THE YOUTH VIOLENCE EPIDEMIC: MYTH OR REALITY? *

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This article searches the arrest statistics of the period 1980-1996 for evidence of trends in juvenile violence in the United States. No consistent long term trends appear for any of the four Part I violent crimes (homicide, rape, aggravated assault, and robbery). Only two of the four offenses have arrest rates higher than in 1980. Aggravated assault arrests have increased substantially, but most of this is due to reclassification by police instead of changes in youth behavior. There is no long-term trend in youth violence to project forward to the twenty-first century.

Conventional wisdom has it that rates of juvenile violence are an ominous exception to the good news of declining crime in the United States in the 1990s. Rates of serious adolescent violence are reported as increasing.1 These recent increases are the basis for projecting higher rates of juvenile arrests in the future.2 Congressman McCollum of Florida, the chief sponsor of sweeping federal juvenile justice legislation, sums up the common sentiments as such: "In recent years, overall crime rates have seen a modest decrease . . . . Nevertheless, this general decline masks an unprecedented surge of youth violence that has only begun to gather momentum.

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1. See WILLIAM J. BENNETT ET AL., BODY COUNT 20 (1996) (noting that violence among American youth "has been soaring"); JAMES ALAN FOX, TRENDS IN JUVENILE VIOLENCE: A REPORT TO THE UNITED STATES ATTORNEY GENERAL ON CURRENT AND FUTURE RATES OF JUVENILE OFFENDING 1-2 (1996) (observing that, since 1985, homicide by teenagers aged fourteen to seventeen has increased 172%).

2. See HOWARD N. SYNDER & MELISSA SICKMUND, NAT'L CTR. FOR JUVENILE JUSTICE, JUVENILE OFFENDERS AND VICTIMS: A NATIONAL REPORT 111 (1995) (estimating that by the year 2010, juvenile arrests will increase by 145%).
Today's drop in crime is only the calm before the coming storm."³ In other published accounts, future developments are characterized using terms like "bloodbath"⁴ and "juvenile super-predators."⁵

This article is a detailed analysis of the statistics that have inspired such alarm. The first section of the article examines trends in the four "Part I" offenses of violence over the period from 1980 to 1996. The second section focuses on youth arrests for homicide, concluding that all of the increase noted in this category is attributable to increases in gun violence. The third section shows that arrests for aggravated assault—the largest growth category since 1980—may be the result of changes in police practices and reporting standards. A concluding section addresses the implications of the statistical patterns found for projecting rates of youth crime forward.

My principle conclusions are two. First, there never was a general pattern of increasing adolescent violence in the 1980s and 1990s. The important variations concerned narrower bands of behavior and shorter periods of time. The two increases were in a thin band of highly lethal gun attacks, at the very top of the seriousness scale, and garden variety assaults, at the very bottom of the seriousness scale. Second, there is no basis for making any projections fifteen years forward based on current trends. Any such projections are fundamentally unscientific in character and more closely resemble phrenology than meteorology.

I. A GENERAL TREND?

The only official statistics that provide age-specific patterns are police data from arrests. These statistics have served as the basis for predictions of a coming wave of youth violence. Figure 1 combines this national data on arrests for youths under age eighteen with census-based data on age to illustrate trends in arrest rates per 100,000 youths aged thirteen to seventeen for homicide, rape, aggravated assault and robbery. For each offense, the arrest rate per 100,000 in 1980 is expressed as a baseline level of one hundred, and each succeeding year's arrest rate is expressed as a percentage of that figure. This presentational strategy shows the trends in all four offense categories most directly.

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The estimates generated in Figure 1 express the number of arrests over the entire population of thirteen to seventeen-year-olds, despite the fact that the percentage of the U.S. population in reporting agencies varies and is never 100%. Accordingly, the rates derived are merely an index of trends rather than a precise rate.

Figure 1 shows especially pronounced trends in two of the four offenses: homicide and aggravated assault. The largest movements over time are noted for homicide, where the arrest rate first dropped by just under 40% in the early 1980s, and then began a sustained climb after 1984. The peak rate, attained in 1993, was more than double the 1980 rate. Since 1993, homicides arrests have dropped sharply; the 1996 rate was only 34% above the 1980 rate. On the other hand, the aggravated assault arrest rate did not drop much in the early 1980s, but it also increased slowly from 1985 to 1988. Large one-year jumps in 1989 and again in 1992 raised the aggravated assault arrest rate to nearly double the 1980 rate. After reaching its peak in 1994, the aggravated assault rate then declined by 20% over the next two years. Even so, arrests for aggravated assault remain 56% above the 1980 level, by far the largest rate increase of the four violent crimes.

