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Albert C. Wagner

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CRIME AND ECONOMIC CHANGE IN PHILADELPHIA, 1925-1934

ALBERT C. WAGNER²

The relationship between economic conditions and criminality has long been a subject of interest to criminologists. The literature is voluminous, though often colored by the particular "mind set" or economic prejudice peculiar to the individual writer. In some instances, the same set of statistics has been made to yield conclusions diametrically opposed.

The present study makes no attempt to draw broad generalizations regarding the relationship between these two sets of phenomena, crime and economic change, but is rather an effort to delineate the effect of a long-continued business depression on the rates of crime in a restricted locality, namely the city of Philadelphia.

For this purpose, the ten-year period, 1925-1934, was selected for study. This period possesses the advantage of giving a balance of a five-year span on either side of the business crisis of November, 1929. In initiating the study, it was intended that the crime indexes be based on offenses known to the police, but, despite the fact that the Philadelphia police have been reporting offenses to the Bureau of Investigation in the Department of Justice, Washington, since 1930, these figures, as well as those for prior periods, were found to be virtually useless.³

The index of crime was founded, then, on arrests. Compared with a rate based on "offenses known," the most serious objection to be advanced against such an index is that the number of arrests in a community does not maintain a constant relationship to actual crime conditions in that community because of the varied influences to which it is subjected. To obviate this difficulty, at least in part, only serious crimes were taken into account, since it is likely that arrests for such offenses would be relatively more stable than for

² New Jersey Department of Institutions and Agencies, Trenton.

³ The method employed in the computation of these figures varied so radically during the period as to present a grossly inaccurate and inadequate description of the true crime situation. It is only for the last eight months of 1933 and for 1934 that the data have approached a complete enumeration, and then only for larceny over \$50 and crimes more serious. The figures for larceny under \$50 and for lesser offenses are still unreliable.

lesser offenses, simple assaults and disorderly conduct for example.

An attempt was also made to evaluate certain other factors that tend to vitiate a constant relationship. These influences might be summarized as follows: (1) changes in arrest policy, (2) changes in number, selection, and training of police officers, and (3) changes in police equipment. The third is the most important and three significant changes must be noted. The Motor Bandit Division was organized in 1929 "to prevent banditry on the highways." From a corps of 176 patrolmen mounted on motorcycles the service grew to a force of 353 during 1934. Police officials are unanimous in the belief that this patrol has enabled them to make a larger number of arrests than was previously possible, also, that it has had a decidedly noticeable deterrent effect. The "Red Car" system, an automobile patrol, was likewise inaugurated in 1929. The cars were equipped with radio in May, 1931. A larger proportion of arrests to offenses committed was thus made possible, especially in the instance of breaking and entering. The teletype system among district stations was introduced in March, 1930, but with little effect on arrests, since the same service was previously carried on by phone communication. A redistricting of the city in 1928 changed the number of station houses from twenty-eight to forty-three. Whether or not this change resulted in increased efficiency reflected in the arrest rate it is, however, impossible to say.

Changes in arrest policy come usually as the result of changes in administrative personnel. There were several such in Philadelphia during the period, but no effect on the rate of arrests for serious crime could be noted in the monthly figures (not here presented). For the most part, the changes in policy were confined to commercialized vice. This was particularly true of the "shake-up" which came to national notice late in 1928.

The ranks of the police have continued to be filled from Civil Service lists. The School of Instruction was discontinued in 1931, but it is agreed that the effect of this change upon arrests was negligible. The number of police was slightly increased during 1928-1934 over the preceding period, but the increase hardly took care of the increase in population. Of greater significance was the reorganization of the Detective Division in 1929. The force was increased to three times its former size and was more efficiently organized. This reorganization has undoubtedly raised the rate of arrests, especially for serious offenses.

