What's Happening to Crime in the UK?

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Contents

CRIME TRENDS

UK crime statistics paint a mixed picture. Crime, as measured by the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW), has continued to fall over the last 20 years. There has been a long-term decline in the volume of crime, with fewer crimes today in total than in 1995, when crime reached its peak (see figure 1).[1]

Figure 1: Crime in England and Wales, December 1981–March 2018

Source: ONS, Crime in England and Wales, 2017
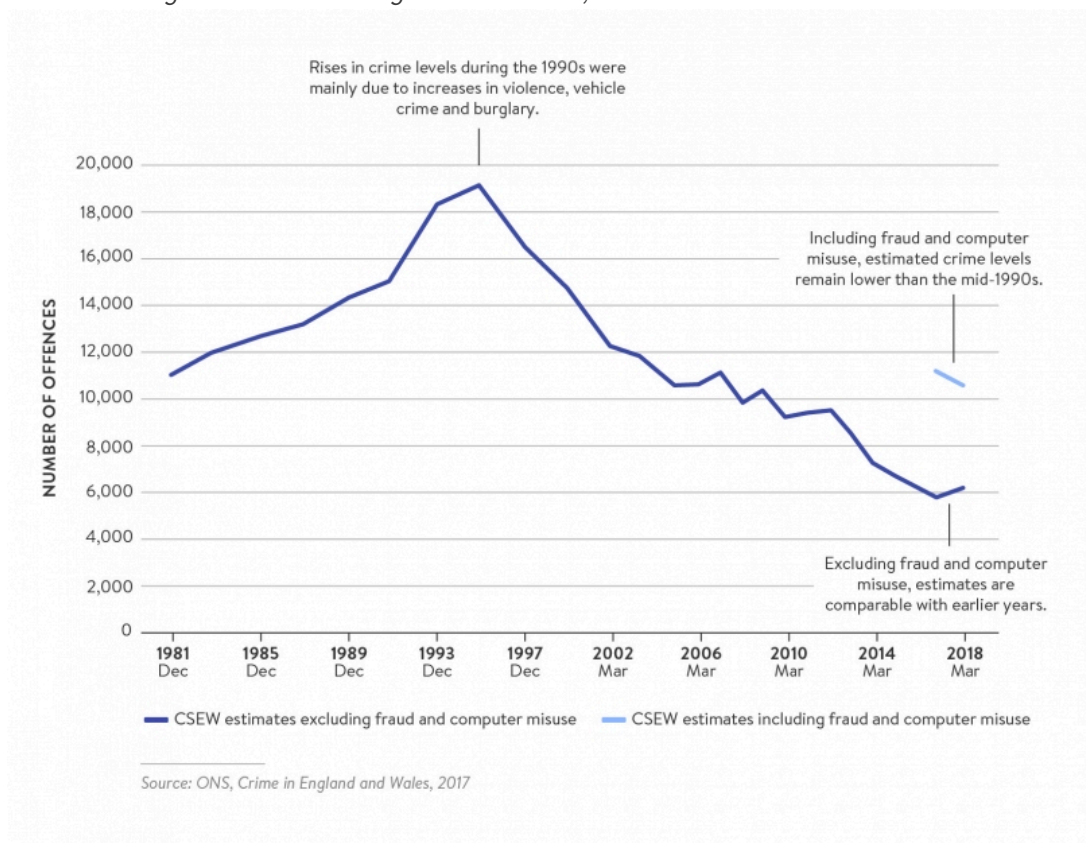
There are three caveats here. One is that the CSEW did not previously pick up fraud and computer-misuse offences. These are now included, and the overall level of crime once those have been included is represented by the light blue line on the far right of figure 1. This shows that crime has fallen significantly since 1995, but not by as much as previously assumed, and that a considerable amount has shifted online.

1 ONS, Crime in England and Wales: year ending March 2018
https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/crimeinenglandandwales/yearendingmarch2018

The second caveat is that even if the total volume of crime has reduced, that does not necessarily mean that overall harm has reduced. This is because some crimes, such as serious violence and sexual offences, are more harmful than others. The evidence shows that if one assesses the harm caused by each offence, the biggest falls in crime have been among the less harmful offences.[2]

The third and most important caveat is that the pattern illustrated by the crime survey is not repeated for crimes recorded by the police, which have been increasing since 2014 (and which have increased by 11 per cent over the last year)[3]. These are the figures often quoted by newspapers and opposition politicians when referring to the British crime wave.

