

Considering paradigms of crime reduction in different contexts

Keith Soothill and Brian Francis*

ABSTRACT

This paper consists of three parts. First we focus on four theoretical perspectives of crime reduction and consider the implications of the longitudinal study by Soothill et al.¹ These 'paradigms' relate to parental child-rearing methods; structural factors of the family during adolescence; geographical segregation; and individual resource deficits. They are considered risk factors for first-time convictions for shoplifting, burglary and violence. Each offence type is considered separately.

The second part focuses on the debate about 'why crime rates fell' in many developed countries and the type of explanations put forward. The main authors considered are Conklin,² Levitt³ and Zimring.⁴ We point to the remarkable contrast between the factors discussed in the first part of the paper and the factors discussed by these authors who emphasise, among others, the importance of an increased prison population and an increase in the number of police officers.

The final part of the paper connects the different sets of results presented in the first two parts. We maintain that the pivotal issue is whether one can develop a society in which all persons feel that they have a stake and, thus, develop internal controls to resist crime. The development of more prisons and more intrusive policing – measures of external controls – is a sad reflection of a failure to do this.

* Keith Soothill is Emeritus Professor of Social Research, Lancaster University, UK, and Brian Francis is Professor of Social Statistics, Lancaster University, UK.

INTRODUCTION

This paper consists of three parts in considering the issue of crime reduction. First, we focus on theoretical perspectives of crime reduction and then we engage in the debate about 'Why crime rates fell' in many Western countries. The final part tries to connect what seem to be rather different sets of results presented in the first two parts.

Elsewhere⁵ we have stressed how over the past century or so, criminology has been the crucible for generating various theories about criminal behaviour. There has been an important tradition in developing perspectives that are directly relevant to the issue of crime reduction. Scholars such as Hope⁶ and Kahn⁷ have tried to put some order into the tremendous range of perspectives which have special relevance to crime reduction. This paper considers four paradigms derived from this body of work: a focus on parental child-rearing methods; a focus on structural factors relating to the family during adolescence; the notion that criminal behaviour is linked to localities/neighbourhoods; and, finally, a focus on the resource deficits of individuals.

Our own recent work⁸ assesses which of these perspectives or paradigms is the most important if one is trying to reduce first-time offending for specific offences. We use Denmark as our social laboratory as that country has a particularly rich source of administrative data which has enabled us to test which of the paradigms are likely to be the most effective in reducing crime in a country.

This last phrase, 'in a country', is crucial, for we are not confident that the results in one country necessarily transfer to the experience of other countries. In other words, the social and cultural contexts of different countries may also be pivotal in thinking about crime reduction. What is appropriate in one country may not be appropriate in another. Nevertheless, the experience of one country may still be helpful in providing clues as to the way forward in another country. It provides a way of thinking about crime reduction.

The second part of the paper considers a different tradition that again has a long history, but has come to the fore in the last two decades as the discussion about the apparently falling crime rates in the Western world has come to public notice. Here, the focus is on what we can *do* to deviants in terms of social control – that is, what are the effects of more policing, what if we imprison more offenders and so on. In other words, this discourse is much more about the social *response* to crime than about the characteristics and, indeed, the problems of the offenders themselves. Of course, the two discourses are not quite as separate as indicated and there may be some overlap. Journalists and politicians from time to time deplore the so-called break-up of the family which relates to child-rearing patterns, while calling for more police to deal with public disorder caused by youngsters roaming the streets late at night. Nevertheless, one can analytically distinguish between these two rather separate traditions. The third and final part of the paper considers what the connections are, if any, between these two approaches to crime reduction and whether it is more appropriate to identify connections rather than conflict between the two traditions.

Perspectives of crime reduction: lessons from Denmark

Our work⁹ has focused on the following four major and well-known paradigms for crime reduction:

- Relating to parental child-rearing methods
- Relating to structural factors relating to the family during adolescence
- Relating to localities/neighbourhoods
- Relating to individual resource deficits

A crucial issue is whether these apparently competing paradigms make specific or independent contributions to the explanation of criminal behaviour and, thus, to crime reduction. Understanding the relationships between the various paradigms helps to identify the most appropriate focus in attempting to reduce crime.

In theorising about crime there has been a tendency to consider the onset of general offending behaviour. We contend that the start of each of the forms of criminal activity may have different precursors. In our study we chose to focus upon three types of crime – violent offences, shoplifting, and burglary – which have widespread prevalence. They are essentially crimes open to all in the sense that they can be committed by anyone – unlike, say, embezzlement (where employment is a prerequisite) or drink-driving (where access to a car is a prerequisite). With no such structural constraints, the interest is whether the various paradigms have the same explanatory power for each of these three offences. *In short, are there different precipitating factors for the onset of these three offences?*

We need to stress that focusing on risk factors has its problems.¹⁰ For example, some risk factors (for example, parental substance abuse, child-in-care) are comparatively infrequent. Therefore, it takes large samples to study the associations in order to disentangle potential confounding effects. For this reason, *national* birth cohorts that provide large numbers to analyse are particularly helpful. In our earlier paper we probed a *national* cohort of males born in 1980 and who were registered and living in Denmark on 1 January 1994; this cohort was followed up to the end of 2005. Hence, it excludes all males born in Denmark in 1980 but who emigrated or died prior to the ‘census date’ of 1 January 1994. However, the series includes males born in 1980 who immigrated into the country before 1994. For this study national administrative registers with information based on each individual’s contact with public services, together with their parents and other family members, were linked together by the use of a unique personal identity number.¹¹

We identified three potentially confounding variables – gender, Danish citizenship and prior convictions – which correlate with both the outcome variables and the paradigm risk factors and which needed to be controlled for. We controlled for gender by limiting the study to males.¹² The latter two were controlled for by including them in the statistical models, but they do not have a risk factor interpretation as these variables cannot be used for determining crime reduction policies. Age was controlled for by the use of a specific statistical method – discrete time Cox modelling – which fits a separate parameter for each age.

