

dialogues**Does Abortion Prevent Crime?**

By Steven Levitt and Steve Sailer

Updated Tuesday, Aug. 24, 1999, at 4:24 PM PT

From: Steven Levitt**To:** Steve Sailer

Posted Monday, Aug. 23, 1999, at 5:32 PM PT

In recent weeks there has been a lot of media coverage of a paper John Donohue and I recently wrote connecting the legalization of abortion in the 1970s to reduced crime in the 1990s. (A preliminary version of the paper is posted [here](#).) The purpose of the study is to better understand the reasons for the sharp decline in crime during this decade, which, prior to our research, had largely eluded explanation. While there are many other theories as to why crime declined (more prisoners, better policing, the strong economy, the decline of crack, etc.), most experts agree that none of these very convincingly explains the 30 percent to 40 percent fall in crime since 1991.

The theoretical justification for our argument rests on two simple assumptions: 1) Legalized abortion leads to fewer "unwanted" babies being born, and 2) unwanted babies are more likely to suffer abuse and neglect and are therefore at an increased risk for criminal involvement later in life. The first assumption, that abortion reduces the number of unwanted children, is true virtually by definition. The second assumption, that unwanted children are at increased risk for criminal involvement, is supported by three decades of academic research. If one accepts these two assumptions, then a direct mechanism by which the legalization of abortion can reduce crime has been established. At that point, the question merely becomes: Is the magnitude of the impact large or small?

Our preliminary research suggests that the effect of abortion legalization is large. According to our estimates, as much as one-half of the remarkable decline in crime in the 1990s may be attributable to the legalization of abortion. We base our conclusions on four separate data analyses.

First, we demonstrate that crime rates began to fall 18 years after the landmark Supreme Court decision *Roe vs. Wade* legalized abortion across the nation, just the point at which babies born under legalized abortion would be reaching the peak adolescent crime years. In my opinion, this is the weakest of our four data analyses. In a simple time series, many factors are negatively correlated with crime. Furthermore, the world is a complicated place and it would be simplistic to believe that legalized abortion could overpower all other social determinants of crime.

Second, we show that the five states that legalized abortion in 1970--three years before *Roe vs. Wade*--saw crime begin to decrease roughly three years earlier than the rest of the nation. This is a bit more convincing to me but still far from conclusive.

Third, we demonstrate that states with high abortion rates in the mid-1970s have had much greater crime decreases in the 1990s than states that had low abortion rates in the 1970s. This relationship holds true even when we take into account changes in the size of prison populations, number of police, poverty rates, measures of the economy, changes in welfare generosity, and other changes in fertility. This is the evidence

that really starts to be convincing, in my opinion.

Fourth, we show that the abortion-related drop in crime is occurring only for those who today are under the age of 25. This is exactly the age group we would expect to be affected by the legalization of abortion in the early 1970s. That is where our paper stops. Our paper is a descriptive exercise attempting to explain why crime fell. While our paper highlights one benefit of allowing women to determine whether or not to bring pregnancies to term, we make no attempt to systematically analyze the many possible costs and benefits of legalized abortion. Consequently, we can make no judgment as to whether legalized abortion is good or bad. In no way does our paper endorse abortion as a form of birth control. In no way does our paper suggest that the government should restrict any woman's right to bear children. Although these are the most interesting issues for the media to discuss, our paper actually has very little to say on such topics.

I think the crux of the misinterpretation of our study is that critics of our work fail to see the distinction between identifying a relationship between social phenomena and endorsing such a relationship. When a scientist presents evidence that global warming is occurring, it does not mean that he or she favors global warming, but merely that the scientist believes such a phenomenon exists. That is precisely our position with respect to the link between abortion and crime: We are not arguing that such a relationship is good or bad, merely that it appears to exist.

As an aside, it has been both fascinating and disturbing to me how the media have insisted on reporting this as a study about race, when race really is not an integral part of the story. The link between abortion and unwantedness, and also between unwantedness and later criminality, have been shown most clearly in Scandinavian data. Abortion rates among African-Americans are higher, but overall, far more abortions are done by whites. None of our analysis is race-based because the crime data by race is generally not deemed reliable.

