The curious case of the fall in crime

Crime is plunging in the rich world. To keep it down, governments should focus on prevention, not punishment

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IN THE 1990s John DiIulio, a conservative American academic, argued that a new breed of "superpredators", "kids that have absolutely no respect for human life and no sense of the future", would terrorise Americans almost indefinitely. He was not alone. Experts were convinced that crime would keep rising. Law-abiding citizens would retreat to gated communities, patrolled by security guards. Politicians and police chiefs could do little except bluster and try to fiddle the statistics.

Mr DiIulio later recanted and it is clear that the pessimists were wrong. Even as he wrote, America's crime wave was breaking. Its cities have become vastly safer, and the rest of the developed world has followed. From Japan to Estonia, property and people are now safer than at almost any time since the 1970s (see article). Confounding expectations, the recession has not interrupted the downward trend. Even as America furiously debates the shooting of Trayvon Martin (see article), new data show that the homicide rate for young Americans is at a 30-year low.

Some crimes have all but died out. Last year there were just 69 armed robberies of banks, building societies and post offices in England and Wales, compared with 500 a year in the 1990s. In 1990 some 147,000 cars were stolen in New York. Last year fewer than 10,000 were. In the Netherlands and Switzerland street dealers and hustlers have been driven out of city centres; addicts there are now elderly men, often alcoholics, living in state hostels. In countries such as Lithuania and Poland the gangsters who trafficked people and drugs in the 1990s have moved into less violent activities such as fraud.

The receding tide

Cherished social theories have been discarded. Conservatives who insisted that the decline of the traditional nuclear family and growing ethnic diversity would unleash an unstoppable crime wave have been proved wrong. Young people are increasingly likely to have been brought up by one parent and to have played a lot of computer games. Yet they are far better behaved than previous generations. Left-wingers who argued that crime could never be curbed unless inequality was reduced look just as silly.

There is no single cause of the decline; rather, several have coincided. Western societies are growing older, and most crimes are committed by young men. Policing has improved greatly in recent decades, especially in big cities such as New York and London, with forces using computers to analyse the incidence of crime; in some parts of Manhattan this helped to reduce the robbery rate by over 95%. The epidemics of crack cocaine and heroin appear to have burnt out.

The biggest factor may be simply that security measures have improved. Car immobilisers have killed joyriding; bulletproof screens, security guards and marked money have all but done for bank robbery. Alarms and DNA databases

have increased the chance a burglar will be caught. At the same time, the rewards for burglary have fallen because electronic gizmos are so cheap. Even small shops now invest in CCTV cameras and security tags. Some crimes now look very risky—and that matters because, as every survey of criminals shows, the main deterrent to crime is the fear of being caught.

Loosen the cuffs

Many conservatives will think this list omits the main reason crime has declined: the far harsher prison sentences introduced on both sides of the Atlantic over the past two decades. One in every hundred American adults is now in prison. This has obviously had some effect—a young man in prison cannot steal your car—but if tough prison sentences were the cause, crime would not be falling in the Netherlands and Germany, which have reduced their prison populations. New York's prison population has fallen by a quarter since 1999, yet its crime rate has dropped faster than that of many other cities.

Harsh punishments, and in particular long mandatory sentences for certain crimes, increasingly look counterproductive. American prisons are full of old men, many of whom are well past their criminal years, and non-violent drug users, who would be better off in treatment. In California, the pioneer of mandatory sentencing, more than a fifth of prisoners are over 50. To keep each one inside costs taxpayers $47,000 a year (about the same as a place at Stanford University). And because prison stresses punishment rather than rehabilitation, most of what remains of the crime problem is really a recidivism issue. In England and Wales, for example, the number of first-time offenders has fallen by 44% since 2007. The number with more than 15 convictions has risen.

Politicians seem to have grasped this. In America the number of new mandatory sentences enacted by Congress has fallen. Even in the Republican South, governors such as Rick Perry and Bobby Jindal have adopted policies favouring treatment over imprisonment for drug users. Britain has stopped adding to its prison population. But more could be done to support people when they come out of prison (at the moment, in Britain, they get £46) and to help addicts. In the Netherlands and Switzerland hard-drug addiction is being reduced by treatment rather than by punishment. American addicts, by contrast, often get little more than counselling.

