

Abortion's secret legacy

ANDREW LEIGH AND
JUSTIN WOLFERS

ONE of the hottest debates among American criminologists over the past few years has been why the United States' crime rate, rising since the '60s, has fallen sharply during the '90s.

Political fortunes have been made as politicians have claimed vindication for policies that are tough on crime, including longer jail terms, better policing, and the end of the crack epidemic. Some liberals have countered that reduced crime is yet another benefit of a full employment economy. But two leading academics have just put forward a more radical proposition — that the legalisation of abortion explains a large part of the drop.

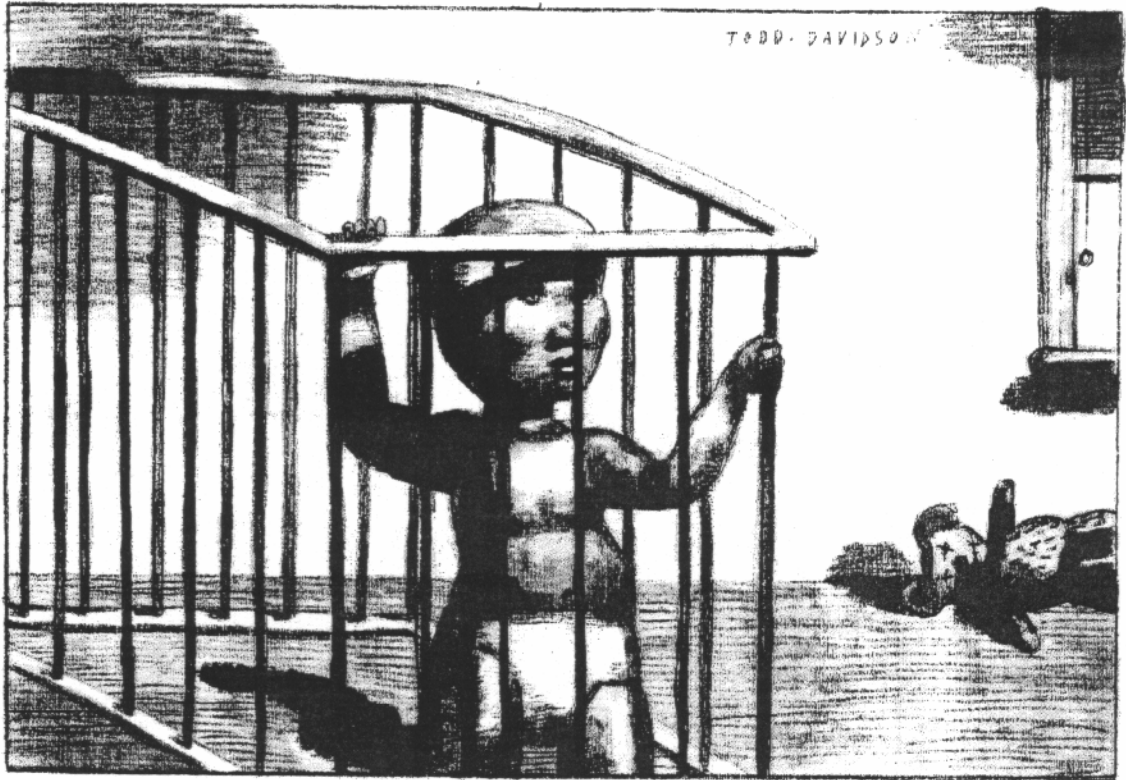
Their case is stunningly simple. The 1973 Supreme Court decision in *Roe v Wade* effectively legalised abortion, leading to a dramatic increase in the number of terminations performed. The turning point in violent crime in the '90s coincided with the period when children born in the post *Roe v Wade* era would be reaching their late teens, and this decline has continued as this generation reaches the peak ages for criminal activity.

The researchers, Dr John Donohue (Stanford University) and Dr Steven Levitt (University of Chicago), cite several pieces of evidence to support their explanation.

First, the drop in crime came around 1992, about 20 years after *Roe v Wade*. Second, it was disproportionately concentrated among those under 25. Third, the handful of states that legalised abortion before *Roe v Wade* were also the first to witness a fall in crime. Fourth, states with high abortion rates had larger reductions in crime than states with low abortion rates. Donohue and Levitt estimate that crime in 1997 was 10-20 per cent lower than it would have been without legalised abortion — explaining around half of the drop in crime.

