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Why Is U.S. Violent Crime Declining? (Part 2): Goldberg

By Jeffrey Goldberg - Feb 15, 2012

In the mid-1990s, even as crime rates across the U.S. were falling, a group of prominent criminologists and sociologists came along with the intention of scaring the hell out of us.

Don't be fooled by this downturn in violence, they said. Something much worse is coming -- the "superpredators," a [group of children](#) who, in 10 years, would grow into the most murderous cohort of teenagers the country had seen.

This is how Time magazine portrayed the problem in January 1996: "They are growing up, too frequently, in abusive or broken homes, with little adult supervision and few positive role models. Left to themselves, they spend much of their time hanging out on the streets or soaking up violent TV shows."

Although the crime rate was dropping for adults, the article added, it was soaring for teens, a population that would soon be booming. It then quotes the esteemed criminologist James Alan Fox, who says: "This is the calm before the crime storm. So long as we fool ourselves in thinking we're winning the war against crime, we may be blindsided by this bloodbath of teenage violence that is lurking in the future."

Well, the future came, and no, you didn't somehow miss the "bloodbath of teenage violence." Because it didn't happen. Crime rates continued to fall through the first decade of the new millennium, and continue to fall today. In the city whose crime patterns I know best, [Washington](#), D.C., the homicide rate -- perhaps the most important single marker of civilization's advance or retreat -- is dropping through the floor.

Unpredictable Trajectory

In 1991, 479 people were murdered in a city whose population was about 500,000. Last year, 108 people were killed in a city whose population has topped 600,000. Washington's mayor, Vincent Gray, told me he attributes the city's population growth -- D.C. has added 17,000 people in the past 15 months -- in large part to the precipitous drop in violent crime. "This is not a trajectory anyone could have predicted," he said.

The rate of decline in violent crime is uneven across the country. Some cities, such as Philadelphia and Baltimore, are having much more difficulty reducing their homicide rates than Washington or [New York](#). But no city has seen the burst of violence that was forecast in the 1990s. The obvious

question is, Why didn't these ostensibly vicious youth turn to violent crime in large numbers?

Not long ago, I visited Washington's police chief, Cathy Lanier, in her office to discuss the city's seemingly miraculous turnaround, and asked her why she thought the homicide rate was cratering. She listed a number of broad trends, including economic development, which pushed crime out of Washington's downtown and toward the periphery (and over the city's eastern border with Prince George's County, [Maryland](#)), and the waning of the crack epidemic. It was crack that fueled the drug wars of the late 1980s and early 1990s, and crack that took apart so many families.

Other police chiefs, and criminologists, have attributed the broad declines in violence to an assortment of other trends. The [decline in lead](#) levels in young people, brought about by the banning of leaded gasoline in the 1970s, is sometimes cited by public-health officials. So, too, is the discovery that so-called [crack babies](#) weren't nearly as affected by their mothers' addiction as was originally feared.

America's high rate of incarceration is often credited as well. Charles Murray, the political scientist and author, argues that "higher imprisonment was the necessary condition for 100 percent of the reduction in violent crime." James Q. Wilson, a professor at [Pepperdine University](#), argues more modestly that incarceration is responsible for perhaps 25 percent to 30 percent of the reduction.

Controversial Argument

Then there's the controversial argument, advanced most famously by the economists Steven Levitt and John Donohue, that legalized abortion curtailed the number of unwanted babies, who would have presumably grown up unloved, maladjusted and prone to violence.

But those theories don't fully account for actual policing. Lanier outlined some of the changes in the way her department does its job -- procedural, technological and investigative changes that I suspect have more to do with the drop in homicides than sociologists might credit. She talked about the frustration she felt, first as a patrol officer then as a midlevel commander, when good ideas were ignored.

"Every time I took a promotional test, I would have that many less idiots to listen to, and I would try to fix the things that I thought were bad. As chief, I get the chance to fix the things that aggravated me my whole career. I have watched chief after chief implement strategies that someone else brought here without consideration for whether the strategy fits our specific crime problem."

Early in her tenure, for instance, she rejected the philosophy of "zero-tolerance" law enforcement. "When you do zero-tolerance and flood neighborhoods with violent crime with cops and you lock up everybody for the most minor violations, the 45-year-old woman sitting on her stoop drinking beer, you make people think you're an occupying army locking up good people and leaving behind the thugs," she said.

"We tried to flip that the other way. Arresting people is not a measure of success. Less crime is a measure of success. We put beat people on the streets, handing out business cards with their cell

numbers, BlackBerry numbers, and told them to call if they needed anything. After a shooting people don't want to talk to an officer on the street, but they will call."

Ending Retaliation

The goal, largely achieved, was to convince residents of high-crime neighborhoods that the police weren't the enemy. This, Lanier said, brought the police closer to their ultimate goal of quickly inserting themselves into the retaliatory cycle that begins after each homicide. As many as 60 percent of last year's murders, she told me, were committed in retaliation for earlier killings. Homicide detectives are making arrests much faster these days, thanks to better street-level intelligence. In 2007, the average D.C. homicide investigation was closed in 52 days; by 2011 that number had been halved. Many of the arrests grow out of an [anonymous tip line](#) Lanier established.

"In 2008, we got 292 tips," she said. "By 2011 we were at over 1,200, and you would not believe the detailed tips we get. People are trusting us now much more."

She went on, "As soon as a victim is shot, we want the name, within the hour, to go to the analysts, and then the gang intelligence unit will see if he's a validated gang member and then we'll get a work-up on his prior arrests, who his co- defendants were, what arrests happened in the last 30 days, and that will all go to the homicide detectives who are then making arrests before retaliation kicks in."

Lanier believes that smart policing can drive D.C.'s homicide number below 50 a year. "We want zero, of course, and there's no reason that advanced, intelligent policing can't intervene and make this situation better than it is even now."

Zero homicides in a city of 600,000 seems like an impossibility. But so too did the notion that Washington's homicide rate would ever drop at all. Sweeping and unpredicted change has much to do with this astonishing drop. But so, too, does Lanier's police department. Which proves, if nothing else, that government is still capable of doing some things right.

([Jeffrey Goldberg](#) is a Bloomberg View columnist and a national correspondent for The Atlantic. The opinions expressed are his own. Read [Part 1](#).)

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