

Three

Misinformation About the Crime Problem

In recent decades, it has become fashionable for political figureheads to decry the nation's "crime problem." News-friendly quips from political pundits come in many flavors, but most often they are merely slight variations of the common theme that crime in the United States is "out of control." Such claims are aided by high-profile violent incidents such as the rise in the number of school shootings—over 20 incidents since 1996, with over 70 deaths and over 100 injured—and the terror brought on by the Washington, D.C.–area snipers in 2002 and the Virginia Tech University shootings in 2007. These events are certainly tragic in their own right, yet they also tap into our deepest fear of crime: stranger-to-stranger violent victimization.

The end result of such tragedies is that policy makers have continued to feel justified in their message to the American citizenry that it is reasonable for all of us to be afraid of the random victimization experienced by those on television since, as evidenced by such horrific events, the crime problem in this country is off the charts. And it is not just crime, but the *kind* of crime—those offenses that citizens buy deadbolts for their doors to shield themselves against—that is important. After all, the message implies, this is not some socially constructed "moral panic" over nothing, but rather a rational response for us to want to protect ourselves from what John DiIulio and colleagues (including former Drug Czar and Department of Education Secretary William Bennett) have dubbed

“superpredators”—those intrinsically flawed evildoers who are apparently growing in number (Bennett et al. 1996).

Curiously, this position seems to be at odds with the recent “crime drop” in the United States during the 1990s, which has been described by criminologists as “extraordinary” (Conklin 2003, vii) and “remarkable” (Blumstein and Wallman 2000, 1). Despite this potential call for optimism, some criminologists, such as James Alan Fox (who also frequently appears before Congress on matters of crime policy), still warn us of impending doom: “We are facing a potential bloodbath of teenage violence in years ahead that will be so bad, we’ll look back at the 1990s and say those were the good old days” (quoted in Austin and Irwin 2001, 239).¹ Based on comments like this and others like it, DiIulio appeared to make the ongoing exponential growth of the prison system in this country a personal crusade during the 1990s (see, e.g., DiIulio and Piehl 1991). Such growth would be necessary, according to DiIulio (1995, 15), to give us a fighting chance of winning the battle against the “fatherless, Godless, and jobless” superpredators.

This chapter examines the validity of these claims by tracing how three misconceptions about the nature of crime in the United States have served as political fodder for advocates of the expanded use of incarceration. The first misconception is that increases in the “fear of crime” among Americans simply reflect increases in the objective probability of being victimized. This myth is necessary for policy makers to justify the continued growth of incarceration as a means of addressing the fears of their voters. The second misconception is that low-level offenders (e.g., drug and property offenders) will inevitably graduate to violent offending in the absence of a stiff criminal sanction. This erroneous assumption has been the key for stiffening the sanctions associated with virtually all criminal offenses—not just violent crimes. The third misconception is that chronic, life-course persistent offending can be accurately predicted using variables that are given the most “weight” in criminal justice processing: the severity of the offense and the offender’s prior record. These factors play directly into enhanced sentencing schemes by being the primary axes for determining an offender’s punishment in the sentencing grids that have been adopted by states. By themselves, the acceptance of any one of these mistruths would be enough to cause advocates of mass incarceration to salivate in anticipation and to cause critics of the current state of imprisonment to lose their appetites. When taken together, however, like the combination of heroin and cocaine, these individual slices of misinformation have merged to create a “speedball” political justification for sustaining the incarceration addiction.

Victimization and the Fear of Crime

Prior to the 1960s, crime was not cited by the American public as being a major issue of concern (Chambliss 1999). Even when President Reagan formally launched his “War on Drugs” in 1982—which effectively tied the issues of crime and drugs together for years to come—less than 2 percent of American citizens cited drugs as the nation’s most pressing problem. This figure had changed dramatically by the time Reagan’s understudy, George Herbert Walker Bush, took office in 1988 (and appointed a “Drug Czar”), at which time 64 percent of Americans believed that the drug problem was the most salient issue facing the nation (Beckett 1997). This trend also followed public concern over crime in general, where even as late as June of 1993—under the leadership of President Bill Clinton this time, and right before Congress began its debate over his “crime bill” proposal—only 7 percent of Americans cited crime as the nation’s most important problem. Just 6 months later, and largely as a result of the intense publicity these legislative sessions received, that number had increased to 30 percent (Braun and Pasternak, 1994). By August of 1994, that figure had reached 52 percent, which public opinion pollsters attributed to Clinton’s discussion of the crime bill in the State of the Union Address, and to the extensive media coverage of how Congress was considering the bill (Moore 1994; see also Alderman 1994).

