

Book Review

THE GREAT AMERICAN CRIME DECLINE

Franklin E. Zimring
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Franklin E. Zimring is the William G. Simon Professor of Law and Wolfen Distinguished Scholar at the University of California, Berkley. His most recent works include *Crime is Not the Problem: Violence in America* (with Hawkins, 1997), *American Youth Violence* (1998), and *The Contradictions of American Capital Punishment* (2003). In his latest book, *The Great American Crime Decline* (2007), Zimring addresses the academic community, and attempts to inspire a more ardent pursuit of interdisciplinary, empirical research to better understand the crime decline of the 1990's and crime trends in general. Nevertheless, every reader can gain important insights into crime trends from this book, which refutes many of the traditional explanations for changes in crime rates.

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A coming storm of juvenile violence²; a blood bath³; 60,000 more juvenile murderers, robbers, and thieves⁴: these are just a few of the descriptions of the crime wave that American cities were predicted to face during the late 1990's. Fortunately, during the 1990's the United States experienced the most dramatic decline in the rate of crime per 100,000 inhabitants since World War II. Although no one predicted this historic decline in crime rates, there is no shortage of explanatory theories. Some credit the increased access to legal abortion, others increased incarceration rates, others demographics, and still others the booming economy. However, none of these explanations adequately account for the equally dramatic decreases in crime rates during the same period in Canada and the decline in New York City, which was twice as great as the national average.

In his seminal book *The Great American Crime Decline*, Franklin Zimring challenges orthodox notions about the causes of large scale crime rate declines by employing a comparative analysis of the national crime declines of Canada, the United States and the local crime decline of New York City during the 1990's. These analyses raise more questions than they answer, but Zimring clearly and concisely explains what conclusions can be drawn from the empirical data, and what areas need to be studied further to better explain the variable factors that influence crime rates. Most importantly, Zimring's findings demand a reconsideration of the most foundational principles upon which our ideas about crime and its causes are based.

Before arriving at conclusions about what caused the decrease in crime rates during the 1990's, it is necessary to understand the extent of the declines. According to the FBI's *Uniform Crime Report*, from 1990 to 2000 the rate of crime per 100,000 inhabitants in all seven categories decreased dramatically in the U.S., ranging from 23 percent in the case of larceny to 44 percent in the case of aggravated assault. As Zimring points out, these numbers may even underestimate the decrease in crime rates because the household survey done by the Bureau of Jus-

2. FRANKLIN E. ZIMRING, *THE GREAT AMERICAN CRIME DECLINE* 22 (Oxford University Press 2007).

3. *Id.*

4. *Id.* at 165.

tice Statistics estimated decreases between 44% and 65%.⁵ Although these numbers indicate a precipitous decrease in the rate of crime, the most distinguishing characteristic of the American decline is its duration of nine years which demonstrates that it was probably not merely a cyclical decrease.⁶ The slow, continuous decline over nine years also belies any single-cause theory.⁷ In New York City during the same period, the decrease in crime rates was about twice the national average.⁸ According to the FBI's *Uniform Crime Report*, in Canada during the same period, all seven categories of crime saw dramatic rate decreases, ranging from 13 percent in the case of robbery to 62 percent in the case of serious assault.⁹

Few dispute that the decrease in the rate of crime in the U.S. during the 1990's was a unique event; however, few can agree on what caused this historic event. An increase in incarceration rates, a decrease of young males as a percentage of the population, and a booming economy are often speculated to be indicators of crime rates. Zimring's comparative analysis offers new insight into the viability and explanatory power of these theories.

Although a historically high number of incarcerated persons and decreasing crime rates coincided during the 1990's, Zimring's international comparison contradicts the assertion that increased prison populations, alone, account for most of the crime decline in the 1990's. Zimring's unique comparison of the Canadian and American crime declines of the 1990's reveals two interesting facts. First, Canada and the U.S. experienced a strikingly similar crime decline during the 1990's. The decline in rates of crime per 100,000 inhabitants continued for nine years in both Canada and the United States. Additionally, the percentage of decreases in the rates of crime in the U.S. and Canada were astonishingly similar. However, Canada's prison

5. *Id.* at 8. Rape decreased by 65%, robbery by 44%, aggravated assault by 42%, burglary by 15%, auto theft by 58%, and larceny by 48%. *Id.*

6. *Id.* at 20.

7. *Id.* at 21.

