

**Official crime statistics can be knocked down and so far
sideways those responsible criminologists ignore them.
Discuss.**

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Introduction

Social scientist has been aware of the pitfalls and limitation in official crime statistics. Arguments have surrounded the official crime statistics to be sideways, and they can be distorted by social and institutional factors. (Reiner, Maguire and Coleman et al) In this assignment we will analyse the problems surrounding the interpretation of official crime statistics and illustrate how they are constructed and consequently where their systematic biases lies.

Dark figures-non-reported and non-recorded criminal behaviour

The core problem interpreting the official statistics on crimes that have been recorded by the police arise from the fact that they are incomplete and biased. For an event to be recorded and known to police category it has to overcome two hurdles: Addressing of Issues and Appropriate handling of procedures.

Criminal behaviour must come to the attention of the police and should be recorded as such by the police using his appropriate procedures. Many criminal events may fail to enter the record at either stage. They may not come to be known to the police at all, even they do, the police may not record them as crimes for variety of reasons. Therefore, the problems of non-reporting and non-recording lead to the official crime statistics becoming unreliable. (Reiner, 1996)

Many offences will fail to become apparent to police due to various social factors. Awareness is such a 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 and the police can enable the crime to become invisible. (Jupp et al., 1999: 7) The invisibility of crime, leads to victim failure to report and the police unable to take a proactive approach to discover

Although victims are aware that they have been victimised by criminal acts, they maybe reluctant to report to police due to variety of reasons: fear of reprisals, fear of self incrimination, embarrassment (Devis et al., 1995: 82-84) and lack of confidence in the police (Koffman, 1996)

However what is more problematic is police bias in recording processes. A great deal of discretion remains in police hands about whether and how to record possible offences, which do come to their notice. They can exercise their discretion for not to record due to their perception, such as considered some cases as too trivial, deemed not to constitute a criminal offence, with the result that they are either not recorded at all, or are officially 'no crime' later. (Maguire, 1997) Thus, the police are reluctant to record some cases due to some institutional reasons, for example, to improve their overall clear up rate. (Coleman and Bottomley 1981) (Maguire, 1997) These reasons lead to approximately 44% of crimes reported to the police do not end up in official statistics. (BCS 1998 p.19)

In this sense, whether to record incidents into official record or not is dependent on the police's culture as well as their institutional practice.

These dark figures lead directly into two major dangers in the interpretation of official crime statistics. (Reiner, 1996) Firstly, they act as an unreliable guide to trends in crimes. An increase in the rate of recorded crime could occur not because of rise in offending behaviour, but because of a higher proportion of crimes being reported by victims, or from more proactive policing discovering more offences, or from police recording a higher proportion of the crimes they become aware of. (Reiner, 1996)

Secondly, the statistics may be a highly misleading indication of the pattern of offending. If some crimes are particularly likely to come to light then the picture conveyed of the prevalent characteristics of crimes, victims and offenders may be correspondingly distorted. (Reiner, 1996)

Limited coverage of cases in official crime statistics

The incompleteness of official crime statistics are also related to the counting method of official crime statistics. Even as a record of criminal offences officially known to the police, it is still incomplete. Notifiable offences only included those being tried in Crown Court, leading to a larger number of summary offences, which do not appear in the figures. Although in general the notifiable offences included, which might widely be regarded as more serious, however is not necessarily the universal case. Summary offences encompasses such cases as common assault, assault on a police officer, crudely to children and drink driving. They are arguably more serious than many cases which regarded as notifiable offences, such as criminal damage or minor thefts. (Maguire, 1997; Reiner, 1996)

In addition, the official crime statistics do not include offences recorded by police forces for which the Home Office is not responsible. (Maguire, 1997; Reiner, 1996) Other governmental policing agencies, such as British Transport Police, Ministry of Defense police as well as other governmental departments like Inland Revenue, Customs and Excise and Department of Social Security. These former departments generally have investigative and prosecutorial functions dealing with the vast majority of cases by using their administrative powers to impose financial penalties, yet these are all excluded in official crime statistics, (Maguire, 1997; Reiner, 1996 Coleman et al., 1996) unless there is a prosecution and they become part of the statistics in later section of official crime statistics. (Reiner, 1996) This counting method of official crime statistics project the government as well as public perspectives on crime, they both regarded summary offences and those white collar crimes as less important, while in fact, these cases are not really trivial in nature.

