Crime Waves, Fears, and Social Reality

The American criminal justice system is a mirror that shows a distorted image of the dangers that threaten us—an image created more by the shape of the mirror than by the reality reflected.

—Jeffrey Reiman and Paul Leighton

For decades, polls have found that people in the United States are worried about crime. A Gallup poll found that people worried their credit card information would be stolen by hackers (69%), their homes would be burglarized when they were not there (45%), their car would be stolen (42%), their child would be physically harmed while attending school (31%), they would be mugged on the streets (31%), their home would be burglarized when they were there (30%), they would be victims of terrorism (28%), they would be attacked while driving their car (20%), they would be murdered (18%), they would be the victim of a hate crime (18%), they would be sexually assaulted (18%), or they would be assaulted/killed at work (7%) (Riffkin, 2014). The learning process for these fears is complex, but one contributing factor is the dissemination of crime statistics by the media and the government. (Recall our discussion of the crime clock in the first chapter.) How reliable and valid are these statistics? Does the public’s perception of crime reflect the reality of crime?

The number of people who fear crime is substantial. Perceptions about individuals who engage in criminal behavior are even more revealing. Jeffrey Reiman and Paul Leighton (2017) describe the stereotyped image: Think of a crime, any crime. . .. What do you see? The odds are you are not imagining an oil company executive sitting at his desk, calculating the costs of proper safety precautions, and deciding not to invest in them. Probably what you see with your mind’s eye is one person attacking another physically or robbing something from another via the threat of physical attack. Look more closely. What does the attacker look like? It is a safe bet he (and it is he, of course) is not wearing a suit and tie. In fact, you—like us, like almost anyone else in America—picture a young, tough, lower- class male when the thought of crime first pops into your head. (p. 74)

The “Typical Criminal” in the minds of most people who fear being victims of crime is poor, young, urban, and black—“threatening the lives, limbs, and possessions of the law-abiding members of society, necessitating recourse to the ultimate weapons of force and detention in our common defense” (pp. 67–68).

The presidential campaign for George H. Bush in 1988 capitalized on this stereotypical image with its infamous “Willie Horton” commercials. The governor of Massachusetts, Michael Dukakis, was Bush’s opponent; his state had a highly successful prison furlough program. The Bush campaign seized on a single case where a participant in the program (Horton) committed a violent crime while on furlough. Willie Horton was an African American male whose predations were directed at white females. The political advertisement reinforced the worst fears and prejudices about crime—violent crime committed by an armed sociopathic stranger after being released by a “soft” criminal justice system.

Violent crime and draconian punishments have taken center stage in nearly every modern-day presidential election. George W. Bush was elected president in 2000 with a gubernatorial legacy of having signed more prisoner execution warrants (158) than any other governor at that time. President Barack Obama’s first campaign for the White House was based, at least in part, on issues surrounding prisoner treatment at the Guantanamo Bay Prison Camp and the issue of torture. Rick Perry was the longest-serving governor in Texas history and twice ran for the U.S. presidency. There were 279 executions while he was in office, far surpassing Bush’s record. During his first presidential campaign, Perry was asked if he lost sleep over the possibility of executing innocent people. He remarked without hesitation, no sir, I have never struggled with that at all. The state of Texas has a very thoughtful, a very clear process in place of which—when someone commits the most heinous of crimes against our citizens . . . you kill one of our children, you kill a police officer, you’re involved with another crime and you kill one of our citizens, you will face the ultimate justice in the state of Texas and that is you will be executed. (Berman, 2011)

Political leaders play on the public’s fear of crime and portray the criminal justice system as being “soft” to convince voters they have the solution to keep the public safe. A majority of Americans (63%) believe that there is more crime than in the previous year (McCarthy, 2014). Historically, Ameri- cans are less likely to believe crime is increasing where they live, but they believe it is increasing nationally. Since 1980, the lowest percentage expressing a belief in increased crime was 41% in 2001; the highest was 89% in 1991. Some argue that consumption of news media influences the public to believe that crime is more widespread than is actually the case. The belief that crime is increasing has stayed relatively stable despite years of declining violent crime. Six in 10 Americans favor the death penalty for convicted murderers, a percentage that has remained the same since 2008. Since 1937, the percentage supporting the death penalty for murder has ranged from a low of 42% in 1966 and a high of 80% in 1994 (Jones, 2014). Given these attitudes, it is not surprising that politicians support legislation for more police, more prisons, more severe sentences, and an ever-widening definition of what constitutes a crime.

Reasoned reflection about crime presents a very different picture than the one promoted by politicians, the media, and law enforcement officials. Facts have been curiously missing from the debate about crime in the United States, and the facts clearly contradict common perceptions. • There is no crime wave in the United States. Criminal victimization has been steadily declining for decades. The U.S. crime wave is a myth. • Most crimes are not the serious, violent, dangerous crimes that prompt the stereotype of the United States as a predatory jungle. The over- whelming majority of crimes are minor incidents involving neither serious economic loss nor extensive injury. • Most of the violent crimes that do threaten our well-being are not com- mitted by terrorists or psychopathic, predatory strangers lurking in urban shadows. Instead, those we trust most—relatives, intimate friends, and acquaintances—are much more likely to be the perpetrators. • Most crimes, even violent crimes, do not involve the use of a weapon, nor do they involve serious injury. • Most crimes, particularly violent crimes, are intraracial, contradicting the stereotype’s subtle and not-so-subtle appeals to racism. • The government remains silent on select crimes that profoundly affect citizens. They hide the prevalence and harm of police crime, corporate crime, political crime, and corruption. They also direct attention away from violent attacks on women and children by relatives, intimates, and acquaintances.

The socially constructed image of crime that emphasizes street crimes committed by the poor, the young, and minority group members is substantially false and shifts public attention away from the most serious threats of death and injury. Our picture of crime reflects a reality—criminal acts, arrests, convictions, imprisonment, and so on—but this reality of crime is not a simple objective threat to which the criminal justice system reacts: It is a reality that takes shape as it is filtered through a series of human decisions running the full gamut of the criminal justice system—from the lawmakers who determine what behavior shall be in the province of criminal justice to the law enforcers who decide which individuals will be brought within that province. And it does not end with the criminal justice system as such because the media—television, newspapers, and the Internet—contribute as well to the image that people have of crime in our society. (Reiman & Leighton, 2017, p. 68)

As the opening quotation to this chapter warns, we need to determine the accuracy of the images reflected in the criminal justice mirror.

