

## STREET DISORDER IN THE METROPOLIS, 1905-39

*Stefan Slater*<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

This article uses insights from sociology, criminology and anthropology to establish patterns of disorder in early-to-mid twentieth century London. As criminal statistics are shown to be the products of both behavioural and institutional practices, this discussion opens with an examination of police culture to comprehend the range of variables influencing decision making on the beat. The second section develops this occupational model further to interpret the trends shown by the statistics. With this appreciation of policing in practice, the third part argues that integrating Taylor's supply-side approach with a street-level understanding of the relationship between police and policed, while considering the broader socio-economic context, allows for measured inferences about social changes to be drawn from prosecution records.

**Keywords:** Metropolitan Police, interwar London, public disorder, street betting, prostitution, drunkenness, vagrancy

### Introduction

That the recorded incidence of violence is on the increase may show not that society is falling apart but rather that we live in an increasingly orderly society that tolerates criminal injury far less than in the uncivilized past.<sup>2</sup>

When all is said and done, our perceptions of violence do indeed depend on where we look. That, if nothing else, should alert us to the possibility that, in our eagerness to dispel the myth of a conflict-free golden age, we may be exaggerating the tensions of [earlier societies] while overlooking the reality of violence in our own times.<sup>3</sup>

Elucidating the experience of crime befuddles both historian and sociologist. During the 1920s, however, contemporaries were not plagued by the same angst which taxed the minds of early

---

<sup>1</sup> Stefan Slater has published a number of peer-reviewed articles on crime and policing in interwar London, he currently works in a public house and may be contacted at [s.slater99@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:s.slater99@yahoo.co.uk). A version of this article was presented as a paper at the LSE Criminology Seminar on 2 March 2010. Thanks to Janet Clark, Penelope Corfield, Dick Hobbs, Hannes Kleineke, Bob Morris, Simon Parkes and John Carter Wood for reading a draft of this manuscript. I am also grateful to Katherine Watson and two anonymous referees at *Law Crime and History* for helping me to sharpen the final version; any errors in fact or interpretation, however, remain the sole responsibility of the author.

<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey Pearson, 'The Roots of Violence', *British Medical Journal*, 297 (26 Nov. 1988), pp.1352-53, at p.1353.

<sup>3</sup> J.S. Cockburn, 'Patterns of Violence in English Society: Homicide in Kent 1560-1985', *Past and Present*, 130 (1991), pp. 70-106, at p.106.

Victorian and twenty-first century commentators.<sup>4</sup> In a study for the London School of Economics, former Home Office permanent under-secretary Sir Edward Troup observed that between 1893 and 1928 recorded crime had fallen significantly. Troup felt confident enough to remark in 1930: 'there is clearly a substantial reduction in crimes of violence to the person known to the police'.<sup>5</sup> This fall, up until the late 1920s, continued a trend of falling crime rates in London from the mid-to-late nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup>

A number of studies have observed that the experience of falling crime rates attests to Norbert Elias' concept of the 'civilizing process'.<sup>7</sup> Pieter Spierenburg, however, prefers the term 'process of civilization', and that the former phrase 'suggests that a person or group out there is actively civilizing others, which, in its turn, might suggest that social processes come about because someone directs them. This is never the case. Long-term processes, also that of civilization, are largely "blind".' These behavioural changes are 'not merely due to the offensives of courts and moral entrepreneurs, but were facilitated by social and economic transformations. Both the imitation-and-refinement mechanism and that of conscious inculcation of norms in their turn formed part of overall blind changes.'<sup>8</sup> More recently, Steven Pinker has used his expertise in evolutionary psychology to interpret this cultural process.<sup>9</sup> John Carter Wood points to a 'growing historical consensus that overall rates of interpersonal violence in Europe declined significantly between the late-medieval period and the middle of the twentieth century.'<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Clive Emsley, *Crime and Society in Twentieth-Century England* (Harlow: Pearson, 2011); David J.V. Jones, *Crime and Policing in the Twentieth Century: The South Wales Experience* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1996), p.53.

<sup>5</sup> E. Troup, 'Crime', in H.L. Smith (ed.), *The New Survey of London Life and Labour, Vol. 1: Forty Years of Change* (London: P.S. King & Son Ltd., 1930), pp.391-92.

<sup>6</sup> David Jones, 'Crime in London: The Evidence of the Metropolitan Police, 1831-92', *Crime, Protest, Community and Police in Nineteenth Century Britain* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), pp.117-43; V.A.C. Gatrell, 'The Decline of Theft and Violence in Victorian and Edwardian England', in V.A.C. Gatrell, B. Lenman and G. Parker (eds), *Crime and the Law: The Social History of Crime in Western Europe since 1500* (London: Europa, 1980), pp.238-337.

<sup>7</sup> Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: The History of Manners and State Formation and Civilization* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

<sup>8</sup> Pieter Spierenburg, 'Violence and the Civilizing Process: Does it Work?' *Crime, Histoire & Sociétés/Crime, History and Societies*, 5, 2 (2001), pp.87-105, at p.98.

<sup>9</sup> Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: The Decline of Violence in History and its Causes* (London: Allen Lane, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> John Carter Wood, 'The Limits of Culture? Society, Evolutionary Psychology and the History of Violence', *Cultural and Social History*, 4, 1 (March 2007), pp.95-114, at p.106. See also idem, 'Self-Policing and the Policing of the Self: Violence, Protection and the Civilizing Bargain in Britain', *Crime, Histoire & Sociétés/Crime, History and Societies*, 7, 1 (2003), pp.109-28.

For the benefit of non-historians the people of early twentieth-century Britain experienced falling death and infant mortality rates, improved educational opportunities, political enfranchisement, shorter working hours, and rising real incomes which facilitated the availability of funds, albeit still limited, for discretionary consumer spending on a wider array of pursuits. In 1890, the average life expectancy of a British man was 44 years; by 1930 a man could expect to live up to the age of 59 with much of the shift being accounted for by the substantial decline in mortality rates between birth and five years of age in those years.<sup>11</sup> Other European countries which experienced similar socio-economic changes also witnessed falling recorded crime rates between the wars.<sup>12</sup>

It may appear churlish to remind the reader that crime serves as a catch-all term for a variety of behaviours ranging from murder to drink driving. In the case of London recorded crimes, known as indictable offences, formed fewer than 10 per cent of infractions listed as 'crimes' in the official statistics.<sup>13</sup> Details of those petty infractions, known as non-indictable offences, may be gleaned from the London County Council's annual abstract *London Statistics*, a comprehensive collection of trials held in the Administrative County of London, the City and Greater London.<sup>14</sup> In this article, offences viewed as 'disorderly behaviour' are examined to both complement and add a neglected dimension to the 'processes of civilization' hypothesis.

Disorder is an equally nebulous term, applying to an array of public actions veering from riots associated with public protest to children playing football in the street.<sup>15</sup> As late as 1925, three youths aged between 17 and 19 years were summoned before the bench at North London

---

<sup>11</sup> Joanna Bourke, *Working-Class Cultures in Britain, 1890-1960: Gender, Class and Ethnicity* (London: Routledge, 1994); Eric Hopkins, *The Rise and Decline of the English Working Classes, 1918-1990: A Social History* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1991).

<sup>12</sup> Pieter Spierenburg, *A History of Murder: Personal Violence in Europe from the Middle Ages to the Present* (Cambridge, 2008), pp.199-201. According to official data, public order improved in Stockholm and Sydney both through the 1920s and 1930s: Ted R. Gurr, 'Contemporary Crime in Historical Perspective: A Comparative Study of London, Stockholm, and Sydney', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 434 (1977), pp.114-36, at p.118.

<sup>13</sup> S.K. Ruck, 'Crime', in H.L. Smith (ed.), *The New Survey of London Life and Labour, Vol. 9: Life and Leisure* (London: P.S. King & Son Ltd., 1935), pp.346-90, at p.347.

<sup>14</sup> Figures for the Metropolitan Police District for the offences considered below are available for the period 1905-35, discounting gaps in the data for 1914-18, 1920 and 1923. No data exists for the later 1930s for the outbreak of the Second World War led to the temporary discontinuation of the publication of the *London Statistics*. These raw figures must be weighted to account for population change, thus all the figures below, unless stated otherwise, refer to a ratio per 100,000 of the population.

<sup>15</sup> An excellent analysis of disorder stemming from industrial unrest remains Jane Morgan, *Conflict and Order: The Police and Labour Disputes in England and Wales, 1900-1939* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987).

Police Court for playing football in Roads Place, Holloway. The presiding magistrate, Mr Pope, remarked:

I think it is about time that the police, who are paid for more important duties, should not be called upon to restrain a number of foolish boys when their parents ought to do it. If you tell me there is a complaint from a particular street I will have them brought here and express my views to them. The boys have wasted the time of a man who to be engaged on something more important. Each will have to pay a fine of 2/6.<sup>16</sup>

In short, disorder refers to any breach of the peace occurring on the streets. Following the assent of 34 Edward III, justices of the peace were invested with the power to compel people to enter into recognizances with the sovereign to keep the peace. Hence at common law, as a Royal Commission investigating into police practices noted: 'a constable may arrest anyone who within his view commits a breach of the peace [...] or anyone whom he has just cause to suspect to be about to commit a breach of the peace.'<sup>17</sup> The Metropolitan Police Act 1839 provided the main statutory basis for the discretionary power invested in constables over a variety of street activities.<sup>18</sup>

From the perspective of an historian, the concerns of this discussion are sociological, criminological and anthropological. In the first instance, a comprehensive overview of patterns of disorder in early-to-mid twentieth-century London has yet to be established.<sup>19</sup> Tracing these patterns places present day notions of disorder, often articulated as 'anti-social behaviour', in historical context.<sup>20</sup> The disorderly behaviour examined pertains to betting, prostitution, drunkenness and homelessness. While the law addressed the public manifestation of these practices, it was not illegal to gamble, sell one's body, drink to excess or fail to reside in a permanent residence. Secondly, the criminological component centres upon the interplay of police and policed, hence the importance of the institutional dimension to any study of perceived criminal behaviour. Such an approach necessitates the blending of 'hard' and 'soft' data; official reports and statistics are interpreted in the light of evidence gleaned from Metropolitan Police files, police court records, the papers of voluntary welfare organizations, sociological studies, newspaper stories and other literary sources. While the evidence is at times admittedly

---

<sup>16</sup> *The Times*, 6 May 1925.

<sup>17</sup> *Report of the Royal Commission on the Duties of the Metropolitan Police, Vol. 1, Cd. 4156* (London: HMSO, 1908), p.28.

<sup>18</sup> Stephen Inwood, 'Policing London's Morals: The Metropolitan Police and Popular Culture, 1829-50', *London Journal*, 15, 2 (1990), pp. 129-67. The legislation associated with disorder is covered in the *Royal Commission on the Duties of the Metropolitan Police*, pp.29-33.

<sup>19</sup> For an overview of the recent historiography see Emsley, *Crime and Society*.

<sup>20</sup> Geoffrey Pearson, *Hooligan: A History of Respectable Fears* (London: Macmillan, 1983).

anecdotal, accounting for the institutional aspect alongside long-term socio-economic factors allows for a more nuanced interpretation of patterns of disorder than Howard Taylor's reductionist supply-side thesis, which relies heavily on official sources, suggests.<sup>21</sup> Taken together, micro-history and thick description allows the student of crime to snatch glimpses of the experiences of policing and disorder before the Second World War. What follows is not an *ex-cathedra* statement, but a framework to facilitate further studies of crime and disorder in twentieth-century Britain.

