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1990 Murder Toll -- Initial Projections

Summary of Findings of a Majority Staff Study

Prepared for the Use of the

Committee on the Judiciary

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Comment of Sen. Joseph R. Biden, Jr.

Reports of Rising Murder Rates

July 31, 1990

The new figures in the Majority Staff Study suggest that 1990 may be the deadliest year ever in America's history. At the current pace, more than 23,200 Americans will be murdered this year.

We must stop the bloodshed; the toll it is taking on our families, our police officers, our hospitals, our cities and towns is devastating. And tomorrow, August -- traditionally the deadliest month of the year -- gets underway.

Three things account for the murder record: drugs, deadly weapons, and demographics.

Drug violence is on the rise, as the quality of crack cocaine drops, and gangs battle for turf. Military-style assault weapons are turning many cities into urban battlefields. A boom in the teenage population makes for record numbers of teen killers -- and teen victims.

We need action now. We must get drug addicts off the street, and into jails and treatment centers, where they cannot kill others. We must ban the flow of the deadly assault weapons into our cities and towns. And we must combat escalating teenage violence with new anti-gang initiatives and beefed up police patrols.

All of these measures are found in the National Drug Strategy I have proposed -- and I hope that substantial portions of this approach will soon be enacted by Congress. Murder is a preventable cause of death, and we must get serious about stopping it before the growing epidemic gets worse.

Moreover, in light the record murder toll, last week's decision by the administration to allow the importation of new versions of the Uzi and the AK-47 is particularly unfortunate. Virtually every police chief in the country has called on us to get these killer assault guns off the street; the administration has opened the door for new, foreign weapons to flood in.

Judiciary Committee Majority Staff Study
1990 Murder Toll -- Initial Projections

I. Summary of Findings

Amid-widespread reports that the number of murders in the United States is sharply increasing, the Senate Judiciary Committee Majority Staff was directed by the Chairman to undertake an extensive study of federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies to ascertain the current situation. And as it turns out, the truth is as tragic as it is alarming:

- * If current trends continue, this year will be the most murderous year in American history.
- * Based on the data we collected, we project that there will be 23,220 murders this year; previously, the annual record number of murders was 23,040 (1980).
- * The projected 1990 total is up about 2,000 murders from 1989's count (21,500) -- an increase of 8%.
- * This would make 1990 the third consecutive year when the number of murders increased in the United States.
- * This further confirms a startling turn around from the trend earlier in the 1980s: between 1980 and 1985, the number of murders fell 18%; from 1985 to 1989, the murder toll rose 22%.
- * Drug related murders are soaring: according to FBI figures to be released later this week, drug-related murders rose 50% from 1988 to 1989.
- * The 1990 state-by-state data collected by the Committee Staff shows that the murderous trend is not isolated to any region of the country, and it is not unique to any social or economic cross section.
- * Certain states are hardest hit, and these include: California, New York, Michigan, Illinois, and Pennsylvania. But some Sunbelt states, such as Virginia, Texas and Florida are also reporting increases.

Of the 35 jurisdictions (34 states and the District of Columbia) for which the staff obtained data, 61 percent reported an increase in the number of murders. These jurisdictions represent a broad cross-section of the nation -- large and small states, urban and rural, Frostbelt and Sunbelt -- and collectively, they account for 85 percent of all murders in the country.

II. Explanations for the Increases

The reasons for the recent and continuing murder wave are many. Still, three of these reasons stick out: drugs, deadly weapons, and demographic trends.

Drugs. As reported at a recent Senate Judiciary Committee hearing ("New Drug Reports: Do the Point to Victory in the war on Drugs?"), cocaine prices are up and purity levels are down. This means supplies are scarce. And that, in turns, means that drug dealers are going to be fighting for their turf and customers.

The more they fight, the higher the death toll, a tragic short-term consequence of winning the "war on drugs." The percentage of drug-related murders has been increasing steadily since 1985: up 118 percent from 1985 to 1989 -- and 50% in the last year alone (from 1988 to 1989).

Deadly Weapons. A second reason, associated with the first, is the rise in the use of dangerous weapons -- that is, lethal guns commonly known as assault weapons. These firearms have become the weapons of choice for drug dealers and the weapons of doom for law enforcement personnel.

As today's hearing will show, the number of multiple gunshot victims arriving in hospital emergency rooms is rising sharply. And medics who could previously help wounded crime victims now find bodies riddled with the fire of assault weapons -- wounded beyond hope of repair.

Demographic Trends. Looking at U.S. murder tolls for the last 30 years, the numbers began to rise significantly in the late 1960's and did not fall until the early 1980's. (And even then not very much.) This trend followed from a unusually large number of 18-24 year-olds in the general population. This age group is the most violent one, and the murder toll often swells with its ranks.

Since 1985, a new crop of 18-24 year-olds, with all of their attendant violence, has become an abnormally large segment of the population. And the murderous trend that they have helped spawn will be with us for many years to come.

III. Consequences

Whatever the reasons for the current increase in murder tolls, the consequences are disturbing.

For example, teenagers now run the greatest risk of being murdered of any portion of the U.S. population. Youths between the ages of 15 and 19 are experiencing the greatest rise in murder rates. Between 1988 and 1989, murders among this group of teens increased at a rate that is 4 times the national average.

Also, the United States is exacerbating its position as the most murderous industrialized country on earth. Our murder rate is 13 times what it is in England, 10 times what it is in Japan, and 8 times what it is in Germany and Australia, and 5 times what it is in Canada.

