Chapter 12

Crime

Homicides increased sharply during the first third of the century and then declined to a lower level during the second third. The homicide rate escalated to new peaks during the final third and then declined sharply in the last decade of the century.

The best single indicator of the incidence of violent crime in the nation is the annual homicide rate (murders and non-negligent manslaughters per 100,000 population. Unlike other crimes, which often go unreported, nearly all homicides are known to the police and counted in the statistics. For the same reason, a great deal was known about the perpetrators and victims of homicides.

Homicide was more common in metropolitan areas than in small cities and rural areas, but the rate varied enormously among cities, states, and regions of the country. In 1997, for example, the homicide rate ranged from 1.4 per 100,000 in South Dakota to 15.7 per 100,000 in Louisiana. Two-thirds of all homicides were committed with firearms, and most of the rest with knives or clubs.

Homicide rates were heavily influenced by age, race, and gender. The prime age group for both victims and perpetrators was eighteen to twenty-four. Blacks were about eight times more likely than whites to be involved in homicides, both as victims and perpetrators. Males were about four times more likely than females to be homicide victims and ten times more likely to be homicide perpetrators.

Killer and victim were acquainted in about three out of four homicides. Indeed, the probability of being killed by a close relative or lover was higher than the probability of being killed by a stranger. But strangers did murder strangers in robberies, drug deals, psychopathic episodes, and barroom brawls.

These characteristics of homicides and their perpetrators and victims remained fairly stable from year to year.
Robberies increased rapidly from the early 1960s to the mid-1970s and remained at a high level until the last decade of the century, when a sharp downturn ensued.

The incidence of robbery is considered the best overall indicator of a population's exposure to criminal risk. Unlike homicides or rapes, nearly all robberies are committed by strangers. Unlike thefts or assaults, most robberies are reported. And only robbery is both a violent crime and a property crime.

Unfortunately, the trend data for robbery are incomplete. Data from the FBI’s Uniform Crime Reports go back only to 1957, as shown in the chart. A series based on the National Criminal Victimization Survey goes back no further than 1972. No information is available about the nationwide incidence of robbery before 1957, and data from the two official sources do not agree for the period they both cover.

What is clear from the data is that the incidence of robbery tripled between 1965 and 1975 and then remained at a high level, peaking in 1991. The incidence of robbery dropped sharply during the remainder of the century, declining 44 percent between 1991 and 1999.

Criminologists disagree about the reasons for the abrupt surge in robbery and other serious crimes during the 1960s, as well as the causes of the decline in the 1990s. The original rise has been blamed on the social unrest of the 1960s, the spread of illegal drugs, court-imposed restrictions on police practices, demographic and ethnic shifts, the expansion of street gangs, and youth unemployment. The subsequent decline has been attributed variously to a huge increase in incarceration, new policing strategies, the maturation of the illegal drug market, a sharp decline in youth unemployment, the substitution of credit cards for cash, and enhanced security measures in stores and other public places.

None of these factors, taken alone, seems to explain much about the trend in robberies during the last four decades of the century. Presumably these factors worked in some as yet unknown combination to produce the trend described here.
Robberies
Per 100,000 population per year
Capital punishment increased during the first four decades of the century and then declined sharply in the subsequent three decades. The practice was abolished and then restored during the 1970s, and its use increased in the last two decades of the century.

By 1972, the United States was almost alone among developed nations in retaining capital punishment, but fourteen states had abolished it, and half a dozen other states had effectively abandoned its use. In that year, in Furman v. Georgia, the Supreme Court preempted the issue by ruling that the death penalty as then applied was “cruel and unusual punishment” and therefore prohibited under the Constitution. The decision overturned more than 600 death sentences, but it provoked a backlash as states enacted new legislation to meet the Supreme Court’s objections. After a five-year interval, executions resumed slowly and increased through the end of the century.

Before Furman, executions for rape were not uncommon, and some executions for treason, espionage, and kidnapping also occurred. After Furman, murder was the only crime that warranted a penalty of death.

The states vary greatly in their use of the death penalty. Thirty-eight states had capital statutes in 1998, while twelve states and the District of Columbia did not. In 1997, thirty-three states held no executions and sixteen of these had no one on death row. Texas, Florida, and Virginia accounted for most of the executions carried out in the last two decades of the century. Few women were sentenced to death during the century and even fewer were executed.

By the 1980s, capital punishment had become something of a paradox, as one set of courts handed down death sentences freely and another set of courts prevented most of them from being carried out. As a result, the normal time between sentencing and execution was prolonged from months to years and eventually to decades. At the same time, the number of prisoners on death row grew rapidly, increasing fivefold between 1980 and 1998. In 1997, 256 newcomers arrived on death row, while only 74—2 percent—of the 3,335 prisoners awaiting execution on January 1, 1997, were executed that year.
Executions under Civil Authority
Number during time period by type of conviction

- Other crimes
- Rape
- Murder

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Policing became a much more complex and expensive activity than it was in the past. As the chart indicates, per capita spending on police protection increased more than fivefold between 1950 and 1996. In part, this trend reflects technological improvements, such as the development of computer data banks and the adoption of more sophisticated weaponry and communications, and in part, it reflects the diversification of police functions.

The federal government, for example, employed sworn gun-carrying law enforcement officers in more than a score of civilian agencies, including the Federal Bureau of Investigation; the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms; the Secret Service; the U.S. Customs Service; the Bureau of Indian Affairs; and other less well-known agencies. Most local communities in the United States were actively policed by more than one official force: state troopers, city and county police, sheriff’s deputies, town constables, and campus police, for example.

