

Rethinking Crime—Again

The 15-year decline in violent crime is not nearly as great a success story as you might think. The time is right for a new—and broader—crime bill.

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iolent crime rates in America have declined from coast to coast since 1994. As measured by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) through its annual household surveys, the total rate of victimizations from violent crime—homicide, rape, robbery, and assault—per 1,000 persons age 12 or older fell by 53.5 percent from 1995 to 2005. With a slight stall in 2006, the declines continued through 2009; as tallied by the FBI from reports filed by some 17,000 state and local law enforcement agencies, the number of violent crimes fell by 10 percent and the number of murders fell by 4.4 percent between 2008 and 2009.

As it has been for much of the last 16 years, the latest good news on crime was led by New York City. The Big Apple's fabled police force started collecting largely reliable statistics on violent crimes and murders in 1963. In 1990, the city had a record 2,245 known homicides; by 2007, the body count had dropped to a

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post-1963 record low of 496. After trending up to 523 murders in 2008, the city counted 461 at the end of December 2009, a new post-1963 low. Citywide rates of most other categories of violent crime also declined significantly.

Both in New York City and nationally, the 2009 drops in lethal violence and other violent crimes were all the more impressive given that, in 2008, many criminologists fretted that bad economic conditions, financially strapped and shrunken police forces (for example, in 2009 New York City's police force was down by about 6,000 officers compared with 2001), and other factors would conspire to put crime back on the rise.

Still, even as we enter a new decade with crime at lower levels than anyone could have reasonably hoped a decade ago, all the good news about crime is not quite as good as it seems. Four sets of facts mug the conventional post-1994 crime-drop narrative.

First, criminologists are far from understanding why crime declined or how to keep crime on the run. Second, the federal government systematically undercounts crime nationally, and does so in ways that confound policy-relevant, city-to-city comparisons. Third, although violence by and against juveniles has receded from record highs (not reached new highs, as had been widely predicted) since 1994, far too many young Americans are still being lost to what Barack Obama has eloquently called "an epidemic of violence that's sickening the soul of this nation."

Finally, America in 2010 is a half-century into massive public and private anti-crime investments, tougher criminal sentencing policies, and security-seeking personal life style changes; yet, for all that, nationally, crime is not demonstrably lower today than it was 50 years ago, and in many places it is worse than it was when the national alarm about crime was first sounded. Since crime climbed on to the federal policy agenda in the early 1960s, successive government wars on crime and drugs have sacrificed once-sacred civil liberties. Today, nearly 2.5 million Americans live behind prison gates while tens of millions more live in gated communities. We reflexively practice crime-avoidance behaviors that forsake personal freedom to live as and where we would truly like. We spend billions a year on a private-security industry that profits from our crime fears, and we spend billions more on a recession-proof prison-industrial complex. Measured by the number of persons sentenced to a year or more in state or federal prisons per 100,000 citizens, the imprisonment rate was about 100 in 1960 and still under 150 in 1980, but it broke 200 in 1985, 300 in 1991, 400 in 1995, and 500 in 2006. More than 6 million still-living Americans have spent a year or more behind prison bars. Yet we are not safer—and do not feel safer—than our grandparents did a half-century ago.

The post-1994 crime decline furnishes no basis for complacency about crime. Instead, we need government, led by Washington, to get going on fresh crime

policies. The Obama-Biden White House should lead on a new federal crime bill before Republican presidential hopefuls or the GOP minions in Congress beat Democrats to it. The interlocking goals should be to promote greater public safety without further draining the public's purse; to make citizens feel less inclined to lead security-alarmed life styles; and to change federal, state, and local sentencing policies so that, by 2020, civil liberties are more widely respected and America is completing its first post-1960 decade of zero prison growth.

Whither the Crime Drop?

Over the last decade, the national murder rate per 100,000 residents has been between five and six, and New York City's murder rate has been in that range. What's true for the Big Apple, however, is far from true for many other cities. New Orleans, for example, recorded 179 murders in 2008 and 173 in 2009 (the city's per capita murder rate per 100,000 residents in each of the last two years was 50 to 55 if you use the city's post-Katrina population estimates or 60 to 65 if you follow the FBI's post-Katrina population estimates). In either case, the New Orleans murder rate is at least ten times the murder rate nationally. St. Louis, Philadelphia, Detroit, and Baltimore, among other cities, have all had some share in the post-1994 decline in crime. But, more similar to the Big Easy than to the Big Apple, their respective crime drops have been neither steep nor stable. Baltimore recorded 130 fewer shootings but four more murders (238) in 2009 than it had in 2008 (234).

