

Crime and Punishment in Connecticut

By William A. McEachern

Earlier this decade, some criminologists were predicting a national explosion of crime. They argued that a new type of criminal, a so-called superpredator, was about to reach prime crime age. But the predicted crime spree hasn't developed either in Connecticut or in the nation, at least not so far. In fact, crime rates here and in the nation peaked early in the decade and have trended downward since then. Let's look at the numbers—but be forewarned, there are a lot of them. So buckle up.

Crime Declines

We can track crime in two ways. The FBI's Uniform Crime Reports use police records in each state to compile an index of seven crimes—the violent crimes of murder, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault, plus the property crimes of burglary, larceny, and motor-vehicle theft. Because not all crime is reported to the police, the U.S. Department of Justice carries out a National Crime Victimization Survey, which identifies crime victims based on a large survey of households. But victimization rates are estimated only at the national level. Since our interest is in Connecticut, we rely primarily on the Uniform Crime Reports, but will also reference the victimization surveys.

The chart below compares the index of crime rates for Connecticut and the nation since 1985, about the time when the most recent spike in crime began. After climbing each year from 1985 to 1990, the crime rate in Connecticut dropped each year after 1990. By 1998, Connecticut's rate had fallen 30% below the 1990 level, with violent crime down 33% and property crime down 29%.

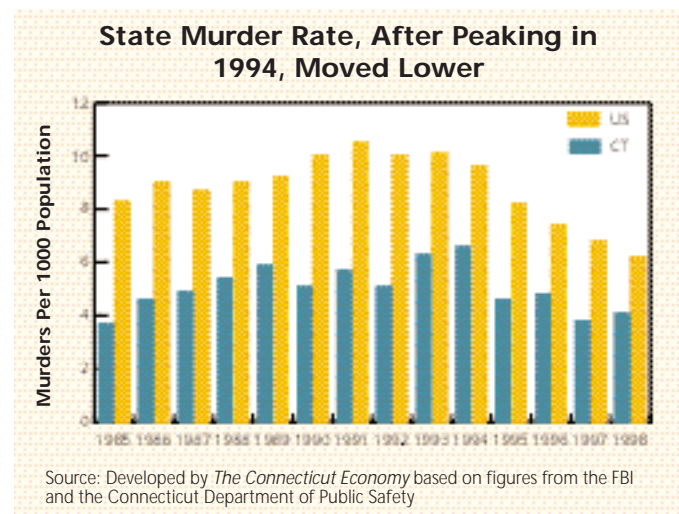
Crime rates in the nation followed a similar pattern but peaked in 1991, not 1990, then fell 23% by 1998. Violent crime dropped 26% and property crime, 22%. As a reference point, the victimization survey showed violent crime in the nation falling 24% between 1991 and 1998 and property crime falling 39%. Thus, the drop in violent crime is similar using each measure, while the drop in property crime is larger based on the victimization survey.

The bottom line is that Connecticut's crime rate averaged 10% lower than the nation's between 1985 and 1992, and 17% lower

between 1993 and 1998. Each of the seven crimes in the index has declined in Connecticut since 1990. The murder rate fell 20%; rape, 22%; robbery, 43%; aggravated assault, 28%; burglary, 40%; larceny, 18%; and motor-vehicle thefts, 47%. What's more, in 1998, each crime rate was lower in Connecticut than in the nation. Specifically, the murder rate in Connecticut was 34% lower than the national average; rape, 35% lower; robbery, 17% lower; aggravated assault, 40% lower; burglary, 40% lower; larceny, 12% lower, and motor-vehicle theft, 14% lower. Let's turn now to the most feared crime.

It's Murder

Murder gets much attention, in the media and thus in our fears. Murder rates are also more reliable than other crime rates since there is not much underreporting. The chart below compares murder rates in Connecticut and in the nation since 1985. Again, Connecticut and the nation show roughly similar patterns, with rates trending upward from 1985 to the early 1990s, then falling.



Connecticut murders per 100,000 population nearly doubled from 3.7 in 1985 to 6.6 in the peak year of 1994, before settling back to 4.1 in 1998. The nation followed a similar trend, but peaked earlier, at 10.5 in 1991, then trended down to 6.2 in 1998.

