

## Section I: Introduction

The overall crime rate has been decreasing nationally (and in California) since 1991. Numerous explanations have been offered by researchers and commentators to account for this decline. Some of these explanations have been offered with little support, while some have been presented with rigorous logic, documentation, and statistical analyses. Explanations have been based on a wide range of criminal justice, cultural, demographic, economic, political, psychological, and sociological perspectives.

This review and the conclusions drawn from it are based on all the original articles on recent crime rates published from January 1997 to Summer 2000 found at the California State University, Sacramento library and on the Internet. Three articles and books with earlier publication dates were included either because they were repeatedly referred to in later articles or they dealt with historical information. Brief articles which reported on other longer articles and added no additional information were excluded. Thus, there was no intentional bias in the choice of sources.

Authors reviewed for this paper often proposed more than one reason for the decreasing crime rate. For some, there was only one reason for the decline in crime. This review is organized by the various categories of reasons offered for the recent decreasing crime rate. Articles offering more than one reason for the decrease are cited in more than one category of explanation. This organization highlights the number and variety of arguments given in support of each explanation. Arguments against some explanations are also presented.

A list of explanations, or factors, affecting the crime rate has been advanced by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) (1999). This list is used to categorize reasons proposed for the decreasing crime rate. The complete list, which includes the categories not cited by any reviewed authors, is shown below:

- Effective strength of law enforcement agencies
- Administrative and investigative emphases of law enforcement
- Policies of other components of the criminal justice system (i.e., prosecutorial, judicial, correctional, and probational)
- Citizens' attitudes toward crime
- Population density and degree of urbanization
- Variations in composition of the population, particularly youth concentration
- Economic conditions, including median income, poverty level, and job availability

- Cultural factors and educational, recreational, and religious characteristics
- Family conditions with respect to divorce and family cohesiveness
- Stability of population with respect to residents' mobility, commuting patterns, and transient factors
- Modes of transportation and highway system
- Climate
- Crime reporting practices of the citizenry

Categories of explanations not included in the FBI list, but added to this paper as possible additional categories are:

- Drug use
- Weapons

Purposes of this critical review include presenting explanations for the recent decreasing crime rate and commenting on these explanations. Conclusions about the validity and applicability of each explanation will be drawn. Proposed explanations will be brought together into a qualitative model and possible causes of future crime rate changes will be discussed.

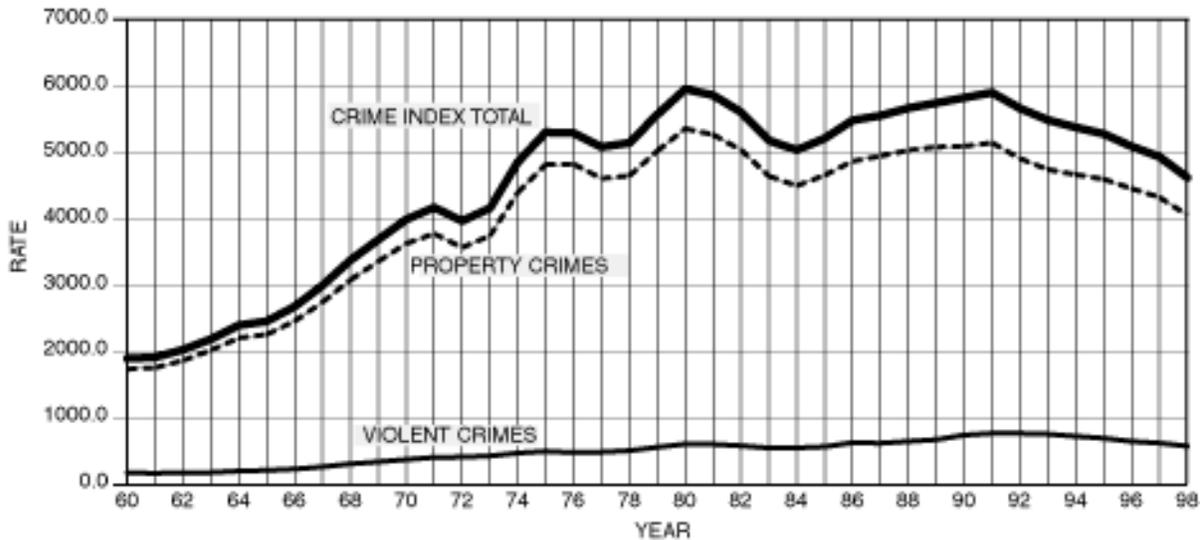
The national perspective of this review and its conclusions are highly relevant to California. A qualitative (and quantitative) model describing the recent decline in California's crime rate would require extensive original research and would be an appropriate and desirable follow-up to this review.