Why is the Big Easy so much more crime-ridden than the Big Apple? Why have diverse cities been post-1994 crime-drop laggards? Why are certain neighborhoods in any given city far less crime-ridden than nearby neighborhoods in the same city? And why do national and local crime rates fluctuate over time as they do?

Despite cross-pollination with more robust social sciences like economics, criminologists have not been terribly successful in explaining variance in crime rates. Moreover, they have been markedly unsuccessful in predicting crime trends: Few forecast the crime waves that started in the mid-1960s and the mid-1980s, and many forecast a crime rise that instead became a crime retreat in the mid-1990s. Even retrospective efforts to explain crime patterns and trends rarely result in empirically bankable explanations.

The best book yet on crime's post-1994 decline is the National Academy of Sciences-sponsored volume, *Understanding Crime Trends: Workshop Report*, published in 2008. The instantly acclaimed report was produced by a methodological and ideological cross-section of the nation's most widely respected criminologists. In its single most notable section, Eric P. Baumer persuasively summarizes the

evidence on five factors that figured significantly in the crime decline and the estimated range of the crime-drop difference for which each factor was likely responsible: increased incarceration rates (10 to 35 percent); improved economic conditions (10 to 30 percent); decline in teenage births (10 to 35 percent); larger adult cohorts (4 to 8 percent); and increased police per capita (3 to 7 percent).

But there are some immediately obvious points of concern. For one, if all the estimates of the outer-bound impact of the five leading factors were correct, they would explain an impossible “115 percent” of the crime drop. And then, in addition to these five factors, there are other much-discussed factors like the decline in crack cocaine use, enhanced gun-control enforcement, the spread of community-based policing, the 1970s abortion legalization, and the proliferation of “shall-issue” concealed weapons laws. By some estimates published in leading academic journals, various combinations of these factors alone can account for the entire crime decline.

The crime-drop criminology is cloudiest regarding inter-city, intra-city, or year-to-year local fluctuations in crime. For instance, some experts insist that policing mattered a lot to the national crime drop, but others argue that it mattered hardly at all, or only in a few big cities. Some argue that changes in policing tactics made a positive difference, but others conclude that it was more cops per capita, not “community policing” or “broken-windows policing,” that made a difference. For every refereed academic journal article reaching one of these conclusions, there is another that reaches the opposite.

Even if we knew what determined the crime drop, we would not therefore know how to engineer factors such as improved economic conditions or fewer teenagers having children. And, even if we could engineer them, what worked then would not be certain to work now. For instance, most experts cite increased incarceration as a major factor in the crime drop, responsible for as much as a third of the total decline. In “Two Million Prisoners Are Enough,” a much-debated *Wall Street Journal* op-ed published in 1999, I popularized the early evidence indicating that post-2000 increases in incarceration would have diminished crime-reduction returns. In *Prison State*, a book published in 2008, economist Anne Morrison Piehl and sociologist Bert Useem marshal near-definitive evidence that since 2000, increased incarceration has had rapidly diminishing crime-reduction returns.

Finally, in addition to the subject’s inherent complexities, our best analysts’ understanding of crime in America is limited by the deficiencies built into the two major national crime data sources with which they must work: Both measures systematically undercount the actual amount of crime, and both make reliably analyzing city-to-city and other differences in crime rates difficult if not impossible.

The Crime Undercount

The two major national crime counts are the Uniform Crime Reports (UCR), compiled from police reports by the FBI, and the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), based on annual household surveys conducted by the BJS. The UCR logs data on reported murders, rapes, robberies, aggravated assaults, burglaries, motor vehicle thefts, and larceny thefts.

Each year millions of serious crimes are never reported to the police, and the UCR has long been plagued by underreporting and other flaws in local police reporting practices. One type of UCR “underreporting,” however, is done by decades-old design. The “hierarchy rule,” as defined in the FBI’s 2004 *UCR Handbook* and reiterated in its April 2009 guide to UCR reporting, states that in a crime incident involving more than one crime, “the law enforcement agency must locate the offense that is highest on the hierarchy list and score that offense and not the other offense(s) in the multiple-offense situation.” The only exceptions to the hierarchy rule are “the offenses of justifiable homicide, motor vehicle theft, and arson.” Some violent crime incidents like murder, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault are, in fact, “multiple-offense situations,” but the UCR counts only the most serious offense in each incident.

