Explanations for Contemporary Crime Drop(s) in America, New York City, and Many Other Places

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Abstract

This paper contributes to a larger project (Understanding the Prolonged Drop in Crime in New York City) by describing the major explanations that have been provided for recent crime drops and assesses their validity with respect to the observed crime declines generally and within New York City, specifically. To meaningfully fulfill this objective, we begin by laying an important foundation that describes and evaluates when the contemporary crime drop began, what it entailed, and where it happened. We conclude with some overall observations about the current state of knowledge and some suggestions for future inquiry.
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Introduction

This paper contributes to a larger project (Understanding the Prolonged Drop in Crime in New York City) directed at evaluating whether the crime drop observed since the early 1990s in New York City has been deeper and longer than in other cities and, if so, why that might be the case. Our specific charges from the project organizers were to (1) provide a description of explanations for contemporary crime trends, and (2) to assess the validity of those explanations both generally and for the specific patterns observed in New York City. The first task has been done before (Blumstein and Wallman, 2000; Rosenfeld, 2004; Zimring, 2007; Baumer, 2008; Rosenfeld and Messner, 2009; Barker, 2010), so we focus on updating prior overviews and borrowing from the broader theoretical literature in criminology for purposes of classifying the various factors that may have contributed to the crime drop into potentially meaningful types of explanations. These include those related to notable decreases in levels of criminal motivation and propensity, increases in levels of constraint leveled at active and/or would-be offenders, and reductions in the quantity and quality of opportunities or situations that might give rise to criminal activity. The second task also has garnered significant attention in prior writings (e.g., Levitt, 2004; Zimring, 2007; Baumer, 2008; Chauhan, 2011). Rather than simply reiterating the remarks found elsewhere, we center our attention on synthesizing existing reviews and highlighting the extent to which specified conditions might be useful for explaining different dimensions of the contemporary crime drop, focusing on what we refer to as “global,” “national,” and “local” dimensions.

Both of the issues noted above address the important question of why the crime drop occurred and, perhaps in some places, continues to unfold. In our judgment, before we can meaningfully tend to that worthy matter, it is important to raise and discuss some preliminary issues about the crime drop, including when it started, what types of activities it has involved, and where it has been observed. Though these issues have received attention elsewhere (Blumstein and Wallman, 2006; Zimring, 2007), our review of the landscape suggests that some dimensions of the general thrust of research and commentary on the crime drop are overly simplistic. In light of this, we begin the essay with a brief description of the timing of the
contemporary crime decline, which also necessitates a discussion of the types of crimes that were encompassed. This is an important step to take before illuminating or evaluating proposed explanations given that many of the ideas about the crime drop emphasize correspondence in “timing” as a key element. Based on our review of the evidence, we suggest that while the early 1990s certainly signaled an important shift in the nature of contemporary crime trends in New York City and elsewhere, there were signs of a notable drop for some crimes much earlier than that, leading us to question the exclusive focus on the 1990s as the epicenter of the crime drop. We highlight evidence that some forms of property crime, especially burglary but also personal theft, had been declining in America for at least a decade before the so-called “Great American Crime Decline” (Zimring, 2007). This is noteworthy both in its own right and because some have suggested that trends in property crime may be relevant for understanding trends in violence owing the influence of the former on the structure and functioning of underground markets (e.g., Rosenfeld, 2009). Other forms of crime (e.g., adult homicide, intimate partner violence, and rape) also show signs of a decline prior to the 1990s, suggesting that perhaps the “real” contemporary crime drop began in the early 1980s and was merely interrupted by a relatively short-lived crack-induced youth violence binge. Though it is convenient to ignore such patterns and focus efforts to understand the contemporary crime drop more tightly around the period beginning in the early 1990s and ending sometime in the early 2000s, we argue that this focus should be reconsidered and, at a minimum, that serious consideration should be given to conceptualizing the contemporary crime drop as a crime-specific phenomenon.

We next discuss the geography of contemporary crime drop, highlighting the apparent breadth of the noted crime decreases. While good arguments have been made that New York City warrants closer inspection for purposes of advancing understanding of the crime drop, during the past few years evidence has mounted in favor of a conclusion that the observed decreases in crime during the 1990s were not limited to America and may not have varied as much within America or American cities as implied in the extant literature. We dig into this issue a bit in an attempt to reveal insights into how much of the contemporary crime drop represents shared experiences across nations, cities, and neighborhoods, and how much might reflect unique experiences. Others have hinted at the importance of similar distinctions, contrasting for
example the influence of broad “cyclical” factors from other types of effects (Zimring, 2007). We build on
the logic of such arguments, aiming to advance thinking on the matter by linking where possible specified
factors to their potential for explaining global, national, and local shifts in crime. Addressing these issues
requires us to divert our attention beyond New York City for a bit, but we see it as critical for two reasons.
One is to illustrate the point that America’s largest city is a useful laboratory for studying the crime drop not
merely because the observed trends may have been somewhat unique there, but also because it largely reflects
what occurred in many other places. Thus, a detailed assessment of crime trends in New York City could
reveal insights into both the global and national conditions that seem highly instrumental for the
contemporary crime drop, as well as the more localized shifts that may have enhanced the magnitude and/or
length of the drop observed in the city. A second motivation for decomposing the crime drop into global,
national, and local components is that doing so is germane to our assessment of the validity of the
explanations that have been proposed for the crime drop. Specifically, this effort facilitates a discussion that
follows about explanations for contemporary crime drops in which we highlight how some of the often
discussed factors are especially useful for enhancing understanding of trends shared across nations (i.e., a
“global” or multi-national trend), some are more targeted at national deviations from the global trend, and
some are particularly germane for explaining local (i.e., city and neighborhood) deviation from a specified
national trend.

The Contemporary Crime Decline: When, What, and Where?

When Did the Crime Drop Begin and What Did it Encompass?

The assumed timing of the crime drop is important for directing the focus of the present work, not
only because it dictates the historical point at which we ought to start our discussion, but also because
“timing” often is used as a means to identify or exclude potential explanations, or to assign more or less
empirical validity to certain arguments. For instance, arguments about the potential role of shifts in abortion
policy, the reduction of lead toxins from the environment, and the implementation of order-maintenance
policing often pivot on whether or not the timing of these things matches up with the beginning of the crime
declines observed in the 1990s (e.g., Cook and Laub, 2002; Zimring, 2007). Proponents of the potential
power of these “innovations” to explain contemporary crime decreases highlight their approximate implementation or coming of age around the time of the observed crime drop, while others are quick to point out the slightest discrepancy in timing between the initiation of significant crime decreases and the aforementioned shifts. Dubbing the 1990s as the period during which the contemporary crime decline started and largely occurred directs our gaze almost exclusively at factors that were present or realized during that period.

Is it reasonable to dictate the early 1990s as the beginning of the crime drop in America? The answer is a definitive yes if we take a relatively myopic view of crime trends in America that gives preference to short-term fluctuations, youth crime trends, and select forms of crime driven disproportionately committed by youth. Figure 1 illustrates trends in overall homicide, robbery, and motor vehicle theft rates from the Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) program for 76 large cities from 1980-2010. Since we wish to highlight trends in rates rather than differences in levels, and to facilitate easy comparisons across crime types, each series is expressed using standardized scores (observed rates are displayed in Appendix A). As Figure 1

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**Figure 1. Trends in Homicide, Robbery, and Motor Vehicle Theft Rates for 76 Large U.S. Cities, 1980-2010**

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1The 76 city sample represents the cities with populations over 200,000 (N=104 in 2005) for which we were able to obtain 2010 UCR crime data. The crime data for 1980-2008 were obtained from the Interuniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR); the data for 2009 were obtained from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI); the 2010 data were obtained directly from individual law enforcement agencies.
shows, rates of homicide, robbery, and motor vehicle theft fluctuated in the 1980s but declined sharply from the early 1990s through the early 2000s, with signs of continued but more modest decreases in the last few years of the decade.

NCVS data on rates of non-lethal assault, robbery, and motor vehicle theft exhibit similar patterns, as displayed in Figure 2 (again, we express the trends using standardized scores to facilitate comparisons across crime types; see Appendix A for trends in observed rates). Additionally, other scholars have shown that the noted declines in violence during the 1990s were experienced by both males and females, and by members of different racial and ethnic groups (Fox and Zawitz, 2007; Lauritsen and Heimer, 2010). Finally, the decreases in the 1990s were especially sharp in large cities, and for incidents arising from arguments, those involving guns, and those that occur in public spaces (Fox and Zawitz, 2007; Zimring, 2007), but noteworthy declines also have been observed in other contexts (e.g., smaller cities, private spaces). These crimes might well be those that a major effort directed at explaining the crime drop in America should be focused, and if that is the case it makes good sense to designate the early 1990s as the initiation of this phenomenon and to study trends that unfold from that point.

A broader view of contemporary crime trends, however, reveals that in contrast to the image of the early 1990s as the epicenter of the crime drop, there were modest declines in police-based measures of adult
homicide (Fox and Zawitz, 2007), and more substantial decreases in both police- and survey-based rates of intimate partner violence, rape, burglary, and theft from the early 1980s onward (Rennison and Welchans, 2000; Dugan, Nagin, and Rosenfeld, 2003; BJS, 2011). The observed patterns in the SHR for adult homicide and both the UCR and NCVS for rape and intimate partner violence illustrates this longer-term decline that began in the early 1980s. Figure 3 shows national trends in SHR homicide rates by victim age and Figure 4 displays national trends in SHR intimate partner homicide rates along-side NCVS rape rates. In each case, the
standardized values are plotted (see Appendix A for the observed rates). These figures reveal notable crime declines in adult homicide (25 and older), intimate partner homicide, and rape well before the 1990s dawned.

