
Paul Knepper

Introduction

Contrary to all expectations, crime has declined in recent decades. Exactly when and where the decline began varies somewhat, depending on whether one is looking at victimization surveys or police statistics, but in general the figures tell a similar story. In the last decade of the 20th century, crime rates began to fall, at first in the USA, then in Europe. Crime rates dropped in Canada, similar to the USA, and in Australia, more in keeping with the timing of the European declines. Victimization data for 15 countries participating in the International Crime Victimization Survey from 1989 indicate that crime rates peaked in the 1990s. Since then crime has decreased, particularly property crime. The ‘near universal fall’ in crime, Jan van Dijk, John van Kesteren and Paul Smit (2007: 16) explain, poses a clear theoretical challenge. ‘In most countries, crime levels in 2004 are back at the level of the late 1980s’.

The response in Britain has been underwhelming. According to the British Crime Survey, between 1995 and 2010, overall crime fell by 50 per cent. This downward trend can also be seen in police-recorded crime. In 2009/10, BCS crime fell by 9 per cent and police-recorded crime fell by 8 per cent compared to the previous year (Flatley et al. 2010: 2). These figures are even more interesting given expectations during the recent recession that property crime should have increased. Yet few politicians, journalists and criminologists have made much of it. If anything, falling crime rates in Britain have been met with ‘a somewhat surprising state of denial’ (Mooney and Young 2006: 398). After more than seven years of good reports, journalist Peter Hitchens declared that criminal behaviour was simply not diminishing and if the British Crime Survey said it was this only meant the survey was not a reliable measure. ‘Certainly, the repeated claims of the current government that crime is falling are risible’ (Hitchens 2003: 11).

This article has to do with the consequences of downward crime trends. There is an ongoing debate about the causes, and while there is an emerging consensus that something extraordinary has taken place, many questions remain. Studies continue to appear, with new sources of data about what is declining and where, and with new explanations about what might be behind...
such goings-on. Of course the consequences of an international decline in crime are tied to the causes, so my discussion will necessarily involve theories about why crime has decreased. But the overall aim is to think about what declining crime rates might mean and, given the theme of this special issue, to raise some points about the relationship between crime reduction and social welfare.

Prisons, Police and Welfare

Declining rates of crime have attracted a great deal of interest in the USA where leading criminologists of the 1980s had predicted increases in crime (DiIulio, 1995). By the middle 1990s, when downward trends began to appear, the Guggenheim Foundation commissioned a series of projects to discover what was behind this unexpected turn of events. The Crime Drop in America, edited by Alfred Blumstein and Joel Wallman (2000), assembled a list of likely reasons for falling crime rates. Their analyses began with a look at prisons and police.

Beginning in 1973 or so, the USA began its experiment in ‘mass imprisonment’. Rates of imprisonment climbed year by year, reaching a level nearly four times higher by 2000. When in the 1990s crime rates began to fall, some observers were ready to claim success. Whether because of deterrence or incapacitation, imprisoning a large volume of lawbreakers had depressed crime rates. But this claim, as Blumstein and Wallman (2006: 128) point out, ignores the fact that the rise in crime during the 1980s occurred within a period of increasing reliance on incarceration. While they acknowledge that unprecedented levels of imprisonment had some effect, crime rates fell owing to a combination of factors, including changes in gun laws, illicit drug markets, economics and demographics, and cannot be taken as evidence that mass imprisonment experiment worked.

Furthermore, imprisonment as a crime reduction strategy comes with ‘externalities’. In economics, externality refers to costs of an economic activity paid by persons other than those engaged in the activity. In crime policy, externality describes the situation when measures undertaken to fight crime create unforeseen (but foreseeable) demands on social welfare, that are in effect met by welfare budgets rather than criminal justice budgets (Knepper 2007: 21). Clear (2007) argues that mass incarceration reduces crime, but only in the short-run and at high financial and social costs. Over the long-term, imprisonment contributes to chronically high levels of crime within distressed communities from which prisoners are drawn disproportionately. Policymakers need to understand the trade-offs between intended and unintended impacts.

Policing has also been promoted as the cause. Police forces across the USA implemented reforms in the 1990s, many under the umbrella of the ‘broken windows’ theory. Order-maintenance, zero tolerance and community policing approaches sought to diminish crime by community engagement and attention to minor infractions. The success of Commissioner Bratton’s initiatives in New York City inspired similar projects in Britain and other parts of America. There is evidence to support particular initiatives and positive evaluations of particular strategies, so the issue is not, as far as Blumstein and
Wallman (2006: 136) are concerned, whether policing strategies have been effective. Rather, the issue is the extent to which these strategies were implemented within the period of decline and whether the decline can be fairly attributed to policing. The causal links between policing initiatives and declining crime rates are difficult to document because of the ubiquity of the fall in crime: crime rates fell in cities that changed policing styles and but also fell in cities that did not.

