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"WHAT'S DRIVING FALLING CRIME RATES?  
HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES AND CONTEMPORARY  
EVIDENCE FROM THE UNITED STATES AND ABROAD"

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## Abstract

One of the most profound social changes of the last generation is the dramatic decline in observed violent crime rates in much of the world. However, how uniform and robust is this decline in reality? Moreover, even if the decline in violent crime is as broad and deep as is commonly portrayed, how should we go about understanding it in context—historical, socioeconomic, cultural, political and legal? This paper provides a broad historical overview of trends in violent crime with view to placing the contemporary decline in perspective. It also covers some of the common theories that purport to explain it, both throughout history and in the context of the present day; places these theories in conversation; and critiques some of them by marshaling the empirical evidence. This paper probes the nature and extent of the reported drop in violent crime in the United States and internationally and assesses these theories in light of the empirical evidence. Finally, it concludes that the decline in violent crime is a sustained and qualitatively significant social phenomenon that bodes well for the future of society.

## I. INTRODUCTION

This paper analyzes one of the most profound social changes of the last several decades. In the United States and around the world, rates of violent crime have fallen dramatically, completely transforming cities, reshaping public debates, challenging academic theories about the root causes of crime and improving the quality of life of countless millions. Given the prominence and importance of this trend, what is perhaps most surprising is how little we actually know about what is driving it. Many theories developed in the high crime years have been challenged and in some cases severely undermined by the evidence of the last two decades; meanwhile, new theories have emerged that are no less disputed. Moreover, the policy implications of these theories are not always clear. This paper provides a broad historical overview of trends in violent crime so as to place the contemporary decline in context and cover some of the common theories that purport to explain it. It also probes the nature and extent of the reported drop in violent crime in the United States and internationally and assesses the theories in light of the empirical evidence. While this paper is not comprehensive by any means, it is intended to serve as an accessible review of this major social change.

Our research question is twofold. First, what are the major hypotheses concerning the causes of violent crime, especially trends in violent crime over time? Second, which of these hypotheses appear to garner the most scholarly and empirical support, given the accumulated evidence? We examine this question within the specific context of the decline in violent crime rates throughout much of the world that began in the middle of the last decade of the twentieth century, but the theoretical implications are much broader, involving the causes of violent crime in the abstract. We employ a qualitative approach that consists mainly of a close reading and coding of the secondary literature on the causal variables behind violent crime.

## II. A FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING VIOLENT CRIME TRENDS IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

In many ways, the world has seemed to become increasingly dangerous, unstable and marked by crisis since the 1990s. One significant domain in which it has not is in the amount of violent crime in many of the world's societies in which it can be reliably measured. In the United States, for instance, the sustained trend toward decreased violent crime in the last two decades is well documented. Rates of violent crime began to rise in the 1960s and rose gradually

over the next thirty years; both the statistical average of incidents of violent crime and perceptions of it in the public mind peaked in the early 1990s. Data shows that the numerical peak occurred in 1992.<sup>1</sup> As for public perceptions, "in 1994, a Gallup survey found that more than 50 percent of Americans cited crime as the nation's biggest problem."<sup>2</sup> The story was much different by the early 2010s, when *The New York Times* reported that "the odds of being murdered or robbed are now less than half of what they were in the early 1990s, when violent crime peaked in the United States."<sup>3</sup> In 2011, the FBI delivered news that "surprised and impressed" criminologists: "The number of violent crimes in the United States dropped [to]...the lowest rate in nearly 40 years."<sup>4</sup> The United States is not exceptional in the trend or its magnitude; similar trends have been identified in countries across the globe, which is discussed below.

Journalists, criminologists, sociologists, economists and others have attempted to explain this overarching pattern of a sustained decline in violent crime rates, but little consensus has been established. One reason is that violent crime is a quintessential overdetermined phenomenon. The inputs that factor into it are legion, and most—if not all—of the explanatory variables that have been put forward probably play some role in the observed trend. What is more fruitful is the relative weight of each of these variables. Additionally, fluctuations in violent crime implicate many interests in society. When violent crime goes down, politicians and law enforcement tend to attribute that decline to proximate, easily identifiable actions that they made, even if the change in crime rates had just as much or more to do with changes in conditions outside of their control (e.g. a changing demographic structure or better public health and education policies). To be rigorous, a theory explaining a decline in violent crime rates must also be able to explain their increase, and also be resilient to alternative explanations that could prove a spurious association. Due to the nature of the phenomenon, a general theory of violent crime rate fluctuation is unlikely to be parsimonious, and each type of theory possesses advantages and disadvantages.