The same pattern emerges for two of the most prevalent index crimes in America: theft and burglary. The measurement of non-violent property crimes other than burglary in the UCR has been questioned on grounds of uncertain validity and reliability, so we show in Figure 5 the normalized trends in national rates of NCVS burglary and theft for 1980-2009 and UCR city burglary rates from 1980-2010 for the same 76 city sample for which UCR trends in violence were described above (Appendix A shows the observed rates). The figure points to a steady decline in non-violent property crime in the U.S. since the early 1980s that has only recently leveled off.

![Figure 5. National Trends in Rates of NCVS Burglary and Theft (1980-2009), and UCR Trends in Burglary for 76 Large U.S. Cities, 1980-2010.](image)

We explore possible city variation for these and other crime types below, but at this juncture we want to highlight that the patterns observed in New York City during this period were, with a few exceptions, generally similar to those displayed in Figure 1-5 (Fagan, Zimring, and Kim, 1998; Joanes, 2000; Rosenfeld, Fornango, and Rengifo, 2007). The trends in motor vehicle theft, robbery, and total homicide in New York City mirror those shown above for the nation, as illustrated in Figure 6. Trends in overall adult homicide and intimate partner homicide rates in New York show more volatility in the 1980s than the national patterns described above, but others have documented notable declines in non-gun homicide rates among adults in
New York City during the 1980s (Fagan et al., 1998). The 1980s decline in rape and larceny for the nation also was not as evident in New York City, but trends in burglary rates area virtually identical, showing steep decreases that began in the early 1980s and continued steadily through the 2000s, as illustrated in Figure 7.

Piecing all of this together suggests that, with a few exceptions (e.g., motor vehicle theft rates in urban areas), there has been a relatively long term decline in property crime in the U.S. and New York City dating from the early 1980s onward, with some acceleration in this trend during the 1990s and a slight
flattening of the trend during the 2000s. For violence, the general pattern that emerges can be described in two ways. One view is that there was an abrupt drop in violence emerging in the early 1990s in the aftermath of the crack epidemic and associated wave of youth violence. This is the view implicit in discussions of the 1990s crime drop, and it draws our attention to social, economic, legal, and cultural conditions that may have shifted at that time to generate the downward trend. Another vantage point, though, is that there was a general and fairly widespread decline in violence that began in the early 1980s (most forms of street crime in America declined during the first five or six years of the 1980s) that was interrupted by an “aberrant” youth and young adult (and primarily minority) crime epidemic during the late 1980s and early 1990s (see also Donahue, 1998), and which has slowed and leveled off in the 2000s. This view would nudge us to also consider the early 1980s as fertile ground for locating potential explanations for contemporary crime declines.

We are not questioning the often made observation that the 1990s was a special decade for crime trends. Yet, the noted ambiguity surrounding the beginning point of the American crime decline suggests that we ought to be cautious in using ‘timing’ as a strong rationale for accepting or rejecting given explanations of the crime drop, and it also suggests that we be careful in drawing strong conclusions about the length of the crime decline across cities. Some cities started earlier and ended later; some started later and ended sooner (Fagan et al., 1998; Messner et al., 2005). A more general and perhaps more important caution that emerges from the contrasting views described above for the temporal patterning of significant crime decreases in America is that it is somewhat misleading to reference a singular crime drop. Although the trends observed during the 1990s were unexpected, fascinating, and widespread (Zimring, 2007), there appears to be noteworthy variability across forms of crime regarding when significant contemporary drops began and how long they lasted. This directs our attention to the question of what the recent crime decreases have encompassed, and it suggests that any broad-based effort to evaluate recent crime declines would be wise to consider crime-specific descriptions and explanations. Put more simply, while there is clearly something interesting about the 1990s that spurred significant reductions in crime, the crime drop as it pertains to burglary, theft, intimate partner homicide, and perhaps other crimes (e.g., rates of rape and adult homicide) had been ongoing for about a decade already by the time the 1990s rolled around, and thus efforts to explain
trends in these crimes should also consider the conditions present during the 1980s that might have generated the observed patterns.

Where Did the Crime Drop Occur? The Importance of “Global,” National, and Local Factors

Most observers now acknowledge that significant decreases in crime since the early-to-mid 1990s have been geographically widespread, occurring across many cities in the U.S., other parts of North America, as well as overseas (Blumstein and Rosenfeld, 2008; Baumer, 2011; Farrell et al., 2011a; Rosenfeld and Messner, 2009). But persuasive arguments also have been made that the magnitude of the declines seen in New York City in the 1990s and the 2000s makes it a unique and potentially informative case to examine, and plausible explanations have been put forth for why there may have been an especially large bite taken out of crime during this period in the “Big Apple” (Zimring, 2007). The two issues that serve to motivate the larger project to which this paper contributes – whether and why New York City may have exhibited contemporary crime trends that diverge notably from other cities – have been questioned (e.g., Joanes, 2000) and, at a minimum, they remain unsettled and would benefit from closer scrutiny. Addressing in some detail “where” the crime drop has occurred is important for revealing insights into distinguishing between the portion of the observed patterns in New York City that were shared with other cities, the nation, and internationally, and the portion that can reasonably be considered as unique to the city and the neighborhoods that compose it. This, in turn, is important for identifying explanations that might be relevant to these different components of the contemporary crime drop.

Thinking “Globally”

An initial issue worthy of further consideration is whether the crime drop was unique to America. It appears that the 1980s decline in burglary and theft observed in the U.S. was not widespread across nations (Baumer, 2011), but there is mounting evidence that the patterns seen for most crimes in the U.S. during the 1990s also were witnessed in many other nations, even if the international crime drop occurred a bit later (e.g., van Dijk, Kesteren and Smit, 2007; Zimring, 2007; Eisner, 2008; Rosenfeld and Messner, 2009; Tseloni et al., 2010; Farrell et al., 2011a). Figure 8 shows a supportive pattern for selected nations, focusing on overall
Citizen-reported victimization trends. Tseloni et al. (2010: 375) examine cross-national crime victimization trends in a more elaborate manner using multi-level statistical modeling; they show that between 1995 and 2004 rates of property crime victimization rates fell significantly in most of the 26 nations they considered (spread widely across the globe), with average reductions of “77.1 percent in theft from cars, 60.3 percent in theft from person, 26.0 percent in burglary, 20.6 percent in assault and 16.8 percent in car theft.”

There are comparatively fewer analyses of cross-national trends in police-recorded data, but Barclay and Tavares’ (2003) study revealed significant declines in police-based burglary and motor vehicle theft rates for several European nations. Aebi and Linde (2010) also show significant declines in property crime among Western European nations, but suggest that the patterns are less consistent for violent offense. Yet, Eisner’s (2008: 310-311) data on homicide indicate that since the early 1990s “homicide rates in most European countries have been falling, in some cases quite dramatically.” Eisner singles out significant drops in homicide from the early 1990s onwards in Austria, Germany, Italy, France, Switzerland, and Portugal. Mouzos (2003) adds Australia to the mix as well, documenting that homicide rates fell by about 43% from the early 1990s through the middle of the 2000s. Others have pointed out comparable trends for Canada (Zimring, 2007; Gartner and Doob, 2010) and a handful of other nations (Messner et al., 2011).
One implication of the parallel drop in crime across many nations during the 1990s is that a potentially large portion of the U.S. crime drop may have little to do with America, *per se*. Instead, it may reflect broader “global” (or at least internationally shared) shifts. Zimring (2007) highlights the importance of considering the shared cross-national crime trends during the crime drop of the 1990s (to which he refers as “cyclical” changes), and separating them from national and local influences. This is a great insight, and one that should be taken seriously before singling out an American city (e.g., New York City) as a highly unique case.

How much of the recent crime drop was shared across nations and how much of the American pattern is due to unique circumstances within its borders? There are several ways we might parse shared “global” influences on recent crime trends, but McDowall and Loftin (2009) recently proposed a method that we find straightforward and intuitive. The method entails the estimation of two econometric panel models of crime rates for a sample of cross-sectional units (one with only cross-sectional fixed effects, and one with these plus period fixed effects), and evaluating the percentage of the variation explained by the period fixed effects (which reflect shared trends across the cross-sectional units) that remains after accounting for cross-sectional heterogeneity, summarized in the form of a squared partial correlation. In an exploratory analysis, we applied these procedures to cross-national trends in burglary rates between 1993-2006 for the U.S. and nine European nations using data from Rosenfeld and Messner (2009). The results (not reported in tabular form) reveal that about half of the variation in burglary rate trends for these nations over the period is shared, evidently due to changes in unspecified conditions that were common across the countries. We also conducted a parallel analysis of cross-national trends in homicide across nations for the same period using data from the United Nations. The results were sensitive to the inclusion of nations in which lethal violence is rare (yielding highly volatile trends in rates), but for the nations with an average homicide rate of 2 per 100,000 or greater during the period (n=28), we find a modest degree of commonality (squared partial correlation = .20) in international homicide trends. Together, our exploratory analyses suggest that between

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2We thank Richard Rosenfeld and Steven Messner for sharing their data to support these analyses. David McDowall graciously provided input on implementing the procedures outlined in McDowall and Loftin (2009).
one-fifth and one-half of the observed crime drop across many nations reflects shared experiences.

