CRIMINAL STATISTICS AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF CRIME

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores a number of interrelated questions about 'crime levels', 'crime patterns', and 'crime trends' and how they are measured. These range from what may sound like (but are not) straightforward empirical and methodological questions, such as 'how much crime is there?', 'how is it changing?', and 'how do we know?', to more sociological and political questions about the relationships between, on the one hand, the kinds of crime data which are collected and published and, on the other, changing perceptions of the nature of 'the crime problem' and developments in criminal justice policy and the politics of crime control.

As elsewhere in the Handbook, the main focus will be on England and Wales, though examples from elsewhere will be drawn upon where appropriate. The discussion will centre around what are colloquially known as the 'official crime statistics': figures published on a regular basis by or on behalf of government to produce a national picture of the level of crime and to map trends over time. In England and Wales, these date back over 150 years. Until 2002, they consisted of compilations of offences recorded by the police, but since then have also included figures from the British Crime Survey (BCS). While for most of their history the status of the official statistics as a national 'barometer' of crime was rarely challenged, in the last 30 years (and especially over the last decade), they have come under increasingly critical scrutiny from academics, policy-makers, politicians, and the media. They have been criticized as 'unfit for purpose' in terms of new data needs, and the general picture they paint of the scale and changing contours of the ‘crime problem’ has been challenged as misleading and incomplete. There is also evidence of a decline in public trust in the published figures, reflecting a mismatch with commonly held perceptions of the ‘true’ state of crime as well as a growing reluctance to believe government statistics of any kind. The chapter will explore the reasons behind this shift in thinking and will examine some of the responses and recommended changes it has provoked.
The chapter is divided into three main sections. The first outlines the processes by which the official statistics are produced from their two main sources, police records and the BCS. It also looks at what the data from each appear to tell us about the scale of crime and trends over time, and to what extent they give similar, complementary, or contradictory messages. The second section examines, and explores the reasons behind, a rapid growth in demand for new kinds of information about crime which has been evident since the 1970s, fuelling (and being fuelled by) a massive expansion in data collection and analysis, and a ‘pluralization’ of sources, methodologies, and providers. Particular attention is paid to types of crime that are especially difficult to ‘count’, such as domestic violence, crimes within closed institutions, corporate fraud, cross-border and organized crime, and crimes by governments. While noting that the growth in information in these areas has served to highlight the limitations of the official statistics, it is argued that the overall state of knowledge about them remains patchy and contradictory, owing to the serious methodological challenges they present. The final section looks at recent proposals about the future of the official statistics, which have been prompted by continuing concerns about comprehensibility, coverage, integrity, and ‘relevance’. These reveal basic dilemmas inherent in the concept of a single set of national statistics, such as whether it should strive for ‘comprehensiveness’ (in the metaphor used by the National Statistician, continually fill in missing pieces of a jigsaw) or for relevance to current policy needs, or whether it should simply aim to provide a stable and easily understood ‘index’ of more serious offences to allow reliable measurement of trends over time.

THE ‘OFFICIAL STATISTICS’

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The idea of ‘measuring’ crime in a systematic way—for example, attempting to count the numbers of offences committed, or to determine where and when they most often occur—first came to prominence in France in the 1830s, where it was promoted by the so-called ‘moral statisticians’, Quetelet and Guerry, as part of a scientific vision of discovering laws and regularities in the social world akin to those that had been identified in the natural world (see, e.g., Beirne 1993). However, the idea was also highly compatible with the aims and practices of the centralized bureaucracies that were expanding across Europe in support of the emerging nation states. As theorists such as Foucault (1977) have argued, the compilation of detailed information about many aspects of social life was a crucial factor in the development of modernity, and closely tied up with the consolidation of governments’ control over their populations. It was unsurprising, therefore, that the collection and analysis of crime data soon became predominantly the province of government employees, rather than academic scientists.

In England and Wales, particular value came to be attached to regular statistical series based on annual returns to the Home Office from the police and the courts in local areas, which were checked and aggregated by government statisticians. The first
set of these national crime statistics was compiled in 1857 and soon settled into a published format which, despite periodic changes in terminology and coverage, remained remarkably similar until 2002. This took the form of an annual Command Paper under the title *Criminal Statistics, England and Wales*. The publication was divided into two main sections, one covering offences recorded by the police and the other ‘offenders cautioned or found guilty’. Most of the tables on recorded crime comprised counts of specific types of offence, classified by legal categories and broken down by, for example, police force area. They also showed trends in the various totals over both the long and short term. The offender-based tables were mainly concerned with the types and lengths of sentence given for different categories of offence, broken down variously by age, sex, and area. Innovation in presentation or analysis was rare, as the statisticians (who over time became to some extent distanced from the policy-making world) attached higher priority to the accurate measurement of trends through consistent statistical series than to producing data or analysis geared to immediate practical needs.

The production of annual criminal statistics of these kinds has a number of potential purposes and uses, the prominence and value of which can change over time. Their introduction in England and Wales initially provided an important new window for central administrators on to what was going on in different areas of the country, and the statistics were increasingly used to assist them in allocating resources and monitoring court and police activities. At a more abstract level, they came to be seen as providing something akin to an official barometer of the ‘moral health of the nation’, paralleling the use of mortality statistics to assess its physical health. To some extent, too, they were taken as a measure of the success or failure of government policies in protecting the public from crime. However, until the late 1950s official crime rates generally remained low and there were few rapid upward trends to generate serious concern. There was also something of a tacit agreement among politicians that the power of governments to influence crime rates over the short term is limited, and it was not until much later that crime control began to be regarded as a major issue in General Elections (see Downes and Morgan, this volume). Thus while the publication of the annual volume of *Criminal Statistics* usually attracted some political debate and media attention, this was usually fairly muted and short-lived. Moreover, although (a) the police, as sole providers of crime data and (b) the Home Office, as the agency which determined how they should be recorded and presented, together had almost total control over how the shape and scale of the ‘crime problem’ were portrayed to the country, surprisingly few challenges were mounted against the validity of the data or the ‘truth’ of the picture they painted. As we shall see, this situation has since changed substantially. First, however, let us look more closely at the official statistics themselves.

**CRIMES RECORDED BY THE POLICE**

**Raw totals**

Let us begin by looking at what the traditional ‘official statistics’, based on crimes recorded by the police, would appear to tell us *if we were to take them entirely at face*
value. These figures, it should first be noted, are misleadingly precise. The latest statistics available at the time of writing indicate that the total number of crimes recorded by the police in England and Wales in the financial year 2010/11\(^1\) was 4,150,097 (Chaplin et al. 2011).

As the records date back over a very long period, it is interesting to look at long term trends in such figures. Figure 8.1 presents a graphical representation of the raw ‘official totals’ for the 135-year period 1876–2011. What immediately leaps out from this histogram is that, while there was relatively little change for the first 80 years, the period from the mid-1950s to the early 1990s saw an unprecedented sustained increase in recorded crime. It is also worth noting that a similar pattern is discernible in the recorded crime statistics of most other Western democracies. Trends since the early 1990s, which have been less clear (and have been obscured by major changes in recording practice), will be discussed later.

In addition to overall totals, the official crime statistics break recorded crimes down into separate offence groups. Table 8.1 shows in simplified form the contributions of the main such groups to the total number of offences recorded in 2010/11. The picture of the current ‘crime problem’ which emerges is one in which, as one might expect, the theft of property looms quite large: theft and handling offences (including those involving vehicles) together with burglaries constitute close to half of the total. However, the relative sizes of the different offence groups have changed markedly over time, and despite increasing in absolute numbers, thefts and burglaries now make up a smaller proportion of the total than they used to. By contrast, two offence groups in particular—criminal damage and violence against the person—have become much more prominent. The number of offences of criminal damage recorded is over 140 times higher than in the early 1950s, when it was an almost negligible category.\(^2\) Likewise, the raw numbers of recorded offences of violence against the person have risen over the same period from under 7,000 to 822,000, and now make up 20 per cent of all recorded crime, compared with 2 per cent then.

**Interpreting the data: key issues to consider**

Of course, none of the above figures should be taken at face value. If they are to be used to say anything sensible about the size and shape of the ‘crime problem’ or about trends over time, they have to be carefully interpreted. This necessitates at least a basic understanding of what kinds of data are collected and how, as well as consideration of the possibility that some, or even all, of a particular change in offence totals does not reflect a change in criminal behaviour, but is an artefact of changes in rules or behaviour involved in the production of the statistics—a comment, as we shall see, particularly pertinent to the period since 1998. Box 8.1 outlines some of the key factors which should be borne in mind when interpreting statistics derived from police records. These are discussed in a little more detail below.

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1. Before 1997, criminal statistics were presented on the basis of calendar years, but have since moved to the financial year (April to March).
2. Between 1950 and 1954, the average annual recorded total of ‘malicious injuries to property’ was just over 5,000.
Figure 8.1 'Raw' totals of offences recorded by the police, 1876-2010/11
Box 8.1 Key factors affecting recorded crime figures

1. The Notifiable Offence List
The ‘Notifiable Offence List’ determines which offence categories are included when recorded crime figures are compiled; additions to, or removals from, the list can artificially raise or lower the overall total.

Legislation may create new offences or legalize behaviour that was previously defined as criminal; definitions of offences may also be significantly changed.

2. Rules on the Counting and Classification of Offences
The Home Office’s ‘counting rules’ provide guidance on how many individual offences should be recorded when, for example, an offender repeats the same type of criminal behaviour many times within a short period; similarly, guidance is produced on the type of offence that should be recorded in different situations. The rules and guidance change over time.

3. Police Recording Behaviour and the NCRS
Despite increasingly prescriptive rules to limit it, the police inevitably retain some discretion as to which of the incidents observed by or reported to them are deemed to be crimes and recorded as such. How this discretion is exercised or constrained can be influenced by a wide variety of social, political, and institutional factors, and may change over time.

The key development in this context in recent years has been the introduction of the National Crime Recording Standard (NCRS), which has significantly increased the proportion of incidents reported to the police which end up as recorded offences.

4. The Reporting Behaviour of the Public
The propensity of the public to report crimes to the police may be affected by a range of factors, including views of the seriousness of particular forms of behaviour, degree of faith in the police, and more pragmatic considerations such as the need to report offences to support insurance claims; again, such factors can change over time.