The outcome factors were the first-time conviction of the three offences of interest – violent offences, shoplifting, and burglary. Analyses were carried out using the total national birth cohort, which includes 29 944 males and their parents.¹³ Among those born in the year 1980, the number of males who by the end of 2005 were convicted of shoplifting was 1 989, those convicted of burglary was 1 324, while 1 901 were convicted of violence. For the crime of shoplifting, the numbers may seem low but the focus here is on convictions – lesser crimes, such as shoplifting, are likely to have court diversionary procedures, such as cautions. For each offence, the occasion of their *first* conviction for that offence is considered. Convicted males could be members of more than one of these three series.

The statistical method used – a form of discrete time Cox analysis - allows individual changes in risk factors over the life course to be assessed.¹⁴ Here we present some examples showing the relationship between the risk factors and the paradigms. So, for example, child abuse or neglect is shown as a variable relevant to Paradigm 1 (relating to parental child rearing methods), while ‘didn’t pass basic schooling level’ is a variable directly relevant to Paradigm 4 (relating to individual resource deficits).

In fact, although a rich dataset, the availability of appropriate data is always a constraint. Hence, some of the paradigms are represented by a fuller list of risk factors than others – for instance, Paradigm 1 had ten risk factors, but Paradigm 2 had only five risk factors. Hence, the available risk factors may not fully reflect the virtues of a particular paradigm and so one cannot too readily pronounce the demise of a particular paradigm.

The following is a summary of results:

- All the four paradigms examined seemed to make a contribution towards explaining crime and criminal behaviour in Denmark.
- Some risk factors seemed to have stronger links with particular offences. So, for example, under the ‘parental child rearing’ paradigm, ‘domestic violence’ has a stronger link to violence; ‘children being in care’ has a stronger link with burglary; and ‘family separation’ has a stronger link with shoplifting. Why this seems to be the case is not clear from the analysis, but it does suggest that different variables may influence the development of certain kinds of offending behaviour.

Table 1 The relationship of risk factors and paradigms

Risk factors	Paradigms			
	1	2	3	4
<i>Social background</i>				
Parental substance abuse	X			
Parental mental illness	X			
Domestic violence	X			
Parental suicidal behaviour	X			
Child abuse or neglect	X			
<i>Family background</i>				
Child in care (‘looked-after children’)	X			
Family separation	X			
<i>Intergenerational transfer</i>				
Mother teenager	X			
Mother convicted	X			
Father convicted	X			

<i>Educational qualifications of parents</i>				
Mother has no vocational qualification		X		
Father has no vocational qualification		X		
<i>Parental employment and poverty</i>				
Parental unemployment > 21 weeks		X		
Poverty (<40% of median income)		X		
Parental disability pension		X		
<i>Disadvantaged area</i>				
Disadvantaged area			X	
Rented housing (not self-owner)			X	
<i>Individual resources</i>				
Unemployment > 21 weeks				X
Didn't pass basic schooling level				X
Not in process of training or education				X
Not graduated				X
Poverty (<50% of median level)				X
Psychiatric disorder				X
Attempted suicide				X
Drug addicted				X
Alcohol abuse				X

Notes

Paradigm 1: Parental child-rearing methods

Paradigm 2: Structural factors relating to the family during adolescence

Paradigm 3: Neighbourhood characteristics

Paradigm 4: Individual resource deficits

The advocates of these various paradigms can take heart from the fact that all can be shown to make some contribution to the explanation of criminal behaviour and, thus, to crime reduction. However, the point that some paradigms may explain more than others is crucial in discussing strategies for effecting crime reduction. In short, there is likely to be more widespread benefit in focusing on structural issues within a society which have widespread impact (such as unemployment and the lack of vocational qualifications) rather than the more individual deficits (such as a psychiatric disorder or even drug addiction) that may affect fewer people.

We carried out a counterfactual analysis (for example, Canache et al¹⁵) to try to quantify how many of the number of first time offenders of a particular type (for instance, 1 989 shoplifters, 1 324 burglars, or 1 901 violent men) are 'caused' by a given risk factor. This approach is controversial but it does provide an estimated reduction in the numbers becoming an offender of a particular type (that is, of shoplifting, burglary or violence) if a given risk factor is assumed not to be present and assuming that the relationship is directly causal. Table 2

provides some examples indicating that, if, for instance, 'domestic violence' was eliminated, while all other background characteristics remained constant, then the outcome would have the greatest impact on crimes of violence. In contrast, if being in care (that is, children who are the responsibility of the state in terms of their child care) was eliminated, then the outcome would have the greatest impact on the offence of burglary. However, these reductions are comparatively minor compared with the impact of eliminating the variable 'not graduated' where the reduction numbers seem potentially huge and which seems especially relevant to the offence, so eliminating around one-half of the violence offenders. It needs to be recognised that the causality here is especially suspect as individuals graduating are likely to have more personal resources – which are not represented in the model – than those not.

