

TELEMASP BULLETIN

TEXAS LAW ENFORCEMENT MANAGEMENT AND ADMINISTRATIVE STATISTICS PROGRAM

January 1999

Vol. 5, No. 10

Why the Drop In Crime?

Part 1 Measuring Crime

Crime Rates in the 1990s

In the United States, we now find ourselves in the midst of a historically unprecedented drop in crime rates. For several years, virtually every type of crime has decreased. Granted, there is some unevenness. While crime is dropping precipitously in most cities, it has actually increased in a few others. But the exceptions are indeed few. In Texas, crime is down overall 30 percent. There are five recognized potential explanations for the decrease:

Social-demographic trends. Criminologists generally regard social-demographic trends as the strongest influence on crime rates, more important than structured social response (police-courts-corrections). For example, a high proportion in the population of fourteen to twenty-five-year-olds, the crime-prone age bracket, equals a high overall crime rate. Factors such as migration patterns also influence crime. Mobile, disrupted groups tend to commit more crimes than settled, stable groups.

Economic conditions. The economy is recognized as influencing the rate of both violent and property crime. Extreme economic stress, for example, breeds social violence, particularly spouse abuse. Obviously, property crime is likewise influenced by changing economic conditions. However, the relationship is not necessarily a straightforward one. Property crime may increase in an improving economy, particularly if increases in wealth are unevenly distributed.

Drug-use prevalence. Crime is linked in complicated ways to the supply of illicit drugs. Scarce supplies raise street prices, potentially increasing crime, but may also mean

fewer users, thus decreasing crime. Drug supply, drug-use prevalence, and crime all interact.

Incarceration rates. For the last ten years, most states have built new prisons at record rates. Texas has tripled its prison capacity. Incapacitation rates appear, at least on the surface, to offer one of the best explanations for decreasing street crime.

Police programs. Decreases in crime have not been evenly distributed. Where agencies have implemented aggressive intervention styles, crime in some cases has dropped precipitously over a period of months, not years. Clearly, the police make a difference.

This month begins a series of *TELEMASP Bulletins* on the decrease in crime in Texas. The series will examine the viability of possible explanations for the drop in crime. Crime may not continue to fall. The recent reduction—for whatever reason—may be bottoming out. Or we may be fortunate and continue to see additional decreases. Whatever happens in the next few years, however, will not negate the amazing drop in crime in the last seven years. There is no way to determine definitely the degree to which a particular factor is contributing to the current downward trend. However,

**Special Bulletin
Co-Sponsored by the
Texas Regional Community
Policing Institute**

*Bill Blackwood Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas
Texas Regional Community Policing Institute*

one may certainly argue that of the five listed above, three have had the greatest effect on crime, the economy, incarceration rates, and police programs. Social-demographic trends and drug use prevalence do not appear to have an influence.

The Cause and Effect Issue

When crime drops in a particular city by 30 percent in one year, as occurred in several recent instances, it is not likely that changes in demographics are the explanation. And indeed, there have been no dramatic shifts in the nation's demographics during the 1990s. The shifts that are occurring are, by and large, part of longer term trends present for at least the last twenty-five years. Like trends in demographics, trends in drug use do not offer any apparent explanation for the decrease in crime. While the use of some drugs decreased in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the use of others remained steady. Further, in the mid-1990s, drug experimentation surveys of high school students indicated increases in use, or at least in experimentation. Statistics on drug seizures indicate that trafficking continues unabated. The war on drugs has not caused the dramatic decreases in crime.

Changes in the economy, incarceration rates, and police programs do, however, appear to have had an effect. The economy is booming, incarceration is up, and the police have become proactive. The three in combination certainly have had a substantial influence.

Booming economy. The economy is part of the explanation, but not all of it. With the exception of two or three very mild recessions, the nation has experienced slow but steady economic growth since 1970. Unemployment rates have varied within a range of 2 percent. Crime did not start dropping until 1991. The economy did not suddenly change from depression to prosperity. Further, one might argue that changes in the distribution of wealth in the 1990s would beget more crime, not less. Nevertheless, the economy in the 1990s is doing extremely well and is undoubtedly the reason for some of the decrease.

More prisons. Incarceration rates should be considered as another probable contributing factor to the recent drop in crime. Fed up with persistent high crime rates, the public has demanded that chronic offenders, particularly violent offenders, be locked up for long periods. Thus, a prison building boom has accompanied changes in sentencing laws. Some cautionary notes are in order. Among states that have increased capacity dramatically, there has not been uniformly a dramatic decrease in crime. Further, some states that have not expanded prison capacity have nevertheless seen decreases in crime. So increased incarceration is not likely the whole explanation. Nevertheless, few would argue that increased incarceration has had some effect.

