3 The Measurement and Patterning of Criminal Behavior

LEARNING OBJECTIVES
1. Describe how crime data come to be included in the Uniform Crime Reports (UCR)
2. Discuss the problems associated with UCR data
3. Describe how victimization data are measured by the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS)
4. Discuss the limitations of NCVS data
5. Explain the value of self-report studies
6. Describe the geographical differences in crime rates within the United States
7. Explain why women’s crime rates are lower than men’s crime rates
8. Explain why the crime rates of African Americans and Latinos appear to be higher than the crime rates of whites

CHAPTER OUTLINE
Measuring Crime
   Uniform Crime Reports
   National Crime Victimization Survey
   Self-Report Studies
   Evaluating UCR, NCVS, and Self-Report Data
Recent Trends in U.S. Crime Rates
Patterning of Criminal Behavior
   Geographical Patterns
   Crime and Controversy: Why Has the Crime Rate Dropped Since the Early 1990s?
   International Focus: Measuring Crime in Other Nations
   Seasonal and Climatological Variations
Social Patterns of Criminal Behavior
Gender and Crime
Race, Ethnicity, and Crime
Social Class and Crime
Age and Crime
Chronic Offenders and Criminal Careers
Conclusion

Crime in the News

In May 2013, the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel won a prestigious award for a series of articles documenting police misreporting of crime in Milwaukee. The newspaper found that the city’s police had failed for several years to record thousands of serious crimes, including rapes, aggravated assaults, robberies, and burglaries, as the actual crimes they were. Instead, the police had reported these crimes, including many involving weapons and significant injuries, as more minor offenses. This practice meant that these crimes were missing from the count of serious crimes that the city transmitted to the federal government. These missing crimes thus artificially and misleadingly reduced the city’s crime rate.


This news story from Milwaukee raises a very interesting and important question: How accurate are crime statistics? When the U.S. Congress investigated the Watergate scandal four decades ago that forced President Richard Nixon to resign, Republican Senator Howard Baker of Tennessee repeatedly asked about the president, “What did he know and when did he know it?” The Milwaukee story suggests that a similar question might be asked of the measurement of crime: What do we know and how do we know it? Accurate answers to this question are essential for the creation of fair criminal justice policy and sound criminological theory. For example, we cannot know whether crime is increasing or decreasing unless we first know how much crime occurs now and how much occurred in the past. Similarly, if we want to be able to explain why more crime occurs in urban areas than in rural areas, we first need to know the amount of crime in both kinds of locations.

Unfortunately, crime is very difficult to measure because usually only the offender and victim know about it. Unlike the weather, we cannot observe crime merely by looking out the window. On TV police shows or in crime movies, crimes are always discovered (otherwise there would be no plot). But real life is never that easy: because crime often remains hidden from the police, it is difficult to measure. Thus, we can never know with 100 percent accuracy how much crime there is or what kinds of people or organizations are committing crime and who their victims are.

At best we can measure crime in different ways, with each giving us a piece of the puzzle. When we put all these pieces together, we begin to come up with a more precise picture. Like many jigsaw puzzles lying around, however, some pieces might be missing. We can guess at the picture of crime, sometimes fairly accurately, but we can never know whether our guess is completely correct. Fortunately, the measurement of crime has improved greatly over the past few decades, and we know much more about crime than we used to. This chapter reports the state of our knowledge.

▶ Measuring Crime

Uniform Crime Reports

The primary source of U.S. crime statistics is the Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). Begun in the 1930s, the UCR involves massive data collection from almost all the nation’s police precincts. Each precinct regularly reports various crimes known to the police. The most extensive reporting is done on what are called Part I offenses, which the FBI considers to be the most serious: homicide (murder and nonnegligent manslaughter), rape, robbery, and aggravated assault, classified as violent crime; and burglary, larceny, motor vehicle theft, and arson, classified as property crime. The police tell the FBI whether each Part I crime has been cleared by arrest. A crime is considered cleared if anyone is arrested for the crime or if
the case is closed for another reason, such as the death of the prime suspect. If someone has been arrested, the police report the person’s race, gender, and age. The FBI also gathers data from the police on Part II offenses, which include fraud and embezzlement, vandalism, prostitution, gambling, disorderly conduct, and several others (see Figure 3-1).

**Part I Offenses**

**Criminal Homicide:** (a) murder and nonnegligent manslaughter (the willful killing of one human being by another); deaths caused by negligence, attempts to kill, assaults to kill, suicides, accidental deaths, and justifiable homicides are excluded; (b) manslaughter by negligence (the killing of another person through gross negligence, traffic fatalities are excluded)

**Rape:** the penetration, no matter how slight, of the vagina or anus with any body part or object, or oral penetration by a sex organ of another person, without the consent of the victim

**Robbery:** the taking or attempting to take anything of value from the care, custody, or control of a person or persons by force or threat of force and/or by putting the victim in fear

**Aggravated Assault:** an unlawful attack by one person upon another to inflict severe bodily injury; usually involves use of a weapon or other means likely to produce death or great bodily harm. Simple assaults are excluded

**Burglary:** unlawful entry, completed or attempted, of a structure to commit a felony or theft

**Larceny-Theft:** unlawful taking, completed or attempted, of property from another’s possession that does not involve force, threat of force, or fraud; examples include thefts of bicycles or car accessories, shoplifting, pocket-picking

**Motor Vehicle Theft:** theft or attempted theft of self-propelled motor vehicle that runs on the surface and not on rails; excluded are thefts of boats, construction equipment, airplanes, and farming equipment

**Arson:** willful burning or attempt to burn a dwelling, public building, personal property, etc.

**Part II Offenses**

**Simple Assaults:** assaults and attempted assaults involving no weapon and not resulting in serious injury

**Forgery and Counterfeiting:** making, altering, uttering or possessing with intent to defraud, anything false in the semblance of that which is true

**Fraud:** fraudulent obtaining of money or property by false pretense; included are confidence games and bad checks

**Embezzlement:** misappropriation of money or property entrusted to one’s care or control

**Stolen Property:** buying, receiving, and possessing stolen property, including attempts

**Vandalism:** willful destruction or defacement of public or private property without consent of the owner

**Weapons:** carrying, possessing, etc. All violations of regulations or statutes controlling the carrying, using, possessing, furnishing, and manufacturing of deadly weapons or firearms. Attempts are included

**Prostitution and Commercialized Vice:** sex offenses such as prostitution and procuring

**Sex Offenses:** statutory rape and offenses against common decency, morals, etc.; excludes forcible rape and prostitution and commercial vice

**Drug Abuse:** unlawful possession, sale, use, growing, and manufacturing of drugs

**Gambling**

**Offenses Against the Family and Children:** nonsupport, neglect, desertion, or abuse of family and children

**Driving Under the Influence**

**Liquor Laws:** state/local liquor law violations, except drunkenness and driving under the influence

**Drunkenness**

**Disorderly Conduct:** breach of the peace

**Vagrancy:** vagabonding, begging, loitering, etc.

**All Other Offenses:** all violations of state/local laws, except as above and traffic offenses

**Suspicion:** no specific offense; suspect released without formal charges being placed

**Curfew and Loitering Laws:** persons under age 18

**Runaways:** persons under age 18

**FIGURE 3-1 The Uniform Crime Reports.**

*Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation 2012.*
The FBI classifies the vandalism depicted here as one of many Part II offenses.

In turn, each year the FBI reports to the public the official number of Part I crimes (i.e., the number the FBI hears about from the police) that occurred in the previous year for every state and major city in the United States. (Because of incomplete reporting of arson by police, the total number of arsons is not included in the UCR.) The FBI also reports the number of Part I crimes cleared by arrest and the age, race, and gender distribution of people arrested. This information makes UCR data valuable for understanding the geographical distribution of Part I offenses and the age, race, and gender of the people arrested for them. For Part II offenses, the FBI reports only the number of people arrested.

Table 3–1 presents UCR data for Part I crimes. Note that violent crime comprises about 12 percent of all Part I crimes and property crime about 88 percent.

For about three decades after the beginning of the publication of the UCR in the 1930s, the UCR and other official statistics (e.g., arrest records gathered from local police stations) were virtually the only data about U.S. crime. But in the 1960s and 1970s scholars of crime began to question their accuracy. Before reviewing the criticism, let us first see how crimes become known to the police, or official.

