DECLINING VIOLENT CRIME RATES IN THE 1990S: Predicting Crime Booms and Busts

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ABSTRACT
The United States in the 1990s has experienced the greatest sustained decline in violent crime rates since World War II—even though rates thus far have not fallen as rapidly as they increased during the crime boom of the 1960s and early 1970s. I review a set of exogenous and policy-related explanations for the earlier crime boom and for the crime bust of the 1990s. I argue that our understanding of crime trends is hampered by a lack of longitudinal analysis and by ahistorical approaches. I identify a set of questions, concepts, and research opportunities raised by taking a more comprehensive look at crime waves.

INTRODUCTION
Recent declines in rates of violent crime in the United States caught many policymakers and researchers off guard. These declines were perhaps more surprising in that they came on the heels of dire predictions about the rise of a generation of “superpredators” who would soon unleash the full force of their destructive capacities on an already crime-weary nation (Bennett et al 1996, Fox & Pierce 1994).

I argue in this paper that changes such as those involving the recent downturn in violent crime rates usually surprise researchers because we rely mostly
on cross-sectional analysis and rarely study social phenomenon like crime trends in a longitudinal context. I begin this article by looking more closely at the recent downturn in violent crime rates, comparing it to trends since World War II. I then summarize and evaluate several common explanations for changing violent crime rates. Finally, I identify a set of concepts that might be useful for moving our thinking about social phenomenon such as crime toward a more longitudinal framework.

Studying Crime Trends in Postwar America

I concentrate here on violent crime trends for the United States. While violent crime generally includes murder, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault, researchers agree that data are probably most accurate for murder and robbery (Gove et al. 1985, O’Brien 1996). A focus on the United States is strategic in that it accounts for the greatest volume of research, although such a focus simultaneously underscores the strategic importance of developing more cross-national comparisons.

Researchers interested in studying violent crime trends in the United States are limited to two main data sources: the Uniform Crime Reports (UCR), collected annually since 1930 by the Federal Bureau of Investigation; and the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), collected every six months since 1973 by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (Rand et al. 1997). Space limitations prevent a detailed assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of these data sets (Biderman & Lynch 1991, LaFree 1998a:Ch. 2). I concentrate here on the UCR because it provides the longest uninterrupted crime series data for the United States.

Figure 1 shows UCR trends for murder and robbery, 1946 to 1997. I begin the series in 1946 because of serious validity problems with pre-World War II UCR data. I use “longitudinal” throughout this paper to refer to studies based on annual time-series analysis.

My first concern is to identify the major trends in violent crime rates during the post-World War II period. In fact, considering this issue provides insight because it illustrates how little emphasis we have placed on longitudinal changes in crime rates. We lack even a basic shared vocabulary to describe crime changes in precise language. I use the term crime “boom” to refer to a rapid increase in crime rates and crime “bust” to a rapid decline.

Converting the annual rates depicted in Figure 1 to annual percentage changes shows that the longest sustained increases in murder and robbery rates occurred from the early 1960s to the mid-1970s. Taken together, murder rates increased by 113.04% from 1963 to 1974 and robbery rates increased by 222.47% from 1961 to 1971. While rape and aggravated assault rates are generally less reliable, they also increased dramatically during this period; both
nearly tripled from the 1960s to the early 1970s. Hence, the most persuasive evidence for a postwar violent crime boom comes from the years about 1961 to 1974. While there were other periods of increase (especially the late 1970s and the late 1980s), none was as steep or as sustained.

Evidence for a single crime bust is less clear. Thus far at least, none of the four violent crimes rates have shown declines that were as long or as steep as the increases of the 1960s and early 1970s. Still, Figure 1 shows that, from 1991 to 1997, murder rates declined in five of six years and robbery rates declined in all six years. In fact, for both murder and robbery, the largest sustained declines of the postwar period have occurred in the 1990s. Murder rates dropped by 30.6% and robbery rates by 31.8% from 1991 to 1997. Rape and aggravated assault rates have also registered declines in the 1990s: rape rates fell by 15.1% and aggravated assault rates by 11.8%.

EXPLAINING POSTWAR VIOLENT CRIME TRENDS

One of the most important justifications for taking a longitudinal approach to crime trends is that it provides insights that are unavailable in cross-sectional
designs. With regard to the trends shown in Figure 1, two insights are especially important. First, postwar US violent crime trends sometimes changed very rapidly. In the space of just over ten years in the 1960s and early 1970s, murder rates more than doubled and robbery rates more than tripled. Likewise, in the space of only six years in the 1990s, murder and robbery rates fell by about a third. The simple rapidity of these changes calls into question explanations of crime based on fixed biological characteristics, deep-seated psychological characteristics, or slow-moving social characteristics.

Second, a longitudinal perspective underscores the obvious but often neglected fact that events like the crime boom of the 1960s and the crime bust of the 1990s are situated in distinct historical periods. This fact reminds us of the importance of considering not only what causes crime to increase or decline in general, but more specifically, what particular historical events were directly associated with these changes.

In the sections that follow, I divide common explanations for postwar crime trends into exogenous and public policy effects. I specifically consider how well each explanation fits the timing of the 1960s crime boom and the 1990s crime bust.

