

Harm audit: the collateral damage of economic crisis and the Coalition's austerity programme

Christina Pantazis and Simon Pemberton present their findings on the nature and extent of harms in society

Narratives of crime are powerful discourses that exist to portray what, but also whom we should fear. Yet, as the deepening economic crisis and responses to it highlight, the very organisation of societies can produce serious and widespread damage. Discussion in the wake of the 2007-2008 'credit crunch' has been inevitably highly politicised, subjecting how societies are organised to intense scrutiny.

However, the terms of the debate have shifted dramatically. The initial critiques about the detrimental impact of 'casino capitalism' soon faded and were replaced by demands to reform the 'costly' and 'bloated' public sector. What began as a

critique of neoliberal capitalism has turned full circle to reaffirm the central tenets of this ideology and provide the rationale for the retrenchment of the social state. Paradoxically, however, the erosion of these social structures may further exacerbate and deepen the widespread harms produced by the current crisis. This article represents the beginning of a mapping exercise intended to describe and understand the production of harm during the UK Coalition government's period in office. In doing so, we hope to track the harms that are most likely to ensue from the economic recession and government spending cuts, identify those groups who have 'shouldered the burden', and assess

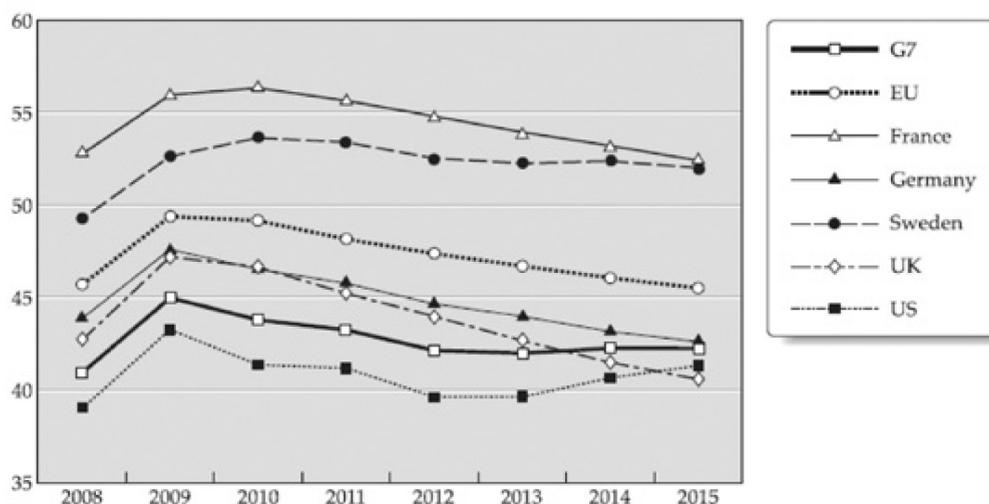
the interrelationships between harms, particularly 'criminal' and 'non criminal' harms.

UK economic and policy environment

The May 2010 election was dominated with concerns about the parlous state of the UK's economy and the size of the public sector deficit. Although the country does not have an especially large public debt compared to other advanced economies, a number of factors, including bailing out the banks and falling tax revenues, resulted in an enlarged public sector deficit, which reached a record of 11 per cent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2009-2010 (HM Treasury, 2010). All three parties entered the election with a commitment to reduce the size of the deficit, although there were differences between the two main parties about the speed and size of the cuts (Taylor-Gooby and Stoker, 2011). The Coalition government announced a programme of public sector cuts and reorganisation, aiming to reduce public borrowing to 1.1 per cent of GDP by 2015-2016 (HM Treasury, 2010). The proposed reforms have been described as unprecedented and will take the UK 'in a direction, rolling back the state of intervention below that in the United States...Britain will abandon the goal of attaining a European level of public provision' (Taylor-Gooby and Stoker, 2011:14). This radical transformation in public spending is illustrated in Chart 1.

