

as other languages do. To read a simple story in a Chinese newspaper, a reader needs a working knowledge of 2,000 characters—yet another reason why a Chinese imperium is not a pretty thought.

SOCIETY

Crime's Great Convergence

THE SOURCE: "Crime and U.S. Cities: Recent Patterns and Implications" by Ingrid Gould Ellen and Katherine O'Regan, in *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Nov. 2009.

FROM THE EARLY 1990S TO 2005, crime rates in America plunged by a third. But the overall national trend obscures other important developments, including the much bigger strides that have been made in reducing the victimization of minority groups.

In a study of 278 cities, New York University public policy professors Ingrid Gould Ellen and Katherine O'Regan describe drastic changes in

the period between 1992 and 2005. Property crime decreased by 38 percent and violent crime by nearly half. In 2005, one-quarter of cities were safer than their surrounding suburbs had been in 1992.

But the benefits were not universal. Northeastern cities with large minority and immigrant populations and high rates of poverty experienced the greatest drop. These cities tended to have higher crime rates to begin with. In contrast, the 70 cities where crime decreased the least—or even, in a few cases, increased—were on average three-quarters white, had far fewer immigrants, and were mostly in the South, West, and Midwest. Overall, the trends indicate a regional convergence.

Another convergence emerged when Ellen and O'Regan trained their sights on the dynamics within cities. Each population group (white, black, Hispanic, immigrant, poor, and not poor) experienced far less crime in 2005 than it had in 1992. Sectors of the population that saw the most crime in 1992 were exposed to less in

2005 than those that were safest 20 years earlier. But again, the trends did not affect all groups equally: The incidence of crime fell more sharply among minorities than whites, narrowing the gap between them.

The sole exception to this general convergence was found in an expanding gap between foreigners and native-born residents. In 1992, they had nearly the same level of "crime exposure." By 2000, immigrants experienced noticeably less crime than the average U.S.-born city resident. In fact, at the start of the millennium, the jurisdiction of residence of the average American Hispanic city dweller was safer than that of the average white city dweller.

The authors venture no explanations for the trends they describe. Among those commonly advanced are changes in the number of young men in the population, improved policing methods, and the ebb and flow of illicit drugs such as crack and methamphetamine and the criminal activities that accompany them.

PRESS & MEDIA

Can a Free Press Hurt?

THE SOURCE: "Watchdog or Lapdog? Media Freedom, Regime Type, and Government Respect for Human Rights" by Jenifer Whitten-Woodring, in *International Studies Quarterly*, Sept. 2009.

ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE OBSERVED that a free press is "the chief democratic instrument of freedom." Today, this bit of

conventional wisdom pops up in the demands of human rights groups and the ideals of American foreign policy: Where a free press flourishes, democracy will surely follow. One small problem: In countries with autocratic regimes, a free press may actually incite an increase in human

rights abuses.

Jenifer Whitten-Woodring, a political scientist at the University of Southern California, argues that a free press can only reduce human rights violations such as political imprisonment, murder, disappearance, and torture if citizens have a means of holding their leaders accountable. Where leaders rule with impunity, critical media coverage has the opposite effect—regimes crack down on journalists and political activists. Whitten-Woodring's case rests on