**Exogenous Effects**

I define exogenous effects as those that are largely independent of crime policy. The three exogenous effects that have probably been most frequently linked to violent crime by researchers are economic stress, political legitimacy, and family disorganization. Other exogenous effects with special relevance for crime trends are the proportion of young people, drug markets, and changes in the public’s routine activities.


Economic stress models of US crime rates work well for the early postwar period when a strong economy was paired with low, stable crime rates. The war jolted the US economy out of a devastating depression, matched the undamaged industrial plants of the United States against the war-torn factories of Europe and Japan, and established America as a supermarket to the world (Levy 1987, Wallerstein 1995). However, connections between economic
stress variables and crime trends are less certain for the middle postwar period (from about 1961 to 1973), when rapidly accelerating crime rates were paired with what appeared to be a fairly robust economy. This problem is well expressed by Wilson’s (1975:3) influential challenge to researchers to explain “the paradox” of “crime amidst plenty.” One possible explanation for this seeming paradox is that crime trends are dependent on specific economic stress measures.

Measures of economic stress can usefully be divided into absolute measures (which refer to how individuals or groups of individuals are doing in comparison to some fixed level of economic well-being) and relative measures (which emphasize how one individual or group of individuals is doing compared to other individuals or groups; LaFree 1998a:119–20). Common absolute measures of economic stress are poverty, median income, and unemployment; common relative measures are income inequality and inflation. Of the two types, relative measures have thus far been more successful at explaining longitudinal crime trends in the postwar United States (Devine et al 1988, LaFree & Drass 1996). While absolute measures of economic stress like unemployment and median income were generally favorable during the middle postwar years, relative measures like income inequality and inflation were far less favorable.

Although it is still too early to tell, economic stress perspectives may also help explain the crime bust of the 1990s. In 1996, the federal spending deficit reached its lowest level since 1979 (US Economic Report to the President 1997). In 1994, the poverty rate began to fall for the first time in five years and income inequality began a modest decline (US Economic Report to the President 1997). In 1997, unemployment reached its lowest level since 1973 (US Economic Report to the President 1997). After reaching double digits in the 1970s and early 1980s, inflation cooled off during the 1990s, remaining under 3% from 1990 to 1996 (US Economic Report to the President 1997).

POLITICAL LEGITIMACY Weber (1947:324) defines legitimate power (or “authority”) as “the probability that certain commands (or all commands) from a given source will be obeyed by a given group of persons” and adds that a basic criterion of legitimate power is a “minimum of voluntary submission” (p. 329). All societies face the ongoing problem of legitimizing their rules and laws and transmitting this legitimacy to succeeding generations. Legitimation is the process of explaining and justifying the social rules to new societal members (Berger & Luckmann 1967:93). This reasoning suggests that crime and deviance rates may be related to trends in the legitimacy of political institutions.

Before the mid-1960s, most researchers assumed that challenges to political legitimacy such as protests and riots were directly related to crime rates
Social disorganization (Davies 1962, Smelser 1962), breakdown (Tilly et al. 1975, Useem 1985), tension (Lodhi & Tilly 1973), anomie (Merton 1938), and strain (Cloward & Ohlin 1960) theories all share the assumption that crime and collective political action are positively related because both flow from social breakdown. When there is a breakdown in social organization, informal sources of social control—family, work, school, voluntary organizations—lose their ability to channel individuals into conventional behavior. The resulting disorganization frees social actors to engage in a wide variety of antisocial behavior, including crime and collective action (Durkheim 1951, Smelser 1962).

But after the mid-1960s, this view of the association between collective political action and crime was increasingly discredited. The most articulate of these challenges came from resource mobilization theorists (McCarthy & Zald 1977, Oberschall 1978, Snyder & Tilly 1972), who argued that unlike crime and other forms of social pathology, collective action requires both access to resources and the development of a well-defined organizational structure. Because collective action and crime have different requirements, resource mobilization theorists reasoned that perspectives that assume that they spring from similar social forces are incorrect.

Probably owing in large part to the complexities of measuring political legitimacy, there are few longitudinal studies examining its relationship to crime. Using a content analysis of news stories recorded in the New York Times Annual Index, LaFree & Drass (1997) compare total event counts for collective political action associated with the civil rights movement to total rates of robbery, murder, and burglary for the United States, 1955 to 1991. They find a strong positive relationship between civil rights–related collective action and crime rates from 1955 to the early 1970s, but an increasingly negative relationship between the two thereafter. They interpret this as partial support for both social disorganization and resource mobilization perspectives: Social disorganization theory is supported in that street crime increased along with political unrest in the early postwar period; but resource mobilization theory is supported in that, compared to crime, collective political action declined more rapidly in the middle and late postwar years.

Arguments about the relationship between political legitimacy and crime seem better suited to explaining the crime boom of the 1960s than the crime bust of the 1990s. Still, there is evidence that the free fall in levels of political trust recorded in the 1960s has ended. This interpretation is consistent with many of the measures tapped since 1958 by the biennial national election survey on American attitudes toward government (Miller 1996). For example, for the past 40 years, this survey has asked respondents, “How much of the time can you trust the US government to do what is right?” The proportion of Americans answering “most of the time or just about always” declined rapidly
during the 1960s and 1970s, scoring just over 25% in 1980 (LaFree 1998a: 102). But since 1980, the percentage who express trust in the federal government has held steady (just under 30%) and even begun to rise a bit. In fact, levels of trust tapped by this measure were higher in 1996 than in 1980 (LaFree 1998a:102). Other measures of public confidence in government tracked by the national election survey data provide similar evidence (LaFree 1998a: 104).

