

# Sociology Factsheet



www.curriculum-press.co.uk

Number 22

## Crime Statistics

This Factsheet examines three main sources of statistics about the extent of crime which are used by sociologists:

- Official crime statistics
- Statistics from victim surveys
- Statistics from self-report surveys

It also examines the way in which different sociological perspectives have interpreted crime statistics in particular the following approaches:

- Positivism
- Social constructivism
- Realism

**Exam Hint** One of the skills required in a Level Sociology is **Knowledge and Understanding**. You can show knowledge and understanding of crime statistics by showing you understand the different methods of collecting statistics about crime and that you have knowledge of some of the key concepts and theories relating to this area.

### Official crime statistics

Each year the Home Office (the government department responsible for law and order) publishes annual crime statistics for England and Wales. These statistics come from two main sources:

**Crimes recorded by the police** Each police force keeps records of how many crimes are committed in their area and these are collated into national figures by the Home Office.

**Records of convictions and cautions of offenders** Courts provide records of offenders who have been convicted. Some offenders also receive official cautions from the police as an alternative to being taken to court; these are also included in official statistics. These statistics provide more information about offenders than the police recorded crime figures as the age, sex, occupation and other characteristics of offenders can be recorded.

### Uses of official statistics

- *Official statistics may give a general picture of trends in crime.* Politicians and the mass media often point to increases or decreases in official crime figures as a measure of the government's success in tackling crime.
- *Official statistics are one of the main records of the actions of government officials who deal with crime* for example police officers and magistrates.

Some sociologists argue that they tell us more about the activities of these officials than about those of criminals as it is the decisions of these officials which affect what gets included in official crime statistics.

- *Official statistics are also increasingly used to assess the effectiveness of law enforcement agencies.* For example, police statistics now include the 'clear up' rates for crimes (the proportion of crimes recorded in which the offender is identified) as a measure of how effective the police are in solving crimes.

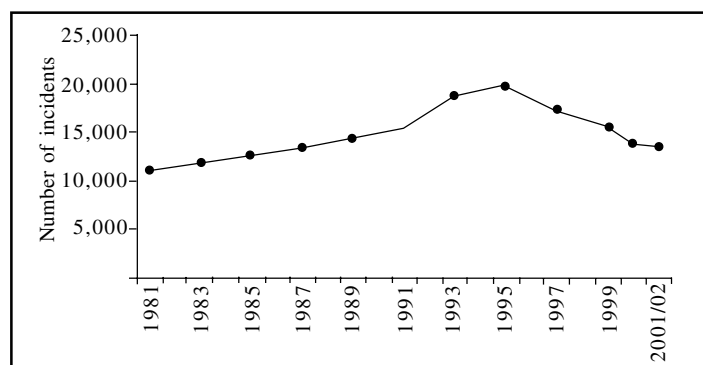
### Problems with official statistics

- *Not all crimes are represented in official statistics.* Summary offences (minor offences triable in Magistrates Courts) were not included until 1998.
- *There are also a variety of other government agencies responsible for law enforcement* such as the Inland Revenue (which deals with tax evasion), Customs and Excise (which deals with smuggling) and the Health and Safety Executive (which deals with Health and Safety legislation). Statistics from these agencies are not included in the Home Office crime statistics even though many of them deal with what might be classed as 'crimes'.
- *The police now have to follow government rules about how to count crimes.* New counting rules were introduced in 1998 which make it difficult to compare official crime statistics before and after that date.

The new counting rules mean the police have to count each victim of an offence as a crime. For example if a group of youths vandalise a row of cars in a street and six people's cars were damaged this would now be counted as six offences whereas before 1998 it would often only be recorded as one offence.

