



AS SUBURBIA SURGES, VIOLENCE TAGS ALONG

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VULNERABLE SUBURBS: THE GROWTH OF VIOLENT CRIME

Part 1 of 2
April 5, 1998; Page A1

Though it has **declined** from its **peak** in the early 1990s, violent crime has become a far more common threat in most of the Washington suburbs than it was 20 years ago, a Washington Post analysis shows. Since the late 1970s, the combined numbers of homicides, rapes, robberies and serious assaults have risen even faster than the population in 13 of 16 major suburbs.

In some places on the outer rim of the metropolitan area, where sheriff's departments say they can't keep pace with rapid growth, the rate of violent crime has doubled. Formerly rural Charles County now has one of the area's highest rates.

Recent years have brought some relief: a lull in the growth of crime in some places, actual declines in others. And the rate of violent crime in the suburbs does not approach that of the District, which is more than five times as high.

But that is little comfort to most suburban police officials, politicians, business people and residents, who have seen crime in their communities become more serious over the years.

In rapidly developing Stafford County, 35 miles south of the District along Interstate 95, sheriff's deputies are responding more to violent crimes typical of urban areas.

"I'm realistic enough to know that it's coming and that we can't stop it," said Capt. Charles Jett. "What we can do is look at others and see what's worked and what hasn't. We try to stay proactive."

The Post's analysis is based on statistics collected by local police departments and reported to the FBI from 1977 through 1997. Comparisons are expressed as rates -- the numbers of crimes per 10,000 residents -- to take into account the suburbs' rapid population growth.

Among the findings:

* Murders undermine the sense of community safety but actually make up a tiny percentage of violent crime. People are far more likely to become victims of robbery or of aggravated assault. The assault rate in suburban Washington is 32 percent higher than it was two decades ago, and robbery rates have more than doubled in some counties.

* Of Washington's major suburbs, only Fairfax and Howard counties and the city of Alexandria have bucked the overall trend, and have lower crime rates now than they did 20 years ago.

* Maryland suburbs in the Washington area have, on average, higher violent crime rates than their counterparts in Virginia. In 1997, Montgomery had more than twice the violent crime rate of Fairfax, despite demographic similarities.

* While outer suburbs remain safer overall than closer-in communities, violent crime is increasing there at a much faster pace. In Loudoun County, the rate of violent crime rose from six crimes per 10,000 residents in 1977 to 11 in 1997. The rate in St. Mary's County jumped from 23 to 41.

* Prince George's County has the suburbs' highest rate of violent crime, but last year it also saw one of the region's largest drops: 19 percent. The homicide rate fell 42 percent, to the lowest level in 10 years.

The very recent downturn in places such as Prince George's has raised hopes that the region is in the early stages of a historic decline in violent crime. But a similar dip in the 1980s turned out to be temporary.

Growth in juvenile crime and a coming bulge in the youth population could bode ill. By 1996, 25 percent of those arrested for violent crimes in the Washington suburbs were juveniles, up from 17 percent in 1990.

Criminologists warn that crime is a complicated phenomenon that responds to a web of social, economic and political factors, which in the Washington area include the great expansion and increasing density of the suburbs; growing pockets of poverty; and changes in family life and patterns of commerce.

Jonathan P. Caulkins, who builds mathematical models at Pittsburgh's Carnegie Mellon University to study the spread of crime, says that even if police and politicians did everything right, criminal activity "is still going to go up and down" because of factors beyond their control.

"We study crime like crazy and have oodles of theories, but in an objective sense, we don't really understand it," Caulkins said. "We don't have anywhere near the understanding of crime that we do of the behavior of subatomic particles."

24-hour Suburbs

Twenty years ago, when many Washington suburbs were strictly bedroom communities, burglars were beckoned by the rows of vulnerable homes in quiet neighborhoods.

By 1980 the burglary rate in the communities ringing the District hit an all-time high. But as commercial centers grew and evolved, the growing crime was robbery, a violent attack on a person or a business.

By the 1980s, there were not only more bank branches, but also automated teller machines, dishing out cash at any hour. Over time, more copy shops and drugstores stayed open 24 hours, providing new reasons for people to be out late.

These tempting targets also were more accessible, thanks in part to new and wider highways such as the Prince William Parkway and Route 5 in Charles County, which made it easier for criminals to move quickly in and out of an area. The robbery rate rose 54 percent in Prince William and 154 percent in Charles between 1977 and 1997.

The rate of aggravated assault -- defined as an attack meant to cause serious injury -- rose even faster in many suburbs. One contributing factor was crowding and congestion; in Loudoun County, the assault rate rose 179 percent over two decades as once-rural communities absorbed 80,000 new residents. More established suburbs, like Montgomery County, also became denser as new housing developments and stores filled in vacant patches.

"Anyone who has children knows you tend to be a little crazy when you're all on top of each other," said Sharon Cox, president of the Montgomery Council of PTAs.

Reports of domestic violence -- which account for a small but significant share of aggravated assaults -- also increased as more police began treating such cases as crimes.

Meanwhile, the overall suburban burglary rate tumbled 53 percent, and other thefts also declined. The proliferation of home and car alarms played a part, as well as the spread of neighborhood watch programs.

