Second Edition

SERIOUS VIOLENCE

Patterns of Homicide and Assault in America

KEITH D. HARRIES

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By

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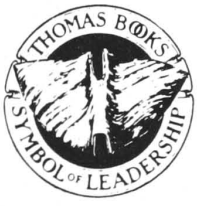
Baltimore County



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PREFACE

The first edition of this book was written at the end of the 1980s when drug-related violence associated with the then-recent cocaine epidemic had overwhelmed America's inner cities. The book was written originally in order to add more emphasis to the violence issue but also to make explicit the connection between *place* and violence.

The second edition is written in the mid-1990s. What has changed? Levels of violence are still high, though generally somewhat lower than a few years ago for reasons both drug-related (territorial conflict over drug turf is thought to have abated) and demographic. But an extremely disturbing new trend has emerged—the vastly increased involvement of juveniles in violent crime. Not only are younger children performing violent acts, but like their older counterparts, they are doing so with ever more lethal weapons. While there is no hard evidence, it also seems that the juvenile violence is increasingly gratuitous—done for "kicks." We can only look to this piece of the future with trepidation in the realization that yet another generation of deprived inner city youth is being lost, the by-product of lack of parental control, abysmal schools, and a litany of other social stresses.

Does American society at large see the situation as a crisis? Is the public response any different than it was in the 1980s? The political shift to the right with the 1992 general election reinforced the trend toward curtailment of social programs and a general turning away from inner city issues. Policy emphasis was to be on a tide of unfettered economic development that would lift all boats. To appease public fears, more resources would be put into policing. Also, welfare would be "reformed," albeit in different ways in different places. Ultimately, however, there would be no coherent effort to look to root causes of violence, perhaps because there is no reward for such focus at the ballot box, or perhaps because those root causes are poorly understood, or both. For suburbanites the carnage of the inner city is out of sight if not out of mind, something to be watched on the evening news; take it or leave it. The

public response is ambivalent—general agreement that there is a major problem, but utter confusion when it comes to "what to do about it."

An extraordinary feature of violence continues to be its localized nature, with fantastically high levels in one neighborhood and next to nothing within a very short distance. Herein lies the essential fascination of a geographic approach; why so much *spatial* variation? What are the qualitative aspects of that variation? In the last decade, interest in this geographic variation has blossomed as police departments have nearly universally adopted geographic information systems (GIS) technology to facilitate the monitoring of crime hot spots in order to mobilize their own resources but also as a basis for informing the community about emerging problems. Geography in this context has gone from being seemingly irrelevant to the status of "tool" and "perspective," providing new insights on community interactions.

Over the last decade I have benefitted greatly from association with several individuals whose knowledge of crime and its patterns and processes is remarkable: Derral Cheatwood (formerly of the University of Baltimore, currently at the University of Texas, San Antonio), Philip Canter of the Baltimore County Police Department, Jacqueline Campbell (Johns Hopkins University), James Lebeau (Southern Illinois University), George Rengert (Temple University), and Roland Reboussin (FBI Academy). Participation in the Homicide Research Working Group based in Chicago has also led to helpful insights. I am also grateful to the University of Maryland Baltimore County for granting a sabbatical leave during part of which this second edition was prepared.

K.D.H.

CONTENTS

SERIOUS VIOLENCE

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION: BACKGROUND, RATIONALE, PLAN OF ATTACK

This book is about violence, with particular emphasis on where it happens and why. However, it is limited in its scope to the related crimes of homicide and assault. Other crimes of violence (including rape and robbery) are interwoven with homicide and assault in that the latter may occur in concert with rapes or robberies, but rape and robbery are sufficiently unique that they have attracted their own specialized research literatures. While rape and robbery will be referred to here insofar as they are incorporated in the fabric of homicide and assault, they will not be treated as separate topics. For specialized treatments, the reader is referred to, for example, Reiss and Roth (1993) on rape and robbery, Gabor (1987), Cook (1983), and Perez (1992) on robbery, and Amir (1971), Brownmiller (1976), Ellis (1989), Macdonald (1971), Parrot and Bechofer (1991), and Allison (1993), on rape. Comprehensive overviews of violence phenomena are found in Reiss and Roth (1993) and Rosenberg and Fenley (1991).

