

Population Growth and Crime *

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It seems trite to point out that if Australia's population doubled, then the incidence of crime in Australia would double. However, the proposition that the crime rate would more than double and perhaps increase four or six fold, is not so obvious. It is the purpose of this paper to show that population growth increases the crime rate (per capita).

One effect of population increase is growth in the average size of cities and towns. If the effect of a doubling of the population is spread evenly among all communities; then towns of 5,000 will become towns of 10,000; cities of 1 million will become cities of 2 million; and so on.

Crime and City size - Theory

Much theorising has been done on the question of why larger cities have higher crime rates than smaller communities. Large cities are said to be characterised by anonymity. In a world of strangers men lose their feelings of responsibility for their fellow man. The anonymity of the city permits the criminal to commit his offence with little fear of being recognised. Anonymity is thought to be particularly important in the causation of juvenile crime. The small town delinquent is likely to have his behaviour reported back to his parents by adult bystanders. However, in the anonymity of the big city, chances are that the bystanders will not know the delinquent and therefore will neither reprimand him themselves nor report the behaviour back to his parents. Thus primary social control in the large city is weak.

The absence of social control implies social disorganisation. This disorganisation in large scale cities is manifested in high rates for divorce, separation, suicide, alcoholism, drug abuse and other forms of deviance. In the deviant climate of the large city all moral prohibitions are weakened through their apparent lack of force. Thus absence of primary social control in large cities produce both crime and other manifestations of social disorganisation. Some of these other manifestations of social disorganisation further contribute to crime. For example there is a great deal of empirical evidence that broken homes are associated with delinquency. (Eaton and Polk, 1961).

The sheer numbers of people in the large city ensures that people with criminal tendencies can find people with similar tendencies to provide social support for their criminality. In small towns there are simply not enough criminals or poor people to allow the criminogenic influence of criminal subcultures and ghettos to develop.

Large cities afford greater opportunities for crime (more cars to steal, more banks to rob, etc.) and permit a getaway to the other side of town. In a small community there is no "other side of town" to get away to.

Finally, there are the theories which emphasise the "soul-destroying" nature of large cities. These theorists argue that the aesthetic wilderness of

* This article is based upon a submission by the author to The National Population Enquiry

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the city, the overcrowding, the absence of a spirit of community are bound to produce anti-social reactions.

Many policy makers have concluded from one or more of the above theories that an effective way of reducing crime is to decentralise the population. However the other obvious inference that rates can be reduced by reducing population growth has been ignored.

Empirical Evidence

Regardless of which of the above theories are more valid, the empirical evidence from many different countries does show consistently that the bigger the city, the higher the crime rate. (Clinard, 1964). The U.S. Uniform Crime Statistics for 1971 (Table I) show that the increase in crime rate from the smallest to the largest cities varies from 63% for "larceny of \$50 and over" to more than a 20-fold increase for "robbery".

TABLE I

City Size and Rates for Crimes known to U.S. Police, 1971 Rate per 10,000 inhabitants

	Homicide	Rape	Robbery	Assault	Burglary	Larceny (\$50 & over)	Car Theft
Over 250,000	1.9	4.4	63.3	35.1	202.6	124.1	109.9
100,000-250,000	1.1	1.7	22.6	23.9	178.9	135.0	73.9
50,000-100,000	0.6	1.7	12.6	15.1	124.3	118.0	49.9
25,000-50,000	0.5	1.2	9.5	13.1	104.2	111.7	39.7
10,000-25,000	0.4	0.9	5.1	12.3	88.0	92.4	25.1
Under 10,000	0.4	0.8	3.1	12.8	72.2	76.3	17.3

Lunden (1964) has reviewed the evidence which shows that, as with adult crime, officially recorded juvenile delinquency rates increase with city size. Using a self-report delinquency measure Clark and Wenninger (1962) reached the same conclusion. Australian data on either adult or juvenile crime is scarce, although Vinson (1972) has shown that for most types of offences adult crime rates are higher in Sydney than in either Newcastle or Wollongong, or the rest of New South Wales, and Kraus (1973) has shown that juvenile delinquency rates are much higher in urban than in rural areas.

