

Limitations of Crime Data

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There are a many factors that limit an understanding of the 'true' picture of crime. Some years ago, one researcher identified how the following factors contributed to the actual reporting and recording of a criminal incident.

1. **Social organisation of crime detection** – in its simplest, police receive information about crime in two ways: (1) the public report crimes and provide information and (2) police observe crime through their routine patrols. Police patrols will necessarily only observe particular (public) offences and given the tyranny of distance confronted by Australian policing agencies, the chances of being detected through routine police patrolling are small.
2. **Relationship between the victim and offender** - the reporting of crime is affected by the relationship between the victim and offender. Crimes committed by partners or parents, for example, might be less likely to be reported to police than those offences committed by strangers. This is one reason why crimes like domestic violence and sexual assault have low reporting rates.
3. **Legal seriousness** – the seriousness of an offence will determine the likelihood of a particular incident being reported. For example, minor damage to property might not be reported to police by property owners, because they do not believe that an offender will be apprehended or that it warrants someone being charged.
4. **Complainant status** – an incident reported to police will not always be recorded as a crime on a relevant database. For example, some people will request that police take no action against the offender or perhaps through previous involvement with the victim (or witness), police might not take a complaint seriously. For these reasons, a crime might not be recorded on the police database.¹

These characteristics result in some crimes having higher reporting rates than others. Offences resulting in death or those that require reporting to police for insurance claims (stolen motor vehicle or break and enter of a residential premise) will have higher reporting rates than offences where the victim knows the offender (sexual assault and domestic violence, for example).

It is also important to understand that while some crimes will be reported, not all will end up with a person being charged and punished:

“When examining our [crime] statistics it must be remembered that not every crime is reported to the police, not every crime that is reported is recorded, not every crime that is recorded is investigated, and not every crime that is investigated is cleared (solved), not every crime that is investigated yields a suspect, not every suspect is apprehended, not every apprehended person is charged, not every charged person is brought before the courts, not every person brought before the courts is convicted, and not every convicted person is imprisoned”.²

Therefore, great caution should be exercised in analysing and interpreting any crime data.

¹ Black, D. (1970) 'Production of Crime Rates', *American Psychological Review*, 35, pp 733-748.

² Graycar, A. and Grabosky, P. (2002) *Trends in Australian Crime and Criminal Justice*, in Graycar, A. and Grabosky, P. (eds)

The Cambridge Handbook of Australian Criminology, Cambridge University Press, Port Melbourne, Australia