

THE SICK SIXTIES

Some speculations on the postwar baby boom
and how it grew

by James Q. Wilson and Robert L. DuPont

The decade of the 1960s began in a mood of contentment with domestic affairs and confidence in international ones: it ended in an agony of bitterness and frustration over both.

The history of the change is well known, and the reasons for it are thought to be also. The country discovered poverty, confronted race, entered a war, and endured a series of tragic assassinations. By 1966, it was clear that any one of these issues, *to say nothing of all three in combination*, was sufficient to strain the political capacities and social bonds of the people very nearly to the breaking point. Not only were the problems themselves serious and difficult: in each case the *existence* of the problem was thought to be the consequence of institutional and political failures: poverty the result of neglect, riots the result of racism, and war the result of . . . what? Confusion? Miscalculations? Conspiracy? No small part of the divisiveness of the 1960s stemmed from the widespread belief that our problems could be explained and in part corrected by the assignment of moral blame. It is simple enough to document the "problems," and their remarkable growth.

Crime

In 1946, there were in this country 6.9 murders per one hundred thousand population, the highest since 1937. In the seventeen years that followed the end of World War II, the murder rate declined more or less steadily, so that by 1962 it was 4.5 per one hundred thousand population—less than two-thirds of what it had been in 1946. By 1968, it stood at 6.8, higher than at any time since 1946.

Robbery is perhaps the most feared crime, inasmuch as it so often occurs among strangers, without warning, and involves the use or threat of force. It is not so accurately counted as murder is, but most of the serious offenses probably are called to the attention of the police. In 1946, the robbery rate was 59.4 per one hundred thousand population, higher than it had been at any time since 1935. Then robbery, like murder, began to show a long, slow decline in its incidence until, by 1959, the rate was only 51.2—a drop of 14 percent. The following year it went up suddenly to 59.9, the largest one-year increase during any of the preceding seventeen years. By 1968, it had more than *doubled*, to 131.

Auto theft is also a more or less accurately counted crime: cars are insured, and victims must report the loss to collect their payments. This crime followed, until the 1960s, an opposite pattern to that for murder and robbery: the mid-1940s were a low point for auto theft, probably because the production of automobiles for civilian use had ended during World War II, so that by 1946 there were not many cars worth stealing. The low point for auto theft came in 1949, when only 107.7 cars per hundred thousand population were stolen. Then, as the country returned to a peacetime economy and new cars began rolling off the production lines, the auto theft rate began to drift upward. By 1960, it had risen to 181.6, an increase of almost 60 percent. For a year or two, the rate paused at this new high—new, at least, for any period since 1935. Then, from 1963 to 1964, it went up by the largest amount of any year since records were kept: over 30 points. In the language of the stock market

chart-makers, auto theft had "broken out," and from that year on, it showed sharp annual increases.

If the figures are to be believed, the increase in crime assumed epidemic proportions in the first few years of the 1960s. Interestingly, murder was somewhat slower to show this increase than robbery or auto theft. One reason for this may be the continued improvement in the delivery of emergency health care to people who have been assaulted: speedy ambulance drivers and skilled doctors and nurses may have saved the lives of persons who had been shot or stabbed. (In 1933, there were six times as many crimes listed as aggravated assaults as there were homicides. By 1960, the ratio had increased to seventeen to one, a crude measure, perhaps, of the improvements resulting from radio-dispatched ambulances and new medical and surgical techniques.)

Drugs

During most of the 1950s, the number of narcotic-related deaths reported by the Medical Examiner in New York City hovered around one hundred a year. In 1960, it touched two hundred for the first time since at least 1918, and perhaps ever. In 1961, there was a sudden, sharp increase, to over three hundred, and by 1967, the number had passed seven hundred a year and was still climbing. By the end of the decade, more than twelve hundred New Yorkers had died either from a lethal overdose of a narcotic or from some other cause related to being a habitual narcotic user. Furthermore, the proportion of all narcotic-related deaths due to an overdose had increased: less than half of such deaths before 1961, but more than 80 percent after 1971.

