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What Are Crime Waves?

The Black Hand Strikes Again—*Most New Yorkers first learned about the crimes of the "Black Hand" in September of 1903. First the* New York Herald *and then other city dailies began an extensive coverage of what seemed to be a growing crime problem. For the residents of New York's Little Italies, however, the papers said nothing they didn't already know. For decades the members of the rapidly growing Italian immigrant communities in New York, New Jersey, Philadelphia, Buffalo, and elsewhere had been victimized by gangs of extortion artists who often identified themselves as members of various Black Hand societies.*

To be sure, there was nothing particularly sophisticated or complex about the typical Black Hand crime. A prosperous member of the Italian community might receive a letter in the mail or find it attached to the front door of the home or business. It would demand that a certain sum of money be paid to the sender by a particular date and under very specific conditions. The letter would describe, often in explicit detail, the dire consequences that would follow if the payment were not forthcoming. The victim or the victim's family might be threatened with violence. Alternatively, the letter might warn ominously that fires and explosions would occur unexpectedly and with devastating results. Typically, the letters were signed with a black handprint—a sure sign of terror to those who knew its meaning. Sometimes victims ignored the letters, in which case, a second or third might follow, escalating the threat or even reducing the amount of payment demanded. All too often, however, to ignore the demand was to risk serious harm. By the time the New York papers had begun to report on the Black Hand, crime, bombings, murders, mutilations, and beatings were becoming routine occurrences in most—if not all—cities with sizable Italian American populations. The victims, often alienated from and afraid of police departments that had no Italian members, were easily and increasingly exploited by the growing Black Hand menace.

While the extortionists tried to present an image of themselves as members of a single powerful criminal organization, most expert

observers agreed that Black Hand gangs were small-time, often solo operations that required little more than ready access to victims and some coal dust into which to dip the hand used to sign the letter. The Black Hand reign of terror would continue until the dawn of World War I. Before it was over, though, it would result in the development of a specialized policing squad in New York City, prompt the formation of citizen crime organizations in Chicago and elsewhere, and forge an indelible relationship in popular culture between Italian immigrant communities and violent criminal conspiracies.

The Lawless Years*—On a hot July night in 1934, the City of Chicago witnessed one of the climactic acts in a long-running crime wave that had gripped much of America. In the presence of a crowd milling around the Biograph Theater on North Lincoln Avenue, federal agents shot down one of the most notorious desperados of the era—John Dillinger. Dillinger and his gang, along with other celebrity bandits who sported media-friendly names like "Baby Face" Nelson, "Pretty Boy" Floyd, "Machine Gun" Kelly, and "Creepy" Karpis, commanded headlines for months as they robbed banks, broke out of jails, and took hostages. The publicity machine of J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI had been largely responsible for turning these rural Midwestern bank robbers into figures of national notoriety, and each time one fell or was captured, the status of Hoover and his agents climbed markedly.*

It was perhaps the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment in 1919 that should be seen as the logical starting point of the crime wave that would occupy Americans between the two world wars. Prohibition had turned every social drinker into a criminal, and many observers argued that the widespread lack of respect for the laws prohibiting the sale of alcohol translated into a more general disrespect for the law itself. Importantly, Prohibition provided the first real sustained market opportunity for the multiethnic urban gangs that existed in all major American cities. With a continual source of profit from the sale of illegal alcohol, these gangs grew larger and more powerful and established important protective links with corrupt urban politicians.

However, as the gangs sought to resolve conflicts that arose between them, violence was an inevitable result. The Illinois Crime Survey estimated, for instance, that in just 2 years (1926 and 1927), 130 unsolved gangland murders occurred in the City of Chicago. By the end of the decade of the 1920s, the nation and indeed much of the world would be shocked by an event that suggested how badly crime had spiraled in few short years. The so-called Saint Valentine's Day Massacre occurred when seven members of a rival gang were machine gunned in the early morning hours of February 14, 1929, most probably by members of the Al Capone mob. Within a few years, not only would Dillinger be killed, but Capone and many of the other famous crime figures between the wars would be dead or in prison.

Crime in the Streets—*Olympic Park in Irvington, New Jersey, was once known as one of the finest amusement parks in the eastern United States. By the 1960s, however, its better days were behind it. The fate of the park was sealed on the first day of May 1965 when a group of several hundred Newark youth went on a destructive rampage inside the park. When chased out of the park, they continued to destroy and vandalize property and to threaten residents of nearby neighborhoods. For many who witnessed or later learned of the event, the riot was just one more example of a general breakdown in law and order, which had been under way in America for some time.*

The 1960s saw the century's most massive increase in street crime. In the 12 years between 1959 and 1971, rates of street crime reported to the police more than quadrupled. Total violent crime rates more than tripled. The rate of robbery, perhaps the most feared and the most powerful symbol of crime in the streets, almost quadrupled between 1958 and 1970. Crimes against property, such as theft and burglary, also showed dramatic increases over the period.

The effects of the postwar crime wave were pervasive. Most generally, cities were perceived as steeped in crime, poverty, and violence. Those who could flee the city for the relative safety and security of the suburbs did so. As this more affluent, largely white population fled, a largely southern, rural, African American population became increasingly dominant in many urban areas. Detroit, for example, at the end of the Second World War was mainly a "white city." By the end of the 1960s, however, African Americans made up about half of the population. The civil disorder that emerged out of the racial and economic inequality of urban social structures only added to the fear and trepidation of many city dwellers.

There were also consequences for political discourse. For the first time, presidential politics were dominated by the problem of crime and urban disorder. "Crime in the streets," "victims' rights," and "law and order" emerged as potent campaign slogans.

The Devil Made Them Do It?—*The television documentary drew record audiences for a show of this type. The host, journalist Geraldo Rivera, warned viewers that America was in the midst of a satanic crime wave. "Every hour, every day," he told them, "their ranks are growing. Their crimes are vicious and bizarre and include child abuse, the production of child pornography, animal mutilation, grave desecration and grisly satanic murders."*

The television special, Devil Worship: Exposing Satan's Underground, *aired in October 1988. By this point, concern and anxiety about satanic crimes and criminals was almost a decade old. Since about 1980, a loose coalition of conservative religious groups, anticult organizations, politicians, and tabloid journalists had been spreading alarm about the threat that the growing level of satanic crime represented. Their claims almost defied belief:*

- *As many as 1,000,000 children are kidnapped each year and used in satanic ritual sacrifices*
- *In excess of 40,000 Americans are killed each year by satanists*
- *Satanists have taken over a large number of day care centers and are working to actively influence the content of music, television, and other forms of popular culture*

But how was it really possible, critics asked, for such activity to go unobserved by those in a position to prosecute the offenders? The response was disturbing. Satanists, we were told, were highly organized in order to escape detection. More important though, it was suggested, many police, judges, reporters, and prosecutors were part of the conspiracy.

