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Ten Facts About Crime

Is the public's mounting fear of crime justified? For the most part, the answer is yes. There are at least 10 things to know about crime in America today.

1. Crime is concentrated in urban America.

Surprisingly, you are less likely to be assaulted, raped, robbed, burglarized or murdered today than you were in 1980 — unless you are a minority resident of an urban neighborhood. For most Americans, all crimes, save auto theft, are down.

For urban minority Americans, all crimes, including homicide, are up. The death rate by violence for African-American males living in these areas is about 10 times the national average. And inner-city African-Americans experience much higher rates of rape, robbery, burglary and aggravated assault than do whites.

2. Urban crime is increasingly concentrated in inner-city neighborhoods.

Crime rates in Milwaukee's most impoverished neighborhoods, for example, are more than 20 times higher than crime rates in other parts of the city. Nationally, such neighborhoods have a disproportionate share of drug abuse, welfare dependency, illegitimacy and breakdown of the social fabric.

3. Conditions that foster crime are spreading to poor white communities, too.

Children who grow up in inner-city neighborhoods grow up amidst deviant and criminalistic adults, many of them felons, ex-felons and drug addicts. Children become radically present-oriented, unable to defer immediate gratifications. They also become radically

self-regarding, unable to feel the joy and pain of others (least of all strangers) and capable of committing the most vicious acts without the slightest pangs of conscience.

There is evidence to suggest that all young Americans, not just poor inner-city youth, are increasingly disposed to these character defects. There is a "white underclass" on the horizon. In the 1980s, the rate of increase in multiple social and economic ills among working-class whites rivaled that of poor African-Americans.

4. More and more crime involves chronic violent offenders under 18 years of age.

Males under 18 years of age are committing unprecedented numbers of violent and other serious crimes. Juvenile arrests for violent crime increased 50 percent from 1987 to 1991, twice the increase for persons 18 years of age or older. The increase in juvenile crime has been concentrated largely among young African-American males.

5. Only a tiny fraction of juvenile criminals commit a majority of all juvenile crimes and become adult career criminals.

A famous study conducted by Marvin Wolfgang and associates tracked the criminal histories of all boys born in Philadelphia in 1958. It found that "chronic offenders" (five or more police contacts) constituted only 6 percent of the cohort and 18 percent of the delinquents. Another study found that about 5 percent of all juvenile delinquents commit a large number of crimes or commit violent crimes, or both. On average, these "serious violent" offenders commit 132 delinquent offenses per year.

The same holds for chronic juvenile offenders. In 20 cities, law-enforcement, corrections, and school officials identified juveniles who had committed three or more major crimes. These juveniles were targeted for arrest and prosecution. As a result, a number of jurisdictions experienced sharp decreases in both violent and property crimes.

6. Liquor, as well as drugs, drives the crime rates.

In the 1980s, about half of all black homicide victims and perpetrators had been drinking at the time of the crime. Both alcohol and drug addiction are "multipliers" of crime. A pattern of persistent alcohol abuse is about as likely to be associated with chronic predatory criminality as a pattern of persistent drug abuse.

7. Inner-city neighborhoods and schools aren't "target-hardened" against crime.

Most Americans don't live in neighborhoods where there's a liquor store on virtually every corner nor are they surrounded by liquor stores, abandoned buildings, and other magnets of criminal activity. Instead, they live in "target hardened" environments, such as houses with doors that lock and public places that are well lit at night.

There are many ways to target-harden inner-city neighborhoods and schools — evicting persons in trouble with the law from public housing, automatically expelling students who make trouble in school, having police assigned to shadow and harass suspected drug dealers, erecting

concrete barriers on streets frequented by drug dealers and their car-bound buyers, to name a few. Unfortunately, however, few such measures have been taken.

8. More cops are needed in inner-city neighborhoods.

Urban America has a severe cop shortage. In the 1980s, as the inner-city crime problem grew, many big-city police forces contracted. In 1991, there were an estimated 1,750 cops on New York City's streets at any given time. This works out to about one cop for every 4,000 residents.

Studies show that increasing police automobile patrols does little to cut crime and intensive but temporary police crackdowns rarely succeed in reducing crime in the long run. It is time to experiment with "saturation policing" — tripling or quadrupling the number of officers on regular duty in and around crime-torn, inner-city neighborhoods.

9. Most predatory street criminals spend very little time behind bars.

Three out of every four persons under correctional supervision in the United States today — over three million convicted criminals — are not incarcerated. Instead of probation and parole being "alternatives to incarceration," imprisonment has become the "alternative" sentence.

The number of state prison commitments per 1,000 serious crimes dropped from 143 in 1981 to 131 in 1989. Despite mandatory-sentencing laws, most felons spend only one-third of their sentences in prison. The average time served in confinement fell from 17 months in 1981 to 13 months in 1988. In 1990, the number of days a convicted criminal could expect to stay in prison was about one-fifth what it was in 1960.

True, incarceration costs about \$25,000 per year per offender. But the typical adult offender commits more than a dozen serious crimes a year when free. Over 93 percent of state prisoners are violent criminals, repeat criminals (two or more felony convictions) or violent repeat criminals.

Incarceration, however, does not mean "warehousing." Some prison time can be used productively. Studies have found certain types of prison-based drug treatment, work and education programs do reduce recidivism rates.

10. Reducing crime requires reducing the number of at-risk juveniles.

To accomplish this, we should experiment with a wide variety of measures. These could include increasing employment opportunities through economic growth and reducing the breakdown of the family fostered by the welfare state. At-risk children do best when they are no longer at-risk. One suggestion has been that public resources be used to enable families in underclass neighborhoods to voluntarily enroll their children, beginning at an early age, in boarding schools. The primary object of the boarding school would be to provide a safe mechanism for the socialization of the child — inculcation of the good character traits of politeness, cooperation, kindness, hard work and self-control.



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