

THE YOUNG AND THE RUTHLESS

The decade of the 1990s may long be remembered for its technological advances—the expanding power of personal computers, the ubiquity of the internet, and the proliferation of wireless communications. Yet to those who closely monitor crime trends, the 1990s will be remembered as the decade when the murder rate fell.

After having peaked, the rate of killing in the United States had, by the end of the 1990s, sunk to levels not seen for decades. As citizens across the country celebrated New Year's 2000 with incredible fanfare and relief that the projected catastrophic Y2K computer bug was little more than a scare, police departments rejoiced in their own sense of victory.

Criminologists had warned of an impending juvenile crime wave created by a new breed of “superpredators.”¹ Despite the dire forecast, as the 1990s drew to a close, city after city reported spectacularly low homicide rates. Boston closed out 1999 with as few as 31 murders, compared with 152 in 1990. Philadelphia's homicide toll reached below the 300 level for the first time in well over a decade. New York City, despite a slight increase in 1999, tallied 667 murders, substantially below its 1990 peak of 2,245. By 1999, Chicago's murder toll had dropped to 641, the city's lowest level in many years and about half what it was in 1991.

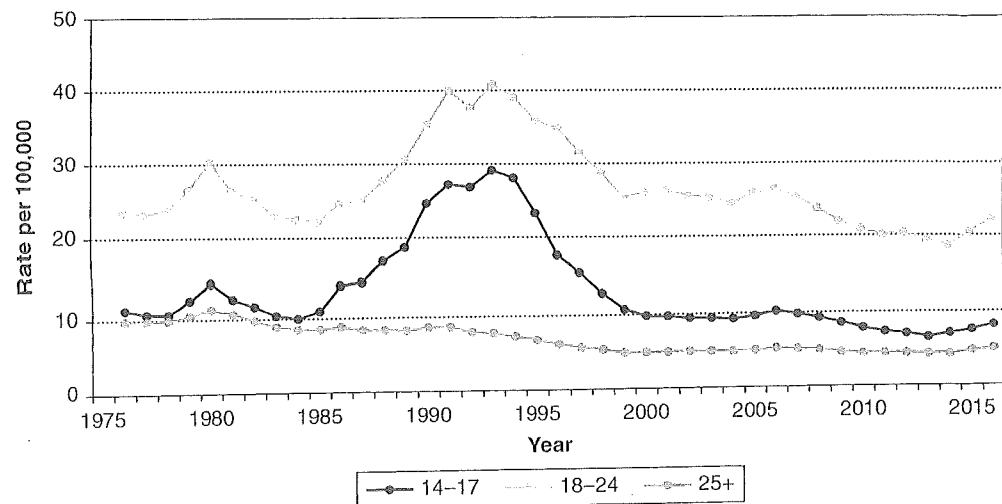
Although these reductions, as well as declines in many other cities, were worthy of celebration, the murder rate was not at a low point for all segments of the population. Only when we look much more closely into the trends do we begin fully to understand the great crime drop of the 1990s.

AN “EPIDEMIC” OF YOUTH HOMICIDE

The overall rate of homicide offending (the number of offenders per 100,000 population) for all age groups combined has experienced substantial fluctuations—peaks and valleys, ups and downs—over the past few decades. Similar to the pattern shown earlier in Chapter 2 for the rate of homicide victimization, the rate of offending per 100,000 rose in the late 1970s and peaked at 11.7 in 1980. Then the rate declined by roughly 25% during the first half of the 1980s, down to 8.6 in 1985. The late 1980s saw another surge in the offending rate, peaking at 11.2 in 1991. From that point on, as crime control became a national priority, the offending rate experienced a long-term drop down to 5.1 in 2014. Despite an uptick in 2015, the offending rate remained half what it was at the start of the 1990s slide.

Probing deeper into these trends by comparing different age groups uncovers a very different picture. As shown in Figure 5.1, the rate of murder at the hands of adults age 25 and older has declined slowly yet steadily since the 1980s, by

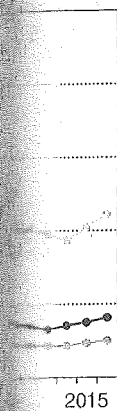
Figure 5.1 Homicide Offending Rate per 100,000 Population by Age, 1976–2016



almost 60%, without any rise during the violence-filled years of the late 1980s. All of the swings in homicide rates were among younger offenders. From 1985 to 1993, the rate of killing among young adults aged 18 to 24 rose by almost 90% before dropping back down by more than a third by 2000 and then stabilizing through the new decade. Young adults have traditionally had the highest rate of offending, and this gap grew even wider in recent years. The most remarkable change, however, occurred among teenagers. Prior to 1985, teens committed homicide at the same low rate as their parents' generation. However, since the mid-1980s, the pattern of offending for adolescents has much more resembled that of their older siblings. From 1985 to 1993, the rate of murder committed by teenagers almost tripled, from 10.9 to 29.3 per 100,000, before its sharp decline in the latter half of the 1990s.