More generally, in the 1990s, there was no organized collective political action that remotely resembled the scope of the civil rights movement or the anti-war protests of the 1960s and 1970s.

FAMILY DISORGANIZATION Measures of family disorganization have been among the most popular postwar explanations of crime trends in the United States. Again, while individual theories vary greatly, most emphasize one or more of three connections between family organization and crime. First, throughout human history, families have helped to regulate crime rates by serving as the primary institution for passing social rules and values from one generation to the next (Davis 1948). With few exceptions, children have more frequent and longer contacts with family members than with others, and family contacts are generally earlier and more emotionally intense than other contacts.

Second, families control crime by directly regulating the behavior of their members. Families may limit the delinquent behavior of their children by restricting their activities, by maintaining actual physical surveillance over them, and by knowing their whereabouts when they are out of sight (Hirschi 1995:128). Relatedly, families control the behavior of children simply by commanding their love and respect. A good deal of research confirms that children who care about their families will be more likely to avoid behavior that they know may result in shame, embarrassment, or inconvenience for family members (Hirschi 1995:128, Braithwaite 1989:48).

And finally, families reduce crime by protecting their members. Thus, families reduce the criminal victimization of family members by shielding them from property crimes such as burglary and theft, and also by guarding them from potential physical harm from unwanted suitors, molesters, muggers, and rapists (Hirschi 1995).

Despite the interest in connections between family organization and crime, there have been few longitudinal studies. Cohen & Felson (1979:600), however, created a longitudinal measure they call a “household activity ratio” by adding the number of married households with women in the paid labor force to the total number of non–husband-wife households. They use this measure to estimate changes in the amount of activity engaged in away from households. But it can also be interpreted as a measure of the amount of time individuals
spend outside of traditional nuclear families. In their analysis of homicide, rape, aggravated assault, robbery, and burglary from 1947 to 1974, Cohen and Felson confirm that increases in the proportion of time individuals spend away from traditional families is consistently associated with increases in all of these street crimes; a finding largely confirmed in a later longitudinal study of murder, robbery, and burglary in the United States from 1948 to 1985 (Devine et al. 1988).

The idea that rapid changes in the family are associated with the 1960s crime boom has obvious appeal. Although it is important not to overstate the homogeneity of the American family directly following World War II (Coontz 1992), the aggregate changes were nevertheless substantial. In the 1950s, divorce rates were lower than they would be for the next fifty years, and the proportion of American households containing individuals with no family connections hovered around 10% (US Bureau of the Census 1975:64). After the 1960s, rates of divorce, children born to unmarried parents, and single-parent families rapidly increased, and the total number of Americans living entirely outside of families skyrocketed (Goldscheider & Waite 1991).

Revolutionary changes in the economy no doubt contributed to these changes. The steady movement of men away from agricultural labor at home to positions in the paid labor force, which had already begun in earnest during the industrial revolution, continued to gain momentum during the postwar period (Coleman 1993:4). Women joined the paid labor force in record numbers during the postwar years (Burggraf 1997:18). And the amount of time children and young adults spent away from families and in schools rapidly accelerated (LaFree 1998a:159–61). These changes totally restructured the American family.

Connections between family organization and crime seem less certain for the crime bust of the 1990s. Still, there is some evidence of growing family stability. Divorce rates per 1000 married women peaked in 1979 and declined slightly into the 1990s (US Bureau of the Census 1996a:104). The proportion of births to unwed mothers was still increasing in the 1990s, but more slowly than it was in earlier decades (US Bureau of the Census 1995). Several economic indicators of family change also held steady or even reversed direction at the end of the twentieth century. For example, trends in female labor force participation and the formation of nonfamily households were flat in the 1990s (US Bureau of the Census 1996a:6, 394).

And importantly, the end of the twentieth century comes more than three decades after the most rapid changes in family organization began. Blended, dual-career, male-household manager, single-parent, and even gay family forms are becoming increasingly institutionalized. As these alternatives to the traditional family become more routinized, their ability to prevent deviance and crime should increase. In fact, there is evidence that some specific types of
violent crime—notably, intimate partner homicides—have actually declined along with falling marriage rates (Rosenfeld 1997) and the increasing availability of domestic violence services (Dugan et al 1999).

Other Exogenous Effects

AGE STRUCTURE The idea that changes in violent crime rates are due to the simple availability of young people over time has been one of the most common explanations of crime in postwar America. Of 24 longitudinal studies on the effects of age structure on homicide reviewed by Marvell & Moody (1991), 19 reported a significant positive relationship with the proportion of young people (measured variously as between 14 and 34 years of age). Moreover, 16 of these 19 studies found “strong” or “moderate” relationships between age and murder rates whereas only one of the negative relationship studies did. Among six time series studies of robbery, all six found a significant positive relationship with age.

