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MUGGING, THE STATE, AND LAW AND ORDER

Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher,
Tony Jefferson, John Clarke
and Brian Roberts

MACMILLAN

First edition 1978
Reprinted 1979, 1980, 1981, 1982, 1984

Published by
Higher and Further Education Division
MACMILLAN PUBLISHERS LTD
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 2XS
and London
Companies and representatives
throughout the world

Printed in Hong Kong

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Policing the crisis.—(Critical social studies).
1. Mugging – Great Britain
I. Hall, Stuart II. Series
364.1'55 HV6665.G7

ISBN 0 333 22060 9
ISBN 0 333 22061 7 Pbk

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The Social History of a 'Moral Panic'

ENTER: A MUGGING GONE WRONG

On 15 August 1972 an elderly widower, Mr Arthur Hills, was stabbed to death near Waterloo Station as he was returning home from a visit to the theatre. The motive was, apparently, robbery. Although the event occurred too late for the following morning's papers, the national press reported it on 17 August. They labelled it – borrowing a description proffered by a police officer – 'a mugging gone wrong'. Thus the word 'mugging', hitherto used almost exclusively in an American context, or to refer in very general terms to the general growth of crime in Britain, was affixed to a particular case, and entered the crime reporter's vocabulary. Some reporters seemed to think the 'new' word also heralded the coming of a new crime. All these notions were neatly encapsulated in the *Daily Mirror* headline of 17 August: 'As Crimes of Violence Escalate, a Word Common In The United States Enters the British Headlines: Mugging. To our Police, it's a frightening new strain of crime.'

The *Daily Mirror* offered a further development of this theme. It described the event itself, provided a definition of the word, and added supporting statistical information about 'mugging' and the escalation in crimes of violence. Since there had been no eye witnesses to the event, the description of what happened must have been imaginatively reconstructed by the reporters. Apparently, they said, Mr Hills was attacked by three young men in their early twenties. They attempted to rob him, but he fought back only to be stabbed in the ensuing struggle. So far as definitions were concerned, the paper commented that the word was American and derived from such phrases as 'attacking a *mug*: an easy victim'. American police, the *Mirror* added, 'describe it as an assault by crushing the victim's head or throat in an armlock or to rob with any degree of force, with or without weapons'. Then followed the statistics: (1) an increase in muggings in the United States by 229 per cent in ten years; and (2) the reporting of about 150 'muggings' a year, during the previous three years, on the London underground. The *Mirror* spelled out the implications of these statistics: 'slowly mugging is coming to Britain'.

Was 'mugging' a new strain of crime? The question is not as simple as it appears. In an article in *The Times* a few weeks later (20 October 1972) Louis Blom-Cooper, Q.C. expressed the view that 'There is nothing new in this world:

and mugging, apart from its omission from the Oxford English Dictionary, is not a new phenomenon. Little more than 100 years ago there occurred in the streets of London an outcrop of robbery with violence. It was called "garrotting", which was an attempt to choke or strangle the victim of a robbery.' (Mugging differs from garrotting only in its use of offensive weapons). Blom-Cooper's stress on the traditional nature of the crime seems to be the correct one; although his attempt to distinguish 'mugging' from 'garrotting' in terms of the use of offensive weapons does not square with the definition of mugging offered by the American police chief who said: 'with or without weapons'. More significant than the question of weapons is what the American definition of 'mugging' shares with the British phenomenon of 'garrotting': both refer to 'choking', 'strangling', 'an assault by crushing the victim's head or throat in an armlock'. In the effort to get a clear definition of 'mugging', the British press referred to the United States, but the similarities suggest that when Americans first defined 'mugging' they had at least one eye on Britain.

In fact the more one looks at the historical parallels, the more striking are the similarities between a number of earlier crimes and mugging. Street crimes were of course a familiar part of the general pattern of urban crime throughout the nineteenth century. Well-off travellers passing through the lonely streets of London after dark sometimes had their luggage pinched off carts by skilful 'dragsmen'. Solitary strangers might be subject to sudden attack and robbery by footpads, occasionally lured to their fate by an accomplice, a professional street-walker. Chesney reminds us of forms of robbery with violence, known variously as 'propping' or 'swinging the stick', practised by 'rampsmen'. There were outbreaks of 'garrotting' in both Manchester and London in the 1850s, and the famous outbreak of 'garrotting' in London in 1862–3 triggered off a reaction of epidemic proportions.[1] Even so, 'garrotting' itself was not new: 'Chokee Bill, the rampsman who grabbed his prey by the neck, was already a well-established underworld type.' It was the boldness and brutality of the 'garrotting' attacks in the summer of 1862, however, which triggered off a new alarm. What is striking, in terms of the parallel with 'mugging', is not just the sudden rash of garrotting cases but the nature and character of the public response. The *Cornhill Magazine* stated, in 1863, in terms which could have been transposed, without a single change, to 1972: 'Once more the streets of London are unsafe by day or night. The public dread has almost become a panic.' The outbreak in London was followed by reports of similar events in Lancashire, Yorkshire, Nottingham, Chester: 'Credulity became a social obligation' as 'the garrotters, lurking in the shadow of the wall, quickening step behind one on the lonely footpath, became something like a national bogey . . . Men of coarse appearance but blameless intentions were attacked . . . under suspicion of being garrotters.' Anti-garrotting societies flourished. Then the reaction began. More people were hanged in 1863 'than in any year since the end of the bloody code'; in July, when the epidemic had ebbed somewhat, the *Garrotting Act* was passed, providing for flogging of offenders. Several of these punishments were in fact brutally administered. Finally, the epidemic began to die away as mysteriously as it had appeared; and, though the Act and the extremity of the punishments may have had something to do with its decline,

Chesney remarks that this 'remains an open question. . . . The real significance of the garrotting scare is that the excitement and publicity it provoked made citizens readier to accept the need (and expense) of efficient, nation wide law enforcement and so speeded the general improvement of public order.'[2]

Before the 'mugging' label took its own kind of stranglehold on the public and official imagination, the police themselves seemed alert to the traditional nature of the crime concealed behind its many labels. The Metropolitan Police Commissioner, in his *Annual Report* of 1964, commenting on the 30 per cent increase in 'robberies or assaults with intent to rob', explicitly referred to the fact that 'London has always been the scene of robberies from further back than the days of highwaymen and footpads.' Were the rising numbers of robberies in 1964 the same as (or different from) 'garrotting' in the 1860s and 'mugging' in the 1970s? In Britain, there has always been a legal distinction between 'robbery' and 'larceny from the person': and the distinction turns on the fact that, in robbery, an individual is deprived of his property, in a face-to-face situation, by force or threat of force. 'Larceny from the person', in the period before the *Theft Act* of 1968, was defined as 'Pickpocketting' or 'stealing from shopping baskets', i.e. a situation involving stealth, not force or threats. Even after the *Theft Act*, when larcenies were reclassified, robbery remained as a separate category, a 'major' offence because of the use or threat of force to deprive another of his property.[3] Though, at the height of the 'mugging' scare, the police lost their sense of history, it is worth recalling that, to the end, no legal category of 'mugging' as a crime exists (though the Metropolitan Police Commissioner was able, in his 1972 *Annual Report*, to reconstruct statistics for its incidence back to 1968). The Home Secretary did, indeed, offer his own definition for clarity's sake (thereby tacitly admitting the ambiguity of the situation) when he asked police chiefs to collect statistics for the incidence of 'muggings',[4] but it never achieved proper legal status. 'Muggings' were in fact always charged as 'robberies' or 'assaults with intent to rob', or other similar and conventional charges.

It is important to remember that, though the Metropolitan Police Commissioner did not have the convenient label, 'mugging', to hand when he drafted his 1964 *Annual Report*, something out of the ordinary had indeed alerted him to this area of crime and called out his comment on its historical antecedents. What disturbed the Commissioner was the fact that in 1964 many more young people, often 'without records' – i.e. unknown to the police – were taking to robberies of this kind. Further, the Commissioner remarked, this trend was accompanied by an increasing tendency to resort to violence – a fact *not* borne out by his own statistics, which he admitted to finding puzzling. It was this coupling of young offenders and crime which had triggered his concern.

When, in 1972, Robert Carr, the Home Secretary, requested more statistical information from his police chiefs on the new wave of 'muggings', a senior county police officer of the Southampton force, in reply, once again remarked on the conventional nature of the crime to which the new title had been attached. He said he found it 'very difficult to differentiate mugging with [sic] the old traditional crime of a seaman getting "rolled" '.[5] Interestingly, in the most publicised British 'mugging' case of all – that of the three Handsworth boys in

March 1973 – the accused spoke of their intention, not to 'mug' but to 'roll' their drunk victim.[6] As the 'mugging' scare progressed, the press, which had seized on its novelty, gradually began to rediscover the historical antecedents. In response to the Handsworth case, the *Daily Mail* editorial of 20 March 1973 lifted the crime altogether outside of history and deposited it in the realms of Nature: 'a crime as old as sin itself'.

