# Criminal Records in High Crime Neighborhoods

## Summary

This paper examines the arrest records of sample of young minority men living in high crime neighborhoods in Rochester and then compares them with records of homicide victims and suspects. In a random sample of 303 minority men over age 17 years old whose home schools were in the crescent area of Rochester, 39% had a record of arrest within the past four years. The data indicate that records of arrest are common among males in high crime neighborhoods but that arrests for serious charges, especially violence, gun crimes and drug offenses, are relatively rare when compared with those of homicide victims and suspects.

## Context

The SACSI research in Rochester has been consistent with research in other SACSI cities showing that both suspects and victims in homicide cases often have significant criminal histories. One interpretation of this fact may be that those involved in serious violence are likely to have prior records of violence and other serious crime. A basic assumption in criminal justice has been that significant criminal records can help predict further involvement in serious crime. This view has found support in other well-known findings such as the fact that research has frequently demonstrated that a large amount of crime is committed by a small group of serious repeat offenders.

Prediction of further involvement in crime has been both complicated and controversial. Advances in the accuracy of prediction have been limited. Systematic study of the process continues to show that high levels of false positives (predicting future crime when none actually occurs) plague the prediction process. However, the logic of prediction based on past criminal behavior and the hope for improvements remain significant influences in criminal justice.

One serious problem affecting this area of work has been limited information about the criminal records of persons not identified through the criminal justice system. To draw conclusions about the value of criminal records in predicting crime it is important to have information regarding the criminal records of ordinary people, not just those who are identified when involved in serious crime. This is especially true when

crime is concentrated geographically.  The small number of serious offenders in one study could also be a significantly higher proportion of people in high crime neighborhoods.  The extent to which a small group of offenders is responsible for a large proportion of crime, and more particularly the usefulness of that conclusion, may depend on the base or population selected for the research.

There is evidence to suggest that criminal records may be quite common among people living in high crime neighborhoods.  Research has shown high rates of arrest and incarceration among minority males in cities.  Furthermore, a review of field interviews by the police in Rochester shows that those interviews are concentrated in high crime neighborhoods and that 80% of persons stopped by the police and interviewed have arrest records with the police.

**Methods**

SACSI research has shown that homicide victims and suspects tend to have significant criminal records. A sample of persons that might be compared with the data on homicide victims and suspects was sought to determine how distinct those criminal records might be.  The goal was to find a sample that was not drawn from criminal justice data sources and to examine sample members' criminal records.

A sample was drawn from the records of the Rochester City School District.  The district is approximately 80% minority and 90% poor as measured by eligibility for participation in the free or reduced price lunch program.  To maximize comparability with the homicide victim and suspect data, a random sample was selected comprised of minority males who were in the 1st through the 9th grade in 1990 (expected approximate current age 17-25) and whose home schools[i] were in the "crescent area" where most homicides occur.  Researchers examined criminal histories on this sample.  Those histories covered a time period of 4 years[ii] for which data was archived by the Rochester Police Department.
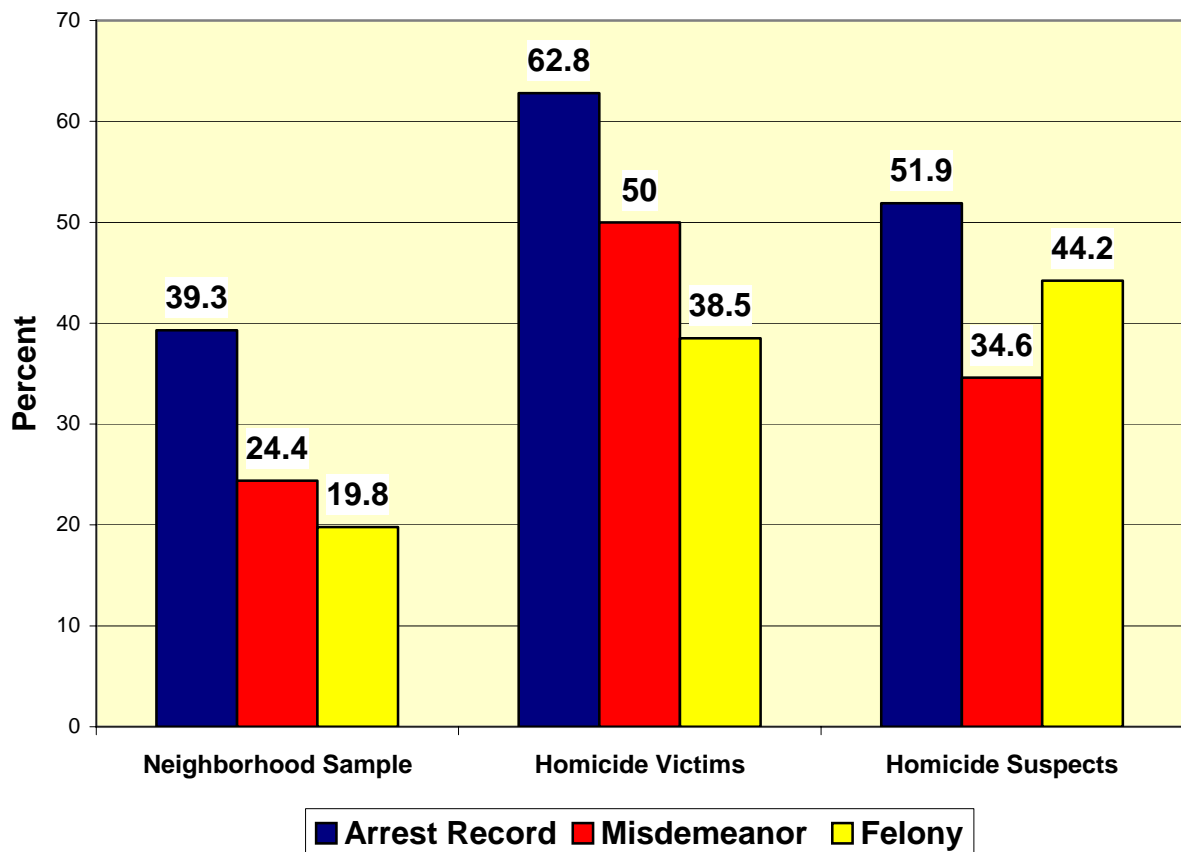
The Neighborhood sample of 303 was compared with 52 identified suspects and 78 homicide victims.[iii]  In first check of comparability of the groups indicated that the median ages of the groups were quite similar: For the Neighborhood Sample median age is 24.3 years, for victims it is 28.5 and for suspects it is 25.1.

