

The Cyclical Evolution of Homicides and Security

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In a cycle, a series of events are repeated in the same order and return to their starting point. Between 1900 and 2013, homicide rates in Canada and the United States fluctuated as follows: 1) from 1900 to 1930, homicides soared, during a period of economic growth, social euphoria, an expanding organized crime and police corruption; 2) between 1931 and 1955, homicide rates declined during a period of severe economic recession, tight social controls and improvements in private and public security; 3) between 1956 and 1989, homicides skyrocketed during the postwar boom, while social controls were eased and the police became more bureaucratic; 4) as of 1990, homicide rates have fallen in a context of an ageing population and innovations in policing. The article ends by offering a general theory of crime rate cycle. The model rests on three hypotheses: that crime adapts to security and vice versa; that security excesses in one direction lead to excesses in the opposite direction; and that one phase in the cycle of crime is the cause of the phase that follows.

Keywords: cycle, crime rates, security, homicides, organized crime, police, private security, corruption, social controls, cyclical theory.

A cycle may be defined as an ongoing sequence of changes that follow one another in the same order as in the cycle of the seasons. In economics, no one disputes the existence of recurrent business cycles: a phase of growth is followed by a phase of recession, which begins with a crisis followed by a contraction and, lastly, the recovery that marks the beginning of a new cycle. Economists seek an explanation of one phase of a cycle in the preceding. A crisis is caused by the prosperity and frenetic speculation of the preceding phase. A growth spurt causes a crisis and then a recession.

Are there cycles of crime, with repeated sequences of periods of security and insecurity, order and disorder, alternating in a regular pattern? Examples of the cyclical development of crime are rare, but a few can be identified, like the evolution of homicides in New York City during the last two centuries.

Monkkonen (2001) finds three long waves in the New York City homicide rate between 1800 and 2000. The first peaked in 1864 after a lull between 1820 and 1830. The second came to a head in 1931 after a respite between 1890 and 1900, while the third was a tidal wave that hit the city with rates that reached an unprecedented height

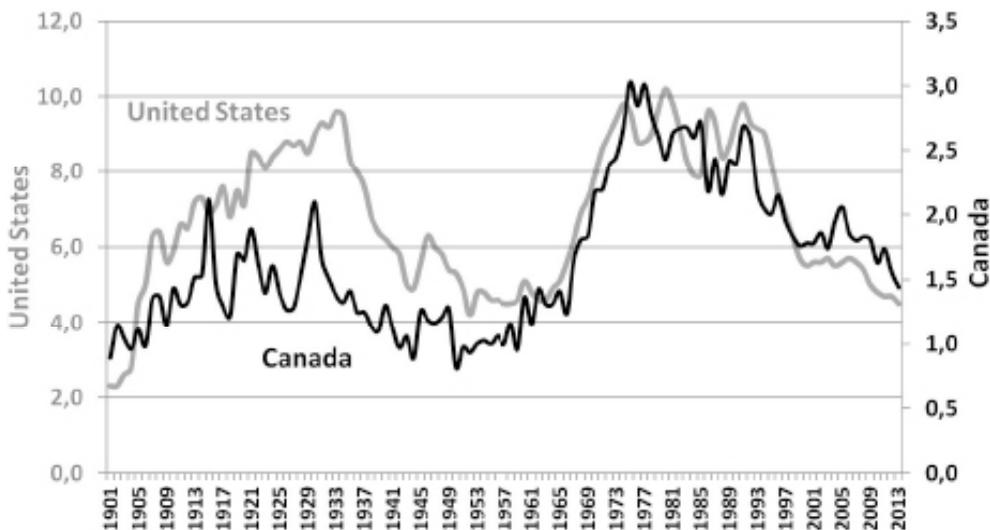
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of 28 per 100,000 inhabitants in 1991. This was preceded by a respite of 5 per 100,000 around 1950. According to Monkkonen, tolerance for violence will push homicides up. Then comes a phase in which most citizens find the violence as intolerable, which will drive it down. After some time, the buildup of actions against violent crime bears fruit and the incidence of homicide begins to fall. When peace and security last too long, however, people see no reason to continue cracking down on violence. The subsequent easing up prepares the ground for another phase that will manifest itself in a fresh upsurge in homicides.