Crime-specific policing. Finally, there are police programs. It is unlikely that either the economy or incarceration rates would have a sudden and dramatic effect on crime rates in individual large cities. To better understand the possible mixed effect of incarceration and police programming, Hoover and Caeti (1994) compared the sharp drop in crime in Houston in 1992 with the crime rates during the comparable period in other major Texas cities. While incarceration affected all of the state's major cities, a sudden and dramatic drop in crime occurred only in Houston. This drop correlated month by month with dramatically increased arrests.

The argument that most of the drop in crime in Houston in 1992 was the product of police-agency productivity rather than offender incarceration was bolstered by a similar drop in New York City two years later. New York mandated that precinct commanders take personal responsibility for crime rates in their area. In turn, commanders ordered patrol officers to make arrests. Long-standing policies prohibiting patrol officers from enforcing vice and narcotic offenses were lifted (those policies were meant to control corruption at the beat level). Crime started dropping immediately and dramatically. Interestingly, even murder dropped precipitously.

College students are taught in their first research methods class that correlation does not equal cause and effect. Indeed, instructors usually go out of their way to find historical accounts of the misinterpretation of correlation as cause and effect. The experimental design is, of course, offered as the ultimate solution to isolating cause and effect from correlation. Unfortunately, many criminologists who have spent their careers cautioning undergraduates about this phenomenon have allowed their own perspective to become distorted. They can no longer accept obvious links between phenomena in the real world. They assert that absent an experimental design, nothing should be accepted as causal. It is true that we can always find absurd examples of correlation. The viscosity of asphalt on a given day in a beach community correlates with the number of drownings. Obviously, there is no cause-and-effect linkage between these phenomena—heat affects the viscosity of asphalt and more people swim on a warm day. But the link between increasing enforcement efforts and a drop in crime is not *prima facie* absurd; indeed, it is *prima facie* logical. And when several major cities dramatically increase enforcement efforts and the crime rate drops precipitously, it is *illogical* to dismiss the relationship as spurious.

Police agencies throughout Texas are engaging in more vigorous, and more targeted, enforcement. An array of programs have been implemented.

Illustrations of Crime Specific Interventions by Texas Police Agencies

- Gang Intervention
- Domestic Violence Efforts
- Housing Project Assistance
- Auto Theft Task Forces
- Citizens on Patrol
- Citizen Police Academies
- Neighborhood Association Partnerships
- School Resource Officers
- Real-time Crime Analysis
- Beat Responsibility
- Nuisance Abatement
- Bicycle Patrol
- Integrated Street Crime Reduction Task Forces

Illustrations of all of these effects were reviewed in *TELEMASP Bulletins* in 1998. Some programs are implemented using the rubric of community policing. Some are characterized as problem-solving. Some are simply termed 'proactive'. Some agencies avoid labels of any kind. But all of these efforts represent a new style of policing. Whether we characterize the style as community-oriented policing, problem-oriented policing, crime-specific policing, targeted enforcement, or beat management—it's working.

The police make a difference. We will return to this issue as the epilogue to this series. Suffice to say here that Sam Houston State University continues to develop the philosophy of crime-specific policing—specific interventions targeted at identified offenses committed by particular classes of offenders at specified times and places.

Two Contrasting Measures of Crime

When the assertion is made that crime is dropping, one must be very careful to specify that it is actually the *measures* of crime that are dropping. No one knows with certainty the total extent of crime in any society. We haggle even over the definition of a criminal event. In the United States we have two measures of the extent of crime—the Uniform Crime Reports and the National Crime Victimization Survey.

Uniform Crime Reports. The Uniform Crime Reports consist of data submitted by state and local law enforcement agencies through a state level compiling agency (in Texas, DPS) and on to the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The Uniform Crime Reports are published annually by the FBI in the document "Crime in the United States." The UCR is commonly characterized as "offenses known to the police." It consists of standardized defined categories of offenses, regardless of vagaries in state law. The offenses are broadly divided into Part I and Part II categories. The Part I offenses include murder and non-negligent homicide, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, motor vehicle theft, larceny, and arson. The Part I category is often referred to as "serious crimes," although many Part II offenses are considerably more serious than simple larceny. Both personal and business crimes are counted. The hierarchy rule specifies that only a single most serious crime is counted in instances of a series of closely related criminal events.

