
Why Is Crime Falling—Or Is It?

Presentation by

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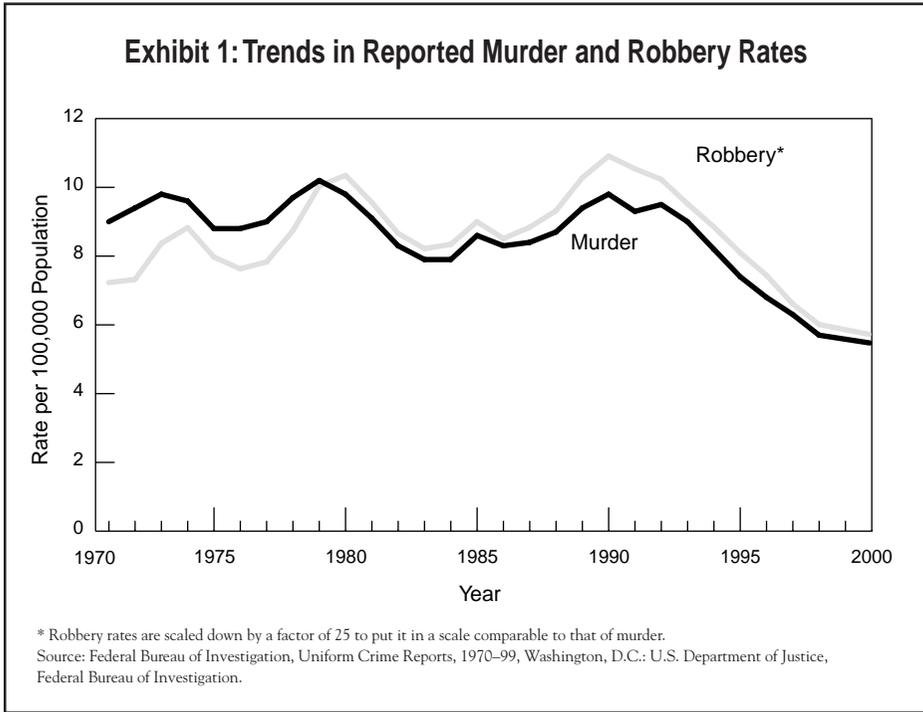
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The Recent Crime Drop

To those who worry about crime in the United States, the period from 1993 through 1999 was a welcome relief. We witnessed a steady drop in crime rates to a level lower than we have seen for more than 30 years. My presentation focuses on violent crime, primarily homicide, because it is so serious. It also is the most reliable and consistently measured crime and is highly correlated with many other aspects of crime. Between 1993 and 1999, the U.S. homicide rate dropped by an impressive 40 percent to a level of 5.7 per 100,000 population, a rate not seen since 1966. This almost brings the United States into the range of some of the countries in Western Europe.

Exhibit 1 presents homicide and robbery rates from 1972 through 1999. These two types of violent crime track each other closely. Both homicide and robbery declined between 1993 and 1999.



These current favorable trends, however, cannot continue indefinitely. We should try to identify the factors that contribute to the downward trend and, as those effects are saturated, determine whether the downward trend will flatten or, because of other factors, reverse.

Whenever crime rates decrease, there are usually claims of both credit (e.g., “it’s a result of my administration’s policy of . . .”) and explanation (e.g., “demographic shift”). Television newscasters always look for a single explanation and are particularly troubled when more than two mutually supportive factors come together. I recently co-edited with Joel Wallman *The Crime Drop in America*,¹ which addresses the multiple factors that together contributed to the crime drop, including the waning of crack markets, the strong economy, efforts to control guns, intensified policing (particularly in efforts to control guns in the community), and increased incarceration.

Aggregate Trends

Exhibit 1 shows that from the 1970s to the mid-1990s, the homicide rate oscillated in the fairly narrow range of 8 to 10 per 100,000 population. Only recently has this rate declined below 8. The peak in 1980 probably was a demographic peak because baby boomers reached the high-crime ages of the late teens and early 20s in the 1970s and moved beyond those high-crime ages in the 1980s.

There was a trough in 1985, followed by the homicide epidemic in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Then, following a peak in 1991 and a slightly lower peak in 1993, the homicide rate declined to its lowest point in 1999, the latest year for which the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) published data in the Uniform Crime Reports (UCR).

Age Differences

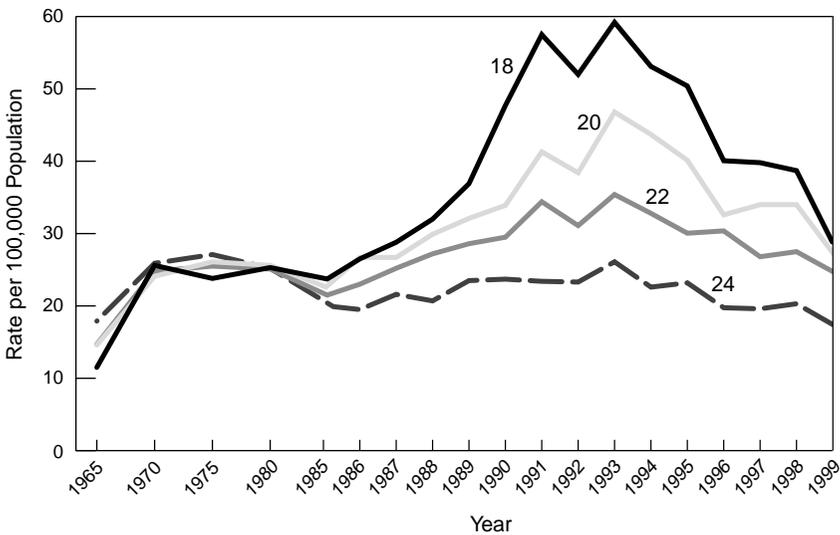
This aggregate picture requires various types of disaggregation if we are to isolate the important factor differences that are masked when looking at only the aggregate. For demographic factors, arrest information is studied because only the demographics of those who get arrested are known. Exhibit 2 is the first step in that disaggregation, where we begin to examine the homicide arrest rate trends for individual ages in the traditional peak range of 18 through 24. There was a clear rise among all ages between 1965 and 1970, followed by a period of reasonable stability from 1970 through 1985; the flatness of the 18 to 24 peak is reflected in the fact that the lines for the individual ages are mixed together and cross one another. That flat period runs through the 1980 peak in the aggregate rate shown in exhibit 1, again suggesting that the 1980 peak was primarily a consequence of changing demographic composition rather than changes within any particular age groups.

Beginning in 1985, we start to see a major divergence across ages, even in this narrow age range of 18 through 24. By 1993, the 18-year-olds had more

than doubled their rates, and 24-year-olds showed no growth at all. Those younger than 18 showed a growth pattern similar to that of the 18-year-olds, more than doubling their rates between 1985 and 1993. These annual growth rates were impressively high, in the range of 10 to 20 percent per year for all ages under 21. After the 1993 peak, we saw a comparably impressive decline in these ages; by 1999, they were roughly back to their 1985 levels.

In contrast to this remarkable growth and decline in homicide arrest rates among the younger ages, the rates for people older than 24 showed no growth; in fact, their rates have steadily declined since 1975.

