

# The meaning of crime



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Printed and bound in the United Kingdom by Jarrold Book Printing, Norfolk, England.

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# Introduction

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‘Tough on the causes of crime.’ A famous phrase, but what is crime? This unit examines how we as a ‘society’ define crime. You will look at the fear that is generated within communities and what evidence is available to support claims that are made about crime rates.

This OpenLearn course provides a sample of Level 1 study in [Sociology](#).

# Learning Outcomes

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After studying this course, you should be able to:

- give a definition of crime (in terms of society)
- state the steps and factors that lead from a crime to conviction
- illustrate how society views crime 'with fear and fascination'
- give examples of the relationship between crime rates and the evidence to support these claims.

# 1 What is a crime?

## 1.1 The meaning of crime

### Activity 1

What is a crime? Good question, but how to go about answering it? For most of us, most of the time, crime is something other people do. So why not check that against personal experience? Have a go at the questionnaire below, private and confidential we assure you. Estimate the total fines and prison sentences you might have under gone had you been caught, charged and convicted of these offences.

**Table 1**

	Incident	Offence	Maximum Penalty
1	Have you ever bought goods knowing or believing they may have been stolen?	Handling stolen property	£5,000 and/or 6 months imprisonment
2	Have you taken stationery or anything else from your office/work?	Theft	£5,000 and/or 6 months imprisonment
3	Have you ever used the firm's telephone for personal calls?	Dishonestly abstracting electricity	£5,000 and/or 6 months imprisonment
4	Have you ever kept money if you received too much in change?	Theft	£5,000 and/or 6 months imprisonment
5	Have you kept money found in the street?	Theft	£5,000 and/or 6 months imprisonment
6	Have you taken 'souvenirs' from a pub/hotel?	Theft	£5,000 and/or 6 months imprisonment
7	Have you ever left a shop without paying in full for your purchases?	Making off without payment	£5,000 and/or 6 months imprisonment
8	Have you used a television without buying a licence?	Using a television without a licence	£1,000 fine
9	Have you ever fiddled your expenses?	Theft	£5,000 and/or 6 months imprisonment
10	Have you ever been in possession of cannabis?	Misuse of drugs	£2,500 and/or 3 months imprisonment
Total			Fine =

Prison Sentence =

(Source: Muncie and McLaughlin, 1996, p. 37)

How did you get on? It may be that you are a perfectly law-abiding citizen who has never knowingly committed a crime. Our answers indicate that at best, if convicted only a single time in each case, we would have spent a total of six years in jail and been fined up to £61,000! As you might imagine we don't consider ourselves habitual criminals or persistent offenders. Yet crime, often thought of as abnormal, minority behaviour is, according to our experience, something that is widespread, perhaps even a majority pursuit.

How can these different senses of crime be reconciled with each other? Have another look at the questionnaire. Does it assume a particular way of thinking about crime? The Maximum Penalty column is the give-away. All of the offences carry fines or the possibility of imprisonment. So there is an assumption that crimes are acts that are codified in law; in this case a law that has been created, policed and enforced by the UK state (the police, the criminal justice system, parliament, the Home Office, etc.). Crimes are acts which break the law of the land. Think of this as the legal definition of crime.

Another place to start answering a question like *What is a crime?* is a dictionary. And even the Oxford English Dictionary sees things in a more complex light than the legal definition of crime. The OED defines crime as:

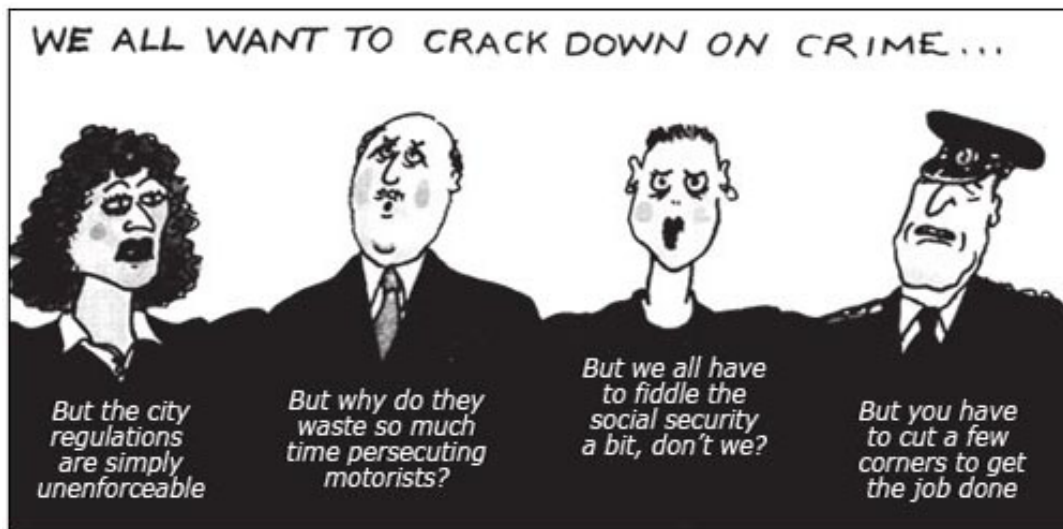
An act punishable by law, as being forbidden by statute or injurious to the public welfare ... An evil or injurious act; an offence, sin; esp. of a grave character.

But this definition begs a whole host of questions. Ones that come immediately to mind are: Does the law cover all acts that are injurious to public welfare? Does that include disastrous economic decisions taken by the government? Does the law forbid all the sins of this world? Is it against the law to fail to honour one's mother or father? For an orthodox Muslim consuming alcohol is a sin, but it is hardly a crime codified by UK law. Is it always against the law to take another life? What about conduct in wartime or assisting euthanasia?

The reason that the OED's definition raises more questions than it answers is that the definition combines at least two ways of thinking about crime which are often in practical conflict with each other. On the one hand, crimes can be thought of as acts which break the law – the legal definition of crime. On the other hand, crimes are acts which can offend against a set of norms like a moral code – the normative definition of crime. So, the two meanings of crime cannot be reconciled because a great deal of legally-defined crime is not considered to be normatively-defined crime.

However, norms come in different forms. Potentially criminal acts can be judged against formal moral systems, like religious beliefs. Quakers and pacifists, for example, would not accept that refusal to fight in a war was a normative crime, whatever the state might say. Alternatively, some legally-defined crimes might not be unacceptable when judged against the norms, codes and conventions of socially-acceptable behaviour. Many personal telephone calls from work are routinely considered a reasonable perk of the job. Keeping money we find in the street, in small amounts, is just good luck – who's going to ask at lost property anyway? Most office cultures assume that employees service some of their private stationery needs from the office cupboard.





### We all want to crack down on crime

Looking again over the questionnaire, we wondered what someone reading it a hundred years ago might have made of it. For a start they might have wondered what a television or a telephone is. Can there be a crime of not paying your licence fee before there are televisions? Even on a narrow legal definition of crime, what is a crime varies over time. They might also have been surprised that possession of cannabis is a crime. It certainly wasn't when cannabis tincture was routinely available from Victorian pharmacies as a painkiller. It isn't a crime now in parts of the Netherlands.

So what a crime is depends on whether you view it from a legal or a normative perspective; what formal and informal normative codes and conventions you are guided by; what moment in history you are considering; and which particular society you are looking at. There is no simple, fixed, unassailable, objective definition of crime. The meaning of crime cannot be separated from the many and varied uses of the term in a particular society. Social scientists would describe this by saying the meaning of crime is a *social construction*.

## 1.2 The recognition and pursuit of crime

Whatever crime might mean, it can still land you in trouble. So given our answers to the questionnaire, why aren't we doing time at Her Majesty's Pleasure, or paying off an enormous backlog of fines? Not only the meaning of crime, but also the transformation of a potentially criminal act into conviction and imprisonment, is an irreducibly social process.

### Activity 2

**Figure 1** is a flow diagram of actions that take place between a potentially criminal act occurring and that act resulting in a conviction and imprisonment. It has been broken down into a series of sequential steps.

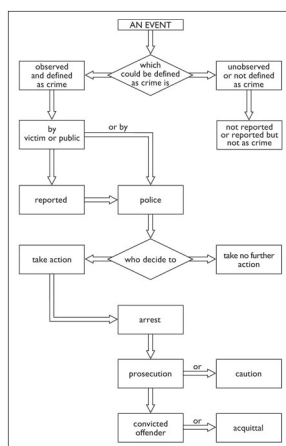
Follow the diagram once to get a sense of it. Then imagine the chain of events that might occur through the diagram if you replace the abstract event in the first box with a concrete example.

Note down any reasons you can think of that might explain the act not resulting in conviction and imprisonment.

Try one of the following:

Two youths stealing a car stereo.

An illegal discharge of chemicals from an oil refinery into a river.



**Figure 1:** The social construction of crimes and criminals. Source: Croall, 1998, p. 16

In the case of the two youths and the car stereo, we assumed it probably wouldn't be witnessed but thought it probably would be reported for insurance purposes.

If it was witnessed, there is a reasonable chance that it would be reported to the police but unless the witness could give a very clear description of the youths the police would just file the incident.

In the unlikely event that the police were to follow up the case and make an arrest, the decision to proceed with a court case might well depend on who they arrested. How might police action differ in the cases of two students, and two schoolkids? Both probably would be prosecuted, but there might be considerable differences in sentencing if magistrates perceived one case as student high jinks and the other as reprehensible juvenile delinquency.

In the case of the chemical discharge, we assumed that most of the time it goes unobserved. Even if most of us had seen such a discharge, would we know whether it was a crime, or just a normal part of the industrial process?

