Book Review

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BOOK REVIEW

EXPLAINING THE CRIME BUST OF THE
1990s

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ALFRED BLUMSTEIN & JOEL WALLMAN, THE CRIME DROP IN AMERICA

America is in the midst of the largest decline in violent crime rates in more than half a century. According to Uniform Crime Report (UCR) statistics, from 1991 to 1999, homicide rates in the United States fell by 41 percent and robbery rates by 44 percent.1 Estimates for 1999 indicate that homicide and robbery rates in the United States are at the lowest level since the late 1960s.2 To put these recent declines into perspective, it is helpful to compare them to earlier trends. UCR trends for murder and robbery from 1946 to 1999 provide such a compari-

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2 See FBI CRIME 1999, supra note 1, at 5.
son. The series begins in 1946 because of serious validity problems with pre-World War II UCR data.

The low crime period, from 1946 to 1960, is marked by low and stable crime rates; the crime boom period, from 1961 to 1973, is marked by rapidly increasing crime rates; the crime plateau period, from 1974 to 1990, is marked by fluctuating but consistently high crime rates; and the crime bust period, from 1991 to 1999, is marked by steep declines in crime.

The lowest reported rate of murder since World War II occurred in 1957 and the lowest reported robbery rate occurred in 1956. But violent crime rates began to increase dramatically during the crime boom period. From 1961 to 1974, murder rates nearly doubled and robbery rates more than tripled. The highest levels of murder and robbery of the postwar period were recorded during the crime plateau period. Murder reached its postwar peak in 1980 and robbery in 1991. But rates fluctuated considerably during the plateau period. Both murder and robbery experienced two crime boomlets during this period—one during the late 1970s and the other during the mid-1980s. These boomlets were considerably smaller and of shorter duration than the sustained increases that happened during the crime boom period. Thus the steepest homicide boom lasted for 12 years from 1963 to 1974 and resulted in a 53.1 percent decline.
increase in homicides. By contrast, the homicide boomlet from 1977 to 1980 lasted only four years and resulted in a 13.7 percent increase and the boomlet of 1985 to 1991 lasted seven years and resulted in a 19.4 percent increase. In percentage terms, the crime boom of the 1960s was 3.9 times bigger than the late 1970s boomlet and 2.7 times bigger than the mid-1980s boomlet.

The crime bust period began in 1991 and had lasted eight consecutive years when this review was being prepared. This compares with a crime boom that lasted eleven consecutive years for murder and ten consecutive years for robbery. So far at least, the boom of the 1960s was more rapid than the bust of the 1990s, but the differences are rapidly narrowing. Homicide rates increased by 5.2 per 100,000 residents (from 4.6 to 9.8) during the boom period from 1963 to 1974. So far, from 1991 to 1999, homicide rates have declined by 4.0 per 100,000 (from 9.8 to 5.8). Robbery rates increased by 129.7 per 100,000 residents from 1961 to 1971 (58.3 to 188.0) and declined by 120.7 per 100,000 residents from 1991 to 1999 (272.7 to 152.0).

Thus, the average decline in homicide rates per 100,000 residents has been 0.5 for the past eight years and the average decline in robbery has been 15.1 per 100,000 residents. If these averages continue in the years ahead, in the year 2000 the robbery bust will surpass the robbery boom of the 1960s, and in 2001 the homicide bust will surpass the homicide boom of the 1960s.

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10 See id. The boomlet of the mid-1980s is even shorter if we require that every consecutive year show increased crime rates in order to qualify. Based on this requirement, the homicide boomlet lasted only five years from 1987 to 1991. See id.
11 See id.
12 See id. at 5.
13 Robbery rates declined slightly in 1971 and then increased again until reaching a peak in 1975. If we discount the slight decline in 1971, the robbery boom lasted 14 years.
14 See id. at 20.
In *The Crime Drop in America*, editors Alfred Blumstein and Joel Wallman concentrate on trying to explain the crime bust of the 1990s. However, they also make frequent reference to the crime boomlet of the mid-1980s, and to a lesser extent, to earlier violent crime trends. Blumstein is director of the National Consortium on Violence Research and Wallman is Program Officer at the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation—two organizations that have funded a great deal of research on violence and aggression in the past decade. As the first major book aimed at explaining the 1990s crime bust, this book is a must-read for all those interested in the characteristics and policy implications of crime. Section I of this review summarizes the book chapter by chapter. Then Section II considers some of the book's specific strengths and weaknesses. Given that the crime bust of the 1960s is the only change in violent crime trends since World War II that is as great in magnitude as the 1990s crime bust, Section III considers some of the differences in the conceptualization and interpretation of crime in reaction to these two pivotal moments in the history of crime in the United States. Finally, because this book brings together some of the most knowledgeable contemporary experts on current crime trends, Section IV considers this book as a benchmark for our ability to study crime trends in the future.

I. EXPLAINING THE CRIME DROP

Blumstein and Wallman lead off the volume by placing the recent crime drop in a broader historical context and by considering some of the likely causes of the decline. For an edited volume, the individual chapters of this book are especially well integrated with the Introduction. This is probably a consequence of how the book was produced. The editors first devised a set of "plausible causes of the crime drop" and then recruited individual scholars to discuss each of the causes. As a result, the Introduction is closely related to the rest of the book and is

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17 *THE CRIME DROP IN AMERICA* (Alfred Blumstein & Joel Wallman eds., 2000) [hereinafter *CRIME DROP*].


19 See id. at 1-12.

20 Id. at 2.
an accurate and helpful summary of the issues addressed in the individual chapters.

In the first substantive chapter of the book, Blumstein concentrates on disaggregating violent crime trends by type of crime (murder, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault), age group, type of weapon, and city size. Blumstein stresses the importance of disaggregating crime trends to better understand their dynamics—a theme that is echoed by many of the contributors to the individual chapters. Blumstein also summarizes the strengths and weaknesses of Uniform Crime Report (UCR) and National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) data, the two principal sources of crime data used throughout the book. Blumstein argues that trends for murder and robbery based on these crime data sources are likely more reliable than those for rape and aggravated assault. Indeed, most of the analysis and discussion of crime data presented in the book is limited to homicide, and to a lesser extent, robbery trends.

Although Blumstein presents some crime data going back as far as 1965, he focuses mostly on the period after 1985. As we have already seen, the mid-1980s mark a period when violent crime increased rapidly for several years and then began its historic decline up to the end of the century. Blumstein shows that the entire increase in homicides during the crime boomlet of the mid-1980s can be attributed to rising handgun use among kids and young adults under twenty-five years old. He also shows that these patterns were especially pronounced for young, African American men and for big cities. What is especially striking about Blumstein’s presentation of disaggregated violent crime trends is how dramatically they increase in the mid-1980s for young men using handguns.

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21 See BLUMSTEIN, Disaggregating the Violence Trends, in CRIME DROP, supra note 17, at 13-44.
22 See id. at 13.
23 The survey was originally called the National Crime Survey. The name was changed to the NCVS in 1992.
24 See id. at 15, 19.
25 See id. at 15.
26 See id. at 24, 32.
27 See id. at 33, 35-36.
28 See id. at 32.
In the last part of the chapter, Blumstein links what is currently known about disaggregated violent crime trends directly to the rise of the crack cocaine trade in the mid-1980s. Although he does not offer any specific empirical links between the characteristics of violent crime, violent crime offenders, and crack cocaine, he argues that the rapid rise in violent crime rates in the mid-1980s is consistent with a sequence of events in which (1) crack cocaine became available in large urban areas; (2) these markets were especially likely to attract young, minority males; (3) to protect their markets, these young males relied heavily on handguns; (4) these processes lead to an explosive general increase in the use of guns for self-protection; and (5) the above developments triggered an explosive growth in homicide and robbery. Blumstein attributes the decline in homicide rates to the same groups that contributed the most to its increase, but points out that there is still no "single hypothesis about the decline period."

