

Why Crime Went Away

The murder rate in America is at an all-time low. Will the recession reverse that?

BY DAVID VON DREHLE

HEALTH CARE, CLIMATE CHANGE, terrorism—is it even possible to solve big problems? The mood in Washington is not very hopeful these days. But take a look at what has happened to one of the biggest, toughest problems facing the country 20 years ago: violent crime. For years, Americans ranked crime at or near the top of their list of urgent issues. Every politician, from alderman to President, was expected to have a crime-fighting agenda, yet many experts despaired of solutions. By 1991, the murder rate in the U.S. reached a near record 9.8 per 100,000 people. Meanwhile, criminologists began to theorize that a looming generation of so-called superpredators would soon make things even worse.

Then, a breakthrough. Crime rates started falling. Apart from a few bumps and plateaus, they continued to drop through boom times and recessions, through peace and war, under Democrats and Republicans. Last year's murder rate may be the lowest since the mid-1960s, according to preliminary statistics released by the Department of Justice. The human dimension of this turnaround is extraordinary: had the rate remained unchanged, an additional 170,000 Americans would have been murdered in the years since 1992. That's more U.S. lives than were lost in combat in World War I, Korea, Vietnam and Iraq—combined. In a single year, 2008, lower crime rates meant 40,000 fewer rapes, 380,000 fewer robberies, half a million fewer aggravated assaults and 1.6 million fewer burglaries

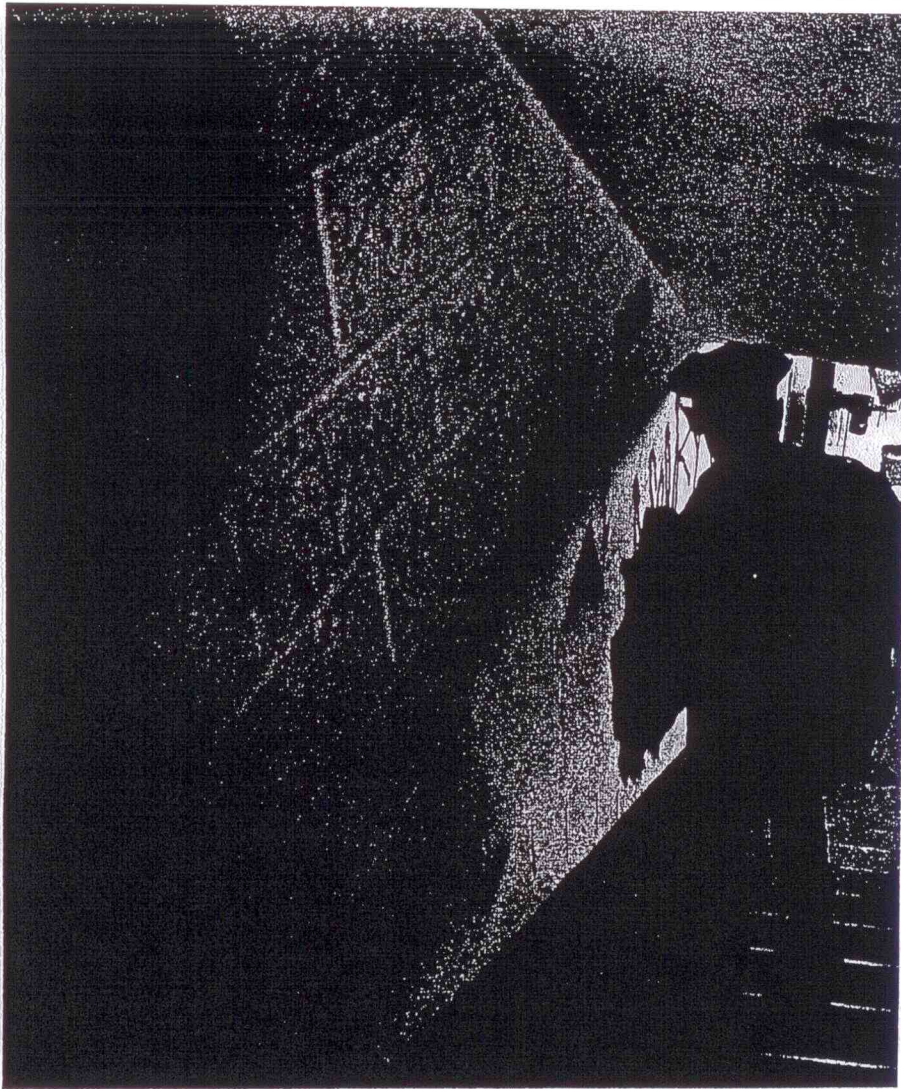
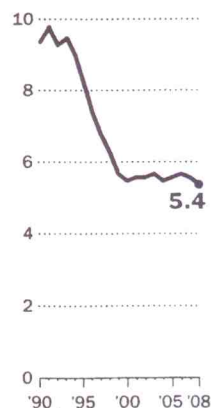
than we would have seen if rates had remained at peak levels.

