

Trends in Street Crime and the Crime Drop

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Abstract

After rising for nearly three decades, rates of street crime have declined in the United States since the early 1990s. Researchers have attributed the crime swings to changes in the economy, age structure, imprisonment, and drug markets. Recent studies also highlight the role of immigration, abortion policy, and policing. A major challenge for future research on crime trends is to explain why street crime did not increase during the Great Recession of 2008–2009. National research agencies should devote attention to the question of why and how crime rates change over time.

INTRODUCTION

After rising for nearly three decades, street crime rates in the United States began falling in the 1990s (Figure 1).¹ “Street crimes” consist of both violent and property offenses, including murder, rape, robbery,² aggravated assault,³ burglary,⁴ larceny,⁵ and motor vehicle theft. Sale or possession of illicit drugs is also generally considered a street crime. Street crime rates flattened somewhat at the turn of the current century but have dropped again in recent years. European crime rates have followed roughly the same course. Prior research has disclosed several factors associated with the crime decline, including improving economic conditions, the aging of the population, shrinking street drug markets, and growing imprisonment rates. However, challenges remain for future research, perhaps none more significant than the absence of increases in street crime during the severe economic recession of 2008–2009. Future research should also look to the

1. The crime data displayed in Figure 1 are from the FBI’s *Uniform Crime Reports* (UCR), which compiles annual crime figures from local police departments. To show the correspondence between the violent and property crime trends, despite their different levels, they have been scaled on separate axes.

2. Theft committed with force or threat of force.

3. Assaults producing serious injury or committed with a weapon.

4. Breaking and entering a residential or commercial premise to commit a felony.

5. Theft unaccompanied by force or breaking and entering.

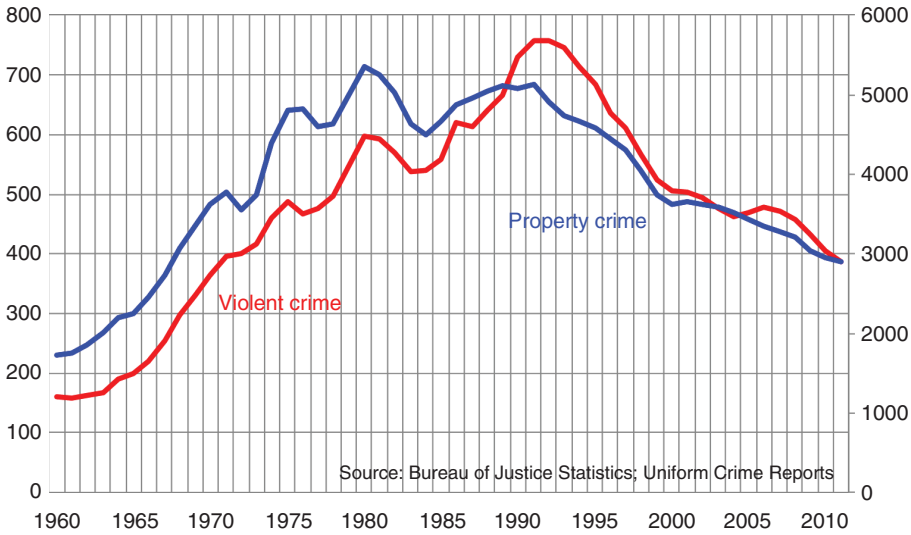


Figure 1 U.S. violent and property crimes per 100,000 population, 1960–2011.

future, literally, by incorporating advances in forecasting methods into analyses of crime trends. Finally, the quantity and quality of future research will depend on incentives from policymakers to make the study of crime trends a priority area of inquiry in the social sciences.

FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

The study of changing crime rates dates to the beginnings of the discipline of sociology. It was a chief concern of the nineteenth century “moral statisticians” who investigated the relationship between living conditions and theft, murder, suicide, and related matters widely regarded as religious transgressions. Economic conditions and performance figured centrally in early efforts to explain changes in crime rates over time. Beginning in the twentieth century, social scientists directed attention to the impact of the business cycle on crime rates. The results of that research were decidedly mixed. Some studies confirmed the conventional view that crime increases during economic downturns and declines during recoveries; others showed just the opposite pattern. By midcentury, reviews of the research literature concluded that no consistent relationship exists between the economy and crime trends.

Regardless of the state of the economy, involvement in street crime is greater among adolescents and young adults than older adults. When the youthful segment of the population grows, as it did in the United States after World War II, street crime rates tend to increase. The postwar baby boomers entered their crime-prone years in the mid-1960s and, as shown

in Figure 1, crime rates began a steep rise. As the baby boomers aged out of their crime-prone years and were replaced by smaller age cohorts, crime rates fell for a few years. Some estimates attribute as much as 20% of the change in American street crime rates between the 1960s and 1980s to these shifts in age composition alone.

