

Television, Crime and Poverty

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The government claims that the effects of increasing poverty and unemployment do not result in increasing crime. It has chosen to ignore expert opinion, including the Home Office research that shows the link between consumption and crime (Field 1990). The government seems to believe that violence on television is a cause of crime, particularly juvenile crime. Apparently, crime is the result of individual 'wickedness', and violence on television or videos causes an increase in 'wickedness'. Following Liberal Democrat MP David Alton's recent moral crusade against video "nasties", the Home Secretary Michael Howard has agreed to introduce a new clause to the Criminal and Public Order Bill and tighten up the Video Recordings Act 1993 with the aim of increasing censorship. Presumably, we can now expect a decrease in the amount of 'wickedness' and a reduction in crime.

This kind of tautological fantasy does not readily lend itself to scientific or statistical analysis. It is hard to conceive how you could obtain an independent measure of 'wickedness' in a population let alone measure how TV programmes affected the level of 'wickedness'. This is not seen as a problem since the Prime Minister wants us to 'Condemn a little more, and understand a little less' in regards to crime. However, as part of recent research project we have found that television has been responsible for a massive increase in crime in the 1980's, but that this increase is closely linked to the effects of increasing poverty.

Breadline Britain

The two Breadline Britain surveys (1983 and 1990) are the only nationally representative surveys commissioned during the past 11 years that can be used to measure accurately the extent and nature of poverty in Britain. The surveys were conducted by MORI on behalf of London Weekend Television and Domino Films and some of the results have been broadcast as part of the six television programmes in 1991, and the four award winning programmes in 1983. The major findings are widely known (Frayman 1991, Gosschalk and Frayman 1992);

- 1 Between 1983 and 1990, the number of people who could objectively be described as living in poverty increased by almost 50%. In 1983, 14% of households (approximately 7.5 million people) were living in poverty and, by 1990, 20% of households (approximately 11 million people) were living in poverty.

- 2 Roughly 10 million people in Britain in 1990 cannot afford adequate housing; for example, their home is unheated, damp or the older children have to share bedrooms.
- 3 About 7 million go without essential clothing, such as a warm waterproof coat, because of lack of money.
- 4 There are approximately 2.5 million children who are forced to go without at least one of the things they need, like three meals a day, toys or out of school activities.
- 5 Around 5 million people are not properly fed by today's standards; they do not have enough fresh fruit and vegetables, or two meals a day, for example.
- 6 About 6.5 million people cannot afford one or more essential household goods, like a fridge, a telephone or carpets for living areas.

As part of further analysis of these surveys for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation we examined how reliable a large number of indicators were at measuring deprivation/poverty. The inability to afford a television (by those respondents who wanted one) proved to be a poor indicator of 'poverty'. This was surprising considering that television is often one of the few sources of entertainment available to many poor people'. In the 1983 study Pamela a lone parent with a 9 month old child, living on supplementary benefit in an attic flat, explained;

"I watch TV from first thing in the morning till last thing at night, till the television goes off. I sit and watch it all day. I can't afford to do other things at all. The only thing I can do is sit and watch television. I can't go anywhere, I can't go out and enjoy myself or nothing. I should be able to take my daughter out somewhere. I would take her to the zoo and things like that. Places she's never been, or seen, and half the places I haven't seen in London myself. Things that I can't afford to do." (Mack and Lansley 1985)

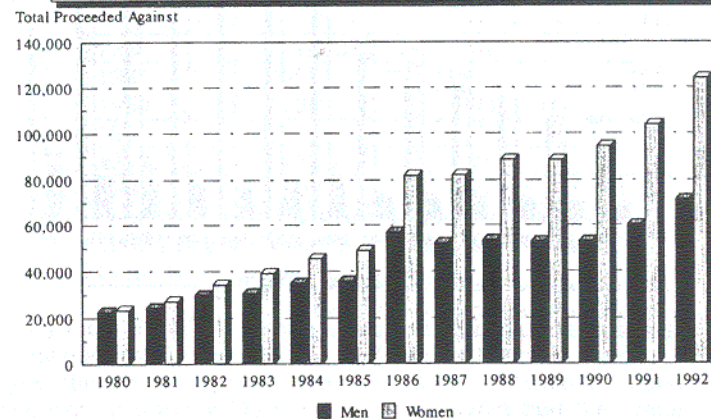
Given this importance of television, why is the possession of one not a reliable indicator of deprivation in the 1990 Breadline Britain Survey? Televisions are a consumer durable that have reached saturation point. The General Household Survey (GHS) shows that 98% of households have a television and this situation has persisted since the mid-1970's. Since some households have more than one television, there are probably more televisions than there are households in Britain. This saturation is evident

¹The 1990 Breadline Britain Survey asked respondents whether they had a television and whether they could not do without it. Seventy percent of respondents from Social Class E said that they could not do without their television set(s); compared with only 47% for those in Social Class AB

from the second-hand prices of televisions. 21" colour televisions typically sell at auction for between £20 and £30 and black and white televisions for between £1 and £10. Televisions are not expensive, however, a television licence is. The present cost of a licence is £84.50 for a colour television set and £27 for a monochrome set.

