

Uneasy Peace: The Great Crime Decline, the Renewal of City Life, and the Next War on Violence. By Patrick Sharkey. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2018.

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You wouldn't know it if you listened to the current political rhetoric about American "carnage" or turned on your local news with the constant stream of sensationalized stories about the epidemic of crime, but the United States is safer now than it has been in a very, very long time. Even among social scientists, we tend to replay the powerful narrative about the mid to late 20th century demise of cities, characterized by the loss of manufacturing jobs, white flight to the suburbs, a shrinking tax base, and an ill-conceived and unjust War on Drugs. A few social scientists even warned about the emergence of a large pack of brutally remorseless "superpredators." Yet the superpredators never really came, and we have instead been living through a 25+ year period of dramatically declining crime rates and a correlative revitalization of many American cities.

In his new book, *Uneasy Peace*, sociologist Patrick Sharkey takes the reader on a methodical journey through the crime decline, showing that the decline is in fact genuine and not some myth created by the police in the process of cooking their data to save their jobs. Sharkey reveals to us that the decline in crime and violence has literally transformed cities. Whereas he gives due attention to the phenomenal decline in violence in New York, he also takes us to places such as Atlanta, Chicago, Cleveland, and Milwaukee, to name but a few, to illustrate how the crime decline happened and what it has meant for urban life in these cities.

Sharkey dissects the laundry list of proposed explanations for the crime decline touted by academics, pundits, politicians, and others, but persuasively reveals the importance of that age-old sociological concept: informal social control. Relying upon Cohen and Felson's (1979) Routine Activity Theory, which posits that crime is the result of the convergence of motivated offenders and suitable targets in the absence of capable guardians, Sharkey considers explanations fitting within each of these three factors. For instance, he evaluates and critiques explanations focused on the changing volume of motivated criminal offenders, including the incapacitation effect of prisons, Donohue and Levitt's (2001) abortion argument, and declining exposure to lead. While not entirely dismissive of these arguments, he meticulously shows that they could not possibly explain the massive, prolonged decline in crime and violence of the 1990s and 2000s. As an alternative, Sharkey focuses on the "capable guardians" component of Cohen and Felson's framework.

Sharkey shows that the number of police officers in many cities increased in the 1990s, thereby putting more watchful guardians on the streets. But the story of the crime decline is not just about the role of police. Perhaps more importantly, the number of community organizations also began increasing in the 1990s. Sharkey shows that as the number of nonprofits increased, particularly those focused on the issue of violent crime, violence declined dramatically in those geographic areas. He explains, "to those who worked for years and decades to change their communities, the decline in violence was no accident of history, no side effect of changes in abortion law or the amount of lead in gasoline; rather, it was hard work by residents, organized into community groups and block clubs, that transformed urban neighborhoods" (p. 55).

A distinguishing feature of *Uneasy Peace* is that Sharkey does not merely account for the sources of the crime decline, he also examines the benefits of the decline for individuals, communities, and urban life more broadly. He shows that the decline in violence has contributed to a narrowing of racial gaps in life expectancy, has led to improved high school completion rates, has revitalized neighborhoods, has led to economic mobility among disadvantaged youth, and even slowed the pace of income segregation which characterizes so many metropolitan areas. Sharkey explains, “All the evidence from the past few chapters suggests that the greatest benefits of the crime drop have been experienced by the most disadvantaged segments of the urban population” (2018, p. 110).

After detailing the nature of the crime decline and its benefits, Sharkey turns to what he calls the “uneasy peace.” Violence has declined, but urban inequality is obscene. Sharkey wonders how we might prevent the reversion to the earlier era of epidemic violence and urban disintegration. He sees value in substantial federal investment in urban areas, but is not holding his breath for it to happen. He also argues for the importance of a “community quarterback,” a concept developed by an organization called Purpose Built Communities that calls for a single entity in charge of coordinating long-term efforts to transform lower-income communities. This community quarterback would, in a way, organize and consolidate the work of the various community organizations Sharkey has shown to be critical to the vitality of neighborhoods.