There is a fiercely contested debate about how much weight should be placed on recorded crime figures. According to the Office for National Statistics (ONS), much of the increase in recorded crime can be attributed to two key factors. Firstly, there have been significant improvements in recording made by the police, for example to violence without injury offences. Secondly, victims have increasingly come forward to report previously hidden offences like domestic and sexual abuse. In other words, increases in recorded crime may well point to successes rather than failures—and are not necessarily related to trends in actual criminality.

Yet the ONS also acknowledges that there is a subset of serious violent offences—homicide, gun crime, knife crime, robbery—that are less likely to be affected by reporting or recording changes. For example, knife crime is a generally well-recorded offence, corroborated by National Health Service (NHS) data on admissions for stabbings. Since it is highly concentrated (half of all knife crime occurs in London), it tends not to be well picked up by the crime survey. Similarly, homicides are generally well recorded and cannot, by definition, be captured by a survey. For these offences, police-
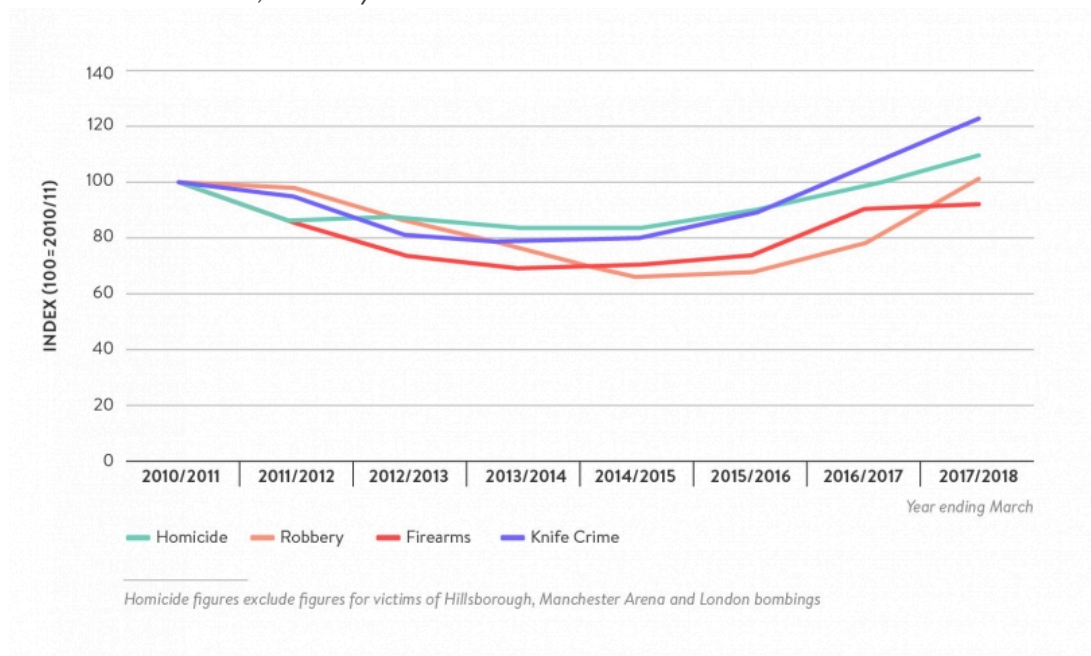
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2 For a good exploration of these issues, see Rick Muir, 'What's happening to crime: a guide for journalists and presidents', Oct 2017 http://www.police-foundation.org.uk/2017/10/whats-happening-to-crime-a-guide-for-journalists-and-presidents/

3 ONS, Crime in England and Wales: year ending March 2018 https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/crimeinenglandandwales/yearendingmarch2018

recorded data is a better barometer of what is happening to crime than the survey. All four offences have been surging since 2014 (see figure 2).

Figure 2: Indexed Long-Term Trends in Police-Recorded Homicide, Firearms Offences, Robbery and Knife

Homicide figures exclude figures for victims of Hillsborough, Manchester Arena and London bombings

While these offences make up a relatively small proportion of total crime, they are among the most harmful to society. They do, however, need to be put in context. Despite the recent increases, they are still below the peak in the early 2000s.

