

Trends in violent crime and the justice system's response

By David Olson, Ph.D.

Beginning in the early to mid-1990s, multiple indicators of violent crime in Illinois appear to confirm that violent crime has been decreasing, while the proportion of these offenses resulting in an arrest and prison sentence has increased slightly. Further, the number and length of prison sentences imposed for violent offenses increased slightly, and tougher sentencing laws are increasing the proportion of sentences actually served. This *Trends and Issues Update* takes a closer look at violent crime in Illinois, and the nature of the sentences imposed in these cases.

Violent offenses

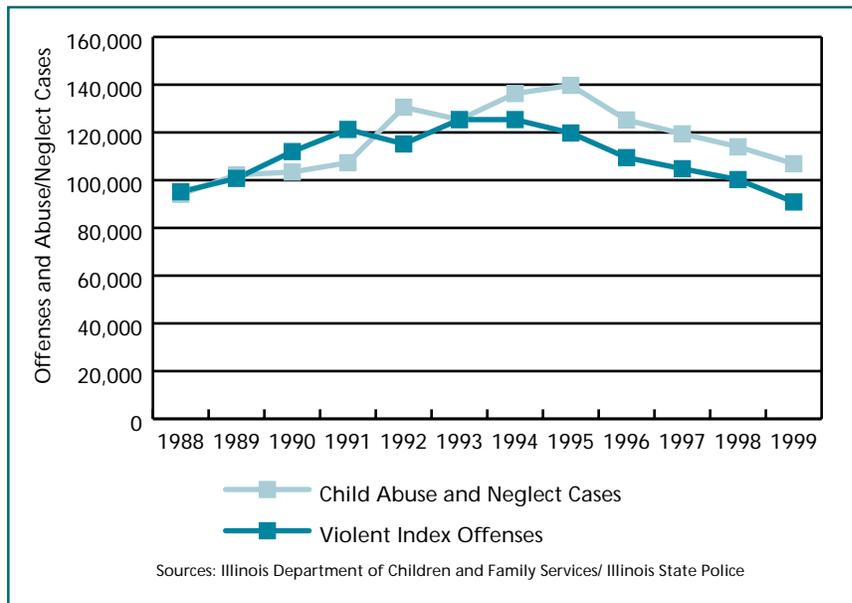
The most consistent and widely available indicator of violent crime in Illinois is the number of offenses reported to police. Through the Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) program, every local law enforcement agency in Illinois reports to the Illinois State Police (ISP) the number of murders, criminal sexual assaults, robberies, and aggravated assaults/batteries reported in their respective jurisdictions. ISP then compiles these numbers in a violent crime Index. It is important to note, however, that not all violent crimes are reported to police. For example, based on national victimization surveys, it is estimated that approximately 45 percent of aggravated assaults and robberies are not reported to police.

Statewide, violent Index offenses reported to police decreased 28 percent between 1993 and 1999, to fewer than 91,000 (Figure 1). During this period, the number of murders fell 31 percent, to 937 in 1999, robberies were down 40 percent, to fewer than 27,000, and criminal sexual assaults and aggravated assaults each dropped 20 percent, to 6,062 and 57,227, respectively. These decreases were found across the various regions of Illinois.

Mirroring these decreases in reported violent crimes, the number of child abuse and neglect cases reported to, and verified by, the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services

between 1993 and 1999 also decreased statewide and across every region of the state (Figure 1). Although not as large as the drop in reported violent crimes, reported cases of child abuse and neglect fell 15 percent between 1993 and 1999. Further, there was a strong correlation between the violent crime rate and the rate of child abuse and neglect cases reported across Illinois' 102 counties, indicating an association between general levels of violent crime and levels of child abuse and neglect.

Figure 1
Comparison of violent crime indicators



However, when violent crime levels and trends were examined across each of Illinois' 102 counties, a more complex and less consistent picture was evident (Figure 2). With respect to crime rates, which measure the number of crimes per 100,000 residents, dramatic differences were seen in 1999 across Illinois' 102 counties. In one third of the counties the violent crime rate exceeded 370 crimes per 100,000 residents. Another third of the counties had violent crimes rates between 230 and 370 per 100,000 residents, while the lower third had rates below 229 per 100,000 residents.

