

World calling Ken Clarke: Prison reduces crime here too!

Briefing prepared by David Green, Nick Cowen and Carolina Bracken, updated by Nigel Williams, January 2012

Kenneth Clarke, Secretary of State for Justice, has been claiming that crime fell in all developed countries in the 1990s and that it was not the result of increasing the prison population in the UK or elsewhere. Most recently he repeated the claim on Newsnight on Tuesday 30th November. When former Chief Constable, Tim Brain, argued that crime fell as a consequence of doubling the prison population from the mid-1990s onwards, Ken Clarke replied:

'I don't think it was caused by the prison population doubling; crime fell throughout the Western world over the years you were talking about including in places like Canada, the Netherlands and New York.'

Ken Clarke is mistaken. As the following charts show:

- Crime rates did not fall consistently across the developed world.
- The relationship between the prison population and the crime rate is complex.
- There are cases of a spike in the crime rate following a particular reduction of the prison population, suggesting that incarceration plays a role in preventing some crimes that would otherwise take place.

All statistics are taken from [Eurostat](#), the European Union's statistics bureau. They compare the total number of crimes recorded by police with the number of individuals incarcerated for all years in which both figures are available and comparable. Charts for all countries can be found in the Appendix.

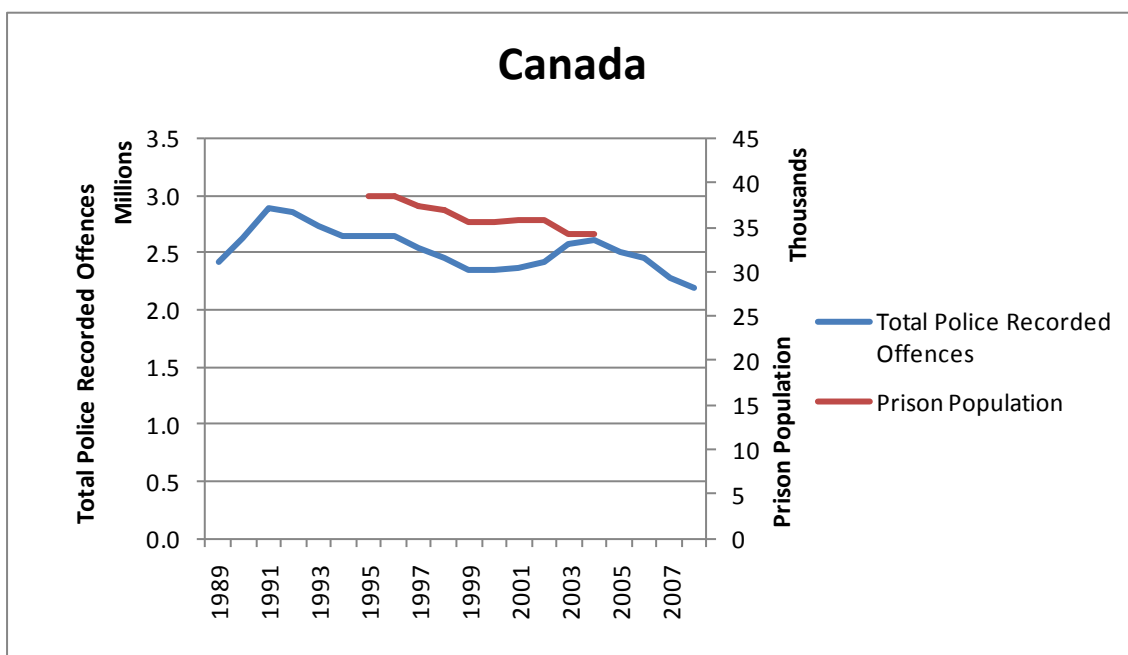
The negative observed correlations between crime rates and prison populations are far from universal. Sometimes incarceration rates simply rise as a reaction to increases in crime (see [Switzerland](#) as a highly probable example of that relationship). However, we believe there are enough incidences of crime dropping in response to an increase in imprisonment to indicate that incarceration is one factor, amongst many others, that contributes to reducing crime.

