

Safe at Home

Americans are offered a heavy diet of crime in everyday life. For entertainment we watch television dramas like *CSI*, read murder mysteries, or see gangster movies. And we receive a constant barrage of crime news on television, in newspapers, and online. Yet crime is something we're more likely to hear about than experience firsthand—relatively few of us actually become victims of serious crime.

BY MARK WARR

Social scientists are gradually coming to appreciate how profoundly crime—or more properly public perceptions of crime—shape how we live in the United States. Much suggests fear of crime is driving us out of the public square and into our homes.

CRIME AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

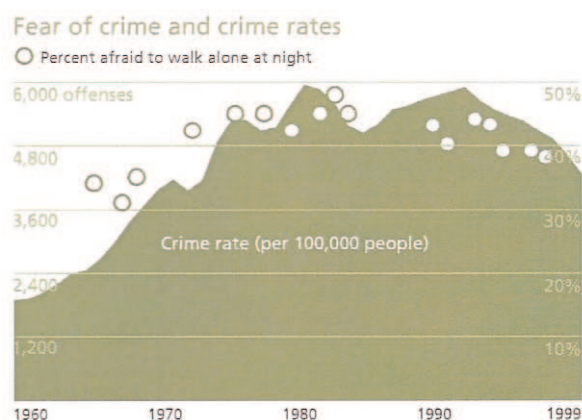
In a healthy society the lives of citizens are knit together and intertwined. Neighbors share chats, and people interact at work, church, and social events like ballgames and picnics. They participate in government and feel trust and commorality—a sense they belong to something larger than themselves. Sociologists use the term “community” to describe this general state of affairs, as well as terms like “social capital” to indicate mutual trust and social engagement among citizens.

Robert Putnam's influential book *Bowling Alone* documents a major transformation in social capital in the United States during the latter half of the 20th century: A widespread public withdrawal

from civic and community life toward a more private, reclusive, home-centered lifestyle. Putnam argued this dwindling social capital was obvious in a variety of trends—declining election turnout and waning interest in current affairs, decreasing enrollments in voluntary associations (like the PTA and Elks Clubs) and professional associations (like the American Bar Association and American Medical Association), falling church attendance and membership, less participation in social forms of leisure (playing cards, visiting friends or neighbors, entertaining at home), the replacement of the local café with impersonal fast food establishments, shrinking newspaper readership (a conventional barometer of civic involvement), and increasing mistrust and litigiousness.

After describing these unsettling changes, Putnam set about to explain them. Time constraints brought on by the rise of dual-income families played a role, he concluded, as did suburbanization and long commute times. But the principal cause of public withdrawal, he asserted, was the rapid diffusion of television. It took only seven years for TV to penetrate 75 percent of American households, compared to 67 years for the telephone and 23 for the refrigerator. The rise in televised entertainment quickly supplanted ballparks, dance halls, and other public, low-cost entertainment as Americans' major leisure activities. For Putnam, no other 20th century development so profoundly affected our leisure:

The single most important consequence of the television revolution has been to bring us home....Watching TV at night has become one of the few universals of contemporary American life.... More television watching means less of virtually every form of civic participation and social involvement.



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While *Bowling Alone* hasn't escaped criticism or skepticism, much sociological evidence supports Putnam's principal assertion of a decline in community life. But if Putnam was correct about declining public participation in the United States, he may have overlooked another social change that developed during the pivotal 1960s period in which television became America's pastime.

Official crime rates in the United States began to rise sharply in the early 1960s, a rise outpacing any seen before or since. Criminologists generally agree this increase in crime was "real" and not merely an artifact of reporting, and that it was attributable in large part to the baby-boom generation hitting the peak crime ages of 16 to 24. Beginning in the early 1960s, in fact, nearly one-third of the entire population of the United States was to pass through this treacherous phase in their lives.

