



Mind the Gap: Public Attitudes on Crime Miss the Mark

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Abstract

Even though crime has fallen dramatically in the United States in the past several years, public opinion polls indicate that crime and public safety are among the leading concerns cited by the public. These polls tell us that Americans have a decidedly and consistently cynical view – saying crime is up locally and nationally; that crime perceptions are largely formed by what they see or hear in the news media; and, in general, opinions about crime don't reflect reality. Public perceptions of crime are important since they shape how people think about, and respond to, crime. This article explores public misconception about the nature and extent of crime and considers why public perception of crime is so at odds with official statistics, and the scope of the disparity between factual indicators and public perception on other crime related issues. The paper concludes with a discussion of the many ways crime perceptions are important and potential consequences of a crime gap.

Keywords: Crime, public opinion, perceptions gap, trends.

Introduction

All of us have opinions about what is being done and what should be done about the crime problem. Crime and the criminal justice system's response to crime has long held the public's interest, yet how much do we actually know about crime? Research on public knowledge has found that the public *feels* passionately about crime and crime prevention but at the same time, *knows* little about crime. To be sure, the public holds strong opinions regarding crime but frequently these opinions are founded upon limited or erroneous information. This, coupled with the fact that there is strong evidence that the media plays a key role in informing crime views, contributes to both the misperception of rising crime rates and the pervasiveness of violent crime.

While crime rates are a major issue for the government and a top concern for the public, surveys have consistently found that the public's perception of crime trends is inconsistent, and that considerable gaps exist between opinions and factual figures. In particular the public still think that crime rates are soaring and that attempts to curb the crime problem have been unsuccessful. No doubt, the rash of school shootings across the country and most recently the devastating attack on Sandy Hook Elementary days before Christmas have contributed to the belief that violent crime is a growing national problem. Thus, Americans' current, and increasing, pessimism that crime is up is not reflected in actual crime rates that show offenses, violent and nonviolent, declining or holding steady. This paper examines public knowledge of crime rates, follows actual crime levels, and considers why public awareness is so at odds with official statistics.

Why the Public's View of Crime is Important: What are the consequences of a perceived rising crime problem and the objective reality of declining crime? Research suggests that misperceptions about crime can pose potentially significant problems for society. If the public perceives crime to be a problem, citizens may have an increased sense of fear of the unknown, viewing others as something to fear and avoid (i.e. "stranger danger") and thus, contribute to social isolation¹ and lower levels of social trust and civic engagement^{2,3}. When people are not very accurate about the absolute frequencies of crime, they most often overestimate the risk of becoming a victim³; which can lead to feelings of anxiety, mistrust, alienation, and dissatisfaction with life as well as to efforts to reduce fear (e.g., taking drugs), to avoid victimization (e.g. staying off the streets at night, avoiding strangers, and curtailing social activities), and behavior modifications (e.g. obtaining a watchdog, firearm, alarm system, insurance, and learning self-defense)⁴.

According to Roberts⁵, the existence of an uninformed and frequently hostile public poses a serious problem for the criminal justice system and also raises concerns about the democratic nature of our legal institutions. Evidence suggests that crime perceptions influence the public's willingness to curtail constitutionally guaranteed rights and liberties and to support harsher, possibly undeserved, penalties⁶⁻⁹. Moreover, the "get-tough" approach to crime has important economic implications. The preference for severe penalties has resulted in a burgeoning U.S. prison population. Whereas in 1990 there were 458 inmates per 100,000 citizens, by 1996 that figure had reached 645⁹, and had grown to 1,020 in 2008¹⁰. It has also meant that spending priorities are directed to law enforcement

and away from other domestic programs. Finally, misperception of crime may also have negative implications for attitudes toward governmental performance and the effectiveness of law enforcement officials. In sum, the misperception that American society is an increasingly violent and unsafe place, and that little can be done to halt rising crime rates without tough criminal punishments and the curtailment of rights, invites a highly pessimistic view of the crime problem and raises serious constitutional questions on how to respond to these increases.

Methodology

At first glance, studying the relationship between public opinion and crime appears straightforward. After all, the issue of law and order has been a major theme in public discussion for decades, so it makes sense that pollsters would be interested in how the general public perceives or feels about matters related to crime and punishment. In reality, studying the public's views on crime is complex. A few notes of caution are in order. First, researchers have generally neglected public *knowledge* and awareness of the crime problem and tended to focus almost exclusively on public *attitudes*. Thus, the discussion is limited somewhat by the absence of surveys that document public awareness of crime trends and areas in which public perceptions conflict with reality. Second, measuring the public's perception of crime is made harder still because criminal offenses occur on a local, state, and national scene, but surveys are normally nationwide. As a result, residents of larger cities with historically higher crime rates may hold more biases with crime than people living in the suburbs or rural locations. Moreover, some respondents' answers may be colored by recent occurrences of crime at the local level when polls may be inquiring about the issue at a national level. In other words, it is difficult to tease out the effects of crime closer to home in a national survey.

