

Official crime statistics – no reassurance for the victims of crime

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The latest official estimates of the number of crimes committed in 1995 have been published (Home Office, 1996). This shows a drop of 2.4% in the number of crimes recorded by the police in England and Wales to 5.123 million, compared with 1994, and is the third annual consecutive decrease. The overall figure masks a 14% increase in the number of street robberies and a 2% rise in violent crime. These figures are seen by Government ministers as reflecting the success of official measures in the "fight against crime" (Travis, 1996), yet anyone who has been a victim of crime during the past year will find little comfort in such assertions. Alternative ways of measuring the number of crimes committed each year provide a much higher overall estimate, but even these are not truly accurate, given the social connotations of so much activity which is termed "law-breaking". For health care workers dealing with the psychological and physical effects on the victims of crime, this reliance on pure statistics will seem to belittle the suffering which they encounter daily. Clearly a different emphasis is required when measuring the impact of crime on the community.

The first statistics of crimes reported to the police in this country were compiled in 1856 and from that time their validity as an index of crime as compared with rates of imprisonment or conviction has been questioned. All police forces in England and Wales currently have a statutory duty to provide the Home Office with statistical information about crime and criminals, and each force makes returns of notifiable offences. When the police learn of a crime, a crime report, which includes the basic details of the case, is completed and forwarded to the police statistical department for classification according to Home Office guidelines. This department makes monthly returns to the Home Office which are added to reports from other police forces. The estimates of the total amount of crime made by such a method gives a picture of an increasing figure from approximately 500 000 offences in the early 1950s, to 3 500 000 in the 1980s, and

5 600 000 in 1993, followed by a decrease to the 1995 estimate.

Criticisms of this method of assessing the total amount of crime are widespread, and refer particularly to the so-called 'dark figure' of concealed crime and to the characteristics of offences which are included. One problem is that official statistics take account of notifiable offences only, which corresponds approximately with offences which can be tried in the Crown Court. Summary offences are not included, yet this group includes such crimes as common assault, assault on a police officer and indecent exposure. Such offences resulted in 1 300 000 convictions in 1994, which is approximately three times the total convictions for notifiable offences during the same period. Given that the route from notification of a crime to final conviction results in a vast decrease in numbers, the true number of summary offences committed must be very much greater than the above figure. In addition, official statistics do not include offences notified to bodies such as the British Transport Police, Ministry of Defence Police, or cases of fraud and tax evasion which are investigated by the Inland Revenue, Department of Social Security or Customs and Excise.

Several commentators have criticised the sole dependence on *numbers* of crimes recorded without any examination of the seriousness of the offence or the effects of the crimes on victims (Hough & Mayhew, 1983). For example, over a third of notifiable offences comprise theft from vehicles or shops, and criminal damage, which tend to rate low in terms of monetary harm caused. This can be compared with the often vast sums of money involved in a single case of corporate fraud such as the Maxwell pension fraud, which nevertheless appears to be less important in the minds of politicians than the more numerous, but less costly, cases of benefit fraud. The financial and psychological damage suffered by thousands of victims of the Maxwell case is impossible to quantify but, in terms of criminal statistics, this counts as only one crime.

Crimes recorded by the police necessarily exclude those crimes of which the police are ignorant, which constitutes a constantly changing figure according to time and geographical location. Therefore the increasing crime figures may reflect a change in the police response to crime and its recording, rather than a genuine increase per se. For example, certain offences which are of low profile may suddenly become publicised because of a high-profile case such as the Cleveland child sex abuse case, with a corresponding increase in the number of cases coming to light. Similarly, "new" offences may be created because of the work of pressure groups such as those who campaigned to have rape of a male recognised as a distinct offence. Crime survey data suggests that approximately 40% of all crimes reported to the police are not included in the official statistics (Mayhew & Maung, 1992). Part of the distortion of statistics caused by this practice may be exacerbated by police targeting a particular type of offence or offender because of public pressure, so leading to a disproportionate increase in the level of this crime which is known to the police.

Simple changes to the rules governing inclusion criteria or estimates of seriousness of a crime can lead to variations in the overall statistics without any change in the characteristics of the offences themselves. For example, in 1977 the Home Office included in official statistics for the first time all offences of criminal damage of less than £20.00 in value. This decision raised the official total of crime by 7%. Hall *et al* (1978) commented that crime can be a construct manufactured by government to stigmatise certain groups within society and to divert attention from a government whose policies are unpopular or ineffective. He sites the emergence of the statistics of offences classified as 'mugging' in the early 1970s and its attribution to young black males, but this idea recently emerged again when the Metropolitan Police Commissioner claimed that mugging was a crime of "very young black people" (National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders, 1995a). Certainly, the central premise of the Home Secretary's approach to dealing with crime by tougher sentencing has aroused widespread criticism. It is unlikely that there will be any reversal of Government policy in this area so close to a general election.

Maguire (1994) has stated that criticism of official statistics often emphasises their inability to quantify the "dark figure" of hidden crime and that any advances in this field are due to a better understanding of the 'true total' of offences. Instead of this emphasis, he feels that measurement of crime should be seen as displaying one

part of an evolving overall picture of law-breaking. He comments on the inappropriateness of referring to *criminal statistics*, as in their current state they fail to provide a social meaning to the terms 'crime' and 'criminal' which are not precise terms but are instead highly selective and value-laden products of social and political influences.

Crime makes the public feel vulnerable and insecure and they want changes to occur which will make them feel safer (NACRO, 1995b). Simply stating that crime is falling is no comfort to those living in areas where crime, especially violent crime, is most common. Given the problems involved in the gathering of official crime statistics, the figures become so inaccurate as to be worthless. What is required in the law and order debate is a shift away from crime statistics, to an emphasis on the causes of crime within social deprivation (Farrington *et al*, 1988) and on the suffering of the victims of crime. This might create an atmosphere of public opinion where the care of mentally ill prisoners and the psychological treatment of sex offenders, among others, is seen as necessary and worthwhile. Forensic psychiatrists may then find that they are given more opportunity to use their clinical and research knowledge to shape criminal justice policy towards crime prevention, rather than their current role in dealing solely with a small subgroup of mentally disordered offenders.

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