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Is Robbery Becoming More Violent an Analysis of Robbery Murder Trends Since 1968

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CRIMINOLOGY

IS ROBBERY BECOMING MORE VIOLENT? AN ANALYSIS OF ROBBERY MURDER TRENDS SINCE 1968*

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I. INTRODUCTION

"Manchild 1984 is the product of a society so rife with violence that killing a mugging or robbery victim is now fashionable."
—Claude Brown[1]

Robbery is an intrinsically violent crime, and, in fact, is defined as theft accomplished by force or the threat of physical injury. In approximately 2,000 cases in the United States each year, robbery violence proves fatal to the victim.[2] This is a relatively rare event given that there are more than one million robberies annually.[3] Nevertheless, the number of robbery homicides is a major contributor to the public's fear of this crime.

From time to time, public concern is enhanced by reports that robbers are becoming more violent. One example from the popular press reports:

Another frightening difference in the crime picture is that life now seems pitifully cheap. Law-enforcement officials think they have witnessed a shift toward gratuitous slaughter. "It used to be 'Your money or your life,'" says assistant Bronx district attorney William Flack.

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[1] Brown, *Manchild in Harlem*, N.Y. Times, Sept. 16, 1984 (Magazine), at 36, 44.

[2] P. COOK, ROBBERY IN THE UNITED STATES: AN ANALYSIS OF RECENT TRENDS AND PATTERNS 5 (Nat'l Inst. of Justice 1983).

[3] *Id.* at 3.

"Now it's 'Your money and your life.' "[4]

Claude Brown offers a number of explanations for the vicious-ness of youths in inner cities. One explanation is that these youths were often eyewitnesses at an impressionable age to "the broad-daylight slayings so typical of the urban drug wars of the 1970's. When they were six, seven, eight or so, they saw friends, neighbors, relatives and total strangers brutally murdered, and seldom heard of anyone even being arrested for any of the slayings."[5]

Before establishing a culprit for the increase in robbery vio-lence, however, it is necessary to investigate systematically whether robbery violence actually has increased. The central assertion, ex-pressed in the uncolorful language of empirical science, is that the percentage of all robberies resulting in serious injury or death has increased substantially in the recent past. Because suitable data on the incidence of robbery injury are not available,[6] this study focuses on robbery murders. The principal finding is that the estimated ra-tio of robbery murders to robberies shows no consistent increase during the period 1968-1983. This ratio does increase between 1968 and 1973, remains at a relatively high plateau from 1973 to 1979, and drops rather sharply after 1979. This result, if taken at face value, suggests that popular concerns about the increasing bloodthirstiness of robbers are rather dated.

Before documenting these results concerning the murder-rob-bery ratio, two related trends in criminal homicide should be ex-plored: (1) the trend in the number of robbery murders and other felony murders per capita, and (2) the trend in the relative composi-tion of criminal homicide in different circumstances. These data help illuminate the common assertion that the nature of homicide has changed dramatically in recent years, with killings resulting from arguments between friends or relations displaced in relative

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[4] *The Plague of Violent Crime*, NEWSWEEK, Mar. 23, 1981, at 46, 48.

[5] Brown, *supra* note 1, at 54.

[6] Some data on the prevalence of serious injury in personal (noncommercial) rob-bery are available from the National Crime Surveys (NCS) for the years 1973-1981. U.S. DEP'T OF JUSTICE, BUREAU OF JUSTICE STATISTICS (Formerly the LAW ENFORCEMENT ASSISTANCE ADMIN.), CRIMINAL VICTIMIZATION IN THE UNITED STATES, 1973-1981. Dur-ing this period, the percentage of robbery victims seeking medical treatment at a hospi-tal ranged from 10.6 percent in 1976 to 8.5 percent in 1977. U.S. DEP'T OF JUSTICE, LAW ENFORCEMENT ASSISTANCE ADMIN., CRIMINAL VICTIMIZATION IN THE UNITED STATES, 1976, at 99; U.S. DEP'T OF JUSTICE, LAW ENFORCEMENT ASSISTANCE ADMIN., CRIMINAL VICTIMIZATION, 1977, at 57. Because the standard error on each of these annual injury rates is about 1.2 percent, and because there is no obvious trend in these statistics, it is plausible that the observed variation is random variation due to sampling error. Unfor-tunately, there are no richer sources of information on national trends in robbery injury. The NCS data are simply too sparse and hence noisy to be useful in the current context.

