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The Transformation of the Politics of Crime in High Crime Societies

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Abstract

This study proceeds from the understanding that the last three decades have witnessed a shift in the state response to crime across Western Europe. The focus of the study is directed at analysing two mechanisms that the research literature has identified as important for the shift in crime policy witnessed over the last three decades, namely crime trends and ideology. It is concluded that crime trends do not constitute a fully satisfactory explanation.

Complementarily it is shown that it exist clear differences in the way youth crime has been viewed by the different political camps during the period 1970–1999. There is also a clear political dynamic in the crime question. Crime is a social problem that is primarily placed on the political agenda by conservatives when social democratic governments are in power.

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Biographical note

Felipe Estrada is associate professor at the Department of Criminology, Stockholm University, Sweden. His dissertation *Juvenile Crime as a Social problem -trends, media attention and societal response* was published in 1999. During 2000-2001 he worked as secretary in the welfare commission that was set up in Sweden to draw up a balance sheet for welfare in the 1990s. This task included an examination of the connection between living conditions, social exclusion and victimization. Part of this work has been published in the *Journal of European Social Policy* and *The British Journal of Criminology*. He is also editor of *Journal of Scandinavian Studies in Criminology and Crime Prevention*.

The Transformation of the Politics of Crime in High Crime Societies

Introduction

Over the last three decades, there has been a marked change in the way western governments react to crime. This trend might be described as constituting a shift from social policy to crime policy, with a concomitant change in emphasis from treatment/rehabilitation to just deserts. This trend has been noted by a substantial number of researchers working in this area (e.g. Kyvsgaard 1995; Tham 1995; O'Malley 1999; Young 1999; Waquant 2001; von Hofer 2003a) and has been summarised admirably by David Garland (2001) in *The Culture of Control*. Its distinguishing features are as follows:

- *A loss of ground by the treatment ideology.* The objective of sanctioning is no longer primarily that of rehabilitating the offender. Punishment and retribution have made a comeback as legitimate sanctioning principles. Value is now associated with the use of legislation as a means of dealing with the righteous anger that crime gives rise to.
- *The rediscovery of the prison.* For a long time the majority of the western countries attempted to reduce both the number of prison inmates and the length of time spent in prison. Today the trend is in the opposite direction (eg. von Hofer 2003a).
- *The central focus is directed at the victim.* The focus of identification, sympathy and understanding is directed at the victim. The protection of the public has become a guiding principle. The objective is to minimise risks and to increase levels of safety.
- *An increased political exploitation of the crime problem.* Crime is viewed as a concrete problem that can be resolved by means of effective action; ideally with the mass media conveying an image of this vigour and efficiency to a wide audience. Nobody can afford to be viewed as being “soft on crime”.
- *Individualisation.* The causal discussion has come to focus less on social mechanisms and more on individual level factors. Thus crime policy strategies focus less attention on attempts to bring about improvements in these areas and more on immediate control and security measures.

The academic debate has not focused so much on describing the changes that have taken place in the crime policy arena, although questions have of course been raised as to whether the extreme situation witnessed in the USA may be regarded as representative from a European perspective (Young 2002; Feeley 2003). There is instead much more of a debate as to what may constitute the most important mechanisms underlying this repressive trend in crime policy. Garland's own analysis points to the importance of everything from structural social factors and economic shifts to changes in intellectual currents, media developments and changes in politics, or as Feeley (2003:113) puts it, "Indeed just about all the features of late 20th century Anglo-American culture one might think of are touched upon." As regards the importance of crime itself for developments in the area of crime policy, however, it is possible to distinguish two principal explanatory models (Tham 2001a).

The first explanatory approach proceeds from actual crime trends. This also constitutes the most obvious explanation of course. Among the politicians who have been involved in shifting crime policy in a more repressive direction, "rising crime" is among the most common means of legitimising this project (Andersson 2002). But in the research community too, and among researchers who may otherwise be viewed as having quite distinctive conceptions of the mechanisms essential to an understanding of crime and punishment, we also find an emphasis on the importance of the trend towards high crime societies (Wilson 1975; Wilson & Herrnstein 1985; Kelling & Coles 1996; Young 1999; Garland 2000). According to this approach, the shift in crime policy should be understood against the backdrop of a substantial increase in levels of crime. Thus the fact that both the political rhetoric and concrete policy have moved in a repressive direction is in the final analysis related to an increase in levels of exposure to and fear of crime as experienced by the population. The vigour of politicians in this area is thus quite simply a manifestation of what Katherine Beckett (1997) has described as "Democracy-at-work".

The second approach plays down the importance of crime trends and focuses instead on the ideological position of the crime issue in the public debate (Hall et al 1978; Tham 1995; Beckett 1997; Garland 1996; Bauman 1998; Waquant 2001; Feeley 2003). Researchers working with this perspective often note the mass media's role as a purveyor of reality. The accelerating commercialisation of the media has created a pressure to produce cheap, marketable products. In the context of such a media climate, crime has become an attractive news item and the presentation of the crime problem focuses predominantly on the most

extreme cases, creating the impression that crime is constantly on the increase (e.g. Hall et al. 1978; Sparks 1992). This produces a need for someone to step in and do something substantial: something which effective and media-savvy politicians have learned to exploit. A situation thus arises where two potent power centres – politics and the media – work to fuel a portrayal of reality that benefits both.

Objectives and research questions

This study proceeds from the understanding that the last three decades have witnessed a shift in the state response to crime, in line with that described above, across Western Europe. The focus of the study is directed at analysing the mechanisms that have guided this trend. Since this is obviously a very complicated question, this article limits itself to an examination of the importance of the two principal explanatory models presented in the introduction. In concrete terms, then, the article's objective is that of examining the extent to which trends in youth crime themselves, or alternatively the political debate, have played the most important role in the shift in crime policy witnessed over the last three decades. Whilst several studies have been published focusing on trends in youth crime, fewer analyses have been conducted into the political dynamics of the crime question, and thus the main emphasis of this article is placed on the latter.