What happened in the mid-1980s that drove the youth homicide figure into record territory? Although many factors would underlie such a sharp rise, as this, the most compelling and important was the emergence of crack cocaine as a popular street market drug in cities across the United States. Although the pharmacological effects of crack cocaine were worrisome, involving a lesser degree of impulse control as well as unpredictable effects on the body, the real danger to our society came from crime problems surrounding the dynamics of the crack drug market.²

When the crack market developed, the usual economic forces of supply and demand created fierce and violent competition for business. The demand for crack, which, unlike other street drugs, was sold in small single-hit quantities so great that dealers had to recruit large numbers of street merchants to distribute the contraband. In light of this intense demand, and that a fair number of sellers were being sent away to prison for long periods of time, teenagers aggressively recruited and enlisted as street sellers. Not only were these young youngsters willing to take on the risks for some quick cash (and free drugs) they also did so at a lower level of compensation. It was also perceived that if caught, they would be treated more leniently by the courts.



late 1980s. From 1985 to 1993, the number of teenagers who killed with a gun nearly quadrupled, before tailing off during the remainder of the 1990s and beyond. At the same time, there was no appreciable increase in juvenile homicides by other means. It has long been true that many teenagers are impatient, imprudent, and impulsive, willing to act spontaneously without fully thinking through the consequences of their actions. The availability of a gun in the hands of quick-triggered kids had a significant impact on the murder rate, both for their age group specifically and overall.

The trends in youth gun homicide are also related to gang activity. As shown in Figure 5.3, the number of homicides associated with street gangs soared in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In detailed analyses of homicide reports in Chicago and Los Angeles, Cheryl Maxson has shown that gang killings represented an increasing number and percentage of all murders from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s.⁵ During the 1980s, several national gangs (e.g., the Bloods, the Crips, and the Latin Kings) expanded their membership, as more and more youngsters were attracted to what these and other prominent gangs had to offer in terms of status, profit, and protection.

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Because of the violence associated with the drug trade, guns were an essential tool for survival. Youngsters trafficking in crack cocaine armed themselves for added muscle as well as for protection.³ As soon as some teenagers were armed, their peers—even those uninvolved in crack as sellers or users—began to acquire guns as well.⁴

A virtual teen arms race spiraled out of control, instigated by, but not limited to, crack activity. Some kids carried guns for offensive purposes, others for self-defense, and still others for status among their friends and rivals. The arming of America's urban youth created a volatile mix of impulsivity and firepower, as trigger-happy adolescents used their weaponry for reasons both serious and trivial—from the elimination of a rival gang member to the execution of someone who "disrespected" them.

As shown in Figure 5.2, the entire surge in teen homicide offending was gun related. From 1985 to 1993, the number of teenagers who killed with a gun nearly quadrupled, before tailing off during the remainder of the 1990s and beyond. At the same time, there was no appreciable increase in juvenile homicides by other means. It has long been true that many teenagers are impatient, imprudent, and impulsive, willing to act spontaneously without fully thinking through the consequences of their actions. The availability of a gun in the hands of quick-triggered kids had a significant impact on the murder rate, both for their age group specifically and overall.

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Figure 5.2 Homicide Offenders Under Age 18 by Type of Weapon, 1976–2016

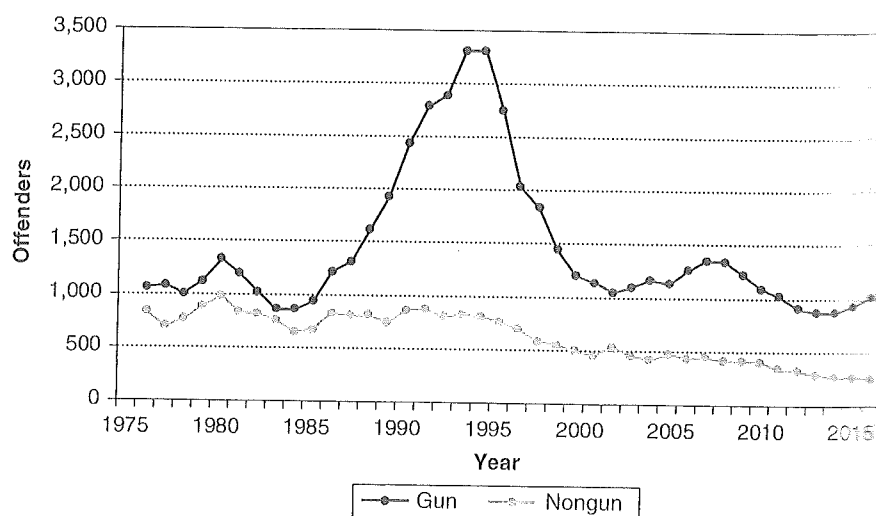
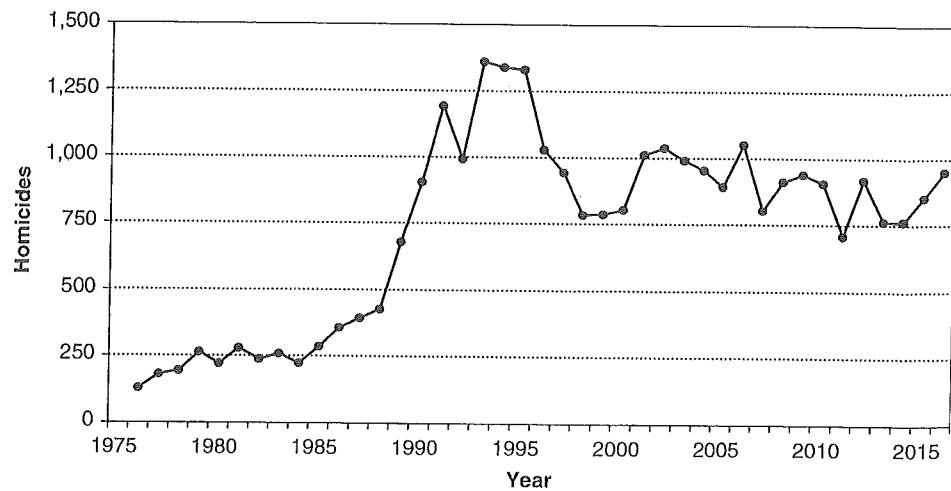


