ISSUE ANALYSIS

The Thinning
Blue Line

Nicole Billante

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The likelihood that a criminal will be caught after committing an offence is an important deterrent for potential offenders. However, on average across Australia, the number of police has not increased significantly enough to combat rising crime.

- Reported serious crime (homicide, rape/sexual assault, assault, robbery, break and enter, and motor vehicle theft) has risen around 450% since 1964.

- Across Australia, the number of police per 10,000 people has risen by about 37% between 1964 and 2000. But the growth rate of serious crime outstripped the increase in police more than tenfold.

- In 1964 there were some 225 police officers per 1,000 serious crimes. In 2000 this number fell to just under 60.

- The proportion of crimes cleared fell by nearly one-third between 1964 and 2001. In 2001 only roughly 22% of serious crimes were cleared.

The statistics seem to demonstrate that we require more police if we are to effectively combat rising crime. But increased police numbers must be accompanied by strategic deployment of the increased resources to be effective.

To gauge the number of new police requires a focus on what we need our police to be doing and whether there are enough police to do that effectively. The best use of police resources is where public debate needs to be centred.

Nicole Billante is a Research Assistant at The Centre for Independent Studies. The author wishes to thank Peter Saunders and Susan Windybank for helpful comment on an earlier draft. The usual disclaimers apply.

Introduction

Reported serious crime (homicide, rape/sexual assault, assault, robbery, break and enter, and motor vehicle theft) has risen around 450% since 1964.* We are told by our politicians that we are pouring more resources into fighting crime than ever before—greater numbers of police, housing more prisoners, and higher budgets. And yes, they are correct; this is what the statistics tell us. We now have around 21 police per 10,000 people (up from roughly 14), we have doubled our prison population, and crime and justice expenditure has increased (adjusted for inflation) from around $100 per person in 1970 to $320 per person in 2001.[1] But this is not all that the statistics are telling us.

In a previous paper, 'Does Prison Work?',[2] we found that while the prison population has risen 50%, this has far from kept up with the rise in serious crime. The chances of going to prison if you commit a serious crime have fallen from 1 in 7 in 1964 to 1 in 32 in 2000. International comparisons with the United States, England and Wales, and New Zealand showed strong patterns of a rise in crime in response to falling imprisonment per crime. Importantly, this reversed when penal policies changed, with a significant fall in crime when imprisonment was increased in the US, England and Wales, and New Zealand. This seemed to lend weight to the argument that 'prison does work'.

One of the important points underpinning this argument is based on the economic theory of crime—namely prison has a deterrent effect. Gary Becker, in his original work on the economic theory of crime, argued that crime involves a rational calculation by the offenders of likely costs, benefits and risks of committing an offence.[3] Of course, different individuals break the law for different reasons, so that not all criminals will make rational calculations (for example, offences relating to mental illness). But proponents of the theory argue that at the margins deterrence can reduce crime.[4]

Prison is not the only deterrent. Becker argues that rational calculations can be altered by raising the likelihood that offenders will be caught and/or by increasing the severity of the punishment. In fact, Becker points out that increasing the likelihood of getting caught is more cost effective than using punishment to deter. Cathy Buchanan and Peter Hartley argue that the deterrent effect is dependent on whether the offender is more risk-averse (deterred more by the chance or getting caught) or risk-loving (deterred more by the severity of punishment).[5] In their 1997 Australian study, Philip Bodman and Cameron Maultby found that whether the chance of getting caught and/or the severity of punishment had a greater deterrent effect is dependent on the crime, but overall policing had a 'significant negative, deterrent effect for all crime categories considered'.[6]

If this is the case, it seems contradictory that Australia has experienced an increase in both the number of police officers and its crime rate. However, a closer look at the statistics tells us a story similar to what happened in our prisons since the 1960s—as crime was going up, the number of police per crime was going down.

Police numbers

Across Australia, the number of police per 10,000 people has risen by about 37% between 1964 and 2000.[7] The ratio of police to persons varies by state, but with the exclusion of the Northern Territory, all states and the ACT have similar policing levels and have followed similar patterns in increasing their police forces.[8]

The statistics tell us that this increase does not appear to be significant enough to combat the rise of crime over the same period. The growth rate of serious crime outstripped the increase in police over tenfold.