6. Figure 1 is derived from FBI annual crime statistics for each year between 1980 and 1996. See Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Dep't of Justice, Uniform Crime Reports for the United States. All data is normalized to the base year 1980, reflecting the rate of arrest as a function of changes in the population. The normalized data is on file with the author.
Trends in rape and robbery arrests over the 1980s and early 1990s were much less pronounced. Rape arrests never dropped lower than their 1980 baseline during the years when homicides and assaults declined in the early 1980s. Rape arrest rates increased after 1988, peaking in 1992 at 32% above the 1980 level. By 1996, however, they had dropped back to the lowest rate recorded at any time since 1977.

Robbery arrest trends differ from the other arrest trends in two respects. While other violent crime arrest rates increased after 1984, robbery arrest rates declined in six of the first eight years of the 1980s and reached their lowest level of the decade in 1988. From 1988 to 1994, the arrest rates increased, but were never more than 20% above the 1980 baseline. The 1995 rate was only 13% above the 1980 rate, and the 1996 arrest rate fell another 34%. By 1996, the robbery arrest rate was reported at 21% below the 1980 level.

There are three notable elements in the aggregate pattern reported in Figure 1. First, there is no common pattern for youth arrests for violent crimes during the period from 1980 to 1996. The rate change over the sixteen-year period varied from a 21% decline for robbery to a 56% increase for aggravated assault. And the homicide rate, which had increased the most as of 1993, eventually settled at a 34% gain by the end of 1996. The four different offenses thus offer four different statistical stories.

The second major conclusion from Figure 1 is that youth arrest rates for violent crimes usually did not run up or down in long cycles. In a period that was supposed to be noteworthy because of its sustained upward trends, there were only three occasions when the arrest rate for any offense trended in the same direction for more than three consecutive years. Moreover, the aggregate rates for two of the four violent offenses were essentially trendless over the sixteen-year period.

The third important characteristic of violent crime arrest rates is that the arrest rate often changed substantially in a short time. Over the sixteen year-to-year transitions depicted in Figure 1, homicide rates increased or decreased by over 20% four times and over 15% seven times. Aggravated assault rates experienced one-year increases of 34%, 19%, and 17% during the sixteen-year period. This volatility of trends in youth violence arrests signifies that these arrest rates, which cannot be predicted, are actually much more important indicators of future youth crime volume than the population levels, which can be predicted. In fact, with large differences in rates occurring, changes in youth population can be expected to play only a relatively minor and independent role in determining the volume of youth violence. Over the fifteen years between 1995 and
2010, the youth population is expected to increase a total of 16%. But the 1980-1996 experience shows that a single year’s increase or decrease in youth arrests can be just as powerful an influence on youth violence volume as fifteen years worth of population changes.

All of the statistical features just discussed warn us that long-range predictions about the volume of youth violence are prone to error. Offense rates are far less predictable than the size of the youth population, but are much more important in determining the volume of serious violence. Assuming that any trend will continue for long is foolhardy given the cyclical nature of youth violence trends. There is at least as much difference between trends in the different violent offenses as there is similarity, such that projections of trends in a single aggregation of youth violence are demonstrably erroneous.

Those reviewing Figure 1 after reading other commentaries on trends in youth violence may notice that the increases just discussed are smaller than data reported in other studies. The reason for the discrepancy is that many analysts use the very lowest points in juvenile violence, 1984 or 1985, as their base year. Picking a low period in a cyclically-fluctuating time frame will generate the greatest difference between baseline rates of violence and current rates of violence. But this tactic also risks confusing the up and down movements in a cyclical pattern with trends over time that represent changes in the expected average volume of violence.

What Figure 1 shows is that rape and robbery arrests varied substantially over the period from 1980 to 1996. But there is simply no evidence of an underlying trend—either up or down—in the incidence of arrests over those sixteen years. That manifest trendlessness removes rape and robbery from further consideration in exploring the central concern of this article—the assessment and explanation of trends over time. Since there is no trend, there is no reason to project any trend forward.