The presentation begins with a brief review of post war trends in youth crime, and then moves on to describe changes in the view of youth crime found in the political discourse during the period 1970-1999 in Sweden. This is achieved by means of an examination of editorials on youth crime (n=221) published in newspapers of differing political complexions. The questions addressed are as follows: How are trends in youth crime portrayed? Which factors are viewed as explaining why youths commit criminal offences? What are regarded as the appropriate ways for society to respond to the problem? In the context of this article, these editorials are viewed as representing the three dominant ideological groupings found in the political systems of the west during the post-war period – the conservative right, the liberal centre, and the social democratic left. This section of the article examines whether there is some form of parliamentary and ideological dynamic underlying the political debate on youth crime. On which points are different political camps agreed at different points in time? What are the focuses of disagreements? Is the view of youth crime more closely linked to what

might be termed the 'spirit of the times' than it is to ideological affiliation? Is the theme of youth crime emphasised during election years when electoral support has to be mobilised, and if so, by which political camps?

Trends in youth crime in Western Europe

In previous studies, I have presented detailed descriptions of post-war trends in youth crime in both Sweden and across Europe (Estrada 1999, 2001, Westfelt & Estrada forth.). This section therefore presents no more than a very brief summary of the most central aspects of these trends. It is well established that the number of criminal offences registered in official crime statistics was much larger in the year 2000 than it was in 1950 and that this increase was to a large extent the result of an increase in theft offences (Westfelt 2001; Falck et al 2003). Post-war criminological research into crime trends has accordingly been dominated by descriptions of an ever-increasing population of offenders (e.g. Wilson & Herrnstein 1985; Smith 1995). In more recent times, however, an alternative description has gained currency, highlighting a levelling off in this trend during the 1980s (von Hofer 2000, 2003b; Kyvsgaard 1991; Estrada 1999; Westfelt 2001).

A review of national studies of youth crime trends from ten western European countries (described in detail in Estrada 1999), indicates that in several of these countries levels of youth crime increased sharply during the first decades following the Second World War. This trend was then broken between the mid-1970s and the beginning of the 1980s and thereafter levelled off. In England and Germany the upward trend appears to have continued into the 1990s. Thus in the majority of countries at least, *the post-war period does not appear to have been characterised by an ever expanding population of young offenders*. Figure 1 presents the trend as recorded in Sweden.

FIGURE 1 about here: Youths aged 15-17 convicted of theft 1913-2002

The marked drop in theft convictions at the very end of the period should partly be seen in the light of major re-organisations of the police and the prosecutorial systems in Sweden, which led to a loss of efficiency and to reduced output (von Hofer 2003b). This observation gives rise to the following classic question in relation to the use of crime statistics in general: to

what extent are the described trends real, and to what extent are they simply the result of amongst other things procedural changes within the criminal justice system or variations in reporting behaviour? The most obvious answer is of course that both alternatives are true to a varying extent. In most of the countries in Western Europe for example statistics concerning *convicted* juveniles indicate a clear *reduction* over the last twenty years or so (as shown in figure 1). Those indicators which lie 'closer' to the crime event however, and which are thus less sensitive to changes within the criminal justice system (such as statistics relating to suspects), suggest that the reductions are not real but are rather the result of "system effects" (a more detailed discussion is found in Estrada 1999). It is nonetheless important to remember that for most countries these sources *do not* indicate that the number of juvenile offenders has continued to increase at an undiminished rate during this period.

This interpretation is reinforced by alternative statistics. In those countries where self-report studies are available over time they suggest a stable level of juvenile offenders (Balvig 2000; Kivivouri 2002; Ring 2003; Junger-Tas 2004). Lars Westfelt (2001; see also Westfelt & Estrada, forthcoming) presents both victim data and official crime statistics that indicates that the population's reports of exposure to theft/vandalism have remained at a relatively stable level, at least since the end of the 1980s. The results from the four waves of the International Crime Victimization Survey also show stable response patterns for the period 1988-1999 (van Kesteren et al. 2000).

The levelling off witnessed in the overall crime trend is absent however from the trend in crimes of violence reported to the police (Junger-tas 1996; Estrada 2001). The trend in levels of assault offences is instead characterised by a continuous increase from around the mid-1960s (see fig. 1). Unlike the general levelling off described above, however, *this upward trend in violent crime is not corroborated by the available alternative indicators. A* examination of the *Swedish victim surveys* suggests that the number of juveniles with experience of exposure to violence has remained relatively stable since 1978 (von Hofer 2000; Nilsson & Estrada 2003). In Sweden, there are a number of different *self-report surveys* which indicate that juveniles report neither that more of them have been assaulted, nor that more are carrying out assaults between the years 1971 & 1996; 1987-1998 and 1995-2001 respectively (Ward 1998; Estrada 2001; Ring 2003). Since the end of the 1960s, Sweden has maintained a register of *patients admitted to public hospitals*. There has been no general increase in the numbers of juveniles admitted for hospital care as a result of violence since the

1970s (Estrada 2001). Since the 1970s, *violence resulting in death* has not increased in terms of either the number of youth perpetrators or the number of youth victims (von Hofer 2000; 2003b). This suggests at the very least that any increases in juvenile violence that may have occurred have not been reflected in the levels of the most serious forms of violence. Viewed together, these alternative indicators present a completely different picture from that given by the crime statistics.