Table 8.1 Offences recorded by the police, 2010/11

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Offence group</th>
<th>Number (to the nearest 1,000)</th>
<th>Per cent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theft/handling</td>
<td>1,079,000</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence against the person</td>
<td>822,000</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criminal damage</td>
<td>701,000</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burglary</td>
<td>522,000</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theft of/from vehicles</td>
<td>450,000</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drugs</td>
<td>232,000</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fraud and forgery</td>
<td>146,000</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robbery</td>
<td>76,000</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual offences</td>
<td>55,000</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>67,000</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4,150,000</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: percentages do not sum to 100 due to rounding.
WHAT OFFICIALLY COUNTS AS CRIME AND WHAT DOES NOT?
THE NOTIFIABLE OFFENCE LIST

The first point to stress is that the overall recorded crime totals do not include all types of offence. The statistical returns submitted by the police, on which they are based, include only those categories of crime that appear on the 'Notifiable Offence List'. This consists of all ‘indictable’ and ‘triable either way’ offences (i.e. those which must or may be tried in a Crown Court), as well as a relatively small selection of summary offences (i.e. offences triable only in magistrates’ courts). As a result, large numbers of criminal offences processed by the police, not to mention those dealt with by other agencies, are by definition excluded from the published figures. The full totals of such offences are not known, as most of the available statistics refer only to those which result in a court conviction or other formal penalty, but they are clearly substantial. For example, in 2010/11, there were about 1,153,000 magistrates’ court convictions and 49,000 Penalty Notices for Disorder for non-notifiable criminal offences (Chaplin et al. 2011: 23; on PNDs, see Padfield, Morgan, and Maguire, this volume). Again, numerous cases of tax and benefit fraud are known to HM Revenue & Customs or to benefits agencies, but remain uncounted because, although many would be classified as notifiable offences if recorded by the police, such agencies often use their administrative powers to levy financial penalties rather than take offenders to court (Levi 1993). The published figures also exclude over 10 million traffic and parking offences annually, dealt with by fixed penalty notices issued by the police or local authorities—although many would argue that these should not be regarded as ‘crime’.

Traditionally, the main reason given for restricting the official figures largely to indictable offences (apart from a wish to avoid excessive bureaucratic burdens on the police) has been that the aim should be to provide a clear picture of the extent of, and trends in, crime above a certain level of seriousness, rather than one dominated by a multitude of minor infractions. However, the boundary between ‘serious’ and ‘minor’ forms of crime is both blurred and variable over time, and debates about the logic of including (or not) particular categories of offence in the recorded crime totals have periodically led the Home Office to change its instructions to police forces on how to complete their annual statistical returns. Such changes have in some cases produced significant ‘artificial’ rises or falls in the official figures. For example, a decision in 1977 to include offences of criminal damage of £20 or less, which had previously not been counted, immediately raised the ‘total volume of crime’ by about 7 per cent. More recently, in 1998/9, on the grounds of producing a more accurate and comprehensive picture of violent crime, it was decided to add to the Notifiable Offence List the summary offences of common assault, harassment, and assault on a constable. Between them, these added over 250,000 extra offences of ‘violence against the person’ to the total. While in such situations government statisticians make appropriate adjustments to tables or warn that direct year-on-year comparisons cannot be made, these caveats are often ignored in public (and particularly political and media) debates, and in the latter case a widespread impression was created of a major ‘rise in violent crime’—ironically, as will be discussed later, at a time when the British Crime Survey was indicating a sizeable fall.
The Notifiable Offences List can also from time to time be affected by legislation which creates new criminal offences and redefines others, thus causing further problems for the measurement of trends. For example, under the Theft Act 1968 the definition of burglary, which had previously been restricted to ‘breaking and entering’ at night, was extended to include ‘entering as a trespasser with intent’ at any time, while offences such as ‘housebreaking’ and ‘shopbreaking’ disappeared (Maguire and Bennett 1982: 8–9). This necessitated several changes to the offence categories shown in Criminal Statistics, making it difficult to make meaningful comparisons pre- and post-1968 across a broad range of property crime. Other examples include the Public Order Act 1986, which created several new offences including ‘violent disorder’; and the Fraud Act 2006, which changed and added offences relating especially to cheque fraud.

RECORDING RULES: CLASSIFICATION AND COUNTING

In addition to the issue of which categories of offence are included, there are important points to consider about how individual crimes are both classified and counted. In many reported incidents it is not immediately obvious what kinds of offence, if any, have been committed. For example, if a thief steals items from close to a house without entering it, a decision may have to be made between recording an attempted burglary or a theft; similarly, there may be a fine line between a robbery and a theft from the person. Decisions in such cases can have a cumulative impact on the overall picture of crime produced, as burglaries and robberies are considerably more serious offences. Indeed, before 1998 (when common assault became a notifiable offence), decisions about the classification of minor acts of violence had a substantial effect on the overall scale of recorded crime, in that choices to record them as common assault (as opposed to, say, assault occasioning actual bodily harm) meant that they were excluded from the official statistics. Generally speaking, there was little central oversight of such decisions. However, over the last decade, the Home Office has adopted a much more prescriptive and interventionist approach, frequently issuing detailed instructions about how to classify different kinds of incident.

Similar comments apply to decisions about how many offences to record in complex or closely linked incidents. Some kinds of offence tend to be repeated many times within a short period, so that, though there may be several separate actions or people involved, they could be considered to form part of one concerted criminal incident. For example, a thief may go through 20 trouser pockets in a changing-room, or steal a cheque card and use it many times to obtain goods or cash. Equally, a large affray—for example, at a demonstration or football match—may involve numerous assaults by many people on many others; or a man may assault his partner virtually every night for a period of months or years. Until the late 1960s, little attention was paid to discrepancies between police forces in the numbers of separate offences recorded in such situations. However, following the Perks Committee in 1967, clearer ‘counting rules’ were established (Home Office 1971). These were significantly revised in 1998, partly to align them more closely with the counting rules used in the British Crime Survey. The basic rule is now that, wherever possible, the statistics should reflect the number of victims, rather than the number of criminal acts. This principle was previously applied.
in relation to violent offences, but was new for property offences. In the above examples, then, the changing room thief and the cheque fraudster, who might previously have produced only one offence each, would now produce several (depending upon how many victims can be identified). As under the previous rules, the spouse abuser is likely to be credited with only one offence, and the affray may produce a large number. Overall, it has been estimated that the joint impact of the inclusion of more summary offences and the changes in counting rules was to elevate the total number of recorded offences between 1997/8 and 1998/9 by about 14 per cent (Home Office 2001: 28).

In short, statisticians involved in the compilation and presentation of criminal statistics—and especially in the measurement of trends—have had to take account of a confusing array of changes in legislation, the Notifiable Offences List, and recording and counting rules, all of which have taken place within a relatively short period. Some idea of the complexity of their task can be gleaned from a glance at the notes to Table 2.04 in Chaplin et al. (2011), which shows recorded crime by offence type, from 1997 to 2010/11. There are no fewer than 41 notes, most of them explaining changes and discontinuities in particular rows of data. Again, while experts may be able to make informed judgements about the extent to which each of these changes affects any conclusions that might be drawn about trends over time, it is hardly to be expected that readers such as politicians or journalists will read the notes in detail or apply appropriate caution.

POLICE RECORDING PRACTICE AND THE EFFECT OF THE NATIONAL CRIME RECORDING STANDARD

Of course, Home Office rules provide only the formal framework for the recording of crime. It is equally important to consider the extent to which these are followed in practice. Concerns about both the consistency and the integrity of police recording practices were frequently cited in the 1980s and 1990s as reason to doubt the validity of official crime statistics. Studies like those of Farrington and Dowds (1985), which explored the puzzle of why Nottinghamshire consistently produced exceptionally high crime rates, clearly demonstrated the existence of major differences between police forces in approaches to crime recording. Other researchers found evidence of dubious practices including, on the one hand, the ‘cuffing’ (hiding) of offences for reasons ranging from work avoidance to a wish to improve the overall clear up rate (Bottomley and Coleman 1981; Young 1991) and on the other, the recording (amounting to the ‘creation’) of large numbers of minor offences in order to elevate the crime rate, for example with a view to supporting a case for more resources.³

Partly in response to such concerns—but also to allow fairer comparisons to be made between police force areas when measuring their ‘performance’ in relation to

³ One particularly strong critic in this regard, Hal Pepinsky, showed how significant increases in crime could be created simply by recording every trivial offence that comes to light: for example, in a small unpublished study in one subdivision of a British city he claimed that almost half the year’s ‘increase in crime’ had been produced by the police recording every admission by one offender who stole milk bottles from doorsteps. On a wider scale, Selke and Pepinsky (1984) claimed that rises and falls in crime figures in Indiana could be shown to coincide closely with shifts in the political aims of the police.
To give the NCRS more teeth, a national audit system was implemented, whereby files were regularly sampled to check whether the rules were being followed. Although this lasted only a few years, each police force still retains a Force Crime Registrar, who monitors the application of the counting rules and has a final say in any disputed recording decisions. There is also a high-level National Crime Recording Steering Group, which oversees efforts to promote consistency in recording practice, and Home Office statisticians are encouraged to investigate and report any unusual trends or patterns they notice which might signal deviation from the rules (Home Office 2011). Importantly, too, Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary takes a close interest in forces’ compliance with guidelines, and at the time of writing is conducting a full review of crime data quality assurance systems in every force.

In that year it assessed 38 of the 43 police forces in England as ‘good’ or ‘excellent’ for crime data quality, compared with 12 in 2003/4 (Audit Commission 2007).
priorities, the extent and nature of patrolling, or external pressures to 'do something' about particular kinds of behaviour. At local level, planned operations or 'crackdowns' will often result in an increase in arrests and the recording of many new offences; for example, strong policing of a pop festival is almost guaranteed to generate a boost in an area's recorded drug offences, while current concern about alcohol-related violence has led to greater police presence and more arrests around city centre pubs and clubs. Conversely, numbers may fall owing to reduced police interest in a particular type of crime, as in the early 1960s when, anticipating legislation to legalize homosexuality, most forces turned a blind eye to 'indecency between males' and the recorded total of such offences declined to half the previous level (Walker 1971). The introduction in Amsterdam of the well-known liberal policies towards the possession of drugs for personal consumption presumably had a similar effect on recorded drugs offences in the city.

