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# Murder in Decline in the 1990s: Why the U.S. and N.Y.C. Were Not That Special," Book Review of Frank Zimring's

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**Book review: The great American decline, Franklin E. Zimring. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007. 257 pp. (including index). US\$29.95. ISBN 0 19 518115 8**

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## Book reviews

*The great American decline*, Franklin E. Zimring, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007. 257 pp. (including index). US\$29.95. ISBN 0-19-518115-8.

I learned a tremendous amount from Frank Zimring's highly readable and penetrating examination of the US drop in crime in the 1990s.<sup>1</sup> Zimring is unsurpassed in his mastery of the relevant crime literature and the wildly varying pronouncements that have emerged from it over the last 40 years. One has to smile as Zimring depicts the academic ping ponging between the early beliefs in the utter fecklessness of police and prisons and the later enthusiastic endorsement of their magnificent crime-fighting achievements. Amid the array of foolish and erroneous proclamations, the crowning failure belongs to those predicting the coming generation of super-predators when crime was in fact dropping like a stone. This was not 'the triumph of mood over data' (p. 178), as Zimring too generously suggests, but rather the shameful brain-child of conservative scholars and political operatives – then-Princeton professor John DiIulio (now largely repentant) and William Bennett, ostensible man of virtue and compulsive gambler – who disgracefully concocted this utter fantasy to undermine Clinton's 1996 Presidential campaign during a period of sharply falling crime rates.<sup>2</sup> Zimring can be extremely deft in ferreting out and then parsing data (with sensitivity to the deficiencies of official statistics) as he tries to distill seven lessons from *The Great American Crime Drop*. On some important points, though, Zimring is less sure footed.

Zimring begins by showing the crime drop in the USA was broad and sustained: in the 1990s, five of seven index crimes fell by around 40 percent, and the remaining two dropped by more than 20 percent. Zimring also shows that Canada had drops in five of seven index crimes that were 70 percent or more of the American decline (p. 126). After a brief examination of the crime patterns in other nations, Zimring, perhaps too quickly, jumps to the conclusion that 'only the Canadian pattern approached the uniformity and magnitude of the United States decline in the 1990s' (p. 16). But France experienced an impressive drop in crime in every listed category, and Italy enjoyed a far more substantial percentage drop in its homicide rate (59%)<sup>3</sup> than even the USA (39%) or Canada (34%). Zimring downplays the French experience because burglary and auto theft only fell by 11 and 3 percent, but the French still had a very impressive 25 percent drop in homicide and a whopping 61 percent drop in robbery (compared to the US and Canadian robbery declines of 44 and 13 percent). Apparently, Zimring downplays Italy's crime drop because the official statistics show a 29 percent *increase* in robbery, but the 26 percent increase in auto theft in Canada is explained away as a likely flaw in the data.

Documenting that homicide trends in Canada and the USA tend to move in lockstep (even though Canadian rates are much lower), Zimring relies on the Canadian experience to shed light on why crime fell in the USA. Zimring tries to de-emphasize the importance of a number of factors that have been offered as important elements of the US crime drop, arguing that, since they are absent from the Canadian experience, these factors can only have influenced the (according to Zimring, roughly) 30 percent greater drop in crime that the USA experienced beyond that enjoyed by its northern neighbor.<sup>4</sup> Zimring places the booming economy and the robust growth in police and prison inmates into this category that only contributed to the incrementally greater American crime decline and not the larger common crime drop that the two countries shared. The only common explanatory factor shared by the two countries that Zimring can identify is the roughly 25 percent drop between 1980 and 2000 in the proportion of the high-crime risk 18–29-year-old age cohort.

Clearly, demographics were important in both countries, but while Zimring calls the similar demographic trends 'the one area' of overlap that would predict declining crime in the two countries, I suspect three other factors were also working to depress crime in both the USA and Canada. First, I was not persuaded that Canada in the 1990s did not get whatever benefits in crime reduction can be obtained from a rapidly improving economy. Canada's unemployment rate fell 4.6 percent from 10.7 percent in 1992 to 6.1 percent in 2000 (while the US unemployment rate fell 3.5 percent from 7.5 percent to 4.0 percent over this same period) (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2005). Shifting the economy from an American-only explanation to a common factor (along with demographics) leaves only police and prison growth as uniquely American. Under this accounting, Zimring's methodology might teach us that the growth in police and prisoners explains 30 percent of the American crime drop, which is in the ballpark of, albeit somewhat lower than, Steve Levitt's (2004) estimates of 40 percent (with incarceration roughly twice as important as police).

