Crime trends capture the attention of the media, public and politicians who demand to know what drives criminal behavior. It is the challenge for criminologists to account for changes in crime rates over time. When crime rates across the U.S. began climbing in the 1960s and into the 1970s, a number of criminologists accounted for this as the result of the relatively large baby boom population ‘coming of age’ – that is, the crime-prone ages of juveniles and young adults. This explanation seemed to account for a great deal of the variation in crime trends during that period. The crime trends of the mid-1980s were more baffling. During a period when the baby boom generation was ‘aging out’ of crime-prone years, the crime rate began rising once again. These rising crime trends also were occurring during a period when ‘get tough on crime’ policies had been implemented and a growing proportion of the adult population was being incarcerated. In retrospect, many criminologists agreed that, in large part, the increasing crime trends in the 1980s and early 1990s were due to the crack-cocaine trade and to gun-carrying youth who had been indoctrinated into the drug trade especially after many adult drug traffickers and to gun-carrying youth who had been indoctrinated in the 1980s and early 1990s were due to the crack-cocaine markets, the economy and abortion laws. No one of these by itself can account for the crime decline; but they all likely contributed to some extent.

Crime Decline: Trends and Patterns

Regardless of the data source – either the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)’s Uniform Crime Reports or the National Crime Victimization Survey, index crime rates declined more than 40% between the early 1990s and 2000 to lows that had not been realized since the mid-1960s. This plummeting trend seemed to account for a great deal of the variation in crime rates over time. When crime rates across the U.S. began climbing in the 1960s and into the 1970s, a number of criminologists accounted for this as the result of the relatively large baby boom population ‘coming of age’ – that is, the crime-prone ages of juveniles and young adults. This explanation seemed to account for a great deal of the variation in crime trends during that period. The crime trends of the mid-1980s were more baffling. During a period when the baby boom generation was ‘aging out’ of crime-prone years, the crime rate began rising once again. These rising crime trends also were occurring during a period when ‘get tough on crime’ policies had been implemented and a growing proportion of the adult population was being incarcerated. In retrospect, many criminologists agreed that, in large part, the increasing crime trends in the 1980s and early 1990s were due to the crack-cocaine trade and to gun-carrying youth who had been indoctrinated into the drug trade especially after many adult drug traffickers and to gun-carrying youth who had been indoctrinated in the 1980s and early 1990s were due to the crack-cocaine markets, the economy and abortion laws. No one of these by itself can account for the crime decline; but they all likely contributed to some extent.

Figure 1 shows that the two decades leading up to the crime decline were characterized primarily with an oscillating pattern. Homicide peaked in 1980 at 10.2 per 100,000 population – its highest rate in the twentieth century, then fell 23% in the next 5 years to 7.9. Between 1985 and 1991, the homicide rate rose almost 25% to 9.8. Unlike homicide trends, robbery peaked in 1990, otherwise mirroring the homicide pattern since 1980. Since 2000, the end of the great American crime decline, these rates stabilized through 2007 after which they declined until 2011, our latest available data point – dropping about 20%.

Remarkably, these general trends were not solely driven by a few of the largest U.S. cities but were found in cities across the country although the magnitude of the crime rates varied across cities (McCall et al., 2011). City-level studies of this period found that larger cities were more likely to exhibit this pattern and that the timing of the rise and fall of crime rates was earlier for more highly and densely populated cities with higher levels of deprivation (Messner et al., 2005). Messner and his colleagues (2005) also found a geographical pattern among those cities following the national trend – that is, the upturn in homicide rates began in the early 1980s on the west coast and the downturn ensued among east coast cities with patterns reflecting a dispersion of effects.

The close parallel between the homicide and robbery series shown in Figure 1 suggests that common forces drive these trends, but criminologists have yet to arrive at any consensus on what these causal influences may be. The structural and situational factors that have been proposed as plausible drivers of these trends and related scholarly debates are the subject of this article. Before moving to those forces, we provide a brief discussion of the age- and race-specific homicide trends between 1980 and 2008.

