

Crime drop of the 1990s

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Cross-References

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Abstract

In the early 1990s, crime dropped unexpectedly and dramatically in the United States and Canada. Here, the geographical and demographic scope of the drop in crime is explored, and potential explanations put forth to explain the drop in crime are reviewed.

Main Entry

Criminal behavior unexpectedly and dramatically declined in the early 1990s in both the United States and Canada. Because of the surprising and unexpected nature of the crime drop, the issue has commanded much popular and academic attention, especially in the United States. The most effective way of illustrating the crime decline is through the tracking of homicide rates. Of all crimes, homicide is the least subject to reporting or recording biases. From the time period 1991 to 2001, homicide rates decreased 43 percent in the United States, and 33 percent in Canada (Sources: FBI Uniform Crime Reports; Statistics Canada; see Figure 1). The very similar declines in both countries are particularly of note given that American homicide rates have been historically several times higher than Canadian homicide rates (Ouimet, 1999). Beyond homicide, violent crimes, property crimes, and sexual crimes all declined significantly in the 1990s in both the United States and Canada.

The decline in crime in the 1990s is not an artifact of changes in reporting methodology. Data from both government crime agencies and victimization surveys show that crime dropped at the same time in the US and Canada. In the United States, data from the FBI Uniform Crime Reports and the National Crime Victimization Survey (a representative, national telephone survey of 100,000 Americans) show the same downward trend in crime rates from 1991 to 2001. In Canada, data from Statistics Canada (obtained from police reports) show the same drop in crime (Ouimet, 2002, 2004).

One remarkable aspect of the crime drop of the 1990s is the wide demographic and geographic generality of the drop. Crime rates dropped in all geographical locations (both metropolitan and rural) and among all age groups (Levitt, 2004). From 1991 to 2001, homicide, violent crime, and property crime in metropolitan jurisdictions in the United States declined 45 percent, 37 percent, and 32 percent, respectively. During the same time period, rural areas in the United States experienced similar drops in homicide (32 percent), violent crime (37 percent), and property crime (32 percent). In Canada, crime rates dropped similarly in both densely (e.g., the province of Ontario) and sparsely (e.g., the Atlantic provinces) populated areas (Ouimet, 2002, 2004). Data from the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports show that arrest rates for total, violent, and property crimes declined among people of all ages, ranging from drops of 20 percent (age 65+)

to 57 percent (age 20-24). Homicide-specific perpetration and victimization rates also declined among every age group (Fox, 2005).

Further evidence suggests that the drop in crime in the 1990s was not restricted to crime itself, but to risky behavior (inclusive of crime) more generally. Mishra and Lalumière (2009) showed that a vast majority of risky behaviors declined in tandem with crime in the 1990s in both the United States and Canada. They showed that risky behavior in various disparate domains (e.g., violence, accidents and behaviors related to accidents, risky sexual behaviors) largely declined analogously to crime in the 1990s. Indicators of risk-taking were comprised of national-level rates of behavior collected by various organizations in both the United States and Canada, and reflect trends for both the general population and teenagers specifically (because they are a particularly risk-prone group). Furthermore, time series analysis demonstrated that rates of various risky behaviors covary with homicide over long periods of time (Mishra & Lalumière, 2009). These results suggest that the crime drop of the 1990s was not restricted to just criminal behavior, but more general risky behavior as well.

Overall, the crime drop was (a) observed across geographical areas in North America (urban and rural, US and Canada), (b) observed among various demographic groups, (c) observed for all types of crime, including homicide, and (d) not just restricted to crime, but extended to risky behavior more generally. These observations suggest that the decline was a very general phenomenon. The generality of the phenomenon has important implications for explaining the crime drop.

