

Aarni Iyer

Dr. Randy Gingrich

AP Language Arts/American Literature

31 January 2020

The Impact of Crime on American Society

Though it may come as a surprise to most, American crime rates have dramatically decreased over the past quarter century. Though crime rates in America peaked during the 90s, violent crimes have been shown to be on the decline. Yet, trends in the public knowledge prove that this information is not widely known. Data collected by the FBI show that, though most crime rates have dramatically reduced as the years go on, almost 40% of the average population still believes that crime rates haven't reduced; their on the rise (Gramlich). However, this raises several questions. To what reason is the weakening crime rate a result of, and why does the public's views reflect the opposite of the truth? With the extended use of technology for news and media purposes, could the public's knowledge of crimes be more well known? Could the use of technology for safety featured be the reason the crime rate has been declining, or has it been declining due to government regulations instead? And, with all of these rapid changes that took place in the past few decades, how has this American crime influenced our modern day life?

Though recent statistics show a decreasing violent crime rate, reports reflect the peak in violent crimes in the 50s, 60s, and 70s. In fact, from the years of 1965 to 1975, "violent crime grew more than 60% a year [and] the total crime rate more than doubled during the same period"[B]. Yet, this period was also immediately followed by the stabilization of these rates, which led to the decline in crime that we are facing right now. One of the most obvious contributors to this trend include the movements, laws, and regulations passed in retaliation to this spike in horrible crimes. For example. Some of the most prevalent examples of child abductions and kidnappings took place during this period in the 70s and 80s when all crimes experienced a peak. However, the decrease

of crimes of this sort can be credited to the increased knowledge and exposure of these past acts and well-known crimes. As the public knowledge of kidnapping (how it happens, usual perpetrators, where it happens, how to defend yourself) increases, so do the odds of an at-risk victim's chance of defending themselves. Additionally, public knowledge is not the only thing combating kidnapping rates. Especially considering the public's support and momentum towards such movements, as certain crimes become more of an issue (such as kidnappings in the late 1900s), the US government becomes more inclined to pass rules and regulations to try to prevent future kidnappings and to resolve those that have already taken place. For example, one of the most interesting child abduction cases, the disappearance of 6-year-old Etan Patz, launched an entire movement centered around the awareness of missing children. Though, unfortunately, thousands of such cases of child abductions happen like Patz, the way the public handled his was enough to spread awareness of child. Patz disappearance marked the first time a missing child's pictures and information were widely broadcasted through media, print, radio, and television, even milk cartons. This behaviour led to the more serious and urgent care that we treat child disappearances now; involving media and news outlets to spread awareness and try to solve the matter. Not only did this disappearance mark the change in public behaviour, but it also drew more attention to the government's reaction to such events. This pattern led to the establishment and government recognition of a National Missing Children's Day on May 25th, as well as the creation of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, increasing government reaction, knowledge, and preparedness for such events [D]. From these events and the rise of abductions in this time period, the public had changed the way they handled these events; they became more united, with more companies and parties involved in spreading the information

(newspapers, milk cartoons, flyers), allowing average people to help cope and search for the children. It also made the government more aware and involved in the process. This behavior led to the public being more concerned and aware of child kidnappings, and this trend continues with the use and integration of technology, such as seen in amber alerts and other methods of missing people's lists.

Additionally, the increased rate of crimes and violent acts had helped prepare people as to how to act in the event of a criminal attack. A notable example of this is shown in the automatic response of dialing "911" into our cell phones in the event of a disaster, attack, or the need of an ambulance, fire truck, or police car. Again, this universal behavior was a learnt habit that was taught and developed through past violent crimes that shaped American society. The murder of Kitty Genovese, a 29 year old New York woman who was brutally stabbed, raped and murdered outside her apartment could be said to have directly led to the development of the numbers 9-1-1 to represent the permanent emergency call line [E]. Though there were several witnesses to Genovese's murder, no one acted accordingly; the police or necessary professional help were never summoned. This unfortunate event showed how unprepared the public was, and how the government could take further steps to prevent a tragedy like this happening again. As said, this resulted in the development of making government aid more accessible, thus the development of 911, and to spread the word and awareness, as to how to act in such situations, when to use the number. Today, this type of information is taught from an early age and is known by almost every American. Developments like this that help establish awareness and a plan for this type of event can be traced to a way of shaping American culture from violent crimes. Though the establishment of 911 was a very unfortunate attack, it soon integrated itself into American

culture; it can be seen used commonly in songs, movies, media, and most now know to properly use it in the case of an emergency.