Put another way, if we had England's murder rate (and America's population), the 1990 murder toll would be about 1,800 -- not 23,000.

EXPLANATION OF CHARTS/STUDY FINDINGS

1. MURDER TOLL: STATE-BY-STATE LIST

THIS CHART LISTS EVERY STATE AND THE CHANGE -- SINCE LAST YEAR -- IN ITS NUMBER OF MURDERS. THE STATES ARE RANKED FROM "MOST" TO "LEAST" IN ORDER OF MURDER TOTALS.

THIS CHART REVEALS THAT MORE THAN HALF THE STATES REPORTING SHOW AN INCREASE OVER THEIR LAST YEAR'S MURDER TOLL. IN ALL, THE AVERAGE INCREASE IS 8 PERCENT.

SIGNIFICANCE: THE DATA PRESENTED ON THIS CHART IS NEW, AND IT IS DISTURBING. IF CURRENT TRENDS HOLD, THIS WILL BE THE MOST MURDEROUS YEAR IN AMERICAN HISTORY. THE 8 PERCENT NATIONAL RISE WILL PRODUCE A TOTAL OF 23,220 MURDERS. THIS WILL SURPASS EVEN THE 1980 MARK OF 23,040 -- THE PREVIOUS RECORD.

Murder Toll: A State by State Analysis

	1989 Murder	Projected 1990 Murder	% Change
California	3,158	3,442	9
New York	2,246	2,692	19
Texas	2,029	2,110	4
Florida	1,405	1,433	2
Illinois	1,051	1,156	10
Michigan	993	1,082	9
Pennsylvania	753	821	9
Ohio	652	652	0
North Carolina	584	642	10
Maryland	544	517	-5
Virginia	480	562	17
District of Columbia	434	443	2
Alabama	421	463	10
Tennessee	417	417	0
Missouri	409	454	11
Indiana	353	388	10
South Carolina	320	339	6
Kentucky	293	308	5
Massachusetts	254	310	22
Washington	209	249	19
Connecticut	190	127	-33
Wisconsin	176	190	8
Colorado	146	146	0
Kansas	138	138	0
Oregon	134	88	-34
Minnesota	111	111	0
Nevada	91	74	-19
Hawaii	53	68	29
Rhode Island	49	49	0
New Hampshire	36	12	-67
Delaware	34	34	0
Idaho	26	39	50
Montana	23	18	-20
Wyoming	21	21	0
North Dakota	4	1	-67
REMAINDER OF NATION	3,263	3,524	8
NATIONAL TOTALS	21,500	*23,220	8

*Total does not sum due to rounding

Source: FBI and State and Local Law Enforcement Agencies; Senate Judiciary Committee Study

2. U.S. MURDER RATES: A STATE-BY-STATE ANALYSIS

THIS CHART -- A MAP OF THE U.S. -- COLOR CODES EACH STATE ACCORDING TO THE PERCENTAGE CHANGE IN ITS NUMBER OF MURDERS BETWEEN 1988 AND 1989. THERE ARE FIVE COLORS:

- 1. RED -- INCREASE OF OVER 8 PERCENT**
- 2. LIGHT RED -- INCREASE OF 8 PERCENT OR LESS**
- 3. WHITE -- NO CHANGE**
- 4. BLUE -- DECREASE**
- 5. BLACK -- DATA UNAVAILABLE**

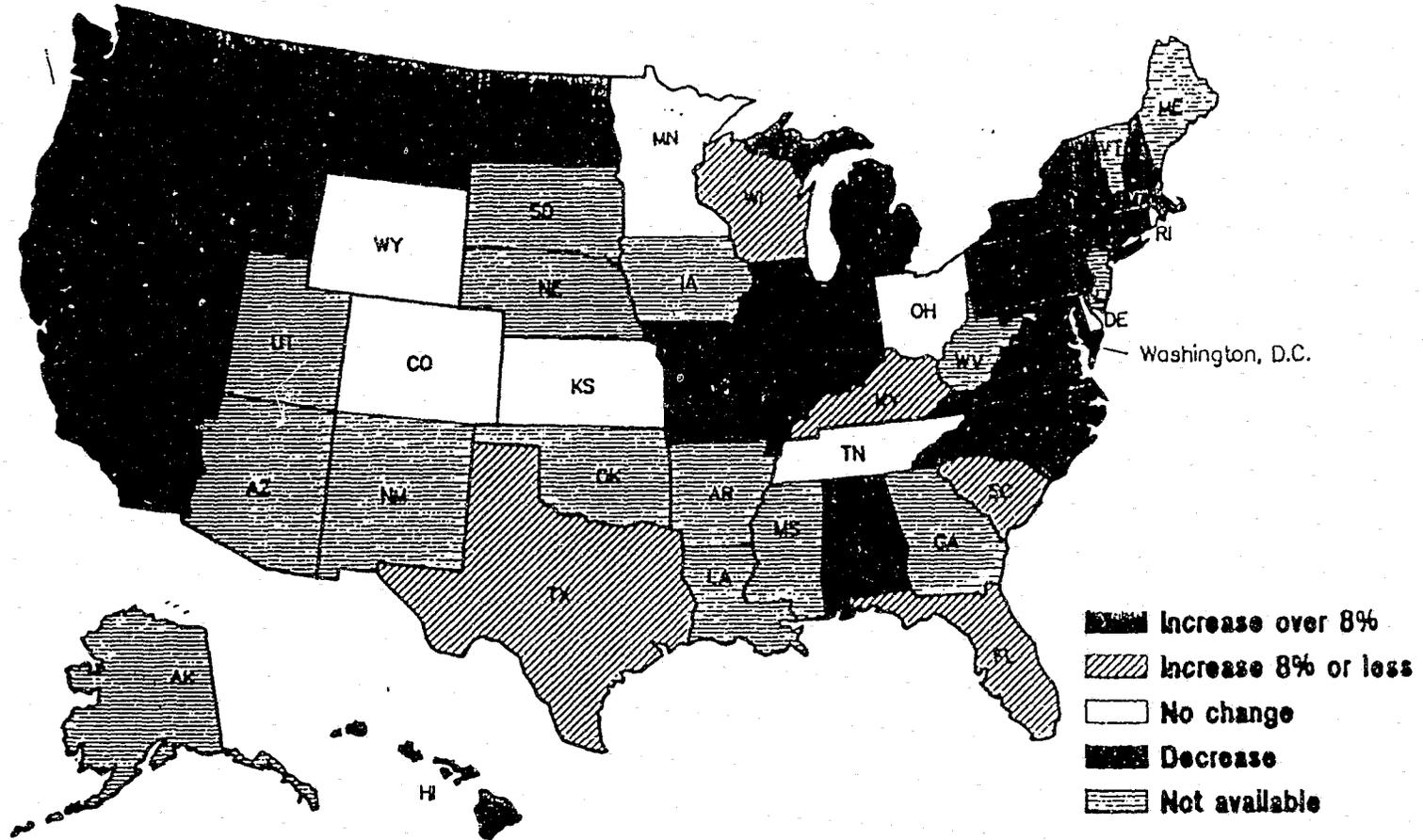
ON AVERAGE, STATES ARE EXPERIENCING AN 8 PERCENT INCREASE IN THE NUMBER OF MURDERS.