Starting in the early 1980s, pawnshops had to furnish police with more detailed information about their inventory and clients. In the last seven years, such data have helped Montgomery police arrest more than 1,500 people peddling stolen merchandise.

By the end of the 1980s, though, suburban police were battling crack cocaine, which created a new class of violent addict and turf battles between rival suppliers. The drug acted as "a magnet that was drawing criminals out of other activities . . . because the profits are so good," said Andrew Karmen, a criminology professor at John Jay College in New York.

Many heroin users also supported their addictions with crime. But crack produced a shorter high, sending addicts back to dealers more often and creating more chances for conflict. And some authorities believe that crack encouraged a shift from property crime to robbery because users needed money more quickly.

"People want what you have and they'll take it in a second," said Joan Fredericks, of Falls Church, whose husband was shot and killed in a carjacking in a quiet Fairfax cul-de-sac in 1993. "Because of drugs, people's attitudes have changed . . . It's not enough to steal anymore. They'll take your life, too."

Fredericks, 46, said she still suffers occasional sleepless nights. "It's so horrible being the person who is left behind," she said. "It constantly reminds you how vulnerable you are."

In Prince William County, the robbery rate increased 127 percent from 1986 to 1993, the heyday of the crack trade. Meanwhile, the burglary rate fell 26 percent. "The crack epidemic came on us, like most jurisdictions, like a tidal wave," said Police Chief Charlie T. Deane.

The wave also swept through parts of Prince George's County. A 1.6-square-mile section along Marlboro Pike near the District line became infamous for drugs and violence. In 1993, it was the scene of 115 robberies, 72 aggravated assaults and three homicides -- including the death of 1-year-old Vania Zamba, who died in a fire set by five suspects trying to kill a witness to a shooting.

"You'd see guys hanging on the street corner. You'd see prostitutes," said county police Cpl. William Steen, who patrols the beat, known to police as H4. "It was a sense of out-of-control . . . it was like the finger in the dike. Every time you turn around, there was another leak."

Unlocked Doors

The lifestyle changes in the Washington region -- and the increases in crime -- have been most striking on the edges.

Drive 30 or 40 miles outside of Washington and the contrasts are everywhere -- sparkling town houses rise next to working farms; discount superstores dwarf aging main streets; new highways intersect with one-lane dirt roads.

Often, the new residents are hoping to escape urban ills such as rising crime. Many find that is not so easy, like the Rev. Daniel Lindsey, who four years ago moved his family from Prince George's to St. Mary's County in Southern Maryland.

"Everywhere you go, crime is following you," Lindsey said. "Most of us thought we were safe in our little haven, but that's not so." In 1997, Claudia A. Pickeral, 13, was killed three blocks away from Lindsey's new home in Longview Beach, and there were two arson fires -- including one at Victory Temple Church, which Lindsey established.

Just north of St. Mary's, Charles County has absorbed 50,000 new residents in the last two decades. On their heels came chain restaurants and large discount retailers along Route 301 and Indian Head Highway and a major mall, the St. Charles Towne Center.

Crime came, too. Two decades ago, Charles had 23 robberies and assaults for every 10,000 residents. By 1997, the rate almost tripled, to 61.

"There's no question that an increased commercial presence is going to attract people looking for criminal opportunities," said Murray D. Levy, president of the Charles County Commission.

Levy said there has been a rash of armed robberies in recent years. In the spring of

1996, after a bank and a Taco Bell were hit in Waldorf, followed by a convenience store in La Plata, local authorities called in the Maryland State Police to teach businesses how to cut their risk.

Levy, 52, who owns a neighborhood grocery in Cobb Island, said that 20 years ago, neighbors rarely locked their doors because "you were the only one who would get locked out." But things have changed; in October, his store was burglarized.

Charles continues to draw people looking for moderate home prices and rural charm. "For people coming here from more urban areas, it's just heaven," Levy said. "But for people who have lived here 30 years it's not."

Police and criminologists said the violence in fast-growing places like Charles is characteristic of rural communities in transition. New communities often lack the social ties that protect older neighborhoods.

That's why the La Plata Crime Council has begun encouraging the 16 communities surrounding La Plata to form walking patrols. Council Treasurer Judy Melvin said residents of her 30-home community put a premium on learning about their neighbors. The mother of two knows, for example, that the man down the street has family in Pennsylvania, so she doesn't worry when a car with Pennsylvania tags shows up.

"But if there is some strange vehicle in the neighborhood moving really slow, you had better pass that information on, because they could be looking for it in another community," said Melvin, 46. "That's what it's all about, people working together."

The same kind of changes are taking place across the Potomac River. In Virginia's Stafford County, the population rose 152 percent in 20 years; the total number of violent crimes rose by 242 percent.

Twenty years ago, Stafford deputies devoted most of their prevention efforts to property crimes. Now, eight deputies teach free, 12-hour self-defense courses for women. The sessions have a long waiting list.

In both Charles and Stafford, sheriff's deputies say the size of their departments failed to keep pace with population growth. Last year, each Stafford deputy responded to more than 1,300 calls, up from 900 in 1986.

"The deputy here in Stafford knows he is handling twice the workload of any other deputy in the region," Jett said. "There is a sense of pride. But if you have one person doing the job of two people, something is going to get lost in the mix."