The fact is that it is extremely difficult to discover exactly what was new in 'mugging' – except the label itself. The matter is of the greatest significance for our enquiry. Let us compare the 'mugging' of Mr Hills with the following incidents. A Conservative M.P. is assaulted and kicked in the face and ribs in Hyde Park by four youths. The attackers escape with £9 and a gold watch. Has the M.P. been 'mugged'? The word 'mugged' was of course not used in this case. The date was 12 December 1968, the report from the *Daily Mirror*. Let us take a second example. In its report of the killing of Mr Hills – a 'mugging gone wrong' – the *Daily Telegraph* made a direct comparison with the street shooting and killing, four years earlier, of a Mr Shaw by two unemployed men in their early twenties. They chose Mr Shaw, the accused men had said, because they were in a 'poor position' and he was 'well dressed'.[7] The shot-gun they carried to threaten the victim accidentally went off. Although the prosecution accepted the plea that murder had not been intended, the judge gave the man who pulled the trigger 'life', his partner twelve years. Except for the choice of weapon the Shaw incident is identical with the Hills murder: amateur robbery, bungled, with unintended fatal consequences. The Shaw case, however, was not called a 'mugging'. To all intents and purposes, it was not seen at the time as a 'new strain of crime'. Perhaps it *became* a 'new strain of crime' when the *Daily Telegraph* resurrected it for comparison with the Hills case? Perhaps it was counted amongst the 'rising mugging statistics' when, in 1973, the Metropolitan Police produced for Mr Carr retrospective figures for 'mugging' going back to 1968? Was the Shaw case a 'mugging' in 1972 but not a 'mugging' in 1969? Just to make matters more complicated, the *Guardian* in 1969 quoted the two unfortunate attackers as saying that they had attempted 'to roll' Mr Shaw. . . .

What evidence we have suggests that, though the label 'mugging', as applied in a British context, was new in August 1972, the crime it purported to describe was not. Its incidence may or may not have increased (we examine the statistical evidence in a moment). Its social content may have changed, but there is nothing to support the view that it was a 'new strain of crime'. No doubt the press had some interest in stressing its 'novelty'. No doubt the use of the term with reference to American experience may have fostered the belief that something quite new to Britain had turned up from across the Atlantic. It may have been only a coincidence that the police officer who called the Hills case a 'mugging gone wrong' had just returned from a study visit to the United States. Contingency, after all, does play a role in the unfolding of history, and we must allow for it. We will try to show, however, that the facts about the 'mugging' scare, like the 'garrotting panic' of 1862 and many other 'great fears' about crime and the 'dangerous classes' before that, are both less contingent and more significant than that.

A CHRONOLOGY

During the thirteen months between August 1972 and the end of August 1973, 'mugging' received a great deal of coverage in the press in the form of crime reports, features, editorials, statements by representatives of the police, judges, the Home Secretary, politicians and various prominent public spokesmen. Before looking at this coverage in detail we want to provide a brief chronological synopsis of how public concern with this crime developed throughout those thirteen months.

The labelling of the killing of Mr Hills as 'a mugging gone wrong' in August 1972 was followed by a brief lull. This calm before the storm was broken by massive press coverage during late September, October and early November. This period provided the 'peak' of press coverage, not only for 1972, but for the whole thirteen-month period. The feature which not only precipitated this, but also sustained much of the press commentary, was the use of 'exemplary' sentences. Almost without exception, young people charged with robberies involving some degree of force (not always referred to as 'muggings') were given 'deterrent' sentences. Three years' imprisonment became the 'norm', even for teenage offenders. Traditional treatment centres for young offenders (i.e. Borstals and detention centres) were bypassed. The justifications for these severe sentences – and many judges admitted that they were unprecedented – were commonly made in the name of 'the public interest', or the need to 'keep our streets safe', or, more simply, to 'deter'. Rehabilitation was a secondary consideration to the need to preserve public safety.

In short, the judiciary declared 'war' on the muggers. Editorials quickly followed. Most of these dealt with the question of the fairness of 'exemplary' sentences. This often led on to an examination of sentencing policy in general, where the considerations affecting such policy (deterrence, retribution, public safety and rehabilitation) were variously correlated, the arguments being conducted with varying degrees of skill and subtlety. All the editorials, in the final analysis, supported the judges. Statistics also appeared to vindicate both the judiciary and the editors, since reports of the criminal statistics in the period were all headlined in terms of the rise in violent crime, especially muggings.

Feature articles also appeared during this period, written either by staff reporters or freelance writers. These attempted to provide background information on 'The making of a mugger' or 'Why they go out mugging', to quote two examples.[8] Most of these were factually well-informed and relatively informative, though the explanations they offered, with perhaps two notable exceptions,[9] neither of which appeared in the national daily press, were less than convincing. One further exception, from a different perspective, was the feature article (already quoted) by Mr Louis Blom-Cooper, Q.C., the one lone 'voice in the wilderness' raised against a harsh reaction by the judiciary.[10]

The police and the politicians took their lead from the Bench. In London the police instigated a 'clean-up-the-Royal-Parks' campaign designed to keep drug-users, prostitutes and muggers out of London's parks.[11] Local councils followed suit by setting up 'high-speed, anti-mugging patrols, equipped with vehicles, walkie-talkie radios and sometimes guard dogs' to replace conven-

tional park-keepers.[12] Special squads were also set up by the police to 'crack-down' on mugging; patrols at London Transport underground stations were increased.[13]

As early as 22 October 1972, the *Sunday Mirror* estimated that Britain was winning its 'war' against muggers; but this did not lead to any let-up. Four days later, the new Chief Inspector of Constabulary promised an all-out drive to stamp out 'mugging' and other violent crime; he spoke of 'mugging' as his 'highest priority'.[14] Six days later, the Home Secretary was reported as having written to all Chief Constables in England and Wales for details of recent muggings. His definition of mugging – 'robberies by gangs of 2 or more youths on people walking alone in the open' – was also made public at this time.[15] This definition caused some immediate queries: terms like 'youths' and 'in the open' were, at the very least, ambiguous and the 'gang' notion seemed to rule out the possibility of an individual 'mugger'.

The Duke of Edinburgh, addressing the Royal College of General Practitioners, referred to 'mugging' as a disease of the community, for which a cure had to be found.[16] Throughout the rest of the year media coverage of 'mugging' declined considerably. However in the courts three year sentences remained fairly standard practice. There were some occasional articles on the effectiveness of various anti-mugging devices.[17] But perhaps the most significant report during this period was the publication of the results of an opinion poll in the *Daily Mail* (10 November 1972). Mugging had apparently touched a very delicate nerve in public consciousness since 90 per cent of those interviewed wanted tougher punishments and 70 per cent *greater* government urgency; and this despite the severe reaction already taking place.

In January 1973, the level of press coverage was higher than in December, but not significantly so. The Home Secretary, in a written Commons reply, said that the state of the 'war' was not 'deteriorating further' and might be 'improving in some areas':[18] cautiously optimistic. However the March headline – 'London muggings up by 129% over four years' – carried by many national papers,[19] seemed to shatter that optimism. The Special Squads, according to black community leaders, were harassing and intimidating black youngsters suspected as potential 'muggers'.[20] Then came the event which set the seal on Mr Carr's optimism: the sentencing of three Handsworth youths, one to twenty years' detention and the others to ten years, on 19 March 1973. This event revived interest in arguments about 'deterrent' sentences and feature articles reappeared; but the terms of reference had changed little, if at all. Security forces on London's underground stations were to be strengthened still further.[21] The same statistics, concerning London muggings, were resurrected and used again in April, with headlines like: 'Muggings reach four a day in London' and 'London mugging – police demand "action now" '.[22] The Old Aged Pensioners' Conference in May carried a resolution urging more drastic action be taken against hooligans. Inevitably Mr Carrr was forced to renounce his earlier optimism when he issued a special directive to police chiefs to 'hot-up' their war on teenage muggers.[23]

Five days later the Wandsworth police division was reported as having 'turned the tide' on muggers; apparently its 'plain clothes anti-mugging squads'

were winning the war.[24] But four days after that on 15 May, Sir Robert Mark, then London's police chief, was reported to be 'getting every available man back on the beat to crack down on crime – particularly mugging'.[25] London had obviously not 'turned the tide' to Sir Robert's satisfaction. On 23 May, some seventeen days later, Robert Carr was again reported as 'optimistic'. He told 1200 women at the Conservative Women's Conference that Britain's police were 'winning'.[26] Despite these 'shifts' in the tides of the anti-mugging war, 'mugging' was beginning to wane as a news item. July and August produced only one 'mugging' report. This decline in media visibility was accompanied by the settling of the debate about the state of the war: it had at last been 'won'. On 29 July the Prime Minister congratulated himself on the country's progress and referred to the decline in mugging and crime in general as examples of that 'progress'.[27] On 1 October 1973 fraud replaced 'mugging' as 'Public Crime Enemy – No.1': Britain's 'Biggest criminal headache'.[28] The 'mugging' epidemic was temporarily over.

