



Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

CRIME PATTERNS AND TRENDS

Crime is down -- or is it?

There is good news on the national crime front...or so it seems at first glance.

As is usual practice, the FBI released today its [preliminary tabulations](#) of crime statistics for 2011, and the short-term trend seems rather encouraging. Although the final figures will not be available until the Fall, the incidence of serious violent and property crime continues its downward slide.

According to the FBI analysis (see figure below), violent crime was down 6.4% in 2011 over 2010, including a 1.9% decline in murder. The homicide drop would mean that nearly 280 fewer Americans were murdered last year as compared to the year before. A homicide death toll of about 14,500 would be the lowest since Richard Nixon was elected President of the United States.

As for property crime, the figures are not nearly as rosy, showing a drop of less than 1 percent for the year. But, of course, that could be considered quite an achievement given the troubled economy, not to mention consequent budget cuts for crime prevention and crime control.



While I hate to be a killjoy, but there is much more a mixed bag in terms of what these trends really indicate. Year-to-year changes are notoriously volatile, especially for lesser volume crimes like murder. They must be viewed with caution, avoiding the temptation to make too much out of rather little.

Let's look back a few months for some perspective. Although the document has been superseded by this latest report, in December the FBI released an even more [preliminary tabulation](#) of trends in crime for the first half of 2011 as compared the same period of time for 2010. The emerging picture based on January through June was so much more promising back then. Violent crime was down 6.4% and property crime down 3.7%. Apparently, the second half of 2011 wasn't so terrific.

The table below displays the full-year trends released today, the half-year trends published previously, along with a crude estimate of what may have happened from July through December 2011 compared with the same time frame for 2010. These estimates are necessarily tentative, as the agencies and their overall population do not align exactly between the two preliminary reports.

| Trends in violent crime, 2010-2011 | | | |
|---|-------------|-------------|----------|
| | Jan-Dec | Jan-Jun | Jul-Dec |
| | Preliminary | Preliminary | Estimate |
| Agencies | 14,009 | 12,554 | |
| Population | 283,940,954 | 254,657,803 | |
| Violent Crime | -4.0% | -6.4% | -1.6% |
| Murder | -1.9% | -5.7% | 1.9% |
| Forcible Rape | -4.0% | -5.1% | -2.9% |
| Robbery | -4.0% | -7.7% | -0.3% |
| Aggravated Assault | -4.0% | -5.9% | -2.1% |
| Property Crime | -0.8% | -3.7% | 2.1% |
| Burglary | 0.3% | -2.2% | 2.8% |
| Larceny-Theft | -0.9% | -4.0% | 2.2% |
| Motor Vehicle Theft | -3.3% | -5.0% | -1.6% |
| Arson | -5.0% | -8.6% | -1.4% |

It would appear from these estimates that several crime categories showed an increase in the second half of the year, including a 1.9% uptick in murder.

Of course, we shouldn't overstate the significance of the trends for the second half of the year; they are as volatile as those for the first half. The late-year increases may say more about low crime levels near the end of 2010 than anything about 2011. The fuller picture remains to be seen.

Whatever the final data show, it would seem that the long-term downturn in crime has slowed, and may even have bottomed out. Crime can't go down forever, of course. At this juncture, we need to focus on making sure that any increase that does occur is relatively modest.

With rates relatively low, this is not the time to diminish crime fighting efforts. If we naively presume that the crime problem has been solved (as opposed to just controlled for the time being), the crime rate could easily rebound. If we fail to invest sufficiently in crime prevention and crime control both personnel and programs, we may someday look back at 2011 and consider them the good old days.