Chart 1: Public spending trends in selected advanced economies, 2008-2015 (% GDP)

Source: Reproduced from Taylor-Gooby and Stoker (2011)



The cuts will impact across all areas of public expenditure but some departments and programmes are expected to bear a greater share including, most notably, local government services. They have been explained by government as necessary in order to restore the health of the economy. Underlying this justification is a rationale which centres on the view that public sector spending 'crowds out' private sector investment. It is this reasoning which leads to the government's claim that the 500,000 expected job losses in the public sector will be compensated by private sector job creation. Whether or not the government's plans will restore UK economic growth and confidence has divided economists. Leading British economists have, for example, questioned the government's breakneck deficit reduction plan in a time of recession (Grayson et al., 2011), whilst the influential Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has warned that the UK is heading for a double-dip recession following seven months of a deteriorating economy (Elliott, 2011).

Defining and measuring social harm

This article utilises a social harm perspective to understand those events and situations, relating to the organisation of our society, which result in harmful outcomes. The perspective takes into consideration a wide range of harms that transcend legal categories, particularly what is commonly thought to be a 'crime'. Our definition of harm, informed by Doyal and Gough's human needs approach, is based on an understanding of what it means to function successfully as a human

the very organisation of societies can produce serious and widespread damage

being. They define harm as the non-fulfilment of specified human needs (Doyal and Gough, 1991). Elsewhere we have identified an indicative list of needs which may be seen as essential requirements for successful human action (Pantazis and Pemberton, 2009). This

article focuses on two aspects of human need which are especially relevant to contemporary developments: physical and economic security.

Pre-existing social indicators were matched against these needs in order to construct the audit. In a rudimentary manner, we are able to observe aspects of the non-satisfaction of needs and thus the prevalence of harm. Creating lists of indicators can only provide an indicative, rather than a definitive, picture of need fulfilment. Given the multifaceted nature of human needs, it is unlikely that a single social indicator or data source could reflect the complexity of the human condition. In response we have tried to utilise a clustering of indicators and the selection of different types of data. Measures of social

disadvantage (relative poverty and unemployment rates) and measures of social phenomena (pollutant levels, accidents at work) have been used to quantify the non-

fulfilment of need. As these measures are drawn from a range of agencies and organisations, we have attempted where possible to minimise disparities between the time periods and geographical coverage.

Auditing harm during 2010-2011

The selected indicators have been chosen to capture the events which

are especially likely to transpire over the forthcoming years as a result of the economic crisis and the government spending cuts. We make no claims to have captured every aspect of harm relating to economic and physical insecurity; our purpose is to illustrate some of the ways we are harmed in order to draw some general observations at this point about the nature and extent of harm. This initial harm audit draws particular attention to the relative distribution of criminal harms and non-criminal harms.

Table 1 illustrates that criminal harms represent a relatively small number of the total harms that we experience. Focusing on physical security, the number of deaths resulting from homicide is considerably lower than many other deaths. For every one homicide, there are nearly three times as many deaths from road traffic accidents, nearly four times as many deaths from hospital infections, and more than twelve as many deaths arising from the workplace. For every one homicidal killing, there are more than five deaths caused by individuals intentionally killing themselves. The comparisons are significantly starker when homicidal deaths are considered in relation to deaths brought forward by air pollution. In this case for every one person murdered, 45 people die from deaths related to excess pollution in the atmosphere. In terms of economic security, living on a low income affects millions of people and there is demonstrable evidence concerning its short and long term detrimental consequences, especially if it is experienced in childhood (Bradshaw, 2001). On the other hand, criminal economic harms such as burglary can be unpleasant and often disturbing events, but the economic impact is often temporary, mitigated by private insurance. However, for many low income households, contents insurance is often an unaffordable luxury. In these situations, the interplay of different indicators of harm (poverty, burglary) become clear, reinforcing the argument that it makes little sense to examine harms according to whether they are 'crimes' or not.

