

Youth, Guns, and Violent Crime

Alfred Blumstein

SUMMARY

Young people are overrepresented as both victims and perpetrators of violence. Indeed, some commentators have suggested that recent cohorts of youth have been composed of “superpredators” who have little regard for human life. The evidence, however, suggests that other factors are responsible for recent increases in youth gun violence.

This article analyzes the extent and causes of youth violence in the United States, paying particular attention to the late 1980s and early 1990s, when rates of homicide and robbery committed by youth rose to extremely high levels. Examination of trends for these crimes shows that:

- ▶ The increase in violence in the United States during the late 1980s and early 1990s was due primarily to an increase in violent acts committed by people under age 20. Similarly, dramatic declines in homicide and robbery in recent years are attributable primarily to a decline in youth violence.

- ▶ The increase in youth homicide was predominantly due to a significant increase in the use of handguns, which converted ordinary teenage fights and other violent encounters into homicides.

- ▶ Several other interrelated factors also fueled the rise in youth violence, including the rise of illegal drug markets, particularly for crack cocaine, the recruitment of youth into those markets, and an increase in gun carrying among young people.

The author points out that youth violence diminished as the crack markets shrank, law enforcement increased efforts to control youth access to guns, youth gun carrying declined, and the robust economy provided legitimate jobs for young people.

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The period from 1985 to 2000 saw some sharp swings in the rate of violence in the United States. Much of that swing is attributable to changes in violence committed by young people, primarily against other young people. Beginning in 1985, the rates of homicide and robbery committed by people under age 20 began to rise dramatically, as did the use of handguns to commit those crimes. This increase in violence peaked in the early 1990s, then fell significantly by the end of the 1990s.

Although youth violence has declined in recent years, a rash of school shootings in the late 1990s generated significant public concern and attention from policymakers.¹ This concern is not new—rhetoric about violent youth has captured public attention over the last two decades. Accordingly, federal and state legislators have sought to impose stiffer penalties on youth who are found guilty of violent crimes, by mandating, for instance, that juveniles who commit violent crimes be tried in adult court rather than juvenile court.² In particular, in 2000 California voters passed, by a two to one majority, Proposition 21, which increases the range of offenses for which juvenile offenders as young as age 14 will be tried and sentenced as adults.

This punitive response to youth violence follows from public rhetoric that labeled a whole generation of youth as “superpredators.”³ This labeling occurred during the peak of the youth violence epidemic, partly in response to outrageous killings by very young people. The superpredator label suggested that the new generation of young people were out of control, beyond redemption, and had little regard for human life or victims’ pain and suffering. Some commentators argued that particularly aggressive steps were needed to keep them under control.

Whether this is an appropriate response to youth violence depends upon the answers to two key questions. First, to what degree was the increase in violence of the late 1980s and early 1990s attributable to youth? Second, to what degree was that growth attributable to a new group of superpredator youth who were inherently more violent than previous generations of young people?

Through examination of homicide and robbery⁴ arrest trends for different age groups,^{5,6} this article will show

that, in fact, youth were primarily responsible for the increase in violence during those years. However, the available evidence indicates that an emergence of superpredators did not contribute significantly to the rise in youth violence. Rather, several interrelated factors more likely fueled the youth violence epidemic—most notably the rise of inner-city drug markets that recruited large numbers of young people in the late 1980s and the associated availability and use of handguns by those youth. Drugs and guns intersected in America’s inner cities, leading to a rapid increase in violence among minority youth.

Young People’s Contribution to the Violence Epidemic

Despite public perceptions about increased crime and violence in the United States, a detailed examination of homicide and robbery rates from 1965 through 2000 shows that these rates have not changed dramatically over time. What has changed is the number of homicides committed by young people. Indeed, the increase in homicide rates in the late 1980s and early 1990s was driven entirely by a rise in youth homicide with handguns.

Homicide Rates among the General Population

The homicide rate in the United States oscillated between 8 and 10 per 100,000 population from 1970 to 1995, as Figure 1 shows.⁷ In 1980, it peaked at 10.2 murders per 100,000 population, and by 1985 it had fallen to 7.9. It then climbed a full 24% to reach a peak of 9.8 in 1991, and has been declining markedly since then, reaching 5.5 in 2000. The last change represents a drop of 44% since 1991, to a level that is lower than any annual rate since 1965.⁸ The robbery rate has followed a very similar pattern, reaching its peaks and troughs within one year of those of the murder trends. The robbery rate has also displayed a steady decline since its 1991 peak, and the 2000 rate is lower than any since 1968.

Despite the fairly sharp swings depicted in Figure 1, it is striking how flat the trend lines for homicide and robbery were before the declines of the 1990s. Homicide and robbery rates jumped up and down from year to year, but they did not change dramatically between 1970 and 1993. The stability of these

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rates stands in marked contrast to the general view of the American public—and the rhetoric of many political candidates, who suggested throughout the 1990s that crime rates were getting out of hand and that crime was becoming an increasingly serious threat.⁹ Indeed, even the steady decline in violent crime rates since 1993 has not fully eased these concerns.

However, the aggregate homicide rates presented in Figure 1 do not take into account the diverse factors that contribute to the overall trend. As the next section of this article makes clear, the increase in the homicide rate in the late 1980s and early 1990s was