There's a catch, though. No one can convincingly explain exactly how the crime problem was solved. Police chiefs around the country credit improved police work. Demographers cite changing demographics of an aging population. Some theorists point to the evolution of the drug trade at both the wholesale and retail levels, while for veterans of the Clinton Administration, the preferred explanation is their initiative to hire more cops. Renegade economist Steven Levitt has speculated that legalized abortion caused the drop in crime. (Fewer unwanted babies in the 1970s and '80s grew up to be thugs in the 1990s and beyond.)

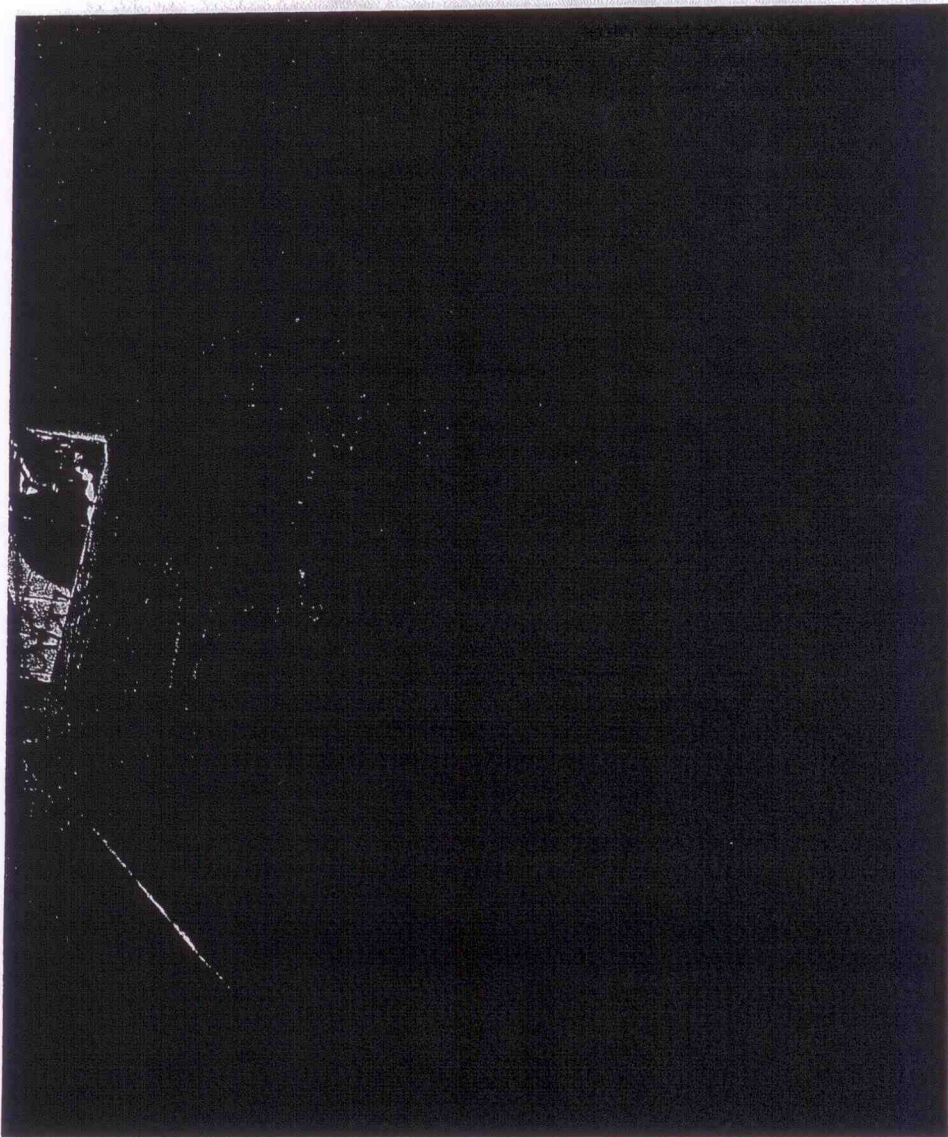
The truth probably lies in a mix of these factors, plus one more: the steep rise in the number of Americans in prison. As local, state and federal governments face an era of diminished resources, they will need

