to 99 in 1996. Meanwhile, for white males ages twenty to twenty-four, the rate fluctuated from 12 to 22 during the 1990s without a consistent downward trend. For white males ages fifteen to nineteen, the rate generally has been higher in the 1990s than in the 1980s, reaching 10 in 1996—again without a clear downward trend. (See Figure 13.)

Youth can kill as well as be killed. Among all youth ages five to seventeen in North Carolina (both sexes and all races), both the "killer rate" (the number of youth suspected of having committed murder) and the victimization rate (from police investigative reports) increased rapidly in the late 1980s and early 1990s (see Figure 14). Since 1994, both rates have declined, although in 1996 they still were above their pre-1989 levels.[3]

Notes

1. William M. Rokaw, James A. Mercy, and Jack C. Smith, "Comparing Death Certificate Data with FBI Crime Reporting Statistics on U.S. Homicides," *Public Health Reports* 105 (Sept.–Oct. 1990): 447–55.

2. Stevens H. Clarke, "Murder in North Carolina," *Popular Government* 61 (Summer 1995): 2–17.

3. The killer rate is sometimes higher than the victimization rate because, for example, some murders involve more than one killer, and some youth kill adults.

Figure 13
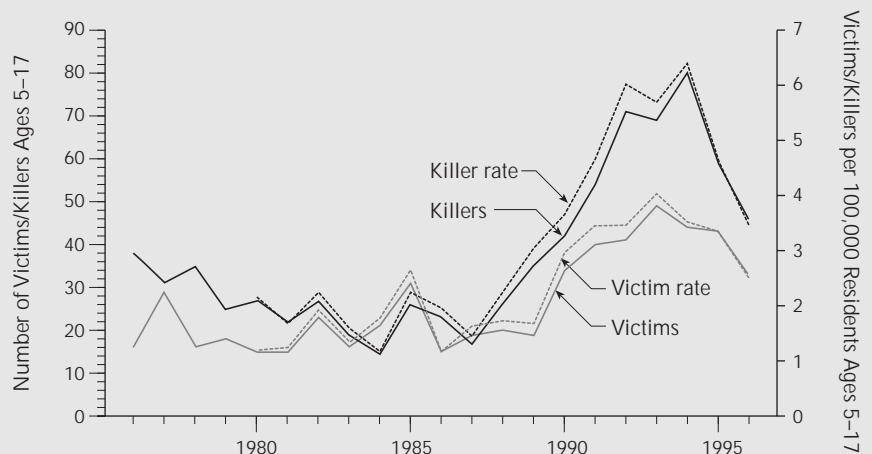Murder Rates of Young Males, for North Carolina, 1979–96
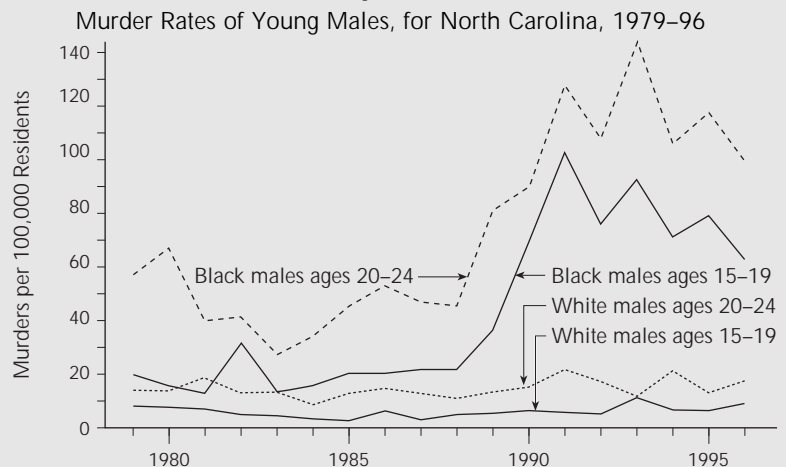
Source: North Carolina Medical Examiner's Office.

