

New Labour and the Lost Causes of Crime

David Downes argues that the rhetorics of reform and fear mask the inequalities that are the real causes of crime.

The central fact about crime in Britain over the past decade is that rates have fallen more or less continuously to levels around those of the early 1980s, a remarkable development, unpredicted and as yet largely unexplained. The trend is basically confirmed by victim survey data, ruling out changes in police recording practices as the reason. The trend is most marked in property crime but, despite a few counter trends such as the rise in robbery and gun-related offences, crimes of violence have also decreased substantially. The obvious explanation, that sentencing has been tougher, with the prison population over 50 per cent higher than in 1993, does not stand up to serious scrutiny. Crime rates have also fallen in comparable European countries that have not undertaken such marked

reductive. Tough policies lead to what John Braithwaite termed 'disintegrative shaming', social exclusion, rising numbers in prison and heightened risks of recidivism. They are, however, tabloid friendly and – so far – electorally popular. Far more likely is that New Labour's success in the crime control field stems from their partial effectiveness in addressing the causes of crime – though it must be stressed that no neat consensus exists on what those causes might be. The balance of evidence implicates relative deprivation, social exclusion and economic inequality as prime contenders.

Sheer opportunity is a crucial variable, but even the most opportunistic offence requires a motivated offender, and it is on that front that causality chiefly resides. It is worth recalling how, for 18 long years,

Narrowing the income and wealth gap ... is a pre-condition for lasting front-line crime reduction.

penal expansion. Crime and imprisonment rates are far more independent of each other than conventional wisdom allows.

The best current illustration of that point is the contrast between Canada and the USA. Canada has much the same crime rate as the USA, except for rates of lethal violence that are, as journalist Michael Moore has dramatically reminded us, far higher in America despite a prison population of vastly greater proportions.

The celebrated slogan that helped bear New Labour to power suggests, nevertheless, that placing so heavy a premium on 'law and order' has indeed paid off. It is only fair that, if governments can be indicted for at least partial responsibility for rising crime, the same token applies to its reduction. Blair and Straw re-branded New Labour as 'tough on crime', following a run of four election defeats in 1992; imported American policies wholesale, except for capital punishment; and set about planning the root and branch remaking of the criminal justice system. Their embrace of what Bottoms termed 'populist punitiveness' ruled out any return to 1980s policies of decarceration, which would never have been feasible if the then Labour Opposition had been snapping at the government's heels as 'soft on crime'. That came later, and it was not for nothing that Margaret Thatcher, asked to name her greatest achievement, replied 'New Labour'.

Nevertheless, it is more likely that tough policy delivery proved counter-productive rather than crime

successive Conservative governments refused to acknowledge any link whatsoever between policies, social and economic trends and crime, which was apparently uncaused by anything except human evil and a lack of discipline in families and schools, a state of denial maintained even when Dickinson (1994) and Wells (1995) documented the close relationship between burglary and unemployment rates for males under the age of 25.

To their credit, New Labour have retrieved from oblivion several causes of crime lost at least from official view between 1979 and 1997. Steep falls in unemployment and a buoyant economy since 1993 coincided with falling crime rates, but the Tories could hardly claim success in those terms, since that would have been to render admissible the highly criminogenic quality of their neo-liberal policies in the 1980s, which depleted in a decade the hard-won social capital built during and after the Second World War.

New Labour have maintained falling unemployment and stepped up investment in education and health, tackling the worst excesses of poverty and environmental neglect born of New Right policies. These have arguably paid off in crime reduction terms, along with the encouragement of New Deals, mentoring, experiments with restorative justice and the best youth justice schemes. Even the minimal minimum wage levels so cautiously set by New Labour have been shown to have a crime reduction effect (Hansen and Machin, 2003),



supporting Richard Wilkinson's assertion (2001) that one does not have to postulate some "unreachable level of total equality" to make a substantial impact, not only on volume crime, but also on health, homicide and social cohesion.

