

Crime Falls, But

Crime is at historic lows in many places. But school and mall shootings, along with grown-up criminal gangs, are grim reminders that the culture of violence is still with us and on the public agenda.

BY DONNA LYONS

The festive surroundings of an Omaha, Neb., department store full of Christmas shoppers quickly turned into the bloody crime scene of a suicidal shooter on a December afternoon in 2007. It was the kind of news that even thousands of miles away makes hearts race, even though recent shootings at Virginia Tech, Northern Illinois University and elsewhere arguably have a numbing effect.

These tragic shootings grab headlines and prompt TV talk show hosts to probe what went wrong in addressing mental health or other disorders of the angry young perpetrators. Meanwhile, some urban communities struggle almost daily with pervasive violence involving drugs, guns and gangs, which often seems unnoticed outside those gritty neighborhoods.

Volatility of crime and violence has the public on guard and law enforcement officials and policymakers exploring issues and approaches. The persistent culture of violence in this country looks different in different places, and prompts any number of crime correlation theories. Indeed, causes of serious crime continue to be complex and pervasive, even at a time when many areas of the country have seen declining rates of crime, including violent offenses.

The FBI's Uniform Crime Reports show the rate of violent crime nationally (that is, crimes per 100,000 population) down dramatically to 473.5 in 2006 from a peak of 758.2 in 1991. And even though the population has grown, the actual number of reported crimes also is down—more than 13 percent

between 1997 and 2006.

Rates of property crimes also have declined nationally in the nearly two decades between 1987 and 2006. And the latest *Crime in the United States* data from the FBI, covering the first half of 2007, show violent crime declining by 1.8 percent and property crime down 2.6 percent in 2007 over the same period in 2006.

Despite the national trends, some cities in recent years have seen serious crime on the upswing. According to Uniform Crime Reports, rates of violent crime varied widely around the country in 2006. The Midwest saw rising crime in 2006, while it declined in the Northeast. Areas of the Midwest and Mountain West also have been hard hit by methamphetamine abuse.

"Crime or the relative absence of crime is very much city-, community- and neighborhood-specific," says Christopher Stone, chair of the Criminal Justice Policy and Management Program at the Kennedy School of Government in Cambridge, Mass. "Different neighborhoods today are having very different experiences."

That dappled pattern means public concern about crime today is equal parts reaction to serious problems in specific places and general edginess created when the culture of violence is seen playing out in random school and mall shootings, says Stone.

Stone says that while people might feel relatively safe in their immediate neighborhood, their fears often reflect what they see happening elsewhere in their city or in the country. Today, the borders of crime and violence are blurry.

"In the 1990s, we had crack cocaine to

blame across the board for a lot of serious crime. That's not so today," says Chuck Wexler, executive director of Police Executive Research Foundation, which has studied recent crime trends. "There is no single answer as there seemed to be then."

The police research describes a "tale of two cities," in which "nationwide crime totals mask significantly more serious problems in certain cities or subgroups."

GANG FACTOR

The foundation surveyed law enforcement agencies to try to identify factors contributing to the rising serious crime rates in certain areas. A key concern is gangs and their spread to communities throughout the United States.

"Migration of gangs across the country has brought with it drugs, weapons and other criminal activity," says Wexler. Gangs are the primary distributors of drugs, and gang activity moves into and through more areas of the country today, including small towns and suburbs that may once have felt insulated from it all.

Law enforcement agencies surveyed by the research group also are concerned about juvenile violence with high-caliber weapons, noting that attacks are more deadly when the weaponry is more lethal. Law enforcement officials also cited economic and family instability and the growing numbers of offenders being released from correctional facilities back into crime-prone communities as factors causing increases.

Criminologists tend to agree that growth in prison populations is poorly related to crime rates, even though increased incarceration has been a primary crime-control strategy in states for decades. Rising numbers of prisoners and costs of corrections systems have some states looking at how to reverse this trend. This includes improved supervision of offenders in the community—including more than half a million who are released

Not Everywhere

Big Cuts in Justice Grants

State and local governments lost two thirds of their FY 2008 federal Justice Assistance Grants funding. The grants pay for a broad range of activities such as drug treatment and enforcement, criminal reentry into society and crime prevention initiatives. The cut in funding from \$520 million in FY 2007 to the \$170 million approved, but not yet received, for FY 2008 will mean reduction and elimination of many programs.

