

Summer 1998

Social Institutions and the Crime Bust of the 1990s

Gary Lafree

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarlycommons.law.northwestern.edu/jclc>

 Part of the [Criminal Law Commons](#), [Criminology Commons](#), and the [Criminology and Criminal Justice Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Gary Lafree, Social Institutions and the Crime Bust of the 1990s, 88 J. Crim. L. & Criminology 1325 (Summer 1998)

This Symposium is brought to you for free and open access by Northwestern University School of Law Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology by an authorized editor of Northwestern University School of Law Scholarly Commons.

SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS AND THE CRIME “BUST” OF THE 1990s

GARY LAFREE*

I. INTRODUCTION

While scarcely visible behind the wave of media attention devoted to crime, beginning in the early 1990s, researchers began to observe declining rates in violent and other serious forms of crime in the United States. In this article, I begin by evaluating the size of these declines and comparing crime trends in the 1990s to crime trends in the U.S. since World War II. I also examine trends for different crime types and data sources, and for large cities. My review shows that crime rates in the 1990s have dropped rapidly and that declines have been sweeping, affecting all of the street crimes that are routinely tracked by the two major sources of crime data in the United States (the Uniform Crime Reports and the National Crime Victimization Survey). In short, the period from 1990 to 1997 represents the closest thing to a sustained decline in crime, or a “crime bust” that the United States has experienced in more than fifty years.

In a recently published book, I argue that changes in the legitimacy of social institutions provide the most promising explanation for the rapid changes in street crime trends observed in America after World War II.¹ In particular, I argue that American crime rates surged in the 1960s as a result of increasing distrust of political institutions, increasing stress produced by economic institutions, and declining strength of family institutions.² American society countered this growing legitimacy crisis by investing more in other institutions, most notably

* Director, Institute for Social Research, University of New Mexico.

¹ GARY LAFREE, *LOSING LEGITIMACY: STREET CRIME AND THE DECLINE OF SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS IN AMERICA* (1998).

² *Id.*

criminal justice, education, and welfare. Stabilization in the legitimacy of political, economic, and family institutions, and investments in criminal justice, education, and welfare eventually produced downward pressure on crime rates. In this essay, I consider the applicability of these arguments for the declines in U.S. crime rates that have occurred during the first eight years of the 1990s.

I concentrate here on the group of offenses popularly known as "street crimes." While the term is imprecise, it has generally come to include the familiar crimes of murder, robbery, rape, aggravated assault, burglary, and larceny. Glaser calls these crimes "predatory" because they all involve offenders who "prey" on other persons or their property, while contrasting these offenses with nonpredatory crimes like prostitution and gambling.³ Predatory crimes are especially worthy of attention because they generally evoke the greatest popular fear and concern and draw the most universal condemnation from society. Probably as a consequence of these characteristics, we have more complete information on predatory crimes than on any other crime types.

II. STREET CRIME TRENDS IN THE UNITED STATES

Street crimes are all similar in that they each consist of an offender, a victim, and at least for the crimes that are reported or discovered, the involvement of police and other legal agents. This, in turn, defines the crime data that may be collected: "official" data collected by legal agents, "self report" data collected from offenders, and "victimization" data collected from crime victims. Because self report data are likely to be most reliably collected for the least serious crimes,⁴ they are of less value for the street crimes examined here, leaving us to rely almost exclusively on either official or victimization data. Moreover, national crime victimization survey data in the United States have only been collected on an annual basis since 1973. In the next

³ DANIEL GLASER, *CRIME IN OUR CHANGING SOCIETY* 6 (1978).

⁴ ROBERT O'BRIEN, *CRIME AND VICTIMIZATION DATA* 78 (1985).

section, I examine street crime trends from official data and victimization survey data for the 1990s.

A. STREET CRIME IN THE 1990S

The most comprehensive official data on street crime in the United States come from the Uniform Crime Reports (UCR), collected annually by the Federal Bureau of Investigation since 1930. Table 1 shows rates for the seven street crimes on which data are most reliably compiled by the UCR, as well as totals for violent crimes, and crimes to property, as well as all crimes, for 1990 and 1997.⁵ The percentage change column indicates sizeable decreases in all seven crimes. The greatest percentage declines are for murder, robbery, burglary, and motor vehicle theft—all registered at least a 23% drop in the first eight years of the 1990s. Percentage declines for rape, aggravated assault and larceny have been somewhat less, but still sizeable. Taken together, these seven crimes logged a 15.4% drop from 1990 to 1997.

National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) data have been collected annually by the Bureau of Justice Statistics since 1973.⁶ The NCVS includes the same street crimes as the UCR with two exceptions: NCVS data do not report murders, and NCVS data distinguish between aggravated and simple assaults. Table 2 shows rates for seven street crimes collected by the NCVS for 1990 and 1996. Although there are substantial differences by crime type, the NCVS data, like the UCR data, show declines in all seven street crimes reported. Declines from the

⁵ UCR data includes only murders that are intentional—as opposed to unintentional killings, such as those resulting from negligence. The UCR includes robberies in which property was seized from another person by violence or intimidation. UCR rape cases include crimes of unlawful, nonconsensual sexual intercourse. Aggravated assaults in the UCR include cases in which individuals confront others with the intention of causing them serious physical injury. They are “aggravated” if they are accompanied by a deadly weapon or with an intent to kill, rob or rape. Burglaries in the UCR include cases in which individuals break into someone's home with the intention of committing a crime, most commonly, theft. Thefts in the UCR refer simply to stealing someone else's property.

⁶ MICHAEL R. RAND ET AL., U.S. DEP'T OF JUSTICE, CRIMINAL VICTIMIZATION, 1973-95 (1997).

TABLE 1.
STREET CRIME RATES PER 100,000 U.S. INHABITANTS,
1990 AND 1996, UCR DATA.

Crime	1990	1996	Percent Change
Murder	9.4	6.8	-27.7
Rape	41.2	35.9	-12.9
Robbery	257.0	186.1	-27.6
Aggravated Assault	424.1	382.0	-9.9
Violent Crimes	731.7	610.8	-16.5
Burglary	1,235.9	919.6	-25.6
Larceny	3,194.8	2,886.5	-9.6
Motor Vehicle Theft	657.8	503.8	-23.1
Property Crimes	5,088.5	4,311.9	-15.3
Total Crimes	5,820.2	4,922.7	-15.4

Note: Data from U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, Uniform Crime Reports, CRIME IN THE UNITED STATES 1990, 1997.

NCVS data are greatest for the three property crimes—all showing more than a 20% drop. Among violent crimes, rape rates show the greatest percentage decline 17.6%. Simple assaults show the least change, declining by only a little more than 1%.

To assess how broad-gauged declines in national street crime rates in the 1990s have been, I next examined changes in crime rates for ten of the nation's largest cities from 1990 to 1995. Using UCR data, I calculated crime rates per 100,000 citizens for the seven crimes reported in Table 1 for Boston, Chicago, Dallas, Detroit, Houston, Los Angeles, New York, Philadelphia, Phoenix, and San Diego. Crime rates for the seven crimes in these ten cities produced a total of sixty-nine contrasts between 1990 and 1995.⁷ Of these sixty-nine contrasts, sixty (87.0%) showed that crime rates had decreased. The size

⁷ Data on rape cases were missing for Chicago.

TABLE 2.
STREET CRIME RATES PER 1,000 POPULATION,
AGE 12 AND OVER, 1990 AND 1996, NCVS DATA.

Crime	1990	1996	Percent Change
Rape	1.7	1.4	-17.6
Robbery	5.7	5.2	-8.8
Aggravated Assault	9.8	8.8	-10.2
Simple Assault	26.9	26.6	-1.1
Total Violent Crime	44.1	42.0	-4.8
Burglary	64.5	47.2	-26.8
Larceny	263.8	205.7	-22.0
Motor Vehicle Theft	20.6	13.5	-34.5
Total Property Crime	348.9	266.3	-23.7

Note: Data for 1990 from Michael R. Rand, et al, *CRIMINAL VICTIMIZATION 1973 - 95* (1997); data for 1996 from C. Ringel, *CRIMINAL VICTIMIZATION 1996* (1997).

of decreases were typically much greater than the size of increases. For example, from 1990 to 1995, burglary rates declined by 51.0% in Dallas, 45.7% in Houston, and 40.7% in San Diego. By contrast, for the one city that recorded increases in robbery from 1990 to 1995 (Philadelphia), rates increased by 10.2%.⁸

For all seven crimes, a majority of cities reported declining crime rates from 1990 to 1995. Thus, all ten cities reported declining murder and burglary rates, nine cities reported declining robbery and motor vehicle theft rates, eight cities reported declining rape rates, and seven cities reported declining aggravated assault and larceny rates.

⁸ The biggest exception to these general trends was for homicide rates in Phoenix. In 1990, with a population of 983,403, Phoenix reported 128 homicide and non-negligent manslaughter cases. In 1995, with a population of 1,085,706, Phoenix reported 214 homicide and non-negligent manslaughter cases—an increase of 51.5%.

Taken together, data from both the UCR and the NCVS strongly support the conclusion that there have been substantial, broad-based declines in street crime rates during the first half of the 1990s. The UCR national data suggest that the declines have been greatest for murder, robbery, and burglary data show the largest decreases for motor vehicle theft, burglary, and larceny. City-level data from the UCR confirm that declines can also be observed in most cases for the nation's largest cities, especially for murder, robbery, rape, burglary, and motor vehicle theft. I will now consider how the magnitude of the recent crime decreases compares to earlier crime trends in the post-World War II United States.

B. PUTTING THE RECENT DOWNTURNS INTO CONTEXT

NCVS data allow us to examine annual trends only from 1973 to 1996. I use UCR data to examine street crime trends from 1946 to 1996.

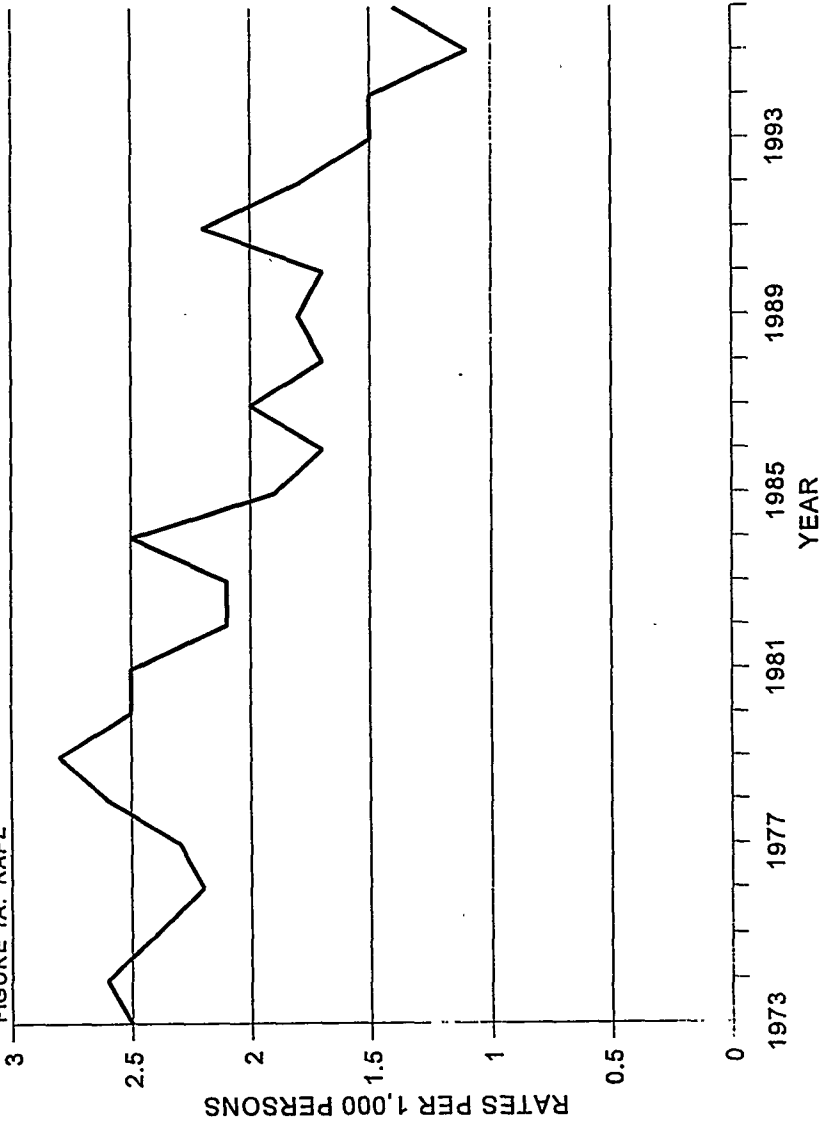
1. NCVS Data, 1973-1996

Figure 1 shows trends for the four violent crimes tracked by the NCVS from 1973 to 1996. Trends for these four crimes provide considerable but not total support for the idea of a crime "bust" during the 1990s. The best case for a rapid decline in the 1990s can be made for rape cases and aggravated assault cases. Rape rates declined by 36.4% from 1991 to 1996 and aggravated assault rates declined by 27.3% from 1993 to 1996. These were the steepest declines in the years included in the NCVS data. Similarly, from 1994 to 1996, simple assault rates exhibited the greatest three-year decline (14.5%) since data collection began in 1973—although simple assault rates were only slightly lower in 1996 (26.6) than they had been in 1990 (26.9).

