

The Significance of the Dark Figure of Crime: Analyzing Unreported Violent Crime Statistics

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Abstract

The underreporting of violent crime is a serious issue in the U.S. that has a great impact on society and the criminal justice system. Since crime statistics are used by different organizations when creating plans for services, services such as police training, police officer allocation and allocation of victim services can be impacted by inaccurate crime statistics caused by underreporting. Therefore, it is important to discover factors that contribute to unreported violent crime and the extent to which violent crime is not reported in the United States. The National Crime Victimization Survey gathers data of unreported crime from households while the Uniform Crime Report gathers data of reported crime from law enforcement agencies. A comparison of these reports shows that there is a great discrepancy between the rates of reported and unreported violent crime. Examination of peer-reviewed studies show the different factors that contribute to unreported crime. These factors primarily consist of the victim's perception of the crime and the justice system, as well as other factors such as reporting the crime to another authority.

Introduction

Statistical data of crime reports are an important tool used by the criminal justice system to analyze crime trends and allocate resources to where they are deemed to be necessary. However, crime statistics that describe how often and what types of crime occur are not completely accurate because many crimes are unreported to law enforcement. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, "...nearly 3.4 million violent victimizations per year, went unreported to the police between 2006 and 2010" (BOJS, 2012). Many crimes are unreported each year and so these crime statistics cannot be accepted as the full reality of the number of crimes that are occurring in the nation.

There are many different reasons why victims or crime do not report the crime to the police. These reasons include the fear of secondary victimization by the justice system, the victim's perception of the seriousness of the crime, and the victim's relationship to the offender (Fohring, 2014). Therefore, victims weigh the costs and benefits of reporting crime before they make the decision of whether or not to report. Other reasons for not reporting a crime are due to lack of information about reporting and personal safety. Some victims may be unaware of the resources available to them to help guide them through the process of reporting. Victim's may also fear retaliation from the offender if they do report them to the police.

Unreported crime leads to many different consequences. Underreporting of crime means that victims may not receive the resources they need, and law enforcement do not have any information about the offender and cannot investigate further. Other consequences include limiting the deterrence capability of the criminal justice system, misallocation of police resources, victim's ineligibility for victim services, and forming the role of police in society (Skogan, 1977). Inaccurate crime data can have a negative effect on the justice system and in society, so the factors that prevent people from reporting crimes must be analyzed in order to try to increase reporting. Therefore, it is important to analyze what type of crimes are

not reported and why they are not reported.

Background

Although many crimes are not reported, they are still accounted for by the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) conducted by the Bureau of Justice Statistics. According to the NCVS, "Nearly 3.4 million violent crimes per year went unreported to police from 2006 to 2010" (NCVS, 2012). Violent crime is less likely to be reported than property crime and serious violent crime, such as rape and aggravated assault, is least likely to be reported. Throughout these years the most common reason why crimes were unreported was, "the fear of retaliation or of getting the offender in trouble" (NCVS, 2012). Another factor that affected whether or not a victim reported a crime was their relationship to the offender. If the victim knew the offender, the crime was less likely to be reported (NCVS, 2012).

Reporting of crimes also varies on the type of crime. More arrests are made for disorderly conduct and other incidents that are perceived as more serious than for larceny-theft and public policy crimes. Americans have a bias to reporting crime by "the man in the street", but offenders are from all social classes and occupations. (Shulman, 1967). The tendency of victims to only report certain types of crimes leads to skewed statistical data which causes a focus on specific social classes and disadvantages as a cause of crime.

The reason victims do not report crimes is not straightforward since victims of crime do not report due to different complex reasons. One of those reasons is to maintain ownership of the incident since the conflict is then controlled by the justice system and the victim's role is diminished. Other reasons include being victimized by the police and the victim's perceptions of the crime, law enforcement, and the stigma of being labeled a victim. These reasons are especially important in sensitive cases, such as rape, where the victim already feels helpless. Out of all these reasons, "...the strongest predictor of reporting was the

victim's perception of the incident" (Fohring, 2015). The victim's view of whether or not the incident they experienced had serious impacts on whether or not the victim reports it to law enforcement.