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<sup>1</sup> "America's safer streets," *The Economist*, August 25, 2012, [www.economist.com/node/21560870](http://www.economist.com/node/21560870)

<sup>2</sup> Diane Dimond, "Crime rates are down – but why?" *The Huffington Post*, March 14, 2013, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/diane-dimond/crime-reduction\\_b\\_2878003.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/diane-dimond/crime-reduction_b_2878003.html)

<sup>3</sup> Richard A. Oppel Jr., "Steady Decline in Major Crime Baffles Experts," *The New York Times*, May 23, 2011, [www.nytimes.com/2011/05/24/us/24crime.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/24/us/24crime.html?_r=0)

<sup>4</sup> Oppel, "Steady Decline in Major Crime Baffles Experts"

There are several categories of theories. These can be broadly described as explanations at the individual level, group level and structural level. Individual level explanations focus on changes to the motivations of single criminals and how those motivations change over time. Many of these explanations either explicitly or implicitly analyze criminals' psychology or criminals' rational calculations of costs and benefits. Studies of the "criminal mind" or whether criminal activity is more lucrative than options in the standard labor market are individual level explanations for crime. Group level explanations emphasize changes to particular social groups or networks as the central factor. Such groups may be defined broadly (e.g., recent immigrants) or specifically (e.g., crack cocaine users in New York City in the 1980s). In group explanations, the interactions among people within a group or network are the key variable. Structural level explanations zoom out the furthest: they locate the causes of changing violent crime trends in changes at the societal or global level. Some examples are demographic changes, new policy regimes and public health programs. Structural theories tend to be slow-moving and generally do not involve individual choice. In "Assessing Macro-Level Predictors and Theories of Crime: A Meta-Analysis," Travis C. Pratt and Francis T. Cullen refer to these theories as "'macro-level' or 'ecological' analysis," which "examines how characteristics of delimited geographic areas—such as neighborhoods, census tracts, cities, counties, states, or nations—are related to rates of crime."<sup>5</sup> It should be noted, however, that some of the examples of macro-level explanations given by the authors are more akin to group explanations than structural ones, since they focus on aggregating characteristics of individuals into the object of analysis.<sup>6</sup>

Each of these types of explanations possesses strengths and weaknesses. While structural explanations succeed at explaining the overarching decline of violent crime over time, they have more trouble accounting for variation across time and space. Group explanations tend to engage with the complexities of the issue more than structural or individual explanations and also tend to be more inductive. However, group explanations neither deal with the possibilities of individual decisions straying from the norm nor carry the pure explanatory heft of structural theories. Explanations at the individual level possess the virtues of parsimony and transportability, but may not adequately recognize the constraints placed on individual decisions by institutions and society in general. Examples of theories at the individual level include crime as a rational activity (e.g.,

cost and benefit calculations) and theories of leadership (e.g., attributing the decline in violent crime in New York City in the 1990s to Mayor Rudy Giuliani or a similar decline in Boston in the same period to David Kennedy's Operation Ceasefire). Group level explanations include changes in urban drug culture or the composition of immigrant neighborhoods. Structural explanations include the benefits of lead being removed from the environment and Stephen Levitt's controversial theory positing a link between the increased availability of legal abortion and the birth of fewer probable candidates for violent crime. Most explanations of violent crime as a social phenomenon reside at the structural level, although some journalistic treatments tend to favor individual explanations at the elite level, specifically in regard to political and administrative leadership.

This working paper surveys the most common explanations offered for the decline in violent crime rates in the United States and abroad since the mid-1990s. The format of this discussion is both (cross-case) comparatively and historically situated, covering the macro-level changes in violent crime, especially homicide, over time. While scholars who study trends in violent crime at the societal level point to the lack of longitudinal studies on the topic (see e.g., LaFree 1999 and Ousey & Kubrin 2009), we present several sources that do examine the topic longitudinally. There are some other limitations on the data, however. Because out of the four categories of violent crime, statistics on murder and robbery are generally more reliable than those on rape and aggravated assault, some of the sources focus more on the former two categories.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, disparate definitions, both formal and informal, of crime in different societies present a significant comparative challenge. This is also the case with regard to variation in reporting of violent crime, as well as the methods by which that reporting is done. Some countries aggregate their violent crime data differently than others, which in turn makes comparison more likely to include systematic errors. There are also obvious political interests involved in the production of crime statistics and in the interpretation of these statistics. While it is safe to assume that the data is by and large reliable in many countries, the interests of governments in presiding over favorable crime metrics should not be forgotten. In addition, methodological problems and measurement error still pose an appreciable challenge to the study of some crime, especially sexual assault. This argument should not be overstated, however. Ted Robert Gurr (1977), among others, cautions against the assumption that observed changes in crime levels as

