Can Scotland shake off its violent reputation?
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Homicide in Scotland remains at an historic low, according to the most recent homicide statistics published by the Scottish Government. The Homicide in Scotland 2014-15 statistical bulletin, published on 29th September, revealed that there were 59 victims of homicide in that 12 month period - one less than the previous year. This reflects the lowest number of recorded homicides since 1976, the earliest year for which comparable data are available.

This downward trend in homicide appears to be part of a wider phenomenon of declining violence in Scotland. If we compare current figures with those in 2002-3, the homicide rate has declined by 38% and non-sexual crimes of violence (which includes homicide) have dropped by a staggering 60%. Furthermore, this declining trend is apparent across most categories of violence and within most parts of Scotland according to the Recorded Crime in Scotland 2013-14 statistical bulletin published by Scottish Government. Attempted murder and serious assault, which is the largest category of violent crime in the police statistics, has fallen by 55% over the last decade. And this decline has been witnessed, to greater or lesser extents, by all but one of our 32 Local Authorities. Robbery, which accounts for approximately a quarter of violent crimes, has fallen by 58% in the last decade, with recorded falls in three quarters of all local authorities. And other forms of violence, which include threats, extortion and certain crimes against children, has fallen by 47% over the same period, with declines in 26 out of the 32 local authorities.

This downturn in violence contrasts sharply with the historical picture of violence in Scotland. The violent gangs that blighted Scotland's past have been well documented and have continued to cast a dark shadow over the country's reputation. Following the publication of a UN report in 2005, Scotland was dubbed the "most violent country in the developed world" and Glasgow was given the unflattering title of "homicide capital of Europe" by the UK media. The same year, a report based on findings from the International Crime and Victimisation Survey, based in 21 countries, noted that the assault rate was higher in Scotland than every other nation – including the United States – which is surprising given that the US homicide rate that year was 5.6 for every 100,000 members of the population, which compared with only 1.8 per 100,000 people in Scotland during the same year.

A decade on and Scotland's reputation continues to be tarnished, especially by studies that compare us to the wider world. For example, the UK Peace Index published by the Institute for Economics and Peace in 2013 ranked Glasgow as the "the least peaceful major urban centre" after comparing its rates of homicide and violent crime with 10 other areas, including London and Belfast (which were ranked second and third, respectively). The 2012/13 Scottish Crime and Justice Survey reported that the rate of violence (including assault and robbery) was 543 per 10,000 adults in Scotland compared to 420 per 10,000 adults in England and Wales. This indicates that the violence rate was 29% greater in Scotland than England and Wales during that 12 month period. While the 2013 UN Global Study on Homicide, revealed that Scotland's use of knives and other sharp objects in homicide cases were consistently higher since 2005 than every other country in Europe for which data were available.

So what source of evidence should we believe about trends in violence in Scotland? Police recorded crime statistics have long been criticized as a 'true' measure of crime, not least because all crimes are not reported to or recorded by the police. Therefore we must be cautious about drawing on only one source of data. The Scottish Crime and Justice Survey (SCJS), a large population survey which provides an alternative picture of crime based on the experiences of victims, suggests that the number of assaults in Scotland did decline sharply between 2008/09 and 2010/11, but only after a long period of increasing violence starting in the mid-1990s (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Estimated number of crimes in Scotland from 1992 to 2012/13
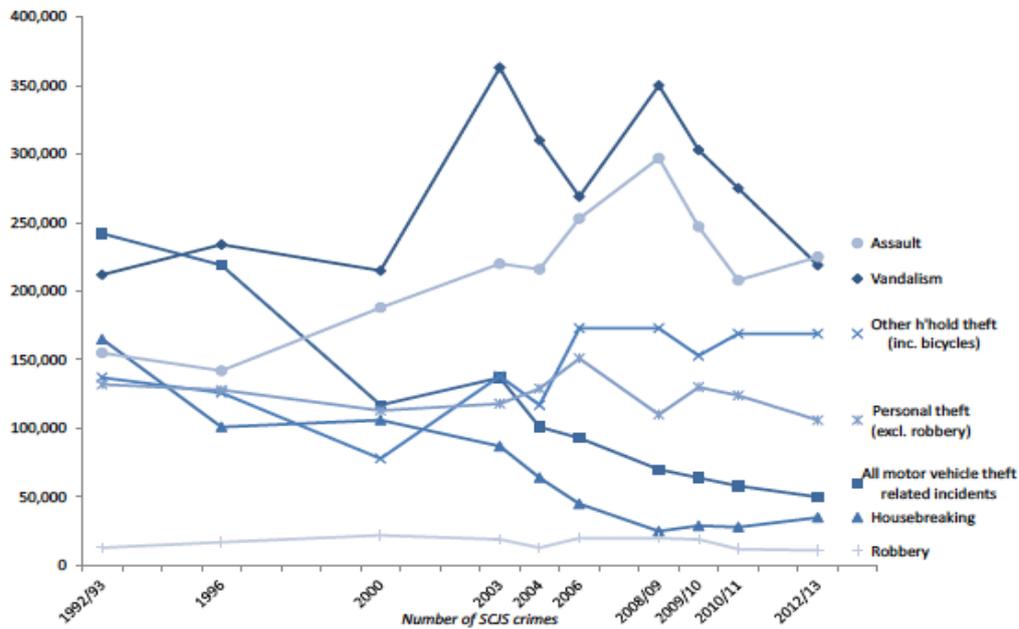
Source: Scottish Crime and Justice Survey 2012/13: Main Findings (Page 17).

