

Crime and Urban Flight
Revisited: The Effect of the 1990s
Drop in Crime on Cities

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Ingrid Gould Ellen ·
Katherine O'Regan

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For most of the twentieth century, concerns about safety and high crime rates have beset U.S. cities. Researchers and policymakers pointed to these high urban crime rates as one of the chief 'urban blights' from which middle class, mobile (and typically white) households fled during the post-War period, fueling suburbanization. But this picture changed dramatically in the 1990s, a decade during which the crime rate in the U.S. fell by a remarkable thirty percent, and crime rates in many U.S. cities declined even further.

This paper builds on the 'flight from blight' literature, and considers what effect (if any) the 1990s drop in crime rates had on urban population changes. While the empirical evidence is somewhat mixed about the effect of crime *levels* on population changes, work by Cullen and Levitt (1999) suggests that *increases* in crime rates during the late 1970s and 1980s may have contributed to central city flight, particularly of more affluent households and those with children. Their work, however, does not extend through the 1990s. Unlike the two previous decades, the 1990s was a period of almost continuous declines in crime rates, to levels that were lower than experienced in decades. Did this drop in crime reverse, or at least abate, urban flight? It is not obvious *a priori* that the relationship between crime and residential decisions would be symmetric – while increases in city crime may push residents away from cities, similarly-sized reductions may not attract or retain them.

We examine this more recent time period using census data for 1980 through 2000, for more than 100 central cities and their surrounding metropolitan areas, in combination with more than 20 years of Uniform Crime Report data. We consider the effect of crime on overall changes in city population, as well as particular sources of population change (migration into cities from surrounding suburbs and migration out of cities into surrounding suburbs) that are more likely to be sensitive to local conditions. We attempt to identify causality through models with lagged measures of crimes, and through an instrumental variables strategy based on state-level measures of stringency of state criminal justice systems.

Our preliminary results provide weak evidence of a significantly negative relationship between changes in crime and population changes. Results from our city migration models suggest that to the extent that crime affects location decisions, it is through influencing intra-metropolitan decisions. Specifically, while lower crime rates do not enable cities to attract new residents as a result (either from their surrounding suburbs or from beyond the metro area) they do help them to retain a larger share of those residents who remain within the MSA. While not supporting an actual reversal of flight, this latter finding is completely consistent with abating flight.