A comparison of police and serious crime per head of population demonstrates to some extent the disparity between the increases (see figure 1). As crime has continued to rise, police numbers have plateaued since the 1980s.

> **Overall policing had a 'significant, negative, deterrent effect for all crime categories considered'.**

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* In order to obtain cleared offences it was necessary to use some different sources than were used for our previous piece 'Does Prison Work?'. The reader may therefore notice slight differences in figures reported but will note that the trends are significantly similar.

It is when police numbers are expressed as a ratio to serious crime (referred to as the strength of the police henceforth) instead of per population that the problem with police numbers becomes clear (see figure 2). As crime per head of population has been on the rise since the 1960s we have failed to provide equivalent police numbers. In 1964 there were some 225 police officers per 1,000 serious crimes. In 2000 this number fell to just under 60. This is not even taking into account the minor offences that police deal with on a daily basis (a function that according to the 'broken windows theory' is just as vital to combating crime).[9]

Figure 1
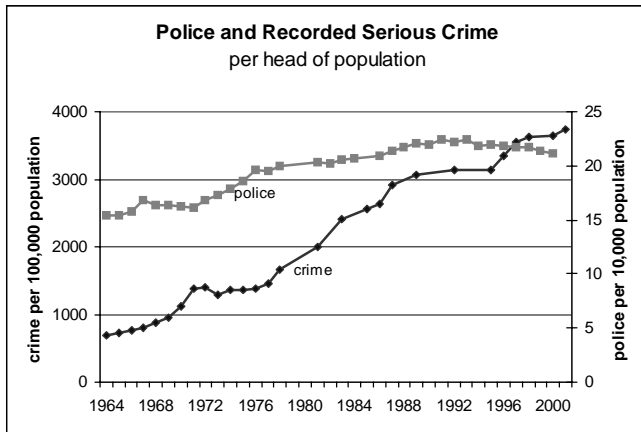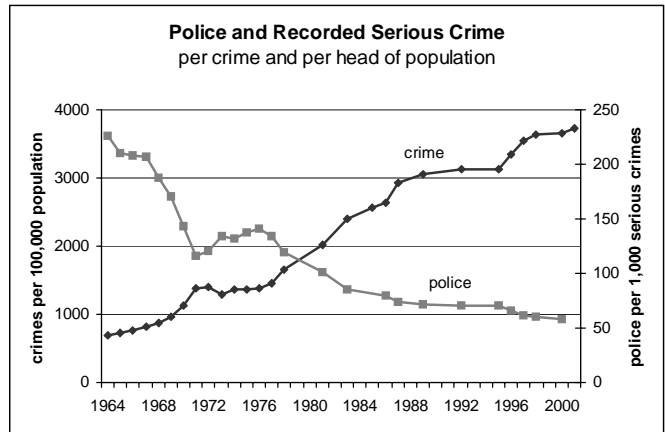
Police and Recorded Serious Crime
per head of population

Figure 2

Police and Recorded Serious Crime
per crime and per head of population

Police Source: ABS Year Book Australia, various years.
Crime Sources: AIC Sourcebook, NSW Recorded Crime, Victoria Police Crime Statistics, Crime and Justice in SA, Queensland Police Statistical Review, ABS Year Book Queensland, Western Australia Police Service Statistics, ABS Year Book WA, Tasmania Police Annual Reports, AFP Annual Reports, NT Police Annual Reports.

**The impact on police effectiveness**

The numbers of crimes that are solved by police (referred to as cleared crimes) are often used as a means of examining police effectiveness. This is in fact a crude measure of police work, as there are also strong arguments to be made for the impact police have on public perceptions of crime/fear of crime, feeling of public safety, and disorder/incivility, all of which cannot be captured in clear-up rates. However, when looking at the direct impact that police can have on deterring criminals, clear-up rates are an appropriate measure as they assess the likelihood that an offender will be apprehended by police.

As the strength of the police force was declining and crime rates were escalating in the 1960s and 1970s, clear-up rates suffered. While the raw number of crimes cleared has steadily increased since 1964, the percent of crimes cleared[10] fell to a low of around 15% in the mid-1980s and has only recently begun to improve.

