

AN EVER INCREASING NUMBER OF NEWSPAPER articles and news shows begin with lamentations about the latest shooting or wave of violent crime. Everywhere we turn there is mention of crime, whether we rely on print or broadcast media for our news. It is no surprise, then, that recent polls find Americans extremely concerned about crime. In fact, recent USA TODAY/CNN and CBS polls show crime and health care to be neck and neck as Americans' two main concerns (Dillon 7). We might expect that increasing media coverage and public concern reflect a growing crime problem. However, we would be dead wrong. If the crime problem has not been increasing, what factors have led us to believe that it is? Have we based our attitudes toward crime on statistics and our own experience with crime, or have we formed opinions based solely on media crime coverage? Why is it that most Americans perceive an increasing crime problem, while the crime rate, according to Justice Department data, has been declining for years? Many students of public opinion write this perception/reality discrepancy off to the nature and sheer volume of media crime coverage, but there are also several other valid reasons for the public's perception of a growing crime problem.

MEDIA INFLUENCE

First, we should examine the validity of attributing this perception/reality gap to the media. There is no doubt that our perceptions are shaped largely by whatever the media deems newsworthy and delivers to us. Of course, if we are victims of a crime or if we are touched by any other issue, media coverage is secondary. However, the number of people directly touched by crime, while it varies by area, is relatively low. According to the Justice Department's National Crime Victimization Study, 1992 saw crime strike only twenty-three percent of American households, the lowest percentage in the study's history (Morin 12). Since a smaller proportion of Americans have been directly affected by crime recently than ever before, public opinion on this issue is being fed overwhelmingly by something other than personal experience. That "something other," whether or not we believe it to be the main source of a 'misinformed' public, is the media.

Now that we have established the media as tremendous influences on our perception of crime, we must take a closer look at the nature and volume of crime reporting. The volume is best described as unbelievable. Virtually no newspaper's front page is devoid of an article concerning crime, and television audi-

ences can realistically expect newscasts to begin with a murder story. A broad sampling of newspaper and television crime reporting will reveal a heavy emphasis on violent crime. Robberies, burglaries, white collar crime, etc. receive little attention compared to murder, armed assault, and rape. It follows that eighty percent of Americans surveyed recently by the Washington Post cited violent crime as the type of crime which concerns them most. If we look only at the figures, it is difficult to reconcile such attitudes with a violent crime rate that has remained relatively flat over the past twenty years and has actually been declining during the early 1990s (Morin 12).

Perhaps it would be easier to understand public attitudes if we consider public attention to statistics. Do people pay any attention to crime statistics? Do such statistics provide any relief to a crime-ridden society? Security analysts propose the answer. "The public generally ignores crime statistics or takes no comfort in them, any more than people who are afraid of flying are emboldened by news that major airlines

had no fatal crashes in 1993" (Dillon 7). Graphs showing a declining violent crime rate are no competition for frequent graphic accounts of murders. (Dillon 7). The public is not captivated by graphs, and the media do not print or broadcast stories which do not captivate the public.

However, we must look beyond a public so thoroughly engrossed by individual incidents of crime. Recently, many other aspects of crime besides the frequency of its occurrence have been in the news. Crime has been in the national spotlight during the past few years, as evinced by the Brady Bill of 1991 and the \$30.2 billion Crime Bill of 1994. All over the country, issues concerning crime abound. For instance, many states are now considering trying juveniles as adults, abolishing juvenile courts entirely, and adopting the "three strikes and you're out" program. Localities nationwide are engaged in debates about alternative sentencing to abate the problem of prison overcrowding. When national legislative crime debates, state "get tough on crime" programs, and intense media coverage of violent crime all team up on Americans, nothing but the perception of a growing crime problem can ensue.

BEYOND THE MEDIA

Despite the media's central role in forming American attitudes towards crime, the discrepancy we are examining is not wholly a media creation. The crime problem as presented by the media is oversimplified, but even studying general statistics can be misleading when attempting to determine the roots of public opinion. For instance, general statistics such as the overall crime rate do not tell us anything about trends in specific groups. Trends in youth crime (with youth as the perpetrators in one group and as victims in another) and suburban

Crime Rate vs. Public Perception of Crime: An Analysis

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crime do not always mirror overall national crime trends, and this divergence plays a part in the perception/ reality gap.