THE REPORTING BEHAVIOUR OF THE PUBLIC

Important as 'police-generated' offences are, it remains the case that the bulk of recorded crimes first come to official notice through reports from members of the public. Decisions on whether to report possible offences to the police are influenced by a variety of factors, including views about the police and expectations of their response, the ease with which reports can be made (to which, for example, the spread of mobile phones has made a difference), the number of victims with insurance policies, and levels of public tolerance of particular kinds of behaviour—all of which can change markedly within a few years and hence have a significant 'artificial' effect on recorded crime trends. An often quoted example is a rise during the 1980s in victims' willingness to report rape, leading to a significant increase in recorded offences of this kind: this was partly explained by well publicized improvements in the treatment of victims such as the design of special facilities in police stations and a greater willingness on the part of police officers to believe their accounts (Blair 1984). Over the longer term, too, major social changes such as the gradual erosion of traditional communities and the increasing anonymity of life in urban areas may have made people more inclined to call in the police rather than 'sort the problem out' by themselves or with neighbours: this applies particularly to minor criminal behaviour by local children.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS AND POTENTIAL PITFALLS

In addition to the key factors discussed above, it is worth briefly mentioning three other potential pitfalls which should be borne in mind when interpreting police recorded statistics.

Short-term ‘trends’

One of the most common kinds of statistic featuring in newspaper headlines is references to apparent trends in crime (e.g. 'Burglary up 20 per cent') which turn out to be

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6 McCabe and Sutcliffe (1978) calculated this from samples of records at about 85%.
based only on a rise or fall relative to the previous year, paying no attention to earlier years. This tells us nothing about genuine trends in that offence—for example, the figures might have been moving in the opposite direction for the previous five years. Sometimes, too—a practice which, if used deliberately, borders on dishonesty—commentators refer to a percentage fall or increase since a particular year, selecting as their baseline year one out of line with the underlying trend. To take a concrete example, if one had stated at the end of 1992 that, ‘recorded burglaries have risen by 65 per cent since 1988’, this would have been factually correct, but it would be misleading not to point out that 1988 had produced one of the lowest recorded totals of burglary for many years and that, for example, the figure had risen by only 45 per cent since 1986. To represent trends properly, it is necessary at least to use figures produced at regular intervals over a sufficient period of time.

**Populations and property ‘at risk’**

It is important when comparing crime figures over time or between areas, to consider differences in the size and composition of the populations. For example, the population of a town may double over 20 years, creating many more potential victims and offenders. To make some allowance for such differences (especially when looking at long-term trends or comparing police force areas) government statisticians often express recorded crime rates in the form of ‘offences per 100,000 population’. However, this is by no means the end of the story, as the social characteristics of the population (e.g. the proportion of young or old people, or the average income level) may be more important than its overall size, in determining the numbers of people ‘at risk’. Similarly, a major increase in, say, the numbers of cars on the road, or the numbers of people using cheque cards or internet banking, means more potential targets for thieves and fraudsters, and is clearly a factor to consider in any analysis, but even then it cannot be simply assumed that they are all equally at risk.

**Context**

Finally, it is important not to jump to conclusions about the reality behind a rise in the incidence of a particular legal category of offence. A long-standing criticism of the recorded crime figures (see, e.g., McLintock and Avison 1968) has been that they do not give a clear enough picture of the social or situational context of crimes. For example, ‘robbery’ includes actions as diverse as an organized bank raid, the theft at knifepoint of the contents of a shopkeeper’s till, or a drunken attempt to snatch a handbag. Over the years, the use of subcategories has increased considerably, but even now the official robbery figures are divided simply into ‘robbery of business property’ and ‘robbery of personal property’. Knowing that 68,452 of the latter were recorded in 2010/11, or that this represented a reduction of 6 per cent over the previous year, does not tell us whether specific modes of robbery are declining or becoming more prevalent. Increases in recorded robbery in the late 1990s and early 2000s led to considerable political argument (at one point the term ‘national emergency’ being used) and the setting up at short notice of the high-profile Street Crime Initiative, directed from central government and involving the deployment of 2,000 officers across 10 cities in England and Wales. However, it emerged later that much of the increase was
accounted for by schoolchildren taking mobile phones from their peers, particularly in London (Curran et al. 2005). While undoubtedly a problem that should be taken seriously, whether this warranted such a dramatic, government-coordinated response is highly debatable.

THE NEW ORTHODOXY? THE BRITISH CRIME SURVEY

It has already been mentioned that the ‘official crime statistics’ no longer contain only offences recorded by the police. Since 2002, the main annual statistical publication (renamed Crime in England and Wales) has also included large amounts of data from the British Crime Survey. This decision was not taken lightly: the BCS had been running for over 20 years before the change occurred. However, over that period it had established itself as a well-respected alternative source of information about crime levels and trends, and for the Home Office to continue to publish its results separately from the police figures risked it taking on the appearance of a ‘rival’ set of official statistics. By bringing them together, it was hoped to show that the two datasets were complementary rather than in competition, and jointly provided a richer and more ‘complete’ picture of crime than previously. In the section, we look briefly at the origins of the BCS and its development over time, then explore similarities and differences vis-à-vis police recorded crime. We also look at some of the limitations of the BCS and the critiques that have been made of it.

The first BCS was conducted in 1982 and its results published the following year (Hough and Mayhew 1983). It was not a new concept: victimization surveys had been conducted in the United States since the late 1960s, and Sparks, Genn, and Dodd (1977) had already undertaken an experimental survey in London. Like these earlier surveys, the BCS was born out of curiosity about the size of the ‘dark figure’ of crime—i.e. unreported and/or unrecorded offences. The main rationale was that, by asking representative samples of members of the public to describe crimes committed against them within the past 12 months, the vagaries of reporting and recording behaviour are neatly avoided, and the responses can be grossed up to produce a ‘fuller’ (and arguably more reliable) picture than the recorded crime statistics of the incidence of certain types of offence (Mayhew and Hough 1988). It was also timely in that it was introduced in a period of rising concern about crime victims, and provided valuable data about their experiences. Over the years, it has grown steadily in prominence and status, being repeated bi-annually from 1991 and annually from 2000/1. Since 2000/1 it has also been sufficiently large (now 46,000 interviews a year) to allow analysis at police force as well as national level.

The basic format of the survey, and the framework for presenting the results, have changed little over the years. One person over 16 from each household in the sample is randomly selected to answer the questions. Using the core Victimization Module, the interviewer first establishes whether this person, or anyone else in the household, has been the victim of any of a specified list of vehicle or property-related crimes (described to them in ordinary language) within the past 12 months; and secondly, whether the respondent him/herself has been the victim of a ‘personal crime’ (mainly assault) over the same period. If any positive answers are received, further details of each incident are recorded—up to a maximum of five for any type of offence—on a
criminal statistics and the construction of crime

The results are analysed and grossed up to produce estimated national totals of both broad types of incident—described as ‘household’ and ‘personal’ crimes—based on calculations using, respectively, the total number of households and the total adult population of England and Wales. 

In addition to being asked about offences to which they have fallen victim, various subsets of respondents answer questions from a range of other modules. These include sets of questions to elicit their views on a range of crime-related topics (which vary from year to year) as well as ‘self-completion’ questionnaires in which respondents enter their answers directly on to a computer screen (which is not seen by the interviewer). These usually concern sensitive topics, such as their knowledge about and use of illicit drugs, or their experiences of sexual attacks or ‘stalking’. Since 2009, too, separate victimization surveys have been conducted with substantial samples of 10–15 year olds (Chaplin et al. 2011). However, the results of these exercises do not (as yet) form part of the core estimates of crime numbers and trends.

A fuller picture of crime?

Table 8.2 shows the estimates of the extent of ‘BCS crime’ that were calculated from the results of the survey in 2010/11. If one compares the overall picture painted by these

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number (to the nearest 1,000)</th>
<th>Per cent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Broadly comparable with police figures:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence</td>
<td>2,203,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vandalism</td>
<td>2,156,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vehicle related theft</td>
<td>1,189,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burglary</td>
<td>745,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theft from person</td>
<td>563,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bicycle theft</td>
<td>526,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not comparable:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other household theft</td>
<td>1,244,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other theft personal property</td>
<td>993,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>9,618,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

figures with that derived from police records (Table 8.1, earlier) the two most obvious differences are that (i) the crime categories included are different; and (ii) the overall estimated total of ‘BCS crime’ (9,180,000 offences) is more than double that of police-recorded crime.

Neither of these differences is surprising, but their implications need some discussion. The first point to emphasize is that the BCS has never set out to cover all kinds of crime recorded by the police. As its designers pointed out at the outset (Hough and Mayhew 1985: ch. 1), public surveys are more suited to gleaning information about some types of incident than others. What it has always aimed to produce first and foremost is a measure of household and personal crimes against adults (and, indeed, not all types of these). Thus the annual estimate of ‘BCS crime’ does not include crimes against commercial or corporate victims, fraudulent offences, 10 sexual offences, or ‘consensual’ crimes such as the possession of or dealing in drugs, nor does it (at the time of writing) include crimes against children under 16. As will be discussed later, quite a lot of data is available on these ‘missing’ categories (for example, the BCS interview data now gathered on crimes against 11–15-year-olds, data from BCS self-completion modules on sexual assault, and data on crime against businesses collected in other surveys) and consideration is being given to including some of it in the annual publication (Matheson 2011). However, to date ‘BCS crime’ continues to be based only on the core Victimization Module, which has changed little since the 1980s. This is partly because some of the other available data are considered less reliable, but mainly because (like the long-term ‘series’ produced from police statistics) one of the aims of the BCS has been to make reliable year-on-year comparisons and track long-term trends in victimization levels.

It is also clear, vice versa, that not all ‘crimes’ included in the BCS estimates would have been identified and recorded as criminal offences if they had been reported to the police. The survey gathers information on large numbers of (overwhelmingly minor) personal and household thefts which do not map sufficiently well on to police definitions of crime for any direct comparisons to be made.