In summary, the total volume of crime has continued its steady downward trend, but the pattern of crime has changed. More of it is online and a greater proportion of crime is harmful—with a particularly worrying growth in serious violence, particularly in major urban areas: London, Greater Manchester, West Midlands and Merseyside.

DRIVERS OF SERIOUS VIOLENCE

Earlier in 2018, the UK Home Office published a Serious Violence Strategy *(https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/*

uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/698009/serious-violence-strategy.pdf) . The document was heavily criticised for the lack of substantive policy and resources pledged (the only new spending commitment was a pledge to introduce an £11 million Early Intervention Fund). It was also overshadowed by the leaking of a Home Office research paper *(https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/apr/08/police-cuts-likely-contributed-to-rise-in-violent-leaked-report-reveals#img-2)* , which appeared to undermine ministers' previous claims that police cuts had had no impact on levels of violence, stating that cuts were "unlikely to be the factor which triggered the shift in serious violence, but may be an underlying driver that has allowed the rise to continue". Despite these flaws, the Home Office strategy nonetheless contains a compelling analysis, identifying at least the key drivers of serious violence. These are summarised below.

Drugs and Profit

There is strong evidence that illicit drug markets can drive sudden shifts in serious violence. For example, in the United States, many academics believe the crack cocaine epidemic was a key factor in the sharp rise in homicide and robbery through the late 1980s and early 1990s.[4] Some drugs, like crack cocaine, have been linked to violence directly via their psychoactive effects. In other instances, drugs can drive up serious violence indirectly, either by fuelling robberies to service drug dependence or through violent competition between drug sellers, with the need to settle grievances in drug markets fuelling an escalation in retaliatory violence. In one UK study containing interviews with 80 convicted firearms offenders, over half of whom had also committed robbery, the authors concluded that "illegal drugs markets represent the single most important theme in relation to the use of illegal firearms – in effect a 'golden thread' that runs through all the interviews to some degree".[5]

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4 Cork, D. (1999). Examining space-time interaction in city-level homicide data: crack markets and the diffusion of guns among youth. Journal of Quantitative Criminology, 15(4), 379-406.

5 Hales, G., Lewis, C. and Silverstone, D. (2006). Gun Crime: The Market in and Use of Illegal Firearms: Home Office Research Study No. 289. Retrieved from: http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.624.8116&rep=rep1&type=pdf [accessed 26/02/2018]

According to the Home Office, there is good evidence that drugs and profit are a factor in the recent rise in serious violence in the UK. Between 2014–2015 and 2016–2017, homicides involving known illicit drug dealers and/or users, as either victims, suspects or both, increased from 206 to 247. At the same time, the number of homicides in which neither the victim nor the suspect was a drug user or dealer fell from 210 to 190.[6]

While the data shows that overall prevalence of illicit drug use in the UK remains stable, there have been important shifts in the drugs market that are likely to have contributed to the rise in serious violence:

- the emergence of new psychoactive substances like spice, which has been linked to serious violence in prisons and homeless communities;
- a significant increase in convictions of young people for class A drug production and possession with intent to supply (up by 77 per cent between 2012 and 2016);
- a rise in crack use since 2014, driven by increases in both supply and demand. For example, Colombia, the main source country for cocaine in the UK, has seen coca cultivation surge since 2013, according to a UN report.[7] In line with this, crack-cocaine purity in England rose from 36 per cent in 2013 to 71 per cent in 2016.

Drug markets may also help to explain the geography of the current increases in violence. One of the most striking findings about the rise in serious violence since 2014 is that it has not been limited to the main metropolitan areas. Indeed the five areas of the country where knife crime is currently rising fastest are Durham, Leicestershire, Cheshire, Humberside and Cambridgeshire.[8] These

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6 Home Office, Serious Violence Strategy, April 2018 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/698009/serious-violence-strategy.pdf
7 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2016). New UNODC report: Coca crops in Colombia increase over 50 per cent in one year. Retrieved from: https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/press/releases/2017/July/new-unodc-report_-cocacrops-in-colombia-increase-over-50-per-cent-in-one-year.html [accessed 26/02/2018]
8 Home Office, Police recorded crime, year ending March 2018, Table P5

patterns may be at least partly due to the phenomenon of county lines *(https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-44127068)* in which drug-selling gangs from the major urban areas, like London and Liverpool, possibly driven by excess supply, have sought to exploit children by using them to travel outside urban areas and take over local drugs markets in other towns and areas. Academic evidence shows that county lines drug-selling gangs are generally much more violent than the local dealers who had controlled the market previously.[9]

Effective Enforcement

There is good evidence that enforcement can play a vital role in tackling serious violence, though most academics agree that big shifts in crime trends tend to be driven by factors outside the police's control, such as drug markets, changes in technology and so on.