Although robbery rates fell considerably during the 1990s, they declined even more rapidly during the 1980s.

Taken together, rates for robbery and aggravated assault were lower in 1996 than at any other point spanned by the twenty-four years of NCVS data. The lowest level of reported rapes was recorded in 1995. While the lowest NCVS level of

FIGURE 1. VIOLENT VICTIMIZATION RATES PERSONS 12 AND OVER, 1973-1996
FIGURE 1A. RAPE



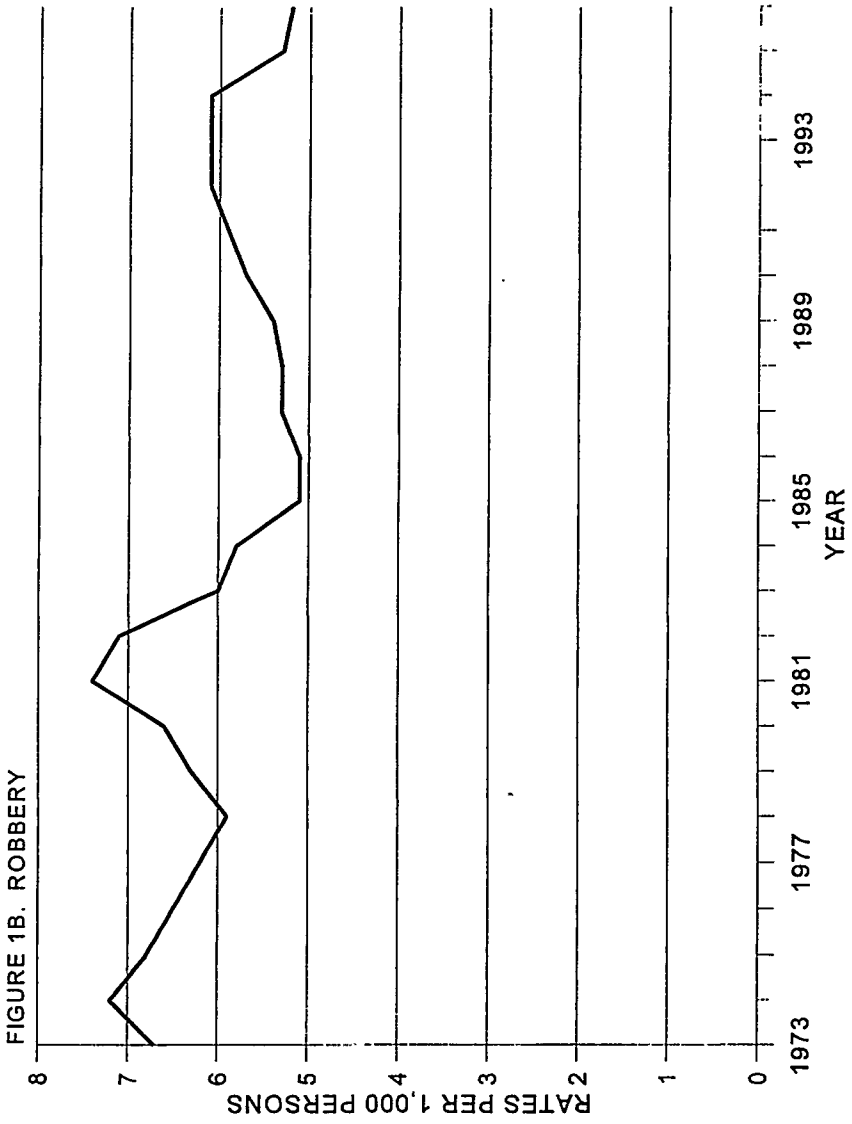


FIGURE 1C. AGGRAVATED ASSAULT

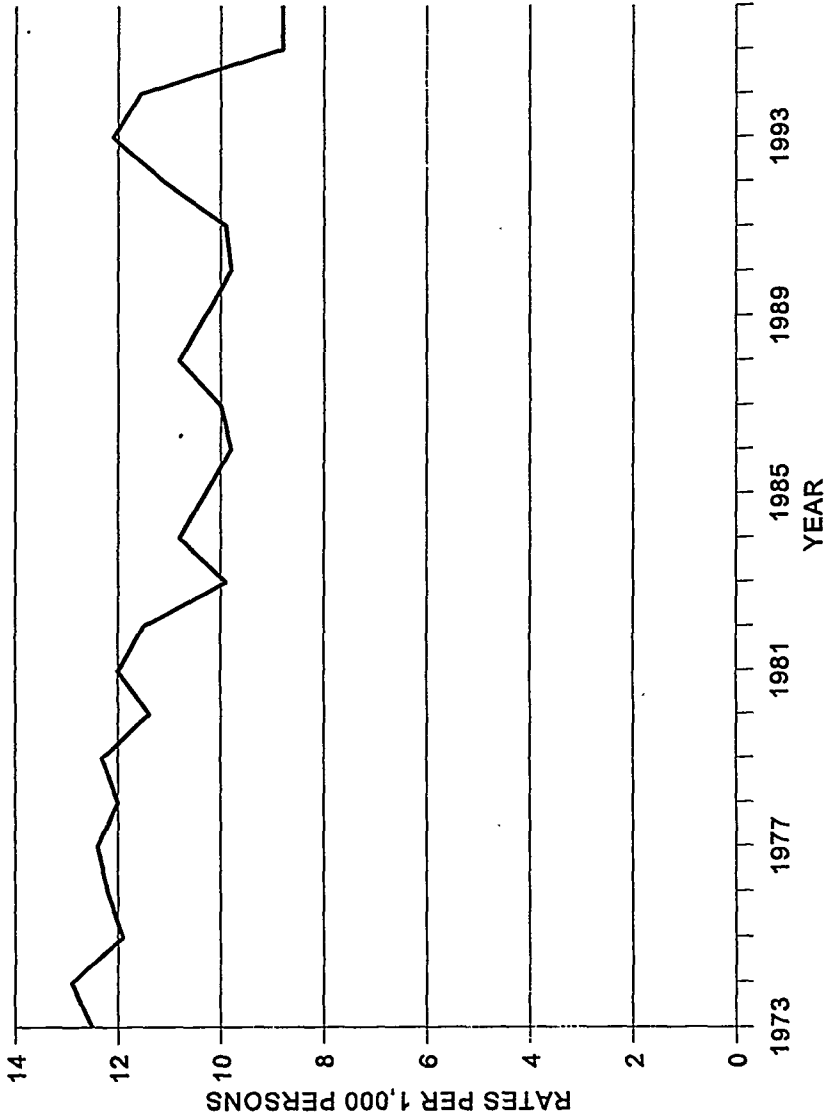
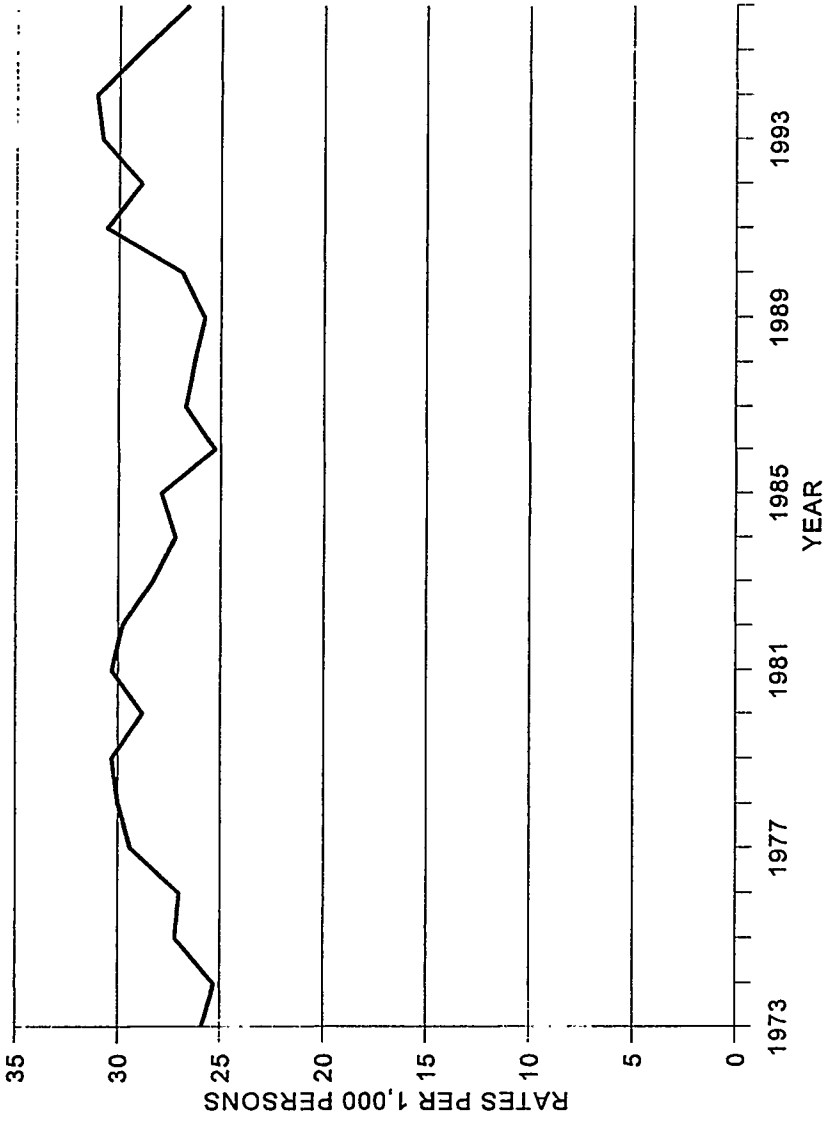


FIGURE 1D. SIMPLE ASSAULT



simple assaults occurred in 1986 (25.3), the levels were similar to those recorded for simple assaults in 1996 (26.6).

Figure 2 shows trends in the three property crimes included in the NCVS data from 1973 to 1996. Data on property crimes are consistently supportive of a 1990s crime bust. In fact, for burglaries, the declines began well before the 1990s, starting in about 1981. Altogether, burglary rates from NCVS data dropped by 55.4% from 1981 to 1996—with about half of this decline occurring in the decade of the 1990s. Similarly, theft rates began to drop consistently in the late 1970s, declining by more than 50.0% from 1979 to 1996. The case of motor vehicle theft is more complex: motor vehicle theft rates declined slowly from 1973 to 1985, increased substantially from 1986 to 1991, and then began to decline again in 1992, reaching their lowest level in 1996. All three of the property crimes included in the NCVS were lower in 1996 than they had been at any time since the NCVS started collecting annual data in 1973.

2. *UCR Data, 1946 to 1997*

To put crime trends for the 1990s in a broader historical context, I next present post-World War II trends (1946-1997) based on UCR data for the violent crimes of murder, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault; and for the property crimes of burglary, theft, and motor vehicle theft. Figure 3 shows trends for the four violent crimes tracked by the UCR.