Sometimes, an established neighborhood is beset by forces that transform it into a source of trouble.

That's what happened to Georgetown South, a community of 3,000 residents in the city of Manassas. The 1970s-era town houses deteriorated as their original baby boomer owners moved on to single-family homes and were replaced by poorer renters. Open-air drug markets and gang-related violence soon followed. In the early 1990s, Georgetown South accounted for 40 percent of all Manassas police calls, police said.

Throughout the suburbs, violent crime tends to concentrate in places like Georgetown South -- poor, densely packed neighborhoods that have high turnover.

As more low-income people, including recent immigrants, have moved to the suburbs, such neighborhoods have expanded. Poor families usually live in smaller dwellings with less privacy, increasing the chances of conflict. They are less likely to have cars, so they are often walking late at night, criminologists say. Some immigrants become targets because they may not be schooled in which dangerous areas to avoid. And people moving to escape crime sometimes have ties to violent people from their

Crime also rises in areas that become dilapidated, according to the popular "broken windows" theory of George L. Kelling, professor of criminal justice at Rutgers University. Kelling says that when a neighborhood looks run-down, people feel less constrained to behave themselves.

Some suburbs also suffer from a spillover effect because they are easily accessible from higher-crime neighbors. Montgomery police say 11 percent of the people they arrest come from the District. In Prince George's, the figure is 15 percent.

Charles County Sheriff Fred Davis said that in a recent survey of the people in the county jail, half were not county residents. Twenty-two percent of them were from neighboring Prince George's, where crime rates are much higher.

"You have the easy route into the county. You have a high concentration of businesses and homes," Davis said. "It's so easy for those who want to commit crimes to shoot over the border" and then drive back to their own territory.

Sociologists also say that the number and character of a community's young adults can have a significant impact on violence. People ages 15 to 24 are more likely to be both victims and perpetrators of crime than older age groups, studies show. Juvenile arrests for violent crime rose 70 percent from 1990 to 1996 in the Washington suburbs.

"Twenty years ago," said Robert F. Horan Jr., the longtime Fairfax commonwealth's attorney, "juveniles did crimes where adults were absent: car theft, the unoccupied dwelling burglary. Now you'll see more . . . juveniles doing robbery."

Fighting Back

Crime hasn't hit every Washington suburb equally. Fairfax and Howard counties and Alexandria have become less dangerous since the early 1980s. Demographic changes played a role, but police also say new techniques -- often grouped under the rubric of "community policing" -- cut crime by enlisting residents and attacking problems quickly.

Howard County officials say their crime rate has dropped because of a steady influx of well-to-do residents, who participate avidly in community crime prevention efforts, and a police department that has grown along with the population.

When violent crime peaked in Alexandria in 1982, the city was Washington's most

dangerous suburb. But the rate is down 42 percent since then. A large drop in the city's under-18 population since 1980 contributed to falling crime, officials said. But they also credit a well-funded police department, which has one of the area's most aggressive community policing efforts.

Beat cops in Alexandria are encouraged to crack down on nuisance crime and deal with burned-out street lights and graffiti. When community crime-prevention efforts faltered in troubled areas like the Samuel Madden Homes public housing complex, the department assigned officers to live and work there.

The department also focused on the problem of public drinking. Repeat offenders are jailed if they refuse to participate in an alcohol abuse program. Liquor stores are legally barred from selling to them; their pictures are posted by some cash registers. Arrests for being drunk in public fell 15 percent in the program's first two years.

"I don't think it's that we are doing any one thing right; it's that we are doing thousands of things right," Alexandria Police Chief Charles E. Samarra said.

In Prince George's, police and officials credit last year's 19 percent drop in violent crime to a slew of tactics, including training officers to confiscate firearms during routine traffic stops, and sending extra police to address crime patterns identified by a new computer mapping system.

The change in Prince George's is evident in high-crime areas like the H4 beat on Marlboro Pike, where the rate of violent crime has dropped 31 percent since 1991.

Steen, the patrol officer there, said that some drug dealers who used to plague the area are now in jail and that after-school programs and a police-sponsored sports league are keeping young people off the streets.

"We are still having a problem with robberies," Steen said. "The murders seem to have dropped. . . . When I came in, the area seemed like it was all death and mayhem. Now, it seems to be isolated in certain areas."

Conservative scholars and many police officials contend that efforts to lock up more violent criminals for longer terms -- such as Virginia's 1995 abolition of parole -- have taken dangerous people off the streets. But liberal criminologists say the toughest sentencing laws tend to catch less dangerous offenders.

Studies that link incarceration rates to crime show that imprisoning many more people has some effect on crime. A 1993 study by the National Academy of Sciences found that tripling the U.S. prison population from 1975 to 1989 reduced violent crime by 10 to 15 percent.

Some factors influencing the current dip have little to do with law enforcement.

Crack use is falling around Washington, according to drug tests of inmates and emergency room patients. The growing acceptance of debit and credit cards at everything from grocery stores to gas stations makes robbery a less attractive crime because people are carrying less cash.

And some sociologists believe that the good economy is removing some incentive to commit crime.

The recent good news has begun to push crime-fighting down on the national agenda. In 1994, 31 percent of Americans told pollsters that crime was the most important challenge facing the nation. Last summer, 14 percent cited crime.