Age-Specific Homicide Offending Trends

By disaggregating the total homicide rates shown in Figure 1, we discover that certain age groups, in particular, were driving these crime trends. In Figure 2, age-specific homicide offending rates for select age groups are displayed (U.S. Department of Justice). These predatory crime rates share remarkably similar trends over this period. Though not so closely shared among other serious crime series, all of the major index crimes declined during the last decade of the twentieth century.
The distinct patterns among these age groups are quite striking as the younger populations exhibited remarkable changes in their homicide offending patterns. In particular, the 14–17 year olds began the period with rates comparable to the relatively lower rates of the 35–49 year olds, but then by 1988, surpassed the rates of the typically higher homicide offending rate group, the 25–34 year olds, and maintained that higher rate until 1999 – toward the end of the crime decline.

The highest offending group is the 18–24 year olds with the steepest growth and decline in their homicide trends during this 30-year period – almost doubling between 1984 and 1993 (from 21.9 to 43.1) and then falling by 42% to their low of 25 per 100,000 in 2004. The youngest age group saw similarly dramatic swings, beginning in 1984 with homicide rates at 9.3 and tripling by 1993 when homicide rates hit a high of 31 per 100,000 14–17 year olds. These rates grew as many young people were affected or caught up in the crack-cocaine markets and began arming themselves with handguns. Their homicide rates then dropped below the 1984 rates to their low of 8.9 in 2003. Interestingly, the two older age groups, 35–49 and 50 years and older, realized stable or decreasing homicide trends over 72% of this 30-year period. There are no clear-cut answers

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**Figure 1** U.S. Homicide and Robbery* Rates, 1974-2010. *Note: Robbery rate divided by 25. Source: Department of Justice, FBI’s Uniform Crime Reports.

**Figure 2** Age-specific homicide-offending rates, 1980–2008. Source: Department of Justice, FBI’s Uniform Crime Reports.
to explain these shifting violent crime rates, and more puzzling to criminologists is what accounted for the unanticipated declines of the 1990s.

Race-Specific Homicide Offending Trends

Disaggregating total homicide rates by race indicate that the African American homicide rate has been considerably higher than that of whites since 1980. (Note that the African American rate has been divided by five so the variation in the white homicide rate is not dwarfed by the substantially higher minority rate.) Moreover, the white homicide rate has remained relatively more stable, fluctuating between 6.4 (highest rate, 1980) to 3.4 (lowest rate, 2008), compared with African American homicide, which fluctuated from 51 (10.2 in figure after being divided by 5) (highest rate, 1991) to 24.5 (lowest rate, 1999). The significantly steeper growth and decline in African American homicide rates suggests that the crime decline in the 1990s was disproportionately influenced by falling homicide rates among African Americans. Again, although a parsimonious example for why African American homicide rates fell dramatically during the 1990s does not exist, the following section sheds light on possible explanations, all of which contributed in part to this decline. (Figure 3).

Crime Decline: Explanations

The major hypotheses that have been proposed to explain the crime decline of the 1990s are delineated below. First, we discuss the demographic influence of age structure and ethnic immigration. Second, we present the role of criminal justice factors – such as incarceration, police forces and strategies, as well as gun control interventions – which may have contributed to the declining violent crime rates. Finally, we shift to social and economic explanations that have been offered, such as the waning crack-cocaine markets, the economic boom of the 1990s and the impact of legalized abortion that led to the drop in numbers of unwanted births who would have been in their crime-prone ages during the 1990s – about 20 years after the passage of those abortion laws. We conclude with summary discussions of each of these proposed explanations.

Age Structure

Criminologists widely acknowledge the existence of an ‘age-crime curve,’ or the tendency for individual criminality to peak in adolescence and early adulthood and decline thereafter (Hirschi and Gottfredson, 1983). The pervasiveness of the age-crime curve suggests that a larger proportion of young people in the total population should equate to a larger pool of criminal victims and offenders and thus a higher crime rate more generally. Early articles reported considerable support for this idea (see Sagi and Wellford, 1968), and the youth age structure trend was found to closely mirror the precipitous increase in crime rates of the 1960s and 1970s (besides a dip in 1975) and subsequent decline beginning around 1980 (Cohen and Land, 1987). Therefore, many criminologists explored this demographic force to explain the crime decline of the 1990s.

