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The Accuracy of FBI Crime Statistics

If the core mission of the police is to prevent and solve crime, then crime rates should be an important measure of police activity. Crime rates, recorded annually, would reflect the amount, as well as any increase or decrease in the amount of crime in a community. One of the most frequently used sources of crime rates is the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Uniform Crime Report (UCR). The report contains data on seven serious, commonly occurring, and commonly reported offenses including murder and non-negligent manslaughter, forcible rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny/theft, and motor vehicle theft. The number of these reported crimes, when collected annually and combined with population allows for the calculation of crime rates for a community and can present a more accurate or realistic picture of crime in a community. Unfortunately, the UCR system has several deficiencies inherent in the system that can impact the validity of the published findings. These are not fatal flaws, but they are issues with which anyone utilizing UCR figures needs to be aware (including the police, the media, researchers, or the public).

One major issue is that UCR only reflects crime reported to the police. According to the FBI, the UCR reflects all actual and attempted offenses reported to an agency occurring within its jurisdiction for the reporting month (or crimes committed in previous months but not reported until the current month). However, other sources of crime data, including the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), indicate that there is more

crime occurring that what is reported to the police (Booth, Johnson, & Choldin, 1977; Biderman & Lynch, 1991). For example, one study found that less than half of all burglaries and robberies are reported to the police (Skogan, 1976). The reasons for not reporting crimes vary by crime type and victim. However, the bottom line is that UCR data do not accurately reflect all crime occurring in a community.

In addition to non-reporting, there are also issues related to missing and incomplete data. Users of UCR data should bear in mind that the UCR program is voluntary, with no legal requirement to report crime figures. Despite this, the UCR still covers most of the population of the United States. The coverage, which had been about 95%, did decline slightly (to approximately 87 percent) with the implementation of the National Incident Based Reporting System (NIBRS). However, as the FBI refines the reporting system, the FBI expects the coverage to return to 95% coverage (Maltz, 1999). During 2003, law enforcement agencies active in the UCR Program represented 93.0 percent of the total population and in coverage reached 94.6 percent of the population in 2007 (United States Department of Justice, 2007a). UCR is also limited to the seven index crimes and does not include several crime categories, including kidnapping, drug offenses, and white collar crimes. Excluding those crimes may give a different overall picture of crime in a community.

In addition to coverage deficiencies, there are also some methodological shortcomings with UCR that can lead to inaccurate estimations. When initially conceived, a major concern was the variations in crime definitions from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. To ensure the uniform reporting of data, the FBI developed a handbook for contributing law enforcement agencies that explained how to classify and score offenses and provided uniform definitions for the UCR crime offenses. As a result, agencies

report crimes as defined by the FBI versus their own state statutes and according to the FBI, most agencies make a good faith effort to comply with established guidelines (United States Department of Justice, 2007b).

A more troublesome area is the potential shortcomings created by the UCR's "Hierarchy Rule," which the FBI instituted in the 1930s to prevent double counting of criminal events (Maltz, 1999: 14). The hierarchy rule essentially allows the police to report only the most serious crime in a criminal category. For example, if a criminal burglarizes a house and kills the resident while stealing property, the police would report the incident as a murder to UCR. Reporting standards included in the NIBRS system, first introduced in 1987, will eliminate this type of issue. However, the rule currently creates a situation where certain crimes could be underreported.

A final area of concern for UCR data involves incomplete data. Incomplete data can result from a variety of sources, including incomplete reporting, differences in crime definitions, errors, zero population agencies, and even delays in reporting. To minimize these potential problems, the FBI has developed a handbook for reporting agencies to ensure consistent reporting practices, has a data checking system, and can estimate totals base upon partials submissions. The end result is that, despite the best efforts of the FBI, UCR data can be uneven and care should be taken, especially when making agency level comparisons (Maltz, 1999).

Works Cited

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