It is unlikely that any victims of the crime would report it, as chemical poisoning might take place many miles away, or many weeks afterwards. In any case, the Environment Agency, not the police, are the main institution responsible for policing pollution. The police do not spend a great deal of time patrolling or observing industrial installations.

Even if the Environment Agency did get to hear about the discharge by some route would they decide to investigate it? Do they have the resources *available* to do so? What else could they use those resources for? The enormous cost in time and money of fighting a large corporation in court might dissuade them from further action even if they got as far as beginning an investigation.

The path from act to conviction is shaped by, amongst other things, the knowledge of potential observers, their own definitions of crime, and police practice and resources. But this raises more questions. What shapes prevalent beliefs and attitudes to potentially

criminal acts? What determines police practice? What determines police priorities? Whatever the answers to these questions we can be sure that part of the explanation will involve more than uncovering the individual preferences and interests of the actors involved. We would, for example, need to look at how a social institution like the police force or the Environment Agency operates; who makes decisions within it and under what circumstances? Just as the meaning of crime is socially constructed, the official recognition and pursuit of crimes is socially constructed.

## 1.3 Summary

- Crime has multiple meanings. Those meanings are socially constructed. The most important differences in the meanings of crime occur between strictly legal definitions and those that relate crime to the breaking of other codes and conventions – normative definitions. These may be formal moral codes like religions, or more informal codes of socially-acceptable behaviour.
- Both these ways of thinking about crime vary historically, across societies, and amongst different social groups. They are almost always in some kind of conflict. Many legally-defined crimes are considered to be legitimate acts in other contexts.
- This difference partly explains why many legally-defined criminal acts do not result in prosecution or imprisonment. So crime can simultaneously be normal and abnormal.
- A fuller explanation requires looking at the social processes involved in getting from an act to a conviction and asking how, at each stage of the process, social forces construct and shape choices and decisions made by individuals.

## 2 Tales of fear and fascination

### 2.1 Social attitudes towards crime

Crime, then, is a social construction. We had to break down the definition of crime and the process of recognising crimes to explore that. This is an *analytical* approach to the issue, which simply means unpacking an idea or a process into its separate components so that we can examine them more closely. But most of the time we don't think about crime analytically. We think about it as a *narrative*, as a story.

At a personal level we may tell the story, over a drink, of our car being broken into for a third time this year. Others confide in each other with stories of personal injury. We use stories to make sense of our misfortunes, to seek remedies to our hurts, to establish a chain of events and actions that we can understand. What we do as individuals and small groups, we also do as a society. What kinds of stories about crime are we telling ourselves in the UK?

Broadly speaking, there are two types of story in circulation. One set of stories is prominent in public discussions and the media. It describes the UK as a society engulfed in a tidal wave of crime in which a secure past has become an insecure and uncertain present, crime is something to be feared and diminished: *a society frightened by crime*. The other set of stories we tell and consume, more privately perhaps, is of crime as macabre but glamorous, fearful but fascinating. It seems that we cannot get enough of this kind of crime and these stories: *a society fascinated by crime*.

### 2.2 A society frightened by crime?

We do not have to look too far to find someone saying that the UK is a society gripped by rising levels of crime, anti-social behaviour and incivility; or that disorder threatens social stability. The criminologist Robert Reiner suggests that 'in the last 40 years, we have got used to thinking of crime, like the weather and pop music, as something that is always getting worse' (Reiner, 1996, p. 3). So who is telling this story?

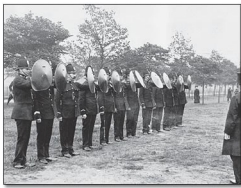
Most of us will have heard older family members and friends refer to 'the old days', even 'the good old days' when there was 'more respect for authority', when 'people knew their place', when 'the elderly were respected by the young', and when the vulnerable lived life unhindered by 'thugs' and 'muggers'. A time when people were able to 'leave their doors unlocked' without fear of intrusion. A time when the local bobby was known and trusted, when the courts dispensed justice. A world of settled, stable communities and families, and strong and enduring community and family moral values.

There appears to be no end of media reporting of crime. The story that gets told is of a transition between a secure, low-crime society to an uncertain society at risk from an epidemic of criminality and social unrest. A once solid homogenous society has become irrefutably fragmented and diverse. Newspaper headlines shout 'communities under siege'. Articles splashed across their pages tell of drug-barons and teenage gangs that take over and terrorise communities. Cities are pock-marked by 'no-go' areas, made derelict by senseless acts of vandalism. Tales of sexual violence and child abuse have

begun to appear with alarming regularity. The police are either incapable of controlling this disorder, or have even become part of the problem.



**Figure 2:** Community policing in an age of community



**Figure 3:** Police practising with riot shields, 1913



**Figure 4:** Meadowell estate, Newcastle upon Tyne, 1998



**Figure 5:** Contemporary riot control

Seemingly crazed acts of violence by strangers make up the staple diet of the news reported on TV crime-solving programmes such as *Crimewatch UK*. Like most popular news broadcasts, the TV schedule is dominated by sensationalist or bizarre crimes. And it is not just tabloid papers and prime-time television that are telling these stories. Here is just one example reported in the late 1990s from the broadsheet press:

The terrified youth was chased from the wine bar by a gang. He managed only to get across the road before he was trapped on a railway bridge. He was kicked and punched before his tormentors lifted him over a wall and dropped him on to the electrified tracks below. Another everyday occurrence in Moss Side perhaps? No: this time it was Northwood, a well-to-do suburb on the borders of north-west London and Hertfordshire ... The violence that was part of the lives of less well-off people in dangerous places ... had finally arrived on the door steps of the middle classes.

(Independent on Sunday, 15 November 1998, 'Urban nightmares disturb the slumber of Metroland')

It is surely no coincidence that the rise of insecurity and uncertainty in areas previously perceived to be safe has seen politicians of all hues join in the story-telling. Crime has become one of the key policy concerns and rhetorical political devices of UK politics. Politicians persistently promise to turn the tide of rising crime; to re-introduce security and certainty into lives; to diminish risks; and to rebuild communities. Politicians, like everyone else, give these stories and these claims their own spin. Some argue that deprivation and unemployment are the problem; others look to the transformation and fragmentation of family life and the physical breakdown of old close-knit communities; and some see the problem in the permissiveness of the 1960s and the collapse of respect for authority of all kinds. Nearly everyone seems to talk of a general malaise of demoralisation and decline. An increase in crime can be linked to a breakdown in the bonds of community.

These narratives of crime represent what social scientists tend to refer to as *common sense*; the popular wisdom of the day, the taken-for-granted, 'what everyone knows' story. We are not saying that there is no grain of 'truth' in such arguments, that they are simply 'wrong', and social scientists will come along with the 'right' point of view. Many of the developments alluded to above are only too real. But there is always room for doubt.

## 2.3 A society fascinated by crime?

To make an analogy with the now outmoded vinyl record, if 'the fear of crime' track is the A-side of this hit record, the track on the B-side is 'the fascination with crime'. Fascination may seem an unusual word to associate with the pressing social problem of crime, given its harmful and destructive consequences. After all, we often associate being fascinated with being allured or charmed by someone or something. How might such feelings be associated with those fearful things we call crimes?

### Activity 3

Think about the role played by both fictional and non-fictional accounts of crimes and criminals in your own leisure time or that of family members or friends. How many examples can you think of from TV or literature that illustrate our fascination with crimes and criminals?

We turned up quite a few examples.

The TV schedules suggest we thrive on a high-crime diet of murder tales and detective thrillers as well as 'true-life' documentaries, especially about the police.

The quickest browse through any chainstore bookshop reveals a vast array of fictional crime thrillers, from P.D. James's English professional mysteries to Elmore Leonard's Detroit and Florida low-lives and hucksters.

In many bookshops you will also find a whole section dedicated to 'true crime' and books which claim to explore the 'mind of the criminal' or recount the gruesome biographies of serial killers.

You may have come up with other examples than these of course, but it is likely that you will have found it quite easy to find past and present manifestations of the culture of

fascination with 'the crime problem'. And let's not forget that popular newspapers from the Victorian 'penny dreadfuls' to our contemporary tabloid press have gained mass readerships from the retelling – in part as entertainment – of lurid criminal offences, their detection and punishment.

Our society, then, is characterised by a culture of fear about crime but also a culture of fascination. We are seemingly both seduced and repulsed by crimes and criminals. Nor is this fascination with crimes and criminals simply the stuff of fiction. Acts defined as criminal may both seduce and repulse us because they involve on occasions both risk-taking and challenges to 'normal' ways of doing things. As the criminologist Jack Katz (1996, pp. 146–7) notes, 'Watch vandals and amateur shoplifters as they duck into alleys ... and you will be moved by their delight in deviance ... Watch the strutting street display [of gang members] and you will be struck by the awesome fascination that symbols of evil hold ... '. Why else are programmes featuring the grainy black-and-white CCTV (close circuit television) pictures of suburban mall shoplifters so popular?

## 2.4 Summary

- While social scientists think about crime analytically, most of the time individuals think about crime in terms of narratives or stories. Narratives which describe and explain their lives.
- Societies also construct narratives about themselves. The dominant common-sense story about the crime problem in the contemporary UK is that a long wave of rising crime has created a society that is frightened, that feels both individual safety and the wider social order are under threat.
- Our society is also fascinated and attracted by stories and representations of crimes and criminals.



## 3 Beyond common sense?

### 3.1 Claims about crime

Definitions beg questions. So do social narratives and stories. Again, we need, as social scientists, to begin with an analytical task. What are the key *claims* that are being made in the common-sense story of the problem of crime? What are the core arguments that hold the whole thing together? There are a number of these, but two seem to be particularly important.