Problems in counting rules of official crime statistics

Apart from the question of the coverage of the official crime statistics, many technical problems exist in the precise construction of the figures that may hamper the recorded

numbers misleading and unreliable. (Reiner, 1996) The basic problem is transforming complex incidents into precise numbers of offences for the purpose of recording rates of crime. There are important questions to ask whereby the method in which the individual crimes are counted. Some kinds of offence tend to be repeated many times within a short period, to the extent that there may be several separate actions or people involved they may consider to form part of one concerted criminal behavior. The number of offences that should be recorded is a matter of interpretation and judgment, without a clear counting guideline, consistency will be unattainable, (Reiner, 1996) thus it will generate difficulty in comparison.

In 1980, an attempt was introduced to establish clearer rules -The instructions for the preparation of statistics relating to crime by Home Office; (Reiner, 1996; Coleman et al., 1996) nevertheless there is still room for ambiguity and discretion about accounting for crime which could bring about variations in figures.

The general rule is now that if several offences are committed 'in one incident', only the most serious is counted, with the exception when violence is involved, in which case the rule is 'one offence for one victim'. (Maguire, 1997; Reiner, 1996) Though, with regard to the other offences there is only the guideline that a number of incidents which form part of the same series should be counted as one offence. This clearly allows individual police officers responsibility in compiling statistics with a choice of measure of discretion in deciding whether a number of events constitute parts of the same series or separate events. (Reiner, 1996)

Farrington and Dowds (1985)'s study based on Nottinghamshire illustrated different police counting method and reactions that distorted the picture of crime. The study suggested that its apparently huge crime rate in comparison to other counties was due to a greater tendency for the police in Nottinghamshire to record thefts of items of little value, offences originating in admissions, and multiple, continuous or series offences as separate crimes. (Maguire, 1997; Coleman et al., 1996) hence, the different crime rate reflected differences in police reactions to crime while there was little relations to difference in criminal behaviour. (ibid.)

The impact of legal and social development in official crime statistics

A further problem is that if the guidelines were altered to take into account legal or social developments, this introduced inconsistency between the figures before and after the change. (Reiner, 1996) Monica Walker (1995:7) discusses the impact of a number of recent changes in legislation, and notes how the many minor alternations in the classification of offences brought about by the Criminal Law Act of 1977 meant that the figures before that date are not strictly comparable with those after it. (Coleman et al., 1996)

If there are any legal changes in the status of offences as notifiable or not, this can lead to apparent increases or decreases in the volume of recorded crime purely as a result of new counting rules. Some offences may likewise become abolished, as were homosexual acts

in private between consenting males over 21 years of age by the Sexual Offences Act 1967. Nigel Walker (1971) has argued that the anticipation of such legislation led to a dramatic reduction in police operations in this area, and this in statistics of 'indecent between males' in the years leading up to the Act. (Coleman et al., 1996)

Not only legal changes will affect the counting method in official crime statistics, the course of legal proceeding, which distorted the nature of offences, will also affect the counting method in official figures. (Reiner, 1996) For example, a person arrested and charged with murder but ultimately acquitted. Should this be altered in the statistics of crimes known to police as no crime occurred? This example is a good illustration on how to court proceedings affect the discrepancy between the 'reality' and the rates shown in the official crime statistics.

The problem of minor offences counting the same as major offences

Criminal Crime statistics lists the notifiable offences recorded by the police under a total of sixty four headings and grouped under eight broader headings. Most of these groups contained a considerable variety of offences, in terms of both context and seriousness, but most are dominated numerically in just one or two. In other words, a relatively small number of offences categories play a major part in dominating both the overall crime total and size of each offences group in relation to others. Moreover, trends in these dominant offences types tend to disguise countertrends in less prolific offences. Furthermore, the statistics can be misleading without an acknowledgement of the relative importance of offences judged by criteria other than sheer numbers: for example, in terms of public concern, the effect upon victims, or other number and length of prison sentences they attract. In this sense, this counting method is not able to provide a clear picture on the distribution of crime in terms of seriousness and it reflects nothing for comparisons except numerical expression of number. (Maguire, 1997)

