

ELECTION ANALYSIS

Reducing Crime: More Police, More Prisons or More Pay?

- Almost six million crimes were recorded by the UK's police force in 2003/04, of which 70% were property crimes and 20% were violent crimes. The Home Office estimates that crime cost £60 billion in 1999/2000.
- Total recorded crime fell throughout the 1990s, but the introduction of better recording rules in 1998 makes it difficult to know the precise changes since then.
- Surveys of whether people are victims of crimes show a 21% decrease in overall crime between 1998 and 2004. Within this, some categories decreased a lot – property crime is *down* by 35% – and a few categories actually rose – violent crime is *up* by 35%.
- Increases in police numbers, combined with new policing strategies such as the Street Crime Initiative, appear to have reduced robberies.
- Poor education and bad labour market opportunities are associated with higher levels of crime. Government policies aimed at improving education and 'making work pay' can therefore have indirect effects on reducing crime.
- The evidence that prison works in cutting crime is less clear, especially for re-offending rates.



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Introduction

Crime is usually high on the list of voter concerns. This might seem surprising since total crime has fallen significantly in recent years. Yet two thirds of the population think that crime is rising. Politicians must take account of the public's false perception of increasing levels of crime, which seems to be sustained even in years when both recorded crime and victimisation surveys point to reductions in overall crime.

Despite this, crime is high by European standards, especially violent crime – and according to the latest figures, burglary rates in England and Wales are twice as high as in France and five times that of Germany.¹ The total economic cost of crime was estimated to be £60 billion by the Home Office for 1999/2000, the latest year for which estimates are available.²

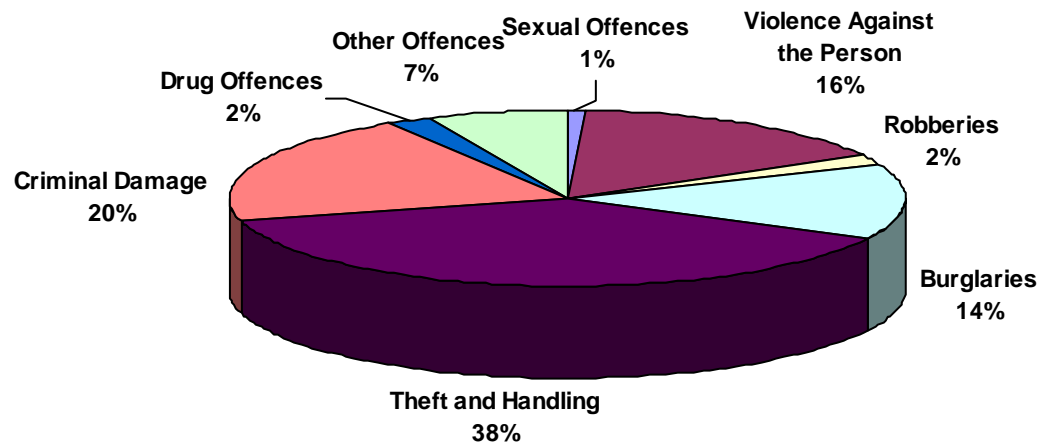
All the political parties claim to be 'tough on crime' and argue for more police. The opposition parties also stress freeing up police time spent on administrative 'red tape'. The Conservatives promise to increase the number and length of custodial sentences, while the Liberals put the emphasis on rehabilitation. The Labour government likes to highlight policies to tackle economic and social deprivation.

This analysis describes crime trends and research evidence relevant to the parties' proposed policies.³

What has happened to crime over time?

The police recorded just over 5.9 million crimes in England and Wales between April 2003 and March 2004. The three main types of property crimes – theft and handling; burglaries; and criminal damage – account for over 70% of the total, while violent crimes – sexual offences; violence against the person; and robbery – account for less than 20% of all recorded crimes (see Figure 1). Interestingly, while robberies represent only 2% of all crimes, the 2001 British Crime Survey (BCS) found that 41% of respondents were worried about becoming the victim of such an offence.