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<sup>5</sup> Travis C. Pratt and Francis T. Cullen, "Assessing Macro-Level Predictors and Theories of Crime: A Meta-Analysis," *Crime and Justice* 2005: 32, 373.

<sup>6</sup> Pratt and Cullen 2005, 374.

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<sup>7</sup> Gary LaFree, "Declining Violent Crime Rates in the 1990s: Predicting Crime Booms and Busts," *Annual Review of Sociology* 1999: 25, 145-168.

measured by government statistics are somehow an artifact of the data itself. "Those who dismiss rising rates of theft, assault, and murder as a social fiction which needs no remedy may be correct in some instances, but in general are just plain wrong. The problem is a very real one in most Western societies, and it weighs most heavily on less advantaged social groups."<sup>8</sup>

In the United States at least, many expected that the stunning decline in violent crime starting in the 1990s would be arrested by the Great Recession. However, the data largely shows that tough economic times have not produced a notable uptick in crime, as some scholars had expected (i.e., "the prevailing expectation that crime would increase during a recession").<sup>9</sup> This expectation can be traced back to economist Gary Becker's famous thesis "that crime is a rational act, committed when the criminal's 'expected utility' exceeds that of using his time and other resources in pursuit of alternative activities, such as leisure or legitimate work."<sup>10</sup> However, as Ted Robert Gurr notes in "Historical Trends in Violent Crime: A Critical Review of the Evidence," violent crime similarly failed to rise in at least one heavily studied, economically analogous period:

"What is strikingly absent from these studies, and those of British and American crime trends reviewed above, is evidence of increases in personal crime during the Great Depression of the 1930s. *Property* offenses evidently increased, especially in Britain...but homicide and assault were at or near their lowest recorded levels in virtually all countries and jurisdictions."<sup>11</sup>

Another hypothesis that has been undermined by the experience of recent years is the assumption that increased incarceration leads to decreased violent crime. In actuality, "As the percentage of people behind bars has decreased in the past few years, violent crime rates have fallen as well."<sup>12</sup> Other hypotheses that have been challenged include the idea that large urban areas are inherently more criminal than smaller cities and rural areas (they have largely reached parity over the last two decades) and the age demographic argument (the current "Generation Y" is the largest youth cohort since the Baby Boomers, yet engages in the least crime of any youth cohort since the 1950s). The millennial drop in criminality, many in the me-

dia and academia argue, is a paradox: its existence has been established beyond much doubt, yet its causes remain mysterious.

An important caveat is that the trend is a macro-level average; the falloff is not universal. For example, "Violent crime remains extremely high in some troubled cities, such as Memphis and Detroit, and in smaller places such as Oakland, California, and Camden, New Jersey. Most striking is an unexpected spike of gang-related violence in Chicago."<sup>13</sup> New York also experienced a spike in violent crime in 2010 despite a national decrease.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, both Philadelphia and Baltimore have experienced much more stubborn crime rates.<sup>15</sup> There is similar variation both across countries and within individual countries. The disparities are not only spatial, but also break down across race. As Gurr notes, the latter two of the "three great surges" of violent crime in the history of the United States "are largely attributable to sharply rising homicide rates among blacks."<sup>16</sup> This variation is at least methodologically useful, however, because it provides researchers with more opportunities to both develop theories from experience and test their theories against the available evidence.

As we know, after rising for about thirty years, rates of violent crime began to decline in the mid-1990s. However, as Manuel Eisner points out in "Long-Term Historical Trends in Violent Crime," homicide and robbery rates at least have been going down for centuries. Accordingly, Eisner states, "[The] data...confirm the Europe-wide massive drop—roughly by a factor of 10:1 to 50:1 over the period from the fifteenth to the twentieth century—in lethal interpersonal violence first observed by Gurr on the basis of English data."<sup>17</sup> (Gurr characterizes this overall pattern as cyclical variation in crime rates around a steadily, albeit slowly, declining mean.) He attributes this, in turn, to a "civilizing process," first propounded by the German sociologist Norbert Elias in the 1930s, the crucial facet of which is greater self-control.<sup>18</sup> This theory, Eisner argues, matches the evidence well: the diminution of interpersonal violence in and around establishments serving alcohol, the disappearance of honor killings and vendetta, and the transition of the nobility from essentially armies-

<sup>8</sup> Ted Robert Gurr, "Contemporary Crime in Historical Perspective: A Comparative Study of London, Stockholm, and Sydney," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 1977: 434, 136.