The above differences mean that one cannot simply compare the two overall totals (9.6 million BCS crimes, 4.2 million police-recorded crimes) and conclude that the BCS shows that there is ‘a little over twice as much crime’ as the official records suggest: this would not be comparing like with like. There are, however, some specific offence categories where meaningful comparisons are possible, once some statistical adjustments have been made. Combined together, these form what is known as the comparable subset (see Home Office 2011: 17–18). Although the fit is not perfect, this allows fair comparisons between about three-quarters of the estimated total of BCS crimes and just under half of all crimes recorded by the police. Most of the BCS crimes in the first five categories shown in Table 8.2 are included in the comparable subset, while ‘other household thefts’ and ‘other thefts of personal property’ are excluded. Within this subset, the BCS clearly does provide a ‘fuller’ picture than the equivalent police figures. Since the BCS was first conducted, the results have consistently indicated that

10 The BCS has included some questions on ‘plastic fraud’ since 2006/7, though they measure prevalence rather than incidence, and are not included in the main ‘BCS crime’ count. The latest results indicate that just over 5% of plastic card users were victims of such fraud in 2010/11 (Chaplin et al. 2011: 81).
victims are aware of between three and four times more offences of these particular kinds than appear in the police recorded statistics. It is interesting to contrast this ratio with the estimate by Sparks et al. (1977) from their pioneering victim survey in London, that the volume of unrecorded crime (the so-called ‘dark figure’) was 11 times higher than the police figure. The discrepancy is partly explained by differences in the nature of the areas surveyed and in the methodologies used, but also by the rather different spread of offences covered: the London survey, carried out mainly in deprived areas, included more minor offences with low reporting rates, which served to increase the ratio. These comments are pertinent to debates about major differences in findings between national and local surveys, which will be discussed later.

In short, ‘BCS crime’, like ‘recorded crime’, is to some extent an arbitrarily constructed aggregation of disparate types of offence: both include some offences in the count, and omit others. It is therefore a serious misunderstanding to regard the BCS as offering a full picture of ‘crime in England and Wales’. Indeed, looked at as a whole, it does not necessarily present a fuller—or indeed, ‘truer’—picture than that provided by the recorded crime statistics, simply a different one: it is fuller in some important respects (notably the inclusion of unrecorded and unreported offences), but less full in others (notably the exclusion of consensual crimes, crimes against organizations, and crimes against children under 16). It is only in relation to certain well-defined individual offence types, or to the ‘comparable subset’, that it can safely be said to provide a fuller picture than the police figures—though even then, questions remain about how accurately it reflects the nature and scale of the behaviour in question (see later).

Comparisons of trends

For much of the 1980s and 1990s, the basic shapes of the trends displayed by both BCS and official crime statistics were fairly similar. Between 1982 and 1997, both showed an increase to a peak in the early to mid-1990s, followed by the beginnings of a downward trend. Indeed, a statistical analysis by Farrington and Langan (1998) of the relationship between the two sets of data from 1981–96, found that they were closely correlated in relation to all four categories of crime examined (vehicle theft, burglary, robbery, and assault). The main difference was that, as with surveys in the USA, the rise in BCS crime was less steep than police figures suggested. Between 1981 and 1991 recorded crime rose by 78 per cent, while the BCS estimated totals rose by 37 per cent. In addition, while recorded crime peaked in 1992, the BCS totals peaked in 1995.

However, since 1998 the picture has become much less clear, and apparent differences in trends have caused confusion and sparked debate. Estimated BCS crime totals began to fall steeply after their peak of 19.1 million in 1995, and although the decreasing trend flattened out considerably from the mid-2000s, by 2010/11 the total

11 Victim surveys have consistently shown wide variations between offence types in reporting and recording rates. For example, in the 2010/11 BCS, 79% of respondents whose home had been burgled with entry, but only 39% of victims of bicycle theft and 34 per cent of victims of ‘vandalism’, said that they had reported the incident to the police. The gap is widened by subsequent differences in police recording behaviour. In broad terms, BCS findings indicate that just under half of all house burglaries (with entry) known to residents end up in the official police statistics, whereas the equivalent ratio for bicycle thefts is around one in five. Offences such as shoplifting are known to be under-reported and under-recorded to a higher degree still (Martin 1962).
had fallen to 9.6 million—a figure lower than that calculated from the first BCS in 1982. By contrast, the raw police-recorded crime totals rose for some of this same period, peaking in 2003/4 at 6.0 million, before decreasing quite rapidly to 4.2 million by 2010/11 (see Figure 8.2).

Clearly, much of the substantial increase in police figures between 1999 and 2004 was artificial, being accounted for by additions to the types of offence counted, other changes in counting rules, and the introduction of the NCRS. Nevertheless, there have remained some puzzles, particularly around crimes of violence, where differences in trends between the two sources have been most visible. Home Office researchers conceded that rises in police recorded violence over this period (when ‘BCS violence’ was falling sharply) were not entirely explained by technical changes (Walker et al. 2006: 66; see also Maguire 2007 and Brookman and Robinson, this volume). Moreover, if one looks at year-on-year figures since 2002/3 for violent offences resulting in injury—which should be less subject to variations in recording practice than violence without injury—it is apparent that, in every year except one, the BCS estimates and police figures have moved in a different direction (see Table 8.3).

In many cases, the differences between successive years were not statistically significant, while apparent divergences in overall trends have been much smaller than often claimed. Nevertheless, their visibility to commentators—and hence their media and political profile—has been heightened since 2002 by the publication of both BCS and recorded crime figures in the same annual research bulletin, Crime in England and Wales. When these appear to contradict each other, disputes break out about which should be ‘believed’.

More similar than different?

How, then, can we summarize the similarities and differences between the pictures of crime that have emerged from the BCS and the recorded crime figures? First, the

![Figure 8.2 Trends in recorded crime and BCS, 1981–2010/11](image-url)
central message sent out by the authors of the BCS in its early years was, in essence: the bad news is that there is a lot more crime than we thought, the good news is that most of it is not very serious. Their remark about ‘the petty nature of most law-breaking’ (Hough and Mayhew 1983:33) was designed to deflect a possible moral panic in reaction to the huge amount of ‘new’ crime revealed by the survey, but it also reflected the key finding—supported by all surveys conducted since—that unreported crimes generally involve much lower levels of financial loss, damage, and injury than those reported to the police.

Second, aside from the much larger totals of offences, the BCS produces a basic picture of crime not wildly dissimilar to that projected by police records: for example, ‘autocrime’ (theft of or from vehicles) is prominent in both sets of figures, and property crime is more frequent than violence.

Finally, the overall shape of trends in crime between the early 1980s and the late 1990s emerges as similar in each case—a long-term rise followed by a fall—although the BCS suggests a steeper rise and a later beginning to the fall. The two sets of data also give similar messages about continuing falls in certain offences since the mid-1990s—notably burglary between 1995 and 2005, and vehicle theft between 1995 and 2011. However, since 1999 it has become much more difficult to compare overall trends, owing to major changes in the rules governing police crime recording, and confusion has been sown by some contradictory short-term movements in the figures, particularly in relation to violent crime.

Critiques of the BCS

The BCS has undoubtedly had a major impact on criminology, as well as criminal justice policy and practice. In addition to its core contribution to the measurement of unreported crime, it has in effect replaced police crime statistics as the most reliable tool for measuring trends in crime. It has also gathered huge amounts of data over the years about public attitudes to crime, victims’ experiences, risks of victimization, and so on (see, respectively, chapters by Hough and Roberts, Hoyle, and Brookman and

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Recorded violence against the person with injury</th>
<th>BCS violence with injury</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Recorded violence against the person with injury</td>
<td>BCS violence with injury</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>000s +/- 000s</td>
<td>000s +/- 000s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002/3</td>
<td>372</td>
<td>1441</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003/4</td>
<td>457 +85</td>
<td>1366 -75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004/5</td>
<td>515 +58</td>
<td>1301 -65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005/6</td>
<td>543 +32</td>
<td>1228 -73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006/7</td>
<td>505 -38</td>
<td>1271 +43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007/8</td>
<td>453 -52</td>
<td>1063 -218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008/9</td>
<td>421 -32</td>
<td>1116 +73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009/10</td>
<td>402 -19</td>
<td>1063 -53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010/11</td>
<td>387 -15</td>
<td>1211 +148</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Robinson, this volume). However, it is all too easy to slip from recognition of its value into uncritical acceptance of its findings as ‘the truth about crime’. Like all public surveys, it has weaknesses in terms of sampling errors, non-response, inaccurate recall of events by respondents, weighting procedures, classification of responses, and so on, which all affect the reliability of the results (such issues are addressed honestly in the technical reports and user guides published alongside the results: see Home Office 2011; TNS-BMRB 2010). More fundamentally, it focuses on a relatively narrow range of criminal behaviour which, critics have argued, creates a somewhat distorted picture of crime and patterns of victimization—a picture reinforced by the strong reputation and high profile of the BCS.

Like police statistics, ‘BCS crime’ is dominated by offences committed by strangers: for example, as with police figures, the BCS uncovers many fewer cases of domestic violence than of stranger or acquaintance violence. Equally, it tells us little more about ‘serial’ offences against the same victim. Most incidents reported to the survey consist of discrete events in which individuals suddenly and unexpectedly suffer an assault, theft, damage to their property, or illegal entry into their house. Crime in this mode takes on an appearance in many ways akin to an accident, or an ‘act of God’—an almost random event which can strike anyone at any time, but which is fairly infrequent in the life of any individual.

In the 1980s, criminologists writing from a Left Realist and/or a feminist perspective also argued that the BCS did not sufficiently reflect the experiences either of women or of the very poor (see, e.g., Matthews and Young 1986; Young 1988a; Stanko 1988; Genn 1988; Dobash and Dobash 1992). It was pointed out that a large proportion of assaults on women are likely to be committed by people known to them, including their partners, and that they are unlikely to report these in response to brief questions from an interviewer on the doorstep. Moreover, many members of marginalized groups—the homeless, the mentally ill, those who drift from bed-sitter to bed-sitter, and so on—are relatively unlikely to have contact with interviewers in a survey based on samples of households; such people may also be subject to exceptionally high levels of victimization.

To correct this imbalance, some academics conducted rather different kinds of crime surveys. These were local surveys, funded mainly by left-leaning local authorities in inner city areas, which aimed to uncover areas of criminal behaviour not seriously touched by the BCS and to explore their distribution among the population (see, e.g., Kinsey 1984; Jones et al. 1986, 1987; Crawford et al. 1990). By focusing chiefly on inner city areas, such surveys (unlike the BCS) showed that victimization is heavily concentrated in some small areas—predominantly those blighted by poverty. For example, the first Islington Crime Survey (Jones et al. 1986) indicated that a third of local households had been touched by burglary, robbery, or assault within the previous 12 months: a situation quite different from that of the notional ‘statistically average’ person referred to in the first BCS.12

12 In the first BCS report, it was calculated that a ‘statistically average’ person aged 16 or over could expect to fall victim to:
- a robbery once every five centuries (excluding attempts);
- an assault resulting in injury (even if slight) once every century;
In addition, efforts were made to find ways of obtaining more information about sexual and other assaults on women. These included less restrictive wording of questions and emphasis on sensitive approaches to these topics in the training and selection of interviewers. Again, the results stood in considerable contrast to the BCS findings: in the Islington survey, significantly higher levels of sexual assault were found, while over one-fifth of reported assaults were classified as ‘domestic’—more than twice the BCS proportion at that time. Moreover, questions were asked about incidents which would not necessarily be classified by the police as ‘crime’, but may be experienced as serious by victims, namely sexual and racial ‘harassment’. It was found, for example, that over two-thirds of women under the age of 24 had been ‘upset by harassment’ in the previous 12 months.

