

Contexts

<http://ctx.sagepub.com/>

Crime Decline in Context

Richard Rosenfeld

Contexts 2002 1: 25

DOI: 10.1525/ctx.2002.1.1.25

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://ctx.sagepub.com/content/1/1/25>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:



Additional services and information for *Contexts* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://ctx.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://ctx.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations: <http://ctx.sagepub.com/content/1/1/25.refs.html>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Feb 1, 2002

[What is This?](#)

crime decline in context

Skyrocketing violent crime rates obsessed Americans for decades. Crime rates have now been dropping for 10 years. What has happened, and how can we learn from it?

After rising to a peak in the early 1990s, crime rates in the United States have been falling for almost a decade. The turnaround was sudden, unexpected, and years later remains something of a puzzle. Some observers attribute most of the drop to tougher sentences and rising rates of imprisonment. Others believe more vigilant policing of loitering, public drunkenness, and other so-called quality-of-life offenses is responsible. Still others point to shrinking drug markets or the booming economy of the 1990s. No strong consensus exists regarding the sources of the crime drop.



Photograph courtesy of the North Carolina Department of Corrections

Marion Correctional Institution, Marion, North Carolina.

Even if we cannot say with certainty what is responsible for the crime decline of the 1990s, it is possible to rule out some of the usual causes and identify some of the real factors in the crime drop. But the first step in unraveling the mystery of the crime decline is to determine whether it happened at all.

real crime decline?

Several years after the rate of crime began declining, most Americans continued to rank crime among the nation's most serious public problems and to believe that crime rates were still going up. A relatively small percentage of Americans have direct experience with serious crime. The primary source of public information about crime is the mass media. Given the constant media drumbeat of murder and mayhem, it is not surprising that people would be unaware or skeptical of claims that crime rates were dropping. But they were and still are.

The crime decline is real, not an artifact of changes in the rate at which crimes are reported to or recorded by the police. It is significant, long, and deep enough to qualify as a trend and not just a short-run statistical anomaly. It is pervasive, cutting across major offense categories and population groups. Finally, it is time-limited. Crime rates cannot be negative, so the rate of decline curve should slow in the coming years. And it is possible, of course, that crime rates will increase, as they did in the 1980s. Predicting the future is always hazardous, but the best guesses about the next decade will be based on an informed assessment of the recent past.

documenting the decline

A "crime rate" is the number of offenses of a specified type divided by the population of some jurisdiction. By taking population size into account, crime rates can be compared across places and times with different populations. The nation has two "official" crime rates. One consists of offenses known to the police. These are compiled in the FBI's Uniform Crime

So the declines in crime are real, but are they meaningful? The simple answer is yes. By the year 2000, homicide and burglary rates were lower than at any time since the mid-1960s. Victimization rates have fallen for youth, adults, blacks, whites, males, and females, in large cities and rural areas, in every region of the country. But the timing and magnitude of these changes differ across population groups, and those differences offer important clues regarding the causes of the crime decline.

Reports (UCR). The other is based on reports by victims to the Justice Department's annual National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS). Both of the crime indicators include informa-

