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## Foreword

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## FOREWORD

BY JEREMY TRAVIS\*

Violent crime rates are at their lowest levels since the early 1970s. While some State and local crime trends may coincide with national trends, it is also true that the nature of the crimes and who commits them can vary widely from State to State and locale to locale. The reasons for these changes and variations are the subject of much debate among criminal justice professionals, researchers, and the average citizen.

To examine how and why violent crime has declined so precipitously, the *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, the Northwestern University School of Law, and the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) sponsored a symposium—"Why Is Crime Declining?"—that brought together leading criminal law scholars and criminologists to discuss this trend. Each presenter approached this question from a very different perspective that probed more deeply into what available data reveal.

As the eleven articles, which were drawn from presentations made at that conference, show, the nature of crime and the factors that contribute to it are complex and tightly interwoven. Taken together, these articles make clear that there is no single cause or explanation for the recent decline in crime and that fresh insights and methods are needed to add to our understanding. *The Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* is publishing the following papers to make the authors' insights available to a wider audience.

Alfred Blumstein and Richard Rosenfeld examine how homicide arrest rates by age have changed since 1985.

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Jeffrey Fagan, Franklin Zimring, and June Kim compare the changes in gun-related homicides with other types of homicides in New York City from 1985 to 1996.

Robert Nash Parker and Randi S. Cartmill look at what part declining alcohol consumption played in falling homicide rates in the United States from 1934 to 1995.

Richard Curtis examines the contributing factors to the positive transformation that took place in two Brooklyn communities that previously were ravaged by rampant gang activity and drug trafficking.

Gary LaFree examines how the erosion of traditional American social institutions and new ones that arose to supplant them may go a long way toward explaining fluctuations in crime rates.

Christopher Uggen and Irving Piliavin argue that exploring the factors that lead convicted offenders to desist from committing further crimes holds promising policy and scientific implications.

George L. Kelling and William J. Bratton explore how efforts to clean up urban decay and aggressive police work dramatically cut violent crime in New York City in the early 1990s.

John Donahue asserts that random factors influence crime rates at any given time, making it impossible to fully explain short-term changes in these rates.

Warren Friedman argues that residents' efforts to police their communities are responsible for declining crime rates.

John Gallo examines how effective deterrence varies widely between different types of crime.

Michael D. Maltz questions whether homicide data should be disaggregated from other types of crime data in examining declining crime rates.

NIJ is proud to have played a role in this symposium. We hope that it and the papers presented here serve to stimulate further discussion and thinking on why crime rates fluctuate. In turn, the recent rise and fall in crime may serve as a catalyst to the development of more useful knowledge and social policy on crime and justice. This is equally the task of researchers, police officials, policymakers, and community leaders.