To date, most of the political debate has centred on the question of police numbers. Central government cuts to police revenue funding have led to a significant fall in officer numbers, down from 143,769 in 2009 to 122,404 at the end of 2018 (see figure 3).[10]

9 Coomber R. & Moyle, L. (2017). The changing shape of street-level heroin and crack supply in England: Commuting, holidaying and cuckooing drug dealers across 'County lines'. The British Journal of Criminology, doi: 10.1093/ bjc/ azx0681-20.

10 Home Office, Police Workforce, England and Wales, 31 March 2018 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/ attachment_data/file/726401/hosb1118-police-workforce.pdf

Figure 3: Number of Police Officers in England and Wales, September 2007–September 2017
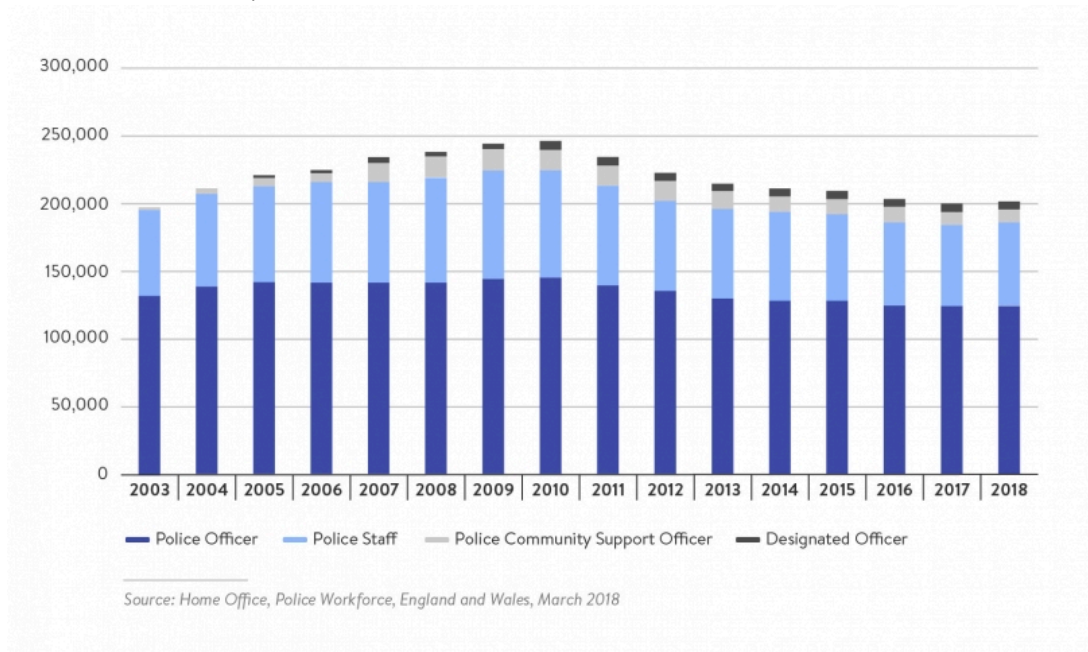
It is notable that the new UK home secretary has broken with his predecessors by explicitly acknowledging the link between police numbers and levels of crime.[11] However, the excessive focus on numbers has arguably come at the expense of a discussion of other, more significant factors relating to effective enforcement. For example, when it comes to deterrence, it is the certainty rather than the severity of punishment that counts. Thus the recent downward trend in arrests and charges (nationally, the proportion of offences that are charged or summonsed has fallen to 9 per cent) is likely to have weakened deterrence. In particular, as robbery offences have risen, the number of robbery charges has remained broadly flat, meaning the percentage of offences resulting in a charge has fallen (see figure 4).[12] Robbery also has a much higher rate of offences that result in no suspect being identified (57 per cent).

