

Public Fear of Crime Exaggerated – Or is it? asks Norman Dennis

The Government has blamed tabloids for stirring up public fear of crime. Norman Dennis shows that public fears are based on their real day-to-day experiences.

Throughout the 1970s, 1980s and into the early 1990s, the consensual opinion of the conforming social-affairs intelligentsia in education, politics and the media was that the popular view, that crime was increasing, was an illusion. The unenlightened public and the popular press were mocked for reacting not to a real situation, but to the ‘images of deviance’ that ‘respectable’ people perennially conjure up out of their irrational fears.¹

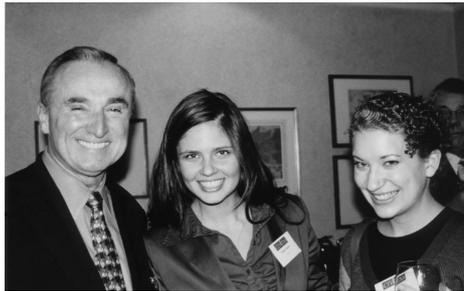
If there were no problem of crime, then there was no need to consider how to solve it. From the 1960s, therefore, not only was the cultural and institutional infrastructure of law and order decaying; the conforming social-affairs intelligentsia was adamant that no one should so much as acknowledge that any decay was taking place.

At least in part this was because the academic, political and media intelligentsia lived in residential areas that were affected far less by the growth in crime than were ‘the communities of our dreadful estates’. They could complacently indulge their fantasies about crime being prefigurative revolution or the freelance redistribution of income and wealth from the rich to the poor.

Human beings do appear to be programmed to be alert to threats. In most areas of life, the saliency given to threats is praised as a highly functional trait, and incorporated into public policy as ‘the precautionary principle’. In 1999, 32 per cent of the British Crime Survey’s respondents said that it was ‘very likely’ that something would be stolen from their car in the following twelve months. Twenty-nine per cent said they expected to have their car stolen in the next year. The Home Office document reporting these findings in 2000 said that although not as high a proportion as 29 per cent would have their car stolen, it was sensible to overestimate risks, and in particular instances individuals faced real risks that were higher than the average real risks.²

But then the theory of the ‘disproportionate fear of crime’ began to appear in official statements. Crime was being conquered by the government and the police. The public was simply being backward in not recognising this. According to the Home Office’s latest volume on police-recorded crime and the findings of the British Crime Survey, Crime in England and Wales 2002/2003, about twice the proportion of over-16s who read the national tabloids as those who read the national broadsheets are very worried about being mugged. Worry about crime ‘is associated with’ newspaper readership.³

But worry about crime is also ‘associated with’ the real facts. In the four years 1999/2000 to 2002/2003, there were 18,563 robberies in Lambeth. There were 1,040 robberies in Richmond.⁴ One wonders how many Guardian readers in Lambeth are protected from the illusion that their locality is unsafe, and how many readers of the Daily Mail in Richmond cower at home rather than venture out onto the main shopping streets of the town. One also wonders how many of the Home Office officials who wrote and approved the statement are Guardian readers in places like Richmond and how many Daily Mail readers in places like Lambeth. *Continued on page 3 >*



WILLIAM BRATTON, POLICE CHIEF OF LOS ANGELES, WITH NADIA MARTIN AND JULIA MAGNET OF CIVITAS AT THE CIVITAS/MIND THE GAP SEMINAR AT THE ATHENAEUM

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- Data Watch: What are the Facts on International Crime Levels?

Letter from the Director



DAVID GREEN IS DIRECTOR OF CIVITAS

“One of the most effective weapons for closing down debate today is the false accusation of racism.”

This is the first of a regular series of newsletters intended to keep members and friends up to date with our activities. We were officially launched just over three years ago in July 2000 and I would like to begin by thanking everyone who has helped to make our work possible.

We are often pressed to say whether we are ‘right wing’ or ‘left wing’, but few labels are more misleading and we have strongly resisted simplistic pigeon-holing. Civitas supporters have turned out to be people with a bit of a defiant streak who insist on their freedom to contribute to public debate without fear or favour, and who can see through the false contrasts that lie in wait of the unwary. Reforming the NHS to increase choice and professionalism whilst retaining access for all is not a sign of an ‘uncaring’ attitude; it is the only way to make a reality of the ideal of health care for everyone. Wanting an effective policy to control crime is not proof of a vengeful disposition, but of a concern for justice in the interests of all. And pointing out that children are best raised by both their biological parents is not scapegoating lone parents, but being open to persuasion by the evidence of what is best for children and being capable of distinguishing between enduring truth and unsupported prejudice.