Criminal statistics are shown to be the products of both behavioural and institutional practices. As records for non-indictable offences are based on the discretion of a police officer to effect an arrest, this article opens with an examination of police culture to comprehend the range of variables influencing decision making on the beat. The second section develops this occupational model further to interpret the trends shown by the statistics. With this appreciation of policing in practice, the third part argues that integrating Taylor's supply-side approach with a street-level understanding of the relationship between police and policed, while considering the broader socio-economic context, allows for measured inferences about social changes to be drawn from prosecution records.<sup>22</sup>

## **1 Police Culture**

At a first glance, an examination of trials for non-indictable offences between 1905 and 1938 suggests that the interwar years witnessed a marked reduction in what is now termed anti-social behaviour. For example, comparing average prosecution rates for the years 1919 and 1921-22 with the late-Edwardian era (1910-13) shows a significant fall in cases of assaulting a constable (-43.3%), begging (-79.8%), drunkenness (-55.13%), infractions against police regulations (-23.62%), malicious damage (-24.13%), parks offences (-10.4%) and prostitution (-41.02%). By the years 1933-34 the fall from late-Edwardian arrest rates was confirmed viz. the categories of assaulting a police officer (-62.36%), begging (-77.82%), common assault (-57.38%),

---

<sup>21</sup> Howard Taylor, 'The Politics of Rising Crime Statistics in England and Wales', *Crime, Histoire & Sociétés/Crime, History and Societies*, 2, 1 (1998), pp.5-28; idem, 'Forging the Job: A Crisis of "Modernization" or Redundancy for the Police in England and Wales, 1900-39', *British Journal of Criminology*, 39, 1 (1999), pp.113-35. For critiques of this one-sided supply thesis see Barry Godfrey, 'Changing Prosecution Practices and their Impact on Crime Figures, 1857-1940', *British Journal of Criminology*, 48 (2008), pp.171-89, at p.179; Robert M. Morris, "'Lies, Damned Lies and Criminal Statistics": Reinterpreting the Criminal Statistics in England and Wales', *Crime, Histoire & Sociétés/Crime, History and Societies*, 5, 1 (2001), pp.111-27.

<sup>22</sup> The most concise statement concerning the positive utility of criminal statistics as indicators of behavioural change is Gurr, 'Contemporary Crime in Historical Perspective', p.117.

drunkenness (-76.68%), infractions against police regulations (-66.24%), malicious damage (-61.28%) and prostitution (-69.98%).

Yet these figures must not be read at face value, for in the absence of wider contextual considerations, prosecutions records remain merely the footprints of the street constable. Individual action on behalf of the police officer was structured by the shifting interactions of the law, operational priorities, occupational practice, geographic place, public opinion and perceived delinquent behaviour. The police tended to target visible groups, such as foreigners, who were perceived to be more susceptible to criminal behaviour. For example, in the Edwardian and late-Edwardian eras, attention focused upon Jews in the case of anarchist behaviour; during the early 1920s the Chinese community in Pennyfields and Limehouse Causeway (East London) was linked in the press, and targeted by the police, for narcotics offences; while throughout the interwar years, especially during the late-1930s, people with a French connection were believed to be disproportionately involved in the sex trade.<sup>23</sup>

The working-classes also bore the brunt of prosecutions. For example, higher-class prostitutes tended not to attract the attention of the police as they did not need to solicit the streets.<sup>24</sup> In the case of betting and gaming offences, a Deputy Assistant Commissioner remarked in 1937:

Another Sub-Division showing small activity is Enfield, the outermost part of 'Y' Division. This ground does not lend itself to open betting offences. One would not say betting is not carried on, but except on a small area it is difficult to detect. In this middle class suburban area and some others, betting is carried on through the various roundsmen who call for orders for food and household requirements. Such men are able to take bets with their order and deliver them to the bookmakers under cover of their occupations – a very difficult thing to detect, and one likely to cause trouble if a mistake were made.

Where prosecutions were low in working-class districts, this in turn raised the suspicions of senior officers. In the same memorandum the author noted:

I'm not satisfied with the returns of Hampstead Sub-Division. West Hampstead, the Sectional Station, includes poor quarters bordering on Kilburn High Road, street markets and many costermongers – the usual ground for operation by low class bookmakers.

---

<sup>23</sup> Paul Knepper, 'The Other Invisible Hand: Jews and Anarchists in London before the First World War', *Jewish History*, 22 (2008), pp.295-315; Marek Kohn, *Dope Girls: The Birth of the British Drug Underground* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1992); John Seed, 'Limehouse Blues: Looking for Chinatown in the London Docks, 1900-40', *History Workshop Journal*, 62 (2006), pp. 58-85, at pp.70-1; Stefan Slater, 'Pimps, Police and Filles de Joie: Foreign Prostitution in Interwar London', *London Journal*, 32, 1 (2007), pp.53-74

<sup>24</sup> Stefan Slater, 'Prostitutes and Popular History: Notes on the "Underworld", 1918-39', *Crime, Histoire & Sociétés/Crime, History and Societies*, 13, 1 (2009), pp.25-48, at p.34.

The [Sub-Divisional] Inspector for this Sub-Division has changed twice in recent months and this may be a contributory cause for limited action.<sup>25</sup>

Police decisions about crime and disorder, and where instances of such behaviour occurred, were influenced heavily by knowledge gained on the beat.<sup>26</sup> When policing recognized 'rough' areas, such as Campbell Road (Holloway), such behaviour fed a self-fulfilling prophecy. For example, the police, expecting hostility and violence, over-reacted to trouble; those expecting to be on the receiving end of heavy-handed policing in turn acted aggressively.<sup>27</sup>

Police attitudes to disorder were shaped by both occupational and wider cultural influences. For the police differed from many occupations in that employee autonomy and discretion over the discharge of duties was higher amongst the lower ranks of the Metropolitan Police; hence enforcing the law, for the individual officer, meant the exercise of his personal authority.<sup>28</sup> That the exercise of authority by officers on the streets often manifested itself in a physical fashion, often towards 'the usual suspects', was reinforced by wider cultural factors in that most beat officers were from the working classes and were more familiar with behaviour classified traditionally as 'disorder'.<sup>29</sup> This machismo culture of policing was conditioned by a deeper tradition of bodily prowess and self-respect present in a working-class culture with men employed in physically demanding manufacturing and casual labour.<sup>30</sup> Hence officers viewed themselves as part of the 'respectable' poor, within the pale of the constitution, yet their uniform set them apart from those whom they policed.<sup>31</sup> This suggests a further precautionary principle when interpreting such statistics, for several objects of police action – beggars, drunks and prostitutes – also served as an easy arrest for the policeman eager to impress his superiors.<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> TNA, MEPO 3/2128, 'Betting Prosecutions, 1936', Deputy Assistant Commissioner's Office, No. 2 District HQ, Paddington Green, memo. 6 Feb. 1937.

<sup>26</sup> Stefan Slater, 'Containment: Managing Street Prostitution in London, 1918-1959', *Journal of British Studies*, 49, 2 (2010), pp. 332-57, at p.335.

<sup>27</sup> Jerry White, *Campbell Bunk: The Worst Street in North London between the Wars* (London: Pimlico, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., 2003), p.117.

<sup>28</sup> James Q. Wilson, *Varieties of Police Behavior: The Management of Law and Order in Eight Communities* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968), p.32.

<sup>29</sup> V.A.C. Gatrell, 'Crime, Authority and the Policeman-State', in F.M.L. Thompson (ed.), *The Cambridge Social History of Britain, 1750-1950, Vol. 3: Social Agencies and Institutions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp.270-71.

<sup>30</sup> Wilson, *Varieties of Police Behavior*, pp.33-34.

<sup>31</sup> Mark Clapson and Clive Emsley, 'Street, Beat, and Respectability: The Culture and Self-image of the Late Victorian and Edwardian Urban Policeman', in Louis A. Knafla (ed.), *Policing and War in Europe* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2002), pp. 107-31.

<sup>32</sup> Metropolitan Police Historical Collection, Charlton (MPHC), Charles Hanslow, 'Anecdotes: Memoirs of Charles James Hanslow' (unpub. 1986), pp.10, 14.

That policing was in itself a highly visible street-based culture, especially in the smaller inner-London divisions, meant that officers both influenced and were influenced by local norms and neighbourhood rules, rules which those whom may be classified as ‘disreputable regulars’ understood.<sup>33</sup> Given the financial, bureaucratic and other practical constraints on policing, a blind eye was turned to many disorderly and illegal activities deemed not to challenge both the local and wider social order.<sup>34</sup> Greater tolerance was shown towards streetwalkers in working-class districts in the East End environs of Aldgate, Cable Street, Commercial Street, Flower and Dean Street, Limehouse and the Whitechapel Road in comparison to the increasingly common targeting of prostitutes in areas such as Mayfair and Paddington, on the fringes of the established West End red-light districts.<sup>35</sup>

Other cultural practices informed the policeman’s choice to effect an arrest. Given the practical constraints governing policing, officers pursued an unofficial policy of containment to manage street crime. Former Police Sergeant Arthur Battle recalled of his time at City Road Station (‘G’ [Finsbury] Division) during the 1930s of ‘the prevalence of bookmakers on practically every street corner. At lunch time workers would pour out of the warehouses and offices, all intent on catching the bookie on the corner.’ When first posted to the Nile Street patrol during the mid-1930s, his actions led to a disruption of traditional police practices, with members of the public viewing him with bemusement:

The interesting part of the whole business is that never again, during the whole time I was at City Road, was I ever posted to the Nile Street patrol. I realized that associating with bookmakers was not confined solely to PCs and that some officers of a higher rank had some sort of understanding with them, and doubtless the matter of my queering the bookmaker’s pitch had been brought to their attention, with the result, as I say, that I never patrolled Nile Street again.<sup>36</sup>

Carl Chinn asserts that it was during the interwar years that the ritual of officers informing bookmakers that it was ‘their turn’ – which led to a stooge, often an unemployed man, being arrested – became standard police practice in certain divisions in many forces. Both beat and

---

<sup>33</sup> James Q. Wilson, *Thinking About Crime* (New York: Vintage, rev. edn., 1985), p.77.

<sup>34</sup> Dick Hobbs, *Doing the Business: Entrepreneurship, the Working Class and Detectives in the East End of London* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp.55-60.

<sup>35</sup> Stefan Slater, ‘Pimps, Police and Filles de Joie’; idem, ‘Containment’.