A review of victim surveys from Denmark, England, Finland, Holland, and Norway shows that in these countries too, the level of violent victimisation reported by juveniles and/or the general population has been relatively stable over recent decades, whilst levels of violent crime reported to the police have increased substantially. Data relating to lethal violence also indicate that levels of victimisation have remained stable since the 1980s (Westfelt 2001; Westfelt & Estrada forthcoming; Falck et al 2003). Further, there are additional alternative indicators from Denmark which show a stable trend by comparison with that found in the police data. Brink et al. (1997) present an analysis of hospital data for the years 1982, 1988 and 1994. Their results show that juvenile violence has neither increased nor become more serious. Danish self-report studies among 15 year old students indicate lower levels of violence in 1999 than in 1979 (Kyvsgaard 1991; Balvig 2000b). The pattern found in Finland and Norway is the same as that found in Sweden and Denmark, i.e. dramatic increases in juvenile violence as reflected in crime statistics, but a more or less stable level of juvenile victimisation as recorded in victim surveys (Estrada 1999; Stene 2003) and self report studies (Kivivouri 2002). Holland is another of the few European countries where alternative indicators of violent crime trends are available. Here too, the substantial increase in levels of non-serious violence indicated by Dutch crime statistics are not reflected in increases in either fatal violence or in the proportion of victim survey respondents reporting exposure to violent crime (Franke 1994; Junger-Tas 1996, 2004; Wittebrood & Junger 2002). In Holland, hospital data are also available relating to the number of patients admitted in association with violent injuries. These data are very similar to those from Sweden, indicating a substantial level of stability over recent decades (Wittebrood & Junger 2002).

A reasonable summary of the results of victim and self-report surveys, hospital data and fatal violence is thus that they do not show a continual increase but rather that the number of violent acts committed by and against young people has remained at a more or less stable level since the 1980s. An integration of the interpretations of data drawn from alternative

sources and crime statistics respectively leads therefore to the following hypothesis regarding violent crime in Europe. A change in criminal behaviour is not the principal reason for the rapid rise in the number of (particularly young) people being registered by the criminal justice system since the 1980s. This increase is rather the result of a marked shift in the way society responds to young people's actions. This change has occurred in parallel with an ideological shift, from the treatment ideology to a neo-classicist focus on just deserts, which has affected the politics of social control. Together, these tendencies have led to an increasing propensity to report acts of violence, which has in turn led to a situation exhibiting all the classic characteristics of a deviancy amplification spiral (Hall et al. 1978; von Hofer 2000; Estrada 2001). (Footnote 1) The following section examines the political dynamics that (may) underlie this process in more detail.

The political dynamics of crime

The objective of this section is to describe developments in the view of youth crime as a social problem over the period 1970-1999, as reflected in Swedish editorial articles. Generally speaking, such articles are comprised of unsigned texts which express the political views of the newspaper in question. Media studies research focusing on Swedish editorials has found that these clearly support the political parties with which they share ideological sympathies (Nord 2000). When ideological shifts are the object of analysis, then, editorials would appear to provide a particularly appropriate source of data. Since the function of these articles is to discuss and provide an ideological commentary on current social issues, they are likely to provide a general overview of which issues are currently regarded as important in the context of the public debate.

Election years were chosen for study based on an assumption that political activity increases in the context of general election campaigns (Nord 2000:136ff). It is less clear what significance the parliamentary situation may have for the position taken by editorial articles in relation to current policy. There are indications that the professionalisation of journalism and a greater independence in relation to the political parties has led to an increase in the level of criticism directed at the party of government, irrespective of whether or not a particular newspaper feels an allegiance towards this party (Nord 2000:136). Whatever the truth of the matter, less work has been focused on examining how the view of crime policy is affected by

these political conditions. Lenke and Olsson (1995) have pointed out, however, that the move towards a more punitive crime and drugs policy does appear to be associated with which party is in government in different European countries. They argue that when social democratic parties are in power, there is a tendency that the crime problem becomes a public issue, which in turn serves to push crime policy in a more repressive direction (see also Hall et al. 1978; Beckett 1997; economic crime appears to constitute an interesting exception to this pattern, see Lindgren 2002. See also Tham 2001b, who describes the way the social democratic left has also started to exploit the crime issue in the 1990s).

Method and material

The editorials have been examined by means of both qualitative and quantitative content analysis. The periods 1970-1982 and 1990-1999 were selected for analysis, as a means of facilitating the illumination of the two different aspects of this phenomenon, namely time and the parliamentary situation. As regards the parliamentary situation, the study looks at whether being in government or opposition and/or electoral campaigns have had any effect on the way attention is focused on the problem of youth crime. The two periods selected allow for a division of the material into times of social democratic government and conservative/liberal opposition during the years 1970-76 and 1994-99 and of conservative/liberal government and social democratic opposition during the years 1976-82 and 1991-94. The significance of election campaigns is examined by means of a comparison of “election years” with the “non-election years”.

The newspapers included in the study are: *Aftonbladet* and *Arbetet*, both of which have social democratic sympathies, the liberal *Dagens Nyheter* and *Expressen* and *Svenska Dagbladet* whose sympathies lie with Sweden’s conservative party. The newspapers selected comprise the dominant papers in Sweden, and the sample includes both tabloids and broadsheets. The press material employed, and the methodological problems involved in the analysis have been described in detail elsewhere (Estrada 2001, 2003) and will therefore only be presented in brief in the present context. The editorials were coded at random, thus avoiding the possibility that a gradual shift in interpretation would have a systematic effect on the way the material was coded (Bergström & Boréus 2000:53). The overall picture presented in each editorial in relation to each specific issue was coded. Using this approach involves the introduction into

the analysis of a substantial amount of qualitative interpretational work. This takes place, however, within a framework of fixed rules, a factor which allows us to describe the work as a quantification of qualitative data (Bergström & Boréus 2000). An intrasubjectivity test was conducted. This involved double-coding 40 articles. In order to avoid memory effects, the first 40 articles coded were selected for the test. The level of correspondence was found to be high (90%).

