

A series of background briefings on the policy
issues in the May 2015 UK General Election

Fighting Crime: Can the Police do more with less?

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CEP ELECTION ANALYSIS

Fighting Crime: Can the police do more with less?

- There were just over 3.7 million crimes recorded by the police in England and Wales in 2013-14, a fall of 21% since 2008-09.
- The decline is even more substantial using another measure of crime: the Crime Survey of England and Wales (in which respondents report whether they have been victims of crime, and which therefore includes crimes not reported to the police). This shows a fall of 29% since 2008-09, though the number of crimes is higher, at 7.3 million.
- Over the same period, the number of police officers has fallen by just over 16,000, a drop of 11%. There has been an even larger decline in the numbers of police staff and Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs).
- The evidence suggests that fewer police officers would tend to lead to a rise in crime. Given the reduced crime figures, this suggests that either the productivity of the police has risen or fewer people are turning to crime – or both.
- On productivity, there is evidence that forces have realised substantial efficiency gains and are policing in a more effective way.
- On criminal behaviour, there are long-run trends, such as an ageing population, that point in the direction of reduced criminality. In addition, technological change appears to have reduced some opportunities available to criminals.
- Whether the pace of reductions in the police workforce that have occurred so far can be sustained without slowing – or reversing – the decline in crime is an open question.

Introduction

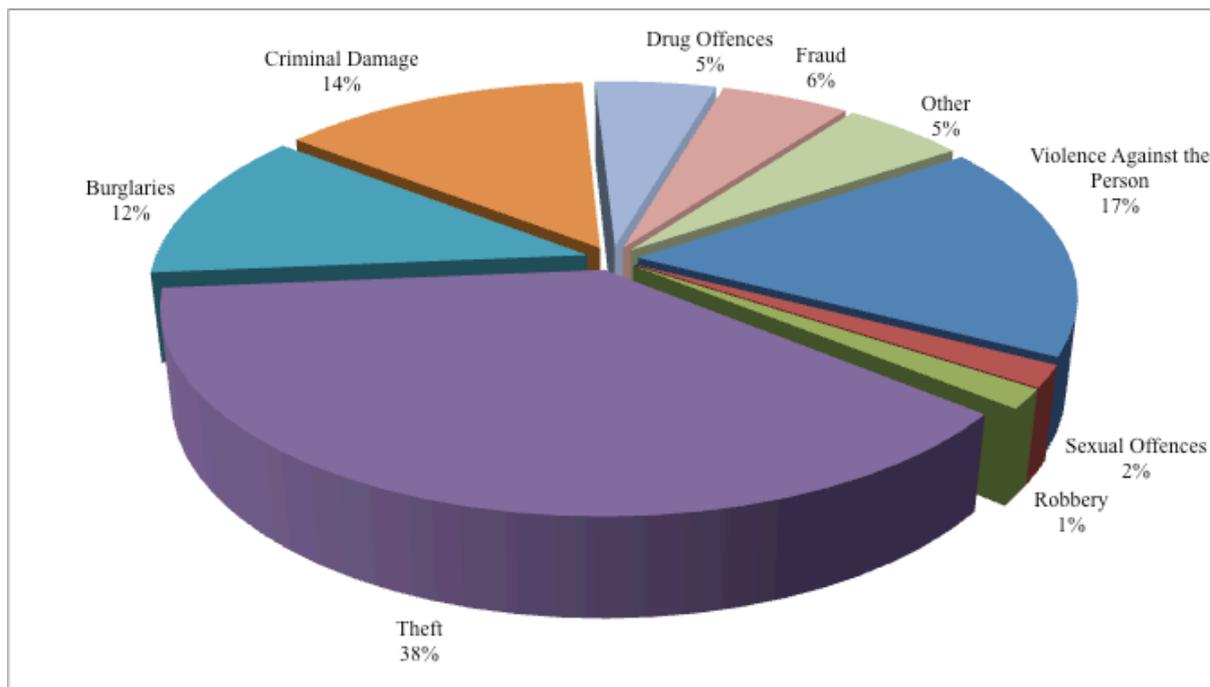
Crime has continued to fall over the last few years despite substantial reductions in the number of police officers employed and the continued weakness of the domestic economy – both factors that one might have expected to generate a rise in criminality.