In 1988, the FBI acted to improve the UCR by instituting the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS). Detailed and demanding in its reporting protocols, the NIBRS does not follow the hierarchy rule. It collects data on 33 offense categories and on scores of specific crimes. But, in 2007, only about 25 percent of the UCR data were compiled via the NIBRS. Many state and local officials worry that if they implement the NIBRS their crime counts will rise (a concern that the FBI pooh-poohs in its materials on “Frequently Asked Questions” about the NIBRS). Other state and local officials want to implement the NIBRS but do not have the money or the manpower necessary to do so. The FBI’s standing policy is that until the UCR “receives the majority of data via the NIBRS,” it will “continue to report crime statistics to the nation on the traditional format.”

Meanwhile, the NCVS interviews persons age 12 and older, meaning that crimes against children age 11 or younger count as zero. In addition, the survey does not duly sample people in places where many crime victims cluster, such as jail holding cells, public hospitals, drug treatment residential facilities, homeless shelters, and centers for abused women. And serial victimizations are counted as only single crimes if the victim cannot recall just how many times she was victimized by a given perpetrator.

Began in 1973, the NCVS changed its interview protocols in the early 1990s. The BJS retrofitted the earlier two decades’ annual data to make them tolerably consistent with what the crime counts for those years would have been had the new

methods been employed instead. But the revised NCVS tallies revealed just how much the survey's results reflected the particular methods being used to estimate the amount of crime in America—rather than the actual amount of crime itself. For example, by the old NCVS method, the violent crime count for 1992 was 6.6 million. By the new NCVS method, however, the violent crime total for 1992 was 10.3 million, or 55 percent more violent crimes in 1992 than were counted by the old NCVS method. (The BJS has fine-tuned the new NCVS several more times over the last 15 years, including a number of methodological changes implemented in 2006.)

On the one hand, even with all the methodological changes, the national crime-decline picture painted by the NCVS is broadly accurate: The annual rate of violent crime victimizations per 1,000 citizens age 12 or older bounced between the low 40s and the low 50s from 1973 to 1996, fell into the mid-30s in the late 1990's, and was in the 20s after 2000 until it dipped to a new record low of 19.3 in 2008.

On the other hand, there can be no doubt that the NCVS still undercounts crime. In 2008, two expert panels issued a National Academy of Sciences-sponsored report on “the current methods of and future options for” the NCVS; and, in 2009, the same panels issued a report on “ensuring the quality, credibility, integrity, and relevance of U.S. justice statistics.” Both reports are rightly sympathetic to the BJS, a shoestring-budgeted agency that has almost unfailingly done outstanding work. But, as the 2009 report emphasized, there are “major gaps in the substantive coverage of BJS data” on juvenile justice, white-collar crime, and more.

The FBI is so (duly) cautious about anyone actually using the UCR to make inter-city comparisons that you cannot even access the annual UCR reports online without first clicking through the agency's disclaimer regarding such comparisons. And the NCVS data cannot be disaggregated on a city by city basis: The BJS has on occasion counted crimes at the city level—it did so for the first time in a report on a dozen cities published in 1999—but that report, which had been designed in part to help the Clinton Administration justify its investment in “100,000 cops” and support for “community policing,” remains an exception to the rule. Both the UCR and the NCVS not only undercount crime but do so in ways that frustrate longitudinal and cross-jurisdiction crime data analysis. While there is no reason at all to doubt that crime is much less prevalent in America today than it was in 1994, there is also no reason to believe that crime is as contained as the official national figures indicate.

Youth: “Epidemic of Violence”

Youths perpetrated about 137,000 more violent crimes in 1994 than they had in 1985. As murders by adults fell, murders by juveniles rose, doubling for 14- to 17-year-old white males and tripling for 14- to 17-year-old black males. In the

mid-1990s, many lawmakers and academics feared that the worst was yet to come. For example, in December 1995, the Senate Judiciary Committee, led by then Delaware Senator Joseph Biden, issued a report stressing “the dire potential that lay in the demographic realities” associated with 39 million juveniles “younger than ten years of age” reaching “their late teens and twenties” and “committing violent crimes at the same rate as ten to twenty year olds today.” Similarly, in 1996, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention issued a report, *Combating Violence and Delinquency: the National Juvenile Justice Action Plan*, which cited dozens of leading experts and forecast that “juvenile arrest rates for violent crimes will more than double by the year 2010.” It began with “An Urgent Call to Action:” “In the 1990s, pervasive problems with juvenile violence threaten the safety and security of communities across the country, and projections for the future are cause for nationwide alarm.”