Blumstein (2006) points out that the American crime decline of the 1990s ‘largely came to an end by 2000’. The years between 2000 and 2005 saw some significant change in rates for violent offences. He warns that ‘there could well be a new crime rise in the future’ owing primarily to the difficulty of young people in finding adequate employment in an increasingly complex economy. He explains that ‘there have been sizable reductions in the level of social services provided as state and local budgets have been tightened, largely as a result of major reductions in funding for those services by the federal government’. This has resulted in ‘small police forces, less job training, less funding for welfare services, and the reductions in many of the other social services provided locally’ (Blumstein 2006: 32). Yet whether he is right to worry is open to question, because it is not so clear that welfare provision had much to do with the decline. The same reasons for doubting explanations for the crime decline based on prisons and police apply to social welfare. There is research pointing to a connection between welfare spending and reduction in some forms of crime, particularly burglary rates. However, total welfare spending per person increased from the middle of the 1960s through the end of the 1970s, and this was not a period of falling crime rates. Rather, welfare spending increased coincident with a massive crime wave (LaFree 1999: 157) 2.

It is hard to see how welfare state largesse contributed to falling crime rates as largesse was not a word social policy analysts used to describe changes to welfare provision in the 1990s. The Democratic Party organized its campaign manifesto around candidate Bill Clinton’s promise to ‘end welfare as we know it’. Essentially, this meant shifting recipients of means-tested benefits (primarily single mothers collecting Aid to Families with Dependent Children) into paid work. Following his victory in elections of 1992, President Clinton moved ahead with his welfare reform proposal, and the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act became law in 1996. Arguably more drastic than reforms of the Reagan and Bush years, this legislation aimed to reduce federal expenditures by ending any legally enforceable right of individuals to collect social assistance, defining time-based benefit limits and further shifting programme responsibilities to state governments (Bashevkin 2000: 25).

The ‘most obvious connection’, as Gary LaFree (1999: 156) puts it, has do with ‘welfare’s presumed ability to ameliorate economic stress and thereby reduce the motivation of potential offenders’. Looking at the situation in the 1990s, the obvious becomes ‘problematic’. LaFree (1998a, 1998b) theorizes that the surge of crime during the 1960s occurred as a result of increasing cynicism about political institutions, souring economic conditions and weakening family ties. Stabilization of the legitimacy of political, economic and family institutions, and investments in criminal justice, education and welfare
eventually brought down crime rates. Ideally, LaFree explains, he would be able to produce findings showing that economic well-being and welfare spending increased during the 1990s. But while the economic situation did reveal signs of improvement, changes in welfare laws would appear to ‘contradict the argument that the 1990s’ downturn in crime in the U.S. is related in part to higher levels of welfare spending’ (LaFree 1998b: 1362). Moving outside the USA does not make it much easier. The leading welfare states did not follow a uniform sequence of changes that make it possible to centre the explanation for an international crime decline around welfare-state expansion. Social policy discussion has taken place around globalization and, specifically, whether expansion of unregulated markets and ascendency of neo-liberal ideals has brought about a retrenchment of social welfare provision (Swank 2005).³

On the other hand, the decline may be deeper than property crime or even crime in general. According to various statistical sources, there have been improvements across an increasing array of social problems. In the USA, there have been fewer cases of child maltreatment. Not only have people been committing fewer burglaries and murders, but also perpetrating less sexual abuse. Youth are better behaved. Fewer teenagers are running away from home. Fewer teenagers are committing suicide. Fewer teenagers are using illicit drugs (Finkelhor and Jones 2006). Across Canada and the USA, car accidents have decreased. Workplace injuries are down. The incidence of sexually transmitted diseases is in decline. Figures for young people leaving school early are down, as are figures for those who have tried cigarettes, engaged in episodic alcohol consumption and engaged in drink-and-driving (Mishra and Lalumière 2009).

Hard as it may be to accept, it appears that something has gone right during the past couple of decades. The possible ‘convergence’ of improvements across social welfare indicators could benefit from further research. ‘Something really positive is going on in the social environment . . .’ Finkelhor and Jones (2006: 707) admonish. ‘If something is working, it is incumbent on us to find out what, and to try to do more of it or expand its impact in some way’.

**America, ‘and elsewhere, too’**

Much of discussion of downward crime trends has been driven by the situation in the USA.⁴ The tendency to make statements based on the USA, and Britain, and then include the phrase ‘and elsewhere, too’, has been flagged by European criminologists as a mistake because what happens in English-speaking countries does not necessarily happen everywhere else (Tonry 2004: 1187). Having started this article with reference to the USA may mean that I share this same criminological tendency, which is worrying because the difference between a national crime decline and an international crime decline matters a great deal, especially when it comes to policy responses.