More recently, Marvell and Moody’s (1991) extensive review identifies statistically significant and positive relationships between the relative size of the youth population and crime rates (i.e., homicide and burglary) in almost all studies under consideration. Some scholars suggest that future crime rates can be forecasted on the basis of the projected size and age composition of juvenile and adult populations. For instance, Blumstein et al. (1980) accurately
predicted that crime rates would peak in 1980 as the postwar baby boom birth cohort moved out of high crime ages. Although the aforementioned studies would suggest that the crime drop of the 1990s had much to do with changes in age structure, some scholars express doubts. Zimring (2007) argues that New York City experienced only a slight reduction in the total number of males in their late teens to late twenties in the mid-1990s, yet also experienced a major crime decline. Others argue that when crime rates were declining in the late 1990s, the number of 15- to 24-year olds in the U.S. population was increasing and continued to do so into the twenty-first century while crime rates continued to decline (Blumstein and Rosenfeld, 1993, 2008; Levitt, 2004). Additionally, the effects of age composition on crime rates can be offset when age compositional changes are slow or when such changes occur along with other demographic changes, such as changes in the relative size of racial minority groups (Blumstein and Rosenfeld, 2008; Levit, 2004).

Also problematic is that a number of forecasts prior to the crime drop based on age composition projections were largely unsuccessful. Steffensmeier and Harer (1987) predicted significant declines in violent and property crime from 1980 to 2000 and thus unanticipated the crime rise beginning in the mid-1980s. Others predicted that anticipated massive increases in the proportion of youths in the late 1990s would produce a “crime bomb” and the emergence of young, ultraviolent ‘superpredators’ after the turn of the century (Dilulio, 1996). However, proponents of the crime storm based their predictions solely on the size of the youth population and did not take into account relative sizes of middle-aged and elderly populations (Steffensmeier and Harer, 1999). Additionally, forecasts are strongly influenced by recent crime trends, which produce projections that are based on expected, not actual age-specific crime rates. Thus, although age composition is certainly an important covariate of crime rates, a large share of youth in the population does not inevitably translate into higher crime rates. In fact, the recent increase in the 15- to 29-year old population from 2000 to 2010 has been accompanied by a leveling and then declining crime trend. Hence, evidence points to other forces that define the crime decline of the 1990s.

**Immigration**

Conventional wisdom has supported the view that immigration promotes crime (Gurr, 1989). Social disorganization theory suggests that immigration influences introduce cultural and language differences among community residents, and thus attenuates community bonds and informal controls and in turn enhances social disorder and crime levels (Shaw and McKay, 1969 [1942]). However, violent crime reductions in recent decades have coincided with the influx of foreign-born individuals (Simanski, 2005). Additionally, many U.S. cities with high concentrations of immigrants have relatively low crime rates and experienced some of the largest crime reductions in the 1990s (Martinez and Lee, 2000). A number of studies based on longitudinal and time-series data find that increases in immigration contributed to the crime decline in the 1990s (Ousey and Kubrin, 2009; Stowell et al., 2009; Wadsworth, 2010). Accordingly, it may no longer be justifiable to assume that immigration and diversity are automatic determinants of social disorganization and crime.

A number of explanations have emerged for why higher immigration levels may lead to lower levels of crime. Many scholars point out that immigrants are less likely to be engaged in criminal behavior than other racial groups; thus, a larger proportion of law-abiding citizens logically equates to a lower overall crime rate (Butcher and Piehl, 1998; Hagan and Palloni, 1999; Sampson and Bean, 2006). Others point out culturally-based protective factors such as marital/family stability, extended family, religiosity, employment networking, and collective efficacy among immigrant enclaves (Ousey and Kubrin, 2009; Sampson et al., 2005; Wadsworth and Kubrin, 2007). Some posit that immigration promotes positive changes in the general character of communities by stimulating the creation of new institutions such as churches and self-help groups (Martinez and Valenzuela, 2006). Logan et al. (1994) argue that low-skilled service markets heavily depend on immigrant labor, and thus reduce unemployment rates in immigrant communities. Finally, some scholars have pointed to a selection effect, which suggests that foreign-born individuals who come to the U.S. are relatively more motivated, talented, and law-abiding than those who do not (Martinez, 2002).

Despite empirical support, some scholars have been skeptical of the crime-reducing potential of immigrant populations. For instance, Skogan (2009) argues that two-thirds of the crime decline in Chicago since 1991 transpired in African American neighborhoods, whereas gang activity and crime increased in Hispanic neighborhoods. Accordingly, Skogan refutes the notion that immigrants exhibit lower levels of criminal behavior, but rather, that undocumented immigrants go to considerable lengths to avoid attention from law enforcement officials. Also, a number of cross-sectional (Reid et al., 2005) and longitudinal studies (Raumer, 2008; Butcher and Piehl, 1998) find that increases in immigration have had a negligible effect on recent crime trends. Finally, some studies find that although first-generation immigrants display lower levels of criminal involvement, criminal behavior is considerably more common among second- and third-generation immigrants (Hagan et al., 2008; Hagan and Palloni, 1999). Despite contradictory findings, there is enough evidence to suggest that growing immigration patterns in some areas contributed to declining crime rates during the 1990s. The immigrant population has continued to grow since the 1990s during a time when the crime trend plateaued until 2006 and subsequently declined.