11 Home Secretary Police Federation Speech 2018 https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/home-secretary-police-federation-speech-2018

12 Home Office, Serious Violence Strategy, April 2018

Figure 4: Police-Recorded Robberies: Trends in Offences and Charges/
Summons, England and Wales

Source: Home Office, Serious Violence Strategy, April 2018
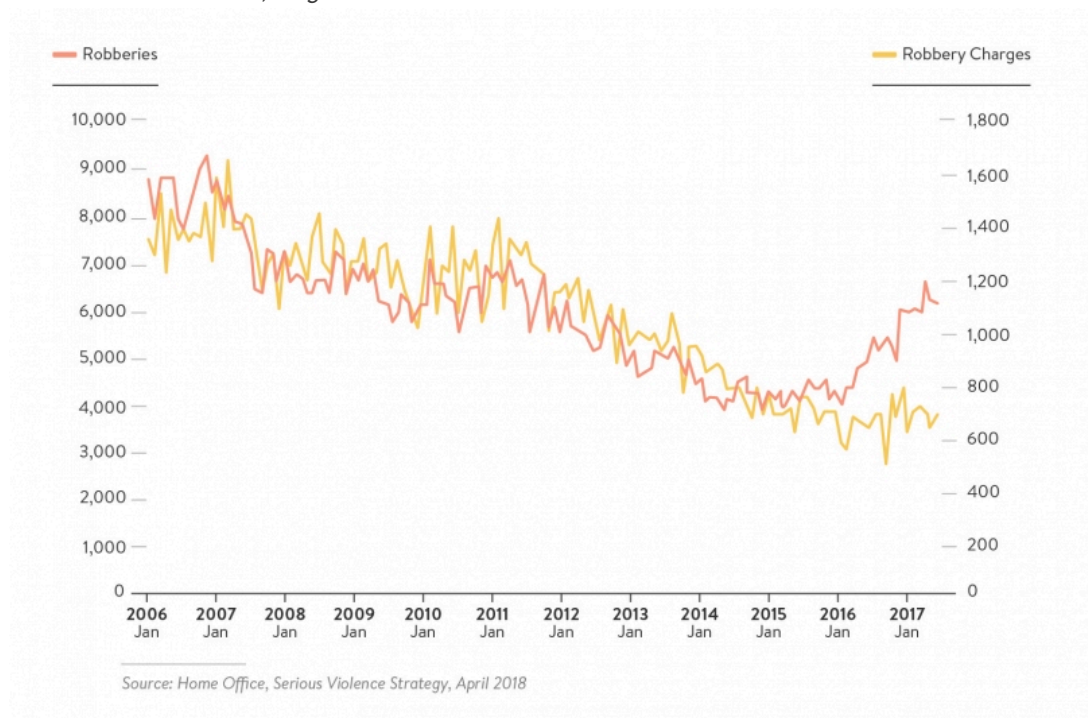
In addition to the above, some have questioned whether the reduction in the use of stop and search may be an explanatory factor in the recent upsurge in violence. Ministers (including the current prime minister) have disputed that there is a clear causal relationship, pointing to the fact that stops and searches started falling several years before the recent increase in violence and the fact that relatively few stops and searches appear to result in arrests for possession of an offensive weapon. Yet in many respects this is the wrong question. The point is not whether the fall in the use of stop and search has caused the increase in violence (highly unlikely), but whether it is undermining the police's ability to get a grip on the problem (much more likely). By definition, less use of stop and search reduces the certainty of punishment—the fewer stops and searches that take place, the less likely offenders are to be deterred from carrying offensive weapons, regardless of whether arrests follow.[13] Clearly there are broader issues about the

13 For an in-depth exploration of this issue, see Gavin Hales, 'Stop and search and knife crime: a small piece of the bigger picture', Police Foundation, Dec 2016 http://www.police-foundation.org.uk/2016/12/stop-and-search-and-knife-crime-revisited-a-small-piece-of-the-bigger-picture/

use of stop and search (including concerns of disproportionality and public confidence), but to deny that it forms part of the context of enforcement against serious violence is a mistake.

### An Increase in the Population of Those at Risk of Offending

Generally, an inverse relationship might be expected between trends in crime and the average age of offenders. That is, crime increases when the average age of the offending population falls, and crime falls when it goes up. Underlying this pattern is strong evidence that crime trends tend to be driven by a small proportion of highly prolific individuals whose criminal careers tend to decrease via a lengthy ageing-out process. For interpreting current trends, then, it is important to understand whether conditions have changed in some way that would explain a shift towards younger offenders. Although data on offenders' ages is limited, various data sources do indicate a shift in that direction.

