

The Spread of Violent Crime from City to Countryside, 1955 to 1975¹

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ABSTRACT This paper addresses the issue of whether cultural differences between communities of varying degrees of urbanism are declining in modern society, taking as a case in point acts of violent crime. I will contend that, contrary to "massification" theories, between 1955 and 1975 differences in rates of criminal behavior between large and small communities actually increased, and furthermore, the pattern of changes is consistent with a specific alternative theory about urban-rural differences. This theory holds that cultural change is continually generated in major urban centers, diffuses to smaller cities and thence to the rural hinterland. Part 1 of this paper presents the empirical material on criminal behavior, largely consisting of national crime data aggregated to the level of categories of communities and of California crime data aggregated to the level of specific counties. Part 2 of the paper turns to more speculative concerns, discussing the extent to which crime is a cultural phenomenon and presenting more fully a theory of urban-to-rural diffusion, a theory suggesting cyclical patterns that are hinted at—but by no means proven—in the crime data.

Theoretical perspectives

It is virtually commonplace in many scholarly circles that "massification"—mass communications, mass transportation, mass media, mass organization, and so forth—has eliminated or is rapidly eroding cultural differences between more and less urban communities² (see, for example, Castells, 1972; Martindale, 1958; Sjöberg, 1964). But for a few isolated regions, all American communities are included in broad "urban fields." Consequently, distinctions between urban and rural ways of life no longer apply, if ever they did. Others, however, argue that social and behavioral differences between large and small communities persist even in modern societies. Their argument, briefly, is that large and concentrated populations nurture cultural changes. Be they new dress styles, moral philosophies, deviations in attitudes or behavioral patterns, change and innovation are most likely to occur in the largest communities. For similar reasons, and also because diffusion tends to occur through personal networks, these changes spread first to large communities, diffusing down the urban

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² By *urban*, I mean extent of population concentration. Thus, by *urban-rural* I allude to the relative size of communities, not to any specific demarcations.

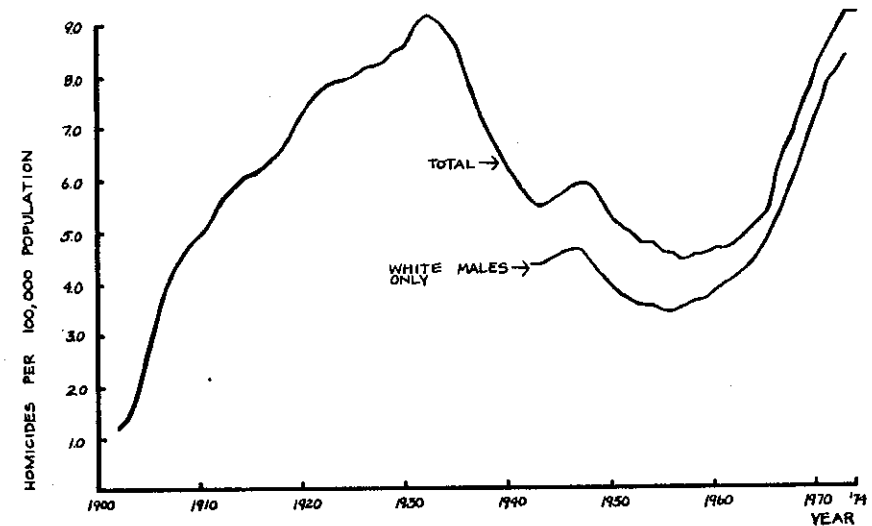


Figure 1. Homicide rate, U.S., 1900 to 1976 (Moving five-year averages).

size hierarchy, and to ones nearer the metropolitan centers, diffusing across geographical space. The changes spread from there to the smallest and most distant places. Since innovation is always occurring, this cultural lag is ever present—although it is probably a briefer lag in modern than in pre-modern societies. Therefore, cultural differences continue to be associated with urbanism (see Fischer, 1975, 1978a; Glenn and Alston, 1967; Glenn and Hill, 1977). This paper applies the model specifically to violent crime.

Crime rates

This study largely uses rates of violent crime as the phenomena to be explained, supplemented at points by consideration of homicide alone. These rates are measured as the number of personal offenses (homicide, aggravated assault, robbery, and rape) recorded and published by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, per 100,000 residents of the communities of their occurrence. FBI crime statistics are generally suspect. In particular, they are known to vastly underestimate true incidences of crime, as well as having more subtle distortions (see, for example, Booth *et al.*, 1977; Gibbs and Ericksen, 1976). Nevertheless, at the level they are used in this study—changes over time in gross rates for large ecological units—there is reason to retain confidence in them (see, for example, Blumstein, 1974; Silberman, 1978:Appendix). Two important features of the data have been confirmed by sources independent of the FBI. First, during this period, violent crime rates were higher in large communities. The FBI sta-

tistics showed stark differences; so did victimization surveys (Ennis, 1967; Skogan, 1976); and fear of violent crime was strongly, and independently, correlated with urbanism (Clemente and Kleiman, 1977). Second, rates of violent crime increased sharply from 1955 to 1975. So indicate the FBI statistics; explorations of those data by others second the conclusion (Mulvihille and Tumin, 1969); and expressions of anxiety about crime, as recorded in surveys, increased over the period. We can assume that between 1955 and 1975 rates of *actual* incidences of violent crime increased, and that they were greater in the larger communities. A few of the other problems that have been noted concerning the use of FBI statistics are partly alleviated here by analysis of two different kinds of ecological units, categories of cities and specific counties.