Homicide rates were one-third higher in 1996 than in 1980. Despite the cyclical fluctuations throughout the period, this seems sufficient ground to investigate the presence of a change in rate and its likely explanation. That is the task of the next section. Aggra-

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9. See, e.g., SNYDER & SICKMÜND, supra note 2, at 106-07 (using the early 1980s as the base year); Blumstein, supra note 8, at 29 (using the period from 1985 to 1992 to measure the increase in violence).
vated assault levels increased by more than half over the period from 1980 to 1996. They are the subject of section three. As the following two sections will show, the trends in homicide and assault are really quite different in origin and policy significance.

II. PATTERNS OF YOUTH HOMICIDE

Figure 2\textsuperscript{10} shows trends in homicide arrest rates for offenders aged thirteen to seventeen and offenders over the age of eighteen in the two decades from 1976 to 1996.

The two arrest rates initially move together—first up, and then down—in the first decade covered by the figure. But then the under-eighteen rate soars from 1985 to 1993 in a pattern that diverges from the stable older age rate.

The most important reason for the sharp escalation in homicide is an escalating volume of fatal attacks with firearms, as shown in Figure 3.\textsuperscript{11}

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{trends-arrest-rates-homicide-1976-1996}
\caption{Trends in Arrest Rates for Homicide, 1976-1996}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{10} Figure 2 is derived from FBI annual crime statistics for each year between 1976 and 1996. See Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Dept of Justice, Uniform Crime Reports for the United States. All data is normalized to the base year 1976, reflecting the rate of arrest as a function of changes in the population. The normalized data is on file with the author.

\textsuperscript{11} Figure 3 is derived from FBI annual crime statistics for each year between 1976 and 1992. See Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Dept of Justice, Uniform Crime Reports for the United States.
The top line in Figure 3 is the rate for all types of homicides which were tied to the arrest of at least one offender under age eighteen. The bottom line in the figure is the rate of arrests for homicides committed with all weapons other than guns, including knives, blunt objects, and personal force. The most important characteristic of that bottom trend line is constancy. There are only minor fluctuations, and no trend can be noted during this time.

The middle line shows trends in arrests for homicides committed with guns, with each death that resulted in one or more youth arrests counted only once. The initial decrease in total homicides in the early 1980s, and the subsequent increase in homicides since that time, correlate directly with this amount of gun homicides. The proportion of homicides committed with guns did not increase among adults, so no general increase in handgun availability seems to explain the sharp increase in youth shootings.

The concentration of homicide increases in gun attacks has two important implications. First, it would necessitate only a small number of attacks changing during the 1985 to 1992 period. After all, gunshot wounds are often deadly: a relatively small number of woundings can produce a relatively large number of killings. My early studies in Chicago found a ratio for nonfatal gunshot woundings to fatalities of about seven to one, in contrast to a knife ratio of

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about five to one. Both numbers are undercounts because there are many more nonfatal woundings that also go undetected. But an extra 1700 gun killings should only produce 10,000 to 15,000 extra gun wound cases in the aggravated assault statistics, a small percentage of the total under-eighteen aggravated assault volume.

Because the homicide patterns suggest that only gun assaults increased after 1985 (there were no additional nongun killings), one would expect a minimal number of additional assault cases, perhaps less than a 10% increase, with gun cases accounting for all of the increase.

But that is not what happened. The number of aggravated assault cases after 1985 grew even faster than homicides. The fact that only gun homicides increased transforms the large increase in under-eighteen aggravated assaults into a mystery. If the increase in homicides had been distributed across all weapons groups, we would have expected a percentage increase in assaults as large as the increase in homicides.

The second implication of the “guns only” pattern of homicide increase is that the “hardware” used in many attacks, not any basic change in the youth population involved, seems to be the major explanation for the expanding rate.

