**EconoFact Chats: Crime in the Time of COVID**

**David Abrams, University of Pennsylvania**

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Michael Klein:

I'm Michael Klein, executive editor of EconoFact, a non-partisan web-based publication of the Fletcher School at Tufts University. At EconoFact, we bring key facts and incisive analysis to the national debate on economic and social policies, publishing work from leading economists across the country. You can learn more about us and see our work at www.econofact.org.

Michael Klein:

The murder rate in 2020 was 25% higher than the previous year and the highest annual rate in this century. But, at about six murders per 100,000 people, it was lower than at any time from 1968 through 1999, and much lower than the peaks of about 10 murders per 100,000 people in the mid-1970s through 1980 and in the early 1990s. At the same time, 2020 saw a reduction in the rates of other types of crime. What causes crime rates to rise or fall? The higher murder rates last year, combined with lower rates of other types of crime suggest any analysis needs to separate out different types of crime. Or maybe it's just the case of COVID which changed so much altered criminal behavior as well?

Michael Klein:

Economists have brought their analytic tools to study crime and the criminal justice system, and a leading scholar in this area is my guest on EconoFact chats David Abrams. David received his PhD in economics from MIT, and after that taught at law schools at the University of Chicago, and since 2008 at the University of Pennsylvania, where he's also on the faculty of the Wharton School. He's a past president and current board member of the Society for Empirical Legal Studies and past chair of the law and economics section of the American Association of Law Schools. David, welcome to EconoFact chats.

David Abrams:

Thank you so much, Michael.

Michael Klein:

David, you recently published an EconoFact memo about rates of different types of crimes in 25 of the largest U.S. cities between 2015 and 2020. Drawing on the adage that a picture or in this case, a graph is worth a thousand words, can you just explain what the graph in your memo shows about how 2020 was really an unusual year with respect to the incidence of crime?

David Abrams:

Let me see if I can try to conjure up this image, ideally, without using a thousand words. Right around the COVID lockdown in mid-March of 2020, there was a big and quick drop in crime rates that corresponded approximately to when states started issuing, stay-at-home orders. Crime rates stay low throughout the year, so that drop persistent throughout almost all of 2020 and especially as we compare it with the previous five years, they were much, much lower in 2020. If you're imagining this graph, you'd also see a little spike right around late May, early June, that came immediately after the death of George Floyd, and this actually corresponded to the protest and actually lootings that, that resulted in quite a few burglaries right around that time. So that's just a short blip there, but the big story of 2020 on crime was the impact

of COVID, which caused this massive decline overall, relative to the relatively smooth movement of crime in the previous five years.

Michael Klein:

The graph is very striking. I would just direct people to your memo on the EconoFact site, though you did do a nice job of explaining it, thanks for that. So David is the explanation for this basically that with people at home, there were fewer opportunities for street crime or home burglaries?

David Abrams:

That seems to be the explanation for a lot of what is observed. Many crimes require victims, and when there are fewer people out on the street, there are going to be fewer potential victims for these, I call them crimes of opportunity, I think about like robbery, a simple theft or assault, a lot of these need someone or objects that are associated with people to occur. And so when you have fewer people on the street, you have less of those crimes. One interesting finding is that the timing of the decline was actually slightly ahead of the imposition of stay-at-home orders in most locations.

Michael Klein:

Yeah, there is actually an interesting EconoFact memo by Lisa Kahn that shows that this phenomenon was similar with respect to spending and other things that people even before you had the orders were responding to the health conditions and acting in advance of the actual stay-at-home orders.

David Abrams:

Right. It's the same phenomenon that we see that people stopped going out even before stay-at-home orders went into place. And we know this because we have mobility data that comes from people's cell phones. We know when people started staying at home and almost everywhere, it happened a week to two weeks before those orders were actually put into place. But now a couple other thoughts about crimes -- some crimes don't require victims and still saw big changes, and I'll give you one example -- burglary. And burglary is actually data is collected on both home burglaries and commercial burglaries.

