

Trends & issues

in crime and criminal justice



Australian Government
Australian Institute of Criminology

No. 495 February 2015

Foreword | *For more than a decade, Australia has witnessed a sustained reduction in property crime. Yet relatively little is known about what may have caused this decline.*

This study aimed to explore plausible explanations for the property crime drop by 'going to the source' and interviewing a sample of 994 police detainees as part of the Drug Use Monitoring in Australia (DUMA) Program. The results showed that less than half of police detainees were able to offer a reason for the property crime drop, highlighting the difficulties with asking for retrospective explanations for an observed event.

Among those who gave a response, nine key themes were identified as potential reasons for the property crime drop. The most frequent of these related to improved security, improved policing and 'other' reasons. Less frequent responses related to increased affluence, increased imprisonment, improved community responses, changes in drug use, changes in the market for stolen goods and changes in crime recording. These findings provide a basis for future testing of hypotheses that might explain the property crime drop in Australia.

Adam Tomison
Director

Explaining the property crime drop: The offender perspective

Rick Brown

Since 2001, there have been significant declines in property crime in Australia. Indeed, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics' Recorded Crime—Victims data, between 2001 and 2009 motor vehicle theft declined by 57 percent, burglary declined by 49 percent and other theft fell by 32 percent. Due to a change in definitions and counting rules, data after 2009 cannot be compared with earlier years. However, the trends observed up to 2009 continued between 2010 and 2013, with further reductions of three percent in motor vehicle theft, six percent in burglary. Other theft represented an exception, rising by four percent between 2010 and 2013. Weatherburn and Holmes (2013) showed that between 2001 and 2009, all states/territories observed reductions in motor vehicle theft, burglary and other theft, while six states/territories also observed a reduction in robbery. Clancey and Lulham (2014) estimated that the reduction in property crime between 2000–01 and 2012–13 in New South Wales alone represented a saving to the community of \$5.15b over the entire period. This property crime drop has not been confined to Australia. Similar declines have been observed in New Zealand (Mayhew 2012), Canada (Ouimet 2002), the United States (Zimring 2007) and much of Western Europe (Aebi & Linde 2010). Indeed, van Dijk and Tseloni (2012) have highlighted the extent to which this crime drop has been an international phenomenon.

Internationally, a range of explanations have been suggested for the decline in crime, although these typically include explanations for changes in violence as well as property crime. As noted by Farrell and colleagues (2010), only some of these theories have been (at best partially) tested. These include demographic changes (Blumstein 2000), increases in immigration (Wadsworth 2010), increased abortion (Donohue & Levitt 2001), increases in the prison population (Langan & Farrington 1998), changes to policing strategies (Zimring 2012), increases in police numbers (Levitt 2004), changes to gun laws (Duggan 2001), changes to drug markets (Levitt 2004) and reductions in childhood exposure to airborne lead pollution (Wolpaw Reyes 2007).

In an Australian context, relatively little attention has been paid to explaining the property crime drop. However, in examining the relationship between the heroin shortage in New South Wales in 2000–01 and the reduction in property crime, Moffatt, Weatherburn and Donnelly (2005) identified a number of factors that may have contributed to the crime drop. Reduction in burglary and robbery were associated with a reduction in heroin consumption, an increase in re-registrations for drug treatment and improvements in economic conditions. In addition, the reduction in burglary (but not robbery) was associated with higher levels of imprisonment for that offence. Wan and colleagues (2012) found that reductions in property crime were associated with increases in arrests and imprisonment, and with reductions in heroin use. However, the strongest effect on reducing property crime was associated with increases in income.

Improvements in security have also been suggested as a possible explanation for the reduction in property crime in Australia (Clancey & Lulham 2014; Weatherburn & Holmes 2013). Indeed, where motor vehicle theft is concerned, the start of the reduction coincides with the introduction of mandatory installation of electronic immobilisers on new vehicles from 2001 onwards, which has been considered an effective form of security (Brown 2013; Farrell et al. 2011; Kriven & Ziersch 2007).