Timing matters. The average correlation for the countries listed by Eurostat from 1999 to 2008 between recorded crime and prison population is 0.027. That is small and positive. As suggested already for Switzerland, increases in crime can cause increases in incarceration. The correlation is stronger (0.15) between recorded crime and the prison population the following year. When comparing the crime rate with the prison population the year before, the correlation is still small, but negative (-0.12), suggesting that prison may be preventing crime in some cases. The gap

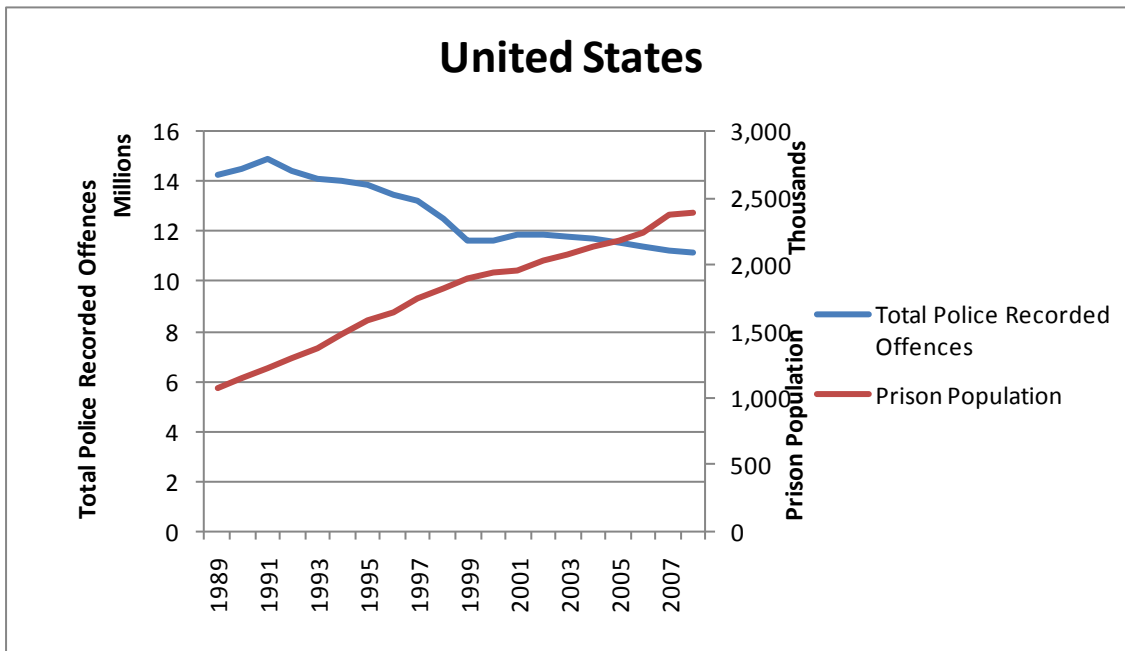
increases a little with time. If the prison year is two years after the crime year, the correlation is positive and slightly greater at 0.22. If the prison year is two years before, the correlation is negative (-0.14). The correlation figures remain close to zero, so clearly there are other factors at work. A more detailed study could attempt to tease out particular relationships. But even a superficial examination is enough to show that an effect of prison in reducing crime cannot be ruled out.

