

**How do media and statistical sources combine to  
construct crime in particular ways?**

The media and statistical sources combine to construct crime in many different ways, as can be seen in the contradictory reports from The Independent and The Sun Newspaper's.

The headline from The Sun 'Drunk and disorderly: booze fuels 12% surge in brawling crimes' (*The Sun*, 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2004) came out on the same day that The Independent newspaper headlined with 'Crime: the truth' (*The Independent*, 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2004).

The two articles report on the rise and fall of crime rates. The Sun states that there has been a 12% surge in violent crime fueled by booze and binge drinking based on police reporting.

The Independent newspaper reports that there has been a 39% fall in crime rates over the past nine years based on figures from the British Crime Survey.

It has been said that the public are misinformed of real crime statistics, as they are manipulated and socially constructed through the eyes of the media. The trends of crime may not be as accurate as we would think on the basis of the 'official' crime figures. When deconstructing crime's ideologies and results, it is essential to remain objective and to assess the reliability of the statistic and where it has come from.

The question of how much crime really exists and how many victims there really are, is still largely unanswered. This essay will attempt to look at how crime is measured, and where 'official' statistics are constructed from. The validity and reliability of this data will be discussed. It will also examine how the public can be misinformed of the real figures of crime throughout the eyes of the media and how this has elevated the public's 'fear' of crime. The term 'moral panic' will also be addressed.

How crime is recorded is a good place to start, crime statistics were first published in France in 1842 (*Quetelet, 1842*). England and Wales then followed suit in 1876 and the U.S even later in 1930. the data was collected by the respective home office or FBI. Crimes were recorded by the authority's and from this basis the government and public could see how much crime was going on. This was sufficient evidence until it became clear that many crimes that had been committed, were in fact not being reported. It therefore became necessary to do nationwide surveys on random samples and to question them about crimes that had occurred to them.

This led to the development of The British Crime Survey in 1982. It revealed that at that time only 50% of crime was reported to the police and that 'official' statistics may be just scratching the surface on the real depths of the levels of crime. The validity of the 'official' statistics was now in question and it became essential to use both methods of data when analyzing the levels of crime.

*Quinney and Wildeman (1977)* believed there were three different interpretations of the crime statistics. The orthodox approach, an interactionist approach and the structural conflict approach. These argue that the way in which the data is gained, and its source, is reflective of how it should be measured.

*Maguire (1997)* through his research found that 80% of all recorded crime is reported by public.

The survey's, such as the BCS, state that only 50% of crime is actually reported. Therefore a huge gap can be seen in the lack of completed statistics and what they really know. The actual figures are unattainable from a survey or the home office. Hidden crime is a big issue and always prevalent within each society throughout the world.

It has been stated that an increase in crime levels could be because people feel more comfortable to report a crime and therefore it is not that there are higher crime levels than in previous years but that the level of public reporting has increased. The public's misrepresentation of crime can be compared historically within changes in legislation, such as definition of a crime and how they change, minor and major crimes and how that has changed and government acts.

The relationship between the media and crime is a very powerful and embedded one. It is a medium to which the public can be reached and manipulated. Crime, whether it is news or entertainment, monopolizes much of the television, newspapers, radio and other forms of media. It can be said that the media caters for the public's need and therefore whatever is seen or read is there because that is what the public want. The public's fear of crime has been said to be greater than crime itself. How the media portrays criminals and criminal acts is how the public will probably view it to.

*Williams and Dickinson (1997)* stated that people who read newspapers have a higher fear of crime.

This is confirmed by *Box(1997)* who elaborates on media stereotypes and how criminals are perceived through the media. He also believes in a need to examine the unreported crimes and the people behind them and their threat to society. His philosophy brings us back to the theory that laws are put in place to protect the upper classes, wealthy, powerful and privileged people within society. To protect and to allow them to become perpetrators of the law, that go unreported or recognized.

The newspaper '*The Sun*' (22<sup>nd</sup> July 2004), reported that booze has fueled a 12% rise in violent/brawling crimes.

The article states that 'official' figures have found there to be a 12% increase in violent crime. The home office figures indicate a rise in most serious crimes, such as, rape, serious wounding, racial attacks and harassment. The article speaks of Blunkett's retaliation to these figures and that his results from the BCS have found a 5% decrease in offenses. These statistics (BCS) are based on interviews with the public and not actual crimes reported by the police.