Table 2 Examples of direct counterfactual reductions in crime when certain risk factors are eliminated

Risk factors	Direct counterfactual reduction in offenders for specific offences		
	Shoplifting	Burglary	Violence
Domestic violence	89	79	148
Child in care	145	202	66
Family separation	380	261	381
Not graduated	647	831	985
Total first convicted	1 989	1 324	1 901

The counterfactual approach is by no means watertight, but gives valuable insights, providing a guide as to what seems worth concentrating on in order to achieve widespread reductions in the crime rate. However, ours is not a popular conclusion for at least two reasons. Firstly, there needs to be the recognition that there is no 'easy fix' or 'magic bullet' which is on offer to reduce crime. Secondly, focusing on structural issues within society – which we argue would have the greatest impact on crime reduction – are potentially more costly to implement economically than focusing on individual needs with some limited psychological interventions.

So what happens in terms of explanations when a country genuinely seems to have a reduction in crime rates? What are the explanations called upon? What are the reasons posited? That is the focus of the second part of this paper. In moving to this new focus, we also change our examination from convicted offenders to police recorded crime.

The debate about 'why crime rates fell' in the United States and Canada

It is not just one country that has recently experienced a fall in crime rates – the crime rates in many countries appear to have fallen. We use the word 'appear', for it could be that people have lost faith in the criminal justice system and are simply not reporting crimes to the authorities. If this happens, then there is an apparent fall in the crime measured by official statistics. However, while that certainly can happen, it seems an unlikely explanation in this case. The phenomenon of falling crime rates seems too widespread. Many countries are reporting a fall in crime rates and, specifically, several are pointing to a fall in the homicide

rate, which is usually considered to be a more reliable measure than most crime indices and also tends to be used as a measure of the stability of a country. First, however, what is the evidence of a fall in crime rates?

A fall in crime rates?

Not unusually, international interest in this topic was sparked by events in the United States. It has been stressed by many commentators that during the 1990s the United States experienced the most dramatic decline in the rate of crime per 100 000 inhabitants since World War II. This fall in crime rates had not been predicted but there is little doubt that it happened. According to the FBI's *Uniform Crime Report*,¹⁶ from 1990 to 2000 the rate of crime per 100 000 inhabitants in all of the seven main categories of crime decreased dramatically in the United States, ranging from 23% in the case of larceny to 44% in the case of aggravated assault. Homicide rates plunged by 43% from the peak in 1991 to 2001, reaching the lowest levels in 35 years.¹⁷ Commentators such as Zimring¹⁸ even suggested that these numbers may be an underestimate of the decrease in crime rates because the household survey carried out by the Bureau of Justice Statistics estimated general decreases between 44% and 65%.

The fall prompted much interest at both academic and public levels. Two important books – John E Conklin's *Why crime rates fell*¹⁹ and Franklin E Zimring's *The great American crime decline*²⁰ – have probably provided the most sustained analysis of the situation in terms of general crime rates. Both Conklin and Zimring focus on the United States, but particularly on New York City, where the decline was twice as great as the national average. In addition, an influential article by Steven Levitt was published in the *Journal of Economic Perspectives*.²¹ Conklin's and Levitt's accounts focus almost exclusively on the United States, while Zimring notes the equally dramatic decreases in crime rates in Canada. In Canada, during the same period, all of the seven main categories of crime saw dramatic rate decreases, ranging from 13% in the case of robbery to 62% in the case of serious assault. Zimring's focus on Canada is important as his comparison of Canada and the United States proves crucial in challenging some arguments based on the United States alone. However, the narrow focus on North America (that is, the United States and Canada) only sidelines the scale of the decline in the Western world (England and Wales, for instance, experienced almost a decade of falling crime although the start date of the decline came later, from the mid-1990s). The insistence on focusing on North America also undermines the recognition that explanations pertinent to the United States may not have a wider application. As Zimring notes, the experience of the United States is not so unique as some commentators have seemed to suggest.

Explanatory theories

There has been no shortage of explanatory theories about the fall in crime rates in the United States. Some point to increased incarceration rates, whilst others ascribe it to the booming economy. Some appeal to changing demographics, whilst others credit the increased access to legal abortion. The problem has been that these explanations (and the many others) have not been examined systematically, though headline writers have enjoyed using the wide range of possible explanations. In short, the media have been able to cherry pick and place before their readers and viewers those explanations which are more likely to appeal to popular prejudices. In contrast, actual evidence is in short supply and this is the knowledge gap which Conklin, Levitt and Zimring address in their various ways.