This is not to imply that longitudinal studies of crime do not exist^{5,8-9}. One interesting issue is whether a "perception gap" exists between the public's view of crime and objective characteristics of crime. While establishing knowledge of crime and crime rates is problematic for scholars to establish, an interesting story can still be told regarding the public's view of crime with the data that does exist. Before turning to this analysis, however, it is essential to distinguish between what is and what is not to come. An analysis of all polls that are tangentially related to crime would be unwieldy; there are simply too many questions to examine. As a result, the focus is only on questions that ask about crime directly. This examination avoids, for example, discussing questions related to terrorism, hate crimes, or specific criminal cases such as the Menendez brothers, topics that certainly are related to crime. The survey data reported here were drawn principally from the Roper Center's IPOLL data base, at the University of Connecticut, and data generously provided on the websites of the various research centers within the Pew Research Center and the Gallup organization. In the interest of space, not all poll

results are shown. Further information about the data can be obtained from the authors.

Complicating the study of a perceptions gap further is the fact that there is considerable debate on the precision and meaning of official statistics on crime and violence in the United States. There are many different sources of data that researchers use to draw inferences about the empirical questions of interest. A major source of national crime statistics that is utilized throughout this study is the FBI, Uniform Crime Reports (UCR).

Results and Discussion

Crime: Most of the findings on public opinion about crime trends suggest there's no denying that a perceptions gap exists. More so than in other countries, violent crime rates in the U.S. continue to be substantially higher than those for nations of similar social and economic composition¹². While the violent crime rate in the United States remains well above those of other industrial democracies, the country has made consistent progress in reducing homicide and other violent crime rates. Initially, social scientists were skeptical of any significant decrease in the actual rate of crime, and suggested that it was merely an artifact of notoriously unreliable and frequently misinterpreted criminal statistics¹³. Subsequent evidence indicates, however, that a de-escalation of crime did occur, both in terms of volume and relative incidences (figure 1). The most recent Uniform Crime Report confirms a decrease in violent crime rates - murder, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault - that began about two decades ago. While the drop appears to have leveled off somewhat, if the present trends continue America will experience a degree of public safety unknown for several decades.

By comparison, beginning in 1989, public opinion polls show that more than eight-in-ten (84%) adults said there was "more" crime in the United States than there was a year ago (table 1). And, despite a short-term sense of progress on the crime front beginning in the late 1990s where about four-in-ten adults reported less crime - results from most recent polls show that more than two-thirds of Americans say crime is higher than in the previous year. As a consequence, the public's belief that crime is going up results in a perceptions gap about the current and future state of national crime. Put differently, as actual crime rates began to drop the percentage of individuals saying crime was on the rise grew slightly. This downbeat appraisal of criminal acts is not the public's only perspective on this matter. When asked to provide a progress report on the state of crime in this country, most believe we are "losing ground" (table 2). This negative view of combating crime has been fairly consistent since this measure was first introduced in 1972. However, just as actual crime rates were beginning to decline, somewhat more Americans - almost 8-in-10 - believed that the country was losing ground on the crime front.

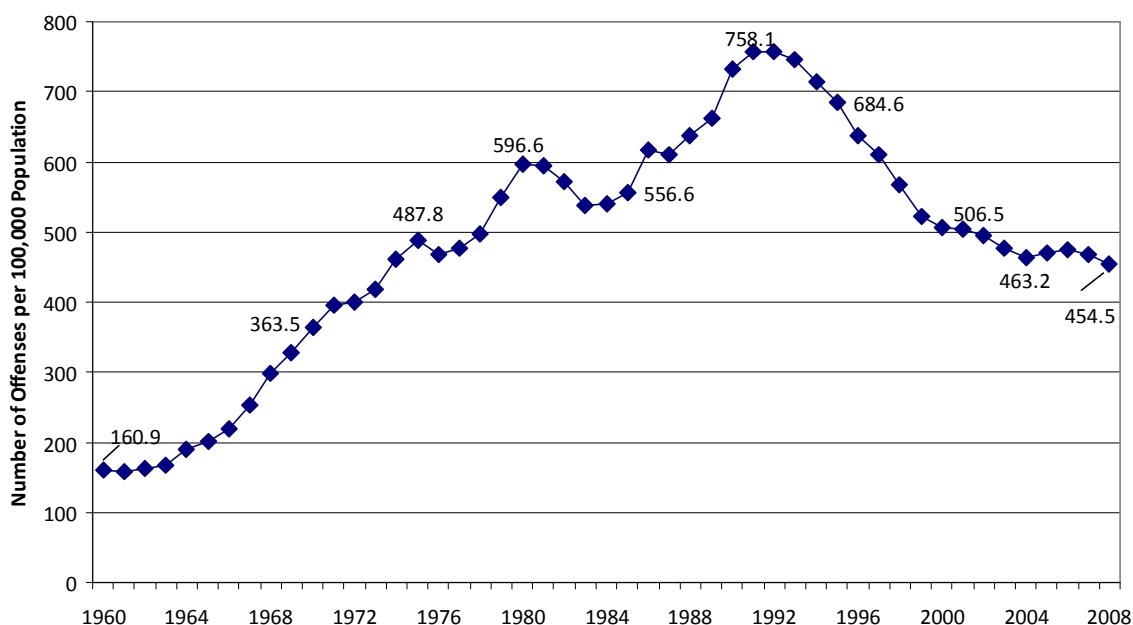


Figure-1
United States Violent Crime Rates: 1960-2008 (FBI, Uniform Crime Reports)

