

Summer 1938

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Harry Willbach

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Recommended Citation

Harry Willbach, Trend of Crime in New York City, 29 *Am. Inst. Crim. L. & Criminology* 62 (1938-1939)

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THE TREND OF CRIME IN NEW YORK CITY

HARRY WILLBACH¹

What has been the trend in crime, has it increased, has it decreased, or has it remained stationary? This question, which it is proposed to consider here, has usually been disposed of summarily. It has usually been answered by reference to publicized crime or by comparison of short term periods.

An accurate answer to the question can be secured only by an approach that will go to original sources and make an analysis based on a comparatively long period.

At the very outset it is necessary to determine whether society is concerned with the occurrence of crime or with the extent of criminality. These two views differ considerably and it is important that a decision be made because there is a vast difference in the units which must be used. The units which might be employed are: 1. crimes committed; 2. crimes reported; 3. persons arrested. Each of these would lead to obviously different conclusions.

The commission of a single crime (whether it is reported or not reported) may be by one person or by a number of people acting in concert or in cooperation with each other. Assuming therefore that it is possible to obtain the accurate number of crimes committed, the only conclusions that could be drawn would relate solely to the injured parties. It would then be known merely how many people suffered personal injury, how many suffered loss or injury to property and how many times the government was offended because of violation of its laws, rules or ordinances.

In modern society with its complex interrelationships any change in the status of every one of its members affects other members of the group. And so a murder, for instance, is not limited in its effects to the person whose death resulted. There are social and economic results and changes that extend to the members of that person's family, to all others who had been associated with the deceased and perhaps to the entire body politic. By the same reasoning a burglary or a robbery while it is felt severely by the person who suffered the loss does not exhaust all its effect on the one

¹ The Capitol, Albany, N. Y.

person. It is an obvious fact that an act sets in motion a series of events each of which flows from it and each of which extends the sphere of influence. It is therefore apparent that a study based on crimes committed gives inadequate information relative to either the persons engaged therein or those affected thereby. It is suggested further that while the political scientist may be interested in noting and measuring variations in patterns, the sociologist's concern is with individual conformance and non-conformance with the standards of the group.

Crimes reported constitute only part of the crimes committed. They are the crimes which have been officially called to the attention or brought to the notice of the agencies charged with law enforcement. As a unit for an analysis this factor has all the defects and shortcomings of crimes committed. In addition it is subject to variations resulting from the desire for redress and recovery as well as from the general opinion of the efficiency of the enforcing authority and the value of their intercession.

The sociologist, as stated above, is more interested in the extent of non-conformance than in the number of acts or occasions in which the non-conformance is evidenced. To him there is great difference in a revolt of a handful of people as compared with one involving large numbers and perhaps a majority of the population. He is concerned not so much with the number of crimes committed but far more with the number of persons committing these crimes. He desires to know how many in a given population have failed to conform with the accepted standards of the group. In the field of crime, he seeks to learn whether more people are becoming lawless. The sociologist finds more interest and more food for thought in the number of persons involved than in the fact that there was only one act. To the sociologist there is a great significance in the fact that in New York City in 1931 there were solved 1163 burglaries which resulted in the arrest of 2600 persons while in 1936 in the same city 1550 burglaries were solved and 2273 persons were arrested for those crimes.

If the number of criminals is the best measure of criminality, can we determine this number with a fair degree of accuracy?

Unfortunately we cannot.

While this information would result in an accurate analysis of the trend of criminality, it is not available and an effort must be made to secure a next best measure. This is to be had in the number of persons arrested. Taken for one period or one point of

time, this measure is inaccurate and should not be made the basis of generalization. However, if it is taken over a continuous series of periods or points in order to develop a trend, it takes on added significance and reliability.

There is one other problem however which must be disposed of. If a criminal is defined as one who commits a crime it becomes necessary to establish the meaning of crime.

Bouvier defines crime as "an act committed or omitted in violation of a public law forbidding or commanding it."

