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This book started out with ‘mugging’, but it has ended in a different place – as the discerning reader who notes the transition from the sub-title to the main title will already have noticed. At any rate it is not about ‘mugging’ in the sense most readers might expect. Indeed, if we could abolish the word, that would have been our principal – perhaps our only – ‘practical proposal’. It has done incalculable harm – raising the wrong things into sensational focus, hiding and mystifying the deeper causes. A moratorium should now be declared on its highly suspect use, especially by politicians, judges, the police, criminal statisticians, the mass media and our moral guardians. Unfortunately you cannot resolve a social contradiction by abolishing the label that has been attached to it. This book aims to go behind the label to the contradictory social content which is mystifyingly reflected in it: but it is not a book about why certain individuals, as individuals, turn to mugging; nor about what practical steps can be taken to control or reduce its incidence; nor about how awful a crime ‘mugging’ is. It is not a case study, a practical manual nor a cry of moral outrage. Nor does it simply reverse the terms of reference – it is not an ‘appreciative’ study of how exciting or revolutionary ‘mugging’ is, either. Some of those books remain to be written – though not all ought to be. But we started somewhere else, developed a different conception of the relation of ‘mugging’ to British society, and have consequently produced a different kind of book. We put it that way specifically to counter the view that the way books about ‘social problems’ are written is that investigators simply walk into the streets, their heads utterly void of any preconceptions about crime or society, look the ‘empirical facts’ in the face, and write about whatever ‘problem’ happens to sneak up behind them and hit them over the head with its presence. This is not a book like that. We doubt whether books of that order of innocence can be written about society – though there are plenty enough currently masquerading in that guise.

We are concerned with ‘mugging’ – but as a social phenomenon, rather than as a particular form of street crime. We want to know what the social causes of ‘mugging’ are. But we argue that this is only half – less than half – of the ‘mugging’ story. More important is why British society reacts to mugging, in the extreme way it does, at that precise historical conjuncture – the early 1970s. If it is true that muggers suddenly appear on British streets – a fact which, in that stark simplicity, we contest – it is also true that the society enters a moral panic about ‘mugging’. And this relates to the larger ‘panic’ about the ‘steadily rising rate of violent crime’ which has been growing through the 1960s. And both these panics are about other things than crime, per se. The society comes to perceive crime in general, and ‘mugging’ in particular, as an index of the disintegration of the social order, as a sign that the ‘British way of life’ is coming apart at the seams. So the book is also about a society which is slipping into a certain kind of crisis. It tries to examine why and how the themes of race, crime and youth – condensed
into the image of ‘mugging’ – come to serve as the articulator of the crisis, as its ideological conductor. It is also about how these themes have functioned as a mechanism for the construction of an authoritarian consensus, a conservative backlash: what we call the slow build-up towards a ‘soft’ law-and-order society. But it also has to ask: to what social contradictions does this trend towards the ‘disciplined society’ – powered by the fears mobilised around ‘mugging’ – really refer? How has the ‘law-and-order’ ideology been constructed? What social forces are constrained and contained by its construction? What forces stand to benefit from it? What role has the state played in its construction? What real fears and anxieties is it mobilising? These are some of the things we mean by ‘mugging’ as a social phenomenon. It is why a study of ‘mugging’ has led us inevitably to the general ‘crisis of hegemony’ in the Britain of the 1970s. This is the ground taken in this book. Those who reject the logic of our argument must contest us on this ground.

We came to redefine ‘mugging’ in this way because of how the book began, and how it developed. Until we started the study, crime was not a special field of interest to us. We became involved in a practical way when, in 1973, sentences of ten and twenty years were handed down in court to three boys of mixed ethnic background after a serious incident in Handsworth, Birmingham, in which a man on the way home from a pub was ‘mugged’ on a piece of waste ground, robbed and badly injured. The sentences seemed to us unnecessarily vicious; but also – in terms of the causes which produced this incident – pointless, dealing with effects, not causes. But we also wanted to do what the courts had signally failed to do: understand a problem which awoke contradictory feelings in us – outrage at the sentence, sorrow for the needless victim, sympathy for the boys caught in a fate they did not make, perplexity at the conditions producing all this. In one sense only, this starting-point proved propitious, for if you enter the ‘mugging’ problem with the Handsworth case, it is impossible to fall into the trap of thinking that ‘mugging’ is simply a term for what some poor boys do to some poor victims in the poor areas of our large cities. ‘Handsworth’ was, clearly, also an exemplary sentence – a sentence intended to have a social as well as a punitive impact; it was, also, the fears and anxieties which the sentence aimed at allaying. It was the massive press coverage, the reactions of local people, experts and commentators, the prophecies of doom which accompanied it, the mobilisation of the police against certain sectors of the population in the ‘mugging’ areas. All this was the ‘Handsworth mugging’. Once you perceive ‘mugging’ not as a fact but as a relation – the relation between crime and the reaction to crime – the conventional wisdoms about ‘mugging’ fall apart in your hands. If you look at this relation in terms of the social forces and the contradictions accumulating within it (rather than simply in terms of the danger to ordinary folks), or in terms of the wider historical context in which it occurs (i.e. in terms of a historical conjuncture, not just a date on the calendar), the whole terrain of the problem changes in character. The pattern of crime, but also the nature of the social reaction, has a pre-history; conditions of existence, strikingly absent from all the publicity concentrated on the single incident. Both have a location in institutional processes and structures, apparently far away from the ‘scene of the crime’. What is more, nobody is really looking at these determining conditions. Crime has been cut adrift from its
social roots. Something is standing in the way of these ‘conditions of existence’ being treated as part of the phenomenon. And part of what is standing in the way – producing crime, so to speak, as a simple and transparent fact – is the label ‘mugging’ itself. It cannot be allowed to stand in all its common-sense immediacy. It has to be dismantled: dismantled in terms of its wider relations to these contradictory social forces. This is the route our investigations took. It is this path we have tried to reconstruct, to retrace, for the reader in the structure and argument of this book. That is why we start with ‘mugging’, but we end with the way the society is ‘policing its crisis’. If the reader can grasp this movement, he or she will not find it difficult to see how the structure of the book follows from it.

The book has been longer in preparation than its ultimate quality deserves: partly this is because it was written while other things – working, teaching, research – had to be done; but it is also because the book has been researched, written, argued over, revised, edited and lived with as a piece of collective work. In this it owes something to where it was done – in the Centre for Cultural Studies at Birmingham, which has devoted some thought and pain to making critical social research a more collaborative intellectual practice. The book reflects something of the rewards – and the costs – of doing it as a collective enterprise. We are aware of many limitations – above all, of the necessarily unfinished nature of some of the arguments and positions we have marshalled. But its faults should not be laid at the door of collective authorship. If it is a poor effort, it would have been poorer had it been written by a single hand.

