

Why is it so difficult to ‘measure crime’? Your answer must address official statistics and the various surveys (Such as British Crime, Victim, and Self-Report) that are routinely used. In what way do surveys enhance our knowledge and understanding of patterns of crime?

In attempting to give an evaluation of the difficulty of measuring crime it is necessary to look at the surveys and official statistics from reference books, text books and websites that record them. The essay will look at ways of recording crime through the victim or police records. It will also examine surveys in which the public have participated to weigh up the types of crimes people have committed without being caught. The essay will then conclude in how these surveys enhance our knowledge and understanding of patterns of crime.

Crime statistics **are** recorded in many different ways. ‘The Official Crime Statistics’ are those recorded by the police, prisons **and** courts. **Those** statistics hold information on crime recorded by the Criminal Justice System. Statistics show that offences recorded by the police have risen from **3,706 in 1989 to 5,301 in 1999. This increase of 1,595** crimes in ten years is recorded in the Home Office Criminal Statistics, (1989 p17, 1999 p21.) The difficulty of using these Official Crime Statistics as accurate figures is that they do not show an increase in crime but just an increase in **the** discovery of crime. For example, one of the problems in a major city may be prostitution. The police will make prostitution one of their targets to crack down on, which will result in discoveries of more prostitutes, but not necessarily an increase **in** prostitution in the city. Quinney and Wildeman (1977), depict this interpretation of

statistics in crime rates in Muncie, J. and McLaughlin, E. (1996, p21) “crime merely reflects what, where and when the law-enforcement agencies decide to target. In this respect, crime rates are not accurate measures, but only reflect the activities, priorities and labelling processes of official agencies.

An increase in crime may also be due to an increase in those reporting crime and not an increase in crime itself. Muncie & McLaughlin (1996 p23) explain how this can be seen in the 1992 publication British Crime Statistics, which show reported crimes as well as recorded crimes and victim statistics. The British Crime Surveys showed an increase in the reporting of burglary and car theft between 1981 and 1991, equating it with an increase in telephones in homes and insurance on the house and car. This shows that telephone ownership makes it easier to report crimes. Insurance claims are acceptable only when the crimes have been reported to the police, and any recompense makes the victims feel reporting is worthwhile if they can get something back.

There are many crimes that are committed which go unrecorded. Muncie & McLaughlin, (1996, p 27) refer to these as the ‘Dark Figure’. An example of the ‘Dark Figure’ is where the crime is classed as minor, the police allow the offender to go with a caution, thus saving police time and paperwork but complicates the measuring of crime statistics. Muncie & McLaughlin also explain another aspect of the ‘Dark Figure’, where crimes that are unrecorded because they are not reported, crimes that the police may never know about. Mirlees-Black (1996) clarifies in Croall, H. (1998, p 17), how the victim may feel it is unnecessary to report the crime because “The incident is not seen as sufficiently serious.” Many people also feel that

they are wasting police time and “The police wouldn’t be able to do much about it.”

Another main reason for victims not reporting crime may be “inconvenience” or “The incident was not a matter for the police- better dealt with themselves.” An example of this would be domestic violence. All **those** aspects of not reporting crime add to the difficulty of **achieving a true measurement of** crime.

Reported crimes often have a lot to do with a persons view **of** the particular crime.

For example if a person sees a particular offence as morally wrong then they are more likely to report it. For example people who lose property or money will be more likely to report it than if they have not been affected. Muncie & McLaughlin (1996 p22-3) portray this “Burglary with loss, and auto theft, on the other hand, had almost 100 per cent rate of reportage.” suggesting that a lot of **other classes of** crime go unrecorded, which adds to the difficulty of measuring crime.

British Crime Surveys may be more accurate at measuring crime because they use the victim surveys rather than police records. The British Crime Survey will ask victims about crimes they have either witnessed or experienced, whether the crime had been reported to the police or not. This can give us a clearer picture of criminal activity. The 2001 British Crime Survey shows a 12% fall in crime between 1999 and 2000 and the police Official Statistics show only 3% fall in the crime rate (www.homeoffice.gov.uk-rds/). The difference in the figures show an inevitable discrepancy in measuring crime.

The downfall of the victim surveys is the harassment the victim receive from the offender. This can **prevent** people **from** coming forward to give information and often

is the main reason for people not reporting the crime to the police. The Victim and Witness Intimidation findings: from the British Crime Survey (2000, p3) show how most witnesses and victims of crime are intimidated by the offender.

“Self-report surveys ask groups of the population how many times they have participated in criminal activity” Croall, H. (1998, p28) explains how the self-report surveys are given to groups of youths, like schoolchildren, prisoners and other groups that are easily gathered in one place at one time and that are more likely to answer the types of questions asked. Croall, H. argues that they cannot be accurate. Often the school children may not give a truthful answer as they may be afraid of what their parents would say if they found out, also the children may overstate the incidents to show off to their peers. Groups of prisoners are not reliable for these same possibilities, being afraid to admit what they had done.

Often prisoners are participants in ‘Qualitative research’ which is aimed at smaller groups of people like offenders and prisoners who are interviewed instead of questioned. This method of research is generally used for understanding methods of crime – why people commit crime (Croall, H. 1998, p28.) This type of research could be used for measuring the types of crime people commit. It is difficult to use these studies for measuring crime as often the interviewer can get too involved with the participant and “their own preconceptions and value judgements” could get in the way, by influencing the answers on the questionnaires.

The validity of victim surveys and self-report surveys will depend on the sample that is surveyed. To have any validity a report based on sampling must be a representative

cross-section. This means that every source of bias must be removed and this is very difficult to achieve.

It seems that there are various methods of measuring crime and these go some way towards enhancing our knowledge and understanding patterns of crime. However they do not give the whole picture as other variables alter and skew the statistics which on the surface can appear to give a true picture. This is potentially damaging because it can affect where the government put its resources. For example focusing on one problem could result in other problems becoming just as **important, leaving fewer** resources to **deal with** the problems **identified**.

Bibliography

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