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DEVELOPMENTAL
CRIMINOLOGY AND THE
CRIME DECLINE

*A Comparative Analysis of the
Criminal Careers of Two New South
Wales Birth Cohorts*

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Developmental Criminology and the Crime Decline

A Comparative Analysis of the Criminal Careers of Two New South Wales Birth Cohorts

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Abstract: Throughout the 1990s, many countries around the world experienced the beginnings of what would later become the most significant and protracted decline in crime ever recorded. Although not a universal experience, the so-called international crime-drop was an unpredicted and unprecedented event that now offers fertile ground for reflection on many of criminology's key theories and debates. Through the lens of developmental and life-course criminology, this Element compares the criminal offending trajectories of two Australian birth cohorts born ten years apart in 1984 and 1994. We find that the crime-drop was unlikely the result of any significant change in the prevalence or persistence of early onset and chronic offending, but the disproportionate disappearance of their low-rate, adolescent-onset peers. Despite decades of research that has prioritized interventions for minimizing chronic offending, it seems our greatest global crime prevention achievement to date was in reducing the prevalence of criminal offending in the general population.

Keywords: crime-drop, birth cohort, life-course criminology, developmental criminology, criminal careers, onset, chronicity, offending trajectories

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1 Introduction

For almost two decades and in almost all corners of the western world, criminologists have observed a significant and sustained downward trend in crime. These declines have been documented from North America (Blumstein & Wallman, 2000; Zimring, 2007; Ouimet 2002), to the Asia-Pacific region (Mayhew, 2012; Weatherburn & Holmes, 2013), and in much of Western Europe (Aebi & Linde, 2010). Although the timing and magnitude of this so-called “crime-drop” has varied from country to country, one feature has emerged as internationally consistent. Specifically, the decline in aggregate crime rates has been most evident in youth populations (Andersen et al., 2016; Backman et al., 2014; Blumstein, 2006; Cook & Laub, 2002; Farrell et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2015; Morgan, 2014; Sothill et al., 2008; Von Hofer, 2014), so much so that contemporary analyses of the crime-drop have sought to rename the phenomena as the “youth crime-drop” to better convey the true nature of the decline and to focus researchers on its most likely causes (Matthews & Minton, 2018, p. 300).

In Australia, the crime-drop has also been a significant feature of the criminal justice landscape since 2001 (Weatherburn & Holmes, 2013) and has been the subject of multiple investigations. These studies have been almost exclusively conducted in the country’s most populous state, New South Wales (NSW), where there has been a 50 percent drop in the rate of theft and a 33 percent drop in the rate of robbery. This, according to Clancey and Lulham (2014), has consequently produced a saving of \$5.15 billion to the NSW community (as of 2014). Like elsewhere, the NSW crime-drop has been driven mainly by substantial declines in youth crime across most categories of offending (Hua et al., 2006; Payne et al., 2018).

Efforts to understand the crime-drop have focused almost entirely on changes to the aggregate crime rate, often presented as cross-sectional population standardized rates of offending by age (see Matthews & Minton, 2018). Essentially, this type of analysis seeks to quantify and interpret year-on-year changes to the age-crime curve and, in its most sophisticated form, attempts to parse out both period and cohort effects for their independent but complementary explanatory value. In the most recent study of this kind, Matthews and Minton (2018) examined the crime-drop using a visual analysis of shaded contour plots to compare changes in annual age crime curves generated from Scottish conviction data between 1989 and 2011. Their analysis compares the age-crime curves generated from twenty-two cross-sectional snapshots and the contour plots provide valuable insight into both period and cohort effects. Their data confirm that the Scottish crime-drop was similarly a youth phenomenon

that started first with a decline in property crime throughout the 1990s and was followed by substantial declines among other crime types in the late 2000s.

Although the empirical efforts of [Matthews and Minton \(2018\)](#) represent one of the largest cross-sectional studies of age-crime curves in the context of the crime-drop, their analysis is nonetheless limited by its cross-sectional design. In a state-of-the-art review on age-crime curve research, [Loeber and Farrington \(2014, p.13\)](#) caution against a reliance on macro-level cross-sectional comparisons because such efforts risk “confounding the influence of multiple cohorts” and obscuring the potentially important developmental differences that underlie changes in individual and population level offending (see also [Berg et al., 2016](#); [Jennings et al., 2016](#)). It is here that the current study makes a novel contribution to the empirical analysis of the international crime-drop phenomenon.