It is not certain what the shared multi-national attributes might be that have yielded near simultaneous crime drops in the 1990s and early 2000s across many distant nations. Things like targeted policing and growth in imprisonment seem unlikely to be highly relevant, for these things have not changed significantly or do not appear to have been highly influential in shaping crime trends in many nations that have experienced large drops in crime since the mid-1990s or so (Rosenfeld and Messner, 2009; Tseloni et al., 2010; Zimring, 2007). The few systematic cross-national studies of the crime drop are somewhat limited in the factors considered as potentially relevant, but as elaborated below thus far it appears that an improved economic outlook and shifts in target-hardening may be significant factors in shared “global” declines in property crime rates during the 1990s and early 2000s (Rosenfeld and Messner, 2009; Farrell et al., 2011), and that shared trends in age structure could be relevant as well (e.g., Gartner and Doob, 2010).

“National” Influences on Crime in America

Though there is a growing acknowledgment that something far and wide appears to have happened to bring down crime across many nations, especially since the mid-1990s, much of the literature continues to at least implicitly highlight America as a unique case with respect to the breadth, depth, and magnitude of the recent crime drop. It is not unreasonable to do so. Even given the noted shared experiences across nations with the recent crime drop, there remains significant variability in the observed trends between nations, and the crime drop appears to have occurred earlier in America and its magnitude appears to be somewhat larger than that observed in many other nations (Eisner, 2008). Additionally, some of the factors thought to be relevant to the reducing crime have been implemented much more heavily in America than elsewhere, especially the growth in police forces and prison populations and the reduction of open-air drug markets (Zimring, 2007). Finally, the full list of factors relevant to explaining crime rate changes within America need not be the same as those that produce changes in crime elsewhere, and a given factor may have differential explanatory power across nations. In other words, after adjusting for the apparent common crime drop across nations, the factors relevant to the American crime drop may be unique and/or the estimated relationships between trends in a given set of factors and crime trends may be stronger or weaker in America
than observed elsewhere. Thus, we believe it is worthwhile to focus attention on the American crime drop.

Most of the research on the crime drop in America has devoted attention to variation in the contemporary crime decline within the United States, rather than to the national trends themselves (e.g., Gould, Weinberg, and Mustard, 2002; Phillips, 2006; Zimring, 2007; Baumer, 2008; McCall, Land, and Parker, 2011). But there is compelling evidence that a significant portion of the trends observed for subnational units within America (e.g., state, city and county-level trends) reflect broader national influences. One source of support for this contention is the relatively high degree of correspondence in recent crime trends across cities (e.g., Messner et al., 2005; McCall et al., 2011). Another is the notable influence of “national-level” temporal fixed-effects on city crime trends. McDowall and Loftin (2009) report that for the period 1960-2004, a substantial amount (between 50-75 percent, depending on the crime type) of the observed trends in crime rates across relatively large cities (cities over 100,000 population) represents a shared trend, presumably driven by changes in national-level conditions that do not vary substantially across cities.

We replicated the analysis reported in McDowall and Loftin (2009) for a larger sample of cities (n=195) and for the specific periods that better capture the recent crime drops (i.e., 1980-2001 for burglary; 1993-2001 for homicide, robbery, and motor vehicle theft). The results (not shown in tabular form) reveal slightly smaller squared partial correlations for each crime type than McDowall and Loftin (2009) obtained for their 45 year period, which might be anticipated from removing the very widespread American crime epidemic observed in the 1960s and 1970s, but the estimates remain fairly large, ranging from .45 (motor vehicle theft) to .62 (robbery) for the 1993-2001 period. The estimated squared partial correlation for city burglary trends from 1980-2001 (estimated at .69) also revealed a strong common trend. These patterns suggest that something quite broad in scope has changed in America during the past few decades to facilitate the noted crime drops of the 1980s and 1990s. Interestingly, with the exception of motor vehicle theft, parallel estimations for UCR city crime trends from 2002-2009 reveal much lower levels of correspondence across cities. This may be due to the short-term spike in crime experienced in selected cities in 2005-2006 (see Rosenfeld and Oliver, 2008), or perhaps it is because of differential crime responses to the housing crisis and economic recession that gripped the nation during the last several years of the present decade (Baumer,
The take-away message from this part of the story is that the available evidence points clearly to the importance of national-level conditions for generating the 1990s American crime drop, or in other words conditions that were experienced in many areas of the country simultaneously or that do not tend to vary dramatically across areas. These could represent the same “global” conditions referenced above (that happened to be shared to some degree across nations and across U.S. cities) and/or they could reflect national-level shifts unique to America. Some of the commonly mentioned potential causes of the crime drop appear to vary considerably within the United States (e.g., the move to order maintenance policing, increased immigration, changes in gun laws and gun prevalence), and thus they may not be highly relevant for explaining the shared trends just described. But as elaborated below, other factors such as broad shifts in subjective economic perceptions (e.g., Rosenfeld and Fornango, 2007; Rosenfeld, 2009) or a general rise in punitiveness (Garland, 2001) appear to be more generally experienced in America and thus might be more useful in this regard.

Localized Effects and the Utility of Looking Closely at New York City

Zimring (2007) justifies a central focus on New York City because the crime drop was highly unique there compared to other places, something he concludes on the basis of evidence that shows crime rates dropping more than twice as much between 1990 and 2000 in the city than observed for the nation as a whole. Based on such evidence, he highlights the potential utility of assessing the factors that made New York City unique and which might have enabled this deviation from the norm. In essence, he paints the picture that there might be a “treasure box” buried somewhere in New York City that, if found, would reveal some hidden mysteries about the crime drop in the city. This strategy is persuasive and is presented masterfully by Zimring (2007), but it is limited in two ways.

First, it assumes that New York City is indeed a “treasure box” of sorts in which we will find unique clues about how to dramatically reduce crime rates, or at least how they were significantly reduced beyond what was accomplished in other areas. There is some debate about whether the decreases observed in the “Big Apple” during the last few decades were as unique as Zimring (2007) suggests (see Fagan et al., 1998; Rosenfeld, and Wolff, 2011).
Joanes, 2000; Messner et al., 2005). New York City clearly ranks high among U.S. cities in the magnitude of the crime drop observed in the 1990s, but the conclusions one draws about which cities experienced the greatest crime drops during this period, and about how unique New York City is, are sensitive to the comparison group and the specific years one uses for the bookends to denote the start and end points of the crime decline. This is largely because of variance across cities in the ebbing of the crack epidemic.

Table 1 displays city rankings and the percentage decrease in homicides, robberies, burglaries, and motor vehicle thefts for U.S. cities that rank in the top 10 among large U.S. cities (populations > 100,000) using three different approaches for computing the magnitude of the observed declines and the corresponding rankings. Panel A adopts the strategy used by Zimring (2007), denoting 1990 and 2000 as the bookends to compute the percentage decrease in the crimes considered. Panel B shows the same information based on using 1993 and 2001 to compute a parallel set of figures, a period that many have identified as the beginning and end of the American 1990s crime drop. Finally, Panel C lists the values obtained when using each city’s maximum crime rate during the crack-era (1986-1996) and each city’s minimum crime rate subsequent to its beginning year, up through 2009 (to minimize the impact of cities with extreme values, Panel C omits cities with average homicide rates over the past two decades below 4 per 100,000).

Each panel in Table 1 illustrates that New York City exhibited substantial declines in crime rates during the past few decades, regardless of how one computes the magnitude of the decreases. Zimring (2007: pp. 13, 137, 140, 145) capitalizes on the large absolute figures shown for New York City in Panel A to show that, compared to the nation as a whole and many other cities, the magnitude of the 1990s crime decline was substantially greater there, roughly twice the national crime decline. This is the primary justification for isolating New York City as a potentially ripe laboratory for studying the crime drop, for concluding that the city deviated significantly from other places in the U.S., and for setting up camp in New York to search for the unique set of conditions that enabled this phenomenon to happen.

Nobody can seriously question that the crime drop has been dramatic in New York City. Yet, the comparisons of New York City that Zimring makes with the rest of the nation are not highly meaningful given that the latter incorporate so many places with very little crime. Further, a careful glance at Table 1
Table 1. Rankings in the Magnitude of the Crime Drop Across Large U.S. Cities (> 100,000) Using Different Parameters for the Beginning and Ending Point of the Decline.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Rank</th>
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<td>Robbery</td>
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<td>Auto Theft</td>
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<td>Burglary</td>
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<td>Boston</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-73%</td>
<td>New York City</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-70%</td>
<td>New York City</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-78%</td>
<td>El Paso</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-79%</td>
</tr>
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<td>Newark</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-68%</td>
<td>Pittsburgh</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-69%</td>
<td>New York City</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-72%</td>
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<td>Long Beach</td>
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<td>San Antonio</td>
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<td>-68%</td>
<td>Anaheim</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-70%</td>
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<td>-64%</td>
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<td>-65%</td>
<td>Santa Ana</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Miami</td>
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<td>-63%</td>
<td>Newark</td>
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<td>Long Beach</td>
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C. Percentage Decrease between Maximum Crime Rate in the "Crack Era" and the Minimum Crime Rate Thereafter.