*Claim 1:* UK society in the immediate post-Second World War era was characterised by more communality, civility and stronger family values than today. As a consequence the past was largely free of crime.

*Claim 2:* Today we are under siege from a rise in crime, danger and insecurity.

If these are the core claims of the common-sense story, the baseline account of how the world was and how the world is now, what questions might a sceptical social scientist ask of them? We thought of the following.

*Claim 1:* Largely free of crime? What about the hidden crimes which often occurred in close-knit communities, such as domestic violence, but few felt able to talk about?

*Claim 2:* Even if there has been a rise in crime, is the world actually as dangerous as we imagine it? Could we be misjudging or overestimating the risks and dangers we face, individually and collectively?

The first set of questions challenge the quantitative claims of the common-sense story. Was there really less crime then? Is there really more crime now? The second set of questions ask, irrespective of the quantitative issues, whether we have collectively misjudged the dangers, and have ascribed incorrect or inappropriate meanings to them? In both cases we won't get very far without looking for some evidence that might support or contradict these claims. In Sections 3.2 and 3.3 we look at the kinds of evidence that might settle the quantity issue. In Section 3.4 we look at how we might use a social science concept – *moral panic* – to gauge the meaning of our response to the crime problem.

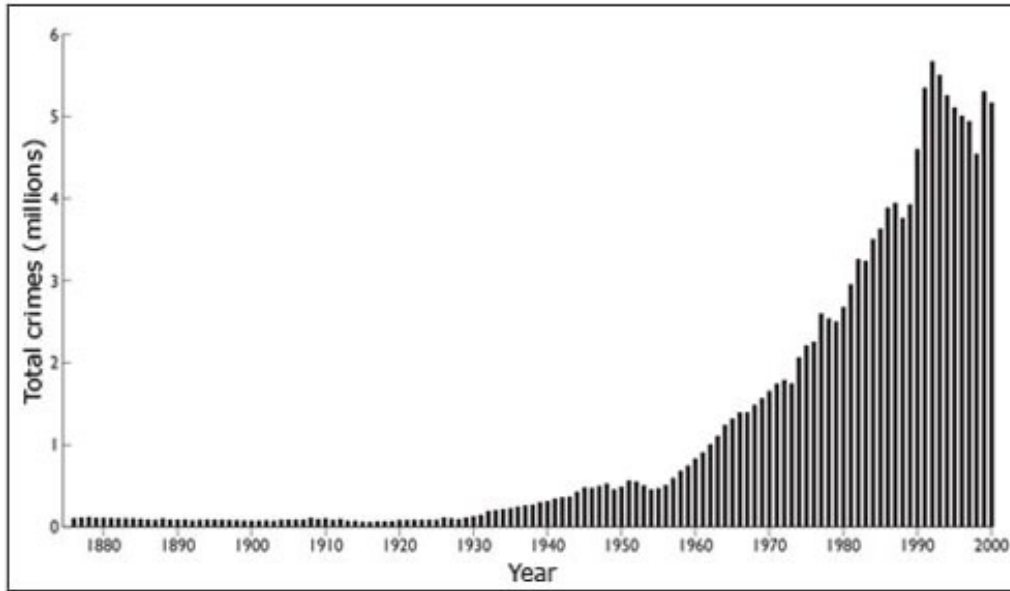
### 3.2 Counting the crime problem

What kind of evidence would support the claims of the common-sense narrative? Where would it come from and where would you find it? Most social scientists would start with the people who actually spend their time counting these things – governments. Government agencies of all kinds spend a great deal of time and money producing official statistics, recording crime rates, conviction rates, the size of prison populations, and so on.



### Activity 4

Look at the diagram below of the numbers of recorded crimes in England and Wales between 1876 and 2000. Note what you think the key trends in the graph are, and then compare them with our commentary below.



**Figure 6:** Crimes recorded by the police, 1876–2000. Source: Maguire, 1997, p. 158; *Social Trends*, 2002

- Prior to the 1930s fewer than 100,000 offences were recorded annually, whereas in 1992, the peak year, over five million offences were recorded.
- Annual figures changed little until the 1930s. They then rose during the 1930s, levelled off at the end of the 1940s and early 1950s, and increased sharply from the mid 1950s onwards.
- The numbers of recorded crimes doubled between 1955 and 1964, doubled again up to 1977 and yet again by 1991.
- Between 1993 and 1998 there was a small but steady drop in number of total recorded crimes. By 1998 there were fewer than five million recorded crimes, but this had risen to 5,171,000 by 2000.

These figures relate to recorded crime. The overall rate of all *incidents* of crime measured by the British Crime Survey, recorded or not by the police, have declined consistently since 1995.

In order to explore the quantitative data further we are going to ask you now to study a range of statistical evidence. These Tables are derived from the annual government publications, *Criminal Statistics* and *Social Trends*. Again these figures relate only to England and Wales (data on Scotland and Northern Ireland may also be found in *Social Trends*).

### Activity 5

Examine the statistical Tables below and try to note down:

1. For [Table 2](#) what is the overall change from 1945 to 2000; and what are the key moments of growth over the period from 1945 to 2000?
2. For [Tables 3](#) and [4](#) what is the overall change in recorded crimes?

**Table 2: Recorded crime, 1945–2000**

Year	Total offences
1945	478,394
1950	461,435
1955	438,085
1960	743,713
1965	1,133,882
1970	1,555,995
1975	2,105,031
1980	2,520,600
1985	3,426,400
1990	5,358,000
1995	5,146,383
2000	5,171,000

(Source: adapted from *Social Trends*, 2002)

**Table 3: Types of recorded crime, 1981 and 2000**

Type of crime	1981	2000
(figures in thousands)		
Theft and handling stolen property	1,603	2,145
Burglary	718	836
Criminal damage	387	960
Violence against the person	100	601
Fraud and forgery	107	319
Robbery	20	95
Sexual offences	19	37
Drug offences	-	113
Other notifiable offences	9	63

(Source: adapted from *Social Trends*, 2002, Table 9.3)

**Table 4: Recorded crime, 1999–2001**

	England and Wales (thousands)	
	1999–00	2000–01
Theft and handling stolen goods;	2,224	2,145
<i>of which: theft of vehicles</i>	375	339
<i>of which: theft from vehicles</i>	669	630
Criminal damage	946	960
Burglary	906	836
Violence against the person	581	601
Fraud and forgery	335	319
Drugs offences	122	1 13
Robbery	84	95
Sexual offences,	38	37
<i>of which: rape</i>	8	9
Other notifiable offences	66	63
All notifiable offences	5,301	5,171

(Source: adapted from *Social Trends*, 2002)

1. There has been a big growth overall: over four million more crimes recorded annually by 2000 compared with 1945.  
After the small decline of the period from 1945 to 1955 there was a massive increase between 1955 and 1965 and significant growth between 1970 and 1990. Note there was over ten times as much recorded crime in 2000 compared with 1945.
2. Between 1981 and 2000 there was a general rise in most categories of crime in England and Wales ([Table 3](#)) but the increase was most striking in cases of robbery, criminal damage and violence against the person over this period. In 1999–2001 ([Table 4](#)) there was a slight decrease overall in recorded crime, for example in the number of thefts, but an increase in cases of violence against the person.

### 3.3 Quantitative and qualitative evidence

The Tables above provide official **quantitative evidence**: evidence, data or information which is expressed in numerical terms. On the face of it, this clearly shows that recorded crime increased significantly throughout the twentieth century, albeit with some ‘dips’ in recent years. Common sense is confirmed. But there are problems with these data. Remember, we are looking here at crimes recorded by the police. Do you think that all crimes are recorded? There might be different reasons why crimes are reported. There are changes over a period of a year even, as [Table 4](#) shows. Think back to Activity 2 and

the processes by which an act might result in a recorded crime, let alone a conviction. So it could be that the level of crime is actually decreasing, but we report more of it!

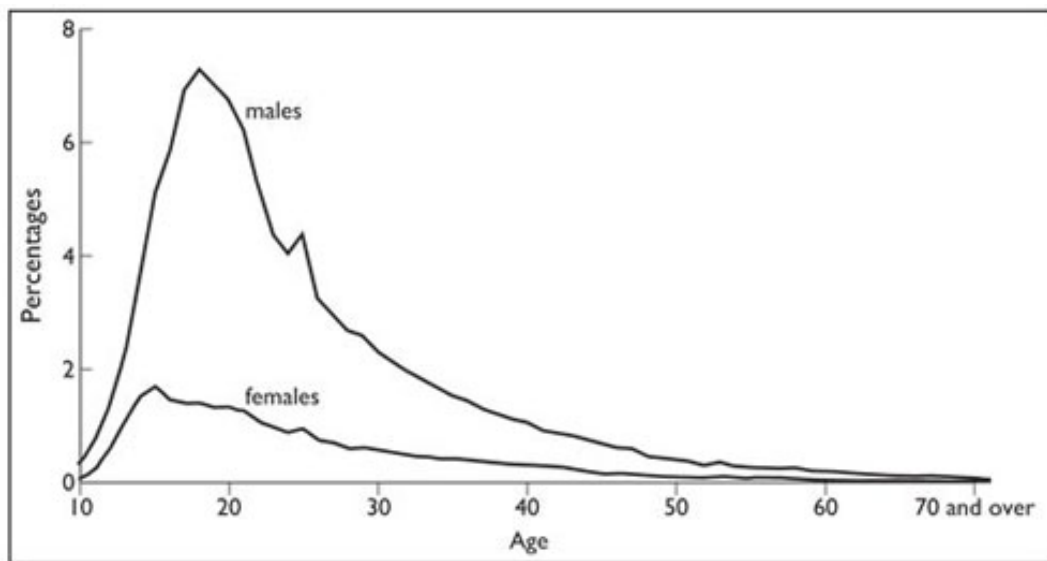
We need more evidence, and different kinds of evidence, that tells us something of the quality and the context of crimes and the meaning perpetrators and victims might ascribe to them. We need **qualitative evidence**: evidence, data or information that is expressed in terms of the meaning of acts or events, which distinguishes between data in terms of quality or form rather than quantity. Qualitative evidence includes interviews with known victims and offenders, direct observations of offending behaviour, and surveys with 'hidden' offenders and victims, like the self-report study you did in Activity 1.

