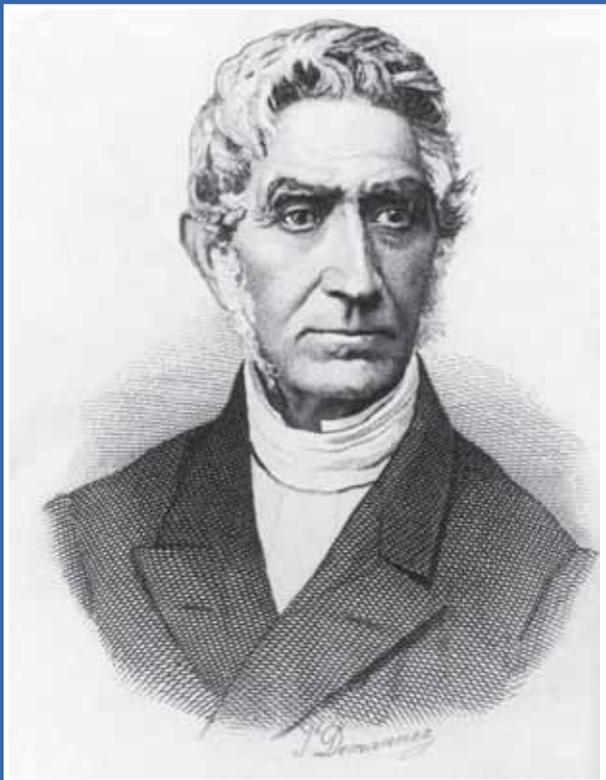


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3

Crime data and crime trends



CHAPTER SUMMARY

In this chapter we focus upon the means by which we measure levels and trends in crime. We look at:

- the main techniques used and their strengths and weaknesses;
- official statistics and victimization surveys – our two main means of assessing crime levels – and compare their merits;
- the extent to which we can rely upon what we are told about crime, and how we should judge it;
- the major sources of data about crime, and assess their pros and cons;
- recent trends in crime;
- different data sources and what they tell us;
- why this is an area which continues to cause controversy;
- how the criminologist deals with the problem of different data sources appearing to indicate different trends;
- the techniques that can be used for assessing the competing claims of different approaches to measuring crime.

Introduction

David Garland (1994) suggests that for much of its history criminology was dominated by two differing projects: the ‘governmental’ and the ‘Lombrosian’ (a reference to Cesare Lombroso – see Chapter 5). The first of these focused primarily on trends in crime and the activities of criminal justice agencies, and its core concern is with the administration of justice. By contrast, the Lombrosian project focused on the causes of crime or, more particularly, in attempting to distinguish the *criminal* from the *non-criminal*. In recent decades, however, these projects have been largely overtaken by a series of broader concerns coalescing around ideas of risk and a calculative, managerialist mentality – concerned with measuring outcomes and managing performance – all of which is set in the context of a much more highly politicised understanding of crime and its control.

Nevertheless, our focus in this chapter is with some of what might be portrayed as the central concerns of the ‘governmental’ project. The core questions for us are ‘how much crime is there?’ and ‘how do we know?’ Now, before proceeding, several words of caution are necessary (and will be repeated regularly). First, and to repeat a message from the very beginning of this book, there is no simple thing ‘out there’ called *crime*. Though there are *criminal offences*, as defined by the criminal law, we must recognise that these things we call crimes are also

socially constructed. That is to say, whether particular actions or activities come to be labelled ‘criminal’ depends upon:

- whether anyone knows about them;
- if they know about them, whether they consider them worth doing anything about (such as reporting to the police); and,
- if they do so, whether the police or anyone else acts upon, or is able to act upon, what they decide to report.

The fact that this is so, of course, makes the act of attempting to ‘measure’ something like crime fraught with difficulties. In recent years, it is fair to say that we have become much more adept at this task. New forms of measurement have appeared and the techniques used have been progressively refined. Nevertheless, as we will see, this remains a highly problematic and often controversial task and our instruments necessarily remain rather blunt in some important respects.

Measuring crime

Broadly speaking there are two main methods used for measuring and tracking trends in crime – both of which we will consider in greater detail later on. One is taken from data collected routinely by law enforcement agencies and concerns crimes reported by the

public or otherwise coming to the attention of the authorities. In the United States these are referred to as the Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) and are collected and collated by the FBI. In England and Wales such data are collected by the police and are generally referred to as *recorded crime statistics*. Similar methods of tracking crime via police records are used in most jurisdictions. As we will discuss in greater detail below such data have a number of quite significant shortcomings, not least that there is much crime that never makes it into official records – the so-called ‘dark figure’ of crime. For much of their history the assumption was that official statistics provided a reasonably sound indication of crime trends. By contrast criminologists have become increasingly critical of such data and some took the view that officially produced statistics had little real value beyond providing an indication of the work undertaken by the main criminal justice agencies. As public and political concern grew in the 1960s and 1970s, so the search for alternative means of estimating crime trends grew.

This resulted in the emergence of the second main approach to crime measurement, which uses survey methods to elicit information from a representative sample of the population about their experiences of crime – primarily as victims, wherever this is the case – usually over the previous 12 months. The US National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) was established in 1972 and has been undertaken twice a year since then. In the UK, a similar approach underpins the British Crime Survey (BCS). This was first undertaken in 1981 and has run intermittently since then – though it, too, is now undertaken annually. For a number of reasons it is now generally assumed by most commentators that victimization surveys are a more accurate measure of crime levels and trends than data collected by law enforcement agencies (Farrington and Langan, 2004). As a consequence such surveys are becoming increasingly common in other jurisdictions and, indeed, there are now regular, comparative surveys such as the International Crime Victims Survey (Nieuwebeerta, 2002).

Official statistics

The first national crime statistics were published in France in 1827. Of central importance in the history of official statistics is a Belgian scientist, Adolphe Quetelet, whose career began as an astronomer. He was sent to Paris by the Belgian government to study ‘celestial mechanics’ (Vold *et al.*, 2002) but



Adolphe Quetelet (1796–1874), astronomer and statistician. One of the first scholars to take a serious interest in criminal statistics, Quetelet became a leading figure in criminology and the social sciences.

quickly became interested in statistics relating to the social world, including crime as a result of the publication of the first French criminal statistics in 1828. Quetelet recognised many of the difficulties involved in measuring ‘crime’, not least the problem of estimating the extent of the activities that are not recorded (‘unknown crimes’) using such statistical methods. The size of this ‘dark figure’ depends on many factors, including the:

activity of justice in reaching the guilty, on the care which these latter will take in hiding themselves, and on the repugnance which wronged individuals will feel in complaining, or on the ignorance in which perhaps they will be concerning the wrong which has been done them. (quoted in Coleman and Moynihan, 1996: 5)

Similar approaches to collecting crime statistics emerged in Britain later in the nineteenth century, initially through the work of statisticians such as Rawson and Fletcher, then through the work of Henry Mayhew and other campaigning investigators. *Judicial Statistics* – which were essentially sentencing statistics – first emerged in 1856. The

first *Criminal Statistics*, drawn from data collected by the police and the courts, were published in 1876.

England and Wales: Criminal Statistics

Published annually as *Criminal Statistics, England and Wales*, this statistical series is compiled from data returned to government by the police and the courts. Although they are subject to changes from time to time – as we will see in greater detail below – they have been produced in a fairly standard format for most of their history. In practice, there are a number of publications published annually (or more frequently) which constitute the ‘official statistics’ on crime in England and Wales (there are equivalent publications for Scotland and Northern Ireland). The main publications historically have been:

- *Criminal Statistics, England and Wales*;
- *Sentencing Statistics*;
- *Prison and Probation Statistics*.

Until the mid- to late-nineteenth century sentencing statistics were one of the main sources of information about crime. They remain an important data-set in their own right, and also provide the raw data for the Offenders Index (see below) and the Police National Computer (PNC) database of criminal records, both of which provide the bulk of information about criminal careers and reconviction rates. In addition considerable information was collected by both the Prison and Probation Services and published separately as *Prison Statistics* and *Probation Statistics* – covering numbers of people in prison or subject to probation, sentence lengths and so on. With the amalgamation of Prison and Probation (see Chapter 27) the two datasets have also been amalgamated and now appear as *Offender Management Caseload Statistics*.

The annually-published criminal statistics historically came as a main volume and a number of supplementary volumes. Increasingly, such data can be accessed online and provide a wealth of information about crime and the criminal justice system. Since 2005 such publications have been superseded by the annual overview *Crime in England and Wales*, which uses both police-recorded crime data and BCS data to provide a general overview of trends. At the time of writing the most recently published are for 2005/06 and are available at: <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/crimeew0506.html>.

Anyone looking at levels and trends in crime prior to 2005 using official statistics will need to

use the older *Criminal Statistics* format. Here, the main volume, for example, contained information on court proceedings, offenders cautioned or found guilty, use of police bail and court remand, and (more recently) offences brought to justice. For the bulk of the period the main report also contained information on notifiable offences recorded by the police. Not all offences are notifiable and some lesser (‘summary’) offences are excluded. The subsidiary volumes contain more detailed information on proceedings in magistrates’ courts, the Crown Court, and by police force area. More recently, government has produced a series of separate publications (generally all published as *Statistical Bulletins*) which provide information about crimes recorded by the police.

United States: Uniform Crime Reports

Collecting systematic data on crime took rather longer to get off the ground in the US than in parts of Europe. Congress initially tasked the Attorney General with reporting crime statistics in 1870. However, the anticipated annual statistics didn’t appear and it wasn’t until around 1920, as a result of concerns among a number of police chiefs about stories about crime in the press, that a new system emerged. This is what became known as the *Uniform Crime Reports* (UCR) that still forms the basis of crime reporting in America. Under the UCR system, police departments provide information on a limited number of crimes, and these are collated by the FBI. The system is not compulsory and not all police departments – there are almost 20,000 in the US – return data.

The UCR has two parts: Part I covers what are called ‘Index offences’ and Part II cover non-Index Offences. Part I, generally used as the basis for assessing annual crime rates, comprises eight offences only:

- criminal homicide;
- forcible rape;
- robbery;
- aggravated assault;
- burglary;
- larceny-theft;
- motor vehicle theft;
- arson.

Part II crimes include matters such as other forms of violence (assault) and theft, sex offences, drunkenness, and fraud and only cover those crimes that

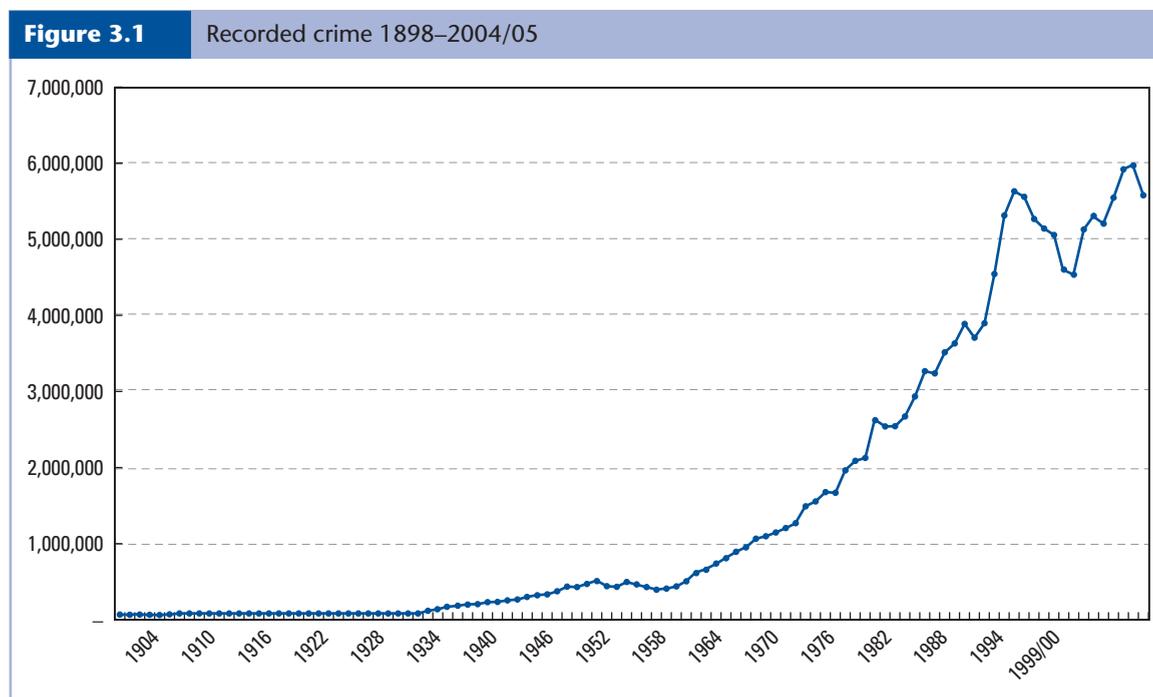
result in an arrest (which distinguishes them from Part I offences). These generally less serious offences are therefore very significantly underestimated. One of the potential advantages of the UCR system, when compared say with British criminal statistics, is that the Part I offences focus on a clearly identifiable set of crimes that the public would almost certainly agree to be those crimes about which they are concerned (though perhaps not an exhaustive list). By contrast, current criminal statistics in England and Wales contain a very broad range of offences and overall rises and falls in the 'crime rate' reported to the public will not necessarily reflect those things that concern the public most.

