

# **Youth Violence**

**CRIME AND JUSTICE**  
*A Review of Research*  
**VOLUME 24**

*Youth Violence in America*

**by Mark H. Moore and Michael Tonry**



*Mark H. Moore and Michael Tonry*

# Youth Violence in America

For a decade now, the United States has been besieged by an epidemic of youth violence. At a time when the overall crime rate has been stable or falling, violence committed by and against youth rose sharply during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Both frightened and disheartened, society wants to understand what is happening to its young people.

Predictably, some widely held conceptions—formed more by compelling anecdotes circulated through popular culture than by academic research—have emerged to explain the nature and causes of the problem. One common idea, for example, is that the epidemic of youth violence is caused by the escalation of ordinary adolescent disputes to lethal violence as a consequence of the ready availability of guns. Other common explanations include a demographic shift that increased both the absolute number and proportion of youth in the overall population; a change in economic opportunities that made prospects for upward mobility among disadvantaged youth seem increasingly remote; a collapse of community and family structures that in earlier times provided informal social controls and channeled young men toward productive careers; the disappearance of African-American men from the nation's hard-pressed ghettos because of penal policies that place unprecedented numbers in prison; the emergence of gangs as an alternative to family and community that tended to support, even demand, violence from their members; an epidemic of crack cocaine use that not only under-

Mark H. Moore is Daniel and Florence V. Guggenheim Professor of Criminal Justice Policy and Management at the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. Michael Tonry is Sonosky Professor of Law and Public Policy at the University of Minnesota Law School.

mined community and family structures, but also created an environment in which a capacity for violence had economic as well as expressive value; a general enabling culture that seemed to glorify violence and fighting as a way of controlling situations or settling disputes; and a ready supply of exceptionally dangerous semiautomatic guns.

Closely related to these understandings are predictions about the future and what needs to be done now to stem the rising violence. Some scholars have warned that the United States faces a coming wave of "superpredators" as an "echo baby boom"—raised under particularly adverse conditions—reaches peak offending ages (Gest and Pope 1996). To deal with this threat, the country is advised to develop more effective preventive interventions, to end leniency toward juvenile thugs, and dramatically to increase prison capacity to lock up the superpredators (DiIulio 1995, 1996; Fox 1996).

There is to be sure another side of the story. The projected plague of superpredators was based on straight-line projections of the unprecedented increase in juvenile violence and, like most extraordinary trends, it did not continue. In retrospect, there may have been an element of hysteria (or ideology run amok) in the assumption that upsetting trends would continue forever (Zimring and Hawkins 1998). As Shay Bilchik, administrator of the federal Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, has written, "Talk of superpredators is tabloid journalism that distorts the facts" (Bilchik 1997, p. 5). Youth violence nonetheless remains a serious and pressing national problem.

Unfortunately, the academic capability to illuminate the nature of the problem and the range of possible solutions is limited. Available data on criminal offenses allow tolerably accurate observations of the size, scale, and directions of youth violence and the epidemic's historical uniqueness. But the data are far too gross, and statistical methods far too weak, to offer either powerful explanations of the past or precise predictions about the future. Similarly, our ability to offer practical advice about interventions is limited. Having theories about causes of youth violence that are consistent with available evidence offers some guidance about interventions: namely, rely on the interventions that seem to reach the important causes of the problem. But knowledge of causes is too imprecise to be confident about the value of attacking one cause rather than another. And even if the relative importance of the causes was clear, there might not be instruments that could reach the cause reliably at an acceptable price. Working the problem from the other end—namely, trying interventions and seeing whether they

work—has not yet produced unequivocal results. In sum, experience is accumulating faster than knowledge, and that limits the capacity of academic social scientists to offer useful policy advice.

Nonetheless, the purpose of this volume is to help the process of comprehending the problem and policy challenges of youth violence by engaging academic researchers in serious efforts to describe and explain the epidemic, and to devise plausibly effective means for combating it. Inevitably, the work is partial and many conclusions are provisional. The aim, then, is not to be comprehensive and definitive, but to get something into the world that can speed up the rate at which we learn from our own experience. Toward this end, we have assembled essays that describe recent trends in youth violence, develop and test some of the principal theories that might help to explain it, and offer advice about what interventions would be both just and practically useful.

### I. An Epidemic of Youth Violence?

The opening line of this essay introduces our subject: understanding and responding to an “epidemic of youth violence.” We thought hard before presenting the subject in these terms. It is a conventional enough phrase, of course. Public health researchers who first documented and drew attention to the phenomenon of youth violence have made it so. Yet, we recognize its inflammatory aspects. All three words have powerful normative connotations as well as precise, denotative meanings. Thus, framing the problem as an epidemic of youth violence risks distortion of both our understanding of the phenomenon and our capacity to act prudently to deal with it.

#### *A. Violence*

Consider, first, the word “violence.” Ordinarily, violence refers to physical trauma or injury: something is violent if flesh has been torn or bones have been broken. But violence also suggests (and particularly in this context) that the trauma has not just occurred accidentally; it has been inflicted. After all, the epidemic of youth violence is an epidemic not only of youthful wounds; it is also an epidemic of youthful offending. In this sense, the violence is not only in the effects on the victim, but also in the heart of the attacker. This is not to say, of course, that the victim is necessarily wholly innocent, or the attacker wholly evil. In many cases, labeling one youth the victim may mean nothing more than that he was the one lying on the floor at the end

of the fight. The youth labeled the attacker may, for one reason or another, have felt obliged to fight (see E. Anderson, in this volume). The word violence can also refer to the psychological trauma that comes from being frightened, or threatened, or consistently terrorized. It certainly is not difficult to imagine that psychological trauma is an important consequence of violence. And, one can imagine using the word violence to refer not to particular acts or consequences but to a more general climate in which violent acts occur often enough to make the fear of such acts omnipresent.

