

Is There an iCrime Wave?

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ABSTRACT

New national FBI statistics show violent crime increased in 2005 and 2006 -- the first jumps in 14 years, and the recent increases defy easy explanation. Homicides and robberies are up, while other violent crimes -- rapes and aggravated assaults -- and all types of property crimes continue to decline. While many hypotheses have been put forward to explain the crime wave, none can explain both why crime started to increase in 2005, and why the crime wave seems to be most concentrated in robberies. In this brief, we propose that the rise in violent offending and the explosion in the sales of iPods and other portable media devices is more than coincidental. We propose that, over the past two years, America may have experienced an iCrime wave.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The recent increase in violent crime defies easy explanation, and many hypotheses have been put forward for debate. In this brief, we propose that the rise in violent offending and the explosion in the sales of iPods and other portable media devices is more than coincidental. We propose that, over the past two years, America may have experienced an iCrime wave.

Developed by the Apple Corporation, the iPod is a portable media player and data storage device that lets users listen to music on the go. A relatively expensive consumer electronics product, iPods retail for up to \$400. In spring of 2004, Apple had sold a relatively modest 3.7 million iPods. In the fall of 2004, a new generation of iPods was introduced and consumer demand exploded. By the end of 2005, more than 42.3 million units had been sold, and by the end of 2006, the total was almost 90 million.

In 2005, for the first time in 12 years, violent crime increased—a trend that continued in 2006. This followed a relatively long period of decline. From 1993 until 2004, the violent crime rate fell every year, for a total decline of 38 percent. At the same time that violent crime rates began to rise, America's streets filled with millions of people visibly wearing, and being distracted by, expensive electronic gear. Thus, there was a marked increase in both the supply of potential victims and opportunities for would-be offenders.¹

Past crime waves are thought to have occurred in a similar way—triggered by the introduction of a new high-status and expensive product. For instance, in the 1980s and 1990s, the proliferation of such valuable products as expensive basketball shoes or North Face jackets may have led to new crimes. However, in past instances where the supply of crime creating products increased, the consumer population purchasing these goods—and the would-be offenders coveting those products—made up a relatively small part of the U.S. population. By contrast, iPods are everywhere, and, unlike a jacket or a sneaker, one size fits all.

The good news is that the iCrime wave may be quick to wane; since iPods have become so ubiquitous, many of those who covet one likely already have one. The bad news is that the iCrime wave was predictable and could have been prevented or mitigated, and yet little was done, or is being done, to slow the wave before it washes out on its own. U.S. crime policy is overwhelmingly focused on increasing the cost of committing crime for would-be offenders and pays little attention to the behavior of potential victims. As technology races ahead, we should expect to see more iCrime-like waves.

¹ While any type of portable media devices can increase the supply of criminal opportunities, iPod is the leading brand.

IPODS AND THE SUPPLY OF CRIME

There are four reasons iPods may be especially criminogenic (crime creating). First, they contain almost no easily accessible antitheft protection. Second, unlike cell phones, there is no subscription associated with iPods, so the offender can continue to use them even after the robbery is reported.

Third, iPods are high-status items and may be stolen for their status, not as items to be resold. As Henry Jenkins, director of the Comparative Media Studies Program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, states in a 2005 New York Times interview,

The participation gap creates techno-envy, where the kids who are locked out of participation in the culture covet those tools and devices that are considered essential to being a young person.

Finally, since iPods transmit sound to both ears, rather than just one in the case of cell phones, iPod users may be less aware of their surroundings than users of other consumer products. Moreover, as iPod users are easy to identify (the devices are often worn on the belt or are otherwise visible via the cords and ear buds) and iPods are typically worn in public places (44 percent of robberies occur on public streets), the device is a lightning rod for criminals.