As we saw in Table 1 above, all four of these violent crimes declined during the 1990s. In this section, I compare the recent declines in these crimes to earlier postwar trends.

U.S. murder rates in 1997 were at their lowest level since 1967. From 1990 to 1997 murder rates declined by 27.7%—the largest decline in postwar history. The only other period in postwar U.S. history with comparable declines in murder rates happened from 1980 to 1984 (a 22.5% drop). But so far at least, murder rates in the 1990s are not decreasing as fast as they increased in the 1960s. For example, in the eight years from 1963 to 1970, murder rates increased by 41.8%.

FIGURE 2. PROPERTY VICTIMIZATION RATES 1973-1996
FIGURE 2A. BURGLARY

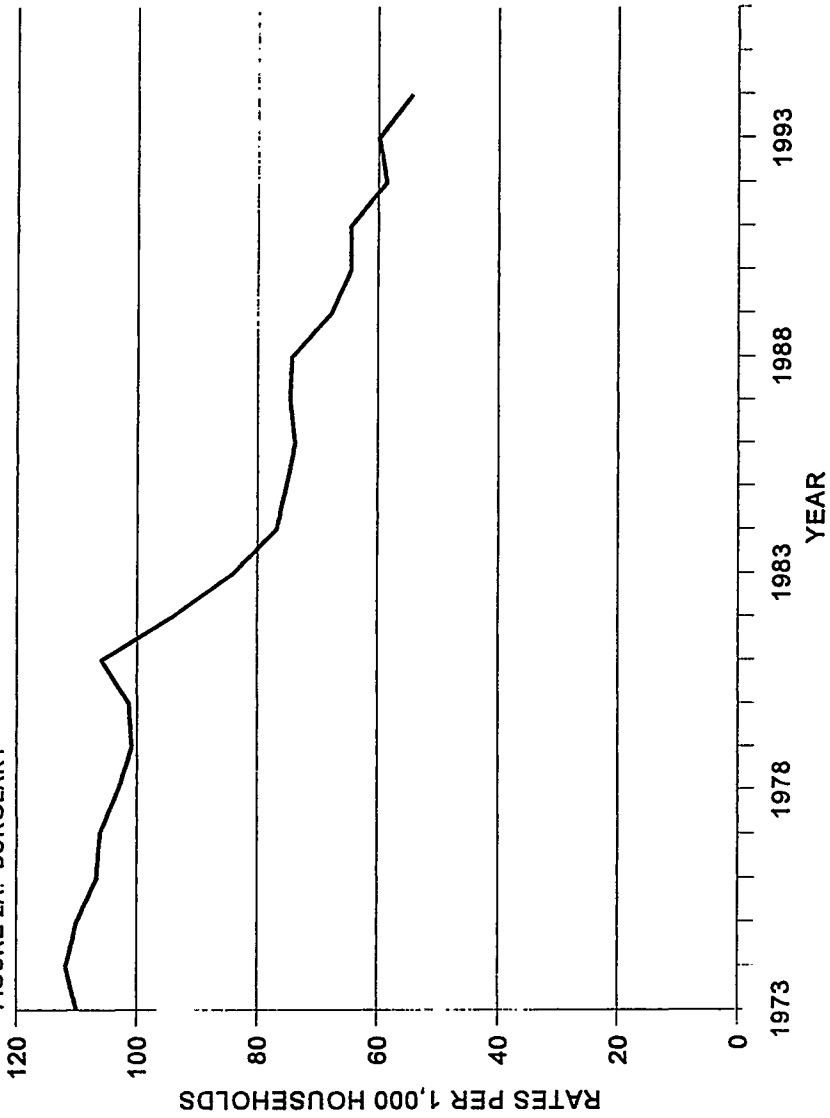
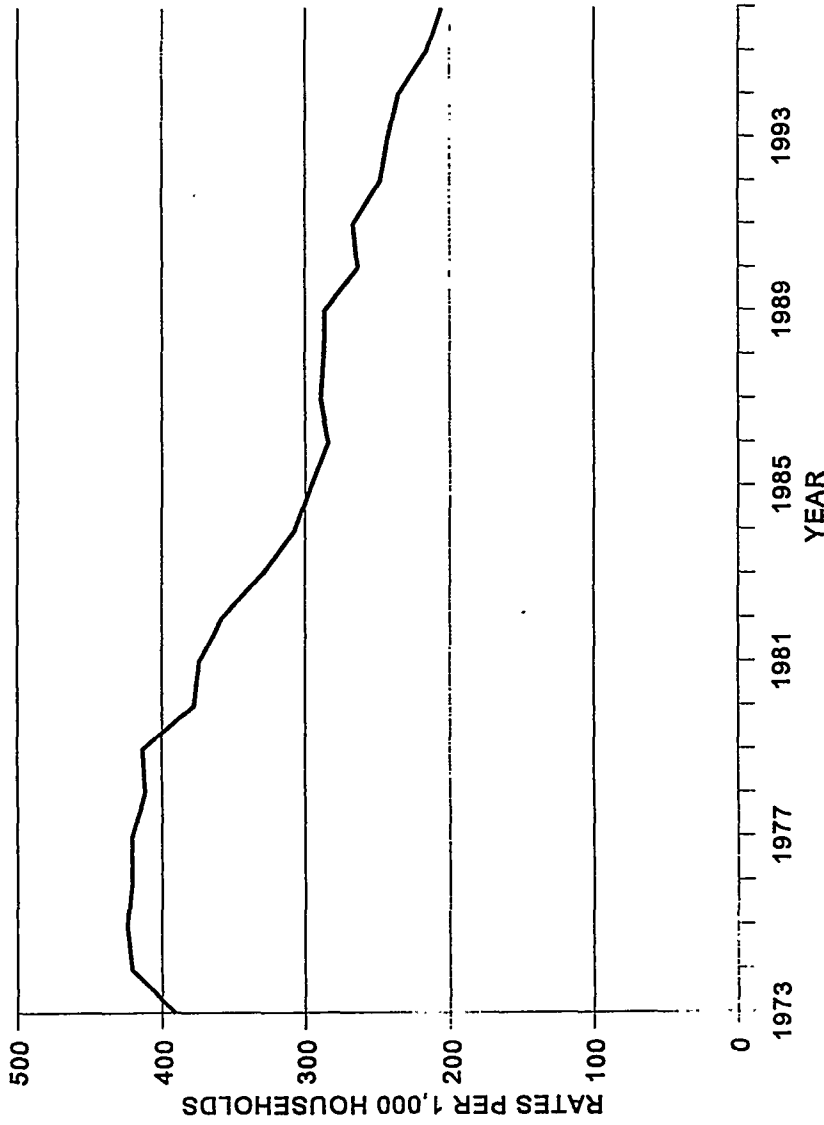
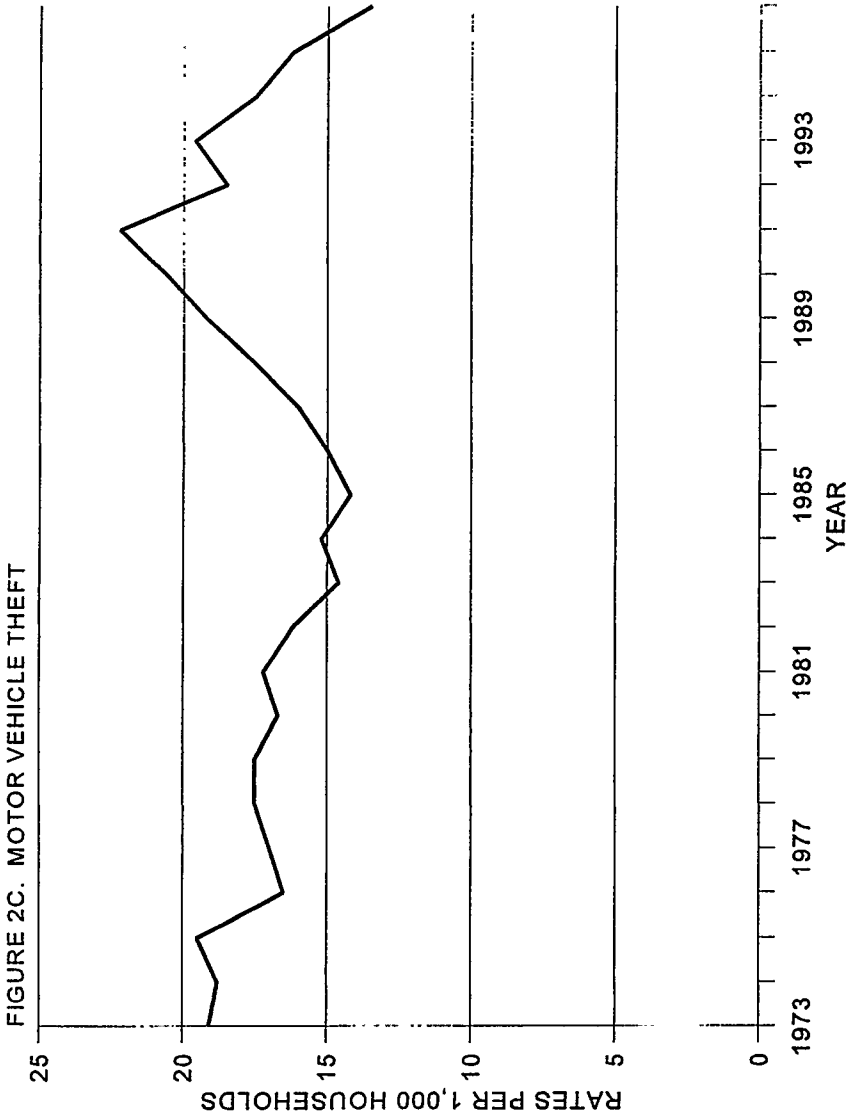


FIGURE 2B. THEFT





U.S. robbery rates in 1997 were at their lowest level since 1973. From 1990 to 1997, robbery rates fell by 27.6%—the fastest decline in more than fifty years. The next greatest decline in robbery rates only once during the postwar period was the five years from 1981 to 1984, which witnessed a 20.6% decline. As with murder rates, robbery rates so far have not declined as rapidly in the 1990s as they increased in the 1960s and early 1970s. Thus, from 1963 to 1975, robbery rates increased by an incredible 257.3%.

Figure 3 shows that while recent decreases in rape and aggravated assault rates are less than those for murder and robbery rates, they are still substantial. In fact, declines in rates of rape and aggravated assault in the 1990s, like those for murder and robbery, represent the largest declines in UCR rates thus far recorded during the postwar period.

