

CRIMES AND MISDEMEANOURS

James Q Wilson talks to Roger Matthews and Tim Newburn.

Why do you think that reported crime has gone down in America in the last ten years or so?

Crime peaked in the late 1970s and began to go down in late 1980 or 1981, at different rates in different places. During the first half of the 1980s the rate at which adults and juveniles committed homicide, for example, was going down significantly, and the rate at which they were committing robberies was going down too. Then around 1985 the adult rate continued to go down but the juvenile rate turned up. In all likelihood it turned up because 1985 was the year that crack-cocaine came to the big cities of America and that brought young people into crime, either as dealers or users or gang members participating in dealing and gave them a stake in defending themselves, attacking rivals, and gave rise to a wave of drive-by shootings and seemingly senseless crime. In the last one or two years that juvenile crime rate has begun to come down a bit and the reasons for that decline are not well understood by anyone. My guess is that it is a combination of the following things. A number of juveniles have been arrested. A number of trigger-happy juveniles have been killed, usually by each other. And there has been a drift away from crack-cocaine as the drug of choice, which means that there has been a drift away from gangs that specialise in it. Those are my speculations. If those speculations are true they provide small comfort because each one of them can easily be reversed in two or three years.

What role do you think policing strategies have played in the decreases in reported crime in places like New York?

It is very hard to know. We all know of the great attention given to the New York Police Department (NYPD), and I

do think there is little doubt that they contributed in part, perhaps large part, to that significant decrease in crime. We also know that crime rates have been going down in many large cities, none of which use the NYPD or its tactics. So clearly there have been some declines which are attributable to what all police departments are doing, but we don't know what they are. Perhaps more police departments have become more proactive, have become more focused on the behaviour of young persons, have become more gang-oriented. All of these things may have helped to drive down the crime rates.

Do pro-active policing strategies require the identification of a specific minority who can be targeted?

I think crime has always been committed by a small group of people. The police have always known that. Where I think the police have changed their behaviour is in focusing their energies more on identifying who in the wider population is part of that group and attempting to deal not only with their large crimes but with their small crimes. Worrying more about their truanting from school. Worrying more about their joining gangs. Worrying more about their using drugs, and not just waiting until the time when they deal them. I think the police have become smarter in how they use their resources.

What do these pro-active strategies actually involve?

It varies enormously across cities. In New York for example the strategy is to make life very tough by bringing lots and lots of misdemeanour arrests against young people who they think are part of criminal or gang activities, but for very minor things such as driving without a licence, driving without a stop light, hanging around a street corner. This is all designed to put pressure on people who are at risk. In other cities the strategy has focused more on neighbourhood groups and on identifying neighbourhood-defined problems, such as young boys gathering on street corners, houses being used for drug sales and focusing police energies more on

those. In still other cities, they have thought of strategies of enforcing truancy laws, enforcing laws against bringing guns onto school campuses and the like. There's no common strategy across American police departments. What is common to the strategies they do employ is that they are focused on the small offences, because in their view if you focus on the small offences you reduce the risk of these people creating greater offences.

Does this not simply result in the harassment of young people for fairly trivial things?

Yes, there is a great deal of that. Civil libertarians don't like it. The public does like it. The police strategy isn't that you get tough on every kid who misbehaves. You identify particular street corners, particular neighbourhoods, particular stores. And you focus on the misdemeanours in those specific locations. These attract very minor penalties: maybe a night in jail, a fine, a community service order. The goal is to get them to sense that the police are watching them. That the police control the streets. That the kids don't control the streets. At least that's the theory anyway.

We know that changes in sentencing practice, the three-strikes philosophy for example, are leading to a rapidly expanding prison population. Are there signs that the size of the incapacitated population may well eventually outweigh the benefits?

Well so far all of the estimates of the cost of the prison population suggest that the benefits in terms of the crimes avoided exceed the cost by a factor of at least two to one. Now at some point, it might be that the cost of the prison population will exceed the benefits of crime reduction. We're not there yet. I don't see any likelihood of the American prison population being dramatically cut no matter what happens. We have a crime rate now that is roughly three to four times what it was in the early 1960s. We're on a new higher plateau of crime, which means a new, higher and, I think, permanent prison population. It is very hard for a free society to figure out how effectively to deal with crime rates other than by imprisonment.

Will a point come where the price being paid is simply too great?

I don't think there are many Americans who feel that way. There are some



David Kidd-Hewitt

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criminologists who think so. The size of our prison population is to me burdensome because of its differential effect across racial groups. A very large fraction of black males are under the control of the criminal justice system, either as inmates or as probationers or parolees. People differ as to the percentages involved, but it is a very large percentage. Now you don't want to live in a society where there is an identifiable group that is politically self-conscious, that lives with the fact that a very high fraction of its males during their prime productive years are under the control of the system. It suggests that society in some sense is not working.

