

# LIFE-THREATENING VIOLENCE IS PRIMARILY A CRIME PROBLEM: A FOCUS ON PREVENTION

DELBERT S. ELLIOTT\*

## INTRODUCTION

The central thesis of Zimring and Hawkins's book *Crime Is Not the Problem: Lethal Violence in America*<sup>1</sup> is that lethal and life-threatening violence is a specific, unique form of criminal behavior which is separate from and unrelated to other forms of crime.<sup>2</sup> It is this proposition that I question. I have no quarrel with the claim that the lethal violence rate distinguishes crime in America from crime in other wealthy industrial nations. The evidence presented by Zimring and Hawkins is compelling on this issue. Nor do I question the claim that a narrow focus on life-threatening violent crimes might produce some new crime policies that will reduce the volume of homicides and assaults which result in serious injury; or that this focus might inform our understanding of the effects of guns, drugs, the media, and changing social norms on injury-producing crime. Should they prove effective, new policies derived from this approach are welcomed. We need all of the help that we can get to reduce the levels of violence, particularly those forms of violence which involve a high risk of injury and death.

Zimring and Hawkins do not view policies directed specifically at lethal violence as part of a more general, comprehensive repertoire of crime and violence prevention policies and programs. Rather, they argue that we should redirect our resources, giving *priority* to their approach to violence prevention; that general crime prevention strategies are *ineffective* in reducing the volume of life-threatening crimes, as these forms of criminal behavior are unique and distinct from other forms of crime. I believe the assertion that life-threatening crimes are unrelated to other

---

\* Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, Institute for Behavioral Science, University of Colorado.

1. FRANKLIN E. ZIMRING & GORDON HAWKINS, *CRIME IS NOT THE PROBLEM: LETHAL VIOLENCE IN AMERICA* (1997).

2. *See id.* at 21-22.

forms of crime is incorrect and that redirecting our resources to policies that focus narrowly on lethal violence will undermine other equally or more effective efforts to prevent this type of criminal behavior.

## I. DEFINING "THE PROBLEM"

At the outset, I would like to be specific about "the problem." Initially, Zimring and Hawkins appear to define the problem as lethal violence. For example, they argue that what is distinctive about crime in the United States is the homicide rate. Later, they define the problem more broadly as "life-threatening violence,"<sup>3</sup> or "interpersonal violence likely to lead to death or serious bodily injury,"<sup>4</sup> or assaults "involving the infliction of wounds with knives or guns."<sup>5</sup> The most restricted definition would appear to include only homicide and nonnegligent manslaughter. The most inclusive definition would include all homicides, nonnegligent manslaughters, robberies, and aggravated assaults; all of the crimes in these categories involve some risk of serious bodily injury or death. In 1995, there were slightly more than 22,000 homicides and nonnegligent manslaughters, 462,000 robberies, and 968,000 aggravated assaults in the United States.<sup>6</sup> Homicides constituted about 1.5% of these serious violent crimes. Even if we restrict robberies and aggravated assaults to those involving bodily injury from a firearm or knife, the number of life-threatening crimes was approximately 594,000, and homicides constituted less than four percent of these events.<sup>7</sup> If the threat of serious injury as well as death causes public concern and fear, "the problem" is most properly reflected in the rates of life-threatening violent crime, a very small proportion of which involves homicides.

The difference in events counted as constituting the problem is not trivial. The types and the rates of criminal events captured by these different definitions are quite variable. The use of lethal violence events is problematic because it confounds a be-

---

3. *Id.* at 19.

4. *Id.* at 52.

5. *Id.* at 72.

6. See FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION, U.S. DEPT OF JUSTICE, CRIME IN THE UNITED STATES, UNIFORM CRIME REPORTS (1997).

7. See *id.*

havior or an act with the consequence of that act, a distinction that is critical to any causal analysis of these events. Life-threatening violence is less problematic because it involves a particular type of behavior and does not assume a specific consequence, which has its own set of causal conditions, some of which are independent of the violent act. Most aggravated assaults with a gun do not result in a homicide; most intentional shootings do not result in a homicide. Finally, it is important to note that the amount and quality of evidence offered in support of particular conclusions in this book vary by which definition is used.

## II. ARE RATES OF LIFE-THREATENING VIOLENCE INDEPENDENT OF GENERAL CRIME RATES?

Zimring and Hawkins's first assertion in support of their claim that lethal and injury-producing crimes are unique and not part of a general pattern of criminal behavior, is that neither the total volume of crime nor the number of active offenders influence variations in the rate of lethal violence.<sup>8</sup> They then present data which they claim demonstrates that changes in the level of property crime do not appear to be an important cause of homicide. The evidence for this claim is not very compelling. First, there is no evidence presented relative to the number of active offenders (prevalence) and the homicide rates across countries or within the United States. The types of data relied upon simply do not afford any reliable estimates of the prevalence of offending. This part of the proposition is never tested.

