

**DANTH's FOURTH LUSTRUM DOWNTOWN TRENDS ASSESSMENT 2008
Part 2: THE DOWNTOWN CRIME PROBLEM REDUX?**

Downtown Curmudgeon Posting Sunday, June 24, 2007

**Is Crime Again Becoming A Crippling Problem For Our Nation's
Downtowns?**

For decades after WW II, crime and the fear of crime first fostered downtown decline and then impeded their revitalization. Happily, since the early 1990s, the crime problem seemed to be abating as violent crime statistics nationally dropped steadily and significantly. This drop in crime was accompanied by reduced fear, increased pedestrian traffic and nighttime activities in downtowns revitalized by:

- Residential and commercial growth
- A population trend that reduced the size of the crime-prone age cohort
- And police departments adopting new and far more effective strategies.

However, the FBI just announced an increase in violent crimes for the second straight year, an occurrence that signals the first continued spike in homicides, robberies and other serious offenses since the early 1990s. This spike is especially noticeable in medium-sized cities and cities located in the Midwest. In large cities such as New York, the crime rate continues to decline.

What is unknown at this time is how this recent uptick in crime has impacted on downtown districts.

The Down Side.

As the introduction of crack cocaine led to a major surge in violent crimes between 1985 and 1992, so the growing use of Methamphetamine --- a.k.a. Crystal Meth -- appears to be associated with higher crime rates. The Crack Meth problem also appears to have taken particularly strong roots in the Midwest and in small and medium-sized municipalities -- localities that trended toward not having major crack cocaine problems.

Many of these same municipalities are reporting the growth of street gangs, especially those having national organizations, such as the Crips, Bloods, MS-13, etc. There is a strong correlation between the growth of Crack Meth use in a locality and the growth of street gangs, since the gangs often are heavily involved

in the sale of this drug. There have been some reports of these gangs being active in poor or marginal commercial districts, where they intimidate shoppers and scare and extort local merchants.

There also has been a rise in retail crimes by well-organized rings of professional thieves. While most of the crimes in the larceny/theft statistical category have declined since 2000, shoplifting has increased 11.7 percent. [1]

The Bush Administration's reduced funding for police departments has had a big negative impact on the police departments in small and medium-sized cities, where, according to the legislative counsel for the International Association of Chiefs of Police, the loss of "one or two or five police officers can make a real difference." [2]

Nationally, there has been an increase in the teenager/young adult population, the age group most prone to committing crimes and acts of violence, especially in low-income disadvantaged areas.

Also nationally, there are growing numbers of released prison inmates and their recidivism is likely to result in many crimes.

Newspaper articles on the recent crime surge have focused on criminal events in poor and often "ethnic" neighborhoods, which often are located near downtown areas and sometimes in them. As a recent major study found, "Downtowns are home to some of the most and least affluent households of their cities and regions." [3]

While some of the newspaper articles mention the meth drug connection, others focus on a new and extremely disturbing aspect of this heightened violence – it's seemingly arbitrary causation. For example:

"And while such crime in the 1990's was characterized by battles over gangs and drug turf, the police say the current rise in homicides has been set off by something more bewildering: petty disputes that hardly seem the stuff of fistfights, much less gunfire or stabbings.

Suspects tell police they killed someone who 'disrespected' them or a family member, or someone who was "mean mugging" them, which police loosely translate as giving a dirty look. And more weapons are on the streets, giving people a way to act on their anger."

Police Chief Nannette H. Hegerty of Milwaukee calls it "the rage thing." [4]

Arbitrary violence is almost impossible to predict and consequently almost impossible to avoid. It is very fear inducing.

On The Upside.

In the 1980s I directed a major study for Regional Plan Association on how the fear of crime is generated and how it strangled the outer borough downtowns in New York City. A major finding was that the fear of crime did not so much thwart visitation rates – people still had to use the subway connections, courts and hospitals -- as it induced a huge amount of pedestrian avoidance behavior and that significantly reduced the number and strength of the multi-purpose trips that are the sine qua non of healthy downtowns.[5]

More recently, as my wife and I have traveled across the nation over the last 10 years, visiting such places as Boston, Chicago, Charlotte, Miami, Midtown Manhattan, Pasadena, Philadelphia, Portland (OR), San Diego, Santa Monica and Seattle, we have been struck by significant evening downtown pedestrian flows, where people seemed to be walking free of fear and not feeling the need to take precautionary measures. Unfortunately, I could not find any statistical evidence to support our “field observations.”