Before 1963, Atlanta probably had no more than about five hundred heroin users. By the end of the decade, the number of users had increased tenfold, to five thousand.

In Boston, the estimated number of heroin users never exceeded six hundred in the period between 1960 and 1963. Between 1963 and 1964, there was a sudden estimated increase of more than four hundred users. By the end of the decade, the number of users in Boston had increased tenfold.

Welfare

In March, 1965, Daniel P. Moynihan, then an Assistant Secretary of Labor, published a document entitled *The Negro Family*. The study described the weakness of the family structure among a large minority of blacks and argued for a national policy to correct the causes of that weakness and to support processes that would strengthen such families. The conditions he described were not new: since as early as 1950, about one-fifth of

black married women, as compared to about one-twenty-fifth of white married women, were separated from their husbands. A large and growing number of these women with children but without husbands were on welfare (that is, receiving Aid to Families With Dependent Children).

One fact in the Moynihan report, however, was utterly without precedent. Since 1948, the annual number of new AFDC cases paralleled almost precisely the unemployment rate for nonwhite males. Whenever the nonwhite unemployment rate went up, as it did in 1949, 1954, and 1957, the number of new welfare cases went up. All this was to be expected—indeed, it was exactly what most supporters of the AFDC plan desired. But in 1962-1963, a remarkable thing happened: the number of new persons admitted to AFDC started going up even though the unemployment rate was going down.

From 1961 to 1964, the unemployment rate for nonwhite males fell from 12.9 percent to 9.1 percent, but between 1962 and 1964 the number of new AFDC cases opened each year increased by almost sixty thousand. In short, entry onto the welfare rolls was for the first time being influenced by forces independent of general economic conditions and of unemployment in particular. For decades the line plotting unemployment and the line plotting new AFDC cases were parallel; beginning in about 1960, they moved in opposite directions. From its graphic appearance, the phenomenon might be referred to as the "welfare scissors."

If a second edition of the study had been published in 1969, it would have shown that the scissors continued to open: by then, the nonwhite unemployment rate had fallen to 6.5 percent, but the annual number of new AFDC cases had grown by 222 percent.

The reasons for the increase in welfare applicants at a time when economic conditions were improving remain a matter of conjecture. For some the increase was the result of the increase in illegitimacy, especially among black children, but it is far from clear that this happened (there have probably been important changes in the willingness to report a birth as illegitimate, but whether the number of such births has gone up is uncertain). If it occurred, the change took place in the first five years of the 1960s. From 1955 to 1960, the proportion of nonwhite births that were reported as illegitimate went from 20.2 percent to 21.6 percent, a trifling change; from 1960 to 1965, however, it rose from 21.6 to 26.3 percent, an increase of about one-fifth.

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Nor is it clear that the rise in welfare consumption in the early 1960s was the result of increasing proportions of women being deserted by their husbands. In 1960, 11 percent of married nonwhite women were separated from their husbands; by 1966, it was still 11 percent. The proportion divorced remained constant at 5 percent and the percentage of nonwhite female-headed households increased only slightly between 1960 and 1966.

What is clear is that a growing percentage of women eligible for AFDC began to apply for it, and to get it. Welfare became either socially more attractive or administratively more accessible or both. While only a minority of illegitimate children receive welfare, and while many women deserted by their husbands never apply for welfare, in the early 1960s more and more of those eligible for such aid sought it and, in many cities, got it.

Unemployment

During only three years between 1947 and 1957 were there as many as one million young persons (aged 16 to 24) unemployed. But since 1958 the number has never dipped below one million, and by 1961, unemployed young adults numbered 1.5 million, almost twice as many as in 1955.

The United States made enormous strides in providing jobs during the 1950s, but adults benefited more than young people. During a decade when the unemployment rate generally declined, the unemployment rate for persons 16 to 19 years of age increased, so that while the young made up only a sixth of the unemployed in 1961, they accounted for more than a quarter of it by 1971. In one year, 1963, the number of unemployed persons aged 16 to 19 alone increased to 17 percent.