Now we have been able to draw at least a temporary line under our efforts, we find it difficult to imagine whom the book we have written will positively please. We have settled for the hope that, if it cannot please, it may convince – which is more important. The courts, the police, the Home Office will certainly find it wildly exaggerated about their negative role (to put it nicely), and inexcusably ‘soft’ on criminals, agitators and trouble-makers. The media will say it is biased. Academics will find it too unbalanced, too committed. Liberals, people of goodwill, active in the cause of penal reform or improving race relations, will like it at least of all – perhaps because they will approach it with more positive expectations. The lack of balance will worry them, the critique of reformism will seem churlish and sectarian, and the absence of practical solutions irresponsible. Perhaps the great majority of our readers will be worried, especially, on the last count: analysis is all very well – but where are the remedies, the practical reforms?

As to this last charge, we confess to have had our hearts hardened by what we have discovered. It is a widespread but fatal trap – precisely, a trap of ‘liberal opinion’ – to split analysis from action, and to assign the first to the instance of the ‘long term’, which never comes, and reserve only the second to ‘what is practical and realistic in the short term’. In direct opposition to this most ‘British’ of logics, we have determined to be ‘unrealistic’ in the short term, in the hope that we might persuade some people to grasp the nettle of what has to be done to be ‘right’ in the end. So, if someone says to us: ‘Yes, but given the present conditions, what are we to do now?’, we can only reply ‘Do something about the “present conditions”’. Oscar Wilde once said that it is an outrage for reformers to spend time asking what can be done to ease the lot of the poor, or to make the
poor bear their conditions with greater dignity, when the only remedy is to abolish the condition of poverty itself.

The problem is that the ‘present conditions’, which make the poor poor (or the criminal take to crime) are precisely the same conditions which make the rich rich (or allow the law-abiding to imagine that the social causes of crime will disappear if you punish individual criminals hard enough). There is something deeply ‘British’ about our ability to abstract individual effects from the contradictory structures which produce them. So the ‘practical remedy’ involves taking sides – struggling with the contradictions. This book may be disappointing to some people who know this hard truth, and who are already engaged in the struggle to change the structures and conditions which produce the effects analysed in this book. We greatly regret not feeling ourselves competent to take the argument further along this road. We hope, however, that what we have written may help to inform, deepen and strengthen their practical struggle. We hope they will read it as we have tried to write it: as an intervention – albeit an intervention in the battleground of ideas.
Part I
On 15 August 1972 an elderly widower, Mr Arthur Hills, was stabbed to death near Waterloo Station as he was returning home from a visit to the theatre. The motive was, apparently, robbery. Although the event occurred too late for the following morning’s papers, the national press reported it on 17 August. They labelled it – borrowing a description proffered by a police officer – ‘a mugging gone wrong’. Thus the word ‘mugging’, hitherto used almost exclusively in an American context, or to refer in very general terms to the general growth of crime in Britain, was affixed to a particular case, and entered the crime reporter’s vocabulary. Some reporters seemed to think the ‘new’ word also heralded the coming of a new crime. All these notions were neatly encapsulated in the Daily Mirror headline of 17 August: ‘As Crimes of Violence Escalate, a Word Common In The United States Enters the British Headlines: Mugging. To our Police, it’s a frightening new strain of crime.’

The Daily Mirror offered a further development of this theme. It described the event itself, provided a definition of the word, and added supporting statistical information about ‘mugging’ and the escalation in crimes of violence. Since there had been no eye witnesses to the event, the description of what happened must have been imaginatively reconstructed by the reporters. Apparently, they said, Mr Hills was attacked by three young men in their early twenties. They attempted to rob him, but he fought back only to be stabbed in the ensuing struggle. So far as definitions were concerned, the paper commented that the word was American and derived from such phrases as ‘attacking a mug: an easy victim’. American police, the Mirror added, ‘describe it as an assault by crushing the victim’s head or throat in an armlock or to rob with any degree of force, with or without weapons’. Then followed the statistics: (1) an increase in muggings in the United States by 229 per cent in ten years; and (2) the reporting of about 150 ‘muggings’ a year, during the previous three years, on the London underground. The Mirror spelled out the implications of these statistics: ‘slowly mugging is coming to Britain’.

Was ‘mugging’ a new strain of crime? The question is not as simple as it appears. In an article in The Times a few weeks later (20 October 1972) Louis Blom-Cooper, Q.C. expressed the view that ‘There is nothing new in this world:
and mugging, apart from its omission from the Oxford English Dictionary, is not a new phenomenon. Little more than 100 years ago there occurred in the streets of London an outcrop of robbery with violence. It was called “garrotting”, which was an attempt to choke or strangle the victim of a robbery. (Mugging differs from garrotting only in its use of offensive weapons.) Blom-Cooper’s stress on the traditional nature of the crime seems to be the correct one; although his attempt to distinguish ‘mugging’ from ‘garrotting’ in terms of the use of offensive weapons does not square with the definition of mugging offered by the American police chief who said: ‘with or without weapons’. More significant than the question of weapons is what the American definition of ‘mugging’ shares with the British phenomenon of ‘garrotting’: both refer to ‘choking’, ‘strangling’, ‘an assault by crushing the victim’s head or throat in an armlock’. In the effort to get a clear definition of ‘mugging’, the British press referred to the United States, but the similarities suggest that when Americans first defined ‘mugging’ they had at least one eye on Britain.

In fact the more one looks at the historical parallels, the more striking are the similarities between a number of earlier crimes and mugging. Street crimes were of course a familiar part of the general pattern of urban crime throughout the nineteenth century. Well-off travellers passing through the lonely streets of London after dark sometimes had their luggage pinched off carts by skilful ‘dragsmen’. Solitary strangers might be subject to sudden attack and robbery by footpads, occasionally lured to their fate by an accomplice, a professional street-walker. Chesney reminds us of forms of robbery with violence, known variously as ‘propping’ or ‘swinging the stick’, practised by ‘rampsmen’. There were outbreaks of ‘garrotting’ in both Manchester and London in the 1850s, and the famous outbreak of ‘garrotting’ in London in 1862–3 triggered off a reaction of epidemic proportions. Even so, ‘garrotting’ itself was not new: ‘Chokee Bill, the rampsman who grabbed his prey by the neck, was already a well-established underworld type.’ It was the boldness and brutality of the ‘garrotting’ attacks in the summer of 1862, however, which triggered off a new alarm. What is striking, in terms of the parallel with ‘mugging’, is not just the sudden rash of garrotting cases but the nature and character of the public response. The Cornhill Magazine stated, in 1863, in terms which could have been transposed, without a single change, to 1972: ‘Once more the streets of London are unsafe by day or night. The public dread has almost become a panic’. The outbreak in London was followed by reports of similar events in Lancashire, Yorkshire, Nottingham, Chester: ‘Credulity became a social obligation’ as ‘the garrotters, lurking in the shadow of the wall, quickening step behind one on the lonely footpath, became something like a national bogey ... Men of coarse appearance but blameless intentions were attacked ... under suspicion of being garrotters.’ Anti-garrotting societies flourished. Then the reaction began. More people were hanged in 1863 ‘than in any year since the end of the bloody code’; in July, when the epidemic had ebbed somewhat, the Garrotting Act was passed, providing for flogging of offenders. Several of these punishments were in fact brutally administered. Finally, the epidemic began to die away as mysteriously as it had appeared; and, though the Act and the extremity of the punishments may have had something to do with its decline, Chesney remarks
that this ‘remains an open question.... The real significance of the garrotting scare is that the excitement and publicity it provoked made citizens readier to accept the need (and expense) of efficient, nation wide law enforcement and so speeded the general improvement of public order.’