Policing can be sharpened, too—and, in an era of austerity, will have to be. Now that officers are not rushed off their feet responding to car thefts and burglaries, they can focus on prevention. Predictive policing, which employs data to try to anticipate crime, is particularly promising. More countries could use civilian "community support officers" of the sort employed in Britain and the Netherlands, who patrol the streets, freeing up better-paid police officers to solve crimes.

Better-trained police officers could focus on new crimes. Traditional measures tend not to include financial crimes such as credit-card fraud or tax evasion. Since these are seldom properly recorded, they have not contributed to the great fall in crime. Unlike rapes and murders, they do not excite public fear. But as policing adapts to the technological age, it is as well to remember that criminals are doing so, too.

Falling crime

Where have all the burglars gone?

The rich world is seeing less and less crime, even in the face of high unemployment and economic stagnation

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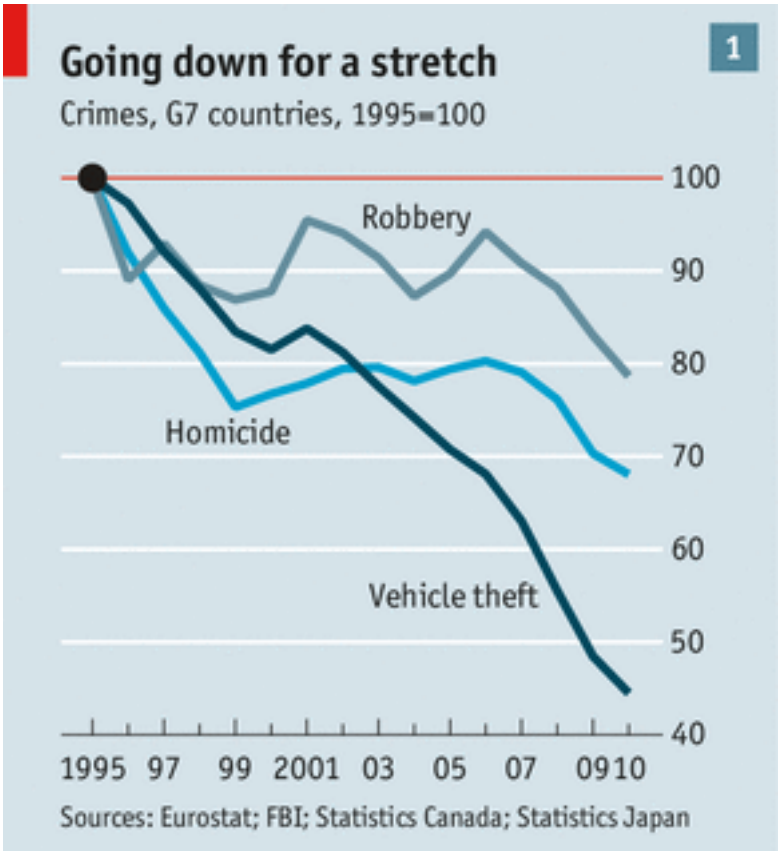
THE Old Town in Tallinn, the capital of Estonia, does not look like a den of thieves. On a summer afternoon, herds of elderly tourists—American, Japanese, British—wander between the gift shops and sip lagers at pavement cafés beneath the gothic town hall. In a park, teenagers chat and smoke cigarettes in the sun.

Valdo Pôder, a local police officer, remembers when it was quite different. In the mid-1990s curtains rose at the city's theatres at six o'clock so that the audience could get home before sunset. Young men hung around selling bootleg vodka. The streetlights were always smashed. Pointing to one smart-looking bar Mr Pôder says he would have needed a team of at least ten officers to raid it. "We'd have to put everyone inside on the floor," he says. "Or else we might get shot at."



Crime in Estonia has fallen precipitously. Since 1995, the country's murder rate has dropped by 70%, and robbery and car theft have fallen almost as far. Even as the country entered a deep recession in 2009, which pushed unemployment up to 19%, the crime rate kept falling. But though the magnitude of this trend sets

post-Soviet Estonia apart, its direction does not. Across the developed world, the crime wave that began in the 1950s is in broad retreat (see chart 1).

