eprints@whiterose.ac.uk
https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/

Worrying about crime:

Experience, moral panics, and public opinion in London, 1660-1800

Robert B. Shoemaker
University of Sheffield
Final Version Submitted 12 February 2016
r.shoemaker@sheffield.ac.uk

What did eighteenth-century Londoners think about crime? Traditionally, as epitomised in the predictable narratives of the *Ordinary's Accounts* (the biographies of condemned felons written by the chaplain of Newgate prison), crime was the product of the sins to which every English man and woman, 'everyman', was vulnerable, and thus the threat posed was above all a threat that people might end up *committing* crimes.[1] From the late seventeenth century, however, stimulated by the vast expansion of printed literature about crime, the threat of becoming a *victim* of crime was increasingly emphasised in public discourse.[2] Ultimately, this led to the development of the sociological idea that crime was committed by a separate group, composed of people unlike the reader or observer, which came in the

---

[1] Andrea McKenzie, *Tyburn's Martyrs: Execution in England, 1675-1775* (London, 2007), ch. 3.

[2] Earlier concerns about crimes committed by others focused on petty crimes such as vagrancy and prostitution: see Paul Griffiths, *Lost Londons: Change, Crime and Control in the Capital City 1550-1660* (Cambridge, 2008). For the emerging discourse of victimisation, see Esther Snell, 'Discourses of Criminality in the Eighteenth-Century Press: the Presentation of Crime in *The Kentish Post*. 1717-1768', *Continuity and Change*, xxii (2007), 29-30.

nineteenth century to be labelled a 'criminal class'.[3] The advent of public opinion about crime as a threat posed by *others* has been portrayed by historians as having led to significant changes in criminal justice policy. John Beattie argued that the experience of crime, particularly violent crime in London, combined with the 'deep anxiety' it induced, drove changes in policing and punishment: 'a widespread sense of increasing criminality in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries was almost certainly responsible for a number of the initiatives taken in the City and in parliament in this period to make the law and its administration more effective'. Similarly, Elaine Reynolds argued that 'there is sufficient evidence … to privilege a growing concern about property crime as the primary motivating force behind police reform in metropolitan London'. Changes in policy, the argument goes, resulted from anxieties about crime arising from both individual experiences and printed representations. With the explosion of crime literature in the century following the expiration of press licensing in 1695, Beattie notes, print 'shaped the public's sense of crime as a growing social problem'.[4]

A focus on the role of the media in shaping public opinion is incorporated in the concept of the 'moral panic', first developed by Jock Young and Stanley Cohen in the early 1970s to characterise the contemporary response to 'mods' and 'rockers'.[5] Owing to the congruence of the rise of the press, the growth of middle class public opinion, and regular parliaments, it can be argued that the eighteenth century witnessed the birth of the 'law and order' moral panic, in which the press assembled disparate evidence to construct and exaggerate social

---

[3] Simon Devereaux, 'From Sessions to Newspaper? Criminal Trial Reporting, the Nature of Crime, and the London Press, 1770-1800', *London Journal*, xxxii (2007), 18.
[4] J. M. Beattie, *Policing and Punishment in London, 1660-1750* (Oxford, 2001), 22, 50; Elaine Reynolds, *Before the Bobbies: The Night Watch and Police Reform in Metropolitan London* (Stanford, 1998), 4.
[5] Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers* (London, 1972); Jock Young, *The Drugtakers* (London, 1971).

problems. These crime reports had the potential to cause widespread anxiety, leading to

public demands for action, shifts in law enforcement strategy, and the passage of

parliamentary legislation, such as that which comprised the 'bloody code'.[6] On the basis of a

comparison of a moral panic in Colchester in 1765 with panics in London and New York in

the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Peter King identified 'a common six-stage pattern' of

the development of panics. He based this model on the 'tremendous similarities across the

last two and a half centuries in the patterns of activity created by, and the lifecycles of, moral

panics about violent street crime'.[7]

Following widespread use of this concept to describe responses to perceived social

problems in a variety of times and places, however, some scholars have questioned whether

the term 'has been used so flexibly and loosely as to undermine its own analytical integrity'.

As David Rowe observes, 'the strengths and limitations of the concept … lie in its

adaptability and applicability , but not in its explanatory comprehensiveness'.[8] Central to the

model of the moral panic is the role of the media, which, acting as a 'moral entrepreneur',

exaggerates the threat posed by a small number of crimes and, by encouraging victims to

come forward and law enforcement officials to act, effectively creates the very crime waves it

subsequently reports. The ensuing panic then forces the authorities to act.[9] But critics point

out that the way the media is conceptualised in this model is based on the highly concentrated

---

[6] David Lemmings, 'Introduction: Law and Order, Moral Panics, and Early Modern England', in David Lemmings and Claire Walker (eds.), *Moral Panics, the Media, and the Law in Early Modern England* (Basingstoke, 2009), 2, 11; David Lemmings, *Law and Government in England During the Long Eighteenth Century: from Consent to Command* (Basingstoke, 2011), ch. 4.
[7] Peter King, 'Moral Panics and Violent Street Crime 1750-2000: a Comparative Perspective', in Barry Godfrey, Clive Emsley and Graeme Dunstall (eds.), *Comparative Histories of Crime* (Cullompton, 2003), 55, 70.
[8] David Rowe, 'The Concept of the Moral Panic: An Historico-Sociological Positioning', in Lemmings and Walker (eds.), *Moral Panics*, 31, 34
[9] For a six stage model of this process, see King, 'Moral Panics', 55.

and relatively homogeneous national mass media found in Britain since the 1970s;[10] the

more diverse press of the eighteenth century (in which crime was covered in much wider

range of genres) was far less capable of having the same impact. Indeed, the recent

collection of studies of moral panics in early modern England coedited by David Lemmings

and Claire Walker includes frequent references to the diversity of views disseminated in the

press as well as the variety of public responses, on topics such as the execution of forgerers,

the punishment of the London 'Monster' (a serial attacker of women), and the persecution of

the British Jacobins; all three attempts to generate pressure for judicial severity were

countered by alternative views, and public opinion was far from unanimous. As Lemmings

concludes when contrasting eighteenth-century moral panics with their sixteenth- and

seventeenth-century counterparts, 'with the proliferation of commercial presses and their

search for a particular niche in the marketplace there was certainly greater opportunity for

stories to be complicated by alternative points of view'.[11]

   Consequently the impact of moral panics in the eighteenth century was more limited than

the model predicts. As represented in the existing historiography, most such panics arose

from demobilisations at the conclusions of wars (in 1698, 1714, 1748, 1763, and 1783) owing

to fears that demobbed soldiers and sailors would resort to violent crime (robbery and

burglary) when they were unable to find employment.[12] There were also more specific panics

in London over the activities of gangs of robbers (the Black Boy Alley gang, 1744), thefts

---

[10] Rowe, 'Concept', 31; Kenneth Thompson, *Moral Panics* (London and New York, 1998), 27-9.

[11] David Lemmings, 'Conclusion: Moral Panics, Law and the Tranformation of the Public Sphere in Early Modern England', in Lemmings and Walker (eds.), *Moral Panics*, 258-9, quote from 262. See also articles in this volume by Randall McGowen, Cindy McCreery, and Michael T. Davis.

[12] J. M. Beattie, *Crime and the Courts in England 1660-1800* (Princeton, 1986), 213-35; Nicholas Rogers, *Mayhem: Post-War Crime and Violence in Britain, 1748-53* (New Haven, 2012).

and robberies which followed the Gordon riots and the ensuing crisis of punishment (1780-83), and the London 'Monster' (1788-90), as well as more general outbreaks of anxiety resulting from political instability (1681, 1688-1689, 1789), which led to general calls for a 'reformation of manners'.[13] While most of these crises resulted in short term increases in criminal prosecutions and more severe sentences for those convicted, these were temporary and relatively limited changes which were soon reversed.[14] Few statutes (the best available instruments for effecting long-term changes in policing and punishment) can be shown to have resulted from moral panics. Lemmings' analysis of the relationship between crime reporting in the *London Journal* in the early 1720s and the passage of the Black Act of 1723, for example, wisely stops short of making a direct connection between the two.[15] Similarly, while Richard Ward showed that the 1744 panic over the activities of the Black Boy Alley gang led in the short term to additional policing, special rewards to encourage prosecutions, and increased convictions and executions, its long term impact is uncertain.[16]

---

[13] Richard Ward, 'Print Culture, Moral Panic and the Administration of the Law: The London Crime Wave of 1744', *Crime, Histoire & Sociétés / Crime, History & Societies*, xvi (2012), 5-24; Tim Hitchcock and Robert Shoemaker, *London Lives: Poverty, Crime and the Making of a Modern City* (Cambridge, 2015), ch. 7; Jan Bondeson, *The London Monster: A Sanguinary Tale* (London, 2000); Dudley W. R. Bahlman, *The Moral Revolution of 1688* (New Haven, 1957); Joanna Innes, 'Politics and Morals: The Reformation of Manners Movement in Later Eighteenth-Century England', in Eckhart Hellmuth (ed.), *The Transformation of Political Culture: England and Germany in the Late Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1990), 57-118.