One of the most important general insights that emerged from the local surveys was that, while there are differences in risks of victimization between broad social groups (male and female, old and young, etc.), such differences can be massive when one looks at very specific subgroups. A striking finding in the Islington survey, for example, was that young, black females in the area were 29 times more likely to be assaulted than white females over 45. As Young (1988b:171) observed, such findings illustrate ‘the fallacy of talking of the problem of women as a whole, or of men, blacks, whites, youths, etc’. Rather, he insisted, criminological analysis should ‘start from the actual subgroups in which people live their lives’.

A graphic illustration of this point is the early exploration by Hazel Genn (1988) of the problem of ‘multiple victimization’. Genn, a co-author of the first large-scale victim survey in London (Sparks et al. 1977) revisited—and temporarily lived with—some of the female respondents who had claimed to have been victimized many times. She gives an eye-opening account of the way that the lives of these women were blighted by frequent sexual and physical assaults, thefts, burglaries, and other forms of mistreatment, often by people with whom they had a continuing relationship. Yet this kind of crime, she notes, is lost from view in most surveys, partly because they tend to impose artificial limits on the number of crimes that can be counted for any one victim, and partly because such victims may be less likely than others to respond to the survey or to admit their victimization to interviewers. At the same time, Genn raises fundamental questions about how meaningful it is to ‘count’ certain crimes at all. She writes:

In asking respondents about their experiences of crime, victim surveys have tended to use an approach which Skogan has termed ‘the events orientation’: that which conceptualises crime as discrete incidents. This can be traced back to one of the original primary objectives of victim surveys: the estimation of the ‘dark figure’ of unrecorded crime for direct comparison with police statistics. In order to accomplish this, information obtained from victims had to be accommodated within a rigid ‘counting’ frame of reference. Although isolated incidents of burglary, car theft or stranger attacks may present few measurement problems, for certain categories of violent crime and for certain types

- a family car stolen or taken by joyriders once every 60 years;
- a burglary in the home once every 40 years.

The authors added that ‘[t]hese risks can be compared with the likelihood of encountering other sorts of mishaps: the chances of burglary are slightly less than the chances...of a fire in the home; the chances a household runs of car theft are smaller than the chances...of having one of its members injured in a car accident.’ (Hough and Mayhew 1983: 15)
of crime victim, the ‘counting’ procedure leads to difficulties. It is clear that violent victimization may often be better conceptualized as a process rather than as a series of discrete events. This is most evident in cases of prolonged and habitual domestic violence, but there are also other situations in which violence, abuse and petty theft are an integral part of victims’ day-to-day existence. (Genn 1988: 91) [emphasis added]

Finally, an important related point is that while it is informative to examine differential risks of victimization between social groups, this should be complemented with an understanding of the differential impact of crime on these groups. A debate about this arose from the prominence given in the first BCS reports to findings that younger males, and people who frequently went out drinking, faced the highest risks of being assaulted. From these findings the Home Office authors concluded that the fears of street violence expressed by both women and the elderly (which were greater than those of young men) were to some extent ‘irrational’ (Hough and Mayhew 1983). Young (1988b:173–5) responded that such a conclusion, like their argument that fears are exaggerated because much crime is ‘trivial’ in terms of loss or injury, obscures the fact that what are ‘objectively’ similar events can have enormously different meanings and consequences for different people:

People differ greatly in their ability to withstand crime. The ‘same’ punch can mean totally different things in different circumstances. Violence, like all kinds of crime, is a social relationship. It is rarely random: it inevitably involves particular social meanings and occurs in particular hierarchies of power. Its impact, likewise, is predicated on the relationship within which it occurs… The relatively powerless situation of women—economically, socially and physically—makes them more unequal victims than men.

Later BCS ‘sweeps’ and reports benefited from the above kinds of criticism, and more attention has since been paid to differential patterns of victimization. For example, ‘booster’ samples have been interviewed to explore the victimization of ethnic minorities (Clancy et al. 2001); separate analysis has been undertaken of crime against older people (Chivite-Matthews and Maggs 2002); computer-aided self-interviewing has been used to produce more reliable data on domestic violence as well as to explore offences like sexual assault and ‘stalking’ (Percy and Mayhew 1997; Mirrlees-Black 1999; Budd and Mattinson 2000; Walby and Allen 2004); and more recently, the survey has included a sample of 11–15-year-olds (Chaplin et al. 2011).

THE EXPANSION AND ‘PLURALIZATION’ OF CRIME DATA

While the BCS has played a big part over the last 30 years in the move away from over-reliance on police recorded statistics and the opening up of new windows on crime, it has by no means been the only important contributor. In this section we outline a much broader process of expansion and ‘pluralization’ that has taken place over this period in the production of knowledge about crime levels, patterns, and trends. This has included a wide range of innovative and creative efforts, by a variety of individuals
Criminal statistics and the construction of crime

and organizations for a variety of purposes, to find out more about the nature and scale of previously under-explored kinds of criminal activity, and especially those which were largely hidden from external scrutiny. As many such offences are seriously under-represented in recorded crime statistics, one of the effects of this work has been to highlight the limitations of the official statistics and hence to undermine the credibility of claims that they provide a realistic picture of the ‘national state of crime’.

NEW THINKING AND NEW DATA DEMANDS

Before the 1970s, apart from the regular statistical returns from criminal justice agencies, the crime data cupboard was largely bare—or, at least, stocked with a very limited range of products. A large proportion of criminological research was aimed at understanding why some individuals engage in crime and how to ‘treat’ them, and hence data collection focused mainly on the characteristics of offenders. By contrast, little attention was paid to the physical and social circumstances or geographical distribution of offences. Analysis or discussion of crime patterns was based on limited sources and carried out within a narrow frame of reference. It had a low public profile and was largely left to government statisticians, occasionally assisted by academics who rarely looked beyond the official figures or questioned the assumptions behind their production.

However, all this has since changed. There now appears to be an almost unquenchable thirst for information about crime. Crime has become a major focus of public concern and a critical issue in party politics (Downes and Morgan, this volume). Governments have increasingly set out to ‘manage’ crime problems, and the crime prevention and control industry, in the broadest sense of the term, has expanded rapidly (Garland 2001). Rather than relying predominantly on traditional criminal justice responses such as punishment and rehabilitation, this has involved a range of new theoretical and practical approaches, many of them based around detailed assessment and management of the risk of future offences, and around measuring and improving the effectiveness of crime reduction initiatives.13 Of course, this process has been greatly facilitated and encouraged by advances in information technology, including the capacity to collect, store, and analyse massive electronic datasets. However, in trying to make sense of what has happened, it is important to look not just at technological change, but at changes in ways of thinking about and responding to crime. These stand in a dynamic relationship with the production of crime data, both driving demands for new kinds of information and in turn being influenced by the new knowledge they generate. Over the period, key developments have included:

- Policies based on identifying and targeting aspects of the environment which facilitate criminal activity, and altering them (for example, through new designs of buildings or vehicles) to reduce the opportunities for crime and their attractiveness to potential offenders. This is encapsulated in the ‘situational crime prevention’ approach developed in the 1980s (Clarke 1980; Crawford and Evans this

13 Earlier versions of this chapter in previous editions of the Handbook contained more detailed accounts of these changes and the reasons behind them (see Maguire 2007—available online at http://www.oup.com/uk/orc/bin/9780199205431/maguire_chap10.pdf). This time, there is space only for a brief summary.
volume) and later underpinned by ‘rational choice’ and ‘routine activities’ theories (Clarke and Felson 1993; Rock, this volume).

- Intelligence-led and problem-oriented forms of policing (Bullock and Tilley 2003; Maguire and Hopkins 2003; Maguire 2000, 2008), latterly underpinned by the National Intelligence Model (Maguire and John 2006). Such approaches aim to identify, analyse, and prioritize existing or emerging crime problems and then deploy appropriate resources to deal with them.

- The direct involvement in crime control activities, including joint working and data sharing, of agencies outside the criminal justice field, particularly through their incorporation into formal partnerships (notably the statutory Community Safety Partnerships: see Crawford and Evans, this volume).

- The promotion of an ‘evidence-based’ or ‘What Works’ philosophy, based on systematically evaluating a range of interventions and adopting those that emerge as most effective—encapsulated in the ambitious Crime Reduction Programme in the early 2000s (see Hough 2004; and chapters by Raynor and Lösel, this volume).

- The growth of managerialism, including the setting of ‘performance targets’ aimed at improving the effectiveness of crime control agencies, and measurement of their progress through baskets of statistical ‘indicators’ (see Hough 2007 and Senior et al. 2007 for critical accounts of these practices).

All of the above factors have contributed to the continuing demand for more and ‘better’ statistical and other kinds of information about crime, including detailed analysis of patterns in specific types of offence that can directly inform policy-making and operational practice, and data that can be processed and disseminated much more quickly than in the past. They have also fuelled the development of increasingly sophisticated methodologies for analysing data (including mapping techniques, ‘hot spot’ analysis, and criminal market profiles), as well as intelligence products such as the ‘strategic assessments’ and ‘problem profiles’ built into the National Intelligence Model (John and Maguire 2007).

