

Concerns Over Rising Crime in Context

“We would have to see the same increase [in violent crime] for 19 more years before we would return to the scale of violence seen just a little more than 10 years ago.”—Dr. Jeffrey A. Butts,¹ Research Fellow, University of Chicago, Chapin Hall Center for Children

Background: The recently released report by the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) suggests that violent crime in the United States has increased drastically over a 24-month period. This new report, “Violent Crime in America: 24 Months of Alarming Trends” is a follow-up to a report issued by PERF in the fall, “A Gathering Storm – Violent Crime in America,” both of which reflected the concerns of law enforcement and city officials that violent crime is on the rise. This latest report from PERF examines results from the FBI’s Uniform Crime Report (UCR) for 2004 and 2005 and compares them to independent surveys of police departments on violent crime in their jurisdictions. The PERF report does not break out changes in crime by age (adults or juveniles).

The Justice Policy Institute (JPI), a Washington, D.C.-based policy group that promotes fair and rational justice policies, cautions that a one-year change in arrests cannot be interpreted as a “trend,” and that no single factor can explain changes in arrests across the nation, or within a jurisdiction. This factsheet is intended to put the 24-month trend of rising crime in 56 jurisdictions in context for people concerned about juvenile justice policy.

1) Adults, not juveniles, represent 84 percent of all violent crime arrests—the increase in juvenile crime witnessed between 2004 and 2005 represents only a fraction of the nation’s public safety challenges. The PERF survey did not report changes in arrests by age. The latest data from the FBI Uniform Crime reports show that there was a small increase in juvenile arrests for homicide (an 18.5 percent increase represents +145 more juvenile arrests for homicide nationwide), robbery (3,268), and aggravated assaults (1,876). While these changes in juvenile arrest patterns are a cause for concern, these figures need to be kept in their proper context: The FBI reports that there were 1,390,695 violent crimes nationwide in 2005, an increase of 23,686 violent crimes since 2004. Seventy-eight percent of the increase in violent crime arrests from 2004 to 2005 was due to adult crime.

**There has been no significant change
in the proportion of violent crime arrests that were juveniles.**

Percentage of total arrests for violent crimes, by adults and juveniles

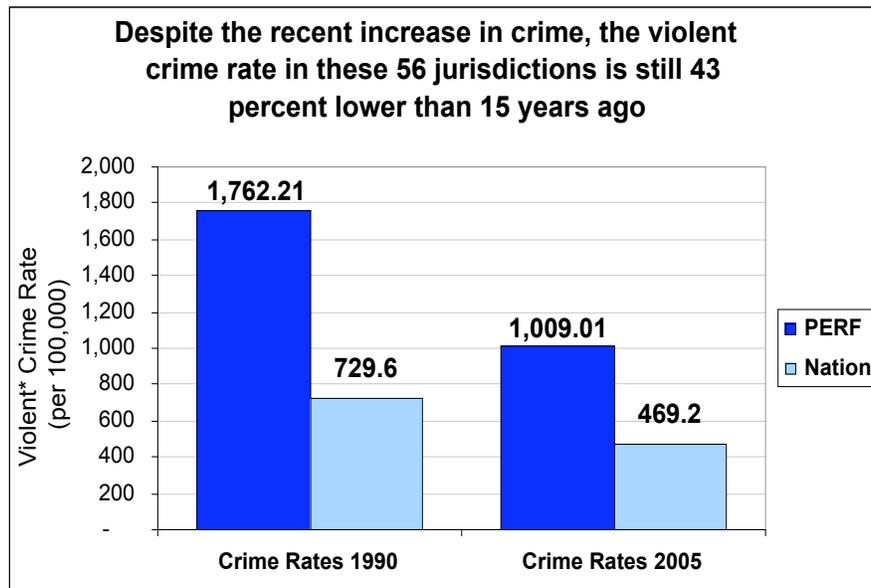
	2004		2005	
	Juveniles	Adults	Juveniles	Adults
Murder	8.2%	91.8%	9.0%	91.0%
Rape	16.2%	83.8%	15.4%	84.6%
Robbery	23.2%	76.8%	25.2%	74.8%
Aggravated Assault	13.8%	86.2%	13.6%	86.4%
Total Arrests	15.5%	84.5%	15.8%	84.2%

Source: FBI Uniform Crime Reports, Crime in the United States, 2005

The recent study from the Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Violent Felons in Large Urban Counties*, is an analysis of violent felony cases from jurisdictions that together accounted for half of the reported violent crime in the nation. According to this report only 10 percent of homicide convictions, 12 percent of robbery convictions, and 4 percent of rape and assault convictions were youth under the age of 18.

