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IS CRIME UP OR DOWN? WELL, IT DEPENDS…

It depends on where *one sits,* when *we compare, and on* who *counts*

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. While browsing The Crime Report's February 15 newsletter, its Top Story, "New Crime Stats Run Counter to Trump's Dystopian View," caught our attention. So we clicked on it. As promised, or perhaps over-promised, the brief, two-paragraph account pointed to falling crime rates in San Diego, Rocky Mount, N.C., Lowell, Mass. and Battle Creek, Michigan as proof positive that it's not crime but President Trump's evident obsession with it that's really out of control.

The Crime Report is not alone. Reassuring comments about crime pervade the media. San Diego police chief Shelley Zimmerman boasted to the local paper that the city's near five-percent drop in violent crime during 2015-2016 (actually, 4.5 percent) "isn't just a statistic or a random number" but "represents real people." Her boss, Mayor Kevin Faulconer, bragged that "our city is safe because of the incredible partnerships forged between our community and our San Diego Police Department." Natch, there's always a fly in the ointment. Later on the article mentioned that yes, some forms of violence did increase, with twelve more homicides, six more rapes and nine more robberies in 2016 (each victim was presumably a "real" person as well.) Here's the data from the SFPD website:

SAN DIEGO HISTORICAL CRIME ACTUALS
1950 - 2016

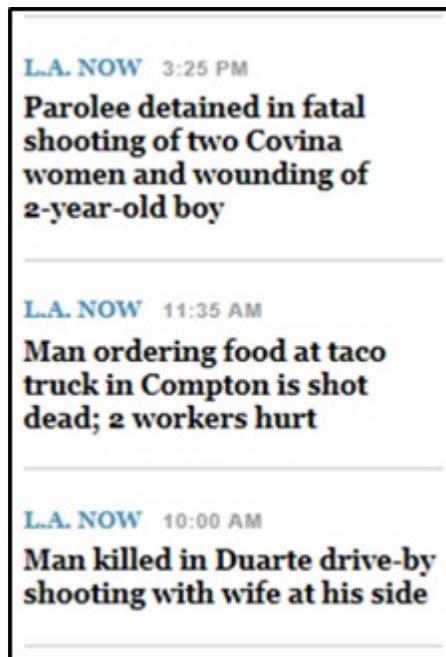| Year	Population	Murder	Rape	Robbery	Aggr. Assault	Violent Crime	Burglary	Larceny	Vehicle Theft	Property Crime	Index Total
2016	1,391,676	49	572	1,387	3,323	5,331	4,743	18,042	5,839	28,624	33,955
2015	1,368,061	37	566	1,378	3,601	5,582	5,129	18,933	5,096	29,158	34,740

San Diego's decline in violence was driven by a 7.7 percent reduction in the number of aggravated assault reports – 278 fewer, to be exact. Without that, there would have been little to crow about. (We'll have more to say about counting issues later.)

So is crime up or down? Just below the "Dystopian" piece a "READ NEXT" prompt directs readers to "More Big-City Murders: A Blip or an Ominous Trend?". Although this brief article concedes that murder is going up in some places, it prominently features the reassuring comment of noted criminologist Alfred Blumstein, that "the national homicide rate is way below what it was in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s." That view is reinforced with a link to "Another Fact-Check of Crime Rates Find Trump is Wrong", a summary of a Minneapolis Star-Tribune article that soft-pedals recent jumps in Chicago and elsewhere with graphs that display a multi-decade national downtrend in violent crime.

So far so good. But the same page in The Crime Report also featured a link to "Chicago Police Boss: 'Enough is Enough' After 3 Kids Killed," a heart-rending piece that recapped a Chicago Tribune

account about the shooting deaths of three Chicago children in four days. Indeed, even the most "liberal" media outlets are conceding that violent crime seems to be creeping up: "Though mostly far below their record levels in the 1980s and 1990s, homicides have jumped dramatically in some U.S. cities over the last two years, breaking from America's decades-long decline in violent crime…." (Los Angeles Times, 1/4/17). While that story focuses on the usual suspects – Chicago, Baltimore, Milwaukee, etc. – it eventually allows that things aren't perfect even at home: "Homicides also rose in Los Angeles in 2016, but by a much smaller amount: 5%. The city is still far less deadly than it was even a decade ago."