It is clear, therefore, that Americans’ concern over the crime problem has increased substantially in recent years and, despite stable and even falling crime rates, fear of crime continues to be high (Gallup 1999). As can be seen in Figure 3.1, the trends in American citizens’ perceptions of both the crime rates in their local communities and nationally are that crime is not only increasing, but it is doing so dramatically. Even so, these patterns are not new; as Figure 3.2 shows that over the last couple of decades around half of all American citizens have thought that crime is on the rise, regardless of actual changes in rates of criminal behavior. Even in 2002, when the media blitz concerning the crime drop of the 1990s was at its strongest, a quarter of the population still believed that crime rates were increasing. In short, criminal victimization, it turns out, bears a surprisingly inconsistent relationship to fear of victimization (Lewis and Salem 1986; Taylor and Hale 1986; see also Hale 1996). If crime itself does not drive fear of crime, what does?

To answer that question, an understanding of the disconnect between citizens’ perceptions of risk and the objective probability of victimization

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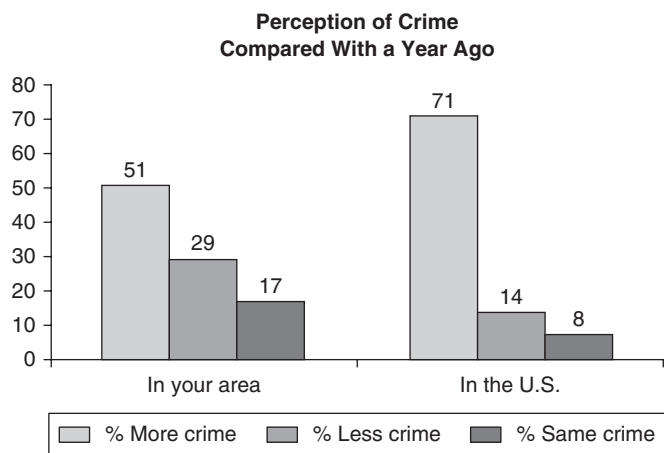


Figure 3.1 Citizens' Perceptions of Local and National Crime Rate Changes

Source: Gallup Poll 2007.

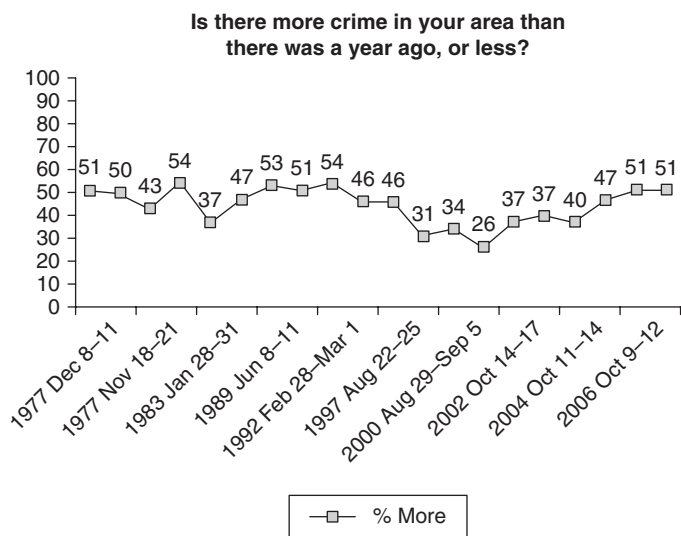


Figure 3.2 Citizens' Perceptions of Local Community Crime Increases From 1977-2006

Source: Gallup Poll, 2007.

can be reached when it is examined through the lens of school shootings. For example, Brooks, Schiraldi, and Ziedenberg's (2000) analysis of national opinion polls that were taken after the shootings in Jonesboro, Arkansas, and Littleton, Colorado, found a 49 percent increase in parents' anxiety about their children's safety in the classroom. This increase occurred despite studies by the U.S. Department of Justice and the National School Safety Center that showed a 40 percent decrease in school-associated violent deaths in 1998–1999, the school year including the Columbine shooting.

