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Crime, Policing and Compliance with the Law

Mike Hough

Abstract

Social scientific research has made a very substantial contribution to specialist academic understanding of crime and its control. This chapter sketches out that contribution that has been made in three areas: our understanding of crime trends; our knowledge of policing and its effects of crime; and the factors that encourage people to comply with the law. The ways in which practitioners and academics think about these issues has been transformed over the last half-century, and social scientific research is a significant factor in achieving this transformation. However, the same research has achieved a much more tenuous hold on political and public discourse about crime, and the chapter concludes with a discussion of the reasons for this, and offers some thoughts on how social science should aim to extend its reach into highly politicised issues such as “law and order”.

Key words: Crime trends; victim surveys; police effectiveness; procedural justice; penal populism

Introduction

This chapter focusses on the contribution that social scientific research has made to our understanding of crime and its control. As a British criminologist, my focus is on Anglophone criminology, which means – largely but not entirely – Anglo-American work. I have attempted not to be parochial in drawing solely on the British experience. As a discipline (or perhaps a sub-discipline, or a multi-disciplinary fusion of the sociology of deviance, the psychology of offending and criminal law) criminology is a fairly recent invention, which can be dated to the 1950s in the UK and the US. I shall argue that its impact on academic understanding of the issues has been substantial. Until the immediate post-war period, the police, prosecutors and judiciary in industrialised countries were hidden effectively from research scrutiny. I shall summarise developments since then in three areas of criminological research:

- crime trends and social indicators of crime
- police work and the impact of the police on crime
- the role of normative compliance in explaining conformity with the law.

It is hard for someone starting a career in criminology today to appreciate the full extent to which academic knowledge has developed over the last five or six decades. For all this achievement, however, the impact of academic work on criminal justice *policy* remains quite marginal. In part this is because – in the UK context at least – the centre of gravity of academic criminology for much of this period has been characterised by critical commentary¹. But academic reticence to engage with policy is only part of the story: at the same time that research has made great progress, “law and order” has become an increasingly politicised issue, notably in the UK and the US, but also in some mainland European countries. The status of academic criminologists in government in the corridors of power has been in decline, and the voice of the “academic expert” is only one of many, and quite a small voice, in public and political debate about crime. The final part of this chapter discusses the pressures on politicians to offer populist solutions to the problems of crime and disorder, and to misread or ignore what social scientific research has to tell them.

Inevitably I have been selective in focussing on three themes within criminological research, and in doing so have drawn on my own professional interests and experience. I am *not* claiming particular significance for research that addresses these themes. Rather, the research described here is

¹ In its early years the discipline had a symbiotic relationship with Home Office research and policy, and indeed it was this closeness that prompted a reaction that involved a more critical stance exemplified by the establishment of the National Deviancy Conference in 1968, which has dominated sociological criminology ever since.

intended to be illustrative both of the contribution made by criminological research – and of the factors that limit its reach into public and political debate.

Crime trends and the measurement of crime

Criminology is almost by definition an applied discipline, as the object of study – crime – is constructed by social institutions and it would be hard to engage in criminology without discovering *some* impulse either to critique or try to improve the functions of these institutions. Until the 1960s, however, there were large gaps in knowledge about crime. The most significant of these was the lack of any firm knowledge whatsoever about the extent of crime, and the proportion of *crimes committed* that get *reported* by victims to the police, and the proportion of these reported crimes that actually find their way into police statistics. Statisticians from Quetelet² onwards had been aware of this, but lacked any viable technology for estimating the ‘dark figure’ of unrecorded crime.

