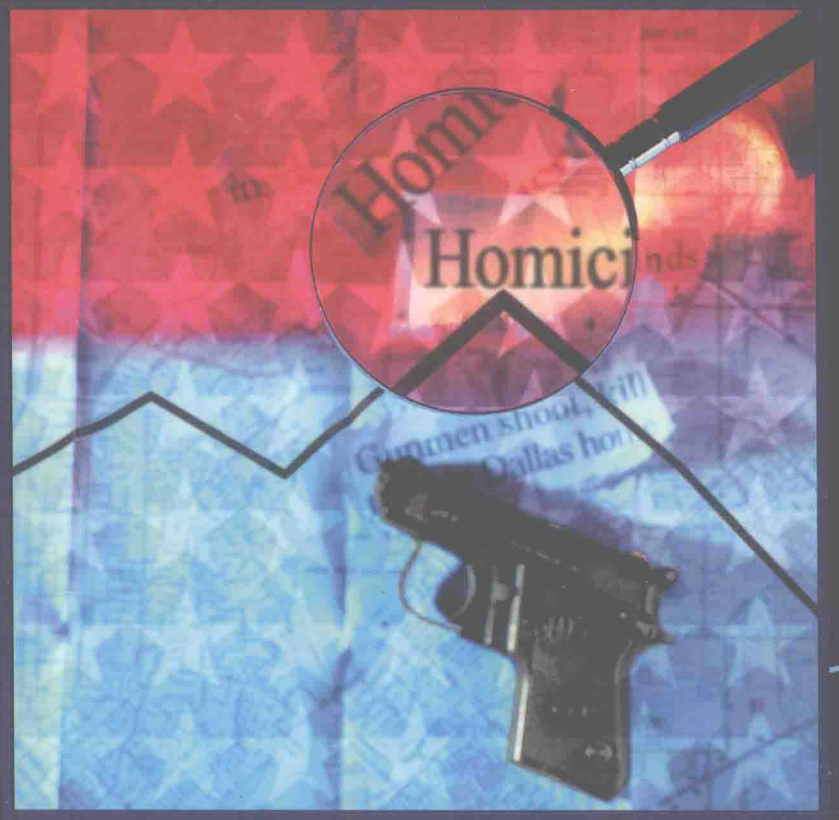
REVISED EDITION

THE CRIME DROP IN AMERICA



ALFRED BLUMSTEIN · JOEL WALLMAN

The Crime Drop in America

Revised Edition

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The Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation

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The Crime Drop in America, Revised Edition

Violent crime in America shot up sharply in the mid-1980s and continued to climb until 1991, after which something unprecedented occurred. The crime level declined to a level not seen since the 1960s. This revised edition of *The Crime Drop in America* focuses on the dramatic drop in crime rates in America in the 1990s, and then, in a new epilogue, on the patterns since 2000. The separate chapters written by distinguished experts cover the many factors affecting crime rates: policing, incarceration, drug markets, gun control, economics, and demographics. Detailed analyses emphasize the mutual effects of change in crack markets, a major locus of youth violence, and the drop in rates of violence following a decline in demand for crack. The contrasts between the crime-drop period of the 1990s and the period since 2000 are explored in the new epilogue, which also reviews major new developments in thinking about the causes and control of crime.

Alfred Blumstein is a University Professor and the J. Erik Jonsson Professor of Urban Systems and Operations Research and former Dean (from 1986 to 1993) at the H. John Heinz III School of Public Policy and Management of Carnegie Mellon University. He is also director of the National Consortium on Violence Research (NCOVR).

Joel Wallman is Senior Program Officer at the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation in New York. He is the author of *Aping Language* (Cambridge University Press, 1992). He has also published in *Computer Applications in the Biosciences*, *Current Anthropology*, and *Criminology & Public Policy*.

Praise for the First Edition

"*The Crime Drop in America* is a must-read for anybody concerned about crime in the United States, as it thoroughly and dispassionately assesses the possible causes of the striking reduction in crime during the 1990s. This volume stands alone in the literature. It addresses many of the topics found in criminology texts but is much more narrowly focused."