Indeed, this last meaning of the word violence may in many ways be the most important, for one of the worst consequences of youth violence is that children and their caretakers become afraid and demoralized. It may also be that the common occurrence of violence itself becomes a cause in sustaining or expanding overall levels of violence. This could occur if, for example, each act of violence became an act that had to be avenged in some way. It could also occur if fear of violence caused people to arm themselves and adopt hypersensitive and vigilant stances toward the conduct of others. And it could occur if violence so demoralized and weakened the sources of formal and informal social control that an area was essentially abandoned to those who were most capable in the use of violence. In such cases, we might well describe a neighborhood as a violent place. Elijah Anderson's evocative essay offers a particularly vivid image of how the context and feel of a neighborhood changes from one of safety and security to one of violence in just a few blocks, even though there is no immediate evidence of violence taking place.

At the core of the concept of violence is physical trauma inflicted by one person on another. That is mostly what the writers in this volume mean, seek to measure, and try to understand. But to comprehend fully both the consequences and the causes of youth violence, it is important to keep in mind the wider meanings that embrace psychological trauma, and the neighborhood conditions as well as the individual incidents.

### *B. Youth*

Consider, next, the word "youth." It can be given a specific meaning by attaching ages to it—say, twelve to eighteen. But, once again, there is an additional meaning. The idea of a youth means someone who is unformed and still developing. If it is true that youths (even those who have committed violent acts) are unformed and still developing, then

just and effective responses to violent acts committed by them are different from those for a more mature person. Franklin Zimring has noted elsewhere (Zimring and Hawkins 1998), and reasserts in his essay in this volume, that youths have a special status in society—one that reduces their criminal culpability for any given act, and increases our practical interest in making investments in their development that can restore them to a healthy developmental process. Thus characterizing violence as being committed by youths implicitly suggests a different response than if it were adult violence, or drug violence, or gang violence.

The difficulty is that the underlying characteristic that makes youth violence different as a matter of justice and practical interest (namely, the lack of maturity and judgment that would expose the offender to the rigors of an adult criminal justice system) is only imperfectly correlated with age. It is even less well correlated with the seriousness of an offense. Many people looking at an eighteen-year-old who has just sprayed a street with a MAC-10 in retaliation for the wounding of a friend, would find it hard to see the youth behind the reckless attacker. It would be easier if the offender were fourteen; easier still if the fourteen-year-old had closed his eyes and squeezed off one shot from an old Colt revolver in a desperate but misguided effort to become accepted into a neighborhood gang. Yet, it is quite possible that the eighteen-year-old, too, has an unformed character and is in the grip of powerful external forces that compel him to engage in the kind of behavior that makes him a dangerous offender in the eyes of the general population. And it is important both to justice and to the future life of the young offender to be able to determine whether he is youthful in materially important ways.

### *C. Epidemic*

Consider, finally, the word “epidemic.” The public health community has brought this word into common usage. But when public health specialists use the word, they have a specific technical meaning in mind. They mean that a particular health problem (in this case, injury caused by violence) is above the expected level. The expectation could have been set by past trends, or by past trends within particular demographic groups, or by past trends within population groups possessing certain “risk factors” for the health condition. Thus an epidemic of youth violence means nothing more than that more trauma is inflicted by violent episodes in the youth population than in the past.

What is important is that public health practitioners do not ordinarily mean by the use of the term epidemic that there is some contagious mechanism operating that tends to spread the problem from one person to another. There could be such a mechanism operating. And that could be the reason for the unexpectedly high levels of the health problem. But whether there are contagious mechanisms at work is a matter to be investigated, not assumed.

This is important because, again, some important imagery goes along with the idea of epidemics. Further, these ideas are influential in shaping policy responses. It is not hard to imagine various ways in which youth violence could be contagious in the sense that one incident creates conditions favorable to another incident occurring. For example, if a strong cultural norm existed among youth that violent incidents had to be avenged in some way, each violent act could become the occasion for another. Or, if one youth arrived in town with the orientation and skills to create a gang, it could be that the gang culture could spread quickly. The gang style could become culturally influential—"in" or "cool." Or, it could become necessary for self-defense to become a member of a gang.

If youth violence can be characterized as an epidemic with some contagious mechanisms operating, then many concepts linked to the control of more traditional contagious disease epidemics seem relevant. For example, it becomes sensible to think about "primary preventive efforts" designed to change the general environment to one that is less supportive of the epidemic; or "secondary preventive efforts" designed to reduce risk factors for particular populations that are at high risk of either offending or being victimized; and "tertiary preventive efforts" designed to minimize the bad consequences of the violence when it occurs. It also becomes important to think about ways to eliminate or confine some of the contagious elements—for example, the gun dealer who is willing to supply youthful offenders with semiautomatic weapons, or the charismatic gang leader who helps to spread a culture of violence.

Again, for the most part, the word epidemic is used here only in the narrow, technical sense: a higher-than-expected level of youth violence compared with past historical experience. But there may be some contagious mechanisms at work to produce nonlinear increases and decreases in levels of violence among youth, and some of the conceptual apparatus of the public health world may be useful in imagining responses that could be made.



## II. Has There Been an Epidemic of Youth Violence?

Has the United States experienced an epidemic of youth violence? The answer, established by Cook and Laub (in this volume), is almost certainly yes. By triangulating several different, imperfect sources of data, they convincingly show that all forms of youth violence increased significantly in the late eighties and early nineties, and that homicide (as one particularly serious form of violence) increased particularly dramatically. They also show that while violence has remained concentrated in the demographic group that has long been most victimized—namely, young, African-American men—the degree of concentration lessened as the epidemic has gotten worse. In short, the violence seems to have spread to Hispanic, Caucasian, and Asian males as well as to African-Americans. It also leaped the gender gap and began increasingly to involve girls as well as boys.

Although Cook and Laub make it clear that the United States has experienced an important epidemic of youth violence, they also provide additional facts that help keep this phenomenon in perspective. For example, they note that despite the increases in youth violence and youth homicide, youth violence never amounts to a large proportion of the overall burden of violence in the United States. The main action remains with adults. In their words, youth violence remains a sideshow (albeit an important one) in the overall pattern of violence the country experienced in the late eighties and early nineties.