On the other hand the UCR system cannot tell us much about the 'overall crime rate' in the United States at all. First, as we have seen it only covers a very limited range of crimes. Second, this limited list is overwhelmingly focused on 'street crime' or conventional forms of crime, and as we have seen doesn't include white-collar crimes and many other fairly serious crimes. Third, because it is not compulsory, it doesn't cover the whole of the country. Finally, it is likely that there remains some variation between police departments in the way in which they record particular crime, despite the existence of guidance about recording procedures. This further limits the reliability of the data.

Assessing official statistics

The most important lesson to be learned in relation to any data-set is that it inevitably has limitations. No data source can tell us with complete accuracy what is happening in relation to crime. Indeed, as Maguire (2007: 254) notes, the fact that there is now a new annual publication on crime which is based on multiple data sources is itself a 'move which amounts to a highly visible acknowledgement of the limitations of police data'. As we will see, each of the major series has its own strengths and weaknesses and awareness of these, together with an ability to recognise where they apply, will enable us to use each source most productively. In what follows we will assess police-recorded crime statistics – official data collected by the police, compiled by government, and published in quarterly statistical bulletins and in the annual overview of crime trends (alongside BCS and other data).

We can begin our assessment by looking at official crime statistics as a 'time series'. As we have already noted, such figures have been collected every year for a century and a half. In principle, therefore, they represent an extraordinary resource for understanding historical trends – something we looked at in the previous chapter. The trend in overall crime over the past century is illustrated in Figure 3.1.



Source: *Criminal Statistics, England and Wales* (various).

There are a number of points to note here. First, compared with levels of recorded crime in the twenty-first century, levels in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were apparently extraordinarily low. Second, they remained so until the late 1950s whereupon crime begins to rise quite quickly. Third, crime rises pretty much every year from the mid-1950s until the early 1990s, at which point there is a brief, but significant decline before crime once again begins to rise. How accurate is this picture? In short, elements of it can probably be taken as a reasonable indicator of what actually happened. Thus, there is relatively little disagreement with the suggestion that crime in England and Wales, and in most other jurisdictions, rose markedly in the second half of the twentieth century – though it is possible that official statistics exaggerate the degree of increase. On the other hand, there is historical data which suggest that Victorian Britain, whilst relatively orderly compared with the first half of the nineteenth century (see Chapter 2), was probably not *more* orderly than Britain in the early decades of the twentieth century (Dunning *et al.*, 1987).

Approximately 100 different notifiable offences are recorded in the official statistics. These are then grouped into nine main categories of crime:

- Theft and handling stolen goods – includes theft of and from motor vehicles and accounts for a large number of offences and, indeed, no doubt for a sizeable element in the growth in crime since the 1960s.
- Burglary – this is now generally subdivided into ‘domestic burglary’ (i.e. of a household) and ‘other burglary’.
- Criminal damage – separate statistics are available for criminal damage to a dwelling, to a building other than a dwelling, and to a vehicle.
- Violence against the person – this is a broad category that ranges from murder, through affray to reckless driving. The bulk of offences recorded in this category come from the more minor end of the spectrum.
- Sexual offences – another broad category covering rape, bigamy, and incest. The majority of recorded offences in this category are indecent assault.
- Robbery – a theft in which force or the threat of force is used. Here again, a distinction can be drawn between robbery of personal property and business property.
- Fraud and forgery.

- Drug offences.
- Other offences.

Table 3.1 and Figure 3.2 provide a graphic illustration of the nature of each of these offences as recorded in the most recent *Criminal Statistics*. Table 3.1 shows the total number of offences falling into each category.

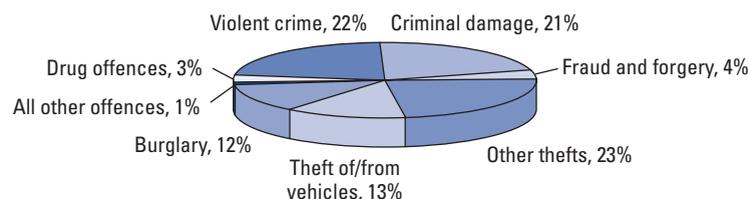
Figure 3.2 illustrates the relative proportions of the different notifiable offences as part of overall recorded crime. The first point to note, very clearly, is that the two main property offences, theft and damage, account for over half of all recorded crime. About one fifth of all recorded crime falls into the category of violence against the person. These three categories account for about three in every five crimes recorded by the police.

There are a couple of important points we might note in relation to the breakdown in the chart above. The first is to reiterate that although violent crime accounts for over a fifth of the total – it is *only* a fifth. So, when we are using general terms like ‘crime’ it is important to remember that many of the offences recorded are relatively minor, and most do not involve violence. Second, although this pattern is reasonably stable, the breakdown of crime has been changing over time. In particular there has been a substantial rise in two categories of offence: violent crime and criminal damage. Figures for

Table 3.1 Number of crimes recorded by the police in 2005/06

Offence group	No. (thousands)
Violence against the person	1,059.9
Sexual offences	62.1
Robbery	98.2
Domestic burglary	300.6
Other burglary	344.6
Thefts of and from vehicles	721.5
Other thefts and handling	1,297.8
Fraud and forgery	233.0
Criminal damage	1,184.7
Drug offences	178.5
Other offences	75.7
Total recorded crime	5,556.5

Source: Walker *et al.* (2006).

Figure 3.2 Police-recorded crime 2005/06

Source: Walker *et al.* (2006).

indictable offences recorded by the police in 1975, for example, show that violent crime accounted for approximately five per cent of offences and criminal damage for less than four per cent (HOSB 1/79). As Maguire (2007) notes, the number of criminal damage offences recorded is now over 230 times higher than it was in the 1950s. The apparent proportionate growth in violent crime as indicated by these statistics is actually largely a product of the introduction of the National Crime Recording Standard in 2002 (see below).

When using such statistics, therefore, we must be careful as to how they are utilised. Potentially, such changes may tell us something important about the changing nature of crime over the past half century. Equally, they may also alert us to the possibility that the recording of crimes has changed substantially in the same period. How do we unravel this? In part, we can do so by using other sources of data as a point of comparison. We will return to this later in the chapter. Before we move on, however, we must look in greater detail at the *construction* of official statistics in order to help us assess how useful they are, and what their limitations might be. We can start by considering what influences recorded crime statistics contain. Perhaps the most obvious one concerns the criminal law. The categories we have been discussing so far – burglary, criminal damage, violence against the person, theft of and from vehicles and so on – are all derived from criminal law and form the basis for the definition and identification of the offences that are recorded by the police.

The impact of legislation

Legislation can affect crime in a number of very important ways:

- New legislation creates new offences (crimes that previously did not exist). Successive Race

Relations Acts (1965, 1976) have created new offences such as racial discrimination and racial harassment. The Crime and Disorder Act 1998 created a range of new racially- and religiously-aggravated offences. The Health Act 2006 provided the basis for the introduction of a ban on smoking in enclosed public spaces from 1 July 2007 in England and Wales. As new legislation creates new offences it also allows for additional crimes to be recorded in the official statistics.

- Legislation may also be repealed and therefore matters that once would have been seen as crimes will no longer be considered criminal and such offences will no longer appear in the official statistics. Thus, the Sexual Offences Act 1967 made legal homosexual acts in private between consenting adults aged 21 or over. Prior to this, homosexuality had been a criminal offence, and indirectly led to the commission of other crimes such as blackmail. Other changes can affect the way the law is policed. Most obviously, the significant discretion available to the police means that certain laws may be enforced more or less vigorously at different times. There may also be policy decisions which affect enforcement. In recent years the changing categorisation of cannabis has led to some controversy over policing of local drugs markets (see Chapter 21) with critics arguing that the sale of cannabis had effectively been decriminalised in certain areas.

In thinking about the construction of official statistics, therefore, it is always important to bear in mind what impact legislative change may have, and also whether it is possible that changes in policing and/or prosecution policies and practices might lie behind any of the changes identified. Beyond these issues lie a number of other



The ban on smoking in enclosed public spaces means the potential for more crimes to be committed and recorded. This illustration shows part of the government's campaign to publicize the ban ahead of its implementation on 1 July 2007.

important factors influencing what is found in police-recorded crime statistics – most particularly, whether or not ‘crimes’ are reported to the police and, if so, whether they are then recorded.

Understanding ‘attrition’

There are a number of stages in the process by which particular acts come to be defined as ‘crimes’. Crimes are not simply ‘there’, waiting to be included in a statistical summary. First of all, they must be ‘known’. Now, this may sound odd, but there are a number of ways in which *crimes* might not be known:

- *The victim may simply be unaware of the offence.* If you had been defrauded of, say, a relatively small sum of money, would you always know about it? How carefully do you read bank statements? Or, if a small sum of money was stolen from your wallet or purse, would you always know? These days we are told to be careful about protecting our personal details as

there is increasing concern about identity theft. When such offences are committed, however, it may be some time, if ever, before the person whose personal details are being used becomes aware of what is happening. Thus, there are circumstances when although a crime may have been committed, you are unaware of it and therefore you cannot tell anyone such as the police about it, and it can therefore never make its way into official records.

- *There may be no victim.* What proportion of cases in which people buy drugs, for example, come to the attention of the police? If a transaction is taking place, to which both people consent, then they will not draw it to the attention of the police. It is likely, therefore, that only a tiny minority of such offences will ever be known by the police – because of proactive operations – and therefore only a tiny minority will potentially be recorded.

The next point at which ‘cases’ drop out of the system is when crimes are *reported* to the police. Of all

those cases in which a victim is aware that an offence has taken place, only a proportion will be reported to the police. Rates of reporting vary markedly by offence with some much more likely to be reported to the police than others. Before we look at the figures we need to raise one question. How do we estimate what proportion of offences are reported to the police? The answer is that we use the BCS as a comparison. The BCS asks respondents about crimes they have experienced in the previous 12 months, and also asks them whether they reported it/them to the police and, if not, why not. Then, using crimes which are covered by both sets of data it is possible to produce estimates of rates of reporting. The 2005/06 BCS estimated that 42 per cent of incidents overall were reported to the police. The reporting rate varied dramatically across offence types (see Figure 3.3).

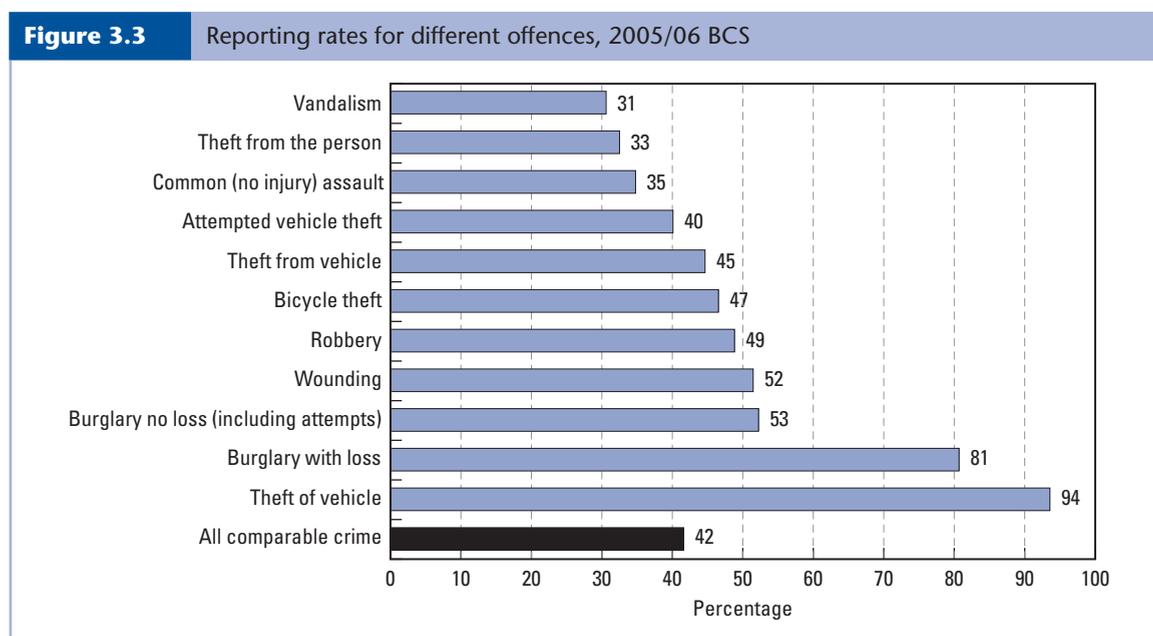
As Figure 3.3 illustrates, offences such as the theft of a motor vehicle are very likely to be reported. This shouldn't surprise us as by law cars have to be insured before they can be used on the road. By and large insurance claims cannot be made successfully without notifying the police that a crime has taken place. The same is true for household insurance claims – say where a burglary has been committed. However, unlike car insurance there is nothing compulsory about household insurance. Poorer people are less likely to have household insurance (Howarth *et al.*, 1998). As we

will see later (see Chapter 20), as it is those living in the poorest communities who are most likely to experience property crime, one can immediately see how crime has a considerable and differential impact according to wealth.

Why then do people decide not to report matters to the police? There are many reasons, including:

- The victim considers it too trivial.
- The victim feels the police will not be able to do anything about it.
- The victim feels the police will not be willing to do anything about it:
 - they may feel the police will not be interested;
 - they may feel the police won't believe them;
 - they may feel the police are simply too busy.
- The matter is too embarrassing, or is compromising in some other way.
- The victim is too scared to report it.
- The victim would prefer to deal with the matter in another way.

