

## Going deeper on crime stats

Robert R. Friedmann – November 9, 2012

Crime happens to someone else somewhere else. When it happens to us, crime is at a 100 percent level. A single murder, burglary, rape or robbery is one too many.

Yet, it is important to look at crime statistics because they provide a helpful, albeit limited, reflection of the public health of a given city, county, state and the nation, particularly when they change. These numbers are used (and abused) by researchers, policy makers, media and politicians to make a statement about our well-being and what to do (or not to do) about it. We have an insatiable addiction for numbers and usually do a very good job with reporting and predicting financial trends, the weather, educational achievement and health issues.

However, the situation regarding crime statistics is still dismal. Most reports on crime statistics are at least a year or two late, limited to raw figures or, at best, limited to crime rates that rely only on raw figures and population size but exclude other important dimensions that are associated with crime. This results in comparisons of cities that are then unfairly ranked by this limited calculation.

Atlanta was ranked for many years as one of the most violent cities compared to other cities or the nation. A more sophisticated analysis, carried out over several years, showed that on homicide, Atlanta actually ranked toward the bottom of cities with populations larger than 250,000.

But even an examination of raw crime figures and crime over a period of almost 50 years reveals a trend common to the city, state and nation: Virtually all index crimes (violence, property) started to climb in the mid-to late 1960s, peaked in the middle 1990s and have declined ever since, returning to levels of the mid to late 1960s.

The national crime rate, the Georgia crime rate and the Atlanta crime rate dropped significantly from the 1990s to date. Interestingly enough, while Atlanta's crime rate has been higher than that of Georgia and the nation, its decline has been faster and larger by more than double that of the national figures.

Somehow, when crime goes up, it receives alarming media attention and quick finger pointing. When the trend reverses, it takes more time to acknowledge, and then, explanations are sought as to what brought about this change.

Typically, criminologists associate dire economic stress with increases in index crimes. Yet the decline since the 1990s kept its pace irrespective of the changing economic times from growth to disaster. In other words, the downward trend of crime associated with better economic times did not stop when the economy declined. Indeed, the downward trend received fairly little public attention during the better economic times, and only during the tough economic times questions started to surface as to the reasons that the "expected" increase did not materialize.

Crime is produced by the (criminals in the) community, and public safety needs to be co-produced by a strong partnership between law enforcement and formal and informal social institutions. The Atlanta Police

Department has made major strides in the last few years, and that could be the key factor explaining Atlanta's faster crime decline.

Community factors explain the rest, as they do for other cities and the nation displaying the same trend: Longer incarceration of repeat offenders (three strikes laws), the decline in drug use and addiction, and decreased opportunity are among the likely factors accounting for the ongoing decline.

How long this trend will continue is an entirely different question.

Robert R. Friedmann is professor emeritus of criminal justice and director of the Georgia International Law Enforcement Exchange at Georgia State University's Andrew Young School of Policy Studies.

Photo

Robert R. Friedmann is professor emeritus of criminal justice and director of the Georgia International Law Enforcement Exchange at Georgia State University's Andrew Young School of Policy Studies.