In the USA, the decline in crime has been sudden and wide-scale. During the last decade of the 20th century, rates fell for both property crimes and violent crimes; across the cities, suburbs and countryside; and for all demo-
graphic groups – young and old, Black and White, wealthy and poor (Ellen and O’Regan 2009). Rape, robbery, homicide, burglary, larceny and motor vehicle theft dropped by 40 per cent compared to 1991. In 2000, homicide rates reached their lowest point since the 1960s. And although rates have levelled off since then, both property crime and violent crime remain remarkably low. ‘Today, there is less crime in America and fewer victims than there were thirty years ago’ (Barker 2010: 490). But the decline has not been limited to the USA. An international trend began to take shape with the publication of International Crime Victimisation Survey (ICVS) data in 2000. This collection of national surveys revealed differences in certain offence categories across countries, but the trend was downward. ‘The broad picture is striking’, van Kesteren, Mayhew and Nieuwbeerta (2001: 97) observed, ‘Both ICVS and police figures suggest that overall levels of crime seem to have peaked in many countries in the early 1990s, and have fallen since then’.

Some doubt the wave effect is real. Or, to be more precise, whether falling crime rates should be understood as a cross-Atlantic phenomenon. Martin Killias points out a tendency in European criminology to regard what happens on the Continent as a replication of the USA, subject to a time lag of a few years. According to this logic, ‘crime “must” drop now also in Europe, since it started to do so in the United States more than a decade ago’ (Killias 2010: 5). Aebi and Linde (2010) insist that while crime overall declined in the USA, there is a major difference compared to Europe. Based on their systematic review of police statistics and victimization surveys, they conclude that there has been ‘no general crime drop’ in Europe. There has been a decline in property offences that began in the mid-1990s, but violent offences, and drug offences, have increased during the last two decades. For Aebi and Linde, the European experience illustrates the limits of American explanations (see, further, Killias and Aebi 2000; Aebi and Linde 2012 forthcoming).

Other recent evidence supports the view of a cross-Atlantic trend. Rosenfeld and Messner (2009) see the declines across the USA and Europe as a windfall of economic expansion. American and European rates declined in tandem because both reflected the same cause: an upturn in the economy. They found evidence to support the theory that improved economic conditions linked to the decline of crime in the USA also contributed to the decline of burglary in Europe. The economic expansion of the 1990s was not confined to the USA; economic expansions and contractions tend to affect both North America and the EU. Collective perceptions of economic changes, reflected in consumer confidence, are associated with burglary rates. The world’s developed nations share basic structural features – their economies linked, their consumers share similar outlooks – so we ought to expect comparable trends in crime (see, also, Reiner 2007).

It is hard to avoid methodological nationalism – the problem Killias has in mind – particularly when regarding the USA as the prime meridian. Methodological nationalism involves equating social boundaries with state boundaries, with viewing society and history through a nation-state lens. It can be described as an outlook that structures the choice of problems to be studied, and the means of studying them, such as statistical indicators, which are national in scope (Franko Aas 2007: 176–7). In the search for causes,
Marcotte and Markowitz (2011), for example, point to the impact of psychiatric drugs on control of mental illness as an explanation for the decline of violent crime in the USA. For a number of reasons, mental illness may contribute to criminal behaviour. A sense of hopelessness and lack of future orientation may cause persons with depression to discount future consequences and stray into criminal activities. In the USA, there was no change in the prevalence of mental illness in the 1990s. But there was a change in the proportion of those with mental illness receiving treatment, following government approval of a series of new types of anti-depressants introduced in the 1980s. In addition, the popularity of stimulants for attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) took off in the early 1990s. This was spurred by a change in public policy. The US Supreme Court in 1990 added ADHD to the list of diseases that enabled children from low-income families to qualify for the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) programme. Further, Medicaid was expanded for low-income children, which allowed for increased rates of diagnosis and treatment of ADHD. Marcotte and Markowitz found evidence of increased prescriptions for drugs to treat mental illness being associated with decreases in violent crime, but not for property crimes.

They go on to suggest that the correlation between psychiatric drugs and crime rates holds up across the international context (Marcotte and Markowitz 2011: 36–7). They compare the per cent change in reported crime across a number of countries, including Australia, Canada, France, Italy, Japan, the UK and the USA, alongside sales of the most widely used psychiatric medication, selective serotonin uptake inhibitors (SSRI). A simple correlation suggests that countries with the largest decline in crime rates in the 1990s were associated with the largest growth in SSRI sales. Japan, which had virtually no growth in SSRI sales in the 1990s, had a marked increase in reported crime. Canada, with falling crime rates similar to the American pattern, was among the world’s leaders in growth and treatment with new psychiatric medication. They conclude that psychiatric drugs and criminal behaviour is an ‘important area for additional research for the purposes of informing public policy’ (Marcotte and Markowitz 2011: 52).

