

The Great American Crime Decline

FRANKLIN E. ZIMRING

The Great American Crime Decline

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Preface

The crime decline that is the subject of this book started quietly. The rate of reported crimes in the United States dropped each year after 1991 for nine years in a row, the longest decline ever recorded. This was a big drop in two other respects. The rates of every serious offense dropped in the United States, even though there are no close or obvious connections between violent offenses, such as homicide and rape, and common theft. And crime dropped all over the United States—in every region, in the country as well as the city, in poor neighborhoods as well as rich neighborhoods. By the start of the twenty-first century, most serious crime rates had dropped by more than 35%.

The great American crime decline was a surprise when it began and is a mystery to this day. No experts were predicting declining crime for the 1990s, and few observers paid much attention to the accumulating good news even during the first four years of the drop. Fifteen years after the decline began, there is little consensus among experts about what changes in circumstances produced the crime decline or what is likely to happen next. Sadly, this lack of consensus has not inspired extraordinary efforts by government or social science to focus scientific resources and attention on study of this remarkable chapter of American history.

This book is my attempt to understand the mysterious good news from the 1990s. The major subjects of my study were the character, the causes, and the consequences of the crime decline, but my research then led to broader conclusions about the nature of crime in America. For the long run, these broader conclusions may be of more importance to criminology and to public policy.

With respect to the causes of the crime decline, there are plenty of plausible candidates to take some credit for the 1990s, including a decline in the proportion of the population in its high-risk younger years, a substantial expansion of the population incarcerated, and the longest economic boom of the past half-century. But even with this bumper crop of likely causes, my analysis of crime cycles in Canada suggests that cyclical forces that are not the result of crime policy changes, population trends, or the economy could be responsible for almost half of the U.S. decline.

The consequences of sharply lower crime rates deserve much more attention than they have received. The crime decline was the only public benefit of the 1990s whereby the poor and disadvantaged received more direct benefits than those with wealth. Because violent crime is a tax of which the poor pay much more, general crime declines also benefit the poor, as likely victims, most intensely. And impoverished minority males in big cities also benefited from less risk of both victimization and offense. The crime decline among younger persons not yet committed to criminal careers was greater than the aggregate crime drop, because those in the middle of active criminal careers do not alter their personal behavior as quickly as the general rates drop.

The two most important lessons from the 1990s are the room for further crime decline that most communities have even now, and the loose linkage between the demographic and social structures of American urban life and any particular level of crime. Relatively small changes in urban environments can produce 75% reductions in crime. The sharpest declines that big cities experienced in the 1990s could not have happened if crime was an inherent byproduct of urban disadvantage. That is the biggest story from the 1990s and an important lesson for the American future.

The book is divided into four two-chapter installments. Part I provides the vital statistics on the national crime decline and shows how crime trends can bias public and expert assumptions about the power of government to control crime. Part II is a critical survey of published

explanations of the causes of the 1990s decline. The third part of the book presents two new perspectives on U.S. crime trends, based on studies of Canada and New York City. The last part applies the lessons of this study to the current and future circumstances of crime in the United States.

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Acknowledgments

The events, institutions, and people who conspired to help me produce this study in 25 months deserve much more than my brief thanks. My first effort to collect and evaluate materials on the 1990s crime decline was to prepare a six-hour review for a seminar on empirical research on crime and criminal justice that Joan Petersilia, Simon Cole, and I offered at the Department of Criminology, Law and Society at the University of California, Irvine, in the winter of 2004. That experience was the sine qua non for this book, the jump start without which the project would not have been launched.

My return to Berkeley in June 2004 was well timed to continue a major research project. A new dean at Boalt Hall, Christopher Edley, Jr., provided expanded support to the program in criminal justice studies and created, with Werner and Mimi Wolfen, the Wolfen Research Scholar designation, which supported the writing and rewriting of the volume. I hope that I have provided a good start to the Wolfen program; it has certainly provided a terrific boost to the completion of this venture.