Canada, the Netherlands and New York

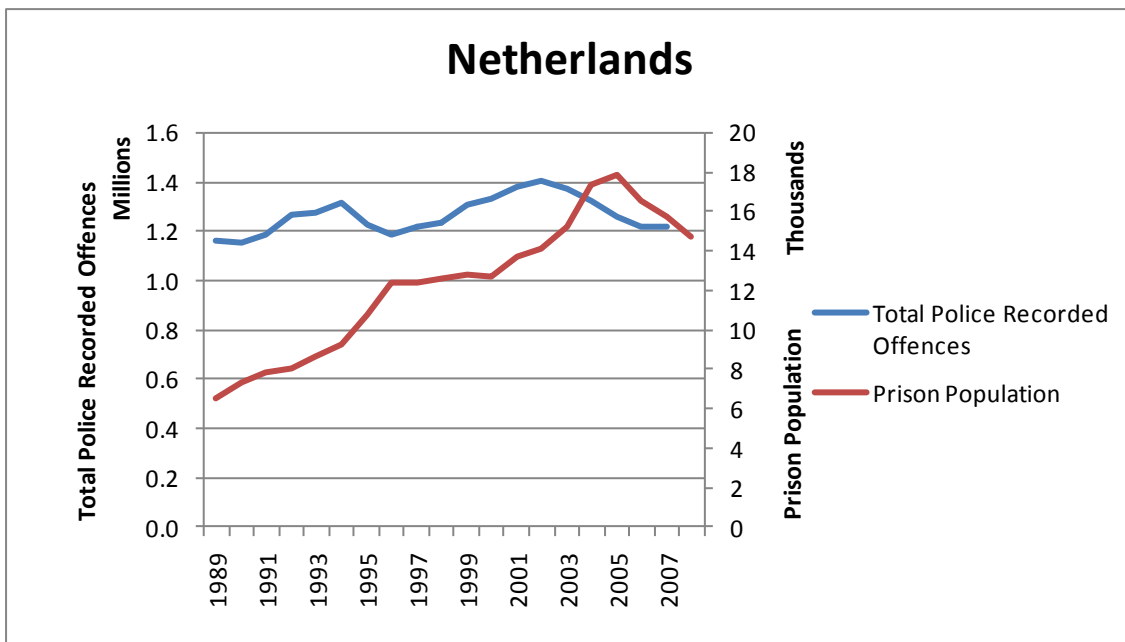
Although the number of recorded crimes in Canada decreased throughout the 1990s, it increased again from 2000 onwards as the prison population continued to fall. In the 90s, the crime rate began decreasing while the prison population was still high.



This contrasts with the USA where incarceration rates have consistently increased. There, crime has continued to decrease. The economist Steven Levitt argues in an [evidence review](#) that incarceration made a significant contribution to the national decline in crime rates. In New York, specifically, he attributes the crime drop to an increase in abortion rates and a significant increase in the number of police officers.

