

‘Criminology’s dirty little secret’ⁱ – Explaining the Crime Drop

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Crime Trends

There is consensus amongst many criminologists that crime increased dramatically in the latter part of the 20th century. The following demonstrates the substantial increases experienced in many jurisdictions:

- “The transformative dynamics of late modernity had their most pronounced and dramatic effects in the two decades after 1960. That period coincided, more or less exactly, with a rapid and substantial, increase in recorded crime rates – not just in the USA and the UK, but in every Western industrialised nation. The growth of crime in this period is a massive and incontestable social fact, notwithstanding the evidentiary problems inherent in criminal statistics and the possibility that these statistics were affected by changes in reporting and recording patterns. Between 1955 and 1964, the number of crimes recorded by the police in England and Wales doubled – from half a million a year to a million. It doubled again by 1975 and yet again by 1990 ... In the USA, crime rates rose sharply from 1960 onwards, reaching a peak in the early 1980s when the rate was three times that of twenty years before, the years between 1965 and 1973 recording the biggest rise on record. Moreover, the increases occurred in all the main offence categories, including: property crime, crimes of violence and drug offending”.ⁱⁱ
- “Between 1973/74 and 1988/89 (in Australia), the recorded rate of household break-and-enter rose 144 per cent, while the recorded rate of motor vehicle theft rose 105 per cent. Over the same period, the recorded rate of robbery rose 126 per cent and the recorded rate of serious assault increased by 376 per cent”.ⁱⁱⁱ

Since the mid 1990s these dramatic increases have been reversed in many jurisdictions:

- “From the early to mid-1990s, many industrialised countries experienced major falls in crime. They occurred first in the United States where serious violent crime including homicide fell by 40 percent ... In England and Wales, violent crime fell 49 percent, burglary 59 percent, and vehicle theft 65 percent between 1995 and 2007”.^{iv}
- “From 2001, motor vehicle theft in Australia ... plummeted and had fallen 55 percent by 2007”.^v
- In “the 10 years between 2001 and 2010 the rate of household burglary recorded by NSW Police fell by half and the current rate of household burglary is considerably lower than it was 20 years ago”.^{vi}

Exercise

1. What might explain these long-term increases and decreases in crime rates for particular offences in Australia and other industrialised Western nations?

2. Why might the timing of the declines differ across jurisdictions?

‘Criminology’s dirty little secret’

Farrell et al (2008) suggested that a failure to adequately explain these significant falls in crime in recent years is ‘criminology’s dirty little secret’. In an attempt to address this limitation, Farrell et al (2011) analysed particular crime trends across various national jurisdictions. Through their analyses, they developed a ‘security hypothesis’ to explain the changes in crime rates. The following is a summary of some key observations.

“It is proposed that changes in the quantity and quality of security have played a major part in driving crime falls in most industrialised societies. More specifically:

1. Security improvements, including specific security devices, vary for different crimes but have been widely implemented.
2. Different security measures work in different ways to reduce the crimes to which they are applied: they increase actual or perceived risk to the offender; and/or they reduce actual or perceived reward for the offender; and/or they increase actual or perceived effort for the offender.
3. The different ways in which security measures work produces variations in expected changes in crime patterns associated with crime drops. These comprise expected security device crime change ‘signatures’.
4. The specific falls in crime produced by improvements in security alongside their associated diffusions of benefit (preventive effects spilling out beyond the operational range of measures) to other targets and methods of committing crime are not matched by equivalent displacement”.^{vii}

A somewhat alternative explanation is provided for the fall in property crime in New South Wales:

“Early in 2001, Australia experienced an acute heroin shortage that forced the price of heroin up and the purity of heroin down. The result was an immediate drop in the rate of fatal heroin overdose and a slower but nonetheless substantial drop in levels of property crime. The fall in property crime has been widely attributed to a fall in heroin use. One problem with this explanation, however, is that property crime rates continued to fall long after heroin use had stabilised, albeit at a lower level ... The results indicate that the downward trend in property crime was assisted by the fall in heroin consumption, but other factors also played an important role. These include a real increase in average weekly earnings, an increase in the number of heroin users returning to treatment, an increase in the imprisonment rate for convicted burglars and, possibly, a fall in long-term unemployment”.^{viii}

Exercise

1. How do these explanations differ?

2. What models of crime prevention appear to have informed these different explanations for reductions in crime?

3. What challenges exist in providing a comprehensive explanation for the falls in crime?

ⁱFarrell, G.; Tilley, N.; Tseloni, A. and Mailey, J. (2008) ‘The Crime Drop and the Security Hypothesis’, *British Society of Criminology Newsletter*, No. 62, Winter 2008.

ⁱⁱGarland, D. (2001) *The Culture of Control: Crime and Social Order in Contemporary Society*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, page 90.

ⁱⁱⁱWeatherburn, D. (2004) *Law and Order in Australia: Rhetoric and Reality*, The Federation Press, Annandale, page 12.

^{iv}Farrell, G.; Tseloni, A.; Mailey, J. and Tilley, N. (2011) ‘The Crime Drop and the Security Hypothesis’, *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, Vol. 48, No. 2, page 148.

^vFarrell, G.; Tseloni, A.; Mailey, J. and Tilley, N. (2011) ‘The Crime Drop and the Security Hypothesis’, *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, Vol. 48, No. 2, pages 151-152.

^{vi}Fitzgerald, J. and Poynton, S. (2011) ‘The changing nature of objects stolen in household burglaries’, Crime and Justice Statistics Bureau Brief, Issue Paper No. 62, NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, Sydney, page 1.

^{vii}Farrell, G.; Tseloni, A.; Mailey, J. and Tilley, N. (2011) ‘The Crime Drop and the Security Hypothesis’, *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, Vol. 48, No. 2, page 152.

^{viii}Moffat, S.; Weatherburn, D. and Donnelly, N. (2005) ‘What caused the recent drop in property crime?’, *Crime and Justice Bulletin*, No. 85, BOCSAR, Sydney, page 1.