

**THE SOURCES OF VIOLENCE
IN AMERICA AND THEIR
CONSEQUENCES FOR
LAW ENFORCEMENT**

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

IN MANY RESPECTS, assaults and murders of law enforcement officers are just specific examples of the various types of violence that occur every day in America. Only certain types of antipolice actions probably have any major characteristics that distinguish them from other common types of violence. So to fully understand the sources of assaults and murders of police officers, it first is necessary to address the sources, the justifications, and the ramifications of violence in contemporary society.¹

Historical Perspective

Assaults, and particularly those that result in death, are uncommon in some modern nations. The life of law enforcement officers is such a safe one in the United Kingdom that most bobbies do not carry firearms. In stark contrast, in America, although the rate of violent crime has declined from its peak, it is one of the most violent nations, and murder is rampant in the United States. In a single year, many small cities have as many murders as some medium-size countries, and the number of American murders with firearms equals the total of those in 25 other modernized nations.² If the trend of the early nineties had continued, by now more Americans would be killed by firearms than by automobile accidents.

The number of violent acts committed against both civilians and law enforcement officers has increased dramatically over the last 40 years. Figure 1.1 illustrates these statistical trends. The number of violent crimes has exploded since the sixties.³ So, too, has the number of reported assaults on law enforcement officers from less than 10,000 per year to a peak of over 70,000 in 1990.⁴ Since both violent crimes against civilians and violent crimes

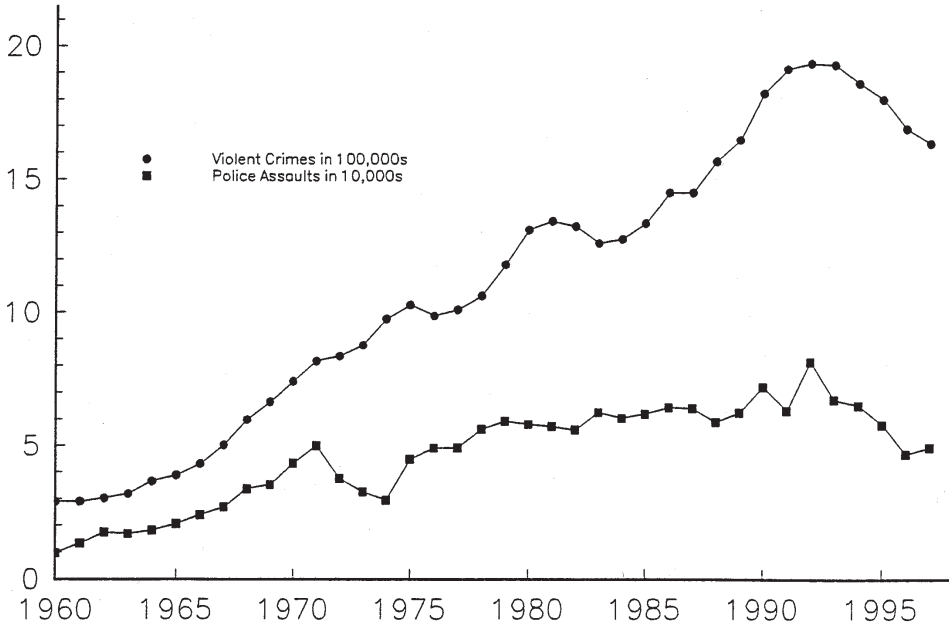


Figure 1.1. Violent crimes and assaults on law enforcement officers.

against law enforcement officers have increased so much during the last 40 years, they may not have separate origins, but are related to each other in some basic way.⁵

Violence has been an important element in most of human history. One of the oldest Western allegories about violence relates the killing of Abel by his brother Cain. In such ancient accounts, group violence most often was recorded in terms of wars, but other forms of violence became commonplace once cities were established (Fisher 1987, Norstrom 1988, Rahav and Jaamdar 1982). These include pogroms against ethnic and religious minorities and antigovernment riots, which could result in many fatalities.

Despite its periodic recurrence throughout history, most contemporary violence within nations is treated as an extraordinary form of behavior.⁶ It is viewed by society's leaders as a type of behavior that should be controlled, unless, of course, it serves their own interests. The concept of violence also is subject to much semantic politics, and there is a common tendency to dismiss it as deviant behavior. By defining violence as deviance, one condemns it as arising from irrational, emotional states (Ball-Rokeach 1980). While the perspective of defining violence as deviance might seem to be an appealing one to law enforcement officers, it can just as easily be used by their critics to attack them. If violence is always deviant, then police officers are seen as

social deviants who are drawn to their work because it is a way for them to legally act out their psychological compulsions.

