

# The Crime Drop in America

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## CHAPTER TWO

### Disaggregating the Violence Trends

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#### The Changing Rates of Violence in the U.S.

THE PERIOD FROM 1980 TO 1998 has seen some sharp swings in the rate of violence in the United States.<sup>1</sup> The homicide rate in 1980 was at a peak value of 10.2 per 100,000 population, and by 1985 it had fallen to a trough of 7.9. It then climbed a full 24 percent to a peak of 9.8 in 1991, and has been declining markedly since then, reaching a level of 6.3 in 1998, a level that is lower than any annual rate since 1967. The rate of robbery has followed a very similar pattern, oscillating since 1972 between rates of 200 and 250 per 100,000 population, reaching its peaks and troughs within one year of the peaks and troughs of the murder trends. It has also displayed a steady decline since its 1991 peak, and its 1998 rate of 165.2 is lower than any experienced since 1969. These patterns are depicted in Figure 2.1.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter focuses primarily on homicide (the ultimate violent act) and secondarily on robbery (the taking of property by force or threat of force) as the principal indicators of violence. In homicide, there is usually a body to be explained, and homicides typically involve intensive police investigation. Robbery is also a relatively well-defined crime and is reported to the police by the victim over one-half the time.<sup>3</sup> The decline of homicide and robbery following their peak in 1991 has to be viewed in the context of the factors that contributed to their previous rise beginning in the late 1980s. This chapter concentrates primarily on crimes reported to the police that are, in turn, reported to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and published annually in the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports (UCR).<sup>4</sup>

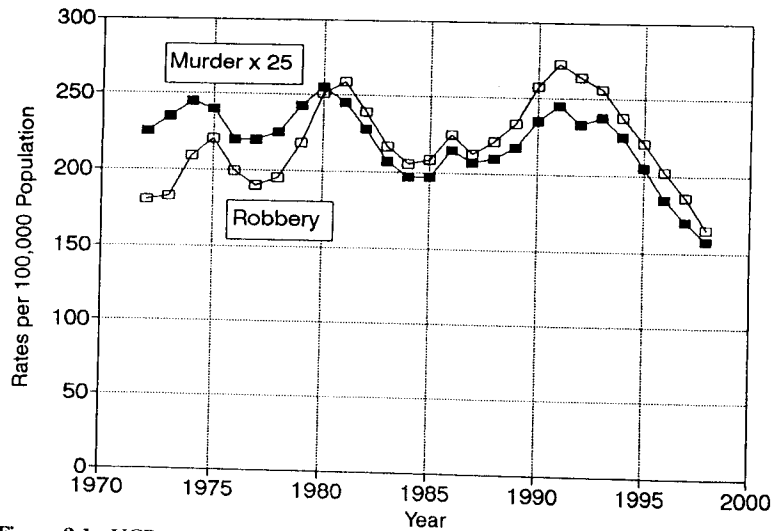


Figure 2.1. UCR murder and robbery rates.

The satisfaction with the recent decline in homicide and robbery is accompanied by widespread curiosity over the factors that are responsible for the decline.<sup>5</sup> This chapter explores some of those factors, focusing on those whose effects are reasonably measurable with special attention to factors where the aggregate picture may fail to capture some of the richness provided by examining the factors in a disaggregated form, or where the aggregate picture may even be misleading. Some ranges of a factor – age, for example – contribute to an increase in violence at the same time that other ranges contribute to a decrease.

### Measuring Violence

**The Mix of Violent Crime.** The rate of violent crime in the United States is typically measured as the sum of the following crimes reported to and recorded by the police: murder and nonnegligent manslaughter, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault. These rates are reported annually by the FBI in the UCR and combined into a *violent-crime index*.

These are very disparate offenses whose rates cover a very broad range. The absolute numbers recorded in a typical year, 1998,<sup>6</sup> display the large disparity across these categories:

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Homicide	16,910
Forcible Rape	93,100
Robbery	446,630
Aggravated Assault	974,400

The ratio among these is approximately 1, 5, 25, and 50, that is, there are 50 times as many aggravated assaults and 25 times as many robberies as there are homicides. It is evident that even minor fluctuations in the reports of aggravated assault will overwhelm significant changes in the number of murders. For example, even if there is a doubling of the number of homicides, a relatively small 2 percent decrease in aggravated assault will counteract that doubling, and will lead to no change in the reported rate of *violent crime*. Thus, just as the total crime index<sup>7</sup> is dominated by larcenies (of which there were 7,373,900 reported in 1998),<sup>8</sup> the violent-crime index can be distorted by fluctuations in the reports of aggravated assault.

Because there tends to be a strong correlation among the various index offenses, these distinctions are often not serious. But there can be occasions when the distinction among them is of serious concern. This is especially true when there are shifts in reporting patterns rather than shifts in the underlying behavior. Thus, it is more appropriate to deal with the various violent-crime types individually in order to avoid the problem of distortions in the aggregate caused by changes in the numerically dominant offenses of robbery or aggravated assault.

Forcible rape has been the most difficult of the four violent offenses to measure. Because of stigma associated with rape and because police have often been insensitive to rape victims' emotions, the percentage of rapes reported to the police is about the lowest of the UCR index crimes, and so changes in reporting rates can be an important factor contributing to changes in the UCR rate of rape. Also, the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), which samples over 40,000 households to ask about their victimization experiences, has discovered that typically there are too few cases of rape reported even to the NCVS to provide precise measures of the rate of that offense.<sup>9</sup> Thus, I do not deal further in this chapter with the serious offense of rape.

**Aggravated Assault.** The UCR rate of aggravated assault has displayed a pattern that is quite different from the generally flat trend displayed by homicide and robbery shown in Figure 2.1. The aggravated assault rate, shown in Figure 2.2, grew significantly – by 134 percent – during the

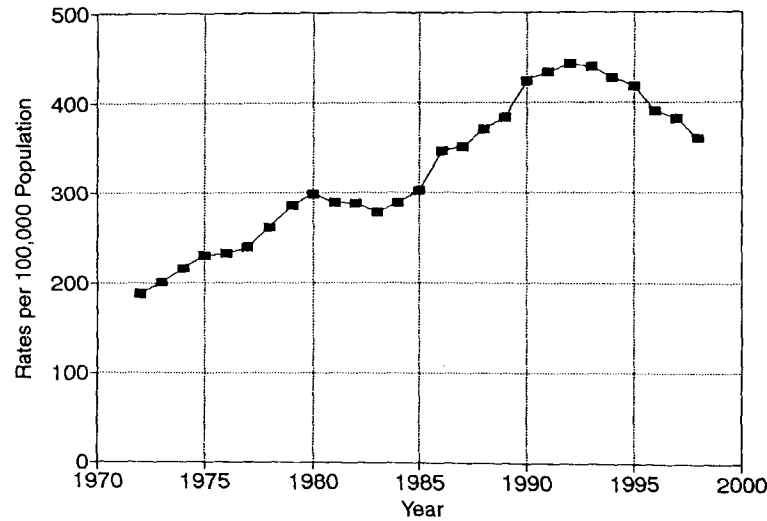


Figure 2.2. UCR aggravated assault rates.

twenty-year period from 1972 to 1992 before its more recent decline. But there are reasons to believe that this sharp trend is more artifactual than real. In contrast to murder and robbery, which are relatively well-defined offenses, "aggravated" assault requires discretion on the part of the police taking the report to distinguish it from "simple" assault.<sup>10</sup> Classification is an issue that is not absent from the other violent crimes noted (a murder could be misclassified as a suicide, or a street robbery as a larceny), but aggravated assaults leave much more room for the exercise of discretion. And perhaps most important in the current context, there is a good possibility that the nature of this distinction has been changing over time.

Support for this interpretation of the growth in aggravated assault is provided by evidence from the other principal source of crime data in the United States, the NCVS, which asks respondents whether they have been a victim of a crime over the past six months. One virtue of the survey is that the form of the questions has been largely stable over time,<sup>11</sup> and so responses to those questions are likely to be much more immune to the changes in discretion and classification that bedevil data from the police reports.