FIGURE 3. VIOLENT CRIME RATES, UCR, 1946-1997
FIGURE 3A. MURDER

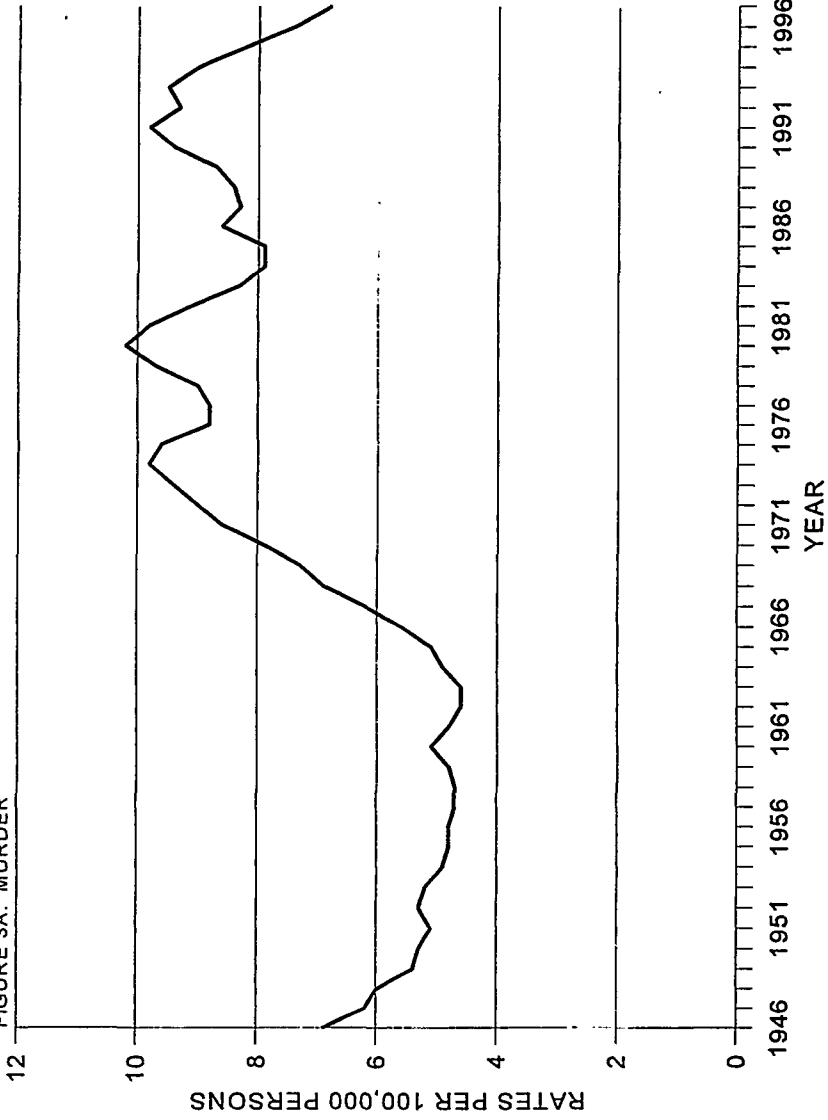


FIGURE 3B. RAPE

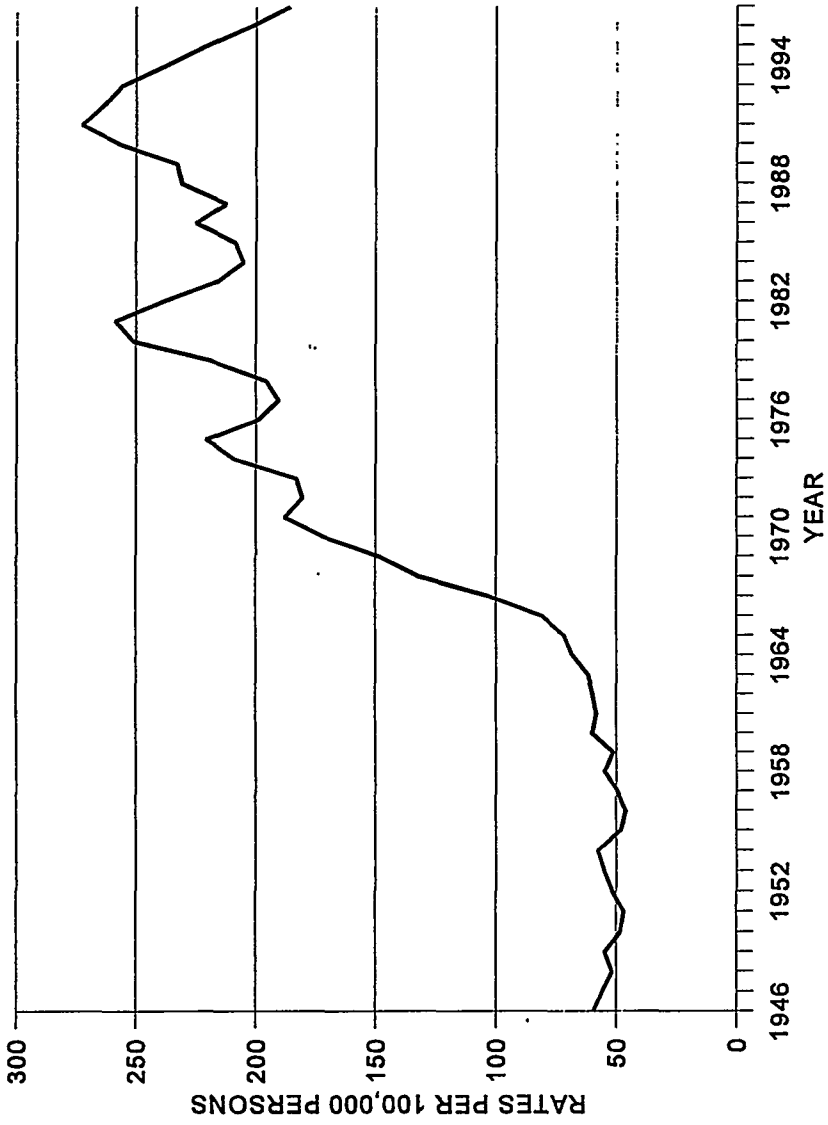


FIGURE 3C. ROBBERY

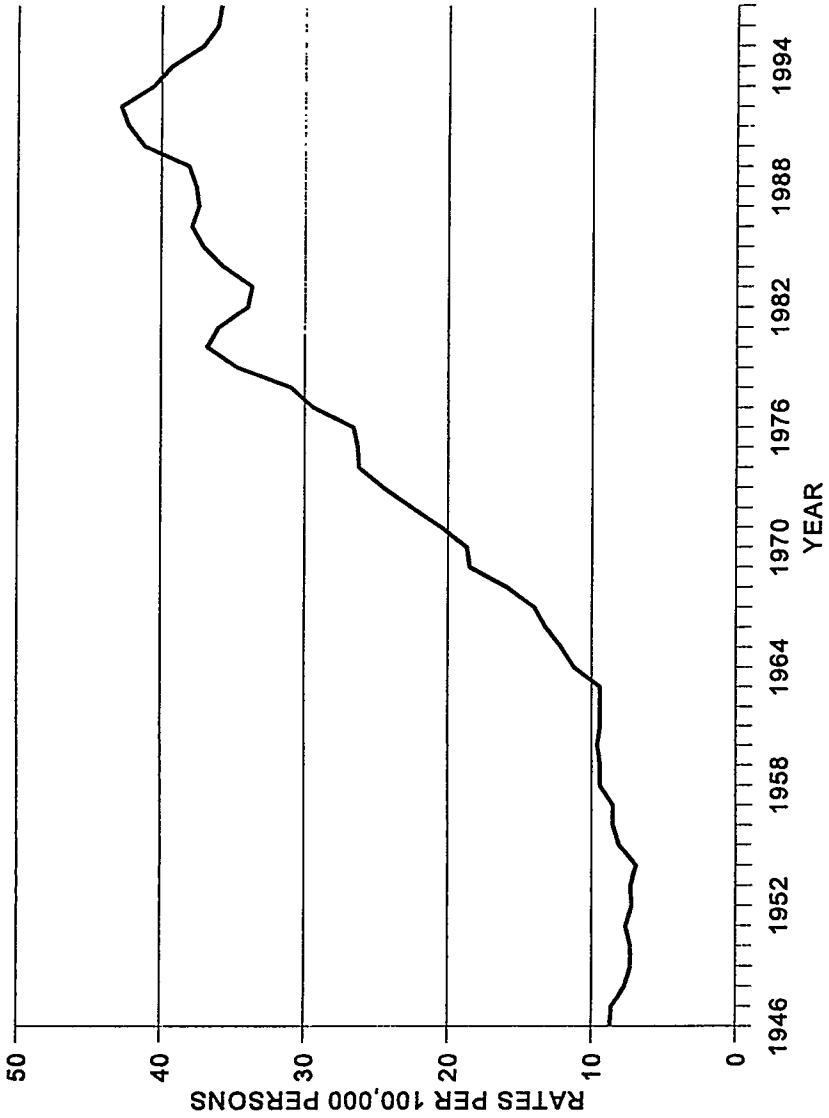


FIGURE 3D. AGGRAVATED ASSAULT

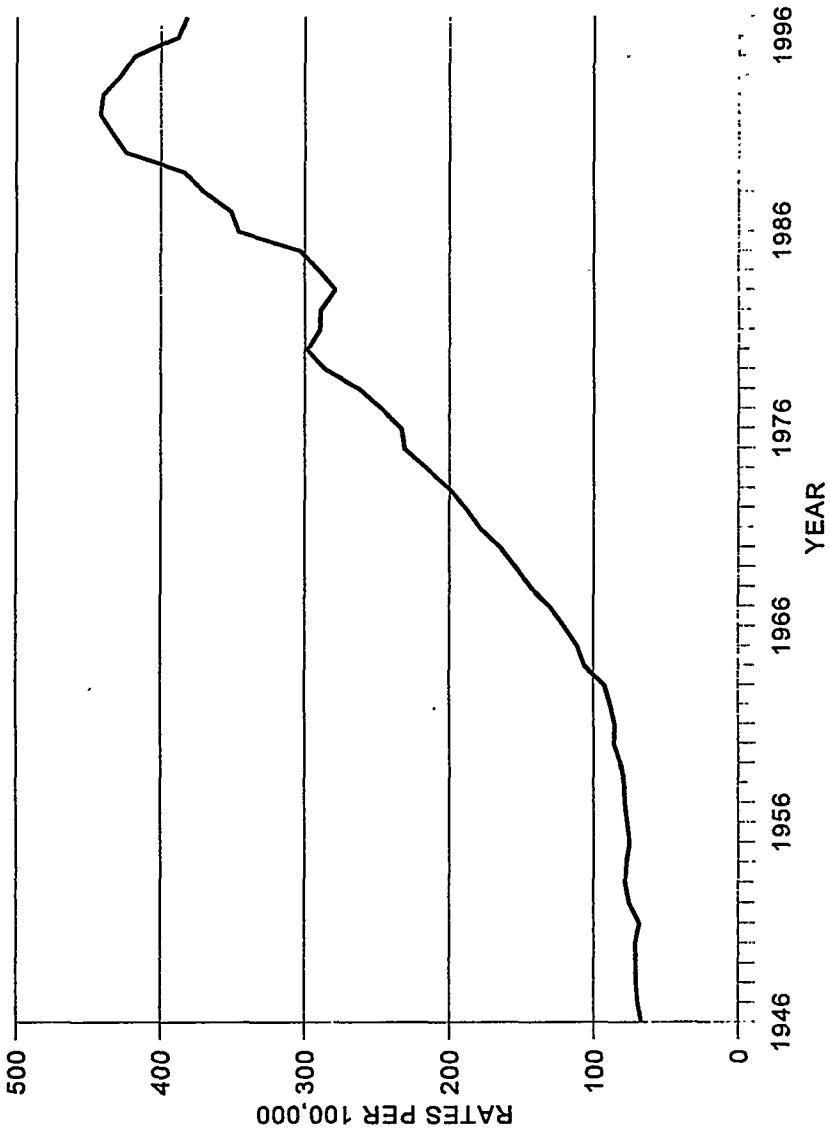
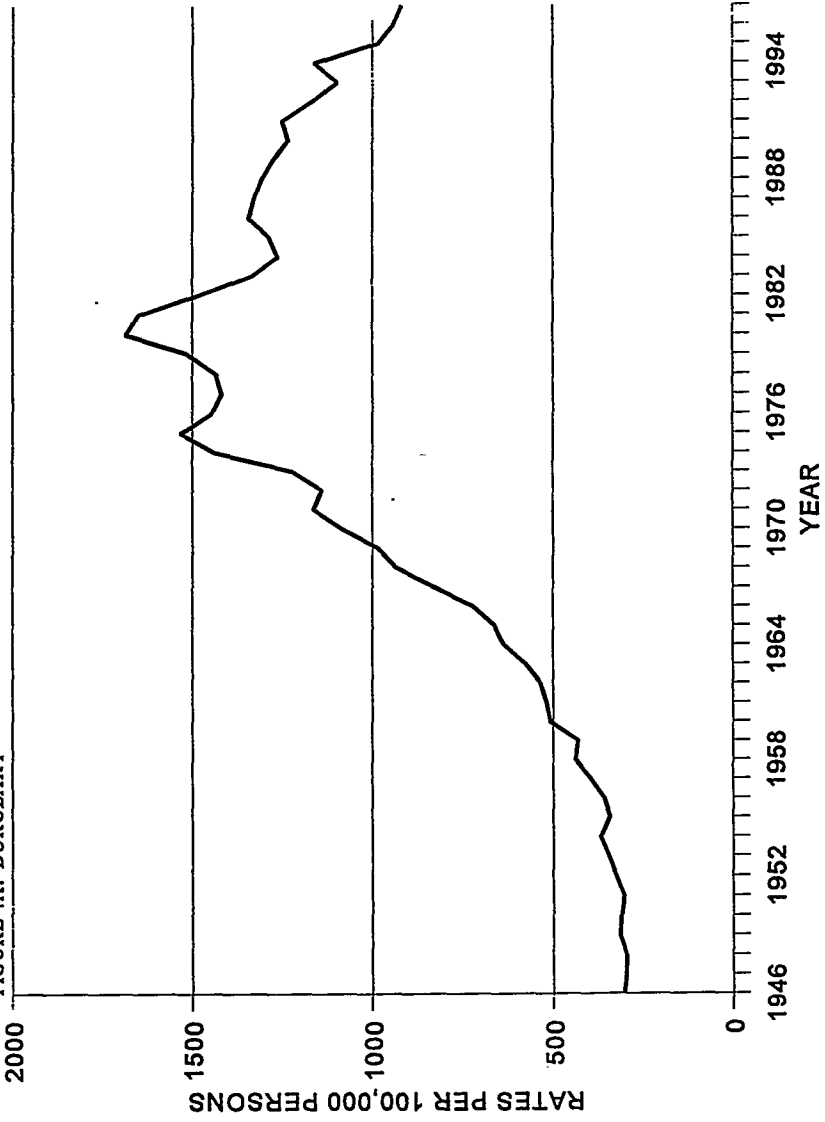


