

## What Wave?

**The evidence for a recent national rise in crime is murky -- and implementing get-tough remedies to address the alleged wave would be misguided.**

**MARC MAUER** | *March 27, 2007* | American Prospect web only

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News accounts in recent months have informed us of rising crime across the nation, particularly in urban areas. The Police Executive Research Forum (PERF), for example, reports that a survey of 56 cities reveals that homicide rates rose by more than 10 percent and robbery by more than 12 percent in a two-year period between 2004 and 2006. This information is used to plead for increased funding to expand law enforcement capacity and toughen sentences, to ensure that persons who commit these crimes remain locked up in prison for long periods of time. (As Greg Voegtlin of the International Association of Chiefs of Police recently **put it**, "we've always been concerned that as funding [for law enforcement programs] decreases, crime rates will increase.")

If accurate, these figures should be cause for policymaker attention. But before we lapse into sound-bite politics concerning causes and cures, we should investigate these claims seriously. First, to what extent is crime rising, and second, what should we do about it?

On the question of the rise in crime, some cities have clearly experienced significant increases. In Houston and Philadelphia, for example, homicide rates rose by 37 percent and 22 percent respectively in the period from 2004 to 2006. But crime rate changes in other jurisdictions are much more ambiguous. In the PERF study, for example, 35 of the 56 jurisdictions with sufficient data for analysis experienced a statistically significant increase in homicides over the two-year period, but half of these had an increase during one of those years and a decrease during the other. And in fact, half of the cities with sufficient data for analysis saw crime rates decline during the second year of the study period. This is not justification for declaring a new wave of violence.

Context is important here as well. Even with the 2.3 percent rise in violent crime reported by the FBI between 2004 and 2005, the overall rate of violent crime is still nearly 40 percent below the peak years of the early 1990s, by virtue of sustained declines for more than ten years.

Explanations cited for the rise in violent crime seem suspect as well. Perhaps the most common is that the failure to extend the COPS (Community Oriented Policing Services) funding of the late 1990s to hire more police has led to understaffed departments. That may be true in some cities, but a recent analysis of the COPS impact published in *Criminology*, the leading journal in its field, concludes that the funding "had little or no effect on crime." The authors, John L. Worrall and Tomislav V. Kovandzic, conclude that shifting police *strategies* to problem-solving policing are likely to be more effective in fighting crime than merely providing more funding.

A second common explanation relates to the large number of people being released from prison to return to our communities -- nearly 700,000 this year. But while the issue of reentry is generally critical to enhancing public safety, the number of returning prisoners has increased by less than 3 percent annually in recent years, well below the double-digit crime increases cited in the PERF study. Transitional supports for people coming home from prison are desperately needed, but we need to distinguish this from quick assessments of short-term fluctuations in crime.

Finally, some commentators point to increasing hopelessness and nihilism among young people in disadvantaged neighborhoods contributing to the spike in robbery and other violent crimes. As

criminologist David M. Kennedy of the John Jay College of Criminal Justice **put it**, "What everybody sees is street rules saying if you're dissed you have to do something. And what counts as being dissed is getting more and more minor." But is there any reason to believe that the degree of hopelessness today is considerably different than it was 3 to 5 years ago? Despair and hopelessness in low-income communities are serious problems for a host of reasons, but we need to distinguish between entrenched social dynamics and those of more recent vintage that may be responsible for sudden changes in criminal behavior.

All told, the picture is still murky as to the size and nature of the recent uptick in crime and violence. Without minimizing the problem, we need to recognize that a one- or two-year rise in crime in some cities does not necessarily represent a trend. In the past, such short-term changes have resulted in drastic policy initiatives, such as mandatory sentencing laws that are easy to pass in a heated political climate but virtually impervious to change once their deficiencies are identified.

Rather than succumb to such quick-fix punitive measures, we should be building on what works to reduce crime. Demonstrated interventions that have been shown to do so include family-based therapy programs for juveniles, expansion of preschool programs for at-risk families, and quality drug treatment as an alternative to incarceration.

Finally, we should consider a model of "justice reinvestment" for communities most beleaguered by crime and other social ills. Neighborhoods in Brooklyn, New York, for example, contain many "million dollar blocks" -- that is, single blocks where the cost of incarceration for residents of that block totals \$1 million a year. If we are already willing to spend a million dollars in these neighborhoods, we need to consider more effective ways of allocating those resources. What mix of criminal justice responses, educational supports, and social services can best provide public safety? We actually know the answer to many of these questions. What we don't know yet is how to build public policy that is based on evidence rather than politics.

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