

Public Responsiveness to Declining Crime Rates in the United States and England and Wales

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During much of the second half of the twentieth century, public opinion in both the United States and Britain became more punitive as crime rates rose. These shifting public attitudes had a profound influence on criminal justice policies. What is less understood is how public attitudes in these countries have responded to declining crime rates since the early-1990s. To understand how the public reacts to declining crime rates, we focus on crimes recorded by the police as well as data on actual victimisation. We also draw on more than 4,000 national survey questions to construct measures of public concern about crime and support for punitive criminal justice responses. Our analyses illustrate parallels in the crime drop measured by victimisation surveys in the two countries (with recorded violent crime in England and Wales the exception to this overall trend). The over-time patterns in public concern about crime and punitive sentiment are more complex, with the US public becoming less punitive (in line with declining crime rates) while the British public's concern with crime appears more in tune with actual crime rates. Given the distinct social, political and institutional settings offered by the two countries, the parallel dynamics of crime and the mixed response of public opinion help illustrate the importance of the comparative analysis of crime and its effects on society as well as the importance of considering multiple measures of public opinion related to crime and punishment.

INTRODUCTION

During much of the second half of the twentieth century, public opinion in the United States and Britain became more punitive as crime rates rose. These shifting attitudes had a profound influence on the criminal legal system in these two countries (Enns 2014; Enns and Shanks-Booth 2015; Enns 2016; Jennings *et al.* 2017). What is less understood is how public attitudes in these countries have responded to *declining* crime rates since the early-1990s.

Some evidence suggests that the public noticed the decline in crime rates in these countries and adjusted their attitudes accordingly (Enns 2014; 2016; Jennings *et al.* 2017). Others,

however, are sceptical of this conclusion (Gramlich 2020; Koerth and Thomson-DeVeaux 2020). O'Hear and Wheelock (2020) argue that crime attitudes are largely expressive, and not tied to crime. Shi's (2021) work goes even further in the other direction, finding that exposing individuals to accurate information about declining crime rates *increases* punitiveness. Further complicating our understanding of the public's reaction (or lack thereof) to declining crime rates is research that finds crime rates have little influence on crime salience in the US context (Beckett 1997; Cheliotis 2020; Shi *et al.* 2020),¹ that the public reacts to national and local crime rates differently (Ramirez 2013), and the influence of 'moral panics' in the British context (Jennings *et al.* 2020).

Given these mixed findings, our goal is to evaluate the relationship between declining crime rates and public attitudes. Our analysis focuses on crime rates in the United States and England and Wales.² This cross-national approach enables comparison of how publics in two major advanced industrial democracies have responded to falling crime rates. Perhaps surprisingly, crime rates and punitive attitudes in these countries have not received in-depth comparative analysis (van Dijk *et al.* 2012).³ While other cross-national comparisons are important, we focus our attention on these countries for several reasons. First, the country selection allows insights on whether public responsiveness is influenced by distinct criminal justice policy regimes. Specifically, the existence of capital punishment, the world's highest incarceration rate, and high rates of gun ownership in the US case versus no capital punishment (abolished in 1965), lower rates of incarceration (though still high relative to West European countries), and low rates of gun ownership in England and Wales. Second, high quality long-term victimisation data are available in both of these countries which allows us to disentangle differences in crimes reported to and recorded by the police versus actual victimisation rates. Finally, these countries offer a large volume of survey data on public attitudes towards crime and criminal justice via long-running social, political and victimisation surveys. Our analysis is thus able to draw upon over 4,000 individual survey questions to construct measures of both public concern about crime and support for punitive policies.

Given the data available, we focus on crimes recorded by the police as well as actual victimisation data. We consider both types of crime data because victimisation and police reports do not always align (Lynch and Addington 2006; McDowall and Loftin 2007; Jennings *et al.* 2015). This allows us to test whether the public in each country has noticed falls in crime rates and whether or not public opinion has become less punitive in response.

The findings carry several important implications. First, they offer a clear conclusion to a largely disjointed set of findings about the public's response to falling crime rates. It turns out the distinction between crime concern and punitive attitudes is critical for understanding how the public has responded to declining crime rates in the United States and England and Wales. Second, they speak to broader debates about the public's awareness and ability to update its attitudes in a systematic manner (e.g. Page and Shapiro 1992; Enns and Kellstedt 2008; Jerit and Zhao 2020). Although exceptions exist, we find much more evidence of public awareness and responsiveness than not. Third, these results hold implications for the future of criminal justice reform. In particular they highlight how public demand for punitive policies may depend on future trends in crime rates. Finally, by focusing on the United States and England and Wales, this article offers a unique cross-national perspective. The United States is typically viewed as an

1 See Enns (2016: 20–23) for why this may be the case.

2 The legal system of England and Wales is separate to that of Scotland, as is the reporting of recorded crime statistics. Likewise, Scotland ceased to be included in the British Crime Survey (now the Crime Survey for England and Wales) in 1988. For this reason, we consider England and Wales rather than Great Britain as the focus of analysis.

3 Important studies have considered criminal justice policies across these countries in a comparative framework (e.g. Garland 2001; Miller 2016; Howard *et al.* 2017), but they have not examined crime rates and punitive attitudes together, and if crime rates have been considered, the focus has primarily been on violent crime (Miller 2016).

outlier both in terms of crime rates (e.g. Miller 2016; Gallo *et al.* 2018) and criminal legal policies (e.g. Reitz 2018). However, focusing on the cross-national and over-time analyses of this particular time period highlights both commonalities and differences across these countries.

UNDERSTANDING CRIME RATES IN THE UNITED STATES AND ENGLAND AND WALES

Our primary goal is to understand the relationship between declining crime rates and public attitudes related to crime and punishment in the United States and England and Wales. Figure 1, which plots crime rates in these countries from 1960 to 2019, helps illustrate why we focus on the early-1990s to present to evaluate declining crime rates. In both countries, the rate of total recorded crimes per 100,000 people underwent a relatively sustained increase from 1960 until the early 1990s (in the figure we rescale each data series to common maximum and minimum values to allow for direct comparison of trends). Crime conditions changed in both countries after this period, as the United States experienced a steady decline in crime while England and Wales saw both sustained decreases and increases in crime since the early 1990s. Importantly, however, the seeming crime increase in 2002–3 is linked to adoption of the new National Crime Reporting Standard in 2002 (Simmons *et al.* 2003), and the increase in 2015–20 has been partly attributed to significant expansion in crime recording and reporting practices (ONS 2021).⁴ Indeed, as we will see, victimisation data from the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) show that crime has continued to fall since the early 1990s despite rises in the recorded crime rate we see in Figure 1 during the later years of this time period, suggesting the overall crime trajectories in the United States and England and Wales were much more similar than Figure 1 suggests.