A. Didrick Castberg, *Perspectives on Political Science*

"As the first major book aimed at explaining the 1990s crime bust, this book is a must-read for all those interested in the characteristics and policy implications of crime."

Gary LaFree, *The Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*

"*The Crime Drop in America* is an important collection of papers that systematically addresses various explanations for changing rates in violent crime in urban areas. This book is a 'must read' for criminologists. The questions examined are important, the research is carefully done, and the findings will not only help us sort out competing explanations for the current crime drop, but will also expand our general knowledge about crime causation and its control."

John H. Laub

Cambridge Studies in Criminology

Edited by
Alfred Blumstein, *H. John Heinz School of Public Policy and Management, Carnegie Mellon University,* and David Farrington, *Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge*

The Cambridge Studies in Criminology series aims to publish the highest quality research on criminology and criminal justice topics. Typical volumes report major quantitative, qualitative, and ethnographic research or make a substantial theoretical contribution. There is a particular emphasis on research monographs, but edited collections may also be published if they make an unusually distinctive offering to the literature. All relevant areas of criminology and criminal justice are included, for example, the causes of offending, juvenile justice, the development of offenders, measurement and analysis of crime, victimization research, policing, crime prevention, sentencing, imprisonment, probation, and parole. The series is global in outlook, with an emphasis on work that is comparative or holds significant implications for theory or policy.

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Eloise Dunlap received her Ph.D. in sociology from the University of California-Berkeley. Her research has primarily examined the dynamics of African-American families and households, especially where drug abusers are present. Dr. Dunlap received advanced training in drug-abuse and treatment research as a Postdoctoral Fellow in the Behavioral Sciences Training in Drug Abuse Research program at National Development and Research Institutes, Inc. (NDRI), a private not-for-profit research institute in New York City. Since 1994, she has been a Principal Investigator at NDRI. She is currently researching the high levels of violence in inner-city households of crack users and sellers and writing a book on the conduct norms and behavior patterns in such households that lead to violence in relationships.

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Andrew Golub received his Ph.D. in public policy analysis from the Heinz School of Public Policy Analysis and Management at Carnegie Mellon. He is currently a Principal Investigator at National Development and Research Institutes, Inc. (NDRI). Dr. Golub's research examines social problems with an aim toward helping to develop more effective and cost-effective government programs. He is the author of *Decision Analysis: An Integrated Approach* (1997). Much of his recent research has been devoted to understanding drug abuse, especially drug epidemics, drug use by adolescents, and the association between drug use and criminality. He has directed or co-directed six research projects funded by the National Institute of Justice, the National Institute on Drug Abuse, and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. He is currently working on two books: an ethnographic examination of the impact of drug epidemics on New York's inner-city households and an expanded analysis of the gateway model for understanding stages in adolescent substance use.

Jeffrey Grogger (Ph.D., University of California at San Diego) is an economist and Professor of Public Policy at UCLA. He is a Fellow of the National Bureau of Economic Research (Cambridge, MA), the Center for Economic Policy Research (London), and the Institute for the Study of Labor (Bonn). He is the author of numerous scholarly articles on the link between crime and the labor market, including "The Effect of Arrests on the Employment and Earnings of Young Men" (1995, *Quarterly Journal of Economics*), "Market Wages and Youth Crime" (1998, *Journal of Labor Economics*), and "The Emergence of Crack Cocaine and the Rise in Urban Crime Rates" (2000, *Review of Economics and Statistics*). He is a co-editor of the *Journal of Human Resources* and sits on the editorial boards of the *Journal of Population Economics* and *Economic Inquiry*.