<sup>36</sup> MPHC, Arthur Battle, ‘The Job’s Not Like It Used to Be’ (unpub. 1972), pp.35-36. For another first-hand account of serious corruption in the case of street betting see Harry Daley, *This Small Cloud: A Personal Memoir* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1986), pp.92-95.



senior officer received financial rewards to play the game.<sup>37</sup> Allegations and examples of corruption were evident in the case of prostitution, suggesting that what would today be termed 'unorthodox practices', the tacit rules of the game, were systemic to managing street crime and containing disorder. With both street betting and street prostitution, fines were often viewed as a form of taxation factored into the operating costs of these illicit economies.<sup>38</sup>

It needs to be stressed, however, that police assumptions of what constituted disorder were not just the product of an occupational culture, these preconceptions were based upon societal attitudes.<sup>39</sup> Disorder was often associated with the indigent poor found in boroughs such as Poplar, with an official poverty rate of 24.1 percent in 1932; yet two-thirds of the population lived and worked in the borough which fostered strong community relations. Oral histories stress this concept of 'community' in structuring concepts of crime and disorder. It appears that few property crimes were committed within these communities as there were few consumer goods which could be stolen and disposed of without attracting attention of neighbours and kin. Hence doors could be kept unlocked. Moreover, the number of people living in multi-occupancy dwellings encouraged strong domestic discipline. While theft and violence occurred, the former was believed to be targeted against areas 'outside', while local gangsters were believed to leave locals alone. These same sources point to the prevalence of street fights, yet such behaviour was not classified as a crime of violence.<sup>40</sup> Bernard Kops remembered of Stepney Green, part of the Jewish East End: 'I see it was a desperate time – but then, it meant security, and happiness.'<sup>41</sup> Despite such strong community relations, it is important to note that the general affluence experienced across London during the interwar years fostered marked social mobility, with father to son occupational continuity below 10 percent. Indeed, East London boroughs witnessed a marked fall in population between 1921 and 1931, especially in Bethnal Green (-

---

<sup>37</sup> Carl Chinn, *Better Betting with a Decent Feller: A Social History of Bookmaking* (London: Aurum Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. 2004).

<sup>38</sup> Keith Laybourn, *Working-Class Gambling in Britain, c. 1906-1960s: The Stages of the Political Debate* (Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2007), pp.118-20; Slater, 'Containment', p.342.

<sup>39</sup> P.A.J. Waddington, 'Police (Canteen) Sub-Culture: An Appreciation', *British Journal of Criminology*, 39, 2 (1999), pp.287-309, at p.293.

<sup>40</sup> Frankie Fraser and James Morton, *Mad Frank: Memoirs of a Life of Crime* (London: Little, Brown, 1994), pp.7-8; Roger Hood and Kate Joyce, 'Three Generations: Oral Testimonies on Crime and Social Change in London's East End', *British Journal of Criminology*, 39, 1 (1999), pp.136-60, at pp.142-50; Bryan Magee, *Clouds of Glory: A Hoxton Childhood* (London: Pimlico, 2004), pp.147-50, 186-88; Gillian Rose, 'Imagining Poplar in the 1920s: Contested Concepts of Community', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 16, 4 (1990), pp.425-37, at p.427.

<sup>41</sup> Bernard Kops, *The World is a Wedding* (London: MacGibbon & Kee Ltd, 1963), p.15.

16.2%), Poplar (-14.3%), Shoreditch (-16.4%) and Stepney (-17.3%).<sup>42</sup> Falling population in such areas may have encouraged a sense of security as crime rates fell. For example, while recorded crime rates rose across the capital during the late 1930s, nominal offences fell by over 26 percent in the 'H' Whitechapel Division between 1934 and 1937.<sup>43</sup>

Officers on the beat both accommodated and reinforced these strong informal social controls.<sup>44</sup> In this context, order could be maintained without recourse to formal justice. Arthur Battle who served in the City Road sub-division of 'G' Division, which covered the then infamous district of Hoxton, recalled:

The way in which the men at City Road dealt with the local 'yobs' was brought home to me very sharply one day. I left the station in company with PC 124 Joe Vincent to walk to our beats in the Goswell Road area. We turned right off Central Street into Bastwick Street, one of the least salubrious streets in the district. It had a very narrow pavement, with only room for the two of us to walk abreast. When we got near to the end of the street I saw four of the local 'layabouts' standing outside a cafe on the narrow pavement. I was talking to Joe, a chap very near to the end of his service, all of which he had spent at the same station, and as we got close to the four on the pavement I casually stepped into the roadway to get by them. Joe decided otherwise. One of the 'yobs' was standing with his back to us. Joe unhooked his tightly rolled cape from his belt, and hit the fellow on the backs of his legs, causing him to fall flat on the ground as he fell against the other three. Not a word was said by anyone. When he had passed by Joe hitched his cape back on his belt, and said so casually to me, 'Never get in the road for those bastards. Shift 'em!'<sup>45</sup>

It is probable that this kind of informal regulation declined during the 1930s. While senior police officers noted with some alarm that offences by juveniles were increasing rapidly, Norman Kendal, the head of the CID, commented: 'I think it is true that police officers are becoming more Juvenile Crime-minded.'<sup>46</sup> Officers were nonetheless concerned about this rise:

Yet another explanation given is that people are less reluctant to bring children to justice now than they used to be. People who have the option of charging or not charging are more prepared to charge if the young offender is not likely to be severely punished, and police whose advice is often sought might be expected to influence the persons

---

<sup>42</sup> Dudley Baines and Paul Johnson, 'In Search of the "Traditional" Working Class: Social Mobility and Occupational Continuity in Interwar London', *Economic History Review*, 52, 4 (1999), pp.692-713, at pp.708-9.

<sup>43</sup> TNA, MEPO 4/275, monthly divisional returns for 1934 and 1937.

<sup>44</sup> Wilson, *Thinking About Crime*, p.83.

<sup>45</sup> MPHC, Battle, 'The Job's Not Like It Used to Be', p.39. For locals recollecting being on the receiving end of such treatment see Phil Cohen, 'Policing the Working-Class City', in Bob Fine *et al* (eds), *Capitalism and the Rule of Law: From Deviancy Theory to Marxism* (London: Hutchinson, 1979), pp.118-36 at pp.122-23.

<sup>46</sup> TNA, MEPO 2/4252, Kendal minute, 23 March 1937.

concerned more frequently to pursue a charge now that the offender is dealt with by a Juvenile Court than they were under the old procedure.

There is doubtless a good deal in this last point though here again it is not easy to believe that any increased readiness to charge can have been general enough or sufficient in quantity to account for a very important part of the large increase in cases in the last three years.<sup>47</sup>

With an appreciation of the variables influencing police action in mind, it is time to examine the statistics in greater detail. For at the simplest level, official statistics record instances of police reaction to perceived disorderly behaviour.

## **2 Police Practices**

The late-Edwardian years witnessed a significant rise in trials for non-indictable offences compared with 1905-9, especially in the case of assaulting a police officer (+18.35%), begging (+10.09%), drunkenness (+15.95%), parks offences (+39.63%) and prostitution (+22.46%). It is probable, however, that these figures overestimate the amount of disorder as compared with the interwar years.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, a number of historians attest that the years from 1890 until the outbreak of the First World War witnessed a general clamp down on public disorder as state and philanthropic action, in conjunction with increased media attention, created greater awareness of anti-social behaviour. As the notion of the 'social' developed, the number of laws and regulations influencing human behaviour increased.<sup>49</sup> Gambling serves as a case in point. The Street Betting Act 1906 criminalized the placing and receiving of bets in the streets and public places; though some senior police officers feared, correctly, that the legislation would prove unworkable in its aim of eliminating gambling. Initial enforcement was spurred, however, by high police morale given the falling overall crime rates and the impetus of the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, Sir Edward Henry, who had fostered strong links with the National Anti-Gambling League.<sup>50</sup> Hence prosecutions for betting and gaming rose by nearly 45 percent between 1905-9 and 1910-13.

---

<sup>47</sup> *Report of the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis for the Year 1936*, Cmd. 5457 (London: HMSO, 1937), p.23.

<sup>48</sup> While the Edwardian era ended technically with the sovereign's death in 1910, the phrase is used as short-hand to refer to the early twentieth century up until the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. In this context 'late-Edwardian' refers to the period 1910-13.

<sup>49</sup> Bill Schwarz, 'Night Battles: Hooligan and Citizen', in Mica Nava and Alan O'Shea (eds), *Modern Times: Reflections on a Century of English Modernity* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp.107-13; Martin J. Wiener, *Reconstructing the Criminal: Culture, Law, and Policy in Victorian England, 1830-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp.338-39.

<sup>50</sup> David Dixon, "'Class Law': The Street Betting Act of 1906", *International Journal of Sociology of Law*, 8 (1980), pp.101-28, at p.120; idem, *From Prohibition to Regulation: Bookmaking, Anti-Gambling and the*

That increased prosecutions need not translate into instances of increased offending may be gleaned from a remark from Sir Edward about prostitution in 1909: 'There has been some increase in the number of charges for solicitation and open-air indecency, but this does not warrant the deduction that the actual amount of vice has increased.'<sup>51</sup> According to former metropolitan magistrate Cecil Chapman between 1894 and 1906 over 700 brothels were closed in Lambeth and Southwark in South London alone, by 1912 over 1,100 had been shut.<sup>52</sup> David Jones found similar evidence of moral revivalism on prosecutions during this period in South Wales.<sup>53</sup>

Yet the officers did not just respond to directives from Scotland Yard. While the streets of London were, with the exception of the City, managed from Scotland Yard, policing in practice was often governed by the whim of the local sub-divisional Inspector. For example, a police memorandum makes clear that the war against gambling being waged in the 'H' (Whitechapel) Division in 1936 was the result of the Superintendent controlling divisional policy.<sup>54</sup> This crackdown may have been occasioned by the appointment of a new Superintendent for 'H' Division in December 1935.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, the author of the memorandum was not convinced that such intense activity was an efficient expenditure of manpower, for he believed that police action tended to drive betting underground.<sup>56</sup>

In turn police officers, at times, chose to deliberately ignore offences. An intense police crackdown on prostitution between 1901 and 1906 was interrupted following the furore over the mistaken arrest of Madame D'Angely, a prostitute, for soliciting in 1906.<sup>57</sup> Prosecutions for

---

Law (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), ch.7; Clive Emsley, *The Great British Bobby: A History of British Policing from the 18<sup>th</sup> Century to the Present* (London: Quercus, 2010), p.204.

<sup>51</sup> TNA, MEPO 2/1287, Edward Henry to the Home Office Undersecretary, 14 July 1909.

<sup>52</sup> Cecil Chapman, *The Poor Man's Court of Justice: Twenty-Five Years as a Metropolitan Police Magistrate* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1925), pp. 90-95. For context see Judith R. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp.211-12.

<sup>53</sup> Jones, *Crime and Policing*, pp.2, 37.

<sup>54</sup> TNA, MEPO 3/2128, memo. 22 July 1936, signature illegible.

<sup>55</sup> MPHC, 'List of Superintendents of "H" Division from Sept. 1829'.

<sup>56</sup> TNA, MEPO 3/2128, memo. 22 July 1936, signature illegible.