This definition is extremely broad and includes the commission of any act prohibited by law and all failures to act when the law places an injunction to act. It therefore encompasses many things considered rather lightly by the group and obviously of such nature as to make it highly objectionable to classify as criminals those who are guilty of them.

Many of the acts or omissions are crimes today and were not so considered yesterday. Their inclusion in any study of trends would introduce a marked bias. Other acts or omissions have been considered crimes for long periods, some of them almost to antiquity.

This study is based on arrests for crimes against the person and crimes against property rights. These two groups bear the distinction of having been considered crimes for "time whereof the memory of man runneth not to the contrary." They have other advantages for judging the trend of criminality. Among these are stability and comparability due to the fact that very few new crimes, if any, have been created and added to these categories. Then, too, they have been reported to enforcing authorities rather regularly and their solution has always been persistently sought by the authorities.

It is recognized that other distinctions have been drawn between crimes. Some are considered felonies while others are called misdemeanors. Such distinctions may have advantages in a penal code and in prescribing penalties. They have no place however in a study of the trends of the incidence of anti-social conduct. Certainly all forms of larceny, whether grand or petit, are crimes against property rights. The differentiation is due to the value of the property appropriated and does not in any manner relate to the *modi operandi* or the intent of the criminal to take unto himself that which rightfully belonged to others. . .

It is almost self-evident that there must be an optimum political unit for studying the extent of crime or of criminality. By determining this unit and limiting the data to it such a study can yield

a high degree of usefulness. It is undesirable to enlarge the political and geographical unit because of the danger of introducing immeasurable variables. These variables differ from one locality to another both in form or nature as well as in degree and in direction. For example, enforcement (and therefore arrests) may be stringent in some localities and lax in others. These differences in enforcement may also be observed in the same locality at different times. Due to the autonomous nature of the separate localities or units the variations in enforcement may or may not be operative in other units. Even more important is the fact that these variations, though present, may be unobserved because they are not general throughout all of the localities.

Because of the availability of data as well as for other reasons this study is limited to one city. Definite advantages result from such a limitation. The conclusions and findings have meaning and value because they pertain to one definite geographical and political unit and cannot be said to reflect a bias by the inclusion of other units where there are differences in law enforcement, law administration and in the composition of the population. By restricting this study to one unit accurate per capita rates can be determined because of reliable knowledge of the distribution of the population by age groups.

Because of its size, its importance as a commercial and industrial center, its areas of congestion and its heterogeneous population New York City has at different times and in different places been referred to as a den of iniquity, a haven of the lawless and a medium for breeding criminals. With such a recommendation it offers itself as a good experimental station for testing the course of crime at its very worst.

Because of this as well as because its police department has published annual reports containing a table of all arrests by crime of commission, this study applies to New York City.

This study covers the period from 1916 to 1936. During this span of twenty-one years there have, to be sure, been changes in the efficiency of the police force and in the enforcement of the criminal law. These changes have consistently been in the direction of increased efficiency and greater stringency. These changes have in part resulted from pressure brought to bear by a watchful press and by an aroused public in periods of so-called crime waves. In part, too, these changes have been brought about by advances in the field of police science that have been made during the last two

decades. Therefore if the data has introduced any bias it is in the direction of a larger number of arrests than would have resulted under conditions of less vigilance and lower efficiency.

Throughout the period encompassed in this study the New York City Police Department has shown arrests in a classification of crimes that has been constant.

The following are the main classes used:

1. Offenses against the person.
2. Offenses against chastity.
3. Offenses against the family and children.
4. Offenses against public health, etc.
5. Offenses against the administration of government.
6. Offenses against property rights.
7. General criminality.
8. Juvenile, delinquency.
9. Witnesses, lunatics, etc.

For reasons given previously only two of these classes have been selected for this study. They are offenses against the person and offenses against property rights.

The following table is based on data available only for the years from 1931 to 1936, inclusive. It was compiled to show that an analysis based on the number of arrests is an accurate and justifiable procedure. The number of complaints received (crimes reported) and the number disposed of by arrest were taken from the annual reports of the New York City Police Department.

