

CRIME IN THE UNITED STATES

The magnitude of the crime problem in the United States is fairly well known and will be sketched only briefly here.

The most recently published detailed crime statistics are for 1997.¹ That year, in the United States one property crime was committed on average every 3 seconds. One violent crime was committed every 19 seconds. On average, there was a burglary every 13 seconds, a motor vehicle theft every 23 seconds, a robbery every minute, a forcible rape every 5 minutes, and a murder every 29 minutes.²

Firearms were used in 67.8 percent of murders committed (*UCR*, Table 2.11).

An estimated \$15.6 billion in property was stolen. Nearly half of this (\$7 billion) resulted from thefts of motor vehicles. The overall recovery rate was 37 percent (*UCR*, p. 7).

In all, more than 13 million major crimes were reported as Crime Index offenses; that is, almost 5,000 per 100,000 inhabitants. Crime rates were highest in metropolitan areas, lowest in rural counties.

¹Preliminary statistics for 1998 were released May 16, 1999. Crime continued to drop, with both violent and property crimes down 7 percent. Murders were down 8 percent, rapes 5 percent, robberies 11 percent, aggravated assaults 5 percent, burglaries 7 percent, larceny-thefts 6 percent, and motor vehicle thefts 10 percent, from 1997.

²*Uniform Crime Reports for the United States, 1997* (henceforth, *UCR*), Chart 2.1. Unless otherwise indicated, all crime statistics cited are for 1997.

The 1997 crime rates were the lowest since 1974. Nationally, the Crime Index rate fell 3 percent from the 1996 level, 10 percent from the 1993 level, and 13 percent from the 1988 level (*UCR*, p. 7).

There were 2.7 million arrests for Index crimes in 1997; 1.5 million of these were larceny-theft arrests. Overall, law enforcement agencies reported a 22 percent clearance rate³ for Index crimes (*UCR*, p. 7). The violent crime clearance rate was 48 percent. The clearance rate for murders was 66 percent; for forcible rape it was 51 percent, and for robbery it was 26 percent (*UCR*, p. 12).

STATE AND LOCAL LAW ENFORCEMENT

U.S. businesses and families are protected against crime by some 18,000 state and local law enforcement agencies that employ approximately 800,000 officers. More than 90 percent of those agencies have 24 or fewer sworn officers and 50 percent have 12 or fewer officers. Yet state and local law enforcement agencies are responsible for handling 95 percent of the crimes that people care about—murders, rapes, muggings, burglaries, etc.

As President Clinton has observed, “We have to recognize . . . that most laws—criminal laws—are state laws and most criminal law enforcement is done by local police officials.”⁴

Each year, the U.S. public pays on the order of \$100 billion to fight crime. Although crime rates are decreasing—for reasons that are not well understood—the cost of the criminal justice system keeps increasing, more than doubling in the decade from 1982 to 1993. The federal system pays about 19 percent, with the remainder paid by state and local agencies.

More than \$44 billion is spent for police protection, with state and local governments paying more than \$36 billion (81.8 percent) of

³The usual way a crime is “cleared” is by arrest of one or more suspects. One arrest may “clear” a number of crimes believed by police to have been committed by the same person or persons. Crimes can be cleared other than by arrest—for example, if a suspect is killed in a shoot-out with police.

⁴President Bill Clinton, remarks before Ohio Peace Officers Training Academy, London, Ohio, February 15, 1994.

that. Judicial and legal expenses to government are more than \$21 billion (78 percent paid by state and local governments), and corrections costs are more than \$32 billion (with 92 percent paid at the state and local levels).⁵

Local governments pay more than \$31 billion for police protection; this is about 72 percent of the national total. Localities pay more than \$10 billion annually for corrections; state governments pay about twice that (*Sourcebook*, p. 3).

On average, there are 250 full-time officers per 100,000 residents, with 150 of these being local police officers (*Sourcebook*, p. 38). About half are assigned to street patrol. Only about 8 percent of these sworn officers are on the streets at any given time (Sherman, 1995, p. 329).

THE NEED FOR MODERN TECHNOLOGY

Research has found that police response speed is not the major determinant of whether an on-scene arrest takes place and whether witnesses are locatable—rather, the time it takes a citizen to report a crime is the important variable (Pate et al., 1976; Van Kirk, 1978; Spelman and Brown, 1982). Here, the question arises, How can citizen reporting be accelerated, perhaps through new technology?

The availability of certain information about a crime—such as the estimated range of time when the crime occurred, whether a witness reported the offense, whether there was an on-view report of offense, if usable fingerprints were retrieved, and if a suspect was described or named—has been shown to be a valid predictor of whether the crime will ever be solved (Greenberg et al., 1975; Greenwood et al., 1997). These “solvability factors” have been used to help decide whether to follow up on a case (Petersilia, 1987), and they can presumably be brought to bear on the problem-solving approach (Eck and Spelman, 1987) to community-oriented policing.

In the past, police information has not been organized into a uniform, formatted, and comprehensive set of cross-referenced retriev-

⁵*Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics 1997* (henceforth, *Sourcebook*), p. 3. These data are for 1993, the most recent available.

able data files available to all officers (Bittner, 1990). There is interest in improving computerized capability to make lists, produce maps, and carry out statistical analyses, building on the Drug Market Analysis Project of NIJ (Manning, 1992). Information technology has great promise for improving crime analysis (NIJ, 1996). More generally, technology can act as a “force multiplier” (NIJ, 1995).