<sup>57</sup> Intensified police action against prostitutes is covered by Lucy Bland, *Banishing the Beast: Feminism, Sex and Morality* (London: Tauris Parke Paperbacks, 2001), p.109. For the public reaction and police response to the D'Angely case see Paula Bartley, *Prostitution: Prevention and Reform in England, 1860-1914* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp.164-65. An excellent, though top-heavy, analysis of policing during

soliciting plummeted by nearly 50 percent between 1906 and 1907 rising back to 'natural' Edwardian rates from 1909. A lack of police action meant that prostitutes could solicit with impunity leading to calls from the public to 'cleanse the streets'. Some magistrates suggested that a similar policy of police inertia towards prostitutes was adopted following Sir Almeric Fitzroy's conviction for annoying women in Hyde Park being overturned on appeal.<sup>58</sup> Subsequent research suggests that the Metropolitan Police adopted a 'go-slow' towards the targeting of prostitutes in 1923 leading officers to pursue, in line with its new attitude towards street betting, a policy of containment.<sup>59</sup>

A.M. Carr-Saunders, a leading social scientist, claimed that official figures demonstrated an increase in 'orderliness' during the Great Depression, yet he failed to account for supply-factors which skewed the statistics.<sup>60</sup> The late 1920s and early 1930s were years of turmoil for the police, with allegations of corruption and heavy-handed behaviour receiving much public comment. A study of non-indictable offences between 1928 and 1932 shows that arrests for assaulting a police officer, begging and sleeping out, betting and gaming, drunkenness, infractions against police regulations and soliciting prostitution fluctuated markedly as constables worked to rule. Overall, between 1928 and 1929 the number of trials for all non-indictable offences fell by 9.9 per cent rising by 8.5 percent in 1930. Moreover, the arrest ratio in the Metropolitan Police District for 1931-3 follows a similar pattern: a 14 percent fall followed by a 13 percent rise. It is important to look beyond the statistics. For example, prosecutions for assaulting a policeman followed this trend between 1928 and 1929 (-5.8%, +23.8%) and from 1931 to 1933 (-20.5%, +28%), suggesting a reduction of police action.<sup>61</sup> Yet in 1931 Patrick Hilditch, a young man from Stepney was fined and sentenced to one month hard-labour for being disorderly and kicking a police officer. The assistant gaoler remarked to the magistrate at Thames Police Court: 'assaults on local police were becoming very prevalent. They had had

---

the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries may be found in Stefan Petrow, *Policing Morals: The Metropolitan Police and the Home Office, 1870-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

<sup>58</sup> TNA, HO 326/7 SOC 2, 50, q. 919, evidence of H.L. Cancellor, Marlborough Street magistrate; H. T. Waddy, *The Police Court and its Work* (London: Butterworth & Co, 1925), 188. For a contemporary belief that the streets did deteriorate following the Fitzroy case see TNA, HO 45/12663, London Public Morality Council, 'Committee of Inquiry: Women's Courts', 1924.

<sup>59</sup> Slater, 'Containment', pp.343, 350.

<sup>60</sup> A.M. Carr-Saunders, 'Crime and Unemployment', *Political Quarterly*, 5, 3 (July 1934), pp.395-99, at p.396.

<sup>61</sup> Stefan Slater, 'Lady Astor and the Ladies of the Night: The Home Office, the Metropolitan Police and the Politics of the Street Offences Committee, 1927-28', *Law and History Review*, 30, 2 (forthcoming, May 2012).

many of these cases recently.<sup>62</sup> Six months later, a short statement appeared in the *City and East London Observer* titled 'Magisterial Warning'; the article proceeded to state: "Anybody who assaults the police in this part of the world, as long as I am here, will go to prison," said F.T. Barrington-Ward, KC, the magistrate at Thames Police Court.<sup>63</sup> To take another example, a study of prostitution suggests that streetwalking, especially outside renowned red-light areas, may have increased during this period of economic recession.<sup>64</sup>

Police action towards public disorder was curtailed further by responses to the Metropolitan Police's dealing with the 1932 Hunger March. Over 10,000 people turned up at a Hyde Park rally on 27 October 1932, and serious allegations were made that two police *agents provocateurs* in the crowd threw missiles at police officers to provoke a baton charge.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, a historian in the 1980s stated that rediscovered footage from an amateur photographer shows the police attacking demonstrators without provocation.<sup>66</sup> Given the adverse press attention which the police faced from late 1928 it should come as no surprise that prosecutions for public order offences fell markedly. It was in the interest of officers at Scotland Yard to be mindful to public opinion, given the vocal opposition to Metropolitan Police Commissioner Trenchard's Police Bill (which included introducing an 'officer class' to the force), which received its third reading on 26 June 1933. That Scotland Yard was sensitive to such considerations is suggested by official preparation for a hunger march in 1934. Sir John Gilmour, the Home Secretary, warned Trenchard that a repeat of policing practices witnessed two years earlier would be politically unpalatable. When the demonstration occurred in February 1934 events unfolded relatively peacefully, which was due in part to less obtrusive policing.<sup>67</sup>

Hence by the mid-1930s the police felt in a secure enough position to reassert their authority and reclaim the streets. Between 1934 and 1935 the prosecution ratio rose in cases of assaulting a constable (+44.8%), betting and gaming (+60.4%), drunkenness (+6.6%), malicious damage (+17%) and prostitution (+72%). While apprehensions for begging and sleeping out fell

---

<sup>62</sup> *City and East London Observer*, 3 Jan. 1931.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 4 July 1931.

<sup>64</sup> Slater, 'Prostitutes and Popular History', pp.31-33.

<sup>65</sup> Janet Clark, 'Sincere and Reasonable Men? The Origins of the National Council for Civil Liberties', *Twentieth Century British History*, 20, 4 (2009), pp.513-37, at pp.517-18; Morgan, *Conflict and Order*, pp.244-59; John Stevenson and Chris Cook, *The Slump: Britain in the Great Depression* (Harlow: Pearson, 2010), pp.235-49.

<sup>66</sup> Richard Croucher, *We Refuse to Starve in Silence: A History of the National Unemployed Workers' Movement, 1920-46* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1987), p.140.

<sup>67</sup> Clark, 'Sincere and Reasonable Men', pp.527-29, 532.

by 14 percent and 21 percent respectively, this was due to the implementation of the Vagrancy Act 1935 which made it necessary for an arresting officer to demonstrate that a vagrant had refused shelter or caused damage.<sup>68</sup> This crackdown may have been boosted by the increased intolerance to disorder in the wake of clashes between fascist and anti-fascist demonstrators, and between the latter and the police, which the Metropolitan Police viewed as a drain on resources.<sup>69</sup> Police practices may have also inflated arrests, for during the late 1930s both Harry Daley and Charles Hanslow recalled an increased pressure to arrest as rival sub-divisional Inspectors competed against each other. Arrests were a means to show who was the most efficient. At the same time, officers realized that they could avoid onerous tasks, such as traffic duty, if they took the time to process an arrest.<sup>70</sup> This practice may have gained momentum during the 1930s. Indeed, the *Daily Herald* observed in 1932:

Many officers in the Metropolitan Police feel that unless they bring a large enough number of their fellow citizens to court they are in danger of losing pay. This is the interpretation they have placed on Lord Trenchard's warning [the Metropolitan Police Commissioner] notices to 174 policemen. The notices are to the effect that unless there is a marked improvement in the zeal and efficiency with which these men perform their duties certain increments will be withheld.<sup>71</sup>

It would be mistaken, however, to suggest that prosecution rates are merely reactive. The rise in offences for prostitution from the mid-1930s resulted from both a change in operational policy (all officers from 1935 were instructed to pay attention to soliciting) and from complaints from ratepayers in Westminster (especially in the environs of Mayfair) about the increased visibility of prostitutes in the district.<sup>72</sup> Despite the crackdown on disorderly behaviour during the mid-thirties, arrests for soliciting rose by a further 10 percent 1935-36.<sup>73</sup>

Most of these arrests occurred in the West End, for local opinion was more tolerant of prostitutes in areas such as East London.<sup>74</sup> Scouring local newspaper reports reveals the

---

<sup>68</sup> *Report of the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis for the Year 1935*, Cmd. 5165 (London: HMSO, 1936), p.61.

<sup>69</sup> John Stevenson, 'The BUF, the Metropolitan Police and Public Order', in Kenneth Lunn and Richard C. Thurlow (eds), *British Fascism: Essays on the Radical Right in Inter-War Britain* (London: Croom Helm, 1980), pp.146-47.

<sup>70</sup> Daley, *This Small Cloud*, pp. 166-67; MPH, Hanslow, 'Anecdotes': pp.10, 14, 40.

<sup>71</sup> *Daily Herald*, 12 Dec. 1932.

<sup>72</sup> TNA, MEPO 2/6622, Carter minute, 3 December 1938; TNA, HO 45/24902, Deputy Assistant Commissioner 'C', Ronald Howe minute, 24 February 1939; Westminster City Archives, minutes of the Watch Committee, 1935-37, meeting 3 October 1935; idem, 1938-39, meeting 19 January 1939; Women's Library, London Metropolitan University, 3/AMS, box 46, Executive Minutes, 13 June 1939.

<sup>73</sup> TNA, MEPO 2/6622, Carter minute, 3 December 1938.

<sup>74</sup> For an examination of prostitution in East London see Slater, 'Containment', pp.348-52.

degree of sympathy with which prostitutes were viewed in the dock areas of East London. In 1937 two public houses on the West India Dock Road, the Blue Posts and the Railway Tavern, were prosecuted for allowing their premises to be used by habitual prostitutes. In the case of the Blue Posts, the MP for South Poplar, David Adams, testified that he used the public house from time-to-time with his wife and saw no disorderly conduct. John Gilbertson, a member of Poplar Borough Council, swore that he had never been approached by women while drinking at the Posts. The landlord, John Brown, was acquitted, for while the magistrate had no doubt that the premises were used by women of 'reputed undesirable character', there was no evidence of disorder.<sup>75</sup> As regards Thomas Chandler, the landlord of the Railway Tavern, the magistrate at Thames Police Court, Mr Dickson, remarked 'that he found the charges proved, but in view of the defendant's record and the difficult circumstances arising out the locality in which the house situated he would dismiss the summons.'<sup>76</sup> In view of these findings, it is important to ground any interpretation of criminal statistics in a local context.

### **3 Street Conditions**

Despite the difficulties in interpreting official statistics to determine levels of disorder, in most cases, there is no doubting the general integrity of the recorded trends. A micro-history of soliciting during the interwar years, in light of the evidence above showing that increased prosecutions during the late-Edwardian era were an artifice of policing, suggests that prostitution – especially the number of casual women undertaking the trade – declined during this period, though the statistics underestimate the extent of streetwalking as surveillance concentrated on professionals in the increasingly commercialized West End. In short, while the prevalence of prostitution across London was on the wane, the incidence of streetwalking may have increased in certain districts.<sup>77</sup>

Relying on official statistics alone is fraught with danger, for the greater the distance between the production of the relevant source material from the site of action classified as disorderly, the greater the need for caution in deploying said material as 'evidence'. For example, John Stevenson wrote 'the worst years of the depression, 1921-2 and 1929-33, appear not to have

---

<sup>75</sup> *City and East London Observer*, 2 Jan., 16 Jan., 6 Feb. 1937.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 23 Jan. 1937.

<sup>77</sup> *Prevalence* refers to the number of offenders as a proportion of the population, while *incidence* denotes the number of offences committed by an individual. For elaboration on this distinction see James Q. Wilson and Richard J. Herrnstein, *Crime and Human Nature* (New York: The Free Press, 1998), p.30.



had a decisive impact on total criminal activity.<sup>78</sup> At face value, the statistics appear to confirm Stevenson's statement, with arrests for prostitution falling by 12.6 percent between 1921 and 1922. Yet an examination of police court records during the depression of the early 1920s reminds the historian of the care needed in statistical interpretation. In the case of prostitution in the 'H' (Whitechapel) Division, 92 women were arrested for 137 soliciting offences in 1920, two years later only 72 women were charged for 89 infractions. Over this same period, the proportion of women detained with a background in domestic service (including char ladies) fell from 68 percent to 52 percent of the total; at the same time women aged 17-29 years rose from 28 percent to 38 percent suggesting that a wider range of working-class women were recruited into prostitution.<sup>79</sup> A young mother from Limehouse (in the East End) interviewed for a London Weekend Television series on the history of the metropolis recalled of this period:

I did apply for assistance, and when someone came to interview me, they told me I'd have to put the children away in a home before they'd give me any money. But I didn't want to lose my children; my children were my treasures. I had a baby that would have been about six months and a boy of two, and I was in such a quandary, I didn't know what to do, you see. I told the person to get out, so he said, 'What are you going to do, start stealing?' I said 'No'.