importance by felony murders (particularly in robbery), senseless killings by strangers, and murders that leave the police simply baffled.[7]

II. DATA ON ROBBERY AND CRIMINAL HOMICIDE

This study is limited to fifty-two of the nation's largest cities— all those, with a few exceptions (due to missing data), that had a population in excess of 250,000 in 1968. This study is thus limited in order to enhance the intertemporal consistency of the data. The bulk of the nation's robberies and robbery murders occurred in these cities. "The 57 cities with populations exceeding 250,000 in 1981 contained only 19 percent of the U.S. population, but reported 61 percent of all robberies. The six largest cities (with eight percent of the population) had 33 percent of the robberies, and New York City alone had 18 percent."[8]

Each of these cities reports the number of criminal homicides, robberies, and other "Index" crimes to the FBI on the Return A Form on an annual basis. In addition, each city provides the FBI with a Supplementary Homicide Report (SHR) that includes incident based information for each homicide.[9] The result is a microdata file that includes information on each criminal homicide, including the circumstance of the killing, the relationship between killer and victim, and the type of weapon used. Beginning in 1973 and again in 1976, the FBI substantially changed the coding scheme for criminal homicides, but there is sufficient consistency in these schemes to permit some intertemporal comparisons for the period since 1968.

There are other problems with both the Return A data and the SHR data. Police department Return A counts of the number of robberies are known to understate the actual total because many victims never report robberies to the police and the police sometimes do not record reported robberies as such. The likelihood that a rob-

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[7] *See* The Washington Post National Weekly Edition, Mar. 5, 1984, at 32 (quoting Franklin Zimring, law professor at the University of California, Berkeley). "[T]he composition of homicide has changed—domestic homicides have declined as a proportion of the total . . . . The new American homicide involves 'puzzling' cases and 'stranger' cases." *Id.*

[8] P. COOK, *supra* note 2, at 11.

[9] The Supplementary Homicide Report (SHR) data did not include information from Houston for the year 1982 and from Jersey City, Akron, and Rochester for the years 1982 and 1983. Estimates for these cities were generated by substituting the Return A homicide count for the SHR total. This total was then allocated among the different subcategories (robbery-related, unknown circumstances, etc.) by assuming that the distributions of homicides across these categories in the missing years were the same as in the three recent years for which SHR data were available.

bery will be reported to and recorded by the police depends in part on its seriousness. Victims are more likely to report gun robberies than other armed robberies, and are more likely to report armed robberies than unarmed robberies.[10] Furthermore, the fraction of all robberies reported to the police (and included in the police departments' annual crime reports) differs among cities and varies over time. There is some evidence that the percentage of all robberies that are included in police reports has increased from 1973 to 1980. During this period, police-reported robbery rate per capita in the United States increased by 33 percent, while the National Crime Survey's estimate of the robbery rate fell slightly.[11]

The SHR data also suffer from certain problems. First, a police department's SHR submissions to the FBI often contain a different number of homicides than that department's Return A submissions. These differences usually are not large. For the fifty-two cities covered in this study, the total SHR count is within a few percentage points of the total Return A count in every year except 1976—when New York reported only six months of homicides on its SHR submission. New York SHR data also have posed difficulties in recent years because information on the circumstances of homicide is missing from the data in an exceptionally high percentage of cases. For these reasons, data from New York are omitted from the statistical work that follows.

