

Public value of crime and justice statistics in the UK

Context

1. The Office for Statistics Regulation provides independent regulation of all official statistics produced in the UK to enhance public confidence in the trustworthiness, quality and value of statistics. Our regulatory role gives us a unique view of Government statistics across the UK. The views in this report have emerged from our routine regulatory work and engagement with people who use crime and justice statistics across the UK to better understand the public value of statistics on crime and justice.
2. The impetus for our work comes from our view that crime and justice statistics – like all statistics and data produced by government – are a valuable public asset. Our focus in this work is on how well the public value of that asset is maintained; in particular how well crime and justice statistics are keeping pace with a complex, changing world, considering:
 - how relevant the statistics are to answer enduring and emerging policy and society’s questions about crime
 - the extent to which crime and justice statistics draw on a range of underlying datasets from a number of organisations and what producers do to nurture and improve those datasets
3. Our interest in crime and justice statistics is broad. It has crime at its centre and includes the people and organisations affected by or involved in crime. It also extends to the criminal justice system and the people and organisations within it that deal with crime. It covers statistics produced across the four administrations of the UK. Our interest in this first paper is primarily crime and criminal justice statistics. We will expand our interest further into justice statistics – including civil and family justice – in future work.

The public value of crime and justice statistics

4. Crime and justice statistics support a large and informed user community, have a high public value and are well-used:
 - by the public themselves who have an interest in crime and criminal justice in general as well as in their local area and in what it means for them
 - by intermediaries who interpret the statistics for the general public
 - by third sector organisations who might use the statistics in their work within criminal justice, to promote a cause or to argue for change
 - in central and local policy making

- in secondary research to increase knowledge and understanding of crime and criminal justice and in other disciplines such as sociology and psychology
- in applied research in crime science and work on crime prevention

The scope of crime and justice statistics is extensive in the UK in comparison to many other countries.

5. According to long-standing opinion surveys, the public was less concerned about crime, policing and prisons – relative to other issues – in the recent past compared with the previous decade¹. While the public as a whole may not consider these issues the most pressing at the moment, there is no doubt that crime is of abiding interest to society.
6. When we consider the public value of statistics, we think about the value of statistics to society, either indirectly through public policy or directly by helping people and organisations across society to make sense of the world, answering their questions and enabling them to make judgements. While we think the current value of crime and justice statistics is high, we see the potential for them to deliver even higher value to society than they currently achieve.

Strategic perspective

7. UK crime and justice statistics are recognised as among world-leading statistics. The crime survey² in particular was ground-breaking when the Home Office first introduced it and it is still an important and valuable asset. But crime and justice statistics must also continue to evolve if they are to meet the challenge of rapid changes in technology and society and the consequent way that crime, and how society experiences it, is changing.
8. The changes that crime and justice statistics need to reflect include that changes in technology that enable – as in cyber crime – a separation between where the crime is committed and the location of the victim. And it can be more difficult to determine – for some crimes – when a crime has occurred and who the victim is, for example in cases of fraud.
9. To address these issues and to achieve further public value, producers of crime and justice statistics need to continue to find ways to innovate to address more of society's questions about crime and the criminal justice system. In broad layman's terms these questions might be summarised as:

¹ <https://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/2905/Issues-Index-2012-onwards.aspx>

² The British Crime Survey, which is now known as the Crime Survey for England and Wales and is carried out by ONS. The survey measures the amount of crime in England and Wales by asking people about whether they or their household have experienced any crimes in the past year and their contact with the justice system in the past year. Similar crime surveys are carried out in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

- what the risk is of harm to people and organisations and how crime and the criminal justice system affects them
 - how effective the system is at dealing with, and what is effective at preventing, harm
 - how the risk of harm and effectiveness of the system are changing
10. Maintaining the relevance of crime and justice statistics is the most important challenge for all producers to address, especially when for some established users of statistics the need for stability and constant time series is paramount. If the statistics lose relevance and no longer reflect the public's experience, they – the public – will lose their confidence in crime and justice statistics. The challenge to maintain relevance is potentially more pronounced in some parts of the UK where resources are scarcer. And the challenge to maintain relevance is the same regardless of the differences between the justice systems in the four areas of the UK.