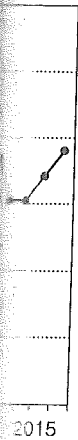
Figure 5.3 Gang-Related Homicides, 1976–2016



The definition of *gang*, not to mention *gang-related homicide*, can be problematic. For example, at what point does a group of kids involved in delinquent acts become gang activity? For our purposes, street gangs are to be distinguished from a host of other youth groups in which delinquent behavior occasionally occurs, as well as prison gangs, organized crime groups, white supremacists, and territorial cells. Most, but not all, street gangs consist of males from minority backgrounds—black, Latino, or Asian—who range in age from preteenagers to adults in their 30s (although sometimes older). Gang members typically live in proximity to one another and have strong neighborhood ties. Much of gang warfare exists as a result of a shared desire to protect local territory from the encroachment of outsiders. But the antisocial behavior of gang members ranges widely from acts of vandalism and petty theft to incidents of assault and murder.

Estimates of gang membership and its impact come from a series of surveys of law enforcement agencies conducted by the National Gang Center (NGC). The results indicate that the percentage of agencies experiencing gang problems declined during the 1990s from nearly 40% down to roughly 25%, a major success as city police departments were prioritizing antigang initiatives. However, then, however, cuts in city police resources appear to have had a negative impact, as the gang problem has rebounded somewhat. As of 2012 (the latest year for which data are available), almost 30% of law enforcement agencies reported having gang issues. Not surprisingly, prevalence estimates vary considerably by type of location. As of 2012, about 85% of agencies in cities with populations over 50,000 reported gang activity, compared to only 16% of agencies in rural areas.⁶

Also according to the NGC, the number of gangs and gang members increased over the five-year time period between 2007 and 2012. Specifically, the estimated number of gangs rose from 27,300 to 30,700, and the estimated total membership increased from 788,000 to 850,000. These figures translate to a significant increase in terms of gang-related killings. The NGC estimates that about 13% of the nation's homicides are gang related. The role of gangs in murder statistics varies considerably by type and size of jurisdiction. In Los Angeles and Chicago, for



gang activity is most prevalent, as many as half of the murders are believed to be tied to gang activity.⁷

A more recent survey of law enforcement agencies across America by the FBI's National Gang Intelligence Center (NGIC) points to a persistent gang problem and violence associated with it. In a 2015 report, the NGIC found that over the previous two years, gang membership had increased in 49% of the jurisdictions, had remained relatively unchanged in 43% of the jurisdictions, and had declined in only 8% of the jurisdictions. Moreover, half of the responding agencies reported that gang-related violence had increased over the two-year time frame, while 36% saw no change and 14% indicated a reduced level of violence associated with local gang activity.⁸

There are several reasons why gang violence has reemerged, even if not nearly as extensively as in the past. First, many of the gang leaders who were sent away to prison in the 1980s and early 1990s are returning back to their old neighborhoods and their old gang affiliations. At the same time, young recruits who did not witness the bloodshed in those earlier years are attracted to the excitement, thrill, and status of gang membership. Finally, many cities have slashed their budgets for antigang initiatives, assuming, or perhaps just hoping, that the problem had been resolved.

Street gangs have changed dramatically over the past 40 years. They have proliferated not only in numbers but also in their ability to spread fear and terror throughout a community. During the 1950s and 1960s, gangs were noted for committing relatively minor offenses. They spoke about the need to protect their turf but rarely followed up by committing major crimes of violence. In sharp contrast, today's gang members are older, more likely to carry firearms, and more willing to be violent in pursuit of their objectives. Gangs often traffic in illicit drugs and stolen guns as a means of support, sometimes having connections to organized crime groups (e.g., Mexican drug cartels).

One of the most significant trends in gang activity during recent years involves the growth and spread of immigrant gangs around the country. Not unlike their European counterparts before them, recent newcomers to the United States from Latin American countries tend to be segregated in their residences by virtue of language and unemployment. In some Latino neighborhoods, gangs develop in order to provide vulnerable residents with the support and protection not available to them from the larger society.

The Salvadorian gang MS-13 (aka Mara Salvatrucha) first appeared in the Los Angeles area during the 1980s, but later spread throughout the country, especially to places where antigang efforts were less effective. The gang's criminal activities have included stealing and exporting automobiles, burglarizing houses and stores, selling illicit drugs, smuggling and selling firearms, carjacking, intimidating witnesses, and committing aggravated assault, rape, and murder.