Media interest

Levitt²² usefully presents a list (see Table 3) of the most frequently cited reasons for the crime decline cited in major newspapers over the period 1991-2001. Levitt explains that ‘the single most frequent explanation given is the innovative policing strategies put into place. The crime decline is also frequently attributed to increased imprisonment, changes in the market for crack cocaine, the aging of the population, tougher gun control laws, the strong economy, and increases in the number of police.’²³

Table 3 Media explanations for the decline in crime in the 1990s, ranked by frequency of mentions

Explanation	Number of mentions
Innovative policing strategies	52
Increased reliance on prisons	47
Changes in crack / other drug markets	33
Aging of the population	32
Tougher gun control laws	32
Strong economy	28
Increased number of police	26
<i>All other explanations</i>	34

Source: Based on a LexisNexis search of articles written about the national decline in crime in leading United States newspapers over the period 1991–2001.²⁴

Types of explanation

Before considering the evidence, it is useful to note the types of explanations which are seriously discussed by the three sets of commentators – Conklin,²⁵ Levitt²⁶ and Zimring.²⁷ In trying to answer the question: ‘Why did crime rates fall in the 1990s?’, Conklin focuses on the police, the prisons, drugs, firearms, age structure, institutions and community, while Zimring mainly considers the increase in incarceration rates, the decrease of young males as a percentage of the population, and the booming economy. Levitt considers ten factors and presents six commonly suggested and plausible theories – the strong economy of the 1990s; changing demographics; better policing strategies; gun control laws; laws allowing the carrying of concealed weapons; increased use of capital punishment – but he maintains that in practice they do not appear important in explaining the decline of crime rates. In contrast, he identifies four factors – increase in the number of police; the rising prison population; the receding crack epidemic; the legalisation of abortion – that he maintains explain the decline in crime.

Levitt also indicates the estimated contribution of various factors to the decline in crime in the 1990s. In addition, he shows what he calls the ‘certainty level of estimated impact’ giving his appraisal of how speculative the estimates are for each of the factors considered. In fact, focusing on homicide, violent crime and property crime, he considers the percentage change that each factor accounts for over the period 1991–2001. So, for example, there is a

43% downward change in the UCR reported crime for homicide over the period 1991–2001. Levitt maintains that four factors – increases in the prison population, legalised abortion, increases in the number of police and the decline of crack – contribute 12%, 10%, 6% and 5,5% respectively, and so adding cumulatively to 33,5% (with just 10% of the decrease ‘unexplained’).

In terms of ‘certainty level of estimated impact’, Levitt places ‘increases in the prison population’ in the HIGH certainty level, ‘increases in the number of police’ and ‘legalized abortion’ in the MEDIUM certainty level, and ‘the decline in crack’ in his LOW certainty level. Levitt’s careful accumulation of evidence about the various factors seems very impressive.

Conklin’s work had both an impact at the time and continues to get media coverage. Recently, in an article in *Time* magazine entitled ‘What’s behind America’s falling crime rate’, Von Drehle notes that, ‘In his book *Why Crime Rates Fell ...* John Conklin concluded that up to half of the improvement was due to a single factor: more people in prison.’²⁸ While there is a bit of media hyperbole, the statement does not fundamentally distort Conklin’s position. Conklin concludes that ‘on the basis of the evidence examined in this book, I believe that the rising rate of incarceration was probably the most important reason that crime rates fell after 1991.’²⁹ This conclusion comes after a discursive examination of various other factors.³⁰ Conklin’s conclusion comes close to Levitt’s conclusion, except that Levitt strongly promotes his espousal of the importance of legalised abortion. The argument about the effect of legalised abortion made by Levitt states that the underlying theory essentially rests on two premises: unwanted children are at greater risk of crime, and legalised abortion leads to a reduction in the number of unwanted births.³¹

In his book Conklin mentions Zimring’s earlier conversion to recognising the validity of the declining crime rates in the United States. In 1997 Zimring is cited as saying: ‘I have been a sceptic. But now, because of the length of the decline, its magnitude and the number of places it is occurring, I think I am experiencing a foxhole conversion.’³² Ten years later Zimring published his book which, in effect, challenges an emerging consensus.

Zimring stressed in his conclusions that his is ‘a book without a bottom line.’³³ Nevertheless, he points to the combination of increased prison populations, a strong economy, and appropriate demographics as creating a very favourable condition for a decline in crime rates. The latter two elements are in contrast to Levitt, who argues that the economy and demographics make a negligible contribution.

In terms of adjudicating between the various contributions of Conklin, Levitt and Zimring, Zimring begins to be the more convincing simply on account of his recourse to a comparative analysis, which is methodologically interesting. Hence, Zimring finds that, although a historically high number of incarcerated persons and decreasing crime rates coincided during the 1990s in the United States, the same was not true for Canada, which experienced similar declines in crime rates. Canada’s prison population remained relatively stable, while the prison population in the United States grew significantly. In fact, by this type of analysis, Zimring systematically challenges other explanations so that he comes to the conclusion that no one explanation will be sufficient. To take another example: the booming economy explanation is seductive and Zimring certainly points to some empirical evidence to suggest there is a relationship between crime rates and economic growth. Curiously, however, while Canada experienced declines in the crime rate in the 1990s similar to the United States, Canada did not experience the same economic boom as the United States. In fact, Canada’s

unemployment rate was higher during the 1990s than it was during the 1980s when their crime rates increased. So perhaps – following Zimring – it is all much more complicated than these analysts sometimes seem to suggest.