Figure 2.3 shows the responses to those victimization surveys for the twenty years until 1992.<sup>12</sup> Here, one sees aggravated assault and simple

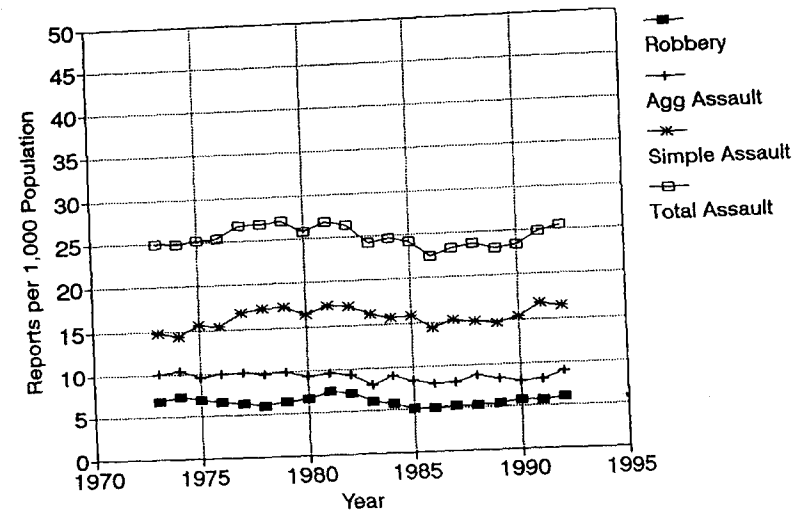


Figure 2.3. Violent victimization rates. Rates per 1,000 population.

assault with virtually no trend, and even with far less fluctuation than displayed in the police reports. Thus, there is a stark contrast between the rapidly rising trend in aggravated assault based on police reports and the very flat trend based on the victimization survey. The flat trend in the homicide series over this period is also consistent with the flat trend in the victimization survey. This suggests the reasonable possibility of a fairly stable ratio of aggravated assaults to homicides; if aggravated assaults were increasing while homicides were flat, we would require an explanation of that disparity.

The evidence from the victimization survey would appear to be the more compelling, and this calls for some investigation into why the growth in UCR aggravated assaults. It is possible that the chance that an aggravated assault turns into a homicide has been diminished somewhat because of the improved quality of emergency medical services in the United States over the past twenty years, but it would be surprising if that change could account for the doubling of the number of aggravated assaults relative to the number of homicides. Rather, it is much more likely that there has been a steady growth in the reporting of assaults that used to be ignored or dealt with as simple assaults. The principal candidates for this reporting shift are cases of domestic violence. Until relatively recently, police tended to downplay domestic assaults, largely because they were considered more

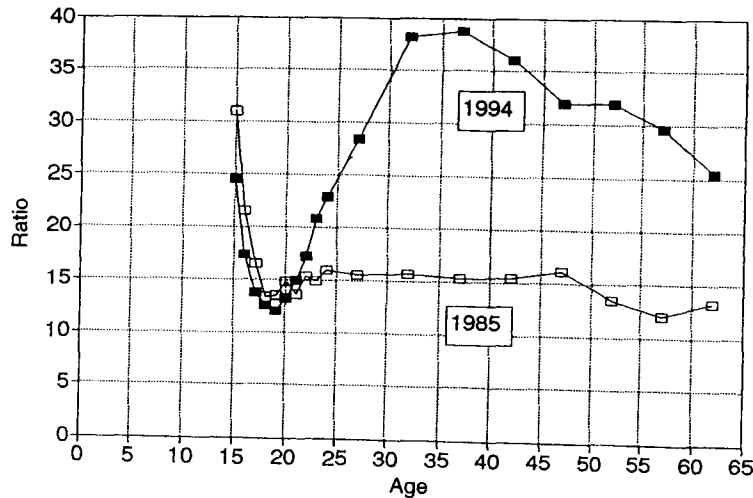


Figure 2.4. Ratio of aggressive assaults to murder rates by age. Arrest rates in 1985 and 1994.

private matters, and the police often chose not to record the crime in order to avoid the frustration of observing the victim recant after the immediate crisis had passed. Recent changes in public attitudes toward domestic assaults, in the attitudes of victims, and in the response by police suggest that these changes are likely to have been major contributors to the growth in the recording of aggravated assaults by the police.

This hypothesis is supported by Figure 2.4, which compares the ratios of the age-specific arrest rates for aggravated assault to those for murder in two years, 1985 and 1994. It is evident that in 1985, that ratio stayed very close to 15 for all ages except ages 15 and 16, where there were many aggravated assaults but relatively few of them resulted in homicides, a manifestation of teenage propensity for fighting, but with relatively low levels of lethality, at least in part because of the relatively low prevalence of firearms then available to teenagers.

The picture changed rather dramatically by 1994. The ratio continued to be close to 15 until age 23, when it began to grow appreciably. It increased to a maximum ratio of 39, and stayed at more than double the previous value of 15 for all the older ages prior to 60. But these are the ages when domestic relationships, and the potential for assault, are more salient in people's lives. It is also the case that the trend to arrest for domestic

assault increased appreciably with the shift in policy that grew out of the Minneapolis Spouse Assault experiment conducted in the mid 1980s.<sup>13</sup> This change was reflected in many states adopting statutes mandating arrest for domestic violence; it also became policy in many police departments, even in the absence of a mandatory statute. Thus, we see this sharp growth in the rate of arrest for aggravated assault at the ages when domestic relationships are most likely. It seems most reasonable, then, to interpret the growth in the UCR rate of aggravated assault in the period between 1985 and 1994 predominantly as a reflection of a growing tendency of police to record incidents of domestic violence as aggravated assaults that would not have been so designated prior to 1985. This change in reporting practice is likely to have been the significant factor contributing to the perplexing growth in the UCR aggravated assault rate in the absence of comparable growth in the other indicators of serious assault, like homicide in the UCR or the NCVS assault-victimization rates.

**Homicide and Robbery Rates.** The two crimes that are best measured in the UCR are homicide and robbery, largely because these offenses are reasonably well defined and their definitions have been stable over time. Also, homicide tends to be very well reported to the police, and the rate at which victims have been reporting robberies to the police has been very stable over time.<sup>14</sup>

Although there have been sharp swings up and down, it is striking how trendless these two crimes are. The trend line for homicide is slightly negative, but is not statistically significant. For robbery, the trend line is slightly upward (at an annual trend of 0.87 percent of its mean rate of 223 per 100,000). This stability or relative trendlessness in crime rates is certainly at marked variance with the general view of the American public – and especially the rhetoric of its candidates for political office. Until the reporting of crime-rate declines in recent years finally sunk in, there was a widespread sense that crime rates were getting out of hand and that the crime problem was becoming an increasingly serious threat.

This is the case, for example, with age: During the late 1980s, homicides by young people were increasing whereas homicides by older people were decreasing. In other cases, there are important interactions – for example, between race and age. A large increase in homicide with handguns occurred among young African-Americans in the late 1980s, but we observe no such increase for older African-Americans. In such instances, demographic disaggregation is necessary to isolate the effects being examined. A general theme of this chapter is that it is not productive to think of

homicide rates as a unitary phenomenon. Rather, recent change in the aggregate homicide rate is the product of several distinct subgroup trends. Any credible explanation – much less forecast – of the overall change in homicide rates, therefore, must address these multiple, interactive, and sometimes countervailing influences.

Many public figures and journalists have offered their own explanations for the recent decline in violence rates. There have been claims, most notably by New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and by William Bratton when he was New York City's police commissioner, that virtually all of the homicide drop in New York resulted from smart and aggressive policing (Butterfield 1995; Kelling and Coles 1997; Krauss 1996; Mitchell 1994). Another view attributes the decline to a change in some of the factors that contributed to the growth, most importantly to a reduction in the high availability of firearms and their use in homicides or robberies by young people. Some of this turnaround may be the result of changes in policing, especially the use of aggressive stop-and-frisk tactics to remove guns from young people, but other factors could well be involved. These could include community efforts to mediate intergang disputes, a greater availability of jobs and income to low-skilled young people in the booming economy (Chapter 8), changing drug markets with diminished roles for young people (Chapter 6), and growing incapacitation effects through increases in the prison population of older offenders (Chapters 4 and 5). Looking across the nation, one finds that the effects of changes in the large cities have a dominant effect on the aggregate rates.

### Differences Across Age Groups

A key factor providing important insight into the changes that have occurred since 1985 is the sharply differing trends in violence associated with different age groups, so this provides the initial departure point for the disaggregation.

**Homicide.** Elsewhere (Blumstein 1995), I discussed the striking changes between 1985 and 1992 in age-specific arrest rates for homicide. That article explained that, while the rates for persons age 18 and younger more than doubled, the rates for those age 30 and above declined by about 20 to 25 percent. I can now extend that analysis to 1998, and we see some striking changes in the opposite direction for the young people.

