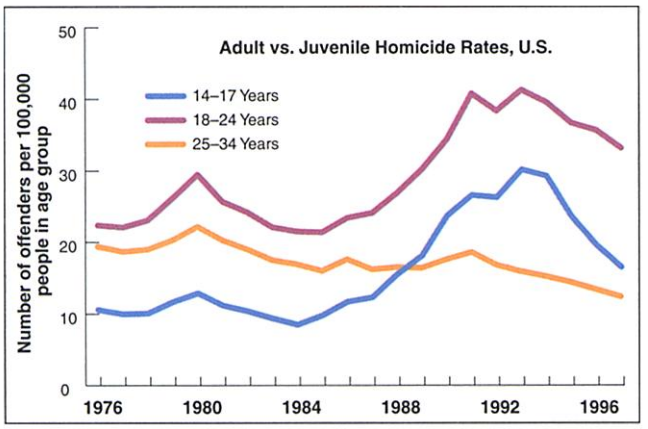
Has America's Tide of Violence Receded for Good?

Experts in the young field of violence epidemiology blame guns and crack cocaine for America's deadly crime surge in the early 1990s. Explaining the subsequent decline in violent crime rates has been harder

Violence in America is often discussed at the intellectual level of call-in radio. Anyone with access to a soapbox or an Internet site can pontificate about the virtues of clean living or a well-armed populace. But recently, out of this opinionated chatter a few empirical signals have begun to emerge.

Scientists are attempting to apply well-honed analytical tools—methods developed for studying economics, epidemiology, and sociology—to make some sense of senseless violence. They are examining the effects on public life of such environmental trends as tougher gun laws, more sophisticated local policing strategies, huge increases in the rate of imprisonment, and the destructive crack epidemic that tore through U.S. cities a decade ago.



Slaughter by the innocents. While adult homicide rates dropped in the early '90s, young people went on a murder binge.

Two dramatic swings in violent crime over the past 15 years provided most of the fodder for this research: Starting in about 1985, crime rates shot up, peaking in the early 1990s. A cooling-off period followed, and it continues to this day.

Like floodwaters receding, the number of violent crimes in the United States has ebbed for the past 8 years. In the FBI's preliminary report of crime for 1999, murder was down 8% compared with 1998; rape decreased by 7%, assault by 7%, and robbery by 8%. However, these drops were less dramatic for cities with more than 500,000 people—worrying violence researchers, who know that big cities set the trend for the rest of the country. Experts say the need to understand crime trends is now even more urgent.

Violent crime rates have been on a roller coaster for years. They peaked in the early 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. Are we due for another lurch up? Some of the factors that seem to have helped squelch crime could be temporary, such as low unemployment rates. But others, including a growing intolerance for violence as a means of settling interpersonal disputes, seem to have become cultural norms.

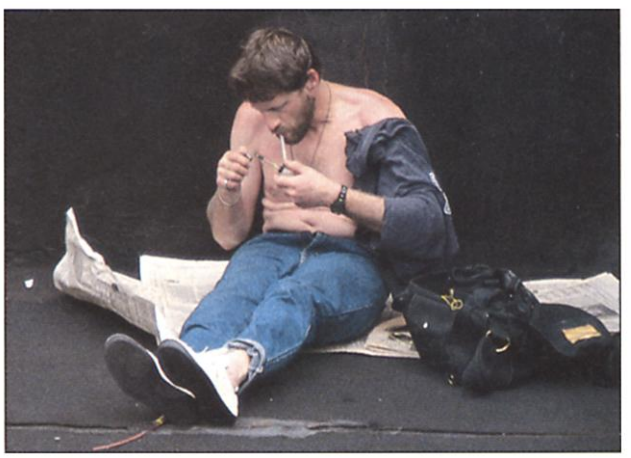
Nearly all the research literature on the epidemiology of violence is less than a decade old, says Garen Wintemute of the University of California, Davis, who studies the effects of gun laws. He thinks violent crime could continue to fall. "The difference this time," compared with other recent dips in violent crime rates, he says, "is that as rates have fallen, a great deal of effort has been expended on figuring out why." And understanding why, in some cases, can help shape policies that thwart violence.

