



Criminological Highlights

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Criminological Highlights is designed to provide an accessible look at some of the more interesting criminological research that is currently being published. There are six issues in each volume. Copies of the original articles can be obtained (at cost) from the Centre of Criminology Information Service and Library. Please contact Tom Finlay or Andrea Shier.

Contents: "Headlines and Conclusions" for each of the eight articles. Short summaries of each of the eight articles.

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This issue of *Criminological Highlights* addresses the following questions:

1. Are the effects of bad experiences with the police offset by good experiences?
2. Does intensive parole supervision work?
3. Is the desire for death sentences in the U.S. part of American culture?
4. Does 'gentrification' of neighbourhoods affect crime rates?
5. How does one know whether a national crime prevention program worked?
6. Why hasn't Canada's imprisonment rate increased in the past 45 years?
7. What is the impact on crime of the reduction of mental hospital beds?
8. Does the state of the economy affect crime?

Negative experiences with the police have large negative impacts on the way in which the police are rated by ordinary citizens. Positive interactions with the police, however, have little, if any, impact.

“For both police-initiated and citizen-initiated encounters [with the police], the impact of having a bad experience is four to fourteen times as great as that of having a positive experience. The coefficients associated with having a good experience – including being treated fairly and politely, and receiving service that was prompt and helpful – were very small and not statistically different from zero” (p. 100). It would appear that it is more important for police administrators interested in improving citizens’ assessments of the police to focus on avoiding negative interactions with the public than on creating opportunities for positive interactions.

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Intensive parole supervision programs can reduce recidivism.

The results demonstrate that recidivism of parolees *can* be reduced by providing intensive supervision, perhaps because those receiving this added amount of attention were also more likely to receive appropriate rehabilitative services. However, in addition, supportive offices were more effective than non-supportive offices in reducing revocation, and parole officers who were able to strike a balance between enforcement and help were more effective in helping their clients stay out of trouble.

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In order to understand fully current criminal justice punishments, we need to consider not only current sensibilities, but also the history of populist punishments: Death sentences in 20th century U.S. are most common in states that have a high percentage of black residents and have a history of lynchings in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

It would appear that “vivid historical events continue to influence the current behaviour of important social institutions... Acts in the distant past still affect recent legal decisions about who will live and who will die... [T]he 19th century racial caste system and the violent means used to preserve it help to explain why the United States has adopted such an exceptional stance on the death penalty, as compared with the many equivalent democracies that have so emphatically renounced this punishment” (p. 674).

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Urban neighbourhoods that are in the process of being ‘gentrified’ are likely to have relatively high levels of crime because of the social instability that results from the influx of higher income people.

“The chance of becoming the victim of a crime is higher not only in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, but also in neighbourhoods that are undergoing strong socioeconomic improvement....” (p. 241). “According to social disorganization theory, such residential instability reduces the potential for collective social control, because unstable neighbourhoods yield few social contacts between inhabitants.... “In neighbourhoods where improvements are taking place, decreases in victimization can be expected only after stabilization and, possibly, homogenization of the local community” (p. 242).

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Another national crime prevention program did not have an impact on crime and violence. Are there lessons to be learned?

There was no evidence of any impact of Finland’s national crime prevention program on crime. Obviously, there may well have been specific programs that had an impact in some locations, but the national funding program as a whole appeared to have no overall impact. Part of the reason for this failure may have been the “radically decentralized nature of the [national crime prevention program]” (p. 188). Adequate program design and attention to what is known about crime prevention is not likely to have occurred in all communities. Furthermore, adequate evaluations were impossible in part because of the breadth and number of different programs that were implemented. In addition, the programs were typically implemented in a manner that made it impossible for them to be evaluated. A similar study of a national funding program focused on youth crime published in Denmark in 1990 came up with similar results: “Trends in youth crime between municipalities with different levels of participation” (p. 177) in the program showed no differences in crime rates. It would appear that in crime prevention, as in any public policy area, intuitive beliefs in the adequacy of a program do not guarantee that the program will achieve its intended effects.