Second, the data presented to test the hypothesis that the homicide rate is associated with the general crime rate are weak and inconclusive. With one exception, none of the analyses presented involved general crime rates. Instead, rates of selected property crimes are used as a proxy for the general crime rate in a series of case studies. No evidence is presented to justify this substitution, and generalizations based upon case studies are always problematic. The one analysis involving general crime rates involved self-reported general victimization rates and homicide rates from twenty countries.<sup>9</sup> The selection of countries appears somewhat arbitrary. For example, the analysis included

---

8. See ZIMRING & HAWKINS, *supra* note 1, at 1.

9. See *id.* at 7-8.

Norway and Sweden but not Denmark; it included Spain but not Portugal; it included Japan but not urban China or Singapore. Nor did it include Mexico, Latvia, Russia, or Armenia. All of these countries have homicide rates which are close to or greater than those in the United States, as reported in the World Health Report document from which homicide rates were obtained for Zimring and Hawkins's analysis.<sup>10</sup>

Relatively minor changes in the countries included or excluded have a significant effect on Zimring and Hawkins's conclusions. For example, if Northern Ireland were excluded from the analysis due to the obvious circumstances there which make it an exception for any analysis of homicide, the correlation would be 0.52 and statistically significant; if the Republic of Ireland had been substituted for Northern Ireland, the correlation would have been approximately 0.43 and statistically significant;<sup>11</sup> and if the number of countries included in the analysis had been twenty-five instead of twenty with the same correlation (0.37), it would have been statistically significant. All of the above examples would suggest that the general victimization rate is related to and predictive of the lethal violence rate, accounting for fourteen to twenty-seven percent of the variation in homicides. But this set of examples also may be capitalizing on the particular countries included in the analysis, and the safest thing to say is that the evidence is inconclusive.

Third, most of the evidence presented involves homicide rates, which represent a very small fraction of all of the life-threatening, serious injury producing crimes that constitute the problem. There are some analyses involving robbery as a life-threatening form of violence, but none involving aggravated assault, which constitute the most frequent type of life-threatening crime. Are the rates of aggravated assault in the United States dramatically higher than in the rest of the world's industrial democracies? Apparently, the data for this analysis are not available. But this is a critical issue if the problem is life-threatening violence rather than lethal violence. Most of the

---

10. The homicide rate is that reported by the World Health Organization as cited by Zimring and Hawkins. See ZIMRING & HAWKINS, *supra* note 1, at 53. The selection of cities in this analysis was limited to those that had both types of data available. The selectivity was thus in the availability of data not the decision making of the authors.

11. Victimization data are not available for the Republic of Ireland, and this calculation assumes that this rate is in the same quartile as Northern Ireland.

evidence presented on homicide and robbery rates involved case studies of a few selected cities like New York and London, Los Angeles and Sydney. The potential selection biases make it difficult to generalize these findings with any confidence. We need better data to test the hypothesis that general crime or property rates are associated with rates of life-threatening violence. With better data it may turn out that Zimring and Hawkins are correct in asserting that these two rates are independent; but they have not made the case with the data presented in *Crime Is Not the Problem*.

### III. ARE INDIVIDUALS INVOLVED IN OTHER FORMS OF CRIME AT HIGH RISK FOR COMMITTING LIFE-THREATENING CRIMES?

In *Crime Is Not the Problem*, the case for viewing life-threatening violence as a unique crime that is separate from and unrelated to other forms of crime, is framed entirely at the macro-level. Although this is an appropriate level for determining how the volume of crime in the United States differs from that in other industrial democracies, it is not the most appropriate level for demonstrating that life-threatening violence is a unique form of behavior that is separate from and independent of other forms of crime. A macro-level comparison of crime rates does not inform the underlying causal connection or process linking these behaviors. Any causal interpretation of macro-level associations like those discussed above is unwarranted; but this is precisely what the claim that crime and lethal violence are independent implies—that the underlying conditions and individual attributes that influence crime do not influence life-threatening violence.<sup>12</sup>

Contrary to the assertions made by Zimring and Hawkins,<sup>13</sup> the use of life-threatening violence in this country is, in fact, largely restricted to a criminal class and embedded in a general pattern of criminal behavior. Evidence for this is found in many self-reported studies of delinquency and crime.<sup>14</sup> For example, in