This decline in crime is also reflected in its relative importance as an issue for voters. According to an Ipsos MORI survey, 37% of respondents rated crime as an important issue facing the UK at the end of 2007. By the end of 2014, this figure had fallen to 12%.

Trends in crime

The police recorded just over 3.7 million crimes in England and Wales between April 2013 and March 2014. The three main types of property crime – theft and handling, burglaries and criminal damage – accounted for 63% of the total, while violent crimes – sexual offences, violence against the person and robbery – accounted for just over 20% of all recorded crimes (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Recorded crime in England and Wales, 2013-14



Source: Crime in England and Wales, year ending March 2014.

However it is recorded, there has been a sustained reduction in crime over the last decade. In England and Wales, two principal measures are used:

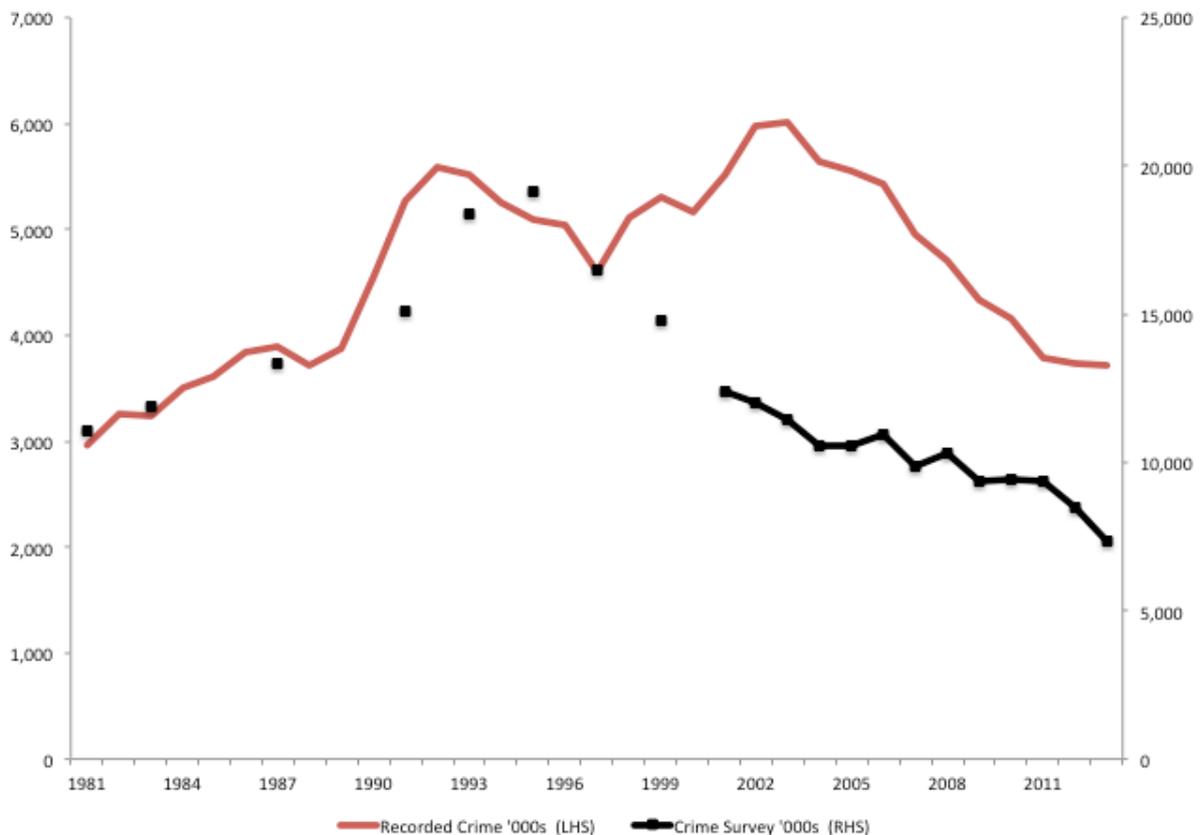
- First, the police record the crimes that are reported to them.¹ These are the data used in Figure 1.