Specifically, instead of comparing annual cross-sectional age-crime curves, as has been the case in the bulk of crime-drop research to date, we present a unique comparative analysis of cohort-level and individual-level longitudinal development using two Australian (NSW-born) birth cohorts – cohorts that straddle, developmentally, the commencement of the NSW crime-drop in the year 2000. Our cohorts were born ten years apart. The first, born in 1984, experienced their entire adolescence (ten to seventeen years of age) at a time when crime in NSW was persistently increasing. The second cohort, born in 1994, traversed their adolescence at a time when crime in NSW was in rapid decline. This later cohort of young boys and girls turned ten years of age (the age of criminal responsibility in NSW, and the age at which formal crime records are first kept) three years after the crime-drop began. Although relatively rare, comparative birth cohort analyses of this kind have been instrumental in criminology (see [Fabio et al., 2006](#); [Farrington & Maughan, 1999](#); [Tracy et al., 1990](#)), especially in exploring some of the discipline’s most contentious issues regarding the coexistence of stability and change over the life course (e.g., [Jennings et al., 2016](#)). In this analysis, we exploit the fact that our two cohorts are from developmentally distinct periods (pre and post crime-drop), which not only adds value to the landscape of existing birth-cohort analyses, but provides for an internationally unique insight into the possible developmental causes and consequences of this international phenomenon.

Consistent with the growing body of crime-drop research, our analyses presented herein show a significant fall in crime. Our youngest cohort was responsible for almost 50 percent fewer offenses than their peers born ten years earlier. Contrary to our expectations, however, this decline was disproportionately the result of the less crime committed by low-rate or adolescent-limited offenders and almost no change in the population prevalence or long-term offending trajectories of those offenders we have traditionally described as

early onset. Whatever caused the crime-drop seems not to have affected all offenders (or potential offenders) equally and this differential experience across the population provides fertile ground for theoretical and empirical reflection. In our view, the results suggest that the crime-drop was not the result of some purposeful effort to reduce the offending of frequent offenders (as has become a criminological mantra since Wolfgang and his colleagues (1972) identified the chronic recidivists in the first Philadelphia Birth Cohort study), but a wider social transformation that likely has restructured criminal opportunities making crime (relative to other activities) less likely. We see this result not as a rejection of the need for comprehensive interventions for high-risk youth, but as a promising reminder that crime-reduction strategies should not ignore the much larger number of less serious offenders whose crime may be more easily prevented and at lower cost.

The international “crime-drop”

It is difficult to pinpoint when and where the crime-drop was first identified and reported, largely because in the earliest phases some jurisdictional government reports of official crime statistics had documented the change in trend, but stopped short of naming it an official “drop” or “decline.” In those early years, there was little reason to believe that the drop was any more than a statistical aberration. Criminologists now know that the crime-drop started in both the United States and Western Europe during the late 1980s and early 1990s (Blumstein, 2006; van Dijk & Tseloni, 2012), although the estimated starting point of the drop varied by jurisdiction and depended on the data source. In a seminal review, Blumstein (2006) showed that for the United States, the national decline in officially recorded murder and robbery offenses started in 1993 and persisted in a year-on-year decline until 2000.¹ By this time, both robbery and murder had fallen by 40 percent and have since plateaued at these historical lows. In Canada (see Farrell & Brantingham, 2013; Hodgkinson et al., 2016; Mishra & Lalumière, 2009; Ouimet, 1999, 2002), the experience was mostly consistent with the United States, although the drop in homicide, for example, appears to have started and plateaued a year or two earlier, while the magnitude of the decline was not as large (Mishra & Lalumière, 2009).

Across the Atlantic, the crime-drop in Western Europe also began in the early to-mid 1990s (van Dijk & Tseloni, 2012). Like in the United States, Scottish data suggest that the drop also started in 1993, but only if the measure of crime

¹ Van Dijk and Tseloni (2012) alternatively used self-reported victimization data from the International Crime Victimization Survey (ICVS). They show that the crime-drop in the United States is actually likely to have commenced somewhere between the 1988 and 1992 ICVS surveys.