OVER HALF THE STATES REPORTING SHOW AN INCREASE IN THE NUMBER OF MURDERS. 61 PERCENT OF THE 35 REPORTING STATES SHOW AN INCREASE; THESE 35 STATES ACCOUNT FOR 86 PERCENT OF ALL MURDERS IN THE COUNTRY.

SIGNIFICANCE: THE NUMBER OF MURDERS IS INCREASING DRAMATICALLY. AT THE CURRENT RATE, WE WILL WITNESS THE MOST MURDEROUS YEAR EVER IN AMERICAN HISTORY.

Murder Toll: A State-by-State Analysis

(1989 vs. 1990)



Source: FBI and State and Local Law Enforcement Agencies; Senate Judiciary Committee Study

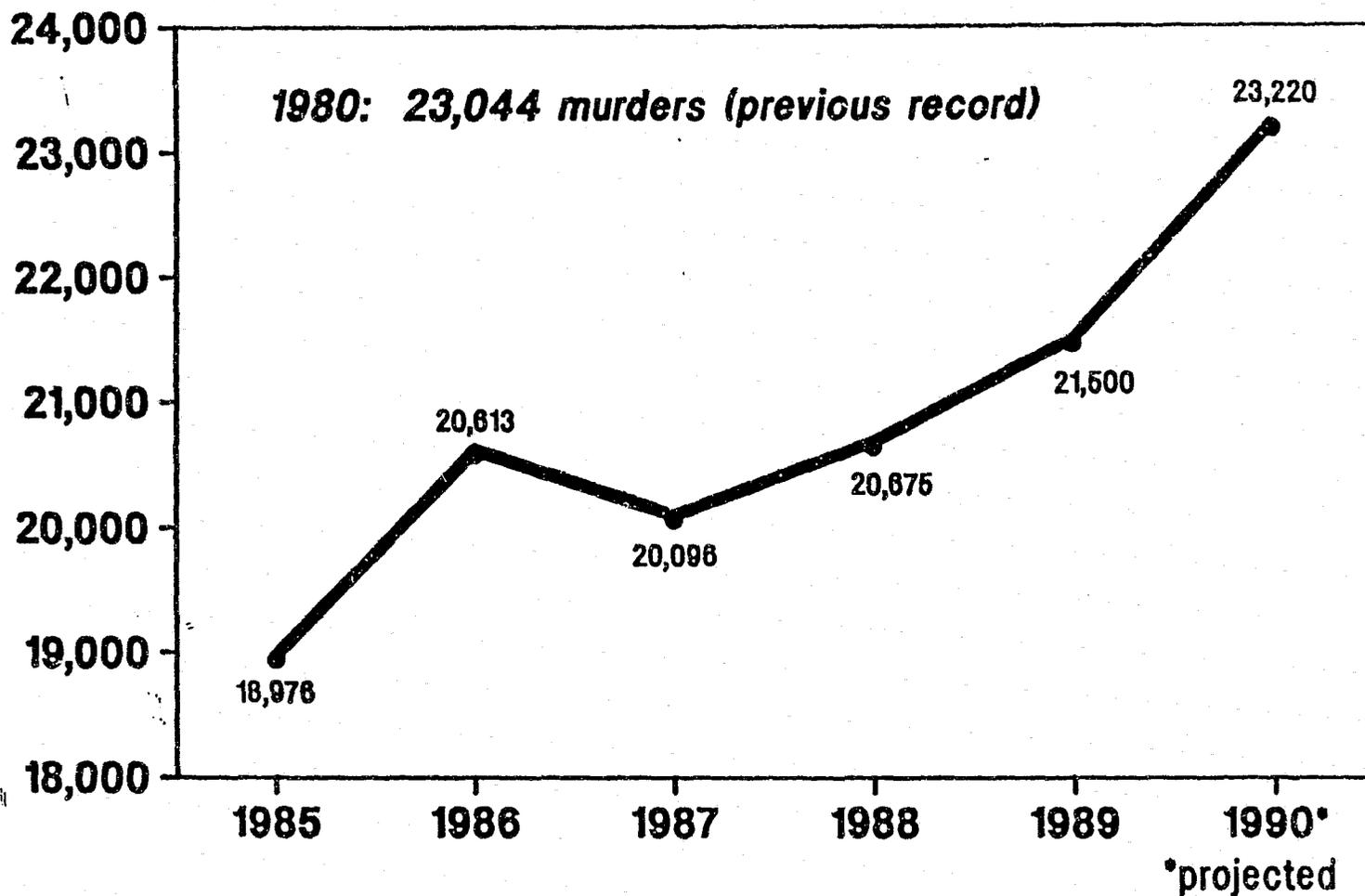
3. THE RECORD BREAKING RISE IN THE NUMBER OF MURDERS