Walking the beat
A New York City police officer moves down the stairwell of a building in the South Bronx while on patrol

The murder rate (per 100,000 population) in the U.S. has sunk to its lowest level since the 1960s



Photographs by Antonio Bolfo



a better understanding of how and why crime rates tumbled. A sour economy need not mean a return to lawless streets, but continued success in fighting crime will require more brains, especially in those neighborhoods where violence is still rampant and public safety is a tattered dream.

The Lockup Factor

IN HIS BOOK *WHY CRIME RATES FELL*, Tufts University sociologist John Conklin concluded that up to half of the improvement was due to a single factor: more people in prison. The U.S. prison population grew by more than half a million during the 1990s and continued to grow, although more slowly, in the next decade. Go back half a century: as sentencing became more lenient in the 1960s and '70s, the crime rate started to rise. When lawmakers responded to the crime wave by building prisons and mandating tough sentences, the number of prisoners in-

creased and the number of crimes fell.

Common sense, you might think. But this is not a popular conclusion among criminologists, according to Conklin. "There is a tendency, perhaps for ideological reasons, not to want to see the connection," he says. Incarceration is to crime what amputation is to gangrene—it can work, but a humane physician would rather find a way to prevent wounds and cure infections before the saw is necessary. Prison is expensive, demoralizing and deadening. "Increased sentencing in some communities has removed entire generations of young men" from some minority communities, says San Francisco police chief George Gascón. "Has that been a factor in lowering crime? I think it probably has. I think it also probably has had a detrimental effect on those communities."

Prisoners leave saddened parents, abandoned mates, fatherless children. Of course, in many cases, those families are better off

with their violent relatives behind bars. But a court system that clobbers first-time offenders with mandatory sentences—sometimes for nonviolent crimes—will inevitably lock up thousands of not-so-bad guys alongside the hardened criminals. Not everyone agrees on the definition of a nonviolent criminal, but studies have estimated that as many as one-third of all U.S. prison inmates are in that category, most of them locked up on drug charges.

R. Dwayne Betts may be one of those not-so-bad guys, sentenced to nine years in an adult prison on a first offense at age 16. It's hard to know if a less severe punishment would have worked. Betts hijacked a stranger's car at gunpoint, which is a dangerous and depraved thing to do. But he also showed signs of promise, having earned his high school diploma a year ahead of schedule. Betts gradually learned to navigate the violence and boredom of prison and emerged in 2006 ready to launch a respectable life, enrolling in college, getting married and writing a book called *A Question of Freedom*. He looks on those prison years as a costly void, "a waste of society's time and money in the sense that I didn't get any rehabilitation or any educational opportunities." As inmates, Betts continues, can't do what he has done; they don't have the tools. "I was fortunate in that I knew how to read, I liked books, was pretty intelligent, and I knew I had no intention of being locked up for the rest of my life."

With government budgets hammered red by the Great Recession, the high cost and human toll of the lock-'em-up strategy has made it hard to sustain. California lawmakers decided last month to cut the number of state prisoners by 6,500 in the coming year. Other states are already at work, on a smaller scale. In 2008, the most recent year for which data are available, 20 states reduced their prisoner counts by a total of nearly 10,000 inmates. As a result, according to the Justice Department, the number of state and federal prisoners grew by less than 1% nationwide—the smallest increase in nearly a decade. (The number of blacks behind bars is, in fact, falling as the rate of incarceration among African Americans has dropped nearly 10% from its peak.)