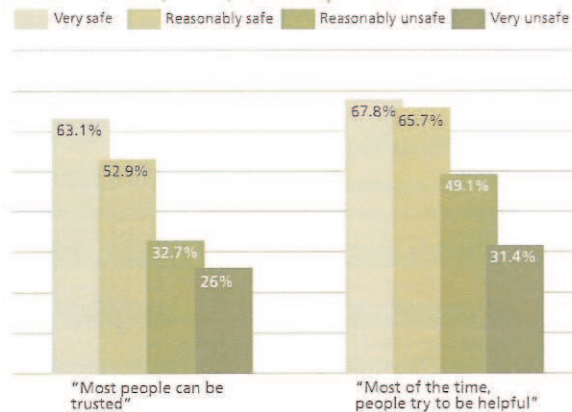
Even when crime rates are high, serious crimes are still statistically rare events. But media accounts of crime create powerful multiplier effects, especially in a media-saturated society like the United States. By the close of the 1960s, the "skyrocketing" crime rate had caught the attention of politicians as well as journalists. Richard Nixon was the first presidential candidate to capitalize on "law and order" as a campaign issue in his successful 1968 campaign.

Nixon's reading of the public mood during the 1960s was astute, for the rise in official crime rates during that decade and the clamor surrounding it appear to have moved public opinion, according to the results of national surveys by such groups as Gallup and the National Opinion Research Center in its General Social Survey. These surveys regularly ask Americans whether they're afraid to walk alone at night in their own neighborhoods. When that percentage is plotted by year (see chart, Fear of crime and crime rates, previous page), we can see fear of crime increased rapidly in the mid-1960s, followed by a peak in 1982 and a gradual descent thereafter. While there are no comparable data before the mid-60s, there's no mistaking the fact that fear spread rapidly during that decade, just as the television age got underway and Putnam's civic participation measures began their long decline.

One might think fear of crime has little to do with withdrawal from public life or television viewing, but the phenomena are closely correlated. For example, a national Roper Survey in 1980—about the midpoint of the period in question—shows a strong negative association between fear of crime and trust in other people, a cornerstone of civic life stressed by Putnam in *Bowling Alone* and by social

capital theorists like James Coleman, Robert Sampson, and Wesley Skogan. There's a similar relationship when it comes to judgments about the helpfulness of other people. Together these two items speak to what Pamela Paxton has called the "subjective element" of social capital—trust, reciprocity and positive emotion.

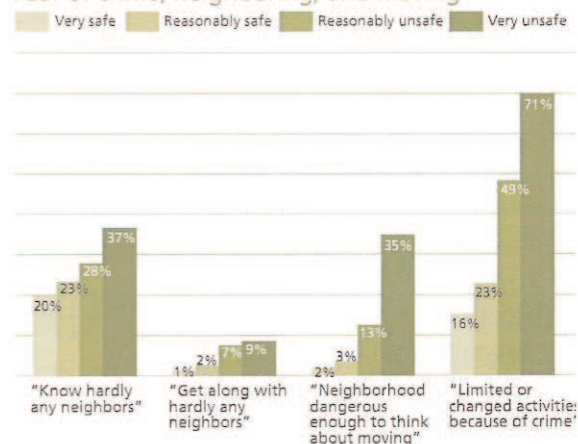
Fear of crime, trust, and helpfulness



The Roper survey also corroborates the claim that fear of crime hinders social bonding with neighbors. Fearful people were less likely to say they knew the people in their neighborhood and less likely to report getting along well with their neighbors. The most fearful individuals were also significantly more likely to say their neighborhood was so dangerous they'd thought about moving away and that they had limited or changed their activities because of crime. These items capture what Paxton has termed the "objective" or "associational" aspect of social capital.

All these statistically significant relationships provide evidence of a connection between fear of

Fear of crime, neighboring, and moving



crime and the dissipation of social capital Putnam so eloquently described. What's more, television viewing is itself correlated with fear in the Roper data. The most fearful respondents were the heaviest TV viewers, and people who watched the most television each day were also those most likely to watch crime shows and pay particular attention to crime-related stories in the news. Consequently, the rapid diffusion of television as a form of domestic entertainment may have been bolstered by a perception of growing criminal danger in the country.

