

Crime is a very common occurrence. Criminologists still argue about what causes a person to turn to crime, offering a number of different theories as to why crime happens. It seems, however, that criminologists cannot come to a conclusion as to what really causes crime. Some say people are born naturally evil and it cannot be helped, that they turn to crime and will eventually become criminals no matter what happens throughout their lives. Some argue that mental illness is responsible and another group believes the environment in which a person is raised contributes to his/her turning to a life of crime. All of these theories have their arguments both for, and against. Whatever the case may be, there is no denying that crime occurs. Day to day come the reports of robberies, murders and other crimes that grab the attention of the public and send people into a state of fear where the only thing they can think of is, "I might be next."

It is here that we run into a somewhat stranger occurrence than the crimes themselves. In recent years, as research and data has shown, the crime rate across the country has dropped substantially yet the public largely believes that crime is worse than ever. The reality is that the country is safer now than it has been since the federal government began collecting data on the crime rate. We should now feel safe to walk our streets at night without fear of getting mugged or murdered or raped, right? This doesn't seem to be the case. Despite the falling crime rates, the general public still does not feel any safer or any more relieved than they did during times when crime was higher than it is now. In national surveys, the fear of crime is very high, and it is widely believed that the U.S. is a more dangerous place to live than it was when crime rates were actually higher. Why does the average American feel no safer, if it is actually safer now than it used to be? The rising fear of crime could be attributed to several outside factors that blur the reality behind the crime rates and perhaps mislead the average citizen on the topic of crime and justice.

In order to fully understand this heightened fear of crime that has been growing and explore the reasons behind the high level of fear of crime, we must first look at the facts and gain an understanding of the real situation. In order to explore the myth we must first explore the facts to have a background on which to contrast the misconceptions. Once we examine the facts about the crime rate in recent years, we can then more fully understand what the problem is. In order to do this we will review the crime rate in the United States since the year 1990 and analyze the trend of the crime rate since that year. To take a look at this crime rate change over the years, we will look at the Federal Bureau of Investigation's own method of keeping track of the crime rate, the Uniform Crime Reports, or UCR for short. The UCR is comprised of the average rate of several different crimes throughout the country. These numbers are gathered through police reports. This means that the UCR can only show us the crimes that are reported to the police. The rate used here is that of per 100,000 people, meaning that the rate represents the number of people out of 100,000 that were victims of crime.

If we take a look at this figure we can see that in 1993 the violent crime rate was 747.1 (Crime in the United States 2012). Meaning that for every 100,000 people 747 of them were victims of a violent crime that year. If we continue to follow the violent crime rate through the years, however, we can see that it began to drop following 1993. In 1994 the violent crime rate was sitting at 713.6. It continued to drop steadily and by 2002, it was at 494.4 (Crime in the United States 2012). We can see this rate continue to drop with only one exception being in 2005 when the rate increased from 463.2 in 2004 to 469. This is the only exception, however, as the majority trend shows what was stated earlier: the crime rate has been dropping significantly over the last 20 years (Crime in the United States 2012).

We can also see this drop in violent crimes by looking at another chart from the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, Figure 1 (Sadd). In this chart we can see that the number of violent crimes stayed

relatively the same from 1973 to 1994. After 1994, however, there was a large decrease in the rate of violent crimes which continued well into the next decade and continues to this day where the rate of violent crimes now sits at an all time low for the country (Sadd).

This doesn't just apply to the rate of violent crimes. If we look at the rate of the property crimes for the same years, they share the same decrease as the violent crime rates. In 1993 the rate of property crimes was 4,740 for every 100,000 citizens. In 2002 it had already dropped to a rate of 3,630.6 (Crime in the United States 2012). The number of the property crimes is so important because of how common these crimes are. You are more likely to be a victim of a property crime, which includes burglary and motor vehicle theft, than of a more violent crime such as murder, robbery, or aggravated assault.

Now with less property and violent crimes occurring per year, one would assume that the overall attitude towards crime would become more positive. Meaning that more people will feel less afraid of crime as they were when crime was higher, and that people should feel safer and more optimistic about crime. After all, the public has good reason to be optimistic. Crime is down and it continues to decrease. However, a large percentage of the population believes crime is rising, as we will see.

With the falling crime rates, one would expect a shift in the public view on crime. Rather than feel the fear of sky high crime rates and daily dangers, you would expect the public to now feel a sense of relief, knowing that crime had been falling for a number of years. This feeling, however, isn't as present or as widespread as one would believe. In a Gallup poll, Figure 2, on the perception of the crime rate, it can be seen that despite the falling crime rates, the number of people who believe crime is down is not consistent with the enormous decreases in crime. The number of people who believe crime is rising always constitutes a large percentage of the people surveyed. From 1994 to 2002, the number of people that believed crime to be increasing took a steady decline along with the crime rate. From 2002 to 2003 the percentage of people that believed crime to be down would jump from 43 percent to 62 percent (Sadd). From 2003 to 2005 this number would once again decrease and would go down to 53 percent. After this year the percentage who believed that crime was increasing would continue to rise steadily. In 2011, the last available year for this graph, the number would now sit at 68 percent (Sadd). While it is true that the number decreased from the 74 percent of 2009, this number is still high. This number has also always been relatively high and, with a few exceptions in 2001 and 2002, the number of people believing crime was increasing was always at least 50 percent of those surveyed (Sadd).

