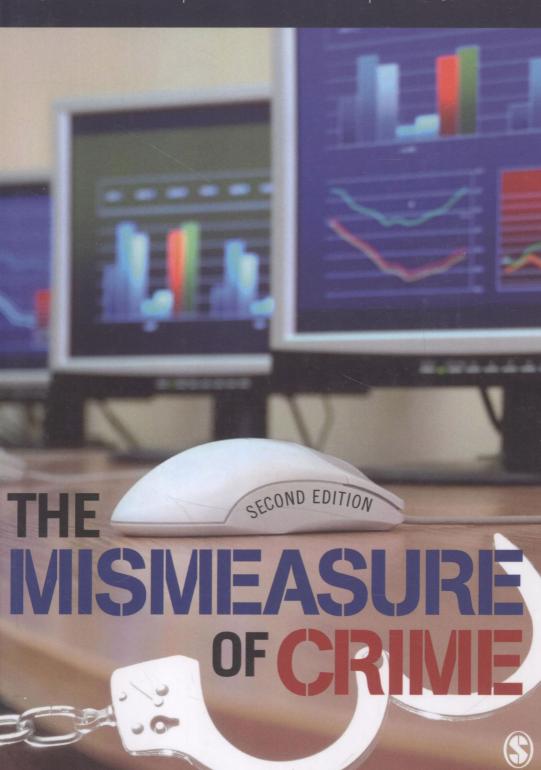
Clayton J. Mosher | Terance D. Miethe | Timothy C. Hart



# THE MISMEASURE OF CRIME

SECOND EDITION



University of Nevada, Las Vegas

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Los Angeles | London | New Delhi Singapore | Washington DC

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### # ONE #

## INTRODUCTION

## The Pervasiveness (and Limitations) of Measurement

[Numbers] can bamboozle and not enlighten, terrorize not guide, and all too easily end up abused and distrusted. Potent but shifty, the role of numbers is frighteningly ambiguous.

—Blastland & Dilnot (2009, p. xi)

n September 23, 1999, NASA fired rockets that were intended to put its Mars Climate spacecraft into a stable, low-altitude orbit over the planet. But after the rockets were fired, the spacecraft disappeared—scientists speculated that it had either crashed on the Martian surface or had escaped the planet completely. This disaster was a result of confusion over measurement units—the manufacturer of the spacecraft had specified the rocket thrust in pounds, whereas NASA assumed that the thrust had been specified in metric system newtons (Browne, 2001).

Measurement is obviously very important in the physical sciences; it is equally important in the social sciences, including the discipline of criminology. Criminologists, policy makers, and the general public are concerned about the levels of crime in society, and the media frequently report on the extent and nature of crime. These media reports typically rely on official data and victimization studies and often focus on whether crime is increasing or decreasing.

1

Both official crime and victimization data indicated that property and violent crime in the United States were in a state of relatively steady decline from the early 1990s to 2000. But in late May 2001, the release of Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) official crime data, widely publicized in the media, indicated that crime was no longer declining. This prompted newspaper headlines such as "Decade-Long Crime Drop Ends" (Lichtblau, 2001a) and led commentators such as James Alan Fox, dean of the College of Criminal Justice at Northeastern University, to assert, "It seems that the crime drop is officially over. . . . We have finally squeezed all the air out of the balloon" (as quoted in Butterfield, 2001a). However, some two weeks after the release of these official data, a report based on victimization data indicated that violent crime had decreased by 15% between 1999 and 2000, the largest one-year decrease since the federal government began collecting national victimization data in 1973 (Rennison, 2001). The release of these data prompted headlines such as "Crime Is: Up? Down? Who Knows?" (Lichtblau, 2001b) and led James Alan Fox to declare, "This is good news, but it's not great news" (as quoted in Bendavid, 2001).

