



Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

CRIME PATTERNS AND TRENDS

Abortion and crime - A missing link

Posted by James Alan Fox, Crime and Punishment June 2, 2011 01:00 PM

According to a recent *New York Times* headline, ("[Steady Decline in Major Crime Baffles Experts.](#)" May 26, 2011), we criminologists are clueless when it comes to explaining the drop in serious crime. To the contrary, a range of plausible explanations have been advanced to account for the downturn in lawlessness that this nation has enjoyed since the early 1990s. Over the long-term, the welcomed trend can be linked to several factors:

- the calmer aftermath of the late-1980s crack epidemic that had caused city crime levels to spike until the drug market shifted;
- improved police strategies that rely heavily on innovative technology and sophisticated crime analysis tools;
- expanded use of incarceration along with longer sentences that have kept more criminals off the streets; and
- the graying of America whereby the fastest growing segment of the population are the aging "baby-boomers" who are now over 50 years old and hardly babies anymore.

Reading beyond the headline of the *Times* story, however, what "baffled" me and other criminologists was the short-term plunge in crime from the first half of 2009 to the first half of 2010, especially the 6.2% drop in violent crime that included a 7.1% dip in murder. There is nothing even close to definitive that can account for such a large reduction over such a limited time period (other than the natural fluctuations inherent of short-term trends).

In the days since the *Times* article appeared, I have been treated to a large volume of e-mails from folks offering various suggestions concerning the cause everything from the impact of a meeting some five years ago of a large group of transcendental mediators who used their special skills to bring about peace, to an increased community cohesion as the recession prevented countless Americans from moving residences.

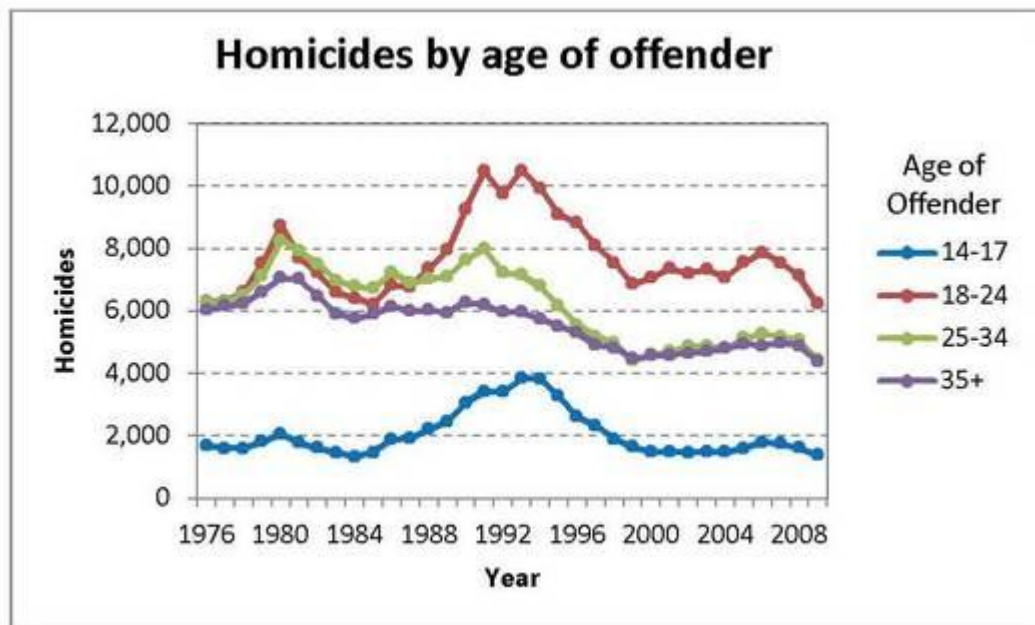
More than a few of the e-mailers, however, were riders on the abortion-crime link bandwagon. A spirited debate among economists was ignited a decade ago when John Donohue of Yale and Steven Levitt of the University of Chicago concluded that legalized abortion had produced a drop in crime. These prominent scholars argued that following the 1973 decision in *Roe v. Wade*, thousands of unwanted fetuses were

aborted instead of being born into less-than-ideal environments, thereby producing two decades later a reduction in the pool of at-risk, violence-prone individuals.

In a 2001 [paper](#) published in the *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Donohue and Levitt developed a complex set of statistical models to reach this bold claim:

"These estimates suggest that legalized abortion is a primary explanation for the large drops in murder, property crime, and violent crime that our nation has experienced over the last decade. Indeed, legalized abortion may account for as much as one-half of the overall crime reduction."

Despite persuasive logic regarding a reduction in the number of children born to circumstances that would place them at-risk for growing into criminality, the significance of this effect appears to have been grossly overstated. For example, nearly 60% of the decline in murder since 1990 involved perpetrators ages 25 and older individuals who would have been born prior to the landmark abortion decision. As shown in the figure below, there were substantial reductions during the 1990s in homicides committed by older age groups, especially those in the 25-34 year-old age range.



The abortion-crime link also cannot account for the transient surge in youth homicide during the late 1980s, if not for which the 1990s would not have witnessed such a sizable decline. The rise and then fall in youth homicide before and then after 1990 has much more to do with fast changing patterns of drug trade, gang activity and illegal gun supply than a sudden shift in abortion policy.

Finally, the abortion-crime hypothesis cannot explain the large drop in murder and other violent crime from the first six months of 2009 to the corresponding months of 2010. In fact, nothing really can.

The latest crime figures from the FBI are preliminary, as labeled. More time and more data will hopefully help us all to move beyond mere conjecture toward a firmer understanding of the reasons for recent crime trends as well as to determine their permanence. The lower that crime rates plunge, and the more that budgets are cut for crime prevention and crime control initiatives, the greater the likelihood that crime rates will rebound. At some point, unfortunately, we may at some point look back and see these as the good old days.