

DO WE CARE ABOUT TRUTH?

A study suggests that abortion has cut crime. But people ignore what they find upsetting.

By ROBERT J. SAMUELSON

THE FUROR OVER THE STUDY THAT ATTRIBUTES falling crime partly to abortion may tell us as much about America as about crime. If you missed it, the study—done by economist Steven Levitt of the University of Chicago and law professor John Donohue III of Stanford University—concluded that half the drop in crime since 1991 might reflect the Supreme Court's 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision legalizing abortion. The argument is that some potential criminals weren't born, because their mothers had abortions. If true, the country got a slightly better crop of teenagers by the 1990s.

But is it true? We may never know. Crime's decline is one of the great mysteries of the 1990s. Between 1991 and 1997, the murder rate fell 31 percent; the rates for all violent crime (murder, rape, assault, robbery) and property crime (burglary, auto theft) dropped 19 percent and 16 percent. No one predicted this, and the usual theories—better policing, tougher sentences, lower unemployment—don't seem to explain it fully. Frustrated, Levitt and Donohue (who have both studied crime extensively) wondered whether abortion might matter.

They convincingly say that their aim is to understand crime, not promote abortion. What impressed them were the sheer numbers. "I don't think that people realize that [about] one in four pregnancies ends in abortion," says Levitt. Indeed. In 1992, there were 4.1 million births and 1.5 million abortions. But their inquiry is the social-science equivalent of "don't ask, don't tell." Few politicians want to cede credit for crime's decline to a distant Supreme Court ruling. The press is also uninterested. The *Chicago Tribune* broke the study with a front-page story, but most coverage has been minimal. The *Washington Post* ran a short story on page A-9; The *New York Times* story (on A-14) didn't appear for almost two weeks.

This reticence, of course, reflects the bitter abortion debate. Interestingly, both sides deplore the study. "Fraught with stupidity," says one anti-abortion group. If you believe abortion is murder, the idea that it's an anti-crime device is outrageous. Consider the grim arithmetic: between 1991 and 1997, the annual number of homicides dropped by 6,500 (from 24,700 to 18,200), while abortions regularly exceeded a million a year. But pro-abortion groups also dislike the study. They promote abortion as a woman's right, not as a covert means of social control—weeding out criminals and incompetents—with racial overtones. Blacks and other minorities account for about 40 percent of abortions.

There's a temptation to embrace self-censorship: let's drop the issue. But will the country be better off if we do? Not really. The probable result is that the study's conclusion will quietly infiltrate popular wisdom—be accepted as accurate, even if it isn't openly discussed—

when it may or may not be true. And our understanding of crime will suffer if we can't debate one plausible cause of its decline.

What's the debate, then? Well, even Donohue and Levitt don't claim that abortion fully explains lower crime. A previous study by Levitt, for example, concluded that keeping criminals in prison has a huge effect on crime; by his estimate, the premature release of one prisoner results in 15 crimes over the next year. The new study attributes half the drop in crime to more prisoners (between 1987 and 1997, the prison and jail population doubled, to 1.7 million). But the study also presents powerful, if circumstantial, evidence for abortion's role.

First, the decline in crime began in 1992, nearly two decades after *Roe v. Wade*. This is just when youths who would have been born in the mid-1970s would have hit their peak crime years (roughly between 18 and 24).

Second, five states legalized abortion before *Roe v. Wade* (Alaska, California, New York, Hawaii and Washington). These states had some crime declines before other states that didn't allow abortion until after the court's ruling.

Third, states with higher abortion rates in the mid-1970s have now experienced steeper drops in crime after controlling for other factors (police, prison populations, poverty, unemployment).



Unwanted children may suffer most from parental neglect, say Levitt and Donohue. Or the children of poorer, less educated parents may be more crime-prone. If abortion reduced crime, it could have other social consequences. Perhaps more people are employable, because fewer unemployables were born. This may have aided welfare reform. But any effects will be doubtful if abortion's connection to crime is mostly a statistical coincidence.

And it might be. Everyone agrees that the crack-cocaine epidemic ignited a firestorm of violence in inner-city neighborhoods. By the mid-1990s, this subsided as a result (perhaps) of more arrests, murders and the settling of turf wars. Donohue and Levitt don't think this completely explains lower crime. But it could. Mobilizing against crack may have made police more effective. Their theory also requires that youth crime rates fall in the early 1990s. But the data may not fit this. Social commentator Steve Sailer—in an analysis for *Slate.com*—notes that homicide-arrest rates for teens rose until the mid-1990s. Drug arrests also increased.

Indeed, it's possible that legalized abortion increased crime by contributing to family breakdown. In a 1996 study, economists George Akerlof of the Brookings Institution and his wife, Janet Yellen, until recently the chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers, argued that *Roe v. Wade* and contraception had helped cause the explosion of single-parent families. Men felt less responsible for the children they fathered, because women could avoid or abort pregnancies. "Shotgun marriages" virtually vanished.

