



Critically Review Official Statistics

Lesley Pugsley

Determined attempts to quantify social phenomena have allowed bureaucratic organisations to collect numerical data from increasingly diverse sources, in seemingly ever increasing volume. For many, there is a certain amount of comfort to be had from columns of figures, bar charts and percentages and we take for granted that statistical data will be derived from sources such as census forms, tax returns, and labour market surveys. From a positivistic perspective numbers provide 'facts', however it is important to remember that facts are themselves social constructs and these do not necessarily equate with truths. While official statistics provide one useful source of data, they should not be taken as wholly unproblematic; rather the resultant evidence needs to be seen as an artifact of the method. As such, there is equal need for critical evaluation of official statistics as there is with data collected via all other approaches.

The value of statistics should not be overlooked, governments and other agencies are extremely skilled at generating large-scale statistical data sets which can be used to generalize findings and allow for comparisons to be made over time. However there are also problems with statistics which are located in and around the ways in which the data are collected, collated and interpreted which we need to be aware of when we look to these data sets to inform our thinking. Political ideologies can manipulate political concerns and control power relations in shaping public perceptions and understandings and influencing institutional practices in terms of how particular phenomena are defined. These definitions in turn will influence what is counted, by whom, how, when and why.

If we take official crime statistics as an example, we can illustrate the ways in which official statistics are distorted and manipulated at different levels. Official Crime statistics are produced annually in the UK and they serve to provide two main types of data for the police, criminologists, the media and the public. The statistics enable statements to be made relating to the 'total' number of crimes which have been committed during the previous year. And this figure is then used to compare crime rates over time. Frequently the media use such statistics to generate 'moral panics' about rising youth crime, crimes against property or sexual assaults for example. These official statistics also provide evidence for social profiling, so enabling information on the social characteristics of those who have committed the offences to be produced. It is possible therefore for crimes and 'criminal' groups to be the subject of political and media manipulation.

What we need to remember is that in order for any offence to become an official statistic, it needs to go through a series of three different social interactions. Firstly in order to 'count', a crime needs to be reported to the police and this in itself involves decisions on 'what' and 'what not' to report. Not wanting to become involved, not considering the offence worthy of reporting, or simply failing to perceive an action as criminal can all result in a failure to notify the authorities of an event. Once a decision has been made to report, a further decision needs to be made, the police need to be convinced that a crime has occurred and be prepared to record it as such. The relevant agencies, the police and then the criminal prosecution service must make the decision to investigate the offence and prosecute the offender.

It is clear that a number of offences are not known to the police, or are not recorded and acted upon by them. However, an even smaller proportion of offenders are successfully prosecuted, currently police clear up rates of serious offences stands at between 30-40% (a possible over-estimation) and the stereotypical young offender popularly portrayed in the media is male, working class and Afro-Caribbean. Crime statistics which are used to suggest that criminals comprise a deviant, small minority of the population perpetuates a notion of 'difference' which allows for biological and social characteristics to be used in order to 'explain' crime and criminal activity. But self-report studies, which use questionnaires and interviews to ask individuals about the number of crimes they have committed, reject this view. While not entirely reliable, these studies have been found to be 80% accurate and indicate a consistent police bias against some social groups and the studies of crime, which do not appear in the official statistics, would suggest, to the contrary, that crime is widespread throughout all strata

of society. White collar crimes, so called 'victim-less' crimes such as corporate tax evasion, fraud, breaking of trade regulations, food and drug laws and safety regulations in industry are widespread. Prosecution of such cases is rare, in the thalidomide affair no individual was ever found guilty of a criminal offence and only one court case, conducted in Canada, for compensation for one deformed baby was ever completed. Delaying tactics by corporate lawyers resulted in out of court settlements.

Since 1983, in an attempt to overcome some of these limitations relating to official statistics, there have been a number of 'victim' surveys. These ask individuals if they have been the victims of any crime in the previous year, if so what action they had taken and what response had they received from the police. The results confirmed that the official statistics were highly unreliable. Vandalism, theft from motor vehicles, bicycle thefts, and sexual offences are frequently under-reported. Many individuals felt that the offence was too trivial to report, or that there might be reprisals, or social stigma result from the offence becoming public knowledge. Insurance companies now insist that claims for compensation, following theft, must have a police file number. This has led to an increase in the levels of reported and recorded household thefts, however the surveys note that a third of all crimes against property reported, are not recorded by the police

Official statistics do serve a useful function, highlighting trends and changes over time – however, they should not be treated as absolutes. Those seeking to read and critically appraise research papers which are informed by official statistics would do well to remember that their production is problematic and treat the findings with a degree of caution.

Further Information

Pilkington, A. *Measuring Crime*. Sociological Review. Nov 1995 pp15 - 18

Coleman, C and Moynihan, J. *Understanding Crime Data: haunted by the dark figure*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press 1996

For Health Statistics see: Department of Health
www.dh.gov.uk/en/publicationsandstatistics

Corty, E. (2007). *Using and Interpreting Statistics: A Practical Guide for Health and Behavioural Sciences*. Mosby Elsevier.

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Dr Lesley Pugsley – formerly Senior Lecturer in Medical Education, Postgraduate Medical & Dental Education (PGMDE), Wales Deanery, Cardiff University.

Series Editor

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