Edward Troup’s preface to *Criminal Statistics of England and Wales, 1894*, reads as a strikingly contemporary account of the limitations of statistics of crimes recorded by the police (Home Office, 1896, quoted in Morris, 2001), anticipating more recent commentators, notably Kitsuse and Cicourel (1963):

Not only do the figures fall short of the real number of *crimes committed* by the enormous number of unreported or unknown cases ; but there seems much reason to think that, though the instructions as to the mode of collecting them have been made as definite as possible, there is still a tendency on the part of some police forces to adopt a very high standard of what constitutes a *crime committed* or a *crime reported to the police*, and by this means further to reduce the number of cases entered into this column... no doubt it is natural... that they should seek to minimise the amount of unpunished crime existing in their district, but such a tendency detracts so much from the value of the returns of crime that it almost raises the question whether it worth retaining the returns at all... it should be clearly stated that they represent only the crimes known to the police, and do not even approach the real total of crime.

The 1965 US President’s Crime Commission marked the start of a step-change in our understanding of crime levels and trends. Commissioned by President Lyndon Johnson, this was a response to the growth in public concern about crime in America. It was an enormously well-funded enterprise, and

² Adolphe Quetelet, the Belgian sociologist and statistician – See Zauberman and Robert (2011).

from the outset relied heavily on academic expertise to assemble reliable evidence about crime. The evidence gathering process was wide-ranging, but included a national 'victim survey' of 10,000 adults supplemented by three city-level surveys in Washington, Chicago and Boston. These surveys asked representative samples of the population about their experience of a range of different crimes, and by aggregating up to the (national or city-level) population could derive estimates of the extent of crime independently of statistics collated by the police. They showed that non-reporting of crime was extensive, and that the 'dark figure' of unrecorded crime was for most offence groups very much larger than the police count.

Partly on the basis of these snapshot surveys the Commission concluded that it was hard to draw firm conclusions about trends in crime from crime statistics collated by the police as it was "likely that each year police agencies are to some degree dipping deeper into the vast reservoir of unreported crime" (President's Commission, 1967: p30). The Commission recommended a programme of research into surveys of victimisation which led to the establishment in 1973 of the National Crime Survey (NCS, redesigned and relabelled in 1993 as the National Crime Victimization Survey – or NCVS). The NCS/NCVS was the first large-scale national crime survey that yielded reliable estimates of crimes committed against people and their private property *independent of police statistics*.