All of this has been set down, at the risk of wearying the

reader, in order better to understand and interpret the crime index based on arrests which was finally correlated with several indexes of economic change. The actual figures for arrests were as follows:

Serious Crimes Against Property

	Robbery	Burglary	Larceny*	Total
1925	667	657	5132	6456
1926	712	912	5726	7350
1927	723	867	6485	8075
1928	902	931	6545	8378
1929	736	911	6652	8299
1930	810	1324	7757	9891
1931	908	1637	7314	9859
1932	746	1694	5857	8297
1933	594	1842	4632	7068
1934	599	1765	4654	7018

Serious Crimes Against Person

	Murder	Man-slaughter**	Aggravated Assault	Total
1925	104	338	1306	1748
1926	178	418	1309	1905
1927	165	394	1212	1771
1928	189	375	1434	1998
1929	224	464	1438	2126
1930	220	390	1491	2101
1931	152	407	1345	1904
1932	186	379	1151	1716
1933	124	381	1140	1645
1934	75	355	952	1382

From these figures and from the accompanying charts it is seen that crimes against the person reached their peak in 1929 and 1930. Except for a diminution in 1927, the increase is slight and steady up to 1930, and the rate of decrease during and after 1930 slightly more accelerated than the previous rate of increase in these offenses. The rate is lower in 1934 than in 1925 or in any of the intervening years.

A period of rapid increase is seen, however, in crimes against property in 1930, the high point being maintained during 1931. Moreover, the rate of decrease in offenses of this category is especially rapid after 1931, down to and including 1933. During 1934 the curve flattens. The rate for burglary is peculiar, showing a

* Contains all larceny, over and under \$50, by flimflam, sneak, etc.

** Includes manslaughter by motor vehicle and by trolley.

highly accelerated and steady increase after 1929 continuing through 1933. "Uniform Crime Reports" show essentially the same situation for cities over 100,000 population, statistics being based on offenses known to the police. "Offenses known" for the city of Minneapolis show the same continuous increase.⁴

The economic indexes employed are as follows:

	Wage Payments ⁵ (1923-5=100)	Cost of Living ⁶ (1914=100)	Retail Trade ⁵ (1923-5=100)	Debits to Individual Accounts ⁵ (1923-5=100)
1925	101.9	180.1	101.5	108.3
1926	109.4	181.5	104.7	112.8
1927	102.7	178.2	100.1	117.4
1928	98.9	174.9	95.2	132.2
1929	105.3	174.1	96.6	145.2
1930	88.6	166.8	89.0	114.4
1931	69.5	152.9	76.8	91.5
1932	50.7	136.3	60.0	61.2
1933	53.5	134.2	57.0
1934	68.1	140.5	61.2	68.4

The index of wage payments is based upon reports of wages from what is considered by the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia as a representative sample of the larger industries within the Philadelphia area (Bucks, Chester, Delaware, Montgomery, and Philadelphia counties). The other figures represent the city of Philadelphia only. The index of retail trade is based on value of sales made in about thirty-five of the larger stores of diverse character.

These indexes exhibit several interesting features. Wage payments, which have often been alleged to bear a direct relationship to crime, especially crimes against property, show but slight changes up to and including 1929. After 1929 the decline is rapid down to 1933, when the trend turns upward. As would seem natural, the decline in savings from 1929 to 1933 presents an almost perfect correlation with the decline in wages. This correlation does not hold in the prior period, however.

There is a lag in the decline of living costs as compared with the decline in wages, which is a phenomenon of universal application. Why retail trade should not show a decline in more approxi-

⁴ "The Amount and Nature of Crime," George B. Vold, *American Journal of Sociology*, Volume XL, pp. 796-803.

⁵ Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia.

⁶ United States Bureau of Labor Statistics.

mate ratio to the decrease in wages demands further explanation. Bias in the computation of these indexes, for comparative purposes, can be shown, inasmuch as the income groups represented in the wage payments index are not identical with the income groups making their purchases in the stores reporting, the latter being somewhat higher in the scale. This lack of identity does not, however, completely explain the divergence between the rates. A view more readily accepted is that relief, from both public and private sources, has helped maintain the volume of retail trade.

Having set forth the above qualifications to both the index of crime and the indexes of economic change here presented, what conclusions are permissible?