While these violent incidents are undoubtedly serious social problems, their prevalence has been severely blown out of proportion. Although the probability that a child would be the victim of lethal violence in school is 1 in 2 million, an overwhelming majority of parents still feel as though it is likely that a tragic event such as this will occur in their child's school in the future (Bonderman 2001). Misplaced public fear over this issue has even resulted in an increase in the number of kids being homeschooled, presumably in an effort by parents to insulate their children from the inevitable violence that they believe must surely come with going to school with other (unpredictable) youths (Hargrove 2001).

This "knowledge gap" between the reality of crime and the public's perception of that reality is mirrored in the American news media's reliance on crime-related issues to generate advertising revenue. For example, Klite, Bardwell, and Salzman's (1997) survey of 100 television stations found that 72 of them began their evening news programming with a crime story, and that a third of all stories dealt with crime-related issues. Furthermore, Angotti's (1997) study of local news programming in eight major media markets—including the 12 million citizens in New York City's market—found that instances of crime news were twice as common as instances of political news. The reliability of crime stories to attract viewers even led KREM 2 News in Spokane, Washington, to place the phrase "Crime Is Bad" in bold letters across the screen in their 2008 television promotional ads, as if their viewers were unaware of this bit of information and therefore needed to be informed of it.

Put simply, the media have discovered that, in the United States, "crime sells," and Americans are constantly bombarded by images of crime and victimization whenever they turn on their television set or open a newspaper. Nevertheless, some scholars still contend that "media effects" on fear of crime are absent, and have effectively dismissed the existence of a "knowledge gap" outright. For example, J. Young (1987, 337) argued that

“popular conceptions of crime . . . are, in the main, constructed out of the material experiences of people, rather than fantasies impressed upon them by mass media.” Rubin, Perse, and Taylor (1988, 126) made the similar argument that “television’s influence on social reality is overshadowed by direct personal and interpersonal experience” with the reality of crime. Sparks (1992, 2) echoed these sentiments in his contention that “fear is so plainly a product of the real conditions of existence . . . as to leave no space for the role of the mass media in accounting for it.”

Statements like these perpetuate the misconception that citizens’ fear of crime is a natural consequence of their objective probability of victimization and that the media does nothing to elevate levels of fear beyond one’s own personal experiences. The fundamental problem with these arguments, however, is that they are based merely on speculation as opposed to solid, social scientific evidence. Recent empirical work on criminal victimization and the fear of crime sheds light on the myth that American citizens’ fear of crime—which has been used to justify the prison boom in recent decades—is solely a function of their own immediate experiences.

Media Influences on Fear of Crime

The relationship between media influences and fear of crime has been well studied (see reviews by Eschholz 1997; Heath and Gilbert 1996). Only three studies of this relationship, however, have been conducted using data more recent than 1981—the time at which rapid prison expansion began. Furthermore, studies rarely differentiate between local and national news media effects (for an exception, see Barzagan 1994). Finally, no studies have included controls for the crime rate (as a measure of the “reality” of crime), and studies that do control for the effect of personal victimization on fear of crime (see Chiricos, Eschholz, and Gertz 1997) have been limited to single communities.