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Canada’s relatively stable rate of adult imprisonment appears to be the result of a unique combination of constitutional, political, historical, and attitudinal factors.

“Canada’s stability in levels of incarceration since the 1960s appears to be the result of two interrelated processes” (p. 359). Canada has avoided various factors that appear to lead to increases in imprisonment while at the same time, “Specific historical, cultural, and structural factors have largely shielded Canada from wider punitive forces. While each of these factors exerts its own impact on the limited adoption of wider punitive trends, their importance seems to reside in their interwoven nature” (p. 359).

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Reducing society’s dependence on psychiatric hospitals increases the size of the homeless population, which, in turn, leads to increased crime and arrests by police.

Although there are undoubtedly enormous advantages of caring for psychiatric patients in the community rather than in hospitals, it would appear that there are also costs of closing psychiatric beds: increased homelessness and increased crime and arrests. The effects on crime, however, may be diminished by addressing the homelessness issue. Reducing the size of the homeless population will also have some effect on arrest rates.

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“It’s the economy, stupid.” Strong economies, more than simply low unemployment rates, can lead to lower property crime rates.

It would appear that improvements in the economy during the 1990s may be partially responsible for the decrease in property crime and robbery rates in the United States during this period. This suggests that an improving economy is more important than the unemployment rate *per se*, in part because changes in the overall economy are likely to affect many more people in a variety of different ways. However, neither the strength of the economy nor the unemployment rate appeared to be related to changes in the rates of “pure” violent crimes such as murder, rape, and assault.

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Negative experiences with the police have large negative impacts on the way in which the police are rated by ordinary citizens. Positive interactions with the police, however, have little, if any, impact.

Most police administrators would agree with the assertion that it is important that the public have confidence in the police. There are data that suggest that individual level factors (e.g., race and age), neighbourhood-level factors, as well as individual experiences with the police affect the way in which the police are evaluated. This paper explores the hypothesis that the relationship between how people feel that they have been treated by the police and their evaluations of the police are asymmetrical. That is, citizens may have expectations that they will be treated fairly and appropriately by the police which would mean that positive encounters with the police would have little (additional) impact on their evaluations of the police. On the other hand, a single bad experience with the police may “deeply influence people’s views of [police] performance and even legitimacy” (p. 100).

Research on various types of encounters with the police suggests that citizens (e.g., victims) are less affected by the outcome of the encounter with the police than they are by the process – how they are treated by the police. If the public expects professional and respectful treatment from the police, it would follow that encounters that are consistent with this expectation would have relatively little impact. However, bad experiences with the police would be expected to have large, and lasting, impacts on people’s evaluation of the police. Psychological research has suggested that “The lessons of bad things are learned more quickly, and forgotten more slowly, than the lessons of positive experiences” (p. 106).

In this study, residents of Chicago were surveyed and asked a number of questions about how good a job they thought their local police were doing on such matters as responding to community concerns, preventing crime, keeping order, and helping victims. They were also asked questions about interactions with the police and

how satisfied they were with the way in which the police handled the issue that led them to have contact with the police.

Various factors known to affect evaluations of the police were “held constant” statistically: race, age, income, marital status, level of fear of crime, the perception of the extent of the local drug and gang problem, the perception of disorder and whether any recent interactions with the police were initiated by the citizen or the police. After taking account of these factors, positive experiences with the police had essentially no impact on confidence in the police. Negative experiences, however, had substantial impacts on reducing confidence in the police. This asymmetrical effect – positive interactions with the police having little if any impact on confidence in the police, and negative interactions with the police reducing dramatically the evaluations citizens give of the police – was replicated in seven other surveys – Seattle, New York, St. Petersburg (Florida), St.

Petersburg (Russian Federation), Indianapolis, Washington, D.C., and an urban sample in England & Wales.