Figure 14
Murder Victims and Suspected Killers Ages 5–17, for North Carolina, 1976–96

Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation, Supplemental Homicide Reports; State Bureau of Investigation.

empirical evidence there is in support of such innovations. . . . There has not been a single, major controlled study of problem-oriented or community policing, and only a handful of solid non-experimental evaluations. . . . It is time to see whether new innovations can stand up to rigorous evaluation efforts.[26]

Increased Incarceration of Offenders

Another explanation offered for the drop in violent crime is that imprisonment of offenders has increased.[27] This explanation is based on two penological concepts, deterrence and incapacitation. Deterrence is the notion that (1) the fear of punishment keeps people from committing crime; and (2) increasing this fear will reduce the amount of crime. Incapacitation is the idea that crime is prevented by keeping potential repeat offenders behind bars or otherwise restrained from victimizing the public. In looking for evidence of deterrence and incapacitation, one can compare trends in imprisonment and violent crime.

The number of people incarcerated in state prisons for crimes more than tripled from 1980 to 1995, from 294,000 to 985,300. Adding those confined in federal prisons brings the 1995 total in prison to more than a million (1,078,445). Another half million (499,300) were in local jails. The fastest-growing segment of the state prison population has been drug offenders, whose numbers have increased nearly twelvefold since 1980. Violent offenders have increased by 168 percent, to constitute nearly half of the total (464,500 of 985,300) in 1995. (See Figure 8.)

Imprisonment of violent offenders has increased not only in absolute numbers but also in relation to the number of serious violent crimes. The number of violent offenders in state prisons, per 100,000 violent crimes,[28] has been growing since 1980, and the pace of the increase has accelerated since 1993. From 1980 to 1995, the ratio nearly tripled, from 4,045 prisoners per 100,000 crimes in 1980 to 12,071 in 1995.[29] (See Figure 9.)

The primary reason for the increase in imprisonment appears to be that police have become more effective. The extent to which offenders are imprisoned depends on whether they are caught (arrested); whether they are convicted; whether they are sentenced to prison; and how much time they actually spend in prison. Arrests per 100 serious violent crimes

more than doubled from 1973 to 1995, from 10.9 to 22.8 (see Figure 10). Other things being equal, more arrests means more convictions and more admissions to prison, and evidently that is what happened. Since 1980 the trend in the number of admissions to state prisons on sentences[30] for serious violent crimes, per 100 serious violent crimes, has closely followed the trend in arrests per crime (see Figure 10). The time actually served by those sentenced to prison for violent offenses does not appear to have increased during this period.[31] Nevertheless, the increase in arrests and admissions has apparently driven up the number of offenders who have served time, relative to the number of crimes.

As the amount of imprisonment per violent crime has gone up, the violent-crime rate sometimes—but not always—has gone down. From 1980 to 1986, imprisonment per serious violent crime increased and the crime rate decreased. From 1986 to 1990, imprisonment continued to increase, but the crime rate remained about the same. From 1990 to 1993, imprisonment still increased, and the crime rate increased. Most recently, from 1993 to 1995, imprisonment increased sharply and the crime rate fell sharply. (See Figure 9.)

The comparison of the national crime rate and imprisonment per crime certainly lends support to the view that increased imprisonment is responsible for the drop in violent crime. But the comparison raises some doubts as well. Since 1980, imprisonment and violent crime have moved in opposite directions for eight years (1980–86 and 1993–95). For another seven years (1986–93), though, violent crime has either stayed at the same level or moved up as imprisonment has increased. Increased imprisonment may have had less effect on youth violence than on violent crime by older people. As explained earlier, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, while imprisonment for crime was increasing, youth involvement in violent crime was going up very sharply.

The data on imprisonment per crime and the rate of violent crime may be interpreted in a variety of ways. For example, increased imprisonment may have brought down violent crime. Or, when imprisonment and the violent-crime rate have moved in opposite directions, the two trends may be the result of some third factor—for example, a change in social attitudes resulting in both more vigorous law enforcement and greater disapproval of violence. Perhaps the most plausible interpretation is that increased imprisonment does indeed have an effect on violent

crime but other factors do too. For example, perhaps the crack epidemic (and the firearms that came with it) kept violent crime from going down from 1986 to 1993, especially among youth, despite rising imprisonment per crime. Perhaps imprisonment had more effect after 1993 because the crack epidemic had begun to abate.

