

Chapter 3: What do crime statistics tell us?

Taking crime to mean a “category of human acts that are proscribed by law and for which those responsible, if found guilty, are liable to some form of judicial punishment” this chapter explores a number of interrelated questions regarding the state of our knowledge about 'crime levels', 'crime patterns' and 'crime trends'.

The chapter begins by looking at the background against which crime statistics are defined and tries to examine the answers to what may sound like (but are not) straightforward empirical and methodological questions.

Generally crime statistics have been theorised applying two polarised views. The “realist perspective” (Emile Durkheim) that sees the official record as an indicator of the state of crime in society and the “constructivist perspective” (Aaron Cicourel) which concluded that official statistics could be understood only with reference to the way in which the agencies responsible for them carried out their work. With these in mind the chapter attempts to provide answers to these questions including ‘what is a crime statistic?’ ‘who counts crime?’ ‘what is counted and how is crime counted?’

The chapter goes on to consider what factors affect whether the police record something as a criminal offence and methods used for comparing counts of incidences and offences. Criminal offences may be carefully defined in law, but they are also *socially* defined and constructed: whether people perceive a particular action or event as a crime, let alone whether they report it as such to anyone else (including the police, or a survey interviewer), can vary according to their own knowledge, awareness or feelings about crime, which in turn may be influenced by the general public ‘mood’ or the preoccupations of politicians and the media. The Chapter focuses on household crime and victimisation surveys to investigate the accuracy of measurement in crime surveys and what these crime surveys therefore tell us about the reporting of crime and the counting of crime and its accuracy. The statistics in this chapter are essentially “descriptive” and the chapter concludes by setting out the dangers with using description alone and concludes it should be coupled with analysis to provide a more truthful picture of what crime statistics represent.