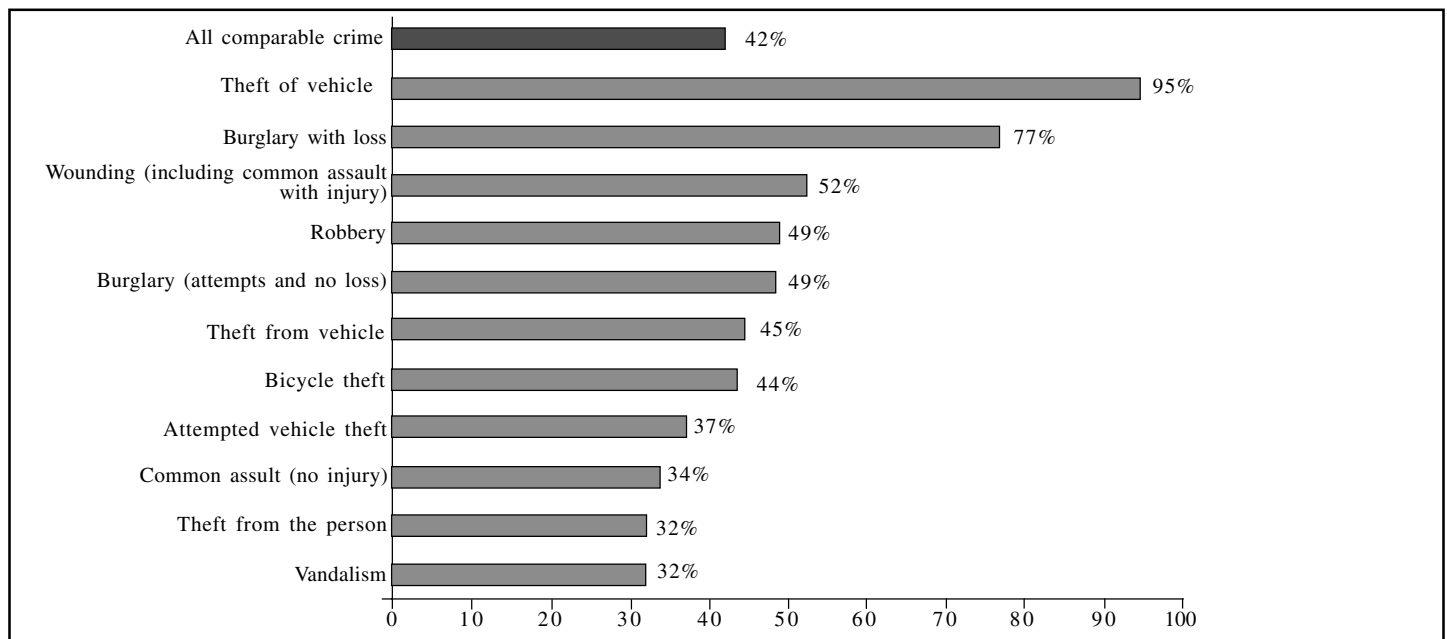
As a result of this there was sharp increase in recorded crime in 1998. This reflects a change in recording practices rather than a 'real' increase in criminal behaviour.

**Fig 1: Trends in recorded crime in England and Wales 1981-2001/02**



What difference does the change in counting rules introduced in 1998 make to the level of recorded crime after 1998/99?

- *The police rely on the public for much of their information about crime,* yet surveys suggest that only a minority of some categories of crime are ever reported to the police (in the case of vandalism probably no more than 1/3 of cases). Police statistics therefore greatly underestimate the level of many crimes as they cannot include crimes which have not been reported. Surveys of victims of crime suggest they may fail to report crimes for a number of reasons:
  - Victims may feel the offence is too trivial to report.
  - Victims may feel the police will be ineffective in dealing with the incident.
  - Some people may not be aware that they have been the victim of a crime, eg fraud.
  - In some crimes there is no victim to report the crime, eg prostitution and drug dealing.
  - Victims may be too afraid or ashamed to report the crime eg child abuse and domestic violence.

