Distributive Justice and the Crime Drop

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Abstract

Data were extracted from a total of almost 600000 respondents from all sweeps of the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) 1982-2012 to determine whether victimisation was more or less concentrated across households during the crime drop. The most victimised household decile experienced the greatest absolute decline in victimisation but still accounted for over 70% of all victimisations suffered. Methodological issues underlying the patterns observed are discussed. The characteristics associated with highly victimised household are consistent across survey sweeps. Cross-national and crime type extension of work of the kind undertaken is advocated as both intrinsically important and likely to clarify the dynamics of the crime drop.

Introduction

The present paper seeks to link two of the central facts concerning victimisation by crime in the Western world. The first is that the burden of crime is borne very unequally across areas and, within areas across households and individuals (Tseloni, Ntzoufras, Nicolaou, & Pease, 2010). The second is that there has been a very substantial cross-national drop in crime as captured by victimisation surveys (van Dijk, Manchin, Nevala, & Hideg, 2007) (Farrell, Tilley, Tseloni, & Mailley, 2010). The present writers seek to establish whether the crime drop has resulted in a more or less *equitable* distribution of crime across households. Inequality of victimisation challenges distributive justice. Harms as well as goods should be distributed equitably. Changes in inequality would suggest whether we should regard the crime drop as unequivocally benign (inequality-reducing or neutral) or have reservations about its benefits (inequality increasing). The possible outcomes of the analysis have differing implications for criminal justice in general and policing in particular. There is already evidence that policing concentration at least in England and Wales is not proportionate to the presenting crime problem (Ross & Pease, 2008), and reasons have been suggested for this, the writers' favoured account being labelled the 'winter in Florida, summer in Alaska' paradox (Townsley & Pease, 2002). This contends that calls for police service are triggered in part by *deviations* from expected levels. People in Florida may experience their winters as cold, and people in Alaska their summers as hot, even though winters in Florida may be warmer than summers in Alaska. Likewise crime and disorder in generally peaceful communities may trigger calls for service in respect of events which represent nothing more than the hurly burly of everyday life in more crime-challenged areas. A recent systematic review of attempts to reduce repeated victimisation was encouraging in its conclusions that the prevention of chronic victimisation of the same individuals or households is viable and has proven largely successful as an approach to crime reduction (Grove, Farrell, Farrington, & Johnson, 2012). Thus, were the analyses to show increased inequality in victimisation, there would be some consolation insofar as a strategy of concentrating effort on those already victimised would reap dividends. Katherine Thorpe (Thorpe, 2007) was, to our knowledge, the first to identify the crime drop as disproportionately due to reduced repeat victimization (Britton,

Kershaw, Osborne, & Smith, 2012) (Farrell & Pease, 2014). Likewise, Nick Tilley's work addresses issues of distributive justice and the crime drop (Tilley, Tseloni, & Farrell, 2011) (Tilley, 2012) though from the perspective of income rather than victimization concentration per se.

A supplementary justification for the present general approach is more speculative, and will not be addressed by analyses reported in this paper. However it is potentially important enough to merit mention. Analyses adopting the approach taken here may shed light on the relative merits of the numerous theories for the crime drop. Fifteen theories have been distinguished (Farrell, 2013) which can be roughly placed into one or more of three categories corresponding to the three necessary elements for crime based on routine activities theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979): change in the supply of motivated offenders (waning crack markets, immigration, declining lead levels in the blood); change in capable guardianship of an official kind (better policing strategies, more imprisonment); and reductions in the supply of victims (increased security of goods and services, migration to online leisure activities). It is contended that the first two putative causes of the crime drop would yield reduced inequality of victimisation across the board, given what is known about offender concentration and travel to crime distances (Wiles & Costello, 2000). The third may not. To reiterate, it should be stressed that this paper suggests a way of approaching the issue of how changes in the presenting profile of crime victimisation may inform the reasons for the crime drop, rather than exploring the data in the detail that would be sufficient to clarify crime drop origins. The more detailed work is in hand. The criminological tradition within which the work is located is that pioneered by Marcus Felson and his colleagues. The writers are grateful for the opportunity to offer the work in this volume celebrating Marcus' work.

