

The Causes of the Decline of Violent Crimes in Victorian London

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Abstract: Violent crimes have a long-term decline trend in London. In Victorian London, with the fast development of urbanization, the increasing number of rural people moved to London to pursue their fortune, it was thought that the urbanization would cause serious crimes. However, in London, the violent crimes did not increase, but on the contrary, they declined. This paper analyses the reasons that caused the decline of the violent crimes. Civilizing process, people's changing attitude toward violent crimes, the change of male honor, the establishment of modern police system and the development of printing culture. All these elements worked together to cause the decline of violent crimes in Victorian London.

1. Violent Crimes in Victorian London

Crime is like a window, and through it we can pry about the social values, modes of behaviors, interpersonal relationships, the power game between the central and local government of a society etc. The attitudes, perceptions and punishments of crime have intimate relationship with the politics, economy and culture of a society. Therefore, the comprehensive understanding of a society's crimes can help us better understand the society. Among all the crimes, violent crime, which easily extends to murder is often termed "the ultimate crime" and the most serious offence. These kinds of crimes include homicide, murder, infanticide, poisoning etc. Compared with other crimes such as property crime, theft, pickpocket, prostitution, violent crime caused great waves of panic and disgust. Because of its apparent features, violent crime has become the focus of the society and reflects the conditions of people of all ranks and classes.

The problems of crimes grew out of cities, and London, as the capital city of Britain, played an important role in politics, economy and culture. London was, of course, also Britain's artistic and literary capital. For centuries, with its publishers, newspapers, journals and weeklies, Coffee-Houses, taverns, and literary salons, the city played a frequently crucial role in the life, development, and work of virtually every English literary figure of any significance. Therefore, it has become the research center of criminologists studying the problems of crimes.

There is a long-term decline trend of violent crime in London. Scientific enticements sometimes come in bunches, and Ted Robert Gurr (1981) took the issue one step further in an article in this series entitled "Historical Trends in Violent Crime: A Critical Review of the Evidence." Besides the cluster of twenty homicide rates provided by Given (1977), he reviewed two studies that offered estimates for a few counties in Elizabethan England (Samaha 1974; Cockburn 1977) and a series of homicide indictments in Surrey for the period 1663–1802 (Beattie 1974). Gurr plotted some thirty estimates between about 1200 and 1800 on a graph, added the London homicide rates for the modern period, and fitted an elegant S-shaped trend curve to the data points (see fig. 1).^[1]