Originally, members of MS-13 consisted almost exclusively of immigrants from El Salvador who had fled from the nation's civil war, settled in the city of Los Angeles, and formed a gang to protect themselves from the threatening activities of other, more established groups. Over the years, as MS-13 has become increasingly violent, the federal government has deported many of its members, only to see them return illegally and rejoin the gang. Since the 1980s, MS-13 has proliferated, becoming a loose network of essentially independent groups of immigrants and encompassing members from not only El Salvador but also Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico.

Another influential Latino street gang, which operates in northern California, is known as SUR-13 (aka Sureños 13). Its members wear identifying red clothing

to distinguish them from their principal rival, the Norteños, whose gang color is blue. Both gangs are especially active in Oakland and San Francisco. They are believed to be offshoots of Mexican prison gangs, although their members come from a range of ethnic groups. Like so many other gangs, the Sureños and Norteños express pride in their group by wearing their colors and tattooing gang symbols on their bodies. Teenage members steal from local liquor stores, while older members push drugs on the streets.

The West Coast is certainly not the only region of the country where immigrant gangs have flourished. In Miami, for example, Haitian gangs emerged in the 1990s comprised of poor immigrants who escaped to south Florida when a military regime seized control of their Caribbean homeland. Gangs in the Little Haiti section of Miami protected the community from area rival African Americans who were higher up on the social ladder. Among Miami's Haitian gangs, Zoe Pound stands out as the most ruthless, quick to enforce its rule and facilitate its illicit drug trade through whatever violent means were necessary.

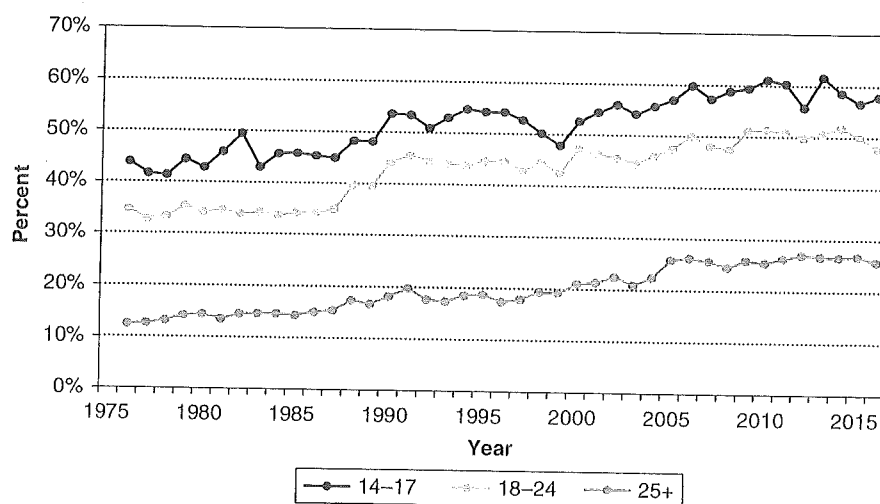
Despite all the negative aspects (e.g., violent conflicts with rivals, intimidating citizens and business owners, selling contraband), street gangs offer several positive functions for their members.⁹ Gangs provide an alternative socializing mechanism, especially as the institution of the family is weakened. By joining a gang, a young recruit can feel special, as if he belongs to something important, and be a member of a group that praises him. Moreover, it is a source of excitement and even economic resources. Where illicit drugs are sold, impoverished inner-city gang members gain not only a quick way to make money (tax free) but also a way to serve an apprenticeship in a growing business—the drug industry.¹⁰ Finally, if not most importantly, gangs offer recruits virtually unlimited access to advancement. Unlike conventional paths to success—power and money—through school and career, a youngster can rise to the top of a gang no matter his or her skin color or background; all that's needed is a show of toughness and loyalty. For this reason, gangs may be more attractive to people who have fewer legitimate job opportunities.

Beyond the functions provided to their loyal participants, gangs can also benefit the communities that they are simultaneously inflicting with their strong-arm methods. A neighborhood gang can shield residents and business owners from outside threats, particularly posed by gangs from other neighborhoods and of other ethnicities. In addition, local gangs can promote locally embraced customs, values, and norms throughout its membership, including respect for elders and religious leaders. Law-abiding residents and gang members may, as Patillo puts it, "agree on goals, but disagree on strategies."¹¹

The brutality of gang violence is often fueled by the more general phenomenon of group dynamics. As shown in Figure 5.4, not only are teen murderers significantly more likely to commit homicide with the help of accomplices, but also the percentage of juvenile murders involving two or more perpetrators has grown steadily.

It is well known that individuals, especially children, often act differently in a group setting than they do on their own. Sometimes peer pressure can encourage someone to conform to a prosocial norm, but frequently it can provide strong encouragement to do the wrong thing. In group settings, the activity may be secondary to interpersonal dynamics. A group leader may feel good that others are willing to follow his lead even into areas of behavior that are cruel and vicious. At the same time, the followers can feel good about the praise they receive from the leader (and other group members) for participating and showing allegiance. In group settings, so-called mob psychology can sweep participants into committing even horrible crimes that no one in the group really wants to do. In situations

Figure 5.4 Multiple Offender Homicides by Age, 1976–2016



of a “shared misunderstanding,” each group member wrongfully believes that everyone else but him actually desires to commit an offense.¹² Concerned about their reputation among friends, they all participate.