Figure 2.5 presents the age-specific arrest rate (known as the age-crime curve) for murder for the years 1985, which was the last year of a fifteen

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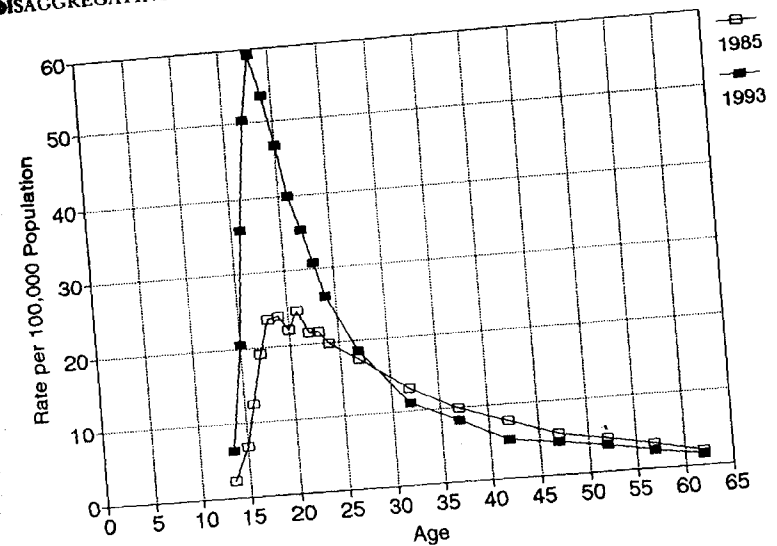


Figure 2.5. Murder arrest rate by age in 1985 and 1993.

year period of very stable age-specific rates, and 1993, which was the peak year of juvenile age-specific rates. Even though the rates for ages 20 and under had more than doubled over this interval, the rates for those over 30 had indeed declined.

Figure 2.6 depicts the same 1993 situation along with the figure for 1998, where we see the rates for all ages decline, with the steepest decline around age 18, where the growth since 1985 had reached the greatest level.

It is instructive to break out these changes in more detail by looking at the time trends for individual ages. Figure 2.7 depicts the trend for the ages traditionally displaying the peak homicide arrest rates – 18 through 24. We see how similar those rates were from 1970 through 1985, and then a divergence beginning in 1986. The rate for the 18 year olds more than doubled by 1991 (for an annual growth rate of 16 percent during this period), dropped in 1992, reached a new peak in 1993, and then continued down for the next five years. The pattern is similar for the other ages depicted in Figure 2.7, although the steepness of the rise in the late 1980s decreases with increasing age, and the decline after 1993 is correspondingly less for the older ages.

For youth 18 and under, depicted in Figure 2.8, the pattern is very similar to the pattern at age 18, although the stable base rate in the 1970–85

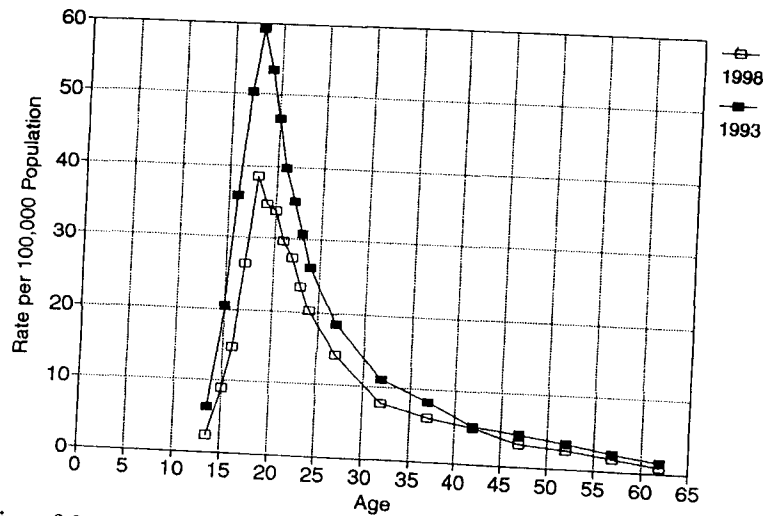


Figure 2.6. Murder arrest rate by age in 1993 and 1998.

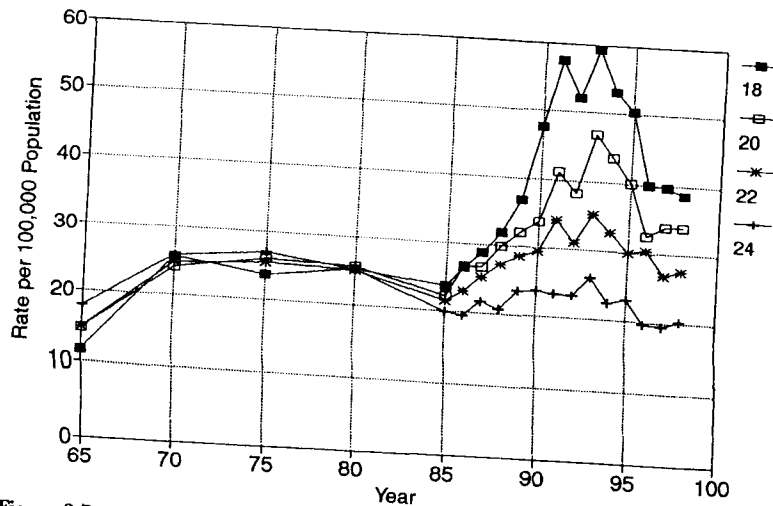


Figure 2.7. Trends in murder arrest rate by age (individual peak ages).

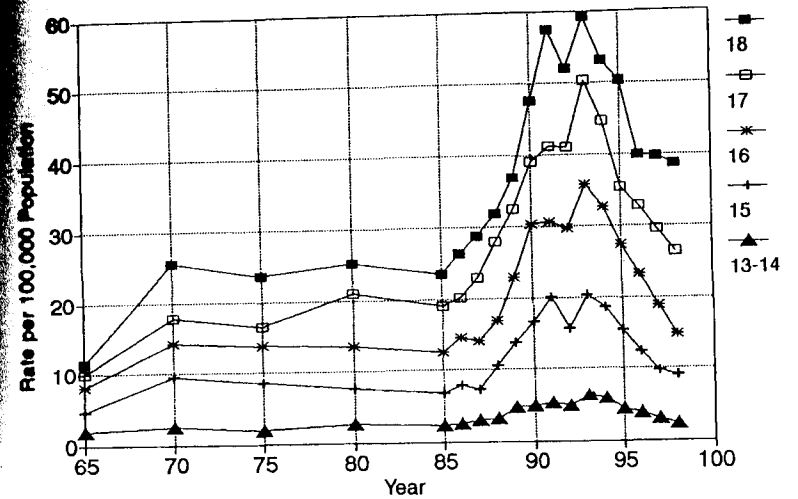


Figure 2.8. Trends in murder arrest rate by age (individual young ages).

period was lower. In all these cases of 18 and under, the rate more than doubled by 1993. The pattern for the ages above 24 generally declines after 1975.

These changes for the growth period, 1985 to 1993, and for the decline period, 1993 to 1998, are reflected in Figure 2.9, which depicts for each age the ratio of the age-specific arrest rate for murder to the rates that prevailed in 1985. Points above the heavy line (a ratio of 1.0) represent an increase in the rates, and points below that line represent a decrease. The upper graph portrays the ratio reached in the peak year, 1993, and the lower graph portrays the degree to which the ratio had declined by 1998.

The arrest rate for 15-year olds in 1993 was triple the rate that had prevailed in 1985. The growth to 1993 declined with age, but it was more than double the 1985 rate for all ages of 20 and below. In contrast, for the older ages of 30 and above, the 1993 rates were actually about 20 percent lower than the 1985 rates.

The graph of the 1998-to-1985 ratio is clearly below that for 1993, and the greatest decline occurred in the teenage years. But it is clear that the teenage rates in 1998 were still about 40 percent above the 1985 rates that had prevailed since 1970, and so there is still considerable room for improvement to get the teenage rates back down to the 1985 rates.

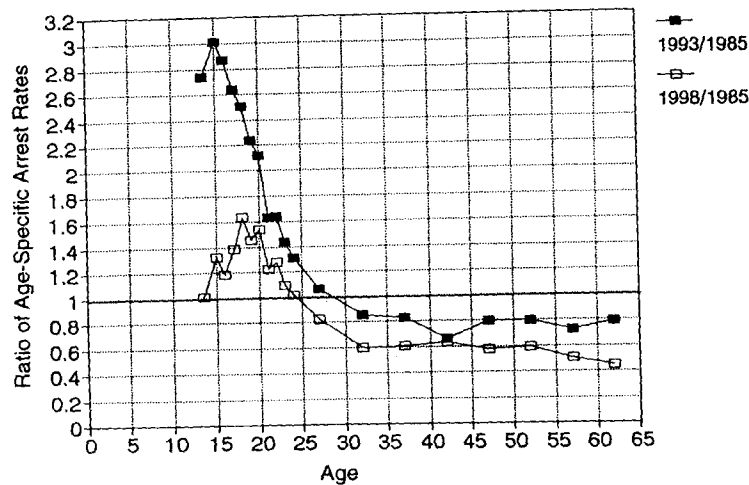


Figure 2.9. Ratios of recent age-specific murder rates (1993 and 1998 murder arrests versus 1985).