All the SHR data on homicide circumstances have the unavoidable problem of unreliability. The police are not always able to determine correctly the circumstances of homicides. Some robbery murders ultimately will be classified in a general category—most likely as "suspected felony type" or "circumstances unknown"— due to a lack of evidence.[12] It also is possible, though less common, that some killings classified as robbery-related in fact occurred in other circumstances. Crime data are always error prone and the data used in this study are no exception. For this reason, one must interpret empirical patterns with caution.

III. TRENDS IN THE TYPES OF CRIMINAL HOMICIDE

In the fifty-one large cities included in this study, there were 5,150 criminal homicides recorded in the SHR records for 1968, a rate of 15.3 homicides per 100,000 people. The homicide rate had

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[10] *See* Block & Block, *Decisions and Data: The Transformation of Robbery Incidents into Official Robbery Statistics*, 71 J. CRIM. L. & CRIMINOLOGY 622, 627-30 (1980).

[11] P. COOK, *supra* note 2, at 4.

[12] *See* Zimring & Zuehl, Victim Injury and Death in Urban Robbery: A Chicago Study (1985) (unpublished manuscript) (to be published in J. LEGAL STUD.).

increased 45 percent by 1974, to a rate of 22.2 homicides per 100,000 people. After a substantial decline of 13 percent through 1977, the rate began to climb again and reached a high point of 24.1 homicides per 100,000 people in 1980. The homicide rate has declined since then to 20.3 per 100,000 people in 1983.

Figure 1 depicts the rate per 100,000 people for several subcategories of criminal homicide. The "felony and suspected felony" rate follows a pattern similar to the total rate, with peaks in 1975 and 1980. The cycles, however, differ in amplitude. For example, the growth rate in felony and suspected felony murders from 1968 to 1975 is much higher than for other categories of criminal homicide. During this period, the felony and suspected felony rate increased 88 percent while all other types of homicide increased 25 percent.[13] Between 1982 and 1983, the felony and suspected felony rate fell by 17 percent while other homicides fell only one percent.

The SHR system introduced distinctions between different types of felony circumstances in 1973, permitting a separate count of robbery related murders. Figure 1 includes robbery murder rate statistics from 1973 to 1983. Robbery murders constitute about one-half of the "felony and suspected felony" category.

The other series included in Figure 1 is "circumstances unknown," consisting of all cases that the FBI coders were unable to classify from the information supplied by the local police departments either because the police investigation failed or because the police department failed to include the relevant information on the SHR form. This category is characterized by relatively large fluctuations around a steep upward trend; the 1983 rate is almost five times the rate in 1968. It should be noted that the FBI has classified a majority of the homicides in New York City (which have been excluded from Figure 1) as "unknown circumstances" in recent years, presumably because the New York Police Department did not provide adequate information on its SHR forms.

What do these trends in homicide rates reveal about the possible changes in the nature of urban lethal violence? Clearly, the numbers of *all* types of criminal homicide increased rapidly until the mid-1970's, reached a still higher peak in 1980, and have fallen off

