

## Approaches to the Study of Urban Crime: A Review Article

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## BOOK REVIEWS

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APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF URBAN CRIME:  
A REVIEW ARTICLE

Nineteenth-century Canadians viewed urbanism and industrialization with ambivalence. The proclaiming of the growth of cities as a sign of progress,<sup>1</sup> coincided with a fear of urban expansion as a precursor of increasing social ills.<sup>2</sup> Nurtured by a tradition which idealized moral order and an agrarian way of life,<sup>3</sup> rather than the flux and diversity of the city, the "anti-urban" view grew in popularity. Of course, such a tendency was not unique to Canada, for spokesmen both in the United States and Britain argued that the urban environment, particularly that of the industrializing city, was conducive to poverty, disease and crime.<sup>4</sup> Historians recently have begun to question depiction of the city as inherently evil, focusing particular attention on the phenomenon of crime as an indicator of social and economic dislocation. While it is still too early to comment on the nature and incidence of crime in the nineteenth-century Canadian city, a survey of studies done elsewhere may provide the Canadian historian with useful guidelines from which to approach the question.

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<sup>1</sup>Alison Prentice, The School Promoters (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977), p. 59.

<sup>2</sup>Paul Rutherford, ed., Saving the Canadian City (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), p. xv; Susan E. Houston, "The Impetus to Reform: Urban Crime, Poverty and Ignorance in Ontario, 1850-1875," Ph.D. Dissertation (University of Toronto, 1974); Terrence R. Morrison, "The Child and Urban Social Reform in Late Nineteenth-Century Ontario," Ph.D. Dissertation (University of Toronto, 1971).

<sup>3</sup>John C. Weaver, Shaping the Canadian City: Essays on Urban Politics and Policy, 1890-1920 (Toronto: The Institute of Public Administration of Canada, 1977), pp. 5-6. The rural ideal was particularly evident in nineteenth-century Canadian poetry, see William D. Lighthall, ed., Songs of the Great Dominion (London: Walter Scott, 1889).

<sup>4</sup>B.I. Coleman, ed., The Idea of the City in the Nineteenth-Century (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973); David Ward, "The Early Victorian City in England and America: On the Parallel Development of an Urban Image," in James R. Gibson, ed., European Settlement and Development in North America (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), pp. 170-189; Robert H. Walker, "The Poet and the Rise of the City," in Alexander B. Callow, ed., American Urban History (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 363-373.

In an attempt to verify or refute the claim that urbanization had a stimulative effect on criminal behaviour, researchers have turned to official records generated by various police, judiciary and penal institutions, sources which allow them to establish per capita crime rates for selected cities. Studies of this nature tend to exhibit two streams of analyses. One concentrates at the level of the individual city, an approach adopted by Gurr in The Politics of Crime and Conflict,<sup>5</sup> Theodore N. Ferdinand in "The Criminal Patterns of Boston Since 1849,"<sup>6</sup> and Eric H. Monkkonen in The Dangerous Class: Crime and Poverty in Columbus, Ohio 1860-1885.<sup>7</sup> The other focuses on urban systems, usually at the national level, and is exhibited in such works as Abdul Q. Lodhi's and Charles Tilly's "Urbanization, Crime and Collective Violence in 19th Century France,"<sup>8</sup> Howard Zehr's "The Modernization of Crime in Germany and France 1830-1913,"<sup>9</sup> and Roger Lane's "Urbanization and Criminal Violence in the 19th Century: Massachusetts as a Test Case."<sup>10</sup>

The foregoing studies, whether at the level of a single city, or an urban network, indicate that the assumption linking urbanization with increased criminal behaviour was more apparent than real, for the centres examined generally exhibited a downward trend in the incidence of their criminality. However, some exceptions were evident. Lane discovered for nineteenth century Massachusetts that while offences of a serious nature declined, the overall crime rate increased.<sup>11</sup> For the same period, Monkkonen found that crime of a serious nature in Columbus,

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<sup>5</sup> Ted R. Gurr, et. al., The Politics of Crime and Conflict (London: Sage Publications Ltd., 1977).

<sup>6</sup> Theodore N. Ferdinand, "The Criminal Patterns of Boston Since 1849," American Journal of Sociology, LXXIII (1967), pp. 84-99.