	1931	1932	1933	1934	1935	1936
Assault and Robbery:						
Complaints received	1434	1429	1138	1251	1184	1240
Disposed of by arrest.....	1072	1007	848	921	998	1074
Per cent disposed of by arrest.....	74.8	70.5	74.5	73.5	84.2	86.6
Burglary:						
Complaints received	2678	2417	2276	2980	2614	2369
Disposed of by arrest.....	1163	1091	1254	1506	1706	1550
Per cent disposed of by arrest.....	43.4	45.1	55.1	50.5	65.3	65.3
Grand Larceny:						
Complaints received	18077	13468	10548	10224	8197	7969
Disposed of by arrest.....	3825	2912	2418	2609	2601	2617
Per cent disposed of by arrest.....	21.1	21.6	22.9	25.4	31.7	32.8

It is of interest to find that complaints received by the police have decreased for each of the crimes listed above. Throughout this same period there has been an almost continuous increase in the percentage of these complaints that were disposed of by arrest. It is therefore clearly evident that there has been a marked increase in the efficiency of the police. This table gives concrete indication

that if a bias is introduced by using arrests in an analysis of crime trends, this bias is in the direction of an increase in arrests.

The twenty-one years from 1916 to 1936 have been turbulent. There were several so-called crime waves and several economic depressions. There was the World War which brought about, as an aftermath, an almost complete readjustment to the changed social order. During this period crime commissions were organized in the cities, the states and the nation. Conferences were called to determine the best ways of combating the increase in criminality. It was a foregone conclusion that crime was increasing therefore scant consideration was given to this question.

It should be expected that during this period there would be a marked increase in the number of persons arrested in New York City for crimes against the person and crimes against property rights. But in spite of increased population and of periods of great economic changes characterized by extreme and prolonged variations, there was an actual numerical decrease in the number of males arrested for these two classes of crimes.

ARRESTS OF MALES IN NEW YORK CITY

CRIMES

	<i>Offenses Against the Person</i>	<i>Offenses Against Property Rights</i>	<i>Robbery</i>	<i>Burglary</i>	<i>Larceny</i>
1916	13516	15814	1186	2417	3119
1917	12652	17536	1247	2900	4065
1918	9294	14768	1122	2203	3552
1919	9079	16650	1695	3055	4963
1920	8864	15729	1546	2980	3749
1921	9413	14002	1403	2631	3099
1922	10137	11967	1420	1932	2465
1923	10097	12259	1408	2027	2901
1924	9429	13766	1918	2317	3563
1925	9351	13566	2009	2478	3388
1926	9588	12985	1738	2105	3295
1927	9340	12263	1274	2112	3049
1928	9466	13959	1576	2458	3699
1929	9299	14054	1871	2319	3648
1930	8929	15369	2240	2415	4298
1931	8565	15872	2623	2568	4458
1932	8218	16985	2534	2456	5290
1933	8244	15789	2088	2721	4212
1934	8425	15553	1943	2851	3732
1935	7728	14710	1935	2842	3506
1936	7867	12767	1724	2241	2936

The decrease is very great with respect to offenses against the person. The all time high was in 1916 which was followed by sharp decreases in 1917 and 1918 (the war period). From then on there have been lesser but nevertheless continued decreases for the rest of the period.

Arrests for offenses against property rights have also decreased during this period. However, the downward trend has not been as pronounced as for offenses against the person nor has it been as regular or as continuous. The year 1917 saw the all time high of the twenty-one year period. From then on there were almost continuous decreases to 1922 when the arrests were the lowest for the entire period. From this date to 1932 there were increases. Subsequent to 1932 the arrests for each year have been less than for each preceding year.

However, the actual number of persons committing crimes or of those arrested for crimes is not a satisfactory measure of the extent of criminality in a community. A much more significant measure would be the ratio of those arrested as compared with the population from which they are drawn. Since this analysis relates to males only and excludes juvenile delinquents, the population considered are the males sixteen years of age or over. The actual census enumeration was available for 1910, 1920 and 1930. For the intervening years and the period following 1930 use was made of estimates furnished by the New York State Department of Health.

