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The Independent Review of Crime Statistics

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INTRODUCTION

The authors have recently completed an Independent Review of Crime Statistics. This work was commissioned by the Statistics Commission and the published report together with the Statistics Commission's own report is available on their website (www.statscom.org.uk).

Our review considered official crime-related statistics (excluding statistics on the criminal justice system) as well as other crime-related statistics that are or potentially could be brought within the public domain. The review focused upon the *use* of crime statistics and their *fitness for purpose*. This involved consideration of: the adequacy and coverage of crime statistics (in each of the jurisdictions of the United Kingdom), their use in decision-making, and in particular, the needs of the users. Throughout the review we paid particular attention to the needs of the 'the public'.

The review comprised two key stages; (1) a 'shallow and wide stage' involving a large number of individuals to help identify broad themes and issues, and (2) a 'narrow and deep' phase which comprised four case studies and examined some of the key issues from stage one in more depth.

ABSTRACT

This article summarises and discusses the main findings from a recently completed Independent Review of Crime Statistics. The Review focused upon the use of crime statistics and their fitness for purpose with particular attention paid to the needs of 'the public'. The main conclusion was that the ongoing development of crime statistics is hampered by a confusion of means (technical discussions about crime statistics that focus on their interpretation and reliability) and ends (conceptual discussions about the purposes and interests of different groups in using crime statistics).

KEY WORDS

crime statistics; independent review; fitness for purpose; public

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PREVIOUS REVIEWS

A number of reviews of crime statistics have been undertaken over recent years. While the basic elements of the modern system of recording crime statistics stem from the review carried out by the Perks Committee in the 1960s (Home Office, 1967), the major changes to the official crime statistics that we examined derive from a series of reviews carried out more recently. A thematic inspection by HM Inspectorate of Constabulary (2000) and Home Office Research Study 204 (2000a) both identified significant deficiencies in the quality of police-recorded crime data. These issues were also taken up in 2000 in the Simmons Report (Home Office, 2000b), which looked widely across the range of issues concerning both the production and presentation of crime statistics. Latterly, and while our work was being undertaken, the then Home Secretary, Charles Clarke, commissioned a review of crime statistics within the Home Office, chaired by Professor Adrian Smith. For us, this range of activity demonstrates that crime statistics and the challenges they pose in terms of reporting, presentation and interpretation, are both high profile and politically sensitive.

WHAT ARE THE MAIN TYPES OF CRIME STATISTICS?

There are a number of different sources of crime data that have been considered within the review. The main ones were police-recorded crime statistics and surveys.

Police-recorded crime

In England and Wales police-recorded crime is composed of categories of crime that are outlined in the Home Office Counting Rules¹ and known as 'notifiable offences'. These include: violence against the person, sexual offences, robbery, burglary, theft, handling stolen goods, fraud and forgery, criminal damage, drug offences and 'other offences'. The data are published on police force websites.

Over time, there have been changes in the way that police have been asked to record crime such as amendments to the Counting Rules introduced in 1998 and the introduction of the National Crime Recording Standard (NCRS) in April 2002. The NCRS requires that the police record a crime if *'the circumstances as reported amount to a crime as defined by law and there is no credible evidence to the contrary'*². The record will remain unless evidence emerges to disprove that a crime has occurred. The NCRS was introduced to ensure standardisation of police recording practices between types of complainant, types of incident and within and between police services (Home Office, 2000b).

It should be noted that the coverage of available crime statistics is limited by the omission of summary offences from the published recorded data (in England and Wales) and the omission of data from police forces such as the British Transport Police (BTP), although it has now been agreed that BTP crimes should be included in the national totals rather than reported separately.

Scotland's police-recorded crime statistics are more highly aggregated than those in England and Wales.

Instead of the NCRS Scotland has the Scottish Crime Recording Standard (SCRS). This is designed to reflect the legal systems, and the data published are not as detailed. Northern Ireland adheres to the NCRS and follows similar principles to those in England and Wales.

Victimisation surveys

There are a number of victimisation surveys in the UK. The largest is the British Crime Survey (BCS), which actually covers only England and Wales. This survey asks approximately 45,000 adults in private households per year about levels of crime and public attitudes to crime.

The survey asks about crime the individuals have experienced within the last year, including crimes *that were not reported* to the police. The BCS includes questions relating to attitudes to crime, such as the level of worry about crime, and also questions about measures taken to avoid crime. The BCS has a range of uses. It provides:

- a measure of crime victimisation, independent of police-recorded crime statistics
- a means of 'auditing' police-recorded crime statistics. For instance, divergence in relation to violent crime is of particular interest. Without the BCS it would not be possible to distinguish between trends in police figures generated by changes in crime as opposed to changes in police recording
- data on people's perceptions of crime such as worry and fear
- data to help policy-makers identify those groups most likely to be at risk of crime.