However, it seems with this increase in violent acts and the public's exposure to this, sympathy levels, for both the victim and the perpetrator, have surprisingly increased. Since this spike in violent crimes that America experienced in the late 20th century, it seems as though the average person sympathizes for even the committees of the worst crimes. In the book *In Cold Blood*, by Truman Capote, it seems as though even the investigator of the murder has an uneasy time dealing with one of the hangings of the murders. Though Alvin Dewey, the main investigator in the book's murder case, has always seemed to be a supporter of capital punishment, he still reacts poorly to the hanging of Perry Smith (an accomplice to the crime), and almost excuses his behavior [A]. This exposure to these crimes and an increased curiosity and insight into possible motives has resulted in the knowledge of mental health issues and their role in violent crimes. The book portrays the abusive childhood Smith endured, and how that produced the man as a killer. Dewey, knowing his traumatic experiences, explains his belief that "the crime was a psychological accident, virtually an impersonal act; the victims might as well have been killed by lightning" [A]. He says this, meaning that Smith's motive and actions were a product of his troubled past, and that due to his misguided judgement, the death penalty may not have been an appropriate response to Smith's behaviour. This pattern of sympathy is also reflected in the legislation of states' rules on capital punishment and death penalty. Studies show that in after the 60s, "support for capital punishment reached an all-time low" (DPIC). This same ideal is presented several times throughout the book and the case, However, the practice of empathizing with the felon still is not widely understood, some may interpret it as having "[No]

thought for the victims” [A], but the awareness of mental health and the correlation to one’s childhood and their behaviours as an adult has increased, especially with increased crime coverage and knowledge within society.

Though crime today is not as prevalent as it may be, today’s violence still has a strong effect on American culture. For example, today's movements and views are very much affected by the violence in today’s culture. As how violent crimes saw a peak in the 1970s, today, there seems to be an increase in the amount of active school shootings. Moreover, the same way that past violent crimes has impacted legislation and behaviour by society, these shootings seem to make students more aware and more opinionated about topics such as gun control and even politics [F]. Not only that, but the acts of violence committed in schools produce retaliation from parents of students and from others. This causes pressure on the government to change legislation (i.e. more gun control laws), and on the school and the education system to protect it’s students from such attacks. This results in lessons teaching children how to arm and protect themselves from active shooters, and an education in how to act when a shooter is in a school. It also creates a stigma around gun usage in school, creating a controversy on whether teachers should be permitted to carry guns, as well as a paranoia on whether our current education system is at fault for the shooter’s action, and if schools are taking the proper measures to effectively protect it’s students. Lastly, an increase in school shooters and media coverage of the tragedy draws attention to the characteristics and behaviors of an at-risk student, focusing on students with mental illnesses, social awkwardness, and trouble at home and school. It teaches students and teachers suspicious behaviours to look for, that can be applied in the classroom or otherwise. In some of today’s schools, teachers are now trained to look for students who may be at-risk, and

their peers are encouraged to report any suspicious characters, proving another change in today's school society shaped by violent tragedies.

From the development of 911, to the increased usage and incorporation of media and technology when combating kidnapping, the violence that has taken place in America's past has influenced how the average citizen acts. Past violence has prepared the average American for how to properly handle witnessing any criminal act, the proper means to summon law enforcement, and has made citizens more aware of their surroundings, threats, suspicious characters, and of common topics surrounding politics. These events that took place, though extremely unfortunate, bloody, and brutal, have resulted in important legislation passed and the change of mindset within millions of Americans, making them think more about precautionary measures they can take to combat violence, and overall contributes to a safer society where crime can effectively decrease.

Works Cited

“The Abolitionist Movement.” *Death Penalty Information Center*,

deathpenaltyinfo.org/facts-and-research/history-of-the-death-penalty/the-abolitionist-movement.

Gramlich, John. “5 Facts about Crime in the U.S.” *Pew Research Center*, Pew Research Center,

17 Oct. 2019, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/10/17/facts-about-crime-in-the-u-s/.