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# TELEMASP BULLETIN

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### Why the Drop In Crime? Part V Social Demographic Trends

*This Bulletin is the fifth of six in a series exploring the recent drop in crime and the role played by police agencies.*

As noted in previous bulletins in this series, there are five potential explanations for the recent precipitous drop in crime. They include incarceration rates, economic conditions, drug use prevalence, social demographic trends, and police programs. The most amorphous of these are social demographic trends. The difficulty in understanding the influence of social demographic trends on crime rates is determined by which social demographic variables are correlated to crime, the strength of the correlation, and whether the correlation is indeed a causal relationship. Visher, in "Understanding the Works of Crime" (1996), listed thirty variables linked to criminal activities and its control. They are listed in Table 1. Many of these factors, of course, "co-vary," that is, social dynamics pertaining to one factor affect others. Thus, parent-child relationships are linked to parental disciplinary practices, that in turn links to parent characteristics, that in turn links to family mental health, etc. Parsing out clear and direct linkages between these variables and crime rates is, therefore, difficult. Some are extremely difficult to measure such as social cohesion, for example. Some are linked to crime under certain circumstances but not necessarily under all circumstances. For example, as a rule, the more residential turnover, the more crime; on the other hand, however, there is enormous residential turnover in university communities that normally does not have an impact on crime rates.

This Bulletin examines social demographic variables generally accepted to be closely related to crime rates. They include the proportion of the population in crime-prone age

brackets and social "values" as measured by rates of unmarried childbearing, teenage births, divorce, and church attendance. Any "tidal movements" in social demographics that would account for the drop in crime in the '90s should show up among these variables.

#### Proportion of Population in Crime-Prone Age Brackets

Youthful members of society commit a disproportionate amount of crime. The typical age range cited as "criminogenic" is 15 to 24 years of age. There are, of course, several factors which contribute to the propensity of youth to commit more crime. They have not yet learned to adequately anticipate negative consequences of dare-devil actions. They are exuberant. They lack job and family responsibilities that tend to mitigate against risk-taking behaviors. For the most part, we simply capture the phenomenon as "immaturity."

The proportion of the population in the crime-prone age bracket varies over time. In our era, the term "baby boomer" has become a part of the lexicon. The enormous increase in the birth rate immediately following World War II was reflected in higher proportions of the population in the criminogenic age bracket during the 1960s. And indeed,

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Table 1

## Variables Related to Crime Incidence and Control

1. Social, economic and demographic structure	16. Deviant and prosocial attitudes of peers
2. Organizational and political structure	17. Location of peer networks (school or community)
3. Community standards and norms	18. Changes in peer relationships over time
4. Informal social control	19. Family structure
5. Crime victimization and arrests	20. Parent-child relationships
6. Social cohesion	21. Parental disciplinary practices
7. Residential turnover	22. Parent characteristics
8. Level of involvement in drug and gang networks	23. Family mental health
9. Academic achievement expectations	24. Family history of criminal behavior and substance abuse
10. School policies regarding social control	25. Physical and mental health status
11. School conflict	26. Impulse control and sensation-seeking traits
12. Teacher-student relationships	27. Cognitive and language development
13. Strengths and weaknesses of the school environment	28. Ethnic identity and acculturation
14. Composition and size of social network	29. Leisure-time activities
15. Substance abuse and delinquency by peers	30. Self-perception, attitudes and values.

Source: Visher (1966).

crime started to climb precipitously in the 1960s, arguing for a cause and effect. The baby boom echo reached adolescence in the late 1980s. Again, the increased rate of crime during the late 80s is attributed by some to this phenomena. During the 1990s, we are in a brief dip in the proportion of the population in crime-prone age brackets (see Table 2). Note that in 1990, 14.8 percent of the population in the United States was between 15 and 24 years of age. By 1996, that proportion had dropped to 13.7 percent, a 7 percent decrease. One could legitimately argue that part of the recent decrease in crime is due to the baby boom echo maturing out of the crime-prone age bracket. If the theory is correct, then we should see a corresponding increase in crime during the early 2000s.