Reliable evidence in support of the claims about satanic crime was hard to come by, and many of the claims simply defied logic and common sense. How could satanists be killing 40 to 50 thousand people per year without anyone noticing? What evidence could be offered that as many as 1,000,000 children were going missing every year? Nonetheless, the response to the crime wave in many sectors was swift and certain. Policing agencies developed special "cult cop" squads. A large number of psychotherapists began to specialize in helping patients "recover" earlier memories of child abuse. Parents' groups moved to pressure record labels to control the satanic imagery in music. Before the decade was over, the concern about the rise in satanic crime was a preoccupation not only of Americans but also of Canadians, Australians, Norwegians, the British, and the Dutch.

Bad Company—*To her fans, Martha Stewart was the epitome of good taste and homemaking ingenuity. In 2002, however, many came to think of her instead as a corporate criminal. Media outlets as diverse as the* Wall Street Journal *and* People *magazine reported allegations that Stewart had benefited from insider information that had allowed her to sell stock shares at a high price before the stock was to fall dramatically. Media interest in her possible criminal involvement was in large part a reaction to her celebrity. In March of 2004, a jury found Martha Stewart guilty on four counts of obstruction of justice and lying to investigators about a curiously timed stock sale. Of perhaps equal importance, though, was the wider context of the allegations.*

America in 2002 appeared to be in the middle of a "corporate crime wave" and when the allegations surfaced against Stewart, she was merely the most recent—if the most notable—offender. The corporate crime wave first came to public attention with the case of Enron, a very large energy company that declared bankruptcy in December of 2001. Subsequent investigation revealed that the kinds of crimes in which Enron executives had been involved lacked many of the subtleties that are sometimes associated with corporate offending. It was alleged, for instance, that they deliberately hid company losses and the degree of indebtedness from investors, and with full knowledge of these problems encouraged company employees to buy Enron stock.

In the months that followed, it became clear that Enron was not an isolated case, and a number of other financial scandals quickly surfaced. The companies involved in these scandals included Tyco, Global Crossing, Quest, WorldCom, Xerox, Adelphia, and others. The consequences were of course severe for investors and the employees of these companies. More generally, though, the scandals weakened the stock market and contributed to a general lack of confidence in the economic and moral order. The media had never really used terms like crime wave *or* crime spree *to describe corporate offending, but all that seemed to have changed.*

These Black Hand extortionists, prohibition-era gangsters, marauding street gangs, satanic conspirators, and corporate criminals are all actors in the kind of grand social dramas that this book explores. We refer to these dramas as *crime waves*. In the popular media, the rhetoric of politicians, and the proclamations of criminal justice officials, however, they are often known by other, related names including criminal crises, epidemics of crime, or crime panics. Whatever the name given to them, their essence is easily understood. What such dramas involve is a collective understanding that some crime problem is getting a lot worse. Sometimes, these crime problems are old and familiar and appear to be just reasserting themselves. Juvenile crime might be a good example of the kind of problem that seems to intrude into public consciousness with some degree of regularity (Gilbert, 1986). At other times, the problems seem new and different. The concern with serial killers in the 1980s (Jenkins, 1994) and cyberstalkers in the 1990s are good examples (Best, 1999).

In this book we use the term *crime wave* because it is preferable to many of the alternatives. *Epidemic* and *crisis* seem too sensationalist to serve as useful analytical categories. While the term *panic* is popular with many observers, it has its own problems (Cohen, 1972; Critcher, 2003; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994). For one thing, it seems to suggest a kind of psychological model of why things happen during such episodes. It is important to emphasize, though, that events unfold as they do not because people somehow "panic," but because of larger social forces. Indeed, according to sociologist Lee Clarke (2003) scholars, policy makers, and journalists have all exaggerated the degree of public irrationality or the tendency on the part of people to panic under extreme circumstances. In addition, the term *panic* implies that the fear people experience during such episodes, or that the precautions they take to protect themselves, are an "overreaction." In other words, when we speak of a moral panic we tend to speak of situations in which there is a response to some problem—like rising crime—that lacks proportionality.

Some observers have said, for instance, that after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, there was a moral panic in America about terrorism (Chapman & Harris, 2002). Many people refused to fly on airplanes or take vacations. Others became increasingly suspicious of anyone from the Middle East, and increasingly willing to suspend certain civil liberties in the name of security. The problem with the use of the label moral panic in this and related episodes is that we can't say with any degree of empirical precision how people *should* react or how afraid they are *supposed* to be. The concept of moral panic really gives us no guidelines regarding what is and what is not a proportionate response. Do people and governments sometimes overreact to threatening situations? Most observers would agree that they sometimes do. But it is difficult to determine whose perspective we are supposed to employ in judging what is and what not an overreaction.

Defining Crime Waves

The concept of crime wave avoids these problems. It also forces us to recognize that since these episodes behave in wave-like fashion, they are of limited duration. But what, more precisely, is a crime wave? This might seem like a simple question given the casual way in which the term is used by politicians and headline writers. After all, doesn't the term just imply some rapid upward and downward movement in the level of crime? Actually, the matter is somewhat more complicated.

What if the level of crime was to escalate rapidly, but aside from those who committed the crimes and those who were victimized by them, no one really noticed? Suppose in this case most people don't even know about—let alone feel concerned about—the increase. There are no demands that the police take any special action, and there are no widespread feelings of anxiety related to crime. Further, suppose that whatever increases do occur in crime levels are not even reflected in crime statistics because victims decide not to report these crimes to authorities. In these circumstances, do we really have a crime wave? This extreme scenario reminds us of the proverbial tree falling in the woods with no one around to determine whether or not it makes a noise.

At the other extreme, what if people act as though crime levels are escalating, even though an objective examination of the rates at which crimes occur would seem to indicate that crime levels are stable. Suppose they believe that crime is increasing and that the streets are becoming more dangerous. They demand that the police "do something" to make them safe from the tide of rising crime. What's going on here? It may be that as people become less willing to tolerate crime, their perceptions of the problem intensify. This decreased tolerance could result in more victims coming forward to report

crimes to the police. As a consequence, even the police statistics would register an increase. In contrast to the previous scenario, this one suggests a situation in which a tree is heard to fall in the forest although it hasn't actually fallen.

These examples suggest that the social phenomena of crime waves have multiple dimensions. While they are often about rising crime levels, they need not be. Indeed, rising crime levels in and of themselves may be neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for crime waves to occur. In a useful review of cross-cultural and historical research on the circumstances under which city-dwellers come to define their communities as dangerous, Sally Merry (1981) argued that while rising crime rates mattered in this regard, they were not the whole story. Most typically, the perception that crime waves are under way is also affected by other social conditions, such as rapid urban growth and the escalation of conflict between the diverse economic and cultural groups who call the city home. Her analysis revealed that we need a way of thinking about crime waves that can take into account shifts in both actual crime levels as well as in perceptions of and feelings about crime levels. A theoretical perspective known as social constructionism provides such a framework.