Informing public policy? International public policy? Having started with an explanation for what was understood as an American situation, they then project these relationships onto an international screen. While they are by no means the only researchers to proceed along such lines, the idea that their research could inform an international policy response is somewhat worrisome, because there does not seem to be a way of moving to a policy argument for medicalization as a means of crime prevention without compounding the error of assuming ‘elsewhere’ to be sufficiently like America. Assumptions that drugs would be made available under conditions approximating a democratic society, administered by medical professionals in appropriate settings, to persons who are in a position to make choices about their treatment, and so on, cannot be sustained when extended over an international landscape.
The Scandinavian Way

Jan van Dijk has the advantage of starting with an international pattern. Based on the contributions to the ICVS, he is able to offer an explanation on an appropriate scale. He suggests that falling victimization rates occurred in the 1990s owing to ‘responsive securitisation’. Public concern about rising property crime rates led to self-protection measures, including installation of home burglar alarms. Higher levels of protection do not affect burglars’ decisions provided there remains a supply of vulnerable houses. But as collective levels of self-protection rise, there will be a point at which offenders will be discouraged from criminal activity. ICVS results reveal increases in levels of self-protection and, particularly, use of burglar alarms by households in affluent parts of the world (van Dijk 2008: 130).

Tseloni, Mailley, Farrell and Tilley (2010) contribute further support in their analyses of ICVS information. They confirm the reality of the ‘international crime trend’ revealed in 2000: the steady increase in crime, which had occurred for most of the 20th century, began to decline. The downward trend first appeared at the end of the 1980s for burglary and car theft, although the most dramatic downturns, which took place for burglary and theft from the person, began in 1995. Assaults began to decline at the end of the 1990s. The pattern suggests that the set of factors that triggered the crime drop first had an impact on burglary and car theft, and only later began to influence assaults. The explanation for the international crime decline, they point out, would necessarily need to be something that took place ‘universally, such as built-in car security’ (Tseloni et al. 2010: 389).

For van Dijk, the findings imply that governments should begin a withdrawal from the war on crime. Or at least, begin to rethink what they are trying to do relative to costs. In bringing about the decline in crime, ‘the role of governments has been of secondary importance’. The geographical breadth of the crime decline affords little support for ‘tough on crime’ policies. Crime rates have decreased throughout the Western industrial world without regard to national anti-crime policies. Countries that have spent little on police and prisons have reaped the benefits of smaller levels of crime. ‘Governments are well-advised to rely more strongly on market forces in the fight against volume crime’ (van Dijk 2006: 18; see, also, van Dijk 2010). The idea here is to help private security on its way. For Andromachi Tseloni, Graham Farrell and colleagues, the solution is to encourage development of situational crime prevention. Architects and planners should be encouraged to pursue plans for the built environment that would further discourage crime. Manufactures and designers should pursue built-in crime prevention. The commercial sector has the imagination, resources and initiative to tackle crime, and their efforts can be enhanced by sensible crime technology policies. ‘Society has a major comparative advantage and better resources than even the more adaptive offenders but needs to stay ahead of the curve. This is the lesson of the crime drop’ (Farrell et al. 2010: 23).

Situational crime prevention is often taken as being opposed to welfare-oriented crime prevention. Marcus Felson, a leading proponent of situational measures, has encouraged this view. He maintains that social welfare schemes
have no impact on criminal behaviour and claims crime reduction ought to be removed from arguments about the welfare state. ‘I maintain that crime variations in industrial nations have nothing to do with the welfare state. In general, it is a mistake to assume that crime is part of a larger set of social evils, such as unemployment, poverty, social injustice, or human suffering. I call this the welfare-state fallacy’ (Felson 2002: 12). Despite what Felson argues, the pursuit of situational measures does not imply a retreat from welfare provision. Situational crime prevention schemes contribute to social welfare in ways unplanned and unimagined by those who initiate them. Measures to improve security within architectural designs for social housing and management of public transportation contribute to welfare-state ideals, even if they were not intended to do so (Knepper 2009).