How do we reconcile the conflicting messages regarding crime trends from these two data sources? First, although most media sources commenting on the FBI data failed to mention this caveat, the official data report was in fact based on preliminary data: "[The report] does not contain official figures for crime rates in 2000" (Butterfield, 2001a). Second, and more important, the underlying reason for these differences is that the two data sources measured crime differently. Official crime data are based on reports submitted to the FBI by police departments, and they measure homicide, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, automobile theft, and larceny/theft. In contrast, victimization data are based on household surveys that question respondents about their experiences with crime, and they do not include homicide (for obvious reasons). However, the victimization survey does include questions about simple assaults, which are far more common than aggravated assaults or robberies and thus tend to statistically dominate the report. As Butterfield (2001b) pointed out, simple assaults accounted for 61.5% of all violent crimes identified in the victimization survey, and because they had declined by 14.4% in 2000 compared with 1999, they accounted for most of the decline in violent crime revealed in the victimization data. In short, and as the prominent criminologist Alfred Blumstein (as quoted in Butterfield, 2001b) noted, "[The data] are telling us that crime is very difficult to measure."

A situation similar to the one noted above occurred in Britain in 2004, when the former Home Secretary commented, "the most reliable crime statistics—those recorded by the police—show that crime in England and Wales has risen by 850,000 in the past five years" (as quoted in Hough, 2004). However, the British Crime (Victimization) Survey indicated that, since 1995, house burglaries had declined by 47%, assaults by 43%, and wounding by

28%. It turned out that crime recorded by the police in Britain had increased due to changes in the way police counted crime—in particular, police data on violence included harassment and common assault charges that did not result in injury (Laurance, 2005). Commenting on the misrepresentation of crime data in Britain, especially in the popular media, Toynbee (2005) noted, "A vast industry of mendacity has a vested interest in scaring people witless with front-page shock, TV cops, and doom-laden moral panic editorials."

Some five years after the alleged crime wave of 2001, another one was constructed in the United States. Based on Uniform Crime Report data from 2005, which indicated that, compared to 2004 figures, homicides had increased by 3.4%, robberies by 3.9%, and aggravated assaults by 1.8%, a Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) report asserted that "violent crime is accelerating at an alarming rate" (Rosen, 2006, p. 1). Los Angeles Police Chief (and President of PERF) William Bratton proclaimed, "we have a gathering storm of crime" (as quoted in Rosen, 2006).

As sometimes occurs in the construction of crime waves, the PERF report presented alarmist, and sometimes misleading, statistics in order to support the claim. For example, it noted that "last year, more than 30,600 persons were murdered, robbed, and assaulted than the year before" (Rosen, 2006, p. 2). Interestingly, however, the accompanying chart in the report indicated that more than 30,000 of that 30,600 total increase in crimes was for robbery and aggravated assault charges—the numerical increase in murders was 544. While acknowledging that several cities were not experiencing increases in crime, the report cautioned "but even in localities that continue to have flat or declining homicide rates, the escalating level of violence is manifesting itself in the rising number of reports of aggravated assaults and robberies in selected areas of cities" (Rosen, 2006, pp. 2–3).

The PERF report attributed this alleged increase in crime to a number of factors, including local, state, and federal cuts in funds allocated for crime fighting and prevention, an increasing number of prisoners being released back into society, and easy access to guns. In addition, Sheriff Bill Young of Las Vegas believed that "the influence of gangsta rap and some rap artists is having its effect on young people. He was not alone" (Rosen, 2006, p. 4).

In his foreword to the report, PERF executive director Chuck Wexler (2006) warned against complacency in addressing the alleged crime wave: "There are some in both academia and government who believe these increases in violent crime may represent just a blip and that overall crime is still relatively low. They argue that before we make rash conclusions we should wait and see if the violent crime rate continues to increase over time. This thinking is faulty. It would be like having a pandemic flu outbreak in a number of cities, but waiting to see if it spreads to other cities before acting. . . . The time to act is now" (p. ii).

Not surprisingly, the popular media devoted considerable attention to this alleged crime wave—several newspapers published articles on the issue, frequently accompanied by alarmist headlines such as "Cities See Crime Surge as Threat to Their Revival" (El Nasser, 2007). An article in *USA Today* noted, "police are reporting spikes in juvenile crime as a surge in violence involving gangs and weapons has raised crime rates from historical lows early this decade" (Johnson, 2006).