<sup>9</sup> Oppel, "Steady Decline."

<sup>10</sup> Wilson, "Hard Times."

<sup>11</sup> Ted Robert Gurr, "Historical Trends in Violent Crime: A Critical Review of the Evidence," *Crime and Justice* 1981: 3, 338. Emphasis in original.

<sup>12</sup> Oppel, "Steady Decline."

<sup>13</sup> "America's safer streets."

<sup>14</sup> Oppel, "Steady Decline."

<sup>15</sup> Jeffrey Goldberg, "Why Is U.S. Violent Crime Declining? (Part 2)" Bloomberg, February 15, 2012, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-02-15/why-is-u-s-violent-crime-down-part-2-commentary-by-jeffrey-goldberg.html>

<sup>16</sup> Gurr, "Historical Trends in Violent Crime," 295.

<sup>17</sup> Manuel Eisner, "Long-Term Historical Trends in Violent Crime," *Crime and Justice* 2003: 30, 88.

<sup>18</sup> Eisner, "Trends," 123.

for-hire to cultural lights, all exemplify this process. One of the major problems, of course, is that violent crime, having dropped for several centuries across the Western world, reached its nadir in the 1950s before beginning a dramatic upswing. Was the “civilizing process” somehow arrested? It is more likely that the long run process of the pacification of society, which has taken place over centuries in many parts of the world, is a separate phenomenon from the more medium term processes that drove the increase in crime from the 1960s to the mid-1990s and its decrease since the mid-1990s. Indeed, Gurr himself makes a similar argument, stressing that cyclical variation and a monotonic decrease in crime are not mutually exclusive. Gurr and others also note, however, that the pacification of social relations can fray around the margins, particularly if a society has recently experienced war. It is important, therefore, to understand the recent decline in violent crime (early 1990s-present) within the context of both the preceding spike in crime (1960s-early 1990s) and the much deeper, more slow-moving decline in crime that began at the end of the Middle Ages.

With this theoretical underpinning established, we should now review some of the theories commonly offered for the decline in violent crime that has taken place from the mid-1990s to the present before turning to the international perspective. They include:

- *The growth in U.S. prison populations.* “The U.S. incarceration rate is among the highest in the world. Plainly put, we have taken record numbers of criminals off the street.”<sup>19</sup> However, the evidence on this is mixed at best.<sup>20</sup>
- *The length of incarceration in the United States.* Not just the number of individuals imprisoned, but also the length of incarceration, might matter. “Imprisonment’s crime-reduction effect helps to explain why the burglary, car-theft and robbery rates are lower in the U.S. than in England. The difference results not from the willingness to send convicted offenders to prison, which is about the same in both countries, but in how long America keeps them behind bars.”<sup>21</sup>
- *The shift toward community policing* in several of the country’s major cities (e.g. New York, Boston, Los An-

geles).<sup>22</sup> “Residents [of Los Angeles] seem by and large to see the police as arbiters and protectors.”<sup>23</sup>

- *A focus on prevention* over making arrests. For example, the Washington, D.C. police department abandoned its zero-tolerance policy, which had been leading to incarceration of minor offenders and undermining community trust.<sup>24</sup> Another example is “hot-spot policing,” which is the concentration of police resources at specific physical locations where crime is known to take place the most (intersections where traffic accidents are common, liquor stores etc.)<sup>25</sup>
- *The application of the “broken windows” philosophy to urban policing.*<sup>26</sup> That is, intervening with the full force of law on minor infractions on the assumption that enforcing rules in the first instance will cultivate respect and law and order among a target population, preventing more serious crimes from taking place. A typical example is the targeting of fare evaders by New York police.
- *More sophisticated data collection and management of resources within police departments.* Improved technology may have played a crucial role in the reduction of violent crime rates. A common example is that of the Compstat technology used in New York and Los Angeles.<sup>27</sup> However, “the fall in violent crime in Los Angeles began in 1992, a decade before the introduction of Compstat, and during a time when the LAPD was hated by many residents, particularly blacks and Latinos.”<sup>28</sup> In Washington, D.C., the police have set up an anonymous tip line.
- Related to this, *better communication among different law enforcement authorities* and between levels of government may be helping to improve enforcement.<sup>29</sup>
- *The role of immersive new entertainment options for young people.* “Today there is growing interest in the role of video games and social-media technologies in providing young men, who are responsible for the lion’s share of violent crimes, with alternative ways to spend their time.”<sup>30</sup>