A Century of Murders in Canada and the United States

The fluctuations in the homicide rates in Canada and the United States display two distinctive features: the curves are in parallel and appear to be cyclical. The figure 1 shows a century of changing homicide rates in the United States and Canada (Ouimet 2008). With US rates four times higher than those of Canada, the respective scales are different, as the two sides of the graph show.

Figure 1: Changing Homicide Rates per 100,000 Inhabitants of Canada and the United States, 1901–2013 (Marc Ouimet)



The homicide rates fluctuate in the same cyclical timing in both country and are remarkably in parallel, with the US scale three to four times higher than that of Canada. For each country, the figure shows an initial cycle beginning at the start of the century and ending in around 1960. This is followed by another cycle, which appears to be still ongoing at the time of writing. The figure can be divided into four phases: 1900–1930; 1931–1955; 1956–1989; and 1990–2013.

1900–1930: Homicide Growth, the Roaring Twenties, and Police Corruption

During this period, the United States recorded a homicide rate that rose from 2 per 100,000 inhabitants to 9 per 100,000. In the United States, historians use the term the “Progressive Era” for the first twenty years of the twentieth century. During that time, standards of living improved, the economy boomed, social reforms were introduced, and major technological advances were made, such as the automobile (Tindall and She 2004). Growing wealth and industrialization brought about the mass production of consumer goods, providing plenty of items for potential thieves to steal. Household incomes increased. People could afford to go out in the evening, drink alcohol, and have fun, which is known to be one of the features of a criminal lifestyle (Cusson 2005).

The next ten years, from 1920 to 1930, extended this earlier period as economic activity accelerated in an atmosphere of euphoria remembered as the “Roaring Twenties”: a booming economy, the mass production of radios and cars. Sexual taboos were overturned. Divorce became increasingly common. Economic players on the financial markets were gripped by speculative fever.

In 1919, the prohibition movement in the United States drove federal lawmakers to pass an amendment to the Constitution, the Volstead Act, banning the manufacture, sale, and transport of alcoholic beverages. However, police officers enforced the law erratically, and were inclined to look the other way when offered bribes by the owners of drinking establishments. People continued to drink alcoholic beverages that were illegally produced and distributed by criminal gangs. Prohibition made the fortunes of the criminal gangs. Already thriving from running prostitution and gaming houses, these gangs underwent substantial expansion. Gang warfare bathed in blood a few major cities. In Chicago, Al Capone took control of the city’s illegal breweries, distilleries, and drinking establishments. He also controlled prostitution, the gaming houses, and racketeering. Corrupt or intimidated, police officers and politicians left him to it (Kenney and Finckenauer 1995).

In Canada, as in the USA, the period between 1900 and 1929 was a time of economic expansion and prosperity. The country industrialized and urbanized. The rich became richer and spent lavishly.

The increase in the number of homicides at the time had nothing to do with poverty. On the contrary, this was a phase of economic expansion and social effervescence. If property crime was on the rise, it was because there were ever more consumer goods that could be stolen. People had the resources to go out and have fun in the evening. Some drank too much and became aggressive. Income from stealing enriched the underworld, which expanded.

In the US cities, police officers were hired through the influence of politicians or else bought their positions. Corruption reigned, and bribes ensured that police officers and their captains protected gaming houses, brothels, and illegal drinking establishments. When a citizen needed a police officer, there would be no one on duty. Lacking authority, the police chiefs of the day proved powerless to control their forces.

They could not recruit good candidates, rid themselves of the wildly incompetent, or crackdown on corruption (Fogelson 1977).

1931–1955: Decline in Homicide, Crash, and Recession

As of 1931 in Canada and 1933 in the United States, homicide rates declined drastically until 1942 to then remain at relatively low levels between 1943 and 1960.

