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

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IN SCOTLAND, 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 scrutinising 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
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
crime survey 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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