If increased imprisonment does in fact reduce the violent-crime rate, it is a costly strategy. Building a prison "bed" (space for one inmate) in North Carolina currently costs from about $19,000 (for a minimum-security facility) to $32,000 (for a maximum-security facility). Because prisons last for many years, a much more important cost is the operating cost, currently averaging $21,000 per bed annually. Some would say that imprisonment is well worth its cost if it prevents substantial amounts of crime. Whether imprisonment is the most cost-effective way of preventing crime is best reserved for a future article.[32]

Conclusion

There is some good news about serious violent crime in North Carolina and the rest of the country. Nonlethal violent crime (rape, robbery, and aggravated assault) per capita generally has been coming down since the 1970s, and it dropped more sharply during the 1990s after a short period of increase. Murder per capita, which followed a different pattern before the 1990s, also has been dropping in the last few years.

More good news is that young people and minority groups, after experiencing an epidemic of violent crime that began about ten years ago, have not been excluded from the downturn in crime. Indeed, the downturn has affected young people more than older ones, and racial minorities more than white Americans.

Despite the good news, there is no reason to suppose that the violent-crime problem has been solved. A number of explanations for the drop in violent crime are possible, including abating of the crack epidemic, innovations in law enforcement, and increased incarceration of offenders. But no firm basis exists for asserting that these factors are responsible for the downturn in crime or that they will prevent another upturn.

There is every reason to continue the search for ways of preventing violent crime. The crack epidemic may be passing, but nothing guarantees that another such plague will not occur. The police may continue to improve their strategies, but they cannot be ex-

pected to eliminate deep-rooted causes of crime. Imprisonment may help to reduce violent crime, but it is a temporary solution at best. A country that values freedom as highly as the United States does cannot be comfortable with having more than 1.6 million people behind bars. Citizens and policy makers will want to find more long-term measures of crime prevention that will reduce the need to call on police and prisons when violence reaches crisis proportions.

Notes

Most of the data used in this article were taken from electronic sources. Some also came from print sources, some from individuals.

The data on (1) nationwide crime from the NCVS and the UCR system, (2) arrests, and (3) imprisonment came from the Web site of the United States Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), http://www. ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/. Dr. Alan Beck of BJS supplied data on incarceration of violent offenders nationally. Figure 6, UCR violent-crime rates for North Carolina, the South, and the nation, came from *Uniform Crime Reports,* published annually by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). The source of population estimates was the Web site of the United States Bureau of the Census, http://www.census.gov/. Arrest data for North Carolina came from *Crime in North Carolina,* published annually by the North Carolina Department of Justice, State Bureau of Investigation (SBI).

Data on crack and cocaine use came from the BJS Web site, as well as from the Web site of the National Institutes of Health, National Institute on Drug Abuse, http://www.nida.nih.gov/NIDAHome.html.

The main sources of North Carolina murder data were the computer files of (1) the North Carolina Medical Examiner's Office concerning homicide and (2) the FBI's Supplemental Homicide Reports (supplied by Professor James Alan Fox of Northeastern University, who formats these data for researchers' use). Julia Nipper of the North Carolina Department of Justice, Division of Criminal Information, supplied age-specific murder data for North Carolina in 1996.

Data on the Carolina Poll, conducted by The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, School of Journalism, were obtained from the Web site of the Institute for Research in Social Sciences, http://veblen.irss.unc.edu/data_archive/.

The figures in this article are based on the sources of data just listed, in most instances with additional computations by me.

1. The housing units are selected to represent a cross-section of the United States from which the total number of crimes can be reliably estimated. The sampled units are divided into six groups. The occupants of each group of units are interviewed every six months for three and one-

half years. Then the group is replaced by a new group. NCVS interviewers ask a variety of nontechnical questions about various types of crime victimization during the previous six months.

2. Few children under age twelve are victims of the kinds of crime discussed in this article.

3. The most common reasons that victims give for not reporting robberies and assaults are that the offender was unsuccessful in completing the crime; the offense was a private or personal matter; the victim believes the police do not want to be bothered, are inefficient, or are biased; the victim fears reprisal; and the victim regards reporting as too inconvenient or time-consuming. U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics 1996* (Washington, D.C.: BJS, 1997), 225, table 3.34.

