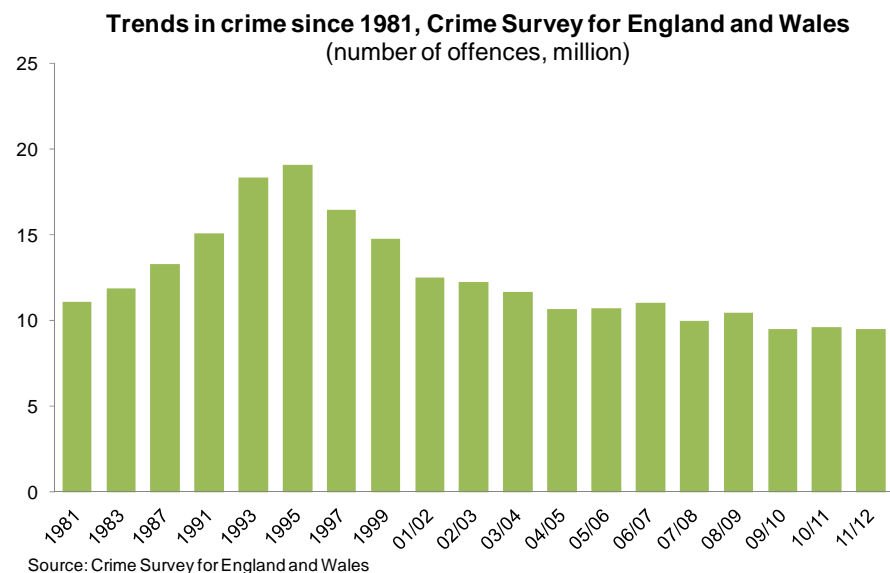


III Why has crime fallen around the world?

Although most respondents to crime surveys don't think so, crime in England and Wales, as measured by the national crime survey, has been falling since it peaked in 1995.

There were substantial falls in crime until 2004/05. From then until 2009/10, crime decreased more slowly. Over the last three years crime levels have stabilised.



Politicians and commentators generally tend to look at what has occurred domestically to bring about such a reduction.

However, a look at the international situation suggests that England and Wales are not alone in seeing sustained reductions in crime.

Sources of international crime statistics

In most industrialised and some developing countries the number of offences recorded by the police is published. The Eurostat database contains detailed information on crimes recorded by the police in much of the Western world.

The main benefits of the police recorded crime data are that they are regularly published, have a longer time series and can provide details for individual types of offence.

However, for a variety of reasons the police recorded crime statistics should not be used to make international comparisons. For example, there are differences in the legal definitions of criminal offences, the willingness of the public to report offences to the police, the recording practices of the police and the rules that govern what they record as crime.

To supplement the administrative police data, national victim surveys have been introduced, which have become the preferred source of information on crime levels in many developed countries.

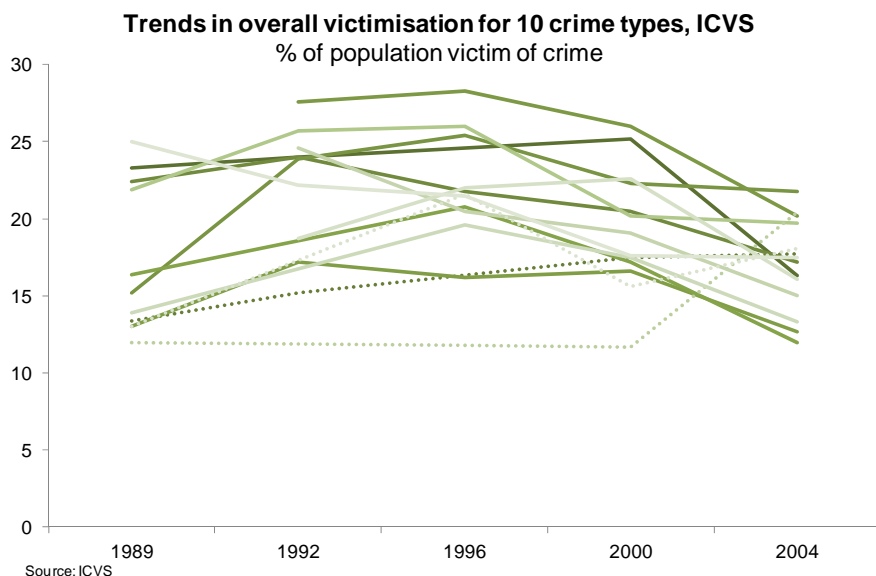
Surveys such as the Crime Survey for England and Wales (formerly the British Crime Survey) and the National Crime Victim Survey in the USA differ in the questions asked as well as other key design features meaning that the results are not directly comparable across countries.