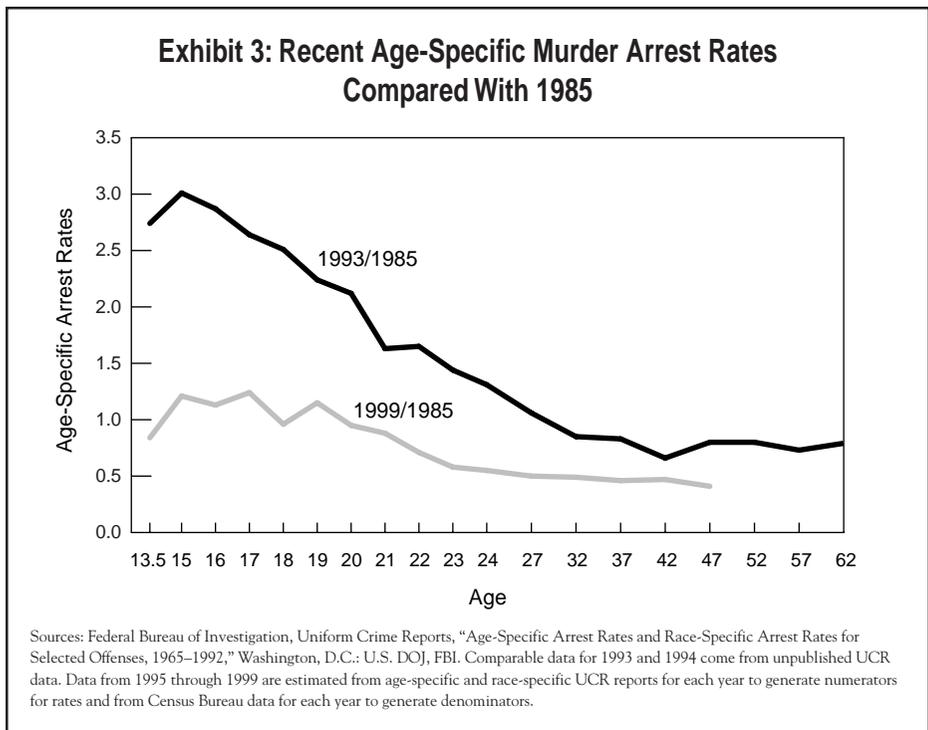
Exhibit 2: Trends in Murder Arrest Rates for the Peak Ages of 18–24



Sources: Federal Bureau of Investigation, Uniform Crime Reports, "Age-Specific Arrest Rates and Race-Specific Arrest Rates for Selected Offenses, 1965–1992," Washington, D.C.: U.S. DOJ, FBI. Comparable data for 1993 and 1994 come from unpublished UCR data. Data from 1995 through 1999 are estimated from age-specific and race-specific UCR arrest reports for each year to generate numerators for rates and from Census Bureau estimates for each year to generate denominators.

These trends are summarized in exhibit 3, which shows two important lines. The upper line reflects the growth period of 1985 to 1993; the lower line reflects the decline or recovery period, which was from 1993 to 1999. Each line depicts for each age the ratio of the age-specific arrest rate for murder in 1993 (the upper line) and in 1999 (the lower line) to the rates that prevailed in 1985. Ratio values greater than 1.0 (denoted by the thick black line) represent an increase in the rates; points below 1.0 represent a decrease. The upper line portrays the ratio reached in the peak year, 1993, and the lower line portrays the degree to which the ratio had declined by 1999.

The arrest rate for 15-year-olds in 1993 was triple the rate in 1985. The growth rate was less for older teens, but it was still more than double the



1985 rate for all those age 20 and younger. In contrast, for those age 30 and older, 1993 rates were actually about 20 percent lower than 1985 rates.

The trend line depicting the 1999:1985 ratio is well below that for 1993, and the greatest decline occurred among younger people. For the first time since 1993, young people's rates in 1999 were roughly back to their 1985 levels—about 20 percent below for the 14- to 17-year-olds and about 20 percent above for the 18- to 22-year-olds. To the extent that the 1985 rates, which are those that prevailed from 1970 through 1985, represent a stable level that is not easily penetrated, that finding may suggest that the current approaches—having finally undone the effects of the 1985 to 1993 rise—may have reached their limits, and we may need to consider different approaches if we are to move significantly below that level for these young people. The positive effects of current approaches—including expanded afterschool programs, conflict resolution, and job skill training—on young people may have reached their limit, and we may have to consider other prevention strategies.

The homicide rates for older people have seen a continuing decline since the mid-1970s. By 1993, rates for people older than 30 had declined about 20 percent from 1985 levels, and by 1999 they had declined another 20 percent to a level that is about 40 to 60 percent of their 1985 level.

The differing patterns for younger and older groups underscore the importance of examining each age group's role in explaining the trends in the aggregate homicide rate since 1985. The aggregate rates shown in exhibit 1 grew to their 1991 peak solely because the rates of the younger people were increasing faster than the rates for the older people were declining. Between 1991 and 1993, the rise for younger people had generally flattened out (as reflected in the pattern for the 18-year-olds in exhibit 2), and so the rate of decline seen in the older ages began to dominate the aggregate rates. Since the rates of both young and old were decreasing after 1993, the aggregate rate continued to fall.

In sum, the increase in the level of homicide in the United States during the growth period of the late 1980s and early 1990s was due entirely to the trends in the younger age groups; homicide rates for those age 25 and older did not increase. However, the decrease since 1993 is due to both the recent sharp drop in offending among young people and the continuing decline in offending among older persons. Even though they commit homicide at lower rates, the contribution of the older age groups to the recent decline in the aggregate homicide rate may be appreciable because of their large numbers. For example, in 1980 and 1985, people older than 30 accounted for about 30 percent of the homicides, but by 1993, their contribution declined to only 22 percent, partly because of the growth in the contribution of the younger offenders and partly because older people were committing fewer homicides. By 1999, their contribution increased to 24 percent, driven largely by the sharp decline in the rates for younger offenders after 1993.

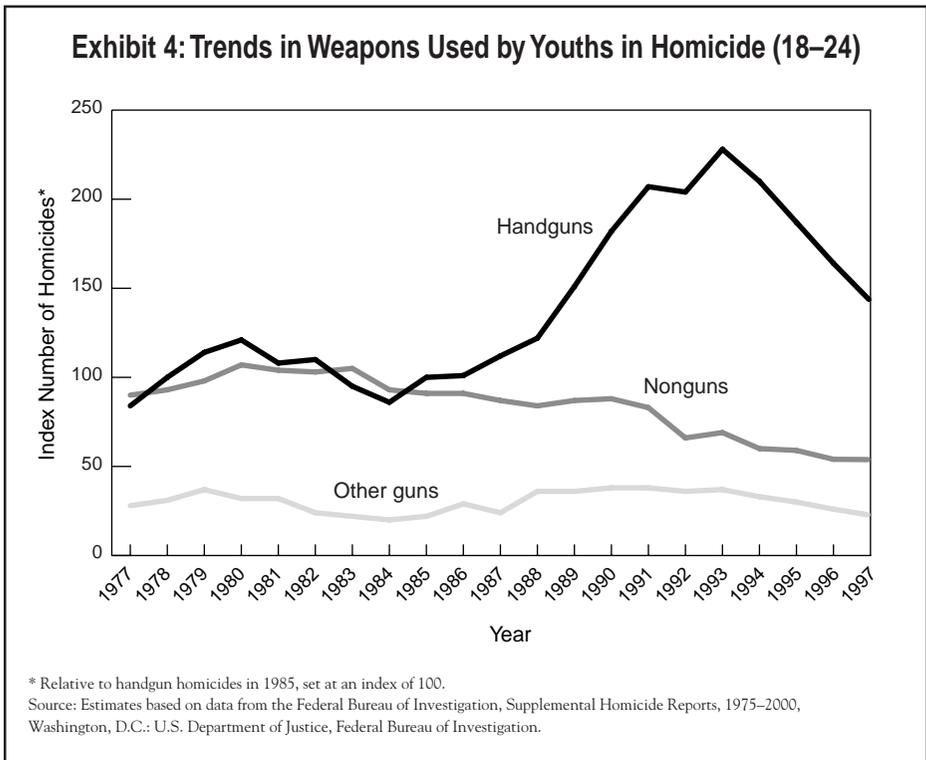
Explanations of the homicide decline must differentiate between the factors that are responsible for the long-term fall in homicide rates among the older adults and the ones causing the post-1985 rise and the more recent drop in homicide offending by the younger groups. Those two explanations are likely to be different.