I was not among the many experts cited in either the 1995 Biden report or in the 1996 OJJDP report, but I was among those who took the experts’ alarming forecasts seriously. The academics’ worst-case fears were widely shared by diverse criminal justice officials. All, it seemed, had frightening, first-hand tales regarding impulsive, hair-trigger street violence, much of it by and against gun-toting, gang-connected teenagers. The testimonies that really gripped me, however, came from long-time maximum-security prisoners around the country. “I was a bad-ass street gladiator,” one New Jersey inmate told me, “but these kids are stone-cold predators.”

In a 1995 essay in *The Weekly Standard*, I quoted the inmate verbatim but elsewhere in the text converted his “stone-cold predators” to “super-predators.” I opened the essay with testimony from Lynne Abraham, Philadelphia’s tough-to-scare veteran district attorney. “But,” I wrote, “what is really frightening everyone from D.A.s to demographers, old cops to old convicts, is not what’s happening now but what’s just around the corner—namely, a sharp increase in the number of super crime-prone young males.”

As I recounted in *The New York Times* in 2001, while I regretted juxtaposing “super-predators” to “delinquents,” the frightening forecasts were predicated on leading experts’ predictions that, following a possible half-decade lull, youth violence would rise in 2000 and surge around 2006. I still have my “Operation 2006” t-shirt from one national anti-violence effort I helped launch in 1996. In fact, I was so concerned by the impending youth violence spiral that I “got religion”: In the “super-predators” essay, I diagnosed the problem’s root cause as “moral poverty,” defined as “the poverty of being without parents and other authorities” who love and support you and being surrounded by too many “deviant, delinquent, and criminal” adults. Long prison terms would not deter impulsive teenage toughs;

indeed, locking them up alongside adult felons would only make matters worse. My prescription was to pour more human and financial resources, both public and private, into urban churches with youth outreach ministries and faith-based crime prevention programs. Thereafter, from 1996 through 2000, in numerous opinion-editorials, research reports, academic articles, and congressional testimonies, I emphasized that “super-preachers” were the key to saving “super-predators,” that we needed to “build churches, not jails,” and that “monitoring, mentoring, and ministering” were the “3Ms of crime prevention.”

Thank God, rather than rising relentlessly, in the late 1990s juvenile violent crime rates began receding to pre-1985 levels. Did “super-preachers” and expanded faith-based crime prevention, mentoring, and related community-based programs have anything to do with that outcome? In certain cities, most notably Boston, I think they probably did, but I cannot prove it. Moreover, even though the worst-case juvenile violence scenarios mercifully did not come to pass, serious crime by and against youth remains a serious national problem. As Barack Obama preached before a church congregation in Chicago on July 15, 2007, “From South Central to Newark, New Jersey, there’s an epidemic of violence that’s sickening the soul of this nation. The violence is unacceptable and it’s got to stop.”

A 2009 report by the Department of Justice suggests that his words about an “epidemic of violence” were not only morally prophetic but also empirically correct. Issued last October, it reported that more than 60 percent of all American children were exposed to violence, either as victims or as witnesses, in the previous 12 months. About half of all youth were assaulted at least once. Nearly one-quarter were victims of robbery, vandalism, or theft. Around 6 percent were raped or sexually assaulted.

On the same day that these discomfiting data were released, Attorney General Eric Holder and Education Secretary Arne Duncan appeared together in Chicago “to call for a national conversation on values to address youth violence in the wake of the fatal beating of a Chicago high-school student.” “These numbers are astonishing, and they are unacceptable,” Holder said. “We simply cannot stand for an epidemic of violence that robs our youth of their childhood and perpetuates a cycle in which today’s victims become tomorrow’s criminals.”

Even as overall juvenile crime rates (including school violence statistics) continue to trend down, little-publicized statistics from other government-

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sponsored studies reinforce what the President and the Attorney General each have stated regarding the “epidemic of violence.” Between 2004 and 2008, the juvenile arrest rate for murder rose by 18.9 percent, and the juvenile arrest rate for robbery rose by 45.8 percent. Today, America is home to an estimated 27,000 street gangs, the highest estimate since 1998. Gang members total 778,000, a statistically significant increase over the 12-year low recorded in 2001.