The special studies reported in chapters 5 and 6 required and received help from research fellows of the Boalt Hall Criminal Justice Research Program in far-flung outposts. Professor Anthony Doob of the University of

Toronto facilitated a study of Canadian crime patterns and hosted my presentation to the Institute of Criminology in March of 2005. Carolyn Greene, a doctoral student at Toronto, became a careful and creative student of Canadian crime and criminal justice. Without her efforts, chapter 5 could not have happened. Jeffrey Fagan of Columbia University has been helping me study crime and violence in New York City for a decade. His fingerprints are all over chapter 6 of this book.

The materials in chapter 4 on fertility, abortion, and crime in the United States and several other developed nations required help from a demographer and data from many different nations. It was my good luck to find and employ Bryan Lamont Sykes, a doctoral student in demography at Berkeley, and then to interest him in conducting independent research on the issue of fertility control and its eventual impact on crime rates.

I was also ruthless in seeking help from friends and colleagues to obtain data on the age distribution of criminal populations in Europe and Australia. Pat Mayhew, now at Victoria University in Wellington, New Zealand, helped me locate data sources in Great Britain and Australia. I only hope her sterling reputation in both nations has survived association with the project. Cristina de Maglie at the University of Pavia found the national statistics for Italy. My colleague Loic Wacquant at Berkeley led me to French data. Jenny Mouzos of the Australian Institute of Criminology, Suzanne Poynton and Sarah Williams of the New South Wales Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, Laurent Mucchielli of the Centre de Recherches Sociologiques sur le Droit et les Institutions Péénales (CNRS/Ministère de la Justice), and Chris Kershaw and Kathryn Coleman of the British Home Office provided statistical access and data. This project is further evidence that on the smaller planet we now inhabit, all studies of crime and criminal justice must have a comparative dimension.

I have already mentioned two research assistants (Greene and Sykes) who made the staff of this project both international and interdisciplinary. But the home team of Boalt Hall research help was also creative and multi-functional to an extraordinary extent. Munir Zilanawala, J.D. 2006, Tom Fletcher, J.D. 2007, and Richard M. Oberto, J.D. 2006, were primarily assigned to the project, and Scotia J. Hicks, J.D. 2007, helped with crime data collection.

A medium-sized collection of the usual suspects helps me write, prepare, and revise large lumps of prose, including this one. Dedi Felman of

Oxford University Press was her standard indispensable self in shaping this book. James Cook of Oxford joined the party in 2005 and pushed the project over the finish line. Toni Mendicino of Berkeley's Institute for Legal Research created the manuscript and graphics and maintained many of the electronic data elements of the research project and the book.

Two colleagues, David Johnson and David Sklansky, read the entire manuscript and provided helpful suggestions. Tony Doob and Rosemary Gartner of Toronto provided analysis and suggestions for chapter 5; Jeffrey Fagan, James Jacobs, and Jan Vetter were reader/critics of chapter 6; Richard Rosenthal helped with chapters 3 and 4. Richard A. Berk of the University of California, Los Angeles, provided helpful comments on a late draft of the manuscript.

One other group of scholars provided important help to this venture and should be recognized here, as well as in my frequently acerbic prose in chapters 3–6. The brave and creative criminologists and economists who published accounts of the causes of crime decline are extensively mentioned in this text, but the tone is often critical. In fact, we are all in the debt of Al Blumstein, Rich Rosenfeld, John Donohue, Steve Levitt, and others who took notice of the important events of the 1990s and frequently took risks on paper in exploring the decline. I gratefully salute them, even as I join the ranks of visible scholarly targets for future students of this remarkable chapter in the story of crime in America.

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Part I

What Happened in the 1990s?