The BCS has for some time found that the feeling that the matter is too trivial is the most commonly cited reason for non-reporting, or that the victim felt that the police could do little about the offence. In relation to violent crime, however, the most common reason given for non-reporting was



Source: Walker *et al.* (2006).



Feminist campaigns to bring greater recognition to violence against women have led to increased reporting of offences such as rape and domestic violence. This picture is of a public protest held in Dublin, Ireland in June 2006.

that victims considered the issue to be a private matter and wished to deal with it themselves, reflecting, it is argued, the personal nature of the offences (Walker *et al.*, 2006).

A further hugely important way in which reporting practices influence levels of crime recorded in official statistics can be seen when social attitudes towards particular offences change. The most obvious example here concerns rape, sexual assault and other domestic violence against women. For many years reporting levels were extremely low – many women being convinced that their experiences would not be treated seriously, that they would be blamed for what had happened to them, or that they would simply not be treated with respect. As a result of much campaigning work over many years, attitudes toward violence against women have changed somewhat, and there have been some substantial changes in police practices in this area (see Chapter 32). One consequence has been significant increases in both reporting (and recording) rates and, therefore, within official statistics, the impression that such offences have been rapidly increasing. In reality, there is little evidence of an increase in such

offences – merely a rise in the number of cases successfully recorded as crimes.

Now, as the previous discussion implies, there is a further stage in the criminal justice process – the *recording* of crime – which also contributes to the attrition process. The uninitiated might assume that once an offence has been reported to the police it is then simply recorded and becomes officially defined as a ‘crime’. This is not the case, however. Reporting an offence is not a guarantee that it will be recorded. Again, there are a number of reasons for this:

- The police may not accept the account given to them.
- The police may find insufficient evidence to confirm that an offence has taken place.
- The victim may refuse to press charges.
- The police may judge that the matter reported to them has already been satisfactorily dealt with or resolved.
- The police may simply not wish to pursue the matter and therefore fail to record it (what is often called ‘cuffing’: the deliberate failure to

record an incident in order to save work or to increase clear-ups – see Young, 1991: 323–5).

Audits are now regularly undertaken of police recording practices, and recent estimates suggest that between 70–75 per cent of incidents reported to the police are recorded as crimes. Figure 3.4 illustrates police recording rates for offences in different categories.

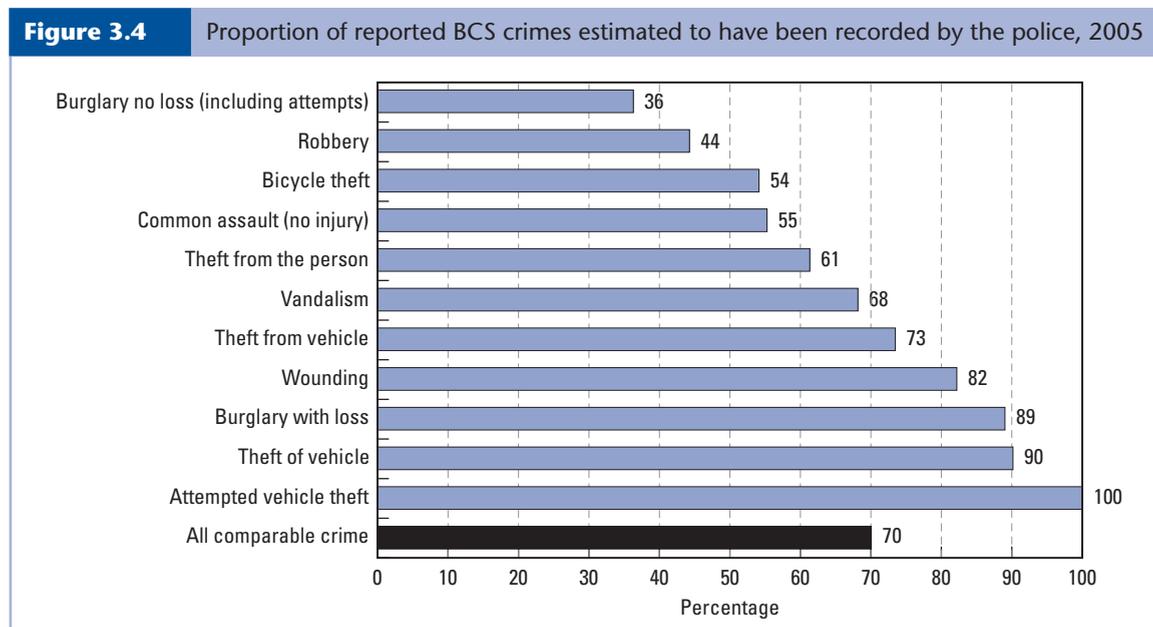
Shortfalls in reporting and in recording are the two major factors in what is commonly referred to as the ‘attrition rate’ in the criminal justice system: the proportion of ‘all offences’ that eventually end up in the criminal justice system and, more particularly, end with a caution or conviction. Of all those offences recorded by the police, only a very small proportion eventually ends with a caution or a conviction.

At this point we must distinguish between the proportion of offences that end with a caution or conviction and what is generally referred to as the ‘clear-up rate’. Historically, the clear-up rate has frequently been used as an indicator of police efficiency. There are a number of conditions which may allow a crime to be defined as having been ‘cleared up’:

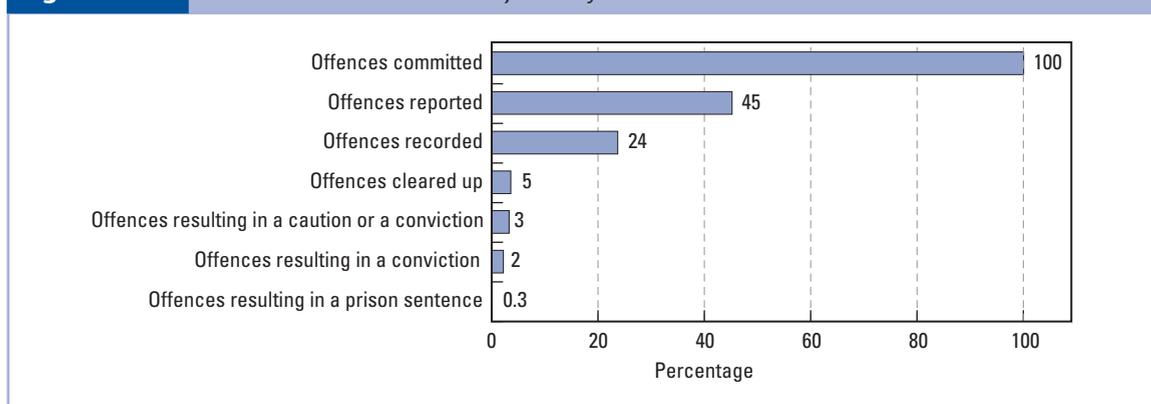
- Someone has been charged or summonsed (though not necessarily convicted).
- Someone has been cautioned.
- The offence has been ‘taken into consideration’ at court – someone has admitted it even though they haven’t been prosecuted for it.

- There is sufficient evidence to prosecute someone, but no prosecution is proceeding (incapacity of the offender, victim, witness and so on).
- Victim is unwilling to give evidence.
- Offender is below the age of criminal responsibility (under ten).
- The offender is already in prison for another offence.

Clear-up rates vary markedly between offence types and, historically, have also varied markedly between police forces. One of the reasons for this – certainly historically – has concerned the use of offences ‘taken into consideration’ or TICs. These occur when suspects, having been arrested and charged, are asked if there are other offences they will admit to. This is an indirect means of clearing up offences, and differing practices in relation to TICs in different forces has on occasion been an important factor in variations in clear-up rates. In understanding ‘attrition’ in the criminal justice system, therefore, the major distinctions to bear in mind concern: the proportion of offences reported; of those reported, the proportion recorded; of these how many are ‘cleared up’; and, finally, how many result in a caution, a conviction, or a prison sentence. Attrition within the criminal justice system is depicted graphically in Figure 3.5.



Source: Walker *et al.* (2006).

Figure 3.5 Attrition within the criminal justice system

Source: Barclay and Tavares (1999).

Limitations of official statistics

As we have seen, what is included within official statistics can be profoundly affected by what is brought to the attention of the police, and how they then respond to such reports. There are Home Office rules governing police procedures for recording crime and we will look at these in more detail when considering recent trends in crime. These factors are among the main concerns when considering the limitations of official statistics is that they are generally offence-rather than offender-focused. Furthermore, they are not victim-focused.

Bottoms (1994) has argued that beginning in the 1970s there was something of a shift from the study of the *offender* to the study of *offences*. In part, in the UK this was the result of the increasing influence of Home Office research and an approach to the study of crime that Jock Young has characterised (and possibly caricatured) as ‘administrative criminology’. There are a number of potential pitfalls in the counting of offenders and offences using official statistics. If an offender is before the court on three charges then normally only the most serious (the *principal* offence) of these will be recorded in the official statistics. By contrast, an offender who commits three offences at different times may appear in court on three separate occasions and be recorded, therefore, three times. More recently, changes in recording rules further shift the focus of police-recorded crime statistics in the direction of counting offences: where previously cases involving a single victim reporting three offences would have been recorded as a single incident, the police are now required to record all three separately. Official statistics tell us quite a lot about what happens to people as they go through the criminal justice

process, but relatively little therefore about the people themselves.

Furthermore, official statistics only contain information about a limited sub-set of offences, not all offences. Police-recorded crime covers all crime reported to, or discovered by, the police and then recorded and *which are required to be reported to the Home Office*. It is for this reason that these are generally known as ‘notifiable offences’. Historically, notifiable offences have generally been what would ordinarily be regarded as the ‘more serious’ crimes. Changes in what are called the ‘counting rules’ in 1998 also brought some less serious offences into the notifiable category. For the purposes of this discussion, it is what is left out that is important. In the main it is summary offences – relatively minor cases that would be heard in the magistrates’ courts – that are not included in police-recorded crime statistics. Whilst they are generally not serious offences – they comprise mainly motoring offences – they are sizeable in number. For this reason, as well as others already outlined, it is a mistake to see police-recorded crime numbers as representing ‘all crime’.

Indeed, as Bottomley and Pease (1986: 1) in the introduction to their book on measuring crime, point out: ‘It is impossible to give any accurate or straightforward answers to [the question of how much crime there is] ... Not only does everything depend on what is meant by “crime”, “criminals” and “victims”, but even if there were to be broad agreement on the definition and scope of these basic terms, it is very apparent that most of the extant methods of measuring the nature and amounts of crime, criminality and victimization would be inadequate to the task.’ Nevertheless, as Maguire (2002: 334) observes:

Despite the warnings of criminologists and government statisticians alike, these statistics are still treated by many politicians and journalists as an accurate ‘barometer’ of crime, and any sizeable rise in the figures they produce tends to receive widespread publicity and spark off arguments about police or government ineffectiveness or the need for sentencing changes (falls, conversely, tend to be largely ignored). The figures are also used a great deal at a local level to inform the distribution of police resources and, increasingly, the preparation of crime ‘audits’ and crime reduction plans, as well as the measurement of police and crime reduction partnerships’ ‘performance’ in comparison with targets and other areas.

Some limitations of *Criminal Statistics*

The numbers of particular crimes, and the overall level of crime, recorded in *Criminal Statistics*, can be profoundly affected by changes in:

- decisions about which offences to include (only ‘notifiable’ offences are included; this excludes ‘summary’ offences, as well as those offences recorded by non-‘Home Office police forces’ such as the British Transport Police, the Ministry of Defence Police, etc.);
- changes in the ‘counting rules’;
- changes in public attitudes toward the reporting of particular offences;
- changes in police practices toward particular offences (the ‘upgrading’ or ‘downgrading’ of particular offences).

In addition, *Criminal Statistics* are a poor tool for:

- understanding the social context of crime (very diverse crimes are included under broad offence headings);
- understanding the relative risks of victimization.

Review questions

- 1 When were official crime statistics first collected in Britain?
- 2 What is meant by attrition?
- 3 What are the main reasons people fail to report crimes to the police?
- 4 Why might the police decide to, or fail to, record crimes that are reported to them?

Victimization surveys

The essence of the victimization survey is the standard sample survey. The objective is generally to seek to interview a representative sample of a particular population and to ask them a series of questions about their experience of victimization – usually over the past year. As with so many elements of modern social scientific inquiry, the victimization survey began life in America. The product of President Johnson’s government in the 1960s, victimization surveys were intended to provide a more accurate measure of the extent of crime, and of trends in crime, than the hitherto standard method of relying on official statistics – the *Uniform Crime Reports*. Of the early studies, it is that undertaken by the National Opinion Research Center (Ennis, 1967) that is most frequently discussed. Based on a sample of 10,000 households, the survey asked a range of questions about household members’ experiences of crime. Although the early victimization surveys were somewhat limited, they nevertheless helped to provide an indication of the extent of non-recorded crime (generally three to five times as many as captured by official means) (Coleman and Moynihan, 1996).

The National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), originally called the National Crime Survey, was established in the US in 1972. Data for the NCVS are collected twice each year, from a nationally representative sample of roughly 49,000 households comprising about 100,000 people. The data cover the frequency, characteristics, and consequences of criminal victimization in the United States. Originally undertaken by the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, the survey is now administered by the US Census Bureau (under the US Department of Commerce) on behalf of the Bureau of Justice Statistics (under the US Department of Justice).