**How a Crime Becomes Official**

A crime typically becomes known to the police only if the victim (or occasionally a witness) reports the crime, usually by calling 911. Yet about 60 percent of all victims of violent and property crimes do not report these crimes. Because the police discover only 3 to 4 percent of all crimes themselves, many crimes remain unknown to the police and do not appear in the UCR count (Lynch and Addington 2007). When the police do hear about a crime, they decide whether to record it. Sometimes they do not believe the victim’s account or, even if they do believe it, may not feel that it describes actual criminal conduct. Even if the police believe a crime has occurred, they may be too busy to do the necessary paperwork, particularly if the crime is not very serious. If the police do not record a crime, they do not report it to the FBI, and it does not appear in the UCR crime. For all these reasons, the number of crimes appearing in the UCR is much smaller than the number that actually occurs.

Even when the police do record a crime, an arrest is the exception and not the rule. Unless a victim or witness identifies the offender or the police catch him (or, much less often, her)

**TABLE 3–1 Selected UCR Data, 2011**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TYPE OF CRIME</th>
<th>NUMBER KNOWN TO POLICE</th>
<th>% CLEARED BY ARREST</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Violent crime</td>
<td>1,203,564</td>
<td>47.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murder and nonnegligent manslaughter</td>
<td>14,612</td>
<td>64.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forcible rape</td>
<td>83,425</td>
<td>41.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggravated assault</td>
<td>751,131</td>
<td>56.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robbery</td>
<td>354,396</td>
<td>26.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Property crime</td>
<td>9,063,173</td>
<td>18.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burglary</td>
<td>2,188,005</td>
<td>12.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larceny-theft</td>
<td>6,159,795</td>
<td>21.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motor vehicle theft</td>
<td>715,373</td>
<td>11.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total offenses</td>
<td>10,266,737</td>
<td>22.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: In 2012, the FBI changed its definition of rape. Previously the category of forcible rape was defined in part as "the carnal knowledge of a female forcibly and against her will." The forcible rape data in this table include only offenses reported under this older definition.

Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation 2012.*
in the act, they probably will not make an arrest. Unlike their TV counterparts, police do not have the time to gather evidence and interview witnesses unless the crime is very serious. As Table 3–1 indicates, the proportion of all Part I crimes cleared by arrest is shockingly small. This proportion does vary by the type of crime and is higher for violent crimes. Yet even for homicides, where there is the most evidence (a corpse), fewer than two-thirds are cleared by arrest.

**Critique of UCR Data**

Increased recognition some thirty years ago of all these problems led to several critiques of the validity of the UCR and other official measures. We discuss each problem briefly.

**Underestimation of the Amount of Crime** The UCR seriously underestimates the actual number of crimes committed in the United States and in the individual states and cities every year. We explore the extent of this underestimation later in this chapter.

**Diversion of Attention from White-Collar Crime** By focusing primarily on Part I crimes, the UCR emphasizes these crimes as the most serious ones facing the nation and diverts attention from white-collar crimes. As a result, the seriousness of the latter is implicitly minimized (Reiman and Leighton 2013).

**Misleading Data on the Characteristics of Arrestees** UCR data may be more valid indicators of the behavior of the police than that of offenders. If so, the characteristics the UCR present for the people who get arrested may not accurately reflect those of the vast majority who escape arrest. This possibility is especially likely if police arrest practices discriminate against the kinds of people—typically poor, nonwhite, and male—who are arrested. To the extent this bias might exist, arrest data yield a distorted picture of the typical offender. To compound the problem, because white-collar criminals are even less likely than Part I criminals to get arrested, arrest data again mischaracterize the typical offender and divert attention from white-collar criminals.

**Citizens' Reporting of Crime** The official number of crimes may change artificially if citizens become more or less likely to report offenses committed against them. For example, if the introduction of the 911 emergency phone number across the United States had its intended effect, more crime victims and witnesses started calling the police. If so, more crimes became known to the police and thus were reported to the FBI, artificially raising the official crime rate. Similarly, increases in UCR rapes since the 1970s probably reflect the greater willingness of rape victims to notify the police, not a real rise in the number of rapes (Baumer and Lauritsen 2010).

**Police Recording Practices and Scandals** The official number of crimes may also change artificially because of changes in police behavior. This can happen in two ways. One way is through police crackdowns, involving sweeps of crime-ridden neighborhoods, on prostitution, drug trafficking, and other offenses. The number of crimes known to the police and the number of people arrested for them rise dramatically, artificially increasing the official rate of these crimes, even though the actual level of criminal activity might not have increased.

The second way crime rates reflect police behavior is more ominous: the police can change how often they record offenses reported to them as crimes. They can decide to record more offenses to make it appear that the crime rate is rising, with such "evidence" providing a rationale for increased funding, or they can decide to record fewer offenses to make it appear that the crime rate is falling, with such evidence indicating the local force's effectiveness at fighting crime. Police recording scandals of this nature have rocked several cities during the past two decades; these cities included Atlanta, Baltimore, New York City, and Philadelphia. The Milwaukee crime-reporting story that began this chapter provides possible evidence of another such scandal.

The Philadelphia scandal was especially notorious, as that city's police department was found to have downgraded or simply failed to record thousands of rapes and sexual assaults during the early 1980s. Police did not tell the victims they were doing this, and they did not try to capture the rapists (Fazlollah et al. 1999). In Atlanta, the city's police department had underreported crimes for several years, in part to help improve the city's image in order to boost tourism. Part of this
effort was aimed at helping Atlanta win the right to host the 1996 Summer Olympics. As part of this multiyear effort, thousands of 911 calls were apparently never answered (Hart 2004).

Different Definitions of Crimes  Police in various communities may have different understandings and definitions of certain crimes. Police in one area may thus be more likely than police elsewhere to record a given event as a crime. Even when they do record an event, police forces also vary in the degree to which they record the event as a more serious or a less serious crime, not because of any dishonesty, but because of normal variation in what they define as "serious."

School Reporting Practices  Although not a fault of the UCR per se, crime-reporting practices at collegiate and secondary school campuses have also come into question. Critics say some universities hide evidence of rapes and other crimes in internal judicial proceedings to avoid alarming the public and reducing admissions applications (Shapiro 2010). When university students are victimized just off campus, their crimes are included in the tallies of some campuses, but not in those of others. In a recent example of the general problem, Yale University was fined $165,000 by the federal government for failing to report four sexual assaults (Sander 2013). In a more serious example, the chancellor and police chief of Elizabeth City State University in North Carolina both resigned in May 2013 amid allegations that the school’s police had failed to investigate and report dozens of alleged crimes, including 18 sexual assaults (Kingcade 2013).

NIBRS and Calls to the Police

The FBI’s National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) will eventually replace the UCR. Under NIBRS, the police provide the FBI extensive information on many types of crimes. The information includes the relationship between offenders and victims and the use of alcohol and other drugs immediately before the offense. Previously, such detailed information had been gathered only for homicides in what are called the Supplementary Homicide Reports (SHR). Although NIBRS will still be subject to the same reporting and recording problems characterizing the UCR, the information it provides on crime incidents promises to greatly increase our understanding of the causes and dynamics of many types of crimes.

As another alternative to the UCR, some researchers advocate using calls to police to indicate the number and nature of crimes in a given community (Warner and Coomer 2003). When crime victims call the police, a dispatcher records their calls. Because these calls do not always find their way into the police records submitted to the FBI, they may provide a more accurate picture of the number and kinds of crimes. One problem is that not every call to the police represents an actual crime. Some callers may describe events that do not fit the definition of any crime, and others may call with falsified reports.