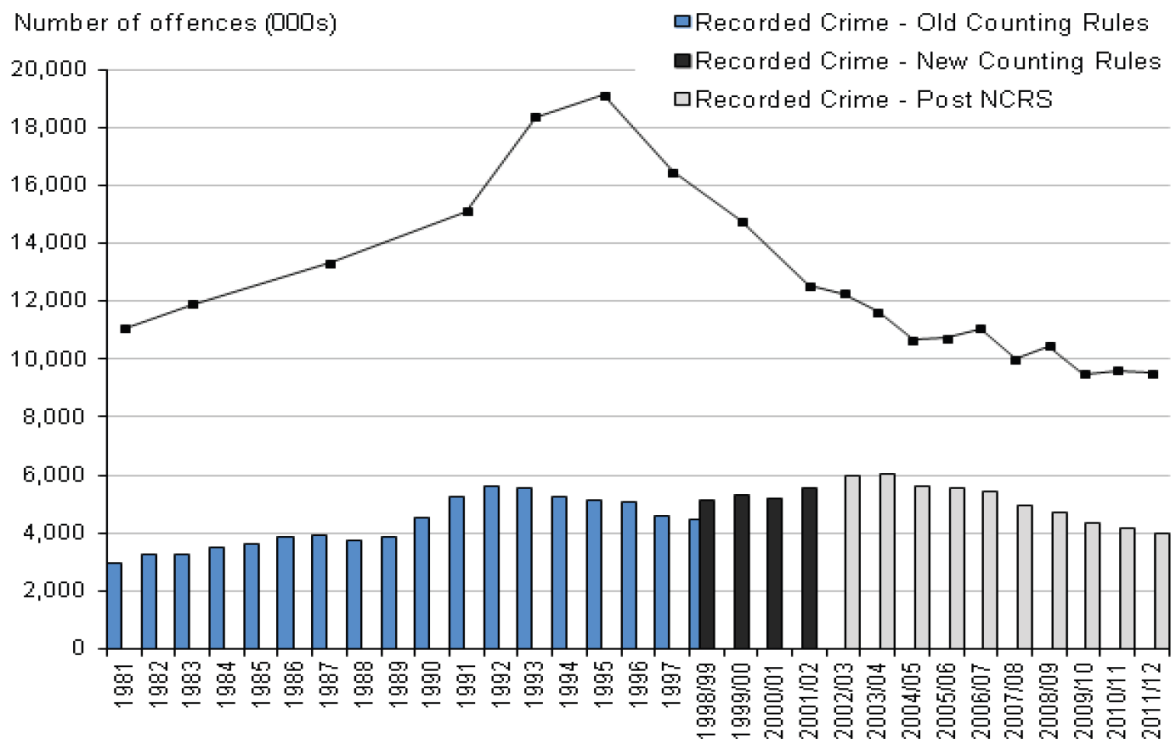
The concept of crime surveys took hold quite quickly in other countries. The Dutch Ministry of Justice (Research and Documentation Centre) launched a national survey in the early 1970s. In the UK the Home Office commissioned the Cambridge Institute of Criminology to carry out a crime survey in London in 1973 (Sparks et al., 1977), and launched a national survey in 1982 (Hough and Mayhew, 1983, Hough and Maxfield, 2007). The British Crime Survey, initially covering England, Wales and Scotland, relied initially on the advice and support of those academics who had been involved in the US programme of survey work (notably Al Biderman, Richard Block, Al Reiss and Wes Skogan) but also drew on the experience of researchers in the Dutch Ministry of Justice, Lesley Wilkins, David Farrington and others. The survey gradually became institutionalised, growing in scale and frequency; it was relabelled the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) in 2012, reflecting the fact that separate though similar surveys are now mounted in Scotland and Northern Ireland. Crime surveys have now been carried out in most European countries, as well as in Australia and New Zealand, and in a range of developing countries. Many of these have used the standardised questionnaire and administration methods of the International Crime Victimization Survey, designed specifically to enable cross-country comparative research (see eg Van Dijk et al., 2007).

These initiatives were, for the most part and especially the US NCVS, in the tradition of social indicators research, rather than exercises in theory-building and theory-testing. Some of the surveys – notably the BCS/CSEW and the Dutch programme of crime surveys – were however conceived of as survey *research*: information was collected not just on respondents' crime experience, but also on their social and economic status, the types of neighbourhood they lived in, the patterns of their everyday 'routine activities', their attitudes to crime and punishment and their concerns about crime, and their ownership and use of crime prevention technology. Over the years, an increasingly fine-grained picture has emerged of variations in vulnerability to crime and the reasons for this.

However the most valuable contribution made by crime surveys probably remains their ability to disentangle changes in levels of reporting and recording of crime from the underlying trend. Figure 1 uses the CSEW to exemplify this. The top line in Figure 1 shows trends in crimes experienced by the population aged 16 or over in England and Wales, as measured by the survey but grossed up to yield national figures. The bars at the bottom of the figure show crimes recorded by the police. For much of the thirty-year period the two trends have been consistent. However, the police statistics actually anticipated the 'real' fall in crime that began in 1995, showing a fall from 1993, arguably as a consequence of political pressure on senior police to deliver reductions in crime. And secondly, the recorded crime statistics show a clear – but artefactual – increase in crime over the six years spanning the millennium, reflecting a succession of changes to the 'counting rules' issued by the Home Office. The fact that the trend in police statistics over this period was upward whilst the CSEW showed falls was exploited to the maximum by politicians. The opposition used the escalating police statistics as a political cosh with which to beat the Government³ - even if anyone with any statistical literacy could see that this trend was misleading, and simply the result of substantial changes in recording practices.