Other explanations within the Australian context (which have not been tested) include changes to policing practices (Clancey & Lulham 2014; Weatherburn & Holmes 2013), changes in the number of people in the age group most likely to commit crime (16–24 years; Weatherburn & Holmes 2013) and the role of ‘debut crimes’ (Clancey & Lulham 2014)—the notion that preventing involvement in crimes such as motor vehicle theft and burglary will prevent young people from becoming involved in crime in a more frequent or serious way (Farrell et al. 2008).

The research that has been undertaken to date (both in Australia and internationally) has largely involved methodologies that aim to associate changes in crime rates

with changes in independent variables that reflect the hypothesis in question, whether they be concerned with demographic change, economic change, changes in policing practices etc. The assumption is then made that a close fit in a statistical model helps to explain the property crime drop. While such statistical models can provide powerful evidence for explaining the property crime drop, they are only as good as the hypotheses that are initially developed. In addition, such models often fail to account for the full range of relevant factors that may explain the crime drop, which could act as statistical controls. This can be due to a number of factors, including failure to recognise that certain factors may provide explanatory power and the availability of data that adequately describe those factors.

The current study aimed to return to first principles in examining the property crime drop question by developing hypotheses that might explain the decline in Australia. This was intended to assist in identifying additional factors that might plausibly explain the property crime drop and that could be included in future statistical studies.

The study involved conducting exploratory research with offenders to gain an understanding about why crime may have declined from those closest to offending activity. This builds on a strong tradition of exploring offender perceptions and experiences of property crime, especially in relation to theft (Sutherland 1937), theft from motor vehicles (Parker 1974), theft of motor vehicles (Spencer 1992), burglary (Bennett & Wright 1984; Cromwell, Olson & Avery 1991; Gately et al. 2014; Maguire 1982; Wright & Decker 1994), robbery (Gill 2000; Wright & Decker 1997) and handling stolen goods (Klockars 1974; Stevenson & Forsythe 1998). An offender population was considered to be particularly appropriate for this task as they were more likely to have had firsthand experience that explained changes in property crime (by virtue of offending), or to have associated with peers who were involved in property crime. However, it was accepted that this approach was likely to have generated certain types of hypotheses grounded in

a combination of experience and popular opinion. As a result, it was anticipated that the information generated from this study would focus on micro-level explanations of change associated with the everyday experiences of offenders (such as the experiences of gaining employment, experiences of fencing stolen goods etc), rather than on macro-level explanations associated with wider social, cultural and economic factors that might have explained the crime drop.

Methodology

This paper is based on analysis of data collected in the second quarter of 2012 as part of the Australian Institute of Criminology’s Drug Use Monitoring in Australia (DUMA) program. DUMA is a face-to-face survey that involves interviewing police detainees about their substance misuse and offending behaviour. Conducted on a quarterly basis, DUMA provides a national picture of changing patterns of drug use in Australia. Further details about the DUMA program and the methodology employed, as well as its associated limitations can be found in Gaffney et al. (2010). In the sweep of the survey conducted in the second quarter of 2012, 994 interviews were completed with police detainees in Southport and Brisbane (Queensland), Bankstown and Parramatta (New South Wales), Footscray (Victoria), Adelaide (South Australia), East Perth (Western Australia) and Darwin (Northern Territory).

In addition to the core questions about drug use and crime, DUMA provides an opportunity to ask additional questions of criminological/criminal justice interest on a one-off basis. In the second quarter of 2012 sweep of the survey, detainees were asked about the property crime drop. The following statement was read to interview subjects:

According to figures released by the Australian Institute of Criminology, there are a lot less property crimes being committed now than there were 10 years ago.

This was followed by a question:

Can you think of any reasons why property crime has decreased over the last 10 years?

The question was purposely left open in order to elicit the opinions of police detainees and in order to avoid influencing the responses given. At the analysis stage, the responses were coded into the most common responses.

The property crime drop question was asked of all police detainees interviewed in this sweep of the survey. Of the 994 interviewees surveyed, 829 (83%) were male and 165 (17%) were female, 353 (36%) were aged 18–25 years, 328 (33%) were aged 26–35 years and 313 (31%) were aged 36 years or over. In addition, 222 (22%) of the interviewees were from an Indigenous background. Of the 994 interviewees, 208 (23%) also reported 'stealing something in the last year'. Given the nature of the property crime drop question, it was considered important to examine differences between those who had reported stealing and those who had not, on the basis that the former might be expected to give more plausible explanations.