So much for the fluctuations in the mugging phenomenon. Crucially underpinning the various shifts in concern was the notion of massive increases in crimes of violence throughout the period, especially 'muggings'. Less visible, but present, if only implicitly in certain instances, were two other key themes: the notion that criminals were getting off lightly, that courts were becoming 'soft'; and the notion (really the corollary of 'soft' sentences) that the only strategy was to 'get tough'. Expressed as an equation, the argument ran: rapid increase in crimes of violence plus 'soft' sentencing policy equals need to return to traditional 'tough' (or deterrent) measures. We wish now to examine these elements in the 'rising crime rate' equation.

THE 'RISING CRIME RATE' EQUATION

This is what we might call the 'equation of concern' into which 'mugging' was inserted. It rested on an implied chain of argument: the rate of violent crime was on the increase, a trend encouraged by a 'soft-on-the-criminal' policy in the courts (as well as in the country at large, the result of 'permissive' attitudes); the only way to deal with this was to revert to traditional 'get-tough' policies which were guaranteed to have the required deterring effect on those attracted to violent crime. We want to examine each element in the argument in turn; but we start with a word of warning about statistics.

Statistics – whether crime rates or opinion polls – have an ideological function: they appear to *ground* free floating and controversial impressions in the hard, incontrovertible soil of numbers. Both the media and the public have enormous respect for 'the facts' – *hard facts*. And there is no fact so 'hard' as a number – unless it is the percentage difference between two numbers. With regard to criminal statistics, these are not – as one might suppose – sure indicators of the volume of crime committed, or very meaningful ones. This has long been recognised even by those who make most use of them, the police themselves. The reasons are not difficult to understand: (1) crime statistics refer only to *reported* crime: they cannot quantify the 'dark figure'; (2) different

areas collate their statistics differently; (3) police sensitisation to, and mobilisation to deal with, selected, 'targetted' crimes increase both the number the police turn up, and the number the public report; (4) public anxiety about particular 'highlighted' offences also leads to 'over-reporting'; (5) crime statistics are based on legal (not sociological) categories and are, thus, arbitrary. This remains the case despite the deliberations of the official Perks Committee,[29] and the efforts of the Cambridge Institute of Criminology[30] to provide more meaningful indicators; (6) changes in the law (e.g. the 1968 *Theft Act*) make strict comparisons over time difficult.[31]

In general it must also be remembered that everything depends on how the crime statistics are *interpreted* (by the police), and then on how these interpretations are *reported* (in the media). However accurate or inaccurate the statistics quoted earlier, they were used to identify the existence of a mugging crime wave and to justify public reaction to it. W. I. Thomas once remarked: 'Those things which men believe to be true, are true in their consequences.'[32] The statistics about mugging therefore had real enough consequences in terms of official and public reactions. Hence we need to look at the figures 'straight' *as if* they were accurate before questioning their basis in reality. But first we ought to reiterate our purpose in making this statistical detour, i.e. we wish to look at the statistical basis to the *first* 'mugging panic' in 1972. For this reason we present here only statistical information up until 1972–3. For those readers interested in the years since then we survey these briefly at the end of this particular section.

When we look at the criminal statistics and the trends that they reveal, some interesting facts emerge. The first is that crime, *as a whole*, has been increasing (though not uniformly) year by year *for most of this century*: since 1915 in fact (only 1949–54 showing a net reduction, as a period, during this time). The period which saw the greatest increase in crime generally was the period 1955–65, where the average annual increase was about 10 per cent.[33] The seven years from 1966 to 1972 saw a decreased rate of increase, the average increase being of the order of 5 per cent.[34] Statistically speaking, then, the period of the greatest crime increase had passed by 1972. We were then in a rather mixed and indeterminate period – not at the crest of a 'crime wave', as certain public spokesmen would have had us believe. The rise, in short, was neither particularly new in 1972, nor sudden; it was nearly as old as this century. In statistical terms, it was, temporarily anyway, past its peak. Nor, when compared with earlier trends, was it especially alarming.

But public spokesmen usually have not meant crime generally when they have spoken of the 'crime wave'. They have meant, specifically, the growth of 'serious' crimes, and especially the growth of 'crimes of violence'. Was this new? Statistically speaking, no. Reginald Maudling, during his period as Home Secretary, spoke, with concern, of 'crimes of violence' having risen by 61.9 per cent between 1967 and 1971.[35] The figures for the years 1957–61 (i.e. a decade earlier) reveal an even *greater* increase, one of 68 per cent.[36] (We are aware of the problem of using statistics quoted by public figures and the press without revealing their sources. However, this somewhat cavalier attitude is not without intent since it is precisely such public statements – the popularisation of official

statistics – which provide the statistical 'back-up' for subsequent action. In point of fact we have checked both these statements with the official statistics, and though there are slight discrepancies due to the fact that the former appear to be taken from the *Reports of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Constabulary*, which only include figures for England and Wales (excepting those for the Metropolitan Police District), and the latter from the *Annual Abstract of Statistics* (1969), which combines figures for England and Wales with those for Northern Ireland and Scotland, the overall point, that the two periods are substantially similar statistically, remains valid.) So the increase, even in the specific area of 'crimes of violence', was not dramatically new.

Let us look specifically at the category, 'robbery or assault with intent to rob', the criminal statistical category nearest to 'mugging', and certainly the charge to which most 'muggers' were subject. Was the increase in *this* category as dramatic as the reaction to mugging suggested? The answer must again be no. During the ten years between 1955 and 1965 'robberies' increased by 354 per cent.[37] Between 1965 and 1972, however, they increased by only 98½ per cent.[38] Expressed as a percentage, the average annual increase between 1955 and 1965 was 35.4 per cent but during the seven years between 1965 and 1972 it was only 14 per cent. Even if we only use statistics for 'mugging', basing ourselves on the one universally quoted, namely the rise in London muggings by 129 per cent over four years 1968–72,[39] we *still* find the average annual increase (32 per cent) is *less* than that (35 per cent) for robberies generally over the ten years 1955–65. So even the statistics most closely related to the reaction to mugging, i.e. statistics of robberies and mugging, were far from being without precedent in the post-war period. The situation with relation to crimes roughly categorisable as 'muggings' was certainly no worse in 1972 than it was between 1955–65 and, it could be argued statistically that it was, if anything, slightly better. Thus, whatever statistics are used, whether the over-all 'crimes of violence' figures, or, more specifically those referring to 'robberies' or 'muggings', it is *not* possible to demonstrate that the situation was dramatically worse in 1972 than it was in the period 1955–65. In other words, it is impossible to 'explain' the severity of the reaction to mugging by using arguments based solely on the objective, quantifiable, statistical facts. A final word of caution. We have based much of our statistical evidence on McClintock and Avison[40] since it is a large-scale, prestigious, quasi-official study, and certainly the most exhaustive survey of its kind ever undertaken in this country. Since then, McDonald has taken the authors to task on methodological grounds and especially for confining most of the analysis to the period 1955–65.[41] McDonald demonstrates, convincingly, that taking a slightly longer time span (1948–68) reduces substantially the increases that McClintock and Avison found. Anybody seriously interested in the problem of criminal statistics should undoubtedly consult McDonald's important text. However, since our purpose is not to develop more adequate ways of computing increases in crime but simply to examine the kinds of simple statistics used to justify the reaction to mugging, we feel that our use of short time spans is justified. In fact, it is precisely the *annual* statistical increase in certain crimes, dramatically presented in the media, which fuel and legitimate the concern about crime.

What about the second element in our equation: the 'softness' of the courts? How well was this grounded, statistically? There are two strands involved here: the 'acquittal versus conviction rate'; and sentencing policy. A major assumption behind some of the proposals of the Criminal Law Revision Committee, and the remarks of vociferous supporters of it, like Sir Robert Mark, was that professional criminals are being found 'not guilty' too easily. Sir Robert Mark's contention was based on the assumption that about half of the defendants who plead 'not guilty' are acquitted by juries.[42] The evidence concerning 'acquittal rates' is not nearly so easy to come by as the evidence relating to criminal statistics, but what little there is tends not to support this judgement.

McCabe and Purves, of the Oxford Penal Research Unit, found that in one-third of the acquittals they examined (fifty-three out of 173), the prosecution evidence was so thin that the judge *directed* an acquittal without leaving it to the jury; [43] and second, that most acquittals in higher courts, even where the accused had previous convictions, involved relatively *minor* offences. Elgrod and Lew re-examined the records of a firm of London solicitors for the period 1964–73 and found that the proportion of acquittals brought in by juries had remained stable and averaged out at about 31 per cent.[44] In other words, it lent support to the view of many practising lawyers of an acquittal rate of one in three of those people pleading 'not guilty', a finding which did not support Sir Robert Mark's case.

Acquittal rates appear, then, to have altered little in recent years, to affect chiefly 'minor' criminals, and to be much less than the 50 per cent claimed. But probably more pivotal to the perception of 'softness' to 'toughness' in the courtroom is sentencing policy.