The data analysed here comes from all twenty sweeps of the British Crime Survey, recently rebadged as the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW). Data for the present study are thus drawn from close to 600000 CSEW respondents over thirty years. Many key variables have been coded consistently over the period, or can be reconciled across sweeps. Three linked features of CSEW convention are controversial and must be discussed.

1. CSEW defines repeat victimisation as multiple victimisations *of the same type*. Thus a heavily victimised household may not appear as such if it has suffered say, one instance of vandalism, one of burglary and one of assault on a household member. This convention is rejected for the purposes of the analyses reported here. The heterogeneity of criminal careers has long been recognised, though still underestimated by police officers (Roach & Pease, 2014). The heterogeneity of *victim* careers has received less research attention.

2. Statistics of victimisation experience may be drawn from either the CSEW screener questions in the main questionnaire (completed by all respondents) or from forms completed by those identified as victims in the screener questionnaire. The justification for choosing the latter option is that some respondents report events falling outside the designated recall period and some events which turn out not to be crimes after closer questioning. Against that, the screener questions do provide an account of victimisation experiences unconstrained by the artificial limits described immediately below.

3. A limit is imposed upon the number of victimisation forms which a respondent may complete, and upon the number of events which can be reported as a series (ie events of the same type under the same circumstances and probably by the same offender). These constraints have been identified and criticised in respect of both CSEW and its US equivalent

survey (Farrell & Pease, 2007) (Planty & Strom, 2007). A limited remedy to the problem of undercounting the victimisations against chronic victims has been proposed in for the US survey (Lauritsen, Gatewood Owens, Planty, Rand, & Truman, 2012) but not for CSEW.

The *initial* analyses reported here are, in the light of the above, based on responses to *screener* questions. Victimisations were aggregated across categories so that the unit of count was total household victimisations reported by a respondent. All the analyses were repeated using the victim forms and are reported.

Walby and Allen (Walby & Allen, 2004) capped series incidents at 51 and used a value of 60 incidents where there were too many for a respondent to recall, a practice adopted by Farrell and Pease (2007). Here were refined that approach empirically. A cap of 49 was applied for each crime type. The decision was made by examining frequencies of each crime type for each year showing that a miniscule proportion of less than a tenth of a percentage was affected by exclusions of respondents reporting fifty or more events. This is not to question the veracity of those reporting more offences, which requires a change of CSEW methodology to clarify.

Various measures of inequality were considered, and the simplest chosen. This involved ranking households by number of victimisations suffered, dividing the ranked households into deciles, and calculating mean number of victimisations per household per year, and the proportion of each year's total victimisations suffered by households in each decile. The approach has similarities with previous single year analyses (Trickett, Osborn, Seymour, & Pease, 1992) (Tseloni & Pease, 2005).

Results

Figure 1 depicts the crime drop by victimisation decile. It will be seen that no crime was captured by the survey in the first five deciles. Interestingly the sixth and seventh deciles have non-zero values *exclusively in the early sweeps*. In recent sweeps these deciles were also crime-free (insofar as that was revealed by CSEW samples). Clearly a population survey would reveal some crime in those deciles. Eighth, ninth and tenth deciles show a massive reduction in mean crimes per household over time. In terms of number of crimes suffered per household, even the most victimised households seem to have benefited in the crime drop, from suffering six crimes per household in 1981, down to fewer than four in recent sweeps. In fact, in absolute terms, the most victimised have benefited most from the crime drop.