Social Constructionism

Social constructionism is a broad theoretical perspective that is useful for understanding a wide range of social problems (Holstein & Miller, 2003; Loseke, 1999; Loseke & Best, 2003; Spector & Kitsuse, 1977). As an approach, it contrasts with more "objectivist" perspectives that dominated the study of social problems for decades.

Objectivist approaches to social problems focus rather narrowly on the material conditions of problems (Loseke, 1999). Researchers working within this tradition might ask, for instance, "What sorts of neighborhood factors are associated with high levels of crime?" or "What causes poverty?" or "What kinds of people are most likely to engage in racist behavior?" Such questions assume that we know what the problematic conditions in society are and that all we really need to do is just investigate their objective dimensions. As an approach, objectivism is pretty unconcerned with how the members of a society at any particular point in time come to understand some conditions rather than others as troubling.

For constructionist writers, it is precisely these subjective perceptions of social conditions as problems that demand investigation (Spector & Kitsuse, 1977). As a result, they are led to ask a different kind of question: What are the social processes through which we come to understand what our social problems are? Constructionist writers warn us against naively assuming that it is simply the nature of the objective conditions themselves that drive this process.

In other words, what we see as our most urgent problems at any point in time are not necessarily those that produce the most harm (however this is defined). As the example at the beginning of the chapter demonstrated, satanism came to be seen as a significant social problem in the 1980s even though there was virtually no evidence to substantiate the claims that were made about its social problem status (Jenkins & Maier-Katkin, 1992; Richardson, Best, & Bromley, 1991).

We can say then that social constructionism is concerned with the study of the subjective meaning of social problems (Best, 1995). Why do some conditions rather than others seem to demand our attention? Why have we, as a society, been so much more worried about street crime historically than about corporate crime? Why do we become excited about the violent content of rap music but seem to have little to say about the violent content of country music? Why do we continue to believe that we are threatened most by the actions of strangers when it is actually the murderous rage of people we know best—friends and family—that is most likely to do us in? Social constructionism argues that the answers to these questions reside not in the objective circumstances themselves but in the meanings we assign to them.

Conditions come to be seen as problems not because they somehow demand it but because processes of collective definition confer the designation of "social problem" upon them. It is this process, and in the interests behind it, about which social constructionist writers are concerned. They argue that our collective view of social problems emerges out of a process of "claims-making" in which those who are interested in doing so, try to convince the rest of us that condition X is a problem and that something must be done about it (Spector & Kitsuse, 1977). It is to the study of such claims, the people who make them, and the conditions that affect their success that constructionist writers direct our attention.

An important aspect of this process concerns the manner in which social problems are "framed" (Loseke, 1999). The point here is that any particular social problem can be understood in many different ways, none of which is inevitable. Gambling, for instances, as a social problem can be seen as a crime, as a sickness, or as a moral failing. These problem frames have very different implications for how urgent we think the problem is, how it should be dealt with, and who should be given the resources and responsibility for ensuring that something is done (Gusfield, 1981). In a similar way, poverty might be understood as a problem that results from capitalist exploitation or as a problem that results from a lack of motivation of poor people. In a similar way, a "crime wave" can be thought of as a kind of social problem. The term implies that crime levels are escalating rapidly and that, as members of society, we face increasing threats to our values or to our personal safety.

As sociologist Mark Fishman (1978) has written,

> When we speak of a crime wave, we are talking about a kind of social aware-
> ness of crime, crime brought to public consciousness. It is something to be
> remarked upon at the corner grocery store, complained about in a commu-
> nity meeting and denounced at the mayor's press conference. One cannot be
> mugged by a crime wave but one can be scared. And one can put more police
> on the streets and enact new laws on the basis of fear. Crime waves may be
> "things of the mind" but they have real consequences. (p. 531)

It would be wrong, however, to suggest that crime waves specifically or
social problems generally are only subjective matters—or "things of the mind."
Claims-making about social problems always occurs in a social context. The
social context shapes and limits the manner in which the process of problem
definition unfolds. Importantly, sometimes—but not always—that context
includes rising rates of the behavior about which claims are made. This means
that any comprehensive discussion of crime waves must pay attention to ques-
tions about how and why crime levels change *and* about how and why crime
levels come to be seen as particular types of problems (Sacco, 2000a). Because
we live in both a physical and a symbolic world, we need to make use of expla-
nations that place both subjective and objective aspects of our social worlds on
the agenda for discussion (Loseke, 1999).

In many ways, this argument parallels the types of arguments that "label-
ing theorists" writing in the 1960s made about crime and deviance (Becker,
1963). These writers were interested in the study of how people come to be
seen as "deviant" and what implications the deviant label has for the ways in
which other people respond to them. As labeling theorists argued, it makes
sense to think about the labels separate from the people and the behavior that
is labeled. Sometimes deviant labels are "deserved" in the sense that the labeled
person has actually engaged in the behavior the label directs our attention
toward. In other cases, though, people are falsely labeled. Of course, in one
sense whether or not the label is deserved becomes irrelevant. What is common
to both cases is the way in which the label excites particular reactions.

In a parallel way, we can think of "crime waves" as a kind of episodic label-
ing. In this sense it is a label applied not to particular kinds of discrete acts or par-
ticular kinds of people but to particular kinds of social episodes. For the purposes
of our discussion, therefore, we can state simply that *a crime wave is under way
when there exist widely shared perceptions that a crime wave is under way.* Such per-
ceptions do not develop in random fashion, but are influenced by a range of social
factors, including rising crime levels and the actions of police, politicians, jour-
nalists, and even victims and offenders. But such influence does not just flow one
way. The widespread belief that a crime wave is under way also has implications
for how police, politicians, journalists, and victims and offenders behave.

This means that there is some sort of dynamic interaction between the objective and subjective dimensions of crime waves (Sacco, 2000a). Increases in crime can promote decreases in levels of tolerance for crime. As tolerance decreases, people might be more likely to report crime to the police or to fight back against the threat in any number of ways. The implication is an important one. It is not just crime but also social control and tolerance that behave in wave-like fashion. That crime waves might be produced by shifts in our willingness to arrest and prosecute offenders (rather than more directly by shifts in the behavior of offenders themselves) is an important theme to which we will return at later points in the book.

