Signal Crimes

Social Reactions to Crime, Disorder, and Control

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Preface

The essays in this book all derive from a single simple premise—that some crimes and disorders are especially influential in shaping how we think, feel, and act in relation to our security. We attend to these signal crimes and signal disorders because of how they act as indicators about the distribution of risks and threats across social space. They organize social reactions, functioning like lightning rods, channelling public attention and sentiments in particular directions—towards some issues and concerns, whilst away from others. The aim of what follows is to re-frame our understanding of how we think about crime and disorder to properly take account of these events. To explain this intent, we should begin at the beginning.

‘Has there been another murder?’ It is November 2003. My research team and I are being shown round the Brunswick Estate by several police officers prior to starting a period of intensive fieldwork. The disconcerting question asked by our interlocutor, as she stepped out of the tower block lift, was her way of making sense of the apparently unusual sight of several police in the area. Entering the lift, the officers stated confidently that there had been a cluster of suicides recently but no murders. It was, they said, journalists generating headlines about suspicious deaths that reflected Brunswick’s public reputation as a place where bad things happen.

Stepping inside the lift one officer pressed the button with the end of his pencil. We should do the same he advised, as the local drug users had taken to breaking off their ‘sharps’ in the buttons. Contact risked all kinds of blood infections. But not using the lifts meant, as we would subsequently discover, navigating stairwells reeking of urine and faeces (not all of which appeared to be animal), graffiti and encounters with aggressive young men.

The Brunswick Estate is situated behind the fading glamour of Blackpool seafront. In November a biting wind whips in from the sea, tossing litter and detritus around the crevices of the tower blocks. With concrete grey edifices stretching towards an overcast sky, the overall colour palette was pallid. There was also a strange absence of people. It was like they had retreated from all unnecessary public display and interaction. Amongst those who were to be seen, an unusual number walked with a limp or used a walking stick, even relatively young people. It was as if the creeping destruction of the physical environment was leeching into their bodies. Over in the play park, groups of young men, accompanied by their status dogs were a far more regular presence than any children.

As we started interviewing residents, it became clear that their stories and concerns were not the same as those of the police. The latter were focused on the reductions in recorded crime that had been achieved. Contrastingly,
residents’ anxieties gravitated around the messages conveyed to them by a stream of disorders. It was ‘a nervous, nervous place’ as one interviewee described. A recurrent concern was arson. It seems that local youths had taken to recreational fire-setting around the rubbish chutes in the flats—when fire engines turned up they could throw stones at them and their personnel. But in a large tower block, the threat of fire taking hold and the difficulties of evacuation played on the minds of many residents.

The salience of this signal was reinforced by the fact that some months earlier a neighbouring school had been destroyed by arson. The burnt out hulk of the building could be directly seen from many windows in the flats; a constant visible signifier of risk. Similarly, many people talked about the impact repeated vandalism of local bus stops and phone boxes had upon them. The significance of such destructive acts is acutely meaningful in a highly deprived area where people had few other assets. Indeed, in a number of flats where we conducted interviews there was little in the way of furniture. It had been sold either to feed chronic drug and alcohol addictions, or sometimes, just to make ends meet.

This sense of fragility was compounded by the ways ‘private’ conflicts and violence ‘leaked’ out into the other spaces within the flats. Thin walls and heating ducts threaded through the building meant private troubles were routinely public knowledge. Residents talked also about burglaries that were never reported to the police because of fears of reprisals and intimidation.

The purpose of the research was to understand how incidents of different kinds, framed by different situations, impact upon sensations of neighbourhood security, and to feed the findings to local agencies. Over a period of time, police and their partners managed to ‘bend’ some of their procedures and assets to become more focused upon the problems prioritized by the residents. I have not been back to Brunswick for several years now. I do not know whether the improvements have been sustained. But for a little while at least, the well-being of a vulnerable community was supported by better understanding the detrimental impacts crime and disorder has.

That there are signal events that achieve disproportionate impacts relative to other similar incidents is something we both intuitively recognize and elide in public and political talk about crime. For instance, there is an annual ritual when national crime statistics are released, involving vociferous media debate about the extent to which the aggregate level of criminality can be asserted to have gone up or down. Depending upon whether the figures have risen or fallen, government policy is celebrated or lambasted. There is an assumed public interest attached to such reporting and commentary, on the grounds that crime statistics act as an index of societal security in some fashion.

