

Section IV: Qualitative Model to Explain the Recent Decline in the Crime Rate

Introduction

In this section a qualitative model will be proposed to explain the recent decline in the crime rate. The model is based on the explanations presented in the reviewed articles. In the interest of truth in modeling, several points need emphasizing at the outset.

First, no factors in the model have been tested for statistical significance in the course of preparing this paper.

Second, the model is likely to be over-inclusive. That is, it is likely that one (or more) of the factors in the model could be shown by quantitative analysis to have had no effect on the recent decline in the crime rate. Since at this point it is not known which term(s) might be excluded, over-inclusion seems prudent.

Third, no claim is made that all included factors had the same degree of effect on the recent decline in the crime rate across the nation. In fact, it is probable that most factors had varying degrees of effect in varying situations and at varying times. Some factors may have had little or no effect in some situations and considerable effect in others. Other factors may have had a substantial effect in most or all situations.

Fourth, a quantitative version of the model could probably be developed which would describe more focused situations with greater precision than more diverse ones. For example, quantitative models could probably be developed which would describe California more precisely than the United States, and Los Angeles more precisely than California.

Fifth, the model qualitatively describes the factors which contributed to the decreasing crime rate through 1999. It does not predict the direction of the crime rate in 2000 and beyond.

Sixth, factors which contributed to the recent decline in the crime rate could, if changing differently or in the opposite direction, contribute to an increase in the crime rate.

The Model

In general, models are built to try to describe how variables are related. Models can succinctly summarize what has been presented in many pages of text. In this paper, a qualitative model is developed to organize and summarize the crime decreasing factors suggested in the articles reviewed in Section III.

Convincing arguments have been presented supporting the existence of two trends affecting the rate of crime during recent years. The trends occurred simultaneously with one forming the gradually decreasing substrate upon which the other soared and fell.

The first trend, the substrate, is the long-term decline in the crime rate which began about 1981. The long-term decline followed a long-term increase in the crime rate which began in the 1950s (in part due to the increasing numbers of agencies reporting and types of crimes reported), and accelerated at about 1964 (when the leading edge of the baby-boomers reached 18 years of age). Most factors affecting the long-term decline were operating during the recent crime rate decrease. However, some long-term factors which affected crime rates prior to 1986 and may affect post-1999 crime rates were not operating during the recent crime rate decrease.

The second trend includes the short-term rise and decline in the crime rate which began about 1986. The short-term trend peaked about 1991 and then began declining. That decline was continuing in 1999.

The model, then, has two basic components. Factors affecting the short-term crime rate trend appear to have accounted for much more of the recent crime rate decrease than factors affecting the long-term crime rate trend. For the most part each trend is described by its own set of factors, but some factors contributed to both trends. Each trend is largely but not entirely associated with identifiable groups of people and crimes. Some factors would be expected to interact. The



biggest interaction appears to have involved the increase in robberies due to the short-term trend and the decrease in burglaries due to both the short- and long-term trends.

Long-term trend factors affecting the recent decreasing crime rate are shown in Table 2. Also shown is the direction each factor changed and the general type of crime it decreased.

**Table 2
Long-Term Factors Which Affected the Recent Crime Rate Decrease**

Factor, Direction of Change to Decrease Recent Crime Rate, and Comment	Type of Crime Decreased
Decrease in number of property criminals due to death, aging, or imprisonment and fewer young apprentices.	Property
Increase in workers' individual and collective economic leverage due, in part, to high demand for workers plus a sense of fairness of economic institutions. Followed a period of downsizing and relocation.	Property
Increase in overall employment.	Property
Decrease in actions of government which engender distrust and contempt leading to disregard for and hostility toward rules, laws, and norms.	Property and Violent
Increase in educational institutions which provide supportive environments and guidance to juveniles.	Property and Violent
Increase in mechanisms for preventing domestic violence, including legal advocacy, domestic violence services, and statutes requiring arrest for violent behavior.	Violent
Increase in, higher probability of, and longer duration of incarceration.	Property and Violent
Increase in use of personal security devices and services.	Property

Short-term trend factors are presented in Table 3. Also given is the direction each factor changed and the general type of crime it decreased.

The full qualitative model describing the recent decrease in the crime rate consists of all the long-term trend factors and all the short-term trend factors shown in Tables 2 and 3. As previously stated, the short-term crack cocaine epidemic led to a crime spree lasting six to eight years. The short-term trend

factors are associated with that crime spree and caused the dramatic upswing and downswing in the crime rate. Short-term trend factors affected the violent crime rate much more than the property crime rate. According to the above analysis, short-term trend factors affecting violent crime probably accounted for almost all of the change in the violent crime rate between 1986 and 1999, and likely accounted for most of the change in the total crime rate during that period.

