

1 Sociology 4099: Victimology

Lecture Notes Week 2.2 : A Critique of Official Police Data

Official police statistics, collected through the UCR, shed some light on patterns of victimization in Canada. They may help us to recognize and classify important properties of deviants, criminals, victims, and crime scenes. This can help clarify popular perceptions, evaluate changes in the risks involved with different locations and time periods, assist professionals in planning, implementing, and assessing programs set up to treat victims, rehabilitate or deter offenders, and aid in constructing sociological theories to explain why some are more prone to offend or be victimized than others. However, the study of crime and victimization poses difficult and unique methodological problems for sociological researchers. We will now review the relative advantages and disadvantages of using official statistics in this regard.

Generally, officially gathered statistics on crime are calculated by dividing the number of times a particular event occurs in a certain time period by the population size for a particular geographical area, and then multiplying this figure by a constant (usually 100,000). Unfortunately, however, there have been radical changes in data collection procedures over the years. For example, until the early 1960's, information on crime in Canada existed only at the municipal and regional levels. Reports of criminal investigations formed the bases of tallies that were compiled at the local level by police detachments across the country. Two major deficiencies plagued these law-enforcement records. First, since they were collected for police purposes only, they lacked sufficient sociological and criminological detail. Second, the procedures by which crimes were recorded differed substantially among police jurisdictions. Therefore, meaningful comparisons of jurisdictions were difficult, if not impossible.

However, in 1962, the federal government introduced nationwide the Canadian Uniform Crime Report (UCR) system. The UCR remedied many of these shortcomings in the previous approach.

Despite these changes, however, there are still numerous problems with the uses of official statistics for the above ends (See Figure 9-1, Gomme p.158).

First, officials cannot know about all acts of deviance and crime. Not all crimes are detected, and even fewer are reported. This involves a distinction between detected and reported crime. Basically, detected crime is that observed by either victims, witnesses, or the police. Reported crime is that brought to the attention of authorities by victims and/or witnesses that the police would not know about otherwise. These numbers are inevitably different, with the latter significantly smaller than the former. There are many reasons why citizens decide not to report crime to the police. Many people consider some offences, such as breaking highway speed limits, as trivial and tolerable. People are reluctant to inform the police about a crime if they perceive that their reporting will cost them time and money. Even serious crimes such as assault may go unreported if victims feel that the social or economic costs of becoming involved with the police, lawyers, and the courts are not worth the effort. Still other criminal acts lack a clearly defined victim. The actions of prostitutes, drug dealers, and loan sharks are seldom reported

because their "victims" willingly exchange money for the illicit goods and services provided by these outlaw entrepreneurs.

The relationship between the victim and the person observing a criminal offence may also effect reporting. Women may not inform police about assaults by their spouses and boyfriends because they love them. They may also fail to report such incidents to the authorities because their assailants threaten them with violent retaliation. People routinely fail to report sexual assaults because of the shame and the fear of publicity felt by both victims and their families. Reports of crimes such as vandalism or minor theft often do not reach the police because people have little faith in the ability of police to apprehend certain types of criminals. Moreover, some people do not report crime because they fear or distrust law enforcement agents.

Going hand in hand with this, many reported crimes are not officially recorded by authorities as "founded." For a crime to be officially recorded, the police must first determine that it is a "founded" crime, one that a police officer, upon investigation, is certain actually happened. Even after people report crimes to police and police determine that they are founded, offences are not always recorded. Patrol officers and detectives have neither the time nor the inclination to complete reports on all offences, especially when the violations are not serious.

Complainants may want lawbreakers to be treated leniently. Wives who call police to intervene in family disputes may not want the matter pursued formally. The wishes of complainants or victims are important because if these persons are reluctant to testify, there is little if any chance that a conviction will result.

The demeanour of both victims and perpetrators also influences the responses of law enforcers. Victims who are belligerent with police officers and offenders who are respectful increase the likelihood that their cases will be dealt with informally and therefore not be recorded. Again, this is especially true for relatively minor offences. Whether offenders and police are acquainted with one another may also influence a police officer's decision about how to deal with a particular offence. If a drunken motorist is well known to them, small-town police may arrange a ride home or time to dry out in jail rather than proceed with a charge of impaired driving. Finally, if individual police officers are "on the take" or entire forces are corrupt, offences ranging from parking violations to prostitution, gambling, and narcotics trafficking are unlikely to be recorded even though they have been detected and reported and are known to be founded.

Thus, the officially recorded numbers of criminal activities often drastically understate the number of incidents occurring, and this shrinkage continues throughout the entire criminal justice process: Crimes recorded by the police far exceed the number of charges laid. Only a small proportion of charges results in the conviction of an offender. Smaller still is the number of convictions that result in imprisonment. Indeed, increases in official rates may have more to do with increases in detection, reporting, or recording of incidents than with any change in the incidence of crime (e.g. the drastic increase in North American sexual assault rates throughout the 1980's).

But there are other problems as well. The amount of crime that a particular police force

officially records depends on its size and organization. Not only are larger police forces covering a similar area likely to detect more crime, official statistics on crime are produced by differentially organized bureaucratic organizations, each affected by internal and external pressures. James Wilson (1981), for example, contrasts "watch" style policing with its focus on informal "containment," with "professional" style departments with their formal emphasis on doing things "by the book." The latter produce higher rates of officially recorded deviance. Similarly, Ken Stoddart (1987), in his research on the enforcement of drug laws in Vancouver, observed that changes in the style and quality of enforcement provide for the appearance of an enlarged population of offenders independent of any actual enlargement. These differentials exist both within and between police departments.