Since the crime drop phenomenon has come to the forefront of criminologists' attention, various explanations have been developed and tested (reviewed in Blumstein & Wallman, 2005; Levitt, 2004; Ouimet 2002; Zimring, 2006). These explanations include demographic effects (aging population, increased access to abortion in the 1970s, increased prisoner incarceration; e.g., Fox, 2005; Donahue & Levitt, 2001; Spelman, 2005), public policy shifts (increased number of police officers, innovative policing strategies, gun control laws; increased capital punishment; e.g., Corman & Mocan, 2000; Eck & Maguire, 2005), and socioeconomic factors (strong economy in the 1990s, decrease in the illegal drug trade; e.g., Blumstein & Rosenfeld, 1998; Raphael & Winter-Ebmer, 2001). More recently, childhood lead exposure has been implicated as a factor affecting variation in crime rates (Reyes, 2007; Nevin, 2000, 2007). Many of these explanations are able to explain some portion of the decline in crime in the 1990s. However, many of these explanations are US-specific (Ouimet, 2002; Zimring, 2006), and most cannot account for the drop in both crime *and* risky behavior in the 1990s (Mishra & Lalumière, 2009). Here, the most commonly cited explanations for the 1990s crime drop are reviewed. Furthermore, these explanations are critically examined to determine whether such explanations are capable of explaining to some degree the broad and general crime and risk drop of the 1990s.

Population demographic changes, such as an aging population, the legalization of abortion in the 1970s, and increased incarceration, are able to explain a small portion of the general decline in risky and criminal behavior (Levitt, 2004). An aging population would lead to a reduction in the number of individuals age 18-34 (especially males) who engage in the majority of criminal behavior (Fox, 2005; Wilson & Daly, 1985). As a consequence, a reduction in crime-prone individuals should be associated with a reduction in crime and risky behavior. Similarly, increases in the number of prisoners would lead to reductions in the size of populations at-risk for present and future criminal behavior (Spelman, 2005). Prison populations in the US and Canada consist largely of young males, and this population is most at-risk for engaging in criminal behavior.

The legalization of abortion is a controversial explanation for some portion of the decline in crime. Donohue and Levitt (2001) argue that the legalization of abortion under the *Roe v. Wade* decision in 1973 led to a reduction in crime because unwanted children are at greater risk for criminal behavior, and legalized abortion leads to reductions in unwanted births. Thus, legalization of abortion in the 1970s may have contributed to a reduction in the number of at-risk individuals in the 1990s (i.e., individuals of low socioeconomic status who were at peak offending ages). A similar phenomenon regarding legalized abortion has been argued to have taken place in Canada (Sen, 2004). However, some evidence suggests that abortion may not have played as large a role as some have argued (Joyce 2004a, 2004b).

Most criminal offenders tend to engage in significant amounts of risk-accepting behavior. If the number of offenders in the general population decreases, then fewer risky behaviors would be observed at the population level (which combines all age groups in overall statistics). That all age groups showed a decline in criminal behavior, however, cannot be accounted for by most explanations based on population demographic changes. Also, the declines in crime and risky behavior in Canada paralleled those observed in the United States—a fact that is also incompatible with some explanations involving population demographic changes; for example, Canada did not experience an increase in number of incarcerated offenders during the crime drop (Zimring, 2006).

Public policy shifts and innovative policing strategies, such as an increased number of police officers, are unlikely to have affected risky behaviors in general (Eck & Maguire, 2005). For example, it is hard to imagine how an increase in number of police officers on the streets could affect teenagers' choices to use condoms, or to drop out of school. An increase in the number of police officers is also limited in explanatory power; large cities like Dallas, for example, actually reduced the number of police officers employed during the period of 1991 to 2001 (Levitt, 2004). Furthermore, innovative policing strategies were only introduced in some jurisdictions (e.g., New York City), but declines in crime were observed much more generally (Eck & Maguire, 2005). It is worth noting, however, that many of these explanations likely had some impact on crime rates in specific jurisdictions. Other more general policy explanations invoked to account for the crime drop (e.g., gun control; concealed weapons laws; capital punishment) have been argued to be limited in explaining any variance in crime, regardless of temporal timeframe (Katz, Levitt, & Shustorovich, 2003; Levitt, 2004; Ludwig & Cook, 2000).

