General crime drop: Where? When? Why?

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The idea that crime is going down has reached the public eye, most notably in The Netherlands where the government has announced plans to close down several prisons due to a lack of prisoners. The concept of a crime drop poses two fundamental challenges to criminology. First, the discipline must reach consensus on the facts. Secondly, criminologists should, ideally, reach a global consensus on the main causes of the drop.

First the statistical facts. As discussed in detail elsewhere (van Dijk 2008) police statistics on recorded crimes cannot be safely used as measures of either the volume or trends in crime. Victimization surveys should be the primary source of information. Fortunately, these are now readily available.

The International Crime Victim Survey (ICVS) results indicate a levelling off of the rise in crime and significant drops in burglaries and car thefts for most participating Europeans tend to see their continent as something like a replication of America, with a time-lag of a few years. We are, therefore, inclined to presume automatically that crime “must” drop now also in Europe, since it started to do so in the United States more than a decade ago. Against such “natural” beliefs, data have little chance to prevail, even if they suggest nuances. We shall try the exercise.

Obviously and as we know from stock-exchange markets, no trend will eternally continue as it started. In the same vein, there is no reason why crime should increase way into the future. Even over the last 30 years, there were many crimes that decreased. This has been true for car theft after the generalisation of steering-wheel locks, for motorcycle theft after the adoption of laws making wearing crash-helmets compulsory, and for obscene phone calls after caller identification (caller ID) became a generally available option. During the same period, other offences,
such as burglary, robbery, and violent offences against the person continued to increase way beyond the 1990s—at least according to police statistics.

The usual reaction in the field of criminology was to point to many well-known deficiencies of counts of police-recorded crime. The face of the apparent contradiction of increasing police-recorded violence and stable trends in victimisation and self-report surveys, a majority of criminologists, intuitively more sympathetic to survey counts than to statistics, did not have much trouble dismissing increasing trends of violence shown in official counts.

However, what does the evidence actually show? If we take, for every country, available ICVS data from 1989 to 2005 (or from the first to the most recent year available), and if we group countries into those with increasing or decreasing trends (i.e., with changes in any direction of more than 20 percent), we see that countries with increasing rates of assault (left side of figure 1) are the clear majority. For robbery, the picture is somewhat more balanced, but there are still as many countries with increasing trends as there are with stable or decreasing trends together. Given that police-recorded assaults and robberies increased in most European countries during the same period (European Sourcebook, editions of 2003 and 2006), there is little doubt that at least these two offences did not decrease before 2005. It is equally true, however, that trends were not uniform, and that raises the interesting question why trends (e.g. in robbery) were so strikingly different in apparently similar countries such as Sweden and Finland, Belgium and the Netherlands, or Austria and Germany. Beyond Europe, the strong decrease of robbery in the United States is even more intriguing.

What has been the trend since 2005? Unfortunately, new Europe-wide survey data will be missing for some years to come. However, data on police-recorded offences collected for the 2010 edition of the European Sourcebook of Crime and Criminal Justice Statistics show, for the years 2003 to 2007, stable trends for completed homicide, assault, rape including sexual assault, and decreasing trends for robbery (particularly in Eastern Europe) and theft (including domestic burglary). However, the picture is far from uniform, and there are several countries where trends do not match the mainstream. With police counts starting to show decreasing trends, we can expect the debate on their validity as trend indicators to
Perhaps the real challenge of European trends is how we can explain the diverging picture our continent leaves in this area. For property offences, trends are easy to explain in terms of changing opportunity structures, either under the form of availability of goods and targets or in terms of increased measures to protect property in shops, private dwellings, or public places. For violent offences, however, such explanations are hard to find and even harder to document. It certainly makes sense that the revolution of leisure time, extending going out and drinking later into the evening, way beyond mid-night in many – but not all – European cities, has contributed to increased violence in the streets.

Unfortunately, however, we were so busy questioning the validity of police-indicators that we missed the moment to collect adequate indicators of leisure-time activities. Whatever we find nowadays, it will be hard to collect data for the early 1990s before these new trends started. But it might be worth trying, particularly if such an endeavour is to be done in many cities and coordinated throughout the continent. In this way, it might become possible better to understand why violence increased in some places but not in others – or why we may see a drop in the near future.

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years could we eventually say that Italy is following a general pattern, with the delay that often characterizes Southern European areas with respect to other Western countries. The results of the third wave of the national victimization survey will be also helpful in confirming the drop.

A closer look at specific crimes shows that Italian trends may not be so different from the rest of Europe. The difference may concern when the drop begins. Burglary and car theft, for instance, were falling in Italy by the end of the ‘90s (figures 2 and 3), and bag-snatching dropped earlier (figure 4). Homicide trends also are not different than in the rest of Europe. So the differences between Italy and other countries become thinner when we look at specific crimes.

Some of the explanations offered for the decreases of those specific crimes are probably also true for Italy: changes in offenders’ behaviours, improved security measures for cars and buildings, target hardening, and changes in victims’ lifestyles.

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