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The Snap Judgment on Crime and Unemployment

Evidence Suggests That People Don't Suddenly Commit Murder After Losing Their Jobs; But Theft, Yes

By CHARLES FORELLE

See Corrections & Amplifications item [below](#).

On the morning of April 3, 41-year-old Jiverly Wong parked his parent's car next to the back door of an immigrant-services center in Binghamton, N.Y., blocking it shut. Then he walked through the front door with two handguns. He fired 98 shots, killing 13 people and then himself.

Mr. Wong's rampage was one in a string of mass killings from Alabama to California. By an Associated Press tally, eight mass shootings killed 57 people between March 10 and April 7.

In the wake of the killings, commentators and some criminologists have fingered another culprit: the recession, and the job losses it brings.

"A mass killer is someone who has almost always suffered a catastrophic loss -- that's the link between a recession and mass killings," Northeastern University criminologist Jack Levin told Agence France-Presse. "Mass Shootings Kill 53 People in 27 Days. Is Recession to Blame?" read the headline of a story on the Web site of an Alabama television station.

Mr. Wong, police said, was upset that he lost his job at a shuttered vacuum-cleaner plant. Richard Poplawski, who on April 4 allegedly ambushed and killed three Pittsburgh police officers responding to a 911 call, had been laid off from a factory. Michael McLendon, who killed 10 people on March 10 in southeastern Alabama, was chronically unemployed - - and shot himself after being cornered at a factory where, authorities said, he once had worked and had returned to kill former co-workers.

High unemployment is likely for the rest of 2009. Does that presage a year of violence?

Maybe not.

It seems obvious. The economy sours, people do bad things. But proving the link between crime and unemployment is another matter.

Efforts to do so go back at least to the 1960s, when Nobel laureate Gary Becker proposed that criminals act rationally, turning to illegal behavior when there's little opportunity for honest work.

There was scant empirical evidence for the theory until a decade or so ago, when studies began digging down to local unemployment rates and homing in on the groups of people most likely to commit crimes.

By and large, the studies show that lousy job markets -- particularly for young or unskilled men -- are linked to more thefts. But the connection isn't so plain with violent crimes like murder and rape. That bolsters the theory of a more rational criminal: When the economy flags, people inclined to crime opt for dishonest income; they don't start shooting people.

"There are these anecdotes and stories you can tell -- a guy tied his actions directly to his job," David Mustard, a University of Georgia economist, says of murders. But "statistically, we haven't seen those as much."

Nationwide data on crime rates for all of 2008 aren't yet available -- so it isn't clear what's happening in the current downturn, though some big cities like New York and Chicago have seen drops in crime so far this year.

It doesn't help that crime figures are nettlesome, particularly for broad categories of offenses like larceny that can be affected strongly by the propensity of victims to come forward.

What's more, there's no clear explanation for why crime rates change, even in the broadest sense. Violent crimes -- assault, murder, robbery and rape, by the FBI's definition -- occurred at a rate of 160.9 per 100,000 inhabitants in 1960 and climbed fairly steadily to a peak of 758.1 in 1991, before turning around and dropping as quickly as they rose. So-called property crimes -- auto theft, burglary and larceny -- show a similar but less pronounced pattern.

In a 2002 study, Eric Gould, Bruce Weinberg and Mr. Mustard sliced up nearly two decades of wage, unemployment and crime data, using regression analyses to probe whether economic factors were causing changes in crime rates. The relationships were strong for crimes like burglary and larceny. Violent crimes were harder to pin down.

"You kind of see it for murder, and you kind of don't see it for murder," says Mr. Weinberg, of Ohio State University. He surmises that murders show a weak effect because some -- drug murders, mostly -- are economically motivated as gangs kill to expand their turf.

In a forthcoming paper, Naci Mocan at Louisiana State University studied state-level unemployment and crime data, as well as the histories of a cohort of 27,000 people born in Philadelphia in 1958. For both sets of data, property crimes showed a link to unemployment, while murder and rape had little connection, if any.

It's not just the U.S. A study a decade ago in New Zealand found a significant link between "dishonesty" offenses -- a category including theft, burglary and fraud -- and unemployment, but no parallel link with violent crimes like murder, though rape did show an association.

But what about mass murders? Mr. Levin, the Northeastern University criminologist, says mass murderers fit a different profile than single-victim killers and thus can't easily be compared. "The data, the evidence about violent crime in general, doesn't seem to apply to mass killings," he says. Mass murderers, he adds, are generally a peculiar sort: more likely than single-victim killers to be socially isolated, for instance, and with greater access to guns.

He pointed to an analysis done by a colleague at Northeastern, James Alan Fox. Mr. Fox charted mass murders (defined as homicides with four or more victims) between 1976 and 2007 alongside national unemployment rates. Though the numbers are volatile, he found a "fairly substantial" correlation between the two trends. In 1982, the year of highest joblessness in the period, there were 48 mass murders, the second most in the time span. Still, the year with the most mass murders, 1979, saw relatively low unemployment.

Other academics say such a correlation may or may not be meaningful. To have greater certainty, you'd need to control for factors like demographic changes or drug use that could be tugging at the numbers. Trends that seem to line up

"tell you little about the underlying causal relationship," says Mr. Mustard. He points to a study he did on crime and casinos: In the aggregate, crime has fallen in the past decade, and more casinos have been built. But by comparing crime rates in counties that built new casinos to similar counties without casinos, he concluded casinos were actually causing crime.

Mr. Fox admits his analysis isn't controlled, but he says the correlation is bolstered by case studies of mass killers that show many are unemployed.

But it is hard to know whether unemployment is causing the violence, or is merely a symptom of something else that's the true cause. Mr. Poplawski, the alleged shooter of the Pittsburgh police officers, expressed violent tendencies on white-supremacist Web sites; that attitude may have led him to kill the officers -- and also may have made it difficult for him to keep a job.

Binghamton, a city of 45,000, has been hollowed out by factory closings and buffeted by a flight to the suburbs. There was just one murder in 2008, says Mayor Matthew Ryan. "We are a very safe city." Mr. Ryan says the tough economic times had brought with them a big jump in larcenies. When gas prices soared last year, more people drove off from the pump without paying. But, until Mr. Wong's rampage, tough times hadn't brought violence, he says.

And Mr. Wong's case has turned out to be far more complex than a grudge over a lost job. He sent a barely comprehensible letter to a local TV station several days before the shootings. In it, he described various torments supposedly committed by undercover police, including "connect the music into my ear" and "used electric gun shoot at the behind my neck."

"Certainly this individual was seemingly very disturbed in other ways," Mr. Ryan says. "There's an awful lot of people who lost their jobs who haven't committed murder."

Corrections & Amplifications

Richard Poplawski is alleged to have killed three Pittsburgh police officers; an earlier version of this article gave the city in one instance as Philadelphia.

—Carl Bialik is on vacation.

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