Introduction to Part I

These introductory chapters provide a two-part profile of the national crime decline. Chapter 1 concerns the vital statistics of changing patterns of crime in the United States, placing the crime drop of the 1990s in historical and statistical context. The statistics in chapter 1 produce a much clearer picture of the central questions considered in the rest of the book. Chapter 2 explores the impact of crime trends on the attitudes of policy actors and experts about whether government policy can reduce crime. I show that sustained crime increases invite observers to conclude that “nothing works,” while cascades of good news encourage optimistic assessments about the ability of governments to control crime and the capacity of experts to understand crime trends. This is one reason that many observers express confidence in their ability to understand the crime declines of the 1990s, despite the fact that nobody had predicted that a major crime drop was on the horizon.

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The Size and Character of the Crime Decline

1

This chapter aims to be more than a statistical profile of how crime dropped in the 1990s, although there will be plenty of statistics used in the analysis. What I hope to describe is the character of the crime decline, and to do this I present statistics that illustrate the size, the range of offenses, and the length of the decline and how those features set what happened between 1991 and 2000 apart from other eras in modern American history. What the chapter examines is not simply the numbers but how the peculiar facts of the 1990s can help us understand the nature of the crime decline.

The chapter begins with a series of statistical accounts of the 1990s, showing the patterns revealed by each of the vital statistics in the survey. A second section steps back from the individual statistical analysis to suggest three broader lessons to be drawn from the collective impact of several different analyses. While the numbers in this first chapter are by no means the end of the story about causes or consequences, they provide a clear picture of the phenomenon at the center of this study, and frame the much more specific questions that the rest of the book will address. The data show a very substantial and nationwide drop, across all categories of serious crimes, steadily progressing through the decade. It is also a decline that

came as a total surprise to all the professional observers of crime and criminal justice in the United States.

Some Statistical Background

For most of American history, the measurement of crime and violence was not possible with any precision at the local level, and meaningful national statistics on crime and violence have been created only in the last generation. The two centuries without significant American crime statistics were a product of both political and methodological problems. The only agencies that receive regular reports of most criminal events are local police departments, where the measurement of crime trends is a low priority, and conflicts of interest may exist because trends in crime can be used to evaluate police performance; and police are not well-trained statisticians. The local nature of crime data means that different places will often use different criteria of crime classification, and aggregating local statistics into state and national totals was therefore a high-risk venture even after the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) tried to impose common standards and definitions. The FBI Uniform Crime Reporting program started in the 1930s but acquired credibility only much later for most offenses.

For one crime, however, good reports can be found outside the police. Because criminal homicides also generate death statistics, the national health statistics vital statistics program created a separate system of death reporting and classification for them at the county level and reported them nationally. After 1933, this information was reported for all states.

The local nature of government responsibility for crime reporting was paralleled by a tradition that crime policy was considered a local concern. One reason that little attention was paid to national-level crime measurement until the middle of the twentieth century was the absence of concern about crime as a national problem. Only in the 1920s and 1930s did crime emerge as a national political issue.

Among the range of offenses for which the FBI attempts to compute a crime rate by adding up crimes reported to the police, the two offenses with the best reputation for accuracy are homicide (because of its importance and the presence in most cases of a body) and auto theft (because of widespread insurance). At the other end of the scale are rape (because of victim reluctance to report) and larceny (not important to

most victims and easy to manipulate). Of course, this statistical report card excludes the incidence of crimes without victims willing to report them, such as drugs and prostitution. These simply cannot be measured by police statistics.

Homicide Trends

I start this inquiry about crime in the 1990s with the best reported data set, the vital statistics data on homicide. Figure 1.1 shows trends in homicide for all the years after 1950, which was 17 years after the national death registry was reported to be complete.

In an abbreviated telling of the story, the half-century divides into two trendless periods—one prior to 1964 and another between 1974 and 1993—and two clear trends: one a decade after 1964, when the homicide rate more than doubled, and the period after 1991, when it dropped consistently. Even with more than 2,800 killings from the attack on September 11, 2001, the homicide rate that year was more than 30% lower than the periodic peak rates that were the top portions of the 20-year cycle that began in the mid-1970s.