I look forward to hearing your thoughts. I am interested in your views on the paper and its analysis, but also on the broader topic of the coverage of scientific research in the popular press, particularly when it relates to sensitive subjects like abortion, crime, or race. Do you think any good comes from a public discussion of academic studies such as this one? What, if anything, could be done to make such public debates more productive?

From: Steve Sailer

To: Steven Levitt

Posted Tuesday, Aug. 24, 1999, at 12:30 AM PT

Your open-minded search for the truth, no matter how disturbing it may turn out to be, epitomizes the scientific ideal. Your study of abortion and crime is exactly what the social sciences need more of: courageous, hard-headed inquiries into the big topics that everybody else is afraid to touch. Even more impressive is your behavior since the controversy started. (Some background for readers: On Aug. 15, I circulated a critique of Steven Levitt and John Donohue's theory that legalized abortion reduced crime to the Human Biodiversity Discussion Group. A member passed it on to Steven, and despite his being deluged with media requests, he wrote to thank me for my criticisms. We then started up an e-mail exchange; this *Slate* "Dialogue" is its public continuation.)

With luck, I'll have room in my next message to respond to your important questions about how to make public and academic discourse less moralistic and more realistic. (Short answer: Junk political correctness.) Today I'll stick to the empirical issues. The problem with your abortion/reduced-crime theory is not that it encourages abortion or eugenic reasoning or whatever, but that it's largely untrue. Your biggest methodological mistake was to focus on the crime rates only in 1985 and 1997. Thus, you missed the 800-pound gorilla of crime trends: the rise and fall of the crack epidemic during the intervening years.

Here's the acid test. Your logic implies that the babies who managed to get born in the '70s should have grown up to be especially law-abiding teens in the early '90s. Did they?

Not exactly. In reality, they went on the worst youth murder spree in American history. According to FBI statistics, the murder rate for 1993's crop of 14- to 17-year-olds (who were born in the high-abortion years of 1975 to 1979) was a horrifying 3.6 times that of the kids who were 14 to 17 years old in 1984 (who were born in the pre-legalization years of 1966 to 1970). (Click [here](#) to see the graph.) In dramatic contrast, over the same time span the murder rate for those 25 and over (all born before legalization) dropped 6 percent.

Your model would also predict that the recent decline in crime should have shown up first among the youngest, but the opposite was true. The murder rate for 35- to 49-year-olds has been falling since the early '80s, and for 25- to 34-year-olds since 1991, but the two most homicidal years for 14- to 17-year-olds were 1993 and 1994.

The dubiousness of your theory becomes even more obvious when we break down this post-*Roe vs. Wade* generation by race.

Now, you say that your theory isn't "about race," but simply about the greater likelihood that "unwanted" babies will grow up to be bad guys. That correlation sounds plausible. Still any realistic theory about abortion and crime must deal with the massive correlation between violence and race. As you note, African-Americans have three times the abortion rate of whites. You don't mention, however, that, as Janet Reno's [Justice Department](#) flatly states that "blacks are 8 times more likely than whites to commit homicide." Therefore, blacks commit more murders than whites in total as well as per capita.

So, let's look at just black males born in 1975 to 1979. Since their mothers were having abortions at three times the white rate, that should have driven down their youth murder rate. Instead, from 1984 to 1993 the black male youth homicide rate grew an apocalyptic 5.1 times. (Click [here](#) to see graph.) This black juvenile rate also grew relative to the white juvenile murder rate, from five times worse in 1984 to 11 times worse in 1993.

