Violent Crime is Up Even Though Poverty is Down. Why?

The FBI recently released its Uniform Crime Report for 2016. There is a lot to digest in the report, but here are three primary takeaways: 1) Violent crime since 2015 is up 4.1% (the second year in a row violent crime has increased); 2) homicides rose sharply (8.6%); 3) the biggest increases in violent crime occurred in urban areas (8.8% overall).

None of these findings are particularly surprising, at least to people who've been paying attention. However, it's worth pointing out that these increases occurred during a time in which economic conditions greatly *improved*.

"In every one of the 25 most populous metro areas in the United States poverty declined from 2015 to '16," Barry Latzer, a criminologist who teaches at John Jay College, writes at the *Daily Beast*. "For the African American population in deep poverty (less than 50% of the poverty level) – a population at high risk for violent crime – there has been a modest but steady decline since 2012. In 2012, 13.5% of the black population was in deep poverty; in 2016 that figure fell by 807,000 to 11%."

Latzer said that despite the conventional wisdom, there is no correlation between violent crime—which usually is not economic in nature—and general economic conditions, and historical evidence bears this out:

> *"Just as recessions don't necessarily produce crime waves, economic booms don't guarantee crime declines. The roaring 1920s also were a high-crime decade, with homicide victimization rates averaging nearly 9 per 100,000. Of course, this being Prohibition time, the booze gang wars helped keep crime rates high. Perhaps the best example of*

> *good economy/high crime was the 1960s. With vivid memories of riots, protests and bombings, it is sometimes forgotten that the economy of the 60s was supercharged."*

Then what about the link between low income and violence?

Latzer says the answer lies in the different values low-income individuals tend to have compared to their wealthier peers. Members of the middle and upper class tend to resolve conflicts through means other than violence; lower-income individuals, particularly young men, are more likely to use violence, either to resolve a dispute or because they cannot control their impulses.

This is all true, but does nothing to explain the increase of violent crime nationwide—some 50,000 crimes.

What does? Latzer doesn't say, but he does note that blacks, who make up 13% of the U.S. population, "were more than 52% of the victims" nationwide. FBI statistics make it clear that blacks are suffering from this increase in violent crime worse than other groups.

This brings us to what Manhattan Institute scholar Heather Mac Donald has called "the Ferguson Effect," a reference to the 2014 police shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. Mac Donald has argued that in the wake of the shooting, which inspired the Black Lives Matter movement, a change took place regarding how police departments practiced law enforcement.

Here is how she explained the Ferguson Effect in a recent City Journal article:

> *"Cops are backing off of proactive policing in high-crime minority neighborhoods, and criminals are becoming emboldened. Having been told incessantly by politicians, the media, and Black Lives Matter activists that they are bigoted for getting out of their cars and questioning someone*

> *loitering on a known drug corner at 2 am, many officers are instead just driving by. Such stops are discretionary; cops don't have to make them. And when political elites demonize the police for just such proactive policing, we shouldn't be surprised when cops get the message and do less of it. Seventy-two percent of the nation's officers say that they and their colleagues are now less willing to stop and question suspicious persons, according to a Pew Research poll released in January. The reason is the persistent anti-cop climate."*

Mac Donald's thesis is not without support—police departments have been quite open about their policies—but it runs counter to a powerful narrative. This one:

The idea that police departments pose threats to civilian populations, rather than offer protection, is becoming increasingly prevalent. A case in point can be found in Minneapolis, where two mayoral hopefuls and seven city council candidates recently said they could envision the city with *no police at all*.

There is something to be said for reform in police departments. I've long championed various accountability measures, including body cameras on officers. But this is fevered thinking. And it's dangerous.

If you're looking for explanations as to why violent crime is rising—and has claimed nearly 900 more black lives in 2016 than 2015—you have your answer, or at least one of them. Police are now afraid to police.

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