But the convergence of favorable factors might not last. "We should expect that some degree of crime is going to be with us for a long time, that crime does ebb and flow," said Caulkins, of Carnegie Mellon.

For instance, if one accepts the argument that a shrinking youth population and falling crack use are key reasons for the recent trend, the future may not be entirely rosy.

Both crack and powdered cocaine spawned spikes of violence as they became widely used, so the next new drug could do the same. And the area's population of 15- to 24-year-olds is about to shoot up again, as the children of baby boomers mature.

Most law enforcement officials are loath to predict what will happen.

"We're doing a good job of holding the line on crime, but we're holding the line in the face of a good economy and a temporary decrease in the number of young adults," said Edward A. Flynn, Arlington's police chief. "The challenge for all of us is to use these years of abating crime to prepare for the future."

Tomorrow: The Montgomery-Fairfax puzzle.

Cutline: Violence in the Suburbs

No. of violent crimes Pct. change in violent
reported, 1997 crime rate, 1977-97:

Maryland

Prince George's +43%

Homicide: 83

Rape: 347

Robbery: 3,263

Aggravated assault: 3,582

Montgomery +43%

Homicide: 23

Rape: 188

Robbery: 913

Aggravated assault: 1,162

Howard -47%

Homicide: 1

Rape: 33

Robbery: 222

Aggravated assault: 298

Anne Arundel +31%

Homicide: 15

Rape: 90

Robbery: 579

Aggravated assault: 1,416

Charles +160%

Homicide: 4

Rape: 39

Robbery: 135

Aggravated assault: 543

Calvert +40%

Homicide: 2

Rape: 11

Robbery: 19

Aggravated assault: 187

St. Mary's +80%

Homicide: 3

Rape: 32

Robbery: 54

Aggravated assault: 250

Virginia

Alexandria -23%

Homicide: 5

Rape: 46

Robbery: 267

Aggravated assault: 288

Arlington/Falls Church +14%

Homicide: 4

Rape: 47

Robbery: 241

Aggravated assault: 314

Fairfax County/City -36%

Homicide: 16

Rape: 78

Robbery: 498

Aggravated assault: 426

Prince William, Manassas, Manassas Park +33%

Homicide: 4

Rape: 87

Robbery: 281

Aggravated assault: 341

Loudoun +86%

Homicide: 2

Rape: 13

Robbery: 22

Aggravated assault: 111

Fauquier +199%

Homicide: 3

Rape: 11

Robbery: 7

Aggravated assault: 47

Fredericksburg +3%

Homicide: 0

Rape: 4

Robbery: 27

Aggravated assault: 48

Spotsylvania +82%

Homicide: 5

Rape: 5

Robbery: 21

Aggravated assault: 176

Stafford +29%

Homicide: 2

Rape: 21

Robbery: 26

Aggravated assault: 64

SOURCE: Federal Bureau of Investigation, state and local police

departments, the Social Sciences Data Center at the University of
Virginia

Violent Crime

The D.C. suburbs have less violent crime than the District and
slightly more than the national average for suburbs.

Violent Crime compared

Violent Crimes per 10,000 people in 1996

Washington D.C. 246.9

Baltimore suburbs 63.9

San Diego suburbs 58.7

Orange County suburbs 46.5

Atlanta suburbs 43.9

D.C. suburbs 42.8

Detroit suburbs 38.3

National suburbs 38.1

Philadelphia suburbs 38

Boston suburbs 37.5

St. Paul/Minn. suburbs 17.1

Violent crime rate

Percent change, 1977-1996

D.C. 68%

D.C. Suburbs 25%

National Suburbs 22%

No. of violent crimes reported in D.C., 1996

Homicide: 397

Rape: 260

Robbery: 6,444

Aggravated assault: 6,310

SOURCE: FBI Uniform Crime Reports

The Fear of Crime

In the mid-1990s, Americans often cited crime as the nation's biggest problem. Some analysts suggested that suburbanites had an exaggerated fear of crime based on heightened media coverage of the issue. But area residents who responded to a recent Washington Post poll had a realistic view of the relative risks of crime in their own counties and cities.

For example, residents of the suburbs were twice as likely to cite burglary and car theft as serious problems in their neighborhood as they were to cite armed robbery. FBI statistics show that Washington suburbanites are three times more likely to have their cars stolen as they are to be robbed.

Q. Is there any area around your home -- that is, within a mile -- where you would be afraid to walk alone at night?

Outer Suburbs Inner Suburbs D.C.

Yes 26% 36% 50%

No 73 63 49

Q. Next, I'm going to read a list of different types of crime that are serious problems in some communities but not in others. Please tell me how serious a problem each one is in your county.*

Percent saying "very serious" or "serious" problem

Virginia Maryland D.C.

Prince Mont- Prince

William* Fairfax* gomery George's

Juvenile crime 64% 51% 50% 62% 82%

Home burglary 42 41 52 47 60

Car theft 27 41 49 58 74

Armed robbery 33 32 37 51 75

Murder 17 19 28 49 80

* Only the most populous jurisdictions are shown because a representative sample of the region includes too few interviews in smaller counties to permit analysis. Fairfax County results also include Fairfax City. Prince William County results also include Manassas and Manassas Park respondents.

