

Statistics Commission



CRIME STATISTICS: USER PERSPECTIVES

Statistics Commission Interim Report
December 2005

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Introduction

In August 2005, the Statistics Commission initiated a review of official statistics relating to crime and appointed Matrix Research and Consultancy to lead the research. This is the third in a series of reviews each taking a broad look at the statistics in a major field of policy. This interim report identifies some high level issues which will be explored in greater depth in the final report, due to be published in June 2006.

The Statistics Commission is an advisory body and the conclusions at this stage are intended as advice to the Home Office and other public bodies with direct responsibility for the compilation of crime data. Once the review is completed, the Commission will publish the consultants' final report alongside its own recommendations. This interim report reflects the Commission's preliminary conclusions only – there may be some changes on points of detail as work continues.

The main issues

We have identified five issues as being of particular importance to those who need and use crime information, including the general public. Whilst there are numerous subsidiary matters that could be addressed here, the review was designed to focus on a relatively small number of major issues that seemed to the Commission to be central to consideration of the way forward:

- 1) **Public trust in the figures** – the broad statistical messages about crime are at risk of being lost against a backdrop of confused reporting by the news media. This confusion is both a consequence of, and a cause of, lack of trust in official statements. It also contributes to, and feeds off, a lack of understanding of statistics more generally. Action is needed to break these circles, enhance confidence, and lay the ground to improve communication.
- 2) **Measurement of fear of crime** – trends and patterns in the reported fear of crime have become increasingly influential in debate over the years and are now central to some aspects of policy and performance management. Given

this growing importance, there are questions over the adequacy of the available data that need to be explored further.

- 3) **Measures of 'total crime'** – these are regularly reported by official sources and the media. But such measures inevitably involve adding together offences that are very different in terms of their seriousness and in the extent to which they are reported to the police by the public. There is a danger that, in the course of public and political debate, changes in 'overall crime levels' will be imbued with greater significance than they deserve. We think there is a need to explore alternative ways to convey trends in crime concisely and unambiguously – whilst being mindful of the need to avoid adding to public confusion.

- 4) **International and inter-administration (within the UK) comparisons** – comparisons of crime trends and patterns between countries are potentially valuable, in that they may indicate the relative impact of different policing strategies and policies. But there are many problems with such comparisons, some of which are deep-rooted. Whilst accepting that making valid comparisons is technically challenging, we think that investment to further develop them may well be justified.

- 5) **Getting the best from local area crime data** – fuller exploitation of the rich data sources available to the police could be of value to local communities and researchers. We see scope for greater use to be made of available and potentially available data at the local level; such wider use could offer an additional safeguard on data quality by helping to expose variations in recording practice and definitions.

Each of these issues is discussed in turn in the sections which follow. Where practicable, we include suggestions on steps that might now be taken by government bodies although we expect to turn these into firmer recommendations in the final report. An issue which cuts across many topics is the inherent reliability, or otherwise, of the statistics – whether they provide a sufficient basis to support decision-making inside and outside government. We expect to say more about this in the final report.

The Annex sets out some of the background to the review.

1) PUBLIC TRUST IN CRIME STATISTICS

Trust in official statistics is important for two main reasons. One is that decisions affecting all our lives are driven by them – for example the decision to regard a particular neighbourhood as deprived, and therefore in need of additional public services, will be influenced by many statistics including crime statistics. If decision-makers do not feel able to trust the statistics then the quality of the decisions will suffer. This potentially affects us all and carries economic and social costs. The other reason is that if we do not believe that decisions are well-founded, we lose trust in the people who make them – and that can mean we lose trust in government and public services, with damaging consequences for democracy.

This argument is well recognised. The Prime Minister states in the preface to the *National Statistics Code of Practice*:

“...it is important for our statistics to be good. But it is just as important for the statistics to be trusted by all those – government, the opposition parties, pressure groups, citizens – involved in debating policy...”¹.

In similar vein, in the foreword to a recent MORI report *Who Do you Believe: Trust in government information*, Geoff Mulgan, Director of the Young Foundation, suggests that the:

“...government’s worst nightmare is not that its polices might fail, but rather that they might succeed but that no one would believe them because of chronic distrust of the official numbers detailing improvements in policing, hospitals, and schools...”².

The announcement by the Chancellor of the Exchequer in November 2005 of his intention to introduce legislation to ensure independent governance of official statistics reflects the Government’s concern to address these issues. The Statistics Commission has welcomed the announcement and looks forward to receiving further details in the New Year. We will take full account of the legislative proposals, and their possible impact in fields such as crime statistics, in our final report.

Evidence of low public trust in crime statistics, and in official statements interpreting those statistics, is not hard to find; examples will be included in the final report.