OBSERVATIONAL EVIDENCE

Since the recent increase in crime has, to date, occurred over only two years, rigorous empirical tests of any hypothesis about the cause of the spike in violence are not possible. Data from national databases often used to study changes in crime rates, such as the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) and the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), are available only through 2005. Pinpointing the precise role of iPods in recent crimes is also difficult—for instance, NIBRS data do not report what type of item was stolen in sufficient detail to allow for a study (iPods are coded merely as “merchandise”).

Nevertheless, other compelling analyses suggest that portable media devices have contributed to the increase in crime. If the iPod is, in fact, driving the recent increase in robberies, three propositions should hold true.

First, the recent increase in robbery should be disproportionately greater than increases in other economically motivated offenses, such as theft and burglary. That is, since iPods are easily observable and are worn in public areas, increases in iCrime should not cause an increase in other crimes. Instead, an increase in iCrime may cause offenders to choose robbery over other types of acquisitive crime.

Second, as iPods are in great demand among young consumers and are highly valued as a status symbol among teenagers and young adults, then if recent crime trends are due to iPod theft, the recent increase in robbery should be greatest among juvenile offenders.

Third, the product's introduction and the change in crime should occur at the same time; robbery should have increased from 2004–2006, when iPods entered the mass market.

Test 1—Has robbery increased at a greater rate than other property crimes?

Since 1960, the relationship between robbery and property crimes has been extraordinarily strong and positive. Correlations range from 0.84 with burglary to 0.91 with auto theft to 0.94 with larceny/theft. Over the 46 years from 1960 to 2006, robbery and theft have trended in opposite directions just five times. The only time during that time in which the trends diverged for two consecutive years occurred in 2005 and 2006.

Similarly, in 2005 and 2006, while theft declined by 6 percent, auto theft declined by 5 percent, and burglary increased fractionally (by 0.3 percent), robbery increased by 9 percent, an unprecedented divergence in the overall trend between robbery and theft.

Test 2—Are young robbers responsible for these new robberies?

While on average robbers tend to be young, it is reasonable to presume that if the iCrime wave was driven by youth who sought status and profit from robberies, there would be additional increases in the number of youth arrested for robbery. Coinciding with the spike in iPod sales, robbery arrests in 2005 increased 11.4 percent for youth under 18 and just 1.1 percent for adults over 18, reversing the trend of declining juvenile robbery arrests. Likewise, while the share of total offenses and thefts committed by juveniles fell by 3.8 and 6.1 percent, respectively, the share of robberies committed by juveniles rose by 8.5 percent. In fact, robbery and homicide are the only index crimes for which the share of juvenile arrests increased between 2004 and 2005. These increases are not trivial—for instance, increases in juvenile arrests account for 48 percent of the increase in arrests for robbery.

Test 3—Has robbery increased as iPod sales have increased?

The increase in robbery coincides with the increase in iPod sales, with sales increasing rapidly beginning in Fall 2004 and growing through the end of 2006. While 32 million iPods were sold in 2005, the robbery rate increased by 3.9 percent. In 2006, 46.6 million units were sold while robbery increased by 6 percent.

How much of the increase in robberies is actually due to iPods? Unfortunately, as Apple only releases sales data in quarterly SEC findings and does not distinguish domestic and international sales, the data needed to causally link iPod sales to the recent increase in crime are not readily available.

Anecdotal evidence is strong, however. In the first three months of 2005, major felonies rose 18.3 percent on the New York City subway—however, if cell phone and iPod thefts are excluded,

felonies actually declined by 3 percent, thus prompting the Metropolitan Transit Authority to post warnings to riders that “Earphones are a giveaway. Protect your device.” Thus far, in Washington, D.C., in 2007, robberies of iPods on the Metro alone account for approximately 4 percent of all robberies in the city, compared with well less than 1 percent of robberies in 2005. Likewise, in San Francisco’s Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) system, there were 4 reported iPod robberies in 2004, 102 in 2005, and 193 in 2006. The increase in iPod robberies on the BART between 2004 and 2006 accounts for 23 percent of the increase in robbery in the entire city over that time.