While substantial scholarly work has focused on the rise of crime from roughly 1960 to the early 1990s shown in Figure 1 (e.g. Enns 2014; Enns and Shanks-Booth 2015; Enns 2016; Jennings *et al.* 2017), the decline in crime rates since the early-1990s, though almost as pronounced, has received much less scholarly attention (though see Rosenfeld and Messner 2009; van Dijk *et al.* 2012; Farrall 2017). Further, as noted above, the research that has focused on this

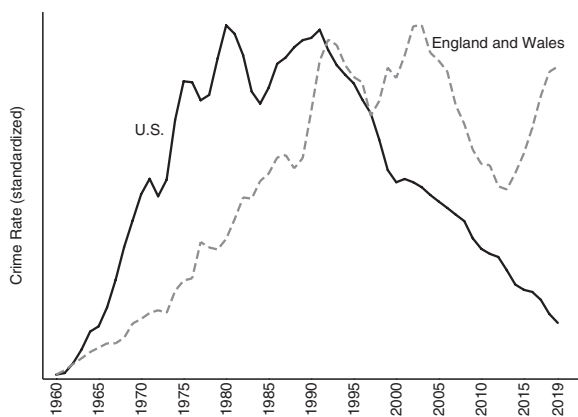


Fig. 1 Total crime recorded by the police in the United States and England and Wales, 1960–2019

4 There was also a change in Home Office counting rules in April 1998, which had the effect of increasing the number of crimes recorded by the police. Separate counts were produced for the 1998/9 year enabling us here to adjust the recorded crime series a multiplier calculated from the data available from the transition year, based on which we deflate the number of crimes recorded from 1999 onwards. The trend shown therefore understates the degree to which recorded crime increased.

period has often reached conflicting conclusions about its effects on public opinion and offered a multitude of explanations for its causes. Thus, we focus our analysis on the last thirty years, which have mostly seen declining crime rates.

DIFFERENT CRIME DATA TELL DIFFERENT STORIES

Before we turn to our analysis of public attitudes toward crime and punishment, we first need to understand variation in crime rates across reporting type and crime type. Consistent with the discussion above regarding changes in crime reporting in England and Wales, our subsequent analyses show that the *type* of crime data analysed holds large implications for what we conclude about whether crime rates are increasing or decreasing. The different patterns we observe are consistent with research highlighting concerns with the reliability of certain crime data (e.g. [Walby et al. \(2016\)](#) on under-counting of domestic violence in official statistics and [Buil-Gil et al. \(2021\)](#) on geographical variation in the 'dark figure' of recorded crime rates in England and Wales, and [Wilson \(1975: 14\)](#) on the Uniform Crime Reporting in the United States). These reliability concerns also validate our analytic strategy. Specifically, our analysis of the effects of crime on public attitudes exploits the variation between types of crime and crimes reported to and recorded by the police versus actual victimisation rates to better understand what influences public attitudes in these domains.

We start by disaggregating the data above, which reflect crimes recorded by the police, by various crime types. [Figure 2](#) presents the homicide rates in the United States and England and Wales from 1993 to 2019. The US data come from the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports (UCR), which document crimes recorded by the police. The UCR program was first established in 1930 and was the only authoritative source of national crime statistics in the United States for several decades. It was not until 1972 when the National Crime Victimization Survey, a nationally representative survey of American households (which we analyse below), provided an additional metric for analysing crime trends ([Ansari and Ni 2015](#)). The data for England and Wales come from the United Kingdom Home Office, the government department responsible for crime and policing. For most of the twentieth century there was relative consistency in measurement practices. Recent years, however, have seen a number of significant changes in police recording practices (as discussed above and in [Supplementary Appendix 1](#)).

Several patterns stand out that are important to our analysis of public opinion. The consistently higher homicide rate in the United States suggests that if the public becomes more

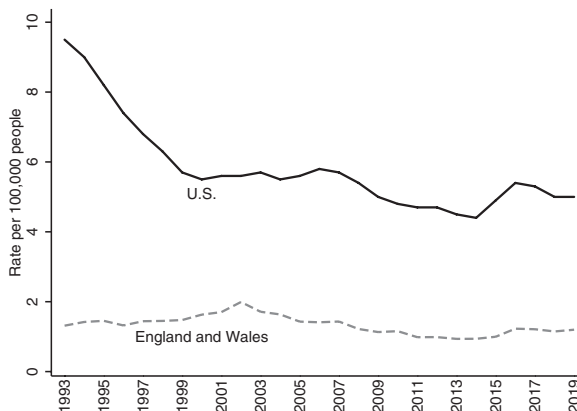


Fig. 2 Homicide rates in the United States and England and Wales, 1993–2019

punitive in response to the murder rate, we would expect more punitive attitudes in the United States relative to England and Wales. However, if it is change that public opinion responds to (Enns 2016), then we might expect to observe declining punitiveness in the United States during this period and relatively consistent levels of punitiveness in England and Wales.

Of course, homicides are relatively infrequent—at least when we consider the public as a whole (Miller 2016)—so it may be that other types of crime have a bigger impact on public attitudes. Figures 3 and 4 report the rate of property crime and violent crime, respectively. In both the United States and England and Wales, property crimes decreased during the period of analysis. This parallel shift is especially evident in the right panel where we rescale the series to

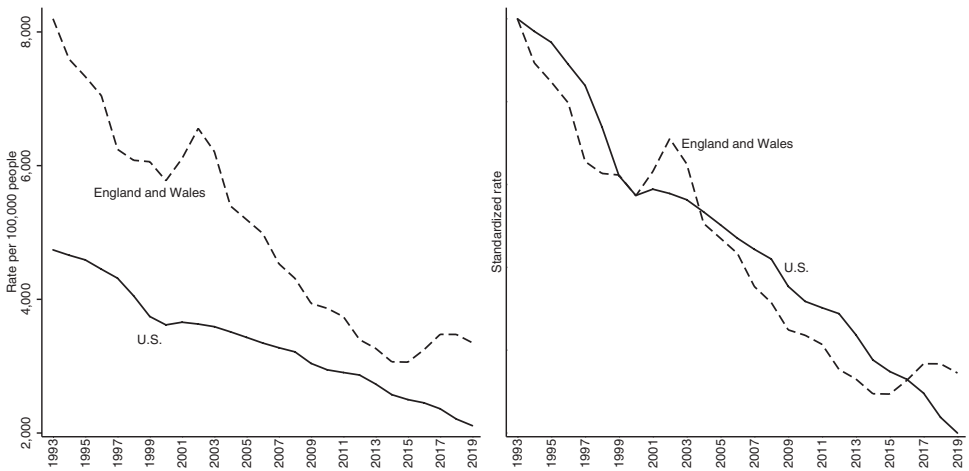


Fig. 3 Property crime rates in the United States and England and Wales, 1993–2019

Note: the left panel reports actual rates, the right panel rescales the series to a common minimum and maximum value to aid over-time comparison.



Fig. 4 Violent crime rates in the United States and England and Wales, 1993–2019

have a common maximum and minimum value. Rescaling the data this way makes it easier to evaluate the extent to which the two series move in tandem or distinctly.⁵ What is remarkable here is that despite distinct social, economic and policy contexts, the property crime rates in the two countries tracked each other extremely closely over this period.

