

Commentary

A place where everyone matters: crime and poverty[†]

Drive over the backbone of Britain, across the middle of the Pennines from Leeds to Lancaster and, just over 'top, outside the hamlet of Cantsfield, on the A687, you come to a sign: "welcome to Lancashire: a place where everyone matters". Turn round, and under the royal crest you read that you are leaving the county of North Yorkshire, implicitly a place where not everyone matters so much.

Signs over the top can be confusing and need to be read with care (Armitage, 1998). There is a little northern rivalry going on, but there is more to these signs than just the sloganeering of the red rose and snobbery of the white. After you have learned that everyone matters the next two road signs you come to inform you that Cantsfield is both "a neighbourhood watch area" and "a police speed check area". Clearly crime as well as inclusivity is on the minds of many living on top, and not just in this remote place.

Crime, what is legal, what matters, who matters and who does not, are at the heart of how we view and share our environment. The signs are all around you: from immigration protestors upstaging the annual conference of American geographers (Bauder, 2006), to concern over affect/emotion and "individuals' myriad abilities to move, be feared, loved and hated..." (Tolia-Kelly, 2006, page 214). Researchers are looking more closely at just who is seen as most human and how. Human geographers have, however, been slow to look at the geography of harm more widely. If they did, this is what I think they would find.

The poorer the place you live in the more likely you are to be a victim of crime. You are also generally more likely to be a victim of acts of harm that are not usually considered as crimes. Our debate on crime needs to widen to remember all victims who are unjustly robbed of their possessions, and even of their lives, both here and abroad through the violation of political or moral law. And we need to look towards the future to see how much of what we currently tolerate, we may soon begin to recognise as criminal.

The good folk of Cantsfield should, perhaps, not worry as much about their neighbourhood watch area as those who put up the sign did, but (as I elaborate below) should be concerned with geographers and others driving through their hamlet on the A687, particularly those turning their necks to read the signs behind them. With crime, and often more generally in life, we tend to fear most what is least likely to occur and to be shocked by what more mundane harm does befall us. For a case in point look at a widespread fear, especially of parents fearful for their children: murder; and then at who is most likely to be murdered in Britain (Hillyard et al, 2005). Do that and you find: that the modal victim is a young adult man aged 21; that the overall murder rate has doubled over the last three decades; but that fewer women and children are now murdered (in absolute let alone relative terms); that you are now six times more likely to be murdered if you live in the poorest areas rather than the

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richest (where rates have dropped); and that if murdered you are most likely to be killed by cutting; but that more firearms (and poison) are used in affluent areas. Collectively the majority of murder victims were simply in the wrong place, born at the wrong time, and were of the same social group as those that killed them. And even for the worse-off, their chances of being a victim by area are (at worst) only one in ten thousand a year. There is a geography to this most sensational of crimes, as with all others. Perhaps we should begin to let people in Cantsfield and elsewhere know what not to fear and when to be afraid? The second sign they put up, on speeding, suggests that some know already.

Many social researchers interested in society and life chances appear to be put off from studying crime. For a quantitative geographer there are practical reasons to avoid mapping crime. These include the complexity of county court areas, police beat boundaries, police force areas, and all the changes to those boundaries over time. But these are not the underlying reason, I think, for the general ambivalence which comes from a wish not to stigmatise, not to preach on delinquency, not to 'blame the victims': the perpetrators are often of the same social group, if not age and sex, as the victims. There is also, I think, a desire amongst many researchers not to simply state the obvious. The majority of variation in your risk of being a victim/perpetrator of a conventional crime can be accounted for geographically by poverty. Those living in poorer areas make up the bulk of the victims of robbery and burglary as well as murder; but conventional crime accounts only for a minority of all those robbed and killed in Britain, as in all other countries.

The large majority of people who are directly and often criminally killed by others in Britain do not have their deaths recorded as murder. Their deaths are part of the large bulk of conventional crime and wider harm that does not make the headlines. This is especially true of that proportion of violent harm and potential 'robbery' which is currently inflicted legally. For every person whose death is recorded as a homicide in Britain some four or five more are killed on the roads—something that should cross our minds far more often even, perhaps especially, when driving over the most scenic routes. The current road death rate is the lowest rate for at least four decades and one of the lowest rates of such deaths in the rich world. However, whilst our reaction to that is to celebrate such a low risk, should we not be appalled that we take for granted this degree of risk, and that it appears to be about as low as it can get (almost anywhere!)? Road deaths are not an 'act of god'. Many result in criminal proceedings, and drink and drugs often play a part. Yet we make a huge distinction as to whether a young man is killed by another young man stabbing him during a fight after a night's drinking, or by a stranger ploughing a tonne of metal into him 'by accident'. To the young man, he is dead regardless. To those who knew him and loved him, he is gone regardless. The distinction would not be made so strongly if driving a car was not seen as respectable, in a way that carrying a knife is not.