“Communities everywhere will see the effects of this bill and its cuts to criminal justice funding,” says David Steingraber, executive director of the Wisconsin Office of Justice Assistance and current president of the National Criminal Justice Association. His group is analyzing the impacts of losing these funds on state and local governments. “Congress has made the job of every police officer in this country more difficult,” he says.

These grants provide direct aid to law enforcement agencies for specialized task forces, equipment and criminal justice information systems. In recent years, local law enforcement agencies have used the funds to fight the manufacture and distribution of methamphetamine, for example. The grants also support state programs for specialized prosecution and courts, re-entry of prisoners back into their communities, school violence prevention, anti-gang efforts and crime victim services.

—Susan Parnas Frederick and
Emily Taylor, NCSL.



CRIME SCENE - DO NOT ENTER

Technology Zeros in on Crime Patterns

CRIME MAPPING

Police departments have new computer-based tools for keeping track of “hot spots” of crime. These maps pinpoint crime clusters and help police allocate resources accordingly.

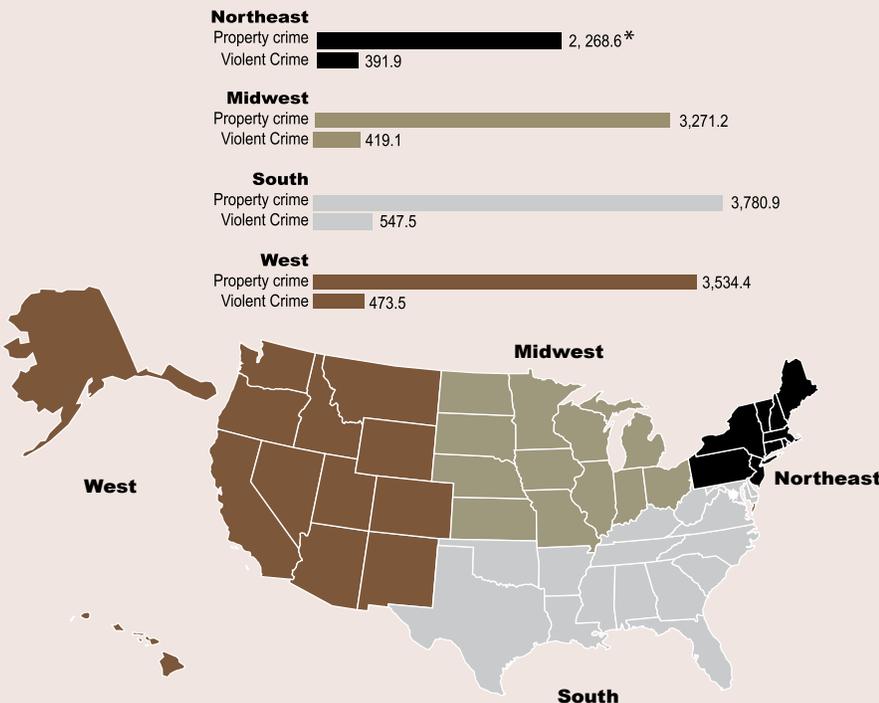
RESIDENTIAL BURGLARIES IN DALLAS, TEXAS

JAN. 1 TO MARCH. 29, 2008



Source: City of Dallas

Crime in the United States by Region 2005–2006



Source: U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, September 2007.

from prison each year back into communities—and policies that reserve prison space for the most dangerous, such as sex offenders and those who use weapons.

THE MENTAL HEALTH QUESTION

The mall shootings in Omaha as well as school shootings over the past decade have focused attention on the mental health of the assailants and policies around their access to guns.

Following the shootings at the Westroads Shopping Center in Omaha, state lawmakers considered a bill that Senator Brad Ashford said was to close gaps in existing gun laws and address gun violence without interfering with anyone’s right to own a weapon.

The measure would have required trigger locks, reporting the loss or theft of guns, and better tracking of illegal guns, especially those in the possession of minors. An amended version of the bill that failed to advance called for the Nebraska Commission on Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice to study gun violence in the state, including the availability of mental health records for firearm purchases and other issues around firearms safety.

The shooter in the Omaha mall was a 19-year-old who experienced psychiatric problems most of his life that ended in the upscale department store where he killed eight people and seriously wounded five others. The shooter stole the assault rifle from a relative, who had purchased the gun legally.