One of the most effective weapons for closing down debate today is the false accusation of racism. We have published a critique of the Macpherson report and its misguided invention of ‘institutional racism’. We have pointed out that anti-discrimination laws which impose quotas will heighten, not diminish, racial identity, contrary to the liberal ideal of judging people by their personal qualities, not their outward appearance. Wanting to control immigration so that people with special skills can easily come here whilst also preventing mass immigration is not a disguise for racism, but a reasoned recognition that we live on an overcrowded island.

We take each issue on its merits and through our studies we try to assist other liberal-minded people also looking for objective truth. Wherever possible we seek out the undisputed facts in the hope of encouraging a new consensus on controversial questions.

The typical friend of Civitas will not be told that certain issues are untouchable. A free society can only flourish if we learn from each other through fearless public discussion, conducted in a spirit of openness to contradiction and guided by a strong sense that we are all the custodians of the best in our cultural heritage.

Thank you for your steadfast support.

David Green

<i>Civitas Review</i> Nadia Martin, Editor	Prof David Conway, Senior Fellow Julia Magnet, Senior Fellow	<i>Civitas Trustees</i> The Hon. Justin Shaw (Chairman)
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	Obi Nwodu, Administrative Assistant	Sir Peter Walters

< Continued from front page.

In a statement extraordinary in the enormity of its compressed misrepresentation of the facts, one of the Home Office's statistical bulletins commented in January 2003 that 'the risk of being a victim of crime remains (*sic*) historically (*sic*) low (*sic*), around the same as the first BCS in 1982'.⁵

The same phrase was used by authors who contributed in July 2003 to the Home Office's main annual volume on crime statistics. The fact that crime is 'still low' and that it 'remains historically low' is demonstrated by an incongruous reference to the very high levels of a very recent year, 1995. 'The risk of becoming a victim of crime remains at an historic low (around 27 per cent) according to the BCS, one-third lower than the risk in 1995 (40 per cent).'⁷

A White Paper in March 2003 expressed the same ideas – that crime is low, that it is historically low, and that therefore the 'real' problem is the public's irrational fear of crime rather than crime itself. The White Paper said or implied that many people mistakenly believe that the level of crime is high. The government's *non sequitur* is that if crime has *declined in recent years*, then it must in some sense have now reached an *historically* low level. 'Since 1997 overall crime has dropped by over a quarter and some crimes, such as burglary and vehicle theft, by a third or more. Despite this many people perceive that levels of crime are high.'⁶

But, first, in historical terms the level of crime did remain high. If we take the police-recorded crime figures only up to 1998 (from which time changes in recording rules have allowed commentators to claim that recorded rises in crime do not reflect real rises) and go no further back than 1955 (when crime numbers first began to rise rapidly): there were 462,300 crimes in England and Wales in 1955; 1,243,500 in 1965; 2,105,600 in 1975; 3,426,400 in 1985; 5,100,200 in 1995; and, using the old counting rules, 4,481,800 in 1998/1999. (The recorded figure for 2002/2003 was 5,899,400.)

The British Crime Survey gave a total of 11 million criminal incidents in 1981. Its figure was 12.3 million in the year covered by its 2002/2003 interviews. It requires a certain boldness of the imagination to cast the comparison of 1981 and 2003 as a 'small' percentage difference in the rate of victimisation, and thus to present 11 million criminal incidents and 12.3 million criminal incidents – an extra 1.3 million criminal incidents – as being 'around the same'. Secondly, a probably substantial contribution to the reduction in the bulk crimes of

burglary and vehicle crime was that householders and car owners had made it more difficult for criminals to break into their homes and cars. It would be reasonable for them not to feel that there was less *criminality* just because they had foiled the car thief and burglar. They had to remain more on the alert and take more precautions against the criminal than in the past. Thus, the feeling that the threat of crime was still rising, was

quite consistent with a sense of there being more crime, even though through their own trouble, inconvenience and vigilance the number of crimes was falling.