Clear up rate

The other set of data, which is analysing in detail of the official crime statistics, is police clear up rate. These data are claimed to be accounted for as the police performance indicator. They are however, a most dubious measure of police effectiveness and efficiency. (Reiner, 1996; Coleman et al., 1996) The clear up rate only purports to provide an index of a limited aspect of the police work, thus, even use clear up rate to measure the detective efficiency, it is still problematic as well. The police can count as a cleared-up crime can be a case falling far short of sufficient proof for a conviction. In practice, a high proportion of crime are cleared up as a result of statements made by an offender who has been convicted in other offence, either in the form of crimes to be taken into consideration in a sort of package deal when being sentenced, or through prison or post sentence visits by detectives to convict criminals. (Reiner, 1996: 194) Moreover, clear up rate can be resulted from bargaining between police and suspected or convicted offenders in which the latter admit offences in return for various advantages. The number of clear up rates is thus open to manipulation by police officers eager to provide evidence of their efficacy. (ibid.) Furthermore, as mentioned above, the clear up rates can be vary

because of changes in public reporting behaviour and police strategies of deployment to uncover crime as well as their recording practice. Based on these deductions, criminologists should be aware such statistics can be reflected in a naïve way as a simple indicator of police effectiveness.

Victim survey-British Crime Survey (BCS)

Criminologists have long been aware of the problem of dark figure of unrecorded crime, especially realists. Realists are concerned with the accuracy and completeness with which data represents the 'real crime that takes place' (Bideman and Reiss 1976:2) (Coleman et al., 1996) This led to the introduction of victim survey, which is aimed directly at the problem of dark figure and attempts to reveal the 'real picture of crime'. The victim survey, therefore, has been regarded as the most significant development in our understanding of crime in the last decade. (Reiner, 1996)

The first victim survey in England was conducted in 1981. The victimisation data provided by the BCS provided an alternative measure of crime to offences recorded by the police. (Mayhew, 2000) It also offered a comparison to trends in victimisation as measured by the surveys with the police recorded statistics, thus, it permits some judgment as to how reporting and recording changes affect official crime statistics. (Reiner, 1996)

It seems that it is a good starting point to make us closer to the real picture of crime as we know more from the unrecorded and unreported crime. However, like any research projects the BCS has methodological problems and limitations.

One such problem is that the coverage of BCS is not wide enough, some of the victimless crime, like business crimes are excluded in BCS due to lack of awareness from respondents. (Mayhew, 2000) Secondly, the representation of BCS is doubted due to lack of sample provided in BCS. (ibid.) Household sampling frames excluded potentially high-risk groups such as homeless or those non-household accommodations, thus, the respond rate of BCS is relatively low. Due to lack of sample in BCS, findings are subject to sampling errors; its estimates are imprecise, in particular for rare crimes such as robbery and serious assault. (ibid.) There are also a set of more specific limitations that arise from asking people to remember experiences of crime and locating them accurately in time. (Mayhew, 2000; Coleman et al., 1996) Thus, in surveys where people have been asked about offences known to have been reported to the police, more trivial crimes are less likely to be recalled whilst more serious incidents are more likely to be over-counted. The count of crime from victim surveys, then, is both incomplete and biased. (Mayhew, 2000; Coleman et al., 1996)

Conclusion

Given what said the above argument, the inevitable omissions and biases of all the most commonly available statistics on crime, the official crimes known to the police as well as victim survey conducted by government department, does it mean we should totally

ignore them? This seems an unnecessary rigorous approach. Careful comparison of the official statistics with what available about crime trends and patterns from other source, usually allow safe judgments about whether they are broadly pointing in the right direction. The greater variety of perspectives on crime now available with the advent of regular crime surveys allows reasonable confidence in judging whether officially measured changes are broadly misleading or not.(Reiner, 1996) Triangulation could be a good approach to understand the crime trend.

The official crime statistics, like the core object of the study-crime, is ultimately, a socially construct: (Maguire, 1997); Coleman et al., 1996) The social culture affected people reporting behaviour; the criminal justice bureaucracies' practice and culture influenced the recording and counting method. By understanding more about the official crime statistics, it can help us to understand some important aspects of process of criminal justice bureaucracies as well as the role of the public. Furthermore, as we understand more about the elements of the way in which the official picture of crime is produced, it can enlighten us to develop a picture of crime, which is different from the official one, as well as to understand more about the structure and culture of society in a broader sense. (Coleman et al., 1996) However, what we have to bear in mind is, we need to understand how the data were compiled and what they represent, hence, aware the pitfall of official crime statistics when we use it in developing criminological theories. To the extent, a better understanding in all forms of statistics is essential in developing theories.

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