I could offer numerous anecdotal reports of our experiences, but here are just two:

- Since returning to NYC in 1980, I have often walked, after dark, from Times Square down 7th Avenue to Penn Station to catch a LIRR train home. During the 1980's and much of the 1990's, Times Square was a physically frayed, fear inducing area, but walking down 7th Avenue, desolate but for the drunks, drug users and homeless was even worse. Street savvy pedestrians were ever vigilant, watching darkened spaces and scanning who was behind them. Today, Times Square is awash in new development and again the entertainment capital of the world, jammed with pedestrians day and night, and a favorite of tourists. Now, after dark, there is a steady pedestrian flow on 7th Avenue, overwhelmingly comprised of Average Joes and Average Janes, with the quality of life issues greatly abated. Pedestrians are no longer constantly looking over their shoulders. Some even window shop.
- We love to visit Center City Philadelphia at least once a year because of its superb restaurants, cultural amenities and “walkability.” On our first visit, in 1985, we drove one Saturday evening down Walnut Street to Rittenhouse Square. The street was devoid of pedestrians as was the rest of the downtown we drove through. On recent visits we've walked to several restaurants on Walnut from our hotels on Logan Square or East Market Street. On these visits, with its numerous restaurants and bars and nearby hotels and cultural facilities, Walnut always had a significant amount of nighttime pedestrian activity, overwhelmingly by “respectable people”

Back in 1987 I argued that downtowns could reduce the fear of crime if they were designed and developed to make visitors feel that they are interesting and attractive places where “respectable people’ like themselves tend to frequent.” The key to the emergence of such downtowns was the development of a dense, compact multi-functional core area that would combine residential, office, retail and entertainment functions. Such core areas would be conducive to significant flows of law-abiding pedestrians during both day and evening hours.

Today, most of the successful downtowns I visit have such multi-functional cores, These downtowns are often referred to -- with some hyperbole -- as “24 hour” activity centers, because commercial and cultural activities as well as pedestrian traffic are present during daylight and evening hours.

Entertainment Niches. Vibrant entertainment niches containing restaurants, watering holes, movie theaters, concert halls and/or legitimate theaters have enabled many downtowns to attract substantial numbers of evening visitors, who are not afraid of strolling and window shopping after dark. This is true for large downtowns such as Midtown Manhattan , Center City Philadelphia, downtown Chicago and the Gaslamp District in San Diego as well for smaller downtowns such as New Brunswick, NJ, Englewood, NJ, Old Pasadena, CA, Manayunk, PA

Residential Growth. Also contributing to this “after dark” resurgence has been the growth of downtown residential populations. In her recent study, Eugenie Birch also found that:

““During the 1990s, downtown population grew by 10 percent, a marked resurgence following 20 years of overall decline. Forty percent of the sample cities began to see growth before the 1990s. While only New York’s two downtown areas and Seattle, Los Angeles, and San Diego saw steady increases from 1970 to 2000, another 13 downtowns have experienced sustained growth since the 1980s.”

This influx of downtown residents is important for several reasons:

- Downtown residents, in Jane Jacobs' terms, take "possession" of the area they live in; they help make sure it is properly maintained and kept safe
- More residents help create a built-in demand for many retailers and entertainment functions. They can be especially important for the attraction and development of good restaurants
- More downtown residents help create a more interesting and safer environment after dark. Directly and indirectly they increase the flow of law-abiding citizens, which in turn serves to reduce the fear of crime

While Birch’s study focused on the nation’s major downtowns, the NY-NJ-CT metropolitan area offers numerous examples of significant growth in residential units in smaller downtowns such as White Plains, Hoboken, Morristown,

Cranford, Englewood, South Orange, New Brunswick, Rahway, Livingston, Garden City, etc.

Police Strategies. Downtown security also has been greatly improved by police departments deploying one of more of the following strategies:

1. Community Policing. This usually involves more foot patrol officers who build relationships with the people on their beats, garner better information about criminal activities and problem-solve specific community crime issues

2. Broken Windows. Based on the famous 1982 “Broken Windows” article by James Q. Wilson and George Kelling in the Atlantic Monthly that argued:

'If disorder goes unchecked, a vicious cycle begins. First, it kindles a fear of crime among residents, who respond by staying behind locked doors. Their involvement in the neighborhood declines; people begin to ignore rowdy and threatening behavior in public. They cease to exercise social regulation over little things like litter on the street, loitering strangers, or truant schoolchildren. When law-abiding eyes stop watching the streets, the social order breaks down and criminals move in.'

A broken windows strategy tries to remove the “signs of disorder” such as broken windows, dirty sidewalks, loitering, public use of drugs and alcohol, prostitution, etc.