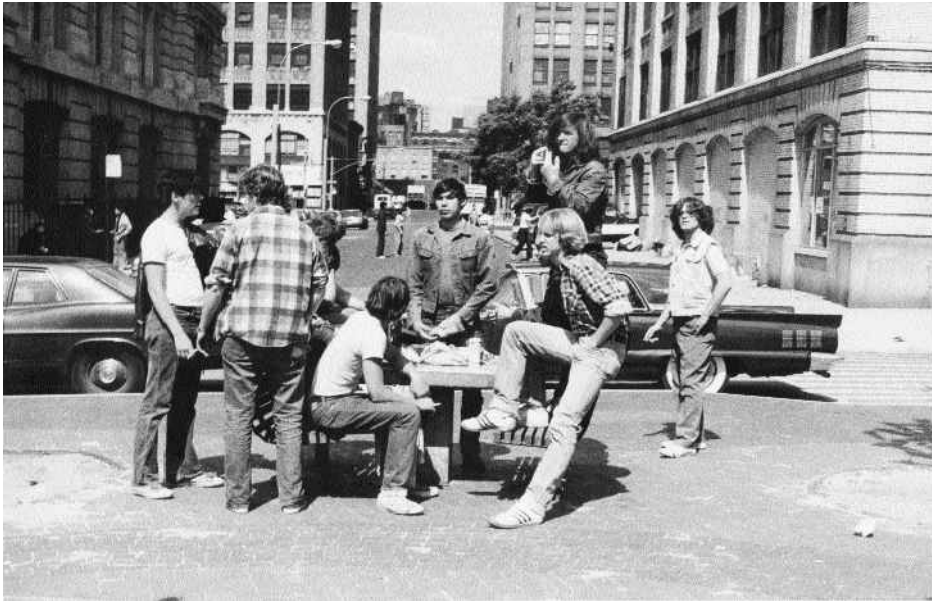


Photo by Steve Gold

Unemployed youth, Manhattan.

tion on serious violent and property offenses, such as assault, rape, robbery, burglary and auto theft. The UCR also records homicides which, of course, are not counted in victim surveys. Both the FBI report and the Justice Department survey are limited to so-called street crimes and omit serious white-collar, corporate, and governmental offenses (e.g., price-fixing, violations of workplace safety rules, pollution, corruption, antitrust violations and false advertising). National indicators for such "suite" crimes do not exist, so no one knows whether they have been rising or falling.

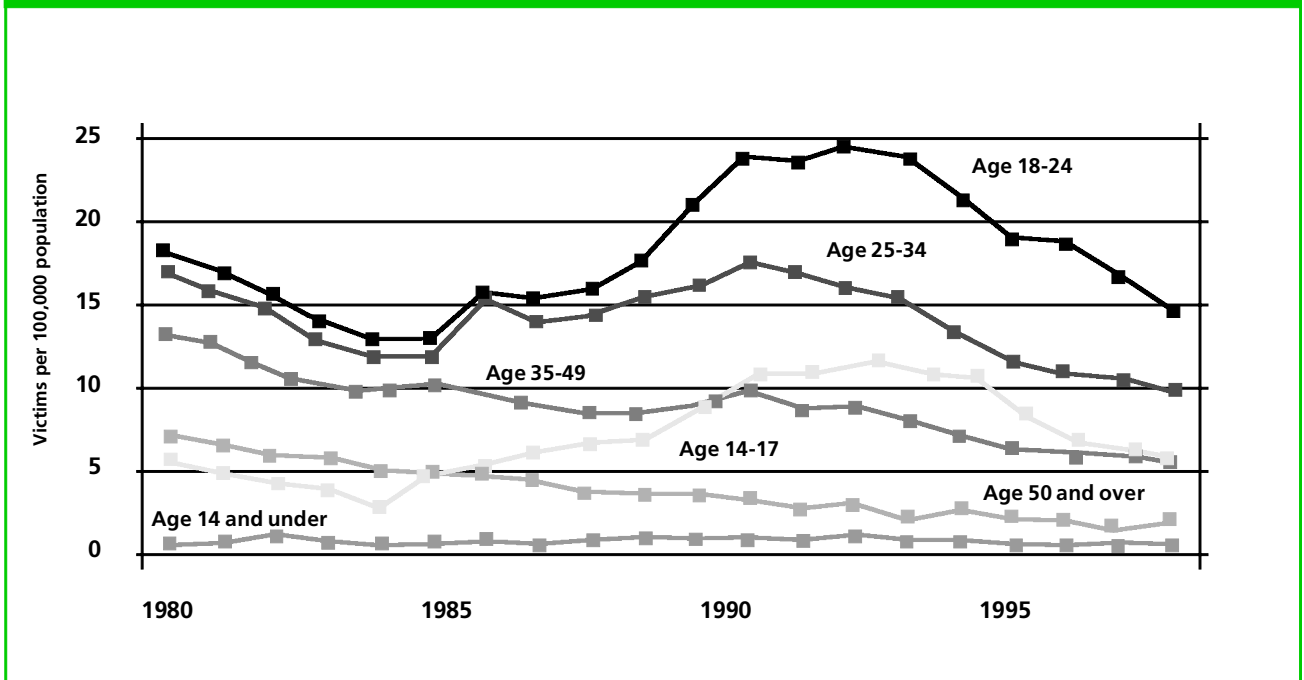
The FBI statistics indicate that street crime has substantially decreased over the past decade. In 1991 the FBI counted 24,700 criminal homicides in the United States, or 9.8 homicides for every 100,000 Americans. By the end of 1999, the number of homicides had dropped to 15,500, and the rate fell to 5.7 per 100,000, a 42 percent decline. The nation's robbery rate also fell by about 40 percent and the burglary rate dropped by one-third during the 1990s. The decreases were less steep, but still appreciable, for rape and aggravated assault (assaults involving serious injury or the use of a weapon), both of which declined by about 20 percent. There is some reason to believe that the declines in nonlethal violence are even sharper than those reported in the FBI report because victims became bolder about reporting such incidents to the police and the police recorded more of them. However, the drop registered in the FBI report and police statistics is mirrored in Justice Department survey results that are unaffected by patterns in reporting and recording.