The United States, 1955 to 1975

The FBI annually reports crime incidences and rates for population groups categorized by size of city. This section presents the trends in violent crime for each category from 1955 to 1975. Before turning to those data, we can gain a longer historical perspective on them by examining first the national trend in homicide for this century (Figure 1).³ There is something suggestively cyclical about that trend, although it is certainly too soon to claim a cycle; we will return to that suggestion below. More immediately, note the trough in the late 1950s and the rapid escalation in the 1960s. This swing is the context of the community differences we examine.

We can also examine the homicide rates for the decennial years, 1940 to 1970, for the largest of the three community-size categories; see Table 1. The figures clearly indicate that between 1940 and 1970, differences among cities of these sizes *widened* greatly, both absolutely and proportionally. The ratio of the smallest to the largest category changed from .93 in 1940 to .65, .49, and .30 in 1970. Skogan (1977) recently published a study with a similar message. Among the 32 largest American cities, the correlation of size and density with crime rate went from near-zero or negative in the late 1940s to highly positive in 1970.⁴ While these figures do not include rural places, they do tap the dimension of urbanism.

The data, population groups, and time periods are refined in Fig-

³ United States Bureau of the Census: *Historical Studies of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970*. Washington, D.C., 1975. Series 4, 971-86.

⁴ Some readers may recall a heated debate between Fischer (1977) and Mayhew and Levinger (1977) over the latter's claim (in 1976) that homicide rates necessarily increase with population density. These two studies should suffice to end that argument.

Table 1. Homicide rates, by size of city, 1940 to 1970*

	1940	1950	1960	1970
Cities over 250,000	6.1	6.8	6.8	17.5
100,000 to 249,999	6.5	6.0	5.6	10.0
50,000 to 99,999	5.7	4.4	3.3	5.2

* Source: McCarthy *et al.*, 1975:Table 1.

ure 2. Moving three-year averages for violent crimes⁵ per 100,000 are plotted for each of six size-of-city categories from 1955 to 1957 through 1974 to 1976. (Figures for rural agencies were only available for 1961 on.) Simple visual inspection suggests that (1) crime rates increased for all groups over the period; (2) the larger the cities, the sooner the increase began; and (3) the larger the cities, the steeper the increase. These impressions can be solidified by looking at two parameters: the year of the lowest rate, and the year of the greatest absolute increase in rate. Both sets of parameters are marked on the figure. Both indicate a rough correlation: the larger the city size, the earlier the trend "bottomed out" (250,000 > 100,000 = 50,000 = 25,000 > 10,000 > under 10,000). And the larger the city-size category—at least in the more populous categories—the earlier the period of rapid increase. This pattern is *inconsistent* with the claim that size-of-community differences are declining in American society; it is consistent with an argument that social changes commence in cities and follow later in smaller places.⁶

⁵ These figures include negligent manslaughter, which later ones do not. It is unlikely that the patterns are affected in any noticeable way by their inclusion.

⁶ Four methodological notes:

(1) Another way of smoothing and analyzing the data is by fitting functions and examining their properties. I fit several functions—linear, exponential, logarithmic, logistic—to the raw figures (excluding rural). The best-fitting was a general S-curve: $V = b_1[\ln(Y - 40)]^2 + b_2[\ln(Y - 40)] + a$, where V is the rate of violent crime, Y is the last two digits of the year, and b_1 , b_2 , and a are coefficients. R^2 ranged from .96 to .99. The calculated minima (i.e., "bottoming out year") for these equations were 1957 for population group I, 1958 for II, and about 1959.25 for the others. Results for the projected year of greatest increase were inconsistent. Ultimately, I decided that the smoothed original figures were less misleading than subtly ill-fitting functions;

(2) An objection might be raised about using cities as the units underlying the analysis, rather than metropolitan areas. The logic of the argument calls for cities, since it posits that crime diffuses from urban centers (the largest cities in their metropolitan areas) to suburbs and the periphery beyond. Nevertheless, I did examine the same crime rates for the following categories: Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas; other cities; and rural areas—although only 1959-1976 figures were available. The results were unclear. There was no pattern to the year of greatest increase; but rural places "bottomed out" in 1961, while SMSAs and cities "bottomed out" in 1960 or earlier;

While these data support the anti-massification argument, a few doubts can be raised about them. One, the statistics refer to ecological categories, *sets* of communities, while the theoretical questions refer to communities. There is the danger of some kind of ecological fallacy. Two, the nature of the categories are such that their composition changes over time. One year a city of 24,000 is in Category V; the next year, at 25,000, it is in Category IV. It is unclear how this process affects the data, but it does introduce uncertainty. Three, at the national level, the data mask major regional variations in incidence and reporting, and also mask possible interaction effects of region with time. Four, the rural series is incomplete, so that most comparisons here are of varying degrees of urbanism. To avoid these problems, I sought a data base of separate units, continuous over time, within a single region, and ranging from fully urban to rural.