The most significant limitation of these data is that they will underestimate the proportion of the sample that actually has a criminal record.  The sample does not permit tracking of individuals who may have moved out of the City of Rochester since 1990.  Therefore, sample members meeting those conditions may have accumulated more lengthy arrest records but that data is not available.  The data also do not allow for the deaths of some sample members.  It is important to note that this limitation would lead to underestimating but not overestimating the level of criminal history in the group.  This sample does, however, include people who may have been sentenced to prison while living in Rochester.  Their criminal records will show the arrest and charges that led to confinement.

**Findings**

        Findings are presented below.  In the neighborhood sample a record of arrest was present in 39.3% of the cases.[iv]  That is a substantial level but below the levels for homicide victims and suspects.  Unexpectedly, the proportion among victims was somewhat higher than the proportion of persons with arrest records among the suspects.
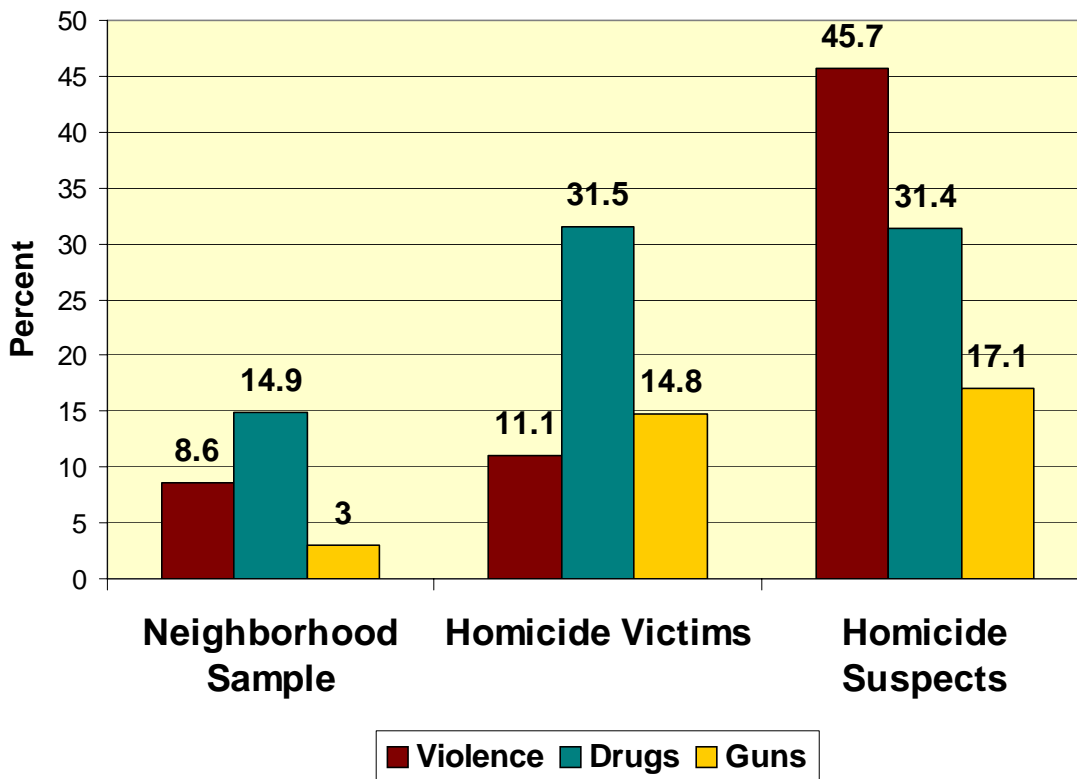
## Proportion of Groups with Arrest



        When level of charges is considered a more complete picture begins to emerge.[v] The proportions of people with misdemeanor and felony charges are both lower in the neighborhood sample than in the other groups.  Felony records are more prevalent among homicide suspects than any other group.