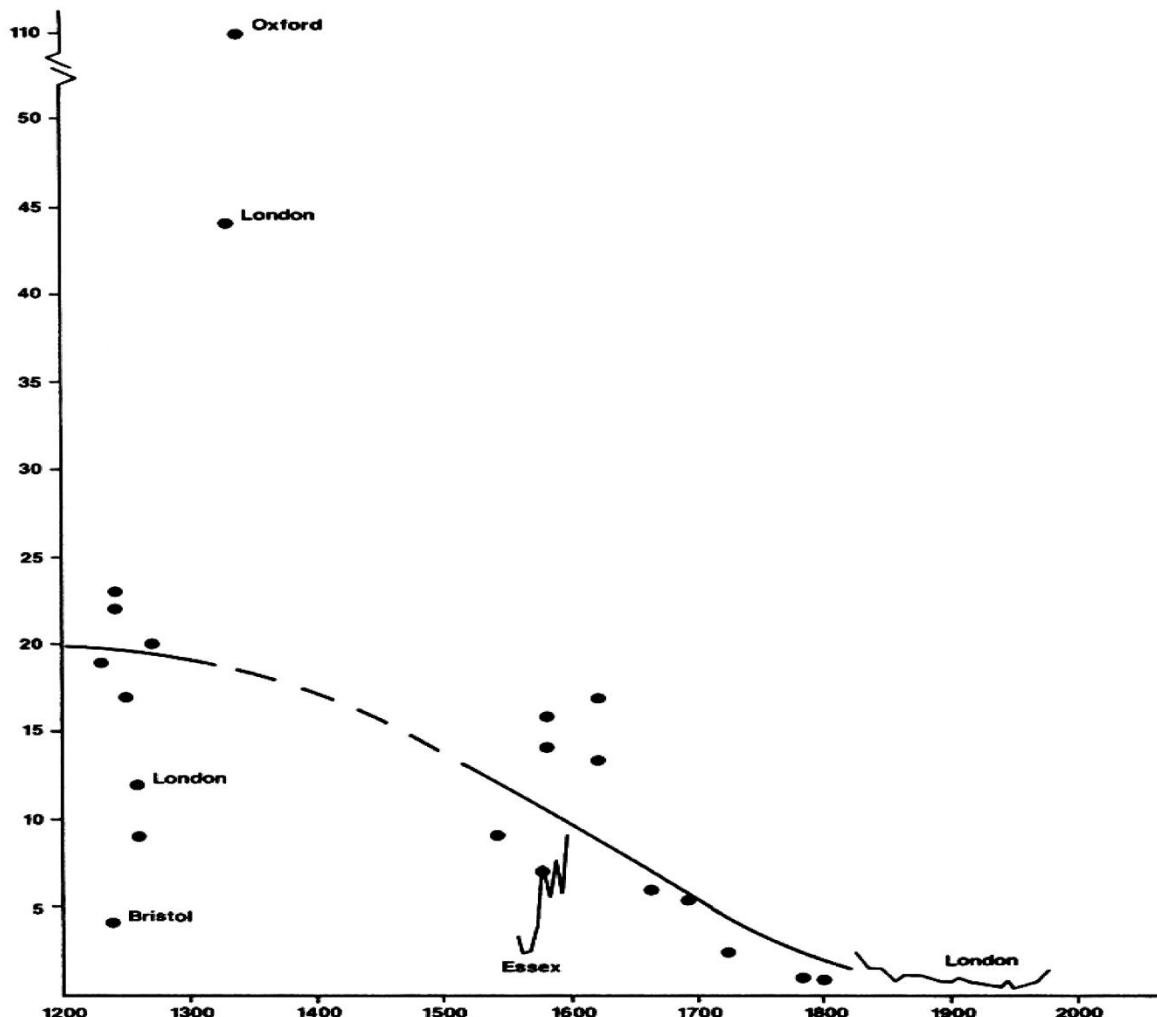


Fig. 1 Indicators of homicides per 100,000 population in England, thirteenth to twentieth centuries
 Note: Each dot represents the estimated homicide rate for a city or county for periods ranging from several years to several decades. Source: Gurr 1981, p. 313.

In the transitional periods of 18th and 19th centuries, London experienced a periodical crime waves, and many justice policies have been experimented and implemented in London. After the industrial revolution, there was an increase of crimes in England, “but in Victorian period then, and despite the stories of Jack the Ripper, murder was not common, and society was not as violent as it is often portrayed.”^[2]Take homicide for example, “in Victorian England, the homicide rate reached 2 per 100,000 of population only once, in 1865; generally it hovered around 1.5 per 100,000 falling to rarely more than 1 per 100,000 at the end of the 1880s and declining still further with the new century. In round figures this means that between 1857 and 1890 there were rarely more than 400 homicides reported to the police each year, and during the 1890s the average was below 350.”^[3]In Victorian London , despite the stories of Jack the Ripper, murder was not a common crime, and society was not as violent as it is often portrayed. According to the statistics, the decline trend reflected real changes of interpersonal violence in society.

German sociologist Norbert Elisa assumed that an interplay between the expansion of the state’s monopoly of power and increasing economic interdependence would lead to the growth of pacified social spaces and restraint from violence through foresight or reflection^[4] In Victorian period, England experience the fastest development of urbanization, civilization and England has reached its climax in economics, science and technology. Besides the historical and cultural background, there are reasons of the decline of violent crimes in that period of time.

