Victimisation essay sample

' The good news is that the number of people who are victims of crime has fallen by 40% compared to ten years ago. And if people are the victims of crime, their experience of the criminal justice system is vastly improved' (Home office 2005 cited in Walklate 2007: 1). Critically assess this statement with respect to victim surveys and the social construction of their contents. ' There are three kinds of lies; lies, damned lies, and statistics'. This semi-ironic statement by Benjamin Disraeli refers to the influential power of numbers and briefly describes how even statistics can be used to strengthen inaccurate arguments.

This statement can be related to the above quote cited by the Home office in 2005, who have stated that victimisation has decreased by forty percent over the previous ten years. The strengths and weaknesses of the survey used by the Home office to measure victimisation will be critically assessed in this essay with relations to the social construction of the contents which will also be analysed to determine whether the statistics are used to strengthen inaccurate arguments. In order to critically assess the Home office statement it is important to acknowledge the origins of crime surveys.

Since the 1960s there has been a major interest into the fear of crime for both academic research and policy proposals. The reasoning behind the rapid interest of fear of crime and the reason why fear of crime has only been ' discovered' over the last quarter of the twentieth century has been answered by Hale (1996 p. 79), who suggested that the answer ' lies in the growing awareness that fear of crime has consequences beyond a deep-seated sense of personal anxiety. ' The implications of these have been noted by sociologists, the media and politicians.

The US was the first to carry out victimisation surveys in order to gather information on the extent of unreported crime known as the ' dark figure' of crime and on the risks of crime (Ennis 1967 cited in Mayhew and Hough 1988). These surveys prompted the birth of comparable crime surveys in international countries including Britain. Surveys which concentrated primarily on victimisation in Britain appeared in the seventies particularly the survey in London by Sparks, Glenn and Dodd (1977) which was produced to deal with methodological issues (Mayhew and Hough 1988).

A number of surveys were also conducted such as crime surveys in Sheffield in 1976 at the University of Sheffield as part of research into the ' Urban Criminal'. Both of these surveys were funded by the Home office, however, a national survey was ruled out largely on the grounds of cost and there were also concerns about the number of estimated unreported crimes that might be created. A workshop was created in 1981 at the time of urban disorder in Britain by the Home office in order to consider development of a national survey.

The national survey would include unreported and unrecorded crime as an index of crime. This in turn would have practical values such as developing crime prevention programmes and also it would provide a more sophisticated idea of crime which may develop a non-biased opinion about law and order. It would also offer more encouragement for criminological research and theory such as fear of crime and attitudes to police. In 1981 the Home Secretary Lord William Whitelaw agreed that the British Crime Survey (BCS) should be developed (Mayhew and Hough 1988).

The introduction of the BCS is known to be the result of the ' radical left realism' approach which argued that the BCS was formed due to the lack of information present crime surveys provide to uncover particularly high risks of crime that women, minority groups, ethnic groups and socially disadvantaged people faced (Young 1988). The BCS set out to emphasise victimisation as a ' real' and everyday problem in society according to the left realists.

The left realists promised to take victimisation and the victim ' seriously' by bringing together the four core elements in an active response to crime (1) formal social control by police, (2) informal social control by members of the public, (3) the offender and (4) the victim. This response to crime and victims is known as the ' square of crime' (Taylor et al. 1973, cited in Goodey 2005). In 1994 Anderson et al. added a fifth element ' the city' which referred to variables such as gender, age, class and race. The first BCS was conducted in 1982 in England, Wales and Scotland, Scotland now has its own survey (Chambers 1984).

The BCS was conducted every two years until 2001 when it was decided that it should be conducted annually. The BCS asks over fifty thousand adults including those over the age of sixteen in private households about their experiences of victimisation over the previous twelve months. One person per household address is selected by a postcode finder to take part in the survey. The Home office gathers information on crimes and victims of crime from both the BCS and Police recorded crimes and develops overall view about crime rates based on these two types of information.

Police recorded crimes are crimes which are reported and recorded by the police, they provide a good measure of patterns in well-reported crimes as well as the less common but serious types of crime and data is produced on the extent of crime. They are also an important sign of police workload and provide information for local areas The BCS also identifies instances of victimisation which go unreported and therefore have been highly admired for unmasking the ' dark figure' of crime.

