A Book Review:
The Great American Crime Decline
by Franklin E. Zimring

The 1990s were a period of unprecedented crime decline in the United States. Yet despite countless fewer victims and savings of law enforcement agencies, little is understood about the causes of the decline. The decline was broad, spanning the seven FBI index crimes: homicide, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, auto theft, and larceny. It lasted longer than any other crime decline since 1950, when national crime data became available and credible. Over the course of the decline, crime dropped further than ever before: homicides, a crime that can be measured accurately through coroner reports, decreased 39%. Decreases of similar magnitude were experienced in the other index crimes. (See figure 1.2 below.) University of California Criminologist Franklin Zimring, one of the leading authorities in the field, examines the historical origins of the crime decline, the state of the research, and the lessons for the future in his newest book, *The Great American Crime Decline* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

Professor Zimring's conclusions are a reminder of the limitations of current theories to explain and predict crime trends. In his thorough examination of the relevant research and literature in criminology, Zimring finds that no theory fully explains the historical crime trends with a reasonable degree of confidence, and that no theory of the causes of crime provides more than the roughest prediction of future crime trends. Zimring's strongest critique of theories to explain the great American crime decline in the 1990s is based on his comparison of the experiences of the United States and Canada. Canada experienced a decrease in crime similar in time, magnitude, and breadth as the United States but without many of the factors assumed to be the causes of the decline in the United States. (See figure 5.1 below.)

Zimring presents three explanations for the crime decrease in the 1990s that he finds credible. First, the dramatic increase in the imprisonment rates in the US, which began in 1973 and continues at the present. The total population of prison inmates in the United States increased from 110,000 in 1980 to 1,540,000 in 2000. With high imprisonment rates, incapacitation increases, putting downward pressure on crime rates. However, Canada's imprisonment rates remained completely flat through the same period, while it experienced a similar decrease in crime. (See figure 5.17 below.)

The economic expansion during the 1990s is the second credible explanation for the American crime decline. Several theories link crime with the state of the economy. The eight year period from 1992 to 2000 was America's longest economic expansion in the 20th century. Despite this unambiguous economic growth, statistical measurements of the effect of the expansion on crime are mixed, with some studies concluding that the growing economy had a small effect and others attributing up to 40% of the decline in property crime to the expanding economy. However, the lack of a comparable economic boom in Canada during a similar decline in crime casts serious doubt on the theory that economic conditions are a major factor affecting crime rates. As a result, Zimring doubts that "[America's] longest sustained period of economic expansion can be given any significant credit for the longest sustained crime decline."

Third, Zimring attributes some of the American crime decline to changes in the demographic makeup of the population. Young men are more likely to commit crimes than any other age group. In the twenty years following 1980, the portion of the population between 15 and 24 years old dropped by 26%, a significant shift by historical standards. (See figure 3.8.) Similar demographic changes occurred in Canada at the time. In Zimring's view, this

demographic explanation is the least controversial explanation for both countries' crime decline. But the typically slow shifts in demographics alone cannot explain the relatively rapid halving of crime rates in the 1990s. Demographics are at most a contributing factor to the crime decline of the 1990s.

In addition to listing three likely causes the crime decline, Zimring lists many factors that he considers to be invalid explanations. Increases in police forces during the 1990s are often given credit for contributing to the decrease in crime. But Zimring concludes that there are no convincing theories describing how additional police reduced crime to the extent experienced in the United States, or conclusive statistical studies showing the effect of additional police on crime. In Zimring's view, the exception may be New York City, where coordinated changes in police strategies, tactics and management appear to have contributed to declines in crime twice those experienced in the rest of the country.

The crime decline is sometimes linked to decreases in crack cocaine usage in the 1990s. But Zimring dismisses this explanation as a case of two trends falling from historical highs without a causal relationship. Crack cocaine use is responsible for specific crimes, such as youth homicides; however, the decrease in crime in the US has occurred across all major crime types. At most, decreased drug abuse brought down some crimes, but it cannot be an explanation for the general crime decline.

Zimring also addresses the theory of the "unborn offender" – that the legalization of abortion in 1973 caused lower crime rates 20 years later. The theory holds that newly available abortion services were disproportionately used by socio-economically disadvantaged women whose children would be more likely to commit crimes later in life. However, an examination of the relevant demographics reveals that the number of children born in disadvantaged socio-economic conditions did not significantly change after the legalization of abortion. Zimring calls for further study of this theory based upon the availability of abortion in other countries before this theory can be considered as a potential explanation of the 1990s crime decline.