Scotland was incorporated in the first BCS, although this only covered southern and central Scotland. Since then, the Scottish Crime and Victimisation Survey (SCVS) has been independent of the BCS. There were survey sweeps in 1993, 1996, 2000 and 2003 involving 5,000

¹ www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/countrules.html

² www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs05/countrecstan05.pdf

adults in face-to-face interviews. Following a review of the survey in 2003, the latest survey launched in June 2004 now involves continuous data collection, with a rolling monthly sample of adults across Scotland that, as with BCS, involves adults over 16. These interviews involve a total annual sample size of 27,500 and are carried out over the telephone, although recent work has indicated problems with telephone-based surveys. This enables estimates of victimisation at police-force-area level and allows more robust estimates of lower incidence crimes. A victimisation survey is conducted in Northern Ireland following the principles of the BCS. Other surveys include:

- a Commercial Victimisation Survey (CVS) run by the Home Office in 1994 and 2002. This survey involves crime against small- and medium-sized retail and manufacturing premises in England and Wales
- the Offending Crime and Justice Survey (OCJS), which examines the extent of offending, anti-social behaviour and drug use among the household population, and in particular, among young people aged from 10 to 25.

KEY FINDINGS

As the review developed we focused on four key questions:

- What groups and organisations have an interest in crime statistics?
- What purposes do these organisations wish to use crime statistics to fulfil?
- Are the available crime statistics fit for these purposes?
- What other crime statistics might be available and would they be fit for these purposes?

Our findings were presented in relation to these questions.

GROUPS WITH AN INTEREST IN CRIME STATISTICS

Our review suggested that the primary 'users' of crime statistics are:

- The public – our review suggested that the sections of the public that most commonly use crime-related statistics were: older people; previous victims of crime; and parents. A recent study by the Audit Commission also identifies the range of sources, uses and users of crime statistics relevant at both district and neighbourhood level (*Ibid*). In particular, statistics are of concern to those from or interested in demographic groups that are most commonly the subject of discrimination.
- Central government – in particular the Home Office, Scottish Executive, Welsh Assembly and Northern Ireland Office.
- Organisations responsible at a local level for the delivery of the criminal justice system and crime reduction – in particular the police and other partners within local crime and disorder reduction partnerships (CDRPs).

However, other groups also have an interest. These include the research community (both academic and commercial), private sector organisations who make use of crime statistics to sell services, or for business information purposes, and the media. These groups provide services, of one kind or another, to the primary users, based upon crime statistics.

THE PURPOSES CRIME STATISTICS ARE USED TO FULFIL

National government and local delivery organisations have three main purposes that they use crime statistics to help fulfil:

- policy and implementation
- performance management
- communicating with the public.

The role played by crime statistics in government has changed considerably. Whereas in the past, the official crime statistics were part of a system of national accounts of the condition of British society, crime

statistics now play a central role within the modern regime of statutory governance intended to regulate the criminal justice system and its agencies. Crime statistics now not only measure the needs of society but are also used to manage the performance of criminal justice agencies and partnerships. Officially, the over-arching purpose for collecting information on crime is now perceived to be – ‘to reduce the impact of crime on society’ (Home Office, 2000b, paragraph 5). This specifically instrumental definition of the use of crime statistics is a relatively new one, largely emerging as part of the Home Office *modernisation agenda* (Home Office, 2000b, paragraph 2), and reflecting the policy priorities of the government.

Understanding the purposes for which the public use crime statistics is difficult. The review suggested the following five uses represent the main reasons that individuals use crime-related statistics:

- assessing the performance of the authorities in tackling crime
- understanding policy development by government
- understanding the causes of crime, victimisation and offending
- determining personal risk and susceptibility to crime
- informing the public of criminal activity in their area.

The review also suggested that although the public have some understanding of crime statistics, on the whole they do not specifically make an effort to keep abreast of trends. In particular, crime statistics are only one of a number of sources of information that the public use when making decisions in their everyday lives, and that they do not use them to make precise calculations about the risks they could face from crime. Indeed, although the public may use crime-related statistics to assess performance of local agencies, or consider who to vote for, and to assess levels of risk of victimisation, they are probably more strongly influenced by local factors. So for instance, anecdotal ‘evidence’ from friends and family are more likely to influence

perceptions than crime figures, which are not always robust, and which do not facilitate easy comparison of one area with another. Furthermore, there is by no means a perfect correlation between individuals’ actual risk of crime and their fear of it. For instance, analysis of the British Social Attitudes Survey suggested that worry about crime was linked to a range of other social attitudes (Dowds & Ahrendt, 1995).