Figure 4 shows UCR trends for three property crimes from 1946 to 1997. The clearest downward trend is for burglaries. Burglary rates in 1997 have not been lower since 1967. Since reaching a peak in 1980, burglary rates have declined by 45.4%. The declines from 1990 to 1997 (25.6%) were greater than those recorded from 1980 to 1986 (20.2%). Percentage declines for burglary in the 1990s have still been somewhat less than percentage increases in the 1970s. In just three years, from 1972 to 1975, burglary rates increased by 34.3%.

Motor vehicle theft has also shown substantial declines during the 1990s (23.1% from 1990 to 1997). This represents the largest percentage decline in motor vehicle theft observed during the past fifty years. Still, these declines are not as large as the increases in motor vehicle theft witnessed during the 1960s. Thus, from 1961 to 1967 rates of motor vehicle theft increased by 82.0%.

Of the street crimes tracked by the UCR, rates of larceny have declined the least during the 1990s (9.6%). In percentage terms, the greatest recorded postwar decline in larceny happened from 1980 to 1984 (an 11.9% drop). Moreover, larceny rates in the 1990s are not declining as quickly as they increased throughout most of the 1960s and 1970s.

FIGURE 4. PROPERTY CRIME RATES, UCR, 1946-1997
FIGURE 4A. BURGLARY



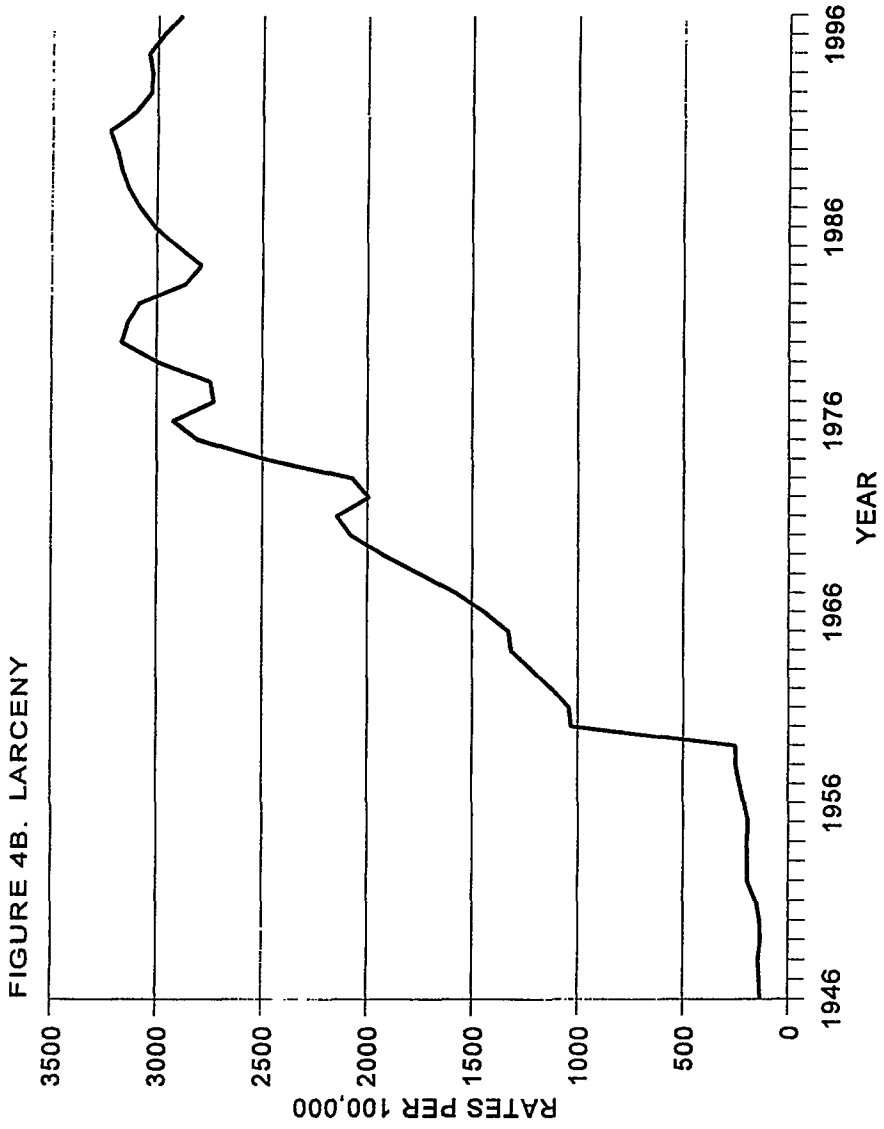
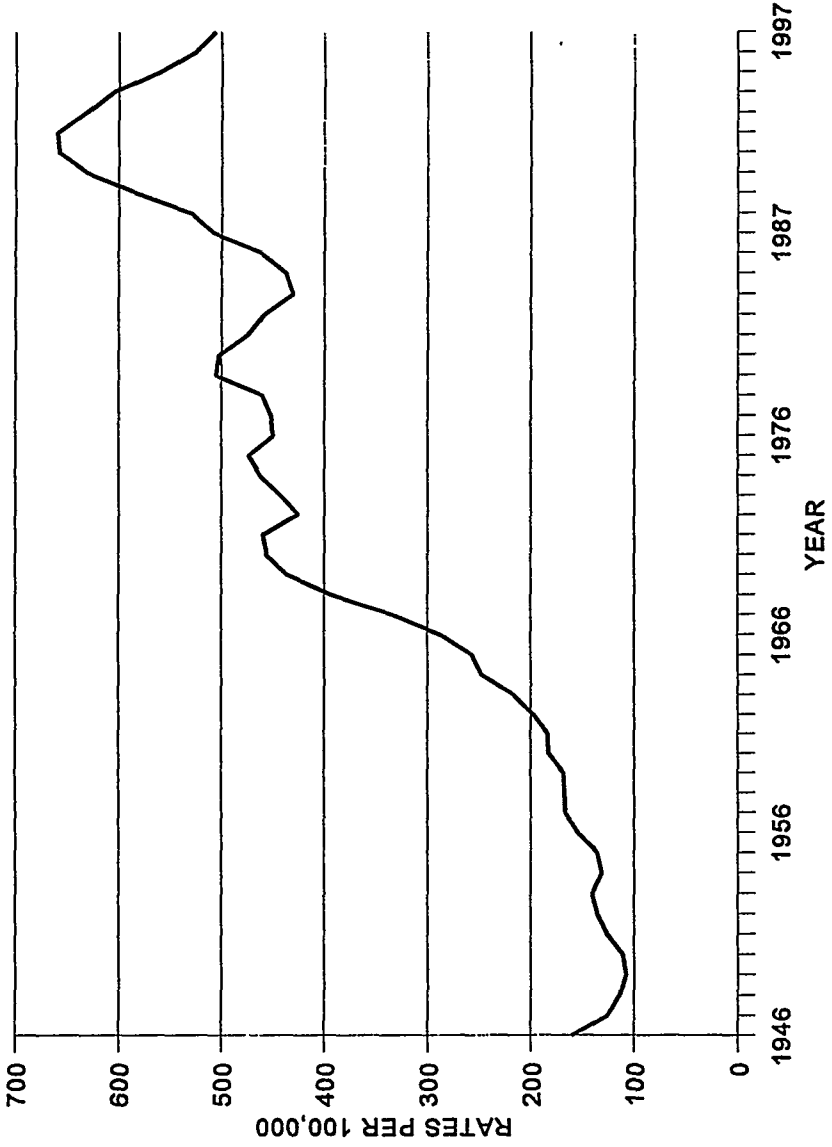


FIGURE 4C. MOTOR VEHICLE THEFT



The UCR data support two main conclusions about crime trends in the 1990s. First, the declines in crime recorded from 1990 to 1997 have been substantial. Thus far, the 1990s have witnessed the greatest recorded percentage drop of the postwar period for the violent street crimes of murder, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault, and the property crimes of burglary and motor vehicle theft. The only exception is for larceny, which declined slightly faster in the 1980s than in the 1990s.

Second, thus far at least, the pace of recent decreases in these seven street crimes has not been as great as the speed at which they increased during the 1960s and 1970s. Nevertheless, 1990s trends clearly represent the closest thing to a crime bust that the U.S. has witnessed since the end of World War II. Moreover, we do not yet know how great the declines in these crimes eventually will be. As this article was being prepared, the Federal Bureau of Investigation released UCR data showing that during the first six months of 1998, violent crime in the United States fell by another 7.0% and property crime by another 5.0%.⁹

3. Explaining the 1990s Crime Bust

Taken together, these postwar street crime trends provide us with at least three important clues about the 1990s decline in crime rates. First, substantial decreases have happened in a relatively short period. During the first eight years of the 1990s, UCR rates of murder, robbery, and burglary all fell by more than 25.0%. Total UCR violent crimes fell by 16.5% and total property crimes fell by 15.3%. During the same period, NCVS data show more than a 20.0% drop in rates of burglary, larceny, and motor vehicle theft, and more than a 10.0% drop in rates of rape and aggravated assault. Thus, we are looking for crime explanations that are capable of accounting for rapid change.

Second, while there is considerable variation across crime types, the declines are extremely broad-based. Thus, there have been measurable declines in the 1990s for all seven crimes re-

⁹ Federal Bureau of Investigation Press Release (Dec. 13, 1998) (on file with the *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*).

ported by the UCR and for all seven crimes reported by the NCVS. These patterns suggest that we are looking for a general explanation that has implications for many different types of street crime.

And finally, the recent declines in crime are clearly time specific; that is, all of the street crimes tracked by the UCR and the NCVS have registered declines in the 1990s. In fact, for most of these crimes, the declines during the 1990s have been the largest observed during the past fifty years. Therefore, we must ask what it is about the 1990s that encouraged declining crime rates. In the remainder of this paper, I concentrate on the role played by institutional legitimacy in bringing about the recent decreases in crime rates.

III. CRIME AND SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS IN THE 1990S

As used here, "institutions" are the patterned, mutually shared ways that people develop for living together.¹⁰ These patterns include the norms, values, statuses, roles, and organizations that define and regulate human conduct. Institutions encompass proper, lawful, expected modes of behavior.¹¹ They are guides to how we should live and conduct our affairs; daily reminders of the conduct that we hold to be either acceptable or unacceptable.¹² "Legitimacy" refers to the ease or difficulty with which institutions are able to get societal members to follow mutually shared rules, laws, and norms.¹³

Institutions are arguably the most important of all human creations. They allow societies to endure over time as individuals join or are replaced by new members. Thus, institutions for humans serve the same purpose as instincts do for other species:

¹⁰ LAFREE, *supra* note 1, at 70-90 (1998); see also ROBERT BELLAH, ET AL., *THE GOOD SOCIETY* 4 (1991).