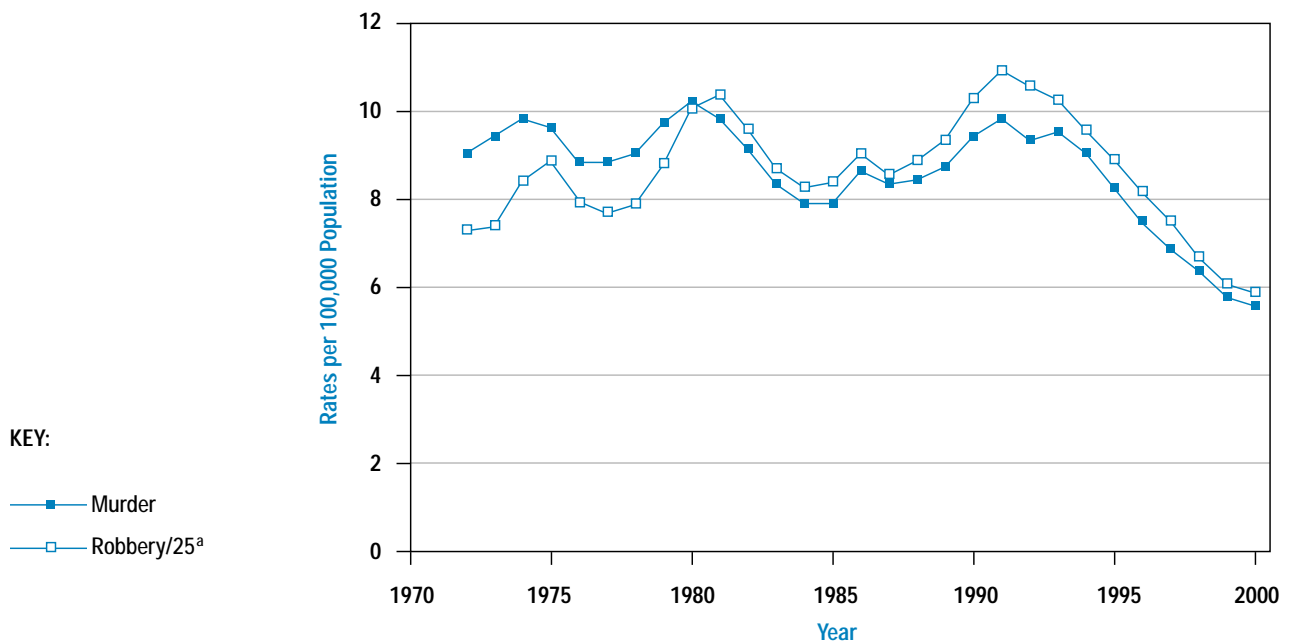
due to multiple, interactive, and sometimes countervailing influences. This is particularly true with respect to age of the perpetrator. During the late 1980s, when the total number of homicides was increasing rapidly, homicides by young people (ages 24 and under) increased, but homicides by older people actually decreased.

Youth Offenders’ Disproportionate Contribution to the Homicide Rate

When the homicide rate is disaggregated by age, it becomes clear that the increase in homicide after 1985 was driven almost entirely by a significant increase in

Figure 1

Trends in Murder and Robbery^a Rates in the United States, 1972–2000

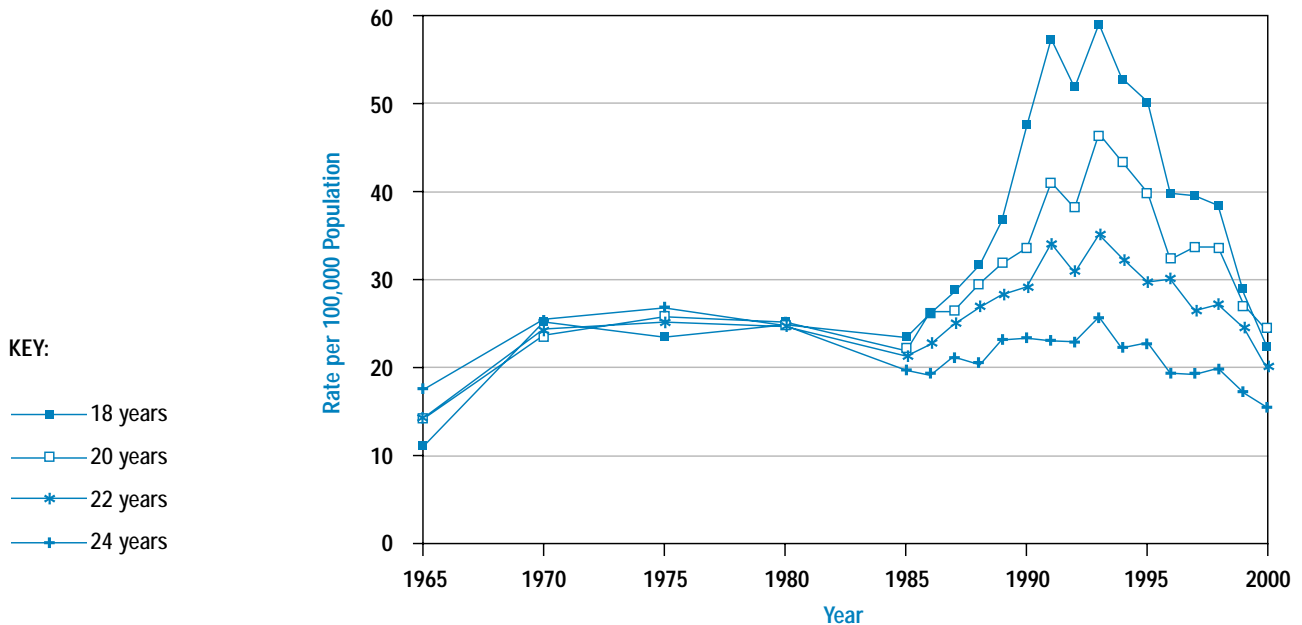


Source: Unpublished tabulations based on U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation. *Crime in the United States: Uniform crime reports (year)*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, and population estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau.

^a The robbery rate is scaled down by a factor of 25 to put it on the same scale as murder to permit easy visual comparison of the two data series.

Figure 2

Trends in Murder Arrest Rates by Age



Source: Unpublished tabulations based on U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation. *Crime in the United States: Uniform crime reports (year)*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, and population estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau.

homicides committed by juveniles (those under age 18) and youth (those between the ages of 18 and 24). Figure 2 presents time trends in the murder arrest rate for individual ages that traditionally have accounted for the highest homicide arrest rates: ages 18 through 24. As the figure shows, those rates were quite similar from 1970 through 1985, when a major divergence began. Although the homicide rate for 24-year-olds did not increase significantly over the next few years, the rate for 18-year-olds more than doubled by 1991 (with an annual growth rate of 16% during this period). The rate dropped in 1992, reached a new peak in 1993, and then declined vigorously in all the succeeding years.

