

# THE EXTENT OF CRIME

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## 1. HOW CAN WE KNOW THE AMOUNT OF CRIME IN SOCIETY?

There are four main ways:

- i) crimes known to the police;
- ii) public responding to victim surveys;
- iii) self-report studies of offenders
- iv) crimes known to other agencies (eg hospital accident wards, battered women's refuges)

## 2. WHAT IS THE DARK FIGURE?

The dark figure is the volume of crime which is not registered in the criminal statistics. This was first recognised by the statistician, Adolphe Quetelet, in the 1830s. All methods of collecting statistics have a dark figure, but victimisation surveys are the most accurate, eg British Crime Survey (BCS) and, in the US, The National Crime Survey (NCS).

## 3. HOW BIG IS THE DARK FIGURE?

The 2000 BCS estimates the true extent of crime is four and a half times larger than that recorded, that is 77% of crime is in the dark figure.

## 4. IS THE CRIME RATE INCREASING?

No, it is decreasing. The BCS suggests that there has been a 10% fall in crime between 1997 and 1999 which followed a 15% fall between 1995 and 1997, that is from 1995 to 1999 an overall 23% fall. The crime rate:

- increased between 1981 and 1991 at 3% per year;
- sharply increased between 1991 and 1993 at 11% per year;
- levelled off between 1993 and 1995 at less than 2% per year;
- decreased between 1995 and 1999 at 6% per year.

## 5. IS VIOLENT CRIME INCREASING?

No, violent crime fell by 20% from 1995 to 1999 with falls occurring in all offence categories but robbery. (But many of these robberies are against 14 year olds.) But in the long term there has been an increase of 50% since 1981.

## 6. HOW DOES THIS COMPARE WITH THE FIGURES OF CRIMES KNOWN TO THE POLICE?

Recorded crime fell by 0.2% in the last year to September 2000. This represents the sixth fall in the last seven years. property crimes have fallen similarly (6/7) but crimes of violence have had the ninth increase in the last ten years.

The divergence with the BCS figures is largely because of changes in recording levels.

#### 7. IS THE DECREASE IN CRIME UNIQUE TO ENGLAND AND WALES?

No, there has been a decrease in crime in 12 of 17 advanced industrial countries between 1993 and 1995. This has created great attention in the US where the rate of homicide has fallen 36% from 1991 to 1998. (See *The Crime Drop in America* (ed) A Blumstein and J Wallman, 2000).

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#### FURTHER READING

1. C Coleman and J Moynihan, 1996, *Understanding Crime Data: Haunted by the Dark Figure*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Good general overview.

2. J Mooney, 2000, *Gender, Violence and the Social Order*. London: Macmillan.

A good discussion of the limitations of victimisation surveys and the need for sensitive research in the area of domestic violence.

3. J Young, 1999, *The Exclusive Society*, Ch.5. London: Macmillan.

For a critique of zero-tolerance policing and the excessive use of imprisonment.