National Crime Victimization Survey

Another source of crime data is the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), begun in the early 1970s under a slightly different name by the U.S. Department of Justice. The Justice Department initiated the NCVS to avoid the UCR problems just noted and to gather information not available from the UCR. This includes the context of crime, such as the time of day and physical setting in which it occurs, and the characteristics of crime victims, including their gender, race, income, extent of injury, and relationship with their offenders. Over the years, the NCVS has provided government officials and social scientists an additional database to determine whether various crime rates are changing and to test various theories of crime.
The NCVS interviews individuals from randomly selected households every six months for a period of three years. During 2011, about 143,000 individuals age 12 and older from 80,000 households were interviewed. Respondents are asked whether they have been a victim in the past half year of any of the following crimes: aggravated and simple assault, rape and sexual assault, robbery, burglary, various kinds of larcenies (including purse snatching and household larceny), and motor vehicle theft. The crimes are described rather than just listed. Notice that these crimes correspond to the Part I crimes included in the UCR, except that the UCR classifies simple assault as a Part II crime. The NCVS excludes the two remaining Part I crimes, homicide and arson (homicide victims obviously cannot be interviewed and too few household arsons occur), and all Part II crimes besides simple assault. The NCVS also does not ask about commercial crimes, such as shoplifting and burglary at a place of business, which the UCR includes. Finally, the NCVS includes sexual assaults short of rape, whereas the UCR excludes them.

For each victimization, the NCVS then asks residents additional questions, including the age, race, and gender of the victim and whether the victimization was reported to the police. For crimes such as robbery, assault, and rape in which the victim may have seen the offender, residents are also asked to identify the race and gender they perceived of the offender.

The NCVS estimates that about 22.9 million offenses of the kinds it covers occurred in 2011 (Truman and Planty 2012). Table 3–2 reports three kinds of data: (1) NCVS estimates of the number of victimizations for 2011, (2) the percentage of these incidents reported to the police, and (3) the number of corresponding official crimes identified by the UCR for that year. Because of the differences noted earlier in the coverage of the NCVS and the UCR, comparisons between them of crime frequency data are inexact and must be interpreted cautiously.

As you can easily see, many more victimizations occur than the UCR would have us believe, as only a surprisingly small proportion, about 40 percent overall, are reported to the police. The crimes not reported are hidden crimes and are often termed the "dark figure of crime" (Biderman and Reiss 1967). If, as most researchers believe, NCVS data are more reliable than UCR data,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TYPE OF CRIME</th>
<th>NCVS</th>
<th>% REPORTED TO POLICE</th>
<th>UCR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Violent crime</td>
<td>5,805,430</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>1,203,564</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homicide</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>14,612</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forcible rape⁹</td>
<td>243,800</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>83,425</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggravated assault</td>
<td>1,052,080</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>751,131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simple assault</td>
<td>3,952,780</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>354,396</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robbery</td>
<td>556,760</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>354,396</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Property crime</td>
<td>17,066,780</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>9,063,173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burglary</td>
<td>3,613,190</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>2,188,005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larceny-theft</td>
<td>12,825,510</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>6,159,795</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motor vehicle theft</td>
<td>628,070</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>715,373</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total offenses</td>
<td>22,872,210</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>10,266,737</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

⁹NCVS number for rape includes sexual assaults.
the NCVS confirms suspicions that the U.S. street crime problem is much worse than official UCR data indicate.

Why do so many crime victims not report their victimization? Although specific reasons vary by the type of crime, many victims feel their experience was not serious enough to justify the time and energy in getting involved with the police. Some also feel the police would not be able to find the offender anyway. Victims of rape, domestic violence, and other crimes in which they know the offender also may fear further harm if they report what happened, and they may wish to avoid the publicity arising from talking to the police.

Although the number of victimizations reported in Table 3–2 is almost 23 million, the U.S. population is about 316 million (mid-2013). For this reason, the chances of becoming a crime victim should theoretically be fairly low. In some ways this is true for violent crime, because the NCVS estimates that your chances of becoming a victim of a violent crime in any given year are "only" about 2.3 percent (i.e., the number of violent-crime victimizations is about 23 per 1,000 persons age 12 or older). Your chances of becoming a victim of a property crime, however, are much higher: about 14 percent (Truman and Planty 2012).

These numbers obscure other figures. First, the risk of victimization varies greatly for the demographic subgroups of the population; depending on your race/ethnicity, social class, gender, and area of residence, you may be much more likely than average (or, if you are lucky, much less likely than average) to become a crime victim in any given year (see Chapter 4). Second, the annual risk of victimization adds up and over the course of a lifetime can become very high. In 1987, for example, the NCVS estimated the following lifetime risks of victimization: violent crime, 83 percent (i.e., 83 percent of the public would one day be a victim of violent crime) and property crime, 99 percent. Specific lifetime risks were as follows: robbery, 30 percent; assault, 74 percent; personal larceny, 99 percent; burglary, 72 percent; household larceny, 90 percent; and motor vehicle theft, 19 percent (Koppel 1987). Although victimization rates have declined since then, these figures indicate that many of us will become a victim of at least one violent or property crime during our lifetime and even of more than one crime.

Evaluating NCVS Data

The NCVS has at least two major advantages over the UCR (Lynch and Addington 2007). First, it yields a much more accurate estimate of the number of crimes. Because it involves a very large random sample of the U.S. population, reliable estimates of the number of victimizations in the population can be made. Second, NCVS information on the characteristics of victims and the context of victimization has furthered the development of theories of victimization (see Chapter 4). As this chapter discusses later, the NCVS also provides (through respondents' reported perceptions) a potentially more accurate portrait than UCR data of the race and gender of offenders.

Certain limitations of NCVS data also exist. A major one is that the NCVS itself underestimates the number of victimizations. Recall that the NCVS excludes commercial crime such as shoplifting and burglary at a business. In two underreporting problems, moreover, victims of several crimes may forget about some of them, and some respondents may decline to tell NCVS interviewers about their victimizations even though they remember them. This latter underreporting might be especially high for rape, domestic violence, and other crimes in which victims tend to know their offenders, because they may fear retaliation, wish the event to remain private, or even deem it an unfortunate episode and not a crime. Another reason for potential underestimation is that the NCVS interviews people in households. This means the survey excludes people such as the homeless and teenage runaways who do not live in households and who for various reasons tend to have higher victimization rates. Their exclusion reduces the amount of victimization the NCVS uncovers.

Although the NCVS underestimates some crimes, it might overestimate others. Respondents might mistakenly interpret some noncriminal events as crimes. They might also be guilty of telescoping by reporting crimes that occurred before the six-month time frame for the NCVS. Further, many of the assaults and larcenies they report are relatively minor in terms of the injury suffered or property taken. Despite possible overestimation, most researchers deem underestimation the more serious problem, and they think NCVS data on robbery, burglary, and motor vehicle theft provide a reasonably accurate picture of the actual number of these crimes in the nation (Lynch and Addington 2007).
One final problem with the NCVS is similar to a problem with the UCR. Because the NCVS solicits information only on street crimes, not on white-collar crimes, it again diverts attention from the seriousness of white-collar crimes.

Self-Report Studies

A third source of information on crime comes from studies asking respondents about offenses they may have committed in a given time period, usually the past year. Some of these self-report studies use interviewers, and others use questionnaires that respondents fill out themselves. Self-report studies can be used to demonstrate the prevalence of offending—the proportion of respondents who have committed a particular offense at least once in the time period under study—and the incidence of offending—the average number of offenses per person in the study.

Although some self-report studies involve adult inmates of jails and prisons, most involve adolescents, who are asked not only about their offenses but also about various aspects of their families, friends, schooling, and other possible influences on their delinquency. High school students are often studied because they comprise a convenience sample (or captive audience, as it is also called) that enables researchers to gather much information fairly quickly and cheaply. High school samples also yield a high response rate. (Wouldn't you have wanted to fill out an interesting questionnaire in high school instead of listening to yet another lecture?)

A few notable self-report studies were undertaken beginning in the 1940s, but the impetus for these studies increased as the 1960s approached because of concern, discussed earlier, over the accuracy of official crime and delinquency data. In one of the most influential self-report studies in this early period, James F. Short Jr., and E. Ivan Nye (1957) surveyed a few thousand high school students and a smaller sample of youths in reform schools. They found that a surprising amount of delinquency had been committed by their nondelinquent students and concluded that delinquency was not confined to youths from lower- or working-class backgrounds.

Because of the information it provides on offenders and the influences on their offending, self-report research has permitted major developments in our understanding of delinquent and criminal behavior. One of its most important findings, as the Short and Nye study discovered, is the amount of delinquency that remains hidden from legal officials. Self-report studies thus underscore the extent of the dark figure of crime that the NCVS demonstrates. They remain very common today and often involve local or national longitudinal samples in which the same youths are studied over time and sometimes into adulthood. Other self-report surveys are cross-sectional, meaning their respondents are queried at only one point in time. A very popular self-report survey that involves both a cross-sectional design and a longitudinal follow-up of a sample of its respondents is Monitoring the Future, which is administered to secondary school students and young adults nationwide. Selected results for the high school senior class of 2011 appear in Figure 3-2. As the results indicate, many high school seniors have broken the law, but far fewer have been arrested.