³ The new counting rules had an especially inflationary effect on violent crimes (cf Hough and Maxfield, 2007).

Figure 1 Crime trends in England and Wales, 1981-2012



Source: ONS (2012)

It might be questioned whether this collection of surveys of victimisation can claim to be social *scientific* research. Much of the work has been a-theoretical, often presented as less methodologically problematic than it actually is; it has been much criticised on these grounds by academic criminologists, notably by Young (2011) whose very overstated, if witty, critique of the methods used by quantitative criminologists has been neatly undermined by Garland (2012). There are other limitations to the use of population surveys to measure crime. They are poor at measuring rare crimes, 'victimless' crimes and those with institutional rather than individual victims. They are good at capturing 'crimes of the poor' – burglary, car theft and street robbery – and bad at capturing 'crimes of the powerful' – environmental crimes and large-scale banking frauds, price-fixing cartels and so on. They may lag behind in the measurement of emerging crimes, such as internet fraud and other 'cybercrimes'.

Whatever their limitations however, their contribution has been significant. Countries with well-developed programmes of victim surveys now find themselves very much better positioned to understand crime trends than they were in third quarter of the 20th Century. Without survey data on

victimisation in England and Wales, for example, it would have been hard to move beyond speculation in discussing crime trends over the last three decades. With the CSEW, we have a reasonably accurate estimate of the extent of unreported crime, as least for offences against people and their personal property, and we can track shifts in patterns of reporting to the police and recording by the police.

The value of survey research of this sort is that they yield social indicators that constitute the building blocks for a better understanding about the drivers of crime. Thus it is clear that in the 1980s the police statistics overstated the rate of crime increase because the rate at which crimes were *reported to the police* rose – reflecting growth in phone ownership and in insurance cover. In the mid-1990s, it seems that the rate at which reported crime were *recorded by the police* fell – perhaps reflecting political pressure on the police to meet new crime targets. In the late 1990s and early 2000s recording rates grew again, and there is some indication that recording rates have been falling off since the early 2000s, thus exaggerating the fall in crime. The CSEW findings since 2007 mean that we are quite well placed to say whether or not the global financial crisis and the associated period of recession in the UK had affected national crime rates. In the absence of a downward trend from the CSEW, the most obvious conclusion to draw would be that ‘real’ crime trends were forced upward by recession, but that that financial cut-backs in police staffing – and in their capacity to record crime – over this period had simply served to mask the increase. The CSEW permits us to reject this – albeit sociologically persuasive – theory with some degree of confidence (cf van Dijk, 2013)⁴. Crimes against individuals and their property have continued to fall throughout the financial crisis, even if there is some evidence that the police statistics have overstated the rate of this fall (ONS, 2013).

If crime surveys have improved academic and professional understanding of crime levels and trends, this understanding has failed to penetrate political and public debate about crime. Despite almost two decades of falling crime, the CSEW shows that majorities of the population think that nationally crime is still rising – even if majorities think that crime is falling in their neighbourhood. Until very recently neither the mass media nor politicians were prepared to accept that crime has been in decline. It would appear that pessimism about falling standards of behaviour is very deeply ingrained

⁴ The downward trend in crime – exhibited by many developed countries – stands in need of explanation, and criminologists have not (yet) done a good job here. Improved security and better anti-theft design is clearly part of the story. To some extent the growth in crimes poorly measured by both police statistics and surveys will have offset the falls in conventional ‘volume’ crimes like burglary and vehicle crime, but the new forms of crime almost certainly involve different victims and offender groups than the traditional ones.

into the public and political consciousness. We shall return to this issue, and its implications, at the end of the chapter.

