

Cambridge University Press
0521862795 - The Crime Drop in America, Revised Edition
Alfred Blumstein and Joel Wallman
Excerpt
[More information](#)

C H A P T E R O N E

The Recent Rise and Fall of American Violence

Alfred Blumstein and Joel Wallman

AMERICANS' PRIDE IN THEIR NATION'S MATERIAL PROSPERITY, thriving democracy, and often admirable role in world affairs is tempered, for many, by concern and puzzlement over another American distinction – her perennial presence at the top of the list of the most violent industrial nations. Violence has been a major theme in public discussion for decades, and apprehension about it was intensified by the sharp rise in violence in the mid-1980s, a development most pronounced among inner-city minority youth. Despite the remarkable decline in violence that began in the early 1990s, a preoccupation with criminal violence persists among the citizenry as well as among scholars of violence, who are intent on understanding what has happened and predicting what will be.

Anxiety about violence was heightened considerably by the spate of school shootings in the late 1990s, which occurred after inner-city violence had declined appreciably. These incidents resonated in a broader constituency because, in contrast to what has come to be the standard image of American violence, they typically involved white, middle-class perpetrators and victims in rural or suburban settings. Thus, the late 1990s appeared to many to be a time of increasing suburban violence. In fact, however horrendous each of these school shootings was, fatal assaults in or around schools remain rare events, making up less than one percent of the violent deaths of school-age children. Lethal school violence is uncommon, and like criminal violence in general, is disproportionately an urban phenomenon. That is why this volume is properly focused on urban violence.

Urban violence is an issue of paramount concern to the two sponsors of this volume, the National Consortium on Violence Research (NCOVR), housed at the H. John Heinz III School of Public Policy and Management of Carnegie Mellon University, and the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation. The former is a research center sponsored by the National Science Foundation and the latter is a private foundation dedicated to research on the causes and control of violence and aggression. Both have been involved in efforts to understand the rise of violence in the United States in the late 1980s, and both are interested in explaining – and sorting out competing claims of credit for – the decline of violence in the 1990s.

The steady reduction in violence over eight years is unprecedented in contemporary crime statistics and has led to an effort on the part of many scholars and practitioners to explain it. Certainly there have been many claims for credit for the decline. William Bratton, former police commissioner of New York City, credits the police under his tenure for the decline in New York. President Clinton cited the federal investment in community policing. A number of observers have attributed the downward trend in crime since 1992 to the concurrent climb in imprisonment. Others ascribe it to changing demography, especially the aging of the baby boomers out of the high-crime ages.

Given the circulation of these competing claims and attributions in popular and academic forums, it seemed to us that the time was right to mobilize a scholarly effort to identify the plausible causes of the crime drop and to assess the contribution of each. Scholars with widely recognized expertise in a pertinent area were recruited to address the role of gun proliferation and gun control, incarceration, drug markets, policing, economic opportunity, and demography. Several chapters provide quantitative estimates of the magnitude of the effect of a given factor, although we have not tried to compare these estimates with each other, in part because their measurements are of quite different sorts. The number of very tenable explanations for the crime drop, none of which inherently excludes any of the others, leads to the conclusion that there is no single explanation but that a variety of factors, some independent and some interacting in a mutually supportive way, have been important.

In the remainder of this introduction, we present a precis of the various perspectives presented in this volume's careful analyses of the crime drop. Before doing so, we draw a thumbnail sketch of the crime backdrop against which the reduction is clearly visible. First, though, we should say something about the two main sources of information that

studies of U.S. crime trends, including those in *The Crime Drop in America*, rely on.

Major Sources of Crime Data

The Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) is an annual compilation of data on U.S. crimes and arrests based upon information provided to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) by local law enforcement agencies. The Supplementary Homicide Reports (SHR), also part of the UCR program, contains detailed information on individual homicide incidents included in the aggregate figures sent to the FBI.