In fact, the presumed strength of the relationship between age structure and crime rates lead Hirschi & Gottfredson (1983:124) to pronounce it “invariant” across cultures, historical periods, and types of crime. Indeed, like violent crime trends, the proportion of youth was relatively low following World War II, began to escalate in the 1960s, reached a peak in the early 1970s, and then declined somewhat into the 1980s and 1990s (LaFree 1998a:44). However, the importance of the age-crime relationship is easily exaggerated. Blumstein & Rosenfeld (1999:11) point out that the crime bust of the 1990s has been accompanied by a period in which age cohorts in the late teens and early 20s have been growing rather than declining in size. More generally, the authors note (1999:11) that age-composition changes are relatively small, with cohort sizes growing at a rate of about 1% per year. By contrast, age-specific crime rates have at times increased or decreased by as much as 20%.

DRUG MARKETS The expansion and contraction of drug markets have also been suggested as an explanation for postwar American violent crime trends. Thus, Wilson (1975:ch. 8) draws connections between the crime boom of the 1960s and dramatic increases in heroin use. Many commentators have argued that the increases in rates of serious violent crime among juveniles in the middle and late 1980s were directly linked to the rapid rise of crack cocaine use (Blumstein 1995, Baumer et al 1998). Moreover, Blumstein & Rosenfeld (1999) argue that the crime bust of the 1990s may be explained in part by the declining number of new crack users and the increasing stability of drug markets.

As with several of the other explanations reviewed here, it is difficult to tell to what extent evolving drug markets have caused violent crime trends or are simply correlated with them. Blumstein’s (1995) careful analysis of connec-
tions between the crack cocaine epidemic and the rise in youthful firearm violence provides evidence for a causal connection. However, some have argued that the nearly simultaneous, rapid increases in drug use that accompanied the violent crime boom of the 1960s may well be a spurious correlation (Goode 1989).

CHANGES IN ROUTINE ACTIVITIES “Routine activity” explanations for changes in violent crimes have been most systematically advanced by Cohen and Felson and their associates (Cohen & Felson 1979, Cohen et al 1980). They argue that economic and social development in the United States has brought about changes in routine activities, increasing the dispersion of activities away from the home and consequently heightening opportunities for crime. They note that for a crime to occur the necessary elements (“motivated offenders,” “suitable targets,” and the absence of “capable guardians”) must converge, and they argue that these elements were increasingly likely to co-occur in the United States during the high crime growth decades of the 1960s and 1970s. In particular, Cohen & Felson (1979:598–600) argue that the increasing dispersion of activities away from households coincided with dramatic increases in the proportion of violent crimes committed by strangers.

Felson (1998:ch. 9) also offers a routine activities explanation for the crime bust of the 1990s, emphasizing especially recent changes in property targets and access to cash. Felson argues that as valuable, easy-to-steal items like electronic equipment have become more widespread, their prices and thus the value of stealing them have dropped commensurately. Likewise, the explosive growth in credit card use, point of sale transactions, and money machines have greatly reduced the number and value of property crime targets.

Routine activity theories have contributed to our understanding of crime trends by focusing attention on the impact of situational variables. However, thus far researchers have not been able to demonstrate conclusively how situational variables are linked to violent crime trends or the extent to which any linkages are unique to situational as opposed to other variables (Birkbeck & LaFree 1993:126–9).

Public Policy Effects

I define public policy effects as the effects of those policies aimed directly or indirectly at reducing crime rates. The most obvious connection here is the effects of the criminal justice system. However, policymakers have also supported education and welfare programs at least partly in terms of crime reduction (President’s Commission 1967:66).

CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM EFFECTS The two parts of the criminal justice system that have probably been most frequently associated with violent crime trends in the postwar United States are police and prisons.
Police initiatives Poor relations between the police and communities were a common explanation for the crime boom of the 1960s (Wilson 1975:109). However, much greater research attention has been focused on the role of police in the crime bust of the 1990s. The last decade of the twentieth century has witnessed a nationwide adoption—or revival—of policing styles variously called “community policing” or “community oriented policing” (Roth & Moore 1995). The best publicized example of the impact of this reorientation on violent crime trends has occurred in New York City (Kelling & Coles 1996). In the early 1990s, New York City police began a citywide campaign against “quality of life” offenses—drinking in public, urinating in the streets, making excessive noise, and other forms of incivility (Anderson 1997:52). Police especially targeted aggressive young toughs who were especially threatening to neighborhoods.

The results have been widely heralded. Only 985 homicides occurred in New York City in 1996—a 57% decline from the peak of 2262 in 1990 (Anderson 1997:53). Similar results are being attributed to changed policing strategies in other cities (Kennedy et al 1996). However, the exact connections between changes in policing and declining rates of violent crime are difficult to gauge because crime rates have decreased both in cities that have changed policing styles and cities that have not. Moreover, no one has been able to establish the extent to which policing strategies interact with other variables thought to be related to crime rates.

Incarceration rates The argument that increased incarceration reduces crime, especially through its effects on deterrence and/or incapacitation, has also been frequently advanced to explain postwar crime trends (Devine et al 1988, Blumstein et al 1978). Several researchers using annual time-series data for the United States report consistent positive effects of imprisonment on violent crime rates (Cantor & Land 1987, Bowker 1981). Devine et al (1988) found a strong connection between annual changes in homicide, robbery, and burglary rates and changes in prison population, controlling for a variety of economic and social variables, 1948 to 1985; a finding updated and replicated for homicides, robberies, and assaults by Marvell & Moody (1997).