Before the ‘mugging’ label took its own kind of stranglehold on the public and official imagination, the police themselves seemed alert to the traditional nature of the crime concealed behind its many labels. The Metropolitan Police Commissioner, in his Annual Report of 1964, commenting on the 30 per cent increase in ‘robberies or assaults with intent to rob’, explicitly referred to the fact that ‘London has always been the scene of robberies from further back than the days of highwaymen and footpads.’ Were the rising numbers of robberies in 1964 the same as (or different from) ‘garrotting’ in the 1860s and ‘mugging’ in the 1970s? In Britain, there has always been a legal distinction between ‘robbery’ and ‘larceny from the person’: and the distinction turns on the fact that, in robbery, an individual is deprived of his property, in a face-to-face situation, by force or threat of force. ‘Larceny from the person’, in the period before the Theft Act of 1968, was defined as ‘Pickpocketing’ or ‘stealing from shopping baskets’, i.e. a situation involving stealth, not force or threats. Even after the Theft Act, when larcenies were reclassified, robbery remained as a separate category, a ‘major’ offence because of the use or threat of force to deprive another of his property. Though, at the height of the ‘mugging’ scare, the police lost their sense of history, it is worth recalling that, to the end, no legal category of ‘mugging’ as a crime exists (though the Metropolitan Police Commissioner was able, in his 1972 Annual Report, to reconstruct statistics for its incidence back to 1968). The Home Secretary did, indeed, offer his own definition for clarity’s sake (thereby tacitly admitting the ambiguity of the situation) when he asked police chiefs to collect statistics for the incidence of ‘muggings’, but it never achieved proper legal status. ‘Muggings’ were in fact always charged as ‘robberies’ or ‘assaults with intent to rob’, or other similar and conventional charges.

It is important to remember that, though the Metropolitan Police Commissioner did not have the convenient label, ‘mugging’, to hand when he drafted his 1964 Annual Report, something out of the ordinary had indeed alerted him to this area of crime and called out his comment on its historical antecedents. What disturbed the Commissioner was the fact that in 1964 many more young people, often ‘without records’ – i.e. unknown to the police – were taking to robberies of this kind. Further, the Commissioner remarked, this trend was accompanied by an increasing tendency to resort to violence – a fact not borne out by his own statistics, which he admitted to finding puzzling. It was this coupling of young offenders and crime which had triggered his concern.

When, in 1972, Robert Carr, the Home Secretary, requested more statistical information from his police chiefs on the new wave of ‘muggings’, a senior county police officer of the Southampton force, in reply, once again remarked on the conventional nature of the crime to which the new title had been attached. He said he found it ‘very difficult to differentiate mugging with [sic] the old traditional crime of a seaman getting “rolled”’. Interestingly, in the most publicised British ‘mugging’ case of all – that of the three Handsworth boys in March
1973 – the accused spoke of their intention, not to ‘mug’ but to ‘roll’ their drunk victim. As the ‘mugging’ scare progressed, the press, which had seized on its novelty, gradually began to rediscover the historical antecedents. In response to the Handsworth case, the *Daily Mail* editorial of 20 March 1973 lifted the crime altogether outside of history and deposited it in the realms of Nature: ‘a crime as old as sin itself’.

The fact is that it is extremely difficult to discover exactly what was new in ‘mugging’ – except the label itself. The matter is of the greatest significance for our enquiry. Let us compare the ‘mugging’ of Mr Hills with the following incidents. A Conservative M.P. is assaulted and kicked in the face and ribs in Hyde Park by four youths. The attackers escape with £9 and a gold watch. Has the M.P. been ‘mugged’? The word ‘mugged’ was of course not used in this case. The date was 12 December 1968, the report from the *Daily Mirror*. Let us take a second example. In its report of the killing of Mr Hills – a ‘mugging gone wrong’ – the *Daily Telegraph* made a direct comparison with the street shooting and killing, four years earlier, of a Mr Shaw by two unemployed men in their early twenties. They chose Mr Shaw, the accused men had said, because they were in a ‘poor position’ and he was ‘well dressed’. The shot-gun they carried to threaten the victim accidentally went off. Although the prosecution accepted the plea that murder had not been intended, the judge gave the man who pulled the trigger ‘life’, his partner twelve years. Except for the choice of weapon the Shaw incident is identical with the Hills murder: amateur robbery, bungled, with unintended fatal consequences. The Shaw case, however, was not called a ‘mugging’. To all intents and purposes, it was not seen at the time as a ‘new strain of crime’. Perhaps it became a ‘new strain of crime’ when the *Daily Telegraph* resurrected it for comparison with the Hills case? Perhaps it was counted amongst the ‘rising mugging statistics’ when, in 1973, the Metropolitan Police produced for Mr Carr retrospective figures for ‘mugging’ going back to 1968? Was the Shaw case a ‘mugging’ in 1972 but not a ‘mugging’ in 1969? Just to make matters more complicated, the *Guardian* in 1969 quoted the two unfortunate attackers as saying that they had attempted ‘to roll’ Mr Shaw....

What evidence we have suggests that, though the label ‘mugging’, as applied in a British context, was new in August 1972, the crime it purported to describe was not. Its incidence may or may not have increased (we examine the statistical evidence in a moment). Its social content may have changed, but there is nothing to support the view that it was a ‘new strain of crime’. No doubt the press had some interest in stressing its ‘novelty’. No doubt the use of the term with reference to American experience may have fostered the belief that something quite new to Britain had turned up from across the Atlantic. It may have been only a coincidence that the police officer who called the Hills case a ‘mugging gone wrong’ had just returned from a study visit to the United States. Contingency, after all, does play a role in the unfolding of history, and we must allow for it. We will try to show, however, that the facts about the ‘mugging’ scare, like the ‘garrotting panic’ of 1862 and many other ‘great fears’ about crime and the ‘dangerous classes’ before that, are both less contingent and more significant than that.
A CHRONOLOGY

During the thirteen months between August 1972 and the end of August 1973, ‘mugging’ received a great deal of coverage in the press in the form of crime reports, features, editorials, statements by representatives of the police, judges, the Home Secretary, politicians and various prominent public spokesmen. Before looking at this coverage in detail we want to provide a brief chronological synopsis of how public concern with this crime developed throughout those thirteen months.