3. Comstat. Uses computerized mapping of crime reports to identify “hot spots” of criminal activity. These hot spots are then analyzed and the local police units are tasked to deal with them and evaluated on their ability to succeed.

The 24 Hour Downtown and New Policing Vs The New Crime Wave

How are the 24-hour downtowns coping with the new crime wave? Are the new residents and greater evening pedestrian flows helping to deter criminal activities and/or keeping the fear levels low? How effective are the new police strategies against the new crime wave? Are downtowns experiencing a recent surge in crime and fear doing so because they have not used the above-mentioned revitalization and policing strategies or because these strategies have failed? These questions need to be addressed and answered – and quickly – so the downtown revitalization community can take appropriate remedial actions. Perhaps the International Downtown Association can work with the National Institute of Justice and academic experts such as George Kelling to create, fund and execute the necessary research project.

[1] Joel Groover, “ORGANIZED CRIME Retailers combat growing number of professional shoplifters,” Shopping Centers Today ,October 2006

[2] Dan Eggen, "Violent Crime Up For Second Year: Some Point to Cuts in Federal Funding," Washington Post, Saturday, June 2, 2007; A01

[3] Eugenie L. Birch, "Who Lives Downtown," The Brookings Institution, November 2006

[4] Kate Zernike, "Violent Crime Rising Sharply in Some Cities," New York Times, Feb.11, 2006

[5] N. David Milder, "Crime and Downtown Revitalization" Urban Land , September 1987, pp. 16-19

Downtown Crime Problem Redux add-on

Downtown Curmudgeon Posting July 09, 2007

Here is an interesting paragraph from today's NY Times relating to my last posting on the possible reemergence of downtown crime problems:

"In Trenton, a city of 85,000 where the police estimate that the Bloods have as many as 2,000 members, overall crime is down and officials say violence is largely confined to areas where gangs are most prevalent. But gang killings remain a persistent problem. There were 20 homicides in the city last year; the police have made arrests in nine of the 16 killings they consider gang related, and in three of the others. In the first half of this year, murders increased by 50 percent."

-- from David Kocieniewski , "Scared Silent: A Little Girl Shot, and a Crowd That Didn't See" New York Times, July 9, 2007

Despite The New National Wave Of Crime, Downtown Security Strategies Still Stand

Downtown Curmudgeon Saturday, February 16, 2008

In a June 24, 2007 posting, "The Downtown Crime Problem Redux?", I asked if crime was again becoming a crippling problem for our nation's downtowns because:

"(T)he FBI just announced an increase in violent crimes for the second straight year, an occurrence that signals the first continued spike in homicides, robberies and other serious offenses since the early 1990s. This spike is especially noticeable in medium-sized cities and cities located in the Midwest. In large cities such as New York, the crime rate continues to decline.

What is unknown at this time is how this recent uptick in crime has impacted on downtown districts.”

I was concerned because such an uptick would be a strong indication that the new policing strategies combined with the creation of 24-hour downtowns were no longer effective ways to solve downtown crime problems. That was important since I had claimed in DANTH’s 2003 downtown trends report that “crime is no longer the barrier to downtown revitalization that it once was” (see our website to download the report http://www.danth.com/pdf/trends_3_25_05.pdf).

I recently conducted an online search for information about downtown crime rates around the nation. I found data for 12 large and medium-sized cities. While this is admittedly a small sample, the results seem reassuring:

Atlanta, GA, Aug.2007. Population: 486,411

1. For several years downtown had 9% of city's crime, but a daily population of half the size of the entire city. It now has just 6% of the city's crimes.
2. Downtown there has been a 61% drop in major crimes over the last 6 months

Boise, ID July 2007. Population: 198,638

Continuing trend of declining crime downtown, with a 14% decline in the last year.

Chapel Hill, NC Nov. 2004. Population: 49,919

- 1.Reports of "major crimes" had gone down in each of the last three years for which the numbers were available.
- 2, But the number of arrests for crimes committed in the downtown had gone up. Leaders feared people could still feel unsafe even though statistics showed some positive trends.