Asking how much crime there is in the United States is a very tricky question. Crime statistics must be treated with great caution and not an inconsiderable amount of skepticism. Two primary questions must be asked about numbers purported to reflect the danger of crime in society. First, are they measuring what they say they measure? Second, what is the source of these numbers, and does it have something to gain from the way crime is presented to the public?

The most commonly recognized measures of crime in the United States are the FBI’s Uniform Crime Reports. As mentioned in chapter 1, the International Association of Chiefs of Police formed the Committee on Uniform Crime Records in 1929 (FBI, 2016a). The committee decided to use the standard of “offenses known to law enforcement” for gathering information and included crimes based on their seriousness, frequency of occurrence, commonality in all geographic locations, and likelihood of being reported to law enforcement. In January 1930, 400 cities in 43 states began participating in the program. By the end of that year, Congress authorized the Federal Bureau of Investigation to collect, publish, and archive the data. The reports are published annually and now include data reported voluntarily by over 18,000 county, city, state, federal, university/college, and tribal law enforcement agencies on crimes brought to their attention.

“Offenses known to law enforcement” is an ambiguous phrase, difficult to define universally. In general, the data consist of reports of crime received from victims, officers who discover infractions, or other sources. Note that this does not mean that a crime has actually occurred. The only requirement is that someone, somewhere, for some reason believed that a crime might have been committed and reported it to the police. As Peter Manning (2009) notes, this means the police “control the flow of data at source with no auditing, accountability, or alternative sources of information” (p. 453).

**UCR Crime Categories Exaggerate Serious Crime**

Seven categories of crimes were indexed in 1930: murder and nonnegligent manslaughter, forcible rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny-theft, and motor vehicle theft; arson was added in 1979. For its Uniform Crime Reports, the FBI distinguishes between serious and nonserious offenses. Part I crimes are the serious felonies designated by the eight indexed categories. Part II crimes are misdemeanors and less serious felonies. Reporting of offenses is limited to these crime classifications, which are considered the most likely to be reported and the most likely to occur with sufficient frequency across jurisdictions. UCR specifies that if multiple offenses are committed in a crime incident, only the most serious offense should be reported. The only exception to this hierarchy rule is the crime of arson, which is reported with the other most serious offense in a multiple- offense incident.

Police departments have a consistent record of overrating the seriousness of offenses they are reporting. Equally confusing is the fact that no two police agencies classify crime in exactly the same way, leading to highly unreliable counts (Manning, 2009; Sherman, 1998). Criminologists, and many police agencies, acknowledge that “uniform” crime reporting is rarely the case (Simerman, 2013). A 157-page handbook defines types of crimes and includes scenarios for agencies to follow when submitting their data, but the choices made in categorizing certain crimes—especially assaults—have a major impact on the numbers and crime rates reported. The handbook itself asserts that aggravated assault is troublesome in terms of classification. Police are instructed to count one aggravated assault for each victim significantly injured or when the assailant is armed. So how should an agency report a shooting at a crowded event: one assault for each injured victim or an attempted aggravated assault for each person in the line of fire in the crowd?

Murder is one of the most reliable statistics because it is almost always reported, and death is not a subjective category. A high murder rate generally signals high levels of other crimes. New Orleans had a murder rate in 2013 of 19 per 100,000 citizens. Flint, Michigan, had a rate of 13.7. Yet the violent crime rate for Flint was 721.1 per 100,000 versus 473.9 for New Orleans. The mayor and police superintendent in New Orleans acknowledge that the murder rate is high, but they tout their violent crime rate as lower than Orlando, Florida. Alfred Blumstein, a criminologist at Carnegie Mellon University, con- firms that discretion is involved when classifying simple versus aggravated assault. He also notes that “to argue that you’re safer in the face of anomalous assault rates—that raises questions” (Times-Picayune, 2013). Rick Rosenfeld, a criminologist at the University of Missouri, St. Louis, specializes in crime statistics. “I find the growing gap between assaults and homicides to be very puzzling. For New Orleans to exceed the national figure by that much requires a good deal of imagination. The two real possibilities are that citizens have reduced the rate at which they’re reporting these crimes to the police, or that police have changed the way in which they classify.”

The problem of classification is not new. Chambliss (1988) pointed out: The crime categories used in the UCR are often ambiguous. For example, burglary requires the use of force for breaking and entering in many states, but the FBI tells local police departments to report the crime as burglary simply if there is unlawful entry. Merging these two types of offenses makes statistics on “burglary” ambiguous. (p. 29)

The exaggeration of serious violent crime gives the false impression that street crime is more dangerous and common than it actually is. It also under- reports crimes that occur in a family setting. Crimes by relatives, friends, and acquaintances are often classified as less serious than crimes by strangers. Instead of the crime of aggravated assault, many of these crimes are classified as misdemeanor assault. In addition, crimes by intimates are far less likely to be reported because of victim fear, embarrassment, and the personal and private nature of the crime (Allison & Wrightsman, 1993; Eigen- berg, 2001).

The stated goal of collecting UCR data is to generate reliable information for use by law enforcement administration and operations (FBI, 2016a). It is also used by criminologists, sociologists, legislators, and the media for research and planning. To improve the usefulness of official statistics, a new component was added to UCR data collection: The National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS). During the 1990s, the UCR began to transform its format from a summary to incident-based statistics. NIBRS collects data on every incident and arrest for 23 crime categories of 49 specific crimes called Group A offenses; it also collects arrest data only on 10 Group B offense categories. The data collected include information about the victim, the offender, property involved, injury sustained, and the circumstances of the incident (FBI 2016c). The 2015 NIBRS data included details on more than 5.6 million criminal offenses: 63% property offenses; 23% crimes against persons; 14% crimes against society (drugs, gambling, pornography, prostitution, and weapons offenses). There were almost 6 million victims (an individual, a business, an institution, or society) and 4.6 million offenders; 6,648 law enforcement agencies provided the information. NIBRS offers additional information on crime known to the police. Non-reporting and police discretion can affect the reliability of the data gathered. As with UCR data, NIBRS depends on voluntary reporting from police agencies, a fundamental flaw (Shelden, Brown, Miller, & Fritzler, 2016).