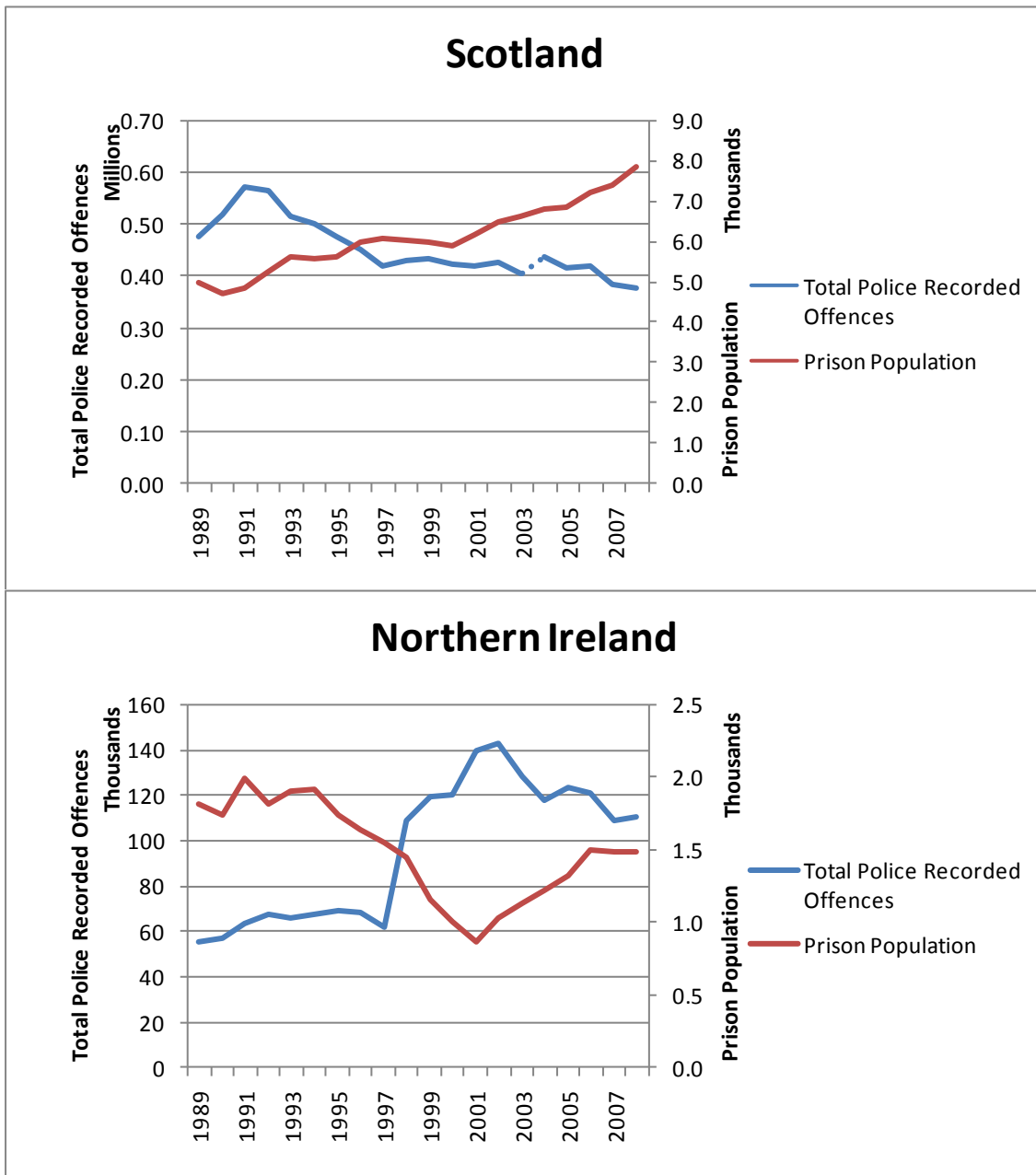


In the Netherlands, there is not a clear trend towards more or less crime but the prison population has increased significantly:



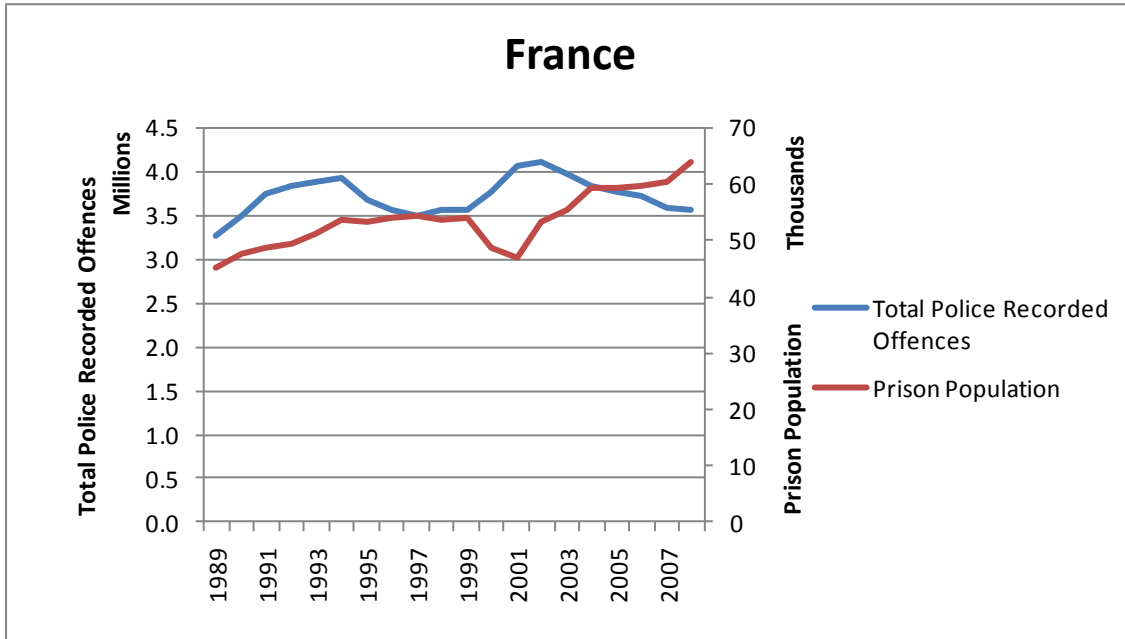
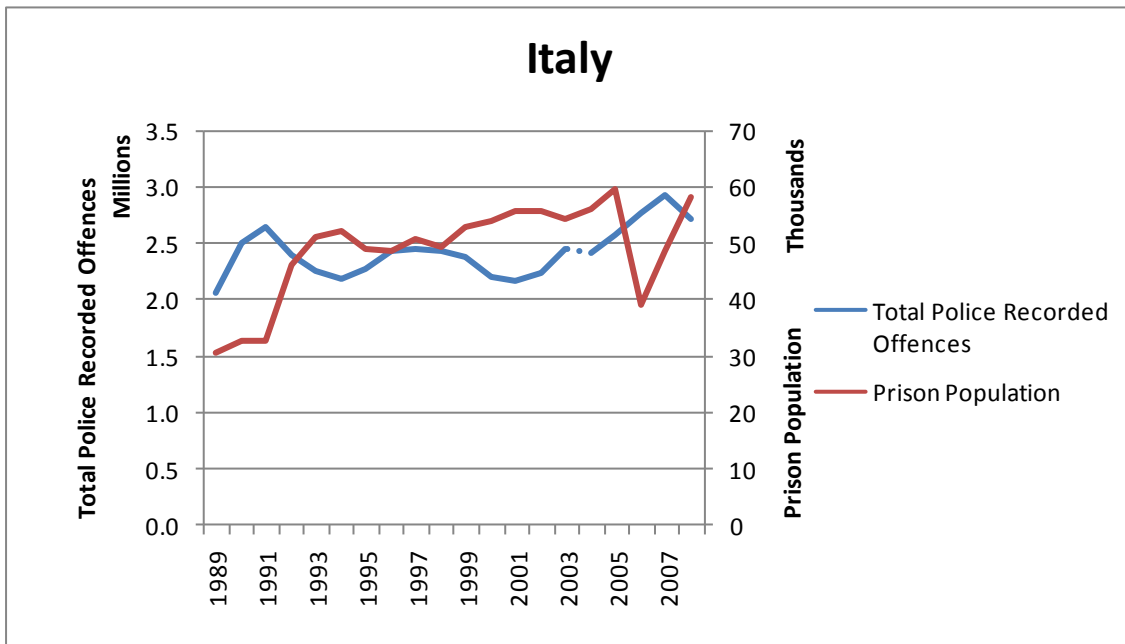
The rest of the UK

