

▲ "Murder rates are extremely low," says Skogan (on Chicago's much tamer streets). "Of the risks I face, that's the least of them."

CRIME WAIVE

Wesley Skogan knows why it's safer out there

Tune in to your local TV news tonight, and you may spend the wee hours tossing and turning. Whether it's a brutal shooting or an unsettling spate of carjackings in a neighborhood near you, violent crime seems to dominate America's video headlines. And of course it sets off shivers among those worried that the next burglar—or rapist or murderer—is headed their way.

But is the threat of violent crime real, or is our fear of it out of proportion to the true risk? In fact your chances of be-

coming a victim are lower than they were five years ago. Sure, there are still plenty of career criminals out there, but the bad guys strike significantly less often than they used to: Victimization rates for 1996 were the lowest ever recorded by the National Crime Victimization Survey since the surveys began in 1973. Violent crime is down 16 percent since 1993; property crime dropped by 17 percent in the same period. And rape declined 44 percent. Notes Wesley Skogan, a professor at Northwestern

University's Institute for Policy Research: "There's a very dramatic change taking place."

A caveat, however: Skogan—coauthor of *Community Policing, Chicago Style* (Oxford University Press)—cautions that the downturn may be temporary. "The baby boomers have aged enough to become low-risk," he reports. "But more people [the children of the baby boomers] are aging into the 14-to-24 bracket, where most offending gets done."

Yes, you should watch your wallet—especially around males, who commit the vast majority of serious crimes. "There's nothing wrong with a healthy dose of fear," says Skogan. But don't get carried away. "What concerns me is when we become prisoners of fear rather

than prisoners of crime." PEOPLE correspondent Lorna Grisby asked Skogan (who lives in Chicago with wife Barbara Puechler, a real estate agent) to share his views about the difference between preparation and paranoia.

Why has crime gone down in recent years?

The national pattern is that violent crime—murder, rape, assault and robbery—shot up at the end of the '80s and peaked about 1993. That was widely interpreted as the impact of the crack epidemic, the wars over street drug sales. It was business crime, and that's what has been falling off.

Can the drop be chalked up entirely to fewer 14-to-24-year-old males?

That's difficult to say. Chicago has seen a substantial decrease in violent crime, and we actually have more young males than we did in 1990. The U.S. now has a terrific economy, with many opportunities for employment, especially in low-skilled service category jobs. And there seems to be a significant decline in the tendency of peo-

ple to carry guns and use them on the street. But all crime is local, so the explanation varies from place to place.

Will the crime rate continue to fall?

Probably not. Many criminologists are fearful of the baby boomers' children, the so-called "echo boom," which is starting to come upon us and will continue until about 2015. Because fertility rates are higher among low-income people, and because more of the kids in this new boom come from broken families, live in poverty and have serious health problems, they are more disenfranchised than before. Not that there will be an explosion of violence, but a new crest in crime is still a big concern.

Was crime a less serious problem before World War II?

No. The boom days of crime were really the 1920s, during Prohibition. People who plot statistics call [the statistical crime graph of that decade] "Mt. Capone." There were also periods of high crime back in the 1800s—big city riots, lots of drunken violence,

more fights. And because of the lack of medical care, more wounds were fatal.

What are the most common misconceptions about crime?