Why, then, is this generation born in 1975 to 1979 now committing relatively fewer crimes as it ages? It makes no sense to give the credit to abortion, which so catastrophically failed to keep them on the straight and narrow when they were juveniles. Instead, the most obvious explanation is the ups and downs of the crack business, which first drove violent crime up in the late '80s and early '90s, then drove it down in the mid and late '90s. That's why the crime rate has fallen fastest exactly where it had previously grown fastest as a result of crack--in the biggest cities (e.g., New York) and among young black males. This generation born right after legalization is better behaved today in part because so many of its bad apples are now confined to prisons, wheelchairs, and coffins. For example, over the last two decades the U.S. has doubled the number of black males in prison, to nearly 1 million.

More encouragingly, the biggest decline in murder from 1993 to 1997 was among the newest generation of

black males aged 14 to 17. These kids born mostly in the early '80s survived abortion levels similar to those faced by the crime-ridden 1975-to-1979 generation. Yet, their murder rate in 1997 was less than half that of the 14- to 17-year-olds of 1993. Seeing their big brothers gunned down in drive-by shootings and their big sisters becoming crack whores may have scared them straight.

Admittedly, it's still theoretically possible that without abortion the black youth murder rate would have, say, sextupled instead of merely quintupling. Still, there's a more interesting question: Why did the places with the highest abortion rates in the '70s (e.g., NYC and Washington D.C.) tend to suffer the worst crack-driven crime waves in the early '90s?

From: Steven Levitt

To: Steve Sailer

Posted Tuesday, Aug. 24, 1999, at 6:30 PM PT

It is so refreshing to have someone challenge our study based on the facts instead of the knee-jerk reactions I have been hearing and reading about in the press the last few weeks.

The set of facts that you offer is indeed challenging to our theory: The late '80s and early '90s were periods of high inner-city youth homicide, fueled by the crack epidemic, declining juvenile punishment, and the increased availability of handguns to kids. I would never deny that legalized abortion is only one factor among many that affect crime rates. According to our estimates, abortion has had the effect of suppressing crime by about 1 percent per year over the last decade. Compared with the gyrations in the crime rate caused by other factors, this is pretty small stuff. But since the impact of abortion builds year after year as more cohorts of potential criminals are covered by legalized abortion (unlike factors such as crack, which tend to rise and fade), eventually the impact of abortion begins to overwhelm the noise in the data.

Because the time-series data are so volatile, I have always been more convinced by the cross-state changes in crime that we uncover (see my previous e-mail). In particular, we find that by 1997, crime among those under age 25 had fallen much more sharply in high-abortion states than low-abortion states. The same was not true for crime among those 25 and over. I do not have the data at my fingertips to see what was happening across states to 17-year-olds in the early '90s. This is clearly data I should gather and analyze.

Your hypothesis that crack, not abortion, is the story, provides a testable alternative to our explanation of the facts. You argue:

1. The arrival of crack led to large increases in crime rates between 1985 and the early '90s, particularly for inner-city African-American youths.
2. The fall of the crack epidemic left many of the bad apples of this cohort dead, imprisoned, or scared straight. Consequently, not only did crime fall back to its original pre-crack level, but actually dropped even further in a "overshoot" effect.
3. States that had high abortion rates in the '70s were hit harder by the crack epidemic, thus any link between falling crime in the '90s and abortion rates in the '70s is spurious.

If either assumption 1 or 2 is true, then the crack epidemic can explain some of the rise and fall in crime in the '80s and '90s. In order for your crack hypothesis to undermine the "abortion reduces crime" theory,

however, all three assumptions must hold true.

So, let's look at the assumptions one by one and see how they fare.