Defining Violence Down

In 1967, following several years of growing public concerns and political debates about “crime in the streets,” the President’s Crime Commission put crime on the national policy agenda to stay. Yet crime is not less prevalent today than it was when it first became a national issue: Measured by the UCR, the overall (violent and property) crime rate per 100,000 residents was 25 percent higher in 2007 (3,730) than it was in 1967 (2,990). The violent crime rate per 100,000 persons was 160.9 in 1960, 363.5 in 1970, 596.6 in 1980, and 731.8 in 1990. It peaked at 758.2 in 1991, and had already fallen to 684.5 when Biden issued his aforementioned report in 1995. Over the next decade it fell to 469.0 in 2005, and was 454.5 in 2008—lower today than it was in the 1980s and 1990s, but higher today than it was in the 1960s and 1970s.

Crime has receded from its horrific pre-1994 highs, and still more widespread youth crime carnage has not happened; but, in absolute terms and relative to the enormous public and private investments and behavioral changes Americans of every demographic description and socioeconomic status have made, we are in 2010 left with more serious crime and violence, and a larger prison-industrial complex, than befits us as a free and democratic people.

By any definition, much of the crime and violence that we do have is horrific. In 2006, Boston surpassed its 1982 homicide high, and was once again witnessing shocking murders like that of a 20-year-old mother who was shot to death while visiting the shrine commemorating her brother’s murder on the same day four years earlier. In 2008, a 36-year-old Starbucks manager in Philadelphia, while walking home from work, was ambushed and killed by several students from one of the city’s 25 public schools classified as “persistently dangerous.” They chose him at random and attacked him for amusement. And, in 2009, a 16-year-old football player on his school’s honor roll was beaten to death with wood planks while walking home and getting caught between rival gangs in Chicago—with which he had no involvement and to which he gave no offense.

Sadly, such bloody statistics and anecdotes now seem less likely to make people shudder than to make them shrug. The reasons are to be found in what my late friend Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan defined as post-1960 Americans’

taste for “defining deviancy down.” Writing under that title for *The American Spectator* in 1993, Moynihan reasoned that the

amount of deviant behavior in American society has increased beyond the levels that the community can afford to recognize and that, accordingly, we have been re-defining deviancy... and also quietly raising the “normal” level in categories where behavior is now abnormal by an earlier standard.

“So it goes,” Moynihan concluded, as “violent killings, often random, go on unabated. Peaks continue to attract some notice. But these are peaks above ‘average’ levels that thirty years ago would have been thought epidemic.”

Moynihan’s words ring truer today than when he wrote them 17 years ago. For, following record murder and mayhem by and against our young, we now console and even congratulate ourselves for receding to a post-1994 crime plateau that we seem eerily content to wink at as average rather than wince at as a soul-sickening “epidemic of violence.” We justify this chilling complacency by noting that this plateau crime rate does not plainly presage ever higher levels of horrifying violence, and ignore the reality that it has been purchased with more finances and freedoms than any previous generation has ever expended for public safety and personal security.

Six Steps to Zero Prison Growth

Vice President Joseph Biden was a chief architect of the 1994 federal crime bill, notable for its balanced and bipartisan approach to crime prevention and enforcement. On crime policy, he remains popular with law enforcement officials and respected by diverse experts. Flanked by Obama and Holder, Biden should lead in proposing a new federal crime bill that will help us punish smarter (not harder) and target resources on at-risk youth so that they do not become adjudicated juveniles, predatory criminals, or incarcerated adults.

The bill’s overarching objective should be to cut adult felony crime and reduce youth violence by at least half while achieving zero federal and state prison growth by or before 2020. Many different approaches could help get us there, but I would nominate six ideas for consideration.

First of all, empanel a bipartisan presidential crime commission like the one that President Lyndon Johnson empanelled some four decades ago to devise better crime measures; study crime trends; conduct field hearings from New York to New Orleans; debate new crime-fighting technologies (like, in our day, the use of DNA databases); and weigh the wisdom of having an advisory staff on crime within the West Wing, a sort of crime-focused National Security Council.