THIS CHART SHOWS THE NUMBER OF MURDERS FROM 1985 THROUGH 1990. 1985 IS THE LOW POINT WITH 18,976 MURDERS, WHILE 1990 IS THE HIGH POINT WITH 23,220 (PROJECTED).

EXCEPT FOR A SLIGHT DROP IN 1987, THE SIX-YEAR TREND HAS BEEN TOWARD HIGHER MURDER RATES, CULMINATING WITH THIS YEAR'S PROJECTED TOTAL OF 23,220. IN ALL, THERE HAS BEEN A 22 PERCENT INCREASE SINCE 1985.

SIGNIFICANCE: THE NUMBER OF MURDERS IN THE COUNTRY ROSE STEADILY (EXCEPT IN 1987) FOR THE LAST HALF OF THE 1980'S. IT HAS REACHED A POINT WHERE, THIS YEAR, THE COMMITTEE PROJECTS THAT THE COUNTRY WILL WITNESS THE HIGHEST-EVER NUMBER OF MURDERS -- 23,220. (THE PREVIOUS HIGH WAS 23,040 IN 1980.)

The Record-Breaking Rise in the Number of Murders



Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation

4. THE NUMBER OF MURDERS (1960-1990)

THIS CHART DEPICTS THE NUMBER OF MURDERS AT FIVE-YEAR INTERVALS BETWEEN 1960 AND 1990. THE LOW-POINT -- 1960 -- RECORDED 9,110 MURDERS, WHILE THE HIGH-POINT -- 1990 -- IS 23,220 (PROJECTED).

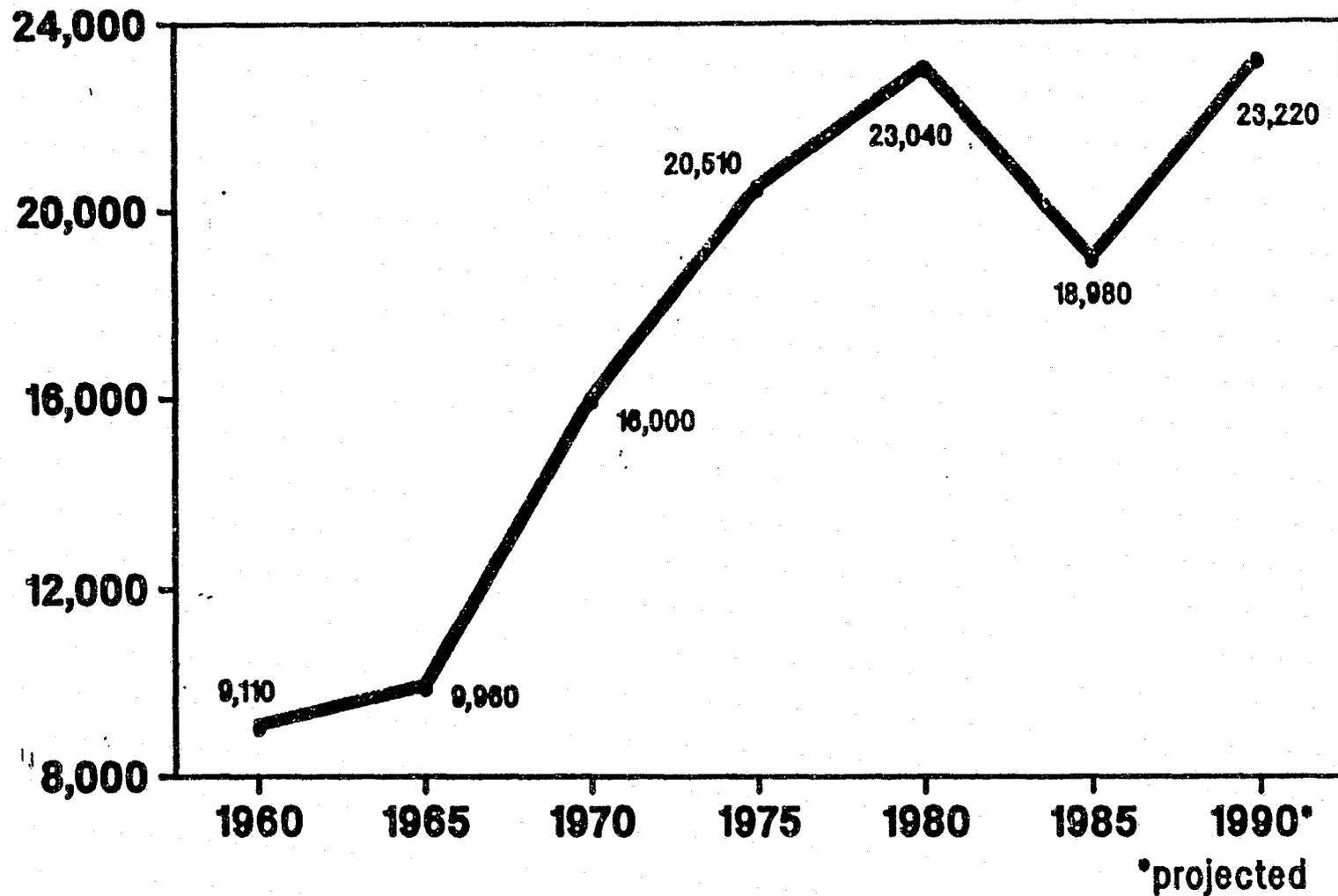
OVER THE PAST 30 YEARS, THEN, THE MURDER TOLL HAS RISEN 155 PERCENT. AND DURING THAT TIME, THE NUMBER OF MURDERS HAS INCREASED ALMOST CONSTANTLY, DIPPING SLIGHTLY ONLY IN THE EARLY 1980'S.