The pattern for young people ages 18 and under, shown in Figure 3, is very similar to the pattern at age 18, except that the rate is lower for each younger age.

For all ages below 20, the 1993 homicide arrest rate was more than double the 1985 rate. For example, the murder arrest rate for 15-year-olds in 1993 was triple what the rate had been in 1985.

In contrast, adults have displayed a continuing decline in homicide arrest rates since the mid-1970s. By 1993, when homicide arrests among young people reached their peak levels, arrest rates among the over-30 population had declined by about 20% from the 1985 level. The decline continued into the 1990s, and by 2000 it had reached a level about 50% below the 1985 rate.

Thus, the 1991 peak in aggregate homicide rates came about solely because of increased violence by youth under age 25; homicide rates for youth were increasing much faster than the rates for adults over age 25 were declining.¹⁰ Because homicide rates for

young and old offenders alike decreased after 1993, the aggregate rate continued to fall—and fall rapidly. The decrease since 1993 is due to both the recent sharp drop in violent crime among young people, and to the continuing decline in violent crime among older persons.

Racial Differences in the Homicide Rate

In addition to age differences, there were important racial differences in the growth of homicides—particularly an increase in homicides among young African Americans, both as offenders and as victims. Figure 4 depicts the rise in handgun homicides committed by youth ages 18 to 24.¹¹ Among African Americans, handgun use grew much more sharply than for youth generally; the number of handgun homicides among African Americans in this age group nearly tripled from 1984 to 1993. Although some growth also

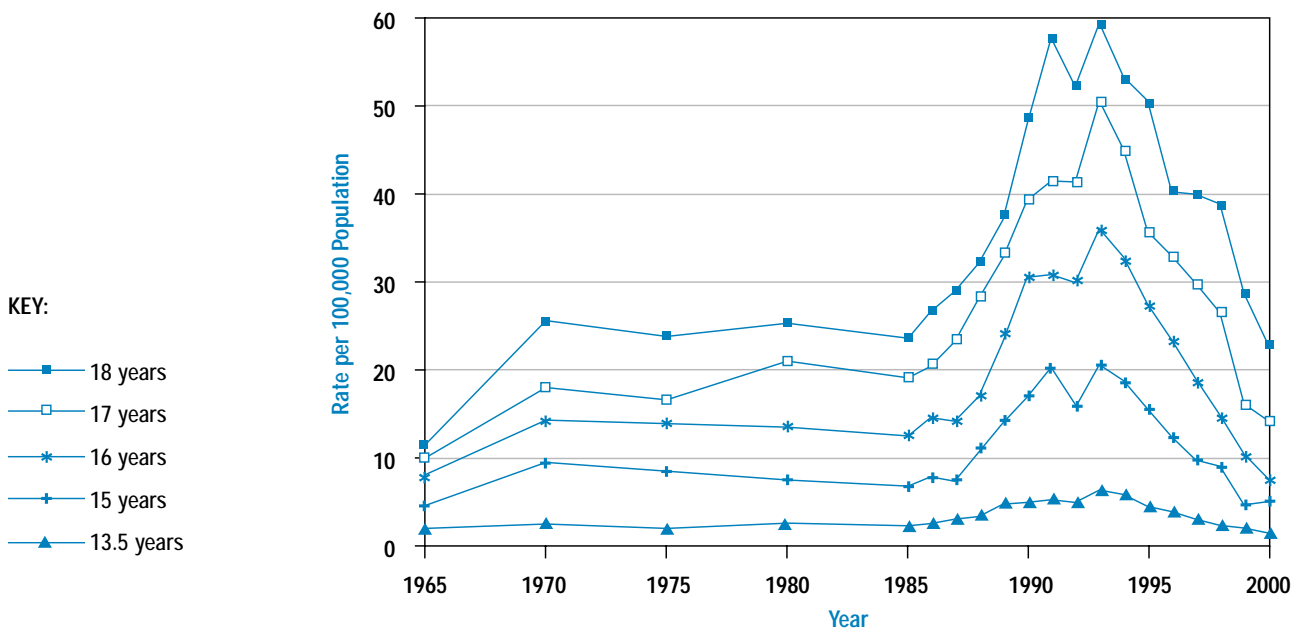
occurred in handgun homicides by white and Hispanic youth, that increase was far less dramatic. Among all youth, there was no comparable growth in the use of other weapons to commit homicides.

What accounted for the dramatic rise in youth gun violence in the late 1980s and early 1990s, particularly among African American youth? The next section of this article offers some possible explanations for the recent rises and falls in the youth homicide rate.

Factors Contributing to the Youth Violence Epidemic

Though the superpredator theory has attracted widespread public attention, other factors—most notably the availability of handguns, increased weapon carrying among young people, and the explosive growth

Figure 3
Trends in Murder Arrest Rates, Ages 18 and Under



Source: Unpublished tabulations based on U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation. *Crime in the United States: Uniform crime reports (year)*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, and population estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau.

of illegal drug markets—more likely fueled the increase in youth homicide. This section reviews each of these factors in detail.