Police work and the impact of the police on crime

Crime surveys exploited developing survey technology to provide answers to questions that had historically been easy to ask but hard to answer – clearly occupying the Rumsfeld-ian territory of ‘known unknowns’. By contrast, social research into policing has proved much more iconoclastic, revealing that policing institutions function in ways that are substantially at odds with received wisdom – charting ‘unknown unknowns’. Until the 1960s the police in most developed countries were largely closed to independent or academic scrutiny, which enabled them to define their own role – or public perceptions of this role. This changed in the early 1960s in the US and the UK, and somewhat later in mainland Europe. In 1980 Ron Clarke and I characterised this body of research as undermining professional and popular assumptions about the police, which we called the ‘rational deterrent’ model of policing (Clarke and Hough, 1980, p2). The key assumptions of this model were that:

- the police were the primary agents of social control
- that social control and crime control were synonymous
- that police work was mainly to do with crime fighting and the deployment of deterrent strategies.

More recently Reiner (2012) has described this process as a dialectic one. He identifies as the thesis the popular (and political/media) conception of the police and crime busters; the antithesis was formed by research showing that only a minority of police time was spent on crime, that the crime dealt with by the police was largely reported to them by the public, and that their deterrent impact was marginal. He describes the academic synthesis of these two positions as presenting the police as an emergency service with a capacity to deploy coercive force, whether to deal with crime or to resolve other problems that require immediate attention.

The sociological policing research of the 1960s and 1970s was genuinely path-breaking. Key pieces of work include Reiss’ (1971) detailed observational research of police at work in the US, and work in the UK by Banton (1964); both studies showed the wide range of demands, most of them non-criminal, made on the police. Punch’s (1979) work characterised the police as a ‘secret social

service'. Egon Bittner's (1970, 1974) work remains very widely cited as providing an important redefinition of the police mandate; his two most quoted passages are probably his characterisation of police work as, "something-that-ought-not-to-be-happening-and-about-which-somone-had-better-do-something-now!" (1974, p.30), and his statement of the unique competence of the police:

The specific capacity of the police is wholly defined in their capacity for decisive action... More specifically, that the feature of decisiveness derives from the authority to overpower opposition in the "then and there" of the situation of action. *The policeman, and the policeman alone, is equipped, entitled, and required to deal with every exigency in which force may have to be used to meet it*" (Bittner, 1974, p.35).

Bittner's account of the police as an *emergency* service whose effective delivery relied on the capacity of deploying coercive force was consistent with accounts of what the police in developed countries actually do. Manning's (1977) influential account of policing in London confirmed the disjunction between the reality of day-to-day police work and the idea of policing as crime-busting that is embedded in political and media discussions of policing. He argued that the police were engaged in "the dramatic management of the appearance of effectiveness" and that whatever effect they had on people's offending, this was mediated through symbolism – in other words, that an important dimension of policing operates at the symbolic level.

If these studies demonstrated that police work actually bore little resemblance to rational-deterrent crime-fighting, a series of important experimental US studies also showed that crime levels were unaffected by changes at the margin⁵ in levels of car and foot patrol (see especially Kelling et al., 1974; Pate et al., 1976 and Clarke and Hough, 1985 for a summary). Yet further work suggested that the detective function was less one of systematic sifting of evidence that eventually identified the culprit, and more one of collecting straightforward evidence from victims and witnesses who had already identified the offender⁶ (Greenwood et al., 1980).

Many of these studies from the third quarter of the twentieth century are now classics of social science research into policing, and remain as essential reference points for modern academic scholarship in the field. The argument that changing levels of police resources or policing strategies achieves at best small gains at the margin in terms of reduced crime remains broadly accepted (cf.

⁵ Few would argue that there is no impact in *gross changes* in police levels, for example when saturation patrolling is introduced, or *all* police presence is removed as in the case of police strikes.

⁶ This is not to suggest that detections *never* result from careful sifting of forensic evidence, and techniques such as DNA testing make such cases more frequent. But they did not – and very probably still do not represent the typical route to detection.