THE MURDER TREND CAN BE PARTIALLY EXPLAINED THROUGH DEMOGRAPHICS. THE RELATIVELY SLOW INCREASE OF THE EARLY 1960'S PHASED INTO A FASTER INCREASE IN THE LATE 1960'S AS THE NUMBER OF 18-24 YEAR OLDS -- THE MOST VIOLENT AGE GROUP -- BALLOONED IN SIZE. DURING THE EARLY 1980'S, THAT MOST VIOLENT GROUP PASSED INTO A MORE PASSIVE AGE BRACKET, CAUSING THE NUMBER OF MURDERS TO FALL A LITTLE.

IN THE MID-1980'S, A NEW, LARGE CROP OF 18-24 YEARS CAME OF AGE. WE ARE NOW EXPERIENCING THEIR VIOLENCE.

SIGNIFICANCE: THE COUNTRY'S DEMOGRAPHICS POINT TO FURTHER INCREASES IN THE NUMBER OF MURDERS FOR MANY YEARS TO COME. ALREADY WE ARE PROJECTING AN ALL-TIME HIGH FOR THIS YEAR. WE MUST ACT NOW TO LIMIT THE NUMBER OF MURDERS, OR WE WILL WITNESS A GROWING BLOOD BATH.

The Number of Murders (1960-1990)



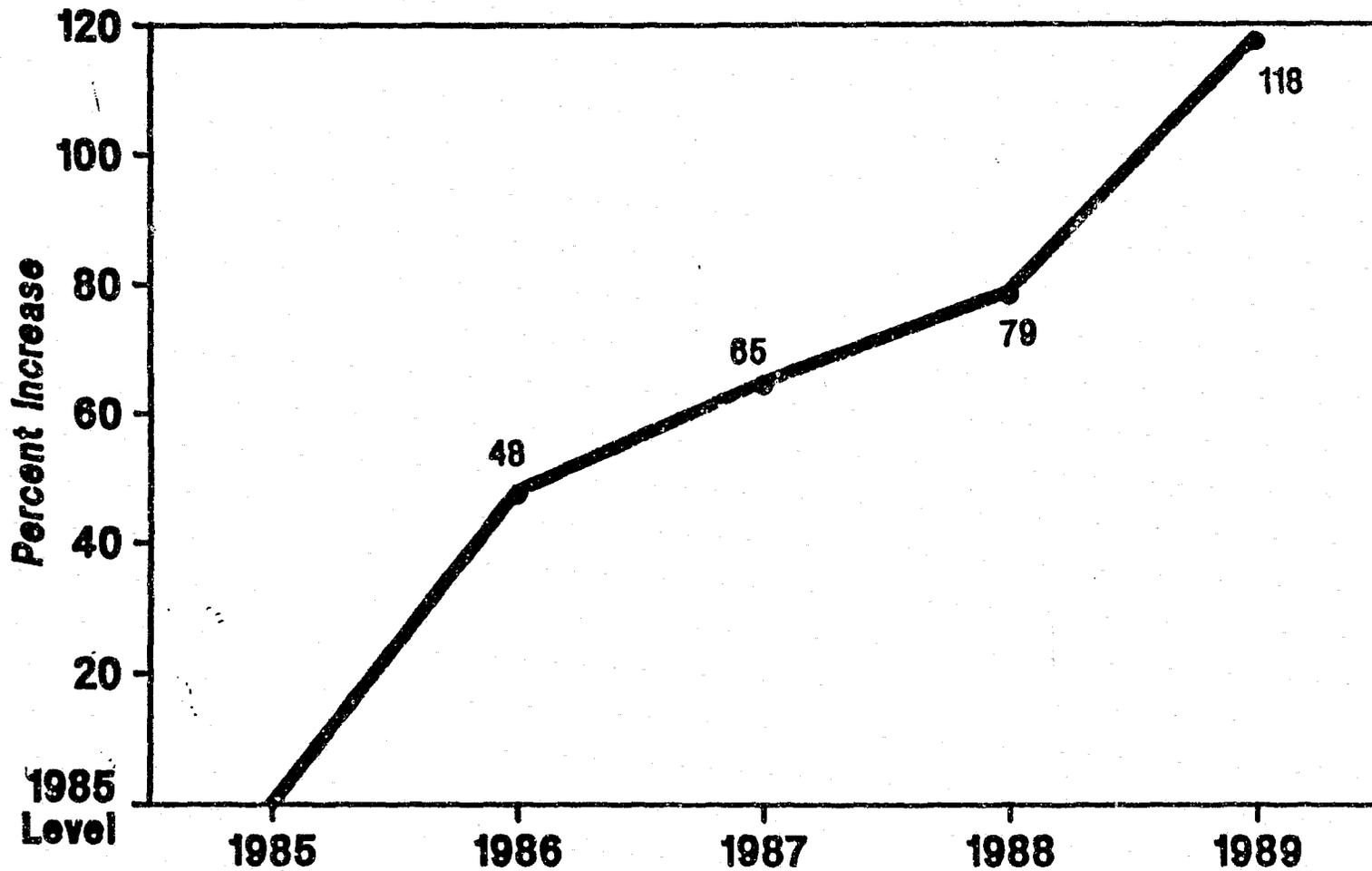
Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation

**5. PERCENT INCREASE IN THE NUMBER OF DRUG-RELATED MURDERS
SINCE 1985**

THIS CHART SHOWS THAT THE PERCENTAGE OF DRUG-RELATED MURDERS IN THIS COUNTRY HAS BEEN INCREASING STEADILY SINCE 1985. IN THE LAST YEAR ALONE (1988-1989), THERE WAS A 50% INCREASE IN THE NUMBER OF SUCH MURDERS.

SIGNIFICANCE: THERE ARE SEVERAL REASONS WHY THE NUMBER OF MURDERS IS RISING AS QUICKLY AS IT IS. ONE IMPORTANT REASON IS DRUGS. AND AS COCAINE BECOMES MORE SCARE AND DEALERS BEGIN TO FIGHT FOR TURF AND SUPPLIES, THE NUMBER OF DRUG-RELATED MURDERS WILL NO DOUBT INCREASE EVEN MORE.

Percent Increase in the Number of Drug-Related Murders Since 1985



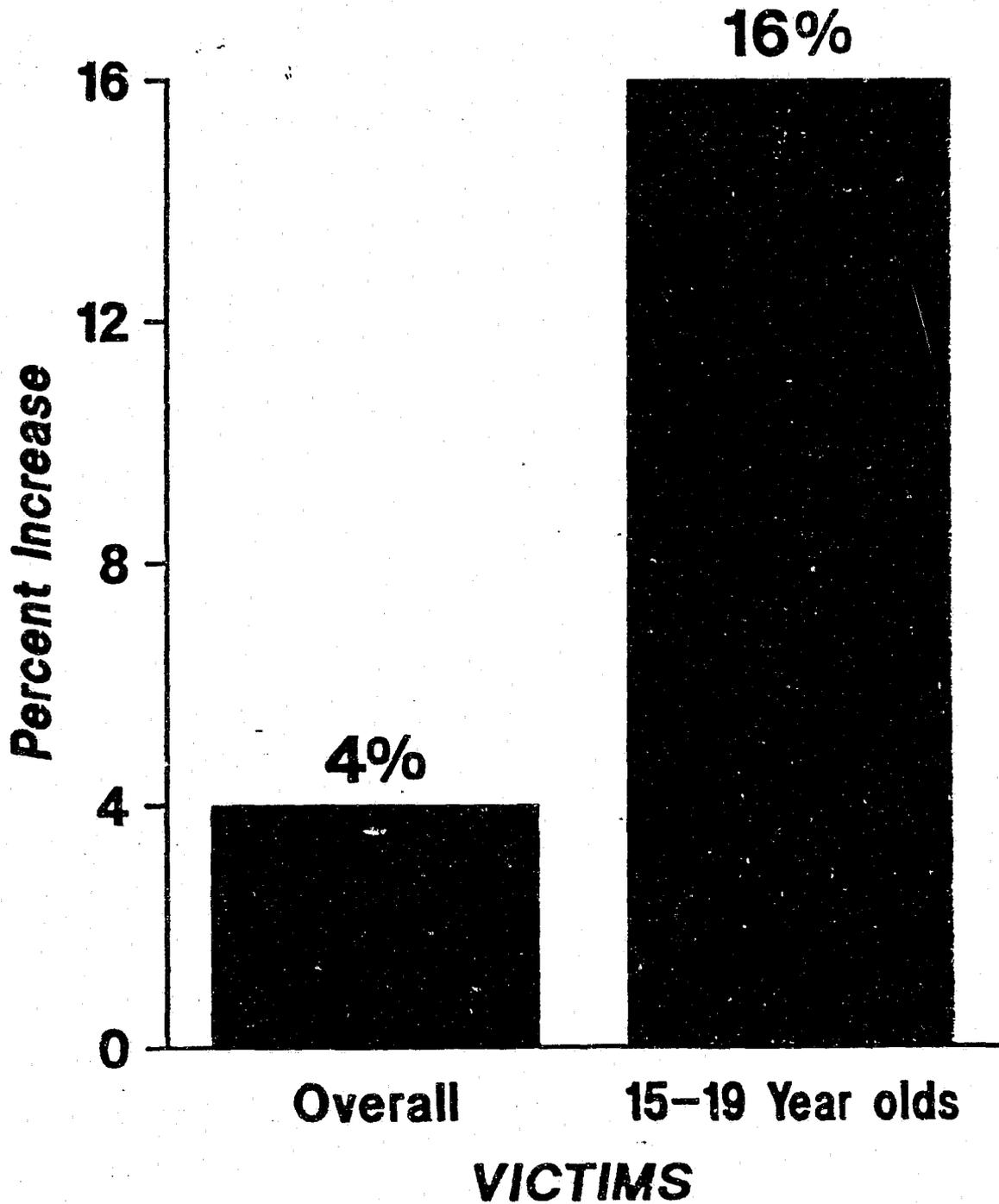
Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation

6. RISK OF MURDER AMONG YOUNG ADULTS (1988-1989)

THIS CHART COMPARES THE MURDER RATE AMONG THE OVERALL POPULATION -- A 4 PERCENT INCREASE -- WITH THE RATE AMONG YOUNG ADULTS -- A 16 PERCENT INCREASE. YOUNG ADULTS ARE PEOPLE 15 - 19 YEARS OLD.

SIGNIFICANCE: YOUNG ADULTS ARE THE MOST AT-RISK AGE GROUP. AND MORE THAN ANY OTHER AGE GROUP, THEY ARE EXPERIENCING THE SHARPEST RISE IN MURDER RATES. THE NATIONAL TREND TOWARD INCREASED NUMBERS OF MURDERS IS BAD ENOUGH -- BUT IT IS THAT MUCH WORSE WHEN WE REALIZE THAT OUR TEENAGERS ARE THE ONES WHO ARE BEARING THE BRUNT OF IT.

Risk of Murder Among Young Adults (1988-1989)



7. AMERICA: THE MOST MURDEROUS INDUSTRIALIZED NATION

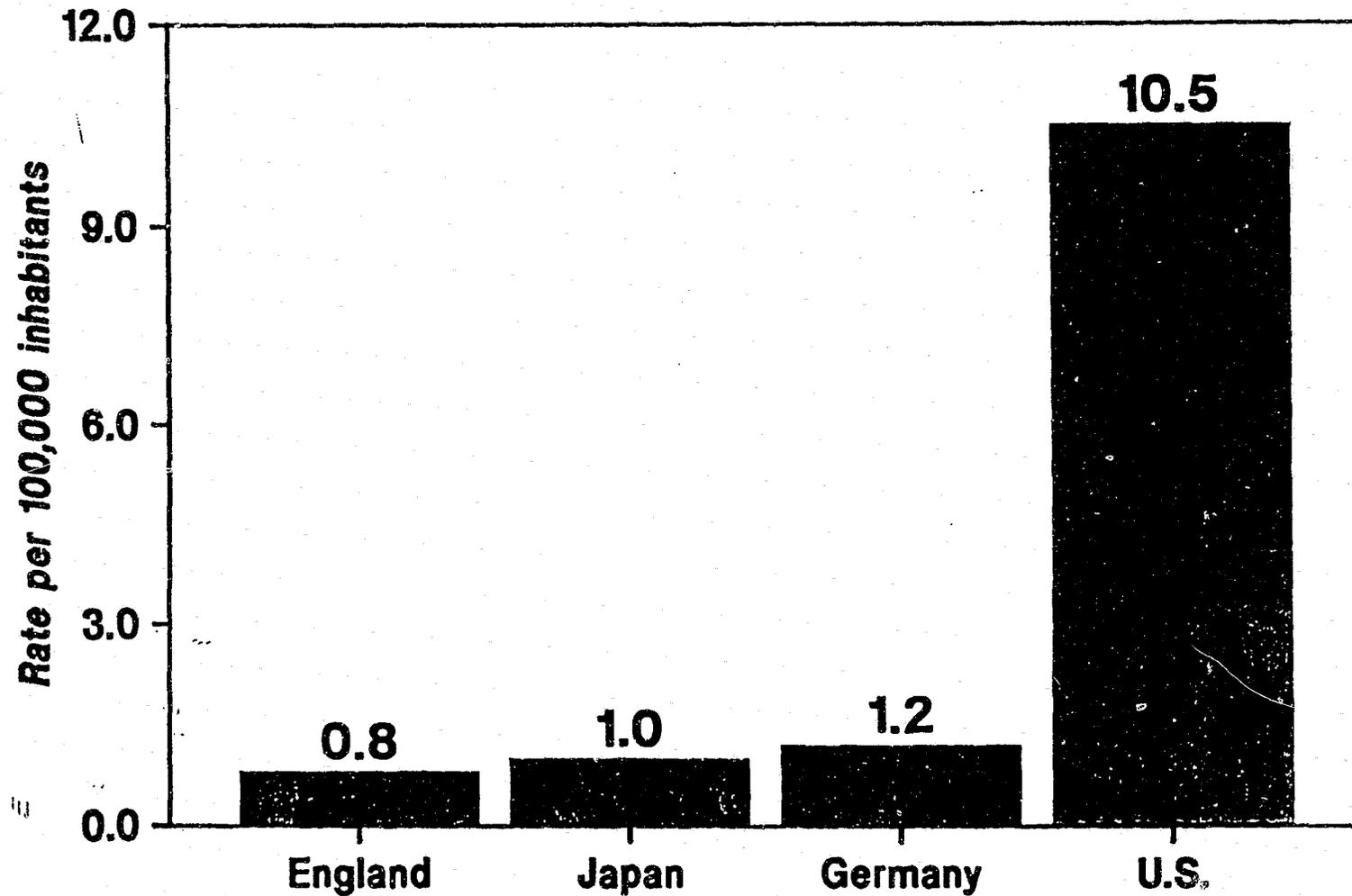
THIS CHART COMPARES THE U.S. MURDER RATE (1980 DATA) WITH THE RATES OF OTHER INDUSTRIALIZED NATIONS, NAMELY ENGLAND, JAPAN, GERMANY, AUSTRALIA, AND CANADA.