¹ National Statistics (2002) *National Statistics Code of Practice Statement of Principles*. TSO

² Duffy B, Hall S, Williams M (2005) *Who do you believe? Trust in government information*. MORI

However our impression is that, faced with a sceptical and at times antagonistic press, the Home Office and other official bodies have sought to contain the flow of statistical messages – prescribing the frequency and form in which statistics are released, and making sure that policy responses are issued at the earliest possible moment, sometimes ahead of the figures themselves. Whilst there is inevitably an element of conjecture in this ‘outsider’s analysis’, we believe that any such control is almost always counterproductive in terms of public confidence. It creates an environment in which the media and public assume that they are receiving a filtered, government-friendly, version of the truth – even though the statistical message may not be either of those things.

The Statistics Commission sees part of the answer on matters of trust as being to put the production and release of crime statistics, and the related statistical analysis, at arm’s length from the policy machinery of government. This needs to be done in such a way that there is no room for doubt that it is so. We believe this would help to give the media and the public confidence in the statistical interpretation offered and that this would ultimately be in the best interests of government itself.

The precise form that an ‘arm’s length’ relationship might take is a matter for government to consider but we think that a board of individuals of high public standing might be charged with oversight of the statistical processes, approval of work priorities and the timing of release of statistics, and with carrying out a measure of quality assurance on the interpretation placed on the data.

The goal of any such initiative must be to give the media and the public confidence that the published interpretation of statistical material is robust – whilst providing all the necessary information for those who still wish to make their own analyses. This may argue for the inclusion of some leading journalists, or others with media experience, in any oversight arrangements, as well as those with specialist knowledge and expertise in interpreting and analysing crime statistics.

Crime statistics are particularly susceptible to confused messages. There are, for good reasons, two main sources of crime data – the British Crime Survey (BCS) and crimes recorded by the police. Whilst the Statistics Commission is satisfied that both sources are needed, careful thought should be given to how these two very different types of information can best be brought together for reporting crime trends and patterns.

The BCS has been criticised on a number of grounds and some aspects of it may require further consideration. We think that the exclusion of respondents under 16 years of age should be re-examined, especially in light of the high victimisation rates believed to be suffered by young people. The coverage of victimisation amongst the under 16-year-olds is a complex area, partly due to the large volume of interactions between young people (eg pushing, shouting) which, if occurring between adults, might be treated as criminal and therefore recorded as crimes³. There would be value in the Home Office looking at how it measures victimisation amongst young people, at both the frequency and depth of the data.

Also, the BCS covers only household and personal crime. There may therefore be a case for the Home Office to carry out more surveys of commercial and industrial 'victimisation' in order to give a more complete picture. There have also been calls for the BCS to be expanded so that it can produce estimates with a 'finer granularity', allowing estimates for smaller geographical areas and deeper analysis more generally.

Equally, the police-recorded crime figures are subject to a range of well known difficulties, such as changes over time, or geographical variations in recording practice, and the interaction between police activity and the likelihood of offences being recorded – cracking down on street crime, for example, may lead to more, not less, offences being recorded.

Crucially, the messages from the BCS are often seen to be at odds with those from the police figures. Whilst this issue is not discussed in any detail in this interim report, we are content that the reasons for divergent trends, where these arise, are mostly explainable in terms of the different bases on which they are collated and the complexity of crime as a concept. It follows that the divergence in trends, of itself, should not be seen as evidence of either technical problems or interference. All the evidence that we have seen indicates that the government statisticians who compile the statistics and write the commentary in the National Statistics press releases, do so with honesty and integrity – although perhaps a little cautiously for fear of being seen to stir up political controversy.

³ The Home Office has recently introduced the *Offending, Crime and Justice Survey*, which allows for comparison of youth and adult victimisation, although the degree of analysis is limited by sample size.

Another characteristic of crime statistics that can have a negative effect on public trust is the use of some technical terms that do not accord with public understanding of the words. An important example relates to violent crime. Recent debate about crime has particularly focused on trends in violence but the legal and statistical category of 'offences against the person' includes offences that are not necessarily what the public think of as 'violent crime'; for example there are many incidents recorded in this category in which no-one is injured. We think the classification and presentation of violent crime ought to be re-examined.

The media response to the many uncertainties and complexities is too often to ignore the central points of the statistical release and seek instead to put a punchier interpretation on the data. It is not surprising that this can lead to public confusion.

2) MEASUREMENT OF FEAR OF CRIME

Statistics on the public's fear of crime are of increasing political importance. They are being used, in the context of performance indicators, to monitor the performance of local authorities and police authorities. They are also used by government to measure performance within the Criminal Justice System more generally – responsibility for which is shared by the Home Office, the Department for Constitutional Affairs and the Crown Prosecution Service. The target is to “reduce [the public] fear of crime”⁴.