Sentences for violent offences have actually been getting longer. Sparks found, using the 'year-end' figures, that those serving fixed-term sentences of seven years or more (the majority of whom were convicted for crimes of violence) had 'roughly doubled' in number between 1960 and 1967, while the numbers of those serving ten years or more had 'tripled'.[45] This finding is very different from those of the H.M.S.O. Report, *People in Prisons*.[46] One essential difference between the two documents is that the H.M.S.O. Report largely deals with *admissions* in any one year. On this basis it argues that apart from the increase in numbers serving fixed-term sentences of over fourteen years, largely consequent upon the abolition of capital punishment, there has been little change in 'intermediate' sentences. Sparks, on the other hand, using the statistics in a more complex way (and berating *People in Prisons* for its 'simple' use of the statistics), finds a very different picture: one of an increasing build-up of 'long-stay' prisoners (those serving seven-plus, ten-plus, fourteen-plus and 'life') throughout the period 1960–7, practically all of whom, by 1967, were convicted of 'violent' offences. Post-abolition, the number of 'lifers' has increased, as has the average length of such sentences.[47] Furthermore, it has been argued that 1950–7 was a period of 'lenient' sentencing which saw a twofold increase in robberies, whereas 1957–66 witnessed a reversal in sentencing policy – and a *three*fold increase in robberies. Professor Radzinowicz also notes the change, in 1960, from the lenience of the years 1950–7:

> Recently the courts seem to have been taking a sterner view, and in 1960 the standards reverted to those of 1950 . . . The trend towards increased severity is also reflected in much sharper sentences for younger and for first offenders.[48]

These are hardly indexes of a growing 'soft policy' by the courts.

Whether these policies have been deterring – the third element in our equation – is another matter. McClintock and Avison,[49] reviewing the 1955–65 period in their chapter on 'The Recidivist', argue for a percentage increase of 160 per cent in the numbers coming back before the courts; with an even higher rate for the younger recidivists (aged 14 – 21). The reconviction rate for 'serious' recidivists (five or more proved indictable offences) was higher than that for other recidivists; a third of young robbers had 'high' rates of recidivism (two or more previous proved indictable offences); and 'offences of robbery and breaking showed the greatest proportion of "high" recidivism'.

As it happens, there *is* important evidence about the relation between tough sentencing and deterrence drawn specifically from 'mugging'. Baxter and Nuttall, Home Office research officers, examined the long and severe sentences passed on the three boys in the Handsworth 'mugging' case for subsequent 'deterrent' effect.[50] They experienced the same difficulty the present authors did in finding an acceptable statistical basis for 'mugging'. But, taking the 'robbery and assault with intent to rob' as their statistical base-line (and acknowledging that this figure would include 'crimes other than mugging'), the authors had to conclude: 'In none of the police areas studied did the sentence have the anticipated impact on the number of reported robberies.' In Birmingham, where the initial offence was committed, the robbery offence rate continued uninterrupted (i.e. 'relatively low throughout the two relevant years').

In short, the statistics such as we have do *not* support the 'rising crime rate' equation. An 'unprecedented' rise in robberies with violence was *not* new in 1972. Sentences for serious offences were growing *longer* rather than shorter, and *more* people were receiving them; acquittal rates seemed *not* to have changed. And these tough policies were *not* deterring. In fact, if we regard the 'toughness' in the courts throughout the 1960s as an 'experiment in deterrence', the rising rate of crime and recidivism demonstrates just how bad is the record of deterrence as an instrument of penal policy. This general picture – true for serious crime as a whole – was also true for 'mugging'.

However, in the specific case of the mugging statistics, we can go further still. We have just alluded to the difficulties that Baxter and Nuttall found in isolating a statistical base in their work on the 'mugging' figures, and we also mentioned we had similar difficulties. This point bears amplification. The much publicised 1973 headlines that London 'muggings' were 129 per cent up over the four years 1968–72 seem to have their base in *Robbery and Kindred Offences In the Metropolitan Police District, 1968–72*.[54] Their precise origin remains a deep mystery to us. Our efforts to 'crack' them have been in vain. Since there is no legal offence called 'mugging', the figures cannot be derived direct from the *Annual Reports*. Some Chief Constables expressed doubt as to what to include under 'mugging' when the Home Secretary asked for figures

for 1968 (though there is evidence that, since the 1972–3 period, regional figures for crimes descriptively arranged under the 'mugging' category, together with some figures, however loose, on the ethnic identity of assailants, *have* been kept). The graph in the 1973 *Report* must therefore be a back-projection; but based on what? Since none of the existing 'robbery' figures for 1968, or the other years, square with the reconstructed 'mugging' figures, these must be a selective conflation of proportions of a number of different sub-categories within the over-all 'robbery' figures. But how much of which? (We have tried as many permutations as ingenuity allows, though without success.) And what statistical checks were there on this selective clustering under the 'mugging' label, performed in 1973 (when the 'mugging' panic was at its peak), for a year – 1968 – when the label was not in use?

We mentioned earlier that we would end with some general updating on statistics. We offer them for completeness, rather than in the hope that they will clarify much. 1973 saw practically no change in the over-all crime figures, substantial percentage *reductions* in the robbery figures, substantial percentage *increases* in 'crimes of violence' generally, and a mixed set of figures for thefts from the person (a large percentage increase (12.5 per cent) in London and a largish percentage reduction in the provinces (8.4 per cent)). 1974 saw larger percentage increases in crime generally and robbery, massive percentage increases in theft from the person (42 per cent in the provinces, 71 per cent in London), but small percentage increases in 'crimes of violence' generally. 1975 saw smaller percentage increases in crime generally but even larger percentage increases in robbery (24 per cent in the provinces, 41.2 per cent in London). The percentage increases in theft from the person, still large, were less dramatic than in 1974, while the 'crimes of violence' category showed far larger percentage increases. Over all, then, the period seems 'mixed', but, for those interested in trends in statistically recorded crimes, it may be of interest that, except for sexual offences, *every* crime category recorded an increase in both the provinces and London during 1974 and 1975 – quite an unusual occurrence.

We have left the mugging statistics until last; these are, as usual, the most complicated. After the London figures produced in 1973 by the Statistical Unit for the years 1968–72, which were also reproduced in the Metropolitan Police Commissioner's *Report* for 1972, a separate 'mugging' statistic does not appear again in any of the *Annual Reports* until the publication of the Metropolitan Police Commissioner's *Report* for 1975. This report carries an identical table to the 1972 *Report*, i.e. a table of robberies sub-divided into smaller categories based on the circumstances of the crime. One of these categories – robbery following an attack in the open – is clearly the mugging statistic since both the category and the figures for 1971 and 1972 tally with those in the 1972 *Report*, where it was announced that this particular category was popularly known as 'mugging'. So, despite a certain coyness on the Commissioner's part about using the label (and this despite the fact that the original decision to sub-categorise the robbery statistics undoubtedly stemmed from, or was sanctioned by, him), we can at least be certain that the figures collected for 1975 were based on the same criteria, whatever these were, as those collected in 1972. Analysing these figures, it would appear that after the dramatic 32 per

cent increase in 1972, muggings *decreased* during 1973 (by 20.7 per cent), only to *increase* by 18.7 per cent in 1974 and by 35.9 per cent in 1975. Whatever the reason for the 1973 decrease, what is certain is that the drop was only temporary. And as sentences in the courts have certainly not been getting any lighter for these offences, and police activity – in the light of much high-level concern – is unlikely to have diminished, we can only see these figures as further confirmation of the bankruptcy of policies of containment and deterrence.

However, the statistical situation regarding these figures becomes more interesting, if more confusing, during this period. In the Metropolitan Commissioner's 1972 *Report* we see the beginnings of a development which was to culminate in the production of a completely new set of crime categories in the 1974 *Report*. We have already mentioned the sub-division of the 'robbery' category which produced, as one outcome, the mugging statistics. 'Theft from the person' was similarly sub-divided, and one particular category – 'snatchings' – was included in a table showing the increases in 'selected crimes of violence, 1968–72'. We were told that 'snatchings' appear there since there was little distinction between such offences and robbery. The implication, since both were included in the table, is that the element common to both categories is that of 'violence'. But, then, in the 1973 *Report* we were told that 'snatches' were 'similar to robberies *differing only in that the victim is neither threatened nor injured by the assailant*' (our emphasis). In view of the fact that snatchings had appeared in a table of selected crimes of violence the previous year, and that it is *precisely* the element of violence which distinguishes robbery from theft, this is a very strange statement indeed. However, there is yet a further 'mystery' in the 1973 figures. We have already mentioned that this was the year which showed a dramatic drop in the numbers of robberies and muggings. 'Snatchings' followed this pattern. But 'thefts from the person' (e.g. 'pickpocketing') showed a *large increase*. How do we explain these divergent trends? Given the ambiguity surrounding all these categories and the failure to specify publicly the criteria for differentiating the categories, is it not at least plausible to mull over the possibility – without necessarily suggesting a conspiracy – that what were perceived and classified as 'muggings' in 1972 were differently perceived and classified in 1973 – as more routine examples of pickpocketing for example? Such selective perception, and the accompanying decline in the mugging statistics, would certainly retrospectively justify the control measures taken.

