

Crime, Politics and Time

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How is politics related to crime? To criminal justice policies? To attitudes about crime? Even if these connections are meaningful how long ought one to expect to 'wait' between political inputs and crime and criminal justice outputs? These are fairly simple questions to pose, however the answers to each of these questions are not straightforward. Using the Thatcher administrations as a case study, we and colleagues have been exploring these very questions over the past ten or so years. In this short essay, we try to distil what we have learnt so far, and point towards what is still to be explored.

What is the Relationship Between Politics and Criminal Justice Policy?

The answer to these questions varies according to how one defines 'politics', 'crime' and 'criminal justice policy'. We define 'politics' as that process whereby laws and policy decisions are reached in such a way as to achieve (even partially) a set of predefined goals and objectives. It encompasses, therefore, Acts of Parliament, policies directives, speeches made by political leaders and that rather vaguely defined group - 'opinion formers'. 'Crime' here means both 'real' crimes, and those reported to the police and other bodies (some of which will be recorded), and those reported in surveys, as well as 'signal events' or 'moral panics' which gain popular notoriety. By 'criminal justice system' of course we mean the courts, police, prisons and probation services. The answer to the question then becomes affirmative. We have charted how political decision making has helped shape 'where' crimes took place over time (i.e. in terms of housing tenure, Farrall et al., 2016b). We have also charted how crime worked its way up the political agenda as both a result of policy decisions and as a cause of subsequent policy decisions. Our argument (Farrall and Jennings, 2012; Jennings et al., 2012) is as follows; although crime was rising in the 1970s, the economic policies pursued by the Thatcher administrations acted in such a way as to accelerate the increase in crime (particularly after 1986). Widespread economic restructuring - which brought with it unemployment - exposed many individuals to the risks of financial instability, as well as class A drugs such as heroin became more readily available in the 1980s. Under these conditions, acquisitive property crime became a means to 'make ends meet' (see Jennings et al., 2012; Morgan, 2014). As crime rose, so too did the fear of crime. As the fear of crime increased, so too did attention to it in the Houses of Parliament, and then the agenda of the executive (as measured by the Queens speeches). In sum, economic policy drove crime, which illuminated the public spectacle of crime and the reporting of crime. Public anxiety about crime then forced political attention to turn to the topic of crime. At this stage, the government could have done any one of a number of things. Trying to maintain social stability, as a form of crime prevention (jobs, strong communities, schools and a sense of purpose) might have been one such strategy, however, it was not one which was attractive to a government whose underlying philosophy revolved around self-reliance, individual responsibility and 'hard work'. A

more attractive policy intervention was situation crime prevention (more locks, CCTV, and lighting). For those who did not get the message, responses to offending were hardened; a greater use of prison, longer prison sentences and more onerous community supervision were the order of the day (Farrall et al, 2016a).

That seemed to make sense at the aggregate (i.e. national) level using data for England and Wales. But were the same processes at work at the individual level, or, had we simply made a classic ecological fallacy? In order to model these processes, we needed longitudinal data for the same individual repeatedly interviewed over time through key transitional points (childhood, early adulthood, family life etc.), which asked about their social and economic circumstances and engagement in crime over their life-courses. Fortunately, the UK has a long history of undertaking exactly such studies. The first major birth cohort study started in 1946 and began to look at the long-term interaction of health and social policy before the establishment of the National Health Service (NHS) in 1948. Twelve years later in 1958, another similar study (which became known as the National Child Development Study or NCDS) commenced, and another twelve years after that, the Birth Cohort Study (or BCS70) was started in 1970. The 1946 cohort is not widely available, but the 1958 cohort (entering adulthood, aged 21 when Thatcher came to power in 1979) and the BCS70 (who were children, aged 9 in 1979) were ideal, since they 'book-ended' that generation of Britons which one might think of today as being 'Thatcher's children'. One of the first topics we turned to was housing.