Thirdly, robbery continued its sharp rise right throughout the late 1990s and an even sharper rise in the early 2000s. In the absence of an effective culture of law-abidingness, the number of robberies depends upon the police's control of the street; there is little that the ordinary citizen can do. Only when effective police measures were at last undertaken did the robbery figures decline. A Street Crime

Initiative to reduce robberies of personal property and snatch thefts commenced in London in February 2002 and was extended to nine other police force areas in April 2002. The number of police-recorded robberies was cut back by 14%, based on police recorded figures, as used by the Home Office.⁷ Even so, this reduction of 14% did no more than bring the number of robberies back to the very high numbers they had reached two or three years before. Moreover, while the detection rates for robberies increased by two percentage points in the ten areas of the Street Crime Initiative, in the remaining police forces of England and Wales the detection rate fell by three percentage points.

Fourthly, the British Crime Survey took no account of growth in the number of crimes committed against people under the age of 16, or against businesses (e.g. shoplifting) or public sector establishments. It did not include any growth in fraud, or sexual offences. It did not include any growth in so-called 'victimless' crimes; in particular, the rapidly growing number of drug offences.⁸

In spite of these obvious weaknesses of the British Crime Survey as a measure of the growth of overall crime, it is used by the Home Office to make the case not only that that overall crime has come down since its peak in the middle of the 1990s (which is true), but that the key date is 1997, and that so far as crime is concerned in 2003, we can all put away our tabloids and proclaim with Candide that all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds.



GEORGE KELLING, AUTHOR OF *BROKEN WINDOWS*, SPEAKING AT CIVITAS

Notes

¹ Cohen, S., *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, London: Macgibbon and Kee, 1972. Cohen, S. and Young, J., *The Manufacture of News deviance, social problems and the mass media*, London: Constable, 1973. Cohen, S. (ed.), *Images of Deviance*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976. Pearson, P., *Hooligan: A history of respectable fears*, London: Macmillan, 1983.

² Kershaw, C., Bud, T., Kinshott, G., Mattinson, J., Mayhew, P. and Myhill, A., *The 2000 British Crime Survey England and Wales*, London: Home Office, October 2000.

³ Simmons, J. and Dodd, T., *Crime in England and Wales 2002/2003*, HOSB 07/03, London: Home Office, July 2003, p.134.

⁴ <http://www.met.police.uk/crimestatistics/index.htm>

⁵ Povey, D., Ellis, C. and Nicholas, S., *Crime in England and Wales: quarterly update 12 months to September 2002*, HOSB, 02/03, London: Home Office, January 2003. Emphasis added.

⁶ Home Office, *Respect and Responsibility: taking a stand against anti-social behaviour*, Cm 5778, London: TSO, March 2003, p.7.

⁷ Simmons, J. and Dodd, T., *Crime in England and Wales 2002/2003*, HOSB 07/03, London: Home Office, July 2003, p.82.

⁸ Kershaw, C., Chivite-Matthews, N., Thomas, C. and Aust, R., *The 2001 British Crime Survey: first results England and Wales*, London: Home Office, October 2001.

Health

NHS: Is the Extra Money Working?

The Government's NHS Plan of July 2000 acknowledged that the NHS had been 'left with insufficient capacity to

provide the services the public expect', and pledged extra cash.

Subsequently in his Spring Budget 2002, Gordon Brown promised to get us to European levels of funding and

announced a 7.4% (real terms) per year increase in public spending on the NHS between 2002-03 and 2007-08. This extra money is accompanied by structural and practice reforms as well as performance targets. Our aim is objectively to assess whether the money is making a difference. While some progress is being made, there is also real concern from the Commission for Health Improvement (CHI),



healthcare professionals, and patients' groups, not to mention many in the Government, that much of the increased expenditure is having little impact. CHI Chairman, Dame Deirdre Hine has said: 'We do not reach a conclusion that everything is rosy in the NHS, but nor do we conclude that it is generally failing'. However, CHI also admits 'that some parts of the NHS are not improving and may be getting worse'.

NICE or NASTY: Has NICE Eliminated the 'Postcode Lottery' in the NHS?

Published in September 2003, the report considers the effect of the National Institute of Clinical Excellence (NICE). Set up in April 1999, NICE produces guidance based on relevant evidence of clinical and cost effectiveness in order to promote the faster uptake of new technologies, effective use of NHS resources, and equitable access to treatments of proven clinical

and cost effectiveness. We considered a number of the NICE technology appraisals to establish whether or not it succeeds in ending the 'lottery of care'. NICE guidance includes an estimate of the expenditure required by the NHS to ensure the technology is being used to the recommended extent. By comparing the actual expenditure to this estimate, we obtain a picture of whether the usage of a particular treatment is appropriate. By examining how rapidly this process occurs we can see whether NICE is succeeding in its aim of promoting rapid uptake of new technologies. The Civitas study found a patchy record at best and at worst no apparent effect at all. Expenditure still has some way to go to reach the levels recommended by NICE. The data also reveal serious and widening geographical inequities.