4. Michael R. Rand, James P. Lynch, and David Cantor, *Criminal Victimization, 1973–95* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1997), 3. The rise of the UCR crime rates may be the result of a long-term improvement in law enforcement that began as early as the 1950s. The number of police officers per capita and the per capita expenditure for law enforcement (adjusted for inflation) have increased in the United States. U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Police Employment and Expenditure Trends* (Washington, D.C.: USDOJ, 1986). From 1980 to 1993, the number of county and municipal police increased by 19.6 percent (from 411,138 to 491,603), faster than the country's population, which increased by 14.4 percent (from about 225 million to about 258 million). U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics 1997* (Washington, D.C.: BJS, 1998), 31. In North Carolina the number of police per 100,000 state residents increased by 47 percent from 1975 to 1990 (from 185 to 272). Law enforcement training and equipment also have improved. One comparison of the NCVS and the UCR system attributes much of the growth in UCR crime to changes in "official police policy for founding or unfounding crime reports (deciding whether there is sufficient evidence to conclude that a crime has been committed) and for recording crime events." Scott Menard, "Residual Gains, Reliability, and the UCR–NCS Relationship: A Comment on Blumstein, Cohen, and Rosenfeld," *Criminology* 30 (1992): 109. (NCS stands for National Crime Survey, the former name of the National Crime Victimization Survey.) A recent book comparing the UCR system with the NCVS discusses organizational and technological changes that "have systematically reduced the pressures leading local [police] departments to avoid reporting or to downgrade incidents." Albert D. Biderman and James P. Lynch, *Understanding Crime Incidence Statistics: Why the UCR Diverges from the NCS* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1991), 75. The authors emphasize the role of increased specialization of the crime-reporting function and increased use of civilian (unsworn) personnel for defining and classifying crime complaints. In North Carolina the percentage of civilian personnel in law enforcement agencies increased from 16 in 1975 to 23 in 1990. N.C. Department of Justice, State Bureau of Investigation, *Crime in North Carolina 1975 to 1990* (Raleigh, N.C.: NCDOJ, 1976–91).

5. U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Criminal Victimization in the United States, 1994* (Washington, D.C.: BJS, 1995), 40.

6. As defined in UCR and Census Bureau data, the South comprises eight southern states (Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, and West Virginia), eight border states (Alabama, Arkansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and Texas), and the District of Columbia.

7. To the consternation of criminologists, when people commit a crime, they do not leave behind a form indicating their age! Thus police do not usually report data such as age on the characteristics of violent-crime victims and perpetrators, with the exception of those involved in homicide. In homicide, perpetrators' characteristics more often are reported, probably because the investigation is more thorough.

8. *See* Joseph Neff, "Juvenile Crime Rates Misleading," *News & Observer* (Raleigh), Oct. 9, 1997, p. 1A.

9. The Gallup Poll results appear in U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics 1996* (Washington, D.C.: BJS, 1997), 114, 134. The Carolina Poll results were obtained from the Web site of the Institute for Research in Social Sciences mentioned in the general note on data sources at the beginning of the Notes section.

10. On the other hand, the percentage saying they were "somewhat" worried about victimization increased. The total of "very" and "somewhat" worried rose from 63 percent in 1992 to 72 percent in 1994.

11. Alfred Blumstein, "Youth Violence, Guns, and the Illicit-Drug Industry," *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 86 (1995): 30.

12. Blumstein, "Youth Violence," 30.

13. National Institutes of Health, National Institute on Drug Abuse, Web site, http://www.nida.nih.gov/NIDA Home.html.

14. Andrew L. Golub and Bruce D. Johnson, *Crack's Decline: Some Surprises across U.S. Cities* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, 1997).

15. The ten cities were Cleveland, Dallas, Detroit, Houston, Los Angeles, New Orleans, Philadelphia, San Diego, San Jose, and Washington, D.C.

16. The seven cities were Birmingham, Chicago, Fort Lauderdale, Kansas City (Mo.), Manhattan (New York City), Miami, and Portland (Ore.)

17. The five cities were Atlanta, Denver, Indianapolis, Phoenix, and St. Louis.

18. The two cities were Omaha and San Antonio.

19. Michael Janofsky, "Some Midsize Cities Defy Trend As Drug Deals and Killing Soar," *New York Times*, Jan. 15, 1998, p. 1.

