

MODULE 2

Theories About Crime: Public Perceptions of Crime Rates

Survey Data in Teaching

enhancing critical thinking and
data numeracy

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Module 2

Theories About Crime: Public Perceptions of Crime Rates

In this module:

- There are different ways to record crime
- The official report says that although crime is really falling, the public think it is increasing
- When we look at time graphs the position is complex
- A common explanation is that the media create unnecessary worry
- There are other factors involved, such as social class

SECTION A: Measuring crime rates differently

The British Crime Survey (BCS) is a survey of a [sample](#) of the population that asks [respondents](#) in England and Wales about their personal experiences of crime over the previous 12 months. It is therefore sometimes referred to as a victimisation survey. Respondents provide answers to a set of questions, the individual details of which are confidential, which means they cannot be passed on to other organisations, for example, the police.

The British Crime Survey is considered by many experts to be more comprehensive and consistent than the police figures and thus a better indicator of the true level of crime in England and Wales.

“For the offences it covers, and the victims within its scope, the BCS gives a more complete estimate of crime in England and Wales since it covers both unreported and unrecorded crime and provides more reliable data on trends.”

(Simmons and Dodd, *Home Office Statistical Bulletin*, 2003, p.1)

“The BCS measures the amount of crime in England and Wales by asking people about crimes they have experienced in the last year. The BCS includes crimes which are not reported to the police, so it is an important alternative to police records. Victims do not report crime for various reasons. Without the BCS the government would have no information on these unreported crimes.”

(Home Office web site, *The British Crime Survey*)

Remember, the British Crime Survey asks *adult* respondents whether they themselves have been a victim of crime in the last 12 months. However, not all crimes are recorded. Box 2.1 sets out what are and what are not counted.

Comparing the British Crime Survey and police recorded crime

To compare BCS and police recorded crime figures it is necessary to limit both to a set of offences that are covered by both series, **the comparable subset**. This is because:

- The BCS excludes so-called victimless crimes (e.g. drug dealing), crimes such as murder, where a victim is no longer available for interview and fraud. BCS estimates also exclude sexual offences (due to the small number reported to the survey and concerns about willingness of respondents to disclose such offences).
- BCS thefts involving household and personal property also cannot be compared because while they might be included in police figures they would fall into a miscellaneous category of thefts, which will also include thefts of business property, shoplifting and other crimes.
- The Glossary gives definitions of the various offence categories, and highlights those where comparisons can be made. In 1998/99 there were changes to the police counting rules and extensions to the offences covered that influenced comparisons (e.g. common assault only became a police recorded crime in 1998/99 and so is not in the comparable subset for longer-term comparisons).

Various adjustments are also made to police figures to take account of the fact that the BCS does not cover offences against non-domestic targets (e.g. businesses), those living in institutions and those under 16. Full details of the adjustments are posted at:

<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/bcs1.html>

The latest BCS figures published here relate to interviews conducted throughout 2002/03, with a recall period for crime incidents in **the 12 months preceding the interview**. Averaging over this moving recall period generates estimates that are most closely comparable with police recorded crime figures for the **12 months up to the end of September 2002, about six months behind the recorded crime figures for 2002/03 in this volume**.

There are some more general points to note in making comparisons between the two series:

- The police have recorded crime figures since 1857 and the BCS started in 1982. The BCS measures both reported and unreported crime. As such the BCS provides a measure of trends in crime that is not affected by changes in public reporting to the police or police recording.
- BCS measures are based on estimates from a sample of the population. The estimates are therefore subject to sampling error, though the move to a larger annual sample from 2001 has reduced sampling variation.
- Police recorded crime provides data at the level of 43 police force areas and for their Basic Command Units (as well as Local Authorities). The BCS can now provide limited information at the police force area level, but not for smaller geographical units.

