Crime statistics: An independent review

In 2006, Charles Clarke, who was then the Home Secretary, commissioned an independent review of crime statistics. The review’s purpose was to make recommendations on what changes should be made to the production and release of crime statistics in order to increase public trust. The Review Group, led by Professor Adrian Smith, found that public trust in crime statistics can be undermined by a range of factors including: the way statistics are presented and sometimes perceived to be at odds with the direct individual experiences of members of the public; the way statistics are presented using categories or definitions that don’t accord with public commonsense interpretations; the way conflicting statistics are presented that appear to contradict each other; the lack of reporting of some significant aspects of criminal activity and victims; the general perception that police and/or government ministers interfere in the way crime statistics are produced and presented. In order to restore public trust and confidence the Review Group have made a number of recommendations in respect of the way crime statistics are currently produced, communicated and used.

Key recommendations included that the Home Office should not just rely on publishing national crime statistics, but should provide information relating to crime at the local level, because crime can be very skewed in its geographical distribution. A focus upon local data as opposed to a focus upon national data was a key theme in the report. The report recommends that future investment in strategies and technology to gather local crime information should become an integral part of the development of neighbourhood policing teams which are held to account by local neighbourhoods. It suggests that the Home Office needs to make use of modern communication methods to develop a strategy for providing local crime information that is useful and relevant. In order to work effectively it recommends better partnerships between the policing team and those living and working in the area. It argues that police forces must make crime information available to the public on an appropriate geographic boundary basis. This will also hold policing teams accountable to the neighbourhood they police.

The crime information available locally should also include all crime and incident data and not just notifiable offences. Police forces should produce mapped geocoded crime and incident data as part of the development of neighbourhood policing teams. This information should be shared with the public via a force website. The police forces should also work with their local partner service providers to produce relevant information in mapped form on the same website and ensure that local crime information is disseminated as soon as possible.

The report outlines three overarching recommendations (p iii):

● A shift in emphasis is required in the production and communication of crime information. The focus must shift from the publication, by the Home Office, of the aggregate national picture to a system of communication which encompasses local data at local level between police and their neighbourhood communities.
Both the scope and definitions of the national statistics that are produced need a radical overhaul. Significant groups of victims are not covered by current surveys and certain major current crime category definitions are confusing and misleading.

Governance, management and organization of the police and Home Office environments in which crime statistics are produced and reported must be revised to provide the public with complete assurance of actual and perceived independence and integrity of the statistics.

This independent report has the potential to bring about considerable changes in the reporting of criminal justice information. While national crime statistics may have exaggerated the risk of crime in many areas and possibly fuelled the fear of crime, localized data will inevitably demonstrate how some communities are considerably more at risk.


Dr Julian Buchanan
Social Inclusion Research Unit, University of Wales, NEWI


This report, produced jointly by the Home Office and the National Statistics Office, provides a helpful and accessible report that outlines findings from both the BCS and from statistical data from recorded crime. The material is well presented with plenty of bullet points, use of colour, charts and graphs. As well as providing factual data, the report passes some comment and analysis. Perhaps largely aimed at the public, student or criminal justice professional, the report looks at: how crime is measured in England and Wales; what crimes are included in the BCS and recorded crime; how much crime there is; how crime is changing; what is happening to violent crime; whether crime varies across the country; who is most at risk of crime; what people think about crime; and finally, anti-social behaviour.

Of interest, the report suggests: a significant drop in domestic burglary over the previous year; a 44 per cent decrease in crime, according to the BCS, since 1995 (although this has not been reflected in violent crime which has largely remained stable). During this same period, police-recorded crime has increased due to increases in the amount of crime that the police are now expected to record. The fear of violent crime has, according to the BCS, decreased since 1998.

Crime can be highly concentrated in particular areas. The national data may, therefore, not reflect people’s experiences in their own community. Metropolitan Police areas have the highest rates for robbery. Significantly most at risk of violence are men between the ages of 16 and 24 years, with 12.6 per cent experiencing a violent crime in the previous year compared with a national average of 3.4 per