The most consequential growth in policing costs, however, occurred not among official police but among private police and correctional officers. The Census Bureau does not distinguish clearly between armed private police, guards armed with nonlethal weapons, and unarmed guards, but all of these categories expanded rapidly and steadily after 1970. Private police of various types numbered more than 1 million in 1998, exceeding the number of official police (764,000). Retail stores, hotels, casinos, office buildings, residential developments, industrial plants, and even private individuals ceased to rely on the official police for routine protection and hired their own protective forces. The number of correctional officers increased even more rapidly. Between 1983 and 1998, their numbers doubled, from 146,000 to 299,000.
Spending on Police Protection
1999 dollars per capita per year

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The inmate population of state and federal prisons increased significantly after 1980.

Before the 1990s, imprisonment rates of more than 400 inmates per 100,000 population had never been approached in the United States or any other developed nation. As the chart shows, the U.S. inmate population more than tripled in the last two decades of the century, reaching 462 per 100,000 population in 1999.

The ethnic, gender, and age distributions of prison inmates differed greatly from those of the general population. At the end of 1997, according to a Bureau of Justice Statistics estimate, 48 percent of state and federal prisoners were white, 49 percent were black, 2 percent were American Indian, and 1 percent were other races. Hispanics, who may be of any race, constituted 18 percent of state and federal prisoners. Women composed about 6 percent of the prisoner population, twice the female share of inmates in the early years of the century. The overwhelming majority of prisoners were between the ages of eighteen and fifty-four, with a concentration around age thirty.

These inmate characteristics produced enormous variations in the imprisonment rates of subgroups of the population. In 1996, for example, the imprisonment rate among eighteen- to fifty-four-year-olds ranged from 59 per 100,000 white women to 6,286 per 100,000 black men.

At the end of 1998, 123,041 inmates were in the federal prison system, and 1,178,978 inmates were in state prisons. In addition, almost 600,000 were confined in local jails, where they were awaiting trial, serving short sentences, or waiting for prison space.

Among the factors contributing to the increase in the inmate population were the enhanced prosecution of drug offenses, longer sentences for common crimes, and reduced access to parole and probation.
State and Federal Prisoners
Per 100,000 population

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Toward the end of the century, the proportion of new state and federal prisoners committed for property crimes declined, while the proportion committed for drug crimes increased.

Among felons committed to state and federal prisons for terms of more than a year, relatively few were sentenced for a violent crime—about one of every four new prisoners in 1910 and about one of four in 1996. The most frequent offense among perpetrators of violent crime was aggravated assault, which may or may not have involved injury to the victim. The presence of a weapon in an assault classified it as aggravated in most jurisdictions. Murderers, robbers, and rapists together made up about 7 percent of new inmates.

For most of the century, the majority of new prisoners were convicted of property offenses, divided almost evenly among burglary, larceny, and fraud. At the end of the century, little more than a quarter of incoming prisoners were sentenced for property offenses, although the incidence of those crimes did not decline dramatically. The burglary rate was slightly lower in 1996 than in 1970, but rates of larceny and fraud were significantly higher. The diminishing representation of property offenders among new prisoners is attributable in part to the growth of the absolute size of the prison population and in part to a tendency for the criminal justice system to treat property crimes more leniently than in the past. In 1996, only one of three property offenders went to prison after a felony conviction; a greater number received probation, while some were sentenced to short terms in local jails.

In the last decade of the century, the biggest change in the offenses of new prisoners was an increase in the proportion sentenced for drug offenses. Some were sentenced for trafficking and some for possession, with most of the latter group serving after a plea bargain from a trafficking offense.

The “other crimes” category includes a wide variety of offenses such as espionage, counterfeiting, violations of securities law, the harboring of fugitives, evasion of customs duties, illegal possession of firearms and explosives, immigration fraud, bribery of officials, and abuse of office. Additional offenses in this category—perjury, obstruction of justice, and jury tampering—arise from within the justice system itself.

The chart covers only civilian prisoners. The population of the federal government’s separate prison system for military personnel did not grow at all after 1970. With about 2,000 inmates, the military system operated at less than 50 percent of capacity at the end of the century.
Juveniles became more heavily involved in serious crime during the second half of the century.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation tracks four major violent “index crimes”: murder, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault. The FBI also tracks serious property crimes, which comprise burglary, larceny, and auto theft. (Arson is also an index crime, but its frequency is so low compared with the others that it is omitted from many analyses.)

In 1947, the first year for which reliable figures on juvenile participation in serious crime were available, 4 percent of the people arrested for violent crimes and 13 percent of those arrested for property crimes were under the age of eighteen. Assault and larceny were the most common juvenile offenses.

It is impossible to determine whether the 1947 figures represented an increase or decrease from earlier years, but the enormous rise in juvenile criminality that occurred during the subsequent two decades is unmistakable. By 1968, the juvenile share of arrests had climbed to 22 percent for serious violent crimes and 55 percent for serious property crimes. In other words, more juveniles than adults were arrested for serious property crimes that year.

Juveniles were responsible for a smaller share of serious crimes at the end of the century than in the 1960s and 1970s. Persons under age eighteen were involved in 17 percent of arrests for serious violent crimes and 33 percent of arrests for serious property crimes in 1998.
Juvenile Share of Serious Crimes
Juvenile arrests as percentage of all arrests

**Property Crimes**

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**Violent Crimes**

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