Are crime statistics and surveys hiding the real extent of domestic forms of violence?

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The most recent published police recorded crime statistics indicate that violent crime has been declining steadily since 2002/03 and is now at its lowest level since 1974 (Scottish Government, 2015a). The 2014/15 Scottish Crime and Justice Survey, which is used as an independent source of comparative information on crime trends, shows a significant 41% decline in violence since 2008/09, and suggests that the decline has been even sharper over that period than is reflected by the police figures (Scottish Government, 2015b).

Data from the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) also reveals that crime has fallen, by an incredible 66% since 1995, with levels for the year ending December 2015 sitting at an all time low (ONS, 2016). However, long term trends in crime as measured by the police in England and Wales are no longer published due to concerns about the quality and reliability of the data.

How good are police recorded crime statistics?

In 2002, National Crime Recording Standards were introduced in England and Wales in an effort to improve and standardise police recording practice. However, from 2006/07 onwards crime appeared to fall faster according to the police statistics than estimates from the CSEW. The timing is significant as it coincided with the period when the Audit Commission stopped scrutiny of the police recorded crime statistics. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) concluded that some police forces may have been guilty of a “gradual erosion of compliance” and referred the matter to the new government statistics watchdog, the UK Statistics Authority (UKSA). UKSA which took the unprecedented step of downgrading the status of the police recorded crime data in England and Wales from ‘national’ to ‘official’ statistics.

A damning report by the Public Administration Select Committee (PASC, 2014) highlighted a general lack of compliance with the Crime Recording Standards and criticised the target-setting culture within police forces for driving perverse incentives to mis-record crime. A review of all 43 forces concluded that there was widespread under-recording and a particular lack of accuracy in the recording of some crimes, such as violence against the person and sexual crimes. Indeed, HMIC estimated that 33% of all violent offences that should have been recorded as crimes were missing from the official figures (HMIC, 2014).

Crime Recording Standards were also introduced to Scotland in 2004, although there was nothing like the same level scrutiny over recording practices within the eight Scottish forces. Following the intervention of the UKSA in England and Wales a decade later, the watchdog chose to reassess the recorded crime statistics in Scotland published by the Scottish Government. While less direct evidence of data problems were found at the operational level, the UKSA also downgraded the status of the Scottish police recorded crime data and urged the Scottish Government to develop a stronger framework of assurance around these statistics.

How do the crime surveys stand up to scrutiny?

Crime surveys were introduced to the UK in the early 1980s as an alternative and more accurate means of measuring the ‘dark figure of crime’ that is, crime that went unreported to and unrecorded by the police. Essentially, a sample of the population report how many crimes they have experienced and a multiplier is used to gross these figures up to reflect the number of adults in the population. For over twenty years, the methodology for creating these estimates has been largely unquestioned. However, a team of researchers from Lancaster University have now cast doubt on their reliability.

Walby et al (2015) applied a new methodology for analysing the CSEW data that involved removing a ‘cap’ that is applied...
by the survey contractors at the time of calculating the crime rates. They also calculated rolling averages across years rather than just analysing one year at a time to even out any irregularities from year to year. Their approach suggests that, rather than showing a decreasing trend, the rate of violent crime may actually have been increasing over recent years.

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What is a ‘cap’ and why is it applied to crime survey data?

When respondents to the CSEW are interviewed they are asked whether they have experienced a number of different forms of victimisation during the previous year. If they have, information is collected by means of a ‘victim form’ about whether they were victims of a ‘single’ incident or a ‘series’ of incidents (i.e. very similar incidents, where the same thing was done under the same circumstances and probably by the same people). Where respondents report in the victim form that a series of six or more incidents occurred within the last year, this number is ‘capped’ at five so that the national estimates are not affected by those respondents who report an extremely high number of crimes that may be variable between years. The fact that incidents of violence, and especially domestic or partner-related violence, has a higher likelihood of having a repeated pattern means that it is more susceptible to the capping process, as Walby and colleagues found.

The researchers looked at three forms of violence: all violent crime, violent crime against women, and domestic violence. Using the standard method applied to CSEW data, it appeared that rates of all violence and violence against women had declined steadily and consistently between 1994 and 2013/14, whereas domestic violence had also decreased from 1994 but plateaued from 2008/09 onwards.

Using the new methodology, rates of all three forms of violent crime had indeed declined between 1994 and 2008/09, but thereafter they had increased steadily to 2013/14 (Walby et al, 2015). Furthermore, by removing the ‘cap’ on the data, they revealed 60% more violent crime than had previously been reported from the survey. This increase was concentrated in violence against women and incidents that involved domestic relations and acquaintances, rather than violence perpetrated by strangers. In other words, the process of capping the data was concealing vast amounts of violent crime, particularly incidents committed in domestic situations and against women.

Do Scottish data on domestic abuse show an increase?

Trend data in Scotland show a significant decline between 2008/09 and 2014/15 in the experience of both physical and psychological abuse experienced by individuals over their lifetime (since age 16), and in the last year (Murray 2016). However, there was no significant change in reported partner abuse between 2012/13 and 2014/15. This is despite evidence of a 2.5% increase in domestic abuse according to the police recorded crime statistics (Scottish Government, 2015c). So could capping be concealing hidden violence in the Scottish crime survey data?

In theory the Scottish data are likely to present a more accurate trend, because they are collected in the self-completion part of the survey, not through the victim form. However, these data cannot be used to provide an accurate estimate of the number of incidents of domestic violence across Scotland.

This seems to be out of kilter with the current direction of policy around domestic violence, including First Minister Nicola Sturgeon’s pledge to consider introducing a specific offence of domestic abuse. If such an offence is to be introduced, it will be imperative to determine accurate ways of recording at police statistics level and to introduce on a way of measuring domestic violence that can produce reliable estimates at the national level.

The ONS has now begun to examine the impact of capping, not only on violence but on a range of crime types, with a view to considering whether increasing the cap or removing it entirely would improve the survey estimates. It remains to be seen whether the Scottish Government will follow suit, although this is not likely to be productive unless further work is done to provide an accurate estimate of domestic abuse based on the victim form component of the survey.

In our modern era of big data and advanced computational methodologies, it is imperative that we do all that we can to uncover ‘hidden crime’ and, where necessary, challenge traditional practice around the recording of crime and revise statistical procedures for survey data that were established almost three decades ago.

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