People's attitudes toward police are a great determinant of whether or not a crime will be reported. People are more likely to report crimes if, "they are more integrated into the community, if they believe the police will be able to catch the offender, if they are more trusting of the police, and if they have been involved in neighborhood-based crime prevention..." (Schneider, et al., 1975). Therefore, efforts that improve attitudes towards the justice system, such as apprehension of criminals, locating stolen property, and punishing offenders, should be implemented to increase the rate of reporting. It is also important to design programs that increase citizen involvement in the community since alienation from the community reduces the likelihood of reporting crimes.

Unreported crimes can lead to many problems in society such as: limiting the criminal justice system's ability to stop crime, misallocation of police resources, victim's ineligibility for victim services, affecting insurance costs, and altering the role of law enforcement in a community. Another social problem that can happen due to unreported crime is that "inferences based on arrest data unduly skew the distribution of criminality in the direction of minorities and the poor" (Skogan, 1977). Some types of crime are often reported, such as homicide and auto theft, while crimes that do not result in death or a great property loss are not consistently reported.

Police resources such as police surveillance in cities and police training are dependent on crime data statistics. Areas that are deemed to be in greater need of police presence and areas that need police officers who are trained in specialized areas are determined by crime rates. It is also important to be aware that although many crimes are reported, there is also a great number of crimes that are not reported. Further studies into unreported crime can assist in providing more information as to why crimes are not reported and methods that can be used in an attempt to increase the rate of reporting.

Methods

This explanatory research uses data from both reported crime statistics and unreported crime data. Explanatory research is conducted to explain aspects of my study in a more detailed manner. It also uses information from psychological studies to analyze unreported crime factors. Comparisons are made of data and information across several years, 2000-2018, in order to provide a clear analysis of change in data over time. The research is conducted by examining data of reported violent crime from the UCR and both reported and unreported crime from the NCVS. The data spans from the years 2000-2018 and is compared to each other in order to determine any differences between the rate of reporting from the two sources. The general rate of victimizations was derived from each of the two reports. The rate of victimizations per 1,000 persons was also derived from these two sources in order to determine any frequency of crime for individuals. The study will also discuss different reasons why crimes are

underreported, which are derived from peer-reviewed journals and the NCVS report.

Results

I analyzed data of violent victimizations from both the NCVS and the UCR in order to make comparisons over an 18-year time period, 2000-2018 (See Table 1 in Appendix A). According to the NCVS, the rate of violent victimizations has increased from 4.3 million to 6.3 million from the years 2000 to 2018. The increase in crime has not been consistent, then crime seemed to decrease up to the year 2005, where it spiked an increase. From 2006 the crime rate decreased until the year 2012 where the crime rate spiked again (See Figure 1). The rate of victimizations per 1,000 persons has also fluctuated throughout these years, from 21.1 in 2005, to 26.1 in 2012, to 23.2 in 2018 (See Table 1 in Appendix A). The results from the UCR show that rates of violent victimization have gradually decreased from 1.4 million to 1.2 million from the years 2000-2018 (See Table 2 in Appendix B). The rate of crime has decreased slightly, but consistently throughout the 18-year time period. The rate of victimizations per 1,000 persons has also gradually decreased from 5.1 to 3.7 from the years 2000 to 2018 (See Figure 1).

The NCVS and the UCR have some differences in how data is collected. The NCVS does not collect data of murder and nonnegligent manslaughter, but it does include all data of sexual assault. (FBI: UCR, 2013). The UCR includes data of murder, non-negligent manslaughter, and commercial crimes, but only includes arrest data for sexual assault (FBI: UCR, 2013).

When analyzing the reasons why victims did not report crimes to the police, the major factors are due to psychological reasons. These factors include reporting the crime to another official that is not a part of law enforcement, the victim believing that their victimization is not important enough to report, the victim believing that the police would not or could not help them, and the victim attempting to protect the offender or fearing retaliation from the offender. Figure 2 represents the factors that affect the reporting of crimes as gathered from the NCVS. According to Figure 2, 35% of victims reported the crime to another official, 18% did not believe their victimization was important enough, 16% believed that the police would not or could not help, 13% wanted to protect the offender or feared retaliation, and 18% did not answer. Therefore, the major factors that contributed to underreporting of crime were due to psychological factors.