The labelling of the killing of Mr Hills as ‘a mugging gone wrong’ in August 1972 was followed by a brief lull. This calm before the storm was broken by massive press coverage during late September, October and early November. This period provided the ‘peak’ of press coverage, not only for 1972, but for the whole thirteen-month period. The feature which not only precipitated this, but also sustained much of the press commentary, was the use of ‘exemplary’ sentences. Almost without exception, young people charged with robberies involving some degree of force (not always referred to as ‘muggings’) were given ‘deterrent’ sentences. Three years’ imprisonment became the ‘norm’, even for teenage offenders. Traditional treatment centres for young offenders (i.e. Borstals and detention centres) were bypassed. The justifications for these severe sentences – and many judges admitted that they were unprecedented – were commonly made in the name of ‘the public interest’, or the need to ‘keep our streets safe’, or, more simply, to ‘deter’. Rehabilitation was a secondary consideration to the need to preserve public safety.

In short, the judiciary declared ‘war’ on the muggers. Editorials quickly followed. Most of these dealt with the question of the fairness of ‘exemplary’ sentences. This often led on to an examination of sentencing policy in general, where the considerations affecting such policy (deterrence, retribution, public safety and rehabilitation) were variously correlated, the arguments being conducted with varying degrees of skill and subtlety. All the editorials, in the final analysis, supported the judges. Statistics also appeared to vindicate both the judiciary and the editors, since reports of the criminal statistics in the period were all headlined in terms of the rise in violent crime, especially muggings.

Feature articles also appeared during this period, written either by staff reporters or freelance writers. These attempted to provide background information on ‘The making of a mugger’ or ‘Why they go out mugging’, to quote two examples. Most of these were factually well-informed and relatively informative, though the explanations they offered, with perhaps two notable exceptions, neither of which appeared in the national daily press, were less than convincing. One further exception, from a different perspective, was the feature article (already quoted) by Mr Louis Blom-Cooper, Q.C., the one lone ‘voice in the wilderness’ raised against a harsh reaction by the judiciary.

The police and the politicians took their lead from the Bench. In London the police instigated a ‘clean-up-the-Royal-Parks’ campaign designed to keep drug-users, prostitutes and muggers out of London’s parks. Local councils followed suit by setting up ‘high-speed, anti-mugging patrols, equipped with vehicles, walkie-talkie radios and sometimes guard dogs’ to replace conventional park-keepers.
Special squads were also set up by the police to ‘crackdown’ on mugging; patrols at London Transport underground stations were increased.\(^{12}\)

As early as 22 October 1972, the *Sunday Mirror* estimated that Britain was winning its ‘war’ against muggers; but this did not lead to any let-up. Four days later, the new Chief Inspector of Constabulary promised an all-out drive to stamp out ‘mugging’ and other violent crime; he spoke of ‘mugging’ as his ‘highest priority’.\(^{14}\) Six days later, the Home Secretary was reported as having written to all Chief Constables in England and Wales for details of recent muggings. His definition of mugging – ‘robberies by gangs of 2 or more youths on people walking alone in the open’ – was also made public at this time.\(^{15}\) This definition caused some immediate queries: terms like ‘youths’ and ‘in the open’ were, at the very least, ambiguous and the ‘gang’ notion seemed to rule out the possibility of an individual ‘mugger’.

The Duke of Edinburgh, addressing the Royal College of General Practitioners, referred to ‘mugging’ as a disease of the community, for which a cure had to be found.\(^{16}\) Throughout the rest of the year media coverage of ‘mugging’ declined considerably. However in the courts three year sentences remained fairly standard practice. There were some occasional articles on the effectiveness of various anti-mugging devices.\(^{17}\) But perhaps the most significant report during this period was the publication of the results of an opinion poll in the *Daily Mail* (10 November 1972). Mugging had apparently touched a very delicate nerve in public consciousness since 90 per cent of those interviewed wanted tougher punishments and 70 per cent greater government urgency; and this despite the severe reaction already taking place.

In January 1973, the level of press coverage was higher than in December, but not significantly so. The Home Secretary, in a written Commons reply, said that the state of the ‘war’ was not ‘deteriorating further’ and might be ‘improving in some areas’;\(^{18}\) cautiously optimistic. However the March headline – ‘London muggings up by 129% over four years’ – carried by many national papers,\(^{19}\) seemed to shatter that optimism. The Special Squads, according to black community leaders, were harassing and intimidating black youngsters suspected as potential ‘muggers’.\(^{20}\) Then came the event which set the seal on Mr Carr’s optimism: the sentencing of three Handsworth youths, one to twenty years’ detention and the others to ten years, on 19 March 1973. This event revived interest in arguments about ‘deterrent’ sentences and feature articles reappeared; but the terms of reference had changed little, if at all. Security forces on London’s underground stations were to be strengthened still further.\(^{21}\) The same statistics, concerning London muggings, were resurrected and used again in April, with headlines like: ‘Muggings reach four a day in London’ and ‘London mugging – police demand “action now” ’.\(^{22}\) The Old Aged Pensioners’ Conference in May carried a resolution urging more drastic action be taken against hooligans. Inevitably Mr Carr was forced to renounce his earlier optimism when he issued a special directive to police chiefs to ‘hot-up’ their war on teenage muggers.\(^{23}\)

Five days later the Wandsworth police division was reported as having ‘turned the tide’ on muggers; apparently its ‘plain clothes anti-mugging squads’ were winning the war.\(^{24}\) But four days after that on 15 May, Sir Robert Mark, then London’s police chief, was reported to be ‘getting every available man back on
the beat to crack down on crime – particularly mugging’. London had obviously not ‘turned the tide’ to Sir Robert’s satisfaction. On 23 May, some seventeen days later, Robert Carr was again reported as ‘optimistic’. He told 1200 women at the Conservative Women’s Conference that Britain’s police were ‘winning’. Despite these ‘shifts’ in the tides of the anti-mugging war, ‘mugging’ was beginning to wane as a news item. July and August produced only one ‘mugging’ report. This decline in media visibility was accompanied by the settling of the debate about the state of the war: it had at last been ‘won’. On 29 July the Prime Minister congratulated himself on the country’s progress and referred to the decline in mugging and crime in general as examples of that ‘progress’. On 1 October 1973 fraud replaced ‘mugging’ as ‘Public Crime Enemy – No. 1’: Britain’s ‘Biggest criminal headache’. The ‘mugging’ epidemic was temporarily over.