Any absolute condemnation of violence denies that it is often a rational behavior, and obscures the fact that the people who use it can be either good or bad, moral or immoral, reasonable or unreasonable. With the decline of an historical perspective, it seems increasingly paradoxical to some Americans that certain types of killings are praised by the government (the bombing of Iraqi and Serbian forces, for example), while many other types of lethal violence are condemned. At the very least, this means that all violence cannot be dismissed out-of-hand as bad, wrong, or immoral. Since people view the use of force from quite varied perspectives, they evaluate the same violent actions quite differently in terms of their morality, reasonableness, and even their effectiveness.

Trying to control the various sorts of violent mischief that humans can cause provides one of the traditional justifications for governments: Without a means to ensure that society's most violent members do not get out of control, it is impossible for even simple societies to exist. The function of maintaining order is delegated to a police force in modern cities,⁷ but the problems caused by violence did not begin with urbanization.⁸ Many prehistoric societies faced the continual threat of war with their neighboring clans. To increase their own chances of survival, groups developed value systems that condemned murder, robbery, and others acts of violence that could destroy internal unity. At the same time, many of the violent acts that were prohibited among a group's members were permitted without restraint if committed against outsiders.

While there were similarities among such primitive rule systems, none of the ancient states adopted identical sets of rules. These rule systems differed among each other in their fine details, and differed, as well, on such major points as the legitimate justifications for the use of force. There remains substantial diversity among modern nations regarding what is considered to be an excessive use of violence. Some societies have outlawed capital punishment, while others use it frequently. In a few nations, such as Afghanistan, virtually everyone owns a weapon, while in others, firearms are prohibited. The United States is distinctive in being the only modern Western country where guns so commonly are owned by civilians.

The leaders of societies try to develop sets of guiding principles and justifications to inform their members about the sorts of circumstances where violence can be used legitimately, and who can employ physical force. These guidelines often are set down as legal codes, but if one looks at them closely, they always are internally contradictory on some issues, contain large gray areas of ambiguity, and rest upon different assumptions about how people and governments should deal with violent citizens who do not follow the norms of behavior that most people accept.

If sufficiently pressed on such matters, people disagree on two very fundamental points. When is employing violence a useful strategy? When is using violence a moral alternative? Some Americans still sanction the unlimited use of violence against foreigners when that advantages our national interest, while most Americans do not. Likewise, the situational circumstances that can justify the use of violence against fellow citizens vary culturally and geographically within the United States. Although some criminologists have written as though the perspective on the constrained use of violence that prevails in the Northeast is the only reasonable view, increasingly, this view is no longer the American norm. What is considered to be a sufficient justification for a civilian killing in Texas may not come close to the minimum legal justification for using lethal force in most Northern states. Similarly, the level of force that police officers can employ varies among the American states, as well.

Why is this the case? Differences of opinion about the proper use of physical force are related to one's social background, economic circumstances, religious beliefs, and a host of other important characteristics that vary widely across the United States. So even otherwise law-abiding people will not always agree about when physical violence is used most appropriately, and these differences are reflected in state legal codes. This dissension is perhaps one major reason that the job of being a police officer has become increasingly difficult in the United States. As people have become more mobile and move among regions, they have taken with them very different Northern, Southern, and Western views about the legitimate bounds of law enforcement action, and when it is appropriate for citizens to use violence.

There are a number of important matters that need to be addressed regarding such beliefs in order to understand antipolice violence. For example, why do some Americans engage in violent behavior while others respond peacefully if faced with exactly the same situation? What are the functions violence plays in modern social, political, and economic relationships? Unless we can better understand such issues, any conclusions that might be drawn about the fundamental causes of antipolice violence are likely to be restricted, both culturally and geographically. They will be more a reflection of the restrained perspective that has guided many past writers of criminology texts, instead of revealing the diversity of opinion that really exists among Americans.

