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Exploring the Crime Drop

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Exploring the Crime Drop

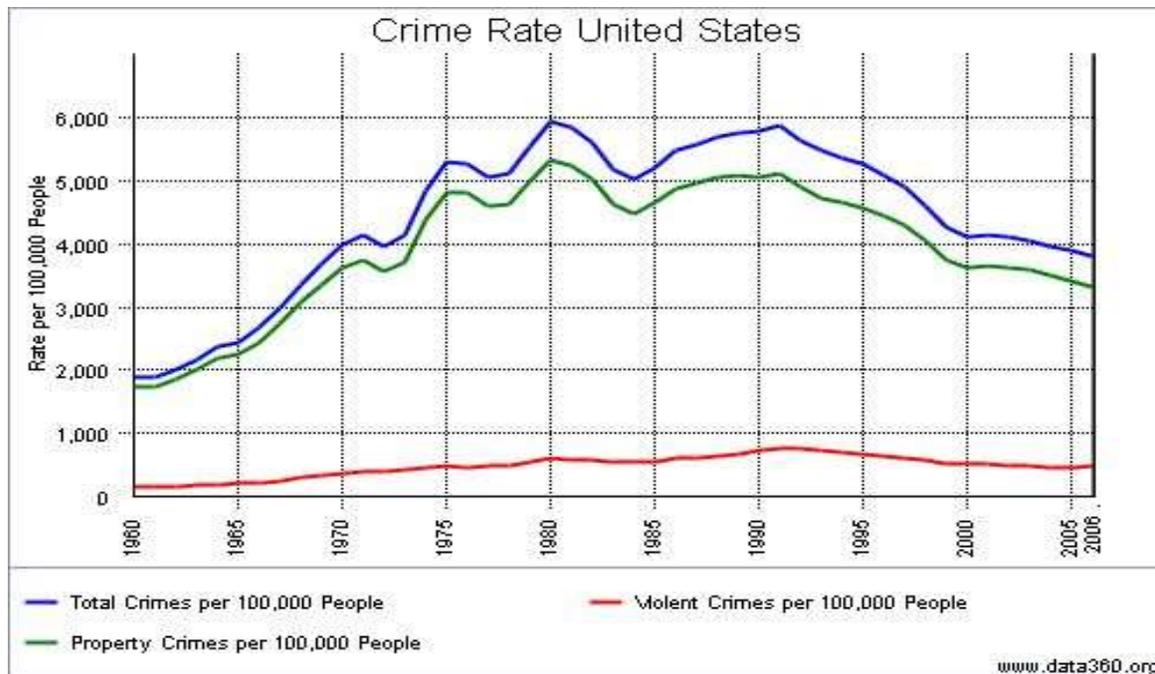
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Introduction

Crime is down. Despite ever present media coverage of crime and violence in society, crime in America continues to decline from its high in the early 1990s. While sensationalist media portrayals of rape after beating after shooting after terror event after murder and so on may paint a different picture, crime is down. American readers, movie goers, and television audiences continue their fascination with crime yet, crime is down. Why?

To answer that question, one must look beyond the borders of America and perhaps, as this paper will suggest, beyond the comfort of thinking within the box containing the common theories on what caused the crime drop. The decline in crime is not unique to one city, one region, or even to the United States as a nation. Since the early nineties, crime has dropped in a downward trend in the US regionally (Rickman, 2013), in developed countries around the world including Australia, Brazil, Canada, Germany, Great Britain, Japan (Farrell, Tseloni, Mailley, & Tilley, 2011; Greenburg, 2014), and even in some African, Asian, and Latin American nations (Tseloni, Mailley, Farrell, & Tilley, 2010). Figure 1 illustrates the changes in the crime rate over the past almost 50 years.

Figure 1. Crime Rates in the United States, 1960 – 2006.



Source: data360.org.

While there have been many propositions as to what exactly caused the steady crime drop, some are reasonable, some preposterous, some strongly confined to thinking within the box, and some show originality of thinking, logical reasoning, and pragmatism. Many of the explanations dispute each other and almost all have findings that dispute whether or not, or to what extent, that respective explanation effected crime. This paper explores some of the explanations previously offered (the preposterous notwithstanding) and supposes that there are yet other factors that have had an inverse effect on crime rates; the use of technology in capturing and reporting crime data, and societal change due to technology.