FORTRESS AMERICA

If fearful Americans began confining their lives to the home during the 1960s, then we ought to observe substantial changes in American lifestyles and behavior beginning at about that time. Fear affects everything from children's play activities to the demand for home entertainment, and it directly fuels the home security industry.

People generally feel safer at home than they do outside the home. Some, however, seek even greater refuge by purchasing a home in a secure or "gated" community. The rise in fear during the 1960s accelerated the trend toward such living arrangements, a trend that had until then made little headway in the United States. Although a few private streets and gated suburbs could be found in 19th century America, modern large-scale gated communities arose during the 1960s with master-planned retirement communities like Leisure World and Sun City.

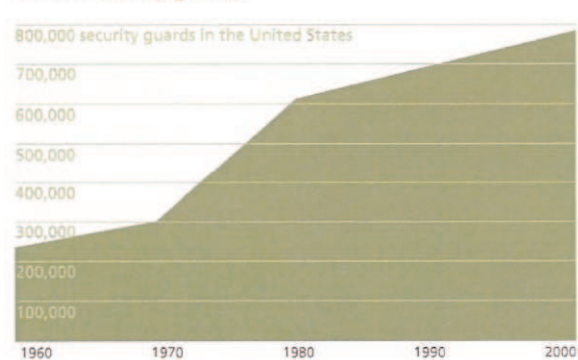
The security features of those early developments helped drive the nationwide expansion of gated communities. In their 1997 book *Fortress America*, Edward J. Blakely and Mary Gail Snyder argue that gated communities were built primarily out of fear as the public grew increasingly preoccupied with violent crime. In their survey of gated-community residents, they found an unmistakable link between fear of crime and residents' preferences for enclosed neighborhoods.

The U.S. Census Bureau had no census housing category for a gated residential community in 1960, but gated communities have now become common in the United States. According to the bureau's 2003 American Housing Survey, nearly 7 million residential units, or 7 percent of all units in the United States, were in "secured communities" with "access secured with walls or fences." An additional 5.3 million were "secured multi-units," typically apartment complexes or condominiums with secure entrances. Today, the security features of

gated communities are emphasized to prospective buyers, and specialized firms appeal to our security-conscious climate in their advertising.

The rise in fear that began in the 1960s—and the concomitant move toward sanctuary in the home—has also made a mark on the U.S. occupational structure and economy. Census Bureau data shows a sharp increase in the number of security guards in the United States, from approximately 235,000 in 1960 to more than 784,000 by 2000. To put this in perspective, the latter figure exceeds the number of employees at General Motors and the Pentagon. William C. Cunningham and colleagues report that private security employment began to outstrip all public law enforcement in the late 1960s or early 1970s—a rise they attribute to an increase in fear, as well as increased workplace crime and fiscal retrenchment among local governments.

Rise in security guards



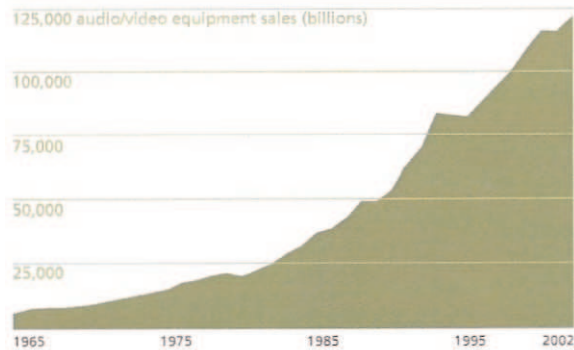
Private security now ranks among the fastest-growing segments of the American economy. And with the rise in private security has come a surge in consumer purchases of electronic home security equipment and other home security devices. Though they may not live in gated communities, millions of Americans—currently about one in nine households—have fortified their homes through the services of commercial security companies or self-installed home-security devices.