They also note important descriptive facts about the epidemic that suggest possible explanations of causes. They observe, for example, that while the rates at which youth commit violent offenses and are themselves victimized by violent offenses tend to increase together, giving credence to the imagery of youth killing youth, a close look at whom youth are victimizing, and who is victimizing youth tells a somewhat different story. Youth are victimizing people older than their age cohorts as well as people within them. And they are being victimized by offenders older than their age cohorts as well as offenders within them.

Cook and Laub also observe that increases in youth violence occurred contemporaneously in several different age cohorts—those entering the teenage years, those in the middle, and those maturing out of the teenage years. This suggests that something happened all at once to all youth rather than slowly to one cohort at a time.

Cook and Laub also show (as do Fagan and Wilkinson, in this volume) that guns figure much more prominently in youth violence and

homicides than they did before. Indeed, it is precisely the gun homicides that add the increment of violence that constitutes the epidemic. This does not necessarily mean, of course, that a shift in the availability of weapons caused the epidemic to occur. But it does seem that a ready supply of weapons was at least an important enabling condition for the epidemic to occur and become as prevalent as it did.

So, the evidence indicates that the United States has experienced an important epidemic of youth violence. The epidemic remained concentrated in urban, minority, male populations, but the degree of concentration diminished as the overall level of violence rose. The epidemic occurred simultaneously in all age groups within the twelve- to eighteen-year-old youth cohort, and became more pronounced in the late eighties and early nineties than in the mid-eighties. The share of the violence that involved guns increased dramatically.

### III. Explaining the Epidemic of Youth Violence

Given that an epidemic of youth violence occurred, what caused it? Unfortunately, there are too many plausible explanations and not enough facts to discriminate among them. But a number of hypotheses have been offered and they can be assessed in light of research findings now available.

#### *A. Age Is Destiny*

Consider, first, the simplest demographic account. In this account, there was an increase in the absolute level of youth violence, and an increase in the share of all violence that could be attributed to youth, simply because the absolute size and share of the population that was youthful went up during the period 1985–95. It is true that the absolute size and share of youth in the U.S. population increased in this period as the echo baby boom began to make its appearance. It is also true that this would naturally have led to absolute increases in levels of youth violence, and to youth violence becoming a larger share of violence overall.

What actually happened, however, was that offending and victimization rates within the youth cohorts increased during this period to historically unprecedented levels. It was not just that there were more youths as an absolute number and as a share of the general population: they were offending and being victimized at higher levels than ever before. So, the increase came both from there being more youth and from the existing youth offending and being victimized more than

other cohorts. And it is this second fact—the increase in offending and victimization rates within the cohort—that requires special explanation.

This could conceivably be explained as a function of the number of youth in the overall population. It could be, for example, that as the ratio of youth to mature adults within a population changes, important changes occur within the youth cohort. Their numbers may strain the capacity of adults to supervise. Or, they may be able to dictate more of the cultural style through sheer force of numbers. Something of the sort may well have happened in the mid- to late sixties as the first baby boom generation hit their teenage years (Wilson and Herrnstein 1985, pp. 425–30). And it could be happening again now as their children reach their teenage years.

But this explanation depends not on the simple account that relatively fixed rates of offending and victimization by age explain rates of violent crime in terms of changes in the age distribution of the population. It is, instead, one that depends on changing rates of offending and victimization as a function of the ratios of demographic groups and the effects of these different ratios on cultural style.

### *B. Risk Factors Are Destiny*

Consider next a somewhat more sophisticated demographic account that seeks to explain the epidemic of youth violence in terms of characteristics of the circumstances under which contemporary youth were raised. The most important such characteristics are those that are known to be “risk factors” for violent offending or victimization. The idea is that the increased level of youth violence can be explained by pointing to the increased adversity of the conditions under which children were raised. If more youth than ever before were being raised in families that were poor and female-headed, or marked by substance abuse and family violence, or lacking in required parenting skills and effective male role models, then rates of youthful offending and victimization might rise simply because more youth were exposed to known risk factors for violence.

This is certainly a plausible explanation. There is lots of evidence to suggest that conditions within poor families in urban areas were worsening at the time that the young, violent offenders and victims of the late eighties and early nineties were going through important developmental stages in the mid- to late seventies and early eighties (W. J. Wilson 1987). The worsening conditions could have caused any partic-

ular cohort to become more violent as more individuals faced community and family conditions that increased their likelihood of becoming violent offenders. Such mechanisms could have planted the time bomb that exploded in the late eighties.

But several things cast doubt on this story. For one thing, the period in which conditions in the inner cities were becoming most desperate seemed to come later than the mid- to late seventies (W. J. Wilson 1996). Of course, that may mean that the worst is yet to come. Indeed, some have made precisely that prediction on precisely this basis (DiIulio 1995, 1996; Fox 1996). But, it could also mean that even this refined demographic prediction is wrong: that there is, in fact, a great deal of variability in rates of youthful victimization and offending that cannot be accounted for by demographic or background characteristics of offenders.

It also seems significant that the increase in youthful offending happened quite suddenly, and within all age groups at the same time. This general pattern is more consistent with a story of a sudden change that affected everyone at the same time than with a story that emphasizes the gradual erosion of family and community structures that interact with each child's individual developmental trajectory in adverse ways. On balance, then, it seems better to understand the worsening conditions within poor inner-city families as conditions that enabled the epidemic to occur and to spread widely rather than as a precise cause of the particular timing and shape of the epidemic as it actually occurred.

### *C. An Entrenched, Intensifying, and Spreading Culture of Violence*

If demographic changes cannot account for the sudden increase in youth violence, how about the emergence of a more or less pervasive culture of violence? There are lots of interesting possibilities here. One possible culprit is TV and movie violence that works on young minds exposed to it. Another is a culture that celebrates violence expressed in sports, and that encourages violence as a means of parental discipline or the resolution of childhood disputes. In this view, youth have been socialized into violence from an early age, and it should not be surprising that they engage in it when they become teenagers.