Critique of Self-Report Studies

A common criticism of self-report studies is that they focus on minor and trivial offenses: truancy, running away from home, minor drug and alcohol use, and the like. This focus was indeed true of most early self-report research, but recent studies ask their subjects about more serious offenses such as rape and robbery. The inclusion of these offenses has increased self-report research’s ability to help us understand the full range of criminal behavior.

A second criticism is that self-report respondents sometimes fib about offenses they have committed. Investigations using lie detectors and police records verify the overall accuracy of respondents’ answers (Morris and Slocum 2010), but some research has found that African-American youths are more likely than white youths to underreport their offending and that youths in general are likely to both overreport and underreport being arrested (Krohn et al. 2013). State-of-the-art self-report surveying, using self-administered computer surveys, appears to produce more accurate results than traditional (paper-and-pencil) surveying, possibly because respondents are more likely to think their answers will remain confidential (Paschall et al. 2001).

A final criticism is that self-report studies join the UCR and NCVS in ignoring white-collar crime because their subjects—usually adolescents or, occasionally, adult jail and prison inmates—certainly do not commit this type of crime.
Evaluating UCR, NCVS, and Self-Report Data

None of the three major sources of street-crime data is perfect, but which is the best depends on what one wants to know (Lynch and Addington 2007). For the best estimate of the actual number of crimes, NCVS data are clearly preferable to UCR data. Keep in mind, however, that NCVS data exclude homicide, arson, commercial crimes, and most of the Part II offenses in the UCR. For the best estimate of offender characteristics such as race and gender, self-report data, and victimization data may be preferable to UCR arrest data, which include few offender characteristics and may be affected by police biases. As we will see later, however, comparisons of type of offenders identified in all three data sources suggest that arrest data provide a fairly accurate portrait of offenders despite any bias affecting police arrest decisions.

Short of a superspy satellite circling Earth and recording each of the millions of crimes occurring every year or a video camera in every household and on every street corner recording every second of our behavior, the measurement of crime will necessarily remain incomplete. To return to our earlier metaphor, some pieces of the crime puzzle will always be missing, but we think we have enough of it assembled to figure out the picture. The three major sources of crime data we have discussed combine to provide a reasonably accurate picture of the amount of crime and the social distribution, or correlates, of criminality.

Review and Discuss

What are four criticisms of UCR data? In what ways are UCR data superior to and inferior to victimization and self-report data?
Recent Trends in U.S. Crime Rates

Crime rates rose sharply (UCR rates) during the 1960s and 1970s before declining during the early 1980s and then rising again during the late 1980s. They then began to fall sharply after the early 1990s before declining more slowly during the past several years (see Figures 3–3 and 3–4). for both UCR and NCVS data). Although the UCR and NCVS do not always exhibit the same crime-rate trends because of their different methodologies, the fact that both data sources show declining crime since the early 1990s provides confidence that crime has in fact decreased during this period.

Scholars and other observers have debated why crime fell so dramatically. Some cite changes in police practices and other aspects of the criminal justice system, whereas others cite social factors. The Crime and Controversy box discusses this debate.

FIGURE 3–3 Violent and Property Crime Known to the Police, 1990–2011, UCR (Number per 100,000 Inhabitants).
Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation 2012.
Review and Discuss
Why does the United States have higher crime rates than Japan and several other nations?
How do international comparisons of crime rates reflect the sociological perspective?

Patterning of Criminal Behavior

Crime rates vary according to location, season and climate, and demographic factors such as gender, race, and social class. This section discusses this patterning.

Geographical Patterns

International Comparisons

International comparisons of crime data are inexact. (See the International Focus box.) We have already seen that U.S. crime data are not totally reliable. Across the world, different nations have
Crime and Controversy

WHY HAS THE CRIME RATE DROPPED SINCE THE EARLY 1990s?

The U.S. crime rate fell dramatically beginning in the early 1990s before declining more slowly during the past decade. Coming after a drastic rise in violent crime beginning in the late 1980s, the 1990s' crime decline was a pleasant surprise for Americans, but also the source of much controversy among criminologists and public officials over why it was occurring. This controversy was no mere intellectual exercise. If the reasons for the decline could be pinpointed, the nation would have gained some valuable information on effective policies and strategies to drive down the crime rate further or at least to keep it from rising again.

Debate over the reasons for the 1990s' crime decline falls into two camps, each centered on a very different set of factors. One side gives the bulk of the credit for the crime decline to the criminal justice system, specifically a get-tough-on-crime approach and smarter policing. According to this view, longer and more certain sentences prompted a rapidly increasing imprisonment rate during the 1990s that kept our streets safer by putting hundreds of thousands of criminals behind bars and by deterring potential offenders from committing crimes in the first place. Zero-tolerance policing in New York and other cities rid the streets of panhandlers and other minor offenders who had committed more serious crimes and sent a message of civility to other offenders and the general populace. At the same time, police targeting of neighborhoods rampant with drug crime, prostitution, and other offenses also proved effective.

The other side says that social and demographic factors explain most of the crime-rate decline. According to this view, the thriving economy during the 1990s lessened the motivation to commit crime, and a decline in the number of people in the crime-prone years of adolescence and young adulthood reduced the number of potential offenders. Also, the crack gang wars that fueled the rise in crime during the late 1980s and early 1990s finally subsided as the crack market stabilized. Proponents of this side of the debate also take issue with the arguments of the criminal justice advocates. Crime had risen during the 1980s, these proponents say, even though imprisonment had also risen, casting doubt on a presumed imprisonment–crime decline link during the 1990s. In addition, states that were the toughest on crime during the 1990s often did not experience the greatest crime declines. Although increasing imprisonment might have helped somewhat, they add, it has had harmful collateral consequences for many urban neighborhoods and has cost billions of dollars that could have been better spent on other efforts. Moreover, although new policing strategies might have helped, cities that did not use them also saw their crime rates drop. Although New York City used zero-tolerance policing and had a huge drop in its crime rate, scholars continue to dispute the exact impact that this policing strategy had on the city's crime rate.

Chapters 16 and 17 return to this debate with a more complete discussion of the criminal justice factors that have been credited for the 1990s' crime drop, but the controversy over the reasons continues precisely because of its importance for determining the most effective crime-control strategies. If the first side to the debate is correct, then the United States would be wise to continue to put more people behind bars for a greater number of years and to have the police crackdown on minor offenses and on the serious offenses that terrorize high-crime neighborhoods. If the second side to the debate is correct, this criminal justice approach does more harm than good, and the dollars it incurs would be better spent on efforts that address the structural and individual factors that underlie crime and that are highlighted in a sociological approach to crime and crime control.

Ironically, it might be possible that neither side has a good explanation for the 1990s' crime decline, because Canada also experienced a significant crime decrease during the 1990s even though its rates of imprisonment and police employment both decreased and even though its economy did not fare particularly well. Although Canada, like the United States, did experience a drop in the number of people in their young crime-prone years, this drop was too small in either nation to account for very much of its crime decline.

One new explanation is attracting increasing attention: a decrease in environmental lead poisoning. According to this way of thinking, the huge switch to unleaded gasoline in the 1970s meant that fewer young children in that era had lead affecting their developing brains. When they reached their prime crime-age years 15–20 years later as older teenagers and young adults during the 1990s, they were thus less likely to break the law than the preceding generation. The drop in environmental lead during the 1970s, therefore, led to the drop in crime during the 1990s.

Despite this new explanation, the drop in the 1990s crime rate must remain a puzzle for now. As Franklin E. Zimring (2006:134), who called attention to the Canadian puzzle, wrote of the two nations' crime declines, "Much of the shared good news of recent history seems to elude easy explanations." No doubt criminologists and other scholars will continue to debate the reasons for the 1990s crime drop in the years ahead.