The Role of Handguns

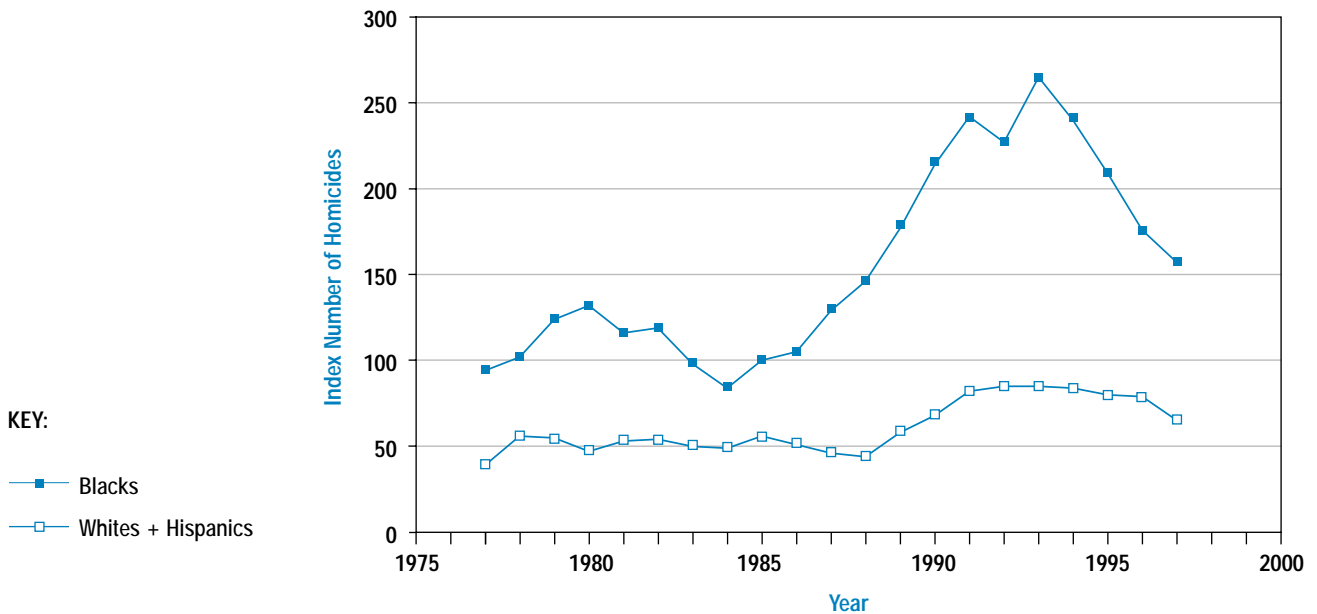
Since 1985, the weapons involved in settling disputes among young people have changed dramatically, from fists or knives to handguns. Youth use of handguns to commit suicides and robberies also has risen significantly. More recently, young people have begun to use semiautomatic pistols with much greater firepower and lethality, as discussed in the article by Win-temute in this journal issue.

The growing use of lethal handguns is reflected in changes in the weapons involved in homicides by young people in different race and age groups. Begin-

ning in 1985, there was a sharp growth in the firearm homicide rate among young people. That rise in firearm homicides changed what had been a flat trend in homicides committed by youth to a sharply rising one—with the rise sharpest for youth ages 18 and under, as shown in Figure 3. There was no comparable growth in homicides committed with other weapons. This suggests that the use of handguns, rather than an increase in violent attitudes among young people, is largely responsible for the increase in violent crime in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

A review of the weapons used in homicides committed by young people, especially those under age 18, clearly shows this sharp rise in the use of firearms to commit homicides.¹² Figure 5 shows time trends in

Figure 4
Trends in Handgun Homicides by Youth, Ages 18 to 24
 1985 Handgun Homicides by Black Youth = 100^a

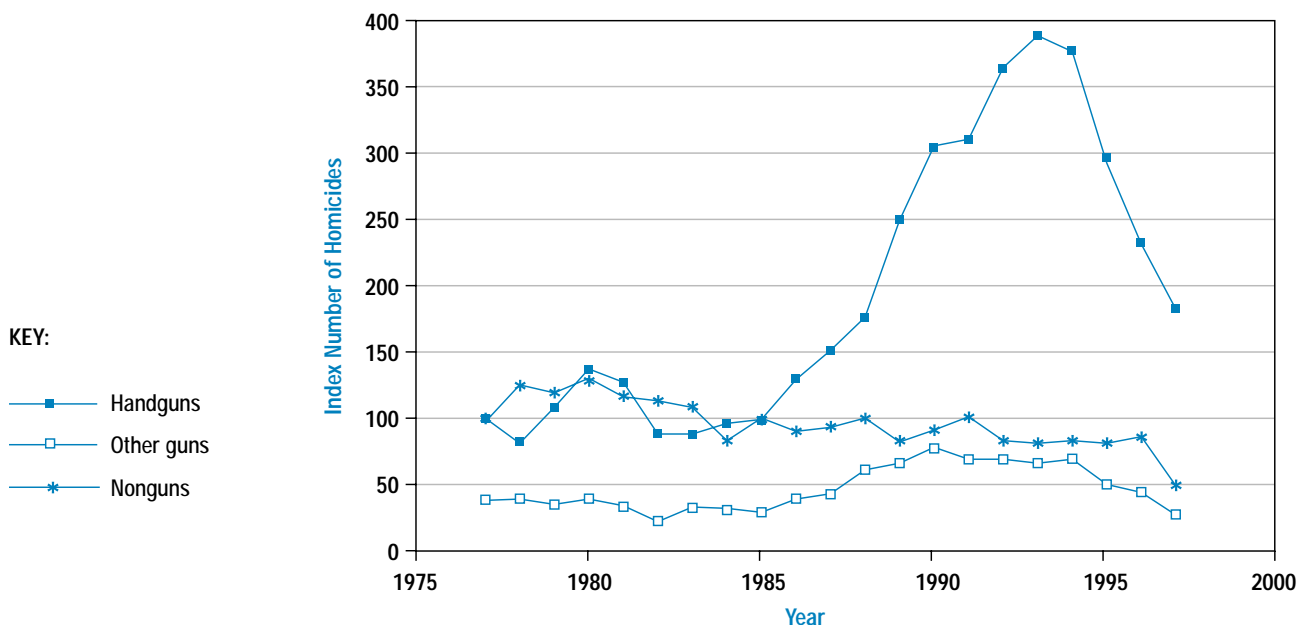


Source: Unpublished tabulations based on U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Supplementary Homicide Reports.

^a This figure uses an index scale, with the number of handgun homicides by black youth in 1985 being assigned an index number of 100. Thus, the number of handgun homicides in any year is relative to the number of homicides with handguns by black youth in 1985.

Figure 5

Trends in Homicide Weapons by Juveniles, Ages 17 and Under

1985 Handguns = 100^a

Source: Unpublished tabulations based on U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Supplementary Homicide Reports.