Why another book on violence? The short answer is that until there is in place a national, effective policy to reduce violence at its roots—in poverty and discrimination wherever they are found—it is impossible to bring too much attention to the problem. The nation has been distracted since the War on Poverty, which officially ended with the closing of the Office of Economic Opportunity in 1974, first with Viet Nam, then with inflation and more recently with budget balancing efforts. In addition to the "normal" political distractions, however, there has been no political will, no mandate from powerful interest groups, to alleviate poverty and its associated violence. Presumably, the point has not been lost on Congress that, for the most part, it is the poor who kill and injure each other in the poverty zones of the cities (and of rural areas, too). These are people without substantial political clout, which is bought for

cash by political action committees in the halls of Congress, and is not, in all too many situations, an expression of public will at the ballot box.

After dipping in the mid-1980s, the homicide rate has worked back towards its historic high achieved around 1980. The rate as it stands (Figure 1.2) is extraordinary compared to other more developed countries. A focused national violence policy has yet to be put in place; the emphasis is still on control of violence via the police and courts rather than on elimination of causes. After all, reinstating and extending the federal death penalty, for example, costs little or nothing; murderers have no support in Congress. Whether such an act would be effective or not is irrelevant; it is politically "good," and better yet, cheap, since few capital incidents actually fall under federal jurisdiction.

This chapter provides a comprehensive background to the violence issue. Initially, the inability of the U.S. to prevent violence or to develop coherent policy responses is dramatized via discussion of the emergence of the national capital as the intermittently most violent city, as represented by conventional measures. Then, international comparisons demonstrate that the U.S. is remarkably unlike its more developed siblings with respect to levels of violence. Finally, several recurring themes relating to violence are outlined, and fundamental demographic and other relationships are discussed.

WASHINGTON, D.C. AS A SYMBOL OF VIOLENCE

As Ronald Reagan stepped down from the Presidency in January, 1989, Washington, D.C. had recently been named "homicide capital of the United States." This dubious distinction was achieved on the basis of 372 homicides in 1988 for a population of 626,000 yielding a rate of 59.4 per 100,000. The District has been among the cities with a higher homicide rate for decades; in 1970, for example, it ranked fifth, but with a rate of 26.4, less than half the current rate (Klebba, 1975). In 1988, Detroit ran a close second with 58/100,000. Dallas, another city with a reputation for violence, ran third with a mere 36.57/100,000 (Mann, 1989). Just across the border in Canada, however, Toronto, a metropolitan area of some 3.3 million, had 53 murders in 1988, or a rate of 1.6/100,000, about one thirty-seventh the D.C. rate (Denton, 1989). As a basis for comparison, the U.S. rate for homicide was about 8.5/100,000 in the same year.

It seems incredible that, virtually within sight of Capitol Hill and the

White House, citizens were afraid to go out into their own neighborhoods. Many were afraid to venture out of their apartments and go to the laundry rooms in their buildings for fear of being mugged, or worse. A *Washington Post* poll in May, 1988, asked residents "Is there any area in your neighborhood—that is, within five or six blocks—where you would be afraid to walk at night?" Some 55 percent of those aged 65 and older answered affirmatively, while younger respondents, while also often fearful, were not as apprehensive as the elderly (Sinclair, 1988). On some occasions, citizens were shot by stray bullets as they minded their own business *inside* their own homes. One woman was killed as she stood by her kitchen sink. A man was shot when he got up out of bed to get a drink of water. Citizens reported hearing gunfire nightly in some neighborhoods, sometimes as a result of gun battles, often as drug dealers put new weapons through their paces, avoiding the inconvenience of going to a firing range by letting loose clips in the street. People have been killed and injured (apparently mainly in Southern states) as a result of bullets falling after guns have been fired in the air in celebrations on New Year's Eve. Milloy (1988) reported that in the four years 1985 through 1988, 860 homicides occurred in Washington, combined with over 100,000 arrests, statistics "more than tripling the number of deaths and arrests in all race riots since 1917." What we have instead of the riots of the 1960s, however, is what are being referred to as "Quiet Riots", a phrase coined by Harris and Wilkins (1988) to describe the process of poor African Americans turning anger and frustration inward to themselves and their communities in a kind of slow burn, or, in the word of Rev. Jesse Jackson, "implosion."