Moving from demographic factors, many politicians and police chiefs have claimed that criminal justice practices have resulted in curbing crime rates during the crime decline period.

**Incarceration**

Beginning in the early 1970s, imprisonment rates in the U.S. soared. By the end of the twentieth Century, the incarcerated population had quadrupled with the number imprisoned climbing from 500 000 in 1972 to two million (Spelman, 2000). Incarceration could affect crime rates via incapacitation,
deterrence, or rehabilitation. Distinguishing among these forces has proven to be a difficult if not insurmountable statistical challenge to date (Blumstein et al., 1978). Scholars have long debated the effects of incarceration on crime rates – some arguing that criminal justice sanctions deter criminal offending (Ehrlich, 1973) and others arguing that prisons have a criminogenic effect (Vieraitis et al., 2007). Scholars have established a link between incarceration and crime rates (Levitt, 2004; Stemen, 2007; Zimring and Hawkins, 1973), and incarceration is listed among the major factors credited for declining crime trends of the 1990s (Levitt, 2004). By and large, the weight of evidence supports the dampening effect of incarceration rates on subsequent crime rates (as well as the positive effect of growing crime rates on imprisonment rates). Recent research by Levitt (2004) and Baumer (2008) suggest that imprisonment (the effect of stock and flow, respectively) accounts for a relatively large percentage of the drop in crime rates during the 1990s (estimates ranging from about 10 to 35% of the decline) making incarceration one of the substantial contributors to the crime decline. Studies of the elasticity of incarceration suggest that the increased effectiveness of incarceration in reducing crime rates may be due to the growth in the scale of imprisonment, the proportion of adults represented among those incarcerated and the focused efforts of law enforcement to get the more serious offenders off the street (Spelman, 2000). On the other hand, some scholars provide evidence of the diminishing returns of these rising imprisonment trends that suggests, after a point, growing imprisonment may actually increase crime rates as optimum deterrent and incapacitation effectiveness is surpassed (Liedka et al., 2006). There are growing concerns among scholars that the release of these prisoners (about 500,000 released in 2000) back into their home communities may have deleterious effects on crime trends (Rose and Clear, 1998).

Even though there appears to be a general consensus in the literature about the effect incarceration has had on reducing crime rates during the 1990s (Blumstein and Rosenfeld, 2008), researchers note that the incarceration rate was climbing long before the precipitous decline of the 1990s crime rates (Blumstein and Rosenfeld, 1998). Furthermore, since 2000, the incarcerated population continued to climb until 2009 when the numbers began to drop – the period when the crime trend leveled off, and renewed its decline. Scholars continue their work to hone the precision of statistical techniques used to assess this relationship; and the growing knowledge of the limitations of previously employed model specifications call into question the confidence some scholars have in inferences drawn from the current body of evidence (Spelman, 2008).

**Police Force and Policing Strategies**

A great deal of credit has been claimed by police commissioners and politicians for the role that the police had on the declining crime trends of the 1990s. Attention not only has been given to changes in the size of the police force but also to changes in the focus of policing efforts and policing strategies. Many police departments shifted from strictly reactive policing as they adopted new innovations in police tactics in the 1980s and 1990s. A myriad of strategies were implemented, including community-oriented policing, problem-solving policing, zero-tolerance policing, and targeting public disorder and weapons carrying. Therefore, the impact of law enforcement is among factors identified in the crime decline literature. Among the crime decline, scholars have called into question the influence law enforcement efforts have on curbing crime because the widespread crime decline occurred in many U.S. cities where such tactics had not been introduced (Blumstein and Rosenfeld, 1998). Furthermore, a direct link between policing and crime rates is difficult to determine as many cities’ crime rates were already declining by the time policing initiatives were introduced (Eck and Maguire, 2000).