California counties, 1955 to 1975

Using a single state permits some control over social and definitional variation, while counties provide units of analysis that are constant over time, for which data are continually gathered and reported, which minimize boundary-line problems involved in calculating rates (see Gibbs and Ericksen, 1976), and which range from the most urban

(3) Given the vulnerability of FBI statistics to changes in various technical matters, I also examined homicide rates alone, rates generally considered the most reliable available. These rates were highly colinear with overall rates of violent crime (correlations over time typically higher than .9), and the results using them were largely comparable, although less stable. (The low absolute numbers create great year-to-year variability in rates.) For example, the best-fitting equation for homicide was also the general S-curve, but R^2 ranged from .65 to .97. Nevertheless, the calculated minima tended to come earlier for the largest categories: 1957.0, 59.1, 62.8, 58.3, 59.6, and 61.5, for 250,000+ to under 10,000. (The calculated years of rapidest increase were projected by the equation for after 1975.) By the way, the same calculations conducted for property crime rates, more stable than violence, yield a perfectly monotonic trend, from 1953.3 to 1959.0;

(4) A case can be made, as suggested by a reader, that changes in relative propensities are best indexed by changes in proportions, rather than the absolute differences discussed here (e.g., a doubling of everyone's propensities to violent crime would double the gaps). On the other hand, there is a material difference in a rate of six homicides per 100,000 becoming 12 versus two becoming four. Many more new actors—even in proportion to the population—must be motivated to act (or to act more often) in the former than in the latter case. In any event, the point may be moot: I conducted analyses using logarithmic transformations, as well as informal inspection of ratios. The diffusion patterns are less dramatic, but still present. For example, the ratio of (the averaged) violent crime rates for the 250,000+ category to the under 10,000 category increases from 4.6 in 1957 to a peak of 7.7 in 1962, and drops to another low of 5.0 in 1973; the ratio to the rural category increases from a low of 4.9 in 1964 to a high of 8.6 in 1970, and drops to a new low of 6.3 in 1975—roughly the sort of results to be expected with lagged diffusion. More important, the key statistics we examine here and below refer to the shape of the individual unit's own time curves: low point and acceleration. These are independent of absolute or relative rates.

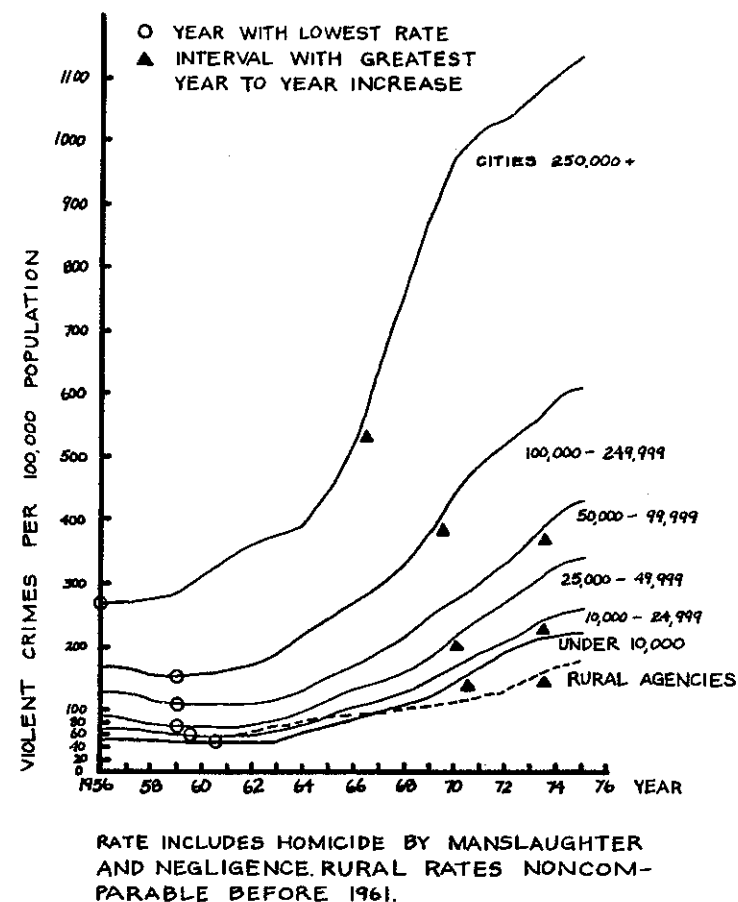


Figure 2. Rates of violent crime, 1955 to 1976, by city-size group (moving three-year averages).

(San Francisco, 100 percent urban; 1970 population 706,000) to the most rural (Alpine, zero percent urban; 1970 population 430). Equally important, these geographical units permit an analysis of both forms of diffusion: down the urban-size hierarchy and across space.