That raises the question of what do you do about this. I don't think anyone knows the answer. There is no question that they're in prison because they have been convicted of a real crime. They're not there because people don't like the black colour. They're not there because of racism in the system. They're there because they have really committed crimes. The question then is can you prevent those crimes being committed in the first place? I think that that's the most important next step to be taken, and I don't think anyone knows how to prevent that persistent recruitment of young black males into crime. There are ideas about early childhood intervention, about parental training, group homes. 60 per cent of these black males grow up without a father in the household, (which is three times as high as it was 30 years ago). Most of them grow up without having known two parents. They grow up on the streets from which the black middle classes fled to the suburbs - they grow up on streets on which everyone else is like them. They face a bleak life and we don't know how to intervene effectively to prevent it.

It is not inevitable. There are many poor people in the United States who are not in this situation; Mexican-American immigrants who come to California, poor Vietnamese, who don't get caught up in this cycle. I'm convinced the reason they don't get caught up in it is because they bring an intact family structure with them, so they get through this process of growing up in a big city.

Why is the absence of one parent so critical?

You can speculate on the reason. The data are unmistakable on this. All of the surveys we now have of children growing up indicate that, controlling for ethnicity and controlling for social class, growing up with one parent, typically a female, rather than two parents makes the child

materially worse-off in every way that people can measure: school achievement, illnesses, involvement with the police, difficulty with friends. This is independent of the consequences of having a low income.

One response might be to increase welfare to this part of the population very dramatically?

The welfare has been increased, very dramatically, over the past 30 years. If you add together welfare benefits, and the other benefits which go to people in this position which include Medicaid (free medical care), subsidised public housing, food stamps, and other forms of assistance, it is financially extremely attractive for a young girl to set up a household of her own without a husband present. Indeed, if she and he earned the same in the private sector and then had to pay taxes on it, they would be worse off than they are now under welfare.

Do you think that, as William Julius Wilson has argued the retreat of jobs from the central city is the reason for these problems?

Central cities have lost certain kinds of jobs, particularly manufacturing jobs. But unemployment among low income people is very unevenly distributed, some people find jobs and some people don't. The ones that find jobs are the ones that are willing to travel to where the jobs are. Now some groups do this and other groups don't. For some people welfare is more attractive than jobs. Second, people have acquired what economists have termed a 'reservation wage' - a refusal to take a job unless it pays more than X dollars an hour, and X is higher than the minimum wage whatever that may be. I think the third reason is that a young male growing up in a household who has never known a working father does not get socialised into thinking that getting out of school and getting a job is the right thing to do. Solving the problem, generating a desire to take advantage of whatever opportunities are around is, I think, the crucial problem facing the United States.

What, if anything, do you think UK politicians can profitably learn from the North American experience?

I think British politicians, Labour and Conservative, alike, made a fundamental mistake in the 1970s. They, in effect, came out against prisons. They announced that they wanted an open prison policy. They wanted to keep prison

for those who had committed the most heinous crimes. The proportion of persons committing offences who went to prison fell far more dramatically in England than it did in the United States. I think England has paid a very high price for that. The word is out on the streets of London that the system isn't serious.

Isn't it that people don't think that they're going to be caught, rather than if caught they're not going to go to prison?

Policing in England and the United States has suffered from the fact that the crime rate has risen much faster than their resources and their skills have gone up. But if you just look at the people who are caught and are convicted and ask what percentage of them go to prison, the answer is that it is higher in the United States than it is in Britain, and the gap has been getting steadily wider.

And the proportion of them that come out and reoffend is very high.

Very high. I don't think that prison has much effect, good or bad. When you're betting on prison you're betting not on changing people, you're simply betting that you'll (a) deter others, (b) incapacitate the inmates, and (c) satisfy society's demand that justice be done. And that is really about all a government can do.

We've concentrated on punishment a lot. I wonder what your thoughts are in relation to social control and, in particular, to the potential for new forms of social control?

I think in many ways that's the most important question people have to think about. In my view the reason that virtually every industrialised nation in the world has dramatically higher crime rates today than it did in the 1950s is because of the breakdown of social control. The West after the Second World War suddenly became a remarkably freer place. We could all do our own thing, and most of us did very reasonable things, but other people took advantage of these opportunities in the wrong way. Now you ask how does a government remain both free and help reinstitute social control? I do not know the answer to that question. I am not sure there is an answer.

James Q Wilson is Collins Professor of Management and Public Policy, Graduate School of Management, University of California, Los Angeles.