¹¹ See generally Talcott Parsons, *The Motivation of Economic Activities*, *CANADIAN J. ECON. & POL. SCI.* 187-203 (1940).

¹² BELLAH ET AL., *supra* note 10, at 12.

¹³ This definition of legitimacy follows Max Weber, who points out that while legitimacy may be grounded in moral validity, individuals may also attribute legitimacy to institutional rules for other reasons, including fear of punishment, respect for tradition, religious beliefs, or simple expediency. MAX WEBER, *THE THEORY OF SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC ORGANIZATIONS* 324-63 (1947).

they channel our behavior into forms that help us satisfy basic collective and individual needs.¹⁴ In fact, because humans have relatively underdeveloped instincts, they are especially dependent on institutions for survival.¹⁵ Instead of relying on messages genetically transmitted from the past, humans are guided in large part by institutional rules that are passed from one generation to the next.¹⁶

This dependence on institutions has important implications for all human behavior, including crime. On the one hand, it allows behavior to change rapidly in response to environmental changes. But because institutions are little more than socially constructed agreements, they are fragile, at least compared to the "hard wired" responses produced by biological instincts.

A. HOW INSTITUTIONS REGULATE CRIME

In general, institutions control crime in three interrelated ways: by reducing individual motivation to commit crime, by supplying effective controls to curb criminal behavior, and by providing individuals with protection against the criminal behavior of others.¹⁷ Because institutions are primarily responsible for teaching children moral behavior, they have a direct linkage to our motivation to commit crime. The most obvious institutional connection here is the family. Through socialization, families teach children the differences between appropriate and inappropriate conduct. These lessons are enforced by social sanctions, both positive and negative. For example, families reinforce acceptable behavior with praise, love, and support, while punishing unacceptable behavior with criticism, ostracism, and expulsion.

The impact of institutions on reducing criminal motivation is not limited to families. In industrialized nations such as the U.S., educational institutions are increasingly important in this regard. Moreover, economic and political institutions may re-

¹⁴ PETER L. BERGER, *INVITATION TO SOCIOLOGY: A HUMANISTIC PERSPECTIVE* 87-91 (1963).

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ PETER BLAU, *EXCHANGE AND POWER IN SOCIAL LIFE* 277 (1964).

¹⁷ See generally LAFREE, *supra* note 1, at 70-90.

duce individual motivation to commit crime simply by convincing individuals that these institutions are fair, just, and worthy of respect.

Institutions also regulate behavior by providing social control. As used here, "social control" refers to the mechanisms aimed at compelling individuals to adhere to institutional rules.¹⁸ Social control is extremely broad and far reaching in its effects.¹⁹ It tells us what crime is, how we are to respond to it, and what is right and wrong about it.

Social control further can be divided into informal and formal sources.²⁰ "Informal" social control refers to sanctions imposed by individuals or groups who are not acting directly on behalf of official political agencies, and includes especially the influence of family, friends, and neighborhood residents. By contrast, formal social control refers to the control of individuals that are acting on behalf of official legal and political agencies, including especially police, judges, prison guards, and prosecutors.

Granovetter uses the term "embeddedness" to describe the social relations that link individuals to institutions and thereby regulate their behavior.²¹ Embeddedness provides a useful metaphor for how social control works. Most individuals are embedded in a complex web of social connections that will either make them think long and hard before engaging in crime, or simply provide enough surveillance to make criminal behavior more difficult. For most people, the first social hurdles to crime are informal: the potential embarrassment they will face when their misdeeds become known to their families—spouse, children, parents, and other relatives. Beyond the family, there is the shame associated with those with whom they work or at-

¹⁸ Robert J. Sampson et al., *Neighborhoods and Violent Crime: A Multilevel Study of Collective Efficacy*, 277 *SCI.* 918 (1997).

¹⁹ Locations, types, and forms of social control have generated a complex research literature. See generally DAVID H. BAYLEY, *SOCIAL CONTROL AND POLITICAL CHANGE* 16 (1985).

²⁰ While this distinction is useful for my purposes, it is not without difficulties. For a discussion of these difficulties, see *id.* at 18-20.

²¹ Mark Granovetter, *Economic Action and Social Structure: The Problem of Embeddedness*, 91 *AM. J. SOC.* 481 (1985).

tend school, members of their church or military company, civic or fraternal organizations to which they belong, and so on. Finally, in addition to all of these informal sources of social control, there is the formal legal system itself, with its threats of arrest, legal processing, and punishment. Most individuals, then, are embedded in social networks that usually serve to channel their behavior down noncriminal paths.

In addition to regulating the motivation to commit crime and surrounding individuals with social controls, institutions also reduce crime by directly protecting individuals from criminal victimization. Families, communities, businesses, and schools play an important role in terms of guarding their individual members from the criminal behavior of others. Likewise, criminal justice institutions, especially the police, are justified in large part by their ability to protect citizens from crime.

In general, then, institutions suppress crime by enmeshing individuals in social systems that reduce their motivation to commit crime, by increasing the effectiveness of those who are informally or formally expected to regulate their criminal behavior, and by protecting individuals from the criminal behavior of others. In a smoothly functioning society, these elements are inextricably related. Thus, individuals who are well socialized in effect serve as their own social control agents. Strong social control reduces motivation and the need for protection; weak motivation makes social control and protection less important; strong guardianship may compensate in part for high levels of motivation and ineffective social control. Succinctly stated, as institutions lose their ability to regulate their members, more individuals will be more motivated to behave as they please, and their behavior will be less successfully controlled by others, and institutions will be less effective in protecting their members from others who are behaving as they please.

B. IDENTIFYING THE MOST IMPORTANT INSTITUTIONS FOR CRIME CONTROL

If we think of institutions as nothing more than shared rules that regulate human conduct in recurrent situations, we may conclude that there are thousands (or even millions) of institutions in any given society. But obviously, some institutions are

more important than others in terms of controlling criminal behavior. The three institutions that probably have been linked to crime most frequently by researchers and policy makers are political, economic, and familial.²²

Political institutions are primarily responsible for mobilizing and distributing resources for collective goals.²³ They include the entire governmental apparatus: the legislature, the judiciary, the military establishment, and the administrative agencies that implement governmental decisions. Political institutions have direct responsibility for crime control and the lawful resolution of conflicts. They are also responsible for maintaining social order, providing channels for resolving conflicts, and protecting citizens from foreign invasion.

Economic institutions are responsible for societal adaptation to the environment.²⁴ Economic institutions include those organized around the production and distribution of goods and services.²⁵ The economy is responsible for satisfying the basic material requirements for human survival: food, clothing, and shelter. Economic institutions also include a stratification system that ranks individuals in a social hierarchy of rewards and responsibilities.

For centuries, families in human societies have been chiefly responsible for the socialization of children. Coleman describes family institutions as "primordial" because, unlike other institutions, they are based in part on a social organization that develops through birth and blood ties.²⁶ In addition, the family has traditionally had primary responsibility for regulating the sexual

²² While I concentrate here on three institutions that frequently have been linked to crime by others, I do not argue that they are the only relevant institutions in controlling crime. For example, religion, neighborhood and community organizations, voluntary associations, and media and mass communication have all been suggested as important determinants of crime trends. See LAFREE, *supra* note 1, at 70-90.

²³ See BLAU, *supra* note 16, at 279; TALCOTT PARSONS, *THE SOCIAL SYSTEM* (1951).

²⁴ BLAU, *supra* note 16, at 278.

²⁵ STEVEN F. MESSNER & RICHARD ROSENFELD, *CRIME AND THE AMERICAN DREAM* 73 (1994).

²⁶ James S. Coleman, *The Rational Reconstruction of Society*, 58 *AM. SOC. REV.* 1, 2 (1993).

activity of its members, caring for and nurturing children, and seeing to the needs of the infirm and the elderly.²⁷

Because they are human creations, institutions are constantly evolving and changing, and newer institutions are being created and expanded to support or supplant older ones. Postwar America has responded to the declining legitimacy of political, economic, and familial institutions in part by strengthening support for newer institutions. In particular, to shore up political institutions, American society has funded major increases in criminal justice spending; to reduce the deleterious consequences of a rapidly changing economy, American society has spent more on welfare; and to help support declining family institutions, American society has invested heavily in education.²⁸ All three of these institutional responses have important implications for crime rates.

C. INSTITUTIONS AND CRIME IN THE 1990S

In the remainder of this paper, I briefly consider the links between street crime declines in the 1990s, three traditional institutions²⁹ (political, economic, and familial), and three institutions (criminal justice, education, and welfare) that have become increasingly important during the postwar years. In my earlier book, I argued that the postwar American crime boom occurred as a result of an institutional legitimacy crisis characterized by (1) growing distrust of political institutions, (2) rising economic stress, and (3) increasing disintegration of the family.³⁰ American society responded to this crisis by providing greater support for criminal justice, education, and welfare institutions.³¹ If these same arguments hold for the 1990s, then the crime bust should be accompanied by evidence of increas-

²⁷ BLAU, *supra* note 16, at 278.

²⁸ It would of course be simplistic to argue that these institutional responses were narrow reactions to a single type of institutional decline. For example, welfare spending is justified not only in terms of reducing economic stress, but also in terms of supporting the family and increasing trust in political institutions.

²⁹ I use "traditional" here in the very limited sense of indicating institutions that have customarily been thought to control or regulate crime.

³⁰ LAFREE, *supra* note 1, at 70-90.

³¹ *Id.* at 85-86.

ing trust in political institutions, declining economic stress, and growing stability of families, as well as increasing support for criminal justice, education, and welfare institutions.

In Figure 5, I summarize these expectations. I do not assume that all of these institutional effects are equally important, that all must be present to the same extent for crime rates to decline, or that all must be absent to the same extent for crime rates to increase. Rather, these six expectations can be seen as characteristics of a hypothetical society experiencing declining crime rates.

The extent to which major institutions in the U.S. in the 1990s approximate this hypothetical society bears consideration. I examine these six institutions in pairs, considering each of the three traditional institutions along with each of the three major corresponding institutional responses to the legitimacy crisis experienced by the traditional institution: political-criminal justice, economic-welfare, family-education. In each section, I first consider general connections between these institutions and crime, and then examine postwar trends in the legitimacy of each institution and how these trends have changed since 1990.

FIGURE 5.
EXPECTED LINKS BETWEEN INSTITUTIONAL LEGITIMACY
AND DECREASING CRIME RATES.

Political trust	Increasing
Criminal justice support	Increasing
Economic well being	Increasing
Welfare support	Increasing
Family organization	Increasing
Educational support	Increasing

1. Political and Criminal Justice Institutions

The declining legitimacy of political institutions increases crime in three main ways. First, individuals who perceive political institutions to be unjust or unfair will be less motivated to

follow rules and laws. Second, individuals in societies with weaker political legitimacy will be less vigilant about controlling the criminal and deviant behavior of others. And finally, societies with little political legitimacy will be less effective at protecting their citizens from the criminal behavior of others. The connections between political institutions and crime in the postwar United States are most directly linked to the trust Americans have had in their political institutions.³² Major increases in support for formal criminal justice institutions have reduced crime rates in the 1990s.

At the end of World War II, the U.S. entered a period in which its citizens reported unprecedented levels of trust in the honesty, fairness, and integrity of American political institutions.³³ There was widespread support for the war effort, high levels of respect for politicians and judges, and enough popular support to carry General Dwight D. Eisenhower, a military hero, into the presidency in 1952.³⁴ As a result of the low crime rates associated with this high level of trust in government, *per capita* spending on criminal justice institutions was lower in the years following World War II than it would be for the next half century.³⁵

Levels of trust in political institutions began to erode substantially in the late 1950s and early 1960s.³⁶ The civil rights movement led the way by exposing long-standing racial injustices in American society. Further erosion accompanied the divisive war in Vietnam, a series of widely publicized political scandals, and the rights-based revolution that followed in the wake of the civil rights movement.³⁷ Moreover, because political institutions are chiefly responsible for crime control, rising

³² I use "trust" here in the usual sense of level of reliance on the equity, justice or evenhandedness of others. See TRUST: MAKING AND BREAKING COOPERATIVE RELATIONS (Diego Gambetta ed., 1988).