Explaining the decline in the crime rates in the United States in the 1990s remains contentious, but there are at least three points to stress. These analyses of the falling crime rate in the US are important and are the type of issue which criminologists should be addressing. One needs to heed Zimring's 'euphoric fallacy' – that is, 'the urge to assume that declines are inevitably caused by human agencies', and to note the dangers of 'the more powerful the vested interests of criminal justice actors to see their efforts as a cause of the benefits of lower crime rates'.³⁴ Hence, advocates of the supposed success of the police and prisons are difficult to resist. One needs to recognise the methodological shortcomings of some existing work. Zimring has pointed to the importance of considering comparative work. However, he also points to the dangers of relying on policy based on work derived from 'some of the weaker statistical techniques associated with regression analyses over time'.³⁵ Nevertheless, as Conklin³⁶ notes, 'it would be quite surprising if the imprisonment of half a million more prisoners in 1999 than in 1991 had not affected crime rates.' We return to this issue in the next section.

Our next concern, however, is the remarkable contrast between the factors that were discussed in the first section of this paper – which focused on risk factors, such as those associated with social and family background, individual resources and so on – and the second section – which highlighted a rather different set of factors, including the importance of an increased prison population and an increase in the number of police officers. In other words, none of the commentators talking about the decline in the US crime rates speculates about improved child-rearing, that people are no longer living in disadvantaged areas or that people have accumulated more in individual resources which will help them to resist the temptation of crime. Such possibilities are not mentioned.

Connections rather than conflict between the two traditions?

We now need to try to connect what seem to be two rather different sets of results emanating from the first two sections of the paper. To some extent they can also be identified as emanating from two separate traditions – one stems from a more ameliorative tradition of trying to make things better for offenders and potential offenders, while the other stems from a more social protection/social defence tradition which considers what society must do to protect itself from harm and potential harm. How can these two sets of results and two traditions be reconciled in some way?

Firstly, there are some important distinctions that need to be recognised from the outset. The work outlined in the first section is at a micro-level focusing on individuals in a birth cohort. In contrast, the work outlined in the second section is more at the macro-level using aggregated rates. However, perhaps more importantly, there are very different constituencies being considered in the two types of analysis. Our work which we report on in section one focuses on the influences *prior to the first conviction*, while the work being reported upon in the second section largely focuses on crime in general where, as we shall see, the contribution of *persistent* offenders is crucial. Additionally, the first section focuses on those caught and prosecuted, whereas the second focuses on recorded crime, whether or not solved. These various constituencies need to be unpacked and, using estimated figures from England and Wales as an exemplar, one needs to consider the numbers in each constituency.

In other countries the proportions may be different from this example, but the underlying principles will remain sacrosanct.

In a famous study in which around four hundred boys from an area in the south-east of London (England) were followed up from early childhood to the age of 50, Farrington and his colleagues³⁷ found that 7% of the males in his series accounted for around half of all the convictions up to the age of 50. This finding has similarities with the estimate of Soothill et al³⁸ that around 4,7% of the males aged 10 to 46 in the population had been 'persistent offenders' at some point in their lives.³⁹ As Soothill et al⁴⁰ stress elsewhere, this figure is not static and one can identify certain trends and patterns that characterise the body of 'persistent offenders' in England and Wales. Age, however, is crucial: 'Both male and female offenders⁴¹ who are first convicted at a young age are much more likely to become persistent offenders than their older counterparts. Hence, there is merit in trying to target young offenders in attempting to break the offending cycle.'⁴²

In fact, in England and Wales there is much more good news about offenders than is generally recognised. If we consider official conviction data, persistence seems to be a fairly unusual phenomenon, for most people seem to have only one court appearance. Indeed, of the 11 068 *convicted* persons in the 1953 Home Office birth cohort, 50,2% of males and 74,3% of females have only one appearance resulting in a conviction.⁴³ So, for most, one court appearance is, thankfully, the end of the story in terms of appearing in the official crime statistics. However, some, mostly males – as we have already indicated – go on to appear on many occasions. Of those males convicted at least once in the 1953 cohort, 16,4% have a second court conviction but no more, while a further 22,5% have three or more.⁴⁴ Of course, when one includes females – who have a lower proportion of convictions – the figures of recidivists become lower.

Presenting the figures for England and Wales, one can therefore roughly say that out of every 100 persons, the following is likely to take place.

Box 1 Types of conviction history for every 100 persons born in 1953 in England and Wales

67 persons – not convicted	
17 persons – convicted once	} around 50% of all convictions
5 persons – convicted twice	
8 persons – convicted three times	
3 persons convicted four or more times	} around 50% of all convictions

The actual proportions are likely to vary from country to country, but the principles will remain the same. In confronting the figures presented in Box 1, there are at least three major tasks:

- 1 Making the group who are *not* convicted at all (currently around 67%) as large as possible. This is the issue of **onset**.
- 2 Making the group who are convicted (currently around 33% of the population) be only one-time offenders, rather than becoming persistent offenders. This is the issue of **recidivism**.

- 3 Dealing with the group who are convicted on four or more occasions (around 3%⁴⁵ of the persons who contribute around 50% of the total *convictions*). This is the issue of **persistence**.