In an attempt to explain the opinion/fact discrepancy, Rice University sociologist Richard Klineberg says "It's not that there is necessarily more crime, but that it has become so much more random and haphazard" (Dillon 7). And as it has become more random and haphazard, we have witnessed the spread of crime, a social ill that used to be centered in cities, to the suburbs. For several years, there has been a firmly established suburban drug culture with all the trappings one would expect, including gangs. In addition, middle class suburbanites contribute heavily to America's cocaine problem, ever more so since "crack" cocaine entered the scene in the mid-1980s (Connelly 17). With drugs and gangs comes crime. The late 1980s and early 1990s were periods of increasing suburban crime diverging with a decreasing overall crime rate.

One theory, proposed by Professor Vincent Webb, chairman of the University of Nebraska at Omaha's criminal justice department, involves the "crime fear/crime risk paradox." Suburbanites, least at risk, are often more fearful than their urban counterparts, Webb asserts. He attributes the public opinion/reality discrepancy to "a tendency by the media to hype crime cover-

age." This sensationalization of crime is exacerbated in suburbia by "a strong word-of-mouth network in tightly knit neighborhoods that amplifies reports" (Broder 6). Webb's assertion, however, leaves out one vital aspect of the situation. Specifically, Webb states that suburbanites are least at risk, but he does not make note of their increasing level of risk.

To back up the claim that suburbia is becoming increasingly dangerous, we

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might examine data from the following areas: Cook County, Chicago, suburban New York state vs. New York cities, and San Fernando Valley, California. The Los Angeles Police Department released data in 1989 that indicated increases in nearly all types of crime in the mostly suburban San Fernando Valley (Connelly 17). To explain the increase, police cited increasing drug use and the tripling of gang activity in the valley during the late 1980s. Rising trends were also found in Cook County for 1991, but the 4.5 percent increase in suburban violent crime

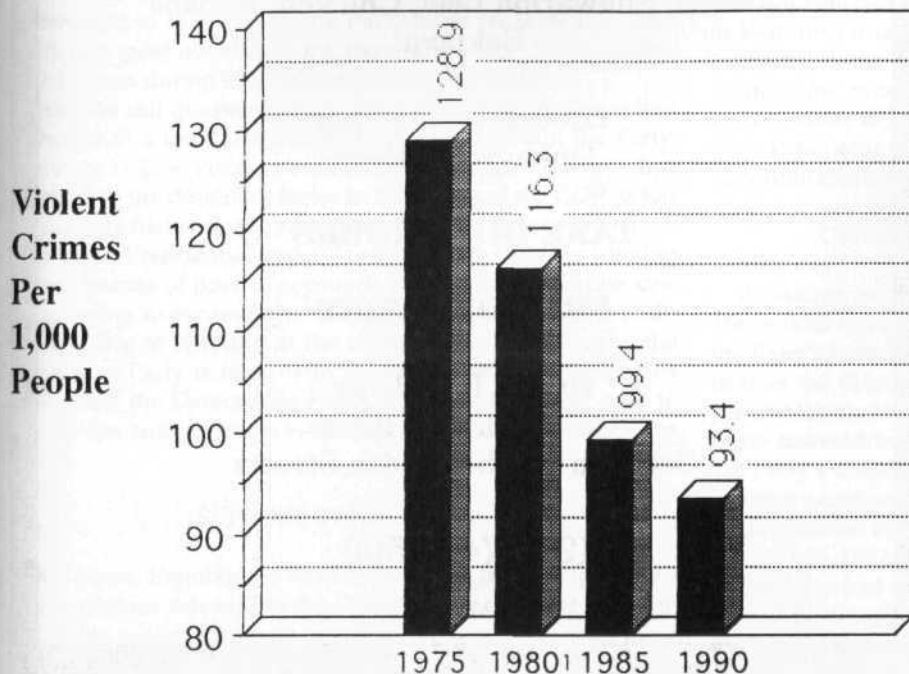
was an improvement over the 8.6 percent leap in 1989. (Reardon and Fountain 9) Finally, violent crime is not the only type of crime increasing recently in suburbia. In 1992, New York state police recorded a 5.6 percent decrease in urban robberies, while the suburban rate shot up 10 percent. Criminologists attributed the urban decrease to a greater number of New York City cops and the suburban increase to the spread of urban ills and a police force ill-equipped to handle it (Barbanel 9).