The broader bracket of criminogenic prone behavior is sometimes expanded to as high as 34 years of age. Table 3 represents the data for the proportion of the population in the 25 to 34 year's age bracket during the 1990s. The drop between 1990 and 1996 is even more dramatic than for the more youthful group, decreasing from 17.3 percent to 15.2 percent of the population, a 12 percent decrease. Census Bureau projections indicate that this age group will continue to decline in both numbers and as a percentage of the population until 2008, when a slight increase is projected.

The immediate inclination, however, to attribute a substantial portion of the drop in crime to proportional drops of youthful population must be tempered by recent experiences with

crime rates among this group. The *Uniform Crime Reports* indicate that from 1988 through 1997, violent crime arrests of juveniles under 18 years of age increased by nearly 50 percent (see Table 4). Property crime arrests remained almost stable among juveniles (+.7%), but between 1988 and 1997, property crime arrests among adults decreased by 11.5 percent. Reflecting the recent drop in crime, arrests among all groups decreased between 1993 and 1997, and more recently, between 1996 and 1997. Nevertheless, the arrest figures argue strongly that the decrease in the proportion of the population in the youthful age bracket cannot be cited as a substantial causal factor for the decrease in crime. While the proportion of 15- to 24-year-olds may have decreased by 7 percent from 1990 to 1996, the proportion of arrests, particularly violent crime arrests, among this age group increased substantially over the last decade. There may be proportionately fewer youths, but arrest figures argue that those who are left are committing more crime.

Further, the increase in juvenile arrests likely represents changes in juvenile behavior—not police response. It is difficult to argue that changes in the criminal justice system account for a 50 percent increase in violent crime arrests of juveniles under 18. Certainly we have become less tolerant of juvenile crime and less likely to respond with unobtrusive intervention. But, an intervention style is almost always a post-arrest response. The police do not decide to become more lenient or tougher on juveniles by electing to arrest or not arrest them for violent crime.





Table 2

## Population Changes by Ages 15-24

(in thousands)

	July 1990	July 1992	July 1994	July 1996	July 1998	July 2002	July 2004	July 2006	July 2008
15-24 Age Group	36,900	36,255	36,158	36,206	37,145	39,301	40,416	41,508	42,309
Change	N/A	-645	-97	+48	939	+2,156	+1,115	+1,092	+801
Total Population	249,440	255,002	260,292	265,179	270,029	279,189	283,713	288,269	292,928
Percent of Population	14.8	14.2	13.9	13.7	13.8	14.1	14.2	14.4	14.4

Source: U.S. Census Bureau (March 1996). *Population Projections*.

Table 3

## Population Changes by Ages 25-34

(in thousands)

	July 1990	July 1992	July 1994	July 1996	July 1998	July 2002	July 2004	July 2006	July 2008
25-34 Age Group	43,142	42,389	41,283	40,321	38,784	36,522	36,315	36,281	37,145
Change	N/A	-753	-1,106	-962	-1,537	-2,262	-207	-34	+864
Total Population	249,440	255,002	260,292	265,179	270,029	279,189	283,713	288,269	292,928
Percent of Population	17.3	16.6	15.9	15.2	14.4	13.1	12.8	12.6	12.7

Source: U.S. Census Bureau (March 1996). *Population Projections*.





**Table 4**  
**Percent Changes in Total Number of Persons Arrested**

Type of Crime	1988-1997	1993-1997	1996-1997
Violent Crime— Juvenile (under 18)	+48.9%	-6.0%	-4.3%
Property Crime— Juvenile (under 18)	+48.9%	-6.0%	-4.3%
Violent Crime— Adult (18 and over)	+19.0%	-1.4%	+0.1%
Property Crime— Adult (18 and over)	-11.5%	-8.8%	-2.5%

Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation (1998). *Uniform Crime Reports, 1997*.

### Population Changes by Race/Ethnicity

It is often argued that one of the reasons crime rates in the United States are relatively high compared to other Western industrialized countries is racial/ethnic diversity. The core of the argument is that a homogeneous society is more stable, while heterogeneity generates conflict, some of which statistically shows up as crime. Table 5 contains data from the U.S. Census Bureau regarding the proportion of the population by race/ethnicity during the 1990s. The U.S. population as a whole is gradually becoming more diverse, with proportionately more blacks and Hispanics. For example, between 1990 and 1996, the proportion of the population classified as black increased from 11.8 percent to 12 percent. Concurrently, the proportion of Hispanics increased from 9 percent to 10.6 percent. These changes reflect greater heterogeneity. If the theory is correct, we should have proportionately more crime, not less. At the same time, of course, while these changes are steady and pronounced, they are not within a span of a decade a realignment of the entire population composition. One definitively will have to look elsewhere than population race/ethnicity heterogeneity to find an explanation for the drop in crime in the 1990s.

