PRESS RELEASE
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FIGHTING CRIME: Can the police do more with less?
New #ElectionEconomics policy briefing from the Centre for Economic Performance

The coalition government’s austerity programme has resulted in some sizeable reductions in the police workforce, yet crime has continued to fall. A key question for the next Parliament is whether further real-terms reductions in police budgets can occur without more deleterious effects on crime.

A new report from the Centre for Economic Performance (CEP) – the latest in a series of background briefings on key policy issues in the May 2015 UK general election – explores the evidence on the trends in crime and the police workforce, and factors that may have led to the continued fall in reported crime.

Among the CEP’s findings:

- 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.
Brian Bell, the report’s author, comments:

‘We might have expected that the reduction in the number of police officers and staff that has occurred over the last few years to have led to a rise in reported crime, since there is substantial evidence that police numbers do matter.

‘Fortunately, it seems that two factors have worked in the other direction. First, it is not just police numbers that matter, but also what they are doing: there appears to have been substantial improvements in the way policing is done. Second, there are long-run trends that are reducing crime, not just in the UK but across the world.

‘While the issue of crime has dropped down the list of key voter concerns as crime itself has fallen, this may quickly change if further reductions in police budgets cannot be achieved without a more substantial effect on the front-line.’

ENDS

Notes for editors:

‘Fighting Crime: Can the police do more with less?’ by Brian Bell is the latest in CEP’s #ElectionEconomics series.

Objective, brief and non-technical, CEP Election Analysis is a series of background briefings on the policy issues in the May 2015 UK General Election.

This series discusses the research evidence on some of the UK’s key policy battlegrounds, including immigration, austerity, living standards, productivity and business, Europe, health, schools, tuition fees, inequality, top taxes, gender, urban and regional policy, crime, housing and planning, climate change and energy.

These analyses are provided by some of our expert researchers and draw on some of our past and current research.

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