[14] Richard Ward, *Print Culture, Crime and Justice in Eighteenth-Century London* (London, 2014)*, 72-5, 106-10; Peter King, 'Newspaper Reporting, Prosecution Practice and Perceptions of Urban Crime: the Colchester Crime Wave of 1765' *Continuity and Change*, ii (1987), 423-54; Peter King, *Crime, Justice and Discretion in England, 1740-1840* (Oxford, 2001), 161-6.

[15] David Lemmings, 'The Dark Side of the Enlightenment: *The London Journal*, Moral Panics and the Law in the Eighteenth Century', in Lemmings and Walker (eds.), *Moral Panics*, 139-56, esp. 153.

[16] Ward, 'Print Culture'.

In order to explain why these crime waves and moral panics failed to have the expected impact on public opinion and criminal justice policy, we need to investigate more closely how moral panics worked in an eighteenth-century context and investigate the formation of public opinion in greater depth. Building on studies of earlier panics,[17] we need to examine the eighteenth-century 'law and order' panic from the point of view of the participants, the 'public' who were potential victims of crime and supposedly rendered anxious by widespread reporting of crime in print. This article will present new evidence about Londoners' actual experiences of crime, what they read about it, and their attitudes towards crime and criminal justice throughout the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, including periods with and without supposed moral panics. It will suggest that some of the assumptions embedded in the moral panics model about the role of print cannot be sustained, and argue that public attitudes towards crime were more diverse and fluid, and sometimes more tolerant, than the model suggests. This has important implications, not only for explaining changes in judicial and penal policy, but more directly for our understanding of public responses to crime. The focus is on London, which was not only the centre of English print culture in the eighteenth century, but is also widely recognised as having had disproportionate influence over national criminal justice policy in the period.

<div align="center">I</div>

To examine moral panics from the point of view of individual Londoners the best available sources, in the absence of modern crime and opinion surveys, are diaries and correspondence.[18] Originally prompted by the Calvinist spiritual requirement for self-

---

[17] Lemmings and Walker (eds.), *Moral Panics*, chs. 3-7.
[18] For historians' uses of diaries to study experiences of crime, see King, *Crime, Justice and Discretion*, ch. 2, and Ward, *Print Culture*, ch. 2; for their use of diaries and correspondence

examination and the need to monitor evidence of God's grace, diary keeping became increasingly common over the course of the seventeenth century, owing to instructions from the clergy, increases in literacy, and, it is argued, growing individualism.[19] From the late seventeenth and into the eighteenth century diaries served increasingly secular, as well as spiritual, purposes, and encounters with crime and print were regularly reported. A more secular practice, letter writing also increased dramatically in the eighteenth century, owing to the development of the postal service and the important role correspondence played in elite sociability, and these letters contain similar evidence.[20]

All letters and diaries are of course selective, and do not offer direct access to the experiences and attitudes of the author. Both were influenced by published guidebooks prescribing how they should be written and by contemporary cultural expectations about how an individual life story should be told.[21] As careful analysis of the extraordinarily detailed diary of Samuel Pepys has shown, diaries could be compiled retrospectively, and were subject to sometimes repeated revision, influenced by the diarists' concerns to construct the right public persona and their desire to be represented in a positive light for posterity (even

---

in the study of reading practices, see Stephen Colclough, *Consuming Texts: Readers and Reading Communities, 1695-1870* (Basingstoke, 2007) and John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination: The Emergence of English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1997), chs. 2, 4.

[19] Stuart Sherman, 'Diary and Autobiography', in John J. Richetti (ed.), *The Cambridge History of English Literature, 1660-1780* (Cambridge, 2005), 649; Michael Mascuch, *Origins of the Individualist Self: Autobiography and Self Identity in England, 1591-1791* (Cambridge, 1997), ch. 4.

[20] Rebecca Earle (ed.), *Epistolary Selves: Letters and Letter Writers, 1600-1945* (Aldershot, 1999); Susan Whyman, *The Pen and the People: English Letter Writers, 1660-1800* (Oxford, 2009).

[21] Philip Woodfine, '"Nothing but Dust & the most Minute Particles": Historians and the Evidence of Journals and Diaries', in Dan Doll and Jessica Munns (eds.), *Recording and Reordering: Essays on the Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Diary and Journal* (Lewisburg, Penn., 2006), 185-210; Mascuch, *Origins of Individualist Self*, 75, 99.

when, as in Pepys's case, the diary was written in shorthand and its existence kept secret).[22]

Not all diarists were interested in reporting on crime. But there were good reasons for them to record both their experiences and what they read. Following their spiritual origins, there was a strong theme of accounting in many diaries, as the compilers detailed, in the form of a balance sheet, not only their spiritual highs and lows but also their economic and social fortunes and misfortunes, as a means of discovering divine providence.[23] Becoming the victim of a crime was a significant indication of divine displeasure, a financial loss, and a potential setback to one's social position, while reflecting on crime provided an opportunity to test one's attitudes towards sin and redemption. In the eighteenth century diarists' concerns were arguably more worldly, as they became more concerned with how they might be viewed by others, but this still involved assessments of their personal conduct and emotions.[24]

Diarists and correspondents were also influenced by the contemporary passion for 'news'. As a result of the availability of weekly newsbooks and later weekly and then daily printed newspapers, as well as discussion about them in coffee houses, seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Londoners became accustomed to regularly recording domestic and

---

[22] *The Diary of Samuel Pepys: A New and Complete Transcription,* ed. Robert Latham and William Matthews, 11 vols. (London, 1970-83), i, pp. xli-xlv, xcvii-cvii ; Mark Stanley Dawson, 'Histories and Texts: Refiguring the Diary of Samuel Pepys', *Historical Journal,* xliii (2000), 407-32. See also Avra Kouffman, 'Women's Diaries of late Stuart England: An Overview', in Doll and Munns (eds.), *Recording and Reordering*, 65-101; Mascuch, *Origins of the Individualist Self,* 92, 96; Andrew Cambers, 'Reading, the Godly, and Self-Writing in England, *c.* 1580-1720', *Journal of British Studies,* xlvi (2007), 796-825.

[23] Stuart Sherman, *Telling Time: Clocks, Diaries, and English Diurnal Form, 1660-1785* (Chicago, 1996), 62-8; Craig Muldrew, 'The Culture of Reconciliation: Community and the Settlement of Economic Disputes in Early Modern England', *Historical Journal,* xxxix (1996), 923; Sara Heller Mendelson, 'Stuart Women's Diaries and Occasional Memoirs', in Mary Prior (ed.), *Women in English Society 1500-1800* (London and New York, 1985), 186.

[24] John Brewer, 'John Marsh's *History of My Private Life 1752-1828*, in T. C. W. Blanning and David Cannadine (eds.), *History and Biography: Essays in Honour of Derek Beales* (Cambridge, 1996), 76-81.

foreign events and what they read about them.[25] Some diarists, notably John Evelyn and

Gertrude Savile, chronicled the major events of their times, including notorious crimes, and

one of the many reasons letter writing flourished in this period was as a means of conveying

the latest news. As a primary means of building relationships, friends used letters to send

news reports, both public and private, as a gift, with the expectation of reciprocity. Both the

frequent desire to report news, and the opportunities personal writing gave to reflect on

printed crime reports and express anxieties to close confidants, mean that crime often features

in diaries and correspondence.