Family Studies

The Art of Loving Well

During the autumn term we have been promoting a new curriculum resource in UK secondary schools in association with Family Education Trust. *The Art of Loving Well* is a 340-page anthology, developed by the University of Boston to help young people learn responsible social and sexual values through good literature.

To facilitate its use in the UK, we have prepared an accompanying set of teachers' notes according to the Personal Social and Health Education (PSHE) guidelines. Around 150 schools have requested inspection copies, and we have received a number of bulk orders.

Marriage on MARS

Nadia Martin has studied the grants awarded by the Lord Chancellor's Department under the government's Marriage and Relationships Support (MARS) programme. MARS was intended to make a contribution towards the institution of marriage, in the light of the Green Paper *Supporting Families* which acknowledged the advantages of the married state. Nadia Martin's analysis of the grants, published as a study called *Marriage on MARS*, showed that, while some of the grants have gone to organisations which genuinely support marriage, others have gone to groups which do not include marriage as part of their agenda, such as gay and lesbian groups, and groups which teach people how to defend their interests in the

break-up of a relationship. Given the huge costs of marital breakdown to the community, and the very small amount allocated to marriage support, the report argued that, if these groups receive government funding, it should come from a different budget.

The Marriage Penalty

Rebecca O'Neill has been working on a comparison of the treatment of marriage, *vis-a-vis* other types of relationship, in the tax and benefit systems of France, Germany and the UK. This has resulted in a soon-to-be-published factsheet called *The Marriage Penalty: A European Comparison* which reveals that, whilst all regimes impose a marriage penalty, it bites at different points on the income scale. The British system favours low or irregular earners,

especially single parents, whilst the other two systems are more favourable to middle-income groups. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, France and Germany both have lower levels of single-parenthood.

Does Marriage Matter?

Rebecca O'Neill has adapted for the British market a publication of the Institute of American Values which examines the social science findings on the advantages of marriage. Called *Does Marriage Matter?* this little booklet will be distributed to older students and young adults, through schools, doctors' surgeries, student unions and other outlets.

Immigration

While large-scale net immigration has gone virtually unopposed by recent, successive British governments, Oxford University's David Coleman has researched the demographic impact of such massive movements of people. In his work, he charts the rapid growth of net immigration, which was virtually non-existent prior to 1982 (except for post-WWII), through the Conservative and Labour government policies on immigration, that have led to particularly large increases in asylum seeking, reaching 100,000 per year in the 1980s and 'making Britain the preferred asylum destination of Europe'.

Immigration proponents claim that migrants bring skills, provide young workers for an ageing British population and enhance the level of economic activity.

Coleman states that although 'Few doubt the advantages to employers, and probably to the economy, of the ability to

recruit highly skilled workers to fill job vacancies... most immigrants are not workers'. In measuring workforce distribution by industry on a national scale, he finds that no sector is dependent on foreign workers, except for possibly medicine, though immigrants have been statistically over-represented in certain occupations.

Coleman convincingly argues that immigrants also age. In order to meet the pension, healthcare and other needs in the future through a younger immigrant population, Britain will need to rely on 'replacement migration' rates at clearly unsustainable levels, with low estimates of an additional 7.5 million immigrants necessary by the year 2050 and high estimates of an additional 60 million. Coleman explains: 'Population ageing is a consequence of low birth and death rates, not a failure of migration'.

Coleman finds that 'GDP per head is apparently

diminished as a consequence of immigration', based on calculations that show UK immigration to have contributed 0.31 percent in population growth and only 0.25 per cent in net GDP growth in 2000. Furthermore, these calculations assume that the 'cost' of education, crime, prisons and public disorder is the same for immigrants. But, since the 1960s, for example, schools with higher immigrant populations have received additional grants to help cope with language difficulties.

Yet the Home Office chooses to ignore these figures in calculating the 'benefits' of net immigration.

All quotations are from David Coleman's chapter, 'Demographic, Economic and Social Consequences of UK Migration' in the Civitas/Stockholm Network publication *Work in Progress*.