So much for the fluctuations in the mugging phenomenon. Crucially underpinning the various shifts in concern was the notion of massive increases in crimes of violence throughout the period, especially ‘muggings’. Less visible, but present, if only implicitly in certain instances, were two other key themes: the notion that criminals were getting off lightly, that courts were becoming ‘soft’; and the notion (really the corollary of ‘soft’ sentences) that the only strategy was to ‘get tough’. Expressed as an equation, the argument ran: rapid increase in crimes of violence plus ‘soft’ sentencing policy equals need to return to traditional ‘tough’ (or deterrent) measures. We wish now to examine these elements in the ‘rising crime rate’ equation.

**THE ‘RISING CRIME RATE’ EQUATION**

This is what we might call the ‘equation of concern’ into which ‘mugging’ was inserted. It rested on an implied chain of argument: the rate of violent crime was on the increase, a trend encouraged by a ‘soft-on-the-criminal’ policy in the courts (as well as in the country at large, the result of ‘permissive’ attitudes); the only way to deal with this was to revert to traditional ‘get-tough’ policies which were guaranteed to have the required deterring effect on those attracted to violent crime. We want to examine each element in the argument in turn; but we start with a word of warning about statistics.

Statistics – whether crime rates or opinion polls – have an ideological function: they appear to ground free floating and controversial impressions in the hard, incontrovertible soil of numbers. Both the media and the public have enormous respect for ‘the facts’ – hard facts. And there is no fact so ‘hard’ as a number – unless it is the percentage difference between two numbers. With regard to criminal statistics, these are not – as one might suppose – sure indicators of the volume of crime committed, or very meaningful ones. This has long been recognised even by those who make most use of them, the police themselves. The reasons are not difficult to understand: (1) crime statistics refer only to *reported* crime: they cannot quantify the ‘dark figure’; (2) different areas collate their statistics differently; (3) police sensitisation to, and mobilisation to deal with, selected, ‘targeted’ crimes increase both the number the police turn up, and the number the public report; (4) public anxiety about particular ‘highlighted’ offences also leads to ‘over-reporting’; (5) crime statistics are based on legal (not sociological)
categories and are, thus, arbitrary. This remains the case despite the deliberations of the official Perks Committee, and the efforts of the Cambridge Institute of Criminology to provide more meaningful indicators; (6) changes in the law (e.g. the 1968 Theft Act) make strict comparisons over time difficult.

In general it must also be remembered that everything depends on how the crime statistics are interpreted (by the police), and then on how these interpretations are reported (in the media). However accurate or inaccurate the statistics quoted earlier, they were used to identify the existence of a mugging crime wave and to justify public reaction to it. W. I. Thomas once remarked: ‘Those things which men believe to be true, are true in their consequences.’ The statistics about mugging therefore had real enough consequences in terms of official and public reactions. Hence we need to look at the figures ‘straight’ as if they were accurate before questioning their basis in reality. But first we ought to reiterate our purpose in making this statistical detour, i.e. we wish to look at the statistical basis to the first ‘mugging panic’ in 1972. For this reason we present here only statistical information up until 1972–3. For those readers interested in the years since then we survey these briefly at the end of this particular section.

When we look at the criminal statistics and the trends that they reveal, some interesting facts emerge. The first is that crime, as a whole, has been increasing (though not uniformly) year by year for most of this century: since 1915 in fact (only 1949–54 showing a net reduction, as a period, during this time). The period which saw the greatest increase in crime generally was the period 1955–65, where the average annual increase was about 10 per cent. The seven years from 1966 to 1972 saw a decreased rate of increase, the average increase being of the order of 5 per cent. Statistically speaking, then, the period of the greatest crime increase had passed by 1972. We were then in a rather mixed and indeterminate period – not at the crest of a ‘crime wave’, as certain public spokesmen would have had us believe. The rise, in short, was neither particularly new in 1972, nor sudden; it was nearly as old as this century. In statistical terms, it was, temporarily anyway, past its peak. Nor, when compared with earlier trends, was it especially alarming.

But public spokesmen usually have not meant crime generally when they have spoken of the ‘crime wave’. They have meant, specifically, the growth of ‘serious’ crimes, and especially the growth of ‘crimes of violence’. Was this new? Statistically speaking, no. Reginald Maudling, during his period as Home Secretary, spoke, with concern, of ‘crimes of violence’ having risen by 61.9 per cent between 1967 and 1971. The figures for the years 1957–61 (i.e. a decade earlier) reveal an even greater increase, one of 68 per cent. (We are aware of the problem of using statistics quoted by public figures and the press without revealing their sources. However, this somewhat cavalier attitude is not without intent since it is precisely such public statements – the popularisation of official statistics – which provide the statistical ‘back-up’ for subsequent action. In point of fact we have checked both these statements with the official statistics, and though there are slight discrepancies due to the fact that the former appear to be taken from the Reports of Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Constabulary, which only include figures for England and Wales (excepting those for the Metropolitan Police District), and the latter from the Annual Abstract of Statistics (1969), which combines figures for England and Wales with those for Northern Ireland and
Scotland, the overall point, that the two periods are substantially similar statistically, remains valid.) So the increase, even in the specific area of ‘crimes of violence’, was not dramatically new.

Let us look specifically at the category, ‘robbery or assault with intent to rob’, the criminal statistical category nearest to ‘mugging’, and certainly the charge to which most ‘muggers’ were subject. Was the increase in this category as dramatic as the reaction to mugging suggested? The answer must again be no. During the ten years between 1955 and 1965 ‘robberies’ increased by 354 per cent.37 Between 1965 and 1972, however, they increased by only 98½ per cent.38 Expressed as a percentage, the average annual increase between 1955 and 1965 was 35.4 per cent but during the seven years between 1965 and 1972 it was only 14 per cent. Even if we only use statistics for ‘mugging’, basing ourselves on the one universally quoted, namely the rise in London muggings by 129 per cent over four years 1968–72,39 we still find the average annual increase (32 per cent) is less than that (35 per cent) for robberies generally over the ten years 1955–65. So even the statistics most closely related to the reaction to mugging, i.e. statistics of robberies and mugging, were far from being without precedent in the post-war period. The situation with relation to crimes roughly categorisable as ‘muggings’ was certainly no worse in 1972 than it was between 1955–65 and, it could be argued statistically that it was, if anything, slightly better. Thus, whatever statistics are used, whether the over-all ‘crimes of violence’ figures, or, more specifically those referring to ‘robberies’ or ‘muggings’, it is not possible to demonstrate that the situation was dramatically worse in 1972 than it was in the period 1955–65. In other words, it is impossible to ‘explain’ the severity of the reaction to mugging by using arguments based solely on the objective, quantifiable, statistical facts. A final word of caution. We have based much of our statistical evidence on McClintock and Avison40 since it is a large-scale, prestigious, quasi-official study, and certainly the most exhaustive survey of its kind ever undertaken in this country. Since then, McDonald has taken the authors to task on methodological grounds and especially for confining most of the analysis to the period 1955–65.41 McDonald demonstrates, convincingly, that taking a slightly longer time span (1948–68) reduces substantially the increases that McClintock and Avison found. Anybody seriously interested in the problem of criminal statistics should undoubtedly consult McDonald’s important text. However, since our purpose is not to develop more adequate ways of computing increases in crime but simply to examine the kinds of simple statistics used to justify the reaction to mugging, we feel that our use of short time spans is justified. In fact, it is precisely the annual statistical increase in certain crimes, dramatically presented in the media, which fuel and legitimate the concern about crime.