   Of course, not all diaries and collections of letters are equally useful, as many were

compiled for very limited purposes, such as solely to record the author's spiritual state,

finances, or professional activities. For the purposes of this analysis, a selection of eleven

'core' diaries, both published and unpublished, were chosen on the basis of the detailed

information they provide on a broad range of subjects (Table 1).[26] In each case the level of

detail and nature of the information provided gives confidence that should the diarist or a

close acquaintance have been the victim of a crime, they would have recorded it. Also

included in the core analysis is the incredibly detailed correspondence of Horace Walpole,

whose four thousand surviving letters effectively amount to a daily record of his activities, as

well of the news which mattered to him. Additional qualitative evidence was taken from a

number of other contemporary accounts of life in London.[27]

---

[25] C. John Sommerville, *The News Revolution in England: Cultural Dynamics of Daily Information* (New York and Oxford, 1996); Matthew Green, 'Londoners and the News: Responses to the Political Press, 1695-1742' (Univ. of Oxford D.Phil. thesis, 2011).
[26] For a list of available diaries, both published and unpublished, I am indebted to: H. Creaton, *A Checklist of Unpublished Diaries by Londoners and Visitors with a Select Bibliography of Published Diaries* (London Record Society, xxxvii, 2003).
[27] These include several other diaries which are for a variety of reasons less comprehensive, notably those of John Byrom (covering 1723-48), John Baker (1751-78), John Marsh (1765-1828), Sylas Neville (1767-88), Anna Larpent (1773-1830), and Joseph Farington (1793-

Table 1

Principal diarists and correspondents

Name	Years Covered	Occupation and Residence	Source
John Evelyn	1660-1706[28]	commissioner, Westminster	published
Samuel Pepys	1660-1669	secretary of the navy, Seething Lane	published
Norris Purslow	1688-1728	clothier, of Wapping	Wellcome Library
Peter Briggens	1706-07, 1711-12[29]	tobacco merchant, Bartholomew Close	London Metropolitan Archives
Dudley Ryder	1715-1716	law student, Middle Temple/Hackney	published[30]
William Byrd	1717-1719[31]	Virginia planter, Beaufort Street	published
John Dawson	1722, 1727-46[32]	excise officer and staymaker, Hoxton	Hackney Archives
Gertrude Savile	1721-57	gentlewoman, Golden Sq./Gt Russell St.	published
Stephen Monteague	1733-64	accountant, Winchester St./Red Cross St.	Guildhall Library
Horace Walpole	1746-96	sinecurist, Piccadilly/Strawberry Hill	published
Samuel Curwen	1775-1784	merchant, Aldersgate	published

1821). An additional collection of correspondence, that of Richard Lapthorne (1687-97), the London agent of Richard Coffin, a Devonshire gentleman, has also proved useful, as well as the chronicle or 'Entring Book' of Roger Morrice (1677-91), political agent and chaplain to two Presbyterian MPs. These have been supplemented by accounts of visits to London, by the German Sophie von La Roche (1786) and two Scotsmen, Robert Kirk (1689-90) and James Boswell (1762-76).

[28] Evelyn's diary starts in 1620, but for the purpose of this study it has been examined only from 1660: *The Diary of John Evelyn*, ed. E. S. de Beer, 6 vols. (Oxford, 1955).

[29] Briggens' diary covers 1706-9 and 1711-16, but only a portion of the diary has been examined.   Selections have been published in *The Eliot Papers*, ed. Eliot Howard, 2 vols. (Gloucester, 1893-4), ii, 29-70.

[30] A full transcript of the shorthand diary is in the Harrowby MSS, 3rd ser., A, lxix (Sandon Hall, Strafford).

[31] Byrd's diary covers 1717-21 but only five months have been sampled.

[32] Dawson's diary covers 1722-63, but between 1722 and 1727 he lived outside London, and from 1747 he ceased recording anything but the weather.

James Jenkins	1780-1800[33]	grocer, Coleman Street/Islington	Friends House

There are some clear but unavoidable biases in the composition of this group. Reflecting the original spiritual impetus for diary keeping, their religious orientation was predominantly non-conformist, including several Quakers and at least one Presbyterian. The sort of introspection stimulated by non-conformity was not restricted to dissenters, however, and some of the most detailed records of London life in this period were kept by Anglicans, particularly Evelyn, Pepys and Walpole. Reflecting a combination of actual patterns of diary keeping and their survival,[34] the diarists are overwhelmingly men, though the core group includes Gertrude Savile, sister of an MP. The diaries of Anna Larpent (the 'modestly prosperous' wife of John Larpent, Chief Inspector of Plays) and Sophie von la Roche (an elite visitor from Germany), have also been consulted.[35] These and our male observers were predominantly upper or upper-middle class, but a few diarists appear more solidly middle class, including John Dawson, an excise officer, and Stephen Monteague, an accountant for the South Sea House and Customs House, and some were engaged in retail: William Purslow was a clothier, and James Jenkins was a grocer. No useful lower class diaries have been found for this period. This is not a problem for this analysis, since these were not the people who are generally considered as having contributed to public opinion at this time.

It is impossible to say whether these men and women were more or less likely to suffer from crime than those in a lower social position, but they were certainly vulnerable. Their frequent journeys on the roads between the metropolis and the surrounding countryside

---

[33] Jenkins' diary extends to 1831, but for this analysis it has only been examined until 1800.
[34] Mendelson, 'Stuart Women's Diaries', 182-5, 188.
[35] For Larpent, see Brewer, *Pleasures of the Imagination*, 57-8.

provided plenty of opportunities for being robbed, and these writers were also susceptible to theft by their servants. While they were also able to afford the locks, carriages and footmen which helped protect them from crime, many of our diarists lived in a part of London, the west end, where prosecution rates were the highest in the metropolis.[36] At the same time, together with the City, this was the area with the greatest concentration of bookshops and coffee houses where printed literature was sold and discussed.[37] Our diarists and correspondents had numerous and diverse opportunities to both experience crime and encounter representations of it. While their ego documents can provide only a partial and distorted picture, they contain valuable new evidence concerning eighteenth-century encounters with crime.

<p style="text-align:center">II</p>

According to King's 'six-stage pattern', moral panics start with some initial acts of crime, which then are subject to exaggerated reporting by the media. While the precise scale of the original level of criminality is not crucial to the concept, the strong implication is that it is often relatively low (but then misrepresented by the press).[38] Certainly this was the case in London: despite the religious and social impetus to record experiences of crime, it is

---

[36] Robert B. Shoemaker, *Prosecution and Punishment: Petty Crime and the Law in London and Rural Middlesex, c.1660-1725* (Cambridge, 1991), 276, table 10.1; and Peter Linebaugh, 'Tyburn: a Study of Crime and the Labouring Poor in London during the First Half of the Eighteenth Century' (Univ. of Warwick Ph.D. thesis, 1975), 60. See also *Locating London's Past* (www.locatinglondon.org, consulted 7 Feb. 2016), which allows per capita prosecution rates for Old Bailey trials to be mapped.

[37] Brian Cowan, *The Social Life of Coffee: The Emergence of the British Coffeehouse* (New Haven, 2005), 157; Vic Gatrell, *The First Bohemians: Life and Art in London's Golden Age* (London, 2013), 177-82; James Raven, 'London and the Central Sites of the English Book Trade', in Michael F. Suarez S.J. and Michael L. Turner (eds.), *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain, Volume 5: 1695-1830* (Cambridge, 2009), 293-308.

[38] King, 'Moral Panics', 55, refers to 'an initial act or acts of violent street crime'.

remarkable how rarely our observers recorded that they, members of their immediate family

and household, and their neighbours, friends and acquaintances, became victims of crime

during moral panics. [39] If we restrict ourselves to the most serious crimes (robbery and break-

ins, which account for 40 per cent of all crimes recorded), the crime rate for years of panic

was 0.18 per year (Table 2) for the 76.67 years covered. While this is higher than the figure

of 0.11 for periods of non-panic, at less than one crime every five years for an individual's

whole personal network, the figure is low. Moreover, seven of our eleven diarists who lived

through periods of panic reported no serious crimes. But it must be acknowledged that the

diary coverage was uneven and probably incomplete, and the periods of panic have been

broadly and inevitably somewhat arbitrarily defined; it is the overall pattern rather than the

precise numbers which is important.

Table 2

Experiences of crime

Name	# Years Analysed	Total Crimes/ Year	Serious Crimes/ Panic Year	Serious Crimes/ Non-Panic Year
John Evelyn (1660-1706)	46.0	0.13	0.12	0.10
Samuel Pepys (1660-69)	9.4	1.38	0.0	0.13
Norris Purslow (1688-1728)	40.0	0.25	0.0	0.0
Peter Briggens (1706-12)	1.1	0.0	0.0	0.0

---

[39] Any selection of years characterised by 'moral panic' is inevitably arbitrary, but as explained above for the purpose of this study they incorporate periods of post-war demobilisation, concern about specific notorious criminals, and political instability. They have been defined as 1668-71, 1675-81, 1688-89, 1698-1701, 1714-28, 1744, 1748-54, 1763-64, 1780-87, and 1789.

