

Official statistics can be used as a general research tool covering topics ranging from the economy to unemployment and from health to education. As far as criminal statistics are concerned, the major method of measurement is through the collation of these official figures, collected by the police and published annually by the Home Office. These figures should therefore be the major base upon which to form analyses and comparisons over time and over societies. Unfortunately though, the statistics collected by police are a poor indication of the full extent of criminality in the UK. This essay will seek to examine the extent to which official statistics can be said to give a distorted picture of criminality in Britain. In order to do this, the problems faced and created by relying on official statistics will be stated and the alternatives to official statistics, their advantages and disadvantages will be considered.

The first problem encountered when trying to collate figures that give a clear picture of crime is the question 'what is classed as a crime?' Criminal statistics have been collected since 1857 and therefore are an excellent trend of source data. Unfortunately, 'crime' has changed over that period of time. Therefore the comparability of offences and offence groupings over time is very problematic. Criminal statistics are subject to changing definitions of offences, although recent and planned changes in counting rules are pushing figures up towards a more realistic level. Changes introduced in 1999, for example, included common assault for the first time and led to 12% increase in the total number of offences.

Another reason for official statistics not giving an accurate representation of crime levels is the fact that a lot of crime occurs that is not reported. Although the police do detect some crimes for themselves such as driving offences like speeding or fighting in football grounds for example, this only accounts for a quarter of detected crime. The majority of offences that are reported are done so by the victim or victims. However, the problem is that not all offences are actually reported to the police by the victim. So what are the reasons for this? Surely if a wrong was done to an individual, that person would want to make sure the wrong-doer was held accountable for their actions? Not always. There are various reasons as to why some crimes go unreported. Firstly, the victim may be unaware that a crime has taken place. This is particularly true in the cases of shoplifting in large stores and in crimes against children.

Furthermore, there is the consideration that the victim themselves may have been behaving criminally and would not want to bring attention to their own actions by reporting an infraction against them. Also, the victim may sometimes feel the offence was "too trivial to report it to the police".<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, the victim could be worried about possible retaliation if they report the crime. They may have been threatened into silence and be afraid to come forward. They may also worry that they will not be believed.

Another deciding factor on whether or not a crime is reported is that the victim may actually know their offender and be reluctant to go to the police. This is particularly evident in cases of domestic abuse and violence. Or feeling that the offence was their fault, as can be seen in cases of date rape and sexual assault. Women tend to hide and conceal such experiences, often fearing the physical, emotional and material repercussions of reporting.

Furthermore, Croall argues that crime at work, for example, is often not reported through fear of losing jobs.<sup>2</sup> There is also the problem of white-collar crime. White-collar crime is not

represented in official statistics, as it is very difficult to initially detect and then prosecute and is therefore not adequately represented in the official statistics.

Even when crimes are reported to the police, this is not an absolute guarantee that they will be recorded and therefore included in the official statistics. There are certain criteria set out for the collection of criminal statistics by the police, but these guidelines are very open to “different interpretation by different forces, different divisions within the same force and even different police officers.”<sup>3</sup> For example, a police officer may record a reported theft as ‘lost property’ if it appears to that particular officer that there was no foul play involved. It would be impossible for the police to record every single minor infraction they encounter. It is necessary for the smooth running of the force that officers use their discretion in the course of their day to day duties and also that the force uses its discretion in the allocation of its resources.

Another way in which official statistics can be said to be inaccurate is that some types of crime are “controlled by bodies other than the police.”<sup>4</sup> For example, drug and other types of smuggling are controlled by the Customs and Excise and unless such crimes reach court and are recorded in court records, they will not make the official statistics.

It is obvious, therefore, that the official criminal statistics do not give a true reflection of criminality in Britain. So are there alternatives? If so, then what are they and do they solve the problems presented by the official statistics? Alternatives to the official statistics have shown there to be a ‘Dark Figure of Crime’. This refers to the criminal activity that falls outside the officially recorded offences. The statistics of crime recorded by the police do not reveal the full incidence of crime committed, since not all crimes are reported to the police and, of those that are, not all are subsequently recorded.

There are three methods used to try and assess the size of this dark figure. The first method is estimating or guessing. This is obviously very unreliable and the conclusions that different people come to are often extremely varied. There is one they do agree on however, and that is that a great deal of crime does go undetected.

The second method used is self-report studies. These involve going and asking people to volunteer their past illegal actions. There are both advantages and disadvantages of this method. One advantage is that they pick up on private and victimless crime, which is a disadvantage of the next method. They also record levels of crime above the official statistics and are therefore useful when trying to calculate the dark figure.

The results, however, are also subject to limitations. There is the problem of validity in that the respondents may often exaggerate or under-report their delinquencies through dishonesty, bravado or simple forgetfulness.

Furthermore, the sample of individuals is often not representative of the entire population. Most studies tend to focus on adolescents and therefore, although giving a good picture of youth crime, fail to reflect the population as a whole.

The third alternative method used is victim or crime surveys (principally the British Crime Survey or BCS). These surveys work by asking a randomly selected sample of the population about their experiences with crime in the past year. Like self-report studies, the findings of these annually published reports state that official statistics do not give a true reflection of crime levels in the UK.

The BCS covers a wide range of topic areas in its questionnaires and this is one of its major advantages. Some of the areas covered include victim's experiences property and personal crime, their fears and worries in relation to crime, violence at work, illegal drug use and security measures including those such as Neighbourhood Watch. Another major advantage is that it also shows who and what social groups are most at risk from crime.

Another virtue of crime surveys such, as the BCS is that they not only count crimes, but they also collect additional info about crime, the victim and the police. The official statistics provide very little information on victims and offenders and the BCS is an excellent alternative to these statistics. Also, the BCS records both reported and unreported crimes and can suggest why reasons as to why some crimes go unreported. Furthermore, they look at attitudes towards the Criminal Justice System, including the police and the courts.

One criticism is that, although a crime may be repeated over and over, for example, in cases of domestic violence, it only appears once in the published results derived from the survey. It also disregards consensual offences. Crime surveys do not provide a complete picture of crime. They do not cover crimes committed against businesses (eg fraud, shoplifting etc); crimes which people may not be aware of (eg environmental crimes); nor victimless crime (eg drug offences). The accuracy of crime surveys is limited by the reliability of answers given by respondents and sampling and non-sampling errors. Crime surveys offer a better guide than police recorded crime statistics to levels and trends of certain types of crime since reporting levels and police recording practices tend to vary over time.

Both self-report studies and victim or crime surveys fail to give an account of white-collar crime.

The official crime statistics are often criticised for failing to provide a clear and simple mirror image of criminal activity. It is true that official statistics give a distorted picture of criminality in Britain. There are a number of disadvantages to these statistics. Some of them can be solved by alternative means such as self-report studies or crime surveys such as the BCS. However, perfectly consistent data may be an unobtainable goal. All methods of gathering crime data have their disadvantages. The complexities of statistics merely reflect the complexities within society. In conclusion, the official statistics can be considered to be a "better reflection of societies attitudes towards crime and criminals than an objective measure of criminal behaviour". 5

## ENDNOTES

- 1) *Textbook on Criminology; Williams K; Pg 61*
- 2) *Crime and Society in Britain; Croall H; Pg 279*
- 3) *Textbook on Criminology; Williams K; Pg 63*
- 4) *Textbook on Criminology; Williams K; Pg 65*
- 5) *Textbook on Criminology; Williams K; Pg 61*

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