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Violent Crime Past, Present and Future: Implications for Society and Emergency Medicine

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For those of you working in emergency departments serving as trauma centers: Remember the old days, when it seemed every hour a new gunshot or stabbing victim was brought in? What has happened since that time? Is there an explanation for this decreasing trend? Experts have been debating the causes of the nation's declining crime rate. Let's examine and compare some of the prevailing theories.

Ten years ago, the existence of violent crime within American society was firmly entrenched. The crack epidemic was in full force and showed no sign of diminishing. In large cities a pall of fear descended as citizens stayed indoors, local businesses were destroyed, and racial tensions increased. From 1984 to 1993, the number of murders around the country increased by 31% -- peaking at 24,500 murders in 1993 (Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1995: 199; 1998: 210). Trauma centers were overwhelmed by the number and frequency of penetrating trauma patients, especially as a result of gang warfare and "drive-by" shootings. Things appeared desperate at best.

However, a peculiar phenomenon occurred during the mid-1990s. Violent crime began to decrease significantly, especially homicide, which is considered to be the most reliable indicator, as the majority of these crimes are reported. According to the latest Federal Bureau of Investigation Uniform Crime Report, violent and property crimes dropped 5.4% over the time frame of one year, and 12 percent over 10 years. It marked the seventh consecutive year serious crime has fallen, unprecedented since these types of statistics have been recorded. The murder rate is the lowest it has been since 1967. In terms of regional variation, the South remained on top, with a murder rate of 8 per 100,000, followed by the Midwest and West at 6 per 100,000. the Northeast, historically lower in crime than the "Sunbelt" (i.e. the South and the West), is now below the Midwest as well, with a national murder rate of 4 per 100,000.

Experts do not agree about the reasons behind this drop in violent crime, although there is agreement that it is multi-causal. One long-standing theory is a proposed link between poverty and crime (For recent discussions of this link, see Chiricos, 1997 and Koch Crime Institute, 2000). Obviously, the economy has performed incredibly well during the 1990s. Unemployment is at an all time low. Young people are less likely to turn to crime if legal work is available. Essentially, anyone who wants a job can get one at this time. . However, one problem with this theory is that violent crimes such as murder are usually not linked to the economy. Instead, property crimes tend to fluctuate with the economy. During the 1960s crime rates increased greatly during a period of low unemployment. New York City currently has a higher unemployment rate than the national average, yet number of murders has been the lowest there in two decades. Similarly, Rubinstein shows (in Landis and Kando, 1995) that the rate of both murder and property crimes was far lower during the Great Depression than it is now, and that

both types of crimes kept **declining** throughout the 1930s, as the Depression deepened and unemployment rose.

The relationship between crime and economic conditions has long been a central topic in social science. Experts agree that economic conditions are **relevant** to an understanding of crime. However, the **objective** level of poverty, taken by itself, is a poor predictor of crime. **Relative deprivation**, changing expectations, values and perceptions, a sense of entitlement and other psychological and cultural factors are at least as important. As the Koch Institute report notes, “theorists and researchers have been hesitant to make a firm linkage between lower unemployment and lower crime. The crime wave...reflects more a poverty of values than a poverty of material wealth” (p.47).

The number of prisons has increased significantly, as have the number of prisoners. The total number of prisoners in the United States has effectively tripled over the past 20 years. We now lock up nearly 700 people per 100,000 population. This is the highest rate of incarceration in the world. This has mainly been a result of tougher "zero tolerance" crime laws passed in the early 1980s, especially those involving trafficking and use of drugs and handguns, as well as the three-strikes laws passed by 23 states during the mid 90s (Boorstein, 1998). Fewer criminals on the street obviously translates into fewer crimes. A Rand Corporation study estimates that the number of felonies committed by a career criminal may be as high as 200 per year (Washington Times, 1998). Some experts in criminology believe this is the single most important factor responsible for the decrease in violent crime experienced in the United States this past decade. However, there are some flaws in this theory. New York City has experienced its fewest murders in 2 decades, yet the prison population has increased only 8 percent since 1993.

In 1999, Police officer deaths dropped to a 34-year low, and for the first time more police were killed in automobile accidents than by gunshot wounds or stabbings. This may have been due to more frequent use of bullet-resistant vests, better training, and the overall decrease in violent crime. Prevention programs targeted at high-risk youth may have also had an impact in the decrease in violent crime. Juvenile violent crime tends to occur in the afternoon and early evening, and after-school activities such as sports and music may have contributed to mitigate the problem. However, social studies investigating this phenomenon have questioned the effectiveness of such programs. Other unique anti-crime measures such as neighborhood watches and gun buy-back programs have also been mentioned as factors in the decrease in violent crime. Crimes involving the murder of a spouse, or significant other, fell 40% over the past 20 years. The number of female homicide victims dropped 11 percent in 1998. This may have been aided by the increase in entities helping abused women, such as shelters, legal aid, hotlines, and counseling services.