The first victimization survey in the UK was included in the 1972 General Household Survey (GHS). As it sounds, the GHS is used to record information about a wide variety of domestic experiences. In the early 1970s the GHS explored the extent of household burglary. The first major victimization survey with a broad focus was also carried out in the early 1970s in three areas of London by Richard Sparks (senior) and colleagues – largely to test the effectiveness of this particular method. Their book, *Surveying Victims* (Sparks *et al.*, 1977), remains an important landmark in British criminology.

The purposes of crime surveys

Sparks and colleagues in the late 1970s identified eight reasons why victimization surveys might provide useful data:

- The ability of victimization surveys to provide a relatively accurate measure of crime rates enables them to be used as a 'social barometer'.
- Such surveys can be used to estimate the size of the gap between reported and unreported crime.
- They can be used to assess public attitudes toward reporting and therefore towards crime and policing.
- They can be used to assess crime prevention effects of particular initiatives.
- They can help direct our attention to the experiences of victims – experiences that might otherwise be ignored.
- They can provide more information about the nature of crime victims.
- They can be used to help assess the veracity of particular criminological theories.
- They can be used to help measure fear of crime and other responses to crime and victimization.

The second victimization survey in England was undertaken by Bottoms and colleagues in Sheffield in 1975 (Bottoms *et al.*, 1987).

The British Crime Survey

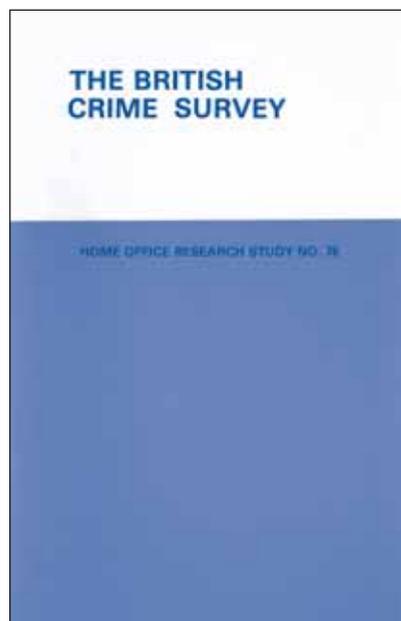
Within a few years the Home Office had taken the decision to fund a national victimization survey. Although it has always been known as the British Crime Survey (BCS), it was only the first and third surveys that were conducted in Scotland as well as England and Wales. Scotland now has its own survey, as does Northern Ireland. The first BCS was undertaken in 1981/82 and was published in 1983 (Hough and Mayhew, 1983). Based on a representative sample of the population in England and Wales, interviews were conducted with 10,000 respondents aged 16 or over. The authors of the very first BCS described the main reasons for its introduction in the following way (Mayhew and Hough, 1988: 157):

The case for such a survey rested largely in the value to policy-makers of having at least a rough

guide to the extent and shape of the problem which the criminal justice system was intended to tackle: police statistics of recorded crime seemed adequate as a measure of police workload, but – because of unreported and unrecorded crime – deficient as an index of crime ...

Another attraction lay in the survey's promise as an antidote to public misperceptions about crime. It was thought within the Home Office that misconceptions about crime levels, trends and risks were widespread among the public. A survey-based index of crime would demonstrate the possibility – if not the reality – that the index of crime based on offences recorded by the police might be subject to statistical inflation by virtue of changing reporting and recording practices ... In other words, the survey promised a more informed picture of crime which might help create a more balanced climate of opinion about law and order. Finally, it was felt that a national survey might give a boost for criminological research and theory.

The BCS was undertaken subsequently in 1984, 1988, 1992, 1994, 1996, 1998, 2000, and 2001. Since then it has become an annual survey – essentially conducted on a rolling basis – with a significantly enlarged sample size. The sizeable increase in the BCS sample size meant that analysis could be undertaken at police force level.



The very first *British Crime Survey* was published in 1983.

Understanding the British Crime Survey

The BCS increased its sample size to 15,000 in 1996 and then again to 20,000 in 2000. From 2001 onward when it became an annual, rolling survey, the core sample of the BCS was raised to 40,000.

The first three 'sweeps' of the BCS used the electoral register as the sampling frame. The electoral register has a number of shortcomings, leading to the under-representation of minority ethnic groups and transient populations (see Mayhew *et al.*, 1993: 149–151 for details). More particularly, in the 1980s the introduction of the community charge – the 'poll tax' – which used the electoral register as its primary means of identifying those liable for the tax, increased the gaps in its coverage.

Since 1992, the BCS has used the Postal Address File (PAF) as its sampling frame. The PAF, which also has a number of limitations, has the advantage of being constantly updated, unlike the electoral register which is only updated annually.

Since 1994, the BCS has used CAPI (Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing), with limited use of CASI (Computer Assisted Self Interviewing) for some sensitive questions (see Hough and Maxfield, 2007).

The BCS asks a series of questions covering a list of specified crimes. Respondents are asked whether they have experienced any of the listed crimes in the

previous 12 months and, if they answer positively, they are then asked a series of follow-up questions about the incident(s). The remainder of the survey covers other areas, such as (Mayhew and Hough 1988: 158):

First British Crime Survey

- Lifestyle, and other factors affecting risks of victimization.
- Fear of, and beliefs and attitudes about, crime.
- Contact with the police, and attitudes to the police.
- Drinking habits, and knowledge of sanctions for drunken driving.
- Self-reported offending.

Second British Crime Survey

- Assessments of seriousness of crime.
- The impact of crime on victims.
- Perceptions of crime risks and (modified) fear of crime.
- Attitudes to sentencing.
- Attitudes to neighbourhood watch schemes.
- Self-reported offending.

The results of the various 'sweeps' of the BCS are published by the Home Office and the majority are now available online. As we noted in the discussion about official statistics, in recent years the Home Office has taken to publishing an annual 'snapshot' of crime in England and Wales, drawing on data from the BCS, police-recorded crime and other sources. Elements of the BCS are still published separately, but usually when there is a particular subject – such as drug use – being investigated. The major reports from the BCS are listed in the box overleaf.

The first BCS produced some quite startling data. Its authors, faced with the prospect of identifying the level of unreported crime for the first time, also introduced a number of findings that were intended to be somewhat more reassuring. Thus, they (Hough and Mayhew, 1983: 15) suggested that the average citizen could anticipate:

- a robbery once every five centuries;
- an assault resulting in injury once every century;

- the family car to be stolen once every 60 years;
- a burglary in the home once every 40 years.

The authors were subsequently criticised for presenting such 'averages' and thereby masking the very wide variations in likelihood of victimization across different parts of the population. Later crime survey reports avoided such generalisations and have tended to analyse the patterns and risks of victimization by a range of demographic characteristics. We will return to this in later chapters (see, for example, Chapters 20 and 31).

The BCS has provided a wealth of information on criminal victimization over the past 20 years and more. Respondents are asked about a broad range of crimes and, if they have experienced any in the previous year, are then asked a substantial series of follow-up questions to explore the nature of the offence and their response to it (including, as we have seen, whether they reported it to the police). In addition, the BCS carries a series of other modules which explore respondents' experiences and attitudes towards a variety of other

Main Reports from the British Crime Survey

- Hough, M. and Mayhew, P. (1983) *The British Crime Survey*, Home Office Research Study No. 76, London: Home Office
- Hough, M. and Mayhew, P. (1985) *Taking Account of Crime: Findings from the Second British Crime Survey*, Home Office Research Study No. 85, London: Home Office
- Mayhew, P., Elliott, D. and Dowds, L. (1989) *The 1988 British Crime Survey*, Home Office Research Study No.111, London: Home Office
- Mayhew, P., Aye-Maung, N. and Mirrlees-Black, C. (1992) *The 1992 British Crime Survey*, Home Office Research Study No. 132, London: Home Office
- Hough, M. (1995) *Anxiety about Crime: Findings from the 1994 British Crime Survey*, Home Office Research Study No.147, London: Home Office
- Mirrlees-Black, C., Mayhew, P. and Percy, A. (1996). *The 1996 British Crime Survey*. Home Office Statistical Bulletin 19/96, London: Home Office
- Mirrlees-Black, C., Budd, T., Partridge, S. and Mayhew, P. (1998). *The 1998 British Crime Survey*. Home Office Statistical Bulletin 21/98, London: Home Office
- Kershaw, C., Budd, T., Kinshott, G., Mattinson, J., Mayhew, P. and Myhill, A. (2000) *The 2000 British Crime Survey*. Home Office Statistical Bulletin 18/00, London: Home Office
- Kershaw, C., Chivite-Matthews, N., Thomas, C. and Aust, R. (2001) *The 2001 British Crime Survey: First Results*, Home Office Statistical Bulletin 18/01, London: Home Office
- Flood-Page, C. and Taylor, J. (2003) *Crime in England and Wales 2001/2002: Supplementary Volume*. Home Office Statistical Bulletin 1/03, London: Home Office
- Simmons, J. and Dodd, T. (2003) *Crime in England and Wales 2002/2003*. Home Office Statistical Bulletin 07/03, London: Home Office
- Dodd, T., Nicholas, S., Povey, D. and Walker, A. (2004) *Crime in England and Wales 2003/04*, Home Office Statistical Bulletin 10/04, London: Home Office
- Nicholas, S., Povey, D., Walker, A. and Kershaw, C. (2005) *Crime in England and Wales 2004/05*, Home Office Statistical Bulletin 11/05, London: Home Office
- Walker, A., Kershaw, C. and Nicholas, S. (2006) *Crime in England and Wales 2005/06*, Statistical Bulletin 12/06, London: Home Office

All of the above are available online at the Home Office website: <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pubsintro1.html>

matters, such as drugs, domestic and sexual violence. Clearly, one of the great advantages that such surveys have over official statistics is that they largely overcome the ‘non-reporting’ and ‘non-recording’ problems associated with the latter. Crime, or more accurately, victimization surveys also have some quite significant limitations, however. Thus, for example, the sample for the British Crime Survey:

- does not include under-16s and therefore cannot say anything about the victimization of young people;
- is a household sample, and therefore excludes people not living in a household, such as the homeless, those irregularly living in hostels and those in prisons. Available research suggests that these groups probably have very high victimization rates (see Chapters 17 and 28);
- does not cover businesses and, therefore, commercial and industrial victimization is not included in the BCS’s estimate of crime;

- is a study which relies on people to report what they have experienced, by definition it cannot include murder or ‘victimless crimes’ such as the buying and selling of drugs;
- is insufficiently large (despite increases in sample sizes) to be able to assess offences like rape and sexual assault;
- doesn’t include most forms of corporate crime, environmental crime or other offences subject to regulation by bodies such as Revenue and Customs, the Health and Safety Executive and others.

Some of these shortcomings can be overcome, and there have been recommendations recently (Smith 2007) that, if practicable, the BCS should be extended to under-16s and to certain types of group residences (such as university halls of residence) and that the surveys of commercial and industrial victimization that the Home Office has occasionally undertaken ought to be carried out regularly.

It is not just at the national level that victimization surveys have been used. As we will see below they are increasingly being used internationally in order to try to facilitate comparisons across jurisdictions. In addition, there have been a number of influential local crime surveys.

Local crime surveys

For a short but important period in the 1980s and beyond, local crime surveys became a small but influential criminological industry. Adopting a largely identical approach to national surveys, but rather focusing on a much smaller, highly targeted geographical area, local surveys were frequently funded by some of the more radical local authorities (e.g. Islington and Merseyside) that sought to focus attention on the nature, level and shape of local crime problems. Such surveys aimed to correct what their authors saw as two of the main shortcomings of the BCS: its underestimate of the impact of criminal victimization; and its relative ineffectiveness at uncovering 'hidden' crimes such as domestic violence.

The Merseyside Crime Survey was undertaken in 1984 with the first Islington Crime Survey following a year later. Indeed, they were developed together in many ways, sharing overlapping questionnaires and with common staff working as consultants on both surveys. During the period from the mid-'80s to the early '90s crime surveys were undertaken twice in Islington (Jones *et al.*, 1986; Crawford *et al.*, 1990) and also in Merseyside (Kinsey, 1984), Edinburgh twice (Anderson *et al.*, 1990, 1991) and in Glasgow (Hartless *et al.*, 1995). The political context of the emergence of these surveys is interesting. As the authors of the first Islington Crime Survey (Jones *et al.*, 1986: 6) explain:

It had become increasingly obvious that there was an extraordinary hiatus in Labour Party policy over crime. Despite the fact that socialist administrations control virtually every inner-city high crime area in Britain ... the Labour Party has come to regard law and order as the natural and exclusive realm of Conservatives. The question is how to develop policies which help protect women, ethnic minorities and the working class – those who suffer most from the impact of crime – who are the natural constituents of Labour, whilst refusing to accept the

The Scottish Crime (and Victimization) Survey

The Scottish Crime Survey (SCS) is a repeat, cross-sectional survey which seeks to measure the incidence and prevalence of criminal victimization in Scotland. In 1982 and 1988 the Crime Survey in Scotland was part of the British Crime Survey (BCS) – though the Scottish part of the 1988 BCS was also known as the Scottish Areas Crime Survey. In 1993 the first independent SCS was carried out and then again in 1996, 2000 and 2003. In 2004 the new Scottish Crime and Victimization Survey (SCVS) was launched with a number of changes in design, methodology and sample size from previous surveys. The sample size was increased from 5,000 interviews approximately every three years to an annual sample of 27,000 with continuous interviewing. Second, the survey method was changed in part from a face-to-face survey to a telephone survey (and thus it differs markedly in method from the BCS). In addition to the telephone survey, the research company undertaking the fieldwork in 2004 also undertook a limited face-to-face survey (comprising 3,000 interviews) in order to assess the impact of the change to telephone interviews and to provide some continuity with earlier sweeps of the SCS. A review of the methodology concluded that telephone interviewing was unreliable and the SCVS will revert to face-to-face interviewing from 2007.

