

Since the 1950's there has been an upwards trend in crime, 'so spectacular as to be difficult to comprehend'<sup>1</sup>, with recorded crime increasing ten fold. Yet, there has also been a dramatic improvement on the reporting and recording practises of crime. Modern technology has meant that crimes can now be recorded more easily, to the point that you can now in some areas of the country report crimes at your local post office. However, Statistics and surveys are both partially and subjectively construed. Although the practises used to report and record crimes have improved, much crime is still not reported and recorded, the real 'dark figure' of crime is being failed to be met through these methods of data collection.

Crime statistics are based on crimes that are reported and subsequently recorded by the police. According to a study by Bottomley and Coleman, 1981, The public report over 80% of all recorded crimes, 'but some offences may not be reported because of ignorance that a crime has been committed'<sup>2</sup>. The most frequently mentioned reason for not reporting incidents was that 'victims perceived them to be too trivial, there was no loss or they believed that the police would or could not do so much about them (71% of incidents)' <sup>3</sup>.

The annual British Crime Survey, clearly is better than official statistics at detecting unreported and unrecorded crimes. Hough and Mayhew 1983 found that the 'BCS surveys have demonstrated that only a minority of incidents that are recognised as crimes by their victims end up in the official statistics'<sup>4</sup>. The BCS relies on its data through the general public, the question must be asked, how much weight should we attach to the views of the public? It is easy to forget about a crime, and some people might not even realise that a crime has occurred. Respondents may remember an incident, but may be too embarrassed to write about it, on the other hand, they might invent an offence, possibly to seem interesting. Nevertheless, where the victim does tell the truth, these surveys can be very successful. Once contextual information has been gained from the victim, it can be used to get a better reflection of crime. It must also be taken into consideration that the BCS measures are based on 'estimates from a sample of the population, and that estimates can be subject to sampling errors'<sup>5</sup>. However, the BCS is replacing statistics based on police crime records, as the key official source of statistics used in 'policy making, planning and performance measurement'<sup>6</sup>.

'According to the British Crime Survey 2000, the amount of crime actually committed

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<sup>1</sup> George Erdos, the department of psychology, Newcastle university

<sup>2</sup> J. Muncie, and E. McLaughlin, *The problem of crime*, (London: Sage publications, 1996 chap 1)

<sup>3</sup> [www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs04/hosb1004.pdf](http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs04/hosb1004.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> M. Maguire et al., *The oxford handbook of criminology*, (Oxford: Oxford university press, 2002 chap 11)

<sup>5</sup> The Home Office, *Crime in England and Wales 2001 -2*, Jon Simmons

<sup>6</sup> *Oxford handbook of Criminology*, chap 11 *eadem*

may be more than four times the number of crimes recorded by the police'<sup>7</sup>, this is known as the 'grey figure' of crime. The police possess a great deal of discretion about whether to record certain offences. The police see certain crimes as too trivial to report, and instead of including them, they 'cuff' them in order to avoid extra work. 'Hundreds of thousands of serious crimes have been quietly dropped from police records as senior officers massage their statistics to meet new Home Office efficiency targets'<sup>8</sup>.

Home office efficiency targets should be down played, otherwise the real figure of crime will never be truly reflected. 'The work of Farrington and Dowds provides a telling demonstration of the unreliability of criminal statistics as indicators of criminal behaviour'<sup>9</sup>. Their study brought attention to the recording methods of the Nottinghamshire police. They had an excellent system of recording crimes, whereby '<sup>10</sup>a telephone call might be put directly onto a crime complaint form and given a crime number. As a result a significantly higher proportion of telephone calls were recorded as crimes'. However, the procedure was changed in 1983 in an effort to bring down the counties embarrassingly high crime rate. Surely everything possible should be done to demonstrate the true social phenomenon of crime, rather than vanishing some crimes all together, to give an illusion of falling crime rates.