The Role of Weapons

Young people experienced a major growth in the use of handguns in homicide after 1985. Exhibit 4 displays the number of homicides—relative to the number of handgun homicides in 1985, which is set to an index of 100—in each year with three types of weapons: handguns, other guns, and weapons other than guns. The exhibit focuses on the weaponry used in homicides by youths between the ages of 18 and 24, using data from the Supplementary Homicide Reports (SHR), compiled by the FBI, of factors associated with individual homicide events. Before 1985, there was some oscillation, but no clear trend. But between

1985 and 1993, there was an increase of more than 130 percent in homicides committed with handguns, with no marked change in the number of homicides committed with long guns and about a 50-percent decrease with nonguns. This suggests that handguns were partly a substitute for nongun weapons (e.g., knives) and caused more homicides that, if handguns had not been used, may have been merely assaults. The decline started in 1994 and, by 1997, had decreased to about only a 50-percent increase over 1985.

Handgun homicides committed by juveniles younger than 18 *quadrupled* between 1985 and 1993, with a doubling in the number of long-gun homicides and about a 20-percent decrease in the number of nongun homicides. By 1997, the number of handgun homicides had decreased sharply to about



80 percent below the 1993 rate. There was no such increase in the number of handgun homicides committed by 25- to 45-year-old adults; that age group displays a downward trend that accelerates after 1991 and reaches a level about 60 percent of the 1985 level in 1997.

A major change occurred after 1985; young people were acquiring handguns in alarming numbers. Older people may have had more handguns during this period, but they appear to have exercised greater restraint in their use.

It is widely recognized that teenage males are poor dispute resolvers; they have always fought to settle their disputes. When they fight with fists, the conflict evolves relatively slowly; the loser will eventually find a way to withdraw or a third party, observing the incident, has time to intervene. The dynamics are extremely different when a handgun is present; the conflict escalates well before anyone can retreat or intervene. Once handguns become prevalent in a neighborhood, each person who carries one has an incentive to make a preemptive strike before his adversary does.

Between 1985 and 1993, the weapons involved in settling young people's disputes changed from fists and knives to handguns—and more recently, to semiautomatic pistols, which have much greater firepower and lethality. The growth in lethal weaponry is reflected in the changes in the weapons used in homicides committed by different race and age groups. Beginning in 1985, there was a sharp growth in the firearm homicide death rate among young people (those in their early 20s and younger; youths [ages 18–24], especially juveniles [under 18 years old]; but not among adults [ages 25–45]) that changed a flat trend to a sharply rising one, with the rise sharpest for young ages. At the same time, the shift was much smaller for the number of homicide deaths due to means other than handguns.

The decline in the number of handgun homicides almost mirrors the rise. Following the peak in 1993, the rate of decline was steepest for juveniles; it

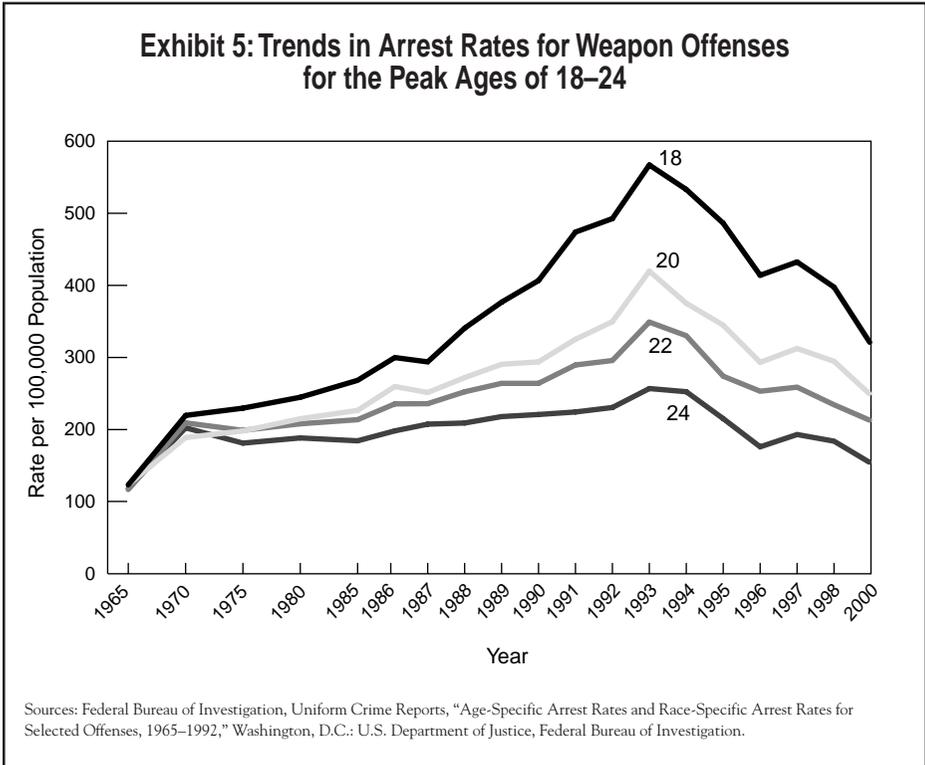
was less steep for youths. Adults, whose rate displayed no peaking, nevertheless showed a steady decline of almost 40 percent after 1993. These data end in 1997, two years before the age-specific homicide arrest rates reached the 1985 level, and one can speculate that their decline continued until at least 1999.

The increase in suicide weapons-specific death rates before 1993 was similar to that of homicide death rates. Following a period of generally flat rates, the rate of suicide by firearms increased sharply after 1985, but the rate of suicide by other means did not change. This shift was especially marked in suicides of black youth and juveniles, whose suicide rate had previously been markedly lower than that of whites.²

These observations suggest that the growth in homicide committed by young people was more attributable to the weapons they used than to the emergence of inadequately socialized cohorts of “superpredators,” as some observers claimed during the period that saw such an increase in the number of homicides. If the cohorts were indeed more vicious, then one would expect to see a growth in homicides by all forms of weaponry rather than by only handguns. The findings strongly suggest that teenagers had disputes as they always had, but that the availability and lethality of handguns, and later semiautomatic pistols, resulted in an increase in homicides.