¹ It should be noted that there have been two substantial changes in the way that police record crime (in 1998-99 and 2002-03) that makes comparisons over the longer term less robust.

- Second, the Crime Survey of England and Wales is a long-running victimisation survey, which asks a large representative cross-section of individuals in households whether they have been victims of crime. This series is not affected by the reporting changes so may give a better sense of long-run trends. It also has the advantage of capturing crimes that are not reported to the police.

Figure 2 shows the total crimes for each measure since 1981. While there are differences between the two series, it is clear that crime rose in the 1980s and early 1990s and has fallen significantly in the 2000s.

Figure 2: Trends in crime, 1981-2014



Source: Crime in England and Wales, year ending March 2014.

The reduction in crime over the last few years has been observed across a wide range of crime categories. Table 1 documents the percentage falls in crime between 2008-09 and 2013-14 for a set of different offence categories. With one notable exception, crime has fallen across all categories.

The notable exception is sexual offences, where there has been a rise of 28% over the period. This is partly explained in terms of a rise in the probability of reporting such offences (and improved compliance with reporting standards by the police) rather than a straightforward rise in the number of offences, though it is hard to attribute the exact extent of this effect (note that the Crime Survey of England and Wales does not ask about sexual offences).

One other important point to note is that crime here is measured by counts of offences. One might also be interested in the ‘size’ of the offence – for example, an internet scam may be a much more serious offence in terms of losses and victims than a chip-and-pin offence. There are no reliable publicly available data that give a sense as to trends in the severity of crime.

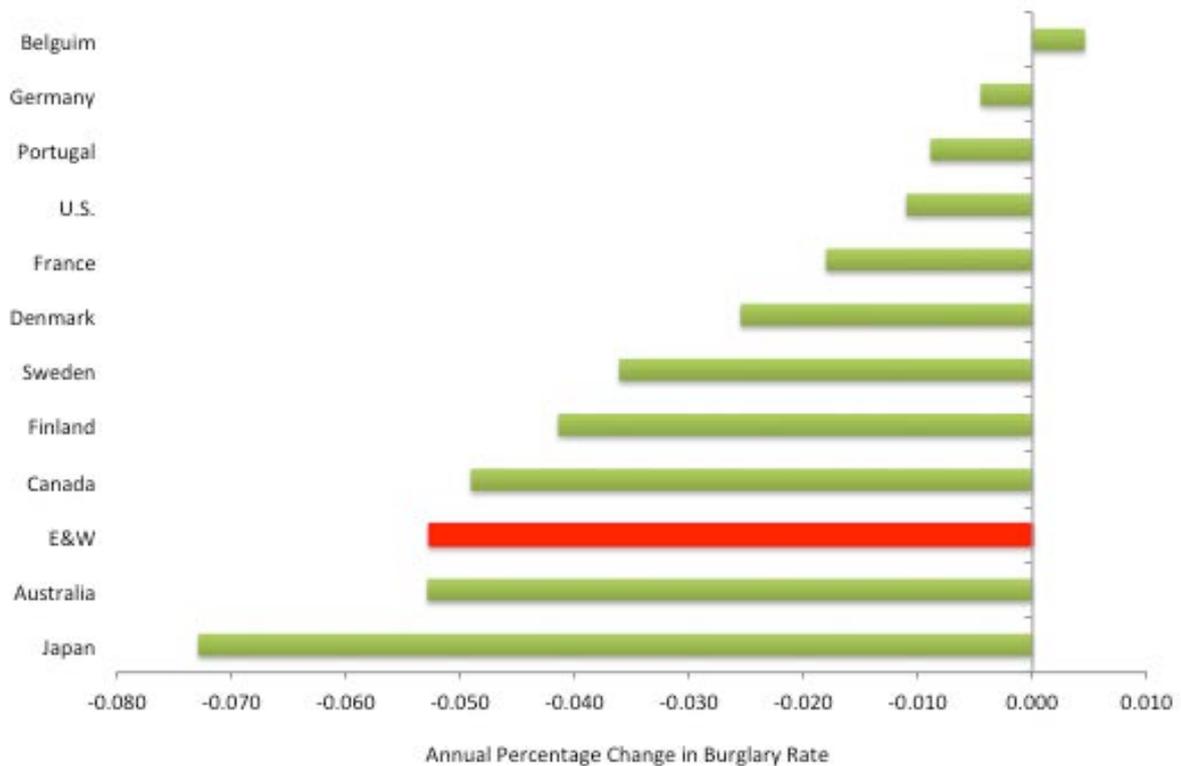
Table 1: Percentage changes in crime between 2008-09 and 2013-14