There is in the entire post-1950s period only one other time period that might qualify as a downward crime trend, the four years after 1980; but that decline lasted only half as long. Further, the next upturn in the late 1980s brought homicide quickly up to almost the same peak rate area in 1991 as 1980 and 1974.

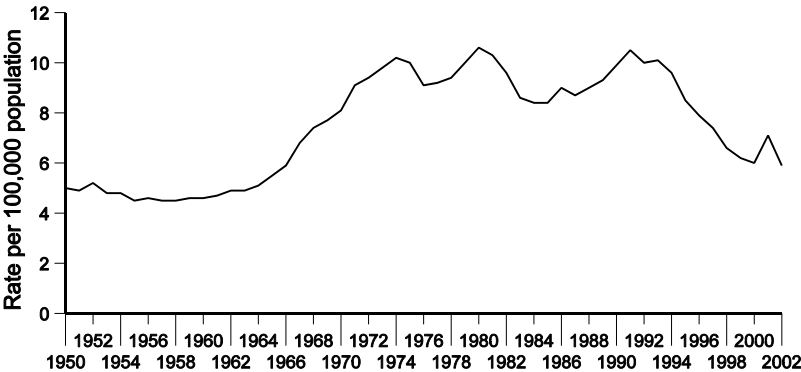


Figure 1.1. Homicide rate (NVSS), United States, 1950–2002. Source: National Center for Health Statistics. 2005. *Health, United States, 2005*. Hyattsville, Md.

How Big a Decline?

The scale of figure 1.1 provides a useful context for estimating the size of the decline in homicide after 1991. The increase in homicides in the decade after 1964 was just over 100%. The magnitude of the decline after 1992 was more than 70% as large as that increase—by 2002, the homicide rate in the United States was only 15–20% higher than in the early 1960s.

How Broad a Decline?

While homicides are the most serious crimes in the United States, they are a tiny part of the statistical tapestry of crime in America. One obvious question in measuring the crime trends of the 1990s is to determine how broadly the downward trend ranged across the spectrum of well-reported crimes. This type of investigation must leave behind the vital statistics, which only report deaths, in favor of police statistics and a national program of surveys of households that measures crime victimization for persons over 12 years of age.

The official crime reporting system for most offenses in the United States is the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports (UCRs), which focus on a category of eight "index" crimes. Not all the "index" crimes are serious (any theft offense is included in larceny), but all of the most serious ordinary crimes are included in the index category. Figure 1.2 launches the inquiry by

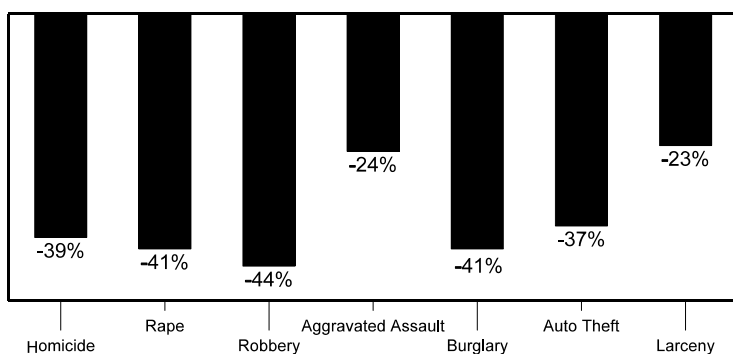


Figure 1.2. Everything goes down in the 1990s. Source: U.S. Department of Justice. Federal Bureau of Investigation. 1990, 2000. *Uniform Crime Report*. Washington, D.C.

comparing trends in all seven of the traditional FBI crime index offenses, comparing the census years 1990 and 2000. An eighth offense, arson, new to the FBI index, is excluded from the comparison.

