

Millennials commit less crime than prior generations

May 11 2021, by Victoria Yu



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Crime has dropped since 1990, but not for the reasons some might think, according to a new study. Research from the LBJ School of Public Affairs at The University of Texas at Austin suggests crime reduction efforts account for less than half of the crime drop since 1990 and essentially none of the crime drop since 2000. Researchers also discovered that millennials commit less crime than prior generations.

Most attempts to find causes and solutions to [crime](#) are focused on

current conditions. But researchers said current crime rates do not depend only on current conditions. Rather, crime rises and falls based on the life experiences and decisions of young children. Crime rates dropped rapidly among millennials (born after 1985). The age group born between 1946 and 1964, commonly known as baby boomers, was the most criminally active in modern history.

The peer-reviewed study was published in the *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*.

"Since [criminal activity](#) starts in the teens and peaks at about 18, this means improved conditions in childhood—families, neighborhoods, schools—were mostly responsible for the crime drop," said Bill Spelman, a professor of public affairs at the LBJ School and author of the report. "The best way to reduce crime in the future is probably what caused it to drop in the first place: helping our families, neighborhoods and schools raise kids who are respectful of others and don't need to steal to get by. It's time we shifted focus from stopping bad guys to helping kids be good guys."

Youth delinquency has long been associated with families in poverty, failing schools, disparities in income and [social class](#) among neighborhoods, and racial disparities in economic opportunity. Youth arrest rates can also be predictors of long-term crime prospects.

"The number of prison beds and [police officers](#) doesn't matter as much as many expected, and gun and [drug policies](#) appear to increase crime rather than reduce it," Spelman said. "All this is aimed at increasing the costs of crime and reducing the benefits of it to people who are, right now, looking for criminal opportunities. The paper tells us that we're digging in the wrong place. The criminal justice system can blunt the roughest edges of the problem. But only primary prevention can solve it."

In general, [birth cohort](#), age and social and economic factors are about equally important in determining crime rates. Most crimes are committed by people ages 15-25, with criminal activity slowing or stopping entirely between the ages of 25 and 40, a pattern researchers call the age effect. Most crime reduction methods focus on currently active offenders and affect only criminal activity right now, a result called the period effect.

In the paper, researchers isolate the cohort effect: the relative criminal activity of people born in the same year. These cohorts also respond to age and period effects, so while most crime today is committed by people ages 15-25 year (millennials born between 1996 and 2006), millennials are still less criminally inclined than previous generations. Millennials' peak of crime is still much lower than the Generation X peak, which is lower than the baby boomer peak. Thus, researchers say policies aimed at reducing delinquency among young children may be more effective in the long run than current policies aimed at incapacitation, deterrence and opportunity reduction.

More information: William Spelman. How Cohorts Changed Crime Rates, 1980–2016, *Journal of Quantitative Criminology* (2021). [DOI: 10.1007/s10940-021-09508-7](#)

Provided by University of Texas at Austin

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