

No, Mr Cameron, it's doing time that's cut crime

The prime minister is taking the credit for a fall in offending but others have a greater claim, writes **David Green**

Last week's crime statistics revealed a 9% fall and David Cameron was quick to claim the credit. He was particularly proud that the figure had declined despite cutting the police strength from 144,000 to 130,000 since May 2010. The risk of crime is now lower than it was in 1981, when the first British Crime Survey (now the Crime Survey for England and Wales) was carried out.

One problem with linking the number of police officers to the amount of crime is that police activity is not the main driver of the crime rate. The two biggest falls have been in domestic burglary and car theft, and here the credit must go to technology. Homeowners have spent a fortune on making their homes more difficult to break into and cars are now almost impossible to steal without the keys.

Where good policing is capable of making a difference, however, crime has not fallen and in one or two cases it has gone up. Police patrolling is particularly important in reducing street crime. The crime survey found that when other crimes were falling, violent crime remained stable in 2012-13. In fact, violence with injury increased. Many such crimes are the result of drunken fighting close to pubs. If the police are near at hand, they can stop minor scuffles turning into full-scale fights. Another crime that is reduced by a visible police presence is theft from the person, a non-violent crime that includes pickpocketing. Here police figures show a 9% rise.

Is there another reason why crime is at its lowest for 30 years? Some commentators claim it is because we have become nicer people, but in 1981 more than 11m crimes were committed with a prison population of about 42,000. Today we can keep a lid on the crime rate only by keeping twice as many criminals in jail. In 2012-13 the prison population varied from 87,000 to 83,000. Early in 2012 we had the highest prison population so far at more than 87,800.

If we let 40,000 prisoners out onto the streets would crime remain the same? Fortunately we don't need to try the experiment — the Italians have done it for us. Every now and then the Italian government deals with overcrowding by

granting mass pardons to thousands of prisoners. Two Italian academics studied pardons granted between 1962 and 1995 to as many as 35% of the prison population. As economists they felt duty bound to express the result as a cost-benefit ratio. Keeping offenders in prison incurred about half the cost of the crimes committed by offenders after release and so the policy of mass pardons stood condemned as "inefficient".

There is another complication. Back in the 1980s car theft and burglary were the high-volume crimes to fear. Today the criminals have switched to fraud. Buying over the internet is vulnerable to fraud and in the past year or so plastic-card fraud has affected more than 4% of card owners (the risk of theft from the person is 1.1%). In 2012, £388m was stolen, up by 14% from the previous year.

The police have undercounted fraud for many years and are only now being forced to produce accurate figures. The latest figure is up by 27%, reflecting earlier undercounting. The official estimate by the National Fraud Intelligence Bureau is 327,000, compared with a police figure of 229,000.

Then there's the Commercial Victimization Survey. The Crime Survey for England and Wales interviews only private households. In 2012 the government surveyed businesses, too, and found another 9.2m crimes, even more than the survey count of 8.6m. Crimes against businesses, such as shoplifting, are supposed to be included in the police figures, but officers recorded only 3.7m offences of any kind.

In addition, as the police inspectorate discovered, the police often wrongly classify crimes as antisocial behaviour, thereby giving the impression that crime is falling. This is not the only evidence of the police fudging the statistics. Rodger Patrick, a former senior police officer, gave evidence to the Commons home affairs committee about several police malpractices, including "cuffing", a slang term derived from the magician's practice of making objects disappear up the cuff of his shirt sleeve. It subsequently emerged that crimes as serious as rape were not being properly classified as crimes. Other stories are circulating of officers treating thefts of mobile phones as cases of lost property.

A common response to the claim that prison cuts crime is to argue that the prison population has been reduced in some countries while crime has fallen. Germany and Holland are cited as examples, and Eurostat figures show that in Germany there was a prison population of 73,200 in 2008 and 6.1m crimes. In 2010 (the latest figures) the prison population was 70,100 and crime was down to 5.9m. Ergo, locking up criminals does not reduce crime.

However, we can go back a little further to 2001, when Germany also had a low prison population of 70,200. Crime in 2001 was 6.3m. It then increased to 6.6m in 2004. What did the Germans do? As crime increased, they incarcerated more offenders and the prison population rose by 13% to more than 79,000 in 2005. Crime subsequently fell. Perhaps some criminals got the message. The trend in Holland was similar, except that the Dutch increased their prison population by 30% between 2001 and 2005 in response to increasing crime.

The government deserves some credit for keeping crime down, but why is it ashamed to give the real reason? Locking up criminals works.

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