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## IS THE SKY ABOUT TO FALL?

***Chiefs warn that police cutbacks will lead to a resurgence of crime. Are they right?***

*By Julius (Jay) Wachtel.* Police layoffs were once unheard of. So when communities as hard-hit by crime as [Oakland](#) trim their sworn ranks – eighty cops, about ten percent of the force, were let go in July – everyone takes notice. [At a recent Washington meeting](#) worried police executives from across the U.S. discussed the impact of public safety cuts and exchanged information on how best to proceed. Chiefs from Sacramento to Massachusetts [complained](#) that plunging tax revenues were threatening to reverse hard-fought gains against crime by forcing them to freeze hiring, disband specialized units and return detectives to patrol.

Dealing with cutbacks has certainly led to some interesting solutions. Desperately looking for ways to close a \$128 million gap the Los Angeles County sheriff's department is having detectives [don uniforms one day a week](#), saving on patrol salaries and overtime but making already substantial investigative backlogs even worse. And in a move [revealed only recently](#), in July the FBI assigned six agents to LAPD homicide and funded an undisclosed amount of detective overtime, enabling the beleaguered department to clear an "unheard of" twenty-seven murders in three months.

During the past two years Congress has set aside a portion of recovery act funds to help police departments pay for more cops. Administered by DOJ's community policing office, [the program](#) just disbursed its second set of grants, amounting to \$300 million. [Sacramento County](#), which laid off more than one-hundred deputies in 2009, got \$21 million, which it will use to bring back fifty.

With only so much money to go around applicant agencies [must prove](#) that their financial circumstances and crime problems are unusually grim. Unable to meet that requirement, NYPD and LAPD have been repeatedly turned away. That's ruffled feathers. "This formula makes absolutely no sense," complained Sen. Charles Schumer (D – NY). "Punishing New York City and other municipalities for their success in keeping crime down and people safe sends the wrong message to law enforcement agencies."

Senator Schumer's anger is understandable. Chuck Wexler, executive director of the Police Executive Research Forum, the organization that hosted the Washington conference, pointed out that New York City had 2,200 murders in 1990 but only 466 in 2009. "For the longest time, people thought that the police didn't matter, didn't affect the crime rate. Now we've seen that's not true." What happens, he asked, when proactive strategies are out of reach?

[Violent and property crime are now about 40 percent](#) lower than in 1990-1992, when the so-called "Great Crime Drop" began. Except for slight upticks in violence in 2005 and 2006, the offense count (actual numbers, not just per capita) has fallen each year. [Just-released figures](#) indicate that this trend has continued through the present, with violent crime down 5.3 percent and property crime down 4.6 percent in 2009.

Why the drop? As we've [previously posted](#), academic assessments have given credit to a variety of factors, including improvements in the economy, the graying of the population, increased incarceration and vigorous policing (see Blumstein and Wallman, "The Crime Drop in America", Cambridge, 2000).

Economic arguments don't seem all that compelling. To be sure, with [recessions](#) in 1960-61, 1969-70, 1973-75, 1980, 1981-82, 1990-91, 2000-2001 and 2007-2009 there is lots of room for speculation. One could surmise, for example, that the relative prosperity of the mid-1980's set the stage for the crime drop, and that the economic expansion of the mid-1990's kept it going. Yet we also know that crime increased during prior periods of growth, such as in the 1960's.

A better answer, many say, is that the American population has been aging out of the crime-prone years. It's true that the [median age has increased](#) – for males, it climbed from 28.9 to an estimated 35.3 between 1980 and 2010. But it's also true that [between 1990-1999](#), a time when violent crime plunged 28 percent and property crime decreased 26 percent, the size of the most criminogenic male age group, 15-29, *increased* by 12 percent.

On the other hand there's no question but that imprisonment prevents crime. One can't commit burglaries while locked up. In his widely quoted (and often reviled) 2003 book about the great crime drop, "[Why Crime Rates Fell](#)," Tufts sociologist John E. Conklin credited up to half the improvement to increased incarceration. Naturally, it's up to police to serve up worthy targets. So to the extent that proactive strategies contribute to the incapacitation of dangerous offenders, slashing police budgets does give reason for concern.

Budgetary constraints also affect the form that punishment can take. The crack-fueled crime spike of the 1980's generated a severely punitive response, which persisted in somewhat diminished form to the present. But with corrections budgets under the gun, states have started experimenting with liberalized release policies. Naturally, should recidivists get out early, there are consequences.

Incidentally, a seldom-mentioned factor that likely contributed to the crime drop is the stabilization of the crack marketplace, which brought the bloody battles between competing gangs to an end. Peace in the 'hood (we know, a relative term) may be one reason why the murder count has plunged.

Doubts have also arisen about the true magnitude of the crime drop. [A criminologist](#) recently recounted an episode when, as a cop, he was asked to help document the city's need for new streetlights. "We wanted a grant to do that, and we were told to go out and find every broken window we could. You know how many broken windows there are...? We led the nation that year in vandalism. And guess who got the grant?"

In the bad old days, when it seemed that crime could only go up, your blogger recalls that departments were often anxious to remind everyone that crime was getting worse so funding would increase. But once things turned the corner it ceased being in a chief's best interests to point out that crime in their city was up. As we mentioned in [Liars Figure](#), the need to demonstrate continual improvement, generated in part by Compstat, has led to widespread cheating. Under pressure from superiors, officers have discouraged citizens from reporting crimes, ignored and undercounted what was reported, and downgraded offenses (e.g., from aggravated to simple assault) to keep them from appearing in the FBI's yearly crime counts. It's

impossible to estimate the effect of such shenanigans, but it's likely significant. Bottom line: the "great crime drop" may not be so "great" after all.