From the end of World War II until the mid-1970s, imprisonment rates in the United States hovered around 100 prisoners per 100,000 US residents (US Bureau of Justice Statistics 1997a:518). In fact, imprisonment rates in 1973 were about the same as they had been in 1946. But from 1974 to 1996, US imprisonment rates more than quadrupled, reaching a century high of 427 per 100,000 residents (US Bureau of Justice Statistics 1997b:1). From 1990 to 1996 alone, imprisonment rates increased by 43.8% (US Bureau of Justice Statistics 1997b:1). Freeman (1995:172) provides the startling conclusion that by 1995, the number of American men under the supervision of corrections had
surpassed the total number of unemployed men. While much research confirms that informal social controls are generally more effective than formal controls such as imprisonment in reducing crime (Braithwaite 1989, Tyler 1990), nevertheless, increases in formal sanctions of this magnitude have undoubtedly dampened US crime rates in the 1990s.

**EDUCATION AND WELFARE EFFECTS** Schools, like families, can discourage crime by reducing criminal motivation, by increasing the effectiveness of social control, and in principal at least, by protecting students from the criminal behavior of others. There is a well-known tendency for offenders to be drawn from those with low levels of educational attainment (Elliott & Voss 1974). There is also evidence that juveniles who accept the legitimacy of education and who have high educational aspirations and long-term educational goals are less likely to engage in delinquency (Liska 1971:12, Figueira-McDonough 1984:325). Schools can reduce crime by effectively monitoring and supervising the behavior of children under their custody (Toby 1995:152–58). More generally, research shows that juveniles are less likely to commit crime when they are strongly attached to school (Braithwaite 1989:28–29) and when they are more successful in school (Agnew 1985:151).

Despite the great interest in the potential impact of expanding educational attainment on crime, there have been few longitudinal studies (Long & Witte 1981). The crime bust of the 1990s does coincide with continued expansion of educational attainment. During the 1990s, the proportion of 14 to 17 year olds enrolled in school topped 96%, the proportion of 18 and 19 year olds in school reached 59.4%, and the total proportion of young adults 20 to 24 years old in school reached 31.5% (US Department of Education 1997:15).

But educational attainment also expanded rapidly in the 1960s and 1970s—at the same time as the crime boom. In fact, any connection between educational attainment and crime is likely complex. For example, Carnoy (1972) argues that the effects of educational attainment are complicated by its relativity: expanding educational attainment may improve prospects for graduates but may also lower prospects for nongraduates. LaFree & Drass (1996:618) point out that the capacity of educational attainment to create more egalitarian social conditions ultimately depends on the strength of the economy. Their time-series analysis of murder, robbery, and burglary arrest rates for United States 1957 to 1990 showed that whether increasing levels of educational attainment reduced arrest rates for whites and African Americans depended on levels of income inequality.

The most obvious connection between welfare spending and crime is welfare’s presumed ability to ameliorate economic stress and thereby reduce the motivation of potential offenders to commit crime and to improve the effectiveness of informal social control mechanisms. These connections would
presumably apply most directly to those violent crimes with immediate economic benefits like robbery and some types of homicide. In an annual time-series analysis, Devine et al (1988) found that total spending on Aid to Families with Dependent Children and other public relief was consistently associated with declining burglary rates and marginally associated with declining robbery rates, 1948 to 1985. However, spending on welfare had no effect on homicide rates. In addition, cross-national studies generally support the conclusion that countries that spend more on public assistance have lower rates of child homicide victimization (Fiala & LaFree 1988; Gartner 1990).

In 1948, total US welfare spending amounted to $83 per capita (in 1995 dollars; US Bureau of the Census 1985:26–28). Spending rates increased only slightly during the early postwar period, reaching $116 per capita in 1960 (pp. 26–28). But from the mid-1960s to the late 1970s, increases in welfare spending were rapid. From 1964 to 1978 alone, total per capita welfare spending (again, in 1995 dollars) more than quadrupled—from $121 per year to $551 dollars per year (US Bureau of the Census 1996b:1).

Connecting levels of welfare spending to the crime bust of the 1990s seems more problematic. In 1996, Congress replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and several other long-established programs with the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program (Watts 1997). The new law sets up a system of block grants to the states, mandates that federal funding for TANF programs be capped at $16.4 billion annually through the year 2002, and stipulates that recipients can only receive TANF benefits for a maximum of five years. However, because of the way these changes are being phased in, it is too early to tell what impact if any they will have on violent crime rates. Moreover, recent changes in the welfare system have been implemented during a period when the economy has been relatively strong.

IMPEDIMENTS TO THE STUDY OF CRIME WAVES

Undoubtedly, a simple lack of usable time-series data has been a major impediment to the longitudinal analysis of crime and related phenomena. Even in those relatively rare circumstances in which a given variable has been collected reliably over time, it is seldom possible to gather more than 50 years worth of annual data. This means that time-series analysis must confront many of the same limitations that face comparative research in general: small sample sizes, limited variables, and data based on convenience rather than theory (Lieberson 1991, Ragin 1987). Although longitudinal analysis of crime rates has grown more sophisticated over time, methodological and analytical problems have made it difficult to test competing explanations (LaFree 1998b: 135–7). But there are at least two more fundamental impediments to longitudinal stud-
ies of crime waves; one springs from sociology in general and the other is more specific to the study of crime waves.

