



Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

CRIME PATTERNS AND TRENDS

The victim of crime trend

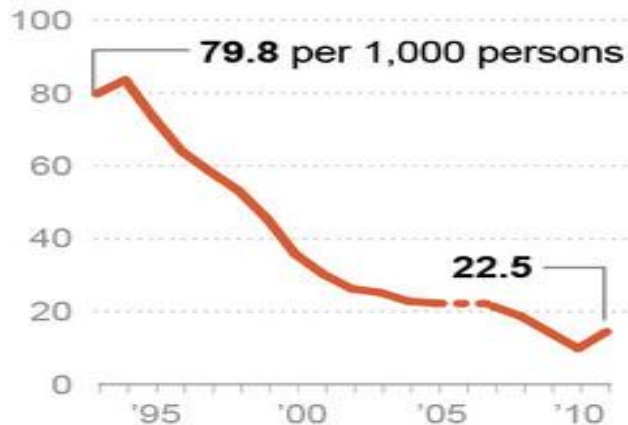
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"Violent crimes jump unexpectedly," read the headline of a Page 2 news brief in today's *Boston Globe*. The attention-grabber sounds as scary as it is wrong -- wrong on two counts. Not only is it rather misleading to call the latest trend in violent crime victimization a jump, but the increase that did occur was hardly surprising.

The following chart showing the rate of violent crime over the past two decades based on the annual survey of tens of thousands of households nationwide places the statistical report in the proper context. Sure, violent crime was up in 2011 over 2010, but it remained lower than every other year since the early 1990s. The rate of violent crime victimization in 2011 was actually the second best in recent history; but with 2010 being the best, the one year trend from 2010 to 2011 appeared worrisome an 18 percent surge in violent crime.

Violent crimes up

The rate of violent crimes targeting U.S. residents ages 12 and older rose last year for the first time since 1993.



NOTE: No data for 2006

SOURCE: Bureau of Justice Statistics

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The critical lesson that seems to be lost time and time again is never to make much of a short term change in crime rate. One-year changes, be they up or down, are terribly ambiguous in meaning. A sudden jump in crime rate, for example, can occur because the latter year was especially bad or because the previous year was especially good.

The long-term context helps us better to understand the current situation. Violent crime dropped precipitously during the 1990s, in large part as a reversal of the surge in street crime and gang conflict that plagued the nation in the late 1980s. To borrow upon Newton's law, what goes up, generally comes down. Then, during the last decade, the rate of decline slowed, as there was less room for improvement.

It appears that we may now be reaching a plateau where it is unlikely that we will see much more improvement, no matter how hard we try. The challenge from here on may just be to maintain the low level of crime we have reached in this country, despite many factors -- including a struggling economy with shrinking budgets for crime prevention and crime control, changing demographics, and retrenchment in gun control initiatives -- that would tend to push the crime rate upward.

With the violent crime victimization having fallen by as much as 75% from the early 1990s through 2010, the 2011 spike is not at all unexpected. To cite Newton's law in reverse, what goes down, generally comes back up.

So what are we to make of the latest statistics on crime victimization in the United States? The jump in crime is nothing more than the victim of past success.