Perhaps it is ironically fitting that the capital city of the United States (one of the most violent of societies and certainly the most violent among more developed countries) should be its most violent municipality. The legendary inefficiency and corruption of District of Columbia government notwithstanding, it appeared throughout 1988 that no police department, no city government, could have thwarted the social forces at work in the area, particularly the turf battle for what has by now become a hackneyed as well as euphemistic phrase: "the lucrative drug trade." Tragically, homicide was to get worse before it would get better. The year 1988 was a low point—murders would not go below 400 again until 1994, when 399 were recorded (Bowles, 1995).

POLICY FAILURE

That public policy in the realm of violence prevention has failed is obvious. Indeed, it has never been clear how to address the violence issue, in part because there has never been agreement among scholars on the causes of crime. However, while "crime" is an extraordinarily complex problem, encompassing as it does everything from stock fraud to pocket picking, it will be argued here that serious violence tends to be spatially focused in particular neighborhoods and those neighborhoods tend to be poor and African American. The evidence that will be represented here will suggest that to eliminate the causes of poverty, particularly African American poverty, would be to take a significant step in the reduction of violence in America (Chapter 9).

In perhaps the only major policy initiative to make explicit the link between crime and poverty, Lyndon Johnson's "War on Poverty" in the 1960s actually had its roots as a war on juvenile delinquency, inspired as it was by Cloward and Ohlin's *Delinquency and Opportunity,* published in 1960 (Lemann, 1988; 1989). In recent years, however, no coherent policy has existed, and social problems have been all but ignored. Reagan economic policy assumed that reduced taxes and economic growth would automatically lift all boats, a scenario that has been tragically wrong. Official poverty measures, which had shown marked improvement between the 1960s and 1970s, leveled off or worsened somewhat between the late seventies and 1985. In 1979, 9.0 percent of whites were below the poverty line, a proportion that had risen to 11.4 percent by 1985. Among blacks, comparable numbers were 31.0 and 31.3 (Harris & Wilkins, 1988: 50). There was no War on Poverty in the 1980s. Furthermore, racism seemed to resume manifestations of openness and ugliness with the Howard Beach incident in New York in 1988, riots in Miami in early 1989, the election of former Ku Klux Klan Grand Wizard David Duke to a seat in the Louisiana legislature from the Metairie district, also in 1989, the infamous Rodney King beating in 1991 (replayed ad nauseam on television), and the Los Angeles Detective Mark Furman revelations in the O.J. Simpson trial (also in Los Angeles), in 1995. The Miami disturbances seemed to epitomize the apparent detachment of American society at large (in contrast to those affected on a day-to-day basis) from the pattern of inner city violence. Miami officials, according to media accounts, seemed to be more concerned about the economic impact of the disturbances on attendance at the

scheduled Super Bowl game and related spending by fans, than about substantive issues concerning causes of the unrest. The Commissioner of the National Football League, Pete Rozelle, was quoted to the effect that it was lucky that the riots were early in the week so that they did not interfere with the game.

Concern for violence did not appear to be a high priority for the incoming Bush administration in early 1989, or for the Clinton administration in 1993. A search of campaign promises and goals drawn from the Bush campaign indicated no explicit undertaking to reduce violence, although some initiatives did relate to drug abuse. A search of references to violence policy on the White House World Wide Web site in 1996 came up empty, as did a query directed to the Democratic National Committee. However, the overall tenor of the goals in the realm of crime and drug abuse remains punitive rather than ameliorative, such as restoring the federal death penalty and developing neighborhood watch programs in public housing areas (see also Hoffman, 1989).

It is, then, against a background of polarization in American society and policy failure that this book is written. Those who can leave areas of violence and deprivation do so, leaving behind an increasingly helpless minority likely to constitute the great majority of both victims and offenders in violent incidents. Perhaps never before in America has the difference between city and suburb been so pronounced. In order to better understand the current context, it is useful to take an historical and comparative perspective.

INTERNATIONAL COMPARISONS

Comparisons of homicide across nations suggest that the U.S. has relatively high rates, but is not among the highest, which tend to be Latin American, Caribbean, North African, or Middle Eastern (Wolfgang, 1986). However, U.S. rates are much higher than those of northwest European nations, or Canada (Fig. 1.1).