In relation to robbery, as recorded offences increased between 2015–2016 and 2016–2017, the proportion of those arrested who were juveniles (aged 10–17) also increased (see figure 5).[14]This was due to a 6 per cent increase in the number of juveniles arrested for robbery in 2016–2017, alongside a decline in the number of adult robbery arrestees.

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14 Ibid.

Figure 5: Police-Recorded Robbery: Offences and Proportion of Those Arrested Aged 10–17, England and

Source: Police Foundation, Dec 2016
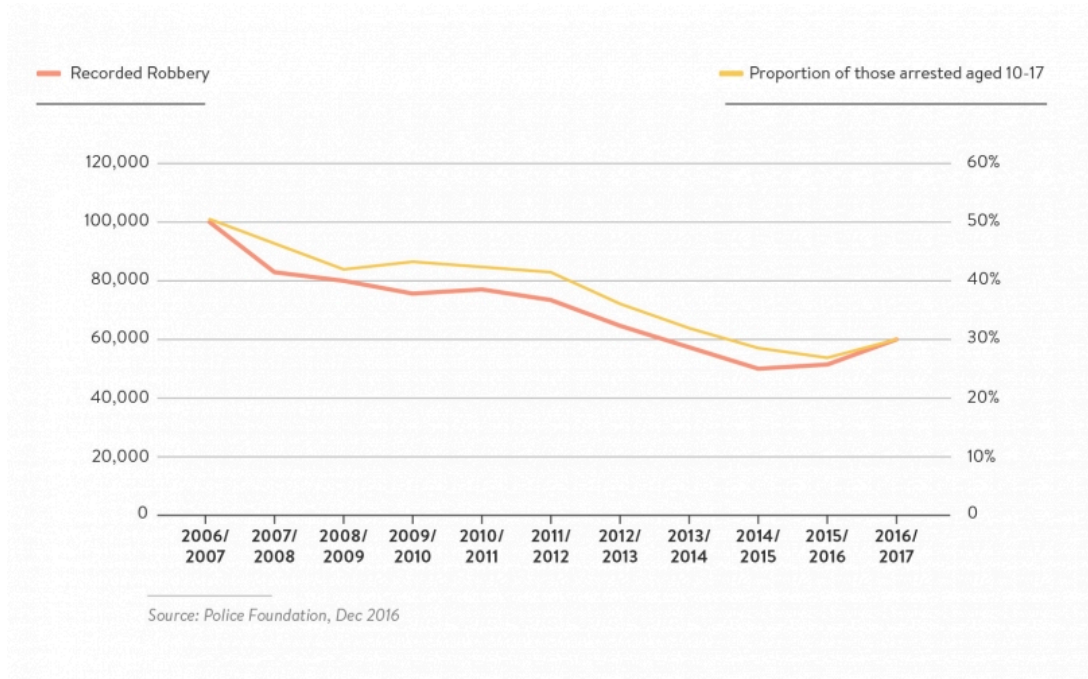
Alongside the shift in the age distribution, there has been an increase in the number of individuals who are most vulnerable. Data shows that numbers of children in care, children excluded from school and homeless adults have all risen since 2014. The evidence suggests that being in care and being excluded from school, in particular, are markers for increased risk of both victimisation and perpetration of violence. While this does not mean there is a causal link between increases in the most vulnerable and serious violence, these groups possess some of the factors that put them at higher risk of being exploited for offences such as drug-related violence. Indeed, the manipulation and exploitation of vulnerable young people by organised criminals further up the chain—whether to carry out robberies or deal in drugs—reveals a tragic irony: gangsters appear better able to identify the vulnerability of these children than many public services.