Data from various state sources⁷ yielded the following information

⁷ The crime data come largely from variously-named annual publications of the California Department of Justice, Division of Law Enforcement, Bureau of Criminal Statistics. The crime statistics for 1974 and 1975 and most of the population data were obtained from the *California County Fact Books*, 1975 and 1977, published by the County Supervisors Association. Population estimates for 1977 (used with the 1970 data to estimate the 1971 through 1975 figures) were released by the State Department of

for each California county for each year from 1955 through 1975: the number of violent crimes (criminal homicide, robbery, assault, and rape)⁸; population, using linear extrapolations between decennial years and official estimates for 1977; percent of the county's population that was urban;⁹ and a rough estimate of the air distance from the approximate center of population to the centers of San Francisco or Los Angeles counties, whichever was nearer. (These two counties are generally recognized as the megalopolitan hubs of Northern and Southern California, respectively.)

Figure 3 illustrates how violent crime rates, measured in three-year moving averages, changed in these counties between 1955 and 1975. It includes as examples the two metropolitan center counties, the most remote southeastern county in the state, Imperial, and the most remote northwestern county, Del Norte. In both Los Angeles and San Francisco, rates increased monotonically from the beginning of the period, jumping the greatest amount in 1968. In both remote counties, rates *declined* until the late 1950s and increased the most in the last year of the period. This is the same pattern we observed in the national figures.

The data are summarized for all the counties, except Los Angeles and San Francisco, in Table 2, by using the same two parameters used before as indices of the pattern of change: for each county, the year of its lowest rate and the year of its greatest absolute increase in rate.¹⁰ (All counties, it should be noted, had strong increases in rates across time; linear correlations between year and rate ranged from .46 to .98.) The 56 counties are divided on two dimensions: urbanism, as (estimated) percent urban in 1965 (the mid-year for this time-series) and distance from the metropolitan centers.

The first panel shows that the less urban a county or the more remote it is, the later it reached the nadir of its violent crime rate.

Finance and published in the *Sacramento Bee* on December 29, 1977. The percent urban figures came from the *City and County Data Book*, 1972, published by the United States Census Bureau.

⁸ The 1969 figures were unavailable for the smaller counties, so their rates were estimated by interpolating the 1968 and 1970 rates. Also, in several cases, only incomplete reports from county sub-divisions were available; for example, there were data for only the first six months. In these instances, projections for the town were made from the previous year.

⁹ Percent urban was available only for the decennial years 1950, 1960, and 1970. I interpolated and extrapolated by using for each county the best-fitting of three possible equations for these points: urban as a linear function of year, as an exponential, and as a negative exponential.

¹⁰ I also fit various functions to the data for each county. The results were basically consistent, but considerably less easy to grasp.

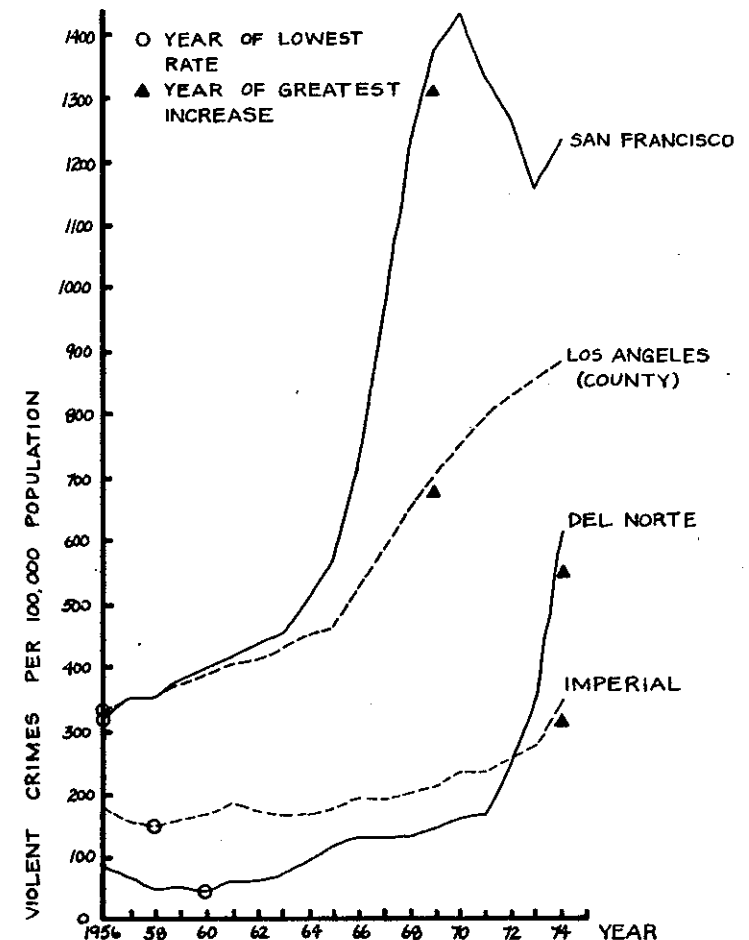


Figure 3. Violent crime rate for selected California counties, 1955 to 1975 (moving three-year averages).