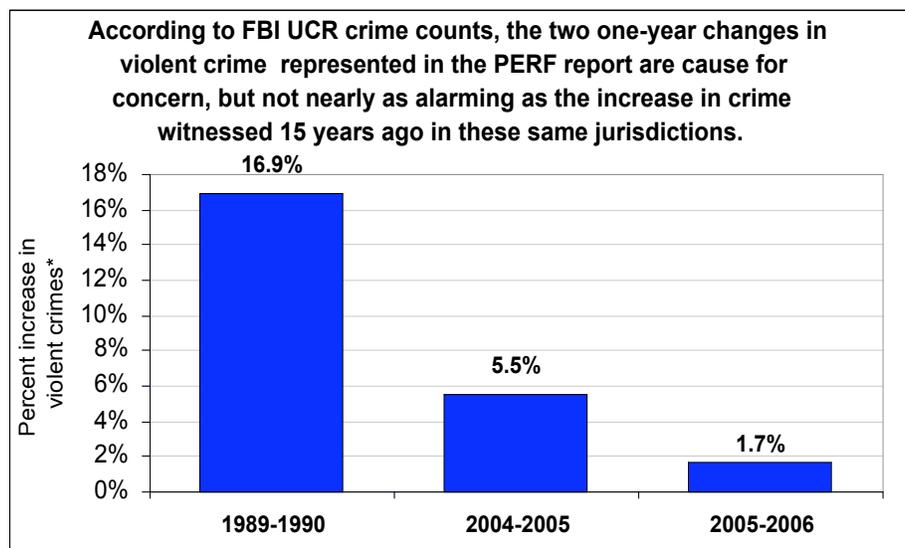
¹ Testimony presented to the Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism and Homeland Security, “Making Communities Safer: Youth Violence and Gang Interventions that Work” February 15, 2007

2) It is difficult to get a clear picture of a trend in violent crime in the United States by studying only 56 jurisdictions, out of 17,000 jurisdictions nationwide. The selected jurisdictions represent only 11 percent of the entire U.S. population. The PERF survey provides no evidence that those 56 jurisdictions accurately represent the entire nation. In fact, these 56 jurisdictions have violent crime rates more than double those of the nation as a whole.² Nationwide, violent crime rates remain far lower today than in decades past (see graph, below).



Sources: U.S. Census Bureau; FBI Uniform Crime Reports, 1990, 2005.

3) **Crime rates are volatile; a trend cannot be established with a short-term change.** While any increase in violence anywhere is a reason for concern, it is “too soon to tell” whether the recent changes in crime in some jurisdictions mean that the country is experiencing a national, multi-year increase in crime. As noted by researchers from the University of Chicago, Chapin Hall Center for Children, it would take many years of a steady increase in crime to return to the same level of violence experienced in the early 1990s. Of interest, the PERF survey shows that the increase in violent crime in 2006 has slowed when compared to the previous year (see graph, below).



Sources: FBI Uniform Crime Reports, Crime in the United States, 1989, 1990; “Violent Crime in America: 24 Months of Alarming Trends.” (2007). Police Executive Research Forum.

Note: the 1989-1990 data represents crime changes in the 56 surveyed jurisdictions from the UCR, and the subsequent data is taken directly from the Police Executive Research Forum survey of 56 jurisdictions.

² According to the FBI Uniform Crime Reports, 2005, the national violent crime rate in 1990 was 729.6 per 100,000 and in 2005 it was 469.2 per 100,000. In addition, these FBI statistics include the crime of rape, which was excluded from the PERF report’s counts, and, if included, would have increased the violent crime rates of these jurisdictions

4) While law enforcement officials and others are advocating for increased federal funding for policing, this may not be the most effective way to meet public safety goals. Several organizations—including PERF—are now calling for an increase in federal funds for policing. The day the PERF survey was released, the U.S. Conference of Mayors issued a release supporting increased funding for policing and the Brookings Institution published a policy brief stating that the COPS program was responsible for a significant share of the drop in crime in the 1990s. U.S. Senator Joseph R. Biden, Jr. (D-DE) held a briefing this week calling for additional funds for policing.

Is increasing the number of police the most effective way to increase public safety?

*“The best available evidence suggests that more police lead to less crime. Thus, COPS appears to have contributed to the drop in crime observed in the 1990s.”*³ **The Brookings Institution**

The Brookings Institution cites an evaluation of the COPS program from the Government Accountability Office (GAO) as evidence that increased investments in policing are a way to bring down crime rates. But the conclusions presented by the actual GAO study are mixed: “Factors other than COPS funds accounted for the majority of the decline in crime during this period. For example, between 1993 and 2000, the overall crime rate declined by 26 percent, and the 1.3 percent decline due to COPS, amounted to about 5 percent of the overall decline. Similarly, COPS contributed about 7 percent of the 32 percent decline in violent crime from 1993 to 2000.”⁴

*“At a time when crime is on the rise in our nation's cities, funding for key law enforcement programs has been cut in half. Mayors and police chiefs urge the federal government to stand with us to make our cities safer by restoring programs that have proven effective in the fight against crime.”*⁵

U.S. Conference of Mayors

According to the President’s Fiscal Year 2007 budget, an assessment of the COPS program rated the program as “*Results Not Demonstrated*” with respect to reducing crime. Additionally, the program has already achieved its mandate, which was to help local police agencies to hire over 100,000 police officers. As a result, additional funding is unwarranted.”⁶

*“There can be no doubt that the COPS program was a success. In 1994 we had historically high rates of violent crimes. Because we put more cops on the streets, we were able to reduce these crimes to the lowest levels in a generation.”*⁷ **U.S. Senator Joseph R. Biden, Jr. (D-DE)**

This increase in police officers from COPS grants was supposed to reduce the rising violent crime rate. However, before the COPS grants were even distributed, the number of reported crimes had already started to fall.