Demography is not always destiny in the study of crime trends. Most of the temporal variation in crime rates does not result from changes in the age composition of the population. That became clear when violent crime rates began increasing again in the mid-1980s, even as the population of adolescents and young adults was shrinking. Murders, robberies, and aggravated assaults were rising *within* this age cohort; in fact, the increase in youth violence accounted for *all* of the increase in the U.S. violent crime rate from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s. An important reason is the spread of crack-cocaine markets and the use of firearms by youthful drug dealers to settle disputes with customers and other sellers and to protect themselves against street robbers.

U.S. imprisonment rates skyrocketed during the 1980s and 1990s. By the turn of the century state and federal prisons housed over 1.3 million inmates, four times the number of prisoners in 1980. There remains little question that the imprisonment boom contributed to the crime drop, although researchers disagree about the magnitude and duration of its effect. Recent research suggests, however, that the crime-reduction effects of prison expansion may be self-limiting. We now turn to this and other “cutting-edge” studies of trends in street crime.

CUTTING-EDGE RESEARCH

Studies focusing on the economy, age structure, drug markets, and imprisonment form the substantive foundation of research on street crime trends. Recent research has disclosed new causal factors and produced new substantive explanations of how the more familiar factors operate, primarily with respect to how economic conditions affect crime trends. Other cutting-edge research stimulates new ways of thinking about the relationship among crime trends and social demography, imprisonment growth, and policing.

ECONOMY AND CRIME: BEYOND THE UNEMPLOYMENT RATE

Decades of research led to the conclusion that the connection between economic conditions and changes in crime rates over time is illusive at best. However, the longitudinal research has begun to tell a more consistent story: crime rates rise as economic conditions worsen and fall as they improve. An

important reason for the disparate results of the earlier and more recent studies of crime trends is the use of a broader array of economic indicators in the recent research.

The unemployment rate was by far the indicator of choice in the early longitudinal research on the economy and crime. Unemployment is certainly a key indicator of economic performance, but it is limited in important respects. The official unemployment measure omits those who have stopped looking for work and dropped out of the labor force. Perhaps most pertinent to its use in longitudinal research, unemployment is a lagging indicator of economic change—the last to respond as economic conditions worsen or improve—which may obscure the temporal connection between unemployment and crime.

By contrast, the recent longitudinal studies that incorporate more inclusive and leading economic indicators, such as consumer sentiment and economic growth, suggest that rates of street crime fall as the economy grows and consumers become more confident about their financial prospects. That is a large part of the story of the dramatic decrease in crime during the 1990s, when the economy was expanding at record rates and crime rates fell to lows not seen since the 1960s. Moreover, economic conditions have been linked directly to trends in property crime and indirectly, through property crime, to trends in violent crime. This is an impressive track record for a research area long regarded as inconclusive, if not moribund.

IMMIGRATION AND ABORTION POLICY

Prior research on demographic change and crime trends focused on the role of the changing age structure of the population. Recent research has turned attention to how immigration and accompanying changes in the ethnic mix of the population influence crime rates. Initially, most of this research was cross sectional in design and showed that U.S. cities or neighborhoods with large numbers of immigrants, primarily from Mexico and Central and South America, have crime rates that are lower than would be expected on the basis of the new arrivals' marginal economic status. Longitudinal research has now begun to disclose, however, that immigration contributes to lower levels of crime over time as well. This work has important implications for current policy debates regarding the impact of immigration on public safety.

Perhaps the most controversial and widely publicized addition to research on crime trends comes from studies of the impact of abortion policy changes on the crime drop of the 1990s in the United States. Abortion was legalized in the 1970s and the number of abortions quickly increased. According to

the researchers, fewer unwanted births, especially among economically disadvantaged women, resulted in fewer “high-risk” children reaching adolescence in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Consequently, crime rates decreased. This conclusion has been hotly contested in the research literature and the extent to which the legalization of abortion contributed to the crime drop remains uncertain. However, the underlying proposition that children born in poverty and other disadvantaged circumstances are at elevated risk for delinquency and crime later in life is generally accepted in the social sciences and is an important premise of a prominent field of study known as *life course* criminology.

DIMINISHING RETURNS OF IMPRISONMENT

Prior research has shown that crime rates drop with increases in imprisonment. However, recent research suggests that the relationship between imprisonment and crime trends is not strictly linear; after a point, further growth in imprisonment yields smaller crime reductions, or even crime increases. The point of diminishing returns to imprisonment may have already been reached in the United States. An important task for future research is to identify the mechanisms that limit the crime-reduction effects of prison expansion and to evaluate the impact on public safety of supervision of offenders in the community.

HOT SPOTS POLICING

Researchers have long been interested in how policing affects crime. Early research focused on the relationship between the number of police officers and city crime rates and yielded mixed results. Some studies found no relationship, some found lower crime rates in places with more officers per capita, and some found higher crime rates where there are more officers. These inconsistent results confirmed the view held by many criminologists, including leading police researchers, that the police have little detectable influence on crime rates.