The rate of all seven offenses reported in figure 1.3 declined significantly over the 1990s, with the aggregate declines ranging from 23% to 44%. For five of the seven offenses, the declines are of similar magnitudes—homicide, rape, robbery, burglary, and auto theft all report declines quite close to 40%. This group includes the two offenses with the best reputations for accuracy—the violent offense of homicide and the oft-reported property offense of auto theft.

The two crimes with markedly smaller declines were aggravated assault (down 24%) and larceny (down 23%). Aggravated assault is the most frequent of the violent crimes used in the crime index. Attacks where the use of a deadly weapon is threatened or occurs or where serious injury is intended or inflicted are the bulk of aggravated assaults reported in the United States. The border between simple and aggravated assault is difficult to determine, and trends in aggravated assault are frequently a puzzle (Zimring 1998, p. 93).

Larceny is by far the most common crime reported to the police everywhere and is also the least harmful of the crimes with definite victims. By itself, the number of larcenies reported to police in the United States forms the bulk of all index crime, about 60% of reported index felonies in 2000. The reason for this huge statistical impact is that larcenies of all sizes are counted into the crime index, in contrast to the treatment of the assault offense, which police exclude from the crime index if they classify an attack as a simple rather than “aggravated” assault.

The rationale for this inclusive approach for larceny is a cautionary tale about reforms in crime statistical reporting. The reason even small thefts have been counted in the index total since 1973 is that in prior years, when the FBI only counted larceny in the serious index category if the value of the property taken was over \$50, police departments could keep their reported offense rates low by underestimating the values of stolen properties (Seideman and Couzens 1974). To get around this problem, since 1973 the FBI has included in the index of all serious crimes a mass of thefts far more frequently petty than grand.

The smaller decline in larceny does mean that the aggregate number of offenses known to the police has not dropped as fast as the rates of offenses

like robbery and burglary, but most serious crimes feared by the public (“fear” crimes) dropped by 40% during the 1990s, and in that sense, the larger declines are clustered just where most citizens would want them to occur (Zimring and Hawkins 1997, ch. 1).

Victim Surveys

When the focus shifts from crimes known to the police to the estimates from household surveys, the trends are substantially confirmed. Figure 1.3 compares the trends over the period 1990–2000 for the police data reported in the UCRs and the household survey data reported by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS).

The crime declines estimated from the household survey are equal to or greater than the police statistics in all six crime categories, with the survey showing much larger declines in larceny, assault, and rape. The victim surveys not only confirm the trends found in the police data but also move the larceny and assault declines much closer to the average declines for other index crimes than do the police statistics. If we regard the National Survey data as a test of the size and breadth of the decline shown by police reports, it is a test that the crime decline passes with flying colors. If police statistics are to be faulted, it is that they underestimate the downtrend in assault, rape, and larceny.

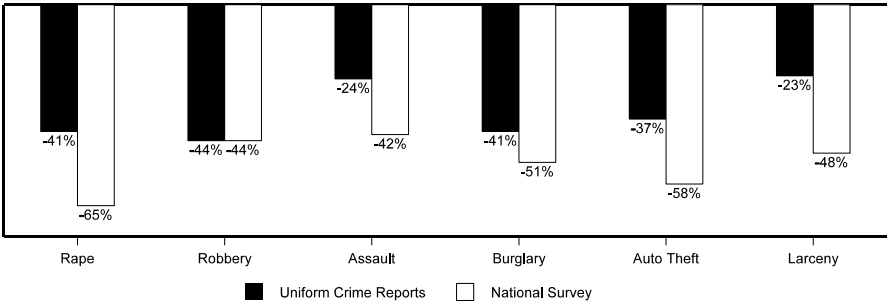


Figure 1.3. Official versus victim survey estimates of crime decline, United States, 1990–2000. Sources: U.S. Department of Justice. Federal Bureau of Investigation. 1990, 2000. *Uniform Crime Report*. Washington, D.C. U.S. Department of Justice. Bureau of Justice Statistics. 1990, 2000. *National Crime Victimization Survey*. Washington, D.C.