8. *Id.* at 137. Homicide decreased by 73%, rape by 52%, robbery by 70%, aggravated assault by 46%, burglary by 72%, auto theft by 78%, and larceny by 52%. *Id.* at 137.

9. *Id.* at 108. Homicide decreased by 34%, rape by 22%, serious assault by 62%, robbery by 13%, burglary by 30%, larceny by 39%, and auto theft increased by 25%. *Id.* at 108.

population remained relatively stable, while the prison population in the U.S. grew significantly. While acknowledging that the best guess is that the increased prison population of the 1990's accounts for 10% to 27% of the crime decrease, Zimring carefully points out that there is no effective way to accurately test for or even measure the effects of the prison population on crime rates.¹⁰ Accordingly, Zimring cautions against over-emphasizing the affect of increased prison population on crime rates.

Zimring's comparative analysis also reconsiders the influence of demographics on crime rates. A large proportion of crimes are committed by males ages 15 to 29.¹¹ In the U.S., from 1990 to 2000 the proportion of the population between 15 and 29 dropped from 23.5% to 20.8%.¹² This decrease in the percentage of the most high risk demographic in the general population coincided with the major decline in crime rates during the 1990's. In Canada, the same high risk group dropped from 24% to 20.3% of the overall population.¹³ This decrease in the high-risk demographic is the only trend which occurred in both the United States and Canada. However, New York City's decrease in the rate of crime was nearly double the national average; yet, the proportion of the city's population of males ages 15-29 declined only half as much as the national decline.¹⁴ Zimring derives several important conclusions from this data. First, a smaller share of the population in high-risk groups clearly puts downward pressure on the rate of crime per 100,000 inhabitants.¹⁵ However, as the case study of New York City illustrates, a change in demographics alone will never be a major explanation of crime rates dropping by half. Rather, major decreases in crime rates can occur without substantial changes to a population, as in New York City during the 1990's.¹⁶

Although there is no unified theory on the influence of the economy on crime rates, the rates of some offenses do rise and

10. *Id.* at 55-56.

11. *Id.* at 56.

12. *Id.* at 61.

13. *Id.* at 123.

14. *Id.* at 230.

15. *Id.* at 61.

16. *Id.* at 207.

fall with changes in rates of unemployment.¹⁷ Zimring also points out there is some empirical evidence to suggest a relationship between crime rates and economic growth.¹⁸ However, during the 1990's Canada experienced declines in crime rate similar to the U.S. without experiencing the same economic boom as the U.S.; in fact, Canada's unemployment rate was higher during the 1990's than it was during the 1980's, when crime rates increased.¹⁹ Moreover, the economic conditions in New York City cannot explain why New York City experienced a crime decline that was largely double the national average.²⁰ In fact, New York City's unemployment rate was actually greater than the national unemployment rate during the 1990's.²¹ Zimring concludes that overall economic growth is certainly "good news" for crime rates. However, its difficult to measure the degree to which economic growth influences crime rates. Indeed, some experts have estimated that the economy decreased property crime by six to seven percent, while others have estimated up to forty percent of property crime. Finally, Zimring concludes that the combination of increased prison populations, the economy, and demographics created a very favorable condition for a decline in crime rates. Therefore, they should have, at the very least, made the crime decline during the 1990's much less of a surprise than it was.

Zimring also addresses some theories which were inspired specifically by the 1990's crime decline.²² Most notably, Zimring examines the theory that the increased availability of legal abortions in the early 1970's caused the crime decline of the 1990's. Zimring skillfully examines the methodology and substance of U.S. studies which purport to prove a connection between legalized abortion and crime decline. Yet, his most novel, persuasive analysis comes from a comparison of Canadian and American abortion policies. Zimring's comparative study reveals that the change in abortion policy does not explain Canada's crime decline during the 1990's. Canada first

17. *Id.* at 63.

18. *Id.*

19. *Id.* at 122-123.

20. *Id.* at 230.

21. *Id.*

22. *Id.* at 73.

allowed abortions on restricted grounds in 1969, but Canada did not remove the restrictions until 1989. Therefore, juveniles and those ages 18-24 were the only groups during the 1990's with 100% of their members born after 1970. Yet, they did not experience larger than average declines in crime rates during the 1990's.²³ In fact, the age group with the greatest decline in crime rates, those age 30-39, did not have any post-1970 births and thus, would not have been affected at all by Canada's legalization of abortion.