The difficulty with these broad cultural explanations is that, like the demographic explanations, they seem most plausible as accounts of how certain enabling conditions might be created rather than an explanation of why the epidemic occurred when and where it did. The generation that reached teenage years in the mid-eighties and nineties was

among the first to be exposed to a steady diet of violence on TV, and that conceivably could account for the apparently strong period effect. But even so, some more geographically and spatially local factors must be added to explain why the epidemic occurred when and where it did. That can be done without leaving the world of “cultural” explanations.

Cultural influences are usually envisioned as very broad, pervasive, and enduring phenomena that grind powerfully and widely, but slowly. But culture also operates in a different way—as style or fashion or fads. In this conception, cultural changes happen quickly and locally, and then spread, and die out. Elijah Anderson’s essay (in this volume), for example, provides a vivid picture of a local culture that makes it important for individuals to respond to violence with violence. What his account does not reveal is how long the culture he describes has existed, and how strong and pervasive it is. But it is possible that this particular culture is not necessarily deeply rooted—that it emerged from relatively recent changes in objective circumstances.

If culture is seen in this way, then it is easy to imagine cultural trends that could operate to produce quickly spreading violence among teenagers who might be particularly vulnerable to such trends. One possibility is that the culture of violence was not produced by TV or corporal punishment by parents, but by the more recent, more local, and altogether more frightening emergence of violent, street-level crack markets. If teenagers grew up in neighborhoods dominated by drug violence, and if they experienced it closely not only as witnesses, but also as victims and as individuals recruited to the trade, then the culture of violence has a local meaning and specificity that makes it a more plausible contender as an explanation for increased violence. The culture of violence could be imagined to have been established and spread through the agency of gangs that provided justifications for violence, training in its use, and occasions in which to use it. The gang ideology could have been spread through “gangsta rap.” Alternatively, a culture that was hypersensitive to “dissing,” and that called on every young male to assert his manhood through violence if offended, could have been produced and generated by the spread of a prison culture to a local neighborhood as young fathers and older brothers returned from prison, having learned there that the only way to avoid victimization was through constant vigilance, and a willingness to respond to attacks with immediate retaliation.

The E. Anderson and Fagan and Wilkinson essays in this volume testify to the potential importance of cultural supports for violence.

The Hagedorn essay in this volume explains why gangs might have emerged, but also sees youth violence as importantly connected to gangs. So, it may be that there are important cultural explanations for the epidemic of youth violence—particularly if there are both society-wide cultural features that move slowly and local cultures that can move more quickly, and local cultural forces are understood to include the potential impact of crack markets, gangs, and the return of older males from prison.

#### *D. A Concomitant of the Crack Epidemic*

Consider, next, the hypothesis that the epidemic of youth violence came as a concomitant to the epidemic of crack cocaine use (Hagedorn, in this volume). This hypothesis seems to hit closer to the mark. The crack epidemic occurred at times and places where the epidemic of youth violence occurred. And the crack epidemic can plausibly be connected to youth violence through several mechanisms.

One story is of violence emerging from the supply side of the market. In this story, demonstrating a capacity for violence is an important asset to anyone selling drugs in an illegal market. The violence is important to ensure discipline within drug dealing organizations, to ensure that customers pay, and to enhance one's competitive position. Youth are potentially attractive candidates for involvement since they are cheap, loyal, and easily intimidated, and do not face the same harsh penalties that would fall on adults. Thus drug entrepreneurs have incentives to recruit youth into drug selling, which necessarily involves them in violence. Surges of violence are likely elements of such a story: fights for territory and competitive advantage would break out, and killing by one trafficking group would have to be avenged quickly by counterattacks.

A second story would focus more on demand-side violence. In this conception, kids using cocaine would be more inclined to engage in violence either because the cocaine intoxication made them more likely to commit violence, or because they engaged in violence to get money to buy cocaine.

The difficulty with both these stories is that the violence actually committed by youth does not seem to be that closely linked either to cocaine dealing or to cocaine use (Fagan and Wilkinson, in this volume). The data that link particular acts of violence to drug use is not particularly powerful (Fagan 1990). There is more ambiguity in research findings relating violence to drug dealing, but such relations as

exist appear to be part of a complex mix of gangs, guns, drugs, and subcultural norms (E. Anderson, in this volume; Hagedorn, in this volume). Drug-related violence in any case accounts for only a small proportion of violent events involving youth. Gang-related violence is far more common, and there have been epidemics of youth violence in places such as Chicago even without an epidemic of crack cocaine use. So, the crack epidemic might explain some of the important upsurge in youth violence, but not all or even most of it.

*E. An Increased Supply of Lethal Guns to Youth*

It is also tempting to find the explanation for increased violence among youth in the supply of guns. After all, as Fagan and Wilkinson show, the increase in gun homicides among youth is very dramatic. Indeed, if youth gun homicides are subtracted from all the other homicides, what is left is the “normal,” or “expected,” level of youth homicide. Thus it seems that gun homicides have changed in the world, and it is the availability of weapons that has made the difference.

At a superficial level, this logic seems compelling. And there is no doubt that the ready availability of weapons may be one important enabling condition that allowed the epidemic of youth violence to become widespread and virulent. But again, to explain the sudden upsurge in youth violence in terms of gun availability requires either a supply-side theory that claims that there was an important change in the availability of guns to kids, or a demand-side theory that there was a sudden change in the desire of youth to own, carry, and use weapons.

The supply-side case is difficult to make. The aggregate stock of guns, built on years of manufacture and sale, is pretty large, and has probably not changed dramatically. There may have been some important changes in the flow of weapons, and this flow may have become more differentially available to youth than it has in the past, but this effect is difficult to pin down.