In addition, the field of concern has extended far beyond the ‘conventional’ forms of crime (such as theft, burglary, and criminal damage) which make up the bulk of recorded offences, to many kinds of criminal behaviour (such as domestic violence and child sexual abuse) that previously remained largely hidden from official view. This has been strongly influenced by campaigns to get particular forms of behaviour taken more seriously by the police and justice agencies, notably the pioneering efforts of feminist groups in the 1970s in relation to domestic violence and sexual assault, and the persistent demands of organizations such as Childline (set up in 1986) for more government and police action in relation to child sexual abuse. Recently, too, attention has grown to new and often highly organized forms of crime with international dimensions (such as Internet fraud, people trafficking, and money laundering) made possible by rapid technological change and globalization (Brookman et al. 2010; Levi, this volume)—and of course, especially since ‘9/11’ in 2001, to international terrorism (Innes and Levi, this volume). Again, all these developments have created major new data needs at local, national, and international level.
The overall response to this continuing surge in demand for crime-related information, combined with the emergence of crime as one of the top issues on the national political agenda (which has persuaded government ministers to supply much of the necessary funding), has been a huge increase in the range and numbers of people engaged in data collection and research, and in the volume of information available to them, as well as the opening up of numerous new fields of inquiry—in short, a veritable ‘data explosion’ in the field. This has been evident within government itself, where the Home Office and Ministry of Justice (despite recent cutbacks) both retain large research teams which have played major roles in the development of new ways of measuring crime and analysing re-offending. At the same time, criminology in universities has grown from a minor subsidiary subject to a flourishing specialist discipline employing several hundred academics, many of them engaged in empirical research (Loader and Sparks, this volume). Many public, private, and voluntary sector organizations with a role in crime reduction or security now employ their own researchers to analyse records or conduct surveys to produce new data (at national, regional, or local level) about specific types of crime. Organizations outside the criminal justice system have also been persuaded to collect and share crime data for the general good—as seen, for example, in the use of records of assault victims attending Accident and Emergency departments to measure trends in violence (Estrada 2006; Maxwell et al. 2007; Sivarajasingam et al. 2009).

NEW KNOWLEDGE: ACHIEVEMENTS AND CHALLENGES

In essence, then, we have moved from a situation in which there was only one ‘official picture’ of crime, to one in which not only are the official crime statistics themselves based on more than one kind of data (BCS results as well as police records), but data from many other sources provide a kaleidoscope of windows on to a much broader range of criminal activity.

Although the volume of work devoted to the production of new information about crime has increased enormously, this should not be taken to suggest that the picture it has collectively created is a clear one. On the contrary, it consists of many different overlapping, and in some cases competing, images. Some important areas of criminal activity remain relatively unexplored, while others are characterized by conflicting findings. To put a little more flesh on the bones, some brief illustrative examples are given below of attempts that have been made to produce new knowledge about the prevalence and incidence of specific types of criminal activity, together with comments on the strengths and limitations of some of the methodologies that have been used—and hence on the reliability of the conclusions.

Domestic violence and sexual abuse

Because much domestic violence (or ‘abuse’) involves a continuing series of aggressive acts in particular households, it makes little sense to attempt to count the overall number of individual ‘offences’ which have been committed. Estimates of the extent of such crime are therefore most often expressed in terms of prevalence: i.e. the proportion of a given population experiencing it over a given period. However, this too
can be misleading, especially in ‘lifetime prevalence’ studies, for example if no effort is made to distinguish those who have been assaulted only once from those who have been victimized repeatedly over many years. Moreover, definitions of what is being measured can make a critical difference to the results. For example, in the 1970s the designers of the feasibility study for the first National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect, a major survey of health service and other professionals across the USA, initially defined ‘child maltreatment’ simply in terms of harmful parental conduct, leading to an estimate that 30 per cent of all children in the USA had been victims of maltreatment over the previous year. When the definition was restricted to conduct resulting in a minimum degree of demonstrable harm (e.g. marks on the skin lasting at least 48 hours), the estimate dropped to only 1 per cent (see Besharov 1981). The survey has since been repeated three times, the latest figures indicating a national prevalence rate of 1.7 per cent in 2005/6 (Sedlak et al. 2010).

Similar caveats apply to estimates of the incidence of all kinds of domestic abuse. In the UK, domestic violence against adult women was afforded special attention in the local crime surveys pioneered in the 1980s, as discussed above. The topic was also explored around the same period through surveys of women, mainly conducted by feminist researchers. For example, Hanmer and Saunders (1984) found that 59 per cent of 129 women surveyed in Leeds had suffered some form of threat, violence, or sexual harassment within the previous year, and Hall (1985) and Radford (1987) produced even more startling figures. A survey by Painter (1991), based on a representative sample of over 1,000 married women, suggested that 14 per cent had been raped by their husbands at some time during their marriage—over 40 per cent of them perceiving the incident as ‘rape’ at the time. Other work has since been carried out to investigate the extent of domestic violence against men (Grady 2002; Dobash and Dobash 2004; see also Saunders 2002) and between same-sex partners (Henderson 2003). Generally speaking, these independent studies have produced much higher estimates of domestic violence than the BCS, even after its introduction of self-completion modules (Walby and Allen 2004), and most commentators believe that the BCS significantly under-estimates the prevalence of this kind of crime (see Robinson 2010). However, it should not automatically be assumed that one set of findings is ‘right’ and another ‘wrong’: they may be counting different things. Results vary widely depending on the offence definitions used, the kind of population sampled, the time period referred to, the wording of the questions, the situation in which they are put, and so on. The crucial point is that the methodologies have to be closely examined and ‘headline’ figures should never be taken at face value.

While it is feasible to ask adults in surveys about physical or even sexual violence by intimates, this presents major practical and ethical difficulties in relation to children. Some evidence on the incidence of physical abuse of children has been gleaned from hospital data on ‘non-accidental injuries’, although what is recorded of course depends on whether children are seriously enough injured to go to hospital and whether hospital staff recognize their injuries as the result of violence. Until recently, most evidence about the prevalence of child abuse, including sexual abuse, came from surveys of adults asked to recall events from their own childhoods, with predictably conflicting results arising from varying methodologies (see Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz 1980;
Baker and Duncan 1985; Finkelhor and Araji 1986; Morgan and Zedner 1992; Hoyle, this volume). However, important new findings have emerged from an innovative UK survey by Radford et al. (2011), based on over 6,000 interviews with random probability samples of parents or guardians of children under 11, young people aged 11–17, and young adults aged 18–24 years. These indicate that between 5 and 14.5 per cent of the groups of young people referred to had experienced ‘severe maltreatment’ by a parent or guardian at some point during their childhood (predominantly ‘severe neglect’ and to a lesser extent severe physical violence—contact sexual abuse was revealed in under 1 per cent of replies from any of the groups). The research also indicates that 2.5 per cent of under 11s and 6 per cent of 11–17s had experienced one or more of these types of abuse in the past year. All the above terms are carefully defined in the study, and repetitive abuse is distinguished from one-off incidents.

**Crimes against businesses**

Crimes against businesses may be committed by members of the public (for example, through shoplifting or cheque frauds), by employees (though workplace theft or embezzlement), or by other businesses (for example, through ‘long firm fraud’—see Levi 2008). Such crimes all pose considerable difficulties for measurement. First, in many cases they never come to light: for example, losses through low-level employee theft may be not be distinguishable from legitimate forms of ‘shrinkage’ (such as goods being damaged at warehouses), and embezzlement by people responsible for preparing the firm’s accounts can be very difficult to detect. Secondly, it may not be clear when losses through theft are detected (often a considerable time after they have occurred) whether they have been committed by, say, shoplifters or counter staff. Thirdly, it may be unclear whether losses are the result of a small number of sizeable crimes by relatively few people or a large number of minor thefts by a large number of people (or indeed, repeated minor thefts over a long period by the same person). Fraud, in particular, causes major problems of definition and measurement. The Fraud Review (Attorney General’s Office 2006) noted that, although recorded crime statistics show reductions in cheque and credit card fraud since 2000, only an estimated 5 per cent of fraudulent credit card transactions are reported to the police, so one can have little confidence in such figures. As with domestic violence, attempting to ‘count crimes’ is often unproductive in this field, so it is usually considered more useful to measure the scale of business-related crime either in terms of the prevalence of victimization or as (gu)estimates of the total amount stolen in various ways over defined periods (Levi et al. 2007).

A number of sources of information are available which, despite their individual limitations, together provide a useful window into this neglected area. A few large-scale surveys have been undertaken, including the national Commercial Victimisation Survey (Shury et al. 2005) and the Business Crime Survey (British Chambers of Commerce 2008), in both of which more than 50 per cent of businesses surveyed reported having experienced crime in the previous year. Most of the offences reported were by ‘outsiders’ rather than staff, with burglary, vandalism, and damage to vehicles prominent. The former survey also found ‘theft by customers’ (43 per cent) and ‘fraud by outsiders’ (18 per cent—mainly cheque fraud) most common among retailers.
On fraud specifically, some public sector organizations make estimates of losses based on samples of transactions in a given area of spend (e.g. income support) which are assessed to determine whether the claim was genuine (Attorney General’s Office 2006: 31). More recently, statisticians have been exploring the potential for measuring fraud through reports from banks, financial institutions, and individual victims to the National Fraud Authority (Matheson 2011).

Despite all this activity, the overall picture remains very unclear, and many of the estimates of losses to organizations through theft and fraud—especially when one gets into the realm of global costs to international companies (e.g. Pricewaterhouse Coopers 2005; see also Levi 2001)—remain highly speculative. It is also worth considering that a sense of the scale of theft within various types of workplace may be best achieved through qualitative research, such as that undertaken many years ago by Ditton (1977) and Mars (1982), who spent time with people working in warehouses and docks, and came to understand the informal cultural rules among employees about pilfering.

**Crime in closed institutions**

Despite the vulnerability of many of their ‘inmates’, criminal activity which takes place in closed institutions such as prisons, army barracks, mental institutions, children’s homes, old people’s homes, and boarding schools rarely comes to police notice, and often goes unrecorded internally. Cultures of secrecy and sometimes intimidation make collection of reliable data very difficult. Although some surveys have been conducted, this is another area that may be better researched through qualitative methodologies such as in-depth interviews with ex-residents or participant observation. Innovative examples include studies of bullying among prisoners (Ireland 2005) and in children’s homes (Barter *et al.* 2005; see also Evans 2010). Research on the other institutions mentioned is less well developed, despite recent high-profile cases involving deaths in army barracks and maltreatment of old people.