The relationship between the subjective and objective dimensions of crime waves is reminiscent of a very important distinction made many years ago by the sociologist C. Wright Mills (1959). Mills wrote that we experience social problems—crime included—as both private troubles and as public issues. To be a victim of crime, or even to be an offender, is to experience crime as a private trouble. The difficulties that the episode might create for us in terms of loss or injury or trouble with the law can have very personal consequences. However, our individual, personal experiences with crime provide the raw materials out of which crime as a public issue is built. This happens when effective arguments are made by academics, journalists, politicians, and advocacy groups that our personal experiences form a particular kind of pattern and when that pattern is successfully labeled as a "crime wave."

The Criminal Content of Crime Waves

Interestingly, of all our social problems, crime is the only one—with the obvious exception of "heat waves" (Klinenberg, 2003)—that is discussed in terms of its wave-like properties. We never read or hear, for instance, of poverty waves, homelessness waves, or war waves. The selective use of the term *wave* in journalistic and political discussions of social problems probably tells us more about popular culture than about the properties of the problems themselves.

While, in principle, any kind of crime might be said to be at the center of a crime wave, in reality our usage of the term tends to be restricted in some ways. First, the term tends to be used in describing more serious rather than less serious crimes. The examples given at the start of this chapter, for instance, all suggest quite consequential forms of crime and victimization. When we use the label crime wave, we seem to be implying that something of substance is occurring—that these changes relate injuries sustained, property damaged, and lives lost. While we could speak of crime waves involving "jaywalking" or "littering," we almost never do.

Second, the term *crime wave* tends to be used most commonly to describe changing patterns of common crime such as theft, murder, burglary, or robbery. The usage of the term to describe crimes of corporations or businesses

is much less common. Of course, one important exception to that was the wave of corporate crime that so many journalists and politicians have spoken and written about in recent years and that was summarized at the beginning of this chapter. Even in this case, a theme that ran though much of the coverage was the irony and novelty of using the term crime wave to describe the kinds of activities it is not typically used to describe.

Third, we tend not to use the term crime wave when we are attempting to describe crimes involving people who have some sort of intimate connection to each other. While we might find the term useful to describe trends in robbery or murder or burglary, we tend not to use it to describe shifts in the patterns of, for instance, wife assault. We rarely read a headline that describes upward shifts in levels of wife assault as a "crime wave" sweeping the nation. Of course, this is consistent with a more general tendency, in our society, not to think about such acts as crimes in the first place (even though they are).

Crime waves can be characterized in at least four different ways. Each way brings to the foreground some aspect of criminal events while it assigns others to the background.

VICTIMS

Some crime waves are identified principally in terms of the categories of people who are victimized. M. Dwayne Smith (1987), for example, has examined the argument that the decades of the 1970s and 1980s saw the emergence of a "new female victim." In essence he sought to determine whether changes in the content of women's roles during this period might have resulted in dramatic increases in victimization levels or in shifts with respect to the kinds of crime that victimize women. While he did find an increase in the likelihood that women would be victims of property crime (especially robbery), the rates of violent crime experienced by women during the period were very stable.

In most cases, those who seek to argue that a crime wave is under way tend to stress the innocence and vulnerability of victims. In the 1970s, for instance, there was considerable public discussion about a "crime wave against the elderly" (Cook & Skogan, 1990). Increasingly, during this period, lawmakers, police, and journalists argued that the rate of crimes against older Americans was escalating rapidly. Crimes against the elderly came to be understood as a new national crisis, and policy measures intended to deal with the problem were quickly mounted (Fattah & Sacco, 1989). Police formed special squads, Congress held numerous hearings, and community groups sought through myriad ways to stem the rising tide of criminal danger. By the decade's end, the problem of crime against the elderly seemed to have gone away. As we will discuss later, there is serious reason to question whether the wave of elderly victimization ever happened.

A decade later, the concern was with the safety of children rather than the elderly (Best, 1990). The 1980s saw a number of claims expressed about the

ways in which children in American society were at risk—especially at the hands of dangerous strangers. These threats included the contamination of Halloween treats, the growing problem of satanic day cares, child molestation, and, most notably, child abduction (Forst & Blomquist, 1991). As in the case of the crimes against the elderly, much of this wave seemed to have more to do with changes in the ways in which people felt about and experienced the dangers of the world than with changes in those dangers themselves.

Whether or not a crime wave is under way may depend very much on the perspective that victims and non-victims bring to the situation. According to an old expression, "A recession is when your friend is out of work, a depression is when you are out of work." In a similar way, the acceptance of the view that that a crime wave is (or is not) under way probably bears some relationship to how victimization is distributed in society.

Of particular relevance in this respect is the issue of "repeat victimization" (Farrell & Pease, 2001). Increasingly, in recent years researchers have come to realize that some people (and households) seem much more likely to be victimized repeatedly than other people or households. Indeed, having been victimized in the past is an important risk factor for being victimized in the future. This might seem counterintuitive. Most of us tend to think that once we have been victimized, we have more or less gotten the experience out of the way. As a result, we should be safer rather than less safe. Research suggests otherwise, however. British researchers Ken Pease and Gloria Laycock (1996) reported that about 4% of surveyed victims suffer about 44% of the victimizations. Clearly, some people are victimized repeatedly and most people are not victimized at all.

The implications of such an unequal distribution of victimization can be quite profound for the study of crime waves. This is shown in an analysis undertaken by Tim Hope (1995), another British researcher. Hope was able to show that when one looks at the overall rate of crime, it is possible that very little change will be observed over time. Yet when we focus on the problem of repeat victimization we might see that even though the overall rate is stable, there can be a redistribution of victim experiences within the victim population. In such a scenario, roughly the same number of victimizations can be concentrated within a much smaller group of victims. This situation is comparable to an economic pattern in which the overall indicators are stable while the gap between rich and poor increases. Who thinks a crime wave is under way and who does not might depend very much on the character of one's own victim experiences.

OFFENDERS

Sometimes crime waves are identified with reference to the offender rather than the victim. When we talk about the wave of "juvenile crime," for instance, it is those who commit the crimes who draw our attention.

Coincident with the wave of crime against the elderly in the 1970s was a concern about huge increases in the number of elderly offenders (Fattah & Sacco, 1989). Journalists and others began to use the expression "geriatric crime wave" to describe the phenomenon. While prior stereotypes had pictured the elderly offender as someone who engaged in isolated and sporadic acts of shoplifting (prompted perhaps by need), it was argued that the elderly were committing both more crimes and more serious crimes. Magazine feature writers and others saw this as an interesting new twist to the by-then familiar story about elderly victims of crime. An analysis of national arrest data for a 15-year period (1967-1982) revealed, however, that the elderly crime wave was much more about rhetoric than about substance (Cullen, Wozniak, & Frank, 1985). During the period in question, and for a variety of crimes, elderly Americans constituted less than 1% of arrestees. Moreover, these data indicated that older Americans' pattern of criminal involvement remained remarkably constant during the period.