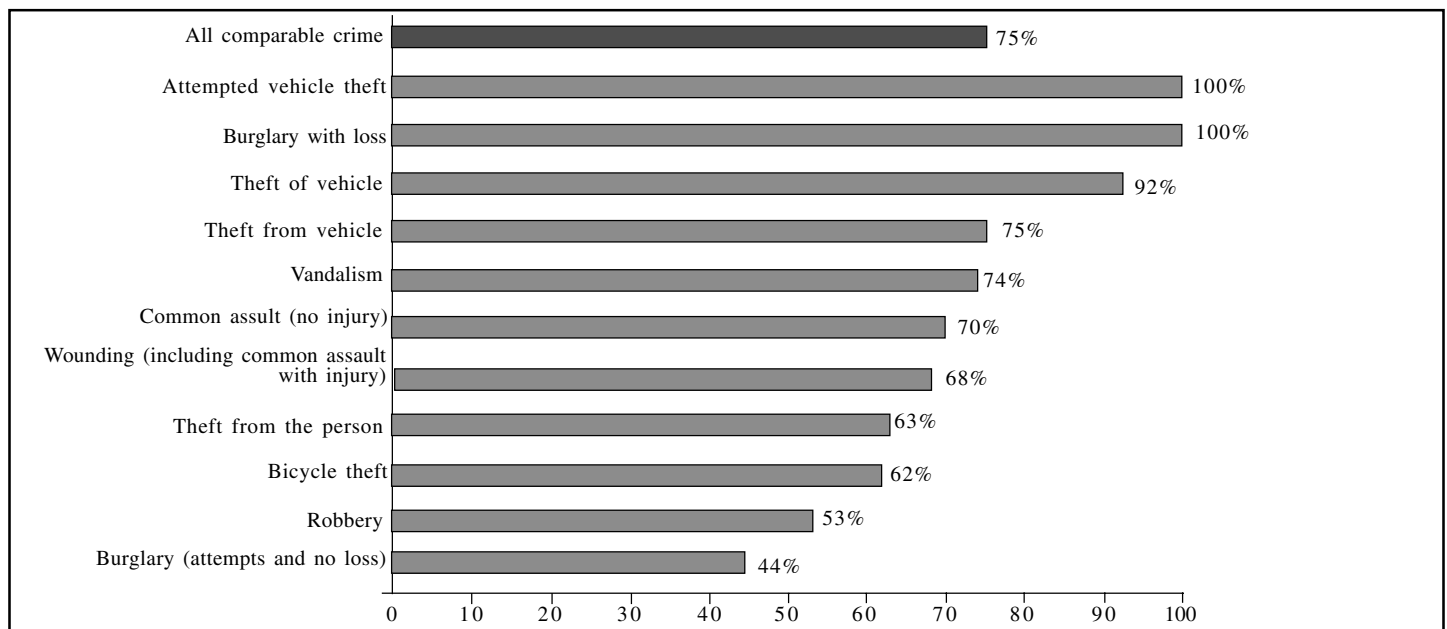
**Fig 2. Reporting rates of crimes in Britain 2004/05**

The statistics above are taken from the British Crime Survey and show the extent to which members of the British population report selected crimes to the police.

a What percentage of all crimes included in the survey were reported to the police?

b Suggest reasons why some crimes appear to be more likely to be reported than others.

- *Even when crimes are reported to the police they may not be recorded.* The police have some discretion as to whether reported crimes should be recorded. According to the 2002/03 British Crime Survey over 30% of offences reported to the police were not recorded. This may be because the police do not believe an offence has occurred or they may feel that the offence is too trivial to record. For example in 1981 Nottinghamshire was shown to be a county with one of the highest theft rates in the country but only because police in that county were much more likely to record thefts of items worth under £10 than the police in other comparable areas.

**Fig 3. Proportion of selected reported crimes estimated to have been recorded by the police in Britain 2003/04**

The statistics above are taken from the British Crime Survey and show the extent to which the police record selected crimes reported by members of the British population.

a Which crimes are most likely and least likely to be recorded by the police?

b Why might the police be more likely to record some crimes than others?

- *The level of recording of some crime reflects police priorities.* This is particularly true of crimes which rely more on police investigation rather than reporting by members of the public. Examples might include possession and selling of illegal drugs, child abuse, obscene publications and prostitution. A sudden increase in one of these types of crime may sometimes reflect a police 'crack down' or a growth in public concern putting more pressure on the police to undertake prosecutions rather than an actual increase in offences.