Social housing underwent radical policy reform in the 1980s. The 'right to buy' initiative afforded council-tenants the opportunity to purchase their home at a vastly reduced rate. Councils however, were not permitted to use the receipts to reinvest in new housing stock, which ultimately led to a residualisation of the social rented sector. Using the cohort studies from 1958 and 1970, we could examine the impact (if any) of these far-reaching reforms on individuals' offending behaviour in adulthood. Tracking the cohorts' experience of both housing and homelessness, we found that homelessness was associated with engagement in crime for both cohorts. More specifically we identified that if parents of the 1970 cohort did not buy their council house the cohort members were more likely to have experienced ensuing homelessness. Why? As social housing stock contracted (through sales and non-investment), the remaining stock was in increased demand. This meant that in order to be eligible to access council property, potential tenants had to be in the 'greatest need'. However, the 1977 Homelessness Persons Act did not include 'single homeless' people as priority candidates. This reconfiguration ultimately shifted the composition of social-housing estates and the communities around them. Crucially, the BCS70 cohort members would have been dependent children during this period, and those whose parents did not purchase their home (and who would, of course, been amongst the less well-off anyway) may have struggled to find secure or affordable accommodation as they entered young adulthood in the early 1990s. Living on the street as some of them did, this cohort were also more likely to have been picked up or 'moved on' by the police. Thatcher's campaigns to reach number 10 had emphasised the restoring of 'law and order' and police resources increased after her election. Statutory notices to the police were issued by Howard in 1994 and Straw in 1998. These notices effectively told the police to get on with the job in the light of rising crime (or perceptions of rising crime even if it was actually falling) and public concern about crime. Being younger than the 1958 cohort, the homeless members of the 1970 cohort were likely to have been subjected to greater levels of

policing, on-street surveillance and ultimately criminal conviction than their older counter-parts. In sum, tenure, homelessness and crime were mediated by social policy reforms of the era. Pertinently, through this long-term lens we can see how temporal and period effects impacted different cohorts in different ways.

The 1958 cohort were not asked many questions about crime as children or young adults (itself an indication of the lower level of importance which crime had in the country at that point, perhaps). As such, comparing the offending careers of the NCDS and BCS70 cohorts is limited until both are in mature adulthood (in their 30s and 40s). However, the BCS70 were asked questions about their engagement in crime at age 16 and 30. This meant that we were able to assess the extent to which those who grew up in parts of the UK which were undergoing economic restructuring were more or less likely to become involved in crime. Our results suggest that if you lived in a county which experienced a high degree of economic restructuring (measured by the percentage of people working in mines in that county in the 1971 census minus the percentage of unemployed men of working age in that county in the 1981 census) you were also more likely to experience a range of interconnected processes that were related to adult offending. Cohort members who lived in areas where local industries collapsed were more likely to be educated in a primary school where harsh forms of discipline were common at age 10. This in turn was associated with higher levels of 'alienation' from school at age 16, which in turn was related to offending at both age 16 and age 30. School alienation also predicted unemployment at age 26, which was also associated with offending at age 30. Additionally, economic restructuring was associated with higher levels of alienation at school at age 16 and offending itself at age 16. There was, as is now widely reported, a strong relationship between offending at age 16 and offending at age 30. Notably, whilst we found that many of the individual-level characteristics (e.g. school experiences, engagement in the labour market) were associated with offending in adulthood (aka 'the causes of crime') we had also uncovered what might be termed the 'causes of causes'. As well as confirming at the individual level the work we had undertaken on tenure and crime and on the unemployment rate and crime, this work de-pathologises those caught up in the criminal justice system, as it demonstrates strong relationships between wider economic fortunes and individual offending.

However, the ripple effect of these processes did not emerge until well into the 1990s (by which time Thatcher was out office). Why the lag? Simply, it takes time to think of a solution, get it through parliament, on to the statute, enacted in policy, and to have effects (assuming that this all goes according to plan). Furthermore, if the effects of social and economic policies are felt most strongly by those in lower income families, then there will inevitably be a lag between the effects 'hitting' children in those families, and those children becoming old enough to start appearing in courts, probation offices and prisons, or as respondents in surveys such as the Crime Survey for England and Wales or the British Social Attitudes Surveys. Time, therefore, is a crucial variable. And it is one that must be sensitively incorporated into our thinking and testing of social phenomena.

How is Politics Related to Attitudes about Crime?

One of the questions which political scientists devoted considerable time to exploring during the period from the late-1980s through to the mid-1990s was the extent to which the governments led by Thatcher shifted political attitudes along lines which

may be thought of as being 'Thatcherite'. Such studies are interesting from our perspective, since attitudinal shifts in the general population (regardless of how these are initiated) may have consequences for the policies which later governments and political parties feel they can legitimately pursue (and also 'need' to pursue if they are to curry favour with the electorate). A hardening of public attitudes towards crime may result in both governments and political parties trying to produce 'tougher' sounding policies in order to demonstrate to the electorate that they share their beliefs about the nature of the problem and how it ought to be tackled.

The earliest forays into this topic were conducted by Crewe (1988). Crewe posed the question 'has the electorate become Thatcherite?', to which he answered 'no', pointing out that by some analyses the population was taking a 'hard line' on some issues before 1979 and that by 1987 was actually showing quite 'anti' Thatcherite sentiments. Studlar and McAllister (1992:165) similarly concluded that 'there has not been a revolution of the right'.