^a This figure uses an index scale, with the number of handgun homicides in 1985 being assigned an index number of 100.

Thus, the number of homicides by any weapon type and in any year is relative to the number of homicides with handguns in 1985.

weapons used to commit homicide by offenders under age 18.¹³ The weapons are classified into three groups: handguns, other guns, and nonguns (which includes knives, sticks, or hands).¹⁴

As Figure 5 illustrates, no clear trend in the use of handguns emerged until after 1985; then handgun use grew significantly, to almost four times the 1985 rate. The rise and decline are consistent with the rise and decline in homicide arrest rates shown in Figure 3. For youth ages 18 to 24, there was a similar but smaller growth in handgun use; by 1993, the use of handguns to commit homicides had increased 128% over 1985 levels.

In contrast, a similar graph for adults would show a general downward trend in homicides by all weapons,

especially by handguns more recently. Overall, however, there has been little change over the years in the mix of weapons used by adults in homicides.

Furthermore, the use of other types of guns or nongun weapons to commit homicides has not increased appreciably, either among adults or youth. In fact, nongun homicides among all age groups declined steadily by 40% to 50% from 1985 to 1997. Thus, although handguns have been substituted for other weapons to some degree, the absolute magnitude of nonhandgun decline is still small compared with the dramatic growth in the use of handguns by juveniles.

Not only did young people under age 25 account for all of the growth in homicides in the post-1985 peri-

od, but that growth stemmed entirely from the increase in homicides committed with handguns. Furthermore, most of the growth was accounted for by youth under age 20. Clearly, the sharp rise in the use of handguns in youth and juvenile homicide is crucial in explaining the increase in the aggregate homicide rate in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Comparably, the more recent sharp decrease in handgun homicides by young people is an important factor in the overall decline since the early 1990s.¹⁵

Firearms have also played an important role in the growth in robberies. No incident-based data source is available for robberies as it is for homicides, but the aggregate statistics indicate a clear rise in the fraction of robberies committed with firearms from 1989 to 1991. During that time—precisely the period when there was a major increase in young people’s involvement in robbery—the total rate of firearm robberies increased by 42%. Over the same period, the rate of nonfirearm robberies increased by only 5%.

These observations suggest that the growth in homicides by young people was attributable much more to the weapons that found their way into their hands than to the emergence of inadequately socialized cohorts of superpredators, as some have claimed. If the cohorts were indeed more vicious, then one would expect to see an increase in homicide with all forms of weapons, rather than just handguns. The findings strongly suggest that teenagers committed crimes and fought as they always had, but that the greater lethality of handguns led to a greater number of disputes resulting in homicides. It was the availability of handguns, rather than a new generation of superpredators, that contributed to the growth in youth violence.

Trends in Weapons Carrying

Throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, an increasing number of young people carried handguns, likely helping to fuel a rise in youth homicide rates. Even though federal law prohibits the sale of handguns to people under age 21 or possession of handguns by juveniles, it is surprisingly common for young people to carry guns. For example, an estimated 10% of male high school students have carried a gun in the previous 30 days. Gun carrying is even more common in high-crime areas, where 25% of male teenagers carry guns, and among high-risk groups. More than 80% of male juvenile offenders report having possessed a gun.¹⁶

Young people who carry guns report that their major reason for doing so is concern for their own safety. In one national survey, 43% of high school students who reported carrying a gun within the past 12 months claimed they carried it primarily for protection.¹⁷ However, when disputes arise, no matter how minor,

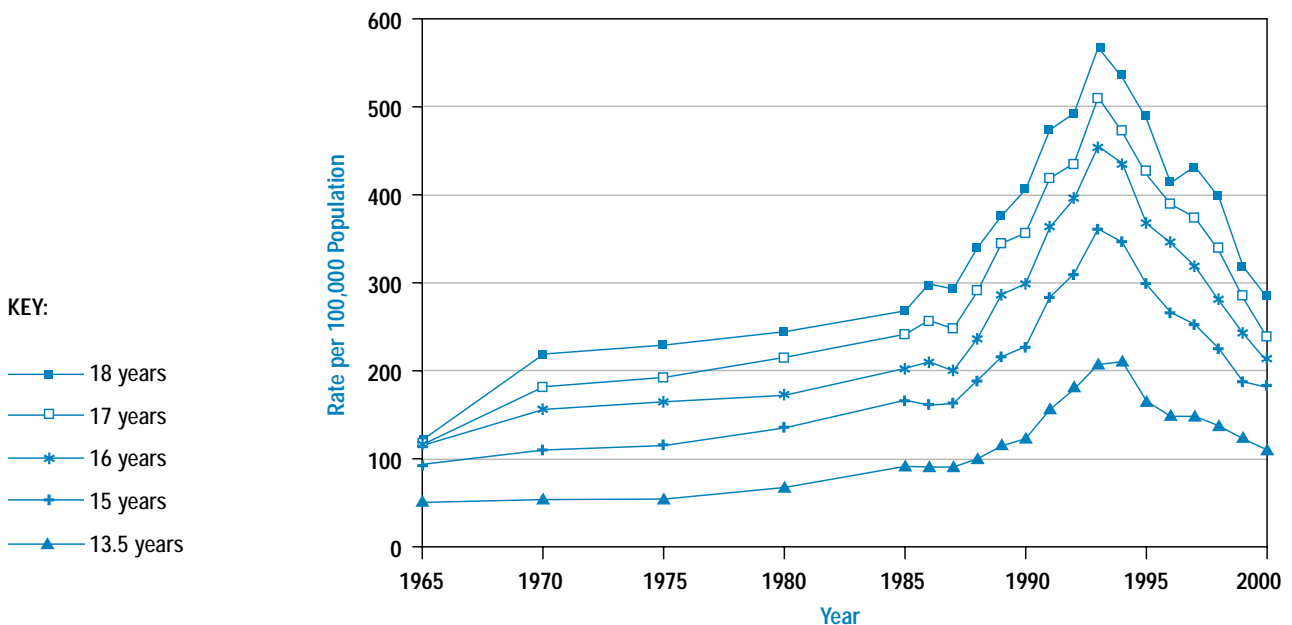
youth who carry guns may use them preemptively, especially if they suspect that their adversaries also have guns.

