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Northeastern Report Shows Surge in Homicides Involving Young Black Males and Guns

In the days ahead, police departments around the country will announce their homicide tallies for 2008, noting whether they are up or down compared with last year. Regardless of these short-term changes, there is a disturbing trend afoot that lies beneath the surface of overall crime figures.

A new report issued by experts at Northeastern University on patterns and trends in homicide since 2000 shows that, despite the small fluctuations in overall homicide rates, there has been a dramatic surge in homicides involving young black males with guns. The findings paint a very different picture concerning recent trends in murder from the apparent tranquility suggested by overall statistics released by the FBI.

James Alan Fox, the Lipman Family professor of criminal justice and professor of law, policy and society and Marc Swatt, assistant professor of criminal justice, both at Northeastern, examined detailed data on victims and offenders of homicide over the past three decades with special focus on trends emerging in the years since 2000. They found, for example, that between 2002 and 2007, the number of homicides involving black male juveniles as victims grew by 31% and, as perpetrators, by 43%. The numbers escalate even more within the same group when guns were used as weapons, with increases of 54% for victims and 47% for perpetrators.

“Although the overall rate of homicide in the United States remains relatively low,” observed Fox, “the landscape is quite different for countless Americans living (and some dying) in violence-infested neighborhoods—those for whom the frightening sound of gunfire is a far too frequent occurrence.”

Fox and Swatt also analyzed trends in regions, states and cities. The increase in homicides among young black offenders, coupled with a smaller increase or even decrease among their white counterparts, held true for every region of the country and nearly all population groupings of cities. This same pattern was true for a majority of states and major cities with available data.

After some decline during the 1990s, the percentage of homicides involving guns has rebounded since 2000, both among black male and young white male offenders. The percentage of gun homicides for young black offenders has reached just below 85%.

Fox noted his concern surrounding recent Congressional legislation limiting the ability to track and control illegal gun markets, which may have contributed to the renewed increase in gun homicides since 2000.

“With a new administration in Washington,” Fox commented, “the time is right to re-examine the federal role in combating the youth gun trade.”

Demographic projections suggest that the concern for at-risk youth should increase over the next decade. The number of black and Hispanic children should continue to expand, contrasting with the rather minimal increase expected among Caucasian children.

“There is an urgency for reinvestment in children and families, said Fox. “In essence, we need a bailout for kids at-risk.”

Fox and Swatt lament the sharp cuts in Federal support for policing and youth violence prevention, which may be partly responsible for the resurgence in homicide, especially among minority youth. Prevention has a cost, however the benefits are far-reaching. Increased funding is needed for programs that protect kids and enrich their development.

“Regardless of trend, be it upward, downward or stable, the concern for keeping children safe is absolutely critical,” said Fox.

Notwithstanding today’s financial crisis, Fox urges restoration of federal funding for crime prevention and crime control, in particular the COPS program and juvenile justice initiatives.

“We either pay for the programs now,” urges Fox, “or pray for the victims later.”

For a copy of the full report, please contact James Alan Fox at j.fox@neu.edu or by phone at (617) 416-4400 (cell) or (617) 450-0012 (home).

About Northeastern

Founded in 1898, Northeastern University is a private research university located in the heart of Boston. Northeastern is a leader in interdisciplinary research, urban engagement, and the integration of classroom learning with real-world experience. The university’s distinctive cooperative education program, where students alternate semesters of full-time study with semesters of paid work in fields relevant to their professional interests and major, is one of the largest and most innovative in the world. The University offers a comprehensive range of undergraduate and graduate programs leading to degrees through the doctorate in six undergraduate colleges, eight graduate schools, and two part-time divisions. For more information, please visit www.northeastern.edu.