In a ranking of 61 "literate societies" based on data from around 1960, the U.S. was 15th, Japan 29th, Sweden 50th, and the Irish Republic 61st. Top ranking nations in this list were Colombia, Mexico, and Nicaragua. Data drawn from more recent sources tended to confirm the approximate rankings. In the quinquennium 1982 through 1986, the U.S. rate averaged 8.4/100,000, or on the order of four to eight times higher than Northern European countries (FBI, 1983–87). This finding is corrobo-

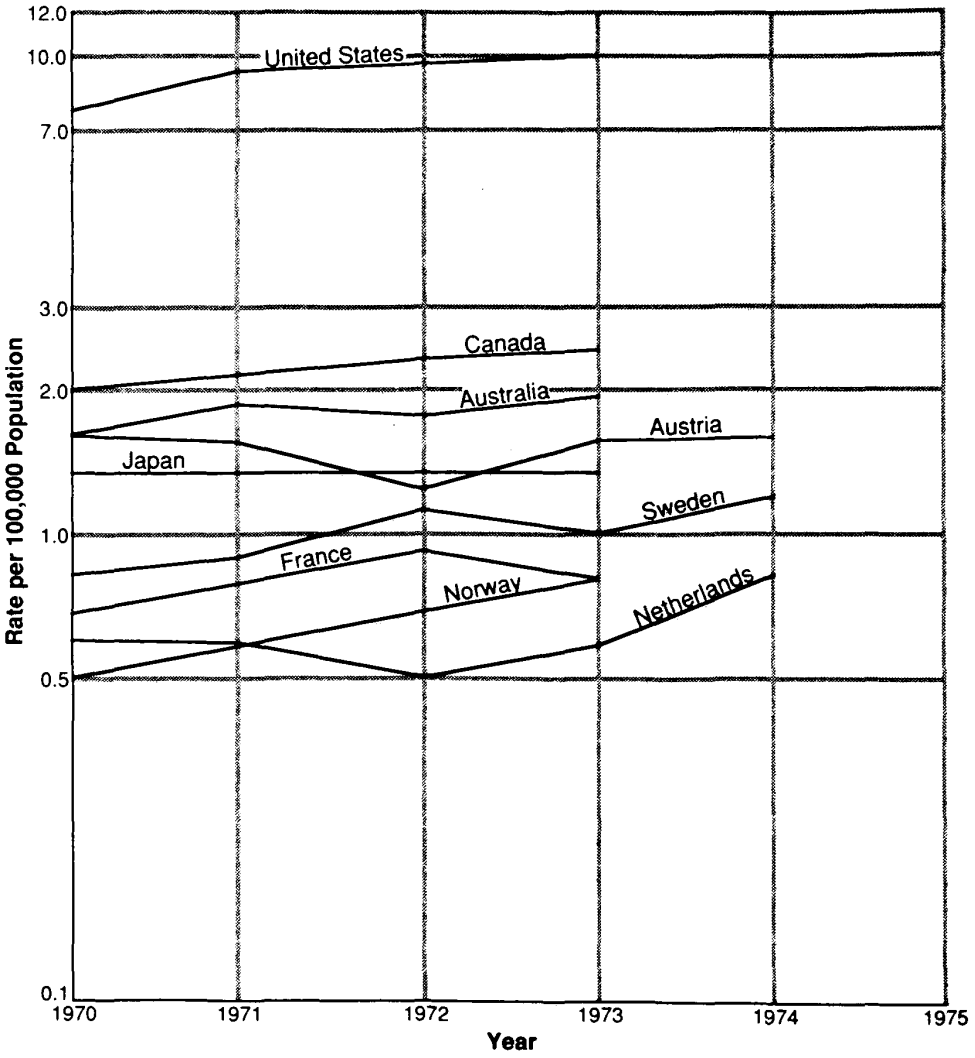

Figure 1.1. International homicide rates per 100,000 population, 1970–74. In 1990, rates were similar. *Source:* Adapted from Wolfgang, 1986.

rated by Kalish (1988), drawing on data for 1980–84 from the United Nations, the International Police Organization, and the World Health Organization. She observed that the U.S. homicide rate ranged between 7.9 and 10.5/100,000 while the comparable European composite rate was below 2/100,000. The rate for Japan was 0.8 for 1980–84. Similar analysis by Fingerhut (1994) for 1989–90 showed a U.S. rate of approxi-

mately 10/100,000, and rates for Canada, Japan, and England and Wales of 2 or less per 100,000.