LUNCHTIME DISCUSSION AT CIVITAS

Stockholm Network

From 2001 to 2003, Civitas was host to the Stockholm Network, Europe's only dedicated network of market-oriented think tanks.

The Network exists to help think tanks across Europe know more about one another's activities and co-operate on joint events, publications and research projects. We have links with over 100 policy research institutions across the EU and beyond, covering a range of policy areas. Our topics are chosen to have a pan-European appeal and to be open to comparative analysis and debate. Events have focused on welfare-to-work, healthcare reform, trade barriers, the underground economy and the European constitution.

Our most recent conference took place in Stockholm on 29 October in association with the leading Swedish think

tank, Timbro, and Britain's centre-left think tank, the IPPR. Delegates from thirteen countries, drawn from the media, politics, business and academia, examined the roles of markets and social solidarity in creating a more consumer-focused healthcare system in Europe. While there was cross-spectrum agreement that 'choice' is the key to handling the upward pressures on European healthcare systems – not least demographic changes, rising medical costs, and more articulate, demanding consumers – defining choice varied. Is choice a right and a necessary good or only valuable as a means of improving efficiency? And at what stage in a healthcare system should choice be employed?

At the conference, Ben Irvine of Civitas presented the findings of the Health

Policy Consensus Group as a model for reforms designed to combine competition, choice and access for all.

For more information on the Stockholm Network, including a copy of the Stockholm conference publication, visit: www.stockholm-network.org or email the Director, Helen Disney: helen@stockholm-network.org.



"...reforms designed to combine competition, choice and access for all."

Past Events

28–30 January 2003 James Q Wilson, criminologist and policy analyst, visited Civitas for a series of discussions on topics such as punishment and crime; his book, *The Marriage Problem*; and Islam and the West.



EVENING LECTURE AND RECEPTION WITH GEORGE KELLING



06 May 2003 Prasanna Srinivasan, director of BEA India, led a lunchtime discussion in support of free trade for developing countries. He offered a convincing account of how European protectionism, particularly through the CAP, hurts the poor in developing countries like India.

7 May 2003 Grace-Marie Turner, president of the Galen Institute, spoke at a lunchtime discussion on US Health Care. While advocating the benefits of consumer choice and fast access to advanced treatment and new medical technologies offered by the US system, Turner demanded that innovations in the market and tax rebates be implemented to solve the problem of the millions of Americans currently uninsured.

30 May 2003 Michael Jacobs, general secretary of the Fabian Society, argued that the future for Britain is on the left. He focused on the value of having a centre-left approach to current issues, specifically on the environment, crime and transport.

23 June 2003 Nicholas Bromley, health research director of the Centre for Reform, and David Green of Civitas, offered contrasting arguments for achieving choice in health care.

24 June 2003 David Heathcoat-Amory MP, former Minister for Europe and member of the Convention on the Future of Europe, recounted his experience for the past 15 months of resisting the Convention's integrationist attitude and hostility towards any discussion of the devolution of power. He then expressed what the new constitutional changes would mean for Britain. Moreover, calling for a referendum, like most of the other EU states, is necessary to ratify such constitutional change. Heathcoat-Amory concluded his remarks by stating the legal position of the UK should the British people vote against the new constitution: Britain will not be ejected from the EU but will instead be able to decide the precise nature of its role within the EU and its relationships with other member states. In this scenario, Britain will be speaking from a position of strength.

27 June 2003 Patrick Fagan, research fellow in family and cultural issues at the Washington-based Heritage Foundation, explained that the evidence is there: marriage and families benefit society. In the United States, even centre-left think tanks are pro-marriage. Fagan stated that if the government is on your side, good; if not, ignore it and go and build your family.

2 July 2003 George Kelling, senior fellow of Manhattan Institute, spoke at an evening lecture entitled, 'Policing in London and New York: Which strategy has worked best?' Drawing largely on his publication with James Q. Wilson, 'Broken Windows', Kelling described the most effective steps taken in New York: cracking down on small offences, such as fare dodging on the subway, led to criminals who were engaged in much more serious violations of the law. High profile cases are a lot more interesting to policemen, but to solve those cases, the less-glamorous approach proves far more effective.



