

Quality of Life in North Carolina

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Welcome to the first edition of the series “Quality of Life in North Carolina.” This series is intended to provide timely data and interpretations about varying dimensions of life in North Carolina. It is hoped that such information will inspire dialogue throughout the state about important issues that affect every citizen, identify issues that may indicate policy initiatives, and make for a more informed public. These goals are consistent with the mission of a land-grant institution.

State legislators, planning agencies, chambers of commerce, extension agents, the business

community, social service agencies, and concerned citizens are expected to be the early recipients of this series, but the distribution list is expected to grow with our efforts to inform the broader public. The Department of Sociology and Anthropology at North Carolina State University will publish several editions a year, each of which will focus on a topic pertinent to quality of life. This first edition examines crime in North Carolina. Later editions will focus on such topics as poverty, housing, health care, tourism, race relations, and contemporary family issues.

CRIME IN NORTH CAROLINA

It seems difficult to find good news in today’s world. Among the many nagging social problems, the one that attracts considerable public attention is crime. Crime is one of the major concerns of American citizens. Interestingly, though, if we look at crime rates over time, we find some encouraging trends in recent years not only for the United States as a whole, but for North Carolina as well.

North Carolina’s State Bureau of Investigation recently released crime statistics for 1996—that is, official counts of crimes reported to the police. After decades of increase in crime from the mid-1960s to the early 1990s, crime rates have decreased for the past three years. Violent crime rates reported to the police fell seven percent in 1996 with the murder and robbery rates dropping by ten and nine percent, respectively. The burglary rate also fell six percent last year. In contrast, motor vehicle theft continued to climb—adding eight percent to last year’s rate. Since the murder rate reached its peak in 1993, it has dropped 27 percent. Burglary and robbery have fallen as well by 12 and 15 percent, respectively. In addition to police statistics, another source of crime statistics is the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), which began presenting victimization data in 1973. The BJS reports that the 1995 drop in violent crime is the largest decrease in any year since BJS began surveying victims of crime.

There are no easy explanations for changes in crime rates. The social and economic forces which influence changes in crime are complex and extremely difficult to measure. Criminologists continue to examine the impact of various societal factors on crime. Some of the most plausible arguments for the decline in crime rates in recent years are related to demographics (the drop in the number of youths in our population—those individuals most likely to be involved in crime), a stronger economy, changes in law enforcement practices and sentencing policies, and stability in the drug market (the crack-cocaine market has seen an end to the turf wars which contributed to the soaring violent crime rates of the 1980s).

Some major trends that characterize crime in North Carolina during the past decade include:

- For North Carolina, as well as the nation, crime rates are on the decline after two decades of increase.
- When we compare the crime rates of North Carolina with those of the US over the past 20 years, we find that North Carolina’s total crime rate and property crime rate, in particular, climbed to reach and surpass the national crime rate by 1992. In other words, North Carolina’s crime rate has increased at a faster rate than that of the US as a whole.

- The recent peak in North Carolina's crime rates of the early 1990s has been followed by a decrease in urban areas but has been followed by a plateau or slight increase in rural areas.
- For people over 30, both the homicide offending rate and the rate at which people are victims of homicide (victimization) have decreased.
- For the first time since age statistics have been available for crime data, youths aged 15 to 19 surpassed all other age groups in 1993 and continue to have the highest homicide *offending* rates.
- Those youths age 20 to 24 have the highest homicide *victimization* rates—an increase of 74 percent between 1988 and 1995.
- When we examine homicide *arrest* rates by race and age, the largest disparities exist between whites and nonwhites in the youngest age groups—with rates for nonwhites exceeding those for whites. As age increases, the disparities between whites and nonwhites decline for homicide arrest rates.

Comparisons over Time and Place

By examining *crime rates*, rather than simply counting the *number* of crimes, we can compare various places and time periods. For example, we expect New York City to have more robberies than Raleigh during a year because more people live in New York City. That's why we speak of robberies as a rate per 100,000 population rather than simply the *number* of

robberies that occur. Raleigh usually has more homicides during the year than Durham, but Durham typically has the higher homicide rate because there are more homicides in Durham relative to the number of people who live there.

North Carolina/US Comparison

When we compare the crime rates of North Carolina with those of the US over the past twenty years, we find that North Carolina's total