Second, I suspect the reversal from the late 1980s crack-induced crime boom plays a greater role in falling US and Canadian crime rates than Zimring believes. All of the factors mentioned above – demographics, the economy, police, and incarceration – were gradually and persistently moving in the right direction to dampen crime, but this slow pace undermines their plausibility as catalysts for the abrupt crime reversal of the early 1990s. Admittedly, the mechanism that led what I consider to be the American/Canadian crack-induced crime jump of the late 1980s to abate is somewhat opaque. At one moment, gun-toting juvenile crack dealers were causing increasing mayhem and suddenly they started retreating back to their pre-crack ways of being. Was order restored by settling the property rights in this new illegal market or did police action change the gun-carrying behavior of the young dealers? Crack consumption clearly fell far less sharply than the killings, so a shrinking market seems not to be the story. (Zimring appears to be misled by the apparent maintenance of high levels of crack consumption during the 1990s. The crack crime link was driven by the behavior of suppliers, not by consumers.) Whatever the reason, if one believes that crack caused a big crime run up, then a good chunk of the subsequent crime drop in *both* the USA and Canada can be attributed to regression to the mean. Zimring may reject some theories while applying a beyond a reasonable doubt standard, when I would find them to be more probable than not.

Third, we could tie a bow on the crime drop story, then, if legalization of abortion can explain the remaining portion of the 1990s crime drop in both countries (with demographics, the booming economy, mean reversion from the crack upswing, and legalized abortion explaining all of Canada's drop, and more police and prisons explaining the 30 percent greater crime drop in the USA) (Donohue and Levitt, 2001). But while Zimring gives the Donohue/Levitt thesis respectful consideration, he is cautiously skeptical: it 'may have played a role in declining crime in the 1990s, but [supporting evidence] must come from other places and other times to be persuasive' (p. 198). In an appendix, Zimring contends that the sparse and incomplete international crime data are too weak to provide much of a test, which is true, but even the uncontrolled data he presents are at least broadly supportive of an abortion effect. We have already seen that the country that enjoyed by far the greatest percentage drop in homicide, dwarfing that in the USA or Canada, was Italy, which made it interesting to learn from Zimring that this was the sole European nation to move from complete prohibition to full abortion legalization in the 1970s. Indeed, after legalization in 1978, Italy's increase in abortions was so great that it briefly had the highest abortion rate of the five European countries that Zimring depicts (p. 213). Zimring's data on the change in homicide rates over the 1990s in six European countries are broadly consistent with the general pattern of greater liberalization leading to lower crime: Ireland and Spain have the worst performance on crime over this decade (and were alone in shunning abortion liberalization), the UK, Sweden, and France do somewhat better with their more modest liberalizing changes in abortion policy, and Italy with the most abrupt and complete liberalization does best. Zimring reveals the impossibility of trying to go further than this broad-brush picture because these European countries simply do not have the age-specific crime data of the kind available (however imperfectly) in the USA.

Since nature abhors a vacuum, the introduction of the crack and abortion–crime link explanations would nicely fill the gap in explaining the crime drop story. Both factors have the considerable advantage of explaining more abrupt crime shifts than the slowly moving forces mentioned above (with Canada moving toward abortion legalization in 1969, and the USA starting down the path in 1970 before going the entire way in 1973). But rather than having the last pieces in the puzzle click nicely into place, Zimring ends with a mystery rather than an explanation: 'the same lack of known causes that holds for the majority of Canadian crime declines may hold for 40 percent of the U.S. crime drop' (p. 134). Zimring then attributes the large unexplained portion of the US and Canadian crime drops to 'cyclical effects [that cannot] be easily assigned to discernable [*sic*] causes' (p. 209). But this is no explanation at all.

While it takes a certain boldness and intellectual confidence, which Zimring certainly has, to end a major book saying we really cannot explain these startling changes in crime, I think the four common factors in the USA and Canada and the two added elements for the USA alone pretty much tell the story. Zimring finds uncertainty by ignoring or discounting some of these factors and then pointing out anomalies that their recognition would eliminate. For example, he notes that in the late 1980s, 'the prison population grew at the greatest rate in history, the youth population declined, the economy boomed, and life-threatening crime in the United States went up.' But if one accepts the crack cocaine crime stimulus story from above, this is no longer a puzzle. An intense crime stimulant overwhelmed lots of other factors that, *ceteris paribus*,

would gradually have pushed crime down. Zimring's statement seems to suggest that because an array of apparent crime suppressants were operating in the late 1980s and crime did not fall, we should therefore reject the view that these factors were really suppressing crime. This is simply not true in a multivariate world – crime can certainly rise even when one or more factors are acting to dampen it, as the late 1980s illustrated.