The Northern Ireland Crime Survey

The Northern Ireland Crime Survey (NICS) is carried out on behalf of the Northern Ireland Office. Like the BCS and SCVS it is a household survey. It was first carried out as a one-off survey in 1994/5 and was repeated in 1998. It became a biennial survey in 2001 and has been running as a continuous survey since January 2005. The survey involves face-to-face interviews and the sample size of the original surveys was 3,000. This was subsequently increased to 4,000 and now involves approximately 6,500 individuals aged 16 or over from households selected randomly from a list of domestic addresses held by the Northern Ireland Land and Property Services Agency (LPSA). Interviews are now conducted over the course of a calendar year and, consequently, whereas originally the 'recall period' in which respondents were asked about their experiences covered a fixed 12-month period, since 2005 the NICS has asked respondents to recall incidents in the 12 calendar months prior to being interviewed (the BCS has operated in this way since 2001).

Figure 3.6 Major reasons for victim non-reporting to police

Reasons for not reporting	Percentage giving reason	
	British Crime Survey %	Islington Crime Survey %
Police unable to do anything	16	38
Too trivial	55	26
Not a matter for police	10	5
Inconvenient	2	13
Fear of police	1	2
Reprisals from offender	1	4

Source: Young (1988: 167).

draconian policing policies and penal practices of the Tories ... The second political circumstance was the need to have objective assessment of police-public relations, a gauge of the efficacy of existing police methods and a measure of public demands as to the sort of service they would ideally want.

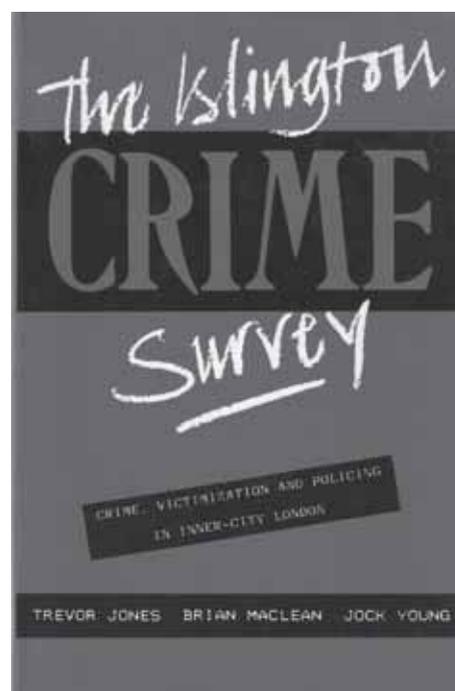
One of the core findings of work like the Islington Crime Survey, and something which underpinned the 'left realist criminology' (see Chapter 13) which developed in its wake under Jock Young, was that most people's attitudes toward crime were very much in line with their experiences of crime – with the exception of older, white people.

As I have already noted, the authors of the British Crime Survey report came in for some criticism – particularly from Jock Young, one of the authors of the two Islington Crime Surveys. The thrust of Young's critique was that national surveys tend to miss some important elements in the distribution of victimization which local surveys, because of their geographical focus, are better able to identify. As one example, Young (1988) compared the reasons crime victims gave for not reporting offences to the police. The results from the two surveys can be seen in Figure 3.6.

By using national averages, the BCS masked the fact that triviality was not the main reason for non-reporting in some (high crime) areas and was overwhelmingly the reason in other areas. Subsequent research, such as the Islington Crime Survey, found that the proportion saying they did not report the crime because they felt it was too trivial, was only one quarter. Consequently, as Jock Young argued, a large number of victimizations

'genuinely belong to the "dark figure" as defined by the victims and are seen as a matter for the police' (1988: 167).

The response of the BCS authors to the left realist critique was to amend aspects of the Crime Survey and to seek more effective measures of both patterns of, and the impact of, victimization. Indeed, its original authors defended the BCS robustly arguing that by prompting the development of other work, such as local crime surveys, it had made a significant contribution to increasing knowledge about the rela-



First Islington Crime Survey, published in 1990.

tionship between risks and fear (Mayhew and Hough, 1988). Furthermore, they argued that the rise of victimization surveys such as the BCS, by shifting the emphasis in explaining crime toward the circumstances of the incident and away from perpetrators' motives, had stimulated and helped refine work in the 'situational' or 'opportunity theory' area (see Chapter 14).

Other victimization surveys

National crime surveys tend to be the ones that are most frequently used and cited. Local crime surveys had an important influence in the 1980s and 1990s, but are less commonly used now. In addition to these tools, there are also a number of other victimization surveys that it is worth us briefly reviewing. The major ones are:

- *The International Crime Victim Survey (ICVS)* – an international survey which generates samples of between 1,000–2,000 people through random selection of telephone numbers in most countries. Sample sizes are, therefore, small and some cross-country comparisons are quite difficult as crime categories differ somewhat. Nevertheless, the ICVS provides one starting point for cross-cultural comparison (Van Dijk and van Vollenhoven, 2007).
- *The Commercial Victimization Survey* – first conducted in 1994 and subsequently in 2002 (there was also a Scottish Business Crime Survey in 1998). This was a telephone survey of a subset of businesses, including 3,955 retailing premises and 2,561 manufacturing premises in England and Wales. In the main, interviews were conducted with the person in the business who was responsible for security issues. The survey explored the nature and extent of crime experienced in different business sectors.

Assessing victimization surveys

The great advantage of victimization surveys is that they do not rely on what comes to the attention of the police or any other agency. Second, they enable a lot of questions to be asked about the nature and impact of crime. However, as with any form of data collection – there is no exception – there are a number of limitations to what crime surveys are able to tell us. As we have noted, there are a series of offences that crime surveys don't pick up, including: corporate and organised crime; much

white-collar crime; criminal damage; so-called 'victimless crimes' such as illicit drug use, and certain activities related to sex, pornography and so on.

Surveys, national or local, are invariably household-based, and therefore have little opportunity to ask about work-based offences. As they ask respondents about experiences of victimization they cannot uncover those crimes where there is no obvious victim – possession of cannabis, say, is not going to be uncovered in a household-based victimization survey. Similarly, there are also circumstances under which respondents may be reluctant to answer questions about victimization. Respondents may, for example, be too frightened to report certain events – perhaps they may live with the perpetrator. They may be too embarrassed – being assaulted or robbed whilst visiting a prostitute, for example – or ashamed, perhaps having been unable or unwilling to defend themselves. Hope (2005: 49–50) identifies seven factors that may affect what respondents say to crime survey interviewers:

- *Knowledge of incidents* – only one person in the household is interviewed and they will have limited knowledge of other household members' experiences.
- *Not telling* – as discussed earlier, there may be various reasons why respondents don't, or can't, report everything that might be of relevance to the survey.
- *Memory decay* – respondents may simply forget things that have happened to them.
- *Telescoping* – certain events, especially if serious, may feel as if they occurred more recently than was actually the case (and thus be reported in the wrong year).
- *Education* – the extent of education of the respondent may affect their ability to deal with the questions and willingness to deal with the interviewer.
- *Multiple and serial incidents* – victimization surveys divide experiences into discrete events even when they may not be experienced in quite this way.
- *Interview conditions* – who the interviewer was, the time of day, which day the interview occurs, and whether the interview uses computer-aided questioning are just some of the conditions that may affect the outcome of the interview.

The strengths and weaknesses of crime surveys

Strengths

- Capture incidents not reported to the police.
- Capture incidents reported, but not recorded by the police.
- Rests on victim's understanding of events rather than, say, a police officer's interpretation of what has occurred.

Weaknesses

- There is a range of crimes not effectively captured by such surveys:
 - 'victimless crimes' – drug sale and use;
 - 'hidden crimes' – domestic violence.
- Surveys don't include those that are in institutions such as prisons, hospitals, care homes, student halls of residence, etc.
- There may be other sampling problems.
- There are limits to the accuracy of respondents' memories.

- Focuses on crimes as 'individual events' and therefore generally fails to capture either 'multiple victimization' (see Genn, 1988) or the 'processual' nature of much harassment (see Bowling, 1993). Certain types of offence, such as racial harassment, domestic violence and child abuse, may be difficult to understand as a set of discrete events, when in practice they may be experienced as an ongoing, almost ceaseless set of events – some less serious, some more – but combining and merging over time. These 'series incidents' are argued by some critics to be poorly captured in victimization surveys.
- There is the potential for respondents to feel inhibited in talking about particular types of victimization – sexual assault for example. In an attempt to overcome this the BCS has introduced computer-aided self-interviewing (CASI) in recent years.

Comparing official statistics and victimization surveys

There are a number of difficulties in producing direct and accurate comparisons of these two sources of data. First, as we have seen, the offence categories used by the two sources are not identical; indeed, in some respects they are rather different. Kershaw and colleagues (2001) suggest that in practice only about three-quarters of the offences covered by the BCS can be used in comparison with official statistics. Likewise, there is much captured, albeit partially, in official data-sets that is not covered by the BCS including, for example, shoplifting and burglary from commercial premises, as well as motoring offences and some 'victimless' crimes. This leads Maguire (2002: 352) to conclude that the BCS 'provides an alternative, rather than a directly comparable, overall picture of crime to that offered by police statistics'. That said, there are, of course, areas where comparison can be made and careful contrasts do allow for some estimate of the 'dark figure' of crime to be undertaken (those crimes which are not recorded in official statistics).

Having analysed the data from the first BCS,

Hough and Mayhew (1983) found that 'the survey indicated that there were twice as many burglaries as were recorded by the police; nearly five times as much wounding; twelve times as much theft from the person ... The overall ratio for incidents which had been compared was one in four.' More recent surveys find roughly similar proportions of crime being unrecorded in official statistics. As Maguire (2007) cautions, however, it is important to resist the temptation to assume that this can be used as a straightforward indicator of the 'dark figure' of crime. In reality it is an approximation for *only* those offences in the two data sources which can reasonably be compared. It tells us little about the likely levels of crime not captured by crime surveys. Maguire (2007) concludes with five main messages from the BCS and comparisons between the survey and *Criminal Statistics*:

- The BCS clearly indicates that there is a very substantial amount of crime that is never recorded in *Criminal Statistics*.
- Building up a picture from successive BCSs over the past two decades suggests that the increases in crime that occurred up until the early/mid-1990s were less steep than indicated by official figures.

- Nevertheless, the general shape of the overall trend in crime is very similar according to both sources of data.
- Within the overall picture, both the BCS and official records paint a similar picture of the balance between car crime, other property crime and violence against the person.
- The BCS has been much better at measuring offences against private individuals and households that are committed by strangers; it has been less successful at capturing crimes committed within family units or between people otherwise known to each other.

Few criminologists these days are as dismissive of officially recorded crime data as might once have been the case. Though the social constructionist case is now well-embedded in criminological discussions of crime data, there is now at least a degree of acceptance that official data do provide an indication of general trends in crime, albeit that without an alternative against which to assess them, they must still be treated with considerable caution.

Review questions

- 1 What are the main ways in which the British Crime Survey has changed since it was first undertaken in the early 1980s?
- 2 Why might local crime surveys differ in their findings from national surveys?
- 3 Why is it difficult to compare police recorded crime with the findings of victimization surveys?

Crime trends

So far in this chapter we have looked at the two major sources of information we have about levels and trends in crime: police-recorded crime or official statistics on the one hand and victimization surveys – primarily the British Crime Survey (BCS) – on the other. One of their uses is to give us estimates of how much crime there is at any particular point and to help us assess whether crime is rising or falling. What, then, do these data sources suggest has been happening to crime levels in recent decades?

It is widely believed that we live in times of unprecedented levels of crime. Whether such

beliefs are accurate rather depends on the time-frame being utilised. It is certainly the case compared with, say, the 1940s, 1950s or 1960s that current levels of crime are very high. However, if we take a longer historical perspective then there is rather reliable evidence to suggest that previous eras were characterised by very high levels of crime and disorder, even by contemporary standards (Gurr, 1989, and see Chapter 2). Indeed, looked at one way there was a reasonably substantial increase in crime during the inter-war years – crime increased by more than one-fifth between 1934 and 1938 for example. With the advent of war in 1939 there were concerns that a crime wave would result and, indeed, there was a substantial rise in indictable offences, an even more significant trend given that many of those most likely to be involved in criminal activity, young males, were abroad fighting the war. Most crime at this time was property crime and rises in violent crime were much shallower than those for theft and burglary.

It was in the mid-1950s that crime began to increase markedly, with recorded crime rising by almost three-quarters between 1955 and 1960. Why might this be so? Well, one important point to note first is that this period saw a very substantial increase in the availability of mass market consumer goods, many of which were portable. Second, as routine activities theorists (see Chapter 14) and others have noted, changes in the labour market saw a substantial increase in the proportion of women going out to work with the consequence that houses were left empty for considerably longer periods than had previously been the case. Third, it is also likely that the police became more assiduous in their recording of crime during this period. As can be seen from Figure 3.1 crime continued to rise fairly markedly and consistently from that period on, all the way through to the mid-1990s from which point it began to fall.