Victim surveys suggest that the official statistics for recorded crimes greatly *understate* the amount of crime that occurs. The *British Crime Survey* estimate of total crimes committed in 1998 was 16,437,000 as against the recorded crime total of 4,595,300. It was found that while 97 per cent of motor vehicle thefts and 85 per cent of burglaries were reported (unsurprising, as reporting the crime is required by insurance companies), only 26 per cent of vandalism to cars, 45 per cent of woundings and 35 per cent of thefts from the person were reported (Mirrlees-Black et al., 1998). Why are such offences not reported? The same survey produced the following results (note, respondents could give more than one reason for not reporting a crime, so the total exceeds 100 per cent):

- 44 per cent of victims felt that the incident was not sufficiently serious;
- 33 per cent claimed that the police would not be able to do much about it;
- 22 per cent thought that the police would not be interested;
- 11 per cent felt that they would be better placed to deal with the matter instead of reporting it to the police;
- a small number of those interviewed (4 per cent) claimed that inconvenience was a factor while the same number were fearful of reprisals.

So there are a range of reasons that account for the *under-reporting* of crime, but the criminologist Mike Maguire suggests there are a number of changes in UK society which lead to *increased* reporting of crime (Maguire, 1997). These factors include a large increase in the number of police officers; the increasing availability of phones making reporting easier; more widespread use of insurance and therefore greater requirements for reporting crimes and making claims; and a greater willingness to call on the police when necessary, particularly with regard to sexual violence. In addition, new crimes have been created by changes in the law and changes in technology, for example: ram-raiding, computer-hacking, and downloading child pornography from the Internet. Understandably there was little in the way of vehicle-related crimes during the first half of the twentieth century. Perhaps also it is in some ways easier to commit crimes. With more consumer goods and other commodities on public display than ever before there are more opportunities for criminal acts, despite all the advances in CCTV and other forms of crime-detection technologies. Certainly there has been a rise in some crimes, but there are many factors at work here.

There are also some continuities and consistencies. For example, the vast majority of crimes are committed by young men, although there has been some increase in young women's (especially girls') criminal activity in recent years.



**Figure 7:** Offenders as percentage of population by gender and age, 2000

The type of area in which people live can affect their likelihood of being a victim, for example of violent crime. 'In general, those households located in council estates and low-income areas are most likely to have been victims of violent crimes – around twice the rate of those living in affluent suburban and rural areas. Single adult and child households were most likely to fall victim of burglary, as well as some form of violence' (*Social Trends*, 2002, pp. 154–5).

One of the most intriguing pieces of evidence, combining quantitative and qualitative evidence, comes from an earlier *British Crime Survey* (BCS). For the first time in 1982, the BCS asked people how at risk they felt from street crime. Two social scientists, Hough and Mayhew (as reported in Muncie and McLaughlin, 1996), then broke down the data into men and women and different age groups, and compared how at risk *they felt* from street crimes like mugging with the percentage of that group who had *actually been* victims of street crime.

### Activity 6

Examine the data in [Tables 5](#) and [6](#) below. What bearing have they on claim 2 of the common-sense narrative?

*Claim 2: Today we are under siege from a rise in crime, danger and insecurity.*

**Table 5: Fear and risk of street crime**

	Age	Those feeling very 'unsafe' (%)	Victims of 'street crime' (%)
Men	16–30	1	7.7
	31–60	4	1.6
	61+	7	0.6
Women	16–30	16	2.8
	31–60	35	1.4
	61+	37	1.2

Note: percentages represent responses to the question: 'How safe do you feel walking alone in this area after dark?' (weighted data; unweighted n=10,905).

(Source: Muncie and McLaughlin, 1996, Table 1.5)

**Table 6: Risk of being a victim of violence for selected groups of adults, 1997 (per cent of group who had been a victim of violence)**

	Men	Women
High income, rural household	4.8	2.9
Low income, inner city household	9.0	7.0
Owner/occupier, rural area	3.4	1.9
Private renter, inner city area	18.9	8.9

(Source: Mirrlees-Black et al., 1998)

Broadly speaking, from [Table 5](#), it seems that there is an inverse relationship between fear of crime and the likelihood of being a victim of crime. The people more likely to be victims of street crime are less likely to have a fear of street crime and vice versa. Older people feel most at risk, yet they are least likely to be victims (*Social Trends*, 2002, p. 154).

The data in [Table 6](#) suggest not only does age and gender affect your likelihood of being a victim of violent crime, but income, locality and social class do as well.

Anxiety about crime depends on complex factors. Individuals and households from Black and Asian groups have consistently shown higher levels of concern about crime than individuals from other ethnic groups. According to the British Crime Survey quoted in *Social Trends* (2002), Black and Asian adults in England and Wales in 2000 were twice as likely to be worried about personal attacks or car theft than white adults.

**Table 7: Worry about crime, by ethnic group in England and Wales, 2000 (percentages)**

	White	Black	Asian	All adults
Theft of car	20	37	37	21
Theft from car	15	33	30	16
Burglary	18	37	41	19
Mugging	16	32	38	17
Physical attack	17	35	38	18
Rape	18	34	34	19

(Source: *Social Trends*, 2002)

So fear and fascination with crime are about more than just counting the crime problem. The question becomes how do people interpret crime, what does it mean to them? There

is a complex relationship between perception of crime and the actual likelihood of being a victim.

### 3.4 Interpreting the crime problem

The Whole City, My Lord, is alarm'd and uneasy. Wickedness has got such a Head, and the Robbers and Insolence of the Night are such that the citizens are no longer secure within their own Walls or safe even in passing their Streets, but are robbed, insulted, and abused, even at their own Doors ... The citizens are oppressed by Rapin and Violence.

(Defoe, 1730, quoted in Reiner, 1996, p.2)

So wrote Daniel Defoe in 1730 in a pamphlet addressed to the Lord Mayor of London entitled *An Effectual Scheme for the Immediate Prevention of Street Robberies and Suppressing of all other Disorders of the Night*. A bit of a mouthful, but none the less an example that shows the fear of crime and fascination with crime are hardly recent developments. But the similarities go deeper, for Defoe was writing in an era of social and economic change. In the 1730s the population was growing fast, social mobility was on the increase, England's cities were beginning to bulge and the old ruling order began to get nervous about change; change that it could not direct or control.

Defoe's comment is one example of a history of *respectable fears*. This notion was coined by the social historian and criminologist, Geoffrey Pearson. In his book *Hooligan*, Pearson claims that the middle-aged of every generation tend to look back nostalgically on the early years of their lives as golden ages of morality, contrasting it with the moral degeneracy of the younger generation (Pearson, 1983). The main theme which runs through many of these accounts is the idea that society has suffered from a *demoralisation and fragmentation*, that there is in some sense a decline in the solidity of social structures and of shared morality and values. In today's common-sense narratives demoralisation has been driven by rising divorce and underage pregnancy rates, widespread drug-misuse, a general sense of irresponsibility and a lack of respect. Against the waves of crime and unrest the law enforcement agencies of the era, whatever era it is, are increasingly impotent, powerless to defend people and their property from the criminal hordes.



**Figure 8:** Respectable fears in 1862

One concept developed by the social sciences to help make sense of such processes is *moral panic*. This term was explored by Stanley Cohen in the early 1970s:

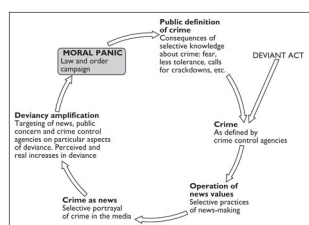
Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right thinking people; socially



accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions, ways of coping are evolved

(Cohen, 1973, p. 9)

Cohen's study focused on the social reaction to the mods and rockers' 'disturbances' in Clacton on Easter Monday, 1964. Cohen shows how media reaction, to what were in the main small-scale scuffles and vandalism, blew the whole event out of proportion. Newspaper headlines spoke of a 'Day of Terror' with Clacton being invaded by a mob 'hell-bent on destruction'. The media's response served only to whip-up a wider public concern about a breakdown in morality. Cohen described this as a *deviancy amplification spiral*. The initial outbreak of abnormal behaviour generated an enormous media reaction, in part because it made such a good news story. This in turn forced the police to intervene more strongly in subsequent disturbances, thereby increasing the numbers arrested, and leading to a spiral of increasing police Activity and public concern. Rising numbers of arrests seemed only to justify the initial concerns and the policing strategies adopted. The cycle of events is outlined in [Figure 9](#).