Every time there is an increase in youth violence, there is worry that a new, more vicious type of juvenile offender is the cause of the increased rate. But the “guns only” pattern in Figure 3 provides pretty strong circumstantial evidence against this proposition for three reasons. First, the sharp increase in gun use provides a clear alternative explanation for the higher number of youth killings. It has long been thought that, because guns are more dangerous, their greater use in attacks can increase the death rate from violence independent of any variations in intent. This so-called instrumentality effect would explain a substantial increase in homicide without resort to changes in the motivations or scruples of young offenders. The second reason the “guns only” pattern does not support the theory of a violent new breed of offender is that so few young attackers are involved in the switch to guns. At most, the shooters comprise only 20,000 or so of the under-eighteen population arrested for violence. If there is a “new breed” of offender, it

14. See id. (“[I]f knives are substituted for guns, the homicide rate would drop significantly.”); see also FRANKLIN E. ZIMRING & GORDON HAWKINS, CRIME IS NOT THE PROBLEM: LETHAL VIOLENCE IN AMERICA 113-18 (1997) (discussing the instrumentality effects of gun use as they relate to increased death rates).
16. This estimate can be calculated by using data from 1992, in which there were 1850 arrests for gun homicides. See Zimring, supra note 12, at 26 fig.1. Using the 7 to 1 ratio for non-fatal and fatal gunshot wounds reported
would have to be found only among that narrow band of firearms wounders.

The third reason the "guns only" increase refutes the proposition that a violent new breed of offender has emerged is that the great majority of youth assault trends has stayed the same over the past two decades. Knives are universally available, and are second only to firearms as the deadliest weapon for use in assaults. Yet the rate of killings with knives remained stable over the eight-year expansion in total youth homicide. If more destructive intentions were the major cause of rate changes in homicide, some of the increase in the death rate should be found in the knife category.

III. THE GROWTH OF ASSAULT ARRESTS

The task of this section is to explore why the United States has experienced a large increase in all aggravated assault categories, when only gun homicides have increased. Because the growth of homicides was limited to gun cases, there is no reason to expect a large increase in the volume of aggravated assault cases over the years when homicide increased. If all forms of homicide double, then one expects all forms of aggravated assault to double as well. If only gun homicides double, then only gun aggravated assaults should double, and the total serious assault rate should increase by less than 20%. Instead, the aggravated assault rate nearly doubled to its peak rate in 1994, and then declined at a slower pace than homicide. Is this evidence that a broad cross-section of adolescents is engaging in many types of serious assaults, not limited to the gun cases? If so, why is there no increase in homicides by other means?

From a policy and planning perspective, sorting out the meaning of the increase in aggravated assault arrests is quite important. If only homicides have increased, the number of cases is quite small. Adding a 20% increase in aggravated assaults for gun assault cases still accounts for less than a quarter of the total case increase, and two-thirds of that increase should have disappeared by 1996. So if the growth in aggravated assault arrests reflects the magnitude of the true growth in the volume of serious adolescent violence, the problem is much broader than an analysis of the homicide statistics would suggest.

There have been indications for some time that observers should be wary of relying on fluctuations in aggravated assault arrest levels to draw conclusions about trends in youth violence. Twenty years ago, I was tempted to label a section on trends in police arrests for this offense "the aggravations of aggravated assault" because increases in arrest rates for this offense did not always oc-

previously, see Zimring, supra note 13, at 728, these 1850 arrests for gun homicides in 1992 would produce 12,950 non-fatal shooters, for a total of 14,800 (1850 + 12,950) arrests for gunshot woundings.
cur when homicide rates were increasing. How assaults are counted and classified is essentially a matter of police discretion. Changing police standards can have a huge impact on statistical trends.

Since 1980, there has been significant circumstantial evidence that changing police standards of what constitutes assault and aggravated assault explains most of the growth in youth assault and aggravated assault arrest rates. The first evidence that recategorization is a major factor comes from arrest rates for adults. It turns out that trends over time in assault arrests for older offenders have been strikingly similar to those noted for younger offenders. But the older group experienced declines in homicide arrests over the same period, so it does not seem likely that this age group is increasingly resorting to life-threatening violence.

Figure 4 shows rates of aggravated assault arrests for thirteen to seventeen-year-olds and for those twenty-five to thirty-four from 1980 to 1995. The twenty-five to thirty-four age group is the youngest population group that did not experience any increase in homi-

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17. That subtitle was deleted by an editor, but the data does demonstrate such an "aggravation." See Franklin E. Zimring, American Youth Violence: Issues and Trends, in 1 CRIME AND JUSTICE: AN ANNUAL REVIEW OF RESEARCH 67, 80-83 (Norval Morris & Michael Tonry eds. 1979) (pointing out divergent trends in homicide and aggravated assault arrest rates).