Wolfgang concluded that the observed patterns suggested two hypotheses; first, that if high homicide rate countries such as those in Latin America, "westernize without turmoil," their rates will decline. If, on the other hand, westernization is accompanied by conflict, rates will probably increase further (Wolfgang, 1986). Relevant to this observation is the finding that the existence of heterogeneous cultural groupings in societies tend to be linked to higher rates of homicide (Hansmann and Quigley, 1982). Straus (1988) noted that in any given nation, a certain minimum amount of violence, ascribed to intrafamily conflict, is inevitable; thus in nations with relatively low rates of homicide, a higher proportion will be family violence. Based on data for 1966–84, Straus found that in the U.S., with its high overall homicide rate, intrafamily events made up about half the total, in Canada about half, and in Denmark, some 67 percent.

Within nations, according to analysis by Archer and Gartner (1986), it appears homicide rates in the principal, or primary, cities tend to be higher than national average rates; this relationship holds in the U.S., also, where city size correlates with homicide rates. Data for 1926 through 1970 showed that homicide rates for primary cities are consistently high compared to their national rates. However, it could not be demonstrated that city growth correlated with homicide rate increase; half the city rates analyzed increased, half decreased. For a small sample (7) of primary cities with data available for the period 1926–70, no trend of increasing rates over time was observed. Archer and Gartner concluded that a city's homicide rate is determined not by its absolute size, but rather by its relative size in the context of its society. "Any jurisdiction more urban than its national environment," they suggested, "will have a homicide rate higher than the national average" (Archer and Gartner, 1986:116).[1]

[1]Archer and Gartner also found, in an analysis of both combatant and non-combatant nations, that homicide rates were consistently higher after wars, a condition explained by the *legitimation of violence* model, arguing that "legal" war killing affects the peacetime society. (See also: Archer and Gartner, 1976.) Another finding of indirect interest in the present context was that the abolition of capital punishment "was followed more often than not by absolute *decreases* in homicide rates, not by the increases predicted by deterrence theory" (Archer and Gartner, 1986:136).

VIOLENCE TRENDS

Violence trends in the U.S. may be seen in the context of broader patterns of variation. In a comprehensive review, Gurr (1981) suggested that the evidence shows "a distended U-shaped curve" of serious crime in Western Europe and the U.S., based on a review of data commencing with the thirteenth century. Included in the evidence is a study of homicide arrest trends between 1860 and 1920 in 23 cities, showing that the rate peaked in the Civil War, fell in the 1880s, then increased again by 1920. The Civil War-related crime waves—actually two, in the late 1860s and mid-1870s—have been explained in terms of the degradation of war (cf. Archer and Gartner, 1976), recession, social disruption caused by the mobility engendered by the war, anomie caused by destruction of the social structure, and the notion that crime waves somehow have a role in "redefining the acceptable boundaries of behavior" (Monkkonen, 1981; 78–79).

Overall, the nineteenth century trend was "stable or declining" (Gurr), with an increase in the 1860s and 1870s. Gurr also drew attention to the differential between African American and white homicide rates. While white rates have remained relatively constant, rates for African Americans have tended to increase. Also, Gurr concluded that two upturns in homicide in twentieth century America "may be attributable mainly to increases in killings among blacks" (Gurr; 324). Significantly, Gurr found that the evidence shows that black and white violence rates react quite differently to changing economic conditions and, therefore, "quantitative studies of determinants of crime trends in the United States ought to be disaggregated along racial lines" (Gurr, 1981;332–333).

The last 130 years in the U.S. have seen three waves of violence in cycles with about 50 years between each, beginning about 1860, 1900, and 1960 (Gurr, 1981). However, sharp racial differences make problematical the question of whether these upsurges were universal or actually disproportionately due to particular age or race cohorts. Gurr's interpretation was that rates among whites had tended to decline while those among African Americans had tended to be higher and to increase (Gurr, 1981).

Other historical studies of homicide patterns provide some insights applicable to the understanding of twentieth century trends. Based on research on nineteenth century Philadelphia, Lane (1980) suggested that the homicide rate was going down—"raggedly", as he put it, through-

out the period. British studies, too, indicated declining rates of serious violence. Nineteenth century rates were greatly understated, owing to the weakness of police work and general data-gathering deficiencies. Infanticide, for example, was virtually unaccounted for, owing to the inadequacy of forensic science. The "best available" rate for Philadelphia for 1839–1901 was about 3.0/100,000, but an accounting making allowance for gaps in the data indicated a "real" rate on the order of 15.0–20.0.