**Figure 9:** Cohen's model of moral panics

(Source: Taylor et al., 1995, p. 478)

### Activity 7

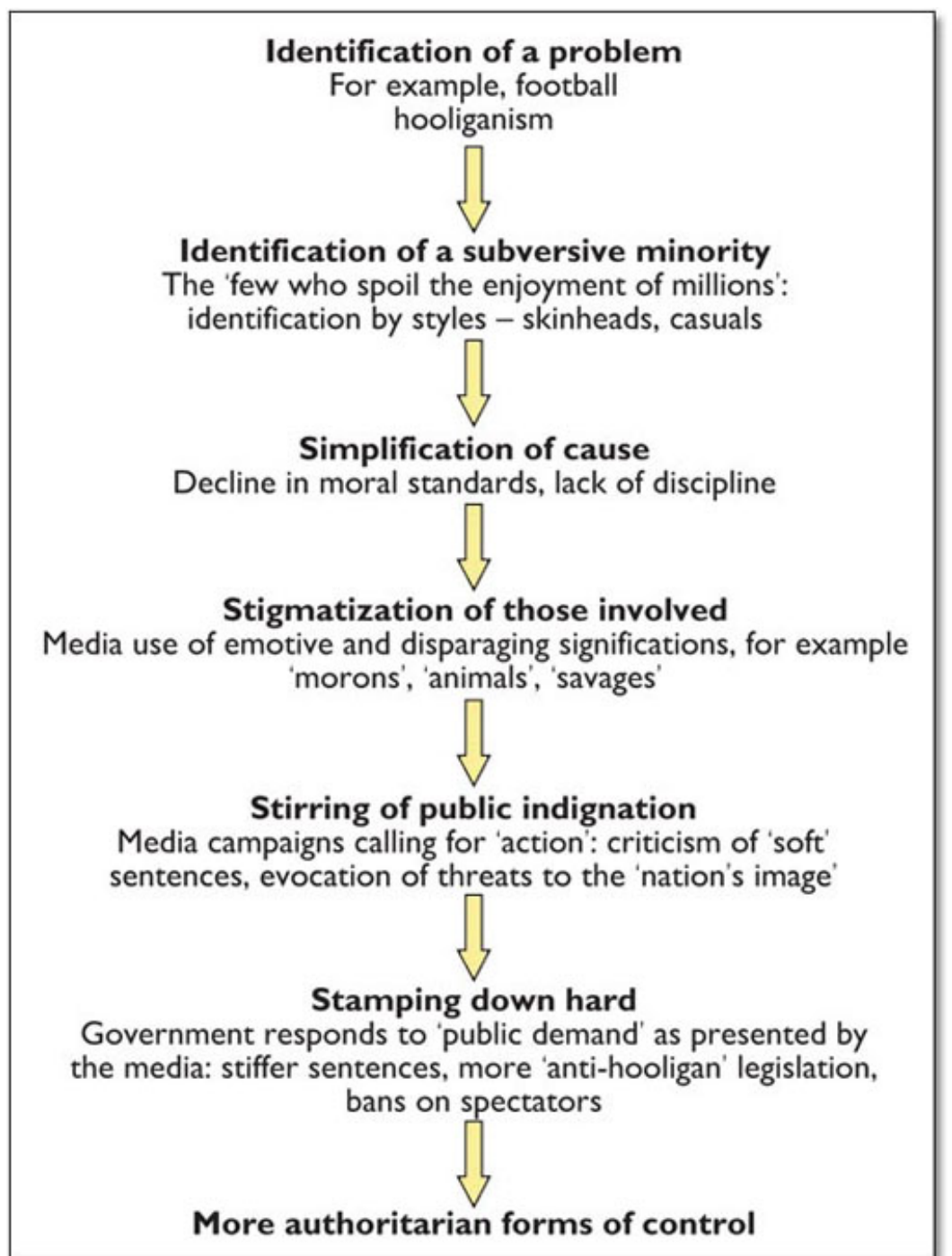
Cohen focuses on mods and rockers. Other researchers have looked at the teddy boy disturbances in the supposedly peaceful and law-abiding 1950s. Can you think of other more recent examples of moral panics which may have a criminal dimension or are considered threats to order perhaps associated with 'immoral' and 'violent' activities?

If you can, follow the examples you think of through the cycle of moral panics in [Figure 9](#).

There are many examples to choose from. We came up with the following: muggers, lager louts, football hooligans, drug-takers, vandalism, AIDS, welfare scroungers, lone parents, ritualised child abuse, paedophiles, industrial agitators and terrorist activities. You may have some of these, or different ones, but they all serve to illustrate Cohen's main point that media and political reactions to a wide range of public issues have commonly been out of proportion to the actual problem or have invented problems where none existed. The media, in particular television and the press, play an important role in identifying an issue, defining it as a problem and presenting it in a particular way, necessitating particular responses.

Below is one interpretation of the moral panic around football hooliganism.





**Figure 10:** Football hooliganism as a moral panic

(Source: Taylor et al., 1995, p. 479)

Moral panics may be socially constructed, but that does not mean they do not have a real impact in the world. On the contrary they do. More likely than not, the moral panic around street crimes such as 'mugging' since the 1970s has resulted in discriminatory rates of stop and search and conviction of young black men by the police. In the case of the murder of Stephen Lawrence in 1993, it may have helped lead to the assumption of the criminality of the young black men by the police even when the black youths had been the victims of racist crimes.

## 3.5 Evaluating claims, using evidence

Where does this exploration of evidence lead us? Can we decisively confirm or refute the common-sense stories of the crime problem in the UK?

Through an investigation of quantitative statistical evidence we certainly have some support for the claim that crime has risen considerably. But there are also doubts. The official statistics do not reflect unrecorded crime, and as one probes more deeply into the statistics we find that only certain types of crime have been on the rise. In any case, more qualitative evidence suggests that there are reasons for thinking that other factors (like the need for insurance claims) may account for some of the rise in recorded crime. There are also reasons for thinking that we may have collectively misjudged the levels of risk and danger that we are exposed to. Dips in the recorded crime rate in recent years have not as yet seen any perceptible decline in concern about crime.

Popular and respectable fears about crime in periods of rapid change, whether in the late twentieth century or in the eighteenth century, can give rise to a series of moral panics. While such panics may focus on particular aspects of society, from declining moral standards to increasing levels of crime, they can also be seen as metaphors for wider social disorder or social breakdown. In other words they can reflect widespread concerns about the nature of social change and the consequences that this has for particular groups and individuals in society.

Fears about crime, then, may mirror a sense of increased risk and uncertainty about other forms of social change that are only partially related to crime, if at all. Cohen's idea of moral panics suggests that public perceptions of crime and police response to crime may be shaped by the responses of the media and other social commentators. Media coverage may focus on the public arena and ignore the very high incidence of violent crime in the private arena of the home. Our fear of crime may in part be the result of our fascination with crime.

However, the case for seeing the crime problem purely as a matter of one long moral panic is not conclusive either. While mods, rockers and lager louts are the stuff of tabloid headlines it is a fact that the UK has more people in its prison system per head of population than any other Western European state; that levels of long-term drug addiction and associated patterns of crime are at an all time high; and however hidden they may have been in the past, we now as a society have to publicly confront the routine reality of widespread domestic violence, child abuse, racist attacks and murders.

## 3.6 Summary

- The common-sense narratives of the crime problem in the UK can be broken down into a series of distinct claims that make assessing them easier.
- Those claims can be tested against quantitative and qualitative evidence. Both types of evidence suggest that the narrative of change from a secure to an insecure society is at best partial, overestimating the tranquillity of the past, and the uncertainty and riskiness of the present.
- One way of explaining both the origins of the common-sense story and our more general fascination with crime are the concepts of respectable fears and moral panics, in which crime and criminality, driven by the media's news values, become social metaphors for the problems and uncertainties of much wider patterns of social

change. However, the case for dismissing the crime problem merely as a moral panic is not conclusive either.

## 4 Explaining crimes

### 4.1 Exploring the claims about crime

The claims of the common-sense story of crime that we unearthed in Section 3 were, broadly speaking, about the start of the story (how things were then) and the end of the story (how things are now). But most stories have a middle. A middle that gets you from the beginning to the end, that explains how one state of affairs is transformed into another. The former claims are primarily *descriptive*. The claim in the middle would be *explanatory*. It would need to address questions like: What has *caused* the rise in recorded crime? What has *changed* in UK society to bring this state of affairs about? Why do people commit crimes? And why they do so now and in such apparently increased numbers?

#### SAQ1

Look back at your notes on Section 2. What, if any, explanatory claims are buried in the common-sense story of the crime problem?

#### Answer

We noted this:

*Claim 3:* The story seems to imply that a decline in the sense of community and a shared set of moral values is to blame for the rise in crime. This, in turn, has been caused by a variety of wider social changes in the post-war UK; for example, the fragmentation of traditional families and communities, a rise in poverty and inequality, increasing moral fecklessness, and unresolvable moral diversity, etc.

We could, like we did in Section 3, immediately begin to test this set of claims against the evidence. But claim 3 is too complex to test in this way, because while nearly everyone seems to agree that a decline in communal values and moral standards is the problem, no one can agree as to precisely how this has happened. To sharpen the claim so it is fit for investigation, we need to take a step back and think about explanatory claims in more detail.

Strange as it may seem, part of the reason there are so many conflicting accounts of the decline of community and moral standards is that there are so many different accounts of this in the social sciences; accounts that have filtered into the language and thinking of political elites, the police, the media and the general public. Indeed, there is an entire branch of the social sciences devoted to exploring crime, criminals and criminality – *criminology*. So, let's go straight to the horse's mouth. In the rest of this section we will be looking at four different explanatory frameworks of criminal behaviour in the social sciences, explanations which divide around the issue of structure and agency. We will then return to our common-sense story of the crime problem and its explanatory claims, and ask whether these criminological explanations take us any further.

