

MEASURING THE EXTENT OF CRIME

Question: Is crime on the increase?

Background: The public's general fear of crime frequently leads to questions about the extent of crime. Is crime going up? Are there more victims of violent crime than before? The questions are numerous but the sometimes confusing and contradictory answers often leave the average citizen no better informed than they were before asking the questions. When information is given that appears contradictory, it leaves the public distrustful of the information. Therefore, it is the responsibility of those who convey information on crime to explain the different measures of crime and how they differ.

Method: Crime is measured in many different ways. A review of the literature and government statistical reports regarding the measurement of crime was conducted. This review was intended to summarize and explain, in a non-technical manner, the various approaches for measuring crime. Moreover, an analysis was undertaken to assess whether there have been changes in crime over time and whether the public's fear of crime is related to crime statistics.

Answer: There are two general methods used in the reporting of crime. The first, often referred to as *official reports*, is based upon crimes reported to the police. These are the statistics released by the Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, an agency of Statistics Canada, and usually reported in the media. Examining officially reported crime, we find that the crime rate (the number of crimes per 100,000 population) has been falling steadily for the past six years. However, because the statistics are based upon crimes *reported to the police*, there is concern that this measure underestimates the extent of crime. For example, some crimes go unreported because victims feel that there is nothing to be gained (e.g., minor thefts) or they choose to keep the act hidden (e.g., sexual assault from a spouse).

A second measure attempts to address the problem of under-reporting noted with official crime statistics. These are surveys asking people whether they have been victims of different crimes. Questions on criminal victimization form part of the General Social Survey (GSS) held every five years. In addition, periodic, specialized surveys have been conducted. These

surveys find that approximately 40% of crimes go unreported to the police. Furthermore, results from the 1988 and 1993 GSS have shown no change in such crimes as assault and theft and a decrease in others (e.g., robbery).

In general, the results from both types of measures indicate that both violent and nonviolent crimes are decreasing. Despite the downward trend in crime, incarceration rates remain relatively high in Canada (i.e., the second highest among Western countries) and public fear of crime is high.

Policy Implications:

1. Both officially reported crimes and victimization surveys have shown decreases in crime over the past few years. It is important that this downward trend is conveyed to the public, policy advisors and policy makers to ensure that discussions on criminal justice policy are based upon

objective and reliable information about crime.

2. Even though crime has been decreasing, the public's fear of crime remains high. Conveying objective information about crime may contribute to allaying some of the public's fears regarding crime but this is insufficient by itself. Research aimed at identifying other factors that contribute to fear of crime is needed.

Source: Bonta, J., & Hanson, R. K. (1994). *Gauging the Risk for Violence: Measurement, Impact and Strategies for Change* (User Report 1994 – 09). Ottawa: Solicitor General Canada.

Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics. *Canadian Crime Statistics, 1997. Juristat, 18* (11). Ottawa: Statistics Canada.

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