Then I thought, which way can I turn? I knew that my children were hungry and I swore that my children would never go hungry again, and no one was going to take them away from me. So, after I'd put them to bed I went out and sold myself for just a few shillings. I went to an all-night café, I bought a tin of Nestlé's milk for my baby and a sponge cake and some ham sandwiches for my boy, and I woke them up. And I gave my little boy a ham sandwich and when he got half way through he said, 'Mummy, I don't want any more,' and this picture is engraved in my memory.

Then I started doing it as a regular thing. I used to go up to the café just up the street, and there would be sailors, a lot of them were Chinese sailors or American tourists, or businessmen. They'd come up and speak to the children, I'd get into conversation, and that's how I used to meet them. Some would be regulars, boyfriends, and they'd be kind to me. I'd take them back to my place or arrange to meet them there. I'd always do it in the other room when the children were asleep. Some would be a pound or two pounds. See, the more money I got the less I'd do it. They'd always have to pay first, because beforehand they'd promise you the world, then when they'd had what they wanted it was bye, bye. I was caught like that.<sup>80</sup>

---

<sup>78</sup> John Stevenson, *British Society 1914-45* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), p.373.

<sup>79</sup> London Metropolitan Archives, Farringdon (LMA), PS/OLD/A1/51-54, 57-60; PS/TH/A1/149-54, 157-61.

<sup>80</sup> Gavin Weightman, Steve Humphries, Joanna Mack and John Taylor, *The Making of Modern London* (London: Ebury Press, 2007), p.208.

While it remains likely that prostitution declined between the birth of the twentieth century and the outbreak of the Second World War, the downward trend in the statistics seriously underestimates the extent of the interwar sex trade.<sup>81</sup>

This trend was not just evident in London. The City of Manchester, a much smaller urban area with a population of just over three-quarters of a million people throughout the interwar years, is a useful jurisdiction to compare with the Metropolitan Police District. For unlike most of Lancashire, which was dramatically affected by the post-war decline in the cotton trade, Manchester's industrial estate at Trafford Park and the presence of the ship canal inured the city from the worst effects of interwar economic malaise. Indeed, Manchester's unemployment figures, in tandem with London, were below the national average throughout the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>82</sup> Eric Hewitt noted that Manchester witnessed a similar fall in prosecutions for prostitution offences, though when considering evidence submitted by an official to the Street Offences Committee during the late-1920s observed: 'His experience of Manchester, he said, went back as far as 1890. "There was, no doubt, less of that kind of offence in the Manchester of 1927, and to some degree it was due to the system of carrying on the business having being changed."<sup>83</sup> A similar falling trend for prostitution offences was found by David Jones in his study of South Wales.<sup>84</sup>

In the case of betting and gaming, prosecutions rose over 100 percent between 1910-13 and 1933-34. While it remains difficult to estimate the extent of gambling, contemporaries and historians are in agreement that expenditure on and participation in this form of recreation increased during the interwar years.<sup>85</sup> Not only did the police arrest according to an unofficial policy of containment, and an unknown number of offenders avoided the law due to police complicity, officers across the board were generally tolerant towards illegal gambling. Indeed, while delivering evidence *in camera* to the Royal Commission on Licensing and Betting in 1932, Sir Trevor Bigham (Deputy Commissioner) admitted that the Commissioner would welcome any relaxation in the law.<sup>86</sup> Thus it is more than likely that the increase in arrests for betting and

---

<sup>81</sup> Slater, 'Containment'.

<sup>82</sup> Alan Kidd, *Manchester* (Keele: Keele University Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., 1996), p.185.

<sup>83</sup> Eric J. Hewitt, *A History of Policing in Manchester* (Manchester: E.J. Morten, 1979), p.123.

<sup>84</sup> Jones, *Crime and Policing*, pp.176-78.

<sup>85</sup> J. Martin, 'Gambling', in H.L. Smith (ed.), *The New Survey of London Life and Labour, Vol. 9: Life and Leisure* (London: P.S. King & Son Ltd, 1935), p.273; Chinn, *Better Betting*, pp.136-38.

<sup>86</sup> TNA, MEPO, 3/755, 'Confidential: Royal Commission on Lotteries and Betting', Paper No. 2, minutes of evidence of 1<sup>st</sup> private session, evidence of Sir Trevor Bigham, 1 July 1932', p.5.

gaming not only grossly underestimates the extent of gambling, this suggests that the activities of street gamblers caused a fair amount of public nuisance. Both drunkenness and begging will in turn be examined to present a clearer picture of disorder.

Both Herman Mannheim (a pioneering criminologist) and Sir Edward Troup (a former Home Office permanent under-secretary) observed that prosecutions for drunkenness rose significantly while at the same time crimes of violence declined during the Edwardian and late-Edwardian eras.<sup>87</sup> That common assault decreased by 13.49 percent between 1905-9 and 1910-13 while drunkenness increased by 15.95 percent suggests that the police were clamping down on unruly behaviour given the overall decline in alcohol consumption which occurred from the late-Victorian era.<sup>88</sup> This fall is evident in other areas of anti-social behaviour, for example, from 1900 most prostitutes were arrested for soliciting offences whereas between 1875 and 1886 70 percent of prostitutes arrested in the 'E' (Holborn) Division were apprehended for being drunk.<sup>89</sup> During the Edwardian years police officers were certainly paying more attention to drunkenness. For example, in 1906 the Executive Branch at Scotland Yard issued a directive:

As the question of drunkenness is now somewhat prominently under consideration I think it would be well to have inquiry made with a view to getting some information on record. Inquiry might be made to elucidate the following points bearing upon the causes at work to bring about the admittedly smaller consumption of to-day.<sup>90</sup>

That the rise in prosecutions for drunkenness offences were an artifice of increased policing is suggested by an observation that the post-First World War peak in court cases for common assault (1921) was five percent *above* the late-Edwardian average, whereas the interwar peak for drunkenness trials (1922) represents a fall of nearly 50 percent from the average prosecution rate between 1910 and 1913. By 1933-34 prosecutions for drunkenness had fallen 76.68 percent from the late-Edwardian average while trials for common assault fell 57.38 percent over the same period. That the vast majority of violent offences remained unrecorded for the late-Victorian and Edwardian eras, does not detract from the provenance of the falling trend

---

<sup>87</sup> Hermann Mannheim, *Social Aspects of Crime in England between the Wars* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1940), pp. 177-78; Troup, 'Crime', p.397.

<sup>88</sup> A.E. Dingle, 'Drink and Working-Class Living Standards in Britain, 1870-1914', *Economic History Review*, 25 (1972), pp.608-22. For contemporary commentary that drunkenness and rowdy behaviour declined see Charles Booth, *Life and Labour of the People of London, Final Volume: Notes on Social Influences and Conclusion* (London: Macmillan, 1903), pp.59, 68-69.

<sup>89</sup> MPHC, Reports of the Superintendent of 'E' Division to the Commissioner, 1875-86; TNA, HO 45/21766, note on prosecutions for soliciting, 4 July 1929.

<sup>90</sup> MPHC, 'M' (Southwark) Division Executive Orders book, Edward Henry memo., 17 Nov. 1906.

suggested by the criminal statistics.<sup>91</sup> Indeed, it is more than likely that the general long-term fall in drunkenness across our period of study contributed to the notion of improved orderliness and civility, which in turn aided formal and informal social controls.<sup>92</sup>

Such considerations should not lead to the suggestion that the 'drink problem' was not an issue during the interwar years. Concern was voiced about increased consumption of methylated spirits after the First World War until the mid 1920s.<sup>93</sup> Stella Moss' research shows that while the practice of women feeding babies and young children with alcohol to keep them quiet had declined since the turn of the twentieth century, these increasingly occasional incidents recur in memories and in court proceedings during the interwar years.<sup>94</sup>

Despite the evidence deployed confirming notions of a general process of civilization, social change is neither an abstract force nor a homogeneous idea following a linear trajectory. Indeed, following the general clampdown in public order in 1935, the prosecution ratio for drunkenness proceedings (garnered from the relevant *Reports of the Commissioner of Police*) rose by a further five percent 1935-37. Yet again, David Jones reached similar conclusions about trends in South Wales.<sup>95</sup> During the late 1930s the rise in prosecutions for drunkenness followed a national pattern.<sup>96</sup> For example, the City of Manchester witnessed a 34 percent fall in the number of proceedings for drunkenness between 1912-13 and 1921, the interwar peak year.<sup>97</sup> Proceedings fell a further 70 percent between 1921 and 1932.<sup>98</sup> Yet the number of arrests rose by 31.5 percent by 1933. The Chief Constable remarked: 'It is difficult to account for such a considerable increase in prosecutions for drunkenness in one year, and it is possible that

---

<sup>91</sup> Barry Godfrey, 'Counting and Accounting for the Decline in Non-Lethal Violence in England, Australia, and New Zealand, 1880-1920', *British Journal of Criminology*, 43, 2 (2003), pp.340-53.

<sup>92</sup> Wilson, *Thinking About Crime*, p.233.

<sup>93</sup> *Report of the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis for the Year 1922* Cmd. 1904 (London: HMSO, 1923), p.6; *Report of the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis for the Year 1923*, Cmd. 2189 (London: HMSO, 1924), p.19; *Report of the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis for the Year 1924*, Cmd. 2480 (London: HMSO, 1925), p.19.

<sup>94</sup> Stella Moss, "'A Grave Question": The Children Act and Public House Regulation, c. 1908-39', *Crimes and Misdemeanours*, 3, 2 (2009), pp. 98-117, at p.108.

<sup>95</sup> Jones, *Crime and Policing*, pp.171-74.

<sup>96</sup> Morris, 'Lies, Damned Lies and Criminal Statistics', p.124.

<sup>97</sup> Hewitt, *A History of Policing in Manchester*, p.122.

<sup>98</sup> All figures for Manchester are to be found in the chief constable's annual reports held at Greater Manchester Police Museum and Archives (GMPMA).

it may be due to an improvement of trade generally.<sup>99</sup> Arrests had risen a further 24.5 percent by 1935.

Moreover, in conjunction with the reduction in behaviour classified as 'disorderly' during the interwar period, the police adopted a more tolerant approach to these petty offences. Hermann Mannheim observed in his study of interwar crime: 'In a written statement from the Assistant Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police to the Royal Commission [on licensing] it is frankly admitted that "in practice we never charge a man unless he is either (a) disorderly, or (b) incapable. Incapable generally means immovable."<sup>100</sup> Custom influenced decision making greatly. Edward Lyscom recalled:

On Christmas night I paraded at 9-45pm and the skeleton crew was briefed especially well by the sergeant. 'Don't forget it's Christmas and a lot of people will have a drop too much to drink. Well, let them, we don't want any drunks unless it's impossible to get them home. If you have any bother let the station know, but no arrests unless absolutely necessary, we haven't got any mince pies to feed them on'.<sup>101</sup>

Custom was also influenced by class; for according to Charles Hanslow:

After the University Boat Race, thousands of students congregated in the Piccadilly Circus vicinity after dark and began some silly jokes and pranks after a 'smell of the barmaid's apron'. Their victims were often policemen. Parades were briefed by the Chief Inspector who 'warned' us that the students usually damaged a theatre interior, BUT on no account were they to be arrested for this damage! [...]