Bruce D. Johnson received his Ph.D. in Sociology from Columbia University. Since 1992, he has directed the Institute for Special Populations Research at National Development and Research Institutes, Inc. (NDRI). He has published more than one hundred articles or book chapters and has authored or co-authored five books, including *Marihuana Users and Drug Subcultures* (1973), *Taking Care of Business: The Economics of Crime by Heroin Abusers* (1985), and *Kids, Drugs, and Crime* (1988). Dr. Johnson was honored in 1999 with the Senior Scholar Award by the Drinking and Drugs Division of the Society for the Study of Social Problems and was chairperson of this division in 1994–96. He was a Woodrow Wilson Fellow at

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Richard Rosenfeld is Professor of Criminology at the University of Missouri–St. Louis. He received his Ph.D. in sociology from the University of Oregon. Professor Rosenfeld is a member of the steering committee of the National Consortium on Violence Research (NCOVR) and associate editor of the journal *Criminology.* His research focuses on the social sources of criminal violence. He is co-author with Steven Messner of *Crime and the American Dream* (1997, 2nd ed.), and his research articles have appeared in the *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology, Social Forces, Criminology, Journal of Quantitative Criminology, Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency,* and other leading journals.

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Joel Wallman is Program Officer at the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation, which sponsors scholarly research on violence and aggression. He received a Ph.D. with Distinction from Columbia University and, before joining the HFG, taught at Hunter College, Rutgers University, and Columbia University. His work has appeared in *Computer Applications in the Biosciences, Current Anthropology,* and the *Journal of Molecular Evolution,* and he is the author of *Aping Language* (1992). He is a member of the Academic Advisory Council of the National Campaign against Youth Violence.

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Contents

CHAPTER ONE

The Recent Rise and Fall of American Violence

Alfred Blumstein and Joel Wallman

AMERICANS' PRIDE IN THEIR NATION'S MATERIAL PROSPERITY, thriving democracy, and often admirable role in world affairs is tempered, for many, by concern and puzzlement over another American distinction – her perennial presence at the top of the list of the most violent industrial nations. Violence has been a major theme in public discussion for decades, and apprehension about it was intensified by the sharp rise in violence in the mid-1980s, a development most pronounced among inner-city minority youth. Despite the remarkable decline in violence that began in the early 1990s, a preoccupation with criminal violence persists among the citizenry as well as among scholars of violence, who are intent on understanding what has happened and predicting what will be.

Anxiety about violence was heightened considerably by the spate of school shootings in the late 1990s, which occurred after inner-city violence had declined appreciably. These incidents resonated in a broader constituency because, in contrast to what has come to be the standard image of American violence, they typically involved white, middle-class perpetrators and victims in rural or suburban settings. Thus, the late 1990s appeared to many to be a time of increasing suburban violence. In fact, however horrendous each of these school shootings was, fatal assaults in or around schools remain rare events, making up less than one percent of the violent deaths of school-age children. Lethal school violence is uncommon, and like criminal violence in general, is disproportionately an urban phenomenon. That is why this volume is properly focused on urban violence.

Urban violence is an issue of paramount concern to the two sponsors of this volume, the National Consortium on Violence Research (NCOVR), housed at the H. John Heinz III School of Public Policy and Management of Carnegie Mellon University, and the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation. The former is a research center sponsored by the National Science Foundation and the latter is a private foundation dedicated to research on the causes and control of violence and aggression. Both have been involved in efforts to understand the rise of violence in the United States in the late 1980s, and both are interested in explaining – and sorting out competing claims of credit for – the decline of violence in the 1990s.

The steady reduction in violence over eight years is unprecedented in contemporary crime statistics and has led to an effort on the part of many scholars and practitioners to explain it. Certainly there have been many claims for credit for the decline. William Bratton, former police commissioner of New York City, credits the police under his tenure for the decline in New York. President Clinton cited the federal investment in community policing. A number of observers have attributed the downward trend in crime since 1992 to the concurrent climb in imprisonment. Others ascribe it to changing demography, especially the aging of the baby boomers out of the high-crime ages.

Given the circulation of these competing claims and attributions in popular and academic forums, it seemed to us that the time was right to mobilize a scholarly effort to identify the plausible causes of the crime drop and to assess the contribution of each. Scholars with widely recognized expertise in a pertinent area were recruited to address the role of gun proliferation and gun control, incarceration, drug markets, policing, economic opportunity, and demography. Several chapters provide quantitative estimates of the magnitude of the effect of a given factor, although we have not tried to compare these estimates with each other, in part because their measurements are of quite different sorts. The number of very tenable explanations for the crime drop, none of which inherently excludes any of the others, leads to the conclusion that there is no single explanation but that a variety of factors, some independent and some interacting in a mutually supportive way, have been important.