Figure 1: Recorded crime categories 2003/04



Source: Crime in England and Wales 2003/04

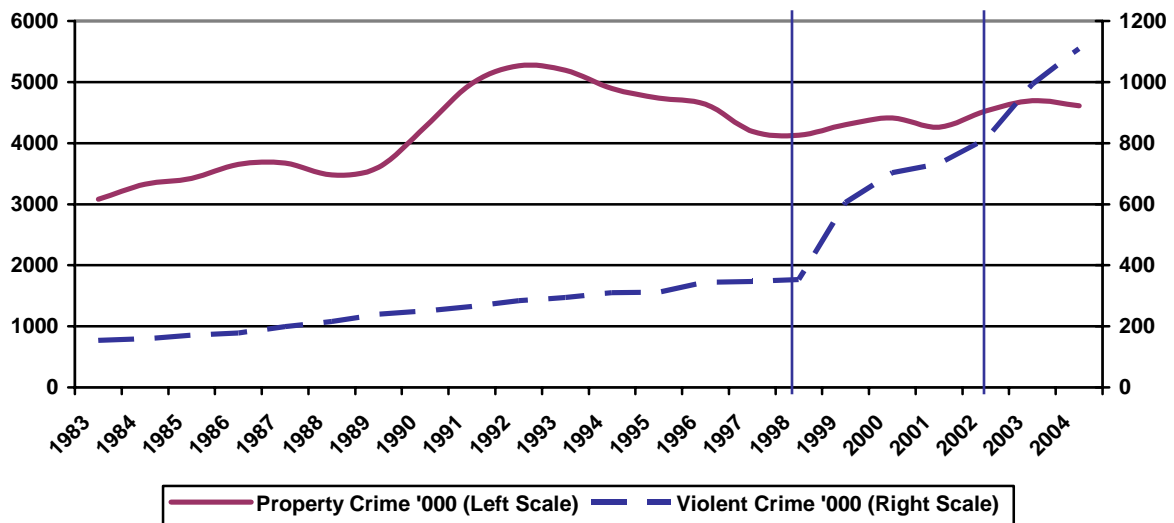
¹ See the Home Office Statistical Bulletin 12/03 (<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs2/hosb1203tabs.xls>), which presents 2001 data, the latest year for which comparable figures are available. As this is based on recorded crimes, it must be assumed that the probability of reporting crime is relatively similar across countries. This is more likely to be the case for burglary because of homogeneous insurance requirements.

² Brand and Price (2000)

³ Levitt (2004) provides an excellent overview of US research on factors reducing crime.

There has been a clear reduction in *recorded* property crime since it peaked in the early 1990s (see Figure 2). The introduction of two successive police recording practice changes in 1998/99 and 2002/03 make it harder to compare what has happened since Labour came to power. The two change years are highlighted in Figure 2 with vertical lines and show that the earlier changes strongly affected violent crime, which now includes some previously unrecorded categories.

Figure 2: Recorded crime trends 1983-2004



Source: Recorded Crime Statistics 1898-2002/03 (<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs/100years.xls>)

The BCS is better for looking at trends, as it was not affected by the recording practice change. This victimisation survey aims to uncover the ‘dark figure’ of crime: offences committed but not recorded. Table 1 shows that there are a far greater number of offences committed than are recorded. For example, only 15% of vandalism offences were recorded in 1997/98.

The changes in recording practices have meant that for many crimes, the proportion of crimes recorded has increased substantially since 1997. For example, only 28% of property crimes were recorded in 1997/98 compared with 40% in 2003/4.

Overall, there has been a 21% fall in the number of crimes committed. There have been important decreases in vandalism and property, but large increases in violent crimes.⁴ But again, it is important to remember that violent crimes are often the ones people fear in terms of being victimised and these are the crimes where it is difficult for the government to claim any success.

⁴ Trends in the relatively new ‘anti-social behaviour’ category, including a lot of low level nuisances, are not properly measured. Some of the relevant crimes come under the category of vandalism and others the category of violence against the person. In this respect, the BCS trends do not make it possible to conclude one way or another as to the evolution of anti-social behaviour in the recent past.