**Figure 1. Mean victimisations per household by decile, CSEW Sweeps 1982-2012**
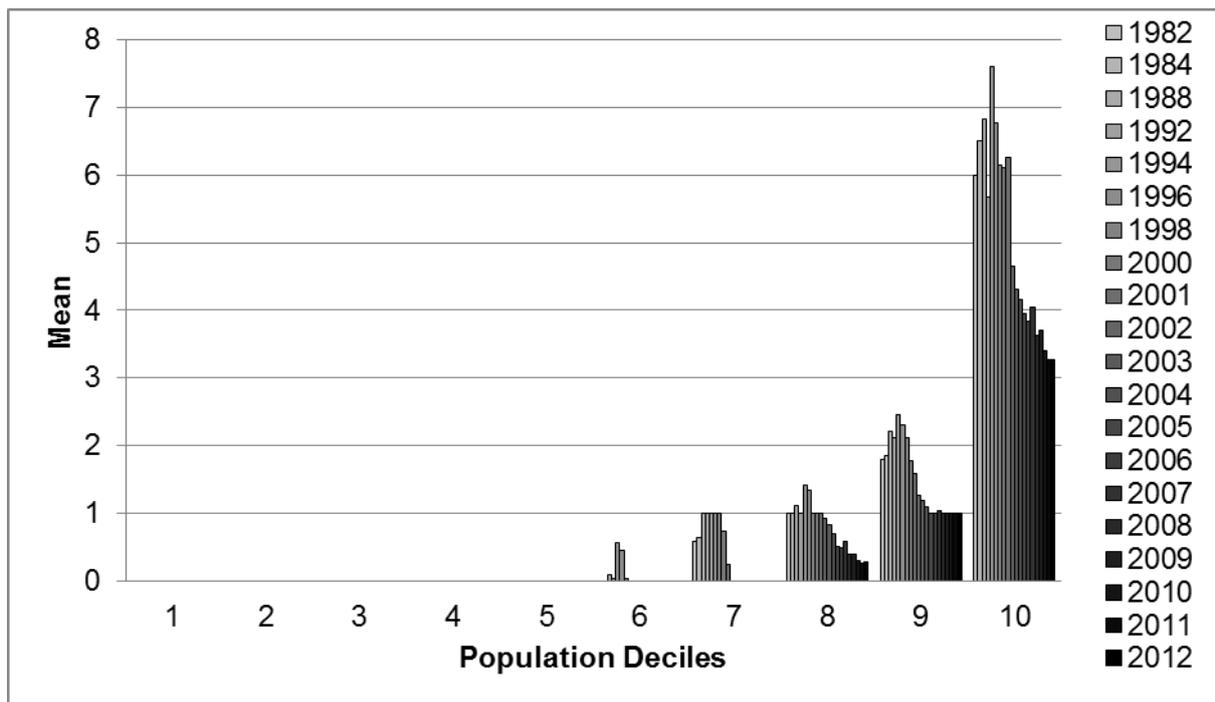
Note

Year	**1982**	**1984**	**1988**	**1992**	**1994**	**1996**	**1998**	**2000**	**2001**	**2002**
Total Sample	10905	11030	11741	11713	16550	16348	14947	19411	8985	32824
Victimised Sample	3960	4029	4810	4740	7554	7282	6035	7258	2913	9637
Total Crimes	10216	11043	13186	11530	21574	19421	15398	18674	7778	22485
Year	**2003**	**2004**	**2005**	**2006**	**2007**	**2008**	**2009**	**2010**	**2011**	**2012**
Total Sample	36479	37931	45120	47796	47203	46286	46983	44638	46754	46031
Victimised Sample	10329	10226	11350	11924	12249	11103	11283	10269	10585	10515
Total Crimes	23070	22595	24645	25561	26813	23274	24003	21023	21232	20956

While the absolute victimisation of the most victimised decile has declined quite dramatically, the *proportion* of total victimisation suffered by the most victimised decile has increased. After an initial decline in the 1990s, that proportion increased to just over 70% of total victimisations. It is probably coincidental that the initial decline coincided with the time when the prevention of repeat victimisation was a tactic in vogue and supported by central Government (Pease, 1998).