<sup>7</sup> Eric H. Monkkonen, The Dangerous Class: Crime and Poverty in Columbus, Ohio 1860-1885 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975).

<sup>8</sup> Abdul Q. Lodhi and Charles Tilly, "Urbanization, Crime and Collective Violence in 19th-Century France," American Journal of Sociology, 79 (Sept. 1973), pp. 296-318.

<sup>9</sup> Howard Zehr, "The Modernization of Crime in Germany and France 1830-1913," Journal of Social History, 8 (Summer 1975), pp. 117-141.

<sup>10</sup> Roger Lane, "Urbanization and Criminal Violence in the 19th Century: Massachusetts as a Test Case," in H.D. Graham and Ted R. Gurr, eds., The History of Violence in America (New York, 1969).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 468.

Ohio neither rose nor fell, but rather displayed a considerable stability.<sup>12</sup> In addition, Zehr discovered for Germany and France that crimes against property generally increased during the nineteenth century, though older, established cities saw crimes of violence diminish.<sup>13</sup>

Evidently further research is necessary before firm conclusions can be drawn on the effect of urbanization as a "civilizing" force. Furthermore, the criminal statistics which form the basis of the foregoing empirical evidence require careful scrutiny.<sup>14</sup> First, it is impossible for such records to ever reflect the actual extent of criminal behaviour in any area due to offences which go unreported or undetected. Criminal statistics based upon arrests, or jail and prison committals, reflect both a willingness of victims to report offences, as well as the efficiency of a law enforcement agency in apprehending offenders. Both elements deserve consideration before deciding whether or not fluctuations in crime rates actually represent a real change in criminal behaviour. The amendments to a criminal code can also create pitfalls for a longitudinal study of crime rates, particularly the decriminalization of activities which were once deemed illegal. The foregoing factors certainly affect the validity of criminal statistics generated in a city over a period of several decades, limitations which are compounded when an attempt is made to examine a larger urban network.

Aware of the inherent problems existing in criminal statistics scholars, like J.J. Tobias in Crime and Industrial Society in the 19th Century,<sup>15</sup> a study of criminal behaviour in Victorian England, chose not to rely upon such sources. Still the scope of Tobias' work seems somewhat limited as a result of his having ignored the statistical returns of criminal behaviour which had been published annually in parliamentary papers since 1805.<sup>16</sup> Had Tobias used the latter source in conjunction with the contemporary opinions he gathered, his argument that nineteenth century crime rates declined, particularly for serious offences, would have been strengthened.<sup>17</sup> Researchers who rely exclusively upon contem-

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<sup>12</sup>Eric H. Monkkonen, The Dangerous Class, pp. 29-32.

<sup>13</sup>Howard Zehr, "The Modernization of Crime in Germany and France," pp. 123, 130.

<sup>14</sup>For a discussion in the use of criminal statistics see V.A.C. Gatrell and T.B. Hadden, "Criminal Statistics and Their Interpretation," in E.A. Wrigley, ed., Nineteenth-Century Society (Cambridge University Press, 1972).

<sup>15</sup>J.J. Tobias, Crime and Industrial Society in the 19th-Century (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), pp. 15-16.

<sup>16</sup>Gurr, The Politics of Crime and Conflict, pp. 18-19.

<sup>17</sup>J.J. Tobias, Crime and Industrial Society, pp. 38-42.

porary literary accounts are likely to encounter as many problems as those employing criminal statistics. The articulate who commented on criminality in their nineteenth-century cities, through novels, journals, pamphlets and the press, often were guided by "presupposition and prejudice."<sup>18</sup> Consequently, Roger Lane argues against the use of such sources in gauging the extent of criminal behaviour claiming the "degree of public concern has never been ... an accurate index of the degree of criminal activity" for frequently "a drop in the actual incidence of disorder has been accompanied by--and contributed to--a heightened sensitivity to disorder."<sup>19</sup>