18. Figure 4 is derived from FBI annual crime statistics for each year between 1980 and 1995. See FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION, U.S. DEPT OF JUSTICE, UNIFORM CRIME REPORTS FOR THE UNITED STATES. All data is normal-
The trends in aggravated assault arrests for the two groups are quite similar over the whole period. In the fifteen year-to-year transitions over the period, the two groups increased or decreased together thirteen times. So an upward or downward movement in the rate for one age group predicts a move in the same direction for the other age group about 85% of the time. The similar magnitude of the year-to-year changes visible in Figure 4 is consistent with policy standards changing.

But is this evidence that trends in true rates of violence are quite similar for the two age groups, or is this evidence instead that changing police practices had the same impact on the two age groups at the same time? Homicide trends for the two age groups point toward the latter interpretation. The parallel trends for the two age groups simply do not hold for homicide arrests. Homicide arrests rose sharply for the thirteen to seventeen age group, but decreased for the twenty-five to thirty-four-year-olds, as shown in Figure 5.\(^{20}\)

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**Figure 5**

Trends in Arrest Rates for Murder and Nonnegligent Manslaughter, 1980-1995

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20. Figure 5 is derived from FBI annual crime statistics for each year between 1980 and 1995. See *Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Dept of Justice, Uniform Crime Reports for the United States*. All data is normal-
Homicide arrests for the twenty-five to thirty-four age group dropped substantially after 1981 and continued a sustained decline throughout the period. There is thus no evidence that the increasing rate of serious assaults for twenty-five to thirty-four-year-olds spills over to create more deaths from assault. This suggests that the fluctuations in the older age group cannot be in the volume of life-threatening assaults. The similarity in pattern between the younger and older offenders then would suggest that the major reason for movements in the thirteen to seventeen age group should be the same as for the older group. If so, the major reason for increasing arrest rates in the thirteen to seventeen bracket for assault is not a change in the behavior of young offenders, but a change in the classification of the border line between simple and aggravated assaults.

One way to estimate the degree to which police reclassification, rather than increasing violent tendencies, drove up aggravated assault arrests is to use the trends for the older group as a proxy for reclassification. Since the homicides for this group dropped, assume all the increase that occurred both in the twenty-five to thirty-four and the thirteen to seventeen age groups is due to reclassification, but that increases above and beyond those of the twenty-five to thirty-four-year-olds were the result of real changes. By this measure, more than 85% of the juvenile increase would be presumptive reclassification. (The adult rate increased 67% from 1980 to 1995, while the juvenile rate increased 78%. The adult increase was 86% of the juvenile increase, leaving 14% of that increase not accounted for by presumed reclassification.)

**Simple Assault**

The trends in arrests for simple assault lend strong support to the theory that police standards are shifting toward recording and upgrading assaults. Figure 6 shows trends in arrests for the “Part II” offense of nonaggravated assault for thirteen to seventeen-year-olds and eighteen to thirty-four-year-olds.
The pattern produced for simple assaults is similar to that observed for aggravated assaults, only more so. The number of police-recorded simple assault arrests has increased more than aggravated assault arrests. The rates for both younger and older offenders are almost identical over time, with the two age groups moving in the same direction in thirteen of the sixteen year-to-year comparisons. The data for 1996 is an exception to this pattern, with a 10% increase in youth simple assault arrests, and a 5% decrease for young adults. The four largest increases for the thirteen to seventeen-year-olds happen in the same years as those for the older offenders. It also turns out that three of the four largest yearly increases in aggravated assaults match the times of the greatest yearly increases in simple assault arrests.

A substantial likelihood exists that a greater police willingness to report and upwardly classify assault crimes—and a greater willingness to arrest those who commit assaults—has contributed to the increase in arrests for both younger and older offenders. The four largest one-year increases in aggravated assault arrests amount to more than 100% of the total increase for aggravated assaults (the four one-year jumps were 166.3 per 100,000 while the total increase was 160) and 83% of the total increase for simple assaults (the four one-year increases were 332.4 per 100,000 of a total increase of 399.6). When all or most of the increase is concentrated in a few step function jumps, a greater likelihood exists that reporting thresholds are changing.
Corroboration from Other Sources

A review of available data reveals three further indications that changing police standards have prompted much of the change in assault statistics. The first indication is the divergent trends in assault arrests and the victimization rate reported to the National Crime Survey for assault. Figure 7 provides data on trends in assault arrests (combining simple and aggravated assault) and victim-reported assault victimization from 1980 until 1993.