Conclusion. “For both police-initiated and citizen-initiated encounters [with the police], the impact of having a bad experience is four to fourteen times as great as that of having a positive experience. The coefficients associated with having a good experience – including being treated fairly and politely, and receiving service that was prompt and helpful – were very small and not statistically different from zero” (p. 100). It would appear that it is more important for police administrators interested in improving citizens’ assessments of the police to focus on avoiding negative interactions with the public than on creating opportunities for positive interactions.

Reference: Skogan, Wesley G. (2006) Asymmetry in the Impact of Encounters with Police. *Policing & Society*, 16 (2), 99-126.

Intensive parole supervision programs can reduce recidivism.

The move to intensive supervision of offenders on probation is often motivated more by punitive or control purposes than it is by motivations to change an offender. In this context, it is not surprising that intensive supervision regimes have had relatively little impact on recidivism. Essentially, intensive supervision programs have focused largely on (temporary) incapacitation or control of offenders (while they are still in the community) rather than on changing offenders.

This study examines an "Intensive Surveillance and Supervision" (ISSP) program in New Jersey that was designed for a different reason: "State parole authorities were concerned about the lack of services for several hundred high-risk/high-need parolees" (p. 449). The idea was to provide them with more appropriate services than a matched comparison group made up of similar offenders who were given traditional parole supervision (TPS), and to compare recidivism rates of the two groups.

In addition to the simple comparison between the intensive and traditional parole regimes, the type and amount of services that were received by the parolees were monitored as was the "organizational supportiveness" of each of the 12 parole offices involved in the study. Organizational supportiveness was operationalized by assessing whether there were clearly articulated programming objectives, a commitment on the part of the office to the objectives and values of the program, presence of a director who was supportive of the program, low staff turnover, sufficient resources, and secure administrators. The parole officers involved in intensive supervision were also assessed and categorized as being law enforcement, social work, or balanced in their orientation.

Those described as "balanced" in their orientation incorporated aspects of both a law enforcement and a social work orientation.

The findings were quite straightforward:

- Generally speaking the ISSP parolees were more likely to receive appropriate rehabilitative services (e.g., substance abuse counselling or educational/vocational training) than were the TPS parolees.
- The overall rate of recidivism (parole revocation for a new conviction or revocation for any reason) was higher in the TPS group than in the ISSP group. (New conviction, TPS: 47.5%; ISSP 19.3%. Overall revocation, TPS: 58.8%; ISSP 37.5%). Technical violations were more likely to be recorded for the ISSP group (18.3% vs. 11.3%).
- Parolees being supervised by those in supportive vs. non-supportive offices were equally likely to be revoked for a new conviction. However, technical violations and overall parole revocation were more likely in the non-supportive offices.
- Revocation for a new conviction was least likely when the parolee was being supervised by a parole officer with a "balanced" orientation (6.3%). Revocation for a new conviction was most

likely (32.3%) for those parolees being supervised by those with a social work orientation. Technical violations were, not surprisingly, most likely to be noted with respect to those parolees being supervised by officers with a "law enforcement" orientation.

Conclusion. The results demonstrate that recidivism of parolees *can* be reduced by providing intensive supervision, perhaps because those receiving this added amount of attention were also more likely to receive appropriate rehabilitative services. However, in addition, supportive offices were more effective than non-supportive offices in reducing revocation, and parole officers who were able to strike a balance between enforcement and help were more effective in helping their clients stay out of trouble.

Reference: Papanozzi, Mario A. and Paul Gendreau. (2005). An Intensive Supervision Program that Worked: Service Delivery, Professional Orientation, and Organizational Supportiveness. *The Prison Journal*, 85 (4), 445-466.

In order to understand fully current criminal justice punishments, we need to consider not only current sensibilities, but also the history of populist punishments: Death sentences in 20th century U.S. are most common in states that have a high percentage of black residents and have a history of lynchings in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Vigilantism in the U.S. in the late 19th and early 20th centuries is often interpreted as an attempt “to ensure that newly freed blacks reverted to their prior subordinate status...” (p. 658). It is clear that in many locations in the U.S. during this period, lynching was seen by many as an acceptable community response to the threat that crime and the presence of large numbers of blacks in the community were thought to present.