In the 1974 and 1975 *Reports*, the incipient unhappiness with the official legal, Home Office classifications found full expression in the production of a completely new set of 'circumstantial' categories (i.e. ones reflecting the circumstances of the crime) which appeared in addition to the Home Office classifications. Of principal interest to us was the production of a 'robbery and other violent thefts' category; though, again, the criteria for adjudging a theft 'violent' were not stated. In the light of the Commissioner's earlier sub-division of 'thefts from the person', it would appear that 'snatchings' had finally become so similar to robberies (despite being 'non-violent'!) as to warrant the production of a joint statistic. In 1975 there were 7959 such 'robberies and other

violent thefts' (up 43 per cent), 4452 official robberies (up 41.2 per cent) and 1977 'muggings' (up 35.9 per cent); though the official 'theft from the person' category had no equivalent category in the Commissioner's classification. What are we to make of the new category 'robbery and other violent thefts'? Violent thefts were obviously similar to robberies; hence the joint statistic: yet official robberies were then further sub-divided without any reference to the joint statistic. This means that the mugging statistic was produced without reference to the 'violent theft' category. Yet it seems hard to believe that the introduction of these new categories – first 'snatches' and then 'violent thefts' – were entirely unrelated to the original breakdown of the robbery figures which had, as one outcome, the production of a set of figures for 'mugging'; particularly since the very reason given for the sub-division of 'thefts from the person' was to differentiate the more 'robbery-like' from the rest. Given this line of reasoning, the current publicity and concern aroused by the London mugging statistics is very difficult to understand, on purely statistical grounds, since the 1975 figures reveal that, of the 'robberies and violent thefts', only 25 per cent were actually 'muggings'. Finally, it should be emphasised that none of these statistical convolutions have ever affected the Chief Inspector of Constabulary's *Reports*, which have always stuck to the official classifications. One important result of this is that, despite the grave concern expressed in these reports about mugging (c.f. the 1973 *Report*), we have *never had any figures at all concerning the scale, and rate of increase, of provincial muggings.* If the reaction to mugging cannot then be explained by a straightforward reference to the statistics, how *can* it be explained?

When the official reaction to a person, groups of persons or series of events is *out of all proportion* to the actual threat offered, when 'experts', in the form of police chiefs, the judiciary, politicians and editors *perceive* the threat in all but identical terms, and appear to talk 'with one voice' of rates, diagnoses, prognoses and solutions, when the media representations universally stress 'sudden and dramatic' increases (in numbers involved or events) and 'novelty', above and beyond that which a sober, realistic appraisal could sustain, then we believe it is appropriate to speak of the beginnings of a *moral panic.*

A moral panic has been defined as follows by Stan Cohen in his study of the 'mods and rockers', *Folk Devils and Moral Panic*:

> Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereo-typical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. Sometimes the object of the panic is quite novel and at other times it is something which has been in existence long enough, but suddenly appears in the limelight. Sometimes the panic is passed over and is forgotten, except in folklore and collective memory; at other times it has more serious and long-lasting repercussions and might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even in the way society conceives itself. [52]

In this study we argue that there was a *moral panic* about 'mugging' in 1972–3; a panic which fits in almost every detail the process described by Cohen in the passage above. This is not to deny that, on occasions during the past few years (but also, almost certainly, for at least a century), individual men and women have been suddenly attacked, rough-handled and robbed in the street. We think, however, that it requires explanation how and why a version of this rather traditional street crime was perceived, at a certain point in the early 1970s, as a 'new strain of crime'. The number of such incidents *may* indeed have gone up – it is virtually impossible to tell from the statistical evidence which has been made publicly available. In the light of that, we think it requires to be explained why and how the weak and confused statistical evidence came to be converted into such hard and massively publicised facts and figures. It also needs to be explained how and why these 'facts' came to be identified as part and parcel – indeed, as some of the strongest evidence for – a general belief in the dramatic rise in the rate of 'violent crime'. The impression that 'violent crime', particularly 'mugging', was increasing produced a massive and intense coverage by the press, official and semi-official spokesmen, and sentences of an increasing severity in court. In short 'mugging' had consequences in the real world, quite apart from the number of people mugged on the streets; and these consequences appear to have less to do with what actually was known to be happening, than with the character, scale and intensity of this reaction. *All these other aspects are part of the 'mugging' phenomenon, too. They, too, require explanation.*

This represents a major shift of focus from conventional studies of crime. Cohen defines this in terms of a shift of attention from the *deviant act* (i.e. 'mugging'), treated in isolation to *the relation between the deviant act and the reaction of the public and the control agencies to the act.*[53] This shift of focus alters the nature of the 'object' or phenomenon which needs to be explained. In what we might call the common-sense view, sometime in the early 1970s British cities were visited by a dramatic and unexpected epidemic of 'mugging'. The police, reacting to these events, spurred on by a vigilant press, by public anxiety and professional duty, took rapid steps to isolate the 'virus' and bring the fever under control. The courts administered a strong inoculating dose of medicine. It disappeared within twelve months, as swiftly and suddenly as it had appeared. It departed as mysteriously as it had arrived. In the 'common-sense' view, *this* little sequence of events was 'mugging', at least in its primary phase. We argue, on the other hand, that there was *also* a massive blaze of publicity in the press, the use of a new 'label', widespread public comment and anxiety, a strong and vigorous official reaction. Moreover, the scale and intensity of this reaction is quite at odds with the scale of the threat to which it was a response. Thus there is strong evidence of a 'moral panic' about mugging. We insist that this 'moral panic' is also crucial to the meaning of the 'mugging' phenomenon itself. It is this whole complex – action and reaction – as well as what produced it and what its consequences were, which requires to be ex-

plained. We suggest that there is no simple 'event' here to be understood, apart from the social processes by which such events are produced, perceived, classified, explained and responded to. The more we examine this whole complex in detail, the more it seems that it is the 'moral panic' *about* 'mugging' rather than the appearance of 'mugging' itself, to which we must first give our attention.

In the following chapter, then, we bring into focus some of these so far neglected aspects of 'mugging': the way the 'moral panic' was articulated in the courts, and the reaction to it of the police – in short, the growth to visibility and subsidence, between August 1972 and the latter months of 1973, of a 'moral panic' about 'mugging' and its passage through the judicial and control apparatus.

However, before we turn to that we must make a detour back to the point from which we started: the appearance of the *label* which identified 'a new strain of crime'. It was the use of this label which provided the stimulus for the take-off of a moral panic about 'mugging'. But what was the birth and subsequent career of the 'mugging' label?

CAREER OF A LABEL

> NEW YORK CITY . . . the science fiction metropolis of the future . . . the cancer capital, a laboratory where all the splendours and miseries of the new age are being tried out in experimental form. . . . Professor Nathan Glazer, the sociologist, remarks: 'We're threatened with the destruction of the entire social fabric.'
>
> America is where our weather comes from – the prevailing cultural winds are carrying the same challenges and threats across the Atlantic to Europe. . . . The forecast does not seem very favourable . . . when I last investigated New York in 1966, half a million of its citizens were living on welfare doles. Now the figure has reached a million. . . . Only last week, massive cuts, the first since the second world war, were made by the state legislature in aid to the poor. . . .
>
> New York's major problem is this widespread poverty with the inevitable aftermath of growing crime, vandalism, rioting and drug-addiction. Already more than 70 per cent of the serious crimes are committed by youngsters under twenty-one. And crime means crime here – with a murder every twelve hours – many of them motiveless acts of violence with no thought of gain. . . .
>
> . . . the New York City Handbook [has] . . . an entire section on how to deal with burglars, double-lock and protect doors and windows and the general warning: 'ON THE STREET walk where it is well-lighted and where there are people' . . . one symptom [of New York's 'ills'] is the deepening bankruptcy of the city's public finances.
>
> THE WORST RESULTS . . . [are] the hatred and contempt engendered in one section of the population for another . . . friends . . . accept the hazards of New York rather as Londoners accepted the Blitz. (Alan Brien, 'New York Nightmare', *Sunday Times*, 6 April 1969.)

> Is it a lack of courage to think big? Could not the country that thought up the Marshall plan do the same for its own good? Is it because the prejudices against race and welfare programmes are no obstacles to a grand rescue operation abroad but they assert themselves stubbornly against such a vision at home? And why is a small nation such as North Vietnam capable of resisting a super-power, despite the technical superiority of American weapons, firepower and mobility?
>
> Such are the questions on the lips of Americans today. They are all symptoms of the doubts and anxieties that assail a large majority of the people about the trust in the America they believe in.
>
> They are appalled by the massive confrontation at home between black and white, hawks and doves, intellectuals and non-intellectuals, between young and old, the law and the protestors. I doubt whether so many segments of American society have ever been as divided as they are today. It is more than a malaise; somehow the American spirit is temporarily unhinged.
>
> They are afraid of walking in the streets at night and being attacked. This fear is greater than ever before. Crime in the street, unless the republican candidate for President is able to offer an alternative to President Johnson's policies in Vietnam, will be the big issue of this election campaign. (Henry Brandon, 'The Disunited States', *Sunday Times*, 10 March 1968.)

