

Crime & Deviance (2)

Evaluating the reliability and validity of the official criminal statistics

Interpretivist sociologists have long questioned the reliability and validity of the official criminal statistics (OCS). Interpretivist sociologists argue that the OCS do not measure actual crime – rather they are a **social construction**.

If something is socially constructed, it means that **it is the product of social forces or influences, i.e. the product of society**. Interpretivist sociologists believe that the OCS are the **end product of decisions** made by **several social groups including:**

- **the general public**
- **victims of crime**
- **politicians**
- **the mass media**
- **Chief Constables and police officers**
- **magistrates and judges**

Interpretivists therefore argue that **the OCS may tell us more about the groups involved in the collection of these statistics than they tell us about crime and criminality**. There are a number of criticisms of the OCS which support their case.

(1) **The role of the general public and victims in the social construction of the criminal statistics**

Interpretivists like **Pilkington** are critical of the OCS because many crimes are actually not included in them – there exists a **'dark figure' (or hidden iceberg) of unreported and unrecorded crime**. The existence of this dark figure of crime can be illustrated in a number of ways:

- Some offences are not included in the OCS because they are dealt with by civil agencies such as the tax authorities rather than the police or courts, e.g. **tax and VAT fraud committed by companies or wealthy individuals, health and safety infringements by employers that result in the death of employees etc.**
- Some offences are not included in the OCS because they belong to **social institutions which have the power to punish offenders without involving**

the police or courts. Institutions such as public schools, professional associations such as the British Medical Association and the Law Society and financial institutions such as **banks** prefer not to involve the police and courts if they uncover criminal activity because arrests and trials bring about bad publicity for these institutions. For examples, **public schools** may expel or suspend pupils for criminal activity such as vandalism or drug use whilst banks prefer to quietly sack employees who engage in white-collar crime.

- Pilkington points out that the OCS **depend on the willingness of the general public and victims to report crime.** There is evidence that as recently as the 1980s, **official attitudes** (i.e. those held by the police, the courts and the government) with regard to crimes such as **domestic violence, rape and child abuse were poor** and that consequently **society did not take these crimes seriously.** As a result, although **these crimes were being committed on a regular basis, they were not reported to the police by victims or they were not taken seriously by the police or courts.** For example, the evidence suggests that if children reported child abuse, they were not often believed. **There was, then, a hidden iceberg or dark figure of unreported crime in this period.**

However, since the 1980s, society has grown more intolerant of these crimes because **social attitudes have changed.** Women are no longer regarded as inferior to men and since the 1990s, society has grown more aware of the need to protect vulnerable children from predatory adults. For example, the setting up of **Childline** - a 24-hour counselling service for children and teenagers by the TV personality Esther Rantzen in 1986 – led to the realisation that child abuse was much more common and widespread than previously thought.

Since the 1980s, the OCS have shown a steep rise in sexual offences and child abuse **but interpretivist sociologists such as Pilkington are not convinced that this statistical increase indicates a true or actual rise in these crimes.** Pilkington argues that crimes such as rape, child sex abuse and domestic violence have **NOT** increased in number since the 1960s. The annual number of these crimes has remained constantly high but few women or children reported these crimes for the reasons stated above. However, in the past 20 years or so, victims have grown more confident that the police, the courts, the government and most importantly, society in general, take these crimes seriously and consequently this has made it **easier for victims of domestic violence, rape and child abuse to report crimes against them** in 2014. It is therefore **the reporting** of these crimes that has increased rather than the

actual number of these crimes. **More of the hidden iceberg of unreported crimes is being uncovered.**

There are signs that today's intolerance of these crimes is distorting the OCS. Think about recent investigations (e.g. Operation Yewtree), arrests and prosecutions focused on historical sex offences, e.g. Jimmy Saville, Rolf Harris etc – how might these past crimes affect the validity of the official statistics in 2014?

EVALUATIVE POINT!

However!

Despite growing intolerance of rape and domestic violence it is probably still the case **that these crimes continue to be under-reported and under-recorded**, i.e. they still constitute part of the 'dark figure' or hidden iceberg of crime. In other words, despite major changes in policing and the criminal justice system, **it is still the case that some victims may not report crimes committed against them.**

For example, there is some evidence that **rape statistics** may **not** be a valid measure of that crime. For example, in the 1980s, the police were encouraged to be more sensitive and understanding in their dealings with rape victims and this resulted in awareness training for all police officers and the introduction of rape suites in police stations. **This led to a rise in rape statistics in the 1980s as women who feared poor treatment at the hands of the police now came forward because they felt that their allegations would be taken seriously by the police.**

However, both the police and Rape Crisis Centres agree that **rape is still a severely under-reported crime**. For example, between 2010 and 2012, it is estimated that **78,000 people were raped in the UK** (69,000 women and 9000 men). However, only **15,670 (approximately 20%) of these rapes were reported to the police**. About 80% of rape victims are not reporting the crime against them because:

- They fear that **social attitudes** will **blame them** for behaving (e.g. being drunk) or dressing in ways which supposedly encourage rape.

- They fear the **courtroom experience** – rape victims often face aggressive cross-examinations from defence counsels which attempt to destroy their reputations.
- **Conviction rates are extremely low**, i.e. 5%-6%. For example, only 2,910 people a year face court proceedings and only 1,070 people a year are convicted. This may be off-putting to victims.

In summary, then, **the official rape statistics tell us very little about the reality of this crime.**

(2) The effect of economic change on the OCS

Interpretivists point out that in addition to social change, **economic change** too has influenced the validity of the OCS. This can be illustrated in four ways:

- Firstly, interpretivist sociologists argue that the massive increase in property crime which occurred from the 1960s through to 2000 was the result of the **UK's increasing affluence** in this period which meant that **living standards improved and people could afford more consumer goods**. For example, in 1960, Britons owned 7 million cars – this had increased to 25 million by 2000. It is therefore not surprising that there was a big increase in theft of cars or theft from cars in this period, i.e. more cars = more car crime.
- The **increasing importance of property and consumer items to people's lifestyle and identity** has probably led to people becoming more **intolerant of property crime and becoming more willing to report it to the police compared with the past**.
- As society has grown more affluent, so **the take-up of insurance has increased**. 80% of households with average income have some type of property insurance in 2012 compared with only 10% in the 1950s. **Insurance claims require police reports**. It is very likely that **part of the increase in property crime since the 1950s reflects an increase in reporting because of the greater take-up of property insurance**.
- There is also evidence that **the types of crime appearing in the statistics are changing because of global economic change**. There has been a major fall in property crimes in the UK in the past decade, particularly in **burglary**. However, this has been accompanied by a **major increase in street robbery**. This is partly due to **globalisation - China flooding the UK with cheap**

electrical goods, (e.g. DVD and CD players) which means that most household items have become so cheap that it is no longer worth the risk of burgling houses to acquire them. However, young people in the UK are **more affluent than previous generations** and are more likely to be carrying around reasonably expensive **status items** such as phones, I-Pads and lap-tops which has **fuelled an increase in street robbery or mugging**.

In conclusion, then, the increase in property crime between 1970 and 2000 was probably fuelled by two factors; firstly, **the increase in the sheer number of consumer goods such as cars resulted in an actual increase in property crime** because **affluence leads to an increase in criminal opportunity**; secondly, there was **more reporting** because of **intolerance and the greater take-up of insurance**.