Bradford, 2012). The synthesis offered by Reiner (2012) stressing the role of the police as responding to emergencies would probably command widespread agreement from academic criminologists. It is significant, nevertheless, that most of the studies cited here were published in the 1970s and 1980s. Subsequent work has served to refine or develop sociological perspectives on the police function, but not to radically reshape the field. Indeed the political task facing academic criminologists working in this area has been to convey the same message to successive generations of politician – that the police function is complex, multi-faceted and less centrally to do with crime control than is popularly assumed.

Research into normative compliance in explaining conformity with the law

The third research theme to be considered here is work on the role of institutions in securing normative compliance (cf. Bottoms, 2002). This can be seen as a natural development of research challenging an overly simple ‘rational deterrent’ conception of police function, in providing a fuller account of the processes by which compliance with authority is actually secured. Procedural justice theory has its roots in Weberian and Durheimian sociology but emerged in the US over the last twenty five years (Tyler, 2006, 2011a, 2011b; Tyler and Huo, 2002). It has tended to contrast instrumental and normative mechanisms for securing compliance, proposing that in many areas of behaviour, people’s behaviour is guided by normative rather than instrumental considerations. The key propositions of procedural justice theory are that the institutions of justice can shape – to some extent – the norms that guide people’s behaviour and that treating people fairly is the key to doing so. Trust and legitimacy are central concepts: it is proposed that fair treatment by those wielding authority builds trust; that trust confers legitimacy on the institution in question; and that if those who are subject to its authority confer legitimacy on it, they will comply with its requirements. Procedural justice theory has the – somewhat paradoxical – attraction of providing an instrumental justification for ensuring that the justice system acts with decency, fairness and legality.

The large body of US evidence is being increasingly supplemented by UK theorising and empirical work (eg (Bottoms and Tankebe, 2012; Hough et al., 2013; Jackson et al, 2012a; Jackson et al, 2012b; Tankebe, 2013), to support procedural justice theory. Much of this relies on population surveys, which consistently demonstrate the expected correlations between fair treatment, trust, perceived legitimacy and compliance. There is rather less experimental research testing whether these relationships are in fact causal though the work that has been done has been positive (notably Mazerolle et al., 2013). Our own work (Hough and Sato, 2011; European Social Survey, 2011, 2012; Jackson et al., 2012; Hough et al., 2013) has used the European Social Survey to examine variations

across country; again we have replicated the hypothesised relationships between perceptions of fair treatment, trust, legitimacy and compliance, but we have also found that ‘moral alignment’ between institutions and those over whom they exercise authority is a critical legitimating factor, as proposed by Beetham (1991). That is, people are more likely to confer legitimacy on the police or the courts if they believe that these operate to the same moral values as themselves.

It is hard for someone immersed in a particular field of research to assess what levels of visibility and influence this body of work has achieved. In the US procedural justice research appears to be well-established. Large numbers of papers on the subject are presented at the major criminological conferences and the ideas appear to be finding some traction amongst politicians and criminal justice managers. Part of the reason for this is that the sheer cost of the reliance of instrumental strategies involving mass incarceration is creating pressure to find more financially viable alternatives. Another factor may be the fact that procedural justice theory provides a useful and appropriate set of concepts to apply to the – increasingly popular – policing strategies that have a neighbourhood or community focus.

Research is less developed on this side of the Atlantic. There are various groupings of academics and police researchers that are active in the area. In the UK, in addition to our own work with the European Social Survey mentioned above, some significant work has been done within and for the Metropolitan Police Service in London (eg Jackson et al., 2012a) and the UK National Policing Improvement Agency, now the College of Policing (eg Myhill and Quinton, 2011, Myhill and Bradford, 2012). Various national bodies, such as the National Audit Office and Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary have made supportive comments or references to procedural justice. Civil servants within the Home Office and Ministry of Justice are familiar with the concepts. But it would be wrong to suggest that procedural justice ideas have achieved any real purchase on political or media discourse. Even though there has been cross-party support for neighbourhood policing (a variant of community policing that has been adopted nationally) politicians justify this not in terms of its legitimating capacity, but in terms of a partnership between police and public in “the fight against crime”. It would seem that social scientific research can reach into the technocratic parts of the process by which justice policy is formulated but has much more difficulty in making itself heard amongst politicians. Let us now turn to the reasons for this.