First, any general statement regarding the effect of economic change on the general crime situation during the first five years of the present depression seems wholly unjustified. Ray Mars Simpson, comparing total arrests with an index of employment in Chicago, notes a consistent tendency on the part of arrests to follow the rise and fall of business during a portion of this period;⁷ but such a correlation possesses little significance in the opinion of the present writer for two reasons. First, any single index, such as employment, is an inadequate measure of business conditions; and second, total arrests are apt to present a wholly inaccurate picture of the crime situation over a period of time. The majority of arrests in any city, and most especially in a large city, such as Chicago or Philadelphia, comprises arrests for minor offenses, drunkenness, disorderly conduct, gambling, and the like, which are subject to striking variations from year to year in police policy. Unless these changes are critically evaluated, an index based on total arrests can be extremely misleading. No really significant correlation between the present depression and crime generally can be shown in the figures for Philadelphia.

As was said above, only serious crimes were employed in building the index under discussion in this paper. Likewise, it seemed feasible to distinguish between crimes against the person and crimes against property. Though this distinction is open to certain objections, it is one that has been made by criminologists for many years. Admittedly, the motives for and the circumstances surrounding each type are different, in some measure at least.

With regard to crimes against the person, it does seem possible

⁷ "The Employment Index, Arrests, Court Actions, and Commitments in Illinois," *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, Volume XXIV, p. 922.

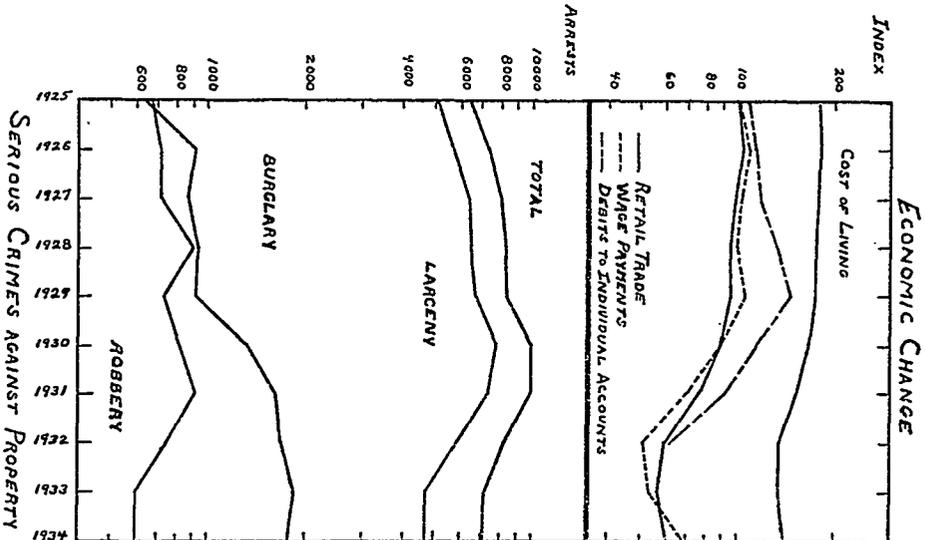
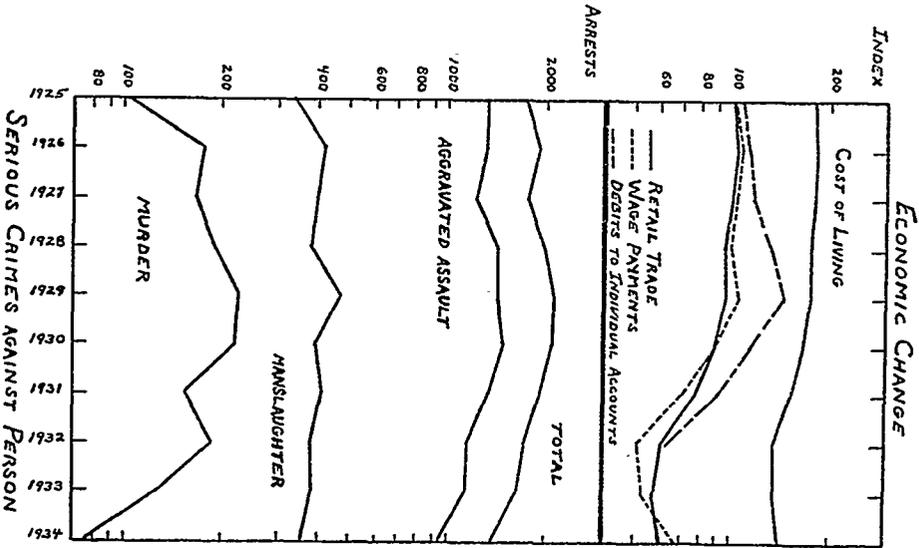
to say, on the basis of the figures presented, that we are experiencing their diminution coincident with the present depression. For the entire ten-year period the coefficients of correlation between violent attacks on the person (rape was excluded because of paucity of arrests) and the various economic indexes are as follows: wage payments, $+.540$, cost of living, $+.595$, retail trade, $+.616$. Recalling our previous conclusion that the efficiency of the Philadelphia police has been tremendously enhanced since 1929, it is seen that these coefficients would be somewhat higher had this increased efficiency not taken place, i. e., arrests for the depression period would have been fewer as compared with the prior period, thus showing more rapid decline in the arrest rate, 1930-1934, more closely approximating the decline in the economic indexes. In other words, the true crime situation was probably less serious in the depression period as compared with 1925-1929 than the number of arrests shows. The actual correlations are therefore higher than those give above, and bespeak possible causal relationship.