---

12. See ZIMRING & HAWKINS, *supra* note 1, at 26.

13. See *id.* at 16.

14. See, e.g., Delbert S. Elliott, *Serious Violent Offenders: Onset, Developmental Course, and Termination*, 32 CRIMINOLOGY 1 (1994); David P. Farrington, *Antisocial Personality from Childhood to Adulthood*, 4 PSYCHOLOGIST 389 (1991); David P. Farrington, *Early Predictors of Adolescent Aggression and Adult Violence*, 4 VIOLENCE & VICTIMS 79 (1989); M.W. Lipsey & J.H. Derzon, *Predictors of Violent or*

the National Youth Survey,<sup>15</sup> involving a national probability sample of 1,725 young people, the correlation between the frequency of any criminal act and the frequency of life-threatening violent acts at ages eighteen to twenty-four was 0.64. Three years earlier when the sample was from ages fifteen to twenty-one, this correlation was 0.59.<sup>16</sup> At the individual level of analysis, involvement in crime generally *is* predictive of life-threatening violence, accounting for thirty-five to forty-one percent of the variance in aggravated assaults, robberies, and rapes involving a weapon or injury requiring medical attention (referred to hereafter as life-threatening violent crimes) during the peak years of offending.

These correlations actually underestimate the relationship between crime generally and life-threatening crime. Figure 1 depicts the developmental progression from minor delinquent acts to life-threatening violent crimes in the National Youth Survey sample.<sup>17</sup> The probabilities associated with any particular sequence of crimes are shown. For example, involvement in minor delinquent acts precedes initial use of marijuana in ninety-three percent of cases where individuals became involved in both behaviors.

Minor delinquency precedes involvement in any index crime in ninety-nine percent of cases where individuals became involved in both types of crime. The developmental progression *within*

---

*Serious Delinquency in Adolescence and Rarely Adulthood: A Synthesis of Longitudinal Research*, in NEVER TOO EARLY, NEVER TOO LATE (R. Loeber & David P. Farrington eds., 1998); R. Loeber, *Antisocial Behavior: More Enduring than Changeable?*, 30 J. AM. ACAD. CHILD & ADOLESCENT PSYCHIATRY 383 (1991); R. Loeber & D. Hays, *Key Issues in the Development of the Aggression and Violence from Childhood to Early Adulthood*, 48 ANN. REV. PSYCH. 371 (1997); D. Magnusson et al., *Aggression and Criminality in a Longitudinal Perspective*, in PROSPECTIVE STUDIES IN CRIME AND DELINQUENCY (K. VanDusen and S.A. Mednick eds., 1989); Terrie E. Moffit, *Adolescence-Limited and Life-Course-Persistent Antisocial Behavior: A Developmental Taxology*, 100 PSYCHOL. REV. 674 (1993); D. Nagin et al., *Life-Course Trajectories of Different Types of Offenders*, 33 CRIMINOLOGY 111 (1995). See generally H. STATTIN & D. MAGNUSSON, *THE ROLE OF EARLY AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR FOR THE FREQUENCY, THE SERIOUSNESS AND THE TYPE OF LATER CRIMINAL OFFENSES* (University of Stockholm, 1984).

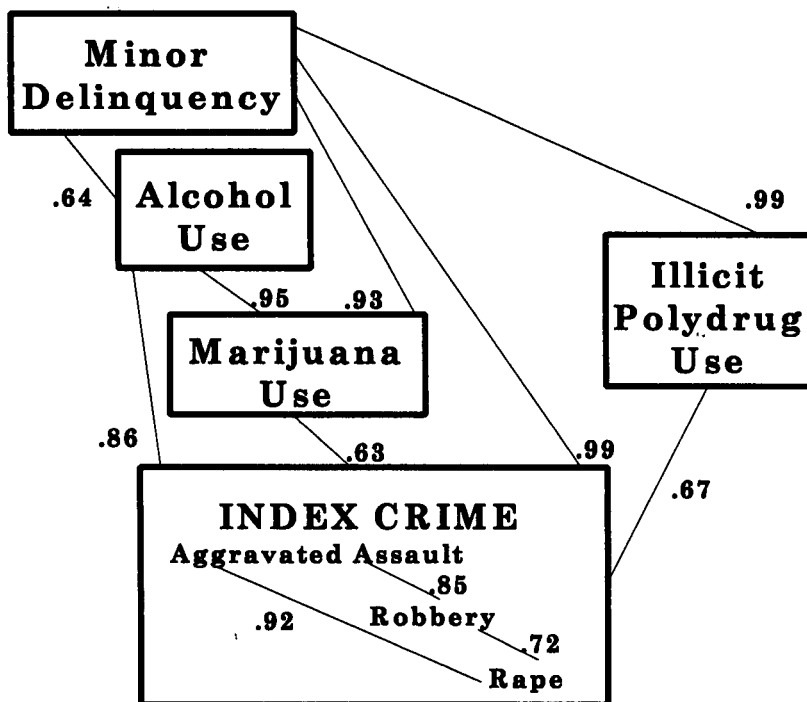
15. See Elliott, *supra* note 14.

