

Policing the borders of crime: who decides research?

Danny Dorling looks at the relationship between poverty and mortality.

Who decides which actions and events constitute a crime and what underlying aspects of crime are worthy of research funding and investigation? The short answer to the funding part of that question is that those who hold the research purse strings decide – but that is a far from satisfactory answer, as those string holders in turn react to academic debate, public opinion and political imperative. Academic debate takes place as much in newsletters and papers as in journals. That debate influences and is influenced by more general opinion. It drives and is driven by political imperatives. Over time, often very short spans of time, the words, meanings and truth within the discussion change.

Seventy-five years ago the Institute for the Scientific Study and Treatment of Delinquency was founded in London. At that time criminology was not a subject of academic enquiry in British universities but within those three-score and fifteen years (less than the average length of a current British lifetime), our collective understanding of delinquency, criminology and crime itself has transformed beyond recognition. The Institute changed its name to the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies in 1993 and has published this magazine ever since then. This is of relevance because recently delinquency has become of interest again. Not the delinquency of the 1920s and 30s working-class in economic recession, but systemic delinquency – a tendency to be negligent and uncaring – that appears to underlie much current social harm.

Last year Paddy Hillyard and his colleagues Christina Pantazis, Steve Tombs and David Gordon argued that criminology needs to change to consider a wider definition of social harm and currently remains “infected with individually-based analysis, explanation and ‘remedy’ ... despite decades of resistance to these notions from within the discipline of criminology itself.”

They illustrated the futility of much current conceptualising and counting of crime with an international example: “By contrast, given that one of the most prevalent ‘crimes’ in the UK is ‘failure to pay the TV licence’ while the most common crime in Turkey is ‘being rude to a public official’, there is not even a theoretical prospect of being able to make meaningful international comparisons of the extent of crime, except in relation to a relatively small sub-set of ‘crimes’” (Hillyard *et al* 2005).

However, in their conclusion Hillyard *et al* were pessimistic as to the future of the academic study of crime. “Holding out hope that this situation might change through ever greater pressure from within criminology is at best optimistic, at worst illusory.” (*ibid* page 66). However, from where I work – outside of criminology – the approach that Hillyard and his colleagues argue for makes sense and it can take social research in a very interesting, possibly useful and certainly wide variety of directions. Their definition of harm extends from the physical (itself ranging from violence to starvation) to financial harm, economic, emotional, psychological to sexual and cultural harms

(*ibid* page 14) – and they use the general term ‘social harm’ to encompass all objects in the study of harm.

Murder

In several publications I argued that a social harm approach could be taken to study what is often seen as a most individual crime: murder (Shaw *et al* 2005, Dorling 2005, 2006). Over the course of the last twenty five years the chances of being murdered have fallen for most groups of people in Britain. However, the chances of young men being murder victims have risen so much that the overall murder rate for all people doubled. Young men in the most affluent parts of the country saw their chances fall too, so this increase is entirely due to rapid increases in fatal violence in the poorest neighbourhoods of the country. Furthermore it is the cohort born after 1965 amongst whom the rise is most evident with – crucially – their chances of being a victim not falling so far as they age. There is even tenuous evidence that the first generation of their male children are experiencing even worse chances in the worst off areas of the country.

Viewed from the location of the victims, from where the harm impacts, the patterns of murder follow geographical and demographic trends in the recent economic and social history of Britain, characterised by a politics that had a tendency to be negligent and uncaring – I would argue a delinquent politics – which coincided with the circumstances that allowed violent harm to rise in Britain and for that rise to be concentrated only on particular groups of people while almost all others saw their circumstances improve. This evidence may appear circumstantial but such patterns are becoming ever clearer as shown in recent research in health (Wilkinson 2005 – see box opposite)

