

How people view crime depends on the politics of when they were growing up

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A new study in the *British Journal of Criminology* indicates that the different political periods in which people 'came of age' has an important influence on their perception of crime, even decades later.

For over forty years, researchers have sought to understand the causes and implications of people's fear of [crime](#). But to date, no studies have been able to take into account whether the political period in which a cohort grew up had a meaningful effect on their emotional responses to crime. The political context the respondents grew up in—during the ages of 15 to 25—is the time when people form key opinions and are most sensitive to social events.

Researchers from the University of Sheffield, University of Southampton and Sciences Po, Paris, analyzed data on fear of crime and [antisocial behavior](#) from the British Crime Survey in England and Wales spanning 30 years. In doing so, they were able to estimate the net effects of individual aging, the historical period in which the survey was conducted and the political generations the respondents belonged to.

The researchers found a strong relationship between a respondent's current crime fears and their political generation. For example, those who

grew up under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher (1979-1990) or John Major (1990-1997) expressed the greatest level of worry about domestic burglary—the same generation who witnessed a dramatic rise in [property crime](#) during the 1980s. Meanwhile, the Wilson/ Callaghan generation expressed the highest levels of worry about robbery and mugging, which was a key concern for politicians, policy makers and journalists at the time.

Responses to antisocial behaviours tell a similar story. People who grew up during the Blair and Brown governments (from the late 1990s to 2010), reported the highest level of concern about local problems, such as vandalism, teenagers loitering, and noisy neighbours; such problems were heavily emphasized and legislated against during this political period.

Overall, this study shows that citizens have a greater propensity to [fear](#) the crimes that were the focus of political debate during their youth and this effect persists into adulthood. The results reveal that crime fears can linger, and that the processes by which people form their political values can cast a long-term influence on their attitude about crime.

"The pronouncements leading politicians make about crime can have a lasting impact on the crime fears of young adults. Political and popular debates about crime that are prevalent in one's youth appear to impact the fears those individuals report through adulthood and into middle age," said one of the paper's authors, Stephen Farrall. "In this respect, our narratives of crime and disorder tell us something important about the enduring influence of our political history and the stories we hear about crime."

More information: Emily Gray et al, Political Socialization, Worry about Crime and Antisocial Behaviour: An Analysis of Age, Period and Cohort Effects, *The British Journal of Criminology* (2018).

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