One important indicator of the extent of youth gun carrying is the arrest rate for weapons charges. Figure 6 depicts the trends over time in the rates of arrest for weapon possession for young people ages 18 and under. The pattern is strikingly similar to the homicide patterns depicted in Figure 3 for the same ages. The weapons arrest trends show a relatively flat period of slight growth until about 1985, a sharp rise to a distinct peak in 1993, and a clear decline after that.

The increases in weapons arrests shown in this graph likely resulted from a combination of an increase in illegal weapon carrying and changes in police aggressiveness in pursuing illegal weapons. Indeed, police

aggressiveness in detecting youth gun carrying and confiscating guns is an important means of reducing gun homicides. (See the article by Fagan in this journal issue.) One group of researchers found that concern about arrest and its consequences was one of the major considerations in decisions by delinquent adolescents not to carry a gun.¹⁶ It is likely that aggressive stop-and-frisk tactics by local police, and the growth of community groups taking an active hand in negotiating truces among gangs and seeking to establish community norms against gun carrying, contributed to the reduction in the carrying of guns. This reduction, which in turn meant that other young people felt less need to carry guns for self-protection, seems to have been an important factor in the decrease in homicide and robbery by youth in the mid- to late 1990s.

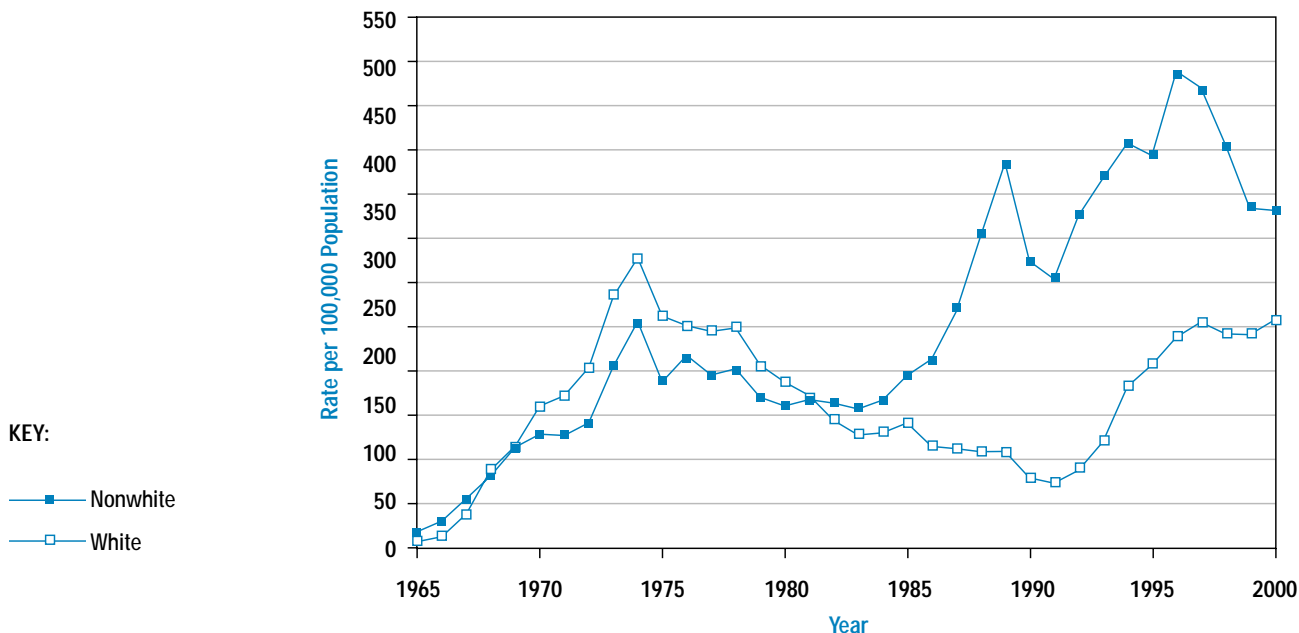
Figure 6
Trends in Weapons Arrest Rates, Ages 18 and Under



Source: Unpublished tabulations based on U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation. *Crime in the United States: Uniform crime reports (year)*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, and population estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau.

Figure 7

Trends in Drug Arrest Rates, Ages 17 and Under



Source: Unpublished tabulations based on U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation. *Crime in the United States: Uniform crime reports (year)*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, and population estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau.

The Role of Drug Markets

The rise of illegal drug markets—most notably markets for crack cocaine—also was a likely factor behind the increase in youth gun homicide, especially among African American young people in the inner city. When youth involved in illegal drug markets began carrying guns for protection and dispute resolution, other young people within the community began carrying guns as well. This diffusion of guns from the drug markets into the larger community led to an increase in gun carrying, resulting in more gun homicides.

The Rise of Juvenile Involvement in the Drug Markets

A serious drug problem, fueled by the introduction of crack cocaine into urban areas, began to emerge in the United States in the early 1980s, and then accelerated significantly in the mid- to late 1980s. The arrest rate

of nonwhite (primarily African American) adults for drug offenses¹⁸ started to rise in the early 1980s, then grew appreciably after 1985 with the wide distribution of crack cocaine, especially in urban ghettos.

Figure 7 shows trends over time in the drug arrest rate for juveniles under age 18. The figure highlights the fact that the major recruitment of nonwhite juveniles into the drug markets did not begin until crack began to be widely distributed in about 1985. The drug arrest rate for juveniles then grew rapidly until it peaked in 1989, at almost three times the 1985 rate.¹⁹

One explanation for this rather dramatic increase in weapons arrest rates and youth violence assigns a central role to illegal drug markets, which appear to operate in a reasonable equilibrium with the demand for drugs, despite massive efforts over the past 15

As more inner-city youth became involved in the illegal drug markets, gun carrying became endemic in their communities.

years to attack the supply side.²⁰ The drug industry recruited juveniles because they were willing to work more cheaply than adults, they were less vulnerable to the punishments imposed by the adult criminal justice system, and they were often willing to take risks that more mature adults would eschew.²¹ (See the article by Cook and Ludwig in this journal issue.)