As Maguire (2007) argues, often figures concerning ‘trends’ in crime are, to put it at its kindest, misleading. Frequently, newspapers will compare this year’s figures with last year’s on the assumption that any differences between the two are necessarily meaningful. In fact, there are a good number of reasons why they may actually be closer to meaningless. Most importantly, *trends* in crime really need to be understood over a relatively extended period of time. Short-term fluctuations may too easily be affected by temporary, and possibly superficial, changes in organisational practices (changing police priorities; particular public concern with certain forms of behaviour; changes in



Crime rates began to increase markedly in the mid-1950s as more and more mass market consumer goods became available – such as television sets, which soon became attractive targets.

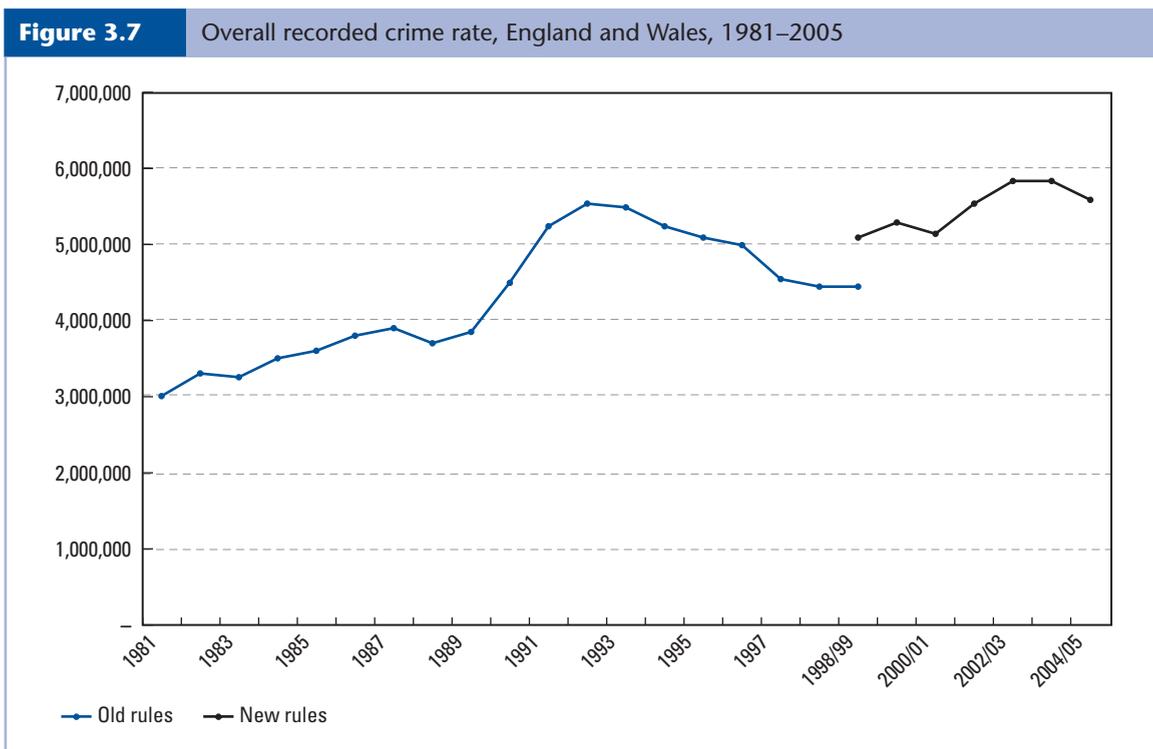
counting rules, etc.). Even when a long-term perspective is taken, it remains the case that great care should be taken when interpreting what at first sight appears to be significant change, for changes in recording and reporting can have a substantial impact here also. This is especially the case with trends based on data from *Criminal Statistics*. Maguire (2007) offers seven persuasive reasons why we should be wary of assuming that such data accurately portray changes over time:

- *Coverage* – as we have seen the categories of offence that go to make up *Criminal Statistics* change over time.
- *Counting rules* – these have been altered substantially on three occasions, on each occasion having a significant impact on the number of crimes counted.

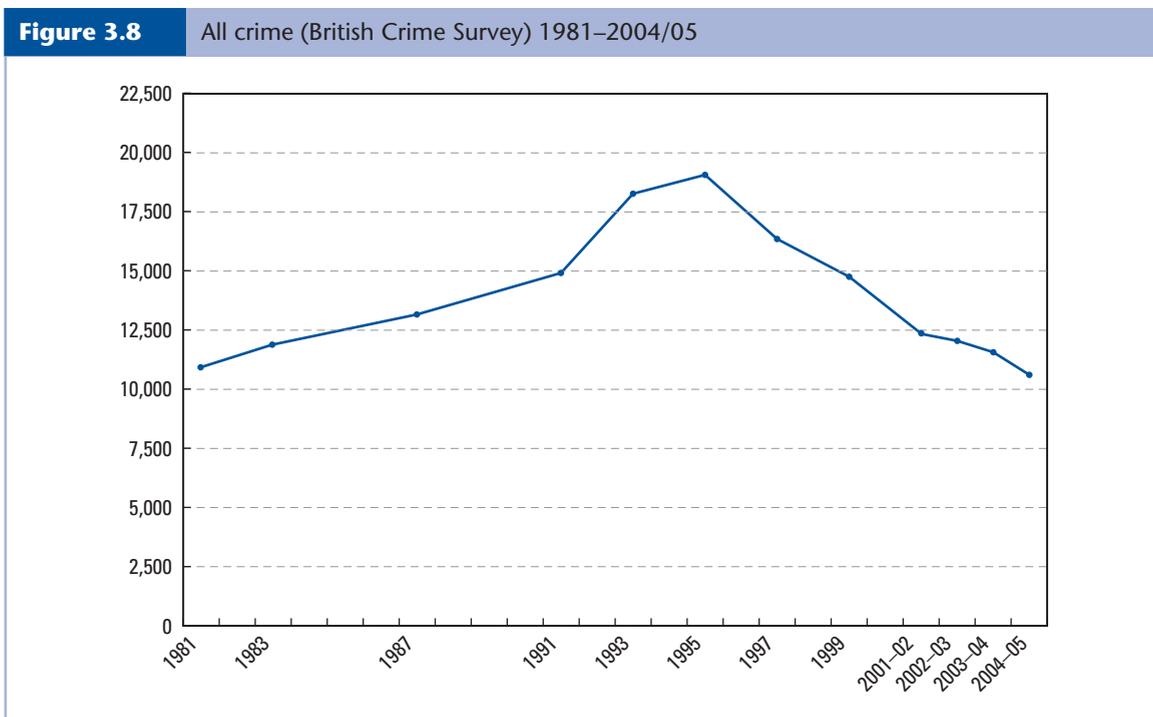
- *Redefinitions* – legislative changes may affect what counts as ‘theft’ or ‘burglary’.
- *Behaviour* – it is not certain that the offence categories used in *Criminal Statistics* are necessarily capturing the same forms of behaviour over time. Is ‘fraud’ in 2007 similar to ‘fraud’ in 1957?
- *Recording rates* – there may be marked changes in recording rates by police irrespective of changes in the counting rules. Some commentators have argued that the police deliberately manipulate recording rates in order, for example, to make it appear that they are facing particularly difficult times and therefore need more resources or, alternatively, to stimulate government to change the law.
- *Reporting rates* – as we know, public willingness to report particular offences is not static. Where once, domestic violence was considered entirely shameful and was largely hidden, there is now greater openness and, consequently, a greater willingness to report such offences to the police (though all the indications are that the bulk of such violence still remains hidden).
- *At risk populations* – demographic changes can have a considerable impact on the size of various elements of the population, such as those at particular risk of certain types of victimization (the size of the elderly population living alone), or at risk of offending (young males aged under 18 for example).

What then has been occurring to crime in the period for which we have two major data sources available? Figure 3.7 shows levels of recorded crime over the past two and half decades. Police-recorded crime data show crime rising relatively steadily during the 1980s and then increasing markedly from towards the end of the decade until 1992. From that point recorded crime rates declined until 1998/9 when new ‘counting rules’ were introduced. As the gap between the two sets of 1998/9 figures illustrate, the new counting rules produced an immediate increase in the number of offences recorded and, thereafter, appear to show crime increasing again until 2002/03, whereupon there is a further slight decline.

Data drawn from the various British Crime Surveys in many ways match the general trend visible from police-recorded statistics in the 1980s and early 1990s, though they differ quite significantly in the period since the late 1990s. BCS data, like

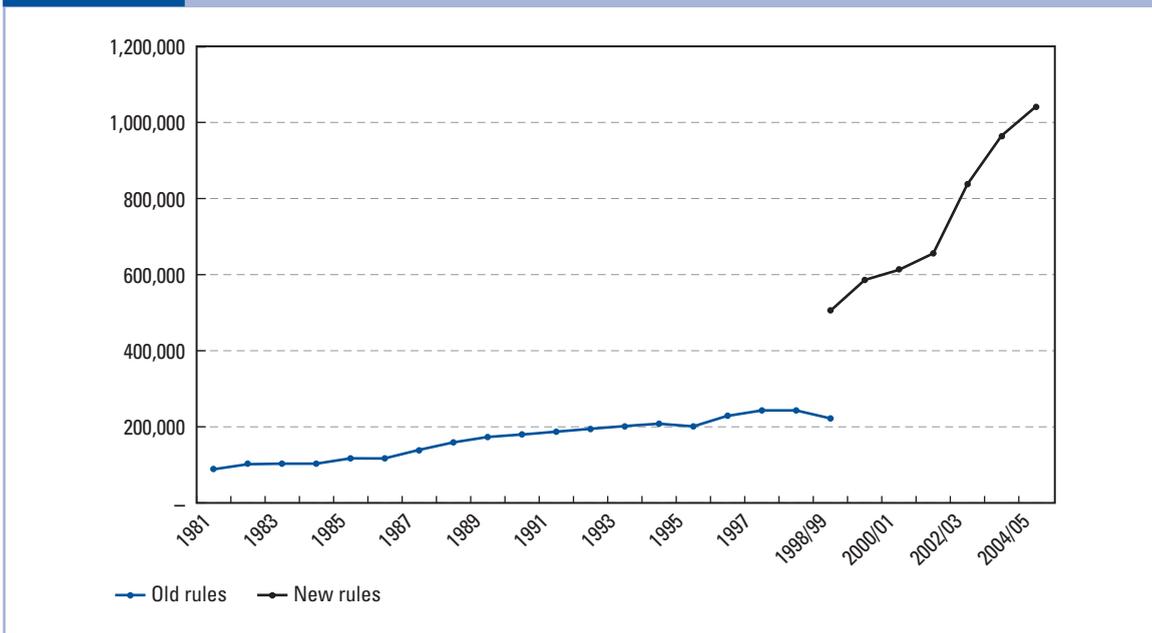


Source: Criminal Statistics, England and Wales (various).



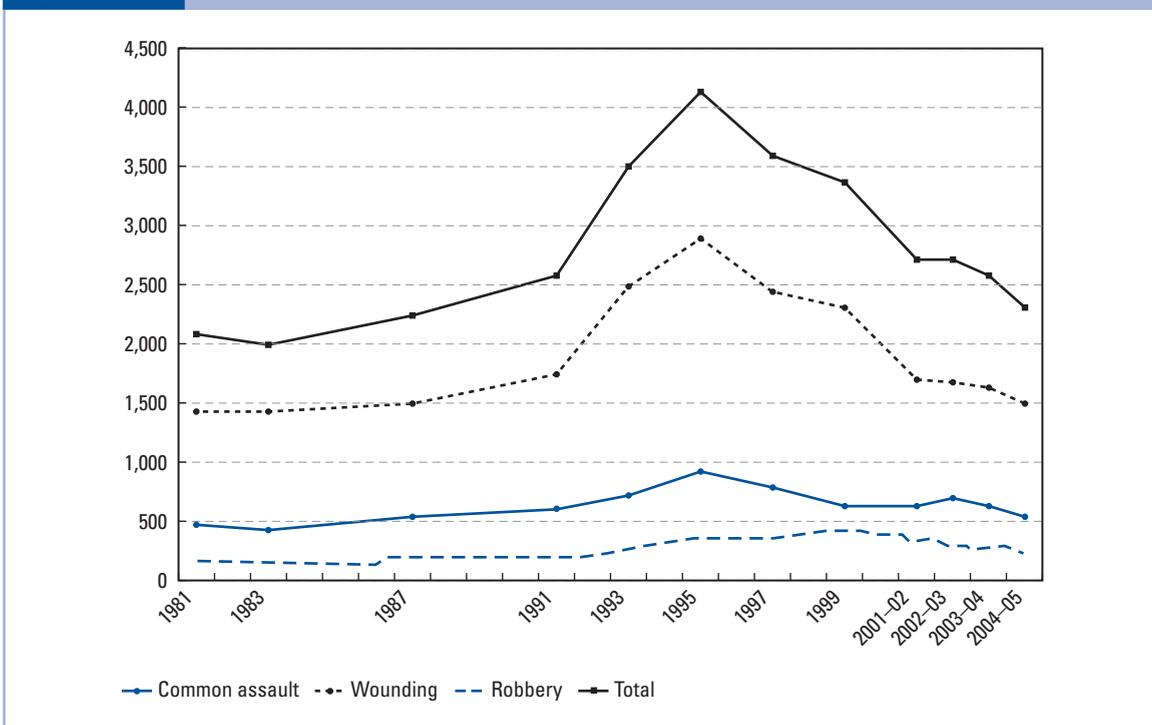
Source: Nicholas et al. (2005).