It is therefore necessary that the statistics should be adequate for these performance-related purposes as well as being of good enough quality for the general public to understand as part of the 'picture of society' painted by official figures.

As a social issue in its own right, it is evident that fear of crime can have a serious adverse effect on the quality of people's lives. It is only through the analysis of data about both fear of crime and incidence of crime that policies to reduce fear can sensibly be guided.

The BCS is the main survey source for data on perceptions of crime and is widely used for assessing progress. The survey contains, among other things, a series of questions concerned with public perceptions of crime, fear of crime and feelings of

⁴ PSA Target 1 (Home Office) http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/performance/Home_Office.cfm.

public safety⁵. However, some doubts have been raised about what these particular questions really measure. There has been work undertaken in recent years to develop them so that the results better reflect what they are intended to measure (fear of crime)⁶ but some difficulties appear to remain.

We believe that there is a good case for further work in this area – either in the design of the questions or the addition of supplementary questions to aid existing analysis – with the aim of disentangling the relationships between worry, anxiety, fear and safety. Alternative sources of data on fear of crime could also be investigated – for example the feasibility of collecting and using local information on problems within areas and data from visual audits⁷.

3) MEASURES OF ‘TOTAL CRIME’

Whether ‘crime’ overall is going up or down has been a major issue in political debate for at least two centuries. Over time it has become accepted practice to add together a large number of different classes of offences reported to the police and treat that as the ‘total’. Whilst these crimes will include many minor offences which happen to fall in those classes, other offences are excluded completely – many motoring offences for example. In that sense, the current concept of ‘total recorded crime’ is just one of numerous possible aggregate measures. It has no special virtue when compared with others. There is however, a continuing and clear demand for a single aggregate measure in order to be able to debate trends unambiguously and to set targets for ‘reducing crime’⁸. Given this background, it is important that there is transparency about what is being counted, and how it should be counted.

Any total based on police-recorded crime will obviously exclude crimes that are not reported to the police. And some high volume crimes such as shoplifting are intrinsically difficult to measure in a consistent way – the discovery of missing goods may be attributed to one criminal offence or many. Also, crime is a product of the extant laws and where those laws, their enforcement, or the public’s tendency to report crime changes over time, then the volume of ‘total crime’ will change as a

⁵ Nicholas S, Povey D, Walker A, Kershaw C (2005) *Crime in England and Wales 2004/2005*. Home Office

⁶ Farrall S, Gadd D (2004). *The Frequency of the Fear of Crime*. *British Journal of Criminology* (44), pp. 127-132.

⁷ The crime reduction website lists various potential data sources.

⁸ The CJS PSA Target 1, for which the Home Office is responsible, is to reduce crime by 15%.

consequence. Some experts believe that changes of this kind are occurring in key classes of crime, such as violence.

It is also highly questionable whether a measure of total crime should give equal weight to all offences included in it without taking their seriousness into account. The Home Office has a programme of work in hand to develop a measure of total crime in the context of estimating the economic and social costs of crime in England and Wales⁹. This could be used as the basis for a statistical measure of 'total crime', possibly in the form of a weighted index. However a weighted index presents some real conceptual problems. For an index to command public credibility there needs to be a high degree of consensus about the relative weights to be used as between, say, an offence of indecent assault and one of fraud. It seems to the Statistics Commission that it is unlikely that such a consensus will be easily achieved – the relative weights used would be largely subjective and would be open to challenge and criticism by different interest groups.

Nevertheless, the demand from government, the media and the public for a measure of total crime is clear and understandable. Various ideas have been put forward to meet it. One is to exclude more minor offences in each class – for example offences recorded as violence but where no-one is injured – so as to focus on the sort of crime that people are most concerned about and which may be less susceptible to fluctuations in recording practice. However, it is also conversely argued that it is the accumulation of minor offences that gives the public most cause for concern about anti-social behaviour and disorder in their communities. We think that current investigative work needs to continue and that public debate about the scope of 'total crime' should be encouraged and facilitated. Ultimately, the best answer may simply be the one that commands well-informed public support, though technical robustness will also be an important consideration.

4) INTERNATIONAL AND INTER-COUNTRY (WITHIN THE UK) COMPARISONS

As in other statistical subject areas such as health and education, we believe that there is demand for, and value in, statistical comparisons of crime between countries. In the UK context this includes comparisons between the different UK administrations, as well as comparison between the UK and other states. But even within the UK, such comparisons raise difficulties due to differences in legal systems

⁹ Dubourg R, Hamed J (2005) *The Economic and Social Costs of Crime Against Individuals and Households 2003/04*. Home Office

and recording practices. In the context of official social surveys within the UK, the Office for National Statistics has produced a harmonised module of questions which concentrates on crime and fear of crime¹⁰. There is however scope for further work looking at harmonising crime surveys within the four UK administrations (for example methods of data collection). We would like to see the Scottish Executive and the Home Office consider together the compatibility of the BCS and the Scottish Crime Survey – we understand that a review of the Scottish survey is currently under way. The BCS, despite its name, only covers England and Wales.

