MODULE 1

Tracking Crime:
Police Recorded Crime Figures, Trends and Reasons for Change

Survey Data in Teaching
enhancing critical thinking and
data numeracy

Module 1
Tracking Crime:
Police Recorded Crime Figures: Trends and Reasons for Change

In this module:

- You find out how crime is measured
- You find out what has been happening to crime rates
- You examine the effectiveness of different governments on crime
- You try to figure out what you would do

Introduction

In this module we look at how Police Recorded Crime Figures can be used to describe the extent of crime (or, to put a more positive slant, the extent of 'lawfulness') in England and Wales.

But what constitutes a 'crime', and how are crimes defined and counted? Police Recorded Crime Figures depend on the police being aware that an act that the Home Office considers to be a crime occurred. Box 1.1 sets out how crime is officially defined in the UK.

Factors influencing police recording of crime

The number of crimes that are recorded by the police are dependent on two factors. Firstly, whether the victim or a representative of the victim brings that crime to the attention of the police or on the crime coming to the attention of the police through some other means (such as the police officer being present at the time). Secondly, whether that incident is determined as being a recordable offence within the categories laid down by the Home Office in the official counting rules.

The Home Office Counting Rules were amended in 1998, adding a large number of crimes to the total recorded by the police, particularly in the categories of less serious violent crimes, frauds and drug offences.

The Home Office Counting Rules were revised again last year in order to incorporate the new National Crime Recording Standard (NCRS), which aims to introduce a greater degree of consistency to the ways in which crime is recorded in different police forces and to ensure that there is a comprehensive record of all crimes that are reported to the police by victims. These changes were fully introduced across all police forces from April 2002, and so have had an impact on the recorded crime statistics reported on here. There has also been a more general impetus over recent years, both from the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) and from the Home Office, to increase the recording of crimes reported to the police which will also have impacted on the recorded crime figures.

Simmons and Dodd, *Home Office Statistical Bulletin*, 2003, p.14

Box 1.1 Factors influencing police recording of crime

Consequently, the extent of criminal activity that is recorded from year to year reflects three factors:

- the number of people reporting to the police that they (or someone they represent) were a victim
- the number of reported incidents that the police accept met the definition of a crime
- any change to the definition of what constitutes a crime.

Several times over the years, the government has changed the way the police's 'official' figures are calculated, making comparison of changing rates of crime between years difficult.

Table 1.1 sets out the actual number of crimes recorded by police during the period 1981-2003.

Table 1.1 Police Recorded Crime, 1981-2003

Year	Number of crimes	Notes	Year	Number of crimes	Notes
1981	2,963,764		1993	5,526,255	
1982	3,262,422		1994	5,252,980	
1983	3,247,030		1995	5,100,241	
1984	3,499,107		1996	5,036,552	
1985	3,611,883		1997	4,598,357	
1986	3,847,410		1997/1998	4,545,337	
1987	3,892,201		1998/1999	4,481,817	Old Counting Rule
1988	3,715,767		1998/1999	5,109,089	New Counting Rule - more crimes now recorded which weren't previously e.g. common assault – no injury
1989	3,870,748		1999/2000	5,301,187	
1990	4,543,611		2000/2001	5,170,843	
1991	5,276,173		2001/2002	5,527,082	
1992	5,591,717		2002/2003	5,899,450	Adjusted figures

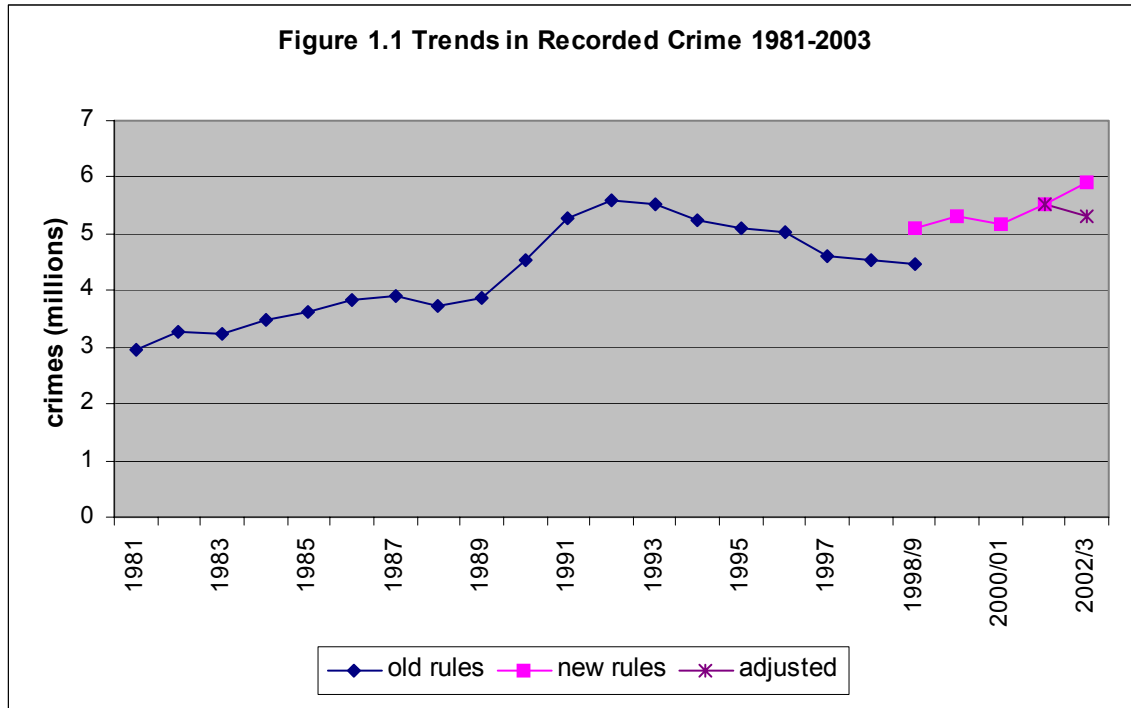Source: Simmons and Dodd, *Home Office Statistical Bulletin*, 2003, p.27