1. Did the arrival of crack lead to rising youth crime? Yes. No argument from me here.
2. Did the decline in crack lead to a "boomerang" effect in which crime actually fell by more than it had risen with the arrival of crack? Unfortunately for your story, the empirical evidence overwhelmingly rejects this claim. Using specifications similar to those in our paper, we find that the states with the biggest increases in murder over the rising crack years (1985-91) did see murder rates fall faster between 1991 and 1997. But for every 10 percent that murder rose between 1985 and 1991, it fell by only 2.6 percent between 1991 and 1997. For your story to explain the decline in crime that we attribute to legalized abortion, this estimate would have to be about five times bigger. Moreover, for violent crime and property crime, increases in these crimes over the period 1985-91 are actually associated with increases in the period 1991-97 as well. In other words, for crimes other than murder, the impact of crack is not even in the right direction for your story.
3. Were high-abortion-rate states in the '70s hit harder by the crack epidemic in the '90s? Given the preceding paragraph, this is a moot point, because all three assumptions must be true to undermine the abortion story, but let's look anyway. A reasonable proxy for how hard the crack epidemic hit a state is the rise in crime in that state over the period 1985-91. Your theory requires a large positive correlation between abortion rates in a state in the '70s and the rise in crime in that state between 1985 and 1991. In fact the actual correlations, depending on the crime category, range between $-.32$ and $+.09$. Thus, the claim that high-abortion states are the same states that were hit hardest by crack is not true empirically. While some states with high abortion rates did have a lot of crack (e.g., New York and D.C.), Vermont, Kansas, Hawaii, Massachusetts, and Washington were among the 10 states with the highest abortion rates in the '70s. These were not exactly the epicenters of the crack epidemic.

So, what is the final tally? Two of the key assumptions underlying your alternative hypothesis appear to be false: The retreat of crack has not led to an "overshoot" in crime, causing it to be lower than 1985, and even if it had, the states with high abortion rates in the '70s do not appear to be affected particularly strongly by the crack epidemic. Moreover, when we re-run our analysis controlling for both changes in crime rates from 1985 to 1991 and the level of crime in 1991, the abortion variable comes in just as strongly as in our original analysis.

Crack clearly has affected crime over the last decade, but it cannot explain away our results with respect to legalized abortion.

The best test of any theory is its predictive value. The abortion theory predicts that crime will continue to fall slowly for the next 10 to 15 years. Also, the declines in crime should continue to be greater in high-abortion states than in low-abortion states. What do you predict based on your crack theory? If you are willing to wait 10 years, perhaps we can resolve this debate.

From: Steve Sailer

To: Steven Levitt

Posted Wednesday, Aug. 25, 1999, at 12:30 AM PT

I suspect that both the readers who have stuck it out with us this far and the professors at Harvard, Stanford, and the University of Chicago who heard you present your theory must be thinking roughly along these lines: "Well, I'm not sure I followed all the statistical details, but Professor Levitt's basic point is pure common sense. As long as abortion rids us of more fetuses likely to become gang members, it simply must reduce crime." That would explain why those high-powered academics forgot to point out to you that, contra your theory, when the first generation to "benefit" from being culled by legal abortion reached ages 14 to 17, they went on a homicidal rampage. (Click [here](#) to see FBI graph.)

Therefore, rather than mud wrestle in the numbers here, I'll privately send you my technical suggestions. In this essay, I'll step back and explain why this straightforward insight might not actually work in practice.

The widespread assumption that your theory must be correct reveals just how many people deep down believe, whether they admit it publicly or not, that "certain people" are just permanently more incorrigible than others. As a contender for the World's Least Politically Correct Human, I'm sympathetic. It's ironic, but because I've been arguing for years that genetic diversity affects society, I was one of the few to notice in this particular case that crime has risen and fallen not because we are aborting the poor and black and unwanted, but because of that staple of genteel liberal commentary, Cultural Forces (e.g., crack).

Your "differential fertility" logic has a fascinating history. That the poor outbreed the rich was noted at least as long ago as Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*. A long line of both conservative and progressive nail-biters have worried that a bourgeoisie that's self-disciplined and responsible enough to use abstinence or contraception will someday be demographically swamped by a working class too sexually indulgent and disorganized to prevent pregnancies. The "eugenicists" feared the spread of the lower orders' inadequate genes, while the "euculturalists" dreaded their cruder culture. And agnostics on the subject realized that while disentangling nature and nurture was extremely difficult (only with the advent of twin and adoption studies have we made much progress), the precise mechanism mattered surprisingly little. Whether from genes or upbringing or both, people who are too irresponsible or incompetent to prevent most unwanted pregnancies tend to have fairly irresponsible or incompetent children. Thus, many unreligious right-wingers and WASP progressives (e.g., Margaret Sanger, founder of Planned Parenthood) supported abortion as the antidote to the bad demographic effects of contraception. Abortion would allow the working class to tidy up its mistakes.