So the declines in crime are real, but are they meaningful? The simple answer is yes. By the year 2000, homicide and burglary rates were lower than at any time since the mid-1960s. Victimization rates have fallen for youth, adults, blacks, whites, males, and females, in large cities and rural areas, in every region of the country. But the timing and magnitude of these changes differ across population groups, and those differences offer important clues regarding the causes of the crime decline.

Consider the difference in the timing of the decrease in youth and adult homicide victims. The victimization rates for people over the age of 24 have fallen more or less continuously since 1980. On the other hand, youth homicide followed a more cyclical pattern, falling during the early 1980s, rising from the mid-1980s to a peak in 1993 and then falling again since then. The increase in youth homicide during the 1980s and early 1990s was so dramatic that it gave rise to concerns about a national youth violence "epidemic." The victimization rate for 14- to 17-year-olds nearly tripled, and that for 18- to 24-year-olds almost doubled between 1984 and 1993. The fall from the 1993 peak in youth homicide has been equally pronounced (figure 1). The trends in the rates at which teenagers and young adults committed homicide were almost identical to the victimization trends.

I focus on criminal homicide in this discussion because more accurate and detailed information about the characteristics of victims and offenders exists for homicide than for other crimes and because it is the most serious. However, the same basic patterns also characterize serious nonlethal criminal violence.

figure 1
Homicide Rates by Age of Victim, 1980-1998



A credible explanation of the homicide decline, then, must explain why the time trends were different for adult and youth homicides, the first dropping steadily since 1980, the second fluctuating. Another notable pattern in the homicide drop involves the differing time trends for offenses committed with and without firearms. Roughly two-thirds of homicides in the United States are committed with a gun. Both the increase in youth homicide during the 1980s and early 1990s and the decrease over the last several years are restricted largely to the firearm category. Youth homicides involving other weapons or no weapons exhibit a gradual downward shift over the past 20 years, and adult homicide rates have decreased in both the firearm and nonfirearm categories. The “action,” then, in the national homicide rate for the last two decades is a consequence of rising and falling rates of youths killing and being killed with guns. A sufficient explanation of recent homicide trends cannot ignore the prominent role of guns in the cycle of youth violence.

The cycling up and down in youth firearm violence occurred earliest and was most pronounced in the largest cities and among young African-American males. The same changes happened in smaller cities and among white teenagers and young adults, but happened a year or two later and the fluctuations were smaller. (Persons of “other races”

constitute only 2 to 3 percent of the nation’s homicide victims.) A sufficient explanation of the recent homicide trends should accommodate these race, sex, and city-size differences as well.

