

CJSC Research Series

Why Did the Crime Rate Decrease Through 1999?

(And Why Might It Decrease or Increase
in 2000 and Beyond?)

A Literature Review and Critical Analysis

Leonard A. Marowitz
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Bureau of Criminal Information and Analysis
CRIMINAL JUSTICE STATISTICS CENTER
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The Attorney General, Department of Justice, and report author do not necessarily agree with the contents of the articles reviewed for this paper. This report is published as a public service to encourage debate and broader understanding of critical criminal justice policy issues.



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The role of the Criminal Justice Statistics Center is:

- To collect, analyze, and report statistical data which provide valid measures of crime and the criminal justice process;
- To examine these data on an ongoing basis to better describe crime and the criminal justice system;
- To promote the responsible presentation and use of crime statistics.

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Executive Summary

For several years policymakers have been asking, “Why is crime down?” and “How long will this trend last?” The president of the American Bar Association, referring to crime and drug use trends, expressed his concern in February 1999 by stating, “Now is the time for us to find out why these trends are moving as they are. Without a clearer assessment of which current policies are working, and which are not, it is impossible to evaluate new proposals for solving our criminal justice problems.”

These concerns arose because the overall crime rate decreased nationally (and in California) from 1991 to 1999. The rate of decrease, which was among the steepest recorded since World War II, was similar to that seen from 1980 to 1984. However, the recent decline lasted more than twice as long as that seen in the early 1980s. It appears that the crime rate decrease in the early 1980s was largely driven by demographics; the number of juveniles (17 years of age and under) and youths (18 to 24 years of age) in peak crime-prone ages decreased markedly. In contrast, it seems that the crime rate decline from 1991 to 1999 had very little to do with demographics since the number of individuals in crime-prone ages changed very little from year to year.

WHY IS CRIME DOWN?

The purpose of this paper is to critically review articles by scholars and media writers which offer explanations for the recent decrease in the crime rate. Brief synopses of these articles are grouped into 11 explanatory categories drawn from the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the author of this paper. These 11 categories, along with compelling comments by the authors of some of the reviewed articles, are as follows:

1. Effective strength of law enforcement agencies

- Proactive community policing, focused on maintaining order by aggressively confronting low-level crimes such as loitering and drinking in public, has caused a decline in serious crime including gun homicide.
- The decline in non-gun homicides appears to be part of a long-term trend and did not result from order-maintenance policing.
- The substantial decrease in crime rates in cities without order-maintenance policing indicates that other factors were key contributors to the crime rate decline. However, cities which adopted order-maintenance policing appear to show generally greater decreases in crime rates than cities which did not.

2. Administrative and investigative emphases of law enforcement

- In cities with efficient community policing, computerized mapping systems have been effective in pinpointing high-crime areas.
- State statutes increased domestic violence arrests and contributed to the decline in domestic murders.

3. Policies of other components of the criminal justice system (i.e., prosecutorial, judicial, correctional, and probational)

- The aggressive early intervention of lower courts with first- or second-time minor offenders has been effective.
- Offenders were sentenced to drug-treatment programs, community service, and other sanctions designed to break the cycle of crime. Court intervention has been most effective when supported by efficient probation departments and social services.
- Increased incarceration rates have contributed to declining property crime and adult violent crime rates since the early 1980s. Increases in incarceration of younger individuals during the 1990s contributed to the recent decline in juvenile and youth crime rates.
- The successful use of the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organization Act (RICO) by federal prosecutors has weakened the leadership and organization of drug gangs.

4. Citizens’ attitudes toward crime

- Community organizations working with community police have contributed to the recent crime rate decline.
- Juveniles who witnessed their older brothers and friends killed or consumed by drugs have been highly motivated to avoid criminal activities.
- The enormous growth of personal security and security devices, due to fear of crime, have contributed to the recent decline in property crime.

5. Population density and degree of urbanization

- Big cities set the trend for the crack cocaine-related increase and subsequent decrease in the crime rate.
- Much of the declining crime rate occurred in cities. Decreases in big cities occurred first and were followed about two years later by decreases in smaller cities.

6. Variations in composition of the population, particularly youth concentration

- No substantial shifts in the age structure of the U.S. took place during this period. Little change in the proportion of youth occurred to affect the crime rate.
- Many older property criminals ceased criminal activity due to aging, death, or imprisonment.

7. Economic conditions, including median income, poverty level, and job availability

- The robust economy created many relatively high wage jobs for low-skilled workers at the same time that jobs in drug trafficking were drying up. This caused a shift from illegitimate to legitimate work.

8. Cultural factors and education, recreational, and religious characteristics

- It was suggested that a cultural renewal was taking place for which the decreasing crime rate was a leading indicator.



- Except for the few unstable individuals who are highly responsive to many environmental influences, juveniles were not incited to violence by violent media.

