The official crime statistics criminology essay

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Introduction

The essay titles statement is correct. Official crime statistics and the mass media are the two main causes. Violent crimes are the most over-represented crime in the media, despite being insignificant in comparison to other crimes types. Domestic violence and victimization in poor inner-city areas and closed institutions are significantly under-represented crimes in official statistics despite being a huge problem. White-collar crimes are the most neglected crimes of all, massively under-represented in both official statistics and the media despite being the most damaging to society. Even if official statistics are accurate, they often become part of the misrepresentation of crimes as the media habitually takes official statistics and uses them out of context (Newburn, 2007: 69). While official statistics should be blamed for certain under-representations of crimes, the media are more to blame for the misrepresentation and distortion of crime.

Official Crime Statistics

Official statistics have come under criticism over the last 30 years and particularly the last decade for under-reporting (Maguire, 2012: 206). Police

records (Home Office) and the BCS (British Crime Survey) are the two main sources of official statistics, with the BCS being added over 20 years ago as a ' respected alternative source of information' (Maguire, 2012: 207). Crime levels in the 19th and early 20th century were ' apparently extraordinarily low' until the late 1950's where crime rose rapidly (Newburn, 2007: 54). Crime rose nearly every year until the early 1990's, where there was a brief but noteworthy decline, before rising again. In particular there was a significant rise in violent crime and criminal damage in criminal statistics due to sudden availability of consumer goods, vacant houses due to working women, and police being more attentive to recording crime as a result (Newburn, 2007: 54). Throughout criminal statistics history, the governmental project has focused on trends in crime and the activities of the criminal justice system, while the ' Lombrosian' project in disparity has focused on causes of crime in an attempt to separate the criminal from the non-criminal (Newburn, 2007: 50). Crime statistics are extensively to blame for the under-representation of certain crimes due to limitations in data collection, errors in methodology and failure for crimes to be reported. Frequently, official crime figures do not give a clear picture of the situational context of crimes (McLintock and Avison, 1968). When compared with current crime victimization surveys, problems are repeatedly found with the interpretation of data from official statistics on crime patterns in England and Wales (Bottomley and Pease, 1986). In a BCS gathering of information on victimization from a sample of 11, 000 individuals it was established that previous under-reporting had occurred, indicating 4 times as many offenses of property damage and loss than in official police statistics (Hough and

Mayhew, 1983) Since the 1970's there have been calls for increased data collection of ' hard to count' crimes including corporate fraud, crime in governments, international crime, organized crime, domestic violence and crimes in closed institutions (Maguire, 2012: 207). They make up the ' dark figure of crime' that is almost non-existing in official crime statistics (Coleman and Moynihan, 1996). Corporate crime is undoubtedly the hardest to measure in crime statistics as this can include crimes against other organizations, against its own employees or against customers and the public (Tombs, 2010). Official crime statistics highlight how the lower classes commit more ' blue-collar' crimes than the middle classes, and at the same time fail to account for how the middle classes ' clock up a track record' in the more damaging white-collar crime that ' leaves the lower class for dead' (Braithwaite, 1979: 66). Corporate crimes are difficult to bring to court due to lack of proof, witnesses or people willing to testify, especially in a high-profile company. Often these crimes are hard to detect, evidence is increasingly rare as digital data can be deleted, and they have no obvious victims and often struggle to depict who to punish for the crime. The reconstruction of corporate crime through analysis of investigation files, newspaper stories and court records is the best method of investigating, but this takes a considerable amount of time and money making them rare (Passas and Groskin, 2001). The rise of investigative journalism through interviews with business people and auditors is helping, yet overall knowledge remains minimal (Maguire, 2012: 232). Organized international and cross-border crime has had negligible exposure in crime statistics as conventional methods of gathering data are not sufficient in coping with the rapidly

