

PREFACE

My aim with this short book is to provoke debate about the ways we have tried to explain the recent crime trends in various countries and to invite colleagues to reflect upon the critique which I outline below. My central argument is that the approach to the crime drop has become too law-like in its thinking, ignoring contextual factors, the role of political ideas, policy changes and the part played by public opinion. It has been too keen to accept ‘security’ as *the* explanation of the crime drop without adequately reflecting on why security was chosen ahead of (or rather, *instead* of) a reinvestment in penal welfarism. As such, the work I critique presents us with an impoverished theory of both policy adaption and the drivers and consequences of it. My aim therefore is to tell—in a narrative style—a rather more complex story than simply ‘securitisation’ by thinking about what might be termed the contextualised causes of causes. The substantive argument which I am going to put forward, which can be read as a variant on the securitization thesis, is that changes in the political goals (unrelated to crime) which elected governments in many Westernised nations pursued in the 1970s–1990s resulted in changes in the social and economic processes associated with crime (especially property crime). As these social, cultural and economic changes took root, they drove up property crime. As a consequence of rising crime rates, notions of ‘law and order’ became politicised (that is became an object of political discourse), popularised (that is became a topic of public discourse and concern) and policy entrepreneurs started to use crime to make political capital. As crime continued

to rise, governments were forced into action, and did so in such a way as to bring about not just a stabilisation of crime rates, but to throw the increases into reverse. My thinking on these matters owes much to Mertonian strain theory and insights derived from political scientists and social policy analysts. Crime, in this analysis, can therefore be used as a barometer of the state of the social health of a nation or society. Rapidly increasing levels of crime suggest, in the main, that all is not well within that society as a result (following Merton and Durkhiem) of rapid social and economic change. Reductions in crime are a result of (a) reductions in such change (or acclimatisation to it), (b) the response of governments and other bodies to reduce crime and (c) creation of a new equilibrium around crime, its causes and the best ways of tackling it. Future studies in this field ought to attend more thoroughly to wider historical processes and develop complimentary qualitative insights in order to help establish causality.

I have benefitted enormously from conversations with numerous colleagues during the period whilst these ideas gestated. The following have all been kind enough to devote time to reading and commenting upon drafts of what follows: David Brown, Felipe Estrada, Tim Hope, Pat O'Malley, Andromachi Tseloni, Sylvia Walby and Sandra Walklate (who suggested a book, rather than a journal-length piece). I would like to thank them all for their time and insights. All errors and omissions remain my fault alone, of course.

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Re-Examining The Crime Drop

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2017, XI, 116 p. 13 illus., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-67653-1