When technologically improved handguns first became available in the 1850s, the homicide rate immediately jumped. Lane argued that handguns have facilitated violence and would have made for higher rates in the nineteenth century had they been readily available. From around 1870 to 1900, the homicide rate declined in spite of handgun availability, a trend interpreted by Lane in terms of public school enrollments and increases in employment in factories and bureaucracies. The public schools inculcated behavior patterns stressing conformity and suppression of emotions or discomfort, thus suppressing violent behavior, but (arguably) at the price of increasing the probability of suicide.

A continuing source of concern has been the tendency for rates of serious violence among blacks to exceed those among whites. Lane saw the roots of this discrepancy in the subservient, marginal status of African Americans, which made the environment in which they lived a hostile one, encouraging the possession of knives, and later handguns, for protection. Thus African American neighborhoods, even in the nineteenth century, were dangerous places. Black rates of violence were high as initially measured, and rose further through the nineteenth century, while white rates fell. The regimented lifestyle of school, factory, and office were not available to African Americans; in effect, there was no broadly based paradigm for behavior. With intermittent breaks in periods of war, this condition has persisted to the present day. (Poor) African American neighborhoods are still dangerous—more dangerous than ever—and behavioral paradigms are still missing, weak, or hopelessly inappropriate for the majority (such as the "professional athlete" and "professional entertainer" models). Indeed, black-white differences in homicide patterns are so pronounced that they account for differences in life expectancy. In 1975, for example, a white male had about six more years of life expectancy compared to a black, and about 20 percent of that difference was traceable to homicide rate differences. Furthermore, homicide is the leading cause of death among younger African American males (Farley, 1980).

Figure 1.2. Twentieth century homicide trend chart. Rates per 100,000, U.S. population. *Source:* U.S. Department of Justice, 1988, 1995.

In the twentieth century, the homicide rate in the U.S. reached a peak in 1980 and has been declining somewhat since (Figure 1.2). As the chart shows, rates were low at the beginning of the century, rose rapidly to about 1910, then continued to increase irregularly until 1933, when the rate stood at 9.7/100,000. Rates dropped until the end of World War II, increased briefly in the mid forties, and declined again until about 1958 (4.5). Between 1961 and 1980, the rate increased to 11.0 (U.S. Department of Justice, 1988a; Klebba, 1975).

The increase in rates between 1900 and 1920 is attributable in part to the in-migration of large numbers of people from more violent cultures, overcoming, in a statistical sense, the tendency toward declining violence in the established population (Lane, 1980). Prohibition is thought to have contributed to the increase between 1919 and 1933; the abolition of prohibition contributed to declining rates through World War II. The nadir of modern homicide rates in the mid- to late-fifties also coincided with full employment in the industrial city. But the opening of factory jobs to African Americans came too late; by the time they gained access, such jobs were obsolete. The upturn of rates in the sixties marked the post-industrial era and relatively few employment opportunities for the unskilled, including African Americans (Lane, 1980). Some interpretations of mortality in general, including deaths resulting from violence,

argue that economic instability is associated with trends in homicide, suicide, accidents, and perhaps (after a lag) chronic disease (Holinger and Klemen, 1982).

However, no one social or economic phenomenon can explain all the variation in homicide rates; another important dimension of variation is found in the interpretation of the influence of population age cohorts, defined as groups of persons born in a particular 5-year period. Klebba (1975), for example, noted that the precipitous decline in the homicide rate during World War II was due in part to the absence of some 5.5 million men, of whom some 3.5 million were in the prime homicide victimization cohorts, 20–24 and 25–29. Furthermore, employment was high, and overtime was common, thus reducing opportunities for hostile interpersonal interaction.

The Klebba study examined homicide trends through 1972 and found that the post-1958 increase had three components:

1. A large increase in the 15–29 age group which has figured prominently in both the offender and victim categories,
2. A large increase in death rates in this age group, beginning about 1960, and
3. Higher homicide rates in the period 1960–72 for the 35 and over age group, compared to the 25–34 group, which is usually more heavily involved.

Most of the increase in homicide rates between 1962–72 was ascribed to the 20–24 cohort, born in 1948–52. Almost a quarter of all arrests for homicide came from this cohort in 1972. The 15–19 cohort (born 1953–57) accounted for nearly 19.1 of homicide arrests in 1973. Overall, the 15–29 age group included 40 percent of victims and 59 percent of arrestees in 1973 (Klebba, 1975). Another element contributing to an understanding of the dynamics of homicide in the 1960–73 period is the increase in firearm involvement from 55 percent to 67 percent of the incidents.