The politics of policing has an effect on crime statistics. A police administrator can use crime statistics to demonstrate the efficiency of his or her operation or a serious need for further funding (Alpert et al., 2015). Police policies directly affect the publicized crime rate, which in turn affects police policies and budgets. If the crime rate is too high, the public could criticize police departments for not using resources efficiently—while departments would claim more resources are necessary. Conversely, if the crime rate is low, the department takes credit for doing its job well, but the public could decide that current levels of funding are too high.

**Statistics Result from Social Processes**

Joel Best (2012) notes that statistics are not just mathematical calculations; social processes determine what is and is not counted. When we hear that some government agency has measured the crime rate or the unemployment rate or the poverty rate, we need to realize that that agency has made a series of choices that led to those numbers. We may also hear criticisms that those official statistics are not really accurate, not because someone has failed to do the calculations correctly, but because the critics think that figures based on different choices would be more valuable. No statistic can be completely understood unless we appreciate the process of social construction that shaped its production. . . . We live in a complicated world, and we need to be able to think critically about its complexity. We cannot rely on our narrow personal experiences to tell us what is going on; we need statistics to give us a broader, more accurate view. But if we are going to use numbers, we need to understand the social processes that produce statistics—and what the limitations of those figures might be. (pp. 182–183, 186)

Social scientists have demonstrated with regularity that statistics reporting crime are subject to manipulation (as the New Orleans example above illustrates). President Richard Nixon (1969–1974) instituted a crime-control experiment in Washington, DC, to demonstrate the effectiveness of his crime-control proposals for the nation. The Nixon administration wanted the crime rate to go down in order to claim success. The crime rate did indeed go down—not because there was any less crime committed but because of a change in the reporting of crime. The District of Columbia police simply began listing the value of stolen property at less than $50, thereby removing a vast number of crimes from the felony category and thus “reducing” the crime rate (Seidman & Couzens, 1974, p. 469). William Selke and Harold Pepinsky (1984) studied crime-reporting practices over a thirty-year period in Indianapolis. They found that local police officials could make the crime rate rise or fall, depending on political exigencies.

Serious questions have been raised over the years about whether crime data reported to the FBI for inclusion in the UCR are routinely falsified by the reporting departments. The FBI instituted an auditing program in 1997. However, the FBI conducts an audit in each state once every three years, choosing 6 to 9 departments and reviewing a limited number of incidents (Poston, 2012). For example, the FBI did not review the Milwaukee Police Department (the largest in Wisconsin) until 2012—and they reviewed 60 incidents. Eli Silverman, professor emeritus at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, said if reviews are only cursory, it would be more candid not to con- duct an audit rather than giving the pretense of checking validity. He commented that crime data “is a tool that politicians and police leaders use, yet the system is so incentivized to cast a favorable light and there is very little checks and balances to make sure it’s accurate.” He also said that because the statistics are collected and published by the FBI, most people assume the data are FBI statistics rather than police department statistics.

During the 1980s the FBI had to drop reports from the states of Florida and Kentucky because of unreliability and careless reporting (Sherman, 1998). Police departments in Philadelphia, New York, Atlanta, and Boca Raton, Florida, have all falsely reported crime statistics. The city of Philadelphia had to withdraw its crime reports for 1996, 1997, and 1998 because they were downgrading some crimes, underreporting other crimes, and because of “general sloppiness” in their data collection. An audit of Nashville Police Department’s crime records following allegations of downgrading serious crimes found that computer glitches and human errors accounted for the misreporting of over 11,000 crimes. A survey of retired NYPD commanders found that more than 100 of them said they were under intense pressure to manipulate official crime statistics to show downward trends (Rashbaum, 2010). Crime statistics can be manipulated to match the goals of reporting agencies.

**Collateral Effects**

UCR crime data are highly sensitive to things that have nothing at all to do with crime. For example, improved police record keeping, or computerization can make the crime rate skyrocket. During the 1970s and 1980s, many police departments computerized their record-keeping and filing systems. The result was a higher rate of reported crime that did not necessarily reflect any real increase in crimes committed. For example, in 1973 citizens reported 861,000 aggravated assaults in the National Crime Victimization Survey, but the police recorded only 421,000. In 1988, citizens reported 940,000 aggravated assaults in the victimization survey, and the police recorded 910,000 (Reiss & Roth, 1993, p. 414). Victimization surveys showed a small increase in aggravated assault, almost all of which could be explained by an increase in population, but the police statistics showed massive increases. Expansion of 911 emergency phone systems greatly increases the reporting of crime to police.

Police department practices affect the statistics reported to the FBI. If the police concentrate personnel and funds on policing criminal activity in minority neighborhoods, the amount of crime reported for those neighbor- hoods will be higher than for neighborhoods not as intensely policed. As we shall see in a later chapter, the deployment of police personnel in the war on drugs has seriously aggravated this problem and has contributed substantially to beliefs that young, urban, poor, male blacks constitute the bulk of the crime problem in the United States. Manning (2009) observes that the distribution of official crime reports “associated with race, class, age, gender, name and place of incident, and those involved, is assumed to be without public question an accurate approximation of the actual distribution of such events, incidents, and crimes in cities” (p. 458).

**Unscientific Presentation**

As mentioned in chapter 1, UCR data are presented in ways that are far from scientific. The FBI “crime clock” exaggerates the incidence of crime and the threat it poses to the public. By taking a large number (the total number of crimes) as the numerator and a small number (the number of seconds in a minute, minutes in an hour, and hours in a day) as the denominator, a melodramatic and misleading ratio of crimes to minutes or hours can be created. Presentation of UCR data in this form creates the impression that violent victimization is imminent. Chambliss (1988) warned: This makes good newspaper copy and serves to give the law enforcement agencies considerable political clout, which is translated into ever- increasing budgets, pay raises, and more technologically sophisticated “crime-fighting” equipment. It does not, however, provide policy makers or social scientists with reliable data. (p. 31)

Because “crimes known to the police” is an ambiguous category, subject to political manipulation, and easily adjusted to the bureaucratic requirements of law enforcement agencies, UCR crime rates do not accurately detail crimes committed, although they may tell us a little about police department practices and policies.

