

PROBLEMS IN GLOBAL CRIME RESEARCH: LOOKING BACKWARD, LOOKING FORWARD



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We have a tendency to believe that, owing to technological, political and cultural developments in recent years, we are the first generation to experience crime as a global problem. But crime as an international issue has a significant provenance and we can better understand our current situation by appreciating its historical context.

Nearly a century ago, the League of Nations commissioned one of the first crime surveys of global reach. The *Report of the Special Body of Experts on the Traffic in Women*, released in 1927, encompassed research in 112 cities in 28 countries. The researchers collated reports from governments, collected material from international voluntary organisations, and interviewed some 6500 persons, including ‘underworld’ figures engaged in the traffic. Although the political tensions, cultural outlook and moral anxieties of the interwar period cannot be projected onto the present, there are some lessons that can be drawn about carrying out research into global crime problems.

The survey took place under the auspices of the Advisory Committee on the Traffic in Women, established by the League of Nations in 1921. The proposal for the research came from the American delegate, Grace Abbott, who regarded the men on the Advisory Committee as apologists for a disgusting European system of ‘licensed houses’. A worldwide survey, she hoped, would embarrass authorities in countries with this system into action leading to its abolition. The survey was sponsored by the American Bureau of Social Hygiene in New York, one of several entities in various countries interested in seeing the issue of human trafficking on the international public agenda. The International Bureau for Suppression of the Traffic in Women welcomed the survey, as did the International Women’s Organisation, the Jewish Association for the Protection of Girls and Women, and a number of others. Each of these entities had their reasons for doing so, which brings up an important point. Then, as now, the findings of any report into international crime will be interpreted and diffused with reference to pre-existing agendas.

Findings inconsistent with previous agendas will be ignored or dismissed, meaning that the organisations and governments most likely to benefit from following recommendations based on them may be the least likely to acknowledge them. When the human trafficking survey appeared, Mussolini’s government in Italy resisted Abbott’s message. The Italians objected to being categorised among ‘anti-abolitionist countries’ and insisted their system occupied a place somewhere between ‘authorisation’ and ‘toleration’. In other words, because the report had misunderstood their position, the recommendations

did not apply.

Further, it is likely the findings will be used to support causes altogether different from those the researchers and their sponsors had in mind. The League of Nations had its own agenda. It had been established in the aftermath of the First World War with the idea of averting a second. Activities centred on problems left over from the collapse of pre-war empires; problems of drawing national borders and settling displaced minorities. The social agenda – the work of the advisory committee on trafficking in women – was relatively minor. But by the 1930s, when the League had lost all credibility as a political institution, the social agenda became its primary justification. As late as 1939, the League of Nations Union issued a small booklet, *The League and Human Welfare*, to promote its activities concerning the traffic (in drugs as well as women) as its most positive achievement. The League of Nations amplified the threat of human trafficking because it needed a problem as big as the solution.

In any research project that aspires to stretch across national borders, choices will have to be made. In planning their research strategy, the special body of experts decided to focus on what was thought to be the ‘centre of the traffic’ between Europe and South America. It was not an unreasonable choice given the scale and scope of the problem to be grasped, but invited criticism later on. When the report appeared, sceptics wondered why such a massive effort had gone into confirming ‘what everybody already knew’. A year later, English novelist Evelyn Waugh produced a comic satire, *Decline and Fall*, which turned the white slave trade, Britain’s anti-trafficking effort and the League of Nations, into a grand joke. For other critics, the survey was worse than a waste of time. In focusing their efforts in this way, critics such as feminist pioneer Paola Luisi from Uruguay, alleged the researchers had repeated press stereotypes and cultural pre-

judices. The report ‘whitewashed’ the Anglo-American contribution to the evil of the white slave trade while blackening the reputation of Latin nations.

Drawing global conclusions from local sources is hampered by the unavoidable overlap between the two sources. In statistical modelling, this problem is known as collinearity. In terms of human trafficking during the interwar period, it can be seen with reference to Malta. In 1926, Joseph Semini, an inspector with the Malta Police, published a book about crime on the island. He discussed youth crime, counterfeiting, prostitution and other local concerns with reference to Italian criminology. This raises a dilemma. In discussing prostitution, Semini refers to women falling victim to ‘white slave traffickers’. But how is this to be interpreted? Does the use of this phrase by a local police authority constitute evidence of this new global problem having reached the Mediterranean? Or, is Semini, in his effort to demonstrate his cosmopolitan knowledge of developments abroad, merely applying the new internationalist vocabulary to a problem at least as old as sailors, ships and port cities in the Mediterranean? Contemporary researchers will need to be cautious, because even when reports from several cities and countries refer to the same crime problem it may have more to do with the decision on the part of local authorities to use international language rather than reflecting a cross-border reality.

The decision of the special body of experts to interview underworld figures brought its own liabilities. The experts decided that rather than rely on official statements from governments, or even the observations of the international voluntary organisations, they needed to find out ‘what was really going on’. As a means of triangulation, interviewing persons engaged in the traffic was worthwhile, and talking to perpetrators as well as victims could have been considered an innovative approach to crimino-

logical research. But the experts failed to scrutinise the information they received. Their narrative reproduced claims from alleged traffickers, souteneurs and the like with little effort to understand how such persons knew what they claimed to know, and why they were willing to share it with researchers. It is unlikely that criminals are *more* honest than politicians. Notwithstanding the regimes of Hitler and Mussolini, statements by those engaged in criminal activities should be met with at least the same degree of scepticism as that of politicians and government officials.

Finally, it is easy to see how criminal events can have severe political consequences. Murders, bombings and so on can trigger conflicts between countries, even wars. It is also true that research into criminal activities contributes to such tensions as well. The *Report of the Special Body of Experts* avoided reference to religious, ethnic or racial identity of persons in various countries or regions, except for those referred to as Jews. The report gives the impression of Jewish over-involvement in trafficking, a characterisation that coincided with claims that the National Socialists made about ‘international Jewry’ as directors of the worldwide white slave trade. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler said it had been the sight of Jewish prostitutes polluting Vienna that had made him an anti-Semite. In the 1930s, Jewish organisations published material refuting such claims, including those made in the League of Nations survey.

One conclusion that can be reached from this is that research into trans-national crime problems has political and moral implications of significant dimension, and inferences about who is to blame, for what, and how others should respond, are inescapable. Researchers who pursue an understanding of global crime, and their sponsors, are advised to be prepared.

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PROJECT RE- PORT AVICRI – ATTENTION FOR VICTIMS OF CRIME



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Description of the project

The AViCri (Attention for Victims of Crime) Project is part of the European Daphne II Programme aimed at victims of crime and the prevention of secondary victimization. (This programme is the second phase of the Daphne programme.

The European Council (with the Framework Decision of 15 March 2001) has established victims’ needs for contact with workers who are trained to assess the particular situation of a victim, which is characterized by specific requisites, needs and precautions. This is one of the rights accorded to victims.

The organization heading the project was the Faculty of Psychology 2, of the “Sapienza” University of Rome, represented by the Project Leader Prof. Anna Maria Giannini.

The partners in Italy were: Ministry of Interior – Department of Public Security – Central Directorate of Criminal Police, Latium Region, Regional Directorate of Social Services, Italian Inter-University Centre for the Study and Research on the Origins and Development of Pro-social and Anti-social Motivations and the two NGOs “Differenza Donna” and “Telefono Rosa”.

The Project is also being carried out in Europe by international partners such as the Ministry of Home Affairs and Sport of Lower Saxony (Germany), Devon and Cornwall Police and the Metropolitan Police of London (UK).

The aim of the project