Notes: Serious violent crimes include rape, robbery, aggravated assault, and homicide. State offense totals are based on data from all reporting agencies and estimates for unreported areas. The murder and non-negligent homicides that occurred as a result of the events of September 11, 2001 are not included.

Table-1
Is there more *crime* in the US (United States) than there was a year ago, or less?

<i>Crime...in the US</i>	More	Less	Same (Vol.)	DK/Ref	(N)
	%	%	%	%	
October, 2009	74	15	6	5=100	1,013
October, 2007	71	14	8	6=100	1,010
October, 2006	68	16	8	8=100	1,001
October, 2005	67	21	9	3=100	1,012
October, 2004	53	28	14	5=100	1,012
October, 2003	60	25	11	4=100	1,017
October, 2002	62	21	11	6=100	1,002
October, 2001	41	43	10	6=100	1,011
August, 2000	47	41	7	5=100	1,012
October, 1998	52	35	8	6=100	1,013
August, 1997	64	25	6	5=100	1,014
July, 1996	71	15	8	6=100	1,008
October, 1993	87	4	5	4=100	1,244
February, 1992	89	3	4	4=100	1,001
September, 1990	84	3	7	6=100	1,031
June, 1989	84	5	5	6=100	1,235
January, 1989	84	5	5	6=100	1,001

{Source: Gallup}

Table-2

As I read a list of some problems, please tell me if you think the country is making progress, losing ground, or if things are about the same as they have been...Crime...Do you think the country is making progress, losing ground, or are things about the same as they have been when it comes to crime?

Crime...in the US	Making progress	About the same	Losing ground	DK/Ref	(N)
	%	%	%	%	
<i>Pew Research Center</i> December, 2008	20	36	41	3=100	1,489
<i>Pew Research Center</i> March 2002	27	34	35	4=100	1,048
<i>Pew Research Center</i> February, 2001	29	31	38	2=100	1,513
<i>Pew Research Center</i> November 1997	24	30	44	2=100	1,200
<i>Pew Research Center</i> November, 1996	15	23	61	1=100	1,204
<i>Pew Research Center</i> April, 1995	9	13	77	1=100	1,800
<i>Pew Research Center</i> March, 1994	7	15	77	1=100	2,001
<i>Gallup/CNN</i> August, 1992	7	24	68	2=100	1,387
<i>Pew Research Center</i> January, 1989	15	19	64	2=100	2,048
<i>Gallup/Newsweek</i> March, 1985	20	37	42	2=100	1,020

Table-3

Is there more crime in your area than there was a year ago, or less?

Crime in your neighborhood	More	Less	Same (Vol.)	DK/Ref	(N)
	%	%	%	%	
<i>Gallup Poll</i> October, 2009	51	29	16	4=100	1,013
<i>Gallup Poll</i> October, 2007	51	29	17	4=100	1,010
<i>Gallup Poll</i> October, 2006	51	30	15	4=100	1,001
<i>Gallup Poll</i> October, 2005	47	33	18	2=100	1,012
<i>Gallup Poll</i> October, 2004	37	37	22	4=100	1,012
<i>Gallup Poll</i> October, 2003	40	39	19	2=100	1,017
<i>Gallup Poll</i> October, 2002	37	34	24	5=100	1,002
<i>Gallup Poll</i> October, 2001	26	52	18	4=100	1,011
<i>Gallup Poll</i> August, 2000	34	46	15	5=100	1,012
<i>Gallup Poll</i> October, 1998	31	48	16	5=100	1,013
<i>Gallup Poll</i> August, 1997	47	32	20	2=100	1,014
<i>Gallup Poll</i> July, 1996	46	24	25	6=100	1,008
<i>LA Times</i> January, 1994	52	31	13	4=100	1,516
<i>Associated Press</i> May, 1992	57	18	22	4=100	1,006
<i>Gallup Poll</i> February, 1992	54	19	23	4=100	1,001
<i>Gallup Poll</i> September, 1990	51	18	24	8=100	1,031
<i>Gallup Poll</i> June, 1989	53	18	22	7=100	1,235
<i>Gallup Poll</i> January, 1989	47	21	27	5=100	1,001
<i>Gallup Poll</i> January, 1982	47	17	28	8=100	1,511
<i>Gallup/Newsweek Poll</i> January, 1981	58	14	24	4=100	1,030
<i>Gallup/AIPO Poll</i> November, 1977	43	17	32	9=100	1,506
<i>Gallup/AIPO Poll</i> June, 1975	50	12	29	10=100	1,558
<i>Gallup/AIPO Poll</i> December, 1972	51	10	27	12=100	1,504

Another indicator of the public's belief about crime levels is found when we consider crime locally. As is typical with many perceptions, Americans give much better ratings to their local area when rating crime (table 3). The latest Gallup survey reports that slightly more than half (51%) believe crime is up locally as compared to the 74 percent saying the same about crime nationally in the same poll. Thus, the public is more likely

to have a positive view of their neighborhood as compared to the nation as a whole.