In 1991, the population of the United States was 252.2 million, and there were 1.9 million violent crimes committed and almost 13 million property crimes. In 2015, the population was 321.4 million, and there were 1.2 million violent crimes committed and 8 million property crimes (FBI, 2016a). The population increased by more than 27% while violent crimes decreased almost 37% and property crimes decreased by more than 38%. The highest violent crime rate was 758.2 in 1991, declining to 372.6 in 2015. The property crime rate has also fallen steadily from 5,140.2 in 1991 to 2,487.1 in 2015. The highest murder rate was 10.2 in 1980; it was 4.9 in 2015. The highest robbery rate was 272.7 in 1991, falling steadily to 101.9 in 2015. All other forms of crime show the same downward spiral.

The decline in “crimes reported to the police” is remarkable for two rea- sons unrelated to the incidence of crime. First, there are many more police on the streets today than in the past. The number of local police employees has increased 35% since 1987; in 2013, local police departments employed an estimated 605,000 people, including 477,000 sworn officers (Reaves, 2015). More police patrolling with greater frequency should facilitate reporting of crimes, and it would be reasonable to expect an increase in those numbers. Instead we find a prolonged decline. Second, citizen reports of crime incidents in every category of crime have increased in the past three decades. This means that the decrease in crime rates is even greater than it appears at first glance because more people now participate in reporting crimes.

A better source of crime data is the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS). It is the primary source of information on criminal victimization. The U.S. Census Bureau collects information for the Bureau of Justice Statis- tics annually. The NCVS is a self-report survey administered to a nationally representative sample of about 90,000 households—about 160,000 people aged 12 or older. People in each household are interviewed twice during the year and are asked if they or any member of their households have been victims of crime in the previous six months.

The victimization surveys measure both reported and unreported crime, and they are unaffected by technological changes in police record keeping and the other factors that raise questions about the validity of UCR data. The NCVS data come from questionnaires carefully designed for reliability by social scientists; they are administered to a very large, demographically representative sample of the U.S. population. While no survey is perfect, the NCVS represents the best available source of data on crime victimization in the United States. How the data are reported is subject to political manipulation, but the data themselves are scientifically valid.

**Redesign of NCVS Questionnaire**

From 1973 to 1992, the National Crime Survey (NCS) measured criminal victimization. In 1992 the survey was redesigned as the NCVS (Kindermann, Lynch & Cantor, 1997). To improve the measurement of sex crimes and domes- tic violence, rape was aggregated with sexual assault to create a new crime classification. NCS questions did not mention rape; the questions asked only about assault, thus leading to the underreporting of rape (Eigenberg, 2001). NCVS also combined aggravated and simple assault with “attempted assault with a weapon” and “attempted assault without a weapon.” The redesign was based on annual methodological reviews to increase the reliability and validity of the study. Reviews addressed how to phrase questions to improve recall and reduce underreporting. Questions were screened to diminish subjective interpretations of survey questions, and cues were added for nonstereotypical crimes such as those involving offenders who were not strangers.

It is possible, however, that some of the redesign may have had other motivations. The NCVS recorded a decline in serious crime between 1973 and 1991, contrary to politicians’ proclamations and public impressions. The data did not justify immense new expenditures on law enforcement and prisons; the expansion of the criminal law; the extension of the death penalty to new offenses; the incarceration of an additional one million Americans; and a “crime crisis” mentality in policy making. Perhaps some of the survey’s redesign was a bit of methodological legerdemain intended to give the appearance that victimizations were increasing. Perhaps the intent was simpler. By changing the survey and the classification of crimes in that survey, it was no longer possible to make longitudinal comparisons of reports before the redesign with reports after the redesign.

The Bureau of Justice Statistics cautions that while the core methodology has been validated over three decades, the viability of the survey and its ability to meet the original goals of measuring the dark figure of crime are threatened by increasing costs. Budgetary constraints in 2006 affected the introduction of a new sample based on the Decennial Census (Rand, 2009). The procedure for the new sample was truncated because funds were not available to implement the sample as had been done three times previously. The unanticipated consequences were that the overall violent crime rate was artificially higher, breaking the longitudinal comparisons (which were restored with the 2007 survey).

**Steady Decrease in Violent and Property Crime**

The National Crime Victimization Survey data speak volumes about crime in the United States. In 2015 the survey reported 5 million violent victimizations and 14.6 million property victimizations (Truman & Morgan, 2016). From 1993 to 2015, the rate of violent crime declined from 79.8 to 18.6 victimizations per 1,000 people age 12 or older, and the property crime rate declined from 351.8 victimizations to 110.7. Between 1993 and 2015, violent criminal victimization declined 77% and property crime 69%. Figure 2.1 Violent Victimization, 1993–2015. Rate per 1,000 persons age 12 or older 100

The only reliable scientific data we have on crime in the United States tells us that crime is decreasing, and it has been decreasing dramatically for decades. Furthermore, those de- creases are not small or marginal; they are consistent decreases that have resulted in a diminution in the amount of crime. Both sets of government data (UCR and NCVS) confirm the declining crime rate. Ironically, this prolonged and significant decrease in crime has been juxtaposed against an increase in public concern about crime. 75 50 25 0

The decrease in crime is only a part of the story. At the start of the twenty- first century, approximately 98% of the U.S. population was not the victim of any kind of personal crime. In addition, the bulk of crime reported is not the heinous, violent, predatory crime that people imagine. In 2015, serious violent victimization—rape/sexual assault, robbery, or aggravated assault— affected 0.98% of the population older than 12 (Truman & Morgan, 2016).

Recall that 18% of U.S. citizens worried about being murdered; 18% also worried about being sexually assaulted. Murder is the least frequent violent victimization, with fewer than 5 murder victims for every 100,000 people in the population (FBI, 2016a). Turning to crimes of theft we find a similar situation. In 2015, the prevalence rate of property victimization was 7.6% (Truman & Morgan, 2016). While 45% of the U.S. population worried about their homes being burglarized, the rate of burglary in 2015 was 22 per 1,000 households (2%).

**Strangers and Crime**

There are strong indicators that the “typical criminal” is less of a threat than the popular stereotype would have us believe. In 2015, 22% of violent victimizations were committed by intimates/family members and 34% by acquaintances, versus 36% by strangers (BJS, 2016). The relationship of offender to victim was unknown in 48% of the murders in 2015. When the relationship was known, 10% of the murders were committed by strangers (FBI, 2016a). Clearly, it is not the lurking stranger we should fear; those closest to us pose the greatest danger.