Dudley Ryder (1715-16)	1.5	1.32	1.32	--
William Byrd (1717-19)	0.4	0.0	0.0	0.0
John Dawson (1722-46)	19.5	0.21	0.0	0.0
Gertrude Savile (1721-57)	19.0	0.21	0.0	0.0
Stephen Monteague (1733-64)	2.0	0.5	0.0	0.83
Horace Walpole (1746-96)	52.0	0.56	0.56	0.27
Samuel Curwen (1775-84)	5.2	0.77	0.19	0.0
James Jenkins (1780-1800)	20.6	0.0	0.0	0.0
TOTAL	216.7	0.34	0.18	0.11

If we expand our focus to all crimes reported (the additional crimes are mostly non-violent thefts, often by servants, and assaults), and all periods, the numbers remain low, but variable. Out of a cumulative 216 years covered, only 29 crimes against the diarist/correspondent or their households, and 44 against neighbours, friends, and acquaintances, were reported, an average of only 3.4 crimes per decade, or once every three years. Of course, experiences varied widely. While Dawson (1722, 1727-1746) and Jenkins (1780-1800) reportedly suffered no crimes against themselves and their households in the long periods covered by their diaries (though Dawson reports four committed by or against his neighbours), Pepys reported three committed against him and his household, and a further ten against his friends and acquaintances, in the almost nine and a half years covered by his diary in the 1660s. Curwen suffered three thefts in little more than five years in the late 1770s and early 1780s, and he reports that a friend was robbed by his servant.[40] But there is no clear chronological pattern to these variations: the overall low level of crimes reported is present throughout the period.

---

[40] *The Journal of Samuel Curwen, Loyalist,* ed. Andrew Oliver, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1972), i, 172.

The relative scarcity of crime in these sources is comparable with the findings of other studies. Peter King's analysis of eight Essex diaries between 1740 and 1820 found that households suffered from 'on average, a minimum of three property appropriations per decade' (0.326 offences per year).   His evidence is largely rural, but Norma Landau's survey of printed reports of crimes against justices of the peace in London found a considerably lower crime rate (only 2.2 per cent of justices each year were victims), and we must remember that as prominent judicial officials, justices of the peace were subject to revenge attacks.   On the basis of an analysis of published London diaries during the panic years following the peace of 1748, Ward concluded that 'references to the direct experience of crime as victims are rare'.[41]

Not only did our diarists and correspondents have little direct experience of crime, even in years of panic, they also rarely availed themselves of opportunities to witness trials and punishments, despite the fact that these were carried out in public. Few attended the criminal courts unless they were personally connected with a specific case, or the case was notorious (as with treason trials, and those of Jonathan Wild, Lord Ferrers, the Perreaus and Mrs Rudd, and Lord Gordon). Ryder, Savile, and Walpole reported attending no criminal trials in the long periods covered by their writings, and Evelyn's comment after he attended the trial of those accused of participation in the Popish Plot perhaps explains why: 'we having [capital trials] so commonly, so exactly published, by those who take them in short hand', it was easier to read the printed accounts. Six years later he went to hear an equally sensational trial, that of Titus Oates for perjury at King's Bench, but soon regretted it, 'it being exceedingly tedious, I did not much endeavour to see the issue of it, considering that it would

---

[41] King, *Crime, Justice and Discretion*, 18-19; Norma Landau, 'Gauging Crime in late Eighteenth-Century London', *Social History*, xxxv (2010), 397-8, 415-16; Ward, *Print Culture*, 38.

certainly be published'.[42] More than a century later, Joseph Farington was also familiar with

some of the sensational trials of the day (such as that of Horne Tooke at the Old Bailey), but

he relied on reports from his friends rather than attending himself.[43]

Similarly, there are relatively few reports of witnessing public punishments. For the most

part, diarists only deliberately went to observe the punishments of traitors, others accused of

political offences, and notorious criminals such as Jonathan Wild. At other times diarists

travelling in and around London only happened by chance to observe someone whipped or

standing in the pillory, the procession of the condemned heading towards Tyburn, or bodies

hanging in chains, but they did not usually tarry long to observe. On the 12th of February

1728 Gertrude Savile recorded that 'in crossing Tyburn Road the prisoners were going to be

hang'd. Stop'd to see the sad sight. There were five men, one of them for the murder of his

son, a boy of 11, by cruel beating; the rest for robberies.'[44] Though she took the trouble to

find out their crimes, she did not go on to see the executions, and her apparent unwillingness

to witness such punishments was shared by many diarists in the second half of the century, as

respectable Londoners either lost interest in public punishments, or, affected by the rise of

sentimentalism, increasingly found both the executions themselves and the behaviour of the

crowds repellent.[45] Boswell could not resist his intense 'curiosity to see the melancholy

---

[42] *Diary of John Evelyn*, iv, 173-6, 438-40.

[43] *The Diary of Joseph Farington*, *Volume 1: July 1793-December 1794*, ed. Kathryn Cave (New Haven, 1978), 143, 261-2.

[44] *Secret Comment: The Diaries of Gertrude Savile 1721-1757,* ed. Alan Savile (Thoroton Society Record Series, xli, 1995), 103.

[45] Robert Shoemaker, 'Streets of Shame? The Crowd and Public Punishments in London, 1700-1820', in Simon Devereaux and Paul Griffiths (eds.), *Penal Practice and Culture, 1500-1900: Punishing the English* (Basingstoke, 2004), 232-57; Randall McGowen, 'Civilizing Punishment: The End of the Public Execution in England', *Journal of British Studies*, xxxiii (1994), 259-60; V. A. C. Gatrell, *The Hanging Tree: Execution and the English People, 1770-1868* (Oxford, 1994), 259-72. Matthew White, however, argues that the respectable classes remained interested in public punishments at the end of the century:

spectacle of the executions', but when he saw the execution of Paul Lewis in 1763 he 'was most terribly shocked, and thrown into a very deep melancholy'.[46] Having queued up to see the dissected body of Elizabeth Brownrigg in 1767, Sylas Neville found it 'a most shocking sight' and wished he had not seen it. He appears to have avoided personally witnessing executions thereafter; when he saw George and Joseph Weston and four others being carried to Tyburn in a cart at 'the bottom of our street' in 1782, a time of heightened concern about crime, he followed them to Tyburn, but did not stay to see the executions, claiming his 'principal view' was to examine the behaviour of the crowd.[47] An exception to this pattern is Samuel Curwen who, after he moved to a house near Tyburn during this same period of concern, recorded witnessing executions at Tyburn four times between 1781 and 1783, without expressing any distaste.[48]

III

   Despite their limited experiences as both victims of crime and witnesses of trials and punishments, Londoners did have opinions about crime, and, as the moral panic model suggests,[49] these were increasingly shaped by what they read, and the oral reports they heard about this literature. But in contrast to the model, the content of the printed literature of crime did not uniformly express a message of danger; rather, print was, in the words of King (with respect to newspaper reporting), 'multi-vocal', including 'a kaleidoscope of different and often contradictory messages', with reports serving, at turns, to frighten, reassure, and

'Ordering the Mob: London's Public Punishments, *c.* 1783-1868' (Univ. of Hertfordshore Ph.D, 2010).
[46] *Boswell's London Journal, 1762-1763*, ed. Frederick A. Pottle (New York, 1950), 252.
[47] *The Diary of Sylas Neville, 1767-1788,* ed. Basil Cozens-Hardy (Oxford, 1950), 25, 296.
[48] *Journal of Samuel Curwen*, 760-1, 774, 941, 942.
[49] King, 'Moral Panics', 55.

entertain readers.[50] As already noted, even during moral panics printed literature contained

conflicting views, reflecting the varied interests of both producers and consumers. Some of

those accused of notorious crimes, notably forgerers and highwaymen, were even able to use

print to convey their side of the story and elicit sympathy.[51] While newspapers were most

frequently consulted, they did not dominate the literature of crime the way they do today, a

point which has implications for a model which gives the media such a key role. Crime was

reported in a much wider range of genres, including printed trial reports, biographies,

polemical works, broadsides, ballads, plays and novels, and from a variety of points of

view.[52] Moreover, and again in contrast to the moral panics model but in line with recent

studies of reader response, the diary and correspondence evidence demonstrates that readers

responded to texts in different ways, at times with a significant degree of scepticism.[53]

In 1690 the Scottish visitor Robert Kirk observed of London that 'the city is a great vast

wilderness. Few in it know the fourth part of its streets, far less can they get intelligence of

the hundredth part the special affairs and remarkable passages in it, unless by public printed

---

[50] Peter King, 'Newspaper Reporting and Attitudes to Crime and Justice in late-Eighteenth-and early-Nineteenth-Century London', *Continuity and Change*, xxii (2007), 76. See also Landau, 'Gauging Crime', 409-17; Ward, *Print Culture*, 217; Lemmings, 'Moral Panics', 249, 256, 258-9.

