

The Effects of the Great War on Crime in West Sussex



Petworth Prison c1819

Image from West Sussex Past (www.westsussexpast.org.uk) PP/WSL/E000031

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Description

The aim of the project was to examine how the conditions created by the Great War affected the level and nature of crime being prosecuted within West Sussex. It looked at crime statistics over three five-year periods; 1909-1913, 1914-1918 and 1919-1923. These periods will be referred to in the text as the pre-war period, the war years, and the post-war period respectively. The pre-war data acts as a baseline against which the effect of changes during the war years and the post-war period can be measured.

Thesis

The research sought to test two ideas:

1. That the level of crime would drop during the war years due to the removal of large numbers of young men from the general population. Young men being more likely to commit criminal acts than other sections of society.
2. That crimes of violence would increase in the post-war years due to the exposure to sudden death and traumatic injury during the preceding period.

Constraints

There were initially two constraints upon the project, the survival of crime data for the relevant period and the time available for the project. The latter had two aspects, the time allowed by the overall project and the personal availability of the researcher. On the data front, there was good survival of Quarter Sessions records for the courts sitting within West Sussex, although the amount of supporting material declined after 1914.

A further constraint became apparent once the project began, which was the small number of cases reaching the Quarter Session level. This makes the differences between periods small in number and therefore statistically less robust than they might otherwise have been. Nevertheless, there are some noticeable trends.

Method

The statistics used in the study were collated from data held in the QR/W series of documents which are lodged with West Sussex Record Office in Chichester. A full list of documents used is given at the end of this report. The particular piece of data used in each case was the court calendar, which details the defendants, charges, result and sentences.

Results

1. Demography.

Number of Defendants by Gender					
	Male		Female		Total
	No.	%age	No.	%age	
1909-1913	122	89	15	11	137
1914-1918	48	81	11	19	59
1919-1923	83	89	10	11	93

The number of crimes tried at the Quarter Sessions shows a distinct drop during the war years, with less than half the number of defendants between 1914-18 as there were between 1909-13. In the second quarter of 1916 there appear to have been no crimes tried at all, and only one defendant appeared in the preceding quarter. It is of note that the number of defendants in the post-war period, while higher than that of the war years, fails to return to the pre-war level.

As expected, the percentage of male and female defendants changed during the war years when large numbers of young men were removed from society. Despite the transfer of young men overseas, 15 of the 48 male defendants during this period were identified as soldiers, and a further three as seamen, showing that some crime did occur when the men were home on leave.

Once the war was over, and despite the overall drop in number of defendants, the proportion of male to female accused returned exactly to its pre-war level.

Number of Defendants by Age								
	<16	16-24	25-34	35-49	50-64	65+	NG	Total
1909-13	1	46	34	36	14	4	2	137
1914-18	0	22	9	13	7	1	7	59
1919-23	1	39	13	19	12	4	5	93

It is more difficult to gauge the effect of the war on the age of the defendants, partly due to the small size of the data and partly due to a high proportion of cases during the war years where no age was supplied.

%age of Defendants by Age							
	<16	16-24	25-34	35-49	50-64	65+	Total
1909-13	1	34	25	27	10	3	100
1914-18	0	42.5	17	25	13.5	2	100
1919-23	1	44	15	21.5	14	4.5	100

If we remove the cases where no age is given from the statistics and examine the percentages, we get a clearer picture. The percentage of defendants aged between 25 and 49 decreases during the war years, and decreases further in the post-war period, with a consequent increase in defendants in the other age groups. The post-war increase in the over

65's is probably statistically insignificant, given the already small sample. The increase in the 16-24 age group, however, is likely to represent those too young to have been actively affected by the war and who therefore form a larger proportion of the population than would otherwise have been the case.

	Alias		Record		Remand		Total
	No.	%age	No.	%age	No	%age	
1909-1913	22	16	53	38.5	32	23	137
1914-1918	8	13.5	24	40.5	19	32	59
1919-1923	21	22.5	57	61	21	22.5	93

I have also looked at numbers of defendants who used an alias or had a known record, on the assumption that these people are more likely to have been habitual criminals. In the post-war period the percentage of defendants with an alias or known record increases compared to the two previous periods. This suggests there was either less appetite for crime in the general population during those periods, or less need for it, since the pre-war attitude to poverty was quite punitive.

Lastly, the numbers being placed on remand is greatest during the war years. Since remand was used for those defendants who were thought likely to abscond, it may have been felt that the war time conditions gave greater opportunity for a felon to disappear, but the evidence isn't available.

2. Crimes

%age of Crimes by Type													
	Stealing	Break & Enter	Att. Suicide	Receiving	Embezzlement	Assault	Criminal Damage	Fraud	Sexual Offences	Neglect	War Related	Other	Total
1909-1913	39	21	8	3	4	4.5	4	9	5	2	N/A	0	100
1914-1918	44	19	7	4.5	0	1.5	1.5	6	7.5	1.5	6	1.5	100
1919-1923	38	33	2	7	0	2	1	14	0	1	N/A	2	100

The thesis that crimes of violence would increase during the post-war period is not borne out by the statistics. In fact, cases of assault and criminal damage actually drop quite dramatically. Crimes of a sexual nature drop to zero in the post-war period, but are at their highest during the war years. The biggest change is in the number of attempted suicides, which run at 7-8% during the pre-war period and war years, but drop to 2% in the post-war period. This suggests that the experience of war has made people place more value on their own lives.

