



Was there a Ferguson Effect on crime rates in large U.S. cities? [☆]



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ABSTRACT

Purpose: There has been widespread speculation that the events surrounding the shooting death of an unarmed young black man by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri—and a string of similar incidents across the country—have led to increases in crime in the United States. This study tested for the “Ferguson Effect” on crime rates in large U.S. cities.

Methods: Aggregate and disaggregate monthly Part I criminal offense data were gathered 12 months before and after August 2014 from police department data requests and websites in 81 large U.S. cities. The exogenous shock of Ferguson was examined using a discontinuous growth model to determine if there was a redirection in seasonality-adjusted crime trends in the months following the Ferguson shooting.

Results: No evidence was found to support a systematic post-Ferguson change in overall, violent, and property crime trends; however, the disaggregated analyses revealed that robbery rates, declining before Ferguson, increased in the months after Ferguson. Also, there was much greater variation in crime trends in the post-Ferguson era, and select cities did experience increases in homicide. Overall, any Ferguson Effect is constrained largely to cities with historically high levels of violence, a large composition of black residents, and socioeconomic disadvantages.

Conclusions: The national discourse surrounding the “Ferguson Effect” is long on anecdotes and short on data, leaving criminologists largely on the sidelines of a conversation concerning one of the most prominent contemporary issues in criminal justice. Our findings are largely consistent with longstanding criminological knowledge that changes in crime trends are slow and rarely a product of random shocks.

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Crime is one of the most important influences on the quality of life in the United States. Beyond the harm faced by crime victims, crime rates are a key structural feature of communities that are associated with long-term negative consequences for residents and the well-being of cities. These consequences include the stigma of being identified as a “bad neighborhood” or “dangerous city” to outsiders and insiders alike, and the resulting deleterious consequences for the area’s economic landscape (Besbris, Faber, Rich, & Sharkey, 2015; Sampson, 2012; Xie & McDowall, 2010). Accordingly, understanding changes in crime rates is important for a wide range of academic disciplines and has direct policy implications for the criminal justice system and other social institutions. Since the early 1990s, the United States has enjoyed the longest sustained decline in crime since the FBI began compiling crime statistics in the early 1930s (Blumstein & Wallman, 2006;

Fagan, Zimring, & Kim, 1998). However, since the shooting of Michael Brown, an unarmed black man in Ferguson, MO on August 9, 2014, the subsequent civil unrest, and social media attention to his shooting, there has been speculation that a “Ferguson Effect” has ended the great crime decline (Bialik, 2015; Davey & Smith, 2015; Mac Donald, 2015; Rosenfeld, 2015).

Could the events surrounding Ferguson have changed the trajectory of crime trends in the United States? Such a hypothesis is consistent with three potential explanations. The first of these is de-policing, where negative publicity and public protest regarding police behavior leads officers to withdraw from enforcing the law for fear of criticism and lawsuits. From this perspective, police officers throughout the United States may have become hesitant to be proactive out of concerns for being subjected to negative media scrutiny for racial profiling or the use of excessive force (Wolfe & Nix, 2015; see also: Oliver, 2015). Reduced guardianship and lack of enforcement—if widespread enough—may lead to increases in crime rates (Braga, Papachristos, & Hureau, 2014; Levitt, 2002; Marvell & Moody, 1996; Rosenfeld, Deckard, & Blackburn, 2014). The empirical evidence for de-policing is mixed (Shi, 2008; Stone, Foglesong, & Cole, 2009).¹ For example, Shi (2008) showed that in the wake of a highly publicized incident involving a

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white police officer shooting an unarmed African-American teenager in Cincinnati, OH and subsequent Department of Justice investigation, arrests fell substantially (i.e., evidence of de-policing). However, research showed that an LAPD consent decree did not result in any form of de-policing (Stone et al., 2009). In fact, pedestrian and motor vehicle stops doubled after the consent decree and a higher proportion of such stops resulted in an arrest. Total arrests were also shown to increase post-consent decree. It must be noted, however, that de-policing is difficult to measure and requires measurements of police activity which are generally not publicly available.

Unlike the events spurring the studies of de-policing in Cincinnati and Los Angeles, the shooting in Ferguson occurred in the era of social media. The massive social media response following the events in Ferguson may have precipitated de-policing through contagion, the viral spread of information across social media. Indeed, the search term “Ferguson shooting” yields around 30 million hits on Google, and has led to speculation about such a response by law enforcement officials including several municipal Chiefs and the Director of the FBI. The juxtaposition of concerns about de-policing, the resulting unrest following the initial shooting, and the decision not to pursue criminal charges against the officer coupled with extensive social media coverage of issues in Ferguson make this a compelling issue to examine empirically.

