

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 &amp; 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

a complex statistical analysis of evidence from 93 countries between 1981 and 1995, and is illustrated by the experiences of Uganda and Mexico during those years.

In Mexico in the 1990s, the news media became “increasingly independent and critical of the government,” exposing massacres of peasants and other atrocities committed by the incumbent regime. Did reform follow? Quite the opposite. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, as the Mexican press became more dogged in its reporting, journalism became a more dangerous occupation. Over time, however, persistent coverage of government scandals helped strip the regime of its legitimacy, and in 2000 the Institutional Revolutionary Party lost the presidency after more than 70 years of single-party rule. But in Uganda, a feisty press continues without success. Reporters there run roughshod over President Yoweri Museveni’s attempts to tamp down their reports of massive human rights violations, but he remains at the helm, as he has since 1986.

#### PRESS & MEDIA

## Signal Effects

**THE SOURCE:** “Do Television and Radio Destroy Social Capital? Evidence From Indonesian Villages” by Benjamin A. Olken, in *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, Oct. 2009.

IT IS A COMMON CHARGE THAT excessive television viewing drives down rates of civic and social involvement. A recent

study by Benjamin A. Olken, an economist at MIT, shows just how true that is, measuring how much people’s community participation decreases for every channel they receive.

Indonesia boasts a strong tradition of community involvement. A typical village has a broad range of civic activities, including religious study groups, women’s organizations, savings and credit partnerships, and neighborhood associations. In Olken’s study of 600 villages in east and central Java—one of the most densely populated places on earth—the average community had nearly

In Indonesia, when a new TV station became available, villagers’ community participation was reduced by 11 percent.

180 different groups. But that number dropped precipitously in areas with better television and radio reception. With just one more TV station available than average, the number of community organizations dropped by about 12.

There are 11 major stations broadcasting throughout Indonesia (up from just one, the government-owned TVRI, in 1993), but the average household in Olken’s study received only five. The Indonesians in his survey spent 123 minutes watching TV and 60 minutes listening to the radio each day. When a sixth channel was available, household viewing

increased by 14 minutes a day and attendance at meetings fell by 11 percent.

Over a three-month period, the extra time in front of the tube correlated with participation in four percent fewer social activities.

The decline in participation was more pronounced among organizations dedicated to improving local infrastructure, school committees, neighborhood associations, and savings and credit partnerships. Religious groups, which made up about one-fifth of the groups but drew about 40 percent of the attendance of all groups combined, didn’t see their numbers drop quite as steeply as the secular groups. Richer respondents with more TV channels reduced their participation in social groups more than other demographics.

Interestingly, the decline in the quantity of civic participation was not matched by a decline in the quality of the civics. Some of the meetings Olken examined were related to a massive road-building project financed by the World Bank. Although attendance was lower in areas with greater TV reception, just as many people were likely to speak, and they discussed the same number of problems. Of course, Olken points out, these small meetings about local roads didn’t receive much media attention. But for higher levels of government, increased TV reception means more time in the public eye—which might have a greater impact than additional meeting attendees.