Also, there was a continuing decline in the homicide rates for the older ages. By 1998, the 25- to 30-year-old group had declined from the 1985 rates by about 20 percent, and the older groups had declined by about 40 percent.

These figures underscore the central importance of examining the different roles of the different age groups in explaining the trends in the aggregate homicide rate since 1985. The aggregate rate of Figure 2.1 grew to the 1991 peak solely because the rates of the younger people were increasing faster than the rates for the older people were declining. Between 1991 and 1993, the rates for younger people were generally flat (as reflected in the pattern for the 18 year olds in Figure 2.7), and so the decline by those in the older age groups dominated the aggregate, leading to the downturn that began in 1992. Since the rates of both young and old were decreasing after 1993, the aggregate rate continued to fall.

In sum, all of the increase in the level of homicide in the United States during the growth period of the late 1980s and early 1990s was due to the trends in the younger ages, because homicide rates for those 25 years old and older did not increase. However, the decrease during the decline period since 1993 is due to both the recent sharp drop in offending among young people and to the continuing decline in offending among older people.

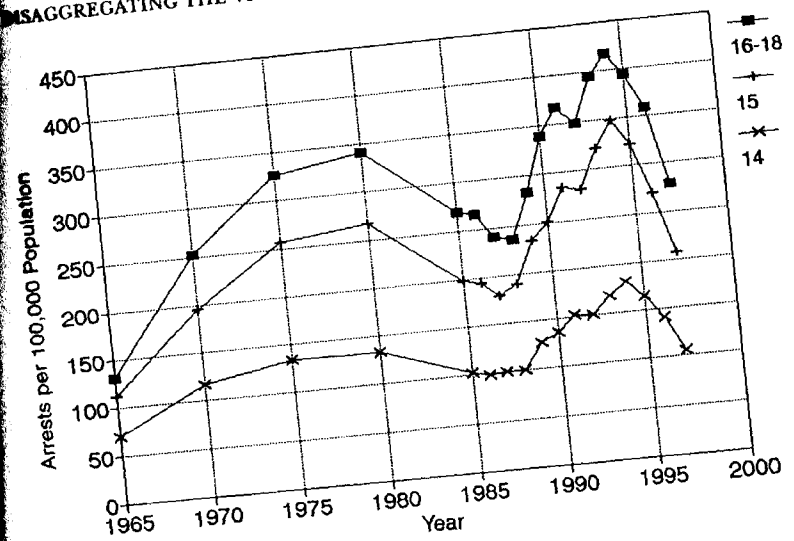


Figure 2.10. Robbery arrest rates ages 14-18.

Explanations of the homicide decline must differentiate between the factors that are responsible for the long-term fall in homicide among the older adults, and the ones causing the more recent drop in homicide offenses in the younger groups. Those two explanations are likely to be very different.

**Robbery.** The changes in levels of robbery have many similarities to those associated with homicide, but with some important differences. The time trends in the age-specific arrest rates for robbery based on UCR estimates are depicted in Figures 2.10 (for ages 14 to 18),<sup>16</sup> 2.11 (for ages 18 to 24), and 2.12 (for ages 24 and above).

Over the 1970-85 period, homicide arrest rates were fairly stable and also displayed a flat peak over the 18-to-24 age range as evidenced by the proximity of their trend lines in Figure 2.7. That period saw considerable change in robbery rates, most notably for the youngest age group: a rapid rise through 1975, a relatively flat period from 1975 to 1980, and a strong decline after 1980. In the period before 1985, the rise and the decline were strongest for the youngest group (Figure 2.10), more muted for the middle group (Figure 2.11), and even less pronounced for the oldest group (Figure 2.12), who had much lower rates generally.

The post-1985 period, which is the dominant period for homicide, also provides some interesting similarities and contrasts with the homicide situ-

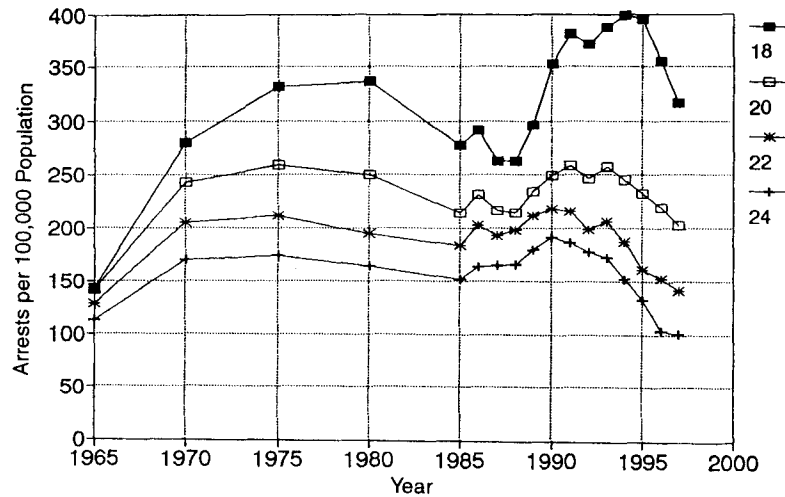


Figure 2.11. Robbery arrest rates ages 18-24.

ation. There was an important post-1985 increase in the robbery arrest rate, especially for the younger age group. For the young people (under age 20), the first noticeable uptick in robbery did not occur until 1989, three years after the increase for homicide (as seen in Figure 2.8). The

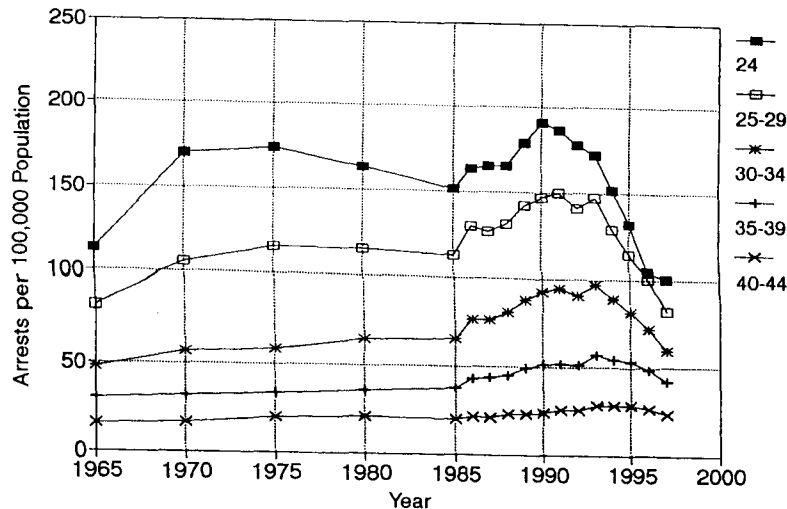


Figure 2.12. Robbery arrest rates age 24 and above.

peak in robbery occurred in 1994, one year after the homicide peak, and the downturn was comparably sharp. For all the ages of 18 and under, the growth in the five years between 1989 and the 1994 peak exceeded 70 per cent.

As we examine older people (ages 24 and above in Figure 2.12), we find a rather different pattern: an earlier rise (starting in 1986 rather than 1989) and a much less sharp (at most half) rise than that displayed by the young people. But the decline after the peak (between 1990 and 1993) is comparably strong.

**Methodological Considerations in Arrest Data.** In discussing robbery and homicide trends, arrest data have been used to represent offending patterns by age. This approach is necessary because reports of crime could contain demographic information about the victim, but knowing the demographic characteristics of the offender is generally dependent on an arrest. In using this approach, it is important to recognize the possibility that arrest rates by age can differ from actual offending rates. That could be a consequence of differential vulnerability to arrest by different demographic groups. For example, it is possible that young offenders are more easily arrested because they are less skillful in avoiding arrest. Or, at least in the case of homicide, they may be less vulnerable to arrest because their victims are more often strangers, and finding the perpetrator in a stranger-homicide is much more difficult than in one involving intimates or other acquaintances (see Riedel 1993).

As one examines trends in arrests over time within a particular age group, any distortion in the trend pattern because of these differential vulnerabilities must be associated with a *change* in the vulnerability within any age group. Thus, if it were the case that younger people were more vulnerable to arrest than older people, then that difference could contribute to the higher absolute values of the arrest rates associated with the young people. But that difference could not be the cause of the rapid post-1985 rise in the arrest rate of the young people unless there was some reason why there would be a comparable increase in their arrest vulnerability, and there is no indication of any such change.