The issue of stranger homicides is vital to understanding the unfounded public hysteria over crime and the role of the media and authorities in creating that fear. The myth of indiscriminate victimization recurs with regularity (Glassner, 2009). In the early 1990s, the media publicized a “wave” of tourist murders in Florida. A statistician had noted that chance alone would dictate an unusually high number of tourists murdered and that the media furor was an “overreaction to statistical noise” (p. 110). Ten murders out of 41 million tourists did not constitute a wave of violence. The victimization of innocent tourists seeking warm weather made a much better story than the largely invisible typical victim of crime in Florida—a young, black, or Hispanic local resident.

Henry Brownstein became skeptical of claims that drug violence was killing innocent bystanders in New York City—that anyone was at equal and random risk of becoming a victim of drug-related violence (Glassner, 2009). He found the claim completely unfounded; about two out of one hundred homicides involved innocent bystanders. Most drug-related violence involved people connected to the drug trade.

Despite the fact that the murder rate had been relatively stable for two decades, an FBI report suggested that random killings—the most chilling type of crime because it involves innocent victims killed by strangers—were increasing. The report combined two categories of murders: unsolved (for example, 45% of murders in 2013 were unsolved) and committed by strangers (Glassner, 2009). Clearly, if a murder has not been solved, the relation- ship of the perpetrator to the victim is unknown. Statistically, chances are high that the murder was committed by a relative (14% in 2013) or an acquaintance (30% in 2013)—not a stranger (10% in 2013). The media immediately seized the theme. USA Today headlined “Random Killings Hit a High” on the front page, with the subtitle “All have ‘realistic chance’ of being victim, says FBI” (Davis & Meddis, 1994). The claim was untrue and is unlikely ever to be true. The chance of a U.S. citizen being murdered by a family member or acquaintance is more than 4 times greater than being murdered by a stranger (FBI, 2016a). Random, stranger murder is a myth.

Jerry Ratcliffe, a criminologist at Temple University, suggests that the media and politicians focus too much attention on violent crime, noting that the impact of other types of crime (burglaries, vehicle thefts, and simple assaults) have more impact on the quality of life (Krajicek, 2015). Homicide is infrequent and spontaneous—therefore difficult to predict or prevent. Homicides often take place indoors between people who know each other. The public tends to view headlines about homicides as a predictor of crime waves—despite its infrequent occurrence. Ratcliffe notes that homicide is an easy statistic to compare from one place to another, but he believes those statistics are not very helpful. They do not reveal whether the police department is managed well or is effective at crime control. Homicide statistics are affected by variables outside the control of the police department.

The most feared crimes involve attacks on children, particularly the rape and murder of children. Legislators quickly passed versions of laws based on New Jersey’s “Megan’s Law,” which requires notification to the community of the presence of a “sex offender.” The laws are intended to protect children against stranger-pedophiles, rapists, and murderers. However, data clearly show that “nonstrangers” pose the greatest threat. Early data collected by NIBRS indicated that 27% of offenders committing sexual assault were family members and 60% were acquaintances; 14% were strangers. Perpetrators against the youngest juveniles were the least likely to be strangers: 3% of offenders in the sexual assaults of children younger than 6 and 5% in the assaults of juveniles between the ages of 6 and 12 (Snyder, 2000). NCVS data for victims age 12 or older showed: 76% of rape/sexual assaults in 2015 were committed by intimates, relatives, or acquaintances versus 21% committed by strangers (BJS, 2016).

**Weapons, Injury, and Crime**

Our images of crime often include violent strangers armed with weapons. However, the data indicate that such crimes are the exception, not the rule. In 2015, the percent of people over the age of 12 who experienced a victimization by a stranger was 0.41; the percentage for serious stranger violence was 0.18 (Truman & Morgan, 2016). Weapons were used in 19.5% of all violent crimes in 2015. Most violent victimizations do not involve weapons. In fact, they typically do not involve injuries; 74% of the violent crime in 2015 did not involve an injury. The rate of violent crime involving injury decreased from 7.2 per 1,000 in 2005 to 4.8 in 2015. Unlike the picture of crime presented by the media, politicians, and the police, the truth is that even in violent crimes, very few people are injured and even fewer are seriously injured.

**Race and Crime**

Crime reporting by the media, politicians, and law enforcement has played on ingrained racism in U.S. culture. The Willie Horton ad was designed to invoke the image of a very specific type of criminal—a violent, black offender—the type of offender most feared by white, middle-class America. Tabloid media coverage of shootings of white tourists by young black men at rest stops, gang attacks on innocent passersby in cities, or acts of vigilantism by people like Bernard Goetz against minority youth play to those racist fears. Politicians in Texas and Arizona frequently refer to the citizens of their states being preyed upon by illegal immigrants—a not-so-subtle appeal to racism and an attempt to paint undocumented people as dangerous criminals.

Interracial crime is rare. Unfortunately, NCVS has not compiled data about personal crimes of violence based on the race of victims and the perceived race of offender since 2008. The data from 1996 through 2008 confirm that intraracial crime is much more common. In 2008, only 15.4% of violent crimes involved white victims and black offenders, while 67.4% of white victims were victimized by white offenders (Maston, 2011). The percentages were almost identical for black victims: 64.7% of the victimizations were by black offenders versus 15.9% by white offenders. From 1996 through 2008, the highest percentage of violent crime with white victims and black offenders was 17.2% in 2005; the highest percentage of violent crime with black victims and white offenders was 16.2% in 2002. Of the 3,167 murders of whites in 2015, 81% were committed by white offenders (FBI, 2016a). Of the 2,664 murders of blacks, 89% were committed by blacks. Interracial violent crime is far less likely than intraracial violent crime.

**Kids and Crime**

Reports of violence by juveniles and alleged increases in drug use fuel fears of crime committed by this segment of the population. Chapter 8 dis- cusses this myth in detail. Here we highlight a few of the facts about juvenile crime and juvenile violence. In 2015, less than 6 out of every 100 juvenile arrests involved a crime of violence (FBI, 2016a). The number of juvenile arrests declined 55% since 2006; arrests for murder were down 34%. Rape and murder account for less than one-half percent (.0046) of juvenile arrests. Of people arrested for murder, 93% are 18 years or older. Since 1980, juvenile arrests for every Part I offense, as well as most Part II offenses, have declined dramatically.

