RIDING THE CRIME WAVE

By Glenn Oakley

Crime is like a shark attack: statistics regarding its occurrence don’t mean a lot if you’re the one being eaten alive. On the other hand, it takes only one or two reports of bitten swimmers to convince the rest of the world that all beaches are infested with man-eaters.

And so it is with crime. Despite an exploding prison population, nightly reports of drive-by shootings and crack-house busts, the fact is that crime rates in general have been decreasing in recent years.

“All of a sudden we think America is in the grips of this crime wave because we see it on TV,” says Boise State criminal justice professor Robert Marsh. A glut of sensational crime shows such as America’s Most Wanted prey on what Marsh terms the public’s “almost perverse interest in crime,” reinforcing the perception of mean streets getting meaner. And political rhetoric perpetuates the drumbeat of crime run rampant, says Marsh.

While Marsh does not discount the crimes that have overwhelmed some cities, he believes the general perception of crime in America is distorted and blown out of proportion. Furthermore, he believes this distorted view is “driving public policy,” frequently in the wrong direction.

America is riding a crime wave that is in many ways more imagined than real. But the reaction to the perceived problem does lead to very real problems, says Marsh.

When America decides to crack down on crime, the results may be the opposite of what was intended. BSU criminal justice professor Tony Welsh calls it the law of inverse efficiency. Mandatory prison sentences are one example cited by Walsh. “My bias is that you put violent folks away. But if you can save somebody from going to prison, by all means do.”

Says Marsh, “What you have in Idaho is a decrease in the crime rate and an increase in the incarceration rate.”

Most law-enforcement officials attribute the increase to drugs. Idaho Department of Law Enforcement Director Mack Richardson says, “Drugs push people into crime. They can’t hold a job and they’ve got to get money.”

But, questions Marsh, “If drugs are on the increase, why isn’t the crime rate on the increase?” He attributes the increasing incarceration rate to drugs and other factors, “Some of it is drugs. Some of it is we’re sending people to jail on alcohol-related events. Part of it is the parole board has tightened up and keeps people there a longer time. Since 1979 the average time spent in prison has increased from 33 months to 44 months.”

The result of this situation proves the inverse efficiency law, says Marsh. “What happens is a lot of people walk to the front door who don’t belong in prison,” he says. “And then you have bad guys who shouldn’t be in prison, but the judge can’t get them in because minor offenders are filling up the cells.”

Furthermore, law enforcement officials tend to lump hard-core addictive drugs with far more benign, albeit illegal, substances such as marijuana. Richardson says, “Narcotics is our biggest crime problem, marijuana being the biggest.” Similarly, Boise Police Chief Jim Carvino says, “The number one drug of preference seems to be marijuana, followed by cocaine, followed by methamphetamines.”

“In terms of substance abuse,” says Marsh, “alcohol is a much bigger problem than marijuana. Running around trying to catch someone smoking marijuana when there’s so much alcohol abuse in this country is kind of silly. I would say domestic violence is a far more serious crime problem.”

Carvino says aside from the illegality of drugs, “There’s a high correlation between drugs and crime, burglary, whatever. If the drug problem gets worse here the burglary problem will probably increase.” Richardson echoes this view. “In most cases,
Like most law-enforcement officials, Owyhee County Sheriff Tim Neillton believer drugs are at the root of the criminal element in Idaho.
thefts and robberies are committed by people trying to get money for their habit.

That, says Marsh, "is the common perception. But we don't know. Just because a guy steals a car when he's high on drugs doesn't mean he's stealing it to sell it for more drugs. I don't know of any current research that has been completed in Idaho that looks at the relationship between substance abuse and property crime."

The hard-core addictive drugs generally associated with drug gangs, drive-by shootings and desperate addicts are not that common in Idaho. "I'm not saying there's no crack in Idaho, but we haven't seen any," says Richardson. Walsh believes, "The market for crack seems to depend on a ghetto subculture."

On the other hand, methamphetamine labs have been increasing in Idaho, says Richardson, particularly in the Panhandle where there is better access to the needed chemicals and an interstate highway tying major cities.

Idaho had its first serious confrontation with drug gangs in January, when 12 members of the Los Angeles-based 38 Street gang were arrested in Pocatello for allegedly trying to establish a drug outlet in town.

Federal, state and local law-enforcement agencies combined to come down on the gang like a ton of bricks and send the drug gangs in California a message. "We used 140-150 law enforcement personnel," says Richardson. "It was picture perfect. A lot of information they [drug gangs] receive down there is these states are remote and there's a lack of enforcement. That's a misnomer."

In Idaho, crime is generally under control, says Richardson. "I won't deny that we've got problems, but we've got people on top of it." Carvino agrees, and like Richardson believes law enforcement must remain vigilant to maintain this level of order. Carvino says he is asked, "Well, Chief, why do you want more people when crime isn't going up? But crime doesn't change overnight. If you don't pay attention to these things, the crime rate goes up. We'll get behind the curve and hit the wall. Crisis management is the worst way to go."

Carvino says that while Boise's population has grown from 101,000 to 131,000 people from 1978 to 1990, the number of police officers has dropped from 157 in 1978 to 153 in 1990. He says the lack of officers shows up in curtailed services and slower responses to non-life-threatening calls.

But Carvino agrees with Marsh that, "The community actually stops the crime." To that end the role of law enforcement becomes geared more toward crime prevention. Marsh says, "If you don't want to be a victim of crime you ought to do something to protect yourself, because the cops can't do much. The system itself only responds after a crime has been committed."