Another concern about using arrest rates as the proxy for offending rates is the possibility that there might be a greater tendency for multiple arrests in some demographic groups than in others. This might be a consequence of more aggressive police practices in dealing with some groups, leading to multiple arrests for a single homicide. Or it might result because homicide or robbery by some groups, and especially the younger groups,



is, in fact, more likely to be committed by multiple offenders than single offenders. Then, a homicide or a robbery committed by a gang, for example, could well result in multiple members of the gang being arrested for the same offense, and that would contribute to a higher arrest rate in the age range typical of gang members.

These measurement problems are certainly real, but again, the concern over them is diminished somewhat in examining time trends. The time trends would be distorted only if there were time trends in the factors contributing to the differences across demographic groups. That could well be the case (e.g., if young people committing offenses today are more likely to be operating in gangs than was the case in the early 1980s), but the emphasis must then be on the shifts in those distorting factors. In view of the sharp shifts up and down observed among young offenders, it is reasonable to anticipate that the trends observed might be changed somewhat by these corrections, but that the basic thrust is not likely to be changed dramatically. In a preliminary examination of multiple arrests for homicides using the Supplementary Homicide Reports (SHR), we can account for at most 10 percent of the growth in the homicide arrest rate through increased incidence of multiple offenders in homicide incidents.

### Changing Demographic Composition

Much of the speculation about the recent decline in homicide rates attributes the decline to changing demographics.<sup>16</sup> This may be a holdover from the realization that much of the decline that began in 1980 was attributable to a demographic shift, as the baby-boom generation aged out of the high-crime ages (Blumstein, Cohen, and Miller 1980; Steffensmeier and Harer 1991). But those same demographic effects were not still at work in the early 1990s, since demographic effects do not always have to work in the same direction.

The decline after 1980 was significantly affected by the shrinking size of the cohorts in the high-crime ages, but the United States in the late 1990s was in a period of growing cohort sizes in the late teens and early twenties. Figure 2.13 depicts the age distribution of the U.S. population in 1998.<sup>17</sup> It is evident that the smallest age cohort under 40 is about 23, the cohort born in 1976. Each of the younger cohorts is larger than its predecessor until the peak at age six. Thus, if teenage age-specific crime rates were to remain constant, then the aggregate crime rate would increase as a result of the larger cohort sizes. This possibility spurred the warnings of a demographic "crime bomb" set to go off during the 1990s (Dilulio 1996).

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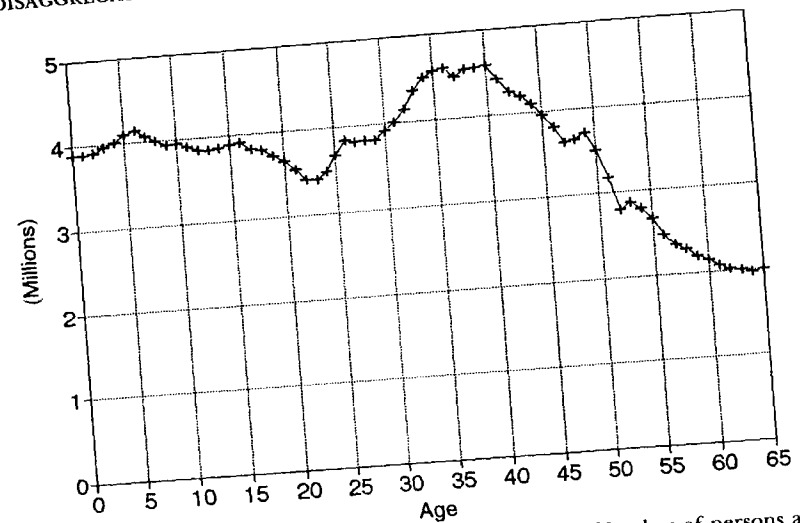


Figure 2.13. Age composition of U.S. population in 1998. Number of persons at each age.

Yet, it is important to recognize that these age-composition changes are relatively small, with cohort sizes growing at a rate of about one percent per year. In the face of much larger annual swings in the age-specific crime rates, as much as 10 to 20 percent per year up in the 1980s (16 percent per year for the 18 year olds from 1985 to 1991) as well as down in the 1990s, the one-percent change in demographic composition is a minor effect.

It is possible, finally, that changes in relative cohort size could alter the age-specific rates through mechanisms whereby larger cohort sizes tend to increase the criminality within a cohort, an effect described by Easterlin and others (Easterlin 1987; Smith 1986). However, the evidence suggests that, if changes in the relative size of age cohorts influence homicide rates, these cohort-size effects are minor compared to effects associated with variation in age and changes over time or period effects (Maxim 1985; O'Brien 1989; Steffensmeier, Streifel, and Shihadeh 1992).

### The Role of Handguns

There is widespread recognition of the changing role of weaponry in young people's hands. Over the last 15 years, the weapons involved in settling juveniles' disputes have changed dramatically, from fists or knives to

handguns – and especially more recently to semiautomatic pistols with their much greater lethality. That growth in lethal weaponry is reflected in the changes in the weapons involved in homicides in different race and age groups (Blumstein and Cork 1996; and Cook 1996, more generally).

The FBI's Supplementary Homicide Reports (SHR) provide data to track such changes in homicides.<sup>18</sup> Those reports, filed by individual police departments, provide considerable detail on individual homicide incidents. I focus specifically on these reports from the cities over 100,000 population. Each report contains information on the victim and (where known) offender characteristics and the victim-offender relationship, the weapon involved in the homicide, and the circumstances leading up to the homicide, such as argument, drug involvement, or gang involvement. Unfortunately, only a single circumstance may be designated, and so time trends in the fashion with which police designate the single circumstance limits the reliability of that aspect.

**The Growth Period, 1985–1993.** Figures 2.14, 2.15, and 2.16<sup>19</sup> provide information on the time trends of the weaponry used in homicides by offenders<sup>20</sup> in three age categories: adults, 25 to 45 years old (Figure 2.14); youth, 18 to 24 (Figure 2.15); and juveniles or “kids,” 17 and under (Figure 2.16). The weapons are classified into three groups:

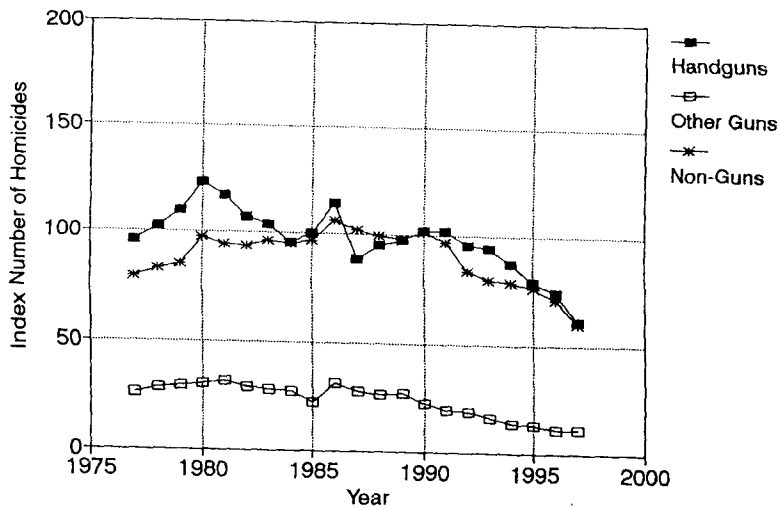


Figure 2.14. Homicide weapons by adults (ages 25–45). 1985 handguns equal 100.

