

CSI 4: Is crime really falling?

Summary

- Overall levels of crime in England and Wales have been falling since the turn of the millennium, according to both main sources, the Crime Survey of England and Wales and police-recorded data. There has been a similar trend in Scotland.
- Violent crime has also fallen over the same period – and here the picture is complemented by alternative sources, such as hospital admissions data.
- Crime trends in Great Britain therefore match a pattern of decline that has been observed across the developed world.
- The reasons for this general decline are unclear, although improvements in home, car and personal security may be one important factor.

Introduction

Is crime going up? Is the United Kingdom becoming a more violent society? These questions have been asked for many years by policy-makers, academics, practitioners, journalists and the public alike. They are also difficult to answer, since crime is an inherently difficult thing to count. Are we interested in victims or offenders? How do we count victimless crimes (such as drug use), or crimes where the victim is unaware of their victimization (such as some fraud offences)? In the 1980s and 90s, however, the answer to the questions above was often in the affirmative.

Figure 1 shows the long-term trend of police-recorded crime in England and Wales. After a slow, gradual increase over the first half of the 20th century there was a marked, indeed dramatic, rise from the early 1960s onwards. This increase appears to have halted in the mid-1990s, and since the turn of the new millennium recorded crime has consistently fallen, with rates in the latest years returning to levels not seen since the late 1970s. The situation in England and Wales therefore corresponds to a trend seen across many developed countries over the last two decades. Crime has fallen in the United States, Canada and many parts of Western Europe over this period.

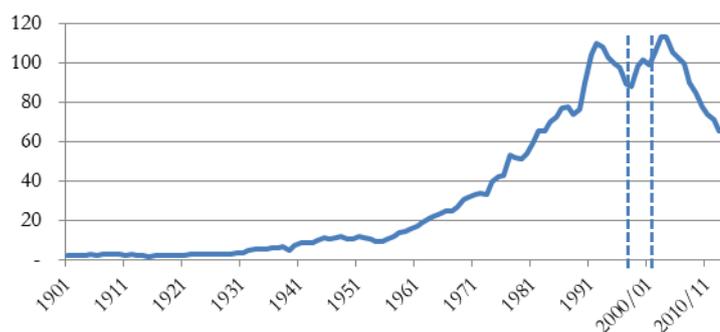


Figure 1: Crime increased markedly in the second half of the 20th century

Crimes per 1,000 population, England and Wales

The purpose of this briefing note is to explore this apparent drop in crime in England and Wales – and Scotland – by bringing together different sources of evidence and examining the impact on different groups in society. The discussion focuses largely on victims rather than offenders; that is, on the impact of crime, not its commission. Telling this story is important, not

least because in 2009/10, by which time recorded crime had been falling consistently for six years, 66 per cent of people in England and Wales believed it was going up ‘in the country as a whole’, according to the Crime Survey of England and Wales – although only 31 per cent believed crime was going up ‘in their local area’.

Why is it necessary to bring different sources of data to bear on this question? Put simply, no one estimate of the extent of crime can be considered truly reliable. The police-recorded data shown in Figure 1, for example, are subject to influence from many factors other than the actual level of victimization or offending. Perhaps most fundamentally, not all crime is reported to the police. Counting rules also change. The two vertical lines in Figure 1 mark two such alterations, both of which increased the apparent level of crime. First, counts became more victim-based in 1998/99; then, in 2002/03, introduction of the National Crime Reporting Standard ensured greater consistency between police forces. Neither apparent increase reflected a change in the underlying social reality of offending and victimization.

One way to address these issues is to focus on the most serious crimes, and particularly murder: the murder rate is often used as an indicator of the level of violence within a society. Figure 2 shows the homicide rate over the same period as in Figure 1. The pattern generally matches that for overall crime, with a relatively constant rate, between 0.5 and 1 per 100,000 for the first half of the 20th century, then a significant increase to around 1.5 per 100,000 by the century's end and, again, a decline since the turn of the millennium. However, the spike in 2002/03 is somewhat misleading: all of Harold Shipman's murders were recorded in this year, even though they were committed over a longer period.