Key findings

Public value

11. **Crime and justice statistics need to answer a lot of important and relevant questions** because a large, well-informed, audience uses crime and justice statistics in diverse ways. This leads to a long list of demands. Those demands might be rivals for resources and require prioritising, but before viewing them as competing, statistics producers should, we think, first think of them as ways of increasing the value of crime and justice statistics to society. To respond effectively to these demands, the system needs broad and wide-ranging dialogue to understand need and the scope for continuous improvement.
12. **The public has an abiding interest in crime and the criminal justice system.** The public often relies on journalists, broadcasters and others to interpret statistics on its behalf; sometimes focusing on headline numbers and at other times seeking to get behind the numbers to explain underlying patterns. To better inform the public, the challenge for producers is to present and explain complex crime and justice statistics simply and clearly to answer questions the public might ask; to build relationships with intermediaries to increase that groups' understanding of crime and justice in the real world; and to address public misunderstanding such as about the extent and risk of crime.
13. **There are some recognised areas for improvement in crime statistics that will make them better able to answer more of society's questions.** For example a UK Statistics Authority seminar in 2015 highlighted some areas where more information was required – such as on online crime and child sex abuse – and some areas where producer organisation could make improvements – such as in the method used to measure repeat victimisation. Our more recent [mapping](#)

of official crime statistics across the UK identified other notable examples of gaps in the statistics outside England and Wales including crimes that happen to children or to businesses. And there is room for improvement in the local view of crimes across the UK. We will extend our mapping to statistics on justice – starting with criminal justice – in the coming year.

- 14. Crime statistics will better answer society’s questions and better reflect the real world of crime as a result of ongoing work by producers.** Examples of work by producers that will enhance public value of crime statistics in England and Wales include: ONS’s introduction of estimates of the extent of fraud and online crime³; its publication of a report on abuse during childhood⁴; its introduction of an experimental crime index⁵. The work of the National Statistician’s Crime Statistics Advisory Committee⁶ in prioritising and supporting this development work for crime statistics in England and Wales is also of note⁷. The Home Office has published reports on hate crime, is working to improve reported fraud statistics and is developing a survey of business head offices in England and Wales that focuses on fraud and online crime. And the Scottish Government has told us that it is reviewing existing data and considering how it might best inform society about all types of online crime in Scotland. In Northern Ireland, the Department of Justice will soon begin a review of how it might address gaps identified in its Crime Survey following a public consultation⁸.
- 15. Academics extend the value of crime and justice statistics by advancing the way that society understands crime and the justice system.** The application of their work extends beyond the policy community to practitioners operating in the justice system across both the public and private sectors. Academic experts told us that they can find it difficult to present their research to some practitioners, who may miss useful analysis as a result. And the community of academic experts that use crime and justice statistics is not equally extensive across different parts of the UK or across all parts of the crime and justice system.

3

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/crimeinenglandandwales/yearendingsept2016#whats-happening-to-trends-in-fraud>

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<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/abuseduringchildhood/findingsfromtheyearendingmarch2016crimesurveyforenglandandwales>

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<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/researchoutputsdevelopingacrimeseverityscoreforenglandandwalesusingdataoncrimesrecordedbythepolice/2016-11-29>

⁶ <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/national-statistician/ns-reports-reviews-guidance-and-advisory-committees/national-statisticians-advisory-committees/crime-statistics-advisory-committee/>

7

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/methodologies/improvingcrimestatisticsforenglandandwalesprogressupdate>

⁸ <https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/consultations/programme-government-consultation>

16. **Accessing data can on occasion be difficult for those who use and produce crime and justice statistics in parts of the UK.** Examples of difficulties in data access include long delays to publishing underlying data; of published data classified at a higher level of security, making access harder; of changes to organisations and systems affecting data availability; and of practitioners sharing data with selected academics only. There are ways to improve access while maintaining data security: ONS's virtual microdata laboratory⁹ – an access model that the Ministry of Justice is also developing – is an example of how this might be achieved. Improving access to data will improve public value as well as increasing perceptions of trustworthiness (paragraph 21).
17. **There is a clear demand within and beyond Government for statistics that exploit the potential of sharing and linking data.** For example linked data could be used to show how people and organisations – as victims or offenders – or how crimes progress through the criminal justice system. In England and Wales, the Ministry of Justice has linked 12 of its datasets and linked to data from other government departments to improve its evidence base and the Home Office has linked police data to information on organised crime groups from the National Crime Agency. Publishing statistics based on linked data will extend their public value. For example the Department of Justice Northern Ireland has published statistics on first time entrants to the criminal justice system¹⁰ that link data from police, prosecution and courts.

Quality

18. **An increasing number of organisations – both international and national – that span public, private and third sectors are involved in crime prevention and detection.** And not all crimes are reported to the police. To illustrate this in the case of fraud, around one-fifth of victims report an incident to either the police or Action Fraud¹¹. Industry bodies – Cifas and Financial Fraud Action UK¹² – also record incidents. We would encourage organisations not directly covered by the [Code of Practice for Official Statistics](#) who produce statistics or supply data to official statistics producers to adhere to core principles of the Code. For their part, official statistics producers need to draw on different sources of data to give a more complete picture of crime and they need to be assured of, and communicate the quality, of that data.

