

# Abortion Is Not the Answer to Crime

By RAMESH PONNURU

Why have crime rates been falling in the 1990s? Criminologists have suggested a number of possible explanations. The end of the crack boom, the strong economy, tougher sentencing policies, better policing techniques, and state laws letting law-abiding citizens carry concealed handguns have all been mentioned.

Now two researchers are advancing yet another theory: The legalization of abortion in the 1970s, they say, may be responsible for about half of the drop in crime in the 1990s. The reason we aren't being terrorized by more 20-year-old thugs, in other words, is that they were aborted 20 years ago. It turns out that the death penalty stops crime after all.

The notion that abortion solves social problems has always been implicit in the pro-choice movement's rhetoric about the perils of bringing "unwanted children" into the world. Steven Levitt, an economist at the University of Chicago, and John Donohue III, a professor at the Stanford University Law School, have merely added some statistics to that intuition in an unpublished paper. Their main evidence seems to be that states that had high abortion rates in the 1970s have seen the most dramatic drops in crime now, and that states that legalized abortion earlier began to see those drops earlier too.

Obviously, a society that has 39 million abortions will have 39 million fewer potential criminals—and 39 million fewer potential crime victims, policemen, moviegoers, taxpayers and so forth. But Messrs. Levitt and Donohue point out that the aborted children would have been more likely than average to become criminals, both because of their mothers' demographic characteristics—disproportionately black or

Hispanic, poor and teenaged—and because of their unwantedness.

The argument can't be dismissed out of hand. No less a scholar than James Q. Wilson made a similar point in "On Crime," attributing the rise in crime in the 20th century partly to advances in public health: Many modern criminals would in earlier times have died in childhood.

But are Messrs. Levitt and Donohue right? To say for sure, we would have to know what would have happened to crime rates if abortion had stayed illegal, and social science cannot construct such counterfactual histories. We might conceive, for instance, that less abortion would yield more illegitimacy. But in fact, abortion and illegitimacy rates rose in tandem in the 1970s and have been falling in tandem recently.

There are other reasons to question the scholars' conclusion. Britain's crime rate was rising 20 years after abortion was legalized. Russians abort seven out of 10 pregnancies, and their society is not noticeably safer as a result. In a recent monograph on the underclass for the American Enterprise Institute, Charles Murray contends that while crime is falling, the number of criminals in America is actually still rising—which suggests that crime is dropping mainly because more of them are behind bars. It's possible, also, that the legalization of abortion increased crime by undermining respect for the sanctity of life, although any such effect would be hard to measure.

Does it matter if Messrs. Levitt and Donohue are right? Cory Richards, vice president for public policy at the pro-abortion rights Alan Guttmacher Institute, told the Chicago Tribune that the study "is an argument for

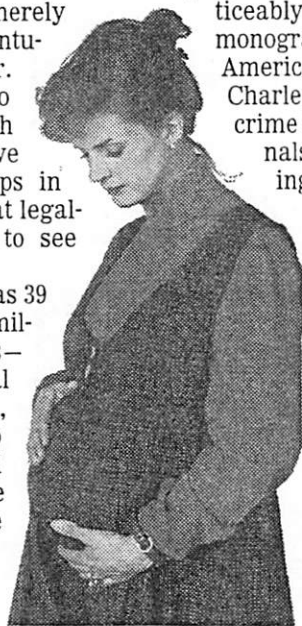
women not being forced to have children they don't want to have," which is to say for allowing abortion. Many pro-lifers, on the other hand, have violently denounced the study. But this politicization of science, or at least of science reporting, is both foolish and unnecessary. The findings shouldn't affect our view of abortion at all.

If we can determine that an unborn child has a good chance of becoming a criminal, presumably we could do the same for a five-year-old. We could then eliminate all five-year-olds with budding criminal propensities. Or we could really take preventive action, and sterilize women who have a high risk of bearing such children. But while Margaret Sanger might have approved, nobody today would propose these eugenic policies, except in a Swiftian vein. Or we could identify adults who are more likely, on the basis of some characteristic, to be criminals and take precautionary action. Oh wait, we already do that: It's called racial profiling, and Vice President Gore just described it as a hate crime.

The argument that abortion should be tolerated because it reduces crime will be persuasive only for people who already favor tolerating abortion for other reasons. It will not impress people who think abortion ought to be considered a crime itself.

There seems, however, to be a modern tendency to expect science to resolve difficult moral questions for us. Just the other day a justice on the New Jersey Supreme Court ruled that "decades of social science" had established that homosexuality is not immoral. Science, even social science, has accomplished many things, but it cannot tell us what is right or wrong. It cannot tell us how we ought to live. And it cannot tell us what we should do about those dangerous characters lurking in the womb.

*Mr. Ponnuru is a senior editor at National Review.*



**Criminal inside?**