Table 3
Short-Term Factors Which Affected the Recent Crime Rate Decrease

Factor, Direction of Change to Decrease Recent Crime Rate, and Comment	Type of Crime Decreased
Increase in meaningful wage jobs for low-skilled workers, especially in larger cities.	Violent
Decrease in jobs in drug trafficking, especially crack cocaine, for juveniles and youth.	Violent
Increase in aggressive, zero-tolerance, order-maintenance policing which confront minor offenses.	Property and Violent
Increase in violent criminals killing each other in disputes, especially those involved with drugs.	Violent
Increase in neighborhood groups working with police to support and counsel juveniles and to interfere with drug trafficking.	Property and Violent
Increase in use of geographical information systems by law enforcement to make maps giving statistical information about crime and highlighting high crime areas.	Property and Violent
Increase in lower-court intervention with minor offenders, giving alternative sentences and requiring drug treatment, especially when aided by effective probation and social services departments.	Property and Violent
Increase in probability and duration of incarceration for serious and violent crimes.	Property and Violent
Increased use of Federal RICO and related laws, and of state and local conspiracy statutes.	Violent
Increase in juveniles and youth with older brothers and friends who had been harmed by drugs or killed while trafficking drugs.	Violent
Decrease in handguns being carried by juveniles and youth.	Violent
Decrease in demand for drugs.	Violent
Decrease in size and organization of a competitive market involving an illegal, addictive, inexpensive, euphoria-producing substance (crack cocaine), whose effect is relatively short-lasting (an hour or less) and whose production, distribution, and marketing generate billions of dollars annually.	Violent
Decrease in violent street gangs.	Violent



It seems clear that the worst periods of violent lawlessness in twentieth century America occurred when sophisticated criminals fought for control of lucrative markets for an illegal drug (or drugs) that was in high demand. As previously described, both such periods had surprisingly similar characteristics. The best way to ensure that twenty-first century America does not experience a similar violent crime wave would be to prevent the circumstances (personal, societal, economic, and political) associated with Prohibition and the crack cocaine epidemic from arising again.

The Future

Future crime rates may be affected by many, if not most, of the factors which affected recent crime rates. Long-term trend

factors which affected crime rates prior to 1986 and which may affect post-1999 crime rate changes, must also be considered. In addition, there may be new or previously overlooked factors which affect future crime rates.

Long-term trend factors which affected crime rates prior to 1986 and which may affect post-1999 crime rate changes are shown in Table 4. Included are the direction each factor would have to change to decrease the crime rate and the general type of crime that would be decreased.

Predicting future crime trends is beyond the scope of this paper and probably beyond anyone’s understanding of the causes and prevention of crime. The best that can be done is to understand

**Table 4
Long-Term Factors Which Did Not Affect the Recent Crime Rate Decrease,
But Which Might Affect Post-1999 Crime Rate Changes**

Factor, Direction of Change to Decrease Crime Rate, and Comment	Type of Crime Decreased
Decrease in urbanization, especially poor, crowded, inner-cities. Unlikely to occur without major governmental intervention.	Property and Violent
Decrease in the number of individuals, especially males, of crime-prone age. Number of juveniles and youth changed little during recent crime binge and decline, but expected to increase in near future.	Property and Violent

the factors which decreased the crime rate in the past and attempt to maximize those factors in the future. Conversely, factors which increased the crime rate in the past should be minimized in the future.

A change in the direction of any or all of the factors in Tables 2, 3, or 4 may lead to an increase in the crime rate in 2000 and beyond. However, if these factors continue acting as they have in recent years, the crime rate will continue to decrease.

Based on prior effects, the passage of time since the peak of the crack cocaine crime surge, demographic changes, and economic events, if the following scenarios occur crime is likely to increase in 2000 and for a few years beyond:

1. Another drug-related crime spree occurs with the following components.

- A resurgence in use of crack cocaine or the appearance of a new drug with similar characteristics occurs (most likely methamphetamine) and another drug epidemic begins. The size of the drug epidemic will determine how much the crime rate, especially the violent crime rate, increases.
- A new generation of violent criminals comes of age to replace the violent criminals who killed each other off in the crack cocaine epidemic. Gangs are taken over by violent leaders and gang members become violent.
- Time has passed since the peak of the crack cocaine epidemic. Juveniles and youth have not seen much violence

or observed the life of someone close to them destroyed by drugs. They are not deterred from violence or the use of drugs because they have not closely or personally witnessed the tragic effects of either.

2. Law enforcement and other societal anti-crime forces do not keep pace with demographic changes which occur.

- Societal and law enforcement efforts to prevent crime remain static and do not grow in proportion with population growth.
- The baby-boom echo causes a rapid and sizable growth in the number of crime-prone age individuals which results in an increase in the crime rate.

3. Disproportional distribution of wealth has consequences for crime.

- A less likely scenario would involve an upsurge in property crime by those who have not prospered in an era when many others have amassed a considerable amount of wealth.
- The recent economic boom has heightened the dichotomy in the distribution of wealth in the United States. In response to that difference, those who have not prospered may be increasingly driven to commit robbery, burglary, larceny-theft, and motor vehicle theft to obtain their share of the wealth.

Conclusion

Between 1986 and 1999 the crime rate increased (peaking in 1991 nationally and in 1992 in California) and then decreased. The increased crime rate was largely due to the crack cocaine epidemic, while the subsequent decrease was largely related to the decline in the use of crack. The use of handguns by juveniles and youth (increasing then decreasing) accounted for most of the changes in the rate of violent crime. Violent crime by adults over 30 years of age and property crime by individuals of all ages did not go through this cycle of increase and decrease, and generally decreased over the entire period. Unlike the period from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s, the populations of juveniles and youth did not change much from 1986 to 1999. The number of individuals of crime-prone age did not, therefore, account for the changes in the crime rate during this latter period.

By 2000, the short-term cycle of increasing and decreasing crime had run its course. The peak crime years were part of distant history to many, including the new, burgeoning population of juveniles and youth. The residual effects of the most violent years, including sobering memories of the violence that had taken loved ones, had worn off. Those individuals and groups inclined toward crime and violence and those trying to prevent both were beginning to deal with the new, but not yet fully delineated, interplay that was evolving between them. A fresh period was commencing in which the rate of crime would depend on the interaction of the factors described throughout this paper.