National Crime Victimization Survey. A contrasting measure to the Uniform Crime Reports is the National Crime Victimization Survey. Conducted since the 1970s by the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the survey involves a rotating sample of 56,000 households selected to be representative of the nation as a whole. Surveys are conducted by telephone interview. Survey respondents are asked to

TWO CONTRASTING MEASURES

UNIFORM CRIME REPORTS

Offenses Known to the Police
Part I and Part II Categories
Hierarchy Rule
Counts Both Personal & Business
Part I Offenses:
Murder
Rape
Robbery
Aggravated Assault
Burglary
Motor Vehicle Theft
Larceny (Arson)

NATIONAL CRIME VICTIMIZATION SURVEY

Census Bureau Telephone Survey
Rotating Sample of 56,000 Households
Victimization of persons and Household
for:
Rape
Robbery
Assault
Personal Theft
Household Theft,
Burglary
Motor Vehicle Theft

report both personal and household victimization for rape, robbery, assault, personal theft, household theft, burglary, and motor vehicle theft. No data on crimes against businesses are gathered.

Both measures have limitations when attempting to assess changes in crime rates over time. There are four major limitations to the Uniform Crime Reports. First, the process of offense classification is complex. When we cite increases or decreases in the crime rate, we always mean increases or decreases in Part I offenses. And the distinction between a Part I offense and a Part II offense is sometimes hazy. If a citizen reports a broken window in a garage door, but nothing is missing from the garage, the offense might be classified either as a Part I burglary, or a Part II malicious destruction. Property reported to the police as missing might be classified either as presumed stolen, and therefore a Part I theft offense, or lost, and no offense at all. Whether an altercation between two people is a simple assault (a Part II offense), or an aggravated assault (a Part I offense) often depends on an officer's interpretation of the situation. Hence, the police are often accused of bias and inconsistency in crime classification. When there is political pressure to reduce crime, it is common for the police to be accused of downgrading offenses. When it is in the economic interests of a police department for crime to be increasing, it is common for agencies to be accused of inflating statistics.

A second major limitation of the UCR is that it is dependent upon citizen propensity to report offenses to the police. The UCR consists, of course, of all offenses known to the police. But in excess of 90 percent of Part I offenses known to the police are known to them only because they are reported by a citizen. Without a citizen report, the offense would never be recorded. That is, the police discover relatively little Part I crimes on their own. And citizen propensity to report is dependent upon police-citizen relations and police proactivity. A proactive police department with active citizen outreach programs is likely to engender more

reporting. More reporting may give the impression that crime is going up, when, in fact, the opposite is true. The inverse is also the case. An inefficient and inept police department with extremely poor relationships with the citizens it serves may record lower crime rates, because no one calls the police.

Third, the UCR may vary with police propensity to record offenses. Once again, this is often a definitional issue as to what constitutes a criminal offense. To illustrate, a perpetual problem for the police are gas station drive-offs—customers filling the car with gas at a self-service pump, then leaving without paying. A high proportion of such offenses reported are, in fact, employee fraud. A clerk pockets money from the cash register, and reports that a customer did not pay, or a clerk in collusion with friends allows gas to be pumped without being paid for. Further, the extent of the problem is subject to the efforts of businesses to control it. A uniform "pay before you pump" policy would end the offense. But gas stations are reluctant to implement such policies fearing that the inconvenience will drive customers to competitors. At a less obtrusive level, the placement of the pumps, lighting, view of the pumps by the clerk, number of clerks on duty, and other factors affect the rate of this offense. Furthermore, a failure to pay after pumping gas is sometimes an honest mistake, not an event with criminal intent. Every gas station clerk will tell stories of customers who pulled away from the pump only to return in a moment or two realizing they had forgotten to pay. Taken together, these phenomenon may cause police departments to be reluctant to record every gas station drive-off as a reported UCR Part I offense of larceny. Many agencies in the state of Texas now require service station owners to file written reports of such offenses, refusing to send a patrol officer out to take reports. Where such policies have been implemented, the number of reported gas station drive-offs have dropped to almost nothing. Police propensity to record is not simply a matter of police efficiency or deliberative police efforts to skew data. The method of taking reports can have a dramatic effect.