Operationalisation of central concepts

The variables employed to describe the content of the editorials can be roughly divided into those relating to the articles' view of youth crime and those focusing more on the question of what society ought to do about this phenomenon. The coding system differentiates between four fundamental causal areas; *Social conditions*, at both the structural and individual level: where the editorial emphasises the importance of underlying conditions, such as inequality, unemployment and/or having grown up in difficult conditions, which are assumed to affect an individual's level of opportunity and thereby also the propensity to commit crime; *Upbringing*: where the editorial argues that the principal reason young people commit offences is to be found in a general dissolution of normative standards, with parents and school failing to teach children right from wrong; *Societal control*: where the article does not emphasise the issue of why young people tend to commit crime but focuses rather on deficiencies in police numbers, the leniency of sanctioning practices, the slowness of reactions to crime etc. Thus the underlying causes of crime are less linked to the individual and more to the situation and the opportunity structure. *Drugs and youth culture*: here the editorial emphasises drug or alcohol use, video violence etc. as causal factors underlying youth crime. The next variable relates to the articles' view of the offender. Where the youth is described as vulnerable, as different from other young people as a result of a difficult background, the editorial is categorised as viewing the *offender as a victim*. In those cases where the editorial instead presents the young offender as immoral and ruthless, where he is assigned a criminal identity which differentiates him from other youth, the editorial is categorised as identifying the offender as a *hardened criminal*. The third category is employed in relation to editorials which do not treat the offender as a specific type of individual. Instead young offenders are presented as *relatively normal*, rational, anonymous members of a group of young people who exploit opportunities for crime. The measures most commonly advocated by the editorials were divided into categories corresponding to those

described in relation to the major causal areas described above. The final two response-related variables focused on the editorials' view of social services youth care and the justice system respectively.

The editorials' view of youth crime

The presentation of findings begins by focusing on the overall picture of the youth crime problem presented by editorials representing the three political camps during the whole of the period 1970-99. The findings show that at the general level there are quite major differences between the three political positions (this information is presented separately for the 1970s and the 1990s later on in the article; see Tables 1 and 2).

A typical conservative editorial on youth crime, takes youth violence as its point of departure, and then focuses on societal controls (Table 1). The view of the police and the justice system is favourable. It is highly unusual for a conservative editorial to state that youth crime is not on the increase or that people's fears are exaggerated. By contrast, the reverse of this position, i.e. the view that levels of youth crime are rising, that the situation is very serious and that public concerns are therefore justified, is expressed in almost half of the editorials. Further, articles focusing on the social causes of crime, or where the offender is described as the victim of poor childhood conditions, are rare. Instead, it is more common for the offender to be described as a hardened criminal. It follows from this that conservative editorials seldom advocate social measures or the provision of treatment outside the justice system; instead it is common for measures of this kind to be criticised quite explicitly (Table 2). Thus the efforts of the social services, to the extent that they are discussed at all, which is unusual, are primarily a focus for criticism. One of the most clearly manifest dimensions of the conservative view consists in the way the crime problem is viewed as requiring immediate action on the part of those in power, often in the form of improved resources for the police, and in the way that the social democratic government is criticised for its lack of decisive action in the battle against crime.

Crime in Sweden continues to rise ... and thus we find confirmation for the fact that little by little, serious crime has become an increasingly distressing problem within the welfare society. Against this backdrop, it is of course extremely worrying that the police continue to find it difficult to keep the situation under control. ... We have done a great deal in this country to improve levels of safety and security. We have social security and a comprehensive pensions system. We have tried to safeguard ourselves against the

problems associated with illness, unemployment and age. But here in our own society we are not physically safe. ... Surely security of life and limb is as important an issue as some reform or other? (Svenska Dagbladet (cons.) 700130, "*Security of life and limb*")

More and more are coming to see that young people who commit serious offences cannot always be nursed into well adjusted individuals but must forcibly be protected from themselves and the rest of society from them. (Svenska Dagbladet (cons.) 900815, "*Responding in time*")

The editorials lying closer to the social democratic camp tend in most ways towards the opposite position from that of their conservative counterparts. In the social democratic editorials it is almost as common for crime trends to be described as stable, and for concerns to be toned down, as it is for the article to proceed from a more alarmist position. The social democratic editorials are those which most often take up the questions of the causes of youth crime, and when they do so, it is most often by reference to social factors – unemployment, segregation, one's social inheritance. It should also be noted, however, that conditions relating to a child's upbringing – the parents', schools' and the adult world's responsibilities in relation to the child – are emphasised to almost the same extent. Young offenders are rarely described as ruthless criminals by social democratic editorials, but more often as young men who have grown up in disadvantaged conditions. The measures advocated by these editorials relate to a large extent to social measures, treatment or on devoting resources to education/training and the provision of information. Less emphasis is placed on the expansion of control measures. Instead criticism is directed at measures that focus on tougher responses since these are often viewed as being directed at the "symptoms and not the actual causes". The social democratic editorials have instead a more favourable attitude towards the work of the social.