U.S. sales of video and audio home-entertainment equipment have also grown dramatically since the 1960s. Data from the *Statistical Abstract of the United States* show that home entertainment has grown from an industry with annual revenues in the millions before the 1960s to one with sales of more than \$100 billion annually by the 1990s. The growth of the home entertainment industry has literally been exponential.

Although entertainment purchases are also driven by technology and other factors unrelated to fear of crime, the rise of the modern home entertain-

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Rise in home entertainment



ment industry clearly coincided with rising fear in the United States. The swift growth of the cable industry, VCRs, DVDs, satellite television, electronic games (which now generate more revenue than the American movie industry), even home popcorn sales, all point to the fact that American leisure activities have increasingly centered on the home. So while such trends corroborate Putnam's claim that electronic technology lets us consume "hand-tailored entertainment in private, even utterly alone," they also reflect the leisure choices of an increasingly fearful society.

Adults who worry about crime are often as concerned with the safety of their children and spouses as they are with their own, and they frequently take steps, sometimes drastic ones, to protect them. In fact, such "altruistic fear—fear for others—appears to be as strong a motivator as personal fear for oneself when it comes to taking precautionary measures against crime. If Americans began to retreat to their homes in the 1960s due to fear of crime, then we ought to see more precautionary activities directed toward family members beginning about that time.

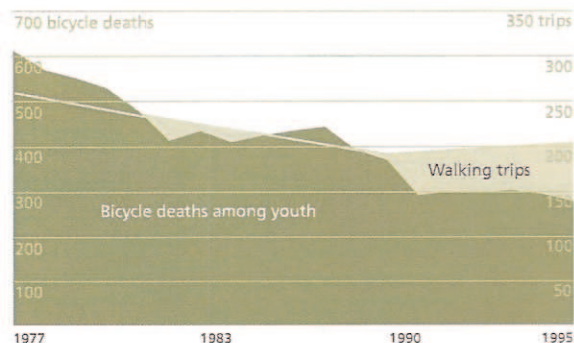
One domain in which such altruistic precautions might be expected involves the most innocent of activities—children's play. A traditional and common form of play in the United States has been riding bicycles. The figure DIRECTION shows the number of bicycle deaths among children age 15 and younger in the United States from 1975 to 2003 using data compiled by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety. Whereas deaths from bicycle accidents slowly dwindled among adults in the United States during this period, deaths among children dropped precipitously presumably because parents grew more reluctant to allow their children out and about on their bicycles. "There is evidence that lowered death rates for child pedestrians and cyclists do

not reflect greater safety—just fewer numbers of children walking and bicycling," the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration concluded.

Walking has also been a traditional activity among children in the United States, particularly walking to school. Unfortunately, there are no reliable age-specific data on walking available, but the figure below shows a downward trend in all walking trips from 1977 through 1990. The up-tick thereafter may be a consequence of changes in the survey or the success of the "Walk and Bike to School" programs recently started by the U.S. Department of Transportation, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Only about 10 percent of U.S. children today walk to school regularly, these agencies report, and they've combined their resources in an effort to reverse the trend.

Not only do fewer children walk to school these days, many no longer walk even to their bus stop. Instead, their parents drive them and wait until the bus arrives to hand over custody, and then the bus takes their children directly to school. In 1995, approximately half of American school children ages 5 to 15 rode to school in private passenger vehicles, according to the U.S. Department of Transportation, and in some cities as much as a quarter of all morning traffic now consists of parents driving their children to school. According to literature from the federal Safe Routes to School Program, "parents drive them because they fear traffic dangers, or they worry about strangers bothering or kidnapping their children; although kidnapping is statistically a very small risk, it looms large in the fears of parents."