Both police records (which underestimate some types of crime) and surveys of victims (which should not, but are not as regularly available a source of data) show crime against the person and against property falling over the past ten years in most rich countries. In America the fall began around 1991; in Britain it began around 1995, though the murder rate followed only in the mid-2000s. In France, property crime rose until 2001—but it has fallen by a third since. Some crimes are all but disappearing. In 1997, some 400,000 cars were reported stolen in England and Wales: in 2012, just 86,000.

Once upon a time in America

Cities have seen the greatest progress. The number of violent crimes has fallen by 32% since 1990 across America as a whole; in the biggest cities, it has fallen by 64%. In New York, the area around Times Square on 42nd Street, where pornographers once mingled with muggers, is now a family oriented tourist trap. On London's housing estates, children play in concrete corridors once used by heroin addicts to shoot up. In Tallinn you can walk home from the theatre unmolested as late as you like.

What is behind this spectacular and widespread improvement? Demographic trends are an obvious factor. The baby-boom in the decades after the second world war created a bubble in the 16- to 24-year-old population a couple of decades later, and most crimes are committed by men of that age. That bubble is now long deflated. In most Western countries, the population is ageing, often quite fast.

But demographics are not everything. Mark Simmons, a deputy assistant commissioner for the Metropolitan Police in London, points out that the number of 18- to 24-year-old men in the city has been increasing in recent years, and yet the decline in crime has continued. The sheer magnitude of the improvement in places such as New York and Los Angeles, where the incidence of some crimes has fallen by as much as 90%, cannot be explained just by a young-person deficit.

Steven Levitt, an economist at the University of Chicago, has argued that the legalisation of abortion in the 1970s cut America's crime rate by reducing the number of children growing up in inner-city poverty and thus predisposed to criminality. But that cannot explain why rates have kept falling long after such an effect should have tapered off, or why crime rates in Britain, where abortion has been legal for longer, began falling later. Jessica Wolpaw Reyes, an American researcher, has argued that the cognitive effects of exposure to lead were a primary determinant of violent crime, and unleaded petrol is to thank for the improvement. But the causal link is far from proven.

Could more criminals being locked up be the answer? The number of people behind bars has grown substantially in many countries over the past 20 years. In Britain the prison population doubled between 1993 and 2012; in Australia and America, it almost doubled. But several countries, including Canada, the Netherlands and Estonia, have reduced their prison populations without seeing any spike in crime; so too have some American states such as New York, where crime rates have fallen fastest. Prison takes existing criminals off the streets. But

in many places, the drop in crime seems to be down to people not becoming criminals in the first place. Between 2007 and 2012 the number of people convicted of an offence for the first time in Britain fell by 44%.

Better policing is a more convincing explanation than bigger prisons: the expectation of being caught undoubtedly deters criminals. In New York and Los Angeles, where crime has fallen further and faster than almost anywhere, Bill Bratton, a former police chief of both cities, is often credited for the turnaround. Partly, that is thanks to higher standards. Today's LAPD is a far cry from the racist, corrupt and scandal-ridden force of the 1990s. But tactics have also changed.

Hot fuzz

A combination of officers talking to the people whose neighbourhoods they police and intensive targeting of crime "hotspots" has transformed the way streets are protected. In the 1990s, Mr Bratton embraced data-driven "CompStat" policing, targeting the most blighted districts with huge numbers of officers. The biggest subsequent crime drops were extremely localised: for example, in the area around Canal Street in Lower Manhattan, the murder rate fell from 29 per 100,000 residents in 1990 to around 1.5 by 2009.

According to Lawrence Sherman, a criminologist at the University of Cambridge, such tactics have now worked in places as different as Sweden and Trinidad and Tobago. In Chicago, where crime has been slower to fall than elsewhere, local politicians this year thanked hotspot methods for the lowest murder rate in half a century. Technology has improved the effectiveness of detective work too. The advent of DNA testing, mobile-phone location and surveillance cameras—which have spread rapidly, especially in Britain—have all increased the risk of getting caught.