<sup>22</sup> “Falling Crime Rates Challenge Long-Held Beliefs,” NPR, January 3, 2012, <http://www.npr.org/2012/01/03/144627627/falling-crime-rates-challenge-long-held-beliefs>

<sup>23</sup> “America’s safer streets.”

<sup>24</sup> Goldberg, “Crime Declining (Part 2).”

<sup>25</sup> Wilson, “Hard Times.”

<sup>26</sup> “Falling Crime Rates Challenge Long-Held Beliefs.”

<sup>27</sup> “America’s safer streets.”

<sup>28</sup> “America’s safer streets.”

<sup>29</sup> “Falling Crime Rates Challenge Long-Held Beliefs.”

<sup>30</sup> “America’s safer streets.”

<sup>19</sup> Dimond, “Crime rates are down.”

<sup>20</sup> “America’s safer streets.”

<sup>21</sup> Wilson, “Hard Times.”

- Some observers point out that *the U. S. is aging demographically*, which is correlated with less violent crime.<sup>3132</sup>
- Interestingly, *increased immigration* may be playing a role in decreasing violent crime rates. “Studies have repeatedly shown that cities with large immigrant populations experience lower rates of violent crime.”<sup>33</sup>
- *The provision of legal and safe abortion services.* Steven Levitt and John Donahue’s hypothesize that the availability of legal abortion following *Roe v. Wade* “curtailed the number of unwanted babies, who would have presumably grown up unloved, maladjusted and prone to violence.”<sup>34</sup>
- *A shift in drug use among urban populations.* Specifically, crack cocaine has become much less popular than it was in the 1980s and early 1990s.<sup>35</sup> Marijuana use, which has come to predominate among urban black populations, is much less connected to violent crime than crack cocaine.
- Finally, *the removal of lead from gasoline and paint* is possibly a crucial factor.<sup>36</sup> The connection between lead and violence is well established, and the fall in violent crime in the United States correlates with the removal of lead from gasoline and paint at a 20-year time lag, the exact amount of time it would have taken the last children born into high lead exposure to enter into their prime violent crime years. This correlation holds at the global level, across every country for which data is available; at the national level in the U.S., within states (states that adopted unleaded gasoline and paint earlier than others experienced decreased crime earlier than others), and even at the municipal level.<sup>37</sup> “We can either attack crime at its root by getting rid of the remaining lead in our environment, or we can continue our current policy of waiting 20 years and then locking up all the lead-poisoned kids who have turned into criminal.”<sup>38</sup> Obviously, lead cannot explain all of the variation within

the U.S.—Detroit’s violent crime rate compared to New York, e.g.—but it seems to be an important background cause.

In light of these numerous and conflicting explanations, it makes sense to expand the pool of observable implications to be as large as possible. While the United States is highly diverse, an international perspective is better able to evaluate these different theories in a way that is less likely to overlook key variables. The experience of other countries can be used to both identify the causes of America’s crime drop and policy paths that could allow for that drop to continue.

### III. TRENDS IN VIOLENT CRIME RATES: LOOKING AT THE ISSUE INTERNATIONALLY

Recently, various research and media sources have reported that the rate of violent crime in the United States has gone down. In fact, for the last two decades, both violent and property crimes have dropped steadily and substantially. Social scientists have started to examine why the violent crime rate has dropped across the nation, offering possible explanations for why the crime situation seems to be improving, despite the continued fear and opinion shared by most Americans that crime is getting worse. Scholars have also attempted to identify the causes responsible for the reduction in crime not only in the United States but also internationally. The main focus of this section is to look at the situation regarding the decline of violent crime rates abroad, conducting a cross-national comparative analysis of this phenomenon.