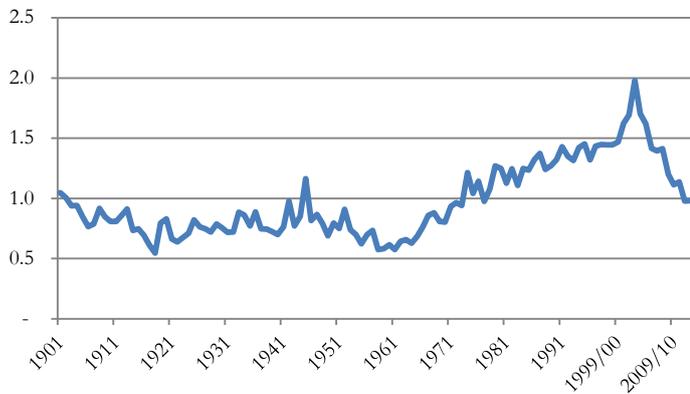


Figure 2: Change in the murder rate broadly tracks change in the overall level of crime

Homicides per 100,000 population, England and Wales
 Data for 1939 are unavailable, and are interpolated from surrounding years

Crime victimization surveys provide another solution to problems inherent in the police-recorded data. Such surveys regularly reveal substantially higher rates of victimization than police-recorded data; in 2013/14 there were 7.3 million incidents of crimes against households and individuals, according

to the Crime Survey of England and Wales (CSEW), compared with the 3.7 million offences recorded by the police. Notably, the 2013/14 CSEW figure compares with 19.1 million incidents reported in the 1995 survey – according to the CSEW, victimization levels have fallen by more than 50 per cent in the last two decades.

Figure 3 shows the trends since 1981 in both police-recorded crime and victimization as reported in CSEW. To allow easy comparison across the two sources the data are indexed on 1981, and both series show an increase in crime through to the early to mid-1990s and a decline thereafter (once the changes in police counting rules are taken into account).

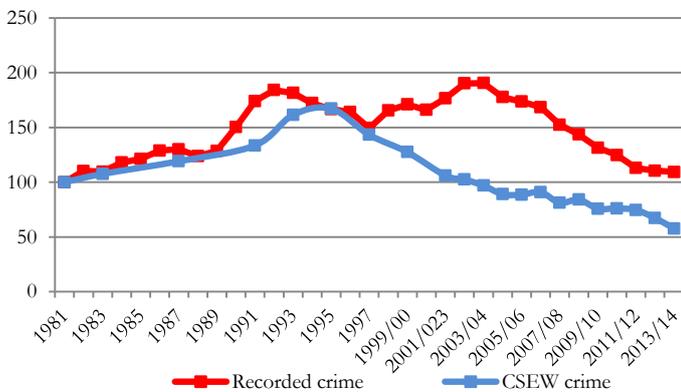


Figure 3: Crime in England and Wales increased up to the mid-1990s, then started to fall *Crimes per 1,000 population, indexed on 1981*

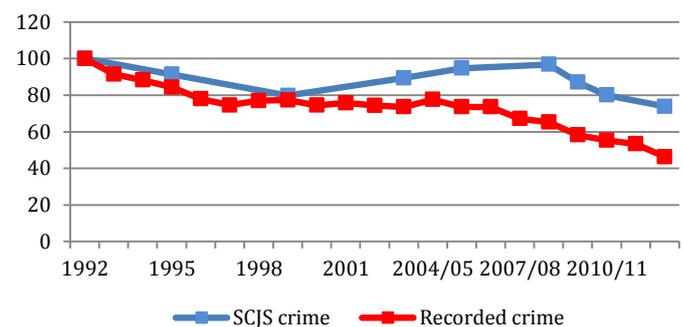
Being a survey of the general public, the CSEW is not subject to the same pressures as the police-recorded data in relation to, for example, counting rules: people are simply asked whether they have been victims of crime, and if so, of what type. However victimization surveys have their own imperfections: for example, they do not cover 'victimless' crimes such as drug offences, nor offences suffered by corporate bodies such as

businesses.

That both sources tend to paint a similar picture, however, suggests they are jointly tapping an important shift in the general pattern of victimization and thus, potentially, of crime. Further evidence comes from Scotland, which, while part of the United Kingdom, has its own police and legal system. Figure 4 replicates Figure 3, this time using data from the Scottish Crime and Justice Survey (SCJS) and Scottish police-recorded data (note the shorter timescale compared with previous charts).

Both sources show a significant decline over the period 1992 to 2012/13. According to both police-recorded and victimization measures, therefore, crime has been falling in England and Wales, and Scotland, for some years.