The Great Depression of 1929 put a stop to the crazy years. The crash was followed by a long and harsh recession that lasted until 1942. Individuals' private incomes were in free fall, as was their purchasing power. Almost a quarter of the working-age population was unemployed. There were thirteen million unemployed in the United States in 1933 (Tindall and Shi 2004). The "New Deal" introduced a system of social protection, and the Welfare State came into being. In Canada, unemployment was rife, as it was in the United States, and salaries fell by 40 percent. Penury spread (Linteau, Durocher and Robert 1986).

As of 1939, under the pressure of the war raging in Europe, industries were mobilized to support the war effort. Full employment returned. Even so, the economic recovery did not translate into any tangible improvement of living standards, since resources were channeled into military production as a priority.

For nearly fifteen years (between 1930 and 1945), then, Canadians and Americans produced and purchased relatively few consumer goods, whether because of recession or the war economy. This meant that, during this period, would-be thieves had fairly few opportunities to make off with consumer durables. Teenagers and young adults could no longer afford to go out and have fun in the evening. Parents had no option but to stay in and look after their children.

In the United States, the criminal gangs that had called the shots in the 1920s were weakened by police operations and the end of prohibition. In Chicago, citizens, politicians, and honest police officers lost patience with Al Capone's celebrity status and his ostentatious display of power. Capone was declared "public enemy." In 1931, tax investigators managed to have Capone sentenced to eleven years in jail. In New York, one of the leading mafia bosses, "Lucky Luciano," found himself in police sights. He was arrested and sentenced to between thirty and fifty years in jail. He would be released during the war (Kenney and Finckenauer 1995). Such renewed police vigor, combined with the lifting of the prohibition laws, left US organized crime impoverished and disorganized.

On the police side, the unemployment brought about by the depression, surprisingly, helped improve recruitment of policemen. With restricted opportunities for work in trade and industry, a great many young people applied to be police officers. Candidates with little education or dubious morals were no longer hired. At the same time, police officers were better paid than before.

Between 1930 and 1955 in the United States and Canada, newspapers reported scandals in several city police forces, and journalists condemned corruption (Sherman

1978; Wadman and Allison 2004). In doing so, they echoed citizen groups that were calling for investigations. Under pressure from the resulting commissions of inquiry, the electoral system loosened its grip on police services. Corruption declined, although it still continued to exist.

It was at this time that private security became a force to be reckoned with. Americans had turned to the security market in response to the high crime rate that developed in the 1920s. In the United States, the number of private detectives is estimated to have gone from twenty thousand in 1920 to one hundred thousand in 1930. Over that same period, storekeepers and industrialists acquired better protection of their establishments and assets by resorting to watchmen, alarm systems, safes, and other security equipment (Fogelson 1977).

In short, the declining homicide rate of the 1930s and the recession of the 1940s and 1950s took place during a period of relative poverty, low consumption, tighter social controls, improved police personnel, vigorous police operations, weaker organized crime, and expanding private security.

1956–1989: The Growth of Crime in a Period of Economic Expansion

The homicide rates (but also the rates of most crimes for which there are reliable statistics) grew steadily from 1960 to 1975. They then remained high, and fluctuations were irregular. This growth in crime and its peak were seen not only in Canada and the United States but also in most Western countries. And it came about at a time of economic expansion: growing wealth and consumption, low unemployment. Purchasing power rose year after year. Mass production increased the number of targets likely to be of interest to thieves, particularly as electronic devices, were becoming lighter and easier to transport. The number of bank branches and convenience stores rose, offering targets to robbers. People increasingly traveled by car to go to work, to go out in the evening, to go away at the weekend, or on holiday. As a result, houses were left empty, a bargain for burglars. With plenty, came carelessness, and citizens protected themselves less and less well (Cohen and Felson 1979; Cusson 1990).

The population was younger, with a vast increase in the percentages aged fifteen to twenty-five, the age range known to be the most active in terms of offending. These young people became increasingly engaged in dissent and protest, particularly at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s. Young adults, of whom there were simply too many, found it hard to find a foothold in the labor market.