The newspaper '*The Independent*' (22<sup>nd</sup> July 2004), reported 'Crime: The Truth'. This article stated that crime has fallen by 395 in the last nine years. These statistics come from The British Crime Survey, and they are crimes that people have experienced but have not necessarily reported. A decrease in violent crime was found compared to the 12% increase found in the home office reports. However an increase in violent crime due to crack and gun culture was found.

The way in which the statistics are compiled are very different and therefore the results are very dissimilar and there is a dramatic discrepancy between the data. The

crime correspondent talks about the insatiable reporting of 'bad' news in the media and the hunger for reports of violence, murder and sex. (Benneto, 2004). The piece also states that there is a fear of the country's 'binge' drinking problem and that it could lead to a rise in crime levels and violence. A 5% decrease is a far cry from the 15% decrease that labour have predicted for the next five years. The Sun states that since labour has been in power violent crime has trebled.

It is hard to distinguish between reality and fantasy when reading some articles in newspapers and magazines, where does the information come from? This leads on to the subject of the reliability and validity of the statistics, and the limitations of the methods of collecting the data. The home office statistics are constructed through recording of crimes thorough the police. This data is incomplete, in that many crimes are not recorded, some are 'domestic' and unreported. The information comes solely from the police and crimes committed through other bodies are left unrecorded , for example, The Transport Police, Vat Customs and Excise and so on.

The British Crime Survey collates its data from surveys on random samples about crimes they have witnessed or experienced. This reveals higher crime levels in some areas and lower in others. It has its limitations in its methodology. Firstly, the samples are random and therefore not conclusive of all members of society. What areas do the survey take place in? What age group? What sex? There are many variables involved in how the crime data is measured. The survey is not carried out on under 16's, which eliminates a huge proportion of possible 'criminals' and 'victims'. It also does not include sex offences, child molestation and murder.

*Mayhew and Manning*(1992) compared the BCS and Police Stats and found that only 48% of violent crimes were reported.

An example of misinformed newspaper reporting can be seen in *Cohen's*(1973) investigation into the article '*Wild ones "beat up" Margate*' in *The Daily Mirror* in 1964, 18<sup>th</sup> May.

It was stated that the 'gangs' the Mods and Rockers had been causing trouble and 'smashed' their way throughout the town of Margate. It was front page news, and scared the public into believing these 'gangs' were dangerous and to fear for their safety.

*Cohen*(1973) found there had been much less of a disturbance than reported and that the violence was more verbal than physical. It was later reported further that the incident may have been 'a little over-reported'. This was the media distorting events and attributing to the public a moral panic, an increase in police presence and thus reacting to the youths behaving as they have been 'labelled' from the media.

*Wilkin's*(1964) model of deviancy amplification clearly demonstrates how the media create scare tactics through its prevarication in some reports.

In conclusion, the statistics that are available from all sources are inaccurate and do not give the full or correct picture on the levels of crime. The media manipulate the statistics to construct the story and the public's view on crime and criminals. The public's higher fear of crime can be attributed to by the media's representation, but, crime has become an integral part of entertainment, to which the public choose to watch and enjoy. Crimewatch attracts more viewers than the news, so there is an obvious fascination with crime and trying to understand it.

In February, 1980, similar reports from two newspapers used statistical data to assist or repudiate the levels of crime. The *London Evening News*(28<sup>th</sup> February) headlined 'London Violence Growing' and The *Evening Standard* (28th February) declared 'London Is Winning the Crime War'.

They were both right but had used different statistics to validate their report, as with the two papers compared in this essay.

The Sun Newspaper will always use much more shock tactic journalism to attract the attention of the publ away from the other tabloid papers. The Independent is very different and attracts a very different calibre of reader. It is more informative , factual, reasoning and shows both sides of story(in this incident).

The government really have as much idea of the levels of crime as the general public do. The general public may even be more informed. Many people are beginning to feel much more unsafe and insecure at home, in the car, walking and so on. This could be due to a rise in crime levels, or is it beacause we are in a state of moral panic? Watching murder, rape and burglary late at night on TV and then waking up to newspaper reports on what has happened the night before, does lead to fear.

The reliability and validity of the statistical evidence that is available is under question. It really does not explain the full picture and reality of crime. The contradictions between data can mislead all concerned when trying to assess the levels and severity of crime in society.

### **References.**

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