This study examined three periods – the early 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s – in the 48 contiguous states and examined death sentences as a function of the number of lynchings and the percentage of blacks in the state. At a simple descriptive level, it is clear that it is the interaction of these two variables that is critical to understanding the number of death sentences handed down. In states that had a history of large numbers of lynchings (in the period 1889-1931) and a high percentage of blacks in the population (in the 1970s, 80s, or 90s), there were an average of about 20 death sentences handed down. In those states in which the percentage of blacks was about average for the country, but the number of historical lynchings was high, there were only about 9 death sentences. Similarly, those states with an intermediate number of historical lynchings, but which had a large black population, death sentences were also somewhat less common (about 11 in a year). It would appear that a history of lynchings combined with high levels of current racial ‘threat’ lead to high rates of death sentences.

In a more detailed analysis, various other factors were controlled: the conservatism of the state (as measured by congressional voting patterns), whether the state was located in the south, religious fundamentalism, unemployment rate and various crime rates. The effect held: “the combination of prior illegal violence directed largely against blacks and the current racial threat based on the size of the contemporary African American populations... [had] a positive relationship with recent death sentences” (p. 671-672). This relationship held whether one was predicting all death sentences or simply death sentences imposed on African Americans.

A separate analysis was carried out using a different set of data from a different source that contained different estimates of the number of lynchings. This analysis focused only on 10 southern states. The results were the same: a history of large numbers of lynchings combined with a high proportion of the population being African American led to large numbers of death sentences being imposed by the courts.

Conclusion. It would appear that “vivid historical events continue to influence the current behaviour of important social institutions... Acts in the distant past still affect recent legal decisions about who will live and who will die... [T]he 19th century racial caste system and the violent means used to preserve it help to explain why the United States has adopted such an exceptional stance on the death penalty, as compared with the many equivalent democracies that have so emphatically renounced this punishment” (p. 674).

Reference: Jacobs, David, Jason T. Carmichael, and Stephanie L. Kent. (2005) Vigilantism, Current Racial Threat, and Death Sentences. *American Sociological Review*, 70, 656-677.

Urban neighbourhoods that are in the process of being ‘gentrified’ are likely to have relatively high levels of crime because of the social instability that results from the influx of higher income people.

A number of studies have found that economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods have high crime rates. Various explanations for this finding have been examined including the possibility that “community cohesion [is expected] to be low not only in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, but also in areas characterized by strong heterogeneity and instability” (p. 226-227). This study examines the impact of gentrification – the change that occurs when there is an inflow of high income households into a previously low income neighbourhood.

It could be predicted that gentrification would reduce crime because the neighbourhood as a whole would become less disadvantaged. Alternatively, “the... inflow of new affluent residents hampers the realization of social cohesion, because many neighbours are not acquainted yet or else have known each other for a short time. Furthermore, social distance between residents is often more pronounced in gentrifying neighbourhoods due to income differences between old and new residents” (p. 228).

This study used Dutch victimization (survey) data combined with census data. In all, data were available for about 65% of Dutch neighbourhoods. Various measures of the characteristics of survey respondents were used in order to control for compositional differences across neighbourhoods. In addition, measures of general mobility in the neighbourhood, levels of neighbourhood disadvantage and ethnic composition of the neighbourhood were obtained from census data. The main focus was the impact of change in the socioeconomic

character of the neighbourhoods between 1994 and 1998 on crime rates.

Above and beyond individual characteristics of the respondent (e.g., educational level, gender, age), and neighbourhood characteristics (e.g., the proportion of young people or members of non-Western ethnic minorities, or the average income of the community) there were effects of *change* in the socioeconomic makeup of the community. Those neighbourhoods showing moderate or large improvements in the economic circumstances of the residents were more likely to have high levels of violent crime, car thefts (and thefts from cars) and burglaries.