Some broad social changes have probably helped. In most countries young people are increasingly sober and well behaved. They are more likely to live with their parents and to be in higher education—across the European Union 28% of adults aged 25-34 still live at home. In Britain, the current generation of 18- to 24-year-olds is a lot less likely to have tried an illegal drug or to drink than those ten years older were at their age, and the same is true in most European countries. In most countries wife-beating has become more stigmatised and less common: since 1994, self-reported domestic violence has fallen by three-quarters in Britain and two-thirds in America.

In America, the end of the crack-cocaine epidemic in the 1990s is widely credited with reducing crime. In Europe, the explosion in heroin use that accompanied the high unemployment of the 1980s has largely receded, even though hard economic times are back. Junkies are older and fewer; in Rotterdam, there is now a state-sponsored hostel for elderly heroin addicts. A lot of people in the rich world still take illegal drugs, but they tend to be drugs that they pay for out of what they earn, not what they steal.

The repopulation of inner cities is probably also a help. A middle-class exodus to the suburbs of the 1950s and 1960s often left behind inner cities blighted by derelict properties and concentrated poverty. George Kelling, the American criminologist who first developed the idea that seemingly small signs of

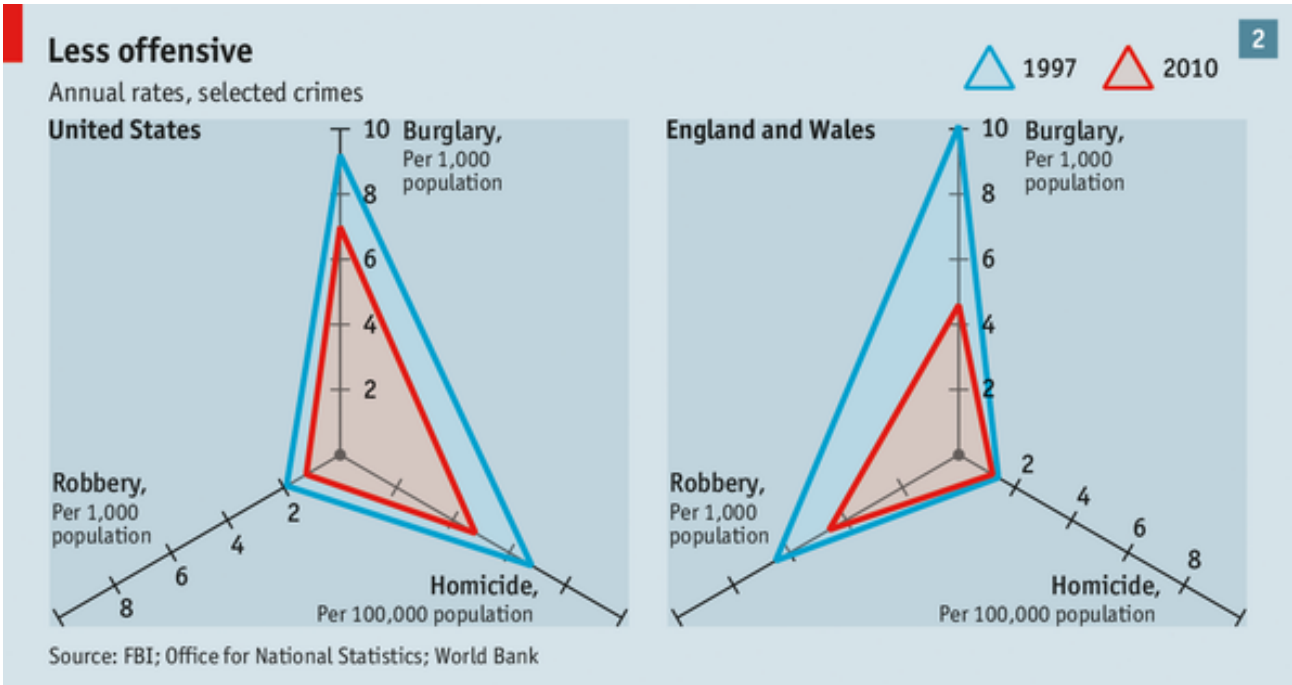
dereliction—such as broken windows—can encourage more significant criminality, points out that inner-centre neighbourhoods such as Harlem in New York, or Amsterdam's Nieuwmarkt district, have been reclaimed by the well-off. The windows have been mended. Gentrifiers may not always be popular, but they set up neighbourhood watch meetings, clean up empty spaces and lobby politicians to take crime more seriously. They may be a consequence of falling crime that lowers crime further.

