

Measuring Crime Rates

The latest crime stats, released by the Office for National Statistics, show conflicting trends. On the one hand the Police stats show an increase of 13% in recorded crimes but the Crime Survey indicates a continuing and significant long-term fall. So what's going on! A good starting point is what are recorded as crimes and how this has differed over time. Take for example internet crime such as fraud and financial 'theft' that has risen with the enormous growth of internet transactions.

The Crime Survey is tricky too. Leaving aside sampling methods it is about perceptions and how these are recorded. There are several complicating factors. First is perceptions of crime as distinct from being victims. The inclusion of new categories makes comparison difficult. This raises the question are all crimes treated equally or is some form of weighting given to differentiate crimes. More serious crimes are picked up through Police recording systems.

Not only are these excluded from the Crime Survey but may skew the findings as the Survey focuses on those crimes deemed less serious. This then leads onto serious crimes recorded by the Police such as murder and also violence and sexual offences of an extremely serious nature. The impression is these may be increasing but by how much? The difficulty here is they are incorporated with other data so these crimes require separating out.

Added to this is the statement expressing concerns over previous Police recording practice. This suggests variation, not only in what crimes are included or excluded, but how they are recorded. Ian Bell points to an increase in some serious crimes, including burglary, knife crime and vehicle theft but no mention of much more serious crimes. The final concern is the mix of data between Police recorded crime and the Crime Survey. We simply do not know.

At issue is the actuality, trends, accuracy and completeness of the crime picture. It is worth remarking that Increasing crime may spread alarm, raising concerns about personal safety, underlying causes, crime clear-up rates and effects of cuts to police budgets. Ask yourself – if presenting crime stats does it pay to be fully transparent; a case of head above the parapet!

Crime – how worried should we be about the latest figures?

Office for National Statistics: Iain Bell - November 1, 2017

Categories: Crime, ONS, Population

Since ONS released its latest statistics there's been much talk of a '13% increase in crime'. But that number only reflects crimes recorded by the police. To understand trends in crime we need to look at a range of crime types and sources, as Iain Bell explains...

The recent headlines about an apparent '13% increase' in overall crime are based on the police recording a growing volume of crime in England and Wales. But our main measure of trends, the Crime Survey for England and Wales, has shown a substantial long-term fall since the mid-1990s. Given these differing indications, what is really happening and why do we even have two sources?

ONS thinks improvements to recording practice by police is the single most important factor behind the 13% increase in police recorded crime. Taking the long view, quite clearly crime has been falling and from the available evidence crime itself has not risen by 13% in the last

year. So how did we get there? The key source of crime statistics is the Crime Survey for England and Wales – a representative sample of the public about their personal experiences of crime. This survey looks at crime through the eyes of victims. It does not ask questions relating to every conceivable type of crime but it does evolve to pick up new trends. Questions on fraud and other aspects of online crime have been added in the last few years.

Some crime types can't be picked up or reliably measured through the survey for a variety of reasons – for example murder, serious sexual offences, possession of a knife and motoring offences. This is where police recorded crime can help supplement the survey and contribute to the overall picture.

Importantly, this means we should not place too much importance on the overall change to police recorded crime – the key word here is “recorded”. This means that changes in recording practices over time can impact the trend. The police have been recording more of the offences brought to their attention over the last three years. This followed concerns over recording practices, which resulted in the removal of the National Statistics status for police recorded crime. This then led to ongoing audits of recording by the inspectorate of constabulary.

ONS thinks that greater recording of crimes is the most important factor behind the 13% increase. However, we also think there have been genuine increases in some types of crime that are thought to have always been well-recorded in the police figures, among them knife crime, burglary and vehicle theft. So given police recorded crime does not provide an overview of trends in total crime, is the fall in the crime survey plausible?

Initial estimates after the first year including fraud and other online crimes show that these crimes are of high volume. They will add nearly as much to the survey-derived crime total as all the other crimes included in the existing headline trends.

It is likely, then, that some of the fall in crime as measured through the survey is due to a switch in types of criminal activity to online, but even allowing for this the headline measure from the survey peaked in 1995, 8.4 million above the estimate which now includes online fraud. This peak was long before internet use became widespread. So taking the long view, crime is clearly falling.

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The January release will be the first where we have two years of data from the new questions relating to online crime. This will shed further light on recent trends once these new data are included; but quite clearly from available sources crime overall has not risen by 13%.

Meanwhile, we need to reflect on what can be done better to inform debate. When no single source can provide the overview, it is our job to make sense of these. We need to provide an overview for users of our statistics of trends in crime both by crime type and overall. We will be working to develop this with users over the coming months to ensure that the next release in January makes these key messages clear for all users.

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