Blumstein's chapter is especially important for the book because it brings out most of the themes that are pursued in more depth in the individual chapters that follow. The picture that emerges from the chapter is that both the crime boomlet of the mid-1980s and the crime bust of the 1990s are tied mostly to handgun use among kids and young adults under twenty-five years old who were participating in the crack cocaine market. Homicide increases are also tied disproportionately to African Americans and residents of big cities. With few exceptions, this image of the dynamics of both the growth of violent crime in the mid-1980s and its decline in the 1990s provides the springboard from which the remaining chapters of the book are launched. Thus, succeeding chapters examine the impact of guns and gun violence, prison incarceration, the rise and de-

29 See id. at 38-39.
30 See id.
31 Id. at 39.
32 See id.
33 See id.
34 Richard Rosenfeld's chapter is the primary exception. See Richard Rosenfeld, Patterns in Adult Homicide: 1980-1995, in CRIME DROP, supra note 17, at 130-163.
35 See Garen Wintemute, Guns and Gun Violence, in CRIME DROP, supra note 17, at 45-96.
cline of large, inner-city drug markets, changes in policing, the economics of crack cocaine markets, and the demographic impact on homicide of changes in the supply of men, young persons and members of racial minority groups.

Garen Wintemute considers the role of guns in both the rapid increase and subsequent decline of homicide in the mid-1980s and 1990s. Echoing the earlier chapter by Blumstein, Wintemute emphasizes how narrowly focused in terms of weapons the offenders and victims of the violence epidemic of the mid-1980s really were. He shows that virtually all of the increase in homicide after 1985 was due to increased gun-related homicide and that both the perpetrators and victims of these crimes were disproportionately likely to be young, African American men. Wintemute further links the violent crime rise to handguns, showing that the type of handguns manufactured and used changed substantially during this period: semiautomatic pistols replaced revolvers as weapons of choice, the caliber of ammunition used by newly manufactured handguns rapidly increased, and the handgun market was flooded with inexpensive (and highly lethal) semiautomatics.

Having established the nature of the recent gun epidemic, Wintemute then considers in detail the likely impact various gun control policies had on the subsequent decline of homicide rates. He examines the success of strategies that focused on demand and use of guns, strategies that focused on curtailing

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40 See Wintemute, supra note 35, at 45.
41 See id.
42 See id. at 45-47.
43 See id. at 53-54.
44 See id. at 54-55.
45 See id. at 61.
46 See id. at 67-88.
the supply of guns, and strategies that altogether banned certain types of guns. According to Wintemute, more aggressive policing, increased criminal justice sanctions, tracing guns that have been used in crimes, limiting the number of gun dealers, limiting gun sales, restricting gun buyers, and banning certain types of guns each show at least some promise in reducing violent crime rates. By contrast, Wintemute concludes that gun exchange programs, child access prevention laws, and making it easier to obtain permits to carry concealed weapons appear to have been largely symbolic efforts with no clear impact on violent crime rates.

Wintemute provides a comprehensive review of links between homicide and the manufacture and use of guns and also the major public policy attempts to break or lessen this connection. However, the role of guns seems clearer in the homicide increase in the mid-1980s than in the homicide decline in the 1990s. It is true that a wide variety of gun intervention policies have been enacted in the 1990s. But it is also true that even with all of these interventions, firearm victimization rates in the United States were at about the same level in the late 1990s as they had been in the early 1980s—long before most of the gun-related interventions began. Moreover, the fact that so many different types of intervention were implemented at about the same time makes it difficult if not impossible to sort out which specific methods were most successful.

After more than a half century of relative stability, incarceration rates in the United States began an unprecedented increase in 1973, quadrupling by the end of the century. William Spelman devotes a chapter to exploring the extent to which this rapid build-up in incarceration rates can explain the violent crime declines of the 1990s. The chief difficulty of the incarceration thesis for explaining the recent crime bust is immediately apparent: while the prison boom has been relatively steady since 1973, violent crime rates substantially increased in the mid-1980s and only began to decline in the 1990s. Spelman

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47 See id.
48 See id. at 70-83.
49 See id. at 85-87.
50 See Blumstein & Wallman, supra note 18, at 5-6.
51 See Spelman, supra note 36, at 97-125.
reasons that unless the recent prison increases were somehow more effective than the earlier ones, then the dramatic decreases in violent crime in the 1990s can not be explained by the growth in prison population. However, he then goes on to argue that there are in fact at least three reasons to believe that prisons have become more effective in reducing crime in the 1990s. First, there is evidence that the elasticity of incapacitation—the percentage change in the crime rate associated with a one-percent change in the prison population—may have increased in the 1990s. Second, prisons are generally more effective at reducing adult than juvenile crime and for most of the past 25 years, the proportion of violent crimes committed by adults has been increasing. And finally, selective incapacitation associated with “three strike” and repeat offender laws may have increased the effectiveness of prisons at reducing crime.

Spelman finds the clearest support for the first two of these possibilities, arguing that changes in the scale of imprisonment and the incidence of juvenile crime have increased the elasticity of incapacitation. The impact of increased selectivity of the criminal justice system on violent-crime declines is more complex. There is evidence that selective policing, prosecution, and sentencing programs can increase prison elasticity, but many jurisdictions never implemented any of these programs or they adopted versions of these programs that were ineffective. Overall, Spelman reaches two related conclusions about the impact of imprisonment on the recent violent crime rate drop. First, even with no change in imprisonment rates, the violent crime rate would still have dropped substantially in the 1990s. But second, in the absence of the prison build up, the crime drop would have been 27 percent smaller than it actually was.

52 See id. at 108.
53 See id. at 108-09.
54 See id. at 109-113.
55 See id. at 114-15.
56 See id. at 115-19.
57 See id. at 119.
58 See id. at 123.
59 See id.
60 See id.
So, without the huge investments in prison beds, the violent crime rate would not have dropped as far or as fast as it has. But it would have nevertheless dropped a good deal.

Richard Rosenfeld’s chapter concentrates on changes in the homicide rate for those twenty five years of age and older.61 He points out that the huge interest in the rise of violent crime rates among young people in the mid-1980s has obscured the fact that homicide rates for persons twenty five and older had been steadily declining since 1980.62 Moreover, these decreases have been extremely broad gauged, affecting women as well as men, African Americans as well as whites, and homicides committed by family members as well as those committed by strangers and acquaintances.63 But while there were declines in violent crime rates for all homicides involving those persons twenty five and older during the 1980s and 1990s, the declines were especially pronounced for homicides involving family members.64 To explain the general decline in homicides among this group, Rosenfeld concentrates on the impact of increasing incarceration rates.65 To explain the more specific decline in family homicides he looks instead at changes in marriage rates and the growing availability of support services aimed at reducing domestic violence.

