British prosecution patterns

British prosecutions followed the same broad pattern found in Europe and the wider English-speaking world. Recorded crime rose sharply in the early nineteenth century, then stabilized until the early twentieth century, then rose again very sharply after the Second World War and particularly after the 1970s (see Figure 2.1).

Historians have explained the British pattern in different ways (see Emsley, 2005). The first sharp rise (1790s–1840s) is often linked to the modernization of society: urbanization, industrialization, migration and economic depression after the Napoleonic wars. These changes probably resulted in more people, especially younger men, committing more crime. However, historians also argue that changes in control caused an increase in prosecutions. New criminal offences were created, the courts were reorganized (which made it easier for ordinary people to initiate a case) and the new police force was set up. In addition, national criminal statistics were collected from 1805 which turned crime into a national and more easily measured phenomenon.

The long ‘plateau’ period where this rise flattened out (1850s–1910s) is more difficult to explain. Social changes may have meant that fewer crimes were actually committed, rather than fewer prosecutions brought. Rising living standards, lower food prices, political stability, declining interpersonal violence and adjustment to new urban industrial lifestyles, combined with the workings of a strong centralized regulatory state seem to have created – temporarily at least – more law-abiding subjects and a new public order consensus (Gatrell, 1990).

The twentieth-century rise in prosecutions is commonly explained in terms of increased opportunities to commit new kinds of crime, trends in the economic cycle, and a breakdown in the fragile public order consensus of the late Victorian period, especially in the wake of the social upheavals of the two world wars. Recorded crimes rose steeply from about half a million

![Figure 2.1 Crimes recorded by the police in England and Wales, 1857–1997](image-url)

Source: Home Office (1999: 2)