This logic implies that legalized abortion should reduce illegitimacy. And since illegitimacy is closely linked to crime, therefore abortion must reduce crime. Right? Yet, abortion and illegitimacy both soared during the '70s, and then the youth violent-crime rate also soared when the kids born during that decade hit their teens. How come?

In theory, legal abortion reduces murder by being, in effect, "prenatal capital punishment." But, first, it's not very efficient. Like Herod, we have to eradicate many to get the one we want. While genes and upbringing do affect criminality, there's so much randomness that predicting the destiny of individual fetuses is hard.

Second, what if besides a contraceptive-using bourgeoisie and an abortion-using working class, there also exists an underclass to whom, in the words of Homer Simpson, "Life is just a bunch of things that happen"? What if in the '70s members of the underclass didn't effectively use either contraception or abortion, but, being too destitute or distracted or drunk or drugged, they just tended to let shit happen all the way to the maternity ward? And what if the legalization of abortion gave them an excuse to be even less careful about avoiding pregnancy? In fact, in your paper you cite evidence that 60 percent to 75 percent of all fetuses aborted in the '70s would never have been conceived without legal abortion. If that's what happened across

all classes, the increase in careless pregnancies specifically among the underclass might have been so big that it negated the eugenic or euculturalist effects of abortion.

Thus, legalizing abortion would have thinned the ranks of the respectable black working class but not the black underclass. Its cultural influence would therefore have mounted. Just compare the working-class black music of the '60s (e.g., Motown) with the underclass gangsta rap of the late '80s, which spread the lethal bust-a-cap code of the East Coast and West Coast crack dealers across America.

Third, legalizing abortion finished off the traditional shotgun wedding. Earlier, the pill had shifted responsibility for not getting pregnant to the woman. Then, legal abortion relieved the impregnating boyfriend of the moral duty of making an honest woman out of her. This would drive up the illegitimacy rate.

Finally, even more speculatively, but also more frighteningly, the revolution in social attitudes that excused terminating the unborn may also have helped persuade violent youths that they could be excused for terminating the born.

To conclude, you ask for my prediction on crime trends. Because you failed to use data that focused precisely enough on particular generations (e.g., the highly violent group born after *Roe vs. Wade* in 1975-1979), your model has consistently failed to even predict the past. For example, in utter contrast to your logic, the murder rate for 14- to 17-year-olds even in the low crime year of 1997 was 94 percent higher than it was for 14- to 17-year-olds in 1984. Yet, over the same span, the murder rate for 25- to 34-year-olds (born pre-legalization) has dropped 27 percent. (Click [here](#) to see FBI table.)

Thus my faith in your theory's ability to forecast the future is limited. Last week, in the Human Biodiversity discussion group, the polymath Gregory Cochran (who was the co-subject of the February 1999 *Atlantic* cover story on his new Darwinian theory of disease) responded to your prediction that crime will fall slowly for another 10 to 15 years, assuming all else is equal: "A counter-prediction: that all else will not be equal. Social changes are more important to crime trends than abortion, they're still ongoing, and they're likely to dominate." At some point in the future when black teens no longer remember much about the previous generation's self-inflicted crack wound, somebody will invent a new drug. Then we'll be back on another drug-epidemic-driven crime roller coaster.

Steven D. Levitt is a professor of economics at the University of Chicago and a research fellow at the American Bar Foundation. His primary research focus is the economics of crime and the criminal justice system. Click [here](#) to read his paper on abortion and crime.

[Steve Sailer](#) is a businessman and writer. He is the founder of the Human Biodiversity e-mail discussion group. His work can be found [here](#).

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