What about the second element in our equation: the ‘softness’ of the courts? How well was this grounded, statistically? There are two strands involved here: the ‘acquittal versus conviction rate’; and sentencing policy. A major assumption behind some of the proposals of the Criminal Law Revision Committee, and the remarks of vociferous supporters of it, like Sir Robert Mark, was that professional criminals are being found ‘not guilty’ too easily. Sir Robert Mark’s contention was based on the assumption that about half of the defendants who plead ‘not guilty’ are acquitted by juries.42 The evidence concerning ‘acquittal rates’ is not nearly so
easy to come by as the evidence relating to criminal statistics, but what little there is tends not to support this judgement.

McCabe and Purves, of the Oxford Penal Research Unit, found that in one-third of the acquittals they examined (fifty-three out of 173), the prosecution evidence was so thin that the judge directed an acquittal without leaving it to the jury; and second, that most acquittals in higher courts, even where the accused had previous convictions, involved relatively minor offences. Elgrod and Lew re-examined the records of a firm of London solicitors for the period 1964–73 and found that the proportion of acquittals brought in by juries had remained stable and averaged out at about 31 per cent. In other words, it lent support to the view of many practising lawyers of an acquittal rate of one in three of those people pleading ‘not guilty’, a finding which did not support Sir Robert Mark’s case.

Acquittal rates appear, then, to have altered little in recent years, to affect chiefly ‘minor’ criminals, and to be much less than the 50 per cent claimed. But probably more pivotal to the perception of ‘softness’ to ‘toughness’ in the courtroom is sentencing policy.

Sentences for violent offences have actually been getting longer. Sparks found, using the ‘year-end’ figures, that those serving fixed-term sentences of seven years or more (the majority of whom were convicted for crimes of violence) had ‘roughly doubled’ in number between 1960 and 1967, while the numbers of those serving ten years or more had ‘tripled’. This finding is very different from those of the H.M.S.O. Report, People in Prisons. One essential difference between the two documents is that the H.M.S.O. Report largely deals with admissions in any one year. On this basis it argues that apart from the increase in numbers serving fixed-term sentences of over fourteen years, largely consequent upon the abolition of capital punishment, there has been little change in ‘intermediate’ sentences. Sparks, on the other hand, using the statistics in a more complex way (and berating People in Prisons for its ‘simple’ use of the statistics), finds a very different picture: one of an increasing build-up of ‘long-stay’ prisoners (those serving seven-plus, ten-plus, fourteen-plus and ‘life’) throughout the period 1960–7, practically all of whom, by 1967, were convicted of ‘violent’ offences. Post-abolition, the number of ‘lifers’ has increased, as has the average length of such sentences. Furthermore, it has been argued that 1950–7 was a period of ‘lenient’ sentencing which saw a twofold increase in robberies, whereas 1957–66 witnessed a reversal in sentencing policy – and a threefold increase in robberies. Professor Radzinowicz also notes the change, in 1960, from the lenience of the years 1950–7:

Recently the courts seem to have been taking a sterner view, and in 1960 the standards reverted to those of 1950 ... The trend towards increased severity is also reflected in much sharper sentences for younger and for first offenders.

These are hardly indexes of a growing ‘soft policy’ by the courts.

Whether these policies have been deterring – the third element in our equation – is another matter. McClintock and Avison, reviewing the 1955–65 period in their chapter on ‘The Recidivist’, argue for a percentage increase of 160 per cent in the
numbers coming back before the courts; with an even higher rate for the younger recidivists (aged 14–21). The reconviction rate for ‘serious’ recidivists (five or more proved indictable offences) was higher than that for other recidivists; a third of young robbers had ‘high’ rates of recidivism (two or more previous proved indictable offences); and ‘offences of robbery and breaking showed the greatest proportion of “high” recidivism’.

As it happens, there is important evidence about the relation between tough sentencing and deterrence drawn specifically from ‘mugging’. Baxter and Nuttall, Home Office research officers, examined the long and severe sentences passed on the three boys in the Handsworth ‘mugging’ case for subsequent ‘deterrent’ effect. They experienced the same difficulty the present authors did in finding an acceptable statistical basis for ‘mugging’. But, taking the ‘robbery and assault with intent to rob’ as their statistical base-line (and acknowledging that this figure would include ‘crimes other than mugging’), the authors had to conclude: ‘In none of the police areas studied did the sentence have the anticipated impact on the number of reported robberies.’ In Birmingham, where the initial offence was committed, the robbery offence rate continued uninterrupted (i.e. ‘relatively low throughout the two relevant years’).

In short, the statistics such as we have do not support the ‘rising crime rate’ equation. An ‘unprecedented’ rise in robberies with violence was not new in 1972. Sentences for serious offences were growing longer rather than shorter, and more people were receiving them; acquittal rates seemed not to have changed. And these tough policies were not deterring. In fact, if we regard the ‘toughness’ in the courts throughout the 1960s as an ‘experiment in deterrence’, the rising rate of crime and recidivism demonstrates just how bad is the record of deterrence as an instrument of penal policy. This general picture – true for serious crime as a whole – was also true for ‘mugging’.

However, in the specific case of the mugging statistics, we can go further still. We have just alluded to the difficulties that Baxter and Nuttall found in isolating a statistical base in their work on the ‘mugging’ figures, and we also mentioned we had similar difficulties. This point bears amplification. The much publicised 1973 headlines that London ‘muggings’ were 129 per cent up over the four years 1968–72 seem to have their base in Robbery and Kindred Offences In the Metropolitan Police District, 1968–72. Their precise origin remains a deep mystery to us. Our efforts to ‘crack’ them have been in vain. Since there is no legal offence called ‘mugging’, the figures cannot be derived direct from the Annual Reports. Some Chief Constables expressed doubt as to what to include under ‘mugging’ when the Home Secretary asked for figures for 1968 (though there is evidence that, since the 1972–3 period, regional figures for crimes descriptively arranged under the ‘mugging’ category, together with some figures, however loose, on the ethnic identity of assailants, have been kept). The graph in the 1973 Report must therefore be a back-projection; but based on what? Since none of the existing ‘robbery’ figures for 1968, or the other years, square with the reconstructed ‘mugging’ figures, these must be a selective conflation of proportions of a number of different sub-categories within the over-all ‘robbery’ figures. But how much of which? (We have tried as many permutations as ingenuity allows,
though without success.) And what statistical checks were there on this selective clustering under the ‘mugging’ label, performed in 1973 (when the ‘mugging’ panic was at its peak), for a year – 1968 – when the label was not in use?