Although economic explanations have characteristics that make them appealing candidate explanations for the widespread decline in risky behavior—economic conditions affect almost everyone in a population, for example—they have been largely ineffective in explaining variation in crime rates (Gould, Weinberg, & Mustard, 2002; Raphael & Winter-Ember, 2001; reviewed in Levitt, 2004). For example, macroeconomic indicators have been shown to have a small effect on property crime, but no effect on violent crime (Levitt, 2004). However, it is arguable that macroeconomic trends may have an indirect effect on other influential variables tied to government policies and funding (e.g., incarceration, hiring of police officers; Levitt, 2004). Most economic explanations focus on absolute indicators (e.g., GDP per capita, unemployment rate, median income). It is possible that more relative economic indicators, such as income inequality, may provide better economic explanations for variation in risky behavior and crime. Income inequality is a very strong predictor of homicide rates and early parturition, for example (Wilson & Daly, 1997), lending some support to this notion.

Socioeconomic factors that were specific to certain times and places are also unlikely candidates to explain the general drop in risky behavior in the 1990s. The receding of the crack

cocaine trade, for example, likely played an important role in declining crime rates in some large urban centers in the United States (reviewed in Levitt, 2004). However, crack cocaine was never a serious problem in Canada (or in more rural areas of the US) and thus cannot explain much of the decline (Ouimet, 2002; Zimring, 2006).

More recently, some research has suggested that exposure to lead may contribute to variation in crime rates. At the individual level, preschool lead exposure has been linked to mental and cognitive deficits (e.g., reduced intelligence, school performance), behavioral problems (e.g., conduct disorder, aggression), and delinquency and crime more generally (reviewed in Nevin, 2000, 2007; Reyes, 2007). Some aggregate level studies have also linked lead to increased delinquency and crime (Masters, Hone, & Doshi, 1998). Building on this research, Nevin (2000) showed that temporal changes in lead exposure are associated with temporal changes in crime rates, and in particular, suggested that preschool lead exposure in the 1970s can account for the decline in crime in the 1990s.

Similar to the abortion-legalization hypothesis put forth by Donahue and Levitt (2001), Nevin (2000) argued that preschool lead exposure in the 1970s (before leaded fuels were heavily regulated) may have led to the development of a particularly risk-prone, antisocial cohort that would have been most at-risk for criminal offending in the 1990s. Further evidence for a lead-crime link was put forth by Reyes (2007), who argued that the abortion-legalization hypothesis and the lead-crime hypothesis together can account for almost all of the decline in crime in the 1990s. The lead-crime hypothesis is also promising in its explanatory scope given that it may be able to account for declines in both crime and risky behavior across all geographical areas. However, further research is required to examine in detail whether Canadian environmental policy governing lead exposure similarly lead to reductions in crime.

In one of the most widely cited and influential papers written on the causes of the crime drop, Levitt (2004) argues that four factors collectively explained the entire drop in crime in the 1990s in the United States: increased police presence, increased incarceration, the receding of the crack cocaine trade, and the legalization of abortion in the 1970s. In light of recent research regarding the scope of the crime drop and possible alternative explanations for the crime drop, these four factors need to be re-evaluated as default explanations for the crime drop. An increase in the number of police officers occurred in the United States, but not in Canada (Zimring, 2006). Similarly, in Canada, increases in prisoner populations did not take place, and the crack cocaine trade was of limited scope (i.e., it was a largely urban, inner-city American problem). Legalized abortion has been argued to have contributed to Canada's crime drop (Sen, 2007), but that factor can only account for a portion of the drop in all jurisdictions. Although the factors described in the Levitt (2004) paper may certainly account for the crime drop in the 1990s in the urban United States, it cannot account for the drop in rural areas, nor in Canada. Furthermore, these explanations cannot also explain the decline in risk-taking more generally that was observed concurrently with the decline in crime.

The crime drop of the 1990s remains one of the most perplexing criminological phenomena. This drop represents an excellent natural experiment to test theories of criminal engagement. Thus far, only limited progress has been made in explaining the phenomenon. Furthermore, many of the traditional explanations given to explain variation in crime (e.g., macroeconomic trends, criminal justice policy, policing, gun control) have been unable to account for the drop. Rather, some of the most promising explanations for the crime drop—the legalization of abortion and lead exposure—are relatively novel in the criminological literature. Further research is required to explain how crime declined so unexpectedly and rapidly (a) across

geographical areas, (b) across demographic groups, and (c) alongside risky behavior. A better understanding of the causes of the crime drop of the 1990s will lead to a better understanding of the causes of crime more generally.