Simmons and Dodd, *Home Office Statistical Bulletin*, 2003, p.10

Box 2.1: Comparison of BCS and Police crime

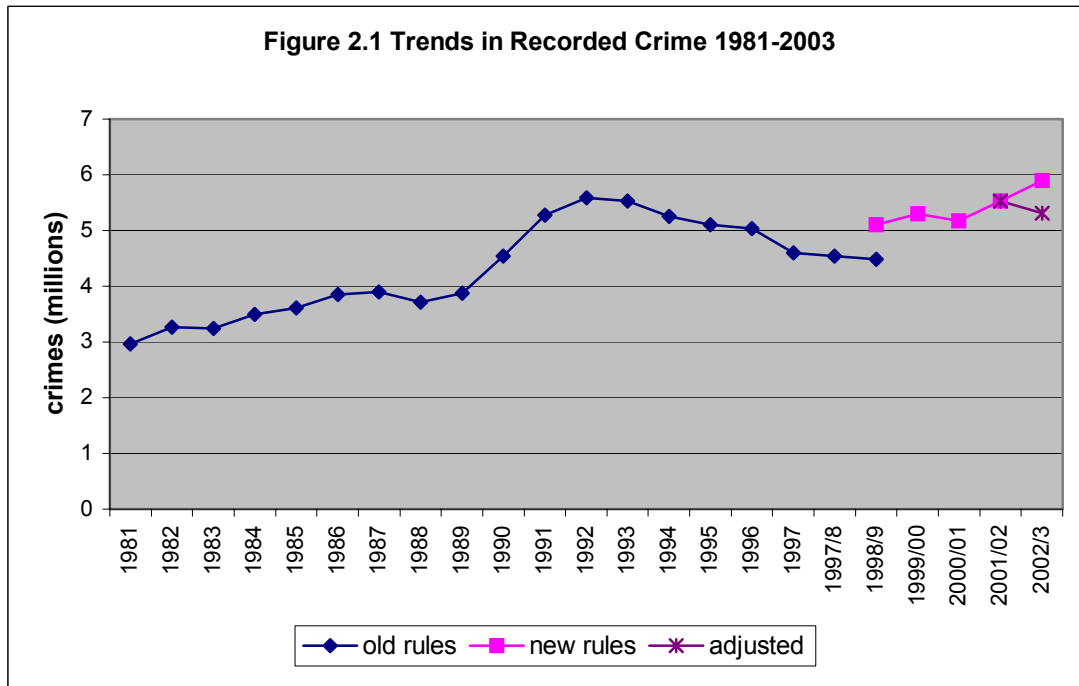
Q1 Read the extract in Box 2.1, and tick whether or not these crimes are recorded by the BCS.

a. Burglary	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
b. Murder (Explanation: The victim cannot report the crime)	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
c. Robbery (e.g. mugging)	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
d. Rape and other sexual offences (Explanation: Individuals are unlikely to volunteer this information)	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
e. Thefts	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
f. Vandalism	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No

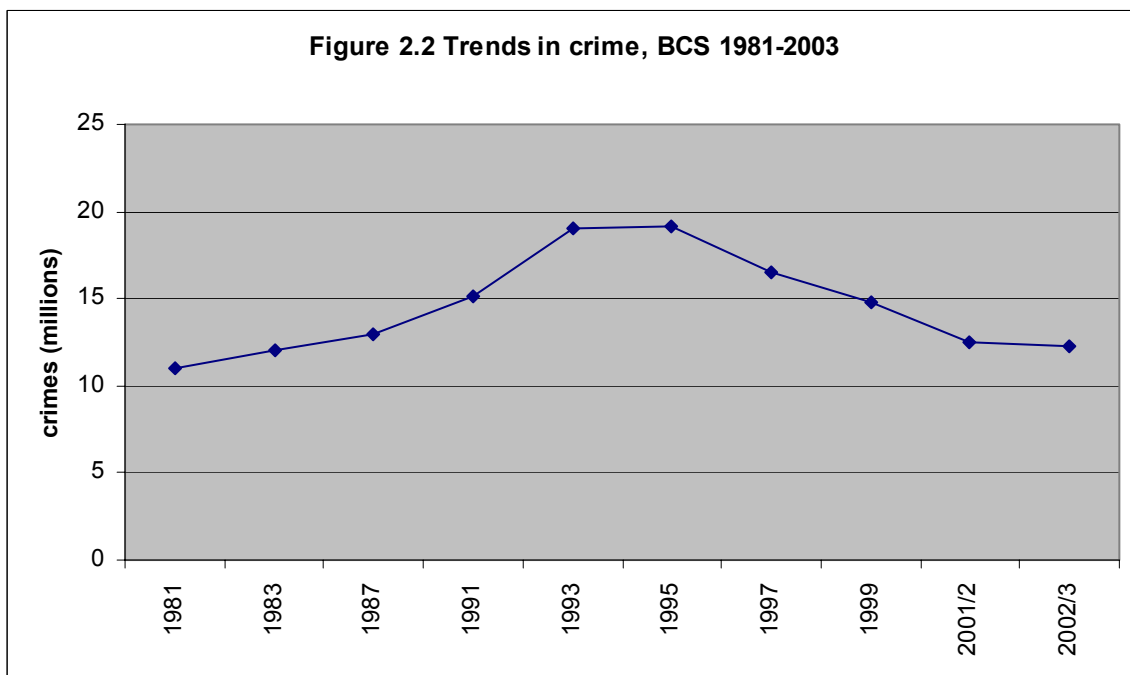
g. Crimes against business (e.g shoplifting and fraud) (Explanation: This crime is not committed against an individual, but against a corporation)	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
h. Crimes committed against individuals under 16 years of age (Explanation: BCS only surveys adults)	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
i. Drug Dealing (Explanation: A purportedly victimless crime)	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No