Fast-forward six weeks. Here's a sidebar from the February 19 *Los Angeles Times* website, just as it appeared at 4:38 pm:
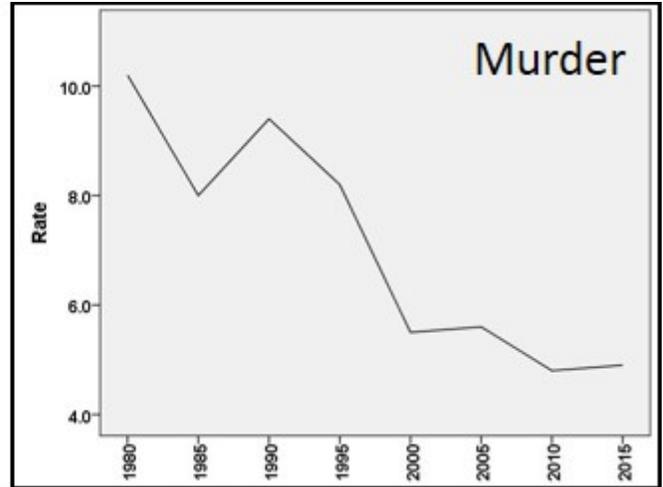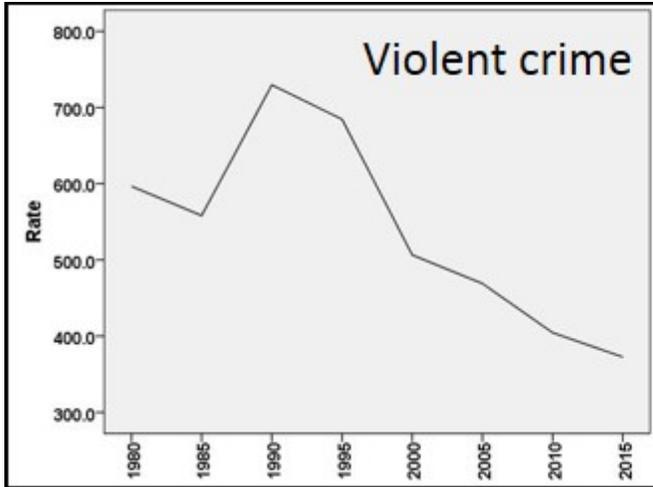
L.A. NOW   3:25 PM

Parolee detained in fatal shooting of two Covina women and wounding of 2-year-old boy

L.A. NOW   11:35 AM

Man ordering food at taco truck in Compton is shot dead; 2 workers hurt

L.A. NOW   10:00 AM

Man killed in Duarte drive-by shooting with wife at his side

Here's the following day's lead story:

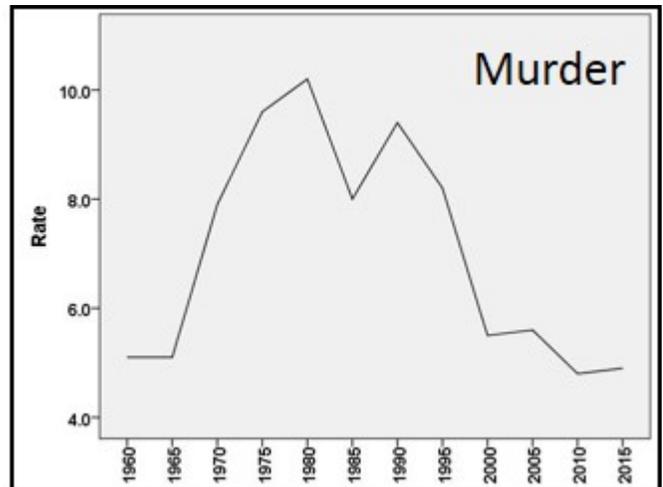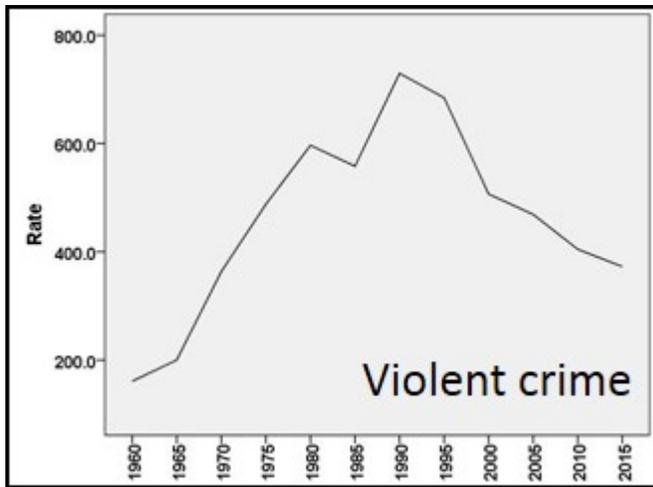**One officer dead, another injured in shootout after report of traffic collision in Whittier**