[51] Robert B. Shoemaker, 'The Street Robber and the Gentleman Highwayman: Changing Representations and Perceptions of Robbery in London, 1690-1800', *Cultural and Social History*, iii (2006), 393-7; Randall McGowen, 'Forgers and Forgery: Severity and Social Identity in Eighteenth-Century England', in Lemmings and Walker (eds.), *Moral Panics*, 262.

[52] Robert Shoemaker, 'Print Culture and the Creation of Public Knowledge about Crime in Eighteenth-Century London', in Paul Knepper, Jonathan Doak, and Joanna Shapland (eds.), *Urban Crime Prevention, Surveillance, and Restorative Justice* (Boca Raton, Fla., 2009), 1-21; Andrea McKenzie, 'Making Crime Pay: Motives, Marketing Strategies, and the Printed Literature of Crime in England 1670-1770', in Greg T Smith, Allyson N May and Simon Devereaux (eds.), *Criminal Justice in the Old World and the New: Essays in Honour of J.M. Beattie* (Toronto, 1998), 235-69.

[53] Ian Jackson, 'Approaches to the History of Readers and Reading in Eighteenth-Century Britain', *Historical Journal*, xlvii (2004), 1041-54; Colclough, *Consuming Texts*.

papers'.[54] With respect to crime, this comment is precocious; while diaries confirm that

newspapers became the most common, but by no means exclusive, source of information,

this did not occur until the middle third of the eighteenth century, and readers frequently

questioned their reliability. Although Londoners regularly read early printed papers such as

the *London Gazette* (founded in 1666), they found little information about crime, with the

exception of prosecutions for treason. Both Pepys and Evelyn appear to have derived the

information about crimes they recorded in their diaries only once from the newspapers.[55]

Early eighteenth-century diarists obtained more information from the papers, but they were

still not their primary source of information. Dudley Ryder's only reference to a newspaper

crime report was a report of a 'last dying speech' of a robber in the *Flying Post* in September

1716, but he remarks that he learned more from an oral informant, 'Dr Lee', who told him

that the speech, which included Jacobite sentiments, had been supplied to him by 'an old

woman'.[56] In 1739 John Byrom recorded a story of a foiled highway robbery where one of

the robbers was killed, and his companion decapitated him in order to prevent his identity

from becoming known. Byrom apparently first heard this story in a coffee house, 'though the

newspapers all have it'.[57] In contrast, Gertrude Savile appears to have relied heavily on the

papers' reports on crime, which she for the most part trusted. She frequently read them

alongside the Old Bailey *Proceedings*, and during periods of moral panic she drew the

---

[54] R. Kirk, 'London in 1689-90', transcr. Donald Maclean, *Transactions of the London and Middlesex Archaeological Society*, new ser. vi (1933), 333.

[55] *Diary of Samuel Pepys*, ii, 35-36; *Diary of John Evelyn*, v, 366 and n.; *Flying Post* no. 702, 7 November 1699 and 709, 23 November 1699. Late seventeenth-century diarists also consulted manuscript newsletters, but there is no evidence that they learned anything about crime from them. For the importance of sociability in Pepys's information gathering, see Kate Loveman, *Samuel Pepys and his Books: Reading, Newsgathering, and Sociability, 1660-1703* (Oxford, 2015).

[56] *The Diary of Dudley Ryder, 1715-16*, ed. and transcr. William Matthews (London, 1939), 336.

[57] *The Private Journal and Literary Remains of John Byrom,* ed. Richard Parkinson (Chetham Society, xl, 1856), ii, pt. 1, p. 252.

expected conclusion that London was suffering from a crime wave. In August and

September 1744 (during the period of concern about the Black Boy Alley gang), she wrote

'never were known so many and such bold robberies in the streets as of late'. Since women

did not have access to coffee house 'news', they may have been more influenced by print, but

they too could be sceptical. Savile compared what she read to what she learned from her oral

informants; when Lord Drumlaurig was shot in 1754, she commented, '(the news says by the

accidentall going off of his pistol), but generally believed 'twas done on purpose by himself

on the road near Doncaster'.[58] In 1796 Anna Larpent demonstrated more trust in the papers

when she recorded a puzzling murder which was discovered on her own street. Despite the

possibility of local knowledge, she looked to 'The papers & magazine[s] of the times' to

explain it.[59]

Although in the second half of the century diarists and correspondents relied more heavily

(but not exclusively) on the newspapers, in contrast to Larpent most continued to read such

reports sceptically. Horace Walpole, who as Table 2 indicates recorded twice as many

serious crimes per year during years of purported panic, relied extensively on the papers for

information about the state of crime, but his relationship with them was ambivalent. He

included frequent references to crime reports throughout his correspondence, and these

became more frequent from the 1760s as he got older and lost access to other sources of

information. Reporting on a duel in a letter to Lady Ossory in 1773, he wrote that he knew

'no more [of it] than the newspapers, who tell everything, have told you'. His tone was

sarcastic; the theme that newspaper reports were necessary, but frequently distorted, runs

---

[58] *Diaries of Gertrude Savile*, 255, 305. For Savile's reading practices, see Colclough, *Consuming Texts,* 48-63.

[59] Huntington Library, MSS 31201, Anna Larpent Diaries, 1790-1830, vol. 2, 27 May 1796. In the course of her diary Larpent records reading newspapers, the *Gentleman's Magazine*, and the *Monthly Review*.

throughout his correspondence, though he acknowledged that there was usually a grain of truth in what they reported. As he commented to Horace Mann in December 1773 when telling him that nothing significant had happened recently, 'the newspapers are my witnesses, which, though always full of lies, seldom fail to reach the outlines at least of incidents'. He was perhaps especially sceptical during periods of panic: in 1782 he observed to William Mason that 'half' of the reports of robberies and murders in the papers are 'lies'.[60]

Other late eighteenth-century diarists also adopted a sceptical approach. While staying in Exeter in 1777, Samuel Curwen took interest in reports of the forgery alleged against William Dodd, noting that Dodd 'figures in the Tete a tetes [sic] in the Magazines and *unless defamed* is a worthless character noted for some vicious publications in the common rout'.[61] Dodd was convicted of forgery; as Walpole recognised, the papers were often right. Boswell notes that he thought a report of an apology made by Oliver Goldsmith to Thomas Evans, a publisher, for beating him was 'an invention … but on my coming to town I found it to be very true'.[62] Significantly, Boswell apparently resorted to oral sources to confirm the report.