Regarding crimes against property, generalization is more difficult. Vold, after examining statistics for prisoners received in state and federal prisons, offenses known to the police as reported in "Uniform Crime Reports," and varied other statistics for certain localities, reaches the conclusion that "none of these indexes show any sudden increase in crime with the onset of the depression."^s The same could be said of Philadelphia when the figures for crimes against property and those against the person are combined. And for the reason that the opposite tendencies in these two types of offenses cancel each other. As a matter of fact, there is a very decided and markedly sudden increase in crimes against property in 1930, and the peak, as before shown, is maintained in 1931. The necessity for distinguishing between crimes when seeking for causes is apparent. Likewise, for this purpose at least, a critical view must be taken of conclusions based on attempts to deal with statistics on a national scale. A variety of factors is often obscured in such figures and the easy generalization that the law of large numbers tends to cancel out bias is not always valid, especially in comparisons extending over periods of time.

After the sudden increase of crimes against property in 1930 and 1931 the arrest curve for these offenses turns sharply down. The down trend would be accentuated were we to allow for increased police efficiency which was shown to operate most effectively

^s *Op. cit.*, p. 803.

in the crimes of burglary and robbery. The sudden decrease after a sharp rise immediately following the onset of hard times might seem perhaps to lend weight to the notion held by several present-day writers that relief to needy families, in ameliorating conditions, tends to decrease offenses against property. But this is to assume what we might be attempting to show. Even though this relationship were established between relief and decrease in crimes of this



type through extensive case study, it seems hardly likely to be a sufficient explanation for the whole of the decline. In all, except for the sudden increase in crimes against property at the beginning of the depression the figures cited here furnish small evidence in favor of the oft-repeated generalization that economic stress increases crimes against property. The coefficients between crimes against property and the various indexes for the ten-year period are: wage payments, $-.066$, cost of living, $+.003$, retail trade, $+.026$.

A trend entirely different from that characterizing offenses against property in general is seen to obtain in the case of burglary, when that offense is separately considered. Here there is a sharp, continuous up-trend for the period 1930-1933, with diminution only in 1934. The correlations with the indexes of economic change for the ten-year period are striking: wage payments, $-.940$, cost of living, $-.922$, retail trade, $-.955$. While it is true that the qualification made above to the index of crime based on arrests would tend to lower this correlation somewhat, the degree of association is still significantly high. There was no "drive" against offenses of this category during the period, which would tend to raise the arrest rate for burglary artificially. Moreover, among large cities the steady increase in the number of burglaries during the era of depression is a phenomenon of national scope, as was shown above. It is a phenomenon that has not been adequately explained except in terms of economic conditions.

In conclusion, it is worthwhile, perhaps, to suggest the desirability of limiting statistical studies of the relationship between crime and economic conditions to limited areas of application, cities or other localities where the indexes of both crime and economic conditions can be determined with a fair degree of accuracy, and where the relationship, if any, between the two sets of phenomena is more direct. This type of procedure enables the student to make an evaluation of the various influences bearing upon the indexes employed, setting the necessary qualifications to the correlations found, and thus making it possible for him to interpret his results more adequately.