Carvino agrees that most crime problems can only be dealt with after the fact. "Police don't control the homicide rate that much," he says. "Robberies, I think, we can affect by patrol patterns. Aggravated assaults can be marginally controlled by controlling large groups of rowdy people, he says. But, he says, "I don't want to take credit for crime going down because I don't want to take the blame when it goes up."

"We have very high community involvement. The working relationship with the police and other agencies is good. Everyone is trying to work together... I don't see a crisis here now, but I see a potential for it to grow," he says, noting, "I can remember when New York City was a nice place to live."

Could Boise or Idaho ever have such serious crime problems as New York City? Is there a critical mass of people that creates a climate for crime?

"City size does lend a certain anonymity," says Walsh, noting that anonymity can free some people from social inhibitions to behave. But, he says, "It's not so much numbers, it's the composition. Look at Toronto and Detroit. They're about the same size, but the crime rate is incredibly different."

In one year Toronto had 44 murders compared with 801 in the Motor City.

Walsh says the increasing gap between rich and poor in America—"the widest gap in the industrial world"—leads to an increase in the volume and violence of crime. The poor tend to be undereducated, often illiterate, and thus unable to find employment were it available, which often it is not. Their lack of education may be exacerbated by poor neonatal nutrition and early childhood malnutrition which, Walsh says, leads to a reduced mental capacity.

Combine that with despair, the availability of drugs and the ability to make unbelievable fortunes dealing drugs, and you have a serious crime problem.

Primarily this is seen as an urban problem. Walsh notes that his biases spring from his work as a probation officer in theghettos of Toledo. A native of Britain who worked as a nobody in northern England, Walsh views much of urban America as less of a melting pot and more of a "boiling pot. There's a lot of rage in the ghetto," he says. "People born and raised in Boise have no conception of life in urban America."

While it is the cities most afflicted with crime and violence, Idaho is not immune to the problems caused by a changing social and economic climate.

Even in the vast open spaces of Owyhee County, where cows outnumber people, crime has changed the way people live. "Used to be you could lay a wrench down when you were done working on a tractor and come back the next morning and it'd still be there," says Sheriff Tim Nettleton. "Nobody leaves tools lying around anymore."
What has changed? In the 20 years that Nettleton has been top lawman in Owyhee County, he has seen small, one-family farms wither and die. “The family-type farm is almost gone,” says Nettleton, whose own family roots go back to Owyhee County’s original settlers. And, he notes, “there’s no other industry here. We’re losing that solid middle-class group of people. We’ve got the top and bottom part of the ladder.”

The same could be said for many other places in America. And although Nettleton notes that thieves in Owyhee County are “stealing cows instead of radios,” like other officials throughout the country he believes drugs are at the root of the criminal element.

The fact that economic conditions and opportunities are inversely proportional to crime is evident when one looks across the Snake River from Owyhee County to Boise, where the economy is booming.

Walsh says although the population of Ada County is also booming, the crime rate is increasing at a slower rate. “Boise is a middle-class white Anglo Saxon town,” explains Marsh.

Carvino, a veteran of law enforcement in New York City and Washington, D.C., says of Idaho: “The value system here is different. It’s more family oriented, less materialistic. The opportunities for recreation, to do all the wholesome things in life, are right at hand. That’s why the [crime] problem is less; it’s not because law enforcement is so good.”

Richardson concurs. “On a per capita basis we’re probably much better off than other parts of the country,” says Richardson, who served 22 years with the U.S. Secret Service. “It’s like night and day. We’ve got a beautiful society here. We feel we’ve got crime in check.

“Here in Boise we don’t have a Skid Row or slum area. I can’t think of any area in Boise where parents are afraid to let their children go.”

CRIME ON CAMPUS

By Amy Stahl

They are crimes of convenience. A Boise State student leaves a book unattended in a hallway, forgets to lock his dorm room or walks away from an unlocked bike leaned up against a tree. Easy targets for a thief — and theft is the most common crime on campus, says Sgt. Dave Stittsworth of the Ada County Sheriff’s office.

The typical victim is a student from a rural area who falls prey to someone looking to pick up a quick $20, he says.

In 1989, thefts accounted for 128 of the 198 campus crimes reported to the sheriff’s office. Stittsworth overseas four officers who protect the 13,500-member university community and patrol 150 acres of BSU property, which includes the main campus and parcels south of University Drive and off Boise and Protest avenues. In addition to sheriff’s officers, security forces also patrol the residence halls and campus buildings in the evening.

Unlike many urban campuses, BSU has relatively few cases of rape and violent crime. In the last three years, there have been two rapes, eight aggravated assaults and no murders. Of course, these figures reflect only incidents that are reported to the sheriff’s office. Unreported crimes are a sore point for Stittsworth, who stresses that officers need to know what to look for to better do their jobs.

Richard McKinnon, director of Residential Life, says his office does its best to inform students about the dangers of unlocked doors and walking alone at night on campus. The Residential Life newsletter outlines security and safety precautions three times annually and McKinnon’s office regularly schedules programs on date/acquaintance rape and self-defense.

Also, additional outdoor lights have been added around Residential Life structures.

Drug-related crimes are also less of a threat at BSU than at other schools. “I’d like to say we don’t have any, but you’ve got to be realistic,” Stittsworth admits. “Fortunately we’ve got some good kids — if they smell it they’ll let us know.”

Officers say random patrols and the cooperation of the university community have kept crime to a minimum at BSU. The students, in particular, deserve recognition for helping with law enforcement efforts. “People respect it and they appreciate it,” says Deputy Jim Fox. Stittsworth adds, “I feel real fortunate that the students police themselves.”