Compared to Spelman’s task of examining the impact of imprisonment on both juvenile and adult crime, Rosenfeld’s emphasis has two immediate advantages. First, the connection between imprisonment rates and crimes committed by persons twenty five and older is more obvious because a majority of inmates are in the twenty five and older age category. And second, unlike homicide trends for youth, homicide trends for those twenty five and older do not include the steep increases in the mid-1980s—at the same time that prison population was also rapidly increasing. Although both Spelman and Rosenfeld explore connections between imprisonment and the decline in violent crime in recent decades, the forecasting methods used

61 See ROSENFELD, supra note 34, at 130-63.
62 See id. at 130-31.
63 See id. at 134.
64 See id. at 137, 142.
65 See id. at 143.
66 See id. at 152-56.
by the two authors are quite different. Spelman uses what he calls a “top down” approach that statistically relates aggregate crime rates to aggregate imprisonment rates. Rosenfeld instead uses what Spelman calls a “bottom up” model, that starts with an estimation of the offending rate of criminals and then calculates how many crimes were averted by incarcerating these offenders.

The major drawback of Rosenfeld’s approach is the difficulty of estimating how many homicides were actually averted by imprisonment. Rosenfeld’s solution to this problem is to use homicide rates from two large urban areas (Chicago and St. Louis) to develop an estimate for the homicide rate of those being sentenced to prison—and hence, the number of homicides averted by incarceration. Based on the assumption that “prison inmates are drawn disproportionately from high-risk urban communities,” Rosenfeld uses police files to compute homicide rates for the 10 percent of census tracts in each city that had the highest crime rates. Based on these techniques, Rosenfeld concludes that incarceration reduced the murder rate for those twenty five years of age and older by 10 percent between 1980 and 1985, nearly 19 percent between 1985 and 1990, and over 26 percent between 1990 and 1995. Thus, Rosenfeld’s estimates of the impact of imprisonment for the older population in earlier years are lower than Spelman’s estimate for the entire population (27 percent), but approach Spelman’s estimate for later years.

To explain the drop in homicide among family members for the twenty five and older group, Rosenfeld focuses on the declining marriage rate and the rise of domestic violence prevention services. Rosenfeld shows that marriage rates plummeted among adults in the United States at about the same time as declines in homicide rates for those twenty five years of age

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68 See id. at 97-98; Rosenfeld, supra note 34, at 143-45.
69 See Rosenfeld, supra note 34, at 146.
70 Id.
71 See id. at 147-49.
72 See id.; See Spelman, supra note 36, at 123.
73 See id. at 152-56.
and older. He speculates that falling marriage rates lowered intimate partner homicides by simply reducing the amount of contact between married persons. Rosenfeld also briefly considers the possibility that declining homicide rates among those twenty five years of age and older may in part reflect a cultural shift that puts greater value on solving disputes without violence. In support, he cites recent research evidence showing reduced tolerance for domestic violence. More generally, he raises the possibility that the “civilizing process” first outlined by criminological pioneer Norbert Elias in the 1920s may have belatedly taken hold with American adults.

Bruce Johnson, Andrew Golub, and Eloise Dunlap examine connections between drugs and the spectacular increase and equally spectacular decline of violent crime in inner-city New York City. The focus on New York City is justified both by the disproportionate impact of New York on violent crime rates (as much as 10 percent of the national total for some years) and by the fact that the crime bust has been especially well publicized in New York. Johnson, Golub, and Dunlap’s chapter is different from the others in the book in at least two respects. First, it is based on a single city whereas most of the other chapters in the book emphasize national statistics. And second, it relies primarily on qualitative field assessments, whereas most of the other chapters in the book depend on quantitative evaluations. Still, the authors, like the other contributors, begin with the problem of how to explain the crime bust of the 1990s and then systematically evaluate the quality of the supporting evidence.

Johnson, Golub, and Dunlap argue that both the crime rise of the mid-1980s and the crime drop of the 1990s can be explained by a transformation of “conduct norms” within succes-s
sive drug subcultures. They define conduct norms as “specific rules persons internalize” and drug subcultures as “related conduct norms organized around a specific behavior that prescribe what participants must do, proscribe what they must not do, and define sanctions for noncompliance.” The authors claim that since World War II, New York City has experienced three relatively distinctive drug subcultures: the heroin injection era (which peaked from 1960 to 1973), the cocaine/crack era (which peaked from 1984 to 1989), and the marijuana/blunts era (which started in 1990). According to the authors, the timing of violent crime trends are closely related to the relative strength of these three drug subcultures. Thus, the rise of the cocaine/crack subculture coincided with the violent crime increase that began in the mid-1980s and the rise of the marijuana/blunts subculture occurred at the same time as the 1990s decline in violent crime rates. The arguments made in the chapter are based mostly on Johnson’s extensive ethnographic observations of the New York City drug scene over the past three decades, drawn from prior publications.

The main birth years for the heroin generation were from 1945 to 1954. By the time this group reached early adulthood in the 1960s, there were many regular heroin users in New York City. Johnson, Golub, and Dunlap estimate that about one-quarter of the heroin generation supported their habits by committing robbery. However, heroin users during the 1960s rarely carried or obtained handguns and assaults and murders by heroin users were relatively rare. But during the 1960s and early 1970s, New York City, like other large urban areas in the United States, was wracked by social unrest, factory closings, and

82 Id.
83 See id. at 165.
84 “Blunts” are produced by placing marijuana in the wrapper of a cheap cigar.
85 See id. at 167-70.
86 See id. at 196.
87 See id. at 196-97.
88 See id. at 168.
89 See id. at 170.
90 See id. at 173.
91 See id.
the flight of the middle class. According to Johnson, Golub, and Dunlap these developments led to increasing inner-city decay. Moreover, the level and visibility of law enforcement in many inner cities declined during this same period. As law enforcement retreated from the inner city, heroin sales became increasingly public. By the 1990s, the original heroin generation still comprised a disproportionate number of all heroin injectors, but their numbers had been greatly decreased by risky lifestyles, especially rapid increases in AIDS-related deaths.

The main birth years for the cocaine/crack generation were from 1955 to 1969. By the time this group reached adulthood in the 1970s, snorting cocaine had grown into a major leisure time activity in New York City. Moreover, the discovery of "freebasing" in 1980 produced a faster and more intense high. However, the expense of cocaine and the technical difficulty of freebasing effectively limited its use to drug dealers and a few wealthy customers. But this changed drastically around 1984 with the appearance of "crack" cocaine. Crack required relatively little money, technical expertise, or specialized equipment. Johnson, Golub, and Dunlap argue that because of these favorable characteristics, crack use exploded. The emerging market was so lucrative that nearly the entire labor force of the illicit drug market was attracted to it. And unlike the members of the heroin subculture, the crack subculture

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92 See id. at 174.
93 See id.
94 See id. at 173-74.
95 See id. 174-75.
96 See id. at 176.
97 See id.
98 See id.
99 Id.
100 See id.
101 See id.
102 See id.
103 See id.
104 See id. at 178.
quickly developed strong connections to handguns. During the crack era, New York City experienced substantial increases in violent crimes, including murder, robbery, assault and domestic violence. Compared to the police response to heroin, the police response to crack was rapid and severe. Thousands of crack users and dealers were arrested, processed and sentenced.