Lejeune and Alex note that 'The term *mugging* assumed its present meaning [in America] in the 1940s. Derived from criminal and police parlance, it refers to a certain manner of robbing and/or beating of a victim by petty professional operators or thieves who often work in touring packs of three or more.' [54] This is the classic meaning of the term 'mugging'. Its American location is, of course, crucial. Whatever its earlier usages.[55] it is in the United States that the term achieves its decisive contemporary definition. It was from this American context that the term was 'reimported' into British usage in the later 1960s and the 1970s.

Labels are important, especially when applied to dramatic public events. They not only place and identify those events; they assign events to a context. Thereafter the use of the label is likely to mobilise *this whole referential context*, with all its associated meanings and connotations. It is this wider, more connotative usage which was 'borrowed' when the British press picked up the term and began to apply it to the British setting. It is crucial to bear in mind, therefore, what this wider, contextual field of reference of the term was or had become in the United States. By the 1960s, 'mugging' was no longer being used in the United States simply as a descriptive and identifying term for a specific kind of urban crime. It not only dominated the whole public discussion of crime and public disorder – it had become a central *symbol* for the many tensions and problems besetting American social and political life in general. 'Mugging' achieved this status because of its ability to *connote* a whole complex of social themes in which the 'crisis of American society' was reflected. These themes included: the involvement of blacks and drug addicts in crime; the expansion of the black ghettoes, coupled with the growth of black social and political militancy; the threatened crisis and collapse of the cities; the crime

panic and the appeal to 'law and order'; the sharpening political tensions and protest movements of the 1960s leading into and out from the Nixon–Agnew mobilisation of 'the silent majority' and their presidential victory in 1968. These topics and themes were not as clearly separated as these headings imply. They tended, in public discussion, to come together into a general scenario of conflict and crisis. In an important sense the image of 'mugging' came ultimately to contain and express them all.

During the 1960s, the principal venue of muggings in the United States was the black ghetto. Such areas in most of the large cities have traditionally been areas associated with high rates of crime. Following the black 'ghetto rebellions' of the mid-1960s, and against the background of an extended debate about the nature of social and family 'disorganisation' amongst ghetto blacks, the issue of black crime surfaced as a major and continuing topic of concern. Crime was taken as an index of the permanent state of tension among urban blacks: perhaps, also, as a means through which racial tension was worked out and expressed – a preoccupation no doubt supported by the fact that, of all violent offences in the United States, only robbery involves a high *inter*-racial element. [56] This equation of violent robbery with blacks was compounded by the spread of the ghettoes in most of the large cities through the 1950s and 1960s. Black crime was troubling enough when confined within the clearly demarcated zones of the ghettoes; but it became the central concern of a far more diffused and generalised threat when coupled with the spread of the ghettoes 'up-town', and the spill over of black populations into formerly white residential areas. The effects of this 'spill over' (which, in any event, compounded the many other serious problems of the large cities in the United States) was differently experienced and perceived by different sectors of the white population. Working-class whites – often of distinctive ethnic origin – perceived the 'black invasion' as a major intrusion from an even more disadvantaged group into their limited economic, social and geographical space. The tensions between these two groups have been considerably sharpened, 'white ethnics' often providing the spearhead for a white backlash against blacks and the poverty programmes (which seemed to be giving blacks an unfair advantage). This was undoubtedly one of the key sectors to which the Nixon 'silent-majority' appeal was directed, and provided active recruits into the 'law and order' campaigns. White middle-class residents were protected for longer from the black incursion; but gradually the spread of the ghettoes (and all that was associated with it) also began to make its impact here, as sectors of the cities hitherto thought 'safe' became redefined as dangerous or unsafe territory. The changing class and ethnic composition of the cities, and a shift in the whole flavour and ambience of 'urban living' for the white middle classes, precipitated not only a sense of panic but also the steady movement of whites out of the city (the so-called accelerated 'flight to the suburbs') and the adoption of a whole series of protective and defensive moves. The actual incidence of violent inter-racial crime was outstripped by the general sense of fear and anxiety on the part of the white urban dwellers; even if not actual victims, more people came to see themselves as *potential* victims, and undoubtedly a sense of 'trust' and security had been undermined. Lejeune and Alex very sensitively describe what

they call the growth of a 'defensive mentality' amongst whites; [57] and the image of the 'mugger' erupting out of the urban dark in a violent and wholly unexpected attack or penetrating right into apartment blocks became, in many ways, the precipitate for what were in fact much larger fears and anxieties about the racial issue in general. By the end of the 1960s, then, the term 'mugging' had come to stand as a referential symbol for this whole complex of attitudes and anxieties about the general drift of American society – a cause for concern made more urgent by the rising political conflicts relating to the Vietnam War, and the growth of student militancy and black power.

Now this 'crisis' of American society in the 1960s was widely and vividly covered in the British press. [58] It fitted well into a whole 'structure of attention' in the British media. American reportage has always played an important part in foreign news coverage in the British media, since, for both historical and contemporary reasons, the United States is taken as a sort of paradigm case for future trends and tendencies in the Western world, especially in Britain. In the 1950s the United States stood, and was reported, as the symbol of affluent success; in the 1960s it became the symbol of a modern industrial capitalist society 'in crisis'. In both cases, the British media presentation of 'the United States' suffered from selective exaggeration. The United States seems always to be presented in 'larger-than-life' terms: more extravagent, more quirky, more bizarre, more sensational than anything comparable in Britain. And when American society began to run into serious difficulties, these too were presented in an exaggerated fashion. What is more, the British coverage of American social problems, like race and crime, reproduced the definitions of those problems which had been already generated in the United States. When the British press reported on American cities, the already forged connections between black unrest, inter-racial tension, the spreading ghettoes and crime tended to be reproduced in that form (though there is no doubt that 'selective exaggerations' solidified some of the looser connections). Thus, long before British 'muggings' appeared in the British media, the British presentation of 'mugging' as an American crime reproduced the *whole context of 'mugging'* as it had already been defined in the American setting. It reproduced *the idea of American mugging* for British consumption (c.f. the extracts at the beginning of the section). The graphic stories by Henry Fairlie – who was himself twice 'mugged' – in the *Sunday Express* in this period offer further highly specific examples of this type of coverage of American problems for British readers. [59] Similar kinds of reports can be found at both ends of the press spectrum in Britain in this period – for example, in Henry Brandon's pieces for the *Sunday Times* and in Mileva Ross's 'I Live With Crime In The Fun City' in the *Sunday Express*:

> MY HOUSEKEEPER arrived one morning shaken by the experience of witnessing the mugging and robbing of a man in front of her own house which is just inside Washington's Negro ghetto.
>
> It seems almost as if crime in Washington has become a sport, as if robbing for money is as easy as shopping for bread. . . . In 80 percent of the cases [of armed robberies in one day] Negroes were both assailants and vic-

tims. For the rest, whites were the victims of Negroes.

President Kennedy ... worried about Washington's reputation as culturally underdeveloped; Mr Nixon will be worrying about crime and how to live up to his election campaign promise 'to restore freedom from fear in the capital'.... Hair-raising accounts of escape from purse-snatchers or hold-up men and their easy getaways have stimulated fear, if not panic.... But many Washingtonians have become accustomed to living with crime almost in the way that Londoners learned to live with the blitz. You carry only sufficient money to keep the hold-up men satisfied.... You acquire a burglar alarm or watchdog; you don't stay out late ... you acquire your own gun.... Whites are afraid that they will be increasingly unsafe in this city where 67 percent of the population is Negro.... In the past, newspapers here have avoided racial identification of criminals.... The fact that this is now done so conspicuously ... is also an indication of how old liberal principles are being swept away by the crime wave. (Henry Brandon, 'Living round the Crime-Clock', *Sunday Times*, 26 January 1969.)

SUCH IS the amount of crime in America today that ... President Nixon ... ordered that the lights in the grounds of the White House should be kept on all night ... to stop the recent wave of attacks on Washington citizens – at least on his new doorstep.

So far ... [this] pledge of his presidential campaign – has been a notable failure.... To the harried police forces of Washington and New York, incidents [of robbery] ... are now almost as routine as parking offences.... My own experience in New York ... was a classic case of what Americans call 'a mugging'. This means that I was robbed by an unarmed attacker who jumped on me from behind.... It has happened to many of my friends.

My first-hand experience ... came early one evening.... I whirled round [upon being attacked] and looked straight ... [at] a hefty Negro youth.

