

RECREATING THE FAMILY

Rising crime and the dismembered family

We have been interested recently in the issue of crime and unemployment, and specifically in three questions. First, what has been the trend in crime and unemployment 1955-1993? Secondly, to what extent do we find a socially significant connection between any rise in crime and any rise in unemployment during that period? Thirdly, what light do earlier statistics throw upon the relationship between rising unemployment and rising crime?

One of the most recent examinations of the relationship between rising crime and rising unemployment is that of David Dickinson (1994). Dickinson accepts that during the past twenty years crime has risen steeply, an opinion opposed by many commentators of the 'moral-panic' school. He is also able to argue, that the increased pressures in recent years of actual or prospective unemployment upon today's young people have made them more prone to seek solutions in criminal conduct.

Scapegoating the unemployed

However, if a longer time span than that of the past twenty years is examined, the figures on crime and unemployment offer little, if any, correlation. Moreover even during the twenty years up to 1992, crime accelerated exponentially and smoothly, while the unemployment figures have fluctuated. Dickinson seems immune to the significance of such changes for his analysis. Nevertheless, in mid-1988 unemployment stood at 1.8 million, it then fell to 1.3 million, before rising again to 1.8 million in 1991. Burglary however, did not follow that fall and rise. It climbed more or less steadily from one million to 1.3 million during the same period.

Focusing upon a longer time span, unemployment was well under 5 per cent from 1941 to 1980. For much of the period it was well under 3 per cent. Yet it was in the period 1955-1980 that crime rates grew rapidly, and began to trace the exponential upward curve that continued until the early 1990s. In those days it was consensual to attribute the rise in crime to the fact of *low* unemployment, it being 'obvious' that young men no longer needed to be well behaved or socially conformist in order to get or keep a good job. Dickinson dismisses this period as irrelevant to his thesis, because unemployment, it could be argued, was 'voluntary'.

Dickinson does not examine the figures on unemployment and crime in the late Victorian period, when figures first

became available, and in the interwar period of heavy involuntary unemployment. Yet during the period of the nineteenth-century trade-cycle the figures show, and social commentators almost universally agree, that crime steadily fell. The difference between how the unemployed *perceived* and *responded* to their unemployment in the late 1920s and early 1930s, as contrasted with the early 1990s, cannot be more dramatically illustrated than with the figure which shows that the increase in robberies in the single year 1990-91 was two-and-a-half times the number of *all* robberies totalled for the years 1920-38.

It seems to us, therefore, that if crime did increase enormously between the mid-1950s and the early 1990s - and the 'moral panic' school may at last be losing adherents - the explanation must be sought in factors which have also changed over the same period, and not in rising unemployment, a factor which correlates with crime trends only in recent years, and then imperfectly.

Changing cultures

What some of these other factors may be we have attempted to identify elsewhere. Our starting point is that crime began its upward trend very markedly from 1955,

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and although various important factors have added to the momentum (notably the emergence of a large segment of the younger generation who have not had a job and may never find one), the underlying influences must be traced back thirty or forty years - and possibly further to the pent-up forces of capitalistic individualism. Most marked has been the sea-change in culture: from a culture that was binding in all sorts of ways, to the relaxation of nearly all rules and organisational structures, except those of the bureaucratically organised economy; from a culture that emphasised duties, to a relatively anomic state of affairs where the claim to rights is paramount: from a culture which approved the postponement of gratification, to a mass of consumers encouraged individually to pursue the ethic of hedonistic immediacy. 'Relative poverty', covering income, housing, job prospects, possessions and so forth, *understood as an expression of core discontent at any level*

of objective well-being is therefore an important explanation of the growth of crime after 1955.

The dismembered family

Another aspect of these changes is the growing sexual liberation of men, which has ramified into what used to be called by the now unacceptable term, 'the breakdown of the family'. In part the connection between men's sexual liberation on the one hand - the freedom to engage in sexual intercourse without being powerfully constrained by social and legal pressures to become long-life monogamous husbands to their sole sexual partners, and life-long fathers to any children that result - and crime on the other, is the greater empirical likelihood that a child from a household of any different composition will engage in criminal conduct.

But much more important, we argue, is the criminogenic effect for all young men of their greater freedom to handle their frustrations in a self-regarding manner. They are much freer than they were before 1955 to cope with their grievances, as they themselves define and are led to define grievances as legitimate, without regard to the adverse consequences for their responsibilities as key adult members of their own families, or for that matter of their families of origin. The progressive release of men from sociological fatherhood, as Malinowski called it, one of the most important expressions of the general movement from cultural control to individual liberty, is the most striking and important change of the past forty years. Nothing else has been transformed at the same rate and in the same direction, in lockstep with crime. Certainly over that period neither rising illiteracy, nor a worsening stock of houses, nor rising unemployment nor even rising relative poverty (the familiar litany) come anywhere close to being as likely candidates for the role of crucial cause of the steep forty-year rise in the crime rate in England and Wales.

References

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