The marijuana/blunts generation was born in the 1970s and has reached adulthood in the 1990s. This group has to a remarkable degree rejected both heroin and cocaine/crack. Johnson, Golub, and Dunlap argue that the main reason for this transformation is that the marijuana generation has grown up with the ample negative role models provided by family and friends who have been heroin and cocaine users. In contrast to the cocaine/crack subculture, the blunts' subculture is not substantially involved in the routine commission of violent crime and the use of guns is not an integral part of their subculture. Moreover, compared to the early years of the heroin generation, the conduct norms of the blunts' generation are enforced by a much more active form of policing in New York City. The authors argue that frequent handgun checks and "quality of life" law enforcement have been especially successful in eliminating handguns and in reducing the public visibility of street-level crime.

John Eck and Edward Maguire examine the possibility that changes in policing account for the 1990s drop in violent crime. The authors divide changes in policing into two broad

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105 See id. at 180.
106 See id. at 196.
107 See id. at 183.
108 See id.
109 See id. at 185.
110 See id.
111 See id.
112 See id.
113 See id. at 188.
categories: generic and focused.115 Major generic changes in policing include increasing the number of police, community policing, and zero tolerance policing.116 There is no commonly accepted definition of community policing, but the authors identify two aspects of community policing that qualify as generic changes: internal organizational changes and community partnerships.117 In general, approaches based on internal organizational changes emphasize changing the management, structure, and culture of police organizations.118 Community partnerships depend on various strategies for forging better relationships between police and communities.119 A third generic approach, zero-tolerance policing, includes a variety of aggressive policing strategies more commonly referred to as “quality of life” or “broken windows” approaches.120 Despite the popularity of many of these approaches, Eck and Maguire conclude that there is little consistent evidence that they had anything to do with the 1990s drop in violent crime rates.121

Major focused changes include directed patrols in hot spots, firearms’ enforcement, retail drug market enforcement, and problem-oriented policing.122 The main logic of directed patrols is that crimes do not happen randomly but are concentrated among repeat offenders, places, and even victims.123 One of the best known of the directed patrol experiments is New York City Police Department’s Compstat process.124 Implemented in 1994, Compstat relies on directed patrol buttressed by substantial data support in the form of mapping, statistical profiles, and detailed precinct-level information.125 Retail drug market en-

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115 See id. at 208.
116 See id.
117 See id. at 218-24.
118 See id. at 218.
119 See id. at 221.
120 Id. at 224.
121 See id. at 228.
122 See id. at 228-29.
123 See id. at 229-230.
124 See id. at 229.
125 See id. at 230.
forcement includes various types of police crackdowns. The main idea of problem-oriented policing is to focus police attention on problems identified by the community rather than on those selected by police administrators. In contrast to their evaluation of generic approaches, the authors conclude that all of the focused approaches have produced at least some evidence that they can be successful at reducing violent crime. However, with the exception of drug market enforcement, none of these approaches were widely implemented before the 1990s drop in violent crime rates had already begun. And the authors point out that even the drug market enforcement strategy is only a plausible explanation for recent declines in homicide if we are also willing to accept as fact the assertion that the drop in violent crime was due mostly to a decline in crack markets.

While there is evidence for the general conclusion that directed patrols of hot spots can help reduce violent crime rates, there is little evidence that the specific Compstat program did this during the 1990s. The authors point out that the main problem with linking Compstat to recent declines in violent crime in New York City is the simple fact that Compstat was implemented long after major declines in homicide had already begun and there is little evidence that it accelerated the declines that were already taking place.

Eck and Maguire conclude that there is evidence that focused firearm enforcement efforts can be successful, but there is much more uncertainty about which specific types of gun enforcement work best and the extent to which gun enforcement tactics were actually applied by police in the 1990s. Of all the policing changes reviewed, the authors seem most enthusiastic about problem-oriented policing (POP), but point out that its

125 See id. at 238-39.
126 See id. at 243-45.
127 See id. at 245.
128 See id.
129 See id. at 242.
130 See id. at 229, 233-34.
131 See id. at 233-34.
132 See id. at 238.
national effects are difficult to measure because some departments have made serious efforts to implement the POP philosophy while others have only superficially applied some of the buzzwords and concepts. In the end, the authors conclude that no changes in policing can be clearly and independently linked to the recent declines in violent crime. Generic methods probably had no influence on the national drop in violent crime rates; focused methods may have played a role in the declines, but only in conjunction with other criminal justice policies and broader social changes that had nothing to do with policing.

Jeff Grogger begins his chapter with the assumption that the increase in violent crime rates in the mid-1980s and its decline in the 1990s are both tied directly to the sudden appearance and growing maturity of crack cocaine markets. The Grogger chapter is an economic model of why the crack market went through the changes that it did and how these changes were in turn related to violent crime trends. The author uses the same model to help explain why criminal violence in the mid-1980s peaked earlier in larger than in smaller cities, and why criminal violence during this period was so concentrated among economically disadvantaged youth.

The foundation of Grogger's model is the standard economic assumption that "individual agents seek to maximize their utility." To make his model easier to evaluate, Grogger ignores the impact that risk has on individual evaluations, concentrating instead on labor market mechanisms. Grogger predicts that individuals will work if wages are high enough but will commit crime if the returns to crime exceed wages. To test this prediction he uses the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NYSL) to show that among a sample of young men em-

134 See id. at 245.
135 See id. at 248-49.
136 See id. at 245.
137 See GROGGER, supra note 38, at 266-87.
138 See id. at 268-73.
139 Id. at 268.
140 See id.
141 See id.
ployed in 1979, those who admitted committing a property crime had wages that were 15 percent lower than those who did not admit to a property crime. A similar analysis shows that compared to those who did not report having committed a recent crime, those who reported committing a recent crime had worked fewer hours annually. Grogger shows that the wage gap between black and white men in the NYSL sample can account for about one-fourth of the race difference in crime participation rates and the fact that young workers earn less than older workers can entirely account for why property crime is concentrated among young persons within the sample.

Grogger’s strategy for developing an economic model to predict violent crime trends after the mid-1980s is to first develop a model to explain property crime. Based on evidence that much of the increase in homicides in the 1980s was driven by gun homicides and was stranger related, he argues that a simple labor market model can usefully be extended to explain the rapid increase in instrumental violent crimes that occurred in the 1980s. Grogger reasons that only two changes in the model he is proposing could have generated the increase in violence in the mid-1980s: declining wages or increasing criminal productivity. Indeed, real wages were falling in the mid-1980s, but because they had been falling steadily since the mid-1970s, Grogger concludes that they do not match well the abrupt change in violent crime. He concludes that there is much better evidence for an increase in criminal productivity during this period. Grogger argues that the advent of crack cocaine can be interpreted as a “technology shock” that increased criminal

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142 See id. at 270-71.
143 See id.
144 See id. at 271.
145 See id. at 273.
146 See e.g., PHILIP J. COOK AND JOHN H. LAUB, The Unprecedented Epidemic in Youth Violence, in CRIME AND JUSTICE: A REVIEW OF RESEARCH 27-64 (Michael Tonry and M.H. Moore eds., 1998) (describing the increase in stranger-related gun homicides during the 1980s).
147 See GROGGER, supra note 38, at 273.
148 See id. at 275.
149 See id.
150 See id.
productivity by abruptly lowering the price of cocaine intoxication. With the emergence of crack, "a given amount of time devoted to crime yields greater income than before." Rising profits as a result of the technology shock increase the numbers of individuals entering the market to take advantage of expanded opportunities. But the expansion of the market also increases competition and necessitates growing violence as entrepreneurs fight to preserve or increase their profits.