Figure 3.9 Recorded violent crime, 1981–2004/05



Source: *Criminal Statistics, England and Wales* (various).

Figure 3.10 Violent crime, BCS, 1981–2004/05



Source: Nicholas *et al.* (2005).

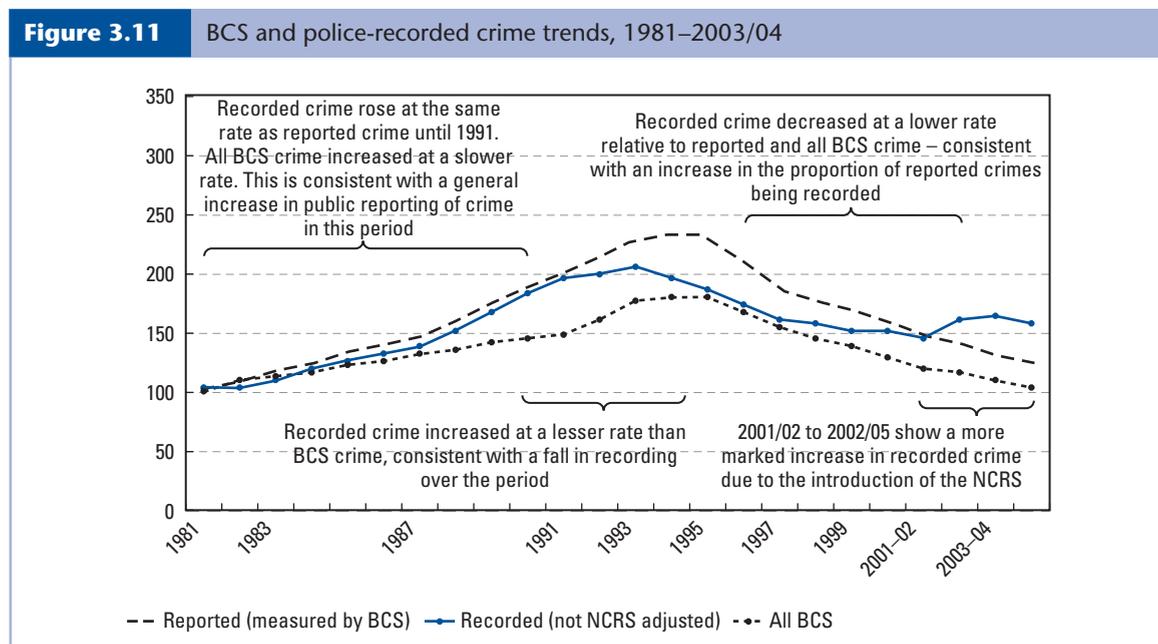
police-recorded crime, show crime rising into the 1990s – in this case to 1995 – and then falling. By contrast with police-recorded crime, the downturn measured by the BCS continues for the whole of the decade since 1995. Indeed, according to the BCS crime has fallen overall by 44 per cent during that decade, and 35 per cent since 1997. By 2005 crime was down slightly below the level recorded in the first BCS in 1981 (see Figure 3.8).

When the two data sources indicate similar trends there is little difficulty. However, when the indicated trends diverge – as they have in recent years – this can quickly become a source of political dispute and controversy. The dispute has concerned the overall trends in crime as well as trends in relation to particular types of offence – particularly violent crime. Indeed, it is in the area of violence against the person that the most significant differences in measured trends are apparent and where, not surprisingly, the most vociferous political debates have focused. Whereas BCS measures suggest that violent crime reached a peak in the mid-1990s and then returned to approximately early 1990s levels, recorded violent crime appears to have increased dramatically in the last five years (see Figures 3.9 and 3.10).

There are a number of reasons why the two sources of data appear to show contrasting trends in recent years. First, as Figure 3.7 indicated, there

was a significant change in 1998–9 in the rules used for ‘counting’ recorded crime. In particular, these changes to the ‘counting rules’ expanded the numbers of crimes recorded by including a greater number of more minor, or summary, offences, particularly in the categories of less serious violent crimes (common assault), fraud and drugs offences. There was a further ‘counting’ change in 2002. This involved the introduction of what was called the National Crime Recording Standard (NCRS). The NCRS sought both to make the process of recording incidents more victim-oriented and to standardise practices across police forces. By ‘victim-oriented’ what was meant was that in future recording would take greater account of the victim’s perception of a crime occurring, rather than relying on police officers’ assessments of the situation (Simmons and Dodd, 2003). On the assumption that previously many incidents reported to the police were not recorded as crimes because officers were not satisfied an offence had taken place, this change was expected to lead to an increase in recorded crime.

Given the diverging trends indicated by the BCS and recorded crime statistics, and the general political sensitivities concerning crime measurement, it is important to try to assess the impact of the introduction of the changes to the construction of recorded crime statistics. Clearly the simplest



Source: Nicholas *et al.* (2005).

method would be to compare recorded crime using the old and the new rules. Unfortunately, there is only one year – 1998/99 – when police forces were asked to submit data using both the old and the new counting rules and where a direct comparison of the impact of the new procedures could be made. Since that period the new rules have been applied and no data have been kept using the old counting procedures. As Figure 3.11 indicates, in 1998/99 there was a substantial increase in the number of offences recorded by the police as a result of the introduction of the new rules. In general terms it appears that the NCRS has had a continuing impact on recorded crime trends. The data in Figure 3.11 show that between 1981 and 2000 the trends shown by BCS and police recorded crime data are largely similar, but then depart substantially around 2001/02 when the NCRS was introduced.

In summary, during the period being reviewed here it is clear that crime increased during the first decade or so and then began to decrease. The fact that the two main methods of assessing crime levels produced somewhat differing pictures of the

trends since the late 1990s has served to complicate matters and created an opportunity for politicians to present widely varying interpretations of recent changes in crime. A good example of how such disputes can arise can be found in a series of newspaper articles that appeared in the *Guardian* in 2004 and which are reproduced below (Excerpts 1–3). We begin with a piece by columnist Polly Toynbee, in which she argued that the then Leader of the Opposition, Michael Howard, was deliberately misrepresenting crime trends in order to make a particular political point.

The second excerpt is taken from Michael Howard's response. In it he takes Toynbee to task for relying on the British Crime Survey as the basis for what he sees to be her mistaken views on crime trends. As you will see, he suggests that if she had used what he describes as the *most reliable* statistics, police-recorded crime statistics, she would have seen a very different picture.

The third excerpt is taken from a response from Mike Hough, a former Home Office official and one of the originators of the British Crime Survey. Hough

Excerpt 1

A scary night in Brixton

When Michael Howard went on the prowl for a quick-hit crime story he didn't let the facts get in his way
Polly Toynbee, Friday 8 October, 2004, *The Guardian*

The police in Brixton are outraged. The community in Brixton is outraged and the Community Consultative Group, which links police and people together, has written a furious letter to Michael Howard.

It was this section in Howard's conference speech that caused the trouble: 'Three weeks ago on a Saturday night, I went out on the streets of Brixton. I saw the problem their community is up against. In two hours we didn't meet a single policeman, not one. This was inner-city London just before midnight, on a Saturday night. No wonder people feel the police have become distant and remote.'

Leave aside the unpleasant 'black mugger' racist overtones in choosing Brixton in the first place, just look at his failure – yet again – to do the most rudimentary research.
[...]

Here is why they are so angry with him. Crime in Brixton has been dropping like a stone. In the last year alone robbery is down by 21.5% – 330 fewer street robberies. Burglary is down by 16.8% and car crime by 21.9%. There were 2,000 fewer crimes this year and that comes on top of three years of falling figures: robbery dropped by 36% the previous year, remarkable results year after year.
[...]

As attentive *Guardian* readers should know by now, nationally the risk of being a victim of a crime has fallen by 40% since 1995 – the longest continuous fall in crime since 1898. Burglary has fallen by 39% and car crime by 31%. Violence has dropped too, by 24%.

The media and opposition parties get away with pretending it is not so, by quoting the police recorded figures, which have been rising due to improvements requiring the police to record more, not less, crime. All reputable, non-partisan crime experts think that the British Crime Survey findings are the ones that more accurately measure the way things are moving, even if no figures ever catch the whole truth.

Excerpt 2

Sorry, Polly, you're wrong

Michael Howard, Tuesday 12 October, 2004, *The Guardian*

If you have recently been mugged or burgled, please don't complain. Be positive. According to Polly Toynbee and *The Guardian*, you are living in a virtually crime-free country.

[...]

Her second line of attack was to take refuge in selective statistics. When she talks about crime nationally, Ms Toynbee prays in aid [i.e. uses as supporting evidence] the British Crime Survey. Perhaps she should listen to what the independent Crime and Society Foundation has to say. It argues that there are 'significant flaws' in the BCS and that it 'stretched credibility' to suggest crime is falling. The BCS

excludes lots of crimes from its calculations – such as murder, crimes against children under 16, sexual offences, dealing and taking drugs, and shoplifting. It is estimated that around 12 million crimes a year don't even make it on to the BCS radar.

The most reliable crime statistics – those crimes recorded by the police – show that crime in England and Wales has risen by almost 850,000 in the past five years. While burglary and car crime have fallen, gun crime has doubled; robbery has gone up by more than half; and, most damning of all, violent crime has increased by 83%. Last year, it hit the 1 million mark for the first time ever. That is 3,000 violent crimes every day – more than 100 violent crimes every hour.

Source: <http://politics.guardian.co.uk/conservatives/comment/0,9236,1325006,00.html>

defends the BCS against Howard's attack and argues that the different picture painted by the official statistics, particularly in relation to violent crime, is actually a product of a change in the 'counting rules' (which as we saw above are the administrative rules which govern how the police and other agencies record crime) rather than changes in crime itself.

The most detailed analysis of crime data, comparing BCS and police recorded data, particularly in the most contentious area of trends in violent crime, tends to suggest that the general picture presented by BCS remains the most accurate, with the changes in the counting rules and the introduction of the NCRS having significantly affected

Excerpt 3

Crimes against statistics

As a former home secretary, Michael Howard can't really believe what he is saying about violence in Brixton
Mike Hough, Thursday 14 October, 2004, *The Guardian*

Earlier this week, Michael Howard called Polly Toynbee to task for drawing on British Crime Survey figures about falling crime. 'The most reliable crime statistics – those recorded by the police – show that crime in England and Wales has risen by 850,000 in the past five years', he claimed. He referred to an increase in recorded violent crime of 83% over the past five years nationally, and, in defence of his remarks about Brixton, a rise in violent crime statistics in Lambeth of 10% over the past year.

As a former home secretary, he must be aware that this is a gross misrepresentation of crime trends. Police statistics bear little relation to the reality. The British

Crime Survey (BCS) shows unequivocally that major types of crime have fallen dramatically since 1995: vehicle crime down by half, house burglary down by 47%, assault down by 43%, wounding down by 28%, vandalism down 27%. Mugging shows a small fall that is statistically not significant.

Recorded crime has gone up over the past five years because the police have changed the way that they count crime. In particular, they altered their 'counting rules' in 1998, and introduced a national crime recording standard from 2002. They previously rejected victims' reports of crime if they doubted them; now, under the NCRS, these are taken at face value. Both sets of changes have inflated the police count of crime, and this inflation has been greatest for crimes of violence. That is the reason for the 83% rise in violence that Mr Howard cites.

Source: <http://politics.guardian.co.uk/conservatives/comment/0,9236,1326685,00.html>

police recorded crime. Indeed, Hough *et al.*'s (2005: *vii*) conclusion from their analysis of data on violent crime in England and Wales was that it was 'clear beyond doubt that recorded crime statistics are, in and of themselves, a totally unreliable guide to trends in violent crime since 1998'. Despite the political controversy, particularly around trends in violent crime, most commentators, academic or otherwise, take the view that, overall, crime has continued to decline since peaking somewhere between 1992–1995.

Data on offenders

In discussing criminal statistics we noted that they contained relatively little information about offenders and, rather, tended to focus on offences. Similarly, the nature of surveys such as the BCS means that they focus on victims' experiences and, again, tend to have little to say about perpetrators. We end our discussion in this chapter by looking briefly at some of the main sources of data about offenders and what they have to say about the distribution of offending across different social groups. Much of these data are recent in origin. However, we begin with official data once again, this time derived from something called the *Offenders Index*. This is a database which contains the official criminal histories of people who have been convicted in a criminal court of what are called 'standard list' offences. These offences include all indictable offences and a selection of the more serious summary offences.

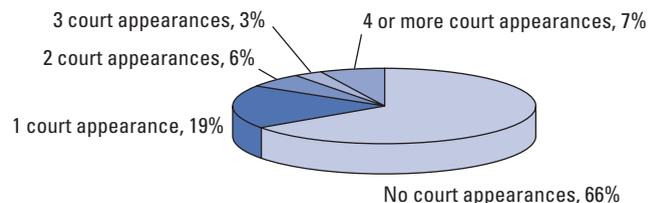
Using this information, Home Office statisticians found that over one-third of adult males will

be convicted in a criminal court of a relatively serious offence. This, to my eyes at least, is one of the more extraordinary criminological findings. Taking all males born in 1953, the Home Office was able to calculate the proportions of adults that had one or more convictions for a standard list offence. Now, before we move to the detailed findings, let's just remind ourselves that these are the more serious offences – the more minor ones, including traffic offences, are excluded. The results are displayed in Figure 3.12.

