Decreasing Trends In Crime Essay, Research Paper

Deacreasing Trends in Crime

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Ten years ago, crime was on the rise across the nation. It was a situation seemingly beyond control. Then, starting in the early 1990s, the trend began to turn around. Crime rates began to drop, slowly at first, but with more notable decreases each following year. This new development promises renewed opportunities for urban areas torn by violence and lawlessness. City streets are gradually becoming safer and citizens can enjoy an improved quality of life. The reasons for this drop are various and complicated. The more salient causes are the thriving economy, a revitalization of urban police forces, a very aggressive criminal justice system, and the waning of violent drug markets. For these reasons, among others, crime is now at 15-year lows across the nation.

Between 1984 and 1993, the crime rate rose dramatically. The problem grew to the point where even police believed it was beyond their capacity to stop (Witkin 1). A few years later, however, the trend began to reverse itself. Violent crime has now been on the decline for six years. Between 1994 and 1996, the murder rate nationwide dropped 20 percent (Clayton 1). Some of the biggest drops in crime occurred in major cities (Current Events 1). This means that cities are gradually becoming safer to live in. The crime rate, especially violent crime, is nonetheless nearer 20-year highs than 20-year lows (Hansen 2-3). Furthermore, though the actual danger of crime may have diminished, citizens? fear of crime is higher than ever (Current Events 1-2). Even so, the current trend toward less crime is a significant advance.

One factor leading to this decline is the newly revived economy. With unemployment down and earnings up, few people need turn to crime for survival (Current Events 1). The economy has improved since the early 1990s. While this fact can probably account for a reduction in property crimes, it does not explain the radical decrease in violent crimes. These tend not to depend on economic factors, as evidenced by the huge declines in murder and other violent crimes in New York City, where the unemployment rate is far above the national average at 9 percent (Witkin 2). So, while the economy can be linked to crime rates, it is unlikely to have been the major cause of the current trend.

A more significant, if less cited, influence is the decrease in violent drug markets. In ?The Crime Bust,? Gordon Whitkin asserts that this accounts for a fair portion of the waning crime rates. He points out that crack was introduced to urban America around 1986, the same time as crime began to spiral out of control. The extremely cheap, extremely addictive drug led to fierce competition for territory among dealers, and volatile relationships between dealers and users. Furthermore, users were willing to turn to violent crime to support their habit. Thus, violence in the cities escalated, until the early 1990s when such crimes leveled off, then began to fall. Witkin attributes this decline to the new nature of the drug markets. The most gruesome battles for territory are over. Fewer and fewer kids are buying or selling crack; the market is currently made up primarily of adults, who are more likely to settle their differences in a nonviolent manner. Furthermore, most drug transactions have been taken behind closed doors, eliminating the characteristically violence-prone street-corner markets. All this means that, although drug use is still high, the link between drug markets and violent crimes is weakening (Witkin 4-5).

Another important development has been an increase in severity of prison terms. Goldstock says, ?It used to be that police and prosecutors thought only in terms of arrests and conviction rates. Now they think in terms of crime control strategies? (Hansen 2). This means longer prison sentences and stricter punishments for repeat offenders (Jet 1). The number of prisoners in the nation more than doubled between 1985 and 1997; the incarceration rate in the U.S. is nearly four times what it was in 1974. Criminologists say most of these new prisoners were convicted of violent crimes (Witkin 2,3). It follows that if more criminals are behind bars, fewer are out on the streets committing crimes.

Still perhaps the most important factor in the diminution of crime has been the revitalization of the criminal justice system. According to Ronald Goldstock, chairman for the American Bar Association Criminal Justice Section, ?The crime reductions?appear to be due more to the innovative ways in which law enforcement officials now approach their jobs than to changes in demographics and other social conditions? (Hansen 2). Indeed, New York City, where Commissioner William Bratton implemented many highly innovative programs to combat crime, is often cited as an example of downward crime trends (Witkin 3). Bratton?s tactics included targeting petty crimes as a means to prevent more serious offenses before they started, a new focus on gun and drug offenses, and using computerized statistical analysis to weed out trouble spots and maximize effectiveness (Hansen 2). Bratton?s strategies are now being implemented in other cities across the United States, with visible results (Witkin 3).

Another incidental trend is a sort of redundancy loop between police and crimes. As the crime rate decreases, the police have fewer crimes to handle at one time. This means they can focus more attention on each case and thus solve more of the reported crimes (Jet 1). This results in more criminals being sent to prison, which in turn further reduces the crime rate (Witkin 3). This effect helps sustain the downward trend in crime.

Crime has long been one of the most vexing problems virtually all societies must face. The current shift towards a lower crime rate could be a sign of improving social conditions in America. It might, however, simply be a natural response to the upsurge of crime in the late 1980s. Whatever the overall implications, it is important to remember that the crime rate is still far higher than it was only 20 years ago. It is furthermore unlikely that the numbers will ever fall that low again. Despite such caveats, the various factors contributing to this trend suggest that it is one that will most likely continue for some time.

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