This was true, too, for each factor within the other. The second panel shows, similarly, that the less urban or more remote a county, the later its year of greatest jump in crime rate. The pattern of means remains the same even if one eliminates from the table counties with under 5,000 population in 1965 (for the erratic quality of their rates), or if one controls for region of the state by dropping the Southern California counties.

Statistical tests are superfluous with this sample, because it is a universe; and such tests are quite conservative with *N*s so small, but they do serve a heuristic function. All the cell means are significantly

different, by t-test, from the parameters for Los Angeles and San Francisco. An unweighted-means analysis of variance shows: for "lowest year," a significant ($P < .05$) main effect for urbanism (eight percent of the variance) and a significant interaction effect (11 percent); for "year of greatest increase," significant effects for distance (eight percent) and the interaction (nine percent).¹¹

In summary, the data on violent crime rates for California counties show that all counties had increases in the late 1960s and 70s, but the more rural and/or more remote the county, the later it "bottomed out" of the previous decline and the later it accelerated during the current increase. These results, combined with the national data organized in a different manner, lend weight to the diffusion-of-crime thesis.

Alternative hypotheses

The data examined so far do not *prove* that crime diffused from city to countryside—most importantly, because we cannot observe the mechanism of diffusion—but they are consistent with that hypothesis. In this section, I will discuss alternatives to, and elaborations of, the diffusion model.

Changes in recording accuracy

One alternative is that violent crime has not spread from city to countryside, but that, instead, more accurate recording of it has. This possibility was partly addressed earlier, when I pointed out that both the general increase in crime from 1955 to 1975 and the urban-rural difference during the period are confirmed by other data. The issue here is the interaction of the two—the differential growth in crime by community size. Could this be due to recording changes? There are reasons to believe not. For one, results from recent commercial surveys suggest that this interaction is also present in the public's reports and attitudes. As with the official rates, the gap in victimiza-

¹¹ In deference to the accuracy problems in these crime statistics, I attempted to replicate the analysis using only homicide rates. Unfortunately, the infrequency of homicide in small counties creates extreme fluctuations in rates from year to year, often by factors of three or four (not to mention infinite, when no homicides occurred). Eliminating counties of under 50,000 (in 1965) and using five-year moving averages only compensates partly for this problem. Of the two statistics, low year is most consistent (as measured by variance). The Los Angeles and San Francisco estimates were both 1959; nearby urban counties averaged 1960.8 ($N = 21$); and distant urban counties, 1962.9 ($N = 7$). There were two few cases (four) to analyze the other cells. The results for year of fastest increase are not consistent: L.A., 1970; S.F., 1969; near urban, 1969.3; distant urban, 1968.9. General examination of the data indicates that, where the base numbers are large enough, homicide rates are highly colinear with general rates of criminal violence, and that our results with the latter can be trusted.

Table 2. Parameters describing trends in violent crime rate for California counties, by urbanism of counties and proximity to metropolitan centers

Panel A. Mean year of lowest absolute rate ^a				
Los Angeles, San Francisco = 1956		Close to San Francisco or Los Angeles ^b	Far from San Francisco or Los Angeles	Total
High Urban ^c	M =	1956.91	1957.71	1957.10
	SD =	(± 1.66)	(± 0.95)	(± 1.54)
	N =	(22)	(7)	(29)
Low Urban		1958.45	1959.28	1958.94
		(± 2.21)	(± 3.09)	(± 2.75)
		(11)	(16)	(27)
Total		1957.42	1958.80	1957.99
		(± 1.97)	(± 2.70)	(± 2.375)
		(33)	(23)	(56)

Panel B. Mean year of greatest absolute increase in rate ^a				
Los Angeles, San Francisco = 1968		Close to San Francisco or Los Angeles ^b	Far from San Francisco or Los Angeles	Total
High Urban ^c		1971.64	1973.00	1971.97
		(± 1.99)	(± 1.53)	(± 1.95)
		(22)	(7)	(29)
Low Urban		1972.36	1973.19	1972.85
		(± 1.80)	(± 1.17)	(± 1.49)
		(11)	(16)	(27)
Total		1971.88	1973.13	1972.39
		(± 1.93)	(± 1.25)	(± 1.79)
		(33)	(23)	(56)

^a Based on three-year moving averages.

^b "Close" = less than 120 miles; measured in 10-mile units from approximate centers of population concentration.

^c "High" = 49 percent or more, estimated for 1965.

tion and fear between large and small places that widened in the 1960s is narrowing in the 1970s.¹² Also, it is unlikely that recording differences can as easily explain the patterns within California, a single, relatively "professionalized" state. To be sure, this alternative

¹² For example, a Gallup Poll, conducted in 1977, of crime victimization found a general decline since 1975 in incidence, and that "the gap between the smaller and larger cities is now not so great" (*San Francisco Chronicle*, December 20, 1977). In 1978, Louis Harris reported a drop in anxiety about crime, and "said residents of small

hypothesis cannot be ruled out, but it would not seem to suffice as a full explanation for the complex changes we have seen.