We can provide 100 or 1000 new police officers each year – neither would lead to any decisive improvements in this area of criminality. ... To achieve results in the fight against crime by means of increases in police numbers, then, besides giving more money to the police authority, society would have to make similarly intense efforts to reduce destitution, to rehabilitate excluded groups, to reduce the extent of class divisions and thereby attack the causes of crime. (Aftonbladet (soc. dem.) 701214, "*Increased police numbers are not enough*")

To help to spread a false picture of generally increasing crime levels and an ever more unmanageable crime problem in order to score political points and win votes by means of demands for tougher measures. It is thus a question of the political exploitation of fear and insecurity. And as such it has to be condemned. ... The most important measures to combat crime are not a crime policy issue. Preventing unemployment, social disadvantage and excessive class divisions constitutes the most effective means of counteracting increases in crime. (Arbetet (soc. dem.) 910707, "*Tougher measures won't help*")

The liberal editorials are characterised by a much more ambivalent attitude towards youth crime than either their conservative or social democratic counterparts, which makes it difficult to describe a typical liberal position during the period 1970-99. From a liberal point of view, the most important causal factor is found in a defective upbringing and faulty norms, which are emphasised in one in four of the editorials. Increased controls constitute the measure that is advocated most often but these do not appear in isolation any more than measures focused on the quality of upbringing and social initiatives. This ambivalence is also apparent when one examines the measures against which the most criticism is directed, with treatment approaches and the introduction of tougher measures being criticised in roughly equal measure. At the general level, the review of editorials indicates the existence of major ideological differences between the different political camps as regards their view of youth crime as a social problem.(footnote 2) On each issue, there are substantial differences between the conservative editorials and their social democratic counterparts. The liberal editorials are located somewhere between the two. The interesting questions now become those of whether what might be termed the ‘spirit of the times’ or the political situation is related to the editorials’ perception of the nature of this problem.

The spirit of the times

Tables 1 and 2 present the editorials’ descriptions of the youth crime problem divided into two periods – 1970-1982 and 1990-1999. If the period itself and not the political situation were the decisive factor for the way in which the editorials describe crime, then we would expect to find substantial differences between the two periods.

Table 1 contains one or two interesting findings. Firstly, it is clear that irrespective of the date, the general pattern described above remains. The differences in the two camps’ view of the causes of crime, and of the young offenders themselves are substantial, irrespective of the period. It is somewhat more common for the conservatives to take up the issue of social conditions in editorials written during the 1990s, however, and this is a result of the fact that segregation and integration are treated as an important causal factor in relation to the offending of immigrant youth. A clear and interesting shift is visible among the social democratic editorials across the two periods, from a focus on social conditions during the 1970s to the question of upbringing during the 1990s.

Secondly, it is clear that the view of the young offender has changed. The proportion of articles where the youth is described as a ruthless criminal undergoes a marked increase. In addition, the 1990s see a clear preponderance of articles focusing on violent crime. One interesting finding is that there is a reduction over time in the proportion of articles contending that youth crime is on the increase, or whose basic tone is alarmist in some other respect. This situation has also been identified in an earlier study, which noted that from 1987, a majority of the editorials about youth crime examined did not proceed from an explicit perception that youth violence was on the increase (Estrada 2001). One possible explanation for this may be that those writing these editorials have taken account of the criminological research that has called attention to the problems associated with descriptions of crime trends as being continuously on the rise (see above). A more realistic interpretation, however, would be that the editorial writers no longer feel the need to legitimise their focus on youth crime by means of explicit references to the increasing seriousness of the problem, since by this point it had already become established as a social problem of note.

Table 1 about here

When the response-related aspects of the editorials are examined (Table 2), the differences between the different political camps discussed above are clearly visible, as is the fact that these differences remain during the 1990s. There is a striking lack of editorials with a positive approach towards social care-based measures, and a fundamentally positive attitude towards the police and the justice system is equally apparent. Among the social democratic editorials too, the values professed in the 1970s are in large part also found in the 1990s, although certain changes may be noted. There is an interesting movement found among the social democrats, with a clear individualisation taking place in relation to proposed measures. Having previously primarily advocated the importance of social measures, it becomes more common during the 1990s for the social democratic editorials to advocate better upbringing or social control. On the whole, criticisms of increases in levels of social controls diminish, as does the critical attitude towards the police and the justice system.

Table 2 about here

The picture that emerges means that the liberals can be characterised as the holding the balance of power in the debate surrounding the crime problem. During the 1970s, it is clear

that the liberal editorials present a view of youth crime that lies close to that of their social democratic counterparts. In the 1970s, with both the liberal the social democratic newspapers occupying an unsympathetic position in relation to increased societal controls, and instead emphasising social initiatives, the conservative perception of the youth crime problem appeared to be relatively extreme. In this context one may also see the impression made by the 'spirit of the times'; an impression that is visible not so much in the way that the conservative view of the youth crime problem was relatively similar to that of the social democratic view during the 1970s, but rather in the way that the conservatives occupied a relatively isolated position in the context of the political debate on crime. The following quote relates to a parliamentary inquiry on crime that had been appointed by the social democratic Government at the beginning of 1973:

The Inquiry was not influenced by the controversy and the report was published. As you might expect, Aftonbladet (soc. dem.) soon choked on the issue as a whole /.../ the editorial writers of Dagens Nyheter (lib.) squirmed nervously /.../ in the current affairs columns of several newspapers, the Crime Inquiry was soon attacked by various social workers. One could read in Dagens Nyheter (lib.) for example, that the police shouldn't be given 90 million kronor over three years and social care workers 25 million, but rather the reverse. (Svenska Dagbladet (con.) 730331, "Police – and social services", bracketed political affiliation added)

There are a great many proposals that appear to be good. /.../ But it is first and foremost the fault of a few political spin doctors that one is constantly given the impression of the police as a largely adequate social cleaning patrol that, but for the sabotaging "nonchalance" of some Minister of Justice, would be able to keep the antisocial "them" from disturbing the law-abiding "us". (Dagens Nyheter (lib.) 730414, "Social cleaning patrols")

During the 1990s, the liberal editorials move closer to the descriptions of the youth crime problem presented by their conservative counterparts, at least since 1970. This shift is particularly clear in relation to the presentation of the young offender, social services care, the police, and most interesting of all, the measures advocated. The liberal editorials veer away from the advocacy of social measures towards expressions of support for responses based on societal controls. Given the liberal editorials' role as holders of the balance of power, their altered perception of the youth crime problem means that the political debate on this issue undergoes a shift between the 1970s and the 1990s. The principal characteristic of this shift involved a movement away from an emphasis on social conditions to an individualistic conception of the crime problem.