The group effect can operate within large mobs of people—such as in the widely publicized episodes of rioting or even lynchings—and in collections as small as a pair of accomplices. Following the arrest of two Vermont teenagers, 17-year-old Robert Tulloch and 16-year-old James Parker, for the January 2001 brutal murder of Dartmouth College professors Half Zantop and Susanne Zantop, numerous theories were proposed for a possible connection between the victims and the perpetrators. Some observers suggested that it may have been a hate crime related to the victims’ German roots. Others speculated that they all had been members of the same hiking club. These and other proposed linkages proved wrong. The victims were selected just because they had something the assailants wanted—cash, to help fund their dream of traveling to Australia.

Rather than a connection between victims and offenders, it is instead the close bond between the two assailants that holds the key to understanding this tragic episode. Tulloch exalted in his leadership position, feeding off the admiration of his younger partner, while Parker sought the praise and approval of his older mentor. Had Tulloch and Parker been apart, arguably this crime would never have occurred. In tandem, they brought out the worst in each other.

Whereas the partnership of Tulloch and Parker facilitated their attack on the Zantops, countless youth follow a violent path through the support and encouragement of peers. The subculture of violence notion described in Chapter 3, if updated and modernized, is quite helpful in understanding the readiness for violence among many young urban dwellers. For inner-city youth, the American Dream, which appears absolutely unattainable, can be little more than a cruel nightmare. Alienated from mainstream society, minority youngsters instead often obey the code of the streets, in which respect is the fundamental and most vital commodity of daily life. Sociologist Elijah Anderson wrote that to earn respect and then guard against losing it, a youngster must comport himself at all times in a

manner showing that he's ready and willing to be violent. According to Anderson, being disrespected is a fate worse than being murdered.¹³

On July 26, 2006, brothers Rasheem Dubose, 21, Terrell Dubose, 19, and Tajuane Dubose, 18, of Jacksonville, Florida, were challenged by Willie L. Davis Jr. Davis had nearly run over Tajuane with his car. Later in the day, Davis reached Rasheem, held a gun to his head, and ordered him to remove his pants and crotch in public. In another neighborhood, the victims of such transgressions and humiliations may have called the police. In the Duboses' world, anything short of retaliation would be a sign of weakness, would invite further victimization, and, more important, would rob them of their most precious possession—respect in the eyes of their peers. After fetching weapons and a ride, the Dubose brothers drove to the house where Davis was hanging out and pummeled it with 29 rounds, three of which ricocheted and killed Davis's 8-year-old niece, DreShawna, while she crouched down inside her bedroom to try and avoid the barrage of gunfire. The three brothers were charged and convicted of first-degree murder.

Another feature that strikingly distinguishes murders committed by youthful assailants is the senseless nature of the underlying motivations. By contrast with the inspirations of profit, jealousy, and control that characterize most adult homicide, youthful offenders often, if not typically, kill for trivial reasons—a leather jacket, a romantic brush-off, a challenging glance, or no reason in particular. In Los Angeles suburb, for example, two teenage girls murdered their best friend because they were jealous of her slender figure, waist-length auburn hair, good looks, and popularity with boys. In Miami, a 12-year-old boy killed a homeless man in a dispute involving a piece of pizza. In Independence, Missouri, a teenager murdered a Good Humor man because the vendor refused to give him a free frozen treat. And in Oklahoma, a 17-year-old, while riding around with a couple of friends, fatally shot a jogger purely as a break from boredom.

The limited capacity that juvenile killers have for appreciating the consequences of their crimes is stunningly illustrated by the remorselessness demonstrated by a Missouri girl after brutally killing a neighbor. In 2009, 15-year-old Bustamante stabbed and strangled to death 9-year-old Elizabeth Olten. Bustamante then buried the body inside a grave she had dug days earlier in anticipation of the funeral. Returning home afterward, the young killer scrawled this entry into her diary:

I just f----- killed someone. I strangled them and slit their throat and I stabbed them now they're dead. I don't know how to feel atm [at the moment]. It was ahmazing. As soon as you get over the "ohmygawd I can't do this" feeling, it's pretty enjoyable. I'm kinda nervous and shy but I'm though right now. Kay, I gotta go to church now . . . lol.¹⁴

As shown in Chapter 2, since 2000, juveniles have constituted fewer than 1% of all homicide offenders. Even during the years of surging juvenile homicide, teenagers committed only about 15% of the nation's murders. However, you may not get that impression based on the news media. Based on a content analysis of news reports, for example, Pollak and Kubrin found that juvenile offenders and juvenile victims are substantially overrepresented in crime coverage.¹⁵ Part of this overexposure is likely a result of the unusual and bizarre reasons why kids commit homicide, as with the cases just described. Crimes that seem to defy reason tend to serve as prime fodder for journalists and reality crime shows. These stories leave Americans completely mystified, asking, "What's the matter with kids today?" They borrow a refrain from the classic musical *Bye Bye Birdie*.

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Despite a widespread belief that kids today are indeed out of control, it absolutely remains the case that the vast majority of youngsters do not even come close to committing acts of serious violence, let alone homicide. Even among the highest rate group—young black males—for every youngster who commits homicide, literally hundreds never will.