Source: Blumstein and Wallman 2006; Drum 2013; Goldberger and Rosenfeld 2008; Greenberg 2013; Rosenfeld et al. 2007; Zimring 2006.
Although international crime data are gathered by the United Nations and other organizations, the measurement of crime across the world is highly inconsistent. In some countries, such as the United States, Canada, and Great Britain, the government systematically gathers crime data through police reports and victimization surveys. In other nations, especially poor nations, crime reporting is haphazard or even virtually nonexistent. Some nations gather and provide arrest and conviction data, whereas others do not. Another problem is that various crimes are defined differently by different nations. For example, what constitutes an "official" rape in some nations may be very different from what constitutes a rape in the United States. Because of its nature, homicide is probably the crime most uniformly defined, and homicide data are believed to be the most consistent international data available about crime. For this reason, many researchers think international comparisons of crime rates should be restricted to homicide.

The three major sources of official international crime data include the International Criminal Police Organization (Interpol), the World Health Organization (WHO), and the United Nations. Although these sources differ in the crimes they cover and the definitions of crime they use, they all provide reasonably reliable data about homicide. Interpol and the UN surveys use homicide data collected by appropriate agencies in various nations, whereas WHO uses nations' mortality data that identify homicide as the cause of death. WHO homicide data are considered more accurate than Interpol or UN data and thus tend to be the focus of international homicide research. At the same time, WHO homicide data exist for only about three dozen nations; these nations account for less than 20 percent of the world population, and their homicides account for less than 10 percent of world homicides. On the plus side, WHO data comprise virtually all the wealthy industrialized nations.

Victimization surveys, most of which are conducted in wealthy nations, are another source of international crime data and are becoming more popular (see Chapter 4). Similar to the NCVS, these surveys ask random samples of respondents about the extent and nature of their victimization by a wide variety of offenses. Although social and cultural differences make comparisons of international victimization data somewhat inexact, these data have nonetheless yielded valuable information on international differences in victimization rates.

Source: Bennett 2009; van Dijk 2012.

Varying definitions and interpretations of criminal behavior and alternative methods of collecting crime data. Although these problems suggest caution in making international comparisons, these comparisons still provide striking evidence of the ways crime is patterned geographically.

Simply put, some nations have higher crime rates than others. In this regard, the United States has the highest homicide rate of any Western democratic nation. In the late 1980s it had one of the highest rates of other violent crimes, but by 2000 its violent-crime rate had lowered to about average; its property-crime rate also seems about average (van Dijk et al. 2008).

Scholars often attribute nations' crime rates to their cultures. In Japan, for example, one of the most important values is harmony: the Japanese are expected to be peaceable in their relations with each other and respectful of authority. Partly because such a culture inhibits people from committing crimes, Japan's crime rates remain relatively low despite its economic growth since World War II (Johnson 2007).

In contrast to Japan and some other nations, people in the United States are thought to be more individualistic and disrespectful of authority (Messner and Rosenfeld 2013). With the familiar phrase "look out for number one" as a prevailing philosophy, there is less emphasis in the United States on peaceable relations and less sense of social obligation. People do not care as much about offending others and are thus more likely to do so. The United States is also thought to have higher rates of violence than some other industrial nations because of its higher degree of inequality (Ouimet 2012).

Comparisons Within the United States

Crime rates within the United States also vary geographically. According to the UCR, the South and West have the highest rates of crime, and the Northeast and Midwest have the lowest rates. Community size also makes a huge difference; crime rates are higher in urban areas than they are in rural areas. Figure 3–5 presents UCR data for crime rates per 100,000 broken down by community size. As you can see, violent- and property-crime rates in our largest cities (MSAs, or
metropolitan statistical areas) and other cities are higher than those in rural communities. Note, however, that urbanization does not automatically mean high crime rates. For example, some of the largest non-U.S. cities (e.g., Toronto, London, and Tokyo) have much lower homicide rates than those in much smaller U.S. cities.

**Seasonal and Climatological Variations**

Some of the most interesting crime data concern seasonal and climatological (weather-related) variations (see Figure 3–6). For many people, summer can be very grim because violent crime is generally higher in the warmer months, although robbery remains high through January. Property crime also peaks in the summer.

Explanations for these patterns are speculative but seem to make some sense (Carbone-Lopez and Lauritsen 2013; Mares 2013). As you might already realize, the summer heat can cause tempers to flare, perhaps violently. We also tend to interact more when it is warmer, creating opportunities for violent behavior to erupt. In addition, people are outdoors and away from home more often in the summer, creating opportunities for various kinds of thefts. For example, there are more empty

▲ Crime is generally higher during the summer months, in part because people spend more time together outside their homes, creating greater opportunities for both violent crime and property crime to occur.
homes to attract burglars. Those not on vacation are still more apt to leave windows open to let in fresh air, again making burglary more likely.

The seasonal research leads some scholars to predict that crime rates should rise, all things equal, as global warming raises the average temperature in the United States and around the globe (Agnew 2012; Mares 2013). When we hear about the dire effects of climate change, we do not usually think about rising crime rates, but the seasonal research does suggest that rising crime should be added to the list of concerns stemming from climate change.

► Social Patterns of Criminal Behavior

Gender and Crime

One of the key social correlates of criminal behavior is gender: women's crime rates are much lower than men's. Figure 3-7 displays UCR arrest data broken down by gender. As you can
see, men account for about 80 percent of violent-crime arrests and 63 percent of property-crime arrests. It is possible, of course, that police bias may account for the high proportion of male arrests: perhaps the police are less likely to arrest women because they do not think women are very dangerous. However, victimization and self-report data reinforce the UCR's large gender difference. In the NCVS, victims identify men as about 86 percent of the lone offenders committing robbery and 77 percent of those committing aggravated assault (Rand and Robinson 2011). In self-report studies, males are also much more likely than females to commit the most serious offenses. Almost all scholars today acknowledge that women's rates of serious offending are much lower than men's rates, with this gender gap called "one of the few undisputed 'facts' in criminology" (Lauritsen et al. 2009:362).

**Explaining Women's Low Crime Rates**

In the past, many criminologists ignored female criminality. Some did discuss it, but their explanations emphasized women's biology (Griffin 2010). For example, one of the first scholars of crime, physician Cesare Lombroso (Lombroso 1920 (1903)), attributed women's low criminality to their natural passivity resulting from the "immobility of the ovule compared with the zoosperm". Followers of the great psychoanalytic thinker Sigmund Freud thought that women commit crime because of penis envy: jealous over not having penises, they strive to be more like men by committing crimes (and also by working outside the home). In an interesting twist, Otto Pollak (1950) argued that women's crimes often never show up in official statistics. The reason? Women are naturally deceitful and thus are good at hiding their behavior. The proof of such deceit? Women learn to hide evidence of their menstrual periods and also to fake orgasms!

The field of criminology now considers these early biological explanations outdated and sexist. In the 1970s, women began to enter the field in greater numbers and, along with some male scholars, began to study the origins and nature of female crime and of crimes such as rape and family violence that especially victimize women. Several factors are now thought to account for women's low crime rates (Renzetti 2013).

A first explanation concerns the way we socialize girls and boys. Put briefly, we raise boys to be active, assertive, dominant, and to "fight like a man"—in other words, to be masculine. Because these traits are conducive to criminal behavior, especially violence, the way we raise boys increases their odds of becoming criminals. Conversely, we raise girls to be less assertive, less dominant, and more gentle and nurturing (Lindsey 2011). Because these traits are not conducive to criminal behavior, we in effect are raising girls not to be criminals.
A second explanation concerns the opportunities provided to commit crime. Because of the traditional double standard, parents typically monitor their daughters’ behavior more closely than their sons’ behavior. Boys thus have more opportunity than girls to get into trouble, and so they do.

A third explanation concerns attachments to families, schools, and other social institutions. Some research indicates that these bonds are stronger for girls than for boys because of socialization. Girls, for example, feel more strongly attached than boys to their parents and thus are more likely to value their parents’ norms and values. Girls also place more importance on schooling and are more likely than boys to emphasize obedience to the law. These attachments and beliefs lead to lower rates of female offending.

Yet another reason for girls’ lower delinquency is that they have fewer ties than boys have to delinquent peers (McCarthy et al. 2004). Moreover, their greater attachment to parents and schools makes them less vulnerable to the negative influence of any delinquent friends they do have. Conversely, boys’ lower attachment makes them more susceptible to the pressure of their peers, most of them being themselves, to commit delinquency.