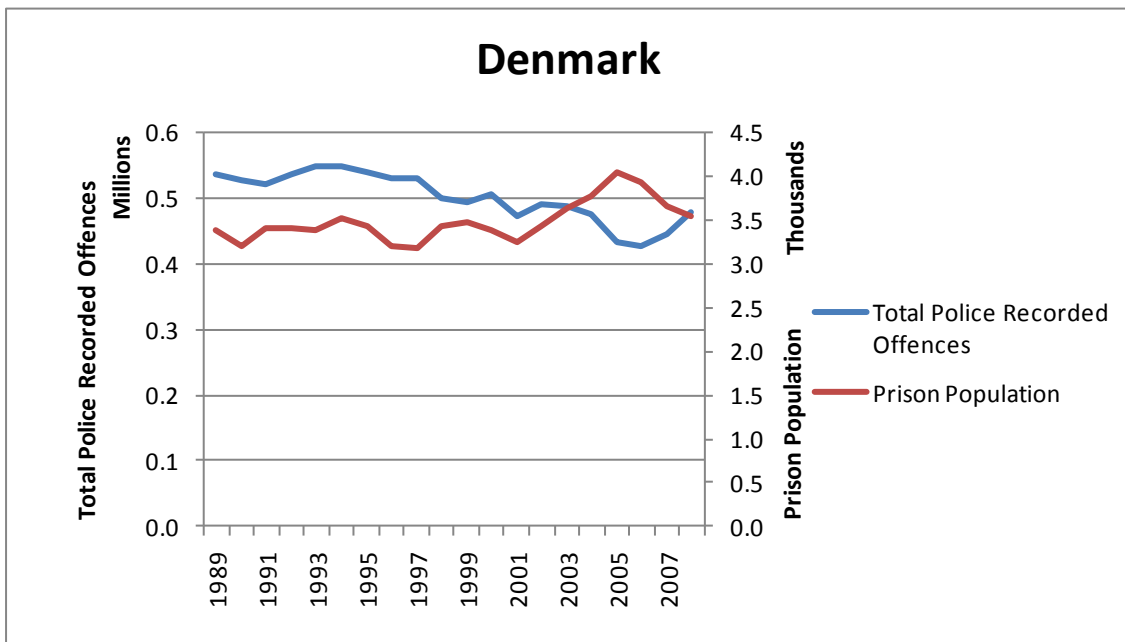
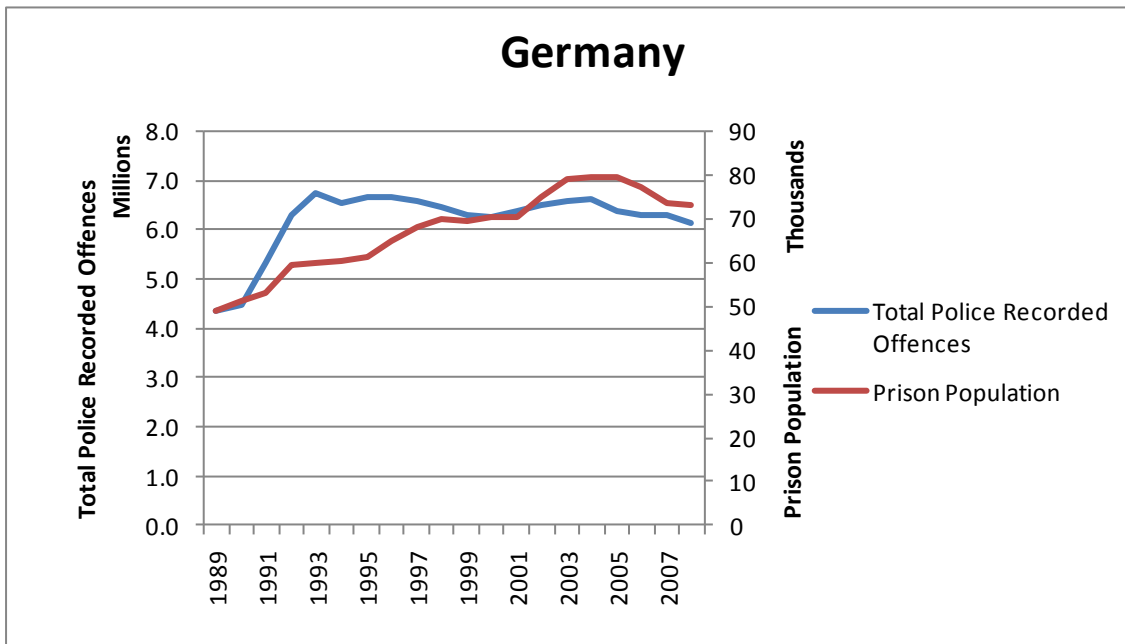
Scotland and Northern Ireland provide a clear observed correlation between an increase in incarceration rates and a reduction in crime. Scotland increased its prison population and saw a significant drop in recorded crime. Northern Ireland, by contrast, reduced its prison population and saw a dramatic increase in recorded crime.



Western Europe

Britain's neighbours have not experienced consistently lower crime rates. However, dips in recorded crime have been associated with increases in prison populations. By contrast, spikes in crime have coincided with sudden decreases in prison populations. A paradigm example of this is Italy's record number of recorded crimes in 2007. It followed Italy's mass pardon of prisoners in 2006 which is documented in detail in a [recent research paper](#) by Alessandro Barbarino and Giovanni Mastrobuoni.





See similar charts for all countries with Eurostat figures in the Appendix.

Appendix

Eurostat recorded crimes and prison populations compared

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