Section II of this paper presents descriptions of changing crime rates in the U.S. and in California. Section III contains a review of available literature on the recent decline in the crime rate, along with commentary and conclusions. Section IV contains a qualitative model which attempts to explain the recent decline in the crime rates. In addition, events that would lead to a change in future crime rates are proposed.

The reader is warned, prior to delving into the various explanations offered for the decline in crime rates, that a definitive understanding of all factors affecting crime rates is beyond the current knowledge of criminologists and other experts. Crime and its causes is an extremely complicated subject, and the factors discussed in this paper must be considered in that context.

## Section II: Descriptive Statistics for the Crime Rate Based on Uniform Crime Reporting

**Figure 1**  
**United States Crime Index Rate, 1960-1998**  
**By Category**  
**Rate per 100,000 Population**



### United States

Crime data for the United States are compiled by the FBI based on crimes reported by each state following the FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Program. The United States Crime Index Rate<sup>1</sup> (FBI, 2000) for the time period presented consists of four violent crimes (murder and nonnegligent manslaughter, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault) and three property crimes (burglary, larceny-theft, and motor vehicle theft). Data for this index are available beginning with 1960. The index's data indicate that the crime rate is decreasing nationally. The United States Crime Index Rate since 1960 and its two major components, property and violent crime rates, are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 shows that the Crime Index Rate Total crime rate generally increased from 1960 to 1980, with slight dips occurring around 1972 and 1977. After the 1980 peak, the

crime rate decreased until 1984, then rose until 1991, when it began decreasing. Recent data show these decreases continuing in 1999. The violent crime rate trended like the Crime Index Rate Total. The property crime rate almost paralleled the Crime Index Rate Total, with increasing separation until 1991 followed by decreasing separation. The varying separation is due to the increase and then the decrease in the violent crime rate component of the overall index.

This description of crime rate trends indicates that something happened in 1981 which made both the property and violent crime rates decrease until 1984. After 1984, both rates increased until 1991 when they both began decreasing. These trends indicate that the decreasing national crime rate might be better understood in light of the decrease that occurred in the early-to-mid 1980s and the increase that followed for seven years.

<sup>1</sup> Arson is not included in Figures 1 and 2 because the FBI did not collect arson data prior to 1980.



