DECLINING CRIME RATES

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According to the Pew Research Center, there have been “dramatic declines in U.S. violent and property crime rates since the early 1990s, when crime spiked across much of the nation.”

According to the FBI, in 1993 there were 747 violent crimes per 100,000 people. (Violent crimes include murder, robbery [threatening violence to steal], aggravated assault, and rape.) By 2019, the number had fallen to 379—almost exactly half. Property crimes fell from 4,740 in 1993 to 2,109 in 2019—more than half. (Property crimes are theft [larceny], such as vehicle theft and burglary [entering a building to steal].)

Not much consolation to victims, I know. But still, crime is down significantly overall: 49% for violent crimes, 55% for property crimes.

Why has crime declined?

Since older people are less likely to commit crimes than teenagers and young adults, I checked to see if demographics could account for crime being down by half since 1993. Nope: the proportion of 18-60 year olds versus over 60s is not that much different over the time period.

One study suggested that the reduction in crime can in part be explained by the elimination of lead from gasoline.

And there is the famous study (studies, actually) by Michael Levitt of Freakonomics fame. He found that abortions have reduced crime, presumably by keeping would-be criminals off the streets.

At any rate, according to Pew, “Americans tend to believe crime is up, even when the data shows it is down. In 20 of 24 Gallup surveys conducted since 1993, at least 60% of U.S. adults have said there is more crime nationally than there was the year before . . .”

That’s good news for Republican politicians, who tend to run on law-and-order platforms. Pew noted, “Trump vowed to end “American carnage” in his inaugural address in 2017. This year [2020], he ran for reelection on a platform of “law and order.””

PS: A 2022 update:

Since the start of the pandemic America has seen an explosion in violence. The national murder rate increased by 29% between 2019 and 2020—the largest single-year jump since 1905—wiping out 20 years of progress on homicide. And recent data suggest that the story is much more complicated as the murder wave has [affected every part of America](https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2022/02/19/are-progressive-prosecutors-to-blame-for-an-american-homicide-wave)—rural, suburban and urban. (“Off the Charts.” *The Economist* [newsletter]. 23 Feb. 2022.)