

# Measuring crime

## How much crime is there?

Working out how much crime takes place is by no means an easy matter. All attempts to measure crime give a somewhat misleading picture of how much there is. Different ways of measuring offending bias the measurement in different ways. This does not mean that crime statistics are useless, but it does mean that no single measure can be relied upon to tell 'the whole truth' about the extent of crime.

## Official statistics

The most frequently cited measures of crime are those compiled by official bodies: the police, criminal justice system and the civil service, under the auspices of the government.

### Police crime figures

An obvious source of information on the extent of crime is the police. The police compile records of the crimes that come to their attention, divided into types: violence against the person, sexual crimes, burglary, vehicle crimes etc. These figures give an indication of whether crime is increasing or decreasing and allow geographical areas to be compared, since regional police authorities return their own statistics. They also give a good indication of police workload. However, there are many sources of bias in these. In order for the police to record a crime, a number of other things must happen. Someone must notice and they must decide that a crime has occurred. For example, if a vehicle owner notices that the wing mirror of their car has gone, they might regard this as accidental or as the result of vandalism. If they decide that it is a crime, they must then make the decision to report it to the police. This may not happen for all sorts of reasons: it might be too much bother, they may wish to avoid contact with the authorities, they may be scared of the consequences of reporting and so on. If they inform the police, it is up to the police to determine whether a crime has occurred. They may decide that there is no crime to investigate or that a crime has occurred but that no action is possible. Only after all these barriers have been negotiated will the initial act be recorded as a crime in the official statistics. Consequently, police crime figures tend to underestimate the true extent of crime.

### Court and prison statistics

The courts record convictions for criminal offences and the prison system records how many offenders are in prison and what they were convicted of. As with police statistics, these figures are susceptible to bias. As already noted, there are a number of barriers to a crime being brought to the attention of the authorities. There are many more that stand in the way of a person being tried and convicted of a reported crime. The police must first identify and arrest a suspect. The Crown Prosecution Service may decide that there is insufficient evidence to mount a prosecution. The jury may not be convinced by the prosecution's case. It may also be that a prolific offender is tried and convicted of only one or a few of many offences they have actually done. Consequently, statistics on criminal convictions may also underestimate the true extent of crime. Prison statistics suffer from the same problems with the additional issue that they also reflect sentencing policies that may be politically determined. For example, if the government decides there is to be a 'crackdown' on drug offences or burglaries, then this might translate into harsher sentencing policies, which result in more people being imprisoned for these offences, even if the actual rate of offending has not really changed.

## **General population surveys**

An alternative approach to measuring the extent of crime is to take a sample of the population and ask them about their experiences of crime. Provided the sample is sufficiently large and representative, this approach may avoid some of the biasing factors that affect official crime statistics.

### **The British Crime Survey (BCS)**

In the UK the BCS samples a large number of people about their experiences of crime and victimization in the previous year and their attitudes relating to crime (e.g. fear of crime, perception of whether crime is rising and falling, opinions of the police and justice systems etc.). The BCS produces estimates of the crime rate that are substantially higher than official figures. Only about half of the crimes recorded by the BCS are reported to the police. This reflects the factors identified above that bias police crime figures. The BCS is considered the most accurate measure of the extent of crime victimization but is also affected by biasing factors. It relies on respondents' willingness to report victimization, which they may not. It also records incidents that the police might regard as 'no crime' so there could be a tendency for some types of offence to be over-reported. The BCS only samples individuals, so crimes against companies are not recorded and neither are crimes where the victim is not a person (e.g. vandalism of bus shelters). Until very recently, the BCS was limited to adults, so crimes against children were not recorded. From 2010, however, children aged 10-15 will be included in the results.

### **Offender surveys**

Another way of measuring crime is to ask offenders what they have done. In a general population offender survey randomly selected members of the population are asked about the crimes they have committed recently. Whilst this approach is likely to detect some crimes that have escaped police attention they are likely to be biased by a tendency to under-report more serious crimes and the fact that the perpetrators of more serious offences are more likely to have been detected and convicted, removing them from the sampling frame.

## **What can we tell from these measures?**

Howitt (2009) makes several points regarding the range of available crime measures. First, none of the measures is useless; each provides a different perspective on the extent of crime. Second, different measures may be useful for different purposes. For example, even though police statistics tend to underestimate the crime rate, they may still provide useful information about trends in offending, particularly where there is agreement with other measures like the BCS. This, however, relies on the factors that bias reporting remaining constant over time, which they may not. For example, changes in public attitudes towards sexual crimes may affect the rate of reporting. So if it is noted that the number of rapes increased from the 1960s to the 1990s, there is a question of whether more rapes were committed or victims were more likely to report having been raped. This raises a third issue. Definitions of crime change over time and this can produce artifacts in measures of crime. To remain with the example of rape, until 2003 English law only allowed for women to be the victims of rape. This could make it difficult to compare crime statistics before and after this date since prior to 2003 only women were represented whereas after 2003 male victims were also included. Finally there is the problem that, since crime is an important political issue, crime statistics may be manipulated for political ends. Political parties have a vested interest in using some measures rather than others. The opposition will typically focus on measures that make the government look bad by suggesting that crime is increasing, whereas the party in power will play up measures that show crime is falling. Consequently, whilst crime statistics in the UK are compiled by an independent body free from political interference (the Office for National Statistics), questions are frequently raised as to their validity, usually by those with political motives.