Figure 4 presents violent crimes recorded by the police, again with the left panel reporting rates and the right panel rescaling the values to facilitate overtime comparison. The US measure of violent crime includes murder/non-negligent manslaughter, aggravated assault, rape and robbery, while that for England and Wales includes homicide, violence with injury, rape and robbery. The different definitions of ‘violent crime’ in the two countries, as well as shifts in reporting practices in England and Wales (see [Supplementary Appendix 1](#) for a full discussion of these changes), give rise to very different trends. In the United States, the violent crime rate has declined steadily since 1993, whereas in England and Wales it rose until 2005, then fell sharply until 2012, before undergoing an upturn in violent crime that has continued to the present day.

The changes in crime reporting in England and Wales offer both a challenge and opportunity for our analysis. The challenge, of course, is that the rates are not directly comparable across time because the definitions for crime and how crimes are counted have shifted. In other words, while crime has actually declined (as we show below), because more offences are now counted in the data, it appears that crime rates have increased substantially. This reporting change also presents an opportunity, however, because we are ultimately interested in the relationship between crime rates and public opinion. One mechanism by which shifting crime rates can influence public attitudes is through media coverage of crime ([Rosenberger and Callanan 2011](#); [Enns 2016](#)). If this is the primary mechanism involved, even when the actual crime rate remained steady or declined, if media covered the *increased* crime reported to the police, we would expect the public to become more punitive in England and Wales as crime reporting changed to be more encompassing. However, if crime influences public attitudes directly based on experience with crime, or if media cover victimisation (not crimes recorded by the police), we would not expect such as relationship. We highlight this possibility in more detail below.

CRIME VICTIMISATION RATES VS CRIMES RECORDED BY THE POLICE

The data above focused on crimes reported to and recorded by the police. In this section, we introduce measures of crime victimisation based on large high-quality government surveys of the general population. These victimisation surveys offer an important complement to the data above because they measure actual victimisation rates—not just crimes recorded by the police. We begin with data from England and Wales and then present victimisation data from the United States.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, officials working in the United Kingdom Home Office became interested in a national victimisation survey that might provide a more comprehensive assessment of the extent of various crimes, independent of those recorded by the police ([Mayhew and Hough 1983](#)). These developments were significantly influenced by the National Crime Survey programme in the United States ([Mayhew and Hough 1992](#)). The first ‘British

⁵ The variables are normalized to range between values of 0 and 1 by subtracting the minimum value from the raw value and dividing by the range of values.

$$z_i = \frac{x_i - \min(x)}{\max(x) - \min(x)}$$

Crime Survey' (BCS) was fielded in 1982 (asking about victimisation in the previous year) and found property offences were four times more common than suggested by official statistics and five times more for violent offences. In the early years the survey was fielded periodically, in 1982, 1984, 1988, 1992, 1994, 1996, 1998 and 2000, before switching to a rolling annual basis in 2002.⁶ It was renamed the 'Crime Survey for England and Wales' (CSEW) in 2012, to better reflect its geographical coverage (which had ceased to include Scotland in 1988). The sample size also increased considerably through this period, with the early surveys interviewing around 11,000 people while those conducted in the 2000s expanded to a sample of 35,000 and above (for an extended discussion, see Flatley 2014).

In Figure 5, we plot the measure of property crime victimisation alongside the property crime rate analysed above (again reporting rates in the left panel and standardised series in the right). The figure reveals a peak in 1993, at almost 37,000 property crimes per 100,000 people and a decline in rates of victimisation ever since. This pattern aligns closely with the trend for recorded crime discussed previously, also shown. While the rate of crime in the CSEW is over twice that for recorded property crime, the standardised series on the right shows the two series fall largely in tandem over the period since 1993.

Turning next to violent crime, plotted in Figure 6, we see a more significant divergence between victimisation rates and recorded crime rates. When we consider victimisation, measured in the CSEW as the number of times individuals have been hit, kicked or had a weapon used against them as well as being *threatened with force or violence*, the rate of violent crimes per 100,000 people in England and Wales peaks in 1995 at over 20,000 per 100,000 people (over one violent crime for every five people in the general population). This is clearly a much more encompassing measure than recorded violent crime (which has never exceeded 1,200 crimes per 100,000 people, reflecting its focus on more serious incidents, even allowing for the expectation that recorded crime will tend to under-count the true extent of victimisation). After 1995, the victimisation rate drops steadily stabilizing at around 8,000 crimes per 100,000 people in 2019. While the rate of reported violent crimes (shown in the left panel) is therefore

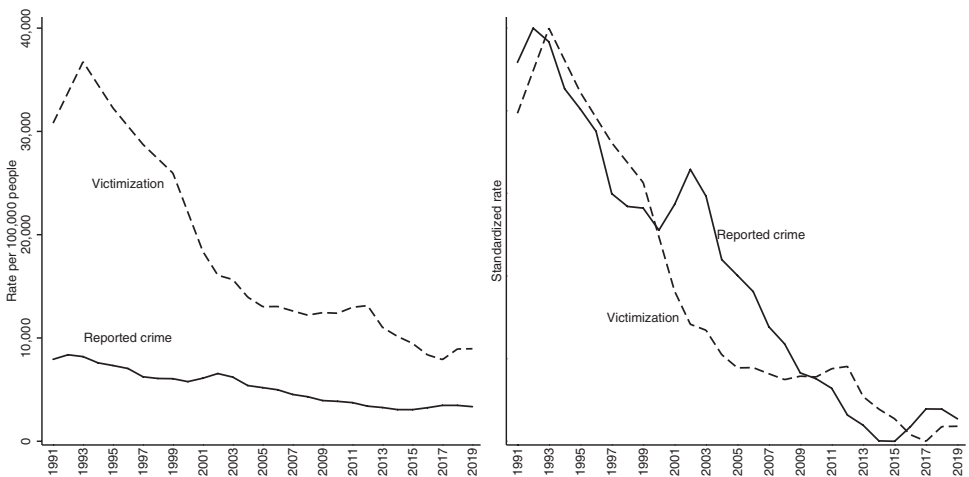


Fig. 5 Property crime victimisation rate (number of crimes per 100,000 people) in England and Wales, 1991–2019

⁶ The survey asks people whether they were a victim of crime in the last 12 months and in light of this we report each wave of the CSEW against the previous calendar year.

consistently much lower, actual victimisations have declined while police reporting of violent crimes has increased (right panel). The absence of steep upturns in victimisation in 2002–3 and after 2015, in contrast to the police data, provide evidence that the uptick in crime rates in [Figures 1](#) and [4](#) are due primarily to changes in counting practices—not actual increases in British crime during this period.