Eck and Maguire (2000) had conducted a thorough review of research on the impact of the number of police personnel on crime and found mixed evidence even after assessing only the more rigorous studies that addressed methodological issues such as simultaneity. Nevertheless, more recent research focusing on the period of the crime decline has produced evidence that the size of the police force (officers on the street) had a dampening, although limited, effect on violent crime rates (Baumer, 2008; Levitt, 2004).

Research examining more targeted police initiatives has provided some support for their contribution to falling crime rates, such as Boston’s Operation Ceasefire (Braga et al., 1999), New York City’s Compstat (Messner et al., 2007), Richmond’s Project Ceasefire (Raphael and Ludwig, 2003), Kansas City’s Gun Experiment (Sherman et al., 1995) and St. Louis’ Firearm Suppression Program (Rosenfeld and Decker, 1996). Rosenfeld et al. (2005) compared police strategies and their effectiveness in reducing violent crime trends among the programs in Boston, New York City, and Richmond along with a sample of cities that did not implement these police tactics. They found modest support (only for Richmond) that new policing interventions differentiated falling violent crime rates across U.S. cities during the 1990s. The effect of policing on the crime decline warrants further scholarly attention in order to provide definitive evidence about the nature and magnitude of this relationship (National Research Council, 2004). Eck and Maguire (2000) concluded that law enforcement’s focused attention on high-crime neighborhoods likely contributed to the reduction in crime rates; and also that overall effectiveness of policing is realized typically as part of a coordinated network of institutions, including formal (e.g., courts and schools) and informal (families and churches) institutions. Other evidence suggests that successful police tactics are those that target specific hot spots and violent offenders (National Research Council, 2005). Another review suggests that the diverse police strategies introduced in the 1990s likely contributed very little to the crime drop (Eck and Maguire, 2000).

The majority of the decline in homicides during the 1990s was accounted for by gun-related homicides (Fagan et al., 1998); therefore, some have given credit to gun control legislation and police strategies that targeted illegal possession of guns and gun-related crimes during this period (Sherman and Rogan, 1995).
Like most studies of police interventions, initiatives toward gun control and the reduction of gun-related violence were seldom evaluated using systematic and multivariate methodological techniques. Most reports are descriptive in nature and only a small percentage of these studies would pass the basic requirements of sound statistical analysis for attributing success to these programs (Wellford, 2005: 674). As stated among the concluding remarks from a critical review of firearms and violence studies published by the National Research Council with regard to place-based policing of firearms and targeted violent gun offenders:

> "... in the committee’s view, the existing data and methods make it difficult to assess how ... policing programs affect crime. Researchers cannot hope to credibly control for the many confounders that influence violence and crime using simple time-series comparisons (National Research Council, 2005: 241)."

Although a number of these initiatives were introduced during the 1990s, it is difficult if not impossible to separate the unique effects of these policing and firearm strategies from other concurrent effects on the declining homicide rates without different methodological designs and statistical tests (National Research Council, 2005). Without clear assessments of these programs’ effectiveness in reducing crime, it is certainly difficult to determine the extent to which these programs had an impact on reducing crime rates in the 1990s net of the effects of other influences. Some scholars attribute limited significance to interventions such as policing strategies, gun control, and concealed weapons laws on influencing the crime decline (Levitt, 2004).

Aside from criminal justice policies and practices, criminologists have examined the influence of social, economic, and situational forces to explain the crime decline.

### The Rise and Fall of the Crack-Cocaine Market

The link between U.S. crack-cocaine markets and violent crime rates is a salient theme in the crime decline debate (Blumstein and Rosenfeld, 1998; Levitt, 2004). Blumstein’s (1995) ‘crack-cocaine thesis’ argues that the intensified demand for crack-cocaine accounts for the substantial increase in homicides and robberies in urban America during the 1980s and early 1990s and that violent crime rates declined with the increase in drug-related arrests and the subsiding crack-cocaine demand in the 1990s. The following section discusses characteristics of the crack-cocaine market that influenced an increase, followed by a subsequent decrease in violent crime.