This type of table is called a time series. It shows how something changes over time. There are other types of table. In Module 3 you will learn about frequency tables, where the responses to a variable are categorised, and the number of occurrences (the frequencies) are compared. In Module 4 you investigate two-way tables, which compare the frequencies of the categories of two variables.

While tables are accurate, it can often be easier to visualise data using graphs. A better way to view these figures is as a trend, as shown in Figure 1.1. Here we present exactly the same information as a line graph:

From 1998 onwards the government began to count a greater range of crimes than it had done previously, which increased the count by approximately 15%. There were two reasons for the change:

- more minor drug offences, types of fraud and less 'serious' violent incidents were added
- there was an attempt to make the definitions consistent among all police forces (remember the definitions set out earlier in *Box 1.1*).

In addition, the introduction of the National Crime Recording Standard (NCRS) in 2002-03 led to a further rise of approximately 10%. However, after adjusting for these changes, estimates suggest that recorded crime actually *fell* by three per cent between 2001-02 and 2002-03, and did not *increase* by seven per cent as suggested by the figures and graph.

Figure 1.1 Trends in Recorded Crime 1981-2003

Source: Simmons and Dodd*, Home Office Statistical Bulletin*, 2003, p.27

SECTION A: Police Recorded Crime Figures

Using the above tables and figure, answer the following multiple choice questions

Q1 In what year was crime at its lowest?

  A 1983   B **1981**   C 1988   D 1999

Q2 Approximately how many offences were recorded in the year that crime was at its lowest point?

  A 1 million   B **3 million**   C 5 million   D 6 million

Q3 In what year was crime at its highest? [HINT- use the new counting rules]

  A 1981   B 1985   C 1992   D **2002-03**

Q4 Approximately how many offences were reported in the year that crime was at its highest point?

  A 8 million   B 3 million   C **6 million**   D 4 million

Q5

Identify in which years Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister (**1979-90**)

[HINT- check the web site **Prime Ministers in history** www.number-10.gov.uk/output/page123.asp]

Which of these statements best describes reported crime trends under Margaret Thatcher?
A no overall rise   B **steady increase**   C rapid increase   D steady decrease

What do you think?

- Using only the data presented above, can we say with certainty whether Margaret Thatcher's law and order policies were a success or not?
- If you cannot be certain, what other information/data would you want?

Q6

Identify in which years John Major was Prime Minister **(1990-97)**

Approximately how many offences were committed in the year that John Major became PM?

A 3 million B **4.5 million** C 5 million D 6 million

Q7 Which of these statements describes crime trends under John Major?

A **increase followed by decrease** B decrease followed by increase C increase throughout D decrease throughout

What do you think?

From what you know about the UK's economic history, is there any possible relationship between unemployment and crime rates?

Q8

Identify on the graph the years Tony Blair has been PM? (**1997-**)

Approximately how many offences were committed in the year that Tony Blair became PM?

A 3 million B **4.5 million** C 5 million D 6 million

Q9 Which of these statements best describes crime trends under Tony Blair? [HINT- use the new counting rules that came in 1998-9]

A decrease B **increase** C decrease then increase D increase then decrease

Q10 Which of these phrases best describes the reported crime trends between 1981 and 2003?