We mentioned earlier that we would end with some general updating on statistics. We offer them for completeness, rather than in the hope that they will clarify much. 1973 saw practically no change in the over-all crime figures, substantial percentage reductions in the robbery figures, substantial percentage increases in ‘crimes of violence’ generally, and a mixed set of figures for thefts from the person (a large percentage increase (12.5 per cent) in London and a largish percentage reduction in the provinces (8.4 per cent)). 1974 saw larger percentage increases in crime generally and robbery, massive percentage increases in theft from the person (42 per cent in the provinces, 71 per cent in London), but small percentage increases in ‘crimes of violence’ generally. 1975 saw smaller percentage increases in crime generally but even larger percentage increases in robbery (24 per cent in the provinces, 41.2 per cent in London). The percentage increases in theft from the person, still large, were less dramatic than in 1974, while the ‘crimes of violence’ category showed far larger percentage increases. Over all, then, the period seems ‘mixed’, but, for those interested in trends in statistically recorded crimes, it may be of interest that, except for sexual offences, every crime category recorded an increase in both the provinces and London during 1974 and 1975 – quite an unusual occurrence.

We have left the mugging statistics until last; these are, as usual, the most complicated. After the London figures produced in 1973 by the Statistical Unit for the years 1968–72, which were also reproduced in the Metropolitan Police Commissioner’s Report for 1972, a separate ‘mugging’ statistic does not appear again in any of the Annual Reports until the publication of the Metropolitan Police Commissioner’s Report for 1975. This report carries an identical table to the 1972 Report, i.e. a table of robberies sub-divided into smaller categories based on the circumstances of the crime. One of these categories – robbery following an attack in the open – is clearly the mugging statistic since both the category and the figures for 1971 and 1972 tally with those in the 1972 Report, where it was announced that this particular category was popularly known as ‘mugging’. So, despite a certain coyness on the Commissioner’s part about using the label (and this despite the fact that the original decision to sub-categorise the robbery statistics undoubtedly stemmed from, or was sanctioned by, him), we can at least be certain that the figures collected for 1975 were based on the same criteria, whatever these were, as those collected in 1972. Analysing these figures, it would appear that after the dramatic 32 per cent increase in 1972, muggings decreased during 1973 (by 20.7 per cent), only to increase by 18.7 per cent in 1974 and by 35.9 per cent in 1975. Whatever the reason for the 1973 decrease, what is certain is that the drop was only temporary. And as sentences in the courts have certainly not been getting any lighter for these offences, and police activity – in the light of much high-level concern – is unlikely to have diminished, we can only see these figures as further confirmation of the bankruptcy of policies of containment and deterrence.

However, the statistical situation regarding these figures becomes more interesting, if more confusing, during this period. In the Metropolitan Commissioner’s
1972 Report we see the beginnings of a development which was to culminate in the production of a completely new set of crime categories in the 1974 Report. We have already mentioned the sub-division of the ‘robbery’ category which produced, as one outcome, the mugging statistics. ‘Theft from the person’ was similarly sub-divided, and one particular category – ‘snatchings’ – was included in a table showing the increases in ‘selected crimes of violence, 1968–72’. We were told that ‘snatchings’ appear there since there was little distinction between such offences and robbery. The implication, since both were included in the table, is that the element common to both categories is that of ‘violence’. But, then, in the 1973 Report we were told that ‘snatches’ were ‘similar to robberies differing only in that the victim is neither threatened nor injured by the assailant’ (our emphasis). In view of the fact that snatchings had appeared in a table of selected crimes of violence the previous year, and that it is precisely the element of violence which distinguishes robbery from theft, this is a very strange statement indeed. However, there is yet a further ‘mystery’ in the 1973 figures. We have already mentioned that this was the year which showed a dramatic drop in the numbers of robberies and muggings. ‘Snatchings’ followed this pattern. But ‘thefts from the person’ (e.g. ‘pickpocketing’) showed a large increase. How do we explain these divergent trends? Given the ambiguity surrounding all these categories and the failure to specify publicly the criteria for differentiating the categories, is it not at least plausible to mull over the possibility – without necessarily suggesting a conspiracy – that what were perceived and classified as ‘muggings’ in 1972 were differently perceived and classified in 1973 – as more routine examples of pickpocketing for example? Such selective perception, and the accompanying decline in the mugging statistics, would certainly retrospectively justify the control measures taken.

In the 1974 and 1975 Reports, the incipient unhappiness with the official legal, Home Office classifications found full expression in the production of a completely new set of ‘circumstantial’ categories (i.e. ones reflecting the circumstances of the crime) which appeared in addition to the Home Office classifications. Of principal interest to us was the production of a ‘robbery and other violent thefts’ category; though, again, the criteria for adjudging a theft ‘violent’ were not stated. In the light of the Commissioner’s earlier sub-division of ‘thefts from the person’, it would appear that ‘snatchings’ had finally become so similar to robberies (despite being ‘non-violent’!) as to warrant the production of a joint statistic. In 1975 there were 7959 such ‘robberies and other violent thefts’ (up 43 per cent), 4452 official robberies (up 41.2 per cent) and 1977 ‘muggings’ (up 35.9 per cent); though the official ‘theft from the person’ category had no equivalent category in the Commissioner’s classification. What are we to make of the new category ‘robbery and other violent thefts’? Violent thefts were obviously similar to robberies; hence the joint statistic: yet official robberies were then further sub-divided without any reference to the joint statistic. This means that the mugging statistic was produced without reference to the ‘violent theft’ category. Yet it seems hard to believe that the introduction of these new categories – first ‘snatches’ and then ‘violent thefts’ – were entirely unrelated to the original breakdown of the robbery figures which had, as one outcome, the production of a set of figures for ‘mugging’: particularly since the very reason given for the sub-division of ‘thefts from the person’ was to
differentiate the more ‘robbery-like’ from the rest. Given this line of reasoning, the current publicity and concern aroused by the London mugging statistics is very difficult to understand, on purely statistical grounds, since the 1975 figures reveal that, of the ‘robberies and violent thefts’, only 25 per cent were actually ‘muggings’. Finally, it should be emphasised that none of these statistical convolutions have ever affected the Chief Inspector of Constabulary’s Reports, which have always stuck to the official classifications. One important result of this is that, despite the grave concern expressed in these reports about mugging (c.f. the 1973 Report), we have never had any figures at all concerning the scale, and rate of increase, of provincial muggings. If the reaction to mugging cannot then be explained by a straightforward reference to the statistics, how can it be explained?