The pattern of clear-up rates closely followed the drop in the strength of the police force until the late 1980s. This seems to indicate that as police strength declined there was a direct impact on the effectiveness/ability of police to catch criminals. More recently though, despite no alteration in police strength, clear-up rates have improved (a point to be discussed further).

Of concern is that despite clear-up rates improving in the 1990s, the crime rate has continued to go up. The impact that an increase in cleared crimes should theoretically have on crime has not yet eventuated. There may be reasons for this that do not contradict the theory of deterrence. The improvement in clear-up rates may not be significant enough to have a noticeable effect on crime. In 2001 only roughly 22% of serious crimes were cleared. Also, we can not expect the impact to be immediate and we may see in the next few years (provided crimes cleared continued to increase) some response in a lower crime rate. This is a reminder that the police, despite their central and important role in fighting crime, are not a panacea to the crime problem Australia is facing.

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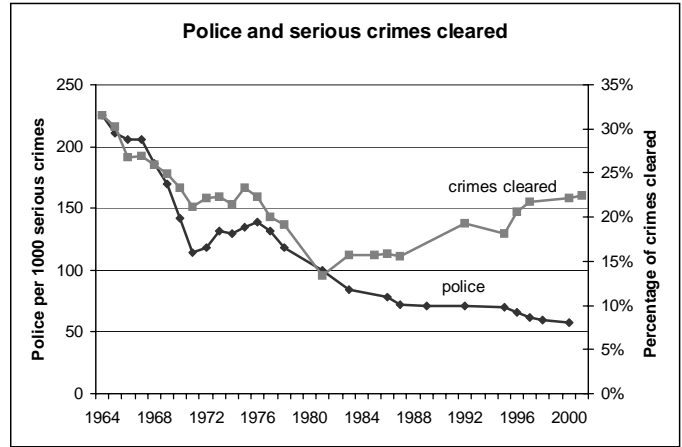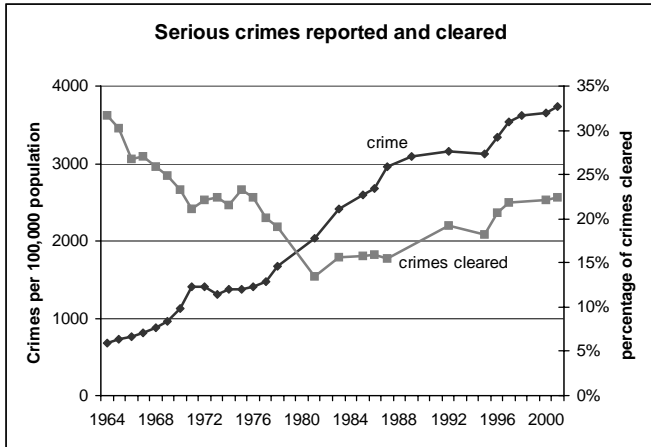
Serious crimes reported and cleared   **Police and serious crimes cleared**

Police Source: ABS Year Book Australia, various years.
Crime Sources: AIC Sourcebook, NSW Recorded Crime, Victoria Police Crime Statistics, Crime and Justice in SA, Queensland Police Statistical Review, ABS Year Book Queensland, Western Australia Police Service Statistics, ABS Year Book WA, Tasmania Police Annual Reports, AFP Annual Reports, NT Police Annual Reports.

What crimes are being cleared?

The drop from 32% to 22% does not look that significant at first glance. Clear-up rates have always been low so is the drop really much cause for concern? A review of the statistics says we should be concerned. The proportion of crimes cleared has fallen by nearly one-third during a period in which crime rose by 450%.

When the statistics are broken down a little further, the story is even more alarming. The clear-up rates for violent crimes against the person (homicide, rape, assault, and robbery) were 74% in 1964 and have fallen to around 62% in 2001. This is a drop of about 16%. Clear-up rates for robbery have the lowest clear-up rates for crimes against the person at 31% in 1964 to 27% in 2001, a drop of 13%.

Property crimes account for the most significant fall in clear-up rates. There has been a 60% drop in property crime clear-up rates since 1964. Break and enter/ burglaries cleared have fallen from 31% to 10% and motor vehicle thefts cleared from 23% to 13%.