The serial killer crime wave of the 1980s provides a useful example of how offender-centered crime waves are defined (Jenkins, 1994). During this period, the serial killer almost became a national preoccupation. There were movies, television dramas and "documentaries," and a limitless number of "true crime" books and memoirs of "profilers." We were told that the number of serial killers had reached epidemic proportions and that serial murder made up as much as 25% of all homicides. While the serial killer might have particular social and demographic characteristics (they tended to be white men), they could be anyone who had these characteristics. Moreover, we were warned that the serial killer seemed to be a uniquely American problem. At the heart of the serial killer problem, of course, was the issue of "random violence" (Best, 1999). Serial killers, we were advised, could strike anyone at any point. While we learned very little, and can probably recall even less about their victims, the names Ted Bundy, Joel Rifkin, and Jeffrey Dahmer, among others, are emblazoned on our collective consciousness.

CRIMINAL EVENTS

Crime waves are sometimes described with reference to the uniqueness of the event rather than with reference to the uniqueness of the offenders or the victims. The "Black Hand" crime wave discussed at the beginning of the chapter, for instance, was about a particular kind of criminal transaction. It was the nature of the extortion, but especially the powerful symbolic elements of an ominous handprint, that gave the crime wave its defining feature (Sacco, 2003). This is evidenced in part by the tendency of journalists of the time to create words that conveyed the essense of the offense. So, being "blackhanded" meant being the object of extortion, "blackhandism" was the practice of extortion, and of course a "black hander" was one who practiced extortion.

In a similar way, the garroting crime wave in Boston in 1865 referred to a new kind of crime (Adler, 1996). While garroting was a form of robbery, it had some unique and elaborate characteristics. One of the assailants would grab the victim's throat from behind and pull the victim backwards over the assailant's knees. A second attacker would hold the victim's knees to prevent him from kicking back and a third would quickly rifle through the victim's pockets. Needless to say, the crimes were committed quickly, under cover of darkness, and typically in public places.

More recently, we have heard about crime waves involving "carjacking," "home invasion," "stalking," and "hate crime." In its historical context, each represents a new kind of crime and a new kind of victim—at least as far as the labels are concerned (Best, 1999). While many of the behaviors predate the labels, these crime categories were all largely inventions of the 1980s and 1990s. In a sense, each category suggested a new way in which the world was getting worse and a new and more serious strain of the crime problem that required attention.

PLACES

In some cases, we speak of crime waves in terms of the places in which they occur. In other words, it is the setting, rather than the participants or trans-actions, that identifies and describes the problem. In this way, we speak, for instance of "workplace" crime or "domestic violence." More broadly, we some-times talk about "urban" crime waves, implying that whatever problems do exist have less to do with the more rural regions of the country than with the cities.

One of the places that has been at the center of crime wave construction in recent years is the school (Chandler, Chapman, Rand, & Taylor, 1998; Toby, 1995). Owing in large part to a number of high-visibility incidents, school vio-lence has come to be seen as a major problem. The best known such incident, of course, occurred on April 20, 1999, when two fully armed students entered Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. The death toll from this one incident was 13, in addition to the two shooters, and the nation was shocked. What made the event all the more frightening to many, though, was the feeling that the incident was part of a larger, worsening pattern (Fox & Levin, 2001). Other deadly incidents occurred in Pearl, Mississippi; West Paducah, Kentucky; Jonesboro, Arkansas; and elsewhere. In March of 2001 a shooting at Santana High School in Santee, California, left two people dead and 13 more injured and gave new life to the worries and anxieties that parents and others felt about the "epidemic" of school violence.

In the wake of these high visibility offenses, the view that a school violence crime wave was under way seemed pretty evident. As with many crimes waves, though, this one seemed to have more to do with perceptions than with

objective realities. A number of different types of research suggest that, overall, violent school deaths were actually decreasing rather than increasing during this period (Best, 2003). As well, surveys of students indicated that many non-lethal forms of violence were also in decline. This is consistent with the more general decline in crime rates that was evident during the 1990s. While the media frenzy about unsafe schools continued unabated during the last decade of the century, the empirical evidence continued to support the idea that the risks of violence in schools, for most students, most of the time, were extremely low. According to Best (2003), for every million children who attend school, there is less than one violent school-related death per year. Moreover, only about 1% of children killed by violence are hurt at school, even though they spend such a large amount of time there.
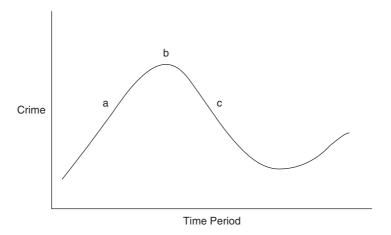

Figure 1.1   Standard (Crime) Wave Graph

The Nature of Waves

The concept of "wave" is usually employed to describe natural phenomena, and it generally conjures up two kinds of visual images. The first is pictured in Figure 1.1. The figure graphs some phenomenon y over some time period measured along the x axis. The y variable in which we would be most inter-ested, of course, would be the level of crime. As the wave unfolds, we see the level of crime rise sharply, reach a kind of peak, and then decline. Figure 1.1 sug-gests that the hypothetical crime wave has three key points—a rise (a), a peak (b),

and a decline (c). While placement in any one of those regions would suggest we are "in a crime wave," our colloquial use of the term tends to be restricted to the rise. We are unlikely ever to hear anyone say that there is a crime wave under way when the levels are falling. Of course, criminologists, particularly in recent years, have become very interested in the study of falling crime levels, but these declines are often described as occurring after rather during the crime wave.

Gary LaFree (1999) and other scholars who focus on the study of crime waves as objective phenomena emphasize that crime waves have several properties that require investigation. One such property is "wave length." We can argue that crime waves suggest phenomena at some intermediate position between two extremes. At one extreme are riots. In riots, the escalation and de-escalation of, for instance, violence or vandalism are very rapid (Locher, 2002). Within perhaps hours or even minutes, the number of incidents increases and then declines. A riot is a crime wave within a very condensed time frame. At the other extreme are long-range trends. How do crime levels change across the centuries? Historian Eric Monkkonen (2001) argues that it is important to distinguish short-term changes from "the long sweep of big events." In his analysis of New York City homicides over two centuries, Monkkonen identifies three distinct "waves" of about 60 years each. The first two waves crested in 1864 and 1931, and the most recent crested in 1991. Troughs occurred in the 1820s to 1830s, around 1890 to 1900, and in the late 1940s to early 1950s. While there is again no precise rule, in general we are interested in somewhat more short-term and episodic phenomena. The long sweeps that Monkkonen describes are perhaps best understood as tides rather than waves.