The literature on these matters is amazingly vast and wide-ranging, and a multitude of diverse theories has been proposed to explain the sources of antiauthority violence. Unfortunately, there is no consensus among the policy "experts" of the popular media, who often relate only their own explanation for the sources of violence, as if it is the only possible perspective. Many of them appear to believe that everyone else should recognize their pet theory as the self-obvious truth, and zealously argue that they can provide an easy solution to the problems of American violence. This pattern can be seen in

such news programs as *Nightline*, *Crossfire*, and *Hardball* after each new incident of mass violence. Unfortunately, this pattern has caused many Americans to wrongly believe that curing the “violence disease” should be an easy task because we understand everything of importance about the causes of antiauthority violence, and only the actions of powerful interest groups are preventing us from accomplishing this noble goal. That is far from the case.

In further delving into these matters, our discussion often will focus on some extreme examples of violence and what may, at first, appear to be some extreme explanations. Many of you can rightly say, “I’ll never see anything like this!” While that is quite true, until a few years ago, few people thought it likely that Americans would blow up a federal building in Oklahoma. Looking at such extreme cases often makes understanding the widely varied causes of violence, and particularly antipolice violence, easier to comprehend. In turn, by better understanding the origins of particular types of violent acts, strategies may be devised to deal with them, and it may become easier to determine whether any changes in individual behavior, departmental policies, or political actions are likely to reduce the level of violence that is encountered by law enforcement officers in their daily routines.

DEFINITIONS OF VIOLENCE

The word violence is used commonly in everyday conversations, but is used quite differently by people, depending on the situation. To bring some precision and consistency to our use of the term, it is necessary to provide a working definition.⁹ Accordingly, for our purposes, violence is an act whereby a person intentionally and *illegitimately* inflicts physical pain, physical injury, or death on another.

To be labeled as violent by this particular definition, a person must intend that one’s actions should cause pain, injury, or death in pursuit of an *illegitimate* purpose or must realize that there is a high probability of generating such effects. If a parent trips on a patch of ice, and causes a baby to be injured, that would not be considered to be a violent act because it was not a deliberate act. Nor would a parent be called violent if a child’s behavior had to be forcefully restrained to prevent the child from harming himself. Nor would a driver who ran over a pedestrian in an attempt to avoid a deer be considered violent for there was no intention to injure, and the accident was caused by a distraction. Nor would the term violent be appropriate for a police officer who was forced to shoot a person to prevent him from killing a hostage if the officer’s action was a measured one taken for a clearly just cause, and therefore was a legitimate act.

From a person's particular perspective, the use of physical force may be virtuous or sinful, immediate or distant, moral or immoral, and consequently legitimate in being justified or illegitimate in not being justified. This does not mean that violent behavior necessarily maximizes the chance of gaining a long-run goal that is well-planned out or executed, but violence often is used to accomplish some goal, even if it is nothing more than an urge to express oneself in a dramatic and forceful manner or to release psychological tension by striking out in anger. Violence is not the only way that people can act in a contemptible and inhumane way, and it is only one of many possible tactics that people employ to achieve their desired ends.

It is quickly becoming apparent that there are two major difficulties in discussing the nature of violence. The word is emotionally charged, and it means quite different things to different people. Elites often use the term to condemn the physical actions that they oppose, and to create a particularly desired effect among their listeners. This is a useful rhetorical strategy because to many Americans the term violent behavior automatically is associated with illegitimate behavior. Therefore, another term besides violence is used by powerful people to describe any sort of forceful physical actions that are approved by them and serve their economic and political interests.

Until recently, most whites have not referred to the police as committing "acts of senseless violence." Instead, whites assumed that force was used by the police in moderate and prudent ways. Then the video of the 1991 Rodney King beating was shown over and over again on television. Until that incident, many whites acted as if to question an officer's actions, reports, testimony, or veracity was to question their own middle class value system, which officers were thought to embody. The reason for this perception is clear from a dominant subculture perspective because whites have constituted the people that the police were supposed to protect. So whites assumed that the police behaved as they would behave regarding the use of force, and reasoned that if force was used by an officer, it must have been required by the situation.

While many assaults are just instrumental means that criminals use to achieve illegitimate gains for themselves (armed robbery, for example), not all of the assaults against police officers can so easily be placed in this category. In some American subcultures, part of common police behavior is considered to be illegitimate by many civilians and even a community's non-elected leaders. In such cases, taking violent actions against the police is not strictly forbidden by local customs. Instead, such violence against certain authority figures may even be sanctioned by a subculture's norms. In such subcultures, antipolice violence can be seen as an act of honor that accords the assailant with a certain degree of prestige and respect.