An explanation of the crime drop should account for why the trends differ for youth and adults and why they are most evident in firearm homicides, in the large cities and among young black men. Serious explanations should account for both the rise and the decline in crime rates since the 1980s. And the best explanation will connect those recent changes to longer-term trends and to the social conditions that make the United States the murder capital of the industrial world, the crime decline notwithstanding.

drug markets and the spread of firearms

No single explanation of the crime decline has been proposed that meets all of these conditions. One of the more promising, however, attributes the increase in youth homicide rates beginning in the mid-1980s to the diffusion of violence in and around urban crack markets. The high demand for crack led drug dealers to recruit young inner-city males as sellers and arm them to fend off attacks from rival dealers and protect themselves from street robbers. A classic arms race resulted as other young people acquired guns in an increas-

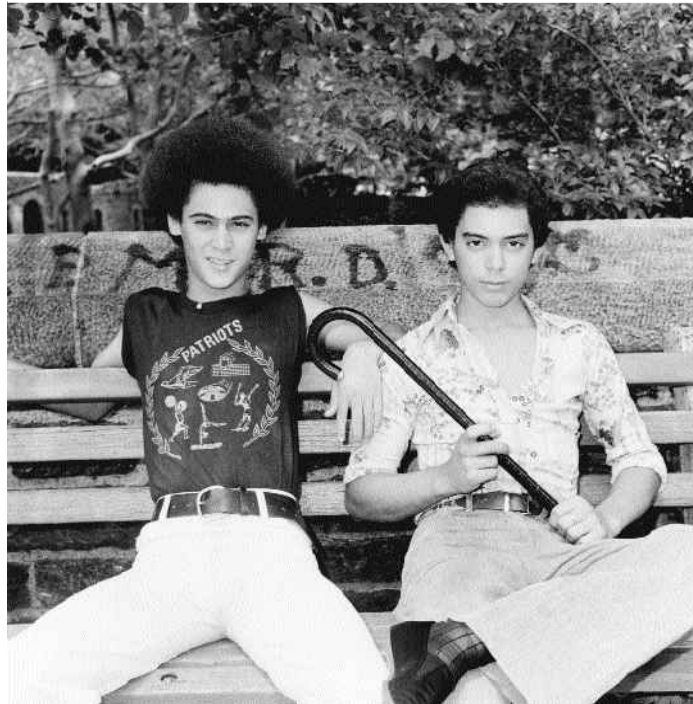


Photo by Steve Gold

Two unemployed young men, Manhattan.

ingly threatening urban environment. The diffusion of firearms fueled escalating rates of youth homicide, with the sharpest increases occurring in the largest cities where the crack epidemic began. The increases in youth homicide, in turn, drove up the total homicide rate.

If this explanation of the increase also applies to the homicide decline, the turning point and drop in youth homicide should have been preceded by corresponding changes in the urban crack markets. That is exactly what happened. The crack epidemic crested around 1990 and the drug markets began to shrink, the process occurring first in the largest cities. The firearm-diffusion hypothesis squares with most of the basic facts underlying the crime decline. It accounts for why the drop occurred in the larger cities before the smaller ones, why it has been concentrated among young African Americans and why it has involved firearms. (Drug dealers do not use fists, sticks, or knives to settle disputes.) Most important, it highlights the changes among adolescents and young adults, and thereby situates the crime decline of the 1990s in the context of earlier increases.

what about adults?

The firearm-diffusion story does not explain everything we want to know about the crime decline. It is silent on the long-

term decrease in homicide among adults. What little we know about that decline suggests it is driven in part by a marked decrease in "intimate partner" homicides—killings involving husbands, wives, boyfriends, and girlfriends—and in part by the explosive increase in incarceration since 1980. But neither of these factors explains the adult homicide decline in its entirety, and the reduction in intimate partner homicide itself requires explanation.