16. The measure of life-threatening violence used in these analyses involved self-reported aggravated assaults, robberies, and rapes that involved either a weapon or injury serious enough to require medical treatment or both. Both correlations are statistically significant.

17. See Elliott, *supra* note 14, at 11.

life-threatening violent crimes is also quite strong, with aggravated assault preceding robbery in eighty-five percent of the cases

**Figure 1: Developmental Progression by Type of Offense  
NYS: Total Sample<sup>18</sup>**



and rape in ninety-two percent of cases; and robbery preceding rape in seventy-two percent of cases. Involvement in minor forms of crime, like alcohol and marijuana use, and involvement in serious property crimes *all* typically precede involvement in a life-threatening crime.<sup>19</sup> Minor crime is essentially a *necessary* cause or condition for involvement in life-threatening violent crime. It is not a sufficient cause because many persons who reach a particular developmental stage of their criminal career do not progress to the next stage. Relatively few minor offenders go on to become involved in life-threatening violent crimes, but

18. Adapted from Delbert S. Elliot, *Serious Violent Offenders: Onset, Developmental Course and Termination*, 32 *CRIMINOLOGY* 1 (1994).

19. *See id.* at 10-12.

virtually all individuals who become involved in life-threatening violent crime have prior involvement in many types of minor (and not so minor) offenses.

**Table 1: NYS Serious Violent Offenders' Offense Patterns, 1980<sup>20</sup>**

Offense	Prevalence	Offending Rate/100	% Total
Felony Assault	80.6	501	77
Felony Theft	65.7	770	79
Robbery	25.4	206	89
Index	100.0	1,140	83
Minor Assault	73.1	1,513	57
Minor Theft	68.7	1,069	44
Illegal Services	56.7	6,640	66
Public Disorder	80.6	5,942	26
Vandalism	71.2	571	40
Total Delinquency	100.0	16,142	50
Alcohol Use	94.0	12,075	12
Marijuana Use	85.1	14,001	20
Polydrug Use	55.2	4,352	36
Problem Drug Use	54.5	—	—
Mental Health Problems	21.2	—	—

---

20. Represents 4.5% of the total NYS sample for 1980 (N=67).

The above data demonstrate the developmental progression in the seriousness of criminal behavior. A similar pattern exists relative to the frequency and variety of offenses.<sup>21</sup> With each transition from minor offending to marijuana use to index offending to life-threatening violent offending, individuals commit an increasing number and variety of offenses. This is illustrated by the offense patterns and offending rates of serious violent offenders in the National Youth Survey.<sup>22</sup> Those persons involved in one or more life-threatening violent crimes in 1980 (ages fifteen to twenty-one) were typically involved in all forms of criminal behavior and reported very high frequencies of offending. For example, they reported an average of fifteen index offenses and 161 total offenses in this one year. And although they represented only 4.5% of the sample, they accounted for eighty-three percent of all index crimes and one-half of all crimes reported by the sample.

The frequency, seriousness, and variety of offending are all strongly predictive of life-threatening violent offending. Even in the case of life-threatening domestic violence, most of these violent offenders have a history of prior involvement in criminal behavior and serious forms of violent crimes.<sup>23</sup> It is not surprising that research has documented a substantial relationship between violent victimization and violent offending.<sup>24</sup> Many victims of life-threatening violence are themselves violent offenders. The view presented in *Crime Is Not the Problem*—that many or most persons involved in life-threatening violence have no prior or current involvement in other forms of crime—is simply unsupported; they almost uniformly have a long history of involvement in criminal behavior.

---

21. See *id.* at 13.

22. See *supra* Table 1.

23. See S.W. Mihalic & Delbert S. Elliott, *A Social Learning Theory Model of Marital Violence*, 12 J. FAM. VIOLENCE 21, 37 (1997).

24. See LESLIE KENNEDY, CRIME VICTIMS IN CONTEXT 118-19 (1998); see, e.g., S. Baron, *The Canadian West Coast Punk Subculture: A Field Study*, 14 CANADIAN J. SOC. 289 (1989); Janet L. Lauritsen et al., *The Link Between Offending and Victimization Among Adolescents*, 29 CRIMINOLOGY 265 (1991); J. McDermott, *Crime in the School and in the Community: Offenders, Victims and Fearful Youth*, 29 CRIME & DELINQUENCY 270 (1983); Robert J. Sampson & Janet L. Lauritsen, *Deviant Lifestyle, Proximity to Crime, and the Offender-Victim Link in Personal Violence*, 27 J. RES. CRIME & DELINQUENCY 110 (1990); Terence P. Thornberry & R.M. Figlio, *Victimization and Criminal Behavior in a Birth Cohort*, in IMAGES OF CRIME: OFFENDERS AND VICTIMS 102 (Terence P. Thornberry & Edward Sagarin eds., 1974).