### Arrest Trends by Gender

Just as we have seen variation in arrest trends by age bracket, likewise we have witnessed in the last decade substantial variation in arrest trends by gender. While arrests for violent crime increased by 16.8 percent for males between 1988 and 1997, it increased by an astounding 73.4 percent for females. And while the arrest rate for property crime decreased for males by 13.2 percent, it increased for females by 10.1 percent. In the more recent time frame of 1993 to 1997, violent crime arrests for males decreased by 5.9 percent, while increasing by 22.4 percent for females, and property crime arrests for males decreased by 10.2 percent while increasing by 1.8 percent for females (see Table 6). Accompanying other changes in female roles in our society is an enormous increase in female criminality. Whenever fully 50 percent of the population has a substantially increased propensity to commit crime, one would expect a skyrocketing crime rate. The fact that the crime rate is falling *despite* a substantial increase in criminal behavior among the female 50 percent of the population speaks to the strength of forces causing its decline. And those forces are clearly not borne of demographics.





**Table 5**

**Population Changes by Race/Ethnicity**

(in percent of total population)

	April 1990	July 1991	July 1992	July 1993	July 1994	July 1995	July 1996	July 1997	July 1998	April 1999
White	75.7	75.2	74.8	74.4	74.0	73.6	73.2	72.7	72.3	72.0
Black	11.8	11.8	11.9	11.9	12.0	12.0	12.0	12.1	12.1	12.1
American Indian/ Eskimo	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.7
Asian/ Pacific Islander	2.8	2.9	3.1	3.2	3.3	3.4	3.5	3.6	3.7	3.7
Hispanic	9	9.3	9.5	9.8	10	10.3	10.6	10.9	11.2	11.4

Source: U.S. Census Bureau (June 4, 1999). *Resident Population Estimates of the United States by Sex . . .*

**Table 6**

**Percent Changes in Total Number of Persons Arrested by Sex**

Type of Crime	1988-1977	1993-1997	1996-1997
Violent Crime— Male (total)	+16.8%	-5.9%	-1.7%
Violent Crime— Male (under 18)	+42.0%	-8.8%	-4.8%
Property Crime— Male (total)	-13.2%	-10.2%	-4.7%
Property Crime— Male (under 18)	-8.6%	-7.8%	-6.6%
Violent Crime— Female (total)	+73.4%	+22.4%	+4.8%
Violent Crime— Female (under 18)	+100.7%	+12.4%	-1.9%
Property Crime— Female (total)	+10.1%	+1.8%	-0.9%
Property Crime— Female (under 18)	+37.3%	+9.9%	-3.30%





## The Concept of Values

The concept of family values has received a significant amount of political attention in recent years. Normally, values are linked to crime with the assumption that social conformity and "righteous" behavior clearly follow from strength in family values. While the concept of family values cannot be directly measured, there are indirect indicators that are widely monitored, including unmarried childbearing, teenage births, divorce, and church attendance rates.

**Unmarried childbearing.** American women become sexually active at earlier ages and marry later, increasing both the risk and the hazard of unmarried childbearing in the U.S. Single mothers are more likely than their married counterparts to be poorly educated. The birth rate for unmarried women dropped 6 percent in 1997 from its 1994 high (Center for Disease Control 1999). The birth rate for unmarried black women is at its lowest rate since statistics were first compiled in 1969 and was down 18 percent from 1991 (Center for Disease Control 1999). Does the decline in the unmarried birth rate represent a change in "values," wider availability of birth control, fear of contracting the AIDS virus, or greater social responsibility? We, of course, don't know.