Recent research suggests that plummeting marriage rates and the growth of hot lines, shelters, legal advocacy, and other domestic violence prevention resources have contributed to the drop in intimate partner killings. One study found the greatest declines in intimate partner homicides over the last 25 years occurred in those cities with the largest drops in marriage rates, the largest increases in divorce rates, and the most rapid growth in shelters and legal advocacy programs for domestic violence victims. Interestingly, the largest homicide drops occurred in the rate at which women kill their husbands or boyfriends and not, as might be expected, in the rate at which women are killed by their male partners. Researchers speculate that domestic violence programs, by offering women a nonviolent means of escaping abusive relationships, make it less likely they will have to kill their way out. However, because prevention programs are designed to assist women, their

growth should have little effect on male behavior. Although interesting, such speculations remain just that. In general, criminologists know even less about the causes of the 20-year adult homicide drop than about the youth homicide epidemic.

criminal justice, the economy and firearms policy

Even allowing for some lag between shrinking drug markets and falling rates of youth firearm violence, the crime decline is far longer and deeper than can be explained by the waning of the crack epidemic alone. It seems certain that other factors are at work, and there is no lack of alternative explanations, some of which are truly inspired. For example, economists Steven Levitt and John Donahue have proposed that the drop in youth violence during the 1990s is due in large part to the legalization of abortion in the 1970s. Their logic is that the increase in abortions, especially among poor women, led to fewer births of unwanted children who, had they been born, would have contributed more than their share of criminal violence as teenagers in the 1990s. Although Levitt and Donahue offer some intriguing evidence for their thesis, proving the counterfactual—that is, demonstrating that something would have happened (more crime) had something else not happened (legal abortions)—is inherently difficult. And even if they are correct about how the increase of abortion might have led to the contraction of youth crime, their argument is silent on

the long-term decline in adult crime, as well as on the abrupt increase in youth crime during the 1980s. Finally, who is to say how many children, once born, remain “unwanted”?

The “more abortions, less crime” thesis is, not surprisingly, controversial. It is also quite new, and replication studies by other researchers have not yet appeared. Several other explanations for the crime drop have received greater research attention. Four are particularly prominent in both scholarly and policy circles: better policing, growing imprisonment, the booming economy and firearms policies.

Policing. Some analysts believe that smart and tough policing is behind the crime drop. That is the reason former Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and former police commissioner William Bratton gave for the dramatic drop in New York City’s homicide rate during the 1990s. However, homicide rates also have decreased sharply in cities that did not noticeably alter their policing policies, such as Los Angeles, or that instituted very different changes from those in New York, such as San Diego. Aggressive policing against minor offenses may have contributed to the crime decline in New York and elsewhere but, as Orlando Patterson and Christopher Winship have pointed out, at the price of heightened police-citizen tension and violence.

Prison Expansion. The other criminal justice response that has been touted as responsible for the crime drop is the massive expansion in incarceration. The prison population has quadrupled since 1980 and now numbers more than 1.3 million inmates. It would be surprising if incarceration growth of



Photo by Keri Pickett, courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society

Teens working at a car wash in Minneapolis, Minnesota.



Photo by Keri Pickett, courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society

Among boys learning auto mechanics in Minnesota.

that magnitude had no effect on the crime rate. But little agreement exists on the size of that effect. Also, whatever crime suppression effects incarceration may have must be reckoned against possible crime increases resulting from the diminished economic prospects of ex-prisoners and the disruptions in the local community when so many men are away in prison.

Prison expansion has been accompanied by a growth in the number of sentenced offenders subject to the death penalty and a dramatic rise in executions since the revival of capital punishment in the United States in the 1970s. By the end of 1999, more than 3,500 inmates were on death row, and nearly 600 had been executed. However, whatever the merits of the death penalty, less violent crime does not appear to be one of them. No credible evidence supports the use of capital punishment to reduce homicide or other forms of criminal violence.