The increase in iPod-related crime appears to be an international phenomenon. Britain’s Home Office reports a 10 percent rise in gunpoint robberies from 2005 to 2006. The BBC quotes British Home Secretary John Reid as identifying devices like iPods as the cause, stating that the increase in robberies “is largely driven by a rise in the numbers of young people carrying expensive goods, such as mobile phones and MP3 players.” Likewise, Ian Johnston, chief constable of the British Transport Police and spokesman for the Association of Chief Police Officers, said the rise had “a lot to do with the products that are available to be stolen these days. The mobile phone explosion is continuing. The iPod explosion is continuing. All of these gadgets that people carry around with them are very attractive to robbers, so that puts the opportunities up. We’ve obviously got to respond to that in a very positive way.”

The scale of iPod sales and the increase in robberies also lend credence to this hypothesis. Increases in robbery in 2005 and 2006 translate into about 40,000 more robberies than in 2004; during that period, 78 million new iPods went into circulation. In order for iPod robberies to explain all of the recent increase in robberies, just 1 in 1,960 iPods would need to have been stolen in a robbery, a rate of less than one-tenth of 1 percent.

The relationship between the release of the iPod and the recent rise in robberies is purely correlational, and our conclusions should therefore be interpreted with caution. That said, the properties of the recent crime increase—a rise in robbery and homicide with a corresponding decrease in other types of crime, an increase in juvenile arrests for robbery, and temporal increases in robbery that mirror trends in iPod sales—are all consistent with the iCrime hypothesis. Moreover, observational data from New York City; Washington, D.C.; San Francisco; and the United Kingdom (jurisdictions where some iCrime data are available) suggest that iPod robberies are on the rise. Finally, the magnitude of the increase in iPod-related crimes (in the U.S. cities) is consistent with increases in robbery rates.

USING THEORIES OF CRIMINAL OFFENDING TO IDENTIFY THE CAUSE OF THE CRIME SPIKE

In the absence of data that allow for violent crime and iPod sales to be causally linked, establishing a credible theoretical relationship between the two is especially important. We believe that a firm theoretical foundation for the iCrime hypothesis can be found in the law and economics literature. Before exploring the theoretical link between the introduction of the iPod and increases in violent crime, it is instructive to consider other hypotheses about why violent crime has increased. While many of these hypotheses contribute to our understanding of the general causes of violence, they do not describe a trigger for the current crime spike.

In 2004–2005 and 2005–2006, robbery rates increased in all regions of the United States and increased in cities of every size. This suggests a national trend rather than a change due to regional factors, which refutes some proposed hypotheses for the increase—from the relocation of Katrina evacuees to the introduction of methamphetamine trade in new markets. Rather, the widespread increase in crime suggests some new phenomenon swept across the nation.

One well-cited theory of crime states that three factors must converge for a crime to occur: a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the absence of guardianship—where guardianship could be police surveillance or more simply neighbors looking out for neighbors (Cohen and Felson 1979; Cornish and Clarke 1986). The three factors that influence whether crime occurs can be grouped into supply and demand—two factors that influence the demand for crime by would-be offenders (the number of motivated offenders and the amount of guardianship) and one that influences the supply of criminal opportunities, the number of suitable targets.²

Most explanations of the recent crime increase have focused on motivation of offenders and the presence of guardianship, factors that might change the demand for crime. Of the explanations for the crime wave that have gained the broadest acceptance, few have considered the possibility that consumer behavior has created more targets for crime, effectively increasing the supply of potential victims.

PRIOR RESEARCH HAS FOCUSED ON THE DEMAND FOR CRIME

The idea that changes in the demand for crime by potential offenders and the supply of potential victims can affect the number of crimes is widely accepted in law and economics (Becker

² Throughout this paper we use “demand” for crime to refer to the choice by would-be offenders to commit crime. In the law and economics literature, would-be offenders do not demand criminal opportunities but rather supply those opportunities (Becker 1968). Potential victims therefore “demand” crime (Ehrlich 1977, 1981). We find that this nomenclature is confusing to those not trained in neoclassical economics. Thus, we have chosen to reverse the meaning of the terms to simplify our presentation.

