

Official data on crime and criminals should be considered as ‘social constructs’. explain and discuss.

In this essay I will be looking at the official data namely the British crime survey it's negative and positive points and the affects these have.

Official crime statistics are the total number of crimes recorded by the police. These form the backbone of Functionalist theory on crime and it is also used to form much social policy. Official crime statistics should not be accepted as closer analysis finds that they can be unreliable. Giddens described them as: "...probably the least reliable of all official figures on social issues." But official crime statistics do have many strong points. Official crime statistics are often the only data available on crime. It is virtually impossible for any sociologist to get a full representative picture on crime for the whole country but official crime statistics allow a snap shot of the country's crime rates as a whole. The statistics are also readily available.

British crime survey or BCS, is released annually. This allows the police, government and sociologists to compare and contrast the data. They can analyse the effects that legislation and policing methods have had.

However crime statistics especially the BCS are highly criticised, mainly in

the collection of the data. The survey is bound to be flawed as it can only report the crime that has been reported. Functionalists see this as there are 'dark figure of crime' that is members of the public do not report all crime, as they see some crimes as petty and believe they would only be wasting police time and resources. Such crimes as rape, domestic violence and child abuse are also highly underrepresented in the statistics due to the fear and sometimes shame of reporting these crimes. This means that the true crime statistics may be a lot higher than as reported in the official crime statistics. To combat this victim studies and self-report studies have been used to get a clearer picture of crime. The statistics are often used by the ruling government to emphasise the progress they have made. However the statistics are easily manipulated e.g. by focusing police effort on certain areas the crime will drop considerably. Also in what is deemed to be a crime also affects the statistics e.g. the lowering of the previously class B drug cannabis to a class C drug, due to this changing the law it will appear that crime in this area will have reduced however it will just be that it is no longer reported in the way it once was. The other side is that certain crime may rise in the latest British crime survey the rates of rape were increased however it is difficult to determine whether rape has actually increased, or if more women are reporting it.

The data is also used to support key ideas in sociology. Positivist sociologists see the statistics as providing an accurate picture of crime in society so this forms the basis of their theory. Interpretist sociologists' crime statistics don't inform the whole of their research, they see it as the starting point for examining the social construction of crime. They also benefit social policy because social problems are easily quantifiable so can be identified and dealt with easily. They also benefit sociology because the methods they use to collect the data are scientific and scientific research is more likely to receive external funding.

Another way to look at statistics relating to crime, is that what they really show is the process by which people are labelled by society the police and the judicial service. It asks the question when does discretion become discrimination? Ultimately the decision to arrest someone and charge them is in the hands of the police. The prejudices of that police officer can affect the crime statistics. The labelling perspective argues that crime is a social process. The interpretation of criminal is subject to the perception of those who have the power to deem someone as either good or bad law abiding or deviant. There is the argument of the self-fulfilling prophecy that once someone is labeled as deviant or criminal that they will respond to this label and live up to it. However this view has been contested as for most

criminals, criminal activity slows down or ceases to exist after the age of 25.

Interpretivists say that a persons' label is the most important feature about them because it can define them and how people treat them. It can become a master status but it can also be negotiated. This is why interpretivists are so interested in why certain people are labelled as criminals by the police because it affects people's position in society. Marxists on the other hand ignore what the official statistics say. They simply see them as a means by which the ruling class blame the subject class for societies problems. Therefore these statistics bare no relation to the true crime rate at all.

The root of the problem is in the definition of crime what constitutes crime and what doesn't. Even with rules and legislation it is still left to the discretion and interpretation of the individual, and here in lies the problem. It would appear that crime is socially constructed.

## Bibliography

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