Next, we report US crime victimisation data, which come from the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) conducted by the Bureau of Justice Statistics. The NCVS collects data on a nationally representative sample of US households on nonfatal victimisations against individuals 12 and older ([Bureau of Justice Statistics 2021b](#)). Households selected for the NCVS are interviewed biannually over a three-year period. Each initial interview is conducted in person with the majority of follow-up interviews conducted over the phone. Since 1993, an average of 94,000 household and 166,000 personal interviews have been conducted each year ([Bureau of Justice Statistics 2021b](#)). One unfortunate complication of comparing US victimisation trends over time is that the NCVS made major methodological adjustments in 1993 that make comparisons to pre-1992 rates tenuous. Some of the most significant changes include more direct questioning about sexual and violent crimes, questions specifically designed to aid victims in recalling past victimisations, additional sexual victimisation measures beyond rape and attempted rape and a greater number of interviews conducted using computer assisted telephone interviews ([Bureau of Justice Statistics 2021b](#)). Together, these changes served to detect higher levels of victimisation and improve the validity of the NCVS moving forward. Because our focus is on the crime *decline* in the United States and England and Wales, we eschew the difficulties of using US victimisation data before and after these changes and focus exclusively on NCVS data from 1993 and forward.⁷

[Figures 7](#) and [8](#) consider property crime and violent crime, respectively. Each figure contains two measures of crime victimisation from the NCVS, overall victimisation and victimisations that were recorded by the police. This second measure offers a more direct comparison between

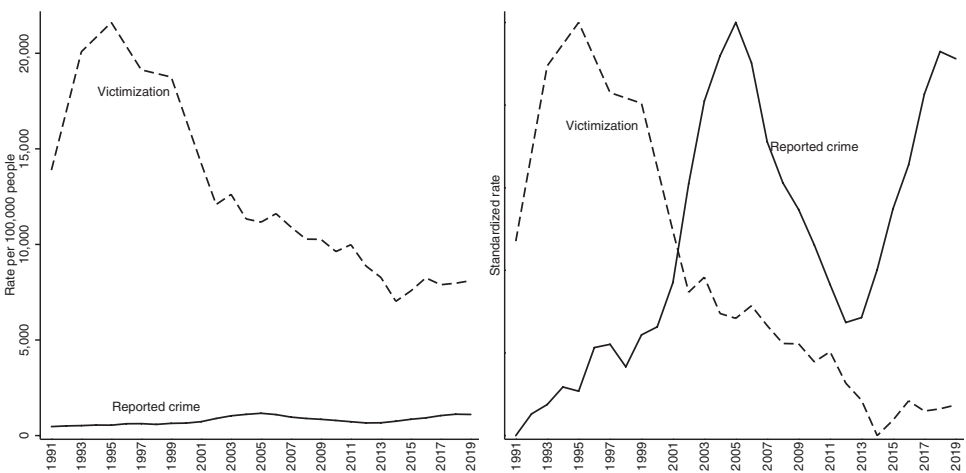


Fig. 6 Violent crime victimisation rate (number of crimes per 100,000 people) in England and Wales, 1991–2019

7 NCVS data are taken from the Bureau of Justice Statistic's NCVS Victimization Analysis Tool ([2021a](#)).

the NCVS victimisation data and the UCR data based on crimes recorded by police (described above) which we also include in these figures.⁸ The data show that victimisation rates greatly exceed official crime data recorded by the police (UCR dashed line) for both property crime (Figure 7) and violent crime (Figure 8). However, when respondents in the NCVS are asked if they reported the crime to the police, the NCVS data are much more closely aligned with the UCR data. With violent crime (Figure 8), the UCR data actually exceed the NCVS police reported statistics for property crime and the two series overlap in many years starting in 2007,

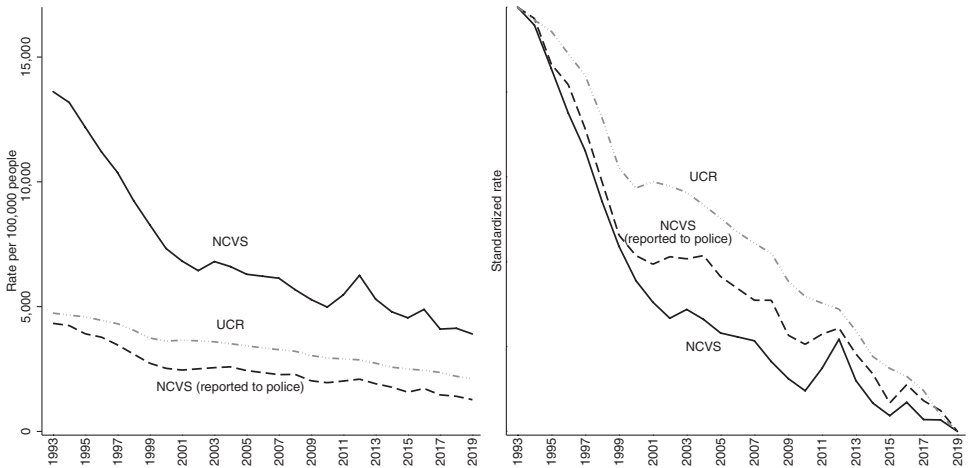


Fig. 7 Rate of property crime victimisation, victimisation reported to the police (NCVS data) and violent crime rates based on the UCR, 1993–2019

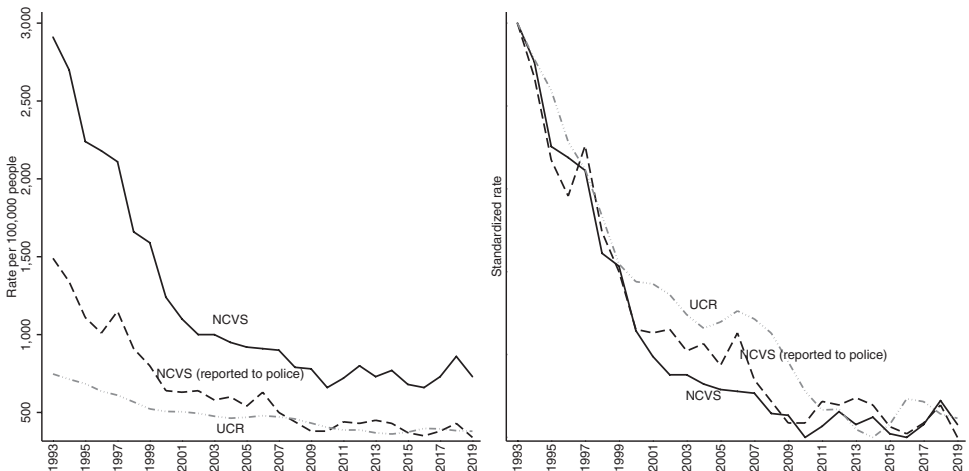


Fig. 8 Rate of violent crime victimisation, victimisation reported to the police (NCVS data) and violent crime rates based on the UCR, 1993–2019

⁸ To aid comparison across crime data, we followed previous research and adjusted the NCVS property crime rates (which are based on households) to reflect the rate per individuals as recorded in the UCR (Biderman *et al.* 1991; Blumstein *et al.* 1991; McDowall and Loflin 1992; 2007). Additionally, because UCR counts arson, murder and manslaughter but the NCVS does not, we removed these measures from our UCR rates.

a pattern that is consistent with research documenting a growing convergence between the NCVS and UCR crime rates since 1993 (Catalano 2007; McDowall and Loftin 2007; Ansari and Ni 2015).

In addition to similar rates once we account for what is reported to police, we see that NCVS victimisation data and UCR police report data suggest the same overall trends—declining violent and property crime since the early 1990s. These similar trajectories are especially noticeable in the right panels of Figures 7 and 8, where the series are rescaled to a common minimum and maximum value.