⁹ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/aboutus/whatwedo/paidservices/virtualmicrodatalaboratoryvml>

¹⁰ <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/publications/r-s-bulletin-182016-first-time-entrants-criminal-justice-system-northern-ireland-201415>

¹¹ Action Fraud is the fraud and cybercrime national reporting centre and records fraud crime centrally on behalf of individual police forces

¹² For more information about these organisations see: Overview of fraud statistics: year ending Mar 2016;

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/overviewoffraudstatistics/yearendingmarch2016#which-source-provides-the-better-measure>

- 19. Separation of governance and operations in the criminal justice system and in statistical production may affect the coherence of statistics in England and Wales.** Three ministerial departments – The Home office, the Ministry of Justice and the Attorney General’s office – oversee the criminal justice system¹³. The system includes a large number of bodies with different functions and separate operational and case management systems that are, or have the potential to be, data sources for crime and justice statistics. The departments and some of their agencies and public bodies produces statistics on aspects of crime and justice, in addition to ONS. While there is less departmental separation in Scotland and Northern Ireland, in the latter administration responsibilities are deliberately separated. Statisticians in producer organisations across the UK encounter difficulties with separate recording systems. Their challenge is to nurture and improve the data sources and support data sharing and linkage where this will better address important, relevant questions.
- 20. We note improvements to the quality of some crime statistics, but in other cases quality remains of concern.** ONS is introducing changes to the method it uses in the Crime Survey for England and Wales to measure repeat victimisation¹⁴. We previously removed National Statistics status from police recorded crime statistics for England and Wales and for Scotland due to concerns about the quality of the source data. We re-designated Police recorded crime statistics for Scotland as National Statistics in September 2106¹⁵. ONS has told us about improvements that some data suppliers have made to police recorded crime statistics in England and Wales and we welcome the progress made. Police recorded crime statistics in England and Wales will continue to be de-designated until the ONS producer team considers that it, and users, can be sufficiently assured of the quality of the source data.
- 21. Surveys of victims are costly yet remain the best method to understand the amount and nature of different types of crime that happen to people.** It is important – particularly where resources are scarce – to maintain the size and quality of the various crime surveys conducted across the UK sufficiently so that each of the surveys fulfils its core purpose of measuring the extent and risks of crime. The organisations responsible for the surveys need to ensure that the data and the statistics resulting from crime surveys in the UK can continue to answer relevant questions to extend their value to society.

¹³ <https://www.nao.org.uk/report/the-criminal-justice-system-landscape-review/>

¹⁴ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/aboutus/whatwedo/statistics/consultationsandsurveys/allconsultationsandsurveys/reviewofmethodologyforaddressinghighfrequencyrepeatvictimisationincrimesurveyforenglandandwalesestimates>

¹⁵ <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/publication/statistics-on-recorded-crime-in-scotland-2/>

Trustworthiness

22. **There is an increasing demand for transparency of and access to Government data**, for example to assess the effectiveness of policy or extend knowledge of crime and justice. Access difficulties can lead those seeking that access to question the trustworthiness of producer organisations. In paragraph 15 we highlighted cases where data access is sometimes difficult. Improving access to data – while at the same time paying attention to issues of confidentiality and privacy – will encourage positive perceptions of the trustworthiness of producer organisations.

Addressing system-wide issues

23. Having spoken to both statistics' users and producers, we have considered how we – as the statistics regulator – might best intervene to support producer organisations in their efforts to increase the value to society of crime and justice statistics across the UK. We have avoided duplicating the work of others such as National Statistician's Crime Statistics Advisory Committee¹⁶. We will continue to consider individual and collections of statistics in our regulatory work and we will continue to add to our understanding of different parts of the system. Our focus to address system-wide issues will be on unlocking the potential of data about crime and the justice system and increasing connections to make crime and justice statistics more relevant and useful to society across all parts of the UK.
24. We have heard from producers and others in different parts of the UK that they see the potential for increasing public value for crime and justice statistics by drawing on a wider range of relevant data, to develop better data sharing and linkage across the system and increase data access. We want to support producers' ability to exploit that potential and to ensure in doing so that the benefits extend beyond government and more widely across society. And we see potential in producers developing online tools and different ways of visualising data to better exploit the data and create richer insights into crime and criminal justice.
25. We also think there are opportunities to develop collaborative working across organisational boundaries to improve the value of crime and justice statistics and we see the potential to improve connections of statistics producers within and between different parts of the UK.
26. To consider these and other opportunities we will convene two roundtable meetings, principally involving crime and justice statistics producers. We intend these to be forward-looking and to encourage crime and justice statistics that are relevant in a changing world and are available to a wider public to the benefit of

¹⁶ See footnote 6

society. We will aim through these roundtables to explore the potential for developing next generation crime and justice statistics in the UK through getting the best out of data and achieving the most from scarce resources. We will publish the outcomes of the roundtables and an update on what further action we think we might usefully take.