The Data-Processing Factor

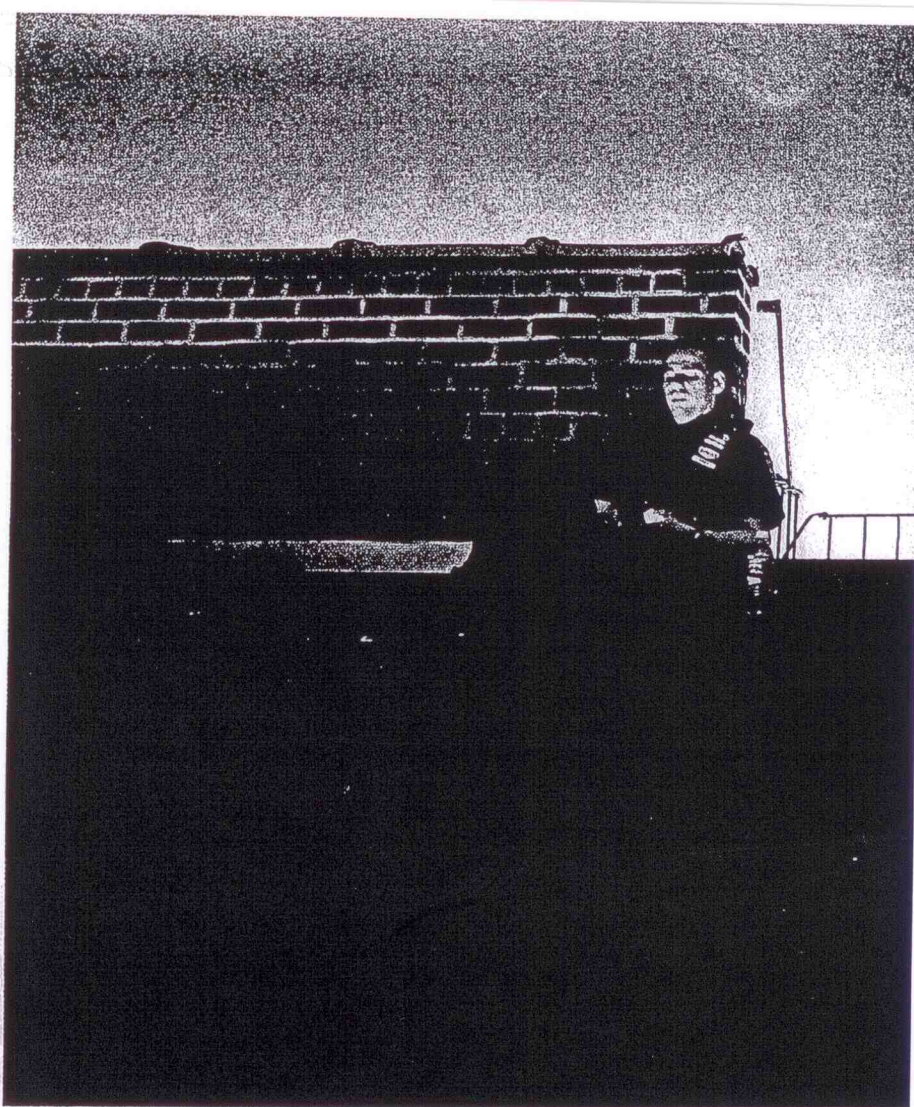
IN INTERVIEWS WITH POLICE CHIEFS across the country, TIME heard the story again and again. It is the saga of a revolution in law enforcement, a new way of battling the bad guys, and it begins, at least in some tellings, with a colorful New York City transit cop named Jack Maple.

He worked the subways back when the city was averaging four, five, almost six murders a day, and even though the experts informed him that crime was inseparable from such "root causes" as poverty and despair, Maple developed a theory that the key cause was criminals. If police collected and analyzed enough data, they could figure out where the criminals liked to operate and when they tended to be there. Voilà: go there and arrest them, and crime would go down.

Maple sold his boss, William Bratton, on the idea of data-driven policing, and when Bratton was promoted to police commissioner under New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani in 1994, his ideas went citywide. They evolved into CompStat, a real-time database of crime statistics and other intelligence useful for pinpointing trouble spots and targeting resources. CompStat put precinct captains and district commanders in the hot seat, and results followed. Crime plummeted. The city of fear became one of the safest major cities in America, and Commissioner Bratton landed on the cover of *TIME*.

A new survey of retired New York City police supervisors, however, confirms what many skeptics have suspected for years. Pressure from the twice-weekly CompStat reviews inspired a certain amount of fudging (exactly how much is unknown). Police hunted for bargains on Bay so that they could adjust theft reports to reflect lower values of stolen goods, magically transforming major crimes into minor ones. A fight involving a weapon—aggravated assault—might become a mere fistfight by the time the police report was filed. Nevertheless, behind the gamesmanship was a genuine drop in crime. (Murder is down an astonishing 80% from its peak in New York City, and it's very hard to fudge a murder.) Similar declines have been recorded in many other cities.