The last category of explanations is perhaps the most intriguing: that criminals simply have fewer opportunities. Jan van Dijk, a criminologist based at Tilburg University in the Netherlands, points out that in the 1950s and 1960s millions of people across the Western world acquired cars, televisions, record players, jewellery and so on for the first time; rich pickings for those who would steal them. In the decades since, those same people have added burglar alarms, window locks and safe deposit boxes. Between 1995 and 2011, the proportion of British households with burglar alarms increased by half, to 29%. And some things once worth stealing from people's homes have become less valuable. There is little point in burgling a house to steal a DVD player worth $30.

Bellman and true

Shops have invested heavily in security, installing clever gates and tags to deter shoplifters and employing ever more guards. In fact, private security is booming in many places. The number of guards employed in Europe has increased by 90% over the past decade, and they now outnumber police officers. Security vans are now harder to knock off and are often followed by police cars. Fewer businesses handle lots of cash. Those that do keep less on the premises.

Armed robbery has been particularly hard hit by reduced opportunities. In 1950s London, professional criminals—often ex-servicemen—used explosives to crack the safes of factories and banks. When safes toughened up, the hard men moved on to holding up banks. As banks put up shutters and alarms, bulletproof partitions and surveillance cameras, they turned to robbing less secure building societies. By the 1990s it was betting shops and off-licences (liquor stores). Now there are few armed robberies at all. As Roger Matthews of the University of Kent puts it: "You might make a thousand pounds and you'll get caught. What's the point?"



Armed robbery may have fallen for another reason too: robbers typically relied on stolen cars for their getaways. But thanks to central locking, alarms and circuitry immune to hot-wiring, stealing a car is far harder than it was. In New York City the annual number of car thefts has fallen by 93% over the past 20 years. According to Graham Farrell, of Simon Fraser University in Canada, reducing car theft may have had broader knock-on effects than just restricting getaway options. Stealing a car for a joyride used to be a “gateway crime”, which would lead teenagers on to other crimes; now such escalation is restricted to Grand Theft Auto games (which, at least one study suggests, may themselves be reducing crime by keeping feisty young men occupied).

Not all crime is falling. Sexual offences, which often go unrecorded, may be becoming more or less common. Bank fraud, money-wire scams and trade in personal information may well have a lot of growth potential. Organised crime may be less violent in the rich world, but it is still a scourge in many places. Even in countries where crime overall continues to decline rapidly, such as Britain, certain types of property crime—such as pickpocketing and shoplifting—have risen with unemployment (the lure of mobile phones, not yet as hard to steal as cars, doubtless plays a role). Violent crime recently ticked up ever so slightly in the United States, and is rising in a few other places, such as France. And in many places police numbers are now falling, which may bode ill if policing has done a lot to drive down crime.

But the sheer scale of the drop—and its broad persistence in the face of the deepest economic depression in a century—make a new crime wave seem unlikely. Policing is still improving; heroin and crack-cocaine consumption continue to fall; and no one is likely to reintroduce lead into petrol. The period of rising crime from the 1950s through to the 1980s looks increasingly like an historical anomaly.

There are still criminals, but there are ever fewer of them and they are getting older. When the global economy recovers, there will be fewer still. In Tallinn, the

police are having to come to terms with the implications of lower crime. “Nowadays we have a new problem,” jokes Priit Pärkna, one of the local police chiefs. “If we want to arrest someone, we need much more evidence than we did.” At the moment, he is worried about the pickpockets that the city’s new-found tourist trade attracts. As problems brought on by progress go, it is not the worst.