Q. How serious is each of these types of crime in your immediate neighborhood?

Percent saying "very serious" or "serious" a problem at all
Percent saying not problem

Outer Inner Outer Inner

Suburbs Suburbs D.C. Suburbs Suburbs D.C.

Juvenile crime 24% 26% 36% 39% 30% 18%

Home burglary 13 22 31 43 30 23

Car theft 8 24 42 54 31 16

Armed robbery 7 13 29 62 45 19

Murder 2 8 27 73 59 24

Q. Would you say that people in your immediate neighborhood mostly look

out for each others' safety or mostly keep to themselves?

Outer Inner

Suburbs Suburbs D.C.

Look out for each other 68% 60% 56%

Keep to themselves 30 36 38

Depends (volunteered response) 2 3 4

Note: Outer vs. inner suburbs: In this analysis outer suburbs consist of Calvert, Charles, and Frederick counties in Maryland; and Loudoun, Manassas, Manassas Park, Prince William and Stafford in Virginia. Inner suburbs consist of Montgomery and Prince George's counties in Maryland; and Fairfax, Fairfax City, Alexandria, Arlington and Falls Church in Virginia.

Percentages may not add to 100 because the responses of those with no opinion have been omitted. Results presented here are based on a telephone survey of 985 randomly selected heads of households in the Washington metropolitan area conducted Jan. 5-17 by Greater Washington Consumer Research Inc. for the Washington Post. Margin of sampling error for the overall results is plus or minus 3 percentage points. The margin of error for subsample populations is larger. Sampling error is only one source of error in this or any other opinion poll.

Suburban Population Boom, 1977-97

1977 1997 Percent

population population change

Virginia

Alexandria 104,056 116,405 11.9%

Arlington (1) 161,646 172,580 6.8

Fairfax (2) 554,920 934,624 68.4

Fauquier 30,209 53,167 76.0

Fredericksburg 17,431 21,088 21.0

Loudoun 54,268 133,493 146.0

Prince William (3) 152,820 297,229 94.5

Spotsylvania 26,902 81,052 201.3

Stafford 34,908 87,857 151.7

Maryland

Anne Arundel 356,374 470,028 31.9%

Calvert 30,019 69,413 131.2

Charles 64,922 115,075 77.3

Howard 110,186 228,797 107.6

Montgomery 571,868 826,766 44.6

Prince George's 671,984 770,633 14.7

St. Mary's 53,506 85,684 60.1

(1) Includes Falls Church; (2) includes Fairfax City; (3) includes

Manassas and Manassas Park

SOURCE: Census Bureau estimates for 1977 and 1997

Where the Numbers Come From

For this series, The Washington Post collected data on crimes

reported to 20 local police departments and compiled by the Federal

Bureau of Investigation from 1977 to 1997. Known as the Uniform Crime

Reports, or UCR, the data include the number of homicides, rapes,

robberies, aggravated assaults, burglaries, larcenies and car thefts.

Additional data were collected from state and local police, the U.S. Census Bureau, the Bureau of Justice Statistics, marketing research firms, universities and nonprofit organizations. More than 70 interviews were conducted.

Criminologists caution that police departments may vary in the accuracy of their record-keeping and the way they categorize crimes. For example, one department might define a home break-in as an attempted burglary, while another might call it vandalism.

In the latter case, the incident would not have to be reported in UCR totals for serious crimes.

The number of crimes reported to police departments probably understates the number of crimes committed. For example, some victims of sexual assault may not file a report out of fear or embarrassment.

Increases or decreases in a particular category of crime may reflect changes in police emphasis rather than differences in the actual incidence of the crime.

Still, crime experts agree that UCR data are the best available to assess the changes in crime over time, and to compare crime in different jurisdictions.

Contributors to this series included staff writer Steve Vogel, assistant polling director Claudia Deane and database specialist Jo Craven.

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2 COUNTIES: A DANGEROUS DIFFERENCE WHILE MONTGOMERY'S CRIME RATE HAS RISEN, FAIRFAX'S IS DOWN

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VULNERABLE SUBURBS: THE GROWTH OF VIOLENT CRIME

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Two decades ago, the chances of becoming the victim of a violent crime in Fairfax and Montgomery were just about equal. That's no longer true.

Although the counties share a reputation for top-notch public schools, high family incomes and peaceful suburban cul-de-sacs, the violent crime rate in Montgomery is now more than twice as high as it is in Fairfax.

From 1977 to 1997, Fairfax's rate of violent crime fell 36 percent, according to a Washington Post analysis. Meanwhile, Montgomery -- like most area suburbs -- became statistically more dangerous. Its rate rose 43 percent.

The rate of violent crime is defined as the combined numbers of homicides, rapes, robberies and serious assaults in relation to the population. Even Bethesda, Montgomery's lowest-crime district, has a higher rate than most parts of Fairfax. And a gap shows up in property crime, too. Today, Montgomery residents are more than twice as likely to be burglarized.

The difference should be kept in perspective: The two counties have crime rates below the average for U.S. suburbs, and both have significantly less violent crime than the District does.

But for police and public officials accustomed to citing the similarities between Washington's two largest and richest suburbs, the disparity in crime rates has proved something of a puzzle.