	2008-09	2013-14	Percentage change
Police recorded crime			
Total	4,703	3,718	-20.9%
Violence against the person	709.0	634.6	-10.5%
Robbery	80.1	57.8	-27.8%
Sexual offences	50.2	64.2	+27.9%
Burglary	581.6	443.2	-23.8%
Criminal damage and arson	930.3	506.2	-45.6%
Crime Survey of England and Wales			
Total	10,283	7,333	-28.7%
Violence	1,774	1,327	-25.2%
Robbery	262	166	-36.6%
Domestic burglary	991	785	-20.8%
Vehicle-related theft	1,447	934	-35.5%

Source: Crime in England and Wales, year ending March 2014. Figures are in thousands.

Finally, the downward trend in crime that has occurred in England and Wales over the last decade has been, more or less, reflected across the developed world. Figure 3 shows the annual percentage change in the burglary rate for a broad set of countries over the period from 2003 to 2012. England and Wales experienced one of the largest falls (from a reasonably high rate by international standards), but there were falls in almost all countries. This strongly suggests that at least some of the decline in crime has been as a result of changes that are not unique to the UK.

Figure 3: Annual percentage changes in burglary rate, 2003-12



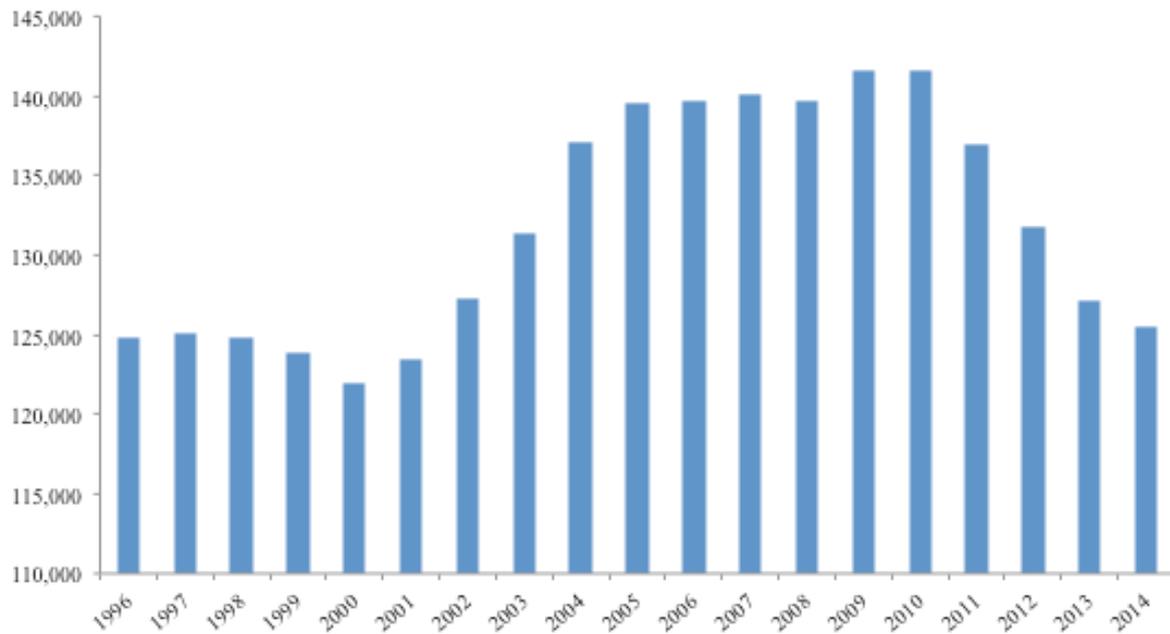
Source: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes.