Needless to say, making good the huge cumulative underinvestment of two decades in the core services is proving a daunting, long-term task. Some causes of crime have, however, remained truly 'lost causes' in the New Labour era – 'missing believed dead', so to speak. The rampant inequality of the Tory years has actually increased under New Labour, despite falling numbers in poverty, due to the refusal of Blair and Brown to raise income tax rates even on annual incomes of over £100,000.

Indirect taxation, which falls regressively on lower incomes, has proliferated; tax havens remain sacrosanct. Moreover, the poorest are increasingly concentrated geographically. Under New Labour the depleted social housing stock has failed to grow to match demand. This, combined with effects of community care policies decanting the mentally disturbed into low rental properties, has led to the criminogenic concentration of people with multiple problems into residualised areas of social housing. This is exacerbated by house price inflation squeezing the poor out of the housing market, especially in the affluent south (see Atkinson and Flint this issue). The poor have been rendered less poor, but they must accept any work available to achieve benefit rights, and are especially vulnerable to appalling exploitation in the non-unionised, 'free market', service industry jobs so vividly documented in Britain by Polly Toynbee in her book 'Hard Work' and in the USA by Barbara

Ehrenreich in 'Nickelled and Dimed'. Meanwhile, CEOs engineer multi-million pound severance deals even for dismal performance. Such stark contrasts are brilliantly captured in Julie Burchill's parody of New Labour's philosophy as 'socialism for the rich, capitalism for the poor'.

The winner/loser culture, the cult of celebrity, and the 'in your face' exaltation of sudden wealth in the mass media, translate readily into a commodity fetishism which fuels and justifies street crime (Hallsworth 2004). Narrowing the income and wealth gap to restore some degree of status and respect to vital but ill-rewarded workers is a precondition for lasting front-line crime reduction. All of which helps to explain why, despite a decade of falling crime, the fear of crime remains so high. As Michael Tonry argues (2004, forthcoming), placing so heavy an emphasis on situational crime prevention paradoxically foments rather than assuages the fear of crime. Being galvanized into a state of red alert every time you leave your home or car, or pick up a newspaper or switch on TV, hardly conduces a sense of civil peace.

More than that, both the tabloids and government and opposition alike goad the electorate daily with a drip-feed of hate against criminals, illegal immigrants, unruly youngsters and 'woolly-minded' liberals who are 'soft on crime'. The major parties have by now developed a vested interest in the 'war against crime' which, in Orwellian fashion, has to be sustained at all costs, with endless initiatives, programmes, and 'rafts' of measures, but which remains highly selective, rarely aimed at the crimes of the powerful. Combined with what David Garland has described as the 'culture of control' which, once established is highly resistant to change, these shifts to what Stuart Hall termed a 'law and order society' lock us all into a discourse in which the fundamental causes of crime recede to vanishing point, from which it is vital they must be retrieved.

Professor David Downes, Mannheim Centre for the Study of Criminology and Criminal Justice, London School of Economics.

References

- Dickinson, D. (1994) *Crime and Unemployment*. Cambridge (mimeo).
- Hallsworth, S. (2004) *Lessons from the Front Line – Street Crime and the Politics of Crime Control in Lambeth*. Paper to Mannheim Centre seminar, 18 February.
- Hansen, K. and Machin, S. (2002) 'Spatial Crime Patterns and the Introduction of the UK Minimum Wage', *Oxford Bulletin of Economics and Statistics*, 64, Supplement, 677-697.
- Tonry, M. (forthcoming) *Punishment and Politics – Evidence and Emulation in English Crime Control Politics*. Willan.
- Wells, J. (1995) 'Crime and Unemployment' in K. Coates (ed.) *The Right to Work: The Loss of our First Freedom*. Nottingham: Spokesman.
- Wilkinson, R. *Mind the Gap: Hierarchies, Health and Human Evolution*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.