Babes with guns

The most recent U.S. murder binge began in the mid-1980s in big cities such as Los Angeles, New York, and Washington, D.C., before spreading quickly to the rest of the country. It was a phenomenon of kids, says criminologist Alfred Blumstein of Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh and director of the National Consortium on Violence Research—kids with guns. While for decades adults have been committing fewer murders, per capita, homicides by people younger than 20 more than doubled between 1985 and 1991 (see chart). In many countries, teenagers are more violent than people in other age groups, says Frank Zimring, a law professor at the University of California, Berkeley. But within this age group, U.S. teens are far more violent than their foreign peers. For example, U.S. 17-year-olds committed seven times more violent crimes during the mid-1990s than people of the same age in the United Kingdom.

Fueling this epidemic of violence, experts agree, was crack cocaine. The new drug was cheap enough to addict new users and profitable enough to draw a torrent of new dealers, says economist Jeff Grogger of the University of California, Los Angeles—and that set off turf wars. Disputes among rival dealers could not be settled civilly in court. Violence, Grogger says, is one way to "enforce property rights in the absence of legal recourse."

To estimate crack's impact on murder rates, Grogger gathered data on the introduction of crack into inner cities and subsequent homicide rates. He surveyed police chiefs in 27 cities to find out when they first noticed the emergence of the crack market and also used National Institute on Drug Abuse statistics on emergency-room admissions to spot increases in crack-related overdoses. As Grogger had suspected, crack hit the big cities first, arriving on the streets of Los Angeles around 1984, hopping to San Diego in 1985, then spreading north and east to San Francisco, Tampa, and New York. Milwaukee was the last city in the survey blighted by crack, in 1991. In some cities, murder rates started climbing the year after crack arrived. Grogger estimates that the violent crime



Living dangerously. Murder rates leaped when crack markets blossomed in the United States.

CREDITS (TOP) SOURCE: *SOURCEBOOK OF CRIMINAL JUSTICE STATISTICS*; (BOTTOM) L. NOVOVITCH/LIAISON AGENCY

peak in 1991 would have been about 10% lower nationwide—or 5% below the 1981 peak—had crack never appeared.

In one unintended consequence of the war on drugs, cracking down on crack markets may have actually increased murder rates, says Blumstein. As older, established dealers were locked up, the demand for crack drew younger and younger people, mostly African Americans from inner cities, into the business—although he cautions that it's still an "open question" how many young dealers were drawn to the market because of increased demand for crack compared with how many replaced imprisoned older dealers. The problem, Blumstein explains, is that "teenage males are not the world's best dispute resolvers—they've always fought." And the presence of guns makes typical confrontations deadly.

Homicide rates rise in such situations because a high concentration of guns in a neighborhood creates an "ecology of danger," says criminologist Jeffrey Fagan of Columbia University. He interviewed 400 young men in New York's most dangerous neighborhoods and found that violence seemed to be contagious: Gun use spread through neighborhoods from 1985 to 1995 like a communicable disease. Young people who otherwise wouldn't carry guns felt that they had to in order to avoid being victimized by their armed peers, they reported. The guns skewed otherwise normal adolescent posturing, Fagan says, and tinged every social interaction with the threat of death. "Ultimately, guns are a form of social toxin," he says.

Shootings account for most of the slayings during the recent murder binge, and they account for all of the increase in homicides. A domestic arms race between police and criminals led to a proliferation of higher caliber, faster firing guns. And the lucrative crack market meant that "the bad guys could afford expensive, high-capacity weapons," says Wintemute. As a result, he says, shooting victims came into emergency rooms with more entry wounds and were more likely to die from their injuries.

