

Crime & Deviance (1)

The Official Criminal Statistics: Trends and Patterns in Crime

Measuring crime

We get most of our information about crime from the **official criminal statistics** (OCS) which are published quarterly by the **government**, i.e. the **Home Office**. These are based on **three** sources:

- (1) **Crimes reported by victims** and the **general public** and **recorded by the police**.
- (2) **Crimes detected and recorded by the police**.

All recording of crime by the police is based on **counting rules** known as the **'National Crime Recording Standard'** which all police forces in the UK use to **categorise and record** particular offences.

- (3) Since 1982, the above criminal statistics have been supplemented by statistics from a **victim survey** known as the **Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW)** (previously known as the **'British Crime Survey'** until 2011). The CSEW is carried out annually by the Home Office and involves approximately 44,000 people aged 16 plus being **interviewed face-to-face** about their experiences as victims of crime. The statistics from this victim survey are compared with the official criminal statistics to work out levels of under-reporting (**the dark figure of hidden crime**) and consequently the 'true' level of crime in the UK.

Trends and Patterns in Crime

The OCS are used to **establish trends and patterns in criminal activity** especially in regard to

- (i) **the volume of crime (i.e. how much there is and whether it is increasing or decreasing)**
- (ii) **types of crime, i.e. whether it is violence or property orientated**
- (iii) **the social characteristics of criminals (i.e. the type of person who is likely to be a criminal).**

Some sociologists accept the **validity** of the official crime statistics without question (**i.e. they believe them to be a realistic or truthful picture of crime in the UK**) and have constructed sociological theories explaining why particular groups (e.g. the young, the poor and ethnic minorities) show up more often in these statistics. **Functionalist** and **subcultural** theories are good examples of the types of sociological theories that have done this.

Trends in crime since the 1980s

The criminologist **Robert Reiner (2007)** suggests that **two** distinct periods exist with regard to trends in criminal behaviour over the last 40 years.

Period 1- 1983-1993 – an explosion of crime

The ten-year period 1983-1993 saw a **doubling in the number of crimes** - the number of **crimes recorded by the police increased by 111 per cent**. However, the British Crime Survey (BCS) (which was first introduced in 1982) suggested that these criminal statistics under-estimated the true amount of crime in UK society because **there was often a huge gap in the number of crimes reported to the police and the number of crimes reported to the BCS**. In other words, it is likely that crime was a lot higher than the official statistics indicated.

Period 2- 1993-2014- falling crime but rising fear

However, between 1993 and 2014, the **UK crime rate significantly fell** according to the official statistics. **Both crimes recorded by the police and reported to the CSEW have declined in number**. This is particularly the case with **property crime**. For example, the number of burglaries and offences against motor vehicles fell by 41% and 54% respectively between 2002 and

2012. Total property crime fell by 39% in this period to 1.898 million – its lowest level since the early 1990s.

Violent crime also fell between 2002 and 2012 but more slowly. For example, between 2002 and 2012, the number of sexual offences and robberies fell by 8% and 31% respectively. Between 2010 and 2012, the offence of ‘violence against the person’ fell by 5%. **However, the total number of crimes involving violence (i.e. murder, wounding, assault, sex crime and robberies such as mugging) declined by about 10% between 2002 and 2012.**

In 2013, the gap between CSEW reported crime and police recorded crime was at its most narrow (2%-3%). Virtually every category of crime showed a decline in victimisation in the latest CSEW survey except for theft from a person, e.g. pick-pocketing, and bicycle theft!. **In 2013, the overall crime rate indicated a 32% fall in total crime since 2002.**

Research Question: What have been the trends in both the crime rate and the volume of crime in the UK since 2013?

However, despite this good news, **opinion polls suggest that the general public believe that crime is rising** and that society has become more dangerous and crime-ridden. In particular, **the mass media, particularly tabloid newspapers, have reinforced this view of crime.**

Types of Crime

One **commonsense belief** about crime is that violence has increased dramatically since the 1950s. There is no doubt that recorded violence has increased in the last 25 years **as a proportion of all crime**. In 1976 violent crime made up 6% of all crime. By 1997, violent crime was still only 8% of all crime but by 2013, it accounted for 22% of all crime. However, the 2013 statistics indicated that it had fallen to 20% of all crime.