Criminology and politics

In her first major speech after her appointment in 2010, Theresa May, the UK Home Secretary at the time of writing, told senior police officers, "Your job is nothing more, and nothing less, than to cut

crime"⁷. This sound-bite neatly incapsulates three key assumptions that the criminological research discussed here has called into question: that crime is rising, that police work is solely about crime control, and that the police have the capacity to drive crime down. This is not intended as a partisan criticism of the current UK coalition government. Politicians from all the main political parties have struck similar postures over the last two decades. In the UK (or at least in Westminster politics) talking tough on crime is routine for Home Secretaries, Justice Secretaries, Prime Ministers and their opposition shadows.

The main reason for this are to be found in the rapid increase in the temperature of criminal justice debate, which can be dated to the early 1990s⁸. The main heating source was provided by year-on-year increases in recorded crime – averaging six per cent per year in England and Wales for over three decades, which not surprisingly was reflected in growing public concern about crime. But a more proximate reason was that New Labour was overhauling policy in many key areas, including crime, in anticipation of the coming election. These developments created the pre-conditions for the then shadow Home Secretary, Tony Blair, to mount an effective challenge to the Conservative Party's status as "the party of law and order"⁹. He famously promised to be 'tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime', initially in early 1993¹⁰. The media construed the emphasis to be on the first half of the promise, which created considerable pressure on the Government to show similar steel, and Michael Howard, the Home Secretary, responded later in the year with his own sound-bite, "Prison works". Since then, the competition between the parties to 'out-tough' each other has been relentless. The upshot has been a process of over-simplification of the issues in political (and media) discussion of crime – and there has been little patience for academics who insist that things aren't that simple.

This process of 'politicisation' and over-simplification has been amplified by two further factors. The first of these is the diminished role of the 'technocratic expert' in social policy, and a greater responsiveness to the voice of the public (cf Giddens, 1991). This trend has been particularly marked in countries such as the UK and the US with adversarial political systems, on the one hand, and attachment to neo-liberal market principles, on the other. In these countries, political

⁷ www.gov.uk/government/speeches/police-reform-theresa-mays-speech-to-the-national-policing-conference

⁸ A metaphor neatly built upon by Loader and Sparks (2011), who explore the scope of various 'cooling devices'.

⁹ Downes and Morgan (2007) suggested that the Conservative Party started this process in 1979, making support for the police a key political issue. However, the Labour Party did little to challenge the government's crime policies until 1992.

¹⁰ Interview on BBC Radio 4 'The World This Weekend', Jan 10, 1993. See also Blair (1993).

responsiveness to public opinion has taken on an overtly populist quality; in criminal justice, the phenomenon of penal populism is well documented, whereby political leaders promote policies largely or entirely for the electoral advantage they confer, rather than from knowledge or conviction that they are the best policies (eg Roberts et al., 2003).

Intertwined with this has been the development of a 'small state' style of governance in which politicians specify the *outcomes* required of state institutions such as the police, usually in the form of numerical targets, but leave the detail of the *processes* to local agencies. These principles of 'New Public Management' (NPM) are often applied in parallel with processes of 'marketisation' – where private sector companies compete for contracts to provide public services – and consumer choice – where service recipients can exercise control over the services they receive (cf Hood, 1991).

I have argued elsewhere (eg Hough, 2007) that criminal justice policy has suffered badly from the combined effects of penal populist and NPM policies. Once politicians adopt a crude and simple instrumental discourse about "the war on crime", they find themselves trapped within its logic – partly because they judge that this is the only one that will be favourably received by the media (and, behind them, the electorate); and equally, the logic of NPM has driven politicians to adopt simple numerical targets that are built around crime and detection statistics. In combination, the increased weight given by politicians to the public voice and the increased uptake of forms of governance through numerical target-setting have squeezed out subtlety from political discourse about crime and justice.

