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Widely predicted teen crime wave never happened

BY FRANK GREVE
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WASHINGTON - A new generation of brutal and remorseless teens was about to savage the nation, leading authorities on juvenile crime warned a decade ago. Millions of Americans believed them.

Conservative criminologist John DiIulio called the fearsome horde "super-predators." He estimated that they'd number nearly 200,000 by now. Even unflappable Attorney General Janet Reno foresaw violent crime doubling among kids.

It never happened. Instead, Americans are experiencing the sharpest decline in teen crime in modern history. Schools today are as safe as they were in the 1960s, according to Justice Department figures. Juvenile homicide arrests are down from 3,800 annually to fewer than 1,000, and only a handful of those homicides occur in schools. Arrest rates for robbery, rape and aggravated assault are off a third since 1980 for kids aged 10-18, according to the Justice Department's 2006 National Report on Juvenile Offenders and Victims, due out later this month.

"Kids now are less violent than you were," James Rieland, the director of juvenile court services in Pittsburgh's Allegheny County, tells new prosecutors.

Today, criminologists say the real question is what went right in the long period of relative peace that dawned in the mid-'90s. Their hope is to prolong the era of amity - or at least know what works the next time juvenile crime goes up.

As it is, teen-crime declines leveled off in 2002 and 2003, the latest years for which solid numbers are available. Simple assaults are up, especially among girls, according to the upcoming Justice Department report, and teen drug arrests, while off their peaks, never fell as far as violent and property crimes. That's the bad news, said criminologist Franklin Zimring of the University of California-Berkeley School of Law. "The good news," he added, "is that juvenile crime overall is staying at the lowest level it's been in 36 years."

The rise and fall of crack cocaine was the biggest factor, most juvenile-crime experts agree. Others include an inner-city influx of relatively peaceable Latino families, a thriving economy, improved strategies for dealing with real and potential delinquents, more adult imprisonment, smarter policing and better school-parent partnerships.

Most likely, these and other factors all worked together in complex ways, said Melissa Sickmund, senior researcher at the National Center for Juvenile Justice in Pittsburgh. No social change as big and broad as teen crime's fall has only one cause, she added. "This isn't medicine."

According to criminologist Alfred Blumstein of Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, teen crime's decline is largely the downside of a rise that started in the mid-'80s when kids took over drug gangs from adult dealers who'd been imprisoned under toughened state and federal laws. The teens needed guns "because crack was a street market and you had to protect yourself," Blumstein said. "And they didn't have the restraint that older folks do."

Jeffrey Seals, then and now a freezer-sized school security guard, watched it play out at Montgomery Blair High School in Washington's Maryland suburbs. It's a big, polyglot school whose students in those days included drug-dealing Jamaican posse members.

If you sold crack back then, recalled Seals, 46, "you went to jail, you got deported, you got killed or you got smart."

Many got smart, Blumstein said. "Kids saw what crack was doing to their siblings, friends and parents and turned away from it." At the same time, he added, "reasonably aggressive policing took the guns from the kids."

It helped that crack's street price dropped in the mid-'90s, according to economist Steven Levitt, the author of the best seller "Freakonomics," which includes an examination of teen crime's decline.

No surprise: The sharpest drops in teen crime since 1993 were among black males, who once dominated crack sales.

But crack's fade is just part of the story, because teen crime also fell sharply in suburbs where crack was scarce and in rural communities where there was none.

Most of those areas saw a dramatic surge in school security, mainly after the Columbine High School shootings in Littleton, Colo., in April 1999. That's long after teen crime started dropping, so the question is whether school security upgrades are keeping it down.

In truth, there's not much real crime to keep down. Only 10 percent of schools reported any serious crime in a pre-Columbine (1997-8) National Education Association survey, and nearly 9 out of 10 students declared their schools safe. In addition, the contribution of school security officers is hard to distinguish from what the rest of a local police force accomplishes.

Phil Bailey, the vice president of the National Association of School Resource Officers, said its members effectively deterred bullying, hate crimes and drug use and kept small problems from growing.

That's the theory at Blair High's new 3,600-student campus, where 50 security cameras and 10 security officers - three times the size of the force when Seals joined it - keep the screws on. Students seem to presume rather than question the heavy surveillance.

"I think the security makes kids more aware of their behavior," said Pria Anand, co-editor of the student paper. But the cameras don't inhibit her, she added, "and I can't see why they would change a behavior that wasn't illegal."

Seals and Vice Principal Linda Wanner agreed that today's kids are more serious strivers than those of the '80s. They also said parents were more involved now in their kids' school lives, more likely to show up promptly when summoned.

Why's that?

"They've all got cell phones," Seals said.

Probably more important than tighter school security, criminologists said, were these factors:

_ Good economic times. In the decade of economic expansion that ended in 2000, the number of older teens who were neither in school nor at full-time jobs dropped by nearly a third, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Prosperity, in other words, gave teens more and better options to crime.

_ Population shifts. The Latino population in central cities swelled as teen crime declined, according to Jeff Roth, a University of Pennsylvania criminologist. Their influx, Roth said, brought more intact families, stronger values, higher religious participation - and lower crime rates. At the same time, many of the black families they replaced moved to suburbs where poverty was less concentrated. "Kids once confined to the inner city started seeing lifestyles other than the street," Roth said.

_ Learning what works. Criminologists decided in the '90s to track what worked and what didn't in dealing with teen crime. Boot camps didn't work, they found. Nor did trying juveniles in adult courts. Big Brother and Big Sister mentoring worked. Foster care for delinquents worked better than lock-ups if foster parents were well trained and the goal was to return the delinquents to well-coached biological parents. Suspending delinquent kids from school or leaving them back didn't work. One happy surprise: They found that if one parent is strong and consistent, the second isn't missed when it comes to preventing delinquency.

_ Imprisoning adults. The incarceration rate rose from 1 per 1,000 adults to 4 from the '80s to today, and it has many foes. But Blumstein, who's among them, and others think that jailing more adults sharply reduced the number of teens who commit crimes with adult accomplices.

_ Abortion? Economist Levitt attributes teen crime's sharp drop to a reduction in unwanted children, which began with the Supreme Court's Roe v. Wade decision in 1973. Criminologist Zimring, among others, thinks it contributed but isn't as big a factor as Levitt argues.

In truth, the declines in U.S. teen crime remain something of a mystery. Zimring noted that Canada's teen-crime rate declined when the U.S. rate did, even though Canada took no major steps to curb it. For that matter, New York City's drop doubled the rest of the country's for reasons that still are being analyzed.

DiIulio, who's now teaching at the University of Pennsylvania, didn't return repeated phone calls or messages asking why super-predators failed to show up and teen crime declined instead. Neither did William Bennett, the former drug czar, who wrote a 1996 book with DiIulio on the topic, titled "Body Count," which attributed the problem to moral decay.

Chuck Colson, the jailed former Nixon aide who founded a ministry for prisoners after his release, took the DiIulio-Bennett line back then. Soaring teen crime, he said, was "a mirror of the community's moral state."

If Colson's right, falling teen crime reflects an unsung moral achievement.

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