9. Family conditions with respect to divorce and family characteristics

- Legal assistance and other domestic violence services, along with declining marriage rates, contributed to a decrease of nine percent in domestic homicides from 1993 to 1996.
- Educational institutions have assumed many of the responsibilities of traditional families and have contributed to the decrease in crime.

10. Drug use

- Increased use of crack cocaine in the late 1980s and early 1990s was associated with increased homicide and robbery rates. Large numbers of handgun carrying juveniles were involved in drug trafficking due to the great demand for crack. Recent decreases in violent crimes followed the abatement of the “crack epidemic.”
- Street gangs violently struggled for control of the distribution and marketing of crack cocaine, powdered cocaine, and other drugs. Disagreements with rival gang members and drug customers were often resolved with guns as reckless, violent juveniles and youth killed each other. Remaining drug traffickers, dealing with less demand for crack cocaine and having seen the undesirable outcome of so much violence, presided over less violent, more stable drug markets.
- The crack epidemic, which drove up violent crime rates prior to their recent decline, had many of the qualities of the era of Prohibition. These included a highly profitable, illegal, addictive, mood-altering, and relatively inexpensive substance. Much of the substance came from foreign sources. Violent crime flourished in a sea of firearms. Federal prosecutors played a major role in criminal convictions of the drug hierarchy.
- Decreasing alcohol consumption may have contributed to the decrease in the homicide rate, but that is uncertain.

11. Weapons

- The 300 percent increase in homicides by juveniles, ages 10 to 17, and 100 percent increase by youth, ages 18 to 24, from 1986 to 1994 was due entirely to increased use of handguns. The recent decline in homicide rates by these age groups paralleled their decreased handgun use.
- In California, in general, and in Los Angeles, in particular, the increase in overall legal gun ownership levels did not appear to affect the already decreasing violent crime rate in the late 1990s.
- Decreased carrying of handguns by juveniles may have been due either to their choosing not to carry guns of their own volition, or to law enforcement efforts to take guns from them. There is disagreement about this.

The recent decline in the crime rate was due to a combination of gradual long-term declining trends in property crime by individuals of all ages and violent crimes by older adults (over

30 years of age), along with the steep short-term decline of violent juvenile and youth crime. The short-term decline, which followed a rapid short-term increase in violent juvenile and youth crime, was a much greater contributor than the long-term decline to the overall recent decrease in the crime rate. The short-term increase and subsequent decline in crime were both almost entirely drug-related, with handguns playing an important role.

The most explosively violent periods in twentieth century domestic U.S. history occurred when gangs controlled illegal substances which were in high demand. The recent decline in the crime rate, seen in California and the U.S., has largely been a descent from the violent peak of such a period. By 1999, the effects of the crack epidemic on crime rates had largely disappeared. The period of rapid increases and decreases in violent crime had run its course. Crime rates were beginning to approach levels which reflected the more gradually decreasing long-term crime rate trend.

A model, consisting of long-term and short-term factors which affected the recent crime rate decline, is presented in detail in the body of this paper. The direction (decrease or increase) that each factor changed in contributing to the recent declining crime rate and the type of crime that decreased (property, violent, or both) is indicated.

FUTURE CRIME TRENDS

Future crime rate trends cannot be predicted with any degree of certainty from the articles reviewed for this paper. However, if factors which contributed to the recent decrease in the crime rate reverse their direction of change, the crime rate will probably increase. If one or more of the following three scenarios occur, an increase in the crime rate in 2000 and beyond is likely:

1. Another drug-related crime spree occurs with the following components

- A resurgence occurs in the use of crack cocaine or other illegal, addictive, mood-altering, inexpensive and highly profitable drug (most likely methamphetamine).
- A new generation of violent criminals comes of age to replace the violent criminals who killed each other off in the crack cocaine epidemic. Gangs are taken over by more violent leaders and gang members become more violent.
- Enough time has passed since the peak of the crack cocaine epidemic so today's juveniles and youth have not closely and personally witnessed tragic killings or drug-destroyed lives. Therefore, they are not deterred from violence or drug use.

2. Law enforcement and other societal anti-crime forces do not keep pace with demographic changes which occur

- Societal and law enforcement efforts to prevent crime remain static and do not grow in proportion with population growth.
- The baby-boom echo causes a rapid and sizable increase in the number of crime-prone age individuals.

3. Disproportional distribution of wealth has consequences for crime

- A less likely scenario would involve an upsurge in property crime by those who have not prospered in an era when many others have amassed considerable wealth.
- These individuals may be increasingly driven to commit robbery, burglary, larceny-theft, and motor vehicle theft to get their share of the wealth.

A qualitative (and quantitative) model describing California's crime rate would require extensive additional research and would be an appropriate and desirable follow-up to this review.

By 2000, the short-term cycle of increasing and decreasing crime had run its course. A new period was beginning in which the rate of crime would depend on the interaction of the factors described throughout this paper.