The steady decline in handgun homicide rates after 1993 is consistent with the decline in youth-perpetrated homicide rates shown in exhibit 2. The pattern in handgun use is also reflected in exhibit 5, which depicts the time trend in the rates of arrests for weapon possession at various ages. This pattern is also similar to the homicide patterns depicted in exhibit 2. Weapon arrest trends show a distinct peaking in 1993, followed by a clear decline.

Changes in the rates of weapon arrests result from a combination of changes in the illegal carrying of weapons and changes in police aggressiveness in pursuing illegal weapons. Exhibit 5 shows a considerable growth in weapon possession



among young people during the late 1980s. Police also became more concerned about weapons, especially in the hands of young people. That combination is reflected in the rise in weapon arrests, which peaked in 1993. There is no indication of any diminution in police aggressiveness in pursuing young people with guns after 1993, so the decline after 1993 is likely due more to a reduction in the carrying of guns than to a slackening of police efforts to capture the guns. This reduction in carrying seems to have been an important factor contributing to the decrease in homicides after 1993.

Thus, we have clear indications from SHR data on weapons used in homicides and weapon arrests that there was a significant decline in the use of handguns by young people after 1993. It is difficult to sort out all the factors

that contributed to that. One important contributor was the aggressive stop-and-frisk tactics used by local police, especially in many large cities. Community groups in many cities also took an active role in negotiating truces among gangs and seeking to establish norms that precluded the carrying of guns.

Important Federal initiatives also are likely to have contributed to the decline. The Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act (P.L. 103–159), which requires a 5-day waiting period for a background check for any person who wants to buy a gun from a licensed dealer, became effective in 1994, the first year of the decline. The denial rate under the Brady Act has been reported at 2.4 percent of those who apply to purchase a gun.³ Uncertain is the degree to which these individuals simply accepted the denials or resorted to one of the many loopholes left open by the Brady Act: purchasing a gun at a gun show, buying one from a private individual, hiring a straw purchaser to buy it, stealing it, or using any of the other means left open to a determined illegal purchaser.

There are also approaches by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) to identify dealers and individuals disproportionately involved in the sale or purchase of “crime guns.” ATF tries to trace back to the original dealers guns seized by law enforcement. Such efforts may lead not only to deterring inappropriate handgun transactions but to making guns harder to obtain.

All these efforts have a mutually reinforcing effect. A reduction in the carrying of handguns, because of either the threat of confiscation or the difficulty in acquiring them, would lead to a reduced incentive for others to carry, thereby reducing the likelihood of handgun homicides, especially among the young people for whom it was so deadly.

The Role of Drug Markets

One important factor that has affected criminality throughout the 1980s and 1990s has been the problem of drug abuse and drug markets. In a survey conducted in 1991, 32 percent of prisoners reported using cocaine or crack regularly and 15 percent used heroin or opiates regularly. At the time of the offense that led to their imprisonment, 14 percent were using cocaine or crack. These numbers were appreciably higher than those reported in a similar survey conducted 5 years earlier.⁴ These are much higher rates than one finds in general population samples (e.g., the National Institute on Drug Abuse household surveys), which strengthens the importance of a connection between drug use and crime rates.

Paul Goldstein developed a useful taxonomy of the drug-crime connection composed of three components other than the sale or possession of the drugs themselves:

- Pharmacological/psychological consequences. The drug itself causes criminal activity (most notably, the connection between alcohol and violence).
- Economic/compulsive crimes. Drug users commit crimes to get money to support their habit.
- Systemic crime. Crimes are committed as part of the regular means of doing business in the drug industry (including violence as the accepted way to solve disputes between competing sellers or as retribution between a seller and a buyer as a result of renegeing on a drug deal).⁵

There is a fourth, more broad connection that should be considered: the community disorganization caused by the drug industry and its operations, including the manner by which the norms and behaviors in the drug industry, which can pervade some communities, influences the behavior of others

who have no direct connection to that industry. For example, the widespread prevalence of guns among drug sellers can impel others in the community to arm themselves to similarly defend themselves, to settle their own disputes even if they do not involve drugs, or to gain respect.

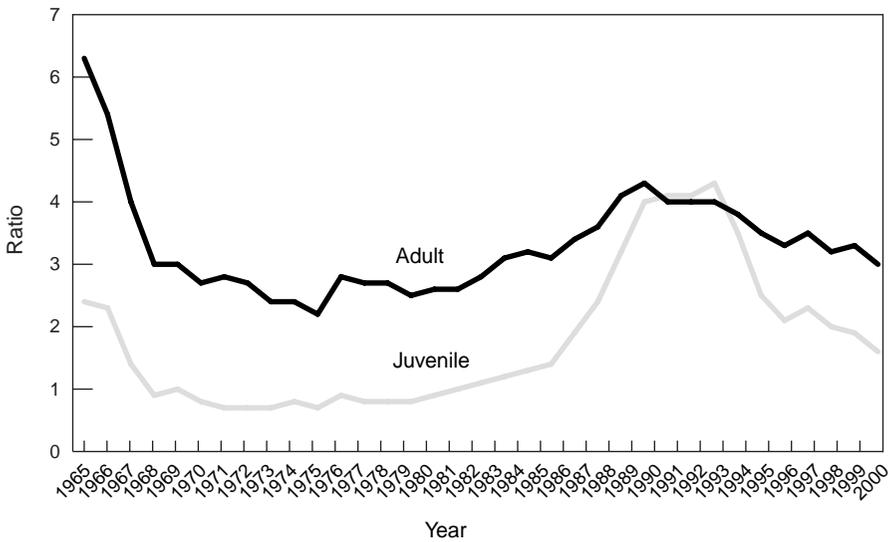
The problem of crack cocaine emerged in the early 1980s and accelerated significantly in the late 1980s. One indication of this growth lies in the rate of arrests of adults for drug offenses, which, especially for nonwhites (primarily blacks) started to increase in the early 1980s and accelerated appreciably after 1985 with the wide distribution of crack, especially in low-income urban neighborhoods. The steady growth in drug arrests of nonwhite adults compared with those of white adults is reflected in exhibit 6, which depicts the ratio of nonwhite-to-white drug arrests for both juveniles and adults.

The trend for juveniles is strikingly different. Throughout the 1970s, the arrest rate for nonwhite juveniles was below that of whites (the ratio is less than 1:1). Starting in 1986, however, their rate grew rapidly, reaching a rate four times that of whites during 1989–92, then began a steep decline to about 50 percent above the white juvenile rate in 1999. This pattern shows that the major recruitment of nonwhite juveniles into the drug markets did not begin until the distribution of crack became widespread in about 1985.

Exhibit 6 provides important information linking some earlier observations about the rise in homicides committed by young people and the role of guns in that rise. Three major increases—more than a doubling—occurred in the short period between 1985 (the beginning of the involvement of young people in drug markets) and 1993 (the peak year of youth violence):

- Rates of homicides committed by youths age 20 and younger, with no growth for adults 25 and older (exhibit 3).

Exhibit 6: Trends in the Ratio of Nonwhite Juvenile and Adult Drug Arrests to White Juvenile and Adult Drug Arrests



Note: The values are the ratio of nonwhite arrest rate to white arrest rate for drug offenses. A ratio above 1:1 indicates that nonwhites have a higher arrest rate than whites, and a value less than 1 indicates that whites have the higher arrest rate.