Those adolescents who do commit homicide tend to differ from the rest in several important respects, besides demographics. Kenneth Busch and his colleagues, for example, studied the case histories of 71 juvenile murderers and compared them with similar data for a sample of 71 nonviolent delinquents, matched for age, race, sex, and social class. Overall, the young murderers were significantly more likely to have come from a violent family, to have abused alcohol, to have had severe educational deficiencies, and to have participated in gang activities.¹⁶ More generally, the large body of research on violent youth has suggested a wide range of risk factors, including poor medical care and nutrition during early age as well as poor prenatal care; drug and alcohol dependency; inadequate supervision and ineffective parenting; emotional, physical, and sexual abuse; poverty; learning disabilities and academic problems; isolation from peers or contact with delinquent peers; and exposure to violent media and entertainment, among many others.¹⁷ Yet none of these conditions, even in combination, are sufficient to produce homicidal behavior. Risk factors represent predispositions, not predestination.

EXPLAINING THE 1990s DECLINE

The precipitous decline in violence that thrilled Americans during the 1990s challenged criminologists to explain the sudden turnaround in lawlessness. Undoubtedly, such a sharp change in street crime would involve the coalescence of multiple factors, including demographic shifts by which the size of the most violence-prone segment of the population—teens and young adults—was shrinking relative to the total, increasing incarceration rates whereby dangerous felons were being kept behind bars for longer periods of time and innovative police strategies guided by constant monitoring of crime data and hot spots. However, arguably the most significant involved a reversal of the very factors that had pushed youth violence levels into record territories.¹⁸

Just as the increase in the U.S. homicide rate in the late 1980s and early 1990s can be linked to the crack epidemic, as described earlier, the subsequent decline can also be associated, at least in part, with a contraction or maturation of the crack market.¹⁹ Typical of most fads in the marketplace, from fidget spinners to ripped jeans, the crack market passed through a natural evolutionary process. Although there had been street warfare over market shares in the early years of the drug, by the 1990s, the turf lines were being settled through survival of the fittest and the fiercest. Certain drug sellers were able to muscle or shoot out the competition—many of the losers had been incarcerated, killed, or had moved away from their neighborhood in a big city—and the crack frenzy began to dissipate. Also, by virtue of some widely publicized horror stories about the dangers of crack (e.g., the death of basketball star Len Bias), the demand for crack dissipated.

The crack market had largely devastated a particular cohort—those born from 1968 to 1974, especially blacks. When the crack market first hit the streets in the mid-1980s, these young people were old enough to be up to taking the risk but not old enough to know better. Thanks to what is known as the “big brother effect,” those born after the early 1970s were scared away from crack by the devastation

they saw in their older siblings and others in their communities. As a result, the rate of homicide by young black males in particular plummeted in the mid-1990s. As shown in Figures 5.5 and 5.6, although similar trends existed for white and black males, the rise and subsequent fall in homicide were especially steep among young black males.

On a statistical basis, murder by juveniles has fallen since 1993, but it fell from a level that was an all-time record when the crack epidemic wreaked havoc on youth, especially minorities in urban centers such as New York, Chicago, and

Figure 5.5 Homicide Offending Rate by Age, White Males, 1976-2016

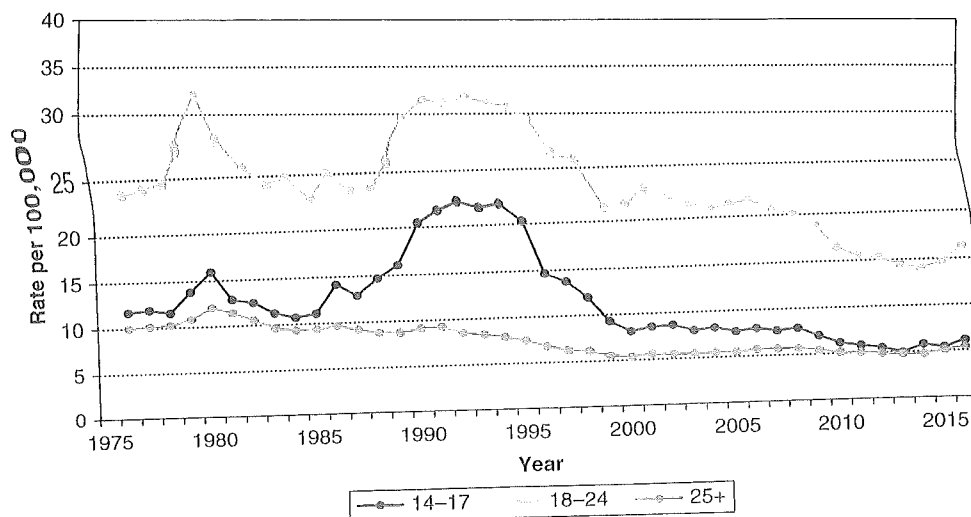
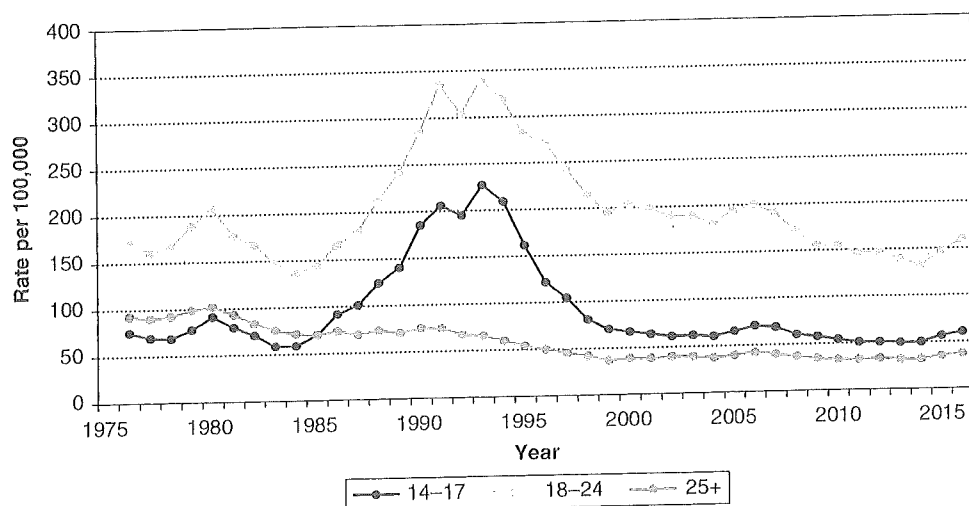
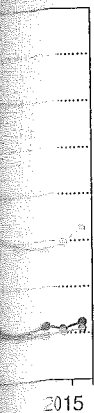