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shows that precisely where New York City falls in the rankings is somewhat sensitive to the parameters used, and more importantly, that many other cities experienced substantial decreases in crime rates over the period examined as well, a finding that is not surprising given the evidence about shared “global” and national influences described above. We do not wish to minimize the wonderful story of the New York City crime drop, but it seems to us that it is at least somewhat ambiguous whether the decreases observed in the city over this period are unique enough to warrant an a concentrated effort to search for special conditions that may have been present there and not elsewhere. Clearly, the crime drop was not twice as large in New York City as it was in many of the other cities shown in Table 1 and, more generally, several other cities emerge as viable candidates of additional investigation if we focus on how they deviate from the national pattern during the 1990s. In some additional analyses, we observed a similar pattern during the 2000s based on a comparison of crime rates from 2001-2009. Over this period, New York City continued to outpace many cities in crime reductions during this period, but the city was less “dominant” than it was in the 1990s and several other cities also emerge as potentially interesting candidates for additional scrutiny during the 2000s owing to comparatively large crime reductions.

A second limitation associated with possibly over-stating the uniqueness of New York City and the degree to which it deviates substantially from other places—if one takes that position—is that it actually minimizes the potential utility of the city as a laboratory for understanding the contemporary crime drop. As a case study, New York City has something to tell us not only about what it may have done differently than other places, but also what happened there that evidently happened elsewhere both within America and other nations. Even if contemporary crime trends observed in New York City are shaped significantly by “global” and national influences, and even if the patterns seen there in the 1990s are not substantially or statistically different than those found in many other large cities (Fagan et al., 1998; Joanes, 2000; Rosenfeld, Fornango, and Baumer, 2005), a closer look at contemporary crime trends within America’s largest city could reveal fresh insights about why crime has declined significantly during the past few decades.

Interestingly, for as much attention that has been given to the potential uniqueness of New York City with respect to the crime drop, there have been relatively few systematic analyses of changes in city-level crime
and other conditions that have chronicled New York City (e.g., Corman and Mocan, 2000) and very few that have systematically examined why New York might deviate from other places (e.g., Rosenfeld et al., 2005; for a review, see Chauhan, 2011). However, a growing number of studies have assessed variability within New York City (e.g., across precincts and boroughs) in both crime trends and some of the factors thought to be responsible for the recent crime drop, including policing and drug involvement (Kelling and Sousa, 2001; Messner et al., 2005; Rosenfeld et al., 2007; Harcourt and Ludwig, 2006; Cerdá et al., 2009, 2010). Most of these studies focus appropriately on the overall relationships between crime trends and other factors pooled across precincts (or other “neighborhood” units), rather than on how neighborhood crime trends deviate from the observed city-wide trends (i.e., typically, temporal dummy variables are excluded). The latter is an interesting issue, of course, but as it turns out there was relatively little deviation across New York precincts in the 1990s crime drop. Crime rates declined significantly in New York City during the 1990s, but they did so in most neighborhoods within the city and the end result was very little change in the relative rank-ordering of neighborhood crime rates.  

The focus on the overall temporal crime patterns in recent neighborhood-level studies of the New York City crime drop, rather than neighborhood deviations from the city pattern, make them relevant to identifying the broader conditions that were consequential for shaping crime trends in the city during the 1990s. An unknown portion of the observed temporal variation in crime examined in these studies may be a function of broader “global” and/or “national” influences, but the collective findings suggest at least a modest role for more localized influences, and most notably New York City’s implementation of several policing innovations during the early-to-mid 1990s (see especially Messner et al., 2007; Rosenfeld et al., 2007; Cerda et al., 2010). We elaborate on this and other pertinent research below, but first we turn to a brief description of the major explanations that have been offered up for the recent crime declines.

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3Richard Rosenfeld graciously supplied us with precinct-level crime data for New York for the 1990s. We applied the procedures outlined by McDowall and Loftin (2009) to these data, and we observed very high squared partial correlations (ranging from .50 to .90 across crime types) between precinct-level crime trends and period fixed effects, which indicates a strong shared crime decline among precincts and suggests the importance of factors that were present city-wide. Given this, it is not surprising that the cross-sectional bivariate correlations across precincts between crime rates in 1992 and 2000 range from .75 to .95 across crime types.
A Description of Major Explanations for Contemporary Crime Declines

The list of possible explanations for the crime drop is long and impressive. Provocative arguments have been made for the primacy of the following: objective and perceptual economic shifts, changes in the quantity and quality of policing and punishment practices, public and personal security efforts, the stabilization of drug markets, increases in immigration, changes in abortion laws, regulations of and changes in lead gas exposure, increased video gaming, rising civility and self control, transformations of family arrangements, reduced alcohol consumption, and increased use of psychiatric pharmaceutical therapies. Most discussions of the crime drop categorize the various factors along dimensions organized by types of variables (e.g., criminal justice, demographic, economic, etc.), which is a useful device but one that is not well integrated with other criminological literature. We therefore take a different approach here, situating the various crime drop explanations into well established domains within the broader literature on criminological theory.

The collective body of factors that have been implicated as potential keys to the crime drop can be categorized as (a) conditions that serve to reduce the criminal motivation or propensities of the population at given points in time; (b) conditions that constrain or channel the conduct of a population away from illegitimate activities, and (c) shifts in physical and/or social settings that decrease the degree to which criminal propensities are activated and/or that permit existing constraints to operate more effectively. The first two have received the greatest attention in extant discussions of the crime drop, though several recent contributions also highlight a set of factors relevant to the third.

Crime Dropped because of Reductions in Criminal Motivation/Propensities and Increases in Constraints

Levels of crime can be expected to decline significantly over time if the pressures, motivations, or inclinations toward crime in the population are reduced and/or if the constraints to behavior are increased. Drawing insights from the criminological theoretical literature, such changes can arise in two primary ways: (1) through a change in the “period conditions” that motivate people to engage in illegal activities or discourage them from doing so; and/or (2) through a shift in the criminal “propensity” of a population, which is shaped primarily by early life experiences but can be “activated” by contemporaneous period
conditions. Put another way, notable shifts in crime levels in a neighborhood, city, or other geographic entity could be a function, at least in part, of both contemporary conditions (i.e., this year, last year, maybe a few years prior) in a geographic area that stimulate or retard criminal behavior and past conditions to which people have been exposed throughout their lives, especially in early childhood and adolescence when criminal propensities tend to be developed.

Propensity-Based Arguments

A relatively large body of research in criminology and related fields suggests that much youth and adult crime is at least partially a manifestation of predispositions that are shaped at early ages by a wide variety of conditions (Farrington, 2005). This makes propensity-based arguments potentially useful for understanding the recent crop drop (Cook and Laub, 1998). The most frequently cited argument about shifting propensities and contemporary crime trends is Donohue and Levitt’s “abortion dividend” thesis. Donahue and Levitt (2001) suggest that the legalization of abortion in the early 1970s was instrumental in generating significantly lower crime rates during the 1990s than would otherwise have been experienced, in part (they also emphasize reductions in youth cohort size) because this legal shift yielded immediate reductions in the proportion of persons born to high-risk mothers and/or into high-risk circumstances (e.g., the proportion born to young unwed mothers and/or those with relatively little education, the proportion exposed to unhealthy pregnancies, the proportion who experienced birth complications). One reason that a reduction in sub-optimal birthing conditions could yield less crime decades later, say Donahue and Levitt (2001), is that such conditions are among the known correlates of criminal propensity, and thus legalizing abortion in the 1970s could in theory reduce crime in America during the 1990s and beyond by lowering the number of persons in the population with a propensity for crime.

Though the specific link made between abortion and crime by Donahue and Levitt (2001) was novel, the primary mechanism implicated— a shift in criminal propensity -- has a solid grounding in the sociological and criminological literature that has emphasized cohort differences in crime rates (e.g., Cook, 1985; O'Brien, Stockard, and Isaacson, 1999). Further, the primary rationale provided by Donahue and Levitt (2001) for why youth and young adults in the 1990s may have exhibited lower propensities for crime is under-
developed, or at least incomplete, when viewed through the lens of life-course/developmental criminology. A wider reading of this literature suggests that the criminal propensities of persons, both generally and of those who during the 1990s moved into age groups that traditionally have contributed disproportionately to aggregate crime rates, are shaped by a large number of factors, including conditions at birth but also a variety of other life circumstances (e.g., family, peer, and school attributes) to which they are exposed throughout childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood (for an overview, see Kazemian, 2009).

Nevin and others (e.g., Reyes, 2007) capitalize on the breadth of possible propensity-based influences in suggesting that shifts in lead exposure during the 1970s represent an alternative reason for why youth and young adults might have started to exhibit lower criminal propensities in the 1990s. These studies highlight the negative effects that lead exposure during childhood can have on neurological development, which can in turn shape one’s propensity for early anti-social conduct and criminal behavior at later ages. Reducing such exposure during a given period (e.g., the 1970s) would, in theory, yield lower levels of criminal propensity at a later point (e.g., the 1990s) and, in turn, could translate into lower crime rates.

