

Crime and society essays - offender victim surveys



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Crime has become an increasingly important topic of political, academic, and public discussion over recent decades. As a result, there has been an increase in public demand for access to information surrounding the extent and nature of the problem of crime within society. The principal method for communicating such information to the public has traditionally been through the use of official criminal statistics, based on offences reported to and recorded by the police. However, most writers on the subject argue that these figures fail to provide an accurate reflection of the true extent of crime within society. 'The gap between the volume of crime which is actually committed and that which enters into official statistics is referred to as the 'dark figure' of crime' (Joyce, 2001: 45). In an attempt to combat the problems posed by the 'dark figure', new methods of identifying and recording criminal behaviour such as offender surveys (often known as self-report studies) and victim surveys have been developed. This essay will examine the extent to which these new methods can be said to compensate for the problems associated with official crime statistics.

Offender surveys and victim surveys have become increasingly popular methods of criminological research in recent decades. In order to analyse their success it is important to look at them individually. Self-report studies consist of a series of questions directed at particular groups, usually youths, asking them to provide information of their involvement in criminality and rule-breaking. Thornberry (1989: 348) argues that 'the introduction of the self-report method has had a greater impact on theory and research than any other single innovation and it has led to fundamental shifts in how delinquent behaviour is described and explained'. However, there are a

number of criticisms of this method. Firstly, they do not make use of a representative sample of society, often only examining the delinquent behaviour of juveniles. Also, they are reliant on the honesty of those being surveyed who may be inclined to embellish their criminal behaviour. In spite of this, offender surveys offer a useful insight into youth culture and particular youth crimes such as vandalism and recreational drug-use. Coleman and Moynihan (1996: 67) put forward that 'there is little doubt that self-report studies have contributed much in documenting some of the omissions in official data. making clear that offending behaviour is far more widespread in the population than was once supposed, and that the 'offender' cannot be so clearly distinguished as a minority with certain key characteristics as was once thought'.

Although self report studies have compensated for the deficiencies of official statistics to some degree by offering an insight into the nature and extent of juvenile offending and minor offences, they have been largely unsuccessful in providing an indication or an understanding of more serious crimes and adult offending behaviour. Also, self-report studies have done little to redress official crime statistics failure to identify certain types of hidden crimes such as white-collar crime and domestic violence.

Many criminologists argue that victimisation surveys can compensate for the problems relating to official statistics and successfully highlight the expanse of the dark figure of crime. The most prominent victimisation study in the UK, the British Crime Survey (BCS) has been published biannually since 1992. The BCS calls upon the public to provide accounts of offences committed against them during a recent period. The BCS consistently

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reveals a much higher level of crime than is recorded by the police. In those offence categories covered on the 2002/ 2003 BCS and which can be directly compared with police figures, the BCS estimated 9.5 million offences whereas the police recorded only 2.3 million. The implication is that, if the BCS's are relied upon, the police figures record less than one quarter of all offences. Muncie (2001: 195) also states that the BCS consistently indicates that only about 50% of crime is in fact reported to the police. It is clear that victim surveys have played an important role in criminology and policy making by providing better estimates of the extent of crime than official criminal statistics and by 'giving insights into victims experiences of crime and of the criminal justice system' (Muncie, 2001).

There are many problems inherent in victimisation surveys. Firstly, crimes may have been committed outside the time-frame that is being surveyed. Secondly, victims may have forgotten about minor offences or alternatively may be unaware that a crime has taken place. In addition they fail to account for 'victimless' crimes and crimes that go unobserved and undetected. However victimisation surveys do provide a useful tool for identifying many crimes that are not reported to or recorded by the police.

In conclusion, offender and victimization surveys can be said to compensate for the deficiencies in official statistics on crime to some degree. They provide a more accurate reflection of the true extent of crime within society by offering a greater insight into the size and characteristics of the dark figure of unreported and unrecorded criminal offences. However they do not overcome the continual difficulties associated with translating peoples accounts of complex incidents into data that can be quantified. As a result,
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they offer little understanding or explanation of the true nature of crimes and criminals. As Maguire (1994) argues; ' There is a tendency to present the accumulation of data about unreported crime as the gradual unveiling of more and more of the ' complete picture', the ' true total' of offences committed, when a more appropriate metaphor might be the constant repainting of a canvas of indeterminate size, with new areas highlighted and depicted in greater detail'.

References

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