Figure 1. NC and US Total Crime Rate

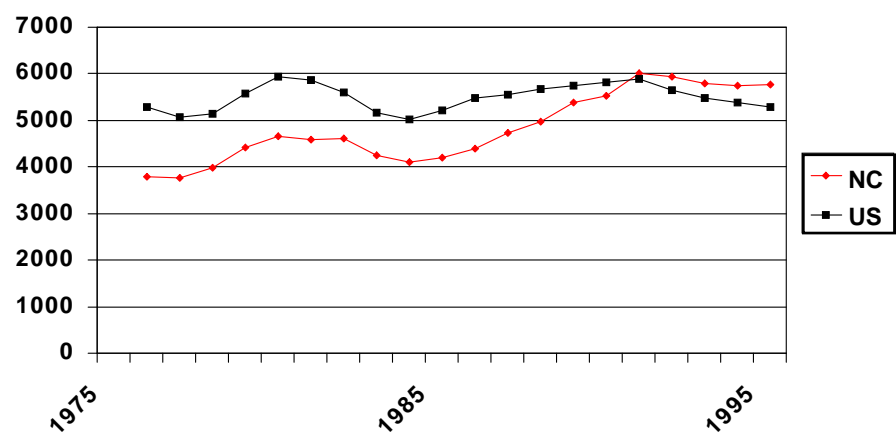


Figure 2. NC and US Violent Crime Rate

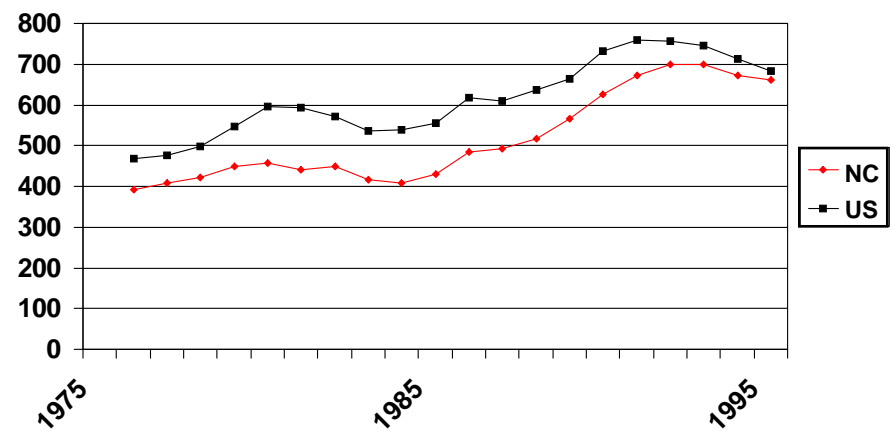
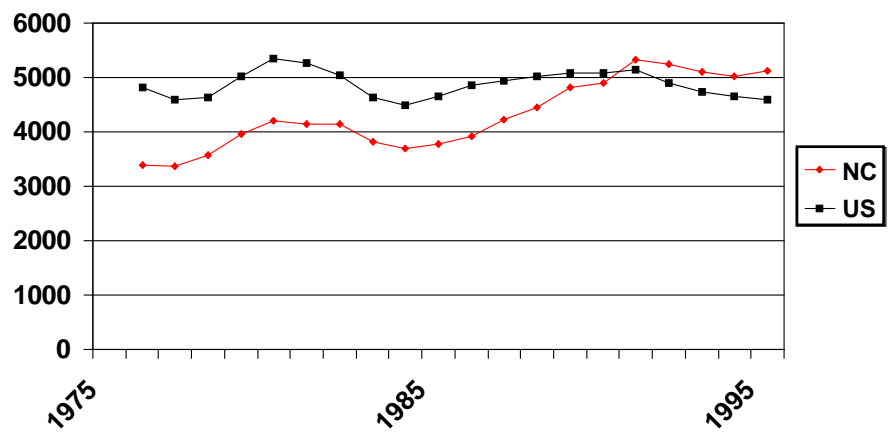


Figure 3. NC and US Property Crime Rate



crime rate (violent and property) has climbed to reach and surpass the total crime rate of the nation in 1992 (Figure 1). Examining violent and property crimes separately, we see that the state's violent crime rate (Figure 2) has approached but not

quite reached the national violent crime rate. On the other hand, North Carolina's property crime rate (Figure 3) surpassed the US property crime rate in 1992 and continues to exceed it.

When we compare different types of serious crimes, the US has had higher homicide rates (especially in 1984, 1986, and 1988) and has had higher rape and robbery rates compared to North Carolina's rates across the entire 20-year period. The only year that the US had higher aggravated assault rates than North Carolina was in 1988; otherwise, the state has exceeded the nation in this category. By and large, the US's burglary and larceny rates have been higher than North Carolina's until around the end of the 1980s when North Carolina's rates surpassed the nation's. During the entire period, though, North Carolina's motor vehicle theft rate has been consistently higher than the nation's.

