

H O U R G L A S S



F O U N D A T I O N

Issue Overview...

...Violent Crime

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When it comes to violent crime, there is reality and then there is fear. The problem is that too often it is the fear that seems more real. In 1973, there were 44 million cases of serious crimes against people and property reported across the nation. In 1999, there were only 28.8 million. According to the FBI, the national murder rate is at its lowest point since 1967. Serious crime has been falling steadily since the early 1990s. But try to tell anybody that America is a safer place today than it was thirty years ago. They just won't believe you. And in this case, perception matters as much as reality because the fear of crime often leads to behavior that exacerbates social problems like urban decay, racism, and the irresponsible use of firearms --all contributing factors in a cycle of violence.

On the other hand, small town complacency can create problems of its own and lead to panic when unexpected crime waves occur. For generations, Lancaster County has been one of the safest places in America. Yet for each of the last two years, the City of Lancaster has actually had a higher homicide rate than New York City --a rate that has been nearly triple state and national averages. Nor does the city show any signs yet of reversing this deadly trend. During the first six months of 2000, the rate of murder and serious crime continued to climb and a series of high-profile shoot-outs, including one near an elementary school playground and another that occurred at midday on a downtown street, mobilized local leaders to react vigorously. In July, city and county officials announced a 70-step "Comprehensive Crime Reduction Strategy" highlighted by controversial proposals to install security cameras at selected street corners and to authorize stop-and-frisk searches of out-of-state bus travelers. The next month, fifteen civic leaders joined a reconstituted City Crime Commission that promised to raise more money and public awareness for the fight against violent crime. Meanwhile, Lancaster City Council endorsed a proposal to include the city in a federal program to crackdown on ex-cons who carry guns.

Yet despite the obvious grounds for concern about this sudden outburst of violence, there is also a clear need for perspective. Focusing on "rates" and percentages can obscure the relatively low overall totals. Lancaster City might have a higher per capita murder rate, but New York endures more killings in a single year than the entire Lancaster region experiences in a decade. In 1999, for example, exactly thirteen people were murdered in Lancaster County (seven in the city). As terrible as that figure is, consider that 58 died in fatal car accidents on county roads during the same year. Based on numbers alone, the focus of public outrage should be on problems such as poorly designed intersections or the need to combat DUI offenses.

Another reason to seek perspective is because experts differ on their analysis about the root causes of violent crime. When announcing the city's new comprehensive crime strategy in July, Mayor Charlie Smithgall claimed that drug abuse and trafficking account for "up to 80 percent of city homicides," but that would be true only if one includes intimate partner murders committed under the influence of drugs or alcohol. The truth is that most murder victims know their killers, and traditionally in Lancaster County domestic violence has been the leading cause of homicide. This is a particular problem for women. According to the US Department of Justice, nearly one-third of all women slain in the United States since 1976 have been killed by their partners. It appears that violent behavior more often than not begins with an abusive home.

Still, it is often difficult to separate drug abuse from domestic violence because one inevitably leads to the other. In addition, almost all experts concede that the explosion of violent crime in the 1980s was due in no small measure to the particularly addictive qualities of crack cocaine, a dangerous street drug that become popular in the middle of the decade. Furthermore, repeated studies have demonstrated a connection between drug use and criminal behavior. Although most casual drug users don't end up in prison, most prisoners have used and abused drugs. The Philadelphia Inquirer has reported that 92 percent of inmates surveyed in Pennsylvania prisons have had addiction problems --although typically less than one-quarter of state prisoners are in jail for actual drug violations (5/16/00).

Many experts identify previous incarceration as one of the principal predictors of future violent behavior. The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette recently noted that one-third of all violent crimes in the US are committed by people on probation, parole or bail (4/23/00). This is a frightening statistic, especially if one considers that the nation's correctional population has reached an all-time high --6.3 million adults in prison, probation or parole. Today, there are actually more current and former inmates and probationers in the US

than certified teachers. The dramatic rise in the correctional population was a direct result of the mandatory minimum sentences introduced during the drug wars of the 1980s. Now we must hope that recidivism rates drop dramatically or the nation will face a renewed crime epidemic as these prisoners re-enter society. This problem is especially relevant in Pennsylvania since the state ranks first in the nation for per capita percentage of residents currently on parole.

Prior to the 1980s, the correctional population in the US was never large enough to study as a factor in causing violence, but there were numerous attempts to define other demographic causes of crime. Experts have known for years that young, adult men are especially prone to violent behavior. Overcrowding and poverty are also factors that contribute to violence. Put a large number of young men in a small space and provide a limited number of job opportunities and you create an explosive mix. That helps explain why half of all homicides in the US occur in just 63 of the nation's largest cities (Phila. Inquirer, 5/17/00). In 1998, over 80 percent of the murders in Pennsylvania occurred in only one-tenth of one percent of the state's 2,568 municipalities (half in Philadelphia alone). Those trends are similar in Lancaster County where city residents typically endure a crime rate 2 1/2 times greater than that experienced by their suburban counterparts and over six times worse than the rates for rural Lancastrians.

One last major factor to consider as a principal cause of violence is the easy access to firearms. Although this is probably the most controversial area of criminal justice at the present time, both gun control advocates and gun rights purists seem to have found consensus on the need to prosecute existing weapons violations more aggressively. Lancaster City is poised to join the federal Operation Cease-Fire program, which is based in Philadelphia and modeled after a successful pilot effort (called Project Exile) that began in Richmond, Virginia in 1997. The idea is to crackdown on weapons violations by ex-cons and drug dealers by using federal prosecutors and tougher federal anti-gun laws to send recidivist criminals away to federal prison. The program, which requires extensive investments in advertising, received endorsements (and financial support) from both the National Rifle Association (NRA) and Handgun Control Inc. and appears to be effective in lowering serious crime rates. Yet some critics question whether this trend toward federalizing various drug and weapons crimes will ultimately prove counter-productive by overburdening federal courts.

Related Links:

Handgun Control Inc. www.handguncontrol.org/ *anti-gun site offering a wide variety of studies and resources*

National Criminal Justice Reference Service www.ncjrs.org/statwww.htm *excellent source for links to other sites*

National Rifle Association www.nra.org/ *pro-gun site full of useful resources*

PA Commission on Crime and Delinquency www.pccd.state.pa.us/ *best overall site for Pennsylvania crime statistics*

Pennsylvania State Police www.psp.state.pa.us/ *site contains recent Pennsylvania state crime reports*

US Department of Justice www.usdoj.gov/ *site contains national and international crime reports*

Violence Policy Center www.vpc.org/ *anti-gun site with excellent resources*