A closer look at the SCJS data, however, suggests that Figure 1 does not reveal the whole story. Figure 2, which is based on data taken from the published SCJS report, shows that the overall trend in violence is largely accounted for by a large and sustained rise in minor assaults (defined as assaults with little or no injury) followed by a drop since 2008/09. However, Figure 1 conceals a significant and consistent fall in serious assaults, which is more in line with the trends shown in the police recorded crime data. In other words, our risk of serious violence in Scotland appears to have genuinely diminished; but it is concerning that this has been replaced by a large increase in low level violence.

Figure 2: Estimated number of serious and petty assaults in Scotland from 1992 to 2012/13
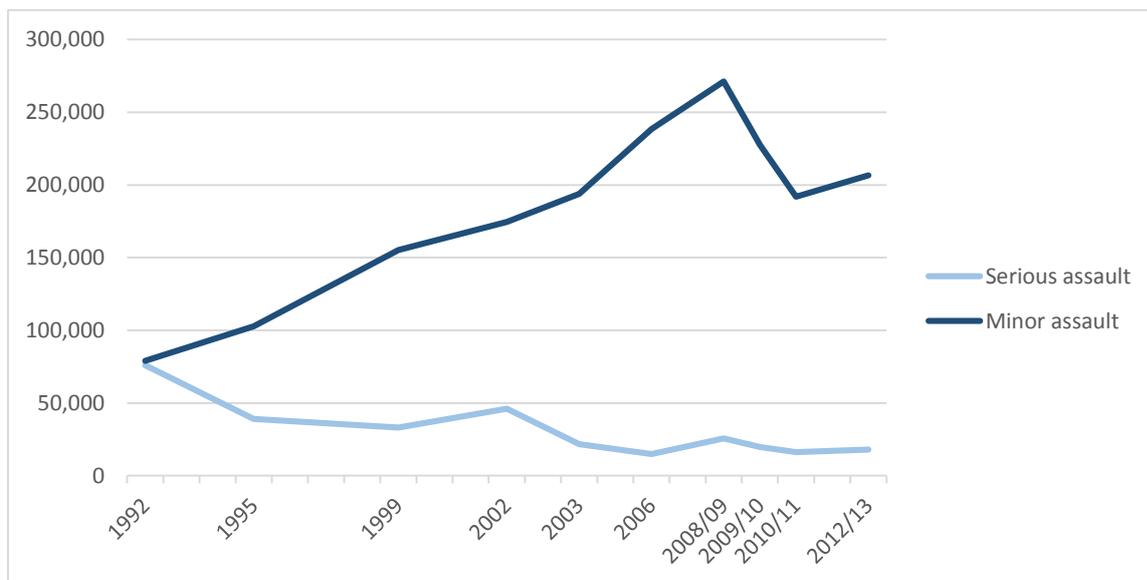
The fact that both police statistics and victim surveys tell us violent crime in Scotland has reduced suggests that we should all be at less risk of becoming a victim. But is this really the case? Research by the Applied Quantitative Methods Network has explored the change in relative risk of being a victim of crime in the context of the recent crime drop in Scotland from 1993 to 2010/11. This study found that most of the population had a very low risk of experiencing any kind of crime and this increased over time. Of the rest, the bulk were either 'one-off victims' of property crimes, mostly motor vehicle or household crime; or 'general victims' who experienced around two incidents per year of motor vehicle crime, household crime, assaults or threats. The risk of being in either of these groups diminished over time. However, 0.5% of the population (an estimated 22,000 people) were frequent victims of violent crime, mostly assaults and threats. The size of this small group remained stable over time and their share of all crime doubled from 5% in 1993 to around 10% from 2006 onwards. Importantly, this group saw no reduction in their risk of violence, while all other groups did. In other words, while most of us benefited from the dividend of the crime drop, a small group of chronically affected victims did not.