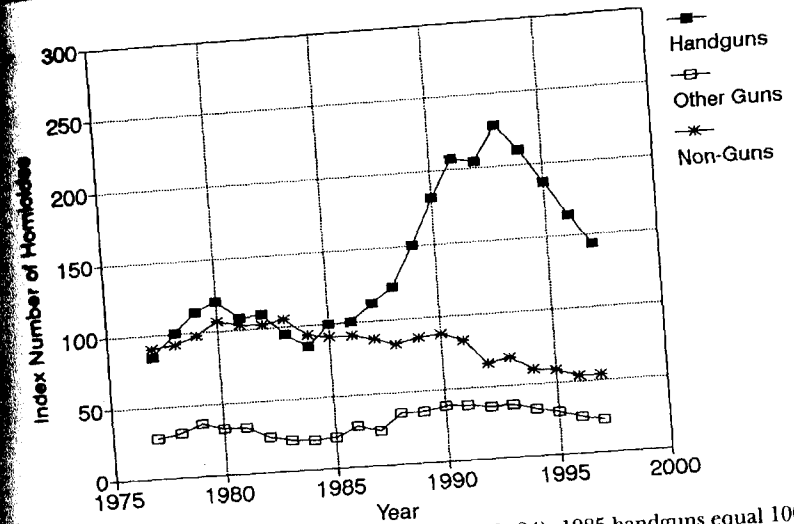


Figure 2.15. Homicide weapons by youth (ages 18–24). 1985 handguns equal 100.

handguns, other guns, and nonguns (which includes no weapon). We can see from Figure 2.14 that over the time period shown, 1977–97, there has been a general downward trend in total homicides by adults with all weapons and especially with handguns more recently; overall,

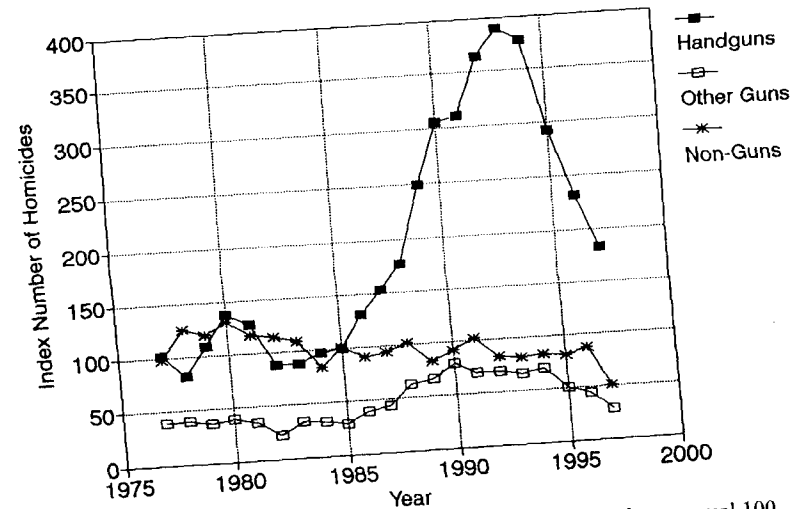


Figure 2.16. Homicide weapons by kids (under 18). 1985 handguns equal 100.

however, there has been only little change in the mix of weapons used by adults in homicide.

The situation for youth and juveniles is quite different, however. For both these groups, there was no clear trend until after 1985, and then a significant growth in handgun use began with no comparable growth in the other weapons. With 1985 as the base year, handgun homicide among youth increased by 1993 to an index value of 228 (an increase of 128 percent). The increase in juveniles' use of handguns was dramatically higher, to an index value of 389, almost quadruple the 1985 rate. In these groups, there is a sharp and steady decline following the 1993 peak. This decline is consistent with the decline in homicide arrest rates shown in Figures 2.7 and 2.8. I also note that, despite the sharp declines, the handgun indexes in 1997 were still well above the 1985 level for these groups, 43 percent above for youth and 83 percent for juveniles, an observation also consistent with the young people's arrest rates shown in Figure 2.9.

In all these figures, no appreciable increase has occurred in either the other-gun or the nongun categories. In fact, there has been a steady 40- to 50-percent decline from 1985 to 1997 in the nongun category for all three groups. Thus, there has been some degree of substitution of handguns for other weapons, but the absolute magnitude of non-handgun decline is still small compared to the dramatic growth in the use of handguns by youth and especially by juveniles. Thus, the observation based on Figures 2.5-2.9 that young people under age 25 accounted for all the growth in homicides in the post-1985 period is augmented with the recognition that that growth was accounted for totally by the growth in homicides committed with handguns. Clearly, the sharply increasing presence of handguns in youth and juvenile homicide must be considered of fundamental importance in any explanation of the aggregate homicide increase of the late 1980s and early 1990s. And the counterpart sharp decrease in the handgun homicides by these two groups is an important factor in the decline. But even though their handgun homicide rates are still well above the 1985 level, the continuing decline in homicides by adults, which, by 1997, reached a level almost half that of 1985, contributed to the aggregate decline since 1991.

Some important racial differences in the growth of handgun homicides can also be observed, with the dominant growth being among young African-Americans, as offenders and as victims. Figure 2.17 presents the index number of the weapons involved in homicides committed by black youth, ages 18 to 24. There is an even sharper growth in handgun use than for youth generally (Figure 2.15); the number of handgun homicides

## DISAGGREGATING THE VIOLENCE TRENDS

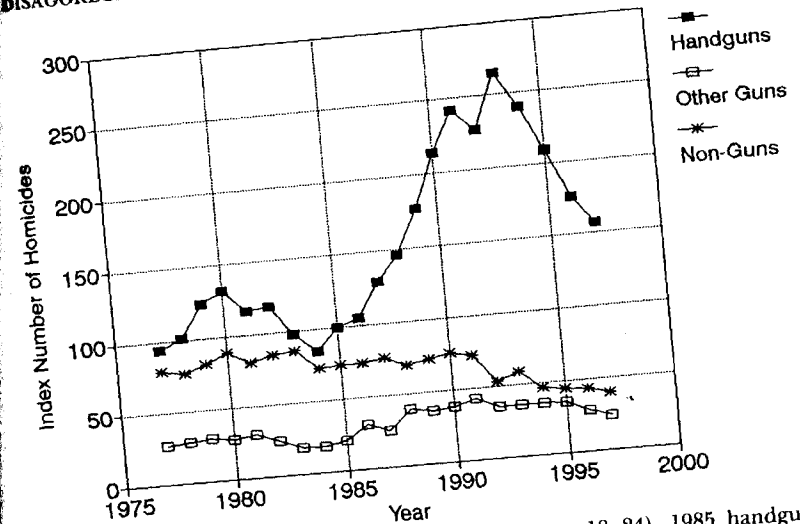


Figure 2.17. Homicide weapons by black youth (ages 18-24). 1985 handguns equal 100.

more than triples from the low in 1984 to the peak in 1993. There was no comparable growth in the role of the other weapon types.

Although some growth also occurred in handgun homicides by white youth, that growth was far less than among the black youth. The difference is depicted in Figure 2.18, which compares the two racial groups - blacks and a combined white and Hispanic group.<sup>21</sup> There is a strong growth in handgun prevalence for black youth, from a low in 1984 to a tripling by 1993. The rise for the white/Hispanic group does not start until 1989, four years after the start of the African-American climb. That growth reaches its peak in 1993, almost a doubling of the rate at the 1988 trough. That growth is attributable predominantly to a growth in handguns in homicides by Hispanics. We also note that the post-1993 decline is much steeper for the black youth than for the white/Hispanic youth.

Firearms have also played an important role in the growth in robberies. There is no incident-based data source for the fraction of robberies for homicide. But there are aggregate statistics for the fraction of robberies that are committed with firearms, and there was indeed a large growth in the fraction committed with firearms during the 1989-91 period. During that time, which was precisely the time of the major increase in the involvement of young people in robbery, there was a 42-percent increase in the total rate of firearm robberies. Over that same period, there was only a 5-percent

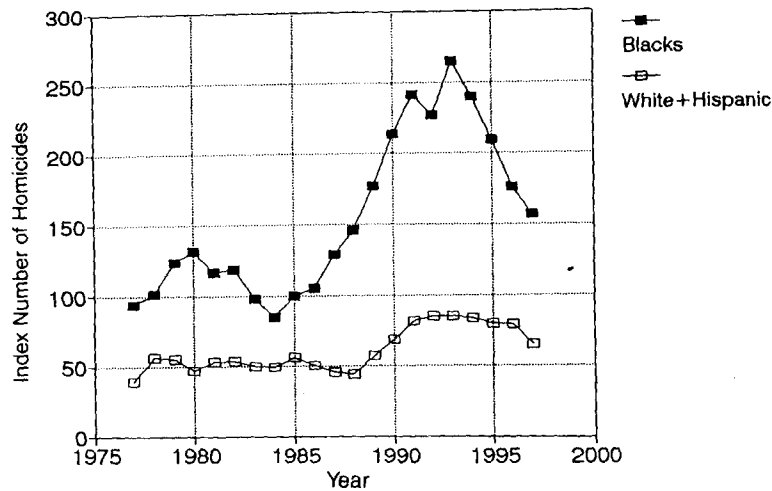


Figure 2.18. Handgun homicides by youth (ages 18-24). 1985 handguns by black youth equal 100.

increase in the rate of nonfirearm robberies. This shift suggests that young people carrying guns found uses for those guns outside the simple role of self-defense. This might help to account for the delay in the rise and the decline in robberies by the younger offenders compared to their older counterparts. For those age 24 and under, the first uptick in robbery did not occur until 1989, whereas for those in their late twenties and thirties, the upturn began three years earlier, in 1986. This may be an indication of the fact that the older people were more likely to include early crack users, and so their rise before the younger robbers may be explained less by their acquisition of guns (which were much less a novelty to them) and more by their use of robbery as means of getting the money to buy drugs. Exploring these issues will require analyses in individual cities, where more detailed information on demographic-specific arrest rates are available.