2. Causes of the Decline of Violent Crimes in Victorian London

2.1. Civilization of Society

In an influential 1836 essay, John Stuart Mill described “Civilization” as a word with a “double meaning”: “it sometimes stands for human improvement in general, and sometimes for certain kinds of improvement in particular.”^[5] The narrow sense of civilization, in Mill’s understanding, is not that in which it is synonymous with improvement, but that in which it is the direct converse or contrary of rudeness. The main elements of civilizing process including the growing social interdependence and the expanding state power drastically changed the society and people’s attitudes to violence. Therefore, civilizing processes gradually inculcated modes of self-control, and that masculine rituals of aggression were replaced with internal control of emotions such as anger. The internal controls on an individual’s behavior eventually helped to produce the ideal of the fully rational, reflective and responsible citizen of the civilized world in the 19th and 20th centuries. With the process of civilization, individuals would be sickened by the sight of suffering and had the ability to control their emotions. They became more controlled and less likely to offend when annoyed and challenged, and less likely to settle disputes and arguments by force. People also would like to respect the authority of the state to help them to resolve their disputes. The court record suggested that other ways of resolving conflicts were increasingly favored and people would like to negotiate with other people, which expressed a highly developing civility and politeness of manner.

On the other hand, the violent crimes were closely connected with the poor classes and the lower classes were said to commit violent crimes due to their poor living conditions. While built into the civilizing process, this group of people was defined as an uncivilized threat to the social order. And at the same time, the social pressure also forced the lower classes to adopt new behavioral standards and tried to improve their public images. In order to improve their images, the lower classes learned to control their emotions and temper, and tried to behave well in the public based on the standards of the middle class and upper class, which partly led to the decline of the crimes.

2.2. The Establishment of New Police System

Before Victorian period, the police system was not built. Most places had only an unpaid parish constable to keep order. The London police force was introduced in 1829 by an Act in Parliament. Before modern police system was established, only watchmen patrolled in London. The local magistrates prosecuted the criminals. Since the birth of police system, the magistrates often requested the assistance of the policemen. Because of the development of telegraph and railway, the police force could move faster to the criminal spots especially to the countryside fast than before, therefore the efficiency of police force was better than magistrates and the public witnessed these changes and gradually trusted the police force to prevent crimes. Gradually the new police superseded the old system of these watchmen. By 1839 these uniformed policemen had replaced the watchmen Patrols, who enforced the decisions of magistrates, and the River Police, who worked to prevent crime along the Thames. The introduction of public police system maintained the public order and many violent offenders were dissuaded from committing offences. The 1856 Police Act saw the start of the Modern Police Service in England and Wales. Since police services became more efficient and the impacts of their effort became more noticeable, the violent crimes declined.

Police campaigns against male offences and masculine aggression also caused a drop in prosecution and caused a change in attitudes towards violence. Between 18th and 20th centuries the criminal justice system underwent immense changes.

2.3. The Change of Male Honor

Violent behavior has been gendered, far more characteristic of males than of females. In the 18th century and before, traditional values of aggression and competitiveness were deeply rooted in the male identity. Male honor was different from female honor, and men took pride in attacking fellow men. Many street fighting could be explained by male honor and the preservation of male status. “For one thing, in societies with pronounced notions of honor and shame, a person’s reputation often depends on physical bravery and a forceful response to insults. Second, notions of honor and shame

are characteristically gendered. In almost every society, male honor is considered to be quite different from female honor. Men may take pride in attacking fellow men, whether they use this force to protect women or for other reasons.”^[6] Dueling was a popular phenomenon before the 18th century in London, and the sharp-pointed small sword was a common weapon for the dueling. In the elite society, duel was also a common means of demonstrating male status. “According to Antony Simpson’s tally of duels fought in Britain and by Britons overseas between 1785 and 1850, the number fought peaked in the 1790s.”^[7] Consequently, there was a high rate of male violence, and more and more men were flowing into the courts.

With the development of urbanization, the standard of male behaviors changed and centered around the notion of politeness. The status of gentlemen in cities depended on the money, appearance, and conduct rather than the land and a coat of arms. Londoners of all classes became less willing to conduct their disputes in public. Male honour was never demonstrated by the physical power and strength. Instead, a higher social status of a man was represented by his politeness and gentleness to other people. Therefore, dueling declined and men tried to change their behaviors in the public. Especially those growing new middle classes who were promoted from the working classes tried to behave well in the public to build their good reputation and images.