Uneasy Peace is a wonderful story about urban revival, but there are two topics that I think deserved more attention and I wouldn’t be surprised if Sharkey agrees with me. These two topics are: the suburbs and prisoner re-entry. Starting with a focus on the suburbs, the question is whether we should treat urban areas as islands, or as components of a larger regional agglomeration in which the dynamics in one part influence transformations in adjacent areas? The fact is that while some cities have been revived over the past few decades, many suburbs have witnessed a downturn. For instance, between 2000 and 2014, poverty increased by sixty-five percent in American suburbs, doubling the growth rate of poverty in major urban areas (Kneebone 2016). In absolute numbers, there are more poor households in U.S. suburbs than in cities and that has been true since at least the turn of the millennium (Allard 2017; Kneebone and Berube 2013).

In terms of the crime decline, Sharkey makes the incredibly important point that the decline was geographically uneven, and actually benefitted severely disadvantaged urban communities the most. A related point not touched on in the book is that suburbs, too, saw declines in crime from 1990 to the present, but cities benefitted far more than suburban areas (Kneebone and Raphael 2011). Between 1990 and 2008, violent crime declined nearly 30% in the primary cities of the 100 largest metropolitan areas in the country, with property crime falling 46%. Over the same time period, property crime fell 37% in the suburban areas of the 100 largest metropolitan areas, but violent crime fell only 7%. Accordingly, whereas the average rate of violent crime is still higher in cities than the suburbs, the gap has shrunk measurably since 1990.

Digging a little bit deeper reveals that the crime decline has been quite uneven *within* suburban areas. Older, high-density, inner-ring suburbs generally saw large declines in violent and property crime from 1990 to the present, but newer, emerging suburbs as well as exurban areas actually had increases in crime and violence (Kneebone and Raphael 2011). Crime may have declined dramatically in cities, but one wonders whether cities exported some of their crime to emerging suburbs. Arguably then, discussions of the crime decline and spatial inequality that are the focus of Sharkey’s book should give due attention to both cities *and* suburbs.

Moving to the topic of prisoner re-entry, Sharkey is absolutely correct that the decline in crime and violence since the early 1990s is real. Yet a key fact that helps put the crime decline in context is that recidivism rates among the formerly incarcerated have actually remained stubbornly persistent over the course of the multi-decade crime decline, at least when aggregated nationally. About once a decade, the Bureau of Justice Statistics conducts an extensive analysis of criminal recidivism (i.e., rearrest, reconviction, and reincarceration) across a sample of U.S. states. From these reports, we learn that of prisoners released in 1983, 62.5% were rearrested within just three years of release and 41.4% returned to incarceration (Beck and Shipley 1989). As we know from Sharkey's book, this was the peak War on Drugs era of Ronald Reagan, and several years before crime began declining in the early 1990s. For individuals released from prison in 1994, 67.5% were rearrested and 51.8% returned to prison within three years (Langan and Levin 2002). So while crime had begun declining by then, recidivism rates were actually escalating. Fast forward to the 2005 release cohort and we see that 67.8% of prison releases were rearrested within three years and 49.7% returned to prison (Durose, Cooper, and Snyder 2005).

Another important fact concerns the share of crimes typically committed by recidivists. Estimates reveal that parolees under supervision following a term of imprisonment account for between 15 and 28 percent of all arrests for violent crimes in the U.S. and between 10 and 18 percent of property arrests (Rosenfeld, Wallman, and Fornango 2005). Putting all these facts together, we see that crime and violence have fallen dramatically since the early 1990s, but paradoxically, we know that the formerly incarcerated account for a sizable volume of crime and arrests but recidivism rates have barely budged over the course of the crime decline.