Thus there is a clear correlation between city size and crime rate. Moreover, there is no discernable plateau where the effect of city size on crime starts to level off. Since population growth results in all cities and towns becoming bigger, the increasing crime rate in many parts of the world can be explained by population increase. The reader will recall that we have assumed that population increases are spread evenly among the cities and towns of the nation. However, it is clear that world-wide population growth is disproportionately concentrated in the largest cities. This tendency increases the effect of population increase on crime rate, since, as can be seen from Table I, the relationship between city size and crime rate is non-linear and positively accelerated. That is, increase in population at the top end of the city size continuum has a greater effect on crime than it does at the bottom end.

Given that there is a correlation between city size and crime rates, can we then infer that a reduced population increase will result in a reduction in the rate of crime increase? In making this inference, there is no problem with respect to the direction of causality since the proposition that a high crime rate for a city causes it to have a large population is **absurd**. However, it is possible that a third variable renders spurious the relationship between city size and crime rate. Six possible sources of spuriousness are considered below.

(1) Bigger cities have greater numbers of police per head of population. Thus the higher crime rates of bigger cities reflect the greater activity of the police.

A massive study by Schuessler and Slatin (1964) found that for 133 U.S. cities with populations of over 100,000 in 1950, there was a positive correlation between size of city and police per 10,000 of population, but by 1960 this correlation had completely disappeared.

(2) There is under-reporting of offences in small communities.

There is no empirical evidence on this hypothesis. Nevertheless, the hypothesis is implausible for several of the types of offences in Table I. Very few homicides or car thefts would take place in any community without being officially recorded by the police. Differences among the cities of different sizes in the recording of offences would have to be astronomical to explain the trend in Table I for any one of the types of offences. For example, with homicide, there would have to be a 100% recording rate in the largest cities compared to a 20% recording rate in smallest cities.

(3) Big cities attract minority groups such as negroes and migrants, and the presence of these groups in large numbers is at the root of the crime problem.

The Schuessler and Slatin study found that, both in 1950 and 1960, larger cities did have larger proportions of non-whites and foreign-born people. Moreover the 1950 data for nearly all types of offences showed that cities with large foreign-born and non-white populations had higher rates of crime. However, with the 1960 data the picture was rather more confused. Although per cent non-white was still correlated with rates for most offences, the relationship with per cent foreign-born had disappeared.

(4) Big cities attract criminals from rural areas and smaller cities.

The problem with this explanation is that it fits only adult criminality. It does not explain the positive correlation between juvenile delinquency rates and city size. Juveniles have no choice in deciding where they shall live, so a selection effect cannot be operative. Even with adults it is implausible that sufficiently large numbers of budding rural criminals would decide their future place of residence on the basis of opportunities for crime rather than on the basis of job opportunities and other criteria. (See Clinard, 1964).

(5) Big cities attract young males, and young males are the most crime-prone group in the population.

While Schuessler and Slatin found no relationship between sex distribution and city size, both in 1950 and 1960, there was a slight tendency for smaller cities to have greater concentrations of young people (15-35 year olds). If larger cities had the same proportion of young people in their populations as smaller cities, the crime rates of larger cities would be higher, thus making city size differences in crime rate even greater. That is, controlling for age distribution shows that the effect of city size on crime is more powerful. This tends to support the hypothesis that a reduction in population growth would have an even greater effect in reducing crime than would be expected on the basis of the direct statistical relationship between city size and crime rate.

(6) The poor tend to congregate in large cities.