Among those testifying at a January hearing on the Nebraska bill was a man wounded in the department store and families of those slain, soliciting lawmakers for solutions to gun violence. Law enforcement officials spoke in favor of tighter requirements on guns; gun advocacy groups advised against such steps.

Senator Dwite Pedersen, who serves on the Judiciary Committee that heard the bill, says he understands both sides of the issue.

“I’m an avid gun sportsman and appreciate the interests of others like me. I also work in a jail with teens who commit serious crimes



Violence Prevention: Gun Laws and Mental Health

and understand why we don't want them to have guns," he says.

Pedersen's district in Elkhorn, Neb., borders the urban Westroads shopping area. He says his constituency includes those who can't understand why a troubled young man could roam around with an assault rifle, and those equally scared that something will be done to diminish their Second Amendment rights.

OUTLAWS AND GUNS

Connecticut Senator Toni Nathaniel Harp, is among urban legislators interested in how to appropriately limit the presence of guns as part of addressing crime and violence.

"Guns often become the panic buttons, too often used by outlaws to automatically transform ordinary crimes into violent ones and routine confrontations into deadly ones," says Harp who is co-chair of a task force on gun violence recently convened by the National Caucus of Black State Legislators. Concerned that the firearm death rate for black males is more than twice that of white men, the group expects to consult with African-American community leaders, law enforcement officials and others to discuss issues and identify solutions.

Last year, the Connecticut General Assembly passed a measure to reduce the flow of guns into the hands of criminals. The law created the felony crimes of firearms trafficking and failure to report any lost or stolen firearms within 72 hours. Investigations of serious crime often dead-end when a crime committed with a gun is traced to an owner who claims the gun was lost or stolen, says Harp.

TECHNOLOGY COMES TO POLICING

In cities making inroads against crime, improved police strategies often are credited. Crime mapping and "hot spots" policing help concentrate police efforts where crime is clustered. Geographic Information Systems, computer based tools for analyzing and managing information, allow police to pinpoint where, for example, most car thefts are occurring, and allocate resources accordingly.

Stone of the Kennedy School says the most promising developments in crime control have been these tools that give police accurate and timely information on crime and crime patterns. "Where police can use this information in real time and deploy resources where crimes are occurring, they have been effective," he says.

This technology has changed how law enforcement agencies operate and how they see themselves. "We've gone from measuring police performance on numbers of arrests, to measuring outcomes like fewer people murdered and fewer shot," Wexler says. "We've shown that



**SENATOR
TONI N. HARP
CONNECTICUT**

In the aftermath of the Virginia Tech and Northern Illinois campus shootings, lawmakers want to better protect the public and prevent similar tragedies. Because the suspects in these mass shootings had been treated for mental health conditions, lawmakers have considered laws ranging from requiring civil commitments to improving the sharing of health information. Some legislators took a different route, and introduced bills to limit gun ownership for people with mental illness.

Forty-four states and the District of Columbia limit people with mental illnesses from getting firearm licenses.

States vary significantly on the individuals they restrict from gun ownership. Different states limit those who have received:

- ◆ Inpatient treatment involuntarily.
- ◆ Any type of inpatient treatment, either by civil commitment or voluntary admission.
- ◆ A determination of posing a danger to himself or to others.
- ◆ Treatment for a mental-health condition requiring medication or supervision.

Pennsylvania's statute is very expansive—it disqualifies a person from obtaining a firearm license for three years if he or she required medication or supervision as part of any mental-health treatment. On the opposite end of the spectrum, South Carolina's law prohibits only those found "mentally incompetent" from owning a handgun.

The length of time for such restrictions also varies by state, as do the methods of regaining the right to possess a firearm.

Restrictions are only effective if the state tracks those with firearm limitations. Twenty states and the District of Columbia have such a central database. There are differences in how these databases are used, who reports the data and what information is collected.

This is a three-pronged issue; Laws must prohibit the appropriate people from getting guns, keep track of restricted individuals, and protect the privacy of those who have received treatment for mental health conditions. New federal law requires improvements to the National Instant Criminal Background Check System by requiring more consistent reporting and mandating that states supply records for those who are prohibited from possessing or obtaining a firearm, including those who have been "adjudicated as mentally defective or committed to mental institutions." The statute also provides financial incentives for states to comply, and awards grants to upgrade technologies for completing firearm background checks with the national system.