The National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), sponsored by the Department of Justice since 1973, is an annual telephone poll of over 40,000 U.S. households regarding residents' experience of victimization by various kinds of crime. The NCVS compensates for some of the shortcomings of the UCR, and vice versa. For example, the usefulness of the UCR data is limited by the extent to which UCR crime rates are a product of not just the actual frequency of crime but also of factors influencing the likelihood that various crimes will come to the attention of the police and by variation in police recording practices between agencies and within each over time. The NCVS is a survey of individuals and so is not vulnerable to failure of victims to report the crime to the police or to variation in police reporting. However, because it is a survey of limited size (under 100,000 respondents), the number of respondents in any particular place is limited, and the number reporting victimization of low-frequency crimes, such as forcible rape, tends to be small. Also, the NCVS does not collect data on homicide, so the UCR and the SHR are the main sources for analyses of this most serious of crimes, and the crime with which this volume is most concerned.

A Four-Decade Backdrop

Prior to 1965, the U.S. homicide rate was consistently under 5 per 100,000 population. Around 1965, it began a steady rise, and from 1970 it oscillated for twenty years in the range of 8 to 10 per 100,000. A decline from 1980 to 1985 was followed by a dramatic growth in youth violence during the period from 1985 to 1991, with arrest rates for homicide more than doubling for each age group of males under age 20; the rise for black youth was even steeper. Then, beginning in 1992, aggregate rates declined steadily to less than 6 per 100,000 in 1999, a level not seen since the 1960s,

with no clear indication of when the decline would level off or reverse itself.

The Elements of the Crime Drop

Chapter 2, by Alfred Blumstein, provides an overview of the trends in violent crime, particularly homicide and robbery, and of the factors influencing these trends. The oscillatory nature of these trends might suggest merely random fluctuation, but there are indeed important causal factors contributing to upturns and downturns. The marked growth in violence between 1965 and the early 1970s may have been, at least in part, a result of the decline in perceived legitimacy of American social and governmental authority during this turbulent period, which contained the civil rights movement and the strident opposition to the war in Vietnam. The continuing uptrend from 1970 to 1980 and the decline to 1985 are largely attributable to the movement of the baby-boom generation into and then out of the high-crime ages of the late teens and early twenties; this is reflected in the general stability of violence rates within individual ages during that period. The rise following the 1985 trough should almost certainly be laid at the crack (smokable cocaine) epidemic and the contagion of violence spawned by its markets, which became a major factor in urban problems of the late 1980s. The decline in the 1990s is a much more complicated story, which involves the numerous factors addressed in the subsequent chapters of this volume.

Chapter 2 also highlights the necessity to partition the trends by key attributes of the problem. One critical dimension is the age of the offenders. We saw very different patterns across the different age groups, with the crime-rate rise of the late 1980s being caused almost entirely by offenders under age 25, whereas offending rates of older people displayed a steady decline. The sharpest decline in the 1990s has thus occurred among the young offenders. There were also important effects associated with weapons used, largely a growth in the use of handguns, with no comparable growth in other weapon types, and then a rapid decline in handgun use in the 1990s. Both the growth and the decline in violence occurred first in the largest cities, followed by smaller cities within one to three years.

It is somewhat ironic that the growth in violence with handguns was at least partly a consequence of the drug war's incarceration of many of the older drug sellers – the incarceration rate for drug offenses increased by a factor of 10 between 1980 and 1996. As older sellers were taken off the street, the drug market turned to younger individuals, particularly inner-city

African-Americans, partly to replace their incarcerated predecessors and partly just to meet the growing demand for crack. The reduction in age of workers in the crack trade entailed a predictable increase in violence, as the inclination to deliberate before acting is simply less developed in the young.

The Role of Handguns

Garen Wintemute, in Chapter 3, reviews the nature and scope of the problems associated with guns in the United States and the variety of efforts to address them. He discusses the independent contribution of guns to the spike in violence in the 1980s, a result of the intrinsic lethality of firearms as opposed to other weapons. Wintemute documents the increase in injury and death that resulted as gun manufacturers shifted handgun production to cheap medium- and high-caliber pistols.