The International Crime Victim Survey (ICVS) project was initiated in 1989 to satisfy the demand for reliable crime statistics that could be used for international comparisons. The ICVS looks at householders' experiences of crime using standardised questionnaires and other design elements, as far as is practical.

There are of course limits to the ICVS. For example, the sample sizes are relatively small for national surveys and questions are asked about broad crime types. The surveys are not run frequently - the latest data relates to 2005.

After World War II there was a boom in crime levels and at some time during the 1990s, as the chart below shows, crime began to fall. The trends are remarkably similar in a variety of countries.

Available trend data from the International Crime Victim Survey (ICVS) suggests a clear downward trend in overall crime victimisation. The chart compares the victimisation rates of the USA, Canada, Australia and nine European countries, as each have participated in at least four of the five editions of the ICVS. Overall crime victimisation rates are based on the ten crimes that are consistent over the life of the ICVS.



In the USA the reduction in crime that began around 1990 has been the subject of much academic debate. There has been less discussion surrounding European crime levels, which reached a plateau around 1995 and then steadily declined over the subsequent decade.

Although victimisation rates in most of the twelve countries in our samples have followed a similar pattern, it should be noted that this has not been the case for all countries. For example the ICVS-based trend data shows that in Belgium victimisation rates increased in the 1990s before stabilising from 2000. In Northern Ireland victimisation rates, which had been stable, increased in the first part of the 21st century and there has been a somewhat erratic trend in Switzerland. These countries are represented by dotted lines in the chart.

The question of what is behind the apparent synchronisation of crime trends is the subject of a recent book *The International Crime Drop*.¹ The book provides a more detailed analysis of the available statistics than is provided here and questions the conventional theories of crime reduction, offering what are referred to as 'new perspectives'.

Conventional explanations of crime

In the USA it has been suggested that the reduction in the use of hard drugs, notably crack, and associated gang related offences were responsible for falling levels of violent crime.

However this does not appear to be a factor in the crime reductions seen in other countries as, for example, European nations were not as affected by widespread crack usage.

Other American academics have posited that the reduction in crime in the 1990s was due, in some part, to the delayed impact of abortion law liberalisation in the early 1970s. This is based on the assumption that abortion reduces the number of people born in groups that would be considered high risk for developing criminal behaviour. Such groups can be defined using factors such as maternal age, marital status, educational attainment and poverty.

¹ *The International Crime Drop: New Directions in Research*, van Dijk et al, Palgrave Macmillan

Again this has been dismissed as a factor in Europe due to the large variation in the timing of legislative or policy changes relating to abortion liberalisation.

Abortions became legal in Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands in 1970s, and as late as the 1990s in Germany, France and Poland. In Ireland, anti-abortion laws have never been repealed. In most of these countries crime started to drop around 1995.²

For abortion liberalisation to be relevant to the global drop in crime similar liberalisation would have needed to have been implemented across the world at similar times.

In much of the Western world the population is 'greying', meaning that the proportion of youngsters, who are more likely to commit crime, is falling. This demographic change will have contributed to the reductions in crime rates, but the changes in age composition witnessed across the Western world are not uniform and 'greying' should have in fact led to reductions from the 1980s rather than the 1990s.

Investment in policing and imprisonment is not thought to be a valid explanatory factor in global crime reduction, as there is too much variation in the criminal justice policies carried out by different governments.

It has long been assumed that the state of the economy has an impact on crime rates. The post-war economic boom with the associated increases in wealth and material possessions have been cited as factors in the global crime rise in the second-half of the 20th century. This explanation cannot easily be extended to the crime drop as Western economies grew as steadily during the period from 1950 to 1990 as they did between 1995 and 2010.