**Corporate crime**

Crime by organizations is even harder to ‘measure’ in any meaningful way. It may include crimes against an organization’s own employees (such as neglect of health and safety rules leading to death or injury), against other organizations (including failures to pay for orders, and the operation of illegal cartels), or against customers or the general public (e.g. the sale of sub-standard or stolen goods, deliberate frauds and ‘scams’, and pollution of the environment). The topic of corporate crime is covered by Nelken in this volume (see also Minkes 2010; Tombs 2010), so it will not be considered further here. However, it is worth making the point that some of the best insights into such offences—which can involve millions of pounds—have come from reconstructions of large-scale cases through analysis of investigation files, court records, or newspaper stories (see, e.g., Passas and Groskin 2001 on the BCCI swindle). There have been some attempts to gather data on corporate criminal behaviour that has not yet come to light, for example by investigative journalists, or to explore the problem through interviews with businesspeople or auditors, but systematic studies are rare and the overall level of knowledge in the field remains low.
INTERNATIONAL, ORGANIZED, AND CROSS-BORDER CRIME

The growing need for crime data on an international scale has been recognized through the development of major surveys which collect information in a consistent way across several different countries at once. Most notable among these are the International Crime Victim Survey (Alvazzi del Frate and Van Kesteren 2004; van Dijk et al. 2010; see also Hoyle, this volume) and the International Crime Business Survey (Alvazzi Del Frate 2005). Both suffer from methodological problems and shortages of resources, but offer rich sets of data for analysis.

By contrast, there is very little strong evidence available about the scale of crime that crosses international borders (such as EU subsidy fraud, money laundering, smuggling, and drug or people trafficking), and especially about crime of this kind committed by highly organized groups. Owing to the rapidly changing and well-concealed nature of the activities, this is an area in which conventional methods of gathering data are plainly inadequate. At present, among the most systematic attempts to summarize what is known in a UK and Europe context are regular ‘threat assessments’ produced by the National Criminal Intelligence Service, Border Agency, Europol and others. These are based on wide variety of data from both closed and open sources, and are published in sanitized form (e.g. SOCA 2009). Otherwise, much of the available information is based on newspaper reports, court cases, police or secret service agencies’ investigation files, and interviews with convicted organized criminals: getting closer to the ‘field’ clearly entails considerable dangers to researchers and informants. Generally speaking, empirical investigations have tended to focus on charting the numbers, size, and ethnic connections of organized criminal groups, rather than attempting to measure the scale of ‘organized crime’ in terms of offences committed. The latter, indeed, comes up against the problem that some kinds of offence are committed as much by individuals as by ‘organized’ criminal groups (see Levi, this volume, and Levi and Maguire 2004, for further discussion).

CRIMES BY GOVERNMENTS AND IN WAR

Finally, Green and Ward (this volume) draw attention to a plethora of horrific state-sanctioned crimes, including crimes against humanity, that have to a large extent remained off the radar of most criminological work (see also Cohen 2001). Unsurprisingly, figures on war crimes, torture, or killings sanctioned by governments are not usually gathered or published by state officials, but by external bodies such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. Such data are gradually being used in analysis by small numbers of criminologists (for good examples, see the Special Issue of the British Journal of Criminology edited by Green and Ward 2005) but are still too rarely thought of as ‘criminal statistics’—which, of course, they are.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

To sum up this section, over the past 30 or so years a process of expansion and pluralization has taken place in relation to the sources of data that are used to ‘measure’ crime, the ownership and control of systems of data collection and analysis, and the
messages about the shape of the ‘crime problem’ that are conveyed to the outside world through publication of the results. The counting of offences officially recorded by the police has thereby been relegated to only one of a variety of alternative ways of exploring the nature and scale of crime, and the somewhat static, monochrome picture it produces has been challenged by a shifting—and often contradictory and confusing—kaleidoscope of new pictures produced by a wide range of individuals and organizations. This is not to deny the continuing importance of the traditional recorded crime figures, especially at the level of symbolic politics: on the contrary, the salience of crime in current political and media discourse ensures that even a small percentage rise in one category of recorded offences can set off tabloid headlines and heated political debates. However, with the change in status accorded to the BCS, they no longer have even the field of ‘official crime statistics’ entirely to themselves. Similarly, while the Home Office remains the major player in the field, it no longer has anything like a ‘monopoly on truth’ where statements about the extent of crime are concerned. Crime figures now occupy a contested—and increasingly politicized—area, in which knowledge claims are often challenged, public and media mistrust of ‘official statistics’ have grown, and the achievement of legitimacy is becoming as important as the quality of the data.

THE UNCERTAIN FUTURE OF THE ‘OFFICIAL STATISTICS’

We turn in this last section to questions about the current status and the future of the ‘official’ crime statistics. Recent years have seen a series of inquiries, reports, and policy recommendations on this topic, reflecting a sense of uncertainty about both their legitimacy and their core purposes—even something of an ‘identity crisis’—that has surrounded them for some time. The most recent report at the time of writing (Matheson 2011) confirms that there are likely to be further shifts in the three main directions of travel that have already begun: the pursuit of ‘relevance’, the search for ‘comprehensiveness’, and the transfer of responsibility and control away from the Home Office into more independent hands. Proposals of this kind are being driven, it is suggested, by a combination of changing data demands from policy-makers and practitioners, new thinking about the purpose of official statistics, and concerns about public mistrust. However, they also come up against some fundamental dilemmas and contradictions inherent in the very concept of a single set of national (‘official’) statistics.


The case for relevance and comprehensiveness was made forcefully in 2000 in a radical report by a senior civil servant which advocated no less than ‘[a revision of] the
philosophy underlying the production of statistics’, in which ‘19th century aims and practices’ would be replaced by

a more flexible view of information—one where we first define the problems requiring solution and then develop the information needed to better understand those problems,. rather than rely on the routine statistics supplied in summary form by the police.

(Simmons 2000:ii)

His recommendations included the replacement of the traditional *Criminal Statistics* with an annual ‘Picture of Crime in England and Wales’ incorporating not just police crime records, but information from a range of other sources including the BCS, police incident data, research studies, other kinds of survey, and administrative data from other agencies and institutions. If information was to be useful, he argued, it had to be as comprehensive—and as timely, reliable, and context-rich—as possible. Thus, for example, the author looked forward to a system of data collection in which a common incident record format would be used by every police force, and part-records of individual cases (as opposed to simply counts of offence types) could be transferred electronically to the Home Office, hence allowing more collation and analysis to be undertaken centrally. Policies should also be introduced to encourage or compel police officers to

ensure that *every* incident relating to crimes, allegations of crimes and also disorder that is brought to their attention is recorded as an incident (or ‘call for service’).

(Simmons 2000: 19, original emphasis)

Further recommendations included a relaxation of the traditional focus on legally defined offences, with greater use being made of social definitions of crime (such as ‘knife crime’ or ‘cheque card fraud’) and even of measures of non-crime events (especially ‘anti-social behaviour’) which cause concern to the public.

This report provides a good illustration of the theme explored in the early part of this chapter, that decisions about how to collect and present crime data do not occur in a vacuum: they respond to the changing demands of the ‘consumers’ of the information and to the dominant preoccupations of the day. It argues, in essence, that there is no longer a strong case for the annual production of a crude single measure of the level of crime, constructed from simple counts of recorded offences: the needs of modern government are for more malleable and contextualized forms of information with which to assess and respond quickly to the highly specific and fast-changing ‘crime problems’ which emerge at frequent intervals to preoccupy the public, politicians, and media.

The changes which actually took place in the early 2000s fell well short of Simmons’ ambitions, but both the publication of BCS results alongside police data in the annual publication *Crime in England and Wales* (which in effect awarded the survey results equal status with police figures as an ‘official’ measure of crime) and the introduction of the National Crime Recording Standard, (based on a ‘prima facie’ approach to crime recording, as discussed earlier), were clearly in line with his thinking. Moreover, many of the themes in his report have re-emerged in subsequent reviews of statistics. For example, the independent review commissioned by the Home Secretary and chaired by Professor Adrian Smith recognized the need for reliable data of relevance
to the needs of policy-makers and practitioners, and also identified 'serious and growing gaps in the national figures', accepting the need to 'extend the coverage of national statistics' (Smith 2006: 7–11). More recently, Simmons’ recommendations for an even more 'comprehensive' approach have been revived by the National Statistician, who uses the analogy of a jigsaw with missing pieces to make the case for the gradual incorporation of a much wider range of data sources into published presentations of the national statistics. She writes:

This overall picture of crime could be conceived as a ‘jigsaw puzzle’. The BCS and police recorded crime represent major pieces of this jigsaw. The publication of additional data (for example on ASB incidents) as more contextual information could form further pieces of the jigsaw. With the inclusion of appropriate explanations about overlaps and remaining gaps, this could provide users and the public with more transparency and a better understanding of the overall picture. As gaps are filled, for example as new data streams become available from the National Fraud Authority, these estimates could be added to the jigsaw. (Matheson 2011: 13)

She lists the following as suitable ‘pieces’ to be added to the jigsaw as part of an ‘overall published framework’, though it is not fully clear which would be included in the main annual statistical bulletin (or ‘headline release’) and which in supplementary reports:

- BCS findings on crimes against children aged 10–15;
- counts of non-notifiable summary offences (based on Ministry of Justice records of penalties imposed through magistrates’ court sentences, cautions, penalty notices for disorder, etc.); and
- police records of incidents of ‘anti-social behaviour’,

and the following as areas for future development:

- fraud data (especially from reports to the National Fraud Authority);
- crimes against business (from a proposed national survey of such crimes, conducted every two years);
- estimates of the extent of cybercrime.

THE PROBLEM OF TRUST

The other major issue that has emerged in recent years is that of public distrust of the official statistics. The Smith Report summed up the problem as follows:

Public trust in crime statistics can be undermined by any or all of the following: presentations of statistics that are perceived to be in conflict with—or of no relevance to—the direct individual experiences of members of the public; presentations of statistics using categories or definitions that do not accord with public commonsense interpretations; presentation of conflicting statistics apparently open to widely differing interpretations; lack of coverage of significant areas of criminal activity and victims; perceived potential for police or ministerial interference in the production and presentation of the statistics. (Smith 2006: p. iii)

Ironically, this suggests that some of the changes discussed earlier, that were introduced ostensibly to improve the reliability and ‘truth’ of the official statistics (such
as the inclusion of common assault in the Notifiable Offence List, the NCRS, and the publication of BCS findings alongside police figures), have actually had the perverse effect of increasing distrust. They have made the statistics more difficult for casual observers to interpret and have opened up more opportunities for politicians to exploit contradictions in the data and ‘cherry pick’ figures to their party’s advantage, or to sow general mistrust of the integrity of the data. Media responses to the release of statistics tend to look no further than the raw figures, and show little interest in ‘technical’ arguments that there have ‘actually’ been falls, not rises.