Incidentally, if you have children and live in Britain, it is those of you who live in the leafier suburbs, or in the more affluent countryside, who should be most fearful. Where the pavements are missing, the lighting is poor, the roads are fast, and the congestion low. If your child is killed by a stranger, that stranger will almost certainly be behind the wheel of a car and will have had no thought of becoming a killer that day. Internationally a million people are killed on the roads worldwide every year. A number set to grow exponentially in the near future. Most of those killings are not deemed illegal.



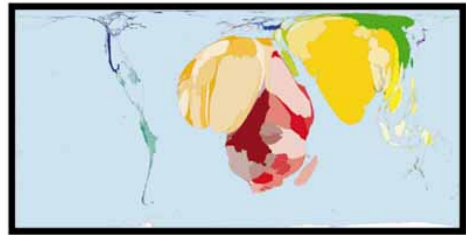
Stillbirths (3.3 million per year)



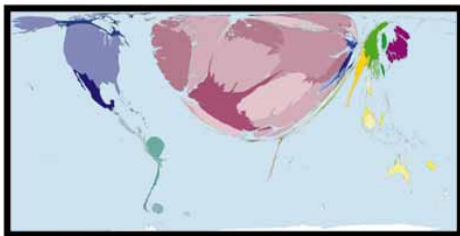
Mortality within seven days
(3 million per year)



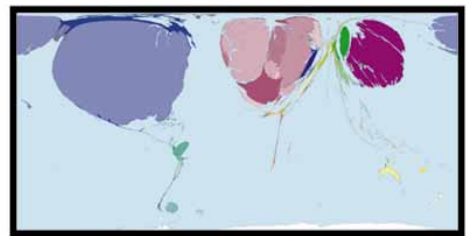
Infant mortality (7.2 million per year)



Mortality at ages 1 to 4
(3.2 million per year)



Medicines exports (gross shown, net profit
per year: \$46 billion)



Royalties and licence fees—gross exports
(2002, \$84 billion per year)

Source: <http://www.worldmapper.org>. The maps here come from the worldmapper website produced by the SASI Group (University of Sheffield) and Mark Newman (University of Michigan). Permission has been granted to reproduce these images. Note: the colours shown allow easier identification of territories and the regions they are in and are identical on all maps shown here to aid comparisons.

What about those acts of robbery that are legal? In the conclusion to the booklet *Criminal Obsessions: Why Harm Matters More Than Crime* the authors argued that:

“given that one of the most prevalent ‘crimes’ in the UK is ‘failure to pay the TV licence’ while the most common crime in Turkey is ‘being rude to a public official’, there is not even a theoretical prospect of being able to make meaningful international comparisons of the extent of crime, except in relation to a relatively small sub-set of ‘crimes’” (Hillyard et al, 2005, page 64).

Crimes are place specific. What is a crime in one location may not be a crime somewhere else—for instance, parking on the verge outside some houses in Cantsfield may be a crime punishable by fine, but not a crime outside other homes. They are also time specific. Last year you could legally park on the verge outside some homes, this year the local bylaw may have been amended. A more universal example of an activity that

was legal and may be becoming illegal relates to corporate crime and specifically 'bank robbery' through bank charges. If you are wondering how this is related to poverty and place, then think for a minute about who currently pays the bulk of bank and overdraft charges, where they live, and, in contrast, where and in what style the beneficiaries, the shareholders (often via pension funds) and managers of our most profitable financial institutions, tend to live. The poor in rich countries are now encouraged to hold bank accounts.

Over the spring and summer of 2006 various stories circulated in the British press suggesting that one interpretation of an Office of Fair Trade ruling is that bank charges and possibly also overdraft interest charges are an illegal penalty because they do not reflect the actual costs to the banks of dealing with customers becoming overdrawn. Sadly I suspect that profiteering will not be made illegal in the near future. However, it is worth considering the extent to which we should expect the world, and our collective opinions of crime, to be very different in the not so distant future. The stories of crime and harm I have touched on so far are very specific to Britain now and necessarily so because there is no universally consistent temporal or spatial concept of what is right or wrong—what is criminal. It can be difficult to appreciate just how locally contingent definitions of crime and the moral and political underpinning of defining crime are.

To illustrate this, think back a lifetime to the 1930s and how we in Britain then thought of crime, criminals, and human rights. Then we had, and used, a death penalty, a form of 'justice' now outlawed across all of the European Union (a Union we could not have imagined then, just as it is difficult for a European today to imagine being subject to American risks, laws, and 'justice'). Trying to think forward a lifetime, to say 2081, is very difficult. One way to attempt to illustrate how very differently we may think then, as compared to now, is to use the example of who we see as human over time:

Seventy-five years ago eugenics was still popular. It was known that the vast bulk of the world's population lived in poverty and it was commonly (if not universally) assumed that such was the natural condition of 'man'. Now we have a United Nations—the main preoccupation of which is alleviating world poverty, a preoccupation that would have been almost impossible to imagine seventy-five years ago (or even when the UN was formed). In trying to look forward to 2081 and by just how much views may change, think back to the issue of corporate profitability illustrated by bank charges, and making a profit for doing almost nothing. Think back also to the images of a few celebrities clicking their fingers every three seconds on national television and in cinema adverts a year or so ago. And then consider a few images...