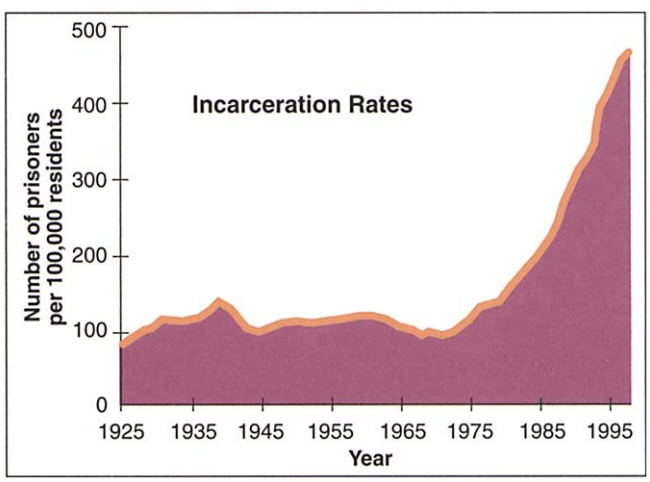
The grisly shooting spree prompted former White House drug czar William J. Bennett and criminologist John DiIulio Jr. to warn that U.S. inner cities were spawning a generation of "superpredators," armed to the hilt with little notion of right and wrong. But with crime rates down, talk of superpredators has petered out. For good reason, says Blumstein: They never existed. "There's no evidence that [the murder binge was caused by] a new generation of notoriously different kids," he says.

Up the river

The triggers of the last decade's crime spree are fairly well understood, but there's less agreement about why violence has since abated. Researchers point to factors such as a healthy economy, stricter gun laws, and a massive dose of imprisonment.

The United States is in the midst of an "incarceration binge," says Blumstein. From the 1920s to the 1970s, about 110 people per 100,000 were imprisoned. That rate has since quadrupled (see chart below)—but not because police are solving more crimes. The rise is fueled instead by longer prison sentences, higher odds that a convict will serve time, and a massive increase in the number of people arrested for drug offenses.

Searching for new solutions. Current gun buyback programs are ineffective.



Throwing away the key. A quadrupled incarceration rate might be helping keep America a safer place to live, for now.

To estimate whether the increased incarceration rate has helped reduce violent crime, criminologist Richard Rosenfeld of the University of Missouri, St. Louis, looked at homicide rates in the most dangerous neighborhoods of St. Louis and Chicago. Prisoners disproportionately come from those neighborhoods, so he assumed that their homicide rates would give a reasonable estimate of how many murders prisoners would commit if they were roaming the streets. For every 10% increase in the number of people incarcerated, he concluded, homicides decrease by about 15% to 20%.

Others have worked up more modest estimates. Economist Steve Levitt of the University of Chicago explored the effects of lawsuits brought by the American Civil Liberties Union against several states during the 1980s that aimed to ease overcrowding in prisons. In some cases, judges ordered states to cut their prison populations, while in other states prison populations continued to swell. Comparing these states, Levitt found that a 10% relative drop in prison population led to about a 4% increase in crime.

Rosenfeld cautions against viewing incarceration as a panacea for violent crime. In the short term, he says, it provides an "incapacitation" effect, preventing prisoners from committing additional crimes. But in the long term, high incarceration rates could amplify homicide rates. "The scenario could be that the massive incarceration experiment has generated violence" by disrupting families and neighborhoods or thwarting the ability of released prisoners to join the legitimate labor market, Rosenfeld speculates.

Imprisonment alone can't explain the recent drop in violent crime, Levitt says, because the boom in incarceration started in the 1970s and crime rates started falling almost 20 years later. He and John Donohue III of Stanford Law School point to a surprising factor: the legalization of abortion. The psychological literature shows that unwanted children are more likely to commit crimes, they contend, and demographic data suggest that women who have abortions are disproportionately young and poor—subpopulations whose children are at relatively