Such distortions can be exacerbated by "unofficial" practices, such as accepting suspectedly false confessions to "clear" the big case; "overcharging" and "bedsheeting" in the context of plea bargaining; contribution to, and generation of, criminal behavior through escalation, nonenforcement, and covert facilitation; organizational pressures to distort the facts; and police corruption.

Thirdly, the perceptual biases of control agents affect accuracy. Research illustrates the influence of stereotypical conceptions of race, ethnicity, gender, social class, age, religion, and even physical appearance influencing one's chance of being caught and labeled (Pfohl, 1994), and hence included in the production of official statistics. Chambliss (1987) notes that youths whose actions may be relatively harmless, but whose social characteristics are typically linked with serious criminality, are frequently labeled more harshly than those whose acts are more "harmful," but whose social backgrounds are more respectable. Arnold Linsky (1970), William Rushing (1971), and William Wilde (1968) all present data suggesting class and social attribute bias in the official diagnosis of mental illness. Chambliss and Nagasawa (1969) present evidence that ethnic stereotypes lead police to overestimate the criminal activities of Blacks and underestimate the involvement of Japanese-Americans. Such biases "distort the public record regarding the true population of typical deviants," contribute to a self-fulfilling prophecy ensuring that control agents will "find what they are looking for," and cover up much "harmful" activity that does not fit the stereotype.

Fourth, shifting political enforcement priorities, such as "crackdowns," play a role in the production of official statistics. Official statistics, on the one hand, are generated by organizations with an interest in showing that they are doing a good job - organizations usually responsible to elected politicians who campaign to fight crime. In doing so, police departments may be pressured to deliberately stretch or downgrade, for record purposes, the seriousness of some offences (McCaghy, 1980; Gomme, 1993).

Conversely, control organizations may manipulate high crime rates in order to underscore the need for more personnel and equipment, and the inevitable crackdowns as a result of political pressure not only serve this purpose, they further distort official figures.

Fifth, the accuracy of official statistics is also limited by the fact that some deviants are more visible than others. Street prostitutes are more noticeable than high-priced escorts, as are their clients. People on welfare are put under intense scrutiny as a condition of obtaining

assistance. Moreover, alienation fed by differential surveillance may limit what crimes lower-class persons voluntarily report. Add that white-collar crime can only be engaged in by the relatively privileged, and that such well-hidden crimes are the least reported, prosecuted, and punished in our society, and one gets an idea of the distortion built into official statistics.

Sixth, the official recording of crime also depends on the dynamics of the situation in which labeling occurs. (Smith and Klein, 1984). Carl Werthman and Irving Piliavin (1987) note the critical importance of a suspect's demeanor in determining whether youths will be taken into custody by police officers. Albert Reiss (1971) presents evidence that the presence of a citizen complaint demanding arrest is critical in police decisions to arrest an offender, and that such demands are made more frequently by blacks. Such factors distort and confuse the nature and extent of deviance.

Seventh, even when crime is recorded, how it is recorded often produces problems. Major changes in 1962 and 1992 add "idiosyncrasies" to comparisons over time and between types of offences. Police count crimes against the person and crimes against property differently (1 victim 1 crime for violent crimes vs. 1 occurrence for multiple theft victims at one household). They also often do not distinguish attempted crimes from completed crimes; record only the most serious offence in a series; utilize differing interpretations for coding information onto standardized government forms; and do not always include the most theoretically relevant matters. Some statisticians calculate official crime rates by counting offences that few people would consider "real" crime (e.g. municipal bylaws and provincial statute offences). Finally, the legislators' ongoing adjustments to offence categories makes longitudinal studies of rates over time complicated, if not impossible.

Eighth, statisticians have to use base population figures from the census. This number doesn't take into account changes in population size between each census. If crime rates are calculated in 2004 by using population counts taken from the 2001 census, incalculable inaccuracies can result. If the population in 2004 is bigger than in 2001 and the actual number of crimes is the same, crime rate estimates will be artificially low. If the population size in 2004 is smaller than it was in 2001 and the number of crimes is the same, crime rates will be artificially high. Moreover, utilizing gross population figures to compute crime rates sometime fail to consider demographic changes in population composition (e.g. age group distribution), which may affect the likelihood of both committing crime and of becoming a victim. Crime rates, based on gross population figures, just don't account for this.

Finally, changes in the "unit at risk" influence rates:

"Increases in both the number and portability of consumer goods have increased rates of theft. Stealing a radio 60 years ago would have required three strong people and a moving van. A modern radio can be carried off by a child. Similarly, a society of two-car families like Canada is likely to have higher rates of auto theft than one like China, where automobiles are extremely scarce (Gomme, 1993: 167).

The foregoing documents many of the serious problems of using official statistics in the study of deviance, crime and victimization. To be fair, the Canadian government developed an improved, computerized model for gathering official crime data in 1992 which collects more detailed information on the levels of personal and property victimization, the demographic traits of victims and accused persons, and the characteristics of criminal events (e.g. weapons, the presence of drugs and alcohol). It also improves on the old system by eliminating differences in counting techniques for personal and property crimes, making possible the computation of age and sex specific crime rates, and by including information on the less serious offences in multiple offence incidents. Nevertheless, many difficulties remain. This is not to say that police data should never be used. If recognized as social constructions (Best, 1989), their ultimate value lies in the fact that, when viewed critically, and combined with other methods, official statistics help reduce pure speculation, help researchers to contextually make more informed estimates, and enable the construction of more well-rounded accounts.