Grogger uses similar logic to explain the sudden decline of crime in the 1990s. He argues that as the crack market expanded, so too did the amount and lethality of violence. But as the demand for more and better weapons rose among drug sellers, it also drove up the cost of entering drug markets. Not only did the crack market demand investment in ever greater quantities of expensive armaments, but it also entailed much greater risk of injury or death. As the cost of entering the market increased, the market contracted and violence rates declined. Grogger argues that similar processes may have affected the costs of consuming crack for buyers because increasing violence surrounding crack markets also imposes growing risks for buyers.

Grogger claims that his model proposes an economic alternative to the cultural argument made by Bruce Johnson and his colleagues. While Johnson, Golub, and Dunlap argue that the blunts generation turned away from cocaine and heroin because of the negative examples set by older users, Grogger counters that their rejection of crack was mostly a rational response to the rising costs imposed by violence in the illegal

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151 Id. at 275-76.
152 Id. at 276.
153 See id.
154 See id.
155 See id. at 277.
156 See id. at 277-78.
157 See id.
158 See id. at 278.
159 See id.
160 See id.
161 See id. at 280.
crack market. But on closer inspection, it isn't entirely clear that the two explanations are all that different. While Johnson, Golub, and Dunlap do not invoke the utility principle to explain the behavior of the blunts generation, they do portray the reaction of the blunts subculture to crack as a rational response to the costs that crack use had exacted on their relatives and older acquaintances. The main difference in the two conclusions is that the decisions of Johnson, Golub, and Dunlap's blunts generation are buttressed by subcultural norms while Grogger's "individual agents" are responding only to market forces.

In the final chapter of the volume, James Alan Fox considers the possibility that the recent declines in violent crime in the United States have been produced by changing demographic characteristics, especially age. Using demographic characteristics to make predictions about crime has a long history and can be traced back to the work of French mathematician and astronomer Lambert-Adolphe-Jacques Quetelet, in the first half of the nineteenth century. The rationale behind the approach is at once straightforward and compelling. We know that violent crime in America has been disproportionately committed by young adult males. All else equal, violent crime rates should therefore increase as the percentage of persons in this demographic category increases. Demographic variables have the added advantage of being relatively easy to measure. If we know how many individuals are in a particular demographic category at a specific point in time, it is not difficult to project estimates of the size of this group forward in time.

Fox presents data that underscores the growing contributions of young men—especially African-Americans—to the mid-1980s crime increase. He shows that the mean age of both homicide offenders and victims has dropped by about four years from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s. According to Fox, this "juvenilization" of murder has changed the overall nature of

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162 See id.; JOHNSTON ET. AL., supra note 37, at 185.
163 See JOHNSTON ET. AL., supra note 37, at 185.
164 See FOX, supra note 39, at 288-317.
165 See id. at 289.
166 See id. at 298.
167 See id. at 304.
homicide in America. To begin with, rising homicide rates among juveniles and young adults in the mid-1980s were accompanied by substantial increases in the percentage of homicides committed with guns. Due to changes in the behavior of offenders age fourteen to twenty four, the percentage of all homicides using a firearm rose from less than 60 percent in the mid-1980s to nearly 70 percent by 1990. As younger offenders committed an increasing proportion of total homicides, the percentage of homicides committed by more than one offender and the proportion of homicides that targeted strangers also increased.

Although the age distribution was frequently invoked to explain the crime boom of the 1960s, it was not very useful in explaining the rise in crime in the mid-1980s. This is because the proportion of individuals in the crime prone years of eighteen to twenty four were generally declining at the same time that violent crime rates were increasing. However, demographic characteristics are a more promising explanation for the crime bust of the 1990s. Using 1991 age-race-sex specific rates of offending as a baseline, Fox predicts the proportion of the homicide offense rate that can be attributed solely to demographic changes. According to Fox, the contribution of demographics to the crime decline was greatest in 1993 and 1994, when it accounted for about 16 percent of the total drop. By 1997 and 1998, the role of demographics in explaining homicide declines had dropped to about ten percent. Based on these comparisons, Fox concludes that “demographics

\[168\] See id.
\[169\] See id.
\[170\] See id.
\[171\] See id. at 305.
\[172\] See \textit{JAMES A. FOX, FORECASTING CRIME DATA: AN ECONOMETRIC ANALYSIS} (1978).
\[173\] See Fox, \textit{supra} note 39, at 293.
\[174\] See id. at 307.
\[175\] See id.
\[176\] See id. at 308.
\[177\] See id.
did play a role in the 1990s crime rate decline, albeit a modest one.\(^{178}\)

II. THE ORIGINALITY AND SCOPE OF THE BOOK

One of the common limitations of edited books is that the academic system that produces them generally puts greater value on refereed publications than book chapters. As a consequence, individual contributors to edited volumes often save their strongest, most original work for journals or monographs and write book chapters that to varying degrees are based on work that they have already published, or work that has less methodological sophistication than is demanded by journals. Although the articles included in this book were all written specifically for the volume, many of the conclusions and results have already appeared elsewhere. Certainly most of the ideas in Blumstein's chapter on disaggregating crime trends, Johnson Golub, and Dunlap's chapter on the rise and decline of hard drugs, and Fox's chapter on demography and crime will be familiar to readers. Likewise, chapters by the other contributors build substantially on their already published work.

Moreover, given the considerable methodological sophistication of the contributors, there is little in the way of pathbreaking new research methods in this book. This may be due partly to the task the contributors were given: to determine whether a particular type of policy or variable could explain the crime drop of the 1990s. When viewed in this way, the contributors were faced with a sample of only eight—the number of years in the current crime decline. In fact, given this restriction, some of the techniques the contributors developed for linking various factors to the crime drop were creative. Still, other ways of analyzing the crime drop that would have been more interesting and labor intensive—such as studying a sample of cities or counties over time, or doing time-series analyses over much longer periods—were not attempted.

But while much of the book draws heavily on already published work, the authors do update, reorganize and extend their earlier work in these chapters. Moreover, by pulling out the specific implications of their earlier work for the recent crime drop, the authors present an unusually focused look at a major

\(^{178}\) Id.
policy issue. And of course it is an advantage to have the diverse information contained in the book available in one place.

Several of my criticisms of the book have to do in one way or another with its scope. Criticizing a book for what it leaves out seems to always be more questionable than criticizing it for what it puts in for the obvious reason that all books have to delimit their boundaries somewhere. However, the scope of this book seriously limits its usefulness in several ways.

Perhaps most importantly, with few exceptions (mostly Johnson, Golub, and Dunlap's study of drug subcultures in New York City) most of the analysis and discussion in the book is limited to crime trends after 1985. While this is certainly understandable in a book whose main task is to explain the crime drop of the 1990s, it has important theoretical and methodological implications. Because the book focuses mostly on very recent comparisons, it never explicitly considers the issue of what the best historical context is for analyzing the crime drop of the 1990s. The implication of this strategy can be seen by returning to the UCR trends from 1946 to 1998 that were discussed at the beginning of this review. If we focus just on violent crime trends from 1985 to 1999, we see a rather sharp crime increase, peaking in 1991, followed by a rapid decline. Indeed, most of the chapters in the book make the implicit assumption that the crime drop of the 1990s is mostly a response to the crime increase of the mid-1980s. And since a major argument in the book is that the crime increase in the mid-1980s was produced mostly by the deadly nexus of crack, guns, and youth violence, it becomes natural to think of the corresponding 1990s drop in violent crime in the same terms.