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13 Richard Block's analysis of homicide in Chicago for the period 1965 to 1973 includes a separate tabulation of robbery murders. Block, *Homicide in Chicago: A Nine-Year Study (1965-1973)*, 66 J. CRIM. L. & CRIMINOLOGY 496, 505 (1975). His conclusion is that "much of the increase in homicides can be accounted for by an increase in the number of homicides related to robbery. The number of robbery related homicides increased from 33 in 1965 to 162 in 1973, an increase of 309 percent. Robbery homicides increased from a total of 8 percent of all homicides to 19 percent of all homicides." *Id.*
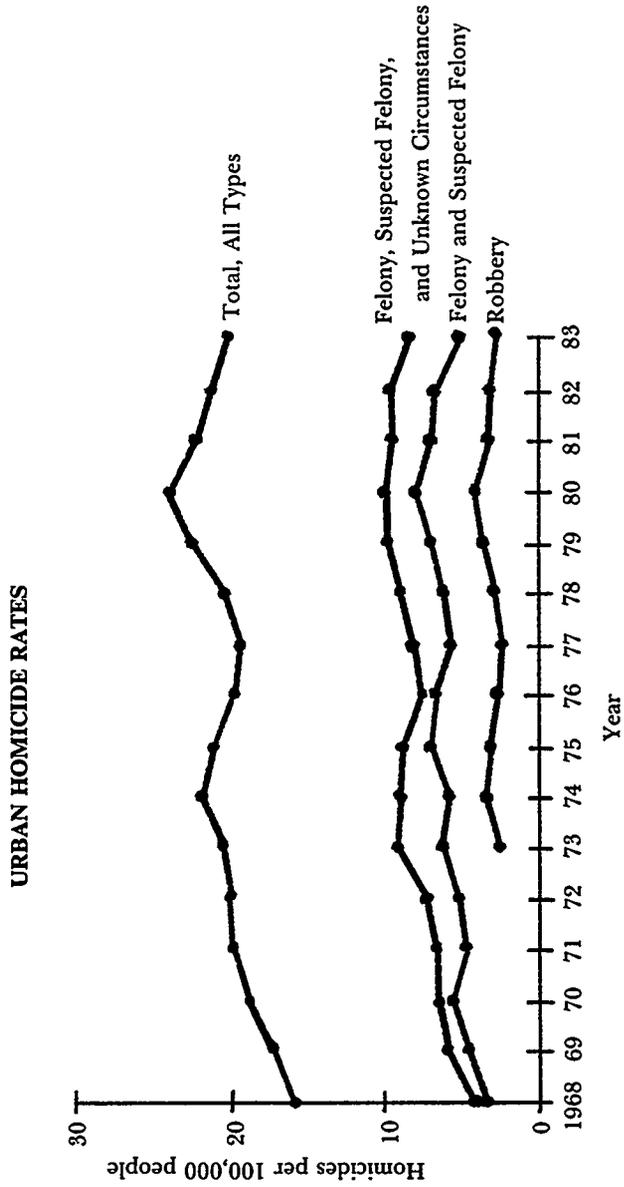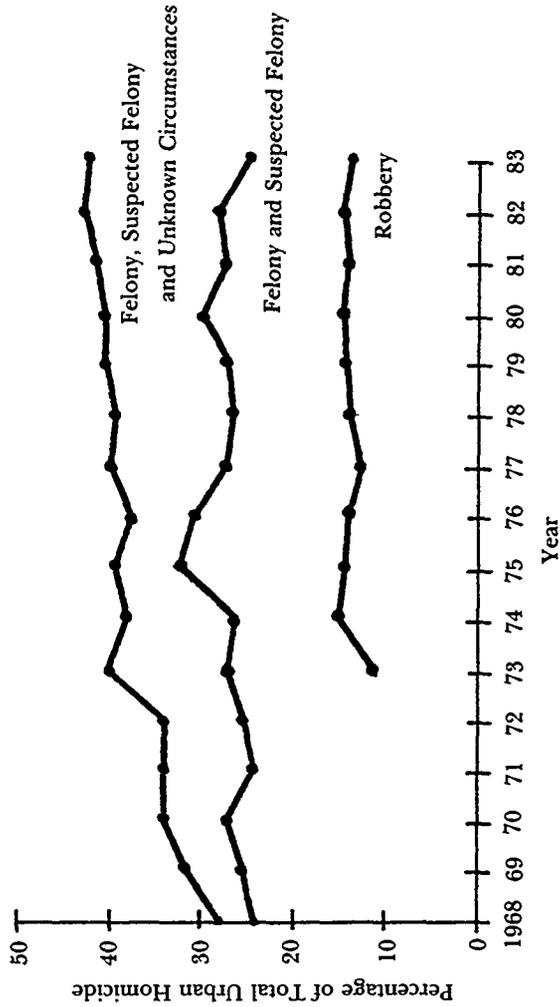
FIGURE 1