Whether these trends towards over-simplification of policy and insulation of policy from academic research are structural – in the sense of being an inherent feature of politics in late-modern industrialised societies – remains to be seen. One school of thought is that the 'punitive turn' that is a consequence of penal populism is restricted to specific countries with particular political traditions and patterns of media ownership. Thus Tonry (2007) has argued that the US – and to a lesser extent the UK – are the outliers, and that politicians in mainland Europe can and should resist the pressures that draw them away from rational policy. On the other hand, plenty of mainland-European criminologists argue that the US and UK are less outliers than the advance guard of a new and nastier form of adversarial, media-led politics (eg Sack and Schlepper, 2013).

There is room for a little optimism. In the UK at least, there has been a retreat from the worst excesses of NPM, as well as frequent calls for more mature and less adversarial forms of politics. And

the falls in the main indices of crime across several jurisdictions may have the effect of cooling the climate of criminal and penal policy debate. Certainly polls measuring public anxiety about social issues have shown a reduction in crime concerns – which appear displaced by concerns about the economy. And following a series of media scandals and the Leveson Inquiry (Leveson, 2012), there are signs that politicians are prepared to be more robust in their handling of the press. It is as yet unclear as to whether these developments will create more political space for engagement with social scientific research.

There are probably things that academic criminologists can do to increase the chances of more fruitful engagement with politicians. In the first place, this requires more positive enthusiasm for engaging in ‘public criminology’, with a view to improving what Loader and Sparks describes as taking on the role of a ‘democratic under-labourer’:

Democratic under-labouring is: committed to both participating within, and to facilitating and extending, institutional spaces that supplement representative politics with inclusive public deliberation about crime and justice matters, whether locally, nationally or in emergent transnational spaces. In this regard, the public value of democratic under-labouring lies not in cooling down controversies about crime and social responses to it, but in playing its part in figuring out ways to bring the heat within practices of democratic governance. ... If one was to encapsulate all the above in a single phrase it would this: intellectual ambition, political humility. (Loader and Sparks, 2010, p. 132)

It is questionable whether the majority of academic criminologists are ready to grasp this role enthusiastically. This is because engaging with politicians and their policy officials is quite a time-consuming process involving the careful building of networks and relationships – which can often be distracting from what academics might reasonably see as their ‘day jobs’ – teaching and publishing academic works; and reflecting attitudes in the wider public, academia has its fair share of cynicism about politicians. However, the incentives that are now being built into the UK funding system for higher education include rewards for research that can demonstrate ‘impact’ on policy or on broader social well-being. This may focus minds on contributing not only to the body of academic knowledge but also to the social good, measured in the short or medium term by contributions to the political process.

However, nurturing an ambition to contribute to the policy process is not the same as achieving it. Several other preconditions are required. Considerable planning and positioning is usually needed by

any policy researcher to ensure that their research gets heard by the right people, and there is also an element of luck and happenstance in the process. Having something coherent to say is, of course, the first requirement. To be able to say it with authority is also important, and building authority in the eyes of the right people is a slow process. Timing is a critical factor, as politicians need ideas at different points in the political cycle – notably when in opposition and developing a new set of policies for the election. Scale can be important, as people tend to set most store by large-scale research. And having non-academic allies – or, at least, sympathetic listeners – is critically important, whether these are politicians and their advisors, civil servants, think-tanks and lobbying groups, criminal justice agencies or journalists. What is undeniably the case – and what is very obvious to anyone who has engaged with policy for any length of time – is that criminologists are indeed minor players with small voices in the policy arena, and that their research will achieve little if they fail to foster, in some way or other, forms of reach into the political process additional to the publication process.

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