Caution should be exercised, whether using criminal records or contemporary opinions. Moreover, an awareness of the strengths and weaknesses the foregoing sources lend to various approaches is necessary. At the urban network level crime rates derived from statistical records could profitably be correlated to indices of urbanization, industrialization, and the economy, if only to provide a framework against which to place individual case studies. An example can be found in the work of V.A.C. Gatrell and T.B. Hadden, "Criminal Statistics and Their Interpretation,"<sup>20</sup> in which changes in the nineteenth-century crime rates of England and Wales are related to fluctuations in the countries' business cycles. In the early part of the nineteenth-century it was discovered crimes against property tended to increase in times of depression and decline in periods of prosperity. In addition, a general decrease in burglaries and other thefts during the century seemed to indicate a real change in behaviour as a result of a rising standard of living among the overall population, as well as a more efficient maintenance of law and order.<sup>21</sup> Tobias, though lacking comparable empirical evidence, argues against such findings, claiming that poverty, or cyclical fluctuations in the economy, were not a major cause of crime in nineteenth-century England.<sup>22</sup> Again, such an argument lacks substance.

Case studies of individual cities will afford the opportunity for literary sources to flesh out the skeletal pattern revealed through criminal statistics. As yet, studies attempting to portray the social milieu of criminals lack a convincing mix of sources. Contemporary literary opinion is the vehicle employed by Kellow Chesney in The

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<sup>18</sup>V.A.C. Gatrell and T.B. Hadden, "Criminal Statistics and Their Interpretation," p. 339.

<sup>19</sup>Roger Lane, "Urbanization and Criminal Violence," p. 482.

<sup>20</sup>V.A.C. Gatrell and J.B. Hadden, "Criminal Statistics and Their Interpretation."

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., pp. 368-378.

<sup>22</sup>J.J. Tobias, Crime and Industrial Society, pp. 150-156.

Victorian Underworld<sup>23</sup> and Louis Chevalier in Labouring Classes and Dangerous Classes,<sup>24</sup> as well as Tobias,<sup>25</sup> to support the notion that London and Paris possessed "a distinct criminal class which lived a life of its own separate from the rest of the community ... wholly or largely upon the proceeds of crime."<sup>26</sup> Had the foregoing historians attempted to approximate the size of the "criminal class" through official statistics they may have found that an anxious and articulate "respectable class" heightened the visibility of the criminal. In terms of sources and methodology, Eric H. Monkkonen in The Dangerous Class represents the other extreme. By subjecting the nineteenth-century criminal records of Columbus, Ohio to extensive factor and regression analyses, he comes to a different conclusion than his European counterparts concerning the position of criminals within an urban social structure. Monkkonen argues that in Columbus between 1860 and 1885, offenders tended to blend with the general population displaying more differences of degree than kind.<sup>27</sup>

What accounts for the difference of opinion among these historians in reference to the presence of a "criminal class"? It would be tempting to attribute it to the diverse analytical techniques employed on both sides. However a more plausible explanation may be found in the longer urban tradition, and the cities of greater scale in Britain and France, as opposed to those of the United States. The larger cities of Europe were able to harbour a sub-culture of criminals within various "rookeries," while in America, relatively undeveloped centres like Columbus, could not support an extensive group of individuals existing solely on crime. Even in the older and larger cities of New York and Boston there was a lack of "rookeries" on the scale of London's St. Giles.

The existence of distinct criminal areas within urban centres raises the question of how criminals function in a city--where do they dwell in relation to other groups? Where do they commit their crimes? David R. Johnson seeks answers to the foregoing through a study entitled

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<sup>23</sup>Kellow Chesney, The Victorian Underworld (London: Temple Smith, 1970), Chapter 4.

<sup>24</sup>Louis Chevalier, Labouring Classes and Dangerous Classes in Paris During the First Half of the Nineteenth Century, translated by Frank Jellinek (London: Routledge and Keagan Paul, 1973).

<sup>25</sup>J.J. Tobias, Crime and Industrial Society.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>27</sup>Eric H. Monkkonen, The Dangerous Class, p. 4.