Social harm

Where would a research agenda that concentrated on the crime of social harm take us? Suppose that we concentrate to begin with only on those crimes that kill. Only a tiny proportion of deaths that result from social harm are legally labelled as murder. For every murder in Britain a further ten people are killed by themselves – often, but not always, labelled suicide. Suicides are just as socially patterned as is murder although correlates of loneliness are a key aspect of the related neglect (Dorling and Gunnell, 2003). Suicide rates too have risen most for young men, as have deaths from accidents when generally defined. However, a slow and early non-violent death from poverty is no less painful and no less harmful than murder, suicide and accident. The legacy of mass early unemployment, mass tobacco poisoning and mass neglect for over a generation are amongst the key explanations for why life expectancies stubbornly stagnate in the poorest parts of the UK, whilst they soar ahead in the richest places. Life expectancy for men in Glasgow by 2002–2004 remained below 70 years while it rose in the royal

“Greater inequality almost certainly affects how important status is and how much people feel their social standing is taken as an indication of their ‘worth’. Bigger material differences lead to bigger social distances up and down the hierarchy. In more unequal societies it is as if some people count for everything and others for nothing, making us all more concerned with how we are seen. More hierarchical societies are marked by greater social divisions and more downward discrimination and prejudice against those lower on the social ladder. The divisiveness of widening income differences during the last two or three decades explains why social mobility has actually decreased in Britain and why there is less social mobility in Britain than in many other rich societies. Among the eight countries for which there are broadly comparable measures of social mobility (Blanden *et al* 2005), there is a close (and statistically significant) correlation showing that social mobility tends to be lower where income differences are greater. In this comparison, the most unequal countries with the lowest social mobility were the USA (the ‘land of opportunity’) followed closely by Britain. At the opposite end, with the lowest income differences and highest social mobility, were countries like Norway and Sweden. The same tendency for income inequality to lead to wider and more rigid social divisions can also be seen geographically: as inequality increases so too does the segregation of the population into rich and poor neighbourhoods. The power and divisiveness of greater income inequality suggests that it is unrealistic to pursue greater equality of opportunity without at the same time moving towards greater equality of outcome. Indeed, greater equality of outcome is likely to be the best way of achieving greater equality of opportunity.” (Wilkinson, 2005).

borough of Kensington and Chelsea by a year for both men and women in the most recent twelve months, to now stand at 80.8 and 85.8 years respectively.

In the past seventy-five years, millions of short lives were begun and ended in this country. Almost none of those deaths were the result of a crime as conventionally understood, but many if not most were preventable and were largely the product of social harm. The correlation between poverty and mortality rates by area is amongst the highest found between any pair of social indicators in the UK. But social harm, the product of a neglectful and uncaring society, does much more than kill people young. The abuse to people’s dignity, their rights to opportunity, and their rights to respect are continuously damaged while poverty remains endemic and inequality is sustained.

The effects of social harm are most evident and again a hierarchy can be established from relatively small numbers of obvious ‘crimes’ to the more widespread and general damage done to others from our collective choices and actions. The mass killing of people (most emotively civilians and especially children) by bombing overseas is one of the most visually

obvious forms of social harm committed by people in London on people abroad. Whether the attorney general thought this ‘illegal’ is immaterial from a social harm perspective.

What though of the deaths spread through our commerce and industry? Two-thirds of men in China now smoke – a future Glasgow on an epic scale. How is the making of profit in London’s square mile from the spread of tobacco worldwide legal? Spread the net more widely and you see a pharmaceutical industry that prices drugs beyond the reach of the world’s poor, profits massively from most of the rest and concentrates subsequent wealth amongst the few (again disproportionately through London!). It is not just bad drugs that do harm. I could go on – but it is perhaps the top of the international ice-berg of harm and the potential causes of future harm that should concern us most, first. Type “qinetiq nanotechnology” into goggle... It is not yet a crime to develop microscopic devices designed to potentially could kill millions – why not?

Who decides what is researched, who polices the borders of crime? Ultimately you do.

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