"It's inexplicable," said Fairfax County Supervisor Gerald W. Hyland (D-Mount Vernon). "We have compared ourselves for years in terms of what we pay our teachers, our police. We use each other as a gauge of how well are we doing. I'm astounded."

Still, police, other officials and criminologists say there are differences that may help explain why Montgomery has more crime:

Few physical barriers separate Montgomery from its higher-crime neighbors, Prince George's County and the District. Montgomery has more poor neighborhoods, and people in the county, on average, live more closely together than do Fairfax residents -- a marker for increased risk of conflict.

Another difference could be the size and strategies of each county's police department. During the 1980s, Fairfax police added officers quickly while Montgomery's force failed to keep up with population growth and, according to police officials, failed to take advantage of new technology.

Shown the crime statistics, Montgomery officials suggest another possible explanation -- that Fairfax could be using a stricter definition of aggravated assault so that fewer attacks meet the threshold. Fairfax police say that is possible, but criminologists who also reviewed the data at the request of The Post say such variance in crime definitions could not account for the large gap in crime rates.

In a January poll conducted for The Post by Greater Washington Consumer Research Inc., four out of 10 Montgomery residents said there is a place within a mile of their homes where they would be afraid to walk at night. In Fairfax, three of 10 respondents felt that way. More than half of Montgomery residents said home burglary is a serious problem in the county, compared with 41 percent in Fairfax.

The Post analyzed FBI statistics for serious crimes reported in Fairfax and Montgomery from 1977 to 1997. Crimes reported in Rockville, Gaithersburg and Fairfax City, which have their own police departments, also were included.

The analysis found that in 1997, there were about 11 violent crimes for every 10,000 residents in Fairfax, compared with 28 violent crimes in Montgomery. In 1996, the last year for which figures are available, the District had 247 violent crimes for every 10,000 residents.

"We're somewhat surprised at the variance," Montgomery police Maj. Joe Price said. "They may have one heck of a system there that we all want to copy."

Friendly Rivals

There is nothing obvious in the makeup of the two counties that would explain the difference in crime rates.

Montgomery, on the District's northwest border, and Fairfax, located west of Washington, are separated by the Potomac River and have long been friendly and rapidly growing rivals. Twenty years ago, both counties had about half a million residents. Fairfax now has about 914,000 people and Montgomery about 827,000.

Each is now its state's most-populous jurisdiction and boasts exclusive neighborhoods that are home to many of the region's power brokers. Both counties rank among the richest 20 in the nation, and each has a poverty rate of about 6 percent, according to

1993 estimates, the most recent data available from the U.S. Census Bureau.

The two have competed aggressively to lure cutting-edge industries. Fairfax is nurturing a reputation as a home for high-technology software companies, while Montgomery has drawn some of the country's major biotechnology firms. In 1996, there were about 35,000 businesses in Fairfax and about 33,000 in Montgomery, according to the Claritas marketing research company.

In recent years, both counties have become more racially diverse. Minorities account for a slightly larger share of Montgomery's population, but Fairfax is receiving national attention as a magnet for immigrants, and some elementary school hallways ring with voices in dozens of languages.

Some criminologists say they think the crime rate in a city or county is linked to the proportion of the population that is ages 15 to 24 -- the group most likely to commit crimes. But there's no difference there either; during the last two decades, the proportion of young people in Fairfax and Montgomery has been almost identical and has declined at about the same pace.

One thing that clearly differentiates the two counties is geography.

About 20 percent of those arrested in Montgomery live in the District or Prince George's County, according to police. Authorities say that reflects the ease of crossing the border, and that many Montgomery residents have close social and economic ties to neighboring higher-crime areas.

Fairfax police don't track where their criminals live, but say most of their crime is home grown. The county is buffered by distance and the Potomac River from the District and Prince George's, where violent crime has risen 43 percent and 68 percent, respectively, since 1977. Fairfax shares borders with Alexandria, where the violent crime rate has fallen by 23 percent in that time, and with Arlington, where violent crime has risen only slightly.

"If you're intending to commit a crime coming out of the District, it's a heck of a lot easier to get into Montgomery County and get back to home base," said E. Blaine Liner, an analyst from the Urban Institute who oversees its law and behavior program.

Pockets of Problems

Throughout the Washington area, crime is not distributed evenly in any jurisdiction but rather is concentrated in certain neighborhoods. These tend to be more densely developed, with more poor and transient residents, than surrounding communities. And Montgomery has more people living in such areas than does Fairfax.

Dense neighborhoods in Montgomery such as Silver Spring and Gaithersburg contrast with the relative sprawl of Chantilly and Great Falls in Fairfax. More than 13 percent of Montgomery residents live in areas where there are more than 15 people per acre, compared with 7 percent of Fairfax residents, according to 1997 population estimates from CACI Marketing Services, a market research firm.

Density alone does not breed crime, criminologists say, but combined with poverty it can be a contributing factor. Apartments packed together increase the potential for conflict and assault. High concentrations of stores and pedestrians can create targets for would-be robbers, and a high turnover of residents sometimes makes it difficult for communities to come together to fight crime.

Fairfax has some areas like that, most notably along the Route 1 corridor south of Alexandria and in the inside-the-Beltway neighborhoods of Baileys Crossroads, Culmore and Seven Corners.