In 1916 the estimated male population sixteen years of age or over was 1,935,060 while in 1936 it rose to 2,814,900. This represents an increase of 44.8 per cent.

The combined total number of arrests for crimes against the person and crimes against property rights was 29,330 in 1916 and 20,634 in 1936. This is a decrease of 29.6 per cent.

This comparison, while it gives no indication of the course of arrests during the intervening period, yields the striking conclusion that in the face of a very great increase in population from 1916 to 1936 there was a most decided decrease in the number of arrests for the groups of crimes mentioned.

Arrests for offenses against the person in 1936 were 41.8 per cent less than for 1916. For arrests for offenses against property rights the corresponding decrease was 19.3 per cent.

ARRESTS OF MALES IN NEW YORK CITY
(Rate per 100,000 male population aged 16 or over)

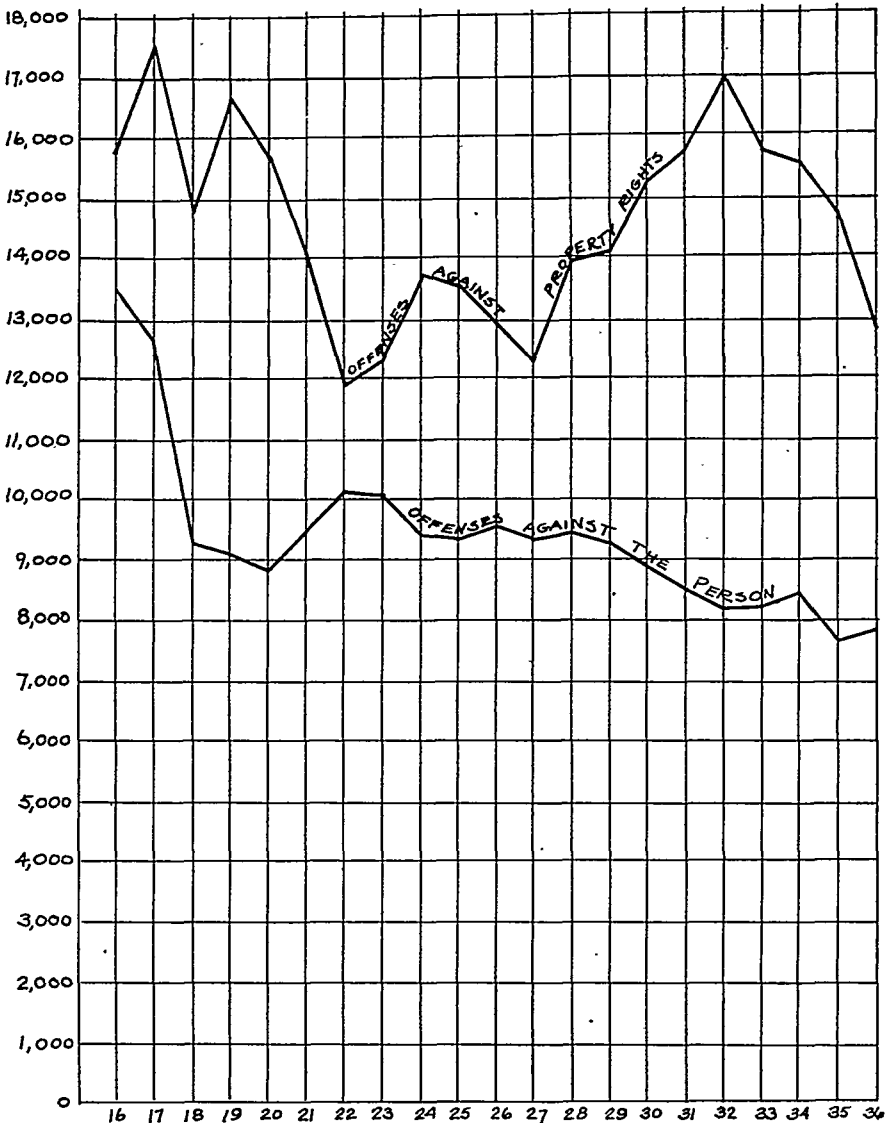
	CRIMES				
	<i>Offenses Against the Person</i>	<i>Offenses Against Property Rights</i>	<i>Robbery</i>	<i>Burglary</i>	<i>Larceny</i>
1916	698.5	817.2	61.3	124.9	161.2
1917	643.4	893.1	63.4	147.5	206.7
1918	465.2	739.2	56.2	110.3	177.8
1919	447.4	820.5	83.5	150.6	200.2
1920	427.0	757.8	74.5	143.6	180.6
1921	440.4	650.1	65.6	123.1	145.0
1922	461.0	542.8	64.6	87.9	112.1
1923	446.6	542.2	62.3	89.7	128.3
1924	406.0	592.7	82.6	99.8	153.4
1925	392.2	569.0	84.3	103.9	142.1
1926	392.0	530.9	71.1	86.1	124.7
1927	372.5	489.0	50.8	84.2	121.6
1928	368.4	543.2	61.3	95.7	144.0
1929	353.5	534.2	71.1	88.2	138.7
1930	347.2	597.7	87.1	93.9	167.1
1931	327.5	606.9	100.3	98.2	170.5
1932	309.6	639.8	95.5	92.5	199.3
1933	306.2	586.8	77.6	101.1	156.4
1934	308.4	569.3	71.1	104.4	136.6
1935	278.7	530.4	69.8	102.5	126.4
1936	279.5	449.2	59.1	79.6	104.3