LIMITATIONS OF THE UCR

- Offense Classification is Complex
- Depends on Citizen Propensity to Report
- Police Recording Practices Vary
- Skewed by Larceny

NIBRS

The National Incident Based Reporting System is scheduled to replace the Uniform Crime Reports in a few years. The system entails collecting considerably more data than the UCR about individual offense characteristics, e.g., victim-offender relationship. There are 22 offense categories in the NIBRS Part A classification, compared to 8 in the UCR Part I classification. The NIBRS Part A category includes:

1. **Arson**
2. **Assault Offenses**
 - Aggravated Assault
 - Simple Assault
 - Intimidation
3. **Bribery**
4. **Burglary/Breaking and Entering**
5. **Counterfeiting/Forgery**
6. **Destruction/Damage/Vandalism of Property**
7. **Drug/Narcotic Offenses**
 - Drug/Narcotic Violations
 - Drug Equipment Violations
8. **Embezzlement**
9. **Extortion/Blackmail**
10. **Fraud Offenses**
 - False Pretenses/Swindle/Confidence Game
 - Credit Card/Automatic Teller Machine Fraud
 - Impersonation
 - Welfare Fraud
 - Wire Fraud
11. **Gambling Offenses**
 - Betting/Wagering
 - Operating/Promoting/Assisting Gambling
 - Gambling Equipment Violations
 - Sports Tampering
12. **Homicide Offenses**
 - Murder and Nonnegligent Manslaughter
 - Negligent Manslaughter
 - Justifiable Homicide
13. **Kidnapping/Abduction**
14. **Larceny/Theft Offenses**
 - Pocket-picking
 - Purse-snatching
 - Shoplifting
 - Theft from Building
 - Theft from Coin-Operated Machine or Device
 - Theft from Motor Vehicle
 - Theft of Motor Vehicle Parts or Accessories
 - All Other Larceny
15. **Motor Vehicle Theft**
16. **Pornography/Obscene Material**
17. **Prostitution Offenses**
 - Prostitution
 - Assisting or Promoting Prostitution
18. **Robbery**
19. **Sex Offenses, Forcible**
 - Forcible Rape
 - Forcible Sodomy
 - Sexual Assault with An Object
 - Forcible Fondling
20. **Sex Offenses, Nonforcible**
 - Incest
 - Statutory Rape
21. **Stolen Property Offenses (Receiving, etc.)**
22. **Weapon law Violations**

There are 11 additional offenses which are known as Group B offenses for which only arrestee data are to be reported. Most Group B offenses only come to law enforcement attention when arrests are made.

1. **Bad Checks**
2. **Curfew/Loitering/Vagrancy Violations**
3. **Disorderly Conduct**
4. **Driving Under the Influence**
5. **Drunkenness**
6. **Family Offenses, Nonviolent**
7. **Liquor Law Violations**
8. **Peeping Tom**
9. **Runaway**
10. **Trespass of Real Property**
11. **All Other Offenses**

There are relatively few Texas police departments currently reporting crime data in NIBRS format, although the number is growing rapidly. NIBRS data can be summarized in UCR format for longitudinal comparison.

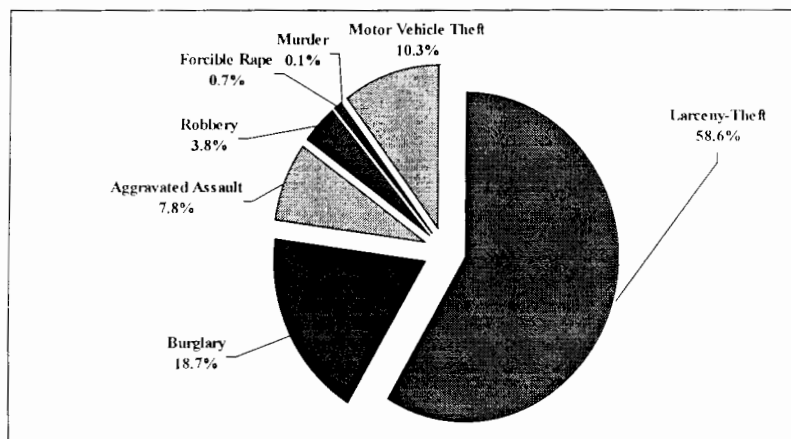
Finally, the Part I category is skewed by the high proportion of larcenies. See Figure 1 for the 1997 percent distribution of offenses in the Uniform Crime Reports. Larceny accounts for nearly 60 percent of all the Part I offenses. Hence, small increases or decreases in larceny will cause disproportionate overall shifts in Part I offenses. It is widely accepted that larceny is the least serious of these offenses. Thus, a proactive police program which increases larceny reports will drive the Part I category up, while it is possible that virtually all serious Part I offenses are concurrently dropping dramatically. This has, in fact, been occurring in Texas in the last three years and will be discussed in next month's Bulletin.