It should be noted that there are limitations with the question asked in relation to the

property crime drop. First, it assumes that police detainees are able to rationally explain the crime drop based on experience of the change. Yet over a third (36%) of those interviewed were aged 15 years or under at the start of the reference period (10 years ago) and so might not reasonably be expected to be able to explain the reduction. In the following analysis, responses are examined by age to determine differences between cohorts. Second, the question asked in this survey assumes that the term *property crime* is understood to mean acquisitive offences (such as theft, shoplifting, theft of/from vehicles, burglary etc). No clarification or testing of meaning was included in the survey, which means that it cannot be certain that interviewees had acquisitive offences in mind. Indeed, as noted later, the high level of non-response to this question may partially reflect a lack of understanding. However, from reviewing the responses given, it would appear that many did understand the meaning of *property crime*.

It is also important to note that much of what is reported here may indeed be the result of little more than guesswork on the part of police detainees, especially among those not engaged in property crime.

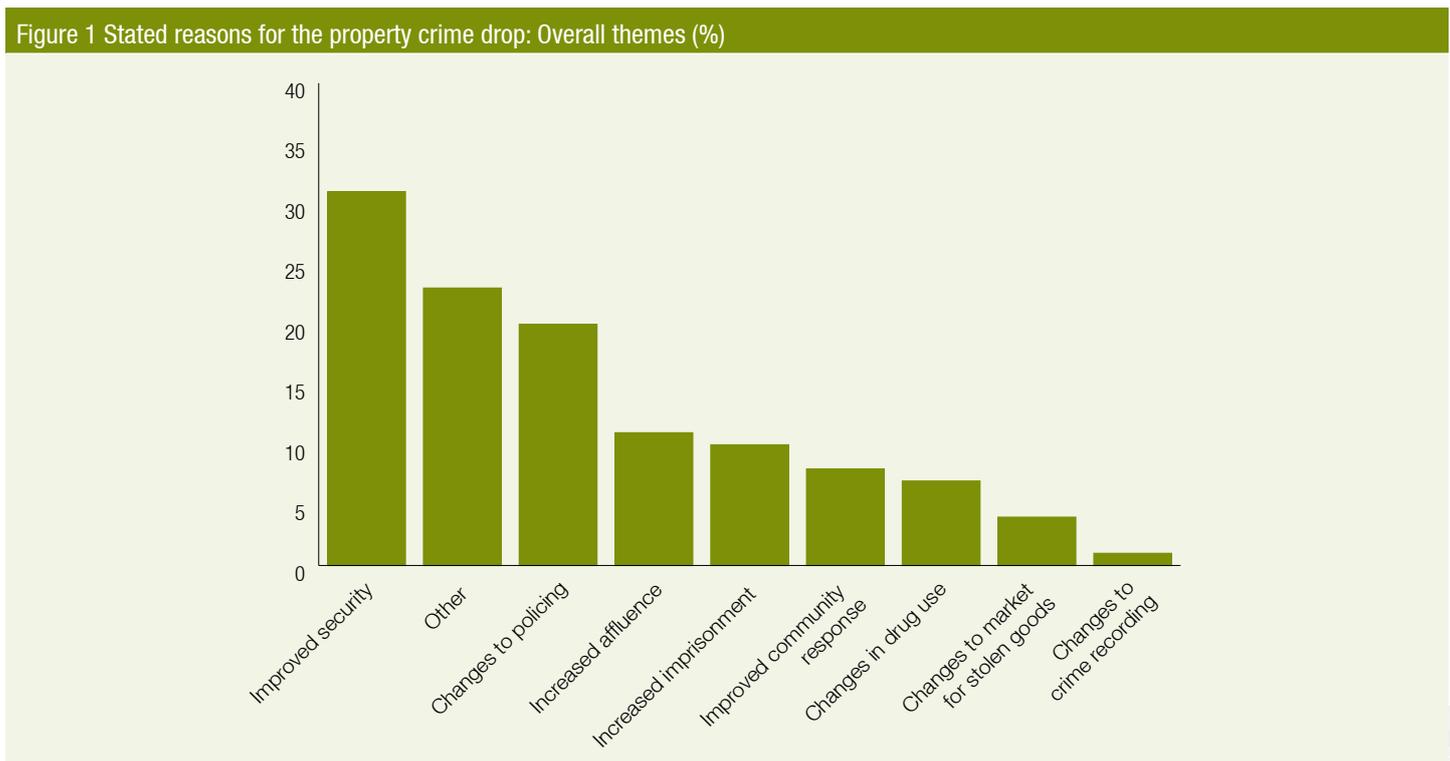
Nevertheless, their views and opinions were