Conclusion. “The chance of becoming the victim of a crime is higher not only in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, but also in neighbourhoods that are undergoing strong socioeconomic improvement...” (p.241). “According to social disorganization theory, such residential instability reduces the potential for collective social control, because unstable neighbourhoods

yield few social contacts between inhabitants.... “In neighbourhoods where improvements are taking place, decreases in victimization can be expected only after stabilization and, possibly, homogenization of the local community” (p. 242).

Reference: Wilsem, Johan Van, Karin Wittebrood, and Nan Dirk De Graff (2006). Socioeconomic Dynamics of Neighbourhoods and the Risk of Crime Victimization: A Multilevel Study of Improving, Declining, and Stable Areas of the Netherlands. *Social Problems*, 53 (2), 226-247.

Another national crime prevention program did not have an impact on crime and violence. Are there lessons to be learned?

In 1999, the government of Finland, working through its municipalities, launched a national crime prevention program. Local governments were expected to identify the nature of the crime problems in their communities, propose solutions, and raise money to fund those solutions. The national program would, in turn, match the funds raised at the local level. A wide range of different programs were implemented under the overall program, including programs addressing risk behaviours (e.g., drinking and drug use) amongst youth, experiments in community policing, and programs to address learning disabilities. Generally, the “social-preventive” model tended to dominate the programs in the communities. The obvious question, then, is whether the overall national funding program had any impact on crime.

Participation of the local communities in the national program was voluntary. The result was that communities varied as to how involved they were in the overall program. Some only submitted a plan for community safety. Others applied for funding, but did not receive matching funds from the national government. Some municipalities received national funding for only one program, whereas others received multiple matching grants. Hence communities could be described as having different levels of involvement in the overall program. Crime rates were estimated using police crime data as well as victimization surveys. The results using data from the crime victimization surveys suggest that levels of participation in the national crime prevention program were not related to the likelihood of crimes being reported to the police; hence police recorded crime could be used as a plausible estimate of crime. In addition, only a subset of communities which were relatively similar were used for the main analyses.

Looking at the prevalence of property crime victimizations as a function of

the intensity of the involvement in the national crime prevention program, the “findings support the conclusion that there is no relationship between program participation and the decline of crime at the local level” (p. 184). A multivariate test of the impact of the program on assault rates (and separately on property crime) showed the same effect: the level of participation in the national crime prevention program was unrelated to crime in 2003 (four years after the crime prevention program was started).

Conclusion. There was no evidence of any impact of Finland’s national crime prevention program on crime. Obviously, there may well have been specific programs that had an impact in some locations, but the national funding program as a whole appeared to have no overall impact. Part of the reason for this failure may have been the “radically decentralized nature of the [national crime prevention program]” (p. 188). Adequate program design and attention to what is known about crime prevention is not likely to have occurred in all communities. Furthermore, adequate evaluations

were impossible in part because of the breadth and number of different programs that were implemented. In addition, the programs were typically implemented in a manner that made it impossible for them to be evaluated. A similar study of a national funding program focused on youth crime published in Denmark in 1990 came up with similar results: “Trends in youth crime between municipalities with different levels of participation” (p. 177) in the program showed no differences in crime rates. It would appear that in crime prevention, as in any public policy area, intuitive beliefs in the adequacy of a program do not guarantee that the program will achieve its intended effects.

Reference: Savolainen, Jukka (2005). Think Nationally, Act Locally: The Municipal-Level Effects of the National Crime Prevention Program in Finland. *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research*, 11, 175-191.

Canada's relatively stable rate of adult imprisonment appears to be the result of a unique combination of constitutional, political, historical, and attitudinal factors.

For at least the past 45 years, Canada's rate of imprisonment has been remarkably stable. Expressed in terms of the number of adults in custody on an average day per hundred thousand people in the population, Canada's overall rate (federal, provincial, and including remand as well as sentenced prisoners) is about 100. Canada's two most obvious comparator countries, England and the U.S., have higher rates and those rates have increased dramatically over this same period.