CREDITS: (TOP) JOHN EDWARDS; (BOTTOM) SOURCE: *SOURCEBOOK OF CRIMINAL JUSTICE STATISTICS*

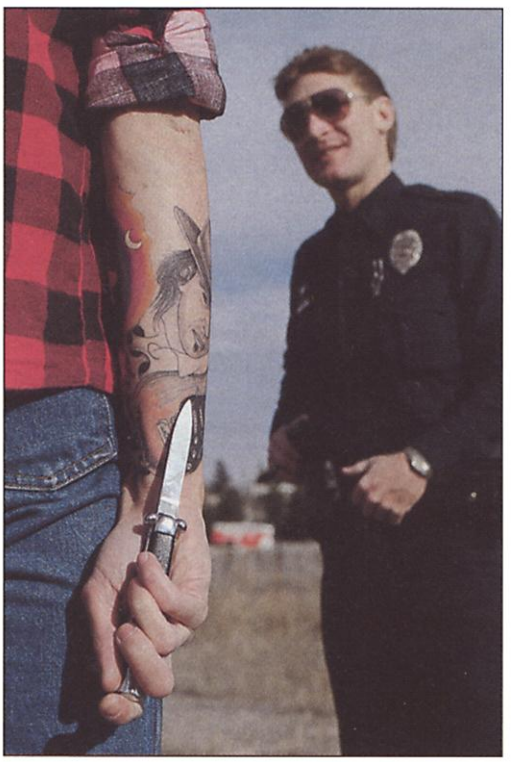
high risk for committing crimes. Without 1973's *Roe* v. *Wade* decision, the researchers reason, more potentially violent children would have reached their peak crime years beginning in about 1991—when crime rates started dropping. They estimate that legalized abortion accounts for 50% of the recent drop in crime.

"It takes great skill to write a paper that infuriates both the left and the right," says Blumstein of Levitt and Donohue's idea, "and I think they've done that brilliantly." But he cautions that they haven't addressed other factors that contribute to their 50% estimate. "To reach a conclusion as aggressive as this takes a much more subtle analysis," says Blumstein.

Although incarceration and abortion are debatable contributors to the decline in violent crime, perhaps the most important factor is a drop in the number of guns on the streets. Increased police aggressiveness in pursuing illegal guns led to a rise in weapons arrests until 1993, says Blumstein. Weapons arrests have since declined—probably not because police are paying less attention to weapons, but because fewer people are carrying them.

In Kansas City and Indianapolis, uniformed police worked overtime to seize more guns in some neighborhoods while continuing standard practices in others. Gun-related crime dropped 49% in the targeted Kansas City areas and 50% and 22% in the two areas of Indianapolis that received extra gun-oriented patrolling. Charleston, South Carolina, experimented with a bounty program offering payment for tips on illegal weapons; the program inhibited the brandishing of weapons and probably helped cut down the city's homicide rate, says Blumstein. Another major force in keeping guns off the streets is the Brady bill, which went into effect in 1994, that requires people to undergo a background check before they are allowed to purchase a gun from a licensed dealer. Convicted felons are prohibited from buying guns. In California and other states, more rigorous background-check systems deny guns to people convicted of misdemeanors involving violence.

Critics of the Brady bill, particularly the National Rifle Association, contend that such laws are counterproductive, as those who want guns can still get them illegally. To investigate whether the bill has had an impact on violent crime, Wintemute compared two groups of people: those who tried to buy weapons after the Brady bill went into effect but were denied due to a prior felony conviction and those who had been arrested for—but not convicted of—a felony and therefore were allowed to buy a gun. He analyzed their arrest records for the following 3 years. After adjusting for demographic variables and prior arrest records, he found that the people who bought guns were 25% more likely to commit crimes involving guns or violence.



However, sociologist Lawrence Sherman of the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia cautions that even the best background checks can't stop most gun violence, because statistics show that most gun homicides are committed by people with minimal criminal records. Sherman dismisses another popular gun-control strategy: gun buyback programs. Three studies have tracked gun violence in communities where large numbers of guns

What Makes a Police Officer a Victim?

The court hearing for armed robbery had finished, and the 26-year-old defendant was headed back to jail. Everyone knew he was dangerous. The man had a long rap sheet that revealed only a fraction of the crimes he would later admit to, including scores of car thefts, some 40 burglaries, and six armed robberies. But the deputy sheriff charged with transporting the prisoner was kind. He told the lanky defendant that because he was too tall to sit comfortably in the squad car's rear security cage, he could ride handcuffed in the front seat. For this small favor, the deputy said, all the defendant had to do was promise that he "would be good."