The demand-side case is easier to make. It is easy to imagine that as youth have encountered more dangerous conditions on the streets and in school, and as their culture has been changed by crack markets, gangs, and the influence of prison culture spread by older males, more kids have found it prudent as well as stylish to acquire, carry, and use guns. Moreover, it is not hard to imagine that if guns are more immediately available to and more on the minds of kids, that the level and especially the seriousness of violent attacks among youth would in-

crease. In this sense, the ready availability of weapons is an important cause of the epidemic of youth violence. But when searching for the policy implication of that conclusion, it is important to recognize that interventions could be focused either on the supply of guns to youth or on the demand for guns by youth, and it is not obvious which would have the greater payoff.

#### *F. Toward a Synthesis*

Thus the causes of the epidemic remain somewhat elusive. There are too many different plausible explanations. Consequently, everyone has a favorite explanation. That usually corresponds to a person's favorite villain and to their favorite target for intervention—usually chosen on grounds other than the importance of that variable in causing the epidemic, or the ease with which that variable can be attacked through policy interventions.

What may be more important and more striking, however, is the common effort to explain the epidemic of youth violence through a simple additive model, in which the primary objective is to find the single variable that explains most of the variance. The effort succeeds if others can be persuaded that specific risk factors for violent offending are important—a culture of violence, guns, gangs, or crack markets. The effort succeeds if others can be persuaded that a single variable is the most important cause because the scientific goal is to produce the most parsimonious account of the phenomenon of interest, and the policy goal is to identify the single variable that should be the focus of an intervention.

But the world is seldom modeled as a linear, additive model. Things are more dynamic than this. It is not hard to imagine a different model that hypothesizes the existence of enabling conditions that might or might not lead to epidemics of youth violence if other more uncertain local events occur. What is hard is proving these alternative hypotheses and estimating the key parameters in a dynamic model. Following David Farrington's theoretical efforts (in this volume), here is one story.

Imagine a world in which kids are growing up in a particular environment. One part of that environment could be considered "background" in the following senses: it happened to them in the past; it was an aggregate condition that operated on them more or less continuously, but in any case persistently; effects of exposure to these conditions have accumulated within them as certain propensities or disposi-



tions, or personality, or character. These propensities differ from one person to another. They are more or less durable.

Another part of the environment could be considered "foreground"; it is what individuals see immediately and more distantly in front of them. The environmental factors immediately in front of them are opportunities or challenges or threats. The environmental factors in the more distant foreground are the images of their possible futures. The foreground viewed by individual kids has structural properties in the sense that it has stable aggregate features known more or less perfectly. But the foreground environment from the point of view of an individual seems fortuitous and idiosyncratic. It produces somewhat randomly a wide variety of particular, short-lived features such as opportunities and challenges. These interact with individual propensities to produce bits of behavior. Some of these bits of behavior are violent. A feedback loop converts these bits of behavior into an individual's past experience and, through that, to continuity or change in propensities. Thus background environments have shaped individual propensities toward violence; and foreground environments create challenges and opportunities. The two working together over time produce certain levels of violence, and certain propensities toward violence within the population.

Now add the idea that the bits of behavior that emerge shape the environment of others. They constitute challenges and opportunities. They shape people's views of what is normal and expected. One person's behavior can affect others via the mechanisms of creating specific opportunities and challenges, via affecting more general views, via setting examples. There can be various escalating and dampening effects. This is the abstract image of a model that gives standing to many different kinds of factors in producing observed aggregate levels of violence.

A simple, more concrete story is consistent with this abstract model and fits recent experience. In the late seventies and early eighties, the social and economic structure of many urban neighborhoods began to collapse under a variety of economic and social pressures. Small merchants shut down and moved away; employment dwindled. Under the economic pressures, families broke apart. Social services could not fill the gaps. Children grew up under increasingly adverse conditions. These are the structural factors that produced conditions ripe for an epidemic.

In response to these conditions, some youth joined gangs in search of affiliation and security. The gangs produced fears and rivalries that

caused other gangs to form and more kids to join the gangs. The infrastructure of gangs increased the number of potential conflicts.

An epidemic of crack cocaine hit the already troubled areas. The epidemic exploded families and communities still further. But the epidemic also created an economic opportunity for the community. Some of the youth gangs that already existed began selling cocaine. Other kids not previously involved in gangs began to participate in drug-selling enterprises. To protect themselves from external attack and internal betrayal, the drug-dealing gangs armed themselves.

The arming of both drug-dealing and non-drug-dealing gangs produced both dangerous conditions on the street and a cultural style that encouraged many other kids to arm themselves in response. The large supply of available guns made it possible for youths to arm themselves once it became important and stylish to do so. The arming of youth, in turn, made conflicts much more lethal. And, since there were now many more potential conflicts among gangs and others than there had once been, society experienced an epidemic of youth violence.

Note that what is important in this story is not just the worsening of aggregate social conditions, but also a response to that situation that seems to feed on itself. It is the growth of gangs that begets other gangs and produces both arming and conflicts. It is the crack epidemic spreading from one user to another that further erodes informal social control and creates incentives for illicit drug dealing that spawns its own rivalries and violence. It is the widespread availability of weapons that allows the increased gang and drug-dealing activity to become very dangerous. And it is that danger that causes new gangs to form and more kids to join gangs or arm themselves in self-defense. These mechanisms seem different—more explosive, but also more superficial and vulnerable to intervention—than the deep structural factors. These could be called the “epidemic” factors.