The list of explanations (variables and hypotheses) that researchers have applied to examine a variable's effect on the crime drop is lengthy and includes the following and more. In her review of research on the crime drop, Barker (2010) found that most research focused on the police, prisons, populations, and the economy as all having an inverse relationship on the amount of crime. Farrell (2013) expands this list to include fifteen hypotheses that have been applied to explain the drop in crime. In addition to a strong economy, Farrell identifies concealed weapons laws, capital punishment, gun control laws, the increase in prison populations, better policing strategies, the legalization of abortion, immigration, increased consumer confidence, the decrease in the crack cocaine market, an aging demographic, more legitimate social institutions, and improved security resulting in reduced opportunity for crime in the first place (2013). Due likely to the dramatic decreases in crime that have occurred in New York City, a number of studies have examined the above variables and more in that location (see Greenberg, 2014, Zimring, 2012). Greenberg (2014) suggests however, that no single piece of research can unequivocally explain the crime drop in New York or, in the United States. The same can be said for explaining the crime drop in other countries as well.

Many variables have been applied to explaining the crime drop. We know few have some correlations and we know some variables can't explain the drop in crime as there is very low or no correlation between those variables and crime. For instance, Blumstein and Rosenfeld, and Levitt suggested that there is "little evidence that demographic change, better policing, gun control, concealed weapons laws, or the death penalty" can explain a drop in crime (see Farrell et al., 2011). Nor can researchers find evidence that Levitt's abortion hypothesis, the economy, higher rates of imprisonment, or the crack epidemic which was prominent only in the United States, have any explanatory effect on crime rate drops (Farrell et al., 2011). While some of these variables have received much attention over the years and students of criminal justice continue to be told and believe they have some correlation, the evidence suggests they do not. It is time to move on from the comfort of mainstream obsession with continued concentration on these variables and seek alternative, new explanations.

Why is it so difficult to find a strong correlation between an explanation and the crime drop? Criminologists have been trying to answer this question for decades. Aside from the conventional variables that have been tested repeatedly, some new ideas come along from time to time and their effect on crime rates are found negligible at best and they too fade into obscurity. Since the causal relationship between variables and the crime drop are commonly unsuccessful, perhaps we should turn to the data itself. The literature reveals that this too has been considered, albeit in the general, macro sense, with what crime data can and cannot tell us.

For instance, criminologists have long known that not all crime comes to the attention of the police. Common reasons for this include non-reporting by victims or witnesses for a variety of reasons and crime not being discovered by the police during routine patrols. Crimes that do occur but escape the attention of the police are of course, uncaptured in the data. This phenomenon produces what is referred to as the 'dark figure of crime'. Some criminologists are vehement in their argument against the use of official statistics because the size of the dark figure is unknown. The dark figure has been discussed by criminologists for decades since Ferracuti, Hernandez, and Wolfgang (1962) referred to it as the dark number or, hidden criminality in the early 1960s.

In addition to concerns surrounding the dark figure, some criminologists have argued that other factors have resulted in crime being mismeasured. While many explanations surrounding the dark figure have focused on crimes that never come to the attention of law enforcement, whether they are not reported or, whether they never make it into the official statistics. The dark figure has been debated for decades and during much of that time, over the last thirty years, the introduction, adoption, and proliferation of personal computers has increased and, so it is believed, official reporting has become easier with the use of computers to capture, store and report data.

Technology: The Real Cause of Declining Crime Rates?

To date, no research has been conducted on the correlation between the use of computers in official data reporting processes and crime rates in the United States. The use of personal computers in the crime data processes has increased exponentially over the past 30 years, since the mid nineteen eighties and early nineteen nineties. In fact, over those thirty-some years, computers have continued to be used more and more in the data process in terms of both hardware and software. More law enforcement agencies use computers in the reporting process still each year. So, when criminologists see crime rates decreasing, and search everywhere at every possible variable for a correlation, why has the use of computer technology not been included as an explanation? Simple answer; you have to think outside the box. Or rather, from outside the box, set your gaze upon the box itself. We need to examine the reporting process itself and not simply computers and technology per se but, (because a computer only does what we tell it) the *process* for how crime data is now reported using that technology. Quite ironically, the question becomes, how do we get our data to be accepted by the technology we create with rules for collecting, for reporting, for data coding, for analyzing, and importantly, synthesizing into national crime rates.

Exploring Technology and Crime Reporting

The authors conducted an exploration of whether technology has had an effect on reported crime rates which would contribute to the decline. Discussions were held with police chiefs as well as law enforcement staff who collect and report crime data for their various policing agencies. These agencies are located in both northern and southern California. and large (500+ sworn personnel) and medium sized (100 – 200 sworn personnel) agencies were included. Discussions included police departments and Sheriff's offices.

All agencies discussed or demonstrated their procedures and issues experienced in the data reporting process. The guidelines for the reporting of crime data for UCR purposes, is determined and communicated by the FBI. While there are some criticisms of different aspects of crime data (such as those mentioned above and more), every agency strives to follow the FBI's guidelines.