A third propensity-based argument for the contemporary crime drop is suggested by Eisner (2008). He speculates that the recent drop in crime in the U.S. and across many other nations during the 1990s and 2000s might be a product of sweeping cultural changes that may have generated higher levels of self-control. While such broad cultural shifts are not typically discussed alongside “criminal propensity,” the logic of Eisner’s (2008) argument fits well within the preceding discussion. Specifically, he points to cultural changes in child-rearing, including an increasing focus on instilling self-control, discipline, and responsibility as a potential locus of the contemporary crime decline. Implicit in his argument is that contemporary youthful cohorts (e.g., those that aged into the traditionally high-crime age groups in the 1980s and 1990s) were exposed to different cultural conditions during their formative years, yielding higher levels of self-control and less crime.

*Period Conditions, Motivation, and Constraint*

Scholarship devoted to articulating or testing potential explanations for contemporary aggregate-level crime trends has focused most heavily on contemporaneous “period conditions” that either significantly
increased or lessened the volume of crime in recent decades (Levitt, 2004). The proposed explanations range widely, some highlighting potential shifts in the level of criminal motivation (or the quantity of motivated offenders) in the population, others emphasizing changes in conditions that serve to constrain or channel behavior away from crime, and still others that have blended these two themes.

Demographic shifts are often included among the possible explanatory candidates when crime rates exhibit notable changes, in part because demographic trends are routinely monitored but also because certain elements of the demographic profile in a population, most notably age structure, have been strongly linked to offending rates. For a variety of reasons that encompass both motivational and constraint mechanisms (Sampson and Laub, 1993), crime is disproportionately committed by teenagers and young adults (e.g., those 15 to 29), and offending rates among older persons tends to be very low. It stands to reason, then, that when the population ages, aggregate crime rates should decline, at least in the absence of major shifts in cohort criminal propensities. Given the evident “graying” of America and several other nations over the past few decades, it is understandable that shifts in age structure have been one of the factors highlighted in discussions about the crime drop (Phillips, 2006).

Another demographic feature that has been linked to recent crime trends in the United States is the level of immigration, and like age structure the existing arguments link immigration to crime trends though both motivational and constraint arguments (Sampson, 2008; Stowell et al., 2009; Ousey and Kubrin, 2010). Recent immigrants to America tend to exhibit lower crime rates than natives (Sampson, Morenoff, and Raudenbush, 2005), and thus a substantial increase in the population through immigration would consist disproportionately of non-offenders, and thus would be expected to yield lower crime, more or less immediately. Alternatively, an influx of immigrants in the 1990s could have reduced crime because it brought a heavy dose of pro-social norms about conflict resolution or increased family stability and collective efficacy, or because it bolstered economies in the areas in which immigrants settled, thereby increasing informal social control and reducing pressures to engage in illicit conduct (see Kubrin and Ousey, 2009).

A final demographic shift that has received some attention in discussions of the crime drop is the notable retreat from marriage that has been observed in America since the early 1980s (Rosenfeld, 1997).
Stevensen and Wolfers (2007) document significant declines in marriage rates during the 1980s and 1990s. Part of this decline has been offset by parallel increases in rates of non-marital cohabitation, but as Rosenfeld (1997) points out the overall nature of these trends equates to a significant decline in “domesticity” since the early 1980s which may have served to constrain intimate partner violence, and especially spousal violence, during the 1980s and 1990 by limiting the types of interactions and situations that give rise to such incidents (see also Rosenfeld, 1998). Other changes implemented during the past few decades that limit potential violent interactions between intimate partners (e.g., an increase in pertinent legal and social services) also have been highlighted in discussions of the observed decline in domestic violence in America (Dugan, Nagin, and Rosenfeld, 2001), as have more general shifts such as the aging of the population and an improvement in women’s economic status (Farmer and Tiefenthaler, 2003).

Most of the other “period” explanations for recent crime declines de-emphasize changes in the number or nationality of persons in the population and highlight instead various pressures and constraints in the environment that have managed to make crime less likely, irrespective of population composition. Some of these arguments focus on how given crime “stimulants” decreased, especially during the 1990s, to contribute to the crime drop (e.g., reductions in illicit substance use and economic adversity), while others highlight increases in the level of social control applied to the population (e.g., enhanced policing and punishment).

Alcohol consumption has declined significantly since the early 1980s in the U.S. (National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 2009; Johnston et al., 2011). Trends in other forms of illicit substance abuse are more difficult to gauge, but the weight of the evidence from school and general population surveys suggests that, with some notable exceptions, most forms of drug use declined substantially during the 1980s, rose during the 1990s, and have fluctuated with a slight decline in the present decade (NCHS, 2002; Johnston et al., 2011). One exception to these patterns, of course, is the precipitous rise in crack-cocaine use from the mid-to-late 1980s through the early 1990s, especially among minorities and in large cities (Fryer et al., 2010). The use of alcohol and many other illicit substances has been linked to violence and property crime (e.g., Fagan, 1990; Parker and Rebhun, 1995), and some have argued that trends in alcohol consumption in
particular during the past several decades may be important for shaping adult homicide trends (Parker and Cartmill, 1998). More recently, Marcotte and Markowitz (2011) note that the treatment of many forms of mental illness and common mood disorders changed dramatically in the late 1980s and early 1990s in ways that may have implications for crime trends. Specifically, they document significant growth in mental health treatment overall, and especially large increases in the use of various pharmaceutical therapies (e.g., antidepressants, antipsychotics). Drawing on theoretical literature that links mental illnesses and negative affective mood states to crime, Marcotte and Markowitz (2011) suggest that these changes may have played a role in the crime drop of the 1990s in the U.S.

Shifts in economic conditions also have loomed large in discussions of “period effects” on the crime drop. Changes in economic conditions have been linked to changes in crime through a variety of mechanisms. Classic arguments suggest that exposure to different types of economic circumstances has implications for assessments of perceived costs and benefits of legal vs. illegal activities (Becker, 1968; Ehrlich, 1973; see also Bushway et al., 2010). Other perspectives highlight the link between subjective economic perceptions and participation in illegal markets (Rosenfeld and Fornango, 2007; Rosenfeld, 2009), the role of economic well-being on community social organization and criminal justice spending (Wilson, 1996; Edberg, Yeide, and Rosenfeld, 2010), and the possibility that economic realities may be linked to frustration levels, which in turn, are relevant to crime levels (Agnew, 1999). Whatever the mechanism, many scholars have pointed to the 1990s as a period of economic prosperity, and have suggested that this may be one reason crime dropped significantly during the decade.

Perhaps the two most commonly discussed “period” factors associated with recent crime drops are changes in policing and incarceration. During the 1980s and 1990s police forces in many corners of America became larger and they implemented different approaches, including more targeted efforts to address behaviors thought to facilitate crime, such as levels of public disorder and the prevalence of weapon carrying. Less often recognized in discussions of policing over this period are the substantial increases in citizen reporting that occurred (Baumer and Lauritsen, 2010), which could have enhanced the overall effectiveness of the police in responding to crime (see also Cook and MacDonald, 2011). Incarceration rates increased
significantly over the period as well, fueled both by the selection of a larger fraction of arrested persons into prisons and by longer sentences applied to those individuals (Sabol, 2011). Theoretically, each of these noted shifts – the growth in police forces, the move to targeted enforcement, and the increase in imprisonment – can yield crime reductions through deterrent and/or incapacitation effects (Zimring and Hawkins, 1973; Eck and Maguire, 2006). As elaborated below, various private and collaborative private-public ventures also became more prevalent during the 1990s and 2000s, and this focus on enhanced security could be linked to recent crime drops in similar ways (Cook and MacDonald, 2011).

*Did Crime Drop because of Shifts in Physical and/or Social Settings?*

A large portion of the scholarly discussion of the crime drop has focused on changes in offender motivation and the amount of social control applied to offenders or those contemplating crime, but substantial drops in crime could occur without major changes in either of these things (Cohen and Felson, 1979). This could be the case if there were notable shifts in the physical surroundings and social settings in which would-be offenders “roll,” changes that could directly decrease the likelihood that criminal motivations or propensities are activated or that could do so indirectly by permitting existing constraints to operate more effectively.

Drug markets represent a setting that long has been linked to crime levels. Blumstein (1995) argued that the emergence and proliferation of crack cocaine in many inner cities in the mid-1980s transformed drug markets in fundamental ways that ultimately stimulated and spread violence. A practical consequence of such processes was sharply increasing violence rates from the mid-1980s through the early 1990s among youth and young adults (Cook and Laub, 1998). As crack markets stabilized during the 1990s, violence decreased considerably, leading some to suggest that the former may be important for understanding the latter (Levitt, 2004; Blumstein and Wallman, 2006).

Aside from drug markets, there were significant changes in the 1980s and 1990s in routine activities and the settings in which they are carried out, and these could have had a profound impact on the volume of crime. Cohen and Felson (1979) make a compelling case that among the key elements of the shifting American social context in the 1970s was a substantial movement in daily activities away from the home and
various technological advances, which coalesced to yield more plentiful and more attractive opportunities for crime. Several broad shifts in lifestyle, technology, and social organization in America since at least the early 1980s could be described as counter trends to these patterns. Putnam (2000) suggests that social interactions have shifted increasingly from the public to the private sphere during the past several decades, a process which may have been accelerated by the “internet revolution.” In theory, these patterns could reduce the exposure of individuals to motivated offenders and increase the guardianship of homes, both of which have implications for crime levels.