What this means is that thieves are the ones benefiting from the decline in the strength of the police force. In his recent article 'Law and Order Blues', Don Weatherburn, Director of the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, summarises that 'The high rates of property crime in Australia are sometimes dismissed on the grounds that most people are insured and suffer no actual material loss.'[11] This argument may be a pragmatic one, but it overlooks the impact that property offences can have on the community.

The impact of rising crime

At the heart of liberal democracies is the notion of property rights. To disregard the escalating number of property crimes and failure to apprehend the offenders as inconsequential is an affront to the core values that underpin the rule of law. One of the primary roles of government is to protect its citizens from breaches of the law. Police, as agents of the state, must uphold laws or risk the rule of law falling into disrepute given that the public consistently rank break and enter as the crime of most concern.[12]

All crime, including property crime, has an impact on social cohesion. As Francis Fukuyama argues, trust is an essential element for the smooth functioning of society. Crime by its very nature breaks the mutual trust on which social cohesion and social capital are founded. Fukuyama points to the abandonment of inner cities for the suburbs in the US and subsequent economic and racial divides in American cities. Simple acts, such as parents teaching their children to be distrustful of strangers, are evidence of the negative impact of rising crime on society.[13]

> The proportion of crimes cleared has fallen by nearly one-third during a period in which crime rose by 450%.

A major study on fear of crime in Australia found that perceptions of crime and consequent fear of becoming a victim of crime has led to several groups, such as women and the elderly, changing their behaviour in response to perceived crime levels. This included avoiding certain places or not going out alone after dark.[14] Such changes in behaviour tie in closely to the broken windows theory of crime.[15] According to the theory, leaving the petty crimes and incivilities unchecked in society conveys a sense of disorder—that no one is in control. Law abiding citizens are driven off the streets as they retreat to their homes and this creates a breeding ground for crime as criminals take advantage of weak social controls. The authors of the theory, James Q. Wilson and George Kelling, argue that police should focus on the little things in order to combat the big problems. There is no room in the theory for concentrating on crimes that may be pragmatically viewed as doing more harm than others, for all crime in the end is harmful to society.

So do we need more police?

In a time of rising crime, when our clear-up rates are relatively low and the ratio of police per crime means that they are at a fifth of their capacity compared to what they were in the 1960s, is the answer to fighting crime an increase in the number of police? The answer is yes. We certainly appear to need more police to apprehend the perpetrators of a growing number of crimes. But we cannot limit ourselves to asking for more police alone. We must also demand a review of how our police are being used.

A National Institute of Justice report to the US Congress, which reviewed years of scientific research on police, showed that it was not enough to simply hire more police.[16] The scientific evidence focusing only on police numbers is rather mixed and methodologically weak, but the strongest study[17] does present consistent evidence that the crime rate fell following an increase in police numbers. However, when the author Lawrence Sherman completed a review of research on several aspects of policing he concluded that increased police numbers must be accompanied by strategic deployment of the increased resources. Sherman argues that 'hiring more police to provide rapid 911 responses, unfocused random patrol, and reactive arrests does not prevent serious crime' but police can prevent crime 'by using certain methods under certain conditions'.[18]

The rise in clearance rates despite the lack of change in police strength may indicate that Australian police have been utilising their resources more effectively. Advances in technology, such as CCTV (closed circuit television) and DNA matching may have also contributed to improved clear-up rates. There is clearly more that can be done, however, as crime is continuing to rise.

Increasing our police numbers to the levels of the 1960s would be a costly exercise. Don Weatherburn has estimated that an increase of 1,000 officers in New South Wales would cost approximately $77 million.[19] To increase the strength of the police force to the level of 1964 would require around 110,000 more police nationwide. The billions of dollars needed to do this is hard to justify bearing in mind that clear-up rates in 1964 were only 32%. But this does not mean that we should disregard an increase in police numbers altogether. Much like the conclusions that prison does work, such policies do not come cheaply but should not be dismissed solely on a fiscal basis without thorough review.

To gauge the number of new police requires a focus on what we need our police to be doing and whether there are enough police to do that effectively. The best use of police resources is where public debate needs to be centred. Our future work will be examining this from an Australian perspective—looking at what has worked overseas and whether it can be applied to the Australian crime problem.

We cannot limit ourselves to asking for more police alone. We must also demand a review of how our police are being used.