Decisions as to what to include or what not to include in official statistics, and what counting rules to apply, can make a huge difference to the published totals, and hence to the impressions given to the public about the levels of crime in society. However, the counting rules have been amended. 'In April 1998, Home Secretary, Jack Straw, announced the counting rules for recorded crime were to be expanded to adhere to the principle of one crime per victim, instead of the original principle of one crime per criminal incident'<sup>11</sup>. 'For most offences, the current system of measuring crime takes a victim centred view. If a crime event has 3 victims, then three crimes will be recorded'<sup>12</sup>, as opposed to the old system where only one crime would be recorded. However, these counting rules are recent, and methods of counting cases prior to April 1998 were less rigorous. Jack Straw had high hopes that 'the changes to the system might give a more accurate picture of the levels of crime which we are facing today'<sup>13</sup>. There has been an increase of 12% in sexual offences recorded by the police since 2002/03 and according to the home office 'much of the increase is likely to be due to the

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<sup>7</sup> Crim.L.R 2001, Mar, 169-170, 'Criminal Statistics' Ian Dennis

<sup>8</sup> 'Falls in Crime a Myth as police chiefs massage the figures' The Sunday times, 16 October 1994' p.1

<sup>9</sup> K. Bottomed and K. Pease, *Crime and punishment, interpreting the data*, (Milton Keynes: Open university press, 1986, chap 2)

<sup>10</sup> *Crime and Punishment, interpreting the data*, chap 2, eadem

<sup>11</sup> Home Office (1999), Recorded Crime Statistics - England and Wales April 1998 - March 1999 Issue 18/99

<sup>12</sup> Crim.L.R.2004, nov, 926-935 'Perjury and False Statements: A criminal profile of persons convicted 1979 - 2001, Soothill K et al

<sup>13</sup> Home Office (1997), New Crime Figures will Lead to Greater Clarity Says Jack Straw, Press Release 247/97, 1st October.

continuing impact of changes in recording’<sup>14</sup>, which would suggest changes in counting rules are taking us a step closer to the true figure of crime.

There is a sizeable dark figure of unrecorded crime within the area of sexual offences. According to the biggest-ever study of rape in Britain, undertaken by London metropolitan university (2005), ‘at least a quarter of the female population has suffered rape or attempted rape’<sup>15</sup>, yet the highest number of rapes reported to the police in one year remains at 11,700. ‘It may only be one in four, but some surveys suggest one in ten raped women, bring the offence to the attention of the police’<sup>16</sup>. A number of studies have indicated that the proportion of rapes reported is very low. A study by Faizy, 1994, on a sample of 2000 women from Oxford Brookes revealed that 90 % of women who had never been sexually assaulted thought that they would report it to the police, yet in fact 6% of those who had been attacked reported it. The question needs to be asked why they did not report it? ‘Many said they feared unsympathetic responses from the police and little faith in the justice system’. Further more, according to Ruth Hall from women against rape “women are not taken seriously and when the CPS sabotages cases nothing happens to them”<sup>17</sup>. The London Metropolitan university study tracked 3,527 cases, and found dubious police officers do not often believe victims and also found some evidence of poor investigation and understanding of the law. However, according to Jo Lovett<sup>18</sup> the rise in rape allegations from 1,842 in 1985 to a present all time high of 11,700 indicates a growing willingness to report rapes.

Although the BCS does not measure sexual offences as a specific category, it does ‘periodically include a self completion section within the survey, in England and Wales’<sup>19</sup>. The BCS provides a better reflection of the true extent of crime than statistics because it includes crimes which are not reported to the police. This can be seen from the figures collected on rape between 99-2000. ‘In 99 Police recorded 7,707 incidents of rape. The 2000 BCS best estimate of the numbers of victims of rape in the last year is 61,000’<sup>20</sup>. These figures would suggest that although crime statistics are completely failing to reflect the true extent of rape, that Surveys, particularly the BCS are reflecting a more accurate figure. However, this has not always been the case, in ‘1983 the BCS on a study of 11,000 households, found only one instance of attempted rape!’<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> [www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs04/hosb1004.pdf](http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs04/hosb1004.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> ‘Drink, Drugs and Rape’, The Sunday Times February 27<sup>th</sup> 2005, p.17