The increase in teen-age and young adult unemployment was particularly sharp among nonwhites. Not only was a higher proportion of young nonwhites unemployed, but the increase in youth unemployment was greater for nonwhites than for whites: between 1960 and 1963, the peak year for the decade, the unemployment rate among persons aged 16 to 19 went up by 23 percent for whites but by 28 percent for nonwhites. In 1963, there were 176,000 unemployed young nonwhites, more than twice as many as eight years earlier; they accounted for almost one-third of all the young nonwhites in the labor force.

The early years of the 1960s suffered a sudden and marked deterioration in certain key social indicators that, taken together, was unprecedented during any of the previous twenty or thirty years. Some of these indicators, such as teen-age unemployment, were noticed and believed; others, such as those about crime and families, were noticed but not believed; and still others,

such as those pertaining to heroin addiction, were scarcely noticed. Or more precisely: "informed opinion" did not notice or believe many of these indicators.

The price that we paid for this oversight—in confusion, frustration, and social divisions—was substantial. At the very time when the United States was embarking on the longest period of sustained prosperity since World War II—a period that was to produce major improvements in incomes, educational levels, and housing and health conditions of almost every major segment of our population—the quality of life, especially of life in public places, was rapidly worsening. We were achieving the Great Society without producing the good life, enhancing our prosperity without improving our tranquillity.

The crucial years seem to have been 1962 and 1963. Well before the war in Vietnam had fully engaged us or the ghetto riots had absorbed us, the social bonds—the ties of family, of neighborhood, of mutual forbearance and civility—seem to have come asunder. Why?

There is no single explanation, but one fact is obvious: by 1962 and 1963, there had come of age the persons born during the baby boom of the immediate postwar period. A child born in 1946 would have been 16 in 1962, 17 in 1963.

The numbers involved were very large. In 1950, there were about 24 million persons aged 14 to 24; by 1960 that had increased to just under 27 million. But during the next ten years the number of young people increased by 1.3 million a year. That ten-year increase of 13 million persons was greater than the growth in the young segment of the population for the entire rest of the century. And during the first two years of the decade of the 1960s, we added more young persons (about 2.6 million) to our population than in any preceding ten years since 1930.

The result of this has been provocatively stated by Professor Norman B. Ryder, the Princeton University demographer: "There is a perennial invasion of barbarians who must somehow be civilized and turned into contributors to fulfillment of the various functions requisite to societal survival." That "invasion" is the coming of age of a new generation of young people. Every society copes with this enormous socialization process more or less successfully, but occasionally that process is almost literally swamped by a quantitative discontinuity in the numbers of persons involved: "The increase in the magnitude of the socialization tasks in the United States during the past decade was completely outside the bounds of previous experience."

If we continue Professor Ryder's metaphor, we note that in 1950 and still in 1960 the "invading army" (those aged 14 to 24) was outnumbered three-to-one by the size of the "defending army"

(those aged 25 to 64). By 1970, the ranks of the former had grown so fast that they were outnumbered by only two-to-one, a state of affairs that had not existed since at least 1890, and may never exist again in our lifetime.

The significance of these numbers is best understood by looking at one city. Take Washington, D.C. It has a large black population, a high crime rate, and is the source of countless stories about popular fears of criminal attack and countless political speeches about the need to get tough. One would think that it is a city the population of which had deteriorated substantially in the last decade or two. In fact, by most measures, quite the opposite is the case.

Consider the black population, which is almost three-fourths of the total. Its median educational level increased from 8.8 years of schooling in 1950 to 11.4 years in 1970. In 1950, there were only ten thousand black adults in the city with a college education; in 1970, there were 22,000. Black median family income, adjusted for inflation, tripled during the two decades. In 1970, when there was substantial unemployment in the country as a whole, the unemployment for black men aged 20 to 59 in Washington was only 4.5 percent and for black women the same age 3.6 percent. Washington has manifold problems of poor housing, poverty, and inadequate schooling, but it is not by any conceivable measure a vast lower-class slum or a city that has lost ground economically or educationally. To a substantial degree, it is a black middle-class or lower-middle-class community.