#### IV. How to Intervene?

Given this tentative understanding of the causes of the epidemic of youth violence, what sorts of interventions might make sense? To answer that question persuasively requires understanding of more than the causes of the epidemic. Concrete ideas about policies and programs must be developed that could in principle, or have in practice, reached the causes and produced the desired effects. A normative framework must be constructed for use in evaluating proposed interventions that not only recognizes the benefits of the initiative in terms of reduced

violence, but also keeps track of the costs of the efforts (in terms both of money and diminished freedom), and anticipates unexpected but important side effects. Finally, it is necessary to try to determine whether a particular proposal could be adopted and reliably implemented in the political and institutional setting in which it was being proposed. These are all additional requirements of effective policy analysis that go beyond the usual requirements of social science to identify cause-and-effect relations. We cannot offer a complete policy analysis here, but some parts of that analysis have been attempted by writers of essays in this volume

#### *A. The Normative Framework*

Consider, first, the normative framework that is used (explicitly or implicitly) to guide the design and evaluation of policy interventions. The obvious goal is to reduce the level and seriousness of youth violence: that is the social benefit to be sought. Yet this goal does not define all the dimensions of public value that are plausibly at stake. To the extent that the interventions rely on public funds to pay for improved parenting classes, or enhanced quality and security in public schools, then society becomes interested in ensuring that these costs are minimized or, more precisely, that the effect of any given expenditure on reducing youth violence is maximized. This defines the familiar utilitarian framework of cost-benefit or cost-effectiveness analysis.

In discussing youth violence, however, these utilitarian concerns are only part of the normative framework for assessing particular interventions. Often, in designing interventions, society is equally concerned with issues of justice and fairness. These issues arise partly because public money is being allocated. When that is true, those who spend the money must be able to show that funds were distributed fairly as well as efficiently and effectively. But concerns about justice and fairness arise even more prominently when public authority is engaged in responding to youth violence. We do not often think of “spending” public authority; that is what is done when rules are established governing student conduct in and around schools, when youth curfews are established, and when youths who have carried weapons or committed violence are subjected to criminal prosecution. When these things are done, the question must be answered whether such interventions are fair and just as well as whether they are effective.

Sometimes, these different normative frameworks are linked to particular political ideologies. Some, for example, might say that concerns

for the “hot button” issues of justice and retribution are commonly linked with right-wing political views on crime. Concerns for cost-effectiveness, demonstrated effects, and the disciplined balancing of ends and means, by contrast, are often linked to the rational, scientific approach that characterizes the Left’s political stance. Yet, a little reflection reveals that there is both a Left and a Right utilitarian conception of how best to respond to youth violence, and a Left and a Right justice approach to youth crime.

The Right/utilitarian approach to youth violence emphasizes the important role of deterrence and the development of consistent and consistently enforced rules of conduct. The Left/utilitarian approach emphasizes the importance of primary prevention efforts and rehabilitation programs when things have gone wrong. The Right/justice approach emphasizes the concept of youth accountability for criminal offenses, and refuses to compromise on the question of criminal culpability for offenses. The Left/justice approach emphasizes the idea that children have rights to social conditions that give them a reasonable chance to develop. It follows, then, that if society fails to ensure a chance for healthy development, it would be unjust for society to hold young people strictly accountable for their failure to develop as society demands.

Understanding these basic normative frameworks is important for two reasons. First, analytically, they can be used to assess the value of particular policy interventions—all things considered. This requires switching from one normative framework to another, accepting each as a plausible guide to just and effective action. A second use, however, is exactly the opposite of the first. It often seems that the frameworks are used to decide among competing policy interventions without further examination or reflection. If one starts with a conviction that the appropriate normative framework to use in assessing youth violence policies is the Right/justice view, then one is inclined to favor the toughening of the juvenile justice system as the best and most appropriate response to youth violence. If, however, one starts with a conviction that the right way to evaluate policies is the Left/justice view, then one is apt to conclude that the best policy interventions are those that focus public resources on the conditions that lead to the development of youthful offenders.

### *B. The Strategic Choices*

The important ideas about how to intervene to stop the epidemic of youth violence appear in the essays in this volume by Howell and

Hawkins, D. Anderson, Fagan and Wilkinson, Zimring, and Feld. Different spirits animate these essays. In an important sense, the first three are animated by a search for preventive effectiveness. The last two also are interested in preventive effectiveness, but in a world where the interventions must meet tests of justice and fairness as well as effectiveness. This should not be surprising. The first three are interested in mounting interventions that do not depend on criminal laws and the institutions of the criminal justice system. The last two are interested in interventions explicitly rooted in agencies of the criminal justice system—namely, the juvenile justice system.

Howell and Hawkins offer an authoritative march through a variety of programs designed to prevent youth violence. The programs could be considered primarily primary or secondary prevention programs in that they seek to reach youth before they have reached crime-prone ages, and individual youths before they have committed offenses. A particular strength of their essay is that these programs are considered in light of a particular theory of conditions that might expose children to a greater risk of committing violence: namely, individual factors that increase the likelihood of violent offenses (roughly the same factors inventoried by Farrington); the bonding or connection of kids to social institutions such as adults, parents, community, and school (these factors are also considered important by Farrington); and the existence of clear standards of conduct that are consistently enforced over time and across institutions that exercise some oversight of the kids. In addition, the essay makes the point and keeps us conscious of the important fact that while some kids tend to persist in violence, many kids will engage in some violence at some stage, but then desist. Thus the mere fact of violence in a youth's history need not portend a sustained commitment to violence in the future.

While the Howell and Hawkins essay reviews many individual programs that have been undertaken to prevent youths from becoming involved in violent offending, it concludes that the effective prevention of youth violence probably does not depend on the development and implementation of any one program. Instead, the authors argue that the promising lines of attack depend crucially on a more generalized process of community mobilization, within which a variety of different programs targeted on different risk factors might be created and sustained. Their argument is that community mobilization as a process is important in preventing youth violence: because it is a necessary condition to ensure a steady supply of resources—money, public support, volunteer effort—to sustain the portfolio of programs that the initia-

tive identifies; because communities differ from one another and therefore require somewhat different mixes of programs; and because a united, committed community is a powerful force that is greater than the effects of any particular set of programs.

This observation is welcome for many reasons, not least because it draws attention to the important question of where the resources and energy for intervening will come from and the question of what programs might work. It also recognizes that resources and energy will be forthcoming only when those who are asked to provide the resources believe in the effort. And finally, it recognizes that the places and people from which the resources and energy are needed include informal institutions such as families, PTAs, and other community-based actors in addition to government agencies. So, if we are to prevent youths from becoming involved and staying involved in violence, we will have to rely on many different programs, shaped in portfolios designed to both meet local problems and respond to local concerns and capabilities, and supported by some combination of private and public resources organized through networks mobilized by concern for the problem.