David Abrams:

And if you think about it, you might anticipate the results that I found, but I didn't think about it ahead of time. But as people were staying at home, they were spending less time in commercial establishment so those were actually one of the few types of crimes that rose as a the pandemic hit. But as they were at home, home burglaries dropped pretty substantially. So they went in the same way most other types of crimes did. Commercial burglaries were one of the few exceptions of crime rates that actually rose as the pandemic hit in the spring of 2020.

Michael Klein:

Yeah. I can imagine, for example, a spike in the theft of popcorn machines from empty movie theaters at that time, because nobody was there and it was easier to do that.

David Abrams:

Right, right, everyone was popping at home at that time.

Michael Klein:

Right. Well, as I indicated in my opening remarks, but it's not the case that the rate of all crimes fell and in particular, there is the issue of violent crimes and murders?

**David Abrams:**

Right. So murder rates went up. Now, this started actually a bit later than the onset mid-March when we saw the big drop in most types of crimes. Murders and also shootings were fairly flat during that period of time, so they didn't drop like most crimes, but they didn't rise either, but they then started rising substantially later in the year, starting in June, starting in early summer in most places. And this is a pretty widespread phenomenon that we've seen throughout the country, throughout large cities in the country. And some places have hit murder rates in 2020, that were near 50 or 60 year highs. And so that's extremely counter to this overall trend that through 2020, almost all other types of crimes dropped a lot.

**Michael Klein:**

What do you find is the most plausible explanation for this?

**David Abrams:**

So there have been a lot of theories put out there. I think what is tricky in sifting, the good ones from the bad is that they need to be able to account not just for the rise in homicides and shootings, but also this overall trend of decline in crime. So I'm going to tell you two, that I find most plausible. So one of those is what I would call a disequilibrium in criminal markets. And by that, I mean that during the early period of the pandemic when people's lives were really disrupted and most people were staying at home, you could imagine a number of different types of criminal enterprises also got disrupted. And so we could think about, for example, drug dealing and in particular organized drug gangs where they might have had particular territories, or types of drugs that they controlled.

**David Abrams:**

And if there was a decline in the sales and usage when people returned back onto the street in bigger numbers in late May and early June that could have led to increased conflict that manifests itself in increased shootings, increased homicide rates. And it doesn't have to, and I talked about this sort of disequilibrium, it doesn't have to be something as formalized as drug markets, but it could even be sort of less organized types of crime that are done on a more local level, but where there was some sort of equilibrium that got shocked by the pandemic. So that's one theory that would explain these more severe crimes shifting that would correspond to homicides and shootings.

**Michael Klein:**

So by equilibrium, that's a phrase that economists use, basically you're saying that there was a stability and people knew whose corner belonged to whom. But with such a disruptive event like COVID people either saw it as an opportunity to take over somebody else's place, or they were really forced to because there was a falloff in their revenues from selling drugs or things like that? So just a really disruptive situation led to a condition where people were tempted to try to move in on others. Is that's what you're getting at with that?

**David Abrams:**

Right. Exactly. And specifically with types of crimes that are more serious and they're going to be more associated with shootings and homicides. That's why we'd see the spike there, but still the fall and other types of crimes, but that's exactly what I'm thinking about. I'll just mention one other theory that gets brought up a lot where I have some mixed feelings and that's changes in policing. There's very strong evidence that policing changed early on in the pandemic and there were announcements by police departments that they were going to de-emphasize lower level crimes for a period of time. There's data that shows that police stops dropped precipitously at the beginning of the pandemic, they dropped again,

precipitously in some cities right after George Floyd's killing. And that perception or the change in perception of people about policing could also have impacted crime.

David Abrams:

Now that theory has to be modified a little bit because otherwise you'd expect that would lead to increases in all types of crime. So it requires a belief that say carrying a gun is now less likely to be detected because of changes in policing, and that's going to increase the shootings and homicides, but that other types of crimes are not going to be as impacted. So there's probably something to it, but I think telling that story is a complicated one. And I don't think we know as of yet with any kind of certainty what has led to this huge growth in homicides and shootings.