The majority of crimes the BCS and Police recorded crimes include are property related such as burglary, vehicle theft, vandalism and other theft, around a fifth are violent crime and almost half of violent crime involves small injury and only a small proportion involves serious violence (see appendix fig. 1 & 2). In relation to the essay question the method of the BCS and police records must be critically analysed in order to determine how valid and reliable the findings are. The BCS has restricted its questions to crimes against individuals and their private property.

Therefore this excludes surveying victims of corporate and state crime such as public services, schools, shops and businesses because it is difficult to survey these victims as they may not know they are being victimised (Schneider and Wiersma 1990 cited in Kennedy and Sacco 1998). Critical victimologists have identified crime statistics as a socially constructed product and it is the States definition of what is crime which keeps crime statistics presumably low as its priority is self maintenance.

Crimes committed by the State are not included in police statistics or the BCS such as war crimes. The number of British soldiers killed in the illegal

Iraq war at present is not included in any of the statistics. If they were the overall findings by the Home office may be different. The BCS is also unsuccessful when measuring offences involving drug and alcohol abuse and consensual sexual offences. Mayhew (1985) suggested that ' for the crime types they cover, crime surveys count yield fuller estimates of the number of statistics than do police statistics'.

Therefore, Mayhew (1985) questioned whether the BCS and police statistics portray different quantities of crime in the way that common-sense suggests? In order to answer this question Mayhew stated that the definition of crime used in the procedures for counting crime in the BCS and police statistics need to be examined. A crime can only be defined as a criminal by the law and can be defined as ' an act (or state) which is punishable by the criminal law. However, Mayhew (1985) argued Is a punishable act something that, given the opportunity, the courts could punish or would punish? This ambiguity between the letter of the law and the law in practice emerges as a key to the differences between the categories counted by surveys and police statistics. ' Becker also argued that it is important to establish when and what is a crime and stated that ' social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance' (Becker 1963, cited in Goodey 2005).

Becker's statement can be related to victimisation and it is important to recognise that a criminal incident may constitute a breech of the law. The police need to determine which of the incidents are considered a crime which they need to deal with. Bottomley and Coleman (1981), Farrington and Dowds (1985) cited in Mayhew (1985) stated that the criteria required for

reporting an incident as a crime in England and Wales is that there must be prima facie evidence that a crime has been committed and the case must be sufficiently serious to attract police attention.

However, some incidents are not treated as criminal even if they are crimes according to the law such as minor traffic offences, minor thefts where the victim and offender may be relatives or crimes where the victim does not wish to pursue action. It can be argued that victimisation and fear of crime is socially constructed (Genn 1987). The media can be largely blamed for this as they tend to stereotype offenders as young unemployed males and are notorious for presenting dramatic crimes (Skogan and Maxfield 1981 cited in Brogden and Nijhar 2000).

Therefore social construction on how approachable police are when reporting a crime is very important. There are a number of reasons why victims fail to report crimes to the police. The victim may believe that the police will not come if he or she calls for them or that they will be unable to do anything useful about the situation. These beliefs are a result of the victim's general views of police efficiency.

The victim may also not report a crime if they believe that it would involve them in further costs such as going to court (Sparks, Genn and Dodd 1977), or the investigation of the crime would result in placing the victim in shameful position, for instance if the individual was a victim of rape or domestic abuse. This may be the case why instances of rape and domestic abuse have not decreased over the past tens years although the overall crime rate has decreased (see appendix Fig 1 & 2). Another reason may be

due to the victim believing calling the police would be a harsh step and the offender would be ' let off' by the police or the courts.

In a study by Sparks, Genn and Dodd (1977) it was found that victims decision to notify the police was greatly influenced by the seriousness of the crime, they also found that other factors came into light when reporting incidents to the police such as age, and race, for instance if an individual believed that the police may be prejudice to them they would be less likely to report a crime, for instance Sparks, Genn and Dodd (1977) found that 30% of residents in Brixton believe that the police may not be working to the standards they should be compared to other areas in London.

This may be the case of prejudices because the majority who lived in Brixton at that time belonged to the Black ethnic group and the police force was a dominant white male organisation. Examples of police racism were noted in the Stephen Lawrence case (1993) where a Black teenager was murdered and which resulted in large media attention. An inquiry, headed by Sir William MacPherson in 1999, into the original Metropolitan police investigation, famously concluded that the force was " institutionally racist" (The Guardian 1999).

