Most crime has fallen by 90% in 30 years—so why does the public think it's increased?

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Seventy-eight percent of people in England and Wales think that crime has gone up in the last few years, according to the latest survey. But the data on actual crime shows the exact opposite.

As of 2024, violence, burglary and car crime have been declining for 30 years and by close to 90%, according to the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW)—our best indicator of true crime levels. Unlike police data, the CSEW is not subject to variations in reporting and recording.

The drop in violence includes domestic violence and other violence against women. Anti-social behavior has similarly declined. While increased fraud and computer misuse now make up half of crime, this mainly reflects how far the rates of other crimes have fallen.

All high-income countries have experienced similar trends, and there is scientific consensus that the decline in crime is a real phenomenon.

There is strong research evidence that security improvements were responsible for the drop. This is most obvious with vehicle electronic immobilizers and door deadlocks, and better household security —stronger door frames, double glazed windows and security fittings—along with an avalanche of security in shopping centers, sports stadiums, schools, businesses and elsewhere. Quite simply, it became more difficult to commit crimes.

Decreases in crimes often committed by teenagers, such as joyriding or burglary, had a multiplying effect: when teenagers could no longer commit these easy "debut crimes" they did not progress to longer criminal careers.

There are, of course, exceptions. Some places, times and crime types had a less pronounced decline or even an increase. For many years, phone theft was an exception to the general decline in theft. Cybercrime, measured by the CSEW as fraud and computer misuse, has increased and is the most prominent exception.

But this increase was not due to thwarted burglars and car thieves switching targets: the skillset, resources and rewards for cybercrime are very different. Rather, it reflects new crime opportunities facilitated by the internet. Preventive policy and practice is slowly getting better at closing off opportunities for computer misuse, but work is needed to accelerate those prevention efforts.

The perception gap

So why is there such a gulf between public perception and the reality of crime trends? A regular YouGov poll asks respondents for their top three concerns from a broad set of issues. Concern about crime went from a low in 2016 (when people were more concerned with Brexit), quadrupled by 2019 and plummeted during the pandemic when people had other worries. But in the last year, the public's concern about crime has risen again.

Proportion of people naming crime as a top three issue facing the country:

There are many possible explanations for this, of which the first is poor information. A study published in 1998 found that "people who watch a lot of television or who read a lot of newspapers will be exposed to a steady diet of crime stories" that does not reflect official statistics.

The old news media adage "if it bleeds, it leads" reflects how violent

news stories, including crime increases and serious crimes, capture public attention. Knife crime grabs headlines in the UK, but our shock at individual incidents is testament to their rarity and our relative success in controlling violence—many gun crimes do not make the news in the US.

Most recent terrorist attacks in the UK have featured knives (plus a thwarted Liverpool bomber), but there is little discussion of how this indicates that measures to restrict guns and bomb-making resources are effective.

Political rhetoric can also skew perceptions, particularly in the run-up to elections. During the recent local elections, the Conservatives were widely criticized for an advert portraying London as "a crime capital of the world" (using a video of New York), while Labor has also made reference to high levels of crime under the current government.

There are also some "crime drop deniers," who have vested interests in crime not declining due to, for example, fear of budget cuts. One of us (Graham) worked with a former police chief who routinely denied the existence of declining crime.

Despite the evidence of crime rates dropping, some concerns are justified. Victims, along with their families and friends, have legitimate concerns, particularly as crime is more likely to recur against the same people and at the same places.

And, while the trend is clear, there are nevertheless localized increases in some types of offending. When these relate to harmful and emotive issues like knife crime in London, for example, it is natural that this might have a substantial influence.

We are unlikely to be able to change political agendas or journalists' approach to reporting. But governments should be taking a more rational

approach to crime that is based on evidence, not public perception.

Local governments need to keep on top of their local crime hotspots: problem bars and clubs where crime occurs, shops where shoplifting is concentrated, local road traffic offense hotspots and so on. The common theme here is how crime concentrates.

National government, meanwhile, should lead on reducing crime opportunities via national-level levers. Only national government can influence social media platforms and websites that host online crime and encourage larger businesses to improve manufacturing, retailing and service industry practices.

The positive story around crime rarely makes headlines, but this should not put us off from learning the lessons borne out in the data. We know this can work from past success, but it took decades to get car makers to improve vehicle security and to get secure-by-design ideas in building regulations. Society needs to move more quickly.

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