**Exam Hint** A skill in A Level Sociology is **Interpretation and Analysis**. To show this you need to link your material to the question. Don't just write all you know about crime statistics but make sure you link it to the question set.

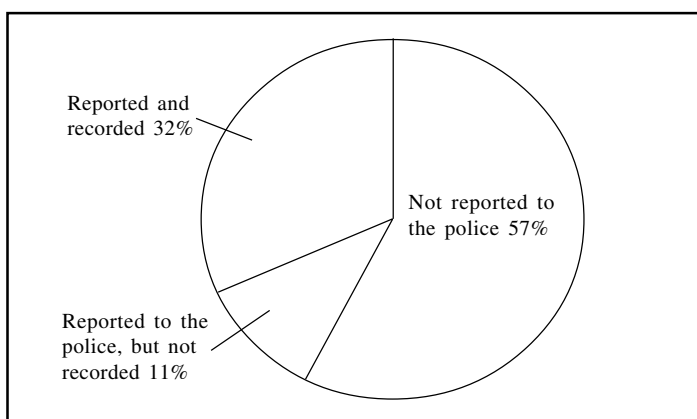
### Victim Surveys

Victim surveys are an alternative method of measuring the level of crime in society. In common with other forms of social surveys they rely on researchers selecting a sample who are representative of a larger population, either the population of a country or a particular locality. Those selected for the sample are then questioned, either using questionnaires or interviews in order to collect data. In victim surveys the main aim is to find out what proportion of those questioned have been victims of crime, usually within the last year. If the researchers know what proportion of the sample have been victims of particular categories of crime and the sample is representative they can estimate the number of crimes occurring in the whole population in a year.

### Uses of victim surveys

- ❑ *Victim surveys can provide an alternative estimate of the level of crime to official statistics.* They typically include many crimes which have either not been reported or if reported have not been recorded by the police. In the UK the British Crime Survey is now conducted each year and provides an alternative measure of crime for the government to police figures on recorded crime.
- ❑ *Victim surveys can also find out from victims whether they reported their crimes to the police* as well as why they did or did not report a crime. This may be useful in developing ways of encouraging more victims to report crimes in the future.

**Fig 4. BCS estimate of proportion of all crime reported to the police and recorded by them 2003/2004**



- ❑ *Victim surveys can find out about victims' fears of crime.* In general surveys such as the British Crime Survey suggest that most people's fear of crime is probably out of proportion to their actual risk of becoming a victim of a crime.
- ❑ *Victim surveys can also help to build up a profile of who is most likely to become a victim of crime.* Media reporting of crime often focuses on groups such as the elderly and women as victims. However, for most types of crime (with the exception of domestic violence and sexual assaults) victim surveys suggest that women are less likely to be victimised than men and young people are at the highest risk. Victimisation is also more common among poorer people and members of ethnic minorities, partly because they tend to live in urban areas with higher rates of crime.

### Problems with victim surveys

- ❑ *Victim surveys only tell us about crimes with victims.* This makes them unsuitable as a method for measuring the level of 'crimes without victims', these might include dealing in and possession of drugs and prostitution.
- ❑ *In the case of some crimes victims may not be aware that they are victims.* This is particularly true of many white collar and corporate crimes where firms may not be aware that employees are stealing from them or consumers may not be aware that they are being defrauded or sold substandard goods or services.
- ❑ *Victims surveys rely on respondents giving valid or truthful answers.* Victims may exaggerate the nature of the crimes they experienced or simply give an inaccurate account because they have a poor memory. Some victims may be reluctant to disclose certain crimes even in a confidential survey. The British Crime Survey has stopped asking victims about rape and sexual assaults because it became apparent that the estimates provided by the survey greatly underestimated the actual level of these crimes.
- ❑ *Victim surveys rely on respondents' subjective assessment of which incidents count as crimes.* In surveys victims are not subjected to the same level of questioning as those who report crimes to the police. While this may mean that many more crimes come to light, it also means that incidents may be recorded in a survey which if investigated by the police would not be defined as crimes, perhaps because they were too petty or did not fit the legal definition of a crime.
- ❑ *National victim surveys such as the British Crime Survey may only give an estimate of the average level of victimisation across the country.* This may conceal the fact that there are big variations in levels of victimisation between local areas. As a result of this some researchers have carried out local victim surveys such as the Islington Crime Survey (Crawford et al, 1990) which focused on an inner city area in North London. This showed that residents in this area had a far greater chance of being victims of crime - especially 'street crimes' such as mugging, assault, car theft and burglary - than was indicated by national statistics from the BCS.