This is a symptom of how a veritable industry has grown up around trying to make sense of the crime problem. Governments expend considerable effort and resource upon gauging and measuring increases and decreases in the total amount of crime. Journalists regale us with stories about notable incidents.
Police and criminal justice institutions, through the implementation of the auspices of criminal law, seek to lead a societal response to such incidents. But each of these institutional responses frames the crime problem in ways that are partial and misleading. An alternative point of departure for an enquiry into how publics interpret and make sense of crime could pose a counterfactual question such as ‘What if aggregate national crime rates have little to do with how safe people perceive themselves to be?’ Might it be more insightful to assume that peoples’ sense of security, pivots around a blend of a few exceptional high profile crimes and what they encounter more locally?

This way of thinking has additional purchase in a historical moment of over two decades of year-on-year reductions in crime in a number of Western countries and cities. Whilst we cannot be sure whether this is a temporary abatement in rising crime levels, it appears less certain than when Garland (2001: 106) was writing, that high crime rates are an incontrovertible and irreversible ‘normal social fact’. Indeed, it is precisely because crime has been reducing that the role and salience of signal crimes has become easier to discern. For set against a backdrop of less crime, it has been possible to clarify that public sentiments and perceptions are not a simple correlate of overall crime levels. The thesis propounded in the following pages is that instead, individual and collective security is significantly influenced by illegal and disorderly acts, and control responses to these, that send signals to people about the distribution of risks and threats.

From time-to-time there are, of course, crimes so horrific and unusual that they transcend local interest. Listing names such as Stephen Lawrence, Amanda Dowler, and Sarah Payne almost intuitively captures how particular incidents possess significant legacies in shaping thinking about crime as a category of social problems. The harm visited in such cases is clear and present. But in seeking to make sense of public reactions to crime, it is important that we do not focus solely upon such incidents, neglecting the less visible occurrences.

Indeed, over recent years there has been growing recognition of the significance of a range of anti-social behaviours in terms of influencing perceptions of neighbourhood security. Many of these are not proscribed in law, and thus defined as crimes, but nevertheless have corrosive impacts upon social cohesion and perceptions of local safety. In part, this might reflect how the institution of law struggles to deal adequately with forms of harm that are collectively rather than individually based.

The argument developed in the essays comprising this book is that there is a generic social reaction process to how we perceive and interpret incidents of crime and disorder, as well as the organized social control responses to these. Empirical warrants for this claim are now available via a number of studies that have drawn upon the earlier articles where the signal crime construct was originally worked out (Innes and Fielding, 2002; Innes, 2004). Notably, Tony Bottoms (2012) has located it within the purview of socio-spatial criminology, emphasizing the insights it affords into how local micro-cultures shape what disorder
and anti-social conduct come to be defined as matters of collective concern. In his discussion of why ‘white collar crimes and criminals’ tend to attract so little public attention despite involving considerable social harm, Levi (2008) invokes signalling processes to explain the absence of a defined public problem, where perhaps there should be one given the increasing prevalence and impacts of this form of illegality.

A perspective is a way of seeing. It affords a particular field of vision by bringing some items to the foreground, whilst others are rendered more obscure.¹ The point of perspective is that precisely what is perceived depends upon how and where one is positioned. In the following pages this central conceit is explored and configured, to disinter the processes through which individuals and collectives perceive, interpret, and make sense of crime and disorder. Across the essays a key theme that emerges is that how events are reacted to depends on whose perspective one is talking about. Individuals and institutions may frame the same incident very differently, depending upon the social, physical, and material positions they occupy. Consequently, different communities and neighbourhoods may view similar problems in markedly different ways.

Crime signals occur in two principal registers—the everyday and the catastrophic. The former refers to mundane, ‘normal’ crimes (Sudnow, 1965), the latter covers far less frequent, but high public profile incidents. Whilst there are obvious differences in the prevalence and intensity of these everyday and catastrophic forms of signal event, and the extent their effects ‘travel’, they share important elements in terms of how they are interpreted and influence patterns of social order. The key assertion of this book is that some crimes and disorders matter more than others in shaping and influencing our feelings and beliefs about security.