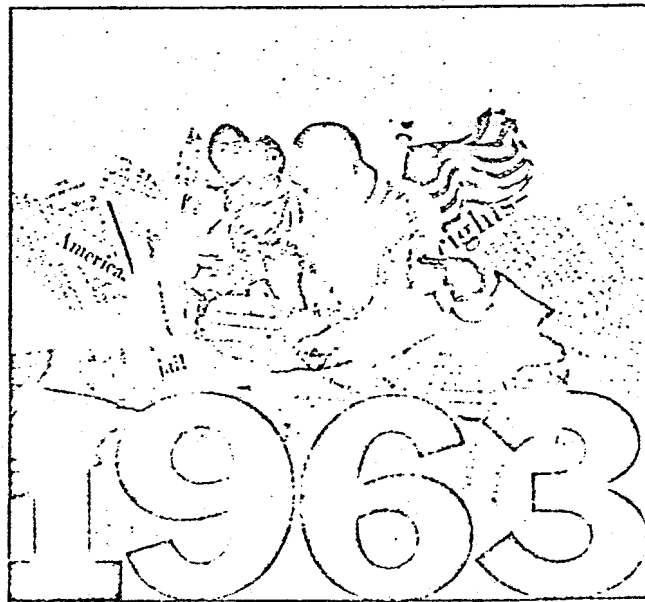
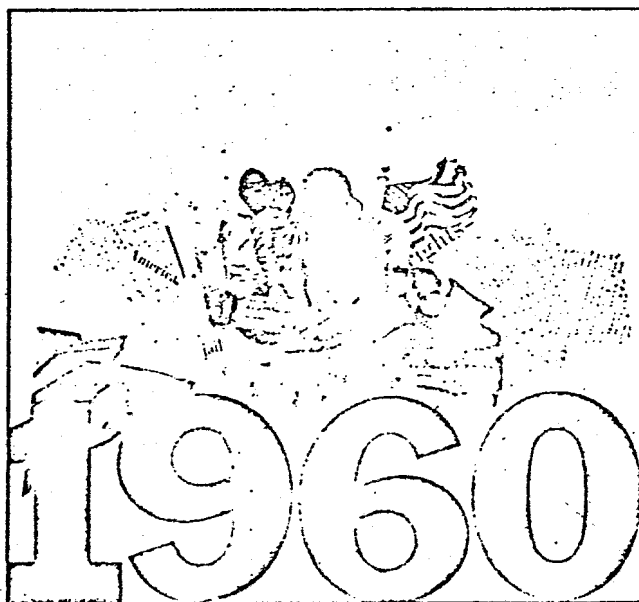
Yet Washington has for almost a decade been besieged by crime, heroin, and welfare problems due in large part to the change in the age structure of the city's population. In 1960, there were about

65,000 persons aged 16 to 21. Ten years later, as a result of the postwar baby boom, that number had risen to more than 86,000—an increase of more than 30 percent. During the 1930s, there had been only about eight thousand live births each year in the city; by the end of World War II, that number had risen to about twenty thousand per year.

The vast majority of these additional children entered the life of the city and its institutions just the way they had always done—they went to school, took jobs, got married, and had children of their own (though far fewer than the number of children their parents had). A small proportion of them did the things that some young people always do, but this time it was a small proportion of a very large number.

The schools were among the first institutions to notice the change. The number of dropouts from Washington junior high schools began to increase in 1962 and peaked in 1964. Then, as the children got older, the number of dropouts from the senior high schools began to rise, peaking in 1968. When those in school or out of school started looking for jobs, they discovered that the number of new young applicants had increased faster than the number of jobs. In Washington, the unemployment rate for blacks aged 16 to 21 had been around 8 percent during the 1950s, but during the 1960s it rose steadily until it reached 16 percent for males and 20 percent for females by 1970.