### The British Crime Survey

The BCS or British Crime Survey is a large scale victim survey which has been carried out by the Home Office since 1981. In its early years the BCS was only carried out every other year and data was collected from questionnaires.

Since 2001 the survey has been carried out every year, this makes the monitoring of trends over time easier. The survey is also now carried out using interviews which are likely to produce more valid responses from those taking part as well as a better response rate.

The British Crime Survey only covers a limited range of offences, however, statistics for these offences can be compared with comparable offences for recorded crime. For example the 2003/04 BCS suggests that only 32% of the crimes covered by the survey are recorded by police, while a further 11% of crimes are reported but not recorded by the police. The other 57% are crimes which are neither reported nor recorded, showing how the BCS is able to uncover much of the 'dark figure of crime', ie crime which is not officially recorded.

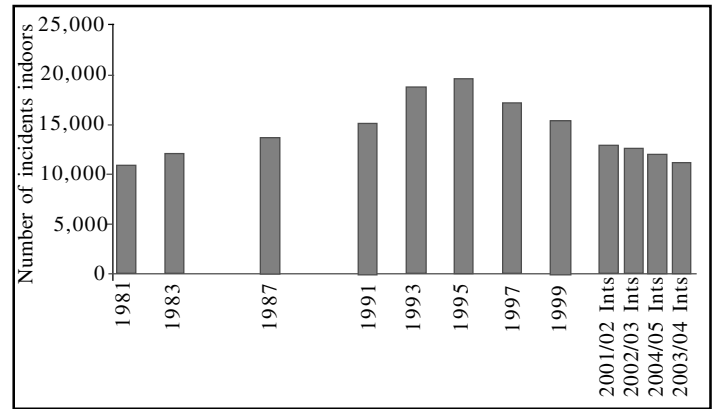


**Comparing the BCS and recorded crime**

In general the BCS suggests that trends in crime in official statistics reflect trends in society. Both BCS figures and recorded crime figures show an increase in crime in the 1980s, rising to a peak in the mid-1990s. The BCS suggests that crime has fallen steadily since about 1995. The recorded crime figures are more difficult to interpret because of the change in counting rules in 1998. This resulted in a larger number of crimes being recorded, although the underlying trend in crime was probably downwards.