URBAN HOMICIDE RATES

FIGURE 2

RELATIVE FREQUENCY OF
URBAN HOMICIDE BY CIRCUMSTANCE

since then. Figure 2 represents the *relative* importance of the different types of homicide in the total. Included in this figure are statistics on the relative importance of "nontraditional" homicides—those that are thought to be felony related or that police leave unclassified or undocumented ("unknown circumstances"). As shown in Figure 2, these increase in relative importance between 1968 and 1973 (from 28.5 percent to 40.0 percent), but do not vary significantly thereafter. Indeed, the stability in the relative importance of nontraditional homicide after 1973 is quite remarkable. Robbery murder, the subcategory of greatest interest to this study, also remains fairly stable throughout most of this period.

If the nature of criminal homicide in fact has been evolving in recent years, as some commentators have claimed, this evolution is certainly not apparent in the statistics. Perhaps a different categorization, for example, focusing on the prior relationship between killer and victim, would exhibit an upward trend during the last decade. In any event, it appears that, in large cities, robbery murder and other forms of "nontraditional" homicide have maintained a constant share of the total criminal homicide count since 1973.
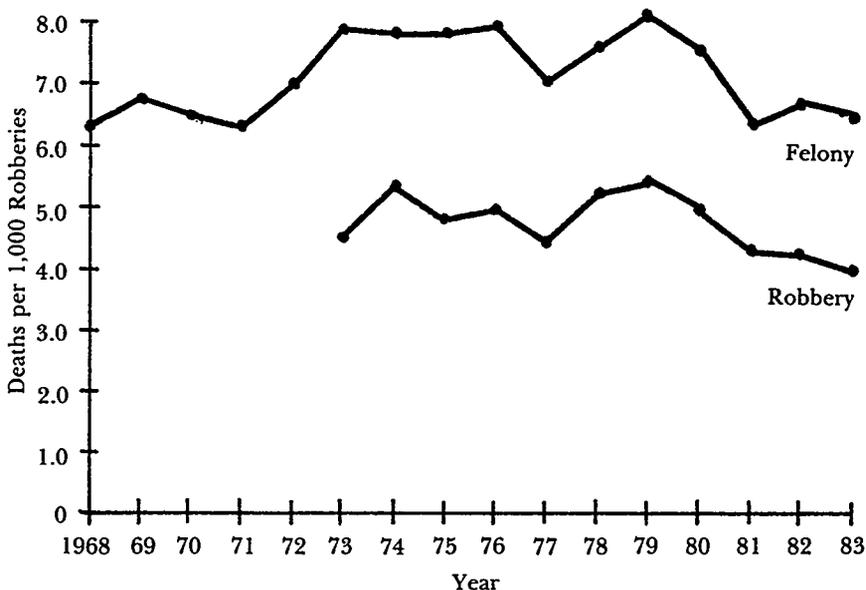
IV. TRENDS IN THE MURDER-ROBBERY RATIO

The statistics most relevant to deciding whether robberies have become more deadly are the annual ratios of the number of robbery murders to the number of robberies. To extend this analysis before 1973 (when the FBI first tabulated robbery murder as a separate category), the study also employs a related statistic—the ratio of the number of felony murders to the number of robberies. In recent years, robbery murders have constituted 60-70 percent of all felony murders. (The remaining felony murders occur in the context of burglary, rape, and other felonies.) Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that the number of robbery murders followed the same trend from 1968 to 1973 as the number of felony murders. Excluded from both series are those homicides classified as "suspected felony" or "unknown circumstance," both of which probably include some killings that actually were robbery related.

Figure 3 depicts the trends in the felony murder-robbery ratio and the robbery murder-robbery ratio. For the fifty-one large cities (excluding New York), the ratio of felony murders to robberies increased from about 6.6 per thousand in the 1968-1972 period to approximately 7.7 per thousand for the 1973-1980 period (with a brief drop in 1977).[14] This ratio fell substantially in 1981, thus

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[14] Franklin Zimring analyzed the robbery murder-robbery ratio in Detroit for the

FIGURE 3

VICTIM DEATH RATE

PER 1,000 URBAN ROBBERIES

returning to the 1968 level. The robbery murder-robbery ratio follows a similar trajectory for the years for which it can be computed. These statistics suggest that the propensity of robbers to kill their victims increased in the early 1970's and declined in the early 1980's. The accuracy of this conclusion is subject to challenge due to homicide classification problems and doubts about the consistency with which victims report robberies to the police.