- The number of homicides those younger than 25 commit with guns, with no growth in nongun homicides (exhibit 4).
- The quadrupling of the arrest rate of nonwhite juveniles on drug charges compared with white juveniles (exhibit 6).

One explanation for this dramatic combination of changes involves a process that is driven by illegal drug markets, which appear to operate in conjunction with the demand for drugs despite massive efforts during the past two decades to attack the supply side. In the late 1980s, the illegal drug trade recruited juveniles because they were willing to work more cheaply than adults, were

less vulnerable to the punishments imposed by the increasingly punitive adult criminal justice system, and were willing to take more risks than adults. The rapid growth in the demand for crack required more sellers—many new users used crack because they could buy one hit at a time, unlike powder cocaine, which was not sold in small quantities—and encouraged the market to find its labor supply wherever it could. Furthermore, recruiting juveniles was the market's means of replacing the large number of adult drug sellers who were being incarcerated during the 1980s. The economic plight of young urban black juveniles, many of whom saw no other comparable route to economic sustenance at the time, made them particularly responsive to the lure of employment in the crack markets.

Because crack markets were run as street markets, especially those operating in inner-city areas, the participants were especially vulnerable to attack by robbers who targeted their sizable assets, either the drugs or the money from the sale of drugs. Calling the police for protection was not an option, so participants in those markets, including recruited juveniles, were likely to carry guns to protect themselves and solve disputes. Once these juveniles started carrying guns, other teenagers who were not involved in the drug markets but went to the same schools or walked the same streets also were more likely to arm themselves. These teenagers felt they needed guns for their own protection, but they also may have believed that weapon possession was a status symbol in the community. This initiated an escalating arms race: As more guns appeared in the street, there was an increased incentive for individuals to arm themselves. In light of the much tighter networking of teenagers than of older people, that diffusion process could proceed quickly. The emergence of teenage gangs—some involved in drug markets—in many cities at about this time contributed to that diffusion.

In view of the recklessness and bravado that often characterize male teenagers and their low skill level in settling disputes other than through the use of physical force, many of the fistfights that would otherwise have taken place

escalated into shootings as a result of the presence of guns. This escalation in violence can be exacerbated by the problems of socialization associated with high levels of poverty, high rates of single-parent households, educational failures, and a widespread sense of economic hopelessness. Not until they reach their mid-20s do they develop some prudence, become more cautious even if they are armed, and display greater restraint.

This hypothesized diffusion process⁶ has been tested further with city-level data on juvenile arrests for drugs and homicides, taking advantage of the fact that drug markets flourished at different times in different cities, such as in the mid-1980s in New York and Los Angeles and later in smaller cities. Daniel Cork⁷ has shown the connection between the rise in handgun homicides and the recruitment of juveniles into crack markets. Using an epidemic model originally developed for marketing literature, Cork identified—in individual cities—the time when juvenile arrests for drugs began to accelerate and the corresponding time when juvenile homicide arrests increased. He found most typically a 1- to 3-year lag between the two, with homicides following involvement in drug markets. These results are consistent with the hypothesis that the rise in juvenile homicides was attributable to the diffusion of guns from young people recruited into drug markets to their friends and beyond. His analysis of individual cities also showed that crack markets generally emerged first in the largest coastal cities, especially in New York and Los Angeles, and then appeared in Middle America and smaller cities. Thus, the observed patterns in the rise of homicide committed by young people with handguns are highly consistent with explanations that assign central importance to the rise and decline of crack markets in the United States.

The fall-off in the nonwhite/white drug-arrest ratio (exhibit 6) in the 1990s is a reflection of the changing tastes for crack, especially in urban neighborhoods. As recognition of its deleterious effects became widespread, word spread through the streets that crack was an undesirable drug, and this

wisdom had a major effect on diminishing the number of new users.⁸ This contributed to a major reduction in the need for street sellers. As a result, the nonwhite juvenile sellers, who had been important participants in those street markets, were no longer needed. Older users continued to be major crack consumers, but their demand could be served more readily by individual delivery, thereby diminishing the need for street markets. All these changes contributed to a decline in street markets, the recruitment of juveniles, and handgun possession by young people following the 1993 peak.

One important contributing factor to the decline in violence as crack demand ebbed has been the strength of the U.S. economy during the past decade. If there were no legitimate jobs for young people, it is reasonable to anticipate that they would have found other criminal activity to provide economic sustenance. But the abundance of job opportunities, including those not requiring high skill levels, provided legitimate alternatives. Individuals in legitimate jobs have a strong incentive to conform and avoid criminal activity. This should indicate the desirability of finding approaches that bring young people into the legitimate economy through appropriate training to develop legitimate employment opportunities.

Incarceration

The United States has gone through a dramatic transformation in its sentencing policies and practices in the past 25 years. As shown in exhibit 7, the United States maintained an impressively stable incarceration rate (prisoners per capita) of about 110 per 100,000 population during the 50-year period from the early 1920s to the mid-1970s,⁹ when it suddenly grew exponentially at a rate of about 6 to 7 percent per year. The rate is currently more than four times the previously stable rate.

Various attempts have been made to correlate the rising incarceration rate with the crime rate. The most aggressive of those analyses use the period after

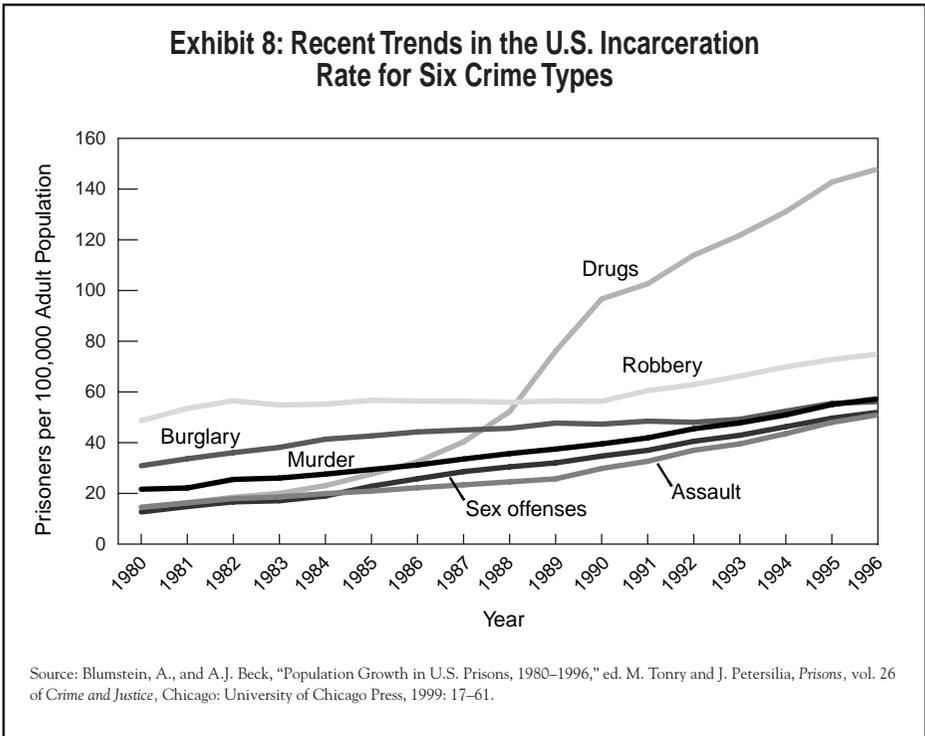


1991—they argue that the crime rate has been steadily decreasing because the incarceration rate is increasing. But such simplistic attempts to estimate the incarceration effects on crime are likely to be misleading. For example, the analysis must also account for the period in the late 1980s when crime was increasing at the same time the prison population was growing.