Decline in bicycle deaths and walking



People who spend many hours at home watching television are more likely to suffer from obesity and other weight-related problems, according to the

results of countless medical studies and the American Academy of Pediatrics. The National Center for Health Statistics reports that rates of overweight children were already increasing in the United States by the early 1970s. In fact, the percentage of overweight youth nearly quadrupled in the four decades leading up to 2000. These well-established changes in public health clearly conform to the idea that young Americans have increasingly spent their childhood leisure time at home in sedentary activities as a result of parents' concerns about safety.

FOREVER FEARFUL?

Crime dominates public and political discourse in the United States in a way unmatched in any other country. And fear of crime has played an important role in the process of social disengagement and declining social capital. To be clear, there's no denying that television contributed to the civic withdrawal Putnam documented in *Bowling Alone*. But it wasn't merely the advent of television that prompted this withdrawal. It was also a fear of crime that led citizens to seclude themselves and their loved ones within the perceived safety of their homes and spend their leisure time in front of the tube.

Ironically, crime dramas like *The Untouchables* and *Dragnet* were common fare in the early days of television, and crime—both news reports and dramatic features—rose to assume its position today as the dominant subject matter on television. Crime shows still lead the national Nielsen TV ratings and some networks devote their entire prime-time schedules to crime dramas. The competition among programs for greater “realism” has resulted in televised depictions of violence that border on the pornographic. Unfortunately, the very television shows Americans turned to in their homes may have reinforced their perception of the world as a dangerous place.

To those who still doubt the thesis, consider the nearly inherent connections between fear of crime and some of the trends uncovered here. Why else would Americans move into high-security home developments if not to reduce their exposure to crime? Why else would they drive their children to school—a serious inconvenience in many cases—if not to protect them from danger and crime? Why would they limit their children's outdoor activities if not for the same reason? Why would Americans spend such enormous sums on home security equipment or personnel if not for concerns about their

security? In the end, it simply strains credulity to argue that the simultaneous onset of so many trends in the 1960s was merely coincidence or happenstance.

One serious question remains unanswered, however. Fear of crime in the United States reached a peak in the 1980s and was slowly receding by the 1990s. Why hasn't this decline affected the other trends reported here? Sociologist Katherine Beckett has argued that public concern about topics like crime or drugs can survive objective drops in these phenomena if media attention or political initiatives persist. Another plausible answer lies in the concept of path dependence—the idea that certain chains of events, once set in motion, follow their own logic and course regardless of later changes in the forces that triggered them. Such path dependent processes can be self-reinforcing and sometimes even irreversible.

The concept of path dependence was developed to explain the adoption of new technologies like VHS recording, and appears applicable to the home entertainment equipment and security technology trends examined here. It may also apply to some of the social trends as well, including the rise of gated communities, which seem destined to grow and don't appear to be easily reversible. Rising fear of crime, it appears, may have set in motion a variety of social and technological trends that, once underway, followed their own course.

Complicating the picture today are the events of September 11, 2001, and fear of international terrorism, reinforcing the tendency of many Americans to avoid what appears to be an increasingly dangerous world. Getting Americans into their homes, in the end, may prove much easier than getting them out again.

Recommended Resources

Katherine Beckett. *Making Crime Pay: Law and Order in Contemporary American Politics* (Oxford University Press, 1997). Explains how crime and drugs became powerful political issues.

Edward J. Blakely and Mary Gail Snyder. *Fortress America: Gated Communities in the United States* (Brookings Institution Press, 1997). A thorough and compelling look at the rise of gated communities.

William C. Cunningham, John J. Strauchs, and Clifford W. Van Meter. *Private Security Trends 1970 to 2000: The Hallcrest Report II* (Butterworths-Heinemann, 1990). Documents

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the private security industry and its relationship with public law enforcement.

Pamela M. Paxton. "Is Social Capital Declining in the United States? A Multiple Indicator Assessment," *American Journal of Sociology* (1999) 105: 88–127. A sophisticated study testing Putnam's thesis about the decline of social capital.

Robert D. Putnam. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (Simon &

Schuster, 2001). The most famous and publicly influential scholarly treatment of social capital.

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