No "yes, but's" there. After taking in the disturbing events of these successive and, believe it or not, randomly plucked days, would *Times* readers be more likely to agree that President Trump is "dystopian" or that the honorable Dr. Blumstein is a bit "Pollyannaish"?

Police report four categories of violent crime to the FBI: murder and non-negligent manslaughter, rape, robbery and aggravated assault. These comprise the "violent crime index," or number of offenses per 100,000 population. Below are graphs depicting two trends since 1980, one for violent crime, and the other for its murder and non-negligent manslaughter component. Each was built using the FBI's online tools (click here and here).

Both trends follow essentially the same pattern. If the data is correct, and excepting an uptick in the late 80's and early 90's that is often attributed to the crack cocaine epidemic, all forms of violence have been dropping since at least the eighties (1985 is often used as a start date since that's as far back as the FBI reports crime trends for cities and counties).

If that's as far back as we go – and most media accounts venture no earlier – the "Great Crime Drop" seems very real. But here's the trend line going back to 1960:

At present, the U.S. murder rate is comparable to the sixties, while violent crime is substantially higher. Really, when compared with other supposedly modern societies, America's always been in dire straits. England and Wales (joint pop. about 58.2 million) had a combined 695 homicides during the 2015-2016 fiscal year. Their murder rate, 1.2, is *less than one-quarter* the 2015 U.S. rate (15,696 murders and non-negligent manslaughters, pop. 321,418,820, rate 4.9.) Meanwhile, neighborly Canada had 604 homicides *country-wide* in 2015, yielding a murder rate of 1.7. America's ten most murderous cities in 2016 had murder rates ranging from Atlanta's merely deplorable 23.9 to St. Louis' jaw-dropping 59.3. As for sheer number of killings, England and Wales and Canada are easily outpaced by the City of Chicago alone, which closed out 2016 with a record 762 murders.

Let's recap. Current violence rates seem a lot better when compared against 1980 than against 1960. Clearly, *when* is crucial. *Where* one sits is also important (and we don't just mean which *country*.) A measly twenty miles separate the Los Angeles-area communities of Westwood (pop. 51,485, one murder in 2015) and Florence (pop. 49,001, 18 murders in 2015). Where would you rather live?

Who counts is also crucial. Prior posts - "Cooking the Books", "The Numbers Game," "Liars Figure" and "Is the UCR Being Mugged?" - described alleged schemes by police in Los Angeles, New York, Philadelphia, Detroit, Dallas, Miami, Baltimore, Nashville, New Orleans, St. Louis and elsewhere to exaggerate their effectiveness against crime by discouraging victims from filing reports and by furtively downgrading what went on the books. Aggravated assault, normally the most substantial contributor to the violent crime index, was a principal target, but not even homicides were spared. Suffice it to say that in these halcyon days of Compstat, there has indeed been "a whole lot of cheatin' going on." So when San Diego reports that aggravated assaults are down while other forms of violence, including murder, are up, we say…"really?".