However, the much ballyhooed crime wave did not materialize. While some cities, such as Philadelphia, did see increases in homicides in 2007 (Hurdle, 2007), nationally, violent crime decreased by 1.4% in that year compared to 2006, with most large cities showing the most significant declines (Sullivan, 2008). For example, New York City, which had 2,245 homicides in 1990, had 494 in 2007, the lowest total number since reliable statistics became available in 1963. As will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3, crime in general, and violent crime in particular, has continued to decline in the ensuing years. But the impact of alarmist media reports regarding increases in crime cannot be understated. In 2009, despite continued decreases in crime in the United States, a Gallup poll found that 74% of Americans believed there was more crime that year than there was in the previous year. This represented the highest percentage of respondents believing that crime had increased since the early 1990s (Jones, 2009).

Statistics and numerical counts of social phenomena, including crime, have become a major fact of modern life. Countries are ranked in terms of statistical information on health, education, social welfare, and economic development. States, cities, counties, and individuals are compared on similar kinds of social indicators. Geographical areas, social groups, and individuals are judged as relatively high, low, or normal on the basis of various types of quantitative data.

Consider the increasingly pervasive rankings of cities on a number of dimensions, both in the United States and globally. For example, in 2010, *Men's Health* magazine included a list of "America's Fattest Cities," with the rankings based on "the percentage of people who are overweight, the percentage with type 2 diabetes, the percentage who haven't left the couch in a month, the money spent on junk food, and the number of people who ate fast food nine or more times in a month" (Colletti & Masters, 2010). Using those criteria, Corpus Christi, Texas, was rated as America's fattest city, with Burlington, Vermont, and San Francisco, California, tied in 100th place (i.e., tied for the "least fattest" cities).

Another list included America's "craziest" cities, based on the number of psychiatrists per capita, the emotional and mental health of residents, eccentricity ("how crazy, wacky, and weird each city is, compiled with the help of a travel writer"), and the percentage of residents who were identified as "heavy drinkers" ("America's Craziest," 2010). Cincinnati, Ohio, was ranked the craziest, and Salt Lake City, Utah, the least crazy, of the 57 cities rated on this list.

Cities have also been ranked with respect to "wastefulness" (based on a survey that asked residents about a range of behaviors from recycling to using

public transportation to turning off the lights when they leave a room)—of the 25 cities rated on this list, San Francisco was the least wasteful and Houston, Texas, the most wasteful ("Which U.S. Cities," 2010). There are also media sources that rank cities for innovation (Fast Company), friendliness (NBC's Today Show), for retaining Old West culture (American Cowboy; Briggs, 2008), and for being the best for singles (Sherman, 2009).

But as is the case with other forms of measurement, it is important to treat these numerous rankings with a degree of skepticism and to consider what factors are taken into account in establishing them. As Briggs (2008) commented, "with the proliferating pack of 'best places' lists, discrepancies are as common as corner coffee shops. One magazine or Web site may celebrate your city as a metro marvel, while another paints your burg as a gusher of civic flop sweat."

He used Bethesda, Maryland, to illustrate his point. In 2008, Fortune Small Business Magazine ranked Bethesda as the fifth best place in the United States to "live and launch." At roughly the same time, Forbes magazine ranked Bethesda as 104th of the "best places for businesses and careers." Such differences are largely explained by differences in the dimensions and indicators used to establish the rankings.

#### DATA FOR THOUGHT

Underlying many of the problems here is the simple fact that measurement is not passive, it often changes the very thing that we are measuring. And many of the measurements we hear every day, if strained too far, may have both caricatured the world and so changed it in ways we never intended. That limitation does not ruin counting by any means, but if you forget it, the world you think you know through numbers will be a neat and tidy illusion. (Blastland & Dilnot, 2009, p. 95)

As previously noted, we are constantly bombarded by statistics and data in the popular media. Consider the following examples, taken from a variety of sources.

- There were 41,518 injuries associated with a hammer in 1997. There were 44,335 injuries from toilets and 37,401 injuries from televisions in the same year (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1999).
- Whooping cough deaths increased from 1,700 to 7,400 from 1980 to 1998. Deaths in the United States resulting from gonorrhea decreased from 100,400 to 35,600 in the same time frame (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1999).
- Broccoli consumption increased from 1.4 pounds per capita in 1980 to 5.6 pounds per capita in 1998 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1999).