There is also a substantial body of research demonstrating a common set of causes for both nonviolent and violent forms of criminal behavior.<sup>25</sup> There may well be some unique conditions associated with the progression from minor to index to life-threatening violent crimes, but research on this issue is quite recent and inconclusive. Research also reveals that once initiated, high levels of aggression and violence in childhood, which rarely involve weapons or injury, are very stable patterns of behavior that persist into late adolescence and adulthood, where they do come to involve both weapons and serious injury.<sup>26</sup> It appears that both a common set of conditions and the stability of aggression and violence over the life course accounts for the developmental progression from minor crimes to more serious crimes to life-threatening violent crimes. The predictive power of our existing causal models is quite similar for crime in general and life-threatening crime specifically, that is, with our existing theoretical understanding about the causes of crime, we can predict one as well as the other.<sup>27</sup>

---

25. See, e.g., John E. Donovan & Richard Jessor, *Structure of Problem Behavior in Adolescence and Young Adulthood*, 53 J. CONSULTING & CLINICAL PSYCHOL. 890 (1985); Delbert S. Elliott, *Health Enhancing and Health Compromising Lifestyles, in PROMOTING THE HEALTH OF ADOLESCENTS: NEW DIRECTIONS FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY* 119 (S.G. Millstein et al. eds., 1993); Howard Kaplan et al., *Self-Rejection and the Explanation of Deviance: Specification of the Structure Among Latent Constructs*, 92 AM. J. SOC. 384 (1986); D. Wayne Osgood et al., *The Generality of Deviance in Late Adolescence and Early Adulthood*, 53 AM. SOC. REV. 81 (1988); H. White, *The Drug-Use Delinquency Connection in Adolescence, in DRUGS, CRIME AND THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM* 215 (Ralph A. Weisheit ed., 1990).

26. See, e.g., Avshalom Caspi et al., *Continuities and Consequences of Interactional Styles Across the Life Course*, 57 J. PERSONALITY 375 (1989); David P. Farrington, *Childhood Violence and Adult Violence: Early Precursors and Later-Life Outcomes, in THE DEVELOPMENT AND TREATMENT OF CHILDHOOD AGGRESSION* 5 (D.J. Pepler & Kenneth H. Rubin eds., 1990); David P. Farrington et al., *Criminal Careers of Two Generations of Family Members in the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development*, 7 STUD. ON CRIME & CRIME PREVENTION 1 (1998); David Fergusson et al., *Factors Associated with Continuity and Changes in Disruptive Behavior Patterns Between Childhood and Adolescence*, 24 J. ABNORMAL CHILD PSYCHOL. 533 (1996); David Fergusson & L.J. Horwood, *The Structure, Stability and Correlations of the Trait Components of Conduct Disorder, Attention Deficit and Anxiety/Withdrawal Reports*, 34 J. CHILD PSYCHOL. & PSYCHIATRY 749 (1993); R. Loeber & T. Dishon, *Early Predictors of Male Delinquency: A Review*, 94 PSYCHOL. BULL. 68 (1983); Terrie E. Moffitt, *Adolescence-Limited and Life-Course Persistent Antisocial Behavior: A Developmental Taxonomy*, 100 PSYCHOL. REV. 674 (1993); Gerald R. Patterson, *Orderly Change in a Stable World: The Antisocial Trait as Chimera*, 61 J. CONSULTING & CLINICAL PSYCHOL. 911 (1993).

27. See Elliott, *supra* note 14, at 15-17.

In sum, persons engaging in life-threatening violent behavior are heavily embedded in a general pattern of criminal behavior; crime is a part of their general lifestyle.<sup>28</sup> Involvement in other forms of crime does put individuals at an elevated risk for later life-threatening violence. The causal connection between early involvement in criminal behavior and later life-threatening violent behavior involves both a common set of causes and evidence that aggression and violence are very stable behavioral patterns, that once initiated are likely to continue over the life course unless there is some effective intervention to disrupt this pattern. These observations are at odds with the image of life-threatening violent offenders presented in *Crime Is Not the Problem* and they have important implications for any effective prevention strategy targeting life-threatening violence.

