“It is a pleasure to see sanity and balance brought to a topic that is typically fraught with emotionality and simple-minded, wrong-headed diagnoses and solutions. Blumstein and Wallman have accomplished just that. They have done a beautiful job of sorting out and assessing the demographic, economic, and public-policy origins of the great fluctuations in American crime during the past two decades. Both the editors and authors are to be congratulated for their insistence on multiple causes, their methodological sophistication, and their prudent interpretations.”

Neil Smelser, Director, Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences

“At last, a scholarly, disinterested examination of the rapid decline in violence during the 1990s, a phenomenon as puzzling as it was unprecedented. Many have claimed credit, from police executives to prison advocates, yet these essays show that many forces were at work. Targeted policing, a strong economy, new gun policies, higher imprisonment rates, stabilized drug markets – all played a role. Yet the book offers sober reminders that broad social forces, including changes in youth culture and marriage patterns, contribute to our crime condition. For all who care about a safe and just society, this book is a required primer.”

Jeremy Travis, Senior Fellow, Urban Institute, former Director of the National Institute of Justice (1994–2000) and Deputy Commissioner for Legal Matters of the New York City Police Department (1990–94)

“Pundits have been all too ready to assign credit for the recent near-miraculous reductions in violent crime. But before we commit to 1990s innovations in policing, sentencing, drug programs, and the like, it’s necessary to take a careful look at the evidence. That’s why this book is so important, and yet surely will irritate those who favor simple answers. The authors provide a patient and penetrating assessment of the contending explanations for the crime drop, nicely deflating the more strident claims and establishing a sound basis for moving forward.”

Philip J. Cook, ITT Terry Sanford Distinguished Professor of Public Policy Studies, Sanford Institute of Public Policy, Duke University, coauthor, Gun Violence: The Real Costs (2000)

“This is the definitive examination of the crime drop. Every criminologist should read it ... before the crime rate starts to go up again. *

Jack Levin, Director, The Brudnick Center on Violence and Conflict, Northeastern University, coauthor, The Will to Kill: Making Sense of Senseless Murder
“Recent widespread declines in violence across the United States have puzzled criminologists and challenged traditional criminological theories. This volume, edited by Alfred Blumstein and Joel Wallman, assesses a wide variety of alleged causes of the decline. Criminologists interested in making sense of the puzzle will find the thematic collection of papers to be essential reading.”

Robert J. Sampson, Lucy Flower Professor of Sociology and of the Social Sciences in the College, The University of Chicago

“A towering optimistic masterpiece in its clear, logical revelation that both the causes and answers to crime are many and complex, and don’t lend themselves to the simplistic, one-solution-fits-all, bumper-sticker type slogans of politicians.”

Peter Elkann, author of Superpredators: The Demonization of our Children by the Law; expert commentator, Court TV

“While politicians pounded their chests, the authors were doing it the right way: systematically mining for evidence of what led to the great drop in crime during the 90s. What they unearthed is both provocative and convincing, and they only give politicians some of the credit.”

Wesley Skogan, Professor, Institute for Policy Research, Northwestern University
The Crime Drop in America

Violent crime in America shot up sharply in the mid-1980s and continued to climb until 1991, after which something remarkable and unprecedented occurred. For the next seven years it declined to a level not seen since the 1960s.

The puzzle of how and why this has happened, after decades of growing violence, has bedeviled criminologists, politicians, policy makers, and average citizens. Numerous explanations have been put forth, from improvements in policing to the decline in crack cocaine use. The authors of this timely and critical book explain and assess the plausible causes and competing claims of credit for the crime drop. Here some of America's top criminologists examine the role of guns and gun violence, the growing prison population, homicide patterns, drug markets, economic opportunity, changes in policing, and changing demographics.

As the authors point out, the trends that have contributed to the decline in violent crime—gun-control efforts (at both the local and federal levels), changes in drug markets (the decline of crack cocaine), and economic shifts (high employment in the flourishing economy of the late 1990s) cannot continue indefinitely. The control and prevention of crime will continue to challenge scholars and public policy makers. This book presents the most authoritative and intelligent discussion available on the rise and fall of American violence. The perspectives offered here will undoubtedly influence the public debate and the planning of future responses to crime.

Alfred Blumstein is J. Erik Jonsson University Professor of Urban Systems and Operations Research at Carnegie Mellon University and Director of the National Consortium on Violence Research.

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Cambridge Studies in Criminology

Edited by
Alfred Blumstein, H. John Heinz School of Public Policy and Management, Carnegie Mellon University and David Farrington, Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge

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The Crime Drop in America

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The Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation
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