Cincinnati, OH May 2004. Population: 332,252

- 1.Last year, serious crime in downtown dipped by 1 percent. The bulk of all downtown crimes are thefts, many from cars
2. Of the city's 75 killings in 2003, one was in the Central Business District.
3. Major problem: area is still perceived to be unsafe

Dallas, TX, January 2008. Population: 1,232,940

1. Car break-ins were a problem a few years ago, but crime has gone down in the past year
2. "I tell people safety and crime is old news downtown," says the downtown manager

Dayton, OH, January 2008. Population: 156,771

1. In January, 2008, City of Dayton officials released statistics that show the city's crime rate continues to decline significantly.
2. Targeted crimes downtown declined by 39 percent over the past five years. From 2006 to 2007 alone, key downtown crime categories dropped more than 25 percent.
3. A further perspective on downtown safety: in 2007, statistics for targeted crime categories downtown represented just 5 percent of the city's overall targeted crime numbers.

Lawrence, KS, Nov. 2007. Population: 88,605

1. Since 2001, violent crime has risen in downtown Lawrence
2. According to the Kansas Incident Based Reporting System, 41 assaults were reported in downtown Lawrence in 2001, a number that has steadily increased in the last five years. In 2006, there were 245 reports of assault and battery in downtown Lawrence, an increase of nearly 100 from the year before.

Kansas City, MO June 2005. Population: 447,306

Between 2002 and 2004, the period before and after the improvement district was introduced downtown crime had dropped in all categories: robbery, 34 percent; juvenile crime, 28 percent; public intoxication, 21 percent; suspicious behavior, 10 percent; and miscellaneous crimes against property, 10 percent.

Los Angeles, CA June 2007. Population: 3,849,378

1. The Downtown crime rate has dropped to its lowest level in more than 60 years.
2. Even as Los Angeles' decrease contrasts with the national trend of rising crime rates, statistics show that the city still contends with high levels of gang-related violence. There was a 14% increase in such activity in 2006

Miami, FL, 2006. Population: 404,048

1. Over the past five years, Downtown Miami has become a safer place. Investment has soared, new businesses have opened, and the population continues to grow.
2. While the same decreases in crime incidents are registered citywide over the 2000-2005, the overall decreases are more dramatic within the DDA boundaries.
3. Almost every category of crime incidents decreased within the DDA boundaries between 2000 and 2005.
4. Most notably there was nearly a 68% decrease in robberies and 38% decrease in larceny/thefts.
5. Criminal homicides within the DDA account for less than 4% of those occurring citywide.

Philadelphia, PA 2004. Population: 1,448,394

1. The 9th consecutive year that there was a reduction in crime downtown

2. Statistics that document a continued drop in downtown crime: Comparing 2003 and 2004, part one crime (aggravated assault, homicide, rape, burglary, robbery, stolen auto and theft, minus retail theft) in the 6th and 9th police districts fell 9.46%; the Center City District experienced a 7.99% drop. Between 1999 and 2003, part one crimes, not counting retail theft, fell 35.77% in the 6th and 9th police districts and 31.94% in the Center City District.

3. Theft from auto declined 19.7% between 2003 and 2004 in the 6th and 9th police districts and 16.77% in the Center City District. Between 1999 and 2003, theft from auto fell 36.58% in the 6th and 9th districts and 30.72% in the Center City District.

Portland, OR, Jan. 2007. Population: 537,081

1. Crime drops for third straight year
2. 16% decrease in 2007

Some Observations:

- Except for Lawrence, KS, a medium-sized college town in the heart of the Midwest, all of the other downtowns report declining crime rates
- In several downtowns (e.g., Cincinnati, Atlanta, Dallas Miami and Kansas City) the wording of the report suggests that the downtown organization is still dealing with the problem of the fear of crime being out of sync with the actual level of crime. This is a long existing problem. Looking at the housing data in Eugenia Birch's report "Who Lives Downtown" suggested a possible explanation: downtowns that lost considerable populations sent lots of people to live in other parts of the city who would tell others negative things about the downtown and who would be hard to persuade that things had improved. These "lost residents" created a powerful negative word-of-mouth network that spreads fears about being a crime victim if you go downtown. For example, between 1970 and 1980 Downtown Miami lost 41% of its population; Downtown Atlanta lost 21.9%; Downtown Cincinnati lost 27.2%; Downtown Dallas lost 27.7%. In contrast, Center City in Philadelphia only lost 8.8% of its population between 1970 and 1980 and had population increases thereafter. Downtown Portland also had a small population loss during the 1970s, 2.2%, and population growth thereafter. Surprisingly, Downtown Los Angeles has had a growing residential population since 1970.
- The situation in Downtown L.A. also demonstrates that high gang activity need not mean a higher crime rate nor impede a reduction in the fear of crime. This is consistent with the situation in Trenton, NJ that I reported on in a previous posting: Trenton has about 2,000 Bloods in a city of 85,000 people. The crime rate has fallen, though gang activity has risen and violence is confined to areas where the gangs are dominant.