"Crime Patterns in Philadelphia 1840-1870"<sup>28</sup> in which he shows that crimes against property tended to concentrate in the city's commercial districts, and the residential areas of the upper classes. As these areas expanded and shifted with the growth of Philadelphia, there was a corresponding change in the distribution of burglaries and other thefts. Johnson also found that crimes of violence against the person were confined largely to lower class neighbourhoods, and as these residential areas remained geographically fixed throughout the period, the distribution of assaults reflected a similar stable pattern.<sup>29</sup>

Further study of the changing distribution of crime in cities as the latter moved into the industrial era, seem warranted. For questions remain of whether the increasing separation of place of work and residence, which occurred with industrialization, created greater opportunities for thieves during periods when commercial and industrial establishments were unoccupied? Also as social classes become more residentially segregated did the informal system of social control which was possible when there was a mingling of the upper and lower strata, appear to break down? Jane Jacobs in The Death and Life of Great American Cities,<sup>30</sup> laments the loss of such neighbourhood self regulation and longs for the "seeming disorder of the old city" in which the bounds of business and residential areas were ill-defined.<sup>31</sup> Similar views had been expressed a century earlier by urban dwellers fearing a rise of disorder and crime in their cities as an economic rationalization of land use occurred, and the upper classes, and the stabilizing influence they provided, fled to the suburbs.<sup>32</sup> As this latter group turned their backs on the inner city, pockets of filth, vice and idleness began to emerge in the abandoned central areas, and the "respectable" citizens, now living largely on the periphery, sought means to alleviate or contain

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<sup>28</sup> David R. Johnson, "Crime Patterns in Philadelphia, 1840-70," in A.F. Davis and M.H. Haller, eds., The Peoples of Philadelphia (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1973).

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>30</sup> Jane Jacobs, The Death and Life of Great American Cities (New York: Random House, 1961).

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., pp. 50-54.

<sup>32</sup> Sam B. Warner, Jr., Streetcar Suburbs: The Process of Growth in Boston 1870-1900 (New York: Atheneum, 1971), p. 162; Edward C. Banfield, The Unheavenly City: The Nature and Future of Our Urban Crisis (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1970), p. 27.

the problems.<sup>33</sup> An awareness of the social and spatial re-ordering of nineteenth-century cities is necessary in order to avoid the problems of studies like Monkkonen's in which criminals seem to exist in a spatial void.<sup>34</sup>

It remains for the historian to unlock the secrets of criminal records generated in various Canadian cities throughout the nineteenth-century. National and provincial crime rates could be established from statistics pertaining to indictable and summary convictions, which were published through the Department of Agriculture and Statistics from 1880 in the Canada Sessional Papers,<sup>35</sup> and include information on the type of crime, as well as the social and demographic character of criminals. Similar data can be found in the common jail returns for various provinces. In the case of Ontario, published statistics date from the early 1840s and consist of returns from individual county jails.<sup>36</sup> Crime rates for various counties could be generated from the foregoing source, and in turn, related to indices of urbanism and industrialization gathered from the Dominion Censuses. An easily accessible source, the published jail returns may best be used in measuring the extent of criminal behaviour at the urban network level. However, a realization of the limitations inherent in such data is necessary. Crime rates based upon persons committed to jail or prison may be more reflective of the court and penal system, rather than a particular form of criminal behaviour, and certainly represent a smaller proportion of such activity.

A study focused on an individual urban centre probably has a greater likelihood of achieving substantial results. Crime rates could be established from offences known to and acted upon by the police, which are preferable to those generated from jail returns, the former representing a greater proportion of criminality due to its position in the legal process after the commitment of an illegality. In the case of Toronto, statistics of arrests were appended to the Chief Constable's report, which was published annually in the Minutes of City Council

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<sup>33</sup>The case of nineteenth-century Detroit is examined by John C. Schneider, "Public Order and The Geography of the City," Journal of Urban History, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Feb. 1978), pp. 183-208.

<sup>34</sup>Eric H. Monkkonen, The Dangerous Class.

<sup>35</sup>Canada, Sessional Papers. Also George Johnson, Crime in Canada, A Monograph (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1893).