## 4.2 Structure and agency in the explanation of the crime problem

The social sciences are both united and divided by the debate over structure and agency. That debate turns on the degree to which people are either free to act as they choose or are constrained by forces beyond their control and possibly beyond their perceptions.

Structural explanations of human behaviour argue that an unrestrained freedom of action is an illusion. Human behaviour is neither random nor purely self-determined. There is always a range of constraints, rules, pressures, established beliefs, etc., which *force*, *dispose* or *propel* us to behave in certain ways.

Agency-driven explanations, on the other hand, argue that human behaviour is moved by real choices. However constrained an actor might be, there are always options and conscious decisions to be made.

This way of dividing up social science explanations comes with two intellectual health warnings.

1. We have deliberately simplified the debate by focusing on social science explanations which are at the extremes of a spectrum. A spectrum that runs from explanations that are overwhelmingly structural to explanations that are overwhelmingly agency driven. Most work in the social sciences falls between the two, trying to strike the right balance between them.
2. In our account of agency-driven explanations, we focus on **individualistic** explanations of human agency. An individualistic analysis takes individuals rather than groups or whole societies as its fundamental starting point. While, clearly, individuals act and choose, we cannot reduce the notion of agency to individual choice alone. Groups, collectives and institutions can also be thought of as actors and agents. Think, for example, of what is implied when a news broadcast reports that 'the government said, did, or failed to do something'. The implication is that the government, as a body of people and a set of institutions and networks, acts in unison; that it possesses *collective* agency. Similarly, we can think of trade unions, pressure groups, credit unions, armies, etc., as collective agents.

In Sections 4.3 to 4.5 we look at three different structural explanations of criminal behaviour. They are similar to each other, in that they all argue it is possible to identify structures, constraining and determining forces which are beyond the control of individuals or groups, and that these structures dispose us to behave in certain ways. Moreover, they all argue that criminal behaviour is essentially abnormal (recall our discussion of the normality/abnormality of crime in Section 1.1). So research is oriented to finding the origins of abnormal structures, on the assumption, of course, that there are identifiable normal structures. Where the three explanations differ is over what kind of structures they believe are the most important. The three examples we have chosen focus on biological and genetic structures (Section 4.3), family structures (Section 4.4), and cultural structures (Section 4.5). We then turn to one version of agency-driven explanations, rational choice theory (Section 4.6). We conclude by beginning to consider whether these explanations clarify our understanding of the crime problem.

## 4.3 Structural explanations I: biology

There is a long and uneven tradition of claims that the origins of crime and deviance are biological. In the nineteenth century it was claimed, for example, that brain sizes and skull shapes could explain criminal behaviour. This kind of crude biological determinism has long been discredited, but it gave way to a more subtle and notionally scientific model of genetic determinism.

In the early twentieth century advocates of *eugenics* claimed to have created the science of improving humanity. They argued that social behaviour could not only be studied with the methods of the natural sciences, but that a social science which modelled itself on the natural sciences could, as medicine discovers the pathological causes of illness, discover the pathological causes of crimes. According to eugenicists at the time, certain groups of people – variously, the poor, aliens and foreigners, the mentally ill or disabled and criminals – possessed incurable genetic defects. These defective and dangerous people threatened the genetic purity of the healthy, and the moral values and fibre of the social order. Moreover, eugenicists worried these groups were likely to reproduce more defective and dangerous people. Taken to their extremes, these arguments underwrote programmes of sterilisation of the mentally ill and of criminals all over Europe; most enthusiastically by the Nazi regime.

While eugenics has long been discredited, biological and genetic arguments continue to re-surface in criminological debates. The *new genetic determinism* of the late twentieth century is backed up by a much more explicit biological understanding of what genes actually are. Genes are particular parts or segments of the DNA strands that sit in the nucleus of every living cell. Genes are in effect biochemical codes that, through a variety of mechanisms, control and shape the development and operation of cells and thus in turn whole organisms. Moreover, when cells divide their DNA passes on to the new cells. When organisms sexually reproduce, the DNA of both parents is combined and transferred to their offspring. The new genetics argues that many patterns of human behaviour can be traced back to an individual's genetic endowment or their inherited genetic and biological structures.

Probably the most rigorous research in this tradition has been associated with the study of twins and of adopted children. There is a large body of research which suggests that identical twins, when compared with non-identical twins, are much more likely to display similar tastes, talents and patterns of behaviour, not least known criminal offending (Christiansen, 1977). (Identical twins share the same genetic make-up as opposed to non-identical twins who share a womb, but possess different genes.) However, it has been widely noted that identical twins are treated by their families and their schools as much more alike than non-identical twins. Therefore, their criminal behaviour may be largely explained by their shared social experiences rather than their shared genetic endowments.

According to the leading exponent of genetic explanations of criminality, Sarnof Mednick, the study of adoptions better separates social and genetic effects or structures than twin studies (Mednick et al., 1987, p. 74). The central proposition of Mednick's research in this area is that adopted childrens' criminal behaviour is more similar to their biological parents' criminal behaviour than their adoptive parents. On the basis of his analysis of research findings from Denmark, Mednick argues that there is indeed a stronger relationship between the criminality of the adopted child and their biological parents, than there is between the adopted child and their adoptive parents. This relationship is particularly strong amongst chronic, persistent criminal offenders.

In related research, Mednick and his colleagues have tried to find a more precise biological mechanism that links possession of a certain gene to a biological characteristic of an individual, and in turn how this links to, or structures, criminal behaviour. They claim to have discovered a particular pattern of inherited *autonomic nervous system* (ANS) characteristics amongst known offenders. The ANS is the unconscious part of the nervous system connecting the brain to our internal organs, senses, skin and muscles. Mednick argues that criminal offenders tend to have an ANS which is less sensitive to environmental stimuli than non-offenders. This creates personalities and dispositions that are less alertly tuned to the world, slower to respond to external signals and more easily distracted. As a consequence these individuals are less likely to respond to all the social messages and constraints that exist against acting criminally or in an anti-social fashion. In short they are less likely to be inhibited in displaying anti-social behaviour.

### SAQ2

What is the explanatory claim at work here?

What weaknesses might this approach carry? Does it rely on biological explanations alone? Are there any kinds of crime it might have difficulty explaining?

#### Answer

The core explanatory claim seems to be: (a) individuals inherit a particular set of genes which structure and shape their capacity to receive socialising messages; and (b) given this failure, over which they have little control, they are more likely than not to exhibit anti-social or criminal behaviour.

Two problems came to our minds. First, it seems that despite the emphasis on the structural biological and genetic origins of criminal behaviour, Mednick has smuggled social factors back into the explanation. It may be that biology shapes how responsive we are to messages about criminality, but someone, somewhere is creating and transmitting those messages and values. Could it be that criminal behaviour is more closely related to the type of messages that we hear, rather than our biological predisposition for listening and responding? Second, even if Mednick is in some sense right about the origins of individual criminal behaviour, how far does this model of explanation take us in explaining corporate crime (like the discharge of chemicals from an oil refinery example in Section 1.2)? Do companies have genes?

## 4.4 Structural explanations II: families

Our second example of structural explanations of criminal behaviour takes a different starting point. It looks at *pathological* or *problem families* and the transmission of *criminal careers* within them. This work is most closely associated with the social-psychological research of David Farrington (1994).

Farrington's argument has two core components. First, he argues that criminal offending is part of a larger syndrome of anti-social behaviour. A syndrome is a medical term for a set of symptoms indicating the existence of a condition or problem. This syndrome is a collection of anti-social dispositions and patterns of behaviour. Second, he argues that the early onset of criminal offending predicts a long and serious criminal career: 'For example, hyperactivity at age two may lead to cruelty to animals at six, shoplifting at ten, burglary at eighteen, robbery at twenty, and eventually spouse assault, child abuse and neglect,



alcohol abuse, and employment and accommodation problems later on in life.' Early anti-social behaviour suggests what Farrington terms 'an underlying criminal potential' (Farrington, 1994, p. 566).

The questions these claims raise are:

1. How do people acquire the antisocial personality syndrome in the first place?
2. Under what kinds of circumstances is the criminal potential it holds translated into a long and sustained criminal career?

Farrington has investigated these questions by doing **longitudinal studies**: this is a form of long-term empirical research in which social scientists follow the progression over time of many individuals' criminal behaviour and their familial circumstances. He found that there was a strong correlation – a type of statistical relationship – between criminal offenders and particular family experiences.

Criminal offenders tended to exhibit socially disruptive behaviour within their families at an early stage. They also tended to possess, for a range of reasons, early cognitive deficits – poor reasoning abilities, for example. Finally, they tended to experience poor patterns of parenting and a troubled family life including alcohol and drug abuse, family violence, truancy and school failure, unemployment, and marital disharmony. Criminal careers, over which they have little or no control, originate, then, in specific types of personality, particular types of families and their modes of **socialisation**. Socialisation is the processes by which children learn the language, culture and norms of the society in which they live. 'It is clear that problem children tend to grow up into problem adults, and that problem adults tend to produce more problem children' (Farrington, 1994, p. 569).

### SAQ3

What is the explanatory claim at work here?

What weaknesses might this approach carry? Are there any kinds of crime it might have difficulty explaining?



### Answer

The core explanatory claim appears to be: (a) criminal careers stem from an anti-social personality syndrome; (b) this syndrome emerges within, and is transmitted by, problem families who exhibit poor or inappropriate parenting, over which children have little control; and (c) the origins of poor parenting are less clear and appear to be transmitted from one generation to the next, they are entrenched by economic and social circumstances over which individuals and their families have little direct control. Again, this explanation might work for individuals but it has real problems with corporate crime, or indeed with most kinds of white collar crime. Second, what exactly is poor parenting, and conversely what is good parenting? Are there clear and agreed meanings over this term? Even if there are, how would we explain criminal behaviour by individuals who did not come from a background of family problems or non-criminal behaviour of individuals who do come from a background of family problems?