More with less?

It is perhaps surprising that crime has continued to fall, given the substantial reductions in headcount that police forces have witnessed in the last few years. Since the peak of 2009, the total number of police officers in England and Wales has fallen by 16,000 – a drop of 11%. Police officer numbers are now back to the level seen at the end of the 1990s, as shown in Figure 4.

To an extent, police forces have managed to protect front-line policing by making more substantial headcount reductions in non-officer numbers. So over the same period, there has been a 19% reduction in police staff and a 23% fall in the number of PCSOs. At the other end, there has been a substantial delayering of management, with a 25% drop in the superintending ranks.

Figure 4: Police officer numbers, England and Wales, 1996-2014



Source: Crime in England and Wales, year ending March 2014.

The research evidence tends to suggest that when there are more police on the street, there is less crime. This may seem obvious, but the difficulty is that police officer numbers often change *in response* to crime trends, so cause and effect is often difficult to identify.

An investigation of surges in the number of police personnel deployed after the 7/7 terrorist attack in London in 2005 suggests that there are large effects of police patrolling the streets on crime (Draca et al, 2011). This research compares differences in crime rates in Central and Outer London before and after the terrorist attack, and finds that they fell by about 10% where there was a sizable (over 30%) increase in the number of police officers deployed.

But it is not just the number of police officers that matter: equally important are what they are doing and how effectively they are doing it. Evidence from the Street Crime Initiative in 2002 finds that a policy of allocating extra money to some forces to combat robbery reduced such crimes by about 20% (Machin and Marie, 2011). Interestingly, the effect appears to have come not just from having additional manpower but also from the introduction of innovative police practices, such as greater and more systematic inter-agency co-operation.

More generally, evidence suggests that strategies such as hot-spots policing – which exploits the fact that a large share of crime often occurs in very localised areas – can be effective in reducing crime (Braga, 2007).

There is also evidence that targeting and monitoring individuals who are responsible for committing large volumes of offences in their communities can reduce crime (Machin et al, 2014). Examination of the effect of early introduction of the Prolific Offender Strategy² in

² This was a strategy to target known prolific and priority offenders by establishing multi-agency partnerships in local areas to focus on prevention, conviction and rehabilitation.

certain areas of the UK before it was rolled out nationally in 2004 indicates that it had a substantial impact on reducing burglaries, the crime that these types of offenders are most likely to commit.

Overall, the evidence shows that what police do seems at least as important as police numbers. Improvements in policing strategy, often driven by increased availability of data, can have substantial effects on productivity.

Fewer criminals, fewer opportunities?

There is a large body of research evidence showing that education and labour market opportunities influence criminal behaviour. All else equal, those who did badly at school and who face a bleak labour market are more likely to commit crime. For property crimes, the potential relative rewards for such marginal individuals are higher, and may easily outweigh the returns to legitimate work or the alternative of unemployment.