**Ahistoricism and Crime**

The general impediment is the ahistoricism that has characterized much quantitative time-series research in sociology. Isaac & Griffin (1989) claim that this ahistoricism is in turn rooted in three common and rarely examined assumptions: theory and history should be separated; time may be treated ahistorically; and quantitative methods should take primacy over historical considerations.

**SEPARATING THEORY AND HISTORY**

Isaac & Griffin (1989) argue that most quantitative time-series analyses handle theories and their derivative hypotheses as independent of history, which “becomes something ‘out there,’ needing no explicit theorization” (p. 875). This separation treats social processes as if they were independent of history so that determinants of social phenomena are expected to be similar, for example, in the contemporary United States, England in the eighteenth century, or ancient Greece.

An example of this ahistoricism in criminology can be found in the now voluminous quantitative literature on connections between criminal processing and offender’s race (Kleck 1981, Blumstein et al 1983). As cross-sectional research accumulates over time, it is easy to interpret each new study as if it were testing relationships between criminal justice outcomes and race for all time. Thus, research which concludes that there is little evidence of discrimination against African Americans in criminal processing at a given point in time (e.g. Kleck 1981) is sometimes incorrectly used to draw conclusions about the viability of race discrimination theories of criminal processing in other periods. Similarly, research that demonstrates discrimination against African Americans in a particular period (e.g. Russell 1998) is sometimes incorrectly used to support theories of discrimination across all periods.

**AHISTORICAL TIME**

Isaac & Griffin’s second point is that much longitudinal sociology research treats time as a “linear organizing device” marking incremental, equal units (1989: 875). This ahistorical time is conceptualized as undifferentiated and external to events and relationships and assumes that relationships between independent and dependent variables are consistent over given measures of time.

But whether relationships between measures of crime and other variables are consistent over time is an empirical question. For example, comparing annual event counts for the total number of collective actions taken in support of the civil rights movement (e.g. sit-ins, demonstrations, riots) to total annual arrest rates for robbery, homicide, and burglary, LaFree & Drass (1997) found that the relationship between crime arrest rates and rates of collective political
action was historically contingent: positive and statistically significant for a period from 1955 to 1972, but unrelated or negatively related thereafter.

PRIMACY OF METHODOLOGY OVER HISTORY Isaac & Griffin’s third point is that quantitative longitudinal studies in sociology are usually governed more by statistical than historical criteria. Because of the emphasis on statistical significance, researchers frequently push to expand the length of their time series analysis even when this expansion is unrelated or antithetical to theoretically critical historical events. Because of the difficulties of obtaining sufficient data to permit a quantitative analysis, this consideration is especially germane to the developing area of longitudinal analysis of crime trends.

Crime Waves in Criminology
The more specific impediment to the development of an empirical study of crime waves is a longstanding tendency by researchers to treat crime waves as socially constructed epiphenomena, rather than as empirical facts with important theoretical and policy implications. This view is exemplified by Erikson’s (1966) influential study of deviance in the Puritan colonies of Massachusetts in the seventeenth century. Erikson identifies three “crime waves” during the first sixty years of settlement: the Antinomian controversy (a challenge to the community’s religious establishment), the arrival of the Quakers from Pennsylvania, and the Salem witch hysteria. But he then argues that all three waves were not fueled by increases in crime rates—which remained relatively stable over the six decades—but were instead efforts to shift public attention away from other problems and create social unity.

Like Erikson, the few researchers who have studied crime waves in contemporary America (Fishman 1978, Graber 1980) have most often interpreted them as social constructs, often emphasizing the generally weak connections between concern about crime and actual crime rates. For example, Fishman (1978) argues that crime waves are constructed when the news media devotes considerable attention to a small number of crimes, encouraging law enforcement agents to bring evidence only of these crimes forward. Relatedly, Beckett (1997) compares increases in rates of street crime in the 1960s and 1970s to levels of public concern about crime and to levels of punishment. While she does not conclude that the increases in crime were imaginary, she nevertheless concentrates on the weak relationship between actual crime levels and public fear of crime to argue against the rise in public support for more punitive crime policies.

PROMISING DIRECTIONS
The study of crime waves might be advanced by examining research in other fields where the behavior of waves has been studied more intensively: includ-
ing mathematics and engineering (Chui 1992, 1995; Bailey 1975); economics, history and political science (Fischer 1996; Goldstein 1988; Gurr 1977); and epidemiology (Potterat et al. 1985; Wallace & Wallace 1990). By treating crime waves as an important research issue, we immediately raise several largely unexplored questions about their nature and their relationship to individual behavior.

Waves and Individual Decision-Making

Perhaps the most fundamental issue advanced by taking crime waves more seriously is the implications raised for the individual decision to commit crime. Just as individual investors would be profoundly affected by whether they happened to enter the stock market in 1928 or 1998, so too, apart from any psychological make-up or deep-seated biological characteristics, individual decisions to commit crimes are going to be profoundly affected by their chance location in history. This is because individual decisions are in part a product of how many other individuals are engaging in crime at a given point in time. Schelling (1978:14) states this interrelationship between individual action and broader social trends in general terms: “People are responding to an environment that consists of other people responding to their environment, which consists of people responding to an environment of people’s responses.”