Since it is so difficult to clearly see what is the closest to us, it is useful to think about similar situations in other countries. A notable case is Israel,

where Palestinians routinely attack and sometimes kill Israeli police officers. From a Palestinian perspective, the Israelis are an illegitimate conquering force that has stolen their land and is attempting to destroy their society. In the United States, we have had a number of such antiestablishment revolts, including the Whiskey Rebellion, Shay's Rebellion, and the Civil War. In each case, the legitimacy of government broke down. When this happens, it becomes acceptable—if not morally required—for citizens to oppose the government and its enforcement agents, most notably police officers. As Thomas Jefferson wrote about the necessity of periodic rebellion, the “tree of liberty must be continually watered by the blood of patriots.”

CONCEPTS CLOSELY RELATED TO VIOLENCE

Because of the condemnatory nuances that are associated with the word violence, it is useful to compare its meaning with closely-related terms. The most common of these are force, coercion, and power. Each of them has a somewhat different meaning and different nuances than does violence.

Force

The term force often is defined as the application of physical energy to accomplish a task. This allows it to be used in both a reinforcing and a negating way. A person may use force positively to boost a child up a tree so that she can pick an apple. Force also can be used to negate another's actions, as when one restrains a child from running into traffic. When force is applied so that one intends to cause harm in an illegitimate manner, it becomes an act of violence. While force does not carry the common negative connotation that is true of violence, using the term force to describe individual or policy actions often is misleading. This is because doing so is often an attempt to camouflage a violent act with a kinder and gentler word.

The terms violence and force are used by society's leaders to describe identical actions, but while force is used by the politically powerful to describe the actions of a state's officers in upholding state authority, violence can be used in two quite different ways (Sorel 1961, Fanon 1966). On the one hand, violence generally is used to describe really violent actions, which everyone agrees constitutes strategic behavior that is designed only to benefit their perpetrator, such as a professional thief who routinely commits armed robbery, although he already is a rich person. On the other hand, violence also is used to describe exactly the same sorts of acts that society's leaders consider to be legitimate when performed by police officers or soldiers, but considered to be

illegitimate when employed by people who oppose governmental policy. In other words, morally-motivated people who are seeking change through the use of physical force are always charged with using violence by the current power structure. This rhetorical trick lumps them into the same category as amoral criminals whose actions everyone deplors.

Those who are charged with enforcing the rules of a powerful regime—the police and other agents of the government—are looked upon as only applying legitimate force. This terminology serves as a type of thought control that structures people’s opinions. Any time people hear about the “violent actions” of the government’s opponents, they are inclined to dismiss both the actions and the opponents as illegitimate, rather than taking the time to focus on the reasons for their use of force. In this way the *status quo* is upheld.

This serves a government’s purpose of retaining its hold on power, but can put the state’s representatives in a particularly awkward position. Such was the case during the sixties when many children of America’s political elite opposed the Vietnam War. The police were expected to control their riots and destruction of property while not doing too much physical harm to the demonstrators. Sometimes the state’s representatives even become the arbitrators of who holds power. In the anticommunist revolutions of the recent past, the tide turned against the communists when military and police units supported the democrats. In the subsequent reactionary coup against Russian President Yeltsin, he telephoned line officers and asked them to refuse the orders of their superiors to fire on fellow Russians. When line officers agreed with Yeltsin, the coup failed.

The use of the words force and violence illustrates the common practice of justifying some types of painful, harmful, and injurious acts as moral and beneficial, while precisely the same acts are condemned when used by one’s opponents. A nation’s elite always tries to argue that its actions are moral and beneficial, while those of its opponents are immoral and harmful. This is a tactic to defend the *status quo* and illegitimize the issues that a regime’s opponents are raising. In part, this strategy is successful because a society’s values often condemn violence within our own group, while praising our neighbors who are willing to kill others during such intergroup conflicts as war.

A government tries to manipulate perceptions of situations so that its opponents are thought of as “them,” while its supporters are part of “us.” In this way, actions that could not be morally sanctioned against members of our own group become acceptable when taken against “them.”¹⁰ While this propaganda pattern can be seen in all wars and in many domestic conflicts, the world cannot accurately be perceived in such an easy fashion. More often than not, it is the case that both parties in a conflict can morally justify their actions without much difficulty.