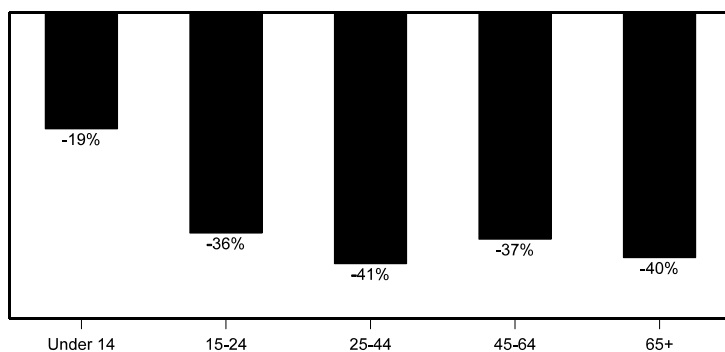


Figure 1.4. Trends of homicide victimization by age of victim, United States, 1990–2000. Source: National Center for Health Statistics. 2005. *Health, United States, 2005*. Hyattsville, Md.

The Demography of Decline

There are also encouraging signs that the benefits of lower crime rates have been spread widely across the social and demographic categories of the American nation. My focus in reporting on these matters will be on homicide, both because it is the ultimate fear crime and also because homicide statistics include many killings of victims of other offenses, most often robbery and assault but also sex offenses. In this sense, homicide trends also measure variations in other violent crimes.

Figure 1.4 shows 10-year trends of homicide victimization by age of victim.

With the exception of children under 14, where the rate decline was 19%, the relative declines in homicide victimization are extraordinarily flat, ranging only between 36 and 41%. This does not mean that homicide risks are spread evenly across age groups—rates of youth and young adults are much higher at both the beginning and the end of the 1990s—but the evenness of the decline over time of relative risk is impressive.

The pattern over time is slightly different when the declines in homicide victimizations are disaggregated by gender, by race and by city size (fig. 1.5).

The decrease in homicide for men is 42%, one-third more than for women. The decrease for nonwhites is 46%, again one-third more than the decline for whites, and the decline in big cities is 49%, much more than the drop in other cities, in suburbs, or in rural areas. The higher the rate

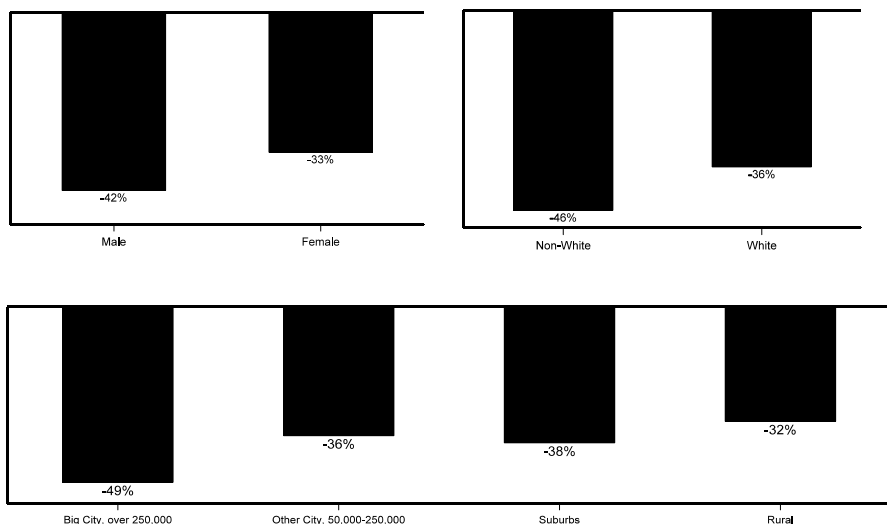


Figure 1.5. Homicide declines by demographic detail, United States, 1990–2000.
Source: National Center for Health Statistics. 2005. *Health, United States, 2005*.
Hyattsville, Md.

of homicide in 1990, the bigger the drop in the rate over the next 10 years. This is of critical importance, because it suggests that the benefits of the crime decline are concentrated in those groups with the highest exposure to crime.