In an effort to address these methodological shortcomings, Chiricos, Padgett, and Gertz (2000) have conducted the most rigorous study of the effect of television news content on citizens’ fear of crime to date. In a statewide survey of Florida residents, they isolated the independent effect of news media programming (both local and national) on fear of crime by controlling for citizens’ prior victimization experiences and even their perception of the level of safety in their neighborhood. Their results indicated that, even after controlling for such experiences, exposure to both

local and national news media sources significantly increased citizens' fear of crime. These effects are even more telling when the magnitude—or "strength of effects"—is taken into account. In particular, the magnitude of the media effects (local and national combined) on fear of crime was nearly twice as large as the effect of personal victimization experiences on fear of crime. These results therefore suggest that American citizens' fear of crime, while to a certain extent rooted in personal experience, is to a greater degree determined by their level of exposure to the spectacle of human horrors depicted by news media organizations.

Linking Fear to Leniency

Beckett's (1997) analysis of national public opinion surveys from 1964 to 1992 also found that changes in public concern over crime (which included indicators of concern over drugs) were unrelated to changes in crime rates. Like Chiricos and colleagues (2000), Beckett found that public concern was instead predicted by media coverage of issues associated with crime and drugs. Furthermore, and perhaps more important, public concern about crime over time was most closely tied to what she referred to as "political initiative," which is defined as "the number of speeches, statements, policy initiatives, or summaries pertaining to crime . . . made by federal officials and reported in the mass media" (1997, 116).

After placing the crime issue at the top of the political agenda, policy makers—abetted by a willing media—were then able to cultivate the public's fear of crime. Even so, as stated in Chapter 1, throwing gasoline on the fear fire was not enough, by itself, to justify a dramatic increase in prison population growth. To do that, policy makers needed to frame the apparent crime problem as a consequence of excessive leniency on the part of the criminal justice system—the techniques for which have been honed to perfection by political elites over the last 30 years. It is clear, however, that their ability to do so has been predicated on misinformation about the degree to which citizens' fears about being victimized are driven by their own experiences versus the lurid images of crime and victimization they are flooded with on a regular basis. In short, our state of mass incarceration cannot be justified on the basis that it is necessary to allay the portion of citizens' fear of crime that can be attributed to instances of personal victimization since such experiences have little to do with fear of crime.

Nonserious Crime as Gateway Offending?

In 1981, Nancy Reagan's advisors sought to change her image from a china-buying White House decorator to something with more political substance. Determined not to be stuck in some budgetary role or in some policy job (after all, these were tasks tackled by her predecessors), Mrs. Reagan informed her projects director that she wanted to address the issue of "drug abuse" (see Baum 1996, 141). Despite the warnings from the media-savvy Communications Director Michael Deaver—who instead suggested focusing on something "fun" along the lines of volunteerism or historic preservation—Nancy went forth with the drug abuse issue. What followed was the memorable "just say no" antidrug campaign, which spawned a number of subsequent generations of antidrug television spots, from "parents who use drugs have children who use drugs" (recall the defiant youth shouting at his father, "You, alright? I learned it by watching you!") to the father figure in the kitchen cracking eggs into a bacon grease-filled cast iron pan who says, "this is your brain; this is your brain on drugs." To push the "just say no" message a step further, Mrs. Reagan even made a cameo appearance alongside Gary Coleman on the television comedy *Diff'rent Strokes* in a storyline about drug use among school-aged children.

The underlying theme of the antidrug movement throughout the 1980s was not simply that drug use, in and of itself, is harmful. Rather, the message being sent to kids and, more importantly, to their parents, was that drug use is a type of "gateway offense" that opens the door to the full spectrum of criminal behavior for youths. Rising levels of violent offending during the 1980s, which were often linked to inner-city drug markets by the media and by political entrepreneurs, led the public and policy makers to adopt a misconception about the "escalation" of the severity of offending by individuals.² Specifically, the political culture surrounding crime—especially since the early 1980s—makes the implicit assumption that if someone is committing low-level offenses now (such as drug abuse or theft), it is only a matter of time until the person graduates into committing violent offenses such as robbery, rape, and murder. It is my contention here that this concern is misplaced, and that it is inconsistent with the reality of criminal-offending trajectories.