A final comparison that sheds additional light on the gravity of the crime problem, and the gap between perceptions and factual indicators of crime, is found in the 2006 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center. This survey included separate samples in each of five metropolitan areas that historically have

experienced differing rates of crime: Phoenix, Las Vegas, Chicago, Raleigh-Durham and Washington DC. Judging from the city offenses compiled in the UCR reported in that same year (figure 2), there is no denying a perceptions gap exists. In Phoenix, which, like Raleigh-Durham has experienced the least amount of crime, there is considerable concern. More than two-thirds of Phoenix residents (63%) say crime is a “very” or “moderately” big local problem. Conversely, in Washington DC, where actual crime rates are significantly higher than in the other four metropolitan areas, residents express only modest concern - just 54% characterize crime as a “very” or “moderately” big problem. This is just 3% more than Raleigh-Durham residents who reside in an area with the least amount of crime.

In this section, we have documented that most people have a great deal of concern about crime. However, this does not mean that they are necessarily well-informed about the actual rate of crime. A common belief is that the country's crime situation is worse than it really is. Although crime rates have declined dramatically in recent periods, people invariably respond that

crime rates are increasing. Linked to the perception that crime rates are escalating is the misperception that a high percentage of crime is violent. The erroneous perception of crime undermines the development of reasoned public responses to both crime, prevention, and punishment.

Fear of Crime: To put the crime issue in greater perspective, we turn to examining the connection between subjective crime rates and fear. Crime victimization can have a significant and often lasting impact for both the individual¹⁴⁻¹⁵ and for society¹⁵. Investigators have identified many behavioral precautions associated with fear of crime ranging from the relatively trivial such as turning on lights and locking doors, to more personally and socially consequential actions such as not leaving the house at night or going out alone. Table 4 by the Gallup organization represents one of the longest-running series on fear of crime in your own *neighborhood*. The most striking feature is the relative constancy of fear- a number that has remained virtually unchanged in the last three decades - despite measurable shifts in actual changes in crime rates. This stability stands in sharp contrast to public perception of crime.

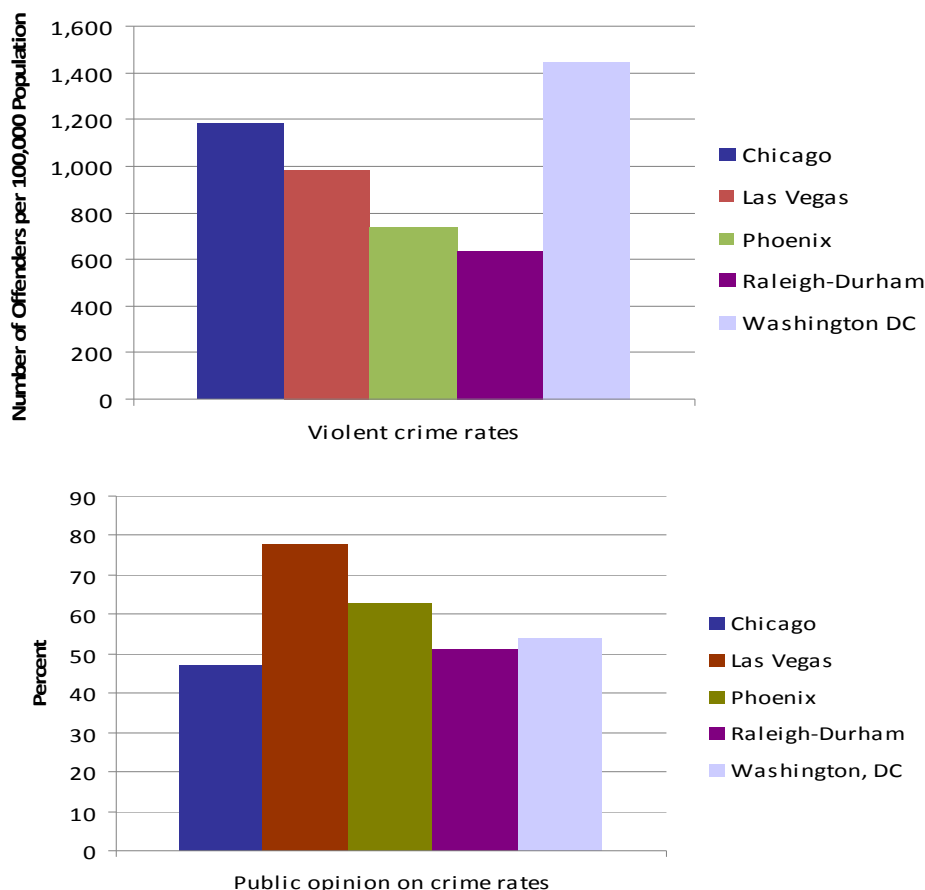


Figure-2
Crime Offenses (UCR) and Public Perceptions by City, Pew Research Center (2006)

Note: % saying crime is a "BIG" problem in their local community

Table-4
Is there any area near where you live right around here -- that is, within a mile – where you would be afraid to walk alone at night?