Consider housing policy. Safety and security are the first priority of poor people living in cities, yet household security measures have been unregulated. In the UK, there have been no statutory requirements for developers to consider crime prevention and city councils have left it to builders to decide features as vital to household security as door and window locks. Building regulations that require consideration of crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED) principles, such as those adopted by some Australian authorities, improve conditions for residents of social housing as well as those who buy into new developments (Cozens 2007: 234–5). Or, to think about it in another way, the New Urbanism trend within city planning promotes compact, high-density, mixed-use spaces within walking distance of public transportation. Projects that incorporate crime prevention principles, such as improving natural surveillance (‘eyes on the street’) and minimizing under-use of space (redundant buildings), also contribute public health benefits through reduction of problems associated with car-dependency (congestion and pollution) and improved physical health (walking, bicycle-riding). Even when aiming for crime reduction, public health may be hit with friendly fire (Cozens 2007: 233).

In fact, situational crime prevention along the lines of ‘responsive securitization’ has received its most full and robust expression within the leading welfare states. Denmark, Sweden and Norway established national crime prevention strategies in the 1970s, followed by Finland in the 1980s, and emphasized situational crime prevention. The crime prevention through environmental design movement began in the Nordic region in the 1970s as well. Denmark’s crime prevention council introduced in the 1980s a crime-reduction checklist for urban planners, as did the Norwegian council several years later. The ‘Scandinavian way’ of architectural crime prevention aims to avoid creating fortress-like buildings. Rather than wrap a house with a steel fence, the approach is to centre the house in a garden; the garden acts as like a fence but sends a different social message. The Scandinavian way also makes use of ‘symbolic measures’ at public buildings. Music, lighting and design are means of encouraging people to use public spaces for their intended purpose. Good strategies blend science and art (Knepper 2009: 68–9).

The Scandinavian way has appeal because it avoids criminalization of social policy. Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Finland have pursued situational crime prevention in response to particular crime problems while
building up provision of social welfare in response to general needs. In providing welfare provision to meet needs rather that reduce threats, Nordic governments avoid the situation that has developed in the UK in which housing policies must be justified with reference to crime reduction. Conflating welfare aims with crime control not only makes it difficult to solve problems, but leads to a ‘security politics’ which jeopardizes democratic principles and basic rights, while achieving little in the way of making citizens safer or more secure (Carr et al. 2007: 106–7).

**Winner Take Nothing**

It is entirely possible that nothing will change. Official measures of crime may register declines year after year, in country after country, yet there is a continuing perception that it remains a pressing problem. Rather than contemplate any sort of peace dividend, governments continue to organize responses around tackling crime that threatens to spiral out-of-control (Young 2003: 38–9).

About the time the international crime decline began to unfold, David Garland began to outline ‘the culture of high crime societies’. In the UK and the USA, crime control took shape in response to a new predicament. Basically, crime rates continued to rise to the point (around 1970 or so) at which rising levels of criminality became accepted as ‘a normal social fact’. At this moment, he explains, the welfarist responses to crime delivered by the ‘sovereign state’ lost their credibility, and ‘adaptive solutions’ became the prevailing policy reality. This new set of responses involved a smaller role for government, an enhanced role for private security, and a shifting of responsibility for the crime problem to citizens, households and communities. The ‘crime complex’ refers to a set of attitudes, beliefs, and assumptions: high crime rates are to be expected; crime issues attract significant fear, anger, and resentment; crime issues are politicized and represented in emotive terms; criminal justice is seen as ineffective; and private security predominates. A ‘crime consciousness’ fills the news, popular culture and built environment (Garland 1996, 2000).

And, we might add, it is here to stay. Garland explains: ‘Once established, this view of the world does not change rapidly. It is not much affected by year to year changes in the recorded crime rate, even when these involve reductions in real rates of victimisation’. Popular attitudes to crime ‘become settled cultural facts that are sustained and reproduced by cultural scripts and not by criminological research or official data’ (Garland 2000: 368). If he is correct, downward trends in crime statistics will fail to motivate governments to alter their policies. The course has been charted using high-crime coordinates and the ship of state will maintain present speed and position. This can be seen in France and Italy where law-and-order furnished themes for national elections despite good news in crime statistics.

In the French elections of 2002, the centre-Right coalition under President Jacques Chirac replaced the centre-left government. Voters were worried about crime, and with some justification as crime figures posted increases in violent and property offences. Chirac championed police efficiency as the top
priority in responding to crime, and his Minister of the Interior, Nicolas Sarkozy, provided a substantial increase in the budget. Sarkozy gave the police more money with the expectation they would deliver, and within a short period of time, they had positive results to report. The number of crimes known to police began to fall in 2002 and opinion polls revealed that only a quarter of people regarded the ‘fight against violent crime’ as of primary importance. Nevertheless, he continued his tough stance toward crime during his second term as Interior Minister, even though the overall crime rate as recorded by police fell back to the level of 2000. Law and order remained the dominant topic in the elections of 2007. Sarkozy set the tone with an uncompromising and confrontational stance taken in response to riots in several cities during autumn 2005. At one point, he dismissed the rioters as *racaille* (‘scum’) (Shea 2009: 83–4).