The truth is that we don't know the truth. Even if Donohue and Levitt are correct, the abortion debate should remain one of moral values. There are other ways to avoid unwanted children: abstinence, birth control. But it's delusional to pretend that something as common as abortion is without social consequences. We cannot find them unless we look. The trouble is that in modern America people often won't search for what they fear they might find.

Stephen Jay Gould

Dorothy, It's Really Oz

A pro-creationist decision in Kansas is more than a blow against Darwin

THE KANSAS BOARD OF EDUCATION VOTED 6 TO 4 TO REMOVE evolution, and the Big Bang theory as well, from the state's science curriculum. In so doing, the board transported its jurisdiction to a never-never land where a Dorothy of the new millennium might exclaim, "They still call it Kansas, but I don't think we're in the real world anymore." The new standards do not forbid the teaching of evolution, but the subject will no longer be included in statewide tests for evaluating students—a virtual guarantee, given the realities of education, that this central concept of biology will be diluted or eliminated, thus reducing courses to something like chemistry without the periodic table, or American history without Lincoln.

2 The Kansas skirmish marks the latest episode of a long struggle by religious Fundamentalists and their allies to restrict or eliminate the teaching of evolution in public schools—a misguided effort that our courts have quashed at each stage, and that saddens both scientists and most theologians. No scientific theory, including evolution, can pose any threat to religion—for these two great tools of human understanding operate in complementary (not contrary) fashion in their totally separate realms: science as an inquiry about the factual state of the natural world, religion as a search for spiritual meaning and ethical values.

3 In the early 1920s, several states simply forbade the teaching of evolution outright, opening an epoch that inspired the infamous 1925 Scopes trial (leading to the conviction of a Tennessee high school teacher) and that ended only in 1968, when the Supreme Court declared such laws unconstitutional on First Amendment grounds. In a second round in the late 1970s, Arkansas and Louisiana required that if evolution be taught, equal time must be given to *Genesis* literalism, masquerading as oxymoronic "creation science." The Supreme Court likewise rejected those laws in 1987.

4 The Kansas decision represents creationism's first—and surely temporary—success with a third strategy for subverting a constitutional imperative: that by simply deleting, but not formally banning, evolution, and by not demanding instruction in a biblically literalist "alternative," their narrowly partisan religious motivations might not derail their goals.

5 Given this protracted struggle, Americans of goodwill might be excused for supposing that some genuine scientific or philosophical dispute motivates this issue: Is evolution speculative and ill founded? Does evolution threaten our ethical values or our sense of life's meaning? As a paleontologist by training, and with abiding respect for religious tra-

ditions, I would raise three points to alleviate these worries:

6 First, no other Western nation has endured any similar movement, with any political clout, against evolution—a subject taught as fundamental, and without dispute, in all other countries that share our major sociocultural traditions.

7 Second, evolution is as well documented as any phenomenon in science, as strongly as the earth's revolution around the sun rather than vice versa. In this sense, we can call evolution a "fact." (Science does not deal in certainty, so "fact" can only mean a proposition affirmed to such a high degree that it would be perverse to withhold one's provisional assent.)

8 The major argument advanced by the school board—that large-scale evolution must be dubious because the process has not been directly observed—smacks of absurdity and only reveals ignorance about the nature of science. Good science integrates observation with inference. No process that unfolds over such long stretches of time (mostly, in this case, before humans appeared), or at an infinitude beneath our powers of direct visualization (subatomic particles, for example), can be seen directly. If justification required eyewitness testimony, we would have no sciences of deep time—no geology, no ancient human history either. (Should I

believe Julius Caesar ever existed? The hard bony evidence for human evolution, as described in the preceding pages, surely exceeds our reliable documentation of Caesar's life.)

9 Third, no factual discovery of science (statements about how nature "is") can, in principle, lead us to ethical conclusions (how we "ought" to behave) or to convictions about intrinsic meaning (the "purpose" of our lives). These last two questions—and what more important inquiries could we make?—lie firmly in the domains of religion, philosophy and humanistic study. Science and religion should be equal, mutually respecting partners, each the master of its own domain, and with each domain vital to human life in a different way.

10 Why get excited over this latest episode in the long, sad history of American anti-intellectualism? Let me suggest that, as patriotic Americans, we should cringe in embarrassment that, at the dawn of a new, technological millennium, a jurisdiction in our heartland has opted to suppress one of the greatest triumphs of human discovery. Evolution is not a peripheral subject but the central organizing principle of all biological science. No one who has not read the Bible or the Bard can be considered educated in Western traditions; so no one ignorant of evolution can understand science.

11 Dorothy followed her yellow brick road as it spiraled outward toward redemption and homecoming (to the true Kansas of our dreams and possibilities). The road of the newly adopted Kansas curriculum can only spiral inward toward restriction and ignorance.



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