

Book Review of *Why Crime Rates Fell*

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Why Crime Rates Fell By John Conklin

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Aptly titled, *Why Crime Rates Fell* discusses the changes in crime, politics, and social institutions that took place in New York City in the 1990s. The book starts with a discussion about the general crime rates in the 1990s including the ways in which crimes are detected, measured, and recorded. This background leads to a general discussion of trends throughout New York City and the United States during that time period. Figures are used throughout the chapter to clearly illustrate key points mentioned in the text regarding such index crimes as murder, robbery, burglary, and auto theft. While Conklin concludes that crime rates fell in both locations, he notes a more dramatic decrease in New York City than in the country as a whole.

Conklin then moves on to the politics behind the falling crime rates in New York City. He discusses the three administrations that were directing the police department during that decade: Dinkins-Brown/Kelly, Guiliani-Bratton, and Guiliani-Safir. The Quality of Life Initiative and the shift toward a well-managed police force were the goals of the NYPD in the 1990s, but media attention moved from quality of life concerns to police abuse during and after the Diallo shooting in 1999. Conklin highlights the termination of the Guiliani-Bratton administration (due to a power struggle between the two over public recognition for the reduction in crime) and its transition into the Guiliani-Safir administration, which permitted crime reduction commendation to remain with Guiliani.

In Chapters 4 and 5 Conklin delves into the day-to-day tasks of officers and supervisors; discussing at length the crime reduction techniques such as car and foot patrols, aggressive policing, community policing, problem-oriented policing, and the effects of arrest and incarceration on crime rates. Conklin concludes that policing may have very little to do with the decrease in crime. Conklin cautions that, conceivably, the decrease in crime rates may have more to do with the number of offenders who were sentenced to incarceration during that time period rather than with police action. Similarly, the decrease in crime may be due to an interaction of factors such as more aggressive policing, a better economy, or an increase in efficiency of the

system. Perhaps researchers must explore these and other factors more closely to determine their contribution to the fluctuation of the crime rates.

While the first part of the book is focused on the police involvement in crime and, perhaps, crime reduction, the second part of the book looks more toward societal factors to explain the phenomenon. First, changes in drug type, use, and selling are discussed as possible alternatives affecting the crime rate. Conklin notes that the change in crack use during the 1990s may explain the decline in murder and robbery rates but is probably not connected to burglary or motor vehicle theft. Despite these potential correlations, choice of drugs and drug usage remained stable during that time period, and no conclusions can be drawn regarding potential effects on the crime rate.

Following changes in drugs, the second non-police related factor is use and availability of firearms. While police can crack down on guns and gun-related crimes, offenders can still purchase guns illegally or steal or borrow them. During the 1990s, murders and robberies conducted with firearms declined, as did those carried out without the use of firearms. To better understand the effects of firearms on crime, Conklin explored motor vehicle theft and burglaries, crimes that typically do not involve firearms. These crimes also decreased during this period leaving similar inconclusive findings. Gun control measures used in cities across the United States were studied for other possible explanations, but such studies were not conducted on a large enough area or with measurable comparisons; which leaves researchers to guess at their contribution to the reduction in crime.

Chapters 8 and 9 conclude Conklin's exploration of non-police related factors. Age and Changing Institutions offer still fewer explanations. Age, according to Conklin, can account for a maximum of approximately 20 percent of the reduction in crime. Conklin also discusses the debate regarding the legalization of abortion. This debate is focused around the idea that women who would have given birth to children they would not have cared for or loved had the option of abortion when it was legalized in 1973. Thus, these women aborted those who would have eventually turned into criminals in the 1990s. Conklin determines that potential effects of the legalization are already incorporated into the age structure of the population and would have little, if any, additional effects. Similarly,

the measures of family legitimacy, the economic system, and the political system, which Conklin calls “Changing Institutions” had very little effect on the changes in crime rates. Every indicator of family that one would think to be a cause for an increase in crime occurred, yet crime rates still declined. In addition, political and economic turmoil was not reaching unprecedented levels and neither could seem to explain the vast drop in crime.

In the final Chapter, Conklin summarizes the potential reasons why crime could have plummeted in the 1990s. Perhaps the police, prisons, or societal changes could have influenced the crime rate individually, or perhaps any one of these needs to be studied more in depth before one will be able to determine the true cause or explanation. This Chapter demonstrates the importance of the book. This work is not full of earth-breaking ideas or landmark revelations;

rather it seeks to provide the reader with an all-inclusive look at the decade of the 1990s and the prospective causes of the dramatic drop in crime in New York City. The author has accomplished this goal. Conklin presents speculation regarding the decrease in crime, he admits that no one supposition can explain the entire shift, and then he nicely summarizes the way in which academics have attempted to uncover these explanations thus far.

Why Crime Rates Fell is an excellent resource for instructors wishing to cover all of the police, prison, and social aspects related to crime. Conklin has used New York City as the example in this book, but it would be easy to look at the literature that he has presented and compare any other city to determine if the conditions existing there are similar to those of New York City in the 1990s. At the very least it demonstrates the potential causes of crime and ways in which institutions interact in an environment.