changing and obscured nature of highly organized groups, with money laundering, EU subsidy fraud, drug smuggling and people trafficking regularly occurring under the radar (Maguire, 2002: 283). The need for international crime data has been recognized by the development of the ' International Crime Victim Survey (van Dijk et al. 2010) and the ' International Crime Business Survey' (Alvazzi Del Frate, 2005) yet both have enduring methodological problems and scarce resources. The National Criminal Intelligence, Europol and the Border Agency provide the UK's and Europe's best threat assessments (Maguire, 2012: 233). Crimes by governments, including war crimes against humanity, also remain under-represented in criminal statistics (Cohen, 2001). There is a worrying discourse that these crimes are not thought of as criminal statistics and unsurprisingly state officials do not publish figures on torture victims, war crimes, and government-sanctioned killings; Human Right Watch and Amnesty International attempt this instead (Maguire, 2012: 233). Crime against business remains under-represented in crime statistics due to its measurement difficulty. Many cases fail to ' come to light' as losses through employee theft are difficult to detect and may not be distinguishable from legitimate forms of shrinkage and embezzlement (Maguire, 2012: 231). It can be unclear whether losses result from a few large crimes by a small number of people or from a great number of smaller thefts by many people (Maguire, 2012: 232). Although crime statistics from 2000 show a decline in credit card and cheque fraud, estimates suggest just 5% of these criminal transactions are reported (Attorney Generals Office, 2006). Again, counting these frauds is unproductive and although efforts have been made in

investigation tactics the overall picture remains ambiguous and estimates of losses through theft and fraud remain exceedingly speculative (Pricewaterhouse Coopers, 2005). Previously domestic violence and sexual assault was under-represented in crime statistics as it is used to be counted, but now is being expressed in terms of prevalence (Maguire, 2012: 229). Lifetime prevalence studies can be deceptive in that those who have been abused once and those who have been attacked constantly are not distinguished from each other. While in the 1980's more attention was given to women, to men (Grady, 2002) and to same sex partners (Henderson, 2003), problems remain ethically and practically when investigating child abuse (Maguire, 2012: 230). Moreover, crimes in closed institutions scarcely reach the police and regularly go unreported, often due to cultures of secrecy and intimidation, making data collection difficult (Maguire, 2012: 232). Progress has been made through studies of bullying in children homes (Barter et al. 2004) and among prisoners (Ireland 2005) yet despite recent high-profile cases research is still lacking regarding army barracks and ill-treatment of old people (Maguire, 2012: 232). While the BCS is now seen as more reliable than police crime statistics for measuring crime trends, criticisms are still made. Like police statistics, the BCS is full of unexpected thefts, assaults, illegal entry's and damage to property offences committed by strangers while it under-represents domestic violence and rarely covers ' serial offenses' (Maguire, 2012: 224). In the 1980's Left Realists and feminists argued that the BCS does not sufficiently reflect the experiences of women of the poor (Matthews and Young, 1986). Domestic violence is often by people known to the victim, who is unlikely to report this during a

doorstep interview (Maguire, 2012: 224). Furthermore marginalized members of society who are most vulnerable to victimization such as the homeless and mentally ill rarely get included in surveys based on samples of households (Maguire, 2012: 224). Positive steps are being taken but further improvement of data collection methods are needed to rectify the problems in overall crime statistics. Left-leaning local authority surveys have been conducted in inner city regions, with results showing the most intense victimization in poverty ridden areas (Crawford et al. 1990). The first Islington Crime Survey highlighted a different situation to that portrayed by the first BCS with a third of local households having been affected by burglary, robbery or assault over the previous 12 months (Jones et al. 1986). Moreover, greater rates of sexual assault were found with one fifth of assaults being classified domestic; much more than the BCS report especially when compared to the Islington Crime Survey figures showing two thirds of women under 24 having been ' upset by harassment' over the previous year (Maguire, 2012: 224). A further significant finding was that ' young, black females in the area are 29 times more likely to be assaulted than white females over 45', with Young (1988: 171) claiming that these figures show the ' fallacy of talking about crime in terms of just women, or men, or black or whites'. Instead analysis should be on the actual subgroups in which people live (Young, 1988: 171). Genn (1988) illustrates this point in London's first major victimization survey, where female respondents claimed to be victimized regularly. This often goes unnoticed because not only do surveys impose limits on crimes per victim but victims are also reluctant to admit being victims in interviews (Maguire, 2012: 225). On a positive note,

