

Long-term upswing in executions reversed as more convictions are overturned

Violence Index researchers find post 9-11 surge in hate crimes short-lived

NORTH MANCHESTER, Ind. (Dec. 22, 2003) – Executions in the United States are on the downswing, in part because of an increase in stays and overturned convictions, report Manchester College researchers in releasing their latest National Index of Violence and Harm.

While executions increased 40 percent between 1995 and 1999, reaching a peak of 98, executions have averaged only 74 annually since, said the researchers. “Some of the decrease can be attributed to the fact that serious questions continue to be raised about the fairness of capital punishment,” said Bradley L. Yoder, Ph.D., professor of sociology and social work.

“Some see injustice in the quality of legal representation available to capital murder suspects. Others raise issues about the execution of youth or the mentally disabled and about access to DNA evidence for suspects.” Several states have declared moratoriums on executions. Since 2000, the courts have exonerated 27 death row inmates (compared to 19 in the previous four-year period), while an additional 178 have received clemency, including 167 in Illinois.

Additional research, conducted as part of the National Index of Violence and Harm, indicates the large increase in hate crimes in 2001 was a temporary spike primarily due to post 9-11 crimes against Muslims and ethnic minorities. Although the FBI did not determine the number of hate crimes directly related to September 11, the agency reported anti-Islamic crimes increased 15-fold, to 554 victims in 2001. Hate crimes had been dropping steadily, decreasing 10.5 percent from 1995 to 2000. Indeed, 90 percent of the 2001 increase was attributed to anti-Muslim and ethnic bias, with total hate crime victims increasing from 9,924 to 12,020 between 2000 and 2001. However, in 2002, the number of victims fell to 9,222 comparable to pre-2001 levels.

The National Index of Violence and Harm, originated by Manchester College psychology, sociology and mathematics professors and students in 1999, examines data from 1995 through 2001 and includes 19 variables in two scales, “Personal Violence and Harm” and “Societal Violence and Harm.” Personal violence includes violence against self, such as suicide, and violence against others in traditional crime (such as homicide and battery).

Due to increases in homicide, robbery and suicide, a five-year plunge in the personal violence index bottomed out in 2001. The personal violence index (which also includes battery, sexual offenses and deaths from substance abuse) had been steadily decreasing, dropping an impressive 15 percent from 1995 to 2000.

In 2001, a companion index of societal violence and harm showed a substantial increase for the first time. This index includes violence or harm from overall societal forces and also institutions related to government, corporations and families (including lack of health insurance, poverty, infant mortality, law enforcement abuse, air pollution, occupational injury, and domestic violence). The increase in societal harm was driven primarily by increases in post 9-11 hate crimes and various measures of social negligence (hunger, homelessness, lack of health insurance, school drop-out rate).

Emergency food requests, for example, increased 23 percent from 2000 to 2001 – the largest yearly increase in 10 years. “Figures from 2000 and 2001 suggest the encouraging decreases in crime and suicide observed during the good economy of the 1990s have come to an end,” notes researcher James P. Brumbaugh-Smith, Ph.D., associate professor of mathematics. “Meantime, increases in hunger and homelessness seen during even these ‘boom’ years continue unabated.”

The Manchester College researchers also noted that while economic inequality decreased consistently from 1995 to 2001 (by 4 percent overall), disparity based on gender did not change significantly and disparity between the poor and the wealthy actually increased.

“In fact, the income gap between the top 5 percent and the lowest 10 percent of U.S. households is the greatest it has been since government tracking began in 1967,” said Neil J. Wollman, Ph.D., Senior Fellow of the Manchester College Peace Institute. Furthermore, in 2001, blacks, Hispanics and Asians were 159 percent more likely to live in poverty than non-Hispanic white residents, the researchers said. Females were 24 percent more likely to live in poverty than males, and children under 18 were 61 percent more likely to live in poverty than adults.

“Most citizens and the media look at violence only on the interpersonal level – murder, rape, robbery, etc. But some researchers and commentators also have looked at violence in broader, more societal terms,” said Wollman. “Even though such violence or harm is less dramatic or graphic, the physical or psychological harm from such things as poverty or environmental pollution can be just as devastating. We hope to present a more inclusive view of violence that heightens the awareness of society on these concerns.”

A detailed explanation of the index (including statistical data and graphics) is available at www.manchester.edu/links/ViolenceIndex