Fear of Crime	Yes	No	DK/Ref	(N)
	%	%	%	
October 2007	37	62	*=100	1,010
October, 2006	37	63	*=100	1,001
October, 2005	38	62	*=100	1,012
October, 2004	32	67	1=100	1,012
October, 2003	36	64	*=100	1,017
October, 2002	35	64	1=100	1,002
October, 2001	30	69	1=100	1,011
August, 2000	34	66	*=100	1,012
August, 1997	38	61	1=100	1,014
July, 1996	39	60	1=100	1,008
December, 1994	39	60	0=100	813
October, 1993	43	56	1=100	1,244
February, 1992	44	56	0=100	1,001
September, 1990	40	59	1=100	1,031
January, 1989	43	57	0=100	1,001
January, 1983	45	55	*=100	1,555
January, 1982	48	52	*=100	1,511
January, 1981	45	55	0=100	1,540
November, 1979	42	58	0=100	1,541
November, 1977	45	55	0=100	1,506
June, 1975	45	55	0=100	1,558
December, 1972	42	57	1=100	1,504
September, 1968	35	62	3=100	1,504
August, 1967	31	67	3=100	1,627
April, 1965	34	66	0=100	1,531

* Less than 0.5%, {Source: Gallup}

What accounts for the apparent disconnect? Evidence regarding the relationship between rates of violence and public fear suggest official crime rates often have a limited associate with fear^{14,2}. This is not to suggest that objective crime rates are irrelevant in explaining fear of crime, rather its contribution does not appear to be a significant one. Social factors such as where people live and personal attributes (e.g. age or gender) seem to have a much greater impact on this emotion².

Moreover, the findings confirm those found elsewhere that fear is a consequence of perceived risk (i.e. likelihood of victimization) and the common tendency among most Americans to impute crime to other, less familiar, places^{16,2}. These trends highlight the observed propensity that people tend to feel safe in their own neighborhoods at night¹⁶. There are no comparable trend data which measure fear of crime in areas away from home. However, context specific survey questions generally corroborate the notion of geographic variation in fear. When asked about fear at night in a variety of locations, most individuals report feeling safe from crime while at home as compared to downtown or at a shopping mall.

Gun Violence and Beliefs About Gun Control: The debate over gun ownership in the United States is a heated one and the results of a number of scholarly studies that attempt to discern the potential benefits and risks of private gun ownership are mixed¹⁷⁻¹⁸. On the one side, pro-gun groups advocate private ownership on the basis of self-defense, sports-related activities and hunting traditions, whereas gun control supporters cite the belief that more guns equal more crime. The debate over whether guns spur or deter crime continues today even as the number of privately-owned guns and Right-to-Carry states has risen to an all-time high - as of 2009, there were 40 states in total (<http://www.nraila.org/Issues/factsheets/read.aspx?ID=18>).

At the same time, a recent FBI report indicates violent crimes - including gun crimes - dropped dramatically in the first six months of 2009 (http://www.fbi.gov/page2/dec09/crimestats_122109.html). Gun-related crime peaked in the late 1980's and early 1990's. Since that time, the U.S. has made steady improvement in reducing gun-related violence. Gun-related homicides have declined by 33 percent since 1993, including a 35-percent drop in handgun homicides (figure 3).