considered useful for generating potential hypotheses—views and opinions that were certainly considered no less valid than those that might be expected from a sample of the general population.

Findings

Overall, 470 (47%) of those interviewed gave a response to the property crime drop question. Of the remaining 524 respondents, 182 (18%) gave no response, while 342 (34%) stated that they didn't know why property crime had declined. There were no statistically significant differences in age or gender between those who gave a response and those who did not. Neither was there any difference between those who had and had not stolen something in the last year. However, Indigenous police detainees (36%, n=79) were significantly less likely to give a response than non-Indigenous police detainees (51%, n=387; $\chi^2=15.40$, $df=1$, $p<0.001$). The remainder of the analysis presented here is based on the 470 police detainees who did give a response.

The responses given to the property crime drop question are summarised in Figure 1.



Note: Respondents could give more than one answer and therefore percentages may total more than 100%

Source: AIC DUMA collection 2012 [computer file]

This shows there were nine main categories of response (note that interviewees could give more than one response so totals may add to more than 100%). The most frequent reasons given for the property crime drop related to improvements in security (31%, n=145), 'other' (23%, n=110), changes to policing (20%, n=94), increased affluence (11%, n=51) and increased imprisonment (10%, n=46). Other explanations that were cited less frequently related to improved community responses (8%, n=36), changes in drug use (7%, n=31), changes in the market for stolen goods (4%, n=17) and changes in crime recording (1%, n=5). The following paragraphs examine each of these responses in more detail.

Improvements in security

Police detainees most frequently cited improvements in security as the reason for the property crime drop (31%, n=145). While there were no statistically significant differences by age, gender or stealing in the last year, non-Indigenous police detainees were significantly more likely to cite improved security as a reason for the crime drop (33%, n=127) than were Indigenous police detainees (20%, n=16; $\chi^2= 4.86$, $df=1$, $p<0.05$). When examined in more detail, the most frequently cited security-related responses included improved security (22%, n=102 unfortunately this could not be broken down any further in the available data), use of CCTV (6%, n=26), use of alarms (4%, n=20) and use of technology (4%, n=19). Other security-related responses given less frequently related to the ability to track goods that might be stolen (1%, n=5), increased effort (which was assumed to be due to improved security in some way; <1%, n=3) and the presence of dogs (<1%, n=2).

Other

Twenty-three percent (n=110) of police detainees gave a response to the property crime drop question that was coded as 'other'. There were no statistically significant differences between groups in terms of age, gender, Indigenous status or previous property offending. The most frequent response under this category

was a disbelief that property crime had gone down, or a belief that it had gone up (15%, n=72). Among other specific responses were six (1%) who suggested that offenders were getting older. This is similar to the demographic changes argument put forward by Blumstein (2000), although the assumption among those in this survey was that those who had been offenders were growing out of it, rather than there simply being fewer in the age cohort most likely to commit crime. Other responses included five (1%) who felt that people had learned it was wrong to steal, three (<1%) who felt better parenting had played a contributory factor and two (<1%) who simply felt there were fewer offenders around. It should be noted that there was a further 22 individual responses that could not be grouped due to the unique nature of the responses given. These included a range of responses, such as 'people don't carry cash anymore', 'people are not being caught', 'people getting lazy' and 'because I stopped stealing!'