Categorical Contagion

The image of a young punk stealing someone's bike does not generally cause people to go and buy state-of-the-art alarm systems for their

houses, to clip cans of pepper spray to their key rings, or to avoid walking home alone in the dark. These types of reactions are instead attributed to the fear of violent victimization, especially the threat of lethal violence, which is the major source of fear and anxiety for Americans. Of course, the fear of lethal violence is not unique to Americans. Kristof (1996) notes that the fear of gunshot wounds is even quite prevalent among Japanese citizens, despite the fact that there were only 32 gun-related homicides in 1995 (roughly half of the total for Newark, New Jersey, in any given year). But the United States does experience a higher rate of homicide victimization than any other Western industrialized nation (Pratt and Godsey 2003), so American citizens' fears of being murdered, in particular, are not necessarily unfounded relative to citizens of other nations. What *is* uniquely American, however, is that our fear of lethal violence has spread like a virus into a universal fear of all forms of crime—even those that pose no credible threat to our physical safety.

Zimring and Hawkins (1997, 13) referred to this phenomenon as “categorical contagion,” which they defined as “the agency whereby citizens come to fear many forms of criminal behavior because they imagine them all committed by extremely violent protagonists.” Even some criminologists, such as James Q. Wilson and George Kelling (1982), have perpetuated this pattern of overgeneralization in their argument that low-level instances of incivility and disorder in a community will inexorably lead to direct, violent, predatory victimization in the absence of some formal intervention.³ In short, today's thief or burglar is tomorrow's rapist and killer. Yet, if this is true, why do we not find the same level and quality of fear of crime among citizens living in nations where the rate of property offending is comparable to ours, such as the United Kingdom? If there really is some sort of “law of escalation” in the severity of offending, fear of crime should be directly commensurate with the supply of potential criminal offenders in any given social context.

Upon closer examination, this proposition simply does not hold up. There is no credible empirical evidence of a progression of increasing severity in the offenses committed over the length of a criminal career (Shannon 1991; Wolfgang, Figlio, and Sellin 1972). On the one hand, offenders—even chronic offenders—are quite versatile in their offending patterns (i.e., they generally are not too picky about which offense to commit when the opportunities to do so are easy; see Piquero, Farrington, and Blumstein 2003). Nevertheless, recent work based on a large sample of high-risk, persistent offenders found no evidence of either offending “specialization” in violence or of systematic escalation of lower-level offending (e.g., drug and property

offending) to violent personal crimes (McGloin et al. 2007; C. J. Sullivan et al. 2006). In short, the evidence suggests that although offenders may exhibit a lot of bad behavior, we have no reason to believe that engaging in more mundane misbehavior will, by definition, lead to the kinds of serious violent offending that tend to *really* scare people.

To illustrate this point, Zimring and Hawkins (1997) noted that for every 10 theft offenses reported in Sydney, Australia, there are just over 13 reported in Los Angeles, and for every 10 burglaries reported in Sydney, there are 9 in Los Angeles. Thus, it appears as though the overall supply of criminal offenders is roughly the same across the two cities. As stated in Chapter 1, however, for every 100 homicides in Los Angeles, there are only 4.8 in Sydney. It is clear, therefore, that (1) despite comparable numbers of potential offenders, the nature of crime differs considerably across these two communities, and (2) a general fear of “crime” has little to do with crime at all, but rather with lethal violence, which, again, is a condition somewhat unique unto itself in the United States.

Implications for Corrections Policy

The problem is that this categorical contagion has had major implications for prison growth in this country. Here lies the fundamental paradox: as states create stiffer sanctions—presumably in an effort to rid the streets of those who would commit acts of life-threatening violence—the bulk of enforcement efforts will typically be directed toward *nonserious offenders*. Even before the creation of baseball metaphor-enhanced sentencing policies such as “Three Strikes and You’re Out,” offenses such as armed robbery, aggravated sexual assault, and murder almost always resulted in a prison sentence. Even with limited prison space, we can always find a bed for folks like Jeffrey Dahmer, Ted Bundy, and Gary Ridgeway (the infamous “Green River Killer”). As prison space expands, who are we going to fill prison cells with if we are already locking up serious violent offenders?