#### IV. ZIMRING AND HAWKINS'S THREE OBJECTIONS TO VIEWING LIFE-THREATENING VIOLENCE AS A CRIME PROBLEM

Zimring and Hawkins raise three objections to viewing lethal or life-threatening violence as a crime problem. First, Zimring and Hawkins claim this perspective narrows the focus of potential interventions or prevention efforts to the limited tools and processes of the criminal justice system, and these have not proved to be effective in preventing or deterring any form of crime. As a criminologist, I have a much broader view of criminal justice interventions than just increasing the severity of sanctions, the level of enforcement, and the number of acts that are proscribed. The criminal justice system has traditionally included a very broad range of interventions. Typically these include rehabilitation programs for convicted offenders, pre-trial diversion programs for suspected offenders, general youth development programs for at-risk youth, and joint police and community problem solving programs (community policing). The latter two programs represent primary prevention efforts. The attempt to redefine violence as a public health problem has some advantages: it focuses attention on the consequences of this behavior, and it brings additional resources to the prevention effort. But I have seen few proposed interventions from those using this approach or even those identified by Zimring and

---

28. See, e.g., Elliott, *supra* note 23.

Hawkins in their description of a loss-reduction approach that have not already been implemented or that could be implemented as part of a general crime-prevention strategy. I acknowledge that other approaches may contribute significantly to the reduction of lethal and life-threatening violence. These efforts should be encouraged. But the tools and processes of the criminal justice system seem quite broad and a crime-prevention strategy based upon these tools and processes will continue to provide the core set of programs and policies to prevent life-threatening violence.

The assertion that these programs are not successful is only partially justified. Most crime and violence prevention programs and policies have not been carefully evaluated.<sup>29</sup> We do not know if they work. The evidence, or lack of it, clearly does not support the claim that they do not work. The observation that rates of life-threatening or lethal violence have increased is not sufficient evidence to demonstrate this claim; we have no idea what the crime rates would be if these programs were not being implemented.

Among those relatively few programs that have been carefully evaluated, some have been demonstrated to be effective in preventing crime and some have been demonstrated not to work.<sup>30</sup> However, the meta analyses completed recently indicate that although the effectiveness of various crime-prevention programs vary, many have some positive prevention effect.<sup>31</sup> Further, these analyses indicate that those programs that are effective in the community are also effective in a justice system

---

29. See Delbert S. Elliott, *Introduction to 1-2 CENTER FOR STUDY AND PREVENTION OF VIOLENCE, BLUEPRINTS FOR VIOLENCE PREVENTION* i, xi (1997); P.H. TOLAN & N.G. GUERRA, *CENTER FOR STUDY AND PREVENTION OF VIOLENCE, WHAT WORKS IN REDUCING ADOLESCENT VIOLENCE* 1 (1994); see, e.g., DELBERT S. ELLIOTT, *Implementing and Evaluating Crime Prevention and Control Programs and Policies*, in *CRIME, LAW AND SOCIAL CHANGE* (forthcoming); Lawrence W. Sherman et al., *Preventing Crime: What Works, What Doesn't, What's Promising: A Report to the U.S. Congress* (1997) (unpublished manuscript, on file at University of Maryland).

30. See, e.g., TOLAN & GUERRA, *supra* note 27; DELBERT S. ELLIOTT, *Implementing and Evaluating Crime Prevention and Control Programs and Policies*, in *CRIME, LAW AND SOCIAL CHANGE* (forthcoming); Sherman et al., *supra* note 27.

31. See, e.g., Mark W. Lipsey, *Juvenile Delinquency Treatment: A Meta-Analytic Inquiry into the Variability of Effects*, in *META-ANALYSIS FOR EXPLANATION: A CASEBOOK* 83 (Thomas Cook et al. eds., 1992); M. Lipsey & D. Wilson, *Effective Intervention for Serious Juvenile Offenders: A Synthesis of Research* (1997) (unpublished manuscript, on file at Vanderbilt University).

setting. The Blueprints for Violence Prevention Project<sup>32</sup> has identified ten violence, crime, and drug prevention programs that meet very high standards of effectiveness: (1) evidence of significant prevention or deterrent effects from a true experimental design; (2) replication on multiple sites; and (3) evidence of sustained effects for at least one year post-intervention. Three of these Blueprint Programs operate within the justice system and four others could easily be adapted for implementation in diversion programs or even within an institutional setting. Given the available research evidence, Zimring and Hawkins's pessimism about the effectiveness of crime and violence prevention programs currently being implemented by the justice system seems unwarranted.

The second objection is that any search for the causes of life-threatening violence that is limited to cases found in the criminal courts would miss many factors or processes involved in generating violence. There is no evidence presented to support this assertion. In fact, the bulk of the research evidence on this issue suggests otherwise; as noted above, the vast majority of persons involved in life-threatening violence have a long criminal record with many prior contacts with the justice system. Obviously these prior contacts are not restricted to the criminal court, but include other law enforcement agencies, the police, the juvenile court, probation and parole departments, and other agencies of the justice system. There are some life-threatening violent offenders who have not been apprehended and charged,<sup>33</sup> but there is no evidence to suggest that their violence is the result of some unique or different set of causal factors.