Figure 2. Proportion of total victimisations by decile, CSEW Sweeps 1982-2012
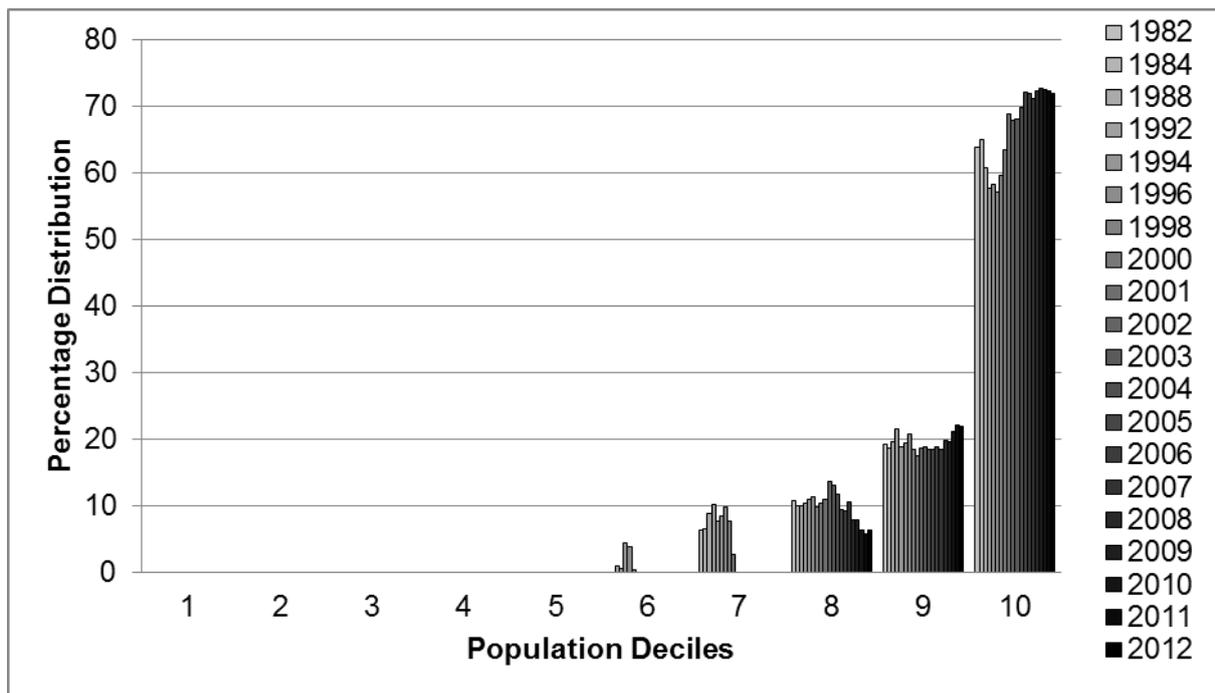
Parallel analyses based on victim forms are presented as Figures 3 and 4. Figure 3 shows a similar picture to Figure 1, with the most victimised decile showing the greatest absolute decline in mean victimisations. Figure 4 shows a similar picture to Figure 2, i.e. an increasing *proportion* of crime being suffered by the most victimised decile.