As they drove, the officer chatted constantly with the prisoner. He stopped the car when he saw two women walking away from a disabled vehicle on the side of the road, and he offered them a ride to town. But when he leaned back to unlock the rear door, the prisoner lunged and grabbed the gun from his holster. After a struggle the prisoner jammed his foot against the officer's throat, pinning him against the door. An instant later, he shot him in the chest. The identities of the victim and the perpetrator and the tragedy's location are kept secret, but the outcome is known: The 28-year-old officer died on the scene.

While many professions are hazardous to health, few jobs run a greater risk of enduring or inflicting violence than law enforcement. In the United States, about 150 officers die every year in the line of duty, and government figures suggest that some 350 suspected criminals are justifiably killed in confrontations with police. Seeking lessons behind these gruesome statistics and other disturbing trends in violent behavior nationwide (see main text) are researchers at the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).

The FBI is perhaps best known for "profiling" serial killers—the kind of work made famous by the film *The Silence of the Lambs*. Beginning in 1979, a handful of agents at the Behavioral Science Unit at the FBI Academy in Quantico, Virginia, interviewed 36 imprisoned serial killers, from Charles Manson to Ted Bundy. They found behaviors, such as a tendency to return to crime scenes, that have helped law enforcement agencies around the country crack unsolved cases.

Profiling is now part of the FBI's National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime in Quantico, which also studies everything from sexual killings of the elderly to serial bombings. With 13 full-time agents and crime analysts, it's the largest center in the United States that concentrates on finding ways to catch criminals, says William Hagmaier, who heads the unit's Child Abduction and Serial Murder Investigative Resources Center. "What we're trying to do," Hagmaier explains, "is learn all we can about criminals and some of their most heinous behaviors and share those insights with local investigators."

Unarmed victims aren't the only research subjects. In a unique study, an academy team has overturned common views of the kind of officer most likely to perish while enforcing the law. After interviewing offenders and colleagues of fallen officers, Anthony Pinizzotto and Edward Davis of the academy's Behavioral Science Unit identified, for the first time, behavioral traits of police officers likely to be killed. Their description of a classic vic-

CREDIT: GEORGE GODOY

were purchased; in none did the buybacks appear to quench crime rates. He says that buybacks should be more targeted, focusing on high-crime neighborhoods and recent gun models.

For whatever reason, Wintemute says, "gun sales have gone right through the floor" in the 1990s. Fear sells guns, he says, and it's possible that declining crime rates have inspired fewer people to buy guns—which further reduces the crime rate and makes people feel less threatened. Gun sales did nudge upward in 1999, but he suspects that was a Y2K paranoia–related fluke. "The gun industry marketed the heck out of Y2K," he says.

The drug world has also quieted down, with fewer new drug users entering the market and thus reducing the demand for new dealers, says Blumstein. And thanks to the booming economy, unemployment is down to levels not seen since the 1970s, he says, even among high-school dropouts, teenagers, and racial minorities—people at highest risk for entering the drug market.

Future trends

The FBI Unified Crime Statistics report for 1999 suggests that the recent crime drop may be slowing in big cities. Blumstein used the FBI's numbers to examine murder rates for 17 large cities during 1998 and 1999. Of those, 12 had fewer homicides in 1999 but five had more. Big cities had the first crime booms and led the way in crime drops; Blumstein suggests we might now be seeing a leveling off of violent crime rates in big cities, and other regions may soon follow suit.

Rosenfeld holds out hope that some factors pushing homicide rates down are here to stay. He speculates that the United States is currently undergoing a "civilizing process." Historians have traced the rise of a cultural intolerance for interpersonal violence in Europe, he says, and the same phenomenon seems to be happening here. He sees it not as a moral process so much as an aesthetic change in which people disapprove of resorting to violence to settle disputes.

Sociologist Murray Straus of the University of New Hampshire, Durham, also discerns evidence that violence is increasingly not tolerated in the United States. He's seen substantial decreases in some forms of family violence since 1975. Fewer people report hitting their adolescent children nowadays, although 94% of parents still physically punish their toddlers. Fewer husbands hit their wives, down from 11% to 7% per year between 1975 and 1995, although 11% of wives continue to hit their husbands.