Regional and City-Level Trends

The 10-year trends for the six index crimes other than larceny are shown by region in figure 1.6.

The pattern of decline by region is even, with one exception: the Northeast shows higher than usual declines for homicide, auto theft, and burglary. Only the UCRs statistics can be broken down by region, so that there is no independent measure to test against variations produced by the police statistics.

With respect to auto theft, the decline in the northeastern region is twice that of other regions, while the Northeast shows a 20–30% advantage for homicide and burglary. Except for this northeastern edge, there are no consistent regional patterns. Because very large cities have a substantial impact on the UCRs crime categories, it is prudent to defer discussion of the Northeast until I have identified and discussed the New York City pattern.

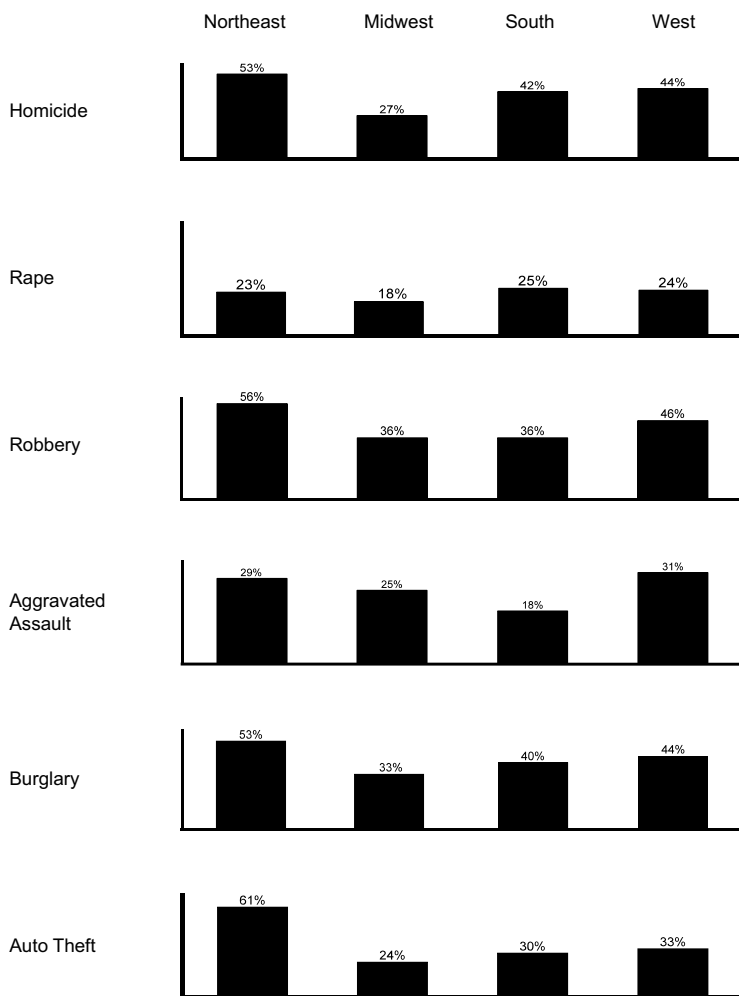


Figure 1.6. Regional trends in Uniform Crime Report crime, 1990–2000. Source: U.S. Department of Justice. Federal Bureau of Investigation. 1990, 2000. *Uniform Crime Report*. Washington, D.C.

Crime Trends in Big Cities

The crime trends in big cities are an important element of the national crime picture in eras of good and bad news. When high crime rates are a focus of public concern, media pay particular attention to which large American city is described as the nation’s “murder capital.” When crime rates fall, the experiences of particular cities may again play an important

role in public discussion. In the late 1990s, the experience of the nation’s largest city—New York—was of particular interest to those tracking crime trends. As I will show, this special attention was appropriate, given the singular performance of New York City crime.