In the United States, one of the most widely established explanations for the reduction in violent crime is that the country’s high rates of incarceration keep criminals off the street, thus preventing them from committing crime. This raises questions of how violent crime is reported. Some incidence of violent crime, such as that which takes place *within* prisons, may be systematically left out of the wider statistical data, skewing the measurement of violent crime. Furthermore, the way in which violent crime is measured, reported, and included in data is contested. Police records underestimate some types of crime and surveys of victims can be misleading and not thorough. There are also crimes that go unnoticed and are never solved. In sum, the accuracy of crime statistics is never perfect and we must be conscious of this when attempting to comprehend crime rates, both domestically and internationally. When the United States saw a surging crime rate in the early 1980s, legislators enacted harsher policies that convicted more criminals and harsher prison sentences that have held

<sup>31</sup> “America’s safer streets.”

<sup>32</sup> Dimond, “Crime rates are down.”

<sup>33</sup> America’s safer streets.”

<sup>34</sup> Goldberg, “Crime Declining (Part 2).”

<sup>35</sup> Jeffrey Goldberg, “Why Is Violent Crime Declining in U.S. Cities?” Bloomberg, February 13, 2012, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-02-14/why-is-violent-crime-falling-in-the-u-s-commentary-by-jeffrey-goldberg.html>

<sup>36</sup> Kevin Drum, “America’s Real Criminal Element: Lead,” *Mother Jones*, January 3, 2013, [www.motherjones.com/print/208586](http://www.motherjones.com/print/208586)

<sup>37</sup> Drum, “Lead.”

<sup>38</sup> Drum, “Lead.”

criminals imprisoned for longer. In the early 1990s, however, the United States experienced major reductions in violence. Can the harsher penalties and rising prison population be the cause for a drop in violent crime in the United States and, furthermore, does the same go for other countries?

Although it may seem that the United States' widespread imprisonment of its citizens has had a crime-reduction effect, one academic, James Q. Wilson, argues that this reasoning is not applicable to England. A recent article in *The Guardian*, citing Wilson, offers an explanation for this. "Imprisonment's crime-reduction effect helps to explain why the burglary, car-theft and robbery rates are lower in the US than in England. The difference results not from the willingness to send convicted offenders to prison, which is about the same in both countries, but in how long America keeps them behind bars. For the same offence, you will spend more time in prison here than in England."<sup>39</sup> Canada has also experienced roughly the same decline in crime as the United States without the same prolongation of prison sentences. What this suggests is that neither higher rates of incarceration nor longer sentences are in and of themselves responsible for crime rates.

America's crime rates have decreased and many other developed nations around the world have seen this same trend. Across the developed world, countries such as, England, Wales, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Lithuania, Poland, and Estonia have seen a drop in violent crime. A recent article in *The Economist* notes that some crimes have perished in certain countries. For example, in 2012, there were only 69 armed robberies of banks, building societies and post offices in England and Wales, compared to 500 per year in the 1990s. In both the Netherlands and Switzerland, "street dealers and hustlers have been driven out of city centres; addicts there are now elderly men, often alcoholics, living in state hostels."<sup>40</sup> Additionally, human and drug traffickers prominent in the 1990s in Lithuania and Poland have moved to less violent crimes such as extortion.

While there is no single cause of the decline in violent crime, the United States and other developed nations around the world have seen similar general tendencies that help elucidate this shared phenomenon. For example, policing in New York and London have both experienced great progress in preventing crime with the help of inten-

sive targeting of crime "hotspots" and advanced technologies. Such policing tactics have influenced the lower crime rates in Sweden and Trinidad and Tobago as well. However, although improved law enforcement practices may have contributed to the decreased violent crime rate in some big cities, there are evident discrepancies in the effects of policies and political efforts when comparing the United States to other nations. While the mass incarceration of American citizens has had some effect on the decline in crime, the Netherlands and Germany have also experienced a falling crime rate that could not have been the result of an increased prison population. In fact, these two countries have reduced their prison populations, thus indicating either that crime responds differently to tougher prison sentences in different countries or that there is a third variable at work that is influencing crime rates independent of any impact of incarceration. Harsher punishments either may not be valuable in determining why crime in the United States has gone down; or, they may simply have different effects in different countries depending on other societal factors.