In the remainder of this introduction, we present a precis of the various perspectives presented in this volume's careful analyses of the crime drop. Before doing so, we draw a thumbnail sketch of the crime backdrop against which the reduction is clearly visible. First, though, we should say something about the two main sources of information that

studies of U.S. crime trends, including those in *The Crime Drop in America,* rely on.

Major Sources of Crime Data

The Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) is an annual compilation of data on U.S. crimes and arrests based upon information provided to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) by local law enforcement agencies. The Supplementary Homicide Reports (SHR), also part of the UCR program, contains detailed information on individual homicide incidents included in the aggregate figures sent to the FBI.

The National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), sponsored by the Department of Justice since 1973, is an annual telephone poll of over 40,000 U.S. households regarding residents' experience of victimization by various kinds of crime. The NCVS compensates for some of the shortcomings of the UCR, and vice versa. For example, the usefulness of the UCR data is limited by the extent to which UCR crime rates are a product of not just the actual frequency of crime but also of factors influencing the likelihood that various crimes will come to the attention of the police and by variation in police recording practices between agencies and within each over time. The NCVS is a survey of individuals and so is not vulnerable to failure of victims to report the crime to the police or to variation in police reporting. However, because it is a survey of limited size (under 100,000 respondents), the number of respondents in any particular place is limited, and the number reporting victimization of low-frequency crimes, such as forcible rape, tends to be small. Also, the NCVS does not collect data on homicide, so the UCR and the SHR are the main sources for analyses of this most serious of crimes, and the crime with which this volume is most concerned.

A Four-Decade Backdrop

Prior to 1965, the U.S. homicide rate was consistently under 5 per 100,000 population. Around 1965, it began a steady rise, and from 1970 it oscillated for twenty years in the range of 8 to 10 per 100,000. A decline from 1980 to 1985 was followed by a dramatic growth in youth violence during the period from 1985 to 1991, with arrest rates for homicide more than doubling for each age group of males under age 20; the rise for black youth was even steeper. Then, beginning in 1992, aggregate rates declined steadily to less than 6 per 100,000 in 1999, a level not seen since the 1960s,

with no clear indication of when the decline would level off or reverse itself.

The Elements of the Crime Drop

Chapter 2, by Alfred Blumstein, provides an overview of the trends in violent crime, particularly homicide and robbery, and of the factors influencing these trends. The oscillatory nature of these trends might suggest merely random fluctuation, but there are indeed important causal factors contributing to upturns and downturns. The marked growth in violence between 1965 and the early 1970s may have been, at least in part, a result of the decline in perceived legitimacy of American social and governmental authority during this turbulent period, which contained the civil rights movement and the strident opposition to the war in Vietnam. The continuing uptrend from 1970 to 1980 and the decline to 1985 are largely attributable to the movement of the baby-boom generation into and then out of the high-crime ages of the late teens and early twenties; this is reflected in the general stability of violence rates within individual ages during that period. The rise following the 1985 trough should almost certainly be laid at the crack (smokable cocaine) epidemic and the contagion of violence spawned by its markets, which became a major factor in urban problems of the late 1980s. The decline in the 1990s is a much more complicated story, which involves the numerous factors addressed in the subsequent chapters of this volume.

Chapter 2 also highlights the necessity to partition the trends by key attributes of the problem. One critical dimension is the age of the offenders. We saw very different patterns across the different age groups, with the crime-rate rise of the late 1980s being caused almost entirely by offenders under age 25, whereas offending rates of older people displayed a steady decline. The sharpest decline in the 1990s has thus occurred among the young offenders. There were also important effects associated with weapons used, largely a growth in the use of handguns, with no comparable growth in other weapon types, and then a rapid decline in handgun use in the 1990s. Both the growth and the decline in violence occurred first in the largest cities, followed by smaller cities within one to three years.

It is somewhat ironic that the growth in violence with handguns was at least partly a consequence of the drug war's incarceration of many of the older drug sellers – the incarceration rate for drug offenses increased by a factor of 10 between 1980 and 1996. As older sellers were taken off the street, the drug market turned to younger individuals, particularly inner-city