4 July 2003 Mark Leonard, director of the Foreign Policy Centre, and Stephen

Pollard of Civitas, debated whether there should be a referendum on the new European Constitution. Leonard argued strongly against, believing a referendum is appropriate in two cases only: when significant change in decision-making is proposed and

is recognised as such; and when the public indicates convincingly that it cares enough about the issue to go out and vote. Pollard ran through a list of the new political issues, not constitutional ones, covered in the new constitution that must be open to debate and not included in a document that binds all future British Acts of Parliament (the primacy of EU law, Article 10 of the new constitution). He concluded that the only reason the Government opposes a referendum is its fear that it will not win. Matthew Bishop of *The Economist* chaired the event and stressed that Europe needs to have a discussion about democracy to get people who are citizens of nations to support and embrace Europe.

16 July 2003 Roger Scruton, professor of philosophy at Birkbeck College, London, addressed the issue of whether the liberal democratic tradition can successfully co-exist with other, less tolerant ideologies, including Islamic fundamentalism.



STEPHEN POLLARD, MATTHEW BISHOP AND MARK LEONARD

Government statisticians fall short of sound professional standards

According to the Government, the latest international research shows that education standards in the UK compare favourably with other European countries. But, speaking at a Civitas seminar, Professor Sig Prais showed how the most recent study cannot be relied on. He warned that the behaviour of British Government statisticians fell far short of sound professional standards.

The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) was undertaken by the OECD in 2000 to compare the educational attainments of 15-year-olds in thirty-two countries. Results are quite encouraging for British students: our 15-year-olds came eighth in what the study calls 'mathematical literacy', seventh in 'reading literacy', and fourth in 'scientific literacy'. The problem, according to Professor Prais, is that 'serious doubts attach both to the designed objectives of the PISA survey and to the way it was carried out'.

First, in a break from traditional methods of evaluation, the study questions were deliberately *not* related to the school curriculum. Rather they were to 'real-life' situations – such as the growth of lichen or the breathing cycles of seals, leading inevitably to significant misunderstandings across the socially disparate countries.

Second, the chosen age of 15+ is problematic because in some countries – such as Germany and Switzerland – 'some pupils have left school and are in employment or unemployment, and others are in part-time vocational colleges and difficult to reach in a sample survey'.

Third, the selection of a specific *year of birth* rather than sampling a specific *school grade* failed to make allowance for the continental practice of staggering school entry to avoid discriminating against younger, slower-maturing pupils.

Fourth, the UK response rate was particularly low. A minimum response rate of 85% was required, but in the UK for schools initially selected it was only 61%. Within those schools only about 80% of pupils responded producing a response rate of 48% of pupils within the original representative sample. Those who did not participate must be suspected of being in the lower attaining groups of the population. To compare these results with countries such as Switzerland, France and Germany, where something like 90% of the original representative sample participated, runs the danger of being seriously misleading.

The attitude of the British Government's statisticians compares badly with the approach taken in Germany, where the cities of Berlin and Hamburg also achieved a low response rate of 70%. However, German

statisticians were so anxious not to overstate the achievement of German schools that they left the two cities out. The attitude of statisticians in the DFES was quite the opposite. They went out of their way to give the impression that the UK response rate was comparable, thus significantly exaggerating the real attainments of British schools.

All quotations are from Prof. Sig Prais's 'Cautions on OECD's Recent Educational Survey (PISA)' in the *Oxford Review of Education*, Vol. 29, No. 2, 2003.

CIVITAS is an independent research institute. CIVITAS is independent of political parties and accepts no government funding. It relies entirely on private donations to fund its work.

The aim of CIVITAS is to deepen public understanding of the legal, institutional and moral framework that makes a free and democratic society possible. Our object is to revive civil society, that network of voluntary social institutions, charities, mutual aid organisations and other collective bodies that lie between the individual and the state. We believe that in social affairs the alternatives to government are not exhausted by commercial services alone.

We have established a reputation for work on social issues that transcends party boundaries. Our authors examine, analyse and report on views about the best way forward on particular issues. The object is to raise the quality of informed debate. For further information regarding CIVITAS and to find out how to become a member, please contact our membership department at info@civitas.org.uk or call +44 (0)20 7401 5470.


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Drugs: A Hard or Soft Approach?

Ben Mitchell argues that drugs should not be legalised.

In the UK, the social and economic costs of drug misuse account for between £10 billion and £18 billion a year. Around 250,000 'problematic drug users' contribute to 99% of these costs.¹ These addicts spend around £16,500 a year each to feed their habits, with most of this coming from the proceeds of crime.² Hard drug users, who indulge in heroin, crack cocaine and powder cocaine, are responsible for 50% of all crimes.³

On the one side, there are proponents of 'harm reduction'. In the case of heroin, they want to see persistent users prescribed heroin under the NHS.