In common usage, violence is an emotive term that is heavily laden with negative connotations. Indeed, what the terms force and violence sometimes best describe are the normative positions of their users, rather than the nature of the acts, themselves. The use of force generally indicates approval, while violence indicates illegitimacy and condemnation from the viewer's perspective.

Coercion

Another salient term is coercion, which refers to compelling people to act contrary to their own wishes. This may involve the use of violence, as when a carjacker twists a driver's arm to compel him to reenter his car. Conversely, coercion could be non-violent and only involve the use of force, as when children are compelled by their parents to refrain from running into a busy street to avoid injury or death.

Coercion also can be applied without delivering any sort of physical pain or injury. Unlike both violence and force, coercion can either be psychological or physical. A spouse might coerce a partner into giving up gambling by threatening separation, divorce or infidelity, or a mayor might coerce a council member to vote for a mayoral pay raise with the threat of withholding funds for street repairs in the politician's ward.

Threatening to employ violence without employing it is also a form of psychological coercion. A person may be coerced with violence, force, physical threats, the threat or imposition of psychological punishment, or by the withdrawal of rewards. Violence is only one method of coercion, and violence often is a rather inefficient method, at that, particularly when dealing with hardened criminals or the sort of righteous individuals that support an ideological cause.

Power

Quite generally, power is the capacity to influence others. It is a much broader and more inclusive term than violence, force, and coercion, which are all ways to exercise power. So are persuasion, love, beauty, and sacrifice, which are some other methods of influencing people. Social scientists have found it particularly difficult to operationalize the definition of power. This is because a person's power is largely a matter of the perceptions of others, and power is not a concrete attribute.

As a case in point, during his presidency, Lyndon Johnson was believed to be a particularly powerful leader because so many of the bills that he supported were passed by Congress and became laws. Today, however, it is recognized that presidents often choose policies on the basis of whether they

already are supported by the public or Congress. This means that a person may look powerful when he is merely crafty. This ploy has become increasingly common as more politicians use pollsters to tell them what positions they should take to be winners. When push comes to shove, some political leaders are discovered to have little power because they lose their ability to influence other people as soon as their true character is recognized.

Legal Definition of Violence

In any given legal tradition, criminal violence usually is differentiated from force, coercion, power, and other types of violence by three components. These are motive, intent and outcome (see Margarita 1980a: 4).

Much of the violence in American society is instrumental because it is used as a means to an end, rather than being effective or emotion-based. The instrumental nature of criminal violence implies that there is a motive to an act, whether or not this goal can easily be comprehended by an outside observer.

Subjective intent in the commission of an act and the outcome of an act are intertwined in American criminal law. An intent to foster a particular outcome either requires planning—premeditation—or the existence of a set of actions which demonstrate that a person's goal was to achieve a particular outcome. This would include taking multiple actions to ensure that a person has been murdered, such as stabbing a victim 30 times. The establishment of guilty intent (*mens rea*) usually is necessary to impose a harsher penalty when there is some discretion in the sentence that can be levied after one is convicted of a crime.

By itself, a result is not considered to be an accurate gauge of intended violence because of the great degree of chance that is embodied in many physical actions. So the dividing lines between murder, attempted murder, and aggravated battery are legally determined on the basis of whether the accused intended to kill the victim, and whether a person's death resulted from the suspect's actions.

CURRENT TRENDS IN UNITED STATES CRIME STATISTICS

Violence is common in American society, as can be seen in the rates of violent crimes that are presented in Table 1.1. However, the actual level is even greater than is reflected in the official FBI statistics because of the under-reporting of such crimes as rape and aggravated assault (Menard and Covey

Table 1.1. Rates of Violent Crimes Committed in the United States, per 100,000 Inhabitants: 1980–1996