The third objection is that a general crime-prevention strategy will diffuse the focus of the prevention effort and miss the life-threatening violent offender. Again, no evidence is presented to support this claim, and again, the research evidence suggests otherwise. This objection fails to consider the developmental progression of violence which begins with relatively minor offenses and progresses over time to more serious property offenses and then to life-threatening violent offenses. Those who will become serious violent offenders in the future are general

---

32. See Delbert S. Elliott, *Introduction to 1-2 CENTER FOR STUDY AND PREVENTION OF VIOLENCE, BLUEPRINTS FOR VIOLENCE PREVENTION* xviii. (1997).

33. See Delbert S. Elliott, *Lies, Damn Lies and Arrest Statistics*, The Edwin R. Sutherland Award Lecture, The American Society of Criminology (1996).

offenders now, and the most effective violence prevention programs are those that intervene when the pattern of offending involves less-serious offenses: the earlier the intervention, the greater the chances of success. If the intervention does not occur until after a life-threatening violent event, the offender is less amenable to change, and a greater intervention effect is required.

In sum, I see little merit in these objections. They raise more problems for the proposed non-criminal focus on lethal violence than they do for a general crime-prevention strategy for preventing these events. A strategy based on lethal violence, what Zimring and Hawkins call a loss-reduction strategy, is largely a focus on the *consequences* of a violent criminal act. It ignores or downplays the individual dispositions, environmental conditions, and situational dynamics which give rise to the violent behavior. In some respects at least, *it* is the narrower strategy, focusing only on the consequences, those conditions which contribute to the lethality or injury resulting from a violent act. However, examining only those cases involving lethal violence likely ignores important causal factors underlying violent behavior. Those cases represent a small fraction of those persons at risk for life-threatening violence, those involved in serious violent crimes, or even those in the justice system for their involvement in these crimes. Finally, it has a much lower potential for identifying persons who might become involved in life-threatening violent crime, for its focus is not on what leads to violent acts, but a particular, relatively rare outcome of such acts.

#### V. PREVENTING LIFE-THREATENING VIOLENCE: A BALANCED, COMPREHENSIVE STRATEGY

I do see merit in loss reduction as a complementary strategy for preventing life-threatening violence. The examples of loss-reduction policies and programs identified by Zimring and Hawkins should be tested and evaluated. But I also see a number of limitations in this strategy: the effects of loss-reduction programs are often short-term, they are often very intrusive for those at low risk for lethal violence, they are difficult to enforce, and if the underlying causes of violence are not addressed, they become very expensive to maintain.

First, the deterrent or preventive effects of these policies and programs are often short-term. There is some evidence of this temporary effect in the use of "hot spot" intensive policing pol-

icies, neighborhood watch programs, roadblocks for deterring DUIs, and other hardening-of-the-environment programs.<sup>34</sup> There are two explanations for this. First, in some instances there appears to be a displacement or substitution effect; either a shifting of targets for burglary, robbery, or rape to adjacent areas where the risks of getting caught are lower or a substitution of other weapons for guns.<sup>35</sup> Second, if the motivation of the perpetrator is strong, ways to circumvent the barriers or obstacles (for example, metal detectors) will soon be figured out. The ingenuity and creativity of computer hackers breaking security codes is an example of the human capacity to avoid obstacles when the rewards are high.

This demonstrates the problem with Zimring and Hawkins's use of the auto seat belt as an example of how loss-reduction strategies work. Auto injuries are primarily the result of unintended actions, but life-threatening violent crimes are intentional acts. If we have done nothing to ameliorate the personal dispositions and environmental conditions which lead persons to want to assault other persons, perpetrators will always find ways to avoid the barriers and obstacles imposed by this approach. I do not believe that displacement and creative ways to avoid barriers to injury will totally offset the effects of good loss-reduction programs; but they will substantially reduce their effectiveness.

In addition, loss-reduction programs are often very intrusive, diminishing the quality of life for law abiding citizens who are at little or no risk for offending or victimization. Airport and federal office building metal detectors, school metal detectors and routine locker searches, gun control laws, limited cash for making change

---

34. See, e.g., Dennis M. Donovan, *Driving While Intoxicated—Different Roads to and from the Problem*, 16 CRIM. JUSTICE & BEHAV. 270 (1989); Richard A. Hay, Jr. & Richard McCleary, *Box-Tiao Time Series Models for Impact Assessment: A Comment on the Recent Work of Deutsche and Alt*, 3 EVALUATION REV. 277 (1979); Michael McCall et al., *An Evaluation of Arizona's July 1982 Drunk Driving Law: Effects on the City of Phoenix*, 19 J. APPLIED SOC. PSYCHOL. 1212 (1989); see also LAWRENCE SHERMAN, NAT'L INST. OF JUSTICE, POLICE CRACKDOWNS, NIJ REPORTS (1990); LAWRENCE SHERMAN ET AL., NAT'L INST. OF JUSTICE, THE KANSAS CITY GUN EXPERIMENT, RESEARCH IN BRIEF (1995); CRAIG D. UCHIDA ET AL., NAT'L INST. OF JUSTICE, CONTROLLING STREET LEVEL DRUG TRAFFICKING: EVIDENCE FROM OAKLAND AND BIRMINGHAM, RESEARCH IN BRIEF (1992); Lynn Zimmer, *Proactive Policing Against Street-Level Drug Trafficking*, 9 AM. J. POLICE 43 (1990).