The general fallacy is to believe that these tasks can be addressed in the same way. In broad terms, the discourse relating to tasks (1) and (2) tends to focus on persons (that is, preventing persons from becoming offenders), while the discourse relating to task (3) largely focuses on offences (that is, reducing the number of offences). In fact, while seemingly different, both sets of discourses are *prevention* discourses – the first discourse focuses on trying to reinforce acceptable behaviour and, where appropriate, to change people, while the second discourse focuses on how to respond to persons who refuse to behave acceptably.

In theoretical terms, this distinction has been fully recognised in the development of the sociology of deviance. Edwin Lemert's famous distinction between primary and secondary deviance⁴⁶ is relevant. Lemert's primary deviance relates to questions of why persons commit deviance in the first place, while secondary deviance relates to questions of how and why persons persist in deviance (that is, the movement from the first to the second court appearance and, for some, a movement to subsequent convictions).

Our recent work has focused on primary deviance and has revealed that there is a set of influences which are useful in promoting good behaviour and/or making young people more resilient to bad influences. The calculations in this work relate to the increased likelihood of preventing a *first* conviction. While most of the favourable influences are likely to be more beneficial 'across the board', that is, in preventing all types of crime, we have also demonstrated that some of the influences are likely to be more beneficial in preventing some types of crime than others. In fact, in England and Wales, despite misgivings about the crime rate, we are remarkably successful in containing the crime problem. Seventeen out of 20 persons in the population will either have none or only one court appearance resulting in a conviction for a standard-list offence.⁴⁷ In other words, over four out of five persons contribute very little to the crime problem in England and Wales. While some youngsters (particularly males) may be troublesome for a while, they are not 'the crime problem'. However, in confronting 'the crime problem' in its initial stages, rather than proposing for more policing and more prisons to come into play, there is still scope for more normal positive influences, such as good parenting, good education and job opportunities, to be influential.

The interest for 'liberal criminologists' is to increase the proportion of the population who will have no or only one conviction. However, one needs to recognise that trying to get fewer to be convicted at all (that is, increasing the figure of 67% who are not currently convicted) is a very worthwhile goal, but presents a long-term effort. Changing social circumstances and improving life chances are not things that can be altered overnight. In short, the results and outcomes are likely to be generational rather than instant.

An alternative approach – which is essentially what Conklin, Levitt and Zimring are embracing – is to focus on how to deal with the 3 in 100 persons who at some stage in their lives are actively involved in crime (that is, those who have four or more convictions). There are various ways of dealing with this 'crime problem', but there has largely been an emphasis on the social response to crime – how we police people, whether we imprison more people and so on. The discourse is not about changing people, but about containing people – whether by increased police observation or by removing people from society.

Importantly, however, increased police observation and removing people from society are activities that can be altered overnight. The outcomes may be more immediate but the consequences may also be generational in the sense of adversely affecting the life chances of their children.

In short, it would be unwise to deny that implementing more draconian measures on certain targeted groups can have an impact. Targeted groups can be operative, because a comparatively low proportion of people commit a lot of crime. However, having said that, no one is all that skilled in predicting which of the persons convicted on, say, two occasions will go on to be reconvicted on several more occasions. In short, the curse of prediction is the likelihood of false positives – that is, lots more persons are likely to end up in prison than need to on grounds of public protection.

It is at this point that one needs to raise the issue of social cost. Again the recent article in *Time* magazine provides a vivid clue:

‘Increased sentencing in some communities has removed entire generations of young men from some minority communities,’ says San Francisco police chief George Gascón. ‘Has that been a factor in lowering crime? I think it probably has. I think it also probably has had a detrimental effect on those communities.’⁴⁸

The article goes on to vividly remind us that:

Prison is expensive, demoralizing and deadening ... Prisoners leave saddened parents, abandoned mates, fatherless children. Of course, in many cases, those families are better off with their violent relatives behind bars. But a court system that clobbers first-time offenders with mandatory sentences – sometimes for non-violent crimes – will inevitably lock up thousands of not-so-bad guys alongside the hardened criminals.⁴⁹

In short, the unintended consequences of imprisoning more and more people need to be both recognised and addressed. The social and economic costs are enormous – indeed, involving the next generation in a deleterious way, for many of the persons imprisoned have children who will suffer.

Wanting low crime rates is, of course, understandable, but the social cost of achieving that goal in a particular way must be taken into account. In fact, there is no doubt that one can manufacture low crime rates. Many totalitarian countries seem to have low crime rates, but living in such countries may be a high price to pay. What democratic countries, in contrast, should be hoping to achieve is a populace that exercises *internal* control (in other words, they want to conform).