**Figure 2**  
**United States Crime Index Rate, 1960-1998**  
**By Crime**  
**Rate per 100,000 Population**

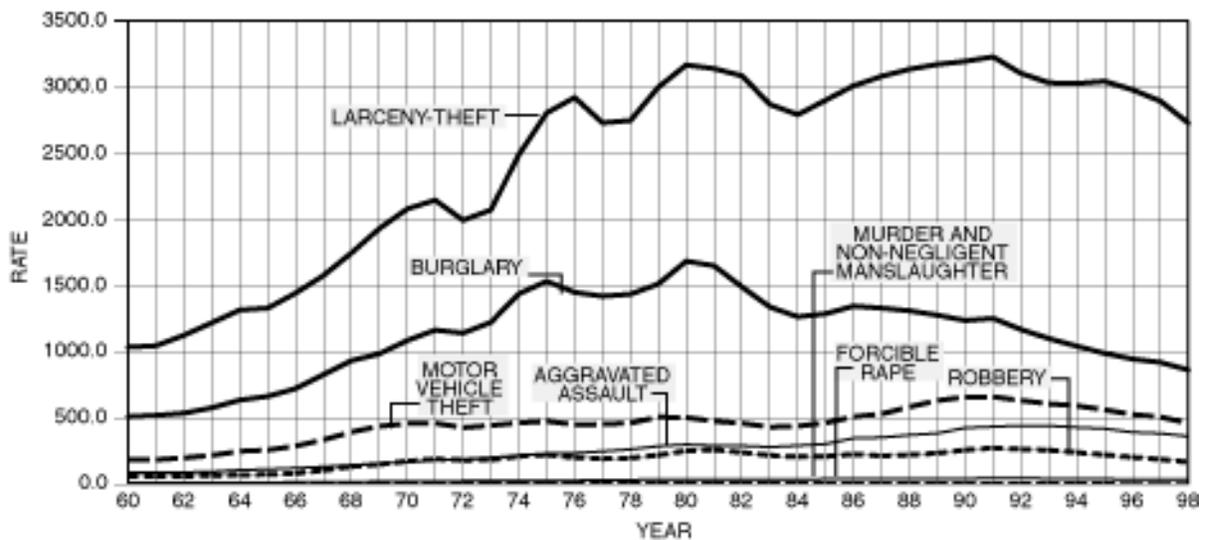


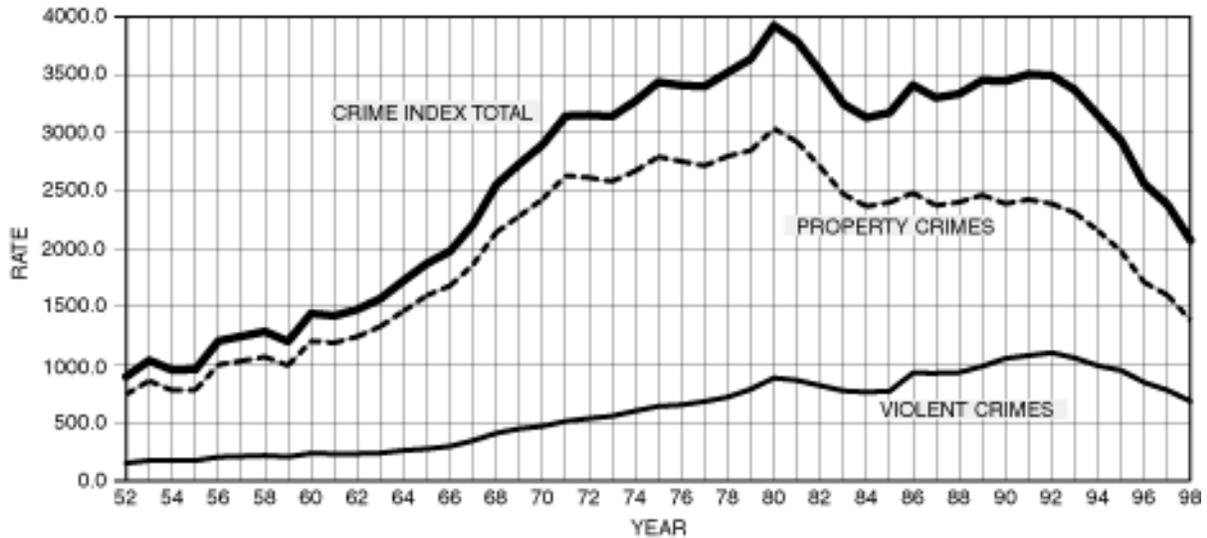
Figure 2 shows that the larceny-theft rate has been by far the greatest single contributor to the United States Crime Index Rate, especially since the early 1980s when the burglary rate began to decrease. Among property crimes, it appears that the decrease in burglaries seen from 1986 to 1991 was paralleled by concurrent increases in the larceny-theft and motor vehicle theft rates. This suggests a shift of property crimes from residences and commercial buildings to motor vehicles and their contents. An increase in robberies was also observed during this time, suggesting a further shift in targets to individuals who would have cash and more readily disposable assets on their person. By the early 1990s, the rates of all seven types of crimes were decreasing, with the rate of burglary having begun its decrease first (in 1987) and the rate of murder beginning its decrease last (1994).

### California

Crime reporting in California is based on the FBI's UCR Program, with aggregate rates based on the California Crime Index (CCI) offenses. The CCI consists of four violent crimes (homicide [includes murder and non-vehicular manslaughter], forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault) and two property crimes (burglary and motor vehicle theft). Data are available for CCI offenses beginning with 1952. This index and the crimes that comprise it are cited as indicating a decreasing crime rate in California (California Department of Justice, 1984, 1989, 1993, & 1999).

Two offenses which are part of the FBI's UCR Program are excluded from the CCI. Larceny-theft is excluded because California's definition of felony theft was changed in 1983.

**Figure 3**  
**California Crime Index Rate, 1952-1998**  
**By Category**  
**Rate per 100,000 Population**



Arson is excluded because law enforcement agencies did not begin submitting arson data until 1979. The CCI rate since 1952 and its two major components, property and violent crime rates, are shown in Figure 3.

Excluding relatively small changes in the crime rate, Figure 3 shows that the CCI rate increased almost steadily from 1952 to 1980, then decreased sharply to 1984, increased gradually to 1991, and decreased sharply to 1998. To some unknown degree, these changes reflect changes in law and data collection procedures which occurred at different times during these years. Recent data show these decreases continued in 1999. The property crime rate also increased steadily from 1952 to 1980, then decreased sharply to 1984, remained fairly constant to 1992, and decreased sharply to 1998. The violent crime rate increased steadily from 1952 to 1980, then decreased to 1985, increased substantially to 1992, and decreased markedly to 1998.