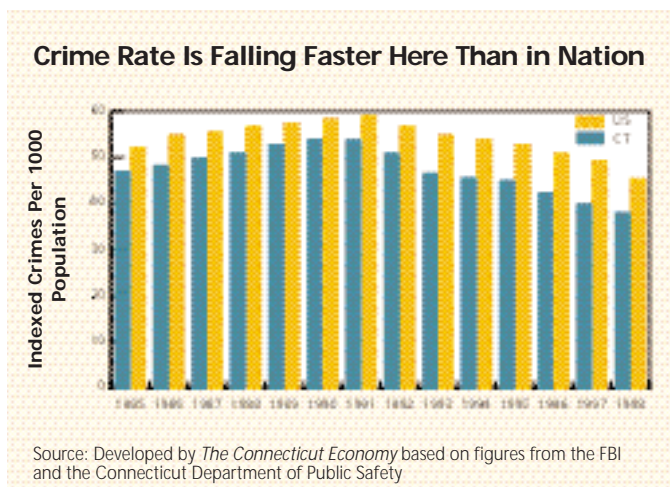
Those arrested in Connecticut for murder in 1998 tended to be male, young, and black. Ninety-four percent were male, 61% were 24 years of age or younger, and 57% were black (41% were white). The profile of murder victims mirrors the arrest records—72% of all murder victims in 1998 were male, 45% of all murder victims were between 15 and 24 years of age, and 53% of all murder victims were black (46% were white).

Although the handgun remains the murder weapon of choice, its grip is slipping. During the peak murder year of 1994, handguns were used in 137 of the 216 murders in the state—63% of the total. Handgun murders dropped to 64 of the 135 murders in 1998, or 47% of the total. While all Connecticut murders declined by 38% between 1994 and 1998, handgun murders fell by 53%.

Of those Connecticut murders in 1998 where the relationship to the victim could be determined, 41% were murdered by an acquaintance, 19% by a family member, and 13% by a "friend." Only 12% were murdered by a stranger.

Perception Versus Reality

Thus, the crime rate in Connecticut, as least as reported to the police, has been declining since 1990 and has consistently been below the national average. In our quarterly survey of households, we asked some questions about crime (see page 8 for more details). First, we asked about crime in Connecticut relative to the national average. Responses were in line with police



reports. Twice as many respondents thought crime was lower in Connecticut than thought it was higher. Those with more education were more likely to say lower.

We also asked what happened to the crime rate in Connecticut since 1990. Twice as many males said crime decreased as said it increased. But females saw things differently. Half again as many females said crime increased since 1990 as said it decreased. There may be a logical explanation for the different responses. The victimization survey found that between 1990 and 1998 violent crime in the nation decreased 25% among males but only 5% among females.

Punishment

Although the crime rate in Connecticut has been falling since 1990, the prison population continues to swell. The chart below shows the number incarcerated in Connecticut correctional facilities since 1985. That population nearly tripled between 1985 and 1999, from 5,790 to 16,776, for an average annual growth rate of 7.9%. Nationally, the state prison population grew even more, by 8.4% per year. The higher national growth could be due to the fact that since 1985 the U.S. population as a whole has grown by an average of 1.0% a year compared to a mere 0.2% average in Connecticut.

The chart also shows the composition of Connecticut's prisons. The number of Hispanic inmates increased from 1,086 in 1985 to 4,332, in 1999, for an average annual growth rate of 10.4%. Non-Hispanic blacks increased from 2,573 to 7,906, growing an average of 8.4% per year. And non-Hispanic whites increased from 2,116 to 4,441, for an annual growth of 5.4%. (Not shown are Asians, Pacific Islanders, and Native Americans, which together make up only 0.6% of the prison population.)

Blacks and Hispanics make up 72.9% of the state's prison population though they account for only 16.2% of the state's population as a whole. Put another way, Connecticut's correctional facilities hold about 1 of every 40 non-Hispanic black residents of the state, and 1 of every 60 Hispanic residents, but only 1 of every 600 non-Hispanic white residents.

Crime Down, Prisoners Up?