When the arrests for these two types of crimes are converted into ratios of the male population sixteen years of age or over and the trend of these ratios is observed from year to year it becomes apparent that there has been a decidedly marked decrease in arrests. In view of the increased efficiency in law enforcement, the improved ability of the police and the decreasing amount of political fixing this decrease indicates conclusively that instead of being an increasing concern as indicating social and moral breakdown, criminality has actually been decreasing.

If the actual number of arrests are plotted on a chart, the two groups of offenses show distinctly different curves. Arrests for crimes against the person decrease almost continuously from year to year except for a few minor rises. Arrests for offenses against property rights do not follow the same even pattern. The curve consists of several parts. First there are decreases terminating in 1922 when the number of arrests was the lowest in the twenty-one

ACTUAL NUMBER OF MALES ARRESTED FOR OFFENSES AGAINST THE PERSON AND OFFENSES AGAINST PROPERTY RIGHTS

NEW YORK CITY 1916-1936



years under investigation. During the next two years there were increases which were followed by declines during the succeeding three years. From 1927 to 1932 there were sharp increases which brought the arrests of the latter year within the range of the high points of 1917 and 1919. However, since 1932 the numbers have been decreasing from year to year until in 1936 it was only 800 greater than for 1922, the lowest point in the curve.

A chart made of the annual per capita ratio of arrests shows a decrease in arrests for crimes against the person that is even more pronounced than that based on the actual number of arrests.