Leading British economists have questioned the government's breakneck deficit reduction plan in a time of recession

Table 1: Economic and physical harms

Harm Indicator	Time Period	Geographical Coverage	Number /Percent
ECONOMIC HARM			
Individuals living in relative poverty (after housing costs)	2009/2010	UK	13.5 million (22%)
Children living in relative poverty (after housing costs)	2009/2010	UK	3.8 million (29%)
Unemployed individuals of working age	March-May 2010	UK	2.47 million 7.9% (unemployed as a % of economically active population aged 16 plus)
Incidences of fraud and forgery	2010/2011	England and Wales	145, 841
Mortgages in arrears	2010	UK	169,000
Houses repossessed	2010	UK	36,000
Incidences of burglary	2010/2011	England and Wales	745,000 incidents (2.6% population)
PHYSICAL HARM			
Homicide	2010/2011	England and Wales	642 (provisional)
Suicide	2010	England and Wales	3, 377
Violent incidents	2010/2011	England and Wales	1.2 million violence with injury 992, 000 violence without injury
Road traffic harms	2010	England, Wales and Scotland	208,648 casualties 1,850 deaths
Workplace harms	2009/2010	England, Wales and Scotland	171 deaths from workplace accidents 8,000 cancer deaths 1.2 million suffering from illness 200,000 injuries
Harm from air pollution	2010	UK	29,000 deaths brought forward *
Excess winter deaths	2009/2010	England and Wales	25,700 deaths brought forward *
Hospital Infections	2010	England and Wales	1,481 MRSA deaths 961 Staphylococcus aureus deaths
Drug Misuse	2010	England and Wales	1,784 deaths
Food Poisoning	2010	England and Wales	56,946 incidents
Note: * Where life expectancy is reduced significantly by an intervening factor			

Structural harms

We can also observe from Table 1 that the most widespread harms are not related to 'intentional' activity. Instead they are structural harms that result from indifference or an omission to act. However, in social and political discourses greater moral opprobrium is reserved for

those harms that result from intent. Underpinned by the prevailing neoliberal language of responsibility is a set of assumptions about intentionality drawn from the liberal philosopher, Friedrich Hayek (1944). For Hayek, market outcomes could not be considered unjust because the harms that result from them are

unintended. An example would be poor business decisions that result in unemployment.

Furthermore, Hayek argued that as no consensus could ever be reached over the reallocation of social resources to ameliorate harmful market consequences, there remains no just basis for a state to

interfere in such outcomes. In the context of the spending cuts, Hayek's logic has not been followed to its ultimate conclusion. However, it clearly influences the current 'common sense' position towards the role of the state. An important critique of these ideas can be found in the work of political theorist Raymond Plant (1998), which asserts that structural harms should be considered to be unjust, exactly because they are foreseeable and, therefore, preventable.

Behind structural harms exist a series of policy decisions. It may be that these decisions were taken without knowledge of the ensuing harmful consequences or those policy actors were indifferent to these outcomes. Yet without exception the impact of market deregulation, the weakening of regulatory bodies, and welfare retrenchment on deaths/ injury at work, poverty and pollution, for example, have been clearly documented. Significantly, in relation to the government's austerity plans, forecast modelling is already predicting some of the harmful consequences. For example, according to the Institute of Fiscal Studies 'relative child poverty will rise from its current level of 20% to reach 24% in 2020-21, and that child poverty against the fixed 2010-11 poverty line will reach 23% in 2020-21. These are both considerably higher than the targets specified in the Child Poverty Act' (Institute of Fiscal Studies, 2011). The persistence of these harms, alongside evidence that demonstrates the relationship to specific policies, would suggest that these harms are entirely foreseeable and, therefore, preventable.

Conclusion

Whilst the policy consensus that has emerged following the 'credit

crunch' dictates the inevitability of the public spending cuts and the resulting structural harms, alternative policy options are available. We should remind ourselves that other nations (e.g. Japan) are running considerably larger public debts than our own. Moreover, the recent history of banking crises in countries such as Sweden and Finland during the 1990s reinforces the point that

structural harms should be considered to be unjust, because they are foreseeable and, therefore, preventable

re-regulation at a point of crisis can serve to provide more stable economies and reduce the production of future harms. Notably, these countries have not been forced

to 'bail out' their banking sector to the same extent and have been in a position to provide social investment to ameliorate the harms associated with the global recession. Thus, whilst many advanced economies have been affected by the global 'credit crunch', resulting harms such as unemployment and poverty have varied in severity and extent, suggesting that how societies chose to organise themselves can be key to protecting their populations against harms. ■

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