Among the initial police responses to the burgeoning gun violence was a policy of aggressive stop-and-frisk. This occurred in a number of cities, most notably New York City. Boston focused its law-enforcement resources on youth gangs, as they were responsible for the great majority of its gun incidents. Federal law enforcement became involved in the early 1990s through serious efforts by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF), which began tracing crime guns to identify their sources and focused on licensed dealers and “straw purchasers” – those buying guns for persons prohibited from doing so – who turned up in multiple traces. The Brady Bill, enacted in 1993 and effective in 1994, was intended to reduce access to guns by prohibited individuals, that is, those who had a high risk of using guns criminally, such as convicted felons and minors. Handgun violence took a sharp downturn at just about the time the Brady Bill became effective. To date, over 400,000 attempted handgun purchases have been denied, but it is not known how many of those customers eventually bought guns from an unregulated source. However, Wintemute presents evidence that denying handgun purchases to those with an elevated risk of dangerous behavior does prevent gun crime. He also discusses strategies to combat handgun violence that do not appear to be effective, ranging from gun-buyback programs to liberalized access to concealed-weapon permits.

The Role of Prisons

One crime-control factor whose effects are especially hard to sort out is incarceration. Following a fifty-year period of impressive stability, incarcer-

ation rates in the United States began an enormous increase in the mid-1970s, quadrupling by the end of the century. It would thus be surprising if prisons had not been a factor in the decline in violence. It is clear, however, that so simplistic an analysis as documenting the negative association between incarceration rate and crime rate in the 1990s cannot provide the basis for generating an estimate of its impact. After all, in the 1980s, during the period of the most prodigious growth in imprisonment, violence was increasing most markedly.

William Spelman considers the incarceration effect in Chapter 4. Drawing on the variety of studies that attempt to estimate the combined incapacitative and deterrent effects of incarceration, he derives estimates of the elasticity of crime due to incarceration, that is, the percentage change in crime associated with a one-percent change in prison population.

The radical expansion of the prison population occurred primarily because of expansion in the rate of commitment of offenders and an increase in time served, including time served after parole violation. Any crime-suppressing benefit of this augmentation process, however, would be attenuated somewhat by a diminishing-returns effect. Because the criminal justice system tends naturally to catch and imprison the highest-rate offenders, an increase in the system's inclination to imprison results in a decrease in the average offending rate of those being sentenced, thus diminishing the effectiveness of incarceration in reducing crime. Another factor that Spelman weighs in the balance is the ratio of adults to juveniles among those committing crime; the higher the ratio, the greater the crime-reduction leverage to be gained through imprisonment, since juveniles are still largely free of the risk of imprisonment. Varying these and other factors, Spelman derives a number of elasticity estimates, concluding that the prison buildup suppressed the yearly crime rate by 35 percent on average and that perhaps 25 percent of the crime drop is attributable to incarceration. Like Richard Rosenfeld in his own discussion of the incarceration effect (Chapter 5), Spelman raises the provocative question of whether the benefits of this reduction in crime outweigh the social and financial costs of such massive use of prisons.

The Steady Decline of Adult Violence

The violent crime pattern of adults above age 25 has been quite different from that of those younger. Adult homicide shows a steady decline through the 1980s, when the homicide rate of younger offenders was spiking, and all the way through the 1990s. This sustained reduction warrants its own inves-

tigation, the contribution of Richard Rosenfeld in Chapter 5. He focuses on two aspects of the adult homicide decline. One is its generality across both major racial groups, both sexes, and all offender – victim relationships – family member, acquaintance, and stranger. The second is that, for both men and women and blacks and whites, the greatest decline is seen in family homicides, a development that Rosenfeld attributes, in part – but only in part – to concurrent declines in marriage rates over the past two decades and to the emergence of a variety of support services intended to reduce domestic violence.