Figure 4: Crime in Scotland tended to fall from 1992 onwards *Crimes per 1,000 population, indexed on 1992*



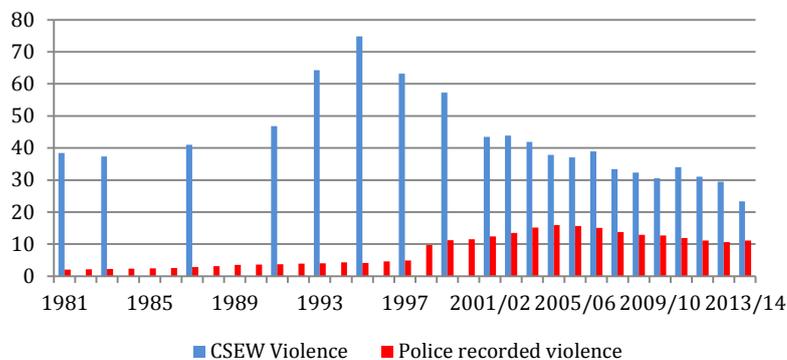


Figure 5: Violent crime rose from 1981 to 1995, then tended to fall

Violent crimes per 1,000 population, England and Wales

Violent crime tends to elicit the most public concern and the harshest criminal justice responses. There are also reasons to think that trends in violent crime will not move in unison with crime overall – violence

may increase as the economy improves, as people have more money to spend on alcohol and going out, for example, while at the same time other types of offending may fall. Yet Figure 5 shows, overall, that between 1981 and 2013/14 the trend in violent crime shadowed that for all crime – an increase, followed by a decline. Police-recorded violence increased for some time after CSEW violence started to decline. This again reflects, primarily, changes in counting rules, particularly in relation to how minor violent offences were recorded. Note also the difference in the absolute levels – as for all crimes, many more violent offences are reported in the CSEW than make it through into the police-recorded statistics.

Is crime really falling?

There are a number of objections to the idea that there has been a marked reduction in crime in recent years. Most relate to the quality and coverage of the CSEW and police-recorded data. In addition to the issues outlined above, for example, response rates to the CSEW seem likely to be disproportionately high among those most likely to be subject to crime – such as marginalized young men from poor urban areas – who are also, arguably, least likely to report victimization to the police.

Alternative methods for counting crime have been developed to address some of the problems with both the police recorded and CSEW, most notably the work of the National Violence Surveillance Network in tracking hospital admissions for violent injury. Overall, an estimated 235,000 people attended emergency departments and other medical centres for treatment for violent injuries in 2013, a decrease of 12 per cent on the previous year.¹ Figure 6 shows that recent trends in hospital attendance for violent injury match almost exactly that the reported in the CSEW, the murder rate and, to a lesser extent, the police recorded data. This adds further credence to the idea that violent crime has indeed fallen in recent years.

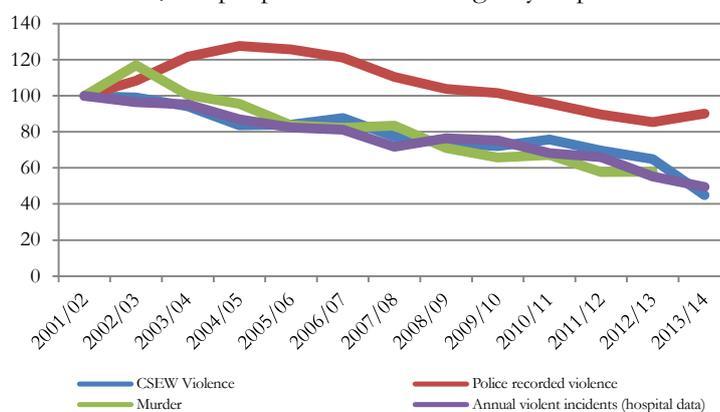


Figure 6: Multiple sources point to a recent reduction in violent crime

England and Wales, data indexed on 2001/02 (Hospital attendance data provided by Dr Vasekaran Sivarajasingam of Cardiff University)

Measurement issues

The two main sources of information on levels of crime are police-recorded data and the Crime Survey of England and Wales (CSEW), formerly known as the British Crime Survey. More information on the CSEW and police-recorded crime can be found at: <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/method-quality/specific/crime-statistics-methodology/user-guide-to-crime-statistics.pdf>

Like much administrative data, police-recorded data are influenced by factors such as changes in counting rules, which make them questionable sources for measuring change over time. Major changes occurred in 1998 with new Home Office counting rules and in 2002/3 with the introduction of the National Crime Reporting Standard. More recently concerns about the quality of police recording practices and quality assurance led the UK Statistics Authority in 2014 to withdraw the 'National Statistics' badge of quality from the recorded crime statistics. The Authority's Assessment Report 268 provides the detailed reasons for this decision.

The CSEW began in 1981, and provides estimates of the level of victimization experienced by individuals and private households. The sampling frame of the CSEW excludes people living in communal residences (student halls of residence, hospitals and prisons etc.), who may be disproportionately likely to fall victim to crime. The CSEW originally sampled only the adult population but a sample of children aged 10-15 years was added from 2009/10.