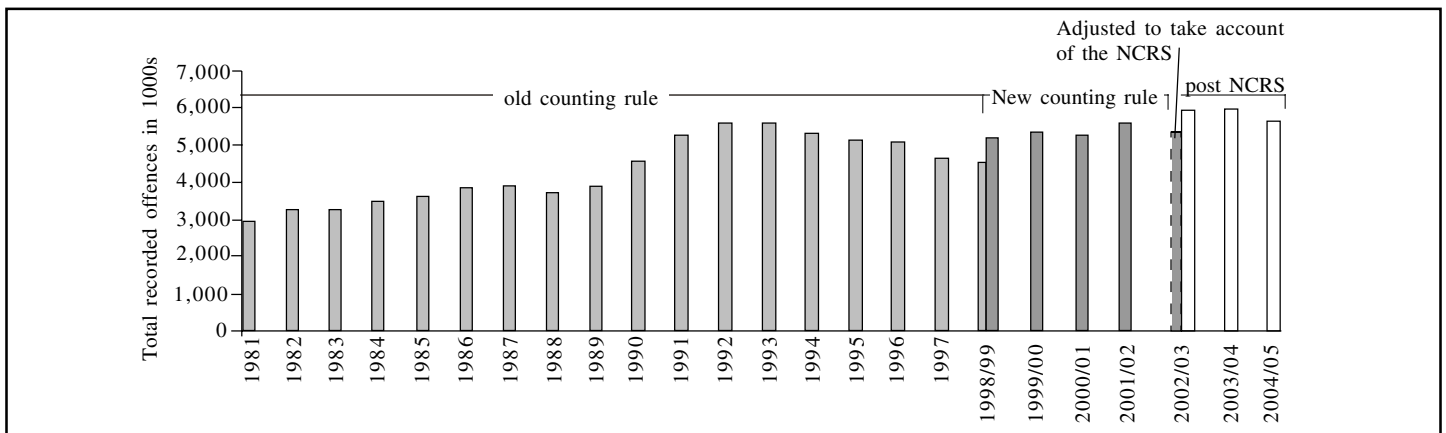
The BCS and recorded crime statistics also paint a different picture for violent crime. While recorded crime has fallen for most categories of crime between 2003/04 and 2004/05 violent crime shows an increase. The BCS by contrast suggests that violent crime fell by 11% in the same period. The difference between the two sources is most likely due to changes in reporting and recording. Public concerns about violent crime may mean that more offences are being reported. Similarly the police may be recording more minor incidents of violence which previously may have gone unrecorded. As a result of this there is an increase in recorded violent crime even though the BCS suggest violent crime is declining along with other categories of crime (Fig 5, Fig 6).

**Fig 5. Trends in all BCS crime, 1981 to 2004/05**



Compare the two sets of crime statistics in Figures 5 and 6. How do the estimates of the British Crime surveys provide a different picture of the extent of crime from the figures for recorded crime?

**Fig 6. Trends in recorded crime, 1981 to 2004/05**



**Evaluation of BCS**

The BCS suffers from many of the disadvantages of victim surveys generally (see above). Its main shortcoming is that it is a household survey and therefore only covers crimes where individuals are victims, it cannot therefore cover crimes against businesses or organisations or crimes without victims. The BCS also only covers a selection of crimes with victims and excludes categories of crime such as sexual offences. Nevertheless, many sociologists would see it as a much more reliable indicator of levels of crime than official statistics since it includes many of the unrecorded crimes which are omitted from official statistics.

**Exam Hint** Try to use evidence from **sociological studies** to show skills of interpretation and analysis. For example, if you are writing about victim surveys you could use some of the data from the British Crime Surveys to illustrate how victim surveys can be useful in studying patterns of crime.

**Self-Report Surveys**

Self-report surveys are another form of survey which can be used to measure the incidence of crime in society. They involve asking respondents to report which crimes they have committed themselves, either in the last 12 months or during their lifetime. Self-report surveys have been most frequently used in studying the extent of offending amongst young people. For example Ann Campbell (1981) used a self-report survey to measure the extent of offending among teenage boys and girls. While official statistics show that males are around

five times more likely to be convicted of an offence than males, in Campbell's survey males only admitted to 1.2 times more offences than females. Similarly a study by Graham and Bowling (1995) of young people's offending using a self-report survey found that white and black respondents both had similar rates of offending (at 44% and 43% respectively) while the rates for Asians were Indians 30%, Pakistanis 28% and Bangladeshis (13%). This contrasts with statistics which show that young blacks are far more likely to be stopped and searched, arrested and convicted than whites (Home Office 2002).

**Uses of self-report surveys**

- ❑ Self-report studies typically reveal that far more of the population are involved in crime than those convicted in courts (around 3% of the population). They therefore show that far from being a deviant and abnormal minority in the population, lawbreakers constitute a majority and can be found in every social class, age group, gender and ethnic group.
- ❑ Self-report studies can be used to call into questions traditional ideas of the profile of the 'typical law breaker'. Some sociological theories of crime have seen the typical offender as young, working class and male with members of some minority ethnic groups such as African-Caribbeans being over-represented. Self-report surveys can be used to call this into question and show that offenders convicted by the courts may not be typical of all those who break the law in society. Some attempts have been made to check on the accuracy and truthfulness of self-report surveys (Gold 1966), these suggest that about 80% of those interviewed in such surveys are telling the truth.