The FA CUP final nights were also prefaced by a 'briefing' [...]. These nights were usually rougher than the university celebrations. An uneasy truce was to be maintained as regards 'genuine revellers'. The Chief omitted to instruct us 'not to make arrests' as in the case of university drunks!<sup>102</sup>

A more nuanced examination of drunkenness during the interwar years corroborates the downward trend suggested in the statistics, for while drunkenness offences fell by 49.5 per cent 1922-35, it is notable that arrests for simple drunkenness fell by 28.6 per cent, yet arrests for drunk and disorderly fell by 63 per cent. The fall in prosecutions for common assault and drunkenness confirm the hypothesis that a decline in alcohol consumption would have probably reduced domestic violence too.<sup>103</sup> While there is evidence that striking a spouse was viewed

---

<sup>99</sup> GMPMA, *City of Manchester Watch Committee: Statistical Returns of the Police, Fire Brigade, and Weights and Measures Departments for the Year ending 1933*, p.2.

<sup>100</sup> Mannheim, *Social Aspects of Crime*, p.175.

<sup>101</sup> MPHC, Lyscom, 'London Policeman', p.31.

<sup>102</sup> MPHC, Hanslow, 'Anecdotes', pp.19, 21.

<sup>103</sup> For the link between alcohol and domestic violence in the interwar years, and the overall fall in alcohol consumption see Pugh, *We Danced All Night: A Social History of Britain between the Wars* (London: Bodley Head, 2008), pp.110, 225-8.

with increased disdain from the 1890s, a study of interwar Liverpool showed that the *threat* of domestic violence existed as a possibility for most women.<sup>104</sup>

Alcohol consumption had fallen, according to the *New Survey of London Life and Labour*, 'from about 46 "standard" gallons in a year in 1891 to 23 "standard" gallons in 1928. In the meantime the strength of London-brewed beer had diminished, so that in "bulk" gallons consumption per head fell by about two-fifths.'<sup>105</sup> Tax on alcohol inflated the price of beer during this period; a pint cost 2½d 1913-14, by 1923-24 consumers were paying 6d a pint.<sup>106</sup> Yet the tightening of licensing restrictions during the First World War merely accelerated changes evident during the Edwardian era, for across England and Wales consumption and expenditure on alcohol fell gradually between 1900 and 1914.<sup>107</sup>

Delivering his evidence to the Royal Commission on Licensing, Sir Chartres Biron, Chief Metropolitan Magistrate, ascribed the fall in drunkenness over the previous 23 years to changes in public opinion, improved standards of living, increased recreational abilities and the attraction of cafes across London. Mr W.J.H. Brodrick, a magistrate at South-Western Police Court, believed that the reduction in permitted hours led to the increased popularity of private parties among the working-classes.<sup>108</sup> These processes of civilization coincided with the geographic expansion of the metropolis and concomitant depopulation of inner London. Central London, with its burgeoning service sector, was home to one pub per 500 people. Whereas the Becontree estate – in the present borough of Barking and Dagenham in East London, just over 11 miles east of the iconic-central Charing Cross – served a ratio of one pub for every 20,000 people. For an extreme example, Britain's largest estate, Downham (Lewisham, South-East London), featured one pub for its entire population of 35,000 people.<sup>109</sup>

---

<sup>104</sup> Pat Ayers and Jan Lambert, 'Marriage Relations, Money, and Domestic Violence in Working-Class Liverpool, 1919-39', in Jane Lewis (ed.), *Labour and Love: Women's Experience of Home and Family, 1850-1940* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), pp.195-219, at p. 209. For the decline in domestic violence see John Benson, *The Working Class in Britain, 1850-1939* (Harlow: Longman, 1989), p.110; Bourke, *Working-Class Cultures*, p.71.

<sup>105</sup> B.D. Nicholson, 'Drink', in H.L. Smith (ed.), *The New Survey of London Life and Labour, Vol. 9: Life and Leisure* (London: P.S. King & Son Ltd, 1935), p.245.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 247. Over the same period, wine rose from 1/6 a bottle to 3/- and a bottle of spirits from 4/- to 12/6.

<sup>107</sup> H. Hamilton Whyte, 'Current Social Statistics: The Drink Problem', *Political Quarterly*, 3, 1 (Jan. 1932), pp. 108-16, at pp.111, 116.

<sup>108</sup> *The Times*, 9 Jan. 1930. This fall in alcohol consumption was also observed by a contemporary temperance advocate in H. Carter, 'The Drink Problem in Great Britain', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 163 (1932), pp.197-205.

<sup>109</sup> Weightman *et al*, *The Making of Modern London*, p.199.

Certain social groups suffered the malign consequences of intense alcohol consumption more than others. A study by the London School of Economics of London publicans found that mortality rates for cirrhosis were 11.6 times higher than for the general population.<sup>110</sup> Heavy drinking was also associated with other occupational groups, such as the police.<sup>111</sup> Arthur Battle recalled of his new sub-divisional Inspector when he was transferred to Upper Street police station, Islington, in 1933: 'A cockney born and bred, short of stature, with a red face and choleric temper, he was one of the last survivors of the old brigade. He had a great addiction for the bottle'.<sup>112</sup> Such people were unlikely to register on the official statistics, yet the adverse effects of alcoholism were often associated with disorderly street behaviour.

Indeed, the drunken beggar was not an uncommon literary trope. Clarissa Dalloway noted while crossing Victoria Street in West London: 'the veriest frumps, the most dejected of miseries sitting on the doorsteps (drink their downfall)'.<sup>113</sup> Stephen Graham in his mid-twenties tour of London observed:

On the Westminster side in the car shelter a drab all in black has taken her stand for the night. She is in a corner and fast asleep, standing. You cannot see her face, but a placard above her head invites you to 'Fine Paintings in the Tate Gallery.' 'She's 'ere every night,' volunteers a man waiting for a home car. 'Drunk, that's what's the matter with 'er. If you or me was in that condition we'd soon find ourselves at the station.' The passenger seems angry about it. But he is also drunk, certainly drunk.<sup>114</sup>

Graham proceeds to sermonize: 'Many of the outcasts, it must be said, are the victims of drink. They earn their shillings during the day, or even more, but cannot resist buying beer with it. It is a truism to say that if there were fewer public-houses there would be fewer homeless.'<sup>115</sup> Such assertions are difficult to substantiate, though the poor diet associated with homelessness may be attributed, in part, to the physical ease of alcohol consumption as compared with solid food,

---

<sup>110</sup> 'Hotel and Catering Trades', in H.L. Smith (ed.), *The New Survey of London Life and Labour, Vol. 8: London Industries* (London: P.S. King and Son Ltd., 1934), pp. 201-46 at pp.219-20.

<sup>111</sup> Jones, *Crime and Policing*, p.225.

<sup>112</sup> MPHC, Battle, 'The Job's Not Like It Used to Be', p.41.

<sup>113</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (London: Penguin Classics, 2000 (1925), p. 4. For further analysis see Leena Kore Schröder, 'Mrs Dalloway and the Female Vagrant', *Essays in Criticism*, 45 (1995), pp.324-46.

<sup>114</sup> Stephen Graham, *London Nights: Studies and Sketches of London at Night* (London: The Bodley Head, 1929 [1925]), p.18.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, p.38.

as many beggars suffered poor teeth.<sup>116</sup> The analgesic qualities of alcohol also serve as a consolation to the miseries of life.<sup>117</sup>

These sources highlight a central problem in ascertaining rates of homelessness, for knowledge of this subject relies heavily on literary sources.<sup>118</sup> Moreover, a consideration of vagrancy reminds the historian of the need for caution in extrapolating behavioural conclusions from the statistics alone. Lionel Rose observes that prosecutions for begging were sensitive to trade fluctuations, while tolerance and manpower considerations led the police to take a less reactive view to the destitute, those arrested for 'sleeping out'.<sup>119</sup> Prosecutions for begging hit an interwar high of 22.8 prosecutions in 1922, when the police issued orders to clamp down on beggars following complaints that the number of beggars on the streets of London was increasing.<sup>120</sup> During the early 1920s, both unemployment and vagrancy increased across England and Wales, yet public opinion, given the impact and socio-economic aftermath of the First World War, was generally sympathetic towards the plight of the beggar.<sup>121</sup> Moreover, given the concern over the plight of disabled war veterans it is likely that Metropolitan Police officers, as was the case with policing prostitution, pursued a liberal policy of containment.<sup>122</sup> The association of beggars with war veterans continued through to the late 1930s. Vi, a nightclub hostess and part-time prostitute in Gerald Kersh's *Night and the City*, set during April 1937 in the run up to the coronation, remarks to her colleague and housemate:

I tell you the police have been absolutely clearing 'em off the streets for the Coronation visitors, lot of bastards, they won't let you live. They want to make out there aren't any tarts in London, see? And all the poor old soldiers, they've been lumbering them too, bloody lot of hypocrites, and nobody dares to stand about and wait for a friend, or anything. It's getting terrible, and they call this a free country.<sup>123</sup>

---

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., pp. 29-30.

<sup>117</sup> Juliet Nicolson, *The Great Silence, 1918-1920: Living in the Shadow of the Great War* (London: John Murray, 2009), p.49; White, *Campbell Bunk*, p. 84.

<sup>118</sup> M. A. Crowther, 'The Tramp', in Roy Porter (ed.), *Myths of the English* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), pp.91-113, at p.109.

<sup>119</sup> Lionel Rose, *'Rogues and Vagabonds': Vagrant Underworld in Britain, 1815-1985* (London: Routledge, 1988), p.138.

<sup>120</sup> TNA, MEPO 3/2439, Clerk to the Guardians to the Commissioner, 9 Jan. 1922; Commissioner's Office to the Clerk of Guardians, Lambeth Parish, 14 Feb. 1922; Sub-Divisional Inspector Brixton Station to Superintendent 'W', 14 March 1922.

<sup>121</sup> M.A. Crowther, *The Workhouse System, 1834-1929: The History of an English Social Institution* (London: Methuen, 1983), p.259; idem, 'The Tramp', pp.109, 261.

<sup>122</sup> Jerry White, *London in the Twentieth Century: A City and its People* (London: Penguin, 2002), p.254.

<sup>123</sup> Gerald Kersh, *Night and the City* (London: London Books Classics, 2007 [1938]), p.261.



The prosecution level for beggars averaged at a stable ratio of 18.61 trials 1924-8, 78 percent below the late-Edwardian average. Indeed in 1917 the Commissioner's office issued a memorandum calling attention to beggars advertising themselves as war veterans. If the case was one of false pretences, a charge was to be issued. Yet if the man was a genuine veteran, he was to be referred to the Local War Pensions Committee. A reminder was reissued two years later.<sup>124</sup> Despite the crackdown in 1922, the Commissioner complained:

In view of the prevalence of street begging, instructions were given for extra vigilance to be used to detect imposters posing as ex-servicemen. Police Officers are being employed in plain clothes for this purpose, but their efforts are hampered to some extent by the varying ideas of the Magistrates on this subject.<sup>125</sup>

And despite the prevalence of begging, *The Times* felt confident enough to state in article about ex-soldiers and the homeless poor in 1921:

The slur on London charity represented 10 years or more ago by the huddled forms of the destitute occupying every seat on the Embankment has now been finally removed. In the last resort there is no reason why anyone in London should be without food and shelter.<sup>126</sup>

Indeed, a census by the Public Health Committee of the London County Council on 11 February 1921 found only 66 homeless people sleeping on the streets, staircases and under archways, compared with 2,747 people during a similar count on a February night in 1910.<sup>127</sup> The Salvation Army attributed the fall in rough sleepers to the establishment of the Homeless Poor Night Office in 1912; open between 10pm and 2am, this facility on the Embankment operated as a clearing house for those in need of accommodation.<sup>128</sup>

Yet a study of street lives by Steve Humphries and Pamela Gordon found that the LCC seriously underestimated London's homeless because their counting covered select areas only such as the Embankment, Leicester Square and railway termini.<sup>129</sup> Moreover, the LCC limited their annual census to a cold winter night 'in order to restrict the numbers to those of genuinely

---

<sup>124</sup> TNA, MEPO 3/2439, 'Organ grinders seeking contributions by adventitious means', memorandum 27 Jan. 1919.