Together, the victimisation data from England and Wales and the United States (Figures 5–8) produce two patterns with implications for analysing public attitudes toward crime and punishment. First, consistent with past research, in almost all cases, victimisation rates greatly exceed crimes reported to the police. However, much of this difference appears to stem from crimes *not* reported to the police. The US data allow us to analyse victimisation among crimes reported to the police, and the data are much closer to actual police statistics. Second, with the exception of violent crime in England and Wales, despite the cross-sectional differences between victimisation and police data, both measures show declining crime rates. The similar over-time patterns are especially evident in the right panels of the previous figures where we scaled each measure to a common minimum and maximum value to facilitate over-time comparisons. These similarities mean that in most cases, it is not possible to evaluate whether the public (or news coverage of crime, if news mediates the crime-opinion relationships) responds to shifts in crimes reported to police or shifts in actual victimisation—over time, the two are nearly perfectly correlated. The one exception is violent crime in England and Wales, where police data have moved in the opposite direction to the trend of actual victimisation in recent years. We exploit this variation in our analyses below.

PUBLIC REACTIONS TO DECLINING CRIME

Although an emerging consensus finds that public attitudes were responsive to rising crime rates (Enns 2016; Jennings *et al.* 2017), there is no such consensus regarding the decline in crime rates observed above (e.g. Enns 2016; Jennings *et al.* 2017; Gramlich 2020; Koerth and Thomson-DeVeaux 2020). In addition to these mixed conclusions, several theoretical considerations complicate our expectations. Public opinion does not always respond to positive and negative information symmetrically (Soroka 2014). It is possible that the public becomes more punitive as crime rises, but support for being tough on crime does not recede when crime goes down. Or, the public may respond to increases and decreases in crime symmetrically, but negativity bias in media reporting (i.e. more focus on crime increases than decreases) may produce such a pattern. The increasingly polarized nature of politics in the United States since the early 1990s presents another complicating factor. It may be that the process of updating political attitudes—particularly among different partisan groups—has changed during our period of analysis, leading to a reduced relationship between crime rates and attitudes. While our own prior research, as well as many others, have found that political attitudes in these countries tend to follow objective conditions in this and other policy domains (e.g. Enns and Kellstedt 2008; Enns 2016; Jennings *et al.* 2017), we recognize it is possible that this relationship may be weaker than we might otherwise expect in the subsequent analysis.

To evaluate these various considerations, we follow Enns (2014; 2016) and Jennings *et al.* (2017), and use Stimson's (1991) 'dyad ratios algorithm' to combine all available survey questions (that have been asked at multiple time points) related to criminal justice attitudes into two over-time measures: public concern about crime *and* punitive attitudes towards crime and

punishment in the United States and Britain.⁹ Our measure of crime concern is new and captures perceptions of the crime rate and the degree to which the public is fearful or concerned about crime. Our measure of punitive attitudes captures the degree to which public opinion supports being tougher on crime or supports less punitive and more rehabilitative policies.

Stimson's method offers a solution to the irregular and infrequent availability of nevertheless informative survey data at different points in time. The principle behind the algorithm is fairly intuitive; the ratio of aggregate-level survey responses to the same question at different points in time provides meaningful information about the relative state of public opinion – telling us whether, on average, the public has become more or less concerned about crime or whether it has become more or less punitive in its opinions. Every survey item can be expressed as the ratio of attitudes on crime or punishment at two points in time: a 'dyad'. This ratio provides an estimate of the relative opinion, for a given question, in years $t+i$ and $t+j$. For example, if 30 per cent of respondents say they are worried about crime in 1995 and 60 per cent say they are worried in 2005, this indicates that the public has become twice as concerned about crime between these two points in time, according to this survey measure. Of course, in practice there are multiple dyads and considerable variation due to survey sampling error.

$$P_{ij} = \frac{X_{t+i}}{X_{t+j}}.$$

This method enables recursive estimation of the index of crime perceptions and punitive attitudes for each survey question for each time period based on all data available. As such the algorithm extracts the underlying tendency of all survey items relating to crime and punishment, analogous to a principal components approach. Because there are multiple estimates of public opinion (i.e. there are multiple survey question series) and they are not all equivalent indicators of the latent construct, the dyad ratios algorithm estimates the squared correlation of each series with the underlying dimension and uses this to weight the series (Stimson 1991; Bartle *et al.* 2011: 269). This item-scale correlation is interpretable as a factor loading, and is reported below for selected question series.

While this method is somewhat inductive, avoiding prior assumptions about weights assigned to items in the extracted index, decisions do need to be taken regarding which survey items satisfy face validity requirement for inclusion – simply, the items need to be credible measures of public concern about crime and serve to measure the public's preference for more (or less) punitive policy with regard to criminal justice.

CRIME CONCERN

We start by considering whether public concerns about crime reflect changes in the rates of recorded crime and victimisation in the two countries. Some researchers have suggested a divergence in perceptions of crime between local and national levels, suggesting that in terms of perceptions of national trends there is no public responsiveness (Mohan *et al.* 2011; Gramlich 2020; Koerth and Thomson-DeVeaux 2020). Our analysis differs from past work in both the United States and England and Wales, however, in that we consider property and violent crime, as measured through victimisation and police data, and we generate measures of crime concern based on all available data.

⁹ Historical survey data from pollsters such as Gallup and Ipsos (and also more recent data from YouGov) measured public opinion in Great Britain, rather than England and Wales, as do those survey items obtained from Bartle *et al.*'s (2011) database of public policy preferences. It is not possible to disaggregate this data and so our measure of public punitiveness corresponds to Britain as a whole. Note that the combined population of England and Wales makes up over 90 per cent of the total population of Britain, meaning that changes in our measure of punitive attitudes are unlikely to be driven by Scottish respondents.

The US measure relies on five survey questions about crime concern, which were each asked repeatedly since 1965 – giving us five time series (though we start our analysis in 1993 to match the crime data reported above). The data were obtained from the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research at Cornell University. [Table 1](#) reports the questions and the relationship between each series and the crime concern index generated with Stimson’s dyad ratios algorithm. Four of the individual series load at 0.93 or above and the fifth series loads at 0.80. These values show that all series are related and contribute to the overall measure. The high proportion of variance explained (88%) offers another indication that assessments of whether crime is going up and fear of crime are measuring the same underlying concept.

The measure of crime concerns for England and Wales uses a number of series in the CSEW and the British Election Study (including its ‘Continuous Monitoring Survey’ that ran monthly between 2004 and 2013 and its Internet Panel fielded at periodic intervals since 2014), plus questions asked by YouGov. Since 1982, the CSEW has asked people about their fear of crime, using a question asking how safe respondents feel when walking alone in their area after dark (as with the US opinion data, we again focus our analysis on the period that aligns with the previous crime data). Research has found that this measure tends to capture diffuse anxiety about the risk of crime more than everyday personal concerns over safety ([Gray et al. 2008](#)). We include this series and a number of other survey questions capturing worry about crime and belief that the crime rate is rising (2,939 items in total), and find that mostly these items load strongly onto the underlying dimension of public concern about crime [Table 2](#). The single estimated dimension accounts for nearly 80 per cent of the variance in the component measures of public opinion. Although the measure of crime concern in England and Wales includes more survey questions than the US measure, we see that the proportion of variance explained and relationships between each series and the resulting index are very similar to what we found in the United States in [Table 1](#).

