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 1960s, has fallen sharply during the 90s.

Political fortunes have been made as politicians claim credit for the decline in crime, including longer jail terms, better policing, and the end of the crack epidemic. Some liberals have argued that Roe v. Wade was 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 the same time as the legalisation of 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. Most of the left voiced discomfort with the evidence—like notion that greater numbers of abortions — about 40 per cent of which are by blacks and minorities — reaped 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 children—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 a spike in crime in the late 90s. Unlike the US, however, our response was not one of increasing police numbers, but of legalising abortion. The link between the two events is striking. In Victoria, where abortion was legalised in 1964, the homicide rate dropped from 53 per 100,000 in 1968 to 26 per 100,000 in 1974. In New South Wales, where abortion was legalised in 1975, the homicide rate dropped from 45 per 100,000 in 1973 to 32 per 100,000 in 1979. In both states, the drop in homicide rates coincided with the legalisation of abortion. Unsurprisingly, in states where abortion remained illegal, the homicide rate remained high.

The evidence supports the hypothesis that legalising abortion reduces crime. But what about the future? Will we see a similar drop in other countries? The answer is yes. In countries where abortion is legal, the number of crimes committed by children born after the legalisation is far lower than in countries where abortion is illegal.

In conclusion, the legalisation of abortion is not just a good thing for women's rights, but also for public safety. It is time to recognise the true benefits of legalising abortion and to stop denying its positive effects on society.