³³ See generally ERIC GOLDMAN, THE CRUCIAL DECADE AND AFTER: AMERICA, 1945-1960.

³⁴ *Id.* at 236.

³⁵ U.S. BUREAU OF THE CENSUS, HISTORICAL STATISTICS ON GOVERNMENTAL FINANCE AND EMPLOYMENT 26-28 (1985).

³⁶ JOHN MORTON BLUM, YEARS OF DISCORD: AMERICAN POLITICS AND SOCIETY, 1961-1974, at 3-21 (1991).

³⁷ FRANCIS FUKUYAMA, TRUST: THE SOCIAL VIRTUES AND THE CREATION OF PROSPERITY 50, 314-315 (1995).

crime rates themselves further undermined political legitimacy.³⁸

By the 1990s, the free fall in levels of political trust had ended; in fact, there was some evidence of stability in the legitimacy of American political institutions.³⁹ While a full treatment of these issues is beyond the scope of this paper, three developments are especially important here. First, there are important signs that overall levels of trust in government, while very low compared to the early postwar period, have nevertheless been stable and perhaps even improving during the 1990s.⁴⁰ Since 1958, a national election survey has collected biennial information on American attitudes toward government.⁴¹ For example, for the past forty years, this survey has asked respondents, "How much of the time can you trust the U.S. government to do what is right?" The proportion of Americans answering "most of the time or just about always" peaked in 1964 at just under 80%.⁴² The percentage who expressed confidence in the federal government then declined rapidly during the 1960s and 1970s, scoring just over 25% in 1980.⁴³ But since 1980, the percentage who express trust in the federal government has held steady and even begun to rise a bit.⁴⁴ In fact, levels of trust tapped by this measure were slightly higher in 1996 (just under 30.0%) than in 1980.⁴⁵ Other measures of public confidence in government tracked by the national election survey data provide similar evidence.⁴⁶

Second, the rapid increase in crime rates in the early 1960s coincided in large part with the rise of collective political action associated especially with the civil rights movement and later,

³⁸ LAFREE, *supra* note 1, at 88.

³⁹ WARREN E. MILLER, AMERICAN NATIONAL ELECTION STUDIES CUMULATIVE DATA FILE, 1952-1996 (1996).

⁴⁰ LAFREE, *supra* note 1, at 113.

⁴¹ MILLER, *supra* note 39.

⁴² LAFREE, *supra* note 1, at 102.

⁴³ *Id.*

⁴⁴ *Id.*

⁴⁵ *Id.*

⁴⁶ *Id.* at 104.

protests against the Vietnam War.⁴⁷ For example, the total annual number of race-related riots in America reached a postwar zenith of 287 in 1968.⁴⁸ Similarly, protests against the Vietnam War became increasingly violent in the late 1960s. By contrast, in the 1990s, there was no organized collective political action that remotely resembled the scope of the civil rights movement or the anti-war protests of the early and middle postwar periods.

And finally, as the legitimacy of political institutions declined during the 1960s, the U.S. began to rely increasingly on formal criminal justice institutions to maintain law and order. Directly following World War II, Americans spent only \$255 a year (in inflation adjusted dollars) on all levels of federal, state, and local law enforcement.⁴⁹ They spent a little over \$100 a year at all governmental levels for corrections.⁵⁰ By the early 1990s, *per capita* spending on police had increased seven-fold and *per capita* spending on corrections had increased nearly twelve-fold.⁵¹

The impact of these developments is perhaps clearest with regard to incarceration rates. From the end of World War II until the mid-1970s, imprisonment rates in the United States hovered around one hundred prisoners per 100,000 U.S. residents.⁵² In fact, imprisonment rates in 1973 were about the same as they had been in 1946.⁵³ But these rates began to change rapidly thereafter. From 1974 to 1996, U.S. imprisonment rates more than quadrupled, reaching a century high of 427 per 100,000 residents.⁵⁴ These increases have been particu-

⁴⁷ Gary LaFree & Kriss A. Drass, *African American Collective Action and Crime, 1955-91*, 75 SOC. FORCES 835 (1997).

⁴⁸ LAFREE, *supra* note 1, at 110.

⁴⁹ U.S. BUREAU OF THE CENSUS, No. GC77(6)-4, HISTORICAL STATISTICS ON GOVERNMENTAL FINANCE AND EMPLOYMENT 29 (1979).

⁵⁰ *Id.*

⁵¹ U.S. BUREAU OF THE CENSUS, SERIES GF/92-5, SUMMARY 1, GOVERNMENT FINANCES: 1991-92 (1996).

⁵² U.S. BUREAU OF JUSTICE STATISTICS, SOURCEBOOK OF CRIMINAL JUSTICE STATISTICS 1996, at 518 (1997).

⁵³ LAFREE, *supra* note 1, at 166.

⁵⁴ U.S. BUREAU OF JUSTICE STATISTICS, PRISONERS IN 1996, at 1 (1997).

larly sharp in the 1990s. From 1990 to 1996 alone, imprisonment rates increased by 43.8%.⁵⁵

By 1995, an estimated 5.4 million Americans were under correctional supervision, including 1.1 million in prisons, one-half million in jails, 700,000 on parole, and more than 3 million on probation.⁵⁶ Freeman provides the startling conclusion that by 1995, the number of American men under the supervision of corrections had surpassed the total number of unemployed men.⁵⁷ While much research confirms that informal social control is generally more effective than formal controls such as imprisonment in reducing crime,⁵⁸ nevertheless, increases in formal sanctions of this magnitude have undoubtedly dampened U.S. crime rates in the 1990s.⁵⁹

2. *Economic and Welfare Institutions and Crime*

Declining economic legitimacy increases street crime rates in two main ways: raising the motivation of potential offenders to commit crime, and reducing the effectiveness of social control aimed at crime prevention and punishment. Conversely, spending on social welfare programs should reduce the motivation of potential offenders to commit crime and more generally, improve the effectiveness of social control mechanisms.

Perhaps the most obvious connection between economic legitimacy and criminal motivation is captured by the prosaic observation that compared to the more well-to-do, those with less property and wealth simply have more to gain by committing crime. The idea that economic deprivation increases criminal motivation has long been central to strain theories in

⁵⁵ *Id.*

⁵⁶ U.S. BUREAU OF JUSTICE STATISTICS, CORRECTIONAL POPULATIONS IN THE UNITED STATES, 1995, at 5 (1997).

⁵⁷ Richard B. Freeman, *The Labor Market*, in CRIME 172 (J.Q. Wilson & J. Petersilia eds., 1995).

⁵⁸ For a classic statement, see generally JEREMY BENTHAM, AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PRINCIPLES OF MORALS AND LEGISLATION 134-36 (The Athlone Press 1970) (1789).

⁵⁹ For a comprehensive review of the empirical literature, see Thomas B. Marvell & Carlisle E. Moody, *The Impact of Prison Growth on Homicide*, 1 HOMICIDE STUD. 205 (1997).

criminology.⁶⁰ A large number of studies confirm that, compared to the wealthy, the economically disadvantaged are more likely to commit street crimes of every type.⁶¹

While most criminology research on the link between economic legitimacy and crime has focussed on its impact on the offender's motivation, the declining legitimacy of economic institutions may also reduce the effectiveness of informal and formal social control. Those who believe that economic institutions are unfair or unjust might be reasonably expected to have less interest in helping to control or regulate the criminal behavior of others.

I argue that the growing strains the economy imposed on Americans directly weakened the legitimacy of economic institutions in the postwar U.S.⁶² These strains were increasingly shaped by global economic trends. At the end of World War II, the U.S. entered an era of unprecedented economic prosperity.⁶³ The war jolted the U.S. economy out of a devastating depression and matched the undamaged industrial plants of the U.S. against the war-torn factories of Europe and Japan. America became a supermarket to the world.

But the economic picture had changed considerably by the late 1960s. Basic industrial production dominated by the United States following World War II was among the first areas to suffer—the United States' lead in textiles, iron, steel, and chemicals greatly diminished.⁶⁴ Seeking higher profits and less competition, U.S. companies increasingly “outsourced” high-

⁶⁰ See RICHARD CLOWARD & LLOYD OHLIN, *DELINQUENCY AND OPPORTUNITY: A THEORY OF DELINQUENT GANGS* (1961); ROBERT K. MERTON, *SOCIAL THEORY AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE* (1957).

⁶¹ See JOHN BRAITHWAITE, *INEQUALITY, CRIME AND PUBLIC POLICY* (1979); JOHN P. HEWITT, *SOCIAL STRATIFICATION AND DEVIANT BEHAVIOR* (1970); ROGER HOOD & RICHARD SPARKS, *KEY ISSUES IN CRIMINOLOGY* (1970). *But see*, Charles R. Tittle et al., *The Myth of Social Class and Criminality: An Empirical Assessment of the Empirical Evidence*, 43 AM. SOC. REV. 643-56 (1978).

⁶² LAFREE, *supra* note 1, at 114-34; Gary LaFree & Kriss A. Drass, *The Effect of Changes in Intraracial Income Inequality and Educational Attainment on Changes in Arrest Rates for African Americans and Whites, 1957 to 1990*, 61 AM. SOC. REV. 614, 615-17 (1996).

⁶³ See FRANK LEVY, *DOLLARS AND DREAMS* (1987); IMMANUEL WALLERSTEIN, *AFTER LIBERALISM* (1995).

⁶⁴ DENNY BRAUN, *THE RICH GET RICHER: THE RISE OF INCOME INEQUALITY IN THE UNITED STATES AND THE WORLD* (1991).

paying industrial jobs in these areas to lower-wage nations.⁶⁵ As economic changes accelerated, the influence of labor unions steadily declined, and the high wages associated with unions also eroded.⁶⁶ Changes that began in traditional manufacturing and production areas eventually spread to other parts of the economy. The U.S. encountered increasingly stiff competition even in newer, high technology industries that it once virtually monopolized, like robotics, aerospace, and computers.⁶⁷ During the 1960s and 1970s, economic inequality grew substantially, inflation reached new heights, and corporate downsizing resulted in thousands of closures and firings.⁶⁸

The U.S. responded in part to these growing economic strains by investing more in welfare support. In 1948, total welfare spending amounted to \$83 *per capita* (in 1995 dollars).⁶⁹ Spending rates increased only slightly during the early postwar period, reaching \$116 *per capita* in 1960.⁷⁰ But from the mid-1960s to the late 1970s, increases in welfare spending were rapid. From 1964 to 1978 alone, total *per capita* welfare spending (again, in 1995 dollars) more than quadrupled—from \$121 per year to \$551 dollars per year.⁷¹

To fit my arguments about the connections between crime and social institutions, I am looking for evidence that both economic well-being and the support of welfare institutions increased during the 1990s. Indeed, the economic situation for the United States has shown unmistakable signs of improvement in the last decade of the twentieth century. In 1996, the federal

⁶⁵ See BARRY BLUESTONE & BENNETT HARRISON, *THE DEINDUSTRIALIZATION OF AMERICA* (1982).

⁶⁶ See generally SAMUEL BOWLES ET AL., *AFTER THE WASTELAND: A DEMOCRATIC ECONOMICS FOR THE YEAR 2000* (1990); MIKE DAVIS, *PRISONERS OF THE AMERICAN DREAM: POLITICS AND ECONOMY IN THE HISTORY OF THE U.S. WORKING CLASS* (1986).

⁶⁷ See generally EAMONN FINGLETON, *BLINDSIDE: WHY JAPAN IS STILL ON TRACK TO OVERTAKE THE U.S. BY THE YEAR 2000* (1995).

⁶⁸ See generally BLUESTONE & HARRISON, *supra* note 65.

⁶⁹ U.S. BUREAU OF THE CENSUS, *HISTORICAL STATISTICS ON GOVERNMENTAL FINANCE AND EMPLOYMENT* 26-28 (1985).