Population composition

Violent crimes are disproportionately committed by some sectors of the population, notably, males, young people, and blacks. Could changes in the distributions across the urban-rural continuum of these populations explain changes in the patterns of crime? The most plausible hypothesis is that crime increased almost solely within one or more of these populations and the groups moved toward rural places since about 1970. There is little reason to believe that such moves have occurred, and some to believe they have not; between 1970 and 1976, as in the earlier years, the proportion of the rural population that was black *declined* slightly; in the previous decade, the proportion of the rural population that was male *declined* slightly.¹³ A more complete analysis, beyond the scope of this paper, would introduce demographic indicators into a model of crime rate changes. I suspect that they would not change our conclusions; after all, it is generally conceded that demographic changes explain only a small part of the nationwide increase in the sixties (see Silberman, 1978:31).

A somewhat different argument is that the entire crime pattern reported here—the big-city increase, followed by the small-town increase—was specific to certain populations. However, evidence suggests that, while the rates of increase during the 1960s varied by groups (highest for young black males), violent crimes increased for males and females, blacks and whites, and most age groups.¹⁴ In any case, even were the increases restricted to a single population, say, males 17 to 24, it would still be necessary to explain why the urban-rural patterns of that population were as described above; the diffusion model would only be specified.¹⁵

towns, not the large cities, report the largest increase of crime. . . it would not be long before small towns in the South and West were the places where people were most apprehensive about crime" (*San Francisco Chronicle*, May 18, 1978).

¹³ Statistics from *The Statistical Abstract of the United States*.

¹⁴ See *Social Indicators 1976*; Archer and Gartner (1976:Table 8); Mulvihill and Tumlin (1969:Chapter 3).

¹⁵ Further doubts about a population composition model come from Skogan's (1977) study of crime rates in the 32 largest cities, from 1946 to 1970. He found that the correlations with size, density, and percent nonwhite changed noticeably over the period, the latter increasing from .03 to .58. Something besides population shift was going on. (Skogan's own explanation, that the metropolitan population has become more socially segregated between city and suburb, does not suffice, since suburban rates have also increased.)

Structural changes

Certain structural variables can be identified as conducive to criminal behavior and might be hypothesized as having changed in such ways as to explain the patterns of results. For example, unemployment is associated with crime. However, it would be difficult to cite it as an explanation here because crime increased through the 1957 to 1958 recession, accelerated during the boom years of the 1960s, and continued through the recession of the early 1970s. Also, poverty has generally been greater in rural areas, with their lower crime rates. Gun ownership is another possibility. In the 1960s, there was a rapid growth in gun sales, and the percent of homicides committed with firearms increased from 52 percent in 1961 to 68 percent in 1974 (United States Bureau of the Census 1977:Table 16/1). However, this still leaves a national increase of 40 percent in the rate of nonfirearm homicides between 1961 and 1974. Furthermore, guns and rifles have always been more plentiful in rural than in urban areas. (These two examples—unemployment and gun ownership—address only the extent to which structural changes can explain the *national* pattern. The more appropriate analysis is whether there has been an urban-rural structural change, such as a change in the correlation between urbanism and unemployment. I was unable, within the scope of this study, to explore that possibility. Nevertheless, if unemployment cannot explain the national trends, it probably cannot explain the urban-rural pattern.) In general, it is difficult to imagine structural changes that occurred in the United States during this period that could account for the urban-rural pattern—large places "bottoming out" earlier and accelerating earlier—in violent crime rates.

Differential propensities to crime

To this point I have used the differences in crime growth curves by size of place as indicative of *diffusion*, of the transmission within populations and from one population to another of the propensity to commit violent crime. However, the same gross patterns might be observed even when there is no contact among individuals at all. If people are normally distributed with regard to some underlying propensity to act, a constant stimulus will produce an S-shaped growth curve; and if the means of two or more populations differ in this propensity, then an investigator will observe lagged growth curves such as those in Figure 2 (see Rogers and Shoemaker, 1971:176ff; Coleman *et al.*, 1966). Therefore, an alternative hypothesis to urban-to-rural diffusion is of stable urban-rural differences in propensity to act.

There is no way to choose between these models with the data presented so far. And for the first argument of this paper, there is no need to choose. *With or without interpersonal diffusion, the lag in crime*

increases between city and countryside demonstrates that urban-rural differences in behavioral patterns, or ways of life, persist in modern America.

What constitutes such an underlying "propensity" is, however, an important matter. Would it be a specific propensity to commit violent crimes that distinguishes urban and rural populations, or as suggested in the theoretical section above, would it be a general propensity to cultural change? There are reasons, albeit not conclusive ones, to prefer the latter interpretation. One involves the evidence that urbanites tend to be relatively unconventional in a wide range of areas (Fischer, 1976:Chapter 8) and that in general material innovations diffuse from city to hinterland. The other is that violent crime is, in other societies and historical periods, more common in *less* urban than in more urban places.¹⁶

The argument I will make is that cultural forms spread from city to countryside because of diffusion along networks of communication and/or differential propensity to cultural change. Violent crime is, in part, one such cultural form. (It may well be that this propensity to innovation or deviation makes urbanites, in general, differentially prone to commit crimes, but that is only one product.) The final section of this paper elaborates this perspective.