New technologies—including electronic surveillance, data access and retrieval, and computerized decision aids—may well improve policing, but specific benefits are commonly not known, and some seemingly useful technologies go unused when offered or fielded. New technologies bring new skill requirements and can alter social relations within an organization (Manning, 1992). For example, lack of user expertise has been an obstacle to use of mapping software for crime control and prevention (Rich, 1995). Earlier evaluations of Computer Assisted Dispatching (CAD) concluded that CAD installations did not yield promised results. Laptop computers, cellular phones, and expert systems have not been subject to published evaluations (Manning, 1992). By and large, the existence of patrol-car allocation models has not created a demand for them (Petersilia, 1987). Without training and testing, new technologies cannot be properly evaluated.

Modern urban police departments need to keep abreast of and, where appropriate, make use of the latest developments in information processing, communications, and enforcement technology. Improved technology has the potential to increase police effectiveness—provided it is wisely chosen, well implemented and integrated, and appropriately used. But it is also possible for an organization to waste money chasing after the latest whiz-bang technology, bringing change so rapidly that everyone is always having to learn a new system and nothing ever seems to work right.

Given this state of affairs, it is no wonder that many law enforcement agencies lack confidence in their ability to make good information technology decisions.

THE NEED FOR FEDERAL ASSISTANCE

Americans support a decentralized system of law enforcement because they believe it allows local control and oversight—their police

and sheriff departments are responsible to them, not to some far-away authority. Yet, it is this very decentralization that has made it difficult for local law enforcement to use advanced technologies to fight crime. Decentralization poses obstacles to information sharing and works against achieving economies of scale. In addition, many municipalities face severe budget constraints.

Although crime control is primarily a state and local responsibility, the federal government clearly has a role to play. In some respects this role remains poorly developed. Areas in need of further development include (1) better collaboration with local police to interdict illicit gun traffic and (2) provision of “public goods” that states and localities need but cannot afford on their own.

These public goods include creation and maintenance of shared operational databases such as the National Crime Information Center (NCIC); *fostering and evaluating a wide range of innovations and disseminating the results of evaluations of those innovations* so that the successful ones can be replicated elsewhere; and organizing and sponsoring the information and new insights they generate (Blumstein, 1998, pp. 18–19, emphasis added).

Increasingly, governments at all levels are being asked to provide quantitative assessments of the effectiveness of their activities. As budgets come under increasing pressure and scrutiny, government agencies are turning to technology in hopes of increasing productivity—but the contribution of technology to productivity enhancement is very difficult to measure. Developing new measures for public investment in technology generally requires an assessment of the costs and benefits within a framework of public goals for the application of technology to provide the context for the investment. The technical challenge is how to plan for technological innovation as part of continuing, sustainable improvements in both community policing and law enforcement—and how to measure the effectiveness of new technologies.

LIMITS TO FEDERAL ASSISTANCE

There are also political and administrative challenges—or limitations—to be considered. The politics of federal assistance to state

and local agencies is outside the scope of this report, but we include one quotation for readers to consider:

Almost \$4 billion per year in federal crime prevention assistance is given out primarily on the basis of population rather than homicide rates. Put bluntly, the money goes where the votes are, not where the crime is (Sherman, 1998, p. 42).

Similarly we note the existence of administrative challenges that policymakers should recognize:

[The] national government now has little ability to implement policies that depend almost entirely on state and local governments for their actual, day-to-day administration, and which aim at changing the behavior of countless people in government and in the community.

The record in such areas as youth and family policy, environmental policy, welfare policy, transportation policy, and health policy shows how human and financial resources can be drained from the leaky bucket of administrative federalism.

Whether the administrative barriers to an expanded national role in crime control can be overcome remains an open question. But to continue to debate and analyze crime policy without due consideration of these administrative challenges is to exaggerate the ease with which crime can be affected by public policy in general, and by national policy in particular (DiIulio et al., 1995, pp. 461–462).

Legacy of the LEAA

Given the desire of federal policymakers to do something to help state and local authorities fight crime, the great temptation is simply to “throw money” at the problem. Critics contend that is what the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA) did, frittering away \$8 billion while the crime rate continued to rise (LEAA, 1980).

Established in 1968 and disestablished in 1982, the LEAA was a vehicle for federal funding of state and local governmental crime control efforts. Basically a check-writing agency,

the LEAA sponsored law enforcement training institutes for state and local officials, began to develop national criminal justice data-gathering and information-sharing networks, spurred ambitious criminal rehabilitation programs, and encouraged local community-based crime control initiatives (DiIulio et al., 1995, p. 453).

The LEAA is generally viewed as having failed to meet expectations. Its virtue in allowing thousands of recipient state and local agencies flexibility in acquiring and employing technology and other resources may also have been its failing, because it did little to make policy or administration of law enforcement more coherent across jurisdictions. The LEAA has been described as one of several “major domestic policy initiatives that stalled or sank after striking the administrative icebergs of intergovernmental implementation” (DiIulio et al., 1995, p. 457).

The response to the perceived failure of LEAA was—for several years—to cease federal funding assistance to local law enforcement, in effect “throwing the baby out with the bath water.”

What’s Different Now

The LEAA gave law enforcement “consumers” more “buying power.” What it did not give them was anything akin to *Consumers Reports*. Current efforts remedy this by providing responsive technology assistance (the subject of Chapter Three) and by facilitating responsible technology deployment (the subject of Chapter Four).