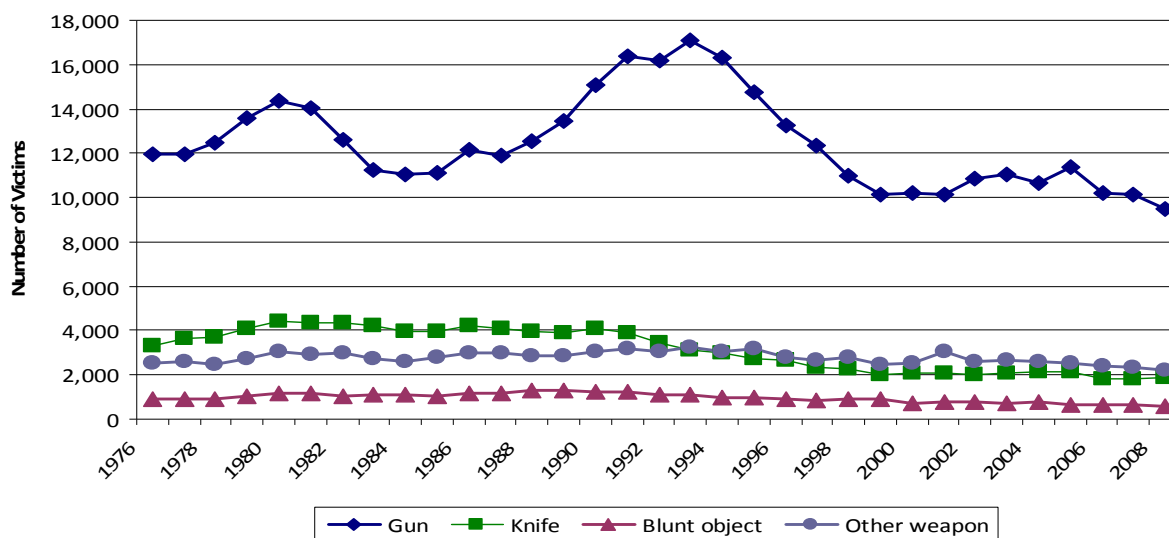


Figure-3
Homicide Trends in the US by Weapon Type: 1976-2008

Meanwhile, FBI data compiled in the first half of 2009 shows that compared to the same time period in 2008, murder rates declined by 10 percent, aggravated assaults and forcible rapes declined by approximately 3 percent each, and the overall violent crime rate decreased by 4 percent (http://www.fbi.gov/pressrel/pressrel09/stats_122109.htm). Nonetheless, gun violence remains a serious national problem. Are crime rates and public perception of crime reflected in beliefs about gun violence and ownership?

The impact of gun violence is reflected in the more than six-in-ten adults who believe gun violence is a "very" serious problem and the additional 25% saying it is "somewhat" serious (not shown, available upon request). Just 12% regarded gun violence of no great concern. The results suggest that large majorities of the public consistently place gun violence as a problem of considerable concern. The earliest observed measure shows that 84% (1989) believe gun violence is becoming a bigger problem and this sentiment is echoed in the 87% who, in 2007, felt that gun violence was a serious ("very" or "somewhat" responses combined) problem.

These figures suggest that the public's concern with gun violence is out of line with gun-related trends as compiled by the UCR. The two observations, taken in 1989 and 2007, stand in stark contrast to actual crime trends in which firearms were used. In those years, gun-related crimes in the United States were among the lowest recorded since 1973. Of course, public perceptions of the seriousness of gun violence may not be persuasive enough to indicate a perceptions gap. A different explanation stems from the view that the public believes, despite the seriousness of firearm related offenses, they remain a low-occurring event contributing very little to overall crime rates.

However, taken together, the findings demonstrate that roughly equal percentages expressed a concern that the severity of gun violence was getting worse, suggesting the public was not tracking real changes in the country's crime rate. By way of example, in 1989, a year marking the lowest recorded level of gun-related crimes, the public stated an overwhelming belief that violence from the use of guns was a "bigger problem in the country these days."

Despite the concern with gun violence, the public is split as to whether gun control measures are an effective approach to crime prevention. For about half of the population gun control is not seen as a solution to the violent crime problem, and gun control attitudes don't appear to be related to changes in crime rates. For example, the high murder rate in the early 1990's did not produce a comparable increase in the percentage endorsing gun control. In fact, polls taken in 1993 and 1994, at the height of homicide activity committed with handguns, show that nearly two-thirds of adults said stricter gun control laws would not reduce violent crime.

Rather, it is quite evident that the public believes better *enforcement* of existing laws, not the creation of stricter gun control laws, are the solution to curbing the problem of gun violence in this country. A growing majority of respondents in three separate ABC News/Washington Post polls conducted in 2000, 2007 and 2009, felt that stricter enforcement of existing laws is the best way to reduce gun violence (not shown, available upon request). This sentiment is echoed in a CBS/NYT poll conducted in April 2007 following one of the deadliest shooting rampages in American history - the tragedy on the Virginia Tech university campus that left 33 dead. When asked to consider the effect of stricter gun control laws on

preventing the violence at Virginia Tech, a plurality (45%) of Americans said stricter laws would have had "no effect."

Moreover, support for gun control in general does not seem to reflect changes in actual crime rates. The substantial drop in the percentage supporting stricter gun laws is consistent with factual reports of long term trends in crime occurrences, giving the impression that gun ownership attitudes may, at least in part, derive from actual crime rates (table 5). However, on closer inspection, the shift in opinion advantaged the belief that gun ownership laws should not be made less strict - but rather, "kept as they are now" - a position that suggests that opinions about

gun ownership may have little to do with real changes in the country's crime rate. In 1991, when the country was at the height of its violent crimes crisis, there was a slippage in the number of Americans that favored stricter laws covering the sale of firearms versus maintaining the status quo that has continued through to current day. According to Niemi, Mueller, and Smith¹⁹, crime rates have no impact on support for gun control because attitudes toward gun control are not primarily shaped by attitudes toward crime (1989, p. 133). Rather, attitudes about gun ownership and gun control reflect a commitment to a hunting and sporting culture and not a reaction to crime rates.