Young offenders must be stopped early. They must be made to learn that crime is followed by punishment. /.../ Increasing the severity of sanctions will not give us fewer criminals. Early and resolute measures against youths who have gone astray may do so on the other hand. (Dagens Nyheter (lib.) 930509, "Important to let them know who's in charge")

Violence among young people is becoming increasingly common. /.../ the majority view the unemployment situation as the major cause of crime. This same guess dominates the general debate. But how well thought-through is this explanation? /.../ Individuals who commit crimes are morally defective in some way. /.../ The most important preventive factor is a high risk of discovery. /.../ It is on the basis of this perspective that we must discuss how reasonable – or more correctly, how insane – it is for the government to also set about the police with their cut-backs. Protecting citizens against crime is one of the tasks that the state of necessity has to accomplish – unlike so much else that it has taken upon itself. (Dagens Nyheter (lib.) 970428, "The fearful are also victims of crime")

One important result of the shift in the liberal perspective is that the position occupied by the conservatives is no longer extreme; instead, on many issues, it is the social democratic position that now becomes isolated. As was pointed out earlier, however, the social democratic editorials have themselves moved closer to rather than further away from the conservative view of the problem. Thus it may be argued that the editorials on youth crime manifest a clear slide towards the right, just as has been noted in other areas of social debate in Sweden (Boréus 1997).

Parliamentary situation and election year

Over the 23 years of the period examined, there have been eight election years. The Social Democrats have been the party of government for thirteen of these 23 years, and the coalition between Liberals and Conservatives for nine. The findings show that election years are not over-represented in the material in terms of the number of editorials published – a similar number of articles on youth crime has been published irrespective of the year (Table 3). Nor are there any differences between the newspapers. This suggests that youth crime does not function in any general way as a mobilising issue during election years in Sweden. This finding does not of course mean that the crime problem in general never finds itself at the centre of the political debate at election times. In the material examined in this study, for example, the election campaigns of both 1973 and 1991 emerge as having involved a fairly in depth discussion of the crime problem (see Tham 1995).

Table 3 about here

Further, the number of editorials published is clearly correlated with the political complexion of the parties of government. The editorial pages publish twice as many articles on youth crime when the Social Democrats are in government. It is difficult to see how this relationship might be explained in terms of the crime problem being so much more serious during periods of social democratic government. It is worth noting that the period examined is of no significance for these findings, since the material includes periods of both social democratic and centre-right government during both the 1970s and the 1990s. Thus a picture emerges whereby the crime problem is something which constitutes an important issue within the political debate during periods of social democratic government. It may be noted, for example, that the social democratic editorials do not avail themselves of the opportunity to write a great deal about youth crime during periods of centre-right government, but that the pattern is instead the same as for the liberal and conservative editorials. This suggests in turn that the social democratic editorial writers tend to assume a position in relation to the political debate, rather than steering the content of this debate.

Concluding discussion

This article has studied two mechanisms that the research literature has identified as playing an important role in relation to the shift in crime policy witnessed in Sweden and other western European countries, namely crime trends and the political debate. The empirical material has been restricted to trends in youth crime and the view of youth crime presented in editorial articles during the period 1970 to 1999. A review of the available statistics on trends in youth crime in Sweden and other comparable Western European countries shows that crime levels increased sharply during the first decades following the end of World War II. This increase has not continued throughout the post-war period however, with data from several countries indicating a break in the upward trend at some point around the end of the 1970s. Since this time, youth crime has remained at a relatively stable level. In brief, crime trends do not constitute a self-evident explanation, as is often claimed, for the way in which the focus of state crime policy has shifted from a model based on looking for social solutions towards a more punitive approach. In the 1970s, crime had been on the increase for over two decades, and continued to rise throughout the decade. At the same time, it can be shown that the view of the crime problem characteristic of the time was quite different to that of today, which has been formulated against the backdrop of a stable crime trend. Thus periods characterised by

rising crime need not necessarily produce crime policy that emphasises more punitive sanctions, greater numbers of police etc. This also means that in order to understand the current intensity of the focus on crime as a social problem, we have to move on to alternative, and perhaps rather less obvious explanations.

The study of editorials shows clear differences in the way youth crime has been viewed by the different political camps during the period 1970–1999. For the majority of the period examined, the editorials more closely affiliated with the social democrats present a view that is more or less diametrically opposed to that of the conservatives. The editorials in the liberal newspapers assume a rather more changeable line. During the 1970s they adopt a position reminiscent of that of the social democrats whilst during the 1990s the view presented lies closer to that of the conservatives. This shift in the liberal position is interesting and may be viewed as corresponding to some extent to the significance assigned by Garland (2001) to the professional middle class in relation to the drop in support for the penal welfare perspective. Unlike Garland, however, I do not see this shift as being unequivocally related to an increase in the levels of exposure to crime experienced by this group. In fact, Swedish data indicate, for example, that the levels of victimisation experienced by middle and high income groups have remained stable or dropped off somewhat over the past fifteen years, whilst those experienced by low income groups have increased (Nilsson & Estrada 2003). Instead I see this trend as being more closely related to the more general criticisms of the use of taxation to finance the welfare state that were formulated in Sweden during the 1980s and which then gained a foothold in precisely these groups (Boréus 1997).