1968; Ehrlich 1973; Vandaele 1978; Van Dijk 1994; Garoupa 1997). In this model, the offender, like a profit-maximizing firm, commits a crime when the benefits outweigh the costs. Since potential offenders are sensitive to both the costs and benefits (the risks and rewards) of offending, any shock to the crime market (something that changes the costs and benefits of offending) will affect crime.

Most anticrime policies focus on reducing the demand for crime by increasing the costs of crime. Crime demand reduction strategies include increasing the number of police and incarcerating offenders for longer periods. Increasing the number of police raises the costs of committing a crime for a potential offender by increasing their probability of getting caught. Increasing sentence lengths also increases the expected cost to a potential offender by increasing the expected severity of their punishment if they get caught.

DEMAND-SIDE EXPLANATIONS FOR CHANGES IN VIOLENCE

On the demand side, many hypotheses have emerged to explain increases in violent crime. A common hypothesis is that the traits of youth have changed, producing larger numbers of motivated offenders and increasing the taste for crime among those already motivated. Proponents of this view argue that cultural shifts have normalized violence in society through violent rock and rap music and videos, violent video games and increased violence in television and movies, all of which reduces the stigma of violent acts (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry 2002; Anderson et al. 2003; Huesmann et al. 2003). Other plausible explanations for increases in violence include illegal immigration (Coronado and Orrenius 2003), increased methamphetamine use (Cartier, Farabee, and Prendergast 2006), more guns and more lethal guns (Cook et al. 2001), lead exposure in childhood (Nevin 2000, 2007), and an ever-increasing number of ex-prisoners returning home who have been assimilated into a culture of violence (Clear et al. 2003). Finally, scholars have long believed economic factors are associated with crime trends (Cantor and Land 1985; Chiricos 1987; Rafael and Winter-Ebner 2001; Gould Weinberg and Mustard 2002; Burdett, Lagos, and Wright 2003). Each of these hypotheses would predict a larger pool of potential offenders.³

The other common explanation for changes in crime is that there has been a change in guardianship, mainly in the form of changes in policing since 9/11. While the number of sworn officers does not appear to have declined (Hickman and Reeves 2006), police authorities report that many experienced officers are leaving the force to pursue higher wages in homeland security jobs (notably to serve as air marshals) or with private security firms, domestically and in Iraq and Afghanistan. Others (Klick and Tabarok 2005; Murray 2005) suggest that terror precautions have caused police to shift tactics from proactive models (such as community policing) to reactive models where the primary goal is to protect a fixed target. These factors would cause the price of offending to go down, as fewer police reduces the chance that a crime is detected while it is being committed.

³ Another large literature emerged in the late 1990s to explain why violence declined throughout that decade, and these studies also focused on identifying changes in the demand for crime. It is reasonable to presume that these hypotheses should perform equally well predicting the current increase in violent crime as they do in explaining past declines. For instance, Donohue and Levitt (2001) suggest that the legalization of abortion in 1973 led to a decline in violent offenders two decades later. Changes in policing in the 1990s are also credited with declines in violence, such as zero tolerance policies and community policing.

WHY ALTERNATIVE HYPOTHESES DO NOT EXPLAIN THE RECENT SPIKE IN VIOLENCE

While any of these hypotheses—either changes in the number of motivated offenders or the level of guardianship—can explain a general increase in violent crimes, none are sufficient to explain national crime trends over the past two years. These hypotheses fail to explain the current situation in two ways.