Table-5

In general, do you feel that the laws covering the sale of firearms should be made more strict, less strict, or kept as they are now? {Source: Gallup}

Guns, Violence, & Gun Control	More Strict	Less Strict	Kept as Now	Unsure	(N)
	%	%	%	%	
CBS News/NYT Poll April, 2010	40	16	42	2=100	1,580
October, 2009	44	12	43	1=100	1,013
October, 2008	49	8	41	2=100	1,011
October, 2007	51	8	39	2=100	1,010
October, 2006	56	9	33	2=100	1,001
October, 2005	57	7	35	1=100	1,012
October, 2004	54	11	34	1=100	1,012
January, 2004	60	6	34	*=100	1,003
October, 2003	55	9	36	*=100	1,017
October 2002	51	11	36	2=100	1,002
October, 2001	53	8	38	1=100	1,011
May, 2000	62	5	31	2=100	1,031
April, 2000	61	7	30	2=100	1,006
December, 1999	60	10	29	1=100	1,037
August, 1999	66	6	27	1=100	1,048
June, 1999	62	6	31	1=100	1,016
May, 1999	65	5	28	2=100	1,050
April, 1999	66	7	25	2=100	1,073
February, 1999	60	9	29	2=100	1,054
April, 1995	62	12	24	2=100	1,008
December, 1993	67	7	25	1=100	1,014
March, 1993	70	4	24	2=100	1,007
March, 1991	68	5	25	2=100	1,010
September, 1990	78	2	17	3=100	1,031
February, 1989	70	6	22	2=100	1,031

* Less than 0.5%

Immigrant Crime - Do Immigrants Make the U.S. More Crime-ridden and Dangerous?: Few issues in the United States are as contentious as immigration and crime. A great deal has been said and written about both, and sometimes the two are conflated. Many calls to curtail immigration, particularly illegal immigration, appeal to public fears about immigrants' involvement in criminal activities²⁰. Tellingly, in 1994, more than a majority of California voters - a state with a large immigrant population, and that devotes an enormous portion of its budget to law enforcement - passed Proposition 187. Despite its eventual challenge and dismissal on constitutional grounds, supporters referred to it as the "Save Our State" initiative. A quick reading of the law, particularly the reference to the "economic hardship and suffering and personal injury and damage caused by the criminal conduct of illegal aliens in this state," demonstrates the degree of anti-immigrant sentiment at the time. These attitudes are echoed in the highest levels of political leadership. For example, in his presidential address in May 2006, President Bush claimed ominously that illegal immigrants bring crime to our communities. According to an article in *The Boston Globe*, the most distressing spectacle of the 2008 presidential race was the attempt by a number of the Republican party's candidates to win the party's nomination by launching a Dobbsian attack (in reference to CNN anchor Lou Dobbs relentless theme of equating "illegal immigration" and "crime" - one of his favorite and often invoked phrases was "criminal illegal aliens") on illegal immigrants (http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/editorial_opinion/oped/articles/2008/03/05).

Are public fears warranted? Do immigrants drive up crime? In an absolute sense, the population growth brought about by immigration, if not counterbalanced by emigration, probably does increase crime. In addition, immigrants are disproportionately male, reflect an extraordinarily wide range of national origins and class, lack adequate education, and confront a host of other factors that may be conducive to a life of crime²¹. Moreover, immigrant families are heavily concentrated in metropolitan areas where the strong pull from the streets and regular exposure to violence may prove too powerful to resist.

Regardless of the fact that official statistics on imprisonment rates vary widely, and research indicates that data problems exist, the overwhelming evidence suggests that the belief that

immigrants make the U.S. more crime-ridden and dangerous is flawed²². In fact, data from the census and other sources show a persistent trend over the last three decades in the country as a whole - incarceration rates among young men are lowest for immigrants regardless of legal status. Taken together, the evidence on crime and population indicate that immigrants are less prone to commit crime, violent or otherwise, than are their U.S.-born counterparts²³.

What do polls say about public attitudes on immigration and crime? In general, polls show broad public belief that immigrants contribute to crime. Americans continue to believe that "immigrants to the United States are making the crime situation in the country worse." Table 6 includes the results of four Gallup surveys, conducted in the summer of 2001, 2002, 2004, and 2007. Roughly half of all respondents in each of the four surveys stated that immigrants are making the crime situation "worse." Virtually no one believes that immigrants have a positive or "better" impact on the nation's crime problem. In the most recent survey, only 4 percent of all adults responded that immigrants make the crime situation "better."

The polls also show that Americans believe that immigrants, legal or otherwise, *increase* the crime rate. A May 2007 CBS News/New York Times poll found that while slightly more than half (53%) think *illegal* immigrants are about as likely to commit crimes as American citizens, nearly a third (30%) of the public believed that *illegal* immigrants were "more" likely to commit crimes (not shown, available upon request). That continues a trend first documented in the General Social Survey in 1996 and again in 2004. Asked whether "immigrants increase crime rates," 32 percent of adults agreed - 7% strongly - a number that remained relatively unchanged eight years later.