⁷⁰ *Id.*

⁷¹ U.S. BUREAU OF THE CENSUS, *SERIES GF/92-5, GOVERNMENT FINANCES: 1984-1992*, at 1 (1996).

spending deficit reached its lowest level since 1979.⁷² In 1994, the poverty rate began to fall for the first time in five years and income inequality began a modest decline.⁷³ In 1997, unemployment reached its lowest level since 1973.⁷⁴ After reaching double digits in the 1970s and early 1980s, inflation cooled off again during the 1990s, remaining under 3.0% from 1990 to 1996.⁷⁵

Changes in the welfare laws may at first seem to contradict the argument that the 1990s' downturn in crime in the U.S. is related in part to higher levels of welfare spending. Thus, in 1996, Congress replaced the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and several other long-established programs with the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program.⁷⁶ The new law sets up a system of block grants to the states, mandates that federal funding for TANF programs be capped at \$16.4 billion annually through the year 2002, and stipulates that recipients can only receive TANF benefits for a maximum of five years.⁷⁷ However, because of the way these changes are being phased in, it is still too early to tell what impact if any they will have on street crime rates. Program caps and limits on participation may not have major effects on recipients for several years. Moreover, as noted above, recent changes in the welfare system have been implemented during a period when the economy has been relatively strong.

3. *Family and Educational Institutions and Crime*

As with political and economic institutions, family institutions can reduce crime by regulating the motivation of offenders and by providing social control. In addition, the family can play a special role in protecting its members from the criminal activity of others. Throughout human history, families have

⁷² UNITED STATES ECONOMIC REPORT TO THE PRESIDENT 20 (1997).

⁷³ *Id.*

⁷⁴ *Id.*

⁷⁵ *Id.*

⁷⁶ Jerry Watts, *The End of Work and the End of Welfare*, 26 CONTEMP. SOC. 409, 409-12 (1997).

⁷⁷ *Id.*

been the primary institution for passing social rules and values from one generation to the next.⁷⁸ With few exceptions, children have more frequent and longer contacts with family members than with others, and family contacts are generally earlier and more emotionally intense than other contacts.⁷⁹ The family has long been the institution with major responsibility for teaching children right from wrong, instilling moral values, and emphasizing the importance of law-abiding behavior. This socialization role of the family means that it is critical for training children to respect and abide by criminal laws.

Families also control crime by directly regulating the behavior of their members. Families may limit the delinquent behavior of their children by restricting their activities, maintaining actual physical surveillance over them, and knowing their whereabouts when they are out of sight.⁸⁰ But perhaps even more importantly, families often control the behavior of children simply by commanding their love and respect. A good deal of research confirms that children who care about their families will be more likely to avoid behavior that they know may result in shame, embarrassment, or inconvenience for family members.⁸¹

Families are also an important crime-reducing agent in terms of the guardianship that they provide their members. Thus, families may reduce the criminal victimization of family members by protecting them from property crimes such as burglary and theft, and also by shielding them from the potential physical harm of unwanted suitors, and would-be molesters, muggers, and rapists.⁸²

Beginning especially in the 1960s, there were major declines in the legitimacy of the traditional two-parent, male-dominated family in America. Two related processes were especially important. The first was a growing challenge to the traditional form

⁷⁸ KINGSLEY DAVIS, *HUMAN SOCIETY* 395 (1948).

⁷⁹ James S. Coleman, *The Rational Reconstruction of Society*, 58 *AM. SOC. REV.* 2 (1993).

⁸⁰ Travis Hirschi, *The Family*, in *CRIME* 128 (J.Q. Wilson & J. Petersilia eds., 1995).

⁸¹ See, e.g. *id.* at 128; JOHN BRAITHWAITE, *CRIME, SHAME AND REINTEGRATION* 48 (1989).

⁸² Hirschi, *supra* note 80, at 129.

of the family.⁸³ As the feminist movement gained momentum in the 1960s, an increasing number of people came to regard the traditional two-parent family as a bastion of male oppression and dominance.⁸⁴ Occurring almost simultaneously and related in complex ways was a growing movement toward greater sexual freedom and experimentation outside of marriage.⁸⁵ In response to these developments, there was an explosion of alternatives to traditional family living arrangements.

Although it is important not to overstate the homogeneity of the American family directly following World War II,⁸⁶ the aggregate changes were nevertheless substantial. In the 1950s, divorce rates were lower than they would be for the next fifty years and the proportion of American households containing individuals with no family connections hovered around 10.0%.⁸⁷ After the 1960s, rates of divorce, children born to unmarried parents, and single-parent families rapidly increased and the total number of Americans living entirely outside of families skyrocketed.⁸⁸

Revolutionary changes in the economy also contributed to the declining legitimacy of the traditional American family. Three developments are especially important here: First, the steady movement of men away from agricultural labor at home to positions in the paid labor force, which had already begun in earnest during the industrial revolution, continued to gain momentum during the postwar period.⁸⁹ Second, women joined the paid labor force in record numbers during the post-

⁸³ See, e.g., DAVID POPENOE, *DISTURBING THE NEST: FAMILY CHANGE AND DECLINE IN MODERN SOCIETY* 51 (1988).

⁸⁴ For the classic statement of this view, see BETTY FRIEDAN, *THE FEMININE MYSTIQUE* (1963); see also KATE MILLET, *SEXUAL POLITICS* (1970).

⁸⁵ For a general discussion, see LAWRENCE M. FRIEDMAN, *THE REPUBLIC OF CHOICE: LAW, AUTHORITY AND CULTURE* (1990).

⁸⁶ For a discussion of stereotypical thinking about the past forms of families, see STEPHANIE COONTZ, *THE WAY WE NEVER WERE: AMERICAN FAMILIES AND THE NOSTALGIA TRAP* (1992).

⁸⁷ LAFREE, *supra* note 1, at 141-44.

⁸⁸ *Id.*

⁸⁹ Coleman, *supra* note 79, at 3.

war years.⁹⁰ And finally, the amount of time children and young adults spent in schools rapidly accelerated.⁹¹ These changes have totally restructured the American family.

To summarize, the institutionalized model of a two-parent family with a husband working for pay and a wife running the household became far less common in America during the postwar period. These changes have been complex and can be measured in a variety of ways. However, they all lead to the same general conclusion: during the postwar period, the legitimacy of the traditional family declined enormously. Moreover, the new forms of family and nonfamily living that increasingly replaced it have thus far not developed the same levels of legitimacy that the traditional family enjoyed during the early postwar period.

However, at least two developments in the 1990s may be changing the long-term relationship between declining family institutions and crime rates. First, nearly three decades have now passed since the most rapid changes in family organization began. Blended, dual career, male household manager, single parent, and even gay family forms are becoming increasingly institutionalized. As these alternatives to the traditional family become routinized, their ability to prevent crime and deviance should increase.

Second, as the legitimacy of traditional family institutions continues to decline in the U.S., Americans have relied increasingly on educational institutions to perform responsibilities that were once performed by families. These changes have been nothing short of revolutionary. From 1990 to 1995 alone, the proportion of three and four year olds enrolled in public, parochial or other private schools jumped from 44.0% to nearly 49.0%.⁹² During the same period, the proportion of fourteen- to seventeen-year-olds enrolled in school topped 96.0%, the proportion of eighteen and nineteen-year-olds in school

⁹⁰ SHIRLEY P. BURGGRAB, *THE FEMININE ECONOMY AND ECONOMIC MAN: REVIVING THE ROLE OF FAMILY IN THE POST-INDUSTRIAL AGE* 18 (1997).

⁹¹ Coleman, *supra* note 79, at 6-7.

⁹² NATIONAL CTR. FOR EDUC. STATISTICS, U.S. DEP'T OF EDUC., *DIGEST OF EDUCATION STATISTICS* 1996, at 15 (1997).

reached 59.4%, and the total proportion of young adults twenty to twenty-four-years-old reached 31.5%.⁹³

Schools, like families, can discourage crime by reducing criminal motivation, by increasing the effectiveness of social control, and, in principle at least, by protecting students from the criminal behavior of others. There is a well-known tendency for offenders to be drawn from those with low levels of educational attainment.⁹⁴ There is also evidence that juveniles who accept the legitimacy of education and who have high educational aspirations and long term educational goals are less likely to engage in delinquency.⁹⁵ Schools can reduce crime by effectively monitoring and supervising the behavior of children under their custody.⁹⁶ More generally, research also shows that juveniles are less likely to commit crime when they are strongly attached to school⁹⁷ and when their performance in school is strong.⁹⁸

Educational institutions have obviously not replaced family functions in America. Indeed, we could argue that educational institutions have steadfastly resisted expanding their responsibilities from the relatively narrow role of education established in the Nineteenth Century.⁹⁹ Nevertheless, a growing proportion of infants, children, young adults, and even adults are spending much of their waking hours in schools. Taken together, this growing participation in educational institutions should put downward pressure on crime rates.

⁹³ *Id.*

⁹⁴ See DELBERT S. ELLIOTT & HARWIN L. VOSS, *DELINQUENCY AND DROPOUT* 119 (1974).

⁹⁵ See, e.g., Josefina Figueira-McDonough, *Feminism and Delinquency*, 24 *BRIT. J. OF CRIMINOLOGY* 325 (1984); Allen E. Liska, *Aspirations, Expectations and Delinquency: Stress and Additive Models*, 12 *SOC. Q.* 99 (1971).

⁹⁶ Jackson Toby, *The Schools*, in *CRIME*, *supra* note 80, at 152-58.

⁹⁷ See generally BRAITHWAITE, *supra* note 81, at 28-29.

⁹⁸ See, e.g., Robert Agnew, *A Revised Strain Theory of Delinquency*, 64 *SOC. FORCES* 151 (1985).

⁹⁹ LAFREE, *supra* note 1, at 185-86.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

U.S. street crime trends in the 1990s can be accurately described as a bust. It is possible that the recent declines in crime were related to the renewed legitimacy of three traditional, and the growing support for three newer, social institutions during the last decade of the twentieth century. Declining crime rates in the 1990s may have been produced by increasing trust in political institutions, increasing economic well-being, and growing institutionalization of alternatives to the traditional two parent American family. Increasing support for criminal justice, welfare, and educational institutions in the 1990s has also put downward pressure on crime rates.

Among the roles of social science, prediction is among the most precarious. If crime rates continue to drop during the last few years of the twentieth century, then history will likely interpret the 1990s as a period of major crime declines in the United States. If, on the other hand, crime rates again begin to increase over the next few years, the first half of the 1990s will more closely resemble the early 1980s—a period when most street crime rates faltered before heading upward again. Still, taken together, the evidence suggests that the U.S. is currently experiencing the most broad-gauged and extensive drop in street crime rates in the past half century.

How reliable is the evidence that these recent crime declines are related to the growing strength of the six institutions described here? The evidence is strongest for a connection between declining crime rates in the 1990s and increased support for criminal justice institutions, increased economic well-being, and increased support for educational institutions. Rates of criminal justice spending, imprisonment, and other forms of punishments have never been higher and much of this increase has happened in the 1990s. The economic condition of the country appears to be more favorable in the mid 1990s than it has been at any time since the oil embargo of 1973. And school enrollments and education-related spending have continued to increase unabated throughout the 1990s.

The connections between recent crime declines and political, welfare, and family institutions must be regarded as some-

what more tentative. Still, there is good evidence that public trust in political institutions is not experiencing the rapid declines that were common in the 1960s and 1970s. And it is clearly the case that there are currently no political protest movements in the U.S. with anything close to the level of intensity or commitment reached by the civil rights movement or the anti-Vietnam War protests. Changes in welfare support in 1996 may prove to be consequential, but their effects on crime rates can reasonably be expected to occur later, when automatic spending limitations are encountered. While there are few signs that family institutions are returning to the form they took in the 1950s, there are clear indications that family arrangements that would have been regarded with horror in the years directly following World War II, have now gathered much greater acceptance.

While any firm conclusions about the exact relations between these institutions and crime trends in the 1990s must await a far more detailed empirical analysis, institutions such as those examined here do seem to provide promising leads in our ongoing efforts to understand the crime bust of the 1990s.