When the official reaction to a person, groups of persons or series of events is out of all proportion to the actual threat offered, when ‘experts’, in the form of police chiefs, the judiciary, politicians and editors perceive the threat in all but identical terms, and appear to talk ‘with one voice’ of rates, diagnoses, prognoses and solutions, when the media representations universally stress ‘sudden and dramatic’ increases (in numbers involved or events) and ‘novelty’, above and beyond that which a sober, realistic appraisal could sustain, then we believe it is appropriate to speak of the beginnings of a moral panic.

A moral panic has been defined as follows by Stan Cohen in his study of the ‘mods and rockers’, Folk Devils and Moral Panic:

Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. Sometimes the object of the panic is quite novel and at other times it is something which has been in existence long enough, but suddenly appears in the limelight. Sometimes the panic is passed over and is forgotten, except in folklore and collective memory; at other times it has more serious and long-lasting repercussions and might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even in the way society conceives itself.52

In this study we argue that there was a moral panic about ‘mugging’ in 1972–3; a panic which fits in almost every detail the process described by Cohen in the passage above. This is not to deny that, on occasions during the past few years (but also, almost certainly, for at least a century), individual men and women have been suddenly attacked, rough-handled and robbed in the street. We think, however, that it requires explanation how and why a version of this rather traditional street crime was perceived, at a certain point in the early 1970s, as a ‘new strain of crime’. The number of such incidents may indeed have gone up – it is virtually impossible to tell from the statistical evidence which has been made publicly available. In the light of that, we think it requires to be explained why
and how the weak and confused statistical evidence came to be converted into such hard and massively publicised facts and figures. It also needs to be explained how and why these ‘facts’ came to be identified as part and parcel – indeed, as some of the strongest evidence for – a general belief in the dramatic rise in the rate of ‘violent crime’. The impression that ‘violent crime’, particularly ‘mugging’, was increasing produced a massive and intense coverage by the press, official and semi-official spokesmen, and sentences of an increasing severity in court. In short ‘mugging’ had consequences in the real world, quite apart from the number of people mugged on the streets; and these consequences appear to have less to do with what actually was known to be happening, than with the character, scale and intensity of this reaction. All these other aspects are part of the ‘mugging’ phenomenon, too. They, too, require explanation.

This represents a major shift of focus from conventional studies of crime. Cohen defines this in terms of a shift of attention from the *deviant act* (i.e. ‘mugging’), treated in isolation to *the relation between the deviant act and the reaction of the public and the control agencies to the act*.\(^5\) This shift of focus alters the nature of the ‘object’ or phenomenon which needs to be explained. In what we might call the common-sense view, sometime in the early 1970s British cities were visited by a dramatic and unexpected epidemic of ‘mugging’. The police, reacting to these events, spurred on by a vigilant press, by public anxiety and professional duty, took rapid steps to isolate the ‘virus’ and bring the fever under control. The courts administered a strong inoculating dose of medicine. It disappeared within twelve months, as swiftly and suddenly as it had appeared. It departed as mysteriously as it had arrived. In the ‘common-sense’ view, *this* little sequence of events was ‘mugging’, at least in its primary phase. We argue, on the other hand, that there was also a massive blaze of publicity in the press, the use of a new ‘label’, widespread public comment and anxiety, a strong and vigorous official reaction. Moreover, the scale and intensity of this reaction is quite at odds with the scale of the threat to which it was a response. Thus there is strong evidence of a ‘moral panic’ about mugging. We insist that this ‘moral panic’ is also crucial to the meaning of the ‘mugging’ phenomenon itself. It is this whole complex – action and reaction – as well as what produced it and what its consequences were, which requires to be explained. We suggest that there is no simple ‘event’ here to be understood, apart from the social processes by which such events are produced, perceived, classified, explained and responded to. The more we examine this whole complex in detail, the more it seems that it is the ‘moral panic’ *about* ‘mugging’ rather than the appearance of ‘mugging’ itself, to which we must first give our attention.

In the following chapter, then, we bring into focus some of these so far neglected aspects of ‘mugging’: the way the ‘moral panic’ was articulated in the courts, and the reaction to it of the police – in short, the growth to visibility and subsidence, between August 1972 and the latter months of 1973, of a ‘moral panic’ about ‘mugging’ and its passage through the judicial and control apparatus.

However, before we turn to that we must make a detour back to the point from which we started: the appearance of the *label* which identified ‘a new strain of crime’. It was the use of this label which provided the stimulus for the take-off of a moral panic about ‘mugging’. But what was the birth and subsequent career of the ‘mugging’ label?
CAREER OF A LABEL

NEW YORK CITY ... the science fiction metropolis of the future ... the cancer capital, a laboratory where all the splendours and miseries of the new age are being tried out in experimental form.... Professor Nathan Glazer, the sociologist, remarks: ‘We’re threatened with the destruction of the entire social fabric.’

America is where our weather comes from – the prevailing cultural winds are carrying the same challenges and threats across the Atlantic to Europe.... The forecast does not seem very favourable ... when I last investigated New York in 1966, half a million of its citizens were living on welfare doles. Now the figure has reached a million.... Only last week, massive cuts, the first since the second world war, were made by the state legislature in aid to the poor....

New York’s major problem is this widespread poverty with the inevitable aftermath of growing crime, vandalism, rioting and drug-addiction. Already more than 70 per cent of the serious crimes are committed by youngsters under twenty-one. And crime means crime here – with a murder every twelve hours – many of them motiveless acts of violence with no thought of gain....

... the New York City Handbook [has] ... an entire section on how to deal with burglars, double-lock and protect doors and windows and the general warning: ‘ON THE STREET walk where it is well-lighted and where there are people’ ... one symptom [of New York’s ‘ills’] is the deepening bankruptcy of the city’s public finances.

THE WORST RESULTS ... [are] the hatred and contempt engendered in one section of the population for another ... friends ... accept the hazards of New York rather as Londoners accepted the Blitz. (Alan Brien, ‘New York Nightmare’, Sunday Times, 6 April 1969.)

Is it a lack of courage to think big? Could not the country that thought up the Marshall plan do the same for its own good? Is it because the prejudices against race and welfare programmes are no obstacles to a grand rescue operation abroad but they assert themselves stubbornly against such a vision at home? And why is a small nation such as North Vietnam capable of resisting a super-power, despite the technical superiority of American weapons, firepower and mobility?

Such are the questions on the lips of Americans today. They are all symptoms of the doubts and anxieties that assail a large majority of the people about the trust in the America they believe in.

They are appalled by the massive confrontation at home between black and white, hawks and doves, intellectuals and non-intellectuals, between young and old, the law and the protestors. I doubt whether so many segments of American society have ever been as divided as they are today. It is more than a malaise; somehow the American spirit is temporarily unhinged.

They are afraid of walking in the streets at night and being attacked. This fear is greater than ever before. Crime in the street, unless the republican candidate for President is able to offer an alternative to President Johnson’s policies in Vietnam, will be the big issue of this election campaign. (Henry Brandon, ‘The Disunited States’, Sunday Times, 10 March 1968.)
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