But as we have seen above, the crime increase of the mid-1980s was not nearly as long or as large as the crime increase of the 1960s and early 1970s. What if the decline in crime in the 1990s is not a response to the crime boomlet of the mid-1980s, but is rather a response to the major crime boom that began three decades earlier? Eck and Maguire actually raise this possibility in their chapter, pointing out the utility of comparing policing during the crime boom of the 1960s and the crime bust of the 1990s to determine whether changes in police behavior are implicated in the earlier crime rise in the same way that they
are implicated in the later crime drop. Unfortunately, the authors do not build this comparison into their analysis and review. By looking mostly at the boomlet of the mid-1980s and the bust of the 1990s, the book's contributors effectively limit their discussion to the crack cocaine-youth-racial minority explanation for the crime bust. This has immediate implications in terms of the choice of topics investigated. With few exceptions (e.g., Rosenfeld's discussion of marriage rates and the increasing availability of support services for spouse abuse victims), the major causes of crime examined in the book are the same ones that have been heavily implicated in the crime boomlet of the mid-1980s. Moreover, the book largely excludes other types of explanations that might be more logical if we consider the decline of crime in the 1990s as a response not to the boomlet of the mid-1980s, but to the boom of the 1960s. For example, Grogger calls his chapter "an economic model" of violent crime, but in fact the chapter focuses entirely on developing an economic interpretation of violent crime trends in response to the rise and decline of crack cocaine markets after the mid-1980s. Other potentially important economic variables—income inequality, unemployment, poverty, inflation, welfare spending, and educational opportunity—are never considered. Likewise, while Blumstein and Wallman note that the crime boom of the 1960s and early 1970s "may have been, at least in part, a result of the decline in perceived legitimacy of American social and governmental authority during this turbulent period," the volume includes no analysis of the impact of such measures as political legitimacy, trust or social capital on the crime drop of the 1990s.

The scope of the book is also limited by the fact that the individual chapters are each focused for the most part on a single potential cause of crime. This means that there is little discussion of the relative importance of the different causal factors investigated. This limitation flows directly from the fact that the book was produced by asking seven researchers or groups of research...
searchers to each consider the impact on the crime drop of an area in which they had special expertise. But once these individual, largely uncoordinated assessments were assembled, they were naturally difficult to compare. As the editors point out, the great range of methods used in the individual chapters—from ethnographic to econometric—make direct comparisons unwise.  

The editors argue that because each of the individual explanations in the book is tenable, and none inherently excludes any of the others, that the causes for the recent decline in crime are due to "a variety of factors, some independent and some interacting in a mutually supportive way." But of course this is an untested hypothesis. Because the book presents no models that simultaneously evaluate rival explanations, it can offer no definitive word on which potential explanations are most important or how different explanations interact with, amplify, or cancel out each other. Given that this book is clearly aimed at influencing public policy, this is a potentially big drawback. For example, it means that if we are interested in further reductions in crime, or concerned about new increases, the book cannot tell us which of the factors or combinations of factors reviewed here would be most efficacious.

Although the title of the book implies an analysis of crime in general, most of the actual analysis in the book is limited to homicide trends. Given that the two editors of this volume both represent organizations with a specific interest in understanding violence and aggression, it is unsurprising that the chapters are almost entirely limited to a concern with violent crime trends. Moreover, an emphasis on homicide is justified by the fact that it is likely the most frequently detected and hence, best measured of the violent crimes. On the other hand, the violent crimes of rape, robbery and aggravated assault are far more common and also of considerable policy interest. Apart from a few pages in the introductory chapter by Blumstein, these other violent crimes are largely ignored.

See id. at 2.
Id.
Although there is also some limited analysis of robbery trends in the book.
See BLUMSTEIN, supra note 21, at 14-15.
Limiting the focus of the book to homicide also limits our understanding of the forces that produced the important changes in crime during this period. For example, knowing how widespread the crime decline in the 1990s has been would give us some insight into the nature of the processes that led to the decline. Thus, if all types of crime declined at about the same time and at about the same rate, it might suggest that variables that are causing the change are very general, affecting broadly different types of behavior. On the other hand, if homicide declines are relatively unique, it might suggest that variables causing the change are more closely related to specific forms of crime.

III. COMPARING THE TWO LARGEST CHANGES IN VIOLENT CRIME RATES IN THE POSTWAR PERIOD

Thinking back again to the violent crime trends shown in the 1946-1998 UCR data, we could make the argument that the two biggest events in the history of violent crime in America since World War II are first, the crime boom of the 1960s and early 1970s, and second, the crime bust of the 1990s. Given the strategic importance of these two events, I thought it useful to compare the policy response suggested in this book about the crime bust to the policy response that was common during the crime boom of the 1960s. In doing this comparison, I was especially struck by four differences in the response to the crime boom and the crime bust.

First, confidence in official statistics has increased dramatically between the crime boom of the 1960s and the crime bust of the 1990s. During the late 1960s and early 1970s there was tremendous doubt among researchers and policy experts about the fundamental reliability and validity of the UCR and other official crime statistics. Many criminologists at the time concluded that the UCR was so hopelessly biased as to have little utility in the study of crime.\footnote{See e.g., Richard Quinney, \textit{The Social Reality of Crime} (1970); Gilbert Geis, \textit{Statistics Concerning Race and Crime}, in \textit{Race, Crime and Justice} 61-69 (C.E Reasons \& J.L. Kuykendall, eds., 1972).} While the President’s Commission on Crime Report was somewhat less critical of the UCR, it nevertheless expressed grave concerns about potential bias in
the UCR based on race and class. Fundamental concerns with the validity and reliability of the UCR were a critical part of the process that resulted in the creation of the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) in the 1970s. The growing availability of NCVS data, and to a lesser extent self-reported crime data, has revolutionized attitudes toward official crime data by convincing researchers that the quality of UCR data—at least for murder and robbery—are reasonably good. Thus, while concerns about the quality of crime data were paramount in the 1967 commission report, they are hardly mentioned in the Blumstein/Wallman volume.

Second, the belief in the ability of social policy to actually reduce crime is much stronger in the Blumstein/Wallman volume than it was in reports about the crime boom of the 1960s. As the labeling and conflict theoretical traditions gathered momentum in the 1960s and early 1970s, many criminologists concluded that not only were current policies on crime failing, but they were actually making crime-related problems worse. Labeling perspectives suggested that serious crime was produced by societal reactions. Thus, the process of identifying, labeling, and stigmatizing offenders only leads to higher crime rates. This reasoning clearly affected the 1967 President's Commission report, which recommended a series of reforms that severely limited the power and the jurisdiction of courts over youthful offenders. Perhaps the classic example of the lack of confidence in the ability of public policy to affect crime rates is the "Martinson report," first published at the height of the crime boom in 1974. Martinson's conclusion that "noth-

190 See Michael Hindelang et. al., Measuring Delinquency 1981.
192 See Lemert, supra note 191, at 105-06.
ing works” with regard to rehabilitation programs was of course not universally accepted, but nevertheless spoke to the beliefs and probably the fears of many criminologists and policy makers at the time.

