

Strengths and weaknesses of crime statistics and victimisation surveys



Rates of crime are recorded using two key sources; Police Recorded Crime (PRC) and Victimisation Surveys. Both will be explored and examined to see how they can, effectively assist policy makers in targeting areas for change. In addition the advantages and disadvantages of each method will be discussed along with their similarities and differences.

To understand why it is important to record crime levels, three key notions must be clarified. Firstly, crime is legally defined as “ any act or omission outlawed by the criminal law and thus punishable” (Odgers, 1911). Secondly, the purpose of the judicial system is to enforce the law and protect victims of crime. Thirdly, criminal guilt relates to premeditated intention.

Universal law is non-existent; therefore each country or locality has its own legal system. The shared aim is to hold person/s accountable for their behaviour. Substructures of the judiciary may focus on specific areas of interest. These may include the courts, and penal system and constabulary. The role of the courts and penal system is specific. It is in place to serve and protect the innocent, to pass judgement on the guilt or innocence of persons presented and to serve a proportionate punishment in response to the criminal act committed. Any form of justice served must remember the civil liberties of all concerned, including the offender. Crime prevention and law enforcement are a separate division provided by the constabulary.

The term criminal guilt stems from two fundamental Latin principles. These are ‘ actus reus’ which translates as bad act and ‘ mens rea’ – guilty mind. The accused must be found to have committed ‘ actus reus’ with the willing intention to perpetrate the act and/or to have assessed the risk i. e. accident

or fear may be experienced as a direct result of the action (Dubber, Markus D. (2002). Few exceptions to being found guilty of one of these alone exist, these concern whether a person can be fully answerable for their actions. Examples of 'mens rea' without 'actus reus' can relate to crimes, where although the action is deemed illegal, the act may not have the deliberate intention to harm another. Examples of this could involve driving at excessive speed, an act of accidental manslaughter or self-defence. (law.jrank.org)

Two comparable sources are used to measure crime rates within the UK. Police recorded crime measures the volume of notifiable offences committed over a fixed period, within the jurisdiction that the constabulary serves. Crime-related statistics are obtained at request of the British Home Office, where they are collated, analysed, and published throughout the year. The figures provide the government and the public with a summarised account of the information obtained. They aim to reveal and compare crime rates within specific localities. They are also used to demonstrate the effectiveness of policing. This information can be used to suggest areas for improvement and assist in the constant struggle to prevent crime occurring.

The second method that is utilised, verifies the extent to which crime is perpetrated and is a valuable tool when combatting crime. Victimisation surveys; primarily recognised as the British Crime Survey (BCS) is a form of crime-related statistical research that was established in 1982. It was introduced in response for an alternative complementary system to exist alongside using police records alone. It aimed to gather intelligence on the public attitudes towards crime and their opinions relating to the judicial

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system. Although operationally independent from any government body, the BCS is still conducted for the British Home Office (First BCS report, Hough and Mayhew, 1983).

The survey confidentially canvasses in the region of forty to fifty thousand individuals (Office for National Statistics, 2005) to uncover various information relating to crime-related experiences, including anti-social behaviour and police interaction and response to criminal activity. The people questioned span various demographics and aim to be representative of society. They are interviewed anonymously via door to door visits or telecommunications.

Police recorded crime statistics are easy to conduct and provide a good measure of criminal cases both regionally and nationally. Because the statistics are compiled from police reports readily available, the only additional cost incurred involves the information being sent, analysed and evaluated. Over time re-occurring inclines and declines in illegal behaviour can be identified and used when analysing patterns of crime, in particular to risk assess, highlight and tackle crime hotspots. Crime statistics can also indicate the workload and performance level of police forces throughout the country.[1]

An indication of a reduction in crime related incidents could boost public morale. If necessary the findings could influence change surrounding governing policy. For example, the allocation or re-allocation of specific resources within a police department could lead to a more efficient service.

Identifying the need to place patrol officers where the greatest street crime occurs would be one way to maximise effectiveness of the police service.