There is reason to suspect that the FBI's robbery count grew faster than the "true" robbery count during the 1970's, in which case the trend in the robbery murder-robbery ratio reported above is misleading. From 1973 to 1980, the robbery rate for the nation grew by 33 percent while the National Crime Survey (NCS) robbery rate remained constant.[15] The NCS estimate's omission of commercial robberies cannot explain the disparity in growth rates between the FBI and NCS statistics.[16] One possibility suggested by these re-

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period 1962-1974. Zimring, *Determinants of the Death Rate from Robbery: A Detroit Time Study*, 6 J. LEGAL STUD. 317 (1977). The death rate per 1,000 robberies was trendless from 1962 to 1970. This rate doubled between 1970 and 1973, and then dropped slightly between 1973 and 1974. *Id.*

[15] P. COOK, *supra* note 2, at 4.

[16] If the increase in the FBI robbery rate between 1973 and 1980 was due to a rapid

sults is that the police knew of and recorded a higher fraction of robberies in 1980 than in the mid-1970's. This possibility receives some support from the trend in weapon use in reported robberies. The percentage of FBI robberies committed with a gun declined from 47.3 percent in 1974 and 1975 to 38.2 percent in 1980.[17] This trend might reflect an overall increase in the propensity to report robberies to the police if the proportional increase were larger for less serious robberies.[18] There is, however, other evidence suggesting that the true robbery rate *was* increasing in the 1970's, and therefore, that the increase in robbery rates reported by the FBI was genuine. Bank robberies, for example, which are reported to the authorities in almost all cases, increased 160 percent between 1973 and 1980.[19] Additionally, the criminal homicide rate, which is usually highly correlated with robbery, increased by 20 percent during this period in the fifty-one cities analyzed in this study. The FBI data probably give a more accurate indication of the true robbery rate trend than the NCS data.

V. CONCLUSIONS

What conclusions can be drawn from these observations? According to the police-generated FBI and SHR data, 1973 was a turning point. Robbery murders as a percentage of both total homicides and total robberies were increasing before 1973, but not thereafter. Indeed, a substantial reduction in the robbery murder-robbery ratio occurred in 1981. Thus, there is little support for the fears that there is a new breed of street criminals who cause more serious injuries and deaths in robberies. Very recent trends point in the other direction. Killing a robbery victim appears to be going out of fashion.

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increase in the commercial robbery rate coupled with a static noncommercial robbery rate, then the fraction of FBI robberies classified in the various "commercial" categories would have increased during this period. In fact, the fraction of such robberies remained roughly constant.

[17] The NCS asks respondents who report being victimized whether they reported the crime to the police. The resulting "reporting rate" for robbery victims did increase somewhat between 1973 (51 percent) and 1980 (57 percent). U.S. DEP'T OF JUSTICE, LAW ENFORCEMENT ASSISTANCE ADMIN., CRIMINAL VICTIMIZATION IN THE UNITED STATES, 1973, at 113; U.S. DEP'T OF JUSTICE, BUREAU OF JUSTICE STATISTICS, CRIMINAL VICTIMIZATION IN THE UNITED STATES, 1980, at 71. This alleged increase in reporting, however, could explain only about one-third of the 33 percent increase in the FBI robbery rate during this period if the "true" robbery rate was constant.

[18] *See* Block & Block, *supra* note 10.

[19] FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION, BANK CRIME STATISTICS: FEDERALLY INSURED FINANCIAL INSTITUTIONS (1973 & 1980) (unpublished tabulations). Robberies increased from 1,349 in the second half of 1973, to 3,526 in the second half of 1980. *Id.*