The assault arrest rate dropped by 14% in the early 1980s, then doubled from 1985 to 1993. The reported incidence of assault victimization dropped slightly in the early 1980s, but then remained steady, never reaching more than 13% higher than the 1980 rate. The large climb in assault arrests is thus not mirrored by any significant change in assault victimization, a result consistent with attributing the arrest increase to a change in standards.

The reason no National Crime Survey data after 1992 is included in Figure 7 is further evidence of the power of changing criteria on statistics. In 1993, a new standard was used for the assault category and the rate immediately jumped more than 80%! Thus, the reclassification process is not confined to police statistics.

The second piece of evidence that youth assaults remained more stable than did official reports of assaults comes from large scale surveys of high school boys conducted by Lloyd Johnston at the University of Michigan. The first survey was conducted in 1982, when aggravated assault arrests were close to their low point (as shown in Figure 4). The second survey, conducted in 1992, was taken one year before the highest rate in the sixteen-year period, nearly double the official 1982 level. The survey results of involvement in serious assaultive behavior are all but identical for the two periods: participation in fights with injury held constant at 13% in the two surveys, serious fights were 17% in 1982 and 18% in 1992 and weapon use was 2% in 1982 and 3% in 1992.23

The third indication that official reclassification is playing a major role in the growth of aggravated assaults is that the death rate for every type of assault has gone down over time. The gun assault death rate declined from 6.9% in 1985 to 5.6% in 1994.24 Using a “case fatality” estimate technique created by Philip Cook,25 if we assume that the additional assaults that reduce the death rate were the product of reclassification without extra killings, then 19% of the gun assault increase between 1985 and 1994 would be due to reclassification. Using the same approach for knife assaults, 40% of their increase would also be attributable to reclassifications. For the 58% of aggravated assaults that involve other weapons and personal force, a declining death rate suggests that 79% of the additional assaults were the product of changes in police standards, rather than violent behavior. This “case fatality” technique estimates that well over half of all the additional assaults in the United States are the result of reclassification. Because there is no detailed breakdown of aggravated assaults by age and weapon, a separate


24. The gun assault death rate for a given year is calculated by computing the number of homicides by gun, computing the number of aggravated assaults by gun, and expressing the number of homicides by gun as a percentage of the combined total number of homicides by gun and aggravated assaults by gun. See Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Dep’t of Justice, Uniform Crime Reports for the United States: 1994, at 13, 18 tbl.2.9, 31, 32 tbl.2.24 (1995); Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Dep’t of Justice, Uniform Crime Reports for the United States: 1985, at 7, 10, 21, 23 (1986).

25. The logic of “case fatality” analysis is to assume that the true death rate for particular types of attack remains constant over time and that any shift in the reported death rate is attributable to changes in reporting standards.
estimate focusing exclusively on young offenders cannot be made using this technique.

IV. PERSPECTIVES ON PREDICTION

Long range predictions about youth violence are difficult in the best of times because rates of serious offenses tend to be unpredictably cyclical. Making projections based upon recent trends is also problematic because a careful review of current data provides no clear indications even for the short range future. There are, however, important lessons about both trends and projections in the data presented here that should inform any discussions of what to expect in the not-so-distant future.

The first important conclusion is that there is no unitary trend in the recent history of youth arrests for violent crime. Homicide and assault arrests have increased, but for different reasons. Robbery and rape have fluctuated without producing any discernible long-range trend. This lack of a unitary pattern has both procedural and substantive implications. The procedural lesson to be learned is that patterns of arrest should be carefully examined one at a time, rather than aggregated into a single violent arrest index. The substantive implication from this lack of a unitary pattern is that no behavioral generalizations about the current cohort of youth can be factually supported. The absence of any discernible growth trend in nongun homicide, robbery, and rape arrest rates simply does not comport with generalizations about a more violent population of young superpredators.

Further, when the growth rates for the two categories of growing rates are scrutinized, it turns out that youth arrests for homicide and assault have increased for different reasons. A sharp increase in gun homicide cases was the only reason the total homicide rate increased after the mid-1980s. By 1993, the rate of gun homicide arrests had tripled from its low point, while nongun homicides remained flat. A sharp downward trend in gun killing arrests followed, eliminating nearly half of the previous eight years’ increase.