Second, legislate age 18 as a compulsory national school attendance requirement, or amend all relevant federal education legislation so that states, on penalty

of losing federal funding, must comply with their own respective compulsory school age requirements (many are age 16) and offer best-practices anti-truancy programs. In several recent co-authored reports sponsored by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and issued by Civic Enterprises, I have documented the high school dropout crisis and the associated truancy epidemic. Several studies by others have confirmed that low graduation rates are strongly linked to high crime rates and high incarceration rates, especially for low-income minority males. By increasing inner-city graduation rates, even by single digits, we might well lower juvenile crime rates by double digits.

Third, mandate that juvenile probation agencies emulate or replicate programs like Philadelphia's Youth Violence Reduction Partnership (YVRP). I helped devise the YVRP in 1998. The program targets local adjudicated youth and young adults aged 14 to 24, most of whom have committed one or more violent felonies. The YVRP assigns these "youth partners" to "street workers" with whom they meet almost daily, and it assures that they get whatever drug treatment or other supports they need. A just-released impact study by Public/Private Ventures finds that YVRP participation reduces juvenile violent crime by 10 percent.

Fourth, each year through 2020, double the 2009 levels of federal aid to state and local parole agencies for programs that find ex-prisoners jobs, and to faith-based and neighborhood partnerships that mobilize adult mentors for some of the over two million children in America who have a parent in prison. The empirical research is clear: Getting jobs for ex-prisoners is a necessary but insufficient condition for reducing recidivism rates that typically run around two-thirds after three years out. Since 2000, the federal government has invested slightly more in job-mentoring programs for ex-prisoners and, in recent years, it has helped fund mentoring for more than 100,000 children of prisoners. But the investment remains paltry.

Fifth, repeal all federal mandatory-minimum drug sentencing policies and rewrite federal laws to give states new financial incentives to use scarce prison space for violent adult offenders while speeding parole for drug-only offenders. I do not make this suggestion lightly. BJS data indicate that eight in ten prisoners confined in state and federal prisons have a prior conviction history and about two in three prisoners have a history of convictions for violence; that the average released prisoner has more than 15 prior arrests for serious offenses; and that a single year's worth of prison releases accounts for about 8 percent of all murder arrests and 9 percent of all arrests for robbery. However, based on both BJS data and prisoner self-report surveys, it seems clear that most of the roughly 400,000 persons incarcerated as drug felons in state or federal prisons today are "drug-only felons" whose sole felony crimes (including ones for which they were never arrested) have been drug crimes involving no use or threat of

violence and no major role as illegal drug manufacturers or distributors. At least 100,000 of these could be placed under intensive parole supervision (complete with mandated drug treatment where necessary) tomorrow with little or no adverse impact on crime rates. The financial savings would be more than sufficient to fund all of the foregoing proposals.

Sixth, legalize marijuana for medically prescribed uses, and seriously consider decriminalizing it altogether. Last year there were more than 800,000 marijuana-related arrests. The impact of these arrests on crime rates was likely close to zero. There is almost no scientific evidence showing that pot is more harmful to its users' health, more of a "gateway drug," or more crime-causing in its effects than alcohol or other legal narcotic or mind-altering substances. Our post-2000 legal drug culture has untold millions of Americans, from the very young to the very old, consuming drugs in unprecedented and untested combinations and quantities. Prime-time commercial television is now a virtual medicine cabinet ("just ask your doctor if this drug is right for you"). Big pharmaceutical companies function as all-purpose drug pushers. And yet we expend scarce federal, state, and local law enforcement resources waging "war" against pot users. That is insane.

The Next Great Crime Drop

America has long experienced unacceptable levels of crime, including predatory violence by and against our youth and young adults. And there is no denying that, 16 years into a national crime drop, the levels remain unacceptable in absolute terms and higher than they were in the early 1960s. But there are better ways to measure crime and better ways to meet that half-century-old crime challenge. After growing at an average annual rate of 6.5 percent during the 1990s, the prison population has grown at an average annual rate of 1.8 percent since 2000.

But prison populations need not grow at all over the next decade if Washington policymakers act soon to usher in more humane and cost-effective crime policies. Americans need not continue to purchase such safety as they enjoy by forsaking freedom for themselves and depriving it to others. We can instead reclaim for ourselves, for our children and grandchildren, and for the children and families of prisoners and ex-prisoners, such lost social and civic luxuries as unlocked front doors, lone late-night walks wherever you please, and everyday life lived among friends and fellow citizens in real American communities. Call the new federal crime bill "The Zero Prison Growth, Youth Violence Prevention, and Compassionate Drug Policy Act of 2010." And let the next, and best, crime drop in modern American history begin. ▀