The above descriptions of major trends in the CCI, and property and violent crime rates indicate that in California, something(s) happened in 1981 to halt the steady 29 year increase in the crime rate. Whatever that something(s) was, its effect on the property crime rate persisted until 1999, while its effect on the violent crime rate wore off or was overridden by other factors after 1985 and until 1992. Beginning in 1993, a factor or factors began causing violent crime rates to decrease dramatically. These trends suggest that a full understanding of why the total crime rate has been decreasing in California since 1991 would be aided by understanding (1) why the CCI rate, and its major components increased steadily from 1952 to 1980, (2) why the CCI rate, and its major components decreased markedly for several years beginning in 1981, and (3) why trends in the rates of property and violent crimes uncoupled from 1985 to 1992 (the property crime rate remained steady while the violent crime rate increased substantially).



**Figure 4**  
**California Crime Index Rate, 1952-1998**  
**By Crime**  
**Rate per 100,000 Population**

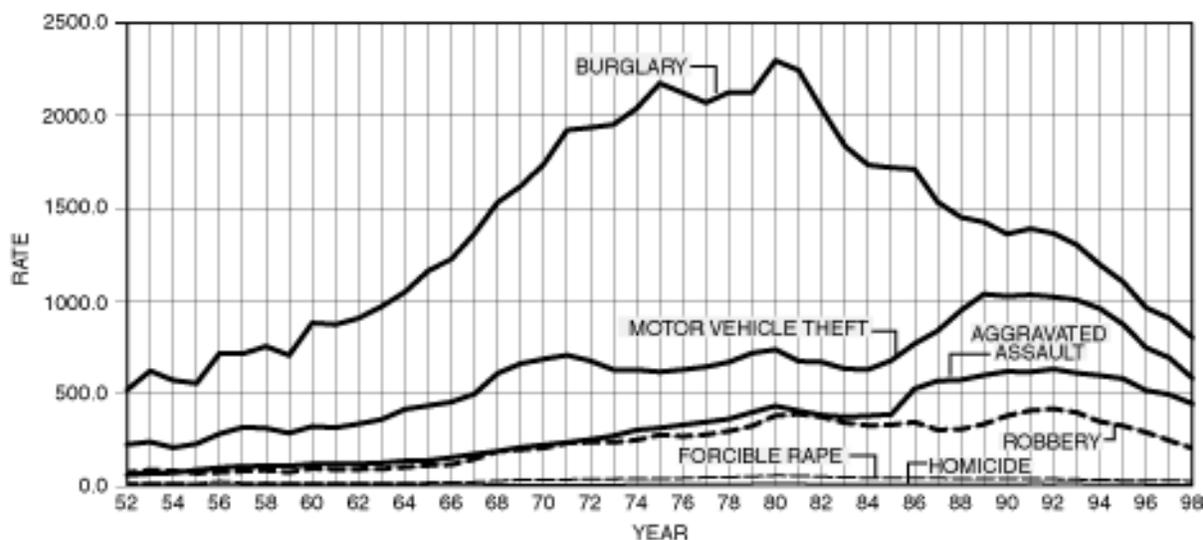


Figure 4 reveals how the CCI rate was dominated numerically by the burglary rate until the late 1980's. By that time the burglary rate had dramatically decreased resulting in the rates of motor vehicle theft, aggravated assault, and robbery (all of which had increased) each contributing a greater proportion of the CCI rate.

California's property crime rate trend from 1952 to 1982 was largely a reflection of the burglary rate. From 1983 to 1992, the property crime rate remained relatively constant. It reflected the concurrent decrease in the burglary rate and increase in the motor vehicle theft rate. Changes in the rates of these two crimes essentially negated each other numerically. A thorough explanation of the recent decrease in the CCI rate might account for this transient change in property crime targets. Beginning in 1993 the rate of motor vehicle thefts began to decrease at a rate paralleling that of burglaries.

The rate of violent crimes has historically reflected mainly the rates of aggravated assault and robbery. Changes in the rates of forcible rape and homicide have paralleled changes in the rates of aggravated assault and robbery. Therefore, changes in these two lesser occurring crimes have not been misrepresented by the overall violent crime rate.

Two points are worth emphasizing. First, the violent crime rate in California declined 37.9 percent from its peak in 1992 to 1998 (over six years), while the United States violent crime rate decreased 25.3 percent from its peak in 1991 to 1998 (over seven years). On an average annual basis, the California violent crime rate dropped 6.3 percent per year from its peak, while the United States violent crime rate (which includes California) dropped 3.6 percent per year. The United States annual violent crime rate drop would have averaged about 3.4 percent if California was excluded. Thus, California's recent decrease in violent crime began slightly after the nation as a whole, but then the decline occurred at almost twice the rate of the rest of the United States.

Second, the decrease in the crime rate was not homogeneous throughout the United States. Data through 1996 (National Institute of Justice, 1998) show the decline in the crime rate varied in timing and degree among the states. Some states showed little or no decrease, and some even showed an increase. Thus, it can be stated from the outset that the factors which caused the recent decline in the United States crime rate were not acting uniformly throughout the nation.