The National Crime Victimization Survey is not a panacea to the problems of the Uniform Crime Reports. The NCVS has its own set of limitations. First and foremost, it does not count crimes against businesses. So an even narrower sample of the totality of criminal activity is measured by the NCVS. Second, one must remember that this is a telephone survey. What's reported to an individual calling from West Virginia by someone in Texas is subject to recall inconsistency. Validity checks indicate that this is a serious

problem. When a sample of individuals who had reported crimes to the police were called and asked to respond to the NCVS round of questions, a high proportion never reported the offense they had previously reported to the police. Conversely, it is recognized that deflation of statistics is probably overridden by inflation of statistics in the NCVS, i.e., reporting more offenses than really occur. The problem of telescoping is very significant here. Traumatic events tend to be recalled as having occurred more recently than they really did (the phenomenon is exemplified by the phrase "it seems like only yesterday that mother died"). People bring forward in time a traumatic event. To the extent that a criminal event was traumatic, we can expect that it's going to be over-reported in a given time frame; that is, it will be reported as having occurred during "the last six month's" time frame measured by the NCVS when it really did not. This will inflate the rate of offenses reported.

Third, it is important to note that during the NCVS telephone call, one member of the household is being asked to recall victimization for the household as a whole. Although we tend to assume that any member of the household will be aware and remember victimization of the household as a whole that's not always the case.

CRIME INDEX OFFENSES 1997 Percent Distribution



Source: 1997 UCR

Figure 1

The fourth limitation is variation in response depending on the wording of queries. When queries were redesigned and rephrased in 1994, significant variation occurred from responses given in prior years. When one asks a respondent, "during the last six months have you been raped?" compared to "in the last six months have you been forced to do something sexually that you did not want to do?" one is likely to get variation in response. The Bureau of Justice Statistics has worked carefully on this problem and does an admirable job of validating the reported events to predefined definitions of criminal events, but there is no way to conduct a telephone survey without this effect being present.

Fifth, the National Crime Victimization Survey measures only victimization of those who are over twelve years of age. Thus, once again, it is by definition a limited measure of the true extent of crime. Crime against children is not counted, so we can't even say that the NCVS is a full measure of personal crime.

Finally, the sampling frame does not allow measurement of state or local victimization rates. So we have no way of knowing from the National Crime Victimization Survey whether reported victimization in Texas is going up or down—we can only say what is happening nationally.

References

- Bureau of Justice Statistics. (January 1999). *Additional Crime Facts at a Glance*. On-line: <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/gvc.htm#violence>.
- Caeti, T. and Hoover, L.A. (December 1994). "Crime specific Policing in Houston." *Texas Law Enforcement Management and Administrative Statistics Program Bulletin*, 1:9.
- Federal Bureau of Investigation. (Annual). *Crime in the United States*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office.
- Federal Bureau of Investigation. *Uniform Crime Reports 1998 Preliminary Annual Release*. On-line: <http://www.fbi.gov>.

This project was co-sponsored by cooperative agreement #97-CK-WX-0020 awarded by the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, U.S. Department of Justice. Points of view or opinions contained within this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

LIMITATIONS OF THE NCVS

- Does Not Count Business Crime
- Subject to Recall Inconsistency, Including Telescoping
- Significant Variation When Queries Are Rephrased, Redesign in 1994
Complicates Prior Comparisons
- Measures Only Victimitizations of Those Over 12 Years
- National Sample Only.



BILL BLACKWOOD

L aw
E nforcement
M anagement
I nstitute of
T exas

Randy Garner, Ph.D.
Executive Director

Kay Billingsley
Publications Manager

For information about LEMIT
programs, call (800) 477-9248



A Member of The Texas State University System

TELEMASP Monthly Bulletins,
ISSN 1075-3702, are produced
under an agreement with the

Police Research Center
Sam Houston State University
Larry T. Hoover, Ph.D., Director
Jamie L. Tillerson, Program Manager

For information about TELEMASP
Bulletins, call (409) 294-1704

This bulletin was authored by Dr. Larry Hoover,
Director of the Police Research Center at Sam
Houston State University, Editor of the
TELEMASP Bulletin Series.

**Bill Blackwood Law Enforcement
Management Institute of Texas**
Criminal Justice Center
Sam Houston State University
Huntsville, TX 77341-2296

Non-Profit
Organization
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
Permit No. 26
Huntsville
Texas