SECTION B: Trends in Crime 1981-2003

The graph in Figure 2.2 sets out the number of crimes reported in the BCS.



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



Source: *British Crime Survey*

Let us contrast these with the figures that we saw in Module 1 which were crimes recorded by the police over the same period, which are set out again in Figure 2.1.

Comparing the two graphs, answer the following multiple choice questions

Q2 In 1981, how many more crimes were recorded by the British Crime Survey than by the Police figures?


- A none **B 8 million** C 3 million D 11 million

Q3 What was the proportion of crime recorded by the British Crime Survey compared to the police figures in 1991?

- A about 10 percent B about a quarter C **about a third** D about a half

Q4 Look at the trends shown in the BCS and in the Recorded Crime figures. Are they:

- A. **broadly similar?** B. significantly different?



What do you think?

What might be the main reasons for the difference between the BCS and Recorded Crime Figures?

SECTION C: Perceptions Of Crime Rates

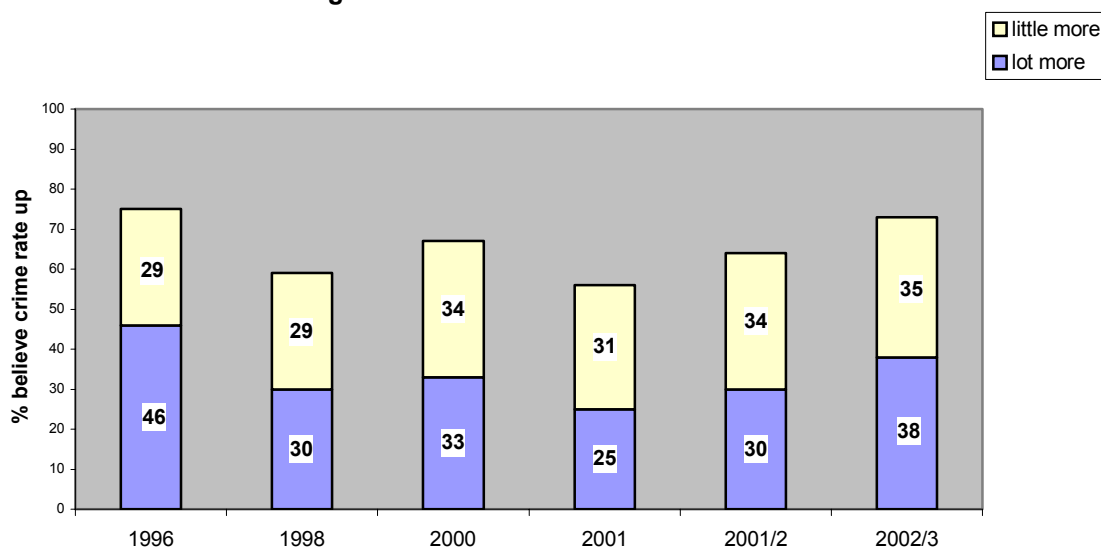
Version 1: Moral panic

The report *Crime in England and Wales*¹, published by the Home Office, suggests that

'In spite of the significant falls in the main volume crimes in recent years, almost three-quarters of the public still believe that the national crime rate has been rising'.

(Introduction).