The Economy. One benign alternative to expanded imprisonment is expanded employment. There seems little doubt that the record drops in unemployment rates, including those for minority teenagers, during the economic boom of the 1990s contributed in some way to the crime decline over the same period. But in what way? The relationship between employment and crime is far from simple and is the subject of ongoing debate among social scientists. Do crime rates fall during periods of economic growth because more people are working or because working people are making more money? And if people are earning more and buying more, that creates

more opportunities for theft and the violence that sometimes accompanies it. Moreover, a drop in the unemployment rate or an increase in wages may reduce crime only when illegitimate opportunities for making money, such as drug dealing, are disappearing. If that is true, it is the combination of rising legitimate and falling illegitimate opportunities that has made criminal activity a less attractive alternative to legal work for many low-income youth.

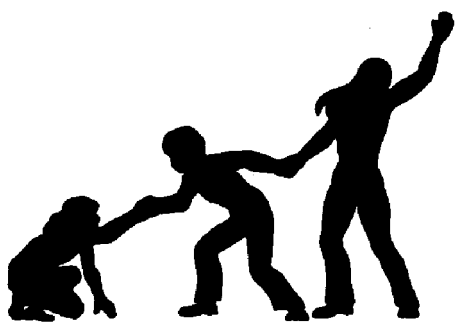
A sizable fraction of teenagers, inner-city teenagers in particular, switch back and forth from low-end jobs in the legitimate and illegitimate labor markets, depending on shifts in prevailing opportunities. During periods of stagnation in the legitimate labor market and growth in illegitimate opportunities, such as the 1980s crack epidemic, we should observe increases in youth crime and violence. Likewise, we should observe drops in teenagers' criminal involvement when their legitimate opportunities are expanding and their illegitimate opportunities are shrinking, as during the economic boom and crack market crash of the 1990s. Both observations fit the temporal pattern of serious youth violence over the past two decades.

Firearms Policy. Given the significant role of guns in serious criminal violence, it is not surprising that the crime decline has been linked to changes in firearm regulations. Some analysts believe that granting persons permission to carry firearms in public deters violent crime by making offenders wary of armed victims. Others favor background checks and waiting periods, such as those required by the 1994 Brady Act, as a way to

reduce criminal misuse of handguns. Some people think, in the words of one pro-gun enthusiast, that more guns lead to less crime, while others believe that fewer guns, or fewer guns in the “wrong” hands, will reduce serious criminal violence. Evidence regarding the effectiveness of either policy is mixed. Some firearm initiatives, such as the popular gun buyback programs that have sprung up over the past decade, clearly do not reduce levels of firearm violence. More promising strategies include longer prison sentences for using a gun in a crime and police “gun patrols” in which seizures of illegal guns are focused in high-risk areas. However, we do not know how much of the crime decline can be attributed to either of these factors.

the big picture

What is the significance of these various partial accounts of the 1990s crime decline? First, none of them is a complete explanation for the crime drop. That is not just because researchers lack sufficient evidence; more important is that major social phenomena, such as serious crime, are rarely driven by a single factor. A comprehensive explanation of the crime decline will have to encompass multiple, interacting factors. Second, we cannot create a comprehensive explanation simply by adding together the various causal factors highlighted in these partial accounts, because we lack a theory that tells us just how it is that law enforcement, imprisonment, economic expansion, drug markets, and firearm diffusion—not to mention abortion—combine to reduce crime in the context of long-term trends. We badly need such an account if we are to anticipate and prepare for, much less forestall, the next increase.



Logo for a refuge center serving women who have suffered from domestic violence and sexual assault.

Image courtesy of the Shasta County Women's Refuge

Although such a theory has not yet been produced, productive first steps have been taken. Gary LaFree argues that changes in crime rates reflect the rise and fall of institutional legitimacy in a society. The basic function of institutions such

as the family, economy, and political system is to regulate social behavior in the service of basic human needs. When institutions function properly, they enjoy high levels of legitimacy. People believe in the institutions, play by the rules, and crime rates decline. At other times, people question whether institutions are getting the job done—for example, when divorce and unemployment rates rise. Institutions lose people's allegiance and the capacity to control people's behavior, and crime rates go up. LaFree has applied his theory to the dramatic rise in crime rates that occurred during the late 1960s and in the 1970s, a period of significant social upheaval, political scandal and institutional challenge. Crime rates stabilized in the 1980s, in part, LaFree suggests, because some of the

The basic function of institutions such as the family, economy, and political system is to regulate social behavior in the service of basic human needs. When institutions function properly, they enjoy high levels of legitimacy. People believe in the institutions, play by the rules and crime rates decline.

