

## US vs. THEM: Does growth lead to big-city crime?

By **Howard Frank**

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We decided to examine the popular belief that crime in the area has grown with the influx of people from the cities. It's a belief that's held by many longtime residents. Has this rural, resource-rich, bucolic, resort community been poisoned by the criminal elements of the big, bad surrounding metropolitan areas?

To take an objective look, we compared census figures and data provided by the state police to measure the changes in crime in our community over the years. We used numbers going back to the year 2000, which is as far back as meaningful arrest breakdowns are available from the state police. The figures reveal some startling truths, and dispel some traditionally accepted beliefs.

### More crime?

Has crime increased in Monroe County with the arrival of new residents from the nearby urban and suburban centers? The answer is yes, but not disproportionate to the population growth.

The crime rate grew at only a slightly faster pace throughout the decade than the population. The county's population grew 18.8 percent between 2000 and 2007. The crime rate went up by 21.9 percent.

The current year is trending more positively. The number of crimes for the first seven months of 2008 are up 19.3 percent over the first seven months of 2000, while the population grew by 19.5 percent. That virtually matches the growth in crime, meaning crime is growing proportionately to population changes.

To put it in other terms, the county reported 30 crimes per thousand residents in 2000. In 2007, the rate was 31, a 3.3 percent increase.

### What trends did we detect in the crime rate?

The county's population continued to grow during the decade, but at an increasingly slower rate. The changes in the crime rate have been less linear, with peaks and valleys.

Total crime dropped in 2003 and 2005, but peaked in 2002 and 2006. In 2007, crime remained relatively unchanged. That year coincided with a meager 1.1 percent growth in the county's population.

A breakdown of the type of crime reveals something entirely different. The rate of serious crimes — murder, forcible rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny, motor vehicle theft and arson — fell between 2002 and 2004, but rose sharply in 2005, far in excess of the growth in population.

The rate of less serious crimes, including fraud, drug sale and possession, DUI and disorderly conduct showed less variability. That rate accelerated in 2001, 2002 and 2006, but fell in 2007.

Today, serious crimes are on the increase, while less serious crimes are down-trending, in relation to the county's population.

## **How has the mix of crimes changed?**

In the year 2000, serious crimes accounted for 23 percent of all crimes, while less serious crimes made up 77 of all crimes committed. The mix changed favorably in the mid-2000s, with serious crimes dipping in relation to total crimes. But now serious crime is on the rise again. Through the first seven months of 2008, serious crimes made up 21 percent of all crimes. They are on pace to increase, if only slightly, for the second year in a row.

## **Crime and race**

The composition of residents in Monroe County has changed dramatically during the current decade. Whites made up 88 percent of the county's population in 2000. That figure dropped to 85 percent in 2008.

The black population has grown dramatically during those years. In 2000, there were 8,343 black residents in the county, or 6 percent of its total population. That share increased to 18,888, or 11 percent, in 2008.

During those years, the portion of crimes white and black offenders committed changed dramatically as well. In the year 2000, whites accounted for 89 percent of all crime arrests in the county. That figure fell to 79 percent through the first seven months of 2008.

Blacks now account for 20 percent of all crime arrests in the county, up from 11 percent just eight years ago.

So, while whites now make up 85 percent of the county's population, they account for 79 percent of the crimes. Blacks, who now make up 11 percent of the county, account for 20 percent of the crime.

The occurrence of crime within the county's black population is disturbingly higher than whites. White residents of Monroe County have committed crimes at the rate of 26 per 1,000 during 2008. The arrest rate for black residents is 50 per 1,000, almost twice as much.

## **What about serious crimes?**

In 2000, there were 959 crimes classified as serious. Whites committed 795, for 82 percent, and blacks committed 157, for 16.3 percent.

In 2007, there were 999 crimes classified as serious. Whites committed 737, for 73 percent, and blacks

committed 258, for 26 percent.

## Monroe vs. the state

How does Monroe County compare with other similarly sized counties?

Monroe's crime rate fell smack in between similarly sized counties, but below the state's average.

Beaver County is 32 miles northwest of Pittsburgh. Its population makes it slightly larger than Monroe County. But while Monroe has been growing throughout the decade, Beaver has been losing residents.

So how does Monroe's crime rate stack up to Beaver's? Monroe experienced 3.1 crimes per 1,000 residents in 2007. In Beaver County, there were 2.8 per 1,000, or about 9 percent less.

Schuylkill County, with a stable population of 147,269 in 2007, had a crime rate of 3.6 per thousand residents.

But Monroe's crime rate is lower than the state's average. Pennsylvania, with a population of 12,432,792 in 2007, and 489,414 crimes committed, had a per capita rate of 3.9 crimes per resident.

Bob Hillman, a human rights advocate, is a former Equal Opportunity Program manager at the Tobyhanna Army Depot, and served as vice president of the NAACP of Monroe County. He currently serves with the Monroe County Advisory Council of the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission and is chairman of the Unity Coalition of the Poconos.

Hillman said crime is both a white and black problem. "It's really down to a point we have a unique situation here. We're a bedroom community with a lot of people that are unsupervised. Gangs and drugs have become a big problem in the Poconos. We are not the little town we used to be," he said.

So while crime in the county hasn't changed much on the whole during the past decade, why has the perception gotten dramatically worse?

"What you've had is a transparency in many police departments and their willingness to talk about it," Stroud Area Regional Police Lt. Brian Kimmins said. The 26-year law enforcement veteran said the reporting of crimes by police departments was an afterthought in the past. And he felt that crime in the area has been proportionate to the number of people in the area.

He does notice some trends, though. "Our property crimes have skyrocketed in the last three years," he said. Those crimes include vehicle theft, burglaries, theft and fraud.

Kimmins believes advances in training and tools have provided local law enforcement with an edge. "As the frequency of crimes goes up, the quality of officers and technology has kept up with it," he said.

Kimmins put it into perspective.

"I don't think we're out of sync with the averages. We've just gotten bigger. The only thing that hasn't increased is the size of the land."

Want to crunch your own arrest and crime numbers? Go to [Pennsylvania Uniform Crime Reporting System](#).

That's the Pennsylvania Uniform Crime Reporting System, the source for many of the crime statistics used in this story.

## **Us Vs. Them: A Four-Part Series**

A four-part series exploring the divisions within a growing community, culminating in a public panel discussion, "Us vs. Them: Can't We All Just Get Along?"

The town meeting featuring panelists with differing perspectives in Monroe County's divided population will be held Thursday at 7 p.m. at the Sherman Theater, 524 Main St., Stroudsburg.

Admission is free. Everyone is invited.

[Submit questions](#) for the panelists' consideration.

## **Think crime is bad only now? Try these gems from 30 years ago, August 1978:**

- Fourteen-year-old Georgiann Yarborough's bullet-riddled body was found in the Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area near Delaware Water Gap. Yarborough, from East Stroudsburg, was wanted for an armed robbery of a gas station two days before she died.
- Steve Geyer, 28 threatened to shoot down Franklin Miller's plane if Miller continued to spray for gypsy moths near Geyer's house.
- The Stroud Township home of Monroe County District Attorney James Marsh was burglarized. A television, money, a coin collection wine and other items were stolen. Marsh believed the culprits parked their car in his garage while they looted his home.