Why has the prison population continued to grow even as the crime rate declines? Is the composition of crime shifting to more serious offenses, leading to more jail time? Not really. In fact, since 1990 violent crime in Connecticut has declined more than property crime.

Is a larger proportion of crimes getting solved, thus yielding more arrests and more convictions? No. A criminal case is considered solved, or "cleared," when at least one person is arrested, charged with the offense, and turned over to the courts for prosecution. The average clearance rate in Connecticut for crimes in the index has remained about 20% a year since 1985. The clearance rate in 1998 was higher for violent crimes (50%) than property crimes (17%). Murder had the highest clearance rate in 1998, at 71%, and motor-vehicle theft and burglary, the lowest, at 12% each.

What has increased is the likelihood of doing prison time for a given conviction and the likelihood of serving a longer sentence. Public fear of crime has spawned tougher laws and stricter sentencing guidelines. For example, truth-in-sentencing measures require Connecticut convicts to serve at least 50% of their sentence before they can be considered for parole. If the crime involved violence, they must serve 75% of their sentence.

But maybe the question needs to be reversed. Rather than wondering why the prison population has not declined in line with falling crime rates, maybe crime rates have fallen in part because the rate of incarceration has increased. There is some evidence to support this view. A higher rate of incarceration not only gets more bad guys off the street, but makes at least some would-be criminals think twice before committing crimes. A comprehensive study published recently in the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta's *Economic Review* concludes that "the evidence of imprisonment rates strongly suggests that punishment works to reduce crime." (First Quarter, 1999, p. 51).

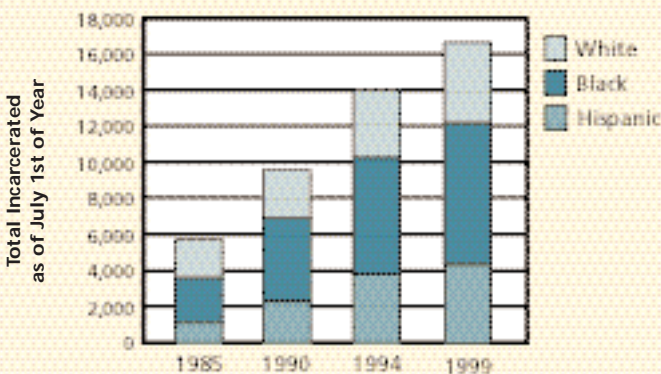
Another possible explanation for the falling crime rate stems from the legalization of abortion in the 1970s. Researchers who propose this theory argue that abortion disproportionately reduced the number of unwanted offspring of poor, minority teenagers.

Regardless of the explanation, the prison system is now carrying a lot of water for society. Nationally, the long-term mental hospital population dropped from 560,000 in 1955 to under 70,000 today. Some former patients made successful transitions, but many ended up homeless and on the streets. In the wake of this deinstitutionalization movement, prisons are becoming the nation's mental hospitals. A U.S. Justice Department study found that many emotionally disturbed inmates go from homelessness to prisons and back to the streets with little treatment. Many were arrested for crimes that stemmed from their illnesses. More than half of mentally disturbed inmates had served three or more prior sentences. Once incarcerated, they spent about 15 more months in jail than other prisoners, often because of their mental problems.

Addiction and its consequences is another social problem that washes up to our prisons. Based on intake surveys, about 80% of those entering Connecticut correctional facilities acknowledge drug or alcohol dependence. More than half the Correction Department's pharmaceutical budget goes toward costly medicines to treat HIV and AIDS inmates, a group that constitutes less than one-fifth of the prison population. Hepatitis B and tuberculosis also involve costly remediation. Finally, longer prison terms mean older prisoners, thus escalating the cost of medical care.

Based on the current growth rate, Connecticut must build an 800-bed facility every year to house the growing prison population. There are other possibilities, such as sending prisoners out of state. Plans are in the works to do just that. But, whatever the public policy, we should recognize that, for better or worse, prisons now play a more critical role in society.

Connecticut's Prison Population Has Nearly Tripled Since 1985 and Minority Share Has Grown



Source: Developed by *The Connecticut Economy* based on figures compiled by the Connecticut Department of Corrections. Figures for whites are for non-Hispanic whites, and figures for blacks are for non-Hispanic blacks.