NOTE: WHILE, OBVIOUSLY, NOT ALL INDUSTRIALIZED NATIONS ARE REPRESENTED ON THE CHART, IT IS TRUE THAT THE UNITED STATES HAS THE HIGHEST MURDER RATE.

THE MURDER RATE IN THE UNITED STATES IS OVER 13 TIMES THAT OF ENGLAND, 10 TIMES THAT OF JAPAN, 8 TIMES THAT OF GERMANY AND AUSTRALIA, AND 5 TIMES THAT OF CANADA.

SIGNIFICANCE: THE UNITED STATES IS FACING INCREASINGLY HIGH NUMBERS OF MURDERS -- AND THIS WHEN IT ALREADY SURPASSES ALL OTHER INDUSTRIALIZED NATIONS WITH ITS MURDER RATE. WE MUST TURN THINGS AROUND BEFORE OUR SITUATION BECOMES EVEN MORE SHAMEFUL AND DESPERATE THAN IT IS NOW.

America: The Most Murderous Industrialized Nation



Source: World Health Organization (Dept. of Justice Report)

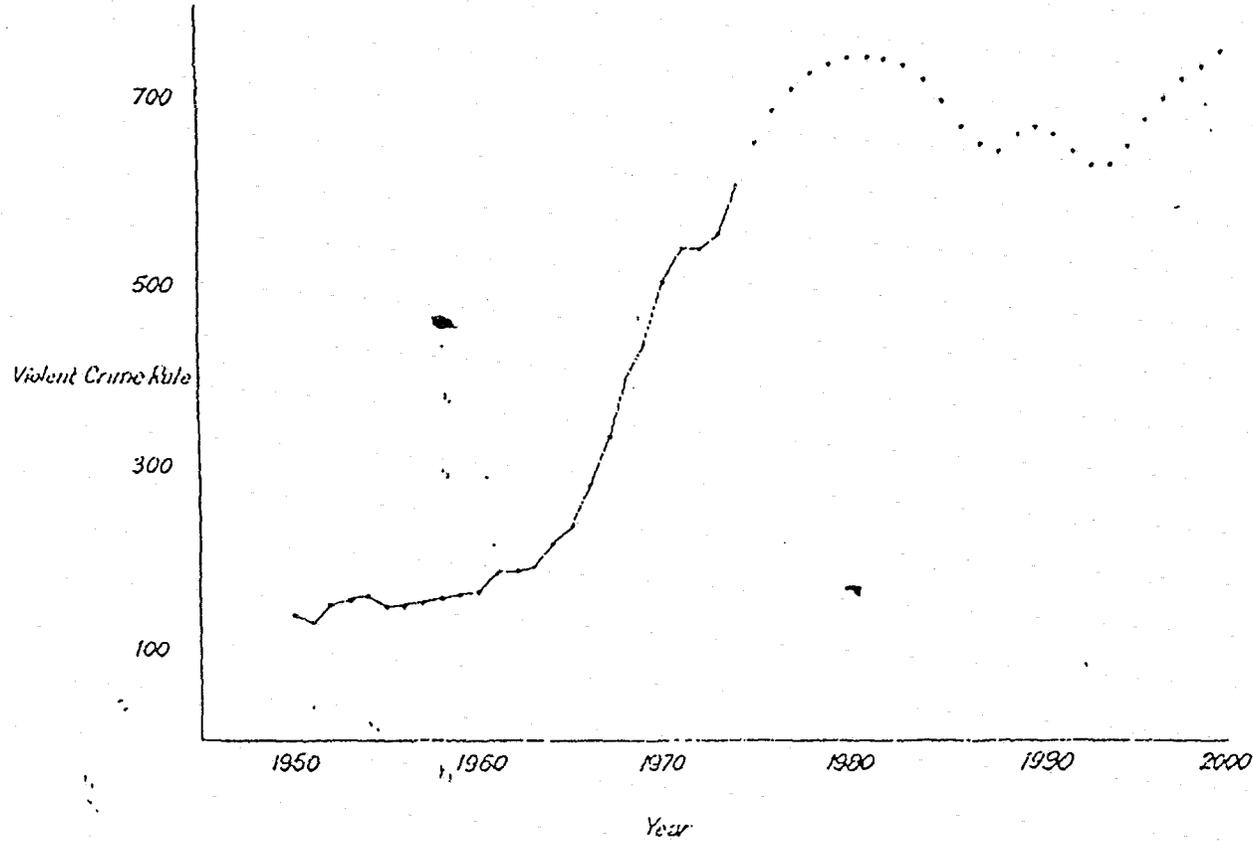


Figure 2: Forecast of Violent Crime Rate

Source: James Alan Fox, Forecasting Crime Data (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, D.C. Heath, 1978).