If newspapers were consulted infrequently early in our period, and often sceptically throughout, how did Londoners treat the manifold other printed sources of information about crime? Some diarists consulted the printed trial accounts, both of state trials and of felonies at the Old Bailey, which were widely disseminated from the 1670s. Unlike some readers,[63]

---

[60] *Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, ed. W.S. Lewis, 48 vols. (London, 1937-83), xxxii, 167; xxiii, 536; xxix, 273.
[61] *Journal of Samuel Curwen*, i, 301-2 (emphasis added).
[62] *Boswell for the Defence 1769-1774*, ed. William K. Winsatt, Jr. and Frederick A. Pottle, (London, 1959), 165.
[63] Robert B. Shoemaker 'The Old Bailey Proceedings and the Representation of Crime and Criminal Justice in Eighteenth-Century London', *Journal of British Studies*, xlvii (2008), 576-7.

our writers accepted these as accurate, and occasionally drew wider conclusions from them

about the state of crime in London. As we have seen with John Evelyn, for some the printed

Proceedings (or 'sessions papers') were a preferable substitute for actual attendance at the Old

Bailey. John Byrom only purchased the *Proceedings* twice, in search of the account of the

sensational trial of the thief-taker Jonathan Wild. Yet Byrom was clearly aware of the

cultural significance of these printed accounts, since he referred to them in a poem he wrote

about his being robbed. Prior to the robbery, he writes, 'none of us, had yet / such rogues,

but in a sessions paper met'.[64] Gertrude Savile read the *Proceedings* alongside the

newspapers, noting down the number of convicts sentenced to death and transportation. As

we have seen, she drew conclusions from this reading about the high crime rate in London.[65]

Few of our diarists read printed biographies of notorious criminals, and when they did

their responses were mixed. While Savile apparently trusted the sometimes empathetic

biographies published in the *Ordinary's Accounts* and 'The Life, Roberies, etc. of [James]

Dalton' (a notorious street robber), Walpole dismissed the *Ordinary's Accounts* as

insignificant, telling one correspondent that the Ordinaries, 'who write for their monthly half-

crown … may swear they find diamonds in dunghills; but you will excuse *me*, if I let our

correspondence lie dormant, rather than deal in such trash'.[66] He also rejected the celebratory

tone of some separately published biographies. At the time of the execution of the gentleman

highwayman James Maclaine, Walpole (who was one of his victims) complained that such

'memoirs' were often 'set forth with as much parade as—as—Marshall Turenne's' (Turenne

was an impetuous seventeenth-century French military commander). Reporting that there

---

[64] *Private Journal and Literary Remains of John Byrom* (Chetham Society, xxxii, 1854), i, pt.
1, pp. 121, 140; John Byrom, *A Full and True Account of an Horrid and Barbarous Robbery*
(London, 1728), 2.
[65] *Diaries of Gertrude Savile*, 61, 113, 134.
[66] *Ibid.*, 113, 116; *Walpole Correspondence*, x, 113. See also x, 5-6, and xxviii, 440.

were 'as many prints and pamphlets' published about Maclaine as about a recent earthquake, he noted 'his profession grows no joke'.[67] Collections of such lives were frequently published, and, with the distance of time, possibly read less critically, and with more impact. A book Boswell read as a child, *The Lives of the Convicts*, stimulated his fears about highway robbery, and he referred to it three times in his journals—including when he went to see an examination conducted by John Fielding at Bow Street, and 'it brought fresh into my mind the ideas of London roguery and wickedness which I conceived in my younger days by reading *The Lives of the Convicts*, and other such books'.[68]

A number of more occasional publications relating to crime are also mentioned in diaries and correspondence, and given various degrees of credulity. In the late seventeenth century, before crime featured in newspaper reporting, separate broadsides and short pamphlets were often published containing accounts of shocking crimes, such as in 1688 when Richard Lapthorne reported that a body of a man without head, arms or legs was discovered on a dunghill and noted 'I suppose the next week we shall have a narrative in print'.[69] The body turned out to be that of Dennis Aubry (or Hobry), murdered by his wife Mary, who came to be labeled 'the French Midwife'. *A Hellish Murder Committed by a French Midwife* was duly published, but the diarist William Westby noted that the 'people mistrust that this account is fictious' [sic], because they believed she only covered up, but did not commit the murder.[70] As more ostensibly accurate accounts of crime proliferated in newspaper reports

---

[67] *Walpole Correspondence*, xx, 188, 199.
[68] *Boswell's London Journal*, 43, 252, 290. It is not clear which of the published collections of criminal lives from this period he is referring to.
[69] *The Portledge Papers, Being Extracts from the Letters of Richard Lapthorne*, ed. Russel J. Kerr and Ida Coffin Duncan (London, 1928), 24-5.
[70] Leigh Yetter, 'Criminal Knowledge: Mapping Murder in (and onto) Early Modern Metropolitan London', *London Journal*, xxxiii (2008), 109 and n. 74, citing Westby's diary in the Folger Library.

and trial accounts in the eighteenth century, more peripheral and partisan publications may have been accorded even less credence. In 1781 Curwen wrote an entry in his diary on the case of Captain John Donellan, convicted of the murder of a baronet in Warwickshire. Following his trial pamphlets were published which questioned the merits of the conviction, introducing new evidence. The case attracted considerable public interest, and Curwen attended one of several debates on this topic conducted in London debating societies. Although he could not remember how the debate was settled, he found the arguments in the pamphlets, although superficially attractive, ultimately unconvincing; 'I am clear there is no room in my mind to doubt about the Captain's guilt and that the after publications have just a plausibility as might appear in every such a complicated case as this is'.[71] Though they did not write about them, other diarists owned books with opposing viewpoints on controversial cases, forcing them to make their own judgements. Byrom owned two books on the notorious case of Elizabeth Canning, allegedly kidnapped for a month during a period of panic in 1753: Henry Fielding's *Clear State of the Case of Elizabeth Canning* and John Hill's response, *The History of Elizabeth Canning Considered*. Walpole also owned two books on this controversy, as well as on the cases of Maclaine and the Perreaus and Mrs Rudd.[72]

Readers thus encountered crime in several different print genres, depicted from variety of points of view, and their responses were highly variable. It is rare that we have evidence of multiple responses to the same text;[73] the one significant exception is John Gay's *Beggar's*

---

[71] *Journal of Samuel Curwen*, 752; *London Debating Societies, 1776-1799*, ed. Donna Andrew (London Record Society, xxx, 1994), entry nos. 798, 799, 801, 805-6.
[72] *A Catalogue of the Library of the Late John Byrom* (London, 1848); Allen T. Hazen, *A Catalogue of Horace Walpole's Library,* 3 vols. (London, 1969).
[73] In principle, the ongoing *Reading Experience Database* (http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/RED/, consulted 7 Feb. 2016) provides evidence of reader responses to texts, but to date it includes few references to the printed literature of crime, with the exception of newspaper advertisements and, as discussed here, the *Beggar's Opera*.

Opera (published in 1728, at the end of the prolonged 1720s post-war panic), the most frequently performed play in the eighteenth century.[74]   Seven of the twenty-four diarists and correspondents alive after 1728 and included in this study report that they went to see it or read it (sometimes both), some several times, and two more mentioned it. Two of those who went to see it also saw performances of its more conventional sequel, *Polly*, and two others saw an imitation, the *Quaker's Opera*. Several report singing or playing the tunes, and there are numerous references to characters and lines from the *Beggar's Opera* in correspondence and reported conversations. In a letter to Walpole in 1741, Henry Seymour Conway wrote that they should stop being angry at each other for not writing 'and conclude like Peacham [sic] and Lockit, "Brother, brother we are both in the wrong"'.[75]

Responses to the opera, a 'pastiche' of familiar references to the literature of crime, varied significantly.[76] Savile, who attended the first performance, commented that 'the top charicters were highwaymen and common whores and very exactly drawn and yet manag'd to be inofencive and very witty'; despite the 'low' subject, she found it 'wonderfully entertaining and instructive'.[77] In contrast, in 1774 Anna Larpent found it 'too shocking to please me; such vice laid open!' She found 'Polly', on the other hand, 'pretty and affecting'.[78] John Fielding attempted, unsuccessfully, to suppress the opera in 1773 on the grounds that it encouraged crime,[79] but both Walpole and Boswell rejected this argument. Boswell, who compared the highwayman Paul Lewis to Macheath, reported Samuel Johnson's view that

---

[74] William Schultz, *Gay's Beggar's Opera: Its Content, History and Influence* (New Haven, 1923), xxi.
[75] *Walpole Correspondence*, xxxvii, 86.
[76] Brewer, *Pleasures of the Imagination*, 431.
[77] *Diaries of Gertrude Savile*, 100.
[78] Larpent Diaries, xvii, 22 (14 April 1774), 68-9 (July 1777).
[79] Schultz, *Gay's Beggar's Opera*, 244-5.

more influence has been ascribed to the *Beggar's Opera* than it in reality ever had, for

I do not believe that any man was ever made a rogue by being present at its

representation. At the same time, I do not deny that it may have some influence, by

making the character of a rogue familiar, and in some degree pleasing.[80]

Whatever they concluded, it is clear that the many viewers and readers of the *Beggar's Opera*

were exposed to representations of highway robbery which were more sympathetic than those

found in some of the other printed works about crime they read, not least the newspapers.[81]

Despite Londoners' growing dependence on the printed word for their information about

crime, oral reports continued to play an important role, both as a separate source of

information and as a means by which printed content was circulated.[82] Although Walpole

read widely, he relied heavily on gossip and reports from his many well-connected visitors

and correspondents, as well as servants and watermen. As he told Lady Ossory in 1789, 'my

house [in Berkeley Square, Piccadilly] is well situated as a coffee house … I have no

intelligence but from those who accidentally drop in'.[83] Similarly, James Boswell was both a

keen reader and an avid conversationalist, and the reports of crime and criminals in his

journals were informed by both sources.

