

Statistical Advice and its Impact on Policy

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Statistics and policy

- Informing the development of policy
- Monitoring the effectiveness of policy
- Government, parliament, public interests

Knife crime: how bad is it really?

The screenshot shows a BBC News article titled "Action plan targets knife crime". The article is dated Monday, 18 February 2008, 14:07 GMT. The main headline is "Action plan targets knife crime". The sub-headline reads: "Police are to get airport-style metal detectors in a crackdown on knife crime in England and Wales being launched by Home Secretary Jacqui Smith." The article text states: "The Tackling Violence Action Plan also aims to identify and 'manage' those likely to become violent criminals. Medical staff will be expected to share data on victims of attacks to build up a 'picture of violence' in an area. But the Conservatives criticised the move as an exercise in 'leaping over the crackle'." The article includes a photo of several knives and a video link titled "Hull teenager on why he used to carry a knife". The sidebar on the left lists various news categories like World, UK, England, etc. The right sidebar has a "SEE ALSO" section with links to related news items.

Desiderata

- Statistics must be:
 - Accurate
 - Appropriate
 - Timely
 - Independent
 - Relevant to real people's experience
 - Robust to changes in policy
 - Reported transparently

Crime Statistics: An independent review

Carried out for
the Secretary of State
for the Home Department

November 2006

How do statistics influence policy?

- Often prompt the fundamental decision to intervene
 - State of the NHS
 - Performance in schools
- Can also prevent a headlong rush into action
 - Is knife crime really as bad as the papers say?
- Vital underpinning role in monitoring, modelling, analysis of impacts, etc.

However...

- Limitations on accuracy, coverage or appropriateness are unavoidable
- And even the best won't tell you how to solve knife crime...



Nevertheless...

- Even imperfect data may indicate:
 - The magnitude of the problem
 - Where there is a need to intervene
 - General trends
- Politicians, policy makers and the public need to understand both the value and the limitations of statistical data

Public trust in statistics

- If the public are to trust statistics they must be:
- Independent
 - Statistical judgements and political judgements should be clearly separated
- Transparent
 - Government must not be seen to be hiding information or selectively using figures that suit its purpose
- Interpretable
 - In 2002 half of all “violent crime” involved no physical injury
- Relevant
 - To report that crime figures are falling nationally may not impress a resident in a neighbourhood where they’ve been steadily rising

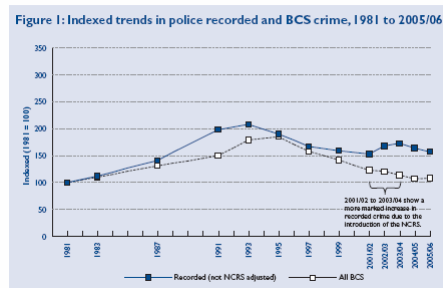
Abuse of statistics

- Statistics can easily be abused
 - Accidentally, by those who do not understand their limitations
 - Intentionally by those with an axe to grind



Recent reforms to build trust

- Recent reforms should improve matters:
 - Clearer distinction in line management between statisticians and policy makers
 - Strengthening of professional independence
 - “24 hour rule” for pre-release access
 - More focus on local statistics
 - Maximum possible transparency



UK Statistics Authority (1)

- The UK Statistics Authority has three main functions:
 - oversight of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) - its executive office
 - monitoring and reporting on all UK official statistics, wherever produced, and
 - independent assessment of official statistics



UK Statistics Authority (2)

- Fundamental role in:
 - Maintaining the integrity of the profession
 - Setting standards and ensuring best practice
 - Serving as a critical friend of Government and other users of statistics

A screenshot of the UK Statistics Authority website. The header includes the UK Statistics Authority logo and navigation links: Home, About the Authority, News, UK Statistical System, and Contact Us. The main content area features a large image of a family silhouette against a sunset, with the text: "The UK Statistics Authority serves the public by promoting and safeguarding the quality of official statistics in the UK". Below this, there are links to "Find out more about the Authority" and "The National Statistics quality kite mark". A section titled "Latest National Statistics released on 28/10/2008" provides a gateway to the latest National Statistics. The footer includes "Health and Care | National Health Service in Scotland" and "Dental Statistics | Update of General Dental Service registrations as at 30th June 2008 and".

Preparing for the future (1)

- Statistical evidence is expensive and time consuming to produce
- Time it takes from initial decision:
 - 10 years to improve the data on migration?
 - 20 years to put in place the finance and systems to get a better census?
- We need to understand now the future requirements for data!

What are we doing about it?

- Various initiatives – for example the ESRC birth cohort study.
 - £28.5m investment funded by ESRC and DIUS's Large Facilities Capital Fund
 - Will provide a long-term resource for the nation's social researchers
- Possible Horizon Scanning Centre project looking at the future needs of the evidence base.
 - What requirements will we have of the evidence base 20 years out?

Conclusions

- Inevitable tension between policy relevance of Government statistics and arms-length “independence”
- Government statisticians should be responsible to the National Statistician for all matters relating to the production and reporting of official statistics
- UKSA provides the potential for a significant change of culture in and perception of Government statistics