Another theory holds that better policing and a larger number of law enforcement agents are main factors in the improvement in violent crime. Using comparative statistics between precincts, many urban police departments now identify crime hotspots and focus a more intense police presence on those areas. Police are more aggressive in routinely stopping individuals for minor infractions or, simply, suspicion and "shaking them down". This has lead some civil rights groups to protest against a putative increase in police violence and racial discrimination such as "profiling". An example of this would be police stopping a black man driving an

expensive car to determine if it was stolen or not. A new type of police malpractice has been identified: picking on motorists while DWB -- driving while black.

Regarding police work, two concepts have become buzzwords in recent years: (1) **community policing** and (2) the **broken windows theory**. The first of these two approaches, community policing, is defined by Trojanowicz et .al. (1994) as "a philosophy of full-service, personalized policing where the same officer patrols and works in the same area on a permanent basis...working in a proactive partnership with citizens to identify and solve problems." The second idea, the broken windows theory, is associated with criminologist James Q. Wilson (Wilson and Kelling, in Landis and Kando, 1995). The point, here, is that if minor violations such as vandalism, turnstile jumping and disorderly conduct are left unchallenged, they are more likely to escalate to serious crime.

These two concepts, then, boil down to more "hands-on" police work and to an effort to "nip problems in the bud." Law enforcement and politicians such as New York mayor Giuliani claim that such policies are responsible for the declining crime rate. Common sense suggests that they do, indeed, make a contribution.

Another factor may be the disappearance of the crack cocaine epidemic of the 1980s and its accompanying gang violence. The reasons for this are elusive. Crack, which is cocaine powder transformed into an inexpensive crystalline form using heat and sodium bicarbonate, provides a rapid but ephemeral high soon replaced by agitation, anger, and irrational behavior. Crack addicts coming down off the drug were willing to commit violent crimes to obtain more crack. Added to this incendiary problem was the competition among dealers for customers, and inner-city turf battles. Young men, even boys, with little or no future prospects were recruited by dealers, who were often front men for gangs. These "drones" were given handguns and allowed to operate with little or no supervision. The combination of youth, testosterone, drugs, cash, and handguns often resulted in fatalities. Sadly, many innocent citizens, especially children playing on the street, were struck by wayward bullets from these street skirmishes. The number of illegal handguns increased dramatically during this period, as kids began carrying these weapons all the time. Soon, minor disputes over sports, money, or girlfriends often resulted in the exchange of bullets rather than threats or fists. During this period, the murder rate increased steadily, but not murders committed by adults. Virtually the entire increase could be accounted for by young people with guns. The number of firearms in the United States is estimated to be around 200 million. Sheley et. al.(1995) and Sheley and Wright (1993; 1995; 1998) have documented the strong correlation between the violent death rates of inner city youth and the spread of handguns ("Saturday Night specials") – a correlation which has spilled over into the suburbs and produced a series of widely publicized "Jonesborough" type juvenile murder sprees.

However, in the early 1990s this trend began reversing in the largest of America's cities. One theory is the "younger brother syndrome", in which adolescents and teens saw the effects of a life devoted to the use and trade of crack, such as death from violence and permanent disability. From this direct exposure, most youth were reluctant to follow the same path to self-destruction. Most of the turf wars of the 1980s and early 1990s are over, with the majority of players in that game dead or incarcerated. Now crack is, for the most part, dealt by unarmed individuals with pagers and has been effectively removed from the street from intense police

pressure and routine "sweeps". Crack users are now older individuals who can usually control their addiction to a certain extent and have some discretion. The same is true for methamphetamine, or "crank", users as well. The crank epidemic of the first half of the 1990s has largely died out for many of the same aforementioned reasons.

A related theory seems to be supported by the fact that, while the murder rate has declined in such large cities as New York and Houston, it has increased in smaller cities such as Minneapolis and Albuquerque. For example, between 1993 and 1996, the murder rate in New York declined from 26.5 per 100,000 to 13.4; in Houston, from 25.9 to 14.7. In Dallas, from 30.4 to 20.5. In Saint Louis, from 69 to 44.4. In Oakland, from 40.8 to 25. During the same period, murder in Minneapolis rose from 15.8 to 23. In Saint Paul, from 8.1 to 9.7. In Albuquerque from 12.3 to 26.4. (Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1995: 200; 1998: 212). This may be due to the fact that, while the drug trade and turf rivalries have stabilized in some cities (usually large cities, or in any event cities with a long history of gang activity, such as Oakland), gangs have subsequently exported some of their activities to mid-size cities. There may simply be a time lag between what happened in the large cities during the late eighties and the early nineties, and what happened a few years later in other cities, often smaller ones, or in any event newcomers to gangs and drugs.

Testosterone, youth, and crime have always been familiar partners and may in turn explain some of the crime trends we have seen in this past century. Post World War II America had a low crime rate until the 1960s, when the baby boom generation grew into their teens and twenties. These are the ages most likely to commit crime, violent or otherwise. Indeed, it's very rare to hear of a 60 year old bank robber or gray-haired crack-dealer. In 1980 the baby boomers peaked at 35 percent of the population. Not coincidentally, the murder rate also peaked at that same time. Given this reasoning, the implications for the future appear dire, as now children of the baby boomers are reaching the crime-prone age. By 2006 there is projected to be 30 million teenagers, the largest number in 30 years.

