

Ted Robert Gurr is a professor of political science at the University of Maryland - College Park and editor of the two-volume Violence in America: The History of Crime (Newbury Park: Sage, 1989). This op-ed piece appeared on April 13, 1989. © 1989 by The New York Times Company. Reprinted by permission.

Drowning in a Crime Wave

By Ted Robert Gurr

Many streets in America's big cities are in a state of anarchy. Too often the police are overwhelmed. In some cities and neighborhoods, people are afraid to go outside. And in and out of their homes they risk murder, assault, rape, holdups, muggings and theft.

The reason is that the United States is in the grip of the third of three great crime waves. They began about 50 years apart — approximately 1850, 1900, and 1960 — and each has lasted for 20 to 30 years. The current wave is more serious than the last one, which Prohibition helped sustain into the early 1930s. At that time, lucrative bootlegging attracted young entrepreneurs, mostly immigrants or their sons, who fought deadly battles with hijackers and rivals for control of booze and markets. Bootlegging warfare, however, was less virulent than the almost random and more widespread violence associated with contemporary drug dealing.

Each year in this decade, about 20,000 Americans have been murdered, mainly in street fights, family quarrels and robberies. Most have been young men, half of them black. In some Northern cities, blacks are twenty times more likely to be murdered than whites.

Our crime waves stand out against the long-run trend of declining personal violence in Western society, which the cultural historian Norbert Elias attributed to "the civilizing process." By that he meant the restraint of aggressive impulses, acceptance of humanistic values and establishment of ordered routines of life that minimize occasions for violence. These conditions were largely absent in medieval Europe, where people had few compunctions about murdering each other in brawls and robberies. In 13th and 14th century England, people killed one another at rates probably ten and perhaps twenty times greater than those of contemporary Britain — though at only twice the rate of the United States today.

But a decline in the homicide rate in England was clearly evident by the 17th century, and it continued irregularly downward to the 1950s. (That rate has since risen, fueled by growing numbers of alienated and unemployed youths, though England's rate has risen far less than America's.) There have been parallel declines in the homicide rate since the early 1800s in France, Scandinavia and Australia — but not in the United States, where murder took a different turn in the mid-1800s.

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immigration, economic deprivation and war, which all interfere with the civilizing process.

From the 1840s to the end of large-scale European immigration after 1918, each new wave of immigrants — Irish, Germans, Italians — added disproportionately to crime and mayhem in our cities. Many were rootless young men who indulged a penchant for drinking and street brawling. As these immigrants were absorbed into the industrial economy's routines and received its rewards, they committed fewer crimes of violence.

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Most blacks in Northern cities were persistently barred from the industrial labor force. Except for a few years during and after World War II, they lacked the chances of immigrants to participate in an economy that produced a growing middle class. Since the best jobs were closed to them, a disproportionate number turned to gambling, prostitution and dealing in alcohol and drugs. However, when economic opportunities for blacks began to open up in the 1960s, their rate of death from homicide declined — by about 30 percent between 1970 and 1983. Since then, the resurgence of inner-city poverty and the onset of deadly drug wars have arrested the decline.

During the same period, homicide rates among whites increased by about the same 30 percent. This was accompanied by a rise in poverty and in family breakdown among whites — conditions that breed violent crime in all ethnic groups.

Every major war has been followed by a short, sharp peak in violent crime in the countries of most of the belligerents. Our current crime wave appears to have been exacerbated by the Vietnam War.

War leads to criminal violence in peacetime society, partly because it temporarily uproots people and legitimizes aggressive action — some ex-servicemen who have trouble readjusting to civilian life turn to crime. War may also legitimize violence

for civilians who find in the patriotic gore of wartime a license to act out their own anger.

In any case, the first and second episodes of violent crime wound down as immigrants were incorporated into the expanding economy. Reforms in policing and criminal justice policy made arrest and punishment more certain. Civic associations and reform movements transformed crime-ridden neighborhoods and cities. Other institutions, especially churches, reasserted conservative moral values that heightened inhibitions against violence.

Today's epidemic will not go away without similar concerted action. Multiple concurrent strategies are needed to undercut conditions that breed and sustain crime. The poverty cycle must be broken. Economic opportunities and discipline must be created for the alienated, poorly educated young people at the lower margins of black society — who still suffer from the persistent consequences of historical segregation — and of white society.

More-certain justice for repeat offenders is essential. This means additional police officers (depending upon how they are used), more prison space, and streamlined criminal court procedures. Community efforts in every neighborhood threatened with crime are also crucial. This requires public support for self-help projects such as teen-ager employment programs and for citizen crime patrols, and probably acceptance of direct action such as running drug dealers out of neighborhoods. Of course, comprehensive drug control and rehabilitation programs are indispensable if the other policies are to work.

Unless we mobilize money and people to pursue all these policies, today's crime wave will be our longest and most costly — and more streets will become our nightmare alleys. ■