Like the United States, crime in Estonia and other developed countries has dropped suddenly. In a recent article in *The Economist*, the author reviews the decreasing crime in Western countries and states of Estonia: "Since 1995, the country's murder rate has dropped by 70%, and robbery and car theft have fallen almost as far. Even as the country entered a deep recession in 2009, which pushed unemployment up to 19%, the crime rate kept falling."<sup>41</sup> The article's main assertion is that many rich countries are seeing the same patterns of falling crime rates as the United States. For example, the overall crime rate started falling in England in 1995, with the murder rate beginning to fall in the mid-2000s. The author asserts that the swift aging population of "baby boomers" in most Western countries may shed light upon the widespread improvement of crime rates. Graham Farrell (2013) shares this same view, i.e. that "an aging population...common across industrialized nations..." is driving crime changes.<sup>42</sup> Yet the crime rate in London, which has seen an increase in young adults, is declining nevertheless. Earlier in this paper, we argued that a link between bigger prison populations and falling crime rates does not stand up to cross-country comparison. For example, in the past 20 years, the prison populations in England, Australia, and the United States have almost doubled. The Netherlands, Estonia and Canada, however, have reduced their prison populations with-

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<sup>39</sup> Chris McGreal, "America's Serious Crime Rate Is Plunging, but Why?" *The Guardian*. N.p., 21 Aug. 2011. Web.

<sup>40</sup> Derek Bacon, "The Curious Case of the Fall in Crime." *The Economist*. N.p., 20 July 2013. Web.

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<sup>41</sup> Herring, Matt. "Where Have All the Burglars Gone?" *The Economist*. N.p., 20 July 2013. Web.

<sup>42</sup> Graham Farrell, "Five Tests for a Theory of the Crime Drop," *Crime Science Journal* 2013: 2:5, 1-8. Web.

out seeing an increase in crime, thus indicating that mass incarceration may not be as a convincing explanation as commonly believed.

However, it is important to be cautious when comparing data across countries. Determinants of crime rates in the United States and other developed European nations are influenced by diverse cultural, political and economic changes. Furthermore, the definition and categorization of crimes varies across countries, making it difficult to assess crime statistics across nations. As documented above, the United States and other countries at a similar level of economic development share the trait of falling (and in many cases, historically low) crime indicators, but with some variation in the degree, timing, and crimes involved. Farrell (2013) explores the major decline in street crime in most advanced countries. The author notes that the United States was at the vanguard of the crime drop, citing a study by Truman and Planty (2012) that total violent crime fell over seventy percent between 1993 and 2011. Internationally, the following illustrates the major crime declines in most advanced countries articulated in Farrell's research, suggesting that there is consensus that there has, in fact, been a uniform decline<sup>43</sup>:

- England started to experience a dramatic decline in violent crime by half or more in the mid-1990s.
- Canada's sudden drop in homicide and other crime is similar to that in the United States. The Canadian decline began in 1991, while the American decline began in 1993.
- Most European countries have experienced significant crime drops.
- A study by Tseloni et al. (2010) argues that the crime drop is not limited to only advanced countries and may be a trend globally.

Farrell also accounts for possible outliers that have not experienced similar significant drops in violent crime. For example, not all personal crimes in New Zealand and Australia have experienced similar declines. Australian violent crime trends are mixed, with the country seeing a major decline in robberies but also a stable rate of assaults that has even increased in some areas. Violent crime in New Zealand has decreased in some areas, with slight increases in others. While the evidence reveals that most European countries have experienced significant crime drops, there is also evidence to suggest that Switzerland has not. Overall, however, it seems apparent that, by and large, violent

crime has dropped in the West, if not in every single form equally.

For comparative purposes, the timing of the decline in crime in Canada being almost identical to that of the United States is important. Although there are commonalities between the two countries, Farrell cites research conducted by Franklin E. Zimring (2006), which cautions us to delve further into the social context of each country in order to determine why rates are falling across either side of the border. Thus, he notes an excerpt from Zimring's research: "The extraordinary similarity of these trends in breadth, magnitude, and timing suggested that whatever was driving the decline in the United States was also operating in Canada. [However,] Canada in the 1990s didn't increase its imprisonment, didn't hire more police per 100,000 population, and didn't have anything close to the economic boom we enjoyed south of the border."<sup>44</sup> In addition to many European countries, therefore, it is apparent that our northern neighbors experienced similar declines in crime rates while maintaining far lower imprisonment rates than the United States.