        Examining the specific type of charges helps to clarify the emerging pattern.[vi]

# Proportion of Group with Violence, Drug or Gun Arrests



Gaps between the neighborhood sample and the other groups grow when the nature of criminal records is considered.[vii] The neighborhood sample has the lowest level of persons charged with a violent crime while the suspects show the highest rates by far. With regard to being charged with drug offenses, homicide victims and suspects are similar and reach a level approximately twice that found in the neighborhood sample. Arrest on gun charges also separates the neighborhood sample from the victims and suspects.

These data indicated that a substantial proportion of young minority men in Rochester's high crime neighborhoods have records of arrest. They are, however, not as likely as homicide victims and suspects to have such records. When types of criminal records are considered the victims and suspects show some important similarities and they are quite distinct from the neighborhood sample. Records of violence are much

higher among suspects than in the other groups. Taken together records of arrests on charges of violence, guns and drugs distinguish the homicide victims and suspects from the neighborhood sample.

**A Check on our findings**

The fact that our data do not follow individuals in our neighborhood sample over time could bias the study if large numbers in the sample have moved out or Rochester or died. The problem would lead to underreporting of arrest records overall, as well as for specific offense types. Such underreporting, however, would not affect the ratio of arrests for specific types of crimes to the overall proportion of those with arrest record. We examined this ratio as a second means of determining whether the victims and suspects showed different criminal records than the neighborhood sample.

| Ratio of proportion arrested for each crime type to proportion with arrest record | Neighborhood Sample | Homicide Victims | Homicide Suspects |
|---|---|---|---|
| Violence | .22 | .18 | .88 |
| Drugs | .38 | .50 | .60 |
| Guns | .08 | .23 | .33 |

The data show that for each offense type (except violence in the victim group) the proportion of the arrest record that is accounted for by the charge types is higher among the victim and suspect groups. This means that suspects have a higher proportion of these offenses in their records than do victims who in turn have a higher proportion than in the neighborhood sample. This supports the overall conclusions.

**Conclusion**

These data add to our understanding of high crime neighborhoods. They show that even in such neighborhoods, where many residents may accumulate a record of arrest, a record of arrest on charges including violence, guns and drugs appears to help distinguish homicide victims and suspects from their neighbors.

**Implications for Intervention**

The data suggest that the presence of an arrest record alone should be of little value in identifying individuals for interventions seeking to prevent homicide. However, arrests for violence, gun offenses and drug offenses should be among the criteria used to select candidates for CeaseFire, Notification of Special Enforcement (NOSE) and other interventions.

[i] The home school in Rochester is that school closest to a student's residence where the student would go if he or she made no other choice.  Home school is used here as a surrogate measure of neighborhood of residence.

[ii] Criminal records data were available from the Rochester Police Department for four years.  This period was therefore examined for each group.  This may lead to similar underestimations of arrest records in each group since some arrests may predate the data.

[iii] Homicide victims and suspects under age 17 were excluded form this analysis.

[iv] The more complete data are presented below:

|  | Neighborhood Sample | Homicide Victims | Homicide Suspects |
|---|---|---|---|
| N | 303 | 78 | 52 |
| Median Age | 24.3 | 28.5 | 25.1 |
| Mean # of Arrests (sd) | 1.56 (3.0) | 1.35 (2.0) | 1.75 (2.4) |
| Mean # of Charges (sd) | 4.7 (11.8) | 6.9 (9.4) | 5.0 (7.1) |

| Offense Category | % of Neighborhood Sample (n=303) | % of Victims (n= 79) | % of Suspects (n= 52) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Any Arrest | 39.3% | 62.8 | 51.9 |
|  |  |  |  |
| Misdemeanor Charge | 24.4 | 50.0 | 34.6 |
| Felony Charge | 19.8 | 38.5 | 44.2 |
|  |  |  |  |
| Public Order Off. | 22.1 | 44.4 | 42.9 |
| Property Off | 12.5 | 44.4 | 17.1 |
| Violent Off | 8.6 | 11.1 | 45.7 |
| Drug Off | 14.9 | 31.5 | 31.4 |
| Gun Off | 3.0 | 14.8 | 17.1 |

[v] All relationships shown are significant beyond .05 using Chi Square.

[vi] In these data violent crimes include: murder, rape, assault and robbery. Drug Offenses include CPCS (Criminal Possession of a Controlled Substance) and CSCS (Criminal Sale of a Controlled Substance) in any degree, UPM (Unauthorized Possession of Marijuana). Gun crimes include possession of a firearm in any degree.

[vii] Since multiple charges often occur on a single arrest, the sum of charges will not equal the sum of the number of arrests.  Individuals may also have felony and misdemeanor arrests and arrests for any or all types of offenses. Therefore, charts are not intended to add to 100% for each group.  Data on suspects does not include charges for the current homicide in which they are a suspect.