This perspective leads quite naturally to D. Anderson's essay on schools. It instructs that schools play three importantly different roles in controlling the epidemic of youth violence. First, as educational institutions, they presumably can affect the dispositions and capabilities of kids. Schools can serve not only as springboards for future success of kids (their primary function), but also as platforms for launching more specific programs designed to shape students' views of and reliance on violence as a method for adjudicating disputes (an additional purpose they may have to take on in a world in which the epidemic of youth violence rages).

Second, as places where kids spend a great deal of their time, schools can become arenas within which violence occurs or is controlled. A great argument rages about the best way to produce reliable security in schools; specifically, whether it is best produced by concentrating on providing quality education and fair but firm governance of the school environment, or whether special security measures such as weapons detection equipment, police in schools, or regular searches of lockers are required. Anderson does not and cannot resolve this great debate, but he does cast doubt on the idea that a school is a hopeless hostage to the community in which it finds itself. In his view, schools have both the responsibility and the capability to become "safe havens" for kids in otherwise violent environments.

Third, as community institutions, schools can provide the physical places and the social networks that could begin the process of mobilizing a community as a whole against violence. In short, for the kinds of community mobilizations that Howell and Hawkins think are most important in preventing youth violence, schools are at least important parts of the mobilization effort, and might, on some occasions, emerge at the leading edge.

Fagan and Wilkinson take a different approach to prevention. One strand that runs through their essay is the suggestion that the ready availability of weapons plays a key role in shaping the epidemic of youth violence. Zimring also urges that this is an important factor fueling the epidemic of youth violence. The compelling piece of evidence is that the increase in youth homicide is accounted for almost exactly by the increase in homicides committed with guns. It is also significant that youths more commonly possess and carry guns than in the past. It is tempting, therefore, to treat guns—and particularly the semiautomatic weapons that have proved particularly attractive—as a “vector” in the epidemic of youth violence. If guns were not available, then the epidemic would not have spread so far, or been so lethal. If the availability of guns could now be suppressed, the extent and virulence of the epidemic could be stemmed. This view seems strongly held by Fagan and Wilkinson and by Zimring.

This is a very different idea of prevention than the ideas offered by Howell and Hawkins. They view the important predisposing condition for the epidemic of youth violence as the existence of young people either disposed, or insufficiently hostile, to the use of violence as a means to acquire wealth or status, as a vehicle for self-expression, or as a device for resolving disputes: the key objective of prevention efforts must be to reduce the pool of those susceptible to using violence. They may also believe that it is an important matter of justice that children be provided with opportunities to grow up well. Fagan and Wilkinson, however, treat the availability of weapons as a key contributing factor. Instead of focusing on the disposition of youth to engage in violence, they focus on the availability of a particular “criminogenic commodity.” This could, arguably, hold out the hope that we need not succeed in the expensive, arduous, chancy, long-run task of keeping youths on healthy developmental trajectories to prevent youth violence; it would be an important step if we could reduce the availability of weapons to children.

Unfortunately, even though the task of reducing weapons availability to youths seems technically straightforward, it is by no means easy

to accomplish. A vast stock of weapons is already available and there is strong political opposition to reducing it significantly. Perhaps more importantly, the task of keeping weapons from youths may end up involving the same wide set of actors and policy instruments as is required to achieve the larger goal of keeping kids on favorable developmental trajectories. It is necessary for communities to decide that they want to achieve this goal of reducing gun availability to kids (and local communities might well disagree on the urgency of that goal). Then it is necessary for a variety of actors to act on the responsibilities implied by that goal: for parents to take on the responsibility of locking up their own weapons and monitoring their children's weapons carrying; for regulatory agencies to demand that gun dealers live up to their civil responsibilities to refuse to sell guns to children or their agents; and for criminal justice agencies to enforce laws against illegal sales, carrying, and distribution. Politically and bureaucratically speaking, then, keeping guns from children may be every bit as demanding a task as ensuring that children follow favorable developmental trajectories. Even this, therefore, may require the community mobilization that Howell and Hawkins recommend.

It should be striking to readers of this volume that we have proceeded this far in examining interventions to control the epidemic of youth violence and have not yet mentioned the institutions that many think should be most centrally involved: the juvenile justice system. The reason for this is that those writing for this volume see little connection between the juvenile justice system and the epidemic of youth violence. At best, it is seen as a set of institutions that responds more or less justly and more or less effectively to specific instances of youthful violent offending. To both Zimring (in this volume) and Feld (in this volume), the juvenile justice system is too reactive to be very preventive, and neither particularly effective nor particularly just in the way it responds to individual incidents.

Both Zimring and Feld see great difficulties in the trends forcing the juvenile justice system to act more like the adult criminal justice system. By focusing attention primarily on the seriousness of the offense rather than on the persistence of offending as the basis for deciding whether cases stay in juvenile court or are exposed to the rigors of adult prosecution, a key idea in juvenile justice is undermined. That key idea is that youths have less well-formed intentions and characters than adults. That implies that, as a matter of justice, it is wrong to hold youths accountable for their crimes in the same way as for adults. It



also means, as a matter of practical concern, that there might be a greater opportunity to intervene in the future development of youths than would be true for adults. If we understand that some youths commit violence even though their commitment to violence may not be deep or sustained, the inability of the juvenile justice system to note and respond to this difference reduces both the justice and the efficacy of the system as a device for handling youth violence.