Second, high-profile incidents such as Ferguson may convey to the public that justice is being administered unfairly and lead to challenges to the legitimacy of the law. One response to the belief that the law is not administered fairly is increased participation in crime (Jackson et al., 2012; Tyler, 2006). It is possible that the killing of unarmed citizens by officers sends the signal to some citizens that law enforcement’s values and behaviors are inconsistent with their expectations about how the law should be administered, therefore reducing stakes in conformity, and leading to crime and disorder. Public trust in the police can be precarious, and such shootings may upend that balance, particularly for the most disadvantaged members of American society (Kane, 2005). Public criticism of the police on social media has spread the potential impact of such an effect well beyond the geographic bounds of the St. Louis metropolitan area, often in response to other officer-involved shootings. For example, the death-in-custody of Freddie Gray led to violent rioting in Baltimore and the shooting of John Crawford III in Beavercreek, OH resulted in a Department of Justice investigation. Public outcry regarding the shooting of Laquan McDonald in Chicago has led to calls for the resignation of Mayor Rahm Emanuel. In short, it is clear that citizens in a number of U.S. cities are calling into question the legitimacy of police use of force.

The third explanation is that crime declines had reached their nadir and any increases in crime were due to factors unrelated to Ferguson. After all, the large declines in crime observed over the past two decades likely will eventually level out or even increase at some point. Such a view is consistent with several threats to internal validity, including history and regression to the mean (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002). This argument finds the relationship between a Ferguson Effect and increased crime rates attributed to extraneous factors and thus spurious. This is a plausible argument, given the length and magnitude of the crime decline which may not be sustainable. Nonetheless, whether this nadir occurred coincidentally at the same time as Ferguson would raise serious questions about turning points in crime trends.

Even so, should the Ferguson Effect be observed systematically throughout the United States or are claims of de-policing and challenges to the legitimacy of the police idiosyncratic to particular cities? The heterogeneity among large U.S. cities makes it likely that exogenous factors will be experienced differently. Social media has played an important role in drawing attention to Ferguson and related events (Wolfe & Nix, 2015), making it possible for events to be observed in one city and their impact to be felt in others. In less than two weeks after the shooting, the *Wall Street Journal* reported over 7.8 million tweets using the #Ferguson hashtag, and the *New York Times* reported considerable

misinformation on social media about the shooting as well as the ensuing social unrest (Bilton, 2014; Zak, 2014). The effects of social media may lead to de-policing or erosion in the legitimacy of the law, which in turn could lead to increases in crime across the United States.

Importantly, the Ferguson Effect has been blamed for apparent increases in violent crime in several U.S. cities by government leaders, law enforcement executives, and academics alike. FBI Director James Comey even recently suggested that the Ferguson Effect has led to increases in violent crime in some cities by stating, “I don’t know whether that explains it entirely, but I do have a strong sense that some part of the explanation is a chill wind that has blown through American law enforcement over the last year” (Schmidt & Apuzzo, 2015). Ironically, Director Comey heads the agency responsible for producing the Uniform Crime Reports in the United States and he himself lacked the full data on crime to draw the conclusions he announced. Indeed, there is little empirical evidence and lots of speculation about this question. A brief paper examined St. Louis crime rates over time and found very limited support for such an effect (Rosenfeld, 2015). Another analysis focused on year-by-year differences in homicide across 60 cities and found a 16% increase in 2015 from 2014 (Bialik, 2015). A recently released *Brennan Center for Justice* report examined homicide changes between 2014 and 2015 in 25 of the 30 largest U.S. cities, finding that homicide rates increased by 15% (Friedman, Fortier, & Cullen, 2015). While these studies reveal important insight into crime in the United States, they are either narrow due to the number of cities or the number of crime types included in their analyses. These studies lack the broad theoretical rationale presented here to anticipate that a Ferguson Effect may extend to a broader cross-section of our largest cities and to forms of crime other than homicide.

This study examines whether crime trends changed systematically after the Ferguson shooting and if there were idiosyncratic changes across U.S. cities. We conduct our analysis among 81 U.S. cities with populations exceeding 200,000 persons using discontinuous growth modeling that incorporates between-city variability in FBI Part I aggregate and disaggregate crime trends before and after Ferguson. After all, there is considerable heterogeneity across U.S. cities. Even among large cities, there is variation in region, crime level, policing style, and the size of the police force, among other things which could either buffer or bolster any “Ferguson Effect” on crime. It is important to note that the city-level crime data used in this analysis cannot establish whether loss of legitimacy or de-policing is at the root of an observed increase in crime, or whether contagion induced by social media was responsible for transmitting these changes. Rather, our central goal is to provide the most comprehensive investigation into the Ferguson Effect on crime trends in the United States. If there is a Ferguson Effect, it could challenge the decades-long decline in serious crime, particularly homicide. But of course, without data, these arguments remain speculative. FBI Director Comey echoed this sentiment by suggesting that “Data is a dry word, but we need better data” concerning the Ferguson Effect. We agree—this issue is important because considerable public and private resources are committed to responding to crime and their use should be guided by data and not speculation. Data and analysis must serve as the foundation of evidence-based decision making and policy development.

Methods

Data

This study examined official crime data in U.S. cities. Monthly crime data were collected from police department data requests and police department websites in 81 of the 105 U.S. cities with populations exceeding 200,000 persons in 2010. Larger cities were the focus of this study because crime recording practices are more reliable, and the volume of criminal activity is greater and less subject to random fluctuation in the numerator, than in smaller cities (Maltz, 2006). Using 200,000 persons as our target population threshold also provided the twofold

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