The proportion of young males in Washington who became addicted to heroin before the 1960s had been, as best one can estimate it, less than 3 percent. One might have expected that rate to remain the same for the new, larger population of young people coming of age in the 1960s. If it had, the number of addicts would have gone up by at



least a third—a serious problem, but nothing like the epidemic that actually struck. In fact, the addiction rate for males born in the decade following 1945 who grew up in Washington was over ten times the “normal” level. As the epidemic mounted, certain age groups were devastated. Of the 6000 young Washington men born in 1953, over 13 percent became heroin addicts and in some large areas of the city about *one-fourth* the males born in that year became heroin users. In the single year 1969, about 5 percent of 16-year-old males became addicted to heroin.

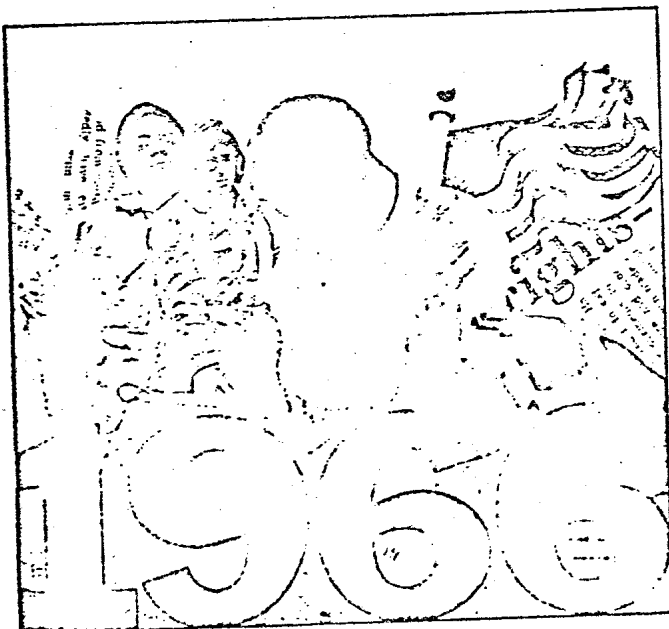
The reason for this increase can be found in the way addicts are recruited: new users are enlisted in peer groups by enthusiastic experimenters. If more than a very small number of addicts exists in a city, and if they are distributed among several different friendship groups, the rate of recruitment of new addicts can increase geometrically. The process may continue until all susceptible persons are recruited, or public countermeasures are taken, or both.

Some women were becoming addicts as well, but there were fewer female than male addicts. Welfare rather than heroin was the women’s problem. For several decades, AFDC had been utilized principally by older women who had lost their husbands. In the 1960s, as large numbers of young women entered childbearing age, there was both an increase in AFDC utilization and a change in the kind of recipient. The women on AFDC in Washington tripled between 1961 and 1971, from 5000 to over 16,000, and the largest growth occurred among young women. The number on AFDC who were over 30 increased by 140 percent, but the number who were under 30 increased by 300 percent and those under 20 increased by 800

percent. In ten years, the age of the typical woman on AFDC fell from 30 to 23.

Crime increased rapidly in this same period. Here, of course, even a crude estimate of the number of young persons involved is difficult. We obviously do not know the age of those who commit crimes, only the age of those arrested for crimes. And we do not know how many crimes are committed by the same person. But we can make some guesses, based on a recent study in Philadelphia that is perhaps the best analysis available of youthful crime. Professor Marvin Wolfgang and his co-workers at the University of Pennsylvania examined the delinquency records of all the males born in 1945 who lived in Philadelphia between their tenth and eighteenth birthdays. They found more than ten thousand of them, more than one-third of whom had at least one recorded contact with the police by the time they were eighteen, and half of these had more than one such contact. Of the delinquent acts recorded, perhaps a quarter could be regarded as relatively serious crimes. Most of the crimes were committed when the boys were 15, 16, or 17.

Suppose those proportions were true for Washington (they are not likely to be exactly the same, because the racial and economic composition of the cities differs). Since the number of persons aged 16 to 21 increased by 21,000 during the 1960s, if one-third of these committed one or more delinquent acts, by 1970 there would have been at least seven thousand more delinquents in the city than there had been when the decade started. Since each delinquent would have committed at least three offenses known to the police before he turned eighteen, 21,000 more offenses resulting in an arrest would have been committed. Many thou-



sands more that did not produce a police contact were no doubt committed.