One factor that clearly does not account for this stability is the rate of reported crime. Crime increased dramatically in Canada, as it did in the U.S., from the early 1960s until the early 1990s. However, unlike the U.S., Canada's imprisonment rates did not increase. During this period, Canada had its share of changes in the criminal law (and in the administration of the criminal justice system). These changes – even changes which, at first glance, would appear to lead inevitably to increases in imprisonment – did not appear to have much impact. For example, in the mid-1990s, mandatory minimum sentences were legislated for a number of serious violent offences committed with a firearm. Changes were also made in procedures for possible release of those serving life sentences for murder. In addition, some maximum sentences were increased. In one province (Ontario) parole releases were severely restricted for those serving sentences of less than two years. But, in general, “the pattern depicted by these examples is one of muted or limited expression of wider punitive trends.... Canada... has largely been able to restrict or contain [the] impact [of these changes]” (p.337).

Borrowing from the language of developmental psychology, it is suggested that Canada has had fewer or muted “risk factors” for higher

imprisonment levels, while at the same time a number of “protective factors” have limited the impact of factors that otherwise could have led to increased imprisonment. These include the following:

- The lack of volatility in sentencing principles and structures that has been experienced in both the U.S. and in England. Even the sentencing changes that were legislated in Canada in the mid-1990s did not constitute an important change in the principles or procedures of sentencing. Sentencing in Canada has – with few exceptions – been left almost entirely in the hands of judges.
- The support for tougher sentences – and the consequential increased imprisonment – has never (at least until recently) been as universal in Canada as it has been in the U.S. and the U.K. Crime was never a core political issue until the 2006 general election. Until recently, politicians were willing to focus on institutions outside of the criminal justice system when discussing ways of reducing crime.
- In various reports on the criminal justice system, as well as the 1996 sentencing legislation, “the leitmotif... is that of an official culture of restraint in the use of incarceration. In striking contrast

with the U.S. and England, Canada has shown deep scepticism about imprisonment as an appropriate response to crime” (p. 344).

- The federal-provincial split in responsibility for criminal justice (criminal *law* is a federal responsibility; the *administration* of justice is provincial) has meant that disagreements among provinces can make it politically difficult for the federal government to create legislation that could increase imprisonment dramatically.

Conclusion. “Canada's stability in levels of incarceration since the 1960s appears to be the result of two interrelated processes” (p. 359). Canada has avoided various factors that appear to lead to increases in imprisonment while at the same time, “Specific historical, cultural, and structural factors have largely shielded Canada from wider punitive forces. While each of these factors exerts its own impact on the limited adoption of wider punitive trends, their importance seems to reside in their interwoven nature” (p. 359).

Reference: Doob, Anthony N. and Cheryl Marie Webster (2006). Countering Punitiveness: Understanding Stability in Canada's Imprisonment Rate. *Law & Society Review*, 40 (2), 325-367.

Reducing society's dependence on psychiatric hospitals increases the size of the homeless population, which, in turn, leads to increased crime and arrests by police.

In the U.S., as in many countries, the number of publicly funded psychiatric beds has declined dramatically in the past 50 years. For example, it is estimated that in 1960 there were 314 beds per 100,000 people in the population. By 1990, this had declined to about 40 per 100,000. Not surprisingly, the average stay in a psychiatric hospital showed similar declines: from about 6 months in the 1960s to about 15 days in the 1990s. But there are spillover effects: research has shown that the number of prison inmates with prior mental health hospitalizations has increased as has the number of mental patients with arrest records. However, it should be pointed out that there are other differences (use of prohibited drugs, fights with officers, etc.) that may account for the increased co-morbidity: hence "if mentally ill persons are overrepresented in criminal justice settings, it is not solely attributable to discriminatory treatment on the part of police, but in part, due to greater likelihood of arrest-generating behaviour" (p. 50).