Figure 2.3: Beliefs about crime 1996-2003



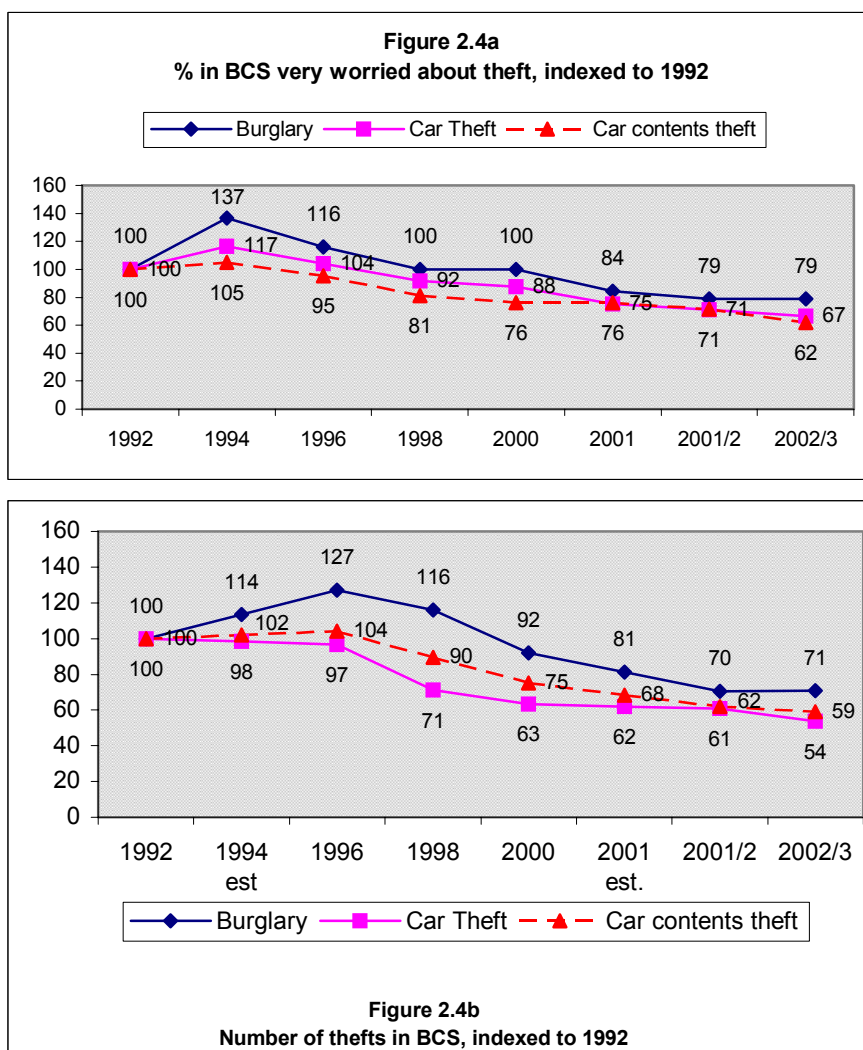
Source : Simmonds and Dodd, 2003

This statement involves two claims:

1. The level of crime has indeed been falling
2. The public hold mistaken views about crime levels.

This module will use data to examine these claims. However, it will also be seen that the use of data cannot be separated from theories and concepts about how crime affects society; data analysis is not 'neutral' in this sense.

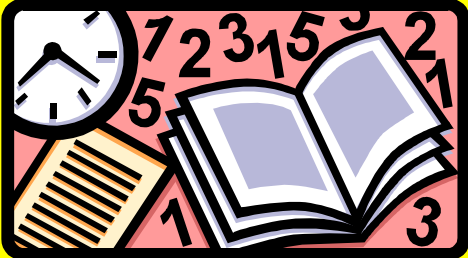
Let's begin by returning to figure 2.1, which shows the trend of crime as reported in the British Crime Survey. This has dropped for the last two years of measurement. Now compare this with the data in figure 2.3, which shows the beliefs respondents had about the change in crime: 73 per cent thought crime had increased, with 38 per cent thinking it had increased a lot.



Source: Simmonds and Dodd, 2003

It would seem that there is a clear discrepancy between the public perception of crime rates and the trends in actual crime. However, the picture is actually far from clear-cut. Figures 2.4a and 2.4b compare [time indices](#) of worry about theft to the levels of crime as reported in

the British Crime Survey.



To create a time index:

- pick a base year
- call this value 100
- compare all other years to this year²


This helps in comparing different trends with each other

Q5 In figure 2.4a, what is the change in the index numbers of concern about burglary in the British Crime Survey between the years 2002-3 and 2001-2?

- A zero B +1 C -4 D -1

Q6 In figure 2.4b, what was the change between 2002-3 and 2001-2 in the index of the number of burglaries as reported in the British Crime Survey?