35. See KEITH D. HARRIES, SERIOUS VIOLENCE: PATTERNS OF HOMICIDE AND ASSAULT IN AMERICA 163-4 (1990); see, e.g., Glenn L. Pierce & William J. Bowers, *The Bartley-Fox Gun Law's Short-Term Impact on Crime in Boston*, 455 ANNALS AM. ACAD. POL. & SOC. SCI. 120 (1981).

on buses and taxis, and the early evening closure of convenience stores, parking lots, gas stations and automated teller bank machines are all examples. Future policies and programs may prove to be even more intrusive. Because such laws and policies are so intrusive, they are often difficult or impossible to enforce, at least within an open, democratic society. The research findings on the effectiveness of gun control laws, for example, provides little evidence that they work. Not because they have been enforced and found not to work, but because they are rarely enforced with any consistency.<sup>36</sup> Finally, there is no end to these programs and the enforcement of these policies if the underlying causes of violence are not also addressed. They must be maintained perpetually because our society will continue to produce persons with the potential for life-threatening violence.

A combined crime-prevention and loss-reduction strategy, focusing on the prevention of both violent behavior and the potential consequences of this behavior, is a better strategy. Life-threatening violence is embedded in a criminal career or lifestyle, and crime-prevention programs and policies can prevent the onset of life-threatening violence. Early interventions have the potential to divert youth from the developmental progression to serious, life-threatening violence; the Blueprint programs referred to earlier<sup>37</sup> have demonstrated thirty to forty percent reductions in the onset or escalation of early behaviors in this developmental sequence. This strategy has the added benefit of reducing *all* forms of serious crimes, not just the lethality of violent crimes. We should not divert major resources from crime-prevention strategies; denying or reducing effective interventions with youth who are at high risk for escalating their criminal involvement into more serious and violent behavior, and attempting only to reduce the lethality of their violence, is a very shortsighted strategy. A more balanced, rational policy would put the bulk of available resources into crime prevention, and pursue loss-reduction policies and programs as a complimentary, but secondary, strategy.

---

36. See, e.g., J. A. Mercy & M. L. Rosenberg, *Preventing Firearm Violence in and Around Schools*, in *VIOLENCE IN AMERICAN SCHOOLS: A NEW PERSPECTIVE* (Delbert S. Elliott et al. eds., forthcoming 1998); Franklin E. Zimring, *Firearms and Federal Law: The Gun Control Act of 1968*, 4 J. LEGAL STUD. 133 (1975).

37. See *supra* note 32 and text accompanying note 29.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The basic proposition underlying the claim that crime is not the problem is demonstrably false. For the vast majority of persons who become involved in life-threatening violence, this behavior is embedded in a pattern of criminal behavior, most frequently beginning in early childhood or adolescence. The crime-prevention strategy takes advantage of the opportunity to intervene early in the developmental process, when the chances of changing this life course trajectory are still quite high, effectively preventing the onset of any serious violent offending and other forms of serious crime as well. We now have good evidence that some of these programs are effective, and with a commitment to evaluating other programs, I believe we can develop a good repertoire of effective violence prevention programs. The salvaged lives and positive contributions of those who would otherwise be caught up in a violent lifestyle are results that cannot be realized with a loss-reduction strategy.

Finally, it is clear that I have a much broader view of crime-prevention programs and policies than do Zimring and Hawkins. I believe the use of the criminal law and criminal sanctions is a very small part of efforts in this country. Much of our disagreement about an appropriate balance in crime-prevention and loss-reduction strategies may hinge on this difference in perspectives. And it is a difference in balance, for they have not argued that we abandon crime-prevention efforts, but that we change our priorities from crime prevention to loss reduction, specifically to address the lethal-violence problem.

I am not persuaded by the argument that achieving parity in homicide rates with other wealthy, industrial democracies is an appropriate goal and justification for redesigning our national priorities and policies on violent crime. Lethal violence constitutes an extremely small fraction of the serious physical injury, psychological trauma, and fear that is generated by nonlethal forms of violence. Overall, these nonlethal violent crimes do far more to undermine the quality of life in the United States. Are we to ignore or neglect the ninety-nine percent of the violence problem to solve the one-percent problem? Given the limited resources available, giving priority to loss-reduction policies and programs means decreasing our investment in crime-prevention strategies. Crime *is* the problem and lethal violence is a part of

**this crime problem. The best strategy for dealing with lethal violence is preventing the onset of criminal behavior.**