Perhaps even more important are the widespread shifts in America and elsewhere during the past few decades directed at enhancing security and automating social control. These include the increased use of “target hardening” tactics for homes during the 1980s and 1990s, including burglar alarms, protective bars, gated entries, and private security details (see Cook and MacDonald, 2011). Technological advances during the 1990s and 2000s also have yielded substantial increases in protection for motor vehicles (Brown, 2004; Farrell et al., 2011a), and the expansion of mobile telephony and closed-circuit video placement has created a public environment with far more “guardianship” for individuals than was the case in previous eras. These shifts integrate efforts by public entities (e.g., state and city governments), private individuals, private-public partnerships (e.g., Business Improvement Districts), and industry groups (e.g., the automobile industry). Collectively, they contribute to what Farrell et al. (2011b) refer as a significant level of growth in the quality and quantity of security in the environment, which they describe more fully in their “security hypothesis” for the recent crime drop (see also Walsh and Taylor, 2007). Others have discussed these changes in terms of a growing “culture of control,” spurred by broader societal shifts (e.g., the increases in crime during the 1970s, the politicization of crime, increased news coverage of crime and its sensationalism) that transformed the once far-removed feeling that crime was a problem for somebody else and created an environment that made it feel real for a much wider spectrum of the population, and therefore called forth a variety of protective actions geared toward minimizing the heightened perceived risk of crime (Garland, 2001; Simon, 2007). The extant literature has made a persuasive case that such shifts have occurred and has linked them to contemporary punishment practices, but far less attention has been given to their possible impact on crime.
Assessing the Global, National, and Local Validity of Crime Drop Explanations

We suggested above that some of the explanations proposed for recent crime drops are likely to have greater face and empirical validity for certain crime types or crime trends among certain groups, and also that given factors may vary in their relevance for explaining global, national, or local crime trends. Now that we have provided a brief review of the major explanations that have been proposed for contemporary crime declines, what can we say about their relevance for understanding the relatively long-term decline in non-violent property crimes that emerged in the 1980s, characterized by notable declines in burglary and theft that accelerated and were joined by decreases in motor vehicle theft in the 1990s? What are we to make of the two notable drops in violence that have been observed in the contemporary era, including the drop in adult and intimate partner homicide since the early 1980s and the drop in overall homicide, robbery, and assaults that have occurred since the early-to-mid 1990s?

The capacity to provide specific answers to these questions depends on what we wish to explain. Specifically, our conclusions about the validity of the explanations summarized above will vary depending on whether we are interested in assessing: (a) Changes in crime that are “global,” or in other words shared across many nations; (b) Changes in crime rates within a given nation and perhaps whether and why it deviates from an average multi-nation trend (e.g., What might account for cross-national variation in the crime drop? What can account for America’s crime drop?); (c) Changes in crime rates within one or more sub-national units and perhaps whether and why they deviate from the national-trend (e.g., What can account for the observed trends in New York City? Why is the crime drop observed in New York City perhaps greater than observed in other cities?); or (d) Changes in crime rates within a given local area (e.g., a neighborhood) and perhaps whether and why it deviates from the larger ecological context (e.g., city) within which it is located? (e.g., Do some neighborhoods within a given sub-national unit exhibit greater crime declines than other neighborhoods, and if so, why is that the case?).

As we suggested above and others also have alluded to (Zimring, 2007), there appear to be significant “global,” national, and local (i.e., sub-national, such as city and neighborhood) components to contemporary
crime declines, and some proposed explanations are better suited for advancing understanding of certain of these components than others. Though the project to which this essay contributes is centered primarily on why the crime drop in New York City might have deviated from other places and thus on local trends and influences that differentiate it from elsewhere, the overall crime drop in the city arose from a combination of “global,” national, and local factors. Thus, it is worthwhile to briefly touch on each of these dimensions of the contemporary crime drop.

The “Global” Crime Drop

If our interest lies in exploring the possible reasons behind the apparent multi-national crime decline that appears to have occurred since the mid-1990s, explanations that highlight shifts in fertility patterns, industry-driven security technological innovations, widespread shifts in regulatory policies (e.g., policies designed to reduce lead content in various substances), and broad economic changes would probably be most germane (Rosenfeld and Messner, 2009; Farrell et al., 2011a). Rosenfeld and Messner (2009) discuss the interdependence of some portions of the world economy that work to produce “a rough temporal correspondence in business cycles,” which may in turn be expected to yield parallel changes in rates of crimes that tend to respond to shifts in economic conditions. Consistent with this notion, Rosenfeld and Messner (2009) report on an empirical analysis across ten nations (the U.S. and nine European countries) that suggests support for a link between trends in subjective economic conditions and burglary rates.

Major shifts in fertility patterns and other aspects of demography such as age structure and divorce rates also tend to follow parallel similar paths across many nations, especially those in close proximity and those integrated socially and/or economically. Messner et al. (2011) present evidence that shifts in divorce rates and the proportion of the population who are in young, high crime rate, groups (e.g., 15-24) are significantly associated with recent cross-national trends in homicide rates. Gartner and Doob (2010) also present evidence that shifts in age structure are strongly associated with recent homicide trends in Canada and the U.S., though they caution that several other factors also mirror the observed trends (including the amount of beef stored in Canada and, thus, definitive conclusions should be made cautiously). As others have argued (e.g., Donahue and Levitt, 2001), some fertility choices (e.g., delaying childbearing; aborting unwanted
pregnancies) could have implications for shaping levels of self-control, so if these antecedents shift in a parallel fashion across nations, so too might levels of self-control, which could yield similarities in crime trends. Donahue and Levitt (2001, 2004) present intriguing evidence in favor of a link between the legalization of abortion in the 1970s and U.S. crime trends in the 1990s, but other studies have yielded mixed evidence on the matter in both in the U.S. context and elsewhere (e.g., Sen, 2002; Kahane, Paton, and Simmons, 2008). More generally, while it is possible that there has been a widely shared decline in levels of self-control across many nations (e.g., Eisner, 2008), the evidence on the matter is thin. We are aware of no direct research that evaluates multi-nation trends in self control. However, consistent with the general idea of such a shift, Mishra and Lalumiere (2009) document that the U.S. and Canada exhibit similar declines during the 1990s not only in crime rates (see also Zimring, 2007), but also a wide variety of other “risky behaviors,” including smoking and drinking, injuries and accidents, risky sex, and school drop-out; they speculate that this could arise because of shared trends in levels of self control, though they do not present evidence that bears directly on that speculation.

Market-driven technological innovations with potential implications for crime, such as anti-theft devices for automobiles, mobile telephones, and home computing and internet use, also have the potential to emerge and proliferate across multiple nations more or less simultaneously, which could yield parallel drops across nations in routine activities and guardianship that translate into similar shifts in crime rates. Farrell et al. (2011a, 2011b) present evidence consistent with the significance of anti-theft devices in driving down motor vehicle theft rates across several nations. To our knowledge, the extant research on trends in crime across nations (or other units) has not explored a possible link between the other innovations noted (e.g., the rise in mobile telephones and home computer use during the 1990s) and the crime drop.

Finally, the extant literature points to several other types of shared experiences across nations in recent decades (e.g., a rise in obesity and diabetes, decline in smoking prevalence and alcohol consumption; decline in lead exposure; the mass movement of women into labor markets) tied generally to the diffusion of norms about “civility” and consumption, technologies, government and industry regulations, market prices, and other factors fueled by globalization. Some of these shifts (e.g., declines in alcohol consumption and lead
exposure) might have implications for understanding shared multi-nation crime declines. For example, Nevin (2007) presents compelling evidence that lagged temporal patterns in lead exposure fit well with contemporary crime trends both in America and several other nations, suggesting that this could be one element of the noted shared temporal variance in recent crime trends.

Overall, there is some persuasive evidence that the “Great Transnational Crime Decline of the 1990s” was due in part to an improved economic outlook, major shifts in technology that made motor vehicles more difficult to steal, and widespread changes in environmental policy that reduced exposure to lead. The literature in this area is fairly thin, however, and has not integrated data or insights from a large number of societies to evaluate whether each of the potential explanations discussed above were influential or which ones were most consequential.

The American Crime Drop

The available evidence suggest that recent crime drop observed within many nations, including America, appears to be a function of both the shared “global” or multi-national conditions just noted, and also unique “national” conditions (Zimring, 2007; Rosenfeld and Messner, 2009). In theory, these unique national conditions could include changes in criminal justice policies and practices (e.g., a move to mass incarceration, a nationwide clemency policy, a large-scale shift to more targeted policing patterns), shifts in the distribution or composition of the population (e.g., immigration trends), disruption of widespread illicit drug distribution paths, and events that modify significantly a nation’s perception of its government’s legitimacy (LaFree, 1998; Blumstein and Wallman, 2006; Sampson, 2008).