<sup>125</sup> *Report of the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis for the Year 1921*, Cmd. 1699 (London: HMSO, 1922), p.7.

<sup>126</sup> *The Times*, 26 Nov. 1921.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 7 March 1921.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 30 March 1929.

<sup>129</sup> Steve Humphries and Pamela Gordon, *Forbidden Britain: Our Secret Past, 1900-1960* (London: BBC Books, 1994), p.180.

homeless people.<sup>130</sup> Stephen Graham discerned: 'As regards the shelterless, some technicality in classification must have shut the eyes of the counters. One individual could rout out a hundred or so, if he knew where to look. The derelicts are not all on the Embankment.'<sup>131</sup> Graham found in a later sketch of London nightlife at Goodfare's restaurant in Covent Garden: 'Up till three in the morning, when the real work of Covent Garden commences, the tramps are allowed to sit in the pews or sleep on the floor. At three they must go.'<sup>132</sup>

The vagaries of policing helped to shape the official statistics. George Orwell found during his 'slumming' experiment that the law was evaded easily:

As the law now stands, if you approach a stranger and ask him for twopence, he can call a policeman and get you seven days for begging. But if you make the air hideous by droning 'Nearer, my God, to Thee', or scrawl some chalk daubs on the pavement, or stand about with a tray of matches – in short, if you make a nuisance of yourself – you are held to be following a legitimate trade and not begging. Match-selling and street-singing are simply legalized crimes.<sup>133</sup>

Local data suggests that the problem of homelessness had not declined as significantly as the prosecution records suggest. For example, in the teeth of opposition from the Staines Board of Guardians, pressure from the Middlesex Joint Vagrancy Committee led to the Staines casual ward being reopened in 1924 owing to unemployment increasing the number of casuals on the roads placing an unfair burden on other wards within the district.<sup>134</sup> Moreover, the records of the Whitechapel Methodist Mission at Brunswick Hall confirm the danger of relying upon official statistics to measure the level of destitution in the 1920s. During the winter of 1923-4, the shelter was attended 6,018 times over 97 nights, accounting for 361 men. For 1924-5, the shelter was attended 6,226 times by 874 men over 108 nights. During the winter of 1925-6 the shelter was attended 6,571 times by 1,023 men over 115 nights.<sup>135</sup> The LCC census of 1926 provides further evidence of such a rise. Taking place on 19 February 1926, 100 homeless

---

<sup>130</sup> *The Times*, 16 Feb. 1932.

<sup>131</sup> Graham, *London Nights*, p.128.

<sup>132</sup> *Idem*, *Twice Round the London Clock and More London Nights* (London: Ernest Benn Ltd, 1933), p.65.

<sup>133</sup> George Orwell, *Down and Out in Paris and London* (Penguin: London, 2003 [1933]), p.174. For critical appraisals of Orwell's social observations and the influence of Jack London's *People of the Abyss* (1902) on his work see Gordon B. Beadle, 'George Orwell's Literary Studies of Poverty in England', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 24, 2 (1978), 188-201; Dolores Buttry, 'Down and Out in Paris, London, and Oslo: Pounding the Pavement with Knut Hamsun and George Orwell', *Comparative Literature Studies*, 25, 3 (1988), 225-41; George Watson, 'Facing Unpleasant Facts: George Orwell's Reports', *Sewanee Review*, 96, 4 (1988), 644-57.

<sup>134</sup> LMA, MCC/MIN/75/2, Middlesex Joint Vagrancy Committee minutes: 12 Jan. 1923, 13 April 1923, 18 Jan. 1924, 18 July 1924, pp.13-14, 25, 48, 77.

<sup>135</sup> LMA, ACC 1926/D/19, Brunswick Hall Night Shelter register.

persons were counted, and the London casual wards and the hostel of the Metropolitan Asylums Board were occupied by 661 men and 12 women, the highest since 1912. *The Times* observed: 'homeless persons are returning to the Victorian Embankment to spend the night, as most of the seats between the Westminster and Blackfriars Bridges were occupied at 2am on the night of the census.'<sup>136</sup>

It appears that more provision was made for the itinerant in the interwar years. For example, while the number of homeless sleeping on the streets had fallen back to 78 people during the LCC count of 1928, 821 men and 14 women were accommodated in London casual wards and the Metropolitan Asylums Board hostel. A further 14,738 persons still lived in licensed common lodging houses.<sup>137</sup> During the November of 1928 W. Carlile of the Church Army Men's Social Committee felt compelled to write to *The Times*: 'Many members of our Committee have been making observations at all hours of the night into the present position of destitute homeless persons in Central London. The problem is found to be more acute than at any time for 15 years and the prospects as winter advances are likely to be very serious.'<sup>138</sup> Moreover, perhaps the prevalence of beggars on the streets of London, in contrast to the decline in other indices of social distress, was due to the pull of the metropolis on the destitute from the provinces and Scotland and Wales.<sup>139</sup> George Orwell noted of social conditions in 1931: 'As always among the destitute, a large proportion of them are Irishmen.'<sup>140</sup> A contemporary survey of vagrancy in the County of London estimated that in 1932 there were around 20,000-25,000 people described as the 'residuum' with no fixed abode, sleeping in lodging houses, charitable hostels and out in the open. By contrast, Booth's study pointed to a residuum of 35,000-40,000.<sup>141</sup> Yet the composition of vagrants did not remain static, both Stephen Graham and George Orwell commented upon the number of young and employable men amongst the dispossessed during the Great Depression.<sup>142</sup> As social conditions improved across the capital city from 1933, it is probable, in

---

<sup>136</sup> *The Times*, 22 March 1926.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 30 April 1928.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 10 Nov. 1928.

<sup>139</sup> Jerry White, "Penniless and Without Food": Unemployment in London between the Wars', in Geoffrey Alderman and Colin Holmes (eds), *Outsiders & Outcasts: Essays in Honour of William J. Fishman* (London: Duckworth, 1993), p.134.

<sup>140</sup> George Orwell's diary for 26 Aug. 1931, communicated in a letter to Dennis Collings c. 12 October 1931, in Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (eds), *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell, Volume 1: An Age Like This 1920-40*, (London, Secker & Warburg, 1968), p.53.

<sup>141</sup> Hubert Llewellyn Smith, 'The Homeless Poor', in H.L. Smith (ed.), *The New Survey of London Life and Labour, Vol. 3: Survey of Social Conditions (1) The Eastern Area* (London: P.S. King & Son Ltd., 1932), pp.254-80.

<sup>142</sup> Graham, *Twice Round the London Clock*, pp. 67-69; Crowther, 'The Tramp', p.103.

line with other non-indictable prosecutions, that hardened offenders were increasingly targeted, for begging as a strategy as a last resort would have been reduced following the closing of workhouses from 1930.<sup>143</sup> Alongside a change in the law in 1935 which practically decriminalized the offence of sleeping out, during that same year the LCC increased the scope of its activities by changing the name of the Night Office to the Welfare Office for the Homeless (which was open for 16 hours a day, as opposed to four hours) to assist the dispossessed.<sup>144</sup> Shattered spirits, often broken by booze, or those who refused to play dog-tricks to an audience, this minority of 'delinquent' beggars were likely to be increasingly on the receiving end of police action.

#### **4 Coda: London Life**

Local studies confirm the general decline in disorder during the early-twentieth century. An investigation of Islington by Phil Cohen during the late 1970s supports the utility of the statistics as an indicator of general trends. Cohen ascribed the decline in crime in Islington to changes within street culture. Demand for casual labour was no longer so marked, with juvenile employment concentrated in shop and distribution trades, especially the post office and rail industry for a number of local lads. Girls were lured away from domestic service with the pull of office work in the City. While such jobs were low-paid and offered few prospects of promotion, they offered a regular source of employment. In turn, the spread of regular work reduced the importance of street-based networks, the official labour exchange served as a more efficient source of information. Moreover, increased participation of the lower-working classes in the post-war urban order was consolidated by the rise of New Unionism and most notably the National Unemployed Workers Movement. Cohen found a distinct pattern of crime in Islington for 1880-1935, based on local press coverage. First of all, reports of public disorder fall markedly after the First World War. Second, the size of crowds involved in such disturbances falls from between 60 and 80 people pre-1914, to around 20 to 30 in the 1920s. Third, the crowds comprised men, women and children in the earlier period, while male youths featured predominately in the 1920s. Fourth, disturbances tended to occur over the weekend and on public holidays during the interwar years, while these were peak periods earlier on, the

---

<sup>143</sup> For begging as a rational response to avoid the workhouse see White, *Campbell Bunk*, p.61.

<sup>144</sup> *The Times*, 19 Feb. 1936.

disturbances were spread more broadly. Finally, in the 1920s the occupations of juveniles arrested were concentrated in street trades.<sup>145</sup>

Fiona Rule's microhistory of Spitalfields corroborates this explanation. Spitalfields had a notorious reputation for violent crime, and as late as 1898 the local vestry petitioned the police commissioner to increase the number of officers in the district.<sup>146</sup> Yet the Great War emptied the common lodging houses of their labouring population leaving them the haunt of women and older men. This falling population made lodging houses less economically viable and reduced the attraction of the area as a red light district. Prices fell and the prostitutes found trade where they could. The extension of Spitalfields Market from 1926 led to the demolition of one of the most notorious London slums, the north side of Duval Street, while cold stores, factories, offices and warehouses replaced the residential property on the south side. The growing Jewish community had become more established in this district, their culture of self-help and confidence in the concept of extended family making the lodging house redundant. Wider economic changes witnessed the decasualization of labour and a decline in home-working schemes.<sup>147</sup> Former police officer G.W. Cornish, who joined the Metropolitan Police in 1895, felt able to write in his memoirs 40 years later:

To-day Whitechapel is as law-abiding as any district in London, and perhaps more so than some. It is still cosmopolitan, and in parts rather picturesque. The two great roads to the eastern suburbs and Docks run through it, but they are very different from the cobbled, badly-lit streets of thirty-five years ago. There are still mean streets and dark alleys, but the coming of buses and the Underground, restaurants, big shops and cinemas has altered it completely.<sup>148</sup>

Even areas associated with casual labour, street enterprise and high levels of poverty – characterized as 'rough', increasingly distinguished from the 'respectable' poor – witnessed a decline in disorder during the interwar years, especially during the 1930s.<sup>149</sup> Evidence of this 'process of civilization' is suggested by Hood and Joyce's comment that 'the steady migration of East Enders to private suburban estates on the edge of North London and new public housing

---

<sup>145</sup> Cohen, 'Policing the Working-Class City', pp.123-7.