Statistical Appendix

It is difficult to compile longitudinal reported crime rates for Australia due to a lack of standard classification for offences. Each state has historically had its own classification for offences so what may be included as assault in one state may not be in another. However, in 1964, the first attempts were made to report on national recorded crime statistics for the offences of homicide, serious assault, robbery, rape, breaking and entering, and motor vehicle theft.

These offences have been the basis for the statistics used in this paper, as reported in annual reports of the state and territory police. While there are concerns about the comparability of the statistics between states the data are still able to show us a general trend in recorded crime over time. Furthermore, recorded crime statistics should always be read with caution given problems arising from changes in police recording practices or in victims' willingness to report offences to the police.

This caveat applies to the exact figures used for this paper, but the overall trends are consistent with previously published accounts of Australia's crime rates.

Statistical Sources

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Endnotes

1. In order to obtain cleared offences it was necessary to use some different sources than were used for our previous piece 'Does Prison Work'. The reader may therefore notice slight differences in figures reported but will note that the trends are significantly similar.

2. ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics), *Year Book Australia,* ABS Cat. No. 1301.0 (Canberra: ABS, 1973 and 2003). Expressed in 1995 dollars.

3. Peter Saunders and Nicole Billante, 'Does Prison Work?', *Policy* 18:4 (Summer 2002/03), 3-8.

4. Gary Becker, 'Crime and punishment: An economic approach', *Journal of Public Policy* 76 (1968), 169-217.

5   Cathy Buchanan and Peter Hartley, *The Economic Theory of Crime* (Sydney: The Centre for Independent Studies, 1992).

6   Buchanan and Hartley, *The Economic Theory of Crime*, 28-29.

7   Philip M Bodman and Cameron Maultby, 'Crime, punishment and deterrence in Australia', *International Journal of Social Economics* 24:7/8/9 (1997), 895.

8   ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics), *Year Book Australia,* ABS Cat. No. 1301.0 (Canberra: ABS, respective years).

9   The Northern Territory has approximately double the ratio of police officers to persons. Their fluctuations in this ratio are out of step with the other areas of Australia but this seems to reflect movements in population more than movements in police numbers.

10   See Nicole Billante and Peter Saunders, *Six Questions About Civility* (Sydney: The Centre for Independent Studies, 2002).

11   Excludes Tasmania as cleared crimes not reported at individual offence level. Tasmania is included in statistics used for figures 1 and 2.

12   Don Weatherburn, 'Law and Order Blues', *The Australia and New Zealand Journal of Criminology* 35:2 (2002), 133. To be clear, this is not Weatherburn's argument, rather a summary of points he is arguing against.

13   Weatherburn, 'Law and Order Blues' citing the ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics), *Crime and Safety in Australia,* ABS Cat. No. 4105.0 (Canberra: ABS, 1998).

14   Francis Fukuyama, *Trust*: *The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity*, (London: Penguin 1996), 310.

15   NCAVAC (National Campaign Against Violence and Crime Unit), *Fear of Crime: Summary Volume*, Canberra: Attorney General's Department 1998).

16   James Q. Wilson and George Kelling, *Broken Windows*, Atlantic Monthly 249:2 (1982), 29-38.

17   Lawrence W. Sherman, 'Policing for Crime Prevention', in *Preventing Crime: What Works, What Doesn't, What's Promising,* prepared for the National Institute of Justice by Lawrence W. Sherman, Denise Gottfredson, Doris MacKenzie, John Eck, Peter Reuter, and Shawn Bushway (Washington DC: National Institute of Justice 1998), 8/1-65.

18   Argued by Sherman to be a study by Thomas Marvell and Carlisle Moody 'Specification Problems, Police Levels, and Crime Rates' *Criminology* 34 (1996), 609-646.

19   Lawrence W. Sherman, 'Policing for Crime Prevention', 8/1.

20   Don Weatherburn, *Does Australia Have a Law and Order Problem?: Public Lecture to Mark Appointment as Adjunct Professor*, (Sydney: UNSW School of Social Science and Policy, 2002). Weatherburn also calculates that an increase of 1,000 officers, taking into account sick leave and shift work would only provide about two additional officers per Local Area Command.

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