Regarding the general reduction in adult homicide, it is important to assess the contribution of incarceration, since the majority of prisoners are in this age category. Where Spelman derives his elasticity estimates through what he terms a “top-down” approach, statistically relating aggregate crime rates to aggregate incarceration rates, Rosenfeld employs what Spelman calls a “bottom-up” model, starting with an estimation of the offending rate of criminals and calculating how many crimes would be averted by locking the offenders up. This is a reasonably straightforward task for crimes, such as robbery, that offenders commit with some regularity. Deriving an individual “offending rate” for homicide, on the other hand, has no obvious algorithm. Rosenfeld’s solution is to use the homicide *event* rate in our worst neighborhoods (100 to 125 per 100,000) as an estimate of the expected rate of homicide *involvement* (commission and victimization) of those being sentenced to prison. With this estimate in hand, he calculates that incarceration reduced the rate of murder at the hands of adults by 10 percent between 1980 and 1985, nearly 20 percent between 1985 and 1990, and some 25 percent between 1990 and 1995. Rosenfeld’s estimates are lower than Spelman’s for the earlier years but approach Spelman’s for the 1990s.

Just as only a part of the overall decline in adult homicide can be ascribed to the ongoing acceleration in imprisonment, neither can the most pronounced component of that decline, family homicide, be accounted for by imprisonment. Some of this reduction can be credited to the growing availability of services for abused women. More important has been the decline in marriage rate – Rosenfeld calculates that roughly one-half of the domestic homicide drop for younger adults is attributable to this trend. The extent of the unexplained portion of the adult crime drop, however, prompts him to consider the possibility that we are witnessing a cultural sea change in the form of a growing aversion to interpersonal violence, a “civilizing” trend shared – variably, to be sure – across sex, class, and ethnicity.

The Role of Drugs

Whereas the adult-violence downtrend of the 1990s was a continuation of the previous decade's pattern, a significant fraction of the reduction in youth violence in the 1990s represented an undoing of the growth of youth violence in the late 1980s. Much of that growth resulted from the recruitment of young people into crack markets and the effect of those markets on youth more generally, effects that dominated much of inner-city life in the late 1980s and early 1990s. That the acquisition of firearms spread beyond those directly involved in the crack trade is attested to by youth surveys carried out during this period. These studies documented a rate of gun-carrying far higher than could be explained in terms of participation in drug sales. Geographic diffusion was evident as well – in the upswing in homicide (though of smaller magnitude) seen among white youth some three years after its occurrence in the inner cities, and in the upturn in violence in smaller cities some two years after it occurred in the larger ones. It is no accident that the time difference by city size in the surge in violence maps rather well, with a lag of one to three years, onto the time difference across cities in the beginning of juvenile involvement in crack markets.

Bruce Johnson, Andrew Golub, and Eloise Dunlap present a vivid picture in Chapter 6 of the origin of the devastating crack tidal wave and its ebbing in the early 1990s, placing crack in a historical profile of the major drug eras in New York City, from heroin to powdered cocaine and crack to marijuana “blunts.” A focus on New York City is easily justified by its bellwether role in national drug and violence trends and its hugely disproportionate numeric weight in those trends. (For similar reasons, New York figures prominently in the discussion of police influences by John Eck and Edward Maguire, Chapter 7.) Johnson, Golub, and Dunlap credit the antidrug tactics of New York City's police department and its “quality-of-life” campaign with making life more difficult for participants on both sides of the crack market. But the major cause of the decline of crack was an attitude shift among inner-city youth consisting not just of loss of interest in crack but of a positive rejection of the drug and the violence and degenerate lifestyles it engendered. Marijuana, rolled in cigar wrappers as “blunts,” has become this generation's illegal substance of preference, which is marketed in ways that seem to avoid the violence of the crack era.