Figure 1. This line graph represents the rates of violent victimizations per 1,000 persons from both the NCVS and the UCR.

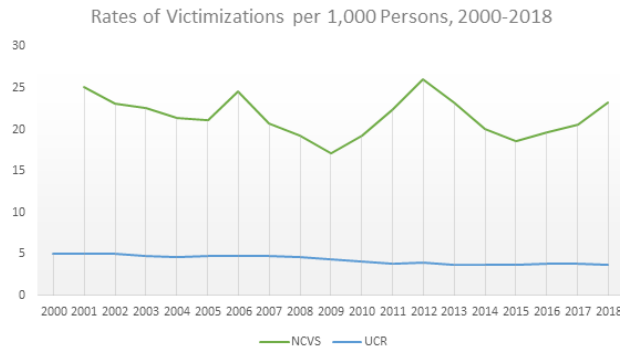
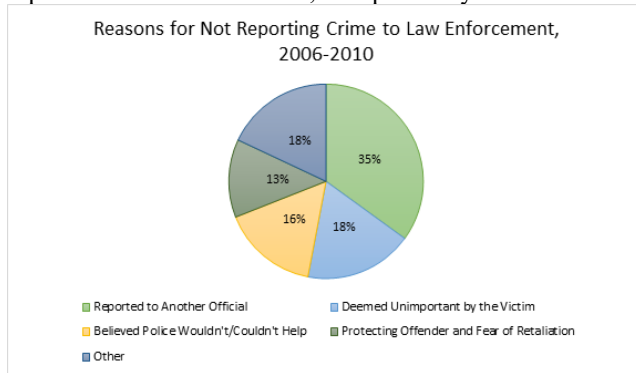


Figure 2. This pie chart represents the composition of different reasonings why violent victimizations were not reported to law enforcement, as reported by the NCVS.



Discussion

The results from this study show that there is a great discrepancy between the nation's largest databases for crime recording. The NCVS shows that there is a greater number of violent victimizations compared to the crime rates in the UCR's reported data. Also, the NCVS shows that the rate of violent victimizations has fluctuated irregularly throughout the years. This means The UCR shows that rates of violent victimizations have steadily decreased throughout the 18-year time period. The purpose of this study is to analyze and compare reported and unreported crime rates in order to determine the difference between them. I analyzed data from the years 2000 to 2018 from both the NCVS and the UCR, the country's two main crime data reports. From this analysis, I was able to draw the conclusion that violent crimes in the U.S. are largely unreported. The data from the UCR indicates that violent crime has been decreasing from the years 2000 to 2018. The NCVS indicates that violent crime has been increasing throughout the same span of time, this is possibly due to an overall increase in population. Although both the population of the U.S. and the rates of violent crime has increased since the year 2000, the rate of crime reporting has stayed roughly the same; approximately half of crimes are not reported to the police. The NCVS shows that the rate of victimizations per 1,000 persons has fluctuated through 2000 to 2018, meaning that the prevalence at which people have experienced crime has constantly changed. This may also be due to changes in

overall population and it is important because it shows how likely people are to experience a crime. So even though the likelihood of experiencing a crime has changed, the rate of unreported crime has still been substantial throughout this timespan.

The reasons victims stated they did not report a crime from the NCVS were consistent with those of Fohring (2015). The reason most commonly given to explain not reporting to the police is that the victim had already reported the crime to another official, such as a manager or a school official. The other reasons include: the crime not being important enough for the victim to report, the belief that the police would not or could not help, and the victims' fear that they would face retaliation from the offender or wanting to protect the offender. This data has remained consistent from the years 2006-2010.

Research about unreported crime may continue by conducting close analysis of the reasons contributing to unreported crime. This can lead to a more thorough explanation of each different factor. A better understanding of each factor can help establish different methods to attempt to increase the rate of reporting. Future studies can also be conducted to determine whether an increase in crime reporting causes a decrease in crimes. With a higher likelihood of being reported, crime rates may possibly reduce over time.

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