Figure 5.6 Homicide Offending Rate by Age, Black Males, 1976-2016



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Baltimore. It would be a serious mistake, however, to frame the decline in crack-related violence as solely a market-driven trend that law enforcement passively watched from the sidelines. Rather, police agencies, in implementing community-oriented strategies, had much to do with curtailing the violence associated with crack, as well as guns and gangs. In Boston, for example, the police negotiated a cease-fire with warring gangs after getting everyone's attention by sending away to prison a major gang leader on federal weapons charges. The New York City police confiscated guns from the hands of teenagers through aggressive (aka "zero-tolerance") stop-and-frisk strategies.

It would also be a mistake to leave the impression that the reduction in youth murder was solely a result of the decline in the drug wars or due to police intervention. The level of youth violence subsided not only for murder but over a range of behaviors from simple assault to rioting, first in large cities but eventually in smaller cities as well. Perhaps precipitated by the incredible growth of violence associated with big-city drugs, many people around the country became desperate for solutions. Afraid to walk the streets in their own neighborhoods or go shopping downtown, they became sick and tired of feeling like victims. In urban centers across the country, residents sought to reestablish a sense of community as they began to recognize that they could make a difference in the lives of local youth. At the grassroots level, parents, teachers, psychologists, religious and business leaders, social workers, college students, and the police worked together in an effort to repair the moral, social, and economic damage done to young people over a period of 20 years and to take the glamour out of destructive behavior. Through myriad new programs, adults gave back to teenagers what they had lacked for more than two decades—supervision, structure, guidance, and hope for the future.²⁰

Local schools were at the center of effective community efforts to reverse the scourge of teenage violence, often taking on responsibilities previously performed by the family. High school principals adopted a strict policy regarding students who carried weapons to school, making classrooms safer from the threat of gun violence. In addition, by means of effective conflict resolution programs built into the curriculum, many local schools began teaching their students what parents used to teach: to have empathy for victims, to control their anger, and to manage their impulsive behavior. Finally, through the 21st Century Schools initiative passed by Congress in 1994, schools provided what was lacking after the school day ended—adult supervision, guidance, and control through after-school programs.

Schools were not the only local institutions that stepped forward to fill guiding roles. Churches ran athletic and gun-buyback programs. Community policing placed more officers in strategic positions in high-crime areas. Probation officers rode in patrol cars to keep an eye on youthful probationers. Increasing numbers of local college students served as mentors, tutors, and peer mediators in neighborhood schools. Parents and teachers volunteered more to supervise after-school programs in athletics, drama, and the arts. Local businesses generated more summer jobs, at least some of which led to careers with the companies. More community centers opened their doors to local teenagers. Municipalities beefed up funds for community policing, with residents forming more partnerships with police.

In Boston, which was seen as a model in dealing with teenage crime, the murder count plummeted from 34 teen offenders in 1990 to only 3 in 1998.²¹ Over the same period, the city saw a proliferation of programs geared toward at-risk teenagers. The wake-up call for Boston's community leaders came during a funeral service in 1992 at the Morning Star Baptist Church. As a crowd of mourners looked on in horror, a gang of local youths chased another teenager into the church, where

they repeatedly stabbed him into submission. Shocked by this crime, a group of local Boston ministers decided that enough was enough and that it was time to act. Rather than wait for troubled youngsters to come to their churches, they decided to take their congregations to the streets and the gangs, working with the police to identify the most recalcitrant young offenders and to provide alternative programs for those teenagers whose lives could be turned around.

Boston's attack on juvenile violence during the 1990s was multifaceted, emphasizing prevention, tough and effective law enforcement, and formation of partnerships with local residents. The community policing effort increased communication between police and neighborhood youth. Perhaps taking their cue from Boston's churches, other local institutions—businesses, government, universities, schools, police, and parents—were suddenly more willing to get involved in the lives of local youth. The juvenile crime rate in Boston finally began to reverse direction, and sharply so.