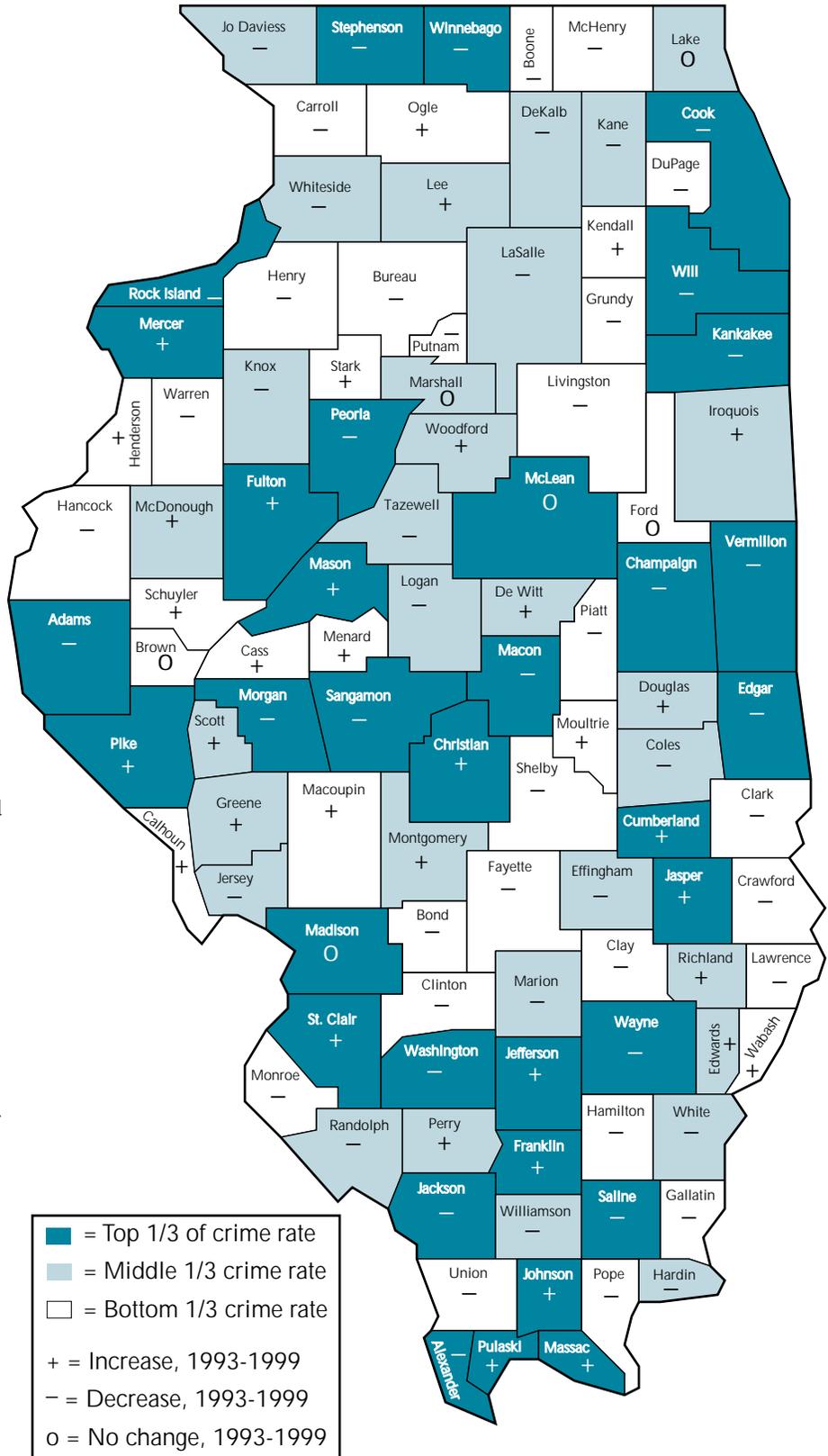
Urban counties — those with a population in excess of 50,000 — were more likely to have violent crime rates which ranked them in the top third, while the violent crime rates in Illinois' more rural counties tended to place them in the middle to bottom third. Still, a considerable proportion of the rural counties — 19 of the 73, or 26 percent — had violent crime rates that placed them in the top third among Illinois counties.

Similarly, examination of violent crime trends between 1993 and 1999 revealed some interesting patterns. Sixty counties experienced a downward trend in total violent Index offenses reported to police during that period, while 36 of the 102 counties actually had increases. The number of offenses in six counties was stable during that time. Illinois' rural counties were the ones most likely to experience an increase in violent crime during the period examined, accounting for 33 of the 36 counties that saw more violent crime in 1999 than 1993. Further, 12 of the 33 rural counties that experienced an increase in violent crime were in the top third statewide in terms of overall violent crime rates.

Arrests for violent crimes

Although violent Index offenses decreased 28 percent between 1993 and 1999, arrests for these offenses decreased less than 10 percent during

Figure 2
Violent crime trends and rates



the same period, to 29,408. Thus, the overall proportion of violent crimes resulting in an arrest has increased. In general, murder and aggravated assault offenses are more likely than criminal sexual assaults and robberies to result in an arrest.

Similarly, according to data gathered by the Authority, the proportion of arrests for violent crimes accounted for by juvenile offenders also varies by offense type. Although juveniles make up approximately 18 percent of Illinois' population, during 1999 they accounted for 29 percent of arrests for robbery, 22 percent of arrests for criminal sexual assault, and 23 percent of arrests for aggravated assault. On the other hand, only 7 percent of people arrested for murder in Illinois during 1999 were juveniles.