- A Zero B +1 C -3 D -1



What do you think?

Is there much difference in the two trends?
What does this answer tell you about the association between crime change and changes in the concern about crime?

If there is a difference between the perceptions of the public and the actual change in crime then we may well ask why. A common answer is to do with the media.



BBC NEWS UK EDITION

Last Updated: Thursday, 17 July, 2003, 16:54 GMT 17:54 UK

[E-mail this to a friend](#) [Printable version](#)

Do tabloids feed on crime fear?

Amid the confusion over what realities Thursday's national crime figures revealed, the media again found itself implicated in the crime debate.



The Home Office has suggested the way newspapers - tabloids in particular - portray crime is helping to widen the gap between what the public fears and what it actually experiences.

The media has more crime to report, said the criminologist

'Do tabloids feed on crime fear?' BBC News web site, 17 July 2003

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/3074411.stm>



The Media Column: 'Missing the chance of a good scary headline really would be a crime'

By Ian Burrell

22 July 2003

You have to wonder whether tabloid editors appreciate the value of cash sales of their newspapers. So lurid are the depictions of crime on their pages that many of their readers must steel themselves just to go outside their front doors, let alone risk the war zone of the high street to visit the newsagent.

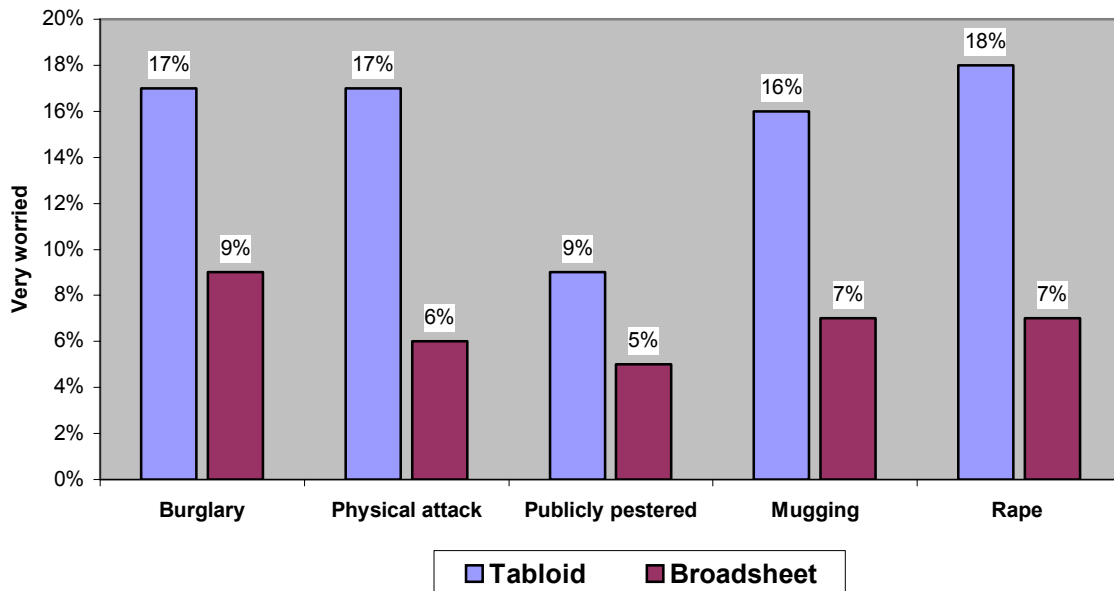
It is often said that the media exaggerate the level of crime to make better stories and boost circulation.

The Home Office report cross-tabulates³ the fear of individual crimes against newspaper readership.

'Missing the chance of a good scary headline really would be a crime', *The Independent*, 22 July 2003

As can be seen from figure 2.5, of the people in the survey very worried about all the forms of crime, the numbers who read tabloid newspapers were about double those who read broadsheet newspapers.

Figure 2.5 Worry about crime types by newspaper readership, British Crime Survey 2002-3



Source: adapted from Simmons and Dodd (eds.), Home Office Statistical Bulletin, 2003



What do you think?

This table suggests that there is a [correlation](#) between readership of tabloid newspapers and perception of crime rates. Do you think it is a causal relationship (reading tabloids causes people to perceive more crime than there actually is)? If newspaper choice does not cause fear of crime, why should newspaper choice be correlated or associated with fear of crime?

Q7 Why might tabloid readers fear crime more than readers of broadsheet newspapers?