<sup>16</sup> Crim.L.R.1989, May, 321-322 ‘Research into Rape’, Editorial

<sup>17</sup> BBC News, February 25<sup>th</sup> 2005

<sup>18</sup> Jo Lovett leading author of rape study by the abuse studies unit at London Metropolitan University

<sup>19</sup> [www.crimestatistics.org.uk/output/page60](http://www.crimestatistics.org.uk/output/page60)

<sup>20</sup> Home office research study 237, rape and sexual assault - extent and nature of the problems Myhill & Allen

<sup>21</sup> E.A. Stanko, *Intimate intrusions, Womens experience of male violence*, London: Unwin Hyman, 1985, chap 4)

In the period of 2001/02 according to crime statistics, 'there were 8,990 reported rapes, rising to 11,441 in 2002/03, giving a 27% increase'<sup>22</sup>. At first this may look like a rapid increase, however it must be taken into consideration that in April 2002, the National Crime Recording Standard was set up. 'The NCRS has introduced a greater degree of consistency to the ways in which crime is recorded in different police forces and has helped to ensure that there is a comprehensive record of all crimes that are reported to the police by victims'<sup>23</sup>. This therefore would explain not only that the numbers of rape did not dramatically increase in this time period, but it also shows that the introduction of the NCRC might have a significant effect on the number of crimes recorded, which will then be reflected in statistics.

Sexual offence statistics could be improved by enhanced police procedures, and by having better facilities to encourage a greater willingness of victims to come forward. The sexual crime reduction team are committed to tackling sexual offences and to providing the right support for victims. Better facilities have been introduced through the introduction of 13 sexual assault referral centre across the country. The Government 'want to make these multi agency services for victims available on a national basis, along with a rape help line'<sup>24</sup>.

Low reporting rates to the police particularly occur in the area of rape, where the respondent might find it embarrassing or difficult to talk about the attack. However, this problem is trying to be countered out. 'Computer - assisted self-interview forms have been introduced for issues such as sexual attacks'<sup>25</sup>. Even so much of this area of offences is still missed as victims might want to stay in denial, and keep the fact that they have been a victim of a sexual assault within their sub-conscious, due to finding it to painful to think about.

It is vital the right support is provided for victims, in order to get them to come forward and report rape as 'the Aftermath of the incident may well be more distressing than the incident itself'<sup>26</sup>. On the 30<sup>th</sup> of June 2004 the CPS published their policy for prosecuting cases of rape. The statement is designed to explain to victims of rape how rape prosecutions are carried out. Its aim is to encourage more rape victims to come forward and to give them greater confidence in the process. 'The government also published a rape action plan in July 2002, and made 18 recommendations of practical measures to the police and CPS to improve guidance and training for both police and prosecutors'<sup>27</sup>. To date training of police officers is been improved, with development of new specialist training for sexual offences. As a result of

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<sup>22</sup> Home office statistical bulletin, 'Crime in England and Wales 2002/3, Simmons & Dodd, July 2003

<sup>23</sup> The Home Office, Crime in England and Wales, 2001 -2, Jon Simmon

<sup>24</sup> [home.office.gov.uk/crime/sexual offences/referralcentres](http://home.office.gov.uk/crime/sexual%20offences/referralcentres)

<sup>25</sup> C. Coleman, *Understanding crime data: haunted by the dark figure*, Buckingham: Open University Press, 1996, Chap 1)

<sup>26</sup> Morris and Heal, 1981

<sup>27</sup> [home.office.gov.uk/crime/sexual offences/rapeactionplan](http://home.office.gov.uk/crime/sexual%20offences/rapeactionplan)

these services, victims should feel more confident from the outset that their case is treated with professionalism and empathy. In turn, it will improve theirs and others confidence in the criminal justice system. Ultimately, this enhanced approach should lead to more reporting, recording and subsequently more realistic statistics.