The Columbine High School shootings and other such tragedies have drawn attention to the problem of youth and violence, but in reality juvenile crime has also been dropping steadily. Looking at demographic changes, some criminologists still predict an imminent onslaught of (renewed) juvenile crime. The Koch Crime Institute Report (2000: 47) and Herrnstein (1995), for example, remain convinced that “the present lull is limited in duration, as there is large juvenile population on the horizon,” Others, however, are saying that “the coming crime wave is washed up, and may not materialize at all (see Steinberg, 2000). Nevertheless, demographics have been by far the most powerful predictor of fluctuations in crime rates in the long run, e.g. since World War Two.

One controversial theory links the timing of the legalization of abortion in the early 1970s to the current decreasing trend in violent crime. The rise in abortions after Roe v. Wade resulted in fewer unwanted children, those traditionally considered most likely to commit crimes as teenagers and young adults. This argument is compelling, as the states with the lowest abortion rates had significant increases in violent crime, whereas those with high abortion rates had a decrease in murders and violence.

Another interesting theory is the "couch potato factor", in which the proliferation of cable TV, VCRs, video games, and DVD has kept more people, especially youth, indoors at night. These types of entertainment devices again reflect the unusually high levels of prosperity during the 1990s.

On the other side of the ledger, here, is found the age-old argument that at least **some** (juvenile) crime is caused by media and video game violence. In other words, Power Rangers, Mortal Combat, Grand Theft Autos, Duke Nukem, Doom, Werewolf and other such shows and games provide impressionable youngsters with violent role models which are then, sometimes, imitated in real life. This theory is based on the classic research on aggression by Bandura and Walters at Yale. All in all, the contribution made by media and video violence to the crime rate is probably not a major one. A similar moral panic occurred in the 1950s, when congressional hearings were held to investigate the crimogenic impact of comic books such as Superman and Captain Marvel.

Despite the remarkable improvement over these past 7 years, the odds of dying from a violent crime is higher in the United States than in any other industrialized country in the world. According to the Eisenhower Foundation report published last year, in 1995 handguns alone were involved in the death of 9,390 in the United States, compared to 213 in Germany, 106 in Canada, 30 in Great Britain, 15 in Japan, and 2 in New Zealand. Put differently, while the murder rate in the US is about 6.5. per 100,000, it is 1 in Germany, 2.1 in Canada, 0.5 in England, and 0. 2 in Japan. An American's chance of being murdered is 70 times greater than that of a Japanese.
Today firearms remain the second leading cause of injury-related deaths behind traffic accidents.

There is a misconception about crime in America: This country's rates of non-lethal crime and property crimes are not exceptionally high. That is, **America does not have an exceptionally high crime rate**, **nor is the American national character more violent than that of, say, most Europeans.** As Newman (1979) argues, a national character, history and culture of violence may be typical of the South, but not of America as a whole. Rates of assault, domestic violence and theft are as high or higher in various European countries, for example Austria (assault), Italy (theft) and most of Eastern Europe. What distinguishes the United States is its exceptionally high rate of **criminal homicide**, and that is clearly caused by our high rate of gun ownership.

Each year, the percentage of murders using a firearm has grown by 2%. Currently, about 74% of all murders are committed through a firearm. In 1996, 19,645 Americans were murdered, of whom 10,744 with firearms (Uniform Crime Report, 1997). In addition, (in 1995) 3,700 people used a handgun to commit suicide, 14,803 committed suicide through "other and unspecified firearms" means, and firearm accidents killed 1,225 people (Statistical Abstract, 1998: 108-109). Thus, firearms kill between 20,000 and 30,000 Americans each year.

Guns, and death by gun, remain one of America's most distinguishing features, as is our astronomic rate of imprisonment. Having grown by 6% annually for over a decade, our prison population now exceeds 2 million, unparalleled anywhere on earth. What drives this explosive growth is **not crime, but fear of crime.** The overwhelming majority of the people we lock up consists of non-violent offenders, namely (1) drug offenders and (2)parole violators. To be sure,

drugs and violence are closely intertwined. However, America is unique among advanced industrialized nations in that it treats its drug problem as a **crime,** whereas elsewhere it is treated as a **public health** issue.

What about implications for emergency medicine? Will we be doing as many thoracotomies and thoracostomies as we used to do in the 1980s and early 1990s anytime soon? Based on current trends it appears not. The Centers for Disease Control estimated 64,207 people were treated in the nation's emergency departments for nonfatal gunshot wounds. This is compared to 104,390 in 1993. The injury rate declined 40.8 percent during this period. While this may not be best for emergency medicine and surgery resident training in the management of penetrating trauma, the benefit to society is clear. Let's hope the trend continues.

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