the criticism of the BCS has meant increased attention to differential patterns of victimization. ' Booster samples' have been interviewed to explore ethnic minority victimization (Clancy et al. 2001), separate analysis of crime against older people has been conducted (Chivatte-Matthews and Maggs, 2002), computer based self-interviewing is utilized to gain stronger data on domestic violence and sexual assault (Percy and Mayhew, 1997) while the survey now includes a sample of 11-15 year olds (Chaplin et al. 2011). However the BCS and police statistics still has a long way to go in accurately representing corporate, international and governmental crime.

The Mass Media

Violent crime in particular is immensely over-represented in the media. A front-page news study over 30 years in 9 cities in the US found that violent crime made up 70% of the crime news and only 20% of the official crime rate (Jacobs, 1980). Crimes against the person are continuously over-represented when compared to official crime statistics (Roshier, 1973). White-collar crimes are more damaging to society than common crimes yet federal court records show that only 22% of filed corporate crimes are charged, meanwhile 70% of filed common crimes are charged (Newburn, 2009: 68). A study into front-page crime stories in the New York Times and the Los Angelis Times shows the link between media representation and prosecution, finding that violent crimes appear 3 times more often than white-collar crime (Dominick, 1978). In Britain, violent crimes are reported regularly on the popular television channels, with ITV1 in particular displaying ' close proximity to tabloid dailies' by focusing on violence, sexual and drug crimes (Newburn, 2009: 74). Members of contemporary society on average watch

just over 4 hours of television a day (Greer and Reiner, 2012: 245). This is alarming when linked to the fact that the percentage of violent crimes reported in television news is closer to the tabloid figure than the quality press (Greer and Reiner, 2012: 250). Local newspapers and broadcasting focus the most on ethnic minority and working class groups in crime reports, with specific incidents being covered lengthily, without any real contemplation for crime patterns or causes of crime (Garofalo: 1981: 325). When ' reel-world' violence is compared to ' real-world' official crime statistics is does appear that the media exaggerates danger (Greer and Reiner, 2012: 261). Liberals and radicals have long argued that the media exaggerates the areas of crime that cause the maximum possible public alarm about law and order, which in turn generates support of repressive solutions (Gerbner, 1995). Crime news often moves the reader through emotions rather than discursive logic (Newburm, 2009: 70). It is easier to trigger anger and fear through violent crime reporting than corporate crime reporting, with individual victims increasingly being used by the media to rally the public (Beck, 1992). Gerbner and his associates through the ' cultivation analysis' over the last 30 years have argued that the media's illustration and imagery of violent crime is a threat to democracy (Gerbner, 1995). The argument is that the ' fear of crime' created by the media, causing excessive anxiety and pain for the public, is a major crime itself (Wilkinson, 2001: 19). By creating a fearful society, Gerbner argues the media can manipulate and control the public, making them susceptible to welcoming regressive strong, hard-line and tough measures with the promise of relief to their anxiety (Signorielli, 1990: 102). While this view may be more