Michael Klein:

So these two explanations that you have -- the change in sort of issues related to perhaps drug violence and also the change in policing, those are related in a way that we saw, as you mentioned in your memo, the biggest fall in crime rates was for drug crimes. So does that mean there is less drug use or does it reflect something else going on?

David Abrams:

Right. So that almost certainly reflects both a real change in drug use, but also a change in policing, which is what I mentioned. And it's worth briefly talking about where crime data comes from -- some comes from citizen reports and some of it comes from reports by police. Drug crimes come by and large from reports from police, and we know that they were de-emphasizing in a lot of cities, drug crimes around this time. So almost certainly some of the drug crime drop is due to just a change in reporting, and so it was probably overstated. But there was also, in a paper I wrote about this, I tested to try to see whether it was all due to a drop in a change in reporting behavior and found some pretty strong evidence that at least some of the drop in drug crimes was real.

Michael Klein:

So that raises an interesting point. To what extent David, the crime statistics actually reflect the prevalence of crime? Do we know anything about the variability of the reporting of crimes as compared to actual number of crimes? And does this vary a lot across cities, across different types of crimes or across different victims of crimes that might be linked to, for example, the racial or ethnic group and the trust those people have in the police and the criminal justice system? And what does this say more broadly about policing?

David Abrams:

Right. I think all those issues are real ones. Crime data, one thing that's nice about it is it tends to be aggregated by the FBI and something called uniform crime reports that takes over a year or two. Yet, I wanted to look at this more quickly last year to know what was going on in the pandemic, so I got data directly from over 25 large cities and put it up and it's still up on my website called citycrimestats.com for anyone to look a and play around with.

Michael Klein:

And that's what you used in your EconoFact memo, right? Those statistics?

David Abrams:

That's exactly right. So I used that in the memo because we can't get the official data that comes from the FBI, it's not going to be released until second half of 2021. So I put this together so people could get a

more real time sense of what was going on, and that's why you can see the analysis of it and the EconoFact memo. Now, to your question about is it comparable across cities or even maybe within a city across neighborhoods, he answer is almost certainly some of the reporting is impacted by characteristics like socioeconomic status, race, other characteristics. But what is likely is that over time, these things are generally static within an area at least if you're looking at relatively short time periods. So while long-term absolutely these things, and cross-sectionally, if you look across cities or across neighborhoods within the city, these things probably affect the rates. If you're looking at a similar location over time, there you should probably be able to be relatively confident in the data.

Michael Klein:

That's a great resource. And the economists often don't get enough recognition for putting together data sets that other economists or other social scientists can use, so thanks for doing that. And I'd also like to discuss some of your other work as well. You've done research on stop and frisk policies, and these are often viewed as racially biased. The George Floyd protests centered on the issue of racial disparities in policing, what is the evidence that you know about and you've collected, say about this?

David Abrams:

Investigations of several dozen police departments over past 25 years that have been done by the Department of Justice and also a smaller number of cases instigated by plaintiff litigation has found evidence of racial disparities in policing. So I've been involved in analyzing disparities myself in a number of cities, some of the work in conjunction with the Department of Justice and some elsewhere. And I've also found some evidence for racial disparities and police stops. Now that doesn't mean it's 100% of the time, but in the data I've looked at, it's pretty frequent. And the conversation in the past year has really started shifting to how do we do a good job, and a precise job of identifying racial disparities to a conversation about how do we try to intervene and to decrease disparities and improve policing when they're discovered?

Michael Klein:

So the evidence you have is that there are in fact racial disparities, and that calls for police reform. Do we have any evidence about the efficacy of police reform one-off? And here's it's the bad behavior of just a few bad apples is the key thing to identify them and to break down the blue wall of silence, or is there more than just that?