Speculation

When material items—for example, radio ownership—diffuse from city to countryside, the process has an end: virtually complete saturation of the population, first in the urban centers and later in the periphery (see, for example, Ogburn and Duncan, 1964). Cultural items, or at least many cultural items, seem to operate differently. As one set of beliefs, styles, or practices proliferates in a population, an alternative or even contradictory set emerges and begins to spread, overtaking the first. In many cases, the process becomes cyclical. The classic example is clothing fashions, such as skirt length; similar, if longer, cycles have been claimed for more consequential phenomena,

¹⁶ For an historical review of violence and urbanism, see Mulvihill and Tumin (1969:Chapter 16; see also, Braudel 1966:743ff). In American history, there are periods such as 1870 to 1890 when the homicide rate in Massachusetts (outside of Boston) was higher in rural than urban areas (Cook, 1893). The same was true in France at that time (Durkheim, 1951:353). Today, there are societies in which this is still true. Archer and Gartner (1976:Table 2) present data showing that, during the 1960s, there were six societies where the homicide rate for the largest city was lower than that for the nation as a whole, and 18 where the opposite was true. The latter 18 are largely composed of European societies and overseas European societies (such as New Zealand), so that in terms of "culture areas" the division is somewhat more even. (Unfortunately, the use of primate cities for the comparison clouds that generally excellent analysis. In the Massachusetts case above, for example, Boston and rural areas had higher rates than other urban places.)

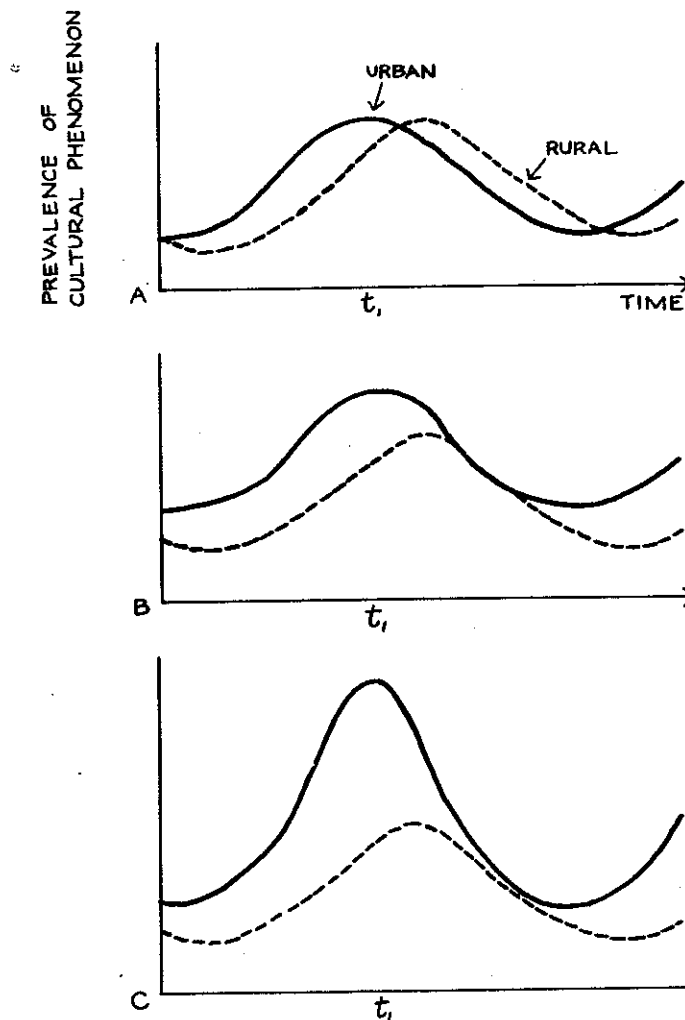


Figure 4. Three models of urban to rural diffusion.

too. In each case, I am arguing, the changes—whether up or down in the cycle—start in the urban centers and spread later to smaller places.

(In what sense is violent crime a "cultural" phenomenon? Without getting into the fierce debates on the "subculture of violence" [Wolfgang and Ferracuti, 1967; versus, for example, Erlanger, 1974], I assume only that there is *some* cultural component to violent crime, whether located in the personal milieu of the actors, in their neigh-

borhoods, or in the wider community. There certainly seems little doubt of national cultural and subcultural variation in rates of violent crime [Hinderlang, 1978].)

Chart A in Figure 4 is a graphic presentation of this thesis, in its elementary form: cultural forms go through cycles, with urban populations changing ahead of rural ones. Note that there is, in this version, no average difference between urban and rural, nor is there a secular trend up or down. This model might be crudely applied to the violent crime data, with the origin marking 1955 and t_1 marking 1975.