Three implications of these data are of paramount importance. One is that much of the increase in crime, welfare utilization, and heroin addiction can be explained by the sheer numbers of young persons involved without adducing any theory about the breakdown of the family, of the church, or of society.

The second is that, except for heroin addicts during certain years in certain districts of the city, those responsible for these behaviors were a small minority of all the young persons. We estimate that of the 147,000 persons born in the decade after World War II who lived in Washington in the 1960s, about 17,200, or less than 12 percent, were either on heroin or on welfare or both.

But the third is that changes in the age structure of the population cannot alone account for the social dislocations of the 1960s. While the number of persons between the ages of 16 and 21 in the District of Columbia increased by 32 percent between 1960 and 1970, the social problems increased much more: the rate of serious crime went up by over 400 percent, welfare recipients by over 200 percent, unemployment rates by at least 100 percent, and heroin addiction by (our best guess) over 1000 percent. Detroit, to cite another example, had about 100 murders in 1960 but over 500 in 1971, yet the number of young persons did not quintuple.

It is possible that the sudden increase in the number of "risk" persons sets off an explosive increase in the amount of crime, addiction, and welfare dependency. What have once been relatively isolated and furtive acts (copping a fix, stealing a TV) become widespread and group-supported activities.

Heroin addiction is an example. We have had addicts since at least 1900, and we have always had young people who were potential addicts. We also know that addiction spreads like a contagion, with one friend "turning on" another. Yet ordinarily this contagion is rather contained and results in no epidemic of the sort that broke out in the 1960s. The sudden, dramatic increase in the number of potential addicts seems to have created a self-sustaining contagion that rapidly produced a more than proportionate number of actual addicts.

At the same time, our society did a number of things that nurtured this reaction. The media spread the message that a "youth culture" was being born and celebrated the cult of personal liberation that seemed to be central to that culture. Enhanced personal mobility made it easier to carry a contagion from one group to another. Social programs designed to combat poverty brought together groups that once would have been isolated from each other and thus facilitated

the contagion. The contacts of upper-middle-class suburban youths with ghetto blacks as a result of civil rights programs increased access to the drug culture, or perhaps created in the eyes of the whites the mistaken view that such a "culture" existed, and was desirable, when in fact only deviant and episodic drug-taking existed.

The institutional mechanisms which could handle problems in ordinary numbers were suddenly swamped and may, in some cases, have broken down entirely. The deterrent force of the police and the courts may not be great in normal times but it may have declined absolutely, not just relatively, in those exceptional times. The increase in crime produced a less than proportionate increase in arrests and, of those arrested, probably a less than proportionate increase in penalties. If the supply and value of legitimate opportunities (that is, jobs) were declining at the very time that the cost of illegitimate activities (that is, fines and jail terms) was also declining, a rational teen-ager might well have concluded that it made more sense to steal cars than to wash them.

One is tempted to ask, "What might have been?" If the age structure of the decade had been normal, if crime and addiction and welfare dependency had not increased so dramatically, could we have come up with our problems any more successfully than we did? Indeed, what would we have considered our problems to be? The war and its divisiveness would have occurred in any event. The demand by blacks for equality of opportunity would still have arisen, though the number of young blacks available for militant protest would have been smaller. The ghetto riots might still have occurred.

But perhaps some problems would have been easier to address had not the social structure appeared to have collapsed. We might have had a more sensible discussion of riots and what to do about them if it had not been so easy for some to link (incorrectly, we think) the existence of rioting with the rise of ordinary criminality. Programs designed to solve teen-age unemployment would clearly have been more successful if so large a fraction of employable teen-agers had not been deeply involved in heroin addiction and remunerative crime. In retrospect, we might not have described certain Great Society programs as failures if the problems they sought to remedy—unemployment, dropping out of school, low educational achievement—had not been suddenly enlarged in scope and altered in character. Rebuilding or rehabilitating our inner-city neighborhoods might have been much easier had not so many of these areas been destroyed as communities by crime and addiction.

But we are not yet sure we can even explain what *did* happen; we shall never be able to explain what *might* have happened. □