How can we explain the persistent, mounting public concern about crime? The crime rate has been dropping dramatically since the mid-1990s; the murder rates in the largest cities are at lows not seen for half century or more—yet people consistently believe crime is getting worse in the United States (Walker, 2014). With serious crime declining over a long period of time, why do fear of crime and feelings of public punitiveness follow precisely the opposite pattern?

In The Better Angels of Our Nature, Steven Pinker argues that not only homicide but all forms of violence are less common today than ever before in history. However, people find that fact difficult to accept because they see examples of gratuitous violence on big-screen televisions and streaming on the Web. “Our own eyes deceive us because we estimate probabilities by how well we can remember examples” (Henig, 2011). Images of violence are omnipresent, making us believe murder, rape, warfare, and suicide bombers lurk around every corner. At least three factors appear to be responsible for the lack of congruence between the facts and public perception: the media and its reporting of crime; the efforts of criminal justice practitioners to protect their vested interests; and a focus on street crime to the exclusion of far more extensive harms.

**The Media**

The media grossly distort our view of crime and its dangers through both news and entertainment programming. Tabloid television shows such as Inside Edition regale us regularly with reports of serial murder, rest stop killings of tourists, patricide among the privileged, and bullying that turns into murder. Multiple mediums focus on crime: crime novels, comic books, film and television dramas, documentaries, reality programming, video gaming, and public service announcements. There is pronounced blurring of fiction, nonfiction, entertainment, and news. It is increasingly difficult to distinguish between media sources and to separate the narratives of crime and justice from other narratives (Barak, 2012).

Police procedurals have been a staple of television programming for decades. CSI ran for 15 seasons (from 2000 to 2015) and spawned multiple spin-offs. Law & Order: Special Victims Unit entered its seventeenth season in 2015 and was a spin-off of Law & Order (a blended police procedural and courtroom drama), which debuted in 1990 and ran for 20 seasons. The franchise also created Law & Order: Criminal Intent, which ran for 10 seasons. All of the programs (many of which appear as reruns on cable television) feature crimes of violence and depredation. Plotlines for CSI included a scuba diver found dead in the top of a tree after a forest fire, a raven with a human eyeball in its beak, and four Buddhist monks murdered in their Las Vegas monastery—“each treated as if this was all in a regular day’s work for the average twenty-first century crime investigator. . . . Graphic gore and state-of-the-art forensics that lent a patina of modernity and authenticity” (Stubbs, 2015).

Ray Surette argues that the media are the most accessible and pervasive potential source of fear. He describes crime-and-justice media narratives as “backwards law.” No matter the topic the media construct and present a crime-and-justice world that is not found in reality. Whatever the truth about crime and the criminal justice system in America, the entertainment, news, and infotainment media seem determined to project the opposite. The wildly inaccurate and inevitably fragmentary images and the facts found in the entertainment and infotainment media reflect this law most clearly. They provide a distorted reflection of crime within society and an equally distorted reflection of the criminal justice system’s response to crime. (p. 205)

Evening newscasts broadcast the details of sensational crimes like the murder of a professor at a Mississippi College, the killing of a state trooper after a chase, kidnap victims imprisoned in a Cleveland house for more than a decade, or shootings by snipers on freeways. Crime is a large component of local newscasts, accounting for 17% of the stories in 2012 (Jurkowitz et al., 2013). The local evening news usually leads with a story about a murder committed in the course of a robbery or a drive-by shooting. Crimes such as these are relatively rare events; the property crimes that make up the vast majority of the crimes committed will not attract the audience necessary for the media to stay in business. Few viewers would stay tuned to watch a segment on the theft of a bicycle or a day in the life of a pickpocket.

Traffic accidents killed 1.24 million people worldwide in 2010—double the number of homicides and armed conflict combined (Kuper, 2015a). Terrorists killed 18,000 people worldwide in 2013—1.5% of the number killed in traffic accidents. Car crashes are not considered news—perhaps because they are so routine. Plane crashes dominate TV news when they occur. In 2014, 1,320 people worldwide died in plane crashes. People worry about flying, although the most dangerous part of their trip is driving to the airport. Driving, however, is too ordinary an activity to arouse fears or media coverage.

The media seek the most sensational and unusual crimes that fit news themes with moralistic messages. Over the years the media have created crime scares by formulating news themes around issues of “white slavery” in the prostitution industry; sexual psychopaths terrorizing major cities; Communists infiltrating vital industries and relaying national security data to the Soviet Union; Satanists engaged in mass murder and ritualistic child abuse; serial killers roaming the country; and many others. Consider how readily today’s media link particular cases to larger social problems. We problematize events, turning particular criminal acts into examples of types of crime. . . . In addition to generalizing from particular cases, claims about crime waves imply changing levels—increases in criminality. We talk about crime waves as though there are fashions in crime: people did not used to commit this crime . . . but now they do. (Best, 1999, pp. 35–36)

The steady stream of media stories—from tabloid headlines at supermarket checkout lines to news on the car radio of road rage to television broad- casts of crimes committed by juveniles—obscures the fact that such events are rare. The infrequency is buried by constant repetition. For example, on the same day in 2013 that a gunman killed 12 people in a mass shooting at Naval Sea Systems Command headquarters in Washington, DC, FBI data showed that violent crime had declined for the sixth year in a row (Roman, 2014). The juxtaposition of mass murder with news that crime is declining presents a disconnect for the public. The dramatic story about a rare event leaves the impression that the United States is becoming more dangerous— even when the facts state clearly that the opposite is taking place.

Surette (2015) notes that the crime-and-justice attitude most often linked to the media is fear of criminal victimization. Those fears support punitive criminal justice policies. To the extent that media accurately reflect already established public attitudes, the media amplify public policy tendencies by simply reinforcing pre-existing punitive attitudes. In this way, the media have a second route of influence on criminal justice police, one by legitimizing and amplifying nascent punitive public attitudes, and the other by helping to create those attitudes. (p. 16) He also points to the difficulty of quantifying the media effects on criminal justice policy. The media sometimes serve as claims makers and sometimes as distributors of the claims of others. The media influence criminal justice decision making both indirectly and directly.

George Gerbner (1994), a media researcher at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, synthesized the impact of media coverage into a theory of “the mean world syndrome.” Gerbner argued that frequent viewers of television violence (whether entertainment programs or newscasts), increasingly develop the feeling that they are living in a state of siege. Heavy television viewers: (1) seriously overestimate the probability that they will be victims of violence; (2) believe their own neighborhoods to be unsafe; (3) rank fear of crime as one of the most compelling personal problems; (4) assume crime rates are going up regardless of whether they really are; (5) support punitive anticrime measures; and (6) are more likely to buy guns and anticrime safety devices.