A relatively large literature on nation-specific crime trends has emerged in recent years, much of it unpublished and much of it focused on relatively long-term trends rather than the recent crime drop. The published work include studies of crime trends in Malaysia (Tang, 2009), Greece (Nikolaos and Alexandros, 2009; Saradakis and Spenglar, 2009), Hong Kong (Lee, 2009), Japan (Roberts and LaFree, 2008) and the UK (Kahane et al., 2007). Of particular interest here is research that has zeroed in on the national-level crime drop in America. Though there are several U.S. time-series studies that focus on post-World War II crime trends (e.g., Cohen and Land, 1987; McDowall and Loftin, 2005), perhaps because the contemporary crime
drop represents a relatively short time frame that is not sufficient for supporting sophisticated time-series techniques, we could not locate a single study that explicitly assesses in a multivariate context the nation-wide crime drops observed since 1980 (for property crime) or the 1990s (for violence). However, several studies have focused on the recent U.S. crime drop across various sub-national units, including regions (Rosenfeld and Fornango, 2007; Rosenfeld, 2009), states (Donahue and Levitt, 2001; Raphael & Winter-Ebmer, 2001), metropolitan areas (Stowell et al., 2009), counties (Gould, Weinberg, Mustard, 2002), and cities (e.g., Rosenfeld et al., 2005; Baumer, 2008).4

The picture that emerges from the pooled cross-sectional time-series literature on crime trends in America is murky. Zimring (2007) and Levitt (2004) summarize the evidence from the pertinent research that had accumulated through the mid-2000s, agreeing that the rise in imprisonment rates in the U.S. was an important determinant of the national crime drop, but disagreeing on just about everything else. Levitt (2004) highlighted increases in police forces, the ebbing of the crack epidemic, and the legalization of abortion, while Zimring (2007) added improving economic conditions, smaller youth cohorts, and undefined “cyclical” factors to his list of changes that probably were most consequential to explaining the American crime drop of the 1990s. Subsequent to these reviews, Stowell et al. (2009) report findings that indicate a significant role of changes in immigration levels on crime trends during the 1990s across U.S. metropolitan areas, suggesting that this may be another pertinent factor. Other research has bolstered conclusions about the significance of economic growth and the increased use of imprisonment during the 1990s. In a series of studies, Rosenfeld and colleagues (Rosenfeld and Fornango, 2007; Rosenfeld, 2009) present compelling evidence that increases in rates of incarceration and subjective economic perceptions were the most significant contributors to the 1990s drop in both property crime and homicide in America.

It is tempting to conclude something definitive from the existing research on the national crime drop in America, and if one were to do so it would probably be that increases in rates of imprisonment and an improving economy (at least subjective perceptions of improving economic conditions) were most

4There is a much larger literature on sub-national crime trends that focuses on other periods (see Baumer, 2008 for a review). We focus here on those that highlight in a significant way the periods encompassed by the contemporary crime drops.
consequential to the American crime drop during the 1990s, with other factors also contributing but perhaps less significantly or more exclusively to some crime types than others (e.g., the role of drug markets in shaping youth homicide trends). But Baumer (2008) outlines several reasons for exercising caution when drawing conclusions from the extant research on the American crime decline.5 Perhaps key among them is that most of the available research on crime tends (for America and elsewhere) tends to be framed in relatively narrow terms conceptually, at least compared to the breadth of ideas that have been proposed for the crime drop. As is common in a relatively young body of literature in which the ideas outpace the data, studies tend to focus on a relatively small number of potentially relevant factors, either not accounting for other factors at all or relegating other possibilities to “fixed effects,” both of which can be problematic.

Focusing on a narrow set of factors, of course, raises the possibility of spurious results. This is often described as one of the motivations in sub-national studies of the crime drop in America for including temporal fixed effects. While this strategy does indeed offer significant power in accounting for unobserved temporal shifts that are constant across sub-national units, it also absorbs a potentially important portion of the crime drop that we wish to explain – the part shared across sub-national units -- which, as noted above, was relatively large during the 1990s and is presumably a function of “global” and “national” conditions. Additionally, although not always acknowledged, including temporal dummy variables in a sub-national level analysis of crime trends modifies the research issue under investigation, changing it from an analysis of shifts in American crime trends overall to how crime trends in the specified sub-national units (e.g., cities or counties) deviate from the average trend observed across the units sampled. Given the relatively significant fraction of variance in recent crime trends that appears to be shared among sub-national units (e.g., McDowall and Loftin, 2009), this is a potentially consequential issue, as illustrated by a brief review of a

5Baumer (2008) notes that the regression models typically estimated use different units (e.g., states vs. counties vs. cities) and incorporate quite different sets of explanatory variables. There also is a lack of uniformity across studies of recent crime trends based on the same unit of analysis, and a variety of different (all defensible) methods (e.g., growth curve regression models, econometric panel regressions, models with and without fixed effects to capture time stable unmeasured factors and/or shared temporal shifts, outcomes measured in levels and/or differences) have been applied to estimate models of crime trends, with little attention to the implications of these disparate approaches on the conclusions one draws. The diversity of defensible approaches used in combination with the diversity of results makes it difficult to see a clear picture.
recent empirical analysis conducted by Baumer (2008) as part of the National Research Council’s (NRC) workshop on contemporary crime trends.

Baumer (2008) lauds the comprehensiveness of the factors considered in his analysis of crime trends across U.S. cities from 1980-2004. The study did indeed encompass a very large number of factors that had been discussed in the literature on the crime drop to that point, some of which as noted above may have special relevance for explaining national-level or global trends (e.g., shifts in age structure, lagged fertility patterns, alcohol consumption). Yet, while a broad empirical specification can be useful, the estimation strategy adopted by Baumer (2008) incorporated temporal fixed effects, which may have confounded conclusions drawn about many of the factors considered. In essence, Baumer’s (2008) analysis removes the portion of the observed trends potentially explained by factors that were mostly national or “global” in nature, or in other words, those that helped to generate crime drops in many places more or less simultaneously during the 1990s. Thus, the analysis may under-estimate the impact of observed variables that fall into this category. Additionally, if a given factor, such as shifts in economic conditions, were to have a national-level impact on crime trends (e.g., by yielding increases in positive consumer sentiment) as well as more localized effects (e.g., putting people to work and limiting time or motivation for crime), sub-national studies that absorb shared influences through temporal fixed effects may under-estimate the overall impact of the economy on the crime drop. At a minimum, studies of American crime trends would profit from more precisely specifying the dimensions or sources of the observed crime trends (i.e., global, national, local) that are or can be assessed with the models estimated.

Localized Effects and The New York Crime Drop

As noted above, there is some debate about whether specific cities within the U.S., including New York City, exhibited highly unique patterns with respect to the magnitude of the observed crime drop during the 1990s. The conclusion one draws on this matter is contingent on the reference group being used, the specific time frame under investigation, and the crime type being considered. In our judgment, the fairest comparison is with other relatively large cities for a period defined by the peak crime rate observed during the late 1980s/early 1990s and the lowest value observed from that point forward through the point at which the
crime drop stalled, which for most large cities occurred in the early 2000s. By this comparison, New York City experienced large drops in crime rates during the 1990s (and continued, more modest, decreases during the 2000s), but so did many other major cities (see Table 1 above). This simple descriptive exercise corroborates the findings generated from more complex analyses, which have shown among other things that a large portion of the 1990s crime drop in America was a shared experience across nations and places within the country (McDowall and Loftin, 2009) and that the magnitude of the decline observed in New York City was not statistically greater than other large cities (Rosenfeld et al., 2005). The key implication of all this is that the crime drop in New York City observed in the 1990s appears to have been driven in part by global factors, in part by national conditions, and in part by features specific to the city and its local neighborhoods. If we are interested in explaining the New York City crime drop, each of the explanations described above would be potentially relevant, in theory, and their potential explanatory power would depend on how much of New York’s trend is due to the different components.

If we instead begin from the vantage point that New York City has exhibited a unique pattern worthy of explanation (e.g., larger declines in crime since the early 1990s than observed elsewhere and possibly greater decreases during the 2000s as well) and aim to uncover why that might be the case – the implicit focus of the project to which this paper is contributing—the critical initial question to ponder is: Through what mechanisms could the crime drop in New York have been unique compared to other places? Borrowing an analogy from medicine, it strikes us that New York City may have emerged as somewhat unique in terms of greater declines in crime during the 1990s because the city (1) received the same “treatment(s)” that fueled national and/or global crime declines, but those treatments were more effective there; (2) received a larger “dose” of those treatments; (3) received a unique set of treatments; and/or (4) allocated treatments more strategically in areas where crime is heavily concentrated.

The first possibility has received relatively little attention, but it is plausible that some of the large scale changes associated primarily with global and national decreases in crime (e.g., shifts in routine activities, technological innovations, changes in consumer economic sentiment, and the rise in levels of incarceration) had larger effects on crime rates in New York City than elsewhere. For example, perhaps enhanced
technology geared toward preventing motor vehicle theft exerts stronger effects in areas with a larger volume of automobile traffic, or maybe consumer sentiment yields stronger effects on crime in large cities where informal markets are more prevalent and better organized. It is also possible that incarceration could have larger effects on crime rates in an area with especially high rates of population density because the potential for disrupting criminal networks through incapacitation and the potential general deterrent message emanating from incarceration might be stronger or more effective under such conditions. To our knowledge, none of the existing studies of the crime drop has explored such possibilities, which equate statistically to “random slopes” (Raudenbush and Bryk, 2002). We are not suggesting that process is a major reason for why New York City might have exhibited uniquely large declines in crime during the 1990s and 2000s, but it is one possibility that should be considered and which does not necessarily equate to things being done all that differently in New York than elsewhere.