Another property discussed by LaFree is "wave shape." Do waves rise as rapidly as they fall? We might also ask, for instance, whether or not crime waves are symmetric or asymmetric with respect to the kinds of factors that affect their rise and fall. In other words, if a worsening economy drives crime rates up, does it follow that the crime rate will fall in equal proportions when the economy improves? To assume that it will, is to assume that the relationships are symmetrical. While some kinds of causal variables might relate to crime-level changes in this way, it would probably be an error to think that they all do.

A third property of crime waves identified by LaFree is the degree of "linearity." Again, we might be tempted to assume, for instance, that as the economy worsens, changes in the crime rate will be proportionate and consistent. It is possible, however, that the relationship will indeed be linear until the economy reaches a particular level, after which the rise in the crime rate will be much more rapid. Garland F. White (2001) has shown, for instance, that the relationship between rising crime and home ownership is characterized by such a "tipping" process. In other words, rising rates of crime can reach a level at which their impact on home ownership is especially profound. A point is

reached at which larger numbers of people than we would expect, given observed effects of crime on ownership, decide to move to another neighborhood. Such large-scale shifts in population further contribute to what are by now rapidly deteriorating neighborhood conditions.

Finally, LaFree says we need to ask if crime waves are synchronous or asynchronous. In other words, when crime waves are under way, how far do they extend? Is a particular crime wave an urban phenomenon? Or is it regional or national or even international in scope? A study by Morton D. Winsberg (1993) of violent and property crime rates in American states during the period 1971 to 1991 found that a majority of the states experienced equivalent fluctuations. This was true even though the states differed from each other in terms of key socioeconomic indicators and even though some states had far higher crime rates than others. In a different way, Martin Killias and Marcelo F. Aebi (2000) compared crime trend data from 36 European countries with rates for the United States for the period 1990 to 1996. Their analysis showed that the European and American trends exhibited different rather than similar patterns over the period.

How much crime and how much change does it take to have a crime wave? As stated, crime waves are often about more than the behavior of aggregate crime levels. When we think about crime waves in terms of fear, anxiety, and the intensification of public concern and public interest, it may be meaningless to talk about some sort of necessary minimum. There is, of course, no rule about the number of people who must be involved before the press or other claims-makers label an episode a crime wave. For instance, what are we to make of the episode that involved the victimization of tourists in Florida during the 1990s (Greek, 1993)? In a single year, 10 tourists were killed and the media were quick to label this a "crime wave." Many people cancelled travel plans and Florida communities engaged in very active advertising blitzes to convince potential travelers that Florida was actually a safe place to visit. As well, new and special precautions were taken at highway rest stops and hotels and other places in which tourists would likely find themselves.

We can debate whether 10 killings of tourists in a single year constitutes a crime wave. Perhaps in absolute numbers it would seem so. At the time of the attacks, however, context was quickly provided by the Florida Department of Law Enforcement. According to data posted on the Department's Web site (http://www.fdle.state.fl.us/fsac/archives/visitor_crime.asp), Florida hosted an estimated record *42 million* visitors in 1995—up from approximately 40 million in 1994. In 1994, only seven-hundredths of one percent (0.07%) of these visitors were victims of crime. And, from the total of visitors, only six-thousandths of one percent (0.006%) were physically injured. Of the total reported victims of crime in Florida in 1994, less than 2.5% were nonresidents. The vast majority of Florida's visitors, the Web site advises, "do not become

victims of any criminal activity during their stay." Certainly, though, in terms of the ways in which people were thinking and acting, a crime wave was under way.

Even more interesting in this respect is what journalists and even law enforcement officials sometimes call the "one-man crime wave." Offenders differ from each other, of course, with respect to how "productive" they are. Some commit a very large number of crimes over the course of a criminal career while others commit far fewer. The phrase "one-man crime wave" is used to describe the kind of offender who is very actively and very consistently involved in the commission of crime. As an example, an offender by the name of Eric Edgar Cooke, who was active in Perth, Australia, in the early 1960s, is often referred to this way (Kidd, n.d.). In addition to murder, Cooke confessed to breaking into more than 250 homes in suburbs around Perth. He also confessed to having stolen dozens of cars and to committing a large number of assaults on women. Andy Hochstetler (2002) observes that even a casual review of the rap sheets of street criminals reveals that it is quite common for them to commit a large number of crimes in a relatively short period of time. Extended episodes of this sort are referred to by police and by offenders themselves as "sprees" or "runs." The former term refers to the situation in which at least two offenses are committed without a break in the action. In contrast, a run involves a situation in which a string of serial crimes is interrupted by sleep, or perhaps by drug-induced inactivity.

A second visual image gives us a somewhat different perspective on the shape and character of waves and is pictured in Figure 1.2. This figure provides an overhead view of the undulation that occurs when, for instance, a stone is dropped into a puddle of water. In many ways, Figure 1.2 comes closer to capturing the colloquial meaning of crime waves—the kind of continual disturbance that comes from some identifiable point of origin and affects the larger body. The description of the crime waves that began this chapter—Black Hand or satanic conspiracies, midwestern gangsterism, and the rest—evoke similar images of criminological pebbles producing consequences that move through the rest of the pond that is society.

Some Uses of Crime Waves

Because we can argue that crime waves are, to a large degree, the product of successful episodic labeling, it might be a good idea to ask in whose interest it is to promote the idea that a crime wave is under way. This question emerges as an important theme in the chapters that follow. Nevertheless, it might be helpful here to give some broad sense of the cast of characters who move the crime wave drama along.

Of course, crime can have a devastating impact on the lives of those who are affected by it. Some people are injured and others die. Some lose their property, and they can suffer emotionally and psychologically. Still others get
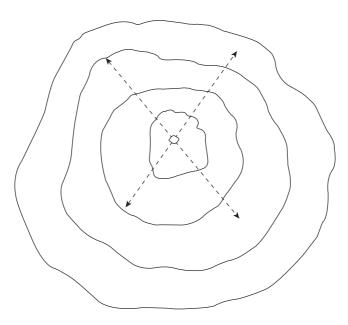
Figure 1.2   Overhead View of Wave

caught up in the mechanisms of a criminal justice system and suffer stigma or the loss of freedom. None of this is in dispute. A more balanced analysis, however, also requires us to be attentive to some of the ways in which public excitement about crime waves produces dividends—sometimes unanticipated—for a variety of groups in society.