Unless a crime has been reported to the police and they have classified it as criminal it will not be included. This means that all minor misdemeanours that would be trialled as summary offences in court such as, crimes relating to anti social behaviour, assault, disorderly conduct and criminal trespass, along with most either-way offences for example theft and drug offences are excluded from being recorded[2]. This highlights one of the main failings of this form of data collection as it leads to discrepancies when analysing the results, especially when comparing between PRC and victimisation surveys.

Data collection and recording of PRC statistics are affected by the regulations implemented by the current governing body[3]. The results uncovered may point to a rise in criminal acts being committed. This could have a negative impact on society. As a result the published findings could become biased and used as propaganda to mislead people into believing that crime rates are more favourable than factual. In some situations the volume of crime could be falsely recorded to meet performance and administrative targets (Chambliss, 2001). This is in direct contradiction of providing a good service to the public.

British crime surveys are independent from government reports and not affected by changes in how crime is reported and documented. They play an important role in serving the public interest and governing change and policy. They provide a better indication relating to long-term trends of crime within society[4], in particular highlighting crimes which affect different

sociological groups. For example, crimes against women and those which affect minority groups such as the vulnerable, mentally ill, the disadvantaged and ethnic minorities. The BCS provides statistics which demonstrate the extent to which crime occurs. It accounts for minor offences, antisocial behaviour and victimless crime such as fraud. It also includes household and personal crime which may not be otherwise reported or deemed a criminal act[5].

The BCS is constantly changing to adapt to new concerns affecting society[6]. Recent expansion has seen the inclusion of acts committed against minors such as ‘gadget theft’ which has seen a vast increase as technology advances; however this is only in the testing stage and is yet to be fully implemented. It has also seen the inclusion of crimes relating to identity theft[7]. The confidential method of surveying is flexible and can reach a wide proportion of people. Interviews conducted may take place at home, by visiting door to door or over the telephone. This can motivate people to openly speak their mind about their experiences and concerns. It may also lead to the discussion of topics of a sensitive nature for example, being the victim of racially incited or homophobic hate crimes, which they may not have wanted to report. This may be due to shame, embarrassment, a fear of repercussions or not being believed or taken seriously by the police service[8]. Overall the BCS appears to paint a broader picture of how a variety of crime-related issues really affect a range of varied people. Perhaps this is because they take the initiative and seek to learn more.

Shortcomings surrounding this form of canvassing is that it is very costly to conduct, not only in man power but also time and resources. The <https://assignbuster.com/strengths-and-weaknesses-of-crime-statistics-and-victimisation-surveys/>

effectiveness is questionable as the results gathered rely on a person's honesty and personal insight in to how they have been affected which may provide exaggerated responses or false information.

The BCS also excludes the recording of commercial crimes and heinous crime such as murder. However, the Commercial Victimisation Survey and the Offending Crime and Justice Survey are both in place to ensure that crimes outside the boundaries of the BCS are still accounted for[9].

In summary, I have explored both methods used to research crime statistics and outlined the strengths and weaknesses of each. For example, The BCS relies on the respondent's personal view of the effect of crime. PRC assumes that crime is always reported. Both methods are dependent on the classification of crime.

Victimisation surveys fail to provide an accurate depiction of society. This is because surveys of this form assume that people interviewed can and will provide a reliable version of events. An effective source of information can not solely rely on the integrity and factual representation of those it surveys. Individual perception can vary hugely, and factors such as differences between living in a rural versus urban location and coming from differing socio-economic backgrounds can lead to ambiguous results. For example, certain groups of people may be targeted more or less than indicated. If these variables are not taken in to account then the measure of crime rates could be distorted and the overall findings in relation to the sample population unfounded. Overall it can be seen that both the BCS and PRC are adequate methods for collecting information. When trying to measure crime

the most effective method is to examine BCS and PRC together as the results combined provide a more comprehensive picture of how crime really affects society.