Much more attention has been devoted to the latter three aforementioned possibilities for why New York City may have experienced greater crime declines than other cities: larger doses of crime reduction ‘treatments,’ unique ‘treatments,’ and/or more effective allocation of “treatments.” Zimring (2007) describes several unique policing innovations that were fielded in New York City, and in so doing he is suggesting that a different treatment was applied there than other places (see also Harcourt and Ludwig, 2006). The policing shifts implemented in New York City also can be thought of as merely a greater dose of remedies applied elsewhere as well (Joanes, 2000), as can the significant growth in police size in New York City compared to other cities (Kelling and Sousa, 2001; Rosenfeld et al., 2005). Indeed, New York City was not alone in moving to targeted policing efforts or hiring more police (Rosenfeld et al., 2005).

Shifts in the volume of immigration and drug involvement in New York City represent alternative examples of things for which New York City received larger doses in the 1990s compared to elsewhere. The 1990s brought the greatest number of immigrants to America in the nation’s history, and New York ranked very high among the receiving locations (Fix and Passell, 2001). Also, several scholars have noted that, since open-air crack markets and levels of crack use were relatively more prevalent in New York City than many
other places during the 1980s, their retreat (for various reasons) during the early 1990s could be particularly consequential for the crime drop in New York (e.g., Blumstein and Wallman, 2006).

A small, but growing number of studies have explicitly examined the 1990s New York City crime drop. Some of these studies have focused on city-level analyses, either in isolation (Corman and Mocan, 2000) or in a comparative context (e.g., Rosenfeld et al., 2005), while the majority of have focused on changes in crime and other features across precincts or census tracts within the city (Kelling and Sousa, 2001; Harcourt and Ludwig, 2006; Messner et al., 2007; Rosenfeld et al., 2007; Cerda et al., 2009, 2010). An excellent review of this literature can be found in Chauhan (2011). While there are exceptions (e.g., Harcourt and Ludwig, 2006), the collective findings of this work suggest that increases in police size and order maintenance policing, and reductions in crack cocaine involvement are important components of the observed crime declines in New York City. Importantly, the effects of changes in policing on New York City crime trends that emerge from recent quantitative research appear to be relatively modest and are notably smaller than those suggested by more qualitative observations (e.g., Zimring, 2007). One possible reason for this divergence may lie in how the research question has been posed by the different parties. Specifically, Zimring (2007) explicitly focuses on the role of shifts in policing that might account for why New York City deviates from other places in recent crime trends, while other investigations that give primary support for significant, but modest, policing effects have not explicitly parsed the portion of the observed trends in the city due to local conditions vs. those that might be shared with other cities and nations (Messner et al., 2007; Rosenfeld et al., 2007; Cerda et al., 2009, 2010).

**Summary and Discussion**

We close with a brief summary of the key points raised herein and a discussion of some ways knowledge about the factors responsible for the contemporary crime drop might be profitably expanded. Our assessment of the literature points to five basic conclusions.

First, the contemporary crime drop was not exclusive to the 1990s; at a minimum, it seems clear that the timing and duration of the crime drop appear to have been contingent on the form of crime considered. There were sizable drops in burglary rates in the U.S. in the 1980s, a trend that is interesting in its own right
but also because of its possible connection to the nature of underground markets and the violence that often accompany them (e.g., Rosenfeld, 2009). The patterns for some other crime types are not as clear, but there is evidence of notable declines in intimate partner homicide, adult homicide, larceny, and rape in the 1980s as well. While all index crimes in the U.S. exhibit significant declines during the 1990s, we should be cautious in drawing conclusions about explanatory factors based on the early 1990s as the point of initiation of recent crime decreases and would be well advised to look to the early 1980s for relevant crime reducing conditions as well.

Second, the 1990s crime drop occurred in many corners of the globe and across most U.S. cities and neighborhoods, and two notable implications of this are that (a) the uniqueness of New York City is open to debate; and (b) valid explanations for the crime drop in America should encompass both national-level factors as well as those that were shared across nations; comprehensive assessments of the crime drop in New York City (or any other city) should encompass “global,” national, and city-level factors; and a full understanding of neighborhood changes in crime rates during the 1990s would entail consideration of all of these factors plus those that might have been implemented differentially within specific sub-areas in a given city.

Third, while the extant empirical research is not an ideal platform from which to draw conclusions about the relative validity of the many proposed ideas that have been offered as potential causes of contemporary crime decrease, the available evidence supports some tentative observations. The limited cross-national research suggests that while the role of widespread changes in environmental policy (e.g., the reduction in lead toxins) and fertility choices cannot be ruled out, based on the evidence marshaled thus far the shared “global” drop in property crime observed from approximately the mid-1990s through the mid-2000s appears to be mainly a function of improving (subjective) economic conditions and various forms of target hardening (Farrell et al., 2011a; Rosenfeld and Messner, 2009). This assessment is admittedly on sketchy ground, however, as the existing research has not simultaneously considered these conditions along with other potential explanations that could help to explain multi-national crime trends (e.g., shifts in alcohol consumption, cultural norms, etc.).
Although far from uniform, the most compelling evidence on the 1990s national crime drop in America, and specifically the portion that is unique from broader multi-national patterns, points most consistently to enhanced economic perceptions and rising imprisonment as most consequential (Rosenfeld et al., 2005; Rosenfeld and Fornango, 2007; Rosenfeld, 2009; Zimring, 2007). Some demographic shifts, such as changes in age structure, have been highlighted as a likely candidate for explaining national crime trends during the 1990s (Zimring, 2007), but we are not aware of any consistent evidence for such a pattern (see also Levitt, 1996, 2004). Further, though Donahue and Levitt (2001, 2006) present compelling empirical evidence linking changes in abortion laws during the 1970s and the 1990s crime drop among youth and young adults, Cook and Laub (2002) make a convincing case against propensity-based explanations for the 1990s crime decline in America, noting in particular the relative invariance in trends across cohorts during this period.

Some areas of the nation experienced larger decreases in crime during the 1990s than others, and while we do not yet have a solid grasp on why that might be, the most compelling evidence points to city differences in trends in police force size, exposure to high levels of imprisonment, drug involvement, immigration, and the nature of policing and other enhanced “security” efforts such as Business Improvement Districts (e.g., Rosenfeld et al., 2005; Messner et al., 2007; Ousey and Kubrin, 2009; Rosenfeld et al., 2007; Baumer, 2008; Martinez, Stowell, and Lee, 2010; Stowell et al., 2010; Wadsworth, 2010; Cook and MacDonald, 2011). While there are many limitations of this body of research that warrant closer scrutiny, two general features that impede more definitive conclusions are that the components of recent crime declines – the portion shared with other places and the portion that is uniquely different – are not always clearly distinguished, and that the factors relevant to these different dimensions are not often clearly identified.

Fourth, there are several issues associated with the contemporary crime decline that remain highly elusive. As noted, the diversity of research approaches and relatively narrow focus of much of the existing research provide a shaky foundation on which to rest the tentative conclusions drawn in the preceding section. More research on crime trends is needed generally, and given the nature of the beast, it would be useful if something of a standard emerged for defining the minimally acceptable empirical specification and
the most appropriate methodology. While there need not be uniform agreement on these things, a more systematic approach would yield a research literature from which it is easier to grasp the most consistent portrait that emerges. Beyond this, it is disappointing that so few studies have systematically explored the long-term decline in burglary and rape in America, and that very little attention has been devoted to the potential importance of shifts in technology (e.g., house target hardening and the proliferation of cell phones) that might be relevant to these trends or other temporal crime patterns. As additional research on these topics is conducted, our hope is that greater attention be devoted to separating where possible “global,” national, and local factors, and also that consideration be given to both additive and multiplicative effects.

Some scholars have suggested that what may have been truly different in the 1990s is that it was evidently the first time in the history of the U.S. (and perhaps other nations) where one saw simultaneous shifts in several things (e.g., major increases in punishment, major improvements in the economy, reduction in the youth population, etc.) that might be highly relevant to crime trends (Zimring, 2007). One reading of such statements is that the combined effects of these (or other) factors may have been greater than the sum of their parts, an issue that has not been explored extensively.

Finally, while the focus on the 1990s crime drop is worthwhile, it should not come at the expense of letting another decade go by without more intimate monitoring and discussion of the prevailing trends by researchers. One frustrating aspect of studying the 1990s crime drop now is that the bulk of our efforts are, by definition, retrospective. We can evaluate and debate data gathered from the infrastructure available at the time, but our capacity to observe and measure key factors after the fact is obviously quite limited. American crime trends during the 2000s look quite a bit different than those evident in the 1980s and 1990s. On the one hand, they have been relatively flat overall. But on the other hand, they have been more volatile across cities and neighborhoods than in the previous two decades, and they appear largely unmoved by one of the most severe recessions in history. Yet, with a few exceptions (e.g., PERF, 2006; Rosenfeld and Oliver, 2008; Wolff, 2010; Baumer, Rosenfeld, and Wolff, 2011; Wolff and Baumer, 2011), there has been relatively little by way of systematic empirical analyses of crime trends during the 2000s and few major shifts in the data infrastructure based on lessons learned from analyses based on the 1980s and 1990s. Greater attention to
very recent crime trend patterns and their link to contemporary conditions would be especially useful.

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Appendix A. Trends in Observed Rates for Various Crimes for 76 U.S. City Sample (UCR) and the Nation (NCVS & SHR).