But Montgomery has more communities with high concentrations of poor residents. Montgomery police identified nine of the county's 42 police beats as high-crime areas. Police said each is characterized by a concentration of apartments or stores, a transient population and lower-income housing. Many have older or abandoned buildings, unkempt houses and empty storefronts.

"Crime probably does follow the poor, but that's because they're more vulnerable than people with money," said Price, of the Montgomery police. "They don't have alarms. They are taking public transportation or walking, so they are more vulnerable to street crime."

One small area of Montgomery called Briggs Chaney, around Briggs Chaney Road and Castle Boulevard south of Burtonsville, generates more calls to police than any other district in the county. Dominated by garden apartments and rental town houses, the community has been beset in years past by assaults, robberies and even some homicides.

"You have people coming and going," said police Sgt. Bob Carter, who oversees a team of officers patrolling the area. "You have a highly transient population that doesn't make the long-term investment that most communities enjoy."

Carter said the Briggs Chaney area is improving, thanks to cooperation among police, business owners and residents. But he said budget problems have kept him from adding more officers to the patrol. **Keeping Up With Crack**

The crime rates in Fairfax and Montgomery began heading in sharply opposite directions in the mid-1980s. That's when police were confronted by the crack cocaine epidemic and its attendant violence.

It was also when Fairfax politicians began paying for more officers and specialized units to meet the twin challenges of drugs and population growth.

From 1980 to 1990, the populations of both Fairfax and Montgomery grew about 35 percent. Fairfax police hired enough new officers to keep pace, but Montgomery fell behind. The number of Montgomery officers for every 10,000 county residents dropped by 16 percent.

The shortage hit hardest in the Germantown District, which covers the northern half of Montgomery. Violent crime rates in that district rose about 45 percent during the 1980s.

Residents certainly noticed, and some complained. Ten years ago, Carol Fanconi, a civic activist, urged the County Council to plan for more officers.

"There was a lot of growth upcounty," said Fanconi, who has lived in northern Montgomery for 26 years. "But the services hadn't followed, whether you were talking about schools or recreation or police."

Fairfax police say that their ability to add officers during the 1980s allowed them to throw manpower at problems. When crack cocaine emerged, Fairfax moved swiftly to deal with open-air drug markets along Route 1 that often served as havens for violent criminals.

"We went after it very vigorously," Fairfax Chief M. Douglas Scott said. "Had we waited another year for that anti-drug unit to be created, we would still be recovering."

Police officials in Montgomery say they still are struggling to undo the damage from the years of understaffing.

"We needed those officers to keep up. . . . We have really operated on a shoestring and chewing gum," Montgomery Police Chief Carol A. Mehrling said. "I sense there is a lot more support from the top in Fairfax, and I think that speaks volumes. We don't have the cheerleaders we need."

Montgomery County Executive Douglas M. Duncan (D) agrees that Mehrling's force is still suffering from previous neglect. But he defends his administration, saying that he has pushed for more officers and better police technology.

"I feel very good about my record over the last four years in terms of correcting some of these past mistakes," said Duncan, who took office in December 1994. "You can't do it all in one year. But the movement is there."

Montgomery began hiring large numbers of officers in 1994, but it still has 14 percent fewer officers per 10,000 residents than it did in 1980. Officials in both counties say they are having trouble finding qualified new officers to fill newly approved positions.

Montgomery police also say they fell behind the curve -- and behind Fairfax -- when it came to the use of technology.

Most squad cars in Fairfax are equipped with computer terminals. Montgomery's police cars don't have them, so officers must rely on the radio for dispatch and for license plate checks, which can force an officer to waste several minutes -- or longer -- at a routine traffic stop.

A shortage of up-to-date computers in police stations means that minor crime reports in Montgomery aren't immediately accessible on a database. Residents sometimes recognize patterns before the police do. Last summer, crime analyst John Dassoulas heard from victims that there had been a rash of car break-ins in the Chevy Chase area before the county's central telephone reporting unit sent him the larceny reports.

More than 50 percent of the computers used by Montgomery police are based on the

outdated 386 computer chip and aren't powerful enough to access the county's crime databases or the FBI software commonly used by detectives and crime analysts in Fairfax.

"Our technology is not up to speed," said Montgomery County Council member Betty Ann Krahnke (R-Potomac-Bethesda). "When I was elected in 1990, they still had black rotary dial telephones in the district stations."

Different Approaches

Police acknowledge, however, that sheer numbers of officers and new crime-fighting technology don't ensure low crime. For example, the District has far more officers per resident than any other community in the area but also the most violence.

Both police departments have embraced the popular technique called community policing, where officers are urged to get out of their squad cars and into neighborhoods. But they have implemented the concept in different ways.

For example, Montgomery recommends that one-third of each officer's time be devoted to community policing. Fairfax chooses instead to assign some officers full time to community policing jobs and others to more traditional patrols.

Fairfax County police have assigned 26 community policing officers to be stationed full time in the schools. The officers investigate gang activity, befriend troubled youths and work with school officials to referee tensions. In Montgomery, schools are considered part of a patrol officer's beat.

In addition, Fairfax has opened 21 "mini-stations" in apartments or strip shopping malls. Officers based in those stations patrol on foot or bicycle with the aim of becoming more accessible and getting to know members of the community. Montgomery has 12 mini-stations, although it has plans for a few more in the near future.