Q8

In two paragraphs discuss other factors that may impact on people's fear of crime (e.g. Age)

Fletcher and Allen ⁴ list a number of factors they believe affect the fear of crime:

- gender
- health
- age
- locality
- previous victimisation
- perception of disorder

It is possible that some of these also affect choice of newspaper. These are known as *prior variables*. So, for example, age could affect *both* choice of newspaper *and* fear of crime⁵.



What do you think?

What are the main factors influencing the fear of crime?

Version 2: Class differences

The argument about the effect of newspapers in the Home Office report bears a striking resemblance to the concept of 'moral panic'. This concept was developed by the sociologist Stanley Cohen, originally to describe what he called the 'amplification' of the perception of disorder between the 'Mods' and 'Rockers' in the 1970s⁶. The notion seems to be that the misrepresentation of the level of crime by the tabloid press leads to a selective focus on crime news, which amplifies the perceived level of crime by giving publicity to crime levels. (Cohen also thought that amplification could even increase reported crime by pressuring police to increase arrests. The moral panic then increases public fear, and leads to calls for 'crackdowns' and so on⁷.) In actual fact, it is held, the level of crime is falling, and there is no need to panic.

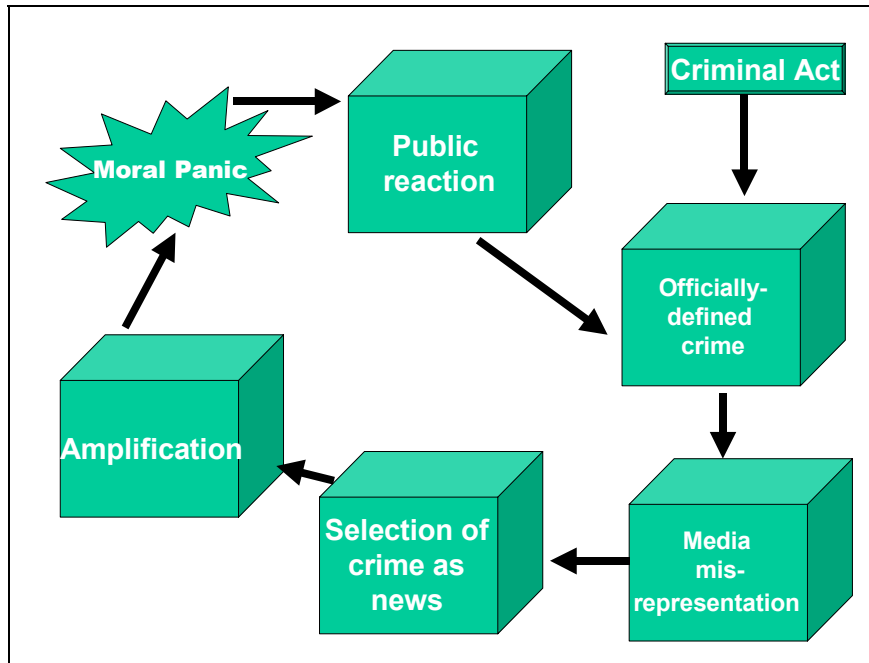
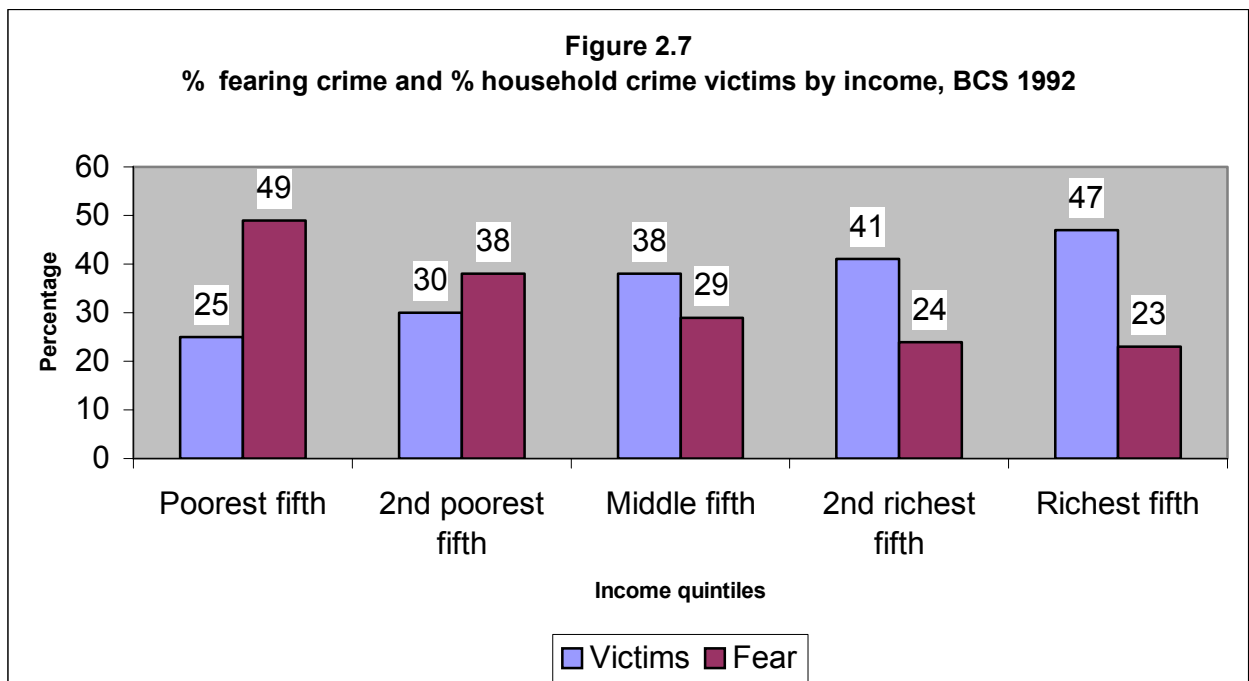