This study examines "the mediating role of homelessness in the relationship between psychiatric hospital capacity and crime and arrest rates" (p. 52). Using data from 81 U.S. cities with populations of over 50,000 in which estimates of the size of the homeless populations were available, it explored the possibility that homelessness was the result of decreased psychiatric hospital capacity which then led to increased crime and arrests.

Psychiatric hospital capacity in these cities was negatively related to reported violent and property crime and arrests: as capacity went down, crime and arrests went up even when other factors (e.g., economic disadvantage) were controlled for. *Private* psychiatric hospital capacity and *general* hospital capacity did not, on the whole, show this same relationship. However, when homelessness was controlled for (in a multiple regression model with crime as the dependent variable), the effect of public psychiatric hospital capacity

disappeared. In other words, it would appear that the effect of lowered public psychiatric capacity on crime is due to its effect on homelessness. Homelessness, controlling for various standard correlates of crime and controlling for psychiatric hospital capacity, had an impact on crime.

When "arrest rates" were examined, homelessness again had a direct impact. High levels of homelessness led to increases in arrests, but it appeared that psychiatric hospital capacity had a direct impact as well. It would appear that "when social control agents [e.g., the police] must deal with individuals whose behaviour may be disturbing or troublesome, in the absence of hospitalization in public psychiatric institutions as an option, arrests may be more frequent..." (p. 60).

Conclusion. Although there are undoubtedly enormous advantages of caring for psychiatric patients in the community rather than in hospitals, it

would appear that there are also costs of closing psychiatric beds: increased homelessness and increased crime and arrests. The effects on crime, however, may be diminished by addressing the homelessness issue. Reducing the size of the homeless population will also have some effect on arrest rates.

Reference: Markowitz, Fred E. (2006) Psychiatric hospital capacity, homelessness, and crime and arrest rates. *Criminology*, 44 (1), 45-72.

“It’s the economy, stupid.” Strong economies, more than simply low unemployment rates, can lead to lower property crime rates.

For decades, there has been interest in the relationship between economic factors and crime. Though the relationship of the level of economic disadvantage of groups within a community and their level of involvement in crime has been fairly well established, the relationship between macro-indicators of the state of the economy such as the unemployment rate and crime rates in a community has been less consistent. Unemployment rates “can fail to reflect other important phenomena, such as changes in work hours, pay, and economic mobility and security...” (p. 140).

This study uses a more direct measure of aggregate economic activity: the inflation-adjusted “gross state product” for each state in the United States for the period 1986 through 2001. This is a measure of the “total production and income generated” in a state during a calendar year. This measure is only slightly correlated with the unemployment rate. During this period, there were quite dramatic changes in the business cycle in the U.S. as a whole: in the late 1980s, the economy weakened and by 1991 the U.S. was formally described as being in a period of recession. In 1992, the economy began growing again and continued growing until 2001.

Controlling for the proportion of the population in the “crime vulnerable” ages of 17-24, the proportion of the population that was non-white, and the imprisonment rate, the data suggest that during this period the rate of property crime – but not most violent crimes – was related to changes in the business cycles. When the economy improved, property crimes within a state declined. Rates

for the “index crimes” of burglary, larceny and auto theft also decreased as the economy improved. This was also true of robbery – a violent crime typically committed for economic gain. However, rates for murder, rape, and assault, were unaffected by changes in the business cycle.

It was notable that the impact of unemployment was “starkly different” (p. 158) from the impact of the business cycle: unemployment rates had no impact on crime rates during this period.

Conclusion. It would appear that improvements in the economy during the 1990s may be partially responsible for the decrease in property crime and robbery rates in the United States during this period. This suggests that an improving economy is more important than the unemployment rate per se, in part because changes in the overall economy are likely to affect many more people in a variety of different ways. However, neither the strength of the economy nor the unemployment rate appeared to

be related to changes in the rates of “pure” violent crimes such as murder, rape, and assault.

Reference: Arvanites, Thomas M. and Robert H. Defina (2006). Business Cycles and Street Crime. *Criminology*, 44 (1), 139-164.