[Figures 9](#) and [10](#) plot the resulting measures of public crime concern for the United States and England and Wales, respectively. In the United States, we see that concern with crime declined from the early 1990s to about 2001. This aligns with the declining crime rates observed above. But from 2003 to 2007, crime concern moved *opposite* declining crime rates. Then, since 2007, concern again declined—in line with actual crime rates—though to a much lesser extent than the decline in the 1990s. The patterns in [Figure 9](#) are thus somewhat puzzling. On one hand, the public was less

Table 1 Factor loadings of question series and the overall measure of crime concern, United States

Survey question (survey organisation)	Cases	Loading
There is more crime in this area than there was a year ago (Gallup)	33	0.97
There is an area near where you livewhere afraid to walk alone at night (Gallup)	34	0.93
Is more crime in the U.S. than there was a year ago (Gallup)	26	0.96
Feel the crime rate in your area has been increasing in the past year (Harris)	10	0.93
Don't feel safe and secure when at home at night (Gallup)	10	0.80
<i>First dimension</i>		
Proportion of variance explained	88.0	
N of question series used to estimate the overall measure	5	
Total N of survey items	120	
Start	1965	
End	2021	

Table 2 Factor loadings of question series and the overall measure of crime concern, England and Wales

Survey question (survey organisation)	Cases	Loading
Crime rate in area going up (YouGov)	3	1.00
Crime rate nationally going up (YouGov)	3	1.00
Worry about being mugged and robbed (CSEW)	26	0.99
Worried about being attacked (CSEW)	16	0.99
Worried about having car stolen (CSEW)	26	0.99
Worried about having your home broken into and something stolen (CSEW)	26	0.98
Worried about having things stolen from car (CSEW)	26	0.98
Don't feel safe walking about in the dark (CSEW)	24	0.93
Crime situation getting worse these days (BES-CMS)	10	0.92
Worried about being raped (CSEW)	26	0.92
Crime makes feel angry (BES-CMS)	10	0.91
Crime makes feel afraid (BES-CMS)	10	0.90
<i>First dimension</i>		
Proportion of variance explained	79.9	
<i>N</i> of question series used to estimate the overall measure	19	
<i>N</i> of survey items	2,939	
Start	1981	
End	2021	

Note: Given the large number of survey items in the series, the threshold for inclusion in the table is a correlation more extreme than ± 0.9 and more than two cases (i.e. cases are survey-years, so one case can include multiple surveys). Thus, the total number of series (19) is greater than the number of series listed in the table.

**Fig. 9** Crime concern in the United States, 1993–2019

concerned with crime in 2019 than in 1993, which aligns with the declining crime rates during this period. On the other hand, the increase in concern during the early 2000s does not align with actual crime rates. This increase is a particularly important puzzle for future research to engage.¹⁰

¹⁰ One possibility is that the uptick in concern with crime reflects broader safety concerns related to the September 11 attacks on the United States.



Fig. 10 Crime concern in England and Wales, 1991–2019

Our measure of crime concern for England and Wales (Figure 10) aligns much more closely with declining crime rates than we saw in the United States in Figure 9. Concern about crime peaked briefly in 1991, but has been in decline ever since – with just the occasional slight upturn. This highlights how in the British context the ‘crime drop’ has translated into an easing of public fears and concerns over crime. Further, the patterns in Figure 10 strongly suggest that concern with crime in Britain follows victimisation, and not the increase in violent crime reported by police, offering evidence that the public (or the news, if news coverage mediates the crime-opinion link), follows victimisation much more than actual police data.

ANALYSING CRIME RATES AND CRIME CONCERN TOGETHER

Although crime victimisation has declined in both the United States and England and Wales, the figures above show that only in England and Wales have crime concerns declined consistently as we would expect based on falling crime rates. Table 3 offers a more precise evaluation of these patterns. We report the bivariate correlations between the five crime measures we have presented for the two countries and the crime concern measures depicted above. We limit our analysis to bivariate correlations given the short time series and limited degrees of freedom. While this means we cannot control for potentially mediating factors, such as news coverage of crime or political rhetoric around crime, bivariate correlations are ideally suited to quantify the empirical relationships described above and to evaluate our core questions about the over-time relationships between crime rates and public opinion.¹¹

Consistent with visual impressions, only a weak relationship exists between crime perceptions and actual crime in the United States. This is true regardless of how crime is measured, though we note that the estimated relationship is roughly twice as large for the homicide rate as the other crime rates. By contrast, the British public seems highly in tune to shifting crime rates, with the exception of the rate of recorded violent crime – where the correlation is strongly negative (-0.57) and statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). This, however, reflects the fact that the

11 While our primary goal is to evaluate whether the overtime patterns in the figures are related, in the Supplementary Appendix Table A2, we also report bivariate correlations for first differences. Not surprisingly, these analyses reveal a more varied pattern of results, but most associations parallel the findings above and in England and Wales the correlation remains significant for victimization rates for violent crime and property crime (the latter only at the 90 per cent confidence level).

Table 3 *The bivariate correlation between crime rates and crime perceptions in the United States and England and Wales, 1993–2019*

	Crime perceptions	
	U.S.	England & Wales
Homicide (police reports)	0.21	0.65*
Violent crime (police reports)	0.09	-0.57*
Violent crime (victimisation)	0.11	0.93*
Property crime (police reports)	0.04	0.96*
Property crime (victimisation)	0.12	0.90*

* $p < 0.05$; $N = 27$, except for victimisation rates in England and Wales ($N = 23$), due to CSEW surveys every other year early in the analysis.

recorded rate of violent crime has significantly diverged from the public's experience of it, as measured in victimisation surveys. The differences between US concern for crime and crime concern in England and Wales suggest an important avenues for future research, which we discuss in the conclusion.

PUNITIVENESS

We turn next to our measure of punitive attitudes held by the public in relation to crime. As before we use the dyad ratios algorithm to extract the underlying trend in around 900 survey items across the two countries. These items are included on the basis that they measure the public's support for approaches to crime and criminal justice that are harsher or more lenient. Our US measure extends previous work by [Enns \(2014; 2016; also see Ramirez 2013\)](#), adding ten years of data. Our measure for Britain draws heavily on survey data from the CSEW, British Election Study (including panel studies and internet panels), the British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey and polls conducted by Gallup, Ipsos-MORI and YouGov. This provides us with 548 survey items relating to the criminal justice policy over the period between 1981 and 2021. The primary difference in the estimation of punitive attitudes across the United States and England and Wales relates to how we treat questions about the death penalty. We will see in [Table 4](#) that in the US attitudes toward the death penalty correspond closely with the overall measure of the public's punitiveness. Perhaps not surprisingly in the US context, increases (decreases) in support for the death penalty correspond with increases (decreases) in other measures of punitiveness, such as support for punishment, the view that courts have been too lenient and support for spending on law enforcement.