A **increasing across the period** B decreasing across the period C increase then decrease D decrease then increase

Q11 Based on the table and graph, choose the statements that are correct
[HINT- more than one and less than four are correct]

| A | crime halved between 1981 and 2002-03 | **B** | **crime doubled between 1981 and 2002-03** | **C** | **crime increased by about 2/3 between 1981 - 95** | D | crime in 2002-03 returned to about the 1981 level |

Q12 Using the knowledge gained from answering the above questions, write two simple sentences outlining trends in Police Recoded Crime from 1981 to 2003?.
[HINT- remember to make reference to the counting rules we learned about!]

Q13 Consider the following factors and rank them in the order in which you think has the MOST influence on the amount of crime recorded by the police? [HINT- choose the most influential first]

- the number of crimes committed
- willingness /unwillingness to report an offence
- willingness to report an offence but 'they just did not get around to it'
- fear of repercussion

SECTION B: Explaining Trends in Crime

GROUP WORK EXERCISE
Part 1

Politicians and social commentators have proposed several different arguments for increases in crime over time. For each of the following types of explanations that they might give, give a reason as to why crime may go up.

Example:

Crime rates will go up because	*when there are too few police officers criminals will escape capture and punishment*
1. **Crime rates will go up**	when there is moral decline
because	
2. **Crime rates will go up**	when there is increasing unemployment
because	
3. **Crime rates will go up**	when too little police funding is provided
because	

4. **Crime rates will go up**	when there is a decreasing respect for authority in general and the police in particular
because	
5. **Crime rates will go up**	when there is increasing poverty/inequality
because	
6. **Crime rates will go up**	when changes are made to the way in which crime statistics are collected and reported
because	
7. **Crime rates will go up**	when there are increases in household and car insurance
because	
8. **Crime rates will go up**	when there is an increase in ownership of consumer durables
because	
9. **Crime rates will go up**	when there is an increase in the use of illicit drugs
because	
10. **Crime rates will go up**	when there is less tolerance of crime
because	
11. **Crime rates will go up**	when there is mass immigration
because	
12. **Crime rates will go up**	with the breakdown in the nuclear family
because	

What do you think?

Which factors do **you** think are the 5 main reasons for the increase in crime in England and Wales over the long term?

GROUP WORK EXERCISE
Part 2

Assume for a moment that you are the Home Secretary. From the 12 explanations for rising crime in part 1, chose the five that you think are most persuasive and list them in the spaces below. For each explanation, write one or two sentences describing how you as Home Secretary would address each. In other words, what would be your solution?

Example	
Problem suggested:	*Too few police officers*
Solution:	*Recruit more police officers*
Problem suggested:	
Solution:	
Problem suggested:	
Solution:	
Problem suggested:	
Solution:	
Problem suggested:	
Solution:	
Problem suggested:	
Solution:	

GROUP WORK EXERCISE
Part 3

All solutions bring their own problems. What difficulties are you as Home Secretary, other politicians, bureaucrats and police officers likely to encounter when implementing each of the five solutions you thought of?

Example Solution suggested:	*Recruit more police officers*
Difficulties:	*Cost/public spending implications; diverting expenditure from the other key public services (e.g. health, education); an increase in police numbers is not necessarily associated with a reduction in crime figures*
Solution suggested:	
Difficulties:	
Solution suggested:	
Difficulties:	
Solution suggested:	
Difficulties:	
Solution suggested:	
Difficulties:	
Solution suggested:	
Difficulties:	

GROUP WORK EXERCISE
Part 4

The previous three parts of this exercise concentrated on increasing crime rates. However figures suggest overall crime is **down** in recent years. Politicians and social commentators have offered several explanations for falling crime rates, which are listed below.
For each explanation, try and identify the logic of the argument.

Example:
Crime rates would go down *when there are better home and car security measures*
because *it is harder for people to break into, and steal from, property and vehicles*

1. **Crime rates would go down** if there are lower unemployment rates

because

2. **Crime rates would go down** if there were increased equality

because

3. **Crime rates would go down** if there is better policing

because

4. **Crime rates would go down** if more criminals are locked up

because

5. **Crime rates would go down** if there was zero tolerance policing

because

6. **Crime rates would go down** if there were fewer adolescent males

because

7. **Crime rates would go down**	if the Government introduced policies to reduce social exclusion through strategies such as reducing school truancy and exclusion
because	
8. **Crime rates would go down**	if there were longer prison sentences
because	
9. **Crime rates would go down**	with the SureStart scheme (HINT- helps deprived children)
because	
10. **Crime rates would go down**	if there were better education
because	

SUMMARY

- You should have some knowledge about trends in crime, as detailed in the police recorded crime figures
- You should have improved your graph and table reading skills
- You have investigated why crime is a difficult policy problem to crack

NEXT UP….

You have explored official figures on crime rates as they are collected by the police. But is this the whole story? Not all crimes are reported to the police. Perhaps then, these figures understate the 'real' amount of crime in England and Wales? The next module explores an alternative source of data to look at crime rates.