The findings presented in this article also confirm an hypothesis previously formulated by Lenke & Olsson (1995; see also Hall et al. 1978; Beckett 1997); crime is a social problem that is primarily placed on the political agenda by conservatives when social democratic governments are in power. Approximately twice as many editorials were published on this topic both in the 1970s and in the 1990s during those periods when the Social Democrats were in power. This finding indicates that those responsible for the editorials see a certain political dynamic in the crime question. An interesting example of the political significance of crime is provided by the issue of economic criminality which also constitutes “the exception that proves the rule.” Lindgren (2002) has shown that the Social Democrats ‘own’ the issue of economic crime in the sense that they have the preferential right of interpretation in relation to the issue of both causality and appropriate responses in this area. The political right has

remained passive in relation to the issue, and has primarily merely reacted to the proposals formulated by the left. The Social Democrats have also formulated their most important proposals when in opposition (in 1982 and 1992 respectively). Lindgren therefore draws attention to what he calls the “reverse position” on the economic crime issue. Put simply, it is the political left that wants a harsher response in relation to economic offences, and that does not focus on underlying structural factors relating to why people commit economic crimes, instead directing any aetiological discussions towards the level of the individual. By contrast, the right has focused on the importance of safeguarding the rights of the individual, on warning against the possibility of a police state, on suggesting decriminalisation and, finally, on emphasising the structural/institutional causes that may explain why people commit tax offences (Lindgren 2002). The political dynamics of the crime question may also be illustrated in the way in which the conservative position has moved from being a marginalised voice in the Swedish political debate to become the dominant one. During the 1970s, conservative editorials were rather alone in their view of youth crime and how it should be combated. The social democratic and liberal editorials often assumed a common position. Clearly, however, the conservatives did not perceive the accusations that they were exaggerating the extent of the problem and contributing to an increase in levels of fear of crime as particularly problematical, instead feeling that crime constituted a political issue which could be used with some success both to distinguish themselves from, and to attack, their political opponents.

In the context of attempts to understand the political dimension of the crime question, then, it is difficult to ignore the fact that the position assumed by the conservatives as early as the 1970s was the direct antithesis of the traditional welfare-state based view of social problems. Those on the political right appear to have understood much earlier than others the potential of the crime problem as a means of criticising the government’s “expensive welfare policy” as “ineffective”. Thus when the ideas associated with neo-liberalism began to make a serious impact in the public debate in Sweden at the beginning of the 1980s (Boréus 1997), there already existed a ready interpretative framework for use in relation to the crime problem. By the beginning of the 1990s, the liberal editorials had also adopted this view of the crime problem. Since the liberals have held the balance of power in relation to the political debate on the crime issue, their change in direction resulted in the social democrats experiencing an increasing sense of isolation. The social democrats coped less well with this political isolation than the conservatives had during the 1970s. Besides the fact that it is difficult to contend that

social democratic editorials have lead the way in relation to the issue of youth crime, it becomes clearer during the 1990s that they are also unwilling to enter into a direct conflict as regards defining the nature of this problem. As the social democratic view of crime and punishment has been modified during the 1990s (Tham 1995; 2001b), the picture of the nature of the phenomenon has also undergone a change in the direction of a more conservative view of crime and of the appropriate response to crime. Thus a picture emerges of the crime problem as a politically highly charged issue, and as one that may be used both as a means of directing criticism at one's political opponents and of providing support for one's own ideological position.

This article began by posing the complex question of why the crime problem has come to occupy a more conspicuous position in the context of the general political debate. It has been pointed out that actual crime trends constitute a misleading, or at least an insufficient, explanation. In conclusion, therefore, an explanatory model is proposed which proceeds from the dynamics of the politics involved, via the connection between policy and the societal transformation witnessed over recent decades. In highly simplified terms, following the Second World War, politicians were given a clear mandate to distribute the wealth created by the market economy in a reasonably equitable fashion. As the development of the global economy made the formulation of national economic policy more difficult, a divide opened up between the policy expected by the electorate and that which it was possible to implement (Habermas 1984; Bauman 1998; Young 1999). In this context, crime came to fill an important function in the neo-liberal critique of the welfare state (Hall et al. 1978; Tham 1995; Beckett 1997). The view that it is the individual who determines whether he will succeed or fail is important here. One of the cornerstones of the neo-liberal argument against the welfare state is that one should not be able to blame society for one's own shortcomings (Boréus 1997). The critique argues that the welfare society produces individuals with no incentive to raise themselves up out of poverty. The social conditions which constitute the breeding ground for criminality have thus increasingly come to be regarded as excuses and evasions. Instead of understanding crime as a social problem requiring reforms which improve the living conditions of the most disadvantaged groups in society, the blame is placed firmly at the door of the individual. The state should therefore focus on law and order rather than "wasting money on expensive welfare programmes." The former president of the USA, Ronald Reagan, expressed this in the following terms in a 1983 speech: *"Here in the richest nation in the world, where more crime is committed than in any other nation, we are told that the answer*

to this problem is to reduce our poverty. This isn't the answer/ .../ Government's function is to protect society from the criminal, not the other way around" (cited in Beckett 1997:48). In Sweden, conservatives were the first to exploit the problem of "rising crime" in this way. Thereafter, first liberals and then social democrats have adapted or modified their position in this same direction.

Footnotes

1. Estrada (2001) presents two studies testing this hypothesis. The first focuses on the media attention surrounding the issue of juvenile crime during the period 1950-1994. The second looks at the concrete effects that changes in reporting propensities may have on the registration of juvenile violence in official crime statistics.
2. As a result of the size of the sample, the differences between the newspapers were not tested separately for each of the two periods examined in the study. A chi-square test conducted on the entire material did show, however, that the differences between the three political positions are significant ($p < 0.01$) for all of the variables examined except for the type of offence dealt with in the article.