<sup>146</sup> Jerry White, *Rothschild Buildings: Life in an East End Tenement Block, 1887-1920* (London: Routledge, Kegan & Paul, 1980), pp.128-29.

<sup>147</sup> Fiona Rule, *The Worst Street in London* (Hersham: Ian Allan, 2008), pp.185-6, 192-7.

<sup>148</sup> G.W. Cornish, *Cornish of the Yard: His Reminiscences and Cases* (1935), p. 2. Other studies and commentaries confirm the rise in living standards in East London during this period: Joseph Green, *A Social History of the Jewish East End in London, 1914-1939: A Study in Life, Labour and Liturgy* (Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1991), p.233; Raphael Samuel (ed.), *East End Underworld: Chapters in the Life of Arthur Harding* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), p.236.

<sup>149</sup> See White, *Campbell Bunk*, passim.

estates in Essex is a good indication of the extent to which “respectable” social aspirations were already embedded in East End life.<sup>150</sup> Yet the housing policies of the London County Council favoured those from the more aspirational and prosperous sections of the working-class, leaving an increasingly visible ‘residuum’ in inner city areas.<sup>151</sup> The LCC rejected half of nominees for resettlement from Poplar to live in estates such as Becontree; indeed, few families displaced by slum clearance schemes could afford the relatively high rents.<sup>152</sup>

The persistence of these pockets of extreme poverty must not be ignored, despite the overall rise in living standards. Where casual labour still flourished, labour historians believe that at the end of the 1920s underemployment was more widespread and marked than hitherto.<sup>153</sup> Districts notorious for casual labourers, the indigent poor who worked the streets, and their common lodging houses, included Bangor Street and Crescent Street (Notting Dale), Campbell Road (Islington), Essex Street and Wilmer Gardens (Hoxton), Litcham Street (Kentish Town), Lorence Road (Tottenham), Rope Yard Rails (Woolwich) and Russia Lane (Bethnal Green).<sup>154</sup> Demonstrating the extent of economic distress in interwar London, historians have estimated that if Sir William Beveridge’s post-war welfare state reforms had been implemented 20 years earlier, twenty percent of London households would still have lived below the poverty line.<sup>155</sup> According to Jerry White, if Joseph Rowntree’s ‘Human Needs Standard’ was factored in to calculations for 1929 (a prosperous year), 23 percent of Londoners – 34 percent of working-class residents – lived below the poverty line.<sup>156</sup> William Meier has found recently that the number of defendants in court reports who are costermongers, dealers and labourers testifies to the importance of casual employment on crime rates during this period.<sup>157</sup>

---

<sup>150</sup> Hood and Joyce, ‘Three Generations’, p.143.

<sup>151</sup> Sally Alexander, ‘A New Civilization? London Surveyed 1928-1940s’, *History Workshop Journal*, 64 (2007), pp.296-320, at p.311.

<sup>152</sup> Andrzej Olechnowicz, *Working-Class Housing in England between the Wars: The Becontree Estate* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp.41-45.

<sup>153</sup> Sam Davies, “‘Three on the Hook and Three on the Book’: Dock Labourers and Unemployment Insurance between the Wars’, *Labour History Review*, 59, 3 (1994), pp.34-43, at p. 41; Noelle Whiteside, ‘Welfare Insurance and Casual Labour: A Study of Administrative Intervention in Industrial Employment, 1906-26’, *Economic History Review*, 32, 4 (1979), pp.507-22, at p. 522.

<sup>154</sup> White, *Campbell Bunk*, p. xviii.

<sup>155</sup> Timothy J. Hatton and Roy E. Bailey, ‘Poverty and the Welfare State in Interwar London’, *Oxford Economic Papers*, 50 (1998), pp.574-606, at p. 592.

<sup>156</sup> Rowntree’s standard (1937) allowed for a ‘modest allowance’ for non-essential luxuries: White, *London*, p.221. The LSE inquiry was so keen to demonstrate the decline in absolute poverty that Booth’s definition of the ‘poverty standard’ was violated: J. Yelling, ‘The Metropolitan Slum’, in S.M. Gaskell (ed.), *Slums* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1990), pp.205-6.

<sup>157</sup> William M. Meier, *Property Crime in London, 1850-Present* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p.57.

This uneasy relationship between the police and those who found their earnings on the streets was still evident during the late 1930s, the Marylebone Lane sub-division still affected between 70 and 80 arrests a week against costermongers for obstruction offences in Oxford Street and Marble Arch.<sup>158</sup> Victorian and Edwardian shadows continued to haunt the interwar years. Mayhew was one of the first to chronicle the culture of the costermonger, the vendor who earned his money from a barrow pushed along the streets and who faced the strong arm of the beat constable ready to arrest for obstruction offences. Indeed, it has been commented that costermongers 'hated the police'.<sup>159</sup> Eighty years after Mayhew, the tradition of the London costermonger was still strong.<sup>160</sup> Take Gerald Kersh's description of Bert in *Night and the City*:

Bert was a short, strongly built man; fair, narrow-chinned and sharp-faced, like Fabian, and having the same imprint of the slum tenements. But he was not at all well-dressed. His head was covered by a cap with a broken peak. Instead of a collar and tie he wore a dirty white muffler. His coat was blackish with ingrained dirt. His trousers, of a different colour, were drenched with rain; from under their frayed and water-logged bottoms there protruded a pair of broken patent-leather shoes. He had an air of absolute poverty, but he carried his disintegrating clothes with a curious impudent jauntiness – the swagger of the Cockney costermonger, the indomitable fruit-vendor, tougher than leather, more indestructible than the stones of the City; wiry; sleepless; sharpened like a needle by perpetual vigilance; devoid of criminal instinct, but accustomed to regarding the policeman as his hereditary enemy; humorous, touchy, uproarious and quick with his hands – the only permanent type of the Londoner, speaking an individual jargon and upholding an old and characteristic tradition.<sup>161</sup>

## Conclusions

Interpreting prosecutions for non-indictable offences necessitates an understanding of policing practices. Decision-making by individual officers was structured by the interaction of legal and bureaucratic concerns with an occupational police culture predicated upon knowledge gained upon the beat. The rise in prosecutions during the Edwardian era was an artifice of intensified policing: the number of arrests by Metropolitan Police officers rose by just under eight percent between 1905-9 and 1910-13; moreover, the number of police officers per 100,000 of the population rose just under 12 percent, at a time when population growth levelled out at just under seven and a half million. Indeed between 1900 and 1913, while the population of Greater

---

<sup>158</sup> TNA, MEPO 2/5539, Acting Superintendent 'D' minute, 26 Aug. 1937.

<sup>159</sup> Eileen Yeo, 'Mayhew as Social Investigator', in E.P. Thompson and Eileen Yeo (eds), *The Unknown Mayhew: Selections from the Morning Chronicle, 1849-50* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), pp.56-109, at p.97. For a contemporary representation of the culture of the mid-nineteenth century costermonger see Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor: A Selection by Rosemary O'Day and David Englander* (London: Wordsworth Classics, 2008), pp.7-84.

<sup>160</sup> White, *Campbell Bunk*, p.55.

<sup>161</sup> Kersh, *Night and the City*, p.38.

London grew by 13.5 percent, the authorized establishment of the Metropolitan Police grew by 32.6 percent. This study thus supports Barry Godfrey's notion that the rise in prosecutions across England and Wales 1890-1920 was an attempt by the police 'to control public space and curb drunken disorder'.<sup>162</sup> In the case of London, intensified police action continued until the end of 1922. For example, Matt Houlbrook found that a twofold increase in arrests for importuning incidents in parks occurred between 1917 and 1922 as a result of pressure from purity organizations.<sup>163</sup> 1923 was a key year, for in the face of the Fitzroy case, as we have seen, arrests for soliciting plummeted. In the case of 'H' Division, 89 arrests were made for soliciting in 1922, falling to one in the following year.<sup>164</sup> This steep fall was due mainly to the police adopting a policy of containment towards street offences such as prostitution, a similar practice being used towards street bookmakers from 1923.<sup>165</sup>

Such a change warrants further exploration, which research to date has failed to shed greater light, for petty-crook Arthur Harding remarked in his memoirs: 'In 1923, there was a new spirit in the courts concerning the treatment of crime and criminals.'<sup>166</sup> Corroborating the research of Jerry White, the early 1920s appear to have more in common with the late-Edwardian era than with the more commercialized and suburban London of the mid-to-late twenties and 1930s.<sup>167</sup> Post-war peaks for trials above the late-Edwardian average confirming the tumultuous times of the early twenties occur in the case of child cruelty (+40 percent in 1922), common assault (+5% in 1921), infringements against the Education Acts (+35% in 1919) and malicious damage (-2% in 1919). These relatively high prosecution rates are probably linked to the resumption of normal peacetime police duties, an improvement in the number and quality of constables and the successful defeat of a second police strike in the capital following a significant improvement in officers' pay.<sup>168</sup> That Britain was finally dragging itself out of the Edwardian era is suggested during Peter Walsh's musings on modern times in *Mrs Dalloway*: 'Those five years – 1918 to 1923 – had been, he suspected, somehow very important.'<sup>169</sup>

---

<sup>162</sup> Godfrey, 'Changing Prosecution Practices', p.174.

<sup>163</sup> Houlbrook, *Queer London*, p.24.

<sup>164</sup> LMA, PS/OLD/A1/57-63, PS/TH/A1/157-65.

<sup>165</sup> Dixon, *From Prohibition to Regulation*, p.219.

<sup>166</sup> Bishopsgate Library, Arthur Harding, 'My Apprenticeship to Crime: An Autobiography' (unpub. c. 1969), p.223.

<sup>167</sup> White, *Campbell Bunk*, p.5.

<sup>168</sup> Emsley, *The Great British Bobby*, pp. 178-99; David Englander, 'Police and Public Order in Britain 1914-1918', in Clive Emsley and Barbara Weinberger (eds), *Policing Western Europe: Politics, Professionalism and Public Order, 1850-1940* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991), pp.90-138.

<sup>169</sup> Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, p.78.



The overall trend of prosecution rates serve as a starting point for any interpretation of disorder. In the case of London, there is little doubt that assaults, begging, drunkenness and prostitution fell from the late-nineteenth century onwards as socio-economic conditions improved for the vast majority of the population. Intensified policing against public disorder during the Edwardian era, however, magnified the extent of processes of civilization over the 1920s and 1930s. Neither is social change linear nor do socio-economic processes account for the fall in disorder alone. Events on the streets are difficult to discern, they shift from day-to-day and from year-to-year. Moreover, notions of disorder differed from district to district. In the case of betting and gaming, the sharp rise in prosecutions confirms contemporary concerns that more people enjoyed a flutter and that, at times, the activities of street betters were a matter of public disquiet. The institution and practice of beat policing, highly visible in inner-London areas, predicated on order maintenance, more than likely contributed to the general low-level anxieties over crime in comparison to the post-Second War period. For the uncomfortable feelings experienced and articulated by certain members of the public at the presence of 'disorderly elements', behaviour not always criminal or warranting formal police intervention, could be tackled unofficially with the sanction of the local community. Tacit understandings also existed between the police and policed, as the examples of disorder outlined above testify; indeed the tendency of street based policing was to under enforce the law.<sup>170</sup> Take heed of the unwritten rules of the street

---

<sup>170</sup> Wilson, *Varieties of Police Behavior*, p.49.