This hypothesis is most crucial because poverty is the variable which has most consistently been found to be strongly related to crime. Empirical studies have found the crime rate among the poor to be from twice to twenty times the rate for the middle class. (Braithwaite, 1973)

In spite of the unfounded theorising to the contrary, the reality is that large cities have fewer poor per head of population than smaller cities. The Schuessler and Slatin data support this conclusion completely. Larger cities were found to have less poverty, and cities with less poverty were found to have lower crime rates. The explanation for the higher incomes in large cities is probably the greater concentration of manufacturing industries in large cities. Manufacturing industries are distinguished from other industries by a higher skill mix, more capital per worker (and hence greater productivity) and greater unionisation and price power. (Matilla and Thompson, 1969). As Jones (1973) summarises:

The rise in income in larger cities is of the order of 30-40% while even the most extreme estimates of the higher costs of living in large cities place them at no more than 10% more expensive than smaller towns.

Thus the relationship between city size and crime is less than it would be if the poor did not happen to be concentrated in the smaller cities. As in the case of the age distribution factor, the finding of less poverty in large cities points to a greater reduction in crime through reducing population growth than would be expected on the basis of the city size - crime rate correlation alone.

Hence the arguments that the relationship between city size and crime is spurious do not receive much empirical support. In some cases empirical testing of these hypotheses reveal that the relationship is even more powerful than expected.

Indirect Effects of Population Growth on Crime.

Let us turn to some other consequences of population growth. Population increase results in an increase in the rate of residential mobility. As cities grow the central business district expands, pushing out generally poor inner city inhabitants into areas further from the city centre. The influx of these poor and "disreputable" people into formerly "respectable" areas tends to push out the middle class people from these areas. Thus city growth acts like a giant centrifuge flinging people into the outer suburbs and causing cultural shock waves to ripple through suburbs at all distances from the city centre.

Panakal (1963) has argued that the effect of the influx of a sub-cultural group with conflicting norms is to generate a situation of moral confusion in which deviance is tolerated and adjustment impeded. Residential mobility also disrupts the lives of people, severing the cohesive bonds which maintain and control a well-ordered society. A fixed residence is believed to foster a sense of security and stability of character. Once removed from the stable environment to which one is accustomed, one's standards become relativistic and a sense of moral values is lost. One begins to play the game of life by ear instead of by clearly defined rules. Families who migrate from place to place encounter a number of conflicting situations, and their children suffer from the clash of old and new standards. The fact that the newcomer is not known in the new community introduces the criminogenic effect of anonymity which was discussed earlier.

Consistent with the above theory, the empirical evidence strongly supports the existence of a correlation between crime and residential mobility. (Shaw and McKay, 1969; Lunden, 1964; Clinard 1964, Eaton and Polk, 1961).

Policy Implications

Given that crime is related to city size and residential mobility, the same policies which are advocated for reducing population growth will be effective in reducing the growth of the crime rate.

Such policies as government subsidies to make contraceptives free, legal advertising for contraceptives, teaching of contraception in schools, free and legal sterilisation, abortion on demand, financial incentives for delaying having a family and limiting family size, and reducing immigration all will affect the crime rate downwards.

Finally, two likely indirect effects on crime from the implementation of the above policies should be pointed out. Firstly, the policies on contraception and abortion may have as an indirect effect that fewer unwanted children would be born. Rodman and Grams (1965) have reviewed considerable empirical evidence that unwanted children who have little affection shed upon them are far more likely to end up as delinquents. Similarly the policy sometimes espoused by supporters of ZPG of financial incentives for couples to delay having a family until say three years after marriage, would permit many incompatible couples to break up without having brought a child into a broken home. Children from broken homes are highly prone to delinquency. (Rodman and Grams, 1965).

The second indirect effect on crime of anti-growth policies is through reduced family size. Both the Gluecks (1958) and Nye (1958) in their classic studies found that delinquents were more likely to come from large families than non-delinquents. It is believed that in large families parental affection and socialisation training are spread thinly among the large number of children.

SUMMARY

Policies for the reduction of population growth will also reduce city size, residential mobility, numbers of unwanted children and family size. Since all the latter variables bear a powerful relationship to criminality, a reduction of population growth will dramatically reduce the growth of the crime rate.

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