These basic differences in the way children are raised are key to understanding the origins of crime and how crime might be reduced. Put simply, we are already doing a good job of raising our girls not to be criminals. If men’s crime rates were as low as women’s, crime in the United States would not be a major problem. Thus, any effort to reduce criminality must start with the difference that gender makes. The more we know about the origins of both female criminality and law-abiding behavior, the greater our understanding will be of what it will take to lower the rate of male criminality.

These explanations of gender differences in crime rates all highlight sociological factors. Contemporary biological explanations highlight such factors as testosterone differences and evolutionary circumstances favoring male aggression. Chapter 6 discusses these explanations.

Are Girls and Women Becoming More Violent?
Before moving on, let us consider an important controversy that began in the mid-1970s when magazines and scholarly books began to stress that women’s arrest rates were rising much faster than men’s (Adler 1975; Deming 1977; Simon 1975). This increase was greeted with alarm and blamed, especially in the popular press, on the new women’s liberation movement: because of this movement, females were said to be acting more like males. More recent writings also say that girls and women are “catching up” to boys and men in violent behavior (Garbarino 2006).

However, a series of scholarly studies since the 1970s has concluded that this belief is in fact a myth. Although female arrests have risen, that increase reflects an increase in decisions of police to arrest girls and women for violence, rather than an actual increase in their level of violence. Despite the impression conveyed by media reports of “mean girls,” female rates of violent crime have been decreasing for many years (see Figure 3–8) (Males and Chesney-Lind 2010; Stevens et al. 2011).

Review and Discuss
Why do women have lower crime rates than men? To what degree are changes in women’s crime rates related to the contemporary women’s movement?

Race, Ethnicity, and Crime
UCR data provide a complex picture of race and criminality in the United States. On the one hand, most criminals are white. In 2011, whites accounted for about 69 percent of all arrests, including 59 percent of violent-crime arrests, 68 percent of property-crime arrests, and at least two-thirds of arrests for forgery and counterfeiting, fraud, vandalism, drug abuse, liquor law offenses and drunkenness, and disorderly conduct (Federal Bureau of Investigation 2012). In terms of sheer numbers, whites commit most crime in the United States, and the typical criminal is white.

On the other hand, African-Americans commit a disproportionate amount of crime relative to their numbers in the population: even though they comprise only about 13 percent of the population, they account for 28 percent of all arrests, 38 percent of violent-crime arrests (including 50 percent of homicide arrests), and almost 30 percent of property-crime arrests (Federal
Bureau of Investigation 2012). Another way of understanding racial differences in arrests is to examine racial arrest rates, or the number of each race arrested for every 100,000 members of that race. Figure 3-9 displays these rates for African-Americans and whites. As you see, the African-American arrest rate for violent and property crime is much higher than the white arrest rate. Government statistical analysis estimates that nearly one-third of African-American males born in 2001 will one day go to prison, compared to less than 6 percent of white males (Bonczar 2003) (see Figure 3-10).

The apparent disproportionate involvement of African-Americans in street crime is one of the most sensitive but important issues in criminology (Peterson 2012). As with gender, racial arrest statistics may reflect bias in police arrest practices more than racial differences in actual offending. Once again, however, NCVS data tend to support the UCR portrait of higher African-American crime rates. Recall that NCVS respondents are asked to report the perceived race of offenders for crimes—assault, rape, robbery—in which they saw their offender. Suggesting that African-Americans do have higher crime rates, the proportion of offenders identified by NCVS data as African-American is similar to the African-American proportion of UCR arrests (Walker et al. 2012). Self-report data find a similar racial difference in serious offending (Farrington et al. 2003). Notwithstanding possible racial bias in the criminal justice system, then, most scholars today agree that African-Americans are indeed more heavily involved in serious street crime (Haynie et al. 2008; Walker et al. 2012). For minor offenses, however, racial differences may be smaller than arrest statistics suggest.

**Explaining African-American Crime Rates**

If African-Americans do commit higher rates of serious street crime, why so? In the early 1900s, racist explanations blamed their supposed biological inferiority (Gabbidon and Greene 2013). Beginning in the 1960s, explanations focusing on a subculture of violence (e.g., attitudes approving violence) and on deficiencies in African-American family structure (e.g., absent fathers) became popular (Moynihan 1965; Wolfgang and Ferracuti 1967). Today many scholars consider the evidence for an African-American subculture of violence weak, but others continue to favor this explanation (see Chapter 7). The family structure explanations also remain popular, but evidence that father-absent households produce lawbreaking children is in fact inconsistent (see Chapter 8).
Many criminologists instead cite the negative social conditions in which African-Americans and other people of color live (Peterson 2012). According to this view, “African Americans and other minorities exhibit higher rates of violence than do whites because they are more likely to reside in community contexts with high levels of poverty, unemployment, family disruption, and residential instability. ... If whites were embedded in similar structural contexts, they would exhibit comparable rates of violence” (McNulty and Bellair 2003a:5). These structural conditions heighten crime because they weaken the influence of conventional social institutions such as family and schools and create frustration and hopelessness (Gabbidon and Greene 2013; Peterson 2012). The racial discrimination felt by African-Americans also matters because it is thought to cause anger and frustration that in turn result in criminal behavior (Unnever and Gabbidon 2011). Chapter 7 discusses these explanations further.

Before leaving the issue of race and crime, three additional points are worth mentioning. First, race is a social construction, something that we make up rather than something real (Gabbidon and Greene 2013). How, for example, do we determine whether someone is
African-American? In the United States, we usually consider people African-American if they have any African ancestry at all, even if most of their ancestry is white. Other countries follow different practices. This ambiguity in measuring race complicates any assessment of racial differences in offending.

Second, studies of racial differences in crime rates address street crime, not white-collar crime. If street criminals are disproportionately African-American and other people of color, white-collar criminals are almost always white. Despite the explanations of African-American criminality stressing a violent subculture, family structure problems, or poor living conditions, whites are quite capable of committing white-collar crime despite growing up in intact families and living in advantaged communities. In this regard, criminologists warn of the myth of the criminal black man that depicts a young African-American male as the prototypical serious criminal offender (Russell 2009; Young 2006). This myth, they say, obscures the domination of whites in white-collar crime and ignores the fact that whites, thanks to their large numbers, also account for the majority of street crime.

Third, although certain aspects of the African-American experience contribute to a higher crime rate, recent research finds that other aspects decrease African-Americans’ criminal behavior. These aspects include relatively high levels of religiosity and low levels of alcohol use, strong family ties, and strong belief in the value of education. Sociologists Bradley R. Entner Wright and C. Wesley Younts (2009:348) say these “prosocial” aspects have been “virtually ignored in studies of race and crime,” and they add that consideration of these aspects “contradicts the stereotypical caricature of African Americans as violent, aggressive, and crime prone.”

Fourth, recall from Figure 3–9 that the African-American arrest rate for violent crime in 2011 was about 379 per 100,000, and for property crime it was 897 per 100,000. Although these numbers exceed those for whites, a more familiar way of understanding them is to say that for every 100 African Americans, about 0.38 are arrested every year for violent crime and 0.90 are arrested for property crime. That means that 99.62 of every 100 African-Americans are not arrested each year for violent crime, and 99.10 of every 100 African Americans are not arrested for property crime. Despite concern about African-American crime rates, then, the evidence is very clear that virtually all African-Americans are not arrested in any given year for Part I crimes.

Regardless, criminology must not shy away from acknowledging and explaining African-American street crime, because even the small absolute rates just cited translate into tens of thousands of crimes nationwide and devastate many urban neighborhoods. As Gary LaFree and Katheryn K. Russell (1993: 281) once put it, “[W]e must face the problem of race and crime.
directly, forthrightly, and with the most objective evidence we can muster collectively. Ignoring connections between race and crime has not made them go away.” It is both possible and important to explain the race-crime connection in a nonracist manner. In this regard, the structural explanations mentioned earlier are especially promising (see Chapters 7 and 10).

**Latinos and Other Groups**

This section has discussed African-Americans because criminology has studied them far more than it has studied other people of color. This focus is understandable for several reasons. First, African-Americans historically were America’s largest minority and the only one forced to live in slavery. Second, their rates of violent crime have been very high. Third, UCR data record the race of arrestees (white, African-American, Native American, Asian, or Pacific Islander), but not their ethnicity. Because Latinos may be of any race, they do not appear as a separate category in UCR arrest data.