## 4.5 Structural explanations III: cultures

An early and influential body of research by the Chicago School of sociology explained criminal behaviour in terms of cultural structures. The school studied American male juvenile delinquents – or young offenders – in inter-war American cities (Shaw and McKay, 1969). Here we use the term *culture* to describe the web of meanings and values that individuals live their life within. (Recall from Section 1.1 how important every-day norms and conventions were in defining the meaning of crime.) There were two stages to the Chicago School's work, stages which required different kinds of research and produced different kinds of evidence.

First of all, the researchers collected *quantitative data* on where young offenders lived in the big cities of the United States. They found them to be young men concentrated in those areas of the city characterised by low rents and physical deterioration; geographically, the inner cities. In these areas – which the Chicago School termed *zones of transition* – there was also a rapid turnover of population. Immigrants would arrive in the areas of lowest pay and cheapest housing. Then, as soon as they were able, those that could would move on. Community structures and institutions were transitory. The opportunities for social mobility, improved pay, better housing, etc., for those that remained were minimal. The normal structures of a community that monitored and checked anti-social behaviour were weak.

But the Chicago School did not leave the matter with quantitative evidence alone. They also looked for *qualitative evidence*. They asked what the meaning of community and crime were for the young offenders who lived in these zones of transition. To investigate this, they initiated a programme of **participant observation**. This is a method of research in the social sciences in which the social scientist observes their subjects at close quarters and may actively participate in routine activities, i.e. joining a gang, taking a job in a factory, etc. In short, researchers actively sought out young offenders and the gangs that they were often part of, and spent a great deal of time just hanging out, talking with them and watching them.

They argued that street gangs provided the main community for young offenders. Furthermore, gangs possessed their own distinct web of meanings and values about what community they belonged to, and what actions counted as criminal. They possessed a distinct criminal *sub-culture*. Put briefly, the Chicago School's idea of a sub-culture

assumed first, that there is a wider, established majority or mainstream culture against which a sub-culture stood out. Second, that these criminal sub-cultures emerged as forms of resistance to the mainstream culture; a culture whose goals and norms of regular work, law-abiding behaviour, and prospects of social mobility were not available or attainable for ghetto youth. In this context the gang provided an alternative set of values and goals that were attainable. Crime in this sub-culture appeared acceptable, attractive, an act of pleasure as well as an act of protest or enrichment. Later developments in this approach have stressed the culture of masculinity which encourages compliance with these goals and values.

#### SAQ4

What is the explanatory claim at work here?

What weaknesses might this approach carry? What problems might there be with participant observation?

#### Answer

Two interrelated explanatory claims appear to be at work in this account: (a) young offenders are immune to the normal cultural prohibitions on criminal behaviour because they embrace alternative existing male sub-cultures; however (b) the reason that these cultures come into existence and appear attractive must be understood in economic terms. Young offenders appear concentrated in areas of employment and economic deprivation – economic structures and life chances over which they have little control.

It seems to us, then, that the Chicago School's cultural explanation of criminal behaviour tells us nothing about how people ended up joining gangs in the first place. Not every youth in the zones of transition did join a gang. Can this be explained in cultural terms, or do we need to look at other structures and decisions made by the people concerned? In particular, how can we clarify the impact of economic structures on criminal behaviour? In any case, can the reports of participant observers be relied upon? Is it possible that the Chicago School's presence altered the way gangs spoke about crime? Is it possible that their presence encouraged bragging about crime and a deliberate indifference to social norms?

## 4.6 Agency explanations: rational choice theory

The work of the Chicago School, despite the potential pitfalls of participant observation, does demonstrate that if you want to know why people commit crimes it makes sense to ask them. In his memoir of a criminal career in the early twentieth century entitled *Jail Journey*, Jim Phelan wrote:

The robber is a tradesman who, from economics or other motivation, chooses a trade with greater rewards and dangers than navvying. All men in dangerous jobs ... will readily understand the thief-convict ... Yet no one speaks of hereditary test-piloting. No semi-neurotics rush into print about the movie-stuntman's characteristic nose or jaw.

(Phelan, 1940, p. 178)

Phelan's point is simple. Crime (property crime at any rate) is a career decision, a way of life, a way of making your living, one of a range of options. There is no need for recourse to complex cultural and structural biological arguments to explain it. The social science model of explanation that most closely parallels this way of thinking is *rational choice theory* (see, for example, Clarke and Coleman, 1980).

The key premises of rational choice theory are strikingly simple.

1. Most criminals are normal-reasoning people. The mode of reasoning that everyone displays, perhaps except the mentally ill, is rational.
2. Rationality is a contested idea, even within rational choice theory, but in essence it is a mode of thinking in which individuals are able to accurately distinguish *means* and *ends*. What they want and the ways that are available to them for obtaining those ends. For example: ends – possessing a certain amount of money for a certain amount of work; and means – paid employment, buying a lottery ticket, stealing it.
3. For each of the different means *available* to them, rational actors are also able to calculate the likely costs (things they don't want to happen) and benefits (how many or how much of their ends they can achieve) of following a course of action.
4. If benefits outweigh costs, *do it*. If costs outweigh benefits, *don't do it*.
5. So, according to rational choice theory, it is not necessary to consider prior causes, antecedents and structures. All that matters are the rational judgements and calculations facing a given person, with their particular set of ends and preferences, in a given situation.

### Activity 8

Since the 1950s there has been a huge growth in recorded property thefts. This growth has coincided with the proliferation of new mass market commodities – cars, TVs, videos, stereos, etc. – which most people now consume as a normal, routine feature of life.

How might rational choice theorists explain the relationship between more consumer goods and more property thefts?

Given that rational choice theory views most crimes as the actions of reasoning and autonomous agents making individual judgements or calculations in response to specific situations or circumstances, the rise in property crime can be attributed to: increasing opportunities to steal consumer goods; declining costs associated with stealing them (i.e. less chance of getting caught, less chance of conviction or imprisonment); and an increasing gap for an increasing number of people between their wants and aspirations (their ends) and their capacity to fulfil those at low cost by non-criminal methods (their means).

Rational choice theory has real strengths. It takes the immediate motivation of actors and their own understanding of their situation seriously. It has a cold but persuasive economic logic to it. But a number of questions immediately arise in our minds. First, can we really describe all human motivations and behaviour, all criminal acts, in terms of rationality? What about crimes of violence? The impulse to commit crimes may come from rather more emotional sources. There may be a high or a buzz to certain criminal pursuits which are not so dissimilar from the thrill of dangerous pursuits elsewhere in life, be it sport, adultery or driving fast in a car.

Even within its own narrow field of vision, how can rational choice theory explain how people acquire their preferences? Is it a given of human nature to want modern consumer goods? Even if agents can accurately gauge the costs and benefits of different courses of action, why is it that the current balance of costs and benefits prevails? We might know, for example, the likelihood of a conviction, but that tells us nothing about why current sentencing policy is as it is. Focusing on agency has its virtues, but it is hard to think about agency for very long without coming back to structures.

And that takes us back to our first three explanations. How can we use these different explanations of crime to explore the claims and concerns of this chapter?

### Activity 9

What bearing might these four models of criminal behaviour have on our common-sense narrative of the crime problem? Do they have any bearing on it? In particular, how might they shape our understanding of the core *claims* of the common-sense narrative?

Jot down a few notes.

We came up with this:

**Biological.** The statistical evidence for some kind of biological component to criminal behaviour seemed strong, but why has this biological potential been unleashed only in the last 50 years?

**Familial.** The cycle of poor parenting creating anti-social personalities leading to criminal careers and more bad parenting seems plausible, but it begs the question what is good and bad parenting? Wasn't there a lot of poor parenting in the past? Why should there suddenly be more problem families, the cycle has to start somewhere? How, if at all, can these kinds of family cycle be linked to other changes in the post-war UK?

**Cultural.** This explanation focuses on gangs and their distinct sub-cultures. Do we have any evidence that the rise in crime has been accompanied by a rise in gangs? We certainly have evidence that young men are frequently involved in criminal activities. Can we apply this model to other criminals? Does it help us think about the development of normative definitions of crime?

**Rational choice theory.** This explanation helps us think about the way criminal behaviour is motivated, it doesn't rely on notions of abnormality, and it helps us think about individual criminal acts and careers. But how can it be used to help us think about why so many individuals all suddenly seem to have arrived at the same decision? To understand that we need to look at the economic and cultural structures which shape preferences and judgements.

## 4.7 Summary

- The social sciences have generated a range of explanations of criminal behaviour, running on a spectrum from overwhelmingly structural causes to overwhelmingly agency-driven causes.

- Structural explanations locate the causes of criminality in abnormal or deviant biologies, pathological or problem families and deviant sub-cultures.
- Agency-driven explanations, like rational choice theory, argue that crimes are an every-day experience whose origins begin and end with actors' conscious choices, judgements and calculations in specific situations.
- Given the range of crimes which exists it is unlikely that any one theory can deliver explanations of all criminal behaviour.