Versions of CompStat now shape police work in metropolitan areas from coast to coast. In the Maryland suburbs of Washington, for example, Prince George's County chief Roberto Hylton sings the praises of "a technology that we call Active Crime Reporting, which provides information every 15 minutes, so I can see, even from a laptop away from work, the whole crime picture of the county. I can shift resources. It actually provides me with the trends, patterns that have occurred the previous week, previous day, maybe even the previous year." Paired with a program to improve trust and communication between police and crime-plagued communities, the data-driven approach is working, Hylton says.



The New Economy of Crime

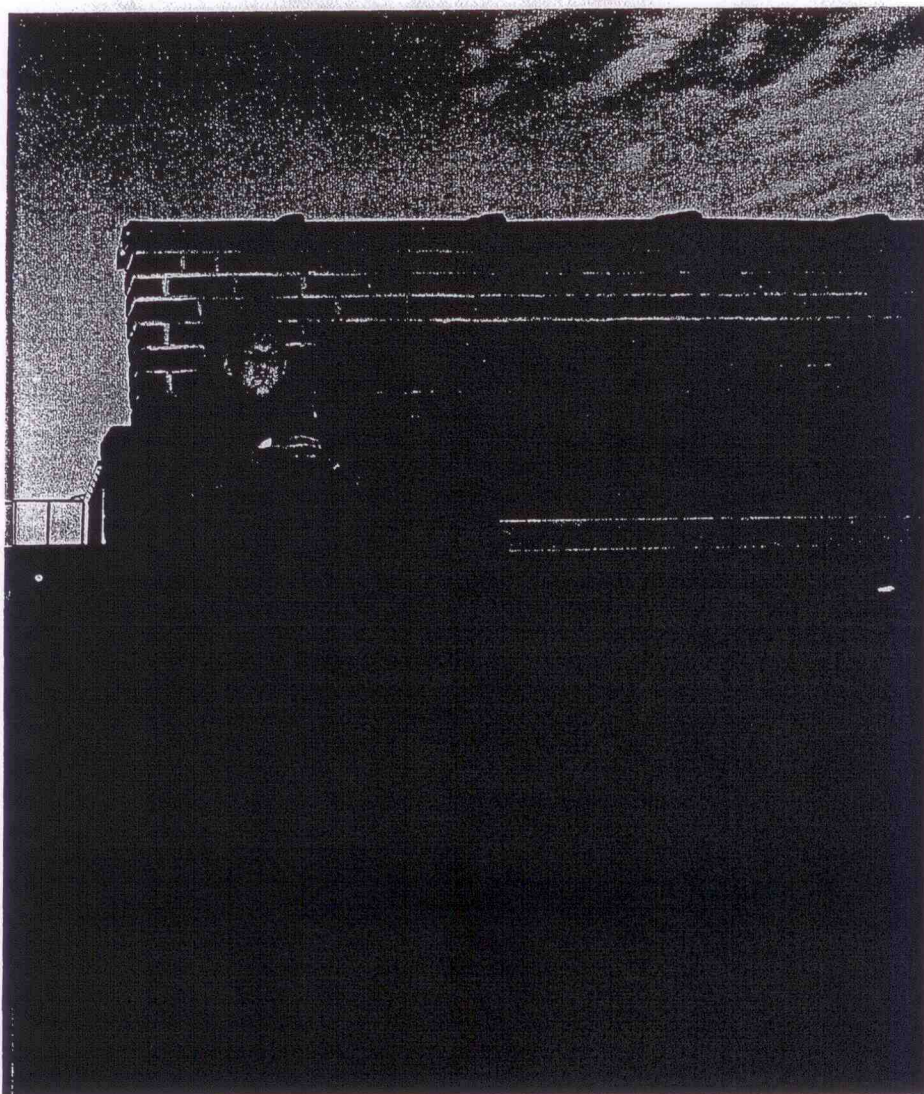
CRIMINOLOGISTS WILL TELL YOU, HOWEVER, that the tale of CompStat is not the whole story. New York City's crime rate actually began to drop a couple of years before Giuliani became mayor. And rates began falling in cities without CompStat at about the same time—though not as rapidly as in New York. For while police were changing tactics, the criminals were shifting gears too.

The high-crime hell of the 1980s and early '90s was a period of chaos in the illegal drug trade. Powder cocaine was generally measured and sold in multiple-dose amounts behind locked doors, but crack was relatively cheap and highly portable. Upstart young dealers saw an opening and shouldered their way into a business long dominated by established kingpins. Trading valuable drugs for ready cash in plain sight was a recipe for robbery and intimidation. Dealers armed themselves for protection, and soon every teenage

squabble in crack territory carried a risk that bullets would fly.