Table 1: Comparing recorded and BCS crime 1997/98 and 2003/04

	Vandalism			All comparable property crimes			All comparable violent crimes		
	1997-1998	2003-2004	% change	1997-1998	2003-2004	% change	1997-1998	2003-2004	% change
Crimes recorded by the police (thousands)	443	574	+ 29	1,751	1,611	- 8	256	443	+ 73
Estimate of crimes committed (thousands)	2,917	2,465	- 16	6,261	4,056	- 35	1,022	1,538	+ 35
Percentage of crimes recorded	15	23	-	28	40	-	25	25	-

Source: 1998 BCS and Crime in England and Wales 2003/04 – the ‘all comparable property crime’ category includes burglary, all vehicle thefts, bicycle theft and theft from the person; the ‘all comparable violent crime’ includes wounding and robbery.

Reducing crime: more police?

Since 1997, a net total of 13,000 extra police have been hired and all the main parties are promising to increase the number of police further.⁵ This is not surprising as there is a strong public perception that more police makes a society safer. But the impact of increasing police on reducing crime is hard to unravel: if more police are hired to combat crime increases, then crime may appear to be higher when there are greater numbers of police.

Examination of the Street Crime Initiative in 2002 suggests that more police resources can significantly reduce crime.⁶ This policy allocated extra funds⁷ to 10 of the 43 police force areas of England and Wales with a remit to use the funds to try and combat robbery. Because the Street Crime Initiative was introduced in certain areas and not in others, it is possible to compare what happened to robberies before and after the introduction across areas.

The research finds that these extra police resources did have a strong impact in reducing robberies by about 20% and were highly cost effective with a net social benefit estimated at between £100 and £170 million a year. Key to this outcome seems to be a combination of extra manpower with the introduction of innovative police practices such as greater and more systematic inter-agency co-operation.

Reducing crime: more prisons?

In 2004, there were almost 75,000 individuals in custody in England and Wales. The Conservative Party is promising to build new custodial establishments to create 20,000 additional places. This would potentially bring the number of prisoners per 100,000 population to 192 compared with 142 today.

Such an incarceration rate is 50% higher than the rate in Germany in 2001 and 60% higher than in France in 2001. But even though these two countries also have lower crime rates than the UK, it is not possible to conclude that prison does not reduce crime since more crime may lead to more prisoners.

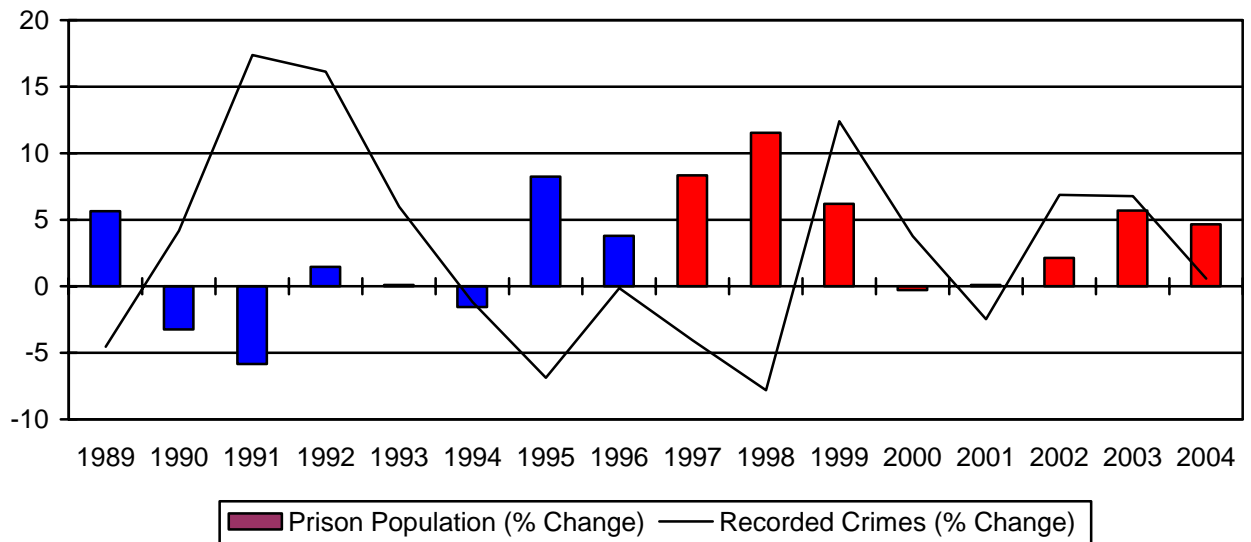
Imprisonment can reduce crime through two channels. First, as offenders are in custody, they are removed from the street and unable to commit other crimes – the ‘incapacitation effect’. Second, the increased threat of punishment deters potential criminals from committing offences.