This in turn may have an effect on the general publics' perception of the police. However, on the other hand individuals may be willing to report crime such as property crime in order to claim insurance. Critics have also argued that, in reality police statistics are a measure of police activity rather than a measure of crime (Kitsuse and Cicourel 1963 cited in Kennedy and Sacco

1998), and due to this the police forces would not record all crimes in order to perceive that they are efficient in keeping crime rates low.

The BCS has it's weaknesses as it does not account for victims under the age of sixteen. The social construction of children as innocent could be responsible for the BCS not including children as part of the sample because society believes that children cannot be victims of crimes such as abuse nor are they capable of committing a crime. The NSPCC has estimated that than twenty five percent of all rapes which are recorded by the police are committed against children under the age of sixteen.

However, there are those who fail to report abuse and rapes because they feel ashamed (Stanko 1987), for instance the feminist critique states that males under report crime because they show ' hegemonic' masculinity, where they are perceived as socially dominant and reporting crimes such as violence or sexual offences would question their hegemonic masculinity. Although the crime rate has decreased from 1995 to 2005, the rate of rapes on females during this period has dramatically increased (see appendix Fig. 3 & 4).

Leah Williams from the Women's Resource Centre stated that ' there were 1, 842 rapes reported in 1985, compared to 14, 449 in 2005. There may be a good explanation for this trend. Research by feminist scholars Hanmer and Saunders (1984) cited in Goodey (2005) found that ' everyday' reality of women's encounters of violence by men were not revealed in the BCS because the BCS is not designed to reveal such information. Therefore the

number of rapes on females may not have increased during this period, but the number of reports to the police has increased.

This suggests that rapes which may have occurred prior 1995 are only being reported to the police in the last decade. This may be due to the social construction of the police changing. There are more female officers now than previously which makes rape victims more willing to talk to female officers than male officers. Society has also changed in order to provide more victim support for rape victims by establishing rape centres for victims.

However, Hough (2004) stated in the Guardian newspaper that the BCS shows that the major types of crime have fallen dramatically since 1995, however, recorded crime has increased. This increase is due to the change in the way in which police count crime. In 1998 it was decided that victim reports of crimes will be recorded even if they are doubted. This may be an alternative reason to why there is an increase in rape crimes, as rape is hard to record without sufficient evidence.

It can also be argued that prisoners who may become victims inside prison and those in hostels cannot take part in the BCS as its sample is randomly selected using the electoral register for private households. This also leads to another error as only one person per household can take part in the survey. An individual who may not have experienced any crime may take part in the survey, however, another individual living in the same premises may have been a victim of crime and may not have been selected to take part in the survey.

A victim could also have experienced a particular crime a number of times in that year, however, the BCS limits multiple victimisation to six incidents therefore victimisation is underestimated (Genn 1988). There are also geographical errors to take into consideration, for instance although overall crime rates appear to decrease, in some areas crime may be increasing in particular areas for instance a BBC News report in August 2005 found that Cleveland Police statistics for July showed a 15% increase compared to July 2004 and included a violent crime rise of just under 600 offences.

The BCS could also gather information which is inaccurate due to recall, where individuals fail to remember incidents, or if they do remember them, they may not include it in the survey. Another source of inaccuracy is known as ' telescoping' which occurs when an individual remembers and reports an event, but recalls the event as having happened earlier or later than it did (Sparks, Genn, Dodd 1987).

Jones, Macleon and Young cited in Walklate (1989) stated that it would seem that segments of the population are so over-exposed to this kind of behaviour that it becomes part of their everyday reality and escapes their memory in the interview situation indicating that our estimate is probably low' This is an important factor to consider as the BCS estimates the frequency certain crimes occur in a given period, therefore backward telescoping has the same effect as failing to recall or report an incident.

In conclusion no matter how carefully crime statistics are gathered, police reports and the BCS will always be socially constructed and therefore inaccuracies will occur such as over and under reporting. The element of the

' dark figure' of crime needs to seriously be taken into consideration, and leaves one to wonder whether or not crime rates in England and Wales have actually decreased or whether statistics are used to strengthen inaccurate arguments by the State in order to maintain itself and perceive to the general public that it is tackling the issue of crime.

However, it can be argued that victims experiences of the criminal justice system has improved due to the social construction of the police force changing to enable efficient recordings of crime and programmes such as rape victim centres have been established as a result of the BCS.