Some types of violent crime continue to rise. For example, in 2013 sexual offences increased by 17% over the course of the year. However, these figures may be distorted by historical sex abuse cases, e.g. hundreds of people have made allegations against celebrities such as Jimmy Savile. It is therefore

difficult to distinguish between contemporary sex offences and historical sex offences.

Moreover, criminologists point out that the rise in violence in recent years has to be put into **statistical context**. The main reason that **violent crime has statistically increased in the past ten years is because property crime has steeply declined since the mid 1990s**. In other words, the rise in violence is a **statistical illusion**.

In reality, **violence has actually declined to the level of the 1980s although certain types of violence, e.g. knife crime, continue to rise**. However, **property crime still made up the major proportion of crime in 2012, i.e. 80% of all crime**.

Research task = what types of crime have increased or decreased since 2013?

The social characteristics of criminality

If we examine the OCS in terms of those being arrested, charged and convicted, we can see that **some social groups are more likely to appear criminal than others**.

(a) Youth

Most burglary, street robbery, violence against the person, shoplifting and criminal damage offences are committed by young people aged 17-24. In 2009-10, the peak age for known offenders for males was **18 years** and for females, it was **15 years**. **The older a person gets, the less likely they are to commit crime**.

(b) Social class

It is difficult to find official data that links criminality to social class in the UK because the socio-economic status of offenders is generally not recorded by

the police or CSEW. Most information about offending and social class tends to come from an examination of the social background of those who have been convicted of crimes and the population of youth detention centres and prisons.

Although the Ministry of Justice does not keep records with regard to the social-class backgrounds of prisoners in British jails, there are clues which suggest there is a relationship between criminality and deprivation:

- 11 per cent of prisoners ran away from home as a child and were either homeless or in care before their conviction.
- About one in three female and half of male prisoners were excluded from school and a majority have no qualifications compared with 15 per cent of the population.
- 41 per cent of prisoners witnessed domestic violence as a child and almost a third experienced abuse.
- Sociologists have pointed out that 74 per cent of the prison population is drawn from the poorest 20 per cent of the population. Most prisoners prior to their conviction were either unemployed or employed in semi-skilled or unskilled manual work.

Reiner (2007) points out that **74% of the prison population is drawn from the poorest 20% of the population.** Most prisoners prior to their conviction were either **unemployed or employed in semi-skilled or unskilled manual work.** Studies of convicted young offenders also confirm this working-class bias. For example, **Hagell and Newburn's** study of youth detention centres found that only **8%** of persistent offenders came from **middle-class** backgrounds.

(c) Ethnicity

Statistics show an **over-representation** of ethnic minority men and women, and particularly **Afro-Caribbeans in prison.** In March 2013, 13.1% of prisoners in British jails were Black yet this ethnic minority group only makes up **2.8%** of the general population. 3.9% were mixed-race. Black youth are

also more likely to be **cautioned** or given an **Anti-Social Behavior Order (ASBO)** than any other ethnic minority group.

There has been a significant rise in the number of convictions of Asian people in recent years. In 2013, 7.9% of male prisoners in UK jails were from an Asian or British-Asian backgrounds. 13% of prisoners were Muslim (compared with only 4% in the general population).

(d) Gender

The number of female offenders has risen faster than the number of male offenders since 1958 but approximately **80-90% of offenders found guilty or cautioned are male**. At least **one-third of men** are likely to be convicted for a criminal offence before the age of 35, compared with **only 8% of women**. In 2013, there were approximately **81,000 men in prison** compared with **only 3900 women**.

However, there has been a **rapid rise** in recent years in **violence committed by young women** (although it is still **vastly outnumbered** by male violent offences).

(e) Region

Urban areas, especially **inner city council estates** have higher rates of crime than the suburbs or rural areas. **Residents of the inner city and council estates, i.e. the urban poor**, are more likely than most other social groups to be **victims of crime**. However, **younger residents of the same areas and estates are most likely to be the offenders**.

However, as sociologists, we need to be careful in our interpretation of these statistics. It may be the case that the official crime statistics may tell us more about the behaviour of those employed by the criminal justice system than they tell us about crime and criminals.