Within days we seemed to be living right on top of a crime explosion.... After a few weeks the superintendent of our building ... pinned up a notice ... saying that ... a porter would be on duty ... every evening. I took all important documents ... out of my handbag. I carried the minimum of money in my purse ... One night we were awakened by a terrible noise outside ... we learned that the victim was an elderly doctor ... he was seriously hurt.... The theory was that the attackers were drug addicts.... The next morning we went out flat hunting ... we found what we were looking for ... Two doormen are on duty round the clock. And at night there is also an armed guard in the lobby. Everyone entering the building is stopped. The doorman rings me on the intercom before any visitor is allowed up.... I accept all this security as normal living now. (Mileva Ross, 'I Live With Crime In The "Fun City": spotlighting the rising tide of violence in America', *Sunday Express*, 23 February 1969.)

We offer substantial sections of these two crime reports, one from Washington, one from New York. They range from the highly personalised and dramatised account of the *Sunday Express* reporter to the more general *Sunday Times*

one. Yet, despite obvious differences in style, the same images and associations are evoked; the total 'message' is all but identical, and unequivocal, 'multifaceted', but unambiguous. The crime problem referred to here is not the problem of 'white-collar' frauds and tax evasion, nor even the problem of professional organised crime, and the legendary Mafia. What crime 'means', in these reports, is something completely different: the sudden attack, the brutal assault, the brazen threat; the 'amateur', uncouth and arrogant 'face-to-face' street and apartment encounters with young blacks/drugtakers desperate either for cash or a quick fix – in a word, the crime problem, in these reports, means *mugging*. It is *this* which is contextualised in both reports as being the 'primary' cause of the other elements mentioned: the escalation in crime; the 'resigned' acceptance of this state of affairs by both law-enforcement agencies and citizens; the fear, defensiveness and 'security-consciousness' of ordinary citizens; and, with the mention of President Nixon's electoral pledge, the notion of all this constituting a national political issue to which liberal responses have proved inadequate.

The kind of reporting exemplified in these early articles, and in a good deal of the American coverage of a similar kind in the British press in this period, acted as 'scene-setters' for the later English usage. It made 'mugging' familiar to English readers; and it did so, not by the coinage of a simple term but by transmitting 'mugging' as part of a whole context of troubling themes and images – it delivered something like *a whole image* of 'mugging' to the English reader. It presented American 'mugging' as in some ways at the centre of this complex of connected themes, drawn together with them into a single, rather terrifying scenario. Subsequent reports in the British press then employ the term 'mugging' unproblematically: the crime it indexes is already familiar to British readers, and *so are its contexts*. It is this whole composite image which was positively translated. And this helps to explain an oddity. So far as we can discover, the term 'mugging' is *not* applied to a specifically English crime until midway through 1972; but even as early as 1970, the term is *generally* and *unspecifically* applied to describe a sort of incipient breakdown in 'law and order' and general rise in violent crime and lawlessness in Britain.[60] Normally such a label would be applied in specific instances first, before gaining a wider, more generalised application. Here we find the reverse – the label is applied to Britain *first* in its *wider*, connotative sense; only then, subsequently, are concrete instances discovered. This can only be because the term was already appropriated from the United States *in its more inclusive sense* – signifying such general themes as crime in the streets, breakdown in law and order, race and poverty, a general rise in lawlessness and violence. To put it simply, if paradoxically: 'mugging' for British readers *meant* 'general social crisis and rising crime' *first*, a particular kind of robbery occurring on British streets second, and later. It is this paradox which accounts for the particular way in which the 'mugging' label is first applied to a specific British 'event' – the Hills killing near Waterloo Station. Although 'mugging' had been made thoroughly familiar to British readers – as we have seen, in the popular as well as the 'serious' press – the *specific application* of the 'mugging' label to a specific incident on a London street is problematic for the newspapers which first employ it, and seems to re-

quire some new definitional 'work' on the journalists' part. The policeman who used it first, qualifies it – 'a mugging *gone wrong*' (our emphasis). Many of the papers use quotation marks around the term – 'mugging'. Some papers (e.g. the *Daily Mirror*) offer a definition. This marks the second significant moment in the British appropriation of the 'mugging' label. The translation of 'mugging' and its context to British audiences, through the representation of American themes in the British coverage, is the first stage. But the application of the label to British events, and not in a general way but in a specific way to describe a concrete case of crime, is a shift in application and requires a new explanatory and contextualising move. This is the moment, not of the referencing of the 'mugging' idea in the American experience, but of the specific *transfer* of the label from one social setting to another: the moment of the *naturalisation* of the label on British soil.

The culmination of the English reporting of American mugging did not come until 4 March 1973 (ironically only two weeks before the Handsworth case). This was the long *Sunday Times* feature by George Feiffer on, 'New York: a Lesson for the World'. The article was in the colour supplement, and the front page of the magazine was a reproduction of a *New York Daily News* front page headed 'Thugs, Mugs, Drugs: City in Terror', which went some way towards encapsulating the article's extensive documentation of the violent decline and decay of New York. The article, which ran for eighteen pages, is too long to fully document here. It was graphically illustrated. It carried an extensive analysis, which brought together all the major themes of 'mugging' in the United States: the influx of Southern blacks, the spread of the ghettoes, the reactions of various sections of the white population, the failure of welfare programmes, the drug problem, the collapse of the education system, police corruption and ineffectiveness in dealing with growing crime, and, crucially, the major threat of violence on the streets. As the following extract demonstrates, the threat of violence on the streets was perceived as undoubtedly New York's most damaging problem. Here, more clearly than anywhere, the equation of the crime problem with the problem of 'mugging' reaches its apotheosis:

> By virtually unanimous agreement, the most damaging of New York's seemingly insoluble crises is crime. Not crime in general, not even the Mafia's illegal operations and hydra-headed leeching of former legitimate businesses. Headlines notwithstanding, most observers feel that the Mafia's great spoils are trivial in the context of New York's total lawlessness, just as gang rub-outs comprised a trifling percentage of its 1346 murders – roughly ten times the total for the whole of Britain – in the first nine months of last year. It is a new kind of crime which beleaguers the city – more accurately, an ancient, crudely simple kind: an atavism perceived as a return to the dark ages.
>
> 'What disturbs New Yorkers', said Roger Starr, a widely read specialist, 'is not cheating on income tax or even embezzling from firms. Millions are steadily swindled, often with official participation – but that's middle-class crime, which scares no-one. What haunts us is being mugged on your own street or in your own elevator. The poor and desperate simply push, slash or kick the nearest victim for his purse – which is terrifying. No-one is ever fully free of that fear.'

It might be useful here to say how in general this slow translation of 'mugging' from its American setting to British ground was shaped and structured by what we might call 'the special relationship' which exists between the media in Britain and the United States. In general this coverage is sustained by the continual search for *parallels* and *prophecies*: will what is happening in the United States happen here? In the words of one famous headline, 'Will Harlem Come to Handsworth'? This is often offset by a notion of *time lag*: yes, Britain generally follows the United States but later, more slowly. There is also what we might call a 'reservation on traditions'. Britain is, it is assumed, a more stable and traditional society, and this *might* provide some buttress or defence against American experiences being reproduced here – *provided* we take immediate and urgent steps. We must learn the lessons – if necessary, in anticipation. The notion that the United States provides the 'laboratory of democracy', a preview of 'the problems of Western democracy', can be clearly seen in Henry Fairlie's *Sunday Express* article of 22 September 1968: 'In America this year one can see the politics of the future: in Britain as much as anywhere else.' There is a fuller view about how Britain might then 'learn the lessons' in Angus Maude's long article on 'The Enemy Within':

> Every observer of the American scene had wondered what would become of a generation of spoiled children with too much money to spend, encouraged to behave like adults in the insecure years of immature adolescence. The spread of violence, vandalism, drugs, sexual promiscuity – in short, the growing rejection of civilized social standards – has provided the answer. Two things have contributed to this trend. First, the commercial exploitation of the prosperous teenage market, seeking to inculcate a totally material standard of values. Secondly, the propaganda of 'liberal' intellectuals who have preached the desirability and inevitability of the emancipation of the young. These are the siren voices we have been hearing, ever more brazen, in this country. As we try to grapple with our major imports from America – violence, drug-taking, student unrest, the hippy cult and pornography – our own permissive leftists have been hailing them as signs of progress. *We might as well begin to learn the lessons of America now*, [our emphasis] for our own traditional standards are under the same kind of attack. Here too, parents are becoming bemused and uncertain of their responsibilities, as authority and discipline are derided and diminished. The American radical intellectuals, who have done more than anyone to set the American people at odds with itself, have preached the rejection of patriotism, of pride in their country and its history, of all the traditions, and heritage of the past. The same gospel of anarchy is being promulgated here. We in Britain have certain advantages. We have a longer tradition of civilized living, a greater heritage of beauty and history from the past. We must treasure it and be prepared to defend it. At the same time we are going to have to fight for our future prosperity, to work harder and meet our challenges with more spirit

> and enterprise than are now necessary in America. This may yet be our salvation, for we have the ability to triumph if we have the will. If we fail, it will be because we have been destroyed from within – by the same kind of people who have done their best to destroy the richest and most powerful nation on earth. (Angus Maude, 'The Enemy Within', *Sunday Express*, 2 May 1971.)