Figure 3. Mean victimisations per household by decile using Victim Forms, CSEW Sweeps 1982-2012
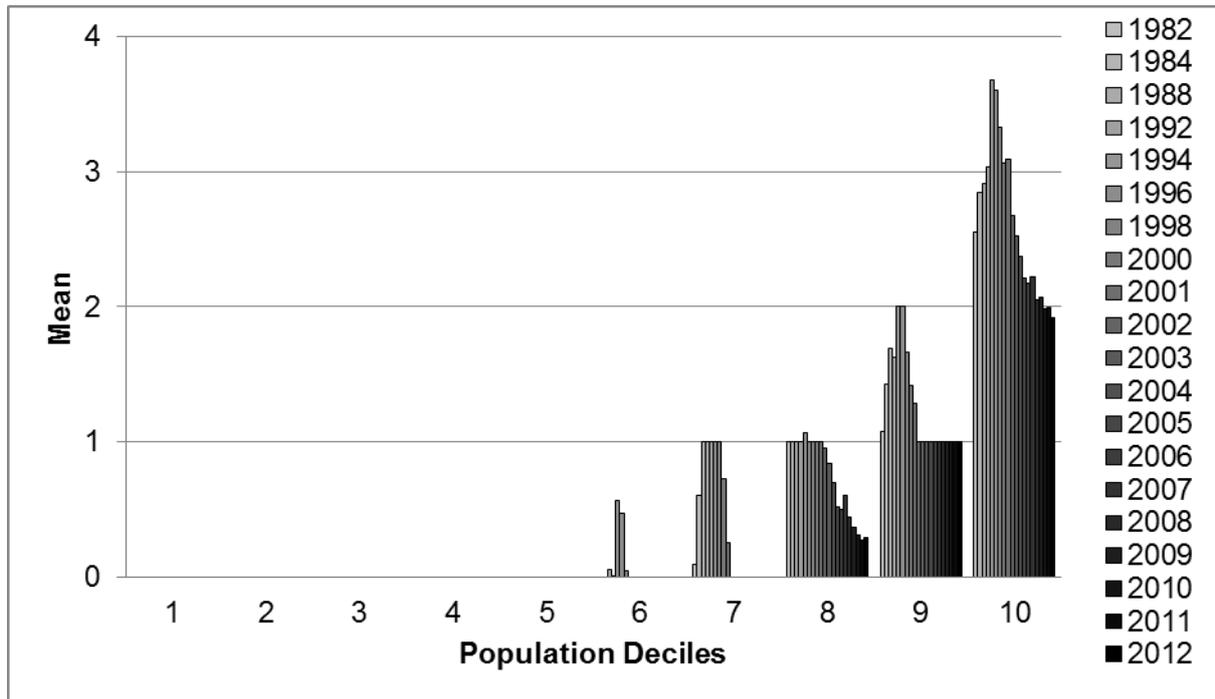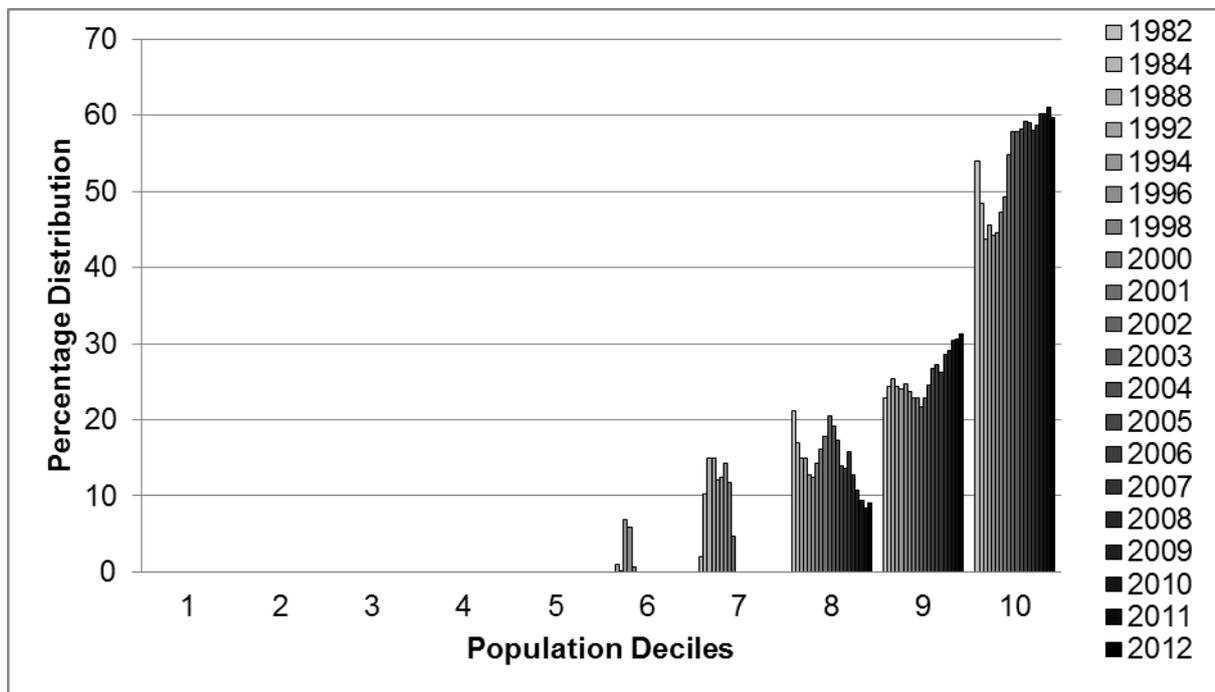

Figure 4. Proportion of total victimisations by decile using Victim Forms, CSEW Sweeps 1982-2012

The next step in the present paper addresses the question of whether the attributes of heavily victimised households remain similar across time. There is already a substantial literature on attributes associated with crime victimisation (Osborn & Tseloni, 1998) (Tseloni, 2006), but these tend to be analyses at single points in time.

