Although, as we learned in Chapter 2, caution should be exercised in interpreting these statistics, these trend lines certainly dramatically depict an inexorable rise in official recorded crime since the mid-1960s, declining in the 1990s. Despite this rise in official rates, victim surveys since the 1970s reported relatively stable or falling rates, perhaps reinforcing the point that better recording and reporting may have in part accounted for some of the rise in official statistics.

The public alarm concerning the rapid rise in UCR crime statistics beginning in the mid-1960s was abetted by the fact that the decades of the 1940s and 1950s with their postwar prosperity demonstrated relative stability in many categories of crime. The new “crime wave” appeared particularly out of place. Historians of crime and violence in the United States remind us of our myopia in this regard and that waves of crime and violence, however difficult to measure, were characteristic of this land since colonial times, particularly in the post-Civil War era. (This subject will be given greater scope in Chapter 8.)

Crime Files 3.1 views the American crime problem from a global perspective. In 1968 the President’s Commission on Law Enforcement and the Administration of Justice (1967) addressed this historical issue:

> There has always been too much crime. Virtually every generation since the founding of the Nation and before has felt itself threatened by the specter of rising crime and violence. A hundred years ago contemporary accounts of San Francisco told of extensive areas where “no decent man was in safety to walk the street after dark, while at all hours, both night and day, his property was jeopardized by incendiarism and burglary.” Teenage gangs gave rise to the word “hoodlum,” while in one central New York City area, near Broadway, the police entered “only in pairs, and never unarmed.” A noted chronicler of the period declared that “municipal law is a failure . . . we must soon fall back on the law of self preservation.” And in 1910 one author declared that “crime, especially its more violent forms, and among the young is increasing steadily and is threatening to bankrupt the Nation.” (p. 101)

However violent crime is in large cities today, both urban and rural areas of Sweden, Holland, and England were more violent during the Middle Ages (Johnson & Monkkonen, 1996). In Hooligans, Pearson (1982) remarks on the historical myth of a crime-free past in England and attributes it to the abundance as well as sophistication of modern statistics, a nostalgia for the past, and cultural amnesia. The relationship of crime to the early history of many countries can be illustrated by Australia, a country that was settled as a penal colony for England. Gangs of “bushrangers” (horse rustlers) achieved notoriety, particularly the group led by Ned Kelly, whose reputation reached mythic proportions. This Robin Hood-like figure received support in opposing authority from small farmers who were nicknamed “cockatoos” or “cockys” because, like the bird, they scratched out a living from the ground. The cocky spirit was one of independence and defiance of authority as illustrated by Ned Kelly, who was obstinate to the end and was hanged at age twenty-five. This spirit is illustrated in Australia’s most beloved song about a vagabond who steals a sheep and commits suicide rather than be caught (Levathes, 1985, p. 261):

> Up jumped the swagman  
> Sprang into the billabong  
> “You’ll never catch me alive,” said he.  
> And his ghost may be heard  
> as you pass by that billabong  
> “Who’ll come a-waltzing Matilda with me?”
Because systematic victim data have been available only since the early 1970s, a relative comparison with UCR data before 1973 is not possible. Figures 3.3a and 3.3b and Table 3.4 present information from the National Crime Victimization Survey. Comparison of these trend lines with those from the UCR for the same period suggests similarities as well as differences. While most of the crimes in both measures are predominantly against property rather than against persons, the NCVS did not demonstrate the same steep rise in offenses in the 1970s that the UCR reported.

Issues

Transnational crime (i.e., crime that violates the laws of several international sovereignties or impacts another sovereignty) has grown incrementally over the past two decades, at a rate roughly corresponding to both the increase in international trade import-export figures and the developments in transportation and communications. Several events demonstrate the stark reality of transnational crimes: the destruction by a terrorist bomb of Pan American Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland in 1988; the 1993 terrorist bombing of the World Trade Center; the more recent conspiracy in New York City to destroy all Hudson River crossings and both FBI and United Nations headquarters; and the Bank of Credit and Commerce (BCCI) scam, with its estimated cost to U.S. taxpayers of between $200 billion and $1.4 trillion by the year 2021.

In each of these cases, U.S. law enforcement authorities responded vigorously, but with limited overall success. Our system has been developed to deal with criminality at the city/county level and, in some cases, at the national level. With respect to global crime, however, we lack readiness—in terms of education, research sponsorship, interagency cooperation (between the Departments of Justice and State), and a full commitment to a centralized and coordinated international effort.

Crime is not a strictly local or even national problem; although its impact is felt at the local level, much crime is internationally conditioned and coordinated. For instance, the connection between street crime and the importation and dissemination of drugs is well established. Similarly, an increase in fraud is commensurate with growth in the operational reach of commercial transactions. Profits from the international drug trade, “laundered” overseas and reinvested in American real estate, commercial, or entertainment enterprises, significantly affect U.S. citizens, who must pick up the burden for uncollected taxes on these transactions.

In addition, the impact of ethnic gang criminality on our “local” crime scene is readily apparent, e.g., the wholesale trade in cocaine, controlled by illegal immigrants from Colombia; the importation of Chinese slave labor into the U.S. and exploitation of Chinese-American businesses by Chinese gangs (triad-based); trade in arms and drugs by Jamaican gangs; burglaries by Albanian gangs; and involvement in the fuel distribution market and the international trade of weapons and nuclear materials by Russian gangs. These new ethnic gangs maintain intra-ethnic contacts, as well as relations with their countries of origin, and local law enforcement professionals are powerless to stop or control them.

Source: American Society of Criminology Task Force Report to Attorney General Janet Reno. The Criminologist (Special Issue), 20(6), November/December 1995. Task force members were Gerhard O.W. Mueller (Chair), Paul Friday, Robert McCormack, Graeme Newman, and Richard H. Ward.

Research Project

On your companion Web site, click on and read Eisner and Killias’s “Switzerland.” What are some interesting facts that you have learned about crime in Switzerland?
In considering these figures it is important to realize that, if we were to consider the full range of economic crimes such as the impact of corporate price fixing, then in fact every household has been touched by crime. Casting a wider net, were we to consider self-report data, particularly of minor offenses, we would conclude that the rate of criminality is pervasive. Despite problems in instruments used and in samples drawn, self-report studies provide much-needed evidence of the extensiveness of hidden criminality and law violation; moreover, they support the notion of the “dualistic fallacy” discussed in the previous chapter, which points out that one must exercise great care in comparing “criminals” and “noncriminals.” One may control misunderstanding or overgeneralizations in referring to “criminals” by using operational definitions such as “those arrested” or “those identified by victims” or “those admitting to certain offenses.”

Age and Crime

Most of those arrested are young. Crime Files 3.2 presents data on ages of those arrested for particular crimes. The peak arrest age for property crime is sixteen, while age eighteen is the highest for violent crime. Overall, crime commission declines with age.

Particularly glaring is the involvement of younger groups in serious property crimes. It is important to note that, while most persons arrested and convicted as adult criminals were first arrested as juveniles, most juvenile delinquents do not become adult criminals. Youthful offenders