Nearly everywhere in North America, police forces were caught off guard by a rising tide of crime. The bureaucratization of the police had reduced its adaptability, and the policing conception that held sway in the 1960s was missing the point. Police chiefs and officers were obsessed with the means and lost sight of the ends (Goldstein 1990). They relied on ineffective vehicle patrols. In United States inner cities, a gulf appeared between police officers and young Blacks.

The resemblance between the 1920s and the 1960s is striking. Those two periods—separated by forty years—of growth in partying and homicide were both

periods of expansion: more wealth, more consumption, and, as a result, more goods vulnerable to theft and more money to spend on having a good time. Forty years apart, they were also periods of greater moral freedom, euphoria, optimism, and a weakening of informal social controls and policing.

1990–2013: Homicide Drop, Innovations in Policing and in Security Technology

In the 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century, homicides declined (at the time of writing, we do not know whether this drop will continue). During that time, Canadian homicide rates fell from 3 per 100,000 inhabitants in 1991 to 1.5 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2013. In the United States, the homicides drop from 9 per 100,000 inhabitants in 1991 to 4 in 2013.

These falls in homicides are part of the “crime drop.” For a period of more than twenty years, many types of property and violent crime declined in several Western countries. This development led to a flurry of scientific studies (Blumstein and Wallman 2000, 2006; Ouimet 2004, 2005, 2008; Zimring 2007, 2012; Van Dijk 2008; Van Dijk et al. 2012; Aebi 2004; Aebi and Linde 2014; Tonry 2014; Farrell et al. 2014; Rosenfeld et al. 2007; Messner et al. 2007; Cusson 2010, 2015).

Rational choice theorists have an explanation for this crime drop. In reaction to the precedent growth of crime, security actors invested in situational crime prevention making crime more risky for offenders, more difficult, and less profitable (Felson 2002; Clarke 1983, 1995, 1997; Clarke and Newman 2006; Cusson 2010a, 2010b, 2015; Brantingham and Brantingham 1984; Van Dijk 2008, 2012; Ekblom 1999, 2004). This approach has been used to account for the drop in crime in New York, Canada, the United States as a whole, and England and Wales.

In New York City, moves against high levels of crime were instigated by Mayor Giuliani and his police chief, William Bratton, who concurred in making the fight against crime a priority (Silverman 1999). Zimring (2007, 2012) has shown that in New York City the actions that contributed most to declining crime were aggressive and proactive policing that targeted crime hot spots localized by the Comp Stat system. This strategy succeeded in driving down crime, especially gun homicide, in the targeted sectors (Rosenfeld et al. 2007; Messner et al. 2007).

At the same time, innovations and improvements within police organizations in Canada and the United States helped to reduce the crime rate of the 1990s and 2000s. State-of-the-art intelligence systems using computerized and increasingly well-analyzed databases enabled police officers to take more targeted action. Problem-oriented policing spread across North America, enabling police organizations to find tailor-made solutions, particularly in crime hot spots (Braga and Weisburd 2010). The impact of these policing innovations was to achieve a greater deterrent effect through more certain punishment, to disorganize and disarm criminal gangs, and to settle numerous interpersonal conflicts that might have escalated without police intervention (Cusson 2010, 2015).

During the 1980s and 1990s, a sharp increase in the quality and quantity of private security staff and security technologies exerted downward pressure on property crime (Cusson 2010). In the United States, security spending tripled during this time, while staff and security guards became more professional. Alarm systems proliferated and became more and more effective. Video-surveillance systems were installed in stores, banks, shopping malls, streets, warehouses, parking lots. Access-control systems helped monitor customers as they entered or left stores, banks, libraries, office blocks.

In England, Farrell et al. (2014) attributed the decline in burglaries since 1995 to the spread of household-protection systems, including sophisticated alarm systems, double-glazed windows with better locking devices, movement detectors, and security lighting. In the case of car thefts, they stressed more effective and widespread vehicle-security technologies, since 1993: central locking, alarms, electronic immobilizers, and tracking devices for tracing stolen vehicles. The upsurge in these security systems was closely followed by a drop in thefts in and of motor vehicles.