By contrast, previous research on the United Kingdom ([Jennings et al. 2017](#)) has shown that public support for the death penalty has undergone sustained long-term decline, reflecting steadily increasing social liberalism on the issue. This differs from aspects of criminal justice policy other than support for the death penalty, where punitive attitudes are subject to greater fluctuation. We find the same here, and exclude items on the death penalty from our measure of punitive attitudes. The two versions of the series (i.e. with and without questions about the death penalty) are correlated at just 0.13 ($p = 0.429$). Thus, our decision to exclude death penalty attitudes in the British measure of punitiveness is not without consequence. But we believe it is theoretically appropriate. The death penalty was abolished in Britain in 1965 and there has been little serious prospect of its reinstatement since. As a result, in contrast to other survey items measuring support for a more or less punitive direction of criminal justice policy,

Table 4 Factor loadings of selected question series and the overall measure of punitive opinion, United States

Survey question (survey organisation)	Cases	Loading
Favour 'much more' government spending on police and law enforcement (GSS)	5	0.99
Believe it is more important to punish people in prison for their crimes (Gallup)	4	0.98
Believe the criminal justice system is not tough enough in its handling of crime (Gallup)	4	0.97
In favor of the death penalty (Harris)	3	0.97
In favor of the death penalty for a person convicted of murder (Gallup)	42	0.97
Believe the main purpose of prisons is to punish (Roper)	3	0.96
Prefer the death penalty as punishment for people convicted of murder (ABC News)	7	0.95
Feel the courts are too lenient in dealing with criminals (Harris)	4	0.95
Favor the death penalty for persons convicted of murder (GSS)	30	0.95
Favor the death penalty for persons convicted of murder (ABC News)	12	0.92
Favour the death penalty as the penalty for murder (Gallup)	18	0.92
Feel that the death penalty acts as a deterrent to the commitment of murder (Gallup)	6	0.90
Believe the death penalty is imposed not often enough (Gallup)	16	0.90
Favor the death penalty for individuals convicted of serious crimes such as murder (Time)	6	0.90
<i>First dimension</i>		
Proportion of variance explained	67.4	
N of question series used to estimate the overall measure	27	
N of survey items	380	
Start	1953	
End	2020	

Note: threshold for inclusion in the table is a correlation more extreme than ± 0.9 and more than two cases (i.e. cases are survey-years, so one case can include multiple surveys). Thus, the total number of series (27) is greater than the number of series listed in the table.

questions about the death penalty capture are distinct from the policy debate and more likely reflect the degree to which British citizens hold socially conservative *values*, without strictly capturing a meaningful preference for policy. For this reason, to keep our measures of public punitiveness theoretically consistent across the two countries, we should not use death penalty questions in the British measure.

In both country series, we depart from previous measures of punitive attitudes, and exclude questions about confidence in policing and criminal justice. In practice, this decision has little influence on our final measures, but this decision reflects important theoretical considerations, particularly in the US context. Previously in the United States, a lack of confidence in the police reflected concern with crime and a desire for the police to do *more*; i.e., confidence was low because police were not doing enough (Enns 2016, Ch.2). More recently, however, a lack of confidence in the police in the United States can reflect the view that the police are *over*-policing. Because police confidence can now mean different things at different time points, we exclude these measures from the updated series.

In Tables 4 and 5, we report factor loadings of selected survey items, as well as the proportion of variance explained by the underlying factor in the United States and Britain respectively. Here, we see a substantial proportion of variance loads onto a single underlying dimension, indicating the central tendency in the public's punitive attitudes. This accounts for 67 per cent of all variance in survey questions on crime and criminal justice in the United States, and 66 per cent in Britain. The loadings reported in the tables further indicate that widely accepted measures of punitive attitudes load strongly onto the extracted measure.

In the United States, questions about the death penalty consistently load strongly on the resulting measure of punitiveness as do support for more spending on police and law enforcement, the belief that it is important to punish people in prison, and the belief that the criminal justice system is not tough enough.

In the case of Britain, survey items asking if 'people who break the law should be given stiffer sentences' correlate at 1.00 (BES Internet Panel), 0.94 (BSA) and 0.87 (BES Panel Study,

Table 5 Factor loadings of selected question series and the overall measure of punitive opinion, Britain

Survey question (survey organisation)	Cases	Loading
People who break the law should be given stiffer sentences (BESIP)	4	1.00
Sentences that the courts hand down to people who have been convicted of crimes are not harsh enough (YouGov)	4	1.00
Poverty and poor housing a very important cause of crime and violence (Gallup)	4	-0.99
People who break the law should be given stiffer sentences (BSA)	29	0.94
General breakdown in respect for authority, law and order is a very important cause of crime and violence (Gallup)	4	0.94
Young offenders are dealt with too leniently (CSEW)	19	0.94
Sentences are too lenient (CSEW)	21	0.92
<i>First dimension</i>		
Proportion of variance explained	66.0	
N of question series used to estimate the overall measure	25	
N of survey items	548	
Start	1981	
End	2021	

Note: threshold for inclusion in the table is a correlation more extreme than ± 0.9 and more than two cases (i.e. cases are survey-years, so one case can include multiple surveys). Thus, the total number of series (25) is greater than the number of series listed in the table.

1992–7). Strong loadings are also observed for items concerning whether sentences are ‘not harsh enough’ (1.00, YouGov), ‘too lenient’ (0.92, CSEW), whether young offenders are dealt with too leniently (0.94, CSEW). Survey items asking about perceived causes of crime also correspond strongly with this measure of punitive attitudes. Believing that poverty and poor housing is a ‘very important cause of crime and violence’ (Gallup, -0.99) is negatively correlated with the measure, while belief that ‘general breakdown in respect for authority, law and order’ (0.94) loads positively. Our measure therefore seems to have face validity in terms of how it corresponds to existing measures of the public’s support for more or less punitive policy.

Figures 11 and 12 report our updated measures of punitiveness in the United States and England and Wales, respectively, plotted against our measures of crime concern and the victimisation rate for violent crime. We analyse victimisation because, as seen above, shifts in crime reporting lead official statistics to deviate from actual crime rates in England and Wales. In Figure 11, we see that the US public has become steadily less punitive since the early 1990s. While concern with crime decreased following the initial crime drop, these series became disconnected around 2001. In contrast, punitive attitudes have declined largely in parallel with the declining crime rates, with something of a lag. This helps resolve conflicting findings in the US

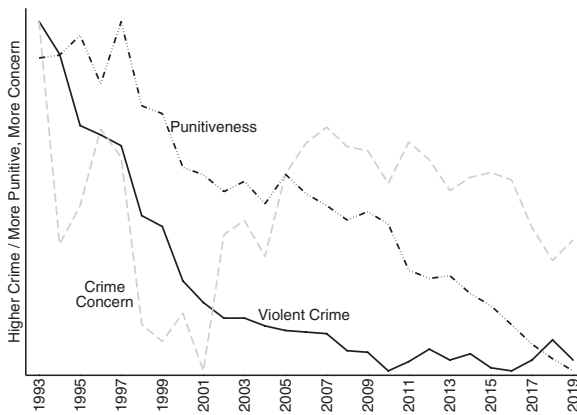


Fig. 11 Punitive attitudes in the United States, 1993–2019

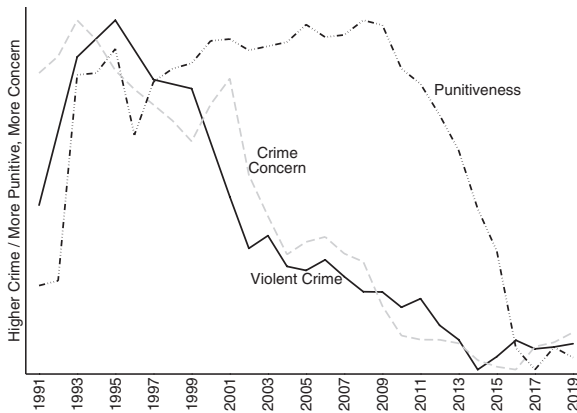


Fig. 12 Punitive attitudes in Britain, 1991–2019

Table 6 *The bivariate correlation between crime rates and punitive attitudes in the United States and England and Wales, 1993–2019*