In 2015, researchers at Annenberg conducted a study to determine if people’s perceptions about walking alone in their neighborhoods at night (a long-standing question in the Gallup poll about crime) were influenced by the amount of violence shown in television dramas. The study compared annual changes in the amount of violence portrayed on popular prime-time dramas broadcast from 1972 through 2010 with responses to the Gallup poll question over the same time frame. The researchers found that public fear of crime was statistically related to the amount of violence portrayed on prime-time television. Patrick Jamieson, the lead author of the study, commented: “The findings are consistent with media scholarship in the 1960s and ’70s that predicted effects of fictional TV violence on audiences. That prediction has been controversial, but with the present results, we have the best evidence to date that TV shows can affect how safe the public feels” (Rozansky, 2014).

In addition to increasing public fears, media crime coverage impacts other public perceptions. Distorted coverage leads to a misinformed public, with ominous implications for society. Sensational stories exaggerate the degree to which criminals are black and victims are white. The media play a prominent role in skewing perceptions about people of color and their com- munities. Constant negative images make it difficult to examine issues without bias—particularly if those images invoke and enhance fears. “You can’t turn on the television news, for example, without being bombarded with negative images of blacks—black men in particular. It is no wonder we all, police officers included, struggle to see beyond the stereotypes” (Turner, 2015a, p. 2).

Media coverage directs people’s attention to specific crimes and criminals—and to solutions. If the criminal is a brilliant loner psychopath commit- ting serial crimes, only a large task force and brilliant detectives can stop the spree. This depiction ignores the fact that most people who commit crime are far less educated than the average American, as well as less advantaged (Roman, 2014). The other common image is crime as a social problem, with gangs as a prime example. Gang members are generally portrayed as soulless, violent predators contained only by armies of police. In reality, gang members are typically teenagers who commit as many crimes against other gang members as against the public, and gang membership is often of short duration.

Another interesting result of misinformation has been dubbed “the CSI effect.” This myth involves the belief that forensic examiners investigate crimes, carry weapons, and can process complex crimes in minutes and that most crimes are solved by DNA. The reality is that it takes months to process DNA collected from a crime scene, and the civilian working in the lab is not aware of the facts of the crime. Less than 1% of serious crimes are solved by DNA (Roman, 2014). The CSI phenomenon has also affected criminal trials. Forensic experts and technology become the focus rather than the crimes committed and the victims. Another myth resulting from the technological focus seems to be accepted by both prosecutors and criminal defense attorneys—that jurors cannot distinguish between reel justice and real justice (Barak, 2012). The attorney’s conductor dire and deliver opening and closing statements as if the CSI effect exists. One study looked at juror decision- making in two Michigan jurisdictions—the presumed CSI effect did not influence decisions on whether to convict or acquit defendants.

The media portray crime as a frequent occurrence—regardless of repeated evidence that crime is declining. Media information distorts the type of crime committed, the rate of crime, and who commits it. Media images focus on people of color and youths as criminals. The disproportionate focus on violent crime increases public fear. The U.S. homicide rate is at its lowest since 1962, but the media portray it as commonplace and people spend increasing amounts of money for protective services. Security-obsessed media encourage permanent fear, while evidence suggests an age of restraint (Kuper, 2015c). The media project an image of crime out of control, which calls for punitive policies to control the epidemic. Media coverage limits dis- course on crime-control options to present policies, suggesting that the only options are more police, more laws, more prisons, and longer sentences.

**The Crime-Industrial Complex**

Very much like the media, the criminal justice establishment has an eco- nomic interest in portraying crime as a serious and growing threat. Public spending on the criminal justice system was more than $265 billion in 2012 (Kyckelhahn, 2015), versus $84 billion in 1982. The criminal justice complex employs more than 2.4 million people. About 750,000 employees work in local, state, and federal correctional institutions costing taxpayers about $38.4 billion. There are about 18,000 police agencies, with over 1.1 million employees and annual payrolls in excess of $75.6 billion. There are 13,000– 15,000 courts with 492,000 employees and expenditures of $30 billion. The justice system employees form a substantial interest group—even before adding in other companies and employees who profit from providing goods and services to police departments, jails, prisons, and the courts.

It is in the interests of police administrators, prison officials, judges, and prosecutors to keep crime in the forefront of public debate. Enormous sums of money, millions of jobs, and bureaucratic survival depend on increasing concerns about crime. It is not surprising then, that official statistics consistently have been presented in ways to increase public fear and to downplay any decrease in criminal activity.

But it is not just money and jobs that are at stake for the criminal justice system in presenting crime as a major threat. Policy decisions and jurisdictional issues also come into play. For example, the “war on drugs” has resulted in expanded jurisdictional and police powers of many federal law enforcement agencies, with the FBI a primary beneficiary. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS), which secures and manages borders, enforces and administers immigration laws, safeguards cyberspace, and works to prevent terror- ism, was created by combining 22 federal departments and agencies (180,000 employees) into a single cabinet agency in 2002. DHS now has 240,000 employees; its budgetary resources in 2016 totaled $88.1 billion (DHS, 2017).

In addition to a massive number of public employees in the criminal jus- tice system, there is also a large and growing private crime-control industry. In 1967, there were 4,000 firms contracting for security services with other companies; in 2009, there were almost 10,000 (Strom et al., 2010). From 1980 to 2010, there was about an 80% increase in the number of private security officers, whose duties range from alarm monitoring, to guard services, to investigation, to armored transport, to correctional facilities management, to security consulting. One survey firm estimated the annual revenue for con- tract security firms at $30 billion. Private industry produces a variety of “protective” devices at a substantial profit, everything from home security systems to the color-coordinated “Club” designed to prevent auto theft. Many major defense contractors market their products to the crime-control industry. Section 1033 of the 1997 National Defense Authorization Act allows the transfer of Department of Defense property to law enforcement agencies (Shelden et al., 2016). Property valued at more than $5.1 billion has been transferred to more than 8,000 law enforcement agencies, including armored troop carriers, Humvees, night-vision rifle scopes, M16 automatic rifles, computers, and finger-print equipment.

