

CRI101 Introduction to Criminology

Assignment 2: Essay

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“Official statistics on crime give an account of crime as opposed to a count of crime.” Evaluate this statement using examples to illustrate your answer.

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70%

The Official statistics of crime have been compiled by the Home Office from police and court records since 1876 (Maguire 2002, p. 334). These statistics have for some time been the dominant measure of crime. They have been used by the media, politicians, policy makers and academics to make judgements about society (Jupp et al 2000, p.58). Crime trends have been identified and new legislations and practices have been put in place as a direct result of these statistics. The Official Statistics have shown a continual increase since they commenced, with around 100 thousand crimes recorded in its first year and with around 5.2 million recorded in recent years. The major increase occurring from the late 1950s to 1992 when the 'crime rate' hit its peak. Why has there been such a dramatic increase in crimes? Are the Official Statistics an accurate measure of crime? And can we solely rely on these statistics to form judgements about our society? This essay will address these questions, investigating the reliability of the Official Statistics and identify changes and other sources of information.

There have been a number of arguments into the reasons why the crime rate, or should we say the recording of crime, has significantly increased. Firstly the number people involved in the measurement of crime have significantly increased, and as Galliher points out, 'there is no doubt about it: more police, more judges and more prisons appear to have a nearly infinite capacity to increase the amount of officially recorded crime' (Galliher 1989, in Muncie 2001, p. 29). The identification of the control that the police have over the statistics lead to the argument by Taylor (1998). He identified that the rise in the Official Statistics between 1914 and 1960 could be linked to the senior police officers playing the 'crime card' in response to low wages and police cuts (Muncie 2001, p. 28). By recording a large number of minor offences, which were traditionally 'cuffed', crime statistics were increased; funding was subsequently increased to combat this and crime and policing were moved further up the political agenda.

The complete opposite can be said in later years crime was seen to be spiralling out of control, the media would sensationalise the statistics, being very selective in what they would print, causing what Stan Cohen (1972) defines as a 'morale panic'. Headlines would read, 'Black Crime: The Alarming Figures' (Daily Mail, 11 March 1982), 'Call for more cops to fight crime rise' (The Sun, 24 October 2003) and 'Violence Rises 10%' (The Sun, 10 March 1997). Such attention by the media was identified to have played a part in the increased reporting of certain incidents, which in turn could lead to more police attention to that area of crime and furthermore new legislations have subsequently been introduced (Muncie 2001; Maguire, 2002). For example, rave music in the 1980's was identified as the cause of all youth misconduct, especially rave parties. It was highly publicised by the press and highly policed. In 1994 the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act made it illegal for any large gatherings featuring music with a repetitive beat to take place.

Crime and Policing are now at the forefront of the political agenda, targets are put into place by the Home Office for policing, for example attainment targets and efficiency targets, this in turn may lead to the 'downgrading' of certain crimes in order to meet these goals, again highlighting the 'elasticity' of the recording methods. (Muncie 2001)

This 'control' over crime statistics is not only limited to the police force, it starts with the reporting of crime from the general public. The police rely heavily on the general public to report crime. It has been identified that they are responsible for reporting 80 per cent of all recorded crime (Maguire 2002, p.335). But less than half of all known crime is reported to the police (Muncie 2001, p. 26). This 'dark figure' of crime has led to the introduction of victim surveys, the most widely known being The British Crime Survey (BCS). It was introduced in 1982 and is now used alongside the official statistics. In 1992 the BCS were compared to the official statistics and it was found that only 40 per cent of robbery and theft from a person was reported and only 48 per cent of violent incidents were reported (Muncie 2001, p. 26). Muncie then determines that this under reporting is due to; ignorance that a crime has been committed, the crime is victimless (for example, prostitution), the victim is powerless (for example, child abuse), there is distrust of the police or protection from the police may not be given (Muncie 2001, p. 26). But the main reasons for not reporting a crime were identified as the crime not being deemed as serious by the victim or observer, or they thought that the police would not be able to take any action. This under reporting does not occur at this extent for every classification of crime. The 1992 BCS also identified that burglary with loss and auto theft had an almost 100 per cent reportage rate which is linked to the increase in telephone ownership and more importantly the wider ownership of house contents and car insurance (Muncie 2001, p. 26) but this might also have been effected by fraudulent reports and claims.

Crimes such as 'white collar' crimes are also highly under reported. This is highly related to the fact that a number of important non Home Office agencies are not included in the official Statistics, such as, British transport police, the Ministry of Defence and the UK Atomic Energy Authority. More importantly are the range of tax and fraud benefit cases known to the Inland Revenue and Customs and Excise, which are excluded unless they are brought to court (Muncie 2001, p 23). They are rendered as 'invisible crime'. Such crime is also highly underestimated and more often than not seen as less serious than 'street crime', even though they are probably far more numerous and far more costly than recorded crime.

Once a crime is reported there is no guarantee that it will find its way into the official statistics. The BCS found that this happens to approximately a 40 per cent of all reported crime. This 'grey figure' of crime is mainly attributed to police discretion. They may chose not to record it, for example, a family dispute may be classified as 'domestic- advice given' (Muncie 2001, p. 27) or if recorded may be 'no crimed' or 'NFA' (no further action), in each case they do not make their way into the statistics. This selectiveness in policing was identified by the home office and in April 2002 a new National Recording Standard (NCRS) was introduced. The aim of this was to promote greater consistency between police forces, and to establish a 'prima facie' approach (Maguire 2002, p.335) whereby the victims determine the recording of the crime. This will require the recording of all reports of crime, whether from victims, witnesses or third parties. For example, an officer may be called to a pub fight where neither side wishes to press charges, previously this would have gone unrecorded but under the new NCRS it will be counted as a violent crime. This new measure will understandably cause an impact on the crime figures but these have been taken into account when publishing the Home Office Crime in England and Wales 2002/2003 statistics. (Safer Society Magazine 2001/2002, p.22; Home Office Statistical Bulletin)

The essay has identified some of the factors that caused the massive increase in crime in the mid 1900s, which showed that it was not an increase in crime itself but an increase in the reports of crime. It also identified how police discretion could darken the accuracy of the Official Statistics and how the comparative BCS may give a 'truer' picture of crime. It has also identified how the measurement of crime is seen by many as 'unreliable'. The methods by which it is measured, the extent to which it can be altered and the amount that is 'left out' shows that it is not a true picture of crime. Is a true picture of crime possible? Even the BCS cannot accurately show the actual amount of crime due to the size of the sample and 'sampling error'. It would take the continuous monitoring of every person living in England and Wales, in which case no crime would be committed as you would know that you would be caught! Many people do not believe that the official statistics are a waste of time, but they should be viewed as what they are, a measurement of the activities of the Criminal Justice System (CJS) in particular the police.

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