**Problems with self-report surveys**

- ❑ *Self-report surveys, like victim surveys, rely on the truthfulness and accuracy of respondents.* Respondents may wish to conceal their offences or in some cases may exaggerate them to show off. In the 1980s Guy Cumberbatch presented children with a list of fictional titles of violent videos such as 'I vomit on your cannibal apocalypse' and asked them to tell him which of the 'video nasties' they had watched. 68% of the children claimed to have watched at least one of the non-existent videos (reported in Harris 1984).
- ❑ *Self-report surveys often include large numbers of relatively trivial offences,* for example Campbell's study cited above included 'I have ridden a bicycle without lights after dark' as one of the offences in her self-report survey. As a result large numbers of respondents are classified as offenders and no distinction is made about the seriousness of their offences. When only more serious offences were considered in Campbells' study the ratio of male to female offenders was much closer to that in official statistics.

**Exam Hint** Remember that Evaluation is one of the skills you must show in A Level Sociology. In discussing crime statistics you can show evaluation skills by discussing the strengths and weaknesses of different methods of collecting statistics about crime where this is relevant to the question.

**Perspectives on Crime Statistics**

**Exam Hint** Understanding **sociological theory** can help to strengthen your evaluation skills. Often the interpretation of evidence offered by one theory can be challenged by looking at the arguments of an alternative theory. For example social constructionists argue that there is no such thing as the real level of crime as all measures of crime are socially constructed. This is challenged by the realist approach which argues that underlying official statistics there are real changes in patterns of crime which can be understood by sociologists.

**Positivism**

Positivist theories in sociology see social sciences (eg sociology, psychology and economics) as being similar to natural sciences (eg biology, chemistry and physics). Like natural scientists they seek to understand how the world works using scientific methods of investigation. In studying crime and deviance positivists seek to establish causes of crime by exploring whether particular factors are linked to criminality. Some positivist criminologists have linked particular biological, genetic or psychological factors to a predisposition to criminality.

In general sociologists reject the idea that people are born criminals because of their genetic make-up, however, some positivist sociologists have argued that certain social characteristics correlate with a higher chance of becoming a criminal, for example growing up in poverty, coming from a broken home or under-achieving in education. Such claims rest on patterns in official crime statistics which show that some social groups are much more likely to be convicted of criminal offences than others. For example, those convicted of many crimes come disproportionately from poor working class backgrounds.

This has led some sociologists to develop theories which explain why poorer or socially disadvantaged groups in society might be more likely to turn to crime. For example, Robert Merton (1968) argued such groups were more likely to suffer 'anomie' or confusion about appropriate social behaviour because they found it harder to achieve the materialistic success goals of American society. Similarly Albert Cohen (1955) argued that lower working class boys were much more likely to suffer 'status frustration' because of educational failure and dead end jobs and thus sought an alternative source of status by committing acts of delinquency in a gang.

All these theories are based on an acceptance of the picture of crime painted by official statistics which suggests that criminals are mainly young working class and male. However, other sources of data about crime can be used to question this. Self-report surveys for example show that people in all sections of society commit crime so it may be mistaken to see poverty or educational failure as causes of crime. There is also a growing body of research on 'white collar crime' or crimes committed by people of high social status (Croall, 2001; Hughes and Langan, 2001). This suggests that crime occurs at the highest levels in society, for example crimes by corporations which harm consumers, workers and the environment. However, because these crimes are taken less seriously by law enforcement agencies and are harder to investigate and prosecute than working class crimes such as burglary, robbery or car theft they appear much less frequently in official crime statistics.

**Social constructionism**

Many sociologists who are critical of positivism argue that crime statistics are socially constructed. They result from a series of decisions by human beings, for example decisions by members of the public over whether to report crimes, decisions by police officers whether to prosecute suspects and decisions about courts about whether to convict defendants. Official statistics therefore reflect the outcome of the interaction of many individuals producing decisions about what should be recorded as crime. While these statistics may tell us a lot about those who collect such statistics and may reflect biases in law enforcement agencies, critics of positivism argue that they tell us little about the activities of those who break the law.