20. Bruce D. Johnson, Andrew Golub, and Jeffrey Fagan, "Careers in Crack, Drug Use, Drug Distribution and Nondrug Criminality," *Crime and Delinquency* 41, no. 3 (1995): 275–95.

21. Johnson, Golub, and Fagan, "Careers in Crack," 290 (emphasis added).

22. Lawrence W. Sherman et al., *Preventing Crime: What Works, What Doesn't, What's Promising: A Report to the United States Congress* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, 1997), obtained from the Web site of the National Criminal Justice Reference Service, http://www.ncjrs.org/works/wholedoc.htm.

23. Mary Ann Wycoff, "Community Policing Strategies" (Washington, D.C.: Police Foundation, 1994, unpublished monograph). The Police Foundation is a nonprofit organization in Washington, D.C., dedicated to innovation and improvement in policing.

24. The Police Foundation study sample was stratified, meaning that agencies of certain types or sizes were deliberately oversampled to be sure that reliable conclusions could be drawn about those kinds of agencies. The percentages reported here are weighted to compensate for this difference in sampling fractions. In other words, the percentages reported are an estimate for all agencies across the country.

25. Wycoff, "Community Policing Strategies," 29, 26–30.

26. Police Foundation, *Preventing Crime and Increasing Justice Through Policing: A Research Agenda* (Washington, D.C.: the Foundation, 1998), cited and quoted in *Criminal Justice Newsletter*, Dec. 15, 1997, p. 2.

27. Some examples of this line of thinking are as follows: (1) Morgan O. Reynolds, *Crime and Punishment in America: 1997 Update* (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Policy Analysis Idea House, 1997). The National Center for Policy Analysis is a nonprofit organization; the publication was obtained from its Web site, http://www.public-policy.org/. (2) Michael Block and Steve Twist, "Order: The Real Infrastructure Issue," *Commentary* (Winter/Spring 1993): 2, 78–79. (3) American Legislative Exchange Council, *Report Card on Crime and Punishment* (Washington, D.C.: the Council, 1994). Michael Block and Steve Twist were major contributors to this publication.

28. Using a technique suggested by Dr. Alan Beck of the United States Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, I estimated the average number of prisoners as a weighted average of the population (head count) at the beginning and the end of the year. I weighted the end-of-year head count twice as heavily as the beginning-of-year head count because the prison population, growing steadily, has tended to surge in the first six to nine months of the year and slow down later in the year.

29. The number of prisoners per crime is a rough estimate of the amount of "offender-years" of prison time actually spent per crime, one "offender-year" being one year served by a single offender. As the number of prisoners per 100,000 crimes increased from 4,045 to 12,070, the amount of imprisonment per crime went from 0.04 offender-years (14.6 offender-days) in 1980 to 0.12 offender-years (43.8 offender-days) in 1995. This may seem to be a ridiculously small amount of prison time, but it takes into account an offender's chances of getting caught, convicted, and sentenced to prison, as well as the actual time served by an offender who makes it all the way to prison. Many persons who commit violent crimes are never apprehended or never convicted and imprisoned.

30. These Bureau of Justice Statistics data include only admissions for sentences exceeding one year.

31. For example, the median time served in prison for robbery remained around twenty-five months from 1980 to 1995, and the median time served for aggravated assault approximately sixteen months. Reynolds, *Crime and Punishment*, table A-5.

32. Peter Greenwood, a noted criminologist with the RAND Corporation, compared a policy of crime-fighting through imprisonment—specifically, the "three strikes and you're out" law enacted in California—with several other strategies aimed at children, family life, and schooling. Reviewing and reanalyzing published research, Greenwood found that, in terms of serious crimes prevented per million dollars spent, three other approaches were more effective than the three-strikes policy: (1) monetary and other incentives to induce disadvantaged students to complete high school; (2) training and therapy for families of young school-age children who have shown aggressive behavior or begun to "act out" in school; and (3) monitoring and supervising of high-school-age youth who already have exhibited delinquent behavior. Peter W. Greenwood et al., *Diverting Children from a Life of Crime: Measuring Costs and Benefits* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 1996).