Extending this way of thinking about processes of social reaction, it is suggested that similar modes of interpretation and sense-making are applied to acts of social control. Just as signal crimes and disorders are generative of an array of cognitive, affective, and behavioural reactions, similar effects can be detected in relation to the presence of ‘control signals’. This latter concept is important in opening up the communicative properties of much social control work, offering the potential for a richer and more supple analysis of how it functions across varied forms and situations. It enables us to see how acts designed to regulate troublesome or problematic behaviours routinely seek to send messages to a number of audiences.

It has become commonplace in talk about contemporary technological innovations to refer to ‘disruptive technologies’ that alter patterns of behaviour and social ordering. Analogous to this, the triad of key concepts introduced via the essays in this book, which are all species of signal event, can be thought of as

¹ There is a deliberate connection here to Kenneth Burke’s (1954) instruction that ‘a way of seeing is also a way of not seeing’.

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disruptive concepts’. They are intended to reconfigure the ways we understand the social impacts and consequences of crime and disorder, and our responses to such occurrences. They are insurgent ideas that challenge aspects of the public understanding of crime.

The essays have been crafted to be standalone but connected. They are designed to throw contrasting shafts of light on to processes of social reaction to crime, disorder and control. As ‘etiolations’, each illuminates slightly different aspects of how we individually and collectively react to particular kinds of public problem. Overall, the intended effect is a ‘theme and variations’ approach. As such, they can be read in different orders, but by viewing them together a more complete understanding of the particular insights that are gained by seeing the world through a ‘signal events’ lens can be achieved.

To comprehend how the parts of the whole ‘hang together’ it is potentially insightful to clarify some of the key elements featuring in the book’s title. The focus throughout is upon individual and collective reactions. These reactions encompass perceptions and interpretations, emotions and subjective feelings, and acts and behaviours. They are ‘socially organized’ reactions in the sense that there are discernible base patterns to their respective causes and consequences. Finally, the individual contributions are presented as essays in the sense of the etymological roots of this form of writing that lie with the French word ‘essaier’ or ‘to try’. That is, they are attempts to work out the consequences of a fairly radical theoretical position that attends to events and their impacts, and in the process move beyond more orthodox approaches already available in the research literature.

The opening essay in the collection sets out the principles of the analytic schema through which a signal can be detected by listening to how people talk about crime. Betraying an influence from a symbolic interactionist sociology that has appropriated some conceptual tools from pragmatist semiotics, it is defined that all signals comprise three principal components: an expression; content; and effect. The main conceptual innovation is to connect particular events to the discrete and distinct effects that they trigger and induce. These arise in different combinations, but gravitate around three main effect types: thought and cognition; affect and emotion; behaviour and action. An important aspect of the ensuing discussion is showing how application of this conceptual scaffolding leads down different paths from some more established theories about the impact of crime and disorder upon social life. As is asserted in the essay itself, it is an approach that provides a unique perspective to the empirical and theoretical study of social reaction. Informed by interview data where people are talking about crime in their neighbourhoods, the discussion sets out the main precepts of a signal crimes perspective (SCP).

Attention turns in the second essay, to focus more exclusively upon the notion of the signal disorder. How an incident is defined via the auspices of criminal law, is found to be of only marginal influence in terms of its power to shape public perceptions and sentiments. The social visibility of disorder is shown to
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have a vital role in terms of its capacity to signal a sense of risk or threat to on-looking audiences. The key contribution this makes to the SCP overall, is evidencing that the capacity of a signal to alter thought, emotion, and action, is dependent upon aspects of the social context in which it arises. Recognizing this situational influence is an important refinement to understanding the social dynamics of signal events.

The next essay alights upon a crime that is very much the property of the criminal justice system—criminal homicide. Starting with the question ‘how does fear travel in the aftermath of fatal violence?’ the essay maps out how thinking about signals and their effects inclines one to new ways of framing public reactions to crime. Pivoting around a critique of the ways the concept of fear of crime has been formulated and operationalized, and informed by a series of field studies designed to measure the community impacts of several high profile murders, the alternative notion of the harm footprint is laid out. This is progressively broken down to delineate three prototypical harm footprints—private, parochial, and public.