Clearly a reform is needed of the BCS, within the area of Sexual Offences. At present the survey does not include these types of offences, even though many victims report offences such as rape in the self completion section of the survey. Sexual offences need to be added to the BSC in order to raise the reporting of this hidden area of crime.

The Simmons report, produced by the home office in 2000, recognises the fact that the use of statistics and surveys examining crime rates, fail to illustrate the social phenomenon of crime. The report sets out a vision for a radically new approach to the collection and presentation of crime data. 'The official statistics derived from police activities would be abandoned and replaced by a broad annual picture drawn from a variety of sources'<sup>28</sup>. However, at present these are still mere proposals. Simmons wants reporting of crime to occur in a way that if the public report an incident it is serious, so presumably if they do not it is not. However, the closer link to aspects of behaviour which seem to concern the public would necessarily weaken the connection with precise legal definitions of crime. It is also important to think of the consequences of the data protection act, considering the collection of personal data would be relayed directly to the home office. The Simmons solution does not seem convincing as a better alternative to statistics and surveys, somewhat more as another confusing system failing to illustrate the extent of crime, rather than accurately reflecting it.

Looking towards further reform of statistics in order to reflect the true figure of crime, 'The home office is setting up a national police improvement agency to get forces to work together and oversee changes in police intelligent systems. The agency will have the powers to ensure that forces improve their detection rates.'<sup>29</sup> The agency may help to make the police more accurate at recording crimes, and lower the amount of 'cuffing' that occurs, therefore conclusively this should help to reflect a more realistic figure of crime.

In an attempt to increase the recording of crimes, we could adopt the simple technique of recording telephone calls as originally done by the Nottinghamshire police. This is a very simple, inexpensive process, and if it was to be practised all over the country, could see a significant change in crime rate levels, echoing a more realistic figure of crime.

The introduction of the serious and organised crime agency (SOCA), used to tackle organised crime, which is due to come into being in April 2006, may help to represent

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<sup>28</sup> K.S. Williams, *Textbook on Criminology*, (5<sup>th</sup> edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, chap 4)

<sup>29</sup> 'Cut crime 15 per cent, police told' *The Times*, November 25<sup>th</sup> 2004, p.7

statistics, particularly in the area of white collar crime, in a more accurate view. It will help to detect more undetected crime. The SOCA will replace many areas including the national crime squad, and the national criminal intelligence service. It has been criticised as being ‘an expensive publicity stunt and will carry on using the same people but under a different logo’.<sup>30</sup> However, It is difficult to access the true implications of SOCA, as it has yet to come into force. Also, in the queens speech 2004 it was proposed for a radical overhaul of the police and criminal evidence act 1984, which would give ‘community support officers and other police back up staff, the power to tackle anti social behaviour’<sup>31</sup>. This would free police officers for front line duty, helping to enable more crimes to be detected and recorded, subsequently reflecting a more realistic figure of crime.

It can be argued that any form of information gathering can never be fully accurate. Statistics and surveys never provide a simple mirror image of the world ‘out there’. Any search for consistency of the results from statistics and surveys can achieve only the ‘empty shell of unprincipled uniformity’<sup>32</sup>. It is unlikely that Statistics and surveys examining crime rates, will ever accurately illustrate the true extent of crime as a social phenomenon. On a more fundamental level, the criminal statistics remain solely a list of reported offences and can never become a list which also includes the crimes which people face. They give a distorted and partial view of crime, and desperately need to be reviewed in a bid for a more accurate reflection as to the true extent of crime. Although the National Crime survey did not arrive till 1982, it has added a new dimension to our knowledge about crime and police recording practises, helping to reflect a more realistic figure of crime. Nevertheless, there is still much need for reform, in order to include a wider range of offences.

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<sup>30</sup> ‘UK’s Crime-fighting agency will use the press to set agenda’, The independent, J anuary 10<sup>th</sup> 2005, p.29

<sup>31</sup> ‘Queens’ Speech: The politics of fear’, The Independent, November 23<sup>rd</sup> 2004, p.1

<sup>32</sup> *Crime and punishment, interpreting the data*, chap 4, eadem

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