Since the late 1970s, both counties have encouraged communities to form Neighborhood Watch groups, in which residents promise to keep an eye out for strangers, trade stories about crime in newsletters and sometimes patrol their own streets.

But the two programs are very different. Montgomery, which requires that 40 percent of the residents in a given area be active members of a Neighborhood Watch, recognizes only 281 such groups. Fairfax has no minimum participation requirement, preferring to maximize the number of groups. The county has 900.

"Community policing does seem to have some impact . . . {but} if you have people who have time to do it, it helps," said Charles Wellford, a professor of criminal justice at the University of Maryland. "It could be that you have the philosophy, but you don't have the organizational structure to implement it in Montgomery."

Some police officers and prosecutors say longer sentences handed up by Virginia juries may contribute to lower crime in Fairfax. But a federal study suggests that isn't the

case. In 1992, the average maximum sentence for violent offenders in Virginia was 176 months, compared with 118 months in Maryland. However, Maryland convicts actually spent more time behind bars because Virginia was letting people out on parole much earlier, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Since then, Virginia has abolished parole and Maryland has tightened its rules for releasing inmates. But, even to judges, it's not clear whether differences in jail time could be affecting the crime rates in Fairfax and Montgomery.

"I would really like to say it's something the courts are doing, but if it is, I'm not sure what," Fairfax Circuit Court Chief Judge F. Bruce Bach said. "There just isn't that much difference between Fairfax and Montgomery to account for this."

Where the Numbers Come From

For this series, The Washington Post collected data on crimes reported to 20 local police departments and compiled by the Federal Bureau of Investigation from 1977 to 1997. Known as the Uniform Crime Reports, or UCR, the data include the number of homicides, rapes, robberies, aggravated assaults, burglaries, larcenies and car thefts.

Additional data were collected from state and local police, the U.S. Census Bureau, the Bureau of Justice Statistics, marketing research firms, universities and nonprofit organizations. More than 70 interviews were conducted.

Criminologists caution that police departments may vary in the accuracy of their record-keeping and the way they categorize crimes. For example, one department might define a home break-in as an attempted burglary, while another might call it vandalism. In the latter case, the incident would not have to be reported in UCR totals for serious crimes.

The number of crimes reported to police departments probably understates the number of crimes committed. For example, some victims of sexual assault may not file a report out of fear or embarrassment.

Increases or decreases in a particular category of crime may reflect changes in police emphasis rather than differences in the actual incidence of the crime.

Still, crime experts agree that UCR data are the best available to assess the changes in crime over time, and to compare crime in different jurisdictions.

Contributors to this series included staff writer Steve Vogel, assistant polling director Claudia Deane and database specialist Jo Craven.

Cutline: A Tale of Two Suburbs

Despite remarkable similarities between Fairfax and Montgomery counties, Montgomery had more than twice the violent crime rate of Fairfax in 1997.

Demographics

POPULATION

FAIRFAX CO.

Ages

Population 15 to 24

1980 596,901 17.2%

1990 818,358 13.9%

1997 914,259 10.7%

MONTGOMERY CO.

Ages

Population 15 to 24

1980 579,053 16.8%

1990 762,207 12.4%

1997 826,766 10.1%

RACE

FAIRFAX CO.

Asian: 10%

Black: 9%

White: 81%

Hispanic: 8%*

MONTGOMERY CO.

Hispanic: 10%*

Asian: 10%

Black: 14%

White: 76%

* Hispanics may be of any race

ECONOMY

FAIRFAX CO.

Poverty** 6.0%

Number of businesses: 35,091

MONTGOMERY CO.

Poverty** 6.0%

Number of businesses: 33,072

** 1993 Census estimate

Crime by the numbers

In the last 20 years, violent crime has fallen 36 percent in Fairfax and risen 43 percent in Montgomery.

Violent crime, per 10,000 residents

Montgomery County: 28%

Fairfax County: 11%

MONTGOMERY CO. Police Districts

Germantown

Rockville

Wheaton

Bethesda

Silver Spring

FAIRFAX CO. Police Districts

Reston

McLean

Fair Oaks

West Springfield

Mason

Franconia

Mount Vernon

VIOLENT CRIME RATE

per 10,000 residents

FAIRFAX CO.

Fair Oaks 5

Franconia 13

Mason 18

McLean 8

Mt. Vernon 23

Reston 7

W. Springfield 6

MONTGOMERY CO.

Bethesda 13

Germantown 26

Rockville 24

Silver Spring 40

Wheaton 26

PROPERTY CRIME RATE

per 10,000 residents

FAIRFAX CO.

Fair Oaks 267

Franconia 392

Mason 384

McLean 357

Mt. Vernon 322

Reston 245

W. Springfield 186

MOTGOMERY CO.

Bethesda 382

Germantown 321

Rockville 406

Silver Spring 421

Wheaton 315

Police Force

During the 1980s, the Fairfax police department quickly added more officers to keep up with population growth. Montgomery's police force grew more slowly.

Number of Police Officers

Fairfax County: 1,076

Montgomery County: 963

SOURCES: CACI Marketing Services, Claritas, Fairfax and Montgomery county police departments, U.S. Census Bureau, FBI Uniform Crime Reports, Virginia and Maryland state police

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