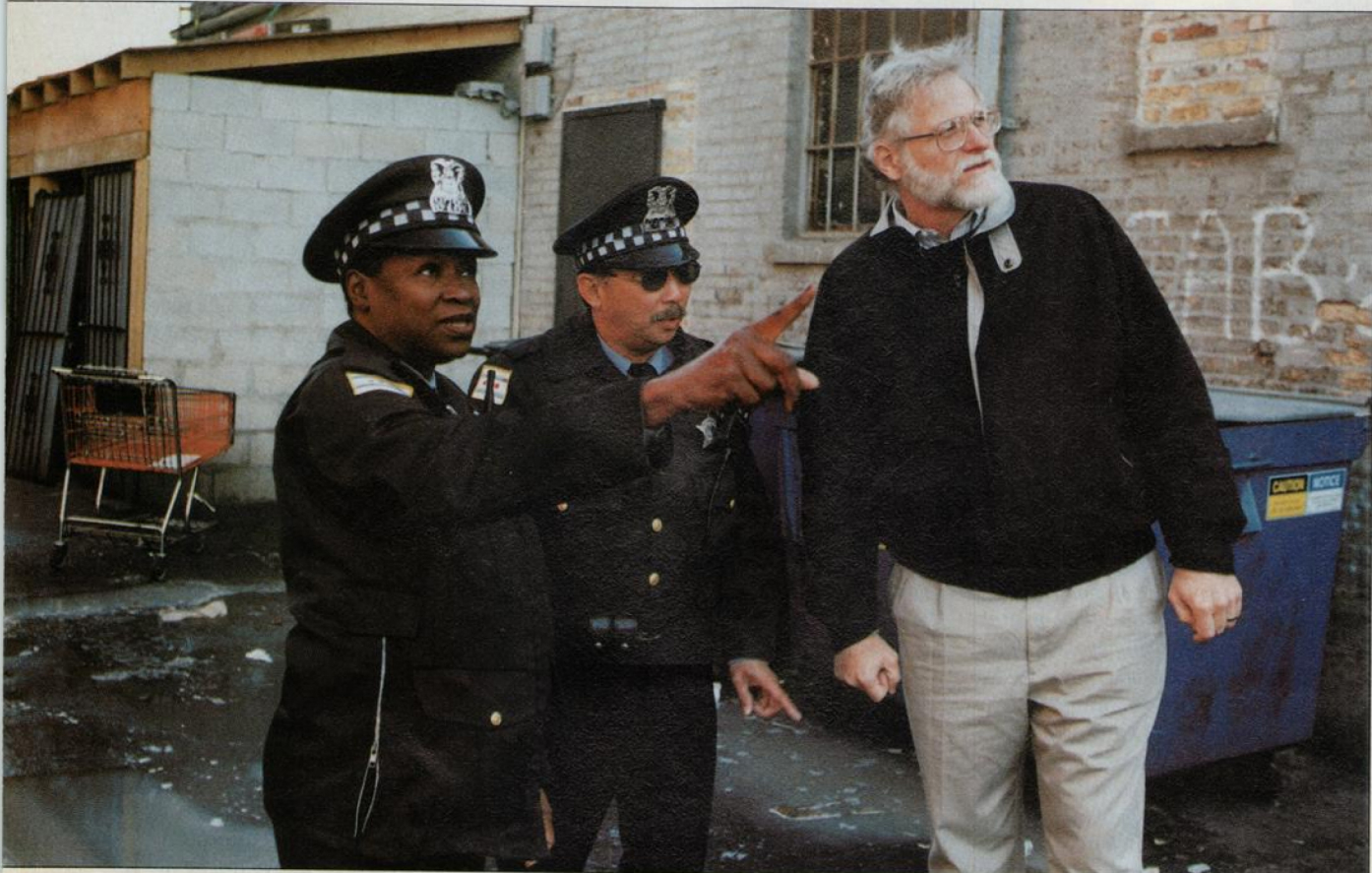
Americans are much too concerned about relatively uncommon violent crime. Even within cities, gun-related lethal violence is extremely concentrated and pretty low. What people should do is limit their risk in more common categories of victimization. Lock your car when you park, leave your house lights on when you go out after dark. Those things usually work.

Does the fear of crime harm cities?

Yes, it fuels suburban flight, which leaches jobs from the city; that leads to a smaller tax base, a shrinking middle class and more inner-city crime.

What can people do?

They can take back the night—celebrate this decrease in life-threatening crime, go places where they haven't gone before and realize it's not so bad after all. Basically what I'm saying is, Come downtown! ■



A Skogan lauds cops (like these in Chicago) for new, progressive tactics: "Police have never been more professional and civil."