In addition, there was a rapid growth of incarceration of older drug sellers—especially the African Americans who constituted the dominant group of sellers in the crack markets.²² Between 1980 and 1996, the incarceration rate in state prisons for drug offenses grew by a factor of 10. This growth in incarceration for drug crimes created a strong demand for new recruits as replacements. Moreover, the rapid growth in demand for crack transactions—spurred by new users for whom powder cocaine had been inaccessible because of its high cost, and by an increase in transactions per consumer²³—made the illegal drug markets anxious for a new labor supply. Finally, the economic plight of many urban black juveniles, who saw no other satisfactory route to economic sustenance,²⁴ made them particularly vulnerable to the lure of employment in the crack markets.

As the next section of the article describes, guns were common tools of the drug trade. As more inner-city youth became involved in the illegal drug markets, gun carrying became endemic in their communities.

The Diffusion of Gun Carrying from the Drug Markets to the Larger Community

There are some strong indications of a link between drug markets and the growth of gun prevalence in urban communities.^{21,25} Because most crack markets, especially in inner-city areas, were run as street markets, participants were vulnerable to attack by robbers targeting their sizable assets (drugs or money from their sale).²⁶ Unable to call the police for protection, participants in those markets, including juveniles, tended to carry guns for self-protection and help in dispute resolution. Once these juveniles started carrying guns, other teenagers who attended the same school or walked the same streets became likely to

arm themselves, for protection or to achieve status in the community.¹⁷

This may have initiated an escalating “arms race” as more guns in the community increased the incentive for the next person to arm himself. Among tight networks of teenagers, that diffusion process could proceed very quickly. The emergence of youth gangs in many cities at about the same time—some with members involved in the drug markets—would further contribute to that diffusion process.²⁷

Once guns were in young people’s hands, given the recklessness and bravado that is characteristic of many teenagers, and their low level of skill in settling disputes without physical force, many fights escalated into shootings because of the presence of guns. The willingness to use lethal force can be exacerbated by the problems associated with high levels of poverty, single-parent households, educational failures, and a widespread sense of economic hopelessness.

This hypothesized process suggested by national data has been tested with city-level data on juvenile arrests for drugs and homicides, taking advantage of the fact that drug markets flourished at different times in different cities. A 1999 study showed the connection between the recruitment of juveniles into the crack markets and the rise in handgun homicides.²⁵ The study identified the time when juvenile arrests for drugs began to accelerate in specific cities and compared it with the corresponding point when juvenile homicide arrests began to rise. Typically, there was a one- to three-year lag between the two; homicides followed involvement in drug markets. These results are consistent with the hypothesis that the rise in juvenile homicides was attributable to the diffusion of guns from youth recruited into drug markets to their friends and beyond. Also, the study’s analysis of individual cities showed that crack markets generally emerged first in the largest coastal cities, especially New York and Los Angeles, and then diffused to the center of the nation and smaller cities at a later time. Thus, the observed patterns in handgun homicides by young people are highly consistent with explanations

other young black males. However, the evidence suggests that although young African Americans working in the drug markets were important in initiating the diffusion of handguns, these individuals were not necessarily involved in the shootings. Examination of the circumstances of these handgun homicides shows that they are mainly attributable to “arguments” rather than drug or gang related.²⁸

Declines in the Drug Markets Fueled Declines in Youth Gun Homicide

This analysis suggests that the decline in handgun homicide by young people after 1993 resulted from a set of mutually supportive events. A decline in the demand for crack by new users²⁹ diminished the need for street markets and young drug sellers and reduced the associated need for handguns.^{28,30}

With the reduced presence of young people in street drug markets, the external stimulus for possessing handguns was diminished, and even though the presence of handguns could develop a persistence of its own, efforts by local police to enforce laws against weapon carrying, as well as efforts by state and federal governments to disrupt illegal weapons markets, contributed to the disarmament that occurred between 1994 and 2000. (See the articles by Wintemute and by Fagan.) As individuals began to avoid carrying guns because of the deterrent effects of police enforcement or because of truces or other inducements stimulated by community groups, the next individual had less incentive to carry a gun. This cumulative process contributed to the decline in young people’s weapons arrests and handgun homicides.

At the same time that young people were dropped from the crack street markets, jobs became more readily available to them in the legitimate economy.³¹ The seasonally adjusted unemployment rate for black males ages 16 to 19 was 43% in the third quarter of 1992, but dropped to 29.5% by the third quarter of 1999.³² Those who took jobs in the legitimate economy had an incentive to conform to the law, an incentive that would be much weaker if they were still involved in illegal drug markets. Thus, a stronger economy, particularly at the low-skill end, provided jobs for young people to move into instead of engaging in illegal activities to make money.

that assign central importance to the rise and decline of crack markets in the United States.

When examining homicides by race, it becomes clear that the predominant consequence of this diffusion of crack cocaine and guns was young black males killing

Conclusion

The United States has seen the consequences of easy youth access to guns in the rise of handgun homicides by young people starting in about 1985 and continuing until a peak in 1993. The entire growth in homicides over that period was attributable to young people with handguns. The subsequent decline in overall homicide rates has been dominated by the decline in handgun homicides by young people, and homicide rates among juveniles and youth are now just about back to where they were in 1985.

A number of complex factors have contributed to the recent decline in young people's violence: the shrinking of illegal drug markets, a robust economy that provided youth with legitimate employment and an incentive to conform to the law, and varied efforts to control youth access to guns, as discussed in the articles by Wintemute and by Fagan.

However, having guns available to young people who lack skill in handling them and are insensitive to their lethal potential can be terrifying. The question remains: What can be done to sustain the recent declines in violent crimes committed by youth?

