

## REVIEWS

UNEQUAL CRIME DECLINE: THEORISING RACE, URBAN INEQUALITY AND CRIMINAL VIOLENCE.  
By KAREN F. PARKER (New York: NYU, 2008, 163pp. £35.50)

In the early 1990s, the public in the United States were bombarded with accounts about the 'super-predator'—a young, primarily black, trigger-happy individual, who would prey on law-abiding citizens and would cause a huge increase in criminality. A gloomy picture of what was supposed to happen throughout that decade was painted. However, instead of the supposed unprecedented increase, the United States experienced a prolonged and persistent fall in crime. And while several explanations of varying influence were put forward for this quite unexpected development, it was as if criminologists were genuinely taken by surprise. Most explanations saw the drop as an effect of policies such as new police strategies, increased reliance on prisons or the disruption of drug markets; but very few capitalized on the discipline's arsenal to disentangle the factors contributing to and producing rich theoretical accounts of the decline (Levitt 2004). Such omission, or failure, is serious and the stakes are indeed very high: how was it possible that we were unable to anticipate such change? And since we have been able to know a great deal about crime as a complex social issue, how is it possible that we have been less than able to explain the drop as a process driven by an equally complex articulation of social forces? Such complaints provide the starting point of Karen F. Parker's book, *Unequal Crime Decline: Theorising Race, Urban Inequality and Criminal Violence*. Professor Parker, who is known for her research on crime, structural factors and the urban environment, takes issue both with the general acceptance of the view that the crime drop has been an undifferentiated and universal experience for American society and with the fact that our prior advances in the theoretical knowledge of how different social groups contribute to and are affected by the issue of crime have not been put to work to explain the crime decline. Parker's intervention features a focus on race and gender disparities in crime, and fills, therefore, a known and important gap: several authors, such as Hawkins (2003), have highlighted the reluctance of the criminological enterprise and social sciences in general to engage in fruitful research and discussion, especially on the differences in crime (and particularly violence) along racial lines, with some notable exemptions.

Thus, the aim of the book is basically to explain the violent crime drop through the way variables such as race and gender intersect with (the changes in) labour markets 'contributing to the spatial concentration of disadvantage and rates of violence' (p. ix). But her analysis is not only a thorough review of the debate on the link between violent crime and unemployment; it is an exploration into the complex intertwining between ethnicity, gender, population composition and political economy in violent crime and specifically in the violent crime drop. Within this context, Parker has three main objectives:

- to examine the changing nature of violence in urban areas since the 1980s through the prism of race and gender;

- to assess structural theories of crime and their ability in explaining racial disparities in violent crime; and
- to explore violence trends through the linkages among the aforementioned variables.

To accomplish these goals, the book is organized into six chapters, including the introduction, which sets the context and the methodology of the study and also outlines the chapters that follow. In her endeavour, Parker uses census data primarily by the Bureau of Labour Statistics when it comes to examining structural changes, whereas for changes in homicides, which, as explained, are the most accurately measured indicator of violent crime, data from the Uniform Crime Report and the National Crime Victimization Survey are used. The unit of analysis is American cities with a population of 100,000 residents or more.

In Chapter Two, the author examines trends in homicide trends, which declined by 46 per cent between 1991 and 2000. Parker first reviews ‘universalist’ explanations that were put forward, which range from the rise in imprisonment rates and increased police presence to changes in the nature and dynamics of drug markets to the improved economy in the 1990s and gun control policies. As the author explains, these views have not been able to advance our understanding of the phenomenon, due to lack of data as well as due to the very fact that they have tended to disregard the group- and area-specific nature of the decrease in violent crime. Thus, Parker sets out to disentangle the components of the trend by offering an analysis of black and white homicide trends as well as black and white homicide trends *by gender*. While, for example, the homicide rate for white males *decreased* by approximately 27 per cent from 1991 to 2000, it *increased* by 6.7 per cent for white females. The investigation reveals impressive differences and disparities between these groups, and thus lays the cornerstone for the continuation.