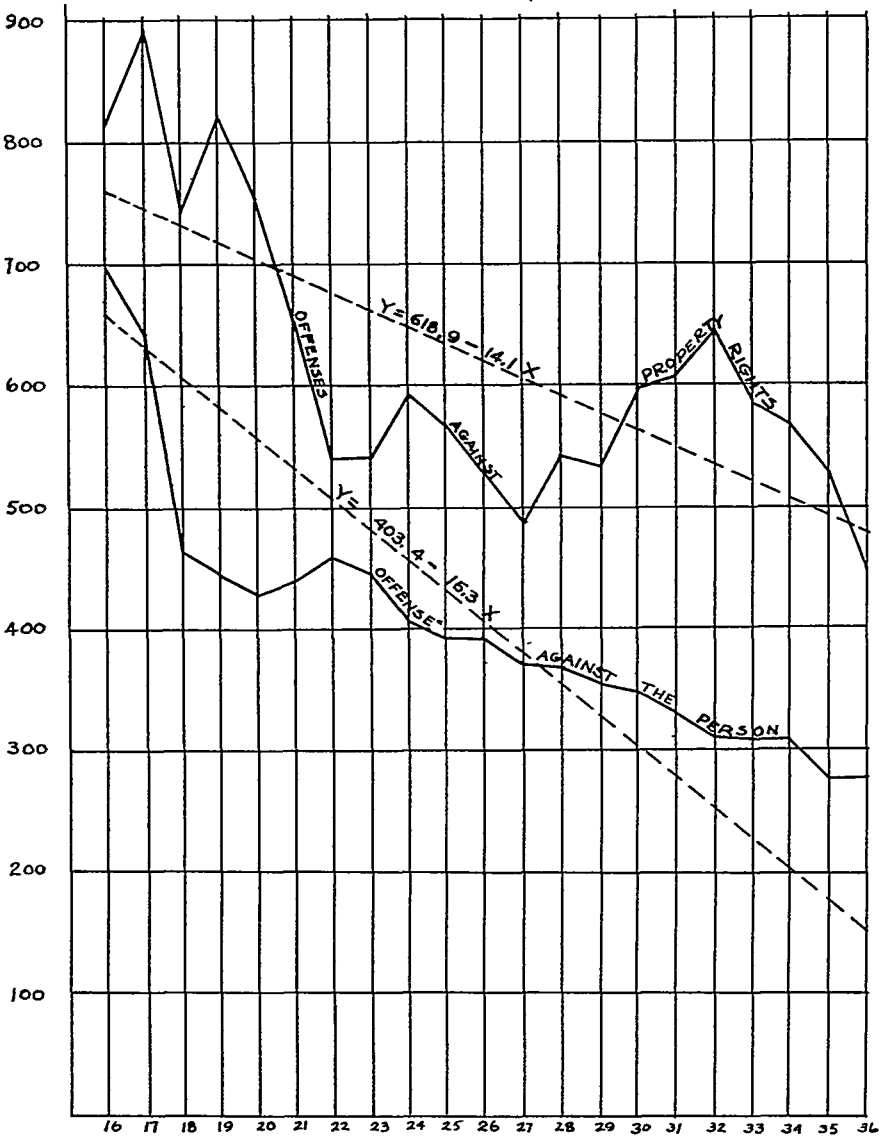
The curve of the per capita ratio of arrests for crimes against property rights showed a much more decided decrease than that based on the actual numbers. It is interesting to note that while the actual arrests in 1932 for this type of crime was close to the all time high of 1917 the per capita ratios differed considerably. In 1917 these arrests were 893.1 per 100,000 male population aged sixteen or over while in 1932 it was 639.8.

The decreasing trend is still further accentuated when it is seen that for the two types of offenses combined there were 1516 arrests in 1916 for every 100,000 of the male population, sixteen years of age or over. In 1936 the ratio was 729 or less than half of what it was in 1916.

The selection of two years for comparison does not give any information relative to the data or the trend of the data for other years. The inspection of a curve may permit a generalized observation but there are serious doubts as to its accuracy. These doubts arise because of frequent and sharp variations both upward and downward. It is possible, however, to apply mathematical methods to smooth out the data. The resulting equation and its curve remove the fluctuations shown from one year to another and gives in smooth and continuous form the general trend and direction of the sequence of the data. Smoothing out the curves for the per capita ratio of arrests for offenses against the person and offenses against property rights it is observed that both of these show definite and pronounced decreases. The equation of the curve for offenses against the person is $Y = 403.4 - 15.3 X$, taking 1926 as the origin. This equation means that the general direction or course of arrests for this type of offense was downward and that on the average there was a yearly decrease of 15.3 arrests for each 100,000 males sixteen years of age or over.