International comparisons are yet more difficult because of the greater differences in legal structures. In particular, comparisons of police data are likely to run into problems because of different offence definitions between countries and different statistical rules¹¹. In order that some international comparisons can be made, special purpose international surveys have been developed. There are three main surveys – the International Crime Victim Survey, the International Commercial Crime Survey and the Eurobarometer¹². Whilst these do provide some points of comparison, their capacity to support analysis is limited due to small sample sizes, differing methods of data collection and varying survey frequency.

Key questions in relation to international and inter-country comparisons are what kind of comparisons are desirable and feasible and what is the best way to make them. These questions will be explored in the second phase of this review, and we will return to these issues in our final report. However, our initial conclusion is that inter-country comparisons have the potential to indicate the relative impact of different policing strategies and polices. And whilst we recognise that making valid comparisons is technically challenging, we think that investment to further develop them may well be justified.

5) GETTING THE BEST FROM LOCAL CRIME DATA

The raw data for recorded crime statistics are local police records of reported crimes and other incidents that they deal with. The issue here is whether the best use is currently made of all of these raw data in the production of official statistics. This raises two further questions. Is there a demonstrable demand for statistical

¹⁰ <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/about/data/harmonisation/downloads/S9.pdf>

¹¹ Barclay G (2000). *The comparability of data on Convictions and Sanctions: are international comparisons possible?* *European Journal of Criminal Policy and Research* (8): pp. 13-26.

¹² The European Social Survey has two crime related questions, please follow the link <http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org>

information that is currently not being met from published statistics? And, assuming that there is, could that demand for more statistics be met from information that is already collected by police forces locally? A Home Office *Review of Crime Statistics* in 2000¹³ suggested that the answer to both questions was 'yes'. That review argued that it would be useful to have more detail in respect of certain aspects of the statistics, in order to gain a better understanding of trends and patterns both locally and nationally¹⁴.

These are issues that will be taken forward in the second phase of the crime statistics review and we will return to them in our final report. A key concern however is the consistency and comparability of the data held at local police level. There have been improvements in this since the introduction of the National Crime Recording Standards in 2002 but an Audit Commission report indicates there is more which can be achieved¹⁵.

End note

This interim report on the Statistics Commission's review of crime statistics has identified five key issues – public trust in the figures, measurement of the fear of crime, measures of total crime, international and inter-country comparisons and getting the best from data held by local police forces. For the most part, this report sets out the issues rather than offering detailed proposals. We will be seeking to make more specific recommendations in our final report.

But in the case of public trust in crime statistics, we are suggesting a 'direction of travel'. In order to increase public trust, we believe that the process of compiling and publishing the statistics should be put at arm's length from the policy functions of government and be seen to be so. We believe that the interests of all parties, including those of the government itself, would be served by taking early steps in this direction.

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¹³ Simmons J (2000) *Review of Crime Statistics: a discussion document*. Home Office

¹⁴ Work is being carried out by the Audit Commission on how agencies and local communities can work together to make people living in different types of high crime and/or high disorder neighbourhoods be and feel safer. It is due to report in 2006

¹⁵ Audit Commission (2004). *Improving the Quality of Crime Records in Police Authorities and Forces in England and Wales*. Audit Commission

ANNEX – BACKGROUND TO THE STATISTICS COMMISSION REVIEW

The review aims to examine the use made of crime statistics and the adequacy of the data for those uses, also the methods used in compiling and presenting key statistics. It is investigating the perceptions and needs of users of crime statistics, both within the main user community and outside it. The scope of the review is official statistics on crime and other statistics relevant to the statistical assessment and analysis of crime. It does not cover statistics relating to the administration of family and civil justice, the judiciary, legal aid, the legal professions and the legal services market.

The project has been contracted to Matrix Research and Consultancy who began work in September 2005. They are a consortium of Chris Fox from Matrix and Professor Tim Hope from Keele University. They are supported in this work by a scientific college comprising 11 academics, chaired by Professor Mike Maguire. Their role is advise the enquiry team and provide expert knowledge for the project.

There are two main stages to the review, the first being a broad and wide evidence gathering stage and the second being a narrow and deep stage where a few issues will be looked at in more depth. We are coming to the end of the first stage; the evidence gathering phase. The second stage will start in January 2006; the report is due in May 2006.