With continuing crime reduction benefits coming in the 1990s from demographics, the economy, and incarceration along with a growing police presence, the USA was poised for a major improvement when it got two additional benign shocks – the abatement of the crime stimulant from the crack trade, and the sudden jolt of the crime-suppressing drop in unwanted births engineered via 1970s abortion legalization. Levitt (2004) concludes that the crack and abortion factors account for roughly one-third of the total crime drop in the USA, and Sen (2007) argues that Canadian abortion legalization alone explained roughly 40 percent of the smaller Canadian decline. Put the entire package together, and you explain both the late 1980s crime surge and the subsequent sharp crime declines, as well as the greater drops in the USA (who had the advantage of the police and prison increases missing in Canada).

Indeed, Zimring's surprise that the New York City 1990s crime drop is twice the magnitude of the entire nation also fits into this story. Not only did New York City have all the other positive factors coming into alignment to reduce crime seen throughout the country, but it also got a much bigger dose of police (as Zimring vividly puts it, the New York City police increase in the 1990s was the equivalent of adding on top of its existing force the entire police force of Chicago). In addition, Zimring gives insufficient weight to the facts that, compared to the rest of the nation, New York City had one of the biggest crack-generated jumps in crime, thereby leaving the greatest room for a mean-restoring crime drop, and a dramatically higher abortion rate (from 1974–6, the number of abortions per 1000 live births was 278 in the USA and 1038 in New York City.). In fact, while the New York City crime experience in the 1990s was wonderful, it was not exceptional. Four of the ten largest cities in the USA – the others were Houston, San Diego, and San Antonio – enjoyed roughly similar drops in murder rates in the 1990s.<sup>5</sup> In other words, the reasons for and the differences in magnitudes of the crime drops in the USA, Canada, and New York City are all broadly understood (even if the final apportionment of the relative contributions has not yet been precisely identified). The lesson of the great American crime drop is that when six major factors press in one direction, crime moves.

## Notes

- 1 A small sample: Canada had little variation in its incarceration rate when the US rate was soaring (pp. 120–1); in 1990, NYC was one of the worst of the top ten largest cities in four of seven crime categories, by 2000 it was the best in five of seven categories (p. 141); the natural experiment of whether NYC style policing makes a difference began in 2002 when William Bratton became police chief in Los Angeles (p. 158); on the question of whether US police forces were rising or falling in 2000 and 2001 – rising according to BJS, falling according to UCR (p. 178); and no-one should trust UCR crime data prior to 1970 (p. 180).
- 2 Dilulio was rewarded for his partisan efforts with a White House position after the Republican victory in 2000, which he left after eight months with a harsh denunciation of the Bush White House (and oddly strong praise for the policy orientation of

- the Clinton White House), only to re-trench a day later in a scene reminiscent of *Darkness at noon*, in which he apologized for his criticisms of the Bush Administration.
- 3 Citing different data sources, Zimring lists the Italian homicide change in the 1990s as a 59 percent drop on page 15 and a 52 percent drop on page 212.
  - 4 The accounting obviously depends on the crime category: the Canadian homicide drop was 87 percent of the US homicide drop, but the robbery drop was only 30 percent as large in Canada (although theft fell 39 percent in Canada and only 23 percent in the USA – if only because, Zimring notes, Canadian official statistics were increasing the minimum value for inclusion).
  - 5 And Los Angeles (number two) and San Jose (number eleven) were not far behind the others in terms of large murder rate declines. Zimring is right that New York City is exceptional and surprising – but primarily in its continuing decline in crime after 2000, which stands in contrast to unimpressive performance on the crime front nationally. (So far there has been little evidence that Bratton's bringing of NYC style policing to Los Angeles has made much of a difference there.) I would also add one more item to the elements of the New York City experience in the 1990s that likely contributed to unusually large crime drops in selected cities – the large influx of low-crime first generation immigrants (Karman, 2000). If one wanted to explore an anomalous big city, a good place to look would be Philadelphia, which had similar murder rates to NYC throughout the 1980s, but has enjoyed a surprisingly small murder rate drop since 1990, and in 2005 had a murder rate of 25.6 per 100,000 when NYC was at 6.6.

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*Gates of injustice: The crisis in America's prisons*, Alan Elsner. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2006. xvii + 283 pp. \$16.99. ISBN 0131881795.

As our prison population expands, so too does the number of books written about it. Not all books are worthy of our time and attention. This book is. *Gates of injustice* by Alan Elsner is thoroughly researched, insightful, and compelling. Using interviews with