applicable with the US media, it does not apply as much to Britain (Gunter, 1985). The ' Moral Panics and Deviancy Amplification' theory is regularly used to explain the phenomenon of crime misrepresentation in the media. A moral panic is an overreaction by the mass media, police and leaders in society to delinquent offences which are in fact trivial, both in nature and occurrence rate (Chibnall, 1977: 208). Moral panic and deviancy amplification is a one-way communication process of the media where disproportionate access is given to the self-proclaimed ' moral guardians' of society who explain route causes of crime through their own powerful group discourse, while deviants' own accounts are rarely heard, highlighting a ' hierarchy of access' to the media (Cohen and Young, 1981). The media seek to set a criminal justice agenda outside of the political process and distort the overall picture of crime so that their own agenda items gain priority and are implemented (Curran and Seaton, 1988: 3). This theory argues that the ultimate goal of the media is to increase public anxiety, thus placing pressure on the political and criminal justice systems, allowing more authoritarian law and order polices to be passed (Cohen and Young, 1981). By projecting a socially constructed society of violence and chaos, often using vulnerable groups in society as scapegoats, the public starts to demand a return of law and order and ultimately call for their own repression through authoritarian measures. This increases the amount of deviance and reinforces deviant identity, and like a self-fulfilling prophecy, creates more crime (Cohen, 1971: 37). An example of ' the rule makers creating the rule breakers' is seen in the demonization of youth groups such as the ' Mod and Rockers, Hells Angels and Hippies' in the mid-1960's, where they were

identified as a threat to society by the media (Cohen and Young, 1973) . In reaction to being stereotyped in a negative manner these groups increased their deviant behaviour and this was amplified by the media to provoke public, political and legal approval for the police to use hard-line tactics (Young, 1980). As a result Britain has a habit of disregarding young people's opinions (Unger, 2001: 271). Further groups blamed for the decline of the British society and economy were the trade unions, welfare scroungers, muggers, thieves and the ' lumpenproletariat', while in the US chaos and danger was depicted by manufacturing exaggerated imagery of riots in cities and violent anti-Vietnam demonstrations, thus gathering support for authoritarian response (Hall et al. 1977: 364). Moral panics theory is a convincing argument for why and how crimes are misrepresented in the media, however there are criticisms that can be made. The law breakers are made into victims while the actual victims are ignored and marginalized. Arguably the theory also overstates the power of the media and its supposed joint conspiracy with conservative and right realist politics. There are other factors that can help explain of the misrepresentation of crime in the media. Violent crimes are more likely to be deemed ' newsworthy' than white-collar crime, as it will make a ' good story that their audience wants to know' (Greer and Reiner, 2012: 263). Earlier studies of crime news reveal the media shows the Marxist hegemony control model in action, stressing the unequal distribution of wealth and power in society, with the media reproducing the dominant capitalist ideology and promoting the interests of the ruling elite (Greer and Reiner, 2012: 263). This means the majority of newspapers have conservative political ideologies, with reporters being

aware of this despite their personal political leaning; even the BBC which seeks a political neutrality often leans towards Westminster (Greer and Reiner, 2012: 264). ' Journalists are not necessarily biased towards the powerful yet their routine assumptions make them willing conduits of that power' (McNair, 2009: 59). The media is as much an agency of policing as law enforcement agencies in that they reproduce crime in the process of representing crime (Ericson et al. 1991: 74). This hegemonic control model is also applied to gender and race, relating to the tendency of crime reports to reinforce gender stereotypes that maintain unequal power relations (Chancer, 2003) and make it difficult for ethnic minorities to gain media attention, victim status or public sympathy (Barlow, 1998). Further more, the combination of films, television series and novels consistantly illustrating violent crime, and the emergence of ' infotainment' and crime reality television such as ' Cops' featuring predominately ethnic, working class youths means the distinction between fact and fiction is being blurred and false stereotypes in crime are being reinforced (Greer and Reiner, 2012: 248). The positive aspect of this is that police deviance is increasingly recorded and documented (e. g. Rodney King case, Ian Tomlinson case) (Greer and McLaughlin, 2011).

Conclusion

Both official statistics and the media are the major causes of the statement in the essay title being correct. They both contribute to the under-representation of white-collar crime despite this causing the most harm to society. Official statistics are guilty of under-representing various other sub-types of crime while media organizations are guilty of over-representing

certain crimes and under-representing other crimes in the name of their own political agenda.