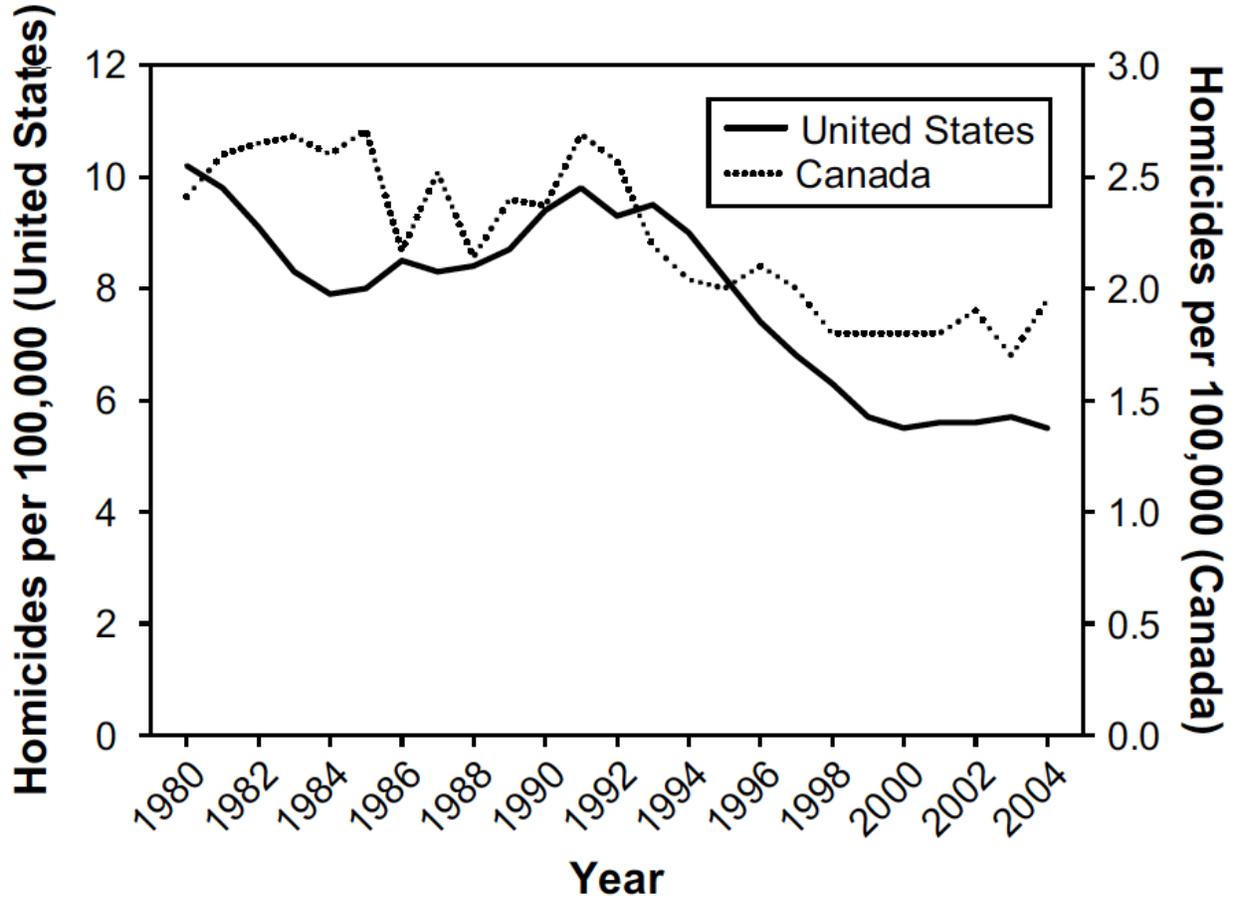
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Figure 1

Homicide rates for the United States and Canada (1980-2004). Source: FBI Uniform Crime Reports (US); Statistics Canada (Canada).



Brief Author Biography

Sandeep Mishra is Assistant Professor of Organizational Behavior in the Faculty of Business Administration at the University of Regina. He received his Ph.D. in psychology from the University of Lethbridge. His research is broadly focused on explaining patterns of risk-taking and risky behavior, including gambling and crime, using interdisciplinary approaches from the fields of social, cognitive, and evolutionary psychology.