

Question 6

“ The official crime statistics so distort the real nature of the crime problem they should be ignored when assessing the distribution and impact of crime.” Discuss.



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Name of lecturer: Clive Norris

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Name of student: Sharon Ingrid Kwok

A) Introduction

People would argue that the official crime statistics tends to give rise to misleading claims about the national crime rates and to the drawing of frequently erroneous conclusions. Some scholars urged the study of official crime statistics as an outcome of social and political process, which distorts the real nature of the crime problem. Therefore, it should be ignored when we assess the distribution and impact of crime. I agree with the first argument, but I have doubt about the second argument. Before we start the argument, let me explain how the official crime statistics distort the real nature of the problem of crime.

B) How does the official statistics distort the real nature of crime problem?

a) Discovery and reporting

The official statistics depends on two influential sources. Firstly they are, statistics on offenders recorded by the police and secondly, statistics on known offenders. The police are heavily dependent on the public to bring crime to their attention and therefore recorded it statistically. (Koffman, 1996: 3) However, of all comparable BCS crimes in 1997, only 44% were said by their victims to have been reported to or become known to the police. The majority of crimes are not reported to the police at all. (BCS 98 p.19) People are not willing to report crimes to the police due to various reasons: firstly, an awareness problem. Some individuals, organisations or government bodies may not be aware that a crime has been committed against them. The ingenuity of the fraudster, the complexity of the act, lack of knowledge and vigilance of the victim can make the crime invisible. (Jupp et al., XX: 7) Secondly, the normalisation problem. Sometimes victims are unaware that act or event has taken place it can be taken for granted as normal rather than as criminal. Third, lack of confidence in the police. Victims think that the police may not show interest in it due to insufficient of evidence or the incident is too trivial to warrant formal action (BCS 97 p.21) and they may also think that the police could not act on it. (Koffman, 1996: 7)) Furthermore, fear of reprisals, fear of self-incrimination, embarrassment and sympathy for the victim also affects the victims to decide whether they report to the police or not. (Davis et al., 1995: 82-84)

b) Recording

Even if people would like to report the crime to the police, this does not mean such reporting can be recorded in the official statistics. The mere fact that an incident is reported to the police does not ensure that it has been recorded as crime. (Coleman, 1996: 34) The recording rate of crime by the police reflects a number of operational, administrative and legal factors. (Koffman, 1996: 5) Different area may have different rules regarding what should be recorded, since there is no standard method of recording crimes used by all the separate police forces around the country, (Davis et al., 1995: 85) which provides difficulties in interpreting the data and lead to different crime recorded rate. Maguire concluded that there might be many different ways of counting an offence or series of offences. (Maguire 1997) It is possible that an offence may involve several offenders. The official statistics in this situation

would show that several offences being committed but in reality it would consist of only one event. Thus, there is a classification problem on recording crime rate where the standard error would increase. Furthermore it will be affected by how the police choose to classify an offence, since many offences may fall into several categories. The police may not have evidence to sustain one charge and therefore choose another. This may also lead to misinterpretation of the crime figures. (Davis et al., 1995: 85)

The police have discretion about what to record as an offence. They may officially record a complaint of crime, or may be 'no crime'. (BCS p.21) However, if the police have not recorded the 'crime report' it does not mean there has no crime occurring. There is doubt about the police's decision.

c) Social and political context

Coleman and Moynihan stated that the study of official data is an outcome of social and institutional process. (Coleman et al., 1996: 16) That is, the crime data are produced in a broader economic, political and social context. Malcolm Young (1991:323) suggested that when crime was not a political issue, there was no incentive for police to record large numbers of crime due to lack of extra finance from the local budget.

Laurence Koffman suggested when there is a problem that the government has some influence over the funding and dissemination of crime research. In this situation, the government may affect the data easily and there is a doubt about the representativeness of the crime figures. (Koffman, 1996: 13)

The total volume of crime known to the police can be affected by wider changes in the society as a whole. The change of the policy may also affect the volume and distribution of crime rate. For example, the changes in insurance policy, which encourages people to report property crime, have to report to the police before they claim compensation from the insurance company. Since more people are willing to report property crime, this will increase the official statistics in property crime. (XX p.0)

Apart from changes in the policy, the improved technology, simplified reporting procedures, allowing rapid response to scenes and improved contact with the station increases reporting crime rate. (Coleman et al., 1995: 35)

d) Invisibility of crimes

Most of the crime figures represented in the official statistics interpreted by a police officer as criminal are observed by witnesses or experienced by a victim. However some of the crimes are well away from the public gaze. The definitions of crime can be very ambiguous due to the importance of the parties involved, and problems in getting sufficient evidence. This leads to the police unable to satisfy themselves that a crime has been perpetrated and accordingly should be recorded in itself. It leads to most of the work related crimes are not included in the official statistics. Health and safety crime is one of the good examples of 'invisible crime'.

It is not possible to assemble accurate data on the number of deaths at work, which can be attributed as crime; this leads to invisible and lesser extent in official statistics. (Jupp et al., XX: 8-9)

The statistics related to injuries and deaths at work present particular problems. It is difficult to know how many people are killed at work in any fact that health and safety statistics do not cover fatal injuries (Jupp et al., XX: 10) According to the Health and Safety Executive, over 70% of workplace deaths are fault of management, however, such kind of cutions are scarce in official statistics due to complexity of cases (such as collusion problem and lack of specialist knowledge) and insufficient evidences to press charges.

It is widely known that official crime statistics based on offences reported to and recorded by the police, are poor reflection of al the crimes that are actually committed. The dark figure of unreported or unrecorded crime can be investigated by research techniques such as self-report and victim studies. Asking sample groups in conditions of anonymity, about crimes they have committed, is a useful research technique. In order to contrast the crime figures derived from these types of survey with official rates of offending, the results of the survey can be sum up from the sample to give an overall crime rate that represents the total population. (Koffman, 1996: 42)

C) Conclusion

From this brief review of official crime statistics, it should be evident that the official statistics data is a product of social and institutional process. It can be concealed as much as it is revealed. The social, political and economic atmosphere affects the official pictures of crime and the operation of the system charged with processing those who are criminalised. Despite this, there are many disadvantages of official crime statistics, however it still has its uses. It can be a considerable value in understanding trends, allocating resources, and developing strategies for responding to crime. There is no harm in the use of official statistics as an indicator of public's response to crime and police's attitudes. The aid of self-report and victim survey can be used to fill up the gaps in the official figures to reveal the whole picture of crimes committed. Therefore, the official statistics are important and it should not be ignored when assessing the distribution and impact of crime.

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