Attributing the decline to incarceration is far more tenable if one focuses on older offenders, whose homicide rates have declined steadily since the mid-1970s. This group is the appropriate focus for estimating the incapacitative effect of incarceration (i.e., crime is reduced because offenders are removed from the streets). One can appreciate that the incapacitation effects were an important contributor to the continuing decline of violent crime rates among

older people, especially for those over 30, who displayed about a 40- to 60-percent drop in homicide rates between 1985 and 1999 (exhibit 3). This connection is particularly appropriate because 32 is about the median age of State prisoners.

One of the contributors to the growth in incapacitation is the large number of drug sellers who have been sentenced to prison in the past two decades. Exhibit 8 shows the growth in incarceration from 1980 through 1996 by crime type. The greatest growth—by a factor of more than 10—was among drug offenders. Ironically, their incarceration did not have a major impact on the drug trade because others, particularly younger sellers, replaced them. But if they would have engaged in violence on the outside, their incarceration



could have contributed to the decline in violent crime rates. The incapacitation effect, however, is at least partially negated by violence committed by the replacements. Indeed, because many replacements were young people, who have a greater propensity for violence, the net effect may have been an increase in violent crime, undoubtedly a factor that must be considered when discussing the rise in violence of the late 1980s.

Even if drug offenders' incarceration contributed to the reduction in homicide, it is not clear whether imprisoning them was an efficient use of fiscal or prison resources. As the prison population grows, marginal offenders are likely to have a lower offending frequency (λ) than those who were already incarcerated.¹⁰ A sizable but unknown fraction of drug offenders who are incarcerated (comprising more than 20 percent of State prisoners and more than 60 percent of Federal prisoners) are predominantly entrepreneurs rather than generic criminals, and they are not likely to be violent.

Incarceration effects are far less likely to have been a significant factor in the more recent decline in violent crime rates among teenagers and youths, and most likely were limited to older youths, whose risk of incarceration is greatest. In addition, levels of violence have fallen in the younger age groups in recent years even as their risk of incarceration has increased. The decline might have been less steep in the absence of the "get tough on juveniles" sentencing policies enacted in recent years. But it seems more likely that the other factors considered in this paper—the reduction in the use of guns, changes in the drug markets, and the growing number of legitimate job opportunities—have had more dominant effects.

In *The Crime Drop in America*, William Spelman and Richard Rosenfeld derived estimates of the contribution of incarceration to the crime drop of the 1990s. Spelman¹¹ used general elasticity estimates (percentage reduction of crime resulting from a 1-percent increase in the prison population) from the literature and estimated that the crime reduction is associated with steady

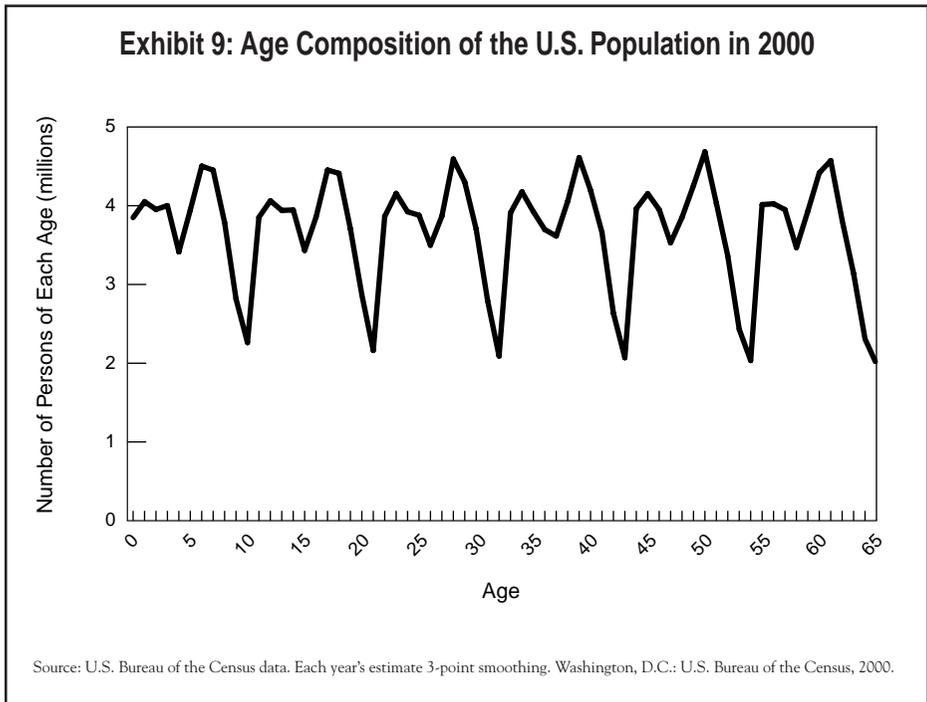
growth in the prison population. Rosenfeld¹² used estimates of prisoners' offending frequency (λ) based on homicide rates in the most disadvantaged neighborhoods of St. Louis and Chicago and estimated that prisoners would commit 150 homicides per 100,000 prison population. Both were crude estimates, and they used very different approaches, but both estimated that incarceration contributed about 25 percent of the crime drop, leaving 75 percent to other explanations.

Changing Demographic Composition

Much of the speculation about the recent decline in homicide rates attributes it to changing demographics. This may be a holdover from the realization that much of the decline that began in 1980 was attributable to a demographic shift as the baby-boom generation outgrew the high-crime ages.¹³ Those same demographic effects were not at work in the early 1990s, since demographic effects do not always move in the same direction.

The decline after 1980 was significantly affected by the shrinking size of the cohorts in the high-crime ages—late teens and early 20s. In the late 1990s and currently in the United States, those cohort sizes are growing. Exhibit 9 depicts the age distribution of the U.S. population in 2000. It is evident that the smallest age cohort under 40 is about 24 (those born in 1976). Each of the youngest cohorts is larger than its predecessor until the peak at age 9. Thus, if age-specific crime rates are to remain constant for teenagers, the aggregate crime rate should be increasing as a result of the larger cohort sizes.

These age-composition changes are relatively small, with cohort sizes growing at a rate of about 1 percent per year. Even disaggregating the composition by race reveals a similar pattern: Both whites and blacks have their smallest cohort at about age 24 in 2000, but the rate of growth of the younger black population is about 2 percent per year. These demographic trends are small compared with the much larger annual swings in the age-specific crime rates,



as much as 10 to 20 percent per year growth in the 1980s (16 percent per year for 18-year-olds from 1985 to 1991) as well as decreases in the 1990s (6 percent per year for 18-year-olds from 1991 to 1998).