The answer, of course, is nonserious offenders. Austin and Irwin’s (2001) analysis of prison admissions confirms this recent trend. Their work indicates that the most frequent crime resulting in a prison sentence is drug possession (22 percent), which is followed by burglary (20 percent), theft and fraud (20 percent), and drug delivery (15 percent), and that these four nonviolent crimes constitute 77 percent of all prison admissions. It is therefore quite obvious that in our efforts to round up violent offenders, a sizeable portion of nonviolent—and nonserious—offenders have been

caught in the net. This has resulted in a dramatic shift in the composition of the inmate population in this country. What we have now is a rather large gap between violence and imprisonment—one that is aided, at least in part, by the third misconception about crime in America: that we can accurately predict whether someone is likely to be a chronic, life-course persistent offender by taking into account the severity of his or her current offense and the extent of the person's prior record of offending.

Incapacitation and Errors in Prediction

The notion of incapacitation as a legitimate goal of punishment—incarcerating an offender so that he or she cannot break the law, at least for the duration of the individual's stay in prison—is a recent phenomenon in American correctional policy. The problem in the past has been that we believed that through imprisonment, some sort of "incapacitation effect" was inevitable (and therefore theoretically uninteresting), which contributed to incapacitation's status as a secondary purpose of punishment at best (Zimring and Hawkins 1995). In essence, incapacitation suffered from the "no duh" syndrome, where lawmakers knew they would get a marginal incapacitation effect through the incarceration of offenders. The risk of focusing on this potential benefit, however, seemed to come at the cost of admitting to the failure of both rehabilitation- and deterrence-based correctional philosophies (Feeley and Simon 1992; see also Pratt and Cullen 2005).

This all changed with Wolfgang et al.'s (1972) "birth cohort" study of Philadelphia youth, which found that 6 percent of the kids in their cohort were responsible for over half of the arrests or police contacts—a finding that has been replicated rather consistently in subsequent research (see, e.g., Chaiken and Chaiken 1984; Shannon 1991; J. D. Wright and Rossi 1986). To lawmakers in the 1970s and 1980s (see J. Q. Wilson 1975), the policy implications of this body of research were as clear as could be: since most criminal offenses are committed by a small proportion of the offender population, crime rates could be substantially reduced if we could lock up those "high-rate" offenders before they embark on their lifelong pattern of criminal activity.

Selective Incapacitation

Like any sexy policy proposal, this concept was given a catchy name to help it resonate with policy makers and the American public: "selective

incapacitation.” To assess the potential social value of a selective incapacitation strategy, the National Institute of Justice funded a multisite, longitudinal study of “criminal careers”—the result of which was a study published by the Rand Corporation in 1982 (Greenwood and Abrahamse 1982). Using a sample of inmates convicted of robbery and burglary from three states (Texas, Michigan, and California), Greenwood and Abrahamse constructed a seven-factor predictive scale that was composed largely of items tapping into an offender’s prior criminal history (e.g., prior convictions and incarcerations, age at first conviction, substance abuse).⁴ Using items such as these was critical for the successful implementation of the selective incapacitation model, since information about these factors is easily accessible to prosecutors and judges—the primary “players” in the sentencing process. Put simply, the selective incapacitation model is only seductive for policy makers if it is fairly easy to predict (with easily obtainable information) whether a particular offender will be a career criminal.

To determine if this is so, Greenwood and Abrahamse (1982) correlated their predictive scale with the self-reported estimates of offending from the inmates in their sample. Based on their analyses, they concluded that their predictive scale is accurate enough at identifying high-rate offenders that it should be used during the sentencing decision. More specifically, the high-rate offenders identified by the predictive scale should receive longer sentences so that the maximum benefit to public safety (crime reduction) could be achieved. By that same token, low-level offenders, as identified by the same predictive scale, should be given shorter sentences in order to maximize the efficient use of finite correctional resources.