Predictably, when the findings of the study were made public, the responses were fast and furious. Pro-lifers were outraged at the study's logic, arguing the murder of a million fetuses was not offset by 6500 fewer homicides. Meanwhile, the left voiced discomfort with the eugenics-like notion that greater numbers of abortions — about 40 per cent of which are by blacks and minorities — weeded out society's villains. To these charges, the writers responded that they were simply explaining a phenomenon, not advocating an agenda.

When the political dust settles, we might, surprisingly, learn something far more interesting about child-



rearing than about abortion. *Roe v Wade* had only a minor influence on the number of children brought into the world — its main effect was to change when they were born. Thus, the main effect is not that the underprivileged have fewer children, but rather that all of these children are born when the mother feels more ready to raise them.

Thus, Levitt argues that the main finding is simply "that when you remove a government prohibition against a woman choosing, the woman makes choices that lead to better outcomes for her children".

What about Australia? Like most developed countries, we experienced what Francis Fukuyama calls a "great disruption" after World War Two. Part of this was a rise in crime. On the surface, the statistics are astounding, with rates of violent crime and theft growing 10-fold in less than 40 years. Much of this, however, must be attributed to higher reporting rates. A more reliable guide is generally considered to be homicide rates, which are comprehensive and considered to be a good indicator of rates of other violent crimes.

From the end of the war, Australia's homicide rate climbed steadily — from an annual rate of around 1 per 100,000 in the '40s to a peak of 2.4 per 100,000 in 1988. Thereafter it

has slowly declined, staying below two people per 100,000 throughout the '90s. Criminologists have attributed this fall to a range of factors, chief among them the reduction in the proportion of young people in the population, shifting attitudes towards violence and higher incarceration rates.

But could the legalisation of abortion also have contributed to the drop in crime? Perhaps the best way of approaching this question is by considering each of the four factors pinpointed by Donohue and Levitt.

First, did the drop in crime follow around 20 years after the legalisation of abortion? While there is no single *Roe v Wade*-type decision in Australia, a number of seminal changes can be identified. Court decisions in Victoria in 1969 and New South Wales and the ACT in 1971 substantially broadened the circumstances in which abortions could be legally performed. Legislative changes in South Australia in 1969 and the Northern Territory in 1974 had a similar effect.

The changes did not occur in every jurisdiction. In Tasmania, Queensland and Western Australia, the legal status of abortion remained unclear throughout the '70s. But, for more than two-thirds of the Australian population, the change occurred in

the late '60s or early '70s, about 20 years before the drop in crime rates. Indeed, just as the legalisation of abortion in most parts of Australia preceded *Roe v Wade* by two to four years, so the fall in Australian homicide rates preceded the drop in the US by a similar time.

Second, was the fall in crime disproportionately concentrated in those under 25? Unfortunately, the small numbers involved make it difficult to draw any significant conclusions on this point.

Third, were those states that legalised abortion earlier also the first to experience a drop in crime? Some evidence seems to suggest so. Victoria (which legalised in 1969) saw homicide decline from 1987-88. NSW (which legalised in 1971) saw homicide decline from 1989-90. The Northern Territory (which legalised in 1974) saw homicide decline from 1990-91. By contrast, Western Australia (where the legal status of abortion remained unclear until recently) has not seen any significant drop in its homicide rate. Yet the evidence for other regions does not support this proposition. At best, we can say that this part of the theory holds for the states where most Australians live.

Fourth, we come to the smoking gun — did states with higher

abortion rates in the early '70s have lower crime rates in the '90s? Unfortunately, only one state, South Australia, kept official statistics on abortions performed during the '70s. These showed that the 1971 legalisation of abortion in South Australia led to a large increase in the number of abortions performed over the subsequent three years. Reporting in 1977, the Royal Commission on Human Relationships cited this phenomenon, and concluded that NSW and Victoria probably experienced a similar increase after their legalisation of abortion (even accounting for illegal abortions performed before legalisation).

Unlike Donohue and Levitt, we cannot point to statistics showing an increase in the number of abortions performed in the first states to legalise abortion. However, there does seem to be a strong connection between the legalisation of abortion and an increase in the number of abortions performed.

While Donohue and Levitt's theory does not fit Australia perfectly, there is enough evidence that we should be suspicious next time we hear a politician or police chief taking responsibility for the latest drop in crime. And the good news is that, if this theory is correct, the fall in crime is here to stay.

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