Some Observations

The sharp rise in violence by young people during the late 1980s and the correspondingly sharp decline in the 1990s are striking. The increase in the aggregate homicide rate was due to escalating rates among juveniles and youths, predominantly (although not exclusively) by and against black males, particularly in larger cities and exclusively involving handguns. By 1999, the rate of homicide perpetrated by youths finally returned to the stable rate that prevailed from 1970 through 1985.

Although the causes of the rise in violent crime are reasonably clear—homicides by young people with handguns, mostly as a result of diffusion out of drug markets—the factors contributing to the decline are more complex. Various forces are involved, some more salient in certain places. They include efforts by local police, communities, and Federal agencies to separate young people from their guns. Those efforts have been helped considerably by the waning of crack markets, especially the diminished participation of young people in those markets. As an alternative, the robust economy has provided legitimate job opportunities for them, which has created incentives to avoid illegal activities.

The changes in drug markets also help account for the variation in the timing of the peaks and declines in rates of violence across cities. Large coastal cities such as New York and Los Angeles, where crack took hold earlier and violent crime rates peaked sooner than in other cities, were expected to—and did—experience a drop in homicide rates sooner than other cities. The effects of drug markets also directs attention to the population groups in which the changes in homicide were concentrated: youth, particularly black youth who did not have more attractive economic opportunities and became drug sellers at disproportionately high rates in inner-city crack markets.

For older offenders, the growth in incarceration is an important component of the explanation, although other considerations seem to be relevant. These include the widespread availability of domestic violence services, which seem to have contributed significantly to the reduction in male victimization in homicide.¹⁴

One final observation is somewhat provocative. The UCR reports for the first half of 2000 were released by the FBI in mid-December 2000. They are strikingly different from the previous 6 years in which annual decreases in crime rates of 6 to 8 percent were common. The new report estimates both crime and homicide drops of merely 0.3 percent. This could be an indication that the decrease in crime, which could not continue indefinitely, has finally

flattened out. A precursor to this estimate occurred in 1998, when homicides dropped by only 2 percent in the large cities (populations of 500,000 to 1 million and more than 1 million) when the national aggregate drop was about 6 to 8 percent. Large cities have led the rise and decline in crime rates. We cannot be certain whether this flattening is an indication of one small disruption to a continuing decline, the start of a next increase, or a plateau from which changes will require particularly innovative approaches that are quite different from the actions that have taken us to this point. Regardless, we should take advantage of the current opportunity to better understand these processes and to pursue criminal justice and community-based policies to forestall the next increase as long as possible. As we look to the future, we should be concerned both about the possibility of a resurgence of active drug markets and any violence they may bring with them and about a downturn in the economy and the impact it would have in communities in which violence is most likely to reignite.

Question-and-Answer Session

Patrick W. Murphy, American Police Association, Alexandria, Virginia: Remember what the Crime Commission said about the police? How can you forget—about [being] ineffective, inefficient, fragmented, insular, unprofessional, and not dedicated to research? Community policing has brought a small revolution in policing. In a quick-and-dirty survey, the *L.A. Times* found that the chiefs of about a dozen major cities that had experienced significant declines in murder, credited community policing. Although the debate continues about New York, there are those who say community policing has had a significant impact there, even if it has not been given the same credit by city hall or police headquarters. Police have a long way to go, but I'm encouraged that some kind of a corner has been turned, with police

focusing more on prevention and working more with the community. Would you comment on that?

A.B.: Policing has been most notable in its development and its openness. Police chiefs are remarkably astute and policing has been impressive in its readiness to try new ideas. Community policing makes so much sense at an abstract level, but when you examine its implementation at the city level, it is difficult to evaluate just what is going on. Programs vary enormously. When the COPS program began, community policing became the byword for whatever police departments wanted to do so they could take advantage of new sources of funding.

A 1999 paper coauthored with Allen Beck¹⁵ examined arrests per crime over time; for all crime categories we looked at, except for drugs—for which we did not know the number of crimes—the arrest rate per crime was flat. So, at least it casts some question about the degree to which innovation in policing has contributed to significant improvements in solving crimes. The extent that it helps solve a variety of other problems, the extent that it contributes to much better relations between the police and more highly mobilized communities, is all to the good. I've been to visit the Compstat operations in the New York Police Department. Much has been made of the technology there, but I think it is secondary to the chiefs and “wise old hands” who put precinct captains on the spot and say, “What are you doing about all this?” and get them to address the emerging crime problems with a variety of challenges and ideas. These are the places where we can see a lot of innovation.

I think police departments are ready to add operations research units, groups that will analyze the data that are now streaming in from 911 calls (which are not easily manipulated), with the data that stream in from other sources, figuring out improved tactics and improved approaches. I would hope that

funding is available to provide this kind of link between the police, who are now anxious for interesting sophisticated analysis leading to better operations, and the resources to do it.

Joanne Wiggins, U.S. Department of Education, Washington, D.C.: You talked about murder, you talked about robbery, you talked about drug arrests; you did not talk about rape, sexual assault, or domestic violence. I would issue a challenge that when we talk about “crime dropping,” it is not true to say that crime is down unless you can also say that crimes against women are down. I think we need to be careful how we make these statements because the realities of women’s lives may not be exactly like the charts you have been showing and research needs to take these disparities into account.

A.B.: I think that is an important issue. Unfortunately, our data sources, on rape particularly, are not terribly reliable in the sense that in the victimization survey, the number or rape victim sample is too low to get reliable estimates, and in police records there is too much “un-founding” (i.e., the alleged incident did not occur) going on. The category of reported rapes is subject to significant shifts in women’s willingness to report over the past couple of decades. One interesting study that came out of the work of the National Consortium on Violence Research was a dissertation by Laura Dugan that compared the association of intimate-partner homicide across cities with the degree of services (e.g., legal services, counseling services). Dugan found that the more services a city provided for domestic violence, the more good it did to reduce intimate-partner homicide, but only of one gender. And the gender that benefited from the reduction was not women, but men. The interpretation has been that increased victim services provided alternatives for women who might otherwise have killed their victimizers. So the major drop in intimate-partner homicide victimization has been for men. Dugan is revisiting the issue of domestic violence itself to gain a better understanding of the situation.

Devon Brown, Office of the Corrections Trustee, Washington, D.C.: I was delighted recently to learn that your colleague, the esteemed John DiIulio, has recently “found religion,” inasmuch as he has changed his view on the prediction that so-called “superpredators” would take over our cities. Could you share with us your view on that?

A.B.: When we saw this rise in juvenile violence, rhetoric started to flow. The “superpredator” theory argued that we are now seeing a breed of kids that is far worse in socialization, conceivably in genetics, than previously seen. A major thrust of everything I said about that rise in violent crime was that it was not different kids, it was the same kids doing what they had always done, with more lethal weaponry. The handgun became the major source of the problem when it got into the hands of irresponsible people. Violent crime was reduced not because we had changes in socialization after 1993, but because the nucleating role of the drug markets diminished. It declined because kids no longer had to carry guns and we saw a general disarmament. Another reason for disarmament was that the police were posing larger threats—taking the guns away and imposing other punishment. As we saw fewer guns in the street, the incentive to carry them was diminished. So we saw this gradual dropping away. John DiIulio has acknowledged that “superpredator” was really an inappropriate characterization. I think the essence of the data I presented today shows that it wasn’t different kids; it was the weapons those kids were carrying. These factors should stimulate everybody to work to prevent handguns from getting into the hands of irresponsible people. There are many ways we can do that without significantly inconveniencing the large number of responsible people who have every right to have handguns legally. These include tracing guns, as ATF does to see where those guns are coming from; identifying dealers who are major sources of guns used in crimes; and restricting gun purchases to one gun per month to inhibit aggressive marketers. Federal laws will be necessary to ensure that one State is not vulnerable to neighboring States that do not enforce gun laws. As long as we see a clearly interstate commerce in guns,

Federal intervention will be needed to identify the source of the problem and identify minimally intrusive methods to ensure that guns don't get in the hands of statutorily defined irresponsible people (youth, felons, and individuals who have been involuntarily committed to mental institutions). A number of States' mental health departments, for example, have set up registries of people who have been committed to mental hospitals who should not have access to guns. A gun dealer can query that registry to determine whether a particular customer is prohibited from purchasing a gun. The response gives no detail on the person's mental illness, but merely provides a yes/no answer on prohibition.