POLITICIANS

Politicians can derive considerable benefit from the promotion of a widespread public perception of crisis. In such circumstances, people can often be more easily manipulated toward certain ends if they believe that their interests are under some growing threat. Crime waves are ideal tools for the politician to use in such circumstances. For one thing, they are issues that are pretty unlikely to be controversial, so there is not much risk of alienating voters. With respect to the supposed crime wave against the elderly in the 1970s, politicians took few risks in speaking out loudly and often about the threat to America's seniors. No "pro elderly-victimization" group existed that might be alienated by the fiery rhetoric. Crime waves give politicians an opportunity to talk tough and to promote what are often largely symbolic measures that they claim will combat the problem. Often such measures involve the passage of severe laws meant to control those responsible for the crime wave. The nature of the problem and the proposed solution often make it relatively easy to build broad-based constituencies that even cross party lines. The passage of law is relatively easily achieved and is a moment loaded with photo opportunities. What such

laws actually accomplish is another matter entirely. Too often they are redundant with laws that already exist and in many cases they lack the resource infrastructure that might actually make them effective. Effectiveness is sometimes beside the point, however, since it is the demonstrable effort that really matters.

MEDIA PERSONNEL

Clearly, crime waves are great news stories. Throughout the history of popular media, crime has occupied a very prominent position (Sacco, 1995). Daily newspapers are filled with crime stories, and any viewer of local television news can easily appreciate the journalistic aphorism, "If it bleeds, it leads." Crime waves provide themes around which disparate crime stories, which are the bedrock of local crime news, can be built. In his analysis, for example, of a 1976 New York City crime wave against the elderly, Mark Fishman (1978) found that the crime wave was given prominent coverage by the city's three daily newspapers and five local television stations. "Crime against the elderly" served as a kind of unifying concept that gave coherence to stories that might, on the surface, not be seen to have very much to do with each other.

Joel Best (1999) argues that crime waves seem to be a 19th-century invention. The rapidly developing daily press, intended to attract the readership of the often illiterate or semi-literate urban masses, provided a kind of showcase for melodramatic and sensationalist crime reporting. Prior to this period, Best argues, crime news tended to focus on the particulars of the case at hand. For example, the murder in 1836 of a New York prostitute named Helen Jewittt (Cohen, 1998) became a kind of "crime of the century." Yet Best notes that the coverage of this case was not generalized in the press to stories about a larger problem of violence against prostitutes. In contrast, the tendency in contemporary media to find news themes in crime reporting, to generalize from the particular case to a broader problem, is, as we shall see, one of the defining features of crime wave construction in the media. In the media's reporting of the satanic crime wave of the 1980s, for instance, widely disconnected events as diverse as the assumed desecration of a local graveyard to allegations of abuse in a day care center across the country could be connected through the satanic crime wave theme.

As we will discuss later, crime news is easy to gather and to report, and crime waves provide an opportunity for the detailed exploration of themes that have traditionally proven quite popular with news consumers.

It is not just the news that profits from the emergence of crime waves, however. Movies, "true crime" books, and other popular forms of entertainment also ride the wave to ratings success. Particularly important in this respect is the "reality show" genre that came to television prominence in the 1980s (Fishman & Cavender, 1998). All of these products of popular culture tend to reflect the broad-based assumption that crime—especially violent crime—is rampant. Other forms of media, for instance talk shows and

made-for-television movies, often are among the first kinds of formats to popularize new problems that, it is typically claimed, affect large numbers of people, even though knowledge of the condition is not widespread (Rapping, 1992).

EXPERTS

Experts, academic and otherwise, often assume a primary role in the popularization of crime waves. They sometimes build quite substantial professional reputations on their purported understanding of the size and dimensions of the crime problem. As experts, they become the authors of best-selling books, stars on the lecture circuit, and the talking heads who are almost permanent fixtures on cable television whenever commentary about a crime wave is judged necessary. Experts are able to lend an air of legitimacy to claims or predictions about crime waves. Their scholarly or other professional credentials suggest objectivity and disinterest to many who hear or read their pronouncements.

> Experts were instrumental in promoting the idea of a crime wave of "super predators," for example. In 1996, then-Princeton sociologist John J. DiIulio, along with two coauthors, published *Body Count*, which warned of a coming tide of violent and predatory juvenile crime. The authors warned that, as high as America's body count is today, a rising tide of youth crime and violence is about to raise it even higher. A new generation of street criminals is upon us—the youngest, biggest and baddest generation any society has ever known. (Bennett, DiIulio, & Walter, 1996, p. 26)

The super-predators would be brutal and "radically impulsive" and would be, in larger numbers than ever, preteen boys, who commit the most serious crimes. For DiIulio and his coauthors this problem had its roots in the inner city where children grow up surrounded by teenagers and adults who are themselves deviant, delinquent, or criminal. By the turn of the century, they warned, the numbers of such super-predators would have increased dramatically. Other experts, along with the mass media and political speechwriters, began to use the term *super-predator* with remarkable ease.

However, the predictions about the coming crime wave never materialized. Rather than increasing, rates of juvenile crime were in decline by the century's end. At best the predictions were merely misguided. At worst, the critics charged they were a covert expression of ultra-conservative politics or, as one critic charged, "utter madness" (Becker, 2001). While DiIulio himself tried to recant, the theory of the super-predators had taken on a life of its own. Increasingly, assumptions about the coming wave of youth violence were used to justify the use of punishment rather than treatment for delinquent youth, and the movement of youth from juvenile to adult courts.

The super-predator episode—in the early stages at least—lent prestige and visibility to those who spoke on the subject with scholarly authority. It is not the only example. Indeed, experts typically form part of any movement that declares a crime wave under way or about to get under way, including those relating to workplace violence, bullying, and crime against the elderly.

While academics are often cited as experts by news stories, a careful analysis of how expertise is used by journalists to report on the crime problem revealed that "intellectuals" were less often cited as experts than were "state managers" (i.e., police officials or political leaders; Welch, Fenwick, & Roberts, 1998). In particular, when specific attention was directed toward the coverage of exaggerated risks of crime, these state managers were much more likely than academics to be relied upon for comment.

POLICING AGENCIES

Policing agencies, like politicians, can gain considerable benefit as public awareness spreads that a crime wave is under way. Typically, the members of the general public are less likely to blame the police for the crime wave than they are to blame the media, liberal social policy, and especially the courts (Sacco, 1998). Crime waves allow policing agencies to plead an effective bureaucratic case of the public servant overwhelmed by the problems at hand but struggling valiantly to "serve and protect." At the same time, requests for new hardware and bigger budgets generally are pressed most effectively when problems reach a crisis stage.

Perhaps the FBI, and its public relations specialists, has shown most clearly how organizational self-presentation can be augmented by a crime wave. In the wave of midwestern bank robberies discussed at the start of the chapter, for instance, the strategy was to create villains of almost mythic proportion who clearly suggested the need for a hero equal to the task (Potter, 1998; Powers, 1983).

The strategy was used again during the serial killer epidemic of the 1980s when the FBI effectively made the case (through its support of books, films, and television shows) that only the kind of scientific law enforcement for which the FBI was famous could deal with the epidemic of serial murder sweeping North America (Jenkins, 1994).