As understandable as criminology’s focus on African-Americans may be, it has nonetheless translated into neglect of other racial and ethnic groups, and the field knows much less about their criminal behavior and victimization and experiences in the criminal justice system. Now that Latinos are the largest minority group and a growing influence in the cultural and political life of the nation, they are receiving more attention from criminologists, although the lack of adequate arrest data of Latinos continues to be a problem.

That said, the available criminological knowledge does yield a fairly reliable picture of the extent of and reasons for Latino criminality (Miller et al. 2009; Miller 2012; Steffensmeier et al. 2010). First, Latinos (focusing on adolescents) have higher serious crime and victimization rates than non-Latino whites have, but lower rates than African-Americans have. Among Latinos, people of Mexican or Puerto Rican descent have higher rates than those of Cuban descent, who tend to be wealthier. Second, Latinos’ crime rates are generally explained by the fact that they tend, like African-Americans, to live amid structural criminogenic conditions, including poverty, unemployment, and rundown urban neighborhoods. Native American crime rates are also higher than white rates and for similar structural reasons (Lanier and Huff-Corzine 2006; Painter-Davis 2012), while Asian-American crime rates appear lower than white rates, perhaps because of Asians’ strong family structures and lower use of drugs and alcohol (McNulty and Bellair 2003b).

One interesting question is why Latinos have lower violent-crime rates than African-Americans. Scholars cite several reasons for this difference (Vélez 2006). First, Latino neighborhoods and individuals are less poor than their African-American counterparts and have lower rates of other structural problems, including unemployment and single-parent households. Second, Latino communities have higher numbers of immigrants, and immigrants tend to have lower crime rates than U.S.-born residents living in similar socioeconomic circumstances. Third, Latino communities have better relations than African-American communities with the police, local politicians, and bank officials, and these better relations help for many reasons (e.g., the provision of economic and legal resources) to reduce crime rates. Fourth, Latino neighborhoods are less racially segregated than African-American neighborhoods and less physically isolated from white neighborhoods. Latino neighborhoods can thus more easily avoid certain problems created by racial segregation and are also “in a better position to protect themselves from crime because they benefit from the spillover of nearby more affluent and socially organized neighborhoods” (Vélez 2006:101).

**Immigrants**

The findings that immigrants have relatively low rates of crime, the second reason just noted, merit further discussion here. Contrary to what many Americans might assume, a research shows that immigrants have lower rates of crime than nonimmigrants (MacDonald et al. 2013; Zatz and Smith 2012). According to María B. Vélez (2006:96), at least two factors help explain why “the presence of immigrants in a neighborhood helps to control crime.” First, immigrant neighborhoods tend to have high numbers of residents owning or working in the many small businesses (e.g., restaurants) that
such neighborhoods need. Second, these neighborhoods also tend to have strong social institutions like churches and schools. For several reasons, the stable employment and strong institutions that thus characterize these neighborhoods help to reduce crime. Other scholars point to the relatively high rates of married households among Latino immigrants as a possible reason for their lower crime rates. Drawing on all this research, some criminologists credit the increased immigration of the 1990s for contributing to the crime rate decline during that decade, and they point out that the evidence of a crime-reducing effect of immigration challenges conventional wisdom (Zatz and Smith 2012).

Interestingly, some research finds that second-generation immigrants commit more crime than new immigrants and that third-generation immigrants commit more crime than second-generation ones (Sampson 2008). Thus, crime among immigrant families rises the longer they have been in the United States. This may happen for several reasons (Press 2006). First, immigrants’ children may become embittered and abandon their parents’ optimism as they experience ethnic discrimination and economic problems. Second, they have time to learn the U.S. culture and in particular two aspects of this culture: (1) its affinity for drugs, flashy possessions, and other temptations that may attract young people into criminal behavior and (2) its “look out for number one” ideology that is thought more generally to contribute to U.S. crime. In short, as two scholars put it, “The children and grandchildren of many immigrants—as well as many immigrants themselves the longer they live in the United States—become subject to economic and social forces that increase the likelihood of criminal behavior” (Rumbaut and Ewing 2007:11).

**Review and Discuss**

Why do African-Americans have higher crime rates than whites? Is it racist to claim that this racial difference in crime exists?

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**Social Class and Crime**

Most people arrested and imprisoned for street crime are poorly educated with low incomes: about two-thirds of prisoners lack even a high school diploma. Sociologists have long been interested in the association between social class and criminality, and they developed several theories of crime from the 1920s through the 1950s to explain why poor people have higher crime rates (see Chapters 7 and 8).

In the 1960s, many sociologists began to argue that the overrepresentation of the poor in the criminal justice system stemmed more from class bias than from real differences in offending. Some scholars proclaimed the long-assumed relationship between social class and criminality a myth (Tittle et al. 1978). While conceding the possibility of class bias, other scholars challenged this new view (Braithwaite 1981; Hindelang et al. 1979). Addressing the debate, a president of the American Society of Criminology warned that a failure to recognize the importance of class would leave criminality impoverished (Hagan 1992). Another sociologist wryly observed that “social scientists somehow still knew better than to stroll the streets at night in certain parts of town or even to park there . . . [and they] knew that the parts of town that scared them were not upper-income neighborhoods” (Stark 1987:894). Supporting these latter views, self-report studies find that poor youths, especially those whose families live in extreme poverty and chronic unemployment, do have higher rates of serious offending (Bjerk 2007).

However, if we consider white-collar crime along with street crime, there probably is no relationship between social class and criminality. Although very poor individuals have higher rates of serious street crime, middle- and upper-class persons clearly have the monopoly on white-collar crime. Explanations of underclass involvement in street criminality focusing on poverty, unemployment, and related structural conditions cannot account for white-collar criminality.

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**Review and Discuss**

Is the relationship between social class and criminality a myth, or does an actual relationship exist? What is the evidence for and against the existence of an actual relationship?
Age and Crime

As you probably realize by now, criminologists disagree on all sorts of issues involving the measurement and patterning of crime. Age, however, is one area in which there is widespread agreement: "The view that involvement in crime diminishes with age is one of the oldest and most widely accepted in criminology" (Steffensmeier and Allan 2000:803). Simply put, street crime is disproportionately committed by young people. As Figure 3–11 shows, the 15–to-24 age bracket accounts for only about 14 percent of the population, but 38 percent of all arrests. Crime peaks at ages 17 or 18 and then declines, especially beyond young adulthood. Despite minor variations depending on the type of crime, this pattern holds true whether one looks at UCR arrests, the perceived age of offenders reported to NCVS interviewers, or self-report data. White-collar crime is once again a different matter because older people commit most of it; teenagers and young adults are too young to be in a position to commit such a crime.

Explaining the Age–Crime Relationship

Why is street crime primarily a young person's phenomenon, and why does it decline after adolescence and young adulthood? Several factors seem to be at work (Steffensmeier and Allan 2000). First, adolescence is a time when peer influences and the desire for friendships are especially strong. To the extent that peers influence one's own delinquent behavior, it is not surprising that adolescence is a peak time for offending. As we move into adulthood, our peer influences diminish, and our peers become more law-abiding than they used to be. As a result, we become more law-abiding as well (Warr 2002).

Second, adolescents, as you well know, have an increasing need for money that part-time jobs or parental allowances may not satisfy. For at least some adolescents, crime provides a means to obtain financial resources. If this is true, one reason crime declines after moving into adulthood might be that our incomes rise as we get full-time jobs. Third, our ties to society strengthen as we become young adults. We acquire full-time jobs, usually get married and have children, and in general start becoming full-fledged members of society. These bonds to society give us an increasing sense of responsibility and stake in conformity and thus reduce our likelihood of committing crime (Benson 2013).

We also become more mature as we leave adolescence; we are no longer the youthful rebels who think everything our parents say and want us to do is ridiculous. We begin to realize that many of the indiscretions of our youth may have been fun and daring but were clearly illegal.
What we were ready to excuse back then, we cannot excuse now. "Yes, I did _______ [fill in the blank] when I was a teenager," you might tell your own children, "but I don't want you doing that!" They'll inevitably see this remark as a sign of your hypocrisy; you'll regard it as a sign of your maturity.