## 5 Questions, questions

### 5.1 How did we get here?

We began this course by posing the question: what is a crime? Shouldn't we be finishing with a clear and unambiguous answer to this? Well we are sorry to disappoint you, if that is what you were expecting, but it doesn't look to us as if there is a simple, unambiguous answer. At the very least, according to Sections 1 and 2 of this chapter, there are: legal and normative definitions of crime; recorded and unrecorded crimes; the crimes we fear and the crimes that fascinate us; and stories of crime and facts about crime. But even this last pair breaks down, for as we know from Section 2, stories of crime in the contemporary UK carry as much weight and as much importance as facts about crime like the official crime rates. And the facts are themselves complex social constructions which cannot be taken at face value.

What is available to us are a range of contested definitions, descriptions and narratives of crime within the social sciences and amongst society at large. And what that says to us is not that we have an adequate answer, but that we need to start asking some more, and some better questions.

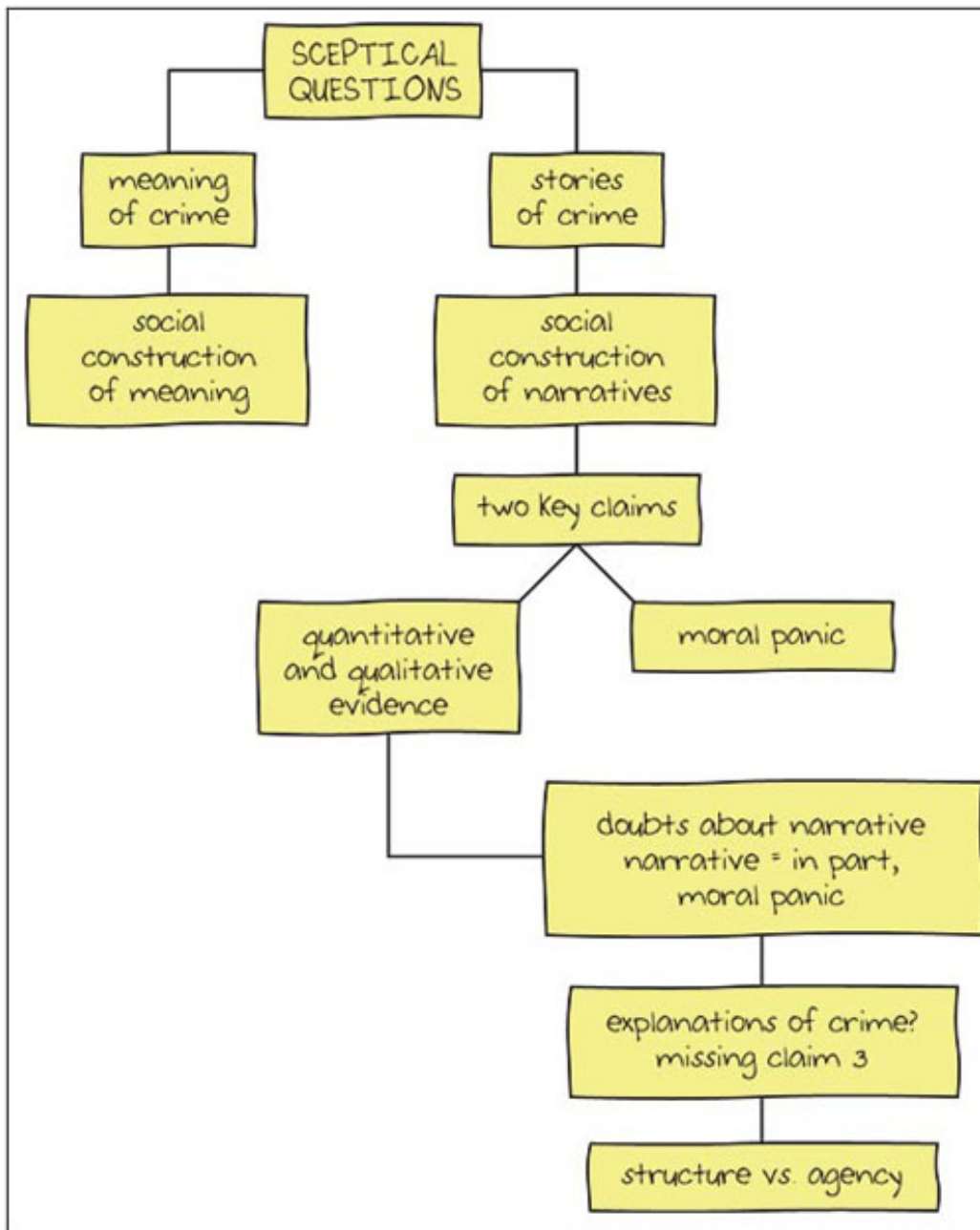
So the story of this chapter has been about how one moves from one set of questions about the social world to a new and better set of questions. How did we do that? Let's stand back for a moment and think through the process by which we arrived at our tentative questions and conclusions.

#### Activity 10

You should be familiar with flow diagrams by now. If not, look at [Figure 1](#) which shows how a hypothetical event might be processed through the criminal justice system.

Try and construct a flow diagram for the stages of argument that we have gone through: the questions which have been asked, the response of the authors, and the development of the argument. Don't spend too long on it, it only needs to be a sketch. Or use a flow diagram program.

Then compare your diagram with ours.



**Figure 11:** Sketch of the argument

So, we began with the *question*: what is a crime? By *analytically* breaking down the definition of the word, its popular uses, and the process that exists between acts and convictions, we concluded that there is no objective, universal standard of human behaviour which clearly distinguishes between criminal and non-criminal behaviour. One of the main ideas introduced at this point to help us understand how certain behaviours and activities come to be defined as criminal was the idea of crime as a *social construction*.

If the definition of crime is not simple, are our *narratives* about crime any more reliable? We know that there are popular, common-sense stories of rising crime, insecurity and uncertainty, and a popular taste or fascination with crime and criminals. These were outlined in Section 2. We also noted that these stories are premised on an assumption of



a relatively crime-free and socially-harmonious past, contrasted with a present characterised by rising degeneracy and falling moral standards.

The first stage in developing a social scientific approach to these narratives was to clarify their core *claims* (Section 3). Stories are often too big and unwieldy to examine as a whole. Once again, we needed to analytically break down the stories and dig out their central claims. Only then could we bring on some *evidence* which might support the popular common-sense claims, or cast them in a different light.

Evidence can come from a variety of sources. *Quantitative evidence*, in the form of official statistics, appeared to give some support to the common-sense story. But, as soon as we began to think about how the evidence was collected, and by whom, doubts set in: the crime rate has actually been falling in recent years, there are grounds for thinking that the rise in crime is due to greater reporting rather than greater numbers of crimes, and it all depends on what type of crime you are looking at, etc. Evidence never speaks for itself and it never arrives innocently into the world.

*Qualitative evidence*, which recognises the context and meaning of crimes for those involved, came in the form of victim reports and surveys on the experience of crime and the fear of crime. One of the most important pieces of evidence was the survey which showed the more at risk people are from crime (in general statistical terms given their age and gender), the less they fear it; and the less at risk they are, the more they fear it. However, even this was complicated by issues of class and geography. So irrespective of what the official statistics might say, it may be that our fascination with crime is fuelling our story-telling.

We took this one stage further in Section 3.4 when we applied the idea of a *moral panic* to the crime problem. While not conclusive in any way, our discussion suggests that popular concerns with crime may function as metaphors and ways of speaking about a whole series of other social changes and uncertainties in our society. *Evaluating* this idea would require a whole new set of questions and claims, evidence and argument.

The *claims* of the common-sense story that we tested against the *evidence* in Section 3 were *descriptive* claims about how the world was and how the world is now. What they did not deal with is how we got from one to the other. To link these together we need an *explanatory* claim. There are many different explanations of why people commit crimes, and therefore many potential explanations of the rise in recorded crime.

Rather than looking at the claims of politicians or common sense, we took a step back to look at social science explanations (explanations which are drawn upon by politicians, the media and the public, in conscious and unconscious ways). Again this was an analytical task. Before we could begin to compare these explanations or examine them against the evidence, we had to break them down, to establish their core explanatory claims.

In the final Activity of Section 4 we thought a little about what the process of comparing explanations might involve and came back to a *new set of questions* and concerns. They certainly suggested that simple accounts of the decline of community and demoralisation which accompany many common-sense narratives about the crime problem need developing.

## 5.2 Where can we go from here?

As this discussion has unfolded we have progressively shifted the focus from a description of crime, either through the common-sense story or through the detailing of



statistical evidence, to competing explanations. But this is not the end of the story, well not quite.

Crime is an important area of social scientific inquiry in its own right. But looking at crime has allowed us to connect with many other important topics which are of concern to all social scientists.

### 5.2.1 Beyond the UK

We have focused on crime in one society, in one period – the late twentieth-century UK. But crime is also becoming increasingly globalised. This is not simply to say that crime occurs throughout the world, which it certainly does. It is to highlight ways through which crime is becoming organised across borders.

One example would be cross-border criminal gangs. The American-Italian Mafia is now in global competition with Eastern European and Russian Mafias who are in turn up against Chinese triads. Other examples of cross-border crimes include: illegal immigration, the growing sex trade and sex tourism, the international distribution of pornography over the Internet, and, of course, international drug trafficking. These developments seem to pose serious threats to nationally-organised police forces and undermine their capacity to combat crime. They are, in short, another potential source of uncertainty and insecurity.

#### **Do you have more questions? ...**

We certainly hope so! If you do, then we have achieved one of our key objectives – encouraging you to develop a sceptical, critical and questioning approach to the world, and to the social sciences.

On behalf of all of us, good luck with your studies!

## Conclusion

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This free course provided an introduction to studying sociology. It took you through a series of exercises designed to develop your approach to study and learning at a distance and helped to improve your confidence as an independent learner.

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Cartoon: "We all want to crack down on crime" David Austin

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