The Breadline Britain Surveys have shown that poverty has increased during the 1980's: if these findings are correct, it would be expected that there would be a concomitant increase in the number of households that could not afford to buy a TV licence during the 1980's. Figure 1 shows the huge increase in the number of prosecutions for TV licence offences between 1980 and 1992. Prosecutions have increased by more than four-fold (from 46,106 in 1980 to 195,665 in 1992).

Fig.1 Total Number Proceeded Against Under the Wireless Telegraphy Acts (TV Licence) 1980-92



Part of this increase might be due to more effective policing of the Wireless Telegraphy Act or even to an increase in 'wickedness' in the population, although there is little evidence for either (Wall and Bradshaw 1987). However, at least some of this large increase in prosecutions probably results from greater numbers of households being unable to afford a TV licence. Softley's examination of 1983 court records, showed that in a third of cases the head of household was unemployed at the time of the hearing. Forty two percent of defendants complained that financial difficulties had

prevented them from buying a television licence. Twenty-eight percent of defendants were lone parents, separated or divorced persons (Softley 1984).

In 1992, 58% of all convictions² of women for criminal offences were for Wireless Telegraphy Act offences (Figure 2). If the TV licence were abolished, criminal convictions against women would fall by more than half.

Fig.2 Convictions Under the Wireless Telegraphy Acts as a Percentage of all Convictions 1980-92

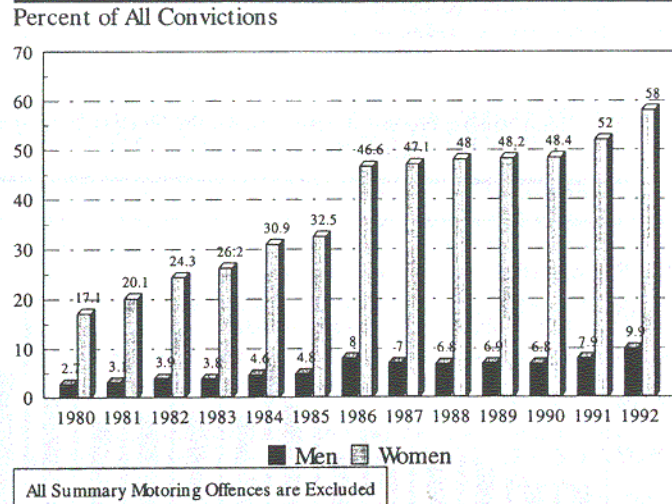


Table.1 shows the number of female offenders sentenced between 1980 and 1992. Female crime fell during the 1980's for virtually all types of crime except crimes linked to poverty. Between 1980 and 1992 women convicted of indictable crimes fell from 67,800 to 40,000; summary offences from 42,700 to 39,000; and summary motoring offences from 115,600 to 69,800. However, female TV licence offenders rose by 87,224 (from 22,780 in 1980 to 110,004 in 1992). Therefore, if TV licence offences are excluded, then female criminal convictions fell during the 1980's. This is clearly a situation where poverty seems to be primarily responsible for a large part of the recorded increase in female crime during the 1980's.

² Excluding all summary motor offences ie parking tickets, etc.

Table.1 Number of female offenders sentenced (thousands) 1980-1992

	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992
TV Licence Offences	22.7	26.1	33.1	37.9	43.8	46.6	76.4	74.3	78.6	78.7	82.3	103.6	110
Indictable Offences	67.8	65.4	66	62.7	59.9	59.1	50.1	47.5	46.1	43	43.9	41.9	40
Summary *	42.7	38.8	37.7	44.5	38	38.2	37.6	36	39.1	41.7	43.6	26.7	39.2
Summary Motoring Offences	115.6	110.7	98.6	108.1	101.2	104.5	113.3	64.9	58.7	58.9	59.5	63.7	69.8

* Excludes all Summary Motoring Offences and TV Licence Offences.

Television, Fines and Prison

Table.2 Number of People in Prison for Fine Default for TV Licence Offences

Year	Female	Male
1981	90	-
1983	120	400
1991	136	258
1992	163	405
1993	292	553

Sources: Prison Statistics, England & Wales 1983 (HMSO); Research and Statistical Division, Home Office.

In 1993 a total of 845 people were imprisoned for fine default, representing a 47% increase on the previous year. The female prison population is only 3%, yet they constitute a third of jailed TV licence offenders (The Independent on Sunday 13/3/94). It is estimated that the average weekly cost of keeping an adult male in prison is around £390 and £540 for an adult female (Prison Reform Trust 1991). In 1991 licence fees were £77 for a colour licence and £25.50 for black and white.

This means that a 'poor' woman convicted of not having a TV licence because she could not afford the £80 licence fee, can typically be given a £150 fine, she cannot afford to pay, and end up imprisoned for 2 weeks at a cost to the tax payer of over £1000. This of course does not take account of the large costs of catching and prosecuting her in the first place. This seems to be a case of the old adage:

"Laws grind the poor, and rich men rule the law"³ and the rest of us who are not poor are paying for it.

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³(Oliver Goldsmith 1728-1774. *The Traveller*)