Figure 4. Total Crime Rate for Urban and Rural NC

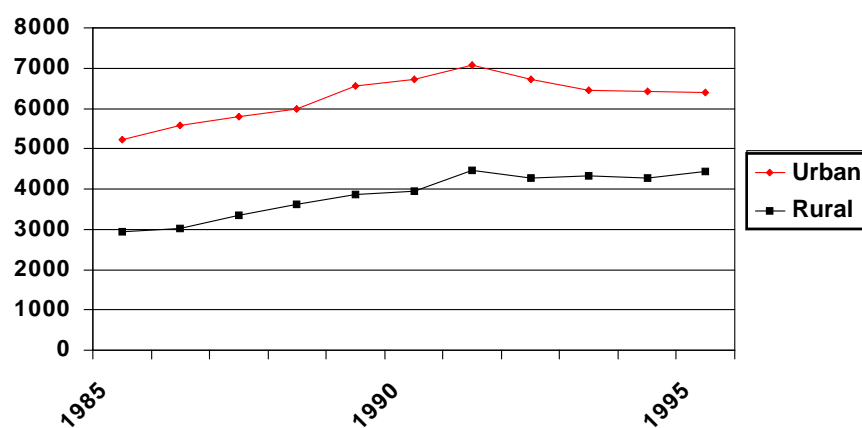


Figure 5. Violent Crime Rates for Urban and Rural NC

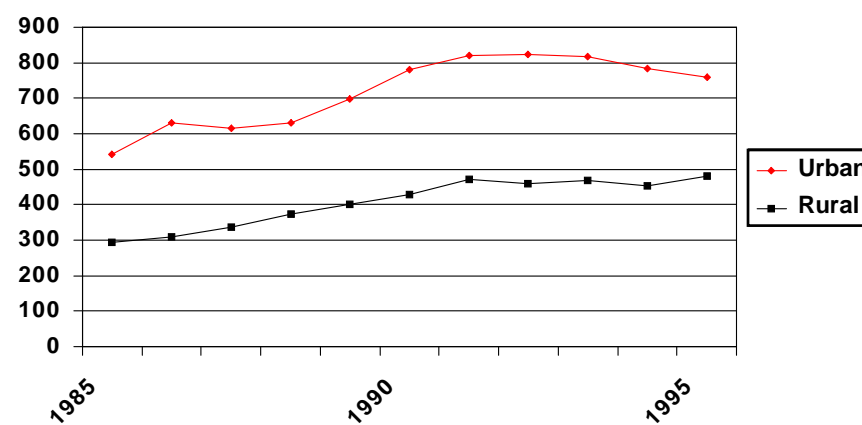
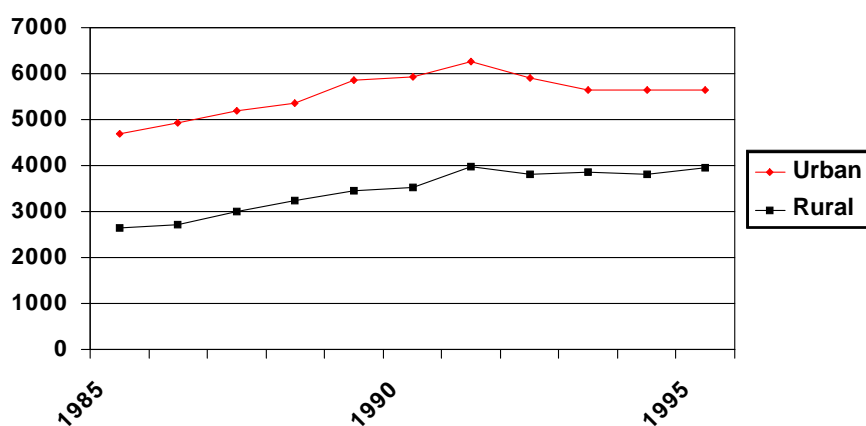


Figure 6. Property Crime Rates in Urban and Rural NC



Urban/Rural Comparison

Although urban areas typically have higher crime rates than rural areas, the peak in North Carolina's crime rates of the early 1990s has been followed by a decrease in urban rates and by a plateau or slight increase in rural rates (Figure 4). On the whole, property crime rates (Figure 6) are more comparable in urban and rural areas in North Carolina than are violent crime rates (Figure 5). Violent crime remains about 50 percent higher in urban compared to rural areas.

Crime Rates by Age

Homicide rates have tended to increase for persons under 29, both for victims and perpetrators. This trend is especially clear for persons 15 to 19, whose homicide offending and victimization rates rose about 2.5 times between 1988 and 1995 in North Carolina. In contrast, the homicide offender rates and victimization rates for persons 30 and over have declined in the past decade.

Summary

The reasons for fluctuations in crime rates are hard to identify. Whether crime rates increase or decline, we should not let short-term changes instill undue fear or allay real concerns that would leave us off guard. Criminal Justice agencies should not use year-to-year fluctuations as a rationale for policy changes. Effective law enforcement and sentencing guidelines should be based on long-term trends. Our major concern should be the great economic cost and societal problems that need to be addressed. We need to recognize that crime affects the quality of our lives as well as our well being. To effectively deal with these problems, we need to deal with long-term trends and address the sources of criminality.

In spite of the good news regarding recent declining violent crime rates in North Carolina, some caution should be taken to guard against property crimes such as burglary, larceny, and motor vehicle theft. Locking doors, securing windows, installing timing lights, and locking your car doors are some things that can be done

to protect your property. Education about crime can also help us improve the quality of our lives. Unfortunately, media accounts often increase our fear of crime by making us feel that we are all vulnerable to crime. And although we should take precautionary measures to guard against our own personal victimization, being informed of our likelihood of victimization should reduce the fear of crime among most North Carolinians. We know that violent crime rates, by and large, are lower in North Carolina than in the rest of the nation. Yet in spite of recent declining rates, young (15-to 24-year old) black males are particularly at risk of violent criminal victimization. Education, family, and community programs should be supplemented to address the risk facing these youths. On the whole, though, recent crime statistics provide news that should decrease our fear of crime which, in turn, can have positive ramifications for our peace of mind, our community well-being, and our quality of life in general.

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