The surprising, yet comforting, conclusion of the data exploration was that all agencies are giving their best effort in collecting, collating, and reporting their data. In some cases, this is remarkable given the size of the agencies and the amount of data involved. The agencies themselves even estimate their error rate. In each case, again surprising and astounding, the agencies reported that they estimate their data error rate to be approximately 1%. This low

error rate seems even more remarkable when compared to data systems at large public agencies that are designed and built to allow for error rates in the range of 5% - 10%.

The finding that law enforcement agencies are doing a remarkable job in reporting crime statistics, rather eliminates the hypothesis that computers and technology may be contributing to an erroneously low crime rate. On the other hand, if the use of technology has not contributed to lower rates but, seemingly has improved the reporting of data and, especially, the accuracy of that data, then, could the opposite actually be true? Prior to increased use of computers and better technology, crime rates may have been somewhat erroneously high due to less accuracy (and possibly much multiple counting of the same offenses) in the data.

While these hypotheses involving technology or lack of technology influencing crime rates are interesting, the finding that crime data reporting processes and data quality are good, returns us to another direction as well; what variables drive crime rates. Without the actor, there is no crime. Study after study, research findings have helped criminologists realize that some offenders offend a lot. So, again, we must consider those offenders who offend more than average; who commit a large proportion of crime if we are truly to positively impact (reduce) crime and crime rates.

Prolific offenders: Driving crime rates

Long have criminologists known that a small percent of offenders commits a disproportionate amount of crime. In the realm of crime, crime rates, and offenders, the conversation consistently comes back to prolific offenders and offending. They do drive crime rates so, while they have received attention in the literature, why do they not receive more attention. The easy answer to that question is that researchers tend to keep inside their box of comfort and examine correlations that they can relate to as historically receiving much attention; even when that attention has found no or weak correlation. A pragmatic examination and focus on prolific offending like those implemented in Great Britain and British Columbia, Canada, is the key to understanding contemporary crime rates. As such, to combat (prevent/reduce) prolific offending, responses specific to prolific offenders must be developed and implemented if any successful and long-term solutions are to be realized (Croisdale, 2012).

As the offenders engaging in an amount of crime that is disproportionate to their numbers, prolific offenders drive crime rates. As such, it logically follows that patterns in crime rates, are tied to patterns in offending. This could not be more true than at a local level (smaller geographic areas) where prolific offenders operate on scale that could seem less significant when illustrated in aggregated data for larger geographic regions.

With the new understanding of the decent quality of the reporting processes and data itself, as drivers of crime rates, the increase or decrease of crime rates will be tied to the offending patterns of this group of offenders. Responses to these offenders and their offenses must be appropriate and serious. While a prolific offender may be seemingly “harmless” due to the template (types) of crimes they customarily commit, societies approach to these individuals must consider the total harm they cause and adjudicate and sentence appropriately.

This approach is quite different from the days of long sentences and inmate warehousing. Or, given the pendulum is swinging away from long sentences for everyone, equally important that we do not create a system where we do not incarcerate those who deserve it. It is not important that we incarcerate or do not incarcerate mass amounts of people but rather, that we incarcerate (neutralize) the *right* people.

Conclusions

It is well known to criminologists and students of criminology/criminal justice that crime rates have been on a declining trajectory since the early 1990s. Some authors have suggested that the decline actually began earlier, in the mid-1980s. Many variables have been posited as having some effect on crime rates; some more plausible and useful than others. The most consistent findings of research into the great crime decline may be that there is no consensus cause for the decline and that the decline may be due not to any single variable but rather, may be due to a convergence of factors and variables.

Following from an examination of explanations of the crime drop, this paper discussed a few that have been found to be of some use as plausible explanations. The focus then shifted to the reporting of crime by the public in the first place, which is essential in crime being captured by the police who then report data and statistics to the FBI for the UCR. The reporting processes of crime event statistics, that ultimately make up the crime rate, is also discussed as a factor possibly having an effect on official crime rates. The findings of the recent exploration on technology and crime suggested law enforcement agencies are doing a fine job of collecting and reporting data. This somewhat surprising finding ultimately leads back to the importance that the criminal justice system in America, as jurisdictions in other countries have done, focus some time and policy development on prolific offenders. Prolific offenders commit a large proportion of the crime and are therefore, key elements in the increase or decrease of crime rates in the future. American criminal justice academics, researchers, professionals, and law makers, must understand that America can no longer ignore or give little attention to addressing the actions of prolific offenders.

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