The success of the Boston model influenced public policy nationwide. Although generating much political controversy concerning the separation of church and state, former president George W. Bush championed federal funding for faith-based organizations in an attempt to bring the church into the loop of providing services for at-risk youth as well as ex-offenders, the homeless, the hungry, substance abusers, those with HIV and AIDS, and welfare-to-work families.

It should be clear, then, that the range of explanations for the sizable and steady drop in homicide rates during the 1990s is extremely broad. Criminologists frequently cite changes in drug markets, the expansion of prison populations and community policing initiatives, intensified prevention and enforcement efforts, demographic change, and increased involvement of community leaders and ordinary citizens in grassroots crime-fighting campaigns as key contributors. However, a few other, less obvious and more controversial theories have also surfaced.

Anthony Harris and colleagues at the University of Massachusetts suggested, for example, that growth in medical technology and the spread of emergency medical services may have contributed to lessening the extent of carnage related to assaults with guns and other deadly weapons.²² They attempted to show empirically that the lethality of criminal assault—the likelihood that aggravated assault victims survive rather than die from their injuries—can in part be linked to emergency care response.

On a very different tack, economists John Donahue and Steven Levitt proposed a rather hotly debated hypothesis, controversial both methodologically and politically, that declining rates of violence in the 1990s were a lagged or delayed effect of the legalization of abortion arising from the 1972 Supreme Court decision *Roe v. Wade*. "Teenagers, unmarried women, and African Americans are all substantially more likely to seek abortions," they wrote in a 1999 paper. "Children born to these mothers tend to be at higher risk for committing crime 17 years or so down the road, so abortion may reduce subsequent criminality through this selection effect."²³

Their proposition, therefore, was that following *Roe v. Wade*, thousands of unwanted fetuses were aborted instead of being born into less-than-ideal environments, producing two decades later a reduction in the pool of at-risk, violence-prone individuals. Despite some persuasive logic, Donahue and Levitt appear to have overstated the impact of legalized abortion. The change in law, for example, cannot account for the steady decline in rates of homicide by adults, aged 25 and older, individuals who would have been born prior to the landmark abortion decision.

Even as the abortion-violent crime link was being debated in academic circles, the theory received a public airing through Levitt and Dubner's widely read book, *Freakonomics*.²⁴ Conservative talk-show host William Bennett, who had served as the secretary of education during the Reagan administration, confronted a firestorm of protest when he tried facetiously, and unwisely, to take the theory to an absurd extreme: that the rate of crime in America could be hugely curtailed if every conceived black baby were aborted.

Another fascinating hypothesis to explain the drop in youth crime—one that has nothing to do with funding for prevention programs, gang interdiction efforts by the police and the clergy, or shifts in drug markets—involves federal initiatives since the 1970s to remove lead from paint, gasoline, and drinking water. There is evidence that heavy exposure to lead, particularly in children, significantly impacts physical and psychological health and tends to increase the propensity toward aggressive behavior.²⁵ The reduction in childhood lead exposure in the late 1970s and early 1980s was, according to this theory, a key fact in the subsequent decline in violence in the 1990s and beyond.²⁶ That fewer children have toxic levels of lead would explain at least part of the decline in youth violence and homicide.²⁷

Each of these novel hypotheses may contribute to our understanding of the 1990s crime drop, at least to some undetermined extent. However, each suffers from one major flaw. None—not advances in emergency medicine, changing access to abortion, nor regulations to address lead poisoning—can account for the steep rise in homicide rates beginning in the mid-1980s or for the fact that youth homicide rates plateaued in the early 2000s almost at the same level as they were prior to the mid-1980s surge. The rise-up then fall-back pattern is more consistent with transient factors than with a permanent policy change.

Whatever the actual causes for the downturn, it is clear that the widely reported and worrisome surge in youth homicide during the late 1980s and early 1990s has completely dissipated. In fact, the rate of homicide committed by teens and young adults since 2010 has remained lower than at any point in time over the past four decades. Criminologists who in the 1990s had wrongly predicted a continued rising tide of youth murder were sharply criticized for their part in scaring the public and for giving lawmakers the impetus for enacting stiff penalties for young killers.²⁸ To be fair, however, those same criminologists had advocated for increased funding for youth violence prevention, not increased punishment.

Although the youth homicide surge was fleeting, the aftereffects have been devastating and long-lasting. During those days of high crime rates, when fear was widespread in both black and white communities, the “superpredator” sound bite went as viral as things could go in an era before social media. Thousands of individuals who had been sentenced under the get-tough laws on juvenile murder enacted during that era remain incarcerated today, many of them for life. Although there has been some remediation, as discussed in this chapter (see section titled “Juveniles in the Adult System”) and in Chapter 14, the juvenile justice system looks nothing like it was before youth killing became a matter of intense concern.

PRINCIPLES OF PREVENTION

Not all Americans are convinced about the value of prevention—especially early childhood enrichment efforts. Prevention strategies occur to keep kids from ever becoming involved in criminal activity; intervention strategies occur after a problem has begun. It seems that the public and policymakers alike would rather pay later than pay now. As a result, prevention initiatives are too often funded and