Year	Murder and Non-Negligent Murder	Forcible Rape	Robbery	Aggravated Assault	Violent Crime Rate
1980	10.2	36.8	251.1	298.5	596.6
1981	9.8	36.0	258.7	289.7	594.3
1982	9.1	34.0	238.9	289.2	571.1
1983	8.3	33.7	216.5	279.2	537.7
1984	7.9	35.7	205.4	290.2	539.2
1985	7.9	37.1	208.5	302.9	556.6
1986	8.6	37.9	225.1	346.1	617.7
1987	8.3	37.4	212.7	351.3	609.7
1988	8.4	37.6	220.9	370.2	637.2
1989	8.7	38.1	233.0	383.4	663.1
1990	9.4	41.2	257.0	424.1	731.8
1991	9.8	42.3	272.7	433.3	758.1
1992	9.3	42.8	263.6	441.8	757.5
1993	9.5	41.1	255.9	440.3	746.8
1994	9.0	39.3	237.7	427.6	713.6
1995	8.2	37.1	220.9	418.3	684.6
1996	7.4	36.1	202.4	388.2	634.1

Source: Compiled from Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Crime in the United States*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, 1996: 62.

1988). According to some estimates, the current number of reported crimes is only about half their actual number.

It also seems likely that there have been major changes over time in the proportion of certain crimes that are reported. For example, a much greater number of antipolice assaults are probably recorded today than 30 years ago. While in the past, many officers would not have bothered to file the paperwork on an apprehended suspect who violently resisted arrest, the plethora of excessive violence lawsuits filed against officers has changed this situation. Today, routinely filing such assault charges has become a bureaucratic means that departments use to reduce the number of successful lawsuits by suspects.

By the late nineties, the rate of violent crime had declined to its mid-eighties level, and the robbery and murder rates were almost at a 30-year low. This recent seven-year decrease is the longest period of declining crime rates since the FBI started collecting nationwide data in 1930. Serious crime decreased by 10 percent from 1998 to 1999, and this reduction was experienced in all regions of the country. Nevertheless, as Table 1.2 shows, there are major differences in crime rates among American cities, and so crime must somehow have a regional nature.

Table 1.2. Rates of Violent Crimes in Selected Cities of the United States: 1996

City	Population	Murder	Rape	Robbery	Assault	Violent Crime Index	Violent Crime Rate ^a
Akron, OH	223,303	14	194	811	1326	2345	1050
Albany, NY	104,919	11	46	491	584	1132	1079
Albuquerque, NM	426,736	70	375	1998	3824	6267	1468
Anchorage, AK	254,774	25	198	558	1297	2078	816
Atlanta, GA	413,123	196	392	4805	8306	13,699	3316
Baltimore, MD	716,446	328	641	10,393	8145	19,507	2723
Birmingham, AL	272,169	113	229	1838	2236	4416	1622
Boston, MA	552,519	59	414	3470	5211	9154	1657
Chicago, IL ^b	2,754,118	789	—	26,860	37,097	—	—
Cleveland, OH	496,049	103	643	4062	2823	7631	1538
Dallas, TX	1,060,585	217	740	6122	9201	16,280	1535
Denver, CO	516,224	64	358	1327	2083	3832	742
Detroit, MI	1,002,299	428	1119	9504	12,188	23,239	2319
Eugene, OR	122,637	2	50	271	416	739	603
Ft. Worth, TX	470,254	68	319	1692	2905	4984	1060
Hartford, CT	124,223	20	94	1089	929	2132	1716
Honolulu, HI	878,044	27	222	1421	1078	2748	313
Houston, TX	1,772,143	261	1002	8276	12,917	22,456	1267
Huntsville, AL	162,376	11	71	310	947	1339	825
Jackson, MS	196,619	67	209	1309	781	2366	1203
Jacksonville, FL	690,367	85	681	2792	6207	9765	1414
Las Vegas Metro. Pol. Dept. Juris.	831,303	161	475	3650	4123	8409	1011
Los Angeles, CA	3,498,139	709	1463	25,189	35,477	62,838	1796
Memphis, TN	631,626	161	789	5970	5615	12,535	1985
Miami, FL	384,976	124	201	5139	6526	11,990	3114
Milwaukee, WI	627,139	130	281	3353	2210	5974	953
Minneapolis, MN	361,595	83	516	3242	2967	6808	1883
Nashville, TN	530,059	89	487	2910	6535	10,021	1890
Newark, NJ	261,909	92	179	4219	4271	8761	3345
New Orleans, LA	488,300	351	390	5700	4580	11,021	2257
New York, NY	7,334,594	983	2332	49,670	45,674	98,659	1344
Oklahoma City, OK	469,632	67	477	1478	3286	5308	1130
Omaha, NE	350,607	27	207	782	3726	4742	1353
Philadelphia, PA	1,528,403	414	704	15,485	6764	23,367	1529
Portland, OR	467,906	51	402	2057	5325	7835	1674
Raleigh, NC	245,176	25	90	732	1262	2109	860
Reno, NV	159,559	12	113	507	491	1123	704
St. Paul, MN	267,292	26	234	875	1302	2437	912