**The Decline Period, 1993-1996.** The steady decline in the handgun homicide rate after 1993 is clearly consistent with the decline in youth homicide rates shown in Figure 2.8, suggesting the importance of the decline in the use of handguns by young people in the decline of the aggregate homicide rate.

The pattern of growth and decline in handgun use is also reflected in Figures 2.19 and 2.20, which depict the time trend in the rate of weapons

arrests at the various ages. The pattern here is very similar to the homicide patterns depicted in Figures 2.7 and 2.8, but there is a much more distinct peaking in 1993, with a clear decline subsequently. Changes in the rate of weapons arrests result from a combination of changes in the presence of illegal weapons in the relevant population group and changes in police aggressiveness in pursuing illegal weapons. It is clear from other data that there was considerable growth in weapon prevalence during the late 1980s, and also that police became more concerned about weapons, especially those in the hands of young people. That combination is reflected in the rise in weapons arrests until the peak in 1993. There is no indication that there was any diminution in police aggressiveness in pursuing young people's guns after 1993, and so it seems likely that the decline after 1993 is due much more to a reduction in the carrying of guns than to a slackening of police efforts to capture the guns. The reduction in gun-carrying seems to have been an important factor contributing to the decrease in homicide after 1993 and the decrease in robberies after 1994 by young people.

### The Big Cities

The largest cities contribute disproportionately to patterns of serious violence for the nation as a whole. The prominent role of the large cities is

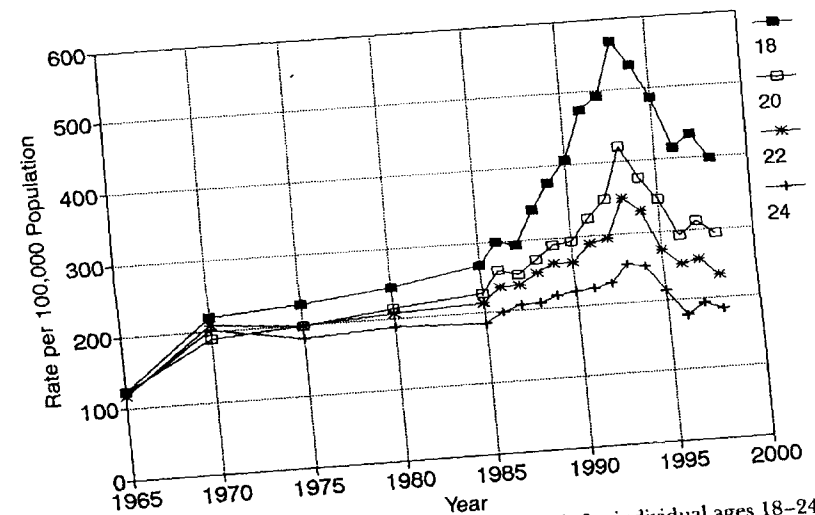


Figure 2.19. Trends: weapons arrest rate by age. Trends for individual ages 18-24.

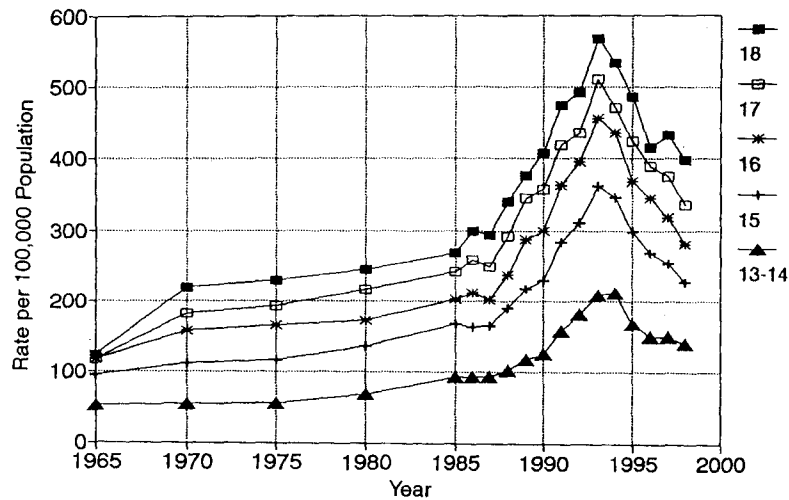


Figure 2.20. Trends: weapons arrest rate by age. Trends for individual young ages.

clearly evident in the trends in homicide. Based on UCR data for 1991, for example, the United States experienced 24,700 homicides. New York City alone provided 2,154 of them, or 9 percent of the total. Since New York City's homicide rate has declined faster than the national rate, its percentage contribution to the total has dropped to a value below 5 percent.

Although no other city has as large an effect as New York, the importance of the large cities is reflected in the relative contribution they make to the total homicide picture. In 1996, ten cities (New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Detroit, Philadelphia, Washington, New Orleans, Baltimore, Houston, Dallas, in order of decreasing numbers of homicides) accounted for fully one-quarter of all the nation's homicides. In contrast, in 1991, when New York alone accounted for 9 percent of all U.S. homicides, only seven cities (New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Detroit, Houston, Dallas, and Washington) were needed to account for a quarter of U.S. homicides.<sup>22</sup>

New York City has been a major contributor to the national decline since the early 1990s. In the national net decline in homicides from 1993 to 1994 (a reduction of 1,200 homicides), New York City's drop of 385 accounted for 32 percent of that change. In the net change from 1994 to 1995 (a national net drop of 1,720 homicides), New York City's drop of 384 accounted for 22 percent of the total decrease. New York City's contribu-

tion to the drop since 1995 has been closer to 10 percent, still very large, but smaller than in the earlier years, in part because the smaller cities are beginning to catch up. It is thus clear that what goes on in New York City, or the largest cities more generally, can have a very powerful effect on national statistics.

Examination of the trends over time offers a compelling picture of the saliency of the large cities, both in the rise of homicide in the 1980s and the decline during the 1990s. Figures 2.21 (for homicides with other than handguns) and 2.22 (for homicides with handguns) use the SHR to estimate the number (not the rate) of homicides in each of four groups of cities (those of one million or more, those in the range of 500,000 to one million, 250,000 to 500,000, and 100,000 to 250,000).<sup>23</sup>

Because each of the city-size groups other than the largest of over one million has a similar number of homicides in each year, we can contrast the large cities with the smaller cities.<sup>24</sup> There were six cities in the million-plus group: New York, Detroit, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, San Diego, and Dallas.<sup>25</sup> Such detailed analyses are not possible for robbery because of the lack of incident-based reports.

Figure 2.21 shows the limited variation associated with the non-handgun homicides. The change was relatively small in the smaller cities, but there was a rather steep and steady decline of almost 50 percent in the large

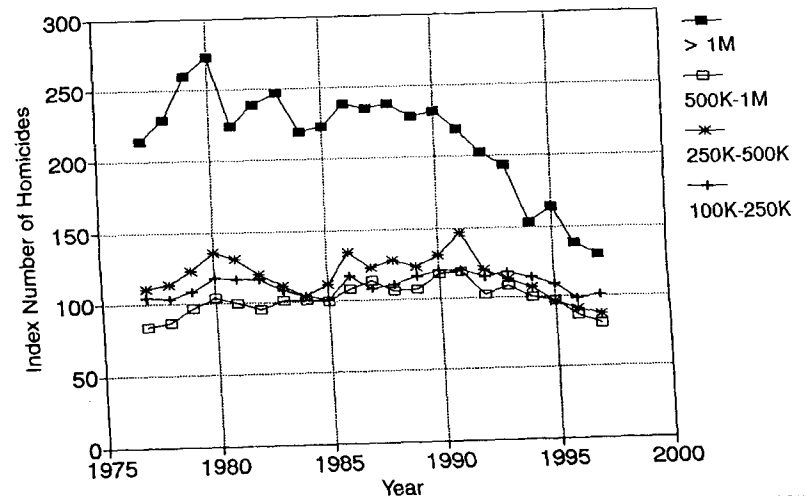


Figure 2.21. Nonhandgun homicides by city size. Cities of 500K-1 million in 1985 equal 100.