Some social constructionists go further and argue that the concept of crime itself is a social construct. By this they mean that crime is not something that can be defined and measured in a scientific way.

While there is a high level of agreement between physicists over how concepts such as temperature or volume can be measured, concepts used in the social world such as crime and deviance cannot be measured with the same accuracy, as something is only a crime when people agree it is a crime and record it as such.

This argument was the basis for labelling theory, developed by writers such as Howard Becker (1963). Labelling theorists reject the scientific study of crime advocated by positivists. They argue that to understand crime we need to understand the way in which individuals attach meanings to one another's behaviour in order to construct a social reality which works for them. Police officers for example, interpret the behaviour of suspects using their past experiences and common sense knowledge in order to determine who are criminals and who are law abiding.

According to labelling theorist such as Aaron Cicourel (1976) this means that the way crime is defined often reflects the biases and stereotypes of those applying the law. He found that working class delinquents were far more likely to be arrested, charged and convicted than those from middle class backgrounds even though it often appeared their behaviour was quite similar. If a meteorologist (a scientist who studies weather) collects statistics which show that the average temperature in Egypt is higher than in Norway this can be argued to reflect a real difference in climate between the two countries. However, if official statistics show more crime committed by working class than middle class people, is this a real difference in criminal behaviour or simply a the result of the way in which the statistics are constructed?

### Realism

Some sociologists are critical of both positivism and social constructionism. Realist sociologists agree that there are problems with relying too much on official statistics but suggest this does not mean that sociologists should give up any attempt to measure trends and patterns in crime. Realists argue that social constructionists have been too ready to abandon the idea of trying to study crime in a social scientific way. They argue that in society, as in the natural world, there are underlying structures and mechanisms which need to be uncovered by scientific investigation. In sociology, it is difficult to investigate things using controlled experiments, so it is not always easy to identify the causes of phenomena such as crime. However, there are other ways we can detect underlying structures and mechanisms.

Realist sociologists such as John Lea and Jock Young (1993) argue that it is possible to investigate the reality of crime, although this is not always apparent from official statistics. They argue that the use of statistical methods such as victim surveys enable us measure underlying patterns and trends in crime. Social constructionists argue that increases in crime are often simply the result of increasing public concern about crime, in many cases whipped up by sensational media reporting into 'moral panics' - situations where the public and authorities over-react to deviant behaviour in a way which out of all proportion to the real threat posed. While realists such as Lea and Young accept that moral panics do occur, they argue that there was a real increase in crime in the UK in the 1980s and early 1990s. They link this to increases in unemployment and poverty and the marginalisation of poorer groups in society including members of some ethnic minorities. This has led to a sense of relative deprivation in these groups whereby they feel socially excluded from the opportunity to better themselves of participate in the rise in living standards being enjoyed by the majority. In this situation crime offers a solution.

For realists crime is not simply a social construction but a real social phenomenon which blights the lives of whole communities (as they demonstrate with data from local crime surveys). Sociologists must therefore be able to measure trends in crime and explain why it is increasing as well as offering some practical measures for reducing crime in society.

**Exam Hint** Material on crime and deviance should be used synoptically, ie to show the examiner that you can see links between the different areas of sociology you have studied in your course. For example, there are strong links between crime statistics and the study of sociological methods. Crime statistics can be used to illustrate the problems of using official statistics, while victim surveys and self-report surveys illustrate some of the advantages and disadvantages of the survey method. You can also use material on crime statistics to illustrate theoretical debates over how far sociologists should try to be scientific, using the approaches of positivism, social constructionism and realism.

**Acknowledgements:** This Sociology Factsheet was researched and written by Paul Taylor.

Curriculum Press, Bank House, 105 King Street, Wellington, TF1 1NU. Sociology Factsheets may be copied free of charge by teaching staff or students, provided that their school is a registered subscriber. No part of these Factsheets may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any other form or by any other means, without the prior permission of the publisher. ISSN 1351-5136