In an illegal drug market, disputes involving drug transactions, territories, and other matters are unlikely to be mediated by the police or other formal modes of control. Consequently, the growth in the crack-cocaine market is purported to have increased violent crime because it heightened the use of informal and violent forms of conflict resolution. Beyond this, crack-cocaine transactions are likely to transpire between strangers, a characteristic that may heighten feelings of suspicion and lead to a “shoot first and ask questions later” mentality (Ousey and Lee, 2007). More importantly, intensified law enforcement efforts that incarcerated early forerunners of crack markets created a ‘replacement effect,’ whereby younger and more inexperienced individuals took over control of crack-cocaine markets. Compared with their predecessors, these replacements were more reckless, more likely to carry handguns, and quicker to resort to lethal forms of conflict resolution (Blumstein, 1995). As the crack-cocaine trade became more lucrative, it also became more violent - characteristics that regularized gun-toting not only among those directly involved in trafficking, but also as a means of self-defense among uninvolved individuals who lived in geographical areas deeply implicated in the crack-cocaine trade (Blumstein, 1995).

Some scholars attribute the decline in violent crime in the 1990s to decreasing levels of crack-cocaine market activity following intensified law enforcement efforts in addition to the declining numbers of new users as information regarding the negative consequences of crack-cocaine involvement became widespread (Blumstein and Rosenfeld, 1999). Ousey and Lee (2007) argue that the violent crime decline can be attributed not only to the subsiding of drug markets, but also to the attenuation of the drug market-letality violence relationship, which had created a “kinder and gentler” drug market than that of the 1980s and early 1990s. Specifically, as marijuana became the drug of choice among young drug users in the 1990s, the crack-using population became increasingly characterized by older, less impulsive, and less violent individuals compared with their younger counterparts during the peak of the “crack era” in the late 1980s (see Johnson et al., 2000). At the same, drug transactions were becoming significantly less likely to transpire in visible street markets, instead moving to private, indoor settings among trusted friends or regular customers (Curtis, 1998).

Several studies indicate that U.S. cities that experienced high levels of crack activity or significant increases in crack use in the 1980s also experienced momentous upsurges in violent crime (Baumer et al., 1998; Messner et al., 2005; Messner et al., 2007). However, other studies find less definitive support. Kelling and Sousa (2001) find that the declining use of crack cocaine, as represented by the number of hospital discharges for cocaine-related incidents, is not associated with the decline in violence in New York City. Corman and Mocan (2000) employ a time-series analysis of crime and drug use in New York City, and report that murder and assault rates are not related to changes in the rate of drug use. The authors speculate that the significant increase in the supply of crack cocaine during the 1980s created cocaine surpluses among drug dealers, and thus reduced violent interactions that were once again prevalent among drug dealers due to a more limited supply of available cocaine.

### Economic Growth

Improving economic conditions during the 1990s have been proposed to account for the declining crime rates during that decade. Criminologists have theorized the link between economic conditions and crime rates arguing that offenders are motivated by economic strain (Merton, 1938) and/or that routine activities facilitate opportunities for crime during economic upswings (Cohen et al., 1980). Typically using
unemployment rates as their economic indicator, criminologists have generated mixed support for the relationship between economic conditions and crime rates (Chiricos, 1987; see Cantor and Land, 1985 for countervailing forces explaining these mixed findings). Some individuals who lack lucrative, legitimate employment opportunities (especially youth and minorities) may turn to illegitimate opportunities for economic gain when those illicit opportunities present themselves as was the case in many inner cities during the crack-cocaine epidemic of the mid-1980s extending to early 1990s (Freeman, 1996).

Between 1991 and 2001, gross domestic product (GDP) per capita increased by 30% in the U.S.; and not only did the unemployment rate drop from 6.8 to 4.8%, but real wages increased and legitimate labor market opportunities improved. Even though many of these job opportunities were low-wage, unskilled positions, they provided many youth with a safer work environment than what the illegal drug market had afforded them during the heyday of the crack-cocaine market (Blumstein and Rosenfeld, 1998). Yet, empirical support found for the relationship between economic expansion of the 1990s and the declining crime rate has been modest and applies primarily to property crimes and robbery. Researchers examining this relationship have operationalized economic forces using measures such as the unemployment rate (Gould et al., 2002), business cycles (Arvanites and Defina, 2006), and real wages (Gould et al., 2002). There is essentially no systematic support for the effect of improved economic conditions and the declining homicide trends of the 1990s. Levitt (2004) argues that the economy does not have a direct impact on crime rates but may work largely through increased resources available to criminal justice agencies (police and prisons) during these times of economic upswings. This may account for the fact that the economic crises of the twenty-first century have not been accompanied by rising crime rates, but instead with a flattened trend through 2006 followed by another crime decline.