A particularly striking aspect of the rise in vulnerability is the growing evidence of overlap between offenders and victims, with a high proportion of perpetrators of violence having previously experienced some kind of trauma earlier in their lives. For example,

data from the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) shows that of the 306 suspects named in 134 MPS homicide investigations in 2017, 72 per cent had previously been victims of crime, and 26 per cent victims of knife crime.[15]

Opportunity

An influential strand of criminology states that crime is driven not only by individuals with a greater propensity for offending but also by factors that greatly enhance the opportunity to commit crime (often described as situational factors). One way in which opportunity for serious violence has changed globally in the last few years is due to social media. Just as the vast majority of individuals do not become involved with serious violence or carry weapons (less than 1 per cent of ten- to 29-year-olds, according to the Crime Survey for England and Wales), so the vast majority of social-media usage has nothing to do with serious violence. But a very small minority of use does, and while popularity of social media predates the rise in serious violence, growth in smartphones between 2011 and 2014 has transformed social-media accessibility and created an almost unlimited opportunity for rivals to antagonise each other, and for those taunts to be viewed by a much larger audience for a much longer time. This may have contributed to cycles of tit-for-tat violence.

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15 Home Office, Serious Violence Strategy, April 2018

THE RISING SALIENCE OF CRIME

One of the less remarked-on features of contemporary politics over the last decade has been the absence of crime and justice from big national policy debates. Crime barely featured in either the 2015 or 2017 UK general election campaign (though the May 2017 Manchester Arena bombing did briefly catapult the issue of police numbers onto the national policy agenda during the 2017 campaign). This is a far cry from the mid- to late 2000s, when crime and policing issues regularly led the news as well as local and national campaigns.

There are at least three explanations for this, which also help explain why there is now a revival in the public's interest.

Firstly, the concept of salience is a relative one: its importance depends in part on what else is going on. At the height of the Brexit debate in 2016, MORI reported that crime had fallen to its lowest salience score in its monthly issues tracker since 1991. Since then, a glance at the same tracker suggests law and order has been rising in importance (now higher than immigration), although it is not yet at the levels of 2008 and still way below issues like Brexit, the NHS and unemployment in terms of national salience (see figure 6).[16]

16 Ipsos Mori Issues Index, April 2018 https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2018-05/issues_index_april18_v1_internal_use_only.pdf

Figure 6: Issues Facing Britain, April 2018

Source: Ipsos Mori Issues Index, April 2018
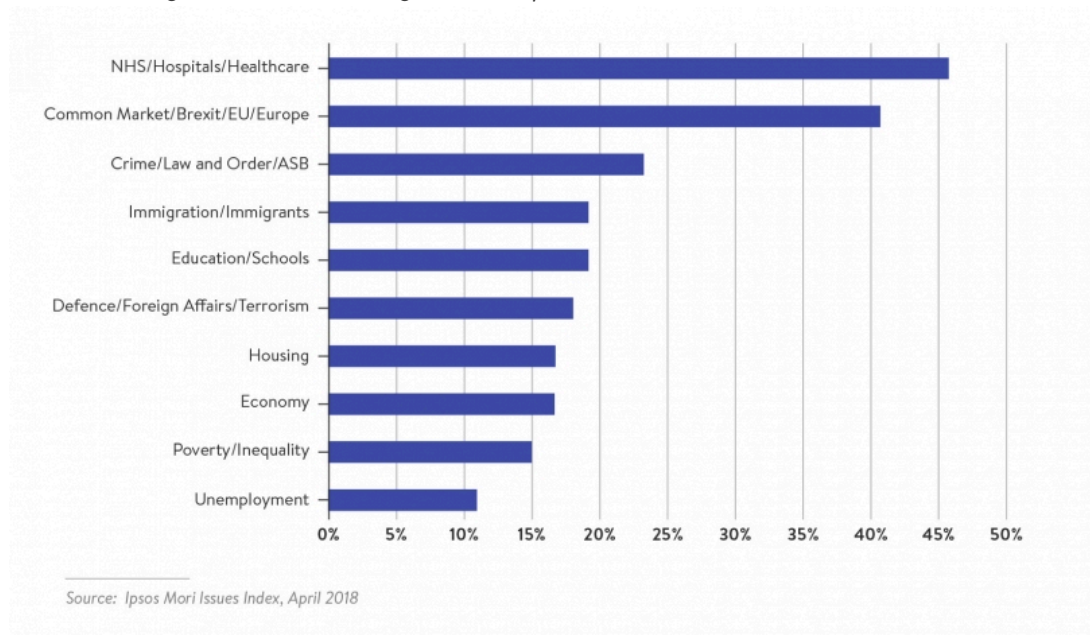
Secondly, the recent fall in salience of crime at the national level may have reflected the shift to a more localised model of policing since 2010. A core rationale for the creation of directly elected police and crime commissioners (PCCs) was that it would provide a mechanism for deepening the engagement of voters with questions of crime at the local level and thus potentially taking some of the heat out of national policy debates. Yet with many PCCs campaigning on national rather than local policy issues (for example, with London Mayor Sadiq Khan calling for a reversal of police cuts), it is perhaps unsurprising that these issues are beginning to creep back into national politics.