In Italy, the government of Silvio Berlusconi introduced intentionally severe penalties a year after crime rates began to fall. Property crime rates climbed steadily during the 1990s, followed by a period after 2001 which saw some ups and downs. Then, in 2008, crime fell by 8 per cent across the country, and particularly in Northern Italy, the region that had seen the largest gains. The decrease in crime had to do primarily with thefts, pickpockets and robberies. Assaults continued to increase. Berlusconi did not take a wait-and-see attitude – to find out whether the fall in property crime would become a fall in crime in general – but announced measures to strengthen police (Arcidiacono and Selmini 2010). In the elections of April 2008 there was widespread concern about crime in general and increased fear of victimization. The government pursued emergency legislation. Berlusconi’s Minister of the Interior, Maroni, pushed through measures allowing soldiers to accompany police on patrol duties, and providing a corps of 500 soldiers to tackle the Camorra (Neopolitan mafia). The emergency degree targeted illegal immigrants, organized crime, recidivists and dangerous drivers, and added 23 new offences to the Italian criminal code (Shea 2009: 90).

Britain, as well, continues to adhere to the politics of high crime. Despite victimization statistics in 1995 showing a shrinking crime problem, the victorious Labour government in the election of 1997 continued to proceed as if nothing had changed. Prime Minister Tony Blair identified ‘anti-social behaviour’ as a new focus of concern and re-centred the crime-fighting project around an ambitious legislative agenda. The Crime and Disorder Act 1998 introduced anti-social behaviour orders (ASBOs), a new legal response that blurred the traditional distinction between civil and criminal. The Blair government, when faced with declining crime rates, ‘discovered, so to speak’ in anti-social behaviour, ‘a new crime wave replacing the old’ (Mooney and Young 2006: 399). So far, the coalition government led by David Cameron has ignored the British Crime Survey results as well and has forged ahead with family-based policies linked to crime reduction. Rather than frame its response around declining crime rates, or at least the possibility of unpredictable crime rates, the Conservative Party has chosen to make crime a significant issue. In 2007, following the fatal shooting of a young man in Liverpool, the Conservative Party released its manifesto for how to tackle ‘Britain’s crime crisis’. Its report proposed a direct link between ‘broken homes and
educational under-achievement, emotional instability and social disengage-
ment’. The report stressed that ‘proper employment is the most pressing need
for many young people’ (Prideaux 2010).6

It is worth keeping in mind, however, that there is no determinist link
between the factors responsible for the crime complex and the policies that
result. The way it is is not the way it must be. Michael Tonry observes crime
policies do not correspond to crime rates, rather, responses to crime reflect
what policymakers want them to reflect, and policymakers have varying
reasons for choosing the policies they do. All of the factors of ‘late modernity’
that took place in the USA and UK also took place in western Europe – public
attitudes toward lawbreakers became more harsh, anti-immigrant sentiment
increased, rightist parties gained political ground, existential angst about the
state of the world increased. And yet, in Germany and the Nordic countries,
even France and Italy, imprisonment rates have not skyrocketed (Tonry 2004:
1197). In other words, Britain built up a large prison population because
British politicians wanted to emulate their American cousins, not because the
underlying aspects of late modernity brought both counties to the same state
of affairs. It is conceivable that a government could choose to make something
of lower crime rates, if for no other reason than saving the money for a
different project.7

Tim Hope (2003) makes an important point and, with it, a suggestion about
what this alternative project should be about. The impact of criminal victim-
ization falls disproportionately on the economically disadvantaged. The role
of security technologies on pushing down crime rates suggests that the middle
class has the resources to shield itself from crime and will benefit most from
reduction in victimization. Should this trend continue, the disparity between
those who do, and those who do not, benefit from the crime drop will widen.
To reduce the victimization divide, crime prevention resources should be
diverted to those in society least able to defend themselves. Using social justice
as a guide to crime prevention policy would mean compensating for the
uneven distribution of capacity for self-protection in society (see, also, Wiles

The Shadow Effect

Even if we knew what was behind the decline in crime, it is possible, even
likely, that we could not control it. It may be something on the order of a
structural process that is beyond the power of national governments to
manipulate to order. Immigration may be one of these.