Opponents compare the Dutch and Swedish approach to drugs over the last 25 years, and point out that drug use in the Netherlands, which has adopted a policy of 'harm reduction', has seen use of cannabis amongst the young more than double, with use of ecstasy and cocaine by 15-16 year olds rising significantly.⁴

By contrast, in Sweden, the goal has been to create a 'drugs free society,' with everyone from the police to schools working towards such a strategy. As a result, overall lifetime prevalence of drug abuse, amongst 15-16 year-olds, is 8% in Sweden, compared to 29% in the Netherlands. In 1998, only 496kg of cannabis were seized in Sweden, compared to 118,122kg in the Netherlands, now described as 'the drugs capital of Western Europe'.⁵ This is because in Sweden drug use is seen as inimical to a civilised, tolerant society, whereas in the Netherlands, drugs have been accepted as a 'way of life' and have contributed hugely to crime.

The UK's approach to drugs is deeply flawed, with the government sending out confusing and misleading messages. Cannabis has been downgraded from a class B to class C drug; yet many people widely believe that cannabis has been decriminalised.

The 'Lambeth Experiment', which led the way to reclassification, caused an explosion in the number of drug dealers preying upon the area.⁶ The experiment has to all intents and purposes 'allowed' people to smoke cannabis publicly. But, the moral and ethical question still remains: is it acceptable to tolerate something which is proven to damage both the health and judgement of individuals, and can also affect relationships with families, friends and the wider society?

There are now several experiments being conducted across Europe in an effort to contain heroin addiction. In Switzerland, since 1994, 1,000 of the country's 33,000 heroin addicts have been prescribed pure heroin. The aim is to stabilise the health of addicts and prevent them from using heroin in public, thus taking their habit away from the black market.

Swiss officials claim that the experiment is working because crime is down. However, addicts are now becoming dependent on prescription heroin and hopes of weaning them off the substance have quickly faded.⁷

The Police Federation disputes that legalisation would cut crime. 'This assumes that the powerful international drug cartels would simply fade away into the night. More likely scenarios are that they would fight to maintain their lucrative street trading.'⁸

Notes

¹ The Government Reply to the Third Report from the Home Affairs Committee Session 2001-02: *The Government's Drug Policy: Is It Working?*, p.5

² Home Affairs Third Report: *The Government's Drug Policy: Is it Working?, Illegal Drugs, Drugs-related property crime*, no.36

³ The Government Reply to the Third Report from the Home Affairs Committee Session 2001-02: *The Government's Drug Policy: Is It Working?*, p.5

⁴ Home Affairs Select Committee Report: *The Government's Drug Policy: Is it Working?*, Memoranda of Evidence – no.16 (submitted by the Criminal Justice Association)

⁵ *Risk of Legalising Cannabis Underestimated: A Comparison of Dutch and Swedish Drug Policy*, Criminal Justice Association, February 2002

⁶ 'The Dealers Think They're Untouchable Now', *The Observer*, 24 February 2002

and 'London's Drug Crime Hotspots Revealed', *Evening Standard*, 28 May 2003

⁷ 'Better Ways', *The Economist*, 26 July 2001.

⁸ Quoted in Home Affairs Select Committee Third Report: *The Government's Drugs Policy: Is it Working?*, no.60

Data Watch

In October 2003 the Government published some international comparisons which drew on the International Crime Victims Survey, comprising 17 industrialised countries. It admits that England and Wales had 'well above average' levels of both property and contact crime.

How England and Wales Fared:		
The Worst Record in:	The Statistics Say:	As Compared to:
Crime per head of population	54.5 crimes per 100 inhabitants	An average of 35.2 crimes per 100 inhabitants in the 17 countries
Number of 'very serious' offences	18 per 100 inhabitants	16 per 100 inhabitants in Australia which held the second worst record
Second Worst Record in:		
Risk of Being a Victim	26.4% were victims of crime	The worst record was in Australia, where 30% were victims of crime
Number of contact crimes (robbery, sexual assault, and assault with force)	3.6% of those surveyed were victims	In Australia 4.1% (the worst record) In the USA 1.9% and in Japan 0.4%
ALL in spite of installing MORE burglar alarms than any other population	34% of the population had installed alarms	26% of Australians and 24% of Americans had installed them

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