First, none of these hypotheses describe an event that would have triggered a crime increase in 2005. Most of these hypotheses describe long-term trends and do not adequately explain why, after a long period of decline, robbery suddenly increased in 2005. For example, the growth of violence in media began several decades ago and, throughout the 1990s, an increasingly violent media coincided with substantial decreases in the national crime rate. Other long-term trends thought to be positively associated with increasing violence (such as illegal immigration and increasing numbers of returning prisoners returning to the community) increased throughout the 1990s when crime was generally declining (Passel 2005; Butcher and Piehl 1998, 2006). The policing and terrorism hypothesis seems most promising in terms of the temporal link to rising crime. However, while crime levels may respond to changes in policing patterns (such as changes in policing due to an increase in the terror alert level), the recent rise in crime is greatest in small and midsized cities—cities presumably less sensitive to the threat of terrorism than larger ones and thus with less of an effect on policing patterns. While all of these factors may contribute to a general increase in crime, none appear to have triggered the recent crime wave.

Second, none of these hypotheses adequately explain why the increases in crime are limited to robbery and homicide. For example, increased methamphetamine use should affect both acquisitive crimes like theft and burglary as well as violent crimes, yet theft and burglary rates are decreasing. And while exposure to high levels of lead is associated with more crime, it is hard to see why it would result in additional robberies but not other types of crimes.

INCREASE IN THE SUPPLY OF SUITABLE TARGETS AS AN EXPLANATION FOR INCREASED CRIME

An intriguing alternative hypothesis is that the crime wave is not due to changes in offender behavior, but rather changes in the behavior of potential victims. The supply model of crime works much like the demand model. When more potential targets are available to a potential offender, the costs of committing a crime decrease, since it becomes easier for a motivated offender to find a suitable target. Imagine a motivated pickpocket choosing between a quiet residential neighborhood

and a busy urban street corner as the location for offending—clearly there are more opportunities downtown.⁴

Another way supply can increase would be if the expected benefit of a crime increases. That is, a motivated robber finds that his targets now carry expensive items—such as electronics—in addition to a wallet and a watch. Other offenders who were not robbers in the past may hear of the bounty to be had from the electronics boom and decide that they too will become street robbers, perhaps forgoing other criminal activities in the process. Thus, robberies increase, and other property crimes decline.

⁴ Ayres and Levitt (1999) conducted an intriguing test of the supply hypothesis. In their study, they investigate whether two different anti-car theft devices (both designed to reduce the suitability of a car as target for crime) would reduce crime. One anti-theft device—the Club—reduces suitability by raising the cost of a car theft (it takes longer to gain entry to a car with a Club than without it, thus raising the chance of detection). The other—Lojack—reduces suitability by allowing stolen cars to be tracked. Ayres and Levitt find that the Club does not reduce crime but simply transfers risk from those with a Club to those without such a device. Lojack, on the other hand, reduces crime for all, since would be thieves can not observe which cars have the device and which do not. This suggests one effective approach to reducing iCrime would be to install Lojack-like locators in these devices.

IMPLICATIONS

If the iCrime hypothesis is true, the iPod's introduction has acted as a shock to crime markets. This means that complex social dynamics, such as changes in young people's taste for violence, have not caused the spike in violence. Rather, the answer is simpler—there are more easily observed expensive objects to steal than there were four years ago, and they are being stolen.

The important lesson is that new technology can create unexpected costs for users in the form of crime. There are three possible solutions to future product-driven crime waves. First, while it is important not to blame the victim, iPod and other personal media users would benefit from paying more attention to their surroundings than usual while wearing these devices, which could reduce crime incidence. The goal is not to blame the victims—the goal is to reduce the number of crimes. Second, manufacturers of products that will be coveted—and can therefore cause crime—also have a responsibility to build in technology that limits the risk a consumer faces when using their device.

Third, a lesson can be learned from Great Britain, which has identified iPod-like devices as a contributor to a similar crime spike. The response has been to develop systems to track the number and type of devices that are being targeted. This data will allow police to make real-time adjustments in policing to respond to changes in both offender and victim behavior. As the old adage says, if you can't measure successes and failures, you can't replicate your success or fix your failures. In the United States, the information gap has led to a mini crime wave. To prevent the next crime wave, policymakers must invest in real-time data systems to identify and respond to consumer-driven changes in crime.

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