This way of conceptualizing criminal decision-making is compatible with Matza’s (1964) influential work on delinquency and drift. Matza argues (p. 28) that delinquents are not locked into crime in any absolute way, but rather exist in a “limbo between convention and crime, responding in turn to the demands of each, flirting now with one, now the other....” Such reasoning suggests that it may well be easier for juveniles to “drift” into crime when they occupy a point in time that is characterized by high levels of criminal activity. Thus, holding constant biological drives, psychological predispositions, fear of punishment, morality and other factors, a given individual will be more likely to commit crime during a crime boom than a crime bust. Crime booms may thus lower thresholds for committing crime and contribute to “bandwagon” effects (Granovetter 1978:1425). Crime busts may raise thresholds for committing crime and contribute to “snob” effects.

Wave Length

The length of waves and whether these lengths are similar across cultures and historical periods are also largely unexplored. Reviews of economic cycles by Goldstein (1988:7) and Fischer (1996:273–77) distinguish between hegemony cycles (about 150 years), long waves or Kondratieff cycles (about 50 years), Kuznet cycles or long swings (about 20 years), Labrousse intercycles (about 10 years) and business, trade, or Julgar cycles (about 5 years). However, few criminologists have made similar attempts to specify the length of crime waves.
Gurr et al.’s (1977:623–24) study of crime trends in London, Stockholm, New South Wales, and Calcutta, 1820 to 1970, suggests that there may be considerable variation in crime wave lengths for different countries and time periods. For example, starting in the 1840s, London’s murder and manslaughter rates declined steadily until the 1920s—a period of about 80 years. New South Wales also showed similar long-term declines. By contrast, declines in murder and manslaughter rates for Stockholm that began in the 1840s were interrupted twenty years later by a rapid resurgence in rates. Calcutta’s rates changed even more rapidly. Figure 1 presented earlier shows that violent crime rates in the post-World War II United States increased most rapidly for a period of about 15 years—from the early 1960s to the mid-1970s.

Wave Shape

The shape of crime waves has also received little attention. Goldstein (1988:7) notes that waves can be divided into an expansion phase or upswing and a stagnation phase or downswing. The transition point from upswing to downswing is called a “peak,” and the transition point from stagnation to expansion is called a “trough.” Application of these distinctions to Gurr et al’s (1977) data suggests that from 1873 to 1971, the city of Calcutta experienced murder and manslaughter peaks in about 1880, 1910, and at the end of the data collection period in 1971; and murder and manslaughter troughs in about 1890 and 1950. For the postwar United States, LaFree (1998a:22) shows that murder rates reached peaks in 1974, 1980, and 1991 and troughs in 1957, 1976, and 1984.

An important related issue is whether crime waves exhibit symmetric or asymmetric connections with other variables. Lieberson (1985:174) points out that because most research and theory in the behavioral sciences is based on cross-sectional data, researchers most often simply assume symmetry between independent and dependent variables: “the question of whether an increase in (some variable) X yields an increase (or a decline) in Y is not distinguished from the question of whether a decline in X yields a decline (or an increase) in Y.” This assumption rules out the possibility that some longitudinal relations are fully or partially irreversible. For example, perhaps a severe economic depression raises crime rates permanently, even when the economy returns to its post-depression levels. Or relatedly, perhaps an economy that is first depressed and then returns to its former level results in crime rates either higher or lower than they were initially.

In a rare test for symmetry in the criminology literature, Cohen & Land (1987) examine the longitudinal relationship between age structure (population aged 15 to 24) and crime (murder and motor vehicle theft rates) in the United States, 1947 to 1984. They conclude that there is evidence for symmetry between crime and age structure for this period. By contrast, LaFree & Drass’s (1997) study of the relationship between crime rates (homicide,
robbery, and burglary) and collective political action cited earlier finds an asymmetrical relationship: crime rates and collective action were positively associated from 1955 to the early 1970s, but unrelated or negatively related thereafter.

Waves and Linearity

Longitudinal analysis also raises the possibility of nonlinear relationships over time between crime and its determinants. At present the literature in this area is largely unsystematic and scattered. However, from diverse sources, we can offer several useful sensitizing concepts: including, tipping points (Schelling 1978, Granovetter 1978), threshold models (Granovetter 1978, Wallace 1991), contagion effects (Crane 1991, Loftin 1986, Wallace &Wallace 1990), epidemic theories (Crane 1991), diffusion models (Burt 1987, Granovetter & Soong 1983, Pitcher et al 1978), and bandwagon effects (Granovetter 1978).

While the exact application of these concepts varies greatly, all of them are grounded in the assumption that under the right circumstances, trends in social problems like crime may be nonlinear. Berry (1991:9) notes that the two general forms this nonlinearity can take are “accelerating acceleration” and “decelerating deceleration.”

These concepts all suggest that rates of specific types of behavior may accelerate (or decelerate) rapidly once the occurrence of this behavior in a particular community reaches a critical level. For example, Schelling (1971) shows that “white flight” behaves as a “tipping point” phenomena such that when a given neighborhood reaches a particular concentration of African Americans, white flight increases inevitably and precipitously. Similarly, Rowe & Rodger’s (1991) research on the average age at which teenagers lose their virginity in a given community can be interpreted in terms of a community-based tipping point: when levels of nonvirginity reach a certain level, they begin to accelerate dramatically.