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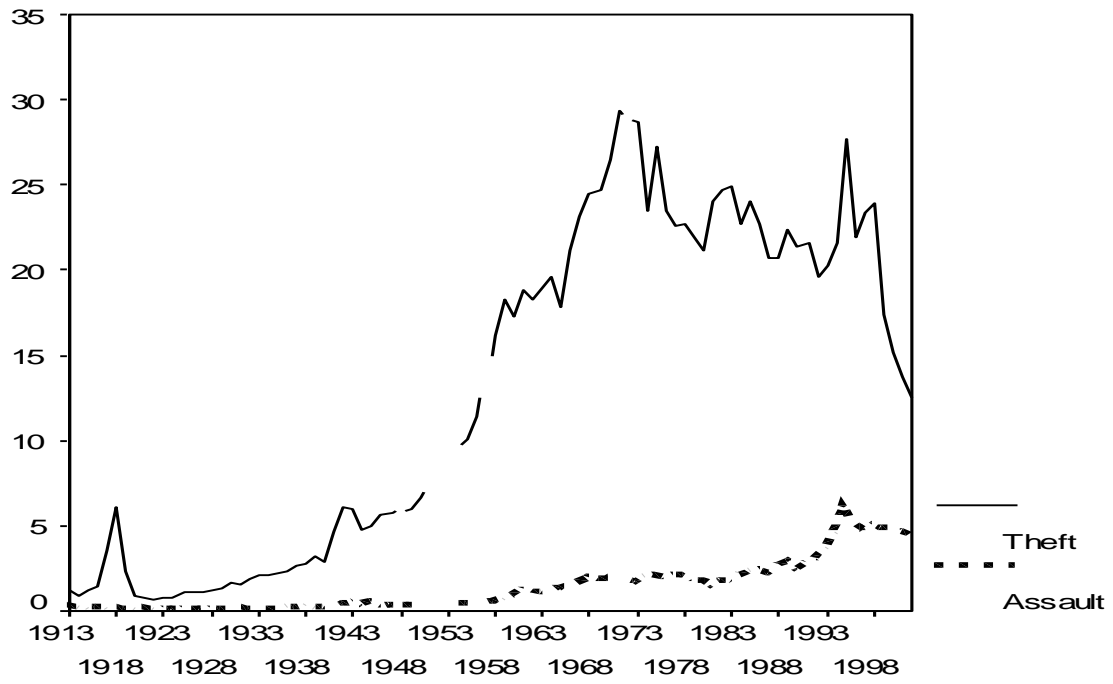


Figure 1. Youths aged 15-17 convicted of theft respectively assault 1913-2002 (per 1000). Sweden.

Table 1. Crime type, trends, causes and the character of the young offender. The view of youth crime as a social problem expressed in editorials with a conservative, liberal and social democratic viewpoint by period, 1970-1982 and 1990-1999, per cent.

	1970-1982				1990-1999			
	Tot.	Con. n=46	Lib. n=31	Soc.dem. n=21	Tot.	Con. n=32	Lib. n=55	Soc.dem. n=36
<i>Crime Type</i>								
- Violent crime	54	59	45	57	68	72	64	72
- Other	46	41	55	43	32	28	36	28
<i>Crime trends</i>								
- Alarmism	49	70	36	24	33	16	40	39
- Toned down	12	0	16	33	11	3	6	25
- Not discussed	39	30	48	43	56	81	54	36
<i>Principal causes</i>	(ns)							
- Social conditions	18	2	23	45	21	16	16	34
- Upbringing	18	17	31	5	27	6	27	47
- Focus on control, causes not problematised	64	81	46	50	52	78	57	18
<i>Character of young offender</i>	**							
- Victim of poor upbringing	16	9	19	29	17	12	16	22
- Immoral/ruthless criminal	13	24	3	5	35	59	36	11
- Normal youth, character not described	70	67	77	67	48	28	47	67

** = $p < 0.01$; * = $p < 0.05$ (chi-square test).

The test shows whether the changes in the aggregate figures are significant across the periods examined.

Table 2. Measures advocated, criticised, view of social service and police. The view of youth crime as a social problem expressed in editorials with a conservative, liberal and social democratic viewpoint by period, 1970-1982 and 1990-1999, per cent.

	1970-1982				1990-1999			
	Tot.	Con. n=46	Lib. n=31	Soc. Dem. N=21	Tot.	Con. n=32	Lib. n=55	Soc. Dem. n=36
<i>Measures advocated</i> *								
- Social measures, treatment	31	9	50	67	18	10	10	38
- Better upbringing	18	9	38	8	33	20	31	47
- Societal control	51	81	12	25	49	70	60	15
<i>Measures criticised</i> *								
- Social measures, treatment	20	36	10	0	30	53	34	3
- Societal control	33	7	53	63	17	3	14	33
- No measures criticised	47	58	37	37	53	44	51	64
<i>View of social services care</i> (*)								
- Positive	19	9	36	19	14	6	11	25
- Negative	22	35	19	0	37	59	45	6
- Not mentioned	58	56	45	81	49	34	44	69
<i>View of police/justice system</i> **								
- Positive	48	76	19	29	33	41	38	19
- Negative	17	2	26	38	9	0	9	17
- Not mentioned	35	22	55	33	58	59	53	64

** = p<0.01; * = p<0.05; (*) = p<0.10 (chi-square test).

The test shows whether the changes in the aggregate figures are significant across the periods examined.

Table 3. Number and proportion of editorials published on youth crime in newspapers with a conservative, liberal and social democratic viewpoint, by political situation, 1970-1982 and 1990-1999.

	<i>Number of editorials per year</i>	<i>Proportion of articles published given a specific political situation</i>		
		Con.	Lib.	Soc.Dem.
<i>Election year</i>	Total			
- Yes	10	38	33	40
- No	9	62	67	60
<i>Party of government</i>				
- Social Democrats	11	77	70	83
- Centre-right coalition	5	23	30	17