2.4. Change of the Public Attitude to Violence

For centuries, violence has not been regarded as a troublesome problem in England, and violence was tolerated and accepted. “Hunt argues that the eighteenth century was not only ‘a society suffused with personal relationships of dominance and submission, but it was one that saw violence as a necessary, if not always optimal, way of maintaining order in any hierarchical relationship.’”^[8] Tolerance and acceptance of violence were shared among all social ranks. Violence was an acceptable social activity. People, especially men preferred to use violence to settle disputes. Until the early 19th century, violence was a remarkably acceptable social activity.

Beginning in the 19th century, attitudes towards violence were changed. There was an increasing intolerance of the public to violence in public and private spaces. People cared about not only the threat of the violent behavior to their property, but also to their safety. With the increasing intolerance to violent crimes, people adapted to impose stricter punishment of violence. In 1803, Lord Ellenborough’s Act imposed death sentences for the first time on attempted murder and certain kinds of assault.^[9] From 1820, great efforts had been spent to define and demarcate violence. Penalties for manslaughter were increased in 1822 and Offences Against the Person Act was passed in 1828.^[10] In 1853, parliament provided the first specific legislative prohibition on violence against women and children.^[11] The anxieties over the violent crimes were transformed into other polices, such as The Habitual Criminals Act of 1869, the Prevention of Crime Act of 1871. One of the consequences of the intolerance to the violent crime is the penalties of the offences. Before the Victorian period, hangings and transportation were the main punishments for all sorts of crimes. During the Victorian age, more prisons were built. And physical punishment, as whipping was still allowed in the public places. Transportation was an alternative punishment to hanging. The criminals were transported to colonies to serve the prison sentences.

2.5. The Development of Printing Culture

From the 18th century, printed crime literature developed very fast in London. The printing literature includes newspapers, magazines, pamphlets, the novels represented by Charles Dickens’ works, and the detective novels. These printed materials offered the most important sources of law and order news for the residents in London. One of the reasons for the fast development of printing was due to the technical development of printing in the 18th century and the cost of printing had been decreased. Therefore, people from all ranks of society began to purchase the large ranged reported and lower prices of the publications such as Old Bailey Sessions Papers, Select Trials and the Ordinary’s Account. Another kind of publication, the broadsheet provided some sort of access to the popular literature of crime for the lowest and poorest class of the society. The printing culture developed to its climax in Victorian Age.

On the other hand, the entertainment of Victorian Londoners also changed. As the development of civilizing and urbanization, people in London were better educated than the people of the previous ages. Most of them, especially the lower class could read. Reading newspaper became a popular entertainment in their life. "By the final quarter of the eighteenth century it was in the newspapers that the vast majority of the English population gained most of their information about the prevalence of crime and the ways the criminal justice system was dealing with it."^[12] In London, the publications of the newspaper proliferated and up to 1790, 15 daily newspapers were produced. The theme of violence became the central to these publications and the lethal violence was regarded as one of the criteria of the newsworthiness of these newspapers. The reporting on violent crimes caused a widespread panic among the Londoners. On the one hand, the public thought that they lived in an unsafe society, and they urged the government to take actions to prevent these violent crimes, and the punishment of the violent criminals had been strengthened. On the other hand, people realized the dangers of the violent crimes and they tried to hold back their tempter in the public and learned to be more patient. By reading the newspapers, the detective novels, people's thirst for violence has been satisfied.

3. Conclusion

Violent crimes have a long-term decline trend in London. In Victorian London, with the fast development of urbanization, the increasing number of rural people moved to London to pursue their fortune, it was thought that the urbanization would cause serious crimes. However, in London, the violent crimes did not increase, but on the contrary, they declined. There were many reasons that caused the decline of the violent crimes. Civilizing process made the people learn to control their emotions and to be more patient, and at the same time changed their attitude toward the violence. Male honor was no longer judged by their physical force, but by their social behavior. Men tried to solve the dispute by negotiating but not by force. People became less tolerant to violence and urged the reformation of justice system. On the other hand, the government built the new police system and put more energy and money in keeping the social security. Many Acts were issued to guarantee and maintain good social order. The development of the printing at that time offered people different ways of entertaining themselves and the increasing report and descriptions of violent crimes in the newspapers and other literatures aroused the panic among people which urged them to care more about their own security and the intolerance of the violent crimes as well. All the above elements worked together to cause the decline of violent crimes in Victorian London.

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