The most harrowing metric of domestic violence, what the FBI calls "intimate partner homicides," has also declined steadily in recent decades. The number of such slayings in 1996 (1842) was 36% lower than the total in 1976. Rosenfeld attributes much of this decline to decreased marriage rates. People are marrying later and divorcing more often, and thus are less likely to be trapped in violent relationships, he says. Marriage rates are continuing to decline, Rosenfeld adds, which will probably continue to dampen the rates of intimate partner homicides.

Not all factors that influence crime rates can be easily changed—"we can't institute a robust economy," says Wintemute. But the past decade's worth of research on the causes and inhibitors of violent crime offer hope that society can reinforce those factors that squelch violence, he says. Blumstein complains that currently, criminal justice policies "are driven by ideology instead of scientific knowledge." But as the field of violence research matures, he predicts, its findings will "eventually become compelling in the public debate."

–LAURA HELMUTH

tim surprises even the researchers themselves: Like the young deputy slain on the drive from the courthouse, police officers most at risk of death, they found, are ones who are friendly, trusting, reluctant to use force, and less likely to follow police procedures. Although critics point to several shortcomings in the study's design, the FBI researchers claim that findings from their ongoing 10-year-old project have already improved police training around the country.

Pinizzotto and Davis first selected 50 incidents between 1975 and 1985 in which a total of 54 police officers were killed while carrying out their duties—often while making an arrest or reacting to a crime in progress. The pair pored over court records, talked to police department colleagues of the slain officers, and traveled to 18 states to interview offenders. The duo had expected to find that aggressive policing triggered the murders. "It was a surprise," Pinizzotto says. "Not one offender said they were being abused or pushed to their limit." And police department colleagues described the fallen officers as good natured and conservative in their use of force.

The deadly situations tended to erupt when officers didn't follow the book. Many of the homicides took place, for example, when officers failed to call for backup while checking out a suspicious situation, didn't identify themselves as police officers, or neglected to call in a license plate number during a routine traffic stop. In two-thirds of the cases, the officer either failed to physically control the suspect or let the situation get out of hand. When combined with a violent offender looking for a chance to escape, such a situation can be deadly.

To prevent such deaths, the FBI issued a report, "Killed in the Line of Duty," that recommends better training. For instance, it advises police departments to train officers in ways to prevent suspects from grabbing police weapons and how to face a drawn gun—although Davis and Pinizzotto decline to give details to avoid giving criminals any tips. The report is not intended for public distribution, but about 150,000 copies were sent a few years ago to police departments around the country. "I teach a police class, and I always use their recommendations," says Laure Brooks, a criminologist at the University of Maryland, College Park.

But Brooks and other criminologists have concerns about the way the study was done. For example, there's no way to know whether the dead officers were really friendlier, harder working, or less likely to follow the rules than their peers, who were not assessed in the study. "Measuring the personality of dead cops is useless unless you're also measuring the personality of living cops," says William King, a criminologist at Bowling Green State University in Ohio. The assessment may also have been confounded by a halo effect, he adds: "How many of these cops are going to say bad things about a fallen comrade?"

Pinizzotto and Davis realize these shortcomings but say their conclusions are nonetheless valuable for training. Since then, they have addressed some of these issues and have drawn a more detailed picture of the personalities and behaviors of officers who were victims of violent assaults—but who lived to tell the FBI researchers about it. They selected 40 cases, interviewing the officers—most of whom had been shot—and their assailants. In their latest report, "In the Line of Fire," Pinizzotto and Davis noted that many survivors recalled knowing when *not* to use deadly force, but they couldn't recall being instructed on when it is appropriate.

Because many of the officers failed to realize that an escalating confrontation was potentially life-threatening, the FBI researchers are now examining how officers tell when they are in danger. They are also touring the country, lecturing to police departments about their findings. Their presentation includes videotaped interviews. "When you hear from a perpetrator who has killed an officer in cold blood," Davis says, "that has a chilling effect that most officers don't forget."

–ERIK STOKSTAD