Chapter Three offers a review of macro-level criminological theories used in the study of race and violence, namely social disorganization theory, anomie/relative deprivation, and conflict theory. While these are leading explanations for urban violence (and) for race-specific homicides, Parker argues that they have been unable to explain disaggregated homicide rates, exactly because they have not been able to shed light on the spacial distribution of economic disadvantage and crime, which lies at the heart of the disparities discussed in the previous chapter. Again, the preoccupation is with social dynamics and change, and it is asserted that important limitations are involved both in the design of prior work and also in the selection of concepts less adequate to capture change, such as *poverty* and *unemployment* over others such as *labour markets* (which may also be related to criminal justice and social trends).

Having made clear her preference towards a structural approach, Parker explores in Chapter Four the ways and processes by which disparities in labour markets and the housing sector create differentials in opportunity structures, and affect the life and experiences in urban areas among different racial and gender groups. Within this context, a number of interrelated major themes are identified. These themes are perceived as catalysts (positive or negative) for the embeddedness of race and gender in the local, urban economy. How these themes can be integrated with criminological perspectives to further explain homicide is the aim of Chapter Five. Parker introduces a model in which changing labour market structures are linked to levels of urban violence through the change they induce to community structures and formal social control. This adds an important structural dimension, as it clarifies how changes in the local

economies have been far more instrumental than simply poverty and how they have affected violent crime drops for specific race and gender groups. Tables and graphs in this chapter very effectively highlight the author's perspective. The chapter also includes an analysis of two US urban centres: Detroit and Dallas. These two cities, although quite different in terms of their financial and social characteristics, appear to be the perfect context, since they present all those intersecting variables that are central to Parker's argument. Chapter Six concludes by returning to the themes analysed and synthesized in the book and primarily Chapters Four and Five. The study also includes a 'technical appendix'—a positive feature that clarifies a number of terms and highlights indicative computations relevant to the study and methodological decisions made by the author.

*Unequal Crime Decline* is a highly rewarding read and clearly a valuable addition to criminological literature. A text of rare clarity, it deals with critically important areas of study and enhances significantly our knowledge on the topic. Parker addresses the specific question of the 1990s crime drop in America by building constructively on the discipline's theoretical arsenal and by enriching it with insights from stratification economics literature, and feminist writings on criminality and labour markets for the period 1980–2003. The book thus delivers what it promises by traversing and synthesizing a broad spectrum of aspects of race, urban inequality and criminal violence. It clearly shows that the linkages between structural variables, policy, economics and crime are extremely complex and warrant continuous and intensive theoretical labour capable of capturing the *dynamism* and *mutative nature* of life in American urban centres.

Nevertheless, the same remarkable discipline and clarity may arguably work to highlight the points about which the text remains quite silent. There is little doubt that the whole argument advanced in the book illustrates in no ambiguous terms the degree to which racial differences and disparities are deeply embedded in American society, and does so by mobilizing lines that are very much akin to conflict and radical theory. Yet the critical edge that undoubtedly has to do with the political side of the 'so what?' question is not particularly developed or made explicit at any point in the text, or in the concluding discussion. The point is not inconsequential, because a structural perspective of the kind Parker offers constitutes a robust line for attacking the self-righteous logic of the conservative and ultra-punitive policies that accompany neo-liberal rule in Western societies. Elaborating on such wider implications of the argument advanced in the book would not be by any means inappropriate, and would rather make the book more relevant for audiences outside the United States, where comparable divides have become apparent.

These comments, of course, do not by any means diminish the value of the book—quite the contrary; they stress how much we found it to be a hugely rewarding read. We would therefore recommend it as a 'must-read' not only to academics or policy makers, but also for a wider audience interested in the crime drop riddle.

*Georgios A. Antonopoulos and Georgios Papanicolaou*

*University of Teesside*

doi:10.1093/bjc/azp053

#### REFERENCES

- HAWKINS, D. F. (2003), *Violent Crime: Assessing Race & Ethnic Differences*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- LEVITT, S. D. (2004), 'Understanding Why Crime Fell in the 1990s: Four Factors that Explain the Decline and Six that Do Not', *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 18: 163–90.