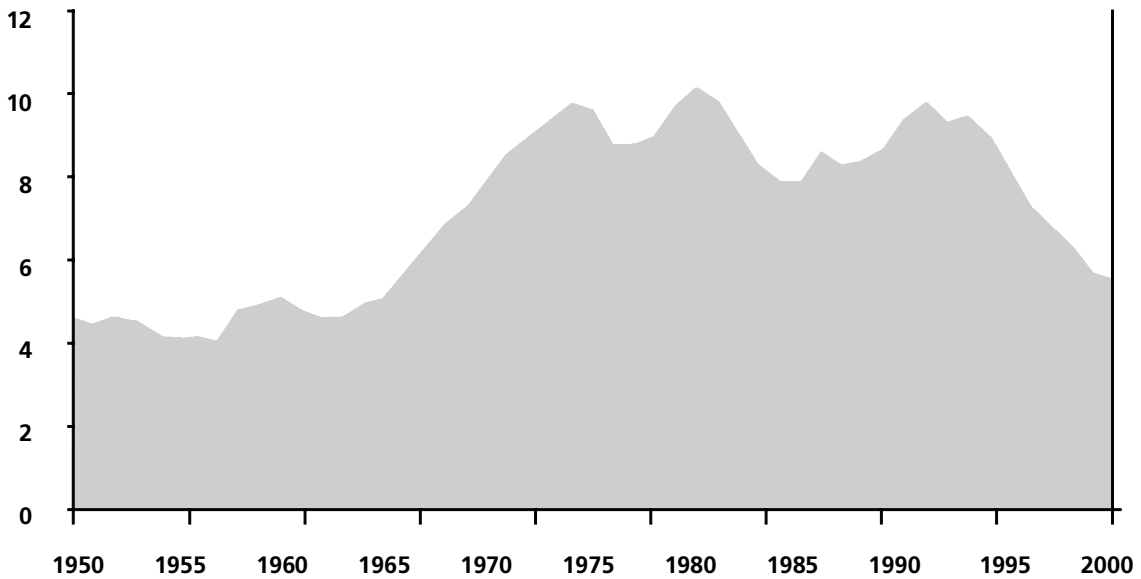
changes that had wrenched the family and economy slowed or reversed (divorce rates stopped climbing, the economy began to grow), and also because policy makers responded to the increase in crime by expanding other institutions, such as the social welfare and criminal justice systems. Those expansions helped to head off further crime increases.

When LaFree published his argument, the crime decline of the 1990s had just begun, yet if the theory of institutional legitimacy is correct, crime rates will fall when the economy is booming, consumer confidence (an indicator of economic “legitimacy”) is climbing, and prisons are expanding—all trademark characteristics of the roaring nineties. These changes evidently were sufficient to offset the effects of the Clinton scandals on political legitimacy and to permit a substantial downsizing of the welfare rolls.

Legitimacy theory, however, is both too broad and too narrow to fully explain the crime decline and the longer trend of which it is a part. It is too broad because it tells us little about the youth violence epidemic of the 1980s and the social conditions in the cities that nourish drug markets and high levels of firearm violence. And it is too narrow because it does not explain why, even during periods of strong institutional

figure 2

Homicides Per 100,000 Population in the United States, 1950-2000



legitimacy such as the 1950s, rates of criminal violence in the United States remain higher than those in most other developed nations (figure 2).