An understanding of the age-crime relationship helps us understand shifts in a nation's crime rate. An increased birth rate will, some fifteen years later, begin to lead to an increased number of people in the 15-to-25 crime-prone age group. All other things being equal, the nation's crime rate should rise as the number of people in this age group rises. If the birth rate later declines, then as these young people move into their less crime-prone middle age and are replaced by fewer numbers of youths, the crime rate should decline. One reason U.S. crime rates probably rose during the 1960s was the entrance of the baby-boom generation born after World War II into the 15-to-25 age group (Ferdinand 1970); one reason they fell during the 1990s may have been a declining number of people in that age group owing to a lower birth rate two decades earlier (Goldberger and Rosenfeld 2008).

**Gender, Race, and Age Combined**

In Chapter 2 we saw that race and gender combine to produce higher fear among African-American women. In this chapter we have seen that males have higher rates of serious crime than females, African-Americans have higher rates than whites, and young people have higher rates than older people. These patterns suggest that young African-American males should have especially high rates of serious offending and older white women very low rates. Table 3-3 reports homicide arrest rates (per 100,000 persons) for various gender, race, and age combinations. Notice first that the younger age group has higher arrest rates than the older age group for each gender and race combination. Now look just at the 18-to-24 age group. Notice that within each race males have higher arrest rates than females, and within each gender African-Americans have higher arrest rates than whites. The same patterns hold true for the older age group. This all works out so that African-American men between the ages of 18 and 24 have the highest rate in the table, 175.8, and white women 25 and older have the lowest rate, 0.8, a huge difference. The patterns displayed in Table 3-3 once again provide powerful evidence of the sociological perspective's emphasis on the importance of social backgrounds for behavior.

| TABLE 3-3 Gender, Race, Age, and Arrest Rates for Homicide, 2008 (per 100,000 persons) |
|---------------------------------------------|--------|
| **CATEGORY**                               | **RATE** |
| Age 18-24                                   |         |
| African-American males                      | 175.8   |
| African-American females                    | 10.8    |
| White males                                 | 20.4    |
| White females                               | 2.5     |
| Age 25 and older                            |         |
| African-American males                      | 37.8    |
| African-American females                    | 3.5     |
| White males                                 | 5.4     |
| White females                               | 0.8     |

Source: Cooper and Smith 2011.
Chronic Offenders and Criminal Careers

One of the most important findings of self-report studies, especially those studying the same persons over time, is that roughly 6 percent of adolescents are responsible for most of the serious crimes committed by the entire group of adolescents (Benson 2013). Although many young people break the law, their offenses are usually minor ones. However, a small number commit many offenses each, particularly the more serious offenses, and persist in their offending over time. These chronic offenders often continue their offending into adulthood as they enter criminal careers. Career criminality is more common among those with low education and bleak job prospects, characteristics most common of the urban underclass. Although some scholars feel that offending does not continue long into adulthood and thus dispute the existence of criminal careers, most accept the concept as a valid characterization of a small number of offenders.

Knowledge of the age patterning of crime and of the existence of career criminals has important implications for efforts to reduce crime. The “three strikes and you’re out” legislation popular a decade or more ago required life imprisonment for people convicted of a third felony. Because imprisonment would continue long after the criminality of most offenders would have declined anyway as they aged, critics said this legislation would increase prison overcrowding, but do little to reduce crime (see Chapter 17). Another effort involves identifying youths at risk for becoming career criminals so that they can be targeted for innovative treatment and punishment (Visher 2000). However, the prediction of career criminality can be inaccurate, with many false positives (people falsely predicted to be career criminals) resulting. Efforts to target career criminals remain beset by various legal and ethical dilemmas.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed both the importance and the complexity of measuring crime. Accurate measurement is critical for efforts to understand the origins of crime and how best to reduce it. If we measure crime inaccurately, we may miss important factors that underlie it and thus ways of reducing it.

All the major sources of crime statistics have their advantages and disadvantages. UCR data help us to understand the geographical distribution of crime, but they greatly underestimate the actual number of crimes and are subject to possible police bias. They also tell us relatively little about the social context of crime and victimization and about the characteristics of victims. NCVS data provide the best estimate of the actual number of crimes and provide solid information on the context of victimization and the characteristics of victims, but even they underestimate certain crimes and exclude others. Self-report data provide important information about offenders, including the many influences on their behavior, but are generally limited to adolescents. Inclusion of serious offenses in the most recent self-report studies has made them even more valuable.

Because none of these sources covers white-collar crime, they reinforce impressions that white-collar crime is less serious than street crime. But together they provide a reasonably good picture of street crime in the United States. The picture is of a relatively small number of violent crimes and a much larger number of property crimes. Despite continuing debate, the picture of street crime is also one of offenders who tend to be male, nonwhite, and especially African-American, poor, and young. Regarding gender, something about being a female in our society inhibits criminality, and something about being a male promotes it. Continued research on the reasons for this gender difference holds promise for crime reduction. The radical and class distribution of street crime alerts us not only to the effect of race and class on criminality but also to the structural factors accounting for this effect. These factors can and must be explored without resorting to explanations that smack of racial or class prejudice.

Now that we have some idea of the extent of street crime and of the characteristics of offenders in the United States, it is almost time to turn to explanations of such crime. But first we explore further in Chapter 4 the characteristics of crime victims and the theories and consequences of victimization.
Summary

1. Accurate measurement of crime is essential to understand geographical and demographic differences in crime rates and gauge whether crime is rising or falling. The nation's sources of crime data provide a good picture of the extent and distribution of crime, but this picture is also necessarily incomplete.

2. The UCR is the nation's official crime source and is based on police reports of crime to the FBI. Problems with the UCR include the fact that (1) many crime victims do not report their victimization to the police; (2) citizens may become more or less likely to report crimes to the police; (3) changes in police behavior, including whether and how they record reported crimes, may affect UCR statistics; and (4) police in different communities may have different definitions and understandings of certain crimes.

3. The NCVS measures the nature and extent of victimization. Begun in the early 1970s, it has since provided a valuable source of information on all these issues. Although it does not cover commercial crime and its respondents do not always disclose their victimizations, it provides a more accurate picture than the UCR of the amount of crime.

4. Self-report studies focus mainly on adolescents and measure the extent of their offending. By asking respondents about many aspects of their lives and backgrounds, self-report studies have been invaluable for the development and testing of criminological theory.

5. Crime is patterned geographically, climatologically, and socially. International differences in crime rates reflect aspects of nations' cultures and their degree of inequality. In the United States, crime is higher in cities than in rural areas and generally higher in the South and West than in the East and Midwest. Several types of violent and property crime are more common in warmer months. Despite much debate, serious street-crime rates seem much higher among men than among women, higher among African-Americans and Latinos than among non-Latino whites, and higher among the poor than the nonpoor.

6. Chronic offenders, who represent a small percentage of youths, commit the majority of serious offenses committed by all youths. Some chronic offenders continue their criminality past young adulthood. Efforts to predict such career criminals have been inaccurate, making it difficult to identify youths at risk for a career of crime.

Key Terms

chronic offenders 62
climatological 51
criminal careers 62
incidence 45
international comparisons 48
measurement 38
National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) 42
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prevalence 45
property crime 38
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victimization 43
violent crime 38

What Would You Do?

1. It's a dark, chilly night in October, and you are walking to your car from the mall. In your arms is a box containing a DVD player you bought for a close friend's birthday. Suddenly you are grabbed around your neck from behind. A male voice says, quietly but ominously, "I don't want to hurt you. Just put the box on the ground and move away." Terrified, you comply. As the man picks up the box and runs off, you look in his direction in the darkened parking lot but see only his back. You take out your cell phone to call 911, but as you do so you begin to think the police probably won't be able to catch the robber and reflect that the DVD player cost only $70 anyway. Do you call 911? Why or why not?

2. You are the night manager of a convenience store. Normal closing time is 10:00 P.M., but it has been a slow night and you are pretty tired. It's now 9:50 P.M. The owner has told you it's okay to close a few minutes early when business is slow, so you have just locked the glass door and are cleaning up inside so that you can leave in a few more minutes. You're startled to hear a knock on the door. Looking through the door, you see two young men motioning to let them in. Something about them frightens you, but you don't know what it is. Do you unlock the door for them? Why or why not? Would your response have been different if the two people at the door had been middle-aged women?