Stephen Rickman, Executive Office for Weed and Seed, U.S. Department of Justice, Washington, D.C.: As a consequence of this increase in incarceration rate over the past 20 years, you have also had an increase in the number of people who are coming out of prison. And I think there was a study done over at the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) estimating more than 500,000 people released. Given the fact that you have had this diminution in postrelease supervision and services with this population, how do you factor this into your trends and how it may affect crime in the future?

A.B.: That's a good question, because it really pulls together a number of important issues. Number one, we are keeping people incarcerated longer. We are keeping people longer partly because our sentences are increasing, partly because of mandatory minimums, and, most important, because of parole violations (increasingly for technical violations). We are increasing the probability that these people coming out are coming out well past their criminal careers—and we must think seriously about criminal careers. There was a period when NIJ sponsored some very important research on criminal careers, looking at the duration of a criminal career, how long people stay active. Research found that the duration of the residual criminal career goes up through the 20s, is fairly flat through the 30s, and then falls off in the 40s. So people in their 30s are the ones most likely to continue—if they are active in their 30s.

The issue of postrelease management is a complex one. It involves a mixture of providing services and exercising control by sending the person back to prison. The trends lately have emphasized the control aspect, often at the expense of services. Indeed, many States are finding that more of their admissions are now composed of parole violators than new court commitments. Service needs are complex, and perhaps the most essential is drug treatment, which everyone acknowledges is important. In addition, there has to be help in finding and keeping a job, treating mental illness, and various other forms of counseling.

The whole notion of parole has become politicized because parole officials rather than prison officials were the ones who made release decisions: “We will stop the release decisions by moving to determinate sentences” without attention to the handholding and the guidance and the counseling needed and without attention to the rate of reincarceration. Parole officials took the political heat for being “soft on crime” at the time when everyone else was being “tough,” so they began sending violators back to prison on the least provocation without dealing with the issue of the optimum policy for dealing with somebody who now is drug positive. The parole issue very much needs rethinking. Parole recommitments have been a major factor in the growing incarceration rate over the past 5 years or so.

Obviously crime rates are declining. We are not doing a lot more on drug enforcement because the drug markets have thinned out and have become more surreptitious. They now look more like powder cocaine markets—more like pizza delivery rather than street markets.

Ted Gest, University of Pennsylvania, Criminal Justice Journalists (based in Washington, D.C.): While your presentation related to government responses to crime, you concentrated almost totally on what you would call enforcement or incarceration remedies. Could you describe the field of so-called crime prevention in the past 10 years or so? I think it’s fair to say there

has been an increase in programs dealing with juveniles and drug treatment—certainly not so much as was contemplated in the 1994 crime law,¹⁶ but a lot of programs. Does the absence of crime prevention from your comments indicate that either we don't know what any of these programs contributed or that you think they have had a marginal or insignificant effect on the phenomenon?

A.B.: I think that's an important question. There is so much I didn't talk about but I certainly didn't mean to slight prevention. I still think the efforts that governments, particularly the Federal Government, put into issues of prevention are quite minimal and the issue is compounded by the fact that we have so little research, between the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), National Institute of Justice, and BJS, to have any accurate assessment of what works best. The programs we get data on and that have been a major cornerstone of both Federal and State policies have been in the incarceration area. Prevention efforts are still strikingly minuscule in comparison to what is needed, particularly the need to combine those efforts with evaluations targeted at what looks like the most promising opportunities. OJJDP has been a major leader in, for example, the longitudinal research in tracking kids through emerging and eventually terminating criminal careers—and the factors associated with getting involved in crime—because that fundamental research helps to identify what kind of interventions are best for whom.

We went through this horrible period in the late 1970s and early 1980s when Bob Martinson's "nothing works" theme emerged out of a variety of evaluation studies that tried to find the "silver bullet" and tested individual technologies to estimate their effectiveness in reducing recidivism. Any such treatment cannot be universally applicable. Treatments have to link the individual offender or potential offender and his or her needs, the treatment provider and his or her skills in delivering various kinds of treatment, and the environment in terms of what kinds of crime that person might be getting involved in.

We have to experiment with many approaches and evaluate them, but budgets in the order of tens of millions of dollars are inadequate to deal with this problem. We continue to be impressively ignorant about the effects of any of our interventions within the justice system. And cutting that back would be the height of folly at a time when the establishment is ready to be open and interested in getting research findings. But we need much more research and evaluation to track the changes that are going on in this phenomenon—because they are changing.

Clinton G. Turner III, U.S. Capitol Police, Washington, D.C.: My primary interest is victims of crime, especially those victimized at night. What about the enhancement of victim/witness support nationwide? At the U.S. Capitol Police, we are very good at dealing with victims of crime, primarily crime that occurs around 6:00 p.m. and later. Youths commit a high percentage of these crimes. If we enhanced victim programs in the various police departments, I believe we would have even fewer. Is there anything being done nationwide to enhance the victim-witness programs in police departments?

A.B.: I believe there are; I just haven't looked very carefully at that. I'm sure there is someone here who could answer that much more fully than I. I'm sure there are many here who might want to comment. Pat Murphy, do you have a sense of the degree to which police departments are developing victim service programs?

Patrick W. Murphy: From what I read in the newsletters and other sources, more departments are getting into victim services. But, you are so right about how chintzy we are about research. It's crazy that we are not spending 10 times as much on research as we are, especially on policing. Earlier, I was too polite. The basic problem about crime in this country is that we do not have a national police system, and we do not have democratic policing in the inner cities where we need it. You know from your murder rates how much higher the murder rates are in cities with populations over 100,000 than they are in

the rest of the country. Fifty percent of the murders in the United States are in cities with populations over 250,000. Within those cities, crime is concentrated in the inner cities, just as 100 or 150 years ago it was in the ghetto neighborhoods. On one block in 1870, 365 murders were committed at “Five Corners” in New York. Both the perpetrators and the victims were “nice people.” But we do not have democratic policing. Democratic policing is self-policing. The people are supposed to be policing themselves with police assistance. Well, for 100 years the police have been telling the people that they can protect them, and the good people don’t even know that they are supposed to be policing themselves with police assistance. Now, that is happening in some cities, which will lead to more drug treatment and more victim programs. About 30 percent of the police officers in the country today have college degrees; this is an encouraging sign, moving toward professionalization of the major departments. And I think as we see more of that, we will see more social programs being supported and actively involved with the urban police.

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