Wanting to conform means that people recognise that they have much to lose if they fail to conform. Social control theorists – a set of theorists not yet considered in this paper – have much to tell us about why persons might develop the option of choosing crime and deviance. In fact, social control theory has long history. As Box⁵⁰ pointed out, it was Hirschi⁵¹ who first suggested, and found empirical support for, the argument that there are three elements in social bonding – attachment (‘a human being’s capacity to become affectively involved with another person and hence sensitive to his/her thoughts, feelings and expectations, particularly in regard to their relevance for his/her own behaviour’),⁵² commitment

(‘commitment refers to the *rational* element in the social bond. This concept enables us to make adequate allowance for the fact that most individuals do not persist in lines of activity unless there is something in it for them, even if that something is the negative reward of avoiding severe costs’)⁵³ and beliefs (that is, ‘the human capacity to evaluate and take a stand on moral and social issues’).⁵⁴ Hirschi’s point is that ‘if these fail to develop or are broken, then the individual has an option of choosing deviance.’⁵⁵ Sadly, it seems evident that the social bonds of around three in 100 persons in England and Wales who together contribute around one-half of the total convictions have failed to develop or have been broken. Without any intervention in relation to this group the outcomes are clearly disastrous for society – that is, more crime. The intervention of incapacitation, among other things, may well produce results in terms of lower crime rates. However, this is a solution which produces permanent outcasts who must be locked up for long periods. The real failure with this group has been much earlier, that is, the failure to produce social bonding whereby *internal* rather than *external* control is operative.

The failure among criminologists such as Conklin, Levitt and Zimring is to recognise that criminals cover a wide range from those who have crossed the line for the first time to those who are hardened criminals. Their efforts have focused on social response issues such as policing and imprisonment, and pointed to ways of containing the problem of hardened criminals. However, their prescriptions are dire ones which rely principally on more *external* control, that is, more intrusive policing, more prisons, and so on. They neglect the focus on helping persons to build up their own stake in society and, thus, develop *internal* controls whereby they can resist the temptation to commit crime.

Finally, we wish to point to the most disappointing outcome of Zimring’s recent book. In his concluding chapter Zimring highlights ‘Seven lessons from the 1990s’. Lessons 1 to 6 are unexceptional. However, Lesson 7 needs to be challenged:

Lesson 7: *Whatever else is now known about crime in America, the most important lesson of the 1990s was that major changes in rates of crime can happen without major changes in the social fabric*

While indeed it may be true that one can achieve lower crime rates by massive investments in measures of *external* control – that is, by high incarceration rates (the United States has one of the highest incarceration rates in the world) and more intrusive policing – is this the way that one wants a society to develop? Is it desirable? Essentially this approach disenfranchises a significant minority to penal waste bins and damages whole communities. The communities that are in trouble tend to have a vast range of other problems, such as health and housing, and it is myopic to see ‘the crime problem’ in isolation.

In fact, we wish to endorse the WHO’s *World report on violence and health*⁵⁶ – which espouses a public health approach to violence – and to widen it to crime in general. The crucial stance of a public health approach is to focus on prevention, that is, preventing diseases or illness from occurring rather than dealing with the health consequences. What this means is that a structural improvement in society will bring more gains (in crime, health and housing etc.) in the longer term than simply removing hardened criminals from society, which is a short-term solution.

CONCLUSION

In summary, our message is a simple one. It is dangerous to ignore the issues raised in the first half of this paper. They are principally directed at preventing persons becoming criminals in the first place. Failure to confront these issues will mean that there will continue to be more persons in the pool of offenders who might 'graduate' to becoming persistent offenders. The pivotal issue is whether one can develop a society in which all persons feel that they have a stake and, thus, develop *internal* controls to resist crime. The development of more prisons and more intrusive policing is a sad measure of the failure to do this.

NOTES

- 1 K Soothill, M N Christoffersen, M Azhar Hussain and B Francis, Exploring paradigms of crime reduction: an empirical longitudinal study', *British Journal of Criminology* 50(2) (2010), 222–238.
- 2 J E Conklin, *Why crime rates fell*, New York: Allyn and Bacon, 2003.
- 3 S D Levitt, Understanding why crime fell in the 1990s: four factors that explain the decline and six that do not, *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 18(1) (2004).
- 4 F E Zimring, *The great American crime decline*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- 5 Soothill et al, Exploring paradigms of crime reduction.
- 6 T Hope, *Perspectives on crime reduction*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000.
- 7 A J Kahn, From delinquency treatment to community development, In Paul F Lazarsfeld, W H Sewell and H Wilensky (eds), *The uses of sociology*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968, 477–505.
- 8 Soothill et al, Exploring paradigms of crime reduction.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 For a detailed description of our methodology see Soothill et al, Exploring paradigms of crime reduction.
- 11 The population-based registers used in this study have been described elsewhere (M N Christoffersen, B Francis and K Soothill, An upbringing to violence? Identifying the likelihood of violent crime among the 1966 birth cohort in Denmark, *Journal of Forensic Psychiatry* 14(2) (2003), 367–381; M N Christoffersen, K Soothill and B Francis, Who is most at risk of becoming a convicted rapist? The likelihood of a rape conviction among the 1966 birth cohort in Denmark, *Journal of Scandinavian Studies in Criminology and Crime Prevention* 6(1) (2005), 39–56), but they are essentially the following: Population statistics; Medical register on vital statistics; Unemployment statistics; Educational classification module Social Assistance Act statistics; Integrated Database for Labour Market Research; Crime statistics, Income compensation benefits; Fertility database; National inpatient register; and National psychiatric register. After all the information had been linked, the personal identity numbers were erased in order to preserve anonymity. None of the participants was contacted, thus sensitive information was preserved without disturbing the involved individuals.
- 12 Focusing on males provides larger proportions who are convicted. In Denmark, only 8,3% of females are listed in the crime register by the age of 25 years (B Kyvsgaard, *The criminal career: the Danish Longitudinal Study*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). Furthermore, as a demonstration study, it was decided to consider males rather than females as criminological theories have traditionally largely developed with males in mind.
- 13 The children's personal identity number is the key which links the children to their parents whether they are living together, married, or not. Information from registers has been collected for each calendar year, and information about the child and the parents is combined to one record for each child.
- 14 Soothill et al, Exploring paradigms of crime reduction.
- 15 D Canache, J J Mondak and E Cabrera, Voters and the personal vote: a counterfactual simulation, *Political Research Quarterly* 53(3) (2000), 663–676.
- 16 See the FBI Uniform Crime Report data tool online at <http://www.ucrdatatool.gov/>.
- 17 Levitt, Understanding why crime fell in the 1990s, 163.
- 18 Zimring, *The great American crime decline*.
- 19 Conklin, *ibid*.
- 20 Zimring, *ibid*.
- 21 Levitt, *ibid*.
- 22 *Ibid*.
- 23 *Ibid*, 163.
- 24 *Ibid*, 164.