Sentences imposed on convicted violent offenders

Unfortunately, it is not possible in Illinois to determine what types of sentences are imposed for specific types of crimes. Detailed information is available from the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) regarding length of sentences and specific offenses for which inmates were convicted. However, among those convicted and placed on probation, the only data available are those from samples of probationers sentenced in 1990 and 1995, and those discharged during 1997.

Based on the available data, it is estimated that in 1995 more than 3,100 adults were placed on probation after being convicted of a violent felony. An additional 4,100 adults convicted of misdemeanor violent offenses were sentenced to probation. The more than 7,000 adults placed on probation following a conviction for a violent crime represents about 16 percent of all probation sentences. By comparison, in 1995, just over 6,500 IDOC admissions were for violent felonies, representing 28 percent of all prison sentences.

Probation sentences for violent offenses

In general, offenses that lead to probation typically do not involve weapons, such as knives or guns, and have less victim injury than offenses that result in prison sentences. Probation sentences also consist of a substantial number of misdemeanor offenses, which do not carry prison terms. Based on data collected from adult probationers convicted of violent crimes and discharged from probation during 1997, there are a number of characteristics of these sentences that can be examined.

With respect to sentence length, the average probation sentence for those convicted of a violent offense and discharged from probation during 1997 was 27 months for felons and almost 15 months for misdemeanants. In addition, many of the violent offenders placed on probation also received additional conditions to their sentences. Among these conditions, 56 percent of those placed on probation for a violent crime were ordered to undergo some form of treatment, 44 percent were ordered to pay fines, 56 percent probation fees, and 57 percent court costs.

Prison sentences for violent offenses

While violent Index offenses and arrests decreased between 1993 and 1999, the number of prison sentences imposed for violent Index offenses increased 7.7 percent during that same period. In addition to an increase in the number of prison admissions for violent Index offenses, the average sentence imposed and length of time served also increased. Between 1993 and 1999, the average sentence imposed on those convicted of a violent Index offense and sentenced to prison — excluding sentences of death or life imprisonment — increased almost 17 percent, to an average sentence length of 106.6 months, or almost 9 years, during 1999.

As would be expected, sentence lengths varied considerably by offense type. Offenders sentenced to prison during 1999 for murder received, on average, a sentence of 34.7 years, while the average prison sentence imposed on those convicted of aggravated criminal sexual assault and armed robbery was 12.9 and 11.6 years, respectively. Prison sentences for aggravated battery, which accounted for the single largest category of prison sentences for violent Index offenses, averaged 3.1 years during 1999. These relatively long sentences, and the resulting low turnover of violent offenders in the prison population, means violent offenders account for an increasing proportion of inmates in Illinois' prisons. During 1999, prison inmates sentenced for violent offenses accounted for one-fourth of all prison admissions, but they made up one-half of the total IDOC population.

Another factor expected to have an impact on the proportion of violent offenders incarcerated in IDOC is Illinois' Truth-in-Sentencing law. Among those sentenced since 1998 for specific violent crimes, Truth-in-Sentencing requires that they serve between 85 percent and 100 percent of their court-imposed sentences. During 1998 and 1999, more than 450 offenders sentenced to prison for a violent offense were subject to the Truth-in-Sentencing requirements. Those offenses not covered under the law are eligible to receive credits towards their sentence for good behavior and participation in specific treatment and vocational programs, which results in a shorter incarceration period than the sentence specified. Among those released from prison during 1999 after serving a sentence for a violent Index offense, all of whom were incarcerated prior to Truth-in-Sentencing, the proportion of the sentence served averaged 45 percent.

Also, Gov. Ryan's recently enacted 15-20-life law will increase sentence lengths and lengths of time served for specific violent offenses committed with a firearm.

Conclusions

From the preceding analyses a number of general conclusions can be made. First, while violent crime has been decreasing across most of Illinois' largest counties, a substantial number of Illinois' rural counties — many of which have high crime rates — have experienced increases in violent crime. Also, even in those counties where violent crime has decreased, the levels of violent crime are still of concern and continue to exact a large societal cost.

Among those placed on probation, most of whom were convicted of a misdemeanor, more than half are ordered to treatment as a condition of their probation, and most are also ordered to pay fees, fines and satisfy other financial conditions along with their probation supervision.

Data regarding prison sentences for violent crimes also reveal some important changes. First, the number of prison sentences have increased, while offenses and arrests have gone down; this would tend to indicate an increased

likelihood of going to prison if you are arrested for a violent crime. Second, the length of sentences imposed on those incarcerated for a violent Index offense have also increased, and as a result of Illinois' Truth-in-Sentencing law, the proportion of these sentences served will also increase. The fact remains, however, that the majority of those sentenced to prison for a violent crime will be released at some point. Of the 22,727 violent offenders in prison at the end of 1999, only 1,355 were sentenced to death, life in prison, or were committed as sexually dangerous persons, and therefore will not be released. Thus, continued attention must be paid to the successful reintegration, and monitoring during the period following release, of most violent offenders sentenced to prison.

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