The contrast with this volume could hardly be greater. Grogger concludes his chapter on economic models of violent crime by claiming that, “the rise in violent crime is fairly straightforward to explain.” Such a confident statement would have been inconceivable during the crime boom of the 1960s. While most of the other authors in the Blumstein/Wallman volume are less optimistic than Grogger, each chapter in the book ultimately concludes that the specific variable or variables being considered has at least contributed to the crime bust. About the only indication in the Blumstein/Wallman book that some recent policies on crime may actually be making crime problems worse is a couple of paragraphs in Rosenfeld’s chapter in which he points out that massive increases in incarceration may ultimately contribute to rising crime rates by depleting marriage markets, destabilizing families, and increasing street-gang activity.

It seems likely that part of the confidence of this group of researchers in the conclusion that they actually know what has produced the crime bust can be linked to the rather remarkable connections that have been made between crack cocaine and the crime rise of the mid-1980s.

Blumstein is in fact a key player in this development. The ability of Blumstein and others to demonstrate close and convincing connections between the beginning of crack cocaine use in the mid-1980s and the rise in juvenile violent crime during the same period has probably increased confidence among researchers that similar conclusions can be reached for other changes in crime trends. Indeed, it is hard to think of another case in criminology history in which some outcome has been so directly linked to a specific change in criminal behavior.

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194 See e.g., Ted Palmer, Martenson Revisited, 12 J. Res. in Crime and Delinq. 133-52 (1975) (refuting the idea that rehabilitation programs were all ineffective).
195 GROGGER, supra note 38, at 286.
196 See Rosenfeld, supra note 34, at 151.
More generally, it is tempting to guess that much of our outlook about the efficacy of public policy initiatives in criminology has been subtly shaped by the broader direction of crime trends in different periods. For example, it must have been truly difficult for researchers to be optimistic about policy alternatives in the early 1970s after eleven straight years of large crime increases. Alternatively, it may be easier to be optimistic about the efficacy of social policies in a period in which crime rates have been steadily declining for several years. And it is relatively easy to see how these processes could work. Given that most policy efforts to reduce crime remain in operation for relatively short periods of time, a continuously falling crime rate is bound to make intervention efforts seem more successful, regardless of the effect they are actually having. And of course, the reverse is probably true for a period when crime is booming.

Third, the emphasis on trends and longitudinal data is much more pronounced in the Blumstein/Wallman volume than in accounts of the crime boom from the 1960s and early 1970s. Part of this change may be due to changing attitudes toward official crime statistics. Because researchers and policy experts were more wary of official statistics in the 1960s than they are today, it no doubt made them more reticent to use official statistics to illustrate trends. Moreover, data from the NCVS were simply unavailable until 1973, long after the beginning of the last major crime boom. By contrast, this book is peppered with charts showing trends in crime and the major explanatory variables over time. Moreover, the contributors are clearly concerned about changes over time and incorporate discussion of longitudinal trends in most of their analyses. One indication of the importance of time in the book is the fact that many of the authors refer to publications and reports that were published in the same year as the book. The authors have taken special care to include the most up-to-the minute statistics that are feasible in the current publishing era.

Finally, compared to the 1960s crime boom, this book about the 1990s crime bust implies a fundamentally different orientation to the way that social policy on crime should be constructed. Criminology has long had a kind of uneasy relationship between its sociological roots in abstract theory and the ongoing demands of citizens and criminal justice practitioners to produce public policy that can actually be implemented. These two traditions are sharply contrasted if we compare the
recommendations and assumptions of the 1967 President's Commission Report to those being made in the Blumstein/Wallman volume. Most of the crime policy recommendations given in the commission report are relatively abstract and theoretical and do not lend themselves in any straightforward way, to immediate implementation:

The Commission doubts that even a vastly improved criminal justice system can substantially reduce crime if society fails to make it possible for each of its citizens to feel a personal stake in it—in the good life that it can provide and in the law and order that are prerequisite to such a good life. ¹⁹⁸

In order for everyone to make it possible for citizens to “feel a personal stake” in society, the commission goes on to recommend that policies be enacted to provide a minimum family income for all Americans, to reduce unemployment, to strengthen families, to eliminate job discrimination and barriers to employment, to get people more involved in their communities, to raise the educational aspirations of lower-class children, and to assist slum children in overcoming their inadequate preparation for school.¹⁹⁹ In a review of the commission reports’ implications for juvenile justice, Lamar Empey characterizes its policy recommendations as “heroic.”²⁰⁰ At the very least, these are recommendations that do not lend themselves, in any straightforward way, to immediate implementation.

By contrast, most of the variables examined in the Blumstein/Wallman book are more easily measured, more amenable to direct policy intervention, and more conceptually concrete. In a recent review of situational crime prevention, Marcus Felson describes “real-life crime prevention experiments” as those that “do not worry about academic theories” and “focus on very specific slices of crime.”²⁰¹ The Blumstein/Wallman book generally conforms to these two principles. Criminological theory is relatively unimportant in this book. In the few places in which theories are discussed in any detail (mainly, Rosenfeld

¹⁹⁸ President's Commission Report, supra note 188, at 58 (1967).
¹⁹⁹ See id. at 66, 69, 74, 77.
and Johnson, Golub, and Dunlap), they are generally added ex post facto, after the data analysis has already been concluded.\textsuperscript{202} The one theory that plays any major role in the book is the economic assumption that individuals will seek to maximize their utility. However, this assumption is so basic, that many of the authors assume it without even explicitly stating it as a theoretical assumption (the main exception is Grogger).\textsuperscript{203}

The book's emphasis on the importance of disaggregating crime trends is also in keeping with the principle that it is necessary to focus on "very specific slices of crime."\textsuperscript{204} The virtues of disaggregating crime trends are raised in Blumstein's introductory chapter and appear in many of the chapters that follow.\textsuperscript{205} It was through disaggregating crime data that Blumstein demonstrated the connections between homicide, youth, guns, and drugs in his influential earlier work\textsuperscript{206} and it is natural that these methods would be carried forward to explain the crime drop of the 1990s. The contributors to the volume separate violent crime from property crime; murder from robbery, rape, and assault; and they divide homicide into separate trends based on age, race, gender, type of weapon, type of handgun, caliber of handgun, city size, and relationship between the victim and the offender. These authors are attempting to understand violent crime trends by looking at very specific slices of crime.

As we look back to the 1960s from the vantage point of several years of large declines in annual crime rates, it is hard not to be impressed by the direct, empirically driven, disaggregated approach that characterizes this book. Nevertheless, this type of approach to social policy on crime does have some drawbacks when compared to approaches that depend less on disaggregation. If we consider the level of disaggregation of crime trends on a continuum that runs from more to less disaggregated, it may be easier to see the general strengths and weaknesses of disaggregation as a method. The great advantage of disaggregation is that it makes it easier for us to see direct connections between crime and variables that are very close to crime; call these

\textsuperscript{202} See Rosenfeld, supra note 34, at 157-59; Johnson et. al., supra note 37, at 165.
\textsuperscript{203} See Grogger, supra note 38, at 268.
\textsuperscript{204} Felson, supra note 201, at 117.
\textsuperscript{205} See Blumstein, supra note 21, at 13-15.
\textsuperscript{206} See Blumstein, supra note 197, at 10-36.
proximal causes. Thus, by disaggregating homicide rates researchers have found that most of the increase in the mid-1980s were handgun related, and took place among young males, disproportionately African American, living in big cities. Given the timing of these characteristics, it was logical to conclude that the rise of crack cocaine markets were a proximal cause of the mid-1980s homicide increases.