- 25 Conklin, *Why crime rates fell*.
- 26 Levitt, Understanding why crime fell in the 1990s.
- 27 Zimring, The great American crime decline.
- 28 David Von Drehle, What's behind America's falling crime rate, *Time*, 22 February 2010, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1963761,00.html>, 1 (accessed 4 November 2010).
- 29 Conklin, *Why crime rates fell*, 200.
- 30 In his book Conklin considers explanations that propose the decline in rates was the result of :
- Less reporting of crime to the police, or less recording of crime by the police (Chapter 2)
 - A natural cycle in crime rates (Chapter 2)
 - More effective policing (Chapter 4)
 - More use of incarceration (Chapter 5)
 - Changes in the market for illegal drugs, especially crack (Chapter 6)
 - Changes in the attitudes of young people (Chapter 6)
 - Reduced access to, or use of, firearms (Chapter 7)
 - Changes in the age distribution of the population (Chapter 8)
 - Improved economic conditions (Chapter 9)
 - Increased participation in community organisations (Chapter 9)
- 31 Levitt, Understanding why crime fell in the 1990s, 181–182.
- 32 Conklin, *Why crime rates fell*, 4.
- 33 Zimring, The great American crime decline, 195.
- 34 Ibid, 41.
- 35 Ibid, 41.
- 36 Conklin, *Why crime rates fell*, 200.
- 37 D P Farrington, J W Coid, L M Harnett, D Jolliffe, N Soteriou, R E Turner and D J West, *Criminal careers up to age 50 and life success up to age 48: new findings from the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development*, 2nd edition, Home Office Research Study 299, 2006, <http://www.psychblog.co.uk/ForensicPsych/OriginalStudies/16456515851247828851.pdf> (accessed 4 November 2010).
- 38 K Soothill, E Ackerley and B Francis, The persistent offenders debate: a focus on temporal changes, *Criminal Justice* 3(4) (2003), 389–412.
- 39 This figure is derived from using data from the Home Office Offender Index up to 1999, where Soothill et al (The persistent offenders debate) define a 'persistent' offender as having convictions for standard-list offences on at least four occasions over a maximum of 11 years.
- 40 K Soothill, C Fitzpatrick and B Francis, *Understanding criminal careers*, Cullompton: Willan, 2009, xv & 204.
- 41 In this paper we have not discussed female offenders in any depth. Soothill et al (The persistent offenders debate) estimate that only 0,4 per cent of the females aged 10 to 46 in England and Wales become persistent offenders as defined in note 39 above.
- 42 Ibid, 83.
- 43 See Tables 5a and 5b in J Prime, S White, S Liriano and K Patel, Criminal careers of those born between 1953 and 1978, UK Home Office Statistical Bulletin 4/01, 2001.
- 44 Again females are a contrast to males. For females, the figures are 12,3% having a second court conviction but no more, while only a further 5,4% have three or more. The difference between males and females shows the importance of considering males and females separately (Soothill et al, *Understanding criminal careers*, 81-82).
- 45 This estimate varies from the 7% indicated by Farrington et al (*Criminal careers up to age 50 and life success up to age 48*) as accounting for around half of all convictions in their series. However, their sample is drawn from a working-class area of south-east London. The proportion for the country as a whole is likely to be lower.
- 46 E M Lemert, *Human deviance, social problems and social control*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1967, 40-66.
- 47 Broadly speaking, the 'standard list' consists of all indictable offences and the more serious summary offences. Convictions for non-standard list offences can appear on the Offenders Index when they occur at a court appearance where there is also a finding of guilt for a standard list offence.
- 48 Von Drehle, *What's behind America's falling crime rate*, 2.
- 49 Ibid.
- 50 S Box, *Deviance, reality and society*, 2nd edition, London: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1981.
- 51 T Hirschi, *Causes of delinquency*, California: California University Press, 1969.
- 52 Box, *Deviance, reality and society*, 123.
- 53 Ibid, 128.
- 54 Ibid, 130.

55 Ibid, 123.

56 World Health Organization (WHO), *World report on violence and health*, Geneva: WHO, 2002, http://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/violence/world_report/en/ (accessed 26 October 2009).