- From 1992-1993, the number of reported violent crimes decreased:⁸ the historic 13-year decline in violent crimes had already started prior to the COPS program being enacted.
- A study by the Heritage Foundation found that COPS grants delegated to hiring more officers were not responsible for the reduction in violent crime rates at the county level from 1994 to 2000.⁹ In other words, the money given to hire more officers was not the reason for the decline in violent crimes during this time period.

5) There are better ways to promote public safety.

³ John J. Donohue III and Jens Ludwig. (March 2007). “More COPS.” The Brookings Institution, Policy Brief #158.

⁴ United States Government Accountability Office. (October 2005). COPS Grants Were a Modest Contributor to Declines in Crime in the 1990s. www.gao.gov/highlights/d06104high.pdf

⁵ “Statement of The U.S. Conference of Mayors President Trenton, N.J., Mayor Douglas H. Palmer on President Bush’s Proposed FY’08 Budget,” February 6, 2007, PR Newswire, <http://news.corporate.findlaw.com/prnewswire/20070206/06feb20071535.html>

⁶ U.S. Department of Justice. Office of Management and Budget. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget/fy2007/justice.html>

⁷ “Congress : Biden: No Coincidence Violent Crime is Up While Administration Shortchanges Law Enforcement,” March 12, 2007, <http://www.allamericanpatriots.com/m-news+article+storvid-21064.html>

⁸ FBI Uniform Crime Reports, Crime in the United States. www.fbi.gov/ucr/ucr.htm

⁹ Muhlhausen, David B., May 2001. “Do Community Oriented Policing Services grants affect violent crime rates?” The Heritage Foundation. Online: www.heritage.org

“It is clear that declines in the crime rate do not require fundamental social or structural changes. Smaller shifts in policy can make large differences.” Franklin E. Zimring, *The Great American Crime Decline* (2006).¹⁰

Scholars suggest that there is no “magic bullet” that would represent a national policy to bring down crime rates in every community. However, there are other options policymakers have that may help improve public safety—including, choosing not to follow the harmful policies of the past.

JPI recommends the following:

- I) **Invest in proven approaches to reduce crime and recidivism among young people.** Evidence-based practices, which have undergone rigorous experimental inquiry, have been shown to work with violent and seriously delinquent youth. Such practices are more cost effective and produce more benefits than traditional punitive measures.¹¹
- II) **Invest in policies that increase employment, educational attainment and treatment for those who need it.** JPI notes the following recent research findings:
 - A study reported in the *American Economic Review* on the effects of education on crime found that a one-year increase in the average year of schooling completed reduces violent crime by almost 30 percent.¹²
 - From 1992 to 1997, during a time when the unemployment rate dropped 33 percent, the country also witnessed a 30 percent drop in robberies, a 15 percent drop in auto theft and burglary and a 4 percent drop in larceny.¹³
 - A JPI study of drug treatment and imprisonment in Maryland from 2000 to 2005 found that eight of 12 jurisdictions that depended more on drug treatment saw crime rates fall by 10 percent or more, while only two of 12 jurisdictions that relied more on imprisonment experienced such a decrease.¹⁴
- III) **Incarcerating young people does not mean safer communities.** According to a report published by JPI, the inappropriate incarceration of youth in secure detention centers across the country can contribute to their future delinquent behavior and harm their education, employment and health. Studies from around the country show that incarcerated youth have higher recidivism rates than youth supervised in other kinds of settings.¹⁵

###

The Justice Policy Institute is a Washington, D.C.-based think tank dedicated to ending society’s reliance on incarceration and promoting effective and just solutions to social problems. For more information, visit our website at www.justicepolicy.org

¹⁰ Zimring, Frank E. (2006). *The Great American Crime Decline*. New York: Oxford University Press.

<http://www.oup.com/us/catalog/general/subject/Sociology/CriminalJustice/Criminology/?view=usa&ci=9780195181159>

¹¹ Steve Aos, Marna Miller, and Elizabeth Drake. (2006). *Evidence-Based Public Policy Options to Reduce Future Prison Construction, Criminal Justice Costs, and Crime Rates*. Olympia: Washington State Institute for Public Policy.

¹² Lochner, L. and Moretti, E. (2004). “The Effect of Education on Crime: Evidence from Prison Inmates, Arrests, and Self-Reports.” *The American Economic Review*.

¹³ Raphael, S. and Winter-Ebmer, R. (2001).

¹⁴ Pranis, Kevin. 2006. “Progress and Challenges: An analysis of drug treatment and imprisonment in Maryland from 2000 to 2005.” Washington, D.C.: Justice Policy Institute.

¹⁵ Holman, Barry and Ziedenberg, Jason. *The Dangers of Detention: The Impact of Incarcerating Youth in Detention and Other Secure Facilities* (2006) Washington DC: Justice Policy Institute