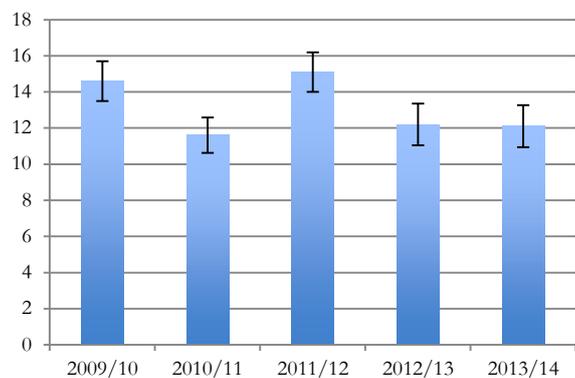


Figure 7: Around one in eight children are victims of crime each year

Percentage of children aged 10-15 victimizedⁱⁱ England and Wales

Another objection to the idea that crime is falling is that the victimization of children has tended to be ignored. Recently, however, the CSEW has started to cover younger people. Figure 7 shows that a smaller proportion of children than adults are victimized each year, around 12 to 14 per cent in each of the five years for which estimates exist. Over the same period around 20 per cent of people aged 16 and over reported at least one victimization experience.

Yet another objection to the general picture of a decline in crime is that offending has merely moved online. Many people do experience crime or crime-like events in virtual environments: in 2011/12, just under one third (31 per cent) of adult internet users reported receiving a computer virus, while 7 per cent reported a hacking attack.ⁱⁱⁱ While neither type of incident is necessarily a crime, from the victim's perspective they clearly share many of characteristics of crimes – inconvenience, annoyance, the creation of a sense of insecurity and/or the potential loss of resources. It is notable, though, that the proportion of internet users experiencing viruses has declined from a high point of 41 per cent in 2005/06, probably due to increasing up take of internet security; overall, levels of on-line victimization do not seem very much higher than they are in off-line environments.

In sum, while it is important to remain cautious, neither the use of alternate sources of data, the inclusion of children in the analysis, nor the examination of on-line victimization appears to significantly discredit the idea that crime 'really has' declined. Which is not to claim, of course, that victimization does not still have a significant impact on individuals and groups within society, nor that crime has fallen uniformly across the country. Falls in the level of burglary, for example, were substantially greater in more deprived areas over the first decade of the new millennium, according to the CSEW; overall levels of household crime fell by slightly more in urban compared with rural areas over the same period.^{iv} What seems increasingly clear, however, is that levels of victimization are, in general, now significantly lower than was the case 20 years ago.

Why has crime declined?

Many theories have been put forward to explain the decline in crime described above. Some, such as increased use of imprisonment or sentence severity, appear to hold relatively little explanatory power, not least because broadly similar declines in crime have occurred in different countries, with difference criminal justices systems, at the same time. More promising is the suggestion that improvements in home, personal and vehicle security have simply made it more difficult for potential offenders to access targets. Recent change in patterns of drug misuse and alcohol consumption may also have had an effect on trends in violent crime. Other possible contributors range from changes in police tactics, such as moves toward community-based and better-targeted modes of policing, to the removal of lead from petrol. What is perhaps most apparent is that the decline in crime has had multiple causes; any attempt to identify one over-arching reason for the crime decline is thus futile. Moreover, since multiple factors are in play, it cannot be assumed that relatively low levels of crime are 'here to stay', since a different combination of underlying causes could produce an upswing in years to come.

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ⁱ Sivarajasingham, V., Wells, J.P., Moore, S., Page, N. and Shepherd, J.P. (2014) *Violence in England and Wales in 2013: An Accident and Emergency Perspective*. Violence and Society Research Group, Cardiff University.

ⁱⁱ Data presented based on the 'preferred measure', which applies a set of norms-based criteria to exclude trivial events from the estimate of victimization. For example, an incident where a child is pushed over in the street, sustaining no injuries, may be a crime in law but would be excluded because the child would not perceive this to be a crime (see Millard and Flatley 2010 for more details).

ⁱⁱⁱ McGuire, M. and Dowling, S. (2013) *Cyber Crime: A review of the Evidence. Research Report 75: Summary of key findings and implications*. London: Home Office.

^{iv} Higgins, N., Robb, P. and Britton, A. (2010). Geographic Patterns of Crime, Chapter 7 in Flatley, J. et al. (eds) *Crime in England and Wales 2009/10*. London: Home Office