Both Illinois and Virginia, the two states recently affected by gun crimes committed by individuals known to have mental health conditions, have addressed the issue. Virginia passed laws that restrict access and increase reporting and Illinois has broadened the definition of mentally incompetent and required stricter reporting.

The West Virginia Legislature passed legislation in March that will allow treatment providers to disclose information to the National Instant Criminal Background Check System if the individual, due to his or her mental health and commitment status, is prohibited from possessing a firearm.

Some worry that such laws may discriminate against people who suffer from mental illness, but are not dangerous. Detractors suggest such laws may have the unintended consequence of discouraging some people from receiving mental health treatment, afraid they will be forced to give up their right to possess a gun. Others say the recent tragedies underscore the need to act on several fronts to find the best defense against violence.

—Sarah Steverman, NCSL

CAMPUS VIOLENCE AND SAFETY

Campus security is back in the legislative spotlight as lawmakers look at how to improve crisis alerts, the need for more open exchange of student information, and whether faculty and students should be allowed to carry concealed firearms.

State and national task forces formed after the tragedy at Virginia Tech concluded that college campuses require updated and carefully coordinated emergency response plans. Virginia and Washington recently enacted legislation creating institutional emergency plans; New York, Ohio and Oklahoma have legislation pending.

“This bill was written in the wake of the tragedy at Virginia Tech last year, and on the day we passed the bill in the Senate, another horrible shooting occurred at Northern Illinois University,” says Senator Jeanne Kohl-Welles, sponsor of the Washington bill. “We hope that this will help improve responses to tragedies like these in the future, and help prevent them from happening in the first place.”

Sixteen states looked at whether people with concealed weapons permits should be allowed to bring their guns onto campuses. So far, legislatures in Alabama, Arizona, Georgia, Idaho, Indiana, Kentucky, Minnesota, Mississippi, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Tennessee, Virginia and Washington have defeated such bills. Legislation is still pending in Louisiana, Ohio and South Carolina.

Supporters of allowing concealed weapons on campus believe that the ability of staff and fellow students to fire back during an indiscriminate campus shooting spree would cut down on such incidents.

Opponents say more guns on campus could increase isolated acts of violence. In the event of a shooting spree, bystanders might be caught in the crossfire. They are also concerned that first responders might not be able to identify the attacker, and that more guns on campus might lead to more suicides and firearms accidents.

—Vincent Badolato, NCSL



good policing can change behaviors.”

Police departments today also are interested in community partnerships that go beyond public relations. Stone says that residents contributing to intelligence gathering is effective when there’s enough money to maintain them. Wexler agrees. He says collaborative police-community efforts to reduce crime require trust, information—and money. “It’s a resource issue. Police presence doesn’t come out of nowhere,” he says.

A community policing method known as “broken windows” has officers more involved and responsive to neighborhood decay and social disorder. Popularized in the 1980s in New York City, “broken windows” suggests that as a neighborhood deteriorates, crime increases. Today, the mortgage foreclosure crisis is prompting a new look at this phenomenon. A recent study by the Georgia Institute of Technology and the Woodstock Institute, a research and advocacy organization in Chicago, shows a strong correlation between home foreclosures and crime, both in cities and suburbs. The study reveals that a 1 percent increase in a neighborhood’s foreclosure rate prompts a more than 2 percent increase in violent crime.

Changing times and changing crime patterns mean policymakers need to be cautious in looking at crime, and react appropriately to things



SENATOR
BRAD ASHFORD
NEBRASKA

like gun violence or youth crime, says Stone.

“There are some real problems out there, but expensive, broad initiatives often are unnecessary to deal with compartmentalized problems,” he says.

In Nebraska, where a community is still healing, Senator Brad Ashford says there remains work before the Legislature to address gun violence.

“In a state like Nebraska, there’s lots of skepticism toward broad, restrictive gun regulations,” he says. “But we’ll be looking at this bottom up to see if there are incremental steps we can take to make us safer.”

CHECK OUT our interviews with Roger Przybylski, of the Colorado Division of Criminal Justice, who is working on a project on preventing recidivism, crime and delinquency and Adam Gelb, from The Pew Charitable Trusts’ Center on the States, on growth in America’s prison population, crime and incarceration.