One interpretation of these trends is that the crime decline, which Sharkey has convincingly shown to be uneven across geographic space, is also uneven across types of individuals. Formal and informal social control strategies may have been successful at preventing non-offenders and perhaps existing low-level offenders from engaging in criminal activity, thereby leading to a dramatic decline in overall crime and violence since the early 1990s. However, crime is still commonplace among many formerly incarcerated individuals. I caution readers, of course, in drawing the premature conclusion that nothing can be done about recidivists and that a 50% reincarceration rate is a foregone conclusion. By now, the social science community has effectively dismantled the "nothing works" rhetoric of the 1970s that claimed that rehabilitation does not work (see Martinson 1974). There are plenty of cost-effective strategies to rehabilitate the formerly incarcerated, including drug treatment, correctional education, job training, and housing assistance (see: <https://www.crimesolutions.gov/>; <http://www.wsipp.wa.gov/BenefitCost?topicId=2>). And these strategies tend to be far more cost-effective than the vast sums of money spent on prisons and the police (in part because of diminishing returns of criminal justice practices). However, by and large, U.S. governments lack the political will to invest sufficient amounts in these strategies even though doing so would yield the types of gains in public safety that they purport to care about. My point in bringing up prisoner re-entry and recidivism is to note that only so much progress can be made in bringing crime down further if society continues to minimally invest in rehabilitation programs and drug treatment.

The two aforementioned themes, suburbanization and prisoner re-entry, are actually intertwined. Traditionally, returning prisoners have been highly concentrated in a relatively small number of urban neighborhoods. Research by the Urban Institute revealed that more than one-half of prisoners released from Illinois prisons in 2001 returned to Chicago, and one-third of these formerly incarcerated individuals were concentrated in only six community areas (La Vigne et al. 2003). However, following the suburbanization of poverty over the past decade or more has been a suburbanization of returning prisoners (Kirk forthcoming). In Illinois, the percentage of state prisoners released to a city of Chicago

residence declined from 52% in 1998 to 39% in 2013. This decline reflects two trends: (1) a declining share of Illinois prison releases to the wider Chicago-Naperville-Elgin core-based statistical area (CBSA) and (2) a suburbanization of releases in the Chicago-Naperville-Elgin CBSA to suburban areas located outside of the Chicago city limits. On this second point, in 1998 three-quarters of the newly released prisoners to the CBSA resided within the Chicago city limits. By 2013, that percentage had declined to 64%. The combination of unstable employment, limited income, rising city rents, and low residential vacancy rates has effectively begun pushing the formerly incarcerated to lower-income suburbs.

Here's one reason why this geographic shift matters: the ability to desist from crime depends upon geographic context. On the one hand, residing in the suburbs could mean living in a safer environment. On the other hand, living in the suburbs can make it difficult, particularly for the transportation-challenged, to access the social services that are critical for successful prisoner reintegration. Relative to urban areas, there are fewer social service organizations in the suburbs, particularly those with a mission to serve former prisoners, and their resources are spread across a more expansive service area given the sprawl of suburbs (Allard 2017). Hence, the shift of the formerly incarcerated to the suburbs means that it is more challenging for former prisoners to access services such as drug and mental health treatment that are so integral to successful rehabilitation. In sum, the great urban crime decline may have been sustained, in part, by the suburbanization of crime and former prisoners, but recidivism rates may increase if the formerly incarcerated are unable to access needed social services.

While I think greater attention to the suburbs and the issue of prisoner reintegration is worthwhile, let me be clear that Patrick Sharkey has produced an incredible portrait of the causes and consequences of the crime decline and the transformation of cities over the past 50 years. Early in the book, Sharkey acknowledges the foundational work in the 1980s and 1990s of eminent urban scholars such as Elijah Anderson, Mary Pattillo, and William Julius Wilson, but he notes that their studies were (mostly) focused on an era before the decline in violence that characterized the last 25 or so years. By recognizing and then chronicling the crime decline as one of the most consequential urban changes of the last several decades, Sharkey has indeed set the stage for a new generation of urban studies to grapple with how the uneasy peace will unfold.

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