⁵ The Conservatives are promising 5,000 extra police and the Liberal Democrats are promising 10,000.

⁶ Machin and Marie (2005)

⁷ Just under £50 million over two years, which was mainly spent on police staffing.

Figure 3: Changes in prison population and recorded crime 1989-2004



Source: Home Office Statistical Bulletin 12/03 and Recorded Crime Statistics 1898 - 2002/03

Figure 3 plots changes in prison population against changes in recorded crime. Although crime does appear to decrease when incarceration levels increase, there may be other factors driving both outcomes. These figures also ignore re-offending rates, which may be considered better measures of the effectiveness of prison, especially in comparison with rehabilitation programmes.

Reducing crime: the impact of education and labour market policies

A large body of evidence suggests that education and labour market opportunities influence criminal activity. Someone with a poor education and bleak labour market opportunities is more likely to commit a crime. This may be because, for property crimes, the potential financial gains outweigh the risks.

Most research findings point to a strong impact of economic conditions, in particular low labour market earnings, on crime. For example, in the 1980s, there were larger increases in crime in areas where low wages deteriorated most strongly.⁸ The introduction of the national minimum wage in 1999 also appears to have reduced crime by improving the relative pay of the worst off workers.⁹ By contrast, the relationship between crime and unemployment is more uncertain.¹⁰

Labour market policies are also potentially important for crime since they have the potential to alter economic incentives. Machin and Marie (2004) study the introduction of more stringent unemployment benefit requirements with the 1996 introduction of the Jobseeker's Allowance. There was a substantial drop in unemployment, but some of these individuals dropped out of the labour market and shifted into criminal activities.

Research also shows that improved education opportunities can reduce crime. Since the UK has one of the lowest post-compulsory participation rates in education in Western Europe, this could well be linked to higher crime rates for 16 to 18 years olds. The Labour government has introduced the Education Maintenance Allowance, which pays low income pupils to stay in school, and this policy has had some success in improving their staying on rates.¹¹ An additional benefit is that in areas where the allowance was first introduced, juvenile property crime rates fell by more than in areas where it was not.¹²

⁸ Machin and Meghir (2004)

⁹ Hansen and Machin (2002)

¹⁰ Freeman (1999)

¹¹ Middleton et al. (2003)

¹² Feinstein and Sabates (2005)

Improving people's education opportunities therefore emerges as an important crime reduction policy. This works in two ways: first, by reducing crime by increasing people's potential future income; and second, by reducing crime participation while individuals stay involved in the education system.

Conclusions

Total crime has significantly fallen under the Labour government. This is due to important reductions in property crimes, which represent the majority of offences committed. Violent crime trends appear to have gone in the opposite direction with increases of over one third over the same period.

The main crime fighting policy advocated by all parties is an increase in police numbers. New research shows that increased police resources reduce certain types of crime when linked to the introduction of new police practices. Improving the education and labour market position of the unskilled can also help.

There is less evidence to support the proposal to increase the prison population so as to reduce crime. The negative relationship between changes in crime and changes in imprisonment does not consider important factors like the cost of prison on longer-run probabilities of people re-offending.

Low wages and poor educational opportunities have emerged as important factors explaining the causes of crime. Certain policies introduced by the Labour government to tackle those causes appear to have had an indirect beneficial effect of reducing crime rates. We leave it to the reader to judge which party offers the best policies to improve labour market and education opportunities.

For further information

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