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Table 1.2--Continued

City	Population	Murder	Rape	Robbery	Assault	Violent Crime Index	Violent Crime Rate ^a
Salt Lake City, UT	180,180	20	152	591	738	1501	833
San Antonio, TX	1,021,477	117	637	2350	1637	4741	464
San Francisco, CA	745,127	82	298	5539	3967	9886	1327
Savannah, GA	146,534	22	63	849	483	1417	967
Seattle, WA	539,591	37	261	1963	2282	4543	842
Shreveport, LA	199,418	51	134	729	1576	2490	1249
Sioux Falls, SD	110,891	1	82	65	325	473	427
Springfield, MO	152,024	4	76	173	542	795	523
Syracuse, NY	160,033	15	62	579	742	1398	874
Toledo, OH	324,610	30	277	1297	1031	2635	812
Topeka, KS	121,495	17	89	533	863	1502	1236
Washington, DC	312,706	24	227	823	1298	2372	759

^a Rate per 100,000 Inhabitants

^b Forcible rape figures provided by Illinois State Police, Uniform Crime Reporting Program, were not in compliance with FBI UCR guidelines.

Source: Adapted from *Uniform Crime Reports*, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Washington, D.C., U.S. Department of Justice, 1996: 112–156.

In recent years, the greatest geographical decline in crime has been in the West (12%), and the least was in the South (7%). Murder showed the greatest decline (13%) among violent crimes, followed by robbery (10%), forcible rape (8%), and aggravated assault (7%). Burglary and motor vehicle theft fell the most among property crimes, 14 and 12 percent, respectively. Similar reductions in serious crimes were reported for all population groupings from 1998 to 1999. There was an 11 percent decline in the crime rate for cities in the 25,000 to 100,000 population range, and a 6 percent reduction in cities with a million or so people. The crime rate also declined in rural and suburban areas by 10 percent.

Despite these official statistics, the perceived fear of crime has not declined, and it is unclear whether the apparent recent decrease in crime reflects a long-run trend, or is a short-term aberration. Many authorities argue that the recent drop is just the result of a temporary reduction in the number of young males. If this is its cause, then as soon as the current group of children reaches their prime years for criminal activity, the crime rate will skyrocket and make the crime-ridden days of the eighties look good in retrospect. Others argue that the apparent reduction in contemporary crime rates is more a reflection of political pressures and Zero-Tolerance Policing (ZTP) than any

real decrease in crime. Since many politicians have made “fighting crime” their campaign slogan, they may have informally told police chiefs that their departments should not be so zealous in reporting crimes as a way to make the politicians look good.

Suppose that the apparent decrease in contemporary American crime is a reality, and not just an artifact of data keeping. Why has it occurred? Some of the more obvious proposals to explain this pattern include: more conservative social norms that view criminal activity as increasingly unacceptable behavior; the community policing movement, which has attempted to get citizens involved in fighting crime; the early identification of particularly violent criminals who are no longer given early parole; mandatory sentencing laws, together with tougher law enforcement methods; the decline in crack-cocaine use; greater control over the sale of firearms; the California “Three Strikes” laws, which puts habitual criminals in jail for life; building many new prisons and gated communities; placing another 100,000 police on the street; and more politicians taking a proactive stance against crime and its perpetrators.

Some writers from the “economic perspective” advocate a less self-obvious explanation for the recent reduction in violent crime. They argue that the real reason for the decrease in violence is that America is increasingly *unsuccessful* in controlling the flow of illegal drugs. As the War on Drugs has failed, most drugs can more easily be supplied to users and at a cheaper cost. The price reduction means that it is less profitable for gangs to engage in turf wars to control marketing areas. Consequently, the level of drug-related violence has dramatically decreased in the last seven years because violence is no longer as useful a strategy to employ in gaining profits. As can be seen in these wildly varied perspectives on American violence, there is no agreement on its major sources, nor is there even an agreement that the recent, apparent decrease in the rate of violent crime is “real” and long-run, rather than just a “paper” decrease or short-run aberration.