Smith (1986) examined the issue of whether violence is seen most clearly as an *age* effect (i.e., one affecting certain age groups), a *period* effect (one impacting all age groups across a particular time period), or a *cohort* effect, in which one or more 5-year age groups consistently have high rates through their life cycles. Using data for the quarter century 1952–76, he found that cohort was the strongest effect. Combined with the age effect (the greater involvement in homicide of younger cohorts), the cohort effect accounts for much of the increase in the homicide rate

during the period 1952–56. However, each cohort is unique, and an additional avenue of explanation suggests that we must look at the characteristics of each cohort in order to better understand the processes at work. The mere fact that a younger cohort is large does not in itself influence the overall crime rate; for a cohort to elevate rates, its *rate* must be higher than that of preceding cohorts.[2] It is in this context that we consider the influence of the notorious "baby boomers", born between about 1945 and 1960. Their relatively large numbers diminished their value in an economic sense and made the affluence of the fifties and sixties harder to sustain. Sub-groups within the cohort have fared very badly, suffering extraordinarily high rates of unemployment. As recently as 1986, for example, young blacks (16–19) were more than twice as likely to be unemployed (39% versus 15%) as their white counterparts (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1988: Table 611).

In order to test the hypothesis that the structural characteristics of cohorts affect their economic well-being, which in turn influences the rate of violence, Smith measured the structural and economic characteristics of each cohort, using the variables *cohort size, age-specific unemployment rates,* and *proportion African American,* and examined their relationship to the homicide rate. All three variables were significant; the strongest correlation was between age-specific homicide rate and the unemployment rate. This finding suggests that such structural characteristics help explain the behavior of particular cohorts, although social-psychological effects, such as thwarted aspirations, should also be taken into account (Smith, 1986).

In the mid-1990s, a welcome downward trend in homicide was noted, with frequencies having declined from 1992–94, including a 7 percent drop from 25,470 in 1993 to 23,730 in 1994 (AP, 1995a), followed by a 12 percent drop in the first half of 1995 compared to the same period in 1994 (AP, 1995b). Significant declines were noted in several major cities, including New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Houston, Washington D.C., and Miami, and Kansas City, Missouri. Suggested explanations included a decline in the size of the youthful male population, the maturing and stabilization of drug markets, improved policing, community involvement, and displacement to the suburbs. The latter

[2]If a cohort is relatively large, it will, other things being equal, generate more crime. However, the larger amount of crime will be spread among more persons, so that the *population-based rate* (e.g., rate per 100,000) is not affected. On the other hand, a cohort generating more than its "share" of crime will contribute to the inflation of overall rates.

phenomenon is exemplified by Washington D.C. where homicide fell 10 percent in 1995, but increased in neighboring Prince George's County by 10 percent (Thomas, 1995a,b), in a "less than par" increment, given that 10 percent in Washington D.C. meant more incidents than 10 percent in Prince George's County. Indeed, displacement cannot explain declining *national* rates; fundamental changes are occurring to some degree.

Data Accuracy

The accuracy of homicide series, particularly in the earlier years, is questionable. Zahn (1980) has noted that complete national statistics were not available until the 1930s. Furthermore, police data and coroner's data are both inconsistent to some degree. For example, police data, ultimately incorporated in the *Uniform Crime Reports* (UCR) of the FBI, are probably quite accurate in terms of counts of incidents. But the accuracy of data on the victim-offender relationship or other aspects of the case may merely reflect the sophistication of the agency or be a function of the social status of the victim or offender, with lower status persons having less effort devoted to their cases. Also, coroners and medical examiners generate homicide data for national *Vital Statistics* (VS). These data, too, have been quite inconsistent over time, depending on whether they came through a coroner or medical examiner system, the adequacy of their staffs, and, again, the social status of the victim or offender.

Complicating the picture further, all states were not included in the national reporting of VS until the 1930s, when the UCR also began. On balance, however, both the UCR and VS have been congruent over time, with the VS usually higher than the UCR, the difference being attributable to definitional variation (Zahn, 1980).[3]

EMERGENT THEMES

Several themes emerge from interpretation of variations in twentieth century homicide rates. First, homicide has been predominantly an event occurring between males, on an intraracial basis. Rates among

[3]VS defines homicide in medical terms, as taking the life of another intentionally, while the UCR uses a legal definition—"willful killing." Thus a police killing would appear in the VS but not in the UCR (Zahn, 1980:115).