Changes to policing

Changes to policing represented the third most frequently cited response, with 20 percent (n=94) giving this as a reason for the property crime drop. There were no statistically significant differences between groups in terms of age, gender, Indigenous status or previous property offending. Within this category, the most frequent responses were in relation to there being better policing (10%, n=45) and more policing (7%, n=35). Fourteen (3%) police detainees also thought there had been an increased risk of detection, while a further two (<1%) simply felt it was not worth the risk. These perceptions of increased risk were interpreted as indicating that policing practices had improved in some way. In addition to these responses, only seven (2%) police detainees suggested that the police use of forensic techniques had increased. This low response is surprising, given the increased collection and use of finger-print, palm-print and DNA in law enforcement investigations (CrimTrac 2013) and the seemingly ubiquitous use of such techniques in television crime dramas.

Increased affluence

Responses relating to increases in affluence over the last decade were suggested by 11 percent (n=51) of police detainees. No statistical analysis of differences between groups was undertaken for this response or for those reported in the remainder of this paper due to the small sample sizes. The most frequent responses under this category suggested that there were alternative, legitimate ways to make money, which meant that individuals need not engage in crime (3%, n=15). Similarly, three percent (n=14) felt that employment prospects had improved. Other responses were largely variations on this theme, suggesting the need to steal had diminished. These responses included the fact that it was now easier to afford desirable objects that may previously have been the (direct or indirect) target of theft (2%, n=11), people having more money and therefore not needing to steal (1%, n=6), improvements in social services, suggesting that stealing out of physical need was less necessary (<1%, n=4) and three (<1%) who simply stated that people no longer needed the possessions of others, presumably due to an improvement in their own circumstances. One individual (<1%) noted that improved access to credit may have made it easier to afford items that might previously have been acquired through theft.

Increased imprisonment

Increased imprisonment was suggested as a reason for the property crime drop by 10 percent (n=46) of police detainees. These fell into three categories, relating to more people being in custody (5%, n=24), laws being stricter (implying either more people being sent to prison or receiving longer sentences; 5%, n=22) and prison being a deterrent (<1%, n=3).

Improved community responses

Responses that suggested an improved community response were given by eight percent (n=36) of police detainees. The most frequent reason given under this category related to members of the community having a greater awareness of crime prevention, or that there had been

an increase in publicity in relation to crime prevention (5%, n=23). A further two (<1%) police detainees gave a similar response, suggesting that people were now taking more care of their possessions. There were also suggestions that Neighbourhood Watch (2%, n=9) had contributed to the property crime reduction. There were also two respondents (<1%) who suggested that people were more likely to be violent towards property crime offenders, which acted as a deterrent.

Changes to drugs

A range of changes to the drugs market in Australia was suggested as a reason for the crime drop. These were somewhat contradictory, with suggestions of declining use, increasing use/availability and a change in the nature of drugs suggested. Where declining use was concerned, some felt there were fewer drugs available (2%, n=9), or that drug diversion programs had been effective (<1%, n=4). Where increasing drug use was concerned, some felt that more drugs were being used (2%, n=8); the implication of this being that if offenders were consuming drugs they would be uninterested in committing crime. There were also suggestions that the availability of drugs had increased (<1%, n=3), or that the price had reduced (<1%, n=2) and therefore fewer offences needed to be committed. In addition, there were suggestions that the kinds of drugs being used had changed (<1%, n=3), which presumably required less property crime to be committed, while a further two (<1%) respondents noted the increased use of prescription drugs. In addition, one police detainee suggested that there may have been a switch in crime away from committing property crime as a source of income towards trading in drugs instead.

Changes to markets for stolen goods

Changes to the market for stolen goods was identified by 17 (4%) police detainees. This included suggestions that there had been a general decline in the market (2%, n=11) and observations that the value of stolen goods had declined, thereby reducing the rewards attained from property crime (2%, n=7).

Changes to crime recording

Finally, there were five (1%) police detainees who suggested there had been a change in the amount of crime that was recorded, rather than a change in the amount of crime committed. Four (<1%) considered this to be due to fewer crimes being reported, while one (<1%) thought this was due to the police reclassifying the crime as something other than a property offence.