Claims by law enforcement personnel that the threat of crime is escalating of necessity imply the need for an escalation of the response. This often seems to mean the need for helicopters, assault vehicles, and other forms of expensive surveillance technology (Parenti, 1999). This militarization of urban places, which was already a trend in policing in the 1990s, accelerated after the attack on the World Trade Center in 2001.

OFFENDERS

It may seem odd to suggest that offenders might have something to gain directly from the fact that their crimes are seen as part of an escalating crime wave, but there are surely cases in which this is true. For any particular offender, a predatory crime might be more easily accomplished if the victim believes that the offender is one of the frightening new variety to which the media have been paying so much attention lately.

An example of this phenomenon can be found in the Black Hand crime wave that terrorized residents of the Little Italies in New York (and other cities) in the first few years of the 20th century (Lombardo, 2002; Pitkin & Cordasco, 1977; Sacco, 2003). As discussed at the beginning of the chapter, Black Hand extortion was successful largely because victims believed that their offenders were part of a large and powerful criminal conspiracy. It seems pretty clear, however, that this was not the case. Instead, most Black Hand operations were small groups or even sole operators who used the threat of the powerful—if mythical—organization to accomplish their criminal ends. Thus, the snowball effect of newspaper coverage created a kind of momentum that made it much easier to be an extortionist while the crime wave was under way than before it started.

VICTIMS

Victims—or rather the spokespersons of victim organizations—are often among the first and most vocal claimants to argue that a sizeable problem exists and that it is getting worse (Weed, 1990). Of course, it is through such claims that attention is drawn to the plight of crime victims. One consequence might be that steps will be taken to provide victims with support or compensation.

Several victim advocates have become familiar figures in the American popular cultural landscape. John Walsh, for instance, the father of murdered child Adam Walsh, became an early spokesperson in the movement to protect missing and exploited children. Subsequently, he became the host of the very popular Fox television program *America's Most Wanted* and later host of his own daytime television talk show.

Less visible, but perhaps not less influential is Candy Lightener, founder of MADD, Mothers Against Drunk Driving (Reinarman, 1988). In May 1980 her 13-year-old daughter Cari was killed by a hit-and-run driver in a Sacramento suburb. The subsequent discovery that the intoxicated driver was on probation for a previous DUI ("driving under the influence") conviction and the leniency with which the driver was treated by the justice system prompted her to take action. Lightener went on to spearhead an international movement that aims to affect legislation and to educate the general public about the drinking-and-driving problem.

As in the case of MADD, many victims groups have become large and influential national organizations (Weed, 1995). Some critics talk of a "victim industry" and suggest that there are many incentives among the leadership in these movements to exaggerate the size of the victim population (Best, 1999; Fattah, 1986). Some groups have been able to lobby effectively for the rights of victims to be respected by the police, heard in court, and compensated by the state. To a considerable degree this has been accomplished by making the persuasive arguments that what happened to them, or to their family members, could also happen to any one of us. Such claims are obviously made more forcefully when the risks associated with crime are thought to be on the rise.

SECURITY INDUSTRY

Rising rates of crime can mean that many people feel personally threatened. If they come to believe that, in increasing numbers, super-predators walk the streets, satanists are after their children, or those to whom they entrust their savings cannot be trusted, they will take steps to protect themselves. Often these steps involve the private actions of individuals and groups rather than the public actions of governments. In this way, safety from the rising tide of crime comes to be seen as a commodity to be bought and sold in the marketplace.

The kinds of measures people take are many and diverse (Lab, 1992). They buy home burglar alarms, guard dogs, and whistles. They install bars and extra locks on doors and windows. Increasingly, they demand that the places where they work, the schools they attend, and the neighborhoods where they live have levels of security beyond that which they think the police can provide. Those who can afford to do so, move to gated communities or to apartment buildings with elaborate screening systems (Blakely, 1997). More and more use is made in a variety of public settings of video cameras to monitor behavior and presumably control what we believe to be escalating risks.

Of course, when security becomes a commodity, there are fortunes to be made. The growth of private policing and the proliferation of a large number of very sophisticated, very costly security technologies means that private security has become a growth industry. In the United States (as in Canada, South Africa, and Australia) there are more police in the employ of private agencies than there are in the employ of the state. In 1996, while there were 354 police officers for every 100,000 inhabitants, there were 582 private security personnel. Indeed, according to David Bayley and Clifford Shearing (2001), today people on their way to work or to shop are as likely to see private security personnel guarding and patrolling as they are to see public police. Especially since the events of September 11, 2001, the money to be made from the exploitation of citizen anxieties, relating not only to terrorism but also to a host of sometimes ill-defined threats, has increased remarkably.

Conclusion

When asked what pornography is, a famous jurist once said that while he may not have been able to define it, he knew it when he saw it. We can make a parallel statement with respect to crime waves. While we have trouble defining them precisely, we can tell by reading a variety of cues whether or not one is under way. There is more talk about crime, more anxiety, more discussion in the media, more worry about what is to be done.

The suggestion that crime waves are really only about the ways in which crime levels change does not take us as far into the investigation of the crime wave phenomenon as we would like. Indeed, sometimes crime rates do go up during crime waves—but sometimes they do not. Moreover, even when crime rates do go up, it is not entirely clear what the increase means. As we will see in later chapters, crime rates can go up not only because more people are committing more crime but also because we are counting crime better than we used to or because we are policing crime more effectively than we used to. These latter two kinds of pressure on the crime rate suggest that the social climate of the crime wave may be an important source of the escalation.

By now the reader might be asking a simple but important question—what does all of this have to do with me? The easy answer is, "A great deal." This is perhaps most obvious for the student of criminology. As we will see in subsequent chapters, the study of crime waves requires us to investigate a wide range of criminological issues relating to, for instance, crime measurement, crime policy, public perceptions of crime, and crime and the mass media. The critical analysis of crime waves benefits those who might have only a passing interest in academic criminology, however. All of us, in our day-to-day lives as members of society, can find ourselves playing roles in crime wave dramas. Law-and-order political candidates ask for our votes. Broadcasters do their best to get us to watch commercials by telling us that if we miss the news tonight we miss vital information about the newest scourge sweeping the land. E-mails bombard our computers, warning us about increases in the activities of marauding youth gangs and urban terrorists. Through a wide variety of channels we are asked to feel compassion for the victims of crime and hostility for those who commit it. Perhaps we ourselves are victims or offenders and seek to put our own situations in some larger context. In order to address any of these issues, it is necessary that we be able to approach what we are told about crime waves by journalists, politicians, and other "opinion makers" as informed consumers. In the marketplace of crime information, as in any other marketplace, critical skills and healthy skepticism are the first lines of defense.