---

[80] *Boswell's London Journal,* 251; *Boswell: The Ominous Years 1774-1776,* ed. Charles
Ryskamp and Frederick A. Pottle (London, 1963), 151-2; *Walpole Correspondence*, xx, 169.
[81] For the changing reception of the *Beggar's Opera* over time, see Brewer, *Pleasures of the
Imagination*, 427-49; Schultz, *Gay's Beggar's Opera*.
[82] Green, 'Londoners and the News'. Although Adam Fox's study of the relationship between
oral and print culture, *Oral and Literate Culture in England 1500*-1700 (Oxford, 2000),
formally ends in 1700, many of his conclusions pertain to the next century.
[83] *Walpole Correspondence*, xxxiv, 37.

Even more than with printed literature, listeners were well aware that oral reports could exaggerate the crime threat, and they carefully assessed what they heard in light of the credibility of the reporter, often listening to and pondering several different accounts, and consulting printed sources, before drawing their own conclusions. Although Walpole clearly had a weakness for gossip, he was keenly aware of its limitations, as he repeatedly acknowledged to his correspondents. In July 1779 he wrote to Lady Ossory, 'I see one is to be kept on the *qui vive* all the summer with reports and alarms true and false; but I have prepared myself by disbelieving every one till it has been contradicted backwards and forwards two or three times'.[84] In his observations of London in 1689-90, Kirk described the London phenomenon of 'Py-corner News', a term used to describe 'fictions or improbable relations' spread about, such as that the keeper of Newgate sent out imprisoned highwaymen over night to continue their trade and that 'he (sharing snips with them) admitted them easily in the morning'.[85] Londoners were well aware of the limitations of such reports, and there must have been a real temptation to place greater reliance on the apparent authority of the increasingly accessible printed literature of crime. We have seen that Lapthorne wanted to wait for the production of printed accounts before assessing oral reports about a dismembered corpse, dismissing the latter as 'the general tattle of the town'.[86] Walpole, while with typical scepticism questioning the validity of both, agreed. When retailing the story of a reported fraudster, he said he learned of it 'from that old maid, Common Fame, who outlies [even] the newspapers'.[87]

IV

---

[84] *Ibid.*, xxxiii, 115.
[85] Kirk, 'London in 1689-90', 496. 'Easily' may be a mistranscription of 'early'.
[86] *Portledge Papers*, 24-5.
[87] *Walpole Correspondence*, xxxii, 162.

Diaries and correspondence, therefore, suggest, in line with the moral panics model, that print, supplemented by oral reports, played a more powerful role in shaping attitudes towards crime than personal experience. But owing to its diverse content and reader scepticism the impact of print was variable, and often not as negative as the model suggests. These conclusions apply both to periods of panic and non-panic, and are also applicable when we examine the conclusions diarists and correspondents drew about the state of crime more generally. While the authors do express some significant anxieties, their concerns were intermixed with scepticism, humour, and lack of concern.

Some observers, particularly in the late seventeenth century, not only accepted the reality of the crime threat but linked it with broader political issues. When Roger Morrice noted in 1681, during the Exclusion Crisis, that there had been a number of horses stolen in London, he was concerned that there may have been a political motive.[88] John Evelyn, whose own experiences of crime were limited,[89] linked his crime reports in the years following the Revolution of 1688 to the emerging campaign for a reformation of manners: 'Horrible roberys, high-way men, & murders committed such as never was known in this nation since Christian[ity] reformed: Atheism, Dissensions, profaneness among all sorts: portending some signal judgement, if not amended'.[90] But with the expansion of newspapers in the 1720s, crime became perceived as a distinct social problem (as opposed to an aspect of religious and political disorder). General comments associating the state of crime with wider issues

---

[88] *The Entring Book of Roger Morrice, 1677-1691*, 6 vols., ed. Mark Goldie (Woodbridge, 2007), ii, 271.
[89] The only crimes committed on Evelyn and his acquaintances over forty-six years were two break-ins (one unsuccessful), two thefts from his coach house, the robbery of his footman, and the murder of Dr Clench in 1692: *Diary of John Evelyn*, iii, 265, 352, 378; iv, 72, 259; v. 583.
[90] *Diary of John Evelyn*, v, 366. See also, *Portledge Papers,* 98-9.

became uncommon, and diary entries concentrated almost entirely on the state of crime itself. On the 29th of February 1728 Byrom recorded a robbery in St Paul's churchyard 'and many other street robberies committed of late, very many'.[91] We have seen that Savile, whose experiences of crime were also few and far between,[92] noted 'much robbing in the streets' during crime panics, though during the post-war panic which started in 1748 she wrote nothing until crime reporting in the papers peaked in December 1750, when she commented that 'never were so many, so bold, and such various kinds of robberys [sic] as this winter, as indeed 'tis observ'd they increase every year'.[93] While these diarists appear to have succumbed in some degree to moral panic, in the second half of the century diarists appear to have lost interest in crimes which did not affect their immediate families or acquaintances, and only one observer, Walpole (as we have seen, a regular newspaper reader), repeatedly reported on the general state of crime. At regular intervals in the more than half a century covered by his correspondence he notes the prevalence of highwaymen, footpads, and housebreakers, often tying his comments to a particular incident affecting someone he knew. During the same crime wave which prompted Savile's comment in 1750, Walpole wrote with typical exaggeration in a letter to Horace Mann:

> You will hear little news from England, but of robberies; the numbers of disbanded
> soldiers and sailors have all taken to the road, or rather to the street: people are almost
> afraid of stirring after it is dark. My Lady Albemarle was robbed t'other night in
> Great Russel [sic] Street by nine men ...[94]

---

[91] *The Private Journal and Literary Remains of John Byrom,* i, pt. 1, p. 296.
[92] In nineteen years, Savile suffered only some thefts by her servants, and a friend had some linen stolen from her house: *Diaries of Gertrude Savile*, 97, 179, 304, 316.
[93] *Ibid.*, 156, 294; Ward, *Print Culture*, 65-7.
[94] *Walpole Correspondence*, xx, 111. Mann, who was in Florence, found this report 'terrifying': xx, 120.

But fears of crime were not pervasive; some diarists showed no concern. Not only did William Byrd fail to comment on the crime wave which followed the Hanoverian accession, but he frequently travelled through the city late at night, on foot or in a chair, and occasionally sought out street prostitutes, without expressing any concerns for his safety, beyond worries that he might become infected with venereal disease.[95] Some appear to have tempted fate by deliberately putting themselves at risk in what appears to be a direct challenge to the narrative of danger presented in some printed literature. During the crisis of the early 1780s, Sylas Neville deliberately 'mix[ed] with highwaymen, footpads, and thieves of all denominations' at a bear-baiting, and Samuel Curwen reports twice that he took a walk through some of London's most disreputable streets, including 'Blackboy Alley, Chick Lane, Cow Cross, Hockley in the Hole, Mutton Lane, Great Saffron Hill, and Field Lane. Within each is the habitation of the most abandoned, profligate, lewd, dirty of the human species'.[96] Others chose not to act when they became victims of crime. When the highway robber Maclaine was apprehended in 1750 during the post-war prosecution wave, Walpole, one of his victims, refused to testify against him; he reported that he was 'honorably mentioned in a grub ballad for not having contributed to his sentence'.[97]

While diaries contain some clear evidence of anxiety about crime, they also reveal that Londoners interrogated their anxieties and attempted to defuse them. Perhaps reflecting the non-conformist impetus to examine their beliefs and feelings, diarists not only reported their

---

[95] *The London Diary* [of William Byrd] *(1717-1721) and Other Writings*, ed. Louis B. Wright and Marion Tinling (New York, 1958), *passim*.
[96] *The Diary of Sylas Neville*, 299; *The Journal of Samuel Curwen*, 941-3.
[97] *Walpole Correspondence*, xx, 188.

fears and concerns, but also analysed them.[98] In September 1715 Ryder's family home in

Hackney was robbed 'of some of our pewter and other things below-stairs of no great value'

when he was not there, and over the next thirteen months he recorded three times having slept

uneasily owing to worries that thieves might break in. Yet Ryder was dismissive of his own

fears, attributing them in one case 'to my eating pretty heartily last night of a turkey and

drinking'.[99]

    Others used humour to make light of their experiences as victims and of other people's

fears. Byrom, an expert in shorthand who was robbed while travelling in a coach from

London to Cambridge in 1728, subsequently published a poetic account of the experience,

celebrating his and the coachman's resistance (which had, in fact, not happened) and the

power of his shorthand hand in driving away the thieves.[100] While socializing with elite

company in Richmond and planning the trip back to London in 1786, a time of heightened

concern about violent crime, Sophie von La Roche notes that:

> Some wanted to put one of the Countess's gloves into somebody's bag, and to send a
>
> rider after it to hold up the coach as highwayman [sic], and, when the first shock was
>
> past, he was merely to demand the glove; this idea appealed to most as a very
>
> humorous one, for the wine had swept them far from all clarity, but the sober-minded
>
> Count and his wife would not consent to it.