² Ibid., p309

If economic growth has, between 1950 and 1990, driven up levels of crime, [it] is difficult to understand how it can be the principal explanatory factor for drops in crime thereafter.³

Following a recession in the UK crime rose throughout the 1980s and crime rates have been expected to rise, particularly for acquisitive crime, following the recent periods of economic downturn. This has not been the case as acquisitive crime has not risen in the wake of the economic downturn that began in late 2008.

It is difficult to place this in a global perspective as the economic downturns of the 1980s and 2000s are not covered by the ICVS data.

'New perspectives'

So if the conventional explanations fail to explain this apparent global drop in crime what have been the drivers behind it? The authors of *The International Crime Drop* provide possible alternative explanations, some of which are summarised in this section.

Some academics have proposed that increased levels of security, common across the industrialised world, have reduced the incidence of crime. There have been increases in both the number of private security guards and the use of technology in terms of the provision of security measures in cars, homes and public spaces.

This theory is thought to be a promising contender as an explanatory factor of the crime drop as security measures have increased across most Western countries. Also in the USA mass securitisation started slightly earlier than in European countries, which would be consistent with crime falling in the USA sooner than it did across the Atlantic.

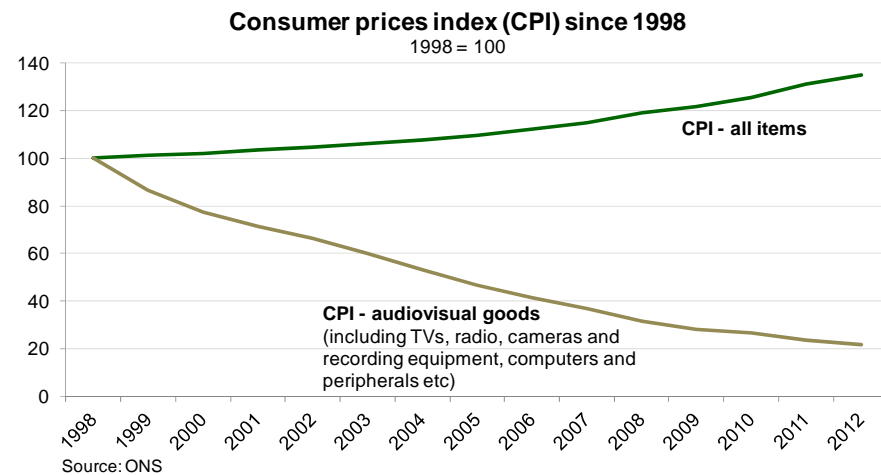
The technological advances in vehicle security have made cars more difficult to steal which will have a direct impact on levels of vehicle crime.

³ Ibid., p310

An additional impact is that vehicle theft is thought to be a common 'debut crime' amongst young men in particular.

If it is more difficult for young offenders to commit these initial crimes, often unplanned and opportunistic, then the theory suggests they will not embark on a criminal career, reducing future levels of crime.

The improvements in household security will have made it more difficult for potential burglars to break in to dwellings, increasing the risk of offending, but there is a suggestion that the benefits of such offending have reduced. Key targets of burglars have been portable electrical goods such as TVs and DVD players, but the market for such stolen goods may have shrunk as the price of legally purchased alternatives decreases. Could it be that this reduction in demand has led would-be burglars to seek more law-abiding ways to earn money?



Perhaps crime is not actually falling, but crime reductions have been restricted to those offences covered by surveys. Administrative police data and victimisation surveys tend to concentrate on well known crimes, for example violence, robbery, burglary and theft. It may be the case that offenders have diverted attention away from these crimes and are

committing more crimes that are not picked up by the statistics, such as internet-related offences and e-commerce.

Conclusion

There is scope for these 'new perspectives' to be tested further by criminologists before they can really be said to explain what is behind the global reduction in crime.

As and when more up to date ICVS data becomes available it will be interesting to see if crime trends have diverged or maintained the apparent global synchronisation. This will be particularly important as, since the last set of ICVS data, the global economic downturn will have had a greater impact on some countries than others.

Gavin Berman

Further reading

The International Crime Drop, New Directions in Research, van Dijk et al., Palgrave Macmillan, 2012

Criminal Victimisation in International Perspective, van Dijk et al., UNODC/UNICRI, 2007

Crime and Criminal Justice, 2006-2009, Eurostat Statistics in Focus, 06/2012