‘FITNESS FOR PURPOSE’ OF CRIME STATISTICS

Government and the public sector

As suggested above, national government and local delivery organisations have three main purposes for their use of crime statistics:

- making policy
- managing performance
- communicating with the public.

Making policy

The review concluded that, allowing for the fact that policy-makers can commission bespoke research and ex ante evaluation to support policy-making decisions, the available crime statistics are broadly fit for policy-making purposes.

However, a number of issues relating to specific types of crime statistics were highlighted.

Police recorded crime statistics

It has long been recognised that police recorded crime statistics are an imperfect measure of crime and hence not an adequate basis for policy. They are highly dependent on:

- recording practices and counting rules
- the relevant authorities’ (limited) ability to detect the occurrence of crime
- the public’s (including victims’) varying propensities to report crime occurrences to the authorities.

Variations in these factors, between places and over time, greatly reduce the reliability of crime statistics as

measures of the need for crime control policy or measures of performance in delivering it.

The data that have been available hitherto have been provided by local police forces in summary form, according to agreed counting rules. The data set contains limited case and contextual information that would be of interest to policy-makers, for example, details of offences and the demographics of victims. Future plans for the direct supply of crime records to the Home Office (through the National Management Information System – NMIS) may go some way to change this position, providing a more flexible, standardised and detailed crime record information system. Yet the Home Office has been vague about when the long-planned NMIS might be brought online, and about its ideas for standardising the recording of ‘incidents’ reported to the police via local force command and control systems.

Other statistics

It was partly because of the recognised limitations of recorded crime statistics in supporting policy-making – especially in failing to capture the extent of un-reported crime victimisation – that the BCS was originally introduced in 1981. The introduction of other surveys such as the Offending, Crime and Justice Survey, Commercial Victimisation Survey, Youth Lifestyles Survey and the Drug Arrestee Survey have provided further important data sets to support policy-making, though none of these have either the coverage or the frequency to match the BCS.

Performance

The capacity of the crime statistics to meet performance needs of central government and local delivery organisations varies, with the statistics more appropriate to central government purposes than the needs of local organisations. However, the review concluded that generally, crime statistics are not ‘fit for purpose’ as a means of managing performance.

It was concluded that the substantial investment that has gone into the various improvements in the official crime statistics in recent years would seem primarily determined by the needs of central government. Issues concerning the investment in crime statistics and statistical systems that might be needed to meet the increased expectations that have been placed on local agencies have not been addressed to the degree to which national government’s needs have been addressed.

Key issues relating to specific types of crime statistics are highlighted below.

Police-recorded crime statistics

Home Office policy-makers and HM Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) use crime statistics to assess the performance of local criminal justice agencies, including police forces and, more recently, the CDRPs. Performance assessment has become much more systematised in recent years, for example, with the introduction of the Police Performance Assessment Framework (PPAF). Historically, recorded crime statistics have been used in national-level performance measurement, and are now available publicly for police forces areas (PFA), basic command units (BCUs) and CDRPs.

The National Crime Recording Standard (NCRS) was introduced in 2001 primarily to bring about a standardisation in crime recording practice across the country, itself necessary to facilitate a consistent standard of comparison between PFAs over time. There seems to be widespread agreement that the NCRS has now put in place the best standard of crime recording obtained to date. This has been due to its recording procedures, its administrative system (through the police force Crime Registrars network), and the programme of auditing of compliance carried out by the Audit Commission on behalf of the Home Office.

Although compliance was at first incomplete, the programme of auditing has now substantially improved

levels of compliance nationally. The NCRS has also had the effect of instituting a 'methodology' so that difficulties, anomalies and problems in definition/recording can be tackled systematically by the relevant parties. In sum, the NCRS seems to have put in place a system that will maintain the future integrity of the recorded crime series.

Despite improvements brought about by the NCRS, the extent to which recorded crime statistics are dependent on counting rules and the collection process will remain a serious limitation to their use. The strongest examples of this abiding problem are violent crime and anti-social behaviour. Despite the priority afforded to these offences in government policy, they are the ones that pose the greatest problems of definition, recording, and the greatest volatility in public reporting.