The fact that there is a strong empirical link between a lack of labour market opportunities and crime, might have suggested that crime would have risen as a result of the global financial crisis in 2008-09 and during the subsequent recession and anaemic recovery in the UK. Two points suggest that this may be too simplistic:

- First, unemployment did not rise as substantially as many expected and is now back at similar levels to those observed pre-crisis.
- Second, those at the very bottom of the income distribution have been protected somewhat as a result of the minimum wage and some pay policies that gave annual cash increases favouring the low paid.

Increasing levels of educational attainment for children in the UK are also likely to have reduced criminality over time. There is evidence that the increase in the compulsory school leaving age from 15 to 16 in England and Wales, which occurred in the 1972-73 school year, had important long-term crime-reducing effects (Machin et al, 2011). With over 40% of 18 year olds now attending university, there is a much smaller group of youths who are at risk of leaving school with no qualifications and facing the starkest trade-offs between crime and legitimate work.

More generally, the evidence seems to suggest that younger cohorts are becoming more sober – in all senses of the word. Alcohol consumption among the young seems to be declining, with a 40% rise in the proportion of young adults who report that they do not consume alcohol at all between 2005 and 2013. Teenage pregnancies are at their lowest level since 1969, and persistent truancy from secondary schools has fallen from 10.2% in 2008-09 to 6.4% in 2012-13.

There is no extant evidence that these changes in society have *caused* the reduction in crime rather than simply occurring at the same time as the fall in crime, but it is likely that such a mechanism exists.

Crime and technology

Crime can be reduced by technological change. We are all familiar with the number of CCTV cameras that cover our high streets and these are often used as evidence in court. They are also likely to deter crime – and given their prevalence, it seems unlikely that they simply displace crime to non-covered areas.

In contrast, there is evidence that technology that makes car theft harder has had a substantial effect on crime. The introduction of mandatory electronic engine immobilisers in the European Union is estimated to have reduced car theft by 40%, accounting for both the protective effect on cars with the device and the displacement effect on cars without the device (van Ours and Vollaard, 2015).

It is important to recognise, however, that technological change is not a one-way street. Indeed, the new forms of cybercrime show that there is increased opportunity for large-scale fraud as a result of the internet and, more disturbingly, increased potential for child exploitation. The police (and the authorities more generally) increasingly need to upgrade their skills to combat these latest forms of crime.

Conclusions

There have been welcome falls in crime over the last decade or so. The crime falls are evident however one measures crime and for most criminal offences – with the exception of sexual offences.

The fact that reductions in crime have occurred against a background of significant reductions in police headcount – and that they are seen in both recorded crime numbers and in victimisation counts – suggest that there has been an improvement in the way that the police are operating. In addition, more general trends suggest that crime would be falling anyway, due to secular trends that are seen both in the UK and overseas.

The projected further reductions in government spending for the next Parliament are likely to result in substantial further real-terms cuts in police budgets – as no party has thus far suggested ring-fencing the Home Office budget. It is hard to see how these cuts will be achieved without even further reductions in headcount.

Whether it is feasible for police forces to continue to make cuts without some deleterious effect on criminal activity is a key question on which policy-makers will need to focus. Our analysis suggests that increased knowledge transfer of best practice is likely to be crucial in further improving productivity, and the role of the new College of Policing in this aspect will be important.³

Other potential efficiency savings include increased co-operation between forces (for example, sharing of back-office operations) or indeed mergers – though the transitional costs of such structural change may be substantial.

³ The College of Policing is the professional body for policing and, among other objectives, provides evidence-based analysis of the best ways to deliver policing (<http://www.college.police.uk/Pages/Home.aspx>).

Further reading

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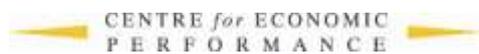
van Ours, JC and B Vollaard (2015) 'The Engine Immobiliser: A Non-Starter for Car Thieves', *Economic Journal*, forthcoming.

April 2015

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