Number of Crimes by Type													
	Stealing	Break & Enter	Att. Suicide	Receiving	Embezzlement	Assault	Criminal Damage	Fraud	Sexual Offences	Neglect	War Related	Other	Total
1909-1913	61	33	13	4	6	7	6	14	8	3	N/A	0	155
1914-1918	30	13	5	3	0	1	1	4	5	1	4	1	68
1919-1923	44	38	3	8	0	2	1	16	0	1	N/A	3	116

One other thing to note is the creation of crimes specific to the war years. There was one case of a person classed as an enemy alien being found in West Sussex without the proper authority. The man claimed to be visiting a friend, but he had not obtained the papers necessary to enable him to move about an area that was considered sensitive due to places such as Portsmouth where there was a naval base. A second case involved a woman who was charged with three counts of aiding a deserter.

3. Verdicts

	Guilty Plea		Guilty Verdict		Not Guilty Verdict		Total
	No.	%age	No.	%age	No.	%age	
1909-1913	79	56.5	31	22	30	21.5	140
1914-1918	25	50	12	24	13	26	50
1919-1923	63	64	17	17.5	18	18.5	98

The most noticeable thing about these figures is the increase in guilty pleas in the post-war period. This increase needs to be considered along with the sentencing and will be tackled below. However, the decrease in guilty and not guilty verdicts is about the same during this period, which suggests half of those who pleaded guilty might not have been found so.

4. Sentences

	Prison		Hard Labour		Bound Over		Borstal		Dismissed		Total
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	
1909-1913	8	6	59	42	34	24	8	6	31	22	140
1914-1918	2	4	20	40	12	24	2	4	14	28	50
1919-1923	4	5	38	39	21	21.5	16	16	18	18.5	98

The number of cases dismissed during each of the three periods closely follows the number of not guilty verdicts, with only one or two guilty verdicts being dismissed outright. All other sentences are statistically commensurate across the periods, apart from those being sent to borstal. This type of punishment was given exclusively to young men and the aim

was a gentler form of reformation than that provided by hard labour. The big increase in this type of sentence during the post-war period seems to match the increase in guilty pleas, which suggests certain young men were being offered the chance of avoiding the harshest sentences if they admitted their crimes. It is tempting to consider that this leniency, compared to pre-war attitudes, was influenced by the numbers of young men who died fighting for their country in the preceding years.

Conclusion

The thesis that crime numbers would drop during the war years is validated by the figures. The increased proportion of female to male defendants clearly shows it was the removal of men from the population that was responsible. The continuing depression of the figures during the post-war period is more likely to be due to the loss of life amongst the relevant section of the population than to a sudden increase in honesty.

The thesis of an increase in violent crime was disproved and a slight effect in the opposite direction was noted, as was a fairly dramatic drop in the number of people attempting to kill themselves. It would seem that the experience of the Great War led to a rejection of violence rather than an embrace of it. This may also have influenced the attitude towards young offenders, with the first stirrings of a move away from harsh sentencing choices such as hard labour.

Sources

Quarter Sessions Rolls (held at WSCC Record Office, Chichester)

For pre-war period:

1909 (Q2-Q4)	QR/W1073 – QR/W1075
1910 (Q1-Q4)	QR/W1076 – QR/W1079
1911 (Q1-Q4)	QR/W1080 – QR/W1083
1912 (Q1-Q4)	QR/W1084 – QR/W1087
1913 (Q1-Q4)	QR/W1088 – QR/W1091
1914 (Q1)	QR/W1092

For war years:

1914 (Q2-Q4)	QR/W1093 – QR/W1095
1915 (Q1-Q4)	QR/W1096 – QR/W1099
1916 (Q1-Q4)	QR/W1100 – QR/W1103
1917 (Q1-Q4)	QR/W1104 – QR/W1107
1918 (Q1-Q4)	QR/W1108 – QR/W1111
1919 (Q1)	QR/W1112

For post-war period:

1919 (Q2-Q4)	QR/W1113 – QR/W1115
1920 (Q1-Q4)	QR/W1116 – QR/W1119

1921 (Q1-Q4)	QR/W1120 – QR/W1123
1922 (Q1-Q4)	QR/W1124 – QR/W1127
1923 (Q1-Q4)	QR/W1128 – QR/W1131
1924 (Q1)	QR/W1132

Note:

The first Quarter Session in every year occurs in January and tries cases that mainly occurred in the last three months of the previous year. Hence the need to omit the first Q1 session of 1909 (which would contain 1908 figures) and include the first Q1 session of each period in the preceding one.