Another indicator of economic health, consumer sentiment, has been proposed as a better predictor of crime trends because it captures the subjective aspects of economic conditions. Rosenfeld and Fornango (2007) find robust evidence for the effect of their consumer sentiment summary index on property crime and robbery trends. Although their study does not test the association between consumer sentiment and homicide trends, Blumstein and Rosenfeld (2008) argue that the close parallel between homicide and detrended consumer sentiment index trends and, likewise, the similarity between the robbery and homicide trends during the last few decades of the twentieth century suggest there may exist a link between economic conditions and homicide trends using this index of consumer sentiment. Although there appears to be consistent empirical evidence for a modest influence of economic forces on property crime and robbery trends, as yet there is no support for its impact on other violent crime trends.

Legalized Abortion

One of the most contentious explanations for the crime drop is Donohue and Levitt’s (2001) “abortion dividend” thesis, which attributes up to half of the crime decline in the 1990s to the legalization of abortion in the early 1970s. The authors argue that changes in abortion laws produced smaller cohorts of teenagers and young adults in the 1990s in addition to fewer numbers of unwanted children who would have been born to high-risk mothers (i.e., young, unmarried, low educational attainment and economic status) and in high-risk birth conditions (i.e., low birth weight, prenatal exposure to drugs and alcohol, neurological deficits) (Levitt, 2004). To support their claim, Donohue and Levitt argue that states that legalized abortion before the 1973 Roe vs Wade decision experienced crime declines earlier than other states, and states with higher abortion rates in the 1970s saw the most significant crime declines in the 1990s. Other studies also find that abortion laws contributed to crime declines in recent decades, although most find its effect to be much lower in magnitude than was estimated by Donohue and Levitt (Baumer, 2008; Berk et al., 2003).

The abortion-dividend thesis has also attracted a great deal of skepticism. Many scholars note that the timing of abortion laws and the crime decline in the 1990s were temporally out-of-synch (Rosenfeld, 2004). Specifically, they argue that crime declines occurred several years later than they should have based on the timing of abortion law implementation and also that increases in violent crime in the early 1990s were greatest among African Americans adolescents, although African American women were more likely to have abortions than other racial groups (Blumstein and Wallman, 2006). Also, Zimring (2007) points out that Canada did not remove restrictions on abortion until 1989, yet experienced significant crime reductions at the same time that the U.S. did. Others claim that the abortion-crime link is not causal, but rather is confounded with the rise and fall of crack markets (Blumstein and Wallman, 2006). For instance, Cork (1999) argues that even though states that legalized abortion earlier than 1973 (e.g., New York and California) did experience earlier starts to the crime drop; this was because these states underwent the rise and fall of the crack epidemic earlier than other states.

Conclusion

The major hypotheses that have been proposed to explain the crime decline of the 1990s are varied and some have generated considerable debate among scholars. The demographic factors including age structure likely have little direct bearing on the decline; and immigration trends may have contributed to some of the decline, but research suggests countervailing forces related to immigration may limit the extent to which these patterns accounted for the decline. Criminal justice policies – that led to unprecedented proportions of the population being incarcerated and to innovative policing strategies and gun control interventions – have been shown to contribute to the declining violent crime rates – in particular, incarceration trends. Unfortunately, limitations in research design of policing and gun control tactics leaves out the extent to which these factors curbed crime rates in question. The diminishing crack-cocaine markets may be linked to the crime decline although the widespread handgun availability that seemed interrelated with drug market activity showed no
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sign of fading. The economic growth of the 1990s provided legitimate labor market opportunities to many youth who, in prior years, were attracted to the lucrative, though dangerous, illicit drug trade; yet research showed that economic forces impacted declining property and robbery crime trends rather than other personal crime trends such as homicide. The impact of legalized abortion was one of the explanations for the crime decline that generated lively scholarly debates in the literature, and some support emerged that it may have accounted for some of the crime decline—indirectly, if not directly. No one of these explanations by itself can account for the crime decline; but likely in combination—and some of which interacting—they all contributed to some extent. A body of literature accounting for crime trends since the turn of the twenty-first century has yet to emerge, but we can expect to revisit many of these social and economic forces when scholars attribute their influence to account for recent fluctuations.

See also: Age and Crime; Communities and Crime; Drugs: Illicit Use and Prevention; Economics and Crime; Guns and Criminals; Homicide; Immigration and Crime in the United States; Mass Imprisonment and Its Consequences; Property Crime: Victimization and Trends.

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