It is simple to see why this model for corrections policy became so popular. The idea of reducing crime by locking people up for an extended period of time—as opposed to wasting our energy trying to change offenders’ behavior through rehabilitative practices—was consistent with the social and political climate of the 1970s and 1980s. Thus, such a policy proposal “made sense” in the social context of the time. The conservative shift in correctional ideology during this time was even powerful enough to cause policy makers—as well as their constituents—to ignore the ethical and due process concerns associated with a selective incapacitation strategy. In particular, the selective incapacitation framework *punishes offenders for crimes that have yet to be committed*—a practice that legal scholars generally denounce as being inconsistent with the basic precepts of justice and the foundation of American criminal law (Packer 1968; von

Hirsch 1984, 1985; see also Dworkin 1985). As problematic as this may be, such ethical concerns ended up playing second fiddle to the proposed public safety benefits of selective incapacitation, especially since “rigorous social scientific research” had clearly demonstrated that the identification of high-rate offenders is both practical and possible, and that it does not require the detailed knowledge of each offender’s battery of social and psychological factors.

Errors in Prediction: False Positives

Like any human endeavor—from forecasting the weather to guessing someone’s age—predicting who will be a high-rate offender will come with a certain degree of error. In the context of selective incapacitation, one kind of error is the “false negative,” where some decision rule (perhaps Greenwood and Abrahamse’s predictive scale) labels someone as low or medium risk when he or she is actually a high-rate offender. Should this offender receive a shorter sentence on the basis of the person’s designated risk level under a selective incapacitation sentencing scheme, there may be an enhanced risk to public safety if that offender is released into the community too early.

Although this issue is certainly important, the corollary problem of “false positives” has been of greater concern for researchers and policy makers interested in constructing a rational and efficient sentencing system, as well as for advocates of due process and fair sentencing practices, where there is a heightened concern that incarceration resources should be judiciously reserved for the worst of the worst criminal offenders. In this case, the errors come in the form of “overprediction,” where low- (or medium-) risk offenders are erroneously predicted to be chronic, high-rate offenders. Again, given that selective incapacitation involves extending the period of incarceration for an individual according to offenses not yet committed, the problem of false positives means that we may be locking people up for crimes that they probably would not commit anyway. This definitely raises ethical and due process concerns, but the practical downfall of the existence of false positives is that correctional resources are squandered on people who have been incorrectly identified, thus raising the costs of incarceration for public budgets that are already stretched to the limit.

This problem would be moot, however, if the rate of accurate identification to risk-level categories was high—as claimed by Greenwood and

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Abrahamse (1982). Unfortunately, nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, one might be surprised that, although we can predict with a certain measure of confidence that a small proportion of offenders in any given community will be career criminals (or high-rate offenders), our success rates for predicting just *who* those folks will be at the individual level is truly dismal. Even Blumstein, Cohen, and Farrington (1988), some of the most respected experts in criminal career research, each of whom had access to information on a host of personal, social, and environmental characteristics of offenders, readily confessed to the inability to identify chronic criminal “persisters” until they were already well into their criminal careers (see also Petersilia 1980).

The problem gets even worse when we start looking at the error rates associated with the purported predictive scale offered by Greenwood and Abrahamse (1982) themselves. Specifically, their analysis indicates an overall success rate of only 51 percent in correctly classifying criminal offenders. Their false positive rate—where offenders are incorrectly classified as high-risk—is 48 percent, and reanalyses of the same Rand data conducted by J. Cohen (1983) and by Visher (1986) placed that figure even higher, at 55 percent. Perhaps the most damaging blow to the selective incapacitation argument came with Auerhahn’s (1999) replication of Greenwood and Abrahamse’s work on a sample of California inmates. Not only did she continue to find relatively low (yet slightly better) overall predictive accuracy at 60 percent, her results also indicated serious problems with the reliability of the original Greenwood and Abrahamse predictive scale. For example, various items contained in the predictive scale—all of which purportedly tap into the same dimension of “seriousness”—were, at best, only weakly related to one another. In other words, knowing how someone scored on one dimension of the scale (e.g., substance abuse) provides little insight into how he or she will score on another dimension of the scale (e.g., age at first arrest).

