



Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

CRIME PATTERNS AND TRENDS

Crime is down, but for how long?

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Apparently, it is now official -- crime has taken an extended holiday. Yesterday, the FBI released its annual report, *Crime in the United States*, confirming what earlier preliminary results had indicated: crime is down across the board, including a 7.3 percent decline in homicide. Although undeniably good news, there is more to the story that should warn us against complacency.

The FBI's tally board includes various crime types, population groupings, and geographic divisions. And, reportedly, the welcome plunge in lawlessness occurred for all offense categories, in cities large and small, and from east coast to west coast. That said, the FBI statistics do not distinguish crime trends by neighborhood, social class and race. The crime rate glory days may be good for America, but not for all Americans. The large drop in violent crime is not exactly consistent with the experience of many citizens who live in certain impoverished sections of Detroit, Baltimore, Newark and elsewhere, and for whom the frightening sound of gunfire is a much too frequent occurrence.

The news about these large crime drops also comes as surprise to many observers who fully anticipated that the economic recession, as it worsened in 2009, would have caused crime levels to spike upward. It is rarely the case, however, that someone loses a job at the bank and decides to rob another bank to make ends meet. Those who lose their homes to foreclosure do not typically go out and burglarize other people's homes for some quick cash. The decision to pursue a criminal career is largely independent of job market conditions.

Despite the minimal direct link between economic conditions and street crime levels, an indirect and lagged effect is cause for concern. When the economy is tight, state and local governments cut budgets for crime prevention and crime control initiatives. Of particular concern are the diminished levels of police protection, particularly in high crime areas. From 2000 to 2009, the number of police officers per 1,000 residents in cities with populations of 250,000 and over has declined by 11% overall. As a result, many police departments have been forced to scale down certain special programs. Back to basics for men and women in blue has meant a reduction or elimination of anti-gang units and community policing efforts.

It has been in some of the poorest and most crime-infested neighborhoods where the negative effects of police budget cuts have hit the hardest. Over the past decade, city police departments have been asked to

do more, but with less. The emphasis on homeland security and the attempt to protect potential targets of terrorism have left many hometowns unsecured against ordinary street violence.

In the short-term, at least, Federal stimulus funds have been used to supplement police department budgets and expenditures for other crime fighting initiatives. And, according to U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder, this has contributed to lowering crime rates. "In 2009 the Obama administration provided over \$4 billion in support to law enforcement and criminal justice initiatives through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, including \$1 billion in COPS funding to keep police officers on the street," Holder said. "Investments in law enforcement play a significant role in reducing violent and property crime."

Unfortunately, the healthy decline in aggregate crime rates can easily be used to justify further budget cutting for law enforcement and other areas of the criminal justice domain. Those who advocate lowering taxes to benefit beleaguered wage earners might want to think twice: A few extra dollars in the pocket is of little value if you're staring down the wrong end of a gun.

Notwithstanding the FBI report, we can never solve the crime problem; we only control it. If we grow too complacent and recklessly seek to trim the fat, crime levels can easily rebound. It is wonderful that crime rates are at a relative low point. It will be a significant challenge to keep them that way.