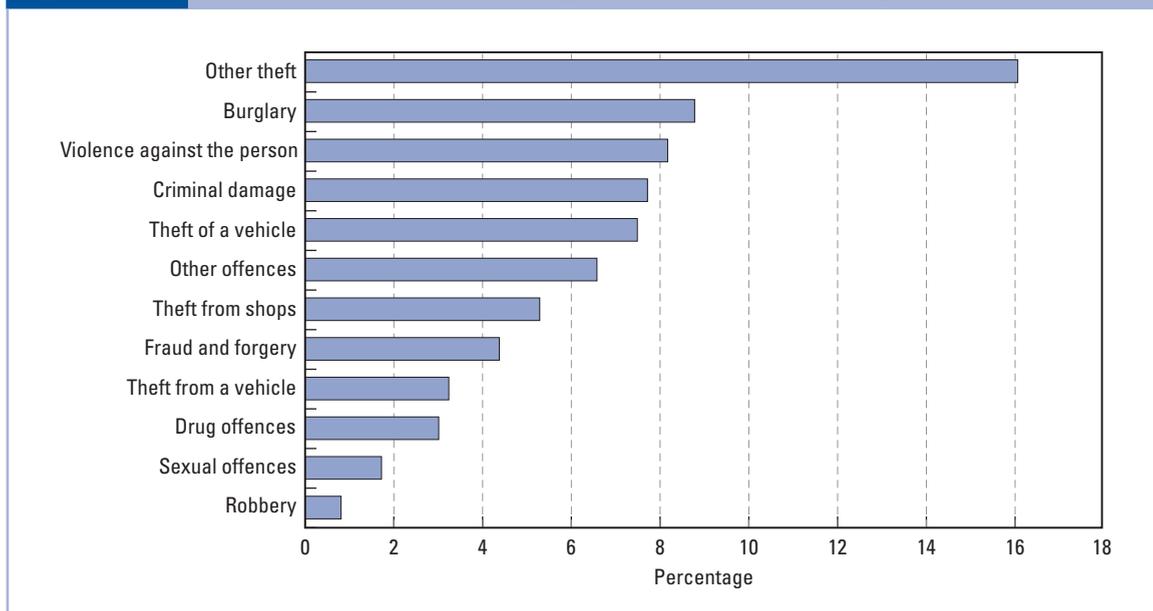
What the pie chart shows is that by their 40th birthday, over one-third of males (34%) had a conviction for a standard list offence, and seven per cent had four or more. What these data also indicate is the very substantial differences between men and women in terms of criminal records – a matter we return to in some detail in Chapter 32. In terms of the offences, the same source of data shows theft offences to be the most common, with 16 per cent of males aged 40 having been convicted of such crimes, with burglary being the next most common (see Figure 3.13).

Fascinating though such data are, they have limitations in the same way all data sources do. Thus, they rely upon information that comes to the attention of the authorities – in this case that small proportion of overall cases that reach the criminal courts. All those offences that are not reported, not recorded, or are not 'cleared up' cannot be taken into account. In order, therefore, to gather fuller information about involvement in offending it is necessary to use survey techniques once again – this time to ask people directly whether they have ever been involved in criminal activity. This approach is what is known as the 'self-report study'.

Figure 3.12 Court appearances of males born in 1953 up to their 40th birthday



Source: Home Office Statistical Bulletin 14/95.

Figure 3.13 Males born in 1953 convicted of specified offences before the age of 40

Source: Home Office Statistical Bulletin 14/95.

Self-report studies

Self-report studies may have a number of objectives. One of the aims, at least early aims, of self-report studies was to develop measures of the extent of crime using very similar definitions of crime to those in *official statistics*, but in a way that would overcome many of the shortcomings of such measures. The aim was to develop a more accurate measure of the extent of crime. Such studies may also be used to explore and possibly test theories that seek to explain crime and offending behaviour. Much recent research on 'risk factors' for example has been based around longitudinal self-report studies. A third aim may be to explore the social distribution of crime and offending.

Self-report studies emerged in the 1940s, developed in the 1950s and 1960s and by the 1980s had become an established criminological method. Coleman and Moynihan (1996) suggest the 'breakthrough' for this method came with Nye's (1958) study of delinquency and family relationships. This and other studies he undertook around this time all used the self-report technique, including a 'delinquency checklist' covering such activities as: driving without a licence; skipping school; criminal damage; underage drinking and using or selling drugs. Though using a somewhat erratic and inconsistent measure of 'delinquency', the studies did

find a fairly strong relationship between delinquency and social class, as well as reinforcing the clear connections between offending and age (see Chapter 29). This was to remain a strong focus for self-report studies for much of the next two decades (and beyond), to be joined in the 1970s by a focus on gender.

In the 1960s a youth survey was undertaken by the University of Michigan, part of which included a self-report element concerning 'behaviour that would get teenagers into trouble if they were caught'. The researchers constructed a 'delinquency scale' which included the types of offences that had been covered by Nye's study, but also included a range of more serious offences, including assault, drug use, theft of a car and carrying a weapon. The researchers found differences in levels of involvement in crime according to sex, age and race – much as self-report studies have continued to do since that time. The self-report technique has become a standard feature of much research on delinquency, especially longitudinal studies, and subsequent studies such as the National Youth Survey that started in the 1970s, through to the Chicago Neighbourhoods study established in the 1990s have added hugely to our knowledge both of the subject and the methodology.

One of the best-known studies in British criminology that has used a self-report instrument as the

core of its approach is the *Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development*, involving a number of academics from the Cambridge Institute of Criminology, but which these days is undoubtedly most closely associated with David Farrington. A longitudinal study of 411 working-class South London males born in the early 1950s and contacted first in 1961–62 when they were eight or nine years old, the study has provided a steady flow of important data for over 40 years. The study has focused on what are now generally referred to as the ‘risk factors’ associated with offending, as well as providing an insight into the differences between self-report studies and official records as measures of the extent of offending. It is worth highlighting some of the findings from the Cambridge cohort study here:

- Prevalence of offending (the proportion of people who have offended) peaks at age 17.
- Individuals who exhibit ‘early onset’ (when they begin to offend) tend to accumulate many more convictions over the life-course than those who exhibit later onset.
- Conviction data suggest that male offenders do not specialise in violent offending.
- Offending frequency is the strongest predictor of whether an individual is a violent offender.
- A small group of individuals in the sample is responsible for a sizeable proportion of all offending activity by those in the group. (Piquero *et al.*, 2007)

During the 1980s and 1990s the use of self-report instruments became particularly popular. In the UK, successive Youth Lifestyles Surveys (YLS) (Graham and Bowling, 1995; Flood-Page *et al.*, 2000) have examined self-reported crime, drug and alcohol use by people aged 14 to 25. In addition, a very large longitudinal study was established in Edinburgh in 1998 and is now beginning to produce very interesting results on the offending ‘careers’ of a cohort of young Scots who were just starting secondary school when the study was first undertaken. Internationally, and especially in the United States, longitudinal studies using self-report instruments have grown markedly in the past decade or more.

Finally, a new survey – the Offending, Crime and Justice Survey (OCJS) – has recently been established in the UK. It is a national longitudinal, self-report offending survey for England and Wales and covers people living in private households. It was first conducted in 2003 and has been repeated

each year until 2006. It has a number of advantages over other surveys, including the YLS, as it includes interviews with children as young as ten and also includes a longitudinal element enabling researchers to follow-up a proportion of respondents in subsequent years (Budd *et al.*, 2005).

Assessing the self-report method

Let us return to the methodological issues raised by self-report studies more generally. We have seen much that is advantageous in using such an approach – particularly when compared with what we can learn about offending from much official data. In short:

- Self-report studies avoid the problems of non-reporting and non-recording associated with police-recorded statistics.
- They do not rely on second- or third-hand accounts, but take information directly from victims/offenders.
- They are not subject to political influence or managerial pressures (they are not, for example, a measure of an organisation’s effectiveness).
- When used as part of longitudinal studies, self-report methods can reveal changes in patterns of offending over the life course that would otherwise be hidden.

What, however, are the difficulties and shortcomings of the self-report method? We can identify the following:

- The inclusion of too many, or too many trivial, items in checklists. This was a particular problem in many early self-report studies. Steven Box (1981) was particularly critical of some early self-report studies for focusing on largely trivial matters.
- There can be difficulties in identifying which items to include in checklists – it is rarely possible to include everything that one is interested in as a researcher.
- There may be difficulties in identifying items for checklists that are distinct and don’t overlap.
- The reference or time period categories can be problematic/vague. Some early studies used entire school career as the time period. The National Youth Survey referred to earlier focused on the three years prior to the survey. It is now more usual to focus on the previous year only. However, difficulties remain. In relation, say, to self-reported drug use, the reference period options are often: ‘in the last month; ‘in the last

year; and, 'ever'. This doesn't, for example, help identify anyone that might be using daily or who might in other ways be considered a 'frequent' user.

- Questions are often raised about the accuracy of respondent's recall of events that are not particularly recent. Can we recall accurately what happened to us in the past year?
- Although self-report methods may overcome some of the problems associated with official statistics, it cannot be assumed that respondents are always entirely truthful. Are people always willing to disclose what they have done, or what has happened to them? Research suggests that in practice self-report studies have a high level of validity – people tend not to lie/exaggerate/mislead. Nevertheless, there are bound to be limits to the accuracy of such data.

Maguire (2007: 289) offers the following astute general observation:

[J]ust as victim surveys are vastly more effective in revealing 'hidden' instances of some kinds of crime than of others, so the perpetrators of different kinds of offence are not equally well 'revealed' through the medium of self-report studies. Thus, while respondents tend to be asked in great detail about the relatively visible kinds of anti-social activity which are associated with the court appearances of adolescents, they are not often asked whether they have assaulted their partners or sexually abused their children, nor whether they have perpetrated a significant financial fraud.

His conclusion, therefore, is that there is much to commend the use of self-report surveys and, possibly, they might one day enable us to explore areas of offending – particularly within families and in the commercial and financial sectors – where currently research is somewhat hampered. As such his conclusion reminds us that all sources of data tend to have both strengths and limitations. It is important to understand these so that data can be utilised appropriately. 'Crime' is not something that is, or ever could be, measured with complete accuracy. It is possible, however, to produce reasonable and relatively reliable *estimates* of levels and trends. The fact that such estimates should always be treated with caution should not stop us from always trying to use the best available measures when discussing trends in crime, in seeking constantly to refine the methods of measurement available to us, and from challenging those who use faulty data or make unsupported claims about the nature of crime and crime trends.

Review questions

- 1 Which two main changes affected official crime statistics after 1998?
- 2 What is a 'standard list' offence?
- 3 Approximately what proportion of males have a criminal conviction by their 40th birthday?
- 4 What sorts of studies use the self-report method?

Questions for further discussion

- 1 What are the main strengths and weaknesses of official crime statistics?
- 2 What are the main strengths and weaknesses of victimization surveys?
- 3 Discuss what is meant by, and what we know about, the 'dark figure' of crime?
- 4 How are the differing crime trends in recent years that are revealed by these two data sources to be explained?
- 5 Can we say with any accuracy how much crime there is in our society?

Further reading

Though now out of date it is well worth studying: Bottomley, K. and Pease, K. (1993) *Crime and Punishment: Interpreting the data*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press

Excellent treatments of the issues can be found in: Coleman, C. and Moynihan, J. (1996) *Understanding Crime Data*, Buckingham: Open University Press

Maguire, M. (2007) Crime data and statistics, in Maguire, M. *et al.* (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Criminology*, 4th edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Hough, M. and Maxfield, M. (eds) (2007) *Surveying Crime in the 21st Century*, Cullompton: Willan

For coverage of slightly different issues you might also consult:

Hope, T. (2005) What do crime statistics tell us? In Hale, C. *et al.* (eds) *Criminology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Websites

There really is no substitute for looking at the various Home Office websites. There is an extraordinary amount of information there, ranging from annual publications such as *Criminal Statistics* to specific Statistical Bulletins analysing particular issues and specialised research studies. The best starting points are:

<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pubsintro1.html> – the homepage of Home Office RDS publications

<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pubsstatistical.html> – a listing of all statistical publications

<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/horsarchive.html> – the archive of Home Office Research Studies which contains all the early BCS reports

If you want to look at crime data from other jurisdictions there are a number of very good websites you can visit. These include:

Scottish Executive – www.scotland.gov.uk

US Department of Justice – <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/>

Council of Europe's Sourcebook – <http://www.european-sourcebook.org/>

Statistics Canada – www.statcan.ca

Australian Bureau of Statistics – <http://www.abs.gov.au/>

Students who have the inclination and confidence to play around with primary data can get access to the British Crime Survey itself via the ESRC Data Archive at Essex University: <http://www.data-archive.ac.uk/findingData/bcrsTitles.asp>

Finally it is worth keeping an eye on the website of the Radical Statistics Group for occasional papers providing a different, critical view of the uses (and abuses) of crime data: <http://www.radstats.org.uk/crime.htm>