---

[98] Robert Shoemaker, 'Fear of Crime in Eighteenth-Century London', in Michael Champion and Andrew Lynch (eds.), *Understanding Emotions in Early Europe* (Turnhout, Belgium, 2015), 233-49.
[99] *Diary of Dudley Ryder*, 95-6, 349.
[100] *The Private Journal and Literary Remains of John Byrom,* i, pt. 1, p. 288; Byrom, *Full and True Account*, 7.

In this and other cases, humour appears to have been used to disarm anxieties: the gentlemen at this lunch were conscious of the dangers of returning to London in the evening, and waited until 11 o'clock 'as at this hour the high road is far less dangerous than at six, nine or ten o'clock'.[101] In contrast, Walpole's solution to the problem of sending his Strawberry Hill visitors back to London was humorously to suggest that they travel by hot air balloon.[102]

Londoners responded to both their own experiences as victims and the more frequent oral and printed reports of crime they encountered with a variety of emotions. As a result, the attempts by some writers to make their readers anxious about crime had a mixed response.

V

Theories of moral panic are based on the presumption that public attitudes towards crime are shaped more by printed literature than by actual experiences of crime, and this is confirmed by the evidence presented here. But they also presume that public opinion, as shaped by the media and expressed at these specific moments of concern, was undivided about the nature and significance of the crime problem, and what should be done about it. In this respect the eighteenth-century evidence suggests otherwise; not only were printed representations of crime diverse, but the sample of diaries and correspondence examined here suggests so were reader responses. As Christian Huck has observed with respect to the portrayal of fashion in the eighteenth-century media, there could be no uniform response

---

[101] *Sophie in London 1786, being the Diary of Sophie v. la Roche*, trans. Clare Williams (London, 1933), 214.
[102] *Walpole Correspondence*, xlii, 109.

because 'people react in different ways', owing to the fact that 'the background reality is not the same for every reader, as it is determined by their choice of reading material, their needs and interests, their economic means and hermeneutical skills, other forms of knowledge and so on'.[103] Because attitudes were shaped by such a complex combination of printed representations, oral discussions, and personal experiences, all reflected through the prism of individual personalities, ideas about crime in eighteenth-century London were very personal, and thus diverse and contradictory. In this context, it should be noted that owing to the fact that the judicial system was characterised by the widespread exercise of discretion, Londoners did have some ability to influence responses to crime. Although most people could not shape judicial policy and statutes (or even local policy), they possessed some control over whether, and how, crimes were prosecuted (as evident in Walpole's refusal to participate in the prosecution of Maclaine) and they could lobby for pardons for those sentenced to death or transportation. This is one reason why, Randall McGowen suggests, 'not everyone endorsed the resort to severe measures'.[104]

Neither individual experiences of crime, nor print culture, created sufficient pressure to provoke strong support for changes in criminal justice policy. While short term shifts in prosecution and sentencing strategies did occur, demonstrating that printed representations of threats did affect some readers and law enforcement officials,[105] responses were varied and the pressure for more substantial change was weak. The policy changes which did occur (and

---

[103] Christian Huck, 'The Public Sphere, Mass Media, Fashion and the Identity of the Individual', in Anja Müller and Isabel Karremann (eds.), *Mediating Identities in Eighteenth-Century England: Public Negotiations, Literary Discourses, Topography* (Farnham, 2011), 130.

[104] Randall McGowen, 'The Problem of Punishment in Eighteenth-Century England', in Devereaux and Griffiths (eds.), *Penal Practice and Culture,* 226, quote at 214.

[105] See, for example, the change in the pardoning policy proclaimed by the king in September 1782: Lemmings, *Law and Government*, 89.

the record is mixed) resulted not from public opinion but from pressures brought by law-enforcement officials (who were themselves no doubt influenced by print—a topic for further study), in negotiation with ministers in Westminster.[106] Given the nature of eighteenth-century print culture, the composition of public opinion, and the way judicial policy was formulated, it was actually quite difficult to construct a moral panic with significant impact. The importance of eighteenth-century public opinion about crime lies less in its impact on judicial policy than in what it tells us about how the public engaged with a system of criminal justice which continued to be characterized to such a significant extent by discretion. Showing some degree of tolerance, and subjecting their emotional responses to self-examination, victims and witnesses continued to treat accused criminals on an individual basis, choosing to resolve the vast majority of accusations informally, even during times of panic.[107] In contrast to the mid-nineteenth-century idea of a 'criminal class', the diarists and correspondents discussed in this article did not conceive of crime as a fixed category, or criminals as an entirely separate group. Consequently, there is little evidence that they pressed for wider changes in policy.

At a time when, as David Lemmings has noted and diary and correspondence confirms, public participation in the 'theatre' of criminal justice through witnessing punishments and observing trials was declining, this disconnect between the public and official justice had significant consequences. It contributed, in his terms, to the transition from government by 'consent' to 'command', a key aspect of which was another disconnect: an increasing socio-

---

[106] Beattie, *Policing and Punishment*; Simon Devereaux, 'The Making of the Penitentiary Act, 1775-1779', *Historical Journal*, xlii (1999), 405-33; Simon Devereaux, 'In Place of Death: Transportation, Penal Practices, and the English State, 1770-1830', in C. Strange (ed.), *Qualities of Mercy: Justice, Punishment and Discretion* (Vancouver, 1996), 52-76; Simon Devereaux, 'Recasting the Theatre of Execution: The Abolition of the Tyburn Ritual', *Past and Present*, ccii (2009), 127-74.
[107] King, *Crime, Justice and Discretion*, ch. 2.

cultural divide between a bourgeois culture of respectability and 'the perceived moral failings of the common people'.[108] It is likely that this change, which was reflected in print culture, led to a homogenization of representations and a decline of individualized responses to crime. From the 1770s some genres of the literature of crime declined: the *Ordinary's Accounts* ceased publication, criminal biographies became less popular, and the *Old Bailey Proceedings* lost readership to the newspapers and addressed an increasingly narrow audience of lawyers and officials. While forms of cheap print including ballads and execution broadsides attracted an expanding lower class audience into the next century, those genres of the literature which were dependent on middle-class readership 'had become subjected to a process of taming …. [T]he deeds of criminals were now regarded by the respectable as inappropriate subjects for literature'. [109] For the middle class, these were replaced to some extent by the 'increasingly moralistic' *Newgate Calendar*. But newspapers increasingly dominated the print consumed by these readers, and from the late eighteenth century they presented a more consistently negative view of crime, as they 'tended to focus selectively on the more violent and frightening types of offences'.[110] These changes arguably facilitated the widespread adoption of the idea that the most dangerous crimes were attributable to an identifiably separate 'criminal class'.[111] In sharp contrast, both printed literature and attitudes towards crime in the eighteenth century were remarkably diverse, as despite the power of discourses of victimisation, Londoners adopted individualized approaches to crime and often resisted the efforts of 'moral entrepreneurs' to induce anxiety.

---

[108] Lemmings, *Law and Government*, 180.

[109] Rosalind Crone, *Violent Victorians: Popular Entertainment in Nineteenth-Century London* (Manchester, 2012), 77-8; Gatrell, *Hanging Tree*, 113-14.

[110] King, 'Newspaper Reporting', 74, quote from 103; Shoemaker, 'Print Culture', 18.

[111] Barry S. Godfrey, David. J. Cox and Stephen D. Farrall, *Serious Offenders: A Historical Study of Habitual Criminals* (Oxford, 2010), 10-13.