By contrast, less disaggregated analyses are better suited for uncovering variables that are linked to crime at a greater distance; call these distal causes. For example, let’s suppose that violent crime is best explained by the fact that offenders are disproportionately likely to live in neighborhoods with concentrated social and economic disadvantages. These kinds of variables are likely to be connected to actual crime rates at a greater distance through their effects on more proximate variables like drug and handgun use.

The great advantage of uncovering distal, as opposed to proximal causes of crime is that they provide more direct connections to crime that are often more amenable to public policy intervention. Thus, knowing that crack cocaine was heavily implicated in the homicide increases of the mid-1980s offers direct and useful information about the kinds of policies likely to lower homicide rates. But note that this explanation tells us little about why it was that young, inner-city African American men were disproportionately likely to actually participate in crack cocaine markets in the first place. In fact, the question may not even arise from a proximal perspective because in order to determine why one group is more likely to commit crime than another group, we need to use a nondisaggregated approach that combines both groups in the analysis. In other words, disaggregating crime trends makes it easier to observe differences between the components of the disaggregation, but more difficult to analyze the sources of these differences.

Of course one reaction to these observations about the weaknesses of disaggregation might simply be to say “so what?” If we can figure out the variables that are most proximal to crime and manipulate these variables through policy interven-

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207 See BLUMSTEIN, supra note 21, at 39.

tion, we can reduce the pain and suffering associated with crime. This is an important consideration and explains in large part why the Blumstein/Wallman book has so much more immediate relevance for public policy intervention than the President’s Commission report. But at the same time, an emphasis on proximal causes makes it easy to downplay distal causes, or forget them altogether. Thus, the emphasis in this volume on getting as close to the proximal causes of specific forms of violent crimes as possible, leads to the near total exclusion of analysis on more distal causes of violent crime such as concentrated poverty, income inequality, and political legitimacy.

IV. THE LIMITES OF POLICY IN CRIMINOLOGY

One of the less obvious benefits of the initial creation of the National Crime Victimization Survey in the early 1970s is that by providing a group of experts with great financial resources and asking them to design an ideal survey from the ground up also offered unique insights into the methodological problems in survey methods that even having lots of expertise and a large sum of money will not solve. For example, the NCVS has not been very effective at measuring extremely sensitive crimes like rape, or crimes whose detection is directly connected to the survey methodology itself, like spouse abuse. It is worth briefly considering the Blumstein/Wallman volume as a similar kind of benchmark: What problems does public policy on crime face even in those relatively rare instances in which it can draw upon a very talented group of experts who have a good deal of experience in a particular area of concern? When considered from this viewpoint, the book may perhaps provide insights into the limits of our current ability to provide public policy recommendations with regard to changes in crime trends.

Taken as a whole, the book offers six main explanations for the 1990s drop in violent crime:

1. More effective gun policies.
2. Increasing levels of incarceration.
3. Growing availability of services for abused women.

In addition to the prediction about social services, Rosenfeld also considers the possibility that declining violent crime rates are due to declining marriage rates and to a more general civilizing process. Declining marriage rates can be seen as similar to demographic changes and while Rosenfeld briefly mentions the possibility
4. Decline of crack cocaine markets
5. More effective policing, and

The authors argue that each of these factors has had an impact on reducing violent crime in the 1990s. Presumably, these six factors would also bear some relationship to violent crime trends in the future.

Perhaps the most important limitation of the book in terms of public policy is that we do not know what additional variables had a significant impact on the crime bust of the 1990s and might, therefore, be expected to affect crime trends in the future. This limitation follows in part from the distinction between proximal and distal causes already discussed. Because this book concentrates on proximal causes, it does not consider in any detail the ways in which the crime bust is related to more distal social, economic and political variables. For example, none of the authors deal directly with the impact of the current record-breaking economic boom on crime trends—except in the very limited sense of connections between the economy and the rise and fall of crack cocaine markets.

The book also does not explain how the six factors are related to each other. Are some factors more important than others are? Are there important interactions between them? These unanswered questions are especially relevant in terms of the rise of crack markets. Several chapters of the book (particularly Johnson, Golub, and Dunlap's, and Grogger's) treat crack cocaine as the key factor in both the crime increase of the mid-1980s and the crime drop of the 1990s. Perhaps gun policies, incarceration rates, and the other factors would have had totally different effects on crime in the absence of a crack epidemic. The book would have been more effective for public policy if it could have included a section that systematically compared the strengths and weaknesses of each of the six factors thought to be responsible for the crime bust. Providing this kind of con-

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of a civilizing process, he offers no specific analysis of its potential effects. See Rosenfeld, supra note 34, at 156-59.

210 See Blumstein & Wallman, supra note 18, at 1-12.
211 See Grogger, supra note 38, at 266-87.
212 See id. Johnson et. al, supra note 37, at 164-206.
ceptually uniform organization was used effectively in a recent evaluation of 500 crime prevention programs by Lawrence Sherman and other scholars.\textsuperscript{213} But a similar strategy is not possible here because each of the individual authors worked independently, used a diverse range of research designs and methods, and defined the purpose of their analyses in unique ways.

Bracketing out for a moment the issue of how comprehensive these six factors are and how they might interact, would it be possible to manipulate any of these factors to regulate crime through public policy in the future? In theory at least it is possible to manipulate all of these factors except crack cocaine markets and the proportion of individuals in high crime demographic categories. And while we cannot easily manipulate demographic categories, we can at least predict them reasonably well—at least in the short term and barring any huge changes in immigration or mortality. Of the six factors, then, the one that is most difficult to manipulate or predict is the rise and fall of crack cocaine markets. And this is an especially big drawback, given that crack cocaine is the factor this is most closely related to all of the other factors. About the best that we could do here is predict that the sudden appearance of another drug like crack cocaine (i.e., inexpensive, easy to manufacture, and extremely addictive) may be associated with the rapid rise of highly violent drug markets in the future.

Perhaps the biggest single contribution of this book is in providing a specific kind of policy-oriented mind set about crime. Because the book is explicitly aimed at a specific policy question, it encourages us to think about the real possibility of doing with crime trends what economists have been doing for many years with economic trends. The book makes it easier to imagine developing a system whereby researchers would closely monitor crime trends, respond with appropriate public policy recommendations, and thereby endeavor to respond quickly to crime booms and more generally, keep crime rates as low as possible.

Of course, predicting crime trends, like predicting economic trends is going to be easiest when trends are either un-
changing or changing at regular intervals. The crime booms and busts that have characterized the United States since World War II are difficult to predict. Still, in principle at least, crime booms and busts are no harder to predict than economic booms and busts. Thus, the great changes in economic trends unleashed by the oil embargo of 1973 raised major methodological difficulties for economists just as the crime boom of the 1960s posed methodological challenges for criminologists. Moreover, it may never be possible to predict with any precision the impact on crime of unique historical developments like the civil rights movement or Vietnam War protests, or technological innovations such as the one that resulted in crack cocaine. About the best that we can do in cases like these is develop generalizations that we hope will cover new developments in the future. Also, by providing forecasts that are timely, it might at least be possible to develop a response to rising crime rates that would be rapid enough to contain damages more effectively. Clearly, prediction is the most precarious of social science tasks, yet books like this begin to at least show us more clearly what the true difficulties are.


215 See Pierre Perron, The Great Crash, the Oil Price Shock, and the Unit Root Hypothesis, 57 ECONOMETRICA 1351-1401.