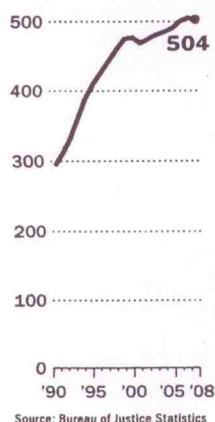
From that low point, the drug business has settled down in most cities. Distribution is better organized. Crack use has fallen by perhaps 20%, according to UCLA criminal-justice expert Mark Kleiman, as younger users have turned against a drug that had devastated their neighborhoods. Opiates and marijuana are illegal, just like cocaine, but they don't turn users into paranoid, agitated, would-be supermen. "A heroin corner is a happy corner" where junkies quietly nod off, says David Simon, creator of the TV series *The Wire*, who used to cover cops for the *Baltimore Sun*.

Criminologist Conklin believes that two statistics in particular—median age and the unemployment rate—help explain the ebb and flow of crime. Violence is typically a young man's vice; it has been said that the most effective crime-fighting tool is a 30th birthday. The arrival of teenage



Text break Cops catch their breath on the roof of a housing project in the Bronx and check their phones for messages

The incarceration rate (sentenced inmates per 100,000 population) shot up as crime declined



baby boomers in the 1960s coincided with a rise in crime, and rates have declined as America has grown older. The median age in 1990, near the peak of the crime wave, was 32, according to Conklin. A decade later, it was over 35. Today, it is 36 plus. (It is also true that today's young men are less prone to crime. The juvenile crime rate in 2007, the most recent available, was the lowest in at least a generation.)

"The effect of unemployment," Conklin adds, "is problematic." Indeed it is. Heather Mac Donald of the Manhattan Institute dissected this issue in a recent *Wall Street Journal* op-ed. "As the economy started shedding jobs in 2008," she wrote, "criminologists and pundits predicted that crime would shoot up, since poverty, as the 'root causes' theory holds, begets criminals. Instead, the opposite happened. Over 7 million lost jobs later, crime has plummeted to its lowest level since the early 1960s." To Mac Donald, this is proof that data-driven police work and tougher

sentencing are the answer to crime—no social-welfare programs. Conklin thinks it may be too soon to tell. "The unemployment rate began to spike less than a year ago. We may yet see the pressure show up in crime rates," he says. It's fair to say, though, that the belief in a simple cause-and-effect relationship between income and crime has worn pretty thin.

The danger of chronic joblessness is that jobs are a part of the social fabric. Ideally, they connect people to constructive projects and well-ordered institutions. They foster self-discipline and reward responsibility. Some optimists theorize that crime rates might continue to drop in coming years as police pit their strength against a dwindling army of criminals. In his recent book, *When Brute Force Fails*, UCLA's Kleiman argues that new strategies for targeting repeat offenders—including reforms to make probation an effective sanction rather than a feckless joke—could cut crime and reduce prison populations simultaneously. Safer communities, in turn, might produce more hopeful and well-disciplined kids. It's a sweet image to contemplate in this sour era, but a lack of jobs is a cloud over the picture.

A more realistic view might be the or dramatized in Simon's HBO series, *The Wire*. In 60 episodes spread across five seasons from 2002 to 2008, the program humanized this tangled question of crime fighting with penetrating sophistication. CompStat-obsessed politicians fostered numbers-fudging in the ranks. Cool-headed drug lords struggled to tame their war-torn industry. Gangs battled for turf under the nodding gaze of needy junkies. Prisons warehoused the violent and non-violent with little regard for who could be rehabilitated. It made for award-winning drama, but it also was a reminder that in every American city, neighborhoods remain where violence still reigns and it simply isn't safe to walk around. And national crime statistics mean nothing to the millions of people who live there.

In those places, the crime problem isn't solved; the fight is scarcely begun. To the many factors that have combined to cool the nation's violent fever, more must be added—more creativity, more pragmatism, more honest concern for the victims of inner-city crime. It's a daunting prospect. The will to keep working on the most persistent pockets of lawlessness will be severely tested in this era of unbalanced budgets. You might be tempted to say it's hopeless. But that's what people were saying 20 years ago, just before progress broke through. —WITH REPORTING BY SAM JEWLER/WASHINGTON