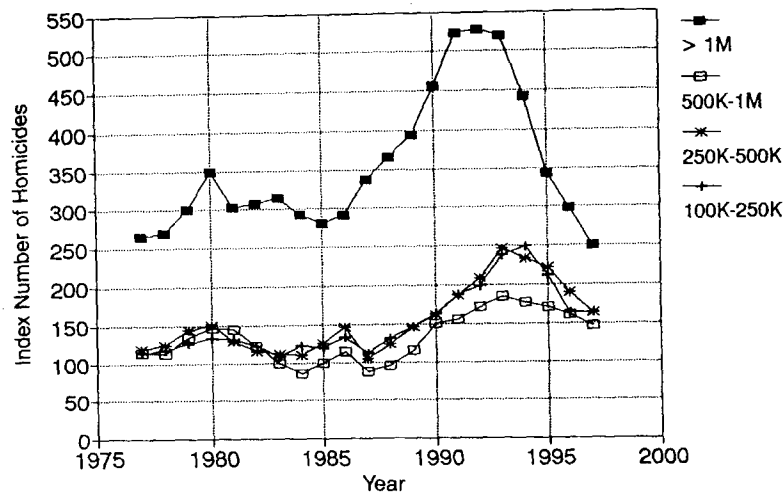


Figure 2.22. Handgun homicides by city size. Cities of 500k-1 million in 1985 equal 100.

cities from the peak in 1980 to the end of the series in 1997, with the decline accelerating after 1990.

These changes were much smaller than those in the handgun homicides. Figure 2.22 shows that the large cities had a major growth beginning in 1986, increasing 80 percent from 1985 to the flat 1991-93 peak, and then declining over 50 percent to the low in 1997, which was below the 1985 rate.

The smaller cities also had a distinct upturn in the handgun homicides, but that upturn did not begin until 1988, two years later than in the large cities. That upturn was even larger in percentage terms, increasing 110 to 130 percent from the trough in 1987 to the peak in 1993. The more recent downturn began one to two years later than in the large cities, and the drop from the respective peaks was still only about 20 to 30 percent by 1997.

Cork (1999) has shown the connection between the rise in the handgun homicides and the recruitment of juveniles into the crack markets. Using an epidemic model originally used in the marketing literature, he identified in individual cities the time when juvenile arrests for drugs began to accelerate and the corresponding point when juvenile homicides took off. He found most typically a one- to three-year lag between the two, a result consistent with the hypothesis that the rise in juvenile homicides was attrib-

utable to the diffusion of guns from the kids recruited into drug markets to their friends and beyond. Cork also showed that crack markets generally emerged first in the largest cities, especially in New York and Los Angeles, and then diffused to the nation's center to smaller cities at a later time, again a result consistent with the lags shown in Figure 2.22. Thus, the observed patterns of handgun homicide are highly consistent with explanations that assign central importance to the rise and decline of crack markets in the United States.

### Conclusion

It has been striking to note the sharp rise in violence by young people during the late 1980s and the correspondingly sharp decline in the 1990s. The increase in the aggregate homicide rate was due to escalating rates among juveniles and youth, predominantly (although not exclusively) by and against black males, particularly in the larger cities and exclusively involving handguns. By 1998, the youth decline was still well above the stable rate that prevailed for the fifteen years from 1970 through 1985. But we are still not necessarily at the end of the downturn of the cycle, and there is some reason to hope that the decline will continue. But, of course, because murder cannot become negative, that trend cannot continue indefinitely.

If the observed process of a rise, followed by a subsequent decline is cyclical with a reasonably well-defined cycle time, perhaps the difference between the larger and the smaller cities is merely one that reflects the lag in the initiation of this process: the large cities start first (as they do in many things both good and bad), and then the smaller ones follow. If the process is indeed cyclical, that opens the questions of the forces driving this cyclical process up and down, and of the factors contributing to the lag between the larger and the smaller cities. Again, I can only speculate. The evidence available so far is largely consistent with the earlier hypothesis (Blumstein 1995) of the sequence that created the rise phase: introduction of crack in the mid-1980s; recruitment of young minority males to sell the drugs in street markets; arming of the drug sellers with handguns for self-protection; diffusion of guns to peers; irresponsible and excessively casual use of guns by young people, leading to a "contagious" growth in homicide and possibly robbery also. Cork (1999) provides some strong evidence supporting this connection. There is still no comparably strong single hypothesis about the decline period. A variety of forces are likely implicated, and each is considered in detail in the following chapters.

A significant aspect of the improvement involved undoing some of the factors that contributed to the growth in the late 1980s – especially kids carrying and using guns and thereby stimulating others to do likewise. Efforts in that direction have been carried out by police and community groups. Much of the decline might be attributable to incapacitation associated with the doubling of the incarceration rate since 1985, but that effect shows itself predominantly in reductions in older individuals, since young people are only rarely candidates for incarceration. This observation emphasizes the importance of efforts to prevent violence by finding ways to socialize the young and train them with the skills necessary to function in a rapidly evolving economy. Current economic conditions seem to have provided legitimate economic opportunities at the same time that opportunities in the illicit drug markets are diminishing, but the cyclical nature of economic conditions makes their crime-reduction effects uncertain in the future. There is undoubtedly a connection between illicit drug markets – and particularly crack markets – and violence, but the nature of that connection is undoubtedly very complex and is not effectively addressed simply through prohibition of the drug or through cracking down on the participants in the markets. To the extent that addicts were treated medically, for example, the activity in the markets might decline, which could well diminish the violence as a result.

As we look to the future, we should be concerned about the possibility of a resurgence of active drug markets and any violence they may bring with them, a turndown in the economy and the impact it would have in the communities where violence is most likely to re-ignite, and the impact of welfare reform as the individuals least able to transition into the economy are dropped from the rolls. We cannot be certain when the next increase in violence will occur, but the current decline cannot continue indefinitely, and we should take advantage of the current opportunity to fashion criminal justice and community-based policies to forestall the next increase as long as possible.

### Acknowledgments

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our collaboration in the *JCLC* article mentioned in Note 1, Richard Rosenfeld has been a most important contributor to this chapter. My co-editor, Joel Wallman, has also made some important suggestions.

### Notes

1. This chapter uses material that is included in two related articles: Alfred Blumstein, "Violence Certainly Is the Problem – and Especially with Hand Guns" in *Colorado University Law Review Symposium Edition*, vol. 69, no. 4 (Fall 1998), and Alfred Blumstein and Richard Rosenfeld, "Exploring Recent Trends in U.S. Homicide Rates" in *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, vol. 88, no. 4 (Fall 1998).
2. On Figure 2.1, the rate for murder is scaled up by a factor of 25 to put it on the same scale as robbery in order to permit easy visual comparison of the two series.
3. Based on reports to the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS). U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), *Criminal Victimization in the United States, 1995*, NCJ-171129 (Washington, 1998), Table 91.
4. U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Crime in the United States: Uniform Crime Reports, 19xx*, Washington, DC. U.S. Government Printing Office. The UCR report for any year is usually published in the fall of the following year.
5. Even with the widespread reporting of the decline since 1991, it is not clear that those rates have contributed to a widespread feeling of greater safety. The frequency with which individual crimes are reported by the news media, and especially by television news, has certainly gone up, and fighting crime is still an important part of the political rhetoric every fall.
6. UCR 1998, p. 64, Table 1.
7. The total crime index is calculated as the sum of the of the seven *index crimes* of murder and nonnegligent manslaughter, forcible rape, robbery, aggravated assault (with these four designated collectively as the *violent crimes*), burglary, larceny-theft, and motor-vehicle theft (with these three designated collectively as the *property crimes*).
8. UCR 1998, p. 64, Table 1.
9. The National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), begun in 1973, is managed by the Bureau of Justice Statistics in the U.S. Department of Justice and carried out by the Census Bureau. Every six months, it interviews a probability-sample of households in a rotating panel (rotated after three years) involving about 100,000 individuals in about 40,000 households. The interview asks all household members at least 12 years old about their victimization experiences. For each such experience, they ask if the victimization was reported to the police. The NCVS does not measure homicides. See, for example, U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Criminal Victimization in the United States, 1998*, A National Crime Victimization Survey Report 1 (Washington, DC, 1999), NCJ 176353.
10. The UCR defines aggravated assault as "an unlawful attack by one person upon another for the purpose of inflicting severe or aggravated bodily injury. This type of assault is usually accompanied by the use of a weapon or by means likely to produce death or great bodily harm. Attempts are included since it is not necessary that an injury result when a gun, knife, or other weapon is used which could and probably would result in serious personal injury if the crime were successfully completed." Subjective judgment is clearly required for the attribution of intent and for assessing the degree of bodily injury intended. Different police officers within a department – and certainly the standards of different police departments – can easily differ in those judgments.
11. There was a significant change in the design of the survey in 1993, and subsequent years have reflected a significant change in the number of events reported, requiring calibration to make the new survey's results consistent with the earlier years. See U.S. Dept. of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Criminal Victimization in the United States, 1993*, A National Crime Victimization Survey Report, 2, 2-3, (Washington, DC, 1996), NCJ 151658