With the crime rate decreasing and dropping to record lows, it is strange and somewhat disturbing that the public view on crime hasn't shared this same trend. After all, one of the benefits of a decreasing crime rate should be a larger feeling of relief in the community rather than an elevated sense fear in the community.

Another graph, Figure 3, also separated and identified people who believed crime to be higher nationwide and people who believed it to be higher locally. A trend exists in this data as the number of people who believe crime to be higher nationally is always much higher than the number who believe it to be higher in their local area. For, example in 2010, 55 percent of people surveyed believed crime to be higher on a national scale while only 12 percent believed it to be higher in the area in which they lived (Sadd).

While these graphs and numbers are useful in displaying the fear of crime on a large scale, I wanted to examine my own community in order to compare it to the surveys conducted by the Gallup organization. In my own survey I surveyed a total of 80 people from school, work and home. Of these 80, 41 responded that crime has risen since the 1990s, 21 responded to it going down and another 18 responded to it being relatively the same. Forty-one of 80 people is roughly 51.25

percent, 21 represents 26.25 percent, and the 18 who voted for same make up the other 22.5 percent. My survey was pretty close to the surveys that have been conducted by Gallup on the same issue. In my survey, just like with the Gallup survey, over half of the people surveyed believed crime to be rising and believed that crime is much higher than it was in the 1990s. This goes to prove the overall theme that has been established: despite the falling crime rate, people believe that crime is increasing.

Now that the fact is verified, we can look at the question: Why is it that this happens? Why is it that the majority of people when surveyed believe that crime has risen and that it is continuing to rise?

The first place we should examine is from where most of these people surveyed receive their information and gather their knowledge of crime. For the majority of Americans, this would be through the institution referred to as the mass media.

The link between the media and the high levels of fear of crime has long been discussed and argued about by criminologists and other professionals concerned with levels of the national fear of crime. This link is considered possible because of one important fact, because the actual number of people who become victims of crime is relatively low when compared to the number of people who believe they may be victims of crime, it stands to reason that there must be something that spreads that fear from actual victims of crime to everyone else who is not directly affected by the crime. It is believed that this something is the mass media (Carrabine 40). When a crime is committed, generally only the victim or a small number of people are affected and the people that know of this crime are usually limited to the local community in which it occurred. With the help of the media, however, the knowledge of this occurrence can spread and soon the effect of this crime can be felt by a larger number of people; people that, if not for the coverage of this crime in the media, would have never been made aware of this crime. The fear then multiplies and affects a large number of people rather than just the victims, which are few.

Another piece of evidence that shows this relationship between a fear of crime and the media is one of the Gallup polls that was referenced earlier, Figure 3. In this poll, the number of people who believed crime to be more of a problem nationwide was much larger than the number that believed crime to be rising and a problem in their own local communities (Sadd). This means that the fear of crime is then something that, for the most part, is not gathered through one's own experiences of victimization, but instead by news of things occurring out in the world. The way we come to learn of these crimes, if not by our own eyes, must be through the eyes of the media outlets which bring us information of what is occurring elsewhere.

The question then remains that if the crime rate is now decreasing, why is the fear of crime still so high? If crime has decreased as a whole and the media is supposed to inform us of occurrences around the country, then this should be something that every person should know about and the decrease in crime should be recognized. As we will now see, even though the media is the primary source of crime news for most people, the way that the media portrays and delivers these stories on crime does not always provide an accurate representation of current trends of crime.

Crime has always been a big ticket item within the news sector. It is estimated that from 1990 to 1999 the percentage of air time devoted to crime on local news stations was roughly 30 percent. A large number when compared to the 11 percent coverage of government and the 4 percent coverage of the education system (Beckett). The large amount of air time devoted to crime on the news isn't the only issue; however, the way that crime is often covered by these news stations also contributes to a misunderstanding of actual crime in America. With the sharp decrease of crime that began occurring in 1994, the number of crimes that had been covered in the media should have also shown a slight decrease. This is something that would have occurred if the media presented crime stories in

an amount proportional to the trends in crime at that time this. However, this is not the case. In 1994, the homicide rate in the country began to decrease. This continued until 1998. By this point the homicide rate had dropped by an amazing 33 percent (Beckett). This decrease in the homicide rate was a welcome occurrence by law enforcement and criminal justice professionals. The general public, however, didn't feel as much excitement, mainly due to the fact that this was a somewhat unknown event to the general public at that time. Even though the homicide rate began to decrease, the coverage of homicides on the network news actually increased. During the time that the homicide rate decreased, the coverage of homicide jumped by as much as 473% (Beckett). Homicide was now an even more common occurrence on the nightly news, despite its sharp continued decrease. This disparity can be further seen by examining the types of crimes that news outlets choose to display on their nightly report. They chose to focus on crimes that are abnormally violent, sensational, and that play to the emotions of their viewers (Surette 78).