Alongside suburban crime rates, the number of violent crimes committed by youths and with youths as victims has been increasing. The FBI reports that arrests of people under 18 for violent crimes have increased 47 percent from 1988 to 1992 (Wilkerson 16). "Some specific types of crime among some kinds of people are increasing at dramatic and tragic rates, and it's those increases that should be scaring Americans out of their wits," notes Richard Morin, director of polling for The Washington Post. (Morin 7). He cites violent crime both perpetrated by and victimizing youths. Gun crime with young victims is increasing rapidly despite the overall decline in crime. The gun homicide rate among youths in 1979 was 9.2 per 100,000, and this number increased in 1991 to 13.4—a 46 percent increase. Proposing her own theory for the perception/reality gap, Bureau of Justice statistician Marianne Zawitz remarks, "The fact that young people are increasingly victims of violent crime is what may be raising concerns. It's not people worried about themselves. It's people worried about their children." (Morin7).

THE PRESIDENT'S EXPLANATION

Earlier this year, two USA TODAY reporters interviewed President Clinton about a host of issues, including crime. They asked the following question: "Statistically, it appears that crime is going down. Yet clearly crime has become the No. 1... concern among voters. Why is that? Is it because crime has begun shifting from the inner city to middle-class neighborhoods?"

Mr. Clinton answered, "There are a couple of reasons. First, the rate of violent crime, especially among the young, is still very, very high. And you're right, it's not just confined to the inner cities. It's also found in the suburbs, small towns, and rural areas. Secondly, when Americans began to sense that the econo-



Statistics from US Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Criminal Victimization in the United States, annual*.

my was going to improve, it gave them some breathing space to think about what the fabric of society is like. Most Americans feel somewhat more vulnerable... to crime than perhaps they did a few years ago" (Nagourney and Nichols 3).

The President raises an interesting issue in the economy. Now that most segments of the population have felt the benefits of our improving economy, the cognizance of social ills and the desire to correct them have both increased. Thomas Mann, director of political studies at the Brookings Institution, calls the economy the "limiting force" in the equation. "One of the reasons that drugs got displaced is that economic concerns took their place. When the economy is performing poorly," he says, people focus on this performance to the exclusion of many other issues (Morin 7). The economy has picked up, and the public has predictably shifted its attention to an urgent social ill.

AN INFORMED PUBLIC, AFTER ALL?

The picture is more complex than either the statistics or the media first hint at. Mr. Clinton is not alone in making the critical point that, even though the crime rate might be decreasing, it is still high enough to warrant the public's concern. Political scientist Everett Carl Ladd, executive director of the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research at the University of Connecticut, echoes the President's point. "We now have an interesting and powerful mix of increased news coverage and a level of crime high enough to merit serious attention, regardless of whether it's going up or down. The coming together of these considerations has fueled a lot of the actual state of the problem [and] led to a failure to appreciate the reality, namely that crime is stable or in decline" (Morin 7).

Crime's spread from cities to suburbia during the past twenty years has exposed another segment of the population. Therefore, although the overall crime rate is decreasing, crime is actually spreading to more virgin areas and has touched a far greater proportion of the population than ever before. Public opinion is merely reflecting a broadening in the type of people affected by the crime problem, not an increase in the number of crimes per capita. As crime is affecting an increasingly diverse section

of the population, and as the economy is gaining ground, a greater percentage of Americans are developing a concern with crime and a mistaken belief that it is on the rise. Media's enormous amount of crime coverage only exacerbates a broadening public awareness. II

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