Here the picture of the 'special relationship' is marginally, but significantly, redrawn. The United States is not solely a source of models and patterns ('the same kind of people', etc.), but seems to play a more active role, 'exporting' a variety of social ills to us. This indeed might stand on its own as another distinctive element of the relationship – one which comes more into play after 1968, which stresses that, because of the status of the United States as the 'richest and most powerful nation on earth', it does not simply set the pattern which Britain, like all other 'modernising societies', will follow, but may actively *impose* aspects of that pattern on our society by force of imitation and example, if not by direct cultural influence.

The underlying image of the United States, and its 'special relationship' to the British case, is central to our understanding of the way the campaign against 'mugging' developed in Britain, for it played a major part in the three stages of the transfer of the 'mugging' label from the United States to Britain. First, the idea of a 'special relationship' legitimated the *transfer* of an American term to the British situation. Second, this transfer allowed the designation of British events as *incipiently* 'American' in character. Third, the vision of the United States as 'potential future' could then be used to *legitimate* the measures being demanded and taken to control 'mugging'.

In the public debate following the extremely heavy sentences in the 'Handsworth' mugging case, the image of the United States was explicitly summoned once again in support of a policy of deterrent sentencing. A *Birmingham Evening Mail* editorial of 20 March 1973 on the sentence commented: 'Of course the innocent must be protected from assault in the streets. The more so at a time when *Britain seems to be edging too close for comfort to the American pattern of urban violence*' [our emphasis]. The American threat appeared in a more fully developed form, and made more explicitly about mugging and the safety of the streets, in a statement by Birmingham M.P., Mrs Jill Knight (quoted in the *Birmingham Evening Mail* on the same day):

> In my view it is absolutely essential to stop this rising tide of mugging in our cities. I have seen what happens in America where muggings are rife. It is absolutely horrifying to know that in all the big American cities, coast to coast, there are areas where people dare not go after dark. I am extremely anxious that such a situation should never come to Britain.

The ultimate effectiveness of the American imagery is the almost routine way in which it came to provide a basis for the justification of extreme reaction (social, judicial, political) to the crime problem. The language in this final example is almost classic, in its down-beat way, of the rhetoric of the law-and-order lobby: the cliché sensationalism of the 'rising tide of mugging' and the

modest exaggeration of 'coast to coast' providing just that common touch that mobilises a silent majority and provokes it into speech. It is not at all uncharacteristic that this final use of the label – to start a crusade – should be accompanied by the mildest trace of anti-Americanism.

The 'mugging' label played a key role in the development of the moral panic about 'mugging' and the United States effectively provided both the label itself and its field of associations and references, which lent meaning and substance to the term. The mass media here was the key apparatus which formed the link and framed the passage of the term from one context to the other. This is no simple coupling. First, there is the whole American experience of 'mugging'; then there is the way an already fully elaborated and troubling theme in the United States is picked up and represented in the British press. This representation familiarises the British audience not only with the term but also with what it has come to mean, to signify, to stand for in the American context. 'Mugging' comes to Britain first as an American phenomenon, but fully thematised and contextualised. It is embedded in a number of linked frames: the race conflict; the urban crisis; rising crime; the breakdown of 'law and order'; the liberal conspiracy; the white blacklash. It is no mere fact about crime in the United States which is reported. It connotes a whole historical construction about the nature and dilemmas of American society. The British media pick up American 'mugging' within this cluster of connotative references. The term is indexical: simply by using the label, a whole social history of the contemporary United States can be immediately and graphically mapped into place. Then the label is *appropriated* and applied to the British situation. Significantly, it is applied in Britain, first, precisely in its connotative dimensions. It is used in a loose and unspecified way, to indicate rising street crime, a general breakdown of 'law and order' in certain parts of London. Only then, finally, is it applied to a particular form of crime. But this later more precise usage *also* carries with it the already powerful and threatening social themes. And gradually throughout the peak of the wave of British 'muggings' these themes, already latent in the American use of the label, re-emerge as part and parcel of the meaning of 'mugging' in Britain too. The 'mugging' label thus has a *career*: American 'mugging'/the image of American 'mugging' in the British media/British 'mugging'. This is a process, not of sudden transplantation but of *progressive naturalisation*. And this process is framed by a more general relationship – a 'special relationship', we have called it – between the United States and Britain, common to the media in many areas other than that of crime, which supports the passage of the label.

This *export-import trade in social labels* has consequences for how 'mugging' was understood in Britain, and for how the media treated it when it arrived, and for how and why the reaction to it was so rapid, intense and far-reaching. It may have helped to establish an anticipation in the minds of the British public and in official circles that 'mugging' was on its way here; and that, if and when it arrived, it would relate to other issues – such as race, poverty, urban deprivation, lawlessness, violence and the crime wave – just as it had in the United States. It may thus have helped to sensitise the British public to its troubling social features, as well as to create an expectancy that it would become an

everyday occurence on British streets, and an unstoppable one at that – just as it was said to be in the United States. It may also have had an effect on the speed and direction of the official reaction, both in the 'closed' season before August 1972, when principally the police and the special Transport Anti-Mugging squads were at the forefront of containment; and subsequently, when open warfare against 'mugging' was in full spate, in the courts, the media, among the police, politicians and moral guardians. Further, it may have helped to set 'mugging' going in the public mind at a very high pitch. Given the American scene-setting, British 'mugging' had *no* career as a descriptive term referring to a version of street robbery with which, in any event, most British cities have long been familiar. The label had *no unsensational* origins in Britain. It was a complex, social theme from its inception. *It arrived in Britain already established in its most sensational and sensationalised form.* It is hardly surprising, given this pre-history, that it triggered off at once its own sensational spiral. What is more, the American representation in the British press may have helped to shape the nature of the unofficial reaction to 'mugging'; for if American 'mugging' arrived entramelled in the whole American panic about race, crime, riot and lawlessness, it was also fully entramelled in the *anti*-crime, *anti*-black, *anti*-riot, *anti*-liberal, 'law-and-order' backlash. Thus, via the American transplant, Britain adopted, not only 'mugging', but the fear and panic *about* 'mugging' and the backlash reaction into which those fears and anxieties issued. If 'mugging', by mid-1972, in Britain meant slums and cities and innocent folk and daylight robbery, it also meant liberal politicians versus decent white folks, the Nixon–Agnew coalition, the 1968 *Crime Control Act*, the politics of 'law and order' and 'silent majorities'. If the career of the label made a certain kind of social knowledge widely available in Britain, it also made a certain kind of response thoroughly predictable. No wonder police patrols jumped in anticipation, and judges delivered themselves of homilies as if they already knew what 'mugging' meant, and had only been waiting for its appearance; no wonder silent majorities spoke up demanding swift action, tough sentences and better protection. The soil of judicial and social reaction was already well tilled in preparation for its timely and long-prepared advent.

2

The Origins of Social Control

We started by looking at the emergence of a 'new strain of crime', dramatically pinpointed by the use of a new label: 'mugging'. We showed that neither the 'crime' nor its label were, in the strict sense, new. Yet the agencies of control and the media approached the phenomenon with absolute conviction of its 'novelty'. This in itself required explanation. Of course, 'novelty' is a conventional news value; but it is not necessary for the press to invent a whole new category in order to catch public attention with 'something new and different'. Moreover, the label and the conviction of novelty seemed to prevail, also, amongst the professional and expert agencies who ought to know about such things. Strictly speaking, the facts about the crimes which both police and the media were describing as 'novel' were not new; what was new was the way the label helped to break up and recategorise the general field of crime – the ideological frame which it laid across the field of social vision. What the agencies and the press were responding to was not a simple set of facts but a new *definition of the situation* – a new construction of the social reality of crime. 'Mugging' provoked an organised response, in part because it was linked with a widespread *belief* about the alarming rate of crime in general, and with a common *perception* that this rising crime was also becoming more *violent*. These social aspects had entered into its meaning. We have already travelled some distance from the world of hard facts – 'social facts as things'. We have entered the realm of the relation of facts to the ideological constructions of 'reality'. Next we examined the statistical basis to this reconstruction of events. This basis does not stand up well under scrutiny. When we first came to this conclusion, it constituted something of a controversial, even tendentious finding; but gradually the suspect nature of the 'mugging' statistics has come to be quite widely established. We concluded from this examination that the reaction to 'mugging' was out of all proportion to any level of actual threat which could be reconstructed through the unreliable statistics. And since it appeared to be a response, at least in part, not to the actual threat, it must have been a reaction by the control agencies and the media to the *perceived or symbolic* threat to society – what the 'mugging' label *represented*. But this made the social reaction to mugging now as problematic – if not more so – than 'mugging' itself. When such discrepancies appear between threat and reaction, between what is perceived and what that is a perception of, we have good evidence to suggest we are in the presence of an ideological displacement. We call this displacement a *moral panic*. This is the critical transition point in the whole argument.

Since the public has little direct experience of crime, and very few people

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