David Abrams:

Right. And this is the really tough question. How do you, how do you get police reform? I can tell you so first on the bad apple theory, which you hear a lot, I can tell you that there is not a lot of evidence supporting the idea that it's just a few bad apples in police departments that are responsible for sort of the bulk of bad incidents or racially disparate incidents. So there was a recent paper by Felipe Goncalves and Steven Mello in the American Economic Review that found almost half of police officers they examined discriminated on race.

Michael Klein:

Felipe and Steven are right now writing an EconoFact memo that we hope will appear in the next few weeks on that paper, distilling that journal article from our listeners may know it's the most prestigious journal in economics. So it's a really important paper, and we're going to be very pleased to have that up on our site.

David Abrams:

That's a great paper, they've developed a new approach to detecting racial disparities in policing, they did fantastic work there. And I can say that it's consistent with results that I found in my own analyses that differential treatment by race can be pretty pervasive within departments, and removing a handful of bad apples is not likely to make a big dent.

Michael Klein:

So what other approaches are being discussed to improve policing?

David Abrams:

So the economist's main tool and main focus always is incentives. A greater focus on incentives and accountability, I think is something that is being discussed more than it was. You mentioned the blue wall of silence, the impact of police unions on things they have historically been resistant to incentives, and also sometimes been resistant to even accountability and punishment even for egregious incidents. It looks like that maybe changing to some extent now, but I think that's still going to be a major hurdle. But one thing that we can do with respect to incentives is use the existing infrastructure that most police departments have, and they have really good infrastructure for real time crime tracking, which they have meetings about... Compustat, they have meetings about almost weekly in most departments to discuss what are the trends in crime.

David Abrams:

It would not be hard to use this infrastructure to also look at the performance of individual officers and therefore incentivize them in ways that would reduce racial disparities in not just the beat officers, but also supervisors as well. And this is a way that you could imagine using data and using incentives to both keep good performance, and not lead to spikes in crime, but also ensure that you have a better efficacy and racial neutrality in policing.

Michael Klein:

And the Derek Chauvin trial, it was noteworthy that people in the police department were testifying against him, but it was also something that it took a crime of that magnitude of being filmed, killing somebody that only led to that, that in lots of other cases, you wouldn't break this blue wall of silence?

David Abrams:

Right. And in body-worn cameras, I mean, there's increasing use of body-worn cameras and footage. So to me it's all different types of data that are going to help both departments and the public monitor themselves more. Their officers and hopefully improve things.

Michael Klein:

So you mentioned data and I'd like to ask you a bit, as we complete this interview, how you view the role of economic analysis in understanding crime, and the criminal justice system. What does economics offer that's distinct from say sociology or given that you teach in a law school law itself? And have you found that your work has had an impact on those who are making policies?

David Abrams:

Well, I think economics offers a level of rigor and oftentimes, I mean, both quantitative rigor and theoretical rigor that is less emphasized in other disciplines, which is not to downplay the importance of sociologists and criminologists who get great depth of knowledge that economists often do not... as

important. But I think it would economist bring to the table is this quantitative tools that we have been developing, especially empirical ones over decades, to answer similar types of questions -- questions about racial bias and discrimination. That's been a huge area of development in the field for the last two, three decades. I think also it lends credibility to economists when we work with lawyers, and with others who are in the system on both, the side of the police departments and cities, and the plaintiffs who are investigating them.

David Abrams:

So I think it's important, and I think it's a great thing that there's been a big increase in the number of economists on working in this area in the last few years. And have I had an impact? I don't know. I would love to say, so maybe a little one. I've had the chance to work in a number of different cities, there has been progress there. I hope I was able to make a little bit of a dent, that's all I can hope.

Michael Klein:

Well, there's a saying from the Talmud that, "Ours is not to complete the job, but neither is it ours to not even start." So at least you're starting the job.

David Abrams:

I liked the Talmud quote, you should end each episode with the Talmud quote.

Michael Klein:

I do as I can, I have to study more Talmud and able to do that for every episode. But thanks very much for speaking with me today, David, and thanks for your work in this area, which is really important, and tremendously interesting as well.

David Abrams:

Thank you, Michael. I really enjoyed it.

Michael Klein:

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