Local criminal justice agencies, especially police BCUs and CDRPs have been required both to assess their performance, and to base their operational and strategic decision-making, upon the use of crime statistics. Unlike national government, local government requirements have had to be met by recorded crime statistics alone, since the cost to the Exchequer of mounting local surveys equivalent to the BCS would be prohibitive. Nevertheless, since crime records are captured at local level there exists some limited capacity for greater granularity and flexibility in output coverage to lower aggregations of local government and police geography (this will also be available to central government following implementation of NMIS).

British Crime Survey

Both BCS and recorded crime data are used by the Home Office to report on its performance under the relevant public service agreements (PSA1 and PSA2) required by HM Treasury. However, the importance of the PSA framework, along with the deficiencies of recorded crime data (see above), now means that the BCS has become the primary source of crime statistics for Home Office performance management at national

and government office (England and Wales) level. It is also now accepted that performance targets for anti-social behaviour will be measured chiefly through perceptual information; again, only to be gleaned from survey data.

Despite the importance now attached to the BCS as the primary national source of important data on crime, and a significant increase in its sample size to provide more frequent measurement at police force area (PFA) level, its basic methodology has remained substantially unchanged since its inception 25 years ago.

Not only has its cost increased substantially (currently about £4 million in fieldwork and data preparation costs alone) but like all social surveys, the BCS encounters a range of methodological issues that can affect its reliability and validity substantially. Neither the range of problems, nor the methodological solutions arrived at (including the re-design applied in 2001) have been sufficiently transparent to either afford independent or public scrutiny. Although work was commissioned by the Home Office around sampling methodology, it is not clear whether the Home Office have taken full advantage of the methodological expertise available in the wider expert community, or whether necessary steps have been taken to ensure that public interests in the reliability of the BCS and value-for-money issues are properly balanced.

Since its redesign in 2001, particularly due to an increased sample size, the BCS can now be used to compute crime statistics and related information at PFA level. Nevertheless, the BCS lacks the granularity to provide reliable statistics on areas of a scale lower than PFA; again, this is inconsistent with the now regular output of recorded crime statistics at BCU and partnership level.

Communication

National government and local crime reduction and criminal justice delivery organisations wish to communicate with the public. However, because it is

not clear what it is that government want to communicate to the public it is difficult to assess whether the crime data that are available to government and local delivery organisations is fit for purpose. In particular, there seems a fundamental ambiguity in the publication of criminal statistics between the government's duties to report to the public about crime and its wish to communicate messages about its own performance.

Currently, the Home Office publishes regular statistical bulletins that include both findings from the BCS and recorded crime statistics that focus on national crime trends. This potentially leads to confusion for public regarding key messages.

THE PUBLIC

As discussed, it is harder to define the purposes for which the public would wish to use crime statistics. Nevertheless, it seems unlikely that the general public has any clearly articulated view as to how crime statistics could assist in these purposes. Not surprisingly, the absence of clarity about the public's interests in crime statistics is shared by professionals in both government and local crime reduction and criminal justice delivery organisations. Rather, the public rely upon others (including central and local government) to assist them with defining their needs and in interpreting how the crime statistics might help them. In general, this requires:

- government/producers to release crime statistics appropriately
- media to report/communicate the statistics accurately
- government/academics/commentators/interest groups to provide valid interpretations of the statistics and to demonstrate the applicability of statistics to meeting the public's needs.

The Review considered the different purposes that the public have for crime statistics and concluded that they are generally not fit for purpose. Key reasons underpinning this conclusion are:

- **Limitations with the crime statistics themselves** – for instance, the lack of neighbourhood level statistics and the extent to which statistics reflect public perceptions of crimes such as violence.
- **The role of the media as a mediator between crime statistics as published and their consumption by the public** – it was recognised that the media pursue a range of agendas and interests and tend to focus on stories about individual, atypical crimes rather than statistics. Although journalists who specialise in home affairs do sometimes have a good understanding of the crime statistics, the wider media sometimes distorts statistical information it reports due to a lack of understanding.
- **The lack of public trust in government statistics** – this lack of trust is not specific to crime statistics.
- **The public's ability to interpret crime statistics** – neither survey data nor police-recorded crime are well understood by the public. In particular the relationship between the BCS and recorded crime statistics causes confusion, particularly since the Home Office now uses both sources in regularly reporting to the public.

WHAT OTHER CRIME STATISTICS MIGHT BE AVAILABLE?

The Review considered a range of 'hidden crimes' ranging from domestic violence to 'white collar' crime and a range of statistics that might throw more light on these issues. Of particular interest was our work on making more use of the data on crime that the private sector holds.