In the fourth essay the focus is upon how rumours of crime events are sometimes sufficient to generate similar effects and reaction patterns to those where incidents actually did occur. A careful and detailed analysis of the causes and consequences of a number of crime rumours, uncovers ‘phantom’ signal crimes that, although they were never there, were nevertheless consequential in shaping public perceptions and concerns. This sense of a presence in absence reflects how crime rumours are often deployed as ‘soft facts’ filling in knowledge gaps when people are seeking information about events, but authoritative sources are unavailable.

The penultimate contribution moves away from the public and their reactions to consider the effects of signal crimes upon social institutions. Just as the thoughts, emotions, and actions of individuals and groups are shaped by the occurrence of signal crimes and disorders, similar reaction patterns pertain to institutions. This is an idea of some import for the signal crimes perspective overall. In a chain of events initially set in motion by the attacks of 9/11 in the United States of America, and subsequently propelled by a series of other terrorist incursions, the institutional structures and processes of counter-terrorism policing have been re-thought and re-made in many Western states. Through a case study of the ways counter-terrorism policing policy and practice has been revised in the UK in particular, this essay considers how significant institutional reform is frequently a consequence of signal events.

The final essay explores the communicative properties of acts of social control. It is argued that communication is fundamental to how social control works and is a dimension neglected by previous contributions to the scholarly literature. An important distinction is made between: ‘signals of control’ that emanate from, or are transmitted by acts or interventions effecting social control; and, ‘signals to control’ involving targeted and intentional attempts to persuade, instruct, regulate, or coerce people to think and/or behave in particular ways. In an era of
public sector austerity, the value of this approach is in understanding the wider potentials and ramifications of social control interventions.

Whilst each essay has been written to work as a separate and individuated entity, there are meta-narratives that span across them in terms of recurrent themes and concerns. The first of these is the presence of a generic process of reaction that is transcendent of any substantive issues that trigger concern, whereby the principal interpretations and effects observed across individuals, collectives, and institutions maintain similar forms and functions.

A second cross-cutting theme is that culture and situation matter. The tenor and tone of any reaction is shaped by the social setting in which the signalling event is itself located. Local cultures and their moral orders play a crucial role in selecting which events function as focal concerns for a particular community and which are deemed less salient.

The third meta-narrative concerns the ways some signals fade and decay, but others are amplified over time. Such legacy effects are important in labeling particular places and people as sources of trouble. Past signals establish frames influencing the interpretation of subsequent happenings. This is a particular variant of a wider challenge relating to how to capture the cumulative impacts of different signals. In any everyday situation there are a multitude of items signalling the presence of potential risks and threats, alongside multiple indicators of social control. How and why are some of these attended to, but others are not?

That the essays in this collection span from anti-social behaviour through to terrorism and homicide, and encompass both contemporary and historical examples, showcases the extent to which signalling processes are integral to the ways we collectively process and make sense of these issues. This diversity reflects also how the empirical materials are derived from a ten-year programme of field studies designed to investigate in different ways and from different vantage points the problem of understanding individual, collective, and institutional processes of reacting to crime, disorder, and social control.

Given the extensive research base that underpins these essays, a final afterword is included reflecting upon matters of method and methodology. For although the individual essays exhibit different substantive concerns, they share a common methodological base—a blend of systematic and unsystematic social observation. That is, a more creative and less structured phase of conceptual innovation and initial development, followed by more rigorous and systematic testing and refinement of these ideas through exposure to detailed empirical data. At a moment where academic disciplines across the social sciences are seemingly increasingly attracted to being ‘scientific’ in their orienting dispositions, it is important that we do not neglect the importance of creativity and intuitive insight. For want of a better label, it is argued that a form of ‘gonzo research’ may be helpful in this endeavour, particularly for more ‘naturalistic’ (as opposed to experimental) research. Rigorous empirical testing is important, but good research involves both skilled craft and science. The purpose of this
short-ish afterword is to lodge the notion that by combining gonzo research’s unsystematic approach, with more structured empirical studies it has been possible to uncover some generic properties of how we collectively ascribe meaning to crime, disorder, and control. This book then, is more about our reactions than the events that stimulate these reactions. For it is in the processes of how we react and make sense of occurrences that trouble us or disturb the patterned rituals and routines of social order, that we find out so much about who we collectively are.