Images, even as impersonal as statistics on the distribution of millions of deaths—can shock. Shown here are maps of inhumanity: of young deaths that are almost all avoidable: where 3.3 million babies are stillborn every year; where a further 3 million babies die within their first seven days of life; where 4.2 million survive that far only to then die within the next 51 weeks; and finally where a further 3.2 million who made it to their first birthday do not live to reach their fifth. These are some of the maps of 'man's patent inhumanity to man' that almost all geographers failed to draw in the 1970s, but still decided they had drawn too many of (Harvey, 1973, page 144). Look then at who makes a net profit of over \$46 billion a year selling medicines, most of which are unaffordable to those who most need them. And finally look to whom almost all the royalties and licence fees in the future will flow. \$84 billion of annual profit that now requires the recipients to do almost nothing to collect. I could well be wrong, but I find it hard to imagine that any of this will be legal in another seventy-five

years time. Seventy-five years ago the Institute for the Scientific Study on Treatment of Delinquency was founded. This is the text of a talk given to its successor, the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies. In seventy-five years the understanding and knowledge we take for granted today will appear just as antiquated—if not more.

Finally I want to take you back to what we find acceptable, unacceptable, and what causes most harm, and the story of murder and fear that I began with. I also want to ask you to try to imagine what will be seen in seventy-five years time as harm when people look back on 2006. Recently British law was changed to make it possible to convict people for certain offences committed overseas. Again, we can change what is seen as criminal. In that context I would like to know the following, and I do not see why these figures should not be available and be compared:

1. How many people are killed overseas by British citizens?
2. What proportion of those citizens were in uniform?
3. How many of their victims were children?

Whether the steel that kills is the blade of a knife in a pub, the bonnet of a car, or the shrapnel from a round of bullets that go ‘astray’, the harm is done and the loss is there. However, only a small minority of the lethal harm that we collectively cause, mostly abroad, is so obviously and clearly brutal. The bulk of the harm we may indirectly be culpable of is a little more subtly delivered.

In future I do not find it impossible to imagine that reparations will be demanded for the lives lost when a drug was priced high enough to secure the managing directors of a pharmaceutical company enough profit to buy their yachts, or enough so that our pension schemes remain in balance. Imagine telling someone in 1931 that one day there would be law suits over the harm done through profiting from selling tobacco? Or that the day would come when the legality of bank charges would be questioned? Or that we would no longer believe that there was a class of people who were naturally delinquent? Or that we would not see the harm that is increasingly concentrated amongst particularly poor groups in particular places as inevitable?

The vast majority of people suffering because they were born in the wrong place at the wrong time were not born in Britain and are not suffering in Britain—but we in Britain are far from being innocent bystanders to that harm. Often we profit from its existence, and we offer very little to aid its alleviation. You can paint a very pessimistic image of the future simply by extrapolating our current injustices forward: a kind of 2084 that makes Orwell’s 1984 appear benign—but there is a more optimistic future that assumes people are not simply impassive recipients of their inevitable fate. One version of that future sees us changing what we view as right and wrong, and relying less on the philanthropy of American billionaires and their charitable foundations in our hope for a global future. In that context I will end with one image of what may, by 2081, come to be seen as an international crime when the full impact of the failure to provide 3 million people with antiretroviral treatment by the end of 2005 is fully realised. This was the “3 by 5” promise you may or may not have heard of, a precursor perhaps for what we should expect of the millennium development goals.

If selling cigarettes without warning is now seen as illegal, nationally, how will *not* supplying drugs that could have preserved life be viewed in seventy-five years time?

While you are considering who benefits from and who is harmed by the international trade in medicines. Who is most robbed, how, and from where? How most lives that are ended violently do end in Britain—and how that epidemic is spreading with the motor car worldwide—albeit at currently ‘only’ a million a year rather than three? I’ll leave with you with proposition I made at the beginning and ask again just how fanciful it is to argue that:



More than 25 million people have died of AIDS since it was first diagnosed in the early 1980s; almost 3 million of these deaths occurred in 2005 (source: <http://www.worldmapper.org>).

- (1) The poorer the place you live in, the more likely you are to be a victim of crime.
- (2) Often you are also more likely to suffer from those acts of harm that are not seen as crimes.
- (3) Our debate on crime needs to widen to remember all victims who are unjustly robbed of their possessions, and even of their lives; both here and abroad through the violation of political or moral law.
- (4) We need to look towards the future to see how much of what we currently tolerate, we may soon begin to recognise as criminal.

Danny Dorling
University of Sheffield

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