While technology and the security forces were cutting down opportunities for theft, the lifestyle of teenagers and young adults changed, bringing about a tightening of the family controls that had been eased in the preceding period. Indeed, during the exciting years from 1960 to 1980, young people went out in the evening to drink, dance, and fight. For some, theft had funded their party lifestyle. As of the 1990s, more and more young people were spending time at their computers, tablets, and video games. They became homebodies. Since they stayed inside most of the time, they had fewer opportunities to join a gang. This reconfiguration of lifestyles and social controls drove down burglaries, car thefts, and robberies, but cybercrime came into being.

In what follows, I intend to move to a more general level and, by building on what has gone before, to put forward a general theory of the crime rates cycles.

Hypotheses for a Theory of Crime Cycle

The model assumes that the most serious and best-measured crime categories tend to fluctuate in parallel. Indeed, in most Western countries, homicide, robbery with violence, and burglaries decline in the same years. This appears to mean that there are factors at work that apply to crime in general rather than specific factors that apply solely to individual categories of infraction. Three hypotheses help us understand the pattern of cyclical developments in crime and security.

A. Mutual adaptation. Offenders adapt to security measures and security officers adapt to crime. Thieves behave in an adapted fashion when they exploit a weakness such as poor locks. The incidence of thefts will fall if a response can be found—better locks, alarm systems, and so forth—until such time as the thieves find a way around the problem. On the other hand, rising crimes challenge security professionals so they seek solutions. By the same logic, during declining crime, the security operatives relax: Why worry about a problem already solved?

B. Security excesses in one direction lead to excesses in the opposite direction, resulting in alternations of too much and too little security. Too much crime generates

excessive security responses, disregarding freedoms and human rights. By contrast, low crime rates encourage laxity, tolerance, and negligence.

C. One phase in a cycle is the cause of the next phase, so a phase may be explained by processes that began in the preceding phase. A period of rising crime is followed by a fall because, under pressure from too many crimes, security actors seek and find solutions.

The model proposed is close to the theory of responsive securitization (Van Dijk 2008, 2012). Van Dijk suggests that levels of victimization are determined by the interactions between the choices of the criminals and those of their victims. When the benefits of crime outweigh the costs, the number of offenders and offenses goes up. In response to growing costs to victims, the latter protect themselves, installing situational protection that will reduce the number of crime opportunities and, consequently, the number of crimes. Van Dijk conclusion: "Crime markets are equilibrium seeking."

The Four Phases of Crime and Security Cycle

I distinguish four successive phases in crime rates: 1) Growth; 2) Summit; 3) Decline; 4) Contraction. The phases follow on from one another, the reasons for one being found in the one before. After the fourth phase, the system goes back to the first.

I. Growth.

Crime begins to go up in times of abundance, partying, euphoria, and extravagance. Economic expansion pushes up purchasing power. With an abundance of goods and cash come opportunities for theft. People afford to have a good time and make the most of the opportunity. During a life as a party, alcohol, promiscuity, and excitements increase provocations and the risks of violent crimes (Cusson 2005). Nightlifers get into fights, indulge in excesses, and pay their debts from the fruits of stealing and trafficking. Criminal networks expand, and their members take control of drinking and other establishments. Gangs enter into competition with one another, resulting in bloody score settlements.

Growth in crime is self-sustaining. Rising profits from crime fund the party lifestyle of offenders and stimulate their criminal activity. Offenders devise new criminal tactics and find new gaps in the protection of goods and persons. Hoodlums have more and more opportunities to meet, spend time together, form networks, and organize. These more intense interactions stimulate repeat crimes: copycat crimes, differential associations, repeat victimizations, and revenge (Cusson 2008). One crime leads to another (Felson and Boba 2010).

Morals become laxer; tolerance, relativism, and insouciance are the order of the day. Goods are left unsupervised. The adults in authority are reluctant to take action. Young hoodlums have free rein and break the law with impunity. Judges and criminologists deny that there is a problem. Does crime really deserve to be punished? Is it not a social construct? Police becomes lax, legalistic, and bureaucratic. Police officers are corrupted.