What the Feld and Zimring essays point to is the importance of re-making our images of the juvenile justice system. If the juvenile justice system is to be nothing more than a criminal court for children, then it adds little to our overall social capacity to deal with youth violence. But what is the alternative? One important idea might be to see the juvenile justice system as less outside the system of community mobilization that Howell and Hawkins envision than Zimring and Feld seem to view it. After all, the juvenile court controls a potentially important community asset: namely, the right to use the authority of the state to exercise control over youthful offenders and (perhaps) those private and public actors who are responsible for their care. This asset may be more valuable when it is held in reserve rather than used directly, but it may be part of the apparatus that helps form a consistent set of expectations for youth, and it may also help mobilize some of the resources needed in individual cases to deal with some of the individual factors that are disposing youth to violence, such as mental illness or violence within the family. That might be particularly effective if the court acts in concert with community-based social service organizations to help children and their caretakers meet their obligations to stay on successful developmental paths. In short, it may be that the juvenile court could become an important instrument of youth policy as well as youth violence policy. That is implicit in the court's current jurisdiction if not in its current focus or capabilities.

#### V. Where to Go from Here

To those who want answers about what to do about youth violence, this volume may seem a bit discouraging. A great deal is known about the factors that expose youth to violence, but we are not sure that these risk factors are the only ones that generated the epidemic of youth violence. It may be that these simply create a larger or smaller pool of those susceptible to being caught up in an epidemic, but do not alone determine how broadly the epidemic will spread, how long it will last, or its ultimate virulence.

There is some evidence about programs that have produced some preventive impacts but, for both practical and theoretical reasons, effective prevention probably does not depend on nationally mandating and funding any particular program. Instead, it depends on mobilizing local communities to define and deal with problems. In some ways, that is a quite appealing idea, but there is the problem that some of the nation's hardest-hit communities may lack the capacity to rally themselves to deal with the intense local epidemic of youth violence. It is also discouraging to learn how crippled and uncertain are two social institutions that should be on the front line of the battle: namely, schools and the juvenile justice system.

Sadly, the epidemic of youth violence may continue. Given the toll, we cannot fail to act. But given our uncertainty about causes and effective interventions, we must proceed with less precision and confidence than we would like. This need not be disabling. Indeed, it can be liberating. But one of the important features of the current situation is that it may very well reverse what is ordinarily thought to be the correct relationship between research and action.

In a well-ordered world, the relationship between research and action is clear: research provides both the technical basis and political legitimacy for action. It tells us what to do. It offers assurances that we are acting neither recklessly nor dangerously. But what is the relationship between action and research in a messy world in which urgent problems require action and the available knowledge is incomplete? Here, responses must be more experimental, and more collaborative.

Researchers have to offer their best knowledge and ideas, but recognize that their knowledge is limited and that they must be as uncertain as everyone else is about what will happen with any particular intervention. That increases rather than reduces the pressure to be clear about why one thinks a particular intervention might work, and to gather information not only about whether the intervention seemed to produce a result, but also whether it operated in ways that were not anticipated. Thus there is urgency for both process and outcome evaluations of interventions to be made.

Researchers have to be more collaborative with communities and the government agencies they support, for three simple reasons. First, given that researchers' knowledge is limited, the difference between expert knowledge and lay knowledge is less than in some other policy realms, and there may be important substantive ideas to be learned from, or developed in partnership with, communities and their opera-

tional agencies. Second, given uncertainty about the consequences of proposed actions, communities must share the risks and consent to avowedly uncertain initiatives. Third, given that the implementation of many initiatives depends on actions taken by communities and agencies, it is important that they come to understand and agree with reasons why a particular intervention, or a particular portfolio of interventions, is being undertaken.

We conclude, then, with the idea that in dealing with the epidemic of youth violence, researchers must be part of the community mobilization that Howell and Hawkins recommend. They cannot guide or direct that activity. Nor should they stay aloof from it. They must enter into the partnership with a commitment to use their skills to ensure that the doing is well-considered, and also to ensure that we learn while doing. That, in contrast to the traditional call for more research and more restraint in policy action until the research can be completed, is what we recommend in dealing with the pressing problems of youth violence.

#### REFERENCES

- Anderson, David C. In this volume. "Curriculum, Culture, and Community: The Challenge of School Violence."
- Anderson, Elijah. In this volume. "The Social Ecology of Youth Violence."
- Bilchik, Shay. 1997. "Making a Difference." *Juvenile Justice* 4(2):2-8.
- Cook, Philip J., and John H. Laub. In this volume. "The Unprecedented Epidemic in Youth Violence."
- DiIulio, John. 1995. "The Coming of the Super-Predators." *Weekly Standard* (November 27), p. 23.
- . 1996. *How to Stop the Coming Crime Wave*. New York: Manhattan Institute.
- Fagan, Jeffrey. 1990. "Intoxication and Aggression." In *Drugs and Crime*, edited by Michael Tonry and James Q. Wilson. Volume 13 of *Crime and Justice: A Review of Research*, edited by Michael Tonry and Norval Morris. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Fagan, Jeffrey, and Deanna L. Wilkinson. In this volume. "Guns, Youth Violence, and Social Identity in Inner Cities."
- Farrington, David P. In this volume. "Predictors, Causes, and Correlates of Youth Violence."
- Feld, Barry C. In this volume. "Juvenile and Criminal Justice Systems Responses to Youth Violence."

- Fox, James. 1996. *Trends in Juvenile Violence: A Report to the United States Attorney General on Current and Future Rates of Juvenile Offending*. Boston: Northeastern University Press.
- Gest, Ted, and Victoria Pope. 1996. "Crime Time Bomb." *U.S. News and World Report* (March 25), p. 28.
- Hagedorn, John M. In this volume. "Gang Violence in the Postindustrial Era."
- Howell, James C., and J. David Hawkins. In this volume. "Prevention of Youth Violence."
- Wilson, James Q., and Richard J. Herrnstein. 1985. *Crime and Human Nature*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Wilson, William Julius. 1987. *The Truly Disadvantaged*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- . 1996. *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor*. New York: Knopf.
- Zimring, Franklin E. In this volume. "Toward a Jurisprudence of Youth Violence."
- Zimring, Franklin E., and Gordon Hawkins. 1998. *Youth Violence*. New York: Oxford University Press.