**Teenage births.** Overall, births to teenagers were down 16 percent in 1997, as compared to 1991 (Center for Disease Control 1999). Teen birth rates decreased for white, black, American Indian, Asian or Pacific Islander, and Hispanic women aged 15-19 (Center for Disease Control 1999). The pregnancy rate for teenagers also showed a decrease of 17 percent from 1990 (Painter 1998). Some researchers credit the decline to more abstinence on the part of teenagers, as well as greater use of more effective birth control methods (Painter 1998). Is there a correlation between the lower teen birth rate and greater social responsibility? Again, of course, we have no way of telling.

**Divorce.** Divorce rates have stabilized. The divorce rate peaked in 1981, and in 1997 was 4.3 per 1,000 people, the same as 1996 and the lowest rate in two decades (Center for Disease Control 1998). The divorce rate continues to decline, along with the crime rate. Does a declining divorce rate mean a more stable family life, and therefore, less opportunities for criminal behavior and stronger "family values"? Or did we simply experience an increase in the rates with the social and economic liberation of women and reach a "natural" rate consistent with that liberation?

**Church attendance.** Church attendance and values would appear to be related, with those who attend church regularly hypothetically having the strongest values, and therefore less participation in criminal behavior. While 82 percent of Americans consider themselves Christians, weekly church

attendance is at 37 percent, the lowest level since 1986 (*American Family Association Journal* 1996). Families with children under 18 are more likely to attend church than those without children, and married individuals are more likely than unmarried individuals to attend church (*American Family Association Journal* 1996). However, only 31 percent of the baby boomers attend church weekly (*American Family Association Journal* 1996). If there is a resurgence in family values in America, it is not reflected in church attendance.

## Social Values—Synopsis

By these measures—unmarried childbearing, teenage births, divorce, and church attendance—one cannot conclude that a sea change in social values has occurred in the 1990s. The positive indicators, unmarried childbearing and teenage births, are both related to sexual behaviors. Decreases in these rates are just as likely the product of expanded use of birth control, which is, in turn, associated with a fear of the AIDS virus and consequent use of associated protective measures. There has been no substantial change in sexual behaviors as measured by social surveys. The divorce rate has stabilized but has not decreased. Further, it is difficult to argue that the increase in the rate from 1960 to 1981 was anything but a product of expanded social choice by women, i.e., options were available beyond staying in an unhappy marriage. There is no indication in church attendance rates that would argue that values have somehow suddenly and dramatically shifted. Finally, another "values" indicator, drug use prevalence, is up, not down. That issue will be examined in-depth in the next Bulletin in this series.

## Conclusion

Among social demographic trends, the only factor which arguably may have contributed to the decrease in crime in the 1990s was a 7 percent drop in the proportion of the population in the crime-prone 15- to 24-year age bracket. Arguments in this respect, however, are mitigated by the observation that arrests among juveniles increased substantially during the same period. And a 7 percent drop in the proportion of 15- to 24-year-olds does not translate to the substantial drop in crime that we have witnessed during this decade. Youths do not commit all crime, only a disproportionate amount of crime. Taking all of the socio-demographic indicators into account, we would argue that the drop in crime is not attributable to changes in either population demographics or social values.



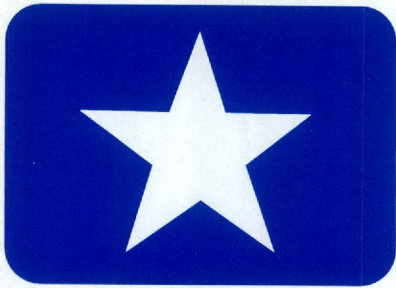


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**I**nstitute of  
**T**exas

Randy Garner, Ph.D.  
Executive Director

Kay Billingsley  
Publications Manager

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programs, call (800) 477-9248

**Texas Regional Community  
Policing Institute**  
Regina Ernst  
Project Coordinator



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Sam Houston State University  
Larry T. Hoover, Ph.D., Director  
Jamie L. Tillerson, Program Manager

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This bulletin was authored by Dr. Larry Hoover,  
Director of the Police Research Center, Dr. David  
Carter, Director of the National Center for  
Community Policing at Michigan State  
University, and Mr. Scott A. Pray, a doctoral  
teaching fellow at Sam Houston State University.

**Bill Blackwood Law Enforcement  
Management Institute of Texas**  
Criminal Justice Center  
Sam Houston State University  
Huntsville, TX 77341-2296

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