One answer is clear. As this article illustrates, youth homicide rates are sensitive to enforcement of gun control laws, as well as larger economic factors. Although economic downturns (and perhaps the emergence of new drug markets) are inevitable, government has at least some power to regulate the supply and use of guns by youth and other inappropriate people. Unless the government exercises that power by adopting more effective approaches to controlling youth access to guns, the United States risks seeing more lethal violence by youth the next time there is a major downturn in the economy accompanied by rapid growth of a new violence-prone drug market.

ENDNOTES

1. A spate of school shootings began with a shooting in Pearl, Mississippi, on October 1, 1997, that killed 2 students. That was followed by shootings in West Paducah, Kentucky (3 killed), Jonesboro, Arkansas (4 students and 1 teacher killed), Edinboro, Pennsylvania (1 teacher killed), and Springfield, Oregon (2 students killed). National concern peaked with the April 20, 1999, shootings in Littleton, Colorado, where 14 students (including the 2 shooters) and 1 teacher were killed. (More details on these and other school shootings are available from the Learning Network Web site, <http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0777958.html>.) These five incidents involved only 28 deaths, compared with the roughly 3,000 annual murders of teenagers over that same period, but they were striking because they occurred suddenly, involved typically suburban middle-class shooters, involved high-firepower weaponry, and had a random quality that increased public concern about the universality of the potential risks.
2. Mears, D.M. Getting tough with juvenile offenders: Explaining support for sanctioning youths as adults. *Criminal Justice and Behavior* (April 2001) 28(20):206–26.
3. Bennett, W.J., DiIulio Jr., J.J., and Walters, J.P. *Body count: Moral poverty...and how to win America's war against crime and drugs*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996.
4. In measuring trends in U.S. violence rates, this article focuses primarily on homicide, with some attention to robbery, which tracks homicide rather closely. These are the two violent crimes that are most reliably measured, largely because they are reasonably well defined and their definitions have been stable over time. Also, homicide tends to be very well reported to the police, and the rate at which victims report robberies to the police has been stable over time, at about 55%. See Rennison, C.M. *Criminal victimization 2000: Changes 1999–2000 with trends 1993–2000*. NCJ 187007. Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, June 2001. The other components of the “violent crime index”—forcible rape and aggravated assault—are far less reliably measured, forcible rape because of sharp changes in reporting rates, and aggravated assault because of changes in definition, especially with the recent growth in the classification of domestic assaults as “aggravated.”
5. The article focuses on crimes reported to the police and reported by them to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, which publishes the reports annually in the Uniform Crime Reports (UCR). See U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Crime in the United States: Uniform crime reports (year)*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. The UCR report for any year is usually published in the fall of the following year. This article relies on UCR reports for the years 1965 through 2000.
6. For homicides specifically, in addition to UCR reports (see note no. 5), the article relies on detailed incident reports supplied to the Federal Bureau of Investigation by the police and compiled in the Supplementary Homicide Reports (SHR), which are raw data made available to researchers by the FBI. The SHR data used here cover the period 1979–1997. The numbers here are based on the SHR counts in a subset of the reporting jurisdictions. Jurisdictions that had erratic reporting were purged in all years to avoid fluctuations based on reporting variations. These reports, filed by individual police departments, provide considerable detail on individual homicide incidents. This article focuses specifically on reports from cities with populations of more than 100,000. Each report contains information on the victim, offender (if known), victim–offender relationship, the weapon involved, and the circumstances leading up to the homicide, such as argument, drug involvement, or gang involvement. Unfortunately, only a single circumstance may be designated, so changes over time in how police designate the single circumstance limit the reliability of those data.
7. In Figure 1, the rate for robbery is scaled down by a factor of 25 to put it on the same scale as murder, to permit easy visual comparison of the two data series.
8. If this trend were to continue, then one might project the homicide rate to go negative by 2007—an obvious impossibility. Because such trends cannot continue indefinitely, it is all the more important to anticipate the conditions that will flatten the trend or turn it upward. In fact, that flattening has already occurred, as the drop of 3.1% from 1999 to 2000 is the smallest seen since the 1991 peak.
9. Gest, T. *Crime and politics: Big government's erratic campaign for law and order*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.
10. It is far less widely recognized that there also was an important increase during this period in suicide by young people, especially African Americans. See the article by Fingerhut and Christoffel in this journal issue.
11. Figure 4 uses an index scale, with the number of handgun homicides by black youth in 1985 being assigned an index number of 100. Thus, the number of handgun homicides in any year is relative to the number of homicides with handguns by black youth in 1985.
12. The Federal Bureau of Investigation's Supplementary Homicide Reports (SHR) provide data to track such changes in homicides. (See note no. 6.)
13. These data are available only for homicides where the offender is known.
14. Figure 5 uses an index scale, with the number of handgun homicides in 1985 being assigned an index number of 100. Thus, the number of homicides by any weapon type and in any year is relative to the number of homicides with handguns in 1985.
15. Suicides displayed the same pattern as homicides: a sharp rise in weapon-specific death rates before 1993. Following a period of generally flat rates, the rate of suicide with firearms increased significantly after 1985, whereas suicides committed by means other than firearms remained unchanged. This pattern was especially pronounced in suicides of African American youth and juveniles, whose suicide rate previously had been markedly lower than that of whites. See Blumstein, A., and Cork, D. Linking gun availability to youth gun violence. *Law and Contemporary Problems* (1996) 59(1):5–24.
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18. Arrests for drug offenses obviously confound information on drug-market activity with the aggressiveness of police pursuit of drug offenders. Cross-city analyses have shown that drug arrests are the

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19. The more recent rise in drug arrests, beginning in 1992—affecting white juveniles as much as nonwhites—is much more associated with arrests for marijuana than for crack, which dominated drug arrests in the late 1980s. It is also interesting to note that in 1975, a policy shift reversed the then rapidly growing drug arrest rate of whites (primarily for marijuana offenses), whose drug arrest rate exceeded that of nonwhites throughout the 1970s. That was a period of some degree of decriminalization, which evidently benefited whites primarily and nonwhites to a lesser degree. However, the trend for the latter was significantly reversed with their recruitment into the crack markets beginning in about 1985.
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