	Punitive attitudes	
	U.S.	England & Wales
Homicide (police reports)	0.79*	0.47*
Violent crime (police reports)	0.91*	–0.30
Violent crime (victimisation)	0.85*	0.52*
Property crime (police reports)	0.98*	0.56*
Property crime (victimisation)	0.91*	0.46*

* $p < 0.05$; $N = 27$, except for victimisation rates in England and Wales ($N = 23$), due to surveys every other year early in the analysis.

context. While both concern for crime and punitiveness declined as crime fell in the 1990s, only public punitiveness continued to decline during the entire period of analysis.

Figure 12 shows the measure of public punitiveness in Britain. We see the British public maintained support for punitive policies for some time after crime rates dropped, but public concern for crime dropped as violent crime rates fell. In fact, public attitudes became slightly more punitive from the early 1990s through about 2010, when the British public's support for tough on crime policies finally dropped substantially.

Together, these figures show that in both countries crime concern and punitiveness broadly reflect actual crime rates (measured by victimization), but the relationship appears more direct for punitiveness in the United States and more direct for crime concern in England and Wales. Our evidence arguably provides a corrective to claims that public opinion has been completely divorced from declining crime rates.

ANALYSING CRIME RATES AND PUNITIVE ATTITUDES TOGETHER

Our next step is to test the degree to which the public's support for punitive policy corresponds with the recorded crime rate or victimisation. We again turn to bivariate correlations. We are primarily interested in comparing relationships across crime types and across countries. The correlations in Table 6 offer a useful summary of this information. Consistent with the visual patterns above, the relationship between all crime rates and the public's punitiveness in the United States is strong. As crime rates have declined, the US public has become less punitive. The relationship is much more constrained in Britain, where there is a modest positive correlation. As with our analysis of concern with crime, to the extent the British public follows crime rates, it is actual crime, not shifts in police reporting, as evidenced by the negative relationship between police reports of violent crime and punitive attitudes. It therefore seems that falling victimisation rates of violent crime have been associated with declining public punitiveness on the issue.¹²

CONCLUSIONS

This study has sought to understand how the crime drop experienced by the United States and Britain since the early 1990s impacted public concern about crime and support for punitive

12 Although this analysis is designed to capture over-time trends, in the [Supplementary Appendix](#) we report bivariate correlations of the first differences model, which, not surprisingly given the short time series and trends in the series, does not reveal statistically significant relationships between changes in punitive attitudes and change in crime rates during this period.

measures on crime. We have not sought to explain the crime drop itself, a debate that is ongoing (e.g. *van Dijk et al. 2012; Farrall 2017*), though it is interesting that the two countries have seen such parallel declines in offending in relative terms, if not absolutes. And these parallel declines have occurred with property and violent crimes, and to a similar extent, homicides in both countries. Though in the British case, because of shifts in police reporting of violent crime, this decline is only fully evident when analysing victimization records. This is despite significant differences in social and economic context (not least in terms of the welfare system), the nature of policing and the carceral system.

We have shown that in England and Wales the public recognized falling rates of crime, reflected in decreased concern about crime, while the correspondence is considerably weaker for the United States – based on original measures of public opinion that are estimated using thousands of survey items. In contrast, the public's support for punitive measures on crime in the United States is highly responsive to both recorded crime and victimisation rates while in England and Wales there is similar responsiveness with the exception of recorded violent crime. That public support for tougher action on crime is not responsive to recorded violent crime rates in England and Wales is not surprising when one considers that counting practices for police recorded crime statistics have been subject to a number of significant changes during this period, which have led the recorded rate of violent crime (and total crime) to diverge significantly from victimisation measures. This finding is notable in that it suggests that public concern about crime does not just stem from the official publication, or media reporting of recorded crime statistics (which can mislead about the underlying trend in crime), but instead from societal experience of crime.

One lesson from our analysis is that even across countries subject to distinct economic and political conditions – and very different legal systems – crime can shift in similar ways across decades. A second lesson is that when seeking to understand public responses to shifting crime rates, if victimisation rates and police data diverge, at least in recent decades, victimisation data should be used. A third and final lesson is that public concern about crime and punitive attitudes are not necessarily equivalent, and these measures relate to crime differently in the United States and Britain. While explaining the reasons for this difference is beyond the scope of this article, it sheds some light on conflicting accounts of the crime-public opinion relationship. Those studying public concern about crime will tend to reach different conclusions than those studying public support for punitive policies when the two series diverge, as they do during the period of our analysis. In the US context, punitive attitudes are strongly related to criminal justice policy and outcomes (*Enns 2014; 2016*), so the connection between falling crime rates and declining punitiveness is particularly important.

By developing and extending measures of crime concern and punitive attitudes, we have also offered a novel perspective on the response of public opinion in America and Britain to falling crime rates since the 1990s – making the important distinction between responsiveness to recorded crime and victimisation. We believe there is potential for further application of our approach, both in terms of the method proposed for estimating over-time public opinion towards crime and in its comparison of recorded crime and victimisation data. Further there remains potential for exploring how public responsiveness differs between different subgroups (e.g. between low and high income populations, or between younger and older people). For example, does public responsiveness to crime rates reflect a general tendency or is it a function of responsiveness of groups who are more exposed to crime? Lastly, given the importance of victimization on public attitudes, what is the role of media coverage of crime in mediating public responsiveness?

This research also holds implications for reforming the criminal legal system in these countries. First, despite somewhat different trajectories, concern with crime and support for tough

on crime policies have declined substantially since the crime apex in the early 1990s. Enns (2016) has shown that in the United States, the decline in punitiveness has led to some corresponding shifts in the legal system (e.g. Baumgartner *et al.* 2008; Karstedt *et al.* 2019). Similar shifts have occurred in the United Kingdom (Jennings *et al.* 2017). Unless crime rates increase, from a strategic political perspective, it seems that now is an optimal time for continued socially-minded criminal justice reform in both the United States and United Kingdom. Given our empirical findings, a further implication is that in the UK criminal justice reformers would be advised to focus on the historically low rate of crime concern while in the US reformers should recognize that punitiveness has been declining steadily, and a focus on reforming particular policies may gain the most traction. Finally, although the strength of the relationships varied, in both contexts, the public has responded to declining crime rates. If crime were to *increase* in the future, unless media coverage unusually focused on understanding the roots of crime and on debates over holistic solutions to crime, we would expect to see a resurgence of punitive attitudes on the issue.

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SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

Supplementary material is available at *The British Journal of Criminology* online.

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