Thirdly, the fall in salience may simply have been a natural consequence of falling crime rates. The less people experience and worry about crime, the less they will prioritise it. Again, recent trends in crime suggests that something of a shift is occurring. Fewer offenders are being charged and sentenced than in the past. Yet the harmfulness and frequency of their offending is more likely to be worse.

THE POLICY RESPONSE

THE ABSENCE OF NATIONAL POLICY

There appears to be a vacuum of ideas at the national level. The Conservative Party's 2017 election manifesto contained some low key pledges to enact a new victims' law, establish a new national infrastructure police force, enshrine a definition of domestic violence in law and push more powers down to PCCs. More recently, the Home Office announced further measures to tackle serious violence, including regulation of the sale of knives and acid and a new National County Lines Coordination Centre. But there has been an absence of big new policy ideas, reflecting a broader stepping back by the Home Office from crime. Indeed, many of the policies and programmes implemented by the previous Labour government, whether relating to prevention (Sure Start, Family Intervention Projects), diversion (Drugs Intervention Programme, parenting interventions) or enforcement (antisocial behaviour orders and other civil injunctions) have been either diluted or deprioritised.

OPTIONS FOR REFORM

There are solutions that have been trialled, either internationally or at a local level, and proven to be effective in reducing serious violence. Some of the key proposals are summarised below.

- A new (properly resourced) programme of early intervention to support vulnerable families and children at risk of offending. If necessary, the troubled families programme, which was announced by former UK Prime Minister David Cameron and led by Dame Louise Casey but has been allowed to drift since 2016, could be revived and repurposed to ensure those families most linked to crime receive wrap-around support.
- A review to explore the increase in school exclusions, which have risen by as much as 30 per cent in some areas, and improve the quality of provision in pupil-referral units. Children who are excluded from school are much more likely to end up as

offenders, but too often young people have to start offending before they receive any additional support. Exclusion should be a trigger point for a needs assessment and, where appropriate, wider support.

- Building on lessons from tackling domestic violence, by establishing new multi-agency structures to prevent violence. Multi-agency risk-assessment conferences were developed to improve information sharing on high-risk domestic violence cases and to case-manage families, reducing their exposure to violence. They provide a means to coordinate all the different services that need to be in place. Similar structures are in place for troubled families. Given the age of some of the victims, there is a strong case for replicating this model for serious violence, for example with new multi-agency violence prevention hubs.

- Ensure the police have the powers they need to limit the activities of dangerous gang members. When possible, the police should seek to prosecute those guilty of criminal offences through the courts. When formal prosecution is not possible, governments should consider allowing the police to widen the use civil injunctions, for example to ban known gang members from specific locations for a specified period of time.

- Use enforcement as a trigger for intervention. When the police arrest a major gang member or drug dealer, there is an opportunity to intervene and reduce the risks of further violence. Social services should follow police enforcement by offering siblings and wider family members support, such as psychological trauma assessment and counselling services.

- Establish integrated multidisciplinary teams to manage the most prolific offenders. Governments should make it easier for the police, probation and local authorities to pool budgets so they are able to personalise services based on the specific needs of individuals who often lead chaotic lives and have multiple overlapping needs.

If policymakers need inspiration, they need look no further than communities where locally elected leaders are developing innovative approaches to tackle serious violence, in contrast to the vacuum at national level. For example, Sadiq Khan has promised to

develop a public-health approach to addressing serious violence, based on Glasgow's success in bringing down knife-related homicides (which itself arose out of a successful approach trialled in Chicago). Locally elected police and crime commissioners like Vera Baird have also been proactive in using their mandates to drive reforms locally, for example in how the criminal justice system works to reduce domestic violence.

The rise in serious violence is a complex and deep-rooted problem, but it is not inevitable. Policymakers just need the political will, resources and imagination to solve it.

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