Deprived of resources, the police staff is overwhelmed. This leads to a rise in the numbers of unsolved, unprosecuted, untried, and unpunished crimes.

2. *Summit.*

In phase 2, crime ceases to rise and remains high. An increase in crimes sets in motion a *critical-mass process*: activity is self-sustaining once the frequency of that activity passes a certain minimum level” (Schelling 1978). During this phase, however, there is increasing exasperation, and indignation at proliferating crime. The losses and suffering caused by so many crimes and offenses are felt more and more acutely, particularly in urban areas, where the worst crime is concentrated. Some clamor for harsher penalties. Nevertheless, responses are gradually discovered. Too much crime heightens the vigilance of security professionals. This paves the way to the next phase of the cycle.

3. *Decline.*

Crime declines with progress in security. In the Seventeenth and Eighteenth centuries France, the establishment of a powerful police organization was followed by a decline in homicides. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the creation of London’s Metropolitan Police drove down crime. In Canada and the United States, the expansion of private security, with technological progress and the increased problem-solving ability of the police, cut crime in the last decade of the twentieth century (Cusson 2010).

Crime that is deemed excessive mobilizes citizens, police officers, and judges to make joint efforts to restore peace and tranquility. Victimization and fear drive victims to protect themselves and take precautions. Ultimately, crime produces its own antibodies.

Once a decline is under way, it drives down repeat crimes and makes punishment more certain, because the law-enforcement agencies are no longer swamped. When a decline in crime begins, it is self-sustaining. Because there are fewer infractions, the process of repeat crimes slows down: fewer copycat crimes, fewer differential associations, and less repeat victimization. Less overwhelmed than before, police officers and judges find the time needed to solve problems.

Too much crime kills crime. Crime tends to concentrate in hot spots where it becomes so rife that, at the end, there is no victim or target to be found. Just as too many foxes eat so many hares that they cut off their own supply, too many very active criminals in a given area drive out storekeepers and asset owners. Those that do stay build their defenses and take extra precautions: before long, there will be little left to steal and few people to attack.

Crime devours its own children: in areas frequented by criminals, the examples of friends who are in jail, injured, destroyed by drugs, or murdered will act as a powerful deterrent to their younger peers and make parents more vigilant.

4. Contraction.

In phase 4, crime stabilizes at a relatively low floor. *Crime remains stable during a contraction because the security measures devised and implemented in preceding phases are still in place.* Prevention systems continue to provide protection and to deter potential offenders. Moreover, security professionals retain the expertise they have already gained.

However, all good things come to an end, and laxity sets in insidiously. There are insufficient incidents, offenses, and crimes to warrant vigilance. A good security system requires its professionals to be on the alert, but it becomes difficult to remain vigilant when nothing is happening: it's deadly dull. Private and public security experts face no challenges, their skills are lost, some shut themselves away in the legalism of bureaucracy, and others succumb to the temptations of corruption.

Security entails costs that seem increasingly prohibitive when crime is rare. Security does not come free of charge. There are the costs of a competent workforce and those of buying, installing, and maintaining security systems. Nonmonetary costs must be factored in as well: endless surveillance, stringent checks, locked doors, false alarms. All these waste time and are bothersome, irritating, and annoying. They earn scrupulous security officers a reputation as pernickety and intolerant.

With tolerance, people become more aware of the drawbacks, inconveniences, and dangers of "total security." When there are fewer victims of crime, intolerant and repressive attitudes cease to be appropriate. The call for security declines and is replaced by calls for compassion, people are more easily moved by the sufferings of prisoners than by those of their victims.

With fewer crimes, the cost-benefit ratio of security drops. There is a reluctance to pay for personnel to twiddle their thumbs or for equipment that seems no longer needed. Security seems detrimental to liberty. Encroachments into private life are criticized. Checks and searches at airports and elsewhere become exasperating. The specter of the "police state" is raised. Security loses its edge precisely because security has prevailed. So the conditions for a new growth in crime are reestablished and we return to the first phase or the cycle.

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