In a *similar* vein, in a March 2006 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, the public expressed a number of other concerns associated with legal and illegal immigration (not shown, available upon request). For example, many felt that immigrants hurt Americans because they take jobs away and increase the danger of terrorism. Although smaller percentages cite immigration as contributing to higher crime rates as compared to economic concerns, similar percentages express worry that legal and illegal immigrants commit crimes.

Table-6

For each of the following areas, please say whether immigrants to the United States are making the situation in the country better or worse, or not having much effect. How about – [RANDOM ORDER]?

Immigration and Crime	Better	Worse	Not much effect	DK/Ref	(N)
All Adults	%	%	%	%	
June, 2007	4	58	34	4=100	2,388
June, 2004	6	47	43	4=100	2,250
June, 2002	8	50	37	5=100	1,360
June, 2001	7	50	38	5=100	1,004

{Source: Gallup}

The public's belief that immigrants, regardless of their legal status, are prone to criminality is not only highly misleading - it is simply wrong. The misperception that crime in the U.S. is caused by immigrants persists among policymakers, the media, and the general public and undermines the development of reasoned public responses to both crime and immigration²⁴.

Why the Misperception?: Although the principal aim of this investigation is uncovering the degree to which public perception of crime is inconsistent with actual criminal behavior, we comment briefly on the possible source of the perceptions gap and the consequences for U.S. society. Polls consistently show that Americans have never been particularly upbeat about the U.S. crime problem. More importantly from a perceptions gap perspective, the public's negative view of crime contrasts with actual government crime statistics. Some of the perceptions gap may be due to public reliance on the mass media for information about crime. Media coverage of crime stories, whether in the form of fictionalized dramas or news programs, presents a distorted view of reality - particularly violent acts such as murder, rape, as well as gun-related assaults - and explains much of the public's interest and the limited knowledge about crime.

That the public relies on the media for information about crime, that crime coverage in the media is dominated by violent events, and the impact of media coverage in shaping public perception of crime, is well documented^{11,25-26}. And, while criminal justice professionals are aware of the distortion in crime coverage, the public are not. Parisi et al. (1979)²⁷ found that the public is inclined to believe crime is the same or even worse than is reported by the news media, and the more distorted views of crime are found among those with greater confidence in media coverage²⁸.

Survey results suggest that the public's version of crime derives, in part, from the near dominance of news coverage that exaggerates the prevalence of crime - particularly the occurrence of violent crime - in the country. While the overrepresentation of violent crimes is understandably newsworthy, they represent but a small portion of the actual crime rate. This is important since most people get their crime information from news coverage rather than from personal experience. Three separate ABC polls (not shown, available upon request) conducted in 1996, 1997 and 2000 show that among those who said the crime problem in this country is "very bad" or "bad", approximately 80% indicated in a follow-up question that they based this opinion on "news accounts" rather than "personal experiences."

On a related topic, when asked to identify their source of crime news, most respondents indicated the electronic media as their primary supplier of crime happenings. More than half follow crime news on the television and another third rely on newspapers for these reports. The public's news medium preference also suggests the potential impact of television on

crime perceptions. In the most recent Pew poll, nearly 7-in-10 adults said they follow crime stories closely - "very" and "somewhat" responses combined (not shown, available upon request). The same survey also found that, along with receiving weather updates, crime stories dominate the type of news followed "very" closely in the newspaper, on television, radio, or the internet. Taken together, these findings strongly suggest that the news media have an important influence on public knowledge of crime.

Conclusion

The foregoing analysis of surveys and government compiled data demonstrate that the American public consistently holds several misconceptions about crime. These documented gaps in public knowledge include the view that crime rates are almost always rising; that a high percentage of crimes occur in locations more remote than their own neighborhood or community; and that immigrants are prone to criminal behavior. In short, perception and reality are at odds when it comes to criminal events. The presence of objective shifts in the level of criminal activity is not reflected in public knowledge, or awareness of crime.

It is clear that policymakers and criminal justice professionals are influenced by public opinion. At the beginning of this paper it was suggested that crime assumptions could affect beliefs about American society: that it is a violent place; that strangers are something to fear and avoid; and that tough criminal punishments and the curtailment of rights may be necessary to halt rising crime rates. The question that remains is whether there is reason to be concerned with the limited amount of information that the public has about these criminal justice issues.

The damaging effects of an ill-informed public is borne out in studies on fear of crime³; policy approaches to crime control including support for harsh penalties⁹ and punishment goals of retribution over rehabilitation²⁸; the death penalty²⁹; and willingness to give up basic civil liberties^{7,9}. The results suggest that misconceptions about crime are a powerful force in shaping the public's assessment of the crime problem and the acceptance or rejection of crime measures and sanctions. Although we don't directly investigate the relationship, it seems a reasonable assumption that the public's misperception of crime would have negative consequences for American society. The findings here concerning crime rates, and beliefs about immigrant criminal behavior, appear to suggest that is so.

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