In the end, the lure of selective incapacitation as a strategy for corrections policy rests on the assumption that we can identify high-rate offenders in a prospective manner, and that we can do so early enough in each offender’s criminal career that we can get the largest potential reduction in crime for our correctional dollar by throwing such miscreants in prison for lengthy periods of time. The problem is that no credible social scientific evidence exists that indicates this can be done. Our inability to correctly identify who among our offender population will come to resemble

Wolfgang et al.'s (1972) "chronic 6 percenters" does not exactly conjure up images of Nostradamus; it instead tends to evoke the more arbitrary image of a coin flip. Regardless of the metaphor, so long as political pundits continue to boast about the potential incapacitative effects of enhanced sentencing policies, they can only do so by ignoring the fact that such claims are based on faulty assumptions regarding the ability of a few criminal history variables to predict complex human behavior over the life course.

Summary

The purpose of this chapter was not to trivialize the issue of crime—especially violent crime and the fear that it engenders—in the United States. To be sure, our rates of violent interpersonal offending are well above those of our Western industrialized peer nations, particularly our levels of homicide victimization. Decision makers in the policy and media arenas have taken this unfortunate reality, however, and have stretched, nipped, and tucked it so much that the face of truth about crime in America is barely recognizable.

This might not be such a problem if the systematic distortion of information was used solely for entertainment purposes. Obviously, this is not the case. Beckett and Sasson's (2003) recent work highlights how receptive Americans are to such misinformation with the popularity of reality TV programming such as *Cops* and *To Catch a Predator*. Nevertheless, political entrepreneurs (and their media sidekicks) have methodically used misinformation about why Americans are so fearful of crime, about patterns of escalation in the seriousness of offenders' criminal careers, and about our ability to predict long-term chronic criminal behavior over the life course with a few simple variables, in an effort to gain political capital.

What we are left with is a caricature of the picture of our current crime problem, complete with exaggerated features that American citizens now consider the "real thing." The purpose of this chapter, therefore, was to highlight how various pieces of misinformation about the crime problem in this country have been used by policy makers to support initiatives—such as the war on drugs and all forms of enhanced sentencing policies—that have fueled our dependence on the incarceration "solution" to the crime problem.

Notes

1. It is worth noting that other criminologists, although not quite as zealous as Fox, also caution against the blatant “triumphalism” (see Currie 1999, 3) of those claiming credit for the crime drop of the 1990s. What may seem like an extreme downward swing in crime rates may just be part of a larger trend of reestablishing an equilibrium following unusually high levels of crime in the 1980s (see also Donohue 1998; Friedman 1998; LaFree 1998).

2. It is important to note that increases in violent crime during this time period were, in fact, highly correlated with patterns of drug use, drug distribution, and gang violence (B. A. Johnson, Golub, and Dunlap 2000). The problem, however, comes when policy makers cling to the false assumption—and claim publicly—that the social processes that lead to the problems of drug use and gang violence are somehow independent of those that influence rates of violent crime. In short, one set of problems (drugs and gang violence) cannot “cause” another problem (violent crime) if the two emerge from a common source (e.g., concentrated disadvantage in urban communities; see W. J. Wilson 1987).

3. Despite its popularity among police agencies and policy makers, the notion that low levels of disorder actually cause an increase in more severe forms of crime has yet to receive much in the way of serious empirical support (see the discussion in Harcourt 2001). Instead, the social scientific evidence on the subject attributes serious crime to social conditions that lead to both disorder and crime (i.e., disorder cannot cause crime since the two are both consequences of the same social processes; see Sampson 2006; Sampson and Raudenbush 1999). Moreover, recent evidence also suggests that citizens do not even make a mental distinction between their perceptions of disorder and of crime (Gau and Pratt, forthcoming), which lends further evidence to the categorical contagion thesis.

4. Only one item in Greenwood and Abrahamse’s (1982) predictive scale was not related to prior offending history: whether the offender had been employed less than 50 percent in the preceding 2 years.