Zimring also reexamines practices previously thought to be ineffectual, such as an increase in police officers and improved police tactics.²⁴ Zimring admits that only a marginal national increase in police officers correlated with the crime decline during the 1990's.²⁵ Zimring also chronicles the inherent difficulty in accurately measuring a nationwide change in police tactics in a system with a decentralized, locally controlled police force.²⁶ The influence of these policies can be measured more accurately on a municipal than a national level. Zimring's analysis of trends in New York City suggests that changes in policing may have contributed to New York City's overall decline in crime rates.

During the 1990's New York City experienced no economic growth which would explain a crime decline double the national average.²⁷ Also, New York City's population of high risk groups declined at a slower rate than that of the nation as a whole.²⁸ Similarly, incarceration rates increased, but not enough to explain a decline in crime rates twice that of the U.S.²⁹ Therefore, the only distinctive trend that would explain New York City's dramatic decrease in crime rates is the increase in the number of police officers and changes in manner of policing.

The New York City police department employees increased by 35% raising the rate of employees per 100,000 citi-

23. *Id.* at 125.

24. *Id.* at 152.

25. *Id.* at 77.

26. *Id.* at 80.

27. *Id.* at 230.

28. *Id.*

29. *Id.* at 232.

zens by 23%.³⁰ This dramatic increase deserves careful attention, especially since the number of police employees in the next nine largest U.S. cities increased by only 14% and raising the rate of employees per 100,000 citizens by 2.5%.³¹ In addition, the New York City police department instituted a policy of proactive policing which included various tactics such as aggressive stops, more misdemeanor arrests for drug offenses, and a variety of public-order offenses.³² Finally, the New York City police department established a new system which facilitated the flow of information to management and stricter scrutiny of police activity.³³ Zimring recognizes that it is impossible to separately measure the influence of each of these changes on crime rates because all three occurred simultaneously.³⁴ Though he stops short of crediting a percentage of the New York City crime decline to changes in police tactics, he notes that a change in police tactics is the most plausible cause for New York City's disproportionate decrease in crime rates.³⁵

Although Zimring's analysis of crime trends in Canada, the U.S., and New York City clearly and concisely summarizes what the current empirical data tells us about crime trends, it also highlights the areas where more empirical research is needed. For example, Zimring's comparison reveals that there was no single cause or group of leading causes of the crime declines during the 1990's. It appears that a convergence of auspicious circumstances like the booming economy, the decrease as a percentage of the population of high risk groups, and high incarceration levels, fortuitously laid the foundation for the crime decline of the 1990's, but they did not cause it. Moreover, none of these factors accompanied the crime decline in Canada, except for the change in demographics, which also occurred in both nations during the late 1980's, a time when crime rates increased. In light of this paradox, Zimring urges more scholarship comparing the American and Canadian crime declines. Additionally, Zimring insists on a revision of the

30. *Id.* at 150.

31. *Id.* at 149.

32. *Id.* at 150.

33. *Id.*

34. *Id.* at 150-151.

35. *Id.* at 151.

methodology of crime trend studies. First, he recommends an international and interdisciplinary approach to empirical research. While Zimring recognizes the difficulty of empirical research in a field where all of the research methods are imperfect, he points out that employing multiple, imperfect research methods, if the methods are imperfect for different reasons, can most effectively increase our knowledge of crime trends.

Most importantly, Zimring's comparative analysis calls into question some of the most fundamental assumptions about crime trends. For instance, many assume that certain portions of the population have a greater propensity to commit crimes than others. Others assumed that declines in crime rates could not be achieved without basic and substantial changes to the urban environment. However, Zimring's analysis of crime trends in New York City reveals that major declines in crime rates can occur with only marginal changes to the population or social and economic structure of the city.³⁶

The dramatic crime decline in New York City illustrates that even relatively superficial environmental changes can yield tremendous decreases in crime.³⁷ Zimring's analysis points out one other important trend: Risk factors, such as demographics, may explain who is at greater risk of committing crimes, but changes in risk factors have proven to be an unreliable tool for predicting crime trends.³⁸

Although Zimring's *The Great American Crime Decline* is sure to disappoint those searching for a simple, terse explanation for the decade-long decrease in crime rates, this work will inevitably alter the way we view crime trends, and hopefully it will encourage further empirical research on an international and interdisciplinary level.

36. *Id.* at 207.

37. *Id.* at 208.

38. *Id.* at 209.