So the question is whether the same variables which distinguish the most victimised ten percent of the households from the rest in 1982 are the same as those which distinguish the most victimised in the top crime decile from the rest in 2012. The anticipation is that by and large they will be, and the conclusion to be reached is that the risk factors of 2012 are similar to the risk factors of 1982, ie the same kinds of households are the most victimised across time and across deciles over the same year. This would validate attention to households with the relevant attributes (Tseloni & Pease, 2014). Bear in mind that the present analysis says nothing about area effects, which will also inform prioritisation of crime prevention effort (Tseloni, 2006)(Kershaw & Tseloni, 2005)(Osborn & Tseloni, 1998).

Table 1 summarises the analyses. Contingency table analysis was used for categorical variables and the Mann-Whitney U Test for ordinal variables. For every variable the direction of the difference is the same in the years compared. The italicised and underlined word or phrase in the left column of Table 1 is the over-represented alternative. For example, households in _rental_ accommodation was more victimised than owner-occupied. Cell entries are probabilities of the relationship.

Table 1. Variables associated with year and decile differences in victimisation

Variable	Top Crime Decile vs Remainder 1982	Top Crime Decile vs Remainder 2012
Age of HRP _(younger)_	<.001	<.001
Gender (Male vs Female)	ns	ns
Marital Status (Married vs _Non-Married_)	<.01	<.001
Race (White vs Non-White)	ns	ns
Number of Adults in Household _(fewer)_	ns	<.005
Number of Children in Household _(fewer)_	<.001	<.001
Employment (Full-Time vs _Other_)	<.001	<.005
Employment Type (Self-Employed vs Employed)	ns	ns
Number of Cars _(fewer)_	<.005	<.001
Number of Bikes _(fewer)_	<.001	<.001
Accommodation (Owner-Occupied vs _Rental_)	<.001	<.001
Accommodation Type (Detached + Semi-Detached vs _Other_)	<.001	<.001
Living in the Area (More than 1 year vs _Less than 1 year_)	<.001	<.001
Living in the Address (More than 1 year vs _Less than 1 year_)	<.001	<.001
Seen Crime in Last Year (_Yes_ vs No)	<.001	<.001
Feels safe in Dark (Safe vs _Unsafe_)	<.05	<.001
Worried about Crime (Non-Worried vs _Worried_)	<.001	<.001

Note Categorical variable statistics are chi-square with one degree of freedom. The ordinal variable statistic is z.

With huge ns, the significance matters little. The important point is the consistent direction of difference, as the characteristics associated with highly victimised household are consistent across survey sweeps.

Discussion

The conclusions reached here apply to just one national victimisation survey and total crime and should be regarded as an initial foray into the question of how the crime drop meshes with notions of distributive justice. The broad brush analyses reported above tend on balance to suggest that the crime drop was benign in that crimes against the most victimised households fell to the greatest extent in *absolute* terms. Yet the *proportion* of total crime suffered by the most victimised 10% of households *increased*. The conclusion to be tentatively reached is that attention to households already victimised is now no less important than before in reducing total crime. One way of expressing this is to point out that some 30% of all crime captured by the 2012 survey was experienced by households that had already suffered at least one previous crime in the recall period. Bear in mind that the effective recall period for a first victimisation is a year, for a second only the period between the first victimisation and year end, for the third victimisation the period between the second victimisation and year end. This diminishing time window means that crimes suffered by those previously victimised is massively higher than captured by the survey and the scope for crime reduction by the prevention of repeats correspondingly higher. The decline in total crime makes the strategy of crime reduction via the prevention of repeat victimisation more viable, though compromised by reductions in police resources. Focused patrol, targeting areas with high likelihood of crime seems increasingly important (Buerger, Petrosino & Cohn, 1995)(Koper, 1995) as do focused proactive arrests (Sherman, 2002). As police resourcing declines and an understanding of the concentration of crime on the same households increases, such tactics should arguably take centre stage in policing.

As noted earlier, the work presented here is intended primarily to flag an approach to data (already available and archived) which seems to hold much promise. The writers have in hand the following studies

1. Analysis of CSEW trends by offence type to clarify which exhibit least precipitous decline and greatest remaining concentration in the highest decile;
2. Equivalent analyses of other national and cross-national victimisation surveys to see whether the 'signature' of the crime drop is common across countries;
3. Exploration of the drop-concentration nexus by looking at variables which may clarify what is happening, such as changes in the proportion of offenders seen and previously known, single versus group offending and weapon use.

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