Table 1.1 provides data on the average ranking of each of 15 large cities for the decline in seven crime categories. (Data were not available for both comparison years for the fifteenth largest city, Jacksonville, Florida; so Columbus, Ohio, the sixteenth largest city in 1990, is substituted for Jacksonville in table 1.1.) The ranks I use in table 1.1 test each of these cities against the other 14 to find out how evenly distributed the drop was in big-city crime. If all the nation’s large cities averaged a rank of between 6 and 8 in the table, no cities stand out as either leaders or laggards in the comparison.

If we search for large cities with the best crime decline records, we find table 1.1 to be one of several indicators that shows the city of New York to

Table 1.1
Average rank of crime decline for seven offenses,
15 largest U.S. cities, 1990–2000.

	<i>Average rank</i>
New York City	1.6
San Diego	4.4
San Francisco	5.4
Dallas	5.6
Los Angeles	6.0
Houston	6.3
San Antonio	6.8
San Jose	6.9
Chicago	8.8
Indianapolis	9.9
Phoenix	9.9
Detroit	11.3
Columbus	11.6
Philadelphia	12.3
Baltimore	12.7

Source: U.S. Department of Justice. *Uniform Crime Report* 1990 and 2000. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.
Ranks derived from index crime rate declines for seven offenses (excludes arson).

be literally in a class by itself. Across the seven FBI index crimes, the average rank for New York City was 1.6 out of 15, showing that this city was almost uniform in reporting the largest or second largest decline among the 15 biggest cities in the nation for a variety of different crimes. The next best performance by a major city was that of San Diego, but the distance between the average rank of New York and San Diego was almost three full ranks. San Diego's rank (and San Francisco's) shows that these cities consistently scored in the top third in crime reduction among major American cities over the 1990s. New York is consistently at the very top, recording the highest level of crime decline in four of the seven categories (homicide, robbery, auto theft, and burglary), recording the second highest in two (rape and assault), and falling to third only once (for larceny). While Baltimore scores the lowest of the 15 cities, we don't observe the same extreme values at the bottom of the distribution as there are at the top.

Figure 1.7 shows the relative magnitude of the official records of crime decline in New York City by comparing the percentage decline in New York police statistics with the decline noted in the rest of the United States over the period 1990–2000.

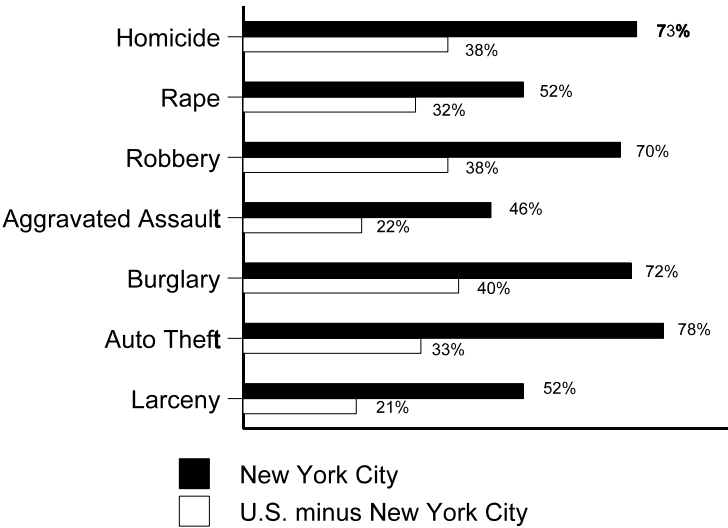


Figure 1.7. Percentage declines in New York City and the rest of the reporting areas in the United States, 1990–2000. Source: U.S. Department of Justice. Federal Bureau of Investigation. 1990, 2000. *Uniform Crime Report*. Washington, D.C.