

Link between the economy and crime rates has broken down, new research finds

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The assumption that rising unemployment means rising crime is challenged by new research by the Universities of Sheffield, Southampton and SciencesPo in Paris.

The study finds that the association between unemployment and property [crime](#) – which was strong in the 1970s and 1980s – weakened after 1995 and became non-existent by 2005.

The research, which will be presented by Professor Will Jennings of the University of Southampton at the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies on Friday (18 September 2015), finds that the relationship between the economy and [crime rates](#) has varied over time.

This helps to shed light on why the official crime rate did not rise following the 2007-2008 financial crisis.

The analysis has been produced by a team of researchers as part of a project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC): 'Long-term trajectories of crime in the UK'.

Professor Jennings offers a number of suggestions for why the relationship between unemployment and property crime declined after 1995. These include:

- The role of the welfare system in shielding citizens from economic shocks;

- Changes in the [labour market](#), including a growth in part-time, and more flexible working patterns;
- Improved crime prevention measures and the growth of non-traditional, online crime.

Professor Jennings said: "The evidence covering the past decade suggests the link between the economic cycle and crime rates has broken down, particularly in relation to unemployment rates. We cannot be sure why fluctuations in economic conditions no longer predict the sorts of changes in recorded crime rates they used to.

"It may be due to differences between the sorts of economic shocks experienced by the UK in the 1970s and 1980s compared to today. It could also be because of changes in the labour market dampening the effects of recent economic downturns.

"It could also be due to trends in crime prevention measures such as growth in use of burglar alarms, CCTV and car immobilisers."

Other research that will be presented at the event looks at changes in domestic property crime (DPC) patterns during the 1980s and 1990s.

Professor Stephen Farrall of the University of Sheffield's School of Law, who will present the findings, will point out that a victimisation gap opened up between owner occupiers and those in socially rented accommodation from the early 1980s.

The research found:

- DPC rates grew for all householders during the 1980s and 1990s. But those living in socially rented accommodation saw their risk of DPC grow much more sharply.
- In 1982 DPC was twice as prevalent among those living in

socially rented accommodation, compared with owner occupiers. By 1996 DPC was three times as prevalent among the social renters.

Professor Farrall argues that changes in home ownership brought about by successive 'right to buy' schemes in the 1980s and 1990s played an important role in opening up the victimisation gap.

This resulted in a divergence between desirable areas, which became predominantly owner-occupied, and the less attractive properties, that increasingly became concentration points for social problems.

Professor Farrall said: 'The decisions relating to the privatisation of council housing taken in the 1980s have had long term effects.

"The right to buy legislation, over time, created two classes of citizenship with regards to victimisation risks.

"The first class citizens lived in homes they owned and faced relatively lower levels of domestic property crime; the second class citizens lived in socially rented homes and faced persistently higher levels of victimisation risks. If we are to reduce these inequalities in risk, we need to invest in the social rented sector much more than we have done since 1980."

Dr Emily Gray, also of the University of Sheffield's Department of Law, will present findings on changing social attitudes to crime and punishment across the generations. Those who grew up under the Wilson and Callaghan administrations appeared most worried about mugging. By contrast, those who grew up under Thatcher and Major were more worried about property crime.

Anti-social behaviour was the key concern for those growing up under

Blair and Brown.

Dr Gray said: "Our data demonstrates how different political generations become attached to 'iconic' notions of crime.

"Anti-social behaviour, for instance was a preoccupation during the years of New Labour. In previous generations it was mugging and burglary. Crime can be viewed as a popular means for people to make sense of, and speak about the world around them: the norms and values of their community, and the forms of social and moral ordering that govern their everyday lives."

Richard Garside, Director of the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies, said: "This research demonstrates the importance of revisiting the past to understand the present. There is no iron law that explains rises and falls in the official crime rate. This important research challenges commonsense notions that unemployment and economic shocks inevitably mean rises in property crime. The relationship between changes in housing tenure and vulnerability to domestic [property crime](#) also demonstrates the role that social changes play in crime victimisation.

"Contrary to popular opinion, it is changes in housing, welfare, and social policy, not the criminal justice system, that tend to shape crime trends."

Provided by University of Sheffield

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