

Despite Rhetoric, Violent Crime Climbs **Updated 69 Study Shows Increase of 40% in Cities**

By David A. Vise and Lorraine Adams

Rosy assessment of the nation's declining crime rate wrongly focus on short-term drops from crime peaks early in the decade and ignore the overall rise of violence since the 1960s, according to a new report.

The 30-year update of a landmark study by the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence found that violent crime in major cities reported to the FBI has risen by 40 percent since 1969.

The new study is intended as a counterpoint to the drumbeat of optimistic reports describing the current drop in crime, and it offers a sober reminder that the United States still suffers from a historically high level of violence.

"There is no attempt here to be doomsayers or naysayers and say nothing good has happened in the last few years. But the intent is to gain perspective by looking back," said Elliott Currie, one of several authors of the original report who also participated in the update.

"This is the kind of crime rate that we would have said is a disaster when we went to work on that crime report 30 years ago. There still is a great deal of trouble out there in our cities, and increasingly in our rural areas, and most people viscerally feel that," Currie said, adding that the study helps explain why many people greet recent reports of dropping crime rates with disbelief.

The National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence was established by President Lyndon B. Johnson in the wake of riots and profound social upheaval, including the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy. Its initial 1969 report argued that violence and unrest stemmed from unmet socioeconomic needs and recommended investments in housing, education and jobs for the disenfranchised.

The new study, which will be formally released later this week, was conducted by the progressive Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation, a private

group named for the brother of the former president and charged with carrying on the work of the violence commission and the 1968 Kerner race commission.

While crime has declined since 1993 amid the waning of the crack cocaine epidemic and the growth of the economy, the report says this drop exaggerates gains in public safety because it is based on comparisons to unusually high levels of violence that prevailed in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

The report suggests that this is why Americans do not feel as safe as they did three decades ago, citing a national survey conducted by the foundation in which people were asked, "Is there any area right around here - that is, within a mile - where you would be afraid to walk alone at night?" In 1967, 31 percent of respondents answered "yes"; by 1998, that number had grown to 41 percent.

"If you compare fear in the late 1960s to fear in 1998, there has been an increase of over 30 percent," said foundation president Lynn A. Curtis, who also worked on the 1960 report.

Deputy Attorney General Eric H. Holder Jr. acknowledged that a "fear factor" exists across the nation but argued that some measures of crime are at a 30-year low. "I think the fear factor is separate and apart from the statistical evidence," Holder said, "People feel a little safer, but not as safe as they should."

The foundation report also notes the continuing prevalence of crime in the United States relative to other industrialized nations. In one of its more startling comparisons, it states: "In 1995, handguns were used to kill 2 people in New Zealand, 15 in Japan, 30 in Great Britain, 106 in Canada, 213 in Germany, and 9,390 in the United States."

Like the original report, the new study attempts to draw connections between American socioeconomic inequalities and crime. "America's failure to reduce endemic fear and violence over the long run is paralleled by its failure to establish justice. Nearly [one-quarter] of all young children live in poverty. America is the most unequal country in the industrialized world in terms of income, wages and wealth."

The 1969 report warned of a declining "City of the Future," with rampant suburbanization as people fled to what they viewed as safer neighborhoods. Today, the update found, Americans no longer feel they can escape the threat of violence by moving to the suburbs or to rural areas.

"Crime and violent acts in the suburbs, such as the Littleton massacre, and the deterioration of the older inner-ring' suburbs show that, in the long run, one can't simply abandon the nation's social problems," the report says. "The commission foresaw that a city based on the principle of flight to safety would only deepen social divisions."

The study decries what some criminologists and big-city mayors have hailed as the twin towers of crime fighting in the 190s: a zero tolerance police policy aimed at arresting people for nuisance crimes and serious offenses alike, and a dramatic increase in the incarceration rate. Instead, the study says building more prisons may dampen the crime rate somewhat but is a poor substitute for effective public policies.

"It is painfully clear that we, when it comes to violence, remain a society in deep trouble," the study says. "How deep is masked by the extraordinary explosion of imprisonment since the time of the violence commission, which has shunted a good part of our crime (and drug) problems behind walls and, accordingly, out of most people's sight."

The study cites a number of programs as good public policy approaches to crime prevention, including full-service community schools such as the El Puente Academy in Brooklyn, the Ford Foundation's Quantum Opportunities Program to keep inner-city youth in high school, the South Bronx Argus Community's "training first" job preparation program for out-of-school youth and the San Francisco Delancey Street reintegration program for ex-offenders.

One strategy endorsed in the study is after-school safe havens, such as the Dorchester Youth Collaborative in Boston, which offers teenagers an alternative to the support and protection of a gang.

The collaborative's staff helps teenagers in the program to find jobs. And if they lose the jobs - as they usually do - the collaborative is a place for them to return to where they can learn from their mistakes and try again.

The collaborative also helps settle beefs. "We can say, You have your food and friendship here and if you have a problem at school, five or six men and women will come and negotiate with both sides," founder Emmett Folgert said.

In addition to its analysis of crime data, the Eisenhower Foundation report is full of strongly worded liberal doctrine, citing numerous inequities, including the growing pay gap between chief executive officers and employees. Foundation president Curtis acknowledged that criminologists can debate the use of government statistics and use figures selectively to bolster whatever case fits their agenda.

The study's strength, its authors say, lies in the perspective that it provides. Looking at crime statistics over decades, rather than years, is necessary to understand public safety and avoid simplistic conclusions about declines in crime.

"The most optimistic view after looking at this," Curtis said, "is that we are in roughly the same ballpark now in the late 1990s as we were in the late 1960s, when everyone said crime is so bad we need a national commission to study it."