Figure 2.6: A moral panic about crime

Adapted from Taylor et.al, *Sociology in Focus*

An alternative approach to explaining crime is to use a notion of class. Class is a difficult concept, and we will be investigating alternative measures later on. Also there are many different aspects to class, so for the purposes of the discussion here class will be taken as being measured by income. Figure 2.7 classifies income against both the risk and the fear of crime.



Source: *Pantazis and Gordon 1999 p.204*

Question 9 asks you to compare fear of household crime with the level of crime victimisation for different income groups in the survey.

Q9a Using the data in figure 2.7, rank the following income groups in order of fear of household crime, from highest [1st] to lowest [5th] (to help you, one of the boxes is already filled in):

a Poorest fifth	b 2 nd Poorest fifth	c Middle fifth	d 2 nd Richest fifth	e Richest fifth
1st				

Q9b Now rank the following income groups by their actual levels of household crime victimisation, from highest (1st) to lowest (5th):

a Poorest fifth	b 2 nd Poorest fifth	c Middle fifth	d 2 nd Richest fifth	e Richest fifth
5th				

Q10a Complete the following sentence:

“As households get more income, their chances of experiencing household crime goes:


A: up B: down

Q10b Complete the following sentence:

“As households get more income, their fear of household crime goes

A: up B: down

The risk of crime goes up as households gain more income, but the fear of crime goes down. This seems to be somewhat contradictory.



What do you think?

What might explain this data?

Pantazis and Gordon⁸ suggest that the reason for the apparent discrepancy between fear of crime and its risk is that crime has a larger effect on poor people. They point to the apparent effects of insurance on the fear of crime.

Q11a In figure 2.8, what is the difference between the percentage of people who experienced crime and had insurance and those who were uninsured.