The private prison industry is booming. The private corrections industry plays on fear of crime the way the defense industry played on fear of Communist expansion during the cold war years. The old coalition of politicians, defense department bureaucrats, and corporations (the military-industrial complex) that drove U.S. foreign policy for some forty years has been replaced by a new coalition of politicians, criminal justice bureaucrats, and corporations in a crime-industrial complex. From 1999 to 2010, the number of individuals held in private prisons grew by 80%, compared to an 18% growth in the overall prison population (Mason, 2012). Core Civic, previously Corrections Corporation of America (CCA), is the largest private prison company. It owns or controls 52 correctional and detention facilities in 18 states and the District of Columbia and manages 12 facilities owned by government agencies. The GEO Group, Inc. is the next largest competitor; the combined earnings of the two companies was $3.3 billion in 2014 (M. Cohen, 2015). Several smaller companies include Management & Training Corporation, LCS Correctional Services, and Emerald Corrections. In 2014, private prisons held 131,300 inmates under the jurisdiction of 30 states and the Bureau of Prisons—between 5 and 7% of the total state prison population and 19% of the federal prison population (Carson, 2015).

Private prisons have a vested interest in motivating political leaders to continue punitive policies such as mandatory sentences. In its 2014 annual report, CCA stated: The demand for our facilities and services could be adversely affected by the relaxation of enforcement efforts, leniency in conviction or parole standards and sentencing practices or through the decriminalization of certain activities that are currently proscribed by criminal laws. For instance, any changes with respect to drugs and controlled substances or illegal immigration could affect the number of persons arrested, convicted, and sentenced, thereby potentially reducing demand for correctional facilities to house them. Immigration reform laws are currently a focus for legislators and politicians at the federal, state, and local level. Legislation has also been proposed in numerous jurisdictions that could lower minimum sentences for some nonviolent crimes and make more inmates eligible for early release based on good behavior. Also, sentencing alternatives under consideration could put some offenders on probation with electronic monitoring who would otherwise be incarcerated.

Following the comments was a statement that their policy prohibits them from engaging in certain lobbying or advocacy efforts. Yet CCA filed a political action committee with the Federal Election Commission in 2014 and spent almost $260,000 (InsideGov, 2015). It lobbies for funding for Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and makes donations to politicians who support favorable legislation (M. Cohen, 2015). In 2014, CCA contributed $233,000 to federal candidates, national parties, committees, state and local candidates, and parties (OpenSecrets, 2015). GEO Group and its affiliates contributed $237,249 and spent $650,000 on lobbying.

Both CCA and GEO Group had previously worked with the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) to draft legislation impacting sentencing policy and prison privatization that included mandatory minimum sentences, three strikes laws, and truth-in-sentencing—all of which contributed to higher prison populations (Mason, 2012). One source estimated that CCA and GEO have contributed $10 million to candidates since 1989 and have spent $25 million on lobbying (M. Cohen, 2015). In addition, almost two- thirds of private prison contracts mandate a certain occupancy rate (often 90%); if unmet, taxpayers pay for empty beds. The ICE detention budget includes a mandate that at least 34,000 immigrants be detained on a daily basis. Private prisons own 9 of the 10 largest ICE detention centers. Some of the biggest beneficiaries of political donations from private prison companies have been border states with large populations of undocumented immigrants.

Private prison companies have watched profits rise as immigration enforcement has increased. Critics have urged ICE to consider more humane and inexpensive options than detention. One of the stated reasons for detention is to ensure that immigrants appear at scheduled hearings; ankle brace- let monitoring would be an alternative to detention for this purpose. GEO acquired B.I. Incorporated, an electronic monitoring company that had con- tracts with ICE. In 2014, the agency awarded GEO a five-year contract to provide supervision services (Barajas, 2015). The expected revenue is $47 million. GEO is expanding its “GEO Continuum of Care,” an umbrella under which the private company provides probation services in jurisdictions across the country.

Both public agencies and private corporations have a vested interest in fear of crime. As Nils Christie (2000) points out in Crime Control as Industry, they also have a vested interest in a “war on crime.” In order for public or private organizations to grow and profit, they require sufficient quantities of raw materials. In the criminal justice field, the raw materials are prisoners. Those profiting from crime and its control work to insure a steady supply.

Politicians compete to see who will be perceived as dedicated to making the public safe—which means endorsing the myth of crime waves that can only be stopped with more punitive crime control. Adding police officers, building prisons, removing constitutional protections for individual rights, buying more hardware, expanding technology, and continually expanding the scope and reach of criminal law are the centerpieces of reflexively endorsed policies. Explaining that crime is less of a threat today than it was in 1973 would not justify expanding the criminal justice system. Appeals to fears about terrorism, immigration, drug crime, drive-by shootings, carjacking’s, and violent predators help maintain large budgets for criminal justice.

**Invisible Crime**

Although the government and media go to great lengths to construct our reality of crime by collecting and disseminating statistical information, they are far less willing to collect and disseminate information about the crimes and victims of criminal justice officials, political leaders, and professionals. While there is an abundance of information about street crime and methods to control it, there is very little government-sponsored research on the crimes committed by social elites. Every year thousands of citizens are victimized by police and correctional officers, some of whom are killed. Yet the government commissions and publishes very little research on these topics. The crimes of corporate America, the medical community, and the military are also given very little attention. When the government does conduct research into these topics, practitioners from the same communities are invited to assist in the construction of the research project. So, for example, a proposed examination of police brutality quickly becomes a study of “police use of force” or a study of police killings becomes a descriptive study of “justifiable police homicides.” When we cannot find enough terrorists to generate fear, we talk about lone wolves, hidden cells, or home-grown terrorists. In short, it is not only what we are told about crime but also what we are not told that constructs our reality.

Whether a creation of the media, politicians, private corporations, or criminal justice system bureaucrats—or a combination of all four—the popular image of crime is a myth. There is no crime wave. Crime is decreasing and decreasing drastically. The projected image of the typical criminal does not exist. Crime is committed, for the most part, in social settings by unarmed people who are relatives, friends, and acquaintances of the victims. The typical crime is also a myth. Most crime is minor in nature and content; very little crime results in serious injury. We have been duped or have duped ourselves. These mythical crime waves divert our attention from more serious forms of social harm that affect many more citizens than the crimes most often discussed. We will return repeatedly to the same questions: how do myths become ingrained in the fabric of our social psyche, and whose interests do exaggerations and divisive images serve?