Zimring concludes his analysis with an examination of the present status of crime in the United States. The crime decline slowed by the end of the 1990s and crime rates remained flat through 2006 (although crime rates are now dropping again). The commonly used "leading indicators" of crime, such as projected imprisonment rates and demographic trends, suggest continue low crime rates in the future. However, according to Zimring, uncertainty about the major causes of the American crime decline means that the reliability of these leading indicators is very low. New York City's transformation from crime capital of the country in the 1980s to one of the safest cities in 2000 suggests that the decline in this country's national crime rates may not be over. Furthermore, because the American crime decline has occurred without clear policy, economic, or social causes, Zimring concludes that further broad and deep crime declines may be possible without significant socio-economic changes in American society.

Figures from *The Great American Crime Decline*

Figure 1.2:
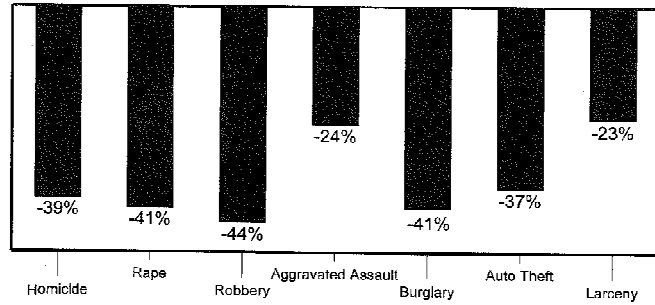The seven FBI index crimes fell
significantly from 1990 to 2000.

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.

Figure 5.1:
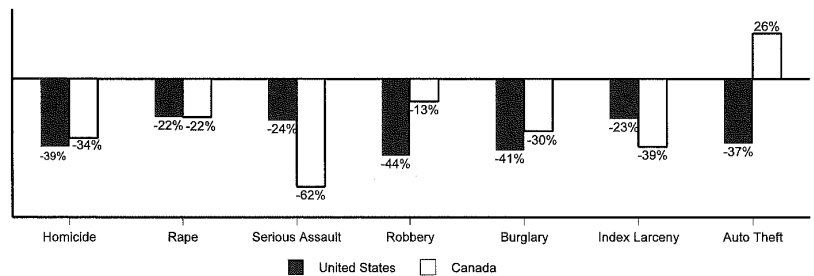Canada experienced a similar
decline in the 1990s.

Figure 5.1. National-level crime rate declines, Canada and United States,
1990–2000. Sources: U.S. Department of Justice. Federal Bureau of Investigation.
Uniform Crime Report. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office. Statistics
Canada. Ottawa.

Figure 5.17:
While American incarceration rates
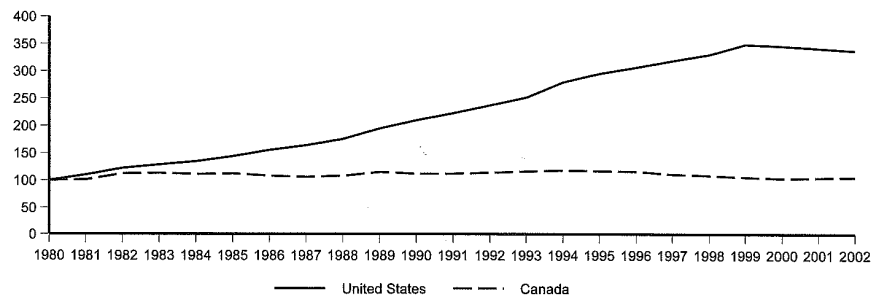tripled from 1980 to 2000, Canadian
rates were flat.

Figure 5.17. Trends in imprisonment rates, United States and Canada, 1980–2002.
Note: 1980 = 100. Sources: U.S. Department of Justice. Bureau of Justice Statistics.
1990, 2000. *National Crime Victimization Survey.* Washington, D.C.: Government
Printing Office. Statistics Canada. Integrated Meta Data Base (IMDB). Ottawa.

Figure 3.8:
The percentage of the population at a
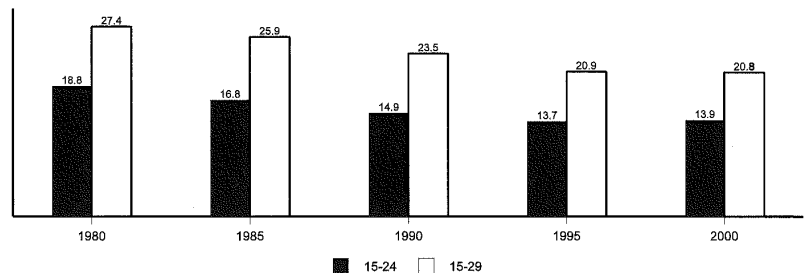high-risk age decreased from 1980 to
2000.

Figure 3.8. High-risk age groups as percentage of population, United States,
1980–2000. Source: U.S. Department of Commerce. Bureau of the Census. Inter-
national Data Base (IDB). Available at the website of the Census Bureau:
www.census.gov/ipc/.