A None **B 3 Per Cent** C 14 Per Cent D 15 Per Cent

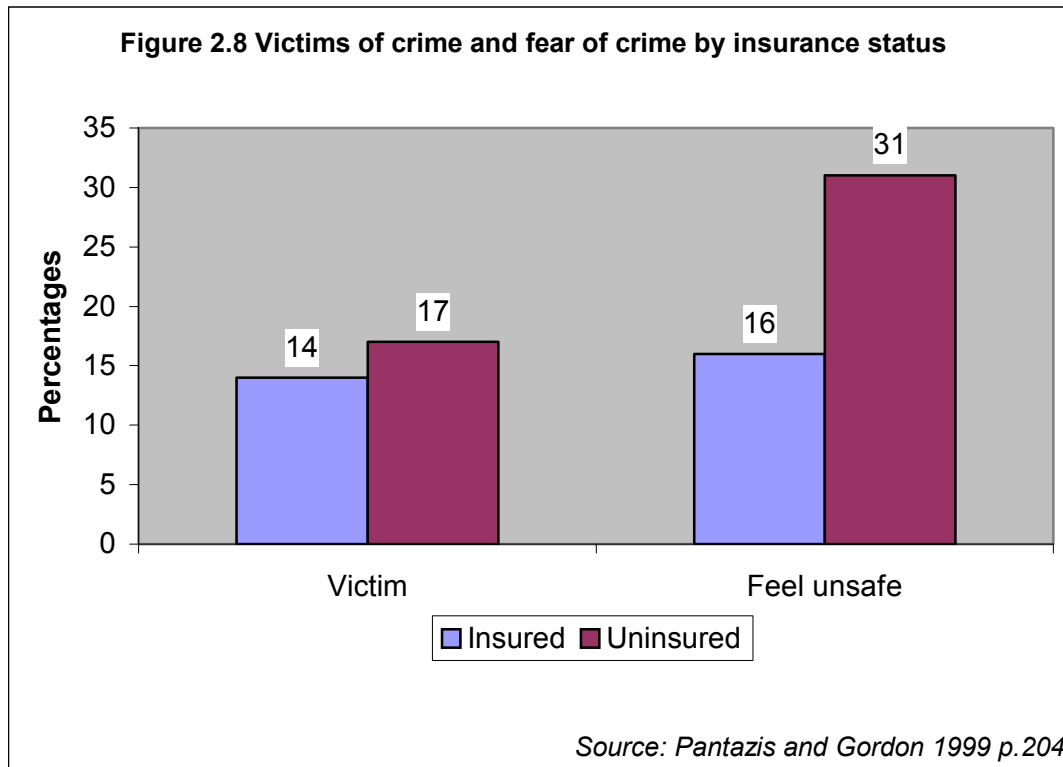
Q11b In figure. 2.8, what is the difference between the percentage of people who felt unsafe about crime and had insurance and those who were uninsured?

A None B 3 per cent C 16 per cent **D 15 per cent**

The difference between the levels of crime experienced by the insured and the uninsured was only 3 per cent, but the difference between those who report they feel unsafe is much higher. Pantazis and Gordon suggest that what counts is the differing effect of household crime on lower income households, which are more likely to be uninsured and therefore would not be compensated for lost effects⁹.

So we now have two views about the perception of crime:

1. Crime is falling, but people are misled by the tabloids into thinking it is going up;
2. Crime makes a bigger difference to poor people than rich people, so it is hardly surprising that they are more worried about it.



What do you think?

Which – if either – of the two views do you think is right?
What data could you use to back up your opinion?

It would seem that social data analysis is never completely value neutral but actually requires a theory to allow for investigation. For example, there may be many social factors that affect an individual's experience of crime. In later modules you will find out how to investigate such theories and hypotheses yourself.

SUMMARY

- Data analysis cannot be separated from theory
- Different theories will lead to different questions being asked
- In this module we compared two approaches to perceptions of crime, the 'moral panic' approach and a class-based approach. Both used different analysis of the same data to back up their viewpoint.

NEXT UP....

You may have trouble deciding which, if any, of the approaches you think is correct. In the next modules you will find out how you can investigate data yourself and test out your own theories.

¹ Simmonds J and Dodd T (eds) *Crime in England and Wales 2002/2003*, Home Office Statistical Bulletin 07/03, London: HMSO, 2003 www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/crimeew0203.html

² To get a time index:

1. Select a base year; this will be made 100

2. Divide all values by the base year value, and then multiply by 100

³ A cross-tabulation compares the categories of two variables, to see if one changes as the other changes. This is covered more fully in later modules.

⁴ Fletcher G and Allen J, 'Perceptions of and Concern about Crime' chapter 8 in Simmonds and Dodd (eds) *Crime in England and Wales 2002/2003*.

⁵ It is also possible that newspaper readership does not affect fear of crime directly, but can affect it indirectly if, say, there is a previous victimisation. Victimisation is then called an *intervening variable*.

⁶ Cohen S. *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, Oxford: Blackwell 1987 3rd ed.

⁷ Taylor P. et al, *Sociology in Focus*, Ormskirk: Causeway 1995 pp.42-43

⁸ Pantazis C and Gordon D, 'Are Crime and Fear of Crime more likely to be experienced by the poor?' in Dorling D and Simpson S (eds) *Statistics in Society*, London: Arnold 1999

⁹ Pantazis C and Gordon D, 'Are Crime and Fear of Crime more likely to be experienced by the poor?'