Granovetter and his colleagues (1978, Granovetter & Soong 1983) develop a more formal approach to related issues through the concept of “thresholds.” Granovetter (1978:1422) defines individual thresholds as that point where the perceived individual benefits of doing a particular thing exceed the perceived costs. Granovetter uses the decision to participate in a riot as an example. The cost to a given individual of joining a riot declines as riot size increases because the probability of being apprehended is smaller when more people are involved. Granovetter points out that different individuals will bring with them different thresholds for joining a riot. For example, political radicals may have low thresholds for joining riots: the benefits of rioting are high to them, the cost of arrest low. But at the same time, apart from individual predispositions, thresholds for everyone are lowered when a particular type of behavior becomes more common.
Crane (1991:1227) builds a “contagion model” of thresholds by assuming that social problems spread mostly through peer influence; an assumption he grounds in the criminology literature demonstrating the importance of peer influence on juvenile delinquency and other deviant behavior (Kandel 1980). This assumption raises the possibility that there may be identifiable levels of the incidence of social problems within given populations such that when the incidence reaches this critical point, the process changes explosively. Crane finds support for this possibility with data showing that when neighborhood levels of dropping out of school and teenage pregnancy reach certain levels, they jump dramatically, rather than showing continuing linear increases. Crane (1991) argues that the effect of neighborhood organization on social problems (including violent crime) in urban ghettos may also take this contagious form.

Key issues raised by sensitizing concepts such as these include the possibility that: (a) violent crime rates might increase explosively in response to key variables reaching a particular threshold or tipping point; (b) violent crime rates within communities or nations sometimes behave like epidemics, changing rapidly in a short time; (c) individual predispositions to violent behavior are affected by the context in which such behavior is already occurring in a given community or nation; and (d) violent crime rates do not always respond in a direct, linear way to predictive variables such as economic stress or age structure.

Synchronous and Asynchronous Waves

Another issue opened by considering the longitudinal properties of crime trends is the extent to which trends are synchronous across various geographical units and time periods. In a review of economic “long cycles,” Goldstein (1988:4) argues that the long-term ups and downs of national economies are synchronous among core nations. Moreover, as the number of nations at the economic core has expanded in the modern period, economic synchrony has spread to larger regions of the world. Similar explorations could be applied to violent crime trends. Gurr et al (1977:619) conclude that historical crime trends for London, Stockholm, and New South Wales appear to be largely synchronous: “one might almost conclude that some common social and political dynamics created public order over the course of a century...then went crazily unsprung.” By contrast, Gurr et al conclude that crime rates for Calcutta appear to be asynchronous with the other three cities.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on violent crime trends for the postwar United States, the best case for existence of a crime boom is the period from the early 1960s to the mid-1970s.
The 1990s have thus far represented the best case for a crime bust—although rates have thus far not fallen as fast in the 1990s as they increased in the 1960s.

The greatest impediment to longitudinal analysis is simple data availability. Annual crime data for the United States from the National Crime Victimization Survey extend only to 1973; UCR data extend back to 1930 but are less complete before 1960 and are extremely incomplete before World War II. Still, imagine how our interpretation of crime trends will change by 2045, when researchers should have a reasonably accurate, 100-year crime series. We can perhaps appreciate the implications of having an expanded longitudinal data set by projecting backward: How would our conclusions about crime trends differ if we had a usable crime series that extended back 100 years?

An approximation is provided by Eckberg (1995), who uses state-level death registration data and econometric modeling techniques to create an estimate of annual US murder rates from 1900 to 1989. Eckberg’s estimates show that murder rates in the first three decades of the twentieth century were about the same as they were in the 1970s and 1980s. Judged from this perspective, the low murder rates of the 1940s and 1950s, rather than the high rates of the 1970s and 1980s, are the aberration. Eckberg’s data also allow us to conclude that the decline in murder rates from 1931 (9.7 per 100,000) to 1957 (4.7 per 100,000) was steeper than the murder rate decline logged thus far in the 1990s (9.8 per 100,000 in 1991 compared to 6.7 per 100,000 in 1997).

More generally, imagine the kinds of analyses that could be done if a valid set of longitudinal data on violent crimes and other variables existed for the past century. For example, we could compare the effects of alcohol prohibition in the 1920s to the war on drugs of the 1980s; the crime boom of the early 1900s to the boom of the 1960s; and the impact of police reform and reorganization in the early 1900s compared to the community policing reforms of the 1990s.

Among the roles of social science, prediction is the most precarious. If crime rates continue to drop during the last few years of the twentieth century, then history will likely interpret the 1990s as a period of major crime declines in the United States. If, on the other hand, crime rates again begin to increase over the next few years, the first half of the 1990s will more closely resemble the early 1980s—a period when most street crime rates faltered before heading upward again.

Campbell (1994:2) predicts that the continuing accumulation of machine readable longitudinal data will soon create “a revolution” in social science forecasting. Clearly, the feasibility of doing longitudinal analysis and forecasting in areas such as violent crime rates improves every year. We can speed up these developments by devoting more time and energy to longitudinal approaches.
DECLINING VIOLENT CRIME RATES

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Literature Cited


