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Policing gun violence: Explaining patterns and trends in arrest rates

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Police have primary responsibility for arresting perpetrators and preparing cases against them. Success in this effort contributes to crime prevention and public safety through deterrence, incapacitation, and other mechanisms. In many cities the most costly crime problem is gun violence, and investigations of murders and gun assaults should be a high priority. But most such investigations end without an arrest or successful prosecution. The presentation will report several results from a research program on improving the quality of police investigations. My focus will be on why nonfatal criminal shootings have a lower clearance rate than fatal shootings (murders), and why there has been a secular decline in homicide clearance rates since the 1960s. Both patterns are analyzed using a simple conceptual framework in which a police department's clearance rate is considered the output from a co-production process with police and community inputs, conditioned on the volume and mix of cases. Unique data sets from Chicago, Boston, and Durham, NC are utilized in this analysis. Among the findings: (1) The case mixes for fatal and nonfatal shooting cases are very similar. The higher arrest rate for fatal shootings in Boston only emerges after the first few days, suggesting that unlike investigations of nonfatal shootings, murder investigations remain active for weeks after the shooting; (2) A long time series for Chicago replicates the national pattern of declining clearance rates. The Chicago data provide evidence that this decline is not the result of a change in case mix. Among the remaining possibilities are increasing caseload relative to investigation capacity, and declining quality of civilian input (cooperation). Some evidence favors the latter.