Regardless of how safe from crime the statistics tell us we are, does the general population of Scotland feel safer? To answer this question, we turn again to the Scottish Crime and Justice Survey carried out in 2012/13. Members of the public were asked whether they thought that crime had gone up, down or stayed the same in Scotland during the previous two years. In actuality, the total number of crimes recorded by the police (including violence) fell by 16% and the SCJS estimated a drop of 7% in all survey crimes over that two year period.[1] However, only 10% of adults thought that crime had fallen in Scotland during that time, and most of these people (9% in total) believed it had only declined by a little. In fact, the vast majority of people thought crime had either stayed the same (36%) or increased (44%) over that period.

When people were asked whether crime had gone up, down or stayed the same within their own local area during the previous two years, the picture was somewhat different. Most adults (65%) thought that crime had stayed the same in their local area, while 20% thought it had gone up and only 11% thought that crime in their area had gone down. Of course, without detailed information about exactly what happened to crime rates in their local areas, it is impossible to say with any certainty whether their perceptions were incorrect. However, given the very large and widespread fall in crime that Scotland has seen in recent years, it is perplexing that public perception and reality are so far apart.

The Scots are not alone in this apparent reality gap. A study conducted in England and Wales by Ipsos Mori, and published in 2008, found that only 1 in 5 people were willing to accept that crime was falling, despite evidence to the contrary. They linked this to the fact that the UK public was far less likely than those in other EU countries to have confidence that the government was 'cracking down on crime and violence'.

So why might it be the case that crime, especially violent crime, is falling and yet the Scottish public appear reluctant to believe it? The Ipsos Mori report gives three possible explanations. Firstly, media coverage of crime is biased towards the negative and it is the way in which TV, radio and newspapers report on crime that overwhelmingly makes people believe that crime is going up. Secondly, changes in high profile or 'signal' crimes have a greater impact on our perceptions than other crimes, and even a small increase in serious crime leads us to believe that crime is increasing generally. And, thirdly, people's perceptions of a change in 'crime' brings to mind a far wider range

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[1] It is important to note that these two figures are not directly comparable as the police recorded crimes cover a far wider range of crime categories than the SCJS. However, both sources indicate a significant fall in crime over the two year period in question.

of social problems, such as low level anti-social behaviour and terrorism, which influences our thinking.

Of course, this begs the question: is it such a bad thing that people think they might be the victim of crime, even when the risk is small in reality? For example, it may lead people to take greater precautions to prevent crime than they might otherwise have taken and monitor their safety and that of the people around them.   Unfortunately, those who are most at risk of violent victimisation (especially young men) express the least concern about crime and take the fewest precautions to prevent it. Whereas those who are least likely to be victimised (especially older women) experience disproportionate levels of fear which can seriously affect their quality of life. In the face of such contradictory responses to the risk of crime, one has to question the extent to which annually published crime statistics could be expected, on their own, to impact on such day to day decision making.

So, should our politicians be doing more to reassure the public in the light of the fact that violence has gone down in Scotland? Well, the Ipsos Mori report concluded that "gaps in perception and reality are likely to be driven by a general lack of trust in government and the statistics they produce". If the public believes that governments pick and choose statistics simply to spin their own political messages, it is hardly surprising that the police recorded crime or SCJS statistics – both published by Scottish Government - do little to reassure people. In fact, the 2013 Scottish Social Attitude Survey found that only 30% of people said they were 'very confident' about the accuracy of Scottish Government official statistics. It seems therefore that, even in the face of positive news stories about crime trends, the government has a long way to go in terms of getting the key messages across.

And so we return to the original question: can Scotland shake off its violent reputation? There is strong and compelling evidence that violent crime in Scotland has fallen, and yet it seems that it will take more than this to convince the public of this fact. The picture of crime at the national level is often skewed and distorted by media reporting, especially when journalists strive to seek out a bad news story from the good. National comparative studies have not been favourable to Scotland and distrust of government statistics may do little to reassure the public that violence is going down. This makes it vital that those of us working in the field of crime and justice ensure we provide informed and balanced commentary on our crime statistics – from whatever sources they emerge – and try to provide a nuanced and credible narrative about what they mean. It is also essential that we look beyond the national picture, and understand far more about the local day to day experiences of people and whether changing patterns of crime at the community level could be better studied and used to influence perceptions. All data are flawed to some extent, and it is imperative that we acknowledge the idiosyncrasies of individual datasets; however, there is much more that could be done to explore the changing nature of violence within Scottish society. It is to this that we must address ourselves if we are to shake off Scotland's violent reputation.

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To find out more about this work, visit http://aqmen.ac.uk/research/crime