Concerns have also been expressed that the presentation and publication of the national statistics have been increasingly caught up in political ‘spin’. Undoubtedly, as the political climate around crime has heated up, the pressure on civil servants involved in this process has increased. The old Criminal Statistics consisted mainly of standard tables with little comment, but the new statistical bulletins require analysis and interpretation—for example, in explaining possible reasons for differences in trends in police and BCS figures. There is an inevitable temptation for them, consciously or unconsciously, to offer the most favourable interpretation from the Government’s point of view (and even if they do not, they will be accused of it). The process of releasing the publication, too, has come under critical scrutiny. For example, the Statistics Commission (2005: 4) stated:

> [O]ur 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.

Finally, a rather different reason for declining faith in criminal statistics has been an increasing mismatch between what the general public tend to think of as ‘crime’ (influenced by their own experiences, images in the media, and so on) and what is measured in the official crime statistics. Most people tend to make little distinction between ‘crime’ and ‘anti-social behaviour’. As the general impression seems to be that levels of, for example, aggressive behaviour in the street by groups of youths, or late night disorder in town centres—much of which is not counted as crime in the published statistics—have increased significantly in recent years, it is therefore not surprising that there is widespread reluctance to believe the official message that crime rates have been falling. In every sweep of the BCS since 1996—a period in which both BCS and police-recorded crime totals have fallen quite sharply—it has been found that between 58 and 75 per cent of respondents believed that over the previous two years, there had

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This is of course not unique to crime statistics: disbelief of government figures and concerns about ‘spin’ are widespread in many other areas of policy (Duffy et al. 2005). However, it has been one of the most prominent themes in recent discussions about the future of crime statistics.
been ‘a little more’ or ‘a lot more’ crime in the country as a whole: see Chaplin et al.
2011: 82.

Most of the recent inquiries into the future of criminal statistics have concluded that
overcoming the problem of public mistrust requires greater transparency and more
independent oversight and control of the process of collecting, analysing, and pre-
senting data (Statistics Commission 2006; UK Statistics Authority 2010). In 2010 the
Home Secretary decided that the main responsibility for management of the process
and publication of the results would be transferred to an independent body. The body
selected is the Office for National Statistics, the current plan being for the ONS to take
on contract management of the BCS and the compilation of police-recorded crime
estimates, while leaving responsibility for the collection and validation of recorded
crime data with the Home Office (Matheson 2011). By placing control over the inter-
pretation and presentation of the data in independent hands, it is hoped that the main
causes of mistrust will be removed.

BACK TO BASICS?

While the transfer of the official criminal statistics into independent hands may
impact upon public trust, it will not in itself solve some of the fundamental dilemmas
surrounding the concept of a regularly updated national ‘picture’ of crime. Many of
the recent developments and proposed changes discussed in this chapter raise basic
questions about the purposes of such a set of statistics, and what it should or should
not contain.

As stated at the beginning of the chapter, although it has always had other uses
as well, the main justification for the continued existence of the official statistics is
the need for a national ‘barometer’ of the level of crime. This is seen as part of the
democratic accountability of the government for the welfare of its citizens. An impor-
tant element of this is the capacity to track change over time, as represented by both
long- and short-term ‘trends’ in the figures produced. Another desirable element is
simplicity—at the extreme the production of a single measure (such as a total number
of recorded crimes) that can be compared year-on-year.

For many years, the annual statistical series based on police-recorded crime served
this purpose and met these criteria well enough in most people’s eyes. However, as
modes of offending grew in complexity and knowledge about a variety of previously
‘hidden’ crime increased, it became increasingly difficult to argue that these figures—
and particularly the incongruously precise single total of recorded offences (4,150,097
in 2010/11)—represented anything like the ‘true state of crime’ in the country.
Moreover, attempts to produce a fuller and more realistic picture (through changes
in counting rules, the NCRS, and so on) had the serious drawback of undermining
the comparability of data year-on-year, so that measurement of trends became dif-
ficult, complex, and confusing. This basic dilemma—between the constant pursuit
of ‘comprehensiveness’ and the need for comparability over time—can still be seen
in the recent debates about the future of the official statistics. For example, the Smith
Review recommended extending their coverage (to include under-16s and non-house-
hold residents in the BCS figures, as well as new sources of data on crimes currently
inadequately covered), yet at the same time urged caution about the pace of change,
recommending that, ‘when significant changes are made, a period of relative stability should be planned while they are absorbed’ (Smith 2006: 17).

Similar points can be made about the demand for ‘relevance’. If the national statistics are frequently tinkered with to produce data of a kind and in a form that policy-makers find useful at that particular point in time (for example, by replacing legal classifications of offences with new categories and datasets reflecting socially constructed ‘crime problems’ of the day), year-on-year comparison becomes highly problematic.

A more fundamental question is whether, even leaving aside the problem of measuring trends, it makes any sense to aim to produce an ‘overall’ or ‘total’ measure of crime—to use the National Statistician’s analogy, to try to complete the full jigsaw. Clearly, if this was understood in terms of adding together every ‘crime’ known (through any reliable source available) to have been committed in a given year, and coming up with a total figure, the task would be made almost impossibly difficult by problems of definition, double counting, serial victimization, and so on. More importantly, one would have to question whether the resulting figure would have any sensible meaning, having been arrived at by adding together a range of very different types of behaviour, (the proverbial ‘apples and pears’), some of them inherently more ‘countable’ than others. They would inevitably be dominated, too, by a vast number of minor offences, many of them on the very fuzzy borderline between criminal and anti-social (but non-criminal) behaviour. In the words of Smith (2006: 9):

We are also clear that there can never be a measure of ‘overall’ or ‘total’ crime. There will always be crimes not adequately captured in the statistics and a single total number would bring together a very wide range of acts and degrees of seriousness in a not very meaningful way. What matters—and is attainable—is to develop national crime statistics series that have clearly understood strengths and weaknesses and are consistent enough over time to provide trend data for whatever area of crime each measures.

Given these arguments, the logical conclusion seems to be that any attempt to present the ‘national state of crime’ through a single statistical measure (both in any given year, and as a trend over time) should focus on more serious and more reliably measurable offences. Some consideration has been given to the production of a ‘crime index’ based around a ‘basket’ of selected offences of these kinds, whose contents would change little from year to year, allowing relatively robust measurement of trends. Rather like the FTSE index in relation to all company shares, it would act as a reasonably sound proxy for the overall state of crime. The core argument for such an index is put by the National Statistician (Matheson 2011: 49) as follows:

The user need is to provide the general population, politicians and decision makers with a clear understanding what is happening over time with crime in England and Wales which is not heavily influenced or dominated by changes in reporting or recording practices or dominated by high volume low severity offences.

It could be argued that this is not far off what the recorded crime statistics have always done: by including only notifiable offences they focus on the more serious end of the crime spectrum, and—apart from periods of upheaval—roughly the same ‘basket’ has been measured in a similar way each year. However, the difference is that notifiable offences have not been selected in any logical fashion to represent ‘crime’: they are accidental products of a long history of legislation and contain a mixture of the very serious and the almost trivial, and of offences more and less susceptible to the vagaries of reporting and recording behaviour.
Objections to such a move—which, paradoxically, seems to go against the current trend towards extending statistical coverage, rather than limiting it—include the concern that it might be interpreted as a message that the Government does not care about ‘minor’ crimes, and it is partly for this reason that the idea has so far been shelved. However, Smith (2006) suggests that this objection can be met by developing ways of measuring, mapping, and sharing information with the public about minor crime and anti-social behaviour at a local level:

At local level we believe that we should no longer be thinking about crime statistics in the traditional static sense of tables of numbers and graphs published as a record, but rather as a dynamic exchange of potentially useful information between the police and the public. For that reason, considerations about the level and form of information and its mode of communication are quite different from those applied to national crime statistics.

This clear distinction between the purposes of national and local crime statistics—the one filling the traditional role of a ‘barometer’ of the ‘national state of crime’ and the other flexible enough to respond to emerging crime problems and the fast-changing data requirements of practitioners—seems to offer a promising way forward out of the contradictory situation in which policies around criminal statistics have found themselves. Whether the ‘barometer’ is provided by a single measure like a crime index or by some other means (for example, through separate analyses of trends in specific offences based on data from different sources) is a secondary issue: the key point is that in recent years the ‘official’ (national) statistics have been expected to serve too many purposes at once, and that it may be time for a return to basics and a renewed focus on their traditional role.

■ SELECTED FURTHER READING

There are relatively few recent textbooks on criminal statistics, especially in the UK. Although obviously out of date in some respects, Understanding Crime Data, by Clive Coleman and Jenny Moynihan (Open University Press 1996) is still one of the best British textbooks on the subject, and covers in more depth several of the main issues discussed in this chapter. It has the added advantage of accessibility and a light and humorous touch.

The annual statistical bulletin, Crime in England and Wales (the most recent at the time of writing authored by R. Chaplin, J. Flatley, and K. Smith (Home Office 2011), though responsibility will eventually pass to the Office of National Statistics) is highly recommended both as the key source of national statistics and for its clarity of style and presentation. For those interested in methodological issues in relation to recorded crime and the British Crime Survey, the User Guide to Home Office Crime Statistics (Home Office 2011) is informative and readily comprehensible. Both can be downloaded from the Home Office website, whose research and statistics pages (www.homeoffice.gov.uk/publications/science-research-statistics/research-statistics/crime-research/) should be the first port of call for anyone wishing to explore the subject. The site contains other statistical bulletins and analyses of data from police and other agency records, the BCS, and other crime-related surveys. Among those most relevant to discussions in this chapter are Shury et al. (2005), Crime against retail and manufacturing premises: Findings from the 2002 Commercial Victimisation Survey, and Millard, B. and Flatley, J. (eds) (2010), Experimental statistics on victimisation of children aged 10 to 15: Findings from the British Crime Survey for the year ending December 2009.
Older research reports can be found in the National Archive (webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20100218135832/http://rds.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pubsintro1.html).

There are also several compilations of data and statistics providing international comparisons of crime rates and patterns. Among the most comprehensive is the European Sourcebook of Crime and Criminal Justice Statistics (2010), 4th edn (The Hague: Ministry of Justice, Research and Documentation Centre). Interesting cross-national surveys include the International Crime Victim Survey (Alvazzi del Frate and Van Kesteren 2004; van Dijke et al. 2010) and the International Crime Business Survey (see Alvazzi Del Frate 2005).

Statistical and other kinds of research data on the nature and extent of over 40 separate types of crime (together with data on their history and social context) are presented and analysed in the comprehensive Handbook on Crime, edited by Brookman et al. (2010).


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