uses the total quantum of official convictions for all offense types (Matthews & Minton, 2018). The actual number of convicted individuals was declining from as early as 1989, although the limits of the Scottish conviction data prohibit a more thorough and longer-term historical analysis. In an earlier study combining Scottish data with police statistics and self-reported victimization data from fourteen other Western European countries, Abei and Linde (2012) provide one of the most comprehensive regional studies of the crime-drop to date. Their analysis explores disaggregated crime trends in theft, burglary, and motor vehicle theft, as well as assault, robbery, homicide, and drug offenses. They conclude that in the combined experience of these Western European countries, the crime-drop was almost exclusively a property-crime phenomenon that commenced in 1992 and continued through to the end of the available data series in 2007. This was a shared experience for all three property-crime types, although the rate (and functional form) of the decline varied. Domestic burglary, for example, fell more quickly than either theft or motor vehicle theft in the mid-1990s, even though the overall decline (to 2007) in domestic burglary was not as great as it was for motor vehicle theft. By contrast, violent and drug crimes did not decline in Western Europe over the same period. Unlike in the United States, recorded assault rates and self-reported assault victimization increased from 1990 to 2007. For robbery, official rates remained unchanged between 1990 and 1998, then increased briefly through to 2002, only to return to the same levels seen in the mid-1990s. Self-reported robbery victimization data also evidenced an increase over the same period. The only exception was the recorded rate of homicide, which began to decline in 1993. Elsewhere in Europe, property crime was also in decline after the year 2000, according to results of the International Crime Victimization Survey (ICVS,) from former Communist countries of Estonia, Poland, and Georgia (van Dijk & Tseloni 2012).

In the Asia-Pacific region, crime statistics and victimization surveys have also evidenced a decline in crime in Australia (BOCSAR 2019), New Zealand (Mayhew, 2012), as well as Japan, Taiwan, and Hong Kong (Sidebottom et al., 2018).² In both Japan and Taiwan, the crime-drop appears to have commenced in the mid-2000s, some ten years later than in North America and Europe (Sidebottom et al., 2018), while in Hong Kong the crime-drop has been substantial in size, but internationally anomalous insofar as the decline appears to have started earlier than elsewhere in the world, sometime between 1980 (motor vehicle theft) and 1985 (burglary). In Australia, crime-drop studies have been

² As part of the United Nations Survey on Crime Trends and Operations of Criminal Justice Systems, del Frate and Mugellini (2012) noted a decline in homicide rates in other East and South-East Asian countries such as Singapore, Bhutan, China, Myanmar, Cambodia, India, Thailand, and the Philippines.

limited to the analysis of crime rates in NSW, the country's most populous state and the site of the present study. In that state, the decline in robbery and other property crimes commenced in the early months of the year 2000 and have continued, largely unabated, through to even the most recent available data from 2018. Property offenses³, for example, peaked in late 2000 at 650 incidents per 100,000 persons. By the end of 2017, the statewide property offense rate was approximately 60 percent lower at 230 incidents per 100,000 persons. Violent crime⁴ has also declined in NSW, although the downward shift started later (in 2003) and the decline has not been as large (currently 85 incidents per 100,000, down 30 percent from its peak).

The Local "Crime-Drop"

The now considerable wealth of collective empirical evidence shows that the crime-drop has been an international phenomenon, experienced mostly, although not exclusively, by high-income industrialized countries from all corners of the globe. So widespread is the experience of the crime-drop that Farrell et al. (2014, p. 421) described it as the "most important criminological phenomenon of modern times" and few criminological or criminal justice trends have been so consistently documented. For the global criminological community, there is merit in conceptualizing the crime-drop as a far-reaching global experience because it focuses attention on the potential macro causes of crime and situates other global social phenomena as potential correlates. More importantly, it prompts exploration beyond specific local explanations for crime and instead (or in addition to) a consideration of the wider social and global contexts that likely underpin such a widespread experience. To be sure, most criminological theory is, itself, intended to offer a *universal* explanation for antisocial and criminal behavior. With this in mind, the crime-drop offers a rare and unique opportunity that demands scholarship with a global behavioral perspective.

It is also essential that we recognize the international experience of the crime-drop as neither a *universal* nor a *general* phenomenon. Widespread though it might be, the specific timing, location and experiences of the crime-drop are sufficiently heterogeneous to warn against its description as a truly universal or

³ Includes break-and-enter dwelling, break-and-enter non-dwelling, motor vehicle theft, steal from motor vehicle, steal from retail store, steal from dwelling, steal from person, stock theft, other theft, and fraud.

⁴ Includes murder, attempted murder, manslaughter, assault – domestic violence related, assault – non-domestic violence related, assault police, robbery without a weapon, robbery with a firearm, robbery with a weapon not a firearm, sexual assault and indecent assault / act of indecency / other sexual offenses.