In a 2006 editorial appearing in the New York Times, Robert Sampson
suggested there was evidence of increased immigration as a factor associated
with the lowering crime rates of the 1990s and subsequent levelling off after
2000. Based on material from his study of Chicago neighbourhoods, he
surmised neighbourhoods that contained a high portion of immigrants from
Mexico experienced lower rates of crime. He noted that immigration into the
USA rose during the 1990s, when crime decreases were greatest, then levelled
off after 2001, about the time crime rates began levelling off (Sampson 2006).
Subsequent research carried out using census data and police records of crime
support the immigration hypothesis. While politicians warn that the influx of immigrants would bring more crime, the reverse is true. Wadsworth (2010) found cities that experienced the largest growth in the proportion of foreign-born and newly arrived immigrant populations experienced decreases in violent crime between 1990 and 2000. He concludes that Sampson is on to something: ‘increases in the proportions of the foreign born and of new immigrants appear to decrease, not increase, robbery and homicide rates’ (Wadsworth 2010: 548).

Sampson did not say why immigrants eschew criminality. Most of the criminological explanations for immigrants and crime are going the other way. That is, there are any number of criminological theories that would explain why immigrants should be more likely rather than less likely to break the law. One reason for Sampson’s immigration effect might be found in the comments of a drug dealer in Oslo. Based on his interviews with Moa, ‘a Muslim drug dealer in a Nordic welfare state’, Sandberg (2010) proposes that identification with Islam has a positive effect. More than the threat of punishment, or the security of welfare support, it is fear of the ‘final judgment’ that motivates Moa to question his lifestyle. ‘Religion inspires him to accept responsibility for his own situation’. Hard as it is for the political left to accept, Sandberg (2010: 116) concludes, religion has a positive influence. Let us say that religion has the same influence on immigrants from Mexico, many of whom are observant Catholics. It may be something else. Perhaps immigrants commit fewer crimes because of intense family ties, or because they fear what will happen to them if caught.

But religion makes a good case in point, because of the thorny problems thrown up by trying to think through how to translate it into crime prevention policy. It is difficult to see a scenario in which governments would recruit immigrants because of their belief in judgement day, a belief likely to restrain them from criminal activity. Any system to target religious immigrants, based on a points system or otherwise, would be highly reactive politically, if not illegal. To create completely open borders would not seem to be workable either, because it is likely that many of the immigrants would fail to bring suitable religious beliefs with them, and defeat the purpose of using immigration policy as a means of crime prevention. This illustrates an important aspect of the relationship between crime and social welfare: welfare measures have crime-reducing effects when delivered as welfare and are not seen as crime reduction. Spotlighting crime reduction as the explicit aim of welfare support tends to kill the crime reduction effect. This can be seen in ‘social inclusion’ schemes which make the potential for criminality, rather than the state of need, the reason for extending benefits. Invoking the idea of criminal threat as a rationale for meeting people’s needs not only maligns the intended recipients of government relief, but alienates the people who imagine themselves paying for it (Knepper 2007: 102–3).

Consider the crime-reducing effect of education. Stephen Machin and colleagues point to significant a relationship between education and crime from their analysis of the effect of raising in 1972 the school leaving age in England and Wales from 15 to 16 years of age. They found significant decreases in property crime for the proportion of people with no educational
qualifications and increases in the age of leaving school following from the
change in the law. They conclude that ‘improving education amongst offend-
ers and potential offenders should be viewed as a key policy lever that can be
used in the drive to combat crime’ (Machin et al. 2011: 479). They also cal-
culate the financial savings from reducing the percentage of individuals with no
educational qualifications. Although, as they note, their calculations presume
‘the 1% who could benefit from staying on and getting some qualifications can
be well targeted’ (Machin et al. 2011: 479).

But this presents a real policy dilemma. It is one thing to bring into effect
a universal policy concerning the school leaving age on the basis of wanting
all people in Britain to have the best chance to enjoy the full range of
opportunities on offer. Such a policy, justified on grounds of citizenship,
rights, justice, etc. might very well bring in its wake a reduction in crime,
but even if it did not, it would still make good education policy. It is quite
another to identify a group of young people and insist they will have further
schooling precisely because they represent ‘potential offenders’. To make
crime reduction the goal of education policy risks distorting the purpose of
acquiring educational qualifications and would foster resentment within the
population it was meant to benefit. This turn of events can be seen in the
effort to deliver community development under the banner of terrorism
prevention.

In the wake of the July 2007 bombings in London, the Labour government
announced a scheme for preventing violent extremism. Implemented through
the Department for Communities and Local Government, the Prevent pro-
gramme introduced £140 million worth of measures intended to strengthen
the resistance of British Muslims to extremism. Essentially, the programme
was about community development; it provided a package of support for
agencies and activities, including ‘support for development of strong faith
institutions’. The announcement indicated that ‘it is not for Government to
intervene in theological debates’ but recognized that many imams came from
overseas, so there was a need for ‘new immigration rules for all Ministers of
Religion to ensure that those seeking to enter the country meet certain
requirements such as basic English skills’ (Department for Communities and
Local Government 2007: 10).