The Review suggested that:

- the corporate world has increasingly sought to build up its own information base on criminal activities and potential threats. This includes an extremely wide range of organisations drawn from many different sectors of UK business. What these organisations have in common is a need to have 'real time' information to help understand key threats to

their businesses and to be able to ensure appropriate measures are in place to mitigate against such threats.

- in response to such needs, large firms now have in place complex systems and processes to capture and analyse information collected from their own operations. For example, in the banking sector this might include data capture on: actual/potential security breaches; monitoring of existing threats; recent criminal use of technology/internet; money laundering; and fraud.
- likewise, branded consumer goods manufacturers will have significant sources of information on criminal behaviour linked to the production of counterfeit goods.
- many of these companies operate across borders and are able to pool intelligence and share information across countries, which governments can often find more challenging. In a world where the lines between the public and private domains are increasingly blurred, it has been increasingly recognised by law enforcement agencies and key stakeholders with an interest in crime reduction that there is far greater need for sharing data and intelligence on criminal activity with companies and other organisations operating outside of public domains.
- there are differing levels of public accessibility to these data. Much of the commercial data that are publicly accessible is aggregated data for the respective industries and sectors and is made available at a national level through trade associations.

We concluded that the case for greater public accessibility to commercial data on crime needs to be tested against:

- the needs of the recipient (public sector agencies, the general public, and/or both); whether this is wider or deeper access
- what uses will be made of the data if there is greater access to them.

Factors to take into account in making this judgement would include:

- definitional issues – defining what acts constitute crime
- political issues – to what extent should the state seek to know about phenomena that occur in the private sphere
- economic issues – gathering data has a cost
- pragmatic issues – the speed of technological and social change and therefore the speed of crime innovation means that data collection procedures need to be as quickly adapted and/or devised to capture this.

We also concluded that attempting to improve the measurement of hidden crime would need to be cognisant of the policy implications of any such recommendation. There is a danger that greater recording of 'hidden crime' means that it is seen as a growing problem and a disproportionate level of resources get directed towards it. As such, greater levels of recording of hidden crime can create as much confusion as it resolves. Key to this is how the data are used and interpreted.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Our detailed findings and recommendations are set out in our report, but our main conclusion was that the ongoing development of crime statistics is hampered by a confusion of means (technical discussions about crime statistics that focus on their interpretation and reliability) and ends (conceptual discussions about the purposes and interests of different groups in using crime statistics).

With regard to the purposes for which crime statistics are used our recommendations included that the Home Office should introduce more clarity between policy, performance and communication as different and

distinct purposes when it uses crime statistics internally and presents the outputs of this work publicly.

With regard to the means by which crime statistics are created and used we acknowledged that the introduction of NCRS is an important step. Our specific recommendations focused on the way in which recorded crime statistics are used and presented and concluded that:

- The Home Office should address the use and presentation of violent crime statistics so that the definition of violent crime makes a clear distinction between crimes that involve violence in the commonly accepted use of the term and other incidents that are currently grouped as violence (this case was strongly supported by the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) in their evidence submitted to the Review).
- The Home Office needs to provide additional support to help the public better understand the improvements to recorded crime statistics brought about by the introduction of the NCRS, but at the same time, make clear the fundamental limitations and volatility of all recorded crime statistics. We recognised that this is a task that will also need to involve local crime reduction and criminal agencies, following the Home Office lead.
- The Home Office should publish its ongoing programme of work to ensure that the BCS is as robust as possible. This should include a planned programme of work and the results of such work.
- The Home Office should consider organisational arrangements that might strengthen the distinction between policy customers and research providers. We suggested that these might range from a prominent independent steering group to oversee the methodological development of the BCS to placing the BCS outside the Home Office. This is achievable in the medium to long term.

THE STATISTICS COMMISSION'S VIEW

Our Review has been included as part two of the UK Statistics Commission's Report No 30 *Crime Statistics: Users' Perspectives*³. Part one contains the Commission's own recommendations. These follow four main themes:

- structural separation between Home Office policy functions and the compilation and publication of crime statistics
- improved communication with users through clearer presentation of the statistics at the time of publication
- better, more consistent, crime data for small areas through more systematic exploitation of existing police data sources
- further technical research on options where the existing statistics do not fully meet demand – including the best measure of 'total crime' and ways to improve comparisons of crime statistics between UK administrations.

It is highly likely that discussion of the future of crime statistics will continue once both these views, and those of the Smith committee, have entered into public debate.

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³Full copies of the Report can be downloaded from the Statistics Commissions website <http://www.statscom.org.uk>