Shortly after this, analysts started to explore regional variations, the notion of 'political generations', and looked at longer-term trends. Johnston and Pattie's work (1990) is characteristic of this growing sophistication. Although they conclude by arguing that 'the Thatcherite project has failed, in that the majority of the electorate ... did not embrace its core values to any significant extent' (1990:492) they were able to show (using the 1983 and 1987 British Election Study surveys) that changes in some public values were emerging at the regional level. Interestingly, from our perspective, attitudes towards law and order were becoming more punitive (i.e. more people preferred 'crime cutting' measures to 'civil libertarian' concerns). This was an early indication that public feelings about crime were beginning to stand out as different from other areas of social policy. However, it did not initially appear that it was Thatcherite values per se that were consolidating tougher sentiments towards offenders and crime.

Russell et al (1992) extended this style of work by exploring the possibility that Thatcherite values had affected first time voters to a greater extent than they had non-first time voters. This hypothesis was partially supported, although the results were not conclusive. For example, first time voters in 1983 were more leftwing in their attitudes towards law and order than either the 1979 or the 1987 cohort of first time voters. However, they appeared to be less left wing overall, than had been the case other elections examined (1974, 1979 and 1987, p749-50), which Russell et al (1992:749) refer to as emerging evidence of a 'Thatcher effect'.

What about the fear of crime and punitive attitudes?

Our earlier research in this area (see Farrall and Jennings 2012; 2014) has suggested that various social and economic policies (which, to varying degrees can be cast as 'Thatcherite') drove property crime rates up, and following this, anxiety about crime and the perception of crime as pressing social problem, expressed via social and crime surveys, rose in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Such trends came to attention of political parties and government officials and, accordingly, both started to concentrate on the issue of 'law and order' and 'safety' much more than they had done previously. Our feedback model of the economy, social change, politics and the criminal justice agenda highlights the dynamic and interactive character of the relationship between society, the economy and the public and political agenda.

Policies introduced in one domain at a particular point in time can shape and limit the future agenda of public debate and political competition, giving rise to social and economic side-effects and future government policies. The rising crime rates of Britain in the 1980s can be linked to economic conditions that resulted partly from the policies of the Thatcher government. This dynamic later shaped competition between the political parties on the issue of crime and pursuit of punitive policies – particularly during the later years of the 1979-1997 Conservative governments and under Labour Home Secretaries from the early-1990s. Our most recent work has explored the role of political socialisation on attitudes using data from the British Social Attitudes Survey and British Crime Survey (now known as the Crime Survey for England and Wales). In these studies, we found that the crimes that people worried most about during their adulthood were the sorts of crimes that political discourses had highlighted when they were growing up (Gray et al 2018). Hence, those people who turned 15 during Thatcher's period in office (so those born between 1964 and 1975) tended to worry about domestic burglary (since this was increasing during the 1980s, and hence there was a lot of attention on it at the time), whilst those who grew up during New Labour's period in office (1997 to 2010, and who were born between 1982 and 1995) tended to worry most about noisy neighbours and teenagers hanging about – both key elements of Blair's discourse on crime. In a similar vein, exploring data from the British Social Attitudes Survey between 1985 and 2012, we found that those who grew up under the New Labour governments – aka 'Blair's Babes' - were even more rightwing than 'Thatcher's children'. The study demonstrated that public opinion has moved sharply to the right since 1979 and not switched back, with young people showing a strong preference for right-wing policies in regard to welfare, crime and the economy (Grasso et al, 2017).

Incorporating a long-term framework means we have been able to examine if relationships between crime and politics remain static as broader political and economic conditions change, or if there are important age, period or cohort effects that vary over time. Moreover, we have questioned what the meaning of any observed time effects represent: do these represent important shifts in attitudes, behaviours and perceptions, and how do these matters interact? We have aimed not only to recognise the 'wider context' that long-term analysis affords us, but also to question how temporal processes are fundamental to the understanding of politics and crime.

Conclusion

Although it has required a vast amount of work (in the form of data collation and prep, and exploiting new analysis techniques), it is clear that, at least in the case of the Thatcher governments, there is a relationship between politics and crime. The social and economic policies pursued by the Thatcher governments helped to accelerate the already increasing crime rate. The political attitudes promoted by Thatcher fostered feelings of punitiveness amongst the electorate and encouraged politicians (especially those who came after Thatcher, such as Michael Howard and Tony Blair) to invest rhetorically and practically in 'get tough' stances. These have helped to increase the prison population from around 39,000 in 1979, to today's figures in the mid-80,000s (for England and Wales). But, crucially, time and temporal lags are key to keep in mind when thinking through the processes of change we have charted.

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