<sup>36</sup>The nineteenth-century jail returns for Ontario were published in the Appendices to Parliamentary Journals up to 1860, from 1860 to 1866 in the Canada Sessional Papers, and from 1867 in the Ontario Sessional Papers.



from 1859.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, manuscript records from the Police Magistrate's Courts and the city jails are still in existence for many urban areas, though generally not in a complete series.<sup>38</sup> These sources provide the means of transcending the bounds of crime rates by allowing for an examination of the social characteristics of individual criminals.<sup>39</sup>

Unfortunately, the records kept by police and jail officials, whether in published or manuscript form, rarely possess a spatial input, and as a result information on the location of crime in a city will have to be acquired from such sources as the trial testimony of county courts, and the local press. The locality in which criminals reside may also be acquired from the latter. However, an attempt to link offenders drawn from police and jail registers to city directories will probably prove futile, for generally the class of people from which the former are drawn are under-represented in the latter.

While nineteenth-century Canadian cities lacked the presence of a Mayhew or Dickens to comment on the nature and extent of their urban crime, observations made by chief constables, police magistrates, and jail and prison inspectors through various reports, memoirs, or the press, should prove informative. Also useful will be testimony given before commissions investigating the Canadian penal system.<sup>40</sup>

Finally, a study of urban crime can provide only one element

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<sup>37</sup> Toronto, Minutes of City Council, "Statistical Report of Crimes, Etc., Committed in the City of Toronto."

<sup>38</sup> Manuscript registers of the Police Magistrate's Court of Toronto are held in the Archives of the Toronto City Hall; while the manuscript registers of the Toronto City jail are at the Ontario Provincial Archives.

<sup>39</sup> For a useful discussion in the use of Ontario county jail registers see Harvey J. Graff, "Crime and Punishment in the Nineteenth Century: A New Look at the Criminal," Journal of Interdisciplinary History, VII (Winter 1977).

<sup>40</sup> An example of the use of such sources in Ontario for the early period can be found in J.J. Bellomo, "Upper Canadian Attitudes Towards Crime and Punishment," Ontario History, LXIV (1972), pp. 11-26; J.M. Beattie, Attitudes Towards Crime and Punishment in Upper Canada 1830-1850: A Documentary Study (Toronto: Centre of Criminology, University of Toronto, 1977). For the later period see "Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Enquire into the Prison and Reformatory System of Ontario," Ontario, Sessional Papers, Vol. XIII, Part IV, Session 1891.

of a city's societal development. It is only when the study of crime is linked with analyses of social structure, wealth distribution, demography, and transiency rates, that an adequate historical perspective from which to view the city is acquired. Certainly such research is essential if a change in the traditional focus of historians on the activities of political and economic elites, to the exclusion of other urban groups, is to take place. It is to be hoped that various studies of nineteenth century urban crime will broaden historians' horizons, and lead to a greater understanding of the social experience of cities, in a period when most were undergoing tremendous growth and change.

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Foran, Max. Calgary: An Illustrated History. History of Canadian Cities Series, vol. 2. General Editor, Alan F.J. Artibise. Toronto: James Lorimer and Company and the National Museum of Man, 1978. Pp. 192. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography. \$19.95 cloth. [Available in French translation as Calgary: Histoire illustrée; translated by Jean-Pierre Paillet].

This is the second of what is intended to be a series of urban biographies whose objective, according to the general editor, is to provide "... a systematic, interpretative and comprehensive account of the urban experience in many Canadian cities" (p. 7). The value of such an ambitious undertaking is particularly evident in the case of Calgary, for until now there has been no detailed account of that city's development to which either the general reader or the urban specialist could turn.

As in the case of the earlier volume in this series on Winnipeg, Foran deals with the themes of economic growth and metropolitan development, population growth and ethnic relationships, the changing urban landscape and social and political life. The most interesting, in many respects, is the first. In tracing Calgary's evolution from an isolated North-West Mounted Police post to one of Canada's most dynamic metropolitan centres Foran singles out three important influences: the Canadian Pacific Railway, cattle ranching and the oil industry.

From its founding in 1875 until the coming of the C.P.R., Fort Calgary existed primarily to maintain law and order among the Indian tribes in the vicinity, and the presence of the Mounted Police provided a focal point for social and economic activity. All this changed, however, with the momentous decision of the C.P.R. board of directors to abandon the then surveyed route across the northern prairies in favour of a more southerly one. Although Calgary was not a creation of the railway, as so many other prairie towns were, Foran shows that the C.P.R.'s