As a strategy for community development, it might have had a longer shelf
life. But when directed at British Muslims, and implemented for the purpose
of violence prevention, it became highly suspect. In March 2010, the Com-
munities and Local Government Committee announced a retreat from the
approach over concerns it had backfired. Rather than integrating youth and
encouraging shared identities, the project had stigmatized and alienated
Muslims. Voices within Muslim communities criticized the programme as an
excuse for intelligence-gathering and ‘spying’. Essentially, the stated ambition
of preventing the mass murder of British citizens tainted many local projects
that would have otherwise been seen as playing an important part of strength-
ening local communities. In order to succeed as crime prevention, welfare
interventions must aim for improvements in well-being, not for pacifying
perceived threats. The crime reduction effect necessarily must remain in the
shadows.
Conclusions

What are the lessons of the international crime decline for social welfare crime policy? To begin with, it might be a mirage. Crime may have declined across the USA for reasons that are quite different than what has occurred across Europe. Or, it may be that the American decline in crime only makes it appear as if crime has declined in Europe, when on balance, increases in some kinds of crime offset decreases in others. In any case, we want to be careful about misreading into the European situation lessons for policy responses. Correlations between factors in the American context may be visible elsewhere, but this does not imply equivalent social, political or cultural contexts for transfer of policy.

If there is an international crime decline, and more than one sign points in this direction, it may be best explained by something like the proliferation of security technology. This would suggest the possibility of a peace dividend for governments. Less money need be spent on prisons and police, allowing more money for other projects to improve well-being such as hospitals, schools and houses. Reducing the victimization divide, that is, compensating for the increased use of security technologies on the part of the affluent by channeling public crime prevention resources to poor communities, would be a worthwhile project. It recognizes the unavoidable link between social class and securitization. But the Scandinavian ideal is also worthwhile because it suggests the avoidable link between crime reduction and social welfare. Declining crime rates mean that governments do not need to justify spending on hospitals, schools and houses as crime reduction.

It is also possible that there are no lessons. The decline of crime rates may be due to an intricate combination of causes which defy any straightforward policy intervention. It may be that regardless of what happens to actual crime rates, politicians remain tuned-in to high crime frequencies and dance to the same music popular when crime rates did rise year on year. Or, it may be that crime rates have fallen for reasons we cannot control. Even if we knew, and the cause of the decline turned out to be immigration, we would be best advised not to attempt to make crime reduction a priority as this could cancel the effect or worse. Thinking about the lessons of an international crime decline, I am reminded of a statement by historian Richard Evans (1997: 59): ‘While many people, especially politicians, try to learn lessons from history, history itself shows that in retrospect very few of these lessons have been the right ones’. The lesson here, I suggest, is that in studying an international crime decline, we need to spend at least as much energy trying to understand the consequences as the causes.

Notes

1. John DiIulio, a senior advisor to President George W. Bush, forecast a sharp rise in crime owing to the arrival of ‘superpredators’, a rising generation of young people who had grown up ‘surrounded by deviant, delinquent, and criminal adults in abusive, violence-ridden, fatherless, Godless, and jobless settings’ (DiIulio 1995).
2. There is research pointing to a connection between educational attainment and lower involvement in crime, and falling crime rates in the 1990s coincide with rising levels of educational achievement. But, educational achievement also increased in the 1960s and 1970s during a period of rising crime rates (LaFree 1999: 156).

3. Further, it would appear that government has failed to regain the legitimacy LaFree suggests has been pivotal to declining crime, at least in Britain, in one very important aspect. Whatever the figures, a large portion of people continue to believe crime has increased. The most recent British Crime Survey revealed that some 66 per cent of the public believes that crime has risen across the country in recent years. Media preoccupation with crime stories has something to do with this. But, more to the point, surveys suggest that the public simply does not believe the government; many people believe there to be political interference in the production of crime statistics (Flatley et al. 2010: 7).


5. Robert Reiner (2007: 152, 161) suggests that improved crime prevention practices, in conjunction with criminal justice policies, explain downward crime trends in Britain (particularly for property crimes), but are of lesser importance than changes in the political economy, associated with mass consumerism, when comparing trends in violent crime (particularly homicide).

6. Heidi Mork Lomell (2010: 138–9) points out that the politics of crime statistics can draw both pessimistic and optimistic conclusions, depending on who is reading them. Politicians in opposition are more likely to see upward trends, while those in government are more likely to see downward trends.

7. Even Margaret Thatcher, well known for her less than sympathetic view of law-breakers, did not do as she said. Despite her ‘tough-on-crime’ speechmaking, the number of people sent to prison in 1990 was less than it was in 1980. She regarded prisons as an expensive way to make bad people worse (Matthews 2005: 190).

References