The equation of the curve for offenses against property rights

ARRESTS FOR EACH 100,000 MALES AGED 16 OR OVER FOR OFFENSES AGAINST THE PERSON AND OFFENSES AGAINST PROPERTY RIGHTS
 NEW YORK CITY 1916-1936



is very much like that for offenses against the person. It is $Y = 618.9 - 14.1 X$, taking 1926 as the origin. The equation shows that the annual decrease in arrests was 14.1 for each 100,000 males sixteen years of age or over. The total arrests, however, were more numerous than for the other type of crime.

From the viewpoint of the general public the greatest concern relative to offenses against property rights arises out of the crimes of robbery, burglary and larceny. These are the crimes which are most numerous among property crimes. They are the offenses which find their way into the newspapers and which usually form the basis for the public's alarm and outrage relative to crime. They can be called the practical working indices of trends of criminality.

The relative importance of these three crimes against property rights shows that for almost the entire period arrests for robbery were fewer than for either of the other two. Next in numerical importance were arrests for burglary which exceeded the arrests for robbery in each year except 1931 and 1932. The number of persons arrested for larceny has always been considerably greater than for either of the other two crimes.

From 1916 to 1931 arrests for robbery have on the whole shown increases although there have been occasional recessions. Thereafter each year showed a decrease from the preceding year. The largest number of arrests for this crime during the entire period of twenty-one years occurred in 1931.

Arrests for burglary showed marked decreases to 1922 at which time they were the lowest of the entire period. From that date to 1934 there has, in general, been an increase in the number of persons arrested for this crime. During the last two years, from 1934 to 1936, there has been a sharp reduction in the arrests.

Arrests for the crime of larceny (both grand and petit) show a downward course to 1922 at which time the number was the lowest for the entire twenty-one years. Thereafter there were great increases which culminated in 1932 with an all time high. Since that date there have been continuous and sharp decreases.

The actual number of arrests for these crimes was converted into ratios of the male population sixteen years of age or over. These ratios followed very closely the same course as was shown by the actual figures. This similarity was evident only in increases and decreases from year to year but not in the degree of sharpness of these variations. For example, while the actual number of arrests for larceny during 1932 was the highest for the entire period,

the per capita ratio of arrests was somewhat lower than for 1917 and 1919.

The general course or trend of the smoothed curves of the per capita ratio of arrests for these crimes is slightly downward for burglary and larceny and somewhat upward for robbery. During the twenty-one years under investigation therefore there have been slight decreases in the arrests for burglary and larceny and an almost insignificant increase in arrests for robbery.

No great comfort should be taken because of the decrease during the last twenty-one years in the proportion of the population arrested for offenses against the person and offenses against property rights. The concerted effort employed in the battle against criminality should have resulted in a far greater decrease than that indicated in this study. There is continued need for the war on crime. An integrated program of crime prevention can and will bring about a pronounced and a visible decrease in non-conformance.

FINDINGS

1. Crimes committed and crimes reported are inadequate measures of criminality in a community because they give no information relative to the number of persons who committed these crimes.
2. If a study of the trend of criminality is to give light on conformance or non-conformance with social standards it must be based on the number of persons committing crimes.
3. Persons arrested is a good approximation of the number of persons committing crimes.
4. Such data if considered only for one period of time cannot be used for generalization but when used to develop a trend it gains in accuracy.
5. Analysis of trends of criminality should be based on crimes which have almost always been frowned upon by society—these are crimes against the person and crimes against property.
6. A city is the optimum political unit for making an analysis of such trends.
7. If a bias is introduced by using arrests it is on the side of increased arrests because of improvements in law enforcement and police science.
8. The actual number of males sixteen years of age and over arrested in New York City for crimes against the person and

crimes against property decreased during the period from 1916 to 1936.

9. The estimated male population 16 years of age and over increased 44.8% from 1916 to 1936. The arrests for crimes against the person and crimes against property decreased 29.6% between these two dates.
10. These arrests when converted into rates based on population show more marked decreases than are indicated for the actual figures.
11. The trend equations for the arrests for these two types of crime show marked and indisputable downward courses in spite of occasional rises.
12. The trend of the arrests for robbery during this period was slightly upward while for larceny and burglary it was downward.