When discussing the trends of decreased violent crime internationally, it is important to recognize the variation between and within countries, as there are sometimes considerable differences. Knepper (2012), cited by Farrell, suggests that "there is a significant and widespread international crime drop with some variation in its nature."<sup>45</sup> Although there have been various efforts to explain the crime drop over the last decades, the expanded research in recent years still has not pinpointed the central cause of the decline, both within the United States and internationally. Many of the same hypotheses that are put forward in the American context (e.g., strong economy, gun control laws, rising prison population, changing demographics, etc.) are also brought up in the context of other countries, yet no universal theory has been put forward that can be rigorously applied cross-nationally. More importantly, some hypotheses that were developed in the United States fail to explain the crime drop in other countries. Finally, while there is evidence that other advanced nations are experiencing falling rates in violent crime, there is a lack of research that focuses on exploring the existence of such phenomena in the developing world. Further research needs to be conducted to examine the crime drop globally, scrutinizing for why there is variation among crime categories within countries, and to provide us with explanations that can be applied globally and attest to what is hopefully the diminishing of our violent nature.

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<sup>43</sup> See Farrell (2013)

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<sup>44</sup> See Farrell (2013)

<sup>45</sup> See Farrell (2013)

#### IV. CONCLUSION

This working paper has assessed the reported decrease in violent crime both domestically and internationally. Given the varying explanations and wealth of statistical data, there are always many caveats that need to be considered when investigating whether there is consensus that there has been, in fact, a uniform decline. This paper provided a brief synopsis of the degree to which, as well as where, this decline has occurred, while offering various reasons for what is driving it. Although a wide range of sources focusing on this issue has been synthesized here, much of the research is time-sensitive; that is, driven by prevailing trends rather than by conducting a long-term examination of the issue. Indeed, we agree with Gurr that the rise in violent crime that began in the 1960s must be understood within the context of a much larger historical process of violent crime largely disappearing from public life and the prevalence of homicide and robbery generally diminishing. This paper extends that observation by arguing that the drop in violent crime throughout much of the world since the early 1990s must in turn be understood within the context of the dramatic rise in crime rates that began in the 1960s and peaked in the early 1990s. These significant shifts are, in the end, deviations from the prevailing norm of the “civilizing process” identified by Elias in the 1930s. It is this process, which delegitimized violence as a form of resolving disputes throughout much of the Western world and thus largely removed it from the public sphere, that lies at the root of understanding manifestations of violent crime. This paper cannot definitively conclude what the primary cause(s) of this long term historical process are better than these scholars, but it seems safe to venture that it has something to do with the socioeconomic, environmental, political and cultural changes associated with modernity.

This discussion, naturally, leads to the observation that while there is substantial evidence that the violent crime rate has dropped in the developed world, there is a lack of similar research in developing countries. Part of the problem is insufficient data: for instance, many governments in Africa and the Middle East do not conduct regular censuses for either logistical or political reasons. But another part of the problem may be the rigid disciplinary lines that Western scholars maintain between criminology on the one hand and sociology and political science on the other; that is to say, between the study of “violent crime” and “political violence.” These limits hinder proper and thorough investigation of the causal mechanisms at work producing the peaks and troughs of violent crime throughout

the world. An especially fascinating research question could consider whether, in many countries of the developing world, violent crime and political violence are driven by separate social processes or whether they are interrelated. Work of this sort has been done to some extent in the West already—for instance, Sidney Tarrow’s studies of contentious performances in Italy in the 1960s.

A final concern has to do with looking beyond the raw statistics and raising issues of the distribution of violent crime. In the United States, as in every country, violent crime victimization is heavily concentrated in marginalized communities, especially African-Americans and the urban poor. Indeed, the decline of violent crime among the population as a whole only brings to the fore the disproportionate burden still shouldered by disadvantaged minorities in this respect. In this sense, the problem and possible solutions are likely to be more detailed than a national analysis would allow; for an illustrative case, see Ailsa Chang’s “Crime-Ridden Camden To Dump City Police Force.”<sup>46</sup>

We hope that future researchers take up the challenge of measuring and analyzing variation in violent crime across time and space, as such research would go a long way toward filling a notable methodological hole in the crime literature. Furthermore, it would provide scholars, activists and policymakers with the background knowledge to recommend, press for and implement policy changes that would more accurately address crime. The implications of such an improvement in the collective advancement of theory in this area would be much more tangible than is often the case in the academic study of social phenomena. A comprehensive understanding of the causes of violent crime in different settings would improve the quality of life for every human being on the planet.

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<sup>46</sup> Ailsa Chang, “Crime-Ridden Camden To Dump City Police Force,” NPR 6 December 2012. <http://www.npr.org/2012/12/06/166658788/crime-ridden-camden-to-dump-city-police-force>

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