

Balanced Justice

Crime statistics – the real picture

Although crime statistics can help to provide a picture of the current situation regarding crime, it is important to understand the limitation of crime statistics when interpreting them.

Crime statistic sources

Information about crime trends in Australia comes from two main sources – police statistics and crime victim surveys.

Police statistics count all the incidents recorded as crimes by the police during the year in each state and territory. These statistics are generally reported as *incidence* measures, that is, a count of reported crimes, usually presented as a rate between the number of crimes and the number of people in the general population.¹ National figures on a selection of important crimes are published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in an annual report.

Major crime victim surveys are conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics and these surveys ask people aged 15 years and over whether they have experienced particular crimes over the past 12 months. Crime survey results are usually based on *prevalence* measures, that is, the number of crime victims, usually expressed as a percentage of people or households that experienced the crime, regardless of the number of times victimised.²

Reliability of crime statistics

The greatest weakness of police statistics is that not all crimes are reported to or recorded by the police. There are only a few types of crimes where virtually all the offences are reported to or discovered by police (e.g. motor vehicle theft, homicide).³ This means that the police statistics produced may not reflect the true crime situation.

While the anonymity associated with crime victim surveys helps to avoid some of the problems associated with the underreporting of crimes to

police (i.e. fear of retribution or fear of giving evidence), it is important to note that despite the name, crime victim surveys are not surveys of victims of crime. Crime victim surveys are representative sample surveys of a defined population (usually the adult population) which can be used to obtain estimates of the prevalence of certain types of crimes in the population and estimates of the proportions of victims reporting these crimes to the police.⁴ As crime victim surveys measure both reported and unreported crimes, these surveys have the potential to give a more accurate picture of the true prevalence of crime than police statistics.⁵ However, in order for crime victim surveys to accurately reflect the true crime situation, the sample surveys must be truly representative of the population.

Is crime increasing?

Queensland Police statistics show that in Queensland, between 2000 and 2011:

- homicide rate fell by 56%
- assault rate fell by 10%
- robbery rate fell by 39%
- sexual assault rate fell by 31%
- drug offence rate fell by 1%.⁶

National crime statistics show that between 2000 and 2009, the national homicide rate fell by 39 per cent, the national robbery rate fell by 55 per cent, the national motor vehicle theft rate fell by 62 per cent and all forms of other theft fell by 39 per cent.⁷

Crime victim surveys also show a decrease in assault, robbery, break-in and malicious property damage rates between 2008-09 and 2011-12.⁸

Therefore, considering the above, crime rates appear to be on the decline.

Balanced Justice

Public perception

Despite the reality that crime rates are falling, it is a commonly held view amongst Australians that crime is on the rise.⁹ The reason for this view can likely be attributed to distorted, misrepresented or exaggerated facts on crime in the media and by politicians and the police.¹⁰

Although there are various ways that the media abuse crime statistics, a common method is the selective reporting of data. This usually involves comparing a period where the recorded crime rate is unusually low with a period where the crime rate is unusually high, resulting in a completely distorted view on the 'trend' in crime rates.¹¹ An obvious motivation for the manipulation of crime statistics is the increased public attention which such sensationalised statistics attract.

Politicians and police also engage in the selective use of data, selective reporting of the facts and misleading commentary, in order to manipulate crime statistics in a way which best suits their objectives.¹² Reasons for doing so may include the downplaying of certain statistics, or the bolstering of support for a proposed legislative reform.

Balanced Justice view

Unlike New South Wales, Western Australia and South Australia, Queensland does not have an agency which independently compiles, analyses and publishes crime statistics.

On 27 June 2013, the Queensland Police Service introduced the 'Online Crime Statistics Portal'. This portal enables community members to access crime statistics for their street, suburb, postcode, local government area, neighbourhood watch area or police region, district or division. While we welcome the public having increased access to crime statistics, we are concerned that by encouraging community members to focus on crime statistics in a particular area, communities may end up with a skewed perspective about crime activities occurring in Queensland and make incorrect

assumptions about what is happening across the state.

Therefore, to ensure that the community is properly informed, we believe that a crime statistics agency, which is independent of police and government, should be established in Queensland. This agency's role would be to monitor crime statistics and crime recording practices, publish regular reports on crime trends, provide statistical information to the community and provide independent advice to the government.

References

- ¹ Henderson, M, 'Australia Crime Trends' (2012) 24(1) *Legaldate* 2 at 2.
- ² As above.
- ³ Weatherburn, D, 'Uses and Abuses of Crime Statistics' (2011) November (No. 153) *Crime and Justice Bulletin: Contemporary Issues in Crime and Justice* 1 at 3.
- ⁴ As above at 2.
- ⁵ As above at 3.
- ⁶ Queensland Police Service, *Reported Offence Rates July 1997 to June 2012*, published at < <http://www.police.qld.gov.au/services/reportsPublications/>> (28 March 2013).
- ⁷ Weatherburn, D, 'Uses and Abuses of Crime Statistics' (2011) November (No. 153) *Crime and Justice Bulletin: Contemporary Issues in Crime and Justice* 1 at 1.
- ⁸ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Crime Victimization, Australia, 2011-12*, published at < <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/4530.0>> (28 March 2013); Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Crime Victimization, Australia, 2008-09*, published at <<http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/allprimarymainfeatures/E929631D0E1956F1CA257839000DEF96?opendocument>> (28 March 2013).
- ⁹ Weatherburn, D, 'Uses and Abuses of Crime Statistics' (2011) November (No. 153) *Crime and Justice Bulletin: Contemporary Issues in Crime and Justice* 1 at 1; Gelb, K, 'More Myths and Misconceptions' (2008) *Sentencing Advisory Council* at 4 <https://sentencingcouncil.vic.gov.au/content/publications/more-myths-and-misconceptions> (28 March 2013).
- ¹⁰ Weatherburn, D, 'Uses and Abuses of Crime Statistics' (2011) November (No. 153) *Crime and Justice Bulletin: Contemporary Issues in Crime and Justice* 1 at 1.
- ¹¹ As above at 10.
- ¹² As above.

This factsheet was updated on 28 June 2013

This factsheet is for information and discussion purposes only. It does not represent the views of organisations involved in the Balanced Justice Project.