An important limitation of these early efforts to estimate the effect of the number of police officers on crime is their failure to account for the fact that cities with high or rising crime rates tend to add more officers. That is at least in part why many of the studies found that cities with more police have more crime. Something of a breakthrough was achieved by later studies that were better able to separate the influence of police on crime from the influence of crime on police. That research indicated that, other things equal, places with more police per capita have lower crime rates. However with the new findings came a new question: Which police activities reduce crime?

The real breakthrough in modern policing research emerged from two seemingly straightforward observations: (i) Street crime is not evenly distributed in a city but is highly concentrated in small crime “hot spots.” (ii) Criminals tend to avoid or commit less crime in locations where the police are present. Putting the two observations together—putting the “cops on the dots”—is the crux of hot-spots enforcement strategies. Evaluations of hot-spots enforcement have shown that it reduces crime in the hot spots and generally does not displace it to other areas of the city. In fact, several studies have found a “diffusion of benefits” whereby crime also decreases in areas near the hot spots. Not all police departments that claim to pursue hot-spots enforcement do so with equal rigor or effect, however, and the contribution of such “smart” policing to overall trends in street crime remains to be determined in future research.

In addition to evaluating the impact of hot spots enforcement on crime trends, future research should focus on the crime-reduction effects of probation and other alternatives to imprisonment. However, perhaps the most vexing challenge facing crime-trends researchers is to explain why crime rates fell during the “Great Recession.”

A KEY ISSUE FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Just as a new research consensus was developing around the proposition that street crime increases during economic downturns, the United States entered the Great Recession of 2008–2009, by many measures the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression of the 1930s. However, crime rates did not increase, as they had during previous recessions, as shown in Figure 1, they fell. We might conclude from this conundrum that, for some reason, the turnaround in crime rates has been delayed and eventually crime will increase. That hypothesis would be consistent with the 2011 upturns in both violent and property crime revealed by the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS),⁶ but we would still have to explain the delayed response of crime to deteriorating economic conditions, 3 years out from the official end of the recession. Moreover, since the early 1990s, the NCVS and the UCR, the other major statistical system for tracking crime in the United States, have registered similar year-to-year changes in crime rates. Yet, as we have seen, the 2011 UCR showed continued crime declines in 2011.

6. The NCVS compiles data on criminal victimizations from nationally representative household surveys of persons age 12 and over. Unlike the UCR (see Foot note 1), the NCVS includes crimes that were not reported to the police.

Another possibility is that the earlier view that little or no relationship exists between crime and the economy is correct after all. However, that explanation would have to contend with the recent research evidence, from multiple studies, that street crime goes up when the economy turns down. A final possibility is that the Great Recession differed from previous downturns in ways that explain why crime did not increase. The Great Recession was similar to previous recessions in several key respects: unemployment rose, economic growth stalled, and the public's confidence in the economy plummeted. However, it did differ in one important way: inflation was at a historic low point. Prices actually decreased in 2009, the first instance of U.S. price deflation in over 50 years.

If crime rates respond to inflation, that could explain why crime did not increase during the economic collapse of the 1930s and rose rapidly during the prosperous 1960s, two periods often cited by critics of the thesis that crime and economic conditions are closely coupled. Prolonged price deflation was a defining feature of the Great Depression and a two-decade inflationary spiral in the United States was ignited in the mid-1960s. Several early studies found that street crimes rise with increases in inflation, but inflation has not figured centrally in the recent research on crime trends that expanded the scope of economic indicators beyond the unemployment rate. Before concluding that crime trends are unrelated to economic conditions, it seems wise to exhaust the full range of economic indicators that may help to clarify the complex association between crime and the economy.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

If an overarching theme emerges from this brief tour of research on crime trends, it is that research is never ending. Conclusions from early research are overturned or modified by later studies, which in turn produce new puzzles for future research. This is a sign of a healthy research area but also one that is in need of a theoretical framework that organizes the results of past research and points to the most productive areas for future inquiry. Agencies such as the National Academy of Sciences, the National Institute of Justice, and the National Science Foundation can play an important role in providing the resources and incentives needed to develop this framework for the study of trends in street crime and also to extend the study of crime trends to fraud, corruption, price-fixing, and other so-called white-collar offenses. As the study of crime trends matures, greater attention should also be directed to forecasting future crime rates by adopting recent advances in forecasting methods from economics. Few areas in the social sciences offer as many opportunities for important and challenging research as the study of why and how crime rates change over time.

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ON-LINE RESOURCES

- National Crime Victimization Survey (<http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/index.cfm?ty=dcdetail&iid=245>).
- Uniform Crime Reports (<http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/ucr>).

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Richard Rosenfeld is Founders Professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of Missouri—St. Louis. He is coauthor with Steven F. Messner of *Crime and the America Dream* (Cengage, 2013, 5th ed.) and *Crime and the Economy* (Sage, 2013). He has written widely on crime trends and criminal justice policy. He was President of the American Society in 2010 and currently serves on the Science Advisory Board of the Office of Justice Programs, U. S. Department of Justice.

Web pages: <http://www.umsl.edu/ccj/faculty/rosenfeld.html>;
<http://www.crimetrends.com>

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