What can be applied from current information towards predicting what will happen next for homicide is one part cliché and one part question mark. Gun cases will likely be the dynamic force in altering arrest rates in the coming decade, just as they were in the previous one. But the future trend in youth gun homicide is anybody’s guess. The most recent decline in gun cases has been steep, but questions remain as to whether that decline can be sustained. While some suspect that changes in the illegal drug market during the 1980s produced the initial increase in adolescent gun

26. For a discussion of gun and nongun homicide arrest rates, see Figure 3 and accompanying text.
commentators do not agree on a common explanation as to why gun killing by youth has decreased. This absence of consensus about the past makes it especially difficult to predict the future for homicide arrests.

One thing is clear about homicide rates which are driven by trends in gun cases: There will be very little tendency for gun homicide trends to reflect big changes in overall rates in assault or aggravated assault. Doubling the total number of gun assaults would produce about a 20% increase in aggravated assaults, while cutting gun assaults in half would lead to a 10% decrease in aggravated assaults.

The largest statistical mystery of the last decade is the sharp rise in assault and aggravated assault arrests. The same large increase in assault and aggravated assault arrests occurred for the twenty-five to thirty-four age group, a group which actually underwent a decline in homicides. Any reduction in the threshold between simple and aggravated assault, and any shift in the level of seriousness before police would make an arrest and record an incident as an offense, could have as large a statistical impact on assault arrests as that seen since the late 1980s. Consequently, it appears that the willingness of police authorities to give greater priority to assaults has altered the classification of attacks across the board.

Two aspects of this possible reclassification deserve special mention. First, when this sort of reclassification occurs, there is no telling whether the old threshold or the new threshold is the correct one. The imprecise definition of aggravated assault, and the large number of attacks that straddle the line between aggravated and simple assault, creates ample ambiguity about what behavior actually constitutes an aggravated assault.

Secondly, the change in priority that motivates reclassification by police can be very good news from a policy standpoint. Greater attention to particular problems often leads to reclassification of cases. For example, domestic violence offenses are more readily counted as assaults when the problem becomes a national priority. Similarly, as police "unfounding" of rape complaints decreases, the number of rape complaints that become officially recorded incidents increases. If similar sentiments have created a higher probability that acts of adolescent violence become officially recorded, this too is good news.

This good news, however, can be badly misinterpreted. A lower threshold for classifying and reporting aggravated assaults can produce a totally artificial crime wave in the sense that, while the statistics indicate an increase in assaults, the actual behavior has remained unchanged. In fact, more than half of the growth from 1980

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27. See Blumstein, supra note 8, at 12.
to 1996 in aggravated assaults by youths may be a product of this reclassification.

If reclassification is the principal reason for the growth in assaults, what further developments can be anticipated in the next decade or so? First, it is not likely that standards for reporting assaults and for considering them aggravated assaults will revert to previous levels. After all, there is simply no recurrent pattern of cyclicity in crime classifications over time to serve as precedent. Furthermore, the larger social concern with violence which supports the efforts of police seems to be a long-term development. As such, the standards for assault arrests and for aggravated assault arrests will stay at their present levels—or perhaps drop further—over the coming years.

The result of these developments might well be more arrests of young persons for assault and aggravated assault. The heterogeneity of the offense category will tend to increase, and the overwhelming majority of offenses that produce arrests will be at the low end of the seriousness scale. More than ever, it will be necessary to sort out the more serious from the less serious assaults in fashioning sanctions and policy responses.

The statistical portrait of the last sixteen years is not without irony. Between 1980 and 1996, the increasing arrest rate for youth violence was concentrated in the assault category. The aggravated assault arrest rate was 41% of the overall youth violence arrest rate in 1980, yet increases in aggravated assault arrests dominate the growth over time. In 1996, the total rate of juvenile arrests for index crimes of violence other than aggravated assault was lower than in 1980. With most of those extra aggravated assault arrests clustering at the low end of the seriousness scale, it is very likely that the average Part I violent arrest in 1996 for an offender under eighteen was for a less serious violent offense than in 1980. In fact, it is quite possible that this trend will continue so that a larger number of violence arrests will be counterbalanced by a smaller proportion of arrests at the serious end of the violence scale. But this kind of expansion at the shallow end of the violent crime pool is far from the growth in crime that is assumed in current policy debate.