Discussion

The findings from this exercise raise some interesting observations for our understanding of the property crime drop in Australia. It is interesting to note the considerable level of congruence between the hypotheses that have been posited (and sometimes tested) by criminologists and those put forward by police detainees. Indeed, improvements in security, an aging population, changes to policing, increased risk of detection (increased arrest rates) increased imprisonment, improved economic conditions and changes to drugs markets have been suggested by criminologists and police detainees alike. However, it is recognised that some of these will be the product of common sense, popular opinion and recall of media depictions shared by both criminologists and police detainees.

The responses given by police detainees also yielded hypotheses that have not been adequately explored by criminologists. For example, the role played by changes to the market for stolen goods warrants further attention. Indeed, reductions in the relative cost of consumer products over time, the apparent shortening of the product lifecycle between purchases and changing attitudes towards secondhand goods may each have played a role in reducing the demand for stolen goods, which may in turn have reduced the rewards associated with theft. An indication of this change is the increase in preference for stealing cash (rather than consumer products) in burglaries. Indeed, in New South Wales, the proportion of burglaries that involved the theft of cash increased from 23 percent in 2001, to 31 percent in 2010 (Fitzgerald & Poynton

2011). This may suggest that property crime (at least that aimed at products rather than cash) may in the fullness of time join the ranks of obsolete offences, as suggested by Farrell and colleagues (2010).

Perhaps the most striking finding to emerge from this study is the strength of opinion regarding the role played by improvements in security. This was apparent not only from the significant number who cited improvements in security, but also from those who noted the improved level of crime prevention awareness in the community that has made people more security conscious. The term *property crime* encompasses a wide variety of behaviours that may have been affected by changes in security over the past decade. For example, rates of motor vehicle theft, burglary, shoplifting and robbery may each have been reduced as a result of changes in the specific security contexts that had previously made such crimes possible. However, these are issues that demand further attention, with relatively little research exploring the role played by improved security.

In addition, there is more to learn about the ways in which policing methods have changed over the past decade, in order to understand how this may have contributed to the crime drop. In particular, the role played by changes to investigative techniques and management methods, as well as changes to the style of policing would benefit from further attention.

Conclusion

The property crime drop in Australia has received relatively little attention, while internationally a range of explanations have been put forward. Drawing on police detainee interviews conducted as part of the DUMA program, this study aimed to develop plausible hypotheses by asking those that are closest to offending behaviour (police detainees) what factors may have contributed to the decline.

Among the 994 police detainees interviewed, it was apparent that over half (53%, n=524) either gave no response or did not know. In addition, among the 470 police detainees who gave a response, 15 percent

(n=72) disputed that property crime had dropped, believing it had in fact increased. This highlights the difficulties in asking respondents to explain historical events in which they may not have been involved. Nevertheless, the responses that were given do have a degree of face validity, given that many of them have also been put forward by criminologists.

The *Methodology* section noted that younger police detainees may not have been able to identify reasons for the property crime drop. However, no differences were found in the proportions of each of three age groups (18–25, 26–35, and 36 and over) who suggested improved security, changes to police, or ‘other’ responses (the sample sizes for other themes were too small to warrant further analysis). On this basis, it can be concluded that younger respondents were no worse at suggesting reasons for the property crime drop than other police detainees. It was also suggested that those that had stolen something in the last year would be better at identifying reasons for the property crime drop than other police detainees. However, the fact that there were no statistically significant differences between those who stole and those that did not suggests they were no better at identifying reasons for the decline and therefore it was legitimate to analyse the sample as a whole.

The fact that improvements in security were identified more often than any other reason for the property crime drop may be significant, given that there is relatively little research that has explored this factor and even less that has focused on Australia (Clancey & Lulham 2014; Farrell et al. 2011; Weatherburn & Holmes 2013). Similarly, little has been written about how changes in policing have contributed to the property crime drop. This suggests that both of these factors warrant further investigation.

Finally, it is important to note that by focusing solely on police detainees, it is unclear whether the reasons given for the property crime drop are any different to those one would expect from a sample of the general population. The assumption made here is that by being closer to offending behaviour, police detainees would generate more plausible hypotheses, although this is an assumption that may warrant further testing.

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ISSN 0817-8542 (Print)
1836-2206 (Online)

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