The sharp increase in youth homicide rates in the late 1980s, as noted earlier, was brought about by the firearm violence emanating in and around the inner-city crack markets. But why were the crack markets so heavily concentrated in already distressed urban areas, and why were they so violent? The insights of a number of sociologists shed light on these issues. Crack sellers were attracted to those neighborhoods where residents were least able to keep them out. William Julius Wilson describes such areas as being subject to multiple “dislocations” in the form of chronically high levels of joblessness, family disruption and extreme social isolation. Their residents are often unable to engage in the kind of cooperative and supervisory activities that Robert Sampson and his colleagues term “collective efficacy.” Collective efficacy enables

communities to contain street crime and resist the predations of drug dealers—in fact, it very much defines what we mean by the word *community*. Along with isolation from mainstream patterns of conduct, alienation from formal institutions of justice, and diminished personal security comes the development of an alternative “code of the street” that, according to Elijah Anderson, encourages violent responses, particularly among young men, to perceived slights, insults and disrespect.

Prolonged joblessness and reduced collective efficacy explain why illicit drug markets emerge when and where they do; isolation, alienation, and the code of the street explain why they are so violent. These ideas help to fill in the gaps in LaFree’s theory, but they do not contradict its basic premise that crime rates increase with the loss of institutional legitimacy. On the contrary, it is hard to imagine a better illustration of that premise than the barren institutional landscape typical of so many high-crime inner-city neighborhoods.



Photo by Todd Myers

Neighborhoods can have similar demographic and economic profiles, but markedly different crime and infectious disease rates and social structures.



Photo by Todd Myers

Neighborhood with same demographics and socioeconomic status as photo above, but with greater social dislocation, higher infectious disease rates, etc. — a good candidate for higher crime rates.

how long will it last?

If the ideas of Wilson, Sampson, Anderson, and others help to narrow the focus of the legitimacy theory on the isolated ghetto poverty areas of the inner cities, we should remember that even at its low points, criminal violence in the United States remains very extensive by international standards. The U.S. homicide rate in particular—even the white homicide rate alone—is higher than that of every other developed nation. Some analysts have, reasonably enough, tied the high level of lethal violence to the limited regulation and widespread possession of firearms in the United States. Certainly firearms are deadly implements, but still we must ask why they are so unrestricted and plentiful in comparison with other nations, and more basically, why they are so often used to kill people.

An influential theory proposes that people use violence as a means of “self-help” when they lack lawful means of resolving conflicts or protecting themselves. Abused women’s use of violence when they lack alternative ways to protect themselves from abusive partners is one example. Now consider the role of gun violence in illicit drug markets. Unable to use the police and courts for resolving disputes with suppliers, competitors, and customers, dealers use violence to enforce discipline, secure territory and supplies, collect debts, and protect against theft. Once guns enter the picture, the violence that begins as an enforcement code in drug markets can quickly diffuse throughout a community as people seek to protect themselves by any means necessary.

As the demand for crack diminished, so did the markets that supplied the drug and generated the violence, and the crime drop began. Multiple factors caused the crime decline of the 1990s, as well as the increase that preceded it. These factors tend to be cyclical. While cycles in the demand for particular drugs, in economic conditions, and in police aggressiveness in going after guns can reduce crime, those reductions are cyclically limited. Lasting and deeper reductions in crime will require correspondingly major reductions in the chronic economic insecurity, social isolation, and alienation found in our nation’s most violent communities. The current decline in crime offers opportunities for social change that are not available when people are too afraid to participate in their communities. But time is running out. ■

recommended resources

Anderson, Elijah. *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1999.

Blumstein, Alfred, and Joel Wallman, eds. *The Crime Drop in America*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

LaFree, Gary. *Losing Legitimacy: Street Crime and the Decline of Social Institutions in America*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1998.

Sampson, Robert J., Stephen W. Raudenbush, and Felton Earls. “Neighborhoods and Violent Crime: A Multilevel Study of Collective Efficacy.” *Science* 277 (1997): 918–24.

Wilson, William Julius. *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996.