The Role of Policing

Policing must be a major topic in any consideration of the crime drop, partly because the police are the first line of response to violent activity, but

also because the period of the 1990s has been one of substantial innovation in policing. John Eck and Edward Maguire, both of whom have been close to police operations, systematically assess evidence for the efficacy of a wide variety of these innovations, including increases in the number of police officers on the street; community, problem-solving, and “zero-tolerance” policing; targeting of drugs and guns; and New York City’s Compstat system, which uses geographic displays as a stimulus to interaction between department leadership and precinct commanders in order to hold the latter responsible for the crime in their precincts. Eck and Maguire, in Chapter 7, looked for differences between jurisdictions that implemented these changes and similar ones that did not. In general, they found that it is difficult to substantiate the often strong and enthusiastic claims made for particular policing strategies, either because the strategy was put in place after crime had already declined or because two or more innovations occurred simultaneously and thus cannot be causally partitioned. They conclude that the best case is to be made for the suite of tactics employed to combat the drug trade, because this campaign at least antedated the drop in crime.

Guns, drugs, prisons, and police – the subjects of the first chapters in this volume – are factors associated in a direct way with crime and the criminal justice system. It is not only variables intrinsic to crime and crime control, however, that inflect crime rates. The larger economy and demographic trends are widely – and correctly – regarded as important influences on crime, and each is the subject of a chapter.

The Role of Economic Opportunity

Jeffrey Grogger suggests in Chapter 8 that individuals weigh the tradeoff between the wages they can earn from crime and the wages they can earn in the legitimate economy and then choose the activity that maximizes their personal utility. This is most readily demonstrable for the case of property crime but can easily be extended to economic crime like drug dealing, and can then be linked to violent crime because of the instrumental role that violence can play in the pursuit of profit. This, he argues, was abundantly evident in the case of crack. For thousands of young men of limited job skills in the inner cities, the steady decline in wages in the legitimate economy in the 1980s, juxtaposed with the easy money possible in the emerging crack trade, forced a clear economic choice.

Forced to operate outside the civil dispute-resolution system, the crack business became a focus of violence. Dealers became a prime target for rob-

bers, and in turn, retaliated whenever they could lest they gain a reputation for vulnerability. Dealers also employed violence to settle bad-debt disputes with customers and business partners, to discipline their employees, and to increase their market share by expanding their territorial dominion. But the violence that initially enhanced the profitability of this pursuit held the seeds of its own decline: the risks from the growing violence raised the cost to both buyers and sellers in the crack market. Grogger believes the increasingly deterrent effect of violence was an important part of the drying-up of the markets and their attendant carnage. That was the push away from illegal wages. The pull toward legitimate employment came with the upturn in the economy in the 1990s, which brought higher wages and more jobs, even for those with low skill levels.

The Role of Demography

Demography, another indirect but important factor in crime trends, asserts its influence through the sharp, patterned differences in criminality across age, sex, and ethnicity. The difference by gender is the largest, but it is the least important because gender composition is reasonably stable. Age and ethnic composition do change considerably, and these shifts can have a large effect on the aggregate violence rate. Demographic characteristics are of great interest also because they are one of the few crime-related factors that can be reliably projected into the future: every nonimmigrant of interest to the criminal justice system for the next eighteen years is already born.

James Alan Fox capitalizes on our knowledge of changing demography to interpret past patterns and consider future possibilities in Chapter 9. He conveys the usefulness of demographic analysis as well as its limitations. The rationale for the demographic approach is that, if all else were equal, crime rates would rise as the fraction of the population in the perennially crime-prone subgroups (young adult males) increased. Thus, Fox was able to predict correctly that violence would peak in 1980 and then decline on the basis of the movement of the baby-boom generation out of the high-crime age range. It is the “all else equal” proviso that limits the predictive value of demography, however. In particular, it is the assumption of stability in crime rates within demographic subgroups that is problematic. We saw this in the late 1980s, when, despite their declining numbers, the young male segment boosted the aggregate rate of violence because of the drastic spike in their per capita rate. This development could not have been – and was not – foreseen by those making predictions based solely on