It is possible to modify the model in various ways while still maintaining its two critical features, cyclicity and the lag between urban and rural. In Chart B, a constant is added to the urban rate, so that, while at some times the difference between urban and rural widens and at others it narrows, there is an average difference between the two. Chart C is based on yet another assumption, that the amplitude of the cycle is greater for urban than rural populations. (It is a plausible assumption, given a theory of interpersonal diffusion.) Again, t_1 might be seen as 1975, and the pattern does resemble that in Figure 2. Further modifications might be made—adding a secular trend, accelerating the cycles over time, narrowing urban-rural differences over time—but the basic features remain: the lag and the cyclicity of cultural phenomena.

(The model also implies a coming downturn in violent crime rates, first in large cities and later elsewhere. At this writing, both FBI statistics and reports of surveys suggest that there is a leveling-off, nationally, in violent crime, although it is too soon to tell whether the rates are following the precise pattern shown in Figure 4C.)

The basic point is that differences by size of community, at least violent crime rates, are *not* necessarily declining in modern societies. In recent American experience, in fact, they have increased greatly. Moreover, *neither* are crime rate differences necessarily widening in modern societies; data reported in an earlier version of this paper (Fischer, 1978b) show narrowing of differences in contemporary Japan and 1920s France. Nor are these differences fluctuating randomly. Instead, there seem to be systematic patterns of change, sometimes widening and sometimes narrowing the gap between large and small communities. And these patterns appear to persist to this day.

The patterns, I would argue, involve diffusion. Just as inventions spread from city to country, so do cultural forms such as fads and fashions—and crime. Cultural forms are different, however, in that they are superseded or reversed. The result is cycles, with urban cycles leading rural ones.

The idea that cyclicity is an aspect of social life is hardly novel, but has not been fashionable for a long time. As used here, it implies that there is something arbitrary or functionally autonomous about

cultural forms such as moral values and political attitudes, that there may be swings between liberalism and conservatism, libertine and authoritarian world views, of “ideational” and “sensate” that are much like swings in fashion. It also implies—and this is frankly bothersome—that the commission of violent crime is somehow like fashion. How can that be?

It may be that a major cause of criminal violence, at least in the modern era,¹⁷ is the “moral climate.” One analysis is that in certain periods the inhibitions to the commission of violent acts is lowered because the normative order becomes questioned. The hackneyed phrase is “breakdown of respect for law and order”; an alternative formulation is “liberation from institutional repression.” This explanation for the rise in crime in America is that the late 1950s and early 1960s saw increases in civil disobedience, student movements, challenges to social orthodoxies, the rise of ideologies of “rights” and “freedoms”—all of which were parts of a moral climate encouraging individual liberty against authority and order. One aspect of this morality is the feeling of some people that they are free to violate the law, perhaps violently; another aspect might be a less repressive or deterrent atmosphere that reduces the inhibitions to crime.¹⁸ This change might have been a response to specific events, or it may have been just part of a long cultural cycle that moves between the poles of anarchic individualism at one extreme and repressive order at the

¹⁷ I include this stipulation since historical evidence suggests that the ability of national states to control internal brigandry and violence was extremely important in pre- and early modern periods.

¹⁸ Theodore Ferdinand (1978:281–82) suggests much the same thing as argued here:

Apparently, the upsurge in criminality since the late 1950s reflects a real increase, and not simply more comprehensive and thorough reporting—it has been felt too broadly and recorded in too many different communities. Moreover, there can be little argument over the sources of the increase. The social liberation of blacks in American society . . .

Another factor in this increase is undoubtedly a decided shift in values and behavior of young, middle-class Americans of every color . . . A substantial portion of all young people rejected the authority of their parents, teachers, and everyone else who spoke for convention or conformity. These young people were not criminals in the traditional sense, but they were certainly more adventuresome than most of their parents, and many were drawn into sexual and psychedelic experimentation. Consequently, a substantial number were introduced to a segment of the underworld that their parents and most of their peers knew only remotely . . .

The most likely outcome at this point seems to be a permanent shift toward greater sexual permissiveness but a decline in both the use of debilitating narcotics and inner-city black crime. Young people today are not as suspicious of and rebellious toward authority as their counterparts were in the 1960s, and their urge to repudiate conventional values has moderated.

other, moving independently of structural changes and events (see, for example, Stone, 1977). And in all this, the changes occur first in urban and later in rural places.

A different, but still cultural, explanation for the recent American experience focuses not on inhibition, but on imitation. In certain periods, violence is valued more, observed more often, is even legitimated, and thus is imitated more. Typically, wars usher in such a period of legitimated violence and thus increase domestic violence—so argue Archer